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High incidence of COVID-19 cases in Latvia – diagnosis of the situation and analysis of the reasons

Latvia is currently the country with the highest incidence of coronavirus cases per 100,000 population in the European Union (1,257 in the last 14 days; the EU average is 190; the other Baltic states – Lithuania and Estonia – are also at the top in terms of COVID-19 incidence, with respectively 1,163 and 1,087¹). Over the past week, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has increased by almost half, and the number of seriously ill hospitalized patients by more than 60%. The reasons for this situation include both factors directly related to the nature of the epidemic and those that arose long before the pandemic outbreak. Therefore, counteracting the increase in morbidity, and thus returning to stability in Latvia, will be a long-term process requiring systemic solutions.

Worst case scenario. On 7 October 2021, a state of emergency was declared in the Latvian medical sector, which meant postponing previously planned procedures and services and focusing medical services on emergencies and providing the medical assistance to COVID-19 patients (Latvia was given medical assistance by Sweden, among others). Then, on 11 October, a state of emergency was introduced across the whole country for the third time since the outbreak of the pandemic. The government made a decision to oblige those working in the public sector to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and allowed employers in the private sector to make similar decisions.

Since 21 October, due to the high rate of COVID-19 cases in Latvia, further restrictions have been adopted in order to limit gatherings and educational, business and social activities. All employees – if possible – should work remotely, and only vaccinated people or those with a negative test performed no earlier than 72 hours ago are allowed to work at their workplace. The school holidays were extended until 29 October. Grades 1-3 returned to school from 1 November while other students continued learning remotely. Moreover, all residents must stay at their place of residence from 20:00 until 05:00 (except cases where people travel to and from work/clinic/hospital/pharmacy – in those cases people must obtain a special certificate). Shops are open from 06:00 to 19:00 (with the exception of fuel stations and pharmacies, which can work round-the-clock). Public transport operates without exceeding 50% of its capacity. Provision of sports training services, protests and meetings of different households are not allowed, and a private vehicle can carry members from a maximum of two different households. Churches can only be opened in particular cases (the total number of visitors must not exceed 20% of capacity). Up to 20 persons may gather for a funeral ceremony. The security measures were introduced for a four-week period. After that, the government will consider whether further restrictions should be applied to all citizens or only to the unvaccinated ones. The State Police remains fully prepared to ensure the control of restrictions related to private companies, public transport and to self-isolating patients.

Reasons for the situation. Among the main reasons for the rapid increase in the incidence of COVID-19 currently observed in Latvia are:

1. Delayed government decisions – the opposition blames Krišjānis Kariņš's cabinet for following political interests (to maintain coalition cohesion) and ignoring the public safety and public health as the main aim of the government. In particular, the prime minister is accused of a lack of decisiveness and a lack of consultation with experts, as well as a lack of planning and strategy to combat the coronavirus – especially with regard to elderly and Russian-speaking residents.

¹ As of 22 October 2021.

The unstable situation in Latvia is used by populists who build their political support on the basis of slogans negating the government's decisions ([‘IEŚ Commentaries’, No. 438](#)). New political leaders such as Aldis Gobzems (Law and Order party) and Ainārs Šlesers (Latvia First party) have repeatedly taken part in protests and demonstrations against vaccination and the restrictions introduced by the government.

2. Delayed vaccinations – due to logistical and organizational problems that resulted in delays in the supply of vaccines at the beginning of 2021, mass vaccination of the population was not possible until late spring. Although the dynamics of vaccinations has increased slightly in last few weeks as a result of the restrictions and pressure introduced by the government, the situation in the country is serious. Slightly more than half of the population are vaccinated (similarly, only little more than half of seniors over 80 are vaccinated). The lowest vaccination rate is still in the Latgale region – in some municipalities, this percentage constitutes only 30-35%. Only 80% of teachers completed the full vaccination series in schools and kindergartens in Daugavpils.

One of the systemic solutions encouraging seniors to vaccinate is the financial support programme targeted at this group. As part of a government initiative, from 1 November to 31 March, seniors vaccinated against COVID-19 will receive a monthly allowance of 20 euros. Similarly, the Lithuanian government has provided a one-time grant of 100 euros to vaccinated seniors. Interestingly, the idea was approved following a sharp rise in prices, including increasing energy prices in recent weeks. The Ministry of Social Welfare estimates that the benefits will amount to approximately 50 million euros – based on a prediction that 80% of seniors will be fully vaccinated by the end of November, and 95% of them by the end of December (currently 57% of residents over 60 have received the first dose, according to data from the National Health Service in Latvia).

3. Disinformation – since the state of pandemic was introduced, speculation and conspiracy theories have accompanied the spread of the virus and mass vaccination. Hundreds of fake certificates have been revealed to certify alleged vaccination or recovery (both medical workers and officials were involved in this illegal procedure). A large part of the population is not still convinced regarding vaccinations, especially those connected to the Russian-speaking information sphere. For a long time, the authorities conducted an information campaign only in the state language. So far, the opinions of politicians in this respect are divided. However, it should be clearly stated that the vulnerability to disinformation concerns the whole of the population in Latvia. According to public opinion polls conducted by SKDS, in September this year, Russian-speaking residents are – like ethnic Latvians – well informed about the situation in the country, but distinctly more sceptical towards the authorities. The problem is mistrust, not language. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to convince the sceptics, regardless of the language of communication.

4. Public distrust towards the government's decision-making – many government decisions aimed at limiting the spread of the virus have been incomprehensible to the public. This led to numerous demonstrations and protests by anti-vaxxers, which were, in fact, an act of expression of frustration and distrust of the government ([‘IEŚ Commentaries’, No. 330](#)). One of the last initiatives took place on 14 October when, in response to the government's decision on mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 for employees of public institutions (unvaccinated people may be suspended from their duties), a protest was organized by emergency service workers dissatisfied with the decision. Importantly, the low level of trust toward the state authorities is not a new phenomenon – for several years Latvia has been among the countries which are characterized by low public support in relation to the political elite and – as a result – by frequent changes of government.

Conclusions. The rapid increase in the incidence of COVID-19 in Latvia is currently the most serious challenge and the main challenge for the Latvian government. A state of emergency is to continue until mid-December. It is possible that some of the restrictions will be extended – if the government's forecasts regarding the vaccination rate of the population do not improve significantly.

It is worth bearing in mind that the current situation is a consequence of various factors, including those that existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. These factors include the failure of the authorities and public scepticism: delayed deliveries, an absence of vaccination strategies, an ineffective information campaign, social division, a low level of trust in government, and a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the vaccine.

Other factors include a political culture (broadly understood) characterized by considerable distrust towards the elite (and authorities in general), as well as social awareness, which is lower in Latvia than in Western Europe due to dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in the country and the authorities' insufficient demonstration of taking responsibility for the society as a whole.

It is also worth mentioning the positive side of the government's actions (the aforementioned support for seniors) and the engagement of society, because only systemic management will contribute to an improvement of the situation in the state. For example the 'COVID-smart' social project is a response to the spreading of disinformation via the Internet. It aims to reveal fake news about the coronavirus and vaccinations. The website also lists about 80 names of celebrities, politicians and doctors who have participated in anti-vaccine protests, violated the law regarding the assembly ban and provided false information about the infection, thus limiting the effectiveness of the government's information campaign.