

Austria: The Coronavirus Chronicles

by Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff



- **Borders matter.** For many years, Europeans have been told by their leaders that borders could not be closed to curb illegal migration due to the Schengen Agreement...
In the 14th century, Poland was less affected by the plague because King Casimir isolated his country, closed borders and quarantined the border regions.
- **Freedom of speech matters.** The Austrian government has installed a “ministry of truth” in the office of the chancellor...
- “[W]henever a government got its hands on truth control, it has massively abused it within a very short time to gag and ban critical and oppositional voices. Once they

have the power to control opinion, it is a massive temptation for those in power to use it in the self-interest of a government.” – Andreas Unterberger, blogger, March 22, 2020.

Week 1 in a country in complete shutdown. Austria has been at the forefront of forcing its citizens to “shelter in place” by enacting [November](#) and has since made its way around the world, roughly a month ago, the Austrian government, led by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, thankfully heeded a [Italy](#), and immediately [first set of measures](#), followed by the drastic rules mentioned above, that were first [stepped up on March 30](#).

The new measures include wearing compulsory masks when grocery shopping, which, in due course, will be extended to the wearing masks when outdoors at any time. In addition, vulnerable men and women, that is, those whose immune systems are compromised, are required to stay home, with their salaries covered by the government. The chancellor warned the population that “what we are witnessing right now is the quiet before the storm” and added that if measures are loosened, they will start with the opening of shops and some restaurants; universities and schools will follow at the very end of this process. Schools in Austria are therefore unlikely to reopen before the fall, although there are already extensive courses online.

Noteworthy findings turned up, however, such as what public issues matter and what do not:

Borders matter. For many years, Europeans have been told by their leaders that borders could not be closed to curb illegal migration due to the [borders](#) with Canada and Mexico. Strict border security helps to stop the virus from spreading. In the 14th century, Polish [here](#) and [Austrian government](#) and the [Andreas Unterberger](#), Austria’s most widely read political blogger, notes:

“It is absolutely stunning that a large police unit has now started to officiate in the Chancellery...The government acts as if it were in possession of the absolute truth amid a sea of lies and half-truths. On the contrary, the opposite is true... whenever a government got its hands on truth control, it has massively abused it within a very short time to gag and ban critical and oppositional voices. Once they have the power to control opinion, it is a massive temptation for those in power to use it in the self-interest of a government. The government ministers fail to realize the most important connection: the more a government carries out opinion control, the more people inevitably trust alternative sources of information, and not the government officials or those financed by the government.”

Sadly, not just the government but also Amazon, has discreetly [notes](#):

“Notice how each country – country! – took upon itself its right to sovereign action to protect its citizens.

Italy imposed quarantines; Austria closed its borders and implemented various restrictions on gatherings and mandated closures of entertainment venues, restaurants etc. Even Germany has now closed its borders.

Borders in the context of Europe is an astounding thing, and it's heartbreaking that it took a virus, and the deaths it's left in its wake, rather than the years-long invasions for [the countries] to assert sovereignty, and to finally, finally, turn to protecting their citizens.

“‘Europe’ in the form of the European Union has been silent. The United Nations does not even seem to be speaking out although, in a rational world they would – and should – be calling for “Crimes against humanity” charges to be brought against China. That silence under these circumstances is simply further proof of the UN’s uselessness at best, and of the EU’s utter irrelevance.

“It is nations putting the health, safety and security of their people above all else that will stem the spread of this virus; the nightmare is that it took this pandemic to wake governments up to the primacy of their people as the core of their responsibility.”

Leadership matters. Whether the greatly differing measures taken by continental Europe or those in the United Kingdom are successful remains to be seen, but leadership in times of crisis is crucial. In the UK, it is prime minister Boris Johnson who on March 3 [backing away](#) from [measures](#), including a lockdown, were later implemented. In Austria, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz exhibited tough leadership. It is too early to assess whether the government is taking the “right” steps; however, remaining calm and in control are key to garnering support even among his critics. Kurz is adept at team-building, by including all members of his government as well as by keeping the political opposition informed. This approach has led to bi-partisan support for all implemented measures. In the United States, President Donald J. Trump has been personally leading an extremely [Covid-19 task force](#).

Receding into the background have been topics such as climate change, Greta Thunberg, and [Rahm Emanuel](#)) and at using one to do things that could not be done before; they will probably be back to doing their best to see what they can land in their “dream catcher”.

Armed forces matter. [Austrian armed forces](#) were mobilized early on in the crisis to assist the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in repatriating Austrians from abroad, providing support in logistical tasks such as [protecting foreign embassies](#) in Vienna. The move proved right the rejection of the 2013 [United Europe](#) and in [accelerated parliamentary Coronavirus Bill](#), which “will enable the police and immigration officers to detain a person, for a limited period, who is, or may be, infectious and to take them to a suitable

place to enable screening and assessment". In a different situation, the words "may be" could be ominous in their broadness. For now, however, we should be thankful to our governments for trying to contain a runaway virus to which we have no immunity until some form of limiting its medical and economic harm can be found.

First published in