Record growth of COVID-19 infections in Eastern Europe

Markus Salzmann
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The numbers of new COVID-19 infections in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary are breaking previous records every day. Even though the ailing health care systems in these countries are already on the brink of being overburdened, the discredited right-wing governments in the region are neither willing nor able to halt the spike in cases.

In the **Czech Republic**, the number of registered cases per day went above the 3,000 mark on September 17 for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic. The total number of those infected is over 60,000, and close to 600 people have died from COVID-19. Even though the country only has a population of 10.7 million, the number of daily infections was recently around 1.5 times the number in Germany, which has seven times the population.

Experts expect the number of infections to remain similarly high over the next few weeks. Health Minister Adam Vojtech had to admit that the epidemiological situation was "not good" and that infections continued to rise. He resigned on Monday.

Several nations, among them the neighboring states of Slovakia and Germany, have already imposed travel warnings for the country, or certain regions of it. The Czech "Corona Traffic Light" shows for more and more areas in the warning level yellow. That includes several border regions, such as the district of Cheb, which borders Bavaria.

After several protective measures were lifted earlier, there will be a slight tightening of such regulations once again. For example, students have had to wear masks covering their mouths and noses in schools since last week. Also, restaurants, bars and clubs will have to be closed between midnight and 6 a.m. Masks will be mandatory again indoors as well. The government said that it will not rule out further measures.

But these changes are purely cosmetic and will hardly halt the spike in cases. Since there are regional elections coming up in October, Prime Minister Andrej Babis wants to at least make it seem like his government is reacting to the situation. At the same time, he made it clear that there would not be a lockdown there was like this spring, when a temporary curfew as well as the closure of businesses prevented a mass spread of the coronavirus. The numbers were relatively low.

Babis, a businessman himself and one of the richest men of the country, saw the lockdown as an impermissible curtailment of the profits of those at the top. Especially the big car manufacturers that own large plants in the Czech Republic demanded quick relaxation of the safety measures and a return to work. For this reason, the regulations ended in May, as workers returned to their jobs and the opening of schools was prepared.

Babis is a prime example of the kind of unscrupulous politician who knows no bounds and has the audacity to blame the population for the soaring number of infections. He recently claimed that people complained that they were being muzzled by the government during the lockdown. "Now those scream the loudest [about coronavirus], who used to push for a relaxation of the safety measures."

Last month, when hygiene experts were seeking a tightening of safety measures due to the upcoming opening of schools, Babis attacked them personally and kept the planned regulations from going into effect.

The coalition government, which consists of Babis' right-wing populist ANO Party and the social democratic CSSD, supported by the Stalinist Communist Party (KSCM), prevents adequate testing.

According to a report by the Austrian *Kurier*, the

capacity of the testing facilities is inadequate, with a wait of up to a week for an appointment, and then only to stand in line for hours. Those tested usually find out the result long after the required time of 48 hours.

Health Minister Vojtech even recommends not taking any voluntary COVID tests. The so-called "travel traffic light system," which warns against trips into countries and regions with high infection rates, is clearly meant to give people a false sense of security. Currently only Spain is red on that list, while Romania was taken off it, despite its recent spike in cases.

The World Health Organization (WHO) voiced concerns early last week over Prague's handling of the pandemic. It criticized the decline in testing and contact tracing, despite the rapid rise in infections. Babis reacted by telling the WHO to "be quiet" via Twitter.

Hungary also saw a record spike in COVID-19 cases in the last few weeks. On Friday the total rose by 927 to over 22,000, one of the highest one-day totals since the outbreak of the pandemic. In the spring this figure rarely went above 100. With nine more deaths, the total rose to 718. Around 400 people are hospitalized, and dozens need ventilators.

In the last two weeks of August, the number of known cases has risen by a factor of ten. Government officials and political representatives of the ruling Fidesz Party have also contracted the virus. Viktor Orbán's extreme right-wing government reacted to that by closing its borders in early September.

Orbán had reacted to the pandemic with complete inaction from the beginning. The fact that Hungary's listed number of infections was extremely low is mainly connected to the almost nonexistent testing at that point. The number of unknown cases was high as a result. The only new protective measures now are that one must wear a mask in public and that restaurants and bars close at 11 p.m.

The week before last, Orbán announced a "war plan" to stop the second wave. He assured the public that the health care system was ready for the growing number of patients. Both are simply lies. Orbán's "war plan" is not aimed at the virus, but the population.

In a state media broadcast, he said that unlike during the first wave, people should not stay home, "but keep living their lives." The "country must function" he added, while explicitly opposing measures that could impact business operations. To secure the profits at the top, Orbán purposefully risks the infection of the population, consequences be damned.

The health care system, which has been systematically destroyed by austerity since the restoration of the capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy 30 years ago, is now on the brink of collapse. According to statistics of a health care authority, half of those who died from COVID-19 contracted it in hospitals. A study by the organization Human Rights Watch warned in early August that there were organizational deficiencies, that hygiene standards were still low and that testing possibilities were insufficient.

On Friday Orbán visited the Korányi National Pulmonological Institute. A video is going around on Facebook in which a doctor tells the prime minister that the hospital is already reaching its limits in terms of taking in COVID-19 patients, and that there are only twelve free beds left and a lack of trained personnel.

In **Slovakia** and **Romania**, the number of cases is also rising quickly. Slovakia reported 419 cases on Friday, which is a new daily record, while Romania reached its worst-ever day with 1,713 new cases Wednesday. According to the most recent predictions, the EU member state will be short about 1,000 ICU beds by November. The number of daily deaths would then rise from the current level, of around 40, to 300. So far, the official number of people who have died from the virus in the country is 4,633.

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