

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH POLICY ADVISORY COUNCILS IN AUSTRIA

Rupert Pichler

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ABSTRACT

Austria was a latecomer in developing a fully-fledged set of institutions for the implementation of science and research policy. The potential role of an advisory body always figured prominently in the post-war debate, but institution building in the 1950s and 1960s focused on building funding institutions. It was not until 1967 that two proper research funding organisations came into being. The “Research Council” (*Forschungsrat*) established together with them was merely a co-ordinating body of those two organisations. In the 1970s, the shift towards a more active science and research policy resulted in the first introduction of a dedicated ministry for science and research in 1971. Yet the virtual absence of a “real” science and research policy advisory council proved increasingly problematic, as challenges grew more and more complex. The eventual creation of a broader science and research council in 1981 had almost no visible impact as its capacity and resources were limited. The technocratic turn at the beginning of the 2000s led to an entirely new research council with its own office and staff. After its merger with the universities’ “Science Council” (*Wissenschaftsrat*) in 2023 there is now a more comprehensive advisory body designed to span the whole spectrum from university research to company innovation. Over time, we see a shift in the councils’ legitimation from a representative to a meritocratic logic. This article analyses the underlying historical trajectories of science and research policy advice in the Second Austrian Republic.¹

Keywords: *Advisory Bodies, Research Council, Science Council, Council History, Science and Research Policy.*

1 Some of the findings presented here are also being published in a forthcoming volume on the history of the Austrian ministries of education and science, edited by Johannes Feichtinger et al.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the development of science and research policy advisory councils in the Second Austrian Republic. It starts with the introduction of a heuristic framework providing an analytical approach to the subject. Then the paper describes the sequence of events and their drivers in the respective historical context. In the conclusion, the various advisory councils that developed over time are characterized utilizing said framework.

First of all, however, a terminological clarification is needed: in historical perspective, the term “research council” has adopted a variety of meanings, yet always with counselling as the key element. If science and policy are understood as different subsystems of society, councils act as intermediaries between science and policy: “Evidently, ... the political system does not intend to, nor can it produce the knowledge necessary for its own functioning and that of other systems. It needs the co-operation of scientists to overcome the implicit lack of knowledge or, in other terms, the ‘information asymmetry’ inherent in functional differentiation.” (Braun, 2003, p. 210).² Such cooperation through research councils can range from advice on political strategies to advice on the allocation of budgets. Not least because one of the most important instruments of public research policies is the provision of financial resources, research funding institutions have often been termed research councils. One of the most recent examples of this is the *European Research Council*.

This article is about the development of research councils in the sense of advisory bodies for science and research policy, and not about funding institutions that may have the term “council” in their name because they advise governments on how to spend public money. Neither does it deal with advisory structures that support sectoral policies where scientific knowledge is instrumental, such as in health or environmental policies.

2 See also Braun (1997) pp. 47-55, and König & Stampfer (2025) pp. 2-3, summarizing the state of research on the interplay between scientific evidence and political decision-making.

2. ANALYSING THE ROLES OF ADVISORY BODIES: A HEURISTIC FRAMEWORK

When delving into the account of how, why, and when science and research policy advisory councils developed in Austria, it may be useful to apply a typology characterizing such councils. In its 2018 Innovation Policy Review of Austria, the OECD (2018b, pp. 189-190) – based on earlier studies (OECD, 2018a) and Schwaag Serger et al. (2015) – presented four types of science and research policy advisory councils defined by their roles and structures:

1. An advice model, where the council actively advises the government.
2. A joint planning model, where the government uses the council as a virtual “horizontal ministry of innovation”.
3. A “sounding board” model, where the council serves as a validation platform without substantial resources and an explicit mandate to plan and co-ordinate policy.
4. A co-ordination model, where the council provides a platform for horizontal communication across ministry responsibilities to align policies.

“Both the role a council is assigned to play in the innovation system and its structure represents a deliberate choice of the government” (OECD, 2018b, p. 189), the OECD furthermore states. Depending on which choices governments make, the ways to implement them differ accordingly. The most important methods governments thereby employ is providing resources and the legal basis. These instruments shape a council’s role and structure along two essential dimensions: the degree of independence a council is given, and how representative a council’s composition is for the science and research system. Figure 1 groups the OECD typology along these two dimensions, thus providing a heuristic framework for the analysis of the development of science and research policy advisory councils in their historical and political context.

Independence	high	Advisory Body (1)	Joint Planning (2)
	low	Sounding Board (3)	Coordination Platform (4)
		low	high
		Representativeness	

Figure 1: Heuristic framework for the role of advisory councils
Source: own compilation based on OECD (2018b, pp. 189-190)

The choice of the legal status and the provision (or not) of dedicated resources (such as an office with its own staff) determine how independently a council can pursue its mission. The composition of a council's membership determines to which extent and in what way it represents the science and research system and its stakeholders. Whether the members exercise their mandates in a personal or institutional capacity can influence both dimensions. Personal membership is likely to strengthen independence while institutional membership may lead to a stronger commitment of those represented to a council's advice. Whether or not a council can fully execute its mandate mostly depends on these factors irrespective of how comprehensive or limited it formally is.

Governments choose from options along these lines according to their needs within a specific framework of institutional (and other) traditions. Therefore, as the OECD found, various models can exist in parallel in different countries at any one time. However, they can also follow one another over time in a single country. Such a sequence may stand for a certain historical development, which we now investigate in the Austrian case.

For clarity's sake, we introduce here the names of the advisory bodies discussed below in the order of their historical appearance. In the following sections we will use the abbreviations of the respective names in German:

ÖFR	Austrian Research Council (<i>Österreichischer Forschungsrat</i>)
FFR	Research Funding Council (<i>Forschungsförderungsrat</i>)
ÖRWF	Austrian Council for Science and Research (<i>Österreichischer Rat für Wissenschaft und Forschung</i>)
ÖKWF	Austrian Conference for Science and Research (<i>Österreichische Konferenz für Wissenschaft und Forschung</i>)
RFTE	Council for Research and Technology Development (<i>Rat für Forschung und Technologieentwicklung</i>)
WR	Science Council (<i>Wissenschaftsrat</i>)
FORWIT	Austrian Council for Sciences, Technology, and Innovation (<i>Forschungs-, Wissenschafts-, Innovations- und Technologieentwicklungsrat</i>)

3. DEBATING THE INTRODUCTION OF A “RESEARCH COUNCIL” IN POST-WAR AUSTRIA

Also in the Austrian case, we can observe the terminological ambivalence mentioned above. Shortly after the end of World War II, the first political debates on the creation of a comprehensive institutional science and research policy framework in Austria began. In these discussions, the term research council (*Forschungsrat*) was generally used for a framework covering both policy advice and research funding, which also figured in a first government bill in 1949 (Pichler et al., 2007). This term may have been familiar to some of the protagonists from personal experience: The physicist (and communist) Engelbert Broda had held a position funded by the Medical Research Council while in exile in Britain, and the German “Reichsforschungsrat” (Flachowsky, 2008; Wagner, 2021), a potential source of funding during the Nazi period, may also have played a role for the familiarity with that term.

All grand coalition governments up to 1966 failed to establish anything called research council by law, partly because the Social Democrats (SPÖ) wanted to assign a strong political, and thus advisory role to such a research council. This was to be reflected in a significant representation of non-academic parts of society in its structures. The People's Party (ÖVP), which was strongly based in the universities, preferred any research council to be primarily a funding body and rejected the SPÖ's ideas as state-interventionist, unduly limiting the autonomy of science (Pichler et al., 2007; Pichler & Stampfer, 2017). The latter argument had already let collapse Werner Heisenberg's plan for a "German Research Council" (Trischler, 2024; Orth, 2011). In Austria, the Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) continued fighting the "spectre of state control of science" (Feichtinger & Geiger, 2022, p. 301). In face of the political deadlock by the end of the 1950s, the ÖAW, together with the universities and endorsed by the ÖVP-led ministry of education, founded an association as a bypass solution for the allocation of public funding in 1960. This institution, even though solely meant to distribute money, was nonetheless named the "Austrian Research Council" (Feichtinger & Geiger, 2022).

It was not until the ÖVP had gained an absolute parliamentary majority in 1966 and was therefore able to form the government alone that research funding in Austria was institutionalized by law in 1967. Still, the ÖVP – successfully, in the end – sought to pass its Research Funding Act also with the votes of the SPÖ and was therefore willing to make, yet very moderate, concessions to the SPÖ in terms of a council reaching beyond mere funding: "Without the introduction of a high-level body, the SPÖ will not be won over to the law."³ The Research Funding Act did indeed create such a high-level body, albeit in a very limited form: The so-called "Austrian Research Council" (ÖFR) was merely a relatively weak umbrella body co-ordinating the two research funding organisations (one for academic and industrial research each – FWF and FFF) that the law had established. Its remit set out by the law appeared quite comprehensive

3 Report on a meeting of the (ÖVP-)Akademikerbund on 16 June 1964, Archives of the Republic in the Austrian State Archives (*Archiv der Republik, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv* – AdR), Federal Ministry of Education (*Bundesministerium für Unterricht* – BMU, 24-Gesetze F, 1966-1969, 1112, file no. (*Geschäftszahl* – GZ) 79.422-1/6/64.

and comprised advising the federal government, the provincial governments, and the legislative bodies. In reality, as the ÖFR consisted only of the presidents and vice-presidents of FWF and FFF, it mainly dealt with co-ordinating funding matters between the two funds, from time to time complemented by some reflections on research policy. The chair rotated annually between the presidents of FWF and FFF, whose offices took care of the ÖFR's affairs accordingly.⁴ In fact, it had nothing in common with the Research Council of the Swiss National Science Foundation, for example, one of the most influential international models at that time (Fleury & Joye, 2002).

4. THE KREISKY ERA

Still, the Research Funding Act can be seen as the beginning of an institutional modernization that accelerated in the 1970s and found its most striking expression in the first establishment of a Federal Ministry for Science and Research (*Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung* – BMWF) by the SPÖ minority government under chancellor Bruno Kreisky in 1970. In the parliamentary debate on the law establishing the BMWF, member of the National Council Karl Blecha explained why the SPÖ now preferred direct political control by a ministry to an intermediary body as in its earlier research council concepts: “And a ministry of this kind ... has, after all, an incredibly greater and more important position as an intermediary not only between industry and science, but also as an intermediary between the population and science, the population that is supposed to pay the money for it, than a research council, the board of trustees of some fund or any other institution.” Blecha concluded, “that in modern industrial societies one can only shipwreck with all these mechanisms of self-regulation.”⁵

The question of a proper policy advice body thus still lingered and was raised again by the OECD, which performed a review of Austria's science

4 Federal Law Gazette (*Bundesgesetzblatt*) No. 377/1967, § 17.

5 Stenographic Protocols of the National Council (*Stenographische Protokolle des Nationalrats* – Sten. Prot. NR), XII. legislative period (*Gesetzgebungsperiode* – GP), 11th session 8 and 9 July 1970, pp. 538-541.

and research policy in 1969/70 and therefore provided important points of reference for the SPÖ government, backed by an absolute majority since 1971 (Wirth, 2023, p. 141). In the course of the review, the OECD suggested “intensifying the activities of the Research Council [ÖFR]” and pointed out that it was not the task of the newly created BMWF to fulfil the function of a broad-based Research Council.⁶ In the “confrontation meeting” with the OECD delegates, the topic was discussed at length. The delegation recommended an administratively independent structure, where “advisory and executive functions should be kept apart”, the members should broadly represent science and research and be appointed *ad personam*. Neither the existing ÖFR nor the BMWF showed any great interest in changing the status quo that had been painstakingly achieved only a few years earlier. The ÖFR did not want to expand its focus beyond the funding business and referred to the BMWF, which – in its opinion – held the responsibility for strategic planning. The latter, in turn, announced that it would set up a “science forum” that would adhere to the OECD proposals to a certain extent.⁷

The published report on the “confrontation meeting” described in detail the discussion on a broader scope of the ÖFR. It reveals how the OECD delegates tried in vain to convince the Austrian representatives that the ÖFR should be neither an executive nor a supervisory body but advise the Ministry on planning and implementation (BKA/BMWF/Austrian Research Council, 1971). The OECD reviewers’ report “urgently” recommended “expanding and deepening the activities of the Research Council [ÖFR] so that it, as a central advisory board for science policy, can advise the government ... and examine and assess the overall situation of research and development”. In addition, the ÖFR should be involved in science policy planning and be given a broader membership. The OECD also proposed concrete measures and addressed a crucial point: In order to be able to meet these demands, it would be necessary to give the ÖFR

6 Draft answer to the OECD auditors’ questions of 2 October 1970, AdR, BMWF, Hauptreihe 2, 230, GZ 128.396-I/SL/4/70.

7 Report on the outcome of the confrontation meeting on 3 and 4 November 1970, AdR, BMWF, Hauptreihe 2, 230, GZ 162.198-I-4/71.

“a number of full-time employees as well as provide it with the necessary resources” (BKA/BMWF/Austrian Research Council, 1971, pp. 29-30). However, this was to remain wishful thinking for a long time.

The Science Forum announced by the BMWF was established in 1971, but not on a statutory basis, and thus only as a less formal commission to advise the Federal Minister. The Science Forum had over 50 members from science, industry and society (so-called “social partners”), and also the members of the ÖFR were part of it.⁸ However, this forum did not really correspond to the science councils in Germany (Bartz, 2007) and Switzerland (Hafner, 2015) referred to by the OECD delegation, amongst others, as models. Nevertheless, it was to consider the German and Swiss experiences when contributing to the 1972 “research conception” (BMWF, 1973, p. 46; Pichler et al., 2007, p. 218). As a matter of fact, the ÖFR itself barely represented the system it addressed and had almost no resources at hand to fulfil its mission. As a result, it was, if at all, no more than a sounding board.

5. THE REORGANIZATION OF THE ADVISORY BODIES IN THE 1980s

The BMWF had been planning a reorganisation of the institutional framework for research and a proposal of a corresponding bill since 1973, but it did not tackle its implementation until after the university reform in 1975 (Wirth, 2023, p. 180). For this purpose, the BMWF launched an extensive participatory process in preparation of the “Research Organization Act”, including surveys, polls, interim reports and an enquête in 1977. A questionnaire sent to over 100 stakeholders also raised the need for a reorganization of the “advisory system”. The answers revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the existing situation, with many respondents calling for genuine advisory structures and, to this end, “the establishment of a comprehensive advisory body” along the lines of the Swiss Science Council founded in 1965 (BMWF, 1978, pp. 18-19).

8 Cf. Structure of the research organization in Austria (overview), December 1977, AdR, BMWF, Hauptreihe 1, 46, GZ 28.511/80-21/77.

As a result, the BMWF regarded “a central advisory body ... worth considering”, which would advise the federal government on the conception, prioritization and financing of research. It also recognised the independence of the members and the need for a separate secretariat (BMWF, 1978, p. 30). In fact, the first draft of the Research Organization Act proposed a new council, yet in addition to the existing ÖFR (Pichler et al., 2007). However, the structure envisaged for it was criticized already during the review of the ministry’s bill, mostly because the members of the council were not to be appointed in a personal capacity rather than as representatives of institutions, and because no secretariat was to be provided. The Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Austrian Industries and the FFF also criticized the low number of business representatives.⁹ The final ministerial bill, however, did nothing to mend these points, so that also the heavily criticized chairmanship by the Minister of Science was left unchanged, rendering the idea of independent advice to the government pointless.¹⁰

The Research Organization Act finally adopted in 1981 newly introduced the “Austrian Council for Science and Research” (ÖRWF). It had eight to twelve members appointed by the Minister of Science, five of whom held institutional mandates, namely from the ÖAW, the Rectors’ Conference, the Federal Conference of Scientific and Artistic Personnel, the FWF and the FFF. It was chaired by the Minister of Science. The tasks were similar to those previously assigned to the ÖWR yet reduced by advising legislative bodies. In addition to the first draft, the law also put the Science Forum on a legal basis as the “Austrian Conference for Science and Research” (ÖKWF). Its membership was made up of representatives of the parliamentary parties, the social partners, the federal ministries, the federal states, the scientific institutions, the two funds, university professors, and students, among others. The members of the ÖRWF were also members of the ÖKWF, which, in total, had up to 58 members. All

9 Preparation of the new legal regulation of research organization in Austria, statements within the preliminary review procedure, 4 January 1979, AdR, BMWF/II, Box 58/78, GZ 28.511/30-21/78.

10 Draft Research Organization Act, review, comments received, May 1979, AdR, BMWF/II, Box 273/79, GZ 28.511/80-21/79.

of them exercised their mandates in an institutional rather than personal capacity. The main task of the ÖKWF was to recommend to the federal government or federal ministers on which matters the ÖKWF itself, or the ÖRWF should provide their advice.¹¹

While, according to Minister of Science and Research, Hertha Firnberg, the ÖRWF “functions as a kind of council of elders”, “the conference [ÖKWF] [serves] the participation of science, research and the state within the research policy decision-making process”.¹² The ÖRWF was supposed to meet at least once a year, which it actually did not much more often. It did not dispose of its own resources in terms of a staffed office and a budget, instead only a secretariat taking the form of a unit in the BMWF was set up.¹³

The ÖFR was renamed the Research Funding Council (FFR). Its remit was limited to the joint affairs of FWF and FFF and proposals to the ÖRWF, but it was otherwise left unchanged.¹⁴ The FFR met by far most frequently of all now three advisory bodies, every two to four months, and continued its former activities practically unchanged under the new – actually much more fitting – name. In retrospect, the FFR considered it a key achievement to have ensured the combination of basic and applied research.¹⁵ In view of the unusual twin structure the two funds it represented, this was undoubtedly true, particularly at a time when FWF and FFF were practically the only research policy instruments available.

Since 1970, however, the range of topics and instruments had begun to expand massively. The newly created advisory bodies were hardly able to meet the corresponding expectations placed in them. Of the twelve members of the ÖRWF, only three were not university members, one

11 Federal Law Gazette No. 341/1981, §§ 2-5.

12 Minutes of the 1st meeting of the Science Conference on 15 January 1982, introduction by Hertha Firnberg, AdR, BMWF/II, Box 446/82, GZ 2.801/1-21/82; 46 people were present in addition to the Minister.

13 Report on the first working session on 16 November 1981, AdR, BMWF/II, Box 41/81, GZ 28.511/65-21/81.

14 Federal Law Gazette No. 341/1981, Art. II Z. 11.

15 Minutes of the 62nd meeting of the Research Promotion Council on 30 September 1981, AdR, BMWF/II, Box 446/82, GZ 2.779/1-21/82; it was decided to continue the numbering of the meetings of the Research Council.

of whom was the President of the FFF and an ex officio member of the ÖRWF.¹⁶ This meant that the range of expertise remained limited. As a result, these bodies apparently played no relevant role in the research policy changes of the 1980s and 1990s (Biegelbauer, 2013).

On the occasion of the 1988 OECD review of science and technology policy, the OECD's verdict on the follow-up of 1971 recommendations was downright scathing: The ÖRWF that had been established in the meantime, "is ... not independent. It has no budget of its own and the outside world is hardly aware of its existence; rather it acts as an internal advisory body for the Minister and the Government." (OECD, 1988, p. 54). The OECD was no less critical of the ÖKWF: "the Conference [ÖKWF] seems to have no more than a formal existence and any initiative within it comes largely from the representatives of the Government. Because of its membership and the way it operates, ... the conference can be no more than an audience." According to the OECD, both bodies should therefore be able to act more actively and independently, have an adequate information base and be allowed to publish recommendations. Moreover, industry should be more strongly represented so as to reflect the trend towards a knowledge-based economy (OECD, 1988, pp. 73-74).

The consequences drawn in Austria from OECD review probably did not go in the direction that had been imagined by the OECD: the ÖKWF was abolished without further ado in 1991, "for reasons of administrative efficiency" at the request of the ÖKWF itself, as the parliamentary committee report put it.¹⁷ As far as the ÖRWF was concerned, nothing changed. In the wake of the enormous structural changes of the time, the Federal Government obviously preferred to rely on other, project-based forms of policy advice.¹⁸ Even though the 1980s' and 1990s' councils (and the conference) expanded their representativeness for the science and research system compared to the 1960s and 1970s, they were still lacking

16 Until the mid-1980s, the other two industry representatives were the directors Bildstein (Plansee) and Kellermair (Chemie Linz). After that, there is no documentation.

17 Federal Law Gazette No. 407/1991, Z. 1; Sten. Prot. NR, XVIII. GP, 161 of the enclosures (der Beilagen - d.B.).

18 Cf. Pichler et al. (2007) pp. 302-304, on the TIP (Technology, Information, Policy Advice) program 1992-1999.

the resources necessary to launch their own initiatives. That left the role as a co-ordination platform at best instead of being among the drivers of change.

6. EXPERTISE INSTEAD OF REPRESENTATION: THE PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE 2000s

The coalition government formed by the ÖVP and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in 2000 continued the expansion of science and research policy, namely in terms of budget increases, which had already been initiated by its predecessor “grand coalition” government. However, in the wake of New Public Management this government broke with some of the long-standing traditions of policymaking through social partnership. In that vein, the government swiftly established a new advisory body to support the setting of research policy priorities. The legislation necessary was submitted to the National Council as a committee motion rather than as a government bill entailing a review procedure, thus speeding up things.

The new legislation abolished the ÖRWF as well as the FFR and replaced them by the “Council for Research and Technology Development” (RFTE).¹⁹ This Council differed significantly from the previous bodies in two main aspects: firstly, all eight members were appointed in a personal capacity not bound by any institutional affiliation. The federal minister for Education, Science and Culture and the federal minister for Transport, Innovation and Technology appointed four members each. Secondly, the RFTE had a staffed office, initially set up as an independent department of the Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT). The parliamentary committee report stated that this would “support research policy more effectively than before through expert opinions.”²⁰ The tasks partly resembled those of the previous councils but also

19 Federal Law Gazette I No. 47/2000, Z. 3; Sten. Prot. NR, XXI. GP, 136 d.B.

20 Technically, die RFTE replaced only the Research Funding Council: Federal Law Gazette I No. 48/2000, Z. 11; Sten. Prot. NR, XXI. GP, 164 d.B. In addition to these eight members, the two ministers responsible for the RFTE as well as the ministers of economics and finance or – which was the rule – representatives delegated by them were consultant members. However, the ministers seldom attended any of the meetings.

included the development of a long-term strategy and guaranteed the autonomy of the council in making proposals.

The legitimization of the members of the RFTE was now exclusively their personal qualification. They represented a broader range of expertise, despite the smaller number of members. The new legal provisions required a balanced representation of university, non-university and company-related research. The establishment of the office, in which eight to ten people usually worked in the following years, gave the RFTE certain operational capacities. Almost thirty years after the first OECD recommendations in this respect, an independent advisory body had almost suddenly come into being. Now there was not only an office with its own staff and budget (which alone “sends a strong message of independence”: OECD, 2018b, p. 191), but also regular publications of strategies, recommendations and reports, which are still fully documented and available on the Internet today.²¹

However, the rapid establishment of the RFTE must be seen also in another context that would have a lasting impact on the RFTE’s position in the Austrian science and research system. In fact, the Ministry of Finance had linked the budget increase for research to the condition that it would make the additional funds available only based on an opinion of the RFTE. Consequently, the ministries responsible for research had to submit proposals to the RFTE for evaluation. The government hoped that this would lead to innovative approaches that would be more effective than the ministry routine, which was supposed to prevail otherwise. The extra budgets allocated in that manner amounted to over 1.1 billion euros from 2001 to 2006.²² This meant that the budget available in this period almost doubled.

As a result of this setting, the RFTE took part in making decisions on the distribution of large sums of money from its very beginning. Because the ministries, together with the implementing agencies, had to apply

21 <https://forwit.at/archive/> (last accessed on 5th March 2026).

22 In retrospect: R&D Supplement to the Federal Budget 2007/2008 (https://service.bmf.gv.at/BUDGET/budgets/2007/beilagen/Fu_E_Beilagen.pdf, last accessed on 5th March 2026), p. 108.

to the RFTE for the funds, it held considerable power over them and thus in research policy in general. However, as the Council got directly involved in the process of budget allocations, it had rather become, as it were, a bargaining platform comprising some joint planning elements as it provided a forum for the ministries' interaction. This, in turn, reduced its capabilities to provide actual strategic advice to the federal government. The establishment of the National Foundation for Research, Technology and Development even aggravated that effect. The foundation was a source of additional budgets provided by the National Bank and the ERP Fund since 2004. The foundation's board of trustees had to obtain an opinion from the RFTE before allocating the funds.²³ While the system of extra-budgetary capital gains became obsolete following the international financial crisis in 2008 and was replaced by other financing mechanisms, the RFTE (and its successor from 2023) continued to make *de facto* decisions on amounts of 125 to 140 million euros per year until 2025.

Even though the heavy involvement of the RFTE in these financial decisions caused a certain tension with its actual advisory tasks, this strengthened the position of the RFTE in the Austrian science and research system even more. In the course of the reform of the Austrian research funding system in 2004, when, among others, the Austrian Research Funding Agency (FFG) was established, the position of the RFTE also changed. It was incorporated as a statutory body in order to guarantee its independence.²⁴ The corresponding legal regulations expanded the organizational provisions considerably; the BMVIT remained as the only source of funding for the council itself.²⁵ Within five years, the RFTE had gained considerable standing and a high degree of independence. The RFTE also used its standing to strive for a stronger role in the procurement of evaluations. The ministries though dismissed this idea, claiming evaluation as their political responsibility.²⁶

23 Federal Law Gazette I No. 133/2003, Art. 1.

24 Sten. Prot. NR, XXII. GP, 510 d.B., 15.

25 Federal Law Gazette I No. 73/2004, Art. 2, § 119.

26 Author's personal recollection as a regular attendee of the council's meetings.

The number of members of the RFTE was not only a third smaller than that of the former ÖRWF, but also – as was the intention of the law – much less academically bred. In the first two five-year terms of office (2000-2010), university members accounted for half of the members or less. In this period, Böhler-Uddeholm board member Knut Consemüller was elected chair, with Innsbruck chemist Günther Bonn as his deputy. During the following two periods (2010-2020), Hannes Androsch, former Finance Minister (1970-1981) during the Kreisky era, chaired the Council, with the former Rector of the Vienna University of Technology, Peter Skalicky, as deputy until 2015, then followed by Markus Hengstschläger, geneticist at the Medical University of Vienna. During this time, members with a university background made up at least half of the members. There were always some internationally based members. Table 1 shows the distribution of the members' background.

Period	Academia	Industry	Other public sector	Other private sector	Of which international
2000-2005	4	4	-	-	1
2005-2010	2	4	2	-	1
2010-2015	5	1	-	2	2
2015-2020	4	3	1	-	4

Table 1: Predominant professional background of RFTE members

Source: own compilation

Notes: other public sector = agencies, intermediaries; other private sector = research associations, consultancies; international = located abroad, irrespective of nationality

Given these capabilities, the RFTE was the first council to gain a real advisory function and make a difference. Compared to its predecessors, it could exercise its task highly independently thanks to the absence of institutional tickets in its membership and the availability of dedicated resources.

Beside the RFTE, another science policy advisory body came into being in the early 2000s, namely the “Science Council” (WR) in 2004 as part

of the university reform introduced by the Universities Act of 2002.²⁷ Its task was to advise the federal minister, parliament and the universities themselves and to “analyse the Austrian university and science system”. The WR had twelve members (serving three or six years’ terms) appointed by the federal government, four of whom were nominated by the science minister and eight members “from different areas of society” (in fact, predominantly professors) nominated by those four members. The law did not assign an explicit legal form to this council; it is therefore safe to assume that it had no legal personality. The Ministry of Science had to provide it with staff and an office. Remarkably, this council had not figured in the original government bill but was only amended by a committee motion in course of the parliamentary proceedings.²⁸ This maybe indicates that originally the RFTE was meant to be the sole council at that time. Wolfgang Mantl, a political scientist and lawyer from Graz, was elected as the founding chair, followed in 2005 by Jürgen Mittelstraß, a philosopher from Constance, for the next ten years. Then, Antonio Loprieno, an Egyptologist from Basel, took over. The WR had followed similarly tasked yet differently composed committees based in earlier versions of the university law dating back to 1955.²⁹

7. A COMPREHENSIVE COUNCIL: THE COUNCIL FOR SCIENCES, TECHNOLOGY, AND RESEARCH

As an autonomous organization of independent experts, the RFTE achieved a degree of independence that its predecessor institutions had not been able to enjoy. Particularly from 2010 onwards, this became highly visible due to the public impact of Hannes Androsch as chair. Nonetheless, its actual influence on political decision-making remained

27 Federal Law Gazette I No. 120/2002, § 119. The documentation of the activities of the Science Council is available at <https://forwit.at/wr/archive/> (last accessed on 5th March 2026).

28 Sten. Prot. NR, XXI. GP, 1224 d.B., p. 12 f.

29 Cfr. Federal Law Gazette No. 805/1993, § 83; Federal Law Gazette No. 258/1975, § 108; Federal Law Gazette No. 154/1955, § 69. See also König, 2012.

limited as it obviously lacked continuous feedback loops to policy makers. Meantime, the WR almost dropped out of public sight.

By the late 2010s, the RFTE seemed to have reached the limits of its scope. From 2013 to 2019, the ministry of science had additionally set up the “ERA Council Forum”³⁰ to advise on European research policy issues, and from 2017 to 2021, the BMVIT had established an expert council for robotics and artificial intelligence, which was hosted by the RFTE office.

This constellation was considered increasingly inadequate, so that the 2017 government program proposed the merger of the existing councils into a new body (Bundesregierung, 2017, p. 78). Because of the collapse of the government in 2019 this never materialized. The program of the subsequent government then only declared that “the institutional reorganization of the councils in the field of science and research” should be evaluated (Bundesregierung, 2020, p. 311), even though still in 2018 the OECD had once again suggested such a reform in its Innovation Policy Review of Austria: “Unlike in other countries (e.g. Finland), there has not been any review or evaluation of any of the Austrian councils”, it stated. In a way, the OECD now had carried out such an evaluation itself and, as a result, proposed two options for the future: either a strengthened expert committee with sufficient resources and a clear mandate, or a political co-ordination platform as in Finland or Sweden chaired by the prime minister (OECD, 2018b, pp. 187-191). Austria, however, had less positive experiences with that approach, even if this intends to ensure political commitment like in Sweden (Edquist, 2019). The viability of a particular organizational model always depends on the specific political and institutional context (Schwaag Serger et al., 2015; OECD, 2018a).

The Covid-19 pandemic shifted political priorities before the federal government that took office in 2020 was able to devote itself to reorganizing the councils. Yet the pandemic was extremely significant for scientific policy advice because it drastically revealed the lack of functional interfaces between science and politics: “nation states have

different institutional arrangements to organize the nexus between scientific expertise and policy making. The pandemic was a stress test to those institutional arrangements, stimulating retrospective inflections and evaluations.” (König & Stampfer, 2025, p. 3; König, 2020).

Amid the Covid crisis, the mandates of the RFTE members expired in September 2020. The two chairpersons could not be reappointed as they had already served two terms on the Council. The remaining members were provisionally reappointed until the finalization of the reorganization of the advisory structures. Klara Sekanina (Managing Director of the Swiss Study Foundation) was elected Chair, after her resignation in 2022 followed by Sylvia Schwaag Serger, among others Professor at the School of Economics and Management at Lund University. Sabine Herlitschka, CEO of Infineon Austria, served as deputy chair during that time.

The new law finally passed in 2023. It established the “Council for Sciences, Technology, and Research” (FWIT-Rat, referred to as “FORWIT” in public communication)³¹ and abolished the two previously existing statutory councils. Like the RFTE, the FORWIT is a corporation under public law. Furthermore, its twelve members’ legitimation is their expertise and not an institutional capacity. The members are appointed by the Federal Government rather than single ministers, but at their proposals, of which six from the science minister, four from the innovation minister, one from the minister of economy. Their ministries also provide the budget. The Chair is appointed (and therefore no longer elected) by the Federal Chancellor in agreement with the Vice-Chancellor. The deputy chair is still elected by the council. The term of office is four years.

The larger number of members, the broader width of their background (science, active research and research-based companies) as well as their appointment by the Federal Government are intended to increase the Council’s relevance. The law expresses this also in a list of objectives for the Council, which the law comprises for the first time: Essentially, the FORWIT’s advice to the federal government should contribute to the positive development of science and research itself, but also to their

31 Federal Law Gazette I No. 52/2023.

positive impact on society, the economy and the environment. The FORWIT is also assigned a role in the context of the Research Financing Act (*Forschungsfinanzierungsgesetz* – FoFinaG) passed in 2020. This law introduces a comprehensive budgetary framework for publicly funded research based on three years’ recurring budget cycles. The FORWIT’s task is to advise on the priorities during these periods.³²

Computer scientist Thomas Henzinger, founding and long-time president of the Institute of Science and Technology Austria, was appointed Chair of the FORWIT, which elected the last RFTE Chair, Sylvia Schwaag Serger, as his deputy.³³ Table 2 shows the overall distribution of the FORWIT members’ background.

Period	Academia	Industry	Other public sector	Other private sector	Of which international
2023-2027	7	3	-	2	2

Table 2: Predominant professional background of FORWIT members

Source: own compilation

Notes: see table 1

The FORWIT office and staff resulted from merging the respective RFTE and WR structures, which were streamlined further in course of fully implementing the law. As a special organizational feature, the FORWIT also has a supervisory board, which is made up of representatives of the ministries entitled to make proposals for the members, the ministry of finance and the chancellery. This board – like in other statutory bodies – shifts governmental supervision away from the immediate ministerial level to a setting where ministerial representatives are not bound by instructions. While this is primarily meant to avoid time-

32 Federal Law Gazette I No. 52/2023, § 2. However, the FORWIT does not figure in the university law although it otherwise succeeded the science council.

33 During the finalization of this article, Sylvia Schwaag Serger announced to withdraw from FORWIT by 31st March 2026. Uwe Cantner, former chair of the German expert commission on research and innovation, was appointed her successor. Theresia Vogel was elected deputy chair.

consuming interministerial coordination procedures – given that more than one ministry is responsible – it also strengthens FORWIT’s independence as an organization.

The FORWIT took its predecessor’s achievement in terms of independence and capacities as a real advisory council further. It enjoys a broader commitment of the government and covers a broader field of expertise among its members, but still without institutional mandates.

8. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

It took several decades to develop stable and relatively independent advisory structures in Austria, later than in other developed countries often referred to in the debate such as Switzerland, Germany, Sweden or Finland. This does not mean that the position of the current Council will remain unchallenged. Yet examples from other countries such as Germany show that once established, advisory structures remain stable over a long period of time and can even have structurally conservative effects (Heinze et al., 2019).

Name	Time period	Legal entity	Max. no. of members	Member-ship	Term (years)	Own resources	Type (see figure 1)
ÖFR	1967-1981	N	4	I	3	N	3
FFR	1981-2000	N	4	I	3	N	3
ÖRWF	1981-2000	N	12	I+P	4	N	4
ÖKWF	1981-1991	N	58	I	4	N	4
RFTE	2000-2023	Y*	8	P	5	Y	1
WR	2004-2023	N	12	P	3/6	Y	1
FORWIT	2023--	Y	12	P	4	Y	1

Table 3: Characteristics of statutory Science and Research Councils in Austria

Source: own compilation

Notes: N=no, Y=yes, I=institutional mandate, P=personal mandate, *=since 2004

Even if the developments leading towards today's council started in the 1960s, we can observe a succession of different institutional models until one of them became settled enough to last for a longer time and achieve some lasting impact on the science and research policy stakeholders. Table 3 summarizes the characteristics of these various councils. The last column categorizes them along the typology introduced at the beginning of this article, using the relating heuristic framework.

As a very light version of a research advisory council, the ÖFR first emerged from the 1960s' political debates. Despite its comparatively comprehensive formal mandate, it busied itself mostly with funding matters and was, if at all, only a sounding board in terms of policy advice. Shortly after that, the new ministry for science and research attracted most of the stakeholders' attention, more than any council could possibly have done at that time. Yet the ministry's role was fundamentally different from the one of an advisory body, as, not least, the OECD criticized. Eventually, the 1980s saw the introduction of the ÖRWF as a broader council. Even though its mandate was limited and resources were lacking, this new council could potentially have served as a more powerful coordination platform, given its more representative membership. Still, it had no visible impact most of the time, partly because it was the result of policy layering as the former council continued to exist as the FFR under a different name and another body – the ÖKWF – was added.

The technocratic turn at the beginning of the 2000s led to a massive change of the institutional environment of science and research policy. As an entirely new council, the RFTE replaced its predecessors, disposed of its own office and staff and lasted for more than 20 years. Yet again, we can observe policy layering, producing additional formal and informal advice structures over time. After the merger of the RFTE and the WR in 2023 there is now a comprehensive advisory body intended to span the whole spectrum from university research and higher education to company innovation. The councils of the 2000s were designed as "real" advisory bodies with their own resources and independent members.

Based on the heuristic framework proposed in this article, we can identify a shift in the councils' legitimation and function over time: The membership of the councils from the 1960s to the 1990s followed a corporatist logic and was largely based on the representation of stakeholders and other institutions somehow involved in science and research. After that, following a meritocratic approach, membership was based primarily on personal expertise, thus strengthening the councils' independence, but potentially weakening its ties to other sectors of society. Contrary to the pre-2000 councils, these councils were given their own staff and budget, which enabled them to act more independently and achieve greater impact. Overall, this progress from a "sounding board" model through "coordination platform" to "advisory body" models reflects international trends as well as Austria's catching-up process in science, research and innovation.

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AUTHOR

Rupert Pichler

Federal Ministry of Innovation, Mobility and Infrastructure (BMIMI)
 Radetzkystraße 2, 1030 Vienna, Austria
 Email: rupert.pichler@bmimi.gv.at
 ORCID: 0009-0007-4889-7821

Biography

Rupert Pichler

Rupert Pichler is Deputy Director General for Innovation and Technology as well as Head of the Department of Research and Technology Funding at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Innovation, Mobility and Infrastructure. He also serves as Deputy Chairman of FORWIT's supervisory board. Before joining the Ministry, he worked as a researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, including stays as visiting researcher in Milan and at the University of Minnesota. Rupert Pichler studied at the Universities of Tübingen and Innsbruck, of which he holds a master's and a doctoral degree in History. He is the author and editor of several books as well as the author of numerous articles and book chapters on research policy and economic history.