

# Pandemic - As Covid cases in France surge, Macron's superman image is fading fast

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**The French president has imposed a national lockdown, but he still won't own up to his mistakes and broken promise.**

France is in a "race against time" against Covid-19, [Emmanuel Macron declared](#) in a television broadcast this week. In an attempt to curb France's soaring [Covid case numbers](#), Macron has imposed a national lockdown, extending to the entire country measures that were already in place in 19 *départements*. Although Macron insisted that France had not lost control, he admitted that "we cannot be in denial either".

The president may no longer be in denial, but the situation in some parts of France appears to be very much out of control. Daily Covid cases [have reached 59,000](#) compared with [the UK's 4,000](#), and hospitals are straining under the pressure; some doctors worry that they may soon need to start prioritising those who will have the greatest chance of [successful treatment](#).

The issue of intensive care bed capacity has been a thorn in Macron's side for the past year. In March 2020, the health minister promised to increase the number of beds [to 14,000](#). One year later, doctors and nurses are accusing the government of having largely broken its pledge. Most of these beds [never materialised](#), and France's hospitals appear unable to [cope with the challenges](#) of the pandemic.

Macron's admission of the scale and severity of France's Covid crisis signals a remarkable change of attitude. When he was interviewed in Greece on 24 March, he acknowledged that Europe had ["lacked ambition"](#) in its vaccination programme but reiterated that he saw no reason to commit France to a new national lockdown. Many have criticised Macron's opaque decision-making over Covid-19, contrasting his ["Jupiter"](#) leadership style with Angela Merkel's approach, a chancellor who has admitted her political errors and consulted with regional leaders.

Macron has decided against a full lockdown, instead opting for "softer" measures that are expected to remain in force for at least four weeks, including a ban on travel between regions and the closure of nonessential businesses. The country's 7pm to 6am curfew remains in place. People are still permitted to go out shopping or to exercise, so long as they remain within a 10km perimeter of their homes. They no longer have to download an [exceptional travel certificate](#), previously the bureaucratic way of monitoring the whereabouts of the population, after [critics argued](#) this self-certified system conferred arbitrary powers on the police.

As the country's public health situation deteriorates, some of Macron's stubborn pronouncements are coming back to haunt him. Last month the president said a [new lockdown](#) wasn't suited to France's situation and ignored scientists and doctors who had warned that tighter measures would be needed to [prevent a "third wave"](#). Epidemiologists now think Covid cases in France have been [increasing](#)

[exponentially](#) for at least a month.

The depiction of Macron as an indefatigable leader who has availed himself of the science on Covid-19 and become something of an expert on the subject – hasn't helped. His education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, said that Macron had “acquired real expertise” in epidemiology, while Richard Ferrand, the speaker of the national assembly, declared that he “could easily write a PhD dissertation [on Covid-19](#)”.

This level of sycophancy has in fact made people less likely to trust in Macron's strategy, and he has been ridiculed on Twitter as a would-be superman: an omniscient and almighty statesman who works wonders. As France's mounting Covid cases show, this image could not be further from reality.

Even when acknowledging the rapid rise in Covid cases in his televised announcement on Wednesday, Macron [made no Merkel-style apologies](#). He said the decision to delay a new lockdown meant French people had “gained precious weeks of liberty, weeks of learning for their children”, and had allowed “hundreds of thousand of workers to keep their head above water, without losing control of the epidemic”.

It was a bizarre and contentious point to make, and seemed to imply that the government's priority was not to protect public health, but to reopen the economy – come what may. Surprisingly, the government has not insisted on people [working from home](#) wherever possible. An estimated 36% of employees who could work from home continue to travel to [unsafe workplaces](#). Meanwhile, as schools across France [closed in droves](#) after large numbers of teachers and pupils contracted the virus, Blanquer, the education minister, provoked the anger of teachers when he declared the virus [hardly circulates at all](#) in classrooms.

Instead of fighting the virus, the French president has so far given the impression that it is better to coexist peacefully with it. He appears to believe that his words, reassurances, and apparent mastery of the science, should be sufficient to tame public opinion. This may prove a grave miscalculation.

One year before the next presidential election, Macron is concerned about the volatility of French public opinion. He is afraid that voters might turn to Marine Le Pen and the far right in great numbers. Yet his mismanagement of the pandemic, and misplaced ego, may be playing into Le Pen's hands.

**Philippe Marlière**

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- The Guardian. i 2 Apr 2021 15.04 BST:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/02/covid-cases-france-emmanuel-macron-french-president-lockdown-mistakes>

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