

Austria to impose partial lockdown, mandatory jabs

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Austria on Friday became the first EU country to announce it would make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory and will next week impose a partial lockdown in the face of spiralling infections.

The lockdown, which comes into effect Monday, constitutes the toughest

restrictions introduced in Europe in recent weeks as COVID-19 cases surge continent-wide, fuelled by vaccine resistance.

Austrians will not be allowed to leave home except to go to work, shop for essentials and exercise. The restrictions will initially last 20 days with an evaluation after 10 days, Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said.

Schools will remain open, although parents have been asked to keep their children at home if possible. Working from home is also recommended.

Vaccination against COVID-19 in the Alpine nation will be mandatory from February 1 next year, Schallenberg said. So far, the Vatican alone in Europe has imposed a vaccination mandate.

"Despite months of persuasion, we have not succeeded in convincing enough people to get vaccinated," Schallenberg told a press conference, calling vaccinations the only "exit ticket" out of the pandemic.

Austria has already imposed movement restrictions on those not vaccinated or recently recovered from the virus, ordering them to stay at home since Monday, becoming the first EU country to do so.

But infections have continued to rise. On Friday, a new record of more than 15,800 new cases was recorded in the EU member of nearly nine million people.

'Tragedy'

"I was hoping that there wouldn't be a general lockdown," said Markus Horvath as he prepared to shut from Monday his stall selling wooden jewellery at a Christmas market in Vienna.

Christian Edlmayr, selling glass ornaments at another Vienna Christmas

market, said he would lose half his yearly revenue.

"This will be very, very bad for me," he said.

Under the partial lockdown, only outlets deemed essential will remain open such as supermarkets, banks, pharmacies and post offices.

Andreas Schneider, a 31-year-old from Belgium who works as an economist in the Austrian capital, also described the lockdown as a "tragedy", saying confining just the unvaccinated had been "reasonable" since they had a choice.

Other European countries are also re-introducing curbs to fight the virus' spread.

On Friday, the German state of Bavaria cancelled all of its popular Christmas markets this year, and announced a shutdown of clubs, bars and night service at restaurants.

"The situation is very, very serious and difficult," state premier Markus Soeder told a news conference.

Last Saturday, the Netherlands shut bars, restaurants, cafes and supermarkets from 8:00 pm for three weeks with non-essential shops forced to shut at 6:00 pm.

Protests

In Austria, demand for vaccinations has increased in recent days, and 66 percent of the population are now fully jabbed, slightly below the EU average of more than 67 percent.

Outside Europe, Indonesia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have made

COVID-19 vaccination mandatory, while the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia has also decided to impose vaccination from the end of December.

On Friday, Austrian opposition party NEOs said the government should have acted sooner to avoid intensive care units from struggling, while the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) described the country as a "dictatorship" over its plan to make vaccinations mandatory.

On Sunday, hundreds demonstrated against the lockdown for the unvaccinated. The FPÖ is planning a bigger rally on Saturday.

On Monday, Vienna city authorities also became the first in the EU to start inoculating children between the ages of five and 11.

They said they would increase the offer in line with high demand even though the European Medicines Agency (EMA) has not yet approved any of the coronavirus vaccines for the five-to-11 age bracket.

Canada on Friday became the latest country to authorise the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for children aged between five and 11-years-old.

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