24th April, 22nd May and 4th December

European Elections monitor

The populist candidate Norbert Hofer comes out ahead in the first round of the presidential election in Austria

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45 year-old Norbert Hofer (Liberal Party, FPÖ), the "3rd leader" of the National Council (Nationalrat), the lower chamber in the Austrian parliament, whose present leader is Doris Bures (SPÖ), came out ahead in the first round of the presidential election on 24th April in Austria. He won 36.40% of the vote, i.e. the highest result for this far right party in a national election, drawing ahead of the former spokesperson for the Green Party (1997-2008), Alexander Van der Bellen (The Greens, DG), who won 20.38% of the vote. The former judge at the Supreme Court, known for having chaired a parliamentary investigative committee into the corruption scandal involving the Hypo Group Alpe Adria Bank; Irmgard Griss won 18.52% of the vote, a first in terms of the score achieved by an "independent".

The candidates of the two ruling parties in office at present – the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) of Chancellor Werner Faymann and the People's Party (ÖVP) of Vice-Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner – respectively Rudolf Hundstorfer, former Social Affairs and Consumer Protection Minister (2008-2016), and

Andreas Khol, former leader of the National Council (2002-2006) were eliminated from the Presidential race after having scored 11.18% of the vote each. This is the first time since the end of the Second World War that this has happened.

Both parties which have governed the country together for more than nine years have therefore suffered a terrible setback. Chancellor Werner Faymann said he was "saddened" by the result and guaranteed that the government would work "even harder". Reinhold Mitterlehner maintained that the parties in office were paying the "price for the fear powerlessness felt by some of the population and because of the generally hostile attitude felt towards the "establishment". Neither of the parties have given any voting recommendations for the time being in terms of the second round that will take place on 22nd May next.

Six Austrians in ten turned out to vote (59.99%), a higher figure than that recorded in the first round of the previous presidential election on 25th April 2010 (+ 6.42 points).

Results of the first round of the presidential election on 24th April 2016 in Austria

Turnout: 59,99%

Candidates	Number of votes won	% of votes won
Norbert Hofer (Liberal Party, FPÖ)	1,363,137	36,40
Alexander Van der Bellen (The Greens, DG)	763 044	20,38
Irmgard Griss (independent)	693 315	18,52
Andreas Khol (People's Party, ÖVP)	418 577	11,18
Rudolf Hundstorfer (Social Democratic Party, SPÖ)	418 442	11,18
Richard Lugner (independent)	87 879	2,35

Source: Site internet (http://orf.at/wahl/bp16/#ergebnisse/0)

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"It is a historical result that reflects Norbert Hofer's qualities and also deep dissatisfaction regarding the government," declared FPÖ leader Heinz Christian Strache, on the announcement of the results. It is clear that the vote bears witness to the loss of ground suffered by the political parties and of the disconnection of the political elites from the country's citizens. Norbert Hofer, a symbol of a revival amongst the younger generation (he is a great deal younger than his adversaries) seems to have convinced young voters if we give credit to the exit polls.

The issue of the refugees, and more widely migration, dominated the electoral campaign – a question that certainly favoured the FPÖ candidate. Austria, which lies on one of the main routes linking Turkey – where most refugees come from – to Germany – where most hope to go, is one of the countries in Europe that hosted the greatest number of refugees in 2015 (90,000) in proportion to its population (8.5 million inhabitants). The FPÖ criticised the government's action and demanded a drastic reduction and even the total halt being brought to the number of refugees being hosted by Vienna.

Norbert Hofer has threatened, if elected, to dissolve parliament if the majority refuses to follow his

recommendations regarding the migrants. Although in Austria the President of the Republic can, on the government's request, make the National Council (and the government) resign, no head of State has yet made use of this power.

Winner of the first round, Norbert Hofer will face extensive opposition, from the government right to left, including supporters of the independent candidate Irmgard Griss in the second round that is to take place on 22nd May. "Motivating the abstentionists will decide the outcome," indicated Christoph Hofinger, an analyst at the SORA institution. "On 22nd May the turnout rate will be the main indicator to watch. The Social Democrats will call on their voters to support the Greens in the hope of maintaining what seems to be a semblance of political life and to prevent a regime crisis. Most voters supporting independent Irmgard Grisss will undoubtedly vote the ecologist Alexander Van der Bellen."

There is only one certainty in the second round: the future President of the Republic of Austria will not be from the ranks of the Social Democrats or the Christian Democrats. To date Rudolf Kirchschläger, in office from 1974 to 1986, has been the only Head of State to have experienced this situation.

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