

# EUROPEUM BRIEF ON COVID-19

## Do Czechs Want a Stronger EU or a Convenient Scapegoat ?

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- **As a preface, it must be noted that this is not intended to be a critique of the Czech Covid-19 measures, which have been timely and so far reasonably efficient, nor is it an absolution of EU's actions during the crisis. The old adage of "everything you do before a pandemic will seem alarmist. Everything you did will seem inadequate afterwards" holds as much true to the EU as it does to Member States. However, once the crisis ends, the political struggle for the future of Europe and European democracy will erupt, which in turn will affect all citizens.**
- **The Covid-19 pandemic is already shaping up to become a deeper crisis of democracy, and the European Union. Some V4 leaders were swift to suggest sacrificing the European Green Deal and thereby future generations' existential living conditions in the name of short-term economic recovery. Domestically, V4 political elites show no qualms about deceiving the public by claiming credit at home for EU initiatives or misrepresenting them, while at the same time decrying the EU as inactive and dysfunctional, conveniently forgetting to mention the numerous initiatives that the EU is launching within its competencies.**

## What has the EU done during the crisis so far?

- [Joint public procurement of medical and protective equipment.](#)
- [Stockpiling and distribution of medical equipment](#), such as ventilators, personal protective equipment, reusable masks, vaccines and therapeutics, and laboratory supplies, the stockpiling costs being financed 90% by the European Commission.
- [Providing additional support through Horizon2020 to strengthen Covid-19 vaccine research.](#)<sup>1</sup>
- **Activating the EU Civil Protection Mechanism**<sup>2</sup>, under which 2280 citizens as of this writing have been helped by the EU to return to their home countries through EU co-financing, with an additional 80 planes planned to repatriate citizens. **The competence to activate this crisis mechanism lies firmly with the Member States.**
- [The EU is supporting jobs, businesses and the economy through massive emergency funds and investments.](#) The EU budget allocates €40 billion to bridge short-term financing of SMEs via the European Investment Bank. It allocates €74 billion towards SMEs and labour markets directed towards health care systems, which receivers have been eligible for since

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<sup>1</sup> The EU is fast-tracking and promoting research on COVID-19 by mobilising:

- €47.5 million for **17 projects for vaccines and treatment**
- €90 million in public and private funds for **therapeutics and diagnostics**
- €164 million for **SMEs and startups for innovative solutions** to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak

<sup>2</sup> Created after 9/11, it has been activated over 330 times, often in relation to natural disasters.

February 1, 2020.<sup>3</sup> [The European Central Bank has announced a €750 billion pandemic emergency purchase programme.](#)

**In sum, the EU is mobilizing 2 % of EU GDP in fiscal measures and 13 % of EU GDP in liquidity support.**

- **The EU is coordinating delivery of vital equipment through ERCC**<sup>4</sup> based on which countries have the greatest need. Hence, the Czech Republic has not (yet) become a recipient due to so far managing the crisis better than larger Member States.
- [The EU has called for countries to 'end selfishness' and assist Member States in dire need.](#)

This list could be a lot longer. This is merely a brief selection of initiatives the EU has either launched or existing policies, such as rescEU<sup>5</sup>, which have been activated, utilized or made available to Member States during this crisis. While those crisis measures cannot completely mitigate the upcoming economic crisis, all Member States would be manifestly worse off if they had not been taken. The economic measures mobilized are astronomical.

## Context is Everything

The EU cannot be absolved of mistakes, of which there are numerous not only in this crisis but in general. However, years of unchallenged misrepresentation and inadequate coverage of the EU in the Czech Republic by political elites and media alike have made the EU a convenient

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<sup>3</sup> Split over the following posts: €37 billion towards the Corona Response Investment Initiative; €29 billion EU Structural Funds; €8 billion of investment liquidity.

<sup>4</sup> Emergency Response Coordination Centre

<sup>5</sup> An upgrade to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism specifically designed to protect citizens from disasters and manage emergent risks.

scapegoat for domestic politicians irrespective of its actions or the benefits it conveys to its Member States. This crisis is no exception. Meanwhile, Russia and China are fallaciously being hailed as purely altruistic good Samaritans.

When China or Russia provide aid, appreciated as it rightfully should be, there is a failure to mention that this help is not borne out of altruism. Much of the equipment is paid for and not given. [Much of the equipment is faulty and of poor standard. This has also been the case in the Czech Republic.](#) Shipments of medical equipment regularly “disappear” without reimbursement, causing hospitals and nations to lose money as the Chinese claim no responsibility despite selling the equipment to a higher bidder without reimbursing the original buyer.<sup>6</sup> Russia has launched a disinformation campaign to sow discord within the EU.<sup>7</sup> There is a failure to highlight that the Covid-19 outbreak was exacerbated by initial Chinese efforts to suppress news and containment efforts through, for instance, prosecution of medical professionals. [Proper awareness has not been raised to the fact that the exclusion of Taiwan from the WHO due to China’s political aspirations could have saved lives.](#)

While any help is appreciated during a crisis, the promulgation of praise towards authoritarian regimes with clear ulterior motives and a proven track record of lacking altruism is puzzling, to say the least, when compared to the concrete assistance

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<sup>6</sup> [Odense University Hospital recently had 450.000 masks “disappear” from a Chinese shipment because it was sold to another bidder.](#)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/russian-media-spreading-covid-19-disinformation> & <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/eu-reports-that-russia-has-launched-a-disinformation-campaign-about-covid-19> & <https://www.dw.com/en/sierens-china-aid-with-ulterior-motives/a-52931397>

made available to Member States by the EU, which receives little to no quality coverage. Years of inadequate and uninformed coverage, political “leadership” and public debate on the EU in the Czech Republic is, for now, reaching its ugly culmination in a cacophony of [disinformation](#), such as [PM Babis neglecting to mention that the EU funds being made available now from the Cohesion Funds are from the 2014-2020 budget that the Czech Republic would otherwise have been unable to utilize due to lack of absorption capacity](#). Those funds would otherwise have gone to other countries or been incorporated into the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework budget pool.

## What EU does the Czech Republic actually want?

Public health is a domain firmly placed with Member States, not the EU. If citizens and their political elites want a powerful EU imbued with the power to take lead in tackling public health crises, the Member States must deliver those competences to the EU. As long as Member States are unwilling to do so, it is disingenuous to expect the EU to effectively lead the effort against Covid-19. It is emblematic of the cognitive dissonance of political elites in the V4 that decisive action is expected while competences to do so are not granted. You cannot have it both ways.

In a globalized and increasingly interconnected context, it is a worthy discussion to have; to tackle a pandemic, the EU *could* be a powerful actor *if* nations were willing to make it fit for the purpose. The same logic, of course, applies to climate change, another threat – and one dwarfing the Covid-19 pandemic by magnitudes – that will require unified global solutions rather than national. In the

aftermath of Covid-19, the battle for Europe will intensify; the narratives promulgated during the crisis will deeply impact the nature of this struggle between multilateralism and nation states, and deeply impact whether an EU fit for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be realized.

Is it too much to expect Czech political elites to cast off the victim-mentality used to justify the singular focus on maximizing EU funds and finally join the European Union as constructive members working towards strengthening Europe in a time of unparalleled instability?