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Second Wave of COVID-19 in Israel

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Israel was among the states that managed to mitigate the first wave of COVID-19. However, inconsistent actions in lifting the restrictions and a decline in social discipline have led to a sharp increase in morbidity. That forced Israel to be first country in the world to introduce a second lockdown, which is now being lifted. The political consequences of the second wave are a drop in support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and increased tensions within the coalition, both of which enhance the chances of another cabinet crisis, including an early elections scenario.

Israel and the Second Wave. Israel took effective preventive measures at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring. The decrease in infections to several dozen detected cases per day was justification for easing the restrictions on social and economic life at the end of April. In May, most businesses, public places, and schools were re-opened under a revised sanitary regime.

The new outbreaks in Israel have mostly happened in educational institutions. At the beginning of June, the number of detected cases began to rise, gaining a new dynamic during the summer (daily increases at 2–4%). Additionally, the spread of the virus was facilitated by a decline in social discipline and failure to follow the sanitary recommendations, with large weddings, for example, a significant source of infections. As a result, since September, Israel recorded several thousand confirmed daily cases (the first wave reached about 800 a day), the highest incidence rate per million citizens worldwide. The government decided to introduce a new lockdown starting 18 September. The reinstatement of the restrictions was justified by the cycle of the most important Jewish holidays (e.g., Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur) and was supposed to counteract the spread of the virus in synagogues and family gatherings. The peak of the second wave came at the end of September, when about 9,000 new infections were registered in one day. In October, the daily growth gradually decreased to below 0.5%, the number of active cases dropped from about 70,000 at the beginning of the month to 11,000 at the end. At the same time, a partial lifting of restrictions began, including the restoration of school education. The total number of cases in Israel from February to November was about 315,000, with almost 2,600 people dead from the disease, of which about 90% came after June. Israel is in the advanced stage of the development of a vaccine for COVID-19 and it has entered the clinical testing phase.

Assessment of Authorities' Actions. The Netanyahu government was accused by the opposition and a large part of public opinion of being unprepared for the return of the pandemic and chaotic in counteracting it. In July, the government introduced a partial return of restrictions on the operation of stores and restaurants but immediately cancelled some of them under protest pressure. With the delay, the contact tracing programme required the army to assist. Divergent positions on COVID-19 strategy led to disputes between ministers and the appointed special coordinator for controlling the pandemic in Israel, Ronni Gamzu, who finally resigned at the end of October. The authorities' image was tarnished by inconsistent communication policy and violations of restrictions by government ministers. Surveys conducted in October showed that support for the prime minister regarding the pandemic fell from 57.5% to 31% since April.

As during the first wave of COVID-19, the attitude of parts of the ultra-orthodox population, especially the non-Chasidic faction—Litvaks—remained problematic. Its representatives and leaders, present in the government through United Torah Judaism, opposed the reintroduction of restrictions in their cities and in religious education, despite the high morbidity in the community. The rabbinical leadership decided, for example, to open schools under their authority

in October, contrary to the government regulations. However, the attitude towards the restrictions among this population was not met with a stronger response from the government due to the political alliance between Likud and religious parties.

Additionally, the wave of protests against Netanyahu grew with the rise of the pandemic, a combination of the persistent protests demanding the resignation of the prime minister over corruption charges and demonstrations against government policy towards the pandemic. The protests were undermined after a ban on assemblies was enacted in September, justified by the authorities as a measure to fight the virus and the state's lack of will to facilitate demonstrations while limiting other events, such as religious gatherings. The opposition accused the prime minister of using the pandemic to suppress civil liberties. The issue of protests and concessions to religious leadership influenced the assessment of the decision about the second lockdown, with 55% of Israelis considering it motivated by political reasons.

Political Aspect. The return of the pandemic overlapped with the growing conflict within the coalition between the Likud and Benjamin Gantz's Blue and White. In addition to the issue of the right to protest and the nation's COVID-19 strategy, its strongest criticism is the failure of the government to pass the now overdue state budget. The coalition deal proposed a budget for 2020-2021, but in July Netanyahu called for a review of the arrangements and for preparation of separate annual budgets. The main reason for the dispute is the point in the coalition agreement between the Likud and Blue and White that states that after elections are held, the failure to approve a budget means Netanyahu remains prime minister. If passed, Gantz would take over the PM function based on the rotation plan in the agreement. Netanyahu's retraction of the deal is a signal to Blue and White that he is ready to pursue the next election cycle to maintain his office. Eventually, the deadline for the budget was postponed to December, which prevented the elections from being called. The lack of a budget complicates an already difficult economic situation. In the first half of 2020, Israel's economy contracted by 10.01%. Unemployment in November stood at 22%, including 627,000 people on unpaid leave. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has provided more than $29 billion through various aid programmes.

The poor assessment of the authorities' actions strengthens mainly the right-wing opposition, whose leader is Naftali Bennett, the former defence and education minister and head of the Yamina party. Basing his message on the presentation of his own comprehensive strategy to fight the pandemic has allowed him to broaden his base of support, especially among the disappointed electorate of Likud. Surveys indicate that Yamina could gain from 5 to more than 20 seats. Yair Lapid's centre alliance Yesh Atid-Telem also sees at least minimal gains. According to the polls, Netanyahu would still have the best chance to form a government, but maintaining the right-wing coalition would require an agreement with Bennett.

Conclusions. Israel is one state that has treated the lockdown as a key tool in fighting the second wave of the pandemic. The Israelis managed to avoid overloading their healthcare system and slow the scale of infections. However, the country's experience shows that such a strategy must be accompanied by constant social mobilisation and a clear strategy for lifting the restrictions. Inconsistency in the authorities' actions to counter COVID-19 has led to a loss of credibility with citizens, which reduces the effectiveness of the sanitary regime. At the same time, the government is under pressure to maintain the economy.

Disputes in Israel over the pandemic strategy have increased instability in the Likud and Blue and White coalition. The December deadline for the budget will be crucial for the government's sustainability. If not met, it would mean the dissolution of the Knesset. For Netanyahu, election in that case would guarantee him retention of the PM's office, but the campaign would be difficult because of the unpredictability of the pandemic, the poor state of the economy, and the lack of guarantees to maintain the right-wing coalition. Thus, an attempt to renegotiate the partnership agreement with Gantz is plausible, due to weakening of Blue and White in the polls and Gantz's probably inability to build an alternative coalition within the current Knesset.

Likud and its coalition partners have lost the public support built up in the first phase of the pandemic. The attitude towards the second wave of COVID-19 has weakened the prime minister, especially since his decisions—including towards religious partners—are perceived as motivated by political interests. Netanyahu, whose corruption proceeding is scheduled for January, will likely compensate for the decline in popularity through foreign policy action. The main goal will be to prepare for the political changes after Joe Biden's victory in the U.S. elections. The government will also strive to deepen normalisation with the Arab states and increase cooperation amid the pandemic with selected European partners, such as exchange of experiences (Austria, Czechia) or reactivation of tourism (Greece, Cyprus).

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