

HERBERT KICKL

IMPACT: Herbert Kickl is the current leader of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), one of Austria's major political parties that has shared power in various coalitions over the past three decades. It regained power, especially after mobilizing against immigrants and Muslims and is one of the main factors in the institutionalization of Islamophobia in Austria with many links to far-right anti-Muslim actors around the globe. Kickl invented the most successful anti-Muslim political campaigns of his party with slogans such as “Home, not Islam” (Daham statt Islam). Together with Viktor Orbán, Kickl established the Patriots for Europe (Pfe or Patriots), the new far-right political group in the European Parliament, which has become the third-largest group ahead of the tenth European Parliament (2024-2029).

- Compared to many other leading politicians, very little is publically known about the biographical background of Herbert Kickl. The authors of his biography titled “Kickl and the Destruction of Europe” (Kickl und die Zerstörung Europas, Zsolnay Verlag, 2024), Gernot Bauer and Robert Treichler, noted that Kickl came from a working-class family. Growing up in the state of Carinthia, Kickl dropped out of university (where he studied philosophy) after **he ran into Jörg Haider, the Freedom Party's charismatic leader in the 1990s, who recruited Kickl. After joining, Kickl began working his way up in the party.**
- Kickl has occupied several positions within the FPÖ. From 2002-2006, he was the general secretary of the FPÖ's political academy. In 2016, he became its president. From 2005 to 2018, Kickl was the general secretary of the FPÖ. He led the FPÖ's election campaign at the federal level in 2006, 2008, 2013, and 2017. **Kickl has a talent for rhyming rhetoric and was the father of the slogans such as “Daham statt Islam” (At home instead of Islam) and “Mehr Mut für unser Wiener Blut” (More courage for our Viennese blood).** From 2006 until 2017 and again since 2019, he has been a member of the national parliament. From 2017 to 2019, when the FPÖ entered into a coalition with the ÖVP under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz as Chancellor and Heinz-Christian Strache as Vice-Chancellor, Herbert Kickl was the Minister of Interior. **In 2019, after Kurz called for snap elections, Kickl led the FPÖ with Norbert Hofer following the Ibiza scandal that removed Strache from the leadership. In July of 2021, Kickl was chosen as the new leader, which Reuters reported as “Austrian far-right party picks hard-liner Kickl as next leader.” A 2019 profile of Hickl by Politico described him as a “leaner, meaner Steve Bannon” and “the mastermind behind the recent ascent of one of Europe's most potent populist parties into power.”**
- A 2024 Reuters piece noted that in 2010, “Kickl said he opposed deeming Hitler's Waffen-SS “collectively guilty” for war crimes.” The FPÖ's first leader in 1955 had been a senior SS officer and a Nazi minister. In an August 2023 piece for Newlines Magazine, journalist Liam Hoare wrote that Kickl's “undistinguished appearance belies his understanding of language and power, as he deploys jargon like ‘Volkskanzler’ (people's chancellor) and ‘Systemparteien’ (system parties). These slogans were also used by the Nazis in the 1930s.”
- **Kickl has described the far-right anti-Muslim Identitarian movement “an NGO from the right.” This movement is the most important social movement of the New Right and its leader Martin Sellner had links to the Christchurch gunman.**
- Kickl has a **history of making anti-Muslim comments and supporting anti-Muslim policies.** In December 2009, during the Swiss debate on the ban of minarets, **Kickl argued that “minarets have nothing to do with the freedom to practice religion, but are merely the outward symbol of Islam's claim to power.”** During the coalition of the ÖVP and the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), Kickl, as general secretary of the FPÖ, in March 2017 **said that “the headscarf has no place in kindergartens, schools and universities!”** Drawing on enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, Kickl argued as follows: “It is precisely this understanding that is negated if we in Europe want to accept that a medieval or politically motivated interpretation of religion is suddenly taking hold here again, and accordingly the headscarf, which in addition to the discrimination described is also valid as a symbol of the claim to political power, is completely out of place in Austria.”

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- Dating back to as early as **January 2006, Kickl called for “a headscarf ban in schools and all public institutions based on the French model.”** In **December 2009, Kickl also called for “a ban on headscarves in schools and in the public sector ... to prevent the emergence of parallel societies in Austria under the guise of religious freedom.”** Ahead of the national parliamentary elections **in September 2024, Kickl called for a total “ban of the Hijab in the public space.”**
- In January 2010, following a French debate on banning the face veil, Kickl argued: “The burqa runs counter to fundamental European values as well as the equality between men and women and is above all a political symbol. This refusal to adapt will become even more pronounced if measures are not taken to preserve one’s own interests, traditions and values. Because already today there are unmistakable tendencies towards parallel societies in Austria’s cities. The SPÖ and ÖVP, who have so far hidden behind multicultural pseudo-liberalism and misunderstood tolerance should not wait until it is too late on this point either.”
- In 2015, Kickl called on the social democratic minister of family and youth “to stop the payments to the MJÖ (Muslim Youth of Austria) immediately and to investigate” why they received state funds, alleging that there was no ground for this support.
- In **2019, Kickl responded to the findings of a survey amongst Muslim youth in Austria conducted by the Austria Integration Fund, by promoting anti-Muslim stereotypes and advocating for harsher immigration policies.** He stated that “before we waste huge sums of money to teach these people our values, which is rarely successful anyway, the continued eligibility for residence of these groups, who almost exclusively ended up in Austria via asylum procedures, should be checked as quickly as possible.” He argued that “we must prevent the hatred and violence that many of these people bring to Austria from soon forcing others to flee Austria.”
- In **June 2018, during his tenure as Minister of Interior, Kickl shut down seven mosques and expelled up to 60 imams in what the government described as “just the beginning” of a crackdown on “political Islam” and foreign-funded Islamic communities.** The US State Department mentioned Kickl twice in its 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom in Austria, saying: “On December 11, parliament adopted an amendment to existing law banning certain symbols, including the symbols of ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. The amendment, scheduled to enter into force in March 2019, expanded the ban to include symbols of other groups the government considered extremist, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Interior Minister Herbert Kickl said the law was a clear sign of the country’s zero tolerance policy towards extremist groups, including those professing religious extremism. ... On November 19, Interior Minister Kickl hosted a conference in the context of Austria’s EU Council presidency on values, rule of law, and security in response to anti-Semitic threats. Kickl warned against ‘the new intensity of anti-Semitic threats in Europe ... triggered by political Islam,’ and pledged to expand protection of Jewish facilities in the country.”
- In **2021, Die Presse revealed that during Kickl’s tenure as Minister of Interior, a working group was established to surveil alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood that included even minors.** Officials of the “Office for the Protection of the Constitution” (BVT), Austria’s domestic intelligence service quit their job thereafter. As the article says, “Officials even reported superiors for this reason, and the Federal Office for Combating Corruption took up the accusations.” The court hearings were not public, but highly relevant given that Operation Luxor, the largest racist and unlawful raid against Muslims in Austria, was prepared shortly thereafter.
- **During his tenure as Minister of Interior, Kickl ordered a raid on the government’s own domestic intelligence service BVT** (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung) to go after secret networks of the ÖVP. As Minister of Interior, he also questioned the validity of the European Convention on Human Rights.
- A couple of months into the 2020 COVID pandemic, Kickl stated “Islamist fundamentalists must be deported immediately,” arguing that “instead of harassing Austrians with absurd corona measures, the

government should deal with the real life-threateners, namely those who refuse to integrate and preach hate in mosques.” Later in the year, following the ÖVP-Green government’s debate to make political Islam a criminal offense, Kickl said that “the only sharp weapon against political Islamists is a law banning it!”

- Kickl regularly speaks about opposing “the system,” which for his biographers Gernot Bauer and Robert Treichler means attacking the constitution, international agreements and human rights. When Kickl called the Austrian Federal President Alexander Van der Belle “senile” and a “mummy,” the Directorate General for Public Security decided to file a report.
- Even though Austria had made political Islam a criminal offense in 2021, Kickl argued in August 2024 that the “rejection of the ban on political Islam by the system parties is shameful!” **Ahead of the national parliamentary elections in September 2024, Kickl said he wants to implement a “Hijab ban in the public sphere.”**
- In the **July 2024 European Parliament elections, the FPÖ under the leadership of Kickl became the strongest force for the first time in its history, gaining 25.36 % and sending six members of the European Parliament to Brussels.** Ahead of the national parliamentary elections in 2024, the FPÖ led in the polls for months under Kickl’s leadership. Conservative Chancellor Karl Nehammer ruled out a coalition with Kickl, saying: “It’s impossible to form a government with someone who adores conspiracy theories, who describes the WHO, the World Health Organization, as the next world government and the economic forum in Davos as preparation for global domination.”
- As political scientists Reinhard Heinisch and Diana Hofmann write, the FPÖ under Kickl continues to view Putin’s regime in Russia as an “effective constraint on what the Radical Right regards as a liberal cultural and economic agenda pursued by the European Union and the United States. The FPÖ remained a supporter of Kremlin policies, even after Moscow’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.”
- **On a European level, Kickl in July 2024 announced together with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis, the creation of a new far-right group in the European Parliament called ‘Patriots for Europe (PfE or Patriots).’** Since then, five other parties including the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), Portugal’s far-right Chega party, Spain’s Vox, and the French National Rally have joined the group. The Patriots for Europe is the third-largest group ahead of the tenth European Parliament (2024-2029).
- Under the **leadership of Herbert Kickl, the FPÖ won a historical landslide victory in the European Parliament elections becoming the strongest political party in June 2024, and in September 2024 became first in the national parliamentary elections.**

Bridge Initiative Factsheet