

Austrian spying affair reveals close connections between Haider's Freedom Party and police

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24 November 2000

Jörg Haider's Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) had access to secret police data for many years. It used this in order to defame its political opponents and support its own xenophobic campaigns. It obtained access to the data via members of a sympathetic trade union, who were paid for their services. Alongside FPÖ strongman Haider, who also heads the Austrian state of Carinthia, other high-ranking party members are also suspected of having procured data illegally.

This is the present result of the so-called "spying affair", which has filled the Austrian news for weeks. The scandal clearly shows that the rightwing FPÖ, whose entrance into the federal Austrian government in 1999 unleashed sanctions by the European Union, has enjoyed close relations with the state apparatus for a long time.

Statements made at the end of September by a former member of the FPÖ's Police Trade Union, Josef Kleindienst, set the ball rolling. Kleindienst admitted obtaining data for the FPÖ from the police computer about Austrian artist André Heller and others. The information then served as basis for slanderous articles, which usually appeared in the rightwing tabloid *Kronen-Zeitung*. According to Kleindienst, other officials had also supplied the Freedom Party with data, receiving regular cash payments from the party for years.

In response, Interior Minister Ernst Strasser, from the Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) initiated a preliminary investigation and the Economic Police began questioning Kleindienst. Since that time the scandal has grown rapidly. Preliminary inquiries were launched into Haider and other leading FPÖ politicians, and their political immunity was partially lifted. House searches were conducted of 14 police suspects, who all belonged to the AUF—the executive trade union of the FPÖ. In the course of these investigations facts emerged indicating the extent

of the cooperation between the state apparatus and the FPÖ.

Hilmar Kabas, chairman of the FPÖ in Vienna, together with party secretary Michael Kreissl, established a veritable network of informers in the capital. According to the investigations, there were several police officers responsible for different districts of Vienna who served as contacts for FPÖ politicians.

Kabas was principally interested in data about foreigners and asylum-seekers, as well as drug-related crimes. With the help of the illegally obtained information, he tried to portray asylum-seekers as drug dealers. Frequently he was informed about drug raids, the arrests made and the drugs seized just a few hours afterwards. Last year he was informed in advance about a large-scale drugs raid targeting Africans (Operation Spring). The FPÖ then launched an advertising campaign against "African drug dealers"—and even claimed credit for the successful raid.

In the course of the investigations, it was shown that Kabas had access to confidential documents from Operation Spring. He also possessed confidential information about civil proceedings, which the charity Caritas was conducting against him because he had claimed the organisation was a centre for the African drug Mafia.

Similar revelations came to light from the investigation of other leading FPÖ politicians. Horst Binder, an AUF functionary and Haider's bodyguard, was exposed as the mediator between the police and the FPÖ. Last year, L. Mayerhofer, a policeman and deputy in Lower Austria's state parliament, had already been accused of data theft. The proceedings were halted by the public prosecutor's office and only relaunched in the course of the current investigations.

According to Kleindienst, the head of the Salzburg FPÖ, Karl Schnell, against whom proceedings are also being taken, possesses "more explosive documents than are stored at the local police premises". Schnell and state parliament delegate Karl Naderer are said to have obtained information from police officers and used this in the election campaign.

Jörg Haider stands at the centre of the whole affair. In 1995, for a special parliamentary meeting to discuss the topic "How safe is Austria," he assigned AUF members to search official data for asylum-seekers that had committed crimes. With the help of this data, he wanted to prove that due to "malfunctioning deportation procedures, hordes of foreigners that were guilty of committing serious crimes were running around Austria", as he said at the time, and there could still be many similar cases. The public prosecutor's office is working on the assumption that Haider has committed an "ongoing offence".

The present Minister of Justice, Dieter Böhmdorfer (FPÖ), is also deeply implicated in the affair. This is particularly explosive, since his ministerial responsibilities include supervising the public prosecutor's office and the investigation and punishment of data crime.

Before he became a minister, Böhmdorfer was the lawyer representing Haider and other FPÖ members in numerous cases, and relied on documentary material obtained from police computers. Böhmdorfer and his clients had access to inside police information that they could utilise in the proceedings against their critics. They even had access to documents that were probably acquired illegally by the police.

The magazine *Falter* describes this as follows: "A constitutional melt-down can be found in Böhmdorfer's files. Policemen snoop on politically unpopular people, eagerly collect data about their political convictions. The FPÖ gets hold of this data and conducts political trials under the direction of the very man the party later appoints as Justice Minister."

The FPÖ politicians that have come under fire are trying to justify themselves by accusing the opposition of committing similar offences. Investigations have also begun in this direction, and with some success. The Austrian Socialist Party (SPÖ) delegate, Rudolf Schober, is suspected of obtaining information from the police computer for the SPÖ. Further enquiries regarding the Social Democrats and their supporters are to be expected.

Karl Schlögl, the former social-democratic Interior Minister and a personal friend of Haider, seems to have known about the FPÖ's practices for a long time. In 1997,

Haider had indicated to him in a letter that he possessed "extracts from police computers records" in three Austrian states. Schlögl did not try at all to prosecute Haider and let the whole thing drop. The fear that investigations might also implicate his party could have played a role.

The "spying affair" clearly shows how deeply intertwined Austria's police, justice officials and the extreme rightwing are. The FPÖ, which incessantly portrays foreigners, asylum-seekers, left-wingers and critics as criminals and terrorists, tried to back up these slanders by criminal machinations and have thoroughly undermined the data security of the general population. None of the establishment parties are able to advocate a thorough clear up, without fear of being pulled into the scandal.

The "spying affair" takes place against the background of a considerable crisis both of the Freedom Party and the government coalition as a whole. The FPÖ owed its election success to a combination of anti-foreigner rhetoric and social demagogy in the interests of "the little man". Since it took its place in the government and bears responsibility for carrying out antisocial policies—in glaring contrast to its earlier demagogy—the party is losing support. According to opinion polls, it has lost approximately a quarter of its former voters.

In view of this development the wrangling has already begun inside the FPÖ and the government. A break up of the coalition between the FPÖ and ÖVP, who may bring back their old coalition partners the Social Democrats, seems ever more likely. Exploratory discussions have already taken place. Within the FPÖ, the calls are getting louder for Haider, who withdrew to Carinthia in the spring and formally transferred the party presidency to Susanne Riess Passer to return to federal politics.



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