



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
Joint Responsibility
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Joint Responsibility

The beginning of November in Slovakia was marked by national mass-testing of the population on COVID 19. The operation, which the government called “Joint Responsibility” and was commented in various foreign media, had divided the society in Slovakia even before it really started. Testing took place during two following weekends - 31.10-1.11 2020 and the second round took place on 7.11-8.11. 2020. After passing the test, citizens received a so-called certificate stating the result. According to the Prime Minister, if the citizen received a negative result, the certificate becomes a kind of ticket to freedom. If the citizen is positive, he/she must remain in the mandatory 10 days isolation. For the mass-testing, standard antigen tests were used, in which a sample from the nasopharynx is taken with a thin rod. This sample is then mixed in a solution which is dripped onto the test cassette. The principle of evaluation resembles pregnancy tests. Results are shown within 20 minutes. It is these tests that have become the main source of differing opinions in the society.

Problem N1 – Antigen tests are not reliable

Probably the most crucial argument that dominated in the society and divided it was the declared reliability of the antigen tests. During the procurement process, the government declared a sensitivity of over 90%. However, several foreign studies have shown that the sensitivity of the Standard Q Covid-19 Ag test is somewhere at the range of about 70%, even at high viral loads. This means that in a person who does not show symptoms of the disease, this test may not detect the positivity. In practice, this means that out of 100 people tested, up to 30 could go home with a negative test result and a false sense of security. In view of this, the government decided to continue and carry out the announced second round of the mass testing. This is to cover the percentage of people who were tested negative in the first round of testing, but who may have been already infected - and therefore the symptoms did not appear until later. During the testing, there were also cases of speculators who went to test twice at two different sampling points. However, they revealed a worrying fact - some received two different results.

Problem N2 – Questionable procurement?

The state has signed a contract with Eurolab Lambda to purchase 10 million tests for 43 million euros. However, the opposition party SPOLU found out, that the company has the debt to the state on social insurance. The party therefore called on the Prime Minister to dispel any doubts about the purchase of tests. The head of state material reserves finally denied this information, but did not explain it in more details.

Problem N3 – Information chaos and lack of medical staff

Mass testing was an event that required the cooperation of local municipalities. The whole operation can be compared in terms of difficulty to elections, which, however, tend to be prepared for almost a year. Municipalities had about two weeks to prepare for testing. The biggest problem was setting up medical teams. The government also tried to motivate doctors with a financial reward. Finally, in the first round, more than 90% of the declared testing points were opened. For the most part, however, thanks to local municipalities.

Problem N4 – Polarization of the society

The most serious consequence of national testing is the polarization of the society. So-called certificates divide people into positive and negative, literally good and bad. People who, for whatever reason, did not want or could not take part in the tests must respect the government's curfew. Many of them did not pass the test due to concerns about their health and possible infection. Overall, however, the tests have brought even greater uncertainty to the society as a result of ever-changing regulations and measures. In addition, the possibility of regular testing to a lesser extent is constantly mentioned, as well as the possibility of continuing a partial or introducing a full lockdown. Concerns in the society also arise from the conflicting opinions of several experts - namely the Slovak Medical Chamber as well as other experts and government representatives - the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Defense, who were the main drivers of mass testing. People are not only afraid of the disease, but are tired of the restrictions limiting freedom and social life that have lasted since the spring with a short summer break.

There are two opposing phenomena in the society - solidarity on the one hand and anger on the other. Testing was surprisingly positive in terms of participation. 3.6 million people participated in the first round and about 2 million in the second round (only districts where the

percentage of positivity was more than 0.7 were tested). However, sociologists point out that high participation may not be the result of a positive societal attitude to testing, but a manifestation of fear of sanctions, which may result in fines for violating the curfew. Employees without a test cannot even enter the workplace. These actions were also examined by lawyers who verified compliance with the constitution. As a state of emergency is currently in place in Slovakia, such measures to protect the health and life of the population are permissible. However, what remains questionable is the identification of a test certificate, which can be considered as an interference with the patient's medical records, which is unacceptable.

The personal protest

A relatively serious act, which expresses a civic and especially medical protest against testing, is the return of the state honor Pribina Cross of the 2nd degree of the head of the National Institute of Pediatric Diseases. In her open letter, the head of the institute points out that what the government calls a successful operation is, according to her, a two-day theater, which resulted in the already mentioned polarization of the society. She emphasizes the validity of antigen tests in the first screening of suspected patients, for example during hospitalization, so as not to endanger the health of other patients and doctors and healthcare professionals. However, according to her, the results of these tests must be confronted with the PCR method, which is the only one that can be considered reliable. She also considers it an insult to offer the financial reward to doctors - since most of them perform their work honestly and often without financial reward, out of an inner conviction to maintain professional honor, because it is their job.

All for one or good against evil

What comes after testing and what is the state of Slovak society? According to several experts, the pandemic paradoxically revealed all the accumulated problems in the society. Undersized health care, insufficient infrastructure in schools, weak relationship to culture. Were we used to living magnificently? Slovakia has prospered significantly in recent years, and the current crisis has brought some entrepreneurs to a standstill. In the society it creates pressure caused by anger, fear, helplessness, loss of financial security. Politicians' quarrels exacerbate these negative pressures by failing to create a safe haven on which citizens can rely. People are looking for solace on social networks, in discussions where two camps have been set up -

supporters of measures calling for civic responsibility in the fight against the pandemic and critical opponents prone to believing in conspiracy theories. Unfortunately, we must state that Slovakia is one of the countries in the EU where most people trust conspiracies and unverified information. These disinformers (especially the web platforms) must also be combated by the Ministry of Health, which seeks to alert citizens to information that may even be dangerous.

This, of course, unnecessarily burdens the authorities and makes it very difficult to enforce unpopular measures, which, however, are to some extent necessary if we do not want our health system to collapse. This is also the main reason for testing - not only to reduce the spread of the disease, but above all not to cripple the routine care of patients with all other diagnoses. It is important to be able to see a doctor regularly and get the care you need. The current situation requires a degree of societal participation and acceptance of the rules that need to be met. However, it is important that this acceptance comes naturally on the basis of correct information and explanation, not on condition of threat. At present, according to sociologists, Slovak society is on a dangerous border – it could be disrupted (in the form of civil protests, riots, distrust of the government) or it could be revived. The question thus remains whether the spirit of belonging and collective responsibility will prevail in Slovak society or whether the struggle between good and evil will continue, simply put.