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Finland

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1. What measures have been taken by the government to control the pandemic, and how effective have these measures been so far?

Finland has been far from untouched by the COVID-19 crisis, but by many measures, it has succeeded relatively well. Finland had its first confirmed coronavirus case on 29th January 2020 – a Chinese tourist visiting Lapland (YLE, 2020). The first confirmed case of a Finnish citizen happened about a month later, on 26th February 2020 (YLE News, 2020). Within a week of the WHO declaring COVID-19 a pandemic, Finland declared the state of emergency on 16th March 2020 (Valtioneuvosto, 2020). The Finnish government and the respective authorities introduced decisions and recommendations following the Emergency Powers Act, the Communicable Diseases Act, and other legislation. As the number of infections increased around the world, the Finnish government relatively quickly and comprehensively introduced curbs to public life. The measures were introduced about two weeks earlier than other Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Norway, not to mention Sweden.

Kindergartens, schools, and universities were closed, and contact teaching was suspended. To the extent possible, education was organized in alternative ways, including distance learning, the usage of various digital learning environments, and, where necessary, self-learning. Daycare arrangements were made for children of health care workers.

Museums, theatres, libraries and other cultural venues, but also hobby and leisure centers such as swimming halls and other sports facilities were closed. Visits to housing services for

the elderly and other risk groups were prohibited. Wherever possible, public and private-sector employees were advised to work from home. Following the relatively rapid spread of the virus in the capital region Uusimaa, a three-week roadblock, preventing travel to and from the capital region, was introduced in March/April 2020.

The decision to implement harsh measures very early on was a contributing factor to Finland's success in containing the virus, especially when compared to EU average infection and death statistics (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021). Due to its history, Finland has a long tradition of national preparedness, which supported the handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

At the beginning of July 2021, "Der Spiegel" published an article in which it analyzed Corona data of 154 countries (Spiegel Ausland, 2021). The index is based on four criteria: excess mortality, restrictions on people's lives and liberty, GDP performance, and vaccination coverage. According to the news magazine, Finland has shown the best results in handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. What changes can be observed in pandemic control over time?

At the end of August 2020, an app for tracing the coronavirus was released. While Finnish health authorities anticipated that it would take one month to reach one million users, the number was reached within 24 hours (YLE News, 2020).

At the beginning of May 2020, the Finnish government introduced a plan for a hybrid strategy to handle the COVID-19 crisis. After a relatively quiet summer 2020 with low infection rates, the hybrid strategy was adopted in autumn 2020 to prevent the spread of the virus in society, safeguard the capacity of the healthcare system, and protect people, especially those in risk groups (Valtioneuvosto, 2020). The effectiveness of Finland's hybrid strategy in combating the coronavirus pandemic is constantly monitored using epidemiological, medical, and functional indicators. The hybrid strategy classifies the COVID-19 pandemic into three tiers.

In tier one, the stable level, the epidemic is at a stable level, and the incidence is low. Local and regional transmission chains occur only occasionally. Transmission chains are manageable, and the people exposed can be traced without delay. New cases are either random isolated cases or most of them are detected among people in quarantine.

In tier two, the acceleration level, the epidemic is accelerating, and the regional incidence is higher than at the stable level. This may mean that the percentage of positive tested people is above one and that large-scale exposures occur. Contact tracing manages to identify a significant proportion of the sources of infection. There are many local and regional transmission chains.

In tier three, the community transmission level, the epidemic continues to accelerate. This may mean that the percentage of positive tested people is above two and that the need for inpatient and intensive care is projected to increase. Cases are spreading at the regional level or more widely through the population. Contact tracing is becoming more difficult.

The action plan supports the measures taken in the regions to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Primarily, the containment of the pandemic under the Communicable Diseases Act takes place through local and regional measures (Liisa-Maria Voipio-Pulkki, 2021).

3. What political and societal narratives exist around the pandemic and pandemic control?

Several factors are contributing positively to Finland's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to Finland's high digitalization standards, the transition to working from home and homeschooling has been much smoother in comparison to many other countries.

Finland's geographical location at the outskirts of the EU, together with the initial closing of borders meant that the spread of the virus could be controlled mostly within the country's borders. Finnish national character, often described as reserved and withdrawn, has played in favour of following COVID-19 restrictions. Finns' appreciation for personal space meant that keeping a safe distance has already been in practice way before COVID-19

made it a necessity. Many Finns own a summer house in the countryside. Following the recommendation for remote work, many people took the liberty of shifting their workplaces to their holiday homes. Not surprisingly, this created an increase in demand for summer cottages (YLE, 2020).

As traveling abroad was strongly discouraged, domestic traveling during the holiday seasons considerably increased. Many of the skiing centers in Finland counted record numbers of visitors. While sales of hotel rooms remained low due to the lack of business travelers, demand for detached holiday cottages increased considerably. Especially the holiday centers in Lapland who feared the absence of international travelers noticed a significant increase of domestic customers.

A survey conducted by the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat during the state of emergency found that a vast majority of the Finnish population considered the imposed restrictions as justified (Helsingin Sanomat, 2020). Although this number decreased during the pandemic, Finns continued to represent a considerably high level of compliance.

4. What has the government done to mitigate the socioeconomic consequences of the measures taken?

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses and society in Finland is substantial. The Finnish government launched several programs that ensure continuous operations of businesses. Direct aids such as business cost support, closure compensation, and event guarantees aim to help companies that face difficult economic situations caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

The fourth round of business cost support was made available for companies whose turnover decreased by more than 30% between 1 March and 31 March 2021 compared with the corresponding period in 2019 (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö, 2021).

Companies that were ordered to close their premises due to an act or official order to stop the spread of the coronavirus are eligible for compensation. The compensation would be paid for 100% of payroll costs and 70% of oth-

er costs, such as rent (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2021).

Event guarantees applied from the Finnish state treasury aim to decrease the financial risk of arranging events. The guarantee is an advance payment commitment given to event planners for the expenses the organizers announced. Should a happening be canceled, or its size restricted by law or order of authority, compensation will be paid for the costs incurred (Valtiokonttori, 2021).

5. How does the population assess the government's crisis management and crisis communication?

From the beginning of the crisis, the Finnish government determined strategic communication as one of the key variables in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with cabinet members, the Finnish prime minister kept weekly press conferences including briefings about the pandemic and addressing open questions by the public. One conference was devoted to queries from children (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for Communications, 2020). In Finland, trust in the government is relatively high. Public trust is a cornerstone of the Finnish administrative and political model, it has also been a key element of Finland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In comparison to other countries, there has been rather little opposition against the measures and restrictions.

An international comparative study covering 11 European countries found that Finns were most committed to complying with restrictions imposed by the Finnish government (Georgieva, et al., 2021).

6. What can other countries learn from the country under consideration in terms of crisis management and crisis communication (and what not)?

Finn's trust in their authorities, the stable Finnish democracy, a well-functioning healthcare system plus advanced digital capabilities help Finland to adapt to the quickly changing COVID-19 crisis. The measures ordered by the government were met with little protest from the population. At the beginning

of the pandemic, specific helplines for COVID-19 related questions were set up, taking off pressure from the normal phone line to the health care centers. Purposeful communication has been one of Finland's cornerstones for handling the pandemic. The authorities emphasized the importance of nuances and proportionality in communicating through the crisis.

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