

Austrian MPs vote against smoking ban

On March 22, 2018, the Austrian parliament voted to overturn legislation mandating a total ban on smoking in bars and restaurants. The legislation, which was passed in 2015, had been due to come into force in May 2018.

Under the current law in Austria, which will now remain unchanged, establishments under 50 m² can permit smoking at the owner's discretion; and establishments with 50–80 m² can apply for a similar dispensation. Stricter rules apply to establishments larger than 80 m², which are nominally smoke-free, however, they are permitted to offer designated indoor smoking areas. Austria ratified the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2005. "They should have put in place comprehensive smoke-free policies within 5 years", explained Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva (WHO, Geneva,

Switzerland). "Smoking in public places normalises tobacco use—it becomes part of the social life", she added.

During the 2017 general election campaign, the right-wing nationalist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) pledged to scrap the scheduled smoking ban. FPÖ subsequently formed a coalition government with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), who were part of the previous government that introduced the 2015 legislation. Under the terms of the agreement it struck with the FPÖ, it agreed to drop its support for the smoking ban. The parliamentarians did vote to raise the age at which cigarettes can be legally bought from 16 years to 18 years, but this measure was already pending, having been decided upon by all nine Austrian states last year.

Manfred Neuberger (Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria) explains that there have been

historically strong links between the tobacco industry and Austria's politicians. Adult smoking prevalence in the country has barely shifted since 2000. Around one in four Austrians smoke, and increasing numbers of women are taking up the habit. Youth smoking is high, and the country has not fully banned tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship. A packet of premium cigarettes in Austria costs less than half of the UK price. "Smoking is seen as normal adult behaviour", Neuberger told *The Lancet Oncology*. Yet there is sizeable public backing for a smoke-free hospitality industry. In February 2018, the Austrian Medical Association launched a petition in support of a comprehensive ban on smoking in bars and restaurants. It has already gathered over 540 000 signatures.

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