

Partial lockdown in Slovakia and Czech Republic following record COVID-19 infections

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After a partial lockdown had already been imposed in Austria, stricter measures and contact restrictions were also imposed in Slovakia and the Czech Republic last week. This is against a background of the rapid spread of coronavirus infections, with new highs almost every day, which was made possible by the criminal reopening policies of the governments.

Slovakia recorded 14,402 new infections on Saturday. The previous record of 13,266 infections had been reported earlier in the middle of the week. In the country of just 5.4 million people, 1.13 million have now been officially infected and 14,177 have died as a result. Not even 43 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

The situation in the neighbouring Czech Republic is similarly dire. As of Friday, the number of new infections was 27,793, nearly double those at the peak of the last wave in March this year. With 2.09 million registered infections, about 20 percent of the population has now contracted the virus. That does not take into account the number of unreported infections. On Friday alone, 120 people died, bringing the total death toll to 32,642. Again, experts expect the death toll to continue to rise as the vaccination rate stands at a low 59 percent.

On Thursday, a two-week partial shutdown went into effect in Slovakia, announced the day before by the right-wing government in Bratislava. Restaurants and stores selling nonessential goods are to remain closed during this period. At the same time, an emergency law will once again come into force that provides for restrictions on free movement. For example, people are only allowed to leave their own homes to go to work, visit the doctors or hospitals and go shopping. Taking walks is also allowed.

Until recently, the government of Prime Minister Igor Matovic had opposed implementing any further protective measures and allowed the virus to spread freely. The

governing parties OĽaNO, Za ľudí and SaS, are all right-wing, pro-business parties. The fourth coalition member, Sme Rodina (We Are Family), led by businessman Boris Kollar, is also far to the right and maintains close ties to coronavirus deniers and right-wing extremists.

Only after the country's hospitals collapsed did the coalition decide to take this step. Hospitals are at full capacity, with 3,200 COVID-19 patients. Tomas Sulik, head of intensive care medicine at the hospital in Trencin, a town near the Czech border, sees the country on the brink of a humanitarian disaster, according to *Tagesschau*. In fact, triage, the selection of which patients do not receive life-saving treatment and which do, is already underway. "For now, we are only selecting patients who are severely poly-morbid and have no longer perspective of surviving on the ventilator. We are on the edge of triage," Sulik told the newspaper.

In addition, there is a severe shortage of staff. A result of frustration felt among physicians and nurses after recent waves, says Peter Vislolažsky, head of the physicians' unions. "We are now short more than 1,300 nurses who have left the healthcare system. And hundreds of experienced physicians have also left. We have less capacity today than we did during the COVID surge last winter."

Clearly, the measures being taken are far from sufficient to significantly curb the incidence of infection. Despite the dramatic situation, which has been exacerbated by the spread of the new Omicron variant, the government continues its profits-before-lives policy undeterred.

After just 10 days, the measures adopted are to be reviewed and possibly lifted. Businesses and schools will remain open without restrictions. In recent weeks, it has become clear that classroom instruction in schools is one of the main drivers of the pandemic. The tests that are

now mandatory for schoolchildren will do little to change this.

Slovak Economic Minister Richard Sulik (SaS) made clear that the government will stick to its homicidal policies. “Schools will be the last to be closed. We insist that they remain open,” he declared.

Earlier, a consortium of health experts had called for a three-week lockdown and the closure of schools. They stated, “The epidemic situation in Slovakia is critical and is reaching the level of a humanitarian crisis.”

Health care in the Czech Republic is also on the verge of collapse, with a seven-day incidence rate of over 1,200 per 100,000 inhabitants. The number of COVID-19 patients in hospitals is over 6,000.

In several parts of the country, no more patients can be cared for. The situation is particularly extreme in the border regions with Austria and Slovakia, the only countries with an even higher infection rate per capita. Here, only acute emergencies have been treated for weeks. On Thursday, 19 seriously ill patients had to be transported from Brno to the capital Prague, 200 kilometres away.

In view of this situation, the government of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, which was voted out of office last month and is now only in office on a caretaker basis, has again declared a 30-day state of emergency.

Since Thursday, bars and clubs have had to close at 10 p.m. and Christmas markets are not permitted to open. Sports and cultural events are only allowed with up to 1,000 participants. In addition, a vaccination requirement for certain occupational and age groups could be decided next week.

Schools in the Czech Republic are also remaining open and work can be undertaken in factories without restrictions and any significant protective measures. This further encourages the spread of the virus. On Saturday, it became known that a case of the Omicron variant had probably occurred for the first time in the Czech Republic. The sample came from the PCR test of a woman who entered from Namibia via South Africa.

Scientists and medical experts had warned multibillionaire Babiš and his government about the consequences of the policy of keeping the economy open. His party ANO, the Social Democrats (CSSD) and the Communist Party (KSCM), however, pushed it through without any qualms—and with disastrous consequences. The government faced a reckoning in the October elections. All three parties lost massive numbers of votes, with CSSD and KSCM no longer represented in

parliament.

On Sunday, President Milos Zeman appointed the conservative Petr Fiala as the new Czech prime minister. Zeman administered the oath of office behind a transparent screen at Lany Castle near Prague, having tested positive for COVID-19 shortly before. The 77-year-old Zeman had been in hospital for 46 days.

Fiala’s new five-party government had made clear before taking office that it would immediately lift the state of emergency and all related restrictions. In other words, it will continue the criminal policies of the previous government with even greater brutality.

The government includes the right-wing conservative Alliance of Civic Democrats (ODS), Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) and TOP-09, as well as the Pirate Party and the Stan Mayoral Party. Representatives of the ODS said they would intervene in the pandemic at most “regionally” and would not declare a nationwide state of emergency. Fiala ruled out closing schools during his term. Future Health Minister Vlastimil Valek (TOP-09) categorically opposed mandatory vaccination and lockdowns. In addition, all restrictions on the unvaccinated that have been in place until now are to be completely lifted.

This cold-blooded policy of deliberate mass infection, which will cause thousands more deaths, follows the coalition agreement signed by the parties early last week. Fiala announced sharp austerity measures across the board, centered on massive pension cuts. The money saved is to go directly into rearmament. The new government aims to spend 2 percent of GDP on military procurement from 2025.

The coalition is expressly committed to greater integration of the country into the EU and NATO. The Pirate Party in particular is calling for a more aggressive policy toward Russia and China. Pirate Party leader Jan Lipavsky, who has been tapped as foreign minister, stands for a foreign policy modelled on that of Poland and the Baltic states. He is calling for strict sanctions against Russia and threatens the use of the military.



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