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Austria and Covid-19

Austria's far right tries to surf on popular anger

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV553 - February 2021 -

Publication date: Friday 5 February 2021

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After the large anti-mask demonstrations in Germany in recent months, and the violent reactions against lockdowns and curfews in Madrid, Denmark and especially in the Netherlands in recent days, Austria has been experiencing its first major mobilisations against health restrictions since last week.

The country has long been a good pupil: a rapid and relatively brief lockdown allowing cases to be traced and infection rates to be reduced to almost zero at the beginning of the summer. Since then, the situation has deteriorated sharply. In autumn, an epidemic outbreak took the government “by surprise”. Even more than elsewhere, the relative success of the spring had been used as a justification for not changing anything, leaving the health system helpless in the face of the second wave. In November, for several weeks, Austria even had the highest per capita case rate in the world (reaching almost 10,000 cases/day in a country with 8.9 million inhabitants).

A first “hard” lockdown was decreed in mid-November, but was relaxed on 6 December under pressure from the tourist industry, which weighs heavily in this country which receives many tourists during the ski season (the largest “cluster” of the first wave had already been located in the ski resort of Ischgl). A decision quickly put to the test by reality, since a new strict confinement, which ended on 18 January, had begun on 16 December.

The “Liberation Day”?

With the deterioration of the health situation and the economic effects (already last spring, unemployment exploded by 25% in one week), the government's popularity was also eroded. There is a weariness in the face of repeated lockdowns and a frank hostility, though quickly denied in certain hospital environments, to compulsory vaccination in health care. For several weeks now, relatively small anti-lockdown demonstrations, with a strong conspiracy-theory content, have been taking place in provincial towns with a contingent of “tourists” making the rounds of all the demonstrations.

The 16 January was planned as “Liberation Day”, with a central demonstration in Vienna. Around 10,000 people marched (less than the 30,000 originally planned by the organizers) under a stream of Austrian flags. It was a demonstration with a very nationalistic tone, with elements of similar demonstrations in Germany, with slogans such as “The blood of Christ protects, not the vaccine!” as well as QAnon logos. There was also a noticeable presence of the institutional far right, which wants to surf on a “populist” movement to rebuild itself since it was ousted from government in 2019.

Last weekend, rather small anti-lockdown demonstrations took place on Saturday, and on Sunday 5,000 demonstrators - probably more QAnon than the Austrian far right - were in the streets of Vienna despite the ban on the demonstration.

The end of the health restrictions is not in sight (AstraZeneca recently announced a long delay in the delivery of vaccine doses for Austria) and, in the absence of alternatives, some of the anger could well fuel a movement whose political significance seems quite similar to the anti-mask demonstrations that have marked Germany.

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