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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 new tensions to an already 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

As of late August 2020, about 2 million confirmed COVID-19 infections and over 183,000 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). As seen in **Table 1**, Spain, the UK, France, and Italy have experienced the largest number of infections, and several European countries have case fatality rates of over 10%. Although the first wave of the pandemic in Europe occurred in spring 2020, many policymakers are wary about the potential for a second wave amid upticks in new cases in some European countries and regions.

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Europe: Top 10 Affected Countries
(by number of cases, as of August 2020)

Country	Cases	Deaths	Deaths per 100,000	Case Fatality Rates
Spain	429,507	28,996	62.06	6.8%
UK	332,509	41,564	62.51	12.5%
France	297,485	30,581	45.65	10.3%
Italy	263,949	35,463	58.68	13.4%
Germany	240,571	9,290	11.20	3.9%
Sweden	83,898	5,820	57.15	6.9%
Belgium	83,500	9,884	86.53	11.8%
Romania	83,150	3,459	17.76	4.2%
Netherlands	70,984	6,244	36.24	8.8%
Poland	64,689	2,010	5.29	3.1%

Source: Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, August 28, 2020, updated daily at https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/.

European Responses

In March 2020, nearly all European governments imposed "lockdown" restrictions and social-distancing measures—including banning large gatherings, closing schools and nonessential businesses, and restricting movement—although these measures varied in strictness and other aspects by country. France, Italy, and Spain instituted some of the most severe restrictions, especially related to nonessential movement and outdoor activity. Most European governments enacted national border controls; some, such as Germany, Denmark, Hungary, and Spain, largely restricted entry to citizens or permanent residents. Sweden took a notably different approach that trusted citizens to practice social distancing and imposed few mandatory restrictions, but many public health experts are skeptical about this policy's success in building immunity among the general public and contend that it failed to protect the most vulnerable, such as the elderly.

In mid-April 2020, attention across Europe began turning to implementing phased reopening plans while guarding against a resurgence of the virus. Most European leaders stress the need for continued social distancing. Numerous countries are requiring facemasks on public transport and/or in shops and other indoor spaces. Many governments, including those of Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the UK, have sought to establish extensive testing and contact-tracing capacities, and some have developed contact-tracing mobile apps to supplement traditional approaches. The use of such apps has raised questions about balancing public health concerns and privacy rights.

Most European countries are expected to suffer major economic shocks due to the pandemic. For 2020, the EU forecasts its total economy will contract by 8.3% and average unemployment across the bloc will rise to 9%. The UK's economy entered into recession in August 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.

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 (as well as the gradual lifting of such restrictions); 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.

Promoting economic recovery has been another area of EU focus. The EU approved a €540 billion (about $640 billion) financial aid package for workers, businesses, and member states. It is planning longer-term support through a €750 billion (around $890 billion) recovery fund—which would include issuing EU bonds backed jointly by member states—attached to a €1.1 trillion (roughly $1.3 trillion) seven-year budget. The European Central Bank, which manages the EU's common currency (the euro) used by 19 members, launched an emergency bond-buying program totaling €1.35 trillion (about $1.6 trillion) as of June 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, the alliance 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 flown over 350 flights to transport equipment and thousands of medical personnel and have helped to build over 1,000 field hospitals 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 exist on trade and tariffs, defense spending, the role and value of multilateral institutions, and key foreign policy concerns (including with respect to Russia, China, and the Middle East). Pandemic-related competition for PPE and medical equipment and for R&D of vaccines and treatments, as well as the U.S. decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization, has generated further transatlantic friction. EU leaders also expressed dismay with what they regarded as a lack of U.S. consultation ahead of the Administration's March 2020 decision to ban visitors from most EU countries.

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. The Trump Administration maintains that it is working closely with European partners to address various aspects of the pandemic, including in NATO and other forums, such as the Group of 7 (G-7) leading industrialized democracies. The United States and the EU reportedly are consulting on easing their respective restrictions on transatlantic travel. U.S. and EU scientific and regulatory experts also have established technical dialogues on pandemic-related issues.

Relations with China

Despite current 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 so-called *facemask diplomacy* would build goodwill, many analysts now assess that the pandemic and its aftermath—including China's waging of a pandemic-related disinformation campaign in Europe—may harden 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 also appear to be contributing to making some European governments—such as those in the UK and France—more hesitant about involving Chinese telecommunications company Huawei in building out their fifth generation (5G) wireless networks. The Trump Administration has urged European allies to exclude Huawei for security reasons. The United States and the EU announced a new dialogue on China in June 2020, but some observers doubt how much policy convergence is possible. European officials may be concerned about being put in a difficult position amid U.S.-China tensions.

Congressional Interests

Many Members of Congress retain a long-standing interest in European affairs and the transatlantic partnership, despite periodic foreign policy, security, or trade differences. 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.
- Ways in which the United States and Europe might work together 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 common concerns about China's geopolitical and economic rise.

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