



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania social briefing:

The pandemic opens up questions about the wellbeing of Lithuania's society

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The pandemic opens up questions about the wellbeing of Lithuania's society

The year 2020 has been a roller coaster for Lithuania's society as many others facing the unknowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The year has seen two lockdowns introduced with a large part of communities and households for the first time experiencing such extensive quarantine periods. Altogether, in the outgoing year, Lithuania's inhabitants spent 290 days under restrictions due to the national quarantine. The first lockdown took place from 16 March until 17 June and the second one from 7 November until the end of the year (the latest quarantine's due date was set to 31 January). During the first one, which corresponded to the first wave pandemic, the Lithuanian society demonstrated resilience and succeeded in becoming one of the least affected countries in Europe. However, after a half-a-year respite during the late spring and throughout the summer that led to Lithuania to declare together with neighbouring Latvia and Estonia a free travel zone (referred to as the "Baltic bubble") inviting foreigners to come, the fortunes dramatically changed.

The second wave of the pandemic that arrived in mid-autumn hit Lithuania unexpectedly hard and took the society and the Government off guard; in December a former champion in tackling the virus has turned into the worst affected country not only in Europe but also in the world, according to the identified daily infection numbers per 100 thousand population. The attempts to stop the pandemic's ominously enlarging wave failed to give the results, and the country entered the second lockdown. By the end of the year, 5 per cent of the population became infected. Half of the infected recovered while another half continued to battle the illness; 1 per cent of all the affected cases were mortal, and the number of deaths accelerated.

Below is an overview of the results from the latest surveys of Lithuania's societal behaviours that are considered vital within the context of the challenges caused by the restrictions imposed during the lockdown. It will identify some of the aspects that create barriers for society's difficulties in responding to the pandemic.

The most recent research on psychological factors underlying adherence to the introduced measures under COVID-19 has shown that the effective policies require to consider two issues that significantly impact the compliance with the governmental regulations on the part of society. Firstly, the measures should specifically target individuals' internal motivation to act, avoiding diffusion of responsibility. Accordingly, as the research shows, the actions to be taken

and communicated in society should be simple, yet transparent and trustworthy; and designed to elicit empathy-driven reactions in public, for example by making people aware that adhering to the quarantine rules is crucial to avoid spreading the virus among their loved ones. Secondly, individuals rather than the government have to be considered key actors in promoting compliance to regulations and norms across their relatives, colleagues and friends. People with leadership roles in formal groups must be empowered and encouraged to share messages with their colleagues. Individuals should be encouraged to share these messages across their informal social circles and motivate other group members to follow public health regulations and norms.

In Lithuania, the opposite has been often the case. The messages circulated in society (especially on social media) that have been questioning the extent of the pandemic and, in extreme cases, even putting in doubt the seriousness of the dangers facing the society. The overall perception held the Government rather than communities, families, and individuals are responsible for successfully battling the virus. The Government's communication was often top-down and one-way, portraying society as the pandemic's passive object rather than the subject that needs to be empowered and supported to overwhelm by showing efforts and solidarity by addressing specific societal behaviours.

During the first wave of the pandemic, the initiatives sprang out sporadically to demonstrate the solidarity with the hospitals' medical personnel, yet they removed the responsibility from the society-at-large by delegating it to the public health institutions. The second wave of the pandemic was short of similar actions except for few isolated instances, where local businesses invited customers to purchase food or other amenities to be delivered to the medics at work, thus again communicating the wrong-headed messages as if the health specialists directed by the Government had the duty to deal with the pandemic on behalf of the rest of the society under lockdown.

One has to look for the deeper causes underlying the passive and, in some cases, even negligent attitude of the society towards the citizen's proactive role in tackling the virus not only by expressing solidarity with the health personnel in hospitals and the patients through donations and gifts but also by taking responsibility and acting upon it for protecting themselves and their families, the closest ones and the people around them.

The global surveys of individuals' public attitudes concerning other members of society have shown that Lithuania has an abysmal record regarding three social behaviours at play when tackling the societal challenges: altruism, positive reciprocity and trust. According to the Global Preferences Survey conducted a few years ago to assess how individual's preferences

for risk and time, positive and negative reciprocity, altruism, and trust influence economic and social outcomes in a cross-country perspective, Lithuania has the second-lowest level of the empirically observed state of altruism (the generosity towards other members of society) among the EU countries and the third-lowest among the OECD countries.

Altruism is a social behaviour that benefits another individual or other individuals in terms of direct advantages or chances of survival and reproduction at some cost of the benefactor. The research shows that the low level of altruism correlates with a low level of positive reciprocity. According to the surveyed level of positive reciprocity, Lithuania is ranked at the bottom of the EU countries, followed by Estonia and the Czech Republic. Also, in terms of trust levels, Lithuania is among the nations where members of society exhibit the lowest levels of trust towards each other, being the fourth from the bottom in the EU, above only Romania, Greece and the Czech Republic.

The research demonstrates that altruism, trust and positive reciprocity have all been shown to predict a wide range of choices at the individual level, including, e.g., financial decision-making, educational decisions, labour market behaviour, charitable giving, social norm enforcement, and health outcomes and are associated with important life outcomes at the individual level. They play an essential role in shaping the social behaviours that influence the compliance with the COVID-19 measures taken by the public authorities.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that in the 2020 Gallup survey on global emotions, Lithuania scored third from the bottom, as the country that has the least Positive Experience Index score. The Positive Experience Index score is obtained by calculating the mean of all valid affirmative responses to the following five questions: 1) did you feel well-rested yesterday? 2) were you treated with respect all day yesterday? 3) did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday? 4) did you learn or do something interesting yesterday? 5) did you experience the following feelings during a lot of the day yesterday?

One might assume that the Lithuanian respondents' rather negative responses in this survey have something to do with society's economic and financial uncertainties in Lithuania. And, indeed, in another global survey conducted by Gallup for the Lloyd's Register Foundation, in assessing the public attitudes to risk, Lithuania was the only high-income country where a very sizable number of respondents (43 per cent) indicated the economic and financial risks as the most relevant risks they considered. The respondents did not see other risks as very appropriate in their social and work contexts, including the risks related to gender inequality

(including the gender pay gap), safety at work, safety and food and drink, cyber threats and the risks arising due to the climate change.

Indeed, the World Worry Index (created by Gallup) shows that Lithuania is among the top 10 countries in the world where the populations for different reasons have the least worries as concerning everyday risks such as severe weather, violent crime, availability of food and clean water, electricity, mental health issues and the essential household appliances. In other words, the Lithuanian society meets the basic needs which entail biological and physiological needs and safety needs, according to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The higher level of the human needs (the psychological needs including the need for belongingness and love needs and esteem needs) which require a certain level of altruism, positive reciprocity and trust, are in deficiency.

During the summer between the two waves of the pandemic, the Lithuanian researchers conducted a psychological health study of society entitled 'My Self-Being' to find out how the coronavirus crisis-affected people's psychological wellbeing in Lithuania and how to help them more effectively. The study results showed that people had been affected in some way or another by various pandemic problems. Many of the study participants felt intense fears, anxiety, sadness or loneliness. Almost half of the people were severely emotionally affected by restrictions on the contacts with the relatives, and even a quarter of the observed study participants experienced severe adaptation difficulties.

The researchers concluded that people have difficulty handling stress during a pandemic, and these emotional difficulties are beginning to interfere with their daily lives. The results of the previous studies in Lithuania have shown less widespread use of these difficulties. Thus, it is argued that the pandemic's current challenges can result in more significant psychological problems for people, which creates more challenges for the Government to find more appropriate and, more importantly, timely and effective ways to shape pro-active social behaviours in response to the underlying worries of the people.

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