

**Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020** : another three weeks have passed since my previous update from France on 28<sup>th</sup> April and, following medical and sanitary advice, withdrawal from lockdown began a week ago on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> May as promised by the President. However the sting in the tail of the progressive nature of the *deconfinement* process is that the country is now split into red and green zones determined by the continuing severity of the epidemic in different departments. The demarcation line which now straddles the country essentially divides the north & north-east which is red from the south and west which is all green. Of the overseas departments, only Mayotte (the island in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa & north of Madagascar) remains a red zone.

Not unsurprisingly, the worst affected areas initially remain the most severely affected now. These include the industrial heartlands of the north and east and the densely populated urban areas in and around Paris (Ile-de-France). 32% of the territory is now red compared to 68% which is classified green though nowhere is considered Covid-19 free and strict precautions apply everywhere to reduce any resurgence of the first peak.

The three criteria adopted to differentiate whether a department is red or green are :

- continuing active circulation of the virus
- capacity of hospital intensive care facilities to cope
- testing capacity cover rate

Needless to say, some rural local authorities now classified red between conglomeration initially affected but now recovering raised objections to this blanket coverage of large swathes of the country in red but the government logic was to facilitate policing complete regions rather than a patchy map of different coloured departments which would have been complicated to manage. The reverse logic benefitted some departments in the green zone which showed up red in the daily medical maps where the introduction of yellow areas also indicated departments that only achieved some of the criteria, just to confuse everybody. These have now disappeared.



Of the twelve administrative regions of mainland France, the four red regions are Ile-de-France, Hauts-de-France, Grand Est & Bourgogne-Franche-Comté. The government's official web site map at <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees> is interactive and the name of each region appears when scrolling across the map. By clicking on each region the image is magnified and scrolling again across the enlarged map reveals the name of each department.

The rules and regulations applied to the two zones are extremely complicated and run to about 50 pages of who can do what, where, when and how. But in a nutshell, everyone, regardless of the zone in which one resides, can now go outside without having to carry a form. Travel in the red zone is limited to 100km as the crow flies from home or in the larger departments is limited to staying within your home department. Bars, restaurants and entertainment venues (cinemas, theatres, museums, etc) remain closed though places of worship have reopened for private meditation only. Professional sport remains banned everywhere until at least the end of August. The online Government website provides separate reference sections for each of the two zones.

The emphasis of coming out of lockdown has been to restart the economy by allowing people to return to work in the commercial and industrial sectors, reopening schools for younger children and providing adequate public transportation to allow those three sectors to function. Social distancing of one metre is maintained everywhere and face masks are now compulsory when in stations and travelling on trains, metros, trams & buses where adequate social distancing is difficult to police. In both red and green zones, only essential workers are allowed to travel on public transport during peak times, morning and evening, and employers are required to provide a certificate to their employees to prove this status.

Whilst not compulsory elsewhere, wearing of masks is strongly recommended in other public places such as supermarkets and shops. As a result most municipalities are providing them free of charge to local residents who are obliged to present identity papers, proof of home address such as a recent electricity or gas bill, and the "family logbook" (*livret de famille*) which shows how many people reside in each household, when collecting them. In our commune, one mask per person will be provided and they are washable up to 50 times.

Otherwise, non-essential workers are encouraged to continue to work from home or use their own transport (electric bicycles are doing a roaring trade) where home working is not possible. For return to the workplace, employers are obliged to operate flexi-time schedules and are required to provide a safe working environment for their staff. Employees are encouraged to complain if they feel their health is being put at risk by going to work in unsanitary conditions, this last point a requirement insisted upon by the unions.

The first week of coming out of lockdown from Monday 11<sup>th</sup> May after such a long time away from the workplace was very gradual and much discussion, preparation and cleaning was required in schools before the local authorities would allow more children to attend. Young children of essential workers were already being cared for but in general the kindergarten and primary schools only opened for mass intake a week later on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> May.

Attendance is voluntary and classes are limited to just 15 pupils. All teachers and supervisors are required to wear face masks and at the end of each day, classrooms are disinfected. Infants in crèches and very young children in kindergarten are not required to wear face masks but they are compulsory for primary school children. Parents will not be fined if they don't send their children to school. The original proposal was to allow secondary school classes (from 11 years old) to recommence a week later but this has been delayed until at least the end of May.

At present it seems unlikely that sixth form students and university graduates will return to formal education at all this academic year but those categories are receiving online classes as compensation. Examinations have generally been replaced by coursework assessment so the all-important end of school *baccalaureat* certificate this year will take on a slightly different significance. University graduation exams are postponed until September and undergraduates will retain their student accreditation until the end of the year to allow for resits as required.

The relative freedom of now being allowed out of doors for prolonged individual exercise or socialising in groups of up to ten people (over and above members of the same household) has been much welcomed by the general public which is apparently suffering severe mental depression (so we are informed by the media) due to such a prolonged dose of being locked up. This is obviously more evident in densely built up areas such as city centres and districts of high rise social housing. It is less evident in residential suburbs where most properties have gardens and the walk to the local shops along leafy streets is in itself refreshing and adequate exercise.

Though we are all expected to respect responsible social distancing of one metre, unfortunately there are always those who stretch the boundaries. Boisterous students found celebrating with alcohol on the banks of the *La Villette* canal in Paris on Monday evening 11<sup>th</sup> May were quickly dispersed by the police but not before receiving much adverse TV publicity criticising both their behaviour and that of government for allowing the conditions whereby this could happen.

The government is therefore treading a very delicate line of public opinion between what almost amounted to martial law and the inherent rights of free society (as noted in the French written constitution) to roam and express oneself, as noted in the motto of the Fifth Republic. For the authorities it is a case of damned if you do, damned if you don't. For the moment anyway, after just a week of this new relaxed regime, the gamble appears to be paying off. Certainly the general public have for the most part reacted positively though the police have recorded a significant number of fines levied to people living in the red zone who are "trespassing" into neighbouring departments or who are too far from home when seeking their daily exercise.

In the normal course of family life, summer holidays for most French people would have long been booked and paid for, so the principal concern for many now is whether they will be allowed to take those holidays in July or August which for the time being have not yet been cancelled. Most people who have had trips already cancelled have received vouchers allowing them the paid value to rebook at a later date, normally within a year of the original trip or holiday for a rebooked holiday up to end of 2021.

On the face of it, this seems a reasonable compromise as most travel organisations are loath to reimburse any money which has already passed through their books. The law though clearly states travel organisations are obliged to refund clients if they have not delivered the travel booked. Actually being able to enforce that is proving extremely difficult. So this is a gamble for the client who either may no longer have any desire for the same holiday trip or has no guarantee that the travel organisation will still be in business next year.

Obviously the same concerns apply in UK and elsewhere touched by the virus which seems now to be about everywhere in the world unless you live in Belarus. Our Moldovan neighbours have not been seen since the lockdown began. Their house is now empty so we have assumed they went back to Moldova where the outbreak is perhaps less severe or at least perceived as less of a threat. It is interesting to see how some countries have been less affected within Europe and are now rebooting their economies more vigorously, the restarting of the German football season albeit behind closed doors being a case in point whereas in France, the season has already been cancelled and the trophies have been awarded.

For myself as a senior citizen living in a red zone, the advice remains clear, stay at home, and this is not really an issue. Even though I now have the freedom to travel again within a 100km radius, there is in fact nowhere I want to go. Retail therapy is not my thing and all the interesting public places, including parks and gardens remain closed. I see shopping as a necessity rather than a pleasure. I am now permitted to walk along the river tow path again to the local woods and meadows so have no desire to travel miles just for exercise, especially as no refreshment will be available when I get there. Visits to family and friends are also allowed as long as any group gathering does not exceed 10 people. Acting responsibly, this really just means drinks in the garden which is nice whilst the weather is hot and sunny since it is not recommended to allow people inside the house. Video zooming has taken on quite a significance and brings much joy.

The France figures for Covid-19 up to the end of today (19<sup>th</sup> May 2020) with daily increase / decrease are as follows :

- total confirmed cases : 143 427 (increase of 524)
- total cumulative deaths : 28 022 (decrease of 217)

In hospitals :

- hospitalised : 18 468 (decrease of 547)
- returned home : 62 563 (increase of 835)
- in intensive care : 1 894 (decrease of 104)
- died in hospital : 17 714 (increase of 125)

In care homes & elsewhere :

- total cases : 73 912 (increase of 289)
- confirmed cases : 36 530 (decrease of 69)
- died in care homes and elsewhere : 10 308 (decrease of 342)

Source 19.05.20 : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>

The various graphs both totalised and daily changes, indicate a continuing drop across all results in France since the peaks between the end of March and the middle of April. Now a month further on the reducing daily changes appear to have justified relaxing of the lockdown rules.

With regard to testing, the official government website only records tests carried out in official municipal laboratories which is about 10% of the total tests done. However this does provide a valid comparison to evaluate the percentage of positive tests which can be applied across all testing stations. Thus in municipal laboratories, to date since the middle of March, 360 422 tests have been carried out in France at a rate of between 8K and 10K per working day though this hit a peak of 12K per day in the middle of April. Of these, a total of 39 373 tests have proved positive, about 11%. The most recent working day for which a total was posted, Friday 15<sup>th</sup> May, only 122 positive results were recorded out of 8 345 tests carried out, about 1,5%, confirming the large drop in new cases, another point in favour of relaxing the lockdown measures.

It has also been recorded that overall testing in France is about the same daily number as in UK of between 80K and 100K though one had to smile at the mischievous way in which the UK Minister of Health justified the achievement of more than 100K tests per day by the end of April at over 120K though about 30K of those were not actually completed tests but tests issued to potential patients. Since then, the real daily figures of tests carried out has fluctuated between 80K and 100K which equates to what is happening in France across the different testing facilities.

More importantly, here in France, is that the infection rate (the number of other people infected by a virus carrier) still remains well below 1 so the aspiration is that by the time the next overall assessment is carried out at the end of May, the whole of France will be able to be classified green thus allowing more activities to reopen at the beginning of June. Chief amongst those sectors clamouring for this are the catering and entertainment industries. Life without bars & restaurants, theatres, cinemas & museums (even parks and gardens which remain closed in red zones albeit open in green zones) is almost unbearable for most French people.

Vigilance is the keyword repeated by government to act responsibly to ensure continuing downward trends leading to safety of all and a new “normal” way of life. “Back to normal” is not an option, so much has changed during the last two months and hopefully the world has seen the error of ignoring the signs. Life after Covid-19 promises to be very different than before.

So after eight weeks of total lockdown before 11<sup>th</sup> May, it is perhaps interesting to evaluate how France has suffered compared to other European countries. By way of general comparison between countries, particularly in Europe, WHO tables and graphs at <https://covid19.who.int/> provide a useful reference though these don't precisely tally with the France statistics given on the French government website. Neither are they perhaps directly comparable as different countries report against different criteria. However, they do provide a simplified comparison between countries assuming all the declared figures have corresponding levels of inaccuracy.

There it can be seen that of the 4 735 622 confirmed cases of Covid-19 worldwide resulting in 316 289 deaths (6.7% of cases resulting in death), Europe has suffered 1 909 592 confirmed cases (40% of the world total). UK now has the highest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Europe with 246 410 (only USA & Russia have more worldwide), resulting in the highest number of deaths in Europe with 34 796 (14.1% of cases resulting in death).

By contrast France has recorded less cases of Covid-19 than Spain, Italy and Germany with 140 497 cases resulting in 28 190 deaths (20.1% of cases resulting in death). Worldwide, Brazil is now the fourth on the list (after USA, Russia & UK) having declared 241 080 cases resulting in 16 118 deaths, the highest number of daily cases and deaths coming in the last week, about a month after the peaks in European countries.

As in the previous briefing, the summary of the five major European economies worst affected, showing population, confirmed Covid-19 cases, deaths due to Covid-19, percentage of deaths compared to confirmed cases, number of deaths per hundred thousand of the population, listed in order from the highest to the lowest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19, are :

- UK : 66.7 million / 246 410 cases / 34 796 deaths / 14.1% / 52 deaths per 100K
- Spain : 45.7 million / 231 606 cases / 27 709 deaths / 12.0% / 61 deaths per 100K
- Italy : 60.0 million / 225 886 cases / 32 007 deaths / 14.2% / 53 deaths per 100K
- Germany : 81.5 million / 175 210 cases / 8 007 deaths / 4.6% / 10 deaths per 100K
- France : 65.8 million / 140 497 cases / 28 190 deaths / 20.1% / 43 deaths per 100K

These figures again show some interesting statistical points with a large variance in the number of deaths resulting from confirmed cases of catching the virus. On this statistic, France appears to have the worst record with just over 20%. However, when looking at the statistic comparing deaths related to population, Spain appears to have the worst record with 61 deaths per 100K. Generally though, comparisons of this sort are not very representative as some countries report figures based on different criteria so not much should be read into them. Overall, the analysis indicates a terrible catastrophe everywhere.

Finding an antidote remains the top priority around the world though some early results, particularly from the Oxford laboratories, do not appear to be as promising as first hoped. The initial forecast that it may well take a year or more to find an appropriate antidote which does not have serious side effects implies that we must get used to a modified way of living with the virus and accept to maintain our vigilance with the sanitary precautions currently in place.

Stay safe, staying inside.

*William Powles / IESF BS / 19.05.2020*

*NB : numbers & percentages quoted from sources given in the text*