# Facing surge, Austria will mandate COVID-19 shots, lock down

November 12 2021, by Emily Schultheis and Kirsten Grieshaber

People line up for vaccination in front of the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg says the country will go into a national lockdown to contain a fourth wave of coronavirus cases. Schallenberg said the lockdown will start Monday, Nov.22 and initially last for 10 days. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

Austria announced a national lockdown and a plan to mandate vaccinations as coronavirus infections hit a record high Friday, forcing the government to walk back promises that strict shutdowns were a thing of the past.

While the scope of the proposed mandate was unclear, a blanket requirement would be a first for a Western country. Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said those who didn't comply would likely be fined but gave no other details.

The moves come as vaccinations in Austria have plateaued at one of the lowest rates in Western Europe, and as hospitals in heavily hit states have warned that their intensive care units are reaching capacity. Average daily deaths have tripled in recent weeks—though the number of fatalities reported over the past week remains well below the high of last winter and 13 U.S. states are already seeing more deaths per 100,000 people.

Earlier this month, Schallenberg indicated a full lockdown would not be needed and instead imposed the restrictions only on those not vaccinated .

The lockdown will start Monday and initially will last for 10 days, when it will be reevaluated, Schallenberg said. Starting Feb. 1, the country will also make vaccinations mandatory—though the chancellor gave few details about what that meant or how it would work.

"Increasing the vaccination rate—and I think we're all in agreement on this—is our only way to break out of this vicious cycle of viral waves and lockdown discussions for good," Schallenberg said. "We don't want a fifth wave, we don't want a sixth and seventh wave."

Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg addresses the media in the Federal Chancellery in Vienna, Austria, Oct. 11, 2021. Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg says the country will go into a national lockdown to contain a fourth wave of coronavirus cases. Schallenberg said the lockdown will start Monday Nov. 22, 2021, and initially last for 10 days. Students will have to go back into home schooling, restaurants will close and cultural events will be canceled. . Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner, File

Austria is among several Western European countries where infections are rising rapidly and where there are concerns that vaccination rates, while relatively high, are insufficient to hold off a winter surge at hospitals.

Thanks largely to inoculation, hospitals in the region are not under the same pressure they were earlier in the pandemic, but many are still straining to handle rising numbers of COVID-19 patients while also attempting to clear backlogs with exhausted or sick staff.

Not quite 66% of Austria's 8.9 million are fully vaccinated, according to government figures. It has tried various measures to boost that further. Like many European countries, it introduced a "green pass"—which shows proof of vaccination, recovery from COVID-19 or a negative test result and was required to enter restaurants and attend cultural events.

"There are too many political forces in this country, which vehemently, massively and publicly oppose (vaccination). ... This is actually an attack on our health system," Schallenberg said. "The results are overcrowded intensive care units and enormous human suffering."

A wide vaccine mandate would make Austria's one of the most stringent requirements in the world—but many countries have imposed targeted mandates or restrictions on what unvaccinated people can do.

The U.S. government is moving forward with a requirement for mandatory vaccines or regular testing for every worker in the country at businesses with more than 100 employees—though opponents have challenged it in court. In addition, numerous corporations and governments across the country have imposed their own vaccine requirements.

People walk over a nearly deserted Christmas market in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg says the country will go into a national lockdown to contain a fourth wave of coronavirus cases. Schallenberg said the lockdown will start Monday, Nov.22 and initially last for 10 days. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

France required health care workers to get the vaccine, and Britain recently announced a similar rule for health staff who work with the public. Slovakia, meanwhile, announced it will ban those who have not been vaccinated from all non-essential stores and shopping malls.

Austria's new lockdown is its fourth since the pandemic began and comes as the country has struggled without success to stop spiraling case numbers. On Friday, the country reported 15,809 new infections, an all-

time high.

When it takes effect early Monday, restaurants, Christmas markets and most stores will close, and cultural events will be canceled. People will be able to leave their homes only for certain reasons, including buying groceries, going to the doctor or exercising.

Wolfgang Mueckstein, the country's health minister, said that kindergartens and schools would remain open for those who needed them, but all parents were asked to keep their children at home if possible.

On Friday afternoon, Vienna's Mariahilfer Strasse in one of the city's main shopping areas was packed with people—but many welcomed the news about the lockdown, with some even saying they wish the government had acted sooner.

"To be honest, in my opinion this is coming too late," said Luca Eder, 21.

People gather on the shopping street Marienhilfer Strasse in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg says the country will go into a national lockdown to contain a fourth wave of coronavirus cases. Schallenberg said the lockdown will start Monday, Nov.22 and initially last for 10 days. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

Austria's intensive care doctors also welcomed the government's decision, warning that it was only a matter of time before their wards are swamped.

"The record infection figures that we have now experienced day after day will only be reflected in normal and intensive care units with a time lag. It really is high time for a full stop," Walter Hasibeder, the president of the Society for Anesthesiology, Resuscitation and Intensive Care

Medicine, told Austrian news agency APA.

The situation is especially dire in the regions of Salzburg and Upper Austria, which have been particularly hard hit by the rising case numbers. In Salzburg, for example, the seven-day rate of new infections is nearly twice the national average.

Hospitals in both states have warned that their ICUs are reaching capacity, and in Salzburg they have begun discussing potentially only taking the worst cases.

Mueckstein, the health minister, said many factors contributed to the current situation, including Austria's lower-than-expected vaccination rate and the seasonal impact of the virus. But he also apologized for state and federal leaders' initial reluctance to implement stronger measures.

"Unfortunately, even we as the federal government have fallen short of our standards in some areas," he said. "I want to apologize for that."

People walk over through a shopping street in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg says the country will go into a national lockdown to contain a fourth wave of coronavirus cases. Schallenberg said the lockdown will start Monday, Nov.22 and initially last for 10 days. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

After 10 days, the lockdown's effects will be assessed. If virus cases have not gone down sufficiently, it can be extended to a maximum of 20 days. In addition, booster shots are now available to all vaccinated people starting four months after their second dose.

Government officials had long promised that vaccinated people would no longer face lockdown restrictions: Over the summer, then-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz declared the pandemic "over" for those who had received

the vaccine. But as virus cases continued to skyrocket, the government said it had no choice but to extend it to everyone.

Alexander Dinhobl, who works as a tour guide and was sitting on a bench in central Vienna on Friday, said the nearly two years since the pandemic started have been difficult on his industry. But he said the current situation has shown there are no easy answers when it comes to defeating the virus.

"There is no wonder weapon against COVID right now," he said.

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