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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Karovic, S., Domazet, S., & Jesic, J. (2022). Local self-government in a crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic: the case of Serbia. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 8(1), 21-33. <https://www.doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2281021k>

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Peer review method: Double-Blind
Accepted: December 17, 2021
Published: February 02, 2022
Original scientific article
DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2281021k>

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN A CRISIS CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF SERBIA

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Abstract: *This research examined whether there is an elaborate system of protocols, protection, and prevention in place at the local self-government level in the event of a crisis caused by an epidemic or pandemic. The core idea of this paper was to evaluate the protocol's effectiveness at the local self-government. Analysis was conducted using responses of 16 local self-government authorities. During a crisis caused by an epidemic/a pandemic of infectious illnesses, surveys were done as a cross-section documenting and detecting the current state of local self-government functioning. Methods used in the study are defining the objectives of the research, conceptualization, analysis of legal regulations, economic analysis, and decomposition of the problem. Key results and arguments of this paper expanded existing research thus there are only certain empirical data from areas that have been affected by the infectious disease caused by the epidemic/pandemic. Data was collected, processed, and systematized to serve in model formulation. As a brief conclusion, this study suggested protocol effectiveness at the local self-government level representing the idea that emergency and crisis management should be organized to preserve the health and livelihood of the population in the area affected by the pandemic of infectious diseases and thus enable the functioning of economic activities and society as a whole.*

Keywords: *Law; Security; Economy; Emergency; Covid-19; Serbia; Epidemic; Pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

Emergencies can be declared due to various influential events that have harmful consequences for the population and material goods and endanger the social community in the affected area (Karović *et al.* 2020, 58). Emergency management should be organized to preserve the health and livelihood of the population in the area affected by the epidemic/pandemic of infectious diseases and thus enables the functioning of economic activities and society as a whole. The results of the research will contribute to the development of the functioning of local self-governments in various types of events and functions in emergencies. At the same time, the scientific fund from the sphere of security sciences will be enriched and the fund for the development of scientific research methodology will be enriched. In practical terms, the problem of efficient functioning of local self-government in the conditions of an epidemic/pandemic of infectious diseases is solved (especially in the light of the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus) through a practical and theoretical model. Among the issues we encountered there is also the issue of communication in crises - how is communication done within the crisis staff, how is communication outside the crisis headquarters to the public done. At the same time, it is expected to find a model of efficient action of local self-government in such a situation that will be applicable for 5-10 years and thus create a scientific basis for further development of an efficient system of local self-government in various crises situations.

Analysis was conducted using responses of 16 local self-government authorities (Sremska Mitrovica, Backa Topola, Sombor, Sremski Karlovci, Subotica, Backi Petrovac, Odzaci, Pancevo, Ruma, Beocin, Apatin, Vrbas, Zrenjanin, Secanj, Pecinci, Backa Palanka) which makes 36% of the total number of local self-governments in the area of Autonomous Province (AP) Vojvodina. At this point in the research, there have been 19 surveys completed from which we can draw major conclusions, according to the research divided into 3 parts: 1) Crisis management at the level of self-government in a situation caused by a pandemic; 2) Harmonization of legal regulations and practical protocols in the conditions of the epidemic/pandemic; 3) The circumstances and consequences for business entities at the level of local self-government in an emergency caused by a pandemic.

According to OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (Covid-19) 'The Territorial Impact of Covid-19: Managing the Crisis across Levels of Government' (2020), the Covid-19 crisis has a strong territorial dimension with significant policy implications for managing its consequences. Two central considerations for policymakers are 1) The regional and local impact of the crisis is highly asymmetric within countries. Some regions, particularly the more vulnerable ones, such as deprived urban areas, have been harder hit than others. Certain vulnerable populations, too, have been more affected. In economic terms, the impact of the crisis is differing across regions, at least in its initial

stages. Differentiating factors include a region's exposure to tradable sectors, its exposure to global value chains and its specialization, such as tourism; 2) Subnational governments (regions and municipalities) are responsible for critical aspects of containment measures, health care, social services, economic development, and public investment, putting them at the frontline of crisis management. Because such responsibilities are shared among levels of government, coordinated effort is critical.

One of the important results and effects of this research is the basis for activating existing multi-level coordination bodies of local self-government that bring together subnational government representatives to minimize the risk of a fragmented crisis response. Supporting and providing cooperation in crisis management across local self-governments and regions to help minimize disjointed responses and competition for resources. The circumstances in inter-regional or inter-local self-government collaboration in procurement especially in emergencies should be better by sharing information and experience. The consequences are reduced by the formation of a unified system of information and communication, the usage of e-government tools, and digital innovation to simplify, harmonize and accelerate procurement practices at the local self-government level. The research goal is to detect a model that will ensure the efficient and effective functioning of local self-government in the conditions of an epidemic/pandemic of infectious diseases. In particular, the crisis plan at the level of local self-government will be covered, which will address issues of communication with the public and cooperation with the bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, medical centers, and the business sector. The model will also include the organization of the functioning of civil protection in crises caused by the pandemic.

COMPOSITION

Emergencies arise as a result of events that cause harmful consequences for people and the environment. The subject of research can be defined as a model of efficient functioning of local self-government in the conditions of an epidemic/pandemic of an infectious disease. The model includes the implementation of security measures and protection of people and material resources and the definition of a crisis plan that is an integral part of the proposed model of work of local governments and economic entities in such a situation.

The research is conducted in 3 phases:

I Phase - preliminary research, involves activities to create a material and theoretical basis. The first activity in this phase is defining the objectives of the research, conceptualization, and analysis of legal regulations, economic analysis, and decomposition of the problem. In addition, at this stage, relevant literature, available sources from the country and abroad will be collected and methods and techniques will

be applied that will be applied in the research. The research is primarily related to the organizational form of functioning of local self-government and the implementation of the protection and rescue plan in such a situation.

II Phase - development and implementation, involves the implementation of the project to assess the capacity of local government that can be used in case of epidemics/pandemics of infectious diseases, organizational forms of local government in such a situation, the way of forming a crisis staff and its competencies.

III Phase - presentation of results refers to the implementation of solutions and testing of a defined model and crisis plan in the functioning of local government in case of a pandemic of infectious diseases that will enable effective crisis management and find a solution to local government in such a situation.

A checklist was constructed for specific research, which included the most important issues relevant to local self-governments in the area of AP Vojvodina. The structure of the checklist is designed to cover the key elements of the content of activities and preparedness of local self-government for the situation caused by the pandemic of infectious diseases. The study is expected to identify key elements, both legal and economic as well as practical, that pose a problem in the efficient functioning of local self-government in the context of an infectious disease epidemic/pandemic.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT AT THE LEVEL OF SELF-GOVERNMENT IN SITUATION CAUSED BY THE EPIDEMIC/PANDEMIC

Observing all local governments in which the research was conducted, points to the conclusion that the situation is very similar in terms of work and functioning in the conditions of an emergency caused by a pandemic of infectious diseases. Having in mind the process of crisis management, because a pandemic is a form of crisis, indicates the complexity of this process and part of the confusion in such a situation. A special problem is the concept of misunderstanding risk assessment at the micro-level in the sense that poor assessments can affect the state of the wider region, the state, and especially the state of the economy. It should be emphasized that the response in a crisis or emergency is aimed at recovering and mitigating the harmful effects of the danger and providing adequate prediction of the development of events. The very process of reacting in a crisis and emergency is aimed at saving lives and property (Baas *et al.* 2008, 7). An important element in the process of crisis management at the level of local self-government is the identification of risks that may have more serious security consequences with a broader and transnational impact. This primarily refers to a pandemic of infectious diseases. Risks directly related to a pandemic of infectious diseases can be classified and characterized as systemic risks because their potential impact calls into question the integrity of entire systems - whether they are political, economic, social, technological, or environmental.

Such systemic risks are defined as “extreme uncertainty and the potential for extensive and possibly irreversible damage” (Habegger 2008, 16). They can arise from changes in the socio-economic or socio-political environment of institutions, whether in public policy or the corporate world, and systems can be damaged by individual catastrophic events or the cascading effect of a complex chain of events (Habegger 2008, 16).

As a result, crisis management, at any level, is an inherent aspect of risk management, is a significant challenge, and constantly calls into question the effectiveness of the measures taken to minimize the risks, and hence the crisis. This also applies to local governments. It is especially characteristic that at the level of local self-government there is no clear and well-organized system of functioning of local self-governments in such a situation. There are many unknowns and instructions from the ‘higher’ level that are always awaited, which restricts and limits the room for maneuver of local self-government in such situations. Of course, one should also keep in mind the expertise of the staff that manages the crisis and realistic estimates of the size of a certain epidemic/pandemic of an infectious disease. It should be emphasized, when it comes to local self-government and key elements of crisis management, that the consequences of inefficient work and decision-making in such a situation are reflected in the negative situation in other segments. Community preparation and functioning in crisis and emergencies, including local self-government, is an ongoing and complex process. This process should include a range of activities, including ongoing assessment and analysis of risks and threats; planning responses to emerging hazards; the timely and coordinated response of the social community, and organized elimination of negative consequences (Krsljanin and Karovic 2015, 143). This includes “coordination of forces and resources of the subjects of the disaster risk reduction system and management of emergencies to protect and rescue people” (Karovic, Radoncic, and Radovanovic 2015, 67). These elements are vital in the operation of local self-government and can serve as a guide. However, the basic problem at the level of local self-government and society as a whole is in a system that does not function in depth. There is no single and efficient management mechanism that ‘forces’ activities in-depth, which practically prevents an integrative approach to controlling the epidemic/pandemic of infectious diseases, and thus the crisis as a whole. In addition, the practice has shown that emergencies provide unique opportunities for corruption (Domazet 2018, 2). Finally, the approach to crisis and emergency management should be understood as an essential and integral part of responsible management in which risks and opportunities are assessed in a multitude of decisions. As Karović (2015) stressed: “Such dramatic events represent a serious challenge for holders of public office in local self-government (...) who are under great time pressure and in the absence of key information about the event itself and its consequences” (p. 84).

HARMONIZATION OF LEGAL REGULATIONS AND PRACTICAL PROTOCOLS DURING THE EPIDEMIC/PANDEMIC

Regarding the legal regulations of the Republic of Serbia, respectively AP Vojvodina, the main regulation is the Law on Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 15/2016, 68/2020 and 136/2020). Concerning local self-governments in the AP Vojvodina, the mentioned Law is certainly the most important in the fight against the epidemic/pandemic of infectious diseases, especially against Covid-19. The Law notes the existence of several novelties in terms of measures to protect the population from the epidemic of infectious diseases.

First, the coronavirus was introduced into the Law, and the category of contact was introduced as persons who are obliged, following article 13 to adhere to the prescribed measures and instructions determined by the competent epidemiologist. The novelties also refer to a closer definition of certain terms, such as unfavorable epidemiological situation, home isolation, self-isolation, quarantine, transportation, isolation, health surveillance, at home, and personal protection. Then, novelties are present regarding measures to protect the population from infectious diseases. Special measures related to transportation, isolation, home isolation and treatment, health surveillance, quarantine and quarantine at home, as well as personal protection against infection should be mentioned here.

Concerning home isolation, article 29a prescribes that it is a measure that requires treatment at home and restricts the freedom of movement of patients with infectious diseases, and in whom the presence of no symptoms or signs of infectious disease and persons suffering from infectious disease in whom the severity of the disease does not require treatment in a hospital setting, during the period of contagion. On the other hand, article 31a stipulates that quarantine at home is a measure that restricts freedom of movement and requires monitoring of the health status of healthy persons who have been or are suspected of being in contact with persons infected with a contagious disease if these persons are not determined by the quarantine measure referred to in article 31 of this Law. Article 33 further states that in the event of a contagious disease epidemic/pandemic, a recommended or necessary emergency immunization against that contagious disease for all persons may be determined, i.e. for certain categories of persons, if the risk of transmission of that contagious disease is determined.

We should also mention the possibility that the Government of the Republic of Serbia, following article 53 prohibits or restricts entry into the territory of Serbia to persons coming from countries with an unfavorable epidemiological situation, decides to open temporary facilities for accommodation, isolation, and treatment of infectious diseases, when the existing capacities of health institutions and facilities are not sufficient for isolation and treatment of persons suffering from infectious diseases,

decide on sending patients with infectious diseases for treatment abroad in case of filling all available capacities for isolation and treatment in the Republic of Serbia, form a crisis staff, etc.

Inspection supervision over the application of legal measures is performed by communal inspection in local self-government units following article 73, and communal militia control over the application of measures from article 46a is performed by communal militia in local self-government units where the communal militia service is formed. Moreover, when there are reasons of urgency due to the immediate endangerment of human life and health, i.e. in cases of non-compliance with the prescribed measures, inspection bodies, as well as communal police officers, may orally order measures and actions such as the measure to empty the facility. There was a violation of the prescribed measures, or to prohibit the performance of activities in the facility, i.e. the area in which the violation of the measure occurred until the competent authority takes the prescribed measures, for a maximum of 72 hours. The Law also tightens penalties for violating epidemiological measures, both for individuals and legal entities.

Regarding the local self-governments in the AP Vojvodina area that are the subject of the study, it should be noted that all local self-governments have faced serious difficulties as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, no municipal government was prepared to respond to the pandemic's urgency. As a result, cities, and municipalities have failed to properly comply with necessary legislation and regulations, the majority of which were passed during the pandemic. First and foremost, it was noted that local self-governments did not have sufficient legal procedures in place in the event of an infectious disease epidemic/pandemic, which was somewhat predicted given the world's surprise at Covid-19's implications. Furthermore, there are organizational and technical problems in response to the consequences of Covid-19. In this regard, the problem of professional staff in charge of emergencies should be especially emphasized. The direct cause is a lack of financial resources for training individuals who work in these occupations, and in certain towns, the immediate cause is a lack of understanding by immediate management. There was a shortage of protective equipment in some local governments in the early stages of the pandemic of infectious diseases, but this was later overcome. Some municipalities have had issues alerting citizens about ways to prevent the pandemic of infectious diseases, and some local governments have had issues with the shortage of equipment in health care facilities in their jurisdiction. Furthermore, there were issues in general with special measures of protection against infectious disease epidemics/pandemics, such as home isolation, quarantine at home, and personal protection against infection. In connection with these measures, numerous cases of violations of epidemiological measures have been recorded, not only by individuals but also by legal entities and entrepreneurs, mostly in the field of catering and tourism. Violations of epidemiological measures by citizens

have created a major problem in the adequate functioning and response of local governments to the crisis caused by the coronavirus. Even though the authorities have enforced a considerable number of fines, the results do not appear to be satisfactory. On this basis, it may be concluded that, in the face of an infectious disease outbreak, local governments have not fully complied with the Republic of Serbia's positive legal framework.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR BUSINESS ENTITIES AT THE LEVEL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

The impact of emergencies on the business of economic entities is a topic on which very little attention is paid in the Republic of Serbia, in contrast to developed European countries (Domazet and Katic 2016, 240). The topic of protection of economic activities of Serbia in emergencies, regardless of many initiatives, is not sufficiently recognized as an interdisciplinary problem whose solution requires careful analysis and application of adequate measures in practice (Jovanovic *et al.* 2015, 579-582). In the Republic of Serbia, i.e. the AP Vojvodina, the scope of a partnership between the state and private capital owners is still low, but there are several positive examples, especially in emergencies, where this sector has played a significant humanitarian role (Domazet and Radovic 2016, 349). At the level of the AP Vojvodina, Provincial Secretariat for Economy and Tourism announced several public competitions for grants to economic entities for co-financing projects in tourism in APV in 2021 - procurement of machinery and equipment and introduction of technological innovations in the promotion and operation of touristic and catering facilities. In Table 1, we can see the answers to the set of subgroups of questions related to business entities in epidemic/pandemic crisis, collected from 16 local self-governments located in AP Vojvodina.

Table 1: Endangering Business Entities as a Result of the Pandemic of Infectious Diseases (Source: Author's research).

	Claims (sub-groups of conditions)	Yes	No
(1)	business entities based in the territory of local self-government are endangered by the pandemic of infectious diseases	18	1
(2)	the threat of business processes caused by the pandemic occurs in 3-4 years	4	15
(3)	the threat of business processes caused by the pandemic occurs in 4-6 years	5	14
(4)	there is a database of pandemic business losses	3	16
(5)	small and medium enterprises are also affected	16	3
(6)	communication between the competent local self-government services and the harmonization of their obligations and tasks are at a satisfactory level	17	2


(7)	there are not enough primary health care facilities	4	15
(8)	the existing equipment in the health institutions is in a satisfactory condition	14	5
(9)	there are not enough funds to replace obsolete equipment in health facilities	14	5
(10)	there is not a sufficiently developed awareness of the population about the needs of disease prevention and health care	14	5
(11)	the pandemic endangered the lives of the population	15	4
(12)	the pandemic endangered the health of the population	18	1
(13)	the pandemic endangered the activities of business entities (reduction of turnover, income, and profit)	12	7
(14)	the pandemic threatens the employment of the population	18	1
(15)	the pandemic threatens the functioning of the economic system	14	5
(16)	the pandemic threatens the infrastructure for electricity supply and telecommunications	2	17
(17)	there is a system of warnings and measures to protect the population in the event of an outbreak and spread of the epidemic	5	14
(18)	there is cooperation and exchange of information with neighboring countries	5	14
(19)	the duration of the emergency in the event of a pandemic is 1 to 2 weeks	5	14
(20)	the duration of the emergency in the event of a pandemic is 1 to 2 months	5	14

Conditions that are prominent in consequences caused by epidemic when we observe business entities which operates at the areas of 16 examined local self-government in AP Vojvodina are: business entities based in the territory of local self-government are endangered by an epidemic of infectious diseases; there is no database of epidemic business losses; small and medium enterprises are most affected, large business entities are medium affected; public enterprises are modestly affected; communication between the competent local self-government services and the harmonization of their obligations and tasks are at a satisfactory level; there is a sufficiently developed information infrastructure between the competent services; there are a sufficient number of primary, secondary and tertiary health care facilities in operation; the existing equipment in the health institutions is in a satisfactory condition; the epidemic endangered the health of the population; the epidemic threatens the employment of the population; the epidemic threatens the functioning of economic system.

The Decision (EU) 2019/420 of the European Parliament and the Council, states that training, research, and innovation are key aspects of cooperation in the field of civil protection. To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of training and exercises in the field of civil protection, to promote innovation and dialogue, and to improve cooperation between national bodies and services of the Member States in charge of

civil protection, a Union Civil Protection Knowledge Network needs to be established. This network should build on existing structures, including centers of excellence, universities, researchers and other professionals, young professionals, and experienced volunteers in the field of emergency management. Additional cooperation with and training in international training, research, and innovation organizations should be strengthened, if possible, including third countries (Karovic and Domazet 2020, 67-68).

CONCLUSION

Research on this topic, in principle, has not been conducted in the segment related to the epidemic of communicable diseases, and in particular, there are no scientific results from the sphere of functioning of local self-government in such a situation. Data are not systematized and should be collected and processed to serve in model formulation. The results of the research will contribute to the development of the functioning of local self-governments in various types of events in the functioning of emergencies. At the same time, the scientific fund in the field of security sciences and applied economics and the development of scientific research methodologies will be enriched. In practical terms, the problem of efficient functioning of local self-government in the conditions of an epidemic of infectious diseases is solved. Within the model, a local government crisis plan will be implemented, which is the basis for creating the model and checking its functioning. Also, the existing emergency response plans caused by the epidemic of infectious diseases need to be compared with the existing regulations, and the existing regulations should be strictly applied. Given the rather negative experiences related to the implementation of epidemiological measures, solutions should be sought in the tightening of penal policy. As far as the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina is concerned, in January 2021, the statistics show that the growth of industrial production is recorded by 2.2% year on year. The total value of foreign trade in January amounted to 970 million Euros, and exports amounted to €484.7 million, which is an increase of 3.2% compared to exports in January 2020. It is very important to determine the organization of industries, private sector operations in Vojvodina, as well as cooperation at the level of local self-government after the pandemic, the experiences of European regions and the real consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as initiating further sustainable measures to overcome negative economic and all other consequences for our economy and society. 

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:

Not applicable.

Funding:

'The model of functioning local self-government in the conditions of an emergency caused by an epidemic of an infectious disease' funded by Provincial Secretariat for Higher Education and Scientific Research of AP Vojvodina, within short-term projects of special interest for sustainable development, no. 142-451-3077/2020-01.

Statement of human rights:

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Statement on the welfare of animals:

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent:

Not applicable.

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