

Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations Ambassador Jan Kickert speaks at Utah Valley University



His Excellency Jan Kickert, Sam Elzinga, Hannah Bieker, and Brandon Pedler

On Tuesday, February 19 the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations (UN) H.E. Jan Kickert, spoke to students at Utah Valley University (UVU) on the topic of how a small country like Austria approaches foreign policy. Prior to His Excellency's main event, members of the Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF) a coalition of students clubs at UVU, were given the opportunity to discuss past and current projects they have worked on to promote sustainable development in mountainous areas, ask questions, and speak about the club's upcoming participation in the 63rd UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, NY next month. During our one-on-one meeting, I was able to inform His Excellency of my contribution to the 63rd UN Commission on the Status of Women with how I will be the first to represent Rotaract at the United Nations, in order to demonstrate how through service oriented learning we can implement through Rotaract the UN sustainable development goals. Such as ensuring access to clean water, polio eradication, and empowerment of women in the developing world.



Hannah Bieker with His Excellency Jan Kickert

After the meeting with UIMF, many students filled the room to hear from the Permanent Representative. UVU's Chief International Officer, Dr. Baldomero Lago addressed the attendees and introduced His Excellency Jan Kickert. Dr. Lago informed those present of the many accomplishments from Mr. Kickert, some of which included becoming the Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations in August 2015, prior which Mr. Kickert was the Director General for Political Affairs of the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs since November 2011, and from 2009 to 2011 serving as Austria's Ambassador to Croatia.

His Excellency Jan Kickert began with a light hearted joke. Assuring those in attendance that it is ok if they sometimes confuse Austria with Australia because even many of his colleagues from other countries within the UN sometimes make that mistake. Even admitting that before the UN changed their voting system, on several occasions both Australia and Austria have lost votes because UN members mix them up. After which, Mr. Kickert commenced the conversation of Austria's approach to foreign policy by acknowledging the importance of a country's history and geography and how that plays a key role in current foreign policy stances. Referencing back to the time between the world wars and the unique struggles Austria faced from losing most of their empire, the power struggle that followed, and the sense of no longer having a true country or place in the

world. Mr. Kickert recalled how at first, most Austrians were against the Nazi regime in Germany but through their political strategy they were able to receive the votes necessary to annex Austria. Using Mr. Kickert's own words, "Under the barrel of a gun you can be sure what the outcome of a referendum will be."

His Excellency then detailed the unique opportunity Austria following World War II and after Stalin had died. Mr. Kickert emphasized how, especially in politics, it is imperative one can recognize historical opportunities when they become visible. Because of Austria's location in Europe, the Iron Curtain ran along the countries eastern border. Mr. Kicker conjured memories from his youth and described to us what the border surrounding the border of the Soviet Union was like. Calling the Iron Curtain one of the worst dividing lines in world history, the only thing possibly worse being the Korean DeMilitarized Zone (DMZ). The reason Austria had the luxury of being outside the Soviet Union was due to their choice to remain sovereign and not join either NATO or the Warsaw Pact. Due to the neutral ground and sharing a border with the Soviet Union, Austria became a meeting place between the Western and Communist worlds, which also made it a popular place for spies from both worlds.

All the factors that Mr. Kicker explained, painted a clear picture as to what values and views Austria holds today. Having had experience being both the oppressor and oppressed during war, Austria is now one of the world's leading peacekeepers. When it comes to foreign policy Austria actively advocates for peace among warring nations but when that is not an option they propose changing the methods in which countries fight to ensure the least amount of civilian casualties possible. Austria also lead a treaty to ban nuclear weapons, as nuclear technology has the ability of destroying humanity. Yet Mr. Kicker stated that he believes the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or more commonly known as the Iran Nuke Deal, is an ok plan as he feels it gives Iran enough restrictions.

Having the opportunity to not only meet in the small group between UIMF and His Excellency Jan Kicker, was an incredible learning experience. Gathering Mr. Kickers thoughts and views regarding sustainable development was very unique; as well as his personal experiences through his career in government and time spent in the United Nations. I also enjoyed Mr. Kicker explain Austria's history as someone who not only is a native but also is a historian. The only way one can understand a current situation is

through the past, and Mr. Kicker made it easy for everyone there to understand why Austria is what it is today.

Hannah Bieker, UVU student and member of the Utah International Mountain Forum and Rotaract