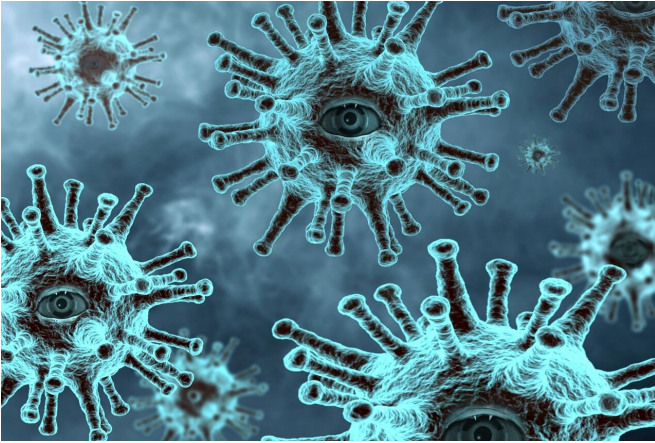


All eyes on Macron as third virus wave shakes France

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French President Emmanuel Macron will make a prime-time television address Wednesday to outline new measures aimed at stemming soaring Covid-19 cases and respond to criticism that he has allowed the pandemic to run out of control.

At the end of January, the 43-year-old president bucked the European trend and went against the recommendation of his scientific advisers by deciding that France would not enter a third lockdown.

For a month, the bet looked to have paid off as new cases flatlined at around 20,000 a day in February, with France in a state of semi-openness—under a night-time curfew, but with shops and schools open.

But with daily cases having doubled to around 40,000 and hospitals in infection hotspots like Paris overflowing, the tide looks to have turned amid pleas from medics for tighter restrictions.

Macron's scheduled address to the nation at 8:00 pm (1800 GMT) sparked expectations of tough measures such as school closures or more severe

lockdown rules a few weeks before spring school vacations.

The French Hospitals Federation (FHF), for its part, urged Macron to order "a strict lockdown immediately" or risk having more hospitals overwhelmed.

Until now, Macron's government has trumpeted a "third way" to manage the crisis, which has sought to contain the spread of the [virus](#) without issuing stay-at-home orders that have significant mental health and economic repercussions.

The spread of the more contagious "British" variant, as well as a sluggish vaccine campaign, have left this strategy under fire from political opponents and many epidemiologists.

On Tuesday health authorities reported an additional 569 intensive care cases in the past 24 hours, the highest number since April 2020, when the first wave of [coronavirus](#) cases hit.

"We have some difficult weeks ahead of us," government spokesman Gabriel Attal said after Macron met with top ministers, acknowledging that "probably some mistakes were made" in the government's handling of the crisis.

'No mea culpa'

The last tightening of restrictions entered into force in France on March 20, covering around a third of the country's population including the Paris region.

Non-essential shops were closed and travel restrictions imposed, but small groups were allowed to meet outside and schools remain open.

Macron has defended himself from attacks from opponents including far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who is rising in opinion polls.

"I have no mea culpa to issue, no regrets and no sense of a failure," he told a press conference on March 25.

He has insisted that every day out of lockdown has been a day gained and points to neighbouring Germany, which is struggling to emerge from months of lockdown restrictions, also because of the spread of the British variant.

Still favourite

At stake in France's current crisis is above all the health of nearly 70 million people and the fate of the eurozone's second-biggest economy, but also Macron's political future one year from presidential elections.

As well as the spiralling infections, he is also on the back foot over France's vaccination campaign, which has been dogged by a chronic shortage of doses due in part to a centralised EU purchasing system which he championed.

His handling of the twin health and economic crises caused by the pandemic will be foremost in voters' minds next April and May, analysts say.

Stephane Zumsteeg, head of public opinion surveys at the Ipsos pollster in France, said Macron's decision not to lock down in January was "a daring gamble, but not one that is totally lost".

"It was a half-way house with a curfew, and people appreciated it on balance," he said.

He said voters would ultimately judge Macron's performance based on a comparison of France with its EU neighbours.

"Of course lots of things can happen in the next year but at this point the main favourite for next year's election is Emmanuel Macron, not because he's the best or the most loved but because there's no credible alternative other than Marine Le Pen."

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