

# Spanish premier Sanchez pledges to end social distancing as COVID-19 rises

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As COVID-19 cases rise across Europe, Spain's PSOE (Socialist Party)-Podemos government has pledged to end social distancing measures in order to fully reopen Spain's economy.

On Tuesday, Spain reported 6,623 new coronavirus cases, taking the total number of COVID-19 infections in the country up to more than 3.3 million. Another 128 coronavirus deaths were announced, bringing the official death toll to nearly 76,000. The National Statistics Institute's count indicate that the real number of COVID-19 fatalities is far higher—over 100,000. The number of daily cases reported is likely a significant underestimate, as testing levels are still inadequate, and infection and hospitalisation rates are rising across Europe.

Nonetheless, PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez spoke at a press conference after a meeting of the ministerial cabinet to announce that on May 9, the government plans to end the “state of alarm.” This is the juridical mechanism the government used to justify imposing obligatory social distancing measures such as lockdowns or mask-wearing mandates.

“I hope that it will not be necessary to continue the state of alarm and that the Interterritorial Health Council will continue responding” to the pandemic, Sánchez said. “We want May 9 to be the end, full stop, of the state of alarm.”

This demonstrates the PSOE-Podemos government's staggering indifference to human life, as infection rates pick up across Spain and Europe. The seven-day rolling average of new cases and the 14-day incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants have both been steadily climbing since mid-March. In the middle of March, the seven-day rolling average was just over 4,000, compared to more than 6,500 at the start of this week.

The current countrywide incidence rate stands at

164.71 per 100,000, having risen from the low point of 127.8 in the middle of last month. According to the government's own framework, an incidence rate above 150 puts Spain at “high risk.” Five of Spain's autonomous regions—Ceuta, Melilla, Navarra, Madrid and the Basque Country—are now in “extreme risk,” meaning that the incidence rate there is over 250 per 100,000 people.

Hospital admissions for coronavirus patients are also rising again. Nearly 9,000 people are currently hospitalised with COVID-19 in Spain, occupying more than 7 percent of all hospital beds. This is the highest figure in a month. Across the country, around a fifth of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds are full. Four regions report ICUs are at 35 percent capacity or more: Melilla (41 percent), Madrid (37 percent), La Rioja (35.85 percent) and Catalonia (35 percent).

“The risk is increasing that we will reach a moment of saturation [in hospitals] if we have an exponential rise in cases,” Pedro Gullón, an epidemiologist and member of the Spanish Society of Epidemiology, told online news site Público. “ICUs and hospitals may not be capable of absorbing the patient demand and it will lead to an increase in mortality.”

Meanwhile, the vaccine rollout has continued to be mired in chaos. Only 12 percent of the Spanish population has received at least one dose of the vaccine—or 5.9 million people—and a mere 6 percent (2.8 million people) have had both required jabs.

Due to the PSOE-Podemos government's disastrously organised vaccine strategy and the nationalist controversies surrounding the AstraZeneca vaccine, a far greater proportion of 25-49 year olds in Spain (10.6 percent) have received at least one dose of the vaccine than people in the 70-79 age bracket (5 percent), according to Ministry of Health data. This is

despite the latter being at higher risk from the disease and nominally being in a “priority group.”

On Tuesday, Sánchez said that 10 million Spaniards will have been fully vaccinated by the first week of June, declaring, “we will only be able to regain full normality thanks to the vaccine. And we have begun to do so.” Sánchez also claimed that 33 million people, or 70 percent of the population, will have received jabs by the end of August. At the current rate, however, Spain would not achieve 70 percent vaccination for a year and a half.

Authorities in Spain and across Europe have been warning of an imminent “fourth wave” of the virus since January. In the middle of February, Fernando Simón, director of the Centre for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies (CCAES), declared:

“It’s possible that there will be a fourth wave [which will] largely depend on how we get out of this one, on what level of low transmission we manage to achieve in this one and on how the vaccination [campaign] develops over the next weeks.”

But rather than taking the necessary measures to prevent this forecasted outbreak, the PSOE-Podemos government is scaling back social distancing to open Spain up to tourism. Recent weeks have seen wall-to-wall demands in the bourgeois media to “save the tourist season.”

The PSOE-Podemos government refused to take any measures to restrict tourism during the busy Easter holiday period, even though Spanish inhabitants were themselves prevented from leaving their own regions due to coronavirus restrictions. In response to the ruling class’ *carte blanche* to tourism companies, many airlines put on additional flights from countries such as Germany to cater for the anticipated surge in demand.

This led to an influx of holiday-makers at the end of March, including from countries with far higher incidence rates than Spain, such as Germany and France. There has been widespread alarm and opposition among workers to the government’s policy of facilitating tourism. Numerous photos and videos circulated on the internet of holiday-makers crowding onto Spanish beaches and streets.

PSOE Prime Minister Sánchez, however, defended this policy, declaring that “Spain is following the recommendations of the EU.”

“The European Commission has been saying for

months that closing borders does not guarantee that there will be no virus transmission,” Sánchez continued. “We will keep the border open [and] ask for a negative PCR from within 72 hours. ... We’re already getting there with vaccinations and are in the final phase of the pandemic.”

At the end of last month, PSOE Minister of Industry, Trade and Tourism, Reyes Maroto, also emphasised that the government’s top priority is to boost tourism revenue—which contributes to around 12 percent of Spain’s GDP and employment—no matter the cost in lives.

“Perhaps the objective is to reach half the number of tourists we had in 2019 [this summer]. This would be an achievement.” This would mean the arrival of at least 40 million holiday-makers into Spain this year, greatly increasing the risk of an explosion of COVID-19.

While acknowledging that Spain was now on the cusp of a “fourth wave” of the virus, CCAES director Simón sought to blame the population for the rise in cases, claiming that if the population simply behaved themselves it would only be a “little wave.” “At the national level,” Simón stated last week, “if we have a constant increase [in cases], we will have a fourth wave, but if we maintain full discipline and control measures over Easter, perhaps it does not make sense to talk of a fourth wave and we would speak of a rippling in a short period.”

The increase in infections in Spain is not the fault of individuals, but the responsibility of the PSOE-Podemos government, who have consistently prioritised profits over lives.



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