



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria social briefing:
**Increasing Unemployment Threatens to Become the Biggest Social
Problem for Bulgaria as a Result of the Pandemic**
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Increasing Unemployment Threatens to Become the Biggest Social Problem for Bulgaria as a Result of the Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic is a serious challenge and test for the Bulgarian society as well as for all societies in Europe nowadays. Bulgaria declared a state of emergency, giving the government extraordinary powers after the number of cases of coronavirus in the country tripled in a day. One month state of emergency on the territory of the whole country was immediately and unanimously voted by the country's Parliament on 13 March 2020.

In fact this means that some of the citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms are temporarily restricted. The argumentation for the emergency measures of the Coronavirus Crisis Staff to Parliament says that freedom of movement and travel will be restricted the most. The motive: the need to respect the conditions of quarantine and limit social contacts in order to stop the spread of the infection.

The state of emergency, which parliament voted for unanimously, will allow for travel bans to and from countries with large coronavirus outbreaks, the closing of schools and universities, and will permit police to intervene when the imposed isolation of infected people is not observed.

Bulgaria does not plan to fully close its borders for now as it wants to keep the transport of goods flowing to avoid further hits on the economy, already struggling with the global impact from the coronavirus outbreaks.

Bulgaria's National Assembly approved on March 18 the first reading of the Emergency Measures Bill, aimed at containing the further spread of Covid-19.

The bill provides for restrictions and prohibitions on attending public events, all kinds of mass events and sanctions for non-compliance with quarantine and the dissemination of fake news. Other measures include extending by six months the validity of expiring identification documents and driving licenses. Parliament will debate and vote on the second reading of the bill on March 20.

MPs rejected a proposal by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party for a moratorium on the deadline for payment of household bills within one month after the lifting of the state of emergency.

How exactly the coronavirus situation in Bulgaria developed so far in a state of emergency and what was the effect for the people concerning the restriction of the already mentioned civil rights and freedoms.

On March 17, the Bulgarian mountain resort of Bansko has been placed under strict quarantine. It happens after within 24 hours, three of the newly-confirmed cases of new coronavirus have been linked to the resort. Earlier, it was announced that a nine-year-old British child who had been on a skiing holiday in the town had tested positive. Like other mountain ski resorts in Bulgaria, Bansko's ski slopes already have been shut down. One of those who tested positive in the Blagoevgrad district was a man who had been working as a bouncer at a disco in Bansko. He is in hospital in Razlog and is in a stable condition. Earlier the same day, at a meeting of a committee of Bulgaria's National Assembly, Prosecutor-General Ivan Geshev had called for a complete quarantine of Bansko. Bulgarian National Television reported, at the time of the announcement of the quarantine, that there was a sharp increase in traffic leaving Bansko. That's why entry and exit from the resort was immediately prohibited. A curfew effective from 8pm was also announced. No one is allowed to go out on the streets of the town, unless they are going to a medical facility, insurance office, bank, pharmacy or grocery store. Only suppliers of electrical goods, plumbers, medical personnel, firefighters and other essential personnel will be admitted to enter that area. Interior Minister Mladen Marinov called on the media not to go to Bansko, on pain of severe fines. Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said that there were currently about 200 foreign tourists in the resort. Interior Ministry chief secretary Ivailo Ivanov announced that checkpoints at entrances to and exits from the town would be staffed by personnel from other parts of Bulgaria. In case of emergency, medical personnel would be sent to Bansko from other parts of the country.

Next day, on March 18, Bulgaria's Prosecutor's Office announced a number of cases in various parts of the country all connected with the coronavirus situation. The District Prosecutor's Office in Plovdiv is seeking to identify people who live in the city and who had worked in or visited the ski resorts of Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo between February 18 and the present. The ski zones of all three resorts were closed earlier this week. Action has also been taken to identify people from at-risk countries in hotels, guest houses and accommodation in the area who have visited the Bulgarian ski resorts since February 18. Once such people have been identified, they will be placed in quarantine. Anyone showing symptoms should be transported to the designated medical establishment.

Varna District Prosecutor's Office also said that it had initiated two new pre-trial proceedings for violating the ordinance against the spread of coronavirus. One case was a 71-year-old woman who had arrived on a flight from Italy on March 7 and flew out via Sofia Airport on March 13. The other was a 52-year-old lorry driver who had transited Bulgaria. If the accused are found guilty, each one face up to five years in prison and a fine of 10 000 to 50 000 leva.

The District Prosecutor's Office in Bourgas declared that it was also initiating pre-trial proceeds against a gaming hall and billiards club that remained open, admitting customers, in spite of the order for all such establishments to close. The penalty is again prison for up to five years and a fine from 10 000 to 50 000 leva. The Veliko Turnovo District Prosecutor's Office has also initiated pre-trial proceedings against a person who posted on Facebook false reports that would cause anxiety. Bulgaria's Criminal Code stipulates that persons who transmit by radio, telephone or other means false alarms or similar disturbing fake claims may be punished by imprisonment and fine. The Regional Prosecutor's Office in Gotse Delechev has begun pre-trial proceedings against a man who broke his quarantine. The person arrived from Italy. He was ordered into quarantine until March 23. A check did not find him at home. During a telephone conversation with him, he said that he was in Romania. An investigation established that he had crossed the border at Danube Bridge in Vidin on March 12. The penalty for such a violation of an ordinance, rules or measures issued against the spread or occurrence of an infectious disease in people during an epidemic, pandemic or emergency related to deaths is five years imprisonment and a fine from 10 000 to 50 000 leva according to the newly adopted legislation. Some other District Prosecutor's Office has also initiated pre-trial proceedings against four Bulgarians for breaking quarantine.

Together with this measures of the different Prosecution offices in the country some other measures restricting peoples movements and gatherings has been taken. Four municipalities so far have introduced curfews as a measure against Covid-19: Nova Zagora, Kozloduy, Devin and Belitsa. Belitsa municipality decreed a curfew, and quarantine for all residents of the municipality who worked in the Bansko resort. Mayor of Pernik Stanislav Vladimirov has issued an order banning gatherings of more than two adults, as well as children, at all open and closed public places, sports and fitness recreational areas, and playgrounds in the municipality.

Together with this some other measures has been taken on a national level. Bulgaria's Health Minister Kiril Ananiev has announced a temporary ban on entry into Bulgaria of persons from 16 countries because of the spread of Covid-19. The temporary ban applies to travellers arriving from China, Iran, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Spain, Italy, South Korea, France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The ban came into force at midnight on March 18. Bulgarian citizens, members of their families, as well as people with permanent and long-term residence status in Bulgaria and their families are excluded from the ban.

Bulgaria's crisis staff against coronavirus proposed to the Prime Minister to rule that outdoor gatherings of adults be limited to two people in the case of queues outside major food chains, pharmacies, banks, drug stores, insurance institutions and government agencies.

The latest sociological surveys provide information on how the Bulgarian population reacts on the emergency situation and the restrictive measures imposed by the government in the country.

The vast majority of Bulgarians claim that they are ready or even firmly prepared, to endure some restrictions in order to stop the virus. Only 7% admit that they have not yet taken any measures. This is indicated by a current survey made by Gallup International Agency on the coronavirus pandemic.

According to the results 54% agree, and 29% rather agree (a total of 83% agree to varying degrees) with the statement "I am prepared to sacrifice some of my human rights if this would help prevent the spread of the virus." 7% disagree and 9% strongly disagree (16% disagree to a different degree). 1% cannot judge.

Of the few non-drug measures listed by the respondents, the most frequently mentioned actions that people claim they have already taken are: more frequent hand washing (mentioned in 89% of cases), use of hand sanitizer (66%), reducing social contacts and staying home (58%), masks (17%), gloves (15%), voluntary quarantine (10%). 7% say they haven't done anything yet. 12% say various other measures such as disinfection, vitamins, etc. It is disturbing that this group also includes answers that contain 'brandy drinking' - they are a total of 2% of the total sample. Even if the respondents put in some irony, this is a direct indicator of the malicious influence of speculation and forgery spread on social networks that drinking of brandy can protect you from getting disease.

Two out of every three Bulgarians are convinced that the coronavirus will continue to spread. One quarter are optimistic that the epidemic will soon go away and the world will return to its normal rhythm of life. This shows a new Alpha Research agency survey conducted between February 29 and March 8, 2020.

The spread of the coronavirus strongly focuses people's attention: 75% of adult Bulgarians monitor information daily about what is happening in Bulgaria, 19% from time to time, and only 6% are uninterested.

After the confirmed presence of the virus in Bulgaria, the majority (55%) is concerned, but following measures and actions of the official authorities, 34% of the people are not particularly worried, and very worried feel 11%. With more concerned behavior, following the recommendations of specialists, but without signs of panic, mostly residents of large cities and middle generations stand out.

However, the attitude of the youngest and oldest is curious. The former have the highest levels of anxiety, but not necessarily accompanied by strict adherence to the recommendations, and potentially the most risky, according to experts, age groups are the least anxious.

An informed attitude to the problem is also evident in the individual measures taken to prevent the coronavirus. 52% rely on enhanced personal hygiene, and the younger and more mobile people are, the more they rely solely on it. The focus on these measures also explains the high demand for medical masks, disinfectants and other hygiene products. Significantly lower proportions (20% - 23%) tend to limit their contacts and travel at this stage.

The most worried resort to stocking products (12%), increased attention to symptoms (10%), and continued use of a medical mask (9%). The least concerned about a third of people take no special measures.

The authorities' actions to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the country are receiving a positive assessment from the society: 67% of the measures taken are relevant to the situation. 19% think they should be stricter, and 14%, on the contrary, are dissatisfied that unnecessary restrictions are imposed. Here again the generational contradiction is evident: the oldest and least anxious people have expectations for even stricter measures, while the youngest and most concerned about the spread of the infection find them too much.

The total number of confirmed cases of new coronavirus in Bulgaria has risen to 112, national crisis staff chief Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski told a regular briefing at 8am on March 20. So far, three people have died - a 66-year-old woman and her 74-year-old husband as well as another 80-year old woman. Up to that moment, over 4000 people have been tested for Covid-19 in Bulgaria. Prof. Mutafchiyski explained that although the number of the positive patients exceeded 100, no further tightening of the measures is envisaged so far.

Unfortunately, the situation is extremely dynamic and completely unpredictable. Most of the population remains hopeful that the strict measures taken by the government to curb the infection will have a positive effect, but whether this will actually happen is still unclear. It remains to monitor the situation and hope for a positive outcome soon.