



USING SCIENCE DIPLOMACY  
FOR ADDRESSING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

## SCIENCE DIPLOMACY AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES: BETWEEN NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN NARRATIVES

THE ZIKA EPIDEMICS IN 2015 AND 2016 PROVIDED A PLATFORM FOR FURTHER ELABORATION OF SCIENCE DIPLOMACY USED BY THE EU INSTITUTIONS AND EU MEMBER STATES. THE RESPONSE WAS CHARACTERISED BY AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE POLITICAL, DIPLOMATIC, MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITIES PERFORMED WITHIN NATIONAL, EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS.

The Zika outbreak in 2015 and 2016 triggered an intensive response by the EU. The response was characterised by an interplay between political, diplomatic, medical and scientific communities. The response to the Zika epidemics used primarily an institutional and legal framework established during previous global epidemics, in particular the outbreaks of SARS (2003), MERS (2009) and Ebola (2013). The reaction of the EU and the three Member States researched in this case (Germany, Czech Republic, United Kingdom) covered a heterogeneous catalogue of activities which included political prioritisation of science diplomacy, an enhanced framework for data collection and data sharing, the internationalisation of research, new funding schemes and, last but not least, an operational response to the crisis.

Synthesizing the EU's and the researched Member States' reactions to the Zika epidemic, four issues relevant for science diplomacy should be highlighted. Firstly, the Zika outbreak has not triggered a fundamental change in the European or national reaction to global health issues. Instead, the reaction to Zika has built upon already existing institutional platforms and narratives. If there was an epidemic which caused substantial changes (both institutional and operational), it was Ebola. Secondly, regardless of the global impact of the Zika epidemic, the geographical position and the intensity of bilateral relations with Latin America had significant impact on science diplomacy related to the Zika outbreak. The relatively low profile of the Czech reaction to the Zika epidemic (compared to the German and British ones) was at least partially caused by the relatively low intensity of bilateral relation between the Czech Republic and Latin American countries. Thirdly, science diplomacy continues to operate within the general national diplomatic narrative of a country, regardless of how obscured the narrative might be. In this context, the German use of science diplomacy during the Zika epidemic can be interpreted as an attempt to globalise German scientific excellence, combined with some altruistic motives. In the UK, science diplomacy is perceived as a confirmation of an already existing and expanding "Global Britain" concept. The Czech case, in contrast, demonstrates the reaction of a smaller country with limited resources and aspirations. Therefore, the Czech reaction focused on addressing direct elements of the Zika threat to Czech citizens and territory; additional activities were either triggered by direct requests from other institutions or by ad hoc research projects. Fourthly, the more intergovernmental 'Union method' (as opposed to the 'Community method') can be identified in the European reaction to the Zika epidemics. It included a strong focus on a securitisation element of the science diplomacy reaction to infectious diseases. A preferred institutional pattern cannot be identified for science diplomacy efforts in this area: all states researched used a combination of national channels, the existing EU framework as well as other institutional platforms (such as the G7 and G20, which were used as fora to bring up the topic by Germany and the UK) when available.



### KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS CASE STUDY

- » Zika has not been a game changer for infectious diseases related science diplomacy.
- » Geographical position and the intensity of bilateral relations with Latin America had a significant impact on science diplomacy during the Zika outbreak.
- » Science diplomacy continues to operate within the general national diplomatic narrative of a country.
- » The European reaction to Zika epidemics corresponds to the 'Union method' of cooperation.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- » The use of science diplomacy in the context of global epidemics should not be taken for granted. While the science diplomacy concept has its place in the diplomatic and scientific communities, it seems to be used less intuitively by stakeholders responsible for public health management.
- » Science diplomacy for infectious diseases will need to adapt not only to the medical aspects of the infectious diseases but also to a changing political and societal environment, such as new migration patterns, the erosion of governance structures in many low income countries and the shift in the vaccination paradigm in developed states.



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[s4d4c.eu](mailto:s4d4c.eu) · [twitter.com/S4D4C](https://twitter.com/S4D4C) · [contact@s4d4c.eu](mailto:contact@s4d4c.eu)

CASE AUTHORS: IVO ŠLOŠARČÍK (CHARLES UNIVERSITY),  
NADIA MEYER (GERMAN AEROSPACE CENTER), JENNIFER CHUBB (UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD)

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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
Charles University



diplomatische akademie wien  
Vienna School of International Studies  
Vienna University of Economics and Business



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