

*Siegfried Beer*

## EDITORIAL

### IS AUSTRIAN INTELLIGENCE FINALLY COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET?



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Most intelligence experts agree on one proposition: accurate and reliable information has never been more important than today, both for governments and society at large. At the same time it appears that public distrust of what intelligence organizations in almost any given state do or are capable of doing is strong and perhaps even growing. Surely it can be claimed that intelligence is directly in front of us, conditioning political and social environments in which we live. It is part of our social interactions every day; intelligence as provision of security is what we are all looking for. No doubt, what people know and how people think about intelligence and security is greatly coloured by the experience of popular media and popular culture. Spy dramas on television like the British “Spooks” or the American “24”, or spy movies like the James Bond series undoubtedly impact the general citizenry and shape their perception of what intelligence is all about, how the trade functions and who its actors are. Naturally it is not only television and film but all media, i.e. press, radio, literature and perhaps even (to a negligible degree) intelligence historians that potentially educate the masses about intelligence issues. The knowledge derived thereof is at best fragmentary and mainly diversionary.

In an earlier editorial (JIPSS 2/2009) I have claimed that media reporting about intelligence topics in Austria has recently improved. Nevertheless, for years now I have also argued that our three national intelligence services need to take the education of Austrian society about intelligence into their own hands by

starting to go public. This has already been done for many years in intelligently advanced countries. In my opinion, government services have a need to create and sustain a supportive public opinion and a realistic understanding of the world of the intelligence community. There is also a genuine necessity for greater public understanding for the nature of intelligence work, not least also of its limitations; this includes building public confidence in the importance and value of their role and the concomitant necessity for intrusion into the privacy of citizens.

On October 28, 2010, the current chief of MI6, Her Majesty’s Secret Service, Sir John Sawers was the first to ever give a public speech and press conference, to a selected audience of newspaper editors and in front of television cameras. His message was well contemplated: “Secrecy plays a crucial part in keeping Britain safe and secure”. Dampening unreasonable expectations, he added: “If our operations and methods become public, they won’t work.”<sup>1</sup> His colleagues at Britain’s GCHQ, Iain Lobban, and Jonathan Evans, the Director General of MI5, the internal security service, had started the trend of British spy bosses going public. All of these intelligence organizations date back to the pre-WWI era. For almost a century they had kept mum. Now they are addressing both their national media and the general public openly through skilful home pages of their organizations on the internet. Their message to the citizen is clear: This is what we do; we work under the law; we are being properly controlled; please trust us and respect our work, “for we are the secret frontline of our national

security, for few know about the terrorist attacks that we helped stop.”

Finally, it seems, the chiefs of our three Austrian intelligence services are paying attention. In issue 43/2010 of the Austrian weekly *News* the freshly appointed chief of Austria’s foreign military intelligence service, the Heeresnachrichtendienst, Edwin Potocnik, gave a remarkable interview in which he not only characterized the work of his organization but also expressed his opinion that the Austrian tax payers “have a right to find out how their money is spent”.<sup>2</sup> Peter Gridling, the chief of Austria’s national security service (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung), on the occasion of the publication of the security report 2010, had joined the Minister of the Interior in a press conference, and on November 9, 2010, even made an impressive appearance on the nightly TV news cast ZIB2. This was followed by the visit of a journalist to the hitherto secretively guarded headquarters of Austria’s sole civilian intelligence service on Vienna’s Ringstraße during which, quite ambiguously and in regressive tendency, Gridling was quoted as having said: “we do not value publicity or going public, avoid citizen contact and shun transparency.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the era of a qualified openness practiced by the Austrian intelligence community has only just begun. Nothing has yet been heard from the new chief of the internal military service, the Abwehramt, Anton Oschep.

If the Austrian intelligence community really seeks to enhance the understanding of its role, tasks and ethics in order to justify its costs to the national taxpayer and to gain a greater public confidence

among the general citizenry and in view of its need to keep sources and methods secret, it might consider the impressive example of the British D-Notice Committee, already in operation for over a century. It is an unofficial group of five senior government officials and 13 representative press and broadcasting editors who are, at regular intervals, given information about the most sensitive national security matters. It has led to a reliable network of trust and reticence which has served the British nation well.<sup>4</sup> This naturally brings up the question as to how much secrecy is necessary in a modern nation state. In the age of WikiLeaks the issue of core secrets for the protection of national security has become paramount. Rigid government attitudes of non-disclosure will inevitably lead to serious misjudgements and threats of leakage for private, political or pecuniary reasons. The recent victims of WikiLeaks can serve as a warning.

A favourable public opinion and parliamentary support from all parties are needed for the legitimization of the activities of the intelligence community. It would therefore be wrong for intelligence services to avoid the public, to shun the citizen and to hinder transparency. The official webpage of the American FBI provides an example of good practice to emulate.<sup>5</sup> It promotes the idea of citizen awareness, alertness and involvement and provides guidance for citizen support. There are many such useful models for webpage information. It is time to leave the provincial orbit of tradition and fear. The growing self-confidence and cost-consciousness of civil society will soon demand it.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *International Herald Tribune*, 29 October 2010, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *News*, 28 October 2010, 34f.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Presse am Sonntag*, 28 November 2010, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nicholas Wilkinson, *Balancing National Security and the Media*. The D-Notice Committee, in: Robert Dover, Michael S. Goodman (eds.), *Spinning Intelligence. Why Intelligence Needs the Media, Why the Media Needs Intelligence* (London 2009), 133-137.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. [www.fbi.gov/contact-us](http://www.fbi.gov/contact-us).