

Corona virus in Europe at a glimpse

Winter wave has arrived

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Europe is currently in the midst of a renewed Corona wave, in part due to inadequate vaccination rates and premature loosening. By mid-November, Europe accounted for 60 % of global Corona infections and deaths.

Corona vaccines reduce only 40 % of the transmission of the highly contagious delta variant of the virus, states WHO. “Data suggest that before the emergence of the Delta variant, the vaccines reduced transmission by about 60 %. With Delta, that value has dropped to about 40 %,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in Geneva in late November.

He therefore urged people to keep wearing masks and take protective measures. “We are concerned about the false sense of security that the vaccines have ended the pandemic and vaccinated people do not need to take further precautions,” the WHO chief said. “The vaccines save lives, but they do not completely prevent transmission.”

According to a count by the AFP news agency based on official data, more than 2.5 million infections and nearly 30,000 deaths were recorded in Europe within a week. This puts the continent as the most severely affected region in the world by the pandemic. WHO Emergency Director Michael Ryan criticized Europe for being back at the same “level of social interaction” as before the pandemic, despite a “very, very strong resurgence of cases.”

Is Austria a role model for Europe?

In most countries, there is talk of a fourth, in Portugal of a fifth, and in Spain even of a sixth wave of Covid. Across Europe, calls for measures to be tightened once more are being heard. The press is at odds as to whether curfews, business closures and other harsh restrictions are necessary or sensible. Several countries are once again reacting to surging COVID-19 infections with drastic restrictions. This is exacerbating social tensions between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, as well as between supporters and opponents of new lockdowns.

As of 1 February 2022, vaccination will be compulsory in Austria. The country currently has one of the highest COVID-19 infection rates worldwide. Up to now, vaccination has been made mandatory only

for certain professions in various EU states such as France or Greece. Several commentators argue that Austria’s lead should be followed – or at least seriously discussed – elsewhere in Europe.

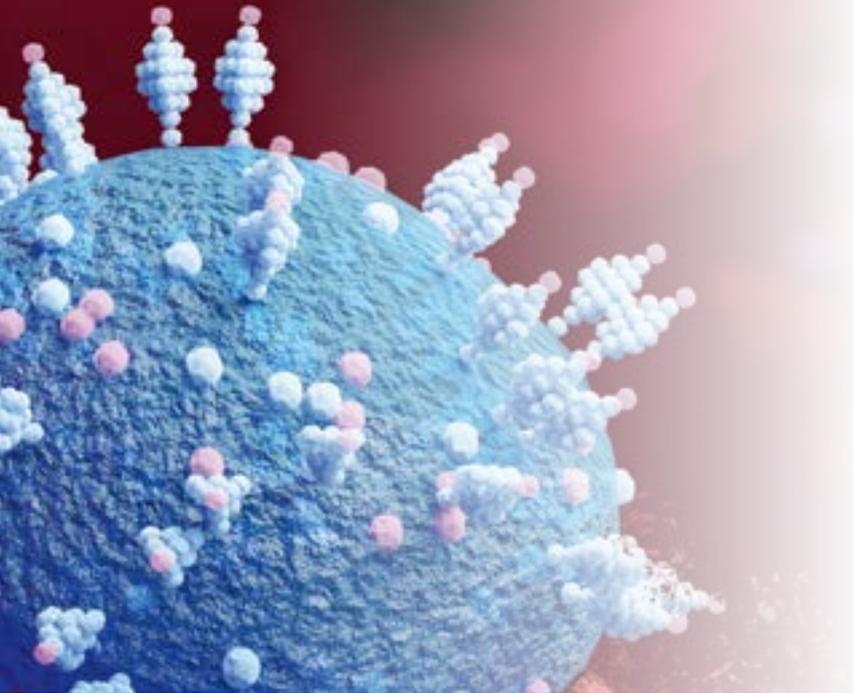
Whether it’s mandatory vaccination, Covid passes or lockdowns – almost all European countries are introducing tighter measures in the fight against a new winter wave of the virus. And almost everywhere, a considerable part of the population considers the measures too harsh. The European press is also divided on this issue:

Is Vienna to blame?

Der Standard uses an example from Austria’s past to illustrate how half-hearted the vaccination campaign in the country has been: “Older people remember how, from 1992 to 1994, the red-black government prepared the referendum on Austria’s accession to the EU: top politicians like Foreign Minister Alois Mock and Chancellor Franz Vranitzky tirelessly appeared at all kinds of events; the social partners were involved; the top agencies designed catchy campaigns. [The current government] hasn’t mounted a single concerted, intelligent campaign for vaccination and simply let everything take its course since last spring. The new government is rushing around like a headless chicken, forced to resort to coercive measures such as a lockdown and mandatory vaccination.”

Are the rich in Spain blamable?

Tax fraud, the climate crisis and the new wave of the pandemic are all interlinked, argues Eva Joly, a lawyer and member of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation (ICRICT), in the Spanish *El País*: “While the virus is on the rise again with the arrival of winter in the northern hemisphere, the boomerang effect of the vaccine monopolies no longer needs to be shown or explained. ... If we are failing to meet our commit-



ments, it is because of a handful of the richest people, the same people who do not pay their taxes. It is time for our elites to realize that fighting inequality on all fronts – health, climate, and tax – is our only way out. Otherwise, there is no salvation for humanity – and it is no longer a hyperbole.”

Lack of medical care in Hungary – beyond Covid

The overburdened Hungarian healthcare system is also neglecting its duties towards non-Covid patients, physician Zoltán Nagy points out in *Népszava*: “In an EU comparison, Hungarians have the second-longest wait for operations, with an estimated 50,000 people currently in this situation. In Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and the UK, for example, waiting times are at most half as long. ... Of course, I’m aware that hundreds of people are currently dying every day from Covid. However, I would like to draw attention to those who have remained chronically ill for lack of medical treatment. We cannot pretend that they do not exist. They are also among the victims of the fourth and who knows how many subsequent waves.”

War on many fronts

There is no panacea against vaccination scepticism, Swedish *Dagens Nyheter* writes: “Efforts to increase vaccination coverage must continue. The results speak for themselves: the higher the coverage, the fewer deaths, and serious cases there will be, and the faster we will be able to return to a completely open society. France has put pressure on the unvaccinated. Austria has imposed a questionable policy of mandatory vaccination. Others have used rewards as incentives. In Romania and Bulgaria, the most vaccine-sceptical countries in the EU, the road is long and

steep. A single solution will not be enough. The fight against COVID-19 must be fought on many fronts.”

Demonstrations against restrictions

In contrast, demonstrations against tighter Covid restrictions in several European cities including Rotterdam, Vienna and Zagreb turned violent on November weekends. In Brussels, police used water cannons and tear gas when an initially peaceful demonstration of 35,000 people escalated. Europe’s press fears a complete breakdown of social consensus and discusses positive examples.

The virus is more dangerous than the riots

Politicians must not let the violence at the demonstrations in Brussels distract them from decisions that are vital for many people, *De Standaard* of Belgium insists: “Many also know people whose operations have been postponed (due to the healthcare system being overstretched) or who are particularly threatened by the most recent wave of the epidemic. Such concerns are less visible than the images from Brussels. The protest is certainly a wake-up call. Conspiracy theories are contagious, and polarisation is dangerous. But even more contagious and dangerous is the virus itself. Fear of angry anti-vaxxers should not influence politics, but concern for angry cancer patients should.”

A different approach in Italy

The example of Italy shows that a different approach can succeed, touts *La Repubblica*: “What is maturing within the No Vax-movement is the most intolerant and dangerous version of the populist rejection of democracy: it rejects the vaccine that protects collective health, identifies it with an oppressive state in order to delegitimise representative institutions. ... In this rejection of knowledge, in this sowing of hatred and in this spread of physical or digital violence lies the greatest danger to Europe’s security and prosperity. ... As one of the best protected from the virus countries, Italy must continue to take courageous decisions and lead the way as an example of political stability and health credibility in the EU.”

New variant discovered in South Africa

Meanwhile, the WHO is monitoring a new variant with numerous mutations to the spike protein, scheduling a special meeting end of November to discuss what it may mean for vaccines and treatments, officials said. According to the WHO, the variant called B.1.1.529 has been detected in South Africa in small numbers. There will be more on this topic in the next issue of *EDI Journal*.