

Learning from Ambassador Jan Kickert about Austrian foreign policy

On Tuesday February 19th, 2019, Utah Valley University (UVU) hosted H.E. Jan Kickert, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations. The topic of the day was what Austrian foreign policy looks like and how a small country like Austria can make a name for itself on the larger international front. The speech focused on Austria's modern foreign policy beginning from the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the current day. Austria's foreign policy has been greatly shaped by the major events of the previous century, namely the two World Wars and the Cold War.



Ambassador Jan Kickert speaks at UVU

Ambassador mentioned that with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War, Austria was reduced to a smaller nation on the European landscape rather than being the geographically much larger and politically stronger nation that it used to be. With this reduction came the need for a new foreign policy in order to remain both relevant and politically independent. This was a struggle since there were a number of political movements at the time suggesting that areas of Austria would secede and join up with neighboring countries. Austria however, survived this time united. Years later with the rise of the Nazi Regime in Germany, led

by the infamous Austrian Adolf Hitler, many Austrians quickly joined up with their cultural, political, and language counterparts. This seemed like a natural move for a small nation especially when as stated, their partner was to be someone with whom they shared many of the same characteristics. Also Germany's plans for Europe were rather beneficial to Austria and thus this move would have been in their national interest, even though knowing Hitler, there would not have been much of choice. According to history and the Ambassador, some of the wicked elements of the Nazi Regime came from Austria. While under the Nazi flag, Austria was a crucial tool in implementing the political and ethnic plans meant for the European continent as established by the Nazi party.

As Ambassador Jan Kickert said further in his presentation, the fall of the Nazi regime with the end of World War II in Europe brought new changes to the Austrian political playing field. As with Germany and Berlin, Austria was divided up into four governing regions of which would be administered by different countries. As the Cold War progressed and Austria's lack of importance as compared to Germany coupled with a strong sense of neutrality, it was able to unite itself under a single system. It was interesting to learn from Ambassador Kickert, that being neutral during the Cold War played well for the small Austria. Without becoming entangled in the web of alliances in which other nations found themselves, Austria was able to govern itself rather independently and work more on establishing itself as an Austrian voice rather than an American or Soviet one. This allowed it to act as an intermediary location for Cold War talks, thus bringing further into the international field.

PR of Austria to the UN, stressed, that in 1955, Austria joined the United Nations, an organization that is seen as extremely beneficial to smaller nations since it is in this organization that all nations are represented and have an equal voice, with the expectation of the Security Council. Additionally, Austria has become one of only four locations in which the U.N. has headquartered itself and one of only two in Europe. After the fall of the Soviet Union Austria, an already western leaning nation was able to free itself from any neutrality deal with the now nonexistent Soviet Union and join up with NATO. As a small country, NATO can provide defensive capabilities that Austria would otherwise never be able to muster. For smaller nations, being able to rely on more powerful ones, especially the super powers, like the United States of America, is something that can never be overlooked. In the event of a conflict, Austria would not last nearly as long without the help of much larger allies. Another major organization to which Austria belongs is the European Union. This too gives a small nation a tool for economic growth by placing it into a collective of other regional and larger economic allies.

The Ambassador's speech ended and allowed for a number of questions from the audience, and one of them was about the Austrian perspective on Brexit. As noted above, Austria is a member of the European Union and with the loss of the United Kingdom, one of the three leaders of the Union, it is clear the E.U. will suffer to some degree. The Ambassador made it clear that for his nation, Brexit is a catastrophe and should not occur. It seems that he understood that a weakened European Union means a weakened Austria. Austria is small and works hard to gain every advantage it can get, and the United Kingdom's exit from the Union removes some of these advantages.



Ambassador Jan Kickert, Austin Melina and Ksaver, son of the Ambassador Jan Kickert,

I had an opportunity to talk to Ambassador after his presentation and found him to be a very personal and friendly figure. Having spent a number of years in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia I can speak a few Slavic languages. I found that while he was the Austrian Ambassador to Croatia at one point prior to his career in the U.N., he too knew how to speak some Croatian and we were able to converse in that language. I was also able to spend some time speaking with his Croatian son in said language as well. Both of them are wonderful people and Austria is blessed to have a charismatic, intellectual, and strong representative at the U.N.

It was a very interesting event and a great presentation on foreign policy from the perspective of a small country. There are around 200 countries in the world each with something to offer and getting to hear another viewpoint other than the American one has strengthened my understanding of global issues. I am grateful to the UVU office of Engaged Learning for bringing Ambassador Jan Kickert to the UVU campus.

Austin Meline, member, Model UN Club