DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 31.05.2021 | Christos Katsioulis & Micky Drill & Knut Dethlefsen

Back to normality?

Countries with high vaccination rates are slowly lifting all restrictions. Is this the return to normality? Dispatches from the UK, Israel and the US

Great Britain

'Per ardua ad astra' – that's how Boris Johnson could have summed up the development of the pandemic in the United Kingdom: 'Through struggle to the stars'. After a disastrous year with many fatalities, the situation looked much better in March. With a consistent lockdown since January and the successful vaccination programme, the number of infections was significantly reduced by the time the school opened on 8 March. So Johnson was finally able to do what he loves most: spread optimism.

The restrictions will be eased in four stages, with a target date of 21 June, when normality is finally supposed to set in. Johnson ingenuously promised that he had learned from the mistakes of the first waves: action would be guided not by the dates set, but by data. Before each step to be taken, vaccination progress, vaccination protection and the burden on hospitals would be checked, as well as the appearance of new virus variants. After the so-called 'English mutation' had already forced Johnson into the last lockdown, it became important to be cautious.

So far everything is going according to plan on the one-way street out of lockdown. The vaccination campaign of the National Health Service (NHS) is working smoothly and is widely accepted. The clear division according to priority groups and then age groups (currently up to 30) makes sense – and there is hardly any sign of people jumping the queue. The pubs opened, first outside and now inside, theatres and cinemas are open again, and there have been football matches with spectators. The numbers remain low nationwide.

But now the stars are going dark. The culprit is the 'Indian variant' — a viral mutation introduced from India that is likely more contagious than

the one circulating up to now. There are currently hotspots in London and Bolton with an increasing number of infections. The variant sheds light on three weak points in the English success story.

First, it is becoming clear that Brexiteer Johnson's government was unable to prevent the introduction of a new variant. Because Johnson wanted to fly to Delhi in April to celebrate a trade deal there, India was not put on the 'red list' at the beginning of April, but only three weeks later; the visit was cancelled. In the meantime, however, some 20,000 people have travelled to the UK from India.

Second, the hotspots in Bolton make it clear that the vaccination campaign has so far not reached the people who, because of their social situation, need it most. For neighbourhoods with cramped housing, poor public transport and precarious incomes, one vaccination centre in the city is not enough. Although the government tried to blame the increase in infections on those who refused to vaccinate, this is only true in individual cases.

Thirdly, it shows that Johnson has not learned from his verbal somersaults of the past year. The question of how to deal with travel remains a mystery to almost all Britons. The government has introduced a traffic light system intended to provide guidance. However, the opposite is the case: no one knows what is actually permitted or required. In particular, the yellow countries, with ten days of quarantine required after entry, are causing confusion. While the government allows travel, it advises against it at the same time. One should travel only for essential reasons, but vacation can be considered an essential reason, according to one minister.

As a result, there are massive increases in flights to popular holiday destinations such as Spain. Johnson, however, will try to stick to his opening schedule – among other reasons, to maintain peace within his own faction. So far, all this feels like more "*ardua*" than "*astra*".

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Israel

In Israel the general feeling is that the Covid-19 pandemic has already been defeated. The topic has all but disappeared from public discussion. This certainly has something to do with the armed conflict of the past few weeks, but primarily with the population's return to an almost normal life. The country is almost completely open with few restrictions left. Close to 5.5 million, or around 63 per cent of Israelis (and over 90

percent of those over 60 years of age) have been vaccinated, although vaccination of those under 16 years of age has not yet begun. There are currently only 436 known cases of Covid-19 diseases, 49 of which are classified as severe. Only 0.1 per cent of tests are positive.

The following rules are still in force, but they will be lifted on 1 June: Up to 50 people are allowed in an enclosed room and up to 500 people may gather in the open air. A so-called 'green passport' must be presented to enter a restaurant, hotel, theatre, etc. as well as for travel abroad. This digital document confirms that a person either has been vaccinated, has recovered, or has tested negative in the last 72 hours. Masks are still mandatory for enclosed spaces, including buses, trains and airplanes.

The vaccination of the population went promptly and quickly. At the beginning of January the first groups started – medical staff and people over 60 years of age. After just a few days, the age was lowered to 45, and since the beginning of February, the vaccine has been available to all Israelis aged 16 and older. The green light for vaccinating children aged 12 and older is expected in the next few days. The daily vaccination numbers were up to 200,000 people in the first three months. This clearly puts Israel among the world's vaccination champions.

The main reason for the success lies in the structure of the health insurance companies: every citizen is required to be a member of one of them. Each of these insurers has its own infrastructure, such as medical staff, clinics and, in two cases, even its own hospitals. Using their databases, they can reach the target groups of the vaccine candidates 'at the push of a button' — whether this be certain age groups or special risk groups due to illnesses. The person concerned is contacted by SMS or telephone to come for vaccination on a certain day at a certain time. The date for the second dose is then set there on the spot. The most important lesson from the Israeli vaccination strategy is that only a functioning welfare state can carry out such a successful mass vaccination campaign.

The number of people who do not want to be vaccinated is relatively low. In times of crisis, the Israeli people are considered disciplined. Media campaigns encourage people to vaccinate; those against being vaccinated are put in a negative light. In addition, the advantages of holding a 'green passport' became apparent very quickly. Vaccinated people live an almost normal life in Israel, while those who refuse are forced to undergo constant testing in order to keep up with the first group.

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United States

In May, Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine was approved in the United States for use in adolescents and children over the age of 12, and in that same month, most states began vaccinating adolescents at vaccination centres and pharmacies. For parents this is a big relief that means more freedom. The group of those eligible to be vaccinated has thus grown significantly and the large-scale state vaccination programme has once again moved one step closer.

Are Americans out of danger? That is not yet certain. But the progress in the vaccination campaign is noticeable in everyday life. 49 per cent of the population have received at least one vaccination, and 39 per cent are already fully vaccinated. However, the rate of vaccination has slowed considerably across the country. This is especially true in some of the conservative states. There are many reasons why eligible people are not getting vaccinated — these include a lack of availability in rural areas, limited access to vaccination sites, and confusing procedures for booking appointments. But some people are simply unwilling to be vaccinated. They distrust the government vaccination programme. This mistrust is often politically motivated.

The *New York Times* recently analysed vaccination and voter data in every county in the United States. It found that both the willingness to get vaccinated and actual vaccination rates were lower on average in the counties where a majority of residents voted to re-elect Donald Trump in 2020. In these places, conspiracy theories about vaccination are also particularly widespread.

The US government will continue to promote the vaccination programme and support the states with vaccination. The major vaccination centres will undoubtedly become less important; the family doctor will be more closely involved as a trusted source. The hope is that if the approach is direct and personal, doubts can be overcome. This is where community initiatives, whereby people in the neighbourhood — family, friends, and the elderly — explain their decision to be vaccinated, are particularly successful. According to surveys, these authentic voices are particularly important to persuade people. Some states even give out small cash bonuses after vaccination, while others hold raffles with larger prizes for those who are fully vaccinated. However, there is to be no compulsory vaccination.

The requirement to wear a face mask is increasingly less prevalent. Travel within the US has increased and economic activity has grown strongly in the past few weeks: in its latest forecast, the US Federal Reserve expects a

growth rate of 6.5 per cent this year. Against this backdrop, it is entirely possible that herd immunity will not be achieved in the US — the importance of the virus and vaccinations are taking more of a backseat in everyday life. As a result, the US may have to live with the virus for a long time to come.

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