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## **Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Several measures to protect citizens and limit the spread of coronavirus have been implemented by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as a result of the first cases of the COVID-19 disease confirmed. Currently, three Baltic states have adopted mechanisms and preventive measures similar to Poland's. Due to the borders being closed and private cars being refused to transit through Poland, numbers of the Baltic states' citizens found it difficult to get back home. This temporarily affected the Polish-Estonian relations.**

**Confirmed cases.** The first case of COVID-19 in the Baltic states was reported in Estonia (February), then in Lithuania (February) and Latvia (March). Currently 715, 484 and 376 cases are confirmed in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, respectively (as of 30 March).

**Reaction of Lithuanian authorities.** On 26 February, the government decided to introduce a mechanism called "extreme situation", serving to improve coordination of activities and cooperation between public institutions and to simplify procedures. The governmental National Center for Extreme Situation was established. On 12 March, the government announced suspension of school activities, initially for two weeks, and a cancellation of mass events. On March 14, the authorities decided to restore control at the borders with EU member states. From 16 March, a state of quarantine was introduced on the entire territory of Lithuania until 30 March (then extended to 13 April). Regulations include, among others: entry ban for foreigners and departure for Lithuanian citizens (with certain exceptions), obliging returnees to a 14-day self-isolation, closing of cultural and sports institutions, gastronomic premises, shops (except for grocery stores and pharmacies). Lithuanian diplomatic missions have been involved in helping citizens returning from abroad. Local self-governments are responsible for quarantining persons returning to Lithuania. The Ministry of Health recommends using protective masks in public places.

On 16 March, the Lithuanian central bank announced its estimates of the economic situation. According to the bank, the Lithuanian economy may shrink 1.2% this year (previously the bank forecast a 2.5% increase). On the same day, the government announced a financial plan to alleviate the impact of the epidemic, which totalled 5 billion euro (10% of GDP). It provides, among other things, tax breaks for enterprises and raising the limits on state loans, directing an additional EUR 500 million to ensure the proper functioning of the healthcare system (including the purchase of equipment and additional salaries). Payments of demurrage, childcare allowance and wages for self-employed persons who cannot perform their duties are planned. The plan also provides measures for companies to maintain their liquidity, as well as deferring their payments and tax arrears.

**Reaction of Latvian authorities.** More serious preventive measures were taken in late February and early March. On 2 March, for instance, the government decided to transfer 2.6 million euro of budget funds for this purpose to the Ministry of Health. On 12 March, Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš announced the introduction of a state of emergency in the entire country, effective from 13 March to 14 April. Its regulations introduce, inter alia, limiting public gatherings to 200 people (later this number was reduced to 50 people) and suspension of teaching in educational institutions. Centralized state exams were postponed to 12–15 May. From 17 March, international passenger traffic was suspended at airports and seaports, freight transport remains without restrictions. The external border with Russia and Belarus was closed for both organized public transport and private transport. In health care facilities, only critical treatments and consultations are performed. People returning to Latvia from abroad are to be directed to a two-week quarantine. The government also supported the request to postpone Riga City Council elections from 25 April to 6 June.

The forecast GDP growth in 2020 may amount to 2.2%; however, an increase estimated at 1.5% will be more likely. The Crisis Management Board commissioned the relevant institutions to monitor the prices of basic products and services, and to develop regulations to prevent fraudulent actions of dishonest entrepreneurs. Aid measures in the economic sector were considered: bank loans and mortgages insurance and export insurance, tax exemptions, financing sick leave, etc. On 13 March, the government announced a 1 billion euro support program for enterprises affected by the epidemic. At the same time, the Ministry of Agriculture assures that the inhabitants of Latvia should not feel shortages in the supply of food products.

**Reaction of Estonian authorities.** Estonia was the first Baltic state where the coronavirus COVID-19 case was confirmed. Riigikogu declared the state of emergency (*Erakorraline seisukord*) on 12 March and banned public gatherings. On-site learning, museums, libraries and sport centres have started to be terminated, and public events have been cancelled and shifted to the later time. From 17 March, the border controls have come into force and the foreign travellers have not been allowed to enter Estonia (with the exceptions for transit and international cargo). Foreigners have been allowed to stay in Estonia. Since the restrictions to entry for foreigners were introduced in Russia on 18 March, some ethnic Russians living in Estonia, including so-called grey passport holders and border regions residents, may be affected.

The amount of 200 million euro has been allocated to cover the extraordinary costs of coronavirus, including the support of work reorganization at hospitals, additional staff salaries and the purchase of personal protective equipment in Estonia. Moreover, the government's economic support package includes reimbursing 70 percent of salaries to employees of companies with financial difficulties due to the impact of the coronavirus as well as to pay sick leave and cover care benefits. In the next few days the government will discuss the supplementary budget and the terms for the 2 billion euro worth of measures in order to mitigate the economic effects of the crisis. Furthermore, Estonia has declared to share its digital education tools to support other countries' education systems during the coronavirus crisis.

**A queue at the Polish-German border.** Hundreds of Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians travelling home got stuck at Polish-German border near Frankfurt an der Oder as a result of Polish borders being closed since 15 March. Only Polish citizens and those with a residence permit in Poland have been allowed to enter the country. After several hours of waiting, the Baltic states' citizens blocked traffic to disturb Polish residents to cross from Germany into Poland. Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Estonia confirmed that efforts were being made to resolve the situation and send a vessel operated by Estonian shipping firm Tallink to bring Estonian citizens from the North German port of Sassnitz home. This included Latvians and Lithuanians, as well.

All three Baltic states have expressed their dissatisfaction while it was Estonia who has raised the issue of the queue at the Polish-German border. Estonia informed about the complicated Polish-Estonian relations in terms of the possibility for the Baltic states' citizens transiting through Poland. The foreign minister of Estonia Urmas Reinsalu said "the cooperation with Poland had been difficult" because it "left Estonians wishing to return home". According to the agreement between Poland and the Baltic states on 15 March, a column of citizens of the Baltic nations (so-called humanitarian corridor) should have been formed that guaranteed the Baltic states' residents returning to Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The next day Poland informed, however, that it would form some convoy for passenger buses that have crossed the border but private cars were not allowed to transit due to the protection of public health in Poland. Estonian media sharply criticized Poland's "withdrawal from its initial promise" and strict measures implemented by Poland while convoying the Baltic states' residents.

As the response to the situation caused by coronavirus epidemic, including the restrictions of international traffic, on 16 March, the Nordic-Baltic Foreign Ministers signed the joint statement emphasizing the need to coordinate and co-operate closely, particularly to ensure transit for EU and EEA citizens and permanent residents who are returning home; to establish a network of consular institutions to exchange information to help citizens and permanent residents of their countries returning home; as well as in terms of economic cooperation to ensure free movement of goods, including medical equipment, and keeping cargo corridors open.

**Conclusions.** Most of the actions taken by the authorities in confrontation with the COVID-19 disease epidemic are standard and do not differ much from the solutions adopted in other countries of the Central and Eastern Europe region (except for Belarus). Individual restrictions, covering educational institutions, assemblies, transport, border traffic, etc., were introduced at a similar time as in neighbouring countries, including Poland. However, some difficulties, e.g. related to the organization of transit of citizens of the Baltic States returning from Western Europe through the territory of Poland, may indicate a problem with international coordination of such activities. Therefore, Poland and the Baltic states should ensure this situation does not happen again in the future, particularly by developing special procedures and mechanisms within the EU. Currently, several issues are being raised related to the coronavirus epidemic, such as: the respect of democratic procedures during an emergency situation, the ability to move NATO troops in case of military threat and hard security dimension, as well as the controversial actions of the authorities, including limited availability of coronavirus tests or – as in the case of Lithuania – burdening local governments with the responsibility of directing returnees from abroad to quarantine.