

European states scrap social distancing as COVID-19 pandemic surges

Jacques Valentin, Alex Lantier

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The COVID-19 pandemic, driven by the Delta variant, is surging in Europe. New COVID-19 infections across Europe rose by 43 percent over the last week to 548,000, as European governments end social distancing measures. Over 80 percent of the cases were concentrated in Britain (190,294 cases), Russia (168,035) and Spain (89,036), where cases rose 148 percent.

In several countries with smaller caseloads, however, infections are spreading even faster, pointing to the danger of a catastrophic rise of COVID-19 cases, despite ongoing vaccination campaigns. Weekly COVID-19 cases quadrupled in Luxembourg to 961, tripled in the Netherlands (to 11,480) and Greece (8,504), and doubled in Denmark (3,208). They rose around 50 percent in France (19,364) and Portugal (16,469).

On July 1, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Europe Hans Kluge had said: "Last week, the number of cases rose by 10 percent, driven by increased mixing, travel, gatherings and easing of social restrictions." He also warned that the Delta variant will dominate in Europe by August, under conditions where 63 percent of Europe's population still has not received its first vaccine dose. Half the elderly and 40 percent of health care workers are unvaccinated. On this basis, he warned that "there will be a new wave in the WHO European region."

Kluge's projections and warnings of a new wave of the pandemic exploding across Europe are being realized. Over 1.1 million people have already died of COVID-19 in Europe, but European governments are pressing ahead with unabashed contempt for human life, adopting opening policies leading to a new surge of millions of cases.

By eliminating social distancing rules that undermine

business profits, they thus hope to intensify the funnelling of social wealth to the top of society, after the pandemic last year saw bank bailouts increase Europe's billionaires' collective wealth by €1 trillion.

Britain is leading the trend that is unfolding across Europe. After France scrapped social distancing rules for businesses on July 1, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson aims to end mask requirements and social distancing measures by July 19. Epidemiologist Professor Neil Ferguson has warned that the UK could see 150,000 to 200,000 by the end of the summer, but Johnson bluntly demanded that the economy and corporate profits take priority over lives.

"We're seeing rising hospital admissions, and we must reconcile ourselves, sadly, to more deaths from COVID," Johnson said, adding: "We have to balance the risks of the disease and of continuing with legal restrictions, with their impact on people's lives and livelihoods."

An indication of the scope of the disaster that could result was a study last month from Public Health England. It showed that so far, 117 people have died of the Delta variant in Britain, including 50 who were doubly vaccinated, as vaccinations bring down the death rate to 0.13 percent. However, even if this far lower death rate were to maintain itself despite the vast increase in circulation of the virus, this would mean 200 to 250 deaths per day in Britain by the end of the summer if Ferguson's projections were realized.

On the European continent, where vaccination rates are substantially lower, this could lead to even greater levels of death.

Yesterday, Russian officials rejected calls for more social distancing measures, as over 700 people die of COVID-19 every day. Russia, Europe's largest country with a population of 146 million, leads Europe for

COVID-19 deaths, at 140,775, just ahead of Britain (128,336) and Italy (127,731). Yet Russian Human Well-being Commissioner Anna Popova blandly declared, “there is no threat or risk now that would force us to go into lockdown or introduce tougher restrictive measures, there is no need for that today.”

In Spain, the incidence rate has surged to over 200 per 100,000 inhabitants, and over 600 among those under 30. The reproduction rate (R0), the number of people whom each infected person then goes on to infect, now stands at 3.3, the highest since the pandemic began. Super-spreader events at school holidays and nightclubs have played a major role. The region of Catalonia, where the incidence rate is at 380, said on Tuesday that it will close discos for 15 days starting this weekend.

Underscoring the risks faced by young people, *El País* reported that at the beginning of July, at least 600 people under age 30 were in intensive care and 80 had died due to COVID-19 in Spain.

This exposes the bitter cost in lives of the false reassurances spread by officials of Spain’s Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government. Last month, Fernando Simón, the head of the Centre of Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies (CCAES), said: “We know that until we have at least 70 percent immunity things can happen, but we also know they cannot be like the past. ... In no way can they be like what happened in winter, and that is true of Britain, too.”

Simón added that he was confident in supporting the elimination of the use of masks: “I believe that it will not cause any risk at all.”

As COVID-19 explodes in the Netherlands, Health Minister Ferd Grapperhaus said only that the government would see “in the coming days if tightening up the rules is justified.” The Dutch public health institute RIVM said that one in five new infections can be traced to a café, bar or club and that over 60 percent of cases are in among people under 30.

One so-called “COVID-free” party in Enschede on June 28 turned into a super-spreader event, after 180 of the 800 people attending tested positive. The party required a “corona admission ticket” showing that partygoers were vaccinated or had tested negative for the virus. Once admitted, however, they did not have to wear masks. Several people reportedly falsified their

corona admission ticket, sharing a single QR code certifying they could safely attend the party.

In France, government spokesman Gabriel Attal reported Wednesday on a national security council meeting held by President Emmanuel Macron. He said that COVID-19 affects the 20-29 age bracket most heavily and is accelerating in 11 of France’s 12 regions, with the Paris and Marseilles regions worst hit. Inside the Paris city limits, the incidence rate has again climbed over 50 per 100,000, the government’s official “alarm limit.”

Nonetheless, Attal announced no new measures, merely asking citizens to get vaccinated. Only 34 percent of French people are fully vaccinated, compared to 51 percent in Britain.

Macron also intends to make users pay for COVID-19 tests starting immediately for foreign visitors in France, and in the autumn for citizens and permanent residents. While officials have said this aims to eliminate “comfort” testing and encourage everyone to get vaccinated, there are also reports that the government was concerned that the total cost of the tests could rise to several billion euros this year. And so, the government is abandoning one of the principal methods through which a track-and-trace policy would be implemented.

These announcements show that workers cannot rely on governments to stop the pandemic. The building of independent safety committees in workplaces and schools to monitor and adopt relevant safety measures to halt the spread of the virus is the way forward for workers and youth. The critical question is mobilizing the independent strength of the working class across Europe and internationally to impose a rational, scientifically guided health policy to prevent the coming surge from claiming further millions of lives in Europe and around the world.



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