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Europe, COVID-19, and U.S. Relations

COVID-19 in Europe

Like most of the rest of the world, European governments and the European Union (EU) have struggled to manage the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

European leaders have characterized the pandemic as Europe’s biggest challenge since the Second World War, with potentially far-reaching political, social, and economic consequences beyond the public health impact. COVID-19 also has added tensions to a strained U.S.-European partnership. Members of Congress may be interested in COVID-19’s implications for U.S. relations with Europe, including in NATO and with the EU, and in how the pandemic might alter certain U.S.-European dynamics, especially vis-à-vis China.

Statistics

The first wave of the pandemic in Europe occurred in spring 2020 but subsided in the summer. A second wave began in early fall 2020. As of late December 2020, about 17.7 million confirmed COVID-19 infections and roughly 433,000 deaths had been reported across the 27-member EU, the United Kingdom (UK), Norway, and Switzerland (out of a combined population of roughly 527 million).

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Europe: Top 10 Affected Countries

(by number of cases, as of end of December 2020)

Country	Cases	Deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Case Fatality Rates
France	2,619,616	63,235	94.40	2.4%
UK	2,336,688	71,217	107.11	3.0%
Italy	2,056,277	72,370	119.76	3.5%
Spain	1,879,413	50,122	107.27	2.7%
Germany	1,672,643	31,145	37.56	1.9%
Poland	1,261,010	27,147	71.48	2.2%
Netherlands	781,467	11,135	64.62	1.4%
Czech Rep.	674,340	11,152	104.95	1.7%
Belgium	639,734	19,234	168.39	3.0%
Romania	618,429	15,334	78.74	2.5%

Source: Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, December 29, 2020, updated daily at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>.

As seen in **Table 1**, France, the UK, and Italy have experienced the largest number of infections. The second wave has hit several Central and Eastern European countries—including Poland and the Czech Republic—

harder than the first wave. Although the rise in new infections may be due partly to more testing, the second surge followed a relaxation of restrictions on social and economic activity in many European countries over the summer and the onset of colder weather. Hospitalizations and deaths continue to increase throughout Europe.

European Responses

In March 2020, in response to the first wave of the pandemic, nearly all European governments imposed national “lockdown” restrictions and social-distancing measures—including banning large gatherings, closing schools and nonessential businesses, and restricting movement—although these measures varied by country in strictness and other aspects. Most European governments also enacted national border controls. Sweden took a notably different approach that trusted citizens to practice social distancing and imposed few mandatory restrictions; some public health experts contend this policy failed to protect the most vulnerable or to build immunity among the general public. European governments began implementing phased reopening plans in mid-April and early May 2020. Most European leaders stressed the need for continued social distancing, and many governments required the use of facemasks, especially indoors.

The pandemic has spurred serious economic difficulties throughout Europe. For 2020, the EU forecasts its total economy will contract by 7.4% and average unemployment across the bloc will rise to 7.7%. Projections suggest the UK economy will contract by roughly 11% in 2020. Measures enacted by European governments to mitigate the economic downturn include loan programs and credit guarantees for companies, income subsidies for affected workers, tax deferrals, and debt repayment deferments.

As COVID-19 cases began to increase again in early fall 2020, European governments initially attempted to avoid a second round of national lockdowns, opting instead for targeted restrictions on regional or local virus “hot spots” to preserve economic recovery and in light of growing “pandemic fatigue” and public protests. By late October, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and others had reimposed national restrictions, although most countries kept schools open and measures in some were less stringent than during the first wave. By December, amid mounting infections and growing concerns about a faster-spreading variant of the virus first detected in the UK, some European governments had imposed more severe lockdowns—including closing schools and nonessential shops. Most EU countries also have restricted travel from the UK. EU member states and the UK have begun vaccination programs, but social distancing measures and limits on economic activities are expected to remain in place throughout Europe for several months at least.

EU Actions

Although national governments retain control over most aspects of health policy, the EU has sought to play a leading role in managing the European response to the pandemic. Critics contend the EU lacked a coherent plan in the early stages of the crisis and member states initially pursued disparate strategies, but many analysts assess that the EU has made progress in overcoming internal discord. The EU coordinated the imposition of bloc-wide travel restrictions on most foreign visitors; worked to ensure the provision of sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies across Europe; and is supporting research and development (R&D) of treatments, diagnostics, and vaccines, in part through leading international donor efforts. The EU is procuring vaccines on behalf of all member states; EU regulators approved the first vaccine for use throughout the bloc in late December 2020.

The EU also is focused on promoting economic recovery. In April 2020, the EU agreed a €540 billion (about \$660 billion) financial aid package for workers, businesses, and member states. The EU is finalizing a €750 billion (around \$918 billion) recovery fund—to include issuing EU bonds backed jointly by member states—attached to a recently approved €1.1 trillion (roughly \$1.3 trillion) budget for 2021-2027. The European Central Bank, which manages the EU's common currency (the euro) used by 19 members, established an emergency bond-buying program totaling €1.8 trillion (about \$2.2 trillion) as of December 2020.

NATO's Role

NATO and allied military personnel, including from the United States, have taken an active role in assisting civilian responses to COVID-19 in Europe and beyond. Although NATO traditionally focuses on military threats, it possesses command and control and logistics capabilities to coordinate multilateral responses to a range of security challenges, including natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other measures, NATO officials report that allied military forces have delivered critical supplies around the world and helped to build field hospitals and conduct testing across the alliance. In an effort to bolster its pandemic response capacities, in June 2020, NATO agreed to establish a stockpile of medical equipment and a new fund to enable rapid distribution of medical supplies and services.

Impact on U.S.-European Relations

Under the Trump Administration, significant U.S.-European divisions have existed on trade and tariffs, defense spending, and a wide range of foreign policy issues. Pandemic-related travel bans; competition for PPE, medical equipment, and the R&D of vaccines and treatments; and the Administration's decision to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organization generated further transatlantic friction. Many analysts consider U.S. and European leadership as instrumental in managing past global public health crises, such as the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak, but view diplomatic cooperation on the COVID-19 pandemic as largely lacking to date. The Trump Administration maintains that it has worked with European partners to address various aspects of the pandemic, including in NATO and the Group of 7 (G-7) leading industrialized democracies. U.S. and EU scientific and

regulatory experts also have established technical dialogues on pandemic-related issues.

Relations with China

Despite recent U.S.-European tensions, some experts contend that COVID-19 could prompt a closer alignment of U.S. and European policy interests with respect to China. The Trump Administration and some in Congress have voiced apprehension about China's efforts to enhance its influence in Europe. Notwithstanding initial concerns that China's *facemask diplomacy* would build goodwill, many analysts assess that the pandemic and its aftermath—including China's waging of a pandemic-related disinformation campaign in Europe—has hardened European attitudes toward China. For some Europeans, the pandemic has highlighted Europe's overreliance on China in global supply chains and the vulnerability of its critical infrastructure and companies to foreign takeover. China's COVID-19-related actions may be contributing to decisions by some European governments—including the UK and France—to ban or limit the participation of Chinese telecommunications company Huawei in building out their fifth generation (5G) wireless networks. The United States and the EU launched a new dialogue on China in October 2020 to discuss common concerns and policy differences. The EU hopes to intensify cooperation toward China with the incoming Biden Administration.

Congressional Interests

Many Members of Congress retain a long-standing interest in European affairs and the transatlantic partnership. Some analysts argue that the pandemic requires more robust U.S.-European cooperation. Potential areas for congressional consideration may include the following:

- The extent of U.S.-European collaboration on COVID-19 in existing forums, such as NATO or the G-7, and possible new initiatives, such as a U.S.-EU dialogue and/or an early warning system on global health threats.
- Possibilities for enhancing U.S.-European economic cooperation to help promote financial recovery on both sides of the Atlantic, including through potential new U.S.-EU and U.S.-UK free trade agreements.
- Potential ways to reduce supply chain vulnerabilities for PPE and other medical equipment, for example by deepening existing U.S.-EU regulatory cooperation on pharmaceuticals and medical devices.
- Options for countering COVID-19 disinformation campaigns that have targeted the United States and its European allies and are believed to be backed by China, Russia, and other foreign powers.
- Prospects for and challenges to greater U.S.-European coordination in addressing China's geopolitical and economic rise.

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