

SEBASTIAN KURZ

IMPACT: Sebastian Kurz is the current Federal Chancellor of Austria and Chairman of the centrist-right New Austrian People's Party (Neue ÖVP). He previously served as State Secretary of the Interior Ministry for Social Integration and was the Foreign Minister of Austria from 2013 to 2017. Under his leadership, the ÖVP has swung to the far-right, adopting anti-immigrant and Islamophobic views and policies.

- Sebastian Kurz **entered Austrian politics in 2003 when he joined the Young People's Party (JVP), the youth wing of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)**. Five years later, Kurz became the chairman of the JVP for Vienna. In 2011, he was appointed [State Secretary of the Interior Ministry for Social Integration](#), and in 2013 he **became the Foreign Minister of Austria and remained the country's head diplomat until December 2017. Kurz has served as chairman of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) since May 2017.**
- Kurz first held the position of **Federal Chancellor of Austria from December 2017 to May 2019 in coalition with the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)**. On May 17, 2019, secretly recorded footage [emerged](#) showing the vice-chancellor, [Heinz-Christian Strache](#), offering lucrative public contracts to the alleged niece of a Russian oligarch in exchange for campaign support. In a May 27, 2019 article, [Politico reported](#) that **although Kurz was not "implicated in the scandal," popularly dubbed the Ibiza scandal, he lost a confidence vote ten days after** the footage came to light. In May 2019, Kurz called for [snap elections](#) and **became chancellor again in January 2020, this time in coalition with the Green Party**. At 33 years old, he is the [youngest head of government in the world](#).
- A 2019 [Reuters](#) article described **Kurz's views as "hard-line" on immigration. His rhetoric and policies frame Islam and Muslims in Austria as both a security and cultural threat.**
- In 2011, during his term as State Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Kurz stated that ["Imams should preach in their mosques in the German language."](#)
- In **2015, the Islam Act of 1912 was amended while Kurz was Minister of Foreign and Integration Affairs**. A 2018 article in the *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* found that the **Islam Act of 2015 evidenced "massively unequal treatment and thus discrimination against Austrian Muslim people as members of a legally recognized religious society."** A 2018 [article](#) in *Politico* noted the act prohibited "religious communities from raising funds from abroad" and a 2015 [piece](#) in *Al Jazeera* said that the law required imams to be able to speak German. Kurz defended this act [stating](#), "Islam is part of Austria" and called on Muslims in the country to "take responsibility and take action against any kind of radicalization." A 2017 *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* article [stated](#) that the **act was "largely criticized as discriminatory, anti-constitutional, and authoritarian towards the Muslim minority."** In response to the amended act, Muslim civil society organizations [mobilized](#) by collecting signatures for a parliamentary petition and suggesting an alternative law.
- In the wake of the [refugee crisis](#) in 2015, when more than a [million](#) individuals crossed into Europe from war-torn countries like Syria, Hungarian Prime Minister [Viktor Orban](#) announced plans "to erect a border fence" in an attempt to stop refugees from seeking asylum. Kurz supported such action, stating in August 2015 that if the European Union failed to address individual states' worries, "then states are forced to take individual measures." **Kurz further claimed, "If the refugees see that there is no getting through to Europe, the flows will decrease."**
- In September 2016 in his role as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Kurz claimed that women in Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, were being paid to wear veils**. He [stated](#) that in these countries "the growing Islamic radicalism must be stopped," and claimed "there is a strong religious and ideological influence as women are being paid to go out on the streets." **Besa Ismaili, Vice Dean of the**

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Faculty of Islamic Studies in Pristina, Kosovo, stated there is no proof of such claims and called the assertion “offensive” and “harmful.”

- On August 18, 2016, **Kurz called for a full face veil-ban, stating the face veil was a “symbol of counter-society” and claiming it was not a “religious symbol.”** The Integration Act which banned the face veil in public, introduced by Kurz, was implemented in 2017. **Kurz defended the ban saying that the full veil was “a symbol of counter-society and political Islamism.”**
- The Integration Act included **fifty action points for implementation by the federal government and called for “a ban on symbols of a counter-society including full-body veils or Salafist Koran distribution campaigns.”** Within the act, Kurz proposed specific “value courses” to culturally integrate new immigrants and refugees.
- **Kurz began targeting Muslim-run kindergartens in late 2015 by claiming that they would spread extremism and radicalize young Muslims.** A 2019 piece in *TRT World* noted that Kurz had accused the preschools of fuelling “integration problems.” In July 2017, the investigative weekly newspaper *Falter* found that **officials from the Department of Integration and Foreign Affairs, under then-Minister Sebastian Kurz, substantially changed the original content of a report on Muslim-run kindergartens to serve the goal of criminalizing Muslim kindergartens.** In August 2017, Kurz used the altered study to defend his positions, posting on his Facebook wall: “The Muslim study confirms my position. We urgently need a reduction of migration and must prevent parallel structures like Islamic kindergartens from emerging.”
- In spring 2017, Kurz took over the ÖVP after an internal coup d’etat, becoming the new chairman of the party. He then **rebranded the party from the ÖVP to the New People’s Party (Neue ÖVP), in an attempt to attract younger voters.** He called for fresh legislative elections scheduled for October 2017.
- A 2017 article in *The Local* found that during an election rally in September 2017, Kurz claimed credit for “closing the Balkan migrant trail in 2016,” and also stated he wanted to cut “social security benefits for immigrants -- even those from the EU.” At the rally, Kurz said, “We were right to close the Balkan route and I will fight for the Mediterranean route to be closed too.”
- In May 2017, the Action Group (AG), a group informally tied to the ÖVP as it represents the main conservative students union, whose members are often part of the ÖVP or its youth wing (JVP), was reported to have disseminated anti-Semitic messages in its internal WhatsApp group. When asked what he would do against anti-Semitism within the AG, Kurz responded that there would be “no tolerance, not even for the conservative students’ union.” However, he went on to state that “we must not look away from imported anti-Semitism either,” claiming there is also an anti-Semitism in “political Islam that we cannot tolerate.”
- After winning the **October 2017 elections, Kurz became the federal chancellor of Austria and formed a coalition with the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)** in December 2017. A piece in the *Guardian* from December 2017 noted that with **the formation of this coalition, Austria became “the only western European country with a far-right party in government.”** The FPÖ, under the leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache, has called for Hijab-bans, mosque and minaret bans, and the surveillance of Muslims.
- In response to criticisms about Austria’s shift to the far-right, **Martin Engelberg, a member of Kurz’s Neue ÖVP, published an opinion piece titled, “Don’t Fixate on the Freedom Party. In Austria Today, the Real anti-Semitic Threat Is From Muslims, Not Nazis.”** Engelberg argued that “there are no neo-Nazis in Austria shouting, ‘Death to the Jews’” but the real threat was from the “growing number of Muslims, living mainly in the Western European cities, often living in effectively parallel societies,

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putting Muslim Sharia law above the law of the land, and who exhibit a high level of anti-Semitism, are a big challenge.”

- After becoming chancellor in late 2017, Kurz continued to play a role in the Visegrad group, a loose collaboration among the four countries Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, where illiberalism is taking hold and Islamophobia has become part of many governing parties. Despite Austria not being a member of this group, Kurz has participated in several meetings.
- On **4 April, 2018 the government headed by chancellor Kurz and vice-chancellor Strache commissioned a hijab ban for kindergartens**. Kurz stated, “We want all girls in Austria to have the same development opportunities.” A 2018 piece in *Kronen Zeitung* stated that the main motive for Kurz and Strache was the “concern for the young girls in connection with the currents of political Islam.” In **May 2019, Austrian MPs approved the law which called for banning all “ideologically or religiously influenced clothing which is associated with the covering of the head.”** A piece in the *Guardian* noted that “despite its wide description, the law is targeted at the Islamic headscarf.”
- In June **2018 during the month of Ramadan, chancellor Kurz, alongside vice-chancellor Strache, announced that the government would shut down seven mosques and deport between 40 and 60 Imams (clerics)** who receive foreign funding. Kurz and Strache both argued that this was “just the beginning” of the government’s fight against “radical Islam.” **Kurz said, “Radicalization and political Islam have no place in our country.”** The leaders of the mosques took the issue to court. In 2019, the Viennese Court of Administration “annulled a government plan to shut down six mosques belonging to the Arab community.”
- In November 2018 Chancellor Kurz spoke at the “Europe beyond anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism - Securing Jewish Life in Europe” conference in Vienna that was organized by his government. There **he claimed that a “strong flow of immigrants coming from Muslim countries can cause troubles like a different understanding about Israel or anti-Semitic ideas, which we would not like to have in our societies.”** According to the political scientist John Bunzl, Kurz hosted this conference in order to normalize the Israeli government’s relations with the ÖVP’s coalition partner, the far-right FPÖ.
- In **2018, the Austrian government produced a study on anti-Semitism and found a “massive and worrying anti-Semitic potential” amongst Turkish and Arabic-speaking people in the country.** As a result of the study, the federal government called for a “package of measures” to combat the problem. During the announcement, State Secretary Karoline Edtstadler (ÖVP) argued, “We have to face up to the fact that imported anti-Semitism has increased significantly. We have to decisively counter this development and protect the basic values of our free society from the excesses of political Islam.” A March 2019 article by Adam Baltner and Klaudia Wieser argued that **the study contained “fundamental errors” and “exploit[ed] research to explain anti-Semitism primarily as a problem for - especially Muslim - others.” This allowed the ÖVP and FPÖ to “distance themselves from anti-Semitism without having to address their own involvement in anti-Semitic and radical right-wing circles.”**
- In January 2020, **Kurz became chancellor again under a new coalition government between Neue ÖVP and the Green Party**. The coalition stated that it would extend the ban on headscarves to girls up to the age of 14. In a January 2020 opinion piece in *Der Standard*, German constitutional lawyer Wolfgang Hecker argued that “a headscarf ban for schoolchildren is evidently unconstitutional in terms of religious freedom and parental rights.”