

Greece sees resurgence of coronavirus since end of lockdown

John Vassilopoulos
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With over 2,600 new Covid-19 cases registered in the last two weeks, Greece is one of nearly two dozen European countries experiencing an escalation in cases after a premature lifting of lockdown restrictions at the beginning of summer.

New daily cases have been steadily climbing throughout the summer before hitting 65 on July 20, the highest tally since 156 new cases on April 20. Both numbers were surpassed with a new high of 262 new cases registered last Wednesday, in a week which saw over 200 new cases registered on most days.

More patients are seriously ill, with 23 on ventilators in hospital—a doubling since the beginning of August. Two patients died of Covid-19 Monday and two more on Tuesday.

With a death toll of 232, Greece has not yet experienced the soaring fatality rate of other European countries such as Belgium, which has a similar population size and whose death toll stands at nearly 10,000. The relatively low death toll is largely due to lockdown restrictions being imposed early during the first coronavirus wave. This advantage is now being undone by the New Democracy (ND) government, with the death toll already nearly a fifth higher than at the beginning of July.

The phased easing of measures began with the opening of retail stores in May, followed by shopping malls, bars and restaurants in June, and the opening of international air links at all airports across the country in July.

Speaking to *Skai TV* on August 10, infectious disease specialist and member of the government's Covid-19 Committee of Experts, Charalambos Gogos, said that “based on the data we have with the increase in cases, the [R number] is now possibly greater than 1—perhaps 1.1 or 1.2”. The R number, or “basic reproductive

rate”, is an estimate of the number of people a carrier is likely to infect, with a value greater than 1 indicating that the disease is escalating.

Following the spike in cases, the government is laying the blame at the door of the population. During a teleconference convened on August 5 to discuss the crisis, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis declared, “We ought to say that the increase in cases is primarily due to the slackening observed with regard to the compliance measures within our country during the month of July. And for this I believe that we all bear responsibility. Just 10 percent of cases have come from abroad, most of the cases at this point in time are domestic.”

If a false sense of security was prevalent among layers of the population, then it was the government that fostered this. At the beginning of June, the government vaguely recommended the avoidance of organising and attending events likely to experience overcrowding—while just a month later the limit of six people per table at restaurants was lifted. The use of masks in shopping centres was mandated for staff only.

The claim that holidaymakers coming into Greece have little or no impact on the spike in cases is ridiculous. According to the government's own Covid-19 figures, 23.4 percent of all reported cases since the start of the pandemic are related to travel from overseas. Of a total of 2.1 million visitors into Greece during July and the first week of August, only around 12 percent were reportedly tested on arrival.

In the previous week, over half of the new cases were clustered in Attica, which includes the capital Athens, and in Thessaloniki. In Athens and Thessaloniki, the country's two main urban centres, public transport passengers are routinely crammed into overcrowded bus and rail services with the mandatory use of masks

the only protection they have. The government routinely breaks its own already high 65 percent capacity rule for public transport.

A similar situation is occurring on passenger ferries from the mainland to the islands. Bowing to pressure from shipowners, the government defied the advice of its panel of infectious disease specialists and increased the authorised passenger capacity from 60 to 80 percent in August.

Two clusters of cases traced back to factories in northern Greece underscore the price the working class is paying after the government reopened the economy. Fifty out of 300 workers in a large olive processing plant in Chalkidiki and 24 workers in a meat processing plant tested positive for the virus in the first week of August. A week later, 36 residents tested positive in an elderly care home in the outskirts of Thessaloniki.

The government's response has been a series of token measures targeting areas with a high number of cases, including Attica and Thessaloniki. Set to run until August 24, the measures subordinate public health to commercial interests. For instance, restaurants, theatres, and cinemas are exempt from the already high limit of 50 people now in force for public gatherings and events. Bars and nightclubs are permitted to remain open except for between midnight and 7am. Workplaces are to remain open, with only people deemed high risk permitted to work from home or in the back office until August 31.

Mitsotakis ruled out a second national lockdown at the start of the month, stating, "We are all aware that we can no longer go into a full lockdown, into a second lockdown of our economies." As in other European countries, the reopening of schools to act as holding pens for children while their parents go to work, is central to the government's plans. On Monday, government spokesman, Stelios Petsas, confirmed that schools are set to open as planned on September 7. This was even as he admitted that "as we approach October and November there is the possibility of the virus' resurgence."

The Greek public health service is in no state to deal with a second coronavirus wave, after a decade of austerity enforced by the social democratic PASOK, ND, and from 2015-19, by the pseudo-left SYRIZA government. This devastated the health budget, which is 50 percent lower than in 2009. Public health services

are chronically understaffed, threatening the ability of hospitals to operate, with health workers succumbing to the virus. Seven workers at the University Hospital in the city of Larissa have tested positive for the virus. Four of those are specialist doctors and one is a 27-year-old surgeon who recently came off a ventilator. Also on a ventilator was a 58-year-old paediatrician, who was transferred from the hospital in the city of Volos. A further nine health workers tested positive at the Papageorgiou Hospital in Thessaloniki.

Under these conditions, the government has cancelled the requirement for health workers to go into pre-emptive quarantine after coming back from holiday. Commenting on the fact that health workers are nonetheless also now required to undergo testing after returning from holiday, Sofia Pappa, a doctor at Athens General Hospital, wrote on her Facebook profile that "[the Health Ministry] cannot place doctors and nurses in quarantine even for just two days (until the test results come out) simply because it doesn't have any doctors and nurses."

A catastrophic spread of the disease is poised to take place in Greece's island migrant camps. Outbreaks have already taken place at refugee holding areas on the mainland, such as the 150 infections reported at a hotel housing migrants in the Peloponnese in April. Greece's island camps are notoriously overcrowded and an outbreak in any of them could rapidly spread. The island camps were built to hold only 6,100 but over 25,000 people are being detained in them in inhumane conditions.

Last week, a 35-year-old man from Yemen living at the Vial migrant camp in Chios tested positive, leading to 30 others requiring a test. Vial holds over 3,800 asylum seekers--over three times the facility's capacity.



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