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Italy, Beset by Coronavirus, Sees Its Way of Life Under Threat

Worst outbreak outside Asia poses challenge to health system, economy and Italians' sense of well-being

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ROME—Italy, home of the biggest coronavirus outbreak outside Asia, is approaching a moment of truth: Can an easygoing Western society, where government has limited powers and people cherish their right to do as they want, [contain the epidemic](#) once it's raging?

[High-Speed Trains, International Flights: How the Coronavirus Spread](#)



Two weeks after Italy discovered its outbreak Feb. 20, total infections have gone from three to 3,858, behind only China and South Korea. Daily life here is under

restrictions that go further than those of any other Western nation, but that fall far short of China's drastic lockdowns.

All schools and universities across the country are suspended, public gatherings are tightly restricted, soccer stadiums and many churches are closed. The government is urging the elderly to stay home and everyone else to keep their distance. Two clusters of small towns are under quarantine. Flights to and from China are banned. Movement and travel remain otherwise free.

China put over 500 million people under full or partial lockdown, more than the population of the European Union. Italy has quarantined just over 50,000 people in two northern provinces, and some of them are saying *basta*.



The Milan Central Train Station, which usually hosts about 320,000 passengers a day, was virtually empty Thursday.

PHOTO: MAIRO CINQUETTI/ZUMA PRESS

Dalila Dossena is frustrated that her small town of Casalpusterlengo, southeast of Milan, ended up under quarantine. "They were maybe too heavy-handed in this

area, while they turned a blind eye elsewhere,” said the 29-year-old, who runs a local construction company with her father.

The town’s mayor and residents are lobbying the government to relax the two-week-old quarantine. “It’s not that I want to go out for a pizza,” Ms. Dossena said. “I need to go back to work.”

Italy’s virus outbreak continues to spread fast, with confirmed cases mounting by around 25% a day.

That should start to slow down in the coming days if the measures imposed two weeks ago are working, Italian officials say. Extra measures announced Wednesday, including [a nationwide school shutdown](#), suggest they aren’t confident.

Italy's cases since Feb. 24, by statusSource: Italian government

AdmittedtohospitalICUQuarantinedat homeRecoveredDeadFeb. 24March 201,0002,0003,0004,000

“This isn’t something that we can fight and defeat through decisions made only by state institutions,” Franco Locatelli, a senior official at Italy’s health ministry, said Thursday. “This is a challenge that involves all citizens of this country.”

Italy is a test case for other Western countries that are bracing themselves for an escalating epidemic. Public-health experts are widely pessimistic about containing the virus in Italy or other European countries, short of draconian restrictions on the population.

But the measures taken are already meeting with some pushback. Public pressure led the city Milan to relax a curfew on nightlife after only a few days last week. And many Italians are afraid that measures against the coronavirus [could hurt the country’s fragile economy](#), which is already on the cusp of recession.

The government’s hope is to at least slow down the epidemic, so as not to overwhelm the country’s health system. In Lombardy, the affluent region around Milan and the biggest locus of infections, hospitals are running out of intensive-care beds.

“At this rate, we won’t hold out for more than a week,” said Alessandro Vergallo, who heads Italy’s association of anesthesiologists and intensive-care doctors.



Test kits have been one of the main ways to determine if a patient has coronavirus, but results from throat-swab tests can be inaccurate. WSJ visited a lab in Singapore to see how the kits work and find out why there are questions over accuracy. Photo: Crystal Tai

Lombardy initially set aside 120 intensive-care beds for patients severely sick with Covid-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus. There were soon more than 200 such patients. The region scrambled to create some 200 extra beds in makeshift intensive-care wards and to hire more medical personnel.

Southeast of Milan, where 10 small towns are under quarantine, three hospitals now treat almost only Covid-19 patients, and more will follow. But the number of sick people is rising faster than Lombardy can improvise beds or buy breathing equipment.

More than 200 medical staff in Lombardy have caught the virus, comprising about 12% of all cases in the region. Army medics are helping out, and the region is bringing other doctors out of retirement.

The national government is considering moving patients from the hot-spot areas to hospitals elsewhere in Italy. This emergency step, usually reserved for natural disasters, is one that health-care authorities want to avoid as it risks spreading the virus further.



People enjoying a drink in the Caffè Lavena at Venice's St. Mark's Square, which has begun offering a free drink with every drink ordered during the aperitivo hour to draw customers. PHOTO: MANUEL SILVESTRI/REUTERS

“We are playing defense in this game,” says Roberto Burioni, a virologist in Milan, who is fast becoming a household name from explaining the epidemic on Italian television. “Right now the excess of intensive-care patients from the worst-affected areas can be absorbed elsewhere. But if other areas are also hit, where do we put them?”

The only solution lies outside the overburdened hospitals, says Dr. Vergallo. “We need drastic measures to limit social interactions.”

The epidemic took Italy by surprise. On Feb. 20, the only coronavirus patients in Italy were a couple of Chinese tourists in a Rome hospital and an Italian researcher evacuated from Wuhan, China.

But that evening, a 38-year-old man from a town southeast of Milan, who had never been to China, tested positive for the virus. So did others he had been in contact with, including his wife and some amateur soccer teammates. Army checkpoints sealed off much of his home province, but the virus had already spread elsewhere. Health authorities now believe it had been circulating in the area for weeks, undetected.

It might have happened in many other parts of Europe. But a region like Lombardy, Italy’s economic powerhouse, was a prime candidate.

Milan is one of Europe’s most globalized cities, a [hub for travel, business, finance and tourism](#). The surrounding provinces are its industrial hinterland, and its commuter belt. The international to-and-fro of daily life here has defeated all efforts so far to trace how the virus arrived in Italy.

Hopes that the outbreak could be contained in Lombardy and the neighboring Veneto region were also forlorn. Northern regions closed schools, museums, churches and other gathering places, but people carried the virus around Italy. A growing number of infections across Europe and even on other continents are linked to travelers from, or visitors to, Italy’s north.



Health-care workers inside an isolation area of the Amedeo di Savoia hospital in Turin, northern Italy, on March 5.

PHOTO: ALESSANDRO DI MARCO/SHUTTERSTOCK

On Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, one of Milan's busiest shopping streets, stores were almost empty Thursday. In the Disney Store, a boy and his father walked alone among rows of toys from "Star Wars" and "Frozen." The large Apple store just off the street also had far fewer visitors than usual.

Tourists are vanishing all over Italy.

Jonathan Piazza, a Rome-based entrepreneur who organizes Italian culinary tours and cooking courses for Israelis, has stopped working. All of his clients canceled when Israel barred flights from Italy.

"I'm making the most of this to spend time with my daughter," he said while taking the four-year-old for a stroll in the Ghetto, Rome's historic Jewish quarter. She isn't busy either, because the government closed her day care from Thursday.

Daniele Cantiano, who runs a cafe in central Rome with his mother, solved the child-care problem by taking his son Adriano to work. “This is not the ideal place for a child,” said Mr. Cantiano, making a cappuccino while the 5-year-old boy tugged at his pants.

Italy’s education shutdown brought home the seriousness of the situation to Mr. Cantiano’s family. “If it’s necessary to safeguard everyone’s health, then I think it was the right decision,” he said.

People are avoiding cafes to avoid other people, said his mother, Antonella Pantellini. It’s bad for business, but she said health comes first. “We need to be careful. Just in case, we are no longer giving hugs,” she said. “Are you still giving hugs?” she asked Adriano.

“Yes, to mommy!” he replied. “To mommy it’s OK,” she said.



A student studied alone Thursday at the library of the University Milano-Bicocca in Milan. Italy has closed all schools and universities until March 15.

PHOTO: PIERO CRUCIATTI/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Bans are affecting more and more of Italian life. The Catholic Church has suspended all Masses in much of northern Italy. “It pains the hearts of pastors, communities and all the faithful not to be able to celebrate Holy Mass together,” Archbishop Francesco Moraglia of Venice wrote to his diocese on March 1, but he called the measure an “act of civic responsibility.”

Bishops have said Masses will continue in other parts of the country, but churchgoers are supposed to stay at least one meter apart.

In the Vatican, Pope Francis has reduced his work schedule for the past week, holding private meetings but canceling speeches to large groups and skipping a retreat for Vatican officials. The pope said he has a cold. His spokesman said there were no “symptoms attributable to other pathologies.” The Vatican has declined to say whether the pope had been tested for the coronavirus.

On Sunday, all games in Italy’s professional soccer league will be held behind closed doors. Roberto Castelpietra, a dermatologist and avid fan of soccer giants AC Milan, said he would watch on TV. “No soccer fan is happy about seeing an empty stadium, but health comes first,” he said.

Patience is running thin in the quarantined town of Casalpusterlengo in Lombardy’s so-called red zone, where all businesses except for supermarkets and pharmacies are forcibly closed.

“We can put up with this situation for maybe another week,” Ms. Dossena said, hoping normal business will resume soon.

“That’s all we’re really asking for: normality.”

—*Eric Sylvers in Milan contributed to this article.*

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