



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Lithuania social briefing:**

## **The coronavirus stirs up the negative emotions in the society under quarantine**

**Linas Eriksonas**

### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

## **The coronavirus stirs up the negative emotions in the society under quarantine**

Since the introduction of the quarantine on 15 March, the Lithuanian society has been exposed to an unprecedented level of social distancing. Each person who was returning from abroad or was in touch with a person infected by COVID-19 was obliged to self-isolate at home. Those returning from abroad after 26 March were put into the quarantine in the places arranged by the relevant municipalities. During the Easter holidays, further preventive measures were taken – the free movement of people between individual municipalities was curtailed. Only those having their home address or property in a particular municipality were allowed through the police check-points which cordoned all cities and towns in the country throughout three Easter festive days with effect from 8 pm on 10 April to 8 pm on 13 April. One hundred fifty thousand vehicles have been checked on the roads leading to the municipalities, and 15 thousand vehicles were disallowed entry during those three days. Police monitored the urban areas using CCTV footage and arrived quickly on the spot to disband any gatherings of few people. The municipality of Vilnius has additionally put drones to use for identifying the hotspots of potential gatherings.

Below is a brief outline explaining how the imposed quarantine measures have impacted the emotional climate in Lithuania and what are the significant concerns about the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on the socio-psychological well-being of society and what plans are being put under consideration.

Until this pandemic, Lithuania's society has not experienced such a massive public health issue in modern times. Cholera which had caused numerous deadly epidemics in the country during the 19th century, was eradicated more than a century ago. Hence, the challenges posed by the coronavirus have created a shock.

Before the coronavirus crisis, the emotional climate of Lithuania's society was assessed quite positively. It is confirmed by the latest report "World Happiness Report 2020" (released on 20 March) which ranks 156 countries by measuring the state of happiness using different variables from multiple sources to assess different factors in social, urban and natural environments which affect the happiness that people perceive. The report (prepared annually by the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University) is based largely on the data from the Gallup World Poll. The latest ranking shows that Lithuania occupies the 41<sup>st</sup> place in

this index (scored as 6.215 out of 10), the 4<sup>th</sup> highest place within the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, Czechia being ranked the highest (19<sup>th</sup>) among the CEE countries, followed up by Slovenia (33<sup>th</sup>) and Slovakia (37<sup>th</sup>). Lithuania has been ranked as 18<sup>th</sup> on the list of the countries where the changes in the levels of happiness have significantly increased during the last decade since the global financial crisis of 2008.

The impact of the coronavirus on the socio-psychological climate was immediate and profound. The survey of the emotional climate of Lithuanian society (which was carried out on 15-30 March) has shown that the effects of COVID-19 were indeed dramatic. The number of respondents who reported the increased sense of anxiety has increased more than two-fold (from 16,1 to 64,6 per cent). The number of the respondents who expressed sadness has also more than doubled (from 21,9 to 46,8 per cent), while the number of people who experienced a sense of anger also notably increased (from 19,8 to 35,6 per cent).

The mental health experts have been quoted saying that such a jump in negative emotions is very dangerous to the people's physical and emotional health, especially, given the fact that negative emotions severely weaken the immune system of the person and also aggravate the health condition of people with chronic diseases. The experts also alerted to the fact that such a rapid increase in the level of anxiety and anger would eventually lead to the increased tensions in the intra-personal relations, causing domestic violence and other harmful behaviours.

Two factors are ascribed to the worsening emotional climate in society. First, the strict quarantine measures (including the increased presence of policing in the public spaces), to which the Lithuanian society has not been used, contributed to the feeling of fear which translated into anxiety and other negative emotions. Second, the increased emphasis on identifying and isolating all those categorized as being in the risk category of being the would-be infectors led to their ostracization. Since the country lacked an adequate number of kits for the coronavirus testing, the suspicions about the infected people freely moving undetected in public only increased the sense of anxiety and fuelled anger. The above survey has shown that the number of respondents who expected to receive help from their neighbours has decreased from 61,9 to 31,2 per cent. During the first three weeks since the introduction of the quarantine, the reported cases of domestic violence have increased by 20 per cent, according to the official data by the Police Department, yet the situation has not exacerbated further.

As the surveys have shown the critical aspect which kept society in the hold was a deep-held conviction that the government would help. Thirty per cent of the respondents put

their trust in the government's actions, despite the fact that the strict quarantine measures were unprecedented in terms of their scope and rapidness of deployment. The follow-up survey (conducted on 5-8 April) have already shown a marked improvement in the emotional climate. The number of those who reported the experienced anxiety has dwindled from 64,3 to 49 per cent. The sadness receded from 49 to 40 per cent of the reported cases, while the anger from 35,6 to 29,3 per cent. The overall level of stress has dropped from 45,8 to 33,8 per cent.

The experts commented that the decrease in negative emotions could be explained as the confirmation of society's coming to terms with the initial shock. "People started seeing that the catastrophic picture created in their imagination does not correspond to reality, and they started guiding themselves by reason, real statistics and not fantasies. Secondly, the natural resistance of psyche has turned on, which helps the person to avoid the impact of negative emotions by suppressing or changing them. Thirdly, no new, dramatic events have happened in Lithuania, which might have caused a new surge of emotions. Fourthly, with the decrease of the emotional heat, the people got used to the new conditions and started to discover new measures for calming down under the quarantine – the number of those who have experienced calmness has increased from 52,9 to 65,1 per cent", - concluded the organiser of the survey.

The uncertainty that plagues society also stems from the fact that since the spread of the pandemic in the country due to the imposed quarantine, more than 50 thousand people became jobless. The rate of unemployment, which was stabilized during the last two years following the healthy growth of the economy and the steady growth of personal income, has increased by 17 per cent. On 8 April the non-governmental organizations in an open letter addressed to the Government and the Parliament urged to take adequate measures to minimize the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the most vulnerable segments of society through the increased financing of social services. The social services that are most needed include the psycho-social support of the part of the population which might feel alienated during the crisis and exposed to the increased levels of the emotional distress resulting in domestic violence and other violent behaviours. Special attention is to be paid to children and people with disabilities whose families and relatives have difficulties in providing adequate care under quarantine. The NGOs also called for making the provision of warm food for families who are experiencing social risks and providing help and support to children from the socially disadvantaged backgrounds having difficulties in accessing and benefiting from online schooling.

In response to these concerns, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and the Ministry of Health have an integrated 24/7 hotline which provides support over the phone to individual

social groups, and a website ([www.pagalbasau.lt](http://www.pagalbasau.lt)) providing the information about the emotional and psychological help freely available.

## References:

1. DELFI.lt, Dalia Plikūnė, “Ekspertai skambina pavojaus varpais: po pandemijos skurdas vėl išgins daugelį iš Lietuvos” (Experts are ringing bells: after the pandemic poverty will push out many from Lithuania), 20 April 2020; <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/ekspertai-skambina-pavojaus-varpais-po-pandemijos-skurdas-vel-isingins-daugeli-is-lietuvos.d?id=84084837>
2. DELFI.lt, “Kita karantino pusė: naujausias tyrimas rodo kardinalius lietuvių savijautos pokyčius” (The other side of quarantine: the latest survey shows the cardinal changes in the well-being of Lithuanians), 6 April, 2020; <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kita-karantino-puse-naujausias-tyrimas-rodo-kardinalius-lietuviu-savijautos-pokycius.d?id=83977807>
3. Verslo žinios, Rūta Balčiūnienė, “Pandemijos akivaizdoje panikos ir nevilties banga Lietuvoje slūgsta” (The wave of panic and despair in Lithuania in the face of the pandemic is on the wane), 17 April, 2020; <https://www.vz.lt/rinkodara/2020/04/17/pandemijos-akivaizdojepanikos-ir-nevilties-banga-lietuvojeslugsta>
4. DELFI.lt, Dalia Plikūnė, “Ant stalo – 34 naujos priemonės, kurios padės žmonėms išgyventi po karantino” (Tabled 34 new policy measures which will support people to survive after the quarantine), <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/ant-stalo-34-naujos-priemones-kurios-pades-zmonems-isingyventi-po-karantino.d?id=84088057>
5. John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, Jeffrey Sachs, and Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, eds, “World Happiness Report 2020”, New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network; <https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/WHR20.pdf>