

Surging Delta variant already dominant in several European states

Robert Stevens**22 June 2021**

The highly transmissible Delta coronavirus variant is spreading rapidly across the European continent. The mutation initially emerged in India and is responsible for tens of thousands of deaths. It is already the dominant strain of Covid-19 in the UK, Portugal and Russia.

The main B.1.617.2 strain of Delta first detected last October is one of several strains of Covid-19. It has now been identified in at least 74 countries according to a World Health Organization survey of local reports.

Public Health England (PHE) has identified all three Delta variants—the original first spotted in India, as well as Delta-AY.1 and Delta-AY.2 as variants of concern. By June 18, PHE had detected 36 confirmed and two probable cases of Delta AY.1 infection in England. Delta-AY.2 has not yet been detected in Britain.

Within weeks of being detected, the main Delta strain became dominant in the UK. According to latest figures it is responsible for at least 98 percent of new cases. Over the last seven days there have been around 10,000 new daily cases of Covid announced in Britain, with the virus allowed to surge due to the government reopening most of the economy on May 17. The number of new cases in the last week (68,449) marked a 31 percent increase on the 52,077 cases in the previous seven days.

On Tuesday, another 11,625 new COVID cases were recorded, the highest number since mid-February and up nearly a thousand cases on Monday. Deaths are also edging up with Tuesday's 27 coronavirus-related deaths comparing with five on Monday.

The spread in Britain is being particularly fuelled by infections among school children and young people; only a tiny percentage of whom are vaccinated. On Tuesday, the Department for Education reported that nearly 250,000 children in England missed school over the last week for Covid-related reasons, including 9,000 children who have contracted the disease.

According to epidemiologists, Delta is around 60

percent more transmissible than the Alpha variant (originally named the Kent variant—which itself became dominant in Britain within a few months in the autumn and rapidly spread globally. Initial data compiled in Britain confirms that the Delta variant increases the risk of hospitalisation by 2.2 times compared with Alpha.

Europe recorded a further 5,770 Covid deaths last week with the vast majority of these (3,000) in Russia, where the Delta variant is already rife. In the last seven days to Tuesday only Russia with 111,796 infections on the continent recorded more Covid cases than Britain. This was a 29 percent increase on the week prior. Last Friday alone a record 9,056 new infections were logged in Moscow.

The largest percentage increase in cases was recorded in Portugal which had 7,734 cases in the last week (compared with a 5,038 the week before)—a 54 percent increase.

A major factor for the spread in Portugal is again the reckless reopening of the economy including its sizeable tourism sector. Portugal's resort are popular with holidaymakers from the UK and it was initially placed on the green list of countries from which people do not need to quarantine on their return. With Covid resurgent in Portugal, the UK placed it on the amber list on June 8 requiring quarantine—though travel continues.

In France, a further 16,444 new cases were recorded last week, in Italy 7,683 and in Belgium 3,077.

These are all being driven by the Delta surge. On Sunday, the *Financial Times* published a report of the spread of the Delta variant across Europe based on an analysis of global genomic data from the Gisaid virus tracking database (Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data). The *FT* noted that Delta "accounts for 96 percent of sequenced Covid-19 infections in Portugal, more than 20 percent in Italy and about 16 percent in Belgium..." It added, "In Portugal, community

transmission of the variant has been detected in the greater Lisbon area, where more than 60 percent of the country's new coronavirus cases in the past week have been identified."

Clusters caused by the Delta variant are springing up across the continent. The *FT* reported, "French authorities are currently trying to contain an outbreak in the Landes region, near the Spanish border, where 125 cases of the Delta variant have been confirmed by genetic sequencing and another 130 are suspected, representing about 30 percent of recent infections in the area. Clusters of the Delta variant have also been identified in recent weeks in the southern suburbs of Paris and an art school in Strasbourg."

The Delta infections reported by governments in mainland Europe are no doubt a significant underestimation. Hardly any genomic sequencing of COVID cases has been carried out. The UK is a world leader in genome sequencing and has completed over half a million genomes. In contrast, as the *FT* notes, "Germany, France and Spain have sequenced about 130,000, 47,000 and 34,000 respectively."

Modelled estimates of Delta's share of all sequenced cases found that up to June 16, 98 percent of UK Covid cases were Delta, where 30 percent of all Covid cases are sequenced. In Russia, the figures were 99 percent of Covid cases being Delta, based on 1 percent sequencing. In Portugal, 96 percent were Delta based on 5 percent sequencing. In Italy, 26 percent of cases were Delta based on 2 percent of cases sequenced and in Belgium 16 percent Delta based on 6 percent sequenced. Germany's rate was 15 percent Delta based on 8 percent sequenced (compared to the Robert Koch Institute's "higher end" estimate of Delta cases reaching 6 percent). In France, where the Health Ministry calculates that the rate of Delta cases is between 2 and 4 percent, the Gisaid data found that almost 7 percent of cases are Delta based on just 1 percent of cases being sequenced.

The lack of such genome sequencing again points to the deadly impact of the principle adopted by all the major powers at the outset of the pandemic that profits and the economy must come before the health and lives of the population. Commenting on the lack of sequencing by some of the richest countries on the planet, the *FT* cited Antoine Flahault, director of the Institute of Global Health at the University of Geneva who said, "It's costly, it's time consuming and it was neglected."

In Sweden, where the government took the decision to let coronavirus run rampant with the goal of reaching

"herd immunity" causing more than a million people to be infected from a 10 million population and over 14,200 deaths, the Public Health Agency confirmed last Thursday a "community spread" of Delta with 71 cases of the variant. Agency director general Johan Carlson told a news conference, "There are some dark clouds on the horizon and I think mainly of outbreaks of the delta variant. It is found in Europe and also locally in Sweden."

Huge swathes of Europe's population remain unvaccinated, allowing the virus to spread and mutate. Even in Britain, which has vaccinated the highest percentage of its population in Europe, only around half of the population has been fully immunised with two doses. As the *FT* notes, "vaccination rates in most countries in mainland Europe are hovering at between 20 per cent and 30 per cent. About 26 per cent of the population in France has been fully vaccinated."

Europe's governments have all barely altered their agendas to fully reopen their economies to ensure the profits of the corporations and banks.

In Portugal, the authorities sealed off the capital, Lisbon, preventing travel in and out, but only for last weekend.

In the case of the Conservative government in Britain, having been forced to delay ending all final restrictions from June 21, it has declared July 19 "Terminus Day" and announced a raft of super-spreader events. On Tuesday, the latest announcement was that 60,000 soccer fans will be allowed into London's Wembley Stadium for the semi-finals and final of Euro 2020 on July 7, 8 and 11—the most allowed at a UK sporting event in 15 months. The upscale in fans watching was agreed between London and Europe's governing soccer body, Uefa.

On Tuesday, Scottish National Party First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced that moving to the lowest level of restrictions will be delayed until July 19 and that all major legal Covid restrictions will be ended in Scotland on August 9.



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