COVID: Europe's Second Wave Soars Past America's Third Wave

By Alex Berezow, PhD — October 27, 2020

Europe is in worse shape than the U.S. when it comes to new infections, at least for the time being. Without a change in strategy -- and hoping for a vaccine is not a strategy -- going back into lockdown is pointless, as a third (or fourth) wave will emerge when society reopens.

The coronavirus is once again spiraling out of control throughout much of the world, particularly in Western countries. Though many observers try to turn a public health catastrophe into an opportunity to score political points, the data show that the pandemic has little respect for political ideologies.
Possible Pandemic Wave Scenarios for COVID-19

**Scenario 1:** Peaks and Valleys

**Scenario 2:** Fall Peak

**Scenario 3:** Slow Burn
Early in the pandemic, Europe chose to implement a harsh lockdown. The goal at the time was to "flatten the curve," by which officials meant that the rate of infections needed to be kept sufficiently low as to not overwhelm hospitals. With a few exceptions, both Europe and the U.S. largely accomplished this goal.

Somewhere along the way, two things happened: (1) People became complacent; and (2) The goal switched from "flatten the curve" to "find a cure" or "prevent any new infections." This is deeply problematic because there may never be a cure or even a good vaccine. And the notion of preventing infections is ridiculous. Coronaviruses are common cold viruses, and they are nearly impossible to stop. Lockdowns can buy some time, but they aren't viable long-term solutions for economic and social reasons. Combine that with "pandemic fatigue" and public complacency, and the results were predictable: A larger second (or even third) wave. (See figure. Credit: University of Minnesota CIDRAP)

Countries that even once had the virus under control have not only lost their progress but are in a worse state now than they were at the beginning of the crisis. The following chart compares 54 countries in Europe (with a population of about 766 million) to the U.S. (with a population of 329 million).

Two things are obvious from this graph. First, Europe has surged past the U.S. in the number of new infections, even after taking its larger population into account. Second, while Europe is entering a second wave, the U.S. is entering a third wave.
It's also useful to look at how countries similar to the U.S. ("peer countries") are performing. The criteria that I set to be considered a "peer country" is a population of more than 50 million and membership in the OECD (which is basically a club for rich countries).

As shown, France is the worst off -- it's literally almost off the scale. The UK and Italy are also doing worse than the U.S. Colombia isn't far behind. And Germany, which was hailed as a model of competent governance, is seeing a huge surge in cases. The only countries that are doing well are Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and Turkey, though I must admit being skeptical about the latter two. Perhaps they just aren't doing that much testing.

Clearly, certain East Asian countries have figured out how to tame the virus. Widespread mask wearing and track-and-trace programs may be the reason. Whatever it is, we have something to learn from them. Going back into lockdown without a change in strategy is pointless, as a third (or fourth) wave will emerge when society reopens. Hoping for a vaccine is not a strategy.

If only there was another idea [4].

Data Source [5]: European CDC

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