

Eastern Europe reaches over 1 million coronavirus deaths

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Just before the New Year, the number of coronavirus fatalities in Eastern Europe passed the 1 million mark, according to estimates by *Reuters*.

Although this region, which stretches from the Czech Republic to Russia and Romania, is home to only 39 percent of the European population, it accounts for 55 percent of the 1.8 million European coronavirus deaths. According to the statistics website Worldometer, 317,687 people succumbed to the virus just in Russia, 100,254 in Poland, 97,554 in Ukraine, 59,070 in Romania, 40,016 in Hungary and 36,683 in the Czech Republic (as of January 12).

The fall wave of Delta variant infections has created catastrophic conditions even in smaller countries such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, which are reporting hundreds of deaths per day. Poland reported a new daily high of 794 fatalities on December 29. As in all Eastern European countries, the Polish government watched passively as daily infections grew from a few hundred in the summer to over 20,000 recently.

Since November, the proportion of positive tests in Poland has been around 20 percent, suggesting massive under-reporting. The death toll is likewise rapidly rising, recently averaging around 450 a week.

Hospitalizations in Poland have peaked for the time being, with over 24,000 coronavirus patients hospitalized on December 17. Around 2,000 patients required artificial respiration due to their critical condition. As a result, the health care system is on the verge of collapse. According to the Ministry of Health, the country has about 31,900 COVID-19 beds and 2,900 ventilators.

In Poland, only 57 percent of the population is doubly vaccinated. Only 19 percent have received a so-called booster vaccination, which is crucial in significantly reducing the risk of a severe course of disease. Since

the proportion of the population over 65 years of age is 18.7 percent, a large proportion of the total population is at extreme risk.

In other Eastern European countries, the situation is similarly dramatic. For example, the vaccination rate in Romania is just over 40 percent, in Ukraine and Hungary just over 30 percent, and in Russia 46 percent. At 64 percent, the Czech Republic still has one of the highest vaccination rates in the region, but due to the official policy of mass infection, it still has one of the highest death rates (3,398 deaths per million inhabitants).

The mass mortality in Eastern Europe is a screaming indictment of the capitalist profit system. The reintroduction of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy 30 years ago ushered in an unprecedented social counterrevolution. The oligarchy, recruited from former Stalinist bureaucrats, hit the Eastern European countries with one “reform” after another in the interests of the banks and corporations.

The health care system has been stripped to the bone. Health care spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in all Eastern European countries was below the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average in 2019, and thus below the level of most developed industrial nations. The number of hospital beds per 100,000 inhabitants is also below average.

Despite these horrific conditions, Eastern European governments have refused to respond with the necessary measures.

The right-wing Polish PIS government tightened measures only minimally shortly before the Christmas holidays. Occupancy rates for restaurants, hotels, cinemas, theatres, sports facilities and religious institutions, for example, have been reduced to 30

percent. However, those who are vaccinated are exempt. As of this week, all students are back in attendance at classes. Kindergartens and businesses are also open without restrictions.

The newly elected Czech government led by Petr Fiala likewise ended the state of emergency shortly before New Year's Eve. As in many countries, the remaining measures are limited to leisure activities and to the unvaccinated. Schools and businesses are open without restriction.

The quarantine period has been shortened to five days so that profits flow despite mass infection. A so-called "test-to-stay" policy has been introduced in schools. A positive rapid test now no longer sends children into quarantine, rather only a positive PCR test.

So far, only a few dozen cases of the new Omicron variant have been officially detected in Eastern European countries. But with the first official Polish Omicron case reported as early as December 16 in Katowice, Poland, it is clear that the virus is far more prevalent than reported.

Scientists have long warned of the immense danger posed by the spread of Omicron. The eight-member Coronavirus Panel of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Polska Akademia Nauk, PAN) said in a statement on December 21 that Omicron is "a threat to us all."

The scientists point out that Omicron undermines vaccine protection and only with a booster vaccination can the risk of symptomatic disease be reduced by about 75 percent. At the same time, the scientists say, the variant is much more contagious, meaning that even assuming Omicron is "milder," which is by no means proven, it will max out the health care system. In the face of mass infections, not only the health care system but also other parts of the critical infrastructure could be crippled.

"Even assuming that Omicron is less pathogenic than Delta, the very high number of cases will result in a maximum burden on the health care system—both for hospitals and primary care facilities. We must not forget that in Poland the number of doctors and nurses per inhabitant is extremely low, by far the lowest in the countries of the European Union. Numerous quarantines can paralyze not only the health care system, but also other infrastructure important for the functioning of society: police, firefighters, border guards, army, education, courts, public transport,

energy, etc."

The scientists urge strict monitoring of distance and masking rules in public. They also say a return to reduced social contact is necessary. The statement ends with an urgent plea, "Let us take the looming threat as seriously as it deserves."

Even Andrzej Horban, chief medical adviser to the Polish prime minister, better known for relativizing the dangers of the coronavirus, expressed this clearly. In an interview with the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, Horban spoke of a "tsunami of infected people." He called discussions about compulsory vaccination and vaccination passport controls a "joke" in view of the facts.

About 12 million Poles are not vaccinated, and "all of these people" would become "infected with the new variant," he said. Of them, "statistically, 5 to 10 percent would go to the hospital." So "about a million people would have to be accommodated." And even if the wave extends "over a few months," that means "we may need 50,000-60,000 COVID beds. Not to mention where we're going to get doctors and other medical personnel."

With vaccination rates low and infections rising, he said, "There will be no option but to implement a hard lockdown." There is a need to "come to our senses." "The tsunami is coming, and it's our duty to warn everyone about it."

The governments in Eastern Europe know full well that their "profits before lives" policies are creating an ever-greater disaster, with millions infected and killed. To stop the mass mortality and stem the Omicron tide, all nonessential businesses, schools and kindergartens must be closed immediately. This requires the independent intervention of the working class on a socialist program.



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