

Belgium suspends Covid closure of cultural venues

December 29 2021

A Belgian court on Tuesday suspended the closure of cultural venues, including theatres, a measure announced last week to stem the spread of the Omicron Covid-19 variant.

The decision—which will not immediately lead to the reopening of cinemas, themselves subject to further legal challenges—came after protests from the country's hard-hit cultural sector that it was being unfairly singled out.

A ruling from Belgium's highest administrative court said the authorities had not demonstrated "in what way entertainment venues are particularly dangerous places for (people's) health... in that they would spread coronavirus, to the extent necessary to order their closure".

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced the original measure on December 22 as Belgium saw a sharp increase in the percentage of tests showing the Omicron variant.

"We are currently analysing the court ruling in detail," De Croo's office said in a statement Tuesday, promising that "all necessary consultations" would rapidly follow.

The court decision is not subject to appeal and while it does not directly give cinemas the [green light](#) to reopen immediately, such a development appeared only to be a matter of time.

"So the closing of theatres is lifted. There is no point in waiting for a new ruling to reopen cinemas," concluded Benedicte Linard, minister of culture for Brussels and the French-speaking region Wallonia.

The decision to suspend cultural activities had come despite an overall drop off in Covid-19 infections since a peak at the start of the month as the country battled a fourth wave that strained hospitals.

Police in Brussels estimated that some 5,000 people took to the streets on Sunday to protest the closure of cultural venues.

The authorities were accused of targeting the sector as bars and restaurants were allowed to keep trading.

The decision to reverse the government's closure order came after a complaint was lodged by a theatre producer in the capital.

Cinemas and other venues including bowling alleys and casinos were not included—but the authorities are facing similar challenges that could see more locations allowed to reopen in the coming days.

Several prominent theatres and cinemas had decided to remain open in defiance of the measure.

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