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Global Quarantine XI

Covid-19 exacerbates inequality, but can also ease existing tensions. Dispatches from Russia, Cameroon and the Philippines

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Russia

When dramatic images came from Italy in March, things were still very quiet in Russia. The borders with China had already been closed in February and the number of Covid-19 cases was hardly worth mentioning. The government even believed it was so well prepared that it could send medical supplies to Italy and many other countries around the world. In the meantime, the pandemic has caught up with Russia. The number of cases has been greatly increasing and now, at the beginning of May, stands at over 100,000 with infections in all regions. Moscow and the surrounding area remains the most severely affected with over 50,000 cases. The number of fatalities is very low at just over 1000 cases, but this is primarily due to the method of counting, with Covid-19 rarely being recorded as the cause of death. In most cases, statistically speaking it is heart failure and pneumonia that result in death. The reality is that substantially more people may have died from the virus.

However, Moscow is not New York. Not in a positive sense. Reports tell stories of hospital overloads, ambulances that wait nine hours to admit patients and the use of medical students to counter the growing number of illnesses. But the situation still seems manageable. Still, Moscow is not the same as Russia. What is happening in the rest of the country is less clear. The healthcare system has been subject to continuous optimisation over the past 15 years, which has significantly reduced the number of hospitals and medical staff. The emergency will now show how many of the intensive care facilities available on paper are actually functioning.

However, there's an even greater problem: poverty. Because of the lack of structural reforms, Russia's economy was stagnating even before the 2014 Crimea annexation and the ensuing sanctions. Rising prices in a period of

poor economic development brought more people back to or on the verge of poverty. 13.5 per cent of the population have less than the subsistence minimum of €150 euros per month. In contrast, thanks to tight fiscal discipline and oil prices again on the rise, the state has managed to build up a prosperity fund of considerable size.

Crises always reveal the weaknesses of states. Russia has shown that a quick switch from being a major worldwide influential power to a welfare state providing for ordinary people proves difficult. An opportunity could arise in this crisis to restore the considerably lower public confidence in the government of recent times and to alleviate the rising protest mood through social measures. But the government took a long time to grasp that the epidemic is, in fact, a problem. However, it did react early by closing the borders and Moscow's mayor Sergei Sobyanin, the actual crisis manager for the pandemic, implemented restrictions in good time and, afterwards, curfews with a system of electronic entry passes.

Overall, however, the reactions remained uncoordinated for an unusually long time for a state that boasts about its 'power vertical'. The President discovered the value of the federal system and transferred the organising and formulation of measures to the regions. The actions taken regarding economic and social aid are even weaker. A state of emergency hasn't been called yet. It would oblige the state to pay for any losses. At very short notice, employees were released from work for one week and then one month. This means that all companies that are not absolutely necessary were required to send their employees home with full wages, if possible in home office, otherwise on a de facto vacation. However, the majority of small businesses cannot do this. Up to 70 per cent of small and medium-sized entreprises (SMEs) face bankruptcy. An increase of five million unemployed could follow. The funds that Russia uses to support the economy are 2.8 per cent of economic output, which is far below the reserves that other European countries maintain. It was only after considerable delay and much criticism that support for SMEs was offered in the form of grants and loans.

This can have a significant impact on poor people or those at risk of poverty. In April, the state development bank VEB estimated that income has fallen by 17.5 per cent. Over 60 per cent of the population have no reserves to fall back on. The crisis is mainly affecting the weakest members of society. Many pensioners continue to work because pensions are barely enough. Many people, especially in the regions, keep irregular jobs to stay afloat. Millions of migrants are working, often illegally, on the country's construction sites. These groups might well be the real victims of this crisis.

This is the moment for the state to help its citizens. The prosperity fund is ready and available. However, the crisis has coincided with an unnecessary oil price war with Saudi Arabia, which has had to be resolved through considerably higher production cuts. A portion of the necessary oil revenues will therefore be lost. Moreover, there are other reasons why the ample wealth fund is not being used: specifically, it is primarily intended to protect Russia from further external sanctions and therefore in reality constitutes an instrument of foreign policy. It is difficult for Russia's leadership to get away from this focus on foreign policy. Europe can help in this case by stepping up its dialogue during the corona crisis to further reduce tensions on the continent. In the end, the common crisis may even help bring more understanding to the continent.

Peer Teschendorf, FES Russia

Cameroon

With the corona crisis in mind, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire in early April. He urged 'armed actors' around the world to put down their weapons and instead fight the virus together. In Cameroon, in Central Africa, his words seem to fall on fertile ground, or at least partly so: for several weeks now, the number of attacks in the two Anglophone regions of the country has decreased significantly. Since 2016, various separatist movements have been fighting against government troops to establish their own state. The reduced number of incidents is probably only partly because of the way that the coronavirus has largely brought public life to a standstill in these regions. For several months, there has been increasing evidence that the separatist groups have been severely weakened militarily after almost four years of armed fighting, that cash flows from the diaspora are becoming scarcer and that the separatists are disintegrating further into different groups.

Indeed, representatives of the Republic of Ambazonia, which was proclaimed in 2017, offered a ceasefire to the Cameroonian government shortly after the UN Secretary-General's appeal. Even while the government did not comment, it took a step towards the separatists and acknowledged it was to blame for the 'Ngarbuh massacre', in which government soldiers killed at least 22 civilians in March, including at least three women and ten children. Three soldiers have been arrested and the case is being tried in a military court. This is a remarkable step, given that the government has denied all guilt, in this and previous massacres, and has referred to allegations against its soldiers as 'fake news'.

Despite some positive signals, the challenges remain immense: the conflict has left more than half a million internally displaced people who

cannot return to their burned-down villages. More than one million people in these regions need humanitarian aid, but during the corona crisis, international aid delivery has been undermined, as the government has closed airspace and all borders. Moreover, the causes of the conflict continue to exist: since 1982, the 87-year-old ruler Paul Biya has been working from Yaounde with his centralist leadership style to ensure that the Anglophone regions are not given much freedom and that language, legal systems and culture are determined by the capital. So far, nothing has changed fundamentally.

Nevertheless, the corona crisis offers many of the civil war-stricken regions an opportunity to move closer to peace, or at least an armistice. The example of Cameroon also shows that the fight against the virus ties up many of the state's capacities, whether it be in the enforcement of curfews by the police and military, in the management and development of ailing health care systems or in the development of aid packages for companies and the population. The government lacks these resources in its fight against armed groups such as the separatists in the northwest and southwest or the Boko Haram in the far north.

This is where international actors can make an attempt to amplify positive developments. The fact that the government in Cameroon accepted the blame for the Ngarbuh massacre was not least due to the fact that international groups such as Human Rights Watch repeatedly demanded public attention to andan investigation of the atrocity. Governments that traditionally maintain close ties – in the case of Cameroon, for example, Germany, France and the US – can now also use their corona aid packages to ensure that ceasefires are reached. One important starting point would be negotiating with the relevant government so that, even in the case of closed borders, aircraft with humanitarian aid will be granted a special permit. In this way, in at least some cases, Guterres' appeal will hopefully become a reality.

Nina Netzer, FES Cameroon

Philippines

After three months since the first confirmed cases of coronavirus in the Philippines, its people are now trying to adapt to a 'new normal' characterised by ongoing quarantine measures. On the first weekend in May, the number of officially confirmed cases of infection nearly reached the 9,000 mark. So far, 603 deaths have been recorded. The number of unreported cases is certainly much higher, since the extent of testing is inadequate.

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, President Rodrigo Duterte first initiated a one-month 'community quarantine' (basically a soft lockdown) in mid-March for the region around the capital, Manila. After unclear information and problems with implementation, the order was quickly expanded to a stricter quarantine for the entire main island of Luzon. Shops, markets, the popular shopping malls and all other non-essential facilities have been closed. The suspension of local public transport ensured that roads were empty in Manila, which is usually plagued by permanent traffic jams. In the meantime, the lockdown has been extended until 15 May and expanded to other parts of the country. Regular national and international air traffic has been completely stopped, at least temporarily. At the same time, the first easing of measures is currently taking place in other parts of the country.

Ten days after the start of the lockdown, Duterte had the Congress, which is controlled by his supporters, pass an emergency law which among other things enables the president to redirect government spending that has already been planned to various support programs made necessary by the corona crisis. In addition to these measures, which are commendable on paper at least, this legal authority also included a provision which states that the dissemination of 'false information' can be punished. Critics saw this as a dangerous restriction on freedom of expression and the press; and renewed evidence of the Duterte government's one-sided 'law and order' approach. It remains to be seen whether these emergency powers will actually be withdrawn once the three months have expired.

Critics saw their fears confirmed when Duterte, in a national speech on 1 April, announced that he had ordered the military and police to shoot criminals if there were problems in implementing the lockdown. Martial pronouncements of this sort place the Philippine government's response to the coronavirus in direct relation to Duterte's internationally criticised 'war on drugs,' in which the president also wields an iron hand. The problems that this approach poses, particularly during the Corona crisis, have recently been pulled into the spotlight by the occurrence of Covid-19 cases in the hopelessly overcrowded prisons. Consequently, the government was forced to release nearly 10,000 prisoners early due to a lack of space.

The government has also been slow to implement the promised relief measures. The number of tests carried out is still low and protective equipment for medical personnel is still lacking. Only about a quarter of the announced aid payments to 18 million families in need have been made so far and the Ministry of Labour has stopped providing aid to workers until further notice because of a lack of financial resources. The

pandemic therefore poses a threat not only to the health of a large part of the population, but also to the economic well-being. While regular employees are anxious as to whether their jobs will continue, members of the informal sector are already out of work; they are surviving on food rations distributed by their district administrations, or receiving aid from relatives, friends and NGOs. It remains to be seen whether the economy and thus the situation of the people will slowly improve again in the coming months or whether the country, which is already characterised by widespread poverty, will slide into recession. One can only hope that the famous Philippine community spirit, called 'bayanihan', gives Filipino men and women the necessary strength to persevere.

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