

WHO warns of 500,000 new COVID-19 deaths in Europe by February

Will Morrow, Alex Lantier

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In a press conference yesterday, World Health Organisation (WHO) director for Europe Hans Kluge issued an urgent warning: Europe and the republics of the former Soviet Union are now the epicentre of the pandemic. Kluge warned that there could be 500,000 more coronavirus deaths in Europe in just the next three months, beyond the 1.4 million who have already died.

“Today, every single country in Europe and Central Asia is facing a real threat of COVID-19 resurgence, or already fighting it,” he said. “The current pace of transmission across the 53 countries of the EU region is of grave concern. COVID-19 cases are once again approaching record levels, with the more transmissible delta variant continuing to dominate transmission across Europe and central Asia.”

He continued, “Last week—with more than 1.9 million new cases and 24,000 deaths reported—Europe and Central Asia saw a more than 6 percent and 12 percent increase in cases, respectively, as compared to the previous week. Over the past 5 weeks, Europe has seen a more than 55 percent increase in COVID-19 cases. Last week, Europe and Central Asia accounted for 59 percent of all global cases and 48 percent of reported deaths.”

“According to one reliable projection, we could see more than half a million COVID-19 deaths in Europe and Central Asia by the first of February next year,” Kluge said, “and 43 countries in our region will face high to extreme stress on hospital beds at some point through the same period.”

Death rates in eastern Europe, which has particularly low vaccination rates, are staggering. In the last seven days, 8,000 people died in Russia, 3,800 in Ukraine, and 3,000 in Romania, a country of less than 20 million people. Latvia, with a population of less than two million, is recording weekly death totals of

approximately 250—equivalent to approximately 43,000 weekly deaths in a country the size of the United States. Lithuania, with a population of 2.7 million, recorded over 250 deaths in the past week.

There were over 1,000 deaths in the UK over the past week, and over 600 in Germany and Poland. More than 200 weekly deaths are still being recorded in France, Italy, Greece, Hungary, and Serbia.

The WHO’s latest 14-day cumulative COVID-19 case notification rate released yesterday shows much of eastern and northern Europe classified as either red or dark red, meaning case numbers of over 200 and 500 cases per 100,000 people, respectively. Dark red is the highest urgency indicator.

Hospital admissions across Europe have more than doubled over the past week, Kluge said: “Of most concern is the rapid increase among older aged groups since Week 38 [four weeks ago]. This is translating into more people with severe disease and dying.”

Even before the northern hemisphere goes into winter, typically the deadliest season for COVID-19, Europe is seeing over 250,000 confirmed cases and 3,000 to 4,000 deaths each day. These numbers are rising rapidly as colder weather leads people to gather together in closed spaces indoors, where the virus is more easily transmitted. Moreover, the surge in Europe is likely just the beginning of a surge spreading across the northern hemisphere this winter.

Kluge urged health authorities to act immediately to halt the spread of the virus and prevent another deadly winter. From November 2020 to April 2021, Europe’s COVID-19 death toll surged from under 300,000 to over 1,000,000. Kluge said, “Europe is back at the epicentre of the pandemic, where we were one year ago. The difference today is that we know more and we can do more.”

“We must change our tactics from reacting to surges of COVID-19 to preventing them from happening in the first place,” Kluge concluded. “With a widespread resurgence of COVID-19, I’m asking every health authority to carefully reconsider the easing or lifting of measures at this very moment ... Ultimately, we are only getting out of this pandemic if politicians, scientists and the public work together.”

The measures that can halt the pandemic—a combination of lockdowns, contact tracing, vaccination and other public health measures to eliminate viral spread—are known. A number of Asia-Pacific countries including China, New Zealand and Vietnam have successfully eliminated the virus on their territories for months or years during the pandemic. If applied on a global scale, such policies could end the transmission of the virus.

Kluge’s appeals are falling on deaf ears, however. As the pandemic hit Europe last spring, capitalist governments were forced to implement strict lockdowns across much of the continent: a wave of strikes spread at major industrial facilities from Italy across much of Europe, as workers in non-essential industries demanded the right to shelter at home. While the strict lockdowns brought cases down to low levels, however, these lockdowns were ended prematurely while the virus was still circulating and contact-tracing procedures were not set up.

Keeping workers at work, and youth at school to ensure a steady stream of profits to the banks, European governments have since overseen a politically-criminal policy of continued circulation of the virus. What is unfolding now in Europe is the product of this policy of social murder. While vaccinations and warmer weather led to slower infections in the spring and summer of 2021, a new, even greater surge is underway.

COVID-19 deaths and infections are rising faster than they were a year ago, despite the vaccination of hundreds of millions of people in Europe. While Europe’s COVID-19 death toll last year rose by 50,000 from October 18 to November 11 of 2020, from 250,000 to 300,000, Europe is on track to record tens of thousands more deaths in the same period this year.

European officials continue to claim that vaccination is the sole tool to halt the pandemic, even as they send unvaccinated children back into schools, workers back to work, and infections and deaths skyrocket. In France,

where daily cases have just reached 10,000, Health Minister Olivier Véran recently told *Libération* that because of vaccination, he is less concerned about the rise in COVID-19 cases.

He said: “We are following this very closely, of course. This rise is taking place across Europe, unsurprisingly, as we know climate conditions favor the spread of respiratory viruses. However, we know vaccination has strongly limited the correlation between the number of infections and the number of serious cases and hospitalizations and deaths. So today, what I look at carefully, beyond the spread of the virus and incidence rates, it is mainly the pressure on hospitals, which is the fundamental indicator.”

In Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson infamously declared, “No more f*cking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands,” the government claimed it would take further measures only if COVID-19 deaths exceeded 1,000 weekly, or 52,000 per year. This figure has been reached, but the government is still not proposing any significant new public health measures.

In Germany, where daily infections have surged above 35,000, Health Minister Jens Spahn recently announced that the government is canceling the legal finding of an “epidemic situation of national scope,” ending the legal basis for anti-COVID-19 health measures. In Spain, the judicial system has repeatedly ruled that the lockdowns imposed last year to halt the pandemic were illegal.

Elimination of the coronavirus is a realistic and feasible policy, as scientists have made clear in webinars hosted by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Averting truly monumental loss of life requires the mobilization of a conscious, international movement in the European working class, opposed to Europe’s capitalist governments, and consciously fighting for the elimination of the virus and for socialism.



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