

Austria: No protection for population despite rising coronavirus infections

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Austria has played a leading role in Europe's lifting of protective measures against the coronavirus pandemic. As a consequence, the number of new infections in the country is once again rising sharply. The government headed by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) has responded to the crisis by continuing to place business interests above the lives and health of citizens.

On September 9, Austria recorded over 500 new infections during the previous 24 hours, approaching the highest increase since April. According to official figures, more than 30,500 people throughout Austria are now infected with the coronavirus, and 747 have died.

In relation to its population, Austria is thus in the upper range of daily new infections in Europe. In Germany, with nine times as many inhabitants, the daily number of new infections is currently around 1,500.

A dramatic increase in infection rates can be observed throughout Europe. In Germany, the highest number of new infections since the spring was reported in August. In France, more than 6,000 new infections per day have been registered in the past week.

Croatia and other Balkan countries are becoming hotspots, while Hungary has closed its borders to neighbouring countries due to the rapidly increasing infection rates. The extreme right-wing government led by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is using these measures to further enflame nationalism in the midst of the pandemic. The Orban government accuses foreigners and refugees of spreading the virus. At the same time, schools in the country opened on September 1 without any special safety measures.

At the end of August, Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz reacted to the drastic increase in infections with a

“statement on the current situation.” He hardly mentioned the increase in coronavirus cases and the precarious situation of many Austrians who have lost their jobs or suffered wage losses as a result of the pandemic and can barely make ends meet. Instead, he promised more money and relief for Austrian businesses and the wealthy.

He declared that Austria would lose around 7 percent of economic output this year, but that a “comeback” would take place next year. He said that for this to succeed, in addition to the existing €50 billion in rescue and aid measures, Austria must improve its competitiveness. The country's economy would receive multiple forms of fresh assistance, including tax relief for companies. Further aid packages could also not be ruled out.

On the other hand, the government is not prepared to support the rising number of unemployed and those who have gotten into financial difficulties due to short-time working benefits.

Business representatives praised Kurz's speech. The Chamber of Commerce commented that he presented “a sustainable location strategy at the right time.” The Federation of Austrian Industry expressed a similar opinion. For his part, Kurz acknowledged that he had held intensive talks with numerous business representatives over the past few months.

As reported by the press, Infineon CEO Sabine Herlitschka, Voestalpine CEO Herbert Eibensteiner, Andritz CEO Wolfgang Leitner, Boehringer Ingelheim CEO Philipp Lattorff, Deutsche Bank Supervisory Board Chairman Paul Achleitner and the Austrian heads of Google, Microsoft and Apple, as well as representatives of the energy and telecommunications industries, were all guests in the Chancellor's Office. Although nothing was revealed about the content of the

talks, it is clear that the main aim was to shift the burden of the pandemic onto the backs of ordinary citizens.

The President of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, Wolfgang Katzian, also held talks with Kurz. The trade unions have avoided any criticism of the government since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis.

At the same time, Kurz made clear that there would be no new tranche of protective measures for the population. In response to specific questions, the Chancellor replied that a decision on “further measures” would be taken next week. The clear goal was “to prevent a lockdown.”

The Austrian government had already lifted almost all restrictions imposed to contain the coronavirus at the beginning of May. Despite the rapid spread of the pandemic throughout Europe, the Kurz government was considered a pioneer with its “opening up policy,” which now has deadly consequences for more and more people.

Since January, Kurz has been ruling in a coalition with the Greens, after his coalition with the extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) collapsed last year. The change of coalition partner, however, has not changed the anti-working-class course of the government. The Greens have essentially continued the right-wing policies of the FPÖ.

Rudolf Anschober, the Green Minister of Health, whose ministry bears primary responsibility for the massive spread of the infections, vilely blamed young people for their lack of “risk awareness.” In fact, it is the government that rejects any sort of effective protective measures.

According to the news magazine *Profil*, the Austrian Ministry of Education insists that there should be no compulsory wearing of masks in classes, despite the risk of infection. When the polytechnic in Vienna Währing sought to circumvent the minister’s decree and introduce compulsory masks during lessons via its own house rules, a spokeswoman for the Minister of Education Heinz Faßmann (ÖVP) promptly responded that this was “not an option.”

The school responded by declaring that the required social distancing between students could not be guaranteed and that the obligation to wear masks should be only lifted during breaks or if there was a

maximum of 15 students in the class room. The ministry, on the other hand, referred to its decree that does not provide for masks in classes, knowing full well that the schools would thus become hotspots for infections.

It is not only the ÖVP and the Greens, however, which categorically reject the protection of workers and young people. All the other parties agree on this issue. The Social Democratic SPÖ, which governs in the capital city of Vienna along with the Greens, is publicly calling for help for the city’s ailing health system, while playing down the rising infection rate and agreeing with the business-friendly measures of the federal government.

Regarding the rising infection figures in Vienna, vice mayor Birgit Heiben (Greens) explained that Vienna is a city of millions and is testing widely, which was the reason for the high numbers of infected.

More and more studies show that the protective measures taken at an earlier stage could prevent the virus from spreading. “As soon as protective measures are withdrawn, cases start to rise again,” virologist Judith Aberle told the *Standard*.

A study commissioned by Philips Austria has also revealed the massive shortage of nursing staff in Austria. With 713 nurses per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018, there were significantly fewer staff than in comparable European countries. In Germany the corresponding figure was 1,351 nurses and in Denmark 1,046.

In addition, there has been barely any increase in personnel since 2008, and all non-medical health staff are inadequately deployed, according to the portal boerse-express. A further increase in hospital admissions due to new coronavirus infections, will quickly exhaust the capacities of the country’s health care system, making it impossible to guarantee adequate care.



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