

ALEKSANDRA KRUK  
Zielona Góra  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7545-941X

## **Pursuing Austria's interests at the Munich Security Conferences**

The article attempts to analyse how Austria's interests and goals were presented at the Munich Security Conferences – annual meetings, compared to the WEF meetings in Davos, which have been organized since the 1960s to discuss international policy. It should be noted that the Munich meetings are widely commented by the Austrian press, e.g. *Kronen Zeitung*, *Die Presse*, *Der Standard*, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, and *Wiener Zeitung* described Munich “as the centre of geopolitics” (München; Kruk 2020).

The Munich conference serves as an agora for Austrian politicians to present the most current political and economic challenges and to comment on the implementation of the security strategy adopted in 2013. Hence, the author of the article decided to examine whether the activity of Austrian politicians at the Munich Security Conferences (especially the activity of Sebastian Kurz, Alexander Schallenberg and Katrin Kneissl) was recognized in the international arena, as much as the activity of Kurt Waldheim (UN Secretary General in 1972-1981), or the activity of Bruno Kreisky as a spokesman for the “active policy of neutrality”. The article also analyses the significance of the Munich Security Conference for the established reputation of Austria as the state involved in international negotiations and creation of international law. The author of the article decided to verify the hypothesis that the rhetoric presented at the Munich meetings was consistent with the declared and implemented policy of the Austrian authorities in other international forums. The other hypothesis assumed that although participation in the Munich Security Conferences was intended to strengthen Austria's positive image in the international arena, it was criticized, especially in relation to Austria's policy towards Russia. The method of analysing strategic documents and politicians' discourse at the Munich Security Conference after 2015 was used. Moreover, a contextual analysis proved useful to identify the background and the situation in which Austrian

politicians presented their positions on security policy. In order to assess Austria's international position and its efforts to strengthen the positive image of the state in the international arena, monographic and historical analysis methods were also used.

### **International position of Austria**

After 1955, Austria sought to build its international position as a neutral and wealthy state. Despite its small area (83,858 km<sup>2</sup>) and lack of access to the sea, the state was able to cooperate with other states owing to navigation on the Danube, or cultural and linguistic ties with Switzerland and Western and Eastern Germany. During the Cold War, this seemed to be the most pragmatic solution, allowing the creation of a *sui generis* position in Europe, dependent on geopolitical interests and determined by the resources possessed by Austria, which aspired to play the role of a mediator involved in resolving international conflicts. Bruno Kreisky proposed that Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Italy develop elements of cooperation following the example of Northern European countries, and in the 1970s, on the initiative of Erhard Busek, the discussion on the role of Austria in Central Europe intensified in order to adapt it to contemporary and forecast challenges (Humbert-Knitel 2018: 155-156). With the collapse of the USSR and the expansion of the European Union, Austria's policy was modified, but efforts to strengthen the positive image of the state in the international arena continued. Its location in Central and Eastern Europe and historical reminiscences made Austria cautious when accepting obligations that went beyond the functions of a neutral state. The distinctiveness and lack of experience that accompanied the countries that had previously entered the area of close interests of the USSR meant that Austria remained outside the Visegrad Group (formed by Czechia, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary). The geographical proximity to the countries of former Yugoslavia resulted in Austria being interested in the conflict in the Balkans and participating in activities aimed at restoring stability in that part of Europe. After the long-running debate on the accession to the European Union, Austria became its member state in 1995. Vienna tried to maintain its image as a state that attracted investors and was at the forefront of the latest strategic trends and challenges (Frey, p. 147-148). Austrian elites remained neutral and did not support American policy towards the Middle East and criticized President Bush's policy towards Iraq. In international organizations, Austria limited its activities to diplomatic and humanitarian ones which mainly involved financial contributions. Mili-

tary activities were restricted to promoting Austrian soldiers in missions to restore peace and stability. In this respect, particular interest was directed towards Kosovo and Bosnia. Austria sought to strengthen its positive image by creating networks of scientific, economic and cultural cooperation. Austria's position in the EU did not result only from its historical burdens and neutrality status, but also from expectations placed by other countries. Austria's interests and the vision of cooperation within the EU had their origins in federalist concepts and were related to the understanding of the importance of the Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino Euroregion and the cooperation related to the location on the Danube or in the Alps (Fischler 2019: 109-111). In 2000, on the initiative of Austria, the Salzburg Forum was launched with the participation of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, whose task was to strengthen the internal security of the member states (Müller, Maurer 2016: 6).

Before the EU enlargement in 2004, Austria operated in the community of 7 smaller states (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal). Cooperation within Central European countries was difficult due to economic differences and different attitudes to the adoption of the euro currency. In 2010, the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) was established with the participation of Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Poland as an observer state. Infrastructure and energy cooperation motivated Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to create the Slavkov Triangle in 2015. It is believed that Austria became interested in cooperation with these countries due to its relations with Russia. Being energy-dependent on Russia, Austria was looking for allies in the European Union to stop the EU restrictions which were a response to the annexation of Crimea (Kalan 2015). In 2020, in order to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Austria co-created C5 together with the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia (Hütterer 2023: 99).

The assessment of the benefits of membership in the European Union changed in Austria in the first quarter of the 21st century and led to increased critical attitudes. In 2021, a review of Austria's strategic situation was published, which presented Austria's development strategies until 2035. The review included conclusions on the maps of potential risks, global trends related to climate change, the spread of new wars, and technological and health challenges. A considerable part of the review discussed the external borders of the European Union.

Attention was drawn to the emerging threats to the European Union resulting from tensions in Africa, the Balkans, Donbas, the Black Sea area, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Moreover, the review also drew attention to the policies

of Russia, Turkey, Iran and the tensions in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. It also emphasized the need to adapt the institutional system of the European Union to the current internal and external tensions. The key topics included economic challenges resulting from the costs of overcoming current threats (Sicher). Due to the growing conflicts, Austria is preparing a new security strategy and it is acting under the provisions of the National Security Council established under the Act of 16 November 2001. This body addresses threats to security that occur inside and outside Austria, including the participation of Austrian soldiers in EU and UN missions; fight against radicalism and terrorism; overcoming the pandemic; attacks in cyberspace. The National Security Council adopted resolutions in connection with Russia's aggression in Ukraine. On 28 January 2022, the National Security Council called for dialogue and diplomacy actions to de-escalate the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and on 25 February 2022, it condemned Russia, expressed solidarity with Ukraine and demanded the implementation of financial sanctions against Russia (Beschluss 1; Beschluss 2; Beschluss 3).

### **Perception of Austria in the international arena**

Although the issue of the image cannot overshadow the importance of the state's hard power, based on military and economic potential, it is difficult to pursue state interest without it. This view was presented by Otmar Höll, who listed factors essential for the analysis and assessment of relations between states at the international and internal levels. He also drew attention to the relations between these levels. At the Munich Conference, Austrian politicians are invited to participate in numerous forums, where they publicly discuss and defend their positions. Participation in the conference is a test of the ability to persuade and convince the interlocutors and the audience. The discourse in the international arena is evaluated and affects the level of relations between political actors. (Höll 2022; Warchala 2019). During the conference, the state has the opportunity to draw attention to motives, conditions and interests. Austrian diplomacy sought to strengthen soft power, defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want" (Nye 2007: 23; Ociepa 2013: 20; Panas 2021:31-39). The Munich Security Conference primarily gathers politicians, although it is also attended by representatives of other circles, such as scientists and businesspeople. Such meetings are significant in promoting the importance of Austria, for example intellectual disputes are very popular meetings. The European Forum Alpbach, The Philosophicum Lech, and the Vienna Lectures (Humbert-Knitel 2008: 344-349) have become well-known.

Table 1  
*Relation parameters by Otmar Höll*

International level	State level	Relation dynamics
International environment (political polarizations; regional economic order and dynamics)	Structures of the political system	Past and current conflicts
Geopolitical location	Government policy, parties	History and narrative(s)
Conflict constellations	Economic structure	Various social values and ideology(ideologies)
Power relations	Unions, civil organizations. Non-political lobby	Self-perception and perception by others
International status	Perception of „national” interests	Cooperation / competition
Provision of natural and human resources	Media reports (news).	Political measures
Political and military membership, alliances	Stereotypes/prejudices, national identities	Culture (including education, science, progress) and sports coverage
Cooperation / competition in international institutions	Past and current dominant values (narratives, ideologies)	
	Personality traits of elites	

Höll 2022:449.

Participation in international conferences allows Austria to influence international debate and the dynamics of international relations. The discourse in the international arena is evaluated and affects the level of relations between political actors. The Munich Conference made it possible to present the political culture of Austria, which resulted from geographical and historical conditions. Austria took advantage of the opportunity to conduct modern public diplomacy in Munich, using its previous experience and status in the world of diplomacy.

Austria's image is assessed by international institutions through the prism of many criteria (business, crime & law enforcement, day-to-day life, education, science, entertainment, governance, health care, human relations, IT service, natural resources, technology & telecommunications). In the new Report "Neighbours in Unity: A Positive Peace Report on Good Relations with Neighbours" Austria is seen as a leader in terms of peacefulness, mutual cooperation, and conflict resolution (World Ranking 2024).

Table 2  
*Ranking about good relations with their neighbours*

Place	Country	Index
1	Denmark	1,37
1	Netherlands	1,37
1	Canada	1,37
1	Germany	1,37
1	Austria	1,37
2	France	1,42
3	Sweeden	1,49
4	Czech Republic	1,53
5	United Kingtom	1,56

Good Neighborhood Relations 2024.

### **Austria's discourse at the Munich Security Conferences after 2015**

Austria's activity at the Munich conference was a consequence of the deepening of the migration crisis and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Between 6 February and 8 February 2015, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the analysis of the situation in the Near and Middle East were important topics of the conference. The phenomenon of the hybrid war and the migration crisis raised questions about the guidelines for Austria's security policy, which was represented in Munich by Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) and Gerald Klug (SPÖ). The conviction of the "twilight of the power of the West" and weak resistance to new threats mobilized Austrian politicians. S. Kurz focused on the role of the Islamic State in the spread of terrorism and spoke out against the spread of radicalization in Europe. He believed that European states should cooperate with Muslim countries in the fight against terrorism. Minister of Defence G. Klug held talks with Ursula von der Leyen (Minister of Defence of the Federal Republic of Germany) and Jean-Yves Le Drian (Minister of Defence of France). The talks concentrated on the development of military cooperation and the EU training mission in Mali (APA).

In March 2015, in connection with S. Kurz's visits to Kiev, New York and Munich, it was made public that Austria had undertaken to organize a meeting on European security in Vienna. The conference, scheduled for 16-17 June 2016, took place in the baroque Liechtenstein Palace, famous for its historic Hall of Hercules. It was an opportunity to promote Austria's cultural potential on the international arena. More importantly, Vienna returned to the role of host, which it had performed many times. It was in Vienna that the congress of 1814-1815 was

held to restore the international order after Napoleon's defeat. The 1961 Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the 1963 Convention on Consular Relations, and the 1969 Convention on the Law of Treaties were adopted in Vienna. In the 1980s, disarmament negotiations took place in Vienna. The diplomatic meeting was organised in Vienna on the initiative of Wolfgang Ischinger, head of the Munich Security Conference. In order to obtain information about the format of the debate, MP Wendelin Mölzer from the Freedom Party of Austria demanded information from S. Kurz, as Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, at the National Council (the lower house of the Austrian Parliament) (*Schriftliche Anfrage* 2023). About 60 participants took part in the talks, including: Toomas Ilves (President of Estonia), Hans-Adam II Prince of Liechtenstein, Miroslav Lajčák (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia), Johannes Hahn (EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Cooperation and Enlargement Policy), Lamberto Zannier (Secretary General of the OSCE), Ivica Dačić (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia), Didier Burkhalter (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland), Sebastian Kurz (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria), Tamara Beruchashvili (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia), Linas Linkevičius (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania), Pawel Klimkin (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine), Alexej Meschkow (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia), Gerald Klug (Minister of Defence of Austria), Peter Hultqvist (Minister of Defence of Sweden), Milica Pejanović-Đurišić (Minister of Defence of Montenegro), Jan Hamáček (President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic), Elmar Brok (Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the European Parliament), Norbert Röttgen (representative of the *Bundestag*), Wolfgang Schüssel (former Chancellor of Austria), Javier Solana (former Secretary General of NATO), Celeste Wallander (Special Advisor to the President of the United States), Salil Shetty (Secretary General of Amnesty International), Prince Turki Al Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (as Chairman of the Royal Centre for Islamic Research), George Soros (Chairman of the Open Society Foundations), Wolfgang Büchele (business representative) (Münchner 2015).

G. Klug, Minister of Defence, presented the guidelines for Austrian security policy. They were consistent with the 2013 Austrian Security Strategy (*Österreichische Sicherheitsstrategie*), but also contained references to recent events. In connection with the conflict in Ukraine, Minister G. Klug spoke in favour of the quick implementation of the Minsk Agreements and called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. At the conference, the fight against terrorism and instability in Africa (APA) was discussed.

The panel moderated by S. Kurz at the 2016 Munich Security Conference included George Ivanov (President of Macedonia), Borut Pahor (President of



Slovenia), Kolinda Kitarovic (President of Croatia), Milo Djukanovic (Prime Minister of Montenegro), and Giorgi Kvirikashvili (Prime Minister of Georgia). This confirmed the role of the Balkans in the policy of Austria, which in its 2013 strategy emphasized the importance of the policy for the stabilization and association of the Western Balkan countries, the development of the neighbourhood policy in the EU, cooperation with the countries of the Mediterranean Region and the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Balkan Region (Österreichische Sicherheitsstrategie). S. Kurz, like many Austrian diplomats before him (Alois Mock, Wolfgang Petritsch, Erhard Busek, Michael Spindelegger), supported the implementation of projects aimed at stabilizing the situation in the Balkans (Plassnik 2013: 76-78).

S. Kurz's attitude towards the migration crisis after 2015 was different from the policy of openness declared by Angela Merkel. S. Kurz's decision to close the borders and prevent migration to Austria via the Balkan route won the conservative many supporters who elected him chairman of the Austrian People's Party in May 2017 and supported him in the early elections on 15 October 2017. The politician was compared to Donald Trump by his opponents and was accused of populism. S. Kurz represented the view that protecting Austria's borders was an element of the Austrian defence identity and did not hesitate to form a coalition with the Freedom Party of Austria (*FPÖ*) in 2017. The alliance with Heinz-Christian Strache's party was controversial due to the nationalist slogans promoted by the group and its ties with the pro-Putin United Russia party (Shuster 2018). Political scientist Anton Pelinka described the "Kurz formula" as aiming to weaken the influence of the *FPÖ* by analysing and "softening" their demands (Oltermann 2017; Tóth 2019).

In 2017, S. Kurz, as Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and chairman, sought to improve relations between the US and Russia. He talked to both the Mayor of Kiev, Vitaly Klitschko, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Sergei Lavrov. He called for increasing observers of the OSCE mission in eastern Ukraine. At the conference, he held a meeting on migration policy with Angelino Alfano, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs. S. Kurz drew attention to the problem of the Balkan route in southern Europe (Kurz). S. Kurz's statements indicated proposals for actions in the European Union towards the problem of migration that were different from those in Germany. The politician returned to the postulate of protecting the European Union's borders at subsequent conferences.

In 2018, Sebastian Kurz and Mateusz Morawiecki, Prime Minister of Poland, participated in a panel moderated by Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference. The politicians' speeches could be viewed from the perspective of competition and striving for leadership in Central and Eastern Europe in this period. Relation between this countries during the cold war was dominated



by recognition and later the cooperation was continuing (Kisztelińska-Węgrzyńska 2013: 120-132). S. Kurz's statement followed the opinions expressed by other politicians about the situation in Europe, setting a course of action and assessing the *status quo*. S. Kurz claimed that "we must finally be determined to defend our Christian-Judaic Europe, shaped by the Enlightenment, and the fundamental values that defined us, such as freedom, democracy, the rule of law and civil rights". He expected institutional reforms in the European Union, consisting in reducing the number of commissioners and reducing bureaucracy. He believed that there were too many regulations in the European Union that slowed down economic activity. S. Kurz supported digitalization and innovative methods of obtaining energy as impulses for economic development in the European Union (Rede 2023; Ultsch 2018). The politician proposed organizing an international mission in Ukraine under the banner of the UN. He also opposed Europe's dependence on the USA. He drew attention to the need to protect borders and protect prosperity. He saw problems in Britain's decision to leave the EU. The Chancellor also expressed the opinion that his generation benefited from integration, while currently they had to struggle with a decline in cooperation and disputes within the European Union (Seinitz 2018; Gillespie 2018). In his speech, S. Kurz repeated the appeals for the EU reform presented during his travels around Europe and he prepared the background for the Austrian presidency of the EU scheduled for the second half of 2018. The slogan of the presidency was "A Europe that protects" (Auel, Pollak 2021). It is worth noting that Austria's first presidency lasted from January to June 2006 and had to face the energy crisis in Central and Eastern Europe caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Later on, it had to cope with avian flu and the failure of the constitutional treaty. Despite problems, Romania and Bulgaria were expected to join the European Union (Dulak 2009). During the 2018 presidency, it was significant that S. Kurz's government acted as a coalition of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), when a sense of disappointment, caused by the migration crisis and the contestation of Donald Trump's presidency and policies pursued by Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was clearly felt in Europe. The changes taking place in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán intended to implement "illiberal democracy", were very important from Austria's perspective. Researcher Karl Aiginger noted that the problem of many inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe was the crisis of liberalism, and social and labour market problems called for a vision of development and reforms to Europe. He emphasized the need to create investments in scientific research, a well-thought-out division of labour and the budget in the European Union. Austria sided with the Green Deal and intended to use its leadership position in climate policy (Aiginger 2021).

In 2019 the presence of non-partisan Karin Kneissl, Minister of Foreign Affairs and a representative of the pro-Putin political scene in Austria, was strongly criticized. The politician emphasized in Munich that the West was in a breakthrough era and required discussing policy directions leading to multilateralism. At the conference she talked to Gent Cakaj, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania and Nikola Dimitrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia. She also had a meeting with James Jeffrey, the US special envoy for Syria (Kneissl 2019; Kneissl 2019). At the conference, there was also a meeting with Mike Pence, Vice President of the USA, during which the continuation of cooperation was announced. In relation to Russia, K. Kneissl announced the continuation of the “smart sanctions” policy, i.e. restrictions against natural persons. She emphasized that the sanctions did not concern economic issues, energy policy and trade (APA/ Lauber 2019).

After 2020, the Austrian discourse on the resonance of the Munich conference was dominated by criticism of China’s policy, treated as a threat to the security of the transatlantic world. The participants expressed their satisfaction with Donald Trump’s election defeat and they expected that transatlantic cooperation would be reactivated. In that context, *Wiener Zeitung* alarmed that the West had lost international importance, joining the discussion on the “Westlessness” (Schmölzer 2020) report proposed by the conference organizers. Despite the economic rivalry between the West and China, Chancellor S. Kurz and Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Schallenberg, present in Munich in 2020, offered 2.4 million protective gloves and 100 thousand surgical masks to Wang Yi, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, as part of humanitarian aid to fight the pandemic (Coronavirus). The Chancellor called for Western responsibility for the rule of law and democracy. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, Professor Timothy Garton Ash took part in the panel “Westlessness in the West: What are we defending?” moderated by S. Kurz. Kurz pointed out that Western countries used to be attractive due to their economic standards and promotion of democracy. Currently, non-democratic countries might be more economically prosperous than non-democratic countries, which was controversial, and China’s economic competitiveness posed a threat to the West. In the debate on migration policy, J. Trudeau pointed to Canada’s successes, while S. Kurz drew attention to the differences between the situation of Austria and Canada, for example the territorial differences between the two states. He emphasised that neutral Austria contributed to defending the values of the transatlantic world through diplomatic actions and participation in peacekeeping missions. He noted that Canadians had developed rules for accepting immigrants, which had proven successful because immigrants constituted a qualified workforce. S. Kurz assessed that Austria had problems with immi-

grants from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan because they did not know the language and were not prepared for competition on the labour market. The politician also answered T. G. Ash's question about the validity of coalition cooperation with the FPÖ, which was criticized for promoting xenophobia. The Chancellor claimed that in Austria there was a need to try different formats of cooperation within the operating political parties (Panel Diskussion 2020; Giulia Fink 2020).

S. Kurz's statements in Munich and Austria's position within the EU's "frugal four" (along with Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands) sparked discussions in the context of work on the organization's budget in 2021-2027 (Słojewska 2020). The reconstruction programme after the Covid-19 pandemic, pushed forward by Germany and France, aroused discussions in Austria and was assessed as a hand-out policy (Miecznikowska 2022). In 2021, due to Covid-19 restrictions, the organizers of the Munich Security Conference decided to hold only online meetings. In 2022, Alexander Schallenberg went to Munich, and his visit included meetings with politicians from the Middle East on the nuclear agreement with Iran and the situation in the Balkans. At the conference, the desire to strengthen relations with India was also signalled by the meeting with Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of India (Agenturen 2022).

The 2023 conference was dominated by the war in Ukraine, therefore the *status quo* "one year after the breakthrough" was discussed. An important signal was the arrival in Munich of Kamala Harris, Vice President of the United States. Austria was represented by A. Schallenberg (Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Karoline Edstadler (Minister of European Affairs). A. Schallenberg (ÖVP), who met Chinese politician Wang Yi at the conference, criticized China's policy towards Russia in connection with the war in Ukraine for its "pro-Russian neutrality". He emphasized that the consequences of the war reached beyond Europe and his criticism of China's policy was consistent with NATO's position expressed at the summit in Madrid on 29-30 June 2022. The twelve-point plan regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict announced by China in Munich did not obscure the fact that the West was concerned about China providing military equipment to Russia. China's attitude was confirmed on 23 February 2023 after the vote for the UN resolution on restoring peace in Ukraine, from which China abstained. The Austrian diplomat held meetings with politicians from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the German Chancellor, and had many unofficial meetings, e.g. with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba (Zalesiński 2023; Mayer 2023; ORF.at/Agenturen).

It should be noted that Austria's attitude towards the war in Ukraine was closely watched by public opinion. A. Schallenberg claimed that at the conference neutral Austria did not face the accusation of not sending weapons to

Ukraine. The politician claimed that the humanitarian aid provided by Austria was sufficient. K. Edtstadler reminded that Austria supported the process of documenting crimes in Ukraine. According to the 2022 survey, 75% of the Austrian population rejected the possibility of joining NATO. 38% of Austrians were in favour of Ukraine's accession to the European Union, but 46% were against it. Austria was accused of not toughening its stance towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. (De Gruyter 2022; Majority 2022; Edtstadler 2023). The fact that MPs of the Freedom Party of Austria left the parliament on 30 March 2023 when the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky was delivering his speech online was received with outrage. Herbert Hickl from the *FPÖ* claimed that leaving the hall was a manifesto to defend Austria's neutrality which the Ukrainian president violated in his speech (Zew 2023).

At the Munich Security Conference in February 2024, Austria was represented by Foreign Minister A. Schallenberg, Minister for European Affairs K. Edtstadler (*ÖVP*), Minister of Justice Alma Zadic (Greens) and Wolfgang Sobotka (President of the National Council, Parliament of the Republic of Austria; former Minister of Interior). Although the presence of W. Sobotka in the media was primarily remembered because of the high costs of his trip to Bavaria, it should be noted that the politician participated in a panel discussing the problem of neutrality in international politics. The panel was moderated by Louise Richardson (Moderator of the Carnegie Corporation of New York), and also discussed by Mirjana Spoljaric (President of the International Committee of the Red Cross), Ian Borg (Minister for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade, Republic of Malta), Leo Varadkar (Ireland). W. Sobotka promoted the concept of active neutrality, allowing to build the resilience of a democratic state to external threats. His statement referred to Austria's attitude towards the Russian-Ukrainian war. The politician pointed to the importance of providing humanitarian aid and shelter to refugees from Ukraine (Sobotka 2024; Spotlight 2024).

## Conclusions

The presence of Austrian representatives at the Munich Security Conferences, just like the activity of this country within international organizations, is based on international agreements and strategies of the Austrian government. The annual conference gives Austrian political elites a chance to present their positions and confront different interests of the participants gathered in Munich. Diplomats visiting the capital of Bavaria are required to have persuasive and negotiation skills needed to present the position of the represented state. Austria is usually represented by the Chancellor and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The most recognizable politician among the Austrian elites is S. Kurz. As a representative of young political elites and a representative of the DACH

countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein), he seems to be the right person to carry out representative tasks and participate in discussions in Munich. Although he has presented Austria's position on current challenges, Austria's position on the migration crisis, the Russian-Ukrainian war, the institutional reform of the European Union and the European Union budget requires in-depth negotiations because it raises controversy within the European Union. Also, the activities of K. Kneissl, an expert on the Middle East, are currently being criticized due to the subservience of Austrian policy towards Putin's Russia. The activity of Austrian politicians will be perceived through the prism of their impact on the stabilization of Europe. Due to the accusations brought against S. Kurz in Austria and the criticism of K. Kneissl's policy towards Russia, Austria's image in the international arena as well as the effectiveness of persuasion have been spoiled. A. Schallenberg also emphasises the influence of globalization challenges and the role of China and other Asian countries in current international politics and takes advantage of the experience gained in contacts with representatives of these countries.

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**Dr hab. Aleksandra Kruk, prof. UZ**, Uniwersytet Zielonogórski, Instytut Nauk o Polityce i Administracji, Katedra Systemów Politycznych, Teorii Polityki i Administracji, Zielona Góra (a.kruk@inpa.uz.zgora.pl)

**Keywords:** Austria, international conferences, Munich Security Conference, Russian-Ukrainian war, migration crisis

**Słowa kluczowe:** Austria, konferencje międzynarodowe, Monachijska Konferencja Bezpieczeństwa, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, kryzys migracyjny

#### Abstract

*The article attempts to examine how Austria's interests and goals were presented at the annual meetings of the Munich Security Conferences in comparison to the WEF gatherings in Davos, which have been organized since the 1960s to discuss international politics.*

*Austria's status as a small, stable and neutral state has conditioned its diplomatic efforts at the Munich Security Conferences as well as in international politics. Austrian politicians actively engage in the conferences, presenting Austria's interests and political goals that follow from current issues, including the Russian-Ukrainian war and the migration crisis. The article examines the activity of Austria's leading politicians, Sebastian Kurz, Katrin Kneissl and Alexander Schallenberg, through the lens of Austria's standing and image abroad. It also analyses Austria's discourse at the post-2015 Munich Security Conference.*

*The author of the article decided to verify the hypothesis that the rhetoric presented at the Munich meetings aligned with the Austrian government's stated and carried out policy in other international fora. The second hypothesis postulated that despite the fact that Austria's participation in the Munich Security Conferences was meant to enhance Austria's favorable reputation internationally, it was criticized, particularly with regard to Austria's stance towards Russia.*

*The method of analyzing strategic documents and the discourse of politicians at the post-2015 Munich Security Conferences was used. Contextual analysis was also helpful in determining the circumstances and background against which Austrian politicians made their security policy statements.*