

# Dramatic spread of coronavirus in the Czech Republic

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The Czech government has extended the state of emergency that has been in effect since October and was originally set to end on Sunday. The reason is the dramatic spread of the coronavirus. The numbers of infections and deaths remain high, and dangerous variants are spreading throughout the country.

For a fortnight now, the districts of Sokolov and Cheb on the German border have seen the number of new weekly cases rise higher than 1,100. The numbers have also risen nationwide in the past few days. On Friday, the two districts were sealed off, as was the district of Trutnov in the Czech Republic's east. The areas may only be left or visited in exceptional circumstances. According to the European Union health agency ECDC, there were around 915 infections per 100,000 inhabitants in the whole of the country over the last 14 days.

Hospitals in the border areas are completely overloaded, and increasingly patients have to be transported from there to distant clinics in the country where there are still a few free intensive care beds. The hospital in Nachod, in the country's northeast, had to transfer 15 patients to places at least 230 kilometres away last Tuesday. All nearby hospitals were fully occupied, according to *Reuters*. Hospital Director Jan Mach said that of its 339 beds, 120 were occupied by COVID-19 patients.

Care in homes for the elderly and clinics is now only possible with the help of volunteers and the military, where 900 military personnel have been deployed so far. The Ministry of Defence announced that it would continue to keep soldiers on standby.

The situation in the Czech Republic is dramatic. Across Europe, only Portugal has had more people infected in the last two weeks, measured in terms of population. With its 10.7 million inhabitants, about 10

percent of the Czech population have been infected so far, and more than 18,000 have died. According to epidemiologists, the number of unreported cases is far higher, and the trend is rising. "We are picking up sicker and younger people born in 1970 and later. There was no such thing in the autumn," said Mach.

The government's irresponsible policies and the unchecked spread of the British strain of the virus are the main reasons for the high numbers and the severe illness of those affected. Bavarian State Premier Markus Söder (CSU) said on Thursday that this strain had become dominant in the German districts of Hof, Wunsiedel and Tirschenreuth on the border with the Czech Republic. Medical experts from the affected areas believe that this variant accounted for between 50 and 60 percent of the total.

The German government has classified the Czech Republic, like the Austrian state of Tyrol, as a "virus variant risk area" and imposed travel restrictions from Sunday. According to the Berlin Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Police had checked around 10,000 people at the borders with the Czech Republic and Austria by Monday morning. About half of them were refused entry.

On Monday, several European governments criticised the border controls, as did business representatives. Car factories in Bavaria and Saxony fear production losses over the next few days due to the disruption of supply chains.

Evolutionary biologist Jaroslav Flegr of Charles University in Prague confirmed the dangers posed by the variants in an interview with *Der Spiegel*. "If they cannot be prevented from spreading, more people will be infected, and more people will die," he said. Doctors were already observing "that more and more younger people and even children are becoming seriously ill.

The virus is becoming more and more deadly.”

Flegr did not doubt that the government and its policy of opening up the economy were to blame. “It was already foreseeable in the summer that the pandemic would again spread so aggressively,” he said.

Lifting the state of emergency would have inevitably led to disaster under the current conditions, he said. Schools, sports facilities, restaurants, shops and tourist facilities reopened, with consequences that could hardly be overestimated.

Despite this, the Czech parliament was not prepared to extend the state of emergency. The ANO and CSSD (Social Democrats) governing parties lacked the necessary majority to do so after the Communist Party (KSCM) rejected an extension. The minority government can only govern with the tacit support of the KSCM. All opposition parties—several right-wing parties and the Pirates—have long demanded an end to the state of emergency and the lifting of all protective measures. The KSCM, the successor to the former Stalinist state party, vehemently advocates the immediate opening of schools and ski resorts.

In the end, the government decided to extend the state of emergency without parliamentary approval, which is legally problematic. It thus followed the request of the representatives of all 14 administrative regions. Whoever did not vote for the state of emergency, declared head of government Andrej Babis (ANO), “will be directly responsible for the death of our fellow citizens.”

In fact, the irresponsible policies of Babis’ government have led to this situation. After a brief lockdown last spring, during which schools and businesses were closed, the infection figures had dropped sharply. But then the measures were lifted again, and the virus spread rapidly. In the autumn, the government was forced to declare a state of emergency. However, under pressure from the business community, farms remained open and containment measures reintroduced half-heartedly at best. It was precisely in the factories that mass outbreaks occurred time and again. Now the virus has been out of control for months.

From the beginning, the government and all the parties advocated unscrupulous policies in the interests of big business. While generous economic aid flowed to the corporations, there were far too few testing

facilities, and the ailing hospitals were left to fend for themselves. The vaccination campaign announced is a pure fiasco. The Ministry of Health recently had to admit that the vaccine from Moderna will only arrive on February 22—a week later than planned—with only half the agreed quantity.

The situation in the Czech Republic is a prime example of the criminal policies of all the European governments, which are callously sacrificing human lives in the interests of the economy. Most recently, Poland enforced massive relaxations. During the weekend, the country’s ski resorts promptly reported fully booked lifts and hotels. In Austria, which ended the lockdown at the beginning of the month, the infection figures rose again just a few days later. In Germany, the complete reopening of schools is currently being prepared; further relaxations will come into force next month.

Like the Czech Republic, the situation in neighbouring Slovakia is developing in a similarly dramatic way. Here, too, as of Sunday, airlines as well as bus and train companies will no longer be allowed to transport passengers to Germany. So far, the number of confirmed infections in the country, with 5.5 million inhabitants, has climbed to 274,000. More than 5,700 people have died. This means that Slovakia is now one of the most severely affected countries in Europe.

Because there were no protective measures taken against the UK variant of the virus now dominant in Slovakia, the pathogens were able to spread rapidly, raising the imminent collapse of the health care system. Intensive care units are already fully occupied, ventilators are so busy with COVID-19 patients that other intensive care patients can no longer be adequately treated, warn medical experts.

Under these conditions, the right-wing government of Igor Matovic largely reopened the country’s schools last week, paving the way for an even greater spread of the virus.



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