

# MATHIAS DÖPFNER

**IMPACT:** Mathias Döpfner is a German businessman and journalist. He is the CEO and 22% owner of one of Europe's largest and most influential media groups, Axel Springer SE. He is also president of the Federal Association of Digital Publishers and Newspaper Publishers. In published pieces, he warns against "Islamism," and "Islamic fundamentalism," conflating Islam with violence. A wealthy and highly influential personality, leaked information revealed anti-Muslim sentiments that align with several of the media outlets associated with him.

- **Starting his career as a journalist in 1992, Mathias Döpfner moved to the media company Axel Springer and became editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Die Welt* in March 1998. At the end of 1999, he became a member of the Management Board of Axel Springer AG and has been Chairman of the Management Board since 2002.** Döpfner was given shares by the widow of its founder, Friede Springer, and in 2019, additional shares worth €1 billion. Since then, he has become identical to Springer, as a 2023 piece in *Die Zeit* argues. **According to Forbes, Döpfner is worth an estimated \$1.2 billion.**
- **In 2015, he bought *Business Insider* for €300 million. In 2021, he bought *Politico* for \$1 billion, thus making Springer a global media giant.** As the Financial Times has reported, "Döpfner ... is a contentious figure in Germany. Critics, especially on the left, accuse his tabloid Bild and the conservative broadsheet Die Welt of pursuing a rightwing agenda, including on migration."
- **In a September 2004 opinion piece for *Die Welt*, titled "Europe - your name is cowardice", Döpfner wrote:** **"And in the end, it is also appeasement at its most grotesque when Germany reacts to the escalating violence of Islamic fundamentalists in Holland and elsewhere by proposing a national Muslim holiday.** What else has to happen before the European public and its political leadership realize that there is a form of crusade underway, an especially perfidious one of systematic attacks by fanatic Muslims targeting civilians, directed against our free, open Western societies. **This is a conflict that will likely last longer than any of the great military conflicts of the last century, waged by an adversary who cannot be tamed by tolerance and accommodation but is instead spurred on by such gestures, mistaking them as signs of weakness."** This statement shows his conflation of Islam with violence, framing the acceptance of Muslims as a symbol of appeasing the enemy.
- In a November 2010 piece for the daily *Die Welt*, Döpfner penned an op-ed with the title 'The West and the derisive laughter of Islamism' (*Der Westen und das höhnische Lachen des Islamismus*), in which he compared the imprisonment of two German journalists in Iran with an alleged attack by Muslims on the German Reichstag, which was never confirmed. While differentiating between Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism, Döpfner still generalizes his critique and constructs a stark difference between Islam following a collectivist ideal vs. the individualist (Western) ideal: "The collectivist ideal, in which the individual must be protected from himself, is cultivated above all by Islamism, communism, and fascism. It is still widespread today, especially in the East and Middle East. The individualistic ideal, in which man takes his fate into his own hands through his free will, is the model of Anglo-Saxon democracies in particular. Today, it is widespread above all in America, Canada, and Great Britain, but essentially throughout the entire Western world." **In his conclusion, Döpfner writes that "the free model of the West is latent and acutely threatened," first by China and second by "the rapidly spreading Islamism worldwide, to which the Western understanding of freedom, free market economy, free sexuality, equality between men and women seem decadent, degenerate, dangerous, despicable, godless - and which must be fought at all costs."** He ends his piece with the words: "Either we understand the symbolism of the fallen World Trade Center and take up the fight. Or we are lost."
- In his New Year Reception address published by *Die Welt* under the title "Laughter is anti-authoritarian, laughter is freedom," Döpfner talked about the threat to democracy by Islamism, calling for more hedonism, humor, and steely love of liberty.

- **An April 2023 [investigative piece](#) by the German *Die Zeit* revealed Döpfner's ideas about the world. The piece noted that he opposed longtime German Chancellor Angela Merkel, hailed Donald Trump, and had strong positions against Muslims and East Germans.** In the piece, he is [quoted](#) with words like “free west, fuck the intolerant Muslims [...]” In regards to migration, he said, “Whoever opens doors will harvest racism.” **Speaking about Israel, he reiterated Axel Springer's program, saying “Zionism above all. Israel my country,” which is in line with Döpfner's [policy](#) to ask anti-Israel employees to find another job.** In 2014, he openly [declared](#) that he was “a non-Jewish Zionist.” The author Pankaj Mishra [commented](#) on Döpfner's support of Israel in Döpfner's statement “Zionism above all” (Zionismus über alles) as an allusion “to the erstwhile first line of the German national anthem, Deutschland Über Alles (Germany above all), which was deleted due to its association with Nazi Germany” and a projection of “their long taboo nationalism on to a proxy state.” **While [German media](#) was full of Döpfner's derogatory comments about Eastern Germans, there was little discussion about his anti-Muslim statements. He [said](#) he held “no prejudices” against East Germans or Muslims, but he was concerned about the success of the far-right in the East and radical Islam.** For Döpfner, East Germans were “either Communists or Fascists. Nothing in between.” After many of these revelations were [leaked](#) in April 2023 by the weekly *Die Zeit*, Döpfner called his statements [ironic](#) after initially denying their existence.
- The leak also [revealed](#) that he pushed to support the Liberals (FDP) and weaken the Greens and the Social Democrats. Döpfner is characterized by the investigative *Die Zeit* as somebody who [despises](#) the elites (excluding himself and his [wealth](#)). **Following the first administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, the *Washington Post* [revealed](#) that Döpfner sent an email to his close allies in the US, saying that people “should pray that Donald Trump becomes president of the United States again.”**
- In 2017, he recruited Julian Reichelt to become editor of the German tabloid press *Bild* [ending](#) the era of “political correctness.” In 2021, the *New York Times* [revealed](#) that Döpfner called Reichelt “the last and only journalist in Germany who is still courageously rebelling against the new GDR authoritarian state.” Reichelt was officially removed due to [sexual misconduct](#) in 2021, fearing the loss of Döpfner's influence in various companies like Netflix, overtaking Politico in the United States.
- Following the rise of the right-wing [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#), Döpfner [wrote](#) a September 2023 piece for Politico arguing that “the party's recent advances are a result of an increasing sense among broad swathes of the population that they aren't being represented by traditional political and media elites,” drawing on the “refugee crisis of 2015, [...] the pandemic, and [...] response to the increasing high-handedness of the ‘woke movement’ and climate politics” as the main drivers of this upsurge. While seeing the AfD as highly problematic, he [reasons](#) as follows: “Start taking voters' most important concerns and issues seriously, and seek to find solutions. The fears that have allowed the AfD to become as big as it is today are clearly identifiable. When a recent survey by Infratest Dimap asked ‘What topics most influence your decision to vote for the AfD at the moment?’ 65 percent said immigration, 47 percent said energy policies and 43 percent named the economy. And in their handling of all three of these key issues, the older parties have demonstrated moral cowardice and a lack of honesty. This is especially apparent when it comes to immigration.”
- In an **October 2023 [piece](#) titled, “The Things I Never Thought Possible—Until October 7,” Döpfner smeared the pro-Palestine student-led protests on U.S. campuses as antisemitic.** [argued](#) He stated, “I didn't want to believe it was possible that some of the most renowned and influential elite universities in the world would capitulate to the cultural struggle carried out in the name of a woke agenda pushed by students that are increasingly demonstrating a blatantly antisemitic mindset, and that, of all groups, it is America's intellectuals who are making Austrian-German-Islamist antisemitism socially acceptable again,” suggesting the then-presidents of Ivy League universities including Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and MIT “should take their own study trip to Auschwitz.” **Prior to October 7, 2023, the *Middle East Monitor* [reported](#) that Döpfner, “told the company's 16,000 employees to find another job if they have a problem with an Israeli flag being posted outside the largest digital publishing house of Europe” following an 11 days-long Israeli attack on the blockaded Gaza Strip in 2021.**

- In a piece on October 27, 2023, Döpfner warned of a new world order, which he described as “one in which the U.S. falls into isolation, no longer able, or willing, to play its crucial role in underpinning European security. Europe would become an annex of Asia, with China defining the rules, and the Middle East would return to the Middle Ages, with no possible challenge to Islamic fundamentalism.”
- Following fights on the streets of Amsterdam in November 2024 between the Maccabi Tel Aviv soccer fan club and locals, a viral video falsely claimed that Muslims were hunting Jews in Amsterdam. Media and politicians wrongly framed this as a “pogrom.” In reality, it was the Maccabi Tel Aviv soccer fan club that “assaulted ... local residents, attacked private property, destroyed symbols of Palestinian solidarity, and chanted racist, genocidal slogans that glorified the slaughter of children in Gaza and the death of all Arabs.” **Döpfner wrote an article titled ‘Make Germany More Jewish Again’ in the wake of these incidents, claiming that “anti-Jewish violence on the streets of Amsterdam ... is only the latest example of antisemitism on Europe’s streets. It is the disgraceful consequence of an irresponsible migration policy that is equally receptive to Islamists and Holocaust deniers.”** In the same article, he argued that Jews were considering leaving Germany because “they are increasingly shaken and scared off by the country’s tolerance for Islamist intolerance,” further arguing that “not only Islam, but Islamism, has invaded the country—and with it, violent antisemitism.”

Bridge Initiative Faculty