

ITALY

ITALY, WORST-CASE SCENARIO?

To date, with Spain, Italy remains one of the worst affected countries in Europe – and in part the world even. This report aims to give an exhaustive overview on the chronology of the crisis as well as the political measures taken. Furthermore, it will give insights into the current situation of the health system, the country's own view on European Union funding and the possible economic outcome.

The first known cases were detected in January 2020. A Chinese couple were confirmed to be positive and were hospitalised, then declared cured at end of February. Due to their Wuhan origin and their travel route from Milan Malpensa Airport to Rome via different cities, the Italian government reacted end of January with the suspension of all flights from China to Italy. A state of emergency was declared on 31st January 2020.¹

The impact on Italy

As of April 29th, there had been, according to the [Ministero della Salute](#), around 203.500 positive cases since the beginning of the pandemic. Currently there are ca. 105.000 positively tested patients, 71.000 recovered and 27.000 deceased. According to the Ministry of Health and the [Istituto Superiore di Sanità](#), the demographic of patients lies around the age of 79 with the majority (ca. 66 %) of patients being male. More than two-thirds of patients

experience high temperature as well as shortness of breath or enhanced coughing. To date, the virus has spread unevenly across the country: the worst hit region is Lombardy with 57 % of the deceased, followed by Emilia-Romagna (13.7%), Piemonte (7.8%) and Veneto (4.7%). All of these regions are in Northern Italy. There are a few unproven theories about this situation. As explained later on, the first secondary infection was detected in a province of Lombardy, although precautionary actions were taken, the spread across Northern Italy was impossible to contain.

A chronology of political responses to the crisis – #IoRestoaCasa

The real patient zero in Italy is to this day unknown. It was impossible to follow the route of transmission. Nevertheless, the first case of secondary infection was verified in Codogno, a town in the province of Lodi in the region of Lombardy. Although the patients were identified around 18th February, the situation did not escalate until a week after. Lodi and the whole town of Codogno were declared *Zona Rossa*.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Italian Government has legislated the political responses via several *decreto del presidente del Consiglio dei ministri (Dpcm)*. These are decrees initiated (mostly) by the Giuseppe Conte, the current head of government, in his capacity as President of the Council of Ministers. Obviously, the prime minister does not decide the political actions alone. Not only does Giuseppe Conte work closely with a task force of experts (since the beginning of April), but also in cooperation with the *commissario straordinario per l'emergenza Covid-19* Domenico Arcuri, the head of the *dipartimento della Protezione Civile* (Civil Protection Department) Angelo Borrelli, the president of the *Istituto superiore di*

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https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/01/31/news/coronavirus_alle_10_il_consiglio_dei_ministri-247224494/

sanità (Italian National Institute of Health – ISS) Silvio Brusaferrò and of course the Ministry of Health, led by Roberto Speranza.

The first decree was implemented on February 23rd. This legislation was meant to contain the spread from the first hit municipalities in the regions of Lombardy and Veneto. The precautionary measures were mainly that residents of those municipalities were not allowed to leave those so-called red zones, nor were people from outside allowed to enter the cities. Within the following days, events of all sorts as well as school activities were suspended. The following decrees dated 28th February and 4th March only extended articles within the original first decree. Meanwhile the communication from Palazzo Chigi, the Prime Minister's seat, continued to dominate not only official channels like televised news, newspapers or their website but also via [Conte's Facebook](#) page. Regularly, the President of the Council of Ministers continued to give press conferences or official speeches on the latest developments.

The biggest change in measures followed with the [decree of March 8th](#). First, all northern regions were placed in lockdown. This led to a huge movement of people or commuters moving quickly from north to the south as they panicked, believing that they would not be able to reach their town of residence anymore. Hence, the government decided to extend the lockdown measures to the whole country. Whereas in the beginning most measures affected opening times of supermarkets, bars or restaurants (they had to close by 6pm), the new restrictions locked people in their houses.

More concretely this meant, that most commercial activities were suspended until April 3rd. That was supposed to be the date, when the then current decree would have to be renewed or – in a more positive way – a possible re-opening of the country

could be discussed. After 9th March, any form of gathering of people in public places was prohibited, sporting events and gatherings were prohibited. Furthermore, all commercial activities were closed except for pharmacies, supermarkets and other forms of food retailing.

The cluster regions Lombardy and Veneto stated that they wanted to implement even more restrictions as their regional territory was hit the hardest. As Italy does not have any form of federal structure, civil protection as well as emergency responses falls within the national government's competencies. However, health is financed by regional taxation, which then clashes at regional and national competency level. Nonetheless, Conte responded without hesitation that nationwide measures had to be respected but the regions were allowed to place further restrictions upon their citizens. In Lombardy, this meant for example that people had to wear masks outside of their private grounds, any sports activity outside was prohibited and grocery shopping was supposed to be reduced to once a week – possibly with only one person per household going out.

The next step of restrictions of movements followed with the decree of March 22nd. It implemented the prohibition of movements between municipalities by public or private means of transportation. The only valid grounds for exemption from these rules were urgent health reasons as well as occupational needs. In practice this meant, that citizens had to fill in a form as a means of a self-declaration. These forms, which also can be hand written, state the person's personal data, the reason for movement and a signature. These *autodichiarazioni* changed in the following weeks with every decree or regional ordinanza (order). At the same time, the local police or Guardia di Finanza observed citizens very closely in terms of the respect of the legal framework set out by the decrees. Those, who have

not followed the rules of confinement, face fines or even arrest.

In order to move more hind sighted, a few days the government implemented later the decree no. 19 of 25 March 2020 which provides that specific parts of the decrees combating the spread of COVID-19 can be extended, amended and repeated up to 30 days until the end of the state of emergency on 31st July. This has also meant, that all measures can be cancelled on equal terms. As a consequence, on April 1st, the decree 19/2020 was prolonged until April 13th, whereas on Good Friday G. Conte signed another decree to extend all measures until May 3rd. However, from April 14th, it stationery stores, bookstores and clothing stores for children and babies have been able to open together with activities in forestry and the lumber industry.

Economic impacts – #CuraItalia

With the beginning of the pandemic at the end of February, the Council of Ministers approved a new decree, which introduced urgent support measures for families, workers and businesses. Firstly, financial support was granted to families and businesses within the provinces of the red zones. This was amended on [March 17th \(decreto no. 70\)](#), to secure

- financing and other measures to strengthen the National Health System, Civil Protection and other public actors involved in the emergency;
- support for employment and workers for the protection of work and income;
- credit support for households and micro, small and medium-sized enterprises through the banking system and the use of the Central Guarantee Fund;
- suspension of payment obligations for taxes and contributions as well

as other fiscal obligations and tax incentives for workplace sanitation and compensation for employees who remain in service.

Regarding the possible increase in unemployment rates, the government created an emergency fund for the already existing *cassa integrazione*. Businesses, which had to suspend workers' activities employing short time working for example, are able to apply for funding for nine weeks. In addition, there is financial aid for self-employed people. They can rely on 600 € compensation on a monthly basis without taxation. Nevertheless, the country faces excruciating problems concerning unemployment rates and terrible losses in economic growth – most of which can be related to the failing tourism industry and service sectors this year. The estimated loss for the EU's third largest economy is around 3 to 5% of the GDP for the first two quarters of the year.

The Italian government mainly hoped for financial aid from the European Union in forms of so-called *Coronabonds*. So far, the Eurogroup has decided against this instrument as the EU is not ready politically and structurally to commit. The disappointment about this decision has meant that so far, the Italian Council of Ministers has said that it will refuse funding from the aid package. The Italian Economics Minister Misiani claimed that they would only accept aid in terms of short-time working as well as loans from the European Investment Bank – Italy says it intends to refuse funding or loans from the European Stability Mechanism. This might be due to the lack of trust in this mechanism after three recessions that Italy has suffered in the past decade. The refusal of certain types of funding goes hand in hand with an on-going narrative that the other countries of Europe and specifically the EU have abandoned Italy. A crucial crossroads lies ahead for the European community while right-wing voices are receiving more attention due to this new

polemic. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has however apologised twice for the late response to the Italian situation².

A crisis for the health sector

Besides the grave impact on Italy's economy, the health sector has been put under an immense pressure. The National Health Service in Italy offers universal health care regardless of income. It is regionally organised and funded and has suffered cuts in the latter over recent years. Besides the lack of funding, the real challenge has been to organise the medical response to an emerging crisis. The regionally organised health system clashed with crisis responses that were initiated and implemented nationally. An unfortunate example of failure was and is at this point in time, the city of Bergamo. Whereas most hospitals in Northern Italy – especially Lombardy – face collapse, the situation in Bergamo escalated rather quickly. The lack of intensive care beds, ventilators and PPE led to a highly deadly outcome. News reports were flooded with images of overcrowded emergency rooms, exhausted doctors and nurses and military vehicles trying to “manage” the growing body count. Rather slowly, the situation de-escalated after measures were taken to re-assign doctors within hospitals, increasing the number of intensive care places as well as doctors arriving from other countries to support the medical staff in crisis.

Re-opening the country, phase 2 - #andràtuttobene

With the country being in total lockdown for almost two months, the voices for a re-opening of the country are now getting

louder. The first information regarding the so-called “phase 2” emerged mid-April right before Easter – a holiday that had to be celebrated in self-isolation. The government initiated a task force, which is setting out a workplace safety protocol. The committee is evaluating *via* identification possible ways to revive different commercial and social sectors taking in account at the same time the requirements necessary for containment and prevention. These production sites, which are deemed to get a green light, will preferably open first. The question of whether school and university activities will open again before the end of the semester remains unanswered. Certainly, Italy will still have been the first country to have experienced COVID-19 and will probably and unfortunately have to deal with the consequences the longest.

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² Rai News

<http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/coronavirus-Von-der-Leyen-Ue-chiede-scusa-a-Italia-nostro-bilancio-sara-la-guida-della-ripresa-presidente-della-Commissione-europea-b6773f55-87b1-4341-a1dc-348536f03d2b.html>