Celebrating 40 Years of the UN in Vienna

A symbol for peace that needs to work on its visibility.
More support from the Austrian government would also be a help

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The Cold War years in Vienna have long been the stuff of legend, as Austria’s long border with communist Central Europe positioned it as the buffer zone between East and West. To strengthen Austria’s position, Chancellor Bruno Kreisky hoped to win a third UN headquarters for Vienna. So in November 1974, he and Finance Minister Hannes Androsch set off to Washington to meet with US President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to plead their case. The discussion went quite well: “Most of our objections are bureaucratic, not in principle,” Kissinger assured them. Still, no decision was reached.

When Ford returned the visit the following June, Kreisky was determined to get an answer.

Finally, as the two leaders headed across the tarmac at the Salzburg airport, he saw his chance. Amid the revving of the engines, according to one witness, Kreisky leaned over to Ford: “So we will go ahead with the UN plans for Vienna,” he said cheerfully, offering his hand. Ford shook it, smiling and nodding, his words swallowed by the noise.

As legend goes, Kreisky smiled back and decided it was a “yes” – and immediately reported the happy news.

When the Vienna International Center (VIC) was formally opened on August 23, 1979, Androsch summed up the reasons for Austria to host the United Nations (UN) in the following way: “We are and have always been convinced that because of our history as well as our present, reinforced by the special circumstances of geography and neutrality, Vienna and Austria can be places of international cooperation and encounter.”

POLITICAL FIGHT
While these reasons are still cited today by Austrian politicians from across the political spectrum, the decision to build the VIC was preceded by a political fight, typical for Austria.

The Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) opposed the project, which they had originally
supported in 1966 when Austria had submitted its formal offer to the UN to construct a permanent UN headquarters on the left bank of the Danube.

The ÖVP was infuriated that the “Sun Chancellor” Bruno Kreisky had used his growing political power to override a decision by an international competition of architects. Instead of sticking to the official winner – the famous Argentine-born architect César Pelli – a little known Austrian architect, Johann Saber, was awarded the contract.

Kreisky frequently faced questions as to why Austria should bring the UN to Vienna and then pay approximately €640 million (shared by the federal government and the City of Vienna) for the privilege. His rejoinder: “A big army costs more and has fewer positive effects.”

The year 1979 was in itself a powerful example of Kreisky’s “active neutrality policy” which was focused on presenting Austria as an honest broker and meeting place for international diplomacy. Along with the inauguration of the VIC, Soviet Premiere Leonid Brezhnev and US President Jimmy Carter signed the SALT II agreement in Vienna, and Kreisky himself hosted PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

“After World War II and the Staatsvertrag of 1955, Austrian politicians realized that they had to open up to Europe and to the world,” says Nasra Hassan, former UN director of public information and expert in refugee affairs, crime and terrorism. “They saw the strategic value of an international presence – particularly for a small country – to contribute to peace and security and in this manner, exercise some form of power.”

**A MYSTERIOUS BUBBLE**

Today, the VIC hosts 16 organizations of the UN family, among them the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as well as the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).

The UN presence has grown from a staff of 3,000 at the beginning to some 5,000 from 125 countries today. The VIC is the only UN headquarters in the European Union, with the others in Geneva, Nairobi and New York.

Yet, the VIC, or UNO City, as the Viennese call it, still sits in a bubble of mystery. UN staffers rarely mix with Austrians, mostly living “in their own national and cultural capsules,” says Hassan.

It is like a small city, with its own duty-free shopping, a hairdresser, a bank, a dry-cleaning service and restaurants. “Many UN staff members leave their homes in the morning, come to work at the UN, do all their daily errands there, and then just go home,” says Hassan.

“We all enjoy the beautiful city of Vienna, but I do admit we live in a bubble,” agrees Jean-Luc Lemaître, director of the Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs at UNODC. Martin Nesirky, director of the United Nations Information Service, is aware of this gap and has plans to bring the work of the VIC closer to the people of Austria.”
BRIDGING THE GAP

To mark the 40th anniversary, he is planning a roadshow to the Austrian provinces "with a special exhibition to showcase the work of the UN," he says, and a series of special UN stamps. An open day is set for September, and an on-going cooperation with local schools.

"The aim is to make people understand how the work of the UN family in Vienna actually impacts on their lives," Nesirky explains.

At the UNODC, for example, expertise on controlling drug trafficking has resulted in world-class expertise on cybercrime. "How to keep children safe online is as relevant to a parent in Klagenfurt as it is to a parent in Kiev or Kuala Lumpur," Nesirky notes.

Another powerful example is the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs, which monitors the effects of climate change from space, recording the disappearance of glaciers. "This information is vital for the livelihood of people living in the Alps," Nesirky says.

LOW VISIBILITY

"Given the range of topics – from nuclear safety to cybercrime, drug control, combating corruption and improving industrialization – you would expect worldwide attention. These are the big issues of our times," commented one former diplomat.

Yet, surprisingly, the visibility of the UN in Vienna is low, both here and abroad.

One reason could be the lack of media coverage. "I have seen far more interest at the UN in New York and Geneva, [where] we used to have regular media briefings. This does not happen here," the diplomat says.

Nesirky agrees: "Compared to the other three... the resident press corps in Vienna is smaller."

George Jahn, former Associated Press Vienna bureau chief, covering Vienna-based UN organizations for 30 years, has some explanations. "A lot of the interesting information at the UN agencies is confidential. Part of media relations here is to keep it confidential and to protect the vested interests of member states.

While understandable, "for a journalist, this can be very frustrating," Jahn says. It is also difficult to "sell a diplomatic process without clear impact or outcome" as a news story.

STAYING COMPETITIVE

The role of the host government is also essential and some are critical of Austria's handling of it.

"I sometimes get the feeling that Vienna feels a bit imperial... that the beauty of the city and the excellent living conditions are enough," said one source, requesting anonymity. "The truth is that this is not sufficient to be competitive in the future."

Other European cities, such as Bonn and Copenhagen, also host UN offices and are growing, with considerable financial support by the respective host cities and national governments.

The infrastructure, too, could use an upgrade. To date, there is no well-functioning press briefing room with the right light and sound systems for live broadcasting or for interpretation – although plans are under discussion, to be partially financed by Austria.

Beyond that, encouraging NGOs and think tanks to establish offices here can also help keep the UN's work visible.

Here, Geneva surpasses Vienna, providing some 250 NGOs with a UN consultative status. In Vienna, this number is far lower (163), of which only half actually have offices here. Aware of this, the Austrian government has authorized a " quasi international organization," providing tax breaks and simplified work permits for NGOs of a certain size and scope.

Ambassador Wolfgang Angerholzer, Director for International Organizations with seat at the Austrian Foreign Ministry, hopes that "more NGOs could establish offices in Vienna, particularly those whose work is overlapping with the UN."

But more has to be done, both by the UN and the Austrian government. Otherwise, the VIC will remain merely "a symbol for peace in the world" that could, in fact, become an empty shell.