

# Delta variant of coronavirus fuels rise in cases in Europe

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While governments in Europe abandon social distancing measures, coronavirus cases are rising across the continent, increasingly dominated by the more infectious Delta strain of the virus. The Delta variant, first detected in India, is considered to be up to 60 percent more contagious than even the Alpha strain first detected in the UK, and to be up to four times as likely to lead to hospitalisations.

The most advanced situation on the continent is the UK. This is largely because the Delta variant began to spread in Britain earlier than elsewhere, despite it having a higher vaccination rate than most EU countries, with almost 60 percent of the adult population having received two doses.

On Tuesday, the UK recorded a further 20,479 cases, the second consecutive day that they have topped 20,000, taking new infections recorded in the last seven days to 123,566. There were 108 deaths due to COVID-19 over the period, a comparatively low figure solely due to the impact of the vaccination program.

Despite this resurgence of the virus fuelled by the Delta variant, and a total of more than 152,000 deaths from COVID-19, Sajid Javid, in his first speech to parliament as UK Health Secretary, insisted that July 19 would be “end of the line” for safety restrictions.

“We see no reason to go beyond July 19 because in truth no date we choose comes with zero risk, we know we simply cannot eliminate it. We have to learn to live with it,” he said. Javid made no bones that the protection of big business was his main concern: “We also know that people and businesses need certainty. So we want every step to be irreversible. Make no mistake, the restriction on our freedoms must come to an end.”

Much of the current surge has been due to the infection of youth and schoolchildren. On Tuesday, the Department of Education released figures showing that

more than 375,000 pupils were absent from school last week in England due to the spread of COVID-19. This was an increase of more than 130,000 in a week, 66 percent, and equates to 5.1 percent of all schoolchildren.

In a stark confirmation of the government’s herd immunity policy, with masks now discouraged in schools in official guidance, 15,000 of the absent pupils are confirmed COVID-19 cases and another 24,000 suspected cases.

The Delta variant is also leading to a surge in cases in other countries, including in Russia and in Portugal. Russia recorded over 20,600 new cases yesterday. While the number of cases was approximately equal to the number recorded in Britain, there were approximately 30 times as many deaths, with 652 deaths officially counted. The vaccination rate in Russia is currently at 11 percent.

In Portugal, there were 1,746 new cases recorded yesterday. The Portuguese health ministry released a report last week stating that more than half of all cases are comprised of the Delta variant. In the capital Lisbon, more than 70 percent of cases are now from the Delta strain.

On Tuesday, the German government invoked a two-week quarantine on travel of passengers from Russia and Portugal, citing concerns about the spread of the Delta variant. The *British Times* newspaper reported on Monday that German government officials were seeking to designate the UK as a “country of concern” and ban travel of UK residents to the EU regardless of whether they have been vaccinated.

German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer on Tuesday criticized the entrance of large number of supporters into British football stadiums as part of the European Championship tournament. He told the regional

newspaper *Augsburger Allgemeine* that it was “irresponsible that tens of thousands of people gather in confined spaces in countries classed at risk because of the highly contagious Delta variant.” The England-Germany clash yesterday evening was attended by some 45,000 people, half of the stadium’s capacity.

In Germany itself, however, the Delta variant is already spreading and is likely to already be the dominant strain. On Tuesday, Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute, told officials that, based on a national genome sequencing analysis, the Delta variant’s relative weight in coronavirus cases reached 36 percent in the week of June 14-20, more than double the 15 percent of the previous week. Based on this trend, Wieler estimated that the Delta variant already now makes up more than half the total number of cases.

Germany is nonetheless proceeding with the ending of limited social-distancing measures. As elsewhere across the continent, its concern is the return of business activity and corporate profit-making for German companies. Approximately 54 percent of the population in Germany has received a first dose of the vaccine, and 35 percent are fully vaccinated.

In Italy and Belgium, the Delta variant already makes up at least 20 percent and 16 percent of coronavirus cases, respectively.

On Tuesday, French Health Minister Olivier Veran stated that Delta made up “around 20 percent of new cases in France,” and “is becoming progressively dominant.” In the Landes region of southwestern France bordering Spain, the Delta variant accounts already for 70 percent of infections.

On June 24, Andrea Ammon, the head of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, said it was “very likely” that Delta circulate “extensively” across the continent through the Summer. “This could cause a risk for the more vulnerable individuals to be infected and experience severe illness and death if they are not fully vaccinated,” she said.

“There are still too many individuals at risk of severe COVID-19 infection whom we need to protect as soon as possible,” Ammon said. She implicitly criticized the abandonment of social distancing measures, stating: “Until most of the vulnerable individuals are protected, we need to keep the circulation of the Delta [variant] low by strictly adhering to public health measures,

which worked for controlling the impact of other variants.”

The stated policy of European governments, however, is to rely on vaccinations to blunt the spread of the virus, but to reject social distancing measures that would have an impact on corporate operations. Only approximately one third of the continent’s adult population is currently fully vaccinated.

Scientists have warned that the policy of permitting the virus to spread among a large, partially vaccinated population creates the conditions for the development of new and even more deadly variants, which could be even more resistant to existing vaccine protections.

The fact that new strains have been allowed to develop and become so dominant was itself not an inevitable, purely biological phenomenon. It was the outcome of the policies pursued by capitalist governments across the European Union, the US and elsewhere. Since the end of stricter lockdown measures last year, they have pursued, in all but name, a policy of “herd immunity” allowing the virus to spread in order to protect the financial interests of the corporate elite.

The result has been more than 1.1 million COVID-19 deaths in Europe. In the same year, the wealth of Europe’s billionaires has risen by \$1 trillion, to approximately \$3 trillion, spread among just 628 people.



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