

## Austria Briefing: October 2022

*Reporting period: 1st October - 7th November*

### National Security & Counter-terrorism

Austrian Ministry, Israeli Embassy and the Danube University of Krems hold joint symposium on Counterterrorism

- "Current challenges in the fight against terrorism - what Austria can learn from them" was the topic of the [2nd autumn symposium](#) held on October 20, 2022 in Vienna.

The symposium was attended by Franz Ruf, Director General for Public Security in the Ministry of the Interior; Mordechai Rodgold, the Ambassador of the State of Israel; and Friedrich Faulhammer, Rector of the University for Continuing Education Krems.

- During his tenure as Interior Minister, current [Chancellor Karl Nehammer granted funding](#) worth €875,000 to the University for research and teaching in the field of "State security and the fight against terrorism and extremism" .

The funding agreement is for 60 months and will [conclude in 2026](#).

- This joint Austrian-Israeli activity should be understood as part of the long term [strategic agreement on security](#) signed this summer between the state of Israel and Austria.

### Individual sentenced for alleged role providing 'ideological tools' for 2020 Vienna attacker

- At the Vienna Regional Court, an individual accused of being a [contact of the Vienna attacker](#) Kujtim Fejzulai was convicted of being part of a terrorist organisation and criminal organisation.

The 24 year-old was said to have provided the attacker with ideological tools for his activity, and was sentenced to 19 months in prison. :



- As the man [has already been in prison since November 3, 2020](#) - having been arrested a few hours after the 2020 attack - and because part of the sentence was suspended, the 24-year-old was released after the conviction
- The young [man distanced himself from the Vienna attack](#) and asked for an acquittal. The media repeatedly "mentioned him personally" in connection with the attack, despite his not being actively involved with it.
- His [defense attorney](#) claimed that the accused was a "completely normal man who opted for Salafism. That is not punishable" and argued that no evidence was provided to prove any actual complicity in the crime.

## Majority of Graz Furkan mosque defendants acquitted of terror charges

- The trial on terrorism charges against 14 members of the Graz Furkan Mosque concluded with most of the [rulings ending in acquittals](#) on the substantive charges.

Nine of the defendants were found not guilty by the jury of the charges of: involvement in a terrorist organisation and a criminal organisation, terrorist financing and anti-state connection.

- [Three of the defendants were convicted](#) on marginal aspects of the charges.

A defendant, who has been convicted on five accounts previously, has been sentenced to 16 months in prison for terrorist financing. He is alleged to have transferred donations to ISIS.

Another defendant without previous convictions, was sentenced to a year's probation for the same charge. A young woman, who was allegedly seeking marriage from an alleged ISIS fighter to then head to Syria, faces a nine month conditional sentence. Since there was no statement issued by her, the guilt and the acquittals are not legally binding.

- On the day of the verdict the court was judging [only 12 of the](#) 14 defendants, as the cases against two men were temporarily dropped during the course of the process, and will be adjudicated over separately.

## National Developments

Former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz founds cyber company with the inventor of surveillance software Pegasus



- Under the company name Dream, Austrian ex-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and former NSO Group boss Shalev Hulio are planning to sell security software to companies in the critical infrastructure sector.

According to a report in Israel's Globe, they have already raised \$20 million from investors.

- After his resignation as Chancellor, [Kurz first started at the investment company Thiel Capital](#), owned by Peter Thiel - co-founder of Palantir, which equips the US government with surveillance software, among other things.

The use of Palantir software in Germany, for example by the police in North Rhine-Westphalia and in Hesse has been controversial for spiralling costs, as well for its role in unjustified dragnet searches as well as for questions over what data collected ends up in the USA.

- [Pegasus](#) is the surveillance spyware software from the NSO Group, the Israeli company which Hulio co-founded and only recently left.

The software, which allows remote access to phones, has been utilised by various repressive governments in order to surveil dissidents and activists - including Israel, India and Saudi Arabia.

- NSO Group is said to be in financial difficulties; several employees were forced to leave and a buyer was being sought.
- The fact that Kurz is venturing into the field of cyber security [raises serious questions](#). During his tenure as Chancellor, the topic of IT security was already a hot topic.

The company Cyan Networks - in whose parent company Kurz's business partner Alexander Schütz is a major shareholder - has been responsible for website security in the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for years.

- [Chats uncovered](#) by various news outlets revealed how fugitive Jan Marsalek could have possibly influenced a deal by the Kurz government. He and an ex-BVT department head coordinated a cyber crisis meeting of the republic with actors from Marsalek's Wirecard environment.

## Alexander Van der Bellen elected President for a second term

- Federal President Alexander van der Bellen was re-elected in the Presidential election [with 56.7 percent](#) of the vote - he was backed by the ruling coalition partner Green Party, as well as the main opposition party SPÖ. The ruling party ÖVP did not

run a candidate against him.

- [Walter Rosenkranz](#) of the far-right FPÖ followed him in second place with 17.7 percent.

Third place was taken by the Beer Party candidate [Dominik Wlazny](#) - who began his political career as a satirist - with 8.3 percent, closely followed by lawyer and "Krone" columnist [Tassilo Wallentin](#) with 8.1 percent.

Former FPÖ and BZÖ politician [Gerald Grosz](#) came in fifth with 5.6 percent. [Michael Brunner](#) from the anti-vaccine MFG party reached 2.1 percent. 1.6 percent of those entitled to vote voted for the shoe manufacturer [Heinrich Staudinger](#).

- Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen has achieved his election goal as he was elected in the first round for a second six-year term. This means that the [other candidates failed in their goal](#) of forcing Van der Bellen into a runoff.
- The role of the president in Austrian politics is to a large extent symbolic, with political leadership resting with the Chancellor.

In addition to representing Austria internationally one of the main responsibilities of the President is appointing the head of government and their Cabinet, dismissing the head of government and their Cabinet, appointing the highest-ranking government officials, signing bills into law, and serving as the military commander-in-chief.

## Confession of former Finance Ministry Secretary General adds to scandals hitting Austrian ruling party

- Thomas Schmid, the former Head of state-owned holding company ÖBAG (Österreichische Beteiligungs AG) and ex-Secretary General in the Ministry of Finance, [has implicated](#) numerous politicians and businessmen including himself in corruption allegations, deepening scandals among the ruling ÖVP.
- [Schmid made a confession](#) to the Economic and Corruption Prosecutor's Office (WKStA), in an attempt to secure leniency for himself.

Some of the allegations revealed by Schmid included: comprehensive information about the [survey affair](#), the "Beinschab-Österreich-Tool" and ex-Chancellor Kurz's alleged involvement in the cause.

Ex-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is said to have embellish surveys in the newspaper "Österreich", which were intended to advance his political career and were financed by fake bills or advertisements from the Ministry of Finance.

- What is new in Schmid's statement is that he confessed to having [promoted the advancement of the ÖVP and Kurz with resources from the Ministry of Finance](#).



Furthermore, Schmid confessed to granting generous discounts on tax debts for the ex-Magna boss and entrepreneur since 2016.

- According to Thomas Schmid, ex-Chancellor Kurz was allegedly involved in filling ÖBAG posts, and exchanging information with him regularly. Schmid explains this has been allegedly planned in advance by Kurz before Schmid's appointment as head of ÖBAG.

This could potentially mean that Schmid is accusing Kurz [with giving possible false statement at the parliamentary investigative committee.](#)

- [Schmid's confession](#) could potentially put many leading ÖVP politicians on trial. And if the court decides that there is a bound network of actors from varying sectors involved, charges could potentially include "organised governmental crime".