

**Final Research Report**  
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**Austria in the International Community**  
**Exploring the Role of Neutrality**

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## Acronyms

CFE.....	Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CFSP.....	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSCE.....	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
EC.....	European Community
EEC.....	European Economic Community
EFTA.....	European Free Trade Association
EU.....	European Union
FPÖ.....	Freedom Party of Austria
IAEA.....	International Atomic Energy Agency
JCPOA.....	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MBFR.....	Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions
NATO.....	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
N+N.....	Neutral and non-aligned countries
ÖGfE.....	Austrian society for European policy
OPEC.....	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE.....	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
ÖVP.....	Austrian People's Party
PfP.....	Partnership for Peace
SPÖ.....	Social Democratic Party of Austria
UNIDO.....	United Nations Industrial Organization
UNSC.....	United Nations Security Council
VIC.....	Vienna International Center

*Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube* (let others wage war, thou, happy Austria, marry) is a well-known proverb in Austria, stemming from the Habsburg tradition of expanding the empire through marriage rather than wars. After two world wars, Austria returned to its aversion for warfare in 1955, when it adopted a status of permanent neutrality. Devoid of royals to marry off and of its longing for expansion, Austria's renunciation was a mere matter of self-preservation and sovereignty and has left an undeniable mark on the country ever since. The benefits of Austrian neutrality have been widely discussed—more than anything, by Austrians themselves. Paul Luif finds that neutrality allowed Austria to develop its identity separately from Germany, to “gain prestige and influence” in the international realm, to have a positive rapport with Eastern Europe and, naturally, to stay politically and economically independent in war times.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Austrian neutrality has also been criticized for its “isolationist-nationalist” nature and proneness to free riding.<sup>2</sup>

As the world around Austria has changed, so has the role of neutrality, so have its imperatives and restrictions on Austrian foreign policy. A product of post-war occupation and pre-condition for the withdrawal of Soviet troops, some have argued that neutrality stopped serving its purpose with the end of the Cold War. I will depart from this assumption and analyze whether indeed, neutrality has ceased being a defining element of Austrian foreign policy and its position in the international sphere.

This paper starts with a short analysis of the meaning of neutrality in the field international relations. It then examines the Austrian case and its specificities: its historic development, influence on foreign policy, Austria's relation to international organizations, and role as diplomatic hub and builder of bridges. In a next step, the domestic perception of neutrality will be discussed, followed by an analysis of its perception abroad, namely in Russia, the United States and Europe as a whole. In a final section, I will draw my conclusions and determine whether Austrian neutrality—in essence—has lost its relevance in Austrian *realpolitik*.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Luif, “Austria's Permanent Neutrality – Its Origins, Development, and Demise,” in *International Perceptions of Austrian Neutrality*, ed. Günther Bischof, Anton Pelinka and Ruth Wodak (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Gustav Gressel, “Austria: Russia's Trojan Horse?” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 21, 2017, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_austria\\_russias\\_trojan\\_horse/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_austria_russias_trojan_horse/).

## Neutrality in International Relations

Some might say that neutrality has its very origins in Austria, having first been recognized as strategic policy during the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Neutrality was later legally codified in the Hague Conventions of 1907, which declared that neutral countries could be exempt from participating directly or indirectly in wars. This right to remain neutral, according to Walzer stems from its sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> Reasons why states become neutral may vary. According to Goetschel, neutrality can help small states remain politically independent, or result from idealistic intentions to limit the use of force in international relations.<sup>4</sup>

Luif defines neutrality as “complement to alliance membership” and describes four variations:<sup>5</sup>

- *Occasional neutrality* “in a particular war between other states”
- *Permanent neutrality* “in all future wars” as well as the commitment “to avoid such peacetime ties and policies as would make its neutrality impossible”
- *Conventional neutrality* as neutrality without foundation in international law
- *Nonalignment* as the abstention from joining Cold War alliances

Despite its existence in political theory for over 200 years, neutrality may be seen as stepchild of international relations theory, having largely been neglected in its literature. Realists in particular have found neutrality to be incompatible with the principle of collective security, considering it an “unrealistic, amoral, unacceptable stance and security choice of small and weak states”.<sup>6</sup> Neutral countries have faced international criticism for not participating in wars, particularly if deemed just.<sup>7</sup> Despite a states’ inherent right to neutrality, Walzer questions the morality of remaining neutral, particularly if one of the parties is an aggressor and thus finds that “the ‘neuter’ is not a person one instinctively likes”.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, neutrals are also associated with positive attributes, particularly related to their frequent role as mediators, providers of good offices, and bridge builders. This special position in the international realm has helped neutral countries justify their policy to other states, which might have considered them free riders or cowards otherwise, and has given neutrals the reputation as contributors to international peace.<sup>9</sup> This identity-providing function of neutrality has become central since the end of the Cold War. According to Goetschel, neutrality “de facto disappeared” after the Cold War, as neutral countries aligned themselves with the European Union and sought stronger NATO cooperation.<sup>10</sup> Due to the near disappearance of interstate conflicts and the rise of other forms of conflicts, including civil wars, the ideological motivations of neutrality—pacifism and disarmament—have grown in importance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 233.

<sup>4</sup> Laurent Goetschel, “Neutrality, a Really Dead Concept?” *Cooperation and Conflict* 34, no. 2 (June 1999): 119–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108369921961807>.

<sup>5</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 129–130.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Martin Rolenc, “The relevance of neutrality in contemporary international relations,” Faculty of International Relations Working papers, 1/2008, (Prague: Oeconomica: 2008), 12, [https://katalog.cbvk.cz/arl-cbvk/en/detail-cbvk\\_us\\_cat-0110503-The-relevance-of-neutrality-in-contemporary-international-relations/](https://katalog.cbvk.cz/arl-cbvk/en/detail-cbvk_us_cat-0110503-The-relevance-of-neutrality-in-contemporary-international-relations/).

<sup>7</sup> Goetschel, “Neutrality,” 120.

<sup>8</sup> Walzer, „Just and Unjust Wars,” 233–235.

<sup>9</sup> Goetschel, „Neutrality,” 121.

<sup>10</sup> Goetschel, „Neutrality,” 115.

<sup>11</sup> Goetschel, „Neutrality,” 131.

Neutrality in international relations thus appears to be caught between two perceptions: neutrality as tool to promote peaceful relations through mediation versus as excuse for passive acquiescence to injustices of an aggressor.<sup>12</sup>

## The many faces of Austrian neutrality

Neutrality has shaped Austrian foreign policy and its perception since 1955. This section shall shed light on the historic development of Austrian permanent neutrality, its effect on the country's foreign policy, its relations with international organizations and Austria's role as bridge-builder and provider of good offices.

### *Historical background and foundations*

Austrian permanent neutrality is a distinct case that resulted directly from the aftermath of World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War. After the Second World War, Austria was divided into four occupation zones by the Allied powers France, the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom from 1945 onwards. It thus, like Germany, faced the risk of being permanently split into a Soviet-occupied East and a Western Allies-occupied West. Negotiations with the Allied powers about an Austrian State Treaty, the legal instrument for the withdrawal of Allied troops, began in 1946. The Soviet approach to the negotiations changed significantly after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, as Nikita Khrushchev indicated his willingness to withdraw troops from Austria if it became neutral—a guarantee that Austria would not position itself with the West. Neutrality thus became Austria's road to State Treaty and independence. On April 15, 1955, the Moscow Memorandum was signed, in which Austria, led by Chancellor Julius Raab, obliged itself to everlasting neutrality following the model of Switzerland.<sup>13</sup> This paved the way for finalizing the treaty negotiations. On May 15, 1955, the Austrian State Treaty was passed without a neutrality clause. The Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria was passed by the Austrian Parliament on October 26, 1955, one day after the last foreign soldier had left Austria. It states:

1. For the purpose of the lasting maintenance of her independence, Austria declares of her own *free will* her perpetual neutrality. Austria will maintain and defend this with all means at her disposal.
2. For the securing of this purpose *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."<sup>14</sup>

October 26 is now celebrated as the Austrian National Day or *Nationalfeiertag* and neutrality soon became the basis of Austrian foreign and security policy decisions.

All states which had diplomatic relations with Austria were notified about the country's new status and either expressly or tacitly accepted it, thus establishing it under international law.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Goetschel, „Neutrality,” 124.

<sup>13</sup> For the full text of the Memorandum, see the Institute for Contemporary History of the University of Innsbruck, <http://www.uibk.ac.at/zeitgeschichte/zis/library/steininger2.html#dok2>.

<sup>14</sup> Federal Constitutional Law of October 26, 1955 on the neutrality of Austria, official translation by Gerald Stourzh, *Geschichte des Staatsvertrages 1945-1955. Österreichs Weg zur Neutralität*. Studienausgabe, 3rd edition (Graz-Vienna-Cologne: Styria, 1985), 239.

<sup>15</sup> Helmut Tichy, “Austria's Permanent Neutrality,” *Austrian Information*, Winter 2015/2016, <https://www.austrianinformation.org/winter-2015-16/wc55d7qi5qrmyzmxh1qkofcmluxvj>.

Austrian neutrality is thus governed by both international and Austrian constitutional law. Tichy stresses that while neutrality was a precondition in the State Treaty negotiations, it was not a legal requirement and was thus adopted freely by Austria as sovereign state.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is the sole competence of Austria to interpret and unilaterally terminate neutrality, if so desired, despite having declared to carry the status *in all future times*. The neutrality law could thus be changed or withdrawn with a two-thirds majority of the Austrian National Council. In March 1996, a petition for a neutrality referendum was carried out but failed, with a voter turnout of only 6%.<sup>17</sup> In the following years, Austria saw an ultimately unfruitful domestic as well as EU-wide debate about repealing neutrality, which was primarily motivated by intentions to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and pursue a stronger common defense of the European Union.

Tichy finds that the extent of Austrian neutrality decreased on two occasions over the last 65 years.<sup>18</sup> First, throughout the Cold War, Austria considered United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decisions to be in conflict with permanent neutrality and thus regarded them as non-binding for Austria. This view changed with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which prompted Austria to reconsider its approach, concluding that UNSC decisions did not violate or interfere with permanent neutrality. Since then, Austria has allowed foreign troops and arms to transit on various occasions, if motivated by a UNSC decision. In 2001, the Law on War Materials and Armaments was further amended to also allow for transit of weapons and foreign troops through Austria, if it takes place as part of peacekeeping missions of the European Council, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other international organizations. These developments have been called a change from “strict” to a ‘differential’ neutrality”.<sup>19</sup> Second, Austria’s accession to the European Union in 1995 and the Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) have continuously reduced the scope of Austrian neutrality, as the European Union has sought to increase joint military and security capacities. For this purpose, Article 23j was added to the Austrian Federal Constitution elaborating on Austria’s contribution to CFSP. Particularly the EU’s Maastricht, Amsterdam, and Lisbon Treaties contributed to a loss of significance of neutrality.

With these two developments, Tichy argues that neutrality in Austria now only consists of its “core elements” as stated in the 1955 Constitutional Law, namely “non-participation in wars, defense of neutrality with all means, no accession to military alliances, and no foreign military bases in Austria”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, neutrality nowadays is only triggered in the exceedingly rare case of a war between two or more states. Schmidl agrees that neutrality has become a “mythical concept”, which is still a relevant element of Austrian identity even though its legal implications have “increasingly been eroded”.<sup>21</sup> Other, more encouraging views of the state of Austrian

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<sup>16</sup> Tichy, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality”.

<sup>17</sup> See [https://bmi.gv.at/411/Volksbegehren\\_der\\_XX\\_Gesetzgebungsperiode/Neutralitaets\\_Volksbegehren/](https://bmi.gv.at/411/Volksbegehren_der_XX_Gesetzgebungsperiode/Neutralitaets_Volksbegehren/)

<sup>18</sup> Tichy, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality”.

<sup>19</sup> “The Austrian neutrality and its foreign policy,” *Demokratiezentrum Wien*, last accessed on August 18, 2021, <http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/en/knowledge/timelines/the-austrian-neutrality-and-its-foreign-policy.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Tichy, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality”.

<sup>21</sup> Erwin A. Schmidl, “Lukewarm Neutrality in a Cold War? The Case of Austria,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016): 50, [https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00679](https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00679).

neutrality include that of Heinz Gärtner, who finds that rather than becoming irrelevant, “neutrality has proven time and again that it can adapt to new situations”.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Ideology, foreign policy and military neutrality***

With the Moscow Memorandum of 1955, Austria committed itself to neutrality after the Swiss model, which comprises both military and, to some extent, economic neutrality—the abstention from customs agreements and joining economic unions—but excludes moral or ideological commitments.<sup>23</sup> It is thus important to note that Austrian neutrality is not equal to impartiality or apathy in international and security affairs. Despite its military neutrality, ideologically, Austria has been deeply rooted in the West. The country first openly sided with the West during the revolt of the Hungarian population against its Communist regime in October 1956, as a consequence of which Austria accepted some 200.000 Hungarian refugees to Soviet discontent. Similarly, in 1968, Austria accepted 160.000 refugees from Czechoslovakia following its occupation by forces of the Warsaw Pact. These actions contributed to Austria’s reputation as “asylum country” rather than as neutral.<sup>24</sup>

Neutrality has also influenced various foreign policy strategies since 1955. Under Chancellor Raab, Austrian foreign policy was characterized by *Ostpolitik*, which aimed at establishing good relations with the Soviet Union and Austria’s Eastern neighborhood in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>25</sup> By doing so, Austria hoped to reduce tensions in the Cold War and assist the democratization of the communist bloc.<sup>26</sup> From 1970 to 1983, the Austrian government under the Social Democratic Chancellor Bruno Kreisky continued its attempts to ease East-West tensions while also adopting *active neutrality policy*, which considered security as foreign policy priority and focused on global conflicts, particularly in the Middle East. Kreisky’s policy included increasing travel diplomacy, advocacy for disarmament and development aid as well as a global, rather than European, focus.<sup>27</sup> Thus, breaking with tradition, neutrality was used as means to emphasize Austrian foreign policy, rather than standing in the way of a firm Austrian position. It was Kreisky’s belief that security in Austria could be better maintained through a strong political and international profile, rather than military means.<sup>28</sup> This included the presence of international actors and organizations in Vienna besides active foreign policy. It was during this time that Austria successfully provided Kurt Waldheim as candidate for United Nations Secretary General, that Vienna became the third UN capital, and that Austria actively cooperated with a group of neutral and non-aligned (N+N) countries in their support for a pan-European security policy.<sup>29</sup> As part of this new approach, Chancellor Kreisky also undertook three fact-finding missions to mediate between Israel and Palestine in 1974, 1975 and 1976. In 1980, Austria recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as first western European country.<sup>30</sup> Even though Kreisky had attempted to establish relations with both Israel and

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<sup>22</sup> Heinz Gärtner, “Austria: Engaged Neutrality,” in *The European Neutrals and NATO*, ed. Andrew Cottey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017):135, [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59524-9\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59524-9_6).

<sup>23</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 133-134

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Rathkolb, “International Perceptions of Austrian Neutrality,” in *International Perceptions of Austrian Neutrality*, ed. Günther Bischof, Anton Pelinka and Ruth Wodak (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 76.

<sup>26</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 76.

<sup>27</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 137.

<sup>28</sup> Erik Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien: Vienna as an International Conference Site,” in *Global Austria*, ed. Günther Bischof, Fritz Plasser, Anton Pelinka and Alexander Smith (University of New Orleans Press, 2011): 151–152, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1n2txkw.10>.

<sup>29</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 137.

<sup>30</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 81.

Palestine on equal terms, and even though Austria had provided refuge to Russian Jews in transit towards Israel during the Cold War, Israel perceived Austrian foreign policy at the time as strictly pro-Palestinian.<sup>31</sup> While active neutrality promoted Austria's role as relevant actor abroad, it also gave rise to criticism. Some saw Kreisky's policy as a move away from Austria's clear Western positioning. This view was shared by the United States in particular, as the US Ambassador to Austria H. Eugene Douglas accused Austria of violating neutrality in a 1982 speech.<sup>32</sup> Under a new coalition between the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) following the 1983 elections, Austrian foreign policy returned to its strictly pro-Western approach as well as its focus on Europe and the military element of neutrality. Even though Austria abandoned Kreisky's model of active neutrality, it continues to be involved in international affairs particularly through its position as EU member state, which further solidified Austria's position in the West. After the Kreisky era and EU accession followed a period of comparative calm in which Austrian foreign policy was barely discussed abroad. In 2009, a leaked US diplomatic cable referred to Austria as "a country that is trying to keep everyone happy", doubted Chancellor Werner Faymann's interest in foreign affairs, and called foreign minister Michael Spindelegger a "nice guy" lacking clear direction.<sup>33</sup> Along similar lines, German Chancellor Angela Merkel reportedly once commented on Faymann that she liked him because "he arrives without an opinion and leaves with mine".<sup>34</sup> This attitude towards foreign policy changed most drastically after 2017, when the People's Party (ÖVP) under Sebastian Kurz entered into a coalition with the FPÖ. The country's youngest chancellor to date with tough stances on issues like migration, Kurz was soon considered a "major player in Europe" representing "a new kind of thinking".<sup>35</sup> However, the two Kurz administrations also faced criticism that their firm stand on foreign policy issues may harm neutrality. When Austria took over the rotating European Council presidency in the second half of 2018, political analysts in Europe warned that the government's strong stances on migration and the EU budget might prevent it from being a neutral broker in political debates.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Austria's recent Israel policy, which stands in strong contrast to that under Kreisky, cast doubt on the country's ongoing respect for neutrality. During an Israel visit in 2018, Chancellor Kurz declared that the "security of Israel is non-negotiable" and a "national interest for Austria".<sup>37</sup> In May 2021, in the midst of a renewed escalation between Israeli forces and the Palestinian Hamas, the Austrian Foreign Ministry and Chancellery raised the Israeli flag in solidarity, prompting harsh criticism from Turkey and Iran. Acts like these raised fear of harming "Austria's reputation as a neutral country and conflict mediator".<sup>38</sup> More than his predecessors, however, Sebastian Kurz

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<sup>31</sup> Rathkolb, "International Perceptions," 81–82.

<sup>32</sup> Rathkolb, "International Perceptions" 83–84.

<sup>33</sup> "Cablegate: Austrian Foreign Policy in Doldrums, But," *Wikileaks*, August 20, 2009, <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WL0908/S00171/cablegate-austrian-foreign-policy-in-doldrums-but.htm>; Eric Culp, "The quiet Austrian," *Politico*, May 11, 2011, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-quiet-austrian/>.

<sup>34</sup> Christian Böhmer, "Im Scheinwerfer: Politik-Figuren 2015," *Kurier*, December 22, 2015, <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/im-scheinwerfer-politik-figuren-2015/170.917.349>.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Rough, "Donald Trump Is Watching Sebastian Kurz," *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/09/donald-trump-is-watching-sebastian-kurz/>.

<sup>36</sup> David M. Herszenhorn, Florian Eder, and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Sebastian Kurz's European debutante ball," *Politico*, July 4, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/sebastian-kurz-austria-europe-presidency-problem/>.

<sup>37</sup> Stephanie Liechtenstein, "Trump and Kurz: not best friends, after all," *EUobserver*, February 21, 2019, <https://euobserver.com/news/144227>.

<sup>38</sup> Oliver Noyan, Sarantis Michalopoulos and Zeljko Trkanjec, "Israeli-Palestinian violence reverberates across Europe," *Euractiv*, May 17, 2021, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/israeli-palestinian-violence-reverberates-across-europe/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/israeli-palestinian-violence-reverberates-across-europe/).

showed determination to raise Austria's profile and use its position as small EU member state outside NATO to function as bridge between the East and West, and the United States and Russia in particular. Heinz Gärtner recently described the Austrian situation as one of *engaged neutrality*: "a strong commitment to stay outside military alliances alongside an equally strong commitment to an engaged—as opposed to passive or insular—security policy", which involves the support of multilateralism, conflict prevention and peacekeeping.<sup>39</sup>

While Austrian foreign policy approaches have changed over time, military policy in Austria has remained strictly neutral, meaning that Austria has not actively fought in a war since 1945 and has refrained from joining military alliances. On various occasions, the country prevented the transit of armaments or foreign military troops through its territory, even after the 1991 and 2001 amendments of the Law on War Materials and Armaments. Among others, Austria has denied transit to troops and military equipment from friendly nations and NATO members like France, the Czech Republic, Hungary or Poland, leading to accusations of free riding.<sup>40</sup> Notably, during the Kosovo crisis, Austria refused to allow NATO transit flights across Austrian territory. As the planes were thus forced to take large detours, Austria was criticized for obstructing NATO's military actions, rather than staying uninvolved.<sup>41</sup> In spite of military neutrality, Austria has also deployed troops and participated in peacekeeping operations on various occasions. Austria's first UN deployment was a medical aid team sent to Congo in 1960. Austria again provided medical services to Cyprus in 1964 and deployed military units to the Sinai and the Golan heights starting in 1973. Austria also contributed to the NATO-led peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1996 as well as in Kosovo in 1999. In the 2010s, Austria provided personnel to missions including the Special Monitoring Mission of the OSCE in the Ukraine, to the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, to the European Monitoring Mission in Georgia, the EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine and the EU Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support. In 2021, Austria had deployed military forces with the EUFOR stabilization force in Bosnia-Herzegovina, with NATO in Kosovo, and with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. This list, far from being exhaustive, indicates that Austria has remained involved in international security and peacekeeping issues despite its neutral status.

### ***Neutrality and international organizations***

Neutrality has partially been an obstacle to Austrian membership of international organizations. Austria became a member of the United Nations on December 14, 1955 and joined the European Council in 1956. Austrian membership of the NATO and the European Union, however, proved more difficult.

NATO membership and neutrality are mutually exclusive due to NATO's mutual assistance obligation. As Gärtner states: "As long as NATO sees itself as a 'military alliance' and Austria as 'neutral', membership in NATO remains impossible".<sup>42</sup> As NATO has expanded its task to include crisis management among other aspects, Austria began to cooperate more closely despite the general irreconcilability of neutrality and NATO membership.<sup>43</sup> In 1995, Austria became a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and, as has been stated earlier, the country has participated in NATO-led operations.

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<sup>39</sup> Gärtner, "Austria: Engaged Neutrality," 129, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Luif, "Austria's Permanent Neutrality," 151.

<sup>41</sup> Luif, "Austria's Permanent Neutrality," 149.

<sup>42</sup> Gärtner, "Austria: Engaged Neutrality," 140.

<sup>43</sup> Gärtner, "Austria: Engaged Neutrality," 138.

Positions on the compatibility of neutrality and Austrian membership in the European Community (EC)/European Union have drastically changed over time, as has the role and importance of the common foreign security and defense policy of the Union. When the European Community was founded in 1957, membership of Austria was considered impossible due to its neutral status. Initial interpretations of neutrality to include economic independence also made joining the European Economic Community (EEC) and Common Market impossible.<sup>44</sup> In 1960, Austria founded the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) with Switzerland and Sweden, and attempted to negotiate an associate agreement with the European Community. However, negotiations failed in 1967, after protests from the Soviet Union.<sup>45</sup> Austria also faced strong opposition from other sides: The United States were opposed to Austrian membership as it might prevent a stronger military cooperation of the EEC, as were Italy and France.<sup>46</sup> The Soviet position on Austrian EC membership and neutrality changed in the 1980s and in 1988, the Soviet Union officially agreed to Austrian EC membership, as long as the country preserved its neutrality. With the Cold War coming to an end, European reservations towards Austrian EC/EU integration decreased as the Union became increasingly concerned with Eastern enlargement.<sup>47</sup> As the Union already had one neutral member with Ireland and two others—Sweden and Finland—were set to join alongside Austria, neutrality was ultimately deemed compatible with European solidarity. In 1989, the Austrian Parliament passed the application for EC membership. In 1994, a popular referendum decided in favor of Austrian EU membership. To allow for full European integration despite neutrality, Austria's application to the European Union included a neutrality clause:

“Austria submits this application on the understanding that its internationally recognized status of permanent neutrality, based on the Federal and Constitutional Law of 26 October 1955, will be maintained and that, as a member of the European Communities by virtue of the Treaty of Accession, it will be able to fulfill its legal obligations arising out of its status as a permanently neutral State and to continue its policy of neutrality as a specific contribution towards the maintenance of peace and security in Europe”<sup>48</sup>

When joining the European Union on January 1, 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden signed a Joint Declaration pledging to be “ready and able to participate fully and actively” in the CFSP.<sup>49</sup> As part of this, Austria also agreed to participate in economic sanctions imposed by the European Union by adding Article 23f to its Federal Constitution in 1994<sup>50</sup>, thus fully losing the economic aspect of neutrality and focusing solely on the military aspect. The constitutional amendment also allowed Austria to participate in crisis management and foreign policy activities of the European Union.<sup>51</sup> Despite its CFSP, the European Union does not yet constitute a military alliance—which would interfere with neutrality—given the lack of a common defense as described in Article 42 (2) of the Treaty on European Union. The same article states that Common Security and Defense Policy “shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States and shall respect the obligations of certain Member States”, thus taking into consideration the limitations of

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<sup>44</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 135.

<sup>45</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 74.

<sup>46</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 74, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 87.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 142.

<sup>49</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 143.

<sup>50</sup> Austrian Constitution 2013, Art. 23f.

<sup>51</sup> Austrian Constitution 2013, Art. 23f.

neutrality. In 2013, the Austrian Chancellery recognized that “the security of neutral Austria is now largely interconnected with the security of the EU as a whole”.<sup>52</sup>

### ***A hub for diplomacy and mediation***

As neutral state, Austria had the opportunity to gain particular legitimacy in the field of diplomacy.<sup>53</sup> Austrian governments have frequently emphasized Austria’s role as mediator in international conflicts. In 2013, the Chancellery listed mediation as one of the principles of Austrian security policy, with: “Austria playing an active role as a mediator in international conflicts and seizing suitable opportunities for mediation resulting from Austria’s status as, both an EU Member State and a neutral country.”<sup>54</sup>

After signing the State Treaty, Austrian governments attempted to turn Vienna into an attractive location for international organizations. One reason behind these efforts was the hope that the presence of international actors and organizations would increase security in a neutral state that was geographically located at the very center of the Cold War. This security rationale has also been referred to as “Mexico syndrome”, since Mexico was the only state to speak out against the German invasion and Anschluss of Austria in 1938.<sup>55</sup>

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), founded in 1957, was the first major international organization to have its headquarters in Austria. According to Frey, Vienna was chosen over other potential locations including Geneva, Rio de Janeiro and Copenhagen due to its neutrality combined with its proximity to the Iron Curtain, which made it a convenient location to store fissile material.<sup>56</sup> Rathkolb, on the other hand, argues that Vienna was selected as compromise between the Soviet Union and the United States: By agreeing to the Soviet-preferred location, the United States were free to pick a director general of their choosing.<sup>57</sup> In any case, the decision marked an important first step for Austria’s plans to reposition itself as diplomatic center. According to Fisher, “choosing Vienna as the IAEA’s seat would underline Austria’s neutral status and mark its re-entry into the international community after the ignominious years of ‘Anschluss’ and after the end of the four-power occupation.”<sup>58</sup> In 1965, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) moved from Geneva to Vienna. According to Enis Al-Attar, a former OPEC administrator, reasons that prompted the move were Vienna’s willingness to grant diplomatic status to OPEC officials as well as “financial benefits” besides Austria’s neutral status.<sup>59</sup> In the 1970s, Vienna established itself as one of the central UN sites besides New York and Geneva. After the IAEA, the United Nations Industrial Organization (UNIDO) chose Vienna as its headquarters in 1966. The decision to locate the United Nations in Vienna followed a strong Austrian campaign developed under the ÖVP Chancellor Josef Klaus, who, among other things, offered to build a headquarters complex on the East bank of the Danube to be used by the United Nations free

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<sup>52</sup> Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria, *Austrian Security Strategy. Security in a new decade*, July 2013, [https://www.bundesheer.at/pdf\\_pool/publikationen/sicherheitsstrategie\\_engl.pdf](https://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/sicherheitsstrategie_engl.pdf), 4.

<sup>53</sup> Gärtner, “Austria: Engaged Neutrality,” 135.

<sup>54</sup> Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria, *Austrian Security Strategy*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 149.

<sup>56</sup> Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 149.

<sup>57</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 72.

<sup>58</sup> David Fisher, *History of the International Atomic Energy Agency: The First Forty Years*, (Vienna: IAEA, 1997), 49.

<sup>59</sup> Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), *50 Years in Vienna*, OPEC bulletin XLVI, no. 7, September 2015, [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/flipbook/OBSeptember2015/OBSeptember2015/assets/common/downloads/OB092015.pdf](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/flipbook/OBSeptember2015/OBSeptember2015/assets/common/downloads/OB092015.pdf), 12.

of charge.<sup>60</sup> The Vienna international Center (VIC), also known as UNO City, opened in August 1979. Construction was completed and the VIC was opened under Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, who referred to the decision to attract the UN to Vienna as a “political” one, as “Vienna’s role as a UN center is of highest importance for Austria’s neutrality and security.”<sup>61</sup> The VIC has since been referred to as “the main pillar for Austrian defense”.<sup>62</sup> It now hosts several UN organizations, including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs and the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization. Between 1980 and 2005, the number of international organizations present in Vienna more than doubled from eight to nineteen.<sup>63</sup> Other notable international organizations that have settled in Vienna include the OSCE, the International Anti-Corruption Academy, and the World Institute for Nuclear Security.

Besides being a popular location for headquarters of international organizations, Vienna has also made a name for itself as meeting place for international conventions and negotiations. In 1961, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations was the first significant UN conference to take place outside of New York and Geneva.<sup>64</sup> According to Bruns, Vienna was selected not only in remembrance of the 1815 Congress of Vienna, but also due to the availability of conference space and since the country was considered “acceptable to both East and West” given its neutral status.<sup>65</sup> Vienna also hosted the negotiations for Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) between 1973 and 1989 as well as the successor negotiations on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in 1989 and 1990. Together with Helsinki, Vienna served as location for the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, which resulted in the SALT II agreement in 1979. More recently, Vienna has hosted international foreign ministers as part of the Syrian peace process alongside Geneva and Astana since 2015. At the conclusion of a round of meetings in Vienna in 2018, UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura stressed the importance of “a secure, calm and neutral environment” for the talks.<sup>66</sup> In 2018, Vienna also served as location for mediation talks on the Macedonian name dispute shortly before its resolution. Arguably the most noteworthy negotiation taking place in Vienna in recent years was that of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear accord with Iran that resulted after 18 months of sessions and ended the country’s economic isolation. The JCPOA has also become known as the *Vienna Accord* and was meant to “cement Vienna’s place as Europe’s principal diplomatic venue”.<sup>67</sup> Renewed talks with Iran took place in Vienna in the spring of 2021.

In its self-imposed function as mediator, Austria particularly likes to point out its role as bridge between East and West. Its geographic location, more than anything else, is what set Austrian neutrality apart from other neutrals during the Cold War. Together with Switzerland, Austria

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<sup>60</sup> Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 151.

<sup>61</sup> “Die Wiener UNO-City,” APA historisch—Zeitgeschichte online, quoted in Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 152.

<sup>62</sup> Arbeiter-Zeitung, 28 Oct. 1976, quoted in Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 152.

<sup>63</sup> Klaus Emmerich, *Unterwegs zum Frieden: 50 Jahre Österreich in den Vereinten Nationen* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2005), 136, quoted in Frey, 157.

<sup>64</sup> Kai Bruns, *A Cornerstone of Modern Diplomacy. Britain and the Negotiation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations*, (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 81.

<sup>65</sup> Bruns, *Cornerstone*, 81.

<sup>66</sup> UN Secretary-General, „Note to Correspondents,“ January 26, 2018, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2018-01-26/note-correspondents-statement-special-envoy-syria-staffan>.

<sup>67</sup> Sam Jones, “A heady mix of diplomatic dining, spies and torte in Vienna,” *Financial Times*, October 20, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/edf2afd2-669a-11e5-97d0-1456a776a4f5>.

had the equilibrium function of a “neutral separator” (or *neutraler Riegel*) in Europe.<sup>68</sup> However, particularly in the early years of neutrality, the United States opposed to Austria becoming a meeting place for East and West—mainly to prevent other countries from considering neutrality as an attractive security policy—while the Soviet Union would have favored a stronger role of Austria.<sup>69</sup> Attempts from Chancellor Julius Raab to host the 1955 meeting between the Soviet Union and the United States in Vienna and to take on a more active neutrality policy after 1958 were thus stopped by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, to prevent any “‘internationalization’ of Austria”.<sup>70</sup> Dulles’ strategy of containing Austrian neutrality changed during the Kennedy administration, as John F. Kennedy chose Vienna over other Soviet suggestions as meeting place for his bilateral meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in 1961.<sup>71</sup> Frey finds that this meeting, only the second of its kind since the outbreak of the Cold War, “firmly established” Vienna’s role as meeting place between the East and the West.<sup>72</sup> In June 1979, the heads of the two blocs met in Vienna once again, when Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev signed the SALT II Treaty on nuclear arms control.

Austria also played a larger role in Eastern stabilization as part of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), in which the neutral and non-aligned small states Austria, Switzerland, Finland, and Sweden took on an active role in geopolitics, increasing the East-West cooperation through educational, informational and cultural activities.<sup>73</sup> The N+N group has frequently been singled out for its important role in furthering the Helsinki process, as the states provided mediation and good offices, advanced communication and helped build a common basis between the blocs.<sup>74</sup> Austria had a particular role as mediator and coordinator in the third section of the Helsinki Accords, which dealt with the humanitarian dimension and thus significantly contributed to de-escalating East-West tensions.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Vienna provided good offices for the Conference particularly between 1986 and 1989 and was chosen as location for the Secretariat of the OSCE, the organization resulting from the Conference.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain Vienna lost in importance as mediator and center for international conventions, as subsequent governments focused more on Austria’s role as member of the European Union.<sup>76</sup> Frey finds that neutrality turned from an “asset” into a “liability”—as high profile international events took place elsewhere in Europe, often in NATO member states.<sup>77</sup> In recent years, the Kurz administrations showed renewed aspirations for Austria to “be a bridge between East and West and keep the lines of communication to Russia open”.<sup>78</sup> As part of this strategy, Kurz repeatedly professed his openness to host a bilateral meeting between the Russian and American governments. Both attempts under presidents Trump and Biden failed, with the summits taking place in Helsinki and Geneva instead.<sup>79</sup> According to former national security advisor John Bolton, President Putin had preferred to

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<sup>68</sup> Goetschel, „Neutrality,” 119.

<sup>69</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 72.

<sup>70</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 72.

<sup>71</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 74.

<sup>72</sup> Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 150.

<sup>73</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 78.

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin Gilde, *Österreich im KSZE-Prozess 1969-1983: Neutraler Vermittler in humanitärer Mission*, Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486719307>, 411.

<sup>75</sup> Gilde, *Österreich im KSZE-Prozess*, 443.

<sup>76</sup> Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 157.

<sup>77</sup> Frey, “Konferenzplatz Wien,” 157.

<sup>78</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig, “Vienna calling Putin,” *Politico*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vienna-austria-sebastian-kurz-calling-russia-vladimir-putin/>.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Rough, “Donald Trump”.

hold his 2018 meeting with Donald Trump in Vienna but Helsinki was later chosen due to opposition from the White House.<sup>80</sup> Vienna as potential meeting venue was also met with resistance due to Austria's past. Constanze Stelzenmüller strongly argued against the meeting taking place in Austria, finding that the "echoes are too ominous".<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, Geneva might have been preferred as venue for the 2021 Biden-Putin meeting due the fact that Switzerland is considered fully neutral and, unlike Austria, does not endorse the EU-Russia sanctions. According to the Austrian political scientist Gerhard Mangott, Austria's changed, and more critical, Russia policy under Kurz's second administration may have contributed to the choice of Geneva over Vienna, just as the fact that Switzerland is not a member of the EU.<sup>82</sup>

Vienna's reputation as diplomatic center might have also been hurt by potential espionage activities in the city. Already in the 1980s deteriorating relations between Austria and the United States gave rise to US suspicions that American technology might be transferred to Eastern Europe through Austria, prompting them to conduct security surveys on the issue.<sup>83</sup> Given the country's positive relations with Russia and the presence of numerous international organizations in Vienna, the city has been called a potential "Trojan horse" for Russia, as Austria might accredit Russian spies as 'diplomats' for the OSCE or the UN.<sup>84</sup> With 17.000 accredited diplomats in the country, as many as 8.000 could be involved in espionage.<sup>85</sup> These circumstances caused initial opposition to hosting the JCPOA negotiations in Austria and also led Dutch and British spy agencies to restrict intelligence sharing with Austria.<sup>86</sup>

Critics have dismissed the vision of Austria as relevant mediator as wishful thinking. Carnegie Europe describes Austria's aspirations as "unrealistic notions" that were "based on exaggerated perceptions of the country's geopolitical significance".<sup>87</sup> Peter Rough shares this perspective and recently described Kurz' ambitions as bridge builder to be "absolutely exaggerated", given that the United States expect Austria to be fully committed to the West as member of the EU.<sup>88</sup> While its mediator profile might have lost in importance, Vienna continues to be a valued city among internationals and expatriates, giving the city a cosmopolitan character.<sup>89</sup> Vienna was ranked the second-most liveable city from 2015 to 2017 and topped the ranking in 2018 and 2019 of the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Ranking. Vienna has also topped the Mercer quality of living city ranking, based on expatriate views, every year since 2009.

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<sup>80</sup> "Biden/Putin-Gipfel: Wien und Helsinki bieten sich als Gastgeber an," *Der Standard*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000125829070/biden-putin-gipfel-wien-und-helsinki-bieten-sich-als-gastgeber>.

<sup>81</sup> Edward Luce, "Donald Trump and the 1930s playbook: liberal democracy comes unstuck," *Financial Times*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/75319cee-761d-11e8-b326-75a27d27ea5f>.

<sup>82</sup> "Warum der Biden-Putin-Gipfel nicht in Wien stattfindet," *Die Presse*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.diepresse.com/5984748/warum-der-biden-putin-gipfel-nicht-in-wien-stattfindet>.

<sup>83</sup> Rathkolb, "International Perceptions," 84.

<sup>84</sup> Gressel, "Austria: Russia's Trojan Horse?"

<sup>85</sup> Wilhelm Theuretsbacher, "In Wien residieren 8000 Spione," *Kurier*, July 20, 2014, <https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/in-wien-residieren-8000-spione/75.669.611>.

<sup>86</sup> "UK, Dutch spy agencies curb intel flow to Austria over Russia ties," *Euractiv*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/uk-dutch-spy-agencies-curb-intel-flow-to-austria-over-russia-ties/>; Sam Jones, "A heady mix".

<sup>87</sup> Andrew S. Weiss, "With Friends Like These: The Kremlin's Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 27, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/27/with-friends-like-these-kremlin-s-far-right-and-populist-connections-in-italy-and-austria-pub-81100>.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Rough, "Donald Trump".

<sup>89</sup> Frey, "Konferenzplatz Wien," 158.

## Domestic perspectives on Austrian neutrality

When discussing how neutrality has shaped Austria's role and position abroad, its national influence should not be overlooked.

Schmidl finds that neutrality has been "sold" as successful security policy by Austrian politicians and that security and foreign policy decisions such as allowing or restricting foreign troops to transit through Austria resulted from political considerations based on public sentiments at the time rather than from a "clear policy of neutrality".<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Luif argues that neutrality has become an "instrument of domestic power politics",<sup>91</sup> often playing a prominent role in political elections. Discussions in favor of and against ditching neutrality peaked at the turn of the millennium, as the SPÖ continued its outspoken support of neutrality, while ÖVP, FPÖ and the Green Party considered abandoning neutrality for good.<sup>92</sup> In 2001, ÖVP Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel sparked outrage with his speech on National Day, in which he compared neutrality with other Austrian stereotypes such as Lippizaner horses and Mozart pralines, which, he argued, had all lost their place "in the complex reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century".<sup>93</sup> Shortly thereafter, the influential far-right politician Jörg Haider called for a nationwide referendum on neutrality. Similar referenda were proposed, mainly by FPÖ politicians, in subsequent years and often caused public uproar. In 2003, the Green parliamentarian Johannes Voggenhuber suggested a two-tier neutrality, where Austria would be neutral in all areas apart from a common European defense, and a year later, the Greens spoke in favor of abandoning neutrality to establish a European security community.<sup>94</sup> In his 2004 new year's address, President Thomas Klestil called for a re-thinking of neutrality due to changing conditions and with a common European future in mind. The debates on ending neutrality of the early 2000s also took place on a broader European level, as Sweden likewise considered a change in the status of its neutrality.<sup>95</sup>

Much of the discussion on ending neutrality is tied to ambitions to join the NATO and pursue stronger military cooperation within the European Union. With EU membership in place, Austrian actors including President Klestil found NATO membership a logical next step.<sup>96</sup> However, nearly three decades after Austria joined the EU, little progress has been made on the road to NATO membership. Some Austrian policy advisors continue to speak in favor of a stronger involvement in EU and NATO security efforts and various Austrian constitutional lawyers support the position that an EU army does not contradict neutrality.<sup>97</sup> Gerhard Jandl, former security policy director at the Austrian Ministry for European and International Affairs, warns that "Austria has to be taken seriously as a player in foreign policy and not dismissed

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<sup>90</sup> Erwin A. Schmidl, "Lukewarm Neutrality," 50.

<sup>91</sup> Luif, "Austria's Permanent Neutrality," 153.

<sup>92</sup> Luif, "Austria's Permanent Neutrality," 153; Lisbeth Kirk, "Austrian Greens in heated discussion over neutrality," *EUobserver*, November 9, 2004, <https://euobserver.com/news/17718>.

<sup>93</sup> Kate Connolly, "Vienna prepares to ditch neutrality," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/05/kateconnolly>.

<sup>94</sup> Honor Mahony, "Austria debates its neutrality," *EUobserver*, February 4, 2003, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/9233>.

<sup>95</sup> Lisbeth Kirk, "Solana: Neutrality is a concept of the past," *EUobserver*, January 17, 2001, <https://euobserver.com/news/1291>.

<sup>96</sup> "Austrians begin to question neutrality," *Politico*, July 24, 1996, <https://www.politico.eu/article/austrians-begin-to-question-neutrality/>.

<sup>97</sup> Herbert Vytiska, "Divided Austria unites in opposition to EU army," *Euractiv*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/security/news/divided-austria-unites-in-opposition-to-eu-army/>.

as a freeloader”.<sup>98</sup> Discussions over Austrian participation in a joint European military continue to split political opinions: former Defense Minister Hans Peter Doskozil (SPÖ) considers an EU military to be incompatible with neutrality, while the EU parliamentarian Othmar Karas (ÖVP) has advocated for Austrian involvement in EU military matters at the same time as remaining neutral.<sup>99</sup> As Foreign Minister, Sebastian Kurz declared he could not support policies that went against neutrality, all the while demanding a stronger military role of the European Union particularly in its Southern neighborhood and in the fight against terrorism.<sup>100</sup> Arguing that there is “no neutrality towards terrorism”, Kurz showed openness for an Austrian participation in European military actions.<sup>101</sup>

In 2021, the debate about joining NATO and ending neutrality has practically disappeared. Overall, there is widespread consensus over maintaining Austria’s neutral status across party lines. During the 2016 presidential elections, both candidates, Alexander van der Bellen, a former member of the Green party, and Norbert Hofer of the FPÖ—who disagreed on practically every other issue—supported continued neutrality.<sup>102</sup> None of the major political parties currently call for an end of neutrality in their party manifestos. Both ÖVP and the liberal NEOS discuss the possibility of a joint European army, while failing to mention neutrality altogether.<sup>103</sup> The SPÖ supports a reinforcement of neutrality and Austria’s role as mediator.<sup>104</sup> The Green party advocates for an “active peace and foreign policy”, echoing Kreisky’s policy, without ever mentioning neutrality.<sup>105</sup> The FPÖ calls for a protection of neutrality as well as military non-alignment.<sup>106</sup> The 2020-2024 government program of the ÖVP and the Green party considers the current state of neutrality in Austria to be an “active” one, due to the country’s contributions to CFSP.<sup>107</sup>

Among the Austrian population, neutrality has enjoyed high popularity, which only grew stronger over time. While half of the population felt that Austrian identity was shaped by neutrality shortly after its adoption, nine out of ten Austrians do so nowadays.<sup>108</sup> In 1999, only

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<sup>98</sup> Herbert Vytiska, “Austrian neutrality complicates future role in security policy,” *Euractiv*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austrian-neutrality-complicates-future-role-in-security-policy/>.

<sup>99</sup> Herbert Vytiska, “EU-Armee: Geteilte Reaktionen im „neutralen“ Österreich,” *Euractiv*, June 8, 2017, [https://www.euractiv.de/section/eu-aussenpolitik/news/eu-armee-geteilte-reaktionen-im-neutralen-oesterreich/?\\_ga=2.23613948.771618727.1629808253-52595452.1629103804](https://www.euractiv.de/section/eu-aussenpolitik/news/eu-armee-geteilte-reaktionen-im-neutralen-oesterreich/?_ga=2.23613948.771618727.1629808253-52595452.1629103804).

<sup>100</sup> Herbert Vytiska, “Divided Austria”.

<sup>101</sup> “Österreichs Außenminister fordert schlagkräftigere EU,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 1, 2016, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/kampf-gegen-den-terror/f-a-s-exklusiv-oesterreichs-aussenminister-fordert-schlagkraeftigere-eu-14209348.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Herbert Vytiska, “Divided Austria”.

<sup>103</sup> Die neue Volkspartei, *Grundsatzprogramm 2015*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.dieneuevolkspartei.at/Files/Grundsatzprogramm-0KoYDM.pdf>, 43; NEOS, “Pläne für ein neues Österreich,” 2019, [https://www.neos.eu/\\_Resources/Persistent/0d4c0dabf194c6a542b867afd4f819a6e9635c79/Pla%CC%88ne%20fu%CC%88r%20ein%20neues%20O%CC%88sterreich%202019.pdf](https://www.neos.eu/_Resources/Persistent/0d4c0dabf194c6a542b867afd4f819a6e9635c79/Pla%CC%88ne%20fu%CC%88r%20ein%20neues%20O%CC%88sterreich%202019.pdf), 100.

<sup>104</sup> SPÖ, *Grundsatzprogramm*, 2018, <https://www.spoe.at/wp-content/uploads/sites/739/2018/12/Parteiprogramm2018.pdf>, 20.

<sup>105</sup> Die Grünen, *Wahlprogramm Nationalratswahl 2019*, 2019, <https://www.gruene.at/partei/programm/wahlprogramme/das-gruene-wahlprogramm-2019.pdf>, 73.

<sup>106</sup> FPÖ, *Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreich*, June 2011, [https://www.fpoe.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/www.fpoe.at/dokumente/2015/2011\\_graz\\_parteiprogramm\\_web.pdf](https://www.fpoe.at/fileadmin/user_upload/www.fpoe.at/dokumente/2015/2011_graz_parteiprogramm_web.pdf), 13.

<sup>107</sup> Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria, *Regierungsprogramm 2020 – 2024*, 2020, [https://www.dieneuevolkspartei.at/Download/Regierungsprogramm\\_2020.pdf](https://www.dieneuevolkspartei.at/Download/Regierungsprogramm_2020.pdf), 26.

<sup>108</sup> Herbert Vytiska, “Austrian neutrality”.

30% would have preferred active peace policy over neutrality.<sup>109</sup> In 2019, 79% were in favor of holding on to neutrality rather than joining a military defense union like NATO.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, in a 2019 survey by the Austrian society for European policy (ÖGfE), eight out of ten survey takers considered Austrian neutrality “very important” or “rather important”, while only 15% considered it rather or completely unimportant.<sup>111</sup> Neutrality thus seems to have become, in the words of Herbert Vytiska, the “holy cow” of Austrian politics,<sup>112</sup> with its effect on Austrian identity weighing much heavier than its real-life implications on military security.

## International perspectives on Austrian neutrality

How have Austria’s relations to the East and West developed under neutrality? What follows is a brief analysis of Austria’s ties to the United States, Russia and Europe.

### *Russia*

The central role of the Soviet Union in the creation of neutrality in Austria is widely known. Soviet demands for neutrality had three central motivations: preventing a renewed ‘Anschluss’ of Austria to Germany, preventing Austrian NATO membership and setting an example for Western Germany.<sup>113</sup> Rathkolb finds that: “From the perspective of Moscow—until the late 1980s—Austrian neutrality was primarily a guarantee against a revival of West German ‘imperialism’ and a move against the Soviet border”.<sup>114</sup> Even though Russia has been an outspoken supporter of permanent neutrality of Austria, it can be expected that Russia would respect Austrian sovereignty in decisions about the future of neutrality. Amid the discussions of abandoning neutrality in the early 2000s, President Putin announced Russia would accept any decision on neutrality from Austria.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, Putin has made it clear that he would consider Austrian NATO membership a violation of international law.<sup>116</sup>

A by-product of Russian occupation, neutrality has allowed Austria to forge a closer relationship with Russia than most EU member states. Carnegie Europe has referred to Austria, besides Italy, as European state “most open to Moscow’s appeals for deeper cooperation”.<sup>117</sup> The Russian foreign ministry and Vladimir Putin have frequently emphasized the role of neutrality in Austro-Russian relations. These ties have become particularly apparent since the Kurz I administration of 2017-2019, a coalition with the Freedom Party. In 2018 alone, Chancellor Kurz and Vladimir Putin met four times. The FPÖ has provided outspoken support for Russia, calling for an end to sanctions and signing a partnership agreement with Putin’s United Russia in 2017.<sup>118</sup> Sebastian Kurz is also known for his moderate stance on Russia, and has advocated for more dialogue between Russia and the European Union as well as for

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<sup>109</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 152.

<sup>110</sup> Conrad Seidl, “Österreicher schätzen Neutralität immer höher ein,” *Der Standard*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/200011210228/oesterreicher-schaetzen-neutralitaet-immer-hoeherein>.

<sup>111</sup> “ÖGfE-Umfrage: EU-Armee für ÖsterreicherInnen derzeit kein Thema,” *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik*, March 28, 2019, [https://www.oegfe.at/umfragen/eu\\_armee\\_umfrage/](https://www.oegfe.at/umfragen/eu_armee_umfrage/).

<sup>112</sup> Vytiska, “EU-Armee.”

<sup>113</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 135.

<sup>114</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 71.

<sup>115</sup> “The Austrian neutrality and its foreign policy.”

<sup>116</sup> Connolly, “Vienna prepares.”

<sup>117</sup> Weiss, “With Friends Like These.”

<sup>118</sup> Karnitschnig, “Vienna calling Putin”; “FPÖ-Spitze in Moskau,” *APA*, December 19, 2016, [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20161219\\_OTS0077/fpoe-spitze-in-moskau](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20161219_OTS0077/fpoe-spitze-in-moskau).

easing sanctions.<sup>119</sup> This also became apparent when Austria refused to expel Russian intelligence operatives or withdraw its ambassador from Moscow like most EU member states following the attempted assassination of the former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in 2018. Russia, on the other hand, reportedly hoped that a government under Chancellor Kurz may benefit Russian relations with the European Union and that Austria, as neutral country and non-NATO EU member state, may provide an open space for discussion between Russia and the West.<sup>120</sup>

Austria's moderate approach to Russia transcends party lines. While international attention to Austria's relation to Russia seems to have increased since 2017, political leaders from left and right have shown support of the Kremlin in the past.<sup>121</sup> Former President Heinz Fischer from the SPÖ, who met with Putin in June 2014 only months after the Russian invasion of the Crimea in June 2014, argued in favor of Austria's historic tendency to approach Russia through dialogue rather than pressure.<sup>122</sup> Various former Austrian politicians have found positions in state-run or -affiliated Russian companies. Former Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl—who infamously danced with Vladimir Putin at her wedding—has a seat on the board of directors of the oil producer Rosneft<sup>123</sup>, former Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel sits on the board of the mobile communications corporation MTS, and former Finance Minister Hans Jörg Schelling is employed at Gazprom.<sup>124</sup>

Austria's ties to Russia have been widely reported on and often been criticized abroad. Despite its openness for dialogue with Russia, however, Austria remains deeply rooted in Western Europe and Austrian governments have continuously pledged Austria's support for the EU sanctions regime.<sup>125</sup>

### **United States**

According to Rathkolb, the United States have had an “extremely low” perception of Austrian neutrality.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, America's regard of Austrian neutrality has varied over time, ranging from fears of Austrian-Soviet allyship to recognition of Austria as mediator between East and West to not considering Austria much of a neutral at all. While the Truman administration pursued a “total anti-neutrality policy”, this changed under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles particularly after the Berlin Conference of 1954, when they became convinced that a neutral Austria could strengthen the Western powers in the region, over fears that neutrality in the region might set a precedent for Germany.<sup>127</sup> The United States eventually accepted Austria's ambitions to mediate between the two blocs, and neutrality has been referred to favorably in internal documents, particularly after the 1960s, when Austria took on

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<sup>119</sup> Stanislav Klimovich, “Right and Far-Right: What Does the New Austrian Government Mean for Russia and the EU?” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, December 28, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75124>

<sup>120</sup> Klimovich, “Right and Far-Right.”

<sup>121</sup> Weiss, “With Friends Like These.”

<sup>122</sup> Robert Anderson, “Heinz Fischer: strong defender of consensual approach,” *Financial Times*, October 20, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/ed75e196-669a-11e5-97d0-1456a776a4f5>.

<sup>123</sup> Kate Connolly, “Ex-Austrian minister who danced with Putin at wedding lands Russian oil job,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/02/former-austrian-minister-given-seat-on-board-of-russias-rosneft>.

<sup>124</sup> Karnitschnig, “Vienna calling Putin.”

<sup>125</sup> Weiss, “With Friends Like These.”

<sup>126</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 74.

<sup>127</sup> Rathkolb, “International Perceptions,” 69–70.

the role as host of international organizations and mediator in the Middle East.<sup>128</sup> However, Austria lost relevance in the eyes of the United States after the Cold War. It has been argued that particularly after joining the European Union, “Austria lost its “special” Cold War international standing, namely its East-West bridge-building function and its status of “Austro-exceptionalism.”<sup>129</sup>

While a leaked diplomatic cable on Austrian foreign policy under the Obama administration referred to Austria as potential partner in the Black Sea and southeastern Europe, overall only little attention appears to have been paid to Austria as international actor recently.<sup>130</sup> In the last two decades, only two bilateral meetings took place between the Austrian and American heads of states and governments. During a 2001 summit, Austrian Chancellor Schüssel discussed the diminishing role of neutrality in Austria with President George Bush.<sup>131</sup> US interest in Austria increased during the Trump administration. In a 2019 meeting between President Donald Trump and Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in the White House, Kurz was greeted by a full delegation, including Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—an unusual effort for a small state like Austria.<sup>132</sup> Following the meeting, there were hopes on both sides that Austria might take on a role as intermediary between the United States and Europe—partly, because Austria as neutral country is exempt from US criticism of European NATO members, which the United States consider to contribute too little financially to NATO.<sup>133</sup> However, at the meeting itself, the neutrality of Austria seemed not to play much of a role, as the leaders rather discussed the trade deficit, economic relations and trade tensions between the U.S. and the EU. Increased interest of the Trump administration in Austria, thus, seems mainly to be based on its political leadership rather than neutrality itself. Sebastian Kurz was described as “rock star” by the former German US ambassador Richard A. Grenell and as “rising star in the sovereignty movement” by Stephen K. Bannon, former chief strategist under the Trump administration.<sup>134</sup> Whether Austria will be able to maintain such a positive report with new leadership on both sides is yet to be seen; during Kurz’s last visit to the United States in July 2021, he failed to be invited to the White House. So far, Austria seems not to play a major role for the Biden administration.<sup>135</sup> Leading up to the recent Biden-Putin meeting, the US embassy in Vienna described Vienna as “center of diplomacy”.<sup>136</sup> Thus, while this role of Austria is recognized by the United States, it does not seem to set Austria apart from other neutrals like Switzerland or Finland, which were ultimately chosen as hosts for the last two US-Russia summits.

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<sup>128</sup> “Cablegate.”

<sup>129</sup> Guenter Bischof, „Austrian-American Relations from Cold War to Post Cold War,” *Austrian Embassy Washington*, last accessed on September 15, 2021, <https://www.austria.org/new-page-2>.

<sup>130</sup> “Cablegate.”

<sup>131</sup> Daniela Spinant, “Austria thorn on debates over ending neutrality,” *EUobserver*, November 6, 2001, <https://euobserver.com/news/4037>.

<sup>132</sup> Peter Rough, “Donald Trump”.

<sup>133</sup> “Kurz im Weißen Haus: Warum Trump Österreich im Auge hat,” *Kurier*, February 23, 2020, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/kurz-im-weissen-haus-warum-trump-oesterreich-im-auge-hat/400762155>.

<sup>134</sup> Mark Landler, “Trump Cultivates a Kindred Spirit From a Continent He Often Antagonizes,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/us/politics/trump-kurz.html>.

<sup>135</sup> Stefan Vospernik, “Rough: “Unter Trump hätte man sich lieber mit Kurz getroffen”,“ *Die Presse*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.diepresse.com/6006862/rough-unter-trump-hatte-man-sich-lieber-mit-kurz-getroffen>.

<sup>136</sup> “USA begrüßen Angebot Wiens für Biden-Putin-Gipfel,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.sn.at/politik/weltpolitik/usa-begruessen-angebot-wiens-fuer-biden-putin-gipfel-102409885>.

## Europe

European perception of Austrian neutrality and Austria's role abroad has varied over time. Particularly in the early 2000s, Austria faced criticism for free riding and pressure to abandon neutrality from European actors. In 2001, Javier Solana, EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy stated that he considered neutrality to be a relic of the Cold War and that, being neutral, Austria could not expect solidarity from other countries.<sup>137</sup> Neutrality of states like Austria has repeatedly been seen as obstacle to a stronger military union in the EU. In 2002, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* found that "There no longer seems to be a place for neutral states in Europe".<sup>138</sup> Western opposition to neutrality also centered on fears that Austria could become a "puppet regime" of the Soviet Union, in which neutrality is considered a form of appeasement to Russia.<sup>139</sup> These concerns continue today, due to Austria's positive relations with Russia. When Sebastian Kurz entered into a coalition with the far-right FPÖ, some in the European Union began to fear that Austria would use its neutrality to join European intelligence and defense activities, while passing on information to Russia.<sup>140</sup>

Despite this, Austria is still considered an "honest broker".<sup>141</sup> Due to economic links as well as a shared history, Austria is often seen as important contact point to the East. According to the EU Coalition Explorer of 2020, Austria is a main point of contact on European policy matters for Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia and Germany.<sup>142</sup> Austria is a strong advocate for full European integration of the Western Balkans, making it, among other things, a priority during its 2018 presidency of the Council of the European Union as well as its top EU policy priority in 2020.<sup>143</sup>

Overall, recent perception of Austrian foreign policy in Europe appears to be one of a country caught between desire for grandeur and conflict aversion. The European Council on Foreign Relations opines that Austria "misperceives itself as one of the EU's big players",<sup>144</sup> while the 2020 EU Coalition Explorer survey ranked Austria as third in punching above its weight in the EU. The same survey ranked it as seventh most influential and seventh most disappointing member state. Carnegie Europe describes Austria as "ambitious" country with "very ambivalent" EU foreign and security policy.<sup>145</sup> With a conflict-averse population, Austrian governments are often unwilling to take risks that could displease Austrian citizens and "all too gladly fall back on neutrality" when things get tricky.<sup>146</sup>

Despite Austria's strong self-identification with neutrality, its reputation as neutral country abroad never came close to that of 'the' neutral country Switzerland.<sup>147</sup> The currently increased

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<sup>137</sup> Lisbeth Kirk, "No solidarity with neutral countries," *EUobserver*, January 19, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/news/1314>; Kirk, "Solana."

<sup>138</sup> Lisbeth Kirk, "No room for neutrals in Europe," *EUobserver*, February 22, 2002, <https://euobserver.com/news/5296>.

<sup>139</sup> Bruno Kreisky, "Austria Draws the Balance," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1959, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/austria/1959-01-01/austria-draws-balance>

<sup>140</sup> Gressel, "Austria: Russia's Trojan Horse?"

<sup>141</sup> Sofia Maria Satanakis, "Austria's toughest EU presidency," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, February 18, 2019, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_austrias\\_toughest\\_eu\\_presidency/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_austrias_toughest_eu_presidency/).

<sup>142</sup> See *EU Coalition Explorer*, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 8, 2020, <https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer/>

<sup>143</sup> Satanakis, "Austria's toughest EU presidency."

<sup>144</sup> Satanakis, "Austria's toughest EU presidency."

<sup>145</sup> Thomas Mayer, "Letter from Vienna," *Carnegie Europe*, April 3, 2015, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/59636>.

<sup>146</sup> Mayer, "Letter."

<sup>147</sup> Rathkolb, "International Perceptions," 74.

discussion of Austrian foreign policy can be traced back to the personality of Austrian leadership under Sebastian Kurz much more than to neutrality. In 2001, Luif wrote that the “future will tell if the negative effects of neutrality for Austria on the international stage will outweigh the positive connotations neutrality still has among the general public”.<sup>148</sup> To the author of this paper it seems that this question is as valid today, as it was 20 years ago.

## Conclusion and discussion

Henry Kissinger once referred to Austria as the “seismograph of Europe”.<sup>149</sup> A small country in Europe’s very center—or, what Austrian’s like to consider its heart—Austria has strong historic, geographic and economic ties to Europe’s East and West. It thus is also among the first to sense any ruptures on the continent. Neutral since 1955, the country was able to ensure stability and independence, but has been accused of relying on security from its NATO neighbors and EU peers. Neutrality, however, has a far deeper meaning for Austria than free riding, and forms an integral part of Austrian identity. It has thus also strongly influenced Austrian foreign policy and Austria’s perception abroad over the past nearly seven decades.

The historic significance of neutrality for Austria cannot be overstated—from its beginnings as informal condition for the withdrawal of Soviet troops, to Kreisky’s global multilateralism and the establishment of Vienna as center of diplomacy. It is unlikely that Vienna would have been chosen as location for organizations like the UN and the OSCE, or for meetings such as the Kennedy-Khrushchev summit, had it not been neutral. Along with its geographic location and shared past, neutrality made Austria also a natural point of contact for Eastern Europe.

But what about today?

There is little doubt that Austrian neutrality is a product of a bygone era. With the end of the Cold War, any concern of an infringement upon Austrian sovereignty by the hands of Russia evaporated. The scope of Austrian neutrality shrunk on various occasions, mainly with Austria’s EU accession and contribution to CFSP as well as the decision to, occasionally, allow transit of foreign troops. By the turn of the millennium, Austrian neutrality had thus lost most of its functions and, while being host to a plethora of international organizations, meetings and talks, Vienna never developed to its full potential as mediator. In addition, Austria has come under scrutiny for its ties to Russia—a direct result of neutrality—as well as its unwillingness to fully commit to a common European defense. What keeps neutrality alive is not political will as much as the Austrian population, to whom neutrality has become nearly sacred, as well as the current indifference of Austrian politicians towards the issue. Neutrality is rarely included in recent domestic debate and comes up even less internationally. Thus, neutrality features much less in Austrian realpolitik than it does in Austrian minds.

Austria finds itself in the predicament of being too neutral and yet not neutral enough. In the eyes of the Western international community, Austria is too neutral in its relation to Russia, too neutral in its conflict aversion and foreign policy flimsiness, too neutral to fully back a European military union, and too neutral in its willingness to free ride on security. And it is not neutral

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<sup>148</sup> Luif, “Austria’s Permanent Neutrality,” 154.

<sup>149</sup> Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored – Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1957), 8.

enough to be considered an international mediator equal to Switzerland—or to the Nordic neutrals for that matter.

Does this mean neutrality will be abandoned anytime soon?

Even though the practical role of neutrality has diminished, little comes to mind that could be gained from stepping away from it. While Austria's friendly relations with Russia might displease parts of the European Union and the United States, it seems to do little real harm as long as Austria continues to be deeply rooted in Western Europe and the EU community. And even though Austria never fully lived up to its own expectations as mediator and provider of good offices and Vienna often is only second in line for hosting high-level diplomatic meetings, ending neutrality would only harm its reputation as independent mediator further. As long as Austrians continue to support neutrality as strongly as they do now, nothing suggests that a change in Austria's status could lie ahead anytime soon.

With a brand new chancellor in place, it remains to be seen how Austrian foreign policy, its approach to Russia, and a common defense policy, as well as interpretation of neutrality as a whole develop under the leadership of Alexander Schallenberg. The past has shown that the Austrian take on neutrality makes it a flexible tool, able to adapt to changing circumstances, and allowing for both disinterested and ambitious foreign policy. For now, neutrality can be expected to remain a unilaterally accepted, yet inconsequential part of Austrian foreign policy and identity.

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