

A warning to Europe? Italy's struggle to convince citizens of coronavirus crisis

Country's experience could offer lesson to European neighbours following a similar trajectory

Ordinarily, having an *aperitivo* in Venice's St Mark's Square would cost a small fortune. Not on 3 March, when bar owners offered a free drink for each one purchased in an attempt to attract custom as the city emptied out amid Italy's developing coronavirus outbreak. The offer was intended to last a month.

In Rome, restaurant touts jokingly invited people to try a "carbonavirus" as the tourists left in the capital went along with the relaxed vibe, choosing to carry on with their holiday rather than go home. That was during the first week of March. Business owners could hardly be blamed for worrying about the impact of coronavirus on their livelihoods, especially when leaders were giving confusing messages.

On 27 February, four days after 11 towns in the north were quarantined and when 17 people had died of the virus and 650 were infected, Nicola Zingaretti, the leader of the governing Democratic party, travelled to Milan, whose wider Lombardy region is the centre of the outbreak, for an aperitif with a group of students. "We must not change our habits," he wrote in a post on social media. "Our economy is stronger than fear: let's go out for an aperitivo, a coffee or to eat a pizza."

On the same day, Beppe Sala, the mayor of Milan, shared a video with the slogan "Milan does not stop." The clip contained images of people hugging each other, eating in restaurants, walking in parks and waiting at train stations. Nine days after his trip to the city, by which time the

death toll had risen to 233 and confirmed cases 5,883, Zingaretti announced he was suffering from the virus.

As Boris Johnson **gave his most explicit warning yet on Sunday** that the UK might face an Italian-style lockdown, Italy's experience – particularly the way people went about their business in the early days of the crisis – could serve as a warning to other European countries that appear to be following a similar infection trajectory.

Giuseppe Pantaleo, a social psychologist at Vita-Salute San Raffaele University in Milan, said: “At the beginning people were not really believing what was happening so politicians like Zingaretti and others just wanted to reassure the population. He went to Milan to demonstrate some forms of social behaviour were still safe and that the government was working towards a solution and so on, but he of course underestimated the risk.”

Medics also clashed, with some taking the virus seriously and others writing it off as only a bit more serious than flu.

As the virus spread, the public turned to humour, with memes and videos shared across social media, including one of an Italian grandmother giving advice about hand-washing. Another featured mobsters hatching a plan to smuggle Amuchina, the Italian-made hand sanitiser enjoying a boom in sales, instead of cocaine.

“Either within their social groups or on social media, people reacted with jokes and irony,” said Pantaleo. “Laughing is a very common reaction that people have when they're confronted with the idea of death. But of course, in those early days nobody saw it as a serious possibility.”

Kissing on the cheek and hugging were banned, and social distancing advised. However, in another foreshadowing of the UK's situation, people were still out and about, frequenting bars, restaurants, parks and beaches. With no school or university, teenagers and students took the opportunity to socialise more with friends.

For the most part, life carried on as normal until **an abrupt change on 8 March**, when deaths from Covid-19 leapt by more than 50%. The prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, ordered the whole of Lombardy and 14 other provinces across other badly affected northern regions to be

quarantined. The news of the quarantine was leaked to the Italian press a few hours before an official announcement, provoking thousands of people of southern origin to flee home from the north. A national lockdown came on 10 March but the measures only really started to hit home a couple of days later, when bars, restaurants and other non-essential shops were closed across the country. Conte's tone became clearer and more direct but also more humbling. He thanked Italians for the "great sacrifices" they were making for the common good, while repeating his call for people to stay at home.

Sara Raginelli, a psychologist in Ancona, in the Marche region, said: "The moment the politics changed and started to speak in a more clear and direct way, people's behaviour also changed and people developed more of an attitude of awareness. "The moment Italians were told to stay at home and rigid containment measures were introduced, the majority of the population complied."

Still, as the lockdown set in, over the course of a week police charged more than 40,000 citizens for flouting the quarantine rules, which stipulate that people can venture out only if strictly necessary, such as for work, health-related reasons or to go to the supermarket. Police have increased checks in recent days and troops are patrolling streets in Naples and Sicily. Perhaps misunderstanding the rules, people took the opportunity to go jogging or walk in the park, leading to all parks being closed on Saturday. People can still exercise outside as long as they stay close to home.

After another steep rise in the death toll on Saturday night to 4,825, Conte made another dramatic speech while announcing all businesses, apart from those supplying **essential goods and services, must close**.

"It is the most difficult crisis of our postwar period," he said.

The latest move is expected to drill home the severity of the virus even more.

Pantaleo said: "Now that we are really in touch with the possibility of dying – either ourselves, a family member or friend, we take it seriously and are increasingly motivated to behave in accordance with the social norms.

"So the example set by institutions is very important because if the norms are clear and group leaders stick to them, then we will follow.

We will also see our self-esteem increase as we act together towards a common goal, contributing even by keeping as calm as possible at home.”

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Mon 23 Mar 2020 0