

Austrians refusing COVID vaccine will face up to \$4,000 fines



A protester holds a placard reading 'Against compulsory vaccination' during a rally in Vienna [File: Georg Hochmuth/APA/AFP]

Vienna, December 10 (RHC)-- Austria's conservative-led government has announced details of its plan to make coronavirus vaccines compulsory, saying it will apply to people aged 14 and above, and holdouts

face fines of up to 3,600 euros (\$4,071) every three months.

About 68 percent of Austria's population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19, one of the lowest rates in Western Europe. Many Austrians are sceptical about vaccines, a view encouraged by the far-right Freedom Party, the third-biggest in parliament.

As infections set records three weeks ago, the government announced a fourth national lockdown and said it would make vaccinations compulsory for all, the first European Union country to do so. "We do not want to punish people who are not vaccinated. We want to win them over and convince them to get vaccinated," the minister for constitutional affairs, Karoline Edtstadler, told a news conference with Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein on Thursday.

The vaccine mandate, which must be approved by parliament, is due to start on February 1 and last through January 2024. Two opposition parties support it, suggesting it will pass easily.

There will be quarterly vaccination deadlines, Mueckstein said, adding that the authorities will check a central vaccination register to see if members of the public are in it. "If that is not the case, proceedings will be brought. In regular proceedings the amount of the fine is 3,600 euros," Mueckstein said, adding people's income and other financial obligations will be taken into account in calculating fines.

"As an alternative, the authorities have the option to impose a fine in shorter proceedings immediately after the vaccination deadline. Here the amount of the fine is 600 euros," he said, adding that if this was not paid it would lead to regular proceedings.

Mueckstein said there will be exemptions for pregnant women – though he stressed that vaccinations are recommended for them too – for people who cannot get vaccinated for medical reasons, and for people who have recovered from COVID-19 in the previous six months.

He also said that people who are eligible for exemptions will have to have those registered in a central vaccination register, which will be checked at regular three-month intervals. The first cut-off date will be March 15.

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