

More protests in France against COVID health pass

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Bar and restaurant owners protest against France's COVID-19 safety restrictions in Cambrai, France [Pascal Rossignol/Reuters]

Paris, August 8 (RHC)-- Tens of thousands of protesters have taken to the streets across France for the fourth weekend in a row against a coronavirus health pass needed to enter a café or travel on an intercity train, two days before the new rules come into force.

Championed by President Emmanuel Macron, the regulations make it obligatory to have either a full course of vaccination against COVID-19, a negative test or be recently recovered from the virus to enjoy

routine activities.

Macron, who faces re-election next year, hopes to encourage all French to be vaccinated against the disease and thereby defeat the virus and its fast-spreading Delta variant. However, opponents who have turned out en masse in the past weeks, argue the rules encroach on civil liberties in a country where individual freedom is prized.

Beginning Monday, the health pass will be needed to eat in a restaurant or enjoy a drink in a café both indoors and on a terrace. It will be obligatory on intercity transport, including high-speed trains and domestic flights, although will not be needed on metro systems and suburban transport.

The pass has already been required since July 21 to visit cultural venues such as cinemas, theatres and museums. Its extension was approved by France's Constitutional Council on Thursday.

In several protests in Paris, thousands marched from the western suburbs to the centre, chanting "Freedom!" and "Macron, we don't want your pass!".

At least 37,000 people protested in the Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur region on the Mediterranean coast in cities including Toulon, Nice and Marseille, officials said. Slogans included "the health pass means the death of freedoms."

The interior ministry said more than 200,000 people protested last weekend and more than 160,000 the weekend before. Police said they expect the numbers to decrease this weekend. Although many of the protesters are among those refusing to be vaccinated, some have taken the jabs but object to the principle of the health pass.

Journalist Anne-Elisabeth Moutet said people who took to the streets in France had different issues with the health pass. "There are fairly extreme right-wingers who are against vaccination. You also have left-wingers who are against the attempt to attack civil liberties," she told Al Jazeera.

Government spokesman Gabriel Attal said the pass, which under current rules will be required until November 15, was needed to avoid further restrictions as the country fights a fourth wave of the pandemic.

Macron, who is still at his official holiday residence in the south of France, has in recent days repeatedly taken to the social media platform TikTok, popular among young people, to get his message across.

"Get vaccinated. Get vaccinated. Get vaccinated," Macron said in the latest video on Friday. "It's a question of being a good citizen ... our freedom is worth nothing if we infect our friends, neighbours or grandparents. To be free is to be responsible."

Le Monde daily said Macron's decision to show no patience with the protesters carried risks, even for a leader who appears to thrive on confrontation as during the 2018-19 "yellow vest" protests. "It is a perilous strategy. Playing with the street is to play with fire," it said.

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