Christchurch terrorist donated to right-wing Austrian Identitarian movement

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Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant enjoyed wide-ranging ties with international right-wing extremist circles, reaching as far as Europe. He was no individual attacker, as the official narrative claims. On 15 March, the Australian shot and killed 50 people in two mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, and injured dozens more.

Last year, Tarrant donated €1,500 to the Austrian Identitarian Movement (IBÖ). As a result, the public prosecutor in Graz has ordered the house of IBÖ leader Martin Sellner to be searched. The spokesman for the prosecutor's office, Hansjörg Wacher, said that possible ties between the Christchurch shooter and Sellner were being investigated.

The donation came to light in the course of an investigation into another matter. The filing of a charge on the criminal offence of participation in a terrorist organisation was being considered, Wacher added.

For his part, Sellner said he had received an "unusually high" donation in 2018, and sent a thank you email to Tarrant. He added that his house had been searched before he could report the donation. Sellner went on to reject having any connection to the Christchurch attack, and accused Tarrant of wanting to associate him with it, in order to provoke repression against the Identitarian Movement.

This is obviously nonsense. Tarrant was in Vienna last winter, and it seems likely that he had ties to right-wing extremist groups. He participated in right-wing extremist discussions on 8chan, and commented on posts on Facebook and other media outlets using his own name. Although it remains unclear whether he developed ties to Sellner and other leading Identitarian figures during this time, it has not been excluded. The parliamentary subcommittee for internal affairs is now examining the Christchurch shooter's ties in Austria.

By contrast, the political and ideological links between the Christchurch shooter and the Identitarians are clear. In his manifesto, released shortly before his attack, Tarrant based himself on a number of their conceptions. Its title "The Great Replacement" is taken from the Identitarians' vocabulary. Even after the attack in New Zealand, a group of Identitarians marched in Vienna under the banner "Stop the great replacement." Such agitation against "uncontrolled mass migration," and the description of refugees as "invaders" are typical for the right-wing extremist scene around the Identitarians.

The same goes for their barely concealed calls for violence and vigilante justice against the left. "Thank God I bought a weapon before the asylum madness started. It would be hard to get something decent now," Sellner tweeted in 2015. And, just one day prior to the massacre in Christchurch, when a two-year weapons ban (imposed after he fired at "antifa" demonstrators with an air pistol) was lifted, Sellner said in a video, "So now with the blessing of the state I can take entirely legal steps to ensure security for me and my girlfriend in a society which is rampant with criminality and becoming ever more violent. In fact, it is being made increasingly difficult for citizens to arm themselves for their own security, while at the same time insecurity rises and public safety can no longer be guaranteed."

"The fact that his [Tarrant's] gaze reached as far as Austria is quite remarkable," Bernhard Weidlinger, an employee of the Documentary Archive for the Austrian Resistance (DÖW), said, according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "But it is by no means surprising that he selected the Identitarians for a donation. The content of the attacker's manifesto overlaps considerably with the Identitarians' world view."

The Identitarians are a right-wing extremist group that emerged 16 years ago in France and now maintains close connections to a network of far-right parties and militant neo-Nazi groups across Europe. They have been active in

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Austria since 2013. Although their membership numbers are relatively low and their activities meet with broad hostility and opposition from the vast majority of the population, they are well connected to high levels of government and enjoy support from the judiciary.

This was made clear in July last year. Seventeen members of the Austrian Identitarian Movement, including Sellner, were acquitted by the Graz District Court on every major charge in their case. The judgement was widely seen as a scandal. The Identitarians were charged because they had intimidated political opponents, disrupted their meetings, and promoted radical, xenophobic, and Islamophobic ideologies. According to the court, the accused were not guilty of sedition, or the formation of, or participation in, a criminal association.

Around six months prior to the Graz decision, the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), led by Sebastian Kurz, formed a coalition government with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), which maintains ties with the Identitarians. FPÖ members are also active in the Identitarian Movement, and high-ranking party officials appear in public with them.

For example, FPÖ Interior Minister Herbert Kickl spoke in 2016 at the right-wing extremist Congress of Europe's Defenders, which was attended by the Identitarians and supporters of other far-right groups. Kickl has played a leading role in adopting more restrictive laws on the rights to asylum and foreigners' ability to stay in Austria.

The ties between the FPÖ and the Identitarians are especially close in Graz. In January 2016, FPÖ member of the state parliament Gerhard Kurzmann joined a protest march there, organised by the Identitarians against the accommodation of refugees in an old barracks. FPÖ local councilor Heinrich Sickl reportedly had contacts to neo-Nazis as a 17-year-old, according to the Vienna-based *Der Standard*. To this day, he rents rooms to the Identitarians in a multi-party building in the centre of Graz. Sickl participated in Identitarian demonstrations—sometimes serving as a steward—including in a march against immigration in the border town of Spielfeld in 2015. The FPÖ's Mario Eustaccio, deputy mayor of Graz, was also present in Spielfeld.

According to *Kontrast.at*, the Free Association of Academics in Styria (FAV) organised a 2015 seminar, to which Sellner was invited as a speaker. The right-wing extremist publication AULA reported on the meeting. The report carries a photo of Sellner and Sickl posing together.

Deputy Chancellor Hans-Christian Strache also maintains close ties to the Identitarians. Photos from 2015 show the FPÖ leader sitting at a table with two well-known Identitarian members in a bar in Styria.

After the Identitarians stormed the stage in a theatre at the University of Vienna in April 2016, where a play by Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek was being performed, Strache defended them on Facebook. "The Identitarians are a non-party, non-left citizens' movement, which has obviously adopted its free activism as a contrast and critical counterpart to the left, which, however, unlike the Identitarians, often unfortunately resorts to acts of violence," the subsequently deleted post declared. "They are basically young activists of a non-left civil society."

Official government policy also corresponds to the Identitarians' line. The latest border-protection exercises, carried out jointly by the Interior and Foreign ministries, took place in southern Styria in 2018 and were entitled "Pro-border," an Identitarian slogan. In 2016 and 2017, Strache posted on Facebook that the "population exchange," which the Identitarians promote as a conspiracy theory, had already been accomplished, according to *Der Standard*.

In this context, Chancellor Kurz's threat to take action against the Identitarians, and consider a potential ban, amounts to an attempt to cover his government's tracks, curtail democratic rights, and prepare the ground for the banning of other, predominantly left-wing organisations.

For its part, the FPÖ immediately spoke out against banning the Identitarians. According to the television news program ZIB, Strache said that the proposed ban was Kurz's initiative, and he did not support it. "An association can't be dissolved just because a madman gave it a donation," he remarked.

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