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TAGS: PGOV, AU
SUBJECT: WALDHEIM AFFAIR - IMPACT ON THE PRESIDENTIAL
CAMPAIGN

REF: (A) VIENNA 3776 (NOTAL), (B) VIENNA 3339 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY:
THE "AFFAIR WALDHEIM" HAS BEEN MUTED BY PLEAS FROM AUSTRIA'S PRESIDENT RUDOLF KIRCHSCHLAEGER FOR MORE POLITICAL CIVILITY AND BY MUTUAL CONSENT OF THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES. BUT THE LAPSE BACK INTO CONSENSUS POLITICS HAS NOT OBSCURED THE VERY REAL POLITICAL IMPACT WHICH THE WALDHEIM CASE HAS HAD ON THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE AND AUSTRIAN POLITICS GENERALLY. IT HAS BEEN AN UNUSUALLY FRACTIOUS ISSUE BETWEEN THE TWO PARTIES. IT HAS PROVED A MAJOR PLUS FOR **KURT WALDHEIM** AND THE PEOPLE'S PARTY (OVP) AND HAS PLACED THE SOCIALIST PARTY (SPO) ON THE DEFENSIVE.

2. FOR THE MOMENT, AS THE WALDHEIM CASE RECEDES, OTHER ISSUES SUCH AS THE USE OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER - VAST LEGALLY BUT CONSTRAINED BY CUSTOM - HAVE BEEN VOICED. THOSE ISSUES WILL PLAY A ROLE IN THE MAY 4 POLL. BUT WE BELIEVE THE "AFFAIR WALDHEIM" WILL CONTINUE TO

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REVERBERATE - SOTTO VOCE - IN THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE AND WILL BE REMEMBERED BY THE ELECTORATE ON MAY 4. END SUMMARY

3. WALDHEIM'S POPULARITY ON THE RISE:

ACCUSATIONS AGAINST (OVP'S) PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE KURT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN. WALDHEIM APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN THE MAJOR BENEFICIARY FROM THE AFFAIR. OVP OPINION POLLS HELD AFTER THE DISCUSSION ON WALDHEIM'S PAST INDICATE THAT WALDHEIM HAS GAINED VOTES THROUGH THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST HIM. WHILE SOME WEEKS AGO WALDHEIM HAD LEAD BY ONLY 2 PERCENTAGE POINTS, THE CURRENT POLLS SHOW HIM 8 PERCENTAGE POINTS AHEAD OF STEYRER (42 VERSUS 34 PERCENT). AT THE SAME TIME, THE CAMP OF UNDECIDED VOTERS HAS SHRUNK FROM ABOUT ONE THIRD OF THE ELECTORATE TO PRESENTLY 16 PERCENT.

4. THE REASONS FOR WALDHEIM'S GAINS ARE VARIOUS AND COMPLEX. THEY RANGE FROM THE WAY AUSTRIANS REGARD THEIR OWN PAST, OUTRAGE AGAINST A NATIONAL SLUR, TO OTHER MORE CONCRETE CONSIDERATIONS. ACCORDING TO THE OVP POLLS, THE MAJORITY OF AUSTRIANS (87 PERCENT) BELIEVES THAT THE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST WALDHEIM WERE NOT COINCIDENTAL, BUT DESIGNED TO HAMPER HIS ELECTION CAMPAIGN. THIS VIEW OF THE AUSTRIAN POPULATION, AS WELL AS WALDHEIM'S EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE IN A TV ENCOUNTER WITH JOURNALISTS ON MARCH 9, WHERE HE MADE A CREDIBLE AND APPEALING APPEARANCE IN REJECTING THE RUMORS CONCERNING HIS PAST HAVE ENHANCED HIS REPUTATION, AND ENHANCED POPULAR IDENTIFICATION WITH THIS ALOOF FIGURE.

5. POLITICAL CLIMATE:

THE WALDHEIM ISSUE WAS, AND IS, EMOTIONALLY CHARGED IN AUSTRIA. BOTH MAJOR PARTIES SOUGHT TO DRAW ADVANTAGE FROM THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST WALDHEIM: THE SPO ATTACKING THE CANDIDATE'S CREDIBILITY AND FITNESS FOR OFFICE, WHILE THE OVP ATTACKED THE SPO FOR HAVING HIT BELOW THE SPECIAL PRESS CONFERENCE ON MARCH 11, SPO CHAIRMAN CHANCELLOR FRED SINOWATZ, TOGETHER WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SPO LEADERSHIP, VEHEMENTLY FENDED OFF CHARGES OF HIS PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT AND THAT OF THE SPO IN PLANTING THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST WALDHEIM. NEVERTHELESS, SINOWATZ, DRIVEN BY THE FRACTIOUS NATURE OF THE DEBATE, UNCHARACTERISTICALLY CHARGED THE OVP WITH BEING "BANANAS". IN A REFERENCE TO WALDHEIM'S SUGGESTION THAT HE MAY HAVE BEEN LISTED AS A NAZI SA MEMBER THROUGH HIS ASSOCIATION WITH A RIDING CLUB IN 1938, SINOWATZ REMARKED THAT IT WAS "NOT WALDHEIM BUT HIS HORSE" THAT HAD JOINED THE NAZI PARTY. SINOWATZ'S AGGRESSIVENESS AND THE SPO REACTION HAS BEEN WIDELY INTERPRETED AS A DEFENSIVE MEASURE REFLECTING THE SURGE OF PUBLIC OPINION FOR WALDHEIM AND POPULAR SUSPICIONS THAT WALDHEIM'S PROBLEMS MAY HAVE BEEN POLITICALLY MOTIVATED BY THE SPO.

6. ONE DAY AFTER THE SINOWATZ PRESS CONFERENCE, PRESIDENT KIRCHSCHLAEGER URGENTLY WARNED AT AN ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRIAN RESISTANCE DOCUMENTATION CENTER THAT THE POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD NOT FALL BACK INTO PARTISAN

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GHETTO MENTALITY, RADICALISM AND HATRED AS HAD EMERGED IN POLITICAL ALTERCATIONS. KIRCHSCHLAEGER ADDED THAT SUCH DEVELOPMENTS WOULD UNDERMINE ANY BASIS FOR A PARTY DIALOGUE AFTER THE NEXT PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS.

7. BOTH SPO AND OVP REACTED IMMEDIATELY TO THE APPEAL AND INDICATED THEIR INTENT TO MODERATE THE POLITICAL TONE. UNCLAS SECTION 02 OF 02 VIENNA 04129

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SINOWATZ STRESSED THAT THE SPO WAS CONDUCTING A PRO-STEYRER RATHER THAN ANTI-WALDHEIM CAMPAIGN AND DISCLOSED THAT HE WOULD MEET PERSONALLY AGAIN WITH OVP CHIEF ALOIS MOCK SOON. MOCK ALSO FAVORED A NEW START FOR DOMESTIC POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTED THAT THE PARTIES SHOULD DESIST FROM MAKING ANY PUBLIC STATEMENT IN THE VERY FINAL PHASE OF THE CAMPAIGN. FOLLOWING UP ON KIRCHSCHLAEGER'S APPEAL, WALDHEIM ALSO DEPLORED THE "DETERIORATION OF POLITICAL CULTURE" IN AUSTRIA. IN HIS CRITICISM OF THE PREVAILING "ENVY, GRUDGE AND HATRED", HE ALSO INCLUDED OVP POLITICIANS LIKE OVP SECRETARY GENERAL MICHAEL GRAFF.

8. PRESIDENTIAL POWERS:

AS THE WALDHEIM ISSUE WAS NUDGED INTO THE BACKGROUND, THE QUESTION OF THE FUTURE PRESIDENT'S USE OF HIS "POWERS" HAS BECOME THE LATEST, AND PERHAPS MOST SUBSTANTIVE ISSUE. IN HIS MARCH 9 TV APPEARANCE, WALDHEIM ALSO ANNOUNCED THAT HE WOULD USE THE POWERS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE "TO THE MAXIMUM". HE ASSERTED THAT THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT AS ABSOLUTE MAJORITIES HAD BECOME LESS LIKELY AND GOVERNMENT NEGOTIATIONS CONSEQUENTLY MORE DIFFICULT TODAY THAN IN PAST YEARS. IF HE WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT, WALDHEIM ADDED, HE WOULD URGE THE GOVERNMENT TO CONSIDER HIS VIEWS, FOR EXAMPLE IN THE AREA OF JOB SECURITY. "TRANSPARENT CONTACTS" WITH THE GOVERNMENT WOULD BE AN IMPORTANT MEANS OF PRESSURE IN THIS RESPECT.

9. THESE STATEMENTS PROMPTED SPO DEPUTY CHAIRMAN HEINZ FISCHER TO WARN OF POSSIBLE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND THE GOVERNMENT, WHILE THE SPO CANDIDATE STEYRER SUBSEQUENTLY STRESSED IN A PUBLIC ADDRESS ON MARCH 12 THAT THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT SHOULD NOT ACT AS A "SUPREME CHANCELLOR". STEYRER EMPHASIZED THAT HE WOULD NOT INTERVENE IN THE CONCRETE REALIZATION OF MEASURES, SINCE THIS WAS THE TASK OF THE CABINET. HOWEVER, HE, TOO, WOULD STEP IN IF HE FELT THAT THE CABINET NEGLECTED IMPORTANT SOCIAL CONCERNS, BE IT IN THE AREA OF JOB SECURITY OR REGARDING YOUTH PROBLEMS.

10. COMMENT:

IN THE COURSE OF THE "AFFAIR WALDHEIM", WALDHEIM

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APPEARS TO HAVE PASSED A "POPULARITY TEST". HIS RECENT GAINS APPEAR TO BE MORE THAN AN IMPULSIVE REACTION AMONG THE AUSTRIAN ELECTORATE. BEYOND THE SYMPATHY THAT THE CHARGES AGAINST HIM HAVE GENERATED, WALDHEIM'S PERFORMANCE HAS DENTED HIS IMAGE OF ALOOFNESS AND STALENESS AND GIVEN HIM A CERTAIN CACHET HERE. WHILE IT IS STILL EARLY FOR ELECTION PREDICTIONS, THE TWO MINOR CANDIDATES - FREDA MEISSNER-BLAU AND OTTO SCRINZI - ARE CURRENTLY NOT DOING WELL IN THE POLLS. THIS COMES RATHER SURPRISINGLY IN THE CASE OF MEISSNER-BLAU, WHO HAD BEEN EXPECTED TO BE PARTICULARLY ATTRACTIVE TO "GREEN" AND PROTEST VOTERS. SHOULD THIS TREND CONTINUE, A FIRST-ROUND DECISION, ON MAY 4, MAY BE LIKELY.

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END OF MESSAGE

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