



In Austria's Kickl, the EU has its next Orbán



Herbert Kickl, who would become Austria's first far-right leader since World War II, has made no secret of admiring Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. | Thomas Kronsteiner/Getty Images

Austria's Kickl, Vienna could be about to get its first far-right leader since World War II. Europe's mainstream sees trouble brewing. Europe's next national leader looks likely to come from the far right.

With Herbert Kickl in pole position to become chancellor of Austria, the European Union's establishment is bracing for fresh torment — and another punch in the guts in its stand against Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Kickl, who would become Austria's first far-right leader since World War II, has made no secret of admiring Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and is likely to follow a similar playbook: cozying up to the Kremlin, clashing with the EU mainstream, and pursuing hardline policies in areas like migration.

If his Freedom Party (FPÖ) takes charge, it would mean a swathe of the EU, from Hungary through Austria to Slovakia under outspoken Prime Minister Robert Fico — and potentially to the Czech Republic, where former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is leading in polls ahead of an election in October — would be sympathetic toward Russia three years into Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It also brings back disturbing memories for Brussels, which in 2000 saw the FPÖ under one of Kickl's predecessors, Jörg Haider, become part of Austria's governing coalition. At the time, other governments within the EU broke off bilateral contacts with Vienna. Should he become chancellor, Kickl goes one better than Haider. On Tuesday he fired the starting gun on coalition talks with the center-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) following the breakdown of negotiations among mainstream parties.