



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic political briefing:
Coronavirus Epidemic to Continue: Political Aspects & Decisions
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Coronavirus Epidemic to Continue: Political Aspects & Decisions

Usually, the summer time is typical of absence of substantial political events on the domestic scene. This year's summer brought no exception in this regard. The political as well as public debate was dominated by the topic of coronavirus epidemic. Politicians were discussing measures to be adopted in order to control and suppress the disease and, at the same time, arguing about appropriate economic and social policies. In this briefing, I will analyse the development of the last two months, emphasising political decisions and crisis management.

According to the recent statistics, the Czech economy dropped by 10.7 per cent year-on-year in the second trimester, thus showing the worst performance since the establishment of the independent Czech Republic in 1993. Amidst this decline, concerns have been deepening as to the situation in autumn when another wave of the epidemic and termination of the generous state support and subsidies are expected. Positive data about the unemployment rate, which amounted to mere 3.8 per cent in July, can therefore change very quickly after various supportive state programmes are terminated.

Summer hot topic

The fact that the coronavirus remains to be a hot topic has been confirmed by several public opinion surveys. In July, more than 75 per cent of people were interested in the current state and development, over 70 per cent being worried for health of their relatives and friends. Only 5 per cent took no interest. In terms of gender, women are more engrossed in this problem than men. In terms of age, the interest and concerns increases as the age rises. The degree of concerns in relation to one's health is lower in case of people with a university degree and inhabitants of the biggest cities. People were also increasingly sceptical as to the future development in comparison with preceding months. 62 per cent were convinced that the situation worldwide would deteriorate, in case of Europe the figure equalled to 55 per cent, in case of the Czech Republic it amounted to 49 per cent. Mild optimism observed prior to the summer holiday among the Czech public has been replaced by pessimism recently.¹ An eminent role in shaping and influencing of the public opinion, moods and sentiments is played by media.

¹ The complete report elaborated by the Public Opinion Research Centre within the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences is available at https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a5259/f9/oz200821.pdf (in Czech).

The way how they inform and interpret the epidemic is therefore crucial. Not by coincidence, the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš made an appeal to journalists not to scare people in connection with statistics of the new cases released on a daily basis.

In August, the numbers of newly infected reached the peaks, highly overcoming the springtime figures (for instance, 503 on the 21st of the month). Notwithstanding this fact, there was no dramatic situation, virtually no restrictive measures in force, sufficient medical capacities and the economy in operation. It confirms rightfulness of the increasingly frequent statements, according to which the former state restrictions were excessive, damaging and disrupting a wide array of processes in society, including the economic ones, seriously. The PM himself stated recently that the number of people who die of cancer in our country is *75 per day* on average. The number of victims of the COVID-19 amounted to 421 *in total* by the 29th of August, which is negligible in this context. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of victims died of other diseases, the coronavirus being only a secondary, minor factor. It is more than obvious that excessive restrictions claim more victims than the epidemic as such. It applies at least to limitations in standard health care, suspension and postponement of medical interventions or the simple fact of people's fear to seek medical attention which became widespread among a significant part of society. The situation in the Czech Republic has not been serious, which has been admitted by an increasing number of politicians and experts. Many politicians are aware that another wave of economic restrictions would bring about disastrous consequences.

A new wave of restrictions to begin

The dynamics and development of the epidemic has been different in individual parts of the country. Whereas in July, the most unfavourable situation was in the Moravian-Silesian Region on the east, in August the capital became the most problematic. In order to avoid global restrictions, the state and regional authorities as well as health officers and hygienist pushed for and introduced the strategy of the so-called smart quarantine and targeted, local restrictive measures. The system of the smart quarantine was designed with the aim of early identification, testing and isolation of the lowest number of people possible which is connected with use of digital tracing of possible contacts of the infected. Introducing this system, the Government referred to the practices used in South Korea or Singapore. Furthermore, a three grades scheme was presented, each grade corresponding to the epidemiological situation and the degree of risk of contagion in a chosen place. At the end of August, Prague was ranked as a region with higher

risk as the community contagion broke out. The disease has also spread among deputies after a former Minister of Defence got infected.

Let's remind that the first cases of the infection appeared on the 1st of March. During that month, the life of society was subjected to severe restrictions including the introduction of the state of emergency or social distancing practices. The restrictive regime started to be loosening by the end of April when the ban on free movement was annulled. In May, the first wave of opening commenced. The situation normalised in principle at the end of June. However, in the course of the second half July an opposite tendency appeared when stricter limitations on public events or a duty to wear masks in defined cases came into force. From the 1st of September on, wearing of masks has been compulsory in public transport, state offices or medical facilities. In August, negative reactions and disputes arose in relation to the Minister of Health's statements as to the alleged Government's plan to introduce masks wearing at schools, shops, restaurants, hairdresser's and other businesses. After public criticism, the Ministry backed away, limited the measures to the abovementioned cases. Since the beginning of September, duration of quarantine and isolation for the infected persons without any symptoms has been shortened to 10 days instead of former 14 days. After the end of the quarantine period, one is not obliged to be tested again. In case of occurrence of symptoms, the infected have to remain in isolation for other 4 days after their disappearance.

Revisions of education & election law

In response to the coronavirus crisis, the Czech deputies have prepared and put forward not only economic, social and epidemiologic regulations but also adapted education and election law. In August, the Chamber of Deputies passed an amendment defining distance learning. According to the amendment, pupils and students will be under an obligation to participate in the distance learning as a part of compulsory education. The compulsory distance education would be applied in case of state of emergency or closure of schools on the basis of decision made by Ministry of Health or regional hygienic authorities. The amendment is thus more general, not limiting itself only to epidemic crisis conditions. It can also be put into effect in case of natural disasters. The newly prepared legal regulation, however, does not define concrete forms and ways of realisation of distance learning, entrusting schools with this power. The distance education will not apply to children in nursery schools if they do not have the

obligation of pre-school education, as well as to students of language or primary art schools.² This year, all educational facilities have been closed since the 11th of March many of them remaining closed up to September. Even though some schools and universities started to be open in May, the school attendance was voluntary. In consequence, a part of pupils and students did not participate in the compulsory education at all. According to recent estimations, the figure of these amounted to 10 thousand students of primary and secondary schools, i.e. no more than 1 per cent. Nevertheless, the real number will probably be much higher.

The epidemic will also affect the regional and Senate election held in October. The deputies have promulgated a special law allowing persons in quarantine to take a vote. So far, there is not an electronic voting system hence the lawmakers defined two ways of personal attendance: (1) the so-called drive-in election posts (voting from one's car); and (2) a special election commission with portable ballot boxes. Thanks to these measures, citizens' suffrage will not be restricted.

² Pre-school education in nursery schools is obligatory for one year in the Czech Republic. But usually, kids go to these facilities three or more years, starting primary education at the age of 6 or 7. In addition, there is a traditionally high-quality system of art education affordable to any talented child, subsidised by the State significantly. See a related article *Art education in Czechia: envy of the world* by the Czech Radio: <https://english.radio.cz/art-education-czechia-envy-world-8108640>.