

Austria's presidential election is set to be another vote dominated by the issue of immigration

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Austria will hold a presidential election on 24 April, with a run off scheduled for 22 May if no candidate manages to win an absolute majority in the first vote. Emmanuel Sigalas states that while the post itself is largely ceremonial, the election will be a key test of the relative standing of each of the main parties. He writes that the contest is likely to be dominated by the issue of the migration crisis and the creeping influence of the Freedom Party of Austria's (FPÖ) anti-immigration platform over the Austrian government.



On 24 April, young (the voting age is 16) and old Austrians alike will cast their ballot, in person or by post, for the new President of the Republic. She, or most likely he, will replace the incumbent President Heinz Fischer, who will have served two terms in office (i.e. twelve years).

By more or less general accord, Fischer has been regarded as a good President. He has fulfilled his predominantly symbolic duties (embodying and promoting national unity and interests) well. His name has not been associated with any scandals, and even if he is not the most charismatic political leader in the country's history, he has undoubtedly proved to be *simpatico*.

Of course, when Fischer was first elected in 2004 the context was completely different. At the time there was no financial crisis, no refugee crisis and Euroscepticism was still kept at bay. Austria was all too happy to start doing business with the EU's latest member states from Central and Eastern Europe, and its economy was growing. While the right-wing populist [Freedom Party of Austria](#) (FPÖ) remained a political force to be reckoned with, it was no longer a major threat to the political establishment. The FPÖ had secured only 10 per cent of the vote in the 2002 general election, and after five years in government with the conservative [Austrian People's Party](#) (ÖVP) between 2000 and 2005, it was weak and divided.

Contrary to 2004, when there were only two candidates, the 2016 elections will be contested by as many as six: Rudolf Hundstorfer of the [Social Democratic Party of Austria](#) (SPÖ), Andreas Khol of the ÖVP, Norbert Hofer of the FPÖ, Alexander Van der Bellen of [the Greens](#), Irmgard Griss (independent) and Richard Lugner (independent). The higher number of candidates implies not only that the political landscape is now more fragmented, but also that there is more at stake in the coming election.



This is not because the presidential post has become more lucrative compared to 2004, but because developments since then have rearranged the situation with regard to Austrian parties' opportunities and constraints. Second-order elections have always been particularly challenging for the governing party or parties, but the 2016 presidential elections find the FPÖ in the ascendancy and the coalition government partners, the SPÖ and the ÖVP, unable to defend themselves unless they pre-empt the FPÖ's positions.

The rise of religious fundamentalism and the terrorist threats associated with it, the European sovereign debt crisis and, most recently, the European refugee crisis, have provided the FPÖ and populist and extreme right-wing parties throughout Europe with plenty of opportunities to capitalise on people's fears. Fears about home-grown or imported terrorists, about taxpayers' money being wasted on foreign countries and individuals, about the country being Islamised through the back door, or more general concern about being flooded by individuals who uphold values that are contrary to those of Europe have come to the fore.

Against this backdrop, the FPÖ has regained its [national electoral strength of 1995](#). In the [last general elections](#) in 2013, the Freedom Party came third with 20.5 per cent of the vote. In the [2014 European](#) elections the FPÖ was again third with 19.7 per cent and in the [2015 municipal elections in Vienna](#) it came second with as much as 30.8 per cent. Hence, the FPÖ has re-emerged as a serious contender for power.

Thus far Austria's other political forces have managed to prevent the FPÖ from holding office at the national level (or in Vienna) by joining forces. This may be necessary once more on 22 May if no candidate receive an absolute majority on 24 April and Mr. Hofer is one of the two candidates with the highest number of votes. Currently, Mr. Van der Bellen, the former Green party leader, appears to be leading the [polls](#) and Mr. Hofer is competing with the independent Ms. Griss for second position. However, it is still too early to make a prediction.

Whatever the outcome, it is clear that the SPÖ and ÖVP have lost an important battle. The moment the FPÖ started gaining ground at the expense of the SPÖ and the ÖVP, the once-powerful parties of Austria could no longer ignore the growing appeal of its populist agenda. The loss of sections of the SPÖ's blue-collar voters and the ÖVP's nationalist voters to the FPÖ has forced both parties to shift to the right. Secondary issues, such as [candidates' fair play](#) or [transparency in the financing of the campaign](#), may be at the forefront of the 2016 presidential election, but it is the refugee crisis and its management in the background which really sets the tune.

In this respect, both the ÖVP and the SPÖ have silently adopted the FPÖ's anti-immigration agenda, which favours a tougher stance against refugees and migrants. Initially, Austria's government and civil society showed remarkable eagerness to aid refugees and migrants when they reached the country's borders. However, as soon as Germany showed signs of exhaustion, the Austrian government reversed its open borders strategy.



An early champion of a European solution to the refugee crisis, Austria decided to act outside of the EU's institutional framework when [it invited all the Balkan countries bar Greece](#) to discuss how to reduce the migrant and refugee flows. Consequently, the question that is often raised to the presidential candidates, [whether they would swear in a government of the FPÖ](#), may be besides the point. Not because such a government is unimaginable, but because an FPÖ-inspired agenda is already a reality and this will continue to be the case if the FPÖ's candidate performs well.

The coming presidential election will not determine who runs Austria for the next six years. Strictly speaking it is a second-order election. However, it will indirectly influence the choices and the rhetoric of the parties in power, which in turn feeds back into the views and expectations of the citizenry. The electoral outcome, therefore, will indicate if

the creeping influence of the FPÖ, and consequently of the anti-immigration and Eurosceptic agenda it espouses, will continue to grow in Austria.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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