

# United Kingdom: European Governments Resist Public Clamor for Easing of Pandemic Lockdown

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## FULL TEXT

Months of lockdowns and pandemic restrictions are taking their toll on Europeans, with many chafing at the prolonged limitations on public life. With vaccine distribution now starting to pick up after a sluggish start in most countries, calls are mounting for an easing of restrictions.

Britain is first up, with pressure building for easing after a blisteringly fast rollout of its inoculation program that's already seen one in three adults in the country receive at least one vaccine dose.

In a race against a faster-spreading variant of the virus, more than 18 million people in Britain have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, fueling demands for a speedy end to the country's lockdown, the third since the pandemic emerged.

The ruling Conservatives hope the success of the largest mass vaccination program in the country's history will erase public memories of the missteps and reversals of last year, which saw ill-disguised clashes between the government, lawmakers and medical advisers. There were more than two dozen abrupt U-turns in policy.

But a Conservative popularity bounce risks being lost amid squabbling about when and how quickly pandemic restrictions are lifted, according to lawmakers and analysts. Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced Monday that his government would take a cautious approach to easing a national lockdown, with restrictions lifted every few weeks so the impact can be judged.

The prime minister told lawmakers this week that England is going to start reclaiming our freedoms with the goal of removing all legal limits on people's social contact set to end by June 21. His road map for relaxing the country's lockdown will see schools reopen on March 8 and some outdoor restrictions lifted three weeks later.

Hugs could be allowed in May, he said.

For some, the planned relaxation is too fast; for others, too slow. And Johnson's party is becoming restive.

Influential Conservative lawmaker Steve Baker lamented the slow pace of relaxation, saying it will be a hammer blow for aviation, for pubs, for restaurants, hotels, gyms and pools, the arts and the establishment.

Nearly 70,000 fines

And many Britons are straining at the leash with breaches of pandemic restrictions rising steeply since last month. Police have handed out in the past year nearly 70,000 fines to people for breaking lockdown rules, according to government data, but of those, more than a third were issued since January 17 of this year.

Elsewhere in Europe, relaxation seems a distant dream, but public impatience is mounting with the slow vaccination campaigns, which are likely to have electoral consequences.

In the Czech Republic, where infections are surging, Prime Minister Andrej Babis has been criticized for sending inconsistent signals about when coronavirus measures will be lifted.

The country's parliament has moved to restrict Babis' powers to tighten restrictions, and the opposition coalition now has overtaken the ruling party in the opinion polls, suggesting voters are losing faith in the government.

Despite the fact that the country's two-week infection rate is three times the EU average and its death rate of 174 people per million is among the worst in Europe, Babis' government started to loosen a few pandemic restrictions, only to backtrack as health experts denounced the move.

Rastislav Maïar, head of the University of Ostrava's Institute of Epidemiology, told Politico EU, Many people are fed

up and tired of the political games, and now refuse to respect obligatory lockdown rules.

Some relaxation

Partly as a result of public pressure, governments in Italy, the Netherlands and Denmark have all tweaked their restrictions to allow some letup on lockdowns.

Starting March 1, high school children in Holland will have at least one day in the classroom. Hairdressers and other so-called contact professions can reopen on March 3. Teenagers and adults up to age 27 can play team sports outside. But a nighttime curfew, which triggered several days of riots when introduced, will remain.

Denmark, which has been under a lockdown since December, is lifting some restrictions that will see the retail sector reopen. Older school students are expected to be allowed to return to classrooms in regions with low infection rates.

And in Italy, high school students are now returning to class, the first time since October, and bars and restaurants in some regions are being allowed again to serve customers at tables and counters until dusk. But a nationwide nighttime curfew remains and travel among Italy's 20 regions is restricted.

In other European countries, lockdowns and severe restrictions are remaining. Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Germany and France aren't ready for any serious easing. In Germany, the government is coming under increasing pressure to present the public with a road map out of the coronavirus crisis amid growing anger over the snail-paced vaccination campaign.

'We envy you'

Only 6% of Germans have received at least one shot so far, compared with about 33% of Britons. That huge disparity prompted Bild Zeitung, a major tabloid newspaper, to splash across its front page Wednesday: Dear Britons, We envy you! The paper went on to ask, When will we be as far as the British are?

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has been rebuffing calls for a major relaxation of lockdown rules, saying there has to be a significant reduction in the incidence rate to under 35 per 100,000 first. It currently stands at about 60 per 100,000.

At a Tuesday meeting with lawmakers from her ruling Christian Democratic party, Merkel said she understood the valid desire for an opening up, but that could be done safely only in four stages of opening, without a yo-yo effect.

The French Prime Minister Jean Castex warned Thursday that the situation in France is worrying and that more restrictions may have to be imposed on the hardest hit areas, if there's no decrease in the rate of infections.

And after a European Council meeting, several leaders of the bloc's 27 member states expressed continuing frustration with the pace of vaccine delivery, specifically with Astra Zeneca's, which was developed at the University of Oxford.

Italy's prime minister Mario Draghi said in a statement that firms that have failed to deliver promised doses should not be excused. The EU, which insisted on a collective purchase of vaccines, has been criticized by member states for its slow vaccine rollout. Some member countries have started to break ranks and are now buying jabs from China and Russia that are yet to be approved by European regulators. -VOA

## DETAILS

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