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New normality in the “Baltic Bubble”

The Baltic States are recording their first successes in stopping the spread of the novel coronavirus. Although it is too early to pinpoint exactly the actions that have contributed to such an effect, the swift decisions taken to introduce restrictions and the readiness of societies to comply with the relevant measures were certainly of key importance. Maintaining the intensity of disease spread at a similar level in all three countries allows for the gradual lifting of restrictions and for the restoration of the free movement of persons across the internal borders.

Crossing borders without restrictions. On May 15, 2020, decisions regarding the lifting of restrictions on passenger traffic for inhabitants of the Baltic States entered into force. Citizens and residents of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania may cross internal borders without being obliged to quarantine for two weeks, as long as they have not been outside the Baltic States within the last 14 days, have not been subjected to isolation with someone who has tested positive to coronavirus, and do not reveal symptoms of respiratory infection. On the same day in Riga, the Foreign Ministers of Estonia – Urmas Reinsalu, Latvia – Edgars Rinkēvičs, and Lithuania – Linas Linkevičius, have signed a memorandum of understanding providing closer coordination of activities as well as consultation and exchange of information on the organisation of the movement of persons across the internal borders.

The decisions were officially justified, among others, by the progress in stopping the spread of the virus in all the three countries and the need to restore regular passenger traffic (by road, rail, sea, and air). The announcement of lifting the restrictions was also an opportunity to emphasise the role and importance of close cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. These activities aim to minimise the economic and social effects of restrictions and ensure the free movement of persons. At the same time, representatives of the authorities of the Baltic States said that full opening without adequate security measures could increase the spread of the virus. Coordination of activities is therefore intended to ensure proper control.

Successes in the fight against coronavirus. The Baltic States are relatively doing well in fighting the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic. At first, Estonia found itself in the most difficult situation, where the disease began to spread quickly on the island of Saaremaa, leading to its complete closure. However, data from recent weeks show that in all three countries it was possible to “flatten the curve” of the disease. Since the beginning of May, the daily increase in new cases has generally remained low – e.g. in Estonia it did not exceed 0.5 percent, while in Latvia and Lithuania it was usually not more than 1 percent. The least number of cases have been registered so far in Latvia (1,009) followed by Lithuania (1,547) and Estonia (1,784) which translated to respectively: 534.94, 568.27 and 1,334.85 per 1 million inhabitants (as of May 19). Since the outbreak, 64 people have died in Estonia, 59 in Lithuania, and 19 in Latvia.

At this point it is difficult to identify specific factors or measures that have decided that the Baltic states managed to gain control, to a certain degree, over the spread of the virus. Factors of particular importance include low population density that facilitates social distancing (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are among the countries with the lowest population density in the entire EU), quick decision-making in introducing restrictions in the organisation of public life (although of varying intensity in particular countries), and the discipline of societies in obeying these restrictions. The high number of tests should also be noted; as of May 17th 228,726 tests have been carried out in Lithuania, 88,405 in Latvia, and 70,189 in Estonia. In the case of Lithuania, this gives it the 3rd highest result per 1 million inhabitants on an EU-wide scale.

The Baltic region is the first in the EU to open its internal borders. The decisions of the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian authorities aroused great interest in foreign media and relatively positive international public opinion

reactions. The media has popularised the term “Baltic travel bubble” that is also used by politicians. As emphasised by representatives of the Baltic states, their decisions are in accordance with the guidelines of the European Commission. On May 13th, the European Commission (EC) recommended that the Member States may gradually abolish border controls in a coordinated manner. The Commission also noted that such decisions should be taken by neighbouring countries with similar epidemic severity.

A road-map into the new normality. The implementation of multi-stage plans for the gradual abolition of restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic has already begun in all Baltic States. In Lithuania, the state of quarantine was extended to May 31st, although the first mitigation decisions were introduced on April 23rd and 27th allowing, among others, the restoration of retail trade, reopening of particular services such as hairdressing salons, and the reopening of outdoor dining places and cultural facilities, as long as security measures are provided. A gradual opening for the following institutions is also planned: kindergartens (from May 18th), primary schools (from May 25th), and secondary schools (from May 30th). From May 18th, it is also possible to service inside dining places and organise small public events in the open air. The new order allows the gathering of up to 5 people.

On April 28th, the Estonian government adopted a plan concerning the lifting of the restrictions. It was developed through consultations with parliamentary groups and non-governmental organisations. The epidemic has been divided into three phases: escalation, stabilisation, and normalisation. According to the government's plan, Estonia has reached a stabilisation phase. In line with current regulations, wearing protective masks is only recommended and not mandatory. At the same time, the ban on gathering in groups of more than 2 people and the two-metre social distancing order was maintained. On the other hand, the opening of hotels, restaurants and shopping centres, museums and exhibition halls, playgrounds and outdoor sports facilities was allowed. From May 15th, it is possible to organise public events for people staying in cars. On May 14th, the Tallinn-Helsinki ferry was re-launched for migrant workers.

Restrictions introduced in Latvia were relatively mild compared to their Lithuanian and Estonian counterparts. On May 7th, the government announced the extension of the state of emergency until June 9th. At the same time, some mitigated restrictions were announced. From May 12th, it is possible to gather in groups of up to 25 people while keeping a two-meter distance and to organise indoor public events. Further, the gradual opening of museums, libraries, and cultural institutions have been allowed assuming they are compliant with sanitary regulations. Shopping centres can also open during weekends while gastronomic establishments can be open from 7 AM-12 PM. Covering the nose and mouth is compulsory only when using public transport. Decisions on lifting restrictions are to be taken based on the assessment of the epidemiological situation, the burden on the healthcare system, the situation in other countries, and on the basis of security issues, social attitudes, and control over public events.

Conclusions. The situation related to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Baltic countries allows for cautious optimism while the authorities can credibly argue that they have managed to maintain control over the spread of the disease. A significant burden on healthcare systems in individual countries was also avoided. Indication of specific actions and decisions that enabled achieving such a state will require additional analyses in the long run, but it can already be said that the “flattening of the curve” of the disease is the result of early decisions to introduce restrictions (see “IEŚ Commentaries”, no. 152).

The international political dimension of the decision to open the internal borders should be considered as a separate issue. It became an opportunity to emphasise the cultural closeness of the societies of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and to focus on what seems to be truly important. Simultaneously, it revealed the readiness and the ability to closely coordinate actions in the face of the serious challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Referring to the guidelines of the European Commission and the announcement by the prime minister of Lithuania concerning the possibility for Poland and Finland to join the “Baltic travel bubble”, will help refute possible allegations of isolation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the rest of the EU. At the same time the success of the “Baltic bubble” can serve as a good example for other Member States who are planning to introduce similar solutions.