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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. 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

Europe has experienced several waves of the pandemic since its onset in early 2020. As of January 14, 2022, about 84.2 million confirmed COVID-19 infections and nearly 1.1 million 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). As seen in **Table 1**, the pandemic has significantly affected countries in both Western and Central Europe.

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Europe: Top 10 Affected Countries
(by number of cases, as of January 14, 2022)

Country	Cases	Deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Case Fatality Rates
UK	15,064,685	151,833	227.18	1.00%
France	13,351,053	127,520	190.16	1.00%
Italy	8,155,645	140,188	232.49	1.70%
Spain	7,930,528	90,620	192.49	1.10%
Germany	7,866,784	115,343	138.75	1.50%
Poland	4,265,433	101,419	267.10	2.40%
Netherlands	3,539,335	21,610	124.68	0.60%
Czech Rep.	2,562,235	36,765	334.57	1.40%
Belgium	2,347,164	28,566	248.74	1.20%
Romania	1,875,887	59,150	305.58	3.20%

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

The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have reported a combined 2.5 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 44,000 deaths to date (out of a combined population of roughly 18 million). Some parts of the region have among the highest case-fatality ratios in Europe.

European Responses

By March 2020, nearly all European governments had imposed national “lockdown” restrictions and social-distancing measures, including closing schools and nonessential businesses and banning large gatherings. Such measures varied by country in strictness, length, and other aspects. Sweden initially took a different approach that trusted citizens to practice social distancing and imposed few mandatory restrictions, but many public health experts questioned this strategy. Most European governments also enacted national border controls, and some limited internal travel. Several European countries, including Denmark, Germany, and Norway, implemented robust testing and tracing programs. Phased reopenings began in mid-April and early May 2020, but most European countries continued to restrict nonessential international travel. Subsequent waves of the virus in fall 2020 and in 2021 prompted new rounds of restrictions on social and business activity throughout Europe, although in some countries restrictions were less stringent than during the first wave.

By early 2021, EU and other European countries had begun vaccination programs. According to Oxford University data, roughly 70% of the total EU population and 70% of the UK population are fully vaccinated (as of mid-January 2022). Western European countries generally have higher vaccination rates (of 70%-80%) to date than Central European countries (most between 40%-60%) or those in the Western Balkans (about 40% of the region’s total population is fully vaccinated). Many European governments require a “COVID pass” (showing proof of vaccination, a recent negative test, or recent recovery) for access to certain venues and businesses, including restaurants. Amid rising cases throughout Europe due to the spread of the more transmissible omicron variant, most European governments are encouraging booster shots.

Some European governments began to reinstitute selected social and commercial restrictions in late 2021 due to concerns that the omicron surge could overburden hospitals. Austria, the Netherlands, and Slovakia reimposed lockdowns for several weeks. Austria, France, Germany, Italy, and others implemented or are considering tighter restrictions for unvaccinated individuals and vaccine mandates.

European leaders continue to grapple with balancing measures to contain the virus’s spread with fostering economic recovery and managing growing “pandemic fatigue.” The EU estimates its total economy contracted by 5.9% in 2020 but grew by 5% in 2021; forecasts predict 4.3% growth in 2022. The speed of economic recovery has been faster than expected but varies among member states. National measures to mitigate the pandemic’s negative economic repercussions include loan programs and credit

guarantees for companies, income subsidies for affected workers, tax deferrals, and debt repayment deferments.

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 and in harmonizing policies in an effort to prevent internal discord and promote EU solidarity. 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 supported research and development of treatments, diagnostics, and vaccines, in part through leading international donor efforts. The EU procured vaccines on behalf of all member states. Although initial production delays and a slow start to vaccine distribution sparked frustration among some European leaders and publics, the EU procurement initiative is largely regarded as a success given the relatively high vaccination rates across much of the bloc.

The EU also has focused on promoting economic recovery. In April 2020, the EU agreed on a €540 billion (about \$590 billion) financial aid package for pandemic-affected workers, businesses, and member states. In February 2021, the EU finalized a €750 billion (around \$911 billion) recovery fund—to include issuing EU bonds backed jointly by member states—attached to a €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 (it is scheduled to end in March 2022).

NATO's Role

NATO and allied military personnel, including from the United States, actively assisted 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 delivered critical supplies around the world and helped build field hospitals and conduct testing across the alliance. In an effort to bolster its pandemic response capacities, NATO also established a stockpile of medical equipment and a new fund to enable rapid distribution of medical supplies and services.

Impact on U.S.-European Relations

At its onset in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic further strained fraught U.S.-European relations during the Trump Administration. U.S. and EU travel bans, competition for PPE and medical equipment, and President Trump's decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO) exacerbated tensions with many European countries and the EU. The Trump Administration asserted it was working with European partners to address 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 established technical dialogues on pandemic-related issues in 2020.

Upon taking office, President Biden pledged to enhance cooperation with Europe to defeat COVID-19, halted the U.S. withdrawal from the WHO, and announced the United States would join COVAX, a WHO-led initiative supported by the EU to deliver vaccines and treatments to developing countries. At their June 2021 summit, the United States and the EU identified ending the pandemic as a key priority; among other measures, they have committed to bolster COVID-19 vaccine supplies globally, including by donating vaccines and addressing manufacturing and supply chain challenges. The United States and the EU also are involved in World Trade Organization (WTO) discussions on trade responses to the pandemic, including the concept of waiving intellectual property rights (IPR) on COVID-19 vaccines. The Biden Administration has voiced support for a potential waiver, but Members of Congress are divided and the EU has proposed alternatives. (See CRS In Focus IF11858, *Potential WTO TRIPS Waiver and COVID-19*.)

Relations with China

Some U.S. officials and Members of Congress have voiced apprehension about China's efforts to enhance its influence in Europe. Notwithstanding initial concerns that China's *face-mask diplomacy* would build goodwill in Europe, the pandemic and its aftermath—including China's waging of a pandemic-related disinformation campaign in Europe—may have contributed to hardening European attitudes toward China. For some Europeans, the pandemic has highlighted Europe's overreliance on China in global supply chains and the vulnerability of Europe's critical infrastructure and companies to foreign takeover. The Biden Administration and the EU have committed to intensifying cooperation on the strategic and economic concerns posed by China and have restarted a dialogue on China begun by the Trump Administration, but devising common U.S.-European policy approaches may remain challenging.

Congressional Interests

Many Members of Congress retain a long-standing interest in European affairs and U.S.-European efforts to tackle global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Potential areas for congressional consideration include

- The extent of collaboration on COVID-19 in forums such as NATO and the G-7, and progress on U.S.-EU initiatives to boost global vaccine access, resolve supply chain issues, improve pandemic preparedness and early warning, and support global economic recovery
- The WTO trade response to the pandemic, including U.S. and EU approaches to IPR obligations for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments
- 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, or other foreign powers.

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