

# “How the battle for Ukraine is changing the world”

## Report on an event organised by “Swiss Standpoint”

by Tankred Schaer\*

On 19/20 April, Austrian historian and journalist Hannes Hofbauer gave a presentation on the Ukraine at the invitation of “Swiss Standpoint” in the seminary room of the association “Bildung Raum geben” in Frauenfeld, in the canton St Gallen, Switzerland.

Hannes Hofbauer is the publisher of *Promedia* Verlag. This Austrian publishing house edits around twenty books a year on topics including cultural history and Eastern Europe. It is regarded as a publishing house that sees itself as a socially committed project and at the same time can hold its own on the book market. Hofbauer is the editor of a book entitled “Kriegsfolgen – wie der Kampf um die Ukraine die Welt verändert” (“Consequences of war – how the battle for Ukraine is changing the world”). He gave his presentation on this topic.

### Causes of the Ukraine conflict

Hofbauer began by addressing the causes of the Ukraine conflict. He emphasised that this conflict should not only be viewed from 24 February 2022, when the Russian attack on Ukraine began. He pointed out that pro-Russian and anti-Russian forces have always clashed in the history of Ukraine.

An important date in this context is 29 November 2013, when a conference on the association of various Eastern European states with the EU took place in Vilnius (Lithuania). It was the EU’s intention to achieve several goals with the association: a replacement of Russia-friendly elites with EU-friendly forces, the termination of Russian gas supplies and a far-reaching liberalisation of the market for European companies in the countries concerned.

After Russia made President *Victor Yanukovich* a multi-billion euro offer of favourable gas supplies, he rejected the association with



Hannes Hofbauer during his presentation. (Picture sv)

the EU. The Maidan movement led to the unconstitutional overthrow of the government and the new President *Petro Poroshenko* signed the EU Association Agreement in June 2014. After the unrest began, the understandable protests of many people against the Yanukovich government were quickly instrumentalised by right-wing groups.

As early as May 2015, the Ukrainian government flew helicopter attacks against the city of Sloviansk in eastern Ukraine. The military confrontation therefore originated in Kiev. On 15 February 2015, the day the *Minsk peace agreement* was signed, more than 10,000 people had already died in the conflict.

The Minsk peace agreement, which was signed by *Angela Merkel*, *Petro Poroshenko*, *François Hollande* and *Vladimir Putin*, aimed to achieve a ceasefire, establish a demilitarised zone, enable the resumption of social transfers to eastern Ukraine and initiate a federalisation process based on the German model. According to Hannes Hofbauer, it is questionable whether Angela Merkel only negotiated this agreement to give the Ukrainian side time to build up the military. In any case, she conducted the negotiations with great commitment.

### The consequences:

#### Shift to the right, sanctions, de-Westernisation

Hofbauer then turned to the consequences of the conflict. Firstly, he observed a political shift to the right in various societies. Ukrainian society has moved to the right, as has Russian society, and a shift to the right has also taken place in Germany and Austria. He referred to his analysis,

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according to which today's right is "green". It combines all the necessary ingredients for this: enthusiasm for war, a culture of prohibition, geopolitical and cultural missionary zeal, an affinity for the authoritarian state and a whole host of created enemy images.

The sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and the USA have had a negative impact on the European economy. Not only have Russian central bank assets totalling USD 300 billion been frozen, but sanctions have even been imposed on – so far – one EU citizen.

The European Parliament has endeavoured to impose sanctions on *Gerhard Schröder* and the former Austrian Foreign Minister *Karin Kneissl*. There are even secondary sanctions against Chinese, Turkish and Kazakh companies that work with companies trading with Russia. Above all, the loss of trust in Western financial institutions and the contractual loyalty of Western contractual partners had devastating economic consequences for Western countries.

The third consequence Hofbauer mentioned was de-Westernisation. We did not realise this in our transatlantic bubble. But the loss of importance of the dollar, the development of new trade routes ("New Silk Road") and the growing together of Asian countries are pushing back the importance of the West worldwide.

### **On the neutrality of Austria and Switzerland**

The ensuing discussion centred on the question of whether the EU and the USA have diverging interests. In Hofbauer's opinion, it cannot be assumed that the USA is always pushing the EU ahead of it, as the EU has often played a pioneering role in the development of the conflict. He also discussed the significance of the West's

growing involvement in war and the consequences for Swiss and Austrian neutrality. In both countries, most of the population is in favour of preserving neutrality. On the other hand, the media in both countries are constantly working to change the public opinion in favour of softening neutrality. Austria is not involved in combat operations in Ukraine and, as far as he knows, is not supplying any weapons. On the other hand, Austria is involved in the sanctions.

With regard to Switzerland, the question was raised as to whether the federal popular initiative entitled "Safeguarding Swiss neutrality", which was submitted on 11 April 2024 with over 130,000 signatures, could have a negative impact if it does not receive a majority in the referendum. The audience specified that it would take around two years until the vote. Due to this upcoming referendum, those in favour of undermining neutrality – accompanied by a creeping rapprochement with NATO – will have to be extremely cautious so as not to inadvertently give the proponents of the neutrality initiative an additional boost. Moreover, future geopolitical developments are still largely unknown.

Another topic in the discussion was the clearly observable totalitarian tendencies in the EU and in Germany in particular. Hannes Hofbauer referred to his analysis in his book "Censorship", explaining that censorship has a long tradition and has always been circumvented. However, it can be observed that not only direct censorship, but also "the little sister of censorship" – silencing and defaming – and the "big brutal brother of censorship" – killing and locking up – are used to prevent certain opinions from being expressed.

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*