Has idealism lost ground against conservativism?
The production of legitimate agency in public media discourses about civil society in Austria

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Authoritarian tendencies are on the rise almost everywhere in the world. Moder & Pranzl (2019) document how capturing the voices of civil society (CS) and moulding them into uniform concert with the opinions held by the government is an often essential first step in the process of countries becoming more authoritarian. This is done via discrediting and hostilities against liberal civil society organisations (CSOs), which are documented for Islamic and former Soviet and countries (Greskovits, 2020; Meyer et al., 2019). Authoritarian tendencies have been observable in Austria as well. The first Kurz government between 2017 and 2019 was characterized by a decisive weakening of consensual governance as it was practiced within the so-called Social Partnership for decades. Moreover, attacks on progressive and humanitarian CSOs where as severe as to lead to the formation of a "solidarity pact" between CSOs to unitedly defend against the government.

Although the direct attacks against CSOs have stopped for the moment, it is highly likely that the hostilities lead to a tectonic shift in the political landscape of Austria. To investigate whether a lasting shift took place, this paper analyses public media discourses in Austria between 2015 and 2020. All articles on CSOs and civic activities (Anheier, 2007) from 12 daily newspapers[1] from different ideological as well as regional scopes are gathered (Earl et al., 2004), that is, almost 1,000,0000 articles for the period under observation.

Particularly, I hypothesize that the way legitimate agency is discursively produced has shifted (Suchman, 1995: 574). Two decades ago, Meyer & Jepperson (2000) observed that the enactment of agency follows particular, very standardized scripts (Goffman, 1974). High legitimacy is granted to actors that take agency for others (e.g. collectives, like a village), and the highest legitimacy is granted to those that take agency for abstract principles in line with enlightenment thinking, like rationality, progress, democracy and individual rights. Comparably lower legitimacy is granted to scripts which refer to one's own interests only. CSOs taking on agency for collectives and even more CSOs taking agency for abstract progressive principles thus were considered highly legitimate actors.

Within the "*cultural backlash*" taking place in western societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), enlightenment thinking with the accompanying liberal-progressive values is losing ground against the conservative values of loyalty, authority, justice and purity (Graham et al., 2011). Thus, it is likely that

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[1] Wiener Zeitung, Kleine Zeitung (covering Styria and Carinthia), Oberösterreichische Nachrichten, Niederösterreichische Nachrichten, Salzburger Nachrichten, Tiroler Tageszeitung, Vorarlberger Nachrichten, Bezirksblätter, Kronen Zeitung, Kurier, Der Standard, Presse.

the scripts with which legitimate agency is constructed are also changing such that now those who claim agency for the principles of loyalty, authority, justice and purity have become the most legitimate agents. As loyalty, authority and purity are hardly conceivable in the abstract, though, they are usually used in reference to a particular collective. Thus, it might be that the schema described by Meyer & Jepperson (2000) needs to be revised overall in that (selfish) agency for the self and the collective is increasingly considered to be of higher legitimacy as compared to agency for abstract principles and collectives (like nature, human rights, rationality).

Summing up, the paper explores the following two research questions: (a) Has the legitimacy of progressive-liberal CSOs in public media changed during the first Kurz government? (b) Is there a general shift in the way legitimate agency is discursively constructed? The questions are approached through a social constructivist lens (Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008: 125-130; Hasse & Krücken, 2009), that is unlike in rational actor models, I don't take the existence of actors that pursue their idiosyncratic interests for granted. I focus instead on the social embeddedness and construction of actors through discourses (Hall, 1997; Shapiro, 1989). To answer the questions, the newspaper articles are analysed with a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, using tools of automated text analysis (e.g. topic modelling, part-of-speech-tagging, named-entity-recognition, classification via dictionaries) and corpus linguistics (concordance, collocation and keywords-in-context analysis) (Litofcenko et al., 2020; Mautner, 2016).

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