

## **ВЪЗДЕЙСТВИЕ НА ПАНДЕМИЯТА ОТ COVID-19 ВЪРХУ ТЪРГОВИЯТА НА ДРЕБНО В БЪЛГАРИЯ**

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**Резюме:** В настоящата разработка е направен преглед на реакцията в сферата на търговията на дребно в Република България и по света като следствие от обявяването на извънредно положение, свързано с разпространението на вирусната инфекция КОВИД-19. Разгледани са действията на търговските оператори по отношение на различните промени в поведението на потребителите и установяването на стандарти за работа, съобразени с предприеманите мерки на местните и националните органи за противоепидемиологичен контрол, препоръките на европейската комисия и световната здравна организация. Непредвидимото поведение на епидемиологичната ситуация в глобален план постави нови предизвикателства за овладяване на извънредната ситуация и за създаване на стандарти и протоколи за работа в условия на повишени изисквания за социална дистанция, хигиена и дезинфекция. Установените мерки поставиха търговията на дребно в първата линия на защита в разразилата се здравна криза.

**Ключови думи:** търговия, търговия на дребно, пандемия, КОВИД-19, предпазни мерки

**JEL:** L81, I18, H12

## **IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE RETAIL TRADE IN BULGARIA**

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the reaction of retail trade in the Republic of Bulgaria and around the world as a consequence of the declaration of a state of emergency related to the spread of COVID-19 virus infection. The actions of the trade operators regarding the various changes in the behavior of the consumers and the establishment of standards for work are systematized, in accordance with the measures for anti-epidemic control taken by the local and national bodies, the recommendations of the European Commission and the World Health Organization. The unpredictable development of the global epidemiological situation has brought new challenges to address the emergency situation and to create standards and protocols for working under conditions of increased requirements for social distance, hygiene and disinfection. The established measures put retailers in the first line of protection in the unprecedented health crisis of our time.

**Key words:** trade, retailing, pandemic, COVID-19, safety measures

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### **Introduction**

Representative agents of retail trade, along with other intermediaries in product distribution channels, have emerged as “essential businesses that must remain open, putting stores on the front lines of the crisis” (Dungca et al., 2020). In most cases they were largely engaged in the resulting consumer response to the pandemic conditions, through the massive extraordinary demand for certain goods, the stocking of households with certain products and the subsequent restrictive measures aimed directly at working in the retail trade and certain groups of economic agents. The crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic has unequivocally strengthened the importance and dependence of society on keeping the retail sector active, which “faces the greatest challenges in maintaining the highest standards of hygiene, protecting staff from the risk of infection, maintaining physical distancing when dealing with large numbers of customers, remaining open, and ensuring that adequate supplies of foods are available on a daily basis” (World Health Organization, 2020).

Restrictions on the use of international and regional transport have resulted in a disruption of part of the supply chains or their substantial delay. The establishment of a green lane border crossings regime and the set up of safe passage transit corridors as a timely response allowed some of the restrictions to be overcome in both national but mainly international freight transport and in particular in land transport in order to counter the emergence of serious product deficits and surpluses in certain regions and countries. This allows products to continue to be distributed regardless of established international, national, regional, municipal or smaller territories isolation measures by applying a regime in which “procedures at green lane border crossings should be minimised and streamlined to what is strictly necessary. Checks and screening should be carried out without drivers having to leave their vehicles, and drivers themselves should undergo only minimal checks. Drivers of freight vehicles should not be asked to produce any document other than their identification and driving license and if necessary a letter from the employer. The electronic submission/display of documents should be accepted. No freight vehicle or driver should face discrimination, irrespective of origin and destination, the driver's nationality or the vehicle's country of registration” (European Commission - Press release, 2020).

The purpose of this work is to point out, track in development and systematize the measures taken by the retail trade in the Republic of Bulgaria as a reaction to the announcement of a state of emergency related to the spread of the virus infection COVID-19.

A main limitation of the present work is that the conducted review of the change in retail trade as a result of the spread of coronavirus is focused on the reaction of Bulgarian commercial operators, but with a high degree of conditionality it can be assumed that their practice and experience can easily achieve application at the international level, simultaneously they can adopt global anti-epidemic trade policies. Further limitation of the work is that it reviews the actions of central and local

authorities and national control bodies that affect the activities of retail trade operators in the country. Although the scope of work is only on Bulgaria, most of the restrictive measures and changes in the working regime of retailers has their analogies and similarities with almost identical policies in other countries and are a projection of much the same anti-epidemic effect decisions established in the EU and worldwide. A further restraint is that the main focus of this paper is directed on the activity of operators in the retail sector, but it largely reflects the epidemic measures and actions that affect all other participants in the supply chain.

In the course of the theoretical and empirical study of the situation in retail trade in Bulgaria, general and specific methods such as the descriptive method, situational and content analysis has been applied. The article summarizes the behavior and reactions of commercial operators and the decisions of central and local authorities to the development of the situation in the country during the months of the period February-June 2020. The study period covers the time from the beginning of the pandemic in the country to the end of the so-called first lock down, so the work is trying to assess the relevance of the problem at the time of the initial development of the epidemic situation and the first measures to control it.

### **1. The adaptation of retail trade in time of COVID-19 restrictions**

Modern retail chains are the first economic entities that, in conditions of business restrictions, as a result of the imposed measures to combat the spread of coronavirus, created standards for work in an epidemic environment, which have been applied systematically in all sites. Many of their measures have been successfully adapted, and in many cases further developed, by all other representatives of the trade industry, and have even been adopted by other participants in economic and social life as a role model. The contemporary directions of adaptation of the retail trade business in time of epidemic restrictions can be summarized as follows:

Control and regime of access to the modern business premises, organized by employees of the commercial company. The role of the employees responsible for the physical security of commercial sites was reformatted and they were determined and instructed to create and maintain an established order at the entrance of the business premises and to take care of the control of the total number of persons in the trade areas, taking into account restrictions imposed according to the size of the commercial site, the formation of crowds in the service areas and other elements of technology and organization of retail activity. In this regard, two complementary regimes have been established to limit the number of customers in the sales zones:

- According to the type of commercial premises, the executive and control bodies of the regional authorities shall establish by decree what the standard for eligible number of customers in one commercial site of the concerned type should be, without taking into account the individual characteristics of the retail outlet. An example of this approach is the Municipality of Burgas, where the local anti-epidemic headquarters sets standards for: large trade chains, type “Metro” and “Kaufland”, the recommended number is up to 50 people, medium, type “Lidl” and “Billa” is up to 20 people and for small neighborhood stores up to 5 clients (Minchev, 2020).

- According to the area of the trade premises in square meters, where the number of customers that can be at the trade zone is equal to or less than the area for customers, divided by the established norm per one visitor. An example of this approach can be the estimated norm of 4 sq. m per one client in certain types of stores (for collective and individual sports without competitive nature, indoor premises for

cultural and entertainment events, etc.) (Ministry of Health, 2020a). Within the extended scope of this restriction, limits are also established for the total number of persons in the shops. The latter is defined as a fixed value for the maximum number of customers, regardless of the other characteristics of the merchant outlet and its product specialization. Their new task was to organize and observe a certain order of clients entering the trade zones and to give individual instructions, recommendations and guidance to each client at each sales visit. According to the powers and the scope of responsibilities, each ministry in the country is entitled to determine its own provisions for the activities under its management, for example an ordinance of the Ministry of Tourism, which is coordinated by the Ministry of Health, lays down guidelines on the measures for the use of seaside beaches, according to which “on every 20 square meters is allowed to accommodate 2 persons or up to the number of members of one family” (Ministry of Tourism, 2020). Another example is the Ministry of Youth and Sports, where “public admission is when the seats are occupied up to 50% of the total capacity of the sports facility / arenas, when accommodating spectators at least in every second seat or at a distance of 1.5 m” (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2020).

Additional restrictive measures in the retail outlets were imposed when customers gathered in certain service areas. In this situation, when a minimum distance between customers cannot be ensured, in different periods it was 1 m (Ministry of Health, 2020c), at least 1-1.5 m (Ministry of Health, 2020e), 1.5 m (Ministry of Health, 2020d), up to 2.5 m (Ministry of Health, 2020b) the incoming flow of customers in the trade premises is limited. Typically, such situations occur in the cash areas, near the entrance / exit of the store, in places with product promotions, sections with basic product groups and others. It should be taken into account here that, at certain point-of-sales, it is possible as a norm for maintaining social distance not to use the distance between customers, but another, tailored to the specifics of the situation, measure and / or features of the applied commercial service technology. For indoor premises and outdoor facilities with seating, this may be the provision of empty seating between customers; distance between tables in catering and entertainment establishments, measured from the end of the tables; the distance between the umbrellas, measured from the middle of the umbrellas or the distance between the sunbeds and other equipment used by the customers during the visit and stay in the commercial site. Each of these requirements takes into account the specificity of the organization and technology of the commercial activity carried out, so as to ensure optimal distance between customers, which provides the restriction of the path for the spread of infections by airborne droplets. Despite such detail, it is often not possible to cover all types of commercial activity. Thus, in a number of cases, situations may arise where some activities are secured by two or more unconditional restrictions on rights and obligations, while others are not covered by restrictions at all. This leads to a situation in which the subjective interpretation of the control authorities may lead to findings of violations of the provisions and this may cause the sanctioning actions of the adopted legal and administrative acts imposed on the commercial operator. Therefore, in such provisions for the introduction of requirements for social distance, it should be based mainly on the distances between people (between the customers themselves and / or between the servicer and the recipient of service) since the rules and obligations cannot describe all types of equipment and commercial furniture that customers can use and which could lead to real situations of regulatory uncertainty or duplication in different legal texts. This

means that the norms must be set in relation to the objective of establishing social distancing of individuals, and not in relation to certain commercial equipment and furniture available and / or used by customers.

Next aspect is the restricting of the access of employees and external parties (suppliers, customers, etc.) with visible signs of acute infectious diseases. This includes a subjective judgment of a controlling person, which can be objectified by the use of modern measuring devices for medical purposes (contactless thermometers, thermal cameras, etc.), which allow certain persons not to be admitted to the trade areas and thus to limit the spread of infections and contacts between individual clients and employees in case of visible symptoms and manifestations of the COVID-19 viral disease.

Another point is the introduction of mandatory disinfection of commercial equipment used by customers. An organization is set up at all commercial premises to perform treatment with products with bactericidal and virucidal activities of all facilities and equipment that customers use at their sales visit. Basically, these are shopping carts that are disinfected either after each use or before each use, depending on the established technology of their utilization. The overall organization of the process of strict compliance with the requirements for disinfection is created and controlled by the managers of the retail outlets or persons authorized by them. This creates a flow of movement of equipment used on the conditional path “clean-used-clean”.

Further moment is the elimination from the commercial process of equipment for which full conditions for maintaining high hygiene cannot be provided. As an example here we can give the small shopping baskets and trolleys. One of the considerations is related to the closer contact with those shopping baskets / carts, which have a more limited capacity (metal and plastic with a volume of 18, 20, 32 liters, etc.). Their use and the fact that they are most often worn close to the body implies the possibility of breaking down the established standards of hygiene, which is associated with the presence of many structural details that are difficult to disinfect and sanitize.

In the areas for bakery and preparation of bread products in the larger trade outlets and in those specialized in offering this product group, an organization for single and group packaging of the products is established and a restriction of the choice of the customer is introduced, who previously had free access to the goods. In the current situation, commercial operators offer alternatives to pre-packaged single or group products, taking into account the assessment of the most common volumes of consumer demand for these merchandise.

The maintenance of the working regime of the stores offering a variety of food and non-food products has created an increased specific consumer demand for disinfection goods and personal protective equipment. Even before the pandemic situation, most retail outlets offered products in this commodity category, but in a limited range, in small and convenient for individual use cuts. The new conditions required commodity portfolios to be intensively supplemented and expanded with disinfection and personal hygiene products. A natural market reaction to the psychological situation is the emergence of product deficits, due to consumer panic and the response by stockpiling in conditions of uncertainty and health risks. In this regard, the reaction of traditional and opportunistic producers in the country and abroad was quick, which in a short time managed to create new product varieties containing ingredients that have bactericidal and proven full or partial virucidal

action. Another group of market participants changed the content of the presented product information through the label of their products, where emphasis was placed on the disinfecting effect of the products, which was reflected in the broadcast mass advertising messages. The content of the label and its design is mandatory defined in Articles 9 to 12 of the Consumer Protection Act (The National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2020b), and the change in presentation was related to the placement of the greatest importance on those product characteristics that in the epidemic situation are subject to increased consumer demand.

In the commercial business was created specific organization for the sales staff when entering the work environment or appearing at work, to conduct a mandatory filter at the official entrance or in the premises for the staff of commercial sites with measurement of body temperature and even providing medical examination when the company has hired a person with appropriate medical education. Intensive disinfection of hands, equipment and clothing used at work and periodically during the work process with appropriate detergents and by applying the correct disinfection technology.

Additionally retail companies were instructed by the authorities to provide of personal protective equipment for commercial workers with high intensity of replacement. Here, an important point is to use of a personal protective mask for the mouth and nose, gloves, protective glasses (non-diopteric). We should pay attention to the relatively new for mass use protective shield (helmet) for the whole face or head. The latter, due to the specifics of the spread of COVID-19 infection, which is most often transmitted by airborne droplets, is a mask that is a barrier made of transparent polymer, which is placed on the head of the sales employee. It provides protection against drops and splashes, allowing use of diopter glasses by the sales person if needed. They can be made in different standard sizes or be universal, which can be adjusted according to the individual characteristics of the user. The materials for construction allow disinfection of this personal protective equipment and its repeated use. This personal protective equipment allows the sales contact between the trader and the customer to take place in a very similar to the traditional way scenarios, in which the seller, regardless of the protective equipment used, remains visually accessible to the customer. Safety goggles are another protective device for selective eye protection. They are ergonomic products for the eyes and face, ensuring wide direct and peripheral visibility. Neutral lenses are used, suitable design to limit fogging, with different coatings, for example for UV protection or against blur. Polycarbonate materials with high transparency are most often used. Different models, in addition to protection from splashes and drops in the air, can provide dust protection and more. Of course, attention should be paid to the need for all personal protective equipment to be accompanied by appropriate instructions and certificates to ensure the safety of their use and a certain level of protection provided. The products are accompanied by information about results and guarantees for conducted independent laboratory tests, metrological tests and applied good manufacturing practices and company standards in production. By placing this information at the point of sale or in a suitable place in the trade premises, an effective awareness-raising approach is created for all interested participants.

In the service areas of the commercial sites, where possible (counter, desk, cash area, reception, etc.). appropriate barriers are placed between the customer and the service person. In the general case, these are plexiglass (polymethyl methacrylate, PMMA). polyethylene terephthalate (PET, PETE) or glass screens, which limit the

transmission of aerosols. The requirements for the panels used are: solid and naturally transparent thermoplastic materials, with high resistance to influences, good light transmission and wide possibilities for shaping and designing (cutting, bending, drilling, polishing, gluing, heat treatment, etc.). In the commercial activity the applied barriers, which separate the participants in the service process, perform two tasks: the first, related to limiting the transport of particles by airborne droplets and the second, psychological, which is associated with the feeling of a higher level of security for the client on store visit and for the employee at his workplace. The screens can be permanently attached to the commercial equipment or can be temporarily placed, which allows them to be removed at a given future moment without permanent and visible consequences of the installation on the commercial equipment. Another important feature is that the barriers used can also be loaded with an additional promotional function for placing advertisements or other information (signs and short messages). and at a future moment they can also be recycled, as they are made of materials, which allow their reprocessing to raw material. We also need to pay attention to the fact that the used fences by employees may have built-in and additional protective characteristics for resistance and filtration of UV radiation, chemical resistance to aggressive disinfectants, certification for contact with food and drinks and more. In this situation, the mechanical barriers between the salesman and the served person are a relatively easy to implement protection mechanism, as they provide efficient defense of the person, opportunities for cleaning and permanent disinfection.

As the next point that was brought into retail trade was improving the mode of use of work clothes that are intended for use in the trade premises. Instructions on the maintenance of the work clothes with increased hygiene requirements, introduction of an organization for the use of disposable consumables for personal protection. All this is combined with periodic cleaning of the contact surfaces of the used commercial equipment and building facilities (escalators, elevators and lifts, doors, etc.). Each trader creates and discloses to all employees the organization and technology of disinfection of all surfaces, as an element of extraordinary and / or periodic work instruction at the workplace. Of course, automated techniques and equipment for disinfection have also been introduced where possible. Examples of this are automated dispensers / dosing systems, autonomous robots for cleaning commercial areas and disinfection of premises, etc. using UV technologies, ionization, ozonation, disinfectant spraying, etc., whereby the innovation of using robots ensures that “these machines are able to navigate dynamic public spaces autonomously, avoid obstacles and the general public, manage data, generate reports and seamlessly interact with human users” (Bandoim, 2020).

In order to improve the organization and technology of the trade activity in the commercial premises and outside them, a number of signposts and scoreboards were placed to indicate: the obligatory or recommended route of the clients; an individual waiting place in a service area; instructions for keeping distance from other customers, etc.; instructions for disinfection of the client's hands; instructions for disinfection of commercial equipment used by the customer, etc. In order to make the information process more effective, the sound and advertising systems of the retail outlets were used to provide information on the measures in place and brief messages on the behavior that each customer and employee should observe while at the retail store. The high frequency of broadcast of these messages allows the main points of the measures for behavior in public places in epidemic conditions to reach a very wide

audience (the need for systematic disinfection of hands and surfaces, keeping distance when moving and waiting in service areas, use of cashless forms of payment, etc.).

The use of cashless payments in retail outlets was prioritized to the extent of congestion and temporary refusal of the national card system operator to take on the extraordinary capacity of transactions and overconsumption of e-services (NetInfo AD, 2020). Natural, in such a situation of stress in the payment system, is the reaction of the highest institution of the state in the banking and credit system, the Bulgarian National Bank, which issued a statement declaring that all banking organizations and payment service providers in the country “continue to perform its operations, including customer service, subject to the necessary measures to limit the risks of the spread of COVID-19” (Bulgarian National Bank, 2020). To reduce the tension in the system, mainly caused by errors, the leading issuers of payment cards and the most popular operators of the global payment systems Mastercard and Visa decided to increase the limit of single payment without the introduction of security keys (PIN, password, signature) and other consumer protection up to a certain limit (Media Ikonomika Bulgaria OOD, 2020). This moment is directly related to the changes in the activity of the trade operators in the conditions of state of emergency and the imposed restrictive measures in a number of economic and social activities, which necessitated the prioritization and the recommendation for the use of cashless payments. An additional consideration is the statement that “the Chinese central bank permitted to release only new bills which had been sterilized and Chinese banks have been ordered to disinfect cash before issuing it to the public in an effort to curb the spread of the new coronavirus” (Taylor, 2020).

The increase in the scope of measures to combat the expansion of the epidemic has led to restricting or completely eliminating certain free or paid services offered through vending machines and other automated machines inside and outside the retail outlets. Examples of this measure are the prohibitions on the use of: bread slicer machine, vending machines offering a variety of goods that are located outdoors (Bulgarian National Radio, 2020). Or all those activities in which a satisfactory level of individual protection cannot be provided and which are placed in an environment with more limited opportunities for continuous maintenance of hygiene, disinfection and creating opportunities for crowding of people. In the case of vending machines, regardless of the established regime for maintaining safe conditions of their use, the imposed restriction applies only to those located in public open spaces, while those located indoors could continue to operate in compliance with “all safety measures by users referred to in Decision I of Protocol 15 / 15.03.2020 of a meeting of the Regional Crisis Headquarters with regard to measures to limit the COVID-19 virus” (Bulgarian National Radio, 2020).

Further measure was the establishment of time intervals and / or days for servicing or non-servicing of specific consumer segments, in accordance with the development of the epidemic. For example, for the most vulnerable group of people over the age of 60 years, there are non-identical time intervals introduced in the different retail chains where they are allowed to make or be restricted in their shopping visits. The purpose of such a measure is for this customer segment to be limited in making contacts with other user groups and mainly with the potential risk groups and alleged carriers of the infection. In the initial regime of this restriction, it is directed against consumers of this age group “it is not allowed to gather more than two persons over 60 years of age in the premises where services are provided and the adjacent outdoor areas” (Ministry of Health, 2020e), and the subsequent new text



ordered that “persons under the age of 60 are prohibited from visiting grocery stores and pharmacies from 8.30 am to 10.30 am every day” (Ministry of Health, 2020f). Determining a fixed time interval for visits to a certain user group has positive health effects, but as a mechanism it may not lead to its mandatory application by the selected group, which makes its effectiveness partially meaningless. This is because giving the designated right to a priority protected visit does not have to be accepted by the users in this group and they are not limited in terms of other time intervals, they have the freedom to organize their visits according to their own preferences. Such a measure was assessed as positive because the chosen early time interval and its lower market attendance allowed the commercial operators to carry out ancillary activities, which are an effect of the lower workload of the traders. In such a situation, the stores have the opportunity to organize priority implementation of other preparatory and non-commercial activities and operations, and mainly those for sanitation of trade halls. For example, in Slovakia a measure has been introduced in which shops remain closed on Sundays by law as a sanitation day (Gabrizova, 2020). The severity of trade restrictions may escalate to the extent of Western Canada's largest private-sector union proposal “governments to limit visits to one person per household, once per week” (Hawthorn, 2020). This is a very restrictive approach aimed at all consumers in order to minimize unnecessary trade visits, and turn shopping, which in recent decades has gradually acquired the characteristics of entertainment and leisure activity, to become only an essential activity for visits to purchase products providing physical existence. In this regard, for all other users this restriction has made it impossible for them to make product exchange in the desired but forbidden time interval, which can be extremely unfavorable to their needs. In response, this led to a redirection of their demand to other market operators, which are not limited at this time, i.e. do not fall within the scope of “grocery stores and pharmacies”. These stores offer the products desired by consumers as a complementary range and which, in violation of the regulations, do not strictly comply with the prohibition introduced, as the control over the implementation of the measure is traditionally aimed at larger market players in retailing.

We can summarize that the measures applied by commercial operators have actions that can be distinguished in two sets: The first group of actions depends on the direction of the measures, in which in retail we have standards, rights and obligations that are aimed to: customers; employees (commercial workers); the partners of the trade organization, among which the main are the suppliers of products. The second group of actions depends on the territorial scope of the imposed measures: which may be valid for the whole territory of the country and cover all commercial sites of one trade system or retail chain and measures aimed at individual commercial sites or territorially limited groups of sites depending on from the specifics of the established regional and local restrictions by the municipal and district authorities and the peculiarities of each commercial outlet.

At a later stage in the development of the epidemic situation in Bulgaria or one month after the adoption of the Law on measures and actions during the state of emergency, announced by a decision of the National Assembly of March 13, 2020, adopted on March 20, 2020, re-adopted on March 23, 2020 and promulgated on March 24, 2020 (The National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2020a) is appointed by order of the Minister of Health “algorithm of disinfection of place of work in commercial and other sites that provide services to citizens in conditions for epidemic spread of COVID-19” (Ministry of Health, 2020d, pp. 4-5), with

instructions for proper hand hygiene (Ministry of Health, 2020d, p. 6) and instructions for proper wearing of a face mask (Ministry of Health, 2020d, pp. 6-7). This clearly leads to the conclusion that planning is needed to create possible scenarios that will be implemented immediately and in a mandatory manner when formulating provisions concerning the imposition of emergency measures related to health or other socially significant situations (e.g. natural disasters, economic crises, etc.). The implementation of parts or all of the set measures can be put into action at the discretion or initiative of commercial operators, where this is in the interest of their employees and customers.

Confirmation of the adverse effects on the Bulgarian trade sector as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is the reported decrease in the percentage change in turnover indices in the economic activity “Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles” at current prices (compared to the previous month, seasonally adjusted), which for March 2020 is -20.0% lower compared to the previous month, with -3.9% lower in April and another -0.2% less in May. This negative change was followed by attempts for slight recovery of 1.4% in June, 1.8% in July, 4.6% in August and 3.3% in September 2020 (National statistical institute, 2020), but it cannot overcome the general lag in the sector from the end of the first and the beginning of the second quarter of 2020. Moreover, in structural terms, this general unfavorable process proceeds with varying intensity in the groups of section G47 “Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles”, which may be the subject of future research.

The general overview and summary of the specific changes in the behavior of retailers in Bulgaria during the state of emergency allows us to present the phases of reaction of individual market participants in the final exchange regarding the evolution of the epidemiological situation:

1. The first stage is a reaction to panic and overstocking. Initially demonstrated by end users, but gradually affected the behavior of traders. This initial reaction of certain consumer groups is related to specific food and non-food commodities.
2. The second stage is the formation of restrictions on quantities for a single purchase, for the number of visits or for the number of persons for a group visit. Such policies aim to restrict irrationality in consumer behavior, they are a tool against the emergence of persistent deficits and a measure to maintain higher safety standards for trade visits.
3. Establishment of protocols and standards for customer service in conditions of epidemiological restrictions.
4. Weakening of the strictest restrictions from the most critical phase of the emergency measure in commercial visits, for the retail trade and business in general.
5. Gradual release of all restrictions and establishment of a normal regime with a high level of hygiene of the commercial activity, as a standard.

## **2. Recommendations for improving the organization and technology in retail trade**

On the basis of the review carried out and the brief summary of the activities of Bulgarian commercial operators in emergency situations, the following recommendations can be made:

1. The need to create uniform standards and protocols for work in the event of an emergency situation of anti-epidemiological nature. The main purpose of such a regulatory and / or sectoral approach is to achieve the same level of protection of end users, for which it is necessary for all retail outlets, regardless of their size and

specificity of commercial activity, to apply similar measures in terms of organization and technology under local, regional or national emergency conditions.

2. Eliminate the possibilities that determine a regime that discriminates against certain economic activities or product exchange agents at the expense of the more liberal regime compared to other active economic participants or businesses. At the same time, the establishment of prohibitions, restrictions or permits should be avoided, which may at the time of their establishment contradict certain regulations, without being based on national or international standards.

3. Establishing clear rights and obligations of the participants in the trade process, which would eliminate the escalation of psychological tension and the emergence of conflict situations caused by factors that are beyond the scope of control of agents of exchange and manifest themselves as economic consequences of the scale of the national epidemic or global pandemic.

4. Preliminary definition of a set of social and economic measures, the implementation of which should depend on reaching certain dimensions of the epidemic and anticipating their action over time.

5. The national trading systems and the leading representatives of modern trade have clearly demonstrated an adequate response to the resulting situation. Under the prevailing conditions, the retail chains in the segment of fast-moving consumer goods were the first to demonstrate adaptation of the trade environment and national coordination of anti-epidemic actions, bringing their own protocols for disinfection and organization of work in a state of emergency, compliance with hygiene control regimes and protection of sales staff and others.

Copying behavior and applying actions that are brought into the legislation of other countries, where the epidemic situation and the factors that caused it, differ from the specifics of the national and local environment, should be limited in their domestic application. Such behavior, especially in ignorance of the nature of the epidemic situation, can have serious social and economic consequences, and here, in the absence of knowledge, fundamental health standards, discoveries of the national and global scientific community and recommendations of authoritative international organizations must be implemented as a matter of priority. Such behavior would limit the regulatory chaos created by decrees and orders in a situation of lack of knowledge about the nature of the spreading infection.

## **Conclusion**

The specific picture of the adaptive response of retailers in an epidemic situation allows us to make one specific recommendation. It is related to the creation of a single European and broader international framework for providing clear and highly standardized protocols for the implementation of the social and economic process in the context of a pandemic with an emphasis on the implementation of safe product exchange, seamless international freight transport ensuring the supply of goods and all other activities ensuring the functioning of the business under conditions of emergency, which clearly define as a single standard the rights and obligations of individual countries, their economic entities and citizens.

Only through the rapid adoption and establishment of uniform internationally recognized standards for work at the level of each commercial site, market segment, economic activity and the entire economy can ensure the protection of business activity and mitigate the economic effects caused by restrictions imposed on the

spread of the COVID-19 infection. It should be assumed that all measures, regardless of their focus and duration of application, will have economic and social significance which is expressed in the recommendation of the World Health Organization that the “countries should not to reimpose national lockdowns in an attempt to stem the spread of Covid-19 due to the health, social and economic repercussions” (Newey, 2020). The rationality of such a position is related to the innumerable and immeasurable effects that national quarantines have on individuals, businesses and all social and economic life in a country and globally.

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