
JIPSS

JOURNAL FOR INTELLIGENCE,
PROPAGANDA AND SECURITY STUDIES

Edited by ACIPSS Vol. 3, No. 2/2009



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EDITORIAL

ZILK, SCHULMEISTER, SPY-INVESTIGATING COMMITTEE, SPY-MUSEUM. THOUGHTS ON INTELLIGENCE, THE MEDIA AND PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS IN AUSTRIA IN 2009



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2009 has been a good year for the academic field generally called “intelligence studies”, as several intelligence-connected issues have consistently taken central stage, both in Austrian politics and in the national media. ACIPSS got involved in all these episodes, as a quick perusal of the category “Medienspiegel” on the ACIPSS-homepage proves.¹ Not surprisingly, public interest in all of these affairs was lively, even if not uniform or of the same duration. Helmut Zilk and the Spy-Investigating Committee received public and media attention for several weeks, Otto Schulmeister for about a week and the Spy-Museum initiative for a few days. And all types of media responded: public and private television and radio as well as the various daily and weekly press organs, some of the products lastingly preserved on the Internet.² The good news first: the quality of intelligence-reporting has generally increased, particularly in the print media. Maybe a bit exaggeratedly one could claim that intelligence has finally arrived as a serious topic for Austrian journalists; and not only for Austria’s all too few national quality newspapers and journals, but also for several regional and even boulevard dailies. The bad news for Austria’s journalism across the media is: there is still a lot of room for improvement.³

Admittedly, intelligence is a complex and tricky field which generally calls for background and context knowledge not readily available on the quick run; it takes a resourceful and persistent type of approach, certainly reaching beyond superficial information, readily available on the Internet. A journalist may have to reach for scholarly articles in hard-to-find journals, have to peruse public libraries or may even have to pay a visit to an archive, state or local.⁴ These are significant tasks to undertake and extraordinary challenges to face, for any journalist. There is further good news: about a dozen Austrian journalists have proven up to the task and have offered well-written and well-researched articles or interviews.⁵ Occasionally the effort took at least a couple of them to one or several archives. This has had the salutary side-effect of getting a larger segment of Austrian society interested in our national archival system (possibly for the first time) as particularly the Zilk-affair seemed to prove that not everything at our State Archives and Archive of the Republic was/is as it should be. Of course, internationally experienced users and many others have known that for a long time. Unfortunately, the news has not reached the relevant section (chief) of the Austrian Chancellery yet.

It may soon. Ultimately, as with most governmental issues, the problem comes down to a traditional under-budgeting and under-staffing of archives in Austria as though historical memory housed there were of little national importance. By international standards our archival backwardness is glaringly obvious. And only public pressure will produce the incentive for improvement.

Though anything capable of strengthening parliamentary democracy in Austria deserves support, the spectacle of the parliamentary “Spitzel-Untersuchungsausschuss” over the last few months has provided ample proof that Austria is in dire need of reforming its parliamentary committee system. And again, the relevant standards can be studied in various countries and democracies with good and best practise. First of all, in reference to intelligence issues as part of national security, a parliamentary permanent committee needs to be created dealing with state security both internally and externally; in other words, such a committee covering security agendas across the various ministries involved. As it now stands there are main committees dealing with the affairs and responsibilities of the separate ministries (Interior and Defence) but there is no holistically-oriented committee for over-all state security issues. And this committee needs to be permanent, i.e. called for meetings in regular intervals, and not just, like special sub-commissions, at the emergence of one or several affairs of different urgency. Longstanding committee membership has a chance of breeding expertise; occasional investigatory work in a sub-committee with limited agendas will rarely create insights leading to meaningful structural change.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. www.acipss.org.

² For example ZIB2-Interview about the Zilk-affair, 23 March 2009. Radio Ö1-Interview related to the “Spitzel-Ausschuss”, Mittagsjournal 21 September 2009.

³ On the intelligence-media relationship cf. Robert Dover, Michael S. Goodman (eds.), *Spinning Intelligence. Why Intelligence Needs the Media, Why the Media Needs Intelligence* (London 2009).

⁴ Such journalism actually exists in Austria; cf. Christa Zöchling, “Als wäre er unser Agent”, profil No. 17, 20 April 2009, 16-23.

⁵ Cf. Ernst Höfler, Zilk war glasklar ein Spion, “Die Presse,” 27 March 2009. Wolfgang Sablatnig, CIA köderte Intellektuelle aus Österreich, “Salzburger Nachrichten,” 21 April 2009. Es gibt ein falsches Verständnis von Geheimnistuerei, “Der Standard,” 19 July 2009. Christian Böhmer, In Österreich ist alles geheim, “Kurier,” 19 July 2009.

⁶ Cf. Vera Mair, Cloak and Dagger Politics, in: *The Vienna Review* (September 2009), 3.

⁷ Cf. Wolfgang Sablatnig, Ein Fünfer für das Parlament, “Tiroler Tageszeitung,” 26 November 2009.

⁸ Cf. www.oegdm.at.

It is not difficult to see that crucial areas connected to topics dealt with in this editorial have a long history of being and having been under-funded or under-staffed or both in the Second Austrian Republic: the armed forces, security organizations, among them military and security intelligence; research and thus also the archival system; possibly even parliamentary activities. One wonders, for example, how well the parliamentary library is stocked. Is it even regularly used by parliamentarians? How well were the members of the spy-committee served by staff? Who are they? Intelligence experts? Why do we know or hear so little about them?

My expectations of this investigatory committee were very low already in August 2009;⁶ by and large, my scepticism was totally justified. It was mainly “a potpourri of political argy-bargy” (Hick-hack); political trivialities and innuendo abounded; the larger issues were ignored or mattered little; it deteriorated into a political show in which rhetoric counted for more than substance. As a consequence, parliamentary democracy appears undermined rather than strengthened.⁷

Is there a connection to serious endeavors to create a scientifically based Austrian spy museum (Österreichisches Geheimdienstemuseum) in Vienna?⁸ You bet! It underlines the need for solid information and better understanding of the central issues of security and intelligence among lawmakers, decision makers but also the citizenry at large. It could prove as crucial support also for all three Austrian intelligence services. Will they recognise the chance it could offer them? More scepticism is called for.