

Austria ends partial lockdown

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13 December 2021

On Sunday, the Austrian government ended the limited lockdown, which had brought about a slight reduction in the number of infections after less than three weeks, in almost all provinces. In view of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, the new chancellor Karl Nehammer (Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP) is continuing the herd immunity strategy of his predecessors Sebastian Kurz and Alexander Schallenberg.

In mid-November, the ÖVP and Green Party coalition government had decided on a lockdown for the unvaccinated, extending it to everyone a week later because the infection incidence levels had run completely out of control. The situation in Austria's hospitals was catastrophic. The high number of cases meant a system of triage was introduced, deciding who would receive life-saving treatment and who did not. Morgues were completely full. The seven-day incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants rose above 1,000, and in several states and among children and adolescents it was far higher.

The lockdown was limited to the same regulations that had been applied earlier: restrictions on leaving the home, closure of stores not serving daily needs, closure of indoor cultural and sports venues. Schools and businesses, on the other hand, remained open without restrictions.

Although the measures came far too late and were insufficient to stop the rising levels of infection in the first place, the contact restrictions did lead to a drop in infections from over 15,000 a day in mid-November to 5,016 at last count. The incidence rate is still just under 400 per 100,000. Since a drop in hospitalisations is only noticeable after about two weeks, there has only been a slight drop in the number of coronavirus admissions in the last few days.

In this situation, the government is now essentially lifting all measures. People with proof of being

vaccinated or recovered can once again frequent restaurants, hotels, theatres, cinemas and other establishments. Parties are permitted with up to 25 people indoors, and far more outdoors. Cinemas and theatres are allowed to seat up to 2,000 people. Ski resorts are also resuming tourist operations.

The public prosecutor's office has closed the criminal investigation into the spread of coronavirus in Ischgl, which with other Tyrolean winter sports resorts had seen more than 6,000 people from 45 countries been proven to be infected in a single month at the beginning of the pandemic. Some 32 of those infected died, and the virus spread from there throughout Europe.

"No charges will be brought," the public prosecutor's office in Innsbruck announced. There was no evidence "that anyone had culpably done or omitted to do anything that would have led to an increase in the risk of infection." Investigations had been conducted against five officials from the competent authorities.

The provinces where incidence and hospitalization rates are still dramatically high are extending the measures by only a few days: Upper Austria by a week, Vienna, Salzburg, Lower Austria and Styria by a few days.

From February next year, vaccination will be compulsory for everyone over the age of 14. Vaccination refusers face fines of up to 3,600 euros. So far, the vaccination rate of around 67 percent is far too low.

Compulsory vaccination is necessary, but the government is not backing away from its criminal policies. For one thing, the February deadline is far too late. For another, the emergence of the Omicron variant underscores that vaccination alone cannot stop the pandemic. Nor is that the government's goal.

According to Health Minister Wolfgang Mückstein (Greens), himself a medical doctor, the law should remain valid for two years. In this way, the government

wants to be prepared for further waves of the pandemic. Until now, Mückstein had always been an opponent of compulsory vaccination. Now he declares that no more predictions will be made about the course of the pandemic and about procedures for its containment.

Scientists and physicians have strongly criticized the relaxation of measures to contain the spread of infection. The predicted “breathing space” is likely to be a short one, according to Katharina Reich, director general for public health.

The Coronavirus Commission, an expert advisory panel, expects the situation to soon worsen again because of the spread of the Omicron variant. Several commission members point to the continuing critical situation in intensive care units. So many operations have been postponed that it would be extremely difficult to catch up with them all, they said.

In view of the relaxations, molecular biologist Ulrich Elling, who welcomes both mandatory vaccination and the lockdown from a medical point of view, sees a danger that a fifth wave could develop as early as January or February, which would be far worse than the previous ones. According to initial models, Omicron is expected to have a broad impact starting in that time frame. Experts assume that the occupancy rate in intensive care units will then still be too high to cope with a new wave of infections.

The People’s Party and the Greens are fully aware of this. Mückstein stated in parliament at the beginning of the month that the infection figures were still at a very high level and that the situation in hospitals was dire. Triage is being employed not only in regard to minor operations, but also in operations for cancer patients. In some cases, he said, decisions have to be made about which patient has more chance of survival.

The callousness with which Mückstein speaks about the brutal effects of his own policies is characteristic of the entire government. The new chancellor, Karl Nehammer, a former professional soldier, is regarded as a domestic policy hardliner and has been called the “deportation king” in the press, and not without reason.

The fact that Nehammer’s successor at the Interior Ministry is Gerhard Karner (ÖVP) shows that the government is preparing for a confrontation with the working class in view of its unscrupulous policies. Karner is considered a supporter and defender of Austro-fascism. In Texingtal, Lower Austria, where

Karner was mayor, there is a museum honouring Engelbert Dollfuss, the Austrian chancellor who paved the way for fascism.

Dollfuss dissolved parliament in 1933 and established an authoritarian regime modelled on Mussolini’s Italian fascism and based on the Catholic Church and the Heimwehr (Home Guard), recruited from fascist circles in the military and declassed elements from rural areas. Like German and Italian fascism, Dollfuss’s regime was directed against the working class and its social democratic and communist representatives.

The museum has long been criticized by historians for its “homage” to the fascist corporate state. As mayor, Karner supported and promoted the museum, refusing to accept any criticism. Even as Interior Minister, he refused to comment on it.



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