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Austrian chancellor hits out at far-right anti-vaxxers

In POLITICO interview, Alexander Schallenberg defends compulsory vaccination law.

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A demonstrator holds a placard reading 'No to compulsory vaccination' during an anti-vaccination protest at the Rathausplatz in Vienna, Austria (Georg Hochmuth/AP/ANP via Getty Images)

NOVEMBER 24, 2021 12:39 AM CET
BY MATTHEW KARNITSCHNG

VIENNA — Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg blamed the far-right Freedom Party for fueling vaccine skepticism that has driven a dramatic rise in coronavirus infections and led the country to introduce a hard lockdown as well as Europe’s first compulsory coronavirus vaccine law.

In an interview with POLITICO in his chancellery in Vienna, Schallenberg said his government had been left with no choice but to take radical measures in the face of spiraling infection rates, overflowing intensive care units and an unyielding cohort of anti-vaxxers.

Though anti-vax sentiment is not hard to find across much of the West, what sets Austria apart is that the Freedom Party (FPÖ), one of the country’s largest opposition forces, has championed the cause with fervor.

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“This is a major difference between us and other European countries,” said Schallenberg, whose center-right People’s Party was in a coalition with the FPÖ from 2017 to 2019.

“It’s irresponsible, especially if you consider that a large percentage of the representatives of this party are vaccinated, but still spread fake news about deworming remedies.”

Resistance to the government’s pandemic policies hardened in recent weeks. As in a number of other European cities last weekend, thousands of people took to the streets of Vienna on Saturday to protest coronavirus measures. The marchers, estimated to number up to 40,000, were a motley group of far-right activists, adherents of alternative medicine and hardline libertarians.

The Freedom Party, whose leader Herbert Kickl was unable to participate in Saturday’s demonstration after contracting COVID-19, has vowed to challenge the compulsory vaccine law in the courts. "As of today, Austria has become a dictatorship!" Kickl declared in a statement after the government announced the planned vaccine measure.

Schallenberg, who studied law, said he was confident the measure, which the government hopes to introduce in February, would withstand judicial scrutiny, an assessment shared by many legal scholars.

After weeks of resisting a return to blanket restrictions, Schallenberg, who took office in October following the sudden resignation of Sebastian Kurz over a corruption scandal, changed course on Friday. The government’s decision came as Austria’s intensive care wards have been overrun by COVID-19 patients, pushing hospitals in some areas to the brink of collapse.

“We want to escape this vicious circle of unpredictable infection waves followed by lockdown discussions, but to do so, a higher percentage of the population has to be vaccinated,” Schallenberg said, sitting in a white leather chair under a crystal chandelier in his spacious office.

“This path isn’t easy, but one also has to accept that we want to leave this pandemic behind us,” he said. “We have the power to do that in our hands because science has given it to us.”

Schallenberg said he “fully acknowledged” his previous opposition to radical steps (voiced publicly even just before Friday’s announcement), which he said was driven by a desire to shield the two-thirds of the population that “did its part” by getting vaccinated from further restrictions.

“To ask for a further act of solidarity from them for the greater good was something I’d hoped we could avoid,” he said, adding that he made the decisions with “a heavy heart,” considering the enormous economic and social costs.

The three-week lockdown, coming at the beginning of the lucrative winter tourist season, will starve Austria’s economy of billions of euros in revenue and leave many small businesses facing an uncertain future.

Dramatic reversal

Austria’s dramatic reversal reflects the degree to which a pandemic many European leaders were confident the Continent had left in the rear-view mirror is once again dominating the political agenda, forcing capitals to make decisions that just a few weeks ago would have been unthinkable.

In Central Europe, COVID-19 has returned with a vengeance in recent weeks, leaving governments to once again weigh the economic fallout of a lockdown against the human cost of not acting. Along with Austria, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have seen cases soar with daily infection rates reaching record levels. Meanwhile, parts of Germany are already on lockdown and outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel has told the country to brace for more restrictions. Vienna’s move on compulsory vaccines has sparked a similar debate in Berlin.

Experts blame a subdued vaccination rate, which allows the virus to spread unabated, for the rise in Austria and the other hard-hit areas. In Austria, some 65 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated, slightly below the EU average and far behind countries such as Portugal, Malta and Spain, where the vaccination rate is above 80 percent.

In other Central European countries, the vaccination figure is even lower. In Austria’s neighbor Slovakia, for example, only 43 percent of the population has been immunized.

Though Austria weathered the first waves of the pandemic in better shape than many countries in terms of infections and deaths, the country suffered a major hit to its reputation in 2020 after authorities ignored signs that the coronavirus was spreading in Ischgl, a Tyrolean ski resort. Many experts believe that failure played a central role in the pandemic’s rapid spread across Europe in 2020.

That history is one reason the latest deliberations have been so fraught.

Schallenberg’s government, a coalition between the People’s Party and the Greens, is betting that the combination of a lockdown and vaccine mandate will help the country turn the page on the pandemic.

But getting there won’t be easy. The Freedom Party, for one, will ensure that vaccination remains a divisive issue in the country’s political debate for the foreseeable future.

That pressure could further erode waning confidence in Schallenberg’s government. About 40 percent of the public considers the government’s pandemic management to be “extremely poor,” according to a poll released over the weekend. Support for the People’s Party, which tanked after the corruption allegations against Kurz emerged, has continued to drop.

Accidental chancellor

A career diplomat with aristocratic ancestry, Schallenberg, 52, served as foreign minister until the People’s Party tapped him to replace Kurz.

While Schallenberg has been careful not to publicly distance himself from Kurz, whom he insists will be vindicated of criminal wrongdoing, he has also made clear that he is his own man.

One of his first decisions was to move his office, housed in Vienna’s 18th-century baroque chancellery, from the dark-panelled chamber Kurz had used to its traditional location on the other side of the building. Schallenberg’s new rooms are the same used by the building’s most storied occupant: Klemens von Metternich, the 19th-century chancellor who was for decades the power behind the Hapsburg throne.

Unlike his immediate predecessor, Schallenberg is not a political animal, having only become a People’s Party member in 2020 after joining Kurz’s Cabinet.

But whatever political experience he lacked going into the chancellery, Schallenberg has gained plenty during his first month on the job. After spending his early days as chancellor dealing with the aftermath of the government shake-up and questions about whether he was merely a stand-in for Kurz, who still heads the People’s Party, the pandemic presented Schallenberg with an even thornier problem.

Despite the headwinds, Schallenberg, Austria’s fourth chancellor in as many years, said he intends to serve out his term, which isn’t scheduled to end until the fall of 2024. Most observers doubt the coalition, already strained to the limit by the Kurz scandal, will last that long. Yet for the moment, neither party, given their poor showing in the polls, would appear to have much interest in triggering a new election. And with Kurz on the sidelines for the foreseeable future, the People’s Party has few options but to stick with Schallenberg.

“The government is stable and the fact that we can reach difficult decisions like the coronavirus measures proves our ability to act,” Schallenberg said. *This article is part of POLITICO’s premium policy service: Pro Health Care. From drug pricing, EMA, vaccines, pharma and more, our specialized journalists keep you on top of the topics driving the health care policy agenda. Email pro@politico.eu for a complimentary trial.*

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