

EUROPE: Managing the pandemic – what we are watching

This updated weekly piece provides snapshots of how selected European governments are dealing with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you wish to discuss any of the countries mentioned in greater detail.

United Kingdom

- With more than 78,000 cases, the UK recorded its highest-ever daily number of new infections. At around 53,000 cases, the seven-day average is also approaching the previous high point of just under 60,000 infections in early January 2021.
- People in England will now need to be double-vaccinated or show a recent negative test to enter certain venues under the government's so-called Plan B. However, the Commons vote on the plan saw more than 100 Tory MPs defecting, receiving a parliamentary majority only thanks to opposition support.
- The largest rebellion in his premiership has further undermined Boris Johnson's standing, leading to open talk of a potential leadership challenge amid the powerful 1922 committee of Conservative backbenchers. Still, the PM will hope that the pandemic crisis will deter Tory MPs from moving against him immediately.

Germany

- The seven-day average of new infections keeps falling, albeit on a still-elevated level. It has receded from just under 60,000 cases a fortnight ago to currently around 45,000 new infections.
- Having ordered a vaccine inventory check after becoming the new health secretary, Karl Lauterbach has declared a lack of doses and orders for the first quarter of 2022. However, the key signpost to watch remains the public willingness to take up the vaccine.
- Lauterbach and his colleagues from the 16 regional states are also searching for a common timeline on booster jabs; the federal health secretary – a professor of medicine – is pleading for four months between the second and third doses, but the largest regional state, North Rhine-Westphalia, is offering boosters already after four weeks.

France

- The average of daily infections has increased to above 50,000, a level unseen since November of last year. ICU occupancy has climbed to above 60% in six of France's 18 regions.
- President Emmanuel Macron's government will hold an extraordinary cabinet meeting on Friday, after which new measures to contain the pandemic will probably be announced. However, the introduction of severe restrictions such as lockdowns or mandatory vaccinations remains unlikely.
- The government has announced on 16 December new restrictions for travelers coming from the UK to contain the spread of the Omicron variant. Visitors will have to present a valid test done 24 hours prior to their arrival in France, and the authorities will not allow tourism or business trips.

Italy

- Daily coronavirus infections are rising steadily, with the seven-day rolling average of new cases at 17,800. The booster jab has been administered to around 21.3% of the population.
- The government on 14 December extended the country's emergency powers until 31 March 2022. The state of emergency grants special powers to national and regional authorities in tackling the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic quickly, cutting through red tape to implement, modify or revoke urgent measures when required.
- Italy is tightening its restrictions for all travelers in response to the rising threat of the omicron variant. As of 16 December, arrivals from other EU countries, including those vaccinated, will have to take a Covid-19 test before arriving in the country. The European Commission has criticized the move.

Spain

- The seven-day rolling average of cases has continued to rise in the last week, and it stands just above 20,000. ICU occupancy across the country is currently at 13.42%.
- Unlike other European countries, Spain is rolling out the administration of third doses per age cohort, rather than for the whole adult population. The health authorities have just authorized the provision of booster shots for the over-50s.
- Regional governments look reluctant to impose severe restrictions to contain the spread of the last wave of the virus. Rather, an increasing number of regions (11 out of 17) are mandating the use of a valid Covid-19 pass to enter bars and restaurants.

Greece

- The health authorities have so far confirmed a total of ten cases of the Omicron Covid-19 variant in the country. The seven-day rolling average of new infections is around 4,900. The main issue remains the high number of intubated patients and the struggle of the health system to cope with this new wave.
- There is no indication that the government is thinking of changing course regarding its Covid-19 policy even though Greece recorded on 14 December the highest number of deaths (130) in a single day since the pandemic began last year.
- Travelers to Greece will need a negative Covid-19 PCR test to enter the country as part of efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the health ministry announced on 15 December. The move came just one day after Italy announced similar restrictions, dealing a new blow to Europe's system to allow hassle-free travel for people vaccinated against Covid-19.

Poland

- The seven-day rolling average of deaths has exceeded 400 and is still rising. The hospital bed occupancy rate remains at 77% - the same as last week. The government has tightened capacity restrictions for unvaccinated persons in restaurants, bars, and various cultural and entertainment venues ahead of the Christmas holidays.
- The vaccination of children aged 5-11 is starting today, 16 December. Around 100,000 or around 2% of all eligible children in the 5-11 age group have signed up in advance. To date, around 55% of the population has been fully vaccinated, and 14% received a booster dose, which is well below the EU average for both metrics.
- Tomorrow, 17 December, the lower house of parliament (Sejm) will consider the 2022 budget in the first reading. This vote will test whether the Law and Justice-led coalition government still holds a majority in parliament.

Hungary

- The seven-day rolling average of new infections declined by 19% to around 5,600, while hospitalizations and deaths are down by around 12%. However, health experts are concerned that the Omicron variant – detected in the country earlier this week – could trigger a new wave of the pandemic.
- Vaccination of children in the 5-11 age group has started this week, although mandatory pre-registration might create an impediment. Overall, the uptake of booster doses remains strong, with around 31% of the population having received one.
- The government has extended the “state of danger” until 31 June 2022. This is the same level of emergency last year, which allows the government to regulate by decree many pandemic-related issues (e.g., working hours, education process, rules in public transport).

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