

Austria says anti-vax COVID activists cross borders

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Vienna, January 29 (RHC)-- Activists who reject COVID-19 vaccines and anti-coronavirus measures are crossing borders to join protests where extremist ideology is being spread, Austria's new domestic

intelligence chief told the AFP news agency, calling the trend “very scary.”

Omar Haijawi-Pirchner said foreign activists are travelling to Austria – where COVID vaccines will become mandatory next month – to demonstrate and hold “network meetings with their partners, right-wing extremists”. He added that the often right-wing extremists were using the gatherings to spread their ideology, including anti-Semitism, and that “we see a lot of people that are very highly radicalised”.

From France to the Netherlands to Germany and Belgium, European countries have been rocked by anti-vaccine protests in recent months, as governments clamp down on the unvaccinated. In Austria, tens of thousands have taken to the streets almost every week since the government said COVID vaccines would become mandatory from February 4th.

Haijawi-Pirchner, 41, who took over Austria’s newly-reformed DSN intelligence agency in December, said the radicalisation of some activists and the protests’ increasingly international dimension were “very, very scary for us.”

While the DSN is not responsible for foreign intelligence gathering, it has received information pointing to a large number of well-organised activists in Germany and Switzerland, Haijawi-Pirchner told AFP in his first interview with foreign media since his appointment. He said the DSN had seen credible threats of violence in Austria, pointing to clashes with the police on the sidelines of protests.

There are “a lot of people threatening ... critical infrastructure at the moment”, including the media, health facilities and politicians, he said. The DSN that Haijawi-Pirchner leads replaced the former BVT agency as part of far-reaching intelligence reforms.

The BVT’s reputation had been tarnished by a string of what Haijawi-Pirchner discreetly refers to as “incidents” in recent years. These included raids on the BVT ordered by the far-right then-Interior Minister Herbert Kickl in 2018 and embarrassing accusations of Austrian officials leaking information to Russia.

This, along with the perceived closeness to Moscow of Kickl’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), led to reports that other Western agencies were refraining from sharing intelligence with Vienna.

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