

March 15, 2020

Lithuania's response to COVID-19: A case for pre-emptive action

Lithuania announced a nation-wide quarantine from March 16 to March 30. During this time period, foreign citizens, except those having a residence or work permit, will be barred from entering the country for the subsequent 15 days. These terms may be reassessed during or after the announced quarantine period. So far, nine cases of COVID-19 have been identified; all of them are people having returned from abroad.

Terms of the quarantine:

- foreign citizens are to be barred from entering the country from March 16 00:00 (exempt from the ruling are those that have a valid residence permit, truck drivers, diplomats, NATO enlisted and support personnel as well as their family members);
- transit of people returning to their country via Lithuanian territory is possible until March 19, 00:00;
- Lithuanian citizens are barred from exiting the country, except citizens returning to their country of residence or work;
- all mass events are banned;
- movement of goods is unrestricted;
- inter-city buses are instructed to limit the number of passengers;
- all public institutions will provide services only remotely;
- all cafes, bars and restaurants to provide takeaway services only;
- all non-essential goods retail stores to provide shipping services only;

List of pre-emptive measures that were implemented before the quarantine:

- vast majority of indoor and outdoor events are banned (only outdoor events with less than 100 attendants are allowed, if they comply to strict hygiene norms);

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- businesses, where large numbers of people congregate (cultural, leisure, entertainment and sports facilities), are suspended, bars and restaurants are allowed to operate until 10 PM;
- day care centers for children, the disabled and the elderly are suspended;
- all educational activities are suspended, studies are to be continued remotely;
- all travellers coming back from abroad will be registered;
- all travellers coming back from abroad through the airports will be registered and checked for the symptoms;
- travellers coming back from COVID-19 hotspots will be subjected to a mandatory self-quarantine regime for 14 days;
- travel to high-risk countries (Italy, France, Germany, Spain, China, Hongkong, Iran, South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Austria, Denmark, Egypt, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland) is forbidden from March 14;
- Lithuanian border control will be renewed on March 16. Border checks will be carried out by officials;
- foreign citizens will be prohibited from entering the country, except for those who have permits to live and work in Lithuania.

A set of **pre-emptive measures** implemented by the Lithuanian Government since mid-February helped the Baltic nation to minimize panic and mitigate the risks of contagion:

- **Keeping all publics informed.** The Government established a uniform communication channel on January 27. All key publics (medical professionals, journalists, citizens) have a reliable source of information updated once per day.
- **State of Emergency drill initiated pre-emptively.** Declaring a State of Emergency before the first case was even reported allowed the Government to:
 - set up a state-level operations centre under the leadership of the Minister of Health;
 - gain access to the federal reserve;
 - simplify public procurement procedures;

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- streamline the production of disinfectant materials (production started by private contractors on March 6, a total of 80,000 litres have already been produced);
 - manage preventive measures at points of entry;
 - declare influenza epidemic status on the municipal level to facilitate;
 - help at-risk citizens to self-quarantine;
 - limit mass events.
- Following the decision by the State Emergency Operations Committee, **all municipalities in Lithuania have declared an influenza epidemic to prevent the spread of viruses.** Doctors are able to issue sick leave certificates to patients remotely. If necessary, it will be easier for municipalities to restrict the work of educational institutions and apply other measures to prevent infection.
 - **Making it easier for at-risk citizens to stay at home.** The State of Emergency also simplified the conditions under which paid sick leave is provided for those who recently returned from COVID-19 affected regions. Employers and higher education facilities have been instructed to allow working from home when possible. Travellers in high risk zones received targeted SMS messages with clear instructions on what to do upon return.
 - **Volunteers at checkpoints replaced with military professionals.** A large number of civilian and paramilitary volunteers took part in monitoring arrivals at Vilnius International Airport. To increase the safety of these procedures, members of the Domestic Support Forces of the Lithuanian military were instructed to help monitor all three international airports and the only maritime port Lithuania has.
All persons arriving at airports from high-risk regions and their luggage are processed separately. Body temperature is measured, hands are disinfected, and all information related to COVID-19 and its prevention is provided. Passengers fill-in questionnaires before landing, providing their contact information as well as the details of their stay abroad. These and other pre-emptive measures helped to start successfully monitoring over 5000 citizens.

Containment strategy at work – as of the morning of March 15, nine cases have been reported. The first Lithuanian citizen was diagnosed with COVID-19 on February 28 after Lithuania Travel

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returning from Verona, Italy on February 24. The citizen, a woman in her 30s, followed the official guidelines of self-quarantining and informing medical personnel by phone. Three immediate family members were taken under supervision as soon as the COVID-19 test came back positive. No further cases linked to this patient zero have been confirmed.

Two other cases – a married couple from Kaunas – were announced on March 11. Both of them came back from Northern Italy, self-quarantined upon return and called the hospital after exhibiting a fever. The latest 3 cases were confirmed on March 13 in Vilnius, Klaipėda and Kaunas. All three patients were infected while visiting abroad. The patient currently being treated in Vilnius is of Spanish nationality, the other two individuals are Lithuanian citizens.

Three cases were reported on March 14. The first case was confirmed on the morning of March 14 – a 21-year-old male from Kretinga was infected while visiting Denmark. The patient is currently hospitalized in Klaipėda. Another male was hospitalized in Vilnius; he had travelled from Italy. The third case was identified in the evening – a male from Panevėžys who came back from a work trip in the Netherlands.

As of March 14, 520 samples in Lithuania were tested. 9176 individuals are currently under watch after returning from high-risk territories or being in contact with potential carriers.