Despite mass deaths, Poland ends lockdown

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The Polish government is gradually ending its lockdown, even though the pandemic is still raging and hundreds are dying every day from COVID-19.

Museums, art galleries and shopping centres have been allowed to reopen since 1 February. Even before that, face-to-face classes for the first to third grade were resumed. As of 12 February, hotels, cinemas, theatres, philharmonic halls and opera houses can reopen at 50 percent capacity, as well as sports fields, ski slopes and swimming pools.

The number of new infections has decreased since the peak in November but has remained above 5,000 a day since January. Hundreds continue to die daily because of COVID-19. With about 36,000 new infections in a week, the seven-day incidence per 100,000 inhabitants is only slightly below 100, and thus far beyond the mark above which the infection incidence can be controlled or contained.

According to the Polish Ministry of Health, mortality increased by 67,000 in 2020, the decisive factor being COVID-19. The country's population, which has been declining since the introduction of capitalism, shrank by 115,000 last year.

The spread of new strains of the virus increases the dangers of the pandemic. The British variant arrived in Poland after the Christmas holidays at the latest. More than 800,000 Poles work in Britain. They constitute the second largest minority in the country after people from India. Only Germany has a larger ex-pat Polish community.

In the Czech town of Trutnov, located in the border triangle between Poland and Germany, around 60 percent of sequenced samples contained the novel corona strain. To make matters worse, Poland has particularly low testing rates compared to other European countries, with the number of daily tests at around 40,000.

For Poland, with a population of about 40 million, this level of testing is criminally low. Germany, with just over twice the number of inhabitants, tests around 140,000 people a day, and the Czech Republic, with 10 million inhabitants, tests 20,000.

On top of that, the vaccination campaign in Poland, as in Germany, is a debacle. About 80,000 vaccine doses are currently distributed every day. Continuing at this rate, it would take almost two years to vaccinate the entire population. Due to the mass deaths this winter, the previously restrained willingness to be vaccinated has largely given way to surging demand. The vaccination rate has increased by leaps and bounds, rising from 43 percent in the autumn to 70 percent in January.

This surge led to the collapse of the official hotlines for the allocation of vaccination appointments. For example, after the start of vaccinations for people over 70, up to 300,000 people dialled in at the same time.

At the same time, there are several known cases of illegally giving preferential treatment for vaccinations. The extent of this is shown by an inspection at the Warsaw University Hospital. It turned out that almost half of 450 vaccine doses received by the institution went to 200 people who had no connection with the hospital, including celebrities and politicians.

In the first half of 2020, Poland had come through the pandemic relatively unscathed. This was due to a rigid containment policy with extensive curfews, so that the incidence of infection was mainly concentrated in the businesses that continued to operate. For example, the Silesian mining region temporarily developed into a hotspot; in June, one in two new infections came from this region. Even then, it was clear how indifferent the government was to the deadly danger to workers.

As the summer progressed, it became clear that none of the European governments would impose another hard lockdown during the coming autumn and winter.

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There was an unspoken consensus that the interests of big business were more important than human lives, and they moved to a herd immunity policy.

Professor Andrzej Horban, the chief adviser to the prime minister and chairman of the National Medical Council, openly admitted this to *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*. He explained that over the summer there had been an "absolutely deliberate" herd immunity strategy. "Protect a little, infect a little," he said. He flatly denied the health risks to younger people and scoffed at the possibility of long-term damage from the coronavirus. He also made clear that a large wave was expected and that forecasts to this effect were already available in September.

Even more criminal is the fact that the government did not impose even a partial lockdown until November, when the incidence rate was already over 200 per 100,000 and tens of thousands of new sufferers were being added daily. Even based on the Ministry of Health's position that the system would collapse with more than 30,000 daily infections, it was clear that mass deaths could no longer be prevented.

Government spin also included the National Stadium in Warsaw, which had been converted into a temporary clinic and was grandly called the "national hospital." Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had inspected it himself shortly before the opening.

However, it became known shortly afterwards that the 500 beds, including about 50 intensive care beds, were never used to capacity. Pictures of the empty rows became public via Twitter, and at the end of November a resident doctor declared anonymously in *Polityka*: "I came here to fight the pandemic. Instead, I am now staying in a five-star hotel and sitting around in an empty hospital. The reason I'm talking about it is because I'm embarrassed to be part of it."

The creation of such Potemkin villages, as some newspapers called them, was not without reason. The government tried to cover up the fact that the health system, which has been broken for decades, is one of the worst in Europe. Poland, for example, is fifth to last among OECD countries in terms of the number of doctors per 1,000 inhabitants.

Despite the murderous consequences of its policies, the Polish bourgeoisie is hell-bent on ending the lockdown. In doing so, it is joining the European competition to reopen the economy. Italy, Germany and Austria have also already decided on relaxations and are in the process of implementing them.

While the PiS government is deciding on far-reaching relaxations, so-called lockdown rebels already started the action "OtwieraMY" ("We open up") in January. Not only dozens of businesses in the catering and tourism sectors opened, but also gyms and bars, in contravention of government regulations. They received ample support from local politicians, the pro-opposition media and the courts, which declared the government's coronavirus restrictions unconstitutional. Likewise the Polish Business Congress. Its president, S?awomir Mentzen, is vice-chairman of the radical right-wing Korwin Party.

The Polish bourgeoisie is divided over the consequences of the PiS government's extreme right-wing and authoritarian course, which only last week drove tens of thousands of people onto the streets against the reactionary abortion law. However, it is absolutely united on the question that profits come before protecting health.

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