Local government fighting COVID-19: the Case of Slovenian Municipalities[1]

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Abstract: *When the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus broke out, it was initially assumed that Slovenian municipalities would successfully cope with the crisis situation due to their experience in dealing with natural and other disasters. Nevertheless, the unprecedented pandemic posed significant challenges to local governments, especially in the first wave, from managing responses to an unknown crisis situation to ensuring the safety of citizens in times of extreme uncertainty. Using a four-dimensional framework, the article analyses the results of the first post-COVID-19 survey of mayors of Slovenian municipalities, which reveals differences and similarities in policies to contain and prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus disease. The analysis proves that there is no single and well-established procedure for dealing with a crisis situation. Indeed, responses varied from municipality to municipality, and the intensity of action depended to a large extent on the commitment, initiative and innovation of the individual mayor.*

Key words: ***decision making, crisis, COVID-19, municipality, Slovenia.***

The Year of Unexpected, Unknown and Uncertainty

As we entered 2020, no one could have guessed that this year would have gone down in history as *Annus Horribilis*. In the Republic of Slovenia, the public expected a dynamic political arena in which the conflicts[2] between the coalition and the opposition would intensify, but no one expected – despite the first

1 The author acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding P5-0206, Defence Science).

2 More about political situation in Slovenia in Haček (2019).

information about the spread of the unknown virus in China spread through various media – such drastic changes in everyday life.

The first unexpected situation arose at the end of January 2020, when former Prime Minister Marjan Šarec resigned at a press conference without informing his coalition partners about this decision. At the same time, Šarec called for early elections (although there was already a serious threat from the COVID-19 pandemic); however, two (now former) coalition partners recognised the seriousness of the situation and started coalition negotiations with the opposition leader Janez Janša. On 12 March 2020, the new centre-right government was formed, ironically just hours after the former Minister of Health had declared a coronavirus epidemic for the entire Slovenian territory. Certainly, this was the worst possible time to form a government, but alas, the new government had little choice but to immediately begin implementing the Infectious Disease Strategy and the National Plan. However, it did not take long to discover that the previous government had left the country unprepared, as the National Strategic Reserve Centre was virtually empty in terms of basic protective equipment (such as masks, gloves and other sanitary materials).

Meanwhile, the number of infected citizens increased rapidly, partly due to the unfortunate timing that coincided with the return of (COVID-19 infected) citizens from abroad (especially Italy) after winter (ski) holidays. This led to a rapid spread of the disease in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and among health and medical staff; the virus soon invaded nursing homes for the elderly. In the absence of a functioning national government, the municipalities carried a heavy burden during the first wave of the pandemic. This was somehow to be expected, as they have extensive experience in dealing with various crisis situations (Prebilič – Kukovič 2021; Prebilič 2022), mostly caused by natural and other disasters. However, the COVID-19 situation was much more difficult, as it presented at least a threefold challenge: It was a completely new phenomenon, unknown to the medical profession; the disease was spreading throughout the population, which meant that, unlike natural and other disasters, its effects were not spatially limited and therefore required simultaneous action throughout the country; last but not least, the lack of experience with the disease and the rapid changes in lifestyles triggered various emotional reactions among citizens, ranging from fear and anxiety to anger and loss of trust in the various "crisis managers", which undoubtedly included local leaders. In this respect, municipalities were forced to adopt improvised measures and responses to an unknown crisis, depending mainly on the activation, initiative and improvisation of the mayor, as well as ensuring the safety of citizens in the midst of extreme uncertainty.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the struggle of Slovenian municipalities in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis. The article presents the results of the first survey of mayors of Slovenian municipalities after the COVID-19 crisis,

which reveals differences and similarities in the measures taken at the municipal level to contain and prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. We test the assumption that a so-called "bottom-up" approach to the COVID-19 crisis has emerged in Slovenian municipalities.

The main research method was a survey of Slovenian mayors conducted between 15 June 2021 and 15 July 2021. The invitation to the survey was sent to all 212 mayors of Slovenian municipalities, to which 76 mayors responded, representing 36 % of the mayor population.[3] The time frame of the analysis referred specifically to the first (spring 2020) and, to a lesser extent, the second (autumn and winter 2020–2021) wave of the COVID-19 epidemic. The survey was divided into two parts: The first part contained 18 closed-ended questions and the second part contained seven open-ended questions. While all 76 mayors answered the first part of the survey, some chose not to answer the second part, while others answered this part in particular detail. Prior to the survey, we conducted a smaller number of interviews with selected mayors to test the validity and meaningfulness of the questions.

In the first part of the article, we address crisis management and then lead into the second part of the article, where we focus on the local policies adopted in order to contain and prevent the spread of coronavirus through four dimensions:[4] 1) beginning preparations for the COVID-19 crisis; 2) activating the first stage of response to the COVID-19 crisis; 3) disclosing COVID-19 crisis information; and 4) balancing COVID-19 measures and local economy.

Managing Crisis Situations

We start the chapter with a discussion of old and new ways of crisis management that (local) authorities can use. Baubion (2013) describes how authorities in the past have mainly relied on 'siloed approaches' characterized by crisis management by individual sectors rather than at a central level. He highlights the many features of this approach, such as risk assessments, allocating budgets for emergency response, developing contingency plans, procuring equipment and supplies, creating crisis management structures, and conducting training and crisis simulations. Experts use experience-based scenarios in this approach as a tool for assessing risks and creating recovery plans. Therefore, we can conclude that the purpose of this crisis management approach is to create an authority that is ready to implement a resolution plan, has a response capability, and is able to allocate resources. In addition, Baubion (2013) presented a new approach to crisis management that is more suitable for previously unknown crises. This approach is characterized by being unprecedented and by incorporating

3 More about the survey in Kukovič (2021).

4 Our four-dimensional framework is based on the idea of the five-dimensional approach of Zhou and Xin (2021).

threats and risks that are unknown. Instead of comprehensive planning based on predefined scenarios, the new method envisages the creation of a response network that can be adapted and expanded according to the needs and dynamics of the crisis. From this perspective, the new approach can be described as "whole-of-government" or "whole-of-society" with the authority having the role of facilitating the participation of the entities that make up the response network. Strong leadership and shared values and principles are extremely important to the successful implementation of this approach.

Joyce (2021: 3–5) adds that the analysis of studies of (local) authorities operating in crisis, emergency or disaster situations also highlights the following aspects of crisis management:

- *Decision-making style:* Two styles are discussed, namely the command-control style, which presumably leads to faster actions and is more suitable for the traditional mode of crisis management (Boin – 't Hart 2003), and the pragmatic-experimental style, which involves learning, flexibility and refinement of strategy and is more suitable for novel crises (Ansell and Boin 2019).
- *Authority's organisational centralisation:* It is argued that centralised decision making is not appropriate for managing novel crises. Instead, multi-level coordination (i.e., centralised leadership combined with distributed discretion) through less centralised control is more appropriate.
- *Expert advice*: An authority responsible for strategic preparedness planning should emphasise expert simulation to support risk assessment. In addition, the availability and influence of different advices can affect the authority's prioritisation, the strategic planning, and decisions and actions.
- *Strong leadership*: In times of crisis, strong leadership is critical to avoid uncertainty. This can be demonstrated by leaders' realistic promises as they seek to reassure the public as much as possible about the situation. On the other hand, weak leaders may be tempted to make unrealistic promises about what the authority can do and how quickly the crisis will be resolved (Boin – 't Hart 2003).
- *Competent response*: An authority must take the right actions in preparing for and responding to a crisis situation, as well as execute strategic decisions in an effective way. Key decisions may include deciding how much effort and resources should go into prevention and how much into treating the affected people.
- *Blame game*: A blame game can be defined as public debates and disputes over who is responsible for mistakes or failures. Elected leaders can suffer reputational damage from the blame game that can develop during and after a crisis.

If we apply the above aspects of crisis management to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following diagram can be designed.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the managing COVID-19 pandemic



Source: Author's own presentation based on Joyce (2021: 6).

In modern democracies, local authorities play an essential role in achieving social governance, political inclusion, cultural development, environmental protection and economic growth. From this point of view, local government oversees administrative, political, social and environmental issues (Koprić 2012: 8–9), which means that it has a relatively strong influence in a given area (Kukovič 2018). Among the main obligations and various specific tasks assumed by local leadership, prevention of potential risks and dealing with public emergencies are two of the most important. Therefore, the sudden occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic was a real challenge and a great test for local governments.

Variance of Local Government Responses in Slovenia

Arising from the general perspective, the exercise of local self-government is a demanding task, primarily related to the division of competences between the state and the municipality as the only local government unit in Slovenia (Kukovič et al 2016: 303–306; Haček 2020: 88–89). Thus, the inhabitants of Slovenia exercise local self-government in the municipalities, which are essen-

tially responsible for such a wide range of activities[5] that cannot be found in any other system of government. It should be noted that Slovenian municipalities are not responsible for the performance of all public functions in their territory, but only for matters of local importance (Haček 2020: 87–88). When dealing with crisis situations (such as natural and other disasters), the municipality is responsible for organising rescue and relief operations in order to protect and rescue, as well as for managing all local matters of public importance (Local Self-Government Act 2007: Article 21).

Dealing with a crisis is not an easy task for any authority, especially when it involves managing a completely unknown, highly virulent virus in local communities where people are used to social contact. Because of its high infectivity and multiple modes of transmission, coronavirus has been shown to be very difficult to contain. At least in the early stages of COVID-19 crisis and in the absence of a fully functional national government, mayors, as local leaders, were cast in the role of decision-makers and protectors of human health.

1) Beginning preparations for the COVID-19 crisis

We begin our analysis of responses to the COVID-19 with the first dimension, which highlights the vigilance of local authorities in responding to the initial information about the COVID-19 pandemic and implementing preventive measures. We asked mayors when they started preparing for the COVID-19 situation, and about a third of respondents (34%) answered that they started preparing as soon as they heard about the infections in neighbouring countries, i.e. before the first case was confirmed in Slovenia. In addition, almost half of the mayors (48 %) answered that they started preparing the crisis team, the basic strategy to prevent the spread, checking sanitary and first aid equipment and other activities immediately after the first infected person was detected in Slovenia. Only 18 % of mayors answered that they started preparations only when the Slovenian government had already declared the epidemic for the entire national territory.

In addition, we asked the mayors about specific activities that were part of the preparations. Table 1 shows that the most common activities carried out by mayors during preparations for the upcoming COVID-19 crisis were the review and definition of preventive measures (84 %) and the formation of a team of experts to prepare emergency plans (73 %). More than half of the participating mayors (57 %) also conducted a review and inventory of protective equipment and brainstormed on the potential risks that the COVID-19 crisis (could) cause to citizens. A slightly smaller age of mayors took preparations a step further by determining the appropriate infrastructure in the event of quarantine and isolation or simulating the worst-case scenario that could affect their municipality.

5 From public primary health care, pre- and primary education, care for the elderly, social and housing issues, public local transport, water supply, sewerage, garbage collection, etc.

Table 1: Activities that were included in preparations for the COVID-19 crisis

		%
1	review and definition of preventive measures	84
2	formation of a team of experts to prepare emergency plans	73
3	consideration and anticipation of potential risks	57
4	worst-case scenario simulation	23
5	a review and inventory of protective equipment	57
6	determining the appropriate infrastructure in the event of quarantine and isolation	39

* The percentages in the table present share of mayors that expressed agreement.

In addition to the listed activities, the mayors carried out some other actions as part of the preparations, such as activating the municipal Civil Protection forces, self-initiating provision of protective equipment, informing citizens about the new coronavirus and its possible spread, coordinating possible actions in case of disease cases in schools and kindergartens, preventively cancelling all (major) public events, restricting access to closed public spaces where a larger number of people could gather, and the like. Based on these data, we note that the mayors were very self-initiated and did not wait for instructions from the national government.

2) Activating the first stage of response to the COVID-19 crisis

The timing of the decision to raise the health emergency varied from municipality to municipality and depended on many factors, such as the number of confirmed cases, the number of potentially infected persons, and mortality rates. As a first step, mayors were asked about their reaction when the first infected cases appeared in the municipality.

Table 2: Response upon detection of the first infected cases with coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 in the municipality

		%
1	issuing a normative act restricting movement in the municipality	36
2	inform citizens of instructions to prevent the spread of infection	89
3	proposing restrictions on visits and access to the elderly home	18
4	proposing temporary closing of the school and kindergarten	17
5	ban on the use of all municipal playgrounds, sports facilities and other public areas	88
6	prohibited by decree gatherings in municipal public places	68

* The percentages in the table present share of mayors that expressed agreement.

Once the virus began to spread in the municipality, most mayors (89 %) stepped up to inform citizens of instructions to prevent the spread of infection. As shown in Table 2, the majority of mayors (88 %) also banned the use of all municipal playgrounds, sports facilities, and other public areas. In addition, more than half of the mayors (68 %) strictly prohibited by decree gatherings in municipal public places (both indoor and outdoor). More than a third of mayors (36 %) issued a normative act restricting movement in the municipality. As the virus was extremely dangerous for the elderly population and had already invaded homes for the elderly, some mayors proposed restrictions on visits and access to facilities with this vulnerable population. As the virus spread to kindergartens and schools, some mayors proposed closing these facilities. One mayor even closed the primary school to prevent further spread of the virus, although this policy is not even part of the mayor's powers. At the same time, mayors set up centres to help citizens, established an emergency telephone number and even organised the production of masks and distributed them to households. They also helped to procure and provide protective equipment for key services in the municipality.

Despite all the above responses and measures, the number of infected citizens increased, and some mayors began to tighten measures more and more. Based on this, we were interested in the factors that contributed to stricter measures. In a second step, we asked the mayors what was the reason for tightening the initial decisions. Table 3 shows that two-thirds (67 %) of the mayors introduced stricter measures because they followed the instructions of the advisory group to the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and/or the national government (6 2%). In addition, half of the respondents took stricter measures based on calculations and forecasts – they considered the number of

Table 3: Factors that contributed to stricter measures

		%
1	the number of confirmed cases in the municipality	52
2	number of confirmed cases in nearby municipalities	49
3	assessment of crisis escalation / estimated number of potential infectionss	50
4	personal experience (the mayor or someone from the family was infected)	2
5	number of COVID-19 deaths / mortality rate	9
6	recommendations of the municipal expert team	38
7	instructions from the national government	62
8	instructions of the advisory group to the Government of the Republic of Slovenia	67

* The percentages in the table present share of mayors that expressed agreement.

confirmed cases in the municipality and/or in neighbouring municipalities and estimated the number of potential infections and the escalation of the crisis. In addition, the mayors discussed the situation with the municipal expert team and forces from Civil Protection and took decisive action on their recommendations. Some mayors took stricter measures based on the number of COVID-19 deaths in their municipality and the mortality rate in the country. Finally, two% of the mayors had personal experience with coronavirus.

Analysis of the responses to COVID-19 reveals differences between the communities. Since there were no uniform guidelines or protocols for dealing with the COVID-19 situation, responses varied and depended mainly on the mayor's individual actions, commitment, efforts, innovation and ingenuity, and leadership skills. In addition, the COVID-19 situation varied widely. While some municipalities faced increasing numbers of infected citizens and were severely affected by the consequences, other municipalities had no infections at all. However, we can identify some common responses, such as the sharing of information among citizens and different types of bans, such as the use of municipal playgrounds and other facilities, as well as gatherings in public places. Depending on the situation in the municipality, some mayors have taken stricter measures, especially after the advisory group of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia issued instructions to do so.

3) Disclosing COVID-19 crisis information

This dimension represents a necessary step and responsibility for local authorities to manage the COVID-19 crisis. At the beginning of the outbreak, and even more so with the first infected people in the community, fear, distrust, concern, and criticism of detection put pressure on the local leadership. According to Zhou and Xin (2021), timely release of information about the crisis is the best way to reassure the public and diffuse social fears. However, the release of information is also delicate because it is very controversial to reveal information about confirmed cases, including patients' workplaces and residences and the like. Too much information could violate patients' personal privacy and cause unnecessary panic among the public.

Based on this perspective, we asked mayors how they handle the disclosure of sensitive information such as the number of infected cases in the municipality, the number of sick citizens, the locations of local coronavirus outbreaks, and information about actions that affect and limit people's daily lives. Many mayors (80 %) responded that they have started to publish all the important information on the official municipal website and update it daily. In addition, in 78 % of the municipalities, citizens were informed about the COVID-19 situation in their municipality through various local media (TV, radio, local newspaper, etc.). One third of the mayors responded that the local leadership and officials of the municipality communicated with citizens by email and some

even by phone (28 %). A few mayors (10 %) decided to hold press conferences and address citizens in this way.

According to the mayors' responses, they were very active and innovative in finding ways to keep in touch with citizens and provide information in a timely manner. In addition to posting information on the municipality's official website, many mayors also used social media. Some mayors (together with the municipal administration and the local team of experts) prepared special brochures with basic information on measures to protect against the coronavirus and prevent its spread, which were distributed by mail to all households in the municipality. Some mayors informed specific groups of citizens through the leadership of local associations (e.g. pensioners' association, youth association, sports clubs and others).

However, it is important to note that all of the above activities were carried out during the initial outbreak of the coronavirus and during the first wave. The role of the municipalities diminished once various online platforms were established by the national government and/or non-governmental organisations, as all important information was already publicly available. Thus, municipalities began to update official municipal websites and social media accounts less frequently. For example, only half of the municipalities updated their official websites concerning COVID-19 at least once a week 18 months after the first wave.

4) Balancing COVID-19 measures and local economy

Probably the most difficult task for local self-government (besides the protection and health of citizens) was to coordinate measures to protect against and prevent the spread of the coronavirus and to ensure the functioning of the local economy. Local leadership was therefore under immense pressure to meet two competing objectives – maintaining economic activity (and therefore jobs) in their municipality and containing the coronavirus. This was particularly difficult in settings where massive spread was occurring in the local community or in local businesses.

During the first and second waves, we had observed some major outbreaks of coronavirus in local businesses that were well managed and quickly suppressed. Surprisingly, this outbreak did not have a major impact on production and – from this – we wanted to find out how municipalities were coping with this challenge. Therefore, we asked the mayors how they were balancing the needs of the local economy in terms of maintaining production on the one hand, and ensuring and providing a safe working environment for workers on the other. According to their responses, they immediately began discussions with local business leaders and established regular weekly meetings with key employers in the municipality. They coordinated and unified infection control measures and agreed on common actions such as providing protective equipment, enabling continuous testing for potential infections and providing

all necessary information. One of the mayors described the situation in the municipality as follows:

> *With the help of the fire brigades, we distributed masks, disinfectants, and other protective equipment to all industries operating in the municipality, and provided local businesses with daily instructions from the government and National Institute of Public Health. The municipality promoted strict compliance and a way of working that reduced contact between people (i.e. working from home, completing only the most urgent tasks, conducting programmes online, announcing arrivals at public facilities, etc.). We also cut back on doing all non-essential activities. In collaboration with Civil Protection forces and the local health centre, we made it possible for employees of local companies to be regularly tested for coronavirus and later vaccinated. It is worth highlighting that the local business community responded very quickly and reduced the risk of coronavirus infection and transmission through mutually agreed measures (see Kukovič 2021).*

Since small business is one of the most important branches of development in Slovenia, the presence of craft and entrepreneurial activities in an individual municipality is of key importance. Even though Slovenian municipalities have very limited competences in the field of (local) economy, they need to be attentive and active in order to create a stimulating and favourable local environment for the development and functioning of (small) entrepreneurship, to which the municipality's financial and non-financial incentives certainly contribute, especially in times of crisis and post-crisis. Unfortunately, smaller local businesses, especially cafes, bars, pubs, restaurants, businesses related to tourism and the entertainment industry have been hit much harder compared to larger local industry, as measures to protect against and prevent the spread of the corona virus have closed virtually all of them. As a result, owners have started to think about possible closures or even bankruptcies, which could lead to a massive unemployment crisis.

This is also the reason why the local authorities gave special attention to these local businesses. The majority of mayors supported small local entrepreneurs with financial and non-financial resources. For example, the municipalities advertised local businesses on the municipality's official website and encouraged citizens to use the services of local businesses, restaurants and bars that offered takeaway food and/or drinks. In addition, municipalities provided financial support, such as exemption from paying monthly rents and cancellation of debts for municipally owned buildings.

It is now clear that the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis are being felt in the local economy, especially in tourism-oriented municipalities and will continue for some time. It is expected that in municipalities with a lower threat or fewer cases of COVID-19, smaller businesses could reopen sooner and the local

economy could return to normal. From the responses of the mayors, we can conclude that they are well aware of the situation and want to provide support and assistance also in the post-crisis period.

Conclusion

COVID-19 disease has brought fear, suffering and an unimaginable challenge to humanity. The pandemic has triggered a series of global and interconnected health, economic, social, institutional, and political crises, leaving unimaginable consequences in its wake. Although we can track daily statistics on the number of infected, survivors, and people sickened, the statistics themselves do not cover all the effects of the pandemic. People have suffered in many ways: Families were separated; access to health services was difficult, even impossible in some places; emergency care was limited or even cancelled; schools were closed; people were isolated as coronavirus containment measures ordered isolation, lockdown, and disruption of social life. However, the psychological pressures and fears escalated as the economy ground to a halt, bringing mass layoffs and plunging many people into an existential crisis. The COVID-19 crisis or "great plague of our time" (Keane 2020; Boin et al. 2021) revealed the fragility of health and economic systems, as well as the social and institutional fabric of trust (Kukovič 2022).

During the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic, Slovenian municipalities were at the forefront of addressing the new and unknown crisis across the country, with mayors taking the leading role – from informing citizens to taking (more or less) stringent measures, sometimes even beyond the scope of their competence. Our analysis shed light on the aforementioned measures along four dimensions. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data revealed that mayors acted on their own initiative during the preparatory phase and were also inventive in terms of responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Since there were no uniform guidelines or protocols for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, responses varied and depended mainly on activation, commitment, effort, innovation, ingenuity, leadership, as well as the overall epidemic situation in the municipality. However, we can identify some common responses and actions, such as information sharing among citizens and different types of restrictions, such as banning the use of municipal playgrounds and other facilities, as well as gatherings in public places. In addition, mayors were very active and innovative in finding ways to stay connected to citizens and share information in a timely manner, as well as in supporting local economy, especially smaller businesses in the service, tourism, and entertainment sectors that were most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings confirm the bottom-up approach that emerged in Slovenian municipalities, especially during the initial outbreak and the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis.

Once the new government managed to be organised, and especially in the later stages of the pandemic, the national government, a special government expert advisory group and the National Centre for Disease Control took over the dynamics of the responses to the COVID-19 crisis and started to help municipalities with clear instructions. Many interventions were (and still are) directly mandated by the Ministry of Health and the national government. Since then, municipalities (together with Civil Protection forces) have mostly taken on more supportive and logistical roles than decision-making ones. Similar is the case for testing and vaccination policies. Moreover, the majority of mayors supported the joint vaccination declaration and encouraged citizens to get vaccinated, also using the approach of leading by example. Based on the results of the study, we conclude that the COVID-19 crisis has reconfirmed that local government is primarily there to provide services to the people, which is especially the case in times of crisis.

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