

Sinn von Sein. Foreign Policy, Memory and Changing Imaginaries and Practices of Neutrality in the Second Republic*

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Abstract

This article unpacks the meaning of permanent neutrality in Austrian foreign policy from a collective memory perspective understood as remembrance of the past and expression of the country's ontological condition (*Sinn von Sein*). I argue, first, that while neutrality has remained formally a backbone of foreign and security policy, in practice, it changed its meaning to incorporate a more active role in multilateral institutions. Second, I demonstrate how this can be related to collective memory and changing imaginaries and role conceptions, showing how Austria's *Sonderweg* emerges from a normative global ambition to contribute to a more positive understanding of order.

Keywords

Collective Memory; Foreign Policy; Austria; Neutrality; Imaginaries; Role Conceptions

Sinn von Sein. Außenpolitik, Erinnerung und Wandel der Neutralitätsvorstellungen und -praktiken in der zweiten Republik

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel wird die Bedeutung der permanenten Neutralität in der österreichischen Außenpolitik aus der Perspektive des kollektiven Gedächtnisses untersucht, das als Erinnerung an die Vergangenheit und als Ausdruck des ontologischen Zustands des Landes (*Sinn von Sein*) verstanden wird. Ich argumentiere erstens, dass die Neutralität zwar formal ein Rückgrat der Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik geblieben ist, in der Praxis aber ihre Bedeutung verändert hat, indem sie eine aktivere Rolle in multilateralen Institutionen einnimmt. Zweitens zeige ich auf, wie dies mit dem kollektiven Gedächtnis und den sich verändernden Vorstellungen und Rollenkonzeptionen zusammenhängt, indem ich darlege, wie Österreichs *Sonderweg* aus einem normativen globalen Bestreben erwächst und so zu einem positiven Verständnis von Ordnung beiträgt.

Schlüsselwörter

Kollektives Gedächtnis; Außenpolitik; Österreich; Neutralität; Imaginäre; Rollenkonzeptionen

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1. Introduction

On 05 July 2022, Finland and Sweden completed accession talks with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Brussels and the accession protocols have been signed by NATO members the next day. Russia's invasion in Ukraine has increased the popularity of NATO membership in the two countries, with membership in the transatlantic alliance being promptly seen as a necessity in the context of a transformed security environment in Europe and an imminent threat to territorial sovereignty from the East. For Finland and Sweden, NATO membership marked a historical shift from neutrality in wartime to a commitment to Article 5 and collective defence of NATO territory.

Surprisingly, the NATO accession by once neutral Finland and Sweden has unleashed little debate on the future of neutrality in Austria. Austria is a permanent neutral state, and its neutrality is enshrined in the constitution and recognition by other states. Neutrality was a pre-condition for the country's sovereignty in 1955, and it had at that time emerged as an ideal solution to the Austrian 'problem'. For Austria, neutrality was a gateway to gaining international recognition as a sovereign state (Senn 2023), for postbellum Russia it was an ideal that Austria would not join NATO, while Western allies were confident that Austria would not cede under the military or political influence of the Soviet Union (Cede/Prosl 2016, 35).

Existing studies seeking to take stock of Austrian permanent neutrality (Senn 2023; Bischof/Karlhofer 2013; Popławski 2020; Cede/Prosl 2016, Chapter 6; Bischof et al. 2011; Harrod 2012) outline the ambivalence of the understanding of neutrality, especially after the end of the Cold War and the accession to the EU. While Austria has refrained from joining NATO and has remained formally committed to the legal and constitutional framework of neutrality, the country displayed strong predispositions to EU integration (Popławski 2020), including in the defence cooperation domain. Existing explanations for Austria's *Sonderweg* (special path) range from Austria as an agent of cosmopolitan security policy (Zakopalová 2011) to Austrian exceptionalism (Pelinka 2009) or remembrance of the past (Knight 2000; Art 2006; Bunzl 1996; Wodak/Cillia 2007). I advance this latter strand of research by analysing the case of neutrality in particular, unpacking how it links to collective memory and remembrance of the past. To this end, I put forward a conceptual framework of analysis underpinned by the interplay between notions of collective memory, state imaginaries and role conceptions. Austria's permanent neutrality has not been static, and it has evolved along four phases (consolidation, expansion, re-orientation and stagnation) to a differentiated and increasingly de-

politicised principle (Senn 2023). Austrian neutrality is performed within the space of intersection of several domestic and international factors: legal aspects, opportunity structures, national identity, security context, international integration and status (Senn 2023). The current article zooms into an important, yet insufficiently addressed sub-factor, *collective memory*, touching upon the interplay between constraining legal-constitutional aspects and ambitious global role conceptions of a small country.

This article unpacks the meaning of permanent neutrality in Austrian foreign policy from a collective memory perspective understood as an actuation of a permanent remembrance of the past and expression of the country's ontological conditions (*Sinn von Sein*). It puts forward a two-level argument. First, I argue that while neutrality has remained formally a backbone of foreign and security policy, in practice, it changed its meaning to incorporate a more active role in multilateral and regional institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (EU), which can be a source of protection and influence for a small country. I demonstrate how this can be linked to collective memory, but also changing imaginaries and role conceptions, especially after the end of the Cold War. Second, I argue that, despite the ambivalence in the projection of neutrality and lack of clear role conception, particularly with regards to regional organisations such as NATO and the EU, Austria's national *Sonderweg* emerges from a normative global ambition to contribute to a more positive understanding of security and international order. This might be related back to memory and Austria's endeavour to come to terms to the Nazi past. The article draws on empirical and historical insights from the *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (*Handbook of Austrian Foreign Policy*, see Senn et al. 2023). Building upon this research, it seeks to contribute to a greater understanding of the entanglements of different dimensions of Austrian foreign policy, which are treated rather separately in the handbook.

This article proceeds as follows: the next section elaborates on the conceptual underpinnings of the association between collective memory, imaginaries and role conceptions. The third section illustrates the changing practice of neutrality in Austria's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, illuminating the interplay between neutrality ambivalence and normative global ambitions. In the conclusion I reflect upon the interpretation of neutrality as a form of *Erinnerung* (*remembrance*), and its nonetheless ambivalent form shaped by a permanent search of answers to ethical-political questions and *Sinn von Sein* (ontological condition, the sense of being) in foreign and security policy.

2. Memory, Imaginaries and Role Conceptions

The study of collective memory in relation to societies has been pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs (1997 [1950]), Jan Assmann (1992) and Aleida Assmann (1999; 2006) and has been advanced in relation to how and why it matters in IR by scholars such as Maja Zehfuss (2007), Maria Mälksoo (2009; 2021), Kathrin Bachleitner (2021) or Jeffrey Andrew Barash (2016). Although we do not know for sure how true memories are (Assmann 1999; Zehfuss 2007), collective memory can be understood as a political consensus of the past (Walach 2019). Collective memory is a socially-constructed category that “endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember” (Halbwachs 1980, 48). In its communicative or cultural form (Assmann 1992), collective memory enacts an active mnemonic¹ effervescence to the ontological condition of a nation. Collective memory takes thus the form of a *collective imaginary of self*, which in its active *jetzt* (now) form embodies referentiality to and remembrance of the past. Memory is a dynamic concept that “needs continuous feeding from collective sources and is sustained by social and moral props”, incorporating simultaneously continuity and change (Halbwachs 1992, 34). Memories can change over time, because they are “situated firmly *within* the present” (Zehfuss 2007, 178, original emphasis), with the social-political context of the present times changing continuously. While the past is real as a form of historicity, collective memory transposes into an imaginary that takes the form of an imagination in the *jetzt* time of the historical past.

An imaginary is defined as a representational cognition and subjective meaning of a referent object. Subjective meanings and representations depend on one’s perception of its ontological condition (*Sinn von Sein*), habits, and perceptions (Horkheimer/Adorno 1977), which might not always be aligned with reason. Imaginaries (*Einbildungskraft*) and aesthetic consciousness thus matter because they define the fundamental meaning (see Kant 1890; see also Tanehisa 2018) to which countries ascribe to in their foreign policy. This adheres to a transcendental logic in which imaginaries can outperform reason while still producing meaning since they are deemed acceptable and significant. The practice level is where this subjective condition of thinking is most likely to appear. The practice level is also essential in the case of practices of recognition, for example empathic recognition of others. The recognition of other’s existence through subjective thoughts of “Mitsein” (Heidegger 2007 [1926]; see also Kaul 2012), can restrain the creation of metaphysical realities through imaginaries, which can

otherwise be considered as an absolute expression of freedom. Consideration of the ‘other’ in the context of one’s own ontological position and meaning (*Sinn von Sein*) therefore serves as a foundation for one’s own existence (*Dasein*), which is informed by the country’s past and collective memory.

However, enactments and performances of collective memory are not de-coupled from the strategic, security and global context and ego and alter role conceptions in these constellations. Especially nations with a troubled past, in the aftermath of the Holocaust or colonial rule, might be susceptible to mnemonic anxiety status². Bachleitner (2021, 2) argues that the “process by which countries remember happens within the social frameworks in which countries interact”. Because of its contingency in time, the *topoi*³ of memory (see Assmann 2006) play an important role in this process. Institutions and elements of strategic culture can thus take the shape of *topoi* of repetition and reproduction. They do not necessarily follow a linear trajectory, but can be punctuated by ‘turning points’, depending on regional and global historical contexts and changing imaginaries or role conceptions⁴.

Roles are a synthesis of expectations, identity and behaviours (Biddle 1979), being entrenched within social ecosystems, whether at individual or organizational level, and thus living through country’s foreign policy and strategic identity (see Wodak/Cillia 2007). I understand role conceptions as being associated with collective memories and state imaginaries, because I expect all three to be influenced by states of mind, remembering of the past and logics of appropriateness. Importantly, ego and alter role expectations are constantly negotiated and re-defined at both national and international levels (Harnisch 2011, 8) and the size of the state may limit the options available to leaders (Bueger/Wivel 2018). Thus, ontological self-expectations in the form of imaginaries and remembrance of the past resonate with role conceptions and performance at global level.

1 Mnemic refers to being intrinsically related to memory or mind.

2 For an in-depth theoretical discussion on mnemonical status anxiety, see Mälksoo 2021.

3 *Topoi* refers to places or spaces.

4 On the nexus between role conceptions and security and foreign policy, see Kaarbo/Cantir 2013; Raunio/Wagner 2020; Ewers Peters/Baciu 2022.

3. Sinn von Sein and Foreign Policy in Austria

Austria lacked a comprehensive *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) policy or an *Erinnerungskultur* (remembrance culture) program as in the neighbouring Germany. The meaning of the collective memory and guilt for the horrible crimes of the Holocaust can nonetheless be interpreted to be reflected in country's foreign policy and understanding of permanent neutrality and ambitious role conceptions of fulfilling the mission of a 'good country' in the global order. The notion of permanent neutrality can be argued to be a permanent acknowledgement of contrition of the country's past in the form of formal commitment to refrain from participating in military alliances and focus on civilian conflict resolution instead. This becomes part of the country's ontological condition (*Sinn von Sein*) and imaginaries as an essentialised meaning. The constitution of normative order is however not only determined by *Sollen* (*neccesitatio*), i.e. the need to behave in a certain pre-determined way (Stemmer 2011, 57), but this can be tempered by notions of "Mitsein" (Heidegger 2007 [1926]; Kaul 2012), understood as the recognition of existence of others and manifested in empathic ambitions to have a positive influence on the other and on the global order more generally.

Neutrality can be seen as a reference object and topoi of memory. This is illustrated by the active form of neutrality as a legal reference object, along its four phases of change, i. e. consolidation, expansion, re-orientation and stagnation (Senn 2023). From a legal perspective, neutral states have a responsibility to seek to maintain their neutral status⁵. Changing structural factors might accelerate states preferences for neutrality, as the examples of Finland and Sweden and the blitz membership request to NATO in the aftermath of the Russia aggression in Ukraine have demonstrated. This is not to say that their neutrality has changed overnight, it was rather a longer process, rooted, inter alia, in changing perceptions of neutrality in the aftermath of their EU membership. Austria's stagnation and thus endurance of permanent neutrality, takes the shape of an imaginary of self with a mnemonical element of the past. This is because "the past is produced and continually reproduced in such articulations of memory" (Zehfuss 2007, 259). Neutrality, once a premise for sovereignty, transformed into a collective way to remember and not forget the past.

The changing practice of neutrality after the end of the Cold War has been contoured by processes of Europeanization of foreign policy (Senn et al. 2023). In 1997, Austria adopted a law on cooperation and

solidarity⁶ (KSE-BVG), which expanded the possibility of sending troops abroad. In another important legal step, the adoption of the 2001 security and defence doctrine could have been a turning point in Austrian foreign policy, if the principle of European solidarity would have replaced the principle of alliance neutrality (see Frank 2023, 6). This was in a context of revival of European security policy with the St. Malo process led by France and the UK and thus possible allies' expectations. In the 2013 Austrian security strategy, the word neutrality is mentioned three times, while the word solidarity is mentioned 20 times⁷. Solidarity has been already present in Austrian foreign policy since the 1980s, as part of the re-orientation phase of solidarity in the framework of collective security systems (Senn 2023; Gintsberger et al. 2023). Solidarity in the framework of collective security systems was perceived as having primacy before responsibility, as demonstrated by the relativization of the Verdross doctrine (Senn 2023) in the perspective of taking greater responsibility in global affairs.

Conceptions of neutrality since the end of the Cold War have nonetheless been ambivalent. The ambivalence of neutrality can take forms of 'differentiated neutrality' (see Harrer 2023; Senn 2023; Rotter 1991) and be sometimes embodied in a lack of clear conception regarding foreign policy or military security, e.g. the role of the *Bundesheer* (Austrian armed forces) (Eder 2023) and how security and defence policy should look like in the context of current global contingencies. While neutrality has been formally kept, practices of neutrality have changed, presumably due to changing opportunity structures (Senn 2023) and role conceptions. Especially since the emigration crisis 2015, a discontinuity in the principle of solidarity can be observed. This is shown by the sinking international engagement of the Austrian troops in international missions and 're-nationalisation' of Austrian military (see Frank 2023) with a role re-deployment of the *Bundesheer* from foreign policy towards domestic policy.

While neutrality can be seen as a topoi of memory and permanent active commitment to the past, its unfolding in the present manifests into a rather ambivalent and differentiated foreign policy, with diminished agency in some domains, such as regional NATO or the EU and overproportioned engagement in collective security organizations such as the UN or OSCE, which are perceived to be more inclusive.

⁵ For the most important domestic and international legal provisions concerning neutrality, see Senn 2023.

⁶ The Bundesverfassungsgesetz über Kooperation und Solidarität bei der Entsendung von Einheiten und Einzelpersonen in das Ausland.

⁷ For a comparative tabulation on the usage of the word neutrality and solidarity in the national security strategies, respectively, NATO Partnership for Peace document of Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland see Baciu 2018, 113.

4. Concluding Reflections on Memory Endurance and Foreign Policy

The interpretation of endurance of permanent neutrality as an active form of *Erinnerung* and commitment to the past is demonstrated by Austria's 'good power' determination (Senn et al. 2023). As a small state, Austria has been punching above its weight, being three times a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, having twice the OSCE Presidency, and taking over-ambitious steps to influence the international global order, especially in the domain of nuclear disarmament, where Austria has been successful in actively influencing a series of initiatives (Kmentt 2023; Roithner 2023; Gintsberger et al. 2023; Zellner 2023). Austria's determination to have a positive influence on the global order could be interpreted as an approach to overcome a sentiment of guilt (Berger 2012, 83-122). The qualitative and quantitative contributions to positively influence the world order, either by punching above its weight, or by pursuing disarmament goals, together with a commitment to civilian mechanisms, for example in the framework of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (see Maurer 2023) and NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) (Gebhard 2023), could take the meaning of an aspiration towards a superior ethical condition as a mode of foreign policy. The use of force and waging war can be seen as phenomena of uncertainty that are reflected in the ambivalent condition of the principle of permanent neutrality, illustrating the contingency of memory and imaginaries themselves. The exposure to permanent ethical-political questions is active through an enduring dilemma of *non-savoir*, or not knowing what the right way and an "ethically correct course" of foreign policy is, therefore implying that while "referring to memory might conceal an uncertainty [...] it does not resolve it" (Zehfuss 1997, 263).

One known unknown concerns Austria's future global and regional positioning (*Sinn von Sein*) in the context of Russia's invasion in Ukraine and its aftermath. While Austrian foreign policy in the Second Republic has been ambitious, apathic, principled and pragmatic (Senn et al. 2023), the imbroglio between national defence, neutrality and global norms necessitates future research. While the *Handbook of Austrian Foreign Policy* does an excellent work in providing a very well-researched and historically solid account of pivotal foreign policy dimensions, it dedicates little space to address the entanglements between different important dynamics. Future studies should examine in-depth the meaning of re-imagining neutrality in a changing world and security landscape. As processes by which countries remember occur in the framework of socialisation and interactions in regional and international contexts (Bachleitner 2021, 2), ego role conceptions can be anticipated to change over time. It will be interesting to know more on how ego and alter

role expectations are negotiated and re-defined in the Austrian public discourse and parliamentary debates. Another limitation of the current research is the lack of comparative approaches studying the evolution of neutrality in other cases, such as Finland, Ireland, Sweden or Switzerland. As the case of Finland or Sweden have shown, the renouncement to neutrality might be more likely in case of threat perceptions to ontological security. Sweden has publicly admitted already during the 1990s that the simultaneous performance of political neutrality and membership in regional and international organizations might be difficult to achieve, while in Ireland the understanding of neutrality is juxtaposed with membership in collective security (Baciu 2018). Other comparative studies could include the study of neighbouring Germany, by closely examining and comparing how the sentiment of guilt has played out in foreign policy approaches there.

In conclusion, while the invocation of memory relates back to a permanent commitment to the past, *ars memoriae* might be nothing but imagined virtues or a myth (Assmann 2006), given that there is a co-existence of a multitude of memories of the past and that "remembering retrospectively conjures up a past that never quite existed in this way when it was the present" (Zehfuss 2007, 221). This transposes into a condition of perpetual contingency, alternation between continuity and change, and a permanent search for the *Sinn von Sein* in relation to foreign and security policy.

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