

# Austrian government ends lockdown despite spread of coronavirus variant

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On February 8, Austria's black-green (conservative-green) coalition government ended entirely what had only been mild lockdown measures. This means that schools and commerce will be fully open despite the fact that infection and death rates remain high and very contagious viral variants are rapidly spreading in the country.

The number of new infections remains elevated. On Friday, 1,731 cases were reported, with a seven-day incidence continuously above 100 per 100,000 population. Over 432,000 people have already been infected with COVID-19 in a country of 8.8 million; 8,195 people have died from it as of Sunday. The situation in clinics remains tense despite recent declines in caseload.

The policy of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and his coalition of the conservative People's Party and the Greens can only be described as criminal. As it did last spring, the Viennese government has led the way among European states in dropping all protective measures against the coronavirus pandemic and allowing the contamination of the population with all its disastrous consequences.

After the initial spring lockdown, infection rates and mortality rates dropped in April. Starting in May, however, the government lifted all relevant protective measures, despite urgent warnings from scientists and the confirmation of these warnings in other countries.

Citing the interests of the economy, even as infection rates rose exponentially again in September and October, the government insisted that the country could not afford another lockdown. It was decided that businesses and schools must open fully, and that tourism should not be restricted.

Only in October, faced with a dramatic rise in infections and a catastrophic situation in the clinics, the

government was forced to introduce measures to contain the pandemic. They proved too late and were entirely inadequate. While schools and stores were largely closed, businesses remained open.

Now schools, kindergartens, commerce and cultural institutions are open, as well as services such as hairdressing and massage. As predicted, in the first few post-lockdown days city centres and stores were completely overcrowded.

The hygienic measures attending the re-openings are window dressing to lull the population into a false sense of security. For example, the requirement to wear FFP-2 masks and free coronavirus testing cannot compensate for contact restrictions. For that, free tests are coming far too late.

The relaxations now enacted are the first step in a total abandonment of precautionary measures. The opening of restaurants and hotels is already being eagerly discussed and will not be long in coming. Ski slopes in the tourist strongholds were allowed to open before Christmas even though the winter sports resort of Ischgl was the European epicentre for the spread of the COVID-19 pathogen last year.

The situation is particularly dramatic in the state of Tyrol, where the so-called South African variant B.1.351 of the coronavirus is on the rise. Experts have reported around 300 cases to date, roughly half of which are currently active. Previous findings show that infections with the South African variant of the virus are often far more severe and more resistant to the available vaccines.

The government in Vienna issued a travel warning for Tyrol, requiring a negative test for travel to and from the region. Since this policy only applies as of last Friday, and is only in force for 10 days, experts do not expect prevention of spreading.

Ending protective measures under these conditions has been strongly criticized by doctors and scientists. “A hard lockdown makes sense from a medical point of view,” Richard Greil, one of the country’s leading infectious disease experts, told SALZUBRG24 in an interview.

Gerald Gartlehner, an epidemiologist at Danube University in Krems, also criticized the fact that “a lot of time was lost” responding to the South African cluster in Tyrol. It had been known for some time “that Tyrol was becoming a hotspot for the South African mutant.” The current measures are “not optimal,” he said.

Gartlehner noted that vaccines against the variant hardly offer protection. “All indications are that the AstraZeneca vaccine is quite ineffective against the South African variant. If we give the South African virus free rein, then that vaccine, which has the largest share in Austria, will not work.” Other experts confirm this.

Gartlehner makes clear what the result of the government’s irresponsible policy will be. “Every model I know shows the same picture, namely a sharp increase in the incidence of infection due to the relaxations and the British mutation. The only difference is when the threshold of 200 is reached. The pessimists say the end of February; the optimists say the second week of March.”

Andreas Bergthaler, a virologist at the Academy of Sciences, shares this view with the *Kurier* newspaper: “In eastern Austria, the British mutation, which is a lot more contagious, already accounts for up to 40 percent of cases. From an epidemiological standpoint, there is no argument for the current relaxations.”

The unscrupulousness of the government is especially apparent in the opening of schools. To justify risky in-person classes, the so-called “nose-picker test,” an antigen test that the students take themselves, was introduced. Yet the test is both voluntary and obviously totally inadequate.

Gartlehner noted that the fact that only 56 students tested positive in the first “nose-picker test” in schools suggests disfunction of the approach since the percentage should be much higher. Either the tests or the self-performed swabbing did not work well.

Kurz and his government know very well the consequences of their policies and pursue them

deliberately, despite their costing countless lives.

Health Minister Rudolf Anschober (Greens) said earlier this month that re-opening was intended to provide “perspectives” and “security.” In doing so, he admitted that two months ago the health care system had been “on the brink.” At the same time, he noted that clinics still treat hundreds more patients than in normal times.

The brutal policy of re-opening in the interests of the economy is supported by a broad alliance of all parties and trade unions. ÖVP, Greens, SPÖ and the right-wing liberal Neos support the move and thus accede to the demands of the far-right Freedom Party, which for its part now goes even further and demands the complete lifting of all protective measures, even in Tyrol.

SPÖ leader Pamela Rendi-Wagner said the return to face-to-face teaching was “right and necessary.” Neos leader Beate Meinl-Reisinger told the ORF news outlet: “Exactly what we demanded over the weekend will be implemented.”

The head of the teachers’ union, Paul Kimberger, expressly supports the re-opening of schools, even if this puts hundreds of teachers’ lives in danger. In his view, the alternative to face-to-face teaching has reached its limits, he explained in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*. “The realization of the last weeks and months is that distance learning cannot replace face-to-face teaching.”

This shows that the struggle against the reckless policies of European governments requires an independent perspective. It is vital to build independent action committees in schools and workplaces that unite internationally and fight with a socialist perspective against the criminal policies of the ruling elite.



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