

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes

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Country: **ESTONIA**

Kadri Simm

Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia

Email: kadri.simm@ut.ee

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Emergency situation was declared by Estonian government on March 12th (currently extended until May 17th). The first COVID case was confirmed on March 2nd, 2020. By March 12th (beginning of emergency situation), Estonia had 74 confirmed cases. As of May 11, we have had altogether 61 casualties of COVID (45 deaths per million), intensive care units were never overwhelmed. Interesting case is that of the biggest island of Estonia (Saaremaa) that had much higher rates of infection and the island was quarantined from the rest of Estonia for over a month.

With emergency situations schools (including universities) switched to distance learning, cinemas, spas, theatres were closed. Shopping centers were still open (but were closed later). Supermarkets, smaller grocery stores, drugstores and all stores/shops that had their own separate entrances have been open throughout. Going outside (for whatever reason) has been allowed throughout the emergency measures but only in groups of two (except families) keeping 2 meters distance (advertised as 2+2 rule). Restaurants were never officially closed (although many of them did voluntarily), but their opening times were limited (until 22.00) and many of them switched to take away.

Wearing of face masks has not been obligatory in Estonia but recommended for shopping and in public transportation. At the beginning of the emergency situation it was also the case that masks were a deficit and difficult to get (for public, not for health institutions).

Estonia is a small and quite sparsely populated country (1.3 million inhabitants), in the streets it is fairly easy to keep a distance of 1,5-2 meters from others.

My personal view is that as long as the spread of the virus is under control (as it currently is), there is no need to make the masks obligatory. There's been a lively debate on this topic in Estonian society (mostly about the lack of good scientific proof of benefits of wearing a mask v common sense that it must help at least a little bit) and the government has now decided that

mask-wearing will remain voluntary. In the streets a very small minority wear masks, in shops more people do but I don't have any data on this (my guess is perhaps 10-20%). Most employers in shops do wear masks.

I personally have not worn a mask (have not purchased any either) with the exception of when I visited health care institution (provided by them). I must also say though that none of my family members are considered a vulnerable population. If my grandmother would live with us I might think differently.

Sources:

Health Board of Republic of Estonia homepage (in English): <https://www.terviseamet.ee/en>

Official Emergency Situation Web Page (governmental, in English): <https://www.kriis.ee/en>