



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia social briefing:
Covid-19 epidemic – from a public health issue to a societal crisis
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Covid-19 epidemic – from a public health issue to a societal crisis

Summary

The developments in Slovenian society in 2020 were predominantly marked by the Covid-19 pandemic. In Slovenia, there were two discernible waves of the epidemic this year, the first one in spring and the second one, which has still not subsided, in autumn. A number of public health measures were adopted by the government and two periods of lockdown of public life were put in place, the first one markedly more successful than the second. Apart from the economic damage of the epidemic and the lockdowns, society suffered a lot of adverse consequences as well, most notably the effect on the education system and the effect on cultural workers and the cultural industry in general.

The first wave of the epidemic

After the rise in cases in the neighbouring Italy, especially in Veneto region which is close to the border between the two countries, Slovenia started the testing for new Covid-19 in January and February 2020. In the beginning of March, first positive test was done with a man that recently returned from a travel in Morocco. Most of the detected cases in the first week were imported, but the number grew as result of the previous two weeks of school holidays when a lot of Slovenians went to the ski destinations in Northern Italy. Public gatherings were gradually limited, and hygienic measures tightened. Epidemic was declared on March 12, just a day before the new government was sworn in, and the active cases on that day were nearing 100. First harsh measures followed in the following days, public transport was stopped, schools closed (universities already stopped lectures the previous week), restaurants and bars were closed. Stricter ban on all unnecessary movement in public spaces (except for recreation) was put in place on March 20. Movement between municipalities was banned on March 30. According to the number of active cases, the peak of the epidemic was reached a month after the first detected case, on April 3rd, when there were 609 active cases in the country. According to the number of deaths the peak of the first wave was few days later with around 5 deaths per day. From late April onwards a gradual relaxation of restriction measures followed, with movement across municipalities being allowed again on April 30, public transport starting on

May 11 and kindergartens and primary schools gradually reopening from May 18 onwards. With the end of May Slovenia was the first country in Europe to declare the end of the epidemic.

The most affected part of the population in the first wave were the elderly people, especially residents of the nursing homes. Almost a third of *Covid-19 cases and 79% of all deaths were among the residents and the staff in the nursing homes. Many aspects of these institutions were discovered to be seriously deficient in dealing with an large-scale epidemic: lack of equipment, old facilities, lack of staff, unclear instructions of health institutions etc. Although a number of the shortcomings were identified after the first wave and the government was explicit about not letting the situation happen again, the second wave again cause a large number of infections and deaths in the nursing homes.*

The second wave of the epidemic

Just over a month after the proclaimed end of the epidemic, the situation started worsening in the region, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. A quarantine was put in place for these three countries on June 19. In the summer months the epidemic gradually spread to Croatia. The government, relying on the guarantees by the government of Croatia that epidemic was under control in the coastal regions, was slow to adopt quarantine measures and the end of the holidays saw a quick rise in the number of case, that the travel ban the last week of August could not stop anymore. At an unprecedented rate, the number of active cases grew from 468 on September 1 to 1908 on October 1 and 22,533 on November 1. Measures to prevent the spread were put in place, but with an already spread epidemic, the slowing down was much less efficient. Mask wearing became mandatory in closed spaces and crowded public places from September 19, all public gatherings of over 10 people were banned from October 9 and schools closed from 6th grade of primary school onwards on October 19. A different approach was initially used for closing down businesses, with diving the country into red and orange regions, but from October 23 all regions already reached the threshold of being labelled red. In a controversial and widely criticized move, a night-time curfew was adopted (from 21:00 to 6:00) from October 20. A strict ban of all unnecessary commercial activities, restaurants, bars, hotels and other activities was put in place on October 24, just before autumn school holidays. It soon also became clear that the autumn holidays will be the beginning of the closure of schools for the remaining 5 grades of primary school and the kindergartens.

In contrast to the first wave, the lockdown was much less efficient. Many factors contributed to that, and the interpretations varied with different experts. The obvious seasonal difference doubtlessly contributed to people spending more time indoors, which led to higher infection rates. Other factors were also of importance. The tracking of contacts at the level of public health authorities completely stopped due to the high number of actively infected people. Even more, the system of issuing mandatory quarantine orders completely collapsed in mid-October, which meant that many potentially infected contacts received no proof of potential infection so they could not stay at home without sanctions at their workplace. Even when getting those, the low compensation for quarantine time also caused many people with lowest income to continue working in order to secure the already extremely low salary. As a result of these systematic shortcomings, the rather strict lockdown did not result in anything more than a plateau of the number of active cases, which continues with little change from mid-November onwards.

Effects on society

Along the economic and employment issues brought by the lockdown, the collapse of small businesses, the growing unemployment and extremely damaging effects on tourism and hospitality industries, two aspects of the society were especially affected by the lockdown and subsequent developments: education system and culture.

The first wave of the epidemic had an extremely harmful effect on cultural industry in general, as all its various activities were virtually stopped. Libraries, bookshops, music and theatre venues and any type of performance was stopped. The effect was especially detrimental for the self-employed cultural workers, since they had no income to rely on and received very little support in the framework of “coronapackages”, state aid programme. With most of the bans staying in place also between the two waves and then in the second wave, this part of Slovenian society is among the worst hit, a situation that was additionally worsened by the conflicts between the cultural workers and the new Minister of Culture, Vasko Simoniti.

The effects of the lockdown on school system are also worrying. Although the official position of the Minister of Education, Simona Kustec, still is that home-schooling is working efficiently and that children and students have not experienced any serious shortcomings, there are many expert groups and civil society associations (headmasters, education experts, parents’ associations, university deans etc.) that voice an opposite claim. Apart from the impossibility of parents successfully navigating both working from home and teaching their children, other factors are being stressed by the mentioned groups, most notably the deepening of the income

and social differences between children from different family backgrounds, increase in home violence and neglect and a much lower educational output compared to the in-class education.

Conclusion

The first and the larger and still ongoing second wave of the epidemic marked most of the societal developments in the year 2020. The lockdown measures which were imposed and periodically lifted and reimposed, not only caused damage to the economic aspects of the Slovenian society and increased unemployment but have also damaged many aspects of societal life in general. In addition to the elderly, who were, due to different factors, most directly affected by the epidemic, the education system and culture suffered the most. While the epidemic still lasts, it is difficult to fully assess the long-term damage for both, but many fear that the negative effects could take a long time to overcome.