

Europe hunkers down but also notes wins against virus surge

November 9 2020, by Barry Hatton, Justin Spike and John Leicester



A resident of a nursing home is being tested with a PCR test in Ammerschwihl, eastern France, Monday, Nov.9, 2020. The antigen tests can give results in 15-30 minutes, and if they turn out positive, the patient is sent for a PCR test to confirm the result. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

Portugal and Hungary on Monday became the latest European countries

to impose curfews against the resurgent tide of coronavirus infections and deaths lashing the continent and filling its emergency wards. But glimmers of hope emerged from France, Belgium and elsewhere that tough restrictions might be starting to work.

Portugal, which like other European countries has seen new cases and hospital admissions surge in recent weeks, imposed a state of emergency and ordered some 7 million people—around 70% of its population—to stay home on weeknights from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. for at least the next two weeks. They'll be even more limited over the weekends, allowed out only in the morning until 1 p.m., unless to buy essentials at supermarkets.

"People need to comply. If they don't, we are in a bad situation," said Miriam Ferreira, a 44-year-old laundry worker in Lisbon.

Portugal's government warned that the measures may be broadened and prolonged if they prove insufficient.

Hungary also imposed its strictest measures so far: an 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew announced by Prime Minister Viktor Orban. All businesses must close by 7 p.m.

Other measures in Hungary mirrored those becoming depressingly familiar across Europe, including limits on eateries and sports events, family gatherings limited to 10 people and remote learning for high school and university students. The restrictions kick in Tuesday at midnight and will remain for at least 30 days.



A nurse prepares an antigen speed test in a nursing home in Ammerschwihir, eastern France, Monday, Nov.9, 2020. So-called antigen tests are cheap and fast, but experts said at the time they are also less accurate than the standard PCR test, which detects even the tiniest genetic trace of the virus. Many governments including in France have started deploying them as a precursor to PCR tests. The antigen tests can give results in 15-30 minutes, and if they turn out positive, the patient is sent for a PCR test to confirm the result. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

"I know, we all know, that this will not be easy. The next weeks will be difficult. But the vaccine is within sight, we've got to hold out until then," Orban said.

Last week, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto announced that a small amount of a Russian coronavirus vaccine would arrive in Hungary in December for final tests, with larger deliveries in January.

The French government has gradually ratcheted up from localized curfews and bar closings to what is now a full-blown nationwide lockdown, albeit with schools and essential businesses open. Health Minister Olivier Veran said early indications are that the measures may be starting to slow the latest virus surge and that it would "have flared up faster and stronger" without them.

Still, the situation in French hospitals and nursing homes was grim, with emergency wards approaching saturation levels and some sick patients being evacuated from struggling hospitals to others that still had space. With more than 1.8 million infections since the start of the pandemic, France has Europe's highest total of recorded cases and the fourth-highest worldwide.



A health worker shows a positive 'SARS-CoV-2 Rapid Antigen' test just after collecting a nose swab sample for a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) at the coronavirus testing facility of Unisante, the university center for general medicine and public health, in Lausanne, Switzerland, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. (Laurent Gillieron/Keystone via AP)

Other European nations also reported the fledgling beginnings of a possible turnaround.

The Welsh government's First Minister Mark Drakeford spoke of "some tentative early positive signs" from a 17-day lockdown that ended Monday in Wales.

"Those give us some hope," he said, as Wales' seven-day average for new coronavirus cases fell from 250 per 100,000 people to just under 220.

From Monday, Wales again allowed people to meet in small groups, and businesses—including pubs, restaurants and hairdressers—to reopen. But nonessential travel remains barred to and from neighbouring England, which is in the midst of a planned 28-day lockdown.

Infections in the Czech Republic have started to decline after a two-month rise to record high levels, and the number of people hospitalized also dropped below the 8,000-mark.



A woman wearing a face mask walks past the Old Opera, left, in Frankfurt, Germany, before sunrise on Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

In hard-hit Belgium, health authorities also were confident that a partial lockdown dealt a blow to COVID-19.

Belgian hospital admissions for the virus appear to have peaked at 879 on Nov. 3, and fell to about 400 on Sunday, virologist Yves Van Laethem said. The drop follows a return to partial lockdown measures including the closure of nonessential businesses and extending a school vacation.

In Germany, the health minister said increased infections seem to be leveling off but that it's too early to talk of a trend.

Germany is one week into a four-week partial shutdown. New infections have continued to increase, reaching a new one-day record of 23,399 on Saturday.

But Health Minister Jens Spahn said Monday "we are seeing that the momentum is flattening, that we have less strong increases."

He added that more progress is needed and that only later this week "at the earliest" will the restrictions' effects become visible, "if at all."



Romanian traffic police officers wait for vehicles to pass by shortly after midnight in Bucharest, Romania, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020 to inform drivers of the pandemic related night traffic restrictions that just came into effect. Romania introduces new restrictions aimed at limiting the spread of the COVID-19 infections following a week when it registered an all time high number of new infections. (AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda)



Workers of a nursing home are being tested with a PCR test in Ammerschwih, eastern France, Monday, Nov.9, 2020. The antigen tests can give results in 15-30 minutes, and if they turn out positive, the patient is sent for a PCR test to confirm the result. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)



Stray cats walk through the empty yard of a high school, on the first day of remote learning classes in Greece, in Athens, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Greece has gone into a second nation-wide lockdown after a recent spike in cases. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



Literature teacher Angeliki Baladima, wearing a face mask to prevent the spread of coronavirus, gives an online lesson to high school students in an empty classroom, on the first day of remote learning classes in Greece, in Athens, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Greece has gone into a second nation-wide lockdown after a recent spike in cases. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



A woman dressed in a traditional mantilla and wearing a face mask to protect against the spread of coronavirus, takes part in an open air mass to celebrate Madrid's patron saint La Almudena virgin in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Some Spanish regions are tightening their restrictions on movement, as the national government waits to see whether its measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 are working before taking further steps. (AP Photo/Paul White)



Literature teacher Angeliki Baladima, wearing a face mask to prevent the spread of coronavirus, gives an online lesson to high school students in an empty classroom, on the first day of remote learning classes in Greece, in Athens, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Greece has gone into a second nation-wide lockdown after a recent spike in cases. (AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis)



Women dressed in traditional mantillas and wearing face masks to protect against the spread of coronavirus, take part in an open air mass to celebrate Madrid's patron saint La Almudena virgin in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Some Spanish regions are tightening their restrictions on movement, as the national government waits to see whether its measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 are working before taking further steps. (AP Photo/Paul White)



People wearing face masks to protect against the spread of coronavirus, queue up to try and get into the Almudena cathedral to celebrate Madrid's patron saint La Almudena virgin in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Nov. 9, 2020. Some Spanish regions are tightening their restrictions on movement, as the national government waits to see whether its measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 are working before taking further steps. (AP Photo/Paul White)



Shoppers queue to enter shops in Cardiff, Wales, Monday Nov. 9, 2020, after restrictions imposed by the Welsh government are relaxed following a two-week lockdown across Wales. (Ben Birchall/PA via AP)



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"We don't want less strong increases," he said. "We have to get the figures down."

With the continent increasingly hunkered-down, the director general of the World Health Organization said unity between countries would be key going forward.

"We might be tired of COVID-19, but it's not tired of us. Yes, it preys on those in weaker health, but it preys on other weaknesses, too: Inequality, division, denial and wishful thinking and willful ignorance,"

Tedros Adhanon Ghebreyesus said.

"We cannot negotiate with it nor close our eyes and hope it goes away. It pays no heed to political rhetoric or conspiracy theories. Our only hope is science, solutions and solidarity."

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