

Chronology of the Corona Crisis in Austria - Part 4: Lockdowns, mass testing and the launch of the vaccination campaign

- The second wave of infection hit Austria in autumn 2020 and led to renewed restrictions on public life by the federal government.
- Since the beginning of November 2020, Austria has been in a lockdown, which was eased in the meantime for several weeks (December 7 - December 26). On February 8, 2021, many of the measures that had been in place, such as the closure of shops and schools, were lifted.
- The peak of confirmed daily cases of infection was reached on November 11, 2020 with 9.209 confirmed cases. In the last two weeks of November and at the beginning of December, more than half of Austria's beds in Intensive Care Units (ICU) were occupied by Covid19 patients. Additionally, new virus mutations from South Africa and Great Britain were spreading in Austria since January 2021 at the latest.
- A number of new measures have been introduced to control the pandemic. In addition to two national mass testing series with partly low participation rates and a FFP2 mask mandate, a vaccination campaign was launched in Austria in January 2021. However, supply shortages delayed the campaign at the beginning of the year. Moreover, the obligation to show a negative Covid-19 test for services where the minimum distance cannot be respected was introduced for the first time in February 2021.

By Markus Pollak, Nikolaus Kowarz and Julia Partheymüller

One year ago, on February 25, 2020, the first COVID-19 case was reported in Austria. In spring 2020, there was a first national lockdown lasting several weeks (see Chronology Part 1), before the situation increasingly normalized in summer (see Chronology Part 2). In autumn 2020, a second wave of infection began to spread (see Chronology Part 3). The measures were tightened again and have since restricted public life. This article summarizes the most important measures and events concerning the Corona crisis in Austria in the period from October 2020 to the beginning of February 2021.

October 2020: The second wave and the path to the second lockdown

At the beginning of October 2020, the peak of daily confirmed new infections during the first wave in spring was exceeded and the second wave of infection began to hit Austria. [1] On October 11, 2020, state elections were held in Vienna. Due to the possible risk of infection in polling stations, a record rate of 43 percent (321,056 people) of the electorate voted by absentee ballot. The Corona traffic light, which has been active since September, was, for the first time, switched to red (very high risk) in four districts of Austria (Wels, Hallein, Innsbruck Land, Innsbruck Stadt) on October 15. The Corona traffic light is regularly updated by the so-called Corona Commission, which meets weekly.

Due to the rising infection numbers, the Ministry of Health issued a decree on October 22, 2020 to tighten the restrictions, which came into force three days later. A maximum of six people were allowed to gather indoors. Outdoors, the minimum distance of one metre had to be respected and groups of no more than 12 people were allowed to meet. On October 27 2020, despite rising infection figures, Health Minister Rudolf Anschober and Chancellor

Sebastian Kurz emphasised - similar to earlier statements - that a lockdown would be "the last measure" and that Austria was still "far from it". Only 4 days later, on October 31, 2020, the federal government eventually announced a "light" lockdown because of the rising infection numbers. According to AGES, 791 new infections had been reported on October 1, but on October 31, 4.797 new cases of infection had been registered - more than six times as many (see Figure 1).

November 2020: Lockdown and the peak of the infection event

On November 1, 2020, a decree by the Ministry of Health, implementing the announced "light" version of a lockdown, was published and came into force two days later. It introduced a curfew during the night (20:00-6:00) and the closing of restaurants, leisure facilities and museums - the restrictions were similar to those in Germany. Universities and high school classes switched to 'distance learning', while all shops were kept open. On November 5, 2020, the Corona traffic light was finally switched to red (very high risk) for the entire country by the Corona Commission. On that day, almost 7,000 new infections were reported. On November 11, the record number of reported new infections was reached with 9,209 new cases according to the epidemiological curve. In November 2020, the occupancy rate of normal and intensive care beds in Austrian hospitals also increased rapidly due to the rising infection numbers and peaked in the second half of November, when up to 60% of beds in Intensive Care Units (ICU) and about half of normal hospital beds were occupied by Covid-19 patients (see Figures 3 and 4). During these weeks, about 100 people per day died with or from Covid-19 in Austria.

Figure 1: Overview of the most important events



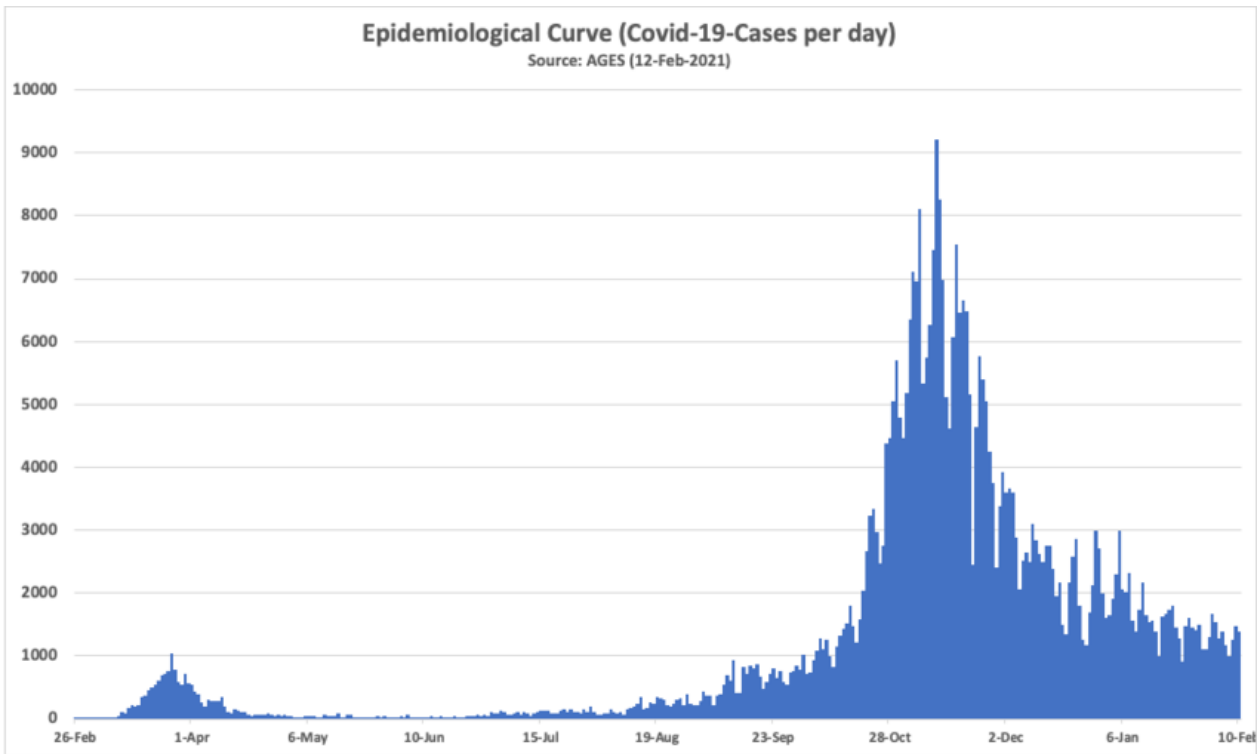
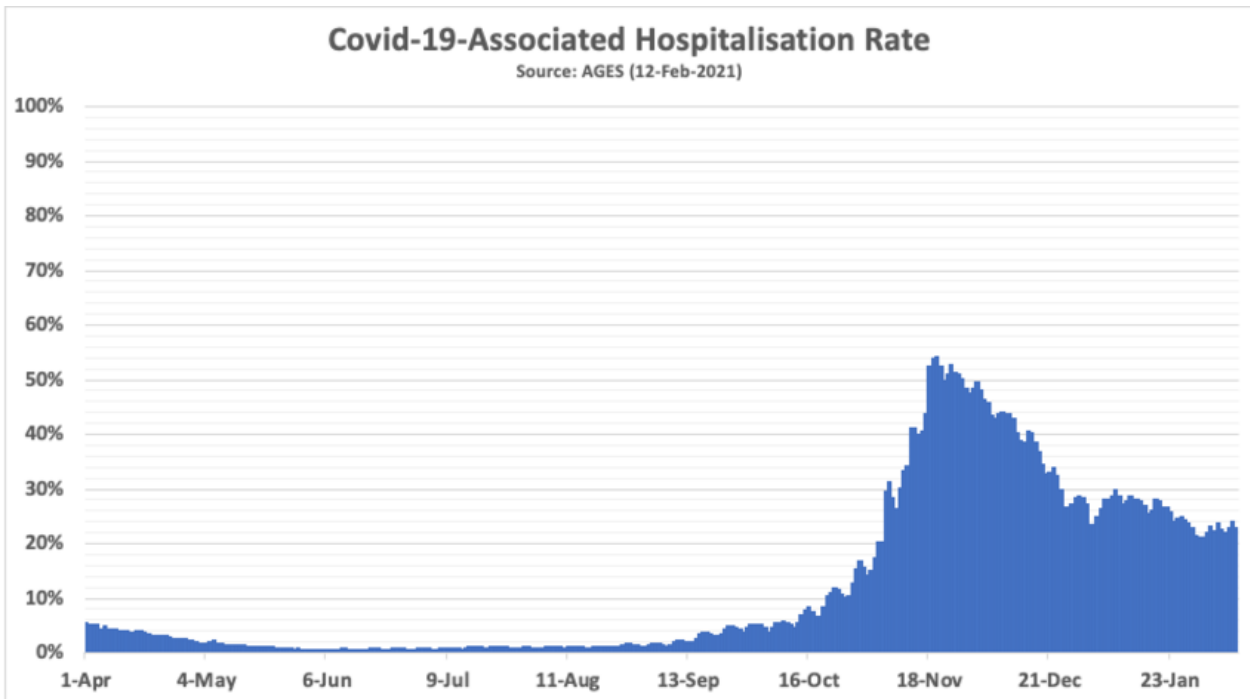


Figure 2: Epidemiological curve (new infections reported per day), (Source: covid19-dashboard.ages.at)



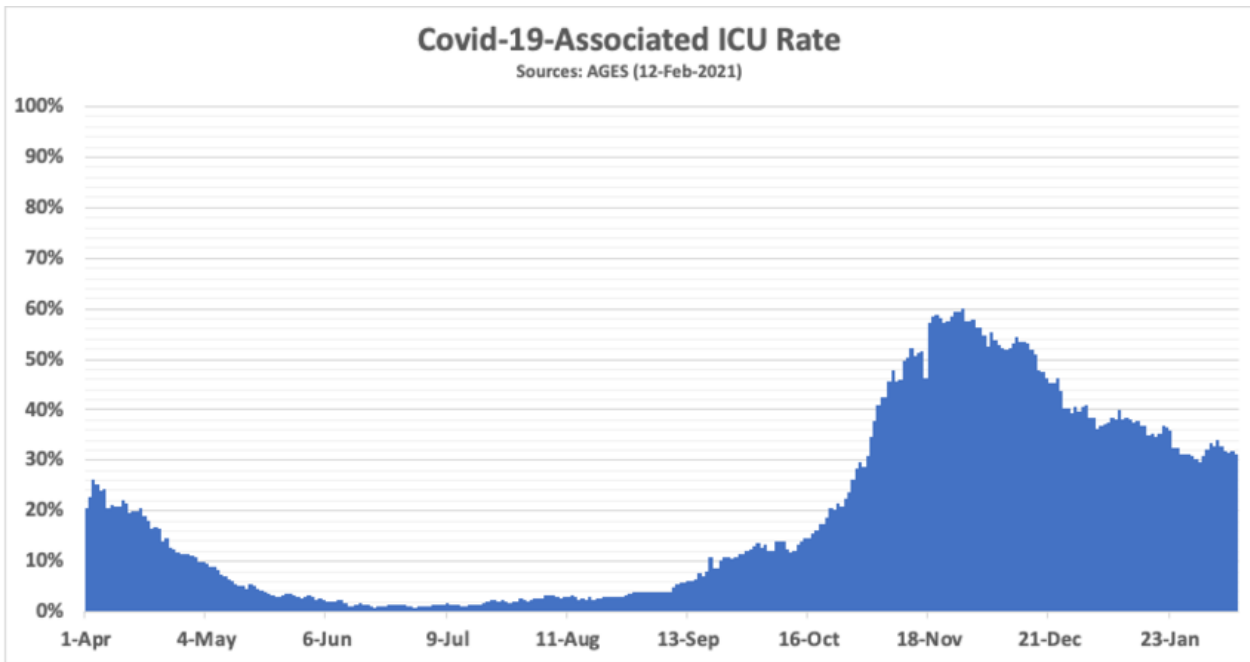


Figure 3: Occupancy of normal hospital beds and ICU beds by Covid-19 patients in percent, (Source: covid19-dashboard.ages.at)

The federal government then announced on November 14, 2020 that the measures would be tightened and a "hard" lockdown would begin on November 17, 2020. The following day, the tightening measures were discussed in parliament with regards to the decree for COVID-19 emergency measures. They were approved with the votes of the governing coalition. Unlike the unanimous vote for the first COVID-19 law in spring, which led to the lockdown in March, there was no cross-party unity this time. In the ranks of the opposition, the FPÖ spoke out against the lockdown overall, while SPÖ and NEOS mainly criticised the school closures, which were intensively discussed in November. Shops apart from basic supply were closed in the course of these tightenings and the curfew as well as the contact restrictions were extended to the whole day. On November 24, 2020, Health Minister Anschöber presented a vaccination plan for Austria. In the first phase, the vaccination plan envisaged that up to 500,000 vaccine doses would already be available in January 2021. On the following day, a decree of the Ministry of Health announced that the "hard" lockdown would end on December 6, 2020.

December 2020: Mass testing, Christmas shopping and a third lockdown

Before the end of the "hard" lockdown on December 7, 2020, a national mass testing series was announced, which eventually took place from December 2 to December 13. Although the federal government did not announce a specific target regarding the participation rate at the tests, the general participation fell short of expectations. There were also massive differences between the participation rates in the individual states during the mass testing series (see Figure 4).

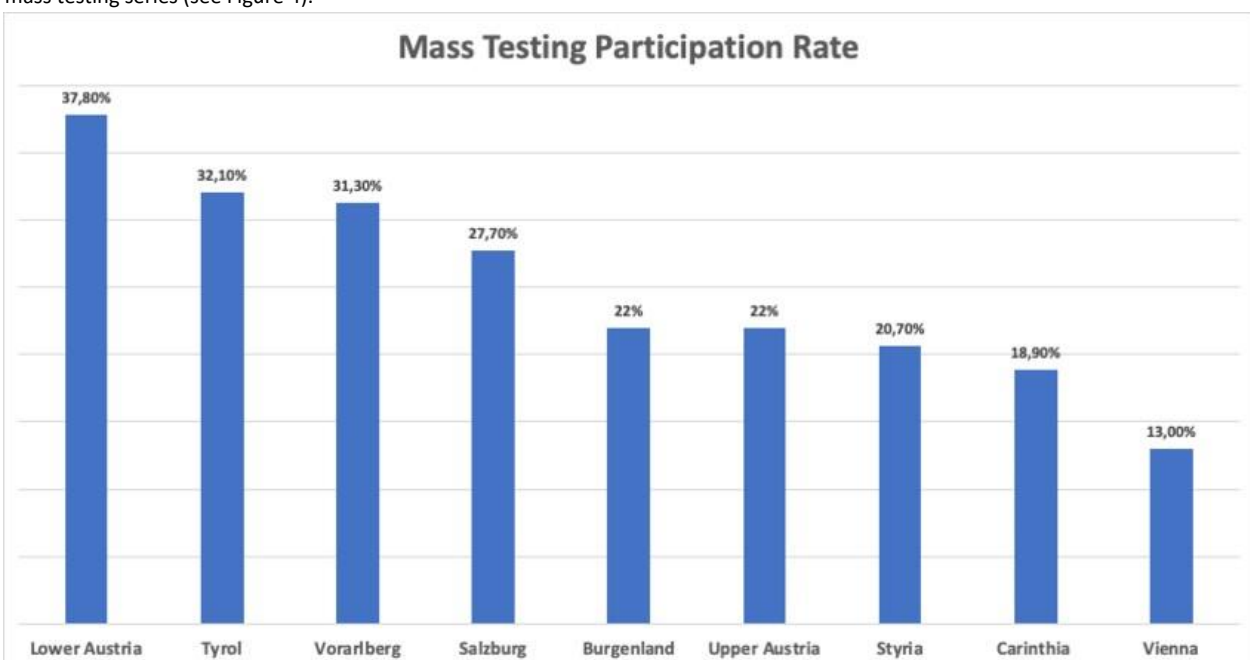


Figure 4: Participation rates in the first Covid-19 mass tests (2-13.12.2020) by province (Source: kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/massentests-4000-infizierte-beizwei-millionen-tests/401128377)

On December 7, 2020, the "hard" lockdown ended and some measures were lifted. Shops apart from basic supply, museums and most schools (exception: upper grades) were reopened under tightened security or hygiene restrictions. At the same time, the opening of shops apart from basic supply led to discussions about the large rush on shops in the days after the opening, although overall Christmas sales decreased significantly compared to the high figures in the previous year. Just 11 days after the opening, the third "hard" lockdown was announced on December 18, 2020. It was announced that it would start eight days later - on December 26, 2020. Due to the relatively low participation rates in the mass testing series in December 2020, incentives such as "testing free" ("freitesten") from the lockdown were announced for the second series of tests planned for January 2021. Nevertheless, two weeks later, these incentives were not implemented due to parliamentary opposition. Schools, commerce and museums should close again in the third, "hard" lockdown and all-day curfews and contact restrictions were to be reintroduced after Christmas. On December 20, 2020, the Ministry of Health issued a decree banning flights from the UK as a new, highly contagious mutation of the virus was identified and began to spread in Europe.

A declared objective of the federal government was to allow the population to gather during the Christmas holidays. To this end, for example, an easing of visiting rules in nursing homes was implemented. In addition, on December 24 and December 25, gatherings of up to ten people were allowed, whereas the regulations previously only allowed a maximum of six people from two different households to gather. On the following day, the third "hard" lockdown came into force, which was supposed to last until January 24, 2021. Despite the lockdown, ski resorts were allowed to open all over Austria. This led to numerous debates about the risk of infection in ski resorts.

Five days after the first approval of a vaccine from BionTech/Pfizer by the European health authorities, the first person in Austria was vaccinated against the coronavirus on December 27, 2020. This marked the beginning of the Austrian vaccination campaign, although larger quantities of vaccines would not be available until 2021.

January 2021: New measures, the launch of the vaccination campaign and the approaching end of the lockdown

First, the "hard" lockdown continued in the new year. Five days before her resignation in the context of a plagiarism scandal, Labour Minister Aschbacher announced on January 4, 2021 that 521,000 unemployed people were registered in Austria at that time - the highest figure since April 2020. According to the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS), the situation worsened slightly in January 2021. The second round of the national Covid-19 mass tests took place, without the originally planned "free testing", between January 8 and January 17 2021. Data on the participation rates are difficult to compare with the first series of tests in December 2020, as in the meantime other test offers were expanded significantly.

Finally, on January 16, 2021, a controversial demonstration against the federal government's Covid-19 measures took place, in which, according to media reports, about 10,000 people participated. Later demonstrations were banned by the Ministry of the Interior due to the risk of infection, which led to parliamentary protest by the FPÖ. On January 17, 2021, the federal government, together with several state governors, announced the extension of the "hard" lockdown until February 7, 2021. The extension was formalised by decree on January 21. It was mainly justified by the increasing spread of new virus mutations from Great Britain (B.1.1.7.) and South Africa (B.1.351). Due to the increased infectivity of the new virus variants, a further tightening of measures was announced from January 25, 2021. The mandatory minimum distance was increased from one to two metres and the obligation to wear masks was replaced by a new FFP2 mask mandate. Additionally, local testing offers were to be expanded nationwide.

In January 2021, the federal government's vaccination campaign was also slowed down by significant supply shortages. At the same time, a discussion came up about the early vaccination of some politicians, who were accused of not complying with the official vaccination schedule, which is supposed to rank people according to their health risk (see e.g. this ZIB2 interview). At that moment, about 0.8% of the population was partially vaccinated (as of 19 January 2021). Finally, on January 29, 2021, a third vaccine, developed by Astra Zeneca and the University of Oxford, was approved by the European authorities (after BionTech/Pfizer and Moderna). However, this vaccine, on which the Austrian vaccination strategy depends a lot, has been controversial with regard to its effectiveness with older persons and the new virus mutations.

Most recently, on February 7, 2020, the third "hard" lockdown ended and the measures were eased by decree. Schools, museums and shops apart from basic supply opened under new, stricter requirements on February 8, and a minimum floor space of 20 m² per customer (previously: 10 m²) was adopted. High school classes returned to on-site teaching in shifts and for the first time, so-called "entry testing" ("reintesten"), the obligation to show a negative Covid-19 test for services where the minimum distance cannot be respected, was introduced. Figure 6 compares a selection of measures that are currently in force (orange) with measures that are no longer in force (blue) and their respective duration in days since September 2020. Approval ratings for individual measures over time since the start of the Corona crisis can also be found in the latest Corona Dynamics blog post.

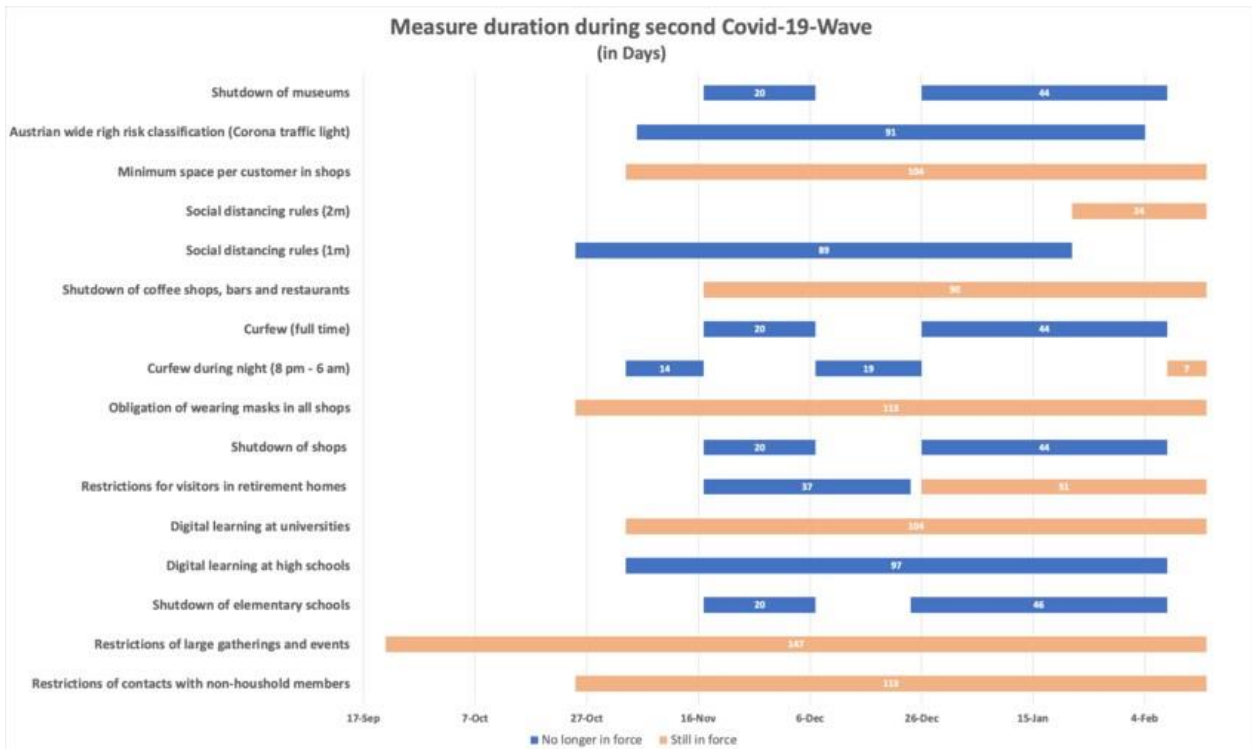


Figure 5: Period of various measures being in force, Orange = currently in force; Blue = currently not in force (as of: 15.02.2021)

Since the beginning of February 2021, increasing tensions have been observed in the governing coalition due to differences over asylum policy and new allegations of corruption against Finance Minister Gernot Blümel. In addition, there was a conflict between the Tyrolean state government and the Ministry of Health regarding special measures to contain the new "South African" virus mutation that was spreading particularly in Tyrol. Finally, the federal government announced travel restrictions for Tyroleans wishing to travel to other states. Finally, Germany decided on a travel ban for Tyroleans and declared the province a "virus mutation area" on February 11, 2021.

Summary and conclusion

Since October 2020, the second wave of infection has affected Austria significantly more than the first wave in spring 2020. So far, approximately 8,400 people have died with or from Covid-19 since the outbreak. Of these, 826 people have died from March 11, 2020, the day the first fatality was reported, to September 30, 2020 (period: 201 days) while 7.548 deaths have been reported from early October 2020 to February 26, 2021 (period: 148 days). Since November 2020, Austria has been in lockdowns of varying intensities and a number of new measures such as mass testing, the FFP2 mask mandate and (night-time) curfews have been introduced. Additionally, following the approval of three vaccines (BionTech/Pfizer; Moderna; Astra Zeneca) by the European health authorities, the long-awaited nationwide vaccination campaign was launched, although it has so far been slowed down by supply shortages and, therefore, only 582.135 vaccine doses could be administered so far (as of February 26, 2021). The highly contagious virus mutations are increasingly worrying observers and the possibility of a third wave of infection associated with the easing of measures as well as a further lockdown are already being discussed in expert circles. In contrast to Austria, Germany, for example, has already extended its "hard lockdown" until March 2021 - at a lower level of new infections per day. The Austrian government has repeatedly expressed the hope that the Corona crisis will be largely over by summer. The implementation of the national vaccination plan and further developments regarding virus mutations will probably be decisive in determining whether this objective can be achieved.

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Footnotes

[1] According to AGES, 1,081 cases of infection were reported on October 6, 2020. Due to the significantly increased testing capacities and the probably associated lower number of unreported cases, the numbers are not directly comparable.

All data on confirmed infections, deaths and growth rates in this article refers to the official data and the calculation method of the Austrian Ministry of Health, the Austrian agency for health and food security GmbH as well as to the AGES Dashboard COVID 19: <https://covid19-dashboard.ages.at/?l=en>

The figures may therefore differ from those of other sources. e.g. COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU): <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

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