



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Slovenia social briefing:**  
**A new rise in the number of Covid-19 cases**  
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## **A new rise in the number of Covid-19 cases**

### **Summary**

*Following a new wave of Covid-19 epidemic in the neighbouring Croatia and other countries of the Western Balkans, Slovenia also started recording a new rise in the number of Covid-19 cases from late August onwards. A relatively relaxed border regime with these countries was responsible for the influx of cases in late August and the late and ambiguous response in border policies could not stop the next wave of epidemic occurring in Slovenia anymore. With the beginning of the school year, many scenarios were played out on how to stop the spread in the school environment and policies have partly changed since the beginning of September. Although schools seem to manage the problem quite successfully, the spread in the general population continues to rise at a worrying rate, with both the government and the public health institution preparing for possible developments in the future months.*

### **Background: a new wave of epidemic in the Western Balkans**

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia – as well as other countries in their neighbourhood, the numbers of Covid-19 infections started to rise rapidly in June. Slovenia established a two-weeks quarantine for all persons coming from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo on June 19<sup>th</sup>. For Croatia, a sudden rise of cases started to take shape in mid-June, just as the tourist season was approaching. Initially, most of the cases were reported especially in the capital, Zagreb, and in several other clusters, most notably in a in the monastery of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross small town Đakovo (Osijek-Baranja County), to where it was brought by sisters returning from a visit to Kosovo. Croatian government responded quickly and expressed its deliberation to use all measures needed to help save the upcoming high tourist season. In the first weeks the infections only slowly spread to the coastal part of the country, although soon several clusters were formed in Dalmatia and, later on, in Istria and other parts of the coast. Slovenian government considered tightening the border regime, but refrained to do so after a meeting between the two Prime Ministers, Janez Janša and Andrej Plenković on July 10. After the meeting Slovenian government decided not to remove Croatia from the list of »green«, i. e. epidemiologically safe countries, while the

Croatian side promised to close down night clubs and prevent large scale parties in tourist areas. Croatian government was not entirely successful in doing so, which caused these high frequented areas to become new clusters of infections, most notable the famous Zrće beach on the island of Pag, where despite the measures parties were still being held. Despite the insecurity about the epidemiological situation or about the potential change in border regime, the numbers of Slovenian citizens, who chose Croatia for their summer holiday destination, still remained rather high, but of course lower than the previous summer. An additional motivation for Slovenian holidaymakers to stay within the borders of their own country was the system of tourist vouchers, which were issued by the government as a way to help the tourism industry after the first wave of Covid-19 epidemic. The number of new cases in Croatia started rising again rapidly in the first half of August, which led to a growing number of imported cases to Slovenia with people returning from holidays. Government finally took the measures to limit the import of the virus from Croatia by imposing a Quarantine for all returning from Croatia from August 25th onwards. This was seen by many as a result of a political compromise with the neighbouring country and a dangerously late date for such a decision with the opening of schools being just a week away. The decision turned out to be less efficient than desired, especially because the decision itself had a number of exceptions, limiting its efficiency.

### **Second wave of Covid-19 in Slovenia and the related measures**

By the time the government put a quarantine on people entering Slovenia from Croatia, the local transmission was unfortunately already established. On the day the new measures started, the number of new cases was 36, while from the second week of September onwards, the numbers started rising rapidly, surpassing the highest number of cases in the first wave (in April) already on September 8th. In the following weeks the numbers were rising considerably, going over 100 on September 10th and over 200 on September 29th.

The government put great hopes and lots of publicity into the new phone application which would track the contacts of the user. At first the promoted scenario of its use was that it would either be obligatory for all citizens or, alternatively, for those with confirmed Covid-19 infection. Many debates went on, both in general public and in media, about the application's safety and especially doubts were raised if enough attention was being given to the potential breaches of privacy. With a two-week delay, the application »Ostani zdrav« (Stay Healthy) was launched on August 17th, first for Android and later for other platforms. Doubts were expressed also by IT and telecommunications experts, claiming that the system it used was not precise

enough to prevent many false positive and many false negative results. For these and other possible reasons, the number of users of the application is still fairly low, over 50,000 or over 2,5 percent of the population, largely hindering its functionality.

With September 1st most of the attention of epidemiologists and the government representatives went into the regime of the opening of schools. Many different scenarios were played out for how to do that in a safe way. Three, dubbed »green«, »orange« and »red« were discussed at the Ministry of Education. »Green« scenario would mean normal class work with the strengthened prevention and hygiene measures. The »orange« scenario would keep the first few years of primary school in schools while others (including the secondary school pupils) would learn from home, and the »red« scenario would mean home-schooling for all pupils. The ministry decided on the green scenario, combined with recommendations ho to prevent the mixing of different classes – which enables the quarantine to be limited to a smaller number of children in the case of an infection. The numbers of quarantined classes were growing in the first two weeks of September, has then decreased and has been stable in the last week of September – not fully reflecting the number of active cases in the country on the general level. The highest number of these classes was 60 on the primary school level and just under 50 at the secondary school level. In the last week of September, the number is around 20 for primary school population and around 18 for secondary schools. The number of actively infected pupils in Slovenia (on both levels cumulatively) was around 140 in the end of September, with a similar number of teachers actively infected on both levels of education.

Other measures were taken in the following weeks to slow down the spread of Covid-19. On September 19<sup>th</sup> stricter measures for the wearing of masks were put in place, making them not only obligatory in all closed public spaces, but also in the open public spaces where sufficient distance of 2m cannot be kept. Bars and restaurant could now only stay open until 22:30. Initially masks also became obligatory for last three years of primary and all secondary school students only to be changed soon after lots of criticism. As the numbers are still on the rise, many other measures are being discussed, such as limiting the number of people in shops, bars and restaurants, a ban on gatherings of more than 10 people etc.

## **Conclusions**

Following the summer months when the relaxed border regime enabled the infection to slowly spread to Slovenia, from the neighbouring countries which were experiencing a rise in the number of cases, the number of newly infected in Slovenia has been on the rise considerably

since the end of August. After the initial worries about the infective potential of school environment, the “green” scenario of school reopening seemed to function reasonably well, with the schools effectively limiting the spread of the virus. The partial quarantining system in schools seems to be functioning well, at the same time limiting the spread of the virus and enabling children to experience a normal schooling as much as possible. The number of cases in the general population, however, is still on the rise, which might motivate the government to draw some new measures to prevent the spread of the virus, most probably limiting the number of people in public spaces and in gatherings.