

# Austrian government approves comprehensive reopening of businesses

Markus Salzmann  
26 April 2021

Despite high rates of infection, Austria is suspending virtually all protective measures against the spread of the coronavirus from May 19. As new virus strains spread rapidly in the country, the government of the right-wing conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens is thus paving the way for a massive flare-up of infections with catastrophic consequences.

According to the government's plans, hotels, restaurants, sports and cultural facilities are to open without restrictions. Restaurants will then allow four people per table indoors and as many as 10 people per table outdoors. Fitness studios will also be able to reopen. Cultural and sporting events can be attended by up to 1,500 people in enclosed areas, and twice as many in open areas.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz announced even more extensive openings, such as the operation of restaurants at night, large celebrations of clubs and weddings, for the beginning of July.

From May 17, schools, which have been a hotspot of infection activity, will switch to in-person attendance nationwide. There are also to be no more significant restrictions on travel and thus tourism in the Alpine republic. Government representatives explained that a quarantine obligation only applied to high-risk areas. For example, for those entering from Germany, a negative coronavirus test or proof of vaccination would suffice.

The supposedly "strict safety concept" that accompanies the "careful opening up" is nothing more than window dressing and is meant to lull the population into a false sense of security. The millions of tests conducted in the country, which serve as the main justification for reopening the economy, have been going on for several months. However, they have not led to any significant decrease in the number of

infections, as the protective measures are far from sufficient or have been ended too early.

Microbiologist Michael Wagner told the *Wiener Standard*, "Contrary to what is claimed, the model is not a success in my opinion. The infection figures have quadrupled within a short time. Even the many tests have not prevented this."

In February, the government had ended the already mild lockdown, which had previously been imposed due to public pressure and the dramatic situation in hospitals. As a result, the number of infections, and the number of severe cases, rose sharply again.

In Vienna and Lower Austria, restrictions had to be reimposed due to the critical situation in hospitals. At the end of March and the beginning of April, 3,000 new infections were reported daily. Currently, the seven-day average is still above 2,300 new infections daily. One day before the reopening was announced, the 10,000th death from COVID-19 was recorded in a country with just 8 million inhabitants.

Currently, the seven-day incidence is 182 per 100,000. Several provinces are still significantly higher. In Tyrol, it is 205, in Vienna 211 and Vorarlberg even 218. For months, hospitals have been at their limits, the number of patients in intensive care units is hardly decreasing, while the course of the illness tends to be more severe and the patients younger.

Like Germany and other European countries, doctors and scientists are speaking out against a further reopening. Tyrol has the highest proportion of cases of the B.1.1.7 E484K strain worldwide. This is a so-called "escape mutation" of the British variant, which also has characteristics of the South African (B1.351) and Brazilian (P.1) variants. Initial investigations have shown that the mutation is not only significantly more contagious than previous pathogens but has also

developed resistance to common vaccinations.

In laboratory tests, the new variant reduced the protection offered by the Biontech/Pfizer vaccine by a factor of 10. According to the study published in the scientific journal *Nature*, the variant poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of the vaccine. According to reports, there are already at least 1,800 reported cases of this strain in Tyrol.

Chancellor Kurz and his government are well aware of the enormous dangers posed by the reopening of businesses. Kurz explicitly stated that a renewed increase in the number of coronavirus infections was to be expected given the reopening plans. He added that “if there is a dramatic development in certain regions,” one must “of course react there” and “take steps to tighten things up.”

Green Party leader and Vice-Chancellor Werner Kogler ignored all warnings from experts and, given the announced reopenings, even declared, “There is already a certain anticipation in the air.”

A key architect of the unscrupulous reopening policy is the new Green Health Minister Wolfgang Mückstein. He took over the post only a week ago from Rudolf Anschober, who resigned for health reasons.

Mückstein, a general practitioner, is an eager careerist for the Greens who had already been active in the background for some time. He was instrumental in drafting the current government programme on health issues and is highly regarded by the ÖVP coalition partner as well as by business circles.

Mückstein has campaigned for school reopenings with the argument that children showed increased depression and sleep disorders due to the lockdown. The same argument has been used for months by the right-wing extremist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in its fight for a mass infection of the population.

Furthermore, Mückstein cynically complained that “chronically ill people were being treated badly and too late, also acutely ill people.” He conceals the fact that it is the government’s criminal coronavirus policy that has led to the catastrophic conditions in the health sector. Despite mass infections and illnesses of pupils, teachers and parents in the pandemic, Mückstein described the complete reopening of schools as an important psychosocial measure.

The Austrian government, like everywhere else in Europe, is oriented exclusively toward the interests of

the economy and the super-rich. Business associations had massively pushed for the reopening of restaurants and the hotel industry. “What we need is a broad upswing for everyone,” the president of the Chamber of Commerce Harald Mahrer demanded, for example.

It is hardly surprising that the government’s decision was welcomed across party lines. All the state premiers, whether from the ÖVP or the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), support the plans. The right-wing New Austria and Liberal Forum’s only criticism was that the reopening would come too late. The far-right FPÖ also demanded an end to the compulsory wearing of masks and any restrictions.

The so-called “social partners” are also behind the ruthless herd immunity policy. Renate Anderl, president of the Chamber of Labour, and Wolfgang Katzian, president of the ÖGB trade union federation, explicitly agreed with the plans in an interview with PULS 24. They praised the reopenings as a “perspective” for employees. Addressing the jump in infection figures in Vorarlberg after reopening steps were taken, Anderl said these were “important” for the Chamber of Labour because they meant an “upswing for the economy.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**