

Why the Virus Outbreak Is Severe in the Grand Est Region of France

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May 6, 2020 Updated: May 6, 2020

The Grand Est region was the epicenter of the CCP virus outbreak in France in March. At present, the number of patients in the intensive care unit has slightly dropped, but local hospitals are still worried about the possibility of a second wave of infection.

As of April 23, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) virus, commonly known as the novel coronavirus, has killed 3,770 people in Grand Est, according to the German newspaper Saarbrücker Zeitung. The number of infected patients was 5,479 as of March 25, according to Statista.

This region bordering Germany has reached the height of the epidemic, but doctors are concerned about France's plans to partially ease the lockdown.

The Grand Est region is among the worst-hit areas in France, with the health minister Olivier Véran describing

the situation as “tense,” especially around Mulhouse and Strasbourg.

Why Is the Outbreak Severe in the Grand Est?

A March 30 commentary by FranceSoir, titled, “Coronavirus: How the Epidemic Started in the Haut-Rhin,” identifies the factors that caused the virus’s spread in the region.

The article pointed out that Mulhouse has sister city relations with Bergamo in Italy and Jining in China, to promote cultural and commercial ties. Bergamo is in the Lombardy region, Italy’s epicenter of the outbreak. Jining is in China’s Shandong Province.

Many Chinese traveled abroad during the Chinese New Year holiday from Jan. 25 to Feb. 8.

Direct flights from France to China are rare. However, the Basel Mulhouse Freiburg airport offers nonstop flights to Jining, the article noted.

Colmar city in Grand Est has also become a very fashionable destination for Chinese tourists, according to

the article. Colmar identified its first virus patient in December.

Strategic Cooperation With Sichuan Province

“Sichuan is a strategic region, a good gateway to the Grand Est region,” said Jean Rottner, president of the regional council of Grand Est. He was also the mayor of Mulhouse from 2010 to 2017.

In May 2018, Rottner and a local delegation traveled to Sichuan, and signed an economic cooperation agreement between Grand Est and the Chinese province. “Health, agriculture and agrifood, industry of the future, tourism and gastronomy” were the four possible areas of cooperation highlighted by the Grand Est region, local newspaper L’hebdo du Vendredi reported.

The delegation did not mention China’s human rights abuses during the meeting, the report said.

Since 2011, Chengdu city, located in Sichuan Province, has emerged as an industrial giant with three main flagship sectors: electronics, aeronautics, and auto. A new rail link, that starts at Chengdu and ends at the Bettembourg freight

platform in Luxembourg, completed construction in October 2019.

Rottner also said he hopes to see a direct flight open between Chengdu and Mulhouse to promote tourism.

Before Grand Est, Sichuan had already signed a cultural cooperation agreement with Champagne-Ardenne in 2010.

According to a 2018 report by L'hebdo du Vendredi, about 60 French companies were already established in Sichuan in the fields of energy (Areva, Suez), transportation (Alstom, Air France-KLM), retail distribution (Carrefour, Auchan, Décathlon), technology (Ubisoft, Alcatel), and luxury goods (Moët Hennessy, Pernod Ricard). Axon' Cable, a leading manufacturer of custom cables, is based in Montmirail, and has a branch in Chengdu.

Under Rottner's tenure as mayor, the Grand Est region became friendly with the Chinese regime.

The close ties continued after his time as mayor. On Sept. 24, 2019, local officials hosted a grand ceremony in Strasbourg to celebrate China's National Day, the 70th anniversary of the founding of communist China. Officials from other regions also attended the event.

Embracing Huawei

In 2011, Huawei began cooperating with the Paris Institute of Technology (ParisTech) to launch the Seeds for the Future program in France. In 2013, Huawei extended this cooperation to six new universities, including ESIEE Paris, HEI Lille, INSA Rennes, INSA Toulouse, INSA Lyon, Ecole Centrale de Lyon, and Institut du Service Civique.

The United States, concerned that the Chinese regime could use Huawei equipment for espionage, has urged its European allies not to include Huawei equipment in next-generation 5G mobile networks.

In late January 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed two indictments against Huawei, its chief financial officer (CFO), Meng Wanzhou, and several of the company's subsidiaries, in a pair of legal cases accusing the company of violating U.S. sanctions against Iran, and stealing trade secrets from U.S. mobile carrier T-Mobile.

On Feb. 28, 2020, Huawei announced it would spend 200 million euros on a new 5G factory in France.

Politico reported in February, citing documents it obtained, that the Chinese firm was using investment to influence EU countries. Being the first of its kind in Europe, the Huawei factory in France would hire 500 people, and produce radio equipment in 4G and 5G communications for the entire European continent.

Politico reported that Huawei's executives courted French local lawmakers in the Alsace region in the months leading up to Huawei's announcement on Feb. 28.

French business magazine Challenges reported on March 3 that Huawei plans to build its new factory in Strasbourg. The Grand Est region "confirms these discussions" and qualifies the dossier as "priority," the report said. Bruno Le Maire, then France's Minister of the Economy and Finance, said that this announcement would "not change an iota" the government's position on 5G. "We have ongoing discussions with Huawei, this issue is a priority," said Lilla Merabet, vice president of the Grand Est region in charge of innovation and digital technology.

On March 12, France announced it would allow telecom operators to use part of Huawei's 5G equipment, but only on insensitive parts of the network, CNET France reported.

Did Chinese Tourists From Wuhan Spread the Virus?

Colmar is a town in Grand Est and is known as “Little Venice” with about 70,000 residents.

In June 2018, Chinese state-run broadcaster Hunan Television filmed its reality TV show “Chinese Restaurant” in Colmar for three weeks. The episodes were filmed at a local restaurant, the Bistrot des Lavandières.

Due to the TV show’s popularity in mainland China, many Chinese wanted to visit Colmar. “The Wuhan visa service notes that three travel agencies submit each week an average of a hundred visa applications for groups going specifically to visit Colmar,” said the consulate general of France in Wuhan.

Colmar saw the volume of Chinese overnight stays jump by 70 percent that year.

“We welcome nearly 4 million tourists to Colmar and we are aware of what you will be able to bring in more, thanks to your program [the ‘Chinese Restaurant’],” said Gilbert Meyer, mayor of Colmar, according to a report by French cable channel BFM TV.