

Paradigm shift in Austria: Government openly advocates deliberate mass infection

Markus Salzmann
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The rapid spread of the Omicron virus across Europe, enabled by the complete inaction of governments, will lead to increasingly catastrophic conditions in the coming days and weeks, experts say.

In Austria, which has repeatedly been a pioneer in terms of relaxing any measures meant to combat the virus since the beginning of the pandemic, the devastating effects of the government's "profits before lives" policy are already becoming apparent. The coalition of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens has now made a "paradigm shift" and is openly promoting the deliberate mass infection of the population.

Within a few days, the daily number of infections has increased fivefold. On January 9, more than 10,000 new infections were recorded in one day for the first time since December 1, the highest figure on a Sunday. The 7-day incidence rate is 606 per 100,000 inhabitants. In total, 13,844 people have died of COVID-19 in a country of nearly 9 million people.

Now that the government has lifted almost all protective measures and there are no significant restrictions on tourism, the Omicron variant is spreading with tremendous speed, especially in tourist areas.

In the Tyrol, the 7-day incidence rate is twice as high as the national average. In the ski resort of Flachau in the province of Salzburg, the incidence rate on Friday was no less than 7,500, not including the number of unreported cases. At the beginning of the year, almost 1,000 people in the Netherlands tested positive when they returned from their holidays in Austria.

In the meantime, many hotels and restaurants can no longer operate because a large part of their staff is infected and in quarantine. Christian Harisch, head of the Kitzbühel Tourism Association, told the APA news agency that the quarantine period should be "cancelled altogether." This would mean sick and infectious employees being forced to work to secure the profits of the tourism industry.

In the ski resort of Ischgl, which was the starting point for the spread of the virus in Europe in 2020, hotels and ski slopes are full again. In the après-ski bar Kitzloch, where hundreds were infected at that time, there was recently another outbreak after an employee became infected.

All investigations into the 2020 incidents have since been dropped by the public prosecutor's office. Although around 6,000 people had been infected, of whom 32 had died, the authorities concluded that no one was "culpable of doing or omitting to do anything that would have led to an increase in the risk of infection."

Victims and their survivors accuse the responsible authorities of making serious mistakes in dealing with the outbreak. In a report in October 2020, an independent expert commission found that at the beginning of the pandemic, staff had continued to work in the Kitzloch despite flu-like symptoms. The responsible authorities played down the situation for weeks.

The virus is now also spreading outside the tourist areas. For Upper Austria, according to a current forecast, provincial crisis staff predict a 7-day incidence rate of up to 5,000 in the next few days. Above all, the end of the school holidays, and thus the return to in-person teaching, will fuel the spread of the virus.

At the end of last week, Education Minister Martin Polaschek (ÖVP) stated that it was out of the question that schools would not reopen for in-person teaching throughout the country. The current coronavirus figures played "no real role" in the start of school, Polaschek said, revealing his absolute indifference to the lives and health of pupils and teachers.

At the same time, more children had to be treated in hospital last year than the previous year. In Salzburg, 40 children were hospitalised because of coronavirus in 2020; in 2021 this figure rose to 121. Five percent of them needed intensive medical treatment. The risk for unvaccinated children is significantly higher than for vaccinated children. Currently, not even 50 percent of school children are vaccinated.

Numerous experts have long warned of the consequences of the ÖVP-Green government's policies. Austrian molecular biologist Ulrich Elling criticised the government's complete inaction: "With the momentum Omicron is unleashing, we need to put the brakes on more than ever before it's too late."

The scientist stressed that it is entirely possible to act against the virus, but this was simply not being done. "If we let Omicron break through because we are fed up with the pandemic, then we are no longer taking care of the vulnerable."

Elling regards the opening of schools as particularly ominous.

“When children meet in school, Omicron takes off.” If the Omicron variant was given free rein, as is currently happening, camp beds would have to be set up in exhibition halls to cater for everyone who was ill at the same time, he said.

Austrian epidemiologist Gerald Gartlehner also expects Omicron to place a heavy burden on hospitals. He fears the “acute danger of overloading intensive care units.”

The People’s Party and the Greens, as well as the other establishment parties, are deliberately ignoring all the warnings. Although Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP) was recently infected with coronavirus, he categorically rules out taking any measures against it. To slow down the number of infections, a radical lockdown would be necessary. But “that must be prevented,” as Nehammer says.

Last Thursday, the government changed the quarantine rules so that triple-vaccinated people are no longer considered contacts and thus do not have to be quarantined. On Friday, Katharina Reich, the head of the Covid Crisis Coordination (Gecko), which operates at federal level, confirmed in an interview with broadcaster Ö1 that this would lead to the wider population becoming infected.

With unbelievable callousness, Reich stated that herd immunity was “negative wording” that caused fear. Omicron, however, was “so contagious that we cannot get around it.”

On news programme ZIB2, Health Minister Wolfgang Mückstein (Greens) spoke of a “paradigm shift.” The physician claimed an infection with Omicron was basically “mild,” a demonstrable lie. He said even the introduction of compulsory vaccination, originally decided for February, which alone would still not be enough to stop the spread, might be postponed.

Reich went on to say that in future, the government would also move away from using the number of occupied intensive care beds as a criterion for initiating protective measures. This means that there will be no restrictions even if hospitals collapse under the weight of patient numbers.

Since this criminal policy is bound to provoke resistance, the government has put the army in charge of Gecko. General Rudolf Striedinger was appointed as one of the two heads of the crisis team. The decision makes clear that the government does not regard the pandemic as a medical problem but as a security issue.

At the same time, it is well known that the army is riddled with right-wing anti-vaxxers and coronavirus deniers. High-ranking officers regularly appear at anti-vaccination demonstrations. These include Colonel Hermann H. Mitterer, who belongs to the group “Beamte für Aufklärung” (Officials for Enlightenment) and aggressively speaks out against COVID vaccinations. The group’s Telegram messaging channel is followed by around 1,800 people, most of them members of the armed forces.

Mitterer spreads slogans about a “fake pandemic” and similar reactionary nonsense. In 2018, he published a book

titled *Bevölkerungsaustausch in Europa: Wie eine globale Elite die Massenmigration nutzt, um die einheimische Bevölkerung zu ersetzen* (The Great Replacement in Europe: How a Global Elite Uses Mass Migration to Replace the Native Population). He is closely networked with openly fascist circles, which at no point has harmed his career in the Austrian Armed Forces.

The Bundesheergewerkschaft, the army staff union close to the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), also openly appears at demonstrations in Vienna against coronavirus measures. At all levels, the most backward and right-wing elements are being promoted to bolster official government policy.

A lecture series is currently taking place at Viennese universities under the title “Coronavirus—A transdisciplinary challenge,” featuring well-known right-wing extremists, coronavirus deniers and anti-vaxxers.

Andreas Sönnichsen, who is close to the Querdenken (the German equivalent of Q Anon), the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the FPÖ, lectured that COVID-19 was nonexistent for people under 45. Christian Schubert, a medical doctor from Innsbruck, spoke against wearing masks and against any vaccination. In addition, other “scientists” with connections to the far-right milieu also appear at such gatherings. According to a report by radio FM4, people who had already denied the existence of AIDS or compared mRNA vaccination with anti-personnel mines in the past are promoted in material accompanying the lectures.

The brutal politics of mass death must be countered by the working class with a rigorous Zero COVID policy. This requires the independent and international organisation of the working class and youth into rank-and-file committees in workplaces and schools to ensure safe conditions, defend the social right to a safe workplace and introduce a public health policy that saves lives and ends the pandemic.



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