

ZURICH'S COVID-19 RESPONSE: A NATIONAL RESPONSE ORCHESTRATED BY A FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Zurich's response to COVID-19 has been national. For the first time since World War II, the Federal Council (the executive branch of the federal government) has invoked emergency powers. A soft lockdown based on trust in people's behaviour and a broad economic support package have helped the healthcare system as well as the employment market to avoid complete collapse.



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Zurich's COVID-19 response is first and foremost a national response. As a consequence of the SARS and H1N1 outbreaks, the Swiss government revised the Epidemics Act originally introduced in 1970. The new law, in force since January 2016, allows the Federal Council to take control and coordinate measures without parliamentary or cantonal approval in order to manage infectious diseases. The work-sharing between the federal government and the cantons is defined by a three-step approach based around what are categorised as "normal", "particular" and "extraordinary" situations. In "normal" situations the cantons are in charge of prevention and supervision. In "particular" situations the federal government makes decisions in coordination with the cantons. And finally, in "extraordinary" situations the federal government takes complete control and the cantons and communities only follow orders. For a country like Switzerland, where any federal authority is based on the cantons' approval, an "extraordinary" situation is truly extraordinary.

On February 28th, three days after the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Switzerland, the national government for the first time implemented the new Epidemics Act and declared the circumstances to be "particular". It banned events

involving more than 1,000 people and, shortly after, those with more than 100 people. On March 16th the government changed its assessment of the situation to “extraordinary”. This entailed the mobilisation of the military and the alignment of containment measures across all cantons (which meant that some cantons that had ordered the closure of hotels had to reverse this measure as it was not part of the national package). Interestingly, there was no opposition to this centralised approach, at least at the beginning. Cantons and communities seemed to be pleased for the federal government to take control. Nevertheless, the canton of Ticino, one of the most affected regions, demanded and was granted an exception to implement more restrictive measures. The incident demonstrated that the federal government is willing to accommodate specific regional needs and interests in its decision-making.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS WILLING TO ACCOMMODATE SPECIFIC REGIONAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS IN ITS DECISION-MAKING.

A “soft” lockdown with a (mostly) obedient civil society

Switzerland’s centrally administered lockdown is relatively soft compared with the measures taken by its bordering countries France and Italy. People are still allowed to leave their homes and move around as long as they are in groups of less than five. Most parks and playgrounds remain open and people are encouraged to go for walks. In Zurich, the lockdown involved the closures of some parks in which people tend to aggregate in larger numbers. To ensure the new rules are complied with, the police have visibly changed their priorities: while a lot more graffiti is appearing around the city, the police are first and foremost concerned with making sure that people in public spaces keep two metres apart.

According to police reports, Zurich’s population has mostly followed the new rules. Research by the ETH (the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) and the canton of Zurich shows that people’s travel distances have drastically reduced (Statistisches Amt des Kantons Zürich and ETH Bereich Covid-19 TF, 2020). The government has attributed the relatively disciplined behaviour of the population to the success of its national information campaign. Surveys show that 98% of the population are aware of the behavioural guidelines (Bundesamt für Gesundheit, 2020).

Despite regional differences (the cantons closest to Italy were hardest-hit), Switzerland has managed this first wave of the pandemic relatively well: no hospital has reached capacity in terms of its intensive care beds and the number of new cases confirmed by tests is decreasing.

A broad economic support package with some help from civil society

With the announcement of the lockdown, the federal government also presented a support package for the economy of over CHF40 billion (€38 billion). The package has four main pillars:

- To maintain business liquidity, banks are providing government-backed credits of up to CHF500,000 at 0% interest, or credits of between CHF500,000 and CHF20 million at 0.5% interest. Businesses can apply via a short seven-step online form.
- To prevent unemployment, employers can apply to the *Kurzarbeit* (or job-saving) programme to subsidise their employees' salaries while activity is reduced or put on hold. This is a pre-existing programme in Switzerland for preventing layoffs when businesses face temporary and unavoidable hardship. For businesses affected by COVID-19, the programme was extended to include temporary and hourly workers as well as apprentices. At the time of writing, one-third of the workforce in the canton of Zurich is benefitting from this programme. Unemployment has nevertheless grown from 0.5% to 2.8% between mid-March and mid-April. Without the *Kurzarbeit* work programme, it is estimated that unemployment would be around 30% in the canton of Zurich.
- Self-employed workers who have to close their business and artists who can no longer perform receive 80% of their daily income up to a maximum of CHF196 (€186) per day. This programme, which is essentially like a guaranteed basic income for those directly or indirectly affected by the lockdown, is also available to people who have to take unpaid leave or cannot work because they have to take care of their children or are under quarantine. Interestingly, two weeks after the programme was introduced, demands for benefits for childcare were still relatively low. According to the Federal Association of Unionised Employees (Schweizerischer Gewerkschaftsbund), this is partly because firms are providing their employees with extra paid time-off and partly because the programme is little known (Blumer, 2020).
- Finally, the government is supporting cultural institutions (e.g. museums, concert halls, etc.) with CHF280 million and is providing CHF100 million in subsidies and credits for sport organisations.

In addition to the national government's economic support package, the City of Zurich has offered rent reductions to businesses leasing city-owned real estate, and financial support to private daycare centres that have lost

clients (although daycare centres have been allowed to remain open, the social pressure on parents with non-essential jobs to keep their toddlers at home has been high). The municipal government has also created a website that features different support services, from community-organised help with home schooling to professional hotlines for people suffering from anxiety or loneliness.

Maybe due to the government's efficient and broad response, civil society initiatives have been slow to emerge and have taken a secondary role in Zürich and Switzerland more broadly. However, for those falling through the cracks of the government's economic measures, or those who need

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short-term relief until they receive government support, they are important. A call by Swiss Solidarity, a non-profit organisation, for financial support to help those most in need raised CHF10 million in one day. Other civil society efforts, organised by spontaneous neighbourhood initiatives or professional organisations, include online platforms to connect local retailers with their consumers, hackathons and "giving fences", on which people can hang health-

care products and other donations for those in need. One of the more interesting private-sector initiatives this author came across was launched by Migros – one of Switzerland's two major supermarket chains – in collaboration with Pro Senectute, the national organisation of retired people. An employee at Migros's IT services developed a peer-to-peer app that matches high-risk individuals with "helpers" for grocery shopping. With 20 orders per day and 81% of those made by people aged 66 or older, it has fast become the most popular online shop for the elderly.

The path towards a new normality

On April 16th the federal government announced its partial plan for returning to normality: from April 27th certain businesses (like hairdressers and private medical clinics) can reopen, and from May 11th kids of mandatory school age will go back to school and shops, bars, restaurants, and museums can reopen. To resume business, the different industry sectors had to present the protective, social distancing and contact tracing measures they would put in place (e.g. to have a cup of coffee in a coffeeshop customers need to provide their name and phone number). This approach once again reflects how the Swiss government is hesitant to govern from the top down and instead looks towards those affected to contribute to a compromise that will hopefully keep both the healthcare system and econ-

omy from collapsing. While the announcement of the lockdown seemed to attract little opposition, calls for a more democratic process to negotiate the reopening of the country are now increasing.

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