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E.O. 12356: N/A

TEXT  
TAGS: PGOV, AU  
SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MAY 4 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:  
- A CLIFFHANGER WITH CONSEQUENCES

1. (LOU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, A STEYRER/WALDHEIM RUN-OFF STILL SEEMS MOST LIKELY, ALTHOUGH A WALDHEIM VICTORY ON THE FIRST BALLOT CAN NO LONGER BE EXCLUDED. WITH WALDHEIM MAINTAINING HIS LEAD IN THE POLLS AND ALMOST CERTAIN TO COME VERY CLOSE TO VICTORY, THE PREDOMINANT OPINION HERE IS THAT HE WILL FALL JUST

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SHORT OF THE NECESSARY ABSOLUTE MAJORITY (OF BALLOTS CAST) IN THE FIRST ROUND ON MAY 4. THE WILD CARD IS THE LARGE NUMBER OF "UNDECIDED" VOTERS. ARE THEY TRULY UNDECIDED? OR DO THEY REPRESENT, IN PART, HIDDEN SUPPORT FOR WALDHEIM -- INDIVIDUALS WHO, GIVEN THE PRIVATE AND EMOTIONAL NATURE OF THE ISSUES IN THIS ELECTION, HAVE REFUSED TO DECLARE THEMSELVES TO POLLSTERS? ADDITIONALLY, THE PREDICTIONS SUGGEST THERE WILL BE A LARGE NUMBER OF BOTH VOTER ABSTENTIONS AND BLANK BALLOTS CAST. THIS WILL LIKELY BE TO STEYRER'S DISADVANTAGE.

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2. (LOU) THE DEBATE ABOUT THE FORMER UN SECRETARY GENERAL'S PAST AND THE EMOTIONAL REACTION TO THE AMERICAN DIMENSION OF THE WALDHEIM CASE CONTINUE TO OVERSHADOW THE CAMPAIGN IN ITS LAST DAYS - TO THE VIRTUAL EXCLUSION OF ANY OTHER ISSUE - AND UNDOUBTEDLY WILL CARRY OVER INTO THE SECOND ROUND, IF THERE IS ONE. BUT THE ISSUE HAS BEEN LARGELY TRANSFORMED FROM THE AFFAIR WALDHEIM TO THE AFFAIR AUSTRIA. THE PEOPLE'S PARTY'S (OVP) FINAL PUSH ON WALDHEIM'S BEHALF HAS PLAYED ON THE WORLD JEWISH CONGRESS (WJC) ALLEGATIONS, DEPICTING THEM AS INTERFERENCE IN AUSTRIA'S AFFAIRS AND THE ELECTION AS A PATRIOTIC PLEBISCITE. THE OVP HAS RAISED THE ISSUE OF AUSTRIAN "COLLECTIVE GUILT," AS A STRAW HORSE TO INCITE POLITICAL REACTION, AND PROPOSES THAT THE IMAGE OF AUSTRIA IS AT STAKE. IN RESPONSE, THE SOCIALISTS HAVE, PREDICTABLY, ACCENTED THE INTERNATIONAL ACCEPTABILITY OF THEIR CANDIDATE **KURT STEYRER** AND **WALDHEIM'S** BAD ODOR.

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3. (LOU) THE ISSUES WHICH THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN HAS INCITED -- RECONCILIATION OF AUSTRIA WITH ITS PAST, ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE IN THIS COUNTRY, AND PERHAPS THE POLITICAL LIFE OF THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP -- HAVE PROVED TO BE MORE PROFOUND THAN THE ELECTION ITSELF. THE PRESIDENCY -- WHOEVER WINS -- WILL REMAIN A LARGELY SYMBOLIC OFFICE, AS IT HAS BEEN UP TO NOW, WITH LIMITED POLITICAL IMPACT. BUT THE ISSUES OF THIS CAMPAIGN NOW HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN AND WILL BE AROUND TO AFFECT AUSTRIA AND POSSIBLY TROUBLE OUR RELATIONSHIP. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

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4. (U) THE CONSERVATIVES WAVE THE RED FLAG: DESPITE PRESIDENT RUDOLF KIRCHSCHLAEGER'S TV SPEECH CALLING FOR AUSTRIANS TO PUT QUESTIONS ABOUT WALDHEIM'S WARTIME ACTIVITIES BEHIND THEM, THE OVP CONTINUES TO MAKE THIS ISSUE THE HEART OF ITS CAMPAIGN. THE AIM IS SIMULTANEOUSLY TO COUNTER THE IMPACT OF THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST THEIR CANDIDATE AND, BEYOND THAT, TO EXPLOIT WIDESPREAD RESENTMENT AT "FOREIGN" AND, SPECIFICALLY, WJC "INTERFERENCE". ON APRIL 28, IN HIS FINAL PRESS CONFERENCE BEFORE THE ELECTIONS, OVP CHAIRMAN ALOIS MOCK POINTED TO THE "HISTORIC DIMENSION" OF THE

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ELECTIONS, APPEALING TO "AUSTRIAN SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS". MOCK CALLED ON HIS FELLOW AUSTRIANS TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY WILL NOT LET THEMSELVES BE PRESSURED "BY SOME PERSONS IN THE WORLD JEWISH CONGRESS (WJC)". ALONG SIMILAR LINES, OVP SECRETARY GENERAL MICHAEL GRAFF DEFINED A VOTE FOR WALDHEIM AS A "PATRIOTIC DEED".

5. (U) SOCIALIST PARTY (SPO) FIRES DISTRESS SIGNALS FOR AUSTRIA'S REPUTATION:  
THE SPO, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAS REPEATEDLY STRESSED  
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IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE CAMPAIGN THE PROBLEMS WHICH MIGHT ARISE IN AUSTRIA'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SHOULD WALDHEIM BE ELECTED PRESIDENT. IN A SPECIAL APRIL 25 PRESS CONFERENCE FOREIGN MINISTER LEOPOLD GRATZ AND SPO INTERNATIONAL SECRETARY PETER JANKOWITSCH DWELT ON THE "FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION". BOTH SPO POLITICIANS STRESSED THAT "IN THE PAST EIGHT WEEKS WALDHEIM'S BEHAVIOR HAS SUBSTANTIALLY HARMED AUSTRIA'S REPUTATION". THE CREDIBILITY OF SPO CANDIDATE STEYRER, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS NOT A SUBJECT OF DISPUTE EITHER IN AUSTRIA OR ABROAD. ACCORDING TO SPO CENTRAL SECRETARY PETER SCHIEDER THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS THAT WALDHEIM BE PUT ON A WATCH LIST DEMONSTRATED HOW PROBLEMATIC A WALDHEIM PRESIDENCY WOULD BE FOR AUSTRIA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH A SIGNATORY OF THE AUSTRIAN STATE TREATY. PURSUING THIS SPO TACK, STEYRER HIMSELF HAS ATTEMPTED TO GAIN FOREIGN POLICY PROFILE BY DEVOTING AN INCREASING NUMBER OF HIS RECENT PUBLIC SPEECHES TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS TOPICS.

6. (U) THE SOCIALISTS ALSO CONTINUE TO ATTACK WALDHEIM ON THE ISSUE OF CREDIBILITY. REACTING TO THE KIRCHSCHLAEGER TV ADDRESS, CHANCELLOR FRED SINOWATZ ON APRIL 24 EMPHASIZED THAT THE IMPACT OF THE SPEECH HAD BEEN TO CONFIRM DOUBTS CONCERNING WALDHEIM ON THIS SCORE. SINOWATZ ARGUED THAT WALDHEIM'S CARELESS HANDLING OF THE TRUTH HAD CAUSED "A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE" ABROAD AND DOUBTS AT HOME.

7. (U) OPINION POLLS: THE UNDECIDED AND THE BLANK BALLOTS MAY BE DECISIVE:  
ACCORDING TO A REPORT IN TODAY'S EDITION OF THE PRESTIGIOUS INDEPENDENT DAILY "DIE PRESSE" (APRIL 30), THE LATEST PUBLIC OPINION POLLS SHOW WALDHEIM FALLING BETWEEN ONE AND TWO PERCENTAGE POINTS SHORT OF AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY. POLLS TAKEN BY SIX INDEPENDENT OR PARTY-AFFILIATED INSTITUTES BETWEEN MID-MARCH AND

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MID-APRIL HAVE WALDHEIM BETWEEN TWO AND SEVEN PERCENT AHEAD OF STEYRER. THE BIG QUESTION, HOWEVER, REVOLVES AROUND THE LARGE CAMP OF UNDECIDED VOTERS (18-19 PERCENT IN THE MID-APRIL POLLS). IT IS EXPECTED THAT A SUBSTANTIAL BLOC OF THE UNDECIDED MAY WELL ABSTAIN FROM VOTING ALTOGETHER, EITHER BECAUSE THEY FIND NONE OF THE CANDIDATES APPEALING OR IN PROTEST AGAINST THE UNCHARACTERISTICALLY ACRIMONIOUS SPIRIT IN WHICH THE CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN CONDUCTED ON BOTH SIDES. ANOTHER REASON FOR EXPECTING LOW VOTER TURNOUT IS THAT A LARGE NUMBER OF AUSTRIANS WILL BE ON VACATION OVER THE FOUR-DAY (MAY 1-4) WEEKEND. AS A RESULT, THE POLLING INSTITUTES EXPECT A RECORD LOW IN VOTER PARTICIPATION, WITH MORE THAN 10 PERCENT ABSTAINING. THIS WOULD REPRESENT A SUBSTANTIAL DEVIATION FROM TRADITIONAL AUSTRIAN VOTING PATTERNS, SINCE VOTER PARTICIPATION IN AUSTRIA IS TRADITIONALLY HIGH, RANGING, IN THE CASE OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS BETWEEN 91 AND 97 PERCENT.

8. (U) MEISSNER-BLAU/SCRINZI AND THE WILD CARDS:  
THE INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE FREDA MEISSNER-BLAU HOLDS BETWEEN FOUR AND FIVE PERCENT IN THE POLLS; THE SECOND INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE, OTTO SCRINZI, HAS AS MUCH AS ONE PERCENT. THESE VOTES WILL MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR EITHER OF THE MAJOR CANDIDATES TO GAIN AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN THE FIRST ROUND. IN THEIR LATEST FORECASTS ABOUT A POSSIBLE SECOND ROUND ON JUNE 8, THE POLLING INSTITUTES ESTIMATE THAT A QUARTER OF THE MEISSNER-BLAU VOTES ARE LIKELY TO GO TO WALDHEIM, A QUARTER TO STEYRER AND THE REMAINING  
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HALF, AS A TOKEN OF PROTEST, TO TAKE THE FORM OF BLANK BALLOTS OR OUTFRIGHT ABSTENTIONS. EARLIER PREDICTIONS HAD SLIGHTLY OVER 50 PERCENT OF THE MEISSNER-BLAU VOTE GOING TO STEYRER IN A SECOND ROUND, WITH A LARGE PART OF THE REMAINDER VOTING BLANK OR ABSTAINING. LAUDER

END OF MESSAGE

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