

Greece battles coronavirus resurgence after early success

August 26 2020, by Elena Becatoros



Travellers wearing face masks to protect against the spread of coronavirus, wait to disembark from a ferry at the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

Workers in bright yellow vests stand on the dock in Greece's main port of Piraeus, greeting hundreds of masked ferry passengers with fliers and the occasional temperature check.

"Would you like a coronavirus test? Yes, it's free. Right over there, in the white structure, you'll see the signs," they tell disembarking passengers.

Free on-the-spot tests for travelers returning from Greek islands where outbreaks have occurred is the latest in an arsenal of measures authorities are using to tackle a resurgence of COVID-19 in a country that has so far managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic.

New localized restrictions, including a midnight curfew for bars, restaurants and cafes and a ban on large gatherings have been imposed, mainly in popular tourist destinations such as the Aegean Sea island of Mykonos,

Maria Skopeliti, whose husband and son work on Mykonos, was one of a handful of people opting for the voluntary coronavirus test in Piraeus on a recent morning. She estimated that more than two-thirds of people in Mykonos had been ignoring personal protective measures.

"Even though I was quite careful... you can't be sure because it's an island that lives to a different beat," said the 57-year-old Skopeliti. "It's logical because there are many young people, you can't restrict them."



A medical worker wearing protective gear collects a swab from a traveller during a COVID-19 test after their arrival from a Greek island to the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. As of Wednesday, total cases in the country of about 11 million people stood at 9,280, with 248 deaths and 33 people intubated in intensive care units.

Belgium, by comparison, with a population of around 11.5 million, has reported nearly 82,000 confirmed cases and close to 10,000 deaths, one of the world's highest per capita pandemic mortality rates.

But Greece's new daily confirmed cases have been spiraling in recent weeks, reaching a record 293 on Wednesday.

"Yes I'm worried, of course I'm worried, and we've rung the alarm bell," Gkikas Magiorkinis, a University of Athens assistant professor of hygiene and epidemiology, told the AP last week. "That's why we're taking measures." including the generalized use of masks.



A worker from Region of Attica takes the temperature of a traveller upon the arrival of a ferry from the Greek islands to the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests

for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

The measures appear to be working, Magiorkinis, who serves on a committee of scientists advising the Greek government, said during a Tuesday news conference.

"For now it seems that the dramatic increase of cases ... has been limited," he said, noting the spike in the first week of August was projected to lead to more than 400 new cases per day, which so far has not occurred.

"The slowdown of this dramatic increase came relatively earlier than the natural development of a full second wave, and coincides with the taking of measures for the use of masks, and with the reinforced restrictions taken in areas with outbreaks," Magiorkinis said.

For a small country barely emerging from the grip of a brutal decade-long financial crisis, Greece appeared to have done remarkably well during the pandemic's initial phase in the spring, when Europe became the second continent after Asia with the coronavirus spreading exponentially.



People gather in front of the Kapnikarea Orthodox church after the midnight closure of the restaurant and bars in Athens, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

The government imposed a nationwide lockdown, ordering people to stay home, shuttering businesses and closing the borders. It also scrambled to bolster a weak health system pummeled by years of budget cuts, announcing the hiring of thousands of temporary health workers and increasing intensive care capacity.

Its strategy seemed to work. Greece was spared the heart-rending scenes all too common in fellow Mediterranean countries Italy and Spain: of overflowing morgues, decimated nursing homes and anguished intensive care doctors forced to choose who to try to save and who to let die due to a lack of equipment and space.

But no country can survive in a vacuum, certainly not one still grappling with the aftermath of a depression that wiped out a quarter of its economy.

In a bid to salvage its vital tourism industry, Greece welcomed foreign visitors and gradually lifted nearly all lockdown restrictions in the early summer.



A waitress picks the drinks from a table as the last customers prepare to leave during the midnight closure of a bar with the Acropolis hill in the background in Athens, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

Inevitably, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases mounted.

Critics have accused the government of reopening to tourists without a coherent plan, a charge officials vehemently reject.

"Is tourism responsible for the increase in the number of cases in Greece? The answer is categorically no," Civil Protection Deputy Minister Nikos Hardalias said last week. The main culprits, he said, were large private gatherings such as weddings and residents ignoring protective measures like social distancing.

Travelers arriving from abroad accounted for just 17% of new cases, Hardalias said, while 83% was domestic transmission.

On Tuesday, Hardalias said that 360,200 tests were carried out on the nearly 3 million international arrivals between July 1—when Greece opened its borders to tourists—and Aug. 23, and just 723 people tested positive.



Workers close a bar and a restaurant at midnight, with the Acropolis hill in the background in Athens, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

Government spokesman Stelios Petsas insisted last week that Greece "was and continues to be at a better epidemiological level, compared to other countries."

Petsas also attributed the increase to people ignoring protective measures, and noted the average age of those testing positive had

dropped to around 36, from just over 48 in March.

Authorities have been particularly alarmed by the summer party scene on the islands, involving both tourists and vacationing Greeks.

On Mykonos, police have played a cat-and-mouse game with parties held in private villas to skirt restrictions on bars and clubs.

In one incident, police broke up a party where the nearly 500 guests reportedly included a couple from Spain that had been placed in a quarantine hotel after at least one of them tested positive for the virus on arrival.

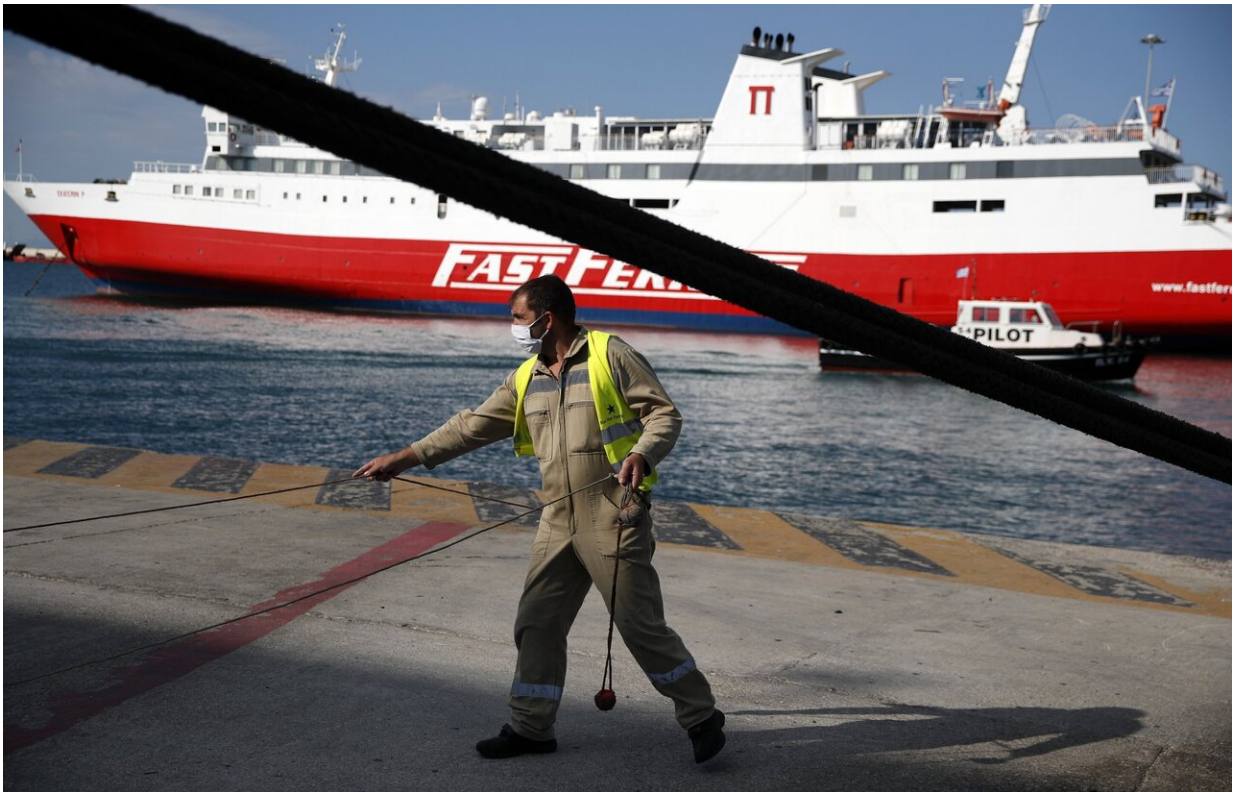


A waiter carries a table during the midnight closure of a bar with the Acropolis hill in the background in Athens, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020. Authorities in Greece

are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



A medical worker wearing protective gear, stands in front of a sign that reads "Hellenic Democracy - Region of Attica" as she waits for travellers to take the COVID-19 test at the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



A seaman wearing a face mask to protect against the spread of coronavirus, works outside a ferry at the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



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A medical worker wearing protective gear prepares to collect a swab from a child as his mother holds him during a COVID-19 test after their arrival from a Greek island to the port of Piraeus, near Athens, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Authorities in Greece are using free on-the-spot tests for ferry passengers and nightlife curfews on popular islands to stem a resurgence of the coronavirus after the country managed to dodge the worst of the pandemic. The number of confirmed virus cases and deaths in Greece remains lower than in many other European countries. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)

What currently worries experts most is the virus spreading in facilities that house the most vulnerable people: retirement homes and hospitals.

Ominously, outbreaks have already been reported in two retirement homes and at two hospitals, all on the mainland. Extra measures have

been imposed, including compulsory coronavirus tests for employees returning from vacation.

"There is an effort to reduce the risk," Magiorkinis said. "We can't eliminate it, but there is risk mitigation."

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Citation: Greece battles coronavirus resurgence after early success (2020, August 26) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-greece-coronavirus-resurgence-early-success.html>

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