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FINLAND'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC

LONG-TERM PREPARATION AND SPECIFIC PLANS

To address Covid-19, Finland has activated its Emergency Powers Act for the first time ever. While the outcome remains uncertain, Finland's plan for how to protect its citizens and vital functions of society has withstood its initial confrontation with reality. The authorities are cooperating with private and third-sector actors to ensure that implementation is effective and to anticipate further steps.

Finland's political decision-makers had the luxury of seeing how Covid-19 was developing in other countries, allowing them to make this societally significant intervention at the optimal time for Finland. Finnish authorities have had time to prepare for the Covid-19 epidemic for some months now, and already have considerable powers in general, for example through the Communicable Diseases Act. However, during the past few weeks, it became increasingly clear that with increasing uncertainty and rapid escalation of the overall situation, additional powers would be needed by the authorities.

The reason for activating certain sections of the Emergency Powers Act is the protection of those most at risk from Covid-19, and the response is guided by the specific epidemic-pandemic plan dating from 2012, but with necessary updates as society has evolved. The plan builds on the Communicable Diseases Act, which already gave authorities the right to quarantine anyone and provide those affected with income compensation. Together with the Emergency Powers Act, they form the operational and legal foundation for actions to address the Covid-19 epidemic.

The fact that the Emergency Powers Act could be invoked to ad-

dress a pandemic was clear, as the purpose of the law is to protect the population and inter alia to secure the economy, the rule of law, and independence. The law also specifies that a dangerous infectious disease is a legitimate reason for declaring a state of emergency. The government, led by Prime Minister Sanna Marin, in cooperation with President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö, cited both the epidemic and the associated society-wide economic impacts as reasons for declaring a state of emergency.

The political and societal foundation for Finland's response to Covid-19 is conditioned by history and a nationally strong sense of

geostrategic separation. As a consequence, Finnish security thinking is comprehensive, and national preparedness is viewed as critical for societal resilience and survival. Hence, Finland has for decades engaged in extensive preparation (including planning, resourcing and exercises) to ensure societal security in the event of a range of potential natural and man-made disruptive events and emergencies, not just war.

This approach, which emerged as a ‘total defence’ concept during WWII, evolved throughout the Cold War and into the 1990s and 2000s with the result that by the early 2010s preparations were centred on a concept of ‘Comprehensive Societal Security’, and the securing of seven vital functions of society. Individual government authorities are required to conduct foresight-based planning and to have ready-made plans in place for a number of contingencies. This takes into account complex dependency relationships and attempts to harness the high level of basic societal trust typical of Finland as a Nordic country.

Engagement with the private and third sector (NGOs) is required throughout the process of updating and implementing these plans. In the Finnish model of comprehen-

sive security, extensive cooperation across society is seen as critical for the efficient use of resources and for an effective response. Private sector participation is largely driven by shared but also self-interest, as government policy is often focused on increasing the resilience of private actors and companies. There are only a handful of true ‘forcing mechanisms’. One example relevant to Covid-19 is that importers of certain medicines must hold larger stocks than they normally would. One of the reasons for immediately activating section 87 of the EPA was to ensure that all stocks of medicine and related equipment would remain in Finland for use by those actors designated by the authorities.

This approach to societal security is possible because the Finnish economic, political, security and other elites (including the media) have worked together for decades to create a culture of cooperation. National and regional defence courses lasting up to four weeks have ensured that individuals in senior positions across society understand their and their organisation’s role in a range of emergencies. The National Emergency Supply Agency guides and partially funds what can be called national continuity management and plan-

ning, with operational cooperation occurring through industry-specific pools. This ‘platform of trust’ enables companies that normally compete to develop and implement joint plans that benefit both their own continuity management and societal security in general.

The Finnish population is only just beginning to adjust to daily life under new circumstances, such as the at least one-month-long closure of schools and extensive self-quarantine recommendations (strong recommendation for those over 70 years of age). Yet the Security Committee, made up of some two dozen senior officials and experts from national authorities and the business community, has already met to discuss medium-term plans (of three months to one year), and how lessons learned will be collected and implemented in preparation for the recovery – and the next crisis.

Finland’s plan for how to protect its citizens and vital functions of society has withstood its initial confrontation with the Covid-19 reality. No plan or preparation can anticipate everything that the future holds, and ultimately resources are finite, but in Finland’s case, the general response system is firmly in place.