Health care systems face collapse across Eastern Europe amid resurgent COVID-19 pandemic

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The dramatic increase in coronavirus infections is placing increased pressure on Europe's health care systems. In Eastern European countries, where health care has been destroyed over the past three decades by privatisations and austerity measures, conditions are especially dire.

The situation is almost out of control in Poland. Approximately 14,000 cases are being recorded daily. This is about the same number of cases recorded in Germany, but in a country with a population of 38 million—less than half of Germany's. Polish medical experts believe that the number of undetected cases is extremely high. Statistics show that just 0.9 tests are carried out for every 1,000 residents.

Poland's leading epidemiologist, Robert Flisiak, pointed to parallels between current conditions in Poland and those in Italy earlier this year, when the health care system collapsed due to the number of infections. Nobody has control of the situation, he remarked.

Temporary hospitals are emerging everywhere because the resources in the country's hospitals are already at or close to capacity. However, a spokesman for the Polish government stated that the lack of intensive care beds is only part of the problem. As was well known prior to the pandemic, a lack of nurses and doctors is the main issue.

A recent report by German regional public broadcaster MDR provides a sense of the catastrophic conditions. From recorded conversations of emergency rescue services obtained by the TVN24 television channel, it was revealed that a patient in serious condition was sent back and forth between four hospitals for hours. In the end, the despairing emergency rescuers asked a hospital if they should leave the patient before the door and called the police for help.

Tomasz Siegel, head of anaesthesiology at the Warsaw Orlowski hospital, confirmed this. "Where should I evacuate the sick who are lying there? The minister won't say, because there is no room anywhere," he said on Facebook. Preparing intensive care units requires money, staff and time. The official figures are a "fiction." The ordinances from the government are only "created in order to hold a press conference and wash the blood of those from their hands who are dying before our eyes and who will continue to die due to a lack of help."

"The critical moment in the pandemic in Poland will come when care collapses in the hospitals," predicted epidemiologist Tomasz Oszorowski, and added, "We are getting closer to that point."

Various governments have bled the health care system in Poland dry over the past 30 years. This is now becoming clear. Of the 10,000 ventilators in the country, 1,400 have been reserved for coronavirus patients. Sixty percent of these are already being used. Some of the remaining ventilators cannot be used due to a shortage of staff.

Deputy Prime Minister Jacek Sasin recently urged doctors to get over their "fear" and operate the often highly complex devices without training, putting the lives of patients at risk.

Talented medics and nurses have been emigrating to Western Europe for years because they can barely live on their wages in Poland. In 2017, Poland had just 2.4 doctors for every 1,000 residents. Germany had almost twice as many.

Romania has recorded an extremely high number of COVID-19 deaths. The death rate, currently 4.5 for every 1,000 residents, is more than 10 times higher than in Germany. Last Friday, the country, with a population of close to 20 million, reported 5,028 cases, the highest daily figure since the beginning of the pandemic up until that

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point. More than 200,000 people have been infected, and over 6,000 have died.

Right-wing president Klaus Johannis was forced to admit that the pandemic has plunged the entire country into chaos. While the government has failed to adopt any meaningful protection measures, schools were recently closed in Bucharest for two weeks and teaching will be carried out online.

The country's hospitals are so overwhelmed by the number of patients that the government was forced to issue an order stating that only the worst cases should be treated in hospital while the rest are cared for at home. Only at the beginning of this month did the government pass legislation requiring hospitals to keep a portion of their beds free for COVID-19 patients. Many say this was too late.

Health Minister Nelu Tataru stated several weeks ago that a level of 3,600 cases per day would lead to critical conditions in hospitals. Of the 1,040 intensive care beds, 749 were already occupied at the beginning of last week. The shortage of doctors is also dire. Only around 1,000 specialists and 800 assistant doctors work in intensive care units across the country, as ARD reported.

With a population of 10.7 million, the Czech Republic is reporting the sharpest increase in coronavirus cases. Last week, the first COVID-19 patients had to be transferred to Germany for treatment. Over 15,200 cases were recorded on Friday alone.

The health care system is now at the limit of its capacities, stated minister Roman Prymula. Thirty percent of those currently tested for coronavirus receive a positive result. Some regions have reported a 500 percent increase in infections.

Hospitals are no longer in a position to guarantee treatment; 120 ventilators are being sent from other European Union (EU) countries to the Czech Republic. Staff from other EU countries and the United States have also been requested. These developments were predictable at the beginning of the pandemic. Earlier this year, the government of businessman Andrej Babis, which includes the social democrats and Stalinists, abandoned all COVID-19 protection measures. Curfews, the wearing of masks and similar measures are only now being reintroduced.

In Slovenia, almost all resources in hospitals are now being used to treat COVID-19 patients. Saturday's 1,697 cases marked the highest daily total in the pandemic. Several days prior, a government spokesman reported that 25.5 percent of tests were positive. According to World Health Organisation guidelines, the rate of positive tests should ideally not rise above 5 percent. Test capacity is already limited. Infections have doubled within a week.

The pandemic has exposed the true state of the health care system. We must "do something for health care infrastructure," demanded Dr. Vojko Flis, general director of the Maribor university hospital, to Radio Slovenia. "All of our hospitals are in relatively old buildings. At the same time, we have no building equipped for accommodating patients who could spread highly infectious diseases."

Large numbers of residents in several elderly care homes across the country are also infected. Between 5 and 10 percent of total infections are health care employees.

Similar conditions are to be found in all countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans that are recording a rapid increase in infections. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, where 10 percent of the more than 1,000 daily cases are school children, conditions in hospitals were already disastrous prior to the pandemic. In spite of the rise in cases, the government stated explicitly that there would be no lockdown due to concerns about its impact on the economy.

Doctors in Serbia are also awaiting an "Italian scenario," after the government in Belgrade withdrew all measures to contain the pandemic.

Although some governments are adopting certain measures in an act of desperation to contain the virus, this does not conceal the fact that the corrupt and discredited regimes are endangering the lives of thousands of people in a criminal manner. Only an independent mass working class movement against the capitalist system can put a stop to this.

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