

Lockdown can wait: Sweden goes its own way

March 24 2020

While most of Europe is firmly locked down in a bid to curb the spread of COVID-19, Sweden is taking a softer line, keeping primary schools, restaurants and bars open and even encouraging people to go outside for a nip of air.

This stands in stark contrast to the urgent tone elsewhere and has sparked heated debate whether Sweden is really doing the right thing.

"We cannot allow the human desperation in Wuhan and Bergamo to be repeated in Sweden. That would be a gamble that violates society's most fundamental principle: that every person has an inherent value," the editor-in-chief of Sweden's biggest newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, wrote on Sunday, calling for either tougher measures or more widespread [coronavirus](#) testing.

'Take responsibility'

Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, in a televised speech on Sunday, urged people to "take responsibility" and follow the government's recommendations.

Those include working from home if you can, staying home if you feel sick, practice social distancing, and stay home if you belong to a [risk group](#) or are over the age of 70.

Gatherings of more than 500 people have been banned—compared to more than two people in Britain and Germany—and the government has

advised [secondary schools](#) and universities to close their facilities and conduct classes online.

On Tuesday, the government announced that restaurants and bars would only be allowed to provide table service to avoid crowding but stopped short of actually closing them.

Health authorities also urged people to reconsider trips to visit relatives over Easter.

But for many, life is carrying on close to normal.

Bars and restaurants were full at the weekend, and Stockholm's city buses have been jam-packed at rush hour despite the social distancing recommendations.

In contrast, neighbouring Norway two weeks ago rolled out the "most intrusive measures" seen in peacetime, including banning sports and cultural events, and shutting down schools and businesses.

Sweden's parliament has so far simply fast-tracked a bill allowing for the closure of primary and pre-schools—if deemed necessary.

However, in line with the rest with the rest of the European Union, Sweden has shut its borders to non-necessary travel.

Experts rule

Grilled by media about their apparently relaxed response to the pandemic, Swedish politicians respond that the government will take its cue from experts at the country's Public Health Agency.

The agency has yet to call for stricter measures, arguing that the elderly

should stay home, not children.

"As soon as the Public Health Agency requests that the government make a decision, we will do it this quickly," Health Minister Lena Hallengren, snapping her fingers, said earlier this month.

But not everybody shares the government's faith in the agency, with some accusing it of putting lives at risk.

This has led to a stream of vitriol on social media directed at the agency and its main spokesperson, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell.

The amount of hateful comments became so overwhelming that the agency's director, Johan Carlson, felt compelled to defend Tegnell, saying: "I think it's close to unworthy, what he has been subjected to".

'Sit on a park bench'

The mounting pressure has not changed the authorities' stance that draconian measures are not effective enough to justify their impact on society.

On Monday, Sweden's former state epidemiologist and current advisor to the World Health Organization (WHO), Johan Giesecke, encouraged Swedes to go out and enjoy the spring sun.

"Bring a friend and walk a metre apart. Don't hug your neighbour. Bring a thermos and sit on a park bench. It's bad for your health to sit at home too," Giesecke told broadcaster SVT's morning show.

Right or wrong, Sweden does not seem to have a worse virus problem than its neighbours, according to the numbers of declared cases.

On Tuesday, Sweden reported 2,272 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus, while Norway and Denmark—which each have around half the population of Sweden—reported 2,566 and 1,577 cases, respectively.

All Scandinavian countries are however believed to have a big number of unknown cases as testing is only being done on patients with severe symptoms.

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Citation: Lockdown can wait: Sweden goes its own way (2020, March 24) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-lockdown-sweden.html>

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