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Global Quarantine VIII

Romania, Pakistan and Bolivia have to fight against the pandemic and its devastating social consequences at the same time

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Read this article in German.

Romania

While Germany was still debating the possibility of Bundesliga football matches in early March 2020, life in Romania was severely restricted starting 10 March, even though only 29 cases of Covid-19 were detected. The experience in northern Italy had shown how quickly the virus could bring the healthcare system of even a more prosperous country to the point of collapse – and Romania is well aware of the dire state of its own health system. The country spends the least on healthcare in the EU, accounting for just five per cent of its gross domestic product, while the EU average is ten per cent. In Romania the availability of medical personnel is also the lowest in the EU, because doctors and nurses have left the country in droves since its accession to the EU in 2007. Romania has lost an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 doctors to the wealthier countries.

And that brings us to the Romanian government's second major concern: its huge diaspora. One fifth of the approximately 20 million Romanians live in other EU countries: around 1.3 million in Italy, 700,000 in Germany and 600,000 in Spain, all of which have been particularly affected by the corona crisis. These fellow citizens were now to be prevented from returning from abroad by imposing very strict quarantine

measures and suspending flights abroad. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of Romanians have returned to their homeland in the past few weeks, as they have lost their earning opportunities in the host countries.

At the same time, many Romanians are willing to accept the risk of infection and extremely poor working conditions, as the example of seasonal harvesters in Germany shows: at the beginning of April, the German Interior Minister and his colleague responsible for agriculture agreed to let 80,000 harvest workers into the country over the next two months. Most of them come from Romania. Photos of the airport in Cluj attracted huge public attention: nearly 2,000 tightly packed people waited for hours for flights to Germany. The images sparked outrage in Romania; meanwhile, German critics pointed out that this was exactly how the virus was imported into their country.

Strict rules were introduced. Travellers' temperatures are measured upon arrival, harvest workers must be driven directly from the airport to the farms, and then they are no longer be allowed to leave them. But above all, while these quarantine measures are intended to prevent the German population from becoming infected, they make the seasonal harvesters even more dependent on their employers. It is also highly questionable as to whether distance regulations and hygiene standards are being observed in the field and in the workers' very simple accommodations. The first case of a Romanian harvest worker dying from Covid-19 was in Baden-Württemberg on 11 April.

After the debacle at the airport in Cluj, the administrations of the Romanian airports vowed to ensure sufficient distance. It can be assumed that Germany will manage to come up with the needed 80,000 harvest workers, because the corona crisis is hitting the Romanian economy hard. The poverty-stricken country, which was already heavily indebted before the pandemic, has fewer resources to combat the virus than Western European countries do. One third of the approximately 800,000 small businesses in Romania are at risk of bankruptcy and one million employment contracts have been suspended. The workers affected may benefit from short-time employment during this extreme situation, but over the medium term their jobs may disappear entirely; and unemployment benefits are extremely poor in Romania. The large number of Romanians without regular employment contracts remain largely without state support.

Given the dramatically high numbers of people infected and killed in Spain and Italy, it is understandable that these two countries are the centre of attention when EU programs to deal with the crisis are discussed. However, the needs of Eastern member countries such as

Romania should not go by the wayside. After the crisis in the West is over, Romania's doctors will probably still be needed, as will its harvest workers. But many of the four million Romanians who worked abroad in the EU before the pandemic will probably lose this source of income if jobs are cut as part of the emerging recession in Western Europe. They cannot hope for substitute employment in Romania. The discussion about economic 'reconstruction' afterwards must therefore also take into account the Eastern member states and meet their special needs.

Juliane Schulte, FES Romania

Pakistan

Compared with other countries, the numbers for Covid-19 infections and related deaths in Pakistan are still at a very low level. Up until April 27, 2020, fewer than 14,000 infections and just over 280 deaths had been recorded, along with over 3,000 recoveries. With a population of more than 210 million people, these numbers are actually miniscule, especially when compared to Europe and the US.

However, this is no reason to rejoice or feel relief: in a place where there is hardly any testing for the virus, hardly any infections are detected. For weeks, only 400–500 tests were carried out each day, and now the number is said to be 2500–3000 – barely worth mentioning. If it is not yet clear in Europe how many people are actually ill from Covid-19, then it is not even possible to make reasonably serious estimates in Pakistan, because the data is simply too scarce. However, since Prime Minister Imran Khan was also tested for coronavirus due to contact with an infected person (the result was negative), awareness of the danger, at least in the middle class, may have increased again.

Until mid-March, Pakistani society was remarkably unconcerned about dealing with the pandemic. The hustle and bustle of the bazaars was as hectic as ever. Although some media had reported the need for distance regulations, this made an impression on very few people. Several days after the WHO officially declared the virus a pandemic, the government suddenly changed course. There are strong indications that the military has forced the prime minister to declare a lockdown, despite his objections for economic reasons.

As sensible as these epidemic measures were, it is difficult to follow through with them. It is not just the casual approach to rules and regulations by most Pakistanis that plays a role, but also economic hardship. Even before the crisis, millions of day labourers did not know what they would live on for the next two or three days – to expect them

to stay at home for weeks and to live without any income is asking too much. The millions of people in the informal sector who exist without any social security are not doing better in lockdown.

At present, the lockdown is a spotty one. In selected, mostly well-to-do districts of some cities – especially in the capital – it is being observed to an amazing degree but elsewhere, for example in poorer bazaars or in many mosques, there is no perceivable impact. Lockdown is particularly difficult to enforce there. Many believers, and above all the preachers, religious officials and representatives of religious parties, have a considerable unwillingness to call off prayers in the mosques.

Although the government tried to influence the ulama accordingly, it was then forced to make an extremely questionable 'compromise': mass prayers may take place, but the carpets are removed from the mosques, the premises disinfected and the faithful are to maintain a minimum distance of 90cm from each other. This figure is obviously far too small, but cannot be carried out during prayers anyway. Many preachers have publicly stated that they have no intention to follow any guidelines. The government turned out to be helpless, because the idea of wanting to keep masses of believers in Pakistan away from prayer by police intervention would be hardly politically viable.

Jochen Hippler, FES Pakistan

Bolivia

At the end of 2019, violent social protests broke out in Bolivia. The suspicion of electoral fraud drove thousands of Bolivians onto the streets to demonstrate against longtime President Evo Morales. This resulted in nationwide scenes of violence and ultimately in Morales' flight into exile, with conservative senator Jeanine Áñez then becoming interim president. At that time, she had certainly imagined her term of office differently, as it was originally intended only to organise new elections. Instead, she must now steer one of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in Latin America through the current Covid-19 pandemic.

This entails numerous problems. The population largely supports the government's strict measures, including total quarantine with a nationwide curfew. Most people realise that the alternatives are even less attractive, given the desolate state of the country's healthcare system. Nevertheless, coordinating the transitional government with the other political forces will prove crucial to combat the emergency situation. If, at least in an exceptional situation like this unprecedented health calamity, the various political forces pulled together for the benefit of everyone, the

government's crisis management and the response of the population could achieve significantly better results. However, supporters and opponents of the interim government are irreconcilable. Some see Evo Morales' disempowerment as a coup d'état, others see it as the result of a civil movement to restore the constitutionally-based democratic order. With such hardened fronts, rapprochement would be difficult, even in the face of a pandemic like this one.

The interim president governs primarily by decree, while the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) parliamentary group of the disempowered Morales, with its still-remaining two-thirds majority, is largely inactive due to internal disputes. In dealing with the crisis, the government demonstrates little transparency. It publishes scant information, for example regarding the procurement of ventilation machines, test kits and protective materials. The sudden resignation of the Minister of Health 'for personal reasons' has gone without comment, there are coordination problems and a lack of competence with the regional governments, while open social debate is difficult. The government is using its special powers to contain the effects of coronavirus for political interests: one decree declares 'misinformation or the creation of uncertainty' to be a 'crime against public health'. This makes sense in principle, but this power is being used selectively to persecute political opponents. People labelled 'digital warriors' by the government are arrested, but the public learns little to nothing about the surrounding circumstances.

After the outbreak of the pandemic, the new elections, originally scheduled for May 2020, were postponed indefinitely. For political reasons, some now want to hold the elections as quickly as possible, while others want to postpone them for as long as they can. Here too, there is no agreement in sight. However, one thing is clear: coping with the deep economic and social crisis that must be confronted after the pandemic will call for sound democratic legitimacy on the part of the government.

The strict measures to contain the virus have slowed its spread, but at high economic and social costs. Together with the sharp global decline in the price of oil and other raw materials and the already gloomy economic situation before the pandemic, the coming economic crisis will present the country with major challenges. Social conflicts and divisions are likely to worsen if the next government has to decide on the use of even more scarce resources and various social groups suffer disadvantages. In addition, it can be assumed that the focus of politics will be on growth at all costs and that questions of ecological sustainability will be neglected.

The political polarisation, social divisions and the economic crisis together form a complicated scenario for the phase after the pandemic in

Bolivia, which will pose enormous challenges for the current and the next government.

Jan Souverein, FES Bolivia



Juliane Schulte
Bucharest

Juliane Schulte heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Romania. Prior to this, she was a consultant for the Visegrád countries in the Central and Eastern Europe Department in Berlin.



Jochen Hippler
Islamabad

Jochen Hippler is a political scientist and peace researcher and has been Country Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Islamabad/Pakistan since May 2019.



Jan Souverein

Sao Paulo

Jan Souverein heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's office in Brazil. Prior to this, he headed the office in Bolivia and worked as a project assistant for the Foundation in Uruguay.

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