

Mass deaths hit Eastern Europe as COVID-19 surges across the continent

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This past week, 1.4 million COVID-19 cases were recorded across Europe, up 18 percent from the previous week. Also 20,503 deaths were recorded in the same time period, up 17 percent. Cases are rapidly spreading across the entire continent: Only four of Europe's 47 countries have seen cases fall in the last week.

All indicators suggest that the number of deaths and infections will continue to rise as colder weather creates optimal conditions for the virus to spread. Without the immediate imposition of stringent scientific measures to eliminate the virus, the coming winter in Europe threatens to be the deadliest so far in the pandemic.

The center of the surge is Eastern Europe. In Russia, 7,454 people died over the last week. In Ukraine, 3,785 people died, a 63 percent week-on-week increase. In Russia and Ukraine, mass infections of children have led to appalling conditions in overflowing pediatric wards.

In Bulgaria and Romania, 127 and 154 people per million inhabitants died last week, respectively, the two highest rates of any state in the world. The virus is ripping through a largely unprotected population; only 30 percent of Romanian citizens have received both vaccine shots. In Bulgaria, just 20 percent of the population have received two doses.

With Romania's 2,000 critical care beds already full, COVID-19 patients are waiting in hospital corridors for treatment. Last week, 50 patients were evacuated to beds in Poland and Hungary to try to free up space. Dorel Sandesc, head of intensive care at Timisoara hospital in western Romania, told the BBC, "I feel like the whole country has become a resuscitation department."

Governments are trying to contain and defuse public anger over their policy of mass death by implementing

a few insufficient health measures. A one-week partial lockdown has just gone into effect in Russia. Elsewhere, most workplaces remain open, however, and families are not receiving the financial support necessary to allow them to remain at home. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said, "We don't want to introduce lockdowns because our economy is gaining momentum, and lockdowns would have a negative impact on economic development."

A similar catastrophe is unfolding in the Baltic countries, though their populations are over 50 percent vaccinated. Last week, Lithuania (population 2.6 million) recorded 19,792 cases and 216 deaths. Latvia (1.8 million) recorded 17,462 infections and 165 deaths, a 53 percent increase over the previous week. Estonia (1.3 million) recorded 10,746 cases and 45 deaths—both increases of more than 30 percent from the week before. As a proportion of the population, these case rates are twice the levels recorded in Britain, the pandemic epicenter in Western Europe.

The conditions prevailing in these countries are a warning for workers across Europe and internationally. As vaccine efficacy wanes over time, new variants develop, and winter weather causes a spike in infections, hospitals throughout Europe will soon be overflowing. Already, conditions in Western and Central Europe are rapidly aligning with those in the East.

Every Scandinavian country has witnessed a near-doubling of infections over the last week. Denmark's cases rose 77 percent to 9,663. In Finland, infections rose 22 percent to 4,187. In Norway, cases rose 78 percent to 5,573. The Faroe Islands, an autonomous territory of Denmark in the North Sea with a population of just 49,000, is facing an acute outbreak with 428 cases recorded in the last week.

In Germany, weekly cases increased by 32 percent to 98,101. The 31,402 daily cases recorded on October 26 were the highest daily figure recorded in Germany since January 4. Nonetheless, the incoming SPD-Green-FDP coalition government plans to let the state of emergency expire on November 25. Weekly cases also increased in Austria by 44 percent to 25,090.

In France and Italy cases and deaths are rising following weeks of decline. In France, cases increased by 16 percent to 38,215 last week. Following the end of free tests in France, the week of October 18-24 saw 675,200 fewer tests compared to the week before.

Britain is one of the only countries to record a fall in cases in the previous week. However, the 305,882 recorded was only a 4 percent decline and still left the country leading Europe for the number of recorded infections and only behind the United States in the rest of the world. The 1,010 recorded deaths in the country represented a 6 percent increase on the week before.

Other seasonal diseases also threaten to worsen the crisis. Scientists in many countries have warned that influenza will have a greater effect than previous years due to a lack of natural immunity built up by lower amounts of social interaction during the pandemic. In France, bronchitis infections in children are overwhelming pediatric wards.

Even in European countries with the highest vaccination rates, millions remain unprotected, including school children and many of the elderly. Waning effectiveness of vaccines month by month and new variants also threaten a surge in cases and deaths. Although the ratio of cases to deaths is less than in previous waves due to vaccination, the vast increase in infections due to the increased contagiousness of the Delta variant means that once again hospitals throughout Europe face inundation in the near future.

The number of deaths this winter may well exceed the levels seen in December, January and February a year ago. However, capitalist governments across Europe are preparing for this wave of mass infection and death by again placing profits above lives.

Throughout the pandemic, the guiding principle of the ruling class has been to maximize the number of hours, weeks and days that profit can be extracted from the working class. They are entirely indifferent to the 1.3 million confirmed COVID-19 deaths across Europe so far in the pandemic, and the millions suffering from

Long COVID or serious organ damage. This was most crassly summed up in British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's wish to "let the bodies pile high in their thousands," but it is held in government offices across Europe.

Meanwhile, the EU has pumped billions into its military budgets and gifted hundreds of billions of euros to corporate bailouts. Spanish courts have ruled that lockdowns are unconstitutional. In France, unions and pseudo-left groups have supported far right-led anti-vaccination protests. These policies all seek to impose a policy of "living with the virus" on a working population that opposes mass death and the continued spread of the virus.

This conscious policy of social murder can and must be opposed. Without a scientific policy to eliminate the virus, the cycle of mass death and social dislocation will continue for years.

Workers must arm themselves with a scientific and political understanding of the pandemic. Lockdowns are needed to eliminate the virus and end the pandemic. These require full compensation for affected workers and small businesses, combined with vaccination, contact tracing and isolation of infected people.

A political movement to impose a scientific policy to eliminate COVID-19 must be built. This perspective was outlined in the webinar "How to end the pandemic" hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) on October 24. The recording of this event can be viewed here .



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