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The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

The right-wing, populist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) has viewed Putin's Russia as an effective constraint on what the Radical Right regards as a liberal cultural and economic agenda pursued by the European Union and the United States. The FPÖ remained a supporter of Kremlin policies, even after Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party in 2016. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the FPÖ has been careful not to be seen defending Moscow's aggression. Instead, it has resorted to populist framing that casts the Austrian people as victims of national and Western political elites. Concretely, the party leadership claims that the country's policies toward Russia are counterproductive and have been decided without the consent of the people. This approach is an extension of the FPÖ's traditional Euroscepticism and anti-establishment positioning. It also appeals to Austrians' longstanding preference for neutrality. According to polling data, the FPÖ is well positioned to outperform all other parties in the current issue environment.

***Keywords:** populist Radical Right, Euroscepticism, neutrality, anti-establishment positioning, anti-Americanism*

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Heinisch, Reinhard & Hofmann, Diana. (2023). "The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp001311>



The Austrian Radical Right has its roots in pan-Germanic nationalism and has traditionally been anti-Slavic (in general) and anti-Russian (in particular). Especially after the Second World War, the populist Radical Right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) held strong anti-Soviet and anti-communist positions. But as the FPÖ has grown increasingly concerned with the progressive cultural and liberal economic agenda of Washington and Brussels, it has come to view Putin's Russia as an effective curb on Western liberalism. The FPÖ signed a formal cooperation agreement with Putin's party United Russia in 2016 and became a defender of Kremlin policy. It has generally blamed Western political elites for the deterioration of international relations and the conflict in the region, including Ukraine. The FPÖ has repeatedly called on the Austrian government to adopt a neutral stance, criticized Western sanctions on Russia, and labelled Ukraine a corrupt state. Especially on the Radical Right, the current conflict is seen as part of a broader contest between liberal and anti-liberal agendas.

Why the Austrian case matters

The Austrian case is particularly illuminating as it differs from other European countries in three important respects. First, Austria enjoys a close relationship with Russia. The FPÖ's ties with the Kremlin are particularly strong. The second is Austria's traditional neutral foreign policy, enshrined in the 1955 State Treaty ending the Four Power occupation. Indeed, Austria stayed outside the European Union (EU) until after the end of the Cold War and is not a NATO member. A third factor is Austria's considerable dependence on Russian energy supplies, especially natural gas, and the extensive commercial ties between the two countries. Indeed, President Putin received a warm welcome in Vienna from Austrian political and economic elites in June 2014, just a few months after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Thus, while all major political parties in Austria have supported maintaining good relations with Russia, the FPÖ has stood out in seeking closer political ties with the Kremlin for ideological reasons.

The political positioning of the populist Radical Right Freedom Party

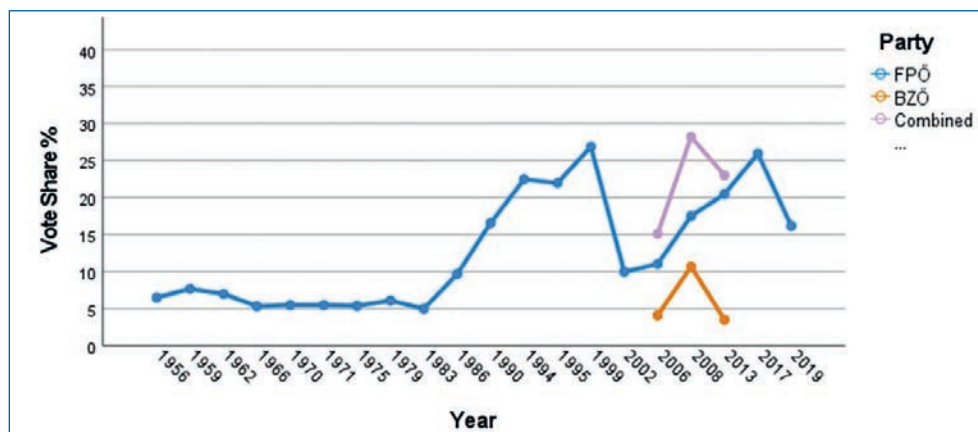
A closer look at the Freedom Party's electoral performance since 1956 reveals a clear pattern (see Figure 1). For decades, the party's vote share languished at around 5%, and it played only a marginal role in Austria's de facto two-party system, in which

the Christian conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ) dominated. Until the 1980s, the FPÖ primarily recruited from pan-German nationalists, former Nazis, and war veterans. Then, in the mid-1980s, it transformed into a populist Radical Right party under the leadership of its flamboyant young leader, Jörg Haider, and began to actively court working-class and socioeconomically disadvantaged voters. It appealed to people fed up with the existing political arrangements and frustrated by being left behind in Austria’s economic development.

Under Haider’s leadership, the party embraced an “Austria-first” agenda that included opposition to immigration and globalization, as well as Euroscepticism and populist anti-elitism. While the FPÖ vowed to defend Christian civilization against Islam in sociocultural terms, its socioeconomic positions increasingly drifted leftward. Another appeal of the party was the strong and charismatic leadership displayed by Haider and his successors Heinz-Christian Strache and later Herbert Kickl (Heinisch, 2017; Belafi, 2017).

On two occasions, in 2000 and 2017, the FPÖ formed governing coalitions with the ÖVP. In both instances, the party failed in public office due to massive internal problems, subsequently losing large shares of its electorate (Heinisch, 2003; Heinisch, 2017; Belafi, 2017). In 2005 a party split saw a smaller, more moderate Haider-led faction called Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) break away from the FPÖ. While competing directly with the FPÖ, the BZÖ did not survive long as a successful populist alternative after Haider’s unexpected death in 2008 (Belafi, 2017). Figure 1 shows the electoral support for the BZÖ as well as the combined vote share of the FPÖ and BZÖ before most of the latter’s members gravitated back to the FPÖ after 2013.

Figure 1. National vote share of the FPÖ and BZÖ (1956-2019)

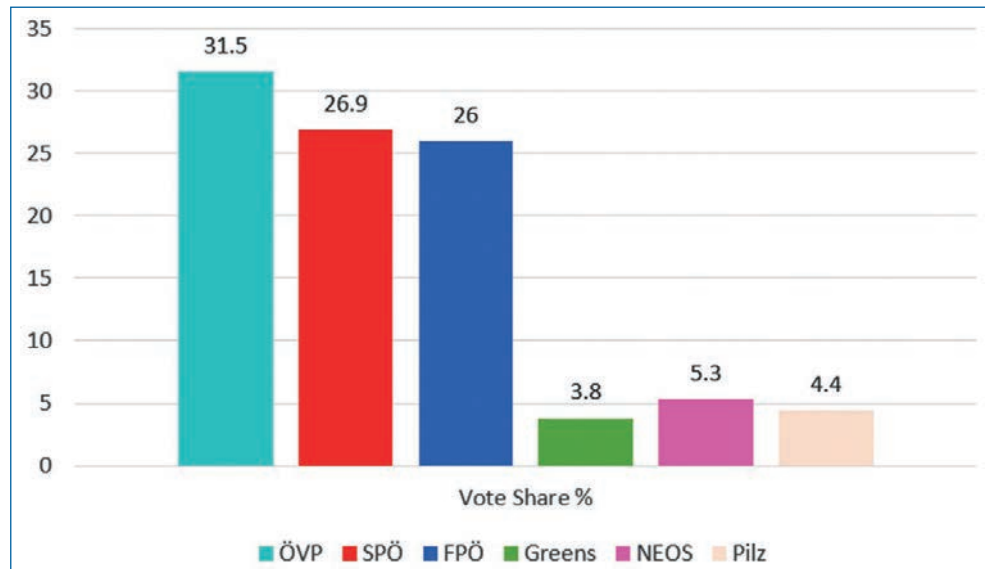


Source: Compiled by the author with data from BMI (n.d.).



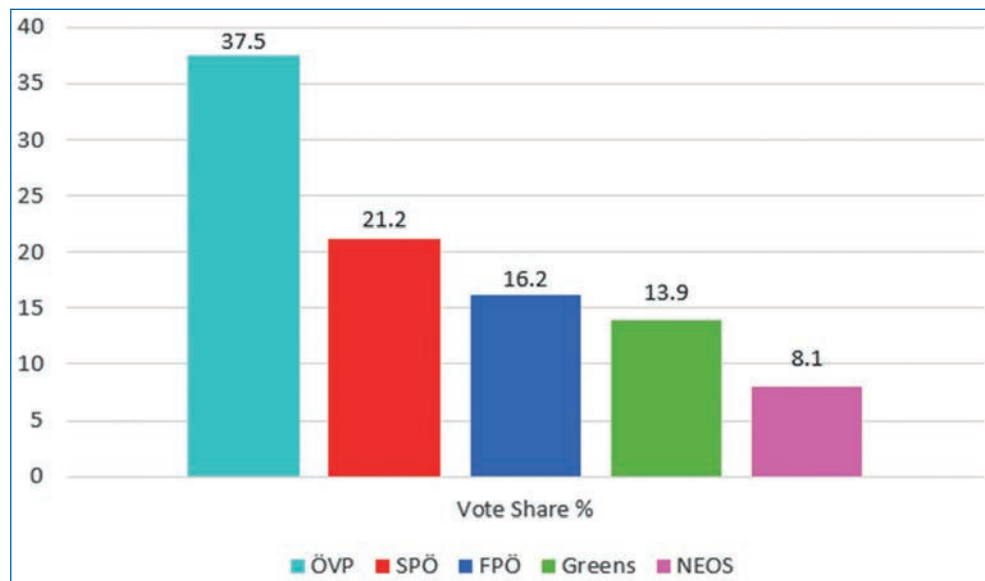
After the second ÖVP–FPÖ government failed in 2019, the Freedom Party suffered significant electoral losses. Figures 2 and 3 present the general election results (vote shares of the major parties) in 2017 and 2019, respectively, indicating a decline in voter support of about ten percentage points for the FPÖ in the space of just two years.

Figure 2. National election results in 2017



Source: Compiled by the author with data from BMI (2017).

Figure 3. National election results in 2019



Source: Compiled by the author with data from BMI (2019).

Moreover, the political scandal that forced the FPÖ out of government in 2019

implicated not only its leader, Heinz-Christian Strache but also Johann Gudenus, the party's point man for relations with Russia (Baumgärtner et al., 2019). With Strache and Gedenus leaving the field, Herbert Kickl —an ideological hardliner — was able to take the reins of the party in 2021 and push it once again further to the anti-establishment Right.

The Freedom Party and Austrian-Russian relations

The 1955 State Treaty between Austria and the so-called Four Powers, including the Soviet Union, enabled Austria to regain full sovereignty after the Second World War and served as the basis for relations between Austria and Russia (Weiss, 2020). An associated voluntary commitment to permanent neutrality in military conflicts has been a cornerstone of Austrian foreign policy ever since. As a result of close economic ties dating back to the Cold War, Austria's dependence on Russian energy supplies has steadily increased. It is far above the level of other Western countries (APA, 2022; Weiss, 2020).

Before the invasion, the FPÖ maintained close political relations with Russia and President Putin based on shared anti-liberal ideological positions (Weiss 2020, Weidinger et al. 2017). Members of the FPÖ openly praised and admired the Russian regime for its aversion to western liberal principles and shared Moscow's criticism of Brussels during the refugee crisis. The FPÖ condemned the EU's sanctions against Moscow and defended Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This position was reinforced by a formal partnership agreement between Putin's party, United Russia and the FPÖ in 2016 (Weiss, 2020; Cede & Mangott, 2023). Although the FPÖ under Kickl publicly distanced themselves from this agreement, the party let the deadline for terminating the accord pass, thereby allowing it to be renewed until 2026 (Die Presse, 2021). Nevertheless, as Cede and Mangott (2023) note, no Austrian government opposed extending sanctions against Russia over the annexation of Crimea in 2014, including the one in which the FPÖ was a coalition partner from 2017 to 2019. Moreover, the FPÖ has been careful not to be seen as defending Moscow's conduct of the war but rather reframe the conflict in ways that fit the party's political narrative.

Reframing the conflict to fit the political agenda

On social media, the FPÖ frames the Ukraine conflict differently from the other



Austrian parties (and official Austrian policy). In the FPÖ's narrative, the conflict is a struggle between opposing sides in pursuit of clashing agendas rather than as a war of aggression launched by a large state against its smaller neighbour. According to this view, Austria would do well to remain neutral. The party directs its ire not at Moscow but at Brussels' sanctions against Russia, emphasizing how these have damaged the Austrian economy. High inflation, spikes in energy prices, and bottlenecks are attributed to the actions of the EU and the West more broadly (FPÖ, 2022d, 2022b, 2022d).

Overall, the party directs its criticism at the United States and the Biden administration by claiming that Washington stands to gain the most from the conflict. The party insinuates that the "true goal" is to weaken Russia and make Europe more dependent on Washington. This sentiment was clearly expressed in a speech given in the Austrian parliament by Susanne Fürst, a Freedom Party member of the Austrian parliament, in July 2022:

[The government] fails to recognize or understand [...] that there are different interests between the EU and the US, that the US is not playing it entirely straight, that it naturally has interests in weakening Russia, in weakening Russia's economy. So it's good [for them] if the war lasts a little longer than necessary. They want to disrupt coexistence and, above all, economic cooperation between Russia and Europe. (*Applause from the FPÖ*). (Parlament Österreich, 2022a).

Similarly, the FPÖ spokesperson on foreign policy Axel Kassegger described President Biden's policy as follows:

Just yesterday, Biden reiterated that he does not want to talk to Putin. His only response to Russia is to make ineffective threatening gestures, as can be seen in the current developments in Ukraine, which are causing great suffering to the Ukrainian people. (Heute, 2022)

Kassegger also hinted that the United States might be behind the attacks on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (OTS, 2022a). The FPÖ studiously avoids denying that Russia is an aggressor or that the Ukrainian people are not also suffering. But its framing feeds into a traditional scepticism toward Brussels and Washington, whose motives are routinely questioned by mainstream political actors. Not surprisingly, the header on the FPÖ's Facebook page shown in Figure 4 depicts party leader Kickl in front of an Austrian flag, claiming that "[s]ecuring wealth means defending neutrality!"

Figure 4: Banner from the Freedom Party's Facebook page



Source: FPÖ (n.d., a)

Instead of sanctioning Russia, Austria should stay true to its tradition of neutrality (FPÖ, n.d. a, FPÖ, 2022b), as this would safeguard the country's wealth and guarantee security in the current crisis and an uncertain world. The FPÖ disparages the sanctions as “Knieschuss-Sanktionen”, meaning that by imposing them, the EU is shooting itself in the foot (FPÖ, 2022e). This discourse implies that Austria is forced to bear the consequences of decisions made by others and is thus another victim of the conflict. The perpetrator, in this case, is not Moscow but rather the political elites in Brussels (or the West in general). This underscores the populist framing of “the people” versus “the elite” that the Freedom Party applies to this conflict. A telling example are the party's frequent references to the “US armaments industry” that seeks to extend the war (OTS, 2022b). This also forms the basis for the FPÖ's calls for a referendum on the sanctions against Russia (FPÖ, 2022a).

The FPÖ also supports other actors in the EU who challenge the bloc's common foreign policy toward Russia, especially the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán as shown in Figure 5. The FPÖ applauded him on Facebook for blocking an EU aid package for Ukraine: “Bravo Viktor Orbán! Put an end to this EU warmongering!” (FPÖ, 2022c). Thus, the sanctions against Russia and aid packages for Ukraine are both framed as breaches of Austrian neutrality. Herbert Kickl and other leading FPÖ officials have repeated these lines of criticism in parliamentary speeches (Parlament Österreich, 2022b). However, despite the FPÖ's stance on neutrality



Figure 5: FPÖ Facebook post about Orbán's blocking an EU aid package for Ukraine



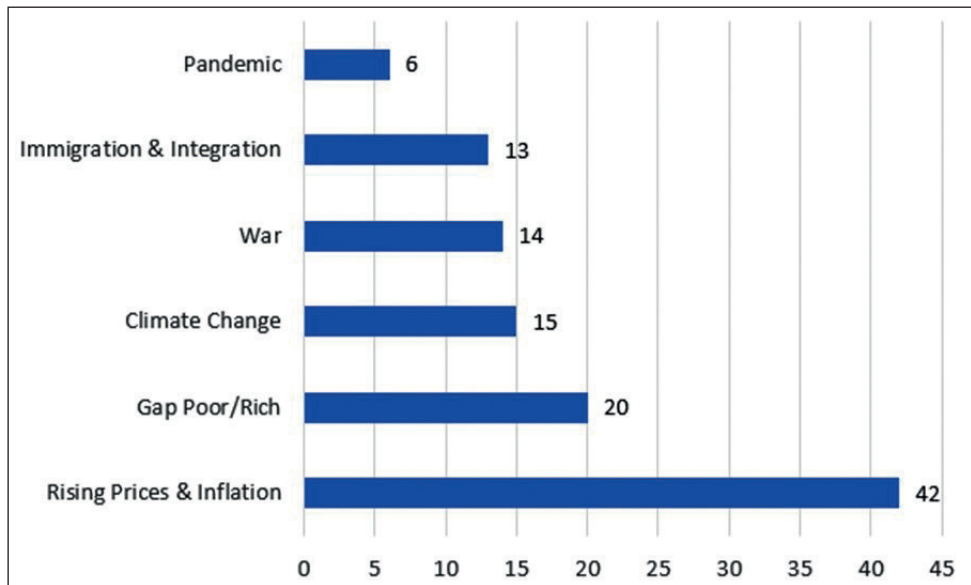
Source: FPÖ (2022c)

Voter preferences and support for the Freedom Party

Since the FPÖ has called for both early elections and a referendum on sanctions against Russia, the question remains about how relevant this stance is for voters. In August 2022, the Austrian daily *Der Standard* reported that the public is split along party lines — supporters of the mainstream and centrist parties back sanctions on Russia, while FPÖ sympathizers are overwhelmingly opposed. However, the overall majority in support was small and thus vulnerable to further adverse developments, such as new spikes in energy prices or even energy shortages and power outages (Seidl, 2022b). In addition, political circles in Austria feared that a severe winter would significantly erode public support.

This view is confirmed by polling data in Figure 6, showing that the central concerns for many Austrians are rising prices and the widening gap between poor and rich, followed by climate change and the war in Ukraine (SORA, 2022). These sentiments are closely connected with expressions of anger about the current political situation, which is often directed against those in power (ibid.).

Figure 6: Important issues for Austrian voters, 2022



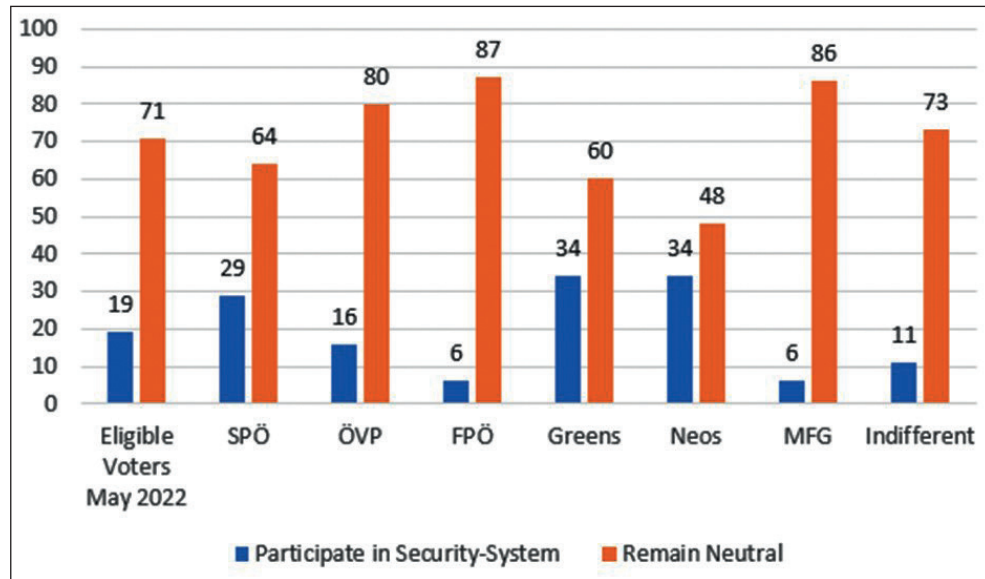
Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from SORA (2022, p. 8).

As Figure 7 shows, growing geopolitical insecurity has also not shaken the traditional preference for Austria's policy of neutrality (Seidl, 2022a), which, according to a survey by the Austrian Institute for European Politics (ÖGfE), is favoured by 9 out of 10 Austrians (ÖGfE 2022a). Similarly, most respondents reject the idea of joining NATO or even participating in a common European security system (Seidl, 2022a).

In fact, FPÖ voters and those of the small populist anti-vaccination party (MFG) are most in favour of neutrality over participating in a Europe-wide security system. Still, neutrality is also preferred by a large number of ÖVP and SPÖ voters. Only Greens and NEOs voters, who presumably support the internationalist outlook of those parties, oppose neutrality in large numbers. Nonetheless, there is no overall majority in Austria for abandoning neutrality in favour of joining the European security system. This isolationist streak among Austrians makes the FPÖ's position potentially attractive beyond its core constituency (i.e., ÖVP and SPÖ supporters).



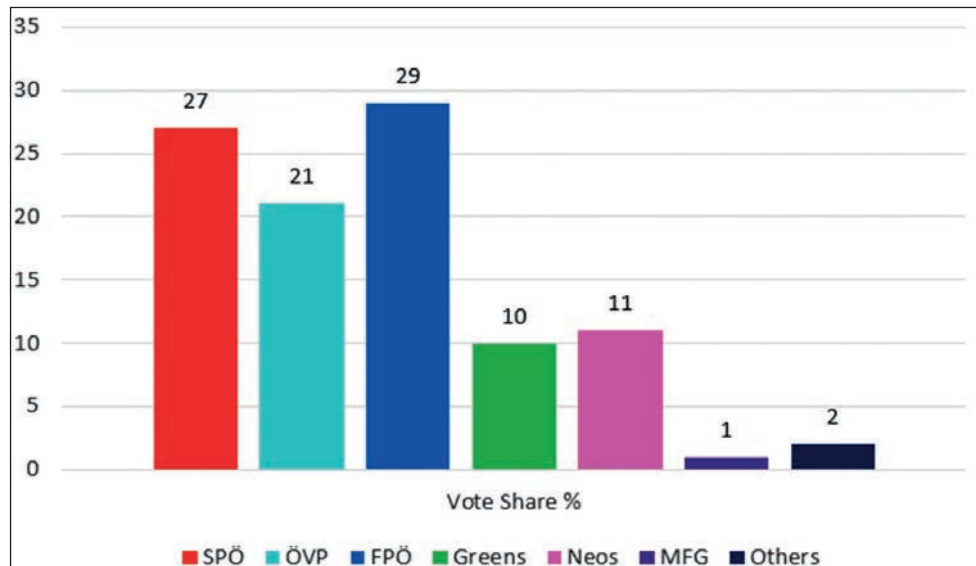
Figure 7: Austrian voters' attitudes towards neutrality in 2022



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from Seidl (2022a)

Additionally, polling commissioned by Der Standard in December 2022 suggested that the FPÖ would either share first place with the SPÖ or win outright if an election were held the following week (Seidl, 2022c). In fact, as Figure 8 indicates, the FPÖ had 29% of support — ahead of the SPÖ and all centrist parties (Seidl, 2022c) — a 13 percentage-point increase in the space of three years.

Figure 8: Party support among Austrian voters, December 2022



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from Seidel (2022c).

Conclusion

The Austrian Freedom Party has avoided defending Russia's war of aggression outright but applies populist framing that presents Austrians as victims of the policy machinations of unaccountable national and Western political elites. These policy decisions vis-à-vis Russia are portrayed as ineffective and counterproductive and blamed for contributing to the escalation of the conflict. The FPÖ accuses the EU of adopting its Russia policy without popular consent and lays the blame on Brussels for rising prices and deteriorating living standards (FPÖ, 2022a, 2022e). This approach is an extension of the FPÖ's traditional Euroscepticism (Heinisch et al., 2021) and anti-establishment positioning, which has underpinned the party's traditional support base of about one-quarter of the electorate.

The FPÖ seeks to further broaden this appeal by emphasizing Austria's traditional policy orientation of neutrality in military conflicts and recalling the benefits of close economic relations with Russia. Moreover, by attributing negative economic news to the EU sanctions, the FPÖ can distinguish itself from all other parties in parliament and deflect criticism for its historical pro-Putin positioning.

Support for Ukraine among Austrians has remained lower than elsewhere in the EU (Mory, 2022). Nonetheless, Russian atrocities, including the indiscriminate shelling of civilians, the frequent military setbacks of the Russian army, and the Kremlin's general ineptitude in conducting the war, have left their mark on Austrians. As a result, the FPÖ must be careful not to appear too extreme in its positions. The FPÖ has worked tirelessly to overcome its erstwhile Nazi image; it has little desire to be seen all too obviously as Moscow's stooge.



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