

REFLECTIONS ON THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT OF SELECTED MUNICIPAL AND CITY AUTHORITIES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 had a significant impact on the operation of all aspects of society, including public administration institutions. This article aims to examine the most challenging issues encountered by selected municipal and city authorities, how they responded to these issues, and how the experience gained has been reflected in crisis plans for managing similar future events. This aim is accomplished through a literature review of public sources and scientific papers on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public administration, as well as the results of interviews with representatives of the selected authorities. The results confirmed that the selected authorities were able to rapidly overcome the initial lack of relevant information and unpreparedness to implement anti-coronavirus measures and maintain the standard level of public services provided, albeit in a limited capacity.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, public administration, anti-coronavirus measures, crisis management.

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 brought the whole world, including the Czech Republic, an unexpected and threatening challenge in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the rapid spread of the virus caused significant restrictions on most people's daily lives [1]. The fundamental requirement of most of the responsible state institutions around the world was to prevent the spread of the infection between people, which led to the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures and restrictions on the free movement and gathering of people [2]. Most people's lives moved into the home and the online world [3].

The introduction of anti-coronavirus measures had significant economic and social impacts. Many countries experienced a decline in gross domestic product, mainly as a result of household savings and a drop in domestic demand. Many businesses were hit by closures of entire operations and workplaces [4]. Significant losses were recorded by such businesses as travel agencies, airline companies, accommodation facilities, catering facilities, retail stores, and other services that were repeatedly closed. On the contrary, postal and courier services, information technology, and drugstore, medical, and pharmaceutical goods recorded growth [5]. The key to business success was the ability to flexibly change the business model and start doing business online [6].

The spread of the coronavirus pandemic and the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures resulted in an exceptional situation in healthcare and social ser-

vices. There was a dramatic increase in the number of patients and deaths, which placed extreme demands on staff [7]. Medical and social facilities lacked doctors, nurses, and social workers. This required the involvement of volunteers from other professions [8]. A similarly complicated situation was in education, where it was necessary to deal with the closure of schools and switch to distance learning using computers and the internet. Distance learning during the coronavirus pandemic fundamentally changed the educational habits of pupils and students and placed increased demands on their parents as well as teachers [9]. Society-wide problems included people's concerns about the health of themselves and their families, as well as concerns about the uncertain economic and social situation. Added to this was the restriction of social contacts and leisure activities, which had negative effects on people's mental and physical health [10].

Dealing with the economic and social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic induced the need for crisis management at all levels of the state, from the national level to the regional level to the level of cities and municipalities. It was important to maintain the standard functioning of public administration offices, even if it was with fewer people or limited office hours [11]. During the lockdowns, there was a surge in working from home, which, in the case of public administration officials, is difficult to implement. Most of the officials thus had to go to work even during the lockdowns, while the offices had to routinely deal with changing officials or replacing sick officials. There was also a significant development of electronic communication

between public administration offices and citizens [12].

The handling of the coronavirus pandemic within public administration offices was naturally associated with many issues that certainly tested the ability of individual offices to handle similar crises through effective crisis management [13]. The coronavirus pandemic was unprecedented, as it broke out unexpectedly, quickly, and strongly. Such an extreme event usually requires a unique ad hoc response according to the current situation, which can hardly be part of any crisis plan [14]. However, every such event is an opportunity to learn something new, and every such experience should or could be incorporated into updated crisis plans for future use [15]. This article seeks to evaluate the extent to which this has been achieved.

This article reflects upon the crisis management of selected municipal and city authorities during the coronavirus pandemic. The aim is to examine the most challenging issues that the selected authorities met, how they responded to these issues, and how the experience gained has been incorporated into crisis plans for managing similar events. The assumption is that the selected authorities were able to overcome the initial difficulties resulting from the uniqueness of the situation and maintain the standard level of public services provided.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This survey of crisis management and the most challenging issues of the selected municipal and city authorities during the coronavirus pandemic is founded on interviews with representatives of selected municipal and city authorities, complete with interviews with representatives of selected state institutions.

The interviews were conducted during April and May 2023, with respondents being approached directly based on previous experience and cooperation on other research projects. The decisive criterion was that the respondents were willing to share their knowledge and experiences from the times of the coronavirus pandemic. For many of them, it was not easy to remember and they wished to never experienced anything like that again.

Representatives of

- (1.) the Ministry of the Interior (one respondent: a department director);
- (2.) the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (three respondents: a deputy minister, a methodology specialist, and a department manager);
- (3.) a city authority in the Vysočina Region, Jihlava District (one respondent: a department manager);
- (4.) a city authority in the Pardubice Region, Svitavy District (two respondents: a deputy mayor and a department manager); and

- (5.) five municipal authorities in the Pardubice Region, Chrudim District (five respondents: five council members)

were obtained for interviews. A total of twelve respondents from nine state, city, and municipal authorities were interviewed. All respondents were members of crisis teams during the coronavirus pandemic and have experience implementing anti-coronavirus measures. Respondents, cities, and municipalities are kept anonymous by agreement.

During the interviews, respondents were asked four questions about their experience with crisis management and the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures during the coronavirus pandemic. The first question asked about early memories of the coronavirus pandemic. The second question asked what the most challenging issues were that the selected authorities met. The third question asked how they had responded to these issues. The fourth and last question asked how the experience reflected in crisis plans for managing similar events. Some interviews took place in person, others took place online through Microsoft Teams. Each of the interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes, depending on the time available and the interest of the respondents. The aim was to let respondents talk freely and remember as many immediate experiences as possible.

The results could be challenged by the limited scope of the survey, including a small set of respondents. However, the surveyed issues relating to the experience of crisis management and the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures are common for most state, regional, city, and municipal institutions dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. This fact is a solid foundation for achieving beneficial results for both managerial theory and practice.

The survey brings added value by providing a closer look at the direct experiences of people from the front line – at the level of the state, regions, cities, and municipalities – who had to deal with new challenges related to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures daily. Their knowledge and experience are a good starting point for further research on managing crises in public administration.

3. RESULTS

In January and February 2020, Czech society and responsible institutions monitored the development of the disease in China and other countries worldwide. Partial measures were aimed mainly at reducing travel abroad [16]. At the beginning of March 2020, the first patients affected by COVID-19 were diagnosed in the Czech Republic. The number of patients began to increase rapidly, and it was obvious that the worsening situation would require a crisis response. When the World Health Organization officially designated the spread of COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020,

a state of emergency was declared in the Czech Republic on March 12, 2020 [17]. The result was, among other things, the closing of state borders, restrictions on the free movement and gathering of people, restrictions on selected business activities, and the closure of schools or other social facilities with the risk of a concentration of a larger number of people [18].

At the national level, the Central Crisis Staff began to function, and similar crisis staffs were also established at the level of regions, cities, and municipalities to take the needed measures, issue appropriate instructions, provide the relevant information, and coordinate the necessary actions [19]. The lack of relevant information was addressed through information hotlines or the websites of relevant governments and other institutions, such as the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of the Interior [20]. It was essential to come up with constructive solutions quickly.

The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the Czech Republic lasted until mid-May 2020, when the government began to loosen its anti-coronavirus measures and ended the state of emergency on May 17, 2020 [17]. However, during the summer of 2020, the pandemic situation began to gradually worsen, so the mandatory wearing of face masks or respirators in public indoor spaces and public transport was renewed in September 2020. A state of emergency was declared again on October 5, 2020, and lasted until April 11, 2021 [21]. During this second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, there were again restrictions on the free movement and gathering of people, school closures, and restrictions on business activities [18].

Local governments had to deal with limited office hours, school closures, or canceled mass events. Cities and municipalities also had to deal with purchasing protective devices and distributing them to citizens, carrying out disinfection of public spaces, and assisting the most vulnerable citizens. Methodological and coordination support for cities and municipalities was provided by ministries and regions [13]. Additional support was provided by regional hygiene stations, the fire brigade, and the police force. These institutions ensured compliance with anti-coronavirus measures, distributed protective devices, performed testing, and traced the infected [17].

The situation during the coronavirus pandemic was not easy for anyone, and most public administration institutions reacted spontaneously to an exceptional and unprecedented event [22]. Every decision was made under uncertainty, due to a lack of relevant information and experience. Nevertheless, most of the initial and subsequent issues were overcome [23]. This article offers several views from selected state, municipal, and city authorities on what issues they faced during the coronavirus pandemic, how they dealt with them, and how they learned from them.

3.1. VIEW FROM THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR

The Ministry of the Interior is, among other duties, responsible for public administration, and it played an important coordinating, controlling, and methodical role during the coronavirus pandemic. Early memories of the interviewed representative of the ministry were associated with surprise at the speed and extent of the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020. It was a unique situation for which no one was prepared. It was initially expected to be a short-term affair, but it soon became clear that the situation was serious and would last a long time. In the beginning, the effort was to coordinate the activities of local governments “from above”, but this was complicated due to the different approaches of ministries and the inconsistent crisis methodologies or undeveloped crisis plans of cities and municipalities. There are also over 6 000 municipalities in the Czech Republic, which makes communication and coordination from the center quite difficult. However, cities and municipalities quickly adapted and began to deal with the situation independently at their own discretion.

The Ministry of the Interior endeavored to coordinate the functioning of local governments through methodological recommendations, which were regularly updated and created as comprehensibly as possible. It was important to give cities and municipalities clear information on what to do and how to do it, without the need for complex legal interpretation. To simplify communication, the instructions were given directly to cities and municipalities, additionally using the territorial offices of the Ministry of the Interior. The operation of offices, office hours, contact with the public, or the gathering of people were dealt with. Questions and complaints were also addressed. The feedback was then used to modify the published methodologies.

In the future, it would be beneficial to implement the Ministry of the Interior’s coordinating role with other institutions. The effort is to coordinate the crisis management of municipalities to the level of municipalities with extended powers. However, each crisis is unique and it is always necessary to relearn to adapt to new circumstances, so the creation of crisis plans or crisis scenarios is questionable. A big challenge for the future is also the digitization of public administration, which proved useful during the coronavirus pandemic, but too much dependence on digital means is also not good. Therefore, it is necessary to be prepared for various options.

3.2. VIEW FROM THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, YOUTH, AND SPORTS

The Ministry of Education is responsible for education, and it had to deal with repeated school closures and the transition to distance learning. As stated by the interviewed representatives of the ministry, almost

immediately after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, a crisis staff started functioning at the ministry, which communicated with the Central Crisis Staff and lower levels responsible for education. The effort was to maintain the full functioning of the ministry, but it was necessary to solve technical issues (remote access, notebooks, smartphones) or organizational issues related to homework. Online communication took place via e-mail and Microsoft Teams, but also other applications such as WhatsApp or social networks such as Facebook. Over time, a close team of people was formed at the ministry, which worked in a 24/7 arrangement. Other people were used as needed.

Communication with the schools focused mainly on sharing important information, explaining it, and moderating panic. Difficulties arose when the media published some information before it was officially announced. This often led to unnecessary panic and chaos. Cooperation with the legal department has proven itself in these situations. The information was transmitted to the schools via data boxes. Later, a helpdesk designed for schools was launched. To facilitate the work of the helpdesk, separate telephone lines for schools and the public were established. The effort was to make work easier for schools and help them solve their issues, including, for example, conflict situations regarding testing or vaccination. In such situations, schools were advised to refer directly to the ministry. To support schools, various methodologies and instructional videos were created, for example on how to test pupils and students.

According to the respondents, the crisis certainly brought about a dramatic shift in the use of information and communication technologies. It taught many people to work in non-standard conditions and to improvise, as well as to show individual dedication. On the other hand, it was necessary to deal with the negative behavior of some people, and it was also necessary to learn to patiently explain and defend the implemented measures.

3.3. VIEW FROM A CITY AUTHORITY IN THE VYSOČINA REGION

As stated by the interviewed representative of a city authority in the Vysočina Region, Jihlava District, who is responsible for education, like everywhere else, here too, after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, they had to deal with the closure of schools and the transition to distance learning. It turned out that most schools were not technically or organizationally ready to work and teach online. The initial issue of the functioning of the city authority and individual schools was the uncertainty resulting from the lack of relevant information. There was a lot of information coming from superior authorities that was difficult to understand correctly and apply effectively. The situation gradually improved with experience. A crisis team met regularly within the city authority (online and physically) to fulfill a coordinating and method-

ical role. The functioning of the city authority was maintained. People alternated between working at the office and from home. In the schools themselves, it was necessary to deal with the technical and organizational issues of distance learning. Subsequently, it was necessary to coordinate and control the implementation and compliance with anti-coronavirus measures. No new methodologies related to crisis management were developed. Only “ten recommendations” were issued for crises. The ability to work online needs to be developed in the future.

3.4. VIEW FROM A CITY AUTHORITY IN THE PARDUBICE REGION

As stated by the interviewed representatives of the city authority in the Pardubice Region, Svitavy District, responsible for the management of the city authority and education, since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the effort was to maintain the functioning of the city authority without significant changes. As with everywhere else, they initially had to overcome technical and organizational difficulties. It was also necessary to deal with often chaotic information in the early days and weeks of the coronavirus pandemic. Within the management of the city authority, the safety council met regularly every week. The team was supplemented by other people as needed. A crisis telephone line was also set up. The priority was to manage the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures. In the beginning, general solidarity was evident. Everyone helped as they could. However, over time various problems had to be overcome, such as the interpretation of some measures or resistance to some measures. It was necessary to handle the technical and organizational issues of distance learning in schools. It was also necessary to deal with the limitation or closure of the operation of services for the public. Issues were solved on the fly, without unnecessary paperwork.

According to the respondents, based on the experience of dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, it is difficult to create any crisis plans or methodologies. It always depends on the situation. It is important to come up with quick, simple, and clear solutions based on the current need. Common sense is also important. Do not instill fear or spread panic. Communicate and share useful information. Learn to improvise.

3.5. VIEW FROM MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES IN THE PARDUBICE REGION

The interviewed representatives of five municipal authorities in the Pardubice Region, Chrudim District, were members of the municipal council during the coronavirus pandemic. The first municipality has about 140 residents, the second municipality has about 90 residents, the third municipality has about 120 residents, the fourth municipality has about 100 residents, and the fifth municipality has about 250 residents. In

The most challenging issues during the coronavirus pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of relevant information • The unpreparedness for anti-coronavirus measures
The response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep working • Do not instill fear or spread panic • Communicate useful information • Offer quick and simple solutions
The reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned to improvise and adapt quickly • Built reserve capacities

TABLE 1. Summary of respondents' answers.

addition to residents, many vacationers in the municipalities come for weekends and holidays.

Initial memories of respondents were similarly associated with something implausible that seemed impossible. The original hope was that the coronavirus pandemic would not particularly affect the municipalities themselves. Later, it became clear that it was necessary to come to terms with reality and submit to the introduced coronavirus measures.

The functioning of the municipal administration was preserved online and physically as much as possible. The effort was to convey relevant information and prevent panic. Information was sought from all available sources. Sometimes it was difficult to understand all the instructions correctly. Social life in the municipalities died down. The operation of local social facilities was suspended. Within the rules, the operation of local general stores was maintained. Everyone handled the situation in their own way. Lessons for the future are rare. Rather, the hope is that a similar situation will not be repeated.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of interviews with representatives of selected state, municipal, and city authorities offer several interesting views on what issues the selected authorities faced during the coronavirus pandemic, how they dealt with them, and how they learned from them (see Table 1).

It was confirmed that the most challenging issue with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic was the initial uncertainty resulting from the lack of relevant information [23]. No one had expected such a crisis. No one was ready for it. No crisis plan anticipated such a crisis. There was a lack of experience and resources to handle such a crisis. After overcoming the initial shock, another issue was the technical and organizational unpreparedness to implement anti-coronavirus measures [20]. People had to learn along the way to work online and outside their workplaces, usually from their homes.

It was further confirmed that selected authorities were able to overcome the initial difficulties resulting from the uniqueness of the situation and maintain the standard level of public services provided [22]. The effort of all was to maintain the functioning of

the authorities, moderate panic, and help overcome problems.

It was also confirmed that the crisis associated with the coronavirus pandemic has taught people to work online in a shared environment using various information and communication technologies [24]. The crisis also tested people's ability to express themselves clearly and concisely, as well as to follow instructions and demonstrate both a material and human approach [15]. The issue of updating crisis plans following the experience of the coronavirus pandemic or issuing some "crisis procedures" in case of emergency is debatable [14]. Each crisis is unique in its way, and it is difficult to predict what and how it will be necessary to do. Rather, it is necessary to develop the ability to learn and adapt quickly. At the same time, it is necessary to build reserve technical and other capacities that could be used in a crisis. In principle, it is necessary to hope for the best but be ready for the worst. However, the tendency to develop and implement obligatory crisis plans is more evident in the state rather than in regional, city, or municipal institutions. The reason is the legitimate effort of state institutions to coordinate the crisis management of lower institutions. Such emergency plans should be clear and easy to use, including easy modification according to the current situation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A survey on a reflection on the crisis management of selected municipal and city authorities during the coronavirus pandemic confirmed the assumption that the selected authorities were able to overcome the initial difficulties resulting from the uniqueness of the situation and maintain the standard level of public services provided.

The most challenging issues that the selected authorities met during the coronavirus pandemic included the initial uncertainty resulting from a lack of relevant information and technical and organizational unpreparedness to implement anti-coronavirus measures. The responses to these issues were sought on the fly, according to current possibilities and requirements. The effort was to keep the authorities functioning, allay panic, and help people overcome problems. The issue of projecting the experience of handling the coro-

navirus pandemic into crisis plans turned out to be debatable. The reason is the uniqueness of each crisis and the difficulty of predicting what it will be necessary to do and how to do it.

The limitations of the survey include a small set of respondents and the focus on a few selected municipal and city authorities in the Czech Republic. However, the surveyed issues of crisis management during the coronavirus pandemic are common for most state, region, city, and municipal institutions. This fact is a solid foundation for achieving beneficial results for both managerial theory and practice. The added value of the results could be seen in a closer look at the direct experiences of people from the front line at the level of the state, regions, cities, and municipalities who had to deal with unique challenges related to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and the introduction of anti-coronavirus measures. Their findings are a possible starting point for further research focused on managing crises in public administration. An interesting issue to investigate could be the vertical line of crisis management from the state through regions to cities and municipalities and back, including the enactment of the coordination role of certain state institutions, such as the Ministry of the Interior.

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