

Czech Republic clinics collapse as pandemic rages

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The coronavirus pandemic is assuming increasingly dramatic forms in the Czech Republic. Across the country an average of 9,000 new infections are being reported daily and around 400 people admitted to hospitals due to COVID-19. Clinics in the west of the country are hopelessly overrun and, in some regions, no intensive care beds remain available.

In the region around Karlovy Vary and Pilsen, intensive care treatment capacity has been exhausted. Every day, patients are transferred by helicopter from the municipal hospital in Cheb to other parts of the country where treatment is still possible.

Residents of the border region have launched an online petition titled, “Open the borders for ambulances,” which received over 3,000 signatures in a very short period of time. The Czech health minister, Jan Blatný, has rejected any transfer of patients to German hospitals only a few kilometres away, as long as intensive care beds are free in other parts of the country. The transport to such facilities, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away, is an enormous burden for seriously ill patients.

In the capital city of Prague, the seven-day incidence (infections per 100,000 inhabitants) is over 310 and even exceeds 1,000 in Cheb and in Trutnov to the north. On the German side of the border, high numbers of infections have also been reported in the border region. According to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the districts of Hof and Tirschenreuth have the highest number of COVID-19 infections in Germany, with a seven-day incidence of 379 and 351 respectively.

Last Wednesday, the number of infected people in the Czech Republic exceeded 1 million. On the same day, the country, with about 10.7 million inhabitants, recorded 16,545 deaths. Mortality rose by 15 percent last year, the highest rate since World War II. Around

129,100 people died in the country in 2020, an increase of 17,000 compared to 2019, according to the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ). More than 11,000 of this increase in deaths were connected to coronavirus infection, according to health authorities.

The situation in the country’s clinics and health facilities can only be described as catastrophic. Up until last week, more than 4,050 clinic workers had been infected. The remaining doctors and nurses have been working to the point of exhaustion for months, and clinics are only able to stay operative due to support from volunteers. A field hospital built specifically to treat 500 coronavirus patients is currently being dismantled. Deputy Health Minister Vladimír Černý admitted that the hospital could not be put into operation due to a lack of staff.

The consequences for the population are also far-reaching in economic and social terms. Unemployment has risen by around 2 percent since 2019 and a record number of bankruptcies are forecast for this year. In 2020, the Czech Republic experienced its weakest economic performance since it split from Slovakia in 1993, with gross domestic product falling by 5.6 percent.

In the border regions with Germany and Austria, thousands of commuters are affected by the border closures. Those who test positive are often unable to carry out their work in the neighbouring country and may lose their jobs as a result. Entry into the Czech Republic is now only possible for non-Czech citizens in exceptional cases.

The extreme intensification of the situation was foreseeable months ago and is entirely due to the policy of the government in Prague. The ruling minority coalition of the neo-liberal ANO and Social Democrats (ČSSD) relies on the support of the Communist Party

(KSCM). After a brief lockdown last spring the coalition reopened businesses and schools and withdrew all previous health and safety measures.

Only after the situation escalated dramatically did the government decide to introduce a few half-hearted measures in December. Prime Minister Andrej Babis, himself a major entrepreneur and multimillionaire, stated unequivocally that there would be no lockdown of businesses and industries comparable to that imposed in the spring.

Even the measures due to come into force on Friday are insufficient to improve the situation. Although non-essential shops, restaurants and hairdressers are to be closed down, businesses and industries will remain open and in-person instruction will be allowed in some schools. The obligation to wear FFP2 face masks, which is mandatory in neighbouring countries, remains a mere recommendation in the Czech Republic.

It is evident that the entire political elite of the country is pursuing a policy of herd immunity. Right-wing parties and movements are able to hold demonstrations with several thousand participants opposing lockdown and safety measures. In January, ex-President Vaclav Klaus appeared at a demonstration of ultra-right forces demanding an end to all measures to curtail the pandemic under the slogan "Let's open up the Czech Republic."

Conflicts over the coronavirus countermeasures are also brewing within the government. The Stalinist KSCM has adopted the policy of the ultra-right and fascists and is threatening to withdraw its support for the minority government if the measures taken to contain the pandemic are extended beyond February 14.

KSCM leader Vojtěch Filip pointed out that his party had only voted in December for an extension of the current state of emergency with reservations. Among other issues, the KSCM had demanded a return to in-person teaching and the opening up of ski resorts. The ruling parties depend on the support of the KSCM to pass the budget and have agreed to hold further talks.

Popular opposition to the criminal policies of the established parties has been expressed in a wave of resignations. The Social Democrats, which, like the KSCM, emerged from the former ruling Stalinist party of Czechoslovakia, are losing members in droves. Last year alone, 2,000 members left the party. Currently party membership is just over 11,000, less than half the

total from 10 years ago.

The ANO, which was founded with extensive funding from the current head of government Babis, is also in deep crisis. Several hundred members and an entire regional grouping have quit the party. The official membership of the leading government party is currently 2,800. According to its own figures, the KSCM lost around 2,000 members last year.



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