

# How the pandemic spiralled out of control in Switzerland

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **48 (2021)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051904>

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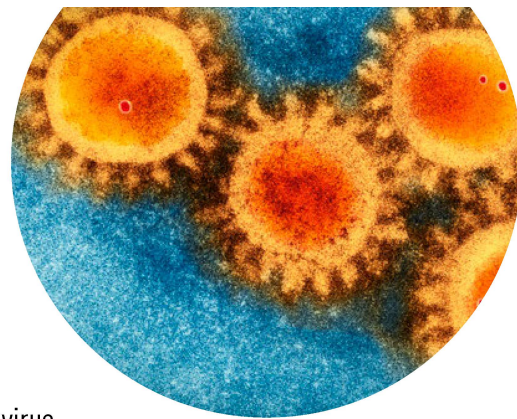
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# How the pandemic spiralled out of control in Switzerland

During the second Covid-19 wave, the Confederation and cantons long remained set on a middle course between shutting the economy and preventing the spread of the virus. They failed to bring the situation under control. An abnormally high number of elderly people died.



SUSANNE WENGER

The first people in Switzerland will have received the Covid-19 vaccine by the time this edition of “Swiss Review” is published in February – a key step towards curbing the pandemic. But as I write before the festive season, the situation looks bad. After surviving the first wave relatively unscathed, Switzerland has unexpectedly become one of Europe’s Covid hotspots in the second wave. Seldom has there been so much wrangling over what to do. This in Switzerland, where everything is meant to go like clockwork. How has it come to this? Time to reconstruct the events of recent months – in the knowledge that things will have changed again by the time we go to press.

The emergency powers allowing the Federal Council to make unilateral decisions ended in early summer and the onus switched back to the cantons, not the government, to manage the crisis. Responsible for healthcare within Switzerland’s federal framework, the cantons wanted to resume control given the sharp fall in infections. The Federal Council took a back seat – even as Covid-19 rates began to surge again in October. With the curve initially steeper in some regions than others, the consensus was that local cantonal measures were better than national ones.

## Switzerland going its “own way”

Infections rose dramatically, however, with daily new cases reaching a record of almost 10,000 at the start of November. The Federal Council intervened at the end of October, announcing nationwide restrictions, e.g. an extension to the rule on face coverings and a ban on public events of over 50 people. More significantly, it decided against the type of partial lockdown already introduced by French-speaking cantons with particularly high infection rates. Restaurants and shops were allowed to stay open, subject to limitations. Despite a comparatively high number of cases per 100,000 people, Switzerland’s response differed to that of neighbouring countries.

Health Minister Alain Berset (SP) said Switzerland was going its “own way”. The Federal Council wanted to protect

the population “without public life and the economy suffering unnecessary collateral damage”. Restaurant industry association GastroSuisse and the *economiesuisse* business federation signalled their relief. The authorities wanted to halve the number of cases every two weeks until Christmas – a strategy that worked initially as the curve dipped in November.

## Hospitals at breaking point

Yet Switzerland could not extricate itself from the danger zone, not least because German-speaking cantons did little to combat the pandemic – much to the Federal Council’s dismay. Our small country of 26 cantons and half-cantons ended up with a confusing, contradictory hotchpotch of restrictions. Fatigue set in among the general public. By the start of December, infections had flatlined at a high level or were beginning to increase again in nearly every canton. Hospitals and care homes were feeling the strain. Intensive-care units were filling up. A disproportionately high number of elderly people were dying of Covid-19, as the second wave left its tragic mark.

Despite a world-class healthcare system, Switzerland’s coronavirus mortality rate was high compared to other countries. The majority of victims were over 80, said Finance Minister Ueli Maurer during a radio interview in mid-November. According to Maurer, the government had had to “weigh the various implications”. In protest at what



Finance Minister  
Ueli Maurer –  
weighing the various  
implications



Health Minister  
Alain Berset –  
Switzerland going its  
“own way”



President of the Swiss  
Confederation  
Simonetta Sommaruga  
Photos: Keystone

they saw as indifference among policymakers and the public, activists in Berne lit candles outside parliament. By Christmas, the virus had claimed well over 6,000 lives.

## Warnings from experts

The more the situation escalated, the more heated the arguments became. Epidemiologists were now not alone in advising the government to do more. Economists also joined in, saying it was a false economy for shops and restaurants to remain open if customers were falling ill. After backing the Federal Council's decisions last spring, Swit-

ment; uncoordinated federalism; a failure to develop a preventive strategy against the second wave; the opinions of lobbies taking precedence over science; fear of the financial consequences of a lockdown – these were reasons used in Switzerland to explain the debacle. Surprise at the government's more relaxed approach to tackling the pandemic was expressed abroad. The World Health Organization slammed the country's response, while renowned US magazine "Foreign Policy" headlined with "Switzerland is choosing austerity over life". German news magazine "Der Spiegel" said Switzerland believed in its own invincibility – an attitude that had historical roots.



Cartoonist Felix Schaad on the sharp increase in deaths.

First published on 21 November 2020, [www.tagesanzeiger.ch](http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch)

zerland's political parties could no longer contain themselves during parliament's winter session. The SP and Greens called for stricter measures and a more generous financial package for beleaguered businesses, whereas the FDP and SVP opposed sweeping restrictions – ensuring Swiss ski resorts stayed open, as neighbouring countries were seeking a multilateral agreement to prohibit winter sports.

The media grew more critical of the government's "middle course". "Minimalism on Covid, and ski resorts to open over Christmas. Has Switzerland lost its moral compass?" asked online magazine "Republik". Even the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" noted it would be "fatal to wait". The newspaper generally agreed with Switzerland's liberal and regionally varied approach to fighting the pandemic. Yet it was a mistake in hindsight for the government and cantons not to act earlier against the rise in cases, commented the broadsheet.

The limits of individual responsibility in a highly contagious pandemic; Switzerland's sluggish system of govern-

ment; uncoordinated federalism; a failure to develop a preventive strategy against the second wave; the opinions of lobbies taking precedence over science; fear of the financial consequences of a lockdown – these were reasons used in Switzerland to explain the debacle. Surprise at the government's more relaxed approach to tackling the pandemic was expressed abroad. The World Health Organization slammed the country's response, while renowned US magazine "Foreign Policy" headlined with "Switzerland is choosing austerity over life". German news magazine "Der Spiegel" said Switzerland believed in its own invincibility – an attitude that had historical roots.

Pressure on the Federal Council was growing. In the middle of December, Switzerland's large hospitals sounded the alarm. The government then stepped in, introducing stricter nationwide rules. It instructed restaurants, sports venues, museums, and leisure facilities to close, and increased its compensation fund by 1.5 billion Swiss francs. "The rate of infection has to drop, this is imperative for the entire country," said the president of the Swiss Confederation, Simonetta Sommaruga. However, the measures lacked consistency in places and still fell short of those in other European countries. Shops remained open, as did Alpine ski resorts. Meanwhile, the World Economic Forum (WEF) announced that its annual gathering of political and business leaders in Davos would move to Singapore in 2021. Concerns about the spread of the virus in Switzerland had led the WEF to take this decision.

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