

# Austria's new ÖVP-Green coalition is unlikely to alter the country's conservative course



*On 7 January, Austria's new government was sworn in by Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen. For the first time in history, the country will be co-governed by the centre-left Green Party, who became the junior coalition partner of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). However, as [Maya Janik](#) explains, there is little reason to believe the composition of the new government will translate into a meaningful shift to the left in policy terms.*

What seemed improbable until 2019 turned out to be possible in 2020: as of this week, Austria is now ruled by a coalition government between the centre-right conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and centre-left Green party. On 1 January, after seven weeks of coalition negotiations, ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz announced that the two parties had come to an agreement – a type of coalition that is unprecedented in Austria. Never before have these parties collectively formed a national government. The closest the Greens came to governing via a national coalition was in 2002, when the ÖVP invited the party to coalition negotiations that ultimately failed.

The Conservative–Green government will replace the technical interim government installed after Kurz's coalition with the right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) collapsed amidst the '[Ibiza scandal](#)'. The scandal erupted when secret recordings became public in May last year, revealing then-FPÖ leader and Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache offering public contracts to an alleged niece of a Russian oligarch in exchange for electoral assistance.

This corruption scandal backfired on the Freedom Party in the general snap election last September following the government's collapse, in which the party saw its support drop by nearly 10 percentage points compared to the elections in 2017. Many of the party's supporters voted for Kurz's ÖVP, which secured more than 37 per cent of the vote. Yet a clear winner at the elections was the Green Party, which, under the new leadership of Werner Kogler, secured a historic 14 per cent of the vote and re-entered the country's parliament after a two-year absence.

## Opting for the lesser evil

Majority support in the snap elections was insufficient for the ÖVP to govern alone, hence the need to enlist a coalition partner. Technically, the election results presented a couple of coalition alternatives; practically, a potential coalition government with the Greens seemed for Kurz the only feasible option.

A coalition with the Freedom Party would have been politically risky for Kurz, despite his clear general preference for the party. Kurz reasoned that reactivating the coalition government, which collapsed only a few months prior, would have further disenchanted supporters and pushed the country deeper into a political tailspin, ultimately harming both the FPÖ and ÖVP. The fact that a coalition with the FPÖ might not receive public support became even clearer shortly before the federal elections in September, when new allegations emerged over the misuse of party funds by Strache. On top of that, the Freedom Party showed no interest in entering into coalition talks, announcing on the eve of the election that a substantial loss of votes did not give the party a "mandate to govern".



Credit: [BKA / Bundesministerium für Finanzen](#) (CC BY 2.0)

Even less popular would have been a 'grand coalition' with Austria's Social Democratic Party (SPÖ). The Social Democrats suffered their worst result in decades at the snap elections; this only confirmed that Austrians have become increasingly wary of the ÖVP–SPÖ coalition that governed the country for much of the post-war period.

Sebastian Kurz's decision to enter into negotiations with the Greens was not only the lesser evil, but could potentially be seen as a smart move from a tactical perspective. The Green Party's impressive election victory indicated that Austrian society is eager for change. Kurz wished to appear to be a person who had 'got the message' and intended to take the public's views seriously.

In addition, the move to partner with a political party that is ideologically distant from Kurz's ÖVP aligns with his self-presentation as a reformer who approaches politics pragmatically and welcomes political dialogue with all sides. He has resolutely followed this path of change since taking office in 2017, as indicated by his decision to change the colour of the ÖVP from black to turquoise. What's more, with a slight green brush on the surface of his image, Kurz will make a good impression on the international scene, where his previous coalition with the Freedom Party occasionally generated resentment.

### **Power division instead of power sharing**

Bringing the Greens into government does not, however, mean that Sebastian Kurz is willing to share his party's power. Kurz is unlikely to change course on the topics for which he has stood since first taking office as Chancellor. Backing down on issues that won him support from a large portion of society, all for the sake of a working turquoise-green government, would be politically damaging for Kurz in the short and long term.

The newly sworn-in government's *modus operandi* will therefore be a clear division of themes, with conservatives maintaining control over key dossiers. In fact, the 300-page coalition deal presented last week shows that the ÖVP will claim 10 ministries, including crucial ones, namely interior, foreign policy, defence, and finance ministries. The Greens, on the other hand, will be responsible for the environment, justice, social affairs, sports, and culture – posts that matter less to the ÖVP.

The ÖVP will continue to steer migration policy without offering concessions to the Greens. The choice of ministers exemplifies Kurz's determination to continue his hard-line policy on migration and domestic security in general. One example of the expected focus on migration is the planned creation of a whole new ministry for integration. The ministry will be run by Susanne Raab, who worked on the ban on full-face veils in 2017 and a law designed to curb "political Islam" in 2015.

The coalition deal also includes a ban on headscarves in schools until the age of 14, as well as “precautionary detention” of potentially dangerous asylum seekers. Also planned are new return centres for asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected.

### **A hard pill to swallow for the Greens**

Sebastian Kurz does not have much to lose; he will deliver on his most important election promises and will not give in to Green demands that his electorate might not support. The new government's plans for climate policy, which the Greens pushed for, are not entirely without advantage for Kurz either. If Austria becomes carbon neutral by 2040, as the deal foresees, then the small Alpine republic will reach this target a decade earlier than all other EU states to become a frontrunner in climate protection. Even a potential collapse of the coalition before the end of the five-year legislative period would be easy to swallow for Kurz and his voters.

Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler and his Green party face the real risks; the Greens' enthusiasm about being in government may soon be tempered by political realities. The concessions that left-wingers, who stand for tolerance and openness, will need to make on domestic security issues – most notably migration – might sooner or later backfire on the party.

### **Back to the future: the ÖVP–FPÖ romance to be continued**

For now, it seems that stability might take hold, at least for a while, in a country that was recently shaken by political turmoil amidst the Ibiza scandal. At the international level, having seemingly abandoned the populist track, Austria may receive a positive response from other western democracies. A deep sigh of relief can already be heard throughout the corridors of power in Brussels.

Yet those who hope that the coalition of the ÖVP with the Freedom Party was merely a brief romance are potentially ignoring one important fact: the FPÖ is still the most similar party to the ÖVP in terms of its ideology and political programme. The political issues with which Kurz is mostly concerned, including migration, are also at the heart of the Freedom Party's programme.

Meanwhile, as the media and public monitor the new government's every step, the FPÖ will use this time in opposition to rehabilitate itself outside the spotlight. It will strive to restore its credibility through internal changes and come back when the time is ripe.

The ÖVP–Green government presents an interesting political test case; it will prove to what extent a coalition between ideologically distant parties is possible. What remains to be seen is whether this political experiment will disenchant the electorate of either side and deepen the divides in Austrian society once the coalition's limits come to light.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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