

Poland, Czech Republic close borders, shut down public life due to coronavirus

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As the coronavirus continues to spread internationally, Poland declared a state of “epidemic emergency” on Thursday. The Czech Republic declared a national emergency on Wednesday. Both countries closed their borders.

As of Friday evening, Poland had 68 confirmed cases of corona, and two people have died. Among those infected is a Polish chief of the army who was diagnosed earlier this week after returning from a meeting with high-ranking German military officials. In Poznan, the head of the local clinic has reportedly been infected.

In the Czech Republic, 131 cases were reported by Friday, an increase of almost 50 within 48 hours. In neighboring Germany, the number of infected had risen by 50 percent within the past 24 hours, from 1567 on Thursday to 2369 on Friday.

The Czech government announced a 30-day state of emergency effective March 13. Beyond a ban on large gatherings, schools, all sports facilities, clubs, galleries and libraries are closed. Restaurants, cafes and other hospitality venues will only be permitted to open from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. The police will be deployed to check upon quarantined individuals. The country will be closing its borders on Sunday night to foreign citizens from 18 countries deemed a “risk,” including much of the European Union, deploying the army on the border. The country is also preparing to shift toward a regime of food self-sufficiency. The Czech Ministry of Agriculture declared on Friday that it had secured plans and supply routes to guarantee food supplies for the duration of the state emergency.

On Friday, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that Poland too would suspend international air and train travel starting Sunday. Border controls on the highways will start in the night

from Saturday to Sunday. Polish citizens are allowed to return to Poland but will have to go into a 14-day quarantine. All events with more than 50 participants will be banned, restaurants and all shops in malls with the exception of grocery stores and pharmacies will be closed. Many Polish cities and regions have closed their schools, though a national closure of schools is not yet in place.

The measures are a desperate attempt, after months of virtual inaction, to contain the spread of the pandemic and prevent a total collapse of the social infrastructure, while simultaneously preparing the conditions for a mobilization of the armed detachments of the state for a possible confrontation with the working class.

Three decades after the restoration of capitalism and endless austerity, the health care system in Poland and the Czech Republic, as across all of Europe, is in devastating conditions.

According to data by the World Health Organization, the total number of acute care hospital beds per 100,000 has declined from over 600 to under 500 between 1989 and 2014 in Poland and from over 650 to under 450 in the Czech Republic. The number of total hospital beds per 100,000 has declined even more dramatically in the Czech Republic from almost 850 in 1996 to under 600 in 2014. Since then, more cuts have been implemented. Since 2014, the number for both has no doubt declined further.

In Poland, according to reports by the *Rzeczpospolita*, a medical unit in a hospital was closed every day last year, and some months up to three units were closed per day. Poland, in particular, has a decrepit social and health infrastructure. Young doctors and nurses have left the country en masse in the past decades because of poverty wages, meaning that much of the medical staff and especially doctors are over 60.

Polish hospitals were already on the brink of collapse before the crisis began and are woefully unprepared for the further spread of the virus. Starved of funds for years, they are totally under-equipped. The first hospitals treating coronavirus patients were running out of critical supplies, including masks, disinfectants, protective gear for medical staff and respirators almost as soon as the crisis began. At the University Hospital of Krakow, the director took the desperate measure of evacuating all patients to prevent further spread.

On Wednesday, a Facebook post by a young doctor from the Silesian town Rybnik, pointing to the utter lack of preparedness by the government and health care system to confront the crisis, went viral on the Polish internet. The doctor pointed out that the actual number of cases of coronavirus in Poland must be significantly higher than officially reported, “Because we don’t have tests. In my hospital we set up a tent, it was announced that people could undergo a test for coronavirus there. Yesterday, there was not a single test kit for the virus.”

She warned that the medical staff was not being protected from infection, threatening widespread infection among nurses and doctors and a total collapse of the system within weeks. Shockingly, she described that entire cities had hospitals without a single available respirator, and that patients had to be driven across the country in search of a place with the necessary equipment for their treatment. She warned that the situation in Poland might well become “MUCH WORSE than in Lombardy,” in Italy.

In interviews with the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* on March 4, doctors had already predicted that the outbreak would be devastating in Poland. An internist in a clinic in Warsaw, the country’s capital, said, “In my hospital there is a daily struggle for respirators. The ambulances with patients are driving all over Warsaw because we don’t have a single free respirator available.” He added, “We are not prepared for an epidemic of a diseases in which the lungs [of the patient] have to be supported. We don’t have additional teams of nurses who can handle apparatuses in the ICU.”

Another doctor pointed out that virtually all hospitals for infectious diseases in smaller towns had been “liquidated,” despite the fact that there had been a growing number of cases of tuberculosis in recent years. People living in rural areas, which in Poland still

comprise 40 percent of the population of about 38 million, often have to travel dozens of kilometers to get to the nearest clinic.

While the health care system in the Czech Republic is rated higher than that in Poland, here too devastating cuts to hospitals have left the system unprepared to deal with a pandemic that is still in its early stages. Apart from the elderly and sick, and immigrants, the Roma minority is at particular risk in the Czech Republic and throughout Eastern and South Eastern Europe where it comprises about 5 million to 6 million people.

In the Czech Republic, the 250,000–300,000 Roma (about 2–3 percent of the population) live in utter poverty. Many live in virtual ghettos with poor hygiene and without running water and electricity. Studies have shown that in the Czech Republic and other countries, the Roma population is many times more likely to lack health insurance and access to basic medical care.

A study by the Czech National Institute of Public Health from 2015 found that Czech Roma are much more likely to suffer from diabetes, bronchitis and lung diseases and cardiovascular diseases than the non-Roma population. These diseases are known to significantly increase the danger of serious progression of the disease and the likelihood of a fatal outcome in case of an infection with COVID-19.



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