

Tens of thousands protest Austria's compulsory COVID vaccines

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?Demonstrators hold flags and placards as they march to protest coronavirus restrictions and the vaccine mandate in Vienna [Lisi Niesner/Reuters]?

Vienna, December 13 (RHC)-- Tens of thousands gathered in Austria's capital Vienna to protest mandatory COVID vaccines and home confinement orders for those who have not yet received the jab.

Police said an estimated 44,000 people attended the demonstration on Saturday, the latest in a string of huge weekend protests since Austria last month became the first EU country to say it would make COVID-19 vaccinations mandatory.

A partial confinement since last month ends on Sunday for the vaccinated, but those who have not received the required doses will have to remain at home. “No to vaccine fascism,” read one protest sign. “I’m not a neo-Nazi or a hooligan,” said another. “I’m fighting for freedom and against the vaccine.”

Vaccination is to be obligatory from February for all residents older than 14, except in the case of a dispensation for health reasons. Nobody will be vaccinated by force, the government has said, but those who refuse the shot will have to pay an initial fine of 600 euros (\$670), which can then increase to 3,600 euros (\$4,000) if not settled.

Why “exclude those who aren’t vaccinated, especially children?” asked the working mother who said she was vaccinated, but did not want to give her surname. “It’s incredible discrimination not to be able to send a kid to dancing, tennis or swimming lessons.”

Analea, a 44-year-old violin teacher who also refused to give her family name, said this was “not the direction a democracy should be taking.” “We can have different opinions and values, but still live together freely,” she said.

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.

The Freedom Party, led by leader Herbert Kickl, called for rallies on Saturday along with a flurry of groups.

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