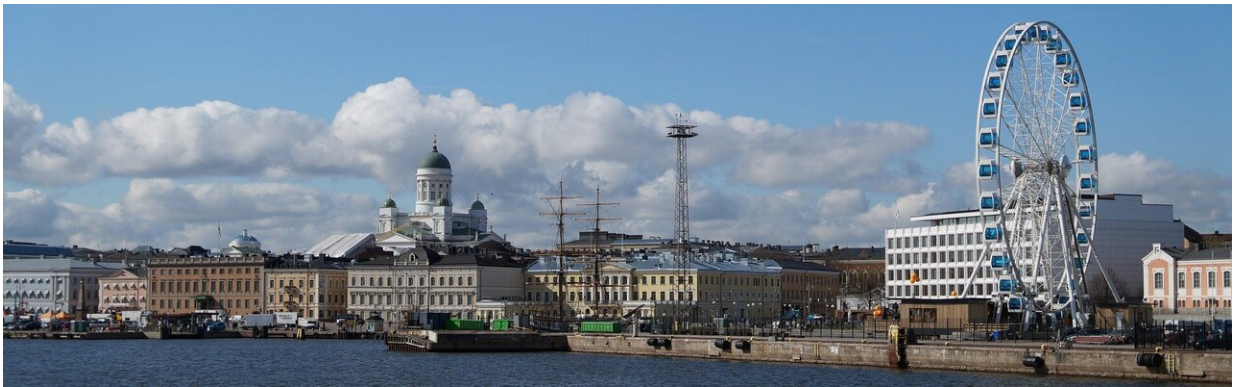


Finland: Europe's quiet success in COVID-19 fight

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As millions across Europe face new lockdown measures to tackle the resurging coronavirus, Finland is bucking the trend: infection rates are falling, while attitudes to restrictions remain the most positive on the continent.

Although much international attention has been focused on next-door Sweden's light-touch response to the virus, Finland has quietly succeeded in keeping infection levels five times below the EU average, with a lesser hit to its economy and one-tenth the number of deaths per capita of its Scandinavian neighbour.

In the last two weeks, the Nordic country has recorded 45.7 new cases per 100,000 population—the lowest rate in the EU according to the WHO and the only country in the bloc whose rate of new infections has slowed since the previous fortnight.

"The situation looked worrying when there was a rapid growth in infections" earlier in October, the country's top epidemiologist Mika Salminen said last week.

"But it's clear that the peak has passed."

Officials credit the outcome to factors such as early government action, which included a two-month lockdown in March and a ban on travel in and out of the capital.

Since then, society has largely re-opened and an effective test and trace system was developed, revolving around a [smartphone app](#).

The "Corona Flash" application, downloaded 2.5 million times in a country of 5.5 million people, has escaped the privacy or functionality problems that have hit similar initiatives in countries from the UK to Norway.

Like elsewhere in the Nordics, high levels of trust towards authority in Finland have meant that there has been little resistance to the government's measures.

Lockdown enthusiasts

Not only have Finns followed the rules, but European Parliament research last week found that 23 percent of respondents in the country said that lockdown had actually improved their lives, making Finland the most positive country in Europe towards the [coronavirus](#) restrictions.

One reason is likely to be the relative ease of switching to distance working in the highly digitised society.

"The economy is structured so that it's not necessary for a large proportion of the Finnish workforce to be in the workplace," Nelli Hankonen, associate professor of social psychology at Helsinki University, told AFP.

But the national character of the Finns, often characterised as reserved and outdoors-loving, may also have played a part.

"In Finnish culture we are not that highly sociable," Hankonen said.

"We like to be on our own and be a bit isolated."

Nonetheless, the solitude of lockdown has exacerbated mental health issues which already affect one in five people in Finland, the highest rate in the OECD.

"Social support might not be easily available, it's the other side of the coin of how we were able to adapt to the lockdown," Hankonen said.

Keep smiling

The number of shoppers and diners on the streets of the capital Helsinki looks almost the same as pre-virus levels.

Few people are wearing masks, although authorities have recently begun recommending them.

"My daily life actually hasn't been affected too much," healthcare assistant Gegi Aydin tells AFP, though his plans to switch careers to graphic design have been disrupted by a lack of job openings.

The 36-year-old also admits that his social life is now more cautious.

"My friends don't really want to meet sometimes, which is understandable."

In the capital's hip Punavuori district, restaurateur Richard McCormick is hanging plants and lights inside a row of protective glass cabins outside his restaurant Yes Yes Yes.

"We're making them look like it's somebody's living room and people can have private dining experiences in them," McCormick said.

Finland's economy shrank by 6.4 percent in the second quarter, considerably less than the EU average of 14 percent, but the hit to the restaurant industry has been "devastating", McCormick said.

An ongoing 50-percent capacity restriction and shorter opening hours mean that his two restaurants have had to lay off many staff.

But with no restrictions on outdoor seating, McCormick said the glass houses "have helped us get most of our teammates back."

We have to "try to find new ways to deal with everyday life and keep smiling," he said.

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