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The Permanent Mission of the Czech Republic to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations at Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and is pleased to submit, in the attachment to this Note Verbale, its responses to the questionnaire on the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of young people according to the Human Rights Council Resolution 48/12.

The Permanent Mission of the Czech Republic to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration. *BJ*



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Study on the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights of young people – Human Rights Council Resolution 48/12: Reply of the Czech Republic

**1) *What are the main challenges that young people face in your country in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it? If any age-disaggregated data has been collected in this regard, please include it in your response.***

The crisis associated with the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the whole society, including young people. The Covid-19 crisis has had significant psychosocial impact on young people, causing disruption in their education and economic opportunities, social isolation or health issues.

**Education:** In the Czech Republic, the personal presence of pupils at schools was prohibited as early on 12 March 2020. This was repeated in the 2020/2021 school year. In spring 2021, it became apparent that Czech schools could implement distance learning, nevertheless, this new and sudden situation required adequate methodological, technical, financial and personnel support, which has been provided in various ways. Related educational challenges were early departure of young people from education, demotivation resulting from distance learning and lack of opportunities for practical training.<sup>1</sup>

For the Czech Republic, distance learning for such a long time and across all levels of education was a new experience. During 2020, the budget for regional education was strengthened in order to acquire ICT equipment to support distance learning. Schools that provide primary education to pupils were thus able to acquire the necessary ICT equipment at the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS), many educational projects were developed, which are still a welcome source of inspiration for distance learning. In September 2020, the MEYS issued a Methodological Recommendation for Distance Learning. In March 2021, the MEYS published a Methodology Guidance for Schools with a focus on mental health, with many recommendations, useful links and tips on how to focus on mental health at a time when social connections are limited. In the same month, a course called "Safe in Cyber!" was developed in partnership with National Cyber and Information Security Agency in order to explain risk in cyber space. The topic of **cybersecurity** was further addressed by organizing several other workshops and other programs. Another area affected by the Covid-19 pandemic was **sports**. In this regard, a Methodological Guideline was created by the University Sports Centre of the MEYS, which helps guide athletes to return to their training and subsequently competing as quickly and safely as possible.

The Czech Republic has supported and continues to support children and youth through subsidy programmes. The support is aimed primarily at regular and long-term activities focused on children and young people, at improving and developing the quality of non-formal education provision and at improving the conditions for organizations working with children and young people. The specific activities for 2021 were: reducing the impact of the covid-19 pandemic, linking formal and non-formal education, and intergenerational dialogue.

The "Together after COVID" call focused on activities of secondary schools providing vocational education. The aim was to develop the competences needed for an active civic, professional and personal life of pupils and to provide professional support to teaching staff in accordance with the Strategy of the Education Policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+. The activities were aimed at primary prevention of risky behavior and promotion of pupils' mental health, promotion and re-establishment of social ties, promotion of healthy life habits and attitude or promotion of mutual relations between pupils and between pupils and teachers. In addition, activities focused on global development education such as solidarity, volunteering, participation and taking responsibility outside the community, or mutual respect and tolerance of difference. In 2021, 90 projects were supported with the amount of 16,600,000.00 CZK.

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<sup>1</sup> Eurofound. Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the EU. Survey is available [here](#).

The **Summer Camps** call was intended for the implementation of summer camps aimed at reducing the negative impact of the covid-19 pandemic on children with compulsory school attendance in the 2020/2021 school year. The purpose of the grant was to promote the re-strengthening of social relationships with peers, to link formal and non-formal education with an emphasis on supplementing partial knowledge and skills, which may have been affected by the absence of full-time education during the school year, to promote children's interest in education, and to promote children's mental well-being and mental health.

With regard to **health issues** during the pandemic, young people were provided with the same health care as other population groups during the Covid-19 pandemic, yet some differences were applied in the case of applied government measures, given that young people tend to have a better course of the disease. The Czech Republic, like other countries, divided the population into various risk groups, which were related to the priority in providing vaccinations at a time when there was a shortage of vaccines (primarily spring and partly summer 2021). The Government has focused on active outreach to senior populations and other hard-to-reach groups to accelerate coverage among more vulnerable sections of the population. Subsequently, the Government rapidly opened up vaccine registration to the wider population, including young people. It is currently possible to vaccinate children from the age of 5 and, in the case of the third (booster) dose, from the age of 12.

The Czech Republic carefully monitors all key indicators (active cases, testing, vaccination, hospitalization, etc.) broken down into age groups, so public health authorities have detailed information on the prevalence of the disease in the population and therefore can prepare appropriate and targeted measures. In case of young people, public health authorities for instance generally increase testing rates in school facilities as the epidemiological situation worsens in order to reduce the burden of infection in the population (the disease often gradually spills over from school facilities into at-risk seniors).

The Czech government has also paid attention to **mental health** of young people. According to the report of the Government Council on Mental Health working group<sup>2</sup> there has been a deterioration in mental health in the population (the incidence of current mental illness has risen from about 20 % to 30 %). In the case of young people, stress and adverse lifestyle changes have increased. The helpline registered about a 30 % increase in calls related to domestic violence, a 30% increase in personal problems (including mental health problems) or a 30% increase in problems in the context of Internet environment (including sexual abuse).

A representative survey on mental health in the pandemic conducted by the Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education – Economics Institute (2,500 respondents, data collected every two weeks between March and June 2020) revealed that young people aged 18–24 and women with children comprised the most anxious and depressed grown ups in society. In the first months of the pandemic, 20% of respondents stated that they had suffered from impaired mental health (at least moderate depression or anxiety). This was a more than threefold increase on the figure prior to the pandemic (6%). This proportion reached as high as 36% for young people and 37% for women with children (Bartoš et al, 2020)<sup>3</sup>

The survey also mentioned a decrease in job vacancy in the three most affected sectors: Administration and support (decrease of 3.1%), professional, scientific and technical sector (decrease of 2.7%), construction sector (decrease of 1.3%). According to the survey, the Czech Republic had also one of the lowest rates (2 %) of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). On the other hand, the Czech Republic was stated as a country with the highest rate of NEETs due to provision of family or care responsibilities as their main reason (65%).

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<sup>2</sup> Available only in Czech: [Dopady-krize-zpusobené-koronavirem-SARS-CoV-2-a-duševního-zdraví-populace-ČR.pdf \(mzcr.cz\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Eurofound. Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the EU. Survey is available [here](#).

**2) What measures is your Government taking to support young people and ensure the full implementation of their rights during and after the pandemic? Please provide examples of policies and programmes adopted to this end, in particular regarding**

- ***right to work and social security (including, for example, to address the job loss, reduction of working hours, wage cut, etc.);***

Throughout the pandemic, young people have been provided with the access to all necessary social services and professional counseling. Selected services have been offered, due to measures taken, via online and phone consultations, and their operation has been extended. Facilities for children requiring immediate assistance operated throughout the whole period. In addition, the Government continuously mapped the situation in the field in individual facilities for children requiring immediate assistance in order to ensure the operation of facilities, some of which had to be partially closed due to quarantine measures. With regard to legislative changes, the amendment to the Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children (No. 363/2021 Coll.) introduced a uniform regulation of the support for young people who, after reaching adulthood or leaving full foster care, guardianship or institutional care, continue to fulfil the condition of dependency.

To protect families against income loss, a nursing benefit for employed parents who need to take care of children in quarantine or isolation was introduced providing them with up to 80% of daily wage from April 2020.

- ***right to education (including in the context of the closure of educational institutions and transition to online learning);***

Transformation of universities has continued with the aim of adapting to new forms of learning and in response to the changing needs of the labor market in post-covid renewal. The National Recovery Plan should enable financing the creation of new lifelong learning programs, courses aimed at upskilling and retraining, and courses leading to the acquisition of professional qualifications required for obtaining qualifications according to the National Qualifications Framework.

Examples of concrete measures with regard to **school support**:

- A development program Equipping School Counselling Facilities with Diagnostic Instruments in 2020 has been announced, the purpose of which is to improve the quality and unify the provision of services of school counselling facilities.
- In 2021, together with external experts, CZ has prepared School Security and Connectivity Standard and the Guide for School Principals on IT Management in Schools, which both help schools to update their digital infrastructure to today's standards.
- In 2021, CZ was preparing implementation of the RRF: Component 3.1: Innovation in education in the context of digitization, and its goal: at least 9 260 schools will be equipped with both basic and advanced digital technologies necessary for promoting digital literacy and teaching new informatics according to the revised curricula. For 2022, the plan is to prioritize support for schools that have already signed up or will sign up to adopt the revised curriculum in 2022. Those schools will receive finances to purchase advanced digital technologies.
- National recovery fund also responds the need for further digitalization of educational systems. It will focus on digitization of existing content and forms of education.
- Focus on a digital and information literacy along with the critical thinking of pupils and students. These are courses for teachers in the field of computer science and digital literacy in the period 2022-2025.

The aim of the activities is to increase the quality of education through a comprehensive support system for the most vulnerable schools, which have an above-average representation of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and often have insufficient support professions, which in turn leads to lower educational outcomes. The activity includes strengthening the competencies of pedagogical staff for working with heterogeneous groups of pupils, considering the specifics of

individual groups. Based on the experience from the verification of such a systematic support, a proposal for financing schools will be created according to the index determined by a combination of several indicators (for example, socio-economic disadvantage of pupils/schools, achieved educational results, etc.).

### **Tutoring for school pupils**

- The activities build on the National Tutoring Plan and partly on the so-called summer camps.
- The aim of the activities is to support pupils with a weaker socio-economic background and pupils at risk of school failure due to the impossibility of implementing full-time teaching in schools. The decrease in study results occurred mainly among pupils who participated in distance learning forms partly or not at all, in direct connection with an unsatisfactory home background and low motivation. This situation leads to a further deepening of inequalities between students and schools. In addition to the component leading to the supplementation of knowledge and skills, tutoring will also have a significant socializing effect.

As part of the National Recovery Plan, the Czech Republic is further developing employment policies (retraining and further vocational training), building on the Reskill and upskill flagship. In line with this EU flagship initiative, the National Recovery Plan aims to support the development of skills of Czech citizens in a lifelong perspective, focusing on the development of basic digital skills (in line with the following EU objectives: *"By 2025, the share of Europeans aged from 16 to 74 with basic digital skills should increase to reach 70 %. Education systems needs to be further adapted to the challenges of the 21st century"*), and further builds on the objectives of the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social justice and resilience.

In connection with the closure of educational institutions and the transition to online education, among other things, the Methodological Recommendations were issued for distance learning. The methodology summarizes the legal, organizational and pedagogical elements of distance learning. The obligation to educate in a distance way is a great challenge for all schools. However, the experience gained during the spring of the epidemic forms a solid foundation on which to build if the ban on the personal presence of children in schools is repeated. This manual is intended to help schools set distance learning rules. Distance education cannot completely replace regular teaching with all its aspects, including the role of socialization. Despite the possible difficulties in its implementation and realization, distance learning has the potential for the development of key competencies, digital literacy and the development of innovative methods or strengthening the role of formative feedback in the learning process.

- ***right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (including with the increase in domestic violence and abuse, anxiety and depression, stress caused by social isolation, etc.);***

Any form of isolation or a quarantine is a challenging experience. That is why there are mechanisms and tools helping to manage these situations, e.g. websites and crisis lines, through which institutions and volunteers offer information and assistance in connection with the pandemic. The topics of assistance focus mainly on psychological assistance for children and young people, isolation during a quarantine, the effects of the pandemic on the psyche and mental health.

As part of the support for the highest possible achievable level of physical health, the National Sports Agency established the Program of Support for Sports Organizations affected by the COVID-19 Global Pandemic "COVID-SPORT" concerned by the consequences of declaring a state of emergency in the Czech Republic and issuing emergency measures.

A number of measures have been introduced with regard to mental health. Crisis centers have been developed, crisis lines expanded, and special websites dedicated to mental health have been launched,

including practical instructions and advice of self-care <https://www.mymentalhealth.guide/>.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, financial measures have been introduced with regard to mental health support, including significant increase in funding for child/young outpatient psychiatry.

The Governmental Human Rights Commissioner together with chairpersons of Governmental Committees on the Rights of the Child and Domestic Violence organized a press conference in April 2020 to inform the public on available support. Contact details on relevant support services and NGOs including the Bright Sky application were distributed by a follow-up campaign and through the Czech Television, Czech Post as well as 17 transport companies. The Signal for Help for victims of domestic violence was also spread through social media and relevant staff such as mail couriers or pharmacists.

- ***right to participate meaningfully in political and public affairs (including in connection with the prohibition of gatherings and transition to online rallies);***

The Czech Republic actively and consistently supports meaningful, diverse and effective engagement of youth both at national and international level. Protection and promotion of human rights, both online and offline, is a longstanding priority of the Czech foreign policy. Equal participation in political and public affairs plays a crucial role in promotion of democracy and the rule of law. In line with the Human Rights and Transition Policy Concept, this topic belongs to the Czech Republic's key priorities in the area of human rights.

At the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, the Czech Republic together with Botswana, Indonesia, Peru and the Netherlands (core group), presented a resolution on **Equal participation in political and public affairs**<sup>5</sup>. The resolution was adopted by consensus, as was the case of all previous resolution on this topic submitted at the Human Rights Council in previous years, and co-sponsored by 69 countries. The resolution focuses on the exercise of the right to participate in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic recovery, and recognizes the importance of genuine periodic elections. Among other things, it underlines **the importance of the active, meaningful and inclusive participation of youth** in decision-making and the important role that youth can play in the promotion of sustainable development and the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights, and the importance of removing barriers that prevent the meaningful participation of youth in public affairs. The resolution further includes a reference to the guidelines on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs, elaborated by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as a set of orientations for states, in the formulation and implementation of their policies and measures concerning equal participation in political and public affairs.

The Czech Republic further strives for visibility and participation of young delegates within international fora, including through online platforms.

### ***3) What role have the young people had in COVID-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts in your country?***

During the pandemic, young people in the Czech Republic participated as volunteers, helping, for example, with sewing face masks, babysitting, tutoring, helping seniors, securing purchases, etc. Volunteer canters also operated within the pandemic. The High Students Union (ČSU), a student NGO association representing about 30,000 high school students, also called for a safe return to schools (they also drew attention to the risk of stress associated mainly with tests and grading). In order to address shortages of health workers during the peaks of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government has significantly mobilized medical and nursing students who have assisted in health and social care facilities and mobile vaccination teams. A large part of the students worked in these facilities for a long time as volunteers, but with regard to the course of the epidemiological situation, the Government had called students of certain years of medical schools to duty. The feedback received from medical

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<sup>4</sup> Information about all (old and new) measures can be found here: <https://covid.gov.cz/en/situations/psychological-help>.

<sup>5</sup> [A/HRC/RES/48/2 - E - A/HRC/RES/48/2 -Desktop \(undocs.org\)](#)

facilities regarding student assistance during the Covid-19 epidemic has been positive, according to the Ministry of Health.

To address the younger audience, the Office of the Government cooperated with young influencers on a TikTok campaign to support vaccination.

**4) *What measures is your Government taking to value/encourage the role of youth in COVID-19 response, vaccination and recovery efforts?***

The Czech Government developed comprehensive measures for population as a whole, not exclusively for young people, notably in order to raise awareness, to combat disinformation and misinformation, and, in particular, to improve vaccination rates. In order to raise awareness about the issue, a special campaign "Together Against Coronavirus" was introduced, using TV commercials, social media advertisements and other media. This campaign has been complemented by a vaccination campaign.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Health has created a special website dedicated to the pandemic, which contains relevant statistics, specific measures, daily reports, access to registration system, or basic facts to uproot disinformation <https://koronavirus.mzcr.cz/en>. The Office of the Government has created a similar website focused on practical advice and questions (e.g. useful information for people with disabilities, foreigners, etc.): <https://covid.gov.cz/en/>. Both websites offer a wide range of important information, including for young people.

Due to the dynamics of ageing of the population the specific experience with the Covid-19 pandemic, the demand for health workers has been increasing in recent years. The Ministry of Health supported the "study health" information campaign, of which aim is to attract young people to study at secondary and higher vocational medical schools and to work in health care.<sup>6</sup>

With regard to financial support and recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic, the Government of the Czech Republic has prepared the National Recovery Plan. The investments included in the National Recovery Plan are divided into 6 pillars, which are further divided into components and specific reforms and investment actions. One of the pillars also focuses on education and the labor market.

A crucial tool for mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the so-called Recovery and Resilience Fund. The National Recovery Plan is a strategic document on the basis of which the Czech Republic applied for a financial contribution from this instrument, amounting to approximately CZK 190 billion. Part of the funds in the amount of CZK 1 billion is also intended to support tutoring.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been interfering with the education regime in Czech schools since March 2020. The exclusion of full-time teaching has significant negative effects on pupils' educational results and an increase in educational inequalities. The reduced level of education is also reflected in the future earnings of current pupils and students, for many decades of their productive lives. It is therefore important to focus on replacing the lack of education by tutoring, which proved to be effective in the autumn of 2021. The current survey, which focused on feedback on the autumn support for tutoring, showed that the addressed directors were satisfied and succeeded in meeting the main objectives.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports also supports youth organizations that carry out leisure activities for children and youth or focus their activities on the support and development of talents, through subsidy programs.

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<sup>6</sup> : <https://www.studujzdravku.cz/> (only in Czech)