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The virus that paralysed Switzerland

We were all looking forward to spring. Then COVID-19 arrived. Switzerland's cities turned into ghost towns. Schools were closed. The streets fell quiet. Parks were declared off limits. This is the story of the first month of the outbreak.

RENAT KUENZI*

COVID-19 has taken hold in Switzerland. Sars-CoV-2 – the virus that causes it – is indiscriminate. Anyone can catch it. Suddenly, the people who make decisions on behalf of Switzerland's population of 8.5 million no longer have any reliable answers. From politicians to business leaders. The seven-member Federal Council is governing the country in crisis mode after having declared an 'extraordinary situation' allowing it to introduce measures that were last seen in the Second World War. It gives the government far-reaching powers.

When it comes to distilling and explaining these momentous decisions to the Swiss public, one man has been a constant presence for weeks: Daniel Koch, a Bernese doctor and head of the Communicable Diseases Division of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH). Apart from the virus, Koch and his team of staff have initially had two other adversaries to contend with. Firstly, some Swiss were slow to appreciate the gravity of the situation. Secondly, certain border cantons broke ranks to take much more drastic measures than those sanctioned by the Federal Council.

Familiar faces from the sporting, cultural, showbiz, political and economic spheres have taken a back step. In their place, 'Mr Coronavirus' Daniel Koch has been cutting to the chase on our television screens in his calm, considered manner – his sudden celebrity another indication of how our world has turned upside down since the beginning of the outbreak.

Coronavirus timeline

January 2020: Skiers Beat Feuz and Daniel Yule send the nation into raptures with their respective victories in the legendary Wengen downhill and the slalom at Adelboden. The flagship event for the Swiss film industry, the Solothurn Film Festival, takes place. US president Trump talks up the successes of the US economy so much at the WEF in Davos that some delegates leave the auditorium. There are reports of a viral outbreak in faraway China. Memes about Corona beer follow on social media.

24 February: COVID-19 is becoming a real worry in Italy. Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset consequently puts Switzerland in a 'state of readiness'.

25 February: The virus has reached Switzerland. A 70-year-old man tests positive in the canton of Ticino. This marks the beginning of a raft of official directives and measures to combat the virus. The number of coronavirus cases and deaths begins to rise inexorably. This has all the hallmarks of an epidemic.

26 February: Ticino takes matters into its own hands and bans all public events – carnival parades included. The canton's two premier ice hockey teams have to play their next two home fixtures behind closed doors.

27 February: Social distancing sets in. The Federal Office of Public Health launches the Protect yourself and others campaign, providing the public with continually updated information. Here are some of its recommendations: Wash your hands thoroughly. Sneeze into the crook of your arm. Stay at home if you display flu-like symptoms. Keep your distance. Always call ahead before going to the doctor's or the emergency department. Eventually, the overriding instruction will be 'Stay at home'.

On the same day, organisers of the Engadine Ski Marathon cancel this year's event scheduled to take place on 8 March. Almost 15,000 athletes were due to take part. The Swiss sporting world starts to shut down.

28 February: At its first major Friday press conference on the matter, the Federal Council categorises the situation in Switzerland as 'special' in terms of the Epidemics Act (EpidA). Events with more than 1,000 people are now banned. The EpidA allows the Federal Council to draw up emergency plans. The Confederation also unveils a bailout scheme for businesses, whereby companies can request compensation for reducing their employees' working hours.

Switzerland's professional football and ice hockey leagues are put on hold. Some of the most sacred events in the Swiss cultural calendar are either postponed or cancelled altogether. These include the annual carnival festivities in Basel, Berne, Lucerne and other cities, the Geneva International Motor Show, the Baselworld watch and jewellery show, and countless other events.

5 March: The first fatality. A 74-year-old woman in Lausanne dies of the COVID-19 respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Beginning of March: Not everyone has got the message. Young people in numerous towns and cities continue to

party, flouting government guidance. However, many other people have started doing their bit to help others – particularly for the elderly who are especially at risk. Kindnesses include grocery shopping, having a friendly chat, and picking up medicine.

11 March: With the virus spreading rapidly in northern Italy, Switzerland introduces border controls in Ticino. Around 70,000 cross-border workers are allowed to continue commuting into Ticino from Italy.

12 March: Ticino is the first canton to declare an ‘extraordinary situation’, shutting all its schools and both of its universities in the process. The federal government offers an emergency package worth ten billion Swiss francs to soften the blow for Swiss companies.

16 March: The Federal Council declares an ‘extraordinary situation’. All shops, restaurants, bars and entertainment and leisure facilities will remain closed throughout Switzerland until at least 19 April. This also applies to schools. Only health and other essential facilities such as food stores and pharmacies will remain open. The Federal Council also authorises the deployment of up to 8,000 members of the armed forces to assist with healthcare, logistics and security.

19 March: Uri oversteps the mark, imposing a curfew on the over-65s. The Alpine canton is forced to reverse this measure two days later following an intervention by the federal government.

20 March: The Federal Council makes use of its emergency powers and bans gatherings of more than five people. It urges the population to stay at home, stating that people should only go out if they need to buy food or if they have a doctor’s appointment. The advice applies especially to those over 65 years of age, who are particularly at risk. This ban on gatherings relies on individual responsibility and is in contrast to the tougher confinement measures seen in countries like Italy, France, Spain and Argentina.

The measure is intended, firstly, to prevent Swiss hospitals from being overwhelmed, and, secondly, to stop cantons introducing their own measures unilaterally. In addition, the Federal Council increases its emergency funding for the Swiss economy to 42 billion francs. SMEs with liquidity shortfalls can apply their banks for unbureaucratic access to a zero-interest bridging loan of up to 500,000 francs.

A number of cities shut their public parks. Police patrols ensure that the rules on gatherings and social distancing are being applied.

21 March: The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) launches a repatriation action for 630 Swiss nation-

als stranded in Latin America. A chartered plane flies the first batch of tourists back to Switzerland three days later. Meanwhile, Ticino goes it alone after its cantonal government decides to shut building sites and non-essential manufacturing activities. This measure amounts to a de facto shutting of the Swiss border to the many Italian cross-border commuters who work in the canton.

22 March: The director of the Federal Office of Justice (FOJ) and supreme federal authority on all legislative matters, Martin Dumermuth, calls Ticino to order, saying that all cantons must adhere to the federal government’s emergency measures. Exceptions are not possible. By breaking ranks, Ticino has set a dangerous precedent and must be overruled, he adds.

25 March: The FOPH announces that the number of recorded coronavirus cases in Switzerland stands at 10,000, with 150 deaths.

One month later

Switzerland’s national standstill continues. Life has changed for us all. People are in isolation. Around 80 per cent of those who work are doing so from home. All schools are shut. Parents (and children) are acquainting themselves with the joys of homeschooling. Switzerland’s flagship tourist industry is currently in hibernation. People in the restaurant and catering sector risk losing their jobs. Medical, nursing and care professionals, on the other hand, are working around the clock to their absolute limit. Farm crops are beginning to sprout, but the closure of international borders means no foreign fruit-and-vegetable pickers.

End of March: the federal government has received around 600,000 applications from over 40,000 businesses seeking compensation after reducing their employees’ working hours. Any trains or buses still running are practically empty. Public transport schedules have been completely scaled back. Reports are emerging of people who have died alone because their families were unable to visit.

* is a member of the swissinfo editorial team. swissinfo is providing in-depth coverage of the coronavirus epidemic in Switzerland. Visit www.swissinfo.ch/eng/in-depth/coronavirus.

For additional coronavirus-related news and information, see page 4.



Keep your distance.



Wash your hands thoroughly.



Don't shake hands.



Cough and sneeze into a paper tissue/handkerchief or the crook of your arm.



Stay at home from now on.



Always call ahead before going to the doctor's or the emergency department.

Hygiene rules and how to behave – pictographs from the current Federal Office of Public Health prevention campaign.