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Risk and Reality: Italy Today

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Risk and Reality: Italy Today

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The novel coronavirus struck Italy fast and hard, yet signs of recovery have emerged. Northern Italy was especially vulnerable as it was the source of the virus spread, and 49% of Italian deaths are registered in the Lombardy region. The rapid spread led Italy into total lockdown to halt the spread of the virus. On the other hand, today, Italy has stabilized its daily cases and resumed travel with its European Union member states. Resuming travel and business is crucial for the Italian economy and everyday optimism of citizens. As more time passes and data is gathered, we have a better idea of how coronavirus spreads and who is most affected. Healthy Czechs are now able to calculate their own risk and travel to Italy without further fear.

Italy had a high death toll because of its older population and the unknown associated with coronavirus at the start of the outbreak. The first positive case in Italy was recorded on January 30th; Italy had limited information and time as the first Western nation to be infected.¹ For example, the World Health Organization announced the coronavirus as a pandemic on March 11, after it had spread throughout Europe with conflicting reports.² Moreover, Italy has an older, vitamin D deficient population that was further endangered. Italy has the highest median age in all of Europe with 23.01% of its population over 65 years old.³ The elderly are more vulnerable due to pre-existing medical conditions and low vitamin levels. Research by Petre Cristian Ilie, Simina Stefanescu, and Lee Smith found that “Vitamin D levels are severely low in the aging population especially in Spain, Italy and Switzerland. This is also the most vulnerable group of population for COVID-19”.⁴ The study found correlation in the mortality and vitamin D levels and stated, “The most vulnerable group of population for COVID-19 is also the one that has the most deficit in Vitamin D”.⁵ Vitamin D deficiency is more common in the elderly and during the winter months; notably, lack of Vitamin D leads to a weakened immune system.⁶ This along with the elderly population and no former experience with the virus led to an explosion of cases and corresponding fatalities in northern Italy. Data collected from Italian deaths can assist Czech travelers in deciding if the virus poses a threat to them.

Czech travelers should understand the chance of becoming infected abroad and make sure they are not in a risk category before traveling. Most Czechs are exposed to the same levels of risk in the Czech Republic in comparison to travelers becoming infected abroad.

¹ Chiara Severgnini, “Coronavirus, first two cases in Italy “They are two Chinese on vacation in Rome” They arrived in Milan on 23 January,” *Corriere della Sera*, 31 January, 2020, https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_gennaio_30/coronavirus-italia-corona-9d6dc436-4343-11ea-bdc8-faf1f56f19b7.shtml.

² “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic,” World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>.

³ “Age Distribution of the Population in Italy from 2002 to 2020,” Istat, February 2020, Statistica, [https://www.statista.com/statistics/270473/age-distribution-in-italy/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20depicts%20the%20age,over%2065%20years%20of%20age](https://www.statista.com/statistics/270473/age-distribution-in-italy/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20depicts%20the%20age,over%2065%20years%20of%20age;) ;

“Population structure and ageing,” Eurostat Statistics Explained, 21 July, 202

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_structure_and_ageing#Median_age_is_highest_in_Italy.

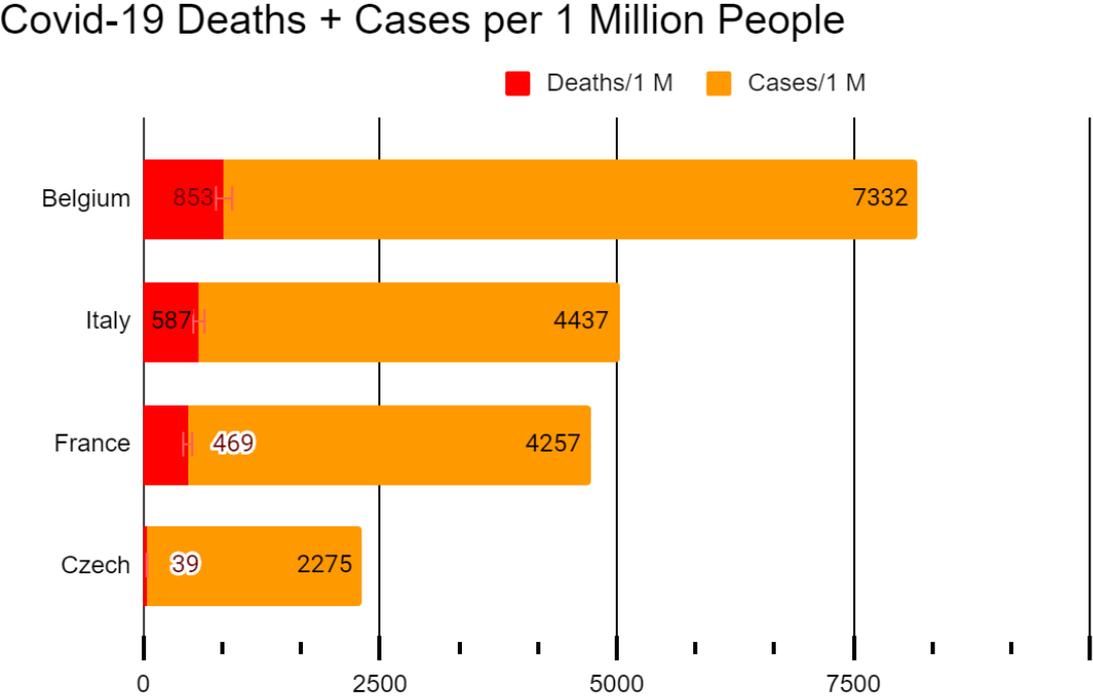
⁴ Petre Cristian Ilie, Simina Stefanescu, Lee Smith et al., “The role of Vitamin D in the prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 infection and mortality,” 08 April 2020, PREPRINT, Research Square + <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-21211/v1+>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hans K. Biesalski, “Vitamin D Deficiency and Co-morbidities in COVID-19 Patients – A fatal Relationship?,” *Nfs Journal* vol. 20 (2020): 10–21, doi:10.1016/j.nfs.2020.06.001.

Renata Povolná from the Czech Ministry of Health reported that only 52 of the weekly 1,754 new coronavirus cases were caught by Czechs abroad (with 24 out of the 52 from Croatia).⁷ Czechs have similar levels of virus exposure in the Czech Republic as in the surrounding countries. Even though less Czechs are travelling in contrast to those remaining in the Czech Republic, only 3% of new coronavirus cases are infected outside the Czech Republic. Subsequently, research done from deaths in Italy can aid in understanding what illnesses lead to a higher risk. Data collected by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità reported the characteristics of 3,952 Italian, in-hospital coronavirus deaths. The following list contains the seven most common pre-existing conditions and patient percentage respectively: hypertension (66%), Type 2-Diabetes (29.8%), Ischemic heart disease (27.6%), Atrial Fibrillation (23.1%), Chronic renal failure (20.2%), Dementia (19.1%), and COPD (17.1%).⁸ Additionally, a total of 389 people died – or 1.1% – under the age of 49 years old out of 34,142 deaths.⁹ The numbers show there is a dire risk for elderly with pre-existing conditions; while on the other hand, a minute risk for younger, healthy people.

Figure 1: Coronavirus cases and death per million



Source: Worldometer Coronavirus Cases as of August 31, 2020.¹⁰

Exposure to the coronavirus is common in the Czech Republic as well. The Czech Republic has a much smaller total number of coronavirus cases than Italy, but a closer rise in daily cases. Italy has 4,437 cases per million people and 587 deaths per million, while the Czech Republic

⁷ “Za poslední týden bylo zjištěno 52 případů nakažených covidem v zahraničí, 24 z nich v Chorvatsku,” Lidovky.cz, 5 August 2020, https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/za-posledni-tyden-bylo-zjisteno-52-pripadu-nakazenych-covidem-v-zahranici-24-z-nich-v-chorvatsku.A200805_201654_in_domov_ele.

⁸ “Characteristics of SARS-CoV-2 patients dying in Italy,” SARS-CoV-2 Surveillance Group, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 22 July 2020, https://www.epicentro.iss.it/en/coronavirus/bollettino/Report-COVID-2019_22_July_2020.pdf.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic,” Worldometer, updated 11 August, 2020 <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

has 2,275 cases per million and 39 deaths per million.¹¹ This means Italy has 1.95 more cases per capita and 15.05 times more death per capita than Czech. However, the number of new cases is closer to the Czech total. Compared with the August seven day moving average, the Czech Republic has had a range of 201-349 new cases per day to Italy's August range of 274-1,267 seven-day average.¹² These numbers are not that far apart considering the Italian population's much larger size and the acceleration Italy has seen this month. Italy had a 371 case seven-day moving average on August 10 but had a 1,267 average on August 31.¹³ This data shows that Italy and the Czech Republic were adding near the same range of cases a day in early August, but Italy has seen a larger increase the second half of August. Significantly, the stable number of new cases illustrates the progress Italy has made with containing the coronavirus spread.

With stable case numbers, Italy has removed the lockdown and loosened restrictions. Travel to Italy is open for tourism from EU and Schengen member states. Anyone traveling to Italy must complete a self-declaration form with his or her personal information concerning citizenship, method of travel, destination, previous countries of stay, recognition of government regulations, and not testing positive coronavirus.¹⁴ The Italian questionnaire form can be found online.¹⁵

Furthermore, masks are still mandatory in Italy on public transportation and "in any case on all occasions when the maintenance of a safe distance cannot be guaranteed."¹⁶ Italy has made significant improvement to the coronavirus crisis but has a lot of ground to cover economically.

Economically, Italy took a massive hit because of the lockdown. Italy is number eight in the world for GDP production; however, Italy has had a -15.4% GDP growth per capita since 2008.¹⁷ The negative GDP per capita shows there are underlying problems with the population in proportion to the national economy as a whole. The Centro Studi Confindustria predicts unemployment will reach 11.1% this year.¹⁸ In addition to higher unemployment, the Bank of Italy reports a -5.4% GDP contraction for the Q1 of 2020 and a -12.4% for Q2.¹⁹ These GDP contractions are currently taking place all over the world in similar percentages. To combat the economic ramifications of the lockdown, Italy passed the third aid package

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Italian Nationals Returning to Italy and Foreigners in Italy," Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, August 7, 2020,

<https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/ministero/normativaonline/decreto-iorestoacasa-domande-frequenti/focus-cittadini-italiani-in-rientro-dall-estero-e-cittadini-stranieri-in-italia.html>.

¹⁵ "SELF-DECLARATION FORM JUSTIFYING TRAVEL IN ITALY OF PERSONS ARRIVING FROM ABROAD,"

https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/08/modulo_rientro_da_estero_6_agosto_eng.pdf.

¹⁶ "FAQ - Covid-19, Questions and Answers," Directorate-General for Preventive Healthcare, Ministry of Health, August 5, 2020,

<http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioFaqNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=english&id=230#6>.

¹⁷ "Italy," Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/ita>.

¹⁸ "PREVISIONI ITALIA: FATICOSA RISALITA DOPO IL CROLLO, INVESTIMENTI ED EXPORT SOFFRONO PIÙ DEI CONSUMI," Centro Studi Confindustria, May 2020, <https://www.confindustria.it/home/centro-studi/temi-di-ricerca/congiuntura-e-previsioni/tutti/dettaglio/congiuntura-flash-maggio-2020>.

¹⁹ *The Italian Economic in Brief, No. 6 - August 2020*, Directorate General for Economics, Statistics, and Research, Banca d'Italia, Eurosystem, 11 August 2020, 2 https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/economia-italiana-in-breve/2020/EIB_11_Agosto_2020_en.pdf?language_id=1.

of 25 billion euros this month.²⁰ Italy also received financial aid from the EU. The European Commission passed a deal of 7.6 billion euros in tax breaks to help Italian companies and workers in March.²¹ This aid should provide some temporary relief for Italians since the coronavirus lockdown.

The financial aid to counter the price of lockdown will cost the Italians in the form of debt. The Italian gross public debt is already 155.7% of their national GDP.²² This means for every euro Italy produces, the country accumulates another euro and half in debt. Italy's debt is well above Germany, France, and Spain and the Euro area average of 102.7% for 2020.²³ On a positive note, Italian have a lower debt to household income than the European average of over 90%.²⁴ This problem is not just Italian based; massive deficit spending and debt accumulation is common and interconnected in most of the world. Because of the relief packages, Italians are receiving temporary relief. On the other hand, government funded debt is paid through future taxation or a deadlier, hidden taxation—inflation. The coronavirus will have economic effects for decades to come that will surely make life difficult for average citizens.

To conclude, a lot has been learned from Italy since the first cases were recorded. The Italian elderly population were most vulnerable to the coronavirus, and the government took extreme measures to halt the spread of the virus. While the virus is still present, the number of new cases are closer to the Czech Republic and travel has resumed. Czech travelers can determine their individual risk of coronavirus, vacation in Italy, and help bring back economic activity.



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Benjamin Rutledge is a Czech-American from Mississippi, USA. Following high school graduation, he was appointed to three military service academies and chose the United States Naval Academy.

Later he moved to Prague to continue his bachelors in International Relations at Anglo American University, where he is on the Student Council. In his free time he enjoys soccer, languages, traveling, and investing.

²⁰ Zampano Giada, “Italy Approves New Post Coronavirus Aid Package,” Anadolu Agency, 8 August, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/italy-approves-new-post-pandemic-aid-package-/1935500>.

²¹ “State aid: Commission approves €7.6 billion Italian tax schemes to support companies and self-employed workers affected by coronavirus outbreak,” European Commission - Press Release, Brussels, 26 June 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1210.

²² *The Italian Economic*, Directorate General, Banca d'Italia, 16

²³Ibid, 16.

²⁴Ibid, 9.

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