# Ibiza Austrian Memes: Reflections on Reclaiming Political Discourse through Memes Anahita Neghabat

On 15 October of 2017, for the first time in almost twenty years, Austrian citizens elected a far-right government, consisting of a coalition between the Christian-conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). What followed the election of this unholy unity were two years of racist and antisemitic scandals, anti-Muslim policies and political rhetoric, a considerable backlash in feminist politics and a series of attacks on worker’s rights. Many of these political measures, as well as the shift in political rhetoric and the normalization of outright racist ‘opinions’ in public discourse, ended up having a lasting effect.

Even as a child, I distinctly remember frustration and anger about politics and my eagerness to speak up and change something. When I was twelve, the far-right FPÖ once left an election campaign booklet in our post box and I—foreshadowing what I am now doing as an anthropologist and activist—took it upon myself to dissect it in the form of several pages of meticulous analysis. In my teens, I went to protests on the weekends behind my parents’ backs, even skipping school once to secretly travel to a protest in another city. As you can see, I was angry, but I was also active. This, however, slowly but surely changed after the election of the far-right government in 2017. I attended the protests that others somehow still found the energy to organize, but I had a hard time following the news and actively engaging with politics. My anger felt heavier and eventually turned into exhaustion. Matters only got worse when I moved to Budapest in January 2019 for a term abroad at the Gender Studies Department of the Central European University. *The* Central European University that far-right authoritarian prime minister Viktor Orbán soon forced out of Hungary through acts of legal warfare, one of which included effectively banning gender studies as a discipline in the whole country. So, there I was in this country that leftists in Austria had been raising as a cautionary example of what Austrian politics could easily become for years. There I was, at this university under attack, studying gender studies when it was no longer accepted as a discipline. And all news I got from Austria at the time was horrible: legal introduction of 12-hour workdays, headscarf bans and drastic reductions of welfare benefits, just to name a few.

But then—in these very dire circumstances—something unforeseen happened. On 17 May 2019, two German newspapers published video recordings of our then vice chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and a younger politician, both from the far-right FPÖ. The videos depicted Strache in a villa on the party island Ibiza discussing dubious, potentially corrupt deals with a woman who had tricked him into believing she was the niece of a rich oligarch. The whole thing was a set-up, including hidden cameras and loads of vodka infused with Red Bull (possibly Austria’s most famous invention). Heinz-Christian Strache was forced to resign and only a few days later chancellor Sebastian Kurz had to announce new elections. Even though I knew that right-wing voters, discriminatory systems, and racist beliefs had not just disappeared overnight, there was an overwhelming feeling of joy at the time—and hope. I was in Vienna that weekend and the collective relief I experienced was unbelievable. People were protesting, hugging, and singing—and making memes. Loads of amazing memes. Their memes inspired me, so, in the spur of the moment, I downloaded a random meme-making app and, because I didn’t want to flood my private Instagram stories with countless memes, I spontaneously created a meme account: @ibiza\_austrian\_memes.

Ein Bild, das Text, Person, Zeitung, Mann enthält.

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Fig. 1. One of my first memes posted on @ibiza\_austrian\_memes in the first couple of days following the Ibiza-scandal. It depicts former vice chancellor and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache and former FPÖ politician Johann Gudenus, who were both filmed on Ibiza. Both are smiling and giving a thumbs up. The text reads, ‘When people have 12-hour shifts because of you but you are unemployed’, referring to the loosening of labor laws and introduction of a 12-hour workday by the ÖVP-FPÖ government in 2018.

[[1]](#footnote-1)

What started as a small idea quickly grew into a big project. After only two days of posting, I already had 5000 followers and it became apparent that I could use memes as a powerful activist tool for political commentary. While my following grew, my online activist practice continually evolved into what it is now. Today, I have about 24 thousand followers, consisting of a diverse audience of many young people, even school students, but also journalists, activists, NGOs, and politicians (with our new vice chancellor perhaps being the most prominent one[[2]](#footnote-2)). In my online unpaid activist work, I use memes as a visual vocabulary, medium, and tool to comment on Austrian political daily news. I aim at doing so from an intersectional feminist, anti-racist and anti-authoritarian perspective. Eventually, however, my memes of course always represent *my* perspective, which is rooted in my biography and identity. As part of my practice, I mostly *create* but sometimes also *curate* memes that users send me and post them along with concise texts contextualizing each meme. These texts in the captions provide background information (along with source references) and offer critical perspectives in preferably accessible language. I aim at using short sentences, visually structure my captions with emojis, and explain certain political terminology. In addition, I briefly describe the memes, ensuring accessibility for people who are using text-to-speech apps, due to visual impairment or other reasons. I have also been using Instagram’s story tool[[3]](#footnote-3) to engage with topics more thoroughly, to provide information about protests or to share other educators’ and activists’ content. Another big part of my online practice is what is often referred to as ‘community management’: replying to messages, moderating comments, deleting hate-speech, and replying to problematic comments, even providing sources for the facts I build my arguments on in my replies.

## Shaping Public Discourse with Memes: When Mainstream Media Sucks

I think one of the reasons my memes resonate with so many people is that by analyzing Austrian interior politics from an explicitly anti-racist and intersectional feminist perspective, I take a stance that is not commonly taken in Austrian mainstream media and political discourse. While there are some journalists, publishers and magazines that are important exceptions here, a large portion of the influential actors shaping Austrian public discourse (re)produce hegemonic, often sexist, racist, classist or otherwise marginalizing and violent views. Sometimes media uncritically reproduces problematic arguments, generalizations, and vocabulary in an effort to report ‘neutrally’, thus contributing to and manifesting shifts in discourse. In these cases, I often deliberately use memes to problematize terminology or arguments. My aim is to thereby intervene in public discourse by disrupting the reproduction of discursive elements.

A good example for this is my meme-criticism of the problematic and historically inaccurate term ‘Judeo-Christian’. In recent years right-wing conservative and extremist politicians have increasingly been using this term to describe Europe’s ‘identity’ or ‘cultural heritage’, often adding that this heritage and identity shall be ‘protected’ from societal changes due to immigration. November 2019 at the European People’s Party congress in Zagreb ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz—Austrian chancellor until the Ibiza-scandal and chancellor quickly again after the new elections—emphasized that the EU commission should ‘protect Europe’s Judeo-Christian [*christlich-jüdisch*] identity and enlightenment’, adding that Europe should not allow more immigrants than it could ‘integrate’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Although the Austrian newspaper *Kurier* put Kurz’ remarks in quotation marks, the notion of a European or Austrian ‘Judeo-Christian identity’ was not problematized, let alone criticized.[[5]](#footnote-5) So, I made a meme.

The meme depicts cartoon character SpongeBob Squarepants, who stands for chancellor and ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz. He is reading a book of which one side is blue and the other one red and is looking at it cross-eyed, each eye looking at one side. The blue side addresses the regular occurrence of antisemitic scandals during the ÖVP-FPÖ governing period, most often caused by FPÖ politicians.[[6]](#footnote-6) It reads, ‘Forming a coalition with the right-wing extremist FPÖ, which is mass-producing antisemitic scandals.’ The red side reads part of the abovementioned Sebastian Kurz quote, ‘We must protect the Judeo-Christian identity.’ The color-split of the book visually indicates a contradiction between the two statements. The meme therefore not only depicts chancellor Sebastian Kurz as a politically inconsistent actor, but even as a hypocrite who on the one hand claims to protect a ‘Jewish identity’ but is on the other hand willing to build a politically opportune alliance with antisemitic political actors. SpongeBob’s expression is also funny: He looks confused, lost and even a little desperate. The meme thus also belittles Sebastian Kurz, his actions and political rhetoric by ridiculing it.

  
  
Fig. 2. A meme depicting cartoon character SpongeBob Squarepants. It criticizes chancellor Sebastian Kurz’ use of the term ‘Judeo-Christian’. The meme was made and posted by me on the Instagram page @ibiza\_austrian\_memes.  
  
Along with the meme, I wrote a caption with which I contextualized and criticized the term ‘Judeo-Christian’ by pinpointing several problematic aspects: first, insisting on a ‘Judeo-Christian’ European or Austrian ‘identity’ is simply historically inaccurate. Jews in Europe have been persecuted and killed by Christians for centuries and are still marginalized to this day. Austria has an especially gruesome history of National Socialism and genocide: in its database, the *Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance* lists 64 *thousand* Austrian Jews who fell victim to the Holocaust.[[7]](#footnote-7) Postulating the existence of a ‘Judeo-Christian’ Austrian identity erases this violent history. Second—just like in the abovementioned Sebastian Kurz example—the notion of a ‘Judeo-Christian identity’ is often deployed in anti-immigration and more specifically anti-Muslim discourses, in which immigrants are discursively othered and framed as Austria’s ‘real’ antisemitism problem.[[8]](#footnote-8) This framing of Orientalized, supposedly ‘Muslim’ immigrants as perpetrators not only discursively distracts from the fact that they are marginalized and affected by anti-Muslim racism, but it also erases Austria’s National Socialist history and antisemitic present.  
  
Using memes, which are enjoyable and quickly readable, as the central medium for voicing my criticism enables me to reach a lot of users, many of whom then proceed to read my written commentary and analysis in the caption. As Anastasia Denisova phrases it, memes are ‘simple’, which helps to reach broad audiences. At the same time, however, they are still ‘sufficiently sophisticated to stimulate critical thinking.’[[9]](#footnote-9) By making the meme above, I deliberately and strategically disrupted public political discourse with an aim to inhibit the normalization of the abovementioned right-wing discursive strategy and anti-Muslim trope. Because hegemonic media and political discourses marginalize anti-racist and other anti-discriminatory perspectives, I—and many other activists—use the online platform Instagram as a space, and memes as a tool, to publicly share our perspectives and narratives. Denisova argues that ‘[w]hen users share memes on political subjects, they intervene in the media discourse. They can promote or confront the hegemonic interpretation of the events; they can suggest an alternative interpretation; they can present an event in a specific context that would be educational for others.’[[10]](#footnote-10) I fully agree: memes are often used as an accessible medium to share one’s (experiential) knowledge and therefore also serve a purpose as accessible, easily comprehensible educational material. One user left a comment under the abovementioned SpongeBob meme that highlights this educational element: ‘Thanks for the amazing post, learned something new again.’ Accordingly, my meme page @ibiza\_austrian\_memes, which I would have previously labelled satirical political activism, has also been perceived as educational work and even been discussed in an art education research context before.[[11]](#footnote-11)   
  
At first glance, it might seem like this is *just* the meme-maker telling her story. However, this is not the case. As Limor Shifman reminds us, memes are intrinsically tied to practices of copying, imitation, and remixing. She writes, ‘the term [meme] describes cultural reproduction as driven by various means of copying and imitation […] [U]ser-driven imitation and remixing are not just prevalent practices: they have become highly valued pillars of a so-called participatory culture.’[[12]](#footnote-12) From my own experience I know that users interact with the meme-maker in various ways, inevitably influencing their practice. The reach of each meme depends on users’ willingness to press the like-button and share it. Liking my memes, commenting, sharing them with *added* commentary, sending in their own memes, and re-using templates I made are therefore all practices of *collectively* creating political narratives online. Moreover, making memes online often translates to offline relationships. At this point, I cannot count the number of politically involved people I got to know through my memes. Online meme practices therefore also shape offline political activities and alliances.[[13]](#footnote-13)

## Shaping Public Discourse with Memes: When Sucking Is Institutionalized

In the example above, media uncritically reproduced elements of a racist discourse while trying to report ‘neutrally’. Often, however, hegemonic power relations are also upheld and reproduced when journalists and other public figures *do* take a stand. As we know, societal power relations and mechanisms of discrimination are institutionalized. Political actors therefore often become influential *because of*—not despite—the fact that they represent hegemonic views. At the same time, unequal social structures stifle the careers, social participation, and discursive power of people belonging to marginalized groups. In this context, social media and memes—which can easily be made and widely shared by anyone with a smartphone and internet access (and an understanding of digital culture)—are used by marginalized people to (co-)create and share their own narratives and truths.[[14]](#footnote-14) As Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose show in their study about feminist humor online, people ‘are turning to social media sites to make visible marginalized voices and bodies, either through amplifying the stories of others or through drawing attention to their own experiences.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Sometimes these stories are shared educationally with a wider public, sometimes they are addressed to people directly affected by the same kind of oppression, and sometimes both. The meme below was posted on the Instagram page @migraobservations, a page that belongs to the second category. @migraobservations describes itself as ‘making memes for the self-healing from the Migra-trauma in an Alman-society’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Their meme below humorously addresses a painful truth for many people of color, who know what it feels like to be racially profiled and unrightfully suspected of being up to something dangerous.

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Fig. 3. Posted by @migraobservations on Instagram. The meme consists of stock photos showing a person who is protecting their purse and making dramatic faces and gestures that can be read as ‘stop’ or ‘leave my purse alone’. The text reads: ‘How I’m holding my bag when Almans sit down or walk next to me, in the hope of inciting a reflection of their racism through my ingenious experiment’.  
  
Marginalized groups are of course not only using memes, but also more conventional media formats to partake in public discourse. There is an endless quantity of blog entries, online magazines, and even online talk shows highlighting marginalized perspectives—formats that resemble the media practices of established media institutions. Memes nonetheless serve a *special* function in marginalized people’s intervention in public political discourse. Unlike other media formats, memes are typically characterized by a do-it-yourself-aesthetic. Basic editing, bad photoshop jobs, visible copy and pasting, the regular occurrence of what would elsewhere be considered spelling mistakes and references to pop culture and entertainment media are all part of a basic and often even purposefully trashy aesthetic. Memes are also humorous, which makes them explicitly non-serious on yet another level. I thus argue that memes, given these characteristics, must also be understood as a tool to reject the whole logic of exclusive, elitist, top-down knowledge production commonly performed by hegemonic, established media and political institutions. I certainly see my own activist practice in such a light, which is one of the reasons I take pride in actively trying to use easily understandable language. The meme below, posted by @kanaxanax*[[17]](#footnote-17)* on Instagram, serves as a poignant example of this kind of criticism too. Using an image from an animated children’s movie—a medium not typically taken too seriously—it questions the expertise and legitimacy of those who are commonly given a platform in political talk shows on German TV.  
  
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Fig. 4. A meme by @kanaxanax on Instagram. It depicts a cartoon character turtle from the movie *Kung Fu Panda*, saying ‘My time has come’ while gazing into the distance. The added text reads: ‘German talk shows when they finally find an opportunity to discuss political and radical Islam with 5 white men and 1 German Islam scholar again.’

## Building Resilience Through Memes: When Life Sucks

Apart from being used to criticize and ridicule elitist knowledge production, memes’ humor serves yet another purpose. In the case of critical memes, humor is also an integral part of a collective empowerment strategy used by marginalized people to build resilience through a process of self-affirmation. Humor is deeply subjective. Finding something funny, maybe even laughing about it, is therefore a very intimate experience. Finding something funny *together* thus creates a sense of collective intimacy and community. As Ashley Lorraine Blewitt-Golsch argues in her study about transgender memes: in a context of oppression, ‘[t]he relatability of the memes that ‘make it’ are the foundation of group identity formation.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Through enabling this collective experience and subsequent group identity, memes often play an important role in strengthening marginalized people’s resilience.[[19]](#footnote-19) As Blewitt-Golsch argues, ‘[i]t is a powerful feeling to know that one is not alone in one’s discomfort.’[[20]](#footnote-20) Dealing with these violent experiences *humorously* also offers moments of emotional relief. I made the meme below after a press conference held by Austria’s Federal Minister for Women and Integration. I experienced the press conference and its media coverage as very emotionally draining, which is why I decided to bring fun into it by ridiculing the minister’s anti-Muslim rhetoric with a meme.  
  
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Fig. 5. A meme I made and posted as @ibiza\_austrian\_memes on Instagram. The top depicts part of a newspaper article about Susanne Raab, Austrian Federal Minister for Women and Integration, who according to the screenshot warned against a ‘fertile ground for violence’ due to some people ‘only going to Turkish supermarkets and the mosque.’ Below is an image of pop culture figure Baby Yoda, a cute and innocent-looking baby alien. The alien is holding a Turkish pastry called Simit, that was edited into the original image. Baby Yoda is described as ‘My Simit and I’. He says, ‘Hi Susi, I won’t hurt you if you don’t hurt me please thanks byyyeee’.

After I had uploaded the meme I received a message from a Muslim follower, who wrote, ‘Seriously, I opened your page three or four times today and just kept thinking, please I need your content 😆❤️’. The ‘need’ for memes, that she is articulating in her message, tells me that like me, she too was seeking emotional relief in a humorous interpretation of the political rhetoric we both experienced as violent. Hegemonic political and media discourse treats discriminatory rhetoric and policies as entirely normal and reasonable, which can cause intense feelings of helplessness and despair in those—in *we*—who are affected by these forms of violence. From my personal experience I know that humor can be tremendously helpful in coping with this emotional distress. Memes like the one above let you know that others also see the ridiculousness, the absurdity, and violence of these politics. For people who are structurally disadvantaged and discriminated against, memes can therefore induce a strong feeling of togetherness by pointing out a shared perception of reality. In such a context, memes can be a powerful way of affirming an alternative reality and (co-)creating an alternative discourse—beyond the one-dimensional, often harmful depictions and narratives pushed by conventional media and public discourse.

As I described in the beginning, my own meme-making started as a consequence of a political scandal and was fueled by an experience of collective relief during its aftermath. As it turns out, however, we are not only making memes when we experience relief—we are also gifting each other experiences of relief when we are making memes.

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1. “Austria: Thousands protest against plans for 12-hour workday,” *DW,* June 30, 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/austria-thousands-protest-against-plans-for-12-hour-workday/a-44475182 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Werner Kogler from Green Party is currently Austrian vice chancellor. From its foundation in 1986 until 2017 the Green Party was always in parliament as a left opposition party. In the 2017 elections, in which the abovementioned far-right government was elected, the Green Party lost two thirds of its votes and did not make it into parliament for the first time since its foundation. After the Ibiza-scandal and during the new election campaign, the Green Party framed itself as a left alternative, as climate protectors, and as an anti-corruption party. It was during this time that now vice chancellor Werner Kogler started following my page, which at the time mostly ridiculed the failed far-right coalition and its corruption scandals. In the new elections Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP), who was chancellor during the Ibiza-scandal, scored 37,5% of the votes, an even higher percentage than his party already had in 2017. The Green Party celebrated a hugely successful comeback with 13,9% of the votes, its best election result ever, and became a governing party for the first time in its history. Today we still have a coalition between the far right ÖVP and a weak Green Party. Key leftist issues, such as women’s rights, migration and integration, or labor lie in the ÖVP’s hands, leaving many Green voters disappointed and discontent. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz introduced the historically new coalition by announcing that it was going to unite ‘the best of both worlds’ by ‘protecting the climate *and* the borders’, which I think says it all. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. With Instagram’s story tool users can post photos and videos that for other users vanish after 24 hours. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Daniela Kittner, “Kurz will, dass die EU die ‘christlich-jüdische Identität schützt’.” *Kurier*, November 21, 2019. https://kurier.at/politik/inland/kurz-will-dass-die-eu-die-christlich-juedische-identitaet-schuetzt/400681271 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kittner, “Kurz will dass die EU.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Oliver Das Gupta, “525 Tage voller Skandale.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* June 1, 2019, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/oesterreich-strache-skandale-tuerkis-blau-fpoe-oevp-kurz-regierung-wien-1.4469797 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. DÖW. n.d. “Austrian Victims of the Holocaust.” Accessed March 9, 2021. https://www.doew.at/english/austrian-victims-of-the-holocaust [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In January 2020 the Austrian Integration Fund, which is a partner organization of the Austrian government, dedicated a full issue of its publication series “Perspectives Integration” to “Antisemitism in the Context of Migration”. To give an example of the content, page 4 contains an image of historian Michael Wolfffsohn along with the text, “Michael Wolffsohn emphasizes that today Muslim antisemitism is strongest and most dangerous.” (ÖIF 2020, 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (Routledge, 2019). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469404, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society,* 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Helena Schmidt and Sophie Lingg, "Coming Back From Ibiza. Der Instagram-Account Ibiza Austrian Memes als Case-Study für intersektionalen Meme-Aktivismus und Vermittlung — basierend auf einem Gespräch mit Anahita Neghabat,” *Art Education Research* 18 (2020): 1-17. https://sfkp.ch/artikel/coming-back-from-ibiza [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A noteworthy project in this regard was the *Feminist Meme School* (2018-2020), a workshop format created by journalist and meme-maker Caren Miesenberger. In these workshops people, who came together in physical space, were encouraged to collectively translate their experiences with discrimination into memes. These memes were then posted on the Instagram page @feministmemeschool (Miesenberger 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Although discussing this topic more thoroughly is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to mention that memes are also used by right-wing extremists to spread their perspectives and narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose, "@NoToFeminism, #FeministsAreUgly, and Misandry Memes: How Social Media Feminist Humor is Calling Out Antifeminism," in *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture*, ed. Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan, 211-232. (Routledge, 2018), 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Migra* is a self-descriptive term for migrants or migration background. *Alman* is a term used by People of Color and migrants in Germany to describe the white German majority population. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The name *kanaxanax* is a combination of the word *Kanak*, a derogatory German word for foreigners, and *Xanax*, a well-known prescription medicine commonly used to treat anxiety and panic disorders.The page’s name alludes to minority stress and trauma due to experiences of racism and othering. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ashley Lorraine Blewitt-Golsch, "Transgender Experience Depicted Through Memes: An Ethnographic Investigation of Minority Stress and Resilience." (PhD Diss., University of Denver, 2019), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Blewitt-Golsch defines resilience as ‘the behaviors, attitudes, and resources that individuals or groups facing significant adversity enact or utilize to achieve better than expected physical and mental health outcomes in the face of said adversity.’ See Belwitt-Golsch, “Transgender Experience,” 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Blewitt-Golsch, “Transgender Experience,” 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)