

Experts criticise Swedish government for failing to prevent COVID-19 spread

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Public health authorities in Sweden announced limited social distancing measures this week in response to a rapid spread of COVID-19 cases across the country. The measures, which remain much more relaxed than almost any country in Europe, were implemented after mounting criticism from medical experts of the Social Democrat-led government's approach, which has been characterised as "herd immunity."

As of yesterday, there were at least 5,466 confirmed cases in the country and 282 fatalities. However, due to a lack of testing, with a mere 10,000-12,000 tests being performed every week, the authorities acknowledge that the real number of infections is much higher.

The Social Democrat/Green government has merely banned events of more than 50 people, while allowing all businesses to keep operating as normal. Schools remain open, apart from high school classes and universities, while employers have only been advised to take steps to reduce contact among workers. Unlike in other countries, no restrictions have been placed on groups meeting in public, although people have been advised to avoid parties, weddings, or funerals. Bars and restaurants remain open, while ski slopes will finally begin closing on 6 April. High-risk groups, including over-70s and individuals with pre-existing conditions, have been ordered to self-isolate.

Sweden's chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, rejected claims that the authorities are pursuing a herd immunity policy. However, in an interview with the right-wing daily *Svenska Dagbladet*, Tegnell admitted that such a policy was "not contradictory" with the government's objective. Displaying a callous disregard for the thousands of people at risk of losing their lives, he stated on public broadcaster SVT that the coronavirus can either be stopped by "herd immunity,

or a combination of immunity and vaccination. It's basically the same thing."

Cases of COVID-19 have spread especially dramatically in Stockholm, where about half of all the country's cases and fatalities have been recorded. "I'm deeply concerned," Umea University virology professor Fredrik Elgh told SVT. "I'd rather Stockholm was quarantined. We are almost the only country in the world not doing everything we can to curb the infection. This is bloody serious."

A petition signed by over 2,000 doctors, including the chairman of the Nobel Foundation, Prof. Carl-Henrik Heldin, appealed for more containment measures to be announced. "We're not testing enough, we're not tracking, we're not isolating enough. We have let the virus loose," stated Prof. Cecilia Söderberg-Naucler, a virus epidemiology researcher at the Karolinska Institute. "They are leading us to catastrophe."

Joacim Rocklöv, a professor of epidemiology and public health at Umea University, added, "Does this mean this is a calculated consequence that the government and public health authority think is okay? How many lives are they prepared to sacrifice so as not to ... risk greater impact on the economy?"

Like governments the world over, Sweden's has made available a multi-billion kronor bailout to big business while offering a pittance to workers and health care. The government presented a package of measures on 16 March that included 300 billion kronor (about €27 billion) in tax deferrals for business. In addition, the Swedish central bank unveiled a 500 billion kronor programme of business loans. Meanwhile, 11 billion kronor was made available for a modest expansion of state-funded employment insurance and retraining programmes for unemployed workers.

Joblessness is expected to rise to its highest level in

over 20 years, with 500,000 people projected to be out of work by the end of 2020. This would amount to a 9 percent unemployment rate. Underscoring that many of these jobs may never return, the government projects that unemployment will remain at 9 percent during 2021 and only drop slightly to 8.4 percent in 2022.

The government's refusal to implement strict quarantine measures is made even more criminal by the fact that after decades of austerity and privatisation overseen by all parties, Sweden's health care system is in no condition to deal with a surge of COVID-19 patients. The Social Democrats began the privatisation drive in the 1990s and the right-wing Alliance government expanded it after 2006.

As the *Guardian* put it in a 2012 article, "Despite its reputation as a left-wing utopia, Sweden is now a laboratory for right-wing radicalism." The article noted the six-storey St. Göran hospital in Stockholm, which is run as a corporation by the Swedish-based private healthcare provider Capio, pointed out that Sweden has the largest per capita private equity market in Europe. "The key to this takeover was allowing private firms to enter the healthcare market, introducing competition into what had been one of the world's most socialised medical systems," the article continued.

Sweden plunged from having one of the best healthcare systems in Europe to one that is chronically overstretched. In 2015, local authority statistics revealed that Swedish hospitals had one of the worst ratios of beds per head of population in Europe, with just 2.5 beds for every 1,000 people. This was less than Ireland and the United Kingdom with 2.6 beds.

In 2017, the *Svenska Dagbladet* reported that around 10,000 hospital beds had been cut from the healthcare system over the previous two decades. While Sweden's population rose by 13 percent since the 1990s, the number of beds in the public healthcare system dropped by 30 percent by 2017. "This is being talked about as if it were a natural disaster. It is not a natural disaster, but about the complete ignorance of those in power," Märit Halmin, an intensive care doctor in Stockholm, told the newspaper at the time.

The results of these policies, implemented by the entire political establishment from the right-wing Moderates to the ex-Stalinist Left Party, are now plain for all to see.

In the greater Stockholm area, where most

coronavirus cases have been registered, health authorities have been forced to appeal for volunteers due to overstretched resources and the absence of uninfected staff. Some 6,500 trained doctors, nurses, and students signed up to assist. In a 24-hour period from Tuesday to Wednesday, 45 patients died in the Stockholm region.

A nurse at Karolinska University Hospital reported that staff work 12.5-hour shifts, caring for three times more patients than normal. A field hospital capable of caring for 140 patients has also been established.

Reflecting growing shortages of protective equipment, the Public Health Agency relaxed its recommendations for protective clothing for health care workers, allowing each regional health authority to pursue its own approach. A Facebook group criticising the reduced requirements got over 30,000 members in a matter of days. "We're fighting for masks, visors and gloves. It's basic protective equipment," said ambulance nurse Ann-Jasmin Wikström, one of the page's organisers.



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