Beating Covid-19: The problem with national lockdowns

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/03/26/beating-covid-19-the-problem-with-national-lockdowns/

Lockdowns have now become a fact of life for many countries across the world, but even if they succeed in halting the spread of Covid-19, are they sustainable? **Martin J. Bull** *argues that lockdowns pose major challenges for European countries and the approach pursued by South Korea may need to be explored as a long-term solution.*

Are 'authoritarian-style' lockdowns, involving the most significant restrictions on freedom of movement since the war and huge economic and social impact, the best way to tackle the coronavirus in democratic states?

What started in Italy (importing the idea from China) is now being followed across Europe. Yet, aside of the well-known, devastating impact of these measures, they also have deep political implications which are not pertinent in authoritarian regimes, where civil liberties are not of paramount concern to the State. The price that democracies pay in terms of sacrificing our freedoms is a high one.

In Italy, for example, a country with an authoritarian legacy, concerns have been raised about the extremity of measures which deny citizens even the right to 'fresh air' (which is accorded prisoners in normal times) and go against the principles of personal liberty and freedom of movement enshrined in the Constitution (even though these can, by the Constitution, be dispensed with on a temporary basis in emergencies).

And in the UK, the journalist Robert Peston, commenting on the coronavirus bill giving sweeping new powers to the State, tweeted, 'There has never in my lifetime been a law that so encroached on our civil liberties and basic rights as the Coronavirus Bill ... It is all aimed at keeping us safe. But the transfer of unchallengeable power to the state for two years is huge.'

Of course, the governmental justification for these lockdowns is about following 'the science' – and there are few who, at the point in time that these lockdowns are being imposed, would doubt their necessity (for an alternative view see Peter Hitchens). Yet, this policy is not without its flaws, the most evident of which is public compliance, since it proceeds on the assumption that heavy restrictions on freedom of movement and association are unproblematic in countries where they have been part of people's daily lives since the end of the Second World War.

Even in Italy, at the European forefront of the coronavirus crisis, where a shift in public awareness of the seriousness of the crisis occurred in the face of a rising number of cases and deaths, there were over 20,000 violations in the first four days of the national

lockdown, and violations have continued since – to the ire of many of Italy's regional Mayors.

Spain and France have similarly had to apply a rigorous police presence to enforce their lockdowns, and the UK has had to impose increasingly draconian restrictions on people partly because of the patent disregard of advice on social distancing by many people apparently intent on continuing with their normal lives. The lockdowns have also caused panic-buying and stockpiling of essentials, resulting in overcrowding at supermarkets and a new breeding ground for the virus.
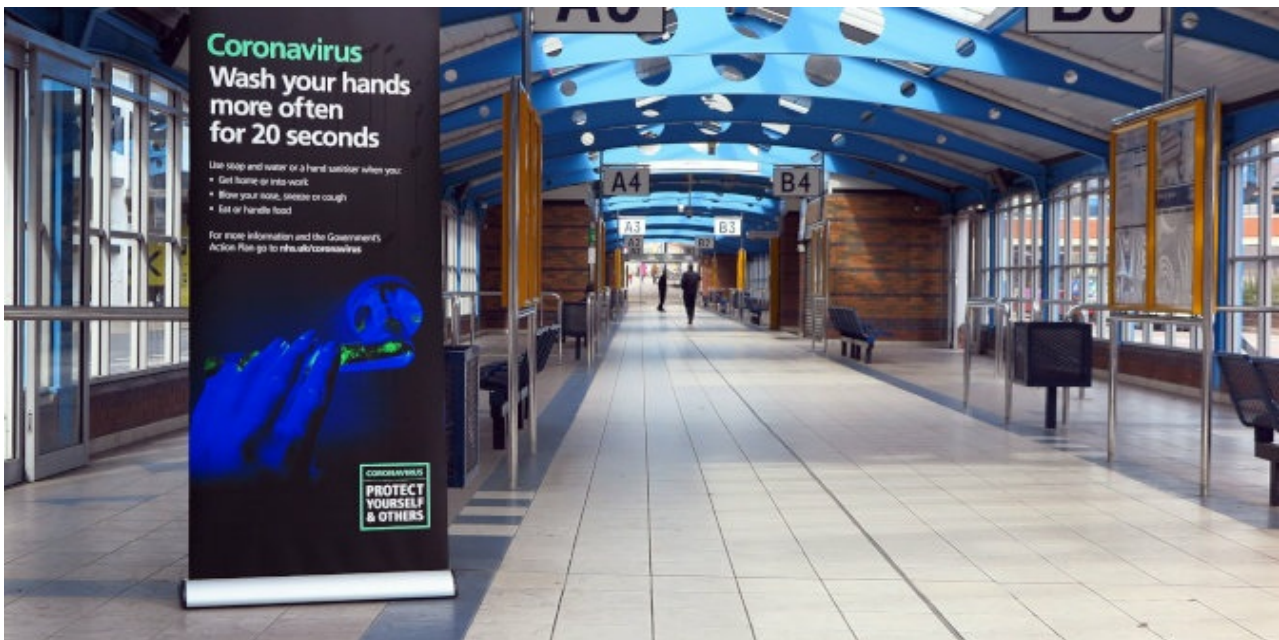
Credit: Tim Dennell (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Lockdowns also, paradoxically (in view of their aim to limit freedom of movement), generate significant mass movements of people responding to the measure itself. This first occurred in Italy when the government placed in lockdown a quarter of the population – the entire region of Lombardy and 14 neighbouring provinces – with the result that approximately 25,000 Italians quickly exited the area to reach that part of the country that was still 'free', many of them no doubt carrying the virus with them. This led the government to change policy within a day and impose a lockdown on the whole country.

But even a nation-wide lockdown does not disincentivise internal movement, especially when economic activity is compulsorily ceased and people's concern focuses on exiting high-risk areas where possible. France has witnessed thousands exiting Paris for the countryside. Italy has seen continual movement of people out of the so-called 'infected areas'. Indeed, the government's most recent draconian restrictions – which have ordered *all* economic activity to cease unless deemed essential by the government – were accompanied with the removal of "returning home" as a justification for one's movement, because of the fear that a huge number of employees in the north of the country no longer allowed to work would start heading back to their homes in the south.

Moreover, a national lockdown does not so much resolve the problem of movement as displace it to the international level, as soon as other countries begin contemplating the same thing, thus generating the movement of thousands of people trying to cross borders to get home or at least out of countries where restrictions are about to be applied, with pinch-points – airports, train stations, border checkpoints – experiencing the sort of mass crowding of people national governments have been trying to prevent.

Indeed, governments have ended up issuing advice to their citizens abroad (to repatriate) which has been in direct contradiction to the restrictions on movement imposed on their citizens already within their borders. This points up the absence of any real international coordination in the response to the coronavirus which might have reduced or quelled this mass movement of peoples across the globe. Nation-states have proceeded with their policies unilaterally, calling their citizens back home and locking their borders to deal with an enemy that knows no borders, and thereby unwittingly aiding that enemy's advance.

A final problem with national lockdowns is that, by their very nature, they have no 'exit' strategy: their 'containment' or 'mitigation' of the virus is effected through enforcing a change in public behaviour (with huge economic, social and political costs), which can help slow the spread as long as that change in behaviour continues to be enforced. National lockdowns are not therefore sustainable in the long-term either in terms of their effectiveness or their side-effects.

Is there another alternative to lockdowns? In terms of democratic states, South Korea stands out for *not* having gone down the route of territorial lockdowns and for avoiding severe restrictions on freedom of movement, while at the same time achieving a significant degree of success in controlling the spread of the virus and not generating panic-buying amongst its population.

This has been achieved through extraordinary levels of testing, especially to identify asymptomatic carriers, the quarantining of infected individuals, contact tracing and then further testing and other measures to control the spread, reinforced by the use of technology to track carriers and warn others of a 'Covid-19 patient' in their vicinity. This has allowed Koreans to continue, to a much greater extent than anywhere in Europe and North America, their everyday lives and economic activities.

The Korean health system has the capacity to test 15,000 people per day and has tested over a quarter of a million people since the beginning of the outbreak, meaning it has carried out 3,692 tests per million people (which contrasts, for example, with 5 tests per million in the United States). It is still experiencing further localised outbreaks of the virus, but these are dealt with rapidly using the same method.

The approach is based less on mitigating the spread of the virus through enforcing a change in public behaviour that is difficult to sustain over the long-term and has no natural endpoint, than on suppressing the virus whenever and wherever it appears

through rapid testing and isolation measures. That it works is <u>also evidenced</u> in an experiment conducted in a small Italian town which (albeit in a situation of lockdown) managed to reduce new coronavirus cases to zero through precisely this method.

However, this approach requires a capacity in European national health systems – in terms of equipment, resources and personnel – which they do not currently have, as <u>the data on testing across countries suggests</u>. In this absence, European democracies are resorting to the only viable form of state capacity they do possess: to mandate changes in public behaviour – and see where it takes them.

<u>Please read our comments policy before commenting</u>.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

_____

About the author

Martin J. Bull– *University of Salford*
Martin J. Bull is a Professor of Politics at the University of Salford.