

“Austria First”: H.C. Strache, Austrian identity and the current politics of Austria’s Freedom Party

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Abstract

In 2005, Heinz-Christian Strache ascended to the FPÖ leadership, and was dismissed by many as being a “Haider clone”. Since then, he has run aggressively fought electoral campaigns, standing on a virulently anti-Muslim platform, warding off persistent rumours of a neo-Nazi past and courted Austria’s youth through rap songs, ringtones and t-shirts. Now he stands poised for election success in Austria’s general elections. This article will examine Strache’s policies and world-view and ask in what ways can Strache be compared with Jörg Haider? Is Strache, in his close collaboration with Andreas Mölzer, a threat to the notion of the European Union? What aspect of Austrian identity today does he represent? Is Strache the face of the new right in Austria, or indeed, of the new right in Europe?

Introduction

We must become the dragon-killer and present a decided resistance against the dissolution of our national identities [which are] democratically bestowed upon us... Now is the time to discard the “penitent’s cloak” (*Büßerkutte*) [and to develop] a new national self-consciousness for the free people of Europe. The irresponsible immigration politics of past decades and in particular the islamising of Europe are a dangerous threat [and] [i]t is again the time to save Europe, as in 1683 [when Vienna was besieged by the Ottoman armies]. Europe was not lost then to Turkey, with its “Islamic-Trojan horse” [and now] [we must] initiat[e]...an exit from the EU (“Raus from this EU”) movement.¹

This is an excerpt from Heinz-Christian Strache’s address to those assembled at the *Europa-Kongress* on 6 October 2007 in Mainz, Germany. Organised by *Die Republikaner*, a conservative German political party, Strache was the guest of honour at the Congress, mobbed by autograph hunters when off-stage and praised for his “fiery speech” on-stage, in

¹ HC Strache speaking at the *Europa-Kongress* on 6 October 2007. see “Kongreß der Republikaner”, <http://www.rep.de/content.aspx?ArticleID=7fc08d65-7502-42d9-94c4-4ce5f90a25b8>

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which he also opined that the time had come for the West to “symbolically” don “battle dress” against Islam.² Heinz-Christian Strache, or H.C. as he is more widely known, is the relatively new leader of Austria’s Freedom Party, the FPÖ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*) but he has received little attention so far outside of Europe. Indeed, he has come to national Austrian prominence only relatively recently. Yet he represents Europe’s latest problematic foray into extreme right-wing politics. The questions which surrounded Jörg Haider—is he populist? Is he far right? Is he neo-fascist?—continue with Strache but with an additional edge in the increasingly divided, post-September 11 world. Strache is the face of Austrian nationalism and European right-wing transnationalism in the twenty-first century: more ideologically hardline than Haider but still as photogenic; making public appearances at Austria’s nightclubs while releasing xenophobic rap songs which can be downloaded as mobile phone ringtones; professing his love for his children on his website while receiving messages of support from Germany’s neo-Nazi party, the NPD. In Austria’s September 2008 general election—“the hardest fought election since 1945”³—Strache and the FPÖ garnered 18% of the vote, which, when counted together with the 11% of the population who voted for Jörg Haider and the similarly rightist BZÖ (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, Alliance for the Future of Austria), meant that “almost one in three Austrians who voted opted for the extreme right.”⁴ With Jörg Haider’s death on 11 October 2008, Strache now has the capacity to marshal certainly Austria’s and perhaps Europe’s far right wing behind him.⁵ Working with far right Eurosceptics like Andreas Mölzer—a man who even Jörg Haider apparently found too right wing—can Heinz-Christian Strache destabilise the European Union with a plan for a “Europe of Fatherlands”?⁶ This paper seeks to address some of these questions through an examination of Strache’s biography, his ideology, his political tactics and his current agenda. In doing so, it aims to make a contribution to understanding the current construction of the ever-complex character of Austria’s national identification within the right-wing context—adding another layer to Austria’s “manifold attempts to imagine and construct national identity”—and to also gain insight into broader trends

² “seiner flammenden Ansprache”. See *Ibid.* See also “Strache will sich “symbolisch” den “Kampfanzug” anziehen”, 23 September 2007, www.oe24.at/zeitung/oesterreich/politik/article132770.ece

³ oe24.at, “Brutaler Wahlkampf: FP mit Sex-Angriff auf Haider”, *Österreich*, 3 August 2008, <http://www.24oe.at/zeitung/oesterreich/politik/neuwahlen/article341028.ece>

⁴ Ian Traynor, “Austria in crisis as far right win 29% of vote”, *Guardian*, 30 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/30/austria>

⁵ See Eric Frey, “Austria’s hard right scents election success”, *Financial Times*, 22 July 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c83a3cde-5779-11dd-916c-000077b07658.html> and Marion Kraske and Walter Mayr, “A Grand Coalition Fails, Leaving Room for Radicals”, *Spiegel Online*, 18 July 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,566744,00.html>

⁶ Europakongreß 2008, “Unser Europa—das Europa der Vaterländer!”, Die Republikaner website, <http://www.rep.de/content.aspx?ArticleID=43f18cc2-d8e7-4be2-9aac-c438af9b139b>

Europe-wide.⁷ It will do this by applying a critical discourse analysis to Strache’s own words as taken from the modern medium through which he himself presents them—the Internet—in an attempt to capture the significance of his stance with a similar immediacy.⁸ In the interests of academic rigour, however, and of making clear the broader importance of Strache’s stance, this analysis will be placed within the context of the wider historiography on the “relationship between national identity and racist exclusion”.⁹

Heinz-Christian Strache: a *Lebenslauf*

By profession Strache is a dental technician, becoming involved in local Viennese politics in 1991. He became leader of the Viennese FPÖ in 2004 and national leader of the FPÖ in 2005 following the party’s acrimonious split (“the Knittelfeld *Putzsch*”) and Haider’s departure to form the BZÖ. Strache gained further notice by enjoying considerable local success at the ballot-box for the Vienna City Council in October 2005, winning 14.9% of the vote.

On Strache’s website, his *Lebenslauf* (curriculum vitae) carefully fleshes his biography out in snappy sound-bite sentences. He describes himself as “a true Viennese” (“Ein echter Wiener”) by sole virtue of that fact that he was born there in 1969.¹⁰ Encouraging the notion that he is a youthful, contemporary figure the *Lebenslauf* mixes this almost confrontationally upfront pronouncement on his political and ethnic identification with a strange combination of pop-staresque details such as his star sign (Gemini), his musical preferences (“fast rhythms”), his favourite film (notably, Mel Gibson’s tale of nascent Scottish nationalism *Braveheart*) and his favourite drink (he laddishly proclaims “all drinks”) with further political posturing. He went into politics, for example, “having been raised in Red Vienna”. As his favourite political book he cites 2004’s *Die Mächte der Zukunft: Gewinner und Verlierer in der Welt von morgen* (Future Powers: Winners and Losers in the World of Tomorrow) by Helmut Schmidt, former German Chancellor (1974-1982). Although a Social Democrat, Schmidt’s book gets Strache’s nod because in its examination of the supposedly fast-approaching Islamic threat to the non-Islamic world, Schmidt provides something which, in Strache’s view, Schmidt’s Social Democrat “comrades in this country [i.e. Austria] should take a slice of.”¹¹ This brief vita of Strache is rounded out by the information that although

⁷ Ruth Wodak, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisigl and Karin Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, English translation, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2.

⁸ John E. Richardson, “Our England”: discourses of “race” and class in party election leaflets”, *Social Semiotics*, 18 (3) September 2008: 331-335, 322-323.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁰ See www.hcstrache.at

¹¹ “Ein Sozialdemokrat, von dem sich die genossen hierzulande ein Scheibchen abschneiden könnten.”, *ibid.*, www.hcstrache.at

divorced he "loves" and "needs" his two children, so is a family man aboveall, and his most admired person is his mother, Marion.¹²

An autobiography of sorts has also recently been published. Entitled *The Country needs New Men* (Neue Männer braucht das Land), it details Strache's biography and political views through a series of 'conversations' with Andreas Mölzer, Strache's close political ally, whose chequered career I will touch upon later in this paper.¹³ Early chapters of the book seek to confirm Strache's claims to being a 'true' Viennese by exploring his ancestral "roots in Vienna" but then inadvertently suggest that Strache may also be afflicted by a malady to which a number of prominent Nazis were similarly prone: border mentality¹⁴ and, as such, "cultural overidentification".¹⁵ By noting that he has ancestors from not only Lower Austria but also the 'Sudetenland', itself a problematic term the use of which hints at a historically revisionist attitude on Strache's part, he indicates possible reasons for what many argue is his exaggerated sense of a national identity.¹⁶

According to his autobiography, it was also during these tender years that Strache developed "an understanding of humanity through his own experiences"¹⁷; intimating privileged, or at least comfortable, origins with a private school education, but also leaving school early (at 15) in order to begin training as a dental technician and enter the workforce. The apparent importance with which Strache regards earning a living is emphasised on his website when he also states, "If I did not work I would have a guilty ("schlechtes") conscience".¹⁸ He is at once educated, but of the working populace too.

Strache's political education began when he left school. As his autobiography continues, he notes that this edification was "no accident, rather [he actively sought to develop his] essential principles."¹⁹ These "essential principles" were focussed, he immediately states, on a close acquaintance with Austrian neo-Nazi Norbert Burger (1929-1992) and on a developing consciousness of not only his Austrian, but also his wider German identity.

¹² Marion Strache has spoken publically about her son and his childhood, recounting how he dressed up as a cat every year for *Fasching* celebrations. See Conny Bischofberger, 3.02.07, <http://www.kurier.at>

¹³ Andreas Mölzer and Heinz-Christian Strache, *Neue Männer braucht das Land*, (Wien: ZZ-Edition, 2006). See also <http://www.zurzeit.at/index.php?id=174>

¹⁴ For example, Hitler, Alfred Rosenberg and *Auslandsorganisation* head E.W. Bohle.

¹⁵ Hans Saner quoted in Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 17.

¹⁶ 'Sudentenland' is not used any longer as a geographical term, only in historical contexts. It is not especially right-wing to use this term, but it is certainly historically revisionist. See <http://www.sudeten.de/cms/> My thanks to Dr Katja Gesche for this information.

¹⁷ <http://www.zurzeit.at/index.php?id=174>

¹⁸ www.hcstrache.at, 'Vita' section.

¹⁹ <http://www.zurzeit.at/index.php?id=174>

Strache, unlike Haider, is not a child of Nazi parents reacting against an untouchable past in an immediately postwar Austria furtively trying to wipe clean its conscience. Rather, he comes of age in the still-more confused aftermath of this era, taking political instruction from a man who has revisited Nazi belief and actively embraced it. Equally, in so avowedly embracing a Pan-German identity, Strache rejects the staunch post-1945 Austrian attempt to ‘de-Germanise’ the country and return instead to an earlier conception of national identity.²⁰ The paths which his connection with Burger and his own understanding of Austria’s complex past led Strache down will be explored later in this paper.

“Strache—a Haider clone?": Strache’s ideology

There is much to suggest (as indeed many have) that Strache is, in a number of respects, simply a younger version of Jörg Haider. Indeed, Strache addresses the question himself in his autobiography by rhetorically asking, "Strache, a Haider clone?".²¹ Despite answering the question with his own protestation that "I am the first Strache and no second Haider" and, most recently, "I am absolutely a different type"²², there is plenty to link the two.²³ Handsome, well groomed, well dressed and telegenic, Strache in his jeans and fashionable jackets cuts something of a dashing figure, just as Haider did, when compared with Austria’s more staid politicians. Just as Haider was variously photographed rock climbing and bungee jumping, Strache made his own declaration of vigour in 2006 to Austrian current affairs magazine *Profil* by saying "I’m bigger and younger than Haider."²⁴ Indeed, Strache is photographed on his website striking various 'male model' poses, winning go-kart races and taking on ski runs. Similarly there are also reams of images of Strache meeting and greeting the country’s youth at Austrian nightclubs. Just as one young Viennese said when interviewed in the late 1990s, "Haider’s really one of us...he’s so cool!", so the same could be said of Strache.²⁵

But one thing that makes differences between the two men apparent and gives Strache a new and additional edge on Haider is his consistent use of multi-media. In August 2006,

²⁰ John Bunzl, “Who the hell is Jörg Haider?”, in Ruth Wodak and Anton Pelinka (eds), *The Haider Phenomenon in Austria*, (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2002), 61-67, 62.

²¹ <http://www.zurzeit.at/index.php?id=174>

²² oe24.at, “Strache: Haider hat die Wähler verraten”, *Österreich*, 3 August 2008, <http://www.oe24.at/zeitung/oesterreich/politik/neuwahlen/article340777.ece>

²³ Strache speaking in *Profil* in 2006 as reported in the *International Herald Tribune*, “Austrian rightist party struggling to woo voters under new leader”, 28 September 2006.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Andre Gingrich, “A Man for all Seasons: An Anthropological Perspective on Public Representation and Cultural Politics of the Austrian Freedom Party”, in Wodak and Pelinka (eds), *The Haider Phenomenon in Austria*, 67-95, 67.

Strache released a rap song, Austria First (Österreich Zuerst) or, the HC Rap, as part of his election campaign. The rap in part reads,

I'm only saying what we're all thinking to ourselves:
We no longer want our land given away
to people, our culture not appreciated,
our laws broken!
For anyone who doesn't want to integrate,
I have a destination,
go back home, have a good flight!
We already have enough of our own unemployed.
Burglary, robbery and raids,
everywhere crime is rising fast.
Opening the East is an "amazing" thing.
It'll be heartily greeted by your HC Strache.²⁶

The HC Rap has now been downloaded some 65,000 times and is available as a ringtone on the FPÖ website. The song was clearly a successful strategy for Strache – he reprised it with the release of a new song in the 2008 elections, "Viva HC".²⁷ The incorporation of its confrontational message into his electoral campaign in some ways recalls the methods now also used by groups like Germany's far right NPD to influence youth through easily accessible music. The NPD's Project Schoolyard (*Project Schulhof*) also allows young, Net savvy people to freely download extreme right wing music with titles such as The Fatherland (Frank Rennicke, Vaterland), German Mother (Annett, Deutsche Mutter), A Warrior (Nahkampf - Ein Krieger) and Will to Victory (Sleipnir - Wille zum Sieg).²⁸ What is striking in Strache's case, though, is his use of a musical style most often associated with African-American culture, which is now so popular as to raise fewer eyebrows with the general public than the NPD's more easily recognisable examples of 'hate-rock'.

Peter Westenthaler, former leader of the BZÖ and Strache's bitter political rival, also released a single, "We're holding on (Wir halten 'zam)". Despite its upbeat pop tempo, it is no match for Strache's rap, and although both songs employ rightist ideology, Westenthaler's does so with old-school nationalistic images of Austria's "beautiful" landscape of "mountains, rivers and forests".²⁹ Strache's message, while more blatantly hostile to other ethnic groups within Austria, does so under the guise of a 'cool' rap song. The lyric, "For anyone who doesn't want to integrate, I have a destination, go back home, have a good flight!", echoes, for example, the slogan heading one of the NPD's latest

²⁶ The HC Rap as sourced from www.hcstrache.at and translated by Emily Turner-Graham.

²⁷ <http://www.hcstrache.at/08/hcrap.htm>

²⁸ See <http://www.npd.de>

²⁹ See <http://bzoe-podcast.podspot.de/post/westenthaler-song-wir-halten-zamm/> Westenthaler was removed from the leadership post on 30 August 2008 and replaced by Jörg Haider. The current leader of the BZÖ, following Jörg Haider's death on 11 October 2008, is Stefan Petzner.

brochures: “Gute Heimreise!” ([Have a] Good Journey Home!), accompanied by a photograph of a group of Muslim women, laden with bags with their backs to the camera, apparently leaving.³⁰ Yet it is interesting to also note that a large group of young Viennese rappers 'dissed' (or disrespected) Strache's musical message over the 2006 summer with their own counter-rap songs at the so-called HC-Diss or Hip Hop against the Right (Hip Hop Gegen Rechts) event.³¹

Strache's slickly presented website provides a wealth of similarly accessible information. His electioneering radio spots can be downloaded, his semi-regular magazine *We Austrians (Wir Österreicher)* is available as a PDF and he is even portrayed as a superhero in semi-regular cartoons, HC-Man, saving Austria from the greivous misdemeanours of its apparently errant politicians.

Strache variously puts himself forward as "the Patriot", "the Challenger" (der Herausforderer) and, of course, HC-Man. Just as Haider did before joining the government, Strache presents himself as an opposing force, a third way, a vital alternative to the stagnant and corrupt powers that be (last year's election campaign, for example, was billed by the FPÖ as the "Duel in Austria"). The use of the word 'duel' also in part recalls Strache's proud connections with his right-wing student fraternity, the *Wiener pennale Burschenschaft Vandalia*, a ritual of whose it is to fight duels.³² I will return to Strache's fraternal connections shortly.

Strache's language is pointedly inclusive. He speaks of "We Austrians" and refers to himself as "your H.C. Strache". As was observed of Haider, Strache too can "work a room, embracing supporters and using the familiar 'du' form of address."³³ This image of Strache as a man of the people is made plain in another snippet from the "the HC Rap":

We're talking about the year 2006. All politicians
have resigned themselves to the dominant government
...All politicians?
No, there's one from a non-compliant party, the FPÖ,
who keeps on resisting.

I'm HC, a representative of the people...
acting on conviction.
Here, no one dares to speak the truth,

³⁰ See www.npd.de

³¹ See "And the nominees are...", *Der Standard*, 23 September 2006. See also Beret Norman, "The Politics of Austrian Hip-Hop: HC Strache's Xenophobia Gets Dissed." *Colloquia Germanica*, Special Issue: Writing In/About Vienna. 39 (2) (2006): 209-30.

³² See http://www.vandalia-wien.at/haupt.php?seite=wer_wir_sind.htm

³³ As quoted in Emily Turner-Graham, "Austria's Shunning by the Global Community", in Meghan Appel O'Meara (ed.), *History Behind the Headlines*, (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001), 25-33, 30.

so may I please be so bold?
This rap will put in black and white
many things you already know.
Scandal, bribery, corruption and treason,
They're the cornerstones of our state[,]
[a]nd the parliament presides over it.³⁴

During both his election bids for the FPÖ, in Vienna and nationally, Strache has employed the following slogans:

At home instead of Islam (Daham statt Islam)
Welfare state instead of immigration (Sozialstaat statt Zuwanderung)
Work instead of immigration (Arbeit statt Zuwanderung)
Secure pensions instead of millions of Asylum Seekers (Sichere Pensionen statt Asyl-Millionen)
German instead 'don't understand' (Deutsch statt Nix versteh'n)
Caring instead of greedy & brutal (Sozial statt Gierig & Brutal)³⁵

The apparent threat of Islam has allowed Strache to embellish upon themes previously made familiar by Jörg Haider, giving his own message an additional edge to the point that he has been labelled a "dangerous demagogue".³⁶ His radio advertisements have also focussed on:

Homeland instead of Schüssel and (together with) Brussels (Heimat statt Schüssel samt Brüssel)
Against the Headscarf (Gegen Koftuchzwang)
Homeland instead of the EU dictate (Heimat statt EU-Diktat)
The EU takes more and more rights from us (EU nimmt uns immer mehr Rechte weg)³⁷

This stark setting up of opposites and again a deliberate construction of an 'us and them' mentality was further consolidated in street posters which urged a vote for Strache so that "the REAL VIENNESE don't go under" (Damit der ECHTE WIENER nicht untergeht – a play on a popular Austrian TV show "Ein echter Wiener geht nicht unter", A real Viennese doesn't go under). For Strache, the *Heimat* is not a place you could migrate to and adopt but it must be in the heart ("Heimat im Herzen"). It was not only a physical location, but also an inner sentiment and a very particularly prescribed one at that. Real Austrians, Strache's posters urged, must "remain masters in their own house" (Herr im EIGENEN HAUS bleiben). The real focus of Strache's campaign, the Muslim community, was also targetted again with the

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* Strache argues that the percentage of school students whose mother tongue is not German should be capped at 30%.

³⁶ Jürgen Kremb, "Time to Reap in Austria", 4 November 2005, *Spiegel Online*,

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,350872,00.html>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

slogan, Free women instead of forced headscarves – go for the REAL VIENNA (Freie Frauen statt Kopftuchzwang – Geh hin für's ECHTE WIEN). In wading into the headscarf debate, Strache took his place amongst a Europe-wide, often conservative, fixation on the Muslim headscarf as a symbol of Islamic otherness and thus, threat. Similarly, Strache's campaign suggested that "Vienna must not become Istanbul" (Wien darf nicht Istanbul werden).

Ever greater concerns about terrorism throughout the post-September 11 world have provided grist to many political mills but far rightists like Strache have made especial use of it. "Our program (is for) a secure Vienna" one advertisement promised, while another called for "Law and order instead of violations (by) asylum (seekers)" (Rechte & Ordnung statt Asylmißbrauch). While Haider stated that "Vienna must not become Chicago" in the 1990s, the current international situation has allowed Strache to add an additional edge to his calls to deport those "unwilling to integrate" (Intergrationsunwillige abschieben) and to "send guestworkers home" (Gastarbeitslose zurück in die Heimat).³⁸

From such inflammatory statements, it is worth also returning to Strache's autobiography in order to further understand his ideological stance. In the chapter headed "Idea of [the] world and Humanity", Strache describes the family as "an organic structure [within] the Volk".³⁹ The use of both the words 'organic' and 'Volk' make reference to, if not explicitly nazified understandings of society, then certainly their *völkisch* predecessors for whom ideological dialogues employing the notion of society as a living organism were a part of common parlance.⁴⁰ Marriage is described by Strache as being of "important value" yet gay marriage is an institution for which he has "no understanding". From there, Strache describes multicultural society as a "failure", and so once more assembling a series of dichotomies: marriage is good and a necessary precursor to family and so a healthy *Volk*. Multiculturalism is a failure, apparently built on the shaky foundations of inexplicable social unions like gay marriage.⁴¹ These are well worn rightist assertions, made new by Strache's extensive cyberspace presence and given a further currency by the addition of his virulently anti-Islam stance.

³⁸ Haider claimed "Vienna must not become Chicago" referred to "this historical image since the city used to be synonymous with organised crime". Yet in virtually the same breath, he also stated that "you should not make an ideology out of multi-culturalism". See Melanie A. Sully, *The Haider Phenomenon*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1997), 217.

³⁹ <http://www.zurzeit.at/index.php?id=174>

⁴⁰ These ideas are discussed in numerous publications but see, for example, Emily Turner-Graham, "Stählernde Romantik—Völkisch thought and National Socialism" in Emily Turner-Graham, "Never forget that you are a German": *Die Brücke, Deutschtum* and National Socialism in Australia, (University of Melbourne: unpublished thesis, 2006), 69-108.

⁴¹ <http://www.zurzeit.at/index.php?id=174>

Strache confirms that he is pro-natalist with the chapter sub-heading "Birth rate is the key" and is keen for Austrians (as defined by him) to have "strong families" with prescribed support from the State (such as "reformed childcare" and "tax breaks").⁴² In a remarkable connection, Strache then links Austrian natalism with national identity by stating in this same chapter that "youth need a homeland"⁴³ and that they must be given an education in awareness in order to protect themselves (Jugendschutz—Bewußtseinbildung). An awareness of and protection from what is left unsaid, but suggested instead by its context.

Strache then goes on to make clear his own ethnic identification: "first Austrian, then German, then European". Europe, he states, is a "Christian-Western community of values". Strache is a pan-German not a pan-European and his Europe when he does eventually cast an eye to it is a narrowly delineated one. There should be no European superstate, he declares, but there should be a solitary core idea of Europe (*Kerneuropa*). Further there should be reduced (no) eastern inclusion into the EU and Turkey—or the "trojan horse" as he again describes it—should certainly be prevented from entering the Union. In keeping with his archly pan-German stance, Strache puts forward that Germans should no longer be made fun of (Kein „Piefke-Frotzeln“) as is the long-held Austrian tradition and, in homage to his political mentor Norbert Burger and with certainly a nationalistic and even an expansionist eye, Strache asserts that Austria should claim the currently autonomous territory of South Tirol.⁴⁴ This latter cause is taken up on the FPÖ website by way of a media-savvy online video presentation.⁴⁵

Strache also writes of a "deutsch Volks-, Kultur- and Schicksalsgemeinschaft", or a German community of *Volk*, culture and common destiny. Most arresting here is his use of "*Volksgemeinschaft*", a word laden with racial meaning and rarely used outside of the Nazi era. There is a need for a predominant culture (*Leitkultur*), he also asserts, and opportunity for expression within the cultural world should not be restricted to the domain of the "*Schickeria*" or in-crowd, thus also taking the traditional right-wing swipe at the cultural elite or intelligentsia.

The learning of the German language is a special and persistent concern of Strache's which ideologically ties him to not only the Nazi period but also the pre-Nazi *völkisch* era and postwar pan-German nationalists. As well as pushing the slogan "German instead (of)

⁴² *Ibid.* all material is taken from this source from hereon in, unless otherwise stated. It should be noted that Strache is constructing a very specific state, however. For example, "(the) [s]ocial lazy-bed is over" (Soziales Faulbett ist vorbei), he states.

⁴³ The complex and multi-layered term 'Heimat' is used.

⁴⁴ South Tirol is an autonomous territory of Italy as of 1919.

⁴⁵ See www.fpoe.at

'don't understand' " (Deutsch statt Nix versteh'n) in his election campaigns, in his autobiography he states that children should not be allowed to attend Austrian schools without some knowledge of German and that German should be taught more thoroughly.

Thus, for all of his apparent modernity, it can be clearly seen that Strache's nationalist stance conforms neatly to a number of key criteria set down in the relevant historiography. Benedict Anderson assumes that nations are “mental constructs, imagined communities”.⁴⁶ Ruth Wodak supports this, arguing that there are a number of necessary planks to the imagined platform of national identity. When understanding ‘identity’ as

a completely static idea, the concept wrongly suggests that people belong to a solid, unchanging, intrinsic, collective unit because of a specific history which they supposedly have in common...⁴⁷

Further, there is a need for “the narrative of the nation”...[which]...ties everyday life to a ‘national destiny’; “an emphasis on origins, continuity, tradition, and timelessness.”; the “invention of tradition”; the “foundational myth or myth of origin” and the idea of a “pure, original people or “folk” ”. In addition, the creation of national identity relies upon the idea of “a national spirit of ‘*Volksgeist*’ ”and “historical memory”.⁴⁸ “A national culture is a discourse—a way of constructing meanings...”, and this is exactly what Strache is in the process of attempting.⁴⁹

“Ladies and gentlemen...learn your history!”

Haider became best known for his inflammatory comments regarding Austria's complex relationship with its past. He was forced to resign as Governor of Carinthia in 1991 following a parliamentary endorsement of what he described as the Third Reich's “proper employment policy”.⁵⁰ During this same period, he described concentration camps as “punishment camps”(the suggestion being that prisoners were criminals and so deserving of punishment); at a reunion of former SS men, he referred to those assembled as “sound, decent men of

⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), 15 and Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 3.

⁴⁷ Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall quoted in Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* It should be noted, however, that he was Deputy Governor of Carinthia within a week of his resignation and returned to the governorship in 1999, a role in which he remains. Also, Haider has since contested interpretations of what he said and the context in which it was said. See Haider's version of events at “Haider sans Filtre”, <http://www.quebecoislibre.org/000219-8.htm>

principle” and compared the deportation of the Jews by the Nazis with the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia following World War Two.⁵¹

Just as Haider’s view of history has underscored his rightist stance, so too Strache’s interpretation of Austrian history has raised both eyebrows and questions. In a recent interview with the Viennese weekly *Falter*, Strache stated that Austria could not be held responsible for Nazi crimes. He labelled deserters from the German Army as ‘perpetrators’ and saw no difference between the Austrian regime of the 1930s, the Nazi regime and the Allied occupation:

From 1933 to 1955 there was no democratic system in Austria. There were atrocities in the concentration camps, expulsions [of Germans from Czechoslovakia] by President Eduard Beneš, violations and rapes by the Allies. Systematic murder took place everywhere.⁵²

At the start of this year, Strache exclaimed at a headline-grabbing press conference, “Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press, learn your history!”⁵³ Strache was in the process of explaining his own past. In January, photographs had surfaced of him as a young man in 1990 in camouflage uniform, playing paintball in the German woods with members of the German neo-Nazi youth group, Viking Youth. He was also photographed posing in the same uniform at a war memorial. In earlier photographs from 1987, Strache was pictured giving the three-fingered “Kühnen-greeting” (the neo-Nazi salute which replaced the banned traditional out-stretched arm) while dressed in the cap of his right wing Viennese student fraternity.⁵⁴

Charges of neo-Nazi allegiance were vigorously denied by Strache, though this sort of evidence stacked up accusingly against him and was further compounded by questions arising over his association with well known neo-Nazis like (Austrian) Gottfried Küssel and also by his confirmed engagement to the daughter of (Austrian) extreme right figure, Norbert Burger. Strache protested,

⁵¹ Emily Turner-Graham, “Austria’s Shunning by the Global Community”, in *History Behind the Headlines—The Origins of Conflicts Worldwide*, volume 2, (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001), 25-33, 30. See Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 85-97 for a further discussion of Austrian political constructions of the past.

⁵² Strache quoted in “Antisemitism and Racism in Austria”, 2005 report, accessed from Tel Aviv University website - www.tau.ac.il

⁵³ Heinz-Christian Strache, “Strache: Distanziere mich von allen totalitären Ideologien! Grundsatzklärung des FPÖ-Bundesparteiobmanns zu den Vorwürfen der vergangenen Wochen”, http://www.fpoe.at/index.php?id=477&backPID=390&tt_news=12083, accessed 7 February 2007.

⁵⁴ The *schlagenden Schülerverbindung*, *Wiener pennale Burschenschaft Vandalia*. Any fraternity prefaced with ‘schlagende Verbindungen’ is known for its (often extreme) right wing, traditionalist stance. These groups participate in duelling as a right of passage. My thanks to Dr Katja Gesche for this information.

In my whole active political thinking, word and deed in my mandated position as an enthusiastic democrat, [it] has been made clear often and unmistakably. I do not have anything in common with the ideology of National Socialism; in fact I have a decided dislike of it. This body of thought is past for the FPÖ.⁵⁵

At first, Strache apparently made light of his situation (or indeed derided its significance), claiming that with his three-fingered salute, he was in fact ordering three beers. The flippancy of such a response recalls Jörg Haider’s present-day “trivializing” of Austria’s complex past.⁵⁶ With Haider, it was the Nazi past. With Strache, it is his own, apparently neo-Nazi past which he seeks to “relativise”.⁵⁷ Strache is a far right politician of a new generation and correspondingly, his focus if not always his approach is different. But as the above quote from the February 2007 press conference made clear, he was increasingly keen to obviate or at least explain away his inconvenient history to a mainstream Austrian populace still concerned by the shadow of Nazism. As a young man, he claimed he was simply “fascinated with military life”, hence the uniform.⁵⁸ As for paintballing with the Viking Youth, “much more dangerous militaristic computer games [are] played by today’s youth”.⁵⁹ Certainly he knew of those associated with neo-Nazism but

[a]s a result of a personal maturing process all those bridges connecting me with [NS] ideology have been burnt. My politics and that of the FPÖ are to maintain a vigilantly distant [*gelebtes*] relationship to all persons who do not draw a sharp, clear line between themselves and NS ideology.⁶⁰

Yet in late 2007, still more photos of Strache emerged. This time, he is pictured in Germany in 1994 holding a flaming torch in the midst of a neo-Nazi crowd.⁶¹ By then twenty-five years of age, Strache was beyond what Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer dismissed in the paintballing photos as nothing more than “youthful pranks”.⁶²

⁵⁵ Strache, “Strache: Distanziere mich von allen totalitären Ideologien!...”.

⁵⁶ Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 194.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ “Neues Jugend-Foto von Strache aufgetaucht”, *Die Presse*, 11 September 2007, www.diepresse.at/home/politik/innenpolitik/329287/print.do

⁶² “Austrian Far-Right Leader Attacked for Alleged Neo-Nazi Past – Jewish Community Criticizes Government for Under-Reacting”, 30 January 2007. Accessed from European Jewish Congress website, www.eurojewcong.org Gusenbauer has been the Chancellor since January 2007 and represents the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ)*. He holds government in ‘grand coalition’ with the *ÖVP*.

The FPÖ was founded in 1956 and had its historical roots in the Pan-German movement. Many of the FPÖ's members were former Nazis but it did find more widespread appeal as a 'third path' party in between the Catholic-focussed Austrian People's Party (ÖVP or *Österreichische Volkspartei*) and the socialist Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ or *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*). During this period, the FPÖ did indeed come to represent something of a grab-bag of those in search of an alternative to the "Grand Coalition" of Austria's postwar years, amongst them dissatisfied liberals, members of the business community seeking more economic liberalism and Pan-Germanists who remained sympathetic to certain Nazi policies.⁶³ Then as now, the FPÖ's number were also swelled by German-Nationalist *Studentenverbinding* (student fraternities).

In 2004, Heinz-Christian Strache made an appearance at the annual Hero Remembrance service (*Heldengedenken*) in Vienna. It takes place each year on 8 May, the day of the German army's surrender in 1945. Strache's appearance is available on *Youtube*, thus taking the event and its message to a wide and often youthful audience and again underscoring how Strache, as a right-winger of the twenty-first century, employs various media to make his mark. The service involves members of the right-wing student fraternities of Vienna—both current and "*Alter Herr*" (or, old boys)—marching through Vienna and then assembling together by candlelight in the Heldenplatz. In 2004, Strache gave the *Totenrede* (Speech to the Dead) and he stated that those attending the memorial were the true guardians of democracy and that the sizeable anti-fascist (*Antifa*) demonstrators who were also present were in fact fascists for suppressing freedom of speech. Strache referred to the "allied bomb terror" of the War and lambasted Vienna's local council and the "present historical view" for refusing to allow hero status to be bestowed upon the Viennese grave of World War Two *Luftwaffe* flying ace Walter Nowotny.⁶⁴ In the use of the word "present" Strache hints at a degree of impermanence (even falsehood) in not only this stance but perhaps in 'political correctness' in general. Another speaker at the service spoke of the "air-terror" unleashed by the Allies, the "strong characters" of the men and women who had faced these terrors and inferred that German wartime 'occupation' of Vienna had been preferable to Allied 'occupation' post-1945. Austria's well known 'victim myth', long since reassessed by the nation at large, had been subverted and reclaimed by the right wing, reflecting still in the early twenty-first century the "collective innocence" antidote Jörg Haider provided in 1990 to the apparently troubling notion of "collective guilt".⁶⁵

⁶³ For a further examination of the early composition of the FPÖ, see Ruth Wodak and Anton Pelinka (eds.), *The Haider Phenomenon in Austria*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), *passim*.

⁶⁴ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaJLubd-6IM>

⁶⁵ Wodak et. al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 92.

In 2006 Andreas Mölzer gave the *Totenrede*. Mölzer represents the FPÖ in the European parliament and has recently co-authored with Strache a biography of sorts, *Neue Männer braucht das Land: Heinz-Christian Strache im Gespräch mit Andreas Mölzer*.⁶⁶ His *Totenrede* made a link between right-wing perceptions of identity in the past and future, calling for the need of contemporary Europe to protect against ‘Islamisation’ and that the recollection of those who had fallen in the War was the “damned duty” [“*verdammt* Pflicht”] of those assembled as Europeans.⁶⁷ This contestable memorialisation of Austria’s past has also given the FPÖ the opportunity to present a contestable version of the present and future.⁶⁸

Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty: Strache, Mölzer & the EU

In 2002, Haider hit upon the idea of a pan-European anti-EU group within the European parliament.⁶⁹ In 2007, this idea came to fruition. The Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group was formally recognised in the European Parliament on 15 January this year. It comprises 23 members from six different member states, including a number of members from France’s *Front National*, such as Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen, Alessandra Mussolini from Italy’s *Alternativa Sociale* and Andreas Mölzer from the FPÖ. Andreas Mölzer had been a driving force behind the group from its inception. Again what had been an idea for Haider, has now become reality and a potentially challenging voice within Europe.

From 1999 until 2002, Andreas Mölzer was cultural advisor to Jörg Haider. In 2004, Mölzer was elected as the only Member of the European Parliament for the Freedom Party. In 2005, he was expelled from the Freedom Party for being a harsh critic of Jörg Haider and his populist faction, but was re-admitted after Heinz-Christian Strache took over the party. He often publishes articles in several German right-wing journals, such as a weekly column on European Affairs for the controversial German newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (Young Freedom). Mölzer has also been widely published in *Die Presse* and the *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria’s leading tabloid. Since 1997, he has been editor-in-chief of the right-wing-weekly *Zur Zeit*, which is seen as the sister paper to Germany’s *Junge Freiheit*. He has also written and edited several books on political and historical topics such as *Jews and Germans: Past and*

⁶⁶ Heinz-Christian Strache and Andreas Mölzer, *Neue Männer braucht das Land: Heinz-Christian Strache im Gespräch mit Andreas Mölzer*, Zur Zeit Edition, (Wien: W3 Verlagsgesellschaft, 2006).

⁶⁷ “Gedenkfeier 2006 in der Wiener Hofburg”, <http://www.wno.org/newpages/lch50.html>

⁶⁸ For further examination of this subject, see Emily Turner-Graham, “*Trauermarsch*: German history as remembered by the Extreme Right”, paper for the German Studies Association conference, 27.09.07.

⁶⁹ Kate Connolly, “Do you wanna be in my gang?”, *Guardian*, 31 May 2002.

Future.⁷⁰ Mölzer is deputy leader of the Identity Tradition and Sovereignty group in the European parliament. His close collaboration with Strache on the latter's autobiography is evidence of the influence which Mölzer's Pan-Germanism and anti-EU stance will now exert within the FPÖ.

The FPÖ currently run a sophisticated campaign through their website entitled "Austria remain free!", suggesting that they offer an alternative to the existing and apparently constraining nature of membership of the EU. In it they call for a referendum on the EU constitution⁷¹ and the entry of Turkey into the EU (and indeed, to prevent that entry altogether if at all possible). They support the idea of Europe, but as *they* define it not as "a dictatorship of Eurokrats". Europe too must become a conglomerate of "self aware fatherlands" and it must represent the concerns of its citizens. In doing so, the FPÖ suggest that those concerns are with illegal immigrants, terrorism and "the politics of the family"—in short, the FPÖ's own concerns.⁷²

For Strache, an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, as is represented in the EU, is a mistake. Of globalisation he says: "The market is stupid actually. It is the scourge of mankind, if it does not allow borders. Freedom needs borders."⁷³ The Christian-Western tradition, he stresses, does not mean freedom of responsibility, but freedom of choice and the bearing of consequences.⁷⁴

Strache puts forward that Austria's social system will break down, because the on-going flow of immigrants costs the State too much money. And, he argues, they come in order to then islamise Austria in the long run. "They come to us," he has said "because it is so intolerable abroad? And want to then change Austria so that it is like the countries from which they fled? That is somewhat difficult to understand."⁷⁵ He fears that, if left unchecked, in a few decades every second young Austrian will be a Muslim.⁷⁶ Like Haider, Strache attempts to demolish public trust in the EU through a persistent "strategy of negative connotation".⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Walter Simon, Andreas Mölzer and Martin Hobek (eds.), *Juden und Deutsche: Vergangenheit und Zukunft*, (Graz: L.Stocker, 1994).

⁷¹ 'The Treaty of Lisbon' which seeks to consolidate the shakier aspects of existing EU legislation. See AFP, "EU leaders gratified but treaty not yet ratified", 20 October 2007. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALegM5hD1W9ONIBdCgHWkAW0hQF3Be1Itw>

⁷² See www.oesterreichbleibfrei.at

⁷³ Martin Krusche, "Hans[sic] Christian Strache in Gleisdorf", www.unplugged.at, no date given.

⁷⁴ Further, the United States of America is not "an exemplary concept" for [Austria]. Austria should actually focus [on building itself up]. *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Wodak et.al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, 101.

At the *Europa-Kongress* in Mainz at the start of October, Strache took Haider’s idea of an anti-EU group within the European parliament one step further, by arguing with his rightist his co-hort for the need to make new connections in Europe, starting by a breaking down of the borders between Austria and Germany. An idea of a *Großdeutschland* seems to be making a comeback. Strikingly, the border between Berchtesgaden (the location of Hitler’s infamous alpine retreat) and Salzburg were cited as an ideal point at which borders could be meshed. Strache now supports a “Europe of Fatherlands”.⁷⁸

Conclusions

It should be observed that Strache has not yet enjoyed quite the sort of election success that swept Haider and the FPÖ into governmental partnership in 2000. In 1999, under Haider, the FPÖ alone received 26.9% of the vote - more than in any previous election since the party’s formation in 1956. Yet the promising showing at the 2008 election prove that in Strache, there is an injection of lifeblood into the FPÖ which will ensure, at least for the time being, that the party remains a persistent voice in Austrian and European politics. Armed now with the easily manipulated spectre of Islamic terrorism, the ever-present question of the EU and a plethora of so far highly successful twenty-first century mechanisms by which to spread his message, Strache now steers a rejuvenated vehicle for any future rides to electoral success for Austrian right-wing nationalism.

With the power vacuum now created by Haider’s death, Strache, with a far more Pan-German and indeed transnational focus, looks ever further afield. Having had considerable electoral success in September on the back of a new sheaf of jingoistic one-liners, "Social Security for Our People" (Soziale Sicherheit für unsere Leut’), "Asylum Fraud means a Flight Home" (Asylbetrug heißt Heimatflug), "People’s Representatives instead of EU-Traitors" (Volksvertreter statt EU-Verräter), "They are against him because he is for you" (Sie sind gegen IHN, Weil ER für EUCH ist), Strache continues to prompt concern and questions both at home and abroad as to his motives and goals.⁷⁹ Is he populist? Is he far right? Is he neo-fascist? Strache displays elements of all of these things and yet he is also beyond these labels. He is a consciously modern politician, using Europe’s past to influence its future and target the institutions of its present.

⁷⁸ Johann Gärtner, “Das „Europa der Vaterländer“ formiert sich! - Heinz-Christian Strache kommt!”, <http://www.rep.de/content.aspx?ArticleID=7fc08d65-7502-42d9-94c4-4ce5f90a25b8>

⁷⁹ <http://www.strache.at/index.php?style=7> Emphases is they appear in the original texts. See also Ian Traynor, “Austria in crisis as far right win 29% of vote”, *Guardian*, 30 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/30/austria>

About the author

Dr Emily Turner-Graham is an historian. She holds a PhD from the Department of History at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral thesis was the first detailed cultural study of Nazi ideology as it was presented to the Australian public. As well as the development of fascist ideology in Australia, Emily has also focused on interwar British fascism. She is currently writing on contemporary far right ideology in Austria and Germany.

In addition to two theses, Emily has written numerous book reviews, journal articles and conference papers. She has also co-edited several academic journals. Her first book, "*Never forget that you are a German: Die Brücke, Deutschtum and National Socialism in interwar Australia*", has been accepted for publication.

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