COVID-19 contagion accelerates across Europe amid chaotic vaccine rollout

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Coronavirus deaths are soaring across Europe, which passed 900,000 COVID-19 deaths in mid-March, with over 39 million recorded cases. The United Kingdom has Europe's highest official death total, at 126,615, followed by Italy (108,350), Russia (96,413), France (95,114), Germany (76,139), Spain (75,199) and Poland (51,932). These figures represent a major undercounting, as excess mortality statistics show significantly higher numbers.

Since mid-February, nearly every country on the continent has seen a rapid rise in daily cases and deaths. Last week, nearly 25,000 people died of the virus in Europe, the highest seven-day total in a month. Europe is on track to see a staggering 1 million dead before the end of April, becoming the first continent to reach this milestone.

The looming death toll of 1 million is a damning indictment of the entire European bourgeoisie. Whether openly or otherwise, governments across Europe have pursued the same "herd immunity" strategy, forcing workers back into factories and offices and children back into schools in order to keep profits flowing to big business. With only a tiny proportion of Europe's population vaccinated, hundreds of thousands are to die needlessly as the ruling elite obstinately rejects life-saving lock-downs.

Central and Eastern Europe are currently the worst affected. Last Friday, Poland and Hungary both recorded their highest ever one-day COVID-19 infection totals: 35,145 and 11,265, respectively. On Saturday, Ukraine (29,458 new cases) and Serbia (9,722) registered record daily infection totals.

Ukraine and Hungary suffered their highest coronavirus death tolls last week, with 2,057 and 1,710 fatalities recorded in a seven-day period. Serbia, with a population of less than 7 million, reported a record 76 deaths on Saturday.

France has also been particularly badly hit, as the explosion of cases overwhelms hospitals across the country. Around 90 percent of intensive care unit (ICU) beds in France are now occupied. On Monday, 4,974 patients were in ICUs, the most since April 2020. A further 28,322 people are currently hospitalised in France with coronavirus.

Doctors in France are demanding a strict lockdown, with Eric D'Ortenzio, an epidemiologist at Inserm (the National Institute of Health and Medical Research), telling *Le Parisien* that a lockdown should last "a month at the minimum". Another epidemiologist told the same newspaper that France must "strictly lock down, as in March 2020, for at least six weeks." President Macron is expected to announce further restrictions tonight.

A similarly catastrophic story is repeated across Europe. ICU occupancy in the Greek capital of Athens reached 95 percent in mid-March.

The Polish health care system is stretched to its limit, with hospitals so full that extra beds are erected in corridors. On March 21, Poland reached a record high 23,583 hospitalised COVID-19 patients. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told a press conference last Wednesday that his government will impose further restrictions before Easter.

In Hungary, almost 12,000 people are hospitalised with COVID-19, by far the highest number since the start of the pandemic. "The majority of hospital wards have become COVID wards, intensive [care] wards are exponentially overloaded, operating rooms have shut down and their ventilators are occupied by COVID patients fighting for their lives," the Hungarian Chamber of Doctors wrote. "We've run out of available health care workers and hospitals are looking for volunteers to help."

Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Estonia also saw record numbers of hospitalisations at the end of March. Italy also saw a surge in hospitalisations, with nearly 31,000 coronavirus patients in hospital as of March 21.

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Meanwhile, the vaccine rollout is still proceeding at a glacial pace. As of March 28, only 15.79 jabs per 100 people had been administered in Europe—or a total of 118.2 million doses. Europe is trailing behind the United States, where 42.9 vaccines have been handed out per 100 inhabitants, according to Our World in Data.

The distribution of vaccines is vastly unequal across the continent, amid accusations that wealthier countries are hoarding vaccines. In Albania, one of Europe's poorest countries, only 0.2 percent of the population has received even a single dose of the vaccine.

Other poorer countries in eastern and south-eastern Europe—Ukraine, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Latvia and Croatia—have all fully inoculated less than 2 percent of their inhabitants. While the United Kingdom has administered at least one jab to 45 percent of its population, most European countries have not even vaccinated a quarter.

There are growing nationalist conflicts over the distribution of vaccines between the European Union and non-EU countries, particularly the UK. Last week, EU leaders debated a proposal to ban the export of COVID-19 vaccines to highly inoculated countries outside of the bloc, such as the United Kingdom.

The EU-UK dispute largely revolves around British-Swedish vaccine manufacturer AstraZeneca. The EU has accused AstraZeneca of failing to honour its contract, after the pharmaceutical giant fell significantly short on promised vaccine deliveries to the bloc. The UK government, meanwhile, has demanded EU leaders not block vaccines or vaccine components manufactured at AstraZeneca's Dutch facility from entering the UK.

While a summit of EU leaders ultimately retreated on the proposal to block COVID-19 jab exports, both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron endorsed vaccine nationalism. Following the summit, Merkel told a press conference that the EU must "provide [for] our own population."

"We are," she continued, "as the EU, the part of the world that is not only supplying itself but also exporting to the wider world—unlike the US, unlike Britain."

Macron was even more explicit, telling reporters: "Every day, when I read the press across the Channel [in Britain], they make a case against us saying that it is the EU that is being selfish. This is false!"

With the right-wing *Le Figaro* complaining that the EU is participating in the international Covax vaccine distribution scheme and has exported 21 million vaccine doses to Britain while receiving none in return, Macron declared: "It's the end of naivety. … I support export control mechanisms put in place by the European Commission. I support the fact that we must block all exports for as long as some drug companies don't respect their commitments with Europeans."

Despite the lack of available vaccines, the ruling class across Europe is calling for the relaxation of lockdown restrictions this summer, to ensure large tourism profits, no matter the cost in lives.

On Sunday, the European Commission's vaccine taskforce head, Thierry Breton, unveiled a "vaccine passport" to be issued to EU citizens by mid-June. It will certify that the bearer has been vaccinated against the virus or previously recovered from it, allowing them to travel freely.

Breton said, "This will be the price for having a tourist season that I hope will be comparable to last year's, which in the end wasn't so bad in the context we're in."

In Germany, Merkel's chief of staff Helge Braun told the newspaper group Funke that while he was "very sceptical" about tourism picking up at Easter, "we can talk in a significantly more relaxed way about travel and leisure from Whitsun [May 23]." Braun insisted Germany could return to full normality by the summer if vaccinations proceed and no new mutation emerges.

In Spain, where tourism revenue has fallen more than 75 percent compared to 2019, the ruling elite is calling to open the country up to holidaymakers, while restrictions are in place on the movements of citizens within Spain. Last week, Malaga mayor Francisco de la Torre called on Spaniards to "sacrifice" themselves in the interests of tourism profits: "We are sacrificing our own mobility in order to guarantee a safer space for those who visit from abroad and invigorate our economy."

Amid widespread anger in Spain, the European Commission was forced to call on Madrid for "coherence" between its domestic and international coronavirus travel restrictions.

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