

Austria's 'Ibizagate' trial condemned by rights organisations

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Europe correspondent

The “excessive” criminal prosecution of a security consultant whose “Ibizagate” video brought down Austria’s government will deter whistleblowers and risks infringing on fundamental press and information freedoms, rights groups have said.

Fifteen Austrian and international organisations said in an open letter today that the trial of Julian Hessenthaler, due to open tomorrow, was based on “partially constructed accusations used to discredit and apprehend” him.

The former Austrian vice-chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache was convicted last week on corruption charges from the May 2019 scandal, which ended the coalition of his far-right Freedom party (FPÖ) and the People’s party (ÖVP) of the chancellor, Sebastian Kurz.

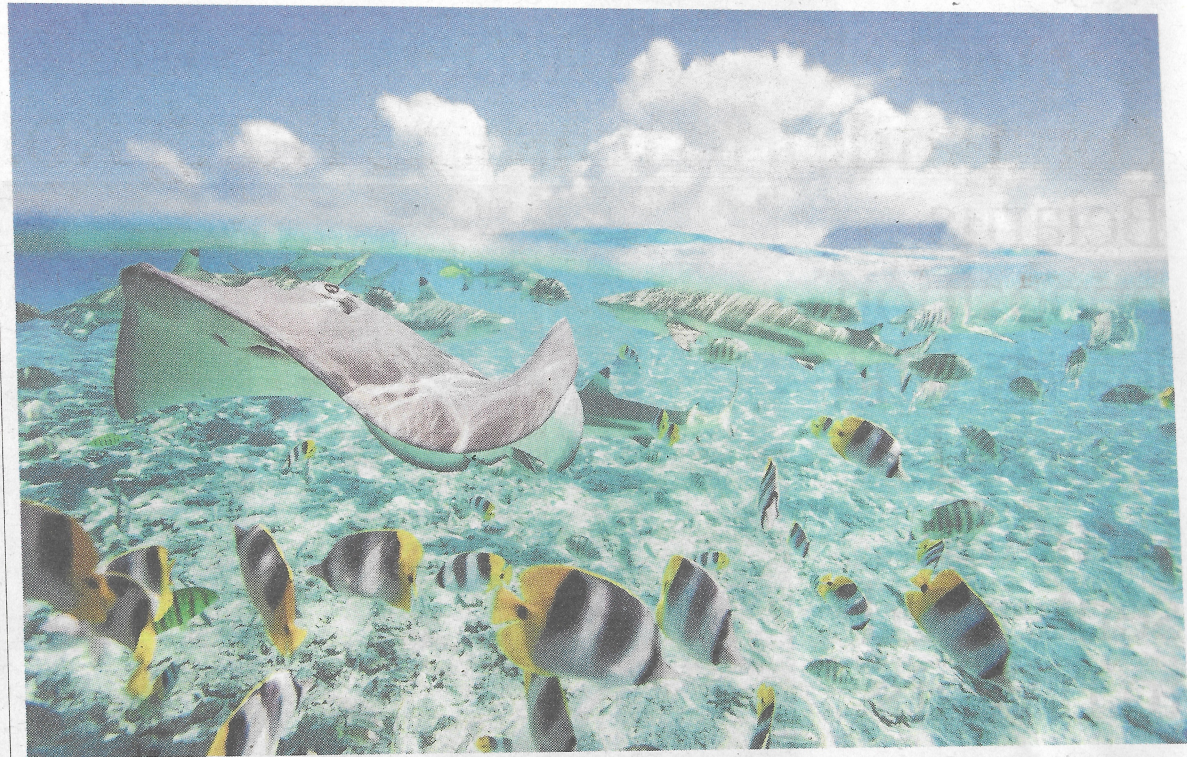
The affair dates back to a meeting in 2017 on the Spanish resort island of Ibiza between Strache and a woman purporting to be the niece of a Russian oligarch, to whom he promised state contracts in return for help

filmed, and his parliamentary leader, Johann Gudenus, resigned after the German weekly Der Spiegel and the daily Süddeutsche Zeitung published the video on their websites.

The “remarkable” prosecution of Hessenthaler, who was arrested in Germany late last year and extradited to Austria, aimed to send “a clear signal” to future whistleblowers, the organisations - including Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International, the Centre for Investigative Journalism and the Electronic Frontier Foundation - alleged.

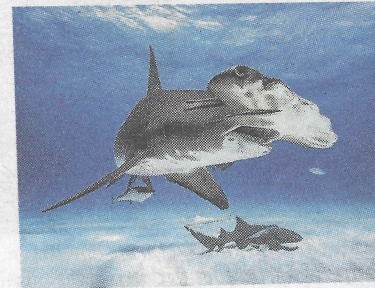
“Publication of the video, made possible by Julian Hessenthaler, initiated a discussion of great public interest and allowed the public to form an opinion about Strache’s suitability to hold public office,” said Heinz Patzelt, the secretary general of Amnesty International Austria.

A judicial investigation launched after the video was released led to 12 separate probes into allegations of wrongdoing by Strache and others. Kurz is also under investigation for allegedly making false statements to a parliamentary committee over the affair. He says he has always answered questions truthfully.



Overfishing driving third of shark and ray species extinct

Karen McVeigh



Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The number of species of sharks, rays and chimaeras, known together as chon-

▲ *Stingray and sharks in Bora Bora. Formerly widespread, hammerhead sharks, left, now face extinction*

PHOTOGRAPH: SHALAMOV/GETTY/ISTOCKPHOTO

and ray populations had crashed by more than 70% in the past 50 years, with previously widespread species such as hammerhead sharks facing extinction.

Sharks, rays and chimaeras are vulnerable to overfishing because they grow slowly and produce few young. An estimated 100m sharks are killed