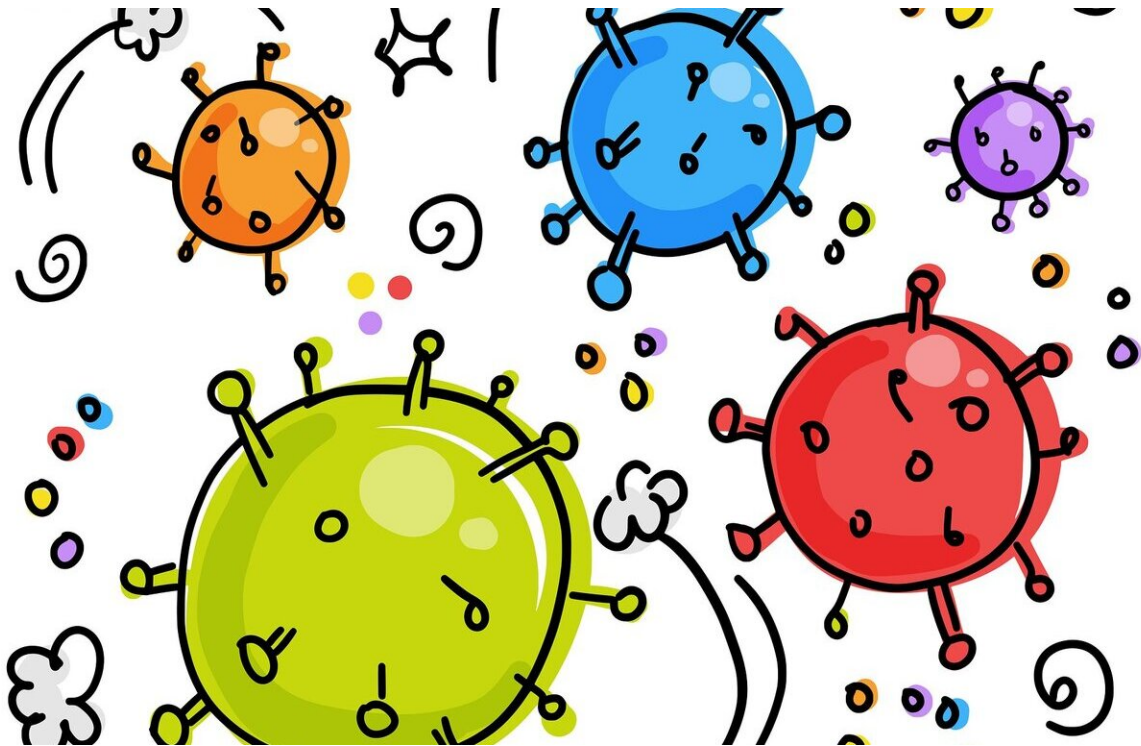


Bulgaria extends virus measures until end of January

December 17 2020



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Bulgaria will keep restaurants, cafes, shopping malls and secondary schools shut until end-January as it faces some of the highest coronavirus infection and death rates in Europe, officials said Thursday.

Prime Minister Boyko Borisov had said that restrictions would be eased

over the holidays, but the country's [coronavirus](#) taskforce on Thursday reported that hospitals remained overburdened.

"Night clubs, gaming halls and casinos will remain shut until January 31, restaurants and gyms also," Health Minister Kostadin Angelov said as he announced an extension of measures at a news conference Thursday.

Kindergartens, day-care centres and some primary school year groups will also wait until after the holidays to open on January 4, while theatres, museums, galleries and cinemas will be allowed to reopen with 30 percent capacity from January 1, he added.

The extension is expected to spark protests from restaurant owners' associations, which called earlier this week for an immediate re-opening of their businesses.

As hotels in the Balkan country remain open, the [health ministry](#) agreed to allow hotel restaurants to re-open, though owners have to ensure that they work at 50-percent capacity, meet all social distancing rules and close at 10 pm.

After a partial lockdown helped Bulgaria weather the first wave of the pandemic, the government hesitated to impose stricter measures when the number of cases began exploding at the end of October, resulting in a near collapse of its severely understaffed [health](#) system.

On Wednesday, its 14-day deaths per 100,000 people rate was the second highest in the European Union, an AFP count showed. To date, the country of under seven million people had registered 186,246 cases and 6,196 deaths.

The new measures are yet to be formally approved by the cabinet but Borisov's office issued a statement on Thursday backing them.

"We must be fast and flexible with the measures, with supporting the businesses and the people, and with supplying the medicines and the vaccines as the pandemic is worsening worldwide and the number of deaths unfortunately remains high," Borisov was quoted as saying.

Bulgaria's chief health inspector Angel Kunchev said Thursday that the country hopes to start vaccinating its frontline health workers before the end of the year, along with all other EU member states.

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