

## CZECH REPUBLIC

CZECH REPUBLIC'S RESPONSE  
TO THE CORONAVIRUS  
PANDEMIC: CHAOTIC SUCCESS  
STORY?

According to the various statistics, the Czech Republic seems to be handling the COVID-19 pandemic relatively successfully. Numbers of infected and deceased are lower compared to other states of similar size and number of inhabitants – Czech Republic has 63.87 reported cases per 100 000 population and 188 victims in total, while Belgium or Portugal recorded 337.03 and 196.52 patients per 100 000 inhabitants and significantly higher losses.<sup>1</sup>

The country's hospitals are not overflowing, testing is currently at 8 000 per day and after the government announced the compulsory wearing of face masks in public, the public mobilised equipping the country with homemade facemasks within just a few days. A month and a half after the first case was confirmed on March 1<sup>st</sup>, the country's representatives presented a plan of gradual de-confinement. The Czech government takes immense pride in this. However, looking closer, the situation is less worthy of applause. The praised steps, such as early lockdown of the country, compulsory face masks and relatively quick re-stocking of protective equipment, which eventually helped to slow down the pandemic, are happening in an environment of populist measures, battles for the spotlight among politicians, chaotic communication, questionable business practices and heavy

dependence on civil society and self-sufficiency of citizens.

## Facing the unknown

The Czech government, just like all of the others in the world, was not prepared for a pandemic of this scale. When the first warning by the ECDC came in the end of January 2020, the Minister of Health, Adam Vojtěch, reassured the Parliament that there was enough protective equipment and hospital capacity and that sufficient measures had been taken.<sup>2</sup> In February, politicians warned against skiing holidays in the Alps and trips to Northern Italy, where the outbreak was progressively spiralling out of control.<sup>3</sup> During the second half of February, testing started to be available for those returning from regions deemed to be risky. The first cases were confirmed on the March 1<sup>st</sup>, all with epidemiological connections to Northern Italy.<sup>4</sup> Nine days later, the first community transmission of the infection on Czech territory was recorded, after a taxi driver from Prague tested positive without any traceable contact.<sup>5</sup> From there on, numbers of those tested positive started to rise and some restrictive measures were introduced just seven days later. The first victim was recorded on March 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>6</sup>

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<https://www.psp.cz/eknih/2017ps/stenprot/040schuz/s040161.htm>

<sup>3</sup> February 24, when the first Italian cities in Lombardy were put into isolation, the Ministry of Foreign affairs issued a recommendation to avoid travels to the regions [https://twitter.com/mzvcr/status/1231874391660748800?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwtcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1231874391660748800&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.novinky.cz%2Fdomaci%2Fclanek%2Fminis-terstvo-zahranici-nedoporucuje-cesty-na-sever-italie-40314453](https://twitter.com/mzvcr/status/1231874391660748800?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwtcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1231874391660748800&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.novinky.cz%2Fdomaci%2Fclanek%2Fminis-terstvo-zahranici-nedoporucuje-cesty-na-sever-italie-40314453)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3056228-v-cesku-jsou-tri-lide-nakazeni-koronavirem>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.denik.cz/z\\_domova/koronavirus-cesko-zlin-epidemie-20200309.html](https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/koronavirus-cesko-zlin-epidemie-20200309.html)

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<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/specially/koronavirus/306559-2-do-ceska-priletely-dalsi-ochranne-pomucky-pocet-nemocnych-se-blizi>

<sup>1</sup> Current data as of April 20, 2020

## Response in terms of health care

### *Tests*

In the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, the biggest problem was access to testing – or the lack thereof. Only people with epidemiologic anamnesis and symptoms were eligible for testing. As there was originally only one laboratory capable of processing the tests, and the waiting time for both testing and results was long, many people were deprived of access to testing by official authorities because they did not “fulfil the epidemiological criteria”, and later tested positive in private laboratories. Currently, tests are processed in hospitals; private and state-owned laboratories and “testing tents” have been set up at major hospitals. At the same time, medical vehicles are testing those who cannot reach the hospital on their own, especially elderly citizens, at their homes.<sup>7</sup> Overall, more than 8,000 tests are currently being processed every day.<sup>8</sup>

### *Lack of medical equipment*

In spite of early reassurance from both Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Minister of Health Vojtěch, it soon became clear that there was a crushing lack of all protective equipment – not only for hospitals, but also GPs, dentists, retirement homes etc. The state’s original reaction was unfortunate – its decision to prevent price speculation and to ensure sufficient supplies of equipment for state/region run hospitals by banning the free sale and export of protective equipment to private companies backfired. This hit the private medical facilities hard, which suddenly lost their chance of obtaining supplies with many having to close.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, other European states criticised this

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/thomayerova-nemocnice-koronavirus-odberove-misto\\_2003271620\\_cen](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/thomayerova-nemocnice-koronavirus-odberove-misto_2003271620_cen)

<sup>8</sup> <https://echo24.cz/a/SXuBf/laboratore-v-cr-se-blizi-testovaci-kapacite-az-10000-vzorku-denne>

<sup>9</sup> <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66729940-lekarum-chybi-masky-vlada-planuje-nakupy-ridit>

decision and accused Czechs for their lack of solidarity. The measure was eventually revoked, as in other EU countries. The situation surrounding supplies of protective equipment has been improving only slowly, with first major supplies of medical equipment arriving only on March 21<sup>st</sup> from China. In a surprising PR move, the plane (provided by NATO) bringing purchased supplies a month after a similar delivery was donated to China, was cheerfully greeted by a delegation comprising the PM, the Minister of Interior and Minister of Finance – many other praises sent out to China followed, most notably on the part of President Miloš Zeman, a long term supporter of China. The image of China as a provider of help continues to dominate the government’s political discourse– and even more visible in contrast is the vocal criticism of the EU by both Babiš and Zeman.<sup>10</sup>

### *Compulsory use of facemasks in public places*

#### In another attempt to slow

The spread of the virus, the Czech Republic became the first European country to introduce face coverage in public space, even though the situation with mask supplies was the same as elsewhere in Europe – it was practically impossible to buy them. While any piece of fabric was allowed and scarfs or shawls were considered equally as acceptable as facemasks, what followed was an unprecedented level of mobilisation on the part of people and civil society. Whoever had a sewing machine started to sew masks and within few days, temporary scarves were replaced by colourful homemade masks, often provided for free to the public and donated to hospitals and retirement homes. Quick adoption of the mask-wearing, supported by a civil society-led

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.respekt.cz/komentare/at-zije-cina-at-mlci-opozice>,

[https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/koronavirus-evropska-unie-pomoc-penize-narok-andrej-babis-premier.A200327\\_160250\\_domaci\\_aug](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/koronavirus-evropska-unie-pomoc-penize-narok-andrej-babis-premier.A200327_160250_domaci_aug)

campaign “my mask protects you, your mask protects me” was later often given as an example by the PM Babiš, for example in his Twitter advice to president Donald Trump<sup>11</sup> or in the world-wide campaign “Masks4All”.<sup>12</sup> Those initiatives, however, fail to highlight the questionable bottom line: the Czech state made face coverage compulsory without providing the public with any masks or other protective equipment.

### Measures restricting free movement of citizens

#### *Quarantine and lockdown*

The first restrictive measures were introduced relatively early after the first confirmed case and what followed was a whirlwind of measures, press conferences and daily changes. On March 7<sup>th</sup>, a compulsory 14-day quarantine period was introduced for people returning from Northern Italy.<sup>13</sup> Three days later, all schools were closed and events over 100 people banned.<sup>14</sup> After a further two days, on March 12<sup>th</sup>, the government declared the state of emergency, which introduced speedy legislative procedure and gave more power to the government for a month. The state of emergency was later prolonged until April 30<sup>th</sup>. It also meant a ban on events of over 30 people, limiting restaurants’ opening times, the closure of sports venues and travel restrictions. Just two days after that, on March 14<sup>th</sup>, all non-essential stores and restaurants were closed. Free movement of citizens was restricted to the “essential trips” for work, doctor’s appointments and helping family members, placing the country in total

quarantine on March 16<sup>th</sup>. Two days later, covering one’s face in public became compulsory.<sup>15</sup> All of these measures were implemented before the first recorded COVID-19 related death, which came on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. The opposition largely supported the steps taken by the government, but many also criticised the speed of change and chaotic communication with which various provisions were introduced in quick succession.

#### *Travel restrictions*

All border crossings were checked as of March 7<sup>th</sup>, when the country recorded only 21 cases of the COVID-19 disease. The state of emergency, declared on Thursday March 12<sup>th</sup> brought a ban on international public transport by trains and buses. Border checks were introduced on selected border crossings with Germany and Austria and others were closed. Furthermore, a ban on travelling to 16 “risk countries” – among them China, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium and other EU countries was introduced. At the same time, citizens of those countries were banned from entering Czech territory.<sup>16</sup> After March 13<sup>th</sup>, travel abroad was limited to strictly defined exceptional cases (such as work trips, journeys to a doctor or to help a family member living abroad).

The group especially hit by those measures were the commuting workers, people living in the Czech Republic and working abroad – or the other way around. After being called “too great a risk ” by government officials,<sup>17</sup> their trips across the border were banned and they were forced to choose a country in which they would stay. This caused problems especially for Germany and Austria, as

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.praguemorning.cz/babis-calls-on-trump-to-introduce-obligatory-face-mask/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZtEX2-n2Hc>

<sup>13</sup>

[https://web.archive.org/web/20200306163554/http://mzcr.cz/dokumenty/ministerstvo-zdravotnictvi-vydalo-mimoradne-opatreni-tykajici-se-karanteny-obcan\\_18653\\_1.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20200306163554/http://mzcr.cz/dokumenty/ministerstvo-zdravotnictvi-vydalo-mimoradne-opatreni-tykajici-se-karanteny-obcan_18653_1.html)

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.mzcr.cz/dokumenty/mimoradne-opatreni-uzavreni-zakladnichstrednich-a-vysokych-skol-od-11320\\_18696\\_4135\\_1.html](http://www.mzcr.cz/dokumenty/mimoradne-opatreni-uzavreni-zakladnichstrednich-a-vysokych-skol-od-11320_18696_4135_1.html)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.e15.cz/domaci/zakaz-vychazeni-bez-ochrany-obliceje-potravin-y-budou-moci-dopoledne-nakupovat-jen-duchodci-136777>

<sup>16</sup> <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3061328-zive-brifink-po-mimoradnem-zasedani-vlady-kvuli-koronaviru>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/pendleri-maji-smulu-karantena-je-nemine-40319794>

many hospitals and companies in the border regions rely heavily on commuting workers based in the Czech Republic. It took direct intervention by Angela Merkel to convince Andrej Babiš to find a temporary solution, under which commuting workers are allowed to stay abroad for 3 weeks and then come home for 2 weeks, during which time they have to spend in quarantine. The provision also features exceptions for medical staff and other “essential” workers, for whom it does not apply – they can show a certificate for their work and cross the border as usual.<sup>18</sup>

### *Easing of the restrictive measures*

Given the slowing rate in new infections, the government decided to start easing restrictive measures on April 7<sup>th</sup>, when some “non-essential” stores, such as DIY stores, repair services and outside sports venues such as tennis and golf courts were allowed to reopen. The Czech Republic became the first EU country to ease some of the measures.<sup>19</sup> A week later, rules on leaving the country were relaxed and Czech citizens now have the right to leave the country in exceptional situations, such as a family emergency or work. At the same time, the government presented a schedule of to ease the regulations and the re-opening the economy:<sup>20</sup> starting from April 20<sup>th</sup>, every week will bring more openings – first small businesses and stores, sport centres, restaurants (beer terraces first!), hairdressers etc. The last round should come on June 8<sup>th</sup>, when things could basically return to normal, while still following specific measures such as wearing face masks and maintaining social distancing. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, the government also presented a plan

for the progressive re-opening of schools. The youngest children (6-11 year olds) will return to schools in alternating smaller groups in the second half of May. The other group allowed to go to school for special consultations with their teachers will be final year secondary (15 year olds) and high school (19 year olds) students). Other students will most likely stay at home until the summer holidays.<sup>21</sup>

The slow return to normal is also due to be supported by the so-called “clever quarantine”, inspired by similar programs implemented in Singapore or South Korea. It comprises a series of measures, from digital, such as (voluntary) tracking applications, to intense testing and cooperation with local hygiene centres. Epidemiologists can, based on the consent of a patient, use information provided by the mobile operators and payment cards to reproduce a map of contacts that might potentially have been infected. Such measures are used for the easy identification of all contacts made by a sick person, notifying them of the potential risk. The project aims to allow for a speedy return to normal and has been tested in the region of South Moravia. While a majority of people do not object to sharing their personal data for the cause, questions marks remain over the potential misuse of data and the lack of capacity in the system to analyse digital footprints and to ensure quick response, such as testing at home.<sup>22</sup>

### Response to the economic crisis

Shortly after the lockdown measures were applied, it became obvious that an economic recovery will be a challenge equal to the health situation. The government soon came with the first measures, which have been updated several times since, and just like at EU

<sup>18</sup><https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/primluva-od-merkelove-babis-ulehcil-pendlerum-i-diky-nemecke-kanclerce-95974>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-republic-eases-lockdown-restrictions/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.vlada.cz/assets/epidemie-koronaviru/dulezite-informace/uvolneni\\_schema\\_podnikatele\\_zivnostnici\\_14\\_042020.pdf](https://www.vlada.cz/assets/epidemie-koronaviru/dulezite-informace/uvolneni_schema_podnikatele_zivnostnici_14_042020.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/otevreni-skol-prehledne-kdo-bude-ucit-a-jak-to-bude-s-osetrovny-m-100557>

<sup>22</sup> <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3071576-chytra-karantena-temer-v-praxi-skoro-vsichni-osloveni-souhlasili-s-vyuzitim-dat-rika>

level, we probably have not seen the end of the battle yet. The deficit forecast for 2020 rose from 40 billion CZK (1.4 billion EUR) to 300 billion CZK (10.9 billion €) which was suggested by Minister of Finance Alena Schillerová on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> of April.<sup>23</sup> This constitutes a budget deficit increase in 2020, from 0.7% as originally planned to 5.3 % GDP.

### **Programs to help businesses**

For the period from March 12<sup>th</sup> to the end of April (possibly extended), companies affected by the state of emergency can apply for a program called Antivirus, which allows for short-time working<sup>24</sup>, effectively compensation of 80% of the salary up to app. 1400 €. <sup>25</sup> SMEs (with fewer than 250 employees) can also ask for an interest-free loan to overcome problems with cash flow within the programs COVID and COVID II. COVID III is currently being prepared. Loans are provided directly by commercial banks, but the state guarantees 80% of loans with a commercial bank and contributes to interest of up to one million Czech crowns. COVID programs are funded from the EU cohesion funds and therefore do not apply to companies based in Prague, which is not eligible for cohesion funding and needs to seek alternative solutions. Besides this direct support, the government has also introduced the postponement of instalments (if inability to pay is related to the pandemic), protection against insolvency, postponement of rent or remission of tax advances due in June 2020.

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.irozhlaz.cz/ekonomika/koronavirus-v-cesku-schillerova-schodek-statniho-rozpocetu\\_2004191241\\_pj](https://www.irozhlaz.cz/ekonomika/koronavirus-v-cesku-schillerova-schodek-statniho-rozpocetu_2004191241_pj)

<sup>24</sup> short-term, recession-related programs operating in several European countries in which companies have entered into an agreement to avoid laying off any of their employees by reducing working hours of all or most of their employees instead, with the government making up some of the employees' lost income.

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.mpsv.cz/documents/20142/1443715/Manual\\_Program\\_Antivirus.pdf/eacabb67-657a-42d3-2279-82ae3280b1fa](https://www.mpsv.cz/documents/20142/1443715/Manual_Program_Antivirus.pdf/eacabb67-657a-42d3-2279-82ae3280b1fa)

### *Programs to help the self-employed*

The situation of the self-employed, who account for approx. 1 million workers,<sup>26</sup> who are more vulnerable in times of crisis compared to bigger companies, was the source of a great deal of controversy. In March, it was announced that compulsory payments of social insurance would be postponed, as well as tax declarations for 2019 and other measures, like those applied to companies, could also be used – such as the postponement of rents or instalments. However, that was mostly passive support. The state offered a one-time payment of 25 000 CZK (app 1,000 €), which was heavily conditioned. After widespread criticism, the program was rewritten to reduce the conditions, however the self-employed are still viewed as being the most vulnerable part of the economy.

### *All that glitters is not gold*

While the measures seem to be achieving the desired goals, the current crisis has revealed several structural problems.

### *Populist leadership*

Firstly, the current government led by PM Andrej Babiš is a coalition government, comprising Babiš's ANO party and the Social Democrats (ČSSD). In line with his political style, Babiš has tried to stay at the centre of the response, participating in all press conferences and going as far as promising that he will personally deliver masks to those in need. The personification of the response to the crisis like this soon proved to hamper the efficiency of the country's response as a whole. It was only on March 15<sup>th</sup> that the Central Crisis Staff was established, a collective body to deal with the pandemic. According to the protocol, the CCS is headed by the Minister of Interior, which Babiš refused to accept, since the post is held by the head of his coalition partner, ČSSD - Jan Hamáček, meaning that Babiš would have

<sup>26</sup> <https://data.cssz.cz/graf-pocet-osvc-v-cr>

lost his central position.<sup>27</sup> Deputy minister of Health, Roman Prymula was named to lead the CCS instead. Hamáček said he accepted the situation, as he did not want to weaken the government in a time of crisis. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, Hamáček took over the leadership of the CCS, when Prymula was tasked with preparations of the “clever quarantine”.<sup>28</sup> The number of people in the spotlight led to some chaotic situations also in communication – for example when the ministries of health (led by ANO) and interior (led by ČSSD) disagreed on which stores should be allowed to open from April 20<sup>th</sup>.

### *Doing the right things for all the wrong reasons*

While the numbers of infected indicate that the steps taken by the Czech government are working, the reasons behind this success remain rather uncertain. Babiš’ team never presented a concise strategy or a plan. When the government presented a plan to ease measures on April 14<sup>th</sup>, it included exact dates for businesses with the footnote that those dates would be assessed based on the current “epidemiologic measures”. But no clear numbers or arguments that would lead to openings of various companies were presented, which has often led to frustration and misunderstandings. The same applies to the question of borders – while both Babiš and Hamáček continue to repeat that “opening the borders is not a priority”,<sup>29</sup> they fail to present under which conditions they are planning to lift or ease the travel ban. The lack of transparency and legitimacy regarding some of the measures, such as the travel ban on Czech citizens, casts a shadow on otherwise relatively successful measures.

<sup>27</sup> <https://echo24.cz/a/SsMg9/vlada-zrejme-aktivuje-ustredni-krizovy-stab-celila-kritice-ze-s-tim-otali>

<sup>28</sup> <https://echo24.cz/a/S6uRF/ustredni-krizovy-stab-povede-hamacek-opozice-je-spokojena>

<sup>29</sup> <https://echo24.cz/a/SvCuA/pro-babise-neni-otevreni-hranic-priorita-nevim-kam-by-lide-sli-v-cesku-je-bezpecno?fbclid=IwAR35RuP7Pyc5XACoLyMwJBFnuswqmpPF70BQfkoUAGwmYJlBxhM-eV89eb0>

### *Communication*

Communication of the measures has also been problematic. The government’s press conferences were occurring on a daily basis, especially in the first half of March. PM Babiš was usually the one with the prominent speaking role, while sectoral ministers were often excluded altogether. The measures were taken so quickly that there was no time to evaluate their success/effectiveness. At the same time, the fact that speed was given priority over coherence, some decisions were decided in somehow questionable fashion – such as closing the schools without consulting the Minister of Education.<sup>30</sup> The fact that the four main figures of the government – Babiš, Hamáček, Vojtěch and Prymula do not get on very well, has led to a lack of coordination and hasty press statements, which make it difficult to follow the latest developments. A good example of this is the opening of borders, where they all express their opinions, rather than any reliable information. Babiš was also repeatedly caught publicly scolding Vojtěch during the press conferences, showing the audience that he was dissatisfied with his answers.<sup>31</sup>

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To further illustrate the rather unstructured approach adopted by the Czech government, let me conclude with two examples. Constitutional lawyers noted that long-term travel restrictions for the citizens of one’s own country are against the Constitution. At the same time, opinion polls show that the majority of Czechs (and especially those who vote for the governing parties, who tend to be elderly and less likely to travel) support the border closure, as they favour security over

<sup>30</sup>

<https://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/koronavirus/clanek/o-zavreni-skol-rozhodla-bezpecnostni-rada-bez-nas-zlobi-se-ministerstvo-skolstvi-40316281>

<sup>31</sup> <https://video.aktualne.cz/z-domova/babis-znovu-skolil-vojtecha-nemluvte-o-pocasi-strediska-zavr/r-e6a30b98652611ea9c800cc47ab5f122/>

freedom.<sup>32</sup> In this context PM Babiš chose his side when he told the Czech TV that re-opening of borders it is not his priority, because *“I do not know where they (citizens) would go, because it is safe in our country, before and after the virus, it will always be safe with us and now I would recommend everyone to stay in the Czech Republic”*.<sup>33</sup>

On a different note, among places allowed to open from April 20<sup>th</sup> on are grooming salons... for dogs.

When asked why dog grooming salons can open weeks earlier than hairdressing salons for their humans owners, Minister of Trade Karel Havlíček told the Czech TV that he had received many emails from citizens asking for the service: *“it may seem funny, but we are a nation of dog owners and people need to cut their dogs’ coats in the spring.”*<sup>34</sup>

**Zuzana Stuchlíková**, *Head of the Brussels’s office, Europeum*

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/vlade-verime-vic-nez-jindy-chybejici-rouscky-nevadi-penize-chybet-teprv-zacnou-96027>

<sup>33</sup> <https://echo24.cz/a/SvCuA/pro-babise-teni-otevreni-hranic-priorita-nevim-kam-by-lide-sli-v-cesku-je-bezpecno?fbclid=IwAR35RuP7Pyc5XACoLyMwJBFnuswqmpF70BQfkoUAgwmYJlhxhM-eV89eb0>

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<sup>34</sup> [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zivotni-styl/spolecnost/psi-salony-otevreni-ministr-havlicek-kladni-opatreni-koronavirus\\_2004171553\\_aur](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zivotni-styl/spolecnost/psi-salony-otevreni-ministr-havlicek-kladni-opatreni-koronavirus_2004171553_aur)