

Austrian Chancellor Kurz resigns to prevent a fully-fledged government crisis

On Saturday, right on time for prime time, Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz announced his resignation. The move came in response to allegations of bribery and corruption.



Austrian Chancellor
Sebastian Kurz

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The steps to step down

Sebastian Kurz and his Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) have repeatedly been the focus of investigations by the Austrian Economic and Corruption Prosecution Authority (WKStA) since 2019. In the context of the so-called 'Ibiza affair', messages between Chancellor Kurz and then-Secretary General Thomas Schmid were revealed, which ultimately led to both a 'no confidence' vote on Sebastian Kurz in parliament and his impeachment in May 2019. In September 2019, he ran again as the ÖVP's top candidate, won the election, and formed a government with the Greens.

In recent days, new accusations were made against Austria's chancellor. The WKStA found indications that taxpayers' money had been used to finance positive media coverage of Kurz and his ÖVP. In particular, the manipulation of poll results in 2016, when Kurz, who at that time was Foreign Minister of Austria, began to strive for party leadership and the position of chancellor. Once again, it was chat messages between Kurz and his allies that brought to light suspicions of bribery

and corruption. Even though most of the messages that have surfaced may not have any criminal relevance, they cast an unflattering light on Kurz.

On October 6, three days before Kurz announced his resignation, investigators raided the ÖVP headquarters in Vienna. In addition, the Federal Chancellery and offices in the Ministry of Finance were searched. While his own party stood firmly behind Kurz and pledged loyalty to him, calls from the opposition, especially from the right-wing FPÖ, grew louder for Kurz to resign from office. As in 2019, a vote of no confidence against Kurz was called for this Tuesday. The fact that the coalition partner, the Greens, also called for an "irreproachable" person to replace Kurz as chancellor in order to continue the government work with the ÖVP was probably the game-changer, pushing Kurz to announce his resignation.

Without Kurz' resignation, Austria would have faced a genuine government crisis and probably new elections. Now, the current government can stay on, even if it remains to be seen whether new information emerge from the investigations which eventually could still lead to a fall of the government.

Where do things go from here?

The investigation against Kurz may well drag on into next year, only then will it be clear whether he will face any charges. The move to step down as chancellor and to become the Austrian People's Party head of the parliamentary group gives Kurz immunity against possible charges. As Kurz will also stay on as party leader, he retains both continued strong political influence and the possibility of becoming Austria's chancellor again. For the moment, however, Kurz himself has proposed Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg as his successor as chancellor, and the coalition partner has already signalled approval for this choice.

In the short run, Austria seems to have avoided a political crisis. However, risks are high that the country will see snap elections before the officially scheduled next national elections in 2024.

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