



Budapest Restart

Proposals for the responsible reopening of the capital city

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Big cities, such as Budapest in Hungary, tend to be exposed the most to the effects of the COVID-19 infection all over the world. In other countries, the causes underlying this fact are not subject to political debates: this is where the number of the population, as well as that of social contacts, are the highest, the capital city is linked most closely into the global circulation, it is the country's primary touristic destination and this is where we find the largest number of hospitals, elderly care homes and homeless people. It is therefore reasonable to pay special attention and apply particular rules to big cities such as Budapest as part of our efforts to defend against the spread of the disease.

By the power of the much-disputed Authorization Act, the government of Hungary monopolized not only the right of action, but, by appropriating information, also the chance to make informed decisions. In today's Hungary, no mayor of any settlement knows more about the background of the defence than any Hungarian citizen trying to be up-to-date about the news. This situation seemed to change when me as the Mayor of Budapest and the president of the Association of Hungarian Towns with County Status were promised at a cabinet meeting that the government would initiate consultation with the associations of municipalities within a month. However, although this one-month period has already expired, not even the date of such consultation has been scheduled.

At the same time, the Prime Minister announced that the first phase of defence had been concluded. This means that now we have the opportunity to draw the conclusions and plan the next phase of defence better, in a more efficient, predictable and transparent manner, in reliance on a partnership.

As proven by objective data, the cooperation shown by people living in Budapest was exemplary. The number of social contacts decreased most significantly in the capital city, as revealed by both Google statistics and the data obtained from the cell information of mobile phones, also presented to the government. According to the reports of BKK Centre for Budapest Transport, 95% of the passengers adhered to the rules concerning the wearing of face masks as early as in the first week. Feedbacks received from the retail sector also indicate that the great majority were abiding by the regulations requiring the covering of the face in the capital city. Road transport, on the other hand seems to be increasing and has reached ca. 65-70% of its volume before the epidemic, and such growth was prompted significantly by the introduction of free parking. At the same time, the number of people travelling by bike also started to increase dynamically in the city.

Having displayed respectable discipline in complying with the often inconvenient, but necessary measures and rules, the people living in Budapest can rightly demand that decision-makers should clearly tell them what can be expected and when and share with them information underlying the decisions influencing their lives. As the restrictions in effect at the moment are based on government decrees, it is the government's responsibility and obligation to amend such decrees, embed the amendments in strategies and communicate them in a clear manner, but the Municipality of Budapest is ready to provide the government all assistance, cooperation and support to this end.

The exemplary behaviour of the people living in Budapest offers lessons to draw for the government and the municipalities alike. In the spirit of cooperation, we will need to find appropriate means for the second phase of defence which can be sustained in the long run as well and enable us to live our lives as similarly to the usual as possible. The realistic schedule of

reopening should make the process more controllable and plannable for everybody, so that the negative impacts of the burdens arising from the epidemic may be minimized.

The fact that we have started thinking about the Budapest Restart program and its communication may not create the illusion that the epidemic is over, because the road still ahead of us will probably be quite long. The gradual and cautious reopening of the city must be planned in a manner that we can respond to any repeated outbreak or seasonal recurrence of the epidemic.

Former everyday routines may be restored step by step, provided that the following conditions are fulfilled:

- a) the number of new cases stabilizes at a low level,
- b) there is continuous and mass testing, the test results are disclosed to the public and substantiate the possibility of reopening,
- c) the necessary reserve capacities have been created in the healthcare system and nobody can be denied any care in lack of which he/she may suffer permanent health deterioration,
- d) we continue abiding the well-known safety measures in a disciplined manner (hygienic measures, the wearing of equipment to cover the mouth and the nose, social distancing rules).

If the foregoing conditions are fulfilled in the opinion of the government, the restrictive measures in effect could be eased and shops and catering units could be reopened to operate according to special rules. The organising of community, cultural and sports events should be gradually permitted again, depending on the possible extent of keeping a physical distance and the intensity of contacts between participants, based on detailed regulations to be created and enforced.

After the reopening, we will need to continuously monitor and analyse the number of new confirmed COVID-19 cases, if any, and also how the easing of the restrictions affects the spread of the disease. In light of the foregoing, the programme of the second phase of defence should be based on the following three principles:

- ❖ The safeguarding of human life and health must be in the focus of all measures.
- ❖ The protection of human health and the gradual restarting of social life are interdependent.
- ❖ The measures to be taken must be characterised by sustainability and flexibility.

The strategy for the reopening of Budapest may be based on the 7+1 steps presented below. Some of them belong to the powers of the government of Hungary and some are delegated to the government of the capital city, but each of them requires a reformulated relation between the government and the municipalities in the second phase of defence against the coronavirus.

1. Involving the municipalities and providing clear and unambiguous information

As revealed by all surveys, the level acceptance of political measures taken with regard to the coronavirus epidemic has remained high. We should expect, however, that the longer these measures are in force, the more vulnerable their current rate of support will become.

Both municipalities and citizens have the right to know the data and analyses based on which the government makes its decisions to ease or sustain the restrictive measures, as the case may be. It can be said in general that people are most likely to follow norms, if they are clear, unambiguous and understandable. For this reason, it is particularly important to formulate and explain political measures taken in connection with the coronavirus epidemic in a clear and unambiguous manner, with an appeal to both personal interest and the responsibility for others.

This requires on the one hand that the government and the Operational Group should change the protocol they have followed so far to provide information and supply data substantially and, on the other hand, that the consultation between the government and the associations of the municipalities should start as soon as possible, according to the former promise. The successful management of either the epidemic, or the socio-economic crisis cannot be imagined without the involvement of the municipalities and such endeavours would be completely futile, if made expressly against them.

2. Publishing the results of mass testing

The government of the capital city has been demanding for a long time that the testing of the groups facing the highest level of risk, including all elderly care homes in the country, hospital and healthcare workers, people working in the social care sector and the homeless should be started.

As far as we know at the moment, the disease spreads primarily within and from hospitals in Budapest, but this well may be the case in the country as a whole as well. The data collected until now have shown that only a low proportion of the population have contracted the disease. This may be explained with the restrictive measures, but first and foremost with the fact that the people living in Budapest have complied with these measures in an exemplarily disciplined manner. Therefore, they simply deserve access to the information which the government has withheld until now not only from the public, but the government of the capital city as well. However, it is also indispensable for the planning of the Budapest Restart strategy itself that the government provide the Municipality of Budapest with the following data:

- ❖ the number of official, government-approved PCR tests done in Budapest, subdivided according to the circumstances calling for testing (respiratory symptoms, contacts, other),
- ❖ the number of official, government-approved PCR tests which were done in Budapest and had a positive result, subdivided to age groups, and the indication of the numbers of positive cases classified as “community acquired” and “nosocomial” infections,
- ❖ the analyses prepared by the Coronavirus Research Action Group of the government on the potential recurrence of the epidemic.

The disclosure of these data would mean an important contribution to planning the cautious reopening of the city. Previous data collections have tended to be symptom-oriented and may therefore distort our view of the infection process. That’s why we need to improve the mapping of the level of infection and immunity of the population significantly, through a representative and regional survey of infection and immunity, which has already started with the cooperation of several universities. The data obtained from the representative surveys should be then fed into dynamic models which can deliver more reliable short-term prognoses, and these could be used to support decisions and also to evaluate the efficiency of political measures.

3. New rules for the healthcare and social care system

The availability of the necessary hospital capacities constitutes an important prerequisite for the partial lifting of restrictions everywhere. To this end, the Hungarian government decided to free a substantial portion of hospital beds, transferring the burden of caring for thousands of hospitalized patients to the families and the social care system of municipalities. As part of the review of this much-disputed decision, the testing of the patients sent home and of the families and social workers caring for them must be ordered.

The professional debate as to the evaluation of the “Swedish model” as a whole has not yet been concluded, nevertheless, it would be worth for the government to consider the introduction of a measure constituting part of this model in Hungary. The Swedish public health institute declared that their most important tool to control the epidemic had been to call upon everybody feeling sick or weaker than usual to stay at home/go home and isolate themselves for two more days after they feel completely healthy again. The Swedish government supported this measure by allowing employees to stay at home on sick leave/sick pay without the need to present a medical certificate (also when staying home with a sick child) and the state assumed to pay the wage of the employee for this three weeks’ period. The introduction of a measure like or similar to this could contribute significantly to maintaining the low level of community-acquired infections, protect health-care workers against the spread of the disease and prevent the overburdening of health-care capacities in Hungary as well. Moreover, it has also proven to reduce the impacts of other seasonal infections considerably in Sweden.

According to our current knowledge, the epidemic tends to take a much heavier toll in institutions, with special regard to hospitals and institutions closely related to hospitals, compared to the community. This is one of the facts calling for the examination of the ground on which the Government Office of Budapest made its resolution in March in which the testing of patients before moving from one hospital to another or taking them back from hospital to an elderly care home was qualified as an “unnecessary cost”. The persons responsible for this obviously faulty and unprofessional decision must be identified and it must be explored how this resolution contributed to the spread of the disease in hospitals and elderly care homes. The reason for establishing the liability has recently been accurately summarized by the previous deputy secretary in state for social affairs of the Orbán government: *“Patients in need of a high level of care were “commuting” between healthcare and social care institutions. This in itself constituted a huge risk of carrying the infection, especially before testing negative for coronavirus was determined as a prerequisite for being moved/returned to an elderly care home. Before (and, as some claim, even after) this measure was taken, hundreds of residents of elderly care homes had been dismissed from hospitals or taken back after having received a treatment, carrying the virus within the walls.”*

The revoking of this irresponsible resolution of the Government Office and ruling that no patient may be transported from a hospital to any other institution or his/her home unless having tested negative are crucial for preventing the spread of the infection.

Continuous testing and the strict prohibition of visits must be maintained in hospitals and elderly care homes regardless of the easing of other measures.

At the same time, the immediate review of the rules relevant to social care institutions and elderly care homes and their adjustment to the challenges presented by the epidemic should start. As part of such review, the conditions for an enhanced financial recognition of those working in the social sector should be created and the equipment necessary for quality care in the elderly care homes must be provided. Professional consultation on the matter should commence urgently between the three key parties operating elderly care homes: the government, the churches and the municipalities.

4. How to keep distance in a re-awakening city?

One of the important goals in the second phase of defence is to prevent that the easing of the restrictions contributes to a repeated spread of the disease. Accordingly, the measures in this second phase of defence may call for much more differentiation in terms of geographical location, age or other social aspect compared to the first phase.

Undesirable congestion tends to arise on public transport vehicles in Budapest in peak-times, i.e. periods before starting and after finishing work. Such overcrowding can be sufficiently reduced not even by the employment of the entire fleet of the public transport vehicles available, however, it could be facilitated by government measures.

For example, the government should investigate the possibility of introducing/ordering flexible working hours so that the use of the public transport by employees would not be concurrent but distributed in time. The reopening of schools should also be planned in a flexible manner, with the order and length of lessons regulated with regard to social distancing rules. We can find numerous examples in foreign countries as to teaching in small groups or in the open air or even the introduction of morning and afternoon shifts.

The granting of the right to work from home as a fundamental right to employees, according to the German example, could be an effective tool for the government to manage not only the epidemic itself, but also the economic crisis it is expected to bring about. Distant working proved to be practical in many cases during the restrictions introduced because of the epidemic, therefore it may be worth maintaining after the emergency situation as well. According to the proposal, employees should be entitled to work from home as long as the emergency situation exists, provided that they can perform their job-related duties from home and could apply for working in home office mode in the same way as they request holidays once the epidemic is over.

After the “closures”, Budapest has to prepare now for “openings”, which will not only mean the opening of the areas closed down to secure the necessary distancing, but we will also make available new areas to the people living in Budapest in addition to the well-known and popular meeting places to prevent overcrowding as much as possible. We will need to open new zones for pedestrians and cyclists on a temporary basis. This may be realized by the closing of the embankments to vehicle traffic at weekends, and the designation of zones subject to temporary traffic reduction initiated by districts VI in VII would also be worth extending to other points of the capital.

Compliance with social distancing rules could be supported by the development of various “smart” solutions, e.g. special applications. Initiatives related to “digital data donation” offer an innovative technology. Digital data donations should be embedded in participatory projects in which citizens can collectively do contribute to the containing the pandemic. As part of this process, they should be able to provide their data anonymously, in a safe and secure manner, so that they can serve as a basis for better prognoses and enable the forecasting of the data relevant to any overcrowding. For the controlling of these data in a responsible manner, the privacy of personal data must be adequately secured.

5. Safety in the catering business, operating service industry

The rules for the reopening of catering and retail units need to be adjusted to the requirements of keeping a safe distance. To realize this, it is important to ensure that guests can be served not (or not only) indoors, but wherever this is physically possible, terraces and outdoor areas could be opened. This is encouraged by the government’s decree to dispense with the payment of costs related to terrace permits.

However, businesses and catering units which are in a difficult situation but have not obtained a terrace permit may not be left out of the reopening of the city, either. The government of the capital city is therefore investigating in cooperation with the districts, based on the example seen in the capital of Lithuania, the possibilities of opening the public

spaces of the city to catering units by creating temporary rules, also with due regard to the rules of keeping a safe distance. Such a regulation would improve the sense of comfort of people living in Budapest and the capacity of the service industry to recover and maintain workplaces at the same time.

The government of the capital city will examine whether shorter road sections could be closed down temporarily for the summer enabling catering units located in the street to install tables outdoors, at the required distance from each other. Having spent months in isolation, people living in Budapest feel a natural desire to spend as much time outdoors as possible in the good weather and meet friends they may have not seen for months. The expansion of the space available for terraces would meet such natural social demand and boost the turnover of catering businesses, who have been probably hit the hardest by the crisis, simultaneously.

6. Rules to cover the face

After initial debates, by now it has been confirmed with international professional consensus that the wide-spread use of equipment suitable to cover the nose and the mouth and related regulations reduce the possibility of spreading the disease. The wearing of masks and the covering of the face may also contribute to the prevention of a repeated, rapid growth of infections in the phase of the gradual easing of the restrictions.

For this reason, the requirement to cover the face, which has applied to public transport and in retail units, should be further extended. Catering units should be allowed to reopen on the condition that the service staff wears a face mask, and it would also be worth requiring adults accompanying children to playgrounds, once they are reopened, to cover their face.

7. Reorganized transport

The Budapest Restart strategy needs to react to the change in transport habits due to coronavirus. The demand for alternative forms of transport has grown all over the world. Certain data based mainly on Chinese surveys suggest that an increased use of cars should also be calculated with, however, this is not viable for Budapest. The number of cars in the downtown area exceeded that of the parking places even before the epidemic and any substantial increase in the use of cars would entail an almost unmanageable burden on the environment. According to the findings of scientific studies, air pollution, which has several well-known adverse effects, would even aggravate the process of coronavirus infection.

Data collected in major European cities have revealed an increase in the demand for cycling, and this is now substantiated by figures from Budapest as well. The epidemic has transformed pedestrian traffic habits as well, with a growing number of people preferring retail units available at a walking distance instead of making longer trips to do their shopping.

The possibilities for bicycle and pedestrian traffic need to be enhanced in the city, in harmony with the traffic attenuation plans prepared for Budapest before the epidemic. The new cycle lanes all over the city have been created right for this purpose. Several capital cities have started to design the broadening of sidewalks, to make them suitable for keeping a safe distance. Social responses to the epidemic in this respect determine the trend for Budapest as well: we will need to establish new pedestrian zones. The decision on the matter should be made based on extended social consultation with the people living in Budapest, with regard to the experience concerning the temporary opening of the embankments.

As proven even by earlier scientific studies made before the coronavirus disease, people tend to express a substantial amount of distrust towards public transport at times of epidemics. This finding is verified by the data related to the rate of utilization of public transport in Budapest: the loss of ca. 1 billion HUF per week may render it impossible to finance the system.

The government's promise to provide HUF 3.2 billion to purchase buses for Budapest, which has been confirmed several times, may no longer be postponed with regard to the situation brought about by the crisis in public transport.

There is also an urgent need for the creation of a professional consultation platform with the participation of the settlements located in the suburbs of Budapest for the discussion of the possibilities as to the financing and reorganisation of public transport and laying transport organisation on regional bases.

+1 Budapest New Deal

The economic and social crisis accompanying the epidemic tends to afflict large cities with a devastating power. Budapest was hit by the present crisis in an extremely difficult situation: although this is where nearly 40% of the GDP is generated, a portion higher than in any other European city, namely 97% is siphoned off from the values created here. The capital city, including its districts, is expected to perform an ever-expanding scope of tasks while its revenues are diminishing continuously. The revenues derived from local business tax, which constitute 70% of the independent revenues of Budapest (including the revenues of the districts) may decrease by billions of forints in the year ahead.

Budapest must therefore be provided with means commensurate with its significance and the extent to which it is afflicted by the crisis. It will be impossible to promote the recovery of the economy and alleviate the economic and social crisis in Hungary by means of measures disregarding, or expressly disadvantageous to, Budapest. We will need to develop a new system of relations contemporaneously with the gradual and cautious reopening of Budapest in which we give due consideration to both the social responses evoked by the epidemic hazard and the crisis symptoms which had been demanding our attention before coronavirus as well, such as climate change or housing poverty. Political measures must be aimed at the principles of ecological and social sustainability on a national and international level alike.

The creation of the new Budapest policy, the so-called Budapest New Deal programme must start contemporaneously with the economic recovery programme intended to manage the crisis.