

Shoppers out again in Austria—with masks, safety distances

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Masked shoppers cautiously entered hardware, gardening and smaller shops in Austria on Tuesday, a month after the government ordered them shut to fight the spread of the new coronavirus.

Among the first in the EU to have imposed strict confinement rules, Austria also became among the first to start lifting them as new [coronavirus](#) infections are subsiding.

"I'm simply happy" to be able to go to a flower shop again, Anita Kakac, a 75-year-old Vienna pensioner, told AFP, sporting a blue mask as a red neon "Open" sign flashed behind her in the store window.

"I just hope by God that it's not too early" to ease the lockdown, she said.

'New normal'

"We are on course... Today we can take, as planned, the first step toward the new normal," Chancellor Sebastian Kurz told a press conference.

Restaurants, bars and schools will still remain closed until at least middle of May, and public events are banned until the end of June.

And even as shoppers returned slowly on Tuesday, social distancing and other rules remained in place. Mask-wearing is compulsory in shops and [public transport](#).

Queues were staggered, and one tobacco shop only served customers on the street, while an optician made only part of the store accessible, asking customers to ring a bell to enter.

In a mobile phone shop, employees wore gloves matching the rest of their outfits and badges that read "handshakes prohibited".

One gardening and hardware store chain made it compulsory for each customer to take a trolley so that they'd be sure to keep a minimum distance to others, according to [security personnel](#).

Only 100 trolleys, all disinfected after each use, are allowed at any one time, while posters read "shopping should not be a family outing".

Fear persists

Store owners said they were relieved to open again, but were struggling with losses and afraid of long-lasting consequences for their businesses.

"It will take a long time for customers to come back. Some have lost their jobs, others are afraid, and a book is a luxury," said Gunnar Graessl, who reopened his bookstore in downtown Vienna.

And masks impeded having a discussion or drink together. "The customer enters, buys and leaves," he told AFP.

Lenz Dreher, a 17-year-old student, said he chose not to shop online for supplies for his goldsmithing

hobby but wait for shops to reopen instead.

"What concerns me are the next 20 years," he said.

But he also doubted it would be business as usual from now on.

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"Firstly the fear hasn't gone away completely. Secondly people may not have as much money as before," he said, adding that he hoped people would also "change their behaviour" after they realise they could manage "without buying new pants every week".

Hard-hit businesses

Yvan Savic, who started selling take-out as a stop-gap measure when all restaurants had to close, said he hoped with shops reopening more people would pass by.

"For the moment, my turnover is down by 90 percent... 20,000 euros (\$22,000) in fixed costs, I received 1,000 euros in state aid," he told AFP.

The central train station's huge shopping centre is also still idling with railway services having been ramped down and most stores staying shut.

Markus Handle, a 44-year-old cosmetic surgeon leaving Vienna for western Tyrol province for work, said the confinement went "a little too far" with improved hygiene the most important measure.

"It's good that the economy is picking up," he said.

The Alpine nation of 8.8 million people has been spared the worst of the virus with some 14,000 reported cases and 384 deaths.

But government officials warn that easing the restrictions can be reversed any time if contaminations rise again.

"If we have to close again, it will be very hard to hold on financially," bookstore owner Graessl said.

Hardware store owner Andreas Zanaschka said he expected his business to pick up again but taxes to increase as the government struggles with the economic downturn caused by the crisis.

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