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Local officials greet each other in Rome with an elbow bump. EPA/Angelo Carconi

Coronavirus: lessons from Italy on the difficulties of exiting lockdown

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Italy has been on the front line of the coronavirus pandemic since it exploded there in late February, and it was the first European country to impose lockdown on its citizens.

Now the peak of the pandemic has passed, with the total number of positive coronavirus cases in decline since April 21. The “R0” figure (infection rate) has been brought down to below 1. Intensive care beds are being freed up, and 50,000-60,000 coronavirus tests carried out per day.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, moreover, is coming out of the crisis with his reputation enhanced. Despite Italy having the third highest number of coronavirus cases in the world; the highest number of deaths save for the United States; a significant loss of medical personnel; and a veritable capacity crisis early on, Conte’s personal approval ratings are at an **unprecedented 71%**.

The far-right opposition League, although still the largest party in opinion polls, is disoriented. It has been left shouting largely redundant anti-immigration and anti-EU messages from the sidelines while its ratings decline.

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Yet Conte's real problems could be just about to begin. The economic impact of the continued lockdown is on a scale that has no precedents outside wartime. The projected figures for 2020 of the ministry of the economy, largely in line with those of the IMF, forecast big trouble ahead. GDP is projected to contract by 8% (against a pre-COVID predicted rise of 0.6%), the public deficit to rise from 2.2% to 10.4%, public debt to GDP to rise to an astronomical 155.7% (from a pre-COVID forecast of 135.2%) and the rate of unemployment to 11.6%. Forecasters estimate that 10 million Italians, a fifth of the total number of adults, will be thrown into poverty, unable to meet essential expenditure on food, medicines and a roof over their heads.



Conte dials in to a meeting of European leaders. EPA

The south of the country is predicted to be especially hard hit, which is ironic since the pandemic has hit mainly the north and especially the industrial heartlands of Lombardy. Cases have been far fewer in the south, yet regional leaders there are aware that it is the lockdown that has kept those numbers low and their fragile health systems intact. The northern regions, spurred on by the Confederation of Italian Industry, are leading calls to reopen the economy. The challenge for Conte is how to achieve this without provoking further spikes in COVID-19 cases.

Phase 2

Exiting "phase 1" (lockdown) and going into "phase 2" (living with the virus) will be gradual. Although some industries such as automobiles, components, clothing may be given special permission to start early, May 4 will mark the reopening of the manufacturing sector, including textiles, construction and wholesale commerce.

From May 4 people will be free to travel beyond their municipality for limited reasons and with a self-certification document, but not their region unless visiting a second home. Parks and gardens will reopen. Exercise with other people will be possible, but not team sports, recreational activities or sunbathing.

Bars and restaurants will be permitted to sell takeaways, if ordered online. Funerals will restart but will be limited to a maximum of 15 people. The wearing of masks will be compulsory inside public places, on public transport or wherever social distancing cannot be guaranteed. Public transport will be adjusted to carrying fewer people at any one time.


On May 18, it will be the turn of retail shopping, museums, libraries and cultural centres to reopen; and on June 1 bars, restaurants, hairdressers and wellness centres, as long as they all meet stringent requirements regarding regular disinfecting and social distancing.

Excluded from the list for now are schools, which are not expected to reopen before September; religious services (to the open fury of the Catholic church), cinemas, theatres and nightclubs.

Phase 2 will be accompanied by extensive testing and contact tracing of the virus, and restrictions will be quickly reimposed on a zonal basis if necessary.

The formulation of phase 2 has, inevitably, been a severe test for Conte. His government has been split between those advocating extreme caution in line with the scientific advice, and those wanting a more rapid reopening of the economy. There has been criticism of the lack of clarity in several of the measures.

This leaves Conte in a fragile position. However successful phase 2 works out in striking a balance between protecting public health and reopening the economy, there will, at some point, be a reckoning - and Conte could still find himself a scapegoat. For Conte is an independent technician, and politicians will be quick to abandon a man without a political party when it suits them.

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