

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

The Truth of the Matter

“Italy Total Lockdown?”

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Bob Schieffer: I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm Andrew Schwartz, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and this is The Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is the podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts, many of them from the CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing, just informed discussion. In today's episode of The Truth of the Matter, I'm flying solo as Bob Schieffer is out of town. To get to The Truth of the Matter about coronavirus, today we brought in my colleagues, Heather Conley and Steve Morrison. Steve, I want to go to you first, Italy made this decision to go from quarantining 16 million in Northern Italy, to going all the way to 60 million, the full country. Pretty drastic decision. Why did they make it?

Steve Morrison: I think we're still trying to sort that out, but one clear reason is that the subnational approach they were proposing of 16 million in the North, in the Milan, Lombardy, Veneto, Venice area simply was not going to work. People were flooding out of the zone going south, the health system was overwhelmed and at risk of collapse, and they came to a decision that they needed national-state solution, not a subnational solution, they had to have the power and resources at that level and to put it in that context, that otherwise they were trying to fix a problem in one zone and it was migrating to other parts of the country and contradicting the whole idea that you could carve out just one zone within the country.

Steve Morrison: That's my sense, keep in mind that what's driving the crisis in Italy is the demographics. You have this huge proportion of very elderly folks and you have a very fragile health system, so that combination of advanced aging and a very fragile health system created this enormous vulnerability and it was at risk of collapse, and that prompted this middle of the night decision over the weekend to close off the north. And then the decision less than two days later that we're going to just go nationwide. Heather, what do you think?

Heather Conley: Yeah, Steve, I think you're absolutely right. In some ways, this goes back to the failure over the weekend when a document was leaked that was announcing the quarantine of the 16 million in Northern Italy. That leak led people to flee Northern Italy by plane, by train, by car, and I think they understood, even by Monday, was the first time that the Carabinieri was being placed on highways and things like that. So it was, basically they didn't quarantine the 16 million-

Andrew Schwartz: For those of us who don't speak Italian, that's the police, correct?

Heather Conley: The military police.

Andrew Schwartz: Military police.

Heather Conley: Yes, yes.

Andrew Schwartz: Okay, got it.

Heather Conley: But today there are planes leaving Italy going to Heathrow. And so, I think it was a recognition that they couldn't contain the red zone so they decided to create an all Italian red zone, and to create a little bit of equality. Again, tensions, political tensions between Northern Italy, Southern Italy, they will play out over the course of the pandemic so I think absolutely, what Steve was saying is true. But, what we're seeing now is neighboring countries taking matters into their own hands. So this morning, the Austrian government announced the closure of the border between Austria and Italy. The only way an Italian can cross that border is if they have a medical certificate allowing them to cross.

Steve Morrison: And that's in breach of Schengen.

Heather Conley: Correct. So now what you're seeing is the neighboring countries beginning to enforce this in a very ad hoc way. And I think, again, going back to what Steve was saying on the bed situation, I think in part some of the dramatic decisions we've seen this government take over the last 48 to 72 hours, has to deal with a crisis of hospital beds, ICU units, the healthcare system now, because of the numbers, are becoming overwhelmed. They're having to select which patients are able to be on ventilators, needing to slow this down. So, I think all of these issues have really created this sense of urgency. You put on top of that, yesterday's and earlier Sunday's, some of the prison riots, I mean there's a fragility to this right now as a government that's under enormous pressure, a government that is already very fragile. A coalition that is trying to manage the best they can, but they are stumbling through this.

Steve Morrison: Heather, it's interesting that the scale is so similar to Wuhan, Hubei province, right? I mean we've got now 60 million Italians under this very Italian form of quarantine to compare with what happened in China. So tell us a bit more about like what's the model for this? Because this... people are going to work, planes are still flying, but people's daily lives are changing profoundly.

Heather Conley: Exactly. So what you basically see is a whole scale cancellation of sporting events, religious services, anything that requires large gatherings. They have now put in place social distancing where you have to be a meter between individuals, but they're allowing people to use public transportation to get to work. Basically, you cannot be in restaurants or shops past 6:00 PM every night. And as I said, they're trying to manage this as best they can, but again, people

are traveling, planes are leaving, things are moving as normal. They're trying to keep this delicate balance of not panicking people, trying to keep a semblance of economic motion going forward. But seeing these scenes of a deserted Venice, it is eerie, I have to say when you see these very crowded tourist spots, absolutely empty.

Steve Morrison: But hopefully that sort of social isolation, or bringing down the levels of interaction, will slow transmission. But they're also trying to ease the pressure on the health system, which as you said, I mean, it was coming unhinged.

Heather Conley: Yes.

Steve Morrison: The demands of those who were in extreme illness and at risk of death had just skyrocketed, and the system was overwhelmed and they had to do something to kind of reign that, pull that back in, and dampen the curve, the rate of growth of infections. And we don't know if that's going to work, but it is something that's reliant much more, it's a liberal democratic model, it's much more reliant on individuals agreeing to comply by these new rules. There are penalties, right? They have police giving out... if you go from one community to the next for work, you got to carry a certificate with you and you can be fined.

Heather Conley: And three months of jail potentially. I mean, again, this is also cultural, some cultures very much follow government rules and regulations. The Italian culture, I don't want to overgeneralize, but sort of prides itself on a little bit of the, ignoring some of those government specified rules. So, you're absolutely right, we're seeing some of that tension of culturally not always following the rules. And I think that, as this breakout was happening, they were not perhaps following the government guidance closely, but now these draconian measures I think have very much sobered people. They're trying to be cognizant of the social distancing norms.

Heather Conley: But again, this goes until April 3rd, this isn't just a sort of a snowstorm here, "Oh, we've got 24 hours, we'll hunker down," this is a long-term issue. So as we watch this unfold until April 3rd, I have to say, I mean, I hope things progress, that normalization can return after April 3rd, but for Christians, Holy week and Easter, that is a very important time for all observant countries, particularly Italy with the Vatican, this is a very significant religious week and I hope that they wouldn't have to extend this quarantine red zone period into the Easter celebrations, which would again prohibit gatherings to celebrate that important religious holiday.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, I wanted to ask you Heather, are people in Italy panicking at this point? I mean, contrasting it, people in the United States aren't quite panicking yet, people in the United States are certainly concerned and growing more concerned by the day. Where's the public in Italy right now? You said they're starting to follow the rules more closely, but are the people feeling or is the population panicked yet?

Heather Conley: This is just very anecdotal. I'm communicating with Italian colleagues, think tank partners, things like that, so this is certainly not representative, I think it's, everyone is very, very sobered. They're very worried about family members. And I think some of the decisions when the Northern Italian quarantine went into effect, the decision of, do you go to Northern Italy if you have family there, elderly parents, grandparents, to be with them? Do you try to get out and to stay away from it? These are very, very difficult decisions. Under the best of circumstances the type of measures that this government has taken would be extraordinary on the best of political economic healthcare systems. And you have to understand, this is happening when Italy, politically very fragile, economically was already going into recession at the end of 2019, has really not seen appreciable amounts of economic growth for 20 years. You have a populous nationalist movement that was born in Northern Italy and Lombardy.

Heather Conley: So you have all of these factors that play into, both the government's crisis response, as well as the population's understanding of, do they have confidence in the institutions and the government? Will they respect the rules? So this is what we need to carefully watch over the next several weeks of how this plays out politically, this government is under enormous stress. How this, economically devastating for Italy, which is really not good news, could set off potentially another European economic crisis with its origins in Italy. And again, underneath this populism, xenophobia, nativism, that we have seen play out, there will be a role to play in this over the coming weeks. So lots of things to watch, but right now, sobering, managing it, let's watch it.

Steve Morrison: On this question, Andrew, that you raise about, how does the Italian population look at this? We need to remind ourselves that this whole thing evolved at rocket speed and the intervention is coming late, right? There was a slow, sluggish, complacent response to the early phase of this epidemic. The transmissions got way out in front of the Italian government. They then began the first lockdown, 50,011 villages –that didn't work. They didn't get control over it. Then they did this sudden 16 million and then sudden 60 million. So they're racing in and trying to be very aggressive, but they're coming in really late and they're way behind and they're not explaining much to a public about this. They're not exactly going through a long process of consensus building before they get to this point. And we know there's been lots of tensions between the provinces, the federal government and the municipalities.

Steve Morrison: There's been a lot of criticism, a lot of churning in this, and so here we are. This is the first major Western democracy to go down this path. And it's very interesting what they're experimenting to do, but it's very uncertain if this is going to work and if people are going to comply and whether the economy can be stabilized and whether the infection rates can be moderated to some degree to create some space on a health system that is on the edge of collapse. That's sort of where we are. It's amazing to watch from a distance and it will have lessons that will inform us if things get out of control in Washington State or anywhere else in this country.

Andrew Schwartz: So this is what I wanted to ask, both of you: as we watched this unfold, today, Spain suspended its parliament because one of its members is infected with COVID-19. Norway slashed 3000 flights because of the disease. Here in the United States, we're battling this hour by hour. What can we learn from what's going on in Italy and what we're seeing in Europe?

Heather Conley: What we're seeing is many different governments managing this in different ways. And so I think that sort of gives, there's now becoming this very much of an ad hoc mechanism, so there's not a huge amount of, watching the European Union itself, there's coordination and conversation, but really the governments have to take these steps and it's their healthcare system on the line, their border protection and control. I think what we're seeing is because Italy was unaware of how rapidly this was going through, the spread now, it's now out and so every country is managing this differently. Some, I would argue the least affected countries today, Poland, the Czech Republic, they're taking incredibly aggressive steps right now, which would not argue for the cases that we are seeing. The United Kingdom is taking a much more measured approach. Although-

Steve Morrison: Their numbers are much lower.

Heather Conley: Their numbers are much lower, but they know this is going to be a spread, but they are managing this. They're sort of their three phases. There's really concerned not to get ahead of themselves leaving the experts moving forward. You have Germany, Spain, France, sort of moving, suspending universities and large gatherings and managing the borders. So

Steve Morrison: Would you say Heather, that France, Spain, Germany are at takeoff phase right now?

Heather Conley: So I would argue certainly France is and Spain. Germany, I'm still watching carefully, and then I'd put the Netherlands and the UK again, the case numbers are just lower.

Steve Morrison: But they are jumping by 25% a day.

Heather Conley: They are, which is why they are anticipating right now this growing effort. But again, just taking again the example of the United Kingdom, the national health service is, this is the seasonal stress period where again, because of seasonal flu, so this is hitting on top of a very stressed healthcare system. They may not have beds, they may not have doctors to be able to do this. You're absolutely right. I think this is a little underappreciated in the Iran example, and of course we have examples here of self-isolation for members of Congress. This starts paralyzing the institutions that have to make decisions about whether that's economic stimulus, whether that's institutions that are responding to it. So it'll be interesting to watch as parliaments may have to suspend. The European parliament didn't have its movement to Strasbourg because staff have been

affected. So again, watching the head of the Italian democratic party has been diagnosed with the Coronavirus. So this starts seeping into the political fabric. And how does that affect decision-making?

Steve Morrison: There are six members of Congress who are self-quarantined. Most of them are tied back to the CPAC incident.

Andrew Schwartz: Right, the Republican gathering.

Steve Morrison: The conservative public action group. Six members of Congress and some of whom were proximate to the president in that same period. So it raises all of these issues around, this gets right up to the edge of the president. It raises all the issues around campaigning for Democrats and Republicans. But the point you were making Heather about the disruptions of parliaments, you were making this point also Andrew, there's discussions right now actively within US Congress about taking the recesses that are on the boards coming up and extending them so that you could have Congress out for a much longer period of time in order to try and go about managing it in that fashion.

Heather Conley: Well, and just to add, there's an election in Poland for the Polish president. The election will be held May 10th. President Duda who's running for reelection has just announced he's not going to be suspending rallies. That's an election for May 10th. The Polish president, he's suspending that, not holding rallies for his reelection efforts. So this is going to start, looking at Germany. The Christian Democratic Union is holding their party convention at the end of April to decide their new leader. Big questions about whether that would be held. So again, this will start impacting the electoral processes and it has to.

Andrew Schwartz: And you have to wonder, we're in primary season for the Democrats right now. And you have to wonder, is it going to affect turnout? Are people going to come and turn out to vote in primaries? Are the two candidates remaining in the democratic primary, are they going to be shaking hands? Are they going to be going to rallies? Is President Trump, who you know pretty much every day on his schedule has a rally, is he going to eliminate the rallies from his schedule?

Steve Morrison: And what's the ethics and public health wisdom of continuing to have mass rallies, which totally contradicts the logic of social distancing.

Andrew Schwartz: Right. Well, so far our politicians, President Trump, Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders seem to be following CDC protocols. So we'll have to wait and see.

Steve Morrison: This carries over into all sorts of things, right? The conference basketball tournaments, the NCAA.

Andrew Schwartz: March Madness is coming.

Steve Morrison: March Madness is upon us. We've got all of these moments in time where you're saying tens of thousands of people are going to be convened in close quarters into confined congregational settings, whether it's for political purposes or for sports entertainment or for whatever. And when do we begin to insist that these events be suspended? And what are the rules and guidance going to be?

Andrew Schwartz: Right? I mean, you have 15, 20,000 fans every night in an NBA arena. Just the other day you had LeBron James saying...

Steve Morrison: "No fans, no play."

Andrew Schwartz: "I'm not going to show up and play." And I think President Trump thinks the same thing. If there's not going to be anybody at the rallies, I'm not going to show up. I'm going to stay home and watch TV.

Heather Conley: It's interesting watching the Italian case. So how did they begin? They first started with fan-less sports events and then they stopped them completely.

Steve Morrison: Took that position to stop all soccer, which, in the Italian context, that's a pretty profound interruption.

Andrew Schwartz: Absolutely.

Heather Conley: Rugby matches were just canceled in the UK. St Patrick's Day parades and gatherings have been canceled in Dublin--

Andrew Schwartz: -- Boston.

Heather Conley: Boston. Northern Ireland leaders are now not traveling this week to Washington to participate in those festivities. So yes, we're rethinking everything.

Andrew Schwartz: You'll know it's really serious when they cancel the St Patrick's Day parade in New Orleans. You'll know that it's really serious.

Heather Conley: It's bigger than Boston.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, I mean if they cancel it, it's not bigger than Boston, but if they cancel it, you'll know the seriousness.

Steve Morrison: Getting back to your question around what are the lessons for us here coming out of Italy? We're going to be, I think cogitating, chewing that over and then in the coming days as we watch things unfolding and of course coming in late is bad. Coming in early is good. Coming in very aggressively early, getting the public to understand what you're trying to do, not repeating the mistakes that the Italians are, not coming in half-baked in a sudden crash way in the middle of the weekend, in the middle of the night is a poor way to sort of win public

confidence and trust. You could look at the Italian case and say the solutions are going to have to be at a very high level, making full use of the powers and authority of the state in order to solve this.

Steve Morrison: Because localities get swamped, provinces get swamped. That of course for us begs a question, how is that going to happen in our system? Because our system is so decentralized, public health has localities and municipalities and states, and at the level of this administration, it's a bit chaotic. And so when Governor Inslee is there facing a crisis in Washington and saying, this could very rapidly get much bigger than I am. Where is he turning to?

Heather Conley: The other thing for me is, others also get a vote and how they're going to manage this. So it's not just the country itself. I'm thinking of the Israeli government's decision to-

Steve Morrison: Move that direction.

Heather Conley: Anybody coming into this structure, [crosstalk 00:10:45].

Andrew Schwartz: Anyone coming into to Israel is quarantined.

Heather Conley: For 14 days. And so I think this is some way, this is the Austrian-Italian case. You may want to continue to do a different type of business as usual, but other countries will also have a say in how they're going to manage it. And this is where this international coordination becomes so vital. So we're not doing this ad hoc and then first mover advantage. Well, if someone does something draconian, does everyone have to follow that? And so, that's when it gets very uneven as far as implementing.

Andrew Schwartz: Right. And I wonder, are we yet taking it seriously enough in the United States? I mean, for instance, here in DC we've had several inflection points. We've had the CPEC conference that you mentioned before.

Heather Conley: Well, APAC, too.

Andrew Schwartz: We have the APAC conference here in Washington. I think all of us know someone who is a member of the church in Georgetown, whose minister has been infected. So, are we taking this seriously enough?

Steve Morrison: Well, there was a Reuters/Ipsos poll that came out the end of last week, which was interesting. It showed four in 10 Democrats believed that this was a threat, that it posed a threat to the country, the coronavirus outbreak. Two in 10 Republicans believed it posed a threat. Now, you can look at those numbers and say twice as many Democrats take this seriously than Republicans, you can also look at those numbers and say 60% of Democrats still don't take it very seriously.

Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Steve Morrison: And 80% of Republicans don't take it very seriously.

Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Steve Morrison: And this was a fairly large poll.

Andrew Schwartz: Whole lot of people are not taking it seriously.

Steve Morrison: Released just a few days ago, so-

Andrew Schwartz: That tells me that there's a bipartisan consensus of not taking it seriously enough.

Heather Conley: Well, and we need a bipartisan consensus that individuals now have to take responsibility, like the British keep calm and keep washing your hands, keep following those guidelines, avoid things that you don't have to do, take responsibility. But that has to be a bipartisan message that this is serious, but you deal with it calmly and confidently, but you take it very, very seriously.

Steve Morrison: There's one important thing that I think offers hope, which is, last week, members of Congress in both chambers, in both parties came together and very rapidly expedited the \$8.3 billion emergency supplemental and got it to the president's desk and got it signed into law.

Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Steve Morrison: Now, you can look at that and say, that is four to six weeks late and why did it take us so long because that as a milestone, that should have happened at least a month earlier, but it happened nonetheless last week and so, as a reflection of consciousness and bipartisanship, it was an important signal of that reality and last week when we were up on the Hill and the week before interacting with members of Congress and we testified at the full committee on Homeland Security, we had a breakfast with the Aspen group, with 20 members of Congress.

Andrew Schwartz: This was for your report-

Steve Morrison: For the Commission on Strengthening America's Health Security.

Andrew Schwartz: Right.

Steve Morrison: We had a mix of Democrats and Republicans in both of those events and they were deadly serious about all of this and they were being civil and cordial with one another, so all of this sort of partisanship and toxic politics that you see in the airwaves was not translating in those context into that type of behavior. You

had them asking very, very detailed questions of the experts who were there and engaging in a very serious deliberation at the same time that this legislation was moving forward.

Steve Morrison: The other thing I'd say is, this morning you pick up the Washington Post, four of the five stories on the front page are on this topic and then you look at the banner of stories inside and there's another 10 stories inside. One day in the Washington post, so the flood of stories and last night I watched NewsHour and then NBC. Half of the stories, half of the airtime was concerning this topic, so it's relentless.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah, the coverage has been pretty extraordinary.

Steve Morrison: I mean the topic has become everything, everywhere, all the time. Somewhere along the way the data is going to change from two in 10 or 4 in 10 to something more in the majority where on both Democrats and Republicans have-

Andrew Schwartz: Do you think media's hyping it up too much?

Steve Morrison: I think there's a little bit of drama in the that you should expect in the 24/7 cable ecosphere. I mean, you look back at what happened with Ebola in the Fall of '14 which was also in a political cycle and the cable networks fueled hysteria and panic, accompanied by other things, Trump's tweeting, White House fumbling, the fact that Ebola was scary as hell and we had outbreaks in Dallas and we had all the other drama that was going on. So, there's some measure in which the overheated media gets out there but in my own estimation, this is truly dangerous and we don't appreciate it. So, I don't say the media is stoking this and it's less serious than what it may seem. I have the opposite response in saying, the media is perhaps stoking a lot of fear, but people need to sit up and take this very seriously, much more so than they do have-

Heather Conley: It has so many angles to it, so there's the economic angle to it and again, Steve, your mentioning of the stimulus here, Italy just today, had to increase the emergency stimulus package to 10 billion euros, they're now suspending mortgage payments. I mean, they're now trying to grapple with an economic crisis, a health crisis, which we don't want to translate into a political crisis where government institutions become paralyzed or so polarized that they can't do their functions, so I think that in some ways is the media saturation. There's so many different elements of this. It's the international stories, the domestic stories, an economic story, it's a health story. It's a personal story of whether that's, elderly patients in a Seattle nursing home or on a cruise ship. I think all of that just feeds into that never ending cycle where it's hard to get balance and making sure you're well-prepared, well-armed, but also again, managing through this in a confident way. Not, you're so physically upset that you're not going to be able to think calmly and rationally.

Steve Morrison: Well, the economic shocks from yesterday here and globally were astonishing and it's translated into the President going to the Hill this morning to talk to Senate Republicans about what are going to be the fiscal stimulus options and what other tax cuts. And they've already did the big monetary, they dropped by 250 base points last week of the Fed, the biggest drops since the '08, '09 crisis. So, to answer your question of are people beginning to take this seriously? The accompanying economic crisis is fully in front of us.

Heather Conley: Particularly for the transportation industry, the airline industry, the shipping industry, tourism. For Italy, I speak more specific to that. Absolutely devastating, of course, Northern Italy is the economic engine for Northern Italy Manufacturing. 40% of Italian exports come from Northern Italy. So again, devastating in sort of two different ways on an already very weak Italian banking system and so, not a lot of room for error in that setting as well, so-

Andrew Schwartz: And our own airlines canceling flights and hiring freezes and so on.

Heather Conley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Andrew Schwartz: We'll have to watch this very closely. Thank you both for being here today, to be continued.

Steve Morrison: Thank you.

Heather Conley: Thanks Andrew.

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