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Nobody wants Wuhan 2.0



Three years ago, the northern Italian region of Lombardy was the most frequent entry point for the then little-known COVID-19 virus in Europe. One of the reasons was that only those passengers from China who arrived on direct flights, but not those who had previously transferred somewhere in Europe or the Middle East, were checked at local airports. Images from three years ago from Milan, Bergamo and other cities in northern Italy, stunned the world. Hospital halls and corridors were overcrowded with patients fighting for their lives, while the bodies of the deceased were placed in sports halls.

Within a week, the cataclysm that hit the north of Italy also hit the rest of Europe. At the end of In 2022, after three years of fighting the virus, the balance sheet showed that of all Italian regions, Lombardy fared the worst. During the pandemic, about 4 million people were infected, and about 45,000 died, as many as the next three regions on the list combined.

Every second passenger from China tests positive for COVID-19

On December 26, the authorities at Milan's main airport, Malpensa, started testing passengers arriving from China. More than half were positive. That is why two days later, Giorgia Meloni's government re-introduced restrictions on passengers from China, requiring them to have a negative test for COVID-19 when entering Italy. "Italy cannot be the only country to carry out anti-Covid checks at airports for those arriving from China", Meloni's deputy and transport minister Matteo Salvini, tweeted, urging such measures to be applied "throughout Europe".

There was opposition to the Italian move from other Europeans, and health officials in Brussels only called for careful monitoring of the development of the situation in China, which had recently drastically eased the strict lockdown measures. Despite this, Italy was immediately joined by Spain, another major victim of the pandemic from three years ago,

imposing new restrictions at airports for passengers from China, followed by France, Germany, Greece, and Sweden. The UK, as of January 5, also requires all passengers arriving from China to have a negative COVID-19 test.

The alarm bell rang in other parts of the world. In just a few days, the US, Australia, Canada, India, Israel, Malaysia, Morocco, Qatar, South Korea, and Taiwan introduced a mandatory negative test for passengers from China. The number of countries that will reintroduce restrictions for passengers from China in the coming days will certainly be even higher, because no one wants to repeat the experience of the beginning of 2020. Regardless of the fact that in the meantime, for example in the EU, 80-90% of the population has been vaccinated.

China's silence no longer binds anyone

Almost three years later, most of the world still lacks a clear picture of the scale of the infection in China, nor of the potential of its health care system to counter the spread of the virus. China never fully participated in the global sharing of data on the disease during the pandemic, and sought to solve the problem by separating from others. It vaccinated its population exclusively with domestic vaccines, although those produced by Western manufacturers have shown much greater efficiency.

The recent lifting of the lockdown measures has naturally opened the door to a new mass spread of the virus, which caused China not to communicate with the rest of the world, just like three years ago. In the absence of any reliable data on the new Chinese outbreak, British health analytics company Airfinity estimates that about 9,000 people a day are dying from Covid in China, and the figure could rise to as many as 25,000 a day this month, while the total death toll could reach 1.7 million by April.

At a briefing in London on Friday, Chinese

embassy spokesman Bi Haibo refused to confirm that estimate, which is understandable, since his government has been talking about only five or fewer deaths per day from COVID-19, after the relaxation of collective quarantine measures. It is evident that Beijing will not change its attitude towards the pandemic, which it has practised since the very beginning, three years ago. Therefore, precautionary measures against passengers from China have been the only rational response to China's behaviour, which still sees the spread of the virus as an internal matter.

New Year's explosion of infection

The reintroduction of restrictions at airports in Europe, the US, Canada and elsewhere came at the right time. Millions of Chinese people are preparing to travel on vacation during the Lunar Chinese New Year holiday, which begins on January 22. After three years of strict lockdown, this will be the first time that Chinese people will be able to travel without restrictions. And that, according to pre-pandemic figures, means that there will be around 200 million people on the road around the country, and between 6 and 7 million Chinese will travel abroad, in ten days in the second half of January.

Restrictions in the countries they plan to visit will certainly reduce the number of trips out of China, and it should be borne in mind that the Chinese New Year is when the Chinese spend about 10 billion dollars on trips abroad. It is therefore not surprising that the International Air Transport Association (IATA) opposes the re-introduction of Covid tests for passengers from China. "It is an impulsive and ineffective response", said IATA Director General Willie Walsh from Paris. Understandable, because this association includes 300 companies that comprise 83% of global air traffic, and the new restrictions are a nightmare for an industry that has just climbed out of the abyss it was in for three years due to the pandemic. However, the reintroduction of restrictions on

passengers from China is the only possible response to the behaviour of Beijing, which itself has no visible strategy to fight the infection, after its failed "zero-Covid policy".

The large scale migrations during the Lunar New Year holiday will bring millions of new infections to China, but their country insists on the fact that it has been dealing with the health crisis quite successfully. The rest of the world cannot have confidence in the success of that struggle, because the evidence in the past three years has been more than overwhelming and deadly. The re-introduction of Covid tests at airports in Europe, the US, and Australia is only the first precautionary step, and if that is not enough, stronger restrictions on passengers from China will be a necessity, not discrimination. No one wants to experience Wuhan 2.0.