

# Outgoing Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's People's Party (ÖVP) favourite in the snap election in Austria on 29th September next

6.4 million Austrians aged at least 16 are being called to ballot on 29th September to elect the 183 members of the National Council (*Nationalrat*), the lower house of Parliament. This election, which is being held three years ahead of schedule, follows the dismissal of the government chaired by Chancellor Kurz (People's Party, ÖVP) by the National Council on 27th May last. It was the first time in the country's history that a government lost a vote of confidence (103 of the 183 MPs voted against). It is even more remarkable that on the day before the vote regarding his dismissal, the ÖVP easily won the European elections on 26th May with 34.55% of the vote.

This vote of no-confidence followed the broadcast, ten days earlier by two German media sources – *Der Spiegel* and *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* – of a video in which Heinz-Christian Strache – Vice Chancellor, Minister for the Civil Service and Sport, together with the leader of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Johann Gudenus (FPÖ), leader of the FPÖ's parliamentary group, were secretly filmed in a villa in Ibiza in 2017, negotiating with a woman, who went by the name of Alyona Makarova, claiming to be the niece of the Russian gas oligarch Igor Makarov, privileged access to Austrian public procurement for the Russian oligarch via the creation of a construction company in exchange for Makarov's financial support to the FPÖ, so that the latter might buy *Die Kronen Zeitung*, one of the biggest Austrian daily newspapers. Moreover, on several occasions, the woman explains that the money she is to provide would come from financial malpractice.

On 18th May Heinz-Christian Strache resigned from government, and the next day he relinquished the

leadership of the FPÖ. He was replaced by Norbert Hofer, Transport Minister and the unlucky candidate in the last presidential election in 2016, when he won 48.3% of the vote and was beaten by Alexander Van der Bellen (51.7%) in the second round of the election on 4th December.

The day after the European elections, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was removed from office. On 3rd June, Brigitte Bierlein, president of the Constitutional Court, became the first female Chancellor in Austria's history. Appointed by the President of the Republic Van der Bellen, she has ensured the interim as head of government. On 21st June the Austrian authorities announced that a snap election would take place on 29th September.

Eight political parties are running in these elections. According to the most recent poll by Research Affairs between 22nd and 28th August last, the People's Party (ÖVP) is due to draw ahead easily with 35% of the vote. It is due to be followed by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) with 21%, then the Freedom Party, 19%, Greens-Alternative Green (DG) with 11%, the liberals of NEOS-New Austria (NEOS), 9% and finally JETZT, a left-wing ecologist party, 2%.

The greens are therefore due to win seats after this election, whilst JETZT might leave the National Council after just two years on the benches.

Sebastian Kurz is still the Austrians' favourite for the position of Chancellor (42%). Norbert Hofer has a 20% rating and Pamela Rendi-Wagner, the SPÖ leader, 19%.

## People's Party: will victory be enough?

Removed from office by the *Nationalrat*, but still extremely popular amongst the Austrians who hope to keep him as head of government, Sebastian Kurz lost his position as Chancellor. He could adopt the victim role according to Sylvia Kritzinger, a professor of political science at the University of Vienna.

The polls are forecasting a landslide victory for the ÖVP. Sebastian Kurz, who owes his fall to his alliance with Strache's FPÖ, and not to his government's work, should win on 29th September. A question remains however: what will the extent of the ÖVP's victory be? Which majority might emerge from this election?

A new government bringing together the ÖVP and the FPÖ is a possible option declared Sebastian Kurz at the beginning of August. He did however set a condition for this: he will not accept Herbert Kickl (FPÖ) in the government. The latter was Home Affairs Minister (2017-2019), responsible for the FPÖ's finances when the video in Ibiza was made. *"I will close the door on no option. The only thing I refuse to do is accept the presence of Herbert Kickl, or an FPÖ member as minister for Home Affairs."* The President of the Republic, Alexander Van der Bellen also maintained that he would not appoint Herbert Kickl to any ministerial post. *"The ÖVP is more prudent than it was in 2017 regarding the formation of an alliance with the FPÖ. This possibility cannot be ruled out however, because any other coalition would be extremely unstable,"* says political analyst Thomas Hofer.

The thing that Sebastian Kurz absolutely has to avoid is the formation of a coalition against his party, for example an alliance between the SPÖ, Greens/Alternative Greens and NEOS-New Austria.

During its two years as Austria's leader, the government led by Sebastian Kurz adopted several measures to reduce the number of foreigners who want to settle in the country, notably making it more difficult for asylum seekers to access apprenticeships and by reducing social allocations granted to foreign children. The ÖVP-FPÖ government coalition also reduced Austrian citizens' taxes.

Last July the unemployment rate totalled 4.5% of the working population, i.e. 7.9% less than in July of the previous year.

The FPÖ's new leader Norbert Hofer wants to break from H.-C. Strache's methods. He is supported by a large share of the party's members, but tension remains. If the populist party suffers a setback on 29th September it should not however suffer the same collapse that followed its first participation in power in 2002 (the party dropped from 26.9% of the vote in 1999 to 10% three years later). A result of 18% or 20% of the vote cast for the FPÖ should herald the renewal of another coalition between the ÖVP and the FPÖ.

Norbert Hofer declared that he did not want to govern with the SPÖ. *"We hold out our hand to the ÖVP to continue the work we started together to reform Austria,"* declared Hofer, who leads the list in which Herbert Kickl stands in second place. Hofer is also standing in Burgenland and Kickl in Lower-Austria, where they are both lead candidates.

## On the opposition side

The Social Democratic Party's programme focuses on the defence of work and the protection of the environment and the climate so that *"humanity triumphs"*. The SPÖ wants to increase the minimum wage to 1,700€ monthly and reduce income tax.

The party's leader, Pamela Rendi-Wagner, wants to introduce a national convention on the climate but the SPÖ would be against a tax on CO2 gas emissions however, since they are deemed "socially unfair".

The Greens-Alternative Greens say they are pragmatic and prepared to govern despite the apparent radical nature of their programme. Although they are not yet in government, they are due to win seats in Parliament on 29th September after stealing a few votes from NEOS-New Austria.

In an interview with the weekly Falter, Beate Meinl-Reisinger, the NEOS's leader, said she would like

to introduce a sustainable policy for the future generations, based on the reform of education, the introduction of a flexible retirement model, similar to the one implemented in Sweden and the radical transformation of the tax system, notably with the introduction of a carbon tax. NEOS also supports a reform of migration management and hopes to initiate a points system as used in Canada, to manage the entries and residency of foreigners in Austria. It has ruled out participation in any government in which the SPÖ and the FPÖ are present.

JETZT (which means "Now" in German), a left-wing ecologist party has chosen to defend the rule of law in its programme.

### The Austrian Political System

The Austrian parliament is bicameral. The lower house, the National Council (*Nationalrat*), brings together 183 MPs elected for five years; the upper house, the Federal Council (Bundesrat), has 64 seats for representatives from the country's 9 Länder.

The members of the National Council are elected by a majority vote in Vienna and in the Land of Vorarlberg and by proportional election in the seven other Länder. Each of the regions appoints between 7 and 36 MPs. Each person has two votes: one which expresses a national vote for a party and the other to appoint a specific candidate within a local constituency.

The distribution of seats is undertaken according to the Hare Method in the regional and provincial constituencies and according to the d'Hondt Method at federal level. A party that puts forward candidates across the entire country must absolutely win 4% of the votes cast or a direct mandate - i.e. around 25% of the vote in one of the local constituency - to be able to enter parliament.

On the day of the election it is the responsibility of each town council to decide on the opening and closing

times of the ballot boxes. Since 28th September 2008, every Austrian aged 16 and over has been allowed to vote.

Political parties with fewer than three seats in the National Council must collate the signatures of at least 2,600 voters if they are to take part in the legislative election. These have to be collated across Austria as a whole and distributed as follows: a minimum of 500 in Lower Austria and in Vienna, 400 in Upper Austria and Styria, 200 in Carinthia, Tyrol and Salzburg and 100 in Burgenland and Vorarlberg.

The Bundesrat represents the Länder. Each Land is managed by a government (*Landesregierung*) and a Diet (*Landtag*). The Länder are competent in all areas that are not specifically the responsibility of the Federal State: urban planning, the protection of the environment, land use, transport. Each Land appoints a number of representatives that is proportional with its population (a minimum of 3) to sit in the upper house (proportional vote). Vienna, which is the most populous region, has 12 representatives in this assembly. The Presidency of the Bundesrat is the responsibility of the Länder and this changes every 6 months, as they succeed each other in alphabetical order.

5 political parties are represented in the present National Council:

- the People's Party (ÖVP), a centre right party created in 1945, led by outgoing PM, Sebastian Kurz, with 62 seats;
- the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), founded in 1889, led since 2nd September 2018 by Pamela Rendi-Wagner, the first woman to lead the party, with 52 seats;
- the Freedom Party (FPÖ), a right-wing populist party created in 1956, led by Norbert Hofer, with 51 seats;
- NEOS - new Austria (NEOS), a liberal party founded in 2012, led by Beate Meinl-Reisinger, with 10 seats;
- the Peter Pilz List (PILZ), a left-wing ecologist party now called JETZT, led by Maria Stern, with 8 seats.

## General Election in Austria

29<sup>th</sup> September 2019

### Reminder of the results of the last general election on 15th October 2017 in Austria

Turn out: 80%

4

Political Parties	No votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
<b>People's Party (ÖVP)</b>	1 595 526	31.50	62
<b>Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)</b>	1 361 746	26.90	52
<b>Freedom Party (FPÖ)</b>	1 316 442	26	51
<b>NEOS-New Austria (NEOS)</b>	268 518	5.30	10
<b>Peter Pilz List (PILZ)</b>	223543	4.40	8
<b>The Greens (DG)</b>	192 638	3.80	0
<b>Others</b>	111 516	2.30	0

Source : <https://wahl17.bmi.gv.at>

You can read all of our publications on our site:  
**[www.robert-schuman.eu](http://www.robert-schuman.eu)**

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

**THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN**, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France , Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.