

Reopening continues in France while danger of resurgence of coronavirus remains high

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The French government is proceeding with its schedule to reopen and end coronavirus lockdown restrictions by the end of June. It is being driven solely by a concern for the resumption of economic and tourist activity, indifferent to the significant circulation of the virus and appearance of more deadly variants, such as the Delta variant first identified in India. The present situation is not unlike the end of the second lockdown at the end of 2020. The relaxation of precautionary measures allowed the UK variant to spread massively at the beginning of 2021.

On Wednesday evening, the daily curfew was extended by two hours to 11:00 p.m., and restaurants and bars reopened terraces to 100 percent capacity, with indoor venues kept at 50 percent. Museums, cinemas and theatres can also accommodate more people. Sports activities have resumed indoors and outdoors, with some restrictions; spectators are once again being invited into sports stadiums. A coronavirus pass will be used for events of more than 1,000 people, which will also facilitate the entry of tourists.

Labour Minister Elizabeth Borne told *Le Parisien* that the “constraints of 100 percent working from home will be ended.” In the private sector, employers supported by the unions can now do more or less what they want: “We are giving the hand back to employers and employees so that they can determine the appropriate number of days” per week at workplaces. Only 100 percent on-site “would violate the protocol.” In the civil service, “the number of days from home will be dropped to three.”

Having deliberately allowed the virus to spread in schools in 2020 and 2021, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer was compelled to announce limited measures to slow the spread of the virus when schools reopened after the holiday break. Classes are to close

when a single case is detected, and schools are closed when several classes are detected. The latest monitoring figures indicate that just over 5,000 classrooms have been closed, and approximately 1,000 teachers and over 11,000 students have been infected over the past seven days. There has been no significant downward trend in recent weeks, as in the rest of the population.

For the general population, the number of daily cases has only declined below 7,000 on June 6. The devastation caused by the epidemic in terms of human lives is illustrated by the fact that the seven-day average of daily deaths only fell below 100 on June 3. This is the first time that an average of less than 100 people have died per day since October 18, 2020. France surpassed the milestone of 110,000 deaths on June 7.

Reviewing the development in the circulation of the virus since the beginning of the year, it is possible to identify the second and third peaks of the waves of the virus. But in terms of daily deaths, the policy pursued by Macron, disregarding scientific advice, of allowing the virus to circulate, imposing lockdowns extremely late and only partially, and ending lockdowns far too early, has resulted in a single wave of deaths that began in September 2020 and continues to this day.

The prestigious medical journal *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) wrote twice, in February and June, that the UK government’s response to the pandemic could be described as “social murder.” Such a characterisation applies no less to the French government’s policy.

As of June 4, 2,571 people were in intensive care, and 14,801 coronavirus patients were in hospital. The occupancy rate of intensive care beds is at approximately 50 percent, with significant differences between regions. The occupancy rate is significantly higher in the Île-de-France region surrounding Paris

and in the north.

More than 13.6 million people are fully vaccinated, or just over 20 percent of the population, and approximately 28 million are partially vaccinated. Vaccination eligibility was expanded to all adults on May 31. From June 15, it will be open to adolescents aged 12 to 18.

The desire to “make numbers” in the vaccination drive is beginning to conflict with the need to protect the oldest and most vulnerable sectors as a priority. Thus, counting full and partial vaccinations, a plateau seems to have been reached of 82 percent vaccination for those aged over 75, and 81.5 percent of those aged 65-74. Many older people have difficulty accessing vaccination, even when they want to.

Similarly, vaccination is poorly prioritised for at-risk groups who have had access to it since May 1. Overweight people, who are particularly vulnerable to coronavirus, are less than 50 percent vaccinated. This is due to the lack of individualised support for the vaccination policy because of a lack of resources.

The virus reproduction rate (R0), which had fallen to a low of 0.75, has risen to between 0.8 and 0.9 since mid-May. This means that the virus is receding, but more slowly than before. A rate of over 1 indicates exponential expansion. Moreover, the situation is contrasted between regions and between departments.

Government spokesman Gabriel Attal announced on June 2 that there were “warning signs,” particularly in New Aquitaine and Occitania, where the reproduction rate had “risen above 1, which means that the epidemic is gaining ground again.” This resurgence was very marked in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques, but also in Charente-Maritime, Lot-et-Garonne, Charente, Landes and Gironde.

In addition, the Delta variant initially identified in India in April, which is also spreading rapidly in England, has also appeared in several departments, including Landes, where there are “around 50 patients,” according to the regional health agency. About 100 cases have been confirmed in France, some of unknown origin.

On Saturday, the regional health agency of the Grand Est region announced that it had detected a “cluster of the Delta (referred to as Indian) variant” in the Superior Academy of the Arts of the Rhine, located in Strasbourg. Four cases have already been identified,

with 43 contact cases.

Thus, the variant is already circulating significantly without detection. The authorities and most of the media are providing reassurances about the Delta variant, or avoiding the subject altogether, to make people believe that the situation is under control.

The real situation is indicated by the developments in the UK. There are already more cases of the Indian variant there than of the British variant (Alpha), which is already known to be more contagious than the original strain of coronavirus it replaced. Infections and deaths from the Delta variant are steadily increasing from an initial small number of infections.

According to Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, the new variant is somewhere between 30 and 100 percent—likely approximately 60 percent—more transmissible than the Alpha variant.

According to a study by Public Health England, the Indian variant could lead to an increase in hospital admissions. After analysing nearly 38,000 sequences of the virus, the researchers estimate that the Delta variant has a 2.61 percent higher risk of hospitalisation than the Alpha variant.

Finally, the Delta variant is one of the variants that has an increased ability to bypass the immune system, so people who have not completed the vaccination schedule could be affected and participate in the spread of the virus.

With only 20 percent of the population fully vaccinated and with the acceleration of the reopening campaign, the potential for the spread of the dominant Alpha strain and the new Delta strain is significant.

As with the arrival of the Alpha strain at Christmas, Macron and his government are sweeping aside the science and pursuing a health policy that risks a fourth wave of contagions by the summer.



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