

FREEDOM PARTY OF AUSTRIA

(FREIHEITLICHE PARTEI ÖSTERREICHS, FPÖ)

IMPACT: The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) was founded in 1956 as a party of former Nazis. While the party remained a marginal opposition party during its first three decades, by the mid-1980s it became one of the first (and most successful) populist far-right parties in Europe. FPÖ has primarily targeted Muslims and Islam in its policies and rhetoric, and has maintained connections with far-right, anti-Muslim parties, movements, and figures across Europe, in the U.S., and in Israel.

- **In 1949, following the end of World War II, former Nazis established the political party Verband der Unabhängigen (VdU, Union of Independents). According to political scientist Anton Pelinka, the VdU is a party that “ex-Nazis founded for ex-Nazis.” In 1965, FPÖ became the successor party of the VdU. Established by Anton Reinthaller, a former top Nazi leader, FPÖ was marginal and vehemently opposed to the power-sharing coalition between the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, SPÖ*) and the Christian conservative Austrian Peoples Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP*).**
- **FPÖ emerged from its marginal position in the 1980s, when Jörg Haider (d. 2008) took over in 1986. From 1986 to 2000, Haider transformed the party into one of the first (and most successful) populist far-right parties in Europe. Haider was a young and charismatic leader who became notorious for minimizing Nazi atrocities. This included describing members of the Waffen-SS as “decent people of good character” and calling Nazi concentration camps “punishment camps.”**
- **In the 1990s under Haider’s leadership, FPÖ primarily mobilized against immigrants of Turkish, former Yugoslavian, and African background. In 1993, Haider wrote in his book *The Freedom I Mean (Die Freiheit, die ich meine)* that “the societal foundations of Islam are diametrically opposed to our Western values.” By the late 1990s, FPÖ’s historical antagonism towards the Church had given way to a party that began to describe itself as a defender of the Christian “Occident” (“Abendland”), and Islam, by implication, as a cultural threat. The new Freedom Party Platform of 1997 devoted extensive attention to Christianity as the “foundation of Europe” and the traditions of the “*Abendland*.”**
- **In 2000, FPÖ became the second strongest political party in Austria and entered into a coalition with ÖVP. Haider broke with his own party following internal party disputes in order to stay in government with the newly established *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ, Alliance for the Future of Austria)*, which governed from 2005 to 2008. In 2005, FPÖ became an opposition party again and elected Heinz-Christian Strache as its new chairman. Strache renewed the party’s electoral success and in December 2017 became Vice-Chancellor in a coalition government with the Christian-Democratic ÖVP led by Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. The coalition was dissolved again by Chancellor Kurz in May 2019 following the Ibiza scandal, in which Strache was implicated in leaked videos that “purported to show...[him] promising government contracts in exchange for political donations from a woman posing as a member of a Russian oligarch family.” Following the scandal, FPÖ was taken over by longstanding members Norbert Hofer and Herbert Kickl. While Kickl had been Haider’s speech writer and is regarded as a staunch ideologue, Hofer is more known as the party’s ‘friendly face’ and has been described by opponents as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”**
- **Following the separation of Haider from FPÖ in April 2005, FPÖ under the leadership of Strache heavily focused on targeting Muslims as the new threat to Austrian identity. Its main election campaigns focused not only on mobilizing against the domestic and European political elite, but particularly on targeting Islam and Muslims as foreign, racially impure, culturally other, violent, and oppressive of women. Top-level politicians of FPÖ regularly tweet and speak out against Islam.**

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- In 2008, FPÖ became the first and only political party in Austria that defined its stance towards Islam in a formal policy platform. In this platform, **FPÖ advocated restricting the legal recognition of Islam to Bosnian Muslims, who are European and who have been a part of Austria since the Austro-Hungarian empire, in contradistinction to newer Muslim immigrants of color.**
- **In 2007, FPÖ and some circles within the ÖVP began depicting the main Muslim representative body, the Islamic Religious Community (*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft, IGGÖ*), as a place of “dangerous” and “radical Islamic tendencies,”** and claiming that IGGÖ’s president has “relations to the Muslim Brotherhood.” In April 2018, FPÖ claimed that the IGGÖ was preaching “messages on the edge of Political Islam” due to their criticism of the government’s hijab-ban for pupils in primary school. **In August 2019, for the first time in its history, the annual report of Austria’s domestic intelligence agency—Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung, BVT*)—declared that “Islamist actors care about religious education in school, the training of religious teachers in higher education,” framing previously state-supported religious teacher training and Islamic education in public schools for Muslim pupils as threats.** In its 2008 policy platform, FPÖ advocated a government ban on the hijab in the public sphere, the surveillance of Islamic kindergartens and schools, banning the construction of minarets, the production of an annual report that monitors the “Islamization” of Austria, and withdrawing citizenship from Muslims, who FPÖ alleges propagate Sharia (without defining it).
- When FPÖ entered government in December 2017, it implemented many of its proposed anti-Muslim policies. The coalition government led by Sebastian Kurz and Heinz-Christian Strache, which lasted from December 2017 to March 2019, defined Islam as a problem. In the government’s coalition policy platform, the word ‘Islam’ appears a total of 21 times. **In 2017, the coalition government passed numerous anti-Muslim laws, including a hijab-ban for children in kindergarten, the closing of mosques (later revoked by the courts), and the banning of symbols such as the logo of the Muslim Brotherhood.**
- **FPÖ has connections with other far-right anti-Muslim political parties, movements, and figures in Europe, Israel, and the United States. In 2008, Strache co-founded the “European City Alliance Against Islamization,”** a loose affiliation of FPÖ and other far-right parties such as Filip De Winter’s Belgian Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) party, and Markus Beisicht’s regional German far-right party Pro Cologne, which during 2004–2008 rallied in various European cities against an alleged ‘Islamization of Europe.’ **Later in June 2015, FPÖ joined the far-right Europe of Nations and Freedom (*Europe des nations et des libertés*) group that was formed by leading far-right political parties** such as the French National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) and the Italian far-right Lega Nord. **In June 2019, following the European Parliament (EP) elections, the group was reformed and renamed ‘Identity and Democracy’ (ID),** and also included the far-right German Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*). According to reporting by Radio France Internationale, the **stated goals of ID are to “return power to European member states, curb immigration, and prevent the spread of Islam in Europe.”** In October 2018, leading members of FPÖ met with U.S. Republican and supporter of white nationalism Rep. Steve King.
- **In December 2010, Heinz-Christian Strache, long-time FPÖ politician and chief-ideologue Andreas Mölzer and FPÖ general secretary David Lasar joined a European delegation to Israel which was organized with the help of Austrian anti-Muslim activist Elisabeth Sabbaditsch-Wolff.** The trip was also attended by Filip De

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Winter, the leader of *Vlaams Belang*, high-ranking members of the German *Die Freiheit* (Freedom Party), and Kent Ekeröth, international affairs secretary from the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*). **The trip culminated in the signing of the Jerusalem Declaration, which states, “We stand at the vanguard in the fight for the Western, democratic community” against the “totalitarian threat” of “fundamentalist Islam.”**

The delegation was given a tour by Gershon Masika, the head of the Regional Council of the settlers in the West Bank. During the tour, Masika stated that the European “members of parliament are fighting against radical Islam and the spread of Islamist terrorist organizations. They are fully on the side of Israel.”

- **In October and November 2009, Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff was invited by FPÖ to deliver a multi-part seminar in the party’s political academy. During the seminars, Sabaditsch-Wolff said that “Muslims kill or rape kids because of their religion” and “we are all lied to by Muslims on a daily basis, because this is their religious duty”—comments for which she was subsequently charged by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for “disparaging religious doctrines.”** FPÖ has also invited other anti-Muslim figures such as Seyran Ateş in November 2018, the sympathizer of the white nationalist Identitarian Movement (*Identitären Bewegung*) Michael Ley in February 2019, and anti-Muslim bestselling author Thilo Sarrazin in March 2019.
- **In December 2016, FPÖ travelled to Moscow Russia and signed a contract of cooperation with Vladimir Putin’s political party United Russia (*Jedinaja Rossija*).** According to analysis by political scientist Anton Shekhovtsov, United Russia is interested in securing external legitimacy of Putin’s regime, strengthening subversive movements within European societies, and enhancing ultranationalist attitudes in European societies in order to undermine the European Union.