

Austria joins countries banning full-face veils

by [Weston Williams](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Austria's ruling coalition has become the latest government body in Europe to ban full-face veils, such as those worn by some Muslim women, in public places. The measure is part of a larger deal struck by the center-left Social Democratic Party and the center-right Austrian People's Party to avert the disintegration of the coalition.

Similar bans have popped up in countries across Europe, propelled by the rise of right-wing populist parties and anti-immigration sentiments. The ban will apply to courts, schools, and other public areas. In explaining the ban, the 35-page statement penned by the coalition said that Austria should be an "open society that requires open communication. . . . Full-face veils in public places are the opposite of that and will be banned."

The number of women who actually wear full-face veils in Austria is very small. The BBC estimates that only 150 women in Austria wear the full niqab, which conceals most of the face but leaves the eyes visible. The ban will also apply to the burqa, the most concealing covering.

"It is saddening," Amani Abu Zahra, of the Islamic religion department at a teacher education university in Vienna/Krems, told CNN. "This is a setback for Austria, for our democracy, and for our understanding of diversity."

Many experts are interpreting the banning of the veil in Austria as a symbolic gesture meant to partially appease the anti-immigration Freedom Party, which is currently leading in the polls.

Like Austria, Germany's ruling centrist party has also made recent concessions in order to stave off right-wing populism, with Chancellor Angela Merkel calling for a ban on the full veil "wherever it's legally possible." Merkel's party, the Christian Democratic Union, is leading in the polls, but its supporters may be wary of Merkel's policies on immigration.

There have been similar bans against Islamic coverings in recent years in the Netherlands, France, and Belgium. Supporters of these bans often cite the need to preserve secular ideals through religiously neutral clothing. Others have said that banning face-concealing veils is a matter of public safety.

“The law is not directed against religious communities and is not repressive,” said Bulgarian parliament member Krasimir Velchev, after Bulgaria approved a ban similar to Austria’s in September of last year. “We made a very good law for the safety of our children.”

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