

Hard-hit Czech Republic reaches 1 million confirmed cases

3 February 2021, by Karel Janicek



In this file photo dated Friday, Nov. 6, 2020, healthcare workers move a COVID-19 patient to the Motol hospital in Prague, Czech Republic. The hospital in Prague has admitted five patients in serious condition from other hospitals that were overrun due to the coronavirus pandemic. Reaching a milestone of one million confirmed cases, the battle against the pandemic is far from over in the Czech Republic. Amid warnings by experts against new contagious virus variants, one of the hardest hit European countries has been trying to avoid the mistakes of the past when soaring infections almost caused the collapse of the struggling health system. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek, FILE)

The Czech Republic has reached 1 million confirmed coronavirus cases, health authorities said Wednesday.

The battle against the pandemic is far from over in the hard-hit European Union country, which hopes to learn from previous mistakes that repeatedly allowed soaring infections to almost bring down the struggling health system.

The Czech Republic is by far the smallest of the 21 countries to surpass the milestone, with the U.S. leading the global table with more than 26 million confirmed cases.

"I'd like to say our approach has not been successful," said Jan Trnka, a biochemist from Prague's Charles University.

Trnka said the government—with three different health ministers in charge since the pandemic struck—has lacked a clear vision about what it wants to achieve and its measures have been met with a growing distrust from citizens.

Things might take a turn for the worse with the fast-spreading British variant of the virus.

"We'll likely have more people infected. We'll have more people in hospitals and more people will die," Trnka said.

Vaccinations might help, but around 50% of Czechs says they don't want to get inoculated because of safety fears and disinformation, according to polls.

"I wish we're all vaccinated to live without restrictions in the fall, but I'm pessimistic about it," Trnka said.



In this file photo dated Friday, Jan. 1, 2021, a man walks at an empty metro station in Prague, Czech Republic, during a night-time curfew imposed by the government that make it impossible to stage traditional New Year's

celebrations. Reaching a milestone of one million confirmed cases, the battle against the pandemic is far from over in the Czech Republic. Amid warnings by experts against new contagious virus variants, one of the hardest hit European countries has been trying to avoid the mistakes of the past when soaring infections almost caused the collapse of the struggling health system. (AP Photo/Petr David Jousek, FILE)

The Health Ministry said Wednesday that the day-to-day increase in new infections reached 9,057 cases the previous day for a total of just over 1 million.

With a population of 10.7 million, the country has registered 16,683 deaths.

Another European Union country, the Netherlands, reached the 1 million mark of confirmed cases on Wednesday.

The Czech Republic was spared the worst of the pandemic in the spring only to see its health care system near collapse in the fall and again in January after the [coalition government](#) led by Prime Minister Andrej Babis repeatedly let down pandemic guards despite warnings by experts.

The daily infection increases dropped after hitting a record high of almost 18,000 in early January but the numbers are still at dangerously high levels.

Health officials say there are 93,043 Czechs who are ill with COVID-19—5,811 of whom are hospitalized while 1,002 are in intensive care, putting the health system under increasing pressure.

The development forced the government last week to abandon its plans to reopen schools and ski resorts and further limit people's contacts and movement.

"There's no doubt that the COVID is a killer," Babis said. "We have to make more people realize that it's not a harmless flu, that it's a very dangerous virus. We have new variants of it. The situation's not good."

That was a different story from August when he claimed the Czech Republic was "the best in (dealing with) COVID," explaining there was no need to impose restrictions. Two months later, the country topped the world rankings of daily new COVID-19 cases and had the worst death rate by size of population in early January, a result of a decision to allow stores, bars and restaurants to reopen for several weeks before Christmas.



In this file photo dated Sunday, Jan. 10, 2021, former Czech Republic's President Vaclav Klaus addresses a crowd during a mass demonstration against the government's restrictive measures imposed to contain the coronavirus pandemic, in Prague, Czech Republic. Reaching a milestone of one million confirmed cases, the battle against the pandemic is far from over in the Czech Republic. Amid warnings by experts against new contagious virus variants, one of the hardest hit European countries has been trying to avoid the mistakes of the past when soaring infections almost caused the collapse of the struggling health system. (AP Photo/Petr David Jousek, FILE)

The virus took its toll.

According to the figures from Czech Statistics Office released on Tuesday, 16,700 more people died in 2020 than the previous year for a total of 129,100, most of them in October and November amid soaring infections.

"We need to state it loud and clear that what happened in the fall and has not been over yet is

the biggest death rate in this country since World War II," Jan Konvalinka, vice rector of Prague's Charles University told Czech public radio in January.

According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the Czech Republic still had the third-highest COVID-19 death rate in the EU for the past 14 days—205 per 1 million.

"We still have a huge number of infected and if the percentage of more contagious variants grows in the population we might be facing a very serious problem for a very long time," virologist Ruth Tachezy said.

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