

World Health Organisation warns “pandemic is far from over” as COVID-19 surges through Europe

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Europe is driving a new global upsurge of COVID-19. Total worldwide cases have now increased for the last two weeks to an average of over 430,000 recorded infections per day. With cases falling or stable in every other region, the growth is entirely down to a massive spread of the virus on the European continent.

Cases rocketed from mid-June to late July, driven overwhelmingly by the United Kingdom. After falling slightly in the period to mid-September, they have shot up again as part of a more generalised spread of the disease, concentrated particularly in Eastern Europe as well as the UK.

In the week to last Sunday, the seven-day European average of daily new cases increased by nearly 11 percent. Over 220,000 people are now being infected every day. According to data from Johns Hopkins University, Europe is registering more than twice the number of daily cases per million (299) than the next-highest region, North America (139). Over 3,000 people in Europe are being killed by COVID-19 each day—34 percent higher than the same time last year.

World Health Organisation (WHO) Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus commented last week, “The global number of reported cases and deaths from COVID-19 is now increasing for the first time in two months, driven by an ongoing rise in Europe that outweighs declines in other regions. It’s another reminder that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over.”

Expressing the homicidal policies of the entire ruling class, however, WHO Regional Director for Europe Dr. Hans Kluge urged the continent’s governments to keep schools open this winter, accompanied by a range of (inadequate) mitigation measures. He claimed, “Last year’s widespread school closures, disrupting the education of millions of children and adolescents, did

more harm than good, especially to children’s mental and social well-being. We can’t repeat the same mistakes.”

The cost of keeping open schools and the economy in the middle of a raging pandemic—a policy driven by the profit motives of the ultra-wealthy—is already playing out across the continent, even before the winter months begin to bite.

The growth of infections in many Central and Eastern European and Balkan countries is astronomical. Official daily case rates are the highest they have ever been in Estonia (1,286 per million), Latvia (1,268), Slovenia (1,095), Slovakia (715), Bulgaria (685), Ukraine (526), Greece (355) and Russia (259), and are rapidly on their way to their highest ever values in Lithuania (1,090) and Croatia (876).

There have also been sharp increases in average daily cases in Hungary (up 82 percent in a week), Czech Republic (up 63 percent), Poland (57) and Austria (42 percent). Across the region, real rates of infection are likely to be far higher as inadequate testing infrastructure is overwhelmed by the spread of the disease. Last week, testing in the Croatian capital returned a positivity rate of 50 percent.

In many countries, the situation is exacerbated by low rates of vaccination. Less than half (43 percent) of Serbia’s population is fully vaccinated, 33 percent of Romania’s and Russia’s, 22 percent of Bulgaria’s and 17 percent of Ukraine’s. General distrust of the government and the healthcare system, the impact of government propaganda declaring the pandemic over or of little concern, and the agitation of far-right and religious forces have all contributed to this phenomenon.

Without even the protection of vaccines, the wave of infections is translating into unprecedented death tolls. Even official average daily COVID-19 death rates are at

their highest levels since the start of the pandemic in Russia (1,104 deaths a day), Romania (439), Ukraine (581) and Serbia (64), with Bulgaria (132) on the way. Romania's average daily death toll is more than 2-and-a-half times its previous peak, Ukraine's is 44 percent higher, and Russia's is 28 percent higher.

The burden of severe disease is straining woefully underfunded health infrastructure to breaking point. Intensive care units in Romanian hospitals are beyond capacity. Medical teams have been sent by Poland and Denmark to provide support and other European countries have donated oxygen concentrators and bottles of monoclonal antibodies. One of Bulgaria's main suppliers of medical oxygen warned last week, "If the number of patients in hospitals continues to increase, there will be no oxygen next week."

Even the more heavily vaccinated countries are suffering serious numbers of fatalities. Latvia, with 54 percent of its population fully vaccinated, is recording its highest average daily death toll of the pandemic. Similarly vaccinated Baltic states Estonia and Lithuania are not far behind.

The catastrophe unfolding in Latvia has forced its government to declare a one-month lockdown, switching some schools to online learning and some industries to remote working, banning indoor and outdoor gatherings, and closing the majority of shops and all restaurants, salons, cinemas, theatres, concert and sports venues.

This falls well short of what is required to stem the tide of infections and deaths. Other governments, however, have refused to go even this far, introducing only a patchwork of partial measures from vaccine and mask mandates, to COVID passes, curfews and limited restrictions on large gatherings.

In Western and Northern Europe, cases have risen dramatically in Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Germany. In the last week, the seven-day average of daily new cases in Norway climbed 62 percent in the week to Sunday, in Belgium 49 percent, in Denmark 48 percent, in the Netherlands 42 percent, and in Germany 40 percent.

Belgium is on track to outstrip the UK in per capita figures, after a slight decline in Britain's recorded infections over the last week. Its government has responded by introducing the most minimal measures, requiring face masks in public places and for bar, restaurant and fitness staff and mandating COVID passes for entry. The same is planned for the Netherlands.

The Danish government will review its measures on

Friday but has already downgraded the threat status of COVID-19, limiting its options. Opposition parties the Red Green Alliance, Danish People's Party and Conservative Party have all expressed their opposition to the return of restrictions.

The German parliament is planning to end the "epidemic situation of national scope" in November, leaving in place only mask wearing in public spaces and vaccine restrictions on entry to certain venues as protective measures. Dirk Wiese, deputy-head of the Social Democrats parliamentary group spelt out, "There will no more be school closures, lockdowns or curfews again."

There have also been significant upticks in cases in France and Italy. COVID hospital admissions in Italy have increased 7.5 percent and admissions to intensive care units in France have climbed 12 percent.

In the UK, despite a small decline, daily infections remain extremely high and over 150 people on average are being killed by the virus every day. The virtually unchecked spread of the virus for the last few months appears to have given rise to a major growth of the AY.4.2 sublineage of the Delta variant, thought to be 10-15 percent more transmissible, which the WHO reported on October 26 has now reached 42 countries.

The initial resurgence of the pandemic in Europe, as the Northern hemisphere heads into winter, is an urgent warning of the dangers of "living with" COVID-19. Yet more waves of suffering and death will engulf the populations of the world if action is not taken by the working class to stop the murderous policy of herd immunity in its tracks, and implement policies for the elimination of the virus.



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