

Massive increase in COVID-19 in Austria after protective measures ended

Markus Salzmann**21 March 2022**

The number of COVID-19 infections is reaching new records every day in Austria after almost all protective measures were lifted on March 5. Despite this, the last remaining quarantine regulations were abandoned Monday. This development underlines the inhuman character of a policy that prioritizes profit over the life and health of people.

On Friday, more than 50,000 new infections were reported for the third day in a row. With 51,112 cases, the number of infections reached the third highest level since the beginning of the pandemic. The Ministry of Health again expects more than 50,000 infections a day this week. The 7-day incidence is 3,600 infections per 100,000 inhabitants. Almost 450,000 people are actively infected, of whom 3,040 are receiving treatment in hospital. Between 20 and 30 people die on average every day.

The total number of people who died of COVID-19 now stands at 15,344. Among the almost 9 million inhabitants of the country, 3.4 million infections have been officially registered since the beginning of the pandemic. The number of unreported cases is undoubtedly much higher. Hospitals are treating 297 more people than a week ago, 207 of them receiving intensive care.

Since March 5, clubs and restaurants throughout the country have been open without restrictions. There are no longer any attendee limits at events. The mask mandate was completely abolished with few exceptions. Other than in hospitals and nursing homes, there are no longer any access restrictions.

To cover up the extent of the infections, the government, a coalition of the right-wing conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens, will severely restrict free tests from April 1. Only five PCR tests and five antigen tests are available free of charge

per person per month. There will only be exceptions for people in hospitals or nursing homes, the elderly and people with symptoms.

As of Monday, all quarantine regulations will cease to apply. Since previously vaccinated contact persons were already exempted from quarantine, the latest relaxation also applies to unvaccinated contact persons. Exceptions apply only to restaurants and event attendees.

From the middle of the week onwards, health workers who have tested positive will continue working. This means that in hospitals and nursing homes, the sick and infirm will be exposed even more than at present to the risk of infection, not to mention the threat of further virus spread among the staff themselves. The number of infections and deaths in the health and care sector will continue to increase as a result.

As of last Friday, employees in the state of Lower Austria who test positive are allowed to resume work in health and care facilities if they have been symptom-free for only two days.

The government justifies the measures on the grounds that there is an extreme shortage of personnel in hospitals and nursing homes, as many employees are infected with COVID-19 and must be quarantined. The fact that this was caused by the previous relaxation of protective measures is deliberately concealed.

Health Minister Johannes Rauch (Greens) is hypocritical about the health situation. Talks with hospital operators and social service organisations have given him cause for concern, he claims. "The operations can only be maintained with difficulty," said Rauch.

In fact, conditions are catastrophic. For example, at the state hospital in Baden-Mödling all scheduled admissions and procedures had to be cancelled for at

least two weeks. The hospital cited the high staff shortages as a reason. Of the 22,000 employees of Lower Austrian state hospitals, 1,812 were reported sick with a confirmed infection or as contact person on Friday. According to the Baden-Mödling hospital, there is no end in sight to this development.

In Vienna, under pressure from the hospitals, Mayor Michael Ludwig (Social Democrats, SPÖ) was forced to severely restrict visits to hospitals and nursing homes. For example, only one visitor per patient per day is allowed in hospitals, and two people per day in facilities for the elderly. Ludwig admitted that the number of patients was rising rapidly. In addition, there are widespread staff absences.

The 2G rule, which states that someone must either be vaccinated or recovered, will also continue to apply in the catering sector, as will the mask requirement in retail, according to the mayor of Vienna. However, these measures are far from sufficient to curb the spread in a sustainable manner.

The announcement by Health Minister Rauch that the abolition of mask mandates in public spaces will be reversed from the middle of the week will also have no significant effect in view of the mass spread of the virus.

This is especially true if mask mandates are not reintroduced in schools—a major driver of the pandemic. According to Rauch, he is still in talks with the Ministry of Education on how to proceed. Minister of Education Martin Polaschek (ÖVP) is a strong advocate of a radical policy of mass infection in schools and rejects outright any protective measures for pupils and teachers.

Federal Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP) and Vice Chancellor Werner Kogler (Greens), who have adopted the policy of lifting all protective measures, are indifferent to the catastrophic consequences of the unchecked mass infection of the population. Their response to the current crisis is to focus on calls for rearmament and militarization.

The increase in the army budget to 1 percent of GDP (€4.3 billion) per year has already been decided. It currently stands at 0.74 percent (€2.7 billion). There are calls in the military leadership for an increase of €6 billion to €10 billion over the next 10 years.

Eurofighter jets are currently being upgraded. The Ministry of Defence confirmed this following a request

from the APA news agency. The fighter planes are to be equipped with night vision and identification capability, electronic self-protection and radar-guided missiles.

As in Germany, the Greens play the leading role in militarization. Thus, Kogler declared his support for the reintroduction of compulsory military exercises, which can last for several months. This would extend the six-month military service accordingly. The exercises were abolished in 2006. “This debate must be conducted,” Kogler demanded.

The war in Ukraine is now serving as a pretext for implementing long-held rearmament plans. Russia’s attack on Ukraine had “brought about a change” in the views of the Greens on the federal army, Kogler remarked. Due to the new threat picture, there will have to be investment in defence, he said.



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