

First in Masks? How Czechs Wore Face Masks When There Weren't Any Available

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By

On March 18, 2020, the Czech Republic became the first country in Europe to legislate mandatory coverage of the mouth and nose in all public areas in an attempt to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. One could no longer walk down the street, use public transport, enter shops or pharmacies, go to school, or pass through communal areas of shared housing (such as elevators in apartment blocks), without covering their face with a scarf or face mask. Residents were given under 48 hours (i.e. until midnight March 19th) to comply with the new legislation. But how could they do so when face masks were already in short supply?

In the days leading up to the announcement, there had been a popular upsurge in mask use. Surgical face masks were donned by politicians and public figures, including the Prime Minister, during press conferences, on TV, and in Parliament. Social media influencers, such as Czech entrepreneur Petr Ludwig, urged that everyone should be wearing masks, under the motto “masks for all” (Ludwig 2020). Prior to the nation-wide ruling, facial covering was already mandatory in some Czech towns and municipalities.

Given, however, that many shops were already sold out of masks, the government mandate threatened to plunge the country into confusion. Notably, those caught mask-less faced not only social opprobrium but stiff legal measures; as one media outlet warned, “the Czech prime minister pointed out that the deliberate spread of coronavirus is considered a crime with the sentence of up to 12 years in prison. If the police officers see someone without protective equipment on the face, they can order the person to leave the area or impose a fine of up to 10,000 korunas (€362)” (Remix 2020).

The face mask law, which was (with some exceptions) largely rescinded on March 25, 2020, was part of a broad array of legislation promoting an aggressive stance against the spread of COVID-19. The first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Czech Republic on March 1, 2020. Twelve days later, the government declared the first nation-wide state of emergency in modern history. Schools and many businesses were closed, and within a few days the international border was sealed off with all

non-residents denied entry as of March 16. As of this writing over four months later (July 12, 2020), with 13,115 cases and 352 deaths, the nation has suffered comparatively lower rates of COVID-19 than neighbouring Germany and Austria (“Onemocn?ni” 2020).

Face masks formed a pivotal part of the government’s containment strategy (Babiš 2020). But while the government was more than happy to mandate their use, it was roundly criticized for doing so without actually ensuring the availability of sufficient numbers of masks to keep everyone covered. Despite this, uptake of the new legislation was a resounding success as there was a near instant mobilization of face mask production. While some of this activity was spearheaded by small businesses, societies, and clubs (for example, fashion students at Prague’s Academy of Art, Architecture and Design who sewed face masks for a nearby maternity hospital (Tait 2020), it was largely undertaken by individual women who swung into action across the nation.





Photos: Antonio Cossa

Women young and old pulled out their sewing machines and transformed their living rooms and bedrooms into sites of domestic production. Over 43,000 people, mainly women, joined the “?esko sews facemasks” (“?esko šije roušky”) Facebook group where they shared patterns, advice on mask sanitization, and tips on how to revitalize dusty sewing machines. A subtab of over 2,000 entries is devoted to detailing individual producers’ craftsmanship, sharing pictures of their productions or videos of themselves sewing in action.



Photos: Antonio Cossa

While production was not limited to women, it was largely a female endeavour, often portrayed as aligned with traditional gendered divisions of labour. Having now spent several weeks scrolling through posts on this and similar Facebook pages, all of the ones I read, bar one, were from women, some of whom appear to be sewing cloth masks in the hundreds. According to Czech anthropologist Petra Ezzeddine, women from ethnic minority groups, including members of Roma, Vietnamese,

Muslim, and refugee communities, took a particularly prominent role, with local coverage highlighting their contributions to the nation-wide campaign. Photographer Antonio Cossa (whose images are reproduced here) has produced a stunning visual montage of women's efforts, documenting the intensity of their labour.



Photos: Antonio Cossa

The “?esko sews facemasks” Facebook page acted as a clearance

centre with posts from those who had more material than they could use, from sewers who offered to give away masks they made, and from those in need of facial coverings. Another website – Damerousky.cz (literally: “we will give face masks”) – was set up with an interactive map enabling those who need masks to quickly locate distribution sites.



Photos: Antonio Cossa

“Need” has multiple definitions. The initial drive was to have some sort of

nose and mouth covering; while masks were being hurriedly made and distributed, there was also the proliferation of instructions (in both Czech and English) on how to produce your own “emergency face mask” out of a handkerchief and rubber bands or using an old t-shirt. For example, targeting English-speaking expats, Damerousky.cz offered detailed instructions on the “No-sewing T-shirt style mask,” explaining, “You need a cotton shirt that you are not sorry to lose and some scissors. See [the video tutorial](#), no need to understand Czech.”

But quickly, there were moves to not only diversify but upscale. Amidst the sea of plain white or light blue surgical-style masks often worn by state officials, there appeared masks of contrasting colours or paisley patterns. Face masks were transformed into creative emblems as men, women, and children donned camouflage masks, bright yellow masks decorated with black ribbons, masks emblazoned with images of fire trucks or Minecraft constructions, masks made to match cloth handbags. Within a few weeks of its launch, the Facebook site was inundated with requests for specific styles or themes (e.g. “does anyone have masks decorated with white terrier dogs?”).

Trade in face masks was largely non-monetary, conducted on an as-needed basis. It was underpinned by social values that stress collective care and reciprocal responsibility (which are sometimes, particularly among older generations, articulated through the concept of solidarity (*solidárnost*), as promoted during the state socialist era (Trnka 2017a). Spurred in part by wariness of the state’s abilities (to provide masks, which were in short supply), members of the general public took on this task by providing for one another. The emphasis on collective care, moreover, shaped not only the wide-scale production and free distribution of face masks but the very rationale behind their use.

Czech public health messages clearly delineated that wearing a mask enables one to protect others as the first step in an act of reciprocal care. A Public Service Announcement distributed by Czech entrepreneur and social influencer Petr Ludwig on YouTube and endorsed by officials in the Czech government evokes the #Masks4All motto: “I protect you, you protect me” (“Czech PSA” 2020). Foregrounding statements by Czech scientists, the video was filmed in English in order to make internationally accessible its call to other countries to follow the Czech example of mandating face masks. Its message received the highest level of government endorsement when a link to the video was tweeted by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš as part of a pointed jab at President Donald Trump. Exhorting Trump to take heed of the Czech approach to Covid-19, Babiš’s tweet declared: “Mr. President [@realDonaldTrump](#), try tackling virus the Czech way. Wearing a simple cloth mask, decreases the spread of the virus by 80 %!” ([Babiš2020](#)).

While masks have historically often been used to hide one's identity (i.e. the masked robber) or shield oneself (e.g. wearing a scarf to protect oneself from the cold), face masks have now been turned into a marker of collective care, signifying one's effort to protect others who will, in turn, endeavour to protect them and thus together protect the nation. These sorts of efforts may come more easily to a nation familiar with conceptualizing health as a public good.

When it comes specifically to respiratory health, the Czech Republic has spent decades emphasizing the need for collective, and in particular, government-directed action to mitigate respiratory distress, as I have documented elsewhere (Trnka 2017a, 2017b). While responding to a global pandemic is different from trying to mitigate asthma, the sense of health, including respiratory health, as a collective problem in need of widespread, ideally state-led but also publically-engaged solutions, is arguably much more embedded in the disease imaginary in the Czech Republic than it is in places such as the United States.

Face masks have also made frequent, and often dramatic, appearances on the political stage, particularly during public confrontations over the government's responsibilities to ensure air quality. In recent years, Czech media stories have repeatedly covered whether or not running or exercising in surgical masks will protect against inhaling toxins (often suggesting that they will not) (e.g. Léblová 2017). Czech environmentalists' calls for collective action to support protecting respiratory health have involved their own set of facial coverings with activists eager to dramatically evoke the dangers of air pollution often donning rubber gas masks reminiscent of WWII (Trnka 2017c). In such contexts, the face mask is not only protective but confrontational, highlighting both an escalating threat as well as state neglect – concerns that take us right back to current debates over COVID-19.

As Tereza Stöckelová, Kateřina Kolářová and Lukáš Senft (2020) of the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences have argued with respect to the COVID-19 face mask phenomenon, what started off as a largely cooperative endeavour is increasingly being portrayed by critics from all sides of the political spectrum as not only a case of state ineptitude (by passing a decree enforcing masks without providing them) but also a potential return to a totalitarian state that restricts civil liberties and demands citizens' compliance with top-down measures instigated 'for their own good.' Clearly, the face mask rulings have not only thrown the Czech Republic into the global spotlight, but reopened and created fresh political fissures.

As the Czech Republic eases its way out of lockdown, face masks – with or without white terriers – have been in less demand. Since early April,

masks have not been required in parks or outdoor nature areas, and in early May they disappeared from many school classrooms. Currently masks are no longer mandatory outdoors, on most public transport and in most in-door facilities, with some regional exceptions. Immortalized on Facebook, in print and online media, and in family photo collections, they may well remain a reminder of how a nation of sewers creatively rose to the challenge to keep its citizens covered in a collective effort to contain COVID-19.

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