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WORLD

As Italy Looks to Ease Coronavirus Lockdown, Doubts Persist About Its Readiness

South Korea, which was able to largely contain its outbreak, is seen as a model for Western countries



Italy, which has suffered one of the world's deadliest coronavirus outbreaks, will start unwinding its strict lockdown from May 4, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has said.

PHOTO: ANGELO CARCONI/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By *Margherita Stancati* in Rome and *Dasl Yoon* in Seoul

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As Italy prepares to phase out its lockdown, many Italians are looking forward to going to the gym, attending church and eating out with friends—the kinds of activities that have already resumed in South Korea, another country that had one of the first big coronavirus outbreaks.

But where South Korea has squeezed its daily new infections down to a low level, contagion is declining only slowly in Italy. A lack of preparations to stop infections from rising again after the lockdown is raising fears that Italy isn't ready to reopen.

“We can only think of entering a phase in which we coexist with the virus and resume normal activities when the epidemic is clearly under control,” says Filippo Anelli, the head of Italy's national doctors' association. “The country today isn't ready for this. The situation is not under control.”

The risk, Mr. Anelli says, is that “if we open up, after a month we'll have to shut down again.”

It is a scenario that worries governments across Europe that, like Italy, are phasing out lockdowns as infection rates slow and the economic cost of closure skyrockets. In Germany, where stores began to reopen this week, Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that infections could pick up again and the country is “walking on thin ice.”

Most European countries lag behind the Asian countries seen as pandemic-fighting models. South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and others have much-studied systems for testing, contact tracing and quarantining, as well as populations accustomed to masks and other precautions.

Yet even Singapore and Hong Kong have seen new infections rise this month, showing how difficult it is to suppress the virus. South Korean authorities are worried that infections could pick up again as guidelines—and people’s attitudes—relax.

That shows the scale of the challenge for most European countries and the U.S., which still need to implement many of the tools and rules experts say are needed to prevent a second wave of the pandemic.



A plexiglass separator is placed on a table in a restaurant in Rome.

PHOTO: FABIO FRUSTACI/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Italy, which has suffered one of the world’s deadliest coronavirus outbreaks, will start unwinding its strict lockdown from May 4, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has said, while cautioning that a rushed exit could trigger a new outbreak. Mr. Conte on Sunday detailed the government’s post-lockdown plans for the first time, saying stores and public venues like museums can reopen in mid-May and bars and restaurants in June. Funerals will soon resume, but not the celebration of Mass. Strict social distancing rules will continue to be enforced.

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South Korea has largely settled such issues. Last week, the government allowed places of worship, gyms and entertainment venues such as clubs to reopen, provided there is no crowding, people wear face masks and facilities keep records of those in attendance and monitor their health conditions, such as by taking their temperatures.

When Lee Young-ha went to the gym for the first time in weeks, she was required to sanitize her hands, take her temperature twice and exercise with a mask on.

“It makes me feel safe,” said Ms. Lee, a 25-year-old university student in South Korea.

South Korea relaxed its social-distancing rules after significantly bringing down the number of infections, with daily confirmed cases dropping from a peak of 909 in late February, to fewer than 20 in recent days. Italy, on the other hand, is still recording more than 2,000 new cases a day—an official number that leaves out many infected people who aren’t being tested.

South Korea was able to largely contain its outbreak without imposing a full lockdown on its population, relying instead on aggressive testing and contact-tracing policies.

Officials trace close contacts of infected people by accessing their personal information—mobile data, credit-card transactions and security footage—an automated process that takes less than 10 minutes. At-risk people are either told to get tested or to self-isolate. Everyone who is infected is either hospitalized or quarantined in makeshift hospitals under medical supervision.

But even in South Korea, health experts warn that new outbreaks could quickly flare up. In a sign South Koreans are eager to go back to normal life, restaurants and bars were crowded over the weekend. Unable to travel abroad, thousands of South Koreans are expected to flock to the resort island of Jeju during the coming public holidays, government officials said.

“People are beginning to feel relaxed, but we must remember the virus alert level is still at its highest,” said Ki Moran, a professor at the National Cancer Center who is advising the South Korean government on its Covid-19 response.

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Health experts say the only way for Italy and other European countries to transition from lockdowns to the next phase of the health emergency is to emulate South Korea's focus on extensive testing, contact-tracing and isolating people with the virus. But this requires quickly mobilizing resources that are often lacking in Italy.

“The real problem will be to have an effective monitoring system,” said Roberto Burioni, a virologist at Milan's San Raffaele hospital. “We need tools to be able to quickly identify clusters, and to quickly contain them when we do. And we need tracing because the alternative to tracing is lockdown.”

The Italian government is planning to ramp up testing—including by rolling out finger-prick antibody tests—and to quickly map close contacts of infected people through a mobile-phone app.

“There will be other clusters,” said Pierpaolo Sileri, Italy's deputy minister of health. “Quickly identifying cases will be central to containing the epidemic.”

But there are obstacles. As in other European countries, the use of the tracing app has become mired in controversy over privacy concerns, so Italy says its use will be voluntary.



A medical worker took a blood sample from a woman to test for Covid-19 at a converted gym in Lombardy on Tuesday.

PHOTO: FLAVIO LO SCALZO/REUTERS

Italy has only recently begun opening drive-through testing facilities, widely used in South Korea. In the northern region of Lombardy, the epicenter of Italy's outbreak, the health-care system is still so stretched that testing is mostly limited to people who are hospitalized.

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“We don’t know how many sick people we have or have had,” says Donatella Albini, a doctor and a local official in Brescia, one of the worst-hit cities in Lombardy. “I’m constantly thinking that there may be thousands of people who are virus carriers but don’t know it. We don’t know anything about what happens in people’s homes.”

Doctors in Lombardy are already concerned that too many people are moving about and spreading the virus, even under the lockdown. Many fear cases will multiply again as more of the population returns to work.

Mr. Sileri, the deputy health minister, said that will change and Italy will soon be able to test people faster. New social-distancing rules for workplaces and in public will be key to avoid a fresh surge in infections, he said.

“We can avoid peaks like the one we had,” said Mr. Sileri. “We are ready and we have more time to prepare.”

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