

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 has more than doubled over recent days, jumping back up to above 190,000 cases, after a period in which it had effectively plateaued around 90,000 cases.

- At the same time, the overall decrease in Covid-related deaths has motivated speculation that the government might stop reporting daily new infections as of around Easter, at the latest. This comes as embattled PM Boris Johnson tries to appease backbenchers from his Conservative Party with a less restrictive approach to the virus.

- Fueled by the post-pandemic recovery, the looming cost-of-living crisis is the main focus for the government on the policy front. Ahead of the increase in national insurance contribution rates and the increase of the energy price cap, Chancellor Rishi Sunak is, once again, looking into major fiscal support initiatives rather than cutting back expenditure.

Germany

- The rise in the seven-day average of new infections shows no sign of abating. It now stands at just over 165,000 cases, up from around 135,000 a week ago.

- Triggered not least by reports about the bold removal of restrictions in neighboring countries such as Denmark, the 16 regional states are fighting about whether and when to follow suit in Germany. Some states with comparably higher vaccination rates have begun to move away from the so-called 2G rule (limiting entry to vaccinated or recovered people) for shops.

- However, amid comparably still weaker vaccination rates than in countries such as Denmark, other regional states remain unwilling to discuss any weakening of local restrictions before Easter at the earliest. It remains to be seen whether this stance can be sustained, but a unitary line for all of Germany will be difficult to construct politically.

France

- Cases have started to drop in the last few days, with the seven-day average of infections now at around 295,000. Meanwhile, the number of daily hospitalized patients (2784) and deaths linked to Covid-19 (264) continues to rise.

- The government lifted several Covid-19 curbs on 1 February. The wearing of facemasks is no longer required outdoors, and working from home will no longer be mandated, although it is still recommended. Prime Minister Jean Castex has suggested most of the remaining restrictions might be removed this month.

- Three members of Marine Le Pen's National Rally have defected to join Eric Zemmour's presidential campaign. Le Pen, who recently obtained a EUR 10.6mn loan from a Hungarian bank to finance her presidential bid, is still head-to-head with Valerie Pécresse in opinion polls, trailing Emmanuel Macron by around seven percentage points.

Italy

- The surge in cases fueled by the highly contagious Omicron variant continues to decelerate. The seven-day rolling average of new daily infections is around 129,000. The share of the total population that is fully vaccinated is 81%, while 57% have received the booster shot.

- Rome decided on 2 February to ease several anti-Covid restrictions, including for schools, as Prime Minister Mario Draghi promised to "continue to advance on the path of reopening." Moreover, the validity of the "green pass" – needed to access most activities – will become unlimited for those who have had three doses, or who have had two doses and have already had Covid-19.

- Due to expire on 31 January, the outdoor mask mandate has been extended by ten days and will remain in force until 10 February. Likewise, the closure of Italy's nightclubs, discos, and dance halls has been extended until 10 February, along with a ban on concerts and outdoor parties

Spain

- Daily infections have dramatically dropped in the last days, with the seven-day average of infections at around 85,000 (compared to 130,000 two weeks ago). ICU occupancy is also falling across the country and is currently at 21%.

- The restrictions in place to contain the Omicron wave of the virus continue to differ significantly across regions. However, most regional governments mandating the use of a Covid-19 pass to participate in certain social activities are planning to remove the obligation at some point before the end of February.

- The Congress of Deputies (Spain's lower chamber) is holding on 3 February a vote on the government's labor reform. While the ruling PSOE-Podemos coalition will not get support from its key allies in parliament, the decree [will be ratified with the support of Ciudadanos](#).

Greece

- The number of daily new cases has marginally increased over the past week, and Covid-19 related deaths remain stubbornly above 100 per day. The seven-day rolling average of new infections is just below 20,000.

- Starting from 7 February, Greeks who were vaccinated seven months ago and have not received a booster shot will no longer be able to use their vaccination certificates to enter restaurants, bars, and other establishments. The share of the total population that is fully vaccinated is around 71%.

- After a few difficult weeks for the government, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis attempted to change the public agenda with a 2 February announcement of a new reduction (averaging 13%) to the much-disliked ENFIA property tax from this year.

Poland

- The fifth wave continues to surge, albeit at a decelerating pace. The seven-day rolling average of new cases increased by 30% to around 49,000, while hospitalizations and deaths saw a relatively minor uptick. Authorities are concerned about the growing number of hospitalized children.

- The governing coalition suffered a significant defeat in parliament on Tuesday when it failed to pass a long-debated bill, which would have allowed employers to verify the vaccination status of their staff and introduce mandatory vaccination for medical staff. The bill was rejected by dozens of deputies from the ruling camp.

- President Andrzej Duda nominated the head of the central bank Adam Glapinski for a second six-year term in office while praising his efforts to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the economy. Glapinski's first term ends on 21 June, and he is likely to be appointed by the lower house of parliament.

Hungary

- The fifth wave of the pandemic appears to be approaching its peak. The seven-day rolling average of new cases rose by just 10% to nearly 16,000, while daily deaths increased by 25% to around 66. Hospitalizations are up by 38% week-on-week.

- The government has extended the validity of national immunity certificates to fully vaccinated persons until 1 May. After this date, the validity of this certificate will be extended only to those who have received a booster.

- Hungary is in the process of approving Russia's Sputnik Light vaccine for booster vaccinations. Even if approved, its uptake would likely be very low due to travel limitations within the EU and the wide availability of other vaccines.

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