

Austrian ruling class closes ranks following collapse of government

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The Austrian ruling class is closing its ranks following the recent collapse of the far-right-conservative government. On Monday, the Austrian president, Alexander Van der Bellen, swore in a “government of experts,” which he personally selected and is responsible for government affairs until fresh parliamentary elections this autumn. The new regime is supported unreservedly by all the parties represented in the Austrian lower house of parliament (National Council).

The government of experts has two functions.

Firstly, it has the task of instilling political calm in the country and ensuring that the massive opposition to the collapsed right-wing government does not find independent expression. In gushing tones, Van der Bellen, a former federal spokesman for the Green Party, stressed the theme of national unity during the swearing-in process. In a period of domestic turbulence, Austria had proved its resilience, he said, thanks to “the courage expressed in the national anthem and the ability of Austrians to communicate with one another.”

Secondly, the new regime is to continue the right-wing policies of the toppled outgoing government and enable the widely discredited Freedom Party (FPÖ) to return to government after the election. A secretly filmed video in Ibiza, which triggered the government crisis, made clear that the FPÖ chairman and vice-chancellor, Heinz-Christian Strache, was guilty of bribery and corruption.

The new federal chancellor is 69-year-old Brigitte Bierlein, the former president of the country’s Constitutional Court. The lawyer, regarded as “conservative in values” and right-wing, is reported to have good contacts with the FPÖ and the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). In 2002, she was appointed vice-president of the Constitutional Court by

the then ÖVP-FPÖ government. Her promotion to head of the court two years before her planned retirement was thanks to the FPÖ.

Van der Bellen tried to disguise the right-wing character of the new transitional government by stressing that a woman was now heading the Austrian government for the first time. He was happy about this and “made no secret of the fact” that for the first time a woman was heading a government in which half of its members were female. “In the future,” the president said, “nobody can say anymore, ‘That’s not possible.’”

The Foreign Ministry has been taken over by Alexander Schallenberg, the “eminence grise” (*Der Standard*) of Austrian foreign policy. The 49-year-old, who comes from an aristocratic and diplomatic family, has had a long diplomatic career. He is regarded to be a close ally of ex-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP). Previously, he was active as a leading representative for Austria in Brussels and has played a major role in shaping the country’s foreign policy, including under ÖVP-FPÖ rule.

The character of the transitional government is most clearly shown by the new infrastructure minister, Andreas Reichhardt. In 2003, the Freedom Party politician was deputy leader of the cabinet and spokesperson in the Transport Ministry headed by Hubert Gorbach (FPÖ) in Austria’s first far-right-conservative coalition government. In 2008, photos turned up showing Reichhardt as member of a far-right fraternity wearing a uniform while standing next to Strache and a convicted neo-Nazi.

The new interior minister is Wolfgang Peschhorn. Peschhorn is former president of the Financial Procurator and has the job of implementing a severe austerity programme. The lawyer is regarded to have

played the leading role in the nationalisation of the Hypo Alpe Adria Bank. Following the financial crash of 2008, millions of euros were diverted from the national budget to save the collapsed bank. The Alpe-Adria crisis also demonstrated the close links between high finance and the country's right-wing governments and parties.

Taking over as defence secretary is Thomas Starlinger, who has served as the main military advisor to the president since 2017. With the appointment of the 56-year-old major general, Van der Bellen, whose party was originally recruited from sections associated with the peace movement, has laid the basis for much more military influence in politics.

Prior to his move to the presidential office, Starlinger was the vice-chief of staff at the multinational NATO command centre in Ulm, which oversees military operations in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. From 2003 to 2007, he worked for the Austrian military mission at the European Defence Agency in Brussels.

A military man also headed the Defence Ministry in the interim government (which lasted just five days) appointed by Van der Bellen following the parliamentary vote to oust Chancellor Kurz. Deputy Chief of Staff Johann Luif has links with all the main political parties, and in particular the FPÖ. According to the Austrian *Kurier* newspaper, "He was on good terms with both Doskozil (Austrian Social Democrat, SPÖ) and Kunasek (FPÖ)." Between 2003 and 2016, Luif was military commander in the Austrian state of Burgenland, which was led by a FPÖ and SPÖ coalition.

Leading FPÖ politicians have praised the new government. On Monday, the new leader of the FPÖ, Norbert Hofer, thanked President Van der Bellen and Chancellor Bierlein for their prudent conduct and constructive discussions in recent days.

Hofer explained that the FPÖ would prove to be a reliable partner for the new government when it came to advancing the interests of Austria and its people. Ex-Interior Minister Herbert Kickl, an FPÖ hardliner, wished "all the best to the designate transitional government in its work."

"I am confident that the ministers selected by designate chancellor Brigitte Bierlein will continue to run the administration well before the opportunity for new political changes following elections this autumn,"

Kickl said. "It is now important for us to make the principles and arguments of the FPÖ to reshape our homeland Austria as visible as possible. It was FPÖ ministers who set the pace in government and implemented the main reform projects."

There are many signs that after the elections, both the ÖVP and the SPÖ will be prepared to form an alliance with the far-right. ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz and other prominent ÖVP politicians have already made comments to this effect.

Support for an alliance with the extreme right is also increasing inside the SPÖ, which is already in coalition with the FPÖ at state level. Recently in parliament, SPÖ Secretary Thomas Drozda gave a wink to Kickl indicating his readiness for talks, despite the fact that the latter had formerly severely criticised the SPÖ. The scene was broadcast on Austrian television the same evening.



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