



Weekly Briefing

Croatia social briefing:
The threat of novel coronavirus: perception and implications
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Summary

In early months of 2020, a new threat imposed itself to the world in the shape of a new strain of coronavirus, previously not familiar to science and medicine experts. As the first victims of the new lethal disease lost their lives under its symptoms, governments of the world and international organizations, found that the status quo is becoming seriously interrupted. World Health Organization declared a global health emergency, and the story gained additional infamy by the strong media coverage which is causing public panic all around the world and inherently, adding to the threat of any pandemic.

Overlapping aspects of global diseases

The recent history had shown that various new diseases, regardless of their origin and extent, whether they are local or global, have a potential of stirring the social, political and economic aspects of the nations and regions inflicted, but also the world. When it came to different pandemics which took global levels of panic and recognisability, such as Ebola, Zika virus, or bird flu, the severity of the outbreak was usually shaped by various factors. For example, the ability and extent of the virus to transmit, how lethal it is, and very importantly, the levels of preparedness of the country of origin to deal with its consequences and its integration with the rest of the world, are the different aspects which shape the outbreak potential of any lethal virus. Public health is considered to be a matter of national interest, moreover, a matter of national security, especially considering potential loss of lives, but also facing turbulences in production, trade and social stability. In some cases, global conflicts can be affected by various pandemics, especially from the perspective of manipulation of public fear and causing additional panic by different parties.

The levels of outbreak are very often shaped by different social and political elements, geography or demographic image of a certain country or region. Therefore, it is clear that some areas of the world are at higher risk of being struck by a lethal disease. Climate factors, propensity to conflict, poverty, lacking in medical aid and equipment, poor sanitation are all factors which can increase the potential of an outbreak for a specific global area. Different kinds of elements are the ones that Asia, especially its southeast, is facing. Continuous rise in

urbanization and traffic infrastructure causes the degradation of land, fertile and rich soil, and leads to higher degrees of air pollution. In that way, a basis for the spread of infectious tropical diseases is created. Furthermore, fast urbanization and proportional decrease in environmental preservation, causes lower immunity system with Asian people, which leads towards greater susceptibility to diseases. Another important aspect which shapes the outbreak potential of a pathogen is the quickness of its spreading beyond the country of its origin. Migration, global transport and trade are all key elements in that equation.

Additional, and perhaps the greatest danger in spreading of any pathogen is the public panic which is caused, and the way the national governments response to such occurrences. Those two factors often correlate in shaping one another. In situations of public fear, stimulated by the excessive media coverage, governments tend to make haste reactions by reassignment of resources, relocation of funds and other policies aimed at the containment of panic and fear, not the cause itself. For example, tuberculosis, the leading cause of infectious diseases worldwide, killed 1.5 million people in 2018, with 10 million people who fell ill. But both the public and governments perception was blurred and therefore the reactions were lacking.

此外，或许引起公众恐慌是任何病原体传播的最大危险，以及各国政府对此类事件的反应方式。这两个因素往往相互影响。在公众担心的情况下，由于媒体的过度报道，政府往往会仓促作出反应，通过重新分配资源、调动资金以及实行其他旨在遏制恐慌和恐惧的政策，而不是针对问题的根本原因。例如，结核病是全球传染病的主要病因，2018年导致150万人死亡，1000万人患病。但是公众和政府的认知都模糊不清，因此缺乏反应。

Novel coronavirus' economic and political dimension

The novel coronavirus broke out in Wuhan, China. Facing protests in Hong Kong, trade disputes with the United States, both which cause a slowdown of national economy, the Chinese government must deal with a matter overshadowing all others in its scope and potential level of harm. Another issue lies in the fact that the city of Wuhan, the source of the outbreak, is an important traffic corridor connecting the coastal area of China with its inland parts. Therefore, government's decision to lock down Wuhan will inevitably result in economic disruption. The transit routes leading in and out of the city are all suspended, regardless of forms of transport. Closure of the city will upset industry, manufacture and transport of goods, all leading to severe losses for other significant trade cities such as Shanghai, and national economy itself.

There is also a political dimension to the Wuhan coronavirus. The authority of the ruling party could be shaken by the raised public expectations regarding public services, health policies, defence policies and different aspect of quality of life. In that way, any perceived mistakes by the ruling party could cause an effect of diminished confidence from the citizens and brand the government as incompetent. Later on, considering that the issue of the pandemic is out in the open, China must adapt its national and local policies of containment, because of the attention of the rest of the world, which generates a serious degree of pressure for China.

The traits of Novel coronavirus

From the lethality point of view, in comparison with other global pandemics with high death toll, such as Ebola, SARS and MERS, according to data available at the period of writing, the fatality rate of Wuhan coronavirus is the lowest with 2.1%. The second lowest is SARS with 9.6%, and much lower number of infected people, while the fatality rates of MERS and Ebola stand at 34.4%, and 40.4%, respectively. According to daily situation reports of the World Trade Organization, at the moment of writing, there are 37251 confirmed cases of infection in China. Number of fatalities is 812 in China and one outside. The main difference between the Wuhan coronavirus, and other similar viruses, is how easy it transmits from person to person and the lengthy period of its incubation. For that reason, effective tracking, monitoring and containment become significantly more difficult. If the new virus spreads as fast as SARS for example, much larger issues with its containment and outbreak control could be evident.

On the basis of previous pathogens, it is expected that the Wuhan coronavirus will decrease in levels of infection through spring and potentially pass until summer. The government in Beijing hopes for such outcome in order to be able to lift the traffic restrictions and proceed with the flow of goods, workforce and finances. The main trouble stems from the fact that approximately 5 million people left Wuhan city before the quarantine measures were set in motion. It is assessed that tens of thousands of people could be spreading the infection around the world at the moment of writing. But even that assessment cannot be certain due to the aforementioned long incubation period of the virus.

Nevertheless, some of the traits of the infection must not be neglected such as the fact that the elderly and those with previous health issues are most likely to be exposed to infection. Also the countries neighbouring China are the first ones to be faced with the outbreak, but due to the global transportation and infrastructural interconnection, the rest of the world should also be on reasonable level of alert, especially those countries with a high number of intake of

Chinese tourists, students studying in China, highly developed trade and businesses with Chinese industry and government. If the pace of the outbreak quickens, Chinese measures of containment would need to remain in place for a longer period, further affecting its industry, manufacturing and export.

Preparedness of Croatia and the international community

The rest of the world also faces the threat of the outbreak with different measures. With the number of noted cases of infection outside of China being 307 people, according to the data of World Health Organization, nations like Japan and Australia have already organised quarantines for hundreds of people who have visited China and city of Wuhan. Furthermore, United States, Singapore, Australia, Vietnam and New Zealand have blocked the entrance for all foreign citizens who visited China in past several weeks. Moreover, airline companies such as Emirates and Etihad are suspending the flights towards China for an unspecified period.

From the perspective of Croatia, the Ministry of Health and Croatian government have promptly reacted stating that there is no place for panic and fear in Croatia and Europe, but the containment measures are ready to be implemented if the cases of infection and potential outbreak are noticed. At the moment of writing there are 28 registered cases of infection in the countries of the European Union, and Croatia is not one of them. The recently appointed Croatian Minister of Health, Vili Beroš, had set up a crisis control centre from which the Ministry is coordinating all the necessary actions required to prevent the pandemic of reaching Croatia. The crisis control centre had informed all Croatian municipalities and local government structures on how to implement measures of monitoring the health situation in order to quickly react if symptoms of infection are noticed. According to the Minister, a set of detailed guidelines was developed and shared among all health and sanitation employees, to achieve the best level of preparedness for the potential threat.

Among the rest, a measure of constant health oversight over Croatian citizens returning from China is implemented, and all citizens with suspicious symptoms are treated, hospitalized if needed, and their blood is instantly being tested in the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases Dr. Fran Mihaljević. Considering that Croatia is presiding over the Council of the European Union in the first part of 2020, Minister Beroš stated that a series of videoconferences between ministers of health from all the Member States are to be organised to achieve an exchange of practices, ideas and measures and to coordinate the further steps in dealing with the potential outbreak.

According to everything noted, Croatia, and most likely other Member States of the European Union are prepared if the Novel coronavirus reaches Europe, with precaution measures and crisis centres being established. Now, it is important to disseminate the awareness about the implemented measures, lessen the levels of panic, and educate the population on how to deal with, and properly react in case the infection reaches Europe in an intensified form.

Conclusion

Taking all stated into account, the coming period before the spring of 2020 will provide an insight on how the new, potentially global threat, the Novel coronavirus, will spread. Differing from similar viruses such as SARS and MERS, in regard of rapid transfer of infection from person to person, and with slower incubation period, Wuhan coronavirus is a new challenge not only for health and sanitation services, departments and policymakers of China and the world, but a stress for Chinese and therefore global economy, trade, transportation and services. At this moment, cooperation between Chinese government, World Health Organization, and the rest of international community, to track the spread of virus, exchange practices and advices on measures to prevent the outbreak and protect health, is necessary to successfully contain the virus and defend the global population.