



## Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic social briefing:**  
**The Battle against the Coronavirus Has Started: The Czech Case**  
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## **The Battle against the Coronavirus Has Started: The Czech Case**

*The international community has been confronted with the pandemic of the COVID-19. In February, the Czech Republic supported China in her fight against the disease, preparing its own plans and preventive measures at the same time. The flights between our two countries were cancelled at the beginning of the month. After occurrence of the virus in the Czech Republic, a wide array of restrictive measures has started to be adopted – closure of borders, ban to leave the Czech territory, declaration of the state of emergency or introduction of quarantine. In the analysis, I will inquire into the Czech assistance to the Chinese side and subsequent Chinese help to our country since the end of January until the half of March. I then go on to describe mechanisms of the Government's anti-coronavirus policy, external reactions to the Czech way of confronting the epidemic, concluding with other parts of the society's initiatives in this regard.*

### **Czech-Chinese cooperation in fighting the epidemic**

At the end of January, China through her ambassador in Prague Zhang Jianmin requested the Czech side for humanitarian aid. Besides, the city of Yichang asked its sister city of Třebíč to provide masks, gloves and other medical equipment. On the 17th of February, the Czech Government decided to send the aid of up to 5 tonnes. This decision was made on the basis of an appeal from the President Miloš Zeman. The transport of the packet of humanitarian aid, including that donated by cities, regions, companies, ministries, the Mixed Czech-Chinese Chamber of Mutual Cooperation as well as the Office of the President, was financed by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the Czech and Chinese Red Cross participated in the realisation of the plan. The concrete use of the aid was defined in cooperation with the Chinese provinces, cities or universities. The special government aircraft arrived in China at the end of February with the participation of Vratislav Mynář, the Chancellor of the Office of the President. It transported more than 43,000 respirators and almost 7,000 units of protective clothes. At the occasion of the Chancellor's visit to China, he met with Hu Chunhua, the incumbent Vice Premier of the PRC and a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China. Apart from this humanitarian mission, the state aid, being approximately 4.5 tonnes in weight, was sent to China via the Austrian capital of Vienna together with a financial aid.

From the very beginning, the President Miloš Zeman has been active in terms of support of China in fighting the coronavirus. On the 2nd of February, he sent an official letter to his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, whereby expressing sympathy with China and assuring that the Czech partners would not remain indifferent to the needs of the Chinese people and provide assistance in conjunction with other members of the international community. After the virus appeared in our country, the President made an appeal to the public to keep calm, obey the Government's decisions and measures, avoid fear, hysteria or panic and, last but not least, feel solidarity with people in need and help them. Thanks to the Miloš Zeman's friendly relations with the Chinese partners and former efforts to collect and provide them with humanitarian aid, the Chinese side has been open to repay for that immediately when the situation in the Czech Republic deteriorated considerably.

An important step in amelioration of the difficult situation in our country was made on the 16th of March when an appointment between the Czech PM and the ambassador of the PRC Zhang Jianmin was arranged. The PM Andrej Babiš appreciated the Chinese Government's attitude towards prevention and fight against the epidemic and expressed gratitude for deepening bilateral cooperation in the field of eliminating the coronavirus. The PRC ambassador thanked for the Czech Republic's assistance provided to China in February. Both representatives made use of the opportunity to declare that deepening of the mutual trust and cooperation between our two countries were in full accordance with the interests of citizens of both the Czech Republic and China, both sides being ready to further enhance and develop Czech-Chinese strategic partnership. In the course of the days to follow after this meeting, an aerial bridge was launched with the aim to enable transport of medical equipment from China to the Czech Republic, which became a clear evidence of friendship and understanding between our nations.

### **The State and entrepreneurs face to face with the epidemic**

The COVID-19 was imported to the Czech Republic from Italy, obviously at the end of February. The first three cases were confirmed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March. All the time, practical steps against the epidemic have been prepared and determined by the Government or more precisely by the National Security Council.<sup>1</sup> The Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO movement), the Minister of the Interior Jan Hamáček (Social Democratic Party), the Minister of Industry and

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<sup>1</sup> The National Security Council is a standing body of the Government responsible for coordinating security issues and preparing measures to safeguard the national security. It was established in 1998.

Trade Karel Havlíček (nominated by the ANO), the Minister of Health Adam Vojtěch (nominated by the ANO) and the Ministry of Finance Alena Schillerová (nominated by the ANO) together with Roman Prymula, the incumbent Vice Minister of Health who was appointed a chairman of the Emergency Committee, have been the most visible leaders in terms of managing the state policy against the coronavirus.<sup>2</sup> Roman Prymula became a crucial player influencing the Government's policy instead of the Minister of the Interior who had been supposed to become a head of the Committee in accordance with the set rules. The PM preferred an expert and respected epidemiologist without political affiliation to his political rival and coalition partner. In the past, Prymula was a director of a regional hospital, a rector of a military medical academy and researcher focusing on epidemics, hygiene, vaccination or health care management. As a director of the hospital in Hradec Králové, he promoted an establishment of a clinic of the traditional Chinese medicine, which should have been financed by the CEFC China Energy. It seems probable that Prymula's position will be strengthening, not being excluded that he can benefit politically from the current situation.

Originally, the Czech Government's stern stance was subjected to criticism from the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. On the 13th of March, she proclaimed that closure of borders as an extraordinary measure aimed at prevention of the coronavirus spreading affected citizens' rights and had negative social and economic impact, violating the people's lives as well as trans-border trade. She referred to a WHO statement, according to which such a measure was not effective enough in fighting the coronavirus. Instead, the EC President preferred medical examinations on the borders, carrying out on the basis of a common EU strategy, which was being elaborated at that moment. Von der Leyen emphasised that the Commission wanted to convince the member states to adopt "proportionate" measures. Her critical statement provoked a wave of disagreement among the Czech politicians. The President Miloš Zeman admitted that the closure of borders restricted free movement of people but it was capable of saving people's lives at the same time. The chairman of the euro-sceptic Freedom and Direct Democracy movement Tomio Okamura stated that not only did the EU do nothing to protect the citizens against the disease but its leadership's behaviour was, moreover, detrimental when criticising individual member states whose governments had endeavoured to stop further spreading of the virus. The chairman of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia has considered the von der Leyen's attitude a proof that she is not competent to run the European Commission. The Czech PM Andrej Babiš

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<sup>2</sup> The Emergency Committee is a body of the Government responsible for solving crisis situations and as such, it is subordinate to the National Security Council.

responded that the Commission's President was concerned with the internal market issue instead of coping with a more acute problem, stressing that the protection of health of all citizens was the utmost priority.

The epidemic crisis has brought about serious problems and challenges but also led to solidarity among people. It has also applied to many private companies. Not only have entrepreneurs been in need of support from the State. Many private companies have offered their support to the State and the public. On the 15th of March, the wealthiest Czech businessman and the controlling shareholder and a founder of the international financial and investment group PPF company Petr Kellner held talks with the PM Andrej Babiš and a Deputy PM, Minister of Industry and Trade and Minister of Transport Karel Havlíček, discussing the crisis situation in terms of supplies of protective medical equipment. Petr Kellner announced there that the PPF was prepared to donate up to 120 tonnes of the former worth of 100 million CZK (nearly 4 million EUR) to the Czech State. The medical equipment, including 1.8 million surgical masks or 1.7 million respirators, was bought in China and Spain by the Home Credit company, which is a part of the PPF group. The transport itself was secured by the Czech Government which is the only eligible subject to request the Chinese side for export of such a massive amount of medical equipment. Already back in the first week of the month, the PPF via its biotechnology Sotio company purchased 20,000 protective masks in the USA and imported them to the Czech Republic, which were subsequently distributed among medical practitioners free of charge. But it is not only the case of the PPF. The private sector engagement in active support provided to the State creates good conditions for further improvement of their relations and future, post-crisis cooperation in a wide array of fields.