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THE IBIZA VIDEO AS AN EXAMPLE OF TODAY'S MEDIA FUNCTIONS BETWEEN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Assistant Prof.Dr. Zehra ÖZKEÇECİ

Nişantaşı University, Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences, Department of Journalism, İstanbul/Turkey



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ABSTRACT

In May 2019, a political scandal shook the Austrian Republic, leading to the withdrawal of high-ranking politicians and the dissolution of the government. Specifically, it was about secret video recordings, corruption and illegal party financing. But also about the acquisition and instrumentalisation of media and the influence on the published opinion. But the mass media also ensured that the affair was spread worldwide. Both the secretly recorded video and the national and international reactions to it were published.

Communication scientists are therefore particularly interested in the role of the media in this matter. The scandal was conducted through and about the media, media were also the subject of secret negotiations as well as the most important actor in the distribution of the affair. This was followed by a political exchange of blows, not least via social media. Not only the party representatives, but also civil society supporters and opponents of the resigned government took the floor. It can therefore be said that the scandal is primarily about a media debate that took place in one form or another. Using the example of the so-called Ibiza affair, this work therefore raises the question of the function of mass media today and whether conventional attributions are still valid in the digital age.

Key Words: Corruption, Austrian Freedom Party, Party Financing, Hidden Camera

INTRODUCTION

"We're not like that!"

"We're not like that! Austria is simply not like that!" (Van der Bellen 2019) was a statement by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen after the Ibiza affair became public and cast doubt on the credibility of the political parties. In addition to Van der Bellen, several other politicians have tried to distance themselves from the protagonists of the video and their questionable methods.

In May 2019 a corruption scandal became known as the Ibiza affair or "Ibizagate", in which former Austrian Vice-Chancellor Heinz Christian Strache was involved and which led to the end of the right-wing government coalition in Austria. In concrete terms, this involved two-year-old video recordings on which the then federal party chairman of the FPÖ and later Vice-Chancellor Strache and the deputy mayor of Vienna and later FPÖ club chairman Johann Gudenus met with a supposed Russian oligarch for secret talks in order to talk about a party donation that had been promised.

The media played an important role in the emergence and further course of the Ibiza affair. At the same time, they were also the subject of discussions between Austrian politicians and the alleged Russian oligarch in the secret video recordings. The idea was to bring the Kronen-Zeitung into line and dismiss unpopular journalists. In addition, the intercepted Vice-Chancellor HC Strache thought about privatizing parts of the ORF, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, in order to gain an even stronger influence on the media.

At the same time, it was also the media that spread the video around the world. The social media in particular played an important role in it. Although all reputable media and tabloid stations broadcast excerpts of the video, the comments and observations of bloggers changed the discourse. Not only the satirical videos and critical comments that were published and disseminated attracted a lot of attention, but also the Facebook page of Vice-Chancellor Strache himself, which is one of the most visited pages in Austria.

Therefore I would like to answer the following research questions:

To what extent were the media involved not only in the distribution of the "Ibiza video", but also in the scandal itself?

Does the scandal confirm previous theories about the function of the media or does it refute them?

Compared to the traditional mass media, what role did social media play in the public perception of the Ibiza scandal?

In order to answer these questions, some political backgrounds such as the history of the FPÖ and the Kronenzeitung will be examined with the help of source research, and media-relevant statements from the monitoring protocols of the affair will also be quoted. In a separate chapter, the reactions to the social media are analysed in order to draw conclusions about current media functions.

The Main Players in the Ibiza Affair

Who is the FPÖ?

In order to determine who the FPÖ, the Freedom Party of Austria, is, one must first tell its story, which makes it clear that it is not just an ordinary party in the democratic spectrum. After the end of the Second World War, an effort was made in Austria to cover up the traces of National Socialism, as if the country had been the first victim of German fascism. (cf. Manoschek 1996: 103) This also included the banning of Hitler's NSDAP, i.e. the National Socialist Workers' Party, so that its members could no longer be legally active. Many were accused, a few sentenced and many others went underground. Austria, which had been annexed to Nazi Germany in 1938 and belonged to the "German Reich" under the name "Ostmark", was still occupied by the victorious powers after the World War and only gained independence in 1955 with the signing of the State Treaty. (cf. Manoschek, Geldmacher 2006: 579) So there was a certain pressure from the allies of the anti-Hitler coalition that the fascists should not get away completely without punishment. (cf. Lehngut 2013: 68-69) However, the former members of the NSDAP were no negligible minority, but a former mass party. After the Second World War the other parties in Austria began to make an effort to win this clientele as voters. (cf. Manoschek 1996: 102)

In order to get out of illegality, the former Nazis had founded a new party, the VDU, the "Association of Independents". The Social Democrats of the SPÖ (Social Democratic Party of Austria) in particular supported the founding of this party because they hoped that this would help to split the right-wing and bourgeois camp. (cf. Lehngut 2013: 87) In the 1949 elections, this "reception camp" for former Nazis already reached 11.7% again.

In 1956 the VDU was dissolved and the FPÖ was founded. Although the leading members of this party had already made a career under National Socialism, a slow but steady rise began. From the very beginning, the FPÖ aimed for government participation and was supported by the SPÖ. An

example of this is the rehabilitation of the former SS-Obersturmführer Friedrich Peter, who was also accused of participating in massive war crimes. He was also defended by the legendary Social Democratic Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. In return, the FPÖ supported the then Social Democratic minority government in 1970. From 1983 to 1987 there was even a government coalition of SPÖ and FPÖ. (cf. Demokratiezentrum 2019)

Ideologically, however, the FPÖ was closer to the Christian-social ÖVP (Austrian People's Party). With it the FPÖ joined a coalition government from 2000-2005 and again in 2018. (Ibid.)

The first coalition between the ÖVP and the FPÖ was marked by the work of right-wing populist politician Jörg Haider, who died in a car accident in 2008. Under Haider, the FPÖ changed from an insignificant force to a mass party, even though or precisely because it was using radical right-wing and racist content to win votes. (cf. Lehngut 2013: 91) Liberal forces in the party were marginalized under Haider or left the FPÖ at all.

In the context of the new coalition between the two right-wing parties in 2018, Heinz Christian Strache as chairman of the Freedom Party was nominated to the position of a Vice-Chancellor. This coalition between the ÖVP and the FPÖ was characterised by an offensive attitude in which hardly one stone of the political landscape remained on the other. The achievements of the last decades were quickly suspended and many economically liberal and conservative reactionary plans realised. Although it was actually a matter of cancelling almost every reform introduced after the Second World War, this policy itself was referred as a reform policy. There was hardly any dialogue with the opposition, and a large group of political and image consultants ensured that there was a great deal of popular support for this policy, even though it was implemented against the real interests of the majority. (cf. Nittelfelder, Peternel 2018)

In contrast to previous coalition governments, the ÖVP and the FPÖ sought a harmonious relationship, which they also demonstrated to the public. The keyword for this new style was "message control", so that no more negative news should reach the recipients. According to an article in the "Kurier", the government employed 50 different public relations consultants to ensure a positive public image of the government and its ministries. (Ibid.)

With the help of the ÖVP, the FPÖ had become the driving political force in Austria. The interior-, foreign- and defence ministries came into the hands of the right-wing populist party. New surveillance measures or increasingly restrictive asylum regulations showed the FPÖ as a law and order party, that almost every week announced a new regulatory tightening. (cf. Mayr, Riss 2019)

But there were also numerous individual cases during this government administration where the close relationship of the FPÖ to right-wing radical groups and to National Socialist ideas came to light. The image of the government suffered as a result, and even the many PR professionals were unable to save anything. In the end, it were the relations with the so-called identitarians, a right-wing radical group with international networks, that led to political debates. The right-wing radical assassin, who had murdered 51 people in mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, was in verifiable contact with the Austrian "identitarians" and had also donated money to them. Although the FPÖ distanced itself from this group, photos showed Strache with leading members of the identitarians drinking beer. (Standard editorial office 2019a) A few days before the release of the Ibiza video, one of the country's best-known neo-Nazis, Gottfried Küssel, who had just been released from prison, threatened to publish any information about the Vice-Chancellor. Strache had taken part in military sports exercises together with Küssel and other fascists in his youth and was also a member of right-wing national fraternities. Even though he himself had always denied having noticed anything about his friends' right-wing radicalism, photos and old postcards testified to his proximity to fascist ideas. (Standard editorial office b)

When the video was released to the public, these announced and eagerly awaited revelations had suddenly become unimportant. After the Ibiza video, HC Strache resigned, just like his close party

colleague Gudenus. But despite the scandal, the party reached 17.3% in the EU Parliament elections that took place shortly afterwards. Even for many professional political experts, this was incomprehensible and surprising. But mainly because of the online media, HC Strache even managed to get 40,000 preferential votes. (Standard editorial office, APA 2019).

The “Kronen-Zeitung”

It is interesting to see how the "Kronen-Zeitung", which was in the centre of the conversation with the oligarch, documented and commented the topic itself. For many years, the popular newspaper was seen as the FPÖ's biggest supporter, especially under the leadership of Straches predecessor Jörg Haider. Haider's right-wing populist demands were received with benevolence and for a long time the FPÖ was reported with great sympathy. (cf. Thurnherr 2019) But the other parties also tried to win the favour of the Kronen-Zeitung and to achieve more friendly reporting through generous advertisements. The Krone is still the highest-circulation magazine in Austria, despite strong competition from free newspapers and online media. According to the Austrian Circulation Control ÖWA, the Kronen-Zeitung has a circulation of 732,220 copies sold and 773,598 copies distributed and 821,994 copies printed. On Sundays, even a circulation of 1,215,201 copies is sold. (cf. ÖWA 2019)

This means that between 2,345 (Monday to Saturday) and 2,899 (Sunday) million readers can be reached, with a population of around 8.8 million people this represents a large reach, which is why all relevant parties are trying to maintain a good relationship with the Kronen-Zeitung. (krone.at 2019)

In the long history of the Kronen-Zeitung, which has been published since 1900, there have always been articles that violated press law principles and good taste and were therefore punished by the Press Council. (cf. Bachmaier 2019) It is precisely for this reason that the Kronen-Zeitung is very popular in Austria, where right-wing parties dominate strongly, especially in rural areas.

But the Kronenzeitung, like almost all newspapers in Austria, also has an online edition, where most of the contents of the print edition are offered with additional videos and chat facilities. According to ÖWA (Austrian web analysis), the online page of the tabloid newspaper has a reach of 2,462,000 readers. (ÖWA 2019) This shows that even in the event of a possible loss of importance of the print edition, the newspaper will continue to play an important role in Austria via the Internet.

The Ibiza Video

The meeting in Ibiza between the Austrian top politicians and the alleged niece of a Russian oligarch took place in 2017 and was secretly documented by audio and video recordings. As already mentioned, the film shows party chairman Strache and club chairman Gudenus from the FPÖ as well as the alleged oligarch who calls herself Aljona Makarowa and pretends to be the niece of the Russian oligarch Igor Makarow. She was accompanied by a man who, as it became known in the meantime, was a private detective from Austria.

The wife of Klubobmann Gudenus, who was present during the conversations, can be seen in the video, but did not say anything and rather takes on the role of a passive observer. In terms of content, it was about party financing, dubious business and intransparent political decisions of high explosiveness. (cf. Obermaier 2019) What is most frightening in the whole affair is the self-evident nature with which illegal topics were discussed in the video. This gives the impression that it is a normal case rather than an exception.

The alleged oligarch pretended that she wanted to invest 250 million from dubious sources in Austria and asked the top Austrian politicians to advise her. It was examined how this money could be invested in such a way that it would also benefit the FPÖ, for example in the forthcoming election to the National Council. Strache reports on already existing major donors who would donate between

500,000 and two million euros, but on an association structure to escape the control of the Court of Audit.

It was also discussed that the oligarch should buy 50 percent of the Kronen-Zeitung in order to promote the FPÖ even more strongly than before. With this support, the prominent party members hope to finally join the government. Strache even expected a majority vote: "If the medium pushes us two or three weeks before the election, if this medium suddenly pushes us, then you're right. Then we don't make 27, then we make 34 percent." (contrast 2019)

Strache also mentioned how he thought it could be done: some journalists who are not FPÖ-friendly enough should be dismissed. They should be replaced by others who are more in line with the Freedom Party. Journalists were also described as prostitutes and journalism as a whole was seen as a service that could be bought.

"Journalists are the biggest whores on the planet anyway. As soon as they know where the journey is going, they'll work one way or the other. You just have to communicate it to them." (Contrast Editing 2019)

The video revealed which offers the supposed oligarch was made for economic grants as well as for the hoped-for propagandistic influence. In return, the FPÖ politicians offered to award her contracts if she would found a construction company. The discussion also includes the idea of privatising parts of the drinking water. In fact, several of the topics discussed there constitute a criminal offence, which is why charges were brought against the two politicians Strache and Gudenus even after the publication.

Although Strache often emphasizes that he will not do anything illegal, these assurances are more like appeasements. After all, he suspects several times during the conversations filmed in the video that it could be a trap. But the content and offers of the FPÖ as well as the obvious willingness to accept "dirty money" are anything but legal. (cf. Obermaier 2019)

Such as party financing, which should be carried out without control by the Court of Auditors and via FPÖ-related associations. These donations should not be disclosed. Also the names of alleged large donors were mentioned, who would already sponsor the FPÖ.

"The donors we have are usually idealists. They want tax reductions ...Gaston Glock as an example, Heidi Horten is an example. Rene Benko, who pays the ÖVP and us...one of the biggest real estate agents in Austria. Novomatic pays them all." (Contrast editorial office 2019)

However, the companies cited denied the statements of Strache. But in fact Rene Benko, mentioned in the quote, has meanwhile taken over 24% of the Kronen-Zeitung, which raises questions about the actual consequences of the recorded secret talks. (cf. Ibid.)

The takeover of the Kronen-Zeitung by the alleged Russian oligarch in order to achieve a more offensive promotion for the FPÖ is described in detail:

"As soon as she takes over the Kronen Zeitung, as soon as that is the case, we have to talk openly, we have to sit together. There's one thing in the Kronen Zeitung: zack, zack, zack. Three, four people, we have to push them. Three, four people, they have to go. And we'll bring in five new ones, which we'll build up." (Ibid.)

For the FPÖ politicians, the takeover of the Kronen-Zeitung as an extremely influential medium means the simultaneous takeover of political power in the country. But the plans go even further:

"If you have the Kronen Zeitung, you are the determining factor. And if you also gain a TV station, you decide everything." (Contrast editorial office 2019).

With the television station the ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation) was meant, which has always emphasized its independence since its foundation as a public broadcaster in 1956. (cf. Obermaier 2019)

In addition, the negotiations involved the awarding of state-owned construction business without a public tender and the exclusion of construction companies that are not acceptable to the FPÖ. Specifically, it was about the industrialist Hans Peter Haselsteiner, who is known as a political opponent of the Freedom Party. Strache therefore emphasized:

"The Haselsteiner does not get any more contracts. So, then we have a huge volume of infrastructural changes. If there is a quality there and there is a qualitative supplier there, I am the first to say: then she should set up a company like Strabag, because then she will receive all the government orders that Strabag now receives." (Ibid.)

Even absolute taboo subjects were addressed, such as the sale and privatisation of drinking water.

The scandal was made public by the German media Spiegel and Süddeutsche Zeitung in May 2019, i.e. only after the video had existed for two years. Of course, the question arises why the publication was delayed for so long, because at least the participation of the FPÖ in the government could have been prevented. Because soon after the event in Ibiza, H.C. Strache became Vice Chancellor, which also had a positive effect on the career of Gudenus as club chairman of the FPÖ.

There are rumours about the responsible persons and the authorship of the video, but economic rather than political motives seem to have played a role for the production.

Changed Media Functions on the Example of Ibizagate

The best known social, political and economic functions attributed to the mass media in journalism include the information function, the opinion-forming function and the critique and control function. (cf. Chill, Meyn 1996)

Of course, the entertainment and distraction function should not be forgotten either, about which Ronneberger (cf. Ronneberger 1971: 50) and Saxer (cf. Saxer 1974: 22-33) have written in particular. In addition to the political explosiveness, the affair had considerable entertainment value, which at the same time increased the interest in political news broadcasts.

Most of the communication theories still taught today date back to the analogue age. Some of them with good reason, because some of the classics of communication science have lost none of their validity. (cf. Maletzke 1984) (Ronneberger 1985) (Burkart 2002) Nevertheless, these theories were primarily related to radio, television, the press and print media. However, technological developments also influenced the functions attributed to the mass media.

The possibility is ignored that media can also fulfil a propaganda and manipulation function. This is not a new phenomenon, but has existed since the beginning of media. Alone through the setting of topics, the so-called agenda-setting, a tendency in terms of content is determined, as has been confirmed by impact research for decades. (cf. Chill, Meyn 1996) Media are primarily dependent on politics and the economy. The hope for press promotion and advertising will determine the reporting. (cf. Siegert, Brecheis 2010)

However, the digital possibilities are many times more extensive and also offer direct interaction between the user or recipient and the communicator. Although the media tasks have been retained in the digital age, the general conditions of news distribution have changed completely and require a new analysis.

For example, the radius of action has been extended worldwide and the relations between sender and receiver have been democratised in a certain way. (cf. Özkececi 2018: 88-94) The social media play a major role in this process.

The Debate Over the Scandal in the Social Media

The discourse in the social media about IbizaGate was just as polarized as the political landscape before the scandal. Most FPÖ and Strache followers remained with their ideology. Their postings rather deplored the vulgarity that the two top politicians were "spied on" and shared the view that Gudenus and Strache had behaved correctly. (see Strache Facebook Comments 2019).

Their own statements, in which they present themselves as victims, sound similar. Strache had to resign, but in the videos he distributed on his Facebook page he emphasized that he would trust the justice system, which would acquit him of all accusations. Contrary to the assessments of political experts that it is impossible for anyone to return to the political stage after such a scandal, Strache also openly thinks about a comeback. (Marx 2019)

His followers support him mostly with encouraging advice and also by attacking the few critical comments that can be found on the Facebook page. It's interesting that Strache himself reacts to these exceptional cases and emphasizes that he "did not do anything wrong". (Strache Facebook comments 2019).

A visitor named Thomas Wiltner had posted about it:

"What upsets me most about the almost 6000 comments I have received is that the implications of what has been said are simply not taken seriously and that one is only entrenched in the role of victim. But perhaps it is no wonder when the world view is made up of conspiracy theories." (Strache Facebook comments 2019).

Such statements are immediately attacked by other followers and mostly Strache even answers personally. Since there are thousands of declarations of support, the few dissenting opinions are all the more noticeable. Martina Marx writes about a rare criticism on the Facebook page, to which 116 users would have responded, whereby almost all comments massively defended Strache and also became offensive against the critic. (Marx 2019)

Also the political line of the homepage - against migrants and the fear of Islam - has been maintained. Those who visit the site are told that 797,629 people like the site and that 776,982 people subscribe to it. (cf. Strache Facebook 2019) This is one of the most visited pages in Austria.

The concrete example of IbizaGate can be used to recognise the growing importance of the social media on public opinion. Although the traditional media and meanwhile also the Kronen-Zeitung criticised the FPÖ practices, the social media managed to create a "Now more than ever" attitude among the supporters of the party. (cf. Marx 2019)

Although Strache has slightly fewer followers than his former coalition partner Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP), no other Facebook page in Austria has more interactions.

On other social media sites Strache is not as committed as on Facebook, but with 58,000 followers on Instagram he is still strongly present. (cf. Dragan 2019)

CONCLUSION

The affair surrounding the so-called IbizaGate video has once again drawn attention to the functions of the media. The information function as a central function of the media was actually perceived more strongly than in everyday reporting, because details came to light that are usually hidden from the public. The Austrian Federal President stressed that Austria and especially the Austrian politicians "are not as seen" on the video. (Van der Bellen 2019) But in contrast, many recipients had the impression that for the first time they could really observe how politicians act when they think they are among themselves.

In this work, IbizaGate was used as an example to primarily examine the political responsibility and the associated critical and control function of new media. The other socio-economic functions

attributed to the media in the classical communication sciences played a subordinate role in this paper. In times of digital communication, it was of particular interest what kinds of possibilities social media offer to users to deal with such violations of democratic principles.

To answer the first research question, to what extent media were not only responsible for the scandalization of the "Ibiza video", but also themselves became the subject of the scandal, can be said: The political potential of the media was highlighted not only in the production and distribution of the Ibiza video, but also in its content. In the case of the Kronen-Zeitung it could be seen that politicians in influential positions will have no hesitation in instrumentalising the media and influencing reporting.

The fact is that the Kronen-Zeitung has a massive influence on the social climate in Austria. The party chairman of the FPÖ also hoped for the support of the Crown in order to reach 34% or even to become the party with the strongest vote, according to his own words. (cf. Kontrast 2019) This is a massive violation of the freedom of the press and thus an intervention in fundamental democratic rights.

On the question of the role of the social media in the public perception of Ibizagate, the article could not find a clear answer. The FPÖ politician Strache uses social media intensively and created thereby a counterweight to the official reporting. On Strache's Facebook page, which is visited by almost 10% of Austrians, the one-sidedness and further approval, which was maintained even after the uncovering of the scandal, surprised.

In specific fora it can be observed how an intensive debate has taken place on this issue, but this obvious fact of corruption and illegal party financing is noted without a great indignation. According to these comments on the net, many citizens assume that politicians are all corrupt anyway, even if there are only few video recordings of such secret transactions.

But also the protest and the criticism of political disinformation and corruption were spread online. This means that the social media are just as inconsistent as the social and political polarisation in Austria.

This leads to an answer to the question of whether the scandal confirms or refutes previous theories about the function of the media. The study concludes that the proven theories should not be discarded, but only supplemented by taking into account the global potential of the social media and the possibilities of interaction for recipients.

In order to change the practices made public by Ibizagate, the political framework must also be changed. This task cannot be left to politicians and experts who were not willing or able to do so in the past. But as was discussed in this work, the social media also make it easier for ordinary users to participate in the political process: How this opportunity can best be used, and how the above-mentioned abuse of social media by party-political instrumentalisation can be avoided, is a question that will certainly require further research for its answer.

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