

Austria lifts most measures to counter coronavirus pandemic

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As of May 1, the Austrian government lifted almost all restrictions aimed at controlling the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the continuing spread of COVID-19 throughout Europe, the government in Vienna has assumed a pioneering role with its “easing policy,” which poses a deadly risk for hundreds of thousands of people.

The “COVID-19 Relaxation Regulation,” passed by the coalition of the conservative People’s Party and the Greens, lifts almost all restrictions in force since March 16. Lockdown restrictions are ended, and all shops can reopen. Smaller shops and garden centres had already opened two weeks ago. With the new regulations, “entering public places” is now permitted again.

The only restriction is maintaining a minimum distance of 1 metre between people who do not live in the same household. This is a farce. Until now, most European countries have required a minimum distance of 1.5 metres, which experts regard as an absolute minimum.

The only other restriction is that “when entering enclosed public places” a facemask must be worn. But even this measure, which offers minimal protection, is completely ineffective because the regulation is a first step towards allowing mass events. Public events with a maximum of 10 participants are now also permitted, and in the case of funerals, up to 30. The ban expressly does not apply to private events, which are permitted without restrictions. There are also no longer any restrictions for religious institutions and open-air markets.

Restaurants and cafes opened from May 1. A maximum of four adults per table are to be served, with a 1 metre distance between tables. Face masks will only be compulsory for employees. Schools will also be reopened for classes in May.

Public transport is to resume regular service starting May 11. Here, the already too small minimum distance will be abolished, with the approval of Health Minister Rudolf Anschober (Greens). In mid-April, the Green Party Vice-Chancellor and Minister of Sport Werner Kogler announced that there would be no more restrictions on sporting activities. Furthermore, the opening of borders and the resumption of the tourist business are currently being planned. Hotels are to reopen from the end of May.

This is particularly insidious, as the Austrian winter sports resort of Ischgl was a “germ cell” for the spread of coronavirus in Europe. It was one of the first focal points from which the virus spread en masse throughout Europe. The federal state of Tyrol acted with extreme negligence. Although there were already indications of spreading infection with the dangerous virus on March 5, skiing and partying continued in Ischgl until March 13.

With the “new normal” announced by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP), Austria is at the forefront of the “return to work” movement throughout Europe. For weeks, Kurz and other government representatives have been trying to convey the image that the virus has been practically defeated and that it is possible to return to “normality.” This is nothing but false propaganda in the interests of big business and the super-rich.

The pandemic continues to spread around the world. So far, there have officially been more than 15,500 cases in Austria among its almost 9 million inhabitants. By May 1, 589 people had died nationwide as a result of the coronavirus. At present, 472 infected persons are receiving hospital treatment, 124 of them in intensive care units. Compared to the previous day, this represented 80 new infections and five deaths. In

neighbouring Germany, too, the number of infections and deaths is increasing daily. On Friday, the number of reported deaths rose to over 6,600 and the total number of infections to more than 163,000.

Experts are alarmed about the rapid and far-reaching moves to loosen all restrictions and have criticized them. Virologist Christoph Steininger fears a second wave of infection. “The biology has not changed. This sounds like the Austrian solution,” said Steininger. The situation in public transport is particularly worrying, he said, as viruses in enclosed spaces such as subways are infectious for up to 72 hours.

Risk groups should avoid public transport, advises epidemiologist Eva Schernhammer in this context. “In Austria, a second wave is not unrealistic; on the contrary: one must assume that it will come,” she said.

Schernhammer, from the University of Vienna, thus also confirmed statements made by the German virologist Christian Drosten to national broadcaster ORF. She said the state needed to implement measures to nip a second wave in the bud. “Sufficient capacity is needed, not only to be able to test particularly critical groups of people such as medical staff regularly, but also so that people with symptoms do not have to wait days for a test and the result.”

But the number of tests has been deliberately kept low since the beginning of the crisis. Between April 12 and 19, only 20 per 1,000 inhabitants were tested in Austria. This is even less than in Germany, where the number of tests is too low. Even in Estonia, the testing rate is significantly higher, at 31 per 1,000.

According to an unreported study, significantly more people in Austria are infected with the coronavirus than the official statistics indicate. In comparison to the 8,500 cases officially reported at the beginning of April, about 28,500 people were affected, according to the Sora opinion research institute. This was only the mean value.

More than 67,000 infected persons can be assumed. For the study, Sora had about 1,500 people tested for the virus. Experts criticize this number of participants as far too low.

In a simulation, researchers from Columbia University came to a far higher number of unreported cases. As the scientific magazine *Science* reported, they simulated the spread of the coronavirus with a pandemic simulation program using data from an early

phase of the epidemic in China when there were no contact restrictions. According to this, for every person who was proven to be infected, there were about seven undetected cases.

The government in Vienna is completely indifferent to scientists’ objections. The policy of the conservative-Green government is also oriented towards the far-right on the coronavirus question. The extreme right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) has initiated a campaign, “Alliance against Corona Madness,” demanding the withdrawal of all public measures against the pandemic. Until last year, the ÖVP had been in coalition with the FPÖ, before the Greens replaced them in January.

The situation in hospitals and nursing homes is particularly dramatic—as everywhere in Europe. As early as the beginning of April, a nursing home in the Graz area had to be evacuated after half of the nursing staff had become infected and its safe operation could no longer be guaranteed.

Infections are now known from numerous other homes. Such facilities “are struggling to find protective equipment,” as the *Kurier* reports. Masks and protective equipment are in short supply and hygienic procedures are not guaranteed. As the *Tagesschau* reported, a general practitioner from Lower Austria died of coronavirus at the beginning of April. This case is a “clear sign that a reaction from the highest authority is finally needed,” wrote the President of the Lower Austrian Medical Association, Christoph Reisner. He criticised the government, saying, “At the moment, we can only distribute the masks and gloves we receive as gifts from other organisations.”



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