

International

Austria foreign minister set to replace embattled Kurz

Kurz steps down as chancellor amid graft claims

VIENNA: Austria's top diplomat Alexander Schallenberg is expected to take over the chancellorship, a day after Sebastian Kurz announced he would step down amid graft claims, capping the spectacular rise of one of Europe's youngest political leaders. The 35-year-old conservative announced late Saturday that he was stepping down as chancellor, bowing to pressure to resign after he was implicated in a corruption scandal.

Saying he wanted to "make space to prevent chaos," Kurz—who has headed two governments over the last four years—has suggested foreign minister Schallenberg to take over the chancellorship. The 52-year-old diplomat was to meet President Alexander Van der Bellen following a meeting with Vice Chancellor Werner Kogler of the Greens. Schallenberg has yet to speak publicly, but Kogler indicated late Saturday that his party would support him to keep the conservative-Greens coalition in government.

Pressure on Kurz to resign, including from the Greens, started after prosecutors on Wednesday raided several locations linked to his People's Party (OeVP). They announced that Kurz and nine other individuals were under investigation over claims that government money was used between 2016 and 2018 in a corrupt deal to ensure positive media coverage. Kurz has denied any wrongdoing, reiterating on Saturday that allegations against him were "false" and that he would seek to clear up the matter while he continues as party leader and as a lawmaker in parliament.

'Shadow chancellor'

The opposition has blasted the continued conser-

vative-Greens coalition given the graft investigation, with Social Democrats (SPÖ) leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner saying even on the back benches Kurz would remain a "shadow chancellor". Commentaries in media yesterday echoed those words, saying it remained to be seen if Schallenberg could step up to lead the country in his own way.

"There is no doubt that he (Kurz) assumes that he will be able to pull the strings from the not-so-subtle background," wrote Hans Rauscher, a columnist for the left-leaning Der Standard, dubbing Kurz "tricky Sebastian". The OeVP-Greens coalition—a first at a

**Kurz denies wrongdoing**

national level—entered office in January 2020 and has already been put under strain several times by the fallout from other corruption scandals and differences over questions such as refugee policy.

In the latest scandal, prosecutors' core allegation is that between 2016 and 2018 finance ministry resources were used to finance "partially manipulated opinion polls that served an exclusively party-political interest". This correlates to the time period in which Kurz, already a government minister, took over the



VIENNA: Austria's Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg arrives to meet Austria's President at Ballhausplatz in Vienna yesterday. — AFP

leadership of the OeVP and later that of the Alpine nation at the helm of a coalition with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). Prosecutors allege that payments were made to an unnamed media company—widely understood to be the Oesterreich tabloid, which was also raided on Wednesday—in return for

publishing these surveys. In 2019, Kurz's first coalition with the FPÖ collapsed after his ally became engulfed in a corruption scandal dubbed "Ibzigate". But fresh elections once again saw Kurz's OeVP come out on top, leading him to form a coalition with the Greens from January 2020. — AFP

Last 2 candidates fight it out to face Hungary's Orban

BUDAPEST: A veteran pro-European and a conservative economist face off in a week-long opposition primary in Hungary that started yesterday, with the winner set to challenge Prime Minister Viktor Orban in next year's election. The opposition agreed for the first time to choose just one contender to oppose Orban—as well as single candidates in each constituency to go up against his nationalist Fidesz party—in the vote expected in April next year. After a first round of primaries that saw more than 600,000 people take part, Klara Dobrev of the leftist Democratic Coalition (DK) party and economist Peter Marki-Zay are the final candidates battling it out.

The polyglot veteran

Dobrev, 49, of Hungary's largest opposition party won the first round of the primary with 35 percent of the votes but fell short of an outright majority that would have secured the candidacy. An MEP vying to become Hungary's first woman prime minister, Dobrev's supporters highlight her experience as a vice president of the European Parliament since 2019 and in government back home during the 2000s.

She speaks English, German, Russian and Bulgarian—she was born in Sofia and has a Bulgarian father—and describes herself as a social democrat. The pro-EU lawyer and economist told reporters this week that "tears come to my eyes when I compare the difference in political cultures between Hungary and Brussels", where she said she could discuss issues with opponents in a "civilised fashion".

Despite being the most senior Hungarian official in the Brussels assembly, Dobrev says she has never been invited to appear on Hungarian state media outlets, which heavily favor Orban. Polls indicate the mother-of-three's weakness is her husband, former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany who admitted lying in 2006 during a leaked private speech and has been relentlessly attacked by Orban ever since. Dobrev wants to bin the constitution that was rewritten by Orban soon after he won the 2010 election, saying it mainly serves to cement Orban's power. Parliamentary speaker and Orban ally Laszlo Kover said the idea was "criminal" and would amount to a constitutional "coup".

The conservative outsider

Marki-Zay came third in the first round but persuaded Budapest mayor Gergely Karacsony, the runner-up, to withdraw and endorse him in the run-off. "I believe that Peter Marki-Zay is capable of uniting the opposition," said Karacsony, who had been considered the frontrunner to win the primary.

A win for Marki-Zay would be "Orban's nightmare", according to analyst Robert Laszlo. "Unlike Dobrev, he cannot be easily framed by Orban and Fidesz as a puppet of Ferenc Gyurcsany," Laszlo said. Marki-Zay, 49, grabbed national attention in 2018 by winning a mayoral by-election in his home city of Hodmezovasarhely, a Fidesz stronghold for decades. Marki-Zay, a father of seven and a practising Catholic who lived in the US and Canada for five years, successfully garnered support from across the political spectrum. — AFP

After deadly shooting, migrants in Libya just want to leave

TRIPOLI: After escaping, with hundreds of others, from an overcrowded Libyan detention centre where guards shot dead six migrants, Sudanese refugee Halima Mokhtar Bshara says she just wants to leave the country. "They attacked us, humiliated us, many of us were wounded," said the 27-year-old from Sudan's war-torn Darfur region. "We're at the end of our tether."

The Al-Mabani facility in the capital Tripoli was at triple its capacity following police raids against migrants last week, when guards shot six people dead on Friday. The shooting was "related to overcrowding and the terrible, very tense situation," the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said. Some 2,000 migrants and refugees escaped in the chaos, including Bshara and her three children.

On Saturday, the Libyan interior ministry denied any "excessive use of force" against escaping migrants. It said that as "hundreds" of people being held at the detention centre

escaped, "a stampede" occurred during which "an illegal migrant died and others were wounded, including several police officers". A "security operation" following the escape "was handled professionally and without excessive use of force", a statement added.

'Nowhere to go'

Bshara was among hundreds taking part in a sit-in in front of the office of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in Tripoli on Saturday. Dozens of destitute migrants and refugees, including young children, have been sleeping rough in front of the building for days, in the hope of receiving assistance. "We're extremely tired. But we have nowhere to go, we are even being chased off the pavement," Bshara told AFP tearfully.

"For our security, we ask to be evacuated," one banner at the site said. "Libya is not a safe country for refugees," read another. In chaos since its 2011 revolution, Libya has long been a favoured departure point



TRIPOLI: African migrants gather at a makeshift shelter in the capital Tripoli's suburb of Ain Zara. — AFP

for migrants — many from sub-Saharan Africa — fleeing violence and poverty in their own countries and hoping to reach Europe. Hundreds die each year trying to make the dangerous Mediterranean crossing in rickety, overcrowded boats, while NGOs say those waiting to leave are often subject to violence and abuse.

Corruption and violence

Late last week, Libyan authorities raided multiple houses and makeshift shelters in a poor suburb of Tripoli, in

what it said was an anti-drug operation. The UN said the raids, mostly targeting irregular migrants, left at least one person dead, 15 wounded and saw more than 5,000 detained. Doctors without Borders (MSF) decried "violent mass arrests". "There were 39 of us living in the same building" before the raids, Bshara said. At first, she said she and her family evaded authorities by hiding in a well, but they were eventually found and placed in the Al-Mabani detention centre. — AFP

Czech president taken to hospital after elections

PRAGUE: Czech President Milos Zeman was taken to a Prague hospital yesterday, shortly after meeting Prime Minister Andrej Babis following a general election in which the billionaire populist was narrowly defeated by a centre-right alliance. Babis met Zeman, his long-time political ally, a day after his ANO party lost to the Together alliance, which said it was ready to form a majority government with another grouping.

But Zeman had made it clear earlier that he would appoint the head of a party, not an alliance, following the election, suggesting Babis would get the first attempt at negotiating a viable cabinet. "I can't see many reasons why he would do something else," Tomas Lebeda, an analyst at Palacky University in the eastern Czech city of Olomouc, told AFP. After the talks at Zeman's residence outside Prague, the president, who has been grappling with liver problems according to local media and politicians, ended up in Prague's Military University Hospital.

Macron still the favorite but faces mounting risks

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron remains the favorite to win France's next election but six months before the polls he faces the uncomfortable situation of not knowing the identity of his main challenger. As the countdown begins to the first round on April 10 next year the centrist Macron can no longer be sure that the run-off two weeks later will be a repeat of the 2017 duel with far-right leader Marine Le Pen, which he won easily.

Instead, Macron faces a host of uncertainties and a hand of wild cards in a campaign that has already seen startling shifts. Assumptions have been upended

"Yes, I can confirm this information," hospital spokeswoman Jitka Zinke told AFP, adding Zeman's doctor would comment later on. The president cast his ballot in the residence because of poor health, less than a month after he spent eight nights at the military hospital. Zeman's office has been secretive about his illness, giving no details for weeks. The Together alliance of the right-wing Civic Democrats, the centre-right TOP 09 and the centrist Christian Democrats won 27.79 percent of the vote, while Babis's ANO party earned 27.12 percent.

The alliance would have a majority of 108 seats in the 200-seat parliament together with another grouping comprising the anti-establishment Pirate Party and the centrist Mayors and Independents. Together leader Petr Fiala said on Saturday that the two alliances would only talk about a government with each other and ask Zeman to tap him to form the government. "It seems that both democratic coalitions will manage to get a parliamentary majority, which most likely means Babis will have to go," said Otto Eibl, head of the political science department at Masaryk University in Brno.

Named in Pandora Papers

Lebeda said that given Zeman's health problems, "he may reconsider the situation and arrive at a different conclusion, but I wouldn't bet much on that as things



PRAGUE: Czech President Milos Zeman is being transported to the military hospital in Prague yesterday. — AFP

are." The two alliances and ANO will be joined in parliament by the far-right, anti-Muslim Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) movement led by Tokyo-born entrepreneur Tomio Okamura which scored almost 10 percent. Babis currently leads a minority government with the left-wing Social Democrats, which was until recently tacitly backed by the Communist Party that ruled the former totalitarian Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989. But the Communists were ousted from parliament at the polls for the first time since World War II, failing to meet the five-percent threshold for any party to enter the assembly. — AFP

in the last weeks by the surge of far-right TV pundit Eric Zemmour, dubbed a French version of Donald Trump, who threatens—if he decides to stand—to out-poll Le Pen and split the far-right vote.

The traditional right is not even close to settling on a candidate in a process that has caused internal feuding, with heavyweights like former minister Xavier Bertrand, Paris region chief Valerie Pécresse and ex-Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier in contention. The left have their own troubles, with the campaign of the Socialist mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo yet to find momentum and the Greens hurt by a bitter selection contest that failed to unify pragmatists and radicals. Their ratings are below those of extreme-left leader Jean-Luc Melenchon.

'Shaken up'

"What worries Macron is he thought there was going to be a rematch with Le Pen and he is no longer certain of that," said a pro-Macron MP, who asked

not to be named. "It is possible someone could get into the second round with just 15-16 percent of the vote, so we don't know who is going to come out of the hat," added a minister, also requesting anonymity. Current polls project Macron winning the first round with around a quarter of the vote. But if Zemmour fragments the scene further, a score in the high teens may be enough to take a challenger to a run-off.

Pascal Perrineau of Sciences Po university in Paris says the whole political order of the past four years is in the process of being shaken up. "What a change there has been in the last two weeks," he told AFP. Frederic Dabi of opinion pollster Ifop said Le Pen had been "relatively weakened" by the emergence of Zemmour. He said that with such a fragmented offer, the price of a ticket into the second round "falls automatically", recalling how Marine Le Pen's father Jean-Marie shocked the political mainstream by slipping into the second round in 2002 with just 16.8 percent of the vote. — AFP