Danes halt virus restrictions; rest of Europe a patchwork

February 1 2022, by Jan M. Olsen

Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, takes part in a coronavirus press conference, with Minister of Health Magnus Heunicke, left, and director of the National Board of Health Soeren Brostroem, right, in Copenhagen, Denmark, Wednesday Jan. 26, 2022. Credit: Mads Claus Rasmussen/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

Denmark took the European Union lead Tuesday by scrapping most

pandemic restrictions as the Scandinavian country no longer considers COVID-19 "a socially critical disease." European nations elsewhere had a patchwork of different approaches, with some relaxing virus measures while others tightened them.

Officials say the reason for the Danish move is that while the omicron variant is surging in the country, it's not placing a heavy burden on the health system and Denmark has a high vaccination rate.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told Danish radio it's too early to know if virus restrictions ever have to make a comeback.

"I dare not say that it is a final goodbye to restrictions," she said. "We do not know what will happen in the fall, whether there will be a new variant."

Denmark, a nation of 5.8 million, has in recent weeks seen more than 50,000 new cases a day but the number of COVID-19 patients in hospital intensive care units has dropped.

Some other nations were moving in the same direction as Denmark.

Last week, England lifted almost all domestic restrictions: masks are not mandatory anywhere, vaccine passes are not required for any venue and people are no longer advised to work from home. The only legal requirement is to self-isolate after a positive COVID test.

Ireland has dropped most of its restrictions and the Netherlands also has been easing its lockdown, although Dutch bars and restaurants still have to close at 10 p.m.

Passengers stand at the Noerreport Metrostation in Copenhagen Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Denmark has become one of the first European Union countries to scrap most pandemic restrictions as the country no longer considers the COVID-19 outbreak "a socially critical disease." The reason for that is that while the omicron variant is surging in Denmark it's not placing a heavy burden on the health system and the country has a high vaccination rate. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

France—which is still reporting the continent's highest daily positive cases—plans on lifting some restrictions Wednesday, notably outdoor mask rules in Paris, a part-time work-from-home order and limits on crowd sizes. But face masks are still required indoor in many public places, nightclubs are closed and no eating or drinking is allowed in cinemas, stadiums or public transport.

Finland will end its COVID-19 restrictions this month. On Monday, border controls between Finland and the other Schengen countries that form Europe's ID check-free travel area, ended. Travelers coming from outside the EU will continue to face [border controls](#) at least until Feb. 14.

In Serbia, there are hardly any controls, so the few rules in place—mandatory face masks in closed spaces, passes for bars, restaurants and nightclubs in the evening and only 500 people at events—don't mean much. Nightclubs have been open all along.

A customer exits a supermarket in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Starting Tuesday, it is no longer mandatory to wear protection mask

anywhere in public in Denmark. The Danish Government decided that COVID-19 is no longer categorized as a socially critical disease after 31 January 2022, and has lifted COVID restrictions. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

Italy, however, has been gradually tightening its health pass requirements during the omicron surge. As of Monday, Italy requires at least a negative test within the previous 48 hours to enter banks and post offices, and anyone over 50 who has not been vaccinated risks a one-time 100-euro ($112) fine.

Austria has imposed a vaccine mandate that takes effect this month and Greece has ordered fines for people 60 and over who refuse to get vaccinated. Germany politicians, meanwhile, have opened a debate on whether to impose a national vaccination mandate.

The head of the Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm, told Danish broadcaster TV2 that his attention was on the number of people in ICUs rather than on the number of infections. He said that number had "fallen and fallen and is incredibly low."

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The most visible restriction disappearing is the wearing of face masks, which are no longer mandatory on public transportation and shops. Authorities only recommend mask use in hospitals, health care facilities and nursing homes.

Another restriction that no longer is required is the digital pass to enter

nightclubs or eat indoors in restaurants.

Stefano Tandmark, a Copenhagen waiter, said bars and eateries can stay open now till 5 a.m. "We can dance and yeah, just be yourself again and don't worry about if corona is gone or where it is at the moment."

Still, many Danes took a cautious approach Monday, wearing [face masks](link) on public transport and in shops. Some noted that the omicron variant had led to staff shortages.

"There's a lot of our employees who are sick without the restrictions being lifted, and it's going to be even worse now," said Ulla Vestergaard, 59-year-old social care worker.

Customers at the fish market in Torvehallerne in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Starting Tuesday, it is no longer mandatory to wear protection mask anywhere in public in Denmark. The Danish Government decided that COVID-19 is no longer categorized as a socially critical disease after 31 January 2022, and has lifted COVID restrictions. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

Customers at the fish market in Torvehallerne in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Starting Tuesday, it is no longer mandatory to wear protection mask anywhere in public in Denmark. The Danish Government decided that COVID-19 is no longer categorized as a socially critical disease after 31 January 2022, and has lifted COVID restrictions. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

Passengers at a bus stop in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Starting Tuesday, it is no longer mandatory to wear protection mask anywhere in public in Denmark. The Danish Government decided that COVID-19 is no longer categorized as a socially critical disease after 31 January 2022, and has lifted COVID restrictions. Credit: Liselotte Sabroe/Ritzau Scanpix via AP

A person stand at the entrance of a department store on the Kurfuerstendamm shopping boulevard in Berlin, Germany, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022. Slogan reads: 'go vaccinate'. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Sohn

A woman receives the Johnson & Johnson's Janssen COVID-19 vaccine at vaccination center located inside the National Theater in Prague, Czech Republic, on Nov. 11, 2021. The Czech Republic has recorded a significant decline in people dying of COVID-19 despite facing a record number of infected in one month. Over 560,000 new coronavirus were registered in the country in January, by far the most in one month since the beginning of the pandemic amid a record surge of infections driven by the highly contagious omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Petr David Josek, File

Healthcare workers opposing mandatory coronavirus vaccinations chant into government slogans during a protest outside Greek Health Ministry in Athens, on Tuesday Feb. 1, 2021. Public hospital workers and civil servant unions hold a protest for various pandemic-related issues demanding more hires at hospitals and free COVID-19 diagnostic tests.Credit: AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris

Healthcare workers opposing mandatory coronavirus vaccinations chant into government slogans during a protest outside Greek Health Ministry in Athens, on Tuesday Feb. 1, 2021.Public hospital workers and civil servant unions hold a protest for various pandemic-related issues demanding more hires at hospitals and free COVID-19 diagnostic tests.Credit: AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris

Health authorities urged Danes to get tested regularly so the country can react quickly if necessary but also praised citizens for embracing vaccines.

" A lot of people (in Denmark) have received two vaccination shots and a lot have received three doses as well, and many of those doses were provided in the fourth quarter of 2021," Jens Lundgren, a professor of viral diseases at Copenhagen University Hospital told The Associated

Press.

More than 60% of Denmark's population over age 12 have gotten a third vaccine shot.

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