

Vienna, June 2021

Total standstill gives way to “ongoing congress”: Austria Center Vienna takes stock of the pandemic for the first time

Austria’s largest congress centre was hit incredibly hard by the Covid-19 pandemic in the 2020 financial year. As with the rest of the international events industry, its core business evaporated overnight in March, leading to a 61.2% year-on-year decline in revenue to EUR 5.14m. A turning point came in September with the internationally-groundbreaking rapid testing pilot project, which provided the basis for what is now Austria’s largest testing and vaccination facility. This critical operation can be compared to an ongoing large-scale congress, which in 2021 will lead to capacity utilisation and staffing reaching levels not seen before at the venue.

“2020 was a year of extremes for us: after an outstanding start, the outbreak of the pandemic saw our core business grind to a halt overnight in March. In September, though, we became the first venue in Europe to demonstrate that rapid testing was an effective tool for combating the spread of Covid-19. And since then we have been supporting the City of Vienna as the largest testing and vaccination facility in Austria. I am extremely grateful that we can make an active contribution towards a gradual return to normality,” said Susanne Baumann-Söllner, Managing Director of the Austria Center Vienna.

International congresses: complete collapse of core business

The Austria Center Vienna was one of the first congress centres in Europe to feel the full force of the pandemic. The European Congress of Radiology (ECR) – the venue’s largest congress by some margin, with up to 25,000 participants – had to be postponed at short notice at the start of March. And the same applied for all of the other large-scale congresses. This development was reflected in a complete collapse in revenue from events: turnover plummeted 61.2% to EUR 5.14m as against the EUR 13.29m reported in what was a particularly strong 2019. The 2020 figures include other income (primarily from testing lanes in November and December) of EUR 2.72m. “The sudden outbreak of the pandemic came as a shock for the entire industry. We used the following months to postpone events, continue our various construction projects and come up with numerous hygiene plans and hybrid meeting concepts,” explained Baumann-Söllner.

Rapid testing pilot project provides turning point

In September 2020, a unique opportunity presented itself for the Austria Center Vienna to acquire a fresh batch of the newly authorised and, in some cases, still contentious Covid-19 rapid testing kits. Run in partnership with the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU), the project drew a great deal of interest internationally, with around 2,000 students being tested shortly before their lecture. Baumann-Söllner elaborated: “What is now standard practice worldwide seemed like something out of a science fiction movie for many at the time.

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It was a stroke of luck that we were able to contribute to the logistical side of things in our capacity as a congress centre with many years of experience of large-scale events. We continue to use the DNA of this pilot project today, tweaking it as necessary.”

2021: vaccination and testing lanes comparable to an ongoing large-scale congress

With the Austria Center Vienna already operating a testing facility at the venue since November 2020 on behalf of the City of Vienna with the support of the Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund medics, it has since been entrusted with running vaccination lanes, which opened in March 2021. To date, around 1 million rapid tests have been taken and around 700,000 doses of the vaccine administered. Baumann-Söllner: “I would like to say a big thank you to the City of Vienna, all partner enterprises and, above all, the numerous employees who have been hard at work making this mammoth project possible for more than half a year! Each day we welcome between 15,000 and 20,000 residents of Vienna at the venue, which is the equivalent of hosting a very large congress seven days a week without closing, from seven in the morning until seven at night.” Due to the staffing demands this brings, the number of people working at the venue has been increased temporarily from 90 permanent employees to more than 600 at present. And this does not include people at contractors with high staffing requirements, such as security and cleaning providers.

Events returned in May – but international congresses and Spielefest delayed until 2022

Thanks to the latest easing of restrictions, the Austria Center Vienna welcomed back a series of smaller virtual and hybrid events in May, starting with the Red Bull Campus Clutch – its first ever esports tournament. Following the virtual World Congress of Paediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition at the start of the month, the Congress of the European Academy of Neurology will be held in June, and this July will see the European Biophysics Congress take place at the venue as a hybrid event. Another highlight, coming at the start of September, is the high-security 5th World Conference of Speakers of Parliament. Due to continued uncertainty, larger-scale international congresses will not be returning until 2022. Regrettably, the same goes for the Wiener Spielefest, which has been put back a year.

Outside is the new inside: a pandemic trend that’s here to stay

With testing and vaccination lanes operating in the background, the largest modernisation project in the venue’s history is currently nearing completion. After covering the square with the danubeSAIL and the addition of the new Panorama Walk, the finishing touches are also being put to the new entrance building. “We’re delighted with the results, and are already busy planning the next round of modernisation for the years to come. Projects include a redesign for the entrance hall, a modern lounge area, a refurb for the car park and greening measures. The pandemic trend of “outside is the new inside” is definitely here to stay after Covid. In response, we are already looking at ways to make the square outside the main building and the terraces more attractive and we want to take steps to incorporate the neighbouring Donaupark for the benefit of future congress participants,” Baumann-Söllner concluded.

About IAKW-AG

Internationales Amtssitz- und Konferenzzentrum Wien, Aktiengesellschaft (IAKW-AG) is responsible for maintaining the Vienna International Centre (VIC) and operating the Austria Center Vienna (ACV). The Austria Center Vienna is Austria's largest conference centre. With 24 halls, 180 meeting rooms and some 26,000 square metres of exhibition space, it is one of the top players on the international conference circuit. www.acv.at

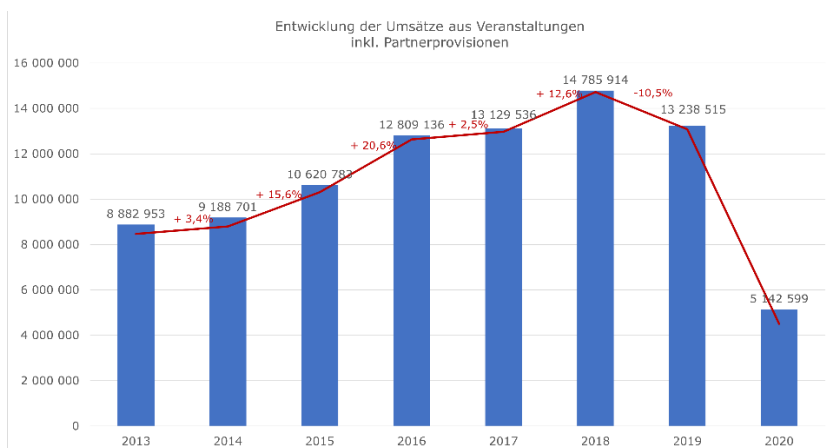
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Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, revenue from events in 2020 was down 61.2% on the previous year. © www.acv.at



Susanne Baumann-Söllner, Managing Director of the Austria Center Vienna
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The Austria Center Vienna is currently Austria's largest testing and vaccination facility
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