

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

- The seven-day average of new infections keeps oscillating around the mark of around 40,000 cases. New mask-wearing requirements are in place in England amid fears of the new variant, for which more stringent self-isolation requirements have been introduced.
- However, the government has so far refused to give in to senior civil servants' calls for more decisive action, such as a return to work-from-home guidance.
- Christmas parties held at 10 Downing Street during the lockdown last year have led to accusations from the opposition Labour Party against Boris Johnson. The PM does not deny that parties were held but claims that no Covid rules were broken, raising fresh credibility questions at a moment when more decisive action might become necessary again soon.

Germany

- The steep increase in new infections seems to have slowed somewhat over the last few days, but the seven-day average is still just under 60,000.
- At a meeting on 2 December, Chancellor Angela Merkel, her successor Olaf Scholz and the 16 regional state leaders will agree on mandatory vaccinations by February in a major U-turn for all major parties; they will also decide on new restrictions for the unvaccinated to take effect in the meantime.
- The powerful Constitutional Court has ruled that previous blanket lockdowns were not unconstitutional; even if similar measures remain unlikely for now, the ruling has provided decision-makers with new legitimacy, thus facilitating the decision for mandatory vaccinations.

France

- The seven-day rolling average of cases has climbed back to around 35,000, and the number of daily hospitalized clients has increased to above 700, a figure unseen since the peak of the last wave during the summer. ICU occupancy has also significantly risen but remains below 50% in most regions.
- The authorities have extended the provision of booster shots to the whole adult population. From 15 January, everyone will have to get a third dose of the vaccine within seven months of the second dose to maintain the validity of their health passes. However, compulsory vaccination remains off the table.
- All travelers coming from outside the European Union will have to show a negative Covid-19 test to enter the country. The new requirement will apply to all individuals regardless of whether they have been fully vaccinated.

Italy

- The number of new cases has increased by around 25% over the past week. The seven-day rolling average of new infections is just above 12,300. Meanwhile, 77% of the total population is fully vaccinated, and around 11% has received the booster shot.
- The government is considering making it mandatory again to wear masks outdoors at all times in public. Regions have called on Rome to tighten the rules in recent days as the infection rate continues to rise and concerns mount over the possible impact of the new Omicron variant after cases were detected over the weekend.
- The new Super Green Pass rules, effective from 6 December until 15 January, will exclude the unvaccinated from attending a wide range of social, cultural, and sporting activities. A new government decree also made vaccinations mandatory for law enforcement, military, and all school employees, among others.

Spain

- Daily cases have gone up back to almost 9,000, and the number of individuals hospitalized due to Covid-19 has increased by 80% in the last 14 days.
- The authorities have still not adopted a decision about when to start giving booster shots to the general population. Meanwhile, some regions plan to start delivering jabs to children between 5 and 11 years of age from 15 December.
- The imposition of health passes in some regions, such as Catalonia, seems to be producing a slight increase in vaccine appointments. However, the central government remains unlikely to mandate the use of health passes at the national level.

Greece

- The government is not considering a lockdown in reaction to the ongoing Covid wave, which has led to ICUs operating at almost 90% capacity. Meanwhile, the Covid death rate in Greece has become one of the highest in Europe.
- The government has taken heart from a recent uptick in the number of Greeks either getting their first vaccine or their booster jab. Around 20,000 people a day are getting their first jab and around 60k their booster. The country seems to be on course for around 65% of the general population to be vaccinated by the end of the year (currently at around 62%).
- Athens is to make Covid-19 vaccinations mandatory for people aged 60 and over. Fines of EUR 100 will be imposed at monthly intervals from mid-January on those who refuse. Data show more than 520,000 people over 60 are yet to get the jab.

Poland

- The seven-day rolling average of Covid-19-related deaths has increased by around 37% to 367 per day, while the number of hospitalized patients grew by 16.4% to over 21,300. Around 77% of hospital beds are occupied. The government hopes that the slowing rise in new infections signals an approaching peak of the fourth wave.
- The rising load on healthcare services and concerns about the new Omicron strain have prompted the government to impose occupancy limits in retail and cultural venues and events. Also, unvaccinated arrivals from outside the Schengen zone and Turkey are subject to a 14-day quarantine (with some exceptions).
- Unless the government reaches an agreement with the European Commission on the judiciary issues blocking the approval of Poland's EUR 36bn National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the country will lose the possibility of receiving pre-financing amounting to around EUR 3.1bn in 2021. The prospects of a breakthrough seem limited.

Hungary

- The fourth wave of the pandemic appears to be approaching its peak, with the seven-day rolling average of new cases and deaths stabilizing just below 10,000 and 200 per day, respectively.
- The government's "vaccination week" has proved successful, bringing the share of the fully vaccinated population above 60% and the share of re-vaccinated persons with a booster dose to 27%. Vaccination of children aged 5-11 is set to begin on 20 December.
- The government is considering introducing an expiration date on immunity cards, likely to be set at around six months from completing a full vaccination course or recovering from Covid-19. Currently, immunity cards are valid indefinitely.

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