

Łukasz Lewkowicz

State of emergency and mass testing: the second wave of the pandemic in Slovakia

On October 1, the Slovak authorities introduced a state of emergency for the second time. This step was taken due to the rapid increase in the number of people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Further restrictions were implemented, concerning, *inter alia*, quarantines, organizing mass events, and a number of restrictions in schools and universities. On October 23, Slovakia began mass testing of coronavirus as part of the “Social Responsibility” pilot program. It started with *poviats* located on the border with Poland, where the epidemiological situation has been very serious for several weeks. The Slovak authorities do not rule out introducing a complete lockdown of the state.

State of emergency and new restrictions in Slovakia. In the post-vacation period, the number of SARS-CoV-2 virus infections in Slovakia increased dramatically. The difficult epidemiological situation forced the Slovak authorities to reintroduce the state of emergency in early October. It is to be in force for 45 days, with the possibility of extension if the situation in the country does not improve significantly. In the first days of the new law being in force, the obligation to wear masks outside buildings returned in situations where at least a two-meter distance cannot be kept from the other person. An exception to this rule applies to people living in the same household. Masks have become compulsory for older students and people inside buildings. The Ministry of the Environment is obliged to provide drinking water in areas where quarantine may be announced. On the other hand, the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Information Technology was obliged to prepare a list of premises that could be used for a possible quarantine. During the state of emergency, the Slovak media was obliged to designate airtime for information for citizens about the new legal regulations being adopted. A maximum of 50 people was allowed to participate in mass events. The restrictions applied to all sports, cultural, social and church events, and to all persons participating in events, including, *inter alia*, actors in theaters, priests at masses, and athletes at matches. Weddings, baptisms, and funerals were allowed, but without any subsequent family and social gatherings. The participants of such ceremonies were obliged to present the results of tests for the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, performed no more than 12 hours earlier.

On October 12, new restrictions on educational institutions were announced. In kindergartens, the wearing of masks was recommended, while in the first and second years of primary school, it became compulsory. Deaf, autistic, and mentally disturbed children are exempt from wearing masks. Secondary schools have moved entirely to distance learning while swimming courses, ski courses, excursions, and group classes in art schools were canceled. In the following weeks, consultations on the form of education at universities continued. The department of education has left the rectors a free hand in this regard. Ultimately, however, universities decided to work remotely in the winter semester.

On October 15, further restrictions were introduced due to the worsening epidemiological situation. All swimming pools, water parks, wellness/fitness centers have been closed. Cultural events held in cinemas and theaters were also canceled. The number of customers in shops has been limited (maximum one person per 15 m², admission only for people with a body temperature of 37°C or less). Catering establishments are obliged to serve meals and drinks outside (on terraces) and sell them in packages. The limit of participants in mass events has been reduced to six people, with the exception of some sports events. Mandatory covering of the nose and mouth has been introduced outside, inside buildings, and on public transport. Special hours for seniors in stores have also been revived. From Monday to Friday, between 9.00 and 11.00, food and cosmetics can only be purchased by people over 65 years of age.

Due to successive records of infections in Slovakia, further restrictions were adopted in the last week of October. By November 27, all schools (except nurseries, kindergartens, and the first years of primary school) were closed. From October 24 to November 1, Slovaks have been allowed to leave their homes only in certain situations, e.g., testing for COVID-19, going to the nearest grocery store, pharmacy or doctor, to care for loved ones or animals, and for purposes of attending a funeral, or commuting to work.

Controversial mass testing. The growing scale of the pandemic in Slovakia has prompted the Slovak government to adopt more radical solutions. In October, it was decided to massively test the country's inhabitants as part of the government's "Social Responsibility" program. On October 23–25, a pilot test was carried out in the districts significantly affected by infections, located in the northern part of Slovakia (Tvrdošín, Dolný Kubín, Namestovo and Bardejov). The 91% of the inhabitants of these *poviats* (140,945 people out of approximately 155,000) were tested, and 5,594 infected people were detected. The ratio of those who tested positive to the total number of people tested was 3.97%. The main tests for residents of the whole of Slovakia will take place in two rounds: from October 30 to November 1 and from November 6 to 8. The Slovaks will be able to test themselves at around 5,000 points.

The tests are voluntary, recommended for people from 10 to 65 years of age. Anyone can undertake them, including foreigners staying in Slovakia on the day they are carried out. It was decided that, in order to reduce the need for travel, the tests could be taken anywhere in Slovakia, without the need to undertake them where one is registered. However, the government asks to choose places located in the commune where people are staying. People staying in nursing homes and hospitals are to be tested in these facilities. The test is also recommended for people who have already been infected with the novel coronavirus. The tests will be carried out by medical personnel supported, among others, by soldiers, firefighters, and volunteers. After the swab is taken, the test result is to be available within 15–30 minutes. In the event of a positive result, the person will be immediately sent to quarantine.

The method of logistical preparation of the test program is controversial. According to some politicians, local governments were given too little time to prepare smear collection points. Locating them, among others, in kindergartens and schools, further resulted in opposition from employees of these institutions and parents of students fearing for infection. Moreover, according to many experts, the applied tests may give false positive or negative results, so their value for assessing the epidemiological situation in Slovakia will be limited. Due to the test's voluntary nature, it is difficult to assess how many people will ultimately participate in this government program. The new restrictions and planned testing of the inhabitants of Slovakia are also causing increasing social tensions. For example, on October 17, despite the ban on gatherings in force, a protest was held in Bratislava. Its participants, mainly football fans and activists of the People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), called for the Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič's (OĽaNO) resignation and expressed their dissatisfaction with the introduction of new restrictions. During the protest, there were verbal and physical attacks against police officers.

Summary – Conclusions for Poland. The epidemiological situation in Slovakia deteriorated drastically in September, after the holiday season and the commencement of full-time schooling. On average, in recent weeks, there are over 2,000 new infections a day in the country. According to official data from October 27, 46,056 Slovaks have been infected since the beginning of the pandemic (11,008 people recovered), and 176 died. A total of 706,191 tests were performed in Slovakia. The constantly growing number of hospitalized people is putting an increasing burden on Slovak hospitals. As government representatives emphasize, currently, the health service is on the verge of endurance. Prime Minister Matovič believes that mass testing may not be a sufficient means of countering the spread of the pandemic and does not rule out the introduction of a complete lockdown in Slovakia with limited human movement and border closure.

The challenge for Poland is the high number of infections in the border areas of northern Slovakia. Frequent visits by Slovaks for shopping to Polish cities and markets located near the border may contribute to further spread of the novel coronavirus. At the same time, a number of articles appeared in the Slovak media, suggesting that the worsening of the pandemic in Orava was related to the frequent organization of weddings by Slovaks on

the Polish side. The authorities in Slovakia have introduced an obligation to quarantine visitors from other countries. However, this does not apply to Poland. Thus, nationals of that country can travel to Slovakia without being forced into isolation. However, Slovakia's Ministry of Health, indicates three Polish regions, referred to as "increased risk" areas; these are Lesser Poland, Silesia, and Pomerania. The Slovak authorities advise against traveling to these places. The current epidemiological situation in Slovakia adversely affects the development of cooperation with Polish local self-governments and the implementation of joint cross-border projects and further affects tourism and cross-border trade.