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Austria's Modus Operandi: Variable Neutrality in Action

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Austria's 65-year-old neutrality has been preserved through political consensus and growing public support. Over the years it has been a source of prestige for the country but also intense internal debate, especially before entering the EU or the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Nowadays, it serves not only as a catchphrase for politicians but also as a political tool used internally and externally to secure Austria's interest. In the internal dimension, it is used to legitimise various policies while in the latter case, its aim is to influence global affairs or to force better relations with other states, even at the expense of the country's reputation as "permanently neutral."

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The Roots of Austria's (Forced) Neutrality

Austria's neutrality was the result of the first stage of the Cold War and the efforts to redefine the country's post-World War II status. For a state annexed by the Third Reich in 1938¹ but also widely perceived as complicit in Nazi war crimes, neutrality became a desired solution suitable for the winning powers and Austria itself. From the Austrian perspective, neutrality played an occupation-reducing function (withdrawal of American, British, French, and Soviet troops) and the chance to finally frame the state's political system and secure its place in the new international security order. For the occupying powers it was a way to enforce the balance of power in Europe through a buffer zone with the Iron Curtain and finally to close one of the last legal, unresolved issues after World War II. Progress in the negotiating process on Austria's status was possible also because of a change of approach by the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Stalin on 5 March 1953.

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Neutrality, the result of international negotiations but also facilitated by internal political consensus, became the price for Austria's unity and independence. The promise to adopt this status, following the example of neutrality maintained by Switzerland, was expressed in the legally non-binding Moscow Memorandum issued on 15 April 1955 by the governments of Austria and the Soviet Union. Still, the original text of the State Treaty from 15 May 1955, which re-established Austria as a sovereign state after World War II, did not include neutrality. Ultimately it was codified by the Austrian parliament on 26 October 1955,² the first day without

foreign troops in Austria, in the act of federal constitutional law. In turn, the four occupying powers recognised the new status and pledged to respect the integrity and inviolability of Austrian territory.

Making Use of Neutrality

After establishing the country's legal framework, the function of neutrality has evolved as the country's decision-makers kept nursing the concept voluntarily. Despite neutrality, Austria—economically and culturally integrated with the West—leaned towards the free world during the ideological struggle between East and West. This was clearly visible in its policy on human rights, which included pressure on the USSR through the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) and admission of political refugees. In the 1970s, thanks to the relaxation of tensions between the two blocs during the détente period and, as a consequence of the questionable ability to defend its territory, Chancellor Bruno Kreisky took neutrality one step further and coined it “active neutrality.” Overcoming the initial scepticism of the western powers, Austria used its role as a venue for summits between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to promote its image internationally as a peacemaker and mediator.³ Vienna, which started to host various international institutions and organisations, became a convenient place for major summits and meetings.⁴

¹ The annexation of Austria was not recognised by the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, or the United States, which was expressed in the Moscow Declaration of October 1943. The document called for the establishment of a free Austria after the victory over Nazi Germany.

² As the Federal Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria states: “Austria of her own free will declares herewith her permanent neutrality which she is resolved to maintain and defend with all the means at her disposal.” See: Federal Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria, www.ris.bka.gv.at.

³ For example, in Vienna on 18 June 1961, the summit of First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President John F. Kennedy took place, and on 18 June 1979, SALT-II, an agreement dealing with limitations on and guidelines for strategic nuclear weapons, was signed by U.S. President Jimmy Carter and First Secretary of the CPSU Leonid Brezhnev.

⁴ The headquarters of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (including the Joint Consultative Group, a body directly related to the OSCE that deals with the compliance of states with the

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Over time, Austrian diplomacy has coined “neutrality” as a [concept of a “bridge-builder”](#)—an image it still cultivates today. Even after the end of the Cold War, Austria remained host of disarmament talks between the major powers. In August 2020, the second round of nuclear negotiations between the U.S. and Russia took place in Vienna,⁵ aimed at the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). In September 2020, the Austrian government offered to host talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan (which had taken place there in 2019) to discuss the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Austria’s capital was also the place where the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached in 2015 and where peace talks to end the war in Syria were held.

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Nowadays, Austria’s decision-makers continue to broaden the meaning of neutrality to justify their preferences in policy solutions. It has become a catchphrase, used, for example, in the areas of technology or energy, such as the promotion of a flexible approach to 5G infrastructure development.

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Chancellor Sebastian Kurz stated that Austria is “fundamentally technology neutral,” explaining that the 5G expansion will be carried out by various companies, including Swedish Ericsson or Chinese tech giant Huawei.⁶ By this approach, Kurz’s cabinet defies U.S. demands to exclude Huawei from developing the European 5G network and cultivates good relations with China. The term “neutral” is also increasingly used by Austria to explain the need for

setting more ambitious climate goals, as was done by the [first federal government with the Greens](#). It also is used to defend Austria’s dependence on Russian gas and bolster its status as a regional gas hub, which was facilitated by the country’s neutrality during the Cold War.

Finding its Place within the European Union

EU membership since 1995 and active participation in European integration processes has limited the scope of Austria’s neutrality somewhat. As the national security strategy from 2013 states, “neutral Austria is now largely interconnected with the security of the EU as a whole.”⁷ The decision to join the EU sparked a national debate over the country’s neutrality. Joining the European Community was not possible before then in part because of the Soviet’s objections. The application to join the European Economic Community was submitted by Austria in July 1989 as Central European states began their transformations. The eagerness to join the EU was strongly confirmed in a referendum in which 66% were in favour—the highest percentage among countries applying for Union membership at that time. While securing public support, Austria also changed its Federal Constitutional Law to legally pave the way to EU accession.⁸

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provisions of the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe), Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, and numerous offices of the United Nations have been located in Austria’s capital.

⁵ The first round of disarmament talks between the two countries ended in June 2020.

⁶ “Kurz: Keinen Handelskrieg zwischen USA und EU,” 29 February 2020, www.krone.at.

⁷ “Austrian Security Strategy Security in a new decade—Shaping security,” July 2013, www.bundesheer.at.

⁸ In 1992, changes were introduced to secure the influence of nine federal states (*Länder*) on the decision-making process in the EU.

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The Austrian leaders perceived the EU as a way to strengthen national security without the need to invest significant resources in military capabilities. With the collapse of the USSR and disappearance of a direct military threat to its territory, Austria was free to support the development of security and defence cooperation within the EU. To commit to the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), a specific article was included in the Austrian federal constitution. This approach has been proven during [Austria's presidency of the EU](#) in the second half of 2018. Kurz's government at that time endorsed EU budget transfers from cohesion funds to the development of CSDP. Austria was also among the 23 Member States that backed [PESCO](#)—a mechanism to facilitate defence cooperation among willing and able EU members. Currently, Austria is involved in five out of the 47 PESCO projects.⁹ Coordination of one in particular—the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) surveillance, detection and incident-management capability—corresponds with one of Austria's primary foreign and security policy objectives, which is the elimination of weapons of mass destruction. Austria also participates in EU battlegroups, contributing its forces to this rapid-reaction capability in 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2020. It supports a number of EU missions, with the most significant contribution offered to EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰

Compromising on Military Engagement

Constitutional law states that “in all future times Austria will not join any military alliances and will not permit the establishment of any foreign military bases on her territory.” The armed forces are to guarantee the state's security, sovereignty, and neutrality. After the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the direct military threat to Austria, its military potential was significantly reduced. Austria is one of a few European countries that retains mandatory conscription,¹¹ confirmed in a nationwide referendum in 2013 and linked by different sides of the Austrian political spectrum to its neutrality, for instance, in the [ÖVP-Greens coalition government's](#) programme for 2020–2024.¹² However, its ability to defend its territory is questionable. The main rationale for the investment in limited military potential (four brigades) is to enable military assistance to civil authorities and support multinational crisis-management missions. To keep such an option open, Austria neither excludes military cooperation with other states and alliances, nor rejects being an active member of other security-relevant international organisations.

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In 1995, Austria joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, but without the intention to join the alliance, rather to develop the ability to conduct joint crisis-response missions. It contributed troops to NATO-led international peacekeeping forces: The Kosovo Force (KFOR)¹³ and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Austria is also an active member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), where it works on conventional disarmament, conflict

⁹ Among the 24 other EU members that take part in PESCO projects, Finland is engaged in four projects and Sweden in seven of them.

¹⁰ As of September 2020, the Austrian Armed Forces take part in 12 international missions, with the biggest contingents in Bosnia and Herzegovina (305 soldiers; *European Force Operation Althea*), the NATO mission in Kosovo (347 soldiers, the fourth-largest of the 27 contingents; the Kosovo International Security Force, KFOR), and in Lebanon (183 soldiers; United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon, UNIFIL). See: *Auslandseinsätze des Bundesheeres, September 2020*, www.bundesheer.at.

¹¹ Apart from Austria, conscription within the EU is in effect in Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Greece.

¹² “Aus Verantwortung für Österreich. Regierungsprogramm 2020–2024,” www.dieneuevolkspartei.at.

¹³ As of September 2020, Austria maintains 347 troops in the KFOR mission, which is the fourth-largest contingent among the 27 contributing states, after the U.S., Italy, and Hungary.

¹⁴ In 2002, Austria deployed 75 soldiers to Kabul. As of August 2020, Austria maintains 11 troops there as part *Resolute Support Mission* in Afghanistan.

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prevention, confidence-building measures, support for police and border management, and other areas.

As a UN member, Austria participates in “blue helmet” peacekeeping operations. Mostly sending paramedics and war observers. Since 1960, more than 90,000 Austrian soldiers and civilians have taken part in 50 international peace support and humanitarian missions, with support for Western Balkans perceived as a state priority. To provide the constitutional basis for further participation in UN missions, the Federal Constitutional Act on Cooperation and Solidarity in Deploying Units and Individuals Abroad was adopted in 1997.

As a Flexible Tool in Austrian Policy

Austria also uses neutrality to diffuse tensions with other states. It was one of only eight EU countries that did not expel Russian diplomats after the poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal¹⁵ and his daughter in March 2018 in Salisbury, England (the other states did so in a gesture of solidarity with the UK). Austria’s authorities explained their reason as the country’s neutrality,¹⁶ the need to protect good communication channels with Russia, and its established status as the seat of international organisations.¹⁷ Instead of defending the principles of the rules-based international order, Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl offered mediation in the Skripal case,¹⁸ a move welcomed by the Russian authorities. Austria has accepted, however, the EU sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

On the other hand, Austria’s attitude towards Israel shows that neutrality does not have to mean impartiality and can be used flexibly by Austria’s decision-makers. Austria endorses the two-state solution and has made a significant policy shift in recent years to become one of the strongest advocates of Israel in the EU. Speaking at an American Jewish Committee meeting in 2018, Chancellor Kurz stated that within its capacity as a neutral country, Austria will be committed to Israel’s security.¹⁹ This promise has translated into support for Israel in its disputes with Palestinians. In May 2020, Austria and Hungary blocked a joint EU appeal to Israel to abandon its annexation plans in the West Bank.²⁰

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Doubtful Model for Central and Eastern Europe

Austria’s neutrality became a reference point for some politicians from Central Europe to serve their interests.

Austria’s neutrality is presented by its leaders as a model for other European states to follow, with an aim to highlight the country’s political attractiveness. It was offered as a model for Ukraine during the Russian aggression in 2014,²¹ as the former Chancellor Werner Faymann simultaneously proposed to host talks between Ukraine and Russia. Five years later, the leader of FPÖ and the vice chancellor, Heinz-

¹⁵ “Salisbury poisoning: What did the attack mean for the UK and Russia?” 4 March 2020, www.bbc.com.

¹⁶ “Kurz und Kneissl: Österreich weist keine Diplomaten aus,” 26 March 2018, www.diepresse.com.

¹⁷ “Europagespräch, Österreichischer Vorsitz im Rat der Europäischen Union: 1998-2006-2018,” 10 May 2018, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1810825542330608&ref=watch_permalink.

¹⁸ CNN Interview 29/03/2018, 30 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmOCdsh1eEo>.

¹⁹ “Israel: Israel’s security is ‘not negotiable’ to us—Austrian PM Kurz,” 11 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nccciPholk>.

²⁰ “Österreich und Ungarn verhindern, dass EU Israels Annexionspläne verurteilt,” 19 May 2020, www.derstandard.at.

²¹ “Faymann in Österreich zur Krim-Krise: ‘Biete Vermittlung an’,” 20 March 2014, www.ots.at.

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Christian Strache, supported the idea of Bosnia and Herzegovina as militarily neutral as “preventing conflicts in the future.”^{22 23}

Austria’s neutrality became a reference point for some politicians from Central Europe to serve their interests. For example, Slovakia’s leader of the extreme right-wing People’s Party of Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) and former governor of the Banská Bystrica region, Marian Kotleba, suggested that an alternative to his country’s membership in NATO should be neutrality or a defence bloc with Austria and Switzerland.²⁴ Kotleba presented the idea without openly admitting his pro-Russia approach. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has used the Austrian example as an argument in international consultations; in telling U.S. diplomats in 2019 that he wanted Hungary to be “neutral, like Austria,” he aimed to deflect U.S. pressure and criticism concerning Russian and Chinese influence in his country.²⁵

Part of Austria’s Identity

Neutrality has become part of Austrian national identity and is deeply rooted in the national self-perception. Thanks to its implementation through domestic law, and not international law, it has given the impression that it was decided and defined by the Austrians themselves. After 1955, the country’s neutrality helped develop its identity, also by highlighting its uniqueness through differences mainly with West Germany. Since 1965, the day parliament approved the constitution—26 October—has been celebrated as Austrian National Day, to further underline the significance of neutrality.

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The state’s status enjoys increasing public support: 59% of Austrians believe their country will remain neutral in 10 or 15 years, and four out of five of them want it maintained.²⁶ According to a survey from October 2019, 79% of respondents prefer keeping neutrality over participating in a common security system, although Austria is already an integral part of one through its membership in the EU. Such opinions have been increasing in recent years. In 2003, 70% of Austrians endorsed neutrality while in 1955 only half did.

Neutrality also has been an integral part of the Austrian political consensus. The 1955 constitutional act of parliament received the endorsement of almost all political parties.²⁷ Currently, no grouping rejects it or questions its necessity. Moreover, neutrality is often a starting point for national debates on foreign policy. This approach is anchored in party and government programmes and elsewhere. However, different political players highlight neutrality to justify various priorities. For instance, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) understands this concept as an obligation for multilateralism and protection of human rights.²⁸ For the Greens, active neutrality means commitment to a socially just economic world order and common ecological standards through the WTO.²⁹ The

Different political players highlight neutrality to justify various priorities.

²² “Dodik Backs Austrian Far-Right in European Elections,” 13 May 2019, www.balkaninsight.com.

²³ It was presented without a plan as to how Bosnia and Herzegovina might achieve neutrality and without context (which contains the argument that neutrality accompanies the stance of the Bosnian Serbs).

²⁴ “Päť vecí, s ktorými išla Kotlebova strana do volieb (program ĽSNS),” 7 March 2016, www.dennikn.sk.

²⁵ “Hungary Bucks U.S. Push to Curb Russian and Chinese Influence,” 27 January 2019, www.wsj.com.

²⁶ “Österreicher schätzen Neutralität immer höher ein,” 19 November 2019, www.derstandard.at.

²⁷ At that time, only the Federation of Independents (VdU), the predecessor of the FPÖ, voted against the act.

²⁸ “Menschlichkeit siegt. Mit diesem Programm zur Nationalratswahl 2019,” www.spoe.at.

²⁹ “Wahlprogramm ‘Vorwärts Grün! Vorwärts Europa’,” April 2009, www.gruene.at.

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extreme-right-wing FPÖ links the state's neutrality with the sovereignty and protection of national territory and citizens.³⁰ In practice, neutrality is used by this party for pro-Russia foreign policymaking.

Conclusions and Prospects

Austria should be perceived as a non-aligned state rather than a neutral one. Its formal neutrality has evolved through decades. On the one hand, the post-1945 policy of strict neutrality has been codified by staying out of military alliances and not allowing foreign bases. On the other hand, neutrality has been used as a political tool to promote the state's security interests and compensate for its natural weaknesses resulting from its small territory and questionable ability to defend itself.

Shifts and inconsistencies in its neutrality policy may undermine the country's image as a neutral state and role as an unbiased broker.

Neutrality is used by decision-makers to increase Austria's prestige through shaping global affairs. In hosting diplomatic gatherings, summits and peace talks, Austrian governments continue to build the nation's brand around international peace processes. Neutrality contributed to the tradition of maintaining good relations with countries on both sides of the former Iron Curtain in the past. Today, Austria uses the concept to pursue its economic interests, which require proper relations with states like Russia or China. It is also used to exploit new opportunities and limit risks: to promote the country's climate policy or, in the sphere of technology, particularly in the development of 5G. Also, the strong endorsement of Israel's policy confirms that neutrality is used flexibly by Austria's decision-makers.

Internally, thanks to public support of neutrality, it is used by all major parties to legitimise their policies. The decision-makers also try to present their country's status as a model for other states, which resonates with some politicians in Central and Eastern Europe. Austria's neutral status is, however, unique because of its historical context and geopolitical situation.

In the longer term, shifts and inconsistencies in its neutrality policy may undermine the country's image as a neutral state and role as an unbiased broker. That has already been shown by Austria taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using the argument of neutrality might also damage the country's reputation, as happened when Austria reacted much more softly than most EU countries to the use of a weapon-grade chemical to try to kill former spy Skripal in the UK. Still, the nuclear negotiations with Iran or the Syria talks indicate that Austria is regarded as a potential mediator and host of important peace talks.

³⁰ "Party Programme of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)," 18 June 2011, www.fpoee.at.