

The right is set to be the big winner in Austria's upcoming general election



Austria will hold a general election on 15 October. [Fabio Wolkenstein](#) takes stock of the campaign so far, which has seen the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) move into a polling lead under the leadership of Sebastian Kurz. He suggests that the most likely outcome to emerge from the election will be a coalition between the ÖVP and the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).



Sebastian Kurz, Credit: [Dragan Tatic](#) (CC BY 2.0)

Like Germany, its much larger neighbour, Austria will elect a new parliament this autumn. But unlike in Germany, where Angela Merkel and her CDU/CSU party are smoothly cruising toward another election victory, there are still many open questions concerning the election outcome and its possible consequences. What is certain is that the political right will emerge as the big winner.

Initially Austria's general election was meant to happen only next year. But persistent conflicts between the two governing parties, the centre-left Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP), led the opposition to call for early elections. The highly unpopular "grand coalition" had become deadlocked on many policy issues and indulged in seemingly never-ending squabbles – a scenario familiar to any Austrian voter.

That was in May, shortly after the resignation of vice-chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner (ÖVP). Replacing Mitterlehner as the leader of the ÖVP was 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, Austria's Foreign Minister and the ÖVP's most popular politician. This proved to be a turning point for the party. All [available polls](#) show a sudden spike in the ÖVP's popularity, rocketing up from somewhere between 20 and 25 percent to around 30-35 percent.

Kurz's shrewd political move was to re-fashion the ÖVP as his own political movement. He changed the party's name into [The New People's Party](#) and began recruiting a number of "new faces" as candidates, including youthful ÖVP loyalists like MEP Elisabeth Köstinger as well as experts without prior political experience, such as the mathematician Rudolf Taschner. Sensing that allowing Kurz to go it alone would put the ÖVP in a strong position to win the election, the party establishment – who are not typically willing to cede power – acquiesced in all of this.

Kurz is popular not only because of his youthful image and excellent communication skills. Essential to his winning formula is that he understands very well that, to win an election in Austria in 2017, one must put the topic of immigration front and centre. And because he is able to couch proposals to restrict immigration in more “tasteful” terms than the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ), he is able to speak to a far greater number of voters than his predecessor. Moreover, and in sharp contrast to the FPÖ, he has not only talked about limiting the numbers of refugees entering Europe but actively tried to close the so-called “[Balkan route](#)”. This endows him with special credibility as a staunch defender of Austrian (and European) borders.

That Kurz has transformed the ÖVP into a one-man-show is bad news for both the SPÖ and the FPÖ. The SPÖ is in a difficult position because the more central themes of its campaign – distributive justice and fighting unemployment – simply lack the same mobilising force as the immigration issue that Kurz emphasises so much. And campaigning on an anti-immigration platform would risk not only alienating many voters, but also stirring serious intra-party conflict. Though some influential Social Democrats – notably Defence Minister Hans Peter Doskozil, who, incidentally, is the [most popular SPÖ politician](#) – are willing to push a hard line on immigration, the position is highly contentious within the party.

For the FPÖ, on the other hand, the problem is simply that Kurz has taken ownership of the immigration issue. Deprived of its most powerful resource – the capacity to mobilise voters by pandering to anti-immigration sentiment – the FPÖ's poll ratings have declined sharply. The [polls are unambiguous](#): just after Kurz took charge of the ÖVP, the FPÖ's popularity dropped from over 30 per cent to somewhere in the low 20s. It seems indeed that Kurz's approval ratings and those of the FPÖ are inversely related.

But not all is lost for the FPÖ. Despite currently polling lower than the ÖVP and SPÖ, it may well end up in government. For if Kurz goes on to win the election, the right-wing populist party is arguably his most plausible coalition partner. This is not only because both parties' platforms focus on the immigration issue, or because another grand coalition would be very difficult to sell to Austrian voters. The ÖVP and FPÖ also share much in common when it comes to other key policy fields. The FPÖ's recently publicised economic policy agenda, for example, may straightforwardly be interpreted as an attempt to reach out to the ÖVP and its voters. It proposes lower taxes, restricting several forms of welfare to passport-holders, and emphatically rejects redistributive policies of the sort promoted by the SPÖ.

So at the present moment, the most likely outcome of the election is a coalition government between the ÖVP and FPÖ. But even if this coalition materialises, there is a much broader sense in which the political right will emerge strengthened from the election. If the SPÖ comes in second (or third) place, its leader, Chancellor Christian Kern, is likely to be forced to step down. The most plausible figure to succeed Kern as party leader will be Defence Minister Doskozil, not least because of his great popularity. Should Doskozil take over, this would mean that the right within the SPÖ – in short, those who are willing to politically exploit the immigration issue and even to coalesce with the FPÖ – will be put in the driving seat, and quite fundamental changes in the party's orientation are likely to ensue.

What if the SPÖ – contrary to expectations but not completely beyond the bounds of possibility – wins the election? Certainly it will be very difficult for Chancellor Kern to form a stable coalition government. As already noted, a grand coalition will be hard sell to voters, even if Kurz has managed to “reinvent” the ÖVP. Coalescing with the FPÖ, on the other hand, is controversial within the SPÖ, and the threat of deep internal conflict looms large.

A third option – possibly Kern's preferred one – would be to work together with multiple smaller parties, such as the Greens, the liberal party NEOS and the Liste Pilz, a party founded by a disenchanted Green MP (and possibly the most high-profile Green politician besides President van der Bellen). But with the Greens facing electoral annihilation, and NEOS and Liste Pilz polling only around 6 per cent, this does not appear workable either. The smaller parties are simply too small.

Given these difficulties, the SPÖ might be forced into opposition even if it wins the election, making space for an ÖVP/FPÖ coalition. This is what happened in 2000, when the ÖVP coalesced with the FPÖ for the first time. Or, perhaps more likely, those within the SPÖ who are open to a coalition with the FPÖ – spearheaded by Doskozil – can manage to convince key players within the party that cooperating with the populist right is a price worth paying for holding onto power. In this scenario, Chancellor Kern might be pressured into resigning despite winning the election, and the right within the SPÖ will get its way.

In short, in all plausible scenarios, the Austrian general election is bound to be a victory for the political right. A separate question is how much room for manoeuvre the future Austrian government will actually have when it comes to delivering on the much-heralded promises to restrict immigration. After all, in Germany Angela Merkel and the CDU/CSU will most likely stay in power, and it is far from clear that the sort of policies promoted by the likes of Kurz, the FPÖ or Doskozil would go down well with the ever-powerful German Chancellor. In the end, and not without irony, it might be that the only thing that can limit the influence of the Austrian right is the German right.

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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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