

As Indian variant spreads in Europe, governments reopen across the continent

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While scientists warn of the dangerous implications of the spread of the more contagious Indian variant of the coronavirus, governments across Europe are pushing ahead rapidly to reopen their economies fully and lifting any limited lockdown measures that have remained in place.

The reopening is taking place amid a competition among the European states over which economy can most quickly restart, and particularly over access to tourism revenue for the Summer holiday season.

The B.1.617 variant, first identified in India, may be up to 50 percent more contagious than even the so-called UK variant, according to a UK government advisory committee, though further studies are required. The B.1.17 variant had first been identified in the UK in September, but has since rapidly become the dominant strain and makes up the majority of cases across Europe. In the UK, the number of identified cases of the Indian variant has rapidly accelerated in the past 10 days to more than 2,300.

By Tuesday, it had reached 2,300 in the UK, a rise of 75 percent from four days earlier. The strain now accounts for at least 20 percent of new infections, and scientists predict that it will become the dominant strain within days. However, yesterday the government admitted that the official count of cases of the new strain was already outdated by a week. The Johnson government's own scientific advisors have made statements warning against the ending of lockdown measures that it is pushing through.

The reopening in Europe, under conditions where only a small portion of the population has been vaccinated, poses clear dangers of a new catastrophic overwhelming of hospitals and mass deaths. It is being pursued as part of the European Union's policy of placing corporate profits before lives, with case

numbers already too high for any systematic testing, tracing and isolation system to be put in place.

In France, cafes and restaurants opened for outdoor dining yesterday. Theaters, museums, public monuments and cinemas also reopened. The nightly curfew was pushed back from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Indoor and outdoor physical sports, except for contact sports, are again legally permitted. On June 9, restaurants are to reopen completely.

Only slightly over 13 percent of the French population has been vaccinated, compared to scientific estimates that, to prevent the virus' spread, a population immunity rate of between 80-90 percent would be required. The Indian variant has already been detected in France, though the number of daily cases remains unknown. More than 17,000 cases were reported on Tuesday in the country, while the seven-day average for deaths remains at almost 200.

Schools in France have been completely reopened to in-person classes at full capacity. The Macron government is not making any attempt to justify this decision on a scientific basis. On April 23, for example, Prime Minister Jean Castex had asserted in an interview that "the virus circulates very little in schools" and that "schools are not the principal location for contaminations."

On May 11, however, in an interview with France 2, Castex stated the opposite: "What does locking down mean? Let's be concrete. It means closing schools. This is the essential variable—which has the most impact, we know, is closing schools." This policy has been rejected, however, because it would require allowing parents to remain at home and providing them with compensation to not attend work.

In neighbouring Germany, only 11.9 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated, and 38.2 percent

has received a single dose. According to the Robert Koch Institute, five percent of those aged under 59 have been fully vaccinated, and one in three people aged over 80 has not been vaccinated. The Indian variant is responsible already for two percent of all new infections in the country, though even this figure is already likely an underestimate. Officials in the region of Mettmann quarantined residents in a pair of high-rise buildings in the town of Velbert on Tuesday, after several cases of the Indian variant were detected there.

However the various German state regions are outdoing each other in their reopening policies. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the largest state by population, schools are being reopened to full attendance on May 31, assuming that the seven-day incidence rate in the state per 100,000 people is below 100. In Berlin, which is governed by a coalition of the Left Party, SPD and the Greens, schools have been opened to all children since the beginning of this week. In Schleswig-Holstein, indoor and outdoor cafes and restaurants have been open again since Monday. Other federal states will follow in the next few days.

In Spain, the six-month national state of emergency ended on May 9, ending even the limited restrictions on travel between regions and late-night curfews. Last month, David López-Acuña, a former official for the World Health Organization, opposed the ending of the restrictions, warning that “we don’t see that the vaccination drive will have a significant impact by May. There may be less pressure on the health system, but the reality is health authorities are trusting too much that the immunization drive can stop the waves.”

In Italy, restrictions were lifted on April 26, permitting outdoor dining in bars, restaurants and cafes, the reopening of swimming pools and sports, cinemas and theatres, and the return to in-person schooling for all students.

In Belgium, outdoor dining in bars and cafes has been restarted since May 8, along with sporting facilities. In mid-April, schools in the country were reopened, while hairdressers and non-essential stores were reopened on April 26.

In Switzerland, music venues, sports, museums, libraries, outdoor cafes and restaurants, and cinemas have all been opened since April 19. Similarly in the Netherlands, outdoor dining was reopened on April 18, with hours restricted to between midday and 6pm.

The reckless reopening policy of European governments raises very grave dangers to the working population on the continent. It is being driven by their determination to prevent any further restriction in business activities and corporate profit-making, regardless of the impact on the lives of the population. It was summed up openly by French President Emmanuel Macron, who declared that the population must “live with the virus,” and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who demanded last year in a leaked private cabinet meeting “no more fucking lockdowns—let the bodies pile high in their thousands.”



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