

Sweden rejects accusations of lack of coronavirus action

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Sweden has got broad media attention for its soft approach to the new coronavirus outbreak, but it strongly rejects the idea that life is carrying on uninterrupted as the country passes 6,000 confirmed cases.

A cradle-to-grave welfare state with strong social protection, Sweden has in recent weeks been accused by some, both internationally and domestically, of risking the lives of its citizens by not taking more stringent measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.

"No, it's not business as usual in Sweden," Health Minister Lena Hallengren told international media outlets this week.

Sweden has not ordered a lockdown, instead issuing recommendations and calling on citizens to "each take responsibility" and follow the guidelines.

Hallengren, who together with Deputy Prime Minister Isabella Lovin and Foreign Minister Ann Linde held a special briefing for international media, stressed that the Nordic country had introduced a string of measures and was ready to do more if needed.

People over the age of 70 and in risk groups have been strongly encouraged to avoid contact with other people, and higher education institutions have been advised to conduct classes remotely.

Economic measures have been adopted to make [sick leave](#) less costly, and people have been repeatedly asked to work from home and self-isolate at the slightest symptom of the new coronavirus.

Among the stricter measures are bans on gatherings of more than 50 people and on visits to nursing homes.

The ministers stressed the recommendations were having a noticeable effect.

They estimated that about 70 percent fewer people were moving about the city centre, and one-third of Stockholmers were now working from

home.

But in stark contrast to much of Europe and its Nordic neighbours, restaurants and primary schools remain open. And even though the streets of Stockholm - the epicentre of Sweden's outbreak - are less bustling than usual, it's far from a ghost town.

'Russian roulette'

"Everyone is responsible for their own well-being, for their neighbours and their own local community. This applies in a normal situation, and it applies in a crisis situation," Linde said, stressing that [public trust](#) was a key element of Sweden's strategy.

So far the approach seems to resonate with voters.

A poll published earlier this week by analyst firm Novus showed that faith in the government was significantly up in March, with 44 percent of respondents saying they had a lot or a great amount of trust in Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, up from 26 percent in February.

However, not all are fans of the Swedish approach.

Marcus Carlsson, a mathematician at Lund University, went so far as to accuse Sweden of playing "Russian roulette with the Swedish population," in a video posted to YouTube and cited by The Guardian among others.

And a study published last week in the medical journal The Lancet, titled "COVID-19: Learning from Experience," said that the "initial slow response in countries such as the UK, the USA, and Sweden now looks increasingly poorly judged."

As of Friday, Sweden had reported 6,078 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus, with 333 deaths.

On Wednesday, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell at the country's Public Health Agency said that while Sweden had observed a relatively flat curve for several weeks, it was now seeing "a fairly steep curve".

Healthcare services have reported shortages in equipment, but they have so far not been overrun like in Italy and Spain.

However, Stockholm plans to open its first field hospital this weekend amid a sharp rise in cases in the capital.

Public broadcaster Swedish Radio also reported on Thursday that a third of the country's municipalities had confirmed or suspected cases of the new [coronavirus](#) in elderly care facilities.

Trust being questioned

Speaking to AFP, Foreign Minister Ann Linde conceded that she did receive a lot of questions from foreign counterparts about Sweden's response, but said this was in part because of disinformation.

Linde said her government had "the same goal as every other government," the main difference being that most of Sweden's measures were not legally binding.

According to Linde, this can partly be explained by Sweden's tradition of ministries taking their cue from expert authorities, and that citizens typically have high a level of trust in politicians and authorities.

"But politicians and authorities also trust people to take responsibility," she said.

However, as cases have increased, that trust in authorities is being questioned.

Last week, a group of 14 scientists wrote an op-ed in newspaper Dagens Nyheter asking the Public Health Agency for more transparency, questioning why Sweden had stayed its course when others, like the UK, followed the rest of Europe with tougher measures.

"Different countries have different conditions, but we struggle to see why the Swedish context is so different from the British," they wrote.

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