

International

Conservatives win Austria election as far-right tumbles

Greens big winners, viable coalition partners for Kurz

VIENNA: Austrian conservatives won most seats in snap elections yesterday, putting their leader Sebastian Kurz on track to retake power but forcing him into tough coalition negotiations after a corruption scandal sent his far-right former allies tumbling. Kurz's People's Party (OeVP) won 37 percent, up almost six percentage points from the last election two years ago, but not enough to form a government on its own, according to projections. The Greens were big winners amid voters saying the climate was their top concern, securing at least 13 percent of the vote. That means they will be viable coalition partners for Kurz in the new government.

Kurz's former allies, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), were the biggest losers, falling 10 percentage points to stand at around 16 percent following the spectacular "Ibiza-gate" affair. The scandal broke in May, bringing down the OeVP-FPÖ coalition after just 18 months in government and triggering the snap poll. The centre-left Social Democrats look set for their worst-ever result on around 22 percent of the vote, with the liberal NEOS party winning around seven percent.



Negotiations between parties to take months

Green partners?

The Greens - who failed to make it into parliament in the last elections in 2017 in shock results - looked to have surged 10 percentage points to at least 13 percent. This puts Kurz - a former law student, who has enjoyed a rapid ascent through the ranks to become the youngest-ever chancellor in 2017 - in a tough spot if he wants to try to woo them and rebrand himself as fighting climate change rather than immigration.

"It's an important vote for the climate. Past governments have done much too little," 26-year-old Peter Litzbauer, 26,

told AFP after casting his vote in Vienna. Kurz has said before the polls he would keep all options open. However, as the Die Presse daily noted in its editorial on Saturday, "even with a nice plus on Sunday, it is more difficult for him than in 2017" to construct a suitable coalition. "We had too much chaos in the last months. We hope for something less chaotic," Vienna voter Clara Heisinger told AFP.

Far-right falls

The FPÖ loss was more than expected following the "Ibiza-gate" scandal which brought down its long-time leader Heinz-Christian Strache and a fresh investigation against him announced this week - this time over alleged fraudulent expense claims. One FPÖ MEP, Harald Vilimsky, told Austrian television the party needed to "win back the confidence of voters" and threw doubt on any return to government.

Previously, a renewed coalition with the far-right - touted by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and other nationalists as a model for all of Europe - looked likely until the new allegations shook the party this week. "We are voting to decide in which direction we will go - that of Orban and the populists, or if we stay oriented toward Europe... we are deciding if the corruption will go on," said Vienna voter Gabriel Steiner, 29.

Since World War II, either the OeVP or SPÖ have always been in government, and for 44 years in total the two have ruled together. But it was Kurz who ended their last "grand coalition", leading to the 2017 polls. He has also floated the idea of ruling in a minority government. But this would potentially further bring political uncertainty and even trigger another election.



VIENNA: A supporter of Austria's People's party (OeVP) holds a sign reading 'We for Kurz' ahead the announcement of exit polls during the party's electoral evening yesterday. —AFP

Either way, negotiations between parties are expected to take months. Ultimately, President Alexander Van der Bellen, a former Green leader, will need to approve any government. The OeVP-FPÖ coalition imploded in May when two German media outlets published footage filmed secretly on

the Spanish resort island of Ibiza, showing then FPÖ leader Strache appearing to offer public contracts in exchange for campaign help from a fake Russian backer. In the aftermath, Strache resigned from all posts, including that of Kurz's vice-chancellor. —AFP

Over half of Europe endemic trees risk extinction: Experts

GENEVA: More than half of Europe's endemic tree species, including the horse-chestnut, risk extinction, conservationists warned, blaming invasive species, unsustainable logging and urban development for their decline. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) said out of the 454 tree species native to Europe, 42 percent could disappear from the continent.

And a full 58 percent of the tree species endemic to Europe - meaning they only exist on the continent - were now considered threatened with extinction, the IUCN said in an update to the tree section of its "Red List" of threatened species. Even more worrying, the update found 15 percent of them, or 66 species, were considered "critically endangered", or just a step away from going extinct. The report comes amid a growing sense of urgency to address global environmental degradation, with fires raging in the Amazon, and following UN warnings in May that climate change, habitat loss and other factors are pushing one million plant and animal species to the brink of extinction.

'Alarming'

The IUCN described the development for Europe's tree species as "alarming", saying pests and diseases were especially fuelling their decline as well as invasive plants introduced by humans. "Trees are essential for life on earth, and European trees in all their diversity are a source of food and shelter for countless animal species such as birds and squirrels, and play a key economic role," Craig Hilton-Taylor, who heads the IUCN Red List Unit, said in the statement. He called for a concerted effort "to ensure their survival", stressing in particular the need to integrate the threatened species into regular conservation planning and land management.

The some 170 tree and shrub species in Europe that belong to the Sorbus genus, within the rose family, have been particularly affected, IUCN said, warning that three-quarters of them, including the Crimean Rowan and Mountain-ash, were threatened. IUCN said that the iconic horse-chestnut, or conker tree, had been assessed as vulnerable following significant declines across Europe. This was mainly due to the leaf-miner moth - an invasive species that originated in the Balkans but which has rapidly spread throughout the continent - as well as logging, forest fires and tourism, it said.

Crucial for ecosystems

While great attention is often paid to the decline of so-called charismatic species, like the African elephant or rhinos, IUCN stressed the need to heed developments in lesser-known species and include them in conservation planning. The Red List's European edition evaluated the status of many lesser-known species for the first time. It found nearly half of all shrub species in Europe were threatened with extinction, as were a fifth of terrestrial mollusc species like snails, and bryophytes species, which are non-vascular plants that include moss. —AFP

UK's Johnson rallies party for Brexit fight

MANCHESTER: Embattled British Prime Minister Boris Johnson gathers his Conservative party yesterday for what could be its final conference before an election, with the gathering set to be dominated by Brexit. Despite a string of parliamentary setbacks and a defeat in the Supreme Court, Johnson insists he will take Britain out of the European Union, with or without a deal, on October 31. His stance has put him at odds with the House of Commons, which has passed a law blocking a "no deal" exit, and lost him a number of his own MPs.

But it resonates with many pro-Brexit voters and particularly with Conservative party members who elected him in July, and are expected to give him a hero's welcome. The conference "will be a rally for Boris Johnson and a rally for Brexit", predicted Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London. The four-day meeting in Manchester, northwest England, however risks being disrupted by parliamentary business back in London.

MPs were furious at Johnson's decision to suspend parliament for five weeks in early September - a move the Supreme Court quashed on Tuesday -

and refused to agree to the normal conference recess. Opposition parties are threatening as yet unspecified maneuvers that could force ministers to race back to parliament over the coming days. But in what will be seen as a snub to MPs, Johnson will deliver his closing speech as planned on Wednesday, when he should be answering questions in the Commons.

Maximize 'Leave' support

Johnson has had a turbulent two months in office, having suffered seven successive defeats in the Commons - in the process losing his majority. He expelled 21 Conservative MPs when they backed a law requiring him to delay Brexit if he cannot get a divorce deal with the EU by mid-October.

Johnson suspended parliament but the Supreme Court ruled this unlawful. And when he called for an election before Brexit day, MPs blocked him. In a further headache, a police watchdog is looking into whether he should face investigation over his links to a US businesswoman when he was London mayor. But Johnson responded with defiance to the court ruling and has focused his ire on MPs, accusing them of "surrendering" to the EU and trying to undermine the 2016 referendum vote to leave.

His rhetoric drew accusations of stoking division, but it appears to be winning over pro-Brexit voters. The Conservatives have had a clear lead over the main opposition Labor party since Johnson took over. A YouGov sur-



MANCHESTER: Mugs and coasters are seen for sale in support of Brexit and the Conservative leader at the Manchester Central convention complex in Manchester, north-west England yesterday on the first day of the annual Conservative Party conference. —AFP

vey this week put them 11 points ahead, while an Opinion poll yesterday put this lead at 12 points. "What he's trying to do is maximize support among Leave voters," Chris Curtis, a political research manager at YouGov said.

'Come out fighting'

Poll numbers matter because, with parliament deadlocked, most commentators expect an election in the next few months. But Johnson must overcome a key hurdle before then. The law passed by MPs means he can only deliver Brexit on October 31 if he strikes a divorce agreement by an EU summit on October

17. But few in Brussels are optimistic and the latest round of talks ended on Friday without a breakthrough.

Constantine Fraser, an analyst on European politics at investment service T.S. Lombard, said Johnson's team were running out of options. "They hung their credibility on an October 31 exit from the EU and it's very difficult to see how they can deliver that," he said. "So their response is going to be to come out fighting, to dial up the rhetoric and to dial up the confrontation." Not all Conservatives are enamored by Johnson's approach, but many moderates will avoid conference. —AFP

State Department ratchets up Clinton email probe: Report

WASHINGTON: Donald Trump's administration is amping up an investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails, The Washington Post reported Saturday, breathing new life into a pet issue used by the president to rail against his opponent during the 2016 elections. The question of whether Clinton improperly used a private email account and server while secretary of state led to Trump's repeat assertion that she deserved to be put in prison and frequent chants of "lock her up" at his political rallies.

Following an FBI investigation into the matter, former director James Comey did not recommend charges against Clinton but did describe her conduct as "extremely careless." In recent weeks, up to 130 officials have been contacted by State Department investigators concerning emails they sent years ago which have been retroactively classified, nearly all of which were sent to or eventually made their way into Clinton's unsecured email account, the Post reported. The paper, which cited

current and former officials, said State Department investigators began contacting employees approximately 1.5 years ago, before the effort trailed off, only to be revived again in August. "This has nothing to do with who is in the White House," one senior State Department official told the Post, speaking on condition of anonymity. "This is about the time it took to go through millions of emails, which is about 3.5 years."

Revelation of the renewed effort comes the same week that Democrats in Congress launched an impeachment investigation into Trump over accusations he tried to arm-twist the Ukrainian president into providing dirt on one of his main 2020 election rivals, Joe Biden. State Department officials deny the renewed effort has any political motivation. However, one former senior US official familiar with the investigation said it seemed to be a means for Republicans "to keep the Clinton email issue alive" and represented "a way to tarnish a whole bunch of Democratic foreign policy people." Those who have found their emails swept up in the investigation do not seem to be at risk of criminal prosecution, however.

Trump's own handling of classified information has come into repeat question, such as when he revealed highly classified infor-



NEW YORK: In this file photo, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaks during the Time 100 Summit event in New York. Donald Trump's administration is amping up an investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails, The Washington Post reported. —AFP

mation on the Islamic State group to senior Russian officials in an Oval Office meeting in May 2017. And in April, a whistleblower told Congress some 25 White House officials including top advisors of Trump were given security clearances despite staff rec-

ommendations against it. Clinton has previously chalked up her election defeat to Comey's brief re-opening of the FBI investigation into her use of the private email account and server just days before the 2016 election. —AFP

In pushing probe of rival, did Trump enlist the US government?

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump pressed his Ukrainian counterpart to investigate a political foe. Now, a central question for Democratic lawmakers moving with

remarkable speed to impeach him is the extent to which Trump entangled both his office and the machinery of the US government to spark investigations that would benefit him personally. The White House and Trump's aides have already put much of that evidence on public display.

During a telephone call in July, Trump urged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy to speak with his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, who had been pursuing a globetrotting effort to find out whether Ukrainian officials improperly dropped an investigation of a company that had hired

the son of former US Vice President Joe Biden, one of the leading contenders to challenge Trump when he seeks reelection in 2020.

The president also offered to involve the US attorney general, according to a summary of the call the White House released last week. Giuliani has said the State Department helped arrange meetings with aides to Zelenskiy, posting a copy of a text message from a US diplomat on Twitter. And much of the episode played out at a time when Trump's administration had suspended security

aid that the US government had earmarked for Ukraine to help it contain threats from Russia.

After Zelenskiy mentioned to Trump that the country was ready to buy new anti-tank missiles, Trump replied that he "would like you to do us a favor" by looking into whether the probe of Russian election interference that shadowed much of his first term was a Ukrainian plot. "The core facts of this are known," said Ross Garber, who teaches impeachment law at Tulane Law School. "The piece we don't know yet, which is critical, is the why." —Reuters