

Incumbent President Alexander Van der Bellen is expected to retain his post in Austria

On 9 October, 6.4 million Austrians are due to vote in the first round of the presidential election. This is traditionally held in the spring, but the last presidential election in 2016, a real drama that started in April ending in December, effectively postponed voting to the autumn.

On 4 December 2016, Alexander Van der Bellen was elected President of Austria with 53.79% of the vote; his opponent, populist candidate Norbert Hofer (Freedom Party, FPÖ), garnered 43.21% in a "third" round organised after the invalidation of the second round of voting on 22 May 2016, which resulted in a 30,863-vote lead for Alexander Van der Bellen. Norbert Hofer contested the results and on 1 July, the [Constitutional Court](#) invalidated the second round, stating that while there was no evidence of electoral fraud, irregularities had nevertheless marred the vote. Initially scheduled for 2 October 2016, a third round was finally organised on 4 December, due to problems with the postal voting envelopes that had been distributed to voters wishing to fulfil their civic duty in this way.

If none of the candidates receive more than half of the votes in the first round on 9 October, a second round is organised four weeks later, on 6 November, between the two first round winners.

According to the opinion poll carried out by the Lazarsfeld Institute on 19 and 20 September, the incumbent President of the Republic Alexander Van der Bellen is likely to be re-elected in the first round with 51% of the vote. He is followed by Walter Rosenkranz (FPÖ) with 16% and Dominik Wlazny (*Marco Pogo*), leader of the Beer Party (BIER) and the punk band Turbobier, who is forecast to win 12% of the vote. The duel for second place is on.

Walter Rosenkranz, admirer of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (FIDESZ-MPSZ), is opposed to economic sanctions against Russia and is calling for peace negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow.

He said that if elected President of the Republic, he would dismiss the government led by Chancellor Karl Nehammer (People's Party, ÖVP) and appoint a government of experts.

THE CANDIDATES RUNNING

Alexander Van der Bellen announced on 22 May his candidacy to run for office again. Usually, in this case, the other Austrian parties do not present a candidate. The Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) confirmed that it would follow this tradition and support the outgoing head of state. Alexander Van der Bellen's own Green Party (DG) and New Austria (NEOS) followed suit. On the other hand, the People's Party (ÖVP), while not putting forward a candidate against the president, did not give him its support, saying nevertheless that it wished him "*all the best in this upcoming election*".

The candidates are:

- Alexander Van der Bellen, outgoing president of the Republic, former spokesperson of the Greens (1997-2008);
- Walter Rosenkranz, FPÖ MP and Ombudsman of the National Council (Nationalrat), the lower house of parliament;
- Dominik Wlazny, known as Marco Pogo, leader of the punk band Turbobier (singer and guitarist) and leader of the Beer Party (BIER), an 'independent, unconventional and daring' party committed to the defence of culture in Austria;
- Tassilo Wallentin, lawyer and writer. In his view, "Austria needs someone from outside the political

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arena as president". He sees Alexander Van der Bellen as a "passive man who is tired of his job";

- Gerald Grosz, former chairman of the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), TV presenter, businessman and writer;
- Michael Brunner, chairman of the Human, Freedom, Fundamental Rights (MFG), a party opposed to vaccination against Covid-19;
- Heinrich Staudinger, entrepreneur.

THE INCUMBENT PRESIDENT IS THE FAVOURITE

Alexander Van der Bellen, who is popular with his compatriots, has been relying on his experience and knowledge of the presidential office during the campaign. His tenure has been quite turbulent.

In 2017, Austria had a snap parliamentary election following the resignation of Vice-Chancellor and People's Party (ÖVP) leader Reinhold Mitterlehner from all of his positions. In the October 15 election, incumbent Chancellor Christian Kern (SPÖ) lost his majority and was replaced by Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP).

Two years later, on 27 May 2019, there was another shock. The government was overthrown by the National Council in a vote of confidence, a first in Austrian history. The event was all the more remarkable because the day before the vote of impeachment, Sebastian Kurz's ÖVP had won a large victory in the European elections with 34.55% of the votes.

The vote of no confidence followed the broadcast by two German media - *Der Spiegel* and *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* - of a video in which Heinz-Christian Strache, Vice-Chancellor, Minister of Public Administration and Sports and leader of the FPÖ, and Johann Gudenus, leader of the FPÖ parliamentary group, were filmed unbeknown to them as they sat in a private room, in a villa in Ibiza in 2017 negotiating (with a woman who called herself Alyona Makarova and claimed to be the niece of Russian gas oligarch Igor Makarov) for privileged access to Austrian public contracts through the creation of a construction company in exchange for her financial support for the FPÖ to buy *Die Kronen Zeitung*, one of Austria's largest newspapers. On several occasions, the woman explains that the funds she is able to provide are the result of financial malpractice.

On 18 May, Heinz-Christian Strache resigned from the government and the next day he gave up the leadership of the FPÖ. After the dismissal of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Brigitte Bierlein, President of the Constitutional Court, was appointed by President Alexander Van der Bellen as interim head of government. On 3 June 2019, she thus became the first chancellor in Austria's history.

Sebastian Kurz became Chancellor again after the parliamentary elections of 29 September 2019, but was forced to resign in 2021 due to accusations of misappropriation of public funds (he has announced that he is leaving politics for good). He was succeeded by the outgoing foreign minister, Alexander Schallenberg (ÖVP), who was replaced within two months by Karl Nehammer (ÖVP).

In addition to these multiple political crises, the head of state has had to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Austria is a neutral country (the country's perpetual and neutrality (*Immerwährende Neutralität Österreichs*) has been part of the constitution since 26 October 1955. Vienna does not belong to any military alliance (Austria is therefore not a member of NATO) and the country is not allowed to host a foreign military base on its territory.

The outgoing president acknowledged that he was "*mistaken, like many others, about Vladimir Putin*", adding "*I would never have suspected that he would wage a war of aggression against Ukraine*".

The head of state, who has refused to take part in any televised debate between the candidates during the election campaign, has chosen to place himself above his competitors so that he can better embody reason and stability in a difficult period. He said he feared that confrontations with the other candidates "would damage the dignity of the presidential office".

THE PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE

The Presidency of the Republic is, in Austria, an essentially honorary position. The Head of State appoints the Prime Minister and chooses the whole government. He has the power to dismiss the latter as well as (at the request of the government) the National

Council (*Nationalrat*), the lower house of parliament, powers which no President of the Republic has ever used before.

In 1959, the head of state Adolf Schärf (SPÖ) refused to appoint a coalition government that included the People's Party (ÖVP) and members of the far-right Association of Independents (VdU), which included former members of the Nazi Party. He eventually agreed to a coalition government, which included the People's Party and the Social Democratic Party.

The Austrian President, who is Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, is elected for 6 years and can be re-elected only once. Any candidate running for president must be at least 35 years old and must gather a minimum of 6,000 signatures from voters or obtain the support of at least 5 members of the National Council in order to run.

Reminder of the results of the presidential elections of 24 April and 4 December 2016 in Austria

Turnout: 68.50% (1st round), 72.75% (2nd round invalidated) and 74.20% (3rd round)

Candidates	1st round		2nd round (invalidated)		3rd round	
	Number of votes	% of votes	Number of votes	% of votes	Number of votes	% of votes
Norbert Hofer (FPÖ)	1 499 971	35,05	2 223 458	49,65	2 124 661	46,21
Alexander Van der Bellen (independent)	913 218	21,34	2 254 484	50,35	2 472 892	53,79
Irmgard Griss (independent)	810 641	18,94				
Rudolf Hundstorfer (SPÖ)	482 790	11,28				
Andreas Khol (ÖVP)	475 767	11,12				
Richard Lugner (independent)	96 783	2,26				

Source : [Austrian Home Affairs Ministry](#)

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