HERBERT KICKL BETWEEN RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM

The FPÖ's Democratic Backsliding in Austria

by

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I, Caroline Bischof, declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are properly cited and included in the bibliography. I hereby declare that no portion of text in this thesis has been submitted in support of another degree, or qualification thereof, for any other university or institute of learning.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ideological evolution of Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ) under three successive leaders Jörg Haider, Heinz-Christian Strache, and Herbert Kickl with particular focus on whether Kickl's tenure has steered the party from radical right-wing populism into the realm of right-wing extremism. Drawing on Cas Mudde's (2007; 2019) distinction between radicalism and extremism and Michael Minkenberg's (2017) criteria for discursive and operational engagement, the study maps the FPÖ's transformation from a more moderate and populist party towards one engaging in increasingly extremist themes.

Employing qualitative discourse analysis of party programmes, public speeches, and media appearances, the thesis evaluates programmatic shifts and rhetorical strategies under Kickl to determine whether the FPÖ presently fulfils the criteria for right-wing extremist politics. The findings reveal a hybrid position: the FPÖ under Kickl operates democratically, through elections, drafting legislation, and respecting procedural rules, while its radical rhetoric and extremist alliances steadily erode liberal norms and deepen polarization.

The thesis then situates the FPÖ's current position within the constellation approach by Blee, Futrell & Simi (2024) and norm-entrepreneurship theory by Valentim (2024), which explain how extremist content persists through stable networks of symbols and how fringe proposals are introduced to expand the Overton Window. Comparative insights contextualize the success of the FPÖ within broader European patterns of far-right resurgence. Overall, the FPÖ's trajectory exemplifies how mainstream parties can weaponize crisis-driven boundary politics to mainstream extremist ideas without abandoning their democratic façade, posing a significant challenge to institutional legitimacy, social cohesion, and the rule of law in Austria and beyond. Therefore, suggestions for safeguarding Austrian democracy will be made in the end.

INHALT

1 INTRODUCTION

The results of the past two elections in Austria show one thing very clearly: Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) is on the rise again. After the Ibiza scandal in 2019 briefly appeared to be the end of the FPÖ's ambitions, Herbert Kickl's leadership has instead led to an astonishing electoral revival. In the national elections in September 2024, the FPÖ won 28.8 percent of the vote, the best result for a far-right party since 1945 (parlament.gv.at 2024). However, it was excluded from coalition talks by parties unwilling to work with a movement seen as flirting with extremism. At the same time, voters do not share the unease of the mainstream parties. In the Vienna local elections on 27 April 2025, the FPÖ tripled its result from 7.1 percent in 2020 to 20.8 percent, demonstrating its ability to mobilise urban voters and draw them away from the mainstream (Stadt Wien 2025). However, Herbert Kickl is not attracting these voters by adopting a more moderate, centrist stance than previous leaders. Compared to his predecessors Jörg Haider and Heinz-Christian Strache, Kickl's radical rhetoric and policy proposals push the boundaries of what is acceptable and legal.

This thesis examines whether Herbert Kickl has moved the FPÖ away from its radical or far-right roots towards a right-wing extremist course. In order to determine the extent of the ideological change, an analysis of the changes in the party's programme since Kickl's promotion to party leader in 2021 as well as Kickl's public statements and actions will be carried out. I then suggest the value of a hybrid position of the FPÖ, with the goal to shift the Overton window[1]. Finally, I will discuss the implications for Austrian politics and place the changes in

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[1] The Overton Window is a political model describing the spectrum of ideas that the public will accept at any given time. Policies within this window are deemed reasonable and electable, while those outside are labeled radical or unthinkable. Groups and parties can shift the window by introducing fringe proposals, over time normalizing what was once unacceptable and thus expanding the realm of public debate. ("The Overton Window" 2019)

the FPÖ in a broader European context. Addressing this question sheds light on the broader process by which mainstream parties can drift towards illiberalism while retaining formal democratic legitimacy.

By analysing Kickl's programmatic innovations and inflammatory rhetoric alongside party documents and public speeches, this study aims to clarify the FPÖ's current ideological position. This analysis is timely and relevant not only for Austria, where the FPÖ's popularity places it at the centre of government formation debates, but also for the European context, where similar parties in France, Italy and Hungary are also exploiting crises and cultural anxieties to normalise extremist tenets. Understanding the trajectory of the FPÖ in Austria under Kickl is therefore a crucial part of understanding the rise of increasingly extreme right-wing ideologies in Europe.

Methodologically, the research employs qualitative discourse analysis based on established theoretical frameworks. After delineating the conceptual boundaries between right-wing radicalism and extremism, drawing primarily on Mudde (2007; 2019) and Minkenberg (2017), I provide a historical overview of the FPÖ under Haider and Strache. The core empirical chapters then trace programmatic revisions since Kickl's ascent in 2021, analysing his public interventions for signs of democratic rejection. Finally, I assess the implications of these shifts for Austria's democratic system, considering both risks of erosion of democratic norms and strategies for strengthening resilience. This approach offers a comprehensive case study of how a far-right party can weaponise crisis-driven politics to bring the extreme into the mainstream, with the aim of recalibrating the political centre of gravity and potentially endangering liberal democracy itself.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the FPÖ and its place within European far-right politics shows a continuous evolution of its ideology and political goals, on which this thesis builds. Early works by Bailer-Galanda and Neugebauer (1996) traced the FPÖ's origins to post-war Austrian nationalism, highlighting the persistence of its cultural-nationalist rhetoric. With the rise of Jörg Haider in the mid-1980s, the FPÖ underwent a marked hardening. It replaced the pan-German orientation with an "Austria first" campaign, institutionalised welfare chauvinism (giving social benefits preferentially to ethnic Austrians) and embraced Euroscepticism. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) and Heschl (2002) then show how, under Haider, the party used mass-circulation tabloids and television to 'mediatise' politics and broaden its appeal without abandoning these core issues.

A second wave of scholarship examines the FPÖ's institutionalisation and ideological hardening under Haider's successors. This will be used to assess the FPÖ's current position in terms of extremism. In order to provide clear criteria for right-wing radicalism and extremism against which to judge the FPÖ's positions, I will draw on the work of Cas Mudde (2007; 2019) and Michael Minkenberg (2017). Cas Mudde defines the extreme right in terms of its core ideological pillars of ultranationalism, racism and authoritarianism, and Minkenberg builds on his work by detailing how radical right parties use an interplay of discursive strategies and institutional engagement to broaden their appeal without relinquishing democratic legitimacy. This dual strategy of border politics helps to explain the general direction of the FPÖ. To better understand Kickl's rhetorical and political choices, other perspectives include Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), who identify narratives of cultural insecurity and conspiratorial framing as tools for normalising exclusionary positions. Inglehart and Norris (2017) complement this by showing how economic and cultural anxieties fuel support for populist-authoritarian parties

across Europe, while Thiele, Sauer, and Penz (2021) add an Austrian perspective on how affective framing in parliamentary debates on migration has deepened polarisation.

To argue for the FPÖ's hybrid position between radicalism and extremism, I will bring in Blee, Futrell, and Simi (2024) constellation approach, which shows how parties like the FPÖ embed extremist ideas in stable networks of symbols, emotions, and practices, allowing them to rebrand while retaining radical core content. Further, Valentim's (2024) theory of norms shows that far-right "norm entrepreneurs" deliberately introduce extreme proposals to shift the Overton window and make once fringe ideas appear democratically defensible. Lastly, Arzheimer and Carter (2006) show how such boundary-shifting forces mainstream actors to either co-opt hardened positions or risk marginalisation, thereby indirectly reinforcing far-right influence.

I will then draw on some literature related to the media environment, which highlights how echo chambers reinforce shifts to the right. Empirical work shows that digital and tabloid platforms create ideologically homogeneous networks that amplify FPÖ messages and entrench polarised viewpoints. As a possible way out, Guess et al. (2020) document that media literacy interventions can improve citizens' ability to distinguish false from credible news, highlighting the role of targeted education in countering disinformation and breaking echo chamber effects.

Finally, to place the FPÖ within the developments across Europe, I will make reference to the rightward shift of parties similar to the FPÖ in Italy, Hungary and France. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia has moved from the margins to lead a governing coalition by reframing radical policy demands as legitimate national concerns, thus normalizing once-taboo positions within the political center (Alcaro and Tocci 2024). Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France underwent a comparable development, trading overt xenophobia for more coded appeals to national identity and social protection (Blecher 2024). Lastly, in Hungary,

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Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has leveraged its supermajority to reshape constitutional norms, co-opt the media landscape, and consolidate executive power under an illiberal banner (Cooper 2023). These cases exemplify how "boundary-shifting" strategies, whether through tactical rebranding or legislative dominance, enable parties to migrate formerly fringe ideas into the realm of acceptable debate.

Overall, there is a wide range of existing literature that provides a framework for analysing the FPÖ under Kickl, from its historical roots and Haider's strategic mainstreaming, through Strache's increasing radicalisation and corruption, to Kickl's potentially extremist position and attempts to shift the political discourse. Nevertheless, some areas could benefit from further research. There remains a gap in the systematic understanding of how the transformation of political narratives under specific leadership can lead to the radicalisation of a party in the eyes of the public. The FPÖ therefore serves as a critical case study for understanding the conditions under which right-wing populism can evolve into radical extremism in Austria, and the possible implications for the democratic system.

3 THE HISTORY OF THE FPÖ IN AUSTRIA

The history of the FPÖ is characterised by repeated shifts in ideology, electoral behaviour and strategic positioning on the Austrian political map. The following comparative analysis of the influence of party leaders on the party's development since the 1980s will focus on the period before Herbert Kickl's leadership, with two distinct eras: the tenure of Jörg Haider (1986-2005) and the subsequent period under Heinz-Christian Strache (2005-2019). The second half of the chapter will then cover Herbert Kickl's tenure since 2019, and the changes he has initiated in the party.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Jörg Haider emerged as the leader of the FPÖ and deliberately steered the party away from its fringe origins and towards a balance between respectability and ideology. He understood that the FPÖ could only preserve its coalition chances by retaining its nationalist core on the one hand and appearing moderate in public on the other (Bailer-Galanda and Neugebauer 1996; Minkenberg 2017). Although Haider continued to prioritise contentious issues such as immigration and national sovereignty, he framed them in less confrontational terms, for example proposing an Austrian National Trust to "protect Austrian culture" rather than advocating outright ethnic exclusion and declaring that "[…] I don't understand why a country like Austria should give up on itself" (Bailer-Galanda and Neugebauer 1996, 58, my translation). This deliberate moderation prevented the radical polarisation that more extreme messages often provoke and positioned the FPÖ as both a guardian of Austrian identity and a credible potential coalition partner. Haider's approach also relied on anti-elitist rhetoric, shared through high-circulation free tabloids and television appearances, with comments that resonated across socio-economic groups about defending pensioners, cutting red tape or denouncing "Brussels bureaucrats" (Heschl 2002, my translation). Conveniently, Haider's proactive media strategy came at a time when European media craved populist voices (Mazzoleni and Schulz

1999). Tapping into socio-economic grievances, he used the classic populist repertoire of "us vs. them", and held countless town hall meetings in industrial regions, listening to local grievances and tailoring his rhetoric accordingly (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018). This combination of cultural and nationalist messaging and media engagement contributed to a shift in public attitudes, normalising policies once considered radical and securing the FPÖ's place within Austria's political centre-right (Art 2011).

Following Haider, Heinz-Christian Strache led the party from 2005 to 2019 and undertook a significant repositioning of the FPÖ in terms of ideology and policy orientation. Under Strache, the party adopted a more radical rhetoric and strategy, emphasising nationalist and anti-establishment sentiments. In many ways, Strache intensified Haider's populist strategy but further alienated the FPÖ from the political mainstream by being more uncompromising and proposing or adopting hardline policies. While Haider focused on national pride, Strache made immigration his battleground. His leadership was characterised by the use of provocative slogans such as "More courage for our 'Viennese blood' - too much foreignness is good for nobody" (Die Presse 2017, my translation). These slogans, largely written by Herbert Kickl, the party's communications secretary at the time, would soon help broaden the FPÖ's electoral base (tagesschau 2024). Strache also made conspiratorial statements, referencing the „Great Replacement" theory. In an interview in 2019, he warned of a "population exchange", claiming that Austrians risked becoming a minority in their own country due to immigration (Der Standard 2019). Further, Strache soon found his rhetorical trademark in referring to migrants as "social tourists", a staple-term on the radical right (Die Presse 2013; Mudde 2019). The rhetorical changes under Strache were accompanied by a number of strategic gambles. The FPÖ abandoned its caution and, over the years, suffered a series of scandals that damaged the party's reputation but never scared off its base of voters. The most consequential of these was the 2019 Ibiza affair, in which secretly recorded footage showed Strache promising public contracts in

exchange for electoral support (Karner 2021). This revealed not only the party's willingness to engage in corruption but also had also alienated the party from the normal expectations of a respectable political party in Austria. The scandal forced Strache's resignation, triggered the collapse of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition and caused a snap election, underscoring the fragile boundary between populist mobilization and democratic accountability.

Overall, the changes in rhetoric and ideology during Strache's tenure can be seen as signs of a broader transformation within the European far-right at the time. While Haider had to moderate his rhetoric in order to maintain a working relationship with the political establishment, Strache was able to adopt an uncompromising style that appealed to a new generation of voters hungry for opinionated voices. The FPÖ therefore adopted simpler and more emotionally charged narratives to appeal directly to voters' fears about immigration, globalisation and the loss of national identity. It is this communicative simplicity and strong emotional appeal that often makes the radical right successful (Thiele, Sauer, and Penz 2021). But Strache's leadership ended with the scandal, leaving the party in a state of transition. The FPÖ still had popular support, with its base rallying around it, but it also faced increasing exclusion from mainstream politics. In effect, Strache's leadership fundamentally reconfigured the FPÖ's relationship with its electoral base and political partners, setting the stage for Herbert Kickl to finally take the lead and implement his ideology.

Kickl's appointment as leader of the FPÖ marks a decisive break with previous leadership styles in terms of rhetoric and ideological focus. In contrast to Jörg Haider's pragmatic populism and Heinz-Christian Strache's radical but ultimately reactive style, Kickl's approach is characterised by a conscious orientation of the FPÖ towards far-right principles. This comes at no surprise, as Kickl's political career was deeply rooted in the FPÖ from the outset. He joined the FPÖ in the 1990s, but finally broke with it in 2001 after Haider made a controversial remark during a

political speech on Ash Wednesday that was attributed to Kickl. Addressing Ariel Muzicant, then president of Vienna's Jewish community, he said: "I don't understand at all how someone called Ariel can have so much dirt on him" (Der Spiegel 2001, my translation). The comment was widely condemned as anti-Semitic, playing on the double meaning of the Jewish name "Ariel" and the laundry detergent brand with the same name (Pelinka 2003). Following the backlash, Kickl's role in the party was marginalised and he was reassigned to Carinthia, but he remained influential. He served as the FPÖ's general secretary from 2005 to 2018, shaping much of the party's strategic messaging, but was again sidelined by Strache's leadership. In December 2017, he was appointed Minister of the Interior, a position he held until May 2019, causing controversy (Die Presse/APA 2018; FAZ/AFP 2024). Following the Ibiza scandal and Strache's downfall, Kickl took over the federal leadership of the FPÖ in June 2021. Under Kickl, the FPÖ has increasingly embraced extremist ideologies, driven by its "people's chancellor" (Matzinger 2024, my translation). Kickl focuses on issues such as national sovereignty, anti-immigration policies and a broad rejection of "political correctness" or "woke ideologies" (Bauer 2023).

Especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Kickl redefined the party's public image. While the party briefly supported quarantine measures in early 2020, Kickl quickly shifted to a narrative that questioned public health restrictions, capitalising on growing public uncertainty. His speeches at the mass demonstrations in Vienna where FPÖ supporters joined anti-lockdown rallies, used conspiratorial overtones and anti-establishment framing to further polarise Austrian politics without offering concessions to centrist voters (Gehrke 2021). This radical repositioning not only re-energised the FPÖ's existing far-right base but also attracted new voters disillusioned with the government's crisis management, a development that reflects a broader trend of shifting to the right in times of social crisis (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Morelli 2020).

Kickl's turn towards greater ideological purity also reflects a generational shift within the FPÖ, driven by those willing to embrace uncompromising positions in order to mobilise untapped constituencies and differentiate themselves from established parties. Under Kickl, the FPÖ has moved closer to previously marginalised nationalist and extremist groups, no longer maintaining its previous silent distance. For example, the party repeatedly participated in protests alongside Identitarian Movement flags and previously convicted Neo-Nazis, showing a public rejection of liberal values (orf.at 2021a; Mellacher 2023). This alignment with extremist movements has solidified the FPÖ's appeal among a new, more radical base of supporters willing to remain loyal through scandals and legal troubles. At the same time, broader shifts in Europe, where mainstream parties are increasingly adopting far-right positions in response to populist pressure, have created an environment in which this pushing of boundaries is openly possible (Henley 2025).

Overall, the FPÖ's path since the 1980s can be understood in terms of three interacting dynamics. First, the ideological development of the party was significantly leader-driven. Haider's careful balancing of nationalist core and respectability gave way under Strache to a more uncompromising, emotionally charged populism, which Kickl has since pushed into open alignment with far right and extremist themes. Second, these shifts in style have been accompanied by a complicated relationship with the political mainstream. Haider's moderation secured coalition entry, then Strache's scandals led to eventual exclusion from the mainstream, and Kickl's radical repositioning will likely prolong the party's isolation even as its voter base remains loyal. Finally, moments of crisis have repeatedly accelerated the FPÖ's radicalization. From the media-driven cultural anxieties of the 1990s, to the Ibiza scandal under Strache, to the COVID-19 pandemic under Kickl, each crisis has served as a stepping stone for harder policies and more extreme messaging. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate not only how the FPÖ

has changed over time, but also how its evolution reflects broader European patterns in which leadership, cultural and economic crises interact to push parties further to the right.

4 THE FPÖ TODAY: RADICAL RIGHT OR EXTREMISTS?

Recently, debates over the direction of right-wing politics in Europe have intensified, and with them comes the challenge to clearly place parties as engaging in either far-right politics or right-wing extremism. This chapter attempts to critically assess whether the FPÖ under the leadership of Herbert Kickl has transformed in a way that is to be classified as far-right-wing politics, retaining the democratic legitimacy necessary, or if it has crossed into the realm of right-wing extremism. Drawing on historical analysis and contemporary political theory, the focus will be on the policy proposals and specific rhetoric used and introduced by Kickl.

Theoretical Framework

The first task in this analysis is to clarify the conceptual boundaries between far-right politics and right-wing extremism. In doing so I will draw on the theories of Cas Mudde and Michael Minkenberg. Cas Mudde defines three pillars of the far-right ideology: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007, 17). These are shared by radical and extreme actors (Mudde 2019). He then goes on to define radical-right parties as those that operate within the rules of democracy (participating in free elections, drafting legislation, and maintaining formal respect for minority rights and the rule of law), while generally rejecting liberal norms. In contrast, extremist movements reject democracy itself by denying popular sovereignty in favour of authoritarian governance and often legitimising violence or extra-legal tactics to achieve ideological goals (Mudde 2007, 146).

Michael Minkenberg builds on Mudde by specifying discursive and operational criteria that distinguish radical from extremist actors. Radical parties engage in boundary politics by using

symbolic exclusion, conspiratorial rhetoric, and anti-pluralist narratives, while formally participating in elections, coalition-making, and legislative processes (Minkenberg 2017). In contrast, extremist movements, reject or boycott institutional channels and may openly sanction political violence as a legitimate means to achieve their goals, thereby directly challenging democratic norms (Minkenberg 2017).

By examining the language, symbolic gestures, and policy proposals found in FPÖ documents alongside Kickl's public statements, I will assess whether the party's current stance is better understood as far-right populism within a democratic context, as an increasingly extremist rejection of democratic norms. I will then propose a hybrid understanding of the current position of the party, which is caused by a conscious attempt by the FPÖ to redraw the political spectrum altogether.

Rhetoric and Programmatic Shifts under Kickl

Since taking leadership, Kickl has triggered a strong transformation in the FPÖ's identity through changes in party program, public rhetoric and an evolving relationship with extremist movements.

Party Programme

The changes to the FPÖ party programme since Kickl took office show some classic themes. In a return to ideological purity, the latest programme emphasizes national sovereignty, a strict anti-immigration stance, and a broad rejection of supranational institutions such as the European Union (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 2024). The rhetoric clearly resonates with an electorate disillusioned with globalisation and existing institutions and driven by xenophobia.

Kickl's radical line on immigration was evident during his tenure as interior minister when he expanded pre-deportation detention and proposed that asylum seekers convicted in first-instance proceedings should be held "concentrated in one place" pending deportation (Hagen 2018, my translation). Following a public outcry, he later amended the proposal to cover second-instance convictions, defending it by claiming that "the law must follow politics, not politics following the law" (parlament.gv.at 2021, my translation). The proposal provoked strong criticism from President Van der Bellen, legal associations, and human-rights advocates, who warned that such detentions risked undermining the rule of law and due-process guarantees by the European Convention on Human Rights.

The 2024 electoral platform of the FPÖ *"Fortress Austria, Fortress of Freedom"* was structured around the reclaiming of national sovereignty and the rejection of supranational governance by the EU, positioning Austria as no longer "taking orders for the interests of others" (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 2024, my translation). Central to the party's vision is a hardline anti-immigration stance and the idea of "remigration," i.e. mass deportations, the end of family reunification laws, and the deportation of migrants who either commit crimes or refuse to integrate (Capodici 2024). This means the total exclusion of those who do not fit into the national "in-group".

In the cultural sector, the FPÖ calls for a constitutional enshrinement of binary gender categories and proposes a ban on "political Islam", citing schools as sites of ideological infiltration (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 2025, my translation) The programme explicitly targets early sexualisation and bans drag queens in schools, arguing that they represent foreign and "politically correct" ideologies that threaten the moral fabric of the nation (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs 2024, my translation). In economic and social policy, the party pushes for preferential treatment of native Austrians through tax cuts for the wealthy with a strict citizenship-only access to social benefits, therefore drawing a definite "in-group" (Maier 2024).

In regional campaigns, the FPÖ likes to present itself as the protector of the identity and traditional values of the homeland, and as a counterweight to the cosmopolitan norms of the "Viennese elite" (Caesar 2023). Kickl portrays himself as a kind of martyr, stating that he is "[…] not afraid […], because I think: you can burn a reformer at the stake, but you cannot suffocate the spirit of reform" (Rauscher 2025, my translation). The rhetorical effect is a highly effective mixture of victimhood and rebellious energy, hallmarks of far-right populist discourse.

Rhetorical Strategies and Public Discourse

Kickl's public statements provide a window into the FPÖ's broader strategy for radicalizing discourse. Historically, Kickl has never had much regard for rhetorical boundaries and touching on the party's nationalist past. In 2010 Kickl rejected the idea of a collective condemnation of the Waffen-SS as "nonsense", arguing that guilt and innocence were "purely individual matters" (Miller 2024, my translation). This relativizing of a historically criminal organization, which had been classified as such in the Nuremberg Trials, underscores Kickl's long-standing willingness to adopt provocative positions to incite emotions. Similarly, in 2020, during a parliamentary session he described political proposals he perceived as authoritarian as "rolling command policy of the Peoples' Party (ÖVP)" drawing a controversial comparison to Nazi-era tactics (Der Standard/APA 2020, my translation). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Kickl's rhetoric has become increasingly confrontational, conspiratorial, and historically charged, in an attempt to position the FPÖ as a last line of defense against a variety of threats. During the crisis, Kickl's communications centered on a common right-wing narrative that the pandemic was being directed by global elites to erode national sovereignty and fundamental freedoms (orf.at 2021b). In multiple media appearances, Kickl has framed public health measures as authoritarian overreach. During a 2021 demonstration he referred to the EU's public health response as part of a "synchronized power game" whose purpose was "to dominate us" (orf.at

2021b, my translation). During parliamentary sessions in 2021, Kickl refused to wear a mask, framing mask requirements as governmental overreach rather than a public-health necessity and positioning himself in opposition to the moral authority claimed by mainstream politicians (Weißensteiner 2020). He later endorsed non-scientifically proven treatments in his claim that "the evidence after two pandemic years proves the covid-sceptics right" (Hager 2021, my translation). These statements often happened in the context of mass protests where demonstrators adopted antisemitic and extremist symbolism, including yellow stars labelled "unvaccinated" and banners reading "vaccination sets you free"[2], which Kickl notably refused to denounce (Sulzbacher 2021, my translation). In general, Kickl often draws from history to appeal to a national victimhood. In a November 2024 Facebook post, he declared "yes to self-determination and sovereignty" while warning against the "successive dissolution of our homeland Austria into a centralistic EU prison" (Kubrak 2025, my translation). Hereby, he draws on a long-standing nationalist trope of historical humiliation and political siege, emphasizing the need for a strong Austria.

Relationship with Extremist Movements and Groups

Under Kickl's leadership, the FPÖ has cultivated increasingly explicit links to Austria's Identitarian Movement (IBÖ) and other radical nationalist networks. Many of these have been inherited from Kickl's previous personal relationships with these groups. As early as October 2016, Kickl appeared as a guest speaker at the "Defenders of Europe" congress, an event organised by IBÖ affiliates, which he praised as an "interesting project worthy of support" and, notably even referred to the extremist Identitarians as a "right-wing NGO" (Kurier 2021, my translation). During his time as interior minister, Kickl was critisised heavily for failing to clearly distance the FPÖ from the Identitarian movement when it became known that Martin

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[2] In reference to "Arbeit macht frei", the slogan on the gates of the concentration camps of the Second World War.

Sellner, head of the IBÖ, had received a donation from the Christchurch shooter shortly before the tragedy (BBC 2019). Kickl's refusal to make a clear break with the IBÖ was interpreted as tacit support, or at least a refusal, to alienate far-right sympathisers. Later, it became clearer how deep the ties ran. After the FPÖ won the 2024 elections, the party appointed several former IBÖ members as parliamentary staff (Bonavida, Melichar, and Winter 2024). Kickl's FPÖ delegation to the European Parliament included Identitäre activists and presenters from conspiratorial media outlets; their visit to Strasbourg was marked by confrontations with journalists and "Remigration" demonstrations in Vienna organized under IBÖ supports (orf.at 2025). Images emerged from FPÖ victory celebrations later that year, of party officials mingling with Identitäre banners and chants invoking "Germanic blood" (Sager 2024). At the same time, Kickl has steered the FPÖ into formal alliances with Europe's most prominent right-wing forces. In January 2022, FPÖ delegates attended the Madrid summit organised by Spain's Vox party, under the banner "Make Europe Great Again", where they joined Viktor Orbán (Fidesz), Marine Le Pen (Front National), and Matteo Salvini (Lega) in celebrating Donald Trump's agenda as a template for European politics (euronews/AFP 2022). Last year, Kickl personally hosted Orbán to inaugurate the "Patriots for Europe" alliance alongside Fidesz and the Czech ANO party, calling it the beginning of a new "patriotic" faction set to reshape the European Parliament (Gros 2024). Through networking, Kickl has positioned the FPÖ at the centre of a transnational far-right network that affirms and legitimizes its own agenda.

Evaluating the FPÖ's Position

In the following, I will determine whether the FPÖ has crossed into extremist territory or not. As outlined earlier, Cas Mudde draws the line between the radical right and the extreme right in terms of an outright rejection of liberal democratic norms (Mudde 2007). According to his framework, the FPÖ under Kickl's leadership embraces some tenants of extremism (Mudde 2007; 2019). Firstly, exclusionary ethno-nationalism is clearly visible in the 2024 *Fortress Austria* platform's call for "remigration" through mass deportation of non-integrated migrants without exception and constitutional amendments to prioritise "Austrian blood" in welfare and public service allocations. Its anti-minority policies further extend beyond immigration, as the party calls for a constitutional ban on non-binary gender recognition and political Islam, which seek to strip vulnerable groups of legal protection and basic civil rights. Furthermore, conspiratorial anti-pluralism defines Kickl's rhetoric, as he routinely warns of the globalist threat of the EU, the WHO, and the courts, which aim to impose a foreign cultural agenda on Austria. This language echoes extremist conspiracy theories about shadowy elites that are common on the far- and extreme-right (Mudde 2019). Moreover, Kickl pursues institutional delegitimisation: courts are dismissed as "elitist", the mainstream media as "lying press" and parliamentary norms as instruments of a corrupt "system" undermining public trust in democratic checks and balances (Minkenberg 2017). Finally, Kickl has forged transnational extremist alliances, embedding the FPÖ in a pan-European far-right network that amplifies illiberal agendas across borders. Nevertheless, the FPÖ respects other parts of democracy, by participating in free elections, drafting legislation and remaining part of the parliamentary debate, rather than openly demanding the abolition of electoral democracy. Where the FPÖ advocates for more radical or violent means, it does so less openly and more through the tacit approval of organisations on the extremist fringe. Thus, according to Mudde's framework, the

FPÖ has not yet fully crossed the line into extremism. However, it cannot be considered a purely democratic party either, because it rejects the values on which democracy is based.

The addition of Minkenberg's insights into discursive strategies adds clarity to the hybrid space currently occupied by the FPÖ (Minkenberg 2017). On a procedural level, Minkenberg agrees with Mudde that the FPÖ formally participates in democratic mechanisms. For example, after its 28.8 percent victory in September 2024, the FPÖ accepted and then returned a presidential mandate to form a government, which would be in stark contrast to an extremist movement's categorical refusal to engage in democratic processes. At the same time, however, Kickl's mobilisation of anti-mask protests and alliance with extra-parliamentary groups demonstrate an extremist style of agitation outside formal institutions. Overall, Kickl's rhetoric appears to be much more extreme than his actual policy efforts, highlighting the oppositional rhetoric that sets parties on the path to increasing extremism.

The Hybrid Space

Given the discrepancy between the FPÖ's extreme rhetoric and its comparatively restrained policy record, the question is why, and how this hybrid positioning persists. In the case of the FPÖ, it may be a deliberate strategy, based on reviving the old, nationalist core and using it to slowly mainstream its ideas. Given the history of the FPÖ, the more extremist ideas that Kickl is now openly embracing, can be seen less as his own than as a continuation of a historical core that simply went through periods of moderation before him. Extremist ideas can remain deeply embedded in a party's identity through "stable networks of practices, ideas, and emotions," even when the organisation formally rebrands itself or changes its public image (Blee, Futrell, and Simi 2024). That this is true of the FPÖ is illustrated in the remarkable number of scandals related to FPÖ-politicians arrested for violating the Prohibition Act 1947 and participating in

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organisations monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism for their extremism throughout the years (Mauthausen Komitee Österreich 2017). Core themes, such as exclusionism towards immigration and a tendency towards the conspiratorial reveals how the FPÖ preserves its radical core through symbolic gestures and emotive appeals and has done so throughout history, despite occasional policy moderation (Blee, Futrell, and Simi 2024).

At the same time, the FPÖ's communications reflect an attempt to redraw the boundaries of the acceptable in mainstream debate rather than get immediate policy victories. Drawing on Vicente Valentim's notion of "norm entrepreneurship," it becomes clear how the FPÖ over time again and again introduces proposals previously considered fringe ideas, such as mass deportations, constitutional bans on "political Islam," or the prioritization of "Austrian blood" in welfare, positioning them as legitimate ideas to be decided upon democratically (Valentim 2024). This desensitizes the broader public and slowly expand the range of thinkable ideas to include proposals previously relegated to extremist groups. These ideas then function less as literal blueprints for government action and more as strategic provocations designed to shift the Overton Window, making exclusionary and authoritarian frames appear progressively legitimate. In turn, centrist actors must respond, either by co-opting hardened positions or by attempting to marginalize the radical right at the risk of seeming out of touch and pushing voters to the right (Arzheimer and Carter 2006). Both can be observed in the Austrian context. The more centrist Peoples' Party (ÖVP) has previously adopted some of the FPÖ's more fringe ideas in order to gain voters, yet the FPÖ struggles to find political allies despite winning elections (orf.at 2024). In the Austrian context, the FPÖ's steady drip of extreme demands this normalizes anti-democratic tropes steadily pulls public opinion and policy discourse toward the radical right.

This dynamic explains the FPÖ's sturdy electoral popularity. The party continues to draft legislation, form coalitions, and occupy parliamentary seats, all while embedding extremist tropes into its platforms. By maintaining formal participation in democratic institutions and accepting electoral outcomes the FPÖ shields itself from the kind of de-legitimation that for example the Republican Party under Donald Trump faces in the United States. Meanwhile, Kickl is free to use provocative language that normalizes anti-pluralist and conspiratorial narratives. However, this combination of age-old ideology and attempted Overton Window shifts renders the FPÖ under Kickl a uniquely insidious challenge: one that leverages institutional legitimacy to propagate extremist ideas from within.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRIAN POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

Since the 1980s, the FPÖ has evolved from a populist-nationalist outlier into a party that wins elections on increasingly radical platforms. This ideological hardening has transformed Austria's coalition predictability. Haider's FPÖ was able to enter government by reframing its core ideas, today's more hardline FPÖ finds itself increasingly shunned by mainstream parties fearful of extremist taint. After winning 28.8 percent of the vote in the 2024 elections, coalition talks stalled as potential partners questioned the FPÖ's democratic commitment (France-Presse 2025). Such self-imposed isolation not only obstructs policy continuity as it takes months to form a government but also undermines institutional legitimacy. As Mudde warns, when a major party rejects democratic compromise, it accelerates the fragmentation of party systems and portrays established institutions as either elitist or complicit in the erosion of national sovereignty (Mudde 2019). In Austria, by reframing governance as a battle against ideological enemies rather than a forum for policy debate, the FPÖ's hardlining deepens polarization. In such a polarized environment, governments become paralyzed by antagonism, and democratic institutions lose their capacity to mediate conflict and maintain social peace.

Consequently, public trust in politics has also suffered. Kickl's portrayal of pandemic restrictions as an attack on Austrian identity resonated with those disillusioned by the government's crisis management and fueled a narrative of collective victimhood. Scholars of radicalisation show that such emotive, conspiratorial framing undermines tolerance for differing opinions and corrodes the norms of political debate (Minkenberg 2017; Mudde 2019). The FPÖ's exploitation of social and tabloid media has created echo chambers in which extremist ideas flourish, which entrenches polarized viewpoints and marginalizes moderate voices (Van Aelst et al. 2017). As mainstream media outlets struggle to balance criticism with impartiality, the FPÖ's narratives dominate online discourse, heightening cynicism and

disengagement among citizens. When media environments are polarized, public trust in information and institutions declines (Van Aelst et al. 2017).

This also poses risks to democratic accountability and the rule of law. For example, Kickl's assertions that emergency powers during COVID-19 were tools of authoritarian control rather than public health measures illustrate his readiness to frame constitutional checks as obstacles to sovereignty. When legal norms are framed as impositions, the separation of powers comes under attack (Mudde 2019). Coupled with Kickl's disregard for human-rights protections and the FPÖ's propensity for corruption, the judicial independence that underpins Austria's constitutional order may be in danger. This is further worsened by the FPÖ's exclusionary language which undermines social cohesion and minority rights. By casting migrants as "welfare tourists" and multicultural education as "politically correct indoctrination," the party normalizes xenophobia and discrimination, weakening the pluralistic understanding of a democratic society. This climate of othering hinders the integration of vulnerable communities and stretches the social bonds that carry democratic discourse.

Countermeasures and Safeguards

In the light of these developments, Austria must pursue a multi-faceted strategy to safeguard its democracy. First, democratic institutions should be strengthened by ensuring judicial independence, parliamentary oversight and transparency in decision-making. The OECD's 2024 Reinforcing Democracy initiative highlights how member states can strengthen courts, strengthen ombudsperson offices, and improve legislative oversight to restore public confidence in governance (OECD 2024). Similarly, the European Commission's recent report on the rule of law calls for clear mechanisms to ensure that executive actions remain subject to judicial review and that parliaments have unhindered access to draft legislation (European

Commission 2024). Implementing these safeguards in Austria will ensure that the constitution and the rule of law are protected.

Promoting inclusive political dialogue and media literacy is also crucial. Studies show that targeted media literacy initiatives, such as teaching citizens how to critically evaluate sources and recognise disinformation, can bridge political divides and reduce susceptibility to polarising narratives (Guess et al. 2020). UNESCO also stresses the importance of media and information literacy as "a first line of defence against disinformation" (UNESCO 2020). This includes fact-checking training for online influencers and the general public to counteract echo chambers and restore trust in public discourse. Overall, this training can counteract the untrue or distorted information consumed and shared in the echo chambers of the internet.

Moreover, addressing the broader social and economic grievances of the electorate removes some of the fuel from radical actors. Empirical evidence from Western Europe suggests that robust social spending, including unemployment benefits, job retraining and support for disadvantaged communities, significantly reduces support for populist parties by reducing economic insecurity (Foster and Frieden, 2022). Welfare programmes undermine the popular narrative that "ordinary people" are being left behind by "political elites".

Finally, regulation of extremist content in the digital space may be necessary be in order. The EU's recently updated Terrorist Content Regulation (2021/784) and the Digital Services Act establish legal obligations for platforms to quickly remove or block extremist propaganda while respecting fundamental rights ("Legal Documents on The Digital Services Act - European Commission" 2022) However, much of the responsibility for which voices are amplified still lies with the platforms themselves, for whom polarising and emotional content is advantageous. Nevertheless, frameworks for healthy online information environments need to be put in place

to enable democratic dialogue. Taken together, these measures offer Austria a chance to defend itself against the dual pressures of radicalisation and polarisation.

6 CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis, the analysis of the FPÖ's trajectory under Jörg Haider, Heinz-Christian Strache and Herbert Kickl has revealed how a movement can maintain democratic legitimacy while steadily normalizing exclusionary and anti-pluralist ideas. From Haider's calculated moderation, through Strache's emotionally charged populism, to Kickl's ideological hardline stance, the FPÖ has demonstrated the ability to adapt its style and symbols to prevailing crises, whether the looming EU enlargement, the Ibiza scandal or the COVID-19 pandemic, without relinquishing formal procedural legitimacy. I have shown that, although the FPÖ has not yet formally abandoned democracy's procedural rules, its programmatic choices and Kickl's radical rhetoric featuring "remigration," constitutional bans on minority rights and conspiratorial delegitimization of courts and media, place it in a hybrid zone between radical populism and outright extremism.

Applying Mudde's (2007; 2019) criteria for the distinction of radicalism and extremism on the far-right, by alongside Minkenberg's (2017) discursive and institutional criteria allowed me to distinguish the FPÖ's policy record, which was marked by albeit far-right legislative engagement, from its far more radical rhetoric. Through Blee's at al. (2024) and Valentim's (2024) frameworks on constellation-driven persistence and norm entrepreneurship, it becomes clear that the party's formal moderation masks an underlying ecosystem of extremist tropes. By continually introducing once-taboo proposals into the public sphere, the FPÖ has succeeded in shifting the Overton Window, forcing mainstream competitors to react and thereby reinforcing its boundary-politics strategy without ever fully breaking with democratic norms.

The party's remarkable electoral success, resulting in a near-29 percent share in the 2024 national vote, and a tripling of the votes in Vienna's 2025 polls, underscores how powerful this

approach can be. Voters are drawn to the FPÖ's promise of restored sovereignty and cultural cohesion, motivated by fear and existing division, even as other political actors retract from formal partnerships. This dynamic has profound consequences, as repeated coalition gridlock, heightened polarization, diminished public trust and an erosion of the rule of law all are consequences of a system in which one of its major participants alternates between parliamentary tactics and extra-institutional agitation.

The Austrian case exemplifies a broader European pattern in which nominally mainstream parties embrace illiberal and conspiratorial currents to mobilize frustrated electorates. While elections continue to give legitimacy to these actors, their radical proposals threaten the underpinnings of liberal democracy, by drawing into question judicial independence, minority protection and mutual respect among political adversaries. As this thesis has argued, understanding the FPÖ's hybrid position demands more than charting its policy outputs. It requires analysing the symbolic networks and rhetorical strategies that carry extremist content into the centre of political debate.

In the future, Austria's democratic resilience will hinge on reinforcing institutional checks, promoting inclusive dialogue and addressing the socio-economic grievances that radical actors exploit. To address this, looking beyond Austrian borders will be useful. The present case study was limited in its scope and therefore could not address the wider European developments in great detail. Future research might examine European comparative cases, such as Italy's Lega and Fratelli d'Italia or Hungary's Fidesz, to test whether the Austrian case hybrid model also applies in differing political cultures.

In Austria, continued scrutiny of the FPÖ's evolving alliances, media ecosystems and legislative initiatives will be essential. Only by pulling the mechanics of hybrid radicalization into the light and educating the public effective countermeasures can be developed to safeguard pluralism and democratic accountability. The FPÖ's rise under Kickl thus stands as both a warning and an invitation: to recognize how democratic forms can mask extremist substance, and to redouble efforts to defend the Austrian constitution that ensures the open, tolerant society that lies at the heart of liberal democracy.

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