GLOBAL 14.04.2020 | Reinhard Naumann & Sven Saaler & Astrid Becker

Global quarantine VI

Portugal legalised the status of refugees, at the US-Mexico border they're struggling. Japan avoids acting like South Korea

Read our first part of 'Global Quarantine' with perspectives from Russia, Vietnam and Argentina; and the second part 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; and the fifth part with perspectives from the Czech Republic, Turkey and Tanzania.

Read this article in German.

Portugal

The socialist government of Portugal worked against the spread of the coronavirus early on. A national state of emergency was imposed on 19 March 2020. It severely restricted the right to freedom of movement, which, in addition to the closure of schools, also forced the suspension of all cultural, leisure and sports facilities as well as restaurants. Since then, this restriction on freedom of movement had been tightened again to counter the spread of the virus during Easter celebrations.

The government's handling of migrants and refugees has attracted international attention. On 27 March, the government issued a decree to legalise the status of all immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers who have previously applied for a residence permit or asylum prior to the state of emergency. Evidence of having applied is recognised by the authorities as a valid residence permit. It grants the use of the national health service and a claim to benefits from the state social insurance. The applicants are also entitled to enter into employment contracts, rent apartments, open bank accounts and arrange contracts for basic services such as water and electricity. This measure is in line with the immigration and integration policy of the Socialist Party, which has been in force since the 1990s and is largely supported by the liberal-conservative president.

The decision to impose a state of emergency was made by consensus across party lines by the president, the socialist government and the parliament. The majority of social partners also expressed their support for the move in a joint statement. According to surveys, the vast majority of the population is in favour of both the state of emergency and the concrete measures against the virus. The growth rate of the number of newly infected people has steadily decreased and has been below 10 per cent since the beginning of April. The total number of infected is 16,934; the number of fatalities is 535 (as of 13 April 2020). Apparently, Portugal has managed to avert a disaster like the one that struck Spain and Italy.

Now, the question of European solidarity is on the agenda. The state budget, which has been stabilised by undergoing major sacrifices in the past 10 years, can provide the necessary funds to cope with the consequences of the economic paralysis – bankruptcy, unemployment and massive short-time work – for only a limited period of time.

At the video conference of the European Council on 26 March, Prime Minister António Costa was among those who called for a strong EU solidarity-based response to the corona crisis. In the Portuguese parliament a few days before the conference, Costa outlined his position as follows: the EU must counteract the 'asymmetrical effects' of the crisis caused by the pandemic. The EU's €37bn euro package, the suspension of the 3 per cent deficit limit and the ECB's intervention against the risk of a new sovereign debt crisis are not sufficient. Money is urgently needed to cover the exploding costs of the pandemic. 'This is a common problem for the entire EU, and therefore we need a common response from the entire EU.' Specifically, Costa called for a 'large investment programme at the European level' and the creation of so-called 'coronabonds', as a commitment to help countries, against a backdrop of increasing public debt, from being isolated due to the distrust of the markets.

After the video conference, António Costa was disappointed with the result. When asked about Dutch minister of finance Wobke Hoekstra's having requested an investigation as to why some countries do not have sufficient financial capacity to cope with the economic impact of the crisis, António Costa reacted in an unusually harsh tone: 'These statements are abhorrent [...] If an EU country believes the problem can be solved by letting the virus run free in other countries, it has not understood what the EU is. This recurring pettiness undermines the EU. If the Union wants to survive, it must not allow statements like these to be made.'

António Costa will certainly maintain the country's traditionally

constructive role in the EU. However, it becomes clear that Portugal, the 'European poster boy', is also calling for solidarity from the wealthier member states, measures not dependent on harsh conditions imposed on the intervention countries by the Troika in the euro crisis.

Reinhard Naumann, FES Portugal

Japan

The decision to take drastic measures was delayed for a long time, the risk downplayed. However, on 7 April 2020, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared an emergency in seven prefectures of the country – four of which are in the Tokyo metropolitan area – for one month, in view of the growing threat of the coronavirus. Even though Japan has a well-functioning health system and sees itself as a technological nation, hardly any country has carried out fewer tests. Between early January 2020 and 24 March of this year, only 18,000 people were tested in Japan, with a total of just 40,000 tests in early April. The official number of people infected with Covid-19 therefore did not exceed the 3,000 mark until the beginning of April, and stood at 7,370 on 13 April.

Therefore, there's the suspicion of a high number of unreported cases, but serious estimates are not possible. However, it is clear that the effort to keep the official figures low is not by accident. First of all, on the part of the Abe government there is a fear that its economic policy ('Abenomics') will fail, should the freedom of movement for people be restricted too much – especially by restricting local transport around the big cities, but also in terms of entry regulations, which have been tightened up after much hesitation.

Second, the idea of postponing (or cancelling) the Olympic Games was long resisted. It was not until 25 March that the International Olympic Committee came around to taking this step. Third, the tense relationship with Korea for months meant that Japan had to take a different course from that of its unbeloved neighbour. Right from the start, South Korea tried to track down and test potential sufferers to prevent the virus from spreading unnoticed. Japan, on the other hand, followed the policy of identifying clusters, whereas individual tests were kept to a minimum. Only people who have been shown to come into contact with an infected person were admitted to a test.

Since February, the government has been calling on the populace and organisations of all kinds to avoid congregating in groups. This was merely a recommendation without a legal basis, but hardly any major events took place from mid-February to mid-March. Shops and

restaurants remained open throughout, however, and public life was only marginally affected, with the exception of a few panic purchases (masks, toilet paper, noodles). Above all, however, people were still crowding into the big cities. Only a few companies had made arrangements for 'home office' working and the concept of social distancing remained a fanciful notion before it was seriously discussed.

At the end of March, the Japanese Ministry of Health announced its own version of this globally practiced practice: namely, to avoid the 3 C's: closed spaces (especially those with poor ventilation), crowded places, and close-range conversations. Basically, these guidelines correspond to what is practiced elsewhere as social distancing.

However, even government institutions have been consistently ignoring these guidelines. For example, the Ministry of Education allowed schools to hold annual graduation ceremonies and enrolment ceremonies at the end of March or beginning of April. At these events, 300 to 500 pupils, teachers and parents gather in often poorly ventilated multi-purpose halls in primary and secondary schools. Even after the government's 6 April announcement that a state of emergency would be declared on 7 April, school enrolment ceremonies were held on that day. Despite this bizarre opening of schools for ceremonial purposes, classes have been suspended.

Along with proclaiming a state of emergency, the government adopted an economic stimulus package – the largest that Japan has ever seen, at 108 trillion yen (€916bn). It provides for cash payments to families whose income has declined significantly due to the corona crisis, as well as credit relief for solo entrepreneurs and small and micro businesses.

In contrast to other countries, hardly anyone fears a threat to democracy in Japan, although Shinzo Abe is not really known as a friend of the democratic process. In recent years, he has used brute force to push questionable laws through in Parliament, and the introduction of an emergency law has long been on his political agenda. At the moment, however, the government is making an effort not to raise any additional concerns among the population. The emergency law passed on 13 March therefore gives the national government limited powers; the prefectures are responsible for its implementation.

It remains to be seen whether the measures adopted, despite their half-hearted nature, will be enough to prevent the virus from spreading further in the densely urban conurbations of Japan. Likewise disputed among experts is the question of whether the spread represents a logical attenuation of the growth curve. Rather, like other countries, Japan could be facing a long struggle against Covid-19.

Sven Saaler, FES Japan

Mexico

'If I want to feed my family, I can't afford to stay at home and protect myself from infection.' This is how many street vendors in Mexico City assess their situation when interviewed by journalists. 60 per cent of the 130 million Mexicans are employed in the informal sector. They mostly live from hand to mouth without being able to accumulate any savings for extreme situations.

The peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Mexico is expected in late April. Just under 4,661 Mexicans are have been infected with the coronavirus on 13 April; it has already cost the lives of 296. Although schools have been closed for three weeks and a health emergency was declared at the end of March – with the private sector also being asked to suspend its non-essential activities – it is doubtful whether the Mexican health system is adequately prepared for the expected challenges. So far, there has basically been an appeal to the population to stay at home; there are no travel restrictions into or out of the country. Mexico is among the countries that are handling the crisis with the least restrictive measures.

Experts estimate that the Mexican economy will shrink by four per cent. Nevertheless, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador sees the current development only as a temporary crisis, which he wants to counter with an action plan presented last Sunday to revive the economy. However, the measures – which include public construction projects, interest-free loans for small businesses, wage cuts for high government employees, scholarships for schoolchildren, early pension payments and the creation of two million new jobs – were not very well received by business representatives. The main criticism is that important industrial companies and employers, in the auto industry for example, received no support. Instead, the government is continuing its austerity policy, which provides for large investments in the expansion of the oil industry and infrastructure projects without clearly recognisable integration into a long-term development strategy.

In view of the drop in crude oil prices, payments to the state oil company Pemex and the construction of a large refinery have met with strong criticism. The plan is to continue the numerous assistance-based social programmes, which are intended primarily for poor population groups in rural regions. Aid to the urban informal sector, on the other hand, is hardly envisaged. For the first time since the president's election, his approval ratings have fallen below 50 per cent, according to a survey

published by Mitofsky on 5 April.

The situation is precarious for the many migrants from Central America who are waiting on the Mexican side of the border for the US authorities' decision on their asylum applications. After the processing of the applications in the US was suspended on 10 April, the number of people stranded in Mexico is increasing by the day. A return to their home countries is no longer possible due to the dangers threatening them there and the closure of the borders with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Most of them are holding out in overcrowded accommodations; they work in the informal sector in order to survive. The number of stranded people is also increasing because anyone picked up in the US border area without valid documents is now deported directly to Mexico. With these returned migrants not being tested for the coronavirus and in view of the catastrophic hygienic conditions in the crowded accommodations, it seems only a matter of time before the number of infections on Mexico's northern border will increase.

Astrid Becker, Regional Sustainability Project of FES Mexico



Reinhard Naumann
Lisbon

Reinhard Naumann represents the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Portugal since 1996. Moreover, he works as a freelance consultant and researcher in the areas of employment policy and industrial relations for, amongst others, the European Observatory of Working Life / EurWORK and the European Observatory Employment Policies Observatory / EEPO



Sven Saaler
Tokyo

Sven Saaler is FES Representative in Japan and Professor of Modern Japanese History at Sophia University in Tôkyô. He has written and edited books on history debates in Japan, East Asian regionalism and Japanese-German relations. Among his most recent publications are *Mutual Perceptions and Images in Japanese-German Relations, 1860-2010* (Brill, 2017) and the *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History* (Routledge, 2017).



Astrid Becker
Amman

Astrid Becker heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's regional project on climate and energy in the Middle East. She is also currently responsible for Yemen. She previously worked for the foundation in Mexico City and Peru.

-