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The World This Week

CORONAVIRUS IN EUROPE

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COVID-19 CONTINUES TO SPREAD

The COVID-19 virus has continued to spread across parts of Europe. 27 European countries now have confirmed cases of the virus, with the Republic of Ireland the most recent addition to the list. Affected nations at this point include Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Georgia, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Monaco, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Switzerland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. So far there have only been deaths in three European countries: one in San Marino, two in France and 41 in Italy.

Banner – The Civil Protection Operational Committee convenes after Italy declares a state of emergency for the coronavirus [cropped]
Dipartimento Protezione Civile (flickr.com)

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The hardest hit European nation by far, Italy has taken the drastic step of quarantining eleven towns with a combined population of more than 55,000. Located in the north of the country, these towns are the epicentre of the Italian cluster. It is currently not known how the virus made it to Italy in the first place. What is known is that northern Italy has been the source of outbreaks in other nations, including Denmark, Romania and Spain.

Myriad preventative measures are being taken across Europe in an attempt to prevent/slow the spread of the virus. Switzerland has banned large gatherings outright, while Ireland has postponed scheduled men's and women's Six Nations rugby matches. Tourists were left standing in the Parisian rain on Sunday when the world-famous Louvre Museum was forced to close after a meeting held by concerned staff. This happened in the wake of the French government banning indoor gatherings of more than 5,000 people on Saturday. When visiting a hospital to meet with staff on the frontline of the biological battle President Emmanuel Macron warned that a COVID-19 epidemic in France is "inevitable".

Governments across Europe continue to emphasise the protective measures that they are taking and are appealing for calm in the face of the continued spread of the virus. It remains to be seen if those measures will be sufficient.

Slovakia: Anti-Corruption Party Wins General Election

Prominent businessman and anti-corruption campaigner Igor Matovic will become the next Prime Minister of Slovakia. His Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Olano) party won 25% of the national vote on Saturday in what proved to be a highly fragmented field. Matovic founded Olano ten years ago as an anti-corruption protest party and campaigned heavily on that topic in the lead-up to Saturday's election. Olano also secured 53 of the 150 seats available within the Slovakian Parliament and is presumed to form a centre-right ruling coalition.

The result sees the incumbent centre-left Smer-SD party unseated with 18% of the vote. Sitting Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini has admitted defeat. This election result marks the first time since gaining independence in 1993 that Slovakia will not be governed by a nationalist party. The result is being celebrated in a number of quarters as evidence of the Slovakian people's rejection of nationalism and embrace of centrism. However, nationalist parties, including Smer-SD, still recorded some strong results. The far-right People's Party, led by former neo-Nazi Marian Kotleba, secured 17 seats.

What brought about this change?

The election period was dominated by public anger over the death of prominent investigative journalist Jan Kuciak in July 2018. Kuciak and his girlfriend were both found murdered, shot at close range. Kuciak had been investigating high-level corruption and his death sparked enormous street protests. These protests – exacerbated once Kuciak's (posthumously published) report revealed links between government ministers and organised crime – eventually led to the fall of the Smer-SD government headed by Roberto Fico in March 2019. The Smer-SD party remained in power, however, and it would appear from the recent election results that Slovakian voters have not forgotten what occurred.

Outgoing Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini: Latvijas armija (flickr.com)

Greece: Asylum Applications Suspended

Greece has announced that it will not accept any applications for asylum for one month, following Turkey's decision to halt efforts to prevent refugees from entering into Europe. The announcement came on Sunday, and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis invoked article 78.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) in an effort to secure the support of the European Union (EU). Article 78.3 allows the European Council to take provisional measures for the benefit of a Member State in a situation involving "a sudden inflow of nationals from third countries". The EU has said that it will assist Greece in protecting the borders of the EU. Greece has stated that it intends to seek support from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (more commonly known as Frontex) to begin a major intervention to protect its borders.

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Greek military forces have been deployed to the Turkish border to enforce the new policy, which also includes a commitment to deport anyone who enters Greece illegally. The suspicion of asylum applications and summary deportation of illegal entrants are both violations of EU law, however the Greek government has indicated that it intends to use Article 78.3 to secure an exemption from the EU.

By their own count, Greek security forces blocked more than 10,000 migrants from entering Greece in the 24-hour period following the announcement. Clashes erupted at border crossings, with migrants throwing stones and metal bars and Greek security forces firing tear gas. In separate incidents, more than 500 migrants using seven different boats have managed to make landfall on the Greek islands of Samos, Lesbos, and Chios. Migrant camps on these islands are already suffering from severe overcrowding.

The situation is developing, as the ramifications of Turkey's decision to allow migrants free passage to the Greek border begin to be felt by Europe as a whole.