Austria Ditches Sweeping Covid Vax Mandate

Austria has suspended its universal Covid vaccine mandate for adults, with government officials admitting that the measure is infringing on individual freedoms, splitting society, and actually discouraging people from getting additional doses of the vaccines.

According to [Reuters](#), Austria's ministers for health and constitutional affairs announced the move on Wednesday, just six days before the unvaccinated would have begun receiving fines for their noncompliance.

The [Associated Press](#) quoted health minister Johannes Rauch, who suggested that the mandate does not serve its intended purpose of boosting the vaccination rate. "The vaccine mandate hinders some people who are generally willing to get the shot from taking the booster, the idea being: I'm not going to be told what to do," Rauch said.

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Salzburg, Austria

The report added that the measure also created "tensions in society" that were less desirable in a time of "hardships":

> [Rauch] said current hardships such as inflation and high energy prices, and fears surrounding the war in Ukraine, had contributed to tensions in society.
>
> "We need every millimeter of solidarity and cohesion to cope with the coming months and years," said Rauch. "And the debate surrounding compulsory vaccination and the hardening of positions over this question tore open rifts and did away with that solidarity."

The country became the first in Europe to introduce compulsory vaccination against Covid for all adults. The mandate went into effect on February 1, 2022, and included maximum potential fines of up to €3,600 ($4,000) for people who did not comply after a series of reminders. Pregnant women, those with medical exemptions, and those who had recovered from the coronavirus in the previous six months were excluded from the mandate.

The lawmakers argued that the sweeping policy was needed to boost the country's vaccination rate and prevent Austria's hospital system from being overrun by unvaccinated individuals, and to help "escape the cycle of opening and closing, of lockdowns." According to a report at *The New American*, the move was supported by the overwhelming majority of lawmakers and key government officials.

The Austrian government used not only sticks, but also carrots to incentivize stubborn jab-refusers.

As the parliament approved the mandate, Chancellor Karl Nehammer unveiled a plan to invest €1.4 billion ($1.59 billion) in "efforts and incentives" to bribe unvaccinated people to get the shot. Of that sum, €1 billion ($1.1 billion) was set to go toward a national "vaccination lottery" beginning March 15, in which all those who got a Covid shot would have "an almost certain" one-in-three chance to win a €500 ($566) gift voucher, while the remaining €400 million ($452 million) was earmarked for towns that reach a certain vaccination rate.

Despite the threat of fines and allure of financial incentives, Austria's vaccination rate has remained flat since early February.

Ever since it was first floated last year, the prospect of compulsory vaccination has prompted regular protests drawing tens of thousands of people. It came as no surprise that the finalized rule was met with fierce opposition from ordinary people.

In early March, the government backtracked on the draconian diktat and decided that it was "not proportionate" to the situation, as Austria's constitutional minister Karoline Edtstadler, who supported it just one month ago, put it, according to Euro News. BBC reported on the matter and added that the minister believed that the mandate was an "infringement of fundamental rights" that was "not justified." The report also quoted Rauch, who said that the mandate would be suspended for the time being.

Rauch has admitted, "We have to live with Covid from now on," according to Euractive. The minister also explained that he supported the mandate when a "deadly Delta variant" was dominating, "with intensive care units nearing their breaking point," "but Omicron changed the rules."

The country has employed the strictest measures in the Western world to "curb the spread" of Covid. In November 2021, Austria sent millions of unvaccinated citizens into lockdown. As reported by *The New American*, Austrians who failed to present proof of Covid vaccination or were unable to prove that they have recovered from Covid in the past 180 days were only allowed to leave their homes for reasons such as work, exercise, necessary shopping, or a doctor visit.

Since the infection rates continued to rise despite the unvaxxed being locked down, the country introduced a nationwide lockdown that lasted for 10 days and was as useless in terms of fighting Covid as the previous lockdowns.

It was reported in late November that for four weeks in a row, the vaccinated accounted for 40 percent of symptomatic Covid cases.

The sweeping vaccination mandate for people over 18 years of age made Austria the first country in Europe, and the fourth in the world, to introduce such a measure, alongside Indonesia, Turkmenistan, and Micronesia.

Written by **Veronika Kyrylenko** on June 24, 2022

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