

Smokers' paradise Austria struggles to stub out habit

September 26 2014, by Thomas Bach

In the wood-panelled rooms of Vienna's traditional coffee houses, tobacco-lovers can still light up pretty much as they please. But one of the last smokers' havens in Europe may be on course to kick the habit.

Even diehard smokers, when arriving in Austria, are in for a shock at the clouds of blue haze filling bars and restaurants, long after the rest of western and central Europe stubbed out puffing in [public places](#).

A partial smoking ban came into force in Austria in January 2009, but the list of exceptions was long.

Small cafes and eateries under 50 square metres (500 square feet) can ignore the ban, while larger establishments need only provide a non-smoking section.

Many punters simply prop the doors open and carry on puffing regardless, prompting self-proclaimed "sheriffs" to patrol the streets and file complaints.

"The current law was set up to fail," says Manfred Neuberger, a professor at Vienna's Medical University, who has led several studies on smoking bans in Europe and Austria.

But the anti-smoking camp is set for a boost after Austria's newly appointed health minister Sabine Oberhauser called for a total ban on smoking in public places within five years.

"I would like to finalise this now, agree to a transition period and have a total ban in place by a deadline—the aim being within five years," she said in a recent interview.

Her plan is likely to run into stiff resistance and she admits no decision will be taken without involving the hospitality industry, which strongly opposes a ban.

Many agree however it's time for some clarity.

"This law we have, I find it pretty ridiculous: either you have a ban or you don't. This just doesn't suit anyone," said 38-year-old Roman, sat in the landmark Cafe Drechsler in central Vienna.

The Viennese institution bade farewell to smokers after a court ordered it to make the path to the toilets smoke-free, which would have required costly alterations.

But it is a rarity. Even Vienna's General Hospital has a "Tabak" selling cigarettes right in the entrance.

Heavy smokers, cheap cigarettes

Cigarettes are significantly cheaper in Austria than elsewhere in western Europe at an average of 4.90 euros (\$6.30) per pack, compared to seven euros in France or 11 euros in Britain.

Austrians are the fourth-heaviest smokers in Europe, according to the latest Eurobarometer poll in 2012.

Thirty-three percent of people in the small alpine country light up on a regular basis, compared to an EU average of 28 percent and far more than the French or Italians. Only Greeks, Bulgarians and Latvians smoke

more.

Many observers believe a culture of government compromise bordering on indecisiveness is to blame for the slow moves towards a ban.

The Social Democrats and conservative Austrian People's Party have ruled together almost continuously since 1945—and both are liable to be swayed against a ban by the country's vocal smoker's lobby.

As a result, "it's difficult to impose anything," according to Karl Krajic, a sociologist and health expert with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute in Vienna.

Austria's Chamber of Commerce opposes a total ban in public places, saying restaurants and cafes invested close to 100 million euros to make alterations in line with the 2009 law.

But some in the sector are open to change.

"If there is a total ban, it will create a level playing field again for everybody," said Cafe Drechsler's owner Robert Kollmann.

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