

Coronavirus pandemic in Austria runs out of control

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The unscrupulous policies of Austria's ruling parties in recent months have led to mass coronavirus infections and high death rates. On Friday, the country of 8.9 million people recorded 15,809 new infections, one of the highest infection rates in all of Europe. Over the weekend, around 15,000 people were also infected daily. On Thursday, the threshold of one million infections was exceeded.

More than 12,000 people have lost their lives since the pandemic began. The country's hospitals are collapsing under the high number of intensive care patients. The 7-day incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants has been above 1,000 for days. In several provinces, it far exceeds that. In Salzburg, it was 1,805 on Friday and in Upper Austria 1,677. The vaccination rate of 66 percent is very low compared to other European countries.

The ferocious wave of infections has been raging for weeks in all sectors of society. In addition to hospitals and nursing homes, schools and kindergartens, in particular, have been exposed to the contagion. In the second week of school after the autumn vacations in the middle of the month, 3,520 PCR tests returned positive results at schools.

According to the Ministry of Education and the City of Vienna, there were 965 positive tests in Vienna alone (862 students, 103 teachers), in Upper Austria there were 673 students, in Lower Austria 406, in Styria 328, in Tyrol 248, in Carinthia 235, in Salzburg 209, in Vorarlberg 96 and in Burgenland 73. Since there is no thorough testing regime, the number of unreported cases is many times higher.

The long-term consequences of this policy are not even foreseeable yet. Since spring 2021, the Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES), MedUni Graz and the Austrian Society for Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine (ÖGKJ) have been conducting a study into this. Most recently, the first interim results from 755 children up to 14 years of age were presented.

Salzburger Nachrichten quoted Daniela ThSchmid, the AGES study coordinator, saying, "Sixty percent of the children who tested positive developed clinical symptoms of COVID-19 disease. Just under 7 percent presented to a physician; 2.4 percent were hospitalized." Later than four weeks after infection, Long COVID symptoms were observed in 11 percent of children under 10 years of age. Ten- to 14-year-old children were affected even more frequently, at 15.5 percent. The most common Long COVID symptoms observed were generally increased fatigue (4.2 percent), followed by impaired sense of smell and taste (3 percent) and shortness of breath. Symptoms were still observed in 6.2 percent of respondents more than three months after infection.

Staff in the country's hospitals have long since reached the limit of their capacity, and regular care of patients is no longer possible. A nurse from a hospital in Upper Austria told the APA news agency about the dire conditions there. From Sunday night to Monday the previous week, she said, there were so many deaths in her hospital that the pathology department was already at its limit. "Bodies had to be deposited in the corridor because of overcrowding."

In hospitals in the province of Salzburg, virtually all intensive care beds are occupied. Last Wednesday, 30 of the total 136 intensive care beds were occupied by COVID-19 patients. Under these conditions, triage measures—i.e., the selection of which patient can be treated and which patient is doomed to die—are being prepared concretely. A spokesman for Salzburg regional hospitals explained that a team of doctors had been nominated to decide which patients could still be treated with intensive care. It was necessary to warn "the population and politicians from this time on that we are up against the wall," the hospital spokesman said.

In this small state alone, there is currently a shortage of 272 hospital beds. In addition, there is a shortage of

medical and nursing staff. Because of the sharp rise in the number of infections, the state of Salzburg also expects a further massive increase in COVID-19 patients.

The federal government coalition of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Green Party, as well as the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), which is in government in several states, is responsible for the catastrophic situation in the Alpine republic. Since the beginning of the pandemic, all parties have all been implementing in essence the policies of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which most openly advocates the criminal and murderous policy of deliberate mass infection.

This cannot be obscured even by the lockdown that went into effect on Monday, which the government only decided upon on Friday. The same regulations now apply that were used in previous lockdowns in Austria. For example, there are restrictions on leaving homes. This is now only allowed for shopping, visits to doctors and relatives, work or outdoor exercise. Only supermarkets and stores supplying daily needs remain open; other stores are closed. The same applies to cultural institutions and indoor sports facilities. In addition, the introduction of a general vaccination requirement is being discussed.

As with previous measures, those now adopted come much too late and are far from sufficient. Initially, the measures are to apply for only 20 days, until December 12. This period is not enough to reduce the number of infections to the extent that would be necessary.

The government is trying to maintain the "profits before lives" policy at all costs. Despite the explosion in infections, businesses and schools remain open. Although parents are free to choose not to send their children to in-person classes, the unrestricted opening of businesses means that parents have little opportunity to make that choice.

Last year, under then Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP), Austria was already the pioneer in its reopening policy. Although the country was one of the starting points of the pandemic in Europe, the People's Party and the Greens have always refused to impose the scientifically necessary protective measures, citing economic interests. Half-hearted, short "lockdowns" were ordered several times. After they ended, wide-ranging reopenings always resulted in a huge increase in the number of infections.

Last month, Kurz was forced to resign after the Central Public Prosecutor's Office for the Prosecution of Economic Crimes and Corruption searched the Federal Chancellery, the Ministry of Finance and the ÖVP party

headquarters. Kurz and his closest associates have been accused of serious embezzlement, bribery and making false statements.

But policies have not changed in any way as a result. Kurz's successor, Alexander Schallenberg, declared just a few days ago that there would be no "lockdown in solidarity with the unvaccinated." Vice Chancellor Werner Kogler and Health Minister Wolfgang Mückstein (both Greens) also resisted the urgent advice and demands of doctors and scientists who had been warning for months of the catastrophe that has now occurred.

The government's unscrupulous herd immunity policies, largely in line with those of the FPÖ and QAnon types, have strengthened these far-right forces.

While tens of thousands are becoming infected daily and dozens die from COVID-19, large demonstrations against coronavirus protections were again permitted in Vienna and were escorted by police. Predominantly right-wing and openly fascist groups called for participation in these demonstrations and, according to media reports, mobilized about 30,000 people from Austria and abroad. The demonstrators included convicted neo-Nazi Gottfried Küssel and Identitarian leader Martin Sellner.

Although there were indications of possible attacks on hospitals and vaccination centres, the Vienna police said they did not expect the situation to escalate. And even after demonstrators carried out attacks, the protests could be carried out and ended unhindered. The close ties between the state and right-wing extremist elements were also shown by the call of high-ranking military representatives to participate in the protests.



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