

Austria vaccine mandate to take effect, but few emulating it

February 4 2022, by Emily Schultheis and Geir Moulson



A person gets vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus as the compulsory COVID-19 vaccination starts in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

Austria is about to become the first country in Europe to require most

adults to get vaccinated against COVID-19, but few other nations appear likely to join it as many turn their attention to loosening restrictions.

The mandate for people 18 and over takes effect on Saturday, 2 1/2 months after the plan was first announced amid a surge of delta-variant cases that sent the country into a since-lifted lockdown.

It comes into force as nations across Europe and beyond have seen infections reach unprecedented levels because of the omicron variant, which is highly contagious but generally causes milder illness and already appears to be leveling off or dropping in some places.

While the sense of urgency in Austria has largely evaporated, officials say the mandate still makes sense.

"The vaccine mandate won't immediately help us break the omicron wave, but that wasn't the goal of this law," Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein said Thursday before parliament's upper house approved the plan. "The vaccine mandate should help protect us from the next waves, and above all from the next variants."

It will be awhile before Austria's 8.9 million people notice any practical change. And it isn't clear when or even if the toughest part of the plan will take effect.



A vaccination pass is signed and stamped after a person got vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

But authorities hope the measure will drive up a vaccination rate that is relatively low for Western Europe: 69% of the population is considered fully vaccinated.

Only in mid-March will police start checking people's vaccination status during traffic stops and checks on coronavirus restrictions. People who can't produce proof of vaccination will be asked in writing to do so and will be fined up to 600 euros (\$680) if they don't. Fines could reach 3,600 euros if people contest their punishment.

In a third phase, officials will check the national vaccination register and send reminders to people who still aren't vaccinated, leading to potential fines. When and if those methodical checks start depends on whether authorities deem vaccination progress sufficient.

"I would like us not to need phase three at all," Mueckstein said.



The compulsory COVID-19 vaccination starts in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

The Austrian mandate—which will exempt pregnant women, people who can't be vaccinated for medical reasons and those who have recently recovered from COVID-19—was first conceived as cases caused by

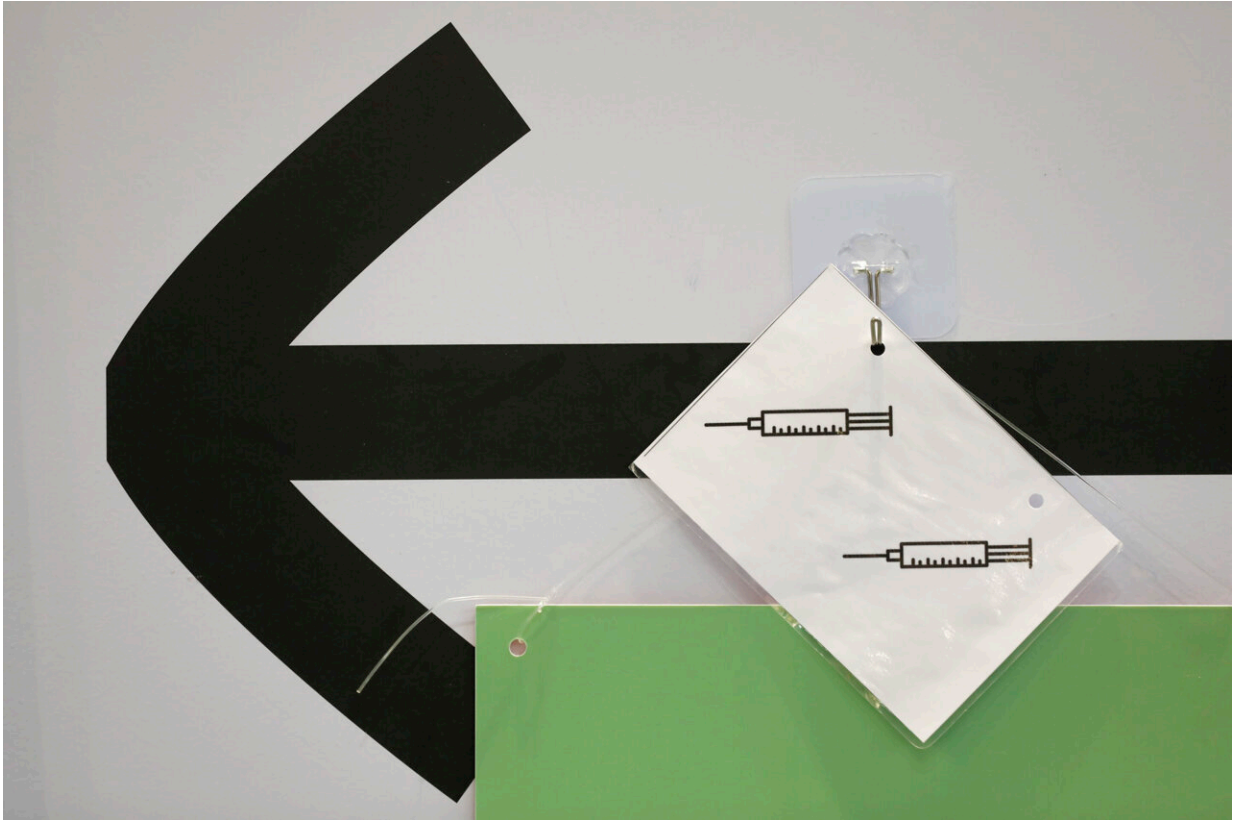
delta surged.

Dr. Susanne Drapalik, overseeing Vienna's biggest vaccination center, said she still thinks more people will get their shots because of the mandate. The vaccination center was running at half-capacity on Friday, with only one of its two floors in use.

While there was an increase in November and December, demand for first shots lately has been "like a few raindrops" rather than a big rush, she said. "But we are still hopeful that people can be convinced."

Not everyone agrees the new rules are still worth having.

"I don't really see the added value of the vaccine mandate at this point," said Gerald Gartlehner, an epidemiologist at the Danube University Krems. He argued that omicron's highly infectious nature and milder symptoms have changed things and that much of the population now has immunity, via either vaccination or infection.



The compulsory COVID-19 vaccination starts in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

Elsewhere in Europe, some countries have vaccine mandates for specific professional or age groups, but only Germany is seriously considering a requirement for all adults. And its prospects are unclear, with Chancellor Olaf Scholz's own coalition divided on the issue and parliament left to [design a mandate](#).

Germany does have a vaccine mandate for the military and has approved legislation that will require workers at hospitals and nursing homes to show that they are fully vaccinated or have recovered by mid-March.

In Britain, vaccination is compulsory for nursing home staff, and the

government had planned to expand that to front-line health care workers in April. It is now reconsidering that amid concern about staff shortages. Calls last fall for mandatory vaccines in Belgium have faded.

Greece last month imposed a vaccination requirement for people 60 and older. Italy followed this week with a mandate under which people over 50 face a one-time 100-euro fine if they aren't vaccinated.



People wait in line to get vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus as the compulsory COVID-19 vaccination starts in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner



A person gets vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus as the compulsory COVID-19 vaccination starts in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022. Credit: AP Photo/Lisa Leutner

Outside Europe, Ecuador announced in December that vaccination against the coronavirus will be mandatory for most citizens.

Moves to [loosen restrictions](#) are garnering more attention in Europe and beyond amid increasing pandemic fatigue. England, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and several Nordic countries have taken steps to end or loosen their restrictions. In some places, like Norway and Denmark, the easing comes even though case counts are still hovering near their highs. Austria itself is easing some measures.

Vaccine mandates have become highly polarizing in the U.S. since President Joe Biden proposed requiring COVID-19 shots or regular testing at all workplaces with more than 100 employees. Republicans challenged the mandate, and the Supreme Court blocked it.

A scaled-back federal measure requiring vaccines for hospital and nursing home workers survived. The U.S. military is also requiring vaccines, and the Army this week said 3,300 soldiers are at risk of being discharged for refusing to get their shots.

Vaccine rules have set off raucous demonstrations in Canada in the past week, with protesters upset over a new requirement that truckers entering the country be fully immunized.

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