

Unvaccinated and undeterred: Austria holdouts dig in despite new law

January 31 2022



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Despite vaccination against COVID-19 becoming mandatory in Austria on Friday, musician Katharina Teufel-Lieli insists she won't bow to pressure to get the jab.

"I have the right to decide over my body... to simply say 'no,'" the harpist told AFP at her home in Neumarkt-am-Wallersee, not far from the western city of Salzburg.

Austria this week becomes the first European Union country to make COVID-19 vaccination legally compulsory for adults.

Under the new law, those holding out against the jab can face fines of up to 3,600 euros (\$4,100) from mid-March after an introductory phase.

Teufel-Lieli, 49, is one of tens of thousands to have joined massive demonstrations against the law and other coronavirus-related measures since November, when plans for the legal change were announced.

The mother of six said that she used to be "apolitical" but the state is "overstepping the mark" by "attacking people" through this act of "totalitarianism".

Parallel society

Access to certain services has already been restricted since last year under government-imposed measures.

Entry to restaurants, hairdressers, hotels, non-essential shops, sports and cultural venues has only been permitted since November to those who are vaccinated or recently cured.

This has sparked complaints within the [retail sector](#) about staff having to act as "an auxiliary police" in checking [vaccine](#) passes in shops.

Frustrations since the beginning of the pandemic have also led opponents to create a new political party, known by its acronym, MFG which stands for People, Freedom, Fundamental Rights.

One of three MFG representatives to have already won a state legislature seat, Dagmar Haeusler, said that she just did not see the point of compulsory COVID vaccination.

"If there was a valid reason, as with smallpox which has a mortality rate of 20 to 30 percent, we could talk about mandatory vaccination, which would benefit everyone.

"But in the case of COVID-19, I don't see the point," the 38-year-old biomedical scientist and MFG co-founder told AFP.

Demonstrators and other opponents say the measures just create a "parallel society"—with the unvaccinated forced to do things under the radar.

According to Teufel-Lieli, there are already hairdressers willing to cater to those not vaccinated or cured, while people still have coffee together in private meet-ups, mostly organised over social networks.

"In fact, there is already this parallel community. It's already being built. There is already everything," she said.

'Worrying development'

The government insists the law is needed to boost the currently 72-percent vaccination rate, but says it will loosen restrictions for the unvaccinated as long as hospital capacities allow it.

"Our top priority is to keep the restrictions as low as possible and only for as long as absolutely necessary," conservative Chancellor Karl Nehammer, who heads a coalition with the Greens, said last week.

As an incentive, a lottery solely for the vaccinated is being launched in

mid-March, with 500-euro vouchers to be won.

Those who don't comply with the new mandatory vaccination law can initially expect an official letter before being slapped with a fine.

Checks are also to be carried out including randomly in the street.

More than 60 percent of Austrians support a vaccine mandate, according to a recent opinion poll by Public Opinion Strategies.

But MFG's co-founder Gerhard Poettler stressed it should be optional.

"We are criticised for being opponents of vaccination... (but) we want to have the choice, that's all. And not to face restrictions if we refuse," the former health sector manager in his mid-40s told AFP.

Set up last year, MFG has 23,000 members and saw three representatives—including Haeusler—elected to Upper Austria's 56-member state legislature in September.

According to a December poll, six percent of Austrians said they would be ready to vote for MFG.

Poettler said it was a "worrying development" that shopping centres were demanding proof of vaccination or cure to enter—sometimes handing out wristbands to those allowed in—with customers even "telling on" traders who don't do this.

"We are stigmatising part of the population," he warned.

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Citation: Unvaccinated and undeterred: Austria holdouts dig in despite new law (2022, January

31) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-unvaccinated-undeterred-austria-holdouts-law.html>

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