

# Slovakia sees virus deaths soar, blames variant found in UK

February 16 2021, by Karel Janicek

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A teacher receives a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine from a health worker during vaccination of pedagogical staff at the vaccination center in Kosice, Slovakia, on Saturday, Feb. 13, 2021. (Frantisek Ivan/TASR via AP)

Slovakia has become the nation with most COVID-19 deaths by size of population in the world amid a surge of cases from a highly contagious

coronavirus variant.

Despite a tough lockdown, the seven-day rolling average of daily deaths in Slovakia has risen from 1.68 deaths per 100,000 people on Feb. 1 to 1.78 deaths per 100,000 people on Monday, according to Johns Hopkins University figures issued Tuesday.

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova called the situation very serious.

"We need to abide by all the rules," Caputova said Tuesday after meeting with a group of scientists and medical experts. "It's inevitable for us to endure this period of time."

Portugal, which had the world's highest rate of COVID-19 deaths among its population for more than three weeks, dropped to second place with 1.48 deaths per 100,000 people.

"The most significant factor that has prevented coronavirus cases from falling in Slovakia is a high occurrence of the variant that was found in Britain," Marek Majdan, a Slovak epidemiologist and vice rector of Trnava University, told The Associated Press.

Earlier this month, the Slovakian government announced the fast-spreading coronavirus variant first found in southern England had become dominant in the Central European country. The pronouncement came after health authorities sequenced all the positive samples nationwide from one day.



A view of the vaccination booths in the sports hall during vaccination of teachers in Trenčín, Slovakia, on Sunday, February 14, 2021. Medical workers from the University Hospital Trenčín have started vaccinating pedagogical staff against COVID-19, with more than 900 teachers receiving the vaccine. (Radovan Stoklasa/TASR via AP)

The British variant was detected in 74% of them, which Health Minister Marek Krajci called "an unbelievable high number."

"The lockdown, which worked effectively against the original virus, isn't as effective against the more infectious variant," Majdan said.

Researchers have also found that the variant dominant in the U.K. is also more deadly than the original virus.



In Slovakia's lockdown, people in the majority of counties where the virus situation is considered serious need to take a coronavirus test every seven days to be able to go to work.

The government also canceled plans to partially reopen schools in the the hardest-hit counties.

Another 111 people died in Slovakia of COVID-19 on Monday for a total of 6,063 in the nation of 5.4 million. Over 3,800 of the country's deaths in the pandemic have occurred this year.



A police officer checks vehicles entering Slovakia at the Slovak-Austrian border crossing Bratislava, on Monday, Feb. 15, 2021. Police officers check compliance with coronavirus quarantine measures and fulfilment of conditions before entering Slovakia. (Pavol Zachar/TASR via AP)

Majdan said mathematical models suggest that between 9,000 and 11,000 might die of COVID-19 in Slovakia by June, if the current trend continues.

The government was getting ready to tighten its rules for international travelers on Wednesday to try to prevent virus variants from spreading or entering the country. Authorities plan to enforce the new measures by reimposing border checks.

Slovakia's hospitals are under pressure, and the Health Ministry has called on volunteers to help medical workers cope with the surge.

Majdan said a fast vaccination program was the key to improving the situation.

"In Britain, they have vaccinated 15% of the population who faced the highest risk, and we can clearly see the death rate falling. I hope we will do the same in Slovakia," he said.

The 27-nation European Union, to which Slovakia belongs, has been criticized by many for its slow vaccine rollout.

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