

France, Germany impose new lockdowns to curb virus spread (Update)

October 28 2020, by Frank Jordans and Thomas Adamson



In this Monday, April 13, 2020 file photo, medical personnel in protective gear prepare to receive a patient at a hospital in Antwerp, Belgium. This week news struck that the European Center for Disease Control has put Belgium at the largest number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 citizens, surpassing the Czech Republic, it is revealed Tuesday Oct. 27, 2020. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, File)

France announced a full nationwide lockdown for the second time this year and German officials imposed a partial four-week lockdown Wednesday, as governments across Europe sought to stop a fast-rising tide of coronavirus cases.

The World Health Organization says the European region—which includes Russia, Turkey, Israel and Central Asia, according to its definition—accounted for almost half of the 2.8 million new coronavirus cases reported globally last week. The U.N. health agency said virus-related deaths were also on the rise in Europe, with about a 35% spike since the previous week, as well as hospitalizations due to COVID-19.

"We are deep in the second wave," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told reporters in Brussels. "I think that this year's Christmas will be a different Christmas."

The European Union, Britain, Norway, Switzerland and Iceland alone accounted for 1.1 million cases over the past seven days, she said, "and we expect this number to keep rising in the next two to three weeks, and rapidly."

German officials have agreed to a four-week shutdown of restaurants, bars, cinemas, theaters and other leisure facilities in a bid to curb a sharp rise in coronavirus infections, Chancellor Angela Merkel said.



Passengers wear face mask mask as they enter a subway in Frankfurt, Germany, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

Merkel and the country's 16 state governors, who are responsible for imposing and easing restrictions, agreed on the partial lockdown in a videoconference. It is set to take effect on Monday and last until the end of November.

Merkel said, "We must act, and now, to avoid an acute national health emergency."

Restaurants will still be allowed to serve take-out food. Shops and schools are to remain open, unlike during Germany's shutdown during

the first phase of the pandemic.

The decision came hours after Germany's disease control agency said a record 14,964 new confirmed cases were registered across the country in the past day, taking the national total in the pandemic to 449,275.

French President Emmanuel Macron announced a second nationwide lockdown from midnight Thursday until Dec. 1, but said schools would remain open.



A street musician performs with his electric guitar beside the statue of Roman Emperor Julius Cesar on a almost empty Via Dei FOrI Imperiali avenue in Rome, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. Italy on Tuesday registered nearly 22,000 confirmed COVID-19 infections since the previous day, its highest one-day total so far in the pandemic. The day-to-day increase in confirmed deaths also

jumped, to 221, according to Health Ministry figures. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

More than half the country's intensive care units are occupied by COVID-19 patients. French military and commercial planes are ferrying critically ill virus patients to other regions as hospitals fill up.

France reported 288 new virus-related deaths in hospitals in 24 hours Tuesday and 235 deaths in nursing homes over the previous four days. Both figures marked the biggest such rise since May.

"(France has been) overpowered by a second wave," Macron said in a national televised address Wednesday.

"Nothing is more important than human life," he added. "We are having 40,000-50,000 new identified contaminations each day."

The government is scheduled to lay out the details of the lockdown on Thursday. Like in the spring, people will have to stay home except if they want to buy essential items, go to a medical appointment or take exercise, which will be capped at one hour.



An elderly woman wearing a face mask takes care of a grave at the main cemetery in Frankfurt, Germany, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

Overall, Europe has seen more than 250,000 virus-related deaths since the start of the outbreak, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Britain and the Czech Republic have also seen a surge in new cases over the past 14 days, while infections rates in Germany were lower but climbing steadily.

Merkel had pressed governors of the country's states to quickly agree upon a partial lockdown. After they authorized the move, the chancellor appealed to people not to make unnecessary journeys and said hotels won't be able to accommodate people on tourist trips.

"We can say that our health system can cope with the challenge today," Merkel said. "But if the pace of infections continues like this, then we'll reach the limits of what the health system can manage within weeks."



A man wears a bag over his head instead of a mask as demonstrators gather to protest the COVID-19 preventive measures downtown Prague, Czech Republic, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. Coronavirus infections in the Czech Republic have again jumped to record levels amid new restrictive measures imposed by the government to curb the spread. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)

The planning has caused anguish in Germany's hospitality industry, with thousands of venue owners staging a protest Wednesday at Berlin's landmark Brandenburg Gate to demand further financial support from the government.

The loud but peaceful rally contrasted with angry scenes in the last few days, when anti-mask protesters clashed with police in the German capital, the Czech Republic and in several Italian cities.

A protest in the Sicilian capital Palermo by business owners against new restrictions turned violent late Wednesday after being infiltrated by anarchists. Italy's interior minister, Luciana Lamorgese, has claimed a variety of fringe groups are using the crisis as an excuse for violence.

In Italy, Milan's mayor, Giuseppe Sala, spoke out Wednesday against a lockdown in the Lombardy capital, the epicenter of Italy's new virus resurgence.



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks via video conference into a press room at EU headquarters in Brussels, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. The European Commission on Wednesday, is launching an additional set of actions, to help limit the spread of the coronavirus, save lives and strengthen the internal market's resilience. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, Pool)

Von der Leyen, the EU chief, acknowledged the growing toll that the continued crisis is taking.

"This time we have two enemies," she said. "The coronavirus itself and corona fatigue, that is the growing weariness when it comes to the precautionary measures."

In Prague, demonstrators in horror masks marched against virus restrictions Wednesday even though the Czech Republic holds the grim

European record of almost 1,450 cases per 100,000 people in the past fortnight, closely followed by Belgium, according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control.

The Czech Health Ministry said the country's daily increase in new infections hit a record high of 15,663 on Tuesday—more than was reported Wednesday in Germany, which has eight times the population.

The Czech government has further tightened its regulations, imposing a nationwide curfew between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. that started Wednesday. It previously limited free movement, closed stores, schools and restaurants, made it mandatory to wear face masks indoors and outdoors, and banned sport competitions, but the number of infections has continued to rise.



Demonstrators gather to protest the COVID-19 preventative measures downtown Prague, Czech Republic, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. Coronavirus infections in the Czech Republic have again jumped to record levels amid new restrictive measures imposed by the government to curb the spread. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)



A man wears a mask as demonstrators gather to protest the COVID-19 preventative measures downtown Prague, Czech Republic, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. Coronavirus infections in the Czech Republic have again jumped to record levels amid new restrictive measures imposed by the government to curb the spread. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)



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A woman wears a Czech flag as a mask as demonstrators gather to protest the COVID-19 preventative measures downtown Prague, Czech Republic, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. Coronavirus infections in the Czech Republic have again jumped to record levels amid new restrictive measures imposed by the government to curb the spread. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)

While Germany has fared better than many European countries, officials there warn that it, too, is beginning to lose control of the situation and cite the explosion of cases in the Czech Republic as a reason for earlier lockdowns.

Economists said further restrictions need to be carefully calibrated to avoid dealing a second severe blow to businesses.

"A national lockdown, as we have seen in, ravages an economy and would add significant complications to the ongoing economic recovery," said Fiona Cincotta, an analyst at online trading firm GAIN Capital.

But Thomas Gitzel, chief economist at Liechtenstein's VP Bank Group, said a temporary lockdown could be less harmful than a prolonged slump in consumer spending as infection levels remain stubbornly high.

In France, there was some understanding about the difficulty of choices facing the government.

"I don't blame the government for pondering before taking decisions that will have serious consequences in many domains such as health, education and economy," said Parisian Gilles Weinzaepflen. "Those are not decisions that are easy to take."

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Citation: France, Germany impose new lockdowns to curb virus spread (Update) (2020, October 28) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-germany-france-gear-lockdowns-virus.html>

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