



Weekly Briefing

Slovenia social briefing:
Slovenian social development outlook for 2021
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Slovenian social development outlook for 2021

Summary

After ten months of the Covid-19 epidemic with two prominent waves thereof in spring and autumn, all different aspects of society are marked by its effects and its development will significantly influence the outlook for Slovenian society in 2021. With the numbers of newly infected slowly decreasing in the last stretch of the second epidemic wave, the future developments are still partly unclear. How effective Slovenian society will be in addressing the adverse effects of the epidemic will depend primarily on how well two aspects of the epidemic management will be handled, namely, the strategy of the gradual easing of the lockdown and the success of the vaccination programme.

Background: Covid-19 epidemic in 2020

With Covid-19 spreading to Europe in late winter and early spring, Slovenia felt the effects of epidemic surge in neighbouring Italy. First larger outbreaks in Lombardy and Veneto coincided with winter school holidays in Slovenia. The return from Italian ski resorts brought first Covid-19 cases and soon in-country transmission started as well. Epidemic was declared on March 12, when the number of active cases was nearing 100 and the peak reached on April 6 with just over 600 active cases in the country. The maximum number of daily deaths was around 5 per day. The lockdown was progressively tightening from mid-March to late April when the government started a gradual loosening of the measures. The end of the epidemic – which turned out to be the end of the first wave only – was declared with the end of May. In the first wave epidemic caused great damage among the elderly population, especially the residents of the nursing homes, which – together with the staff in the nursing homes – made for a third of all Covid-19 cases and almost 80% of all Covid-19-related deaths. After government being late with measures to prevent the spread from the summer outbreak in Croatia, the second wave of the epidemic started early in autumn and worsened by October. Schools were gradually closed in October and stricter lockdown imposed at the end of October with unprecedented measures such as the night-time curfew put in place. What currently seems as the peak of the ongoing second wave of the epidemic was reached in the second week of January – after the temporary loosening of the lockdown measures during the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

At that time the number of active cases was just under 25,000 and average of daily infected rose as high as 2000. The effects of the two waves of the epidemic and the subsequent lockdown measures were detrimental for many segments of the society. The closing down of especially small businesses, especially in the badly hit tourism and hospitality industry, caused unemployment, which was not adequately recorded by the official statistics because these were mostly contract workers and self-employed workers. Cultural industries were also badly affected due to the almost complete closure of all indoor and outdoor venues as well as public gatherings. Many institutions closed with their staff forced to change occupation or seek unemployment benefits. Education system suffered as well, especially gravely during the second ongoing lockdown with an unprecedented long closure of primary schools, secondary schools, and universities, as well as other education institutions (music schools etc.). The long period of the distant learning posed challenges which the society was not prepared for. Among most obvious problems there were the organisation of the distant learning system and a struggle to provide all schools, as well as all pupils and students with adequate equipment to be able to participate. Some areas in Slovenia as well as people from the most underprivileged social groups are still not entirely included in the system, which means that the social gaps are widening progressively with the duration of the educational lockdown. With long lockdown time, all kinds of other societal problems also started worsening, a recorded increase in domestic violence and increased psychological issues. So far, despite a number of successive “corona-packages”, i.e. government packages of measures to manage the adverse consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic, these failed to address the growing societal issues, related to the epidemic.

Loosening of the lockdown measures

With the infection numbers finally going down from mid-January onwards, there is a growing optimism that the epidemic situation in the second wave is about to improve. On January 8, just before the epidemic peaked again, the government presented a five-stage plan of tightening or loosening the anti-epidemic measures. The plan was initially welcomed in media and general public with quite some criticism, since the previous plan of this type was almost entirely overrun by government measures and thus abolished soon after its adoption. The plan, presented on January 8, is structured in 4 stages: black, red, orange, yellow and green. The black (i.e. worst) stage of the epidemic is reached, when the average number of daily infections in the previous 7 days exceeds 1350 and the number of hospitalised Covid-19 patients is above 1200. Red stage is reached when the average number of daily infections in the previous 7 days goes below 1350 and the number of hospitalised below 1200. The transition from red to

orange stage is marked by the average number of daily new cases below 1000 and the number of hospitalized below 1000. Yellow stage is reached at the average number of daily infections in the previous 7 days below 600 and the number of hospitalised below 500. The situation returns to green stage when the average number of daily cases drops below 300. The loosening of the lockdown measures is scheduled accordingly. Reaching the red stage means the return of the first three years of primary school, allowing of necessary lab practice for students, opening of museum, galleries and libraries and opening of the mechanics' shops and similar businesses. In orange stage primary schools open for all pupils and secondary schools open for last year students, while faculties are allowed the classes and exams of up to 10 people. Public gathering of up to 10 people is allowed. The yellow stage launches the re-opening of secondary schools for all students and re-opening of student dormitories, as well as the lifting of the night-time curfew. Green stage brings the lifting of all other lockdown measures except for the closing of bars and nightclubs – with unclear instructions as to when these are supposed to open. So far, red stage is reached in all statistical regions of the country, with periodical drops back into the black stage, which caused a lot of confusion especially in schools.

Vaccination prospects

Slovenia took part in the organized EU purchase of vaccines against Covid-19 from several different producers. The first package of vaccines that arrived in Slovenia were produced in cooperation of US company Pfizer and German BioNTech. Followed by another package in last days of December, the vaccine that needs to be stored at very low temperatures, was first administered to the residents of the nursing homes. Apart from these, medical staff and the oldest strata of the population was vaccinated. Following few successive packages of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, a smaller package of US Moderna vaccine also arrived. In mid-January the government together with the National Institute for Public Health presented the nation vaccination plan. Plan was based on the promised 900,000 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and a further package of 900,000 that Slovenia applied for in the EU tender. Moderna vaccine was presented as having a mostly supplementary role in the national vaccination programme, mostly due to the problems cause by protectionist regulations of US for the export of vaccines that made the supply of Moderna vaccines unreliable for the EU market. Slovenia allegedly ordered an additional 100,000 doses, but the timing of their delivery is still unclear. When the programme was presented, the third producer, Astra Zeneca was still thought of as the solution for two problems of the vaccination programme – the availability of a large number

of doses and the transport problems with Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Slovenia ordered almost 1,4 million doses of Astra Zeneca vaccine and the easier storage requirements of this vaccine would allow also for the vaccination of (especially elderly) people with various mobility issues who cannot come to the medical institutions for the vaccination. Just days after the vaccination programme was presented, however, Astra Zeneca announced an unexpected decrease in its supplies to EU, while at the same time Pfizer-BioNTech also lowered their supply numbers for the next weeks. Successful realization of the plans to vaccinate at least 60% or 70% of the population and reach enough herd immunity to stop the spread of Covid-19 is thus still very unpredictable.

Conclusion

The developments of the Slovenian society, badly hit by the effects of the Covid-19 epidemic in many of its aspects, greatly depend on the successful strategy of loosening the lockdown measures – especially the opening of schools and other public institutions – and of the success in stopping the spread of the virus, to which the vaccination campaign will importantly contribute. The success of the vaccination campaign is still unclear, though, especially due to several issues with the supply of the vaccines in the next weeks.