

Coronavirus pandemic escalates in Poland, with 400 dying every day

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Schools, day-care centres, retail outlets, theatres, hairdressers, museums, cinemas and DIY stores have been closed again in Poland since the beginning of last week. This is the right-wing conservative government's reaction to the escalation of the coronavirus pandemic in recent weeks, which was its own fault.

For the time being, these measures will apply until April 9. It is already clear that this time will not be enough to bring the pandemic under control. In the meantime, the economy is to continue running at full capacity.

With over 35,000 new infections in one day, Poland set a new, sad record the weekend before last. Conducting around 100,000 tests per day is resulting in a positive test rate of more than one third, raising fears of a significantly higher number of unreported cases.

With 38 million inhabitants, the country has the second-highest number of infections in Europe after France, and the seven-day incidence value has exceeded the 500 mark. In the capital, Warsaw, the incidence rate is already above 700, eclipsing the deadly November 2020 wave and with no end in sight. Around 400 people are now dying every day as a result of COVID-19.

The government's responsibility becomes particularly clear when looking back. Thanks to a comparatively hard lockdown in spring 2020, Poland was hardly affected by the pandemic for a long time. Only during the Europe-wide opening up of the economy at the end of the summer did the numbers slowly increase in Poland, reaching a seven-day incidence level of 50 per 100,000 inhabitants for the first time in early October.

By early November 2020, around 5,000 people had died from the pandemic in Poland. In the five months since then, the death toll has increased thirteenfold and currently stands at 52,400. In the same period, the death toll in Germany has increased tenfold and in the Czech Republic ninefold.

At the beginning of February, the Polish government, like all European governments, decided on extensive relaxations. Although the nationwide incidence rate had only just fallen below 100, schools were reopened to first through third graders, as well as shopping malls, museums, cinemas, swimming pools and other facilities. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned strongly at the time: "Despite the murderous consequences of its policies, the Polish bourgeoisie is hell-bent on ending the lockdown."

In addition to the Mazowieckie administrative area (Masovia) with its capital Warsaw, the much more densely populated industrial and mining region of Slaskie (Silesia) is once again a hotspot of the pandemic. In the first half of last year, at times, half of all infections were in the mining region.

The main reason for this is that despite the lockdown measures, production continued everywhere. The underground coal miners are exposed to particular danger when working in a confined space. Also, due to the long tradition of mining, and insufficient protection, there is a disproportionate share of chronic respiratory diseases. Combined with the generally disastrous level of the Polish health system, this is a lethal

combination that particularly affects the Polish working class.

From Cz?stochowa, the second-largest city in the region, the head of the emergency service, Marian Nowak, reported that children were also increasingly affected by coronavirus infections. The youngest infected child last week was 17 months old, according to a report in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

The emergency services are also having to travel ever-longer distances to find free beds for the sick. The *Faktach* programme on TVN reported on an ambulance that had to travel 700 kilometres with a sick person on board.

Marian Nowak says that one night five of his ambulances drove to Prudnik, 180 kilometres away, because there was free bed capacity there. Upon arrival, the ambulances usually have to wait for hours before they can hand over the patients.

Czestochowa's specialist hospital, which a few weeks ago was accepting patients from other regions, is now overcrowded. Although it has only 123 COVID beds, it has accommodated 132 COVID-19 patients. In the city hospital, 124 patients share the official 118 beds. As a result, the 20 beds in trauma surgery will soon be converted into a COVID ward.

However, the creation of further capacity is failing due to the lack of doctors, as Micha? Dworczyk, head of the Prime Minister's Office, admitted at a press conference last Tuesday. The number of Poland's doctors per 1,000 inhabitants is the fifth worst of all OECD countries.

At the joint press conference, government spokesman Michal Dworczyk, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Health Minister Adam Niedzielski tried to argue for perseverance and sought to pull the wool over the eyes of the population. They declared that the vaccination programme was the all-important, final show of strength, the "ray of hope," announcing that 20 million people would be vaccinated by June and the entire population by the end of August.

With about 5 million first vaccinations and 2 million second vaccinations, Poland has so far fully vaccinated only 5.1 percent of its population. Although this is slightly above the catastrophic European average, it is still far from having vaccinated the entire population.

The government's grandly announced target of 10 million vaccinations per month would require more than doubling the current vaccination capacity. Expecting such an increase while the health system is collapsing due to the consequences of the pandemic and the vaccination nationalism that also dominated the last EU summit is simply absurd.

Where the priorities of the vaccination campaign lie became clear again only recently. Poland sent 7,000 vaccine doses from its stockpile to NATO headquarters in Brussels to vaccinate military personnel there ahead of time. NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg thanked Poland for this and remained silent on the question of whether this was morally justifiable when risk groups in Poland were still waiting for the vaccine. Poland occupies a central position in NATO's deployment plans against Russia.

In the past, cases of Polish politicians and celebrities who had

themselves vaccinated prematurely by recourse to illegally diverted vaccine doses have repeatedly come to public attention. The vaccination of Interior Ministry officials began the week before last. Police officers, border guards and customs and tax investigators have already been vaccinated by the thousands, while registration of people born in 1962 will not begin until April 12.

It is not surprising that the government cares more about protecting state power than protecting older citizens. The Polish police are increasingly discredited, with only one third of the population still having confidence in it. Even the ongoing protests against the abortion law have repeatedly met with brutal police violence. Particularly notorious is the use of the BOA anti-terrorist unit, which in November beat demonstrators with telescopic batons while in plainclothes.

This contrasts with scenes like those that took place recently at the University Hospital in Wrocław, where hundreds of people stormed into the vaccination centre to get one of the daily 500 doses.

A hectic vaccination campaign amid a rampant pandemic also poses another danger. As experts warn, the interplay between a high number of active infections and long delays between the first and second vaccinations could lead to mutations against which the vaccines lose their effectiveness.

According to expert estimates, another 25,000 people will die by July, writes *Der Spiegel* —a very conservative estimate. With an average of 400 deaths per day, almost 40,000 people would die in three months. Prof. Andrzej Horban, the government's chief epidemiologist, estimated in an interview with TVN24 that the peak of the current wave has been reached, at "just over 40,000" new infections per day. It is unclear what is prompting him to make this assumption. In fact, there is still no sign of the situation calming down due to the measures taken far too late.

Prof. Horban, however, has already attracted attention on several occasions by his trivialising statements and has openly declared his support for a herd immunity policy. "Protect a little, infect a little," is how he summarised his strategy. Thus, as late as mid-February he had held out the prospect of further school reopenings if "regional differentiations" were taken into account. This was even though at that time he already assumed that the British variant accounted for 10 percent of the total. In the meantime, the share of this strain is around 80 percent.

Horban also denies the proven long-term effects of COVID-19 and scoffs at the idea that such a thing exists. At the same time, he relativises the government's responsibility for the scale of the wave, describing the pandemic as a storm, the kind that sometimes comes out of the blue.

The government and its advisers are fully responsible for the current mass deaths. Even without the mutations, the explosion of new infections because of the relaxations introduced was inevitable. Instead of consistently containing the pandemic at the outset, they have relied on the capacity of the health system. The emergency hospitals opened to great media fanfare, such as the one in Warsaw's National Stadium, are like Potemkin villages, hiding the reality of Poland's ailing health system, whose main problem is the severe shortage of doctors and nurses.

The situation in Poland also highlights the bankruptcy of the European Union, which is organically incapable of taking coordinated and rational action across Europe. This is exemplified by the German-Polish border, which around 70,000 people cross every day for professional reasons.

A week ago, Germany declared Poland a high-risk area and rapidly introduced border controls with mandatory testing. As a result, queues have formed for hours. On top of that, there are not even uniform regulations across Germany. While Brandenburg and Saxony require a test twice a week, Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania have a 48-hour time limit.

The measures now adopted in Poland are insufficient and come far too late. As in all countries, the government is deliberately limiting itself to measures that do not endanger the profits of big business, something on

which the government and opposition agree.

Right-wing extremists from the Konfederacja party have organised protests against the government's half-baked lockdown measures. Among the best-known organisers are the "Góralskie Veto" (Veto of the Mountain People) movement led by Sebastian Pitoń in the Polish Carpathians and "Otwieramy" (We Open Up), supported by Sławomir Mentzen, president of the Polish Economic Congress (Kongres Polskiego Biznesu).

As in other countries, these right-wing forces are using the economic problems of the self-employed and micro-enterprises, such as those in the catering and tourism sectors, who sometimes find themselves penniless and without any income after more than a year of the pandemic, for their anti-lockdown campaigns.

But broad sections of the working class also face acute poverty. The number of unemployed is growing; the rate has risen to 6.5 percent. Parents who have to care for their children at home receive 80 percent of their wages. In the face of chronic low wages, this is not enough for many to pay their bills.

While the working class and lower middle class are being plunged into misery, the government has decided on aid programmes worth billions for the banks and corporations. The interest base rate was cut from 1.5 to 0.1 percent a year ago.

The government and the opposition are in absolute agreement about the murderous pandemic policies that place the defence of profits first. Borys Budka, head of Civic Platform (PO), the largest opposition party, constantly criticises the government from the right. For him, too, the interests of the economy come before the health and lives of the population.

"Clear criteria for the functioning of all sectors of the economy based on COVID standards are needed," he said at a joint press conference with regional entrepreneurs in Olsztyn at the end of February. "Instead, the government has spent over a year constantly closing and opening individual industries without any logic."

One looks in vain for criticism from the opposition of the relaxation measures. This also applies to the new movement "Polska 2050" around Szymon Hołownia, which combines economic liberalism with climate policy and an orientation towards the European Union. In recent polls, it has achieved 18 percent, more than the PO with 12 percent.



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