

Unless we take these steps, UK quarantine restrictions against Spain will do more harm than good

A safe reboot of tourism isn't just possible – it's necessary, writes **Zurab Pololikashvili**





he UK government described its imposition of **quarantine restrictions** against **Spain** as a necessary step. But while the government must safeguard its citizens, knee-jerk reactions could do more harm than good.

As well as undermining public trust and confidence – precious commodities that have taken months to rebuild – the decision has come at a time when the tourism sector (having lost **\$320bn between January and May** alone) was finally beginning to recover.

Of course, a government's primary duty is to safeguard its citizens. And yes, striking the right balance between public health and protecting important industries will undoubtedly be challenging.

But with the majority of **Covid-19** cases in Spain confined to just two territories and with wide disparities between numbers of new cases across the country, a blanket ban against the entire nation might not only have been poorly thought through, it could result in avoidable, yet permanent damage to sectors that millions rely on for their livelihoods – not to mention dampening public confidence in ways that hurt related industries worldwide.

The uncertainty caused by this sudden and unilateral decision also seems to have produced some unintended consequences. Take for example the ensuing panic with which many of the 600,000 British holidaymakers in Spain attempted to fly back to Britain at short notice following their government's surprise announcement. It resulted in a massive concentration of travellers inside Spanish airports – a handful of indoor locations, precisely the type of situation such announcements were designed to avert.

Meanwhile, environments controlled by the tourism sector are probably among the safest right now. The very survival of the tourism sector, after all, depends upon it, with global tourism forced to deliver an overwhelming focus on health, safety and wellbeing. Unsurprisingly then, Spain's popular tourist hotspots like the Canary and Balearic Islands have even lower Covid-19 rates than the UK.

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But perhaps the most lasting legacy of "going it alone" will be that it undermines the very international solidarity the world needs to get through this crisis. Without a **global response** characterised by international cooperation and policy alignment, there is no way the world can truly overcome a global crisis.

We found that out in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, and we have come to that realisation once again.

A crucial component of such international cooperation involves drawing upon the best, most up-to-date practices from around the world in response to what is a fast-evolving threat. Exhausting this avenue of inquiry before considering drastic measures like blanket quarantines may well have resulted in a better policy approach.

Consider that if a fraction of the money British airlines, holiday companies and employers will lose as a result of this quarantine decision was invested in accelerating rigorous testing capability at airports, it might have resulted in a better-calibrated balance between protecting public health and industry. This approach has worked well in Cyprus for instance, which has mandated all tourists receive rapid testing upon arrival, with those testing negative free to continue enjoying their holiday.

More recently, there have been reports of the UK exploring the possibility of incoming travellers leaving quarantine early if they **test negative for Covid-19 twice within several days**. Ostensibly, the most effective way to do this would be for travellers arriving from at-risk countries to have the first test several days airlines, the tourism sector and countless British employers. But if it is to work, it requires meaningful cooperation and dialogue between the governments of at-risk countries and those receiving travellers. In the case of Britain applying quarantine restrictions against Spain – that simply did not happen.

Moving forward, it is imperative that international cooperation characterises the policy response to this pandemic. As the United Nations specialised agency for tourism, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation is **ready to work with our member states**, as well as with countries that are not our members, to foster productive dialogue. In recent weeks, we have seen first-hand **examples of destinations finding the right balance** between safeguarding tourists and tourism workers and supporting businesses and livelihoods. The safe restart of tourism can be done.

Of course, along the way, we will encounter unprecedented challenges – each policy response to this pandemic is a difficult negotiation between valid competing interests. That means this will be a steep learning curve for all nations and missteps will inevitably be made. What will define our collective success, however, is how swiftly we learn from them.

Zurab Pololikashvili is secretary-general of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation



