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COVID-19 – a Swiss perspective

Coronavirus in Switzerland – a story of discipline and of how much worse it could have been

Some 2,000* people in Switzerland have died of COVID-19 – an undeniably heavy price. Tens of thousands have lost their jobs and futures. Hundreds of thousands will feel the effects of the pandemic on society and the economy for years to come. Nevertheless, many Swiss think it could have been worse. Time to make sense of it all.

*) As of 1 July 2020 according to the analysis of the Statistics Office of the Canton of Zurich: 31,827 cases, 1,965 deceased

Always in the foreground (left): Alain Berset and Daniel Koch – the two prominent faces of Switzerland's coronavirus peak.

Always in the background (right): Intensive-care teams such as this one at the La Carità hospital in Locarno – the canton of Ticino was particularly hard hit.

Photos: Keystone



MARC LETTAU

Are things already back to normal? Many in Switzerland asked themselves this question at the beginning of June. Whereas places like Brazil were still very much in the throes of the pandemic, the Federal Council was swiftly lifting restrictions. Street cafes, river banks and lake shores were suddenly filled with life again. Shops reopened their doors. All accompanied by the unmistakable whiff of disinfectant.

Yet 'normal' this definitely is not. Everyday life is still riddled with the consequences of the pandemic. More than a third of all employees have been put on short-time working hours. Thousands have lost their jobs. Meanwhile, the spectre of a possible second wave hangs over us. The social and economic convulsions are likely to preoccupy us for years. It is too early to draw any final conclusions.

What we can do is speculate as to how Switzerland rode the epidemiological curve. Although the impact was hard and the pain and misfortune no less considerable, the general consensus is that the country dealt with the situation in an astonishingly effective and disciplined manner. Our disquiet at the surge in infections, not to mention at the sudden fragility of everything we take for granted, was no less pronounced than elsewhere. However, we came out of it relatively unscathed. This is because the vast majority of us followed the government guidelines and stayed at home. And because we learned to help others in myriad ways.

Ultimately, the fact that we responded in this way is a testimony to the Federal Council, who presented a united front at the beginning of the crisis, showed total faith in what the pandemic experts were saying, and remained con-

sistent and clear throughout. The government put the onus on individual responsibility, trusting us to stay at home and stay safe. There was no total lockdown or obligation to wear masks. Numerous press conferences remain ingrained in our collective consciousness: Health Minister Alain Berset implored us all to stay at home, and Switzerland's pandemic guru Dr Daniel Koch coolly and calmly told the nation about what he knew and – even more importantly – about what he did not know.

Switzerland also provides an example of how important it is to be very well equipped for a crisis in material terms. A strong safety net was put in place. Government aid for individuals, such as compensation for short-time working, has been far more extensive than in many other countries. Support for stricken businesses has also been much more emphatic compared to neighbouring European states, with the Swiss government fully guaranteeing the emergency loans to which SMEs had unbureaucratic access via their banks. International media watched in wide-eyed wonder. "German CEOs can only dream of such things," wrote the Munich-based news magazine "Focus".

Yet it would be wrong to wax lyrical. Switzerland was no better prepared for the pandemic than other industrial economies. The country had a hospital pandemic plan in place at federal level, but the cantons had failed to implement this plan for monetary reasons. Stocks of essential medical supplies were far from full – they were half-empty. Our self-discipline also became frayed at the edges. In May, patience began to wear thin. The Federal Council finally brought this restlessness to an end in June.