

Austria to tighten lockdown, but factories remain open

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Given the dramatic infection figures and a catastrophic situation in hospitals, the Austrian government was forced on Saturday to announce new measures to contain the coronavirus. They come far too late and are completely inadequate.

In terms of population, Austria currently has the highest rate of reported new COVID-19 infections worldwide, according to the data platform “Our World in Data.” On a 7-day average, Austria is ahead of Georgia, Switzerland and the Czech Republic, with 831 new infections per million inhabitants per day. Also, in terms of deaths in Europe, only Slovenia, Belgium and France are currently ahead of Austria. On Friday, almost 9,600 new infections and 53 deaths were reported, in a country with 8.9 million inhabitants.

The responsibility for this disastrous development lies with the government of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, whose right-wing conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) is ruling together with the Greens. After the first lockdown in the spring, infection rates and deaths fell in April. From May 1, the government then lifted all relevant protective measures again, although scientists warned strongly against this and experience from other countries confirmed their warnings. Kurz took a pioneering role in Europe in lifting the protective measures when it came to the interests of industry.

Even when the infection figures rose exponentially again in September and October, Kurz and his Green coalition partner insisted on the course they had taken. Politicians from all parties declared that the country could not afford another lockdown. Businesses and schools had to remain open without restriction, and tourism not be allowed to suffer.

It was only when the infection figures reached five times the peak of the spring—as more and more experts sounded the alarm and the outrage in the population became unmistakable—that the government enacted some disjointed and half-hearted measures starting on November 3. Gastronomy, recreational, cultural and sports facilities would close by the end of November. But factories remained open and schools continued to provide face-to-face instruction. Only in high schools and universities would there be a switch to online teaching. Hospitals were not prepared for the new situation, nor were testing facilities significantly expanded.

Finally, on November 9, four renowned scientists sounded the alarm in an open letter, expressing the widespread mood in the population.

The government measures were partially wrong and much too lax, wrote mathematician Peter Markowich, computer scientist

Georg Gottlob and the two physicists, Christoph Nägerl and Erich Gornik, all four winners of the Wittgenstein Prize, Austria’s highest award for the promotion of science. According to all the scientific evidence, the country “has, for weeks, been heading unchecked into the catastrophe of overstretched hospitals, where doctors are having to follow triage procedures,” i.e., treating some patients and allowing others to die.

The scientists demanded the immediate closure of all schools and the “obligation to work from home wherever possible.” The assertion that schools were particularly safe could not be sustained. They were “one of the drivers of respiratory viruses, that is a proven fact. Austrian studies that try to prove the opposite are methodologically false or outdated,” they wrote. Schools may not be the sole cause of the explosion in case numbers, but were “certainly a significant contribution,” and their closure “one of the most effective individual measures ever.”

“Even if all the major disadvantages of school closures are taken into account,” the scientists said, “the catastrophe of overloading hospitals weighs more heavily. All those who now speak against closing schools must say that they are in favour of a triage approach, at the latest starting from November 18.”

The Austrian Institute for Economic Research (Wifo), which is supported by both the employers’ associations and the trade unions, objected. From an economic point of view, school closures would entail “high individual and social costs,” Wifo declared in a “Research Letter.”

After shedding some crocodile tears about the psychological strain and the lack of progress of students, Wifo came to the point: Schools must remain open and the spread of the virus and thousands of deaths must be accepted to secure the profits of the corporations!

School closures would also have consequences on the labour supply of parents, the “Research Letter” said. About 31 percent of employees had children under the age of 15 in their household and about 25 percent had no potential caregiver, i.e., no adult without employment, in the same household. A total of 12.5 percent of employees had caring responsibilities for children in the event of school or kindergarten closures, with 9 percent of all working hours in Austria being performed by these people.

“Even if those affected find creative ways of combining employment outside the home, or with working from home and [conducting] home schooling, the direct effects on the labour supply are negative,” the economic institute found.

Until two days ago, the Health Ministry, which is run by the Greens, also spoke out against the closure of the schools.

Given the looming catastrophe, the pressure on the government, and its fear of a rebellion should scenes occur like the ones in northern Italy in the spring, became too great. On November 14, Chancellor Kurz announced a tightened lockdown that would apply from November 17 to December 6.

All schools will be closed and shifted to distance learning. Day-care centres will also remain closed, except for emergency care. In addition to catering and leisure facilities, retail outlets will also be largely closed. Excluded from this are grocery stores, post offices, banks, pharmacies and similar businesses. Service providers, such as hairdressers and beauty salons, are also no longer allowed to open. The curfew, which currently applies from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., will be extended to cover the entire day. Leaving the house is only possible for those travelling for work reasons, to meet basic needs as well as to provide support and care for others. Walking and sports are also permitted.

In contrast, production can continue in factories, even if this is not for essential needs. This means that one of the main sources of infection remains. As in schools, numerous infections occur in workplaces due to a lack of protective measures. In the summer, when the infection figures were significantly lower, dozens of infections occurred in several meat processing factories in the country. But the government continues to put the profits of big business above the lives of the people.

Before the announcement of the lockdown, the situation had worsened dramatically. On Friday, 3,922 COVID-19 patients were in hospitals, 567 in intensive care. In the most severely affected provinces of Vorarlberg and Upper Austria, intensive care units are already operating at full capacity. Hospitals in Vorarlberg announced on Friday that they were concentrating only on acute emergencies and COVID-19 patients. Applying a triage approach—the selection of patients who are left to die without treatment—is imminent in the coming days.

Hospitals in other parts of Austria are also reaching their limits, postponing non-essential operations and preparing to admit more coronavirus patients. Most recently, there was a 70 percent increase in patients requiring intensive care.

On Saturday, Susanne Rabady, vice president of the Austrian Society of General Medicine (ÖGAM), sounded the alarm that the health care system in Austria was “now at full capacity.”

Klaus Markstaller, president of the Austrian Society for Anaesthesia, Resuscitation and Intensive Care Medicine (ÖGARI), warned of the impending need to implement triage. “When more than a third of all available intensive care beds are no longer available,” then triage will begin, he said. If the number of hospital admissions increased in the next few days—which can be assumed based on the current figures—triage was inevitable.

“It is becoming increasingly difficult to get patients into intensive care beds who need them,” Markstaller said. “We are right at the limit. We will have to start deciding over the next few days to what extent we can treat which patients with intensive care.” As soon as there was a need for “hard triage,” prognostic factors, the patient’s will, surrounding conditions and comparison with other patients would decide who would be treated and who

would not, the *Kurier* quoted him as saying.

In this dramatic situation, the government’s measures are completely inadequate. Both the extreme right and the Social Democrats, trade unions and the Chamber of Labour continue to openly advocate a policy of herd immunity, allowing the virus free rein among the population.

The extreme right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the ÖVP’s former coalition partner in government, has attacked the measures as “completely excessive.” FPÖ parliamentary faction leader and former Interior Minister Herbert Kickl warned that they were driving Austria to ruin. Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner, herself a doctor, called the closure of the schools “highly irresponsible.” Like other SPÖ politicians, she is concerned about maintaining uninterrupted production in the factories, which she sees as being endangered by the school closures.

The head of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, Wolfgang Katzian, and the president of the Chamber of Labour, Renate Anderl, have been up in arms against lockdown measures for weeks. Despite all the warnings from experts, they are demanding that schools and kindergartens remain open.

Both question the necessity of a lockdown, the *Kurier* reports. Katzian would “be careful not to comment on the measures advocated by virologists and experts.” In the style of a coronavirus denier, Anderl said, “I don’t know if it really makes sense to shut everything down now.” She was not aware that there had been many infections in restaurants, for example.

The facts refute this reactionary twaddle. Only recently, a study in Austria showed that the prevalence, i.e., the proportion of illnesses in the total population, is effectively the same among pupils and teachers. The fact that symptoms occur less frequently in children and adolescents does not affect the risk of transmission. The only differences are in the social structure at schools. According to the scientists, the risk of infection is 3.6 times higher at schools with many children from socially disadvantaged families than at schools with fewer socially disadvantaged children.



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