***For Sebastian Kurz, Austria’s 31-Year-Old New Leader, a Swift Rise***

**By**[**MELISSA EDDY**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/melissa-eddy)OCT. 16, 2017

VIENNA — Supporters see him as the future of a country that tends to define itself more through its past than its prospects. Detractors consider him a presumptuous climber who out-demagogued populists in a ruthless grab at power.

Whatever their take, few Austrians dispute that at 31, their foreign minister, Sebastian Kurz, has already left an indelible mark on their central European homeland. After [an intense campaign](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/world/europe/austria-election-freedom-party.html?_r=0), he won [a snap election](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/world/europe/austria-election-sebastian-kurz.html) on Sunday, setting him on track to become prime minister of Austria and one of the world’s youngest leaders.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” a visibly overwhelmed Mr. Kurz told cheering supporters who had packed into the ballroom of Vienna’s Kurhaus music hall on Sunday night. Roughly an hour earlier, initial returns had shown his center-right People’s Party, a Christian Democratic party founded at the end of World War II, to be [in the lead](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/world/europe/austria-election-sebastian-kurz.html), and Mr. Kurz did not want to miss the moment.

“[Five months ago](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/world/europe/austria-freedom-party.html), we started with the goal to open the People’s Party and make it into a broad movement,” said Mr. Kurz, who dropped by the election party before heading off to previously scheduled television appearances. “We achieved that goal.”

Preliminary results released on Monday showed his party winning 31.4 percent of the vote, upstaging the far-right Freedom Party, which had capitalized on a backlash against the arrival of nearly 100,000 migrants in Austria in 2015.

With nearly all ballots counted, the Social Democrats, with 26.9 percent of the vote, edged ahead of the Freedom Party, with 26 percent. They are believed to be the most likely partner for Mr. Kurz as he tries to create a majority needed to form a government.

The road to that goal could be said to begin when Mr. Kurz, at age 16, called up the People’s Party office in the working-class neighborhood of Vienna’s 12th District where he grew up, the only son of a teacher and a technician. In one of the professionally produced videos on [his home page](https://secure.sebastian-kurz.at/en/), Mr. Kurz tells how he offered them his services.

“It didn’t go too well,” he recalled, pacing and looking pensive in an open-collared shirt. “They gave me the sense that I should get back to them in a couple of years. That experience left me with the idea that politics should actually be something where everyone can participate. Where anyone who wants to can get involved.”

Mr. Kurz persisted, eventually joining the party and working his way up through the youth wing to become its leader in 2009. Two years later, he became a political appointee in the Interior Ministry and in 2013 won a seat in the national Parliament and became the country’s integration minister. The following year, he became Austria’s youngest foreign minister, at 27, and a figure on Europe’s international stage, in his trim navy suits, often worn without a tie.

Freimut Dobretsberger, a longtime member of the People’s Party, claims to have met every Austrian chancellor stretching back to [Bruno Kreisky](http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/30/obituaries/bruno-kreisky-austria-s-leader-for-a-record-13-years-dies-at-79.html), a legendary figure in the country’s political scene who took over in 1970, ushering in a leftward shift in Austrian politics that has remained virtually unbroken since.

**[How Far Is Europe Swinging to the Right?](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html)**

[Right-wing parties have been achieving electoral success in a growing number of nations.](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/22/world/europe/europe-right-wing-austria-hungary.html)

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Instead of viewing Mr. Kurz’s youth as a liability, Mr. Dobretsberger, an 80-year-old former banker, believes that is the young candidate’s strength.

“In Austria, we have strong, but old-fashioned industries,” Mr. Dobretsberger said. “Unlike in Silicon Valley or in Korea, we are too reliant on the service sector and that needs to be changed. I think not him as a person, but the momentum he has generated, will make that possible.”

Analysts of Austria’s political landscape have compared Mr. Kurz’s achievement of sensing [a societal shift to the right](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/world/europe/austria-election-right.html), and harnessing a desire for change. When he took over his political party, he rebranded it a movement, creating a website and an app that made it easy for people to get involved, attracting 200,000 new

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But as Alexandra Siegl, a Vienna-based political analyst, points out, Mr. Kurz understood how to capitalize on Austrians’ fears over the arrival of thousands of immigrants from the Middle East from 2015 to 2016. From the strain they placed on the country’s welfare system to the threat that Islamic extremists may be among them, his position seemed ripped from the populist playbook.

“Mr. Kurz took on similar, if not exactly the same position as the Freedom Party,” Ms. Siegl said. Members of the far-right party complained that the young minister had copied their ideas.

He also sold himself as having closed the so-called Balkan route, after having defied the promise by Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany of a “welcoming culture,” by reaching agreements with countries in Austria’s southwest to close their borders.

Some Austrians disparaged the swing to the right that the election represented and that is likely to continue under Mr. Kurz. Among them was Jörg Heiser, an Austrian who teaches as the Berlin University of Arts, who in a Facebook post called Mr. Kurz “a sort of Orban in Macron clothing,” a reference to Viktor Orban, the populist Hungarian leader who has exhibited strong authoritarian leanings, and Emmanuel Macron, the centrist, technocratic young president of France.

Ms. Merkel congratulated Mr. Kurz on Sunday, after it became clear his party had emerged as the winner. On Monday she praised his “modern” campaign style, but with an eye to the likelihood that Mr. Kurz will build a coalition with the Freedom party, she cautioned that she would not be trying to copy it for Germany. Mr. Kurz also has his critics at home, where the speed at which he rose through the party’s ranks and the seeming unwillingness of many local media outlets to sufficiently challenge him.

“The party saw him as a Messiah, a young man who was going to come and be their savior,” said Josef Redl, an economics reporter for the left-leaning weekly Falter. “All he campaigned on was immigration, and he got away with it.”

On the morning after the election, as the country chewed over the outcome and waited for the final result to be announced, most likely on Thursday, many were quick to point out that governing may prove more challenging than campaigning.“Mr. Kurz promised many things, these promises demand upholding,” wrote Dietmar Neuwirth in the Austrian newspaper Die Presse. “After achieving a turnaround of the People’s Party, Mr. Kurz must achieve a turnaround for Austria.”