

The debate on the reopening of bookshops in the lockdown in Italy

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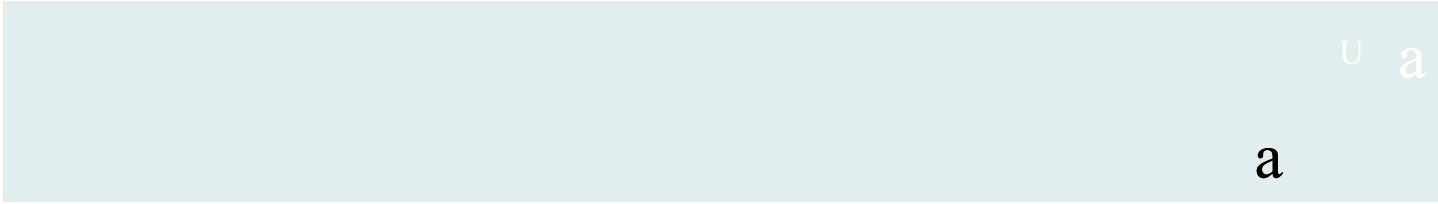
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THE DEBATE ON THE REOPENING OF BOOKSHOPS IN THE LOCKDOWN IN ITALY: THE RUMORS BLOG

BY ROSSANA MORRIELLO | APR 23, 2020 | 2 COMMENTS



by guest blogger Rossana Morriello, (research support librarian, Politecnico di Torino, Italy)



A new urgent law approved by the Italian government on 10 April stated that some commercial activities could reopen starting from 14 April and among these activities are bookshops. The reopening of bookshops has been requested for weeks by the national association of publishers (**AIE, Associazione Italiana Editori**) and the national association of booksellers (**ALI, Associazione Librai Italiani**), and some politicians followed and supported this request. Their motivations were to give a signal of the importance of books and culture, but also to counteract that online companies were mainly selling books.

Therefore, on 14 April all bookshop were allowed to open to the public , but not all did and the choice of the government to consider books a necessary good, and so include bookshops in necessary activities that could open, divided public opinion and of booksellers. Moreover, since the legislative power — the subject of public health in Italy — is delegated to the regional governments, some regional governors, in **Piedmont** and **Lombardy** for example, decided not to open bookshops or other shops allowed by the law (like stationeries, laundries, baby shops) and keep the lockdown situation unchanged.

Many booksellers strongly criticized the decision of the government to issue this law. A group of independent booksellers who created the cooperative platform LED (Librai Editori Distribuzione in rete) wrote **[an open letter to the Head of the Government, Giuseppe Conte, and published it on Facebook](#)** and in many journals, in order to explain

why the decision to reopen bookshops was not wise in their opinion. Hundreds of people have already signed the letter, and the number is constantly increasing. Those who oppose the decision to reopen are mostly small and independent bookshops. In the letter, LED members regret that in the pandemic books seem to be recognized as essential comforts for people and so reopening of bookshops is necessary but it was not so before this. There was no special attention to booksellers in the past, no special help for them, and they wonder if there will be any in the future. They also talk about some other practical difficulties in reopening, considering the current pandemic emergency.

In **Italy**, we still are in a state of lockdown, there are many new cases and deaths from coronavirus, and people are asked to stay at home as much as possible. In this condition to reopen bookshops will mean more people will go out to bookshops. Many bookshops have taken great efforts in these days to reorganize their work so as to deliver books to patrons' homes in total safety. How could they guarantee safety in shops for them and for patrons? The government did not plan any solution to help booksellers guarantee safe conditions in bookshops. Bookshops are often small, they do not have enough space to secure required distancing and, in bookshops, people go to spend time in browsing shelves and to talk to the bookseller for suggestions. Would they cue to enter like in supermarkets?

Moreover, it is unlikely that so many people, mostly in isolation at home, will decide to go and fill up bookstores. Incomes would be lower than usual, possibly very low. Due to this lockdown emergency, booksellers could ask for a reduction of rents and receive some financial benefit granted by the government for merchants. If they open, they will lose benefits but, at the same time, they will not be able to face costs of rent, energy, employee salaries and so on, with the reduced income. The situation is, of course, quite different for small independent booksellers, maybe located in little villages or in suburban areas, and large bookstores, maybe big publisher chains, with large spaces and many employees, and which are often in the city center. For the former the reopening is much more complicated in this situation while probably for the latter it could be easier, having more human and financial resources.

This reopening is currently creating a big debate. Personally, I can very much understand all points stated by the LED group because before starting my career as a librarian, I used to work in a small

independent bookshop in my hometown, and I know how difficult it can be. Anyway, we will see what will happen as time passes, particularly in bookshops that open. The current special law establishes rules until 3 May and things may change after that date.

By the way, this debate arose just a couple of weeks after a new law that took effect on 25 March 2020 reduced the discount permitted on book price to customers from 15% to 5%.

2 COMMENTS

Anthony Paganelli on at

Ciao Rossana. Thank you for the information regarding the booksellers. You have some great insight on these procedures in Italy. I would like to know more about how everything moves forward following Conte's decision on May 3, especially from a librarian's perspective.

Are you experiencing any issues with different regions in Italy opening businesses sooner or other regions being more strict. I know in the United States some states have begun opening businesses. While, some states are maintaining the stay-at-home policy.

Again, thank you for keeping us posted on these important issues in Italy. Take care and best wishes.

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Rossana Morriello on at

Ciao Anthony, thank you for your kind words, I am glad you appreciate my posts.

We are experiencing very different approaches to the reopening in different regions. Some regions are more strict, mainly in North Italy where the number of cases of coronavirus has been higher, while other regions are more loose. But sometimes not all city mayors agree with what the region government states, either strict or loose.

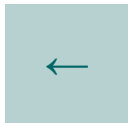
Also for libraries the situation is different. Some regions, like Emilia-Romagna, decided to reopen libraries on May 4, others will reopen on May 18. And a big debate is ongoing among librarians about the many problems to be solved in the reopening, like sanitization of

books returned after loans. Anyway, I will post soon a new article about this debate and the reopening of libraries.

Best wishes.

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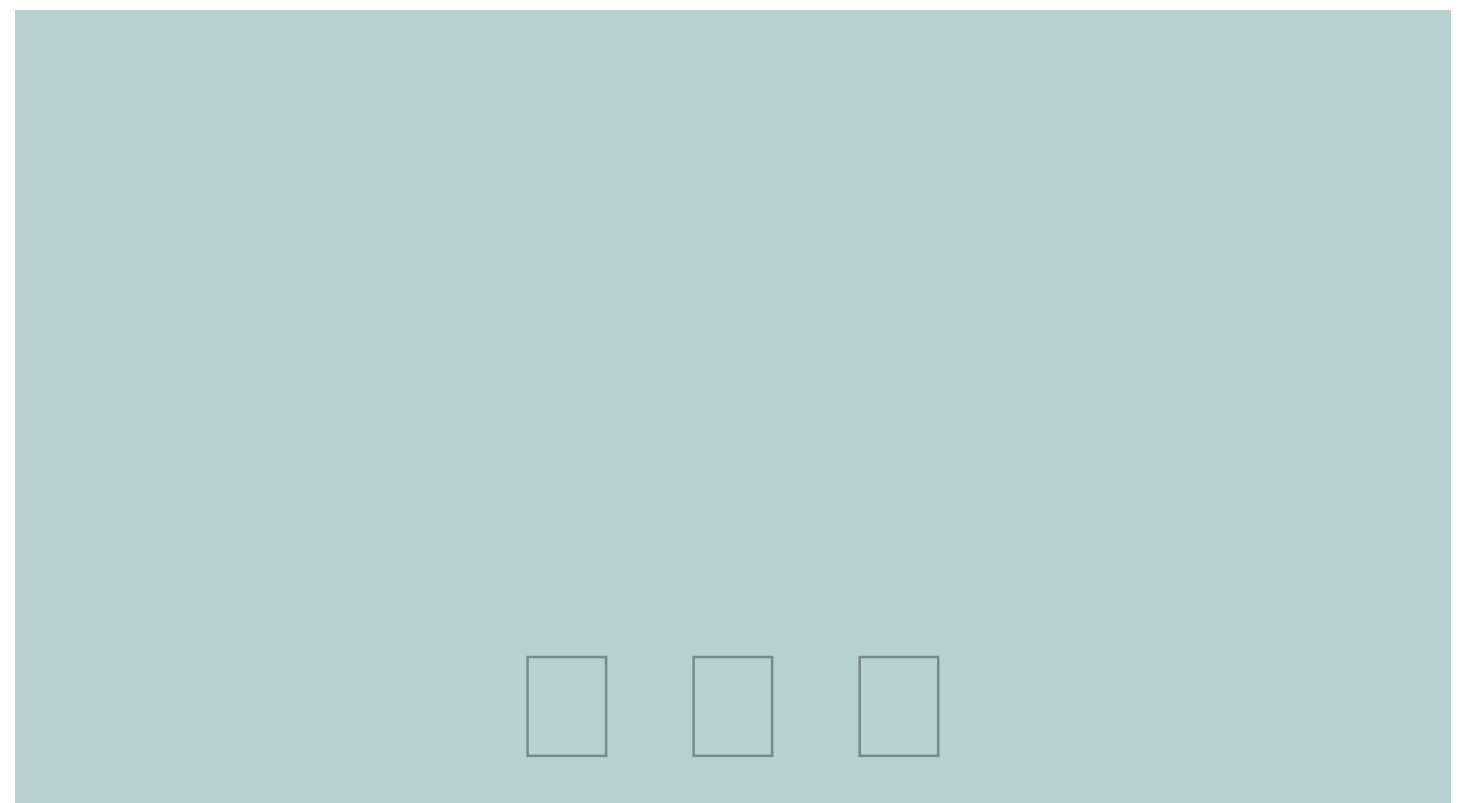
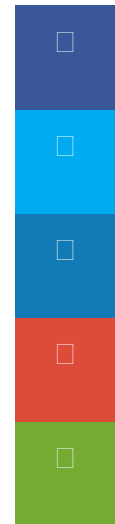
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