

Austria suspends vaccine mandate before enforcement starts

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Austria's government said Wednesday it is suspending the country's coronavirus vaccination mandate for most adults, arguing that there's no need to implement it at present only a week before its enforcement was

due to begin.

The mandate for people age 18 and over [became law](#) in early February, 2½ months after the plan was first announced amid a surge of cases that sent the country into a since-lifted lockdown. By the time the legislation was in place, though, much of the sense of urgency had disappeared.

The plan was for police to start checking people's vaccination status in mid-March, for example during traffic stops. People who can't produce proof of vaccination would be asked in writing to do so and would be fined up to 600 euros (around \$650) if they don't. Fines could reach 3,600 euros if people contest their punishment.

The government, however, said Wednesday that it was suspending the mandate at least for now following a report from a commission of health and legal experts. Health Minister Johannes Rauch said the commission will deliver another report within three months and the government will review the situation then.

"It is time now to use the flexibility of this law," which allows for the mandate to be suspended, said Karoline Edtstadtler, the minister responsible for constitutional matters.

"We came to the conclusion that ... we will suspend the vaccination mandate, in accordance with proportionality," she said. "At the moment, many reasons point to this interference with fundamental rights is not justified; at the moment—because of the dominant variant we see here—we don't see any need to actually implement this vaccination mandate."

The mandate was first announced as Austria saw a surge of infections with the delta variant of COVID-19. But the currently dominant omicron variant, while leading to very high infection levels, generally has caused

milder illness.

Austria was the first country in Europe to go ahead with a universal vaccine mandate. Only neighboring Germany is even considering emulating it—and it's still uncertain whether it will do so. Some countries in Europe have introduced limited mandates, for specific professional or age groups.

The Austrian mandate exempts pregnant women, people who can't be vaccinated for medical reasons and those who have recently recovered from COVID-19.

Edtstadler said the mandate may yet be needed.

"I don't think I need a crystal ball to tell you that today's isn't the last chapter we will write regarding the vaccination mandate," she said.

A big reason for the mandate was concern over Austria's vaccination rate, relatively low for Western Europe. Rauch said 70% of Austria's population of 8.9 million has received two vaccine shots and 54% also have had a booster shot.

The legislation provides for a third phase in which officials would check the national vaccination register and send reminders to people who still aren't vaccinated on dates set by the government, leading to potential fines. The government already said it hoped it wouldn't need to go ahead with methodical checks, on which it would decide with help from the expert commission.

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