

Coronavirus accelerates as new strain detected across Europe

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As the coronavirus pandemic accelerates across Europe, several governments announced over the holidays that they had detected cases of the new, even more infectious strain of the virus, currently believed to have originated in England.

Yesterday, Britain reported more than 40,000 cases—a record since the beginning of the pandemic. Most new cases in at least southern England are believed to be due to the new strain of the virus. The seven-day average is also at an all-time high of more than 36,000, equivalent to almost 180,000 daily cases in a country the size of the United States.

The strain has now been detected on every continent. Its spread is intersecting with the criminal policy of European governments, refusing essential measures to stop the pandemic's spread that would threaten corporate profits, including the closure of non-essential workplaces and schools and provision of a decent income to the population.

On December 26, the French health ministry published a notice announcing the first confirmed case involving the new strain in France. The patient was a French national residing in England who returned from the UK on December 19. It was only detected because the patient, who was asymptomatic, went to the hospital to be treated for a different illness on December 21, and was tested according to standard procedures.

Also on Saturday, Spain announced four confirmed cases of the new strain, all among people recently arrived from the UK. Madrid deputy health chief Antonio Zapatero reported that three other suspected cases could not be confirmed until Tuesday or Wednesday.

Italy registered its second confirmed case of the new strain on December 21. In Europe it has also been

detected in the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany. Yesterday, Canada announced that it had detected two cases, and on Friday Japan announced that it had found five cases, all in people recently arrived from the UK. Finland reported yesterday that two people arriving from abroad had tested positive for the new strain, and another for a variant recently detected for the first time in South Africa. It has also been detected in South Korea, Lebanon and Australia.

There is currently no indication that the more recent strain is more deadly, or resistant to recently developed vaccines. However, it is significantly more contagious, threatening to flood hospitals more rapidly with critically-ill patients, and cause a large increase in deaths.

On December 23, researchers at the Centre for Mathematical Modelling of Infectious Diseases, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, released preliminary results of new research on the transmissibility and severity of the new strain. The group fitted a two-strain model of the virus to COVID-19 hospital admissions, ICU and hospital bed occupancy, and deaths in the three most heavily affected National Health Service regions of England.

They estimate that the strain is 56 percent more contagious, with a 95 percent confidence interval between 50 and 74 percent, consistent with previous estimates that the strain is 70 percent more contagious.

The group conclude that “the increase in transmissibility is likely to lead to a large increase in incidence, with COVID-19 hospitalisations and deaths projected to reach higher levels in 2021 than were observed in 2020.” They state that this would be the case even if current lock-down restrictions introduced on December 19 are maintained.

The researchers call specifically to close schools:

“Our estimates suggest that control measures of a similar stringency to the national lockdown implemented in England in November 2020 are unlikely to reduce the effective reproduction number R to less than 1, unless primary schools, secondary schools, and universities are also closed.” At the same time, they call for an increase of the vaccine roll-out to more than 2 million cases per week, approximately 10 times the number currently being carried out.

Across Europe, official policy is dictated not by the scientific requirement to combat the virus, but the economic imperatives of the financial elite and the protection of corporate profits. The lock-downs implemented in France, Germany, the UK, Italy and elsewhere beginning in October kept schools open, so parents could be kept at work. Their policies have caused a second wave that is killing hundreds of thousands across Europe.

The official death toll in Europe (including Russia) now stands at 525,000, but the real figure is far higher. Yesterday, the Rosstat national statistics agency announced that an estimated 186,000 Russians have died from the virus this year—more than three times higher than the number previously maintained by the Russian government. The figure is based on an analysis of the excess mortality rate; from January to November 2020, the death toll in Russia from all causes increased by over 229,000 compared to the previous year.

In the UK, while the official death toll is now over 71,000, separate figures published by the national statistics agency, including all cases where COVID-19 is mentioned on the death certificate, place the number at 87,000. There have been over 72,000 deaths reported in Italy, 63,000 in France, 50,000 in Spain and 30,000 in Germany. Hundreds of deaths are being reported from all these countries every day.

There are clear warnings by scientists that a further acceleration has already been underway for several weeks. In France, the official case numbers reported over the holiday period have been below 10,000 since Sunday, due to the impact of reduced testing. But the real number is closer to that reported on Friday and Saturday, with more than 40,000 cases detected in 48 hours. The R rate is again above 1, denoting exponential spread of the disease.

Amid the expanding death toll, EU governments and media have focused almost exclusively on the first use

of the COVID-19 vaccine on the continent. The Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines were approved by European regulatory authorities on December 21.

France administered the vaccine for the first time to aged-care residents in Sevrans and Dijon on Sunday. Vaccines have been administered in Italy, Spain, Greece, Slovenia, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

Billions of people worldwide rightly welcome the arrival of a vaccine as a means to eradicate the spread of the deadly virus. But the propaganda campaign of the European governments and media is aimed at covering over the policy of death that they are pursuing, which is allowing the virus to spread.

In France, for example, the official timeline for the roll-out of the vaccine estimates that it will not be administered to the 14 million most vulnerable people until at least the end of April, and possibly later. In contrast, experts give varying estimates of 85 percent or more of the population who must be immune to stop the spread of the virus. Yet nothing is proposed to prevent the spread of the virus in the interim period.

The EU declared December 27-29 to be “EU vaccination days,” and EU commission president Ursula von der Leyen tweeted that the vaccine had been “delivered to all European countries,” calling it a “touching moment of unity.” In fact, to the extent that there is “unity” among the European powers, it is that an untold number of lives must be sacrificed for the interests of the capitalist class.



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