GLOBAL 19.03.2020

Global quarantine

How do other countries react to the outbreak of the coronavirus? Dispatches from Russia, Vietnam and Argentina

Read our second part of 'Global Quarantine' with perspectives from Singapore, Bulgaria and Colombia; and the third part with perspectives from Brazil, Palestine and Benin; and the fourth part with perspectives from France, Ecuador and South Africa.

Read this article in German.

Russia

Russia, with its 145 million inhabitants, 15 neighbouring countries and 4250 km border with China, reported 93 infected people on Monday. The institutions in charge explain this low number by citing the quickly implemented restrictions, such as the early closure of the border with China and other regions. In the meantime, the only international flights are from Moscow to the capitals of European countries. Citizens of particularly affected countries are no longer being issued visas. Anyone arriving from an affected country must go into self-quarantine for 14 days after arriving in Russia. In order to enforce this quarantine, at least in Moscow, there is a system of over 100,000 cameras with facial recognition, enabling quite extensive surveillance. Over 104,000 people have now been tested, and over 15,000 people are currently under surveillance.

The signals the government initially sent were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, measures were taken early despite the limited number of cases; on the other hand, it was repeatedly emphasised that the situation was not so dramatic. The measures therefore initially seemed less stringent. While many people were tested, there are also numerous reports of people with symptoms who were not able to take a test because they had not travelled into high-risk areas.

By and large, the mood in Russia seems almost calm – for example, so far

there has been hardly any panic buying. On the other hand, this relaxed attitude is leading to insufficient caution. Since Russians do have some experience with a lack of transparency (including Chernobyl, the Moscow theatre hostage tragedy in 2002, the sinking of the Kursk submarine, and of course several radiation accidents), there is a certain scepticism about the number of cases that has been released to the public. This creates room for speculation and could prove counterproductive in the event of a major outbreak.

Whether the Russian health care system can withstand a real epidemic remains an open question. The basic structure of nationwide coverage in place for epidemics is still the one that dates from the Soviet era. However, due to the chronic lack of financial support, there is a shortage of both material and specialists.

Economically, the pandemic could hardly come at a worse time. Russia is in the midst of a price war with Saudi Arabia over oil, its most important export. Economic growth has been stagnating for years and real disposable income has fallen for six years in a row. The corona crisis will affect Russia several times over. The declining world demand for oil impacts the national budget and the exchange rate. This in turn will make imports more expensive, inflation will rise and incomes will continue to fall. At the same time, the possibilities for countermeasures are dwindling. Russia has a well-stocked fund for such situations, but this too is finite. At the same time Chinese tourism, which had become quite substantial, is collapsing. Investment from China is now likely to fall for some time, although Russia had actually assumed this would happen after the conflict with its western neighbours and the United States. This will set the already slow modernisation of the economy even further back.

The state is aware of these issues. A wrong decision can have significant repercussions on stability in the country, but competent crisis management can also tone down the mood of protest in recent months. For this purpose, a central body has now been created in the State Council to coordinate anti-pandemic efforts nationally. On Monday, stronger measures were implemented: schools will be closed from 23 March, events with more than 50 people banned and the elderly explicitly called upon to stay at home. The calm that has prevailed so far seems to be slowly coming to an end. The crisis will have a major impact on Russia. Whether this also applies to the government and the president depends on how they manage the crisis.

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Vietnam

After the outbreak of the epidemic in Wuhan, as of the end of February, Vietnam had only 16 documented infections despite its geographical proximity to China. The government reacted swiftly and consistently by closing kindergartens, schools and universities, cancelling major events and increasing controls at borders and airports. This initially prevented a large-scale outbreak. The WHO praised Vietnam's exemplary handling of the virus. No new infections were recorded for 22 days, and all 16 patients were discharged in good health.

In early March, a passenger returning from Europe brought the virus back into Vietnam. As would be expected, this led to new infections. Since then, the number of cases brought into the country by tourist traffic has been increasing. According to official figures, the number of infected people currently stands at 61 (as of 17 March, 2020): this is a relatively small number of cases compared to the regional average, but it could increase rapidly in the next few weeks. There are growing indications that the outbreak in Vietnam is becoming considerably more complex.

With the new outbreak, Vietnam has stepped up internal and external precautionary measures and will continue to act decisively. Initially, the entry ban was valid only for travellers from China and South Korea. With the outbreak of the virus in Europe, the visa-free regime for EU citizens was suspended and a few days later a complete ban on new arrivals was imposed. People who have a valid residence permit and are arriving from a crisis region, including the Schengen area, may return to the country but will be taken to a 14-day mandatory quarantine upon arrival.

Within the country, Vietnamese authorities have put areas and streets with cases of infection under complete lockdown. Major tourist attractions such as Halong Bay are now closed; the boats remain in the harbour. Throughout the country, those who have been in contact with infected people are tracked down and quarantined. How long the authorities can continue to do this, in view of the increasing number of cases, is questionable. In Hanoi, entire housing blocks were sealed off and disinfected on a large scale. A lockdown of the capital has not yet been announced, but preparatory measures are being taken. In Ho Chi Minh City, hotels, restaurants, (karaoke) bars and discos were ordered to close.

The Vietnamese government is preparing for an emergency: field hospitals with thousands of beds are ready, nationwide emergency teams have been mobilised and hotlines have been set up. In addition, an app

was developed that records the geographical location of infections, and citizens are being asked to report their state of health. Moreover, one should not underestimate the effectiveness of social control carried out by neighbourhood committees.

With the renewed outbreak of the virus, there was also a brief run on the supermarkets in Vietnam. Prime Minister Phuc, however, has ordered inventories to be replenished and has managed to calm down the situation. In public spaces, people are moving about only with masks and in some places masks are required for access to supermarkets. The usually crowded and busy streets of Hanoi are deserted – cafes and restaurants are virtually empty and most people are staying at home.

Due to the school closings, since the beginning of February parents have been trying to make up for the lack of child care and consequently all family members are kept quite busy. In the beginning, on social networks anti-Chinese resentment quickly ran high. In no time at all, the real name and address of the Vietnamese woman who had returned from Europe was made public, resulting in a flood of curses against her. At the same time, the government is threatening substantial fines for spreading false news.

The economic consequences for the country are hardly foreseeable at present. For weeks now, the disruption of deliveries has already had serious effects on the value chains. It is clear that Vietnam will not reach its target of 6.8 per cent economic growth in 2020 and must expect painful economic losses. According to a recent survey, 74 per cent of 1,200 companies surveyed will have to declare bankruptcy if the epidemic persists for another 6 months. In addition to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, the most affected sectors are tourism, electronics and textiles, whose supply chains are closely linked to China. Even now, hotels can no longer pay their employees and need to dismiss them or send them on unpaid vacation. The Vietnamese stock exchange is also experiencing a rapid downward trend in line with global developments.

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Argentina

On 3 March, the first case of a citizen infected with the coronavirus appeared in Argentina. In the following two weeks, the number had risen to 56, and the country has recorded two deaths. As far as is known, these first cases were people who had been infected in Europe.

The government's precautions and reporting were cautious in the first

few days, but soon the measures came thick and fast. Even though the government of the pragmatic progressive Peronist Alberto Fernández has been in office for only three and a half months, in this situation of previously unknown challenges, it is reacting in a prompt, proactive and far-sighted manner. In messages to the nation and public appearances, the president explains the restrictive measures – even while standing alongside the opposition mayor of Buenos Aires, a novel show of solidarity in this politically polarised country. In Argentina as elsewhere, the number one priority is to delay the outbreak and avoid overloading the health care system. Transparency, science-based information, joint action and drastic measures seem to be the operative guidelines here.

The government actually has other concerns to deal with. The country is broke and in recession, inflation in 2019 was 53.8 per cent, debt is staggering (public debt is 86.3 per cent of GDP), and 40 per cent of the population is affected by poverty. Negotiations with the IMF and private creditors for debt restructuring, social measures for the poorest of the population and attempts to revive the domestic economy had all been on the new government's agenda. But now it needs to find a balance between radical, far-sighted measures to contain the corona virus on the one hand and the critical economic situation on the other.

For Argentina, the risk of the coronavirus entails a double burden: an overload of the health system and an additional drag on the economy, which is already in dire straits.

After a quickly announced entry ban on flights from the most affected areas such as the EU, US, China, South Korea, Iran and Japan, which included a compulsory 14-day quarantine for travellers, the borders have been closed to all foreigners without permanent residence permits since 15 March. Those who fail to comply are sent home; over 270 people have already been deported. Locals face imprisonment if they violate the quarantine order. Since 16 March, primary and secondary schools are closed. Citizens over 65 are required to stay at home. Public events and sports activities have been cancelled and national parks and playgrounds are also closed. People over 60 and pregnant women are exempt from work. A solution is still being sought for local public transport in Buenos Aires, a city of 15 million. In order to prevent the economy from further collapse, a general curfew has not been imposed.

The Argentinians understand and are responding accordingly. It is clear to most that a sudden spike in corona virus infections would overwhelm the public health system, and likewise, that many lives would be at risk – especially the poor. Nevertheless, Argentina is one of the countries with the highest number of doctors per capita in the world, and compared

with the rest of Latin America, many hospital beds are available. News from Europe – and especially Italy and Spain, where many Argentinians have relatives – leads to a good understanding of the radical measures. Argentine society is inured to crisis. And therefore it is flexible and relatively relaxed. Still, for Argentina, the risk of the corona virus weighs twice as heavily: in a potential overload of the health care system and a further burden on the already-stricken economy. The health crisis may however result in a greater collective cohesion among the population. The first signs of this are visible.

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