Coronavirus: Living with COVID in Europe vs. America

By Alex Berezow, PhD — August 26, 2020

There are some striking differences between how Europeans and Americans are navigating the pandemic. The latter have a lot to learn from the former.

As I wrote previously, I was held hostage on an extended stay in Poland from February to August due to the coronavirus pandemic. I finally returned Stateside on August 12.

The Pandemic in Poland

Like most of Europe, Poland got the coronavirus under control. And the Poles did it in a harsh way. They shut the borders to neighboring countries. Most (maybe all) flights into and out of the country were cancelled. Almost everything was closed, except for truly essential businesses (like grocery stores). Parks were closed. People were told to stay within two kilometers of their house unless they had essential business (like going to the grocery store).

After a week or two of this (I can’t remember precisely -- it's all a fog) restrictions were slowly lifted. Eventually, after a few more weeks, parks and borders reopened. Flights resumed. And businesses opened back up.

Life essentially went back to normal except for the following noticeable differences: (1) Masks were mandated (backed up with the threat of a fine not only for you but for the business owner) in...
all indoor public places; (2) Social distancing required that some tables or seats remain vacant; and (3) Mass gatherings were restricted. Sports resumed, but there weren't many fans.

One of the best features of the "new way of living" was that tables came with signs indicating whether or not they had been disinfected. This, in my opinion, should always have been the case, long before the pandemic came around. Coffee shop tables, in particular, are gross.

**The Pandemic in Seattle**

There are many striking differences in regard to how Seattle (and America as a whole) is navigating the pandemic. There seems to be a general suspicion or fear of getting too close to anyone, even people you know. In the Seattle area, many restaurants are take-out only. (That was the case for a while in Poland, but now things are roughly back to normal.)

Also, a substantial number of people wear masks outside. This makes very little sense. The other extreme is the existence of people -- not generally in Seattle but in the more rural parts of Washington State -- who refuse to wear masks at all because they claim the virus is a hoax. COVID conspiracy theorists are few and far between in Europe.

Another striking difference is the shutting down of entire sports, like college football. This makes little sense, as well, especially given that college students are very unlikely to become extremely sick with coronavirus. The games can be played in empty stadiums.

Finally, it's not at all obvious to me that tables in coffee shops or restaurants (the few that are open, anyway) are being disinfected. There aren't any signs indicating one way or the other.

**COVID: Europe vs. America**

Of course, the circumstances are different. The number of new cases in Europe is just a fraction of that in America. But it seems to me that the U.S. has a lot to learn from our neighbors across the pond, not just in policy but in attitude.