

NEUTRALITY IN THE FACE OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE – WHERE DOES AUSTRIA FIT IN?

As the war in Ukraine reaches its six-month mark, perhaps no one is more surprised that it would reach this point than Vladimir Putin. His vision of a lightning strike that would decapitate the Zelensky government and allow him to install a puppet regime proved to be a massive blunder. He probably counted on three days for his “special operation.” By April, it was clear to most that the invasion had stalled; the stalemate continues today. This was a grave and consequential miscalculation on Putin’s part. But his miscalculation was not limited to surprises on, and above, the battlefield (ranging from the resolve of the people of Ukraine to the tenacity of President Zelensky and the capabilities of the Ukrainian military and intelligence services) or the myriad inadequacies of his own forces. To this point, there are strong similarities between Putin’s miscalculation in Ukraine and Hitler’s flawed Operation Barbarossa.

Beyond the theatre of operations, Putin miscalculated the resolve of the West. He drew the wrong lessons from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, he misread NATO and he misread much of Europe, leaving him to believe he could act with impunity, as he had done before. And there will be significant shifts in defense policy and energy policy in the coming months that flow from the invasion, among them the decisions of neutral Sweden and Finland to abandon their neutrality and apply to join NATO. (Accession talks were [completed](#) July 4.) In June, also prompted by the invasion, Danes by a margin of 67%-33% voted in a referendum to remove an [opt-out](#) from the EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Denmark was the only EU member state not in the CSDP, based on the opt-out secured as part of a 1993 referendum (the other opt-out was from the euro).

The moves by Finland and Sweden prompted me to wonder about another neutral country in Europe, Austria. (Ireland and Switzerland also are neutral.) What further prompted me were news reports of an [open letter](#) published in May by 50 prominent Austrians (a few more have signed on since) calling for “a serious, nationwide discussion about the future of Austria’s security and defence policy and for the adoption of a new security doctrine.” Two months later, there has been no formal government response to this call for a whole-of-society discussion of national security that rises above party politics.

On its face, this call may seem unremarkable, but in fact it is quite significant given how Austria views its place in the world and its post-WWII history – the two in fact are closely intertwined. Austria joined the European Union in 1995 (incidentally at the same time as Finland and Sweden), but it did not join NATO. While the open letter did not suggest that Austria join fellow neutral Europeans Finland and Sweden in seeking admission to NATO, it did place front and center the question of whether it is now time for Austria to jettison 67 years of neutrality.

Austria’s Neutrality

At the end of WWII, Austria, like Germany, was occupied by the Allies – the United States, France, Britain and the Soviet Union. Austria, and separately Vienna, were split into four zones, and administered on a four-party basis. The price for ending the quadripartite administration – in fact, for getting the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from Austria, was an undertaking by Austria of “permanent neutrality” along the lines of Switzerland, set forth

in the so-called Moscow Memorandum of 1955. That, in turn, led to the [State Treaty](#) signed on May 15, 1955. The first day without foreign troops in Austria¹ (October 26, 1955), the Austrian parliament adopted the [Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria](#). Henceforth, Austria would not join any military alliances or permit the establishment of foreign military bases on her territory.

But, neutrality has served various other purposes over the years, as well: from allowing the country to hew to the view that it was the first victim of Nazi Germany to underpinning the idea that the country could serve as an important bridge between West and East. Vienna, like Geneva, hosts a number of UN agencies, including the autonomous International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Vienna also hosts the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is also headquartered in Vienna. Vienna was the site of the Kennedy-Khrushchev summit in 1961 as well as the Carter-Brezhnev summit in 1979. Vienna also has had an outsized share of espionage activity.

The fall of the Iron Curtain reduced the need for that West-East bridge, as western businesses flocked to Prague, Budapest and Warsaw, as well as Moscow.

Austria has never fully come to terms with the period between the Anschluss (annexation) in March 1938 and the end of WWII in 1945, and it is a subject rarely broached. That is why neutrality occupies such a central place in the Austrian psyche. In 2014, Dutch journalist Caroline de Gruyter [wrote](#) that “[t]o this day, neutrality is a secular religion in Austria. The country has a different relationship with Russia from that of Poland or the Baltic states: those countries were ‘freed’ after the Cold War ended, while Austria’s understanding with Moscow continues.”

Times Have Changed

But times have changed, and the war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine has not gone unnoticed in neutral Austria. According to a survey ([available](#) on the website of the Austrian Federal Chancellery), 66% of Austrians favor more cooperation with the European Union on security and defense issues and 46% believe that sanctions against Russia should be tightened. On the issue of neutrality, 70% said neutrality is “very important” and 21% say it is “rather important.” Interestingly the number of Austrians viewing neutrality as “very” or “rather” important increased by 10% over 2019. Similarly, 64% would object to Austria joining NATO.

The views of what neutrality entails has, over the years, gone through various permutations. As a matter of international law, neutrality exists during a state of war. Switzerland is the classic case. From the outset, Austria technically deviated from the Moscow Memorandum undertaking by joining the United Nations (the Swiss had not). Austria participated in UN peacekeeping operations in the Congo in 1960-1962, and in Cypress in 1964-1972, and also participated in UN sanctions programs. Beginning in the 1970s Austria undertook various international commitments under a policy of “active neutrality” championed by Chancellor

¹ Interestingly, the Soviets voluntarily left Austria in 1955, while the countries of the Warsaw Pact would have to wait for the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 before the Soviet military withdrew.

Bruno Kreisky. That came to an end in the mid-1980s, as Austria pulled back, but geopolitical events put further pressure on Austria's foreign policy engagements.

Austria became a member of the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). According to the [Austrian Security Strategy](#) (published in 2013), Austria recognizes that it is in its interest to play a role in the development of security policies both through PfP and EAPC. And it will continue to take part in non-Article 5 operations that are open to PfP partners and fall within its foreign and security interests.

The authors of the open letter note that "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is not only a crime and a tragedy, but also the last warning call for the free world, of which Austria is also a part." It goes on to note that if Austrians "want to maintain our model of life of as an independent, democratic society committed to the rule of law, we urgently need to engage in an honest discussion about how and with which capacities we want to defend ourselves." The status quo, they maintain – premised on a "supposedly untouchable myth" that has never been checked for its "up-to-date functionality," is dangerous for Austria.

Austria did timely back EU sanctions and was reported to have given €60 million to NGOs for humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. But many remain sceptical of its position vis-à-vis Russia given Austria's longstanding benign posture towards its neighbour to the East.

In 2014, while much of the world recoiled at the annexation of Crimea, Vladimir Putin visited Austria (his first to a country in Western Europe following the annexation). In 2018, the then foreign minister (Karin Kneissl – of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)) invited Putin to her wedding (and later served a term on the board of Rosneft). This was Putin's sixth visit, and coincided with the 50th anniversary of the first Soviet deliveries of natural gas to any country in Western Europe – Austria. Austria declined to expel Russian diplomats following the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury.

Since the early 2000s, the FPÖ has maintained close ties with Russia; in 2016, it signed a partnership agreement with Putin's United Russia. Ties between Russian and Austrian politicians are reported to go deeper. Kneissl was not the only former government official to join the board of Russia companies (one former chancellor sat on the board of Russian Railways and another on the board of energy company Lukoil – both resigned over the invasion of Ukraine). In June, it was reported that the supervisory board of Austrian energy group OMV had launched an internal review of investments in Russia (including gas supply contracts with Gazprom) and Nord Stream 2 by its former CEO. A bizarre spy vs. spy raid reportedly triggered by suspected ties to Russia ultimately led to the dissolution of Austria's domestic intelligence agency (BVT), albeit the last straw may have been failures to prevent a terror attack in Vienna in November 2020. Concerns over sharing of intelligence with the Austrians reportedly arose after the FPÖ joined the government as a coalition partner, and one of its politicians was appointed Interior Minister.

Concluding Thoughts

This is an election year in Austria, so government silence on the May open letter, beyond [soundbites](#) that Austria will remain neutral,² is understandable. Interestingly, as noted above Austria participates in the CSDP (the Federal Constitution was amended to enable such participation) and has taken part in UN peacekeeping and sanctions efforts (*see generally*, [a Walk on a tightrope between Neutrality and International Solidarity](#)).³ It is hard, though, to take issue with a call for public debate on a subject that for decades has been taboo, and about which even the current Austrian Chancellor [notes](#), there is “no discussion.” All the more so when the concept at issue no longer fits neatly within the paradigms for European defense and security in 2022.

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² The current chancellor Karl Nehammer, became chancellor after being elected leader of the ruling People’s Party (ÖVP) following the resignation of Sebastian Kurz, who stepped down due to a corruption scandal.

³ According to an [overview](#) posted by the Austrian Embassy in Washington, DC on its website, the EU currently is maintaining 17 CSDP operations and missions, five of which are military (the peace-contingent EUFOR ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the anti-piracy operation Atalanta off the Horn of Africa, the two training-missions in Somalia and Mali and the peace operation EUFOR in the Central African Republic) and eleven civilian missions in Europe (Kosovo, Georgia, Moldova/Ukraine), in the Middle East (Palestine, Afghanistan, Libya) and in Africa (DRC, Niger and the Horn of Africa). An additional mission in the Ukraine is in preparation. The Austrian military currently is contributing to military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mali and the Central African Republic as well as to the civilian missions in Georgia and the DRC. With 300 plus troops Austria is contributing over half the troop strength for EUFOR ALTHEA, and Austrian policemen and diplomats are taking part in CSDP-missions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Georgia, Palestine and Libya.