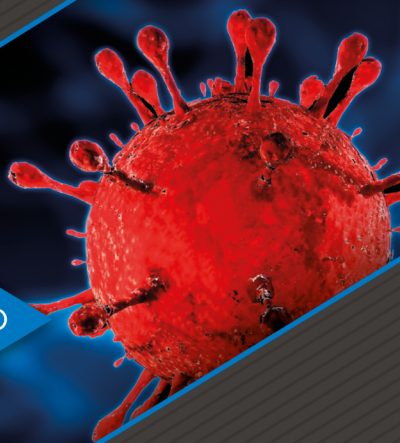


IEŚ

6/2020

POLICY
PAPERS



György Odze, Szczepan Czarnecki, Stefan Drexler,
Péter Galambos, Dominik Héjj,
Łukasz Lewkowicz, Agata Tatarenko

Political & Social Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the V4 countries: Report from the first wave (outbreak – August 2020)

Edited by
Agata Tatarenko



Publishing series IEŚ Policy Papers

Number 6/2020

Series editors Beata Surmacz and Tomasz Stępniewski



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ISBN 978-83-66413-23-8

Published and edited

Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe

ul. Niecała 5

20-080 Lublin

www.ies.lublin.pl

Cover design and typesetting www.targonski.pl

Cover photo © QinJin | [shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

Print www.drukarniaakapit.pl



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Foreword

The coronavirus pandemic is an entirely unusual time for all of us. We have faced fear and uncertainty for our health, jobs and the future. We had to change our everyday functioning, and reorganize work and education. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have already affected virtually every area of life: from medicine to the economy, politics, education, interpersonal relations, religious life, entertainment, and culture. We still do not know when we will return to “everyday life” and whether the one we knew will come back at all.

The burden of counteracting the effects of a pandemic rests mainly with the countries. In immediate response to the pandemic outbreak, many governments introduced radical restrictions on social and economic activity, and barriers to travel. The V4 countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) took decisive steps in this regard quite quickly. Thanks to their policy actions, they successfully kept the epidemic in check, thereby significantly reducing the damage caused by the virus. But the COVID-19 crisis has

brought consequences not only in health but also in social, political and economic terms.

The presented publication is the result of cooperation between the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin (Poland) and the Tihany Centre for Political Analysis (Hungary). Both institutions' analysts decided to look at the pandemic's political and social consequences in the V4 countries during the so-called Covid-19 first wave. They are trying to diagnose the impact of the pandemic on the political scene of the V4 countries and on the social sphere, including education systems, labour markets, healthcare, and social services. What were the first reactions of the V4 governments to the outbreak of the epidemic? Has the pandemic changed the balance of power on the political scenes of these countries and how? How did it affect the labour market? How has the education system changed? How did the healthcare system deal with the pandemic? Which social groups have been at risk of social exclusion?

We are deeply convinced that the V4 countries should actively cooperate in tackling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and work together to bring socio-economic life in the region back on track. This is also a huge task for the Polish presidency in the V4.

Dr hab. Beata Surmacz
Director, Institute of Central Europe



Foreword

The world is facing a very serious global crisis, most probably the worst in centuries, threatening humankind. No matter how developed our science and technology is, we do not know how it started and how it will end. This disaster has hit social life and the global economy and has questioned cultural heritage. In a very short period, the Olympic Games were cancelled. Millions of holidays, business travels were simply washed out, and large companies, like Lufthansa, stopped their services from one day to the next.

This virus showed how vulnerable we are, how difficult it is to join efforts in difficult times, how difficult it is to make important decisions and take responsibility. Most probably, we will have to face criticism of the next generations for our negligent behaviour towards climate change and sacrificing values of nature for cheap business aims.

Though we started this work to analyse the situation in the V4 countries, it soon became clear that this is much more than a regional problem. It is also clear that the crisis is not over and that these countries' political leadership cannot

work out effective solutions. It is also apparent that governments in the European countries are in the same situation: no clear strategy seems to be at hand. Politicians get by one day at a time with no perspective or strategy about how life will go on. The European Union is no longer a solution for the this group of countries; its leaders just watch and wait without any common objective respond.

Almost after ten months, we do not know how it started, what happens now and what the future holds.

Any questions?

György Odze
Director, Tihany Centre for Political Analysis



Executive Summary

Politics

The COVID-19 pandemic in the V4 countries was unexpected for politicians, even though the first warnings about the possibility of SARS-CoV-2 virus transmission to Central Europe had already arrived earlier. Until the first cases of the disease were diagnosed, some representatives of the political elite believed that the pandemic in Central Europe would not develop. As indicated in the text, various tools were implemented at different rates to counter the coronavirus effectively. The V4 countries also differed in what type of political measures were used against COVID-19. During the first wave, a state of emergency has not been introduced in all of them. At the same time, similar-sounding legal solutions did not have the same legal effects. A good example is the *state of epidemic* in Poland and the *state of emergency caused by COVID-19* (based on the Fundamental

Law), which, in Hungary, *de facto* deprived parliament of its powers completely.

In all V4 countries, the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic had a rather positive impact on the strengthening and legitimacy of power, which is a characteristic “bonus” for the political elite struggling with an unknown threat. This trend can be seen in the V4 countries (except Hungary) from the first weeks of March (the support for the Fidesz-KNDP coalition in Hungary remains unchanged, regardless of the pandemic). This was due to the citizens gathering around power, which worked in its favour. Concerns about the future were expressed by all citizens, regardless of political views. Hence, a significant increase has been noticed in the trust towards health ministers and other people managing activities in response to COVID-19. However, there was no straightforward link between COVID-19 and support towards the heads of government or presidents.

From May 2020, a decline in the main political party's support can be observed in all countries except Hungary. On the one hand, this is a consequence of citizens' fatigue with the coronavirus-related restrictions, and on the other, of getting used to the new situation and returning to “normal politics”, resulting in critical reviews of the governments by the citizens. This has a varying degree of impact on the growth of support from the opposition parties. In Poland, from April to mid-August, the largest opposition party gained ten percentage points, while the ruling party lost three percentage points. Such changes cannot be seen in Slovakia and Hungary. On the other hand, in the Czech Republic, there is a trend of increasing support for the anti-system party, namely the Czech Pirate Party.

The development of the situation in the V4 countries concerning the anticipated second wave of cases remains open. We can expect a much more critical attitude of citizens who have been trying to adjust to the new realities for over six months of living with the coronavirus. It is worth pointing out, at this point, that the second wave of the coronavirus had already been announced in Hungary and, as a result, the borders were closed from September 1, 2020.

Social

The first wave of COVID-19 pandemic has already had far-reaching social consequences in the V4 countries, overwhelming the economic and social spheres. The outbreak of COVID-19 strongly affected the educational systems in the V4 countries. Educational restrictions appeared rather quickly after the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in every country, forcing schools into a crash course in online education. However, the shift to virtual learning resulted in difficulties of access to this mode of education for certain groups of students or even in their educational exclusion due to the limited, or rather lack of, access to ICT equipment.

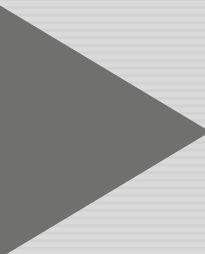
The first months of the COVID-19 pandemic have also affected the labour market with a moderate unemployment growth and income decrease, potentially leading to long-term unemployment among specific groups of labour forces and weakening of labour market attachment for the next years. However, it must be emphasized that the unemployment ratio for the V4, except for Slovakia, was lower than the EU average in June 2020. Nevertheless, presented data concern the first four months of the pandemic and the number

of registered unemployed may increase more significantly in autumn 2020. Up to the point of writing, the dismissals mainly affected people performing temporary work, young people entering the labour market, and women. All countries in the region financially supported enterprises in order to maintain jobs. In the V4 countries, the most affected economic sectors were the following: accommodation services, transport and tourism, fashion and beauty industry. In Slovakia, the crisis also hit the highly developed car industry.

Two additional sectors strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are the healthcare and social services in the V4 group. However, strict measures implemented in the V4 countries at the beginning of the pandemic and lower numbers of the Covid-19 infected patients compared to the western EU countries show that the healthcare systems seemingly performed well and could face the pandemic. However, many limitations of the healthcare services appeared. Patients with disabilities and patients with mental, chronic and specific rare diseases have been deprived, to a large extent, of various forms of health and social assistance, while cancer and chronic disease patients decided to discontinue their treatments, to some extent, which may result in serious complications in the future. Next to the existing problems of the quality of public policies, social implications of COVID-19 also resulted in gender-related exclusion and an increase in domestic violence in the V4.

Main remarks

- The V4 countries were unprepared when faced the COVID-19 pandemic.
- No clear strategy seems to be at hand neither in the V4 nor at the EU level.
- The V4 countries seemed to have a common approach to the pandemic, which helped to succeed in the first stage.
- All the V4 states tried to protect the citizens' lives and simultaneously safeguard the economy.
- It seemed that the governing parties did not lose much popularity during the pandemic.
- Travelling and holiday habits will change on a national and international level.
- Healthcare systems seemingly performed well and could face the pandemic.
- Social services must be improved to help society.



Political Impact of the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic



Stefan Drexler

Czech Republic

The Czech government was of the first EU governments to react comprehensively to the coronavirus. Even before the first coronavirus-related death was registered, the government announced an emergency and a complete lockdown for at least four weeks on March 11, 2020¹. It was extended in April to May 17. The government and parliament have worked much better together during the crisis than usual since the 2018 election. The Czech Republic was the first EU country to declare an emergency and imposed an obligation to wear a mask, even outside. Schools, sports facilities, shopping centres, and the country's borders were closed. This resulted not only in border-crossing restrictions but, as in Slovakia, in the actual isolation of the country from the outside world². On March 15, the Central Crisis Management

¹ S. Morkowitz, *Czech Republic eases lockdown restrictions*, 08.04.2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-republic-eases-lockdown-restrictions/> [02.09.2020].

² N. Narguet, *Europe Versus Coronavirus – the Czech Republic: Masks, But For How Long?*, 20.05.2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/europe-versus-coronavirus-czech-republic-masks-how-long> [02.09.2020].

Team was established as the central executive body to manage the crisis, led by the Ministers of Health and Interior.

In addition to the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, the spotlight during the crisis was thus on the Interior Minister, Jan Hamáček, and the Minister of Health, Adam Vojtěch. Hamáček's work during the crisis is evaluated positively by 70% of Czechs, while 65% viewed Babiš positively. Vojtěch, who is ANO's member received 60% support³ while Hamáček leads the allied ČSSD. Other ministers that were rated important in a STEM inquiry from June 2020 were the Finance Minister, Alena Schillerová, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Jana Maláčová and the Minister of Transport, Karel Havlíček. They received a positive response from around half of the respondents but also around 40% criticism for their work. Maláčová is a social democrat from the ČSSD; the other two belong to ANO. Hamáček was viewed positively by respondents all over the political sphere, whereas Babiš did not receive much support from the opposition. This means that Babiš could not overcome the political dispute around him. Half of Czechs had no problem with the lockdown, a third reported minor problems and only 10% severe problems⁴. In March 2020, according to pollster Kantar, 11% rated the government's response to the crisis excellent, 30% very good, and 39% as good which adds up to 80%⁵. Regardless, this was not reflected in the opinion polls; the government

³ Lidovky.cz, *Poll: Czechs are satisfied with the work of politicians during the coronavirus pandemic*, 18.06.2020, <https://rmx.news/article/article/poll-czechs-are-satisfied-with-the-work-of-politicians-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic> [02.09.2020].

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ D. Lazarová, *Majority of Czechs happy with government's handling of coronavirus crisis*, 21.03.2020, <https://english.radio.cz/majority-czechs-happy-governments-handling-coronavirus-crisis-8104941> [02.09.2020].

improved from a low 36.5-52% rating in February to a 43.5-52.5% in July with the Czech Trend of Kantar for June, with the opposition still leading by around 10% points. The ANO and the Communists were up 1%, the Social Democrats down by 0.5%⁶. The pollster CVVM saw ANO down by 4 points from February to July with the Social Democrats up by 4 points. They gave a narrow lead of 49.5:45.5 for the government over the opposition⁷. This means that the government, despite its widely supported crisis course, failed to gather more support as happened in other states with low infection rate and lockdowns such as Germany, Austria, Norway, Denmark or Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that the minority government was able to work together and did not abuse the additional powers it received during the state of emergency, but it also made clear that Babiš did not overcome his position as a highly controversial figure in Czech politics. ANO, ČSSD, and Communists support him, while the Civic Democrats, Pirates, Christian democrats, and Greens oppose him. He and his party remain the most important political force, but they are far from being domestically as powerful as FIDESZ or PiS in Hungary and Poland, respectively.

As isolationist as the plan was to internally shield the Czech Republic, the citizens' beach summer holidays seemed to be utterly important. The country's foreign policy, therefore, followed the primacy of securing beach access for Czech vacationers. As a landlocked country, the Czech Republic relies on the cooperation of neighbouring coun-

⁶ Česká televize, *Trendy Česka*, June 2020, https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/sites/default/files/2472371-trendy_ceska_2020_vlna_61.pdf [02.09.2020].

⁷ CVVM, *Election forecast for June 2020*, 13.07.2020, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a5227/f9/pv200713.pdf [02.09.2020].

tries (Austria, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) to reach Croatia, which is popular with Czech holidaymakers. At the same time, however, these countries should keep their borders closed to countries with high coronavirus infection numbers and countries with dubious statistics so that returnees cannot import the virus from Croatia to the Czech Republic⁸. Czech foreign policy followed very rational and understandable premises: Citizens from countries with success in dealing with the epidemic should go on a summer holiday in other countries with low coronavirus numbers. While Hungary and Slovenia signalled that they were fine with the Czech approach, Slovakia wanted to maintain its strict border regime, while Austria and Croatia also insisted on opening up to Germany and refusing a special status for Czech tourists. There were also minority issues: Hungary wanted to open the border to Serbia and Croatia to Bosnia. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic succeeded in opening Austria's border with the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Slovenia was, however, removed from the list when it surprisingly announced the opening of the border with Italy, leaving Czech tourists the only option to travel through Hungary⁹. Finally, the Czech plan was overtaken by the European reality: the EU largely restored freedom of travel across the states for tourists in mid-June 2020, making the idea of opening up regionally to countries with low numbers of cases obsolete.

⁸ ORF, *The Czech Republic wants a corridor on the Adriatic in summer*, 17.04.2020, <https://orf.at/stories/3162266/> [02.09.2020].

⁹ Standard.at, *Normality? Slovenia opens borders for EU citizens*, 15.05.2020, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000117525456/slowenien-oeffnet-grenzen-fuer-eu-buerger> [02.09.2020].

The situation is nevertheless interesting because it shows that the Czech Republic acts on a more regional basis than on a European or even global one. It was seemingly acceptable for the Czech Republic to worsen the political relations with Italy or the Balkan countries, as there are hardly any considerable points of contact here, if the Czech tourists could take a safe holiday in return. This also shows that the ethnically and largely homogeneous Czech Republic has little interest and understanding of minority issues or national sensitivities in the Balkans. European solidarity with Italy was also not important. Rather, the country would have at least temporarily established a vacation block from friendly, Central Eastern European countries that rigorously shielded itself from third countries. It would be wrong to label the Czech effort as ridiculous: the episode of the Czech battle for a beach amazingly resembles the German government's attempt to expand the country's coastline in terms of vacation to the Netherlands and especially Denmark and to influence the countries to open up for the expected German summer vacationers, since the German coasts cannot compensate for the loss of Italy, Spain, Turkey, or Egypt. However, Denmark should, be allowed to keep the border with Sweden closed as long as it only opens to the south for German vacationers¹⁰. In Berlin and Prague, the annual beach summer holiday of their citizens is obviously considered a valuable asset and an important distraction from the coronavirus anxiety, which even justifies foreign policy interventions.

¹⁰ S. Weigel, *Endangered vacation in Denmark: "Part of me is already with you"*, 07.05.2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/daenemark-will-nicht-die-grenzen-fuer-touristen-oeffnen-ein-brandbrief-a-f114babf-f49e-4419-aac8-5fa98aacdacf> [02.09.2020].



Agata Tatarenko

Poland

The Polish authorities took a number of preventive measures to slow down the spread of SARS-CoV-2 during the first wave. From January 31, 2020, the Polish sanitary authorities began conducting laboratory tests among patients suspected of being infected with the coronavirus. On March 2, 2020, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland passed the *Act on special solutions related to the prevention, counteraction and combating of COVID-19, other infectious diseases and the emergencies caused by them*¹. The Act entered into force on March 8, 2020. The new law amended the previous *Act on preventing and combating infections and infectious diseases in humans* and allows the use of administrative, budgetary and epidemiological measures in order to prevent spreading COVID-19 and dealing with its consequences.

¹ Ustawa z dnia 2 marca 2020 r. o szczególnych rozwiązaniach związanych z zapobieganiem, przeciwdziałaniem i zwalczaniem COVID-19, innych chorób zakaźnych oraz wywołanych nimi sytuacji kryzysowych, Dz.U. 2020 poz. 374, ISAP, 02.03.2020, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20200000374> [11.08.2020].

The document provoked a discussion concerning the constitutional inaccuracies which were noted by, among others, the Polish Ombudsman, Adam Bodnar. Between March 14-20, 2020 a state of epidemic emergency was introduced which remains in effect until the moment of writing (end of August).

On March 6, the authorities banned the export of medicines and medical equipment useful in COVID-19 treatment. On March 15, the Polish borders were closed for air and rail traffic, and passport controls were introduced at all land borders, allowing exceptionally only Polish citizens to enter the country (e.g., spouses – citizens of other countries). Public gatherings of over 50 people, including state and religious gatherings, were banned. The lockdown-type control measures were strengthened on 25 March, forbidding non-essential travel, limiting non-family gatherings to two people and religious gatherings. On April 20, the first relaxation of social discipline began to be introduced. The Polish government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic so far, and compared to other countries, has overall positive results – Poland experienced a relatively linear progression in the number of contaminations of SARS-CoV-2.

The outbreak of coronavirus pandemic has influenced Poles' support for political parties. The government's actions presented above, during the first months of the pandemic, were positively assessed by the vast majority of Poles, including those who previously showed a critical approach to the ruling party. In June, the government's actions against

the coronavirus were assessed positively by 65% of Poles², while in May it was almost 70%³.

According to a poll conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs Research (IBSP) in mid-March, 47.57% of Poles supported the ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS)⁴. This can be assessed by the effectiveness of actions aimed at preventing the spread of coronavirus, which avoided the epidemic scenario witnessed in countries such as Italy or Spain during the first months, and by the natural reflex to relay on power in the critical moment. After the first three weeks of the pandemic, support for the ruling party had returned to normal levels, ranging from 41%-42% and a maximum of 44%⁵.

The coronavirus pandemic has also influenced support for individual politicians. During the first wave support for the Minister of Health, Łukasz Szumowski, has changed significantly. According to the IBSP survey conducted at the beginning of April, Minister Szumowski enjoyed the highest trust among all Polish politicians – he was supported by 43.59% of Poles. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki came second with the support of 39.30%, and President Andrzej Duda, with 37.61% of the citizens' support, came third one⁶.

² CBOS, *Rzqd wobec epidemii – oceny w drugiej połowie czerwca. Komunikat z badań*, no. 79/2020, July 2020, p. 1.

³ Ibidem, p. 2.

⁴ Instytut Badań Spraw Publicznych, *Sondaż parlamentarny 31.03-02.04*, StanPolityki.pl, 06.04.2020, <https://stanpolityki.pl/najnowszy-sondaz-parlamentarny-ibsp-sondazowe-szanse-partii/> [11.08.2020].

⁵ Ibidem; Idem, *Prognoza parlamentarny: sierpień 2020*, StanPolityki.pl, 10.08.2020, <https://stanpolityki.pl/sierpniowa-prognoza-parlamentarna-standpolityki-pl/> [11.08.2020].

⁶ Idem, *Ranking Poparcia Polityków w Polsce (badanie)*, StanPolityki.pl, 09.04.2020, <https://stanpolityki.pl/ranking-poparcia-politykow-w-polsce-sondaz-standpolityki-pl/> [11.08.2020].

During the coronavirus pandemic, presidential elections were held in Poland. The first round of voting was due to be held on May 10, 2020, but it was postponed until June 28, 2020. Finally, the presidential election was completed with a second round of voting on July 12, 2020. The election dates were the result of negotiations between a governing alliance, namely the Agreement party and the Law and Justice party. Presidential elections carried out in the environment of the pandemic caused a lot of political and social controversy. It raised questions about the method of conducting the election campaign (election rallies) and, most importantly, about the procedures of conducting the elections – which include the issue of safety in terms of coronavirus contamination as well as postal voting (secrecy of voting and voter data protection). Finally, it also raised a question concerning how the epidemiological situation translates into social support for political parties.

Considering the results of the 2020 presidential elections in Poland and the above-quoted polls, it can be concluded that the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic contributed to the deepening of the division of the political scene in Poland. After the short initial shift in favour of the ruling party, caused by a previously unknown threat of the pandemic, the support for political parties has returned more or less at the last parliamentary elections in Poland and the last EU parliamentary elections. The tough division on the political scene could be observed during the presidential campaign, which was dominated by topics of an ideological nature, which aroused strong social opinions. Economic issues, important due to the coronavirus crisis, were in the background of the debate. Secondly, the pan-

demic indirectly influenced the same changes among the Polish opposition. Many topics that have been triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of social debate, such as climate change, were an important part of the political program of Szymon Hołownia, an independent candidate in the 2020 Polish presidential elections. According to the poll from August 2020, his new party, Poland 2050, could become the third force in parliament⁷.

⁷ Idem, *Prognoza parlamentarna...*



György Odze – Péter Galambos

Hungary

It seemed that at the beginning of March 2020, Hungary could not have avoided the pandemic, but initially, the Hungarian politicians, as in other nations, acted with delay and then hastily tried to respond to the pandemic. We should mention that the government did not want to close the schools and the universities during the early days of the pandemic¹. However, after a week of hesitation and inaction (15th March 2020), Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of the country, realized that he could grasp an opportunity out of the crisis by showing his real face as a militant and strong leader who enjoys being in the frontline or creating his own frontline if necessary². Even though he holds a 2/3 majority in parliament, which enables him to act as he pleases, he nevertheless raised the “Emergency Situation” rifle, which further allowed him to rule by decree using this effectively

¹ O. Kormos, *Benne van a levegőben, hogy az iskolák is bezárnak*, 12.03.2020, <https://mfor.hu/cikkek/makro/iskolabezarasok-benne-van-a-levegoben.html> [02.09.2020].

² See the entries of the prime minister at <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/>.

against the “liberals”, the media, and “people who spread rumours”. In some cases, local politicians, mostly mayors connected to the ruling party Fidesz-KDNP, also exploited the situation, by making decisions without their towns’ representatives. It was also rumoured that Hungary concluded some secret deals with China importing essential products and equipment to fight against the pandemic.

However, other players of the political game could not benefit from the situation. Opposition parties and leaders had no idea how to handle the situation, so in the end, Viktor Orbán and Fidesz could gain another victory – this time not at the polls but in the game of popularity figures. Budapest, the capital of the country, was in the spotlight. The mayor of the city, Gergely Karácsony (Párbeszéd) was the only person from the opposition who tried to show some real political action (case of masks and public transportation)³. Because of his success, the government attacked him in different ways (case of nursing home, Chain Bridge).⁴ It also meant that the Orbán cabinet differentiated Budapest and Pest county from other parts of the country. Referring to the fact that there were more infected citizens in the central regions of Hungary, the regime delayed the loosening process in those areas by two weeks.

³ G. Karácsony, *Kötelező lesz Budapesten a szájmaszk viselése a boltokban*, 20.04.2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/ingatlan/20200421/karacsony-gergely-kotelezo-lesz-budapest-en-a-szajmaszk-viselese-a-boltokban-427494> [02.09.2020].

⁴ PJ, *Nyomozás indult a Pesti úti időszotthon ügyében*, 12.05.2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/05/12/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_pesti_uti_idosotthon_nyomozas_indul/ [02.09.2020]; G. Tenczer, *Mi van a Lánchíddal, és ki a hibás az egészben?*, 22.06.2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/06/22/lanchid_szajbarago/ [02.09.2020].

The case of the “Emergency Situation” triggered a process in Brussels against Hungary⁵. Some claimed that the Hungarian government violated the rule of law and values of the EU; others stated that Fidesz has 2/3 majority and that triggering a process against Hungary was a tactic on behalf of liberals in Brussels and the Hungarian opposition against the Hungarian citizens⁶.

To sum up, Hungary followed the other countries in the region with the cabinet introducing a strict lockdown. The cabinet’s main approach was of military nature, but the government also emphasized the pandemic’s medical and economic aspects. The leading star was Cecília Müller, the national chief medical officer, who appeared everywhere (television, news, newspapers) during the pandemic⁷. A slow opening started at the end of May⁸, with the prime minister declaring that Austria would be an example and the experiences of which would be followed by Hungary. He also said that “more Balaton, less Adria”, which means

⁵ Info start, *Megszólalt Brüsszel a magyar koronavírus-törvény miatt*, 31.03.2020, <https://infostart.hu/kulfold/2020/03/31/megszolalt-brusszel-a-magyar-koronavirus-torveny-miatt> [02.09.2020].

⁶ Z. Szabó, *Magyarország megint terítékre kerül Brüsszelben*, 05.05.2020, https://www.napi.hu/nemzetkozi_gazdasag/magyarorszag-europai-parlament-magyarorszag-felhatalmazasi-koronavirus-torveny-brusszel.705647.html [02.09.2020].

⁷ C. Müller, *Nem szabad hátradőlni, mert még világjárvány van*, 21.06.2020, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200621_Muller_Cecilia_nem_szabad_hatradolni_mert_meg_vilagjarvany_van [02.09.2020].

⁸ *Megszűnt a veszélyhelyzet, de életbe lépett a járványügyi készség*, 18.06.2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/megszunt-veszelyhelyzet-de-életbe-lepett-jarvanyugyi-keszultseg> [02.09.2020]; Mfor.hu, *Összefoglaló a koronavírus három hónapjáról – mi marad a veszélyhelyzet után?*, 17.06. 2020, <https://mfor.hu/cikkek/makro/mi-marad-a-veszelyhelyzet-utan.html> [02.09.2020].

Hungarians should stay at home to avoid the pandemic and (re-)boost the national economy (tourism)⁹.

General support of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance remained. Last surveys confirmed this fact: Fidesz-KDNP 31%, DK 9%, Momentum 8%, Jobbik 5%, MSZMP-P 5%, – by ZRI-Závecz. Fidesz-KDNP 40%, Momentum 11%, DK 7%, Jobbik 7%, MSZMP-P 4% – by Nézőpont.¹⁰ Therefore, Fidesz will use its popularity to spread a new National Consulting Questionnaire with questions pertaining to medical and economic issues (Should there be free Internet during a pandemic situation? Should the government support the Hungarian businesses? etc.), but questions concerning, for example, George Soros are also included¹¹.

⁹ Hvg.hu, Orbán: Több Balaton, kevesebb Adria, és akkor a járvány is féken tartható, 10.07.2020, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200710_Orban_Tobb_Balaton_kevesebb_Adria_es_akkor_a_jarvany_is_feken_tarthato [02.09.2020].

¹⁰ Kozvelemeney Kutatok.hu, Kutatócégenkénti havi eredmények legfrissebb kutatási eredmények; <https://kozvelemeneykutatok.hu/havipartpreferenciak/> [02.09.2020].

¹¹ Magyarország kormány, Nemzeti konzultáció a koronavírusról és a gazdaság újraindításáról, <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/nemzeti-konzultacio-a-koronavirusrol-es-a-gazdasag-ujrainditasarol> [14.08.2020].



Péter Galambos

Slovakia

From the beginning of January 2020, it was rumoured that the COVID-19 virus had already infected some people in Slovakia, but the most important event at the time was the preparations for the parliamentary elections (29th February 2020). It was certain that society wanted some changes triggered by the murder of Ján Kuciak and the corruption scandals connected to the SMER, the biggest governing party. In the end, the SMER had lost its positions in the Slovak parliament and a new government was formed by the opposition parties¹. It can be mentioned that the result of the election was as follows, OĽaNO 25%, SMER-SD 18%, SR 8%, L'SNS 7%, SaS 6%, and ZĽ 5%, and the parties of the new government were OĽaNO, SR, SaS, and ZĽ while Zuzana Čaputová appointed Igor Matovič from OĽaNO as a prime minister.

¹ Index, *Az Egyszerű Emberek nagyot nyertek, Fico pártja visszaesett, magyar párt nem jutott be*, 29.02.2020, https://index.hu/kulfold/2020/02/29/szlovakia_valasztas_exit_poll_smer_olano_fico_matovic_caputova_kotleba_bugar_menyhart/ [02.09.2020].

The COVID-19 situation was a little delicate in Slovakia because the first infected person was found during the transition process (9th March 2020) and the declaration of the emergency situation was announced (11th and 12th March 2020) by the former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini and not by his successor, Igor Matovič. This meant that Pellegrini decided swiftly for a strict lockdown, thus managing to contain the pandemic.

The situation showed at least three different paths; firstly, Igor Matovič, as a prime minister wanted to show that he is a real leader. Therefore, he appeared everywhere (TV, radio, newspapers, etc.) and stated that he and the new government have everything under control. Matovič viewed the situation as just a medical challenge, but his partners in the coalition and some members of the civil society tried to convince him that the pandemic is going to be an economic problem too. The Matovič cabinet emphasized that the government's duty is to save the citizens' lives, therefore, they closed, among others, the borders of Slovakia² and introduced a very strict lockdown during the Easter holiday. This caused some distress among Slovakia's people³ and tension was created between the parties of the coalition⁴. Secondly in July, some prominent politicians of the government (Kollár, Matovič, Gröhling) became involved in a scan-

² NTT, *Szlovákia egyelőre ragaszkodik a határainak lezárásához*, 17.05.2020, https://index.hu/kulfold/2020/05/17/szlovakia_egyelore_ragaszkodik_a_hatarainak_lezarasahoz/ [02.09.2020].

³ Bumm Sk, *Matovič: Meg kell vizsgálni, lehet-e enyhíteni a járványügyi intézkedéseket*, 29.05.2020, <https://www.bumm.sk/belfold/2020/05/28/matovic-meg-kell-vizsgalni-lehet-e-enyhiteni-a-jarvanyugyi-intezkedeseket> [02.09.2020].

⁴ Bumm Sk, *Kollár szerint már nincs szükség rendkívüli helyzetre, de megérti Matovičot*, 31.05.2020, <https://www.bumm.sk/belfold/2020/05/31/kollar-szerint-mar-nincs-szukseg-rendkivuli-helyzetre-de-megerti-matovicot> [02.09.2020].

dal (plagiarism)⁵. Thirdly, there was also a conflict among the members of the biggest opposition party (SMER). In the end, some well-known members of the party, with the lead of the former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, established a new social democratic, centrist party, called Hlas-Sociálna demokracia⁶.

From the end of May 2020, Slovakia agreed on loosening the restrictions, but the real changes came only in mid-June when the emergency situation was lifted (12th – 13th June). Currently, the question concerns the kind of leader the Slovakian people want. Do they want a strong leader, who can manage the crisis well, like Pellegrini or Fico? Or, they want a leader like Igor Matovič, who although not corrupt seems, in some ways, incompetent and unreliable⁷. The leftist opposition (SMER, Hlas) has already started to attack the Matovič cabinet because of the scandals concerning plagiarism and is trying to adopt a motion of censure in the Slovak Parliament⁸.

According to recent surveys the most trustworthy politicians are Zuzana Čaputová the President of the Republic

⁵ Bumm Sk, *Matovič diplomamunkájának csak a bevezető- és befejező része nem lopott!*, 27.07.2020, <https://www.bumm.sk/belfold/2020/07/27/matovic-diplomamunkajanak-csak-a-bevezeto-es-befejezo-resze-nem-lopott> [02.09.2020].

⁶ Ujszo.com, *Pellegrini bejelentette az új pártja nevét*, 29.06.2020, <https://uj szo.com/kozelet/pellegrini-bejelentette-az-uj-partja-nevet> [02.09.2020]; P. Techet, *Pellegrini lenyúlhatja Fico alól a Smer és vele együtt a meciari örökséget*, 11.06.2020, https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200611_fico-egyedul-marad-szakad-a-smer [02.09.2020].

⁷ Bumm Sk, *Államfő: A kormányfő diplomamunkája fölötti vita elmélyítette a társadalom megosztottságát*, 24.07.2020, <https://www.bumm.sk/belfold/2020/07/24/allamfo-a-kormanyfo-diplomamunkaja-folotti-vita-elmelyitette-a-tarsadalom-megosztottsagat> [02.09.2020].

⁸ Bumm Sk, *Pellegrini: Egy hazug tolvaj nem állhat a kormány élén!*, 17.07.2020, <https://www.bumm.sk/belfold/2020/07/17/pellegrini-egy-hazug-tolvaj-nem-allhat-a-kormany-elen> [02.09.2020].

62%, followed by Peter Pellegrini 55% and Igor Matovič 48% – by Focus, 3rd May⁹. According to poll figures, on an election OĽaNO would win 23.5% followed by Hlas-SD 16.7% and Smer-SD 10.7%. There will be four more parties, which could join the parliament: SaS 9.4%, ĽSNS 7.9%, Smerodina 6.4% and Progresívne Slovensko 5.2%. Zaľudí (4.0%) could not manage to succeed – by AKO, 7-17th July. Another poll shows almost the same result: OĽANO 21.90%, Hlas-SD 15.50%, SaS 9.20%, Smer-SD 8.80%, Smerodina 8.20%, Kotlebovci 8%, PS 6.80%, and MKÖ 5.50%¹⁰. It seems that the citizens still trust the new regime and the media seem to support them too.

⁹ Bumm Sk, *Felmérés: Az államfő a legmegbízhatóbb politikus*, 03.05.2020, <https://www.bumm.sk/percrol-percre/2020/05/03/felmeres-az-allamfo-a-legmegbizhatobb-politikus> [02.09.2020].

¹⁰ Felvidek.ma, *A Polis felmérése szerint már volna magyar képviselő a parlamentben*, 29.07.2020, <https://felvidek.ma/2020/07/a-polis-felmerese-szerint-mar-volna-magyar-kepviselo-a-parlamentben/> [02.09.2020].



Social Impact of the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in the V4 countries



Szczepan Czarnecki

Czech Republic

Labour Market

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn significantly affected the highly industrialized economy of the Czech Republic. However, on a comparative European analysis, Czechia constantly ranks amongst the top countries with the lowest unemployment. According to the latest available data from Eurostat, the European statistical office, data for the Czech Republic shows the lowest unemployment indicators in the entire European Union. Therefore, it can be concluded that the situation in the Czech Republic is relatively good when compared to other EU countries¹.

There are several reasons why the unemployment ratio remains at a low level in Czechia. For years, the Czech Republic

¹ Český statistický úřad, *Základní charakteristiky ekonomického postavení obyvatelstva ve věku 15 a více let*, <https://vdb.czso.cz/vdbvo2/faces/cs/shortUrl?su=c9ea1odo> [02.09.2020].

has been placed among the EU countries with the lowest unemployment rates. It is determined by a relatively cheap labour (hourly labour cost in Czechia in 2019 was 13,5 EUR, while the EU average was 27,7 EUR)², but also by the relatively high distribution of workforce in the manufacturing industry. Another factor concerns government assistance, which plays a crucial role in the labour market. Programs such as 'kurzarbeit' and a set of COVID-19 support programs stimulated the Czech economy and entrepreneurship. It must be mentioned that programs that stimulate the economy are time-constrained and will be partially finished in August 2020, which may negatively affect the labour market, e.g., with a dynamic unemployment growth. However, even with relatively good results, during the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment growth has been visible. Since the beginning of the pandemic from March until June 2020, the unemployment rate in Czechia increased approximately from 0.7% points to 3.7%, i.e., 269 637 officially registered unemployed (June 2020). This figure is 1.1% higher compared to the corresponding period in 2019, having reached by this time the highest ratio since February 2018³.

In the unemployment structure, we observe a specific dynamic in the main structural categories, e.g., gender, age, and specific employment fields. Year-on-year growth among Czechia's newly reported unemployment was higher among men (1.3%) than women (0.9%), and the highest increase of unemployment was indicated among men in the youngest

² Eurostat, *Hourly labour costs*, March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Hourly_labour_costs [12.08.2020].

³ Ibidem.

age categories⁴. Also, the Czech Republic's youth unemployment rate increased to 8.20% which is 2.8% more than the previous year. Due to the employment fields, the highest increase of the newly unemployed is found in services such as accommodation, transport, and tourism.

It must be emphasized that the data presented concern the first four months of the pandemic (March – June 2020), and the number of registered unemployed may increase more significantly in autumn 2020. Apart from the unemployment growth factor, the Czech labour market was significantly determined by the COVID-19 pandemic; 31.1% of employees and self-employed economically active pointed out that their work was somehow interrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The reasons for the interruption are several, ranging from the loss of orders, agreements on leave, and care for children or other family members. The changes that appeared during the pandemic have substantially affected the self-employed much more than regular full-time employees⁵.

Health Care

The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly an unexpected and, at the same time, a considerable burden for the Czech healthcare sector. In Czechia, the healthcare outcomes, in general, find themselves below the EU average⁶; however,

⁴ J. Grossmann, D. München, *Nezaměstnanost v období COVID-19*, Institut pro demokracii a ekonomickou analýzu, Anti Idea, June 2020, https://idea.cerge-ei.cz/images/COVID/Nezaměstnanost_v_dobe_covid-19_cerven.pdf [12.08.2020].

⁵ Magazin, *Jak se covid-19 promítá do práce a výdělků v Česku*, April 2020, <https://magazin.lmc.eu/unikatni-data-jak-se-covid-19-promita-do-prace-a-vydelku-v-cesku> [12.08.2020].

⁶ OECD, *State of Health in the UE, Country Health Profile – Czechia*, 2019, <http://www.oecd.org/publications/czech-republic-country-health-profile-2019-058290e9-en.htm> [12.08.2020].

the healthcare system is constantly improving. Healthcare expenditures are also below the EU average but have been increasing yearly since 2005. In March 2020, the government of Czechia has introduced a number of preventive measures against the spread of the virus. Undoubtedly, the positive balance of about 13.5 billion CZK of the public health insurance system in Czechia in 2019 partially solved the healthcare system's financial issue at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, Czechia had a capacity of approximately 1,000 beds in the infectious diseases departments, with a possibility of using one or more facilities that are not primarily devoted to infectious patients. Similar to the other countries, Czechia struggled with the lack of access to protective equipment. Significant shortages of protective materials resulted in increased orders from other countries, mainly China. During the pandemic crisis, the healthcare insurance system became a broadly discussed political issue. In April 2020, the Czech Parliament approved the government's proposal to increase state contribution to the social health insurance system on behalf of defined categories of economically inactive people. The governmental proposal resulted in an increase by 500 CZK since June 1st 2020, and further 200 CZK since January 1st 2021 per month/ per capita.

Education

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional classroom education came to a halt during the first days and following the first officially confirmed infected patient in Czechia (March 2020). Following the announcement of a ban on pupils' phys-

ical presence in primary and secondary schools on March 11, 2020, in connection with the Czech government's measures, an entirely exceptional situation arose. The vast majority of primary and secondary school pupils were involved in distance education; however, about 11-16% of pupils in different types of primary schools, and approximately 20% of secondary schools, did not participate in online communication. The main reason for the absence of some students' online communication was either the lack of ICT equipment or poor internet connection⁷. According to the Czech School Inspectorate's survey results, (depending on the school type) approximately 0.25% (High Schools) to 0.7% (primary schools), i.e., 9,500 pupils of primary school and high school did not participate in distance education at all, and 4-17% pointed out existing difficulties with access to online education. At the same time, about 35% of schools have provided, to some extent, online education for all pupils in their school.

Social Exclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a particularly acute global impact on women. The global trend is also visible in the Czech Republic, where during the lockdown, the help line registered up to a 30% increase in calls on domestic violence, a 30% increase in personal and mental health problems, and about 30% increase in internet communication, including sexual abuse⁸.

⁷ Česká školní inspekce, *Vzdělávání na dálku v základních a středních školách*, 2020, <https://www.csicr.cz/cz/Aktuality/Tematicka-zprava-Vzdelavani-na-dalku-v-ZS-a-SS> [04.08.2020], p. 3-6.

⁸ J. Mačí, *V koronakrizi rostlo domácí násilí. Hodně zasáhlo děti*, 10.07.2020, Seznam.cz, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/v-koronakrizi-rostlo-domaci-nasili-hodne-za->

In the context of the healthcare system during the COVID-19 pandemic, serious issues concerning access to healthcare services appeared. People with disabilities and patients with mental, chronic, and specific rare diseases have been deprived of various forms of health and social assistance to a large extent. Data from the study of the organization *Děti úplňku a Aliance pro individualizovanou podporu (AIP)* shows that almost 90% of the respondents suffered from impaired access to the different forms of care that they were using in the period before the introduction of quarantine measures. Failure in healthcare services can be fatal for people with disabilities, rare or chronic illnesses.

Another COVID-19 issue is the growing risk of monetary poverty and income inequalities. The level of threat of the so-called income poverty had already reached a total of 10.1% in 2019, which means that income poverty, prior to the crisis, affected approximately 1 million Czech citizens. However, again, these results are among the lowest in the EU where the average risk was about 16.7%⁹. The number of people who are likely to experience income problems as a result of the pandemic are likely to extend to workers in different sectors who could not work due to a government ban, people in quarantine, or the self-employed (OSVC).

sahlo-deti-111959 [02.09.2020].

⁹ Eurostat, *Income poverty statistics*, May 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Income_poverty_statistics [03.08.2020].



Agata Tatarenko

Poland

Labour market

For the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish labour market was moderately hit, especially compared with last year's data. In June 2020, the registered unemployment ratio in Poland was 6.1%. At the beginning of the pandemic in March, the unemployment ratio was 5.4% (March 2019 – 5.9%, June 2020 – 5.3%)¹. However, the unemployment ratio may increase gradually in the next months. Similarly, Poland may experience a rapid unemployment growth from the beginning of winter, because the spring and summer periods, for which the statistics apply, involve seasonal work (agriculture, construction industry), which will end in autumn. The unemployment rate may increase

¹ GUS, *Wyrównania sezonowe – Bezrobotni zarejestrowani i stopa bezrobocia w latach 2011-2020*, 30.07.2020, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/wyrownania-sezonowe-bezrobotni-zarejestrowani-i-stop-a-bezrobocia-w-latach-2011-2020,5,1.html> [04.08.2020].

significantly in the first half and in the middle of next year. At the moment, until about mid-2021, many businesses use anti-crisis shields. In order not to return loan funds, employers must keep employees in employment for 12 months. When this condition expires, mass layoffs may occur. For this reason, it is important to stimulate investment and sustainable consumption.

In the first few months, the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland has affected primarily three groups of workers. As in other EU and Visegrad Group countries the first group includes people who performed precarious jobs and temporary jobs. The second group consists of young people, especially those who worked in the HoReCa sector and graduates who were to enter the labour market this year. The last group consists of women². The reasons for the latter include, firstly, the fact that women statistically lose their jobs more frequently than men in crisis situations. Secondly, the pandemic crisis has mostly hit sectors occupied by women, such as the beauty industry and often SMEs, where the owners and employees in Poland are mostly women. The beauty industry reopened in the third stage of defrosting the economy. The beauty industry, but also importantly for the Polish economy, the fashion industry (the industry is responsible for revenues to the state budget in the range of PLN 13.3 to 16.0 mln³), is still struggling with a reduced number of customers due to reduced home budget⁴. A spe-

² Wydział Zarządzania Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, GRAPE i CASE, *Diagnoza.plus*, <https://diagnoza.plus/aktualnosci/> [04.08.2020].

³ PWC, *Polski sektor modowy na krawędzi. Wpływ COVID-19. Raport*, March 2020, p. 3, <https://www.pwc.pl/pl/pdf-nf/2020/polski-sektor-modowy-wplyw-covid19.pdf> [04.08.2020].

⁴ Ibidem.

cial subgroup are workers, mostly women from Ukraine, who worked in other people's households (babysitters, medical aid for elderly, housekeepers etc).

Health Care

According to the OECD's Country Health Profile 2019, in 2017, Poland spent 6.5% of its GDP on health compared to an average 9.8% across the EU. Almost 70% of this spending came from public sources, a lower share than the average for EU (79%). The rest is predominantly paid out of pocket by households, primarily for outpatient medicines. The Social Health Insurance system provides access to a broad scope of benefits, however often with a very long waiting time. Also, the health system tends to rely excessively on hospital care⁵. For these reasons, the Polish healthcare system could be inefficient in the case of a large wave of COVID-19 patients. Tough restrictions on social discipline introduced by the government at the start of the pandemic remarkably slowed down the increase in infection in the first five months of the pandemic, especially in comparison to the Western countries. The measures introduced by the authorities include lockdown, the obligation to wear a mask inside buildings, rules on social distancing, regulated hours for seniors in shops and pharmacies, and a ban on public gatherings. The government also purchased needed medical equipment such as respirators and protective clothing. Special

⁵ OECD, *State of Health in the EU: Poland Country Health Profile 2019*, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/297e4b92-en.pdf?expires=1596794959&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=7C7B57E1E1BFC8890532A9E68311855E> [04.08.2020].

hospitals dedicated to COVID-19 patients have been set up to reduce the risk of infection to patients suffering from other illnesses.

The activities of the State Sanitary Inspection (*Państwowa Inspekcja Sanitarna*, common name *Sanepid*) were an important and characteristic element of the Polish healthcare system against the threat of the pandemic. Despite the initial unpreparedness for the conditions of the pandemic, sanitary and epidemiological stations performed an efficient work in detecting the network of connections of infected persons, who were then required to quarantine at home. This system allowed the epidemic to slow down during the first months.

Education

Poland's education system (with some exceptions, such as social assistance units) was subject to time constraints related to preventing the spread of COVID-19. On March 16, 2020, distance learning was introduced during the suspension of classes in schools. This mode of operation was associated with several challenges, such as individual access to a computer. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 data, 96% of students in Poland reported having a computer they could use for school-work (OECD average is 89%)⁶. However, the cited study does not provide information about whether the pupils had individual access to a computer that they could

⁶ OECD, *School Education during the COVID-19: were teachers and students ready? Country note. Poland*, 2020, p. 4.

use continuously for several hours a day, as required by the remote education system.

During the pandemic, students and teachers could borrow the necessary equipment from schools. From April 1st local government units could apply for funds to purchase equipment for pupils and teachers for remote learning and work. Projects like “Remote School” and “Remote School+”, worth PLN 367 million, made it possible to obtain 100% co-financing to purchase equipment, mainly for students who were digitally excluded from rural areas. Until June 15, 4,836 local governments received funding under both programs, for the amount of almost PLN 336 million⁷.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the organization of parents’ and students’ work-life balance. In Poland, 80% of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their parents supported their educational efforts and achievements (OECD average – 89%). However, only 75% of students from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution reported so (OECD average 85%)⁸. Students and parents were supported by the educational offers of institutions such as the Grand Theatre, the National Opera, the Institute of National Remembrance and the online platform Ninateka. The condition for using the online materials was the possession of a computer for personal use, but also appropriate skills in using internet platforms. Educational materials were also prepared by the National Polish Television.

⁷ MEN, *Raport Ministra Edukacji Narodowej na temat funkcjonowania szkół i placówek oświatowych w okresie COVID-19*, 26.06.2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/raport-ministra-edukacji-narodowej-na-temat-funkcjonowania-szkol-i-placowek-oswiatowych-w-okresie-covid-19> [04.08.2020].

⁸ OECD, *School Education during the COVID-19...*, p. 6.

Social Exclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic may, therefore, affect pupils' educational exclusion from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution, due to the lack of appropriate tools (a computer, a quiet place to study), and insufficient parental support.

Another group that may experience social exclusion caused by the consequences of the pandemic are people at risk of losing their jobs, i.e., those who perform precarious or temporary jobs. This group includes young people (graduates) and women. In fact, women are one of the most affected groups in Poland by the pandemic. Firstly, the lockdown and period of remote work are conducive to the increase in domestic violence. Although, currently, there is no official data for the first stage of the pandemic, it is estimated that the level of domestic violence has increased significantly. According to the numbers of the Polish Women's Rights Centre, in March 2020 alone, about 50% more women were calling their helpline than in March 2019. Secondly, during the lockdown, women were more often doing household chores while simultaneously engaged in remote work⁹. The pandemic circumstances have largely exacerbated the traditional division of social roles, already characteristic of Polish society.

In the context of the healthcare system, the pandemic has revealed serious weaknesses with accessibility to the healthcare services, especially access to psychologists and psychiatrists. This problem had already been a big issue in

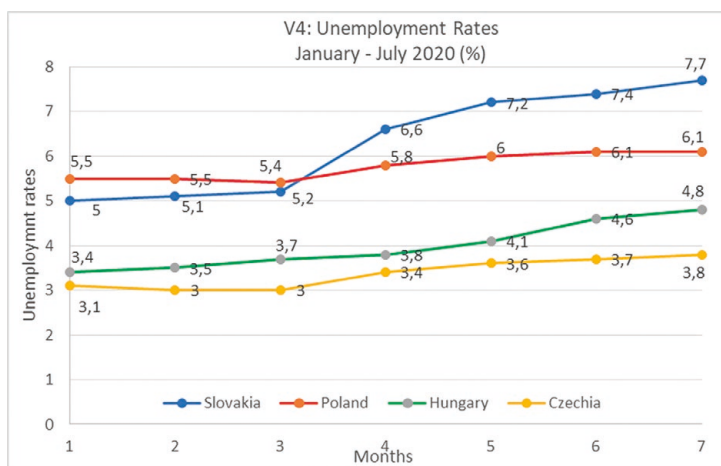
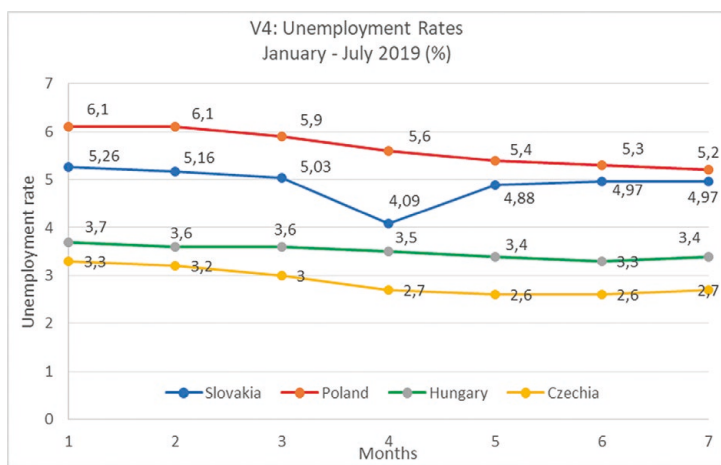
⁹ K. Krzywicka, *Obowiązki w domu w czasie koronawirusa*, IRCenter.com, <https://ircenter.com/obowiazki-w-domu-w-czasie-koronawirusa/> [04.08.2020].

Poland, as symptoms of depression are reported by more than half of Poles over 65 who are also the group most at risk of COVID-19¹⁰. Overall, the available data allow to predict that the COVID-19 crisis affected the most the already excluded groups: the poor, the unemployed, seniors, people with disabilities, and women¹¹.

¹⁰ OECD, *State of Health in the EU...*, s. 3

¹¹ R. Szarfenberg, R. Bakalarczyk, M. Kocejko, *Spoleczne uzupełnienie tarczy antykryzysowej. Ekspertyza*, no. 9, 30.04.2020, <https://oees.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EKSPERTYZA-Spoleczne-uzupelnienie-tarczy-antykryzysowej-1.pdf> [04.08.2020].

Unemployment rates in the V4 countries in the first six months of 2019 and 2020



Own elaboration based on data from Trading Economics



Łukasz Lewkowicz

Slovakia

Labour market

On March 12, the Slovak government decided to introduce a state of emergency caused by COVID-19. The first restrictions came into force the following day; international airports were closed, the international rail and bus connections were suspended – except for truck transit and supplies –, the internal communication has been limited, and bars, restaurants, sports, leisure, and cultural facilities have also been closed. There has also been a reduction in shopping centres' activities as it was forbidden to organize mass events. The sectors most affected by the crisis were transport, culture and tourism, and the car industry, which is important for the Slovak economy. The lockdown had a significant economic impact and caused some increase in unemployment rates in the above-mentioned sectors, mainly in small and medium-sized enterprises. The Slovak government has adopted a special program to help companies and their employees

in the current situation. These included, among others, postponing the repayment of loans and mortgages, granting short-term loans, and postponing the submission of tax returns. Companies did not have to pay social security and health insurance contributions or income tax for workers who were unable to work due to government's restrictions¹. At the turn of May and June, the Slovak government reopened the economy in several stages. The unemployment rate in Slovakia jumped to 7.4% in June 2020 from 5% in the corresponding month of the previous year, but below market expectations of 8%. It was the highest unemployment rate since April 2017, as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the labour market. The number of unemployed persons went up by 66,960 from a year earlier to 203,586, the highest since April 2017. In May, the unemployment rate was lower at 7.2%². The unemployment rate increased in all regions of Slovakia. However, it grew more in the eastern part of the state, which is less economically developed. The highest number of unemployed was in Rimavská Sobota poviat (20.4%) in the south-eastern part of Slovakia, while the lowest number was registered in Bratislava V poviat (3.38%). In June, 4713 university graduates registered with employment offices. Most of them registered in Prešov (402), Košice (373), Bardejov (225), and Nitra (217). The largest number of unemployed graduates was in economics (735), medical (514) and non-medical health sciences (419), and pedagogical

¹ Ł. Lewkowicz, *Słowacja wobec pandemii COVID-19 w sytuacji zmiany władzy*, „Komentarze IES” 2020, no. 144, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/slowacja-wobec-pandemii-covid-19-w-sytuacji-zmiany-wladzy-144-47-2020> [05.08.2020].

² *Slovak Unemployment Rate*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/slovakia/unemployment-rate> [05.08.2020].

sciences (331)³. It is forecasted that by the end of 2020, the unemployment rate in Slovakia may reach approximately 10%. The Slovak authorities count on the help of Slovak entrepreneurs from grants and loans under the Next Generation EU program.

Healthcare

At an extraordinary meeting on 15 March, the Slovak government declared a state of emergency in healthcare. Strikes were forbidden in the entire health sector, and workers could be transferred from one facility to another. The Slovak authorities imposed high fines for non-compliance with the quarantine regulations. In the first weeks of the epidemic in Slovakia, hospitals lacked respirators and protective equipment. At that time, the Slovak government purchased large quantities of surgical masks, gloves, disinfectants, and tests from China and Turkey. On May 16, the Parliament of Slovakia approved the so-called smart quarantine. This method of quarantine was aimed at people returning from abroad. Until this time, these people were referred to state-owned centres, which were, therefore, overcrowded. From mid-May, they could have such quarantine at home, provided that they consented to the inspection via the application on the phone. Slovak tests for coronavirus, which were developed in early April, obtained all the necessary certificates and were put into use. The state received 100,000 tests of

³ *L'udí bez práce pribudlo aj v júni, nezamestnanosť rastie už pol roka (grafy)*, <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22450299/nezamestnanost-na-slovensku-vyvoj-grafy-jun-2020.html> [05.08.2020].

this type. The State Institute for Drug Control called upon medical care providers to introduce restrictions on the sale of medicines. The purpose was to make medicines available to everybody. Additionally, the Institute issued an alert on March 25, 2020 regarding the purchase of falsified medicinal products⁴. According to data from August 5, out of 5.5 million inhabitants in Slovakia, 2,417 cases of infection (0.04% of the population) were confirmed, including 29 deaths and 1,777 cured. During the pandemic period, 269,665 tests (4.9% of the population) were performed⁵. Slovakia was affected by the pandemic to a much lesser extent than other Central European states. The success in the fight against the pandemic was related to the Slovak government's very quick reaction in a situation of political change. Some Slovak self-governments reacted quite quickly, including the Bratislava region. Equally important was the discipline of the Slovak society, the common wearing of masks, and the use of disinfectants. In the first weeks of the pandemic, the inhabitants of Slovakia stocked up on food and did not go outside.

Education

The first restrictions on Slovakia's educational institutions were introduced shortly after the first case of COVID-19 infection was recorded. On March 8, secondary schools in the Bratislava region were closed; a day later, primary schools

⁴ NOERR, *Slovakia: Healthcare regulations as response to COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://www.noerr.com/en/newsroom/news/slovakia-healthcare-regulations-as-response-to-covid-19-pandemic> [05.08.2020].

⁵ Koronavírus a Slovensko, <https://korona.gov.sk> [05.08.2020].

in Bratislava and secondary schools in Trnava and Košice were also closed. From March 13, all universities, schools, and kindergartens in Slovakia were closed. Educational institutions began to gradually open in June. The unconventional break in education highlighted the need to change the content and form of education. Slovak teachers started to use the tools available to them such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Classroom, while some preferred e-mail or chat applications. From the beginning of the pandemic, the *IT Academy – Education for the 21st century* project was used. After March 18, the project was open to all schools in Slovakia. The aim of the project was to provide substantive support to teachers in the field of distance learning with the use of innovative teaching methods. By June 30, 247 open webinars for teachers had been implemented, attended by 6865 teachers from 209 secondary schools, and 303 primary schools from all regions of Slovakia⁶.

A pre-requisite for any type of online learning activity is that students have access to a computer. According to PISA 2018 data, which was collected prior to the crisis, this is a precondition that was not met by all students before the pandemic hit. In Slovakia, 92% of students reported having a computer they could use for school-work, which is higher than the OECD average (89%). For those from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution, 78% of students reported having a computer they could use for school-work, which is the same as the OECD average (78%). However, ac-

⁶ Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu Slovenskej republiky, *Pandémia menila obsah a formy vzdelávania. Aktivne reagoval aj národný projekt, ktorý vzdeláva pre 21. storočie*, 30.06.2020, <https://www.minedu.sk/pandemia-menila-obsah-a-formy-vzdelavania-aktivne-reagoval-aj-narodny-projekt-ktory-vzdelava-pre-21-storocie/> [05.08.2020].

cess to the home computer may in fact have been limited with the crisis in cases where its use had to be shared with other members of the household⁷. Currently, representatives of the Ministry of Education, together with the Public Health Office, are preparing a safety plan for schools in the event of a second wave of COVID-19. It will be presented to the public after August 18. The department of education is also developing hygiene and epidemiological procedures that will be followed in schools and school facilities. They will be different depending on the individual situation in a given region of Slovakia. If Slovakia's epidemiological situation does not change significantly, students will start the new school year 2020/2021 on September 2, 2020⁸.

Social exclusion

The epidemiological and economic effects of the pandemic have particularly hit the Roma minority in Slovakia. Because of the restrictions and discipline measures introduced for Slovaks in March, it was possible to reduce the virus' reproduction rate to an average value of 0.8, which means that one patient infects 0.8 people on average. This did not apply to Roma settlements. In the most affected Romani settlement in Žehra, the reproduction rate was over 6.0. Therefore, it was considered justified to gradually lift restrictions locally and keep them in endangered settlements at the

⁷ OECD, *Slovak Republic: School education during COVID-19: Were teachers and students ready?*, <http://www.oecd.org/education/Slovak-Republic-coronavirus-education-country-note.pdf> [05.08.2020].

⁸ Kosicednes.pl, *Nastúpia žiaci v septembri do školy?*, <https://kosicednes.sk/udalosti/nastupia-ziaci-v-septembri-do-skoly/> [05.08.2020].

same time. Due to the non-compliance with the mandatory 14-day quarantine, entire Romani settlements (mainly in the Spiš region) were closed. They were fenced off with tapes and monitored around the clock by police and military patrols. Compulsory testing of residents was also carried there. This caused local conflicts and accusations of racial discrimination.

According to analysts, the greatest challenge will be the marginalized Roma communities. There is a lack of running water in the Roma settlements, and due to over-population, it is impossible to keep a social distance. Many Roma living in segregated settlements see themselves cut from any source of income and (formal or informal) economic activity, leading to rising unemployment and poverty. Remote learning through digital education is often not accessible and affordable for marginalized Roma children, lacking adequate IT equipment, internet connection, or sometimes even electricity. This could further deepen inequalities in education. Analysts recommend that further government action should focus especially on these groups⁹.

⁹ A. Wolska, *Słowacja: Masowe testy na koronawirusa wśród mniejszości romskiej*, Euroactiv.pl, 04.04.2020, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/praca-i-polityka-spoleczna/news/slowacka-ruszyla-testy-na-koronawirus-romowie-mniejszosc-romska/> [05.08.2020]; Z. Kovačič Hanzelová, *Koronavírus: Štát pre vysokorizikové rómske osady nemá plan*, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22357032/koronavirus-stat-pre-vysokorizikove-romske-osady-nema-plan.html> [05.08.2020]; European Commission, *Overview of the impact of coronavirus measures on the marginalized Roma communities in the EU*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/overview_of_covid19_and_roma_-_impact_-_measures_-_priorities_for_funding_-_23_04_2020.docx.pdf [05.08.2020].



Dominik Héjj

Hungary

Labour market

In the period between January-February 2020, the unemployment ratio in Hungary was 3.7%. In the following period, between February-March, it increased by 0.1% to 3.8%. The start of the pandemic in Hungary resulted in a noticeable increase in unemployment. In the second quarter of 2020, this indicator amounted to 4.6% and it has been the highest result since October 2016. The highest increase in unemployment was recorded in the 15-24 age group. Currently, 14.7% of people of this age group are unemployed, which is an increase by 4%. The smallest increase in unemployment is recorded in the highest age group between 55-74 years old – at 0.1%. According to the latest data, 21% of the unemployed have been looking for a job for at least a year. Interestingly, despite the increase in unemployment, the average time of looking for a job decreased from 8 to 6.4 months. Support programs for entrepreneurs were in-

troduced to protect jobs. One of them was that in return for 6 months of government-guaranteed wage subsidies. In exchange for state aid, the employer will keep employment unchanged for 9 months.

According to data from June 2020, more than 10,000 companies received this kind of help from the government, and as a result, 134,000 jobs will be protected. In an announcement on August 5, 2020, the government informed that because of its initiatives, it has been possible to reduce the unemployment level for seven weeks and the number of unemployed persons by 25,000. This data can be verified with the next report of the National Statistical Office. It is worth noting that on April 29, 2020 Viktor Orbán said in the Hungarian Parliament that people who would lose their jobs as a result of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic would receive unemployment benefits for three months, and then, as he said, after these three months, there would be no Hungarian who would not receive a new job offer – either from the labour market or the state sector. It should also be noted that the strong activation of the Hungarian military, which launched a campaign aimed at the unemployed during the pandemic, sees military service as a possible alternative and a secure workplace.

Healthcare

The situation in public healthcare service in Hungary is one of the biggest concerns identified by Hungarians in public opinion polls. Hence, there was concern about whether the Hungarian healthcare service could cope with the COVID-19 challenge. According to official data, everything went

smoothly. A different position appeared in the press that was unfavourable towards the government, and in internet forums. From March 16, a government decree indicated that public health staff over the age of 65 would not work with people infected by COVID-19. On April 17, 2020 the government announced the award of wage supplements to each person working in the health service to HUF 500,000. The allowances were granted in June and July 2020. The cost of the budget was about 70 billion HUF. At that time, it was declared that the salaries would increase by 20% for healthcare workers. The cost of this political decision was about 80 billion HUF

From the beginning of the pandemic, the government ordered personal protective equipment (masks, coveralls) and medical equipment. The transports reached Hungary mainly from China and were carried out by private low-cost WizzAir airlines. According to the calculations Euronews, Hungary has currently the highest number of life-support machines per 100,000 inhabitants. There are 163 pieces per 100 000. For comparison, in the USA it is 54, in Japan 35, in Germany 30, and in Poland 26¹. The government announced that it was preparing for the second wave of coronavirus, and only the first stage (season) of the fight had ended.

¹ Á. Németh, *Magyarország lélegeztetőgép-nagyhatalom*, Euronews.com 30.06.2020, <https://hu.euronews.com/2020/06/30/magyarorszag-lelegeztetogep-nagyhatalom> [01.08.2020].

Education

Digital learning at universities was introduced on March 11, 2020. From Monday, March 16, schools, kindergartens, and nurseries were closed. Schools remained closed until the end of the school year. From May 18, the government allowed teaching at universities but left the decision to the rectors.

According to the government's announcements, the period of digital education was smooth. In the so-called national consultations, which in Hungary lasted until August 31, the government asked in a survey whether Hungarians think that students and teachers should have free access to the Internet. The results of this study will be published early in September.

The trade unions present a different position in the assessment of distance learning. In their opinion, teachers had to invest an average of HUF 51,000 (ca. EUR 170) out of their own pocket to be able to take part in digital learning. Both high-speed Internet and computer equipment were necessary for classes². The largest trade union of teachers – *Pedagógusok Demokratikus Szakszervezete* – conducted a research on a sample of over 1000 people on distance learning³.

Almost 43% of the respondents worked in primary school and 78.1% indicated that they had to work more than normal during distance learning. To the question of how much more the teachers had to work. 22.7% of teachers said that

² Ne dolgozz ingyen, *Felmérés: a digitális munkarend az oktatásirányítás kudarca*, <https://nedolgozzingyen.hu/2020/06/22/felmeres-a-digitalis-munkarend-az-oktatasiranyitas-kudarca/?fbclid=IwARo-6CBepDsfsYUwHlvB9luMVRM6RxDE6sw5hmK4hr7OhOYKEQ7NZ9FD7UY> [01.08.2020].

³ Ibidem.

they had to work 21-40% more about than in “normal time”. 20.6% of teachers said that it was between 41-60%, and 10.4% of them thought that they had to work 61-80% more than in the normal period⁴.

Teachers also found that, during distance learning, their fixed costs increased (c.a. 30%), although their opinions differed on how much these costs increased. Additionally, 46.2% of teachers experienced increased stress, and many said that their health had declined during the pandemic. A 42.9% of teachers stated that they had to invest in equipment necessary to conduct classes during distance learning. Out of this group, over 68% of respondents declared the need to purchase computer equipment – e.g., web cameras, headphones, among others. The PDSZ emphasized that the government did not pay any additional benefits to this professional group, however, according to the government’s statement published August 6, 2020 teachers have received a 10% increase since August.

Social exclusion

Social exclusion mostly affects areas outside Budapest, which is the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan city in Hungary. The poorest counties include Somogy, Baranya, Bács-Kiskun, Békés, Szabolcs-Szttmár-Bereg, and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén⁵. Even the potential effects of the economic crisis that will most likely follow the COVID-19 pandemic are un-

⁴ Ne dolgozz ingyen, *Felmérés: a digitális munkarend...*

⁵ B. Nagy, *Ezek az ország legszegényebb települései: ennyiből nyomorognak a családok*, Pénzcentrum.hu, 16.07.2019, <https://www.penzcentrum.hu/otthon/ezek-az-orszag-legszegényebb-telepulesei-ennyibol-nyomorognak-a-csaladok.1080569.html> [1.08.2020].

known. As a result of the loss of jobs, an increased number of problems are likely to arise concerning loan repayment, and evictions can be expected. The increase in unemployment among young people may accelerate the next wave of emigrants to the European Union, mainly to Germany and Austria.

An important element resulting from COVID-19 is a marked increase in the gender gap index. In the Global Gender Gap Report 2020⁶, Hungary was ranked 105th out of 153 countries. It was the worst result in the EU. The greatest inequalities were in the “Wage equality for similar work”.

Women dominate the number of unemployed people, part-time workers and workers for unpaid work per day. The Amnesty International⁷ report also highlights the problem of discrimination against women at work. This is mainly the case of pregnant women and women with young children. According to Fidesz, the government’s policy favours parenthood, but in reality, young mothers’ position in the labour market is very difficult. At this point it is worth recalling the changes in the labour code, which have been in force since January 1, 2019 and were characterized as the “slave law”. The position of women is largely due to the country’s culture and the dominant role of patriarchy. This can be seen, inter alia, in the number of women sitting in the Hungarian Parliament or serving as ministers in the

⁶ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>, pp. 181-182.

⁷ Amnesty International, *Hungary: no working around it: gender-based discrimination in Hungarian workplaces*, 03.06.2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur27/2378/2020/en/> [1.08.2020].

government of Viktor Orbán⁸. During the COVID-19 crisis, mainly working people who are employed part-time or contract of mandate will lose their jobs. According to the cited/quoted data, these are mainly women.

⁸ Amnesty International, *Hungary: Women face stark increase in discrimination and job insecurity in the workplace due to COVID-19 crisis*, 03.06.2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/hungary-women-face-stark-increase-in-discrimination-and-job-insecurity-in-the-workplace-due-to-covid19-crisis/> [1.08.2020].

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This IEŚ Policy Paper is a result of cooperation of Institute of Central Europe with Tihany Center for Political Analysis (Hungary). The center was established in 2013 as an independent research institute. It has a wide-range activity which deals with issues important for Hungary's sphere of interest and political environment. Primary area is Central Europe, relations with its neighbors, with special attention to the Austro-Hungarian ties.

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6/2020

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The presented publication is the result of cooperation between the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin (Poland) and the Tihany Centre for Political Analysis (Hungary). Both institutions' analysts decided to look at the pandemic's political and social consequences in the V4 countries during the so-called COVID-19 first wave. They are trying to diagnose the impact of the pandemic on the political scene of the V4 countries and on the social sphere, including education systems, labour markets, healthcare, and social services. What were the first reactions of the V4 governments to the outbreak of the epidemic? Has the pandemic changed the balance of power on the political scenes of these countries and how? How did it affect the labour market? How has the education system changed? How did the healthcare system deal with the pandemic? Which social groups have been at risk of social exclusion?

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ISBN 978-83-66413-23-8



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