

Austria begins national lockdown to fight surging infections

November 22 2021, by Emily Schultheis



People walk on a street decorated with Christmas lights in Vienna, Austria, Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

Austria went into a nationwide lockdown early Monday to combat

soaring coronavirus infections, a step being closely watched by other European governments struggling with national outbreaks that are straining health care systems.

The measures are expected to last for a maximum of 20 days but will be reevaluated after 10. They require people to stay home apart from basic reasons like getting groceries, going to the doctor and exercising. Restaurants and most shops must close and larger events will be canceled. Schools and day care centers can remain open, but parents are encouraged to keep their children home.

Austria hopes to lift the measures on Dec. 13 but may keep a further lockdown on the unvaccinated.

The new lockdown measures kicked in a day after many Austrians hurriedly enjoyed a last day out at coffeehouses and Christmas markets across the country.

Christmas markets across central Vienna were packed Sunday with people eager to buy gifts and enjoy one last round of warm drinks and food. At the Freyung Christmas market in Vienna, Alexandra Ljesevic and her sister Anna sipped mulled wine and punch amid wooden stands and under sparkling holiday lights.

"It's the last chance to feel the Christmas time and vibes," Alexandra Ljesevic said.



People wait in line to enter a cafe in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

The sisters said they feel luckier than most, since their jobs won't be affected by the lockdown. But they're not optimistic that things will reopen as quickly as authorities hope.

"It would be weird if in 20 days they said, 'Okay, for vaccinated people, you're free to go,' if the hospitals are still overwhelmed," said Anna Ljesevic. "That's the only reason why we even need the lockdown."

Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg also announced Friday that Austria will also introduce a vaccine mandate as of Feb. 1. The details of how the mandate will work aren't yet clear.

In an interview Sunday in the Kurier newspaper, Schallenberg said it's "sad" that the Austrian government had to resort to a mandate in order to ensure that enough people get vaccinated. Just under 66% of Austria's 8.9 million people are fully vaccinated, one of the lowest rates in Western Europe.



People walk by the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

On Saturday, Austria reported 15,297 new infections, after a week in which daily cases topped 10,000. Hospitals, especially those in the hardest hit regions of Salzburg and Upper Austria, are overwhelmed as the number of coronavirus patients rises in intensive care units.

Schallenberg said he and other officials had hoped this summer that a new lockdown would not be necessary and it was a tough decision to impose one that affected vaccinated people.

"That people's freedoms need to be restricted again is, believe me, also difficult for me to bear," he said.

The new measures, especially the vaccine mandate, have been met with fierce opposition among some Austrians and vaccine skeptics. A Saturday protest in the capital of Vienna drew 40,000 people, according to police, including members of far-right parties and groups.



A woman holds a child while attending mass at the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

Interior Minister Karl Nehammer said Sunday that the country's anti-coronavirus protest scene is radicalizing.

An "extremely diverse group of people" took part in the anti-vaccination protests, Nehammer said, according to the Austrian Press Agency, adding that included concerned citizens but also right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis.

The lockdown is strictest measure Austrian officials have introduced to combat a fourth surge of infections and deaths. Earlier this month, the government first tried to pressure unvaccinated people to get the jab, barring them from restaurants, hotels and large events. Then officials implemented lockdown measures just for unvaccinated people.

Nehammer said Sunday that police performed 150,000 checks in just one week to see if people outside of their homes were complying with the new rules, according to APA.



A couple walks by a statue with a face mask on at the Prater amusement park in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



People ride in a carousel at the Prater amusement park in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A woman covers her mouth and nose with a napkin as she walks by a small camp set up by opposers of the COVID-19 protection regulations in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



Foto tomada en un mercado navideño en Viena el 20 de noviembre del 2021.
Credit: Foto AP/Vadim Ghirda



People wearing face masks visit the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, Sunday, Nov. 21, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A couple stops in front of a shop window in Vienna, Austria, Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



People sit at an outdoor cafe on a street decorated with Christmas lights in Vienna, Austria, Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A woman walks by a gift shop at a Christmas market in Vienna, Austria, Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



People take pictures as a sweets shop employee handles furniture after closing time in Vienna, Austria, Saturday, Nov. 20, 2021. The Austrian government announced a nationwide lockdown that will start Monday and comes as average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks and hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that intensive care units are reaching capacity. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

At the Christmas market Sunday on Vienna's iconic Rathausplatz square, Rene Schlosser and Silvia Weidenauer sipped mulled wine from heart-shaped red mugs. They came for the day from their home in Austria's Waldviertel region to get a glimpse of the markets before everything shut down.

"You have to accept it," Weidenauer said of the [lockdown](#). "There's no

other option. All you can do is hope that these days when everything is closed actually have an effect."

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