

Italy 'bucks trend' by easing Covid rules

29 January 2021, by Alvisè Armellini



A cordoned-off bar terrace in Trieste on January 19

Italy on Friday opted to ease coronavirus restrictions in most of its regions, despite warnings from public health experts that such a move may be rash.

A source in the health ministry said all but five of Italy's regions would now be considered "yellow", according to a colour-coded system of yellow, orange and red that indicates coronavirus risk.

A "yellow" zone allows for the daytime reopening of bars and restaurants and greater freedom to travel.

Italy's islands of Sicily and Sardinia, as well as its regions of Umbria, Puglia and the autonomous province of South Tyrol will be considered "orange", the source said.

The changes come as other countries in Europe are mulling hardening restrictions.

The World Health Organization's European branch warned on Thursday that it was "too early to ease up" due to a "still very high" presence of the virus.

"Yes, Italy is bucking the trend," said Walter

Ricciardi, a public health expert who advises Italy's health minister on the pandemic.

He told AFP lockdown measures adopted in Italy over Christmas and New Year helped stabilise virus numbers, without lowering them.

Nevertheless, "right now it is extremely difficult to propose stricter measures due to resistance from both politicians and public opinion", Ricciardi said.

France meanwhile is looking at a possible third lockdown, with President Emmanuel Macron expected to make an announcement on new measures over the weekend or on Monday.



108-year-old Fatima Negrini recently became one of the oldest people in the world to get a Covid-19 vaccine in Milan

'This is war'

Italy was one of the first countries to have been hit by the coronavirus, with devastating consequences. Nearly 88,000 people have died, and the economy has plunged into a record recession.

Even if politically unpalatable, Ricciardi said the country would benefit from a "brief stiffening" of

virus rules, as well as more centralised decision-making on the pandemic.

According to GIMBE, an independent think tank, Italy had 799 virus cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the January 20-26 period.

Until that number is brought to below 50 cases, it would be impossible to ensure effective virus test and tracing procedures, Ricciardi warned.

He also suggested that Italy's largely decentralised response to the pandemic—with regions left in charge of vaccinations, with mixed results—needed fixing.

"We need a clearer chain of command... a decisive step-change in management with a government fully in charge, ready to centralise decisions in its hands," Ricciardi said.

Politicians are currently preoccupied with the government crisis triggered by this week's resignation of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. His cabinet remains in charge, but only in a caretaker function.

"This is a war ... and if we were to compare it to World War II, we are not in 1945, but in 1941," Ricciardi said, warning that victory was still far off, and that the political crisis needed to be solved quickly.

"If we don't have a government with full powers... it is clear that the situation in Italy risks becoming even more critical," he added.

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