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# **DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN AUSTRIA**

EU DISINFO LAB



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## INTRODUCTION

Disinformation has a long tradition in post-war Austria. Still, it attracts large supporter groups to a degree capable of splitting society or further manifesting racism, antisemitism, and other types of hate. With the emergence of the internet and the growing popularity of social network services, the spread of false content significantly accelerated hateful resentments against persons perceived as 'aliens.' During the pandemic, a critical movement emerged questioning the effectiveness of the vaccines and the measures taken by the government, and it is still rallying. Fabricated or falsified content appears in social media, on websites, and traditional media alike, and often, the initial creator can hardly be identified as some media admittedly share such content via their channels to boost its reach.

## EMBLEMATIC CASES

### COVID-19 IS LESS HARMFUL THAN ANNOUNCED

A large part of society has been receptive to the idea that COVID-19 is less dangerous than claimed and that [officials used it to restrict peoples' freedom rights, force them to get vaccinated and make entrepreneurs rich.](#)

### REFUGEES ARE BETTER TREATED THAN AUSTRIA'S "OWN" POPULATION

News articles like "[Minimum pensioner kicked out of her apartment to make space for asylum-seekers](#)" issued by the daily tabloid Kronen Zeitung in Salzburg, saying that a woman had to move out of her apartment to make space for refugees.

### MUSLIMS ERADICATE AUSTRIA'S CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

A long-evolved narrative about an alleged [official ban of St. Nicolo in Kindergarten](#) is still feeding into strong resentments and racism against Muslims.

## NARRATIVES

- The most prevalent and manifest narrative evolved over the past 30+ years. It claimed that “migrants/ refugees come to Austria to abuse the social welfare system” and are “better treated than Austria’s population”, thus depriving them of funds and services. A widespread comparison of [the benefits of an asylum-seeking family and the average income of a worker’s family](#) claims that asylum seekers are financially far better off and suggests that they can “lean back in the social hammock”.

The content has been widely shared on social media. It has also been taken up by print media and politicians, leading to debates over the welfare system and manifesting the perception of “them” as “social parasites”. There was almost no resistance against the government(s)’ cut to the monthly allowance and other benefits for asylum seekers, as solidarity with perceived “economic refugees” has shrunk even more recently. The exuberant presence of hate against refugees online even led to an amendment of the Austrian Criminal Code on incitement to hatred. Since 2016, it also explicitly acknowledges refugees as a protected target group against incitement to hatred, including in the media. As in the winter of 2015/2016, solidarity among the population with new refugees from Ukraine was great, and the government decided to skip the lengthy asylum application procedures and granted a proper status, including access to the labour market. However, the narrative of higher “welfare incomes” for refugees resurrected later in 2022 when it became clear that a return to war-torn Ukraine would not be possible soon.

Many articles and videos undermined the initial solidarity, claiming that the war was “self-inflicted” by Ukraine or bluntly denying the invasion and describing it as an act of “liberating” Ukraine from its Nazis. Alternative media like AUF1 was heavily involved with the spread of such content. AUF1 is an online news program founded by a former manager of the far-right youth organisation of the Freedom Party, Ring of Liberal Students, during the pandemic, successfully addressing the German-speaking COVID-denying Querdenker movement in Austria and Germany. Since AUF1 content is also feeding into the terrestrial channel RTV in Upper Austria, the Austrian media regulatory body [Komm Austria](#) has started investigations for lack of proper registration.

- In the winter of 2015/ 2016, when many persons fled from the war in Syria, the prevalent narrative of favourable treatment for the refugees arriving was amplified by even more false reports, like that brand-new [cell phones have been donated “for free”](#), and that even “prostitution services were granted” to “prevent rape”. The consecutive process of “de-solidarisation” with those seeking help led to widespread belief in the enemy image of the “dangerous Muslim, the IS terrorist disguised as a refugee”.
- Hatred against Muslims and their presence in Austria was specifically launched with the narrative of an official ban of St. Nicolas Day in Viennese Kindergarten” (Press Release of the Freedom Party in 2006), accompanied by a campaign of their spin-off “SOS Abendland” (SOS Occident/ 2007). The initiative issued flyers against the ban on the streets and proclaimed on their website “we won’t let (them) take off our values/traditions/festivities”. Although the false narrative has been countered by Officials, stating that no such ban has been ordered and that it’s up to the individual facility to decide on such festivities, the narrative lives on and even made it into the manifesto of the Norwegian assassinator Anders Brevik.

In 2017, it peaked by making the [cover pages of 16 local issues of the district newspaper](#), quoting the mayors' stances against the alleged ban of St. Nicolo. The Austrian Press Council issued a letter to the editor that the headlines would violate point 2.1 (demand for diligence and accuracy in research and reproduction), and that the covers were "cheap propaganda" and "incitement to hatred" and thus violate point 7.1 (refrain from slander and defamation).

- The restrictive measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, participation and movement limits for non-vaccinated people, and an almost imposed legal obligation to get vaccinated led to large protest groups in Austria. Well-attended weekly marches, also in smaller districts in the federal countries, united anti-vaxxers and helped to form a critical movement comprising [ordinary citizens, eco-alternative environmentalists, conspiracy theorists, and the right](#) in all its spectres. A new party evolved from the movement, entering several local and regional governments in 2021/22. Their ideologies include a strong belief in the [non-effectiveness of the vaccines](#) and that the government was taking advantage of the pandemic to suppress their freedom and fundamental rights. For some, the theories went as far as to believe that the vaccines would make people sick, that they would be "[chipped](#)" [with the vaccination and thus become "remote-controlled"](#). Some are convinced that the government has invented the pandemic to distract attention from the alleged dangers of 5G. Also, a rendered version of the "big reset"-theory emerged in this context. Bill Gates was named as the suspected actor behind all of this, and related approaches have further brought slumbering [anti-Semitism](#) back to the surface. The healthcare sector remains divided since part of the personnel joined the anti-vaxxers. In Upper Austria, a doctor committed suicide for being the target of online hate speech and death threats by colleagues and activists for her belief in the pandemic and continuous vaccine delivery.

# COMMUNITY

## PERMANENT ACTORS

- [Mimikama](#): Mimikama is an international contact point and association for education about internet fraud, false news, computer security and for the promotion of media literacy, and a monitoring centre for disinformation and social media analyses.
- [Kobuk](#): Kobuk is a voluntary media watch blog exposing mistakes, false reports, and structural problems in journalistic mass media.
- [Gadmo](#): The German-Austrian Digital Media Observatory (GADMO) started in November 2022 and is the latest regional addition to the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) (EDMO), covering Germany and Austria. The news agencies APA, DPA, and [AFP Faktencheck](#), as well as the Berlin-based fact-checking initiative [Correctiv](#) and university and research institutions in both countries have joined forces against mis- and disinformation in German language media.
- [Ingrid Brodnig](#): The journalist and book author specializes in digitalization, social media harms and fake news and is the author of i.e. “Lies on the internet” and “How to counter fake news, myths, and conspiracy theories”.

## VOLUNTARY ACTORS

During the pandemic, many quality media, like the daily [Der Standard](#), provided continuous information and special editions on the latest scientific findings regarding the pandemic, the vaccines, and the many conspiracy narratives around it, thus contributing to countering widespread dis- and misinformation.

## POLICY

- Apart from provisions regarding obligations for publishers and the protection of media freedom, some paragraphs of [Austria's media law](#) regulate circumstances by which the publication of defamatory content, credit impairment, mockery, and slander can be fined.
- The once-existing law against the spread of disinformation, §264, has been eliminated from Austria's criminal code for being assessed as a “dead law” by the end of 2015. Only very few cases had been brought to justice for violating §264, and its implementation has been criticized by legal experts and practitioners for unclarity as perpetrators could have only been sentenced if they failed to produce an “effective counter statement”.
- Other parts of the criminal code may be applied, though. Mainly §283 on incitement to hatred can be used if specific criteria are being met (i.e. a threshold number of audience reached) and the content is directed against protected groups. Other applicable laws cover violations of privacy- and copyright.

### SELF-REGULATION

- Most Austrian quality media and journalism associations abide by the ethical code of the [Austria Press Council](#). The self-regulatory initiative also receives and regularly reviews complaints about published content and checks for its compliance with the code. Accuracy and fact-checked content is among the code's requirements, and no unfounded allegations should be published without a proven attempt to hear the counterpart. In case published content turns out to be false, rectification is required. Decisions of the Press Council are publicly accessible and published but do not entail any consequences for the publisher or legal proceedings.

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