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Latvia: Social Discontent and a Decline in Trust in the Government

So far, Latvian authorities' preventive actions against COVID-19 and their economic response to it have faced visible public criticism. Increasing dissatisfaction has been manifested by protests and scepticism about mass vaccination. Information campaigns related to the coronavirus were seen as ineffective, resulting in an increase of disinformation and conspiracy theories. There was no efficient communication with the public. As a result, the pandemic highlighted social divisions in Latvia and a decline in trust in the Latvian authorities.

Negative emotions explosiveness in the society. Despite the relatively stable political and economic situation in Latvia since the announcement of a state of emergency (see „IEŚ Commentaries”, no. 308), imposed restrictions resulted in an increase of social discontent. A state of emergency was announced on November 9, 2020, and is planned to be in force till April 6, 2021. Despite limitations on public gatherings, residents took to the streets, protesting against insufficient state aid and mandates to wear masks and provide mass vaccinations. Entrepreneurs, social workers, and artists demonstrated in Riga and other regions of Latvia. Even though the first Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines were delivered to Latvia on December 28 – a day later than to Lithuania and Estonia („IEŚ Commentaries”, no. 302) – and then, by AstraZeneca company, on February 7, Latvia is currently lagging behind European countries in terms of the number of vaccinated people per 100 inhabitants (1.7; well-below the EU average of 3.8). This has resulted from delayed deliveries, logistic constraints, and public sentiment. In January 2021 only half of the residents declared their willingness to be vaccinated when such an opportunity arises. A relatively significant proportion of sceptics was reported in hospitals in Latgale, a region with low economic development, divided along ethnic lines (Russian-speaking and Polish minorities are concentrated here). The arguments indicated were, among others, fear of complications after vaccination and lack of reliable, credible information. These findings are in line with the results of the research on vaccination in Central Europe that show that different socio-demographic factors (gender, age, ethnicity, education, and income) as well as cultural, religious, historical, and geopolitical conditions in the country (including dissatisfaction from the functioning of the health care system during the Soviet Union) may have an impact on scepticism of mass vaccination.

The role of the media in shaping opinions on COVID-19. The effectiveness of the authorities' actions was weakened by false information presented mainly through social media, which dominated over official messages from the state. There were theories that the virus was artificially created to intimidate the public and that authorities overstated the real number of COVID-19 cases in order to benefit the interests of global business. Internet and social networks are the main channels of communication for anti-vaccine supporters, and young people who search for medical information on websites can be easy targets for manipulators. Indeed, trust in vaccination is lowest among young people. Undoubtedly, reluctance to mass vaccinations is also associated with distrust towards the government as the entire process is strictly regulated by state institutions. For this reason, a lack of trust in the state or a critical attitude towards the political elite may influence the decision to not take the vaccine.

Interestingly, the Russian-language media broadcasted from Russia is not the main source of information for Russian-speaking individuals in Latvia, as they are recipients of mainly Latvian media content in Russian.

The crisis of support for the government. The pandemic has intensified discontent among various social groups. There have been both those who claim restrictions are too restrictive and others for whom limitations are insignificant. Elderly people, Russian-speakers, and low-income residents have been the most dissatisfied and harbour more unfavourable attitudes towards the government. They have criticized the political elite as well due to the lack of governmental cohesion and conflicts between various political parties. The prime minister Krišjānis Kariņš (New Unity) was condemned for his criticism of the cabinet ministers as well as both the Minister of Economy Jānis Vitenbergs (KPV LV) and President Egils Levits for their insufficient activity in time of crisis.

It is worth mentioning that some politicians directly opposed the existing restrictions and joined the protesters. For example, the presence in the protest of a former member of the populist KPV LV party, deputy Aldis Gobzems, who is currently planning to form a new political movement, may be seen as an attempt to garner support for his political activities.

Conclusions. According to public opinion, the government's response in Latvia to mitigate the pandemic consequences was delayed, erratic, and inconsistent. There was neither information about the restrictions' legitimacy, nor clear rules of conduct for services and institutions supervising compliance with the law. There was no extensive information campaign in Russian language either. Therefore, strategic communication within the society failed, reducing de facto trust in the government.

Disinformation campaigns are intense in time of crisis. Thus, it is not surprising that the pandemic is accompanied by this phenomenon. Fear, uncertainty, and lack of mutual understanding have been the catalysts of disinformation. Latvia's opinion poll conducted in November 2020 (SKDS) indicated explicitly the decrease of social confidence in official information provided by authorities on the spread and limitations of COVID-19 in the most recent six months. While 63% of respondents admitted that they trusted official messages in the spring, by the end of the year the percentage dropped to 53%. The prevalence of conspiracy theories may result from large socio-economic disproportions among residents in terms of education, income, place of residence, or attachment to a particular language group.

Although social protests, which express the political rights of citizens, exemplify maturity of a contemporary democracy, they also measure the level of residents' trust in institutions in the country. Public opinion polls in Latvia taken in December 2020 indicated that the parliament and the government of Latvia are the least trustworthy (respectively 20 and 23%; in both cases, a drop by 7 percentage points compared to January 2020). In independent Latvia (after 1991) the lowest support was recorded in April 2010 during a serious economic crisis when only 7% trusted the Saeima and only 13% trusted the Cabinet of Valdis Dombrovskis. Since then, the most serious challenge for state authority has been the response to the pandemic. Therefore, it is not surprising that support for the government has been falling further during the second wave of COVID-19. Additionally, the opinion polls from December 2020 revealed the lowest rating of confidence in the president since 2010, registering at only 39% (while in January 2020 it was still 52%). The differences between social groups are significant: the respondents' trust in the president institution is twice as high among ethnic Latvians as among Russian-speaking residents.

According to GlobSec, Latvia's society is one of the most dissatisfied with its system of governance (74%) in Central and Eastern Europe (Voices of Central and Eastern Europe, 2020). Moreover, as many as 76% of respondents do not believe that their needs are taken into account by state authorities. A low degree of trust is characteristic among people with primary and secondary education levels, Russian-speaking people, and citizens with low income, as well as for residents of Latgale. These groups are also more likely to give up certain rights and freedoms for security. During times of crisis, feelings of dissatisfaction becomes a fuel for populist rhetoric (which was reflected in relatively high support for the anti-system KPV LV party in the parliamentary elections in 2018) and is used by politicians to promote their own political image and agitation. Local election in Latvia is scheduled for June 5 this year).