PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 83 (1513), 17 April 2020 © PISM

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A Step Towards Normality: Relaxing the COVID-19 Restrictions Imposed in EU Countries

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The slowing growth rate of COVID-19 incidence has prompted some EU countries to make the first attempts to move away from the restrictions imposed in the fight against the pandemic. The goal is to reduce the scale of the economic recession and return to growth as soon as possible. The usual course of action is opening schools and shops, combined with maintaining precautions and mass testing. However, the authorities emphasize the need to monitor the situation and readiness to quickly restore restrictions.

In recent days, a discussion about how quickly to end the restrictions introduced as part of curtailing the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has been growing in Europe. There is no single pattern for meeting this challenge. Some countries such as France intend to stick with radical restrictions until the infections are controlled or a vaccine is available. Others began to loosen the restrictions, encouraged by the flattening contagion curves. This group includes Germany, Czechia, Denmark, and Austria. Their experience can become a reference point for more systematic strategies for loosening the restrictions.

Germany. In mid-April, the German authorities announced, in the words of Chancellor Angela Merkel, "a fragile, phased success" in the fight against the coronavirus. This made it possible for the federal and regional governments to agree on a joint action plan for the coming weeks. There are still restrictions on personal contact—a minimum 1.5 m distance between people and no groups, only individuals, in public spaces—as well as the ban on travel. The plan allows people to practice sports but recommends they wear face masks and use a "contact tracing" mobile application. Germany is still increasing the number of tests: at the beginning of March, it could carry out 7,000 a day, a month later, already 100,000, which makes it possible to promptly detect new cases.

The process of opening of schools should start from 4 May, starting with pupils in their final years. Exams planned for this year will take place only after proper preparation. As regards kindergartens and nurseries, they remain closed, apart from providing care to the children of parents employed in key occupations for the functioning of the state (e.g., doctors, delivery drivers, policemen).

Germany is also planning a gradual relaxation of rules on trade after 19 April. Shops of up to 800 m^2 may be open after meeting additional conditions regarding hygiene and control of the number of customers. Physical distancing restrictions will not apply to car dealerships, bike shops, or bookstores. After 4 May, hair salons will be able to restore operations, albeit with precautions. Until the end of August 2020, no mass events may take place in Germany. For now, the ban on religious services has also been maintained, although consultations on lifting the restrictions are ongoing.

Austria. From 14 April, authorities allowed the opening of stores of less than 400 m^2, stores selling building materials and tools, and garden centres. They will be able to receive a maximum of one customer per 20 m^2

of the building's total area. Larger stores, shopping centres, and hairdressers are due to open on 1 May. Restaurants and hotels will open at the earliest from mid-May, and school activities will be restored (the authorities will decide on a possible extension of this period by the end of April). At least until the end of June, there is also a ban on public gatherings. The order to wear masks in shops was extended to public transport. Austria's Red Cross prepared the voluntary "Stop Corona" mobile application to help identify people who have contact with virus carriers (it acts like a journal in which the user enters all contacts with other people).

At the beginning of April, the daily increase in the total number of coronavirus infections in Austria fell to 1.6%, which is one of the largest decreases in the EU compared to mid-March. The number of people hospitalised and in intensive care units was stable at the beginning of the month. At the beginning of April, a study was conducted in Austria that showed that less than 1% of the population not in hospitals (i.e., about 28,500 people) are infected with the virus (however, asymptomatic cases were not taken into account). This means that collective ("herd") immunity has not developed at the level of the whole society, and thus lifting the restrictions too quickly threatens to increase the number of infections.

Czechia. Since 9 April, the government has allowed bicycle shops as well as building material and tool stores to open. From 14 April, it is possible to travel abroad for important business or personal purposes (after returning, though, travellers will be subject to a mandatory quarantine). The government has also presented a five-step plan to further ease the restrictions. From 20 April, it will be possible to operate bazaars or car showrooms. From 27 April, stores with an area of up to 200 m^2 may open (except for those operating in shopping centres with an area of over 5,000 m^2). On 11 May, stores with an area of up to 1000 m^2 can operate. On 25 May, the government plans to allow restaurants, bars, and pubs to reopen if they have space outside the premises. On the same day, hair and beauty salons may re-open. The opening of all stores, restaurants, and hotels, as well as shopping centres with an area of over 5,000 m2, is planned for 8 June. All objects that open must comply with the rules of maintaining a safe distance between clients (at least 2 m) and sanitary rules. For an indefinite period, the requirement to wear face masks in public places also applies. The Czech government has also decided to gradually restore education in schools and colleges, depending on the dates of upcoming exams (only from 25 May in primary schools).

The Czech government is working on an application to help identify infected persons (to be launched in April). Users of the popular private application Mapy.cz receive information about possible contact with a virus carrier by sharing their location. However, the system's effectiveness is limited (e.g., the carrier must first report that he/she is infected), and users have also expressed concerns about data security.

Denmark. From 15 April, the government opened kindergartens, schools for children up to 11 years old, and daycare centres. The opening of these facilities is intended to enable parents of the youngest children who have had to look after them at home to return to work. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen also announced consultations with other parties about a further loosening of administrative restrictions (extension of the so-called "first phase"). These decisions are the result of the falling number of new infections, as well as the number of people admitted to hospitals and intensive care units. Medical facilities have an adequate supply of beds for patients (both in normal and intensive care units) and equipment, including ventilators. However, the ban on gatherings of more than 10 people was extended until 10 May, and churches, cinemas, and shopping centres also will be closed until then (the restrictions may be lifted as part of a further general relaxation of restrictions). Also, until the end of August, the government has banned festivals and large gatherings.

Conclusions. The decisions by the authorities of these four countries to relax social and economic restrictions stem from the slowing of detected new coronavirus cases. However, there is no clearly defined threshold below which restrictions can be reduced. The number of people hospitalised and in intensive care units was also an important factor in the decision-making process—in Denmark's case, it has been falling since the beginning of April, while in Austria the number has stabilised—to prevent the healthcare system from being overwhelmed.

If the actions taken can be structured, it would consist of, first, loosening the restrictions in areas most affecting the economy. This includes opening schools to allow parents to return to work and restoring retail trade. At the same time, a lot of attention is being paid to maintaining a lower intensity of social contact, which will be helped by mobile applications and other means of identifying potential exposure to virus carriers. Also, all the countries are assuming an increase in the ability to test for coronavirus. The actions of these governments are cautious and gradual, and the next steps will be taken only if the downward trend in the number of infections persists, otherwise the restrictions may be tightened again.