

BOTTOM-UP RESPONSE: THE ROLE OF MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES IN COMPENSATING AND SUPPORTING CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

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Coping with crisis scenarios, explicitly highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic, has shown the necessity to adapt and to find feasible solutions for state governments and self-government's execution of tasks and responsibilities. In Slovak Republic's conditions, the central government transferred the execution of several response activities onto municipalities and cities. In addition, citizens naturally expected and demanded solutions from the local self-government representations, which are seemed more closely to them. The aim of the paper is to identify and analyse bottom-up response activities from the municipalities and cities, strongly supported by the interest groups and associations of the municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic during crisis situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Innovative solutions, stressing out the use of ICT, proposition of state-of-the-art approaches in providing services for the citizens will be highlighted.

Key words: municipalities; cities; competences; public policy; crisis scenarios.

1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary municipalities and cities exist within the dynamically changing social reality. Regarding to the concept of good governance, municipalities execute their competencies within decentralized and open structures or networks, which might improve governing of territorially defined public issues in conformity with the development of certain territory (Nilssen 2019, 103;

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Kovač 2015, 10). Municipal level of public administration must reflect the newest trends that might enhance the democratic governance. Regardless of the various challenges it faces, local self-government creates a platform between the state and society, which enables the sustainable development and functioning of the society (Peters and Pierre 2018, 11–13). Local self-government creates local public policies, exercise its competences and thus face current challenges.

Current position and importance of municipalities and cities is strengthened thanks to decentralization and subsidiarity, which are because of their universality applied in nearly every democratic state governed by the rule of law (Kákai 2021, 704–706; Cordeiro Guerra and Lastra-Anadón 2019, 295; Koprić 2017, 41). Decentralization also allows public policies to reflect local preferences and demands, because municipalities and cities are responsible for almost all public administration functions (Cerniglia, Longaretti and Zanardi 2021, 377; Benčina, Kozjek and Rakar 2021, 11). Municipalities and cities have a natural tendency to face modern trends and challenges, thanks to which they can enrich their own functioning, but mainly improve the provision of services to citizens and entrepreneurs living and residing in the given territory (Ručinská and Fečko 2020, 389). Consequently, citizens consider the municipality level as the nearest to their everyday life needs, both in a safety and crisis time. Bottom-up approaches of municipalities and cities to solving problems and unknown situations seem to be crucial factor during crisis situations and in the context of crisis management of a given territory. Based on abovementioned, we presume that municipalities and cities compensate and support central government's role, especially during crisis situations.

The aim of the paper is to identify and analyse bottom-up response activities from the municipalities and cities, strongly supported by the interest groups and associations of the municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic during crisis situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Our intention won't be to identify every single possible bottom-up response over the past years, but to highlight selected examples which underline the irreplaceable role of municipalities, cities and municipality associations in crisis situations. The examples will be presented as case studies, following the approach of identifying public choices, public outputs and public impacts in each response activity. Innovative solutions, stressing out the use of information communication technologies, proposition of state-of-the-art approaches in providing services for the citizens will be highlighted.

2 MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES AS SELF-GOVERNMENT ENTITIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

The spatial structure in the Slovak Republic is very fragmented. With 5,4 million inhabitants living in the Slovak Republic in 2021 the overall number of municipalities was according to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022b) 2890 in the same year 2021. As shown in the Table 1, most of the municipalities can be considered as rather small or medium sized ones. In total 2755 municipalities had less than 5 thousand inhabitants living in them, which also includes municipalities such as Prikra with 12 inhabitants, Ondavka with 14 inhabitants, Havranec with 15 inhabitants, Bystrá with 16 inhabitants (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2022a). Compared with very fragmented structure of local self-government, the Slovak Republic also has two cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, namely Bratislava with 475,577 inhabitants and Košice

228,070 with inhabitants (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2022a). Two biggest cities are under a special law which also defines their city districts that are viewed in many ways as a standard local self-government unit.

TABLE 1: SIZE GROUPS OF MUNICIPALITIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC 2021

Size group according to the number of inhabitants	Number of municipalities
199 or less	412
200 – 499	707
500 – 999	749
1 000 – 1 999	584
2 000 – 4 999	303
5 000 – 9 999	67
10 000 – 19 999	32
20 000 – 49 999	27
50 000 – 99 999	7
100 000 and more	2

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2022b).

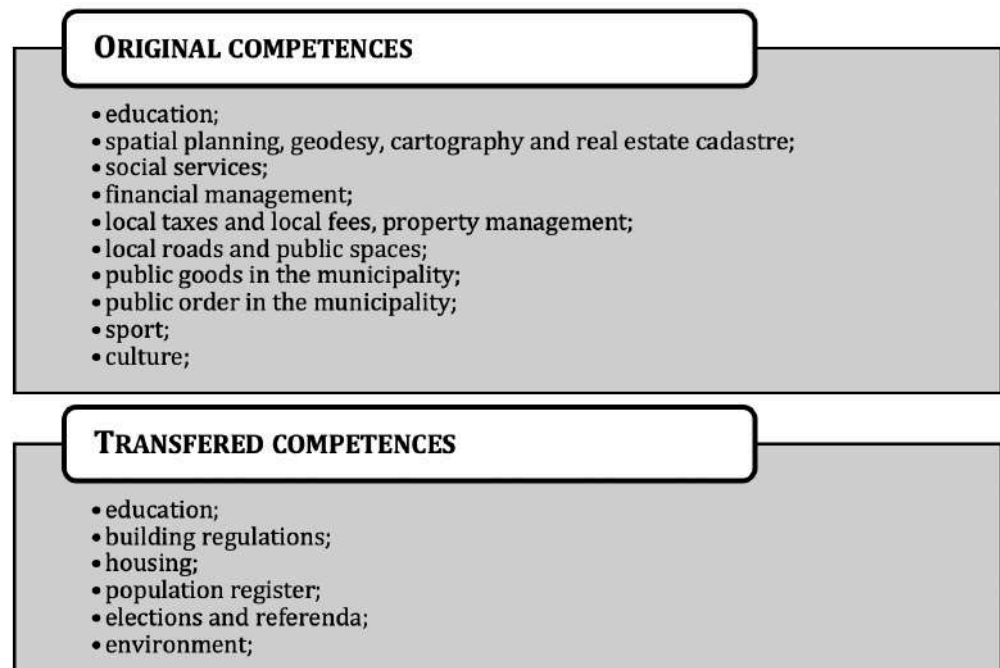
The municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic are grouped into two main municipality and city associations, the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and the City Union. The Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia was established in 1990 and with 2784 municipalities being a part of it, it unites almost every municipality into this non-governmental organisation (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2019). The City Union was established in 1994 and currently unites 54 different cities across the Slovak Republic (City Union 2021, 2–4). Both associations fulfil an irreplaceable role in coordinating activities, formulating good practice, supporting common goals and needs of its members.

As part of the decentralization and deconcentration reforms over the past decades in the Slovak Republic (Ušiaková 2022, 295; Klimovský, Pinterič and Jüptner 2019, 198–200; Vernarský 2019, 72–73; Kováčová 2015, 106–110), municipalities gained different competences reflecting their important role in the society and public policy. Competence in general represents a summary of authority and scope, which the legislation grants to a certain public administration body for the purpose of fulfilling entrusted tasks (Králik and Kútik 2013, 50–51; Škrobák 2012, 10). Authority is understood as a summary of authorisations, rights and obligations, that a public administration body has for the needs of fulfilling assigned tasks and for the implementation of which it is responsible. The scope is then a territorially and factual defined circle of social relations managed by a specific public administration body. Consequently, the tasks of public administration are perceived as matters decomposing long-term society goals on which the political consensus of the relevant entities has been achieved, because they reflect public interest and overall societal conditions. Goals can be characterized as a desired state and tasks as a specific procedure to achieve this state (Hendrych 2014, 70–73; Vačok 2012, 27–28).

Municipalities and cities fulfil in the Slovak Republic two main types of competences, which are original competences and transferred competences. The Act no. 369/1990 on municipal establishment, as amended (§4, section 4) also stated an interpretation rule, whereby if the law doesn't explicitly mention, that it is the exercise of transferred competence, it is applied that it is the exercise of

the self-government original competence of the municipality. In this sense, original competences are seen as the representation of independent decisions of municipalities about the administration of the municipality and of its property. On contrary, transferred competences can be transferred to municipalities only based on law and with an appropriate financial coverage of such competences. The Act no. 416/2001 on the transfer of certain competences from state administration bodies to municipalities and higher territorial units, as amended, but also several other special laws in the past can be considered as representation of such transfer by law. The Figure 1 shows just a representation of the competence's division between original and transferred competences.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLES OF ORIGINAL AND TRANSFERRED COMPETENCES OF THE MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC



Source: Act no. 369/1990 on municipal establishment, as amended; Act no. 416/2001 on the transfer of certain competences from state administration bodies to municipalities and higher territorial units, as amended.

Municipalities and cities exercise their competences independently of other public power subjects, whereas not even the exercise of transferred competences makes the municipalities and cities a subordinate entity (Kadečka 2012, 111–114). An important topic to be stressed out is also the fact, that every municipality, regardless of its size, financial or administrative background, has the same number of competences. Thus, even the smallest municipality is according to law equipped with original and fully transferred competences, as any bigger city in comparison. The financing of transferred competencies is financed is guaranteed by the state, while original competences must be financed by the financial resources of municipality or city.

3 MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES AS POLICY ACTORS

Municipalities and cities realize their activities in particular territory. Their aim is to formulate and realize public policies, mainly in accordance with specific local public interest. Put differently, local self-government units can promote specific requirements and needs of local communities into public policies. Their role in public policy process is very specific. Municipalities and cities are affected and inseparable from the policy process. In this regard, municipalities and cities must be perceived as a relevant actor in public policy process, whose importance is supported by the overall public trust.

3.1 The role of municipalities and cities in the policy process

The generally accepted definition of public policy actors is that they are involved in the policy process, and their aim is to influence the outcome of this process, both in various parts of the policy process and at different levels of governance. The involvement of actors usually depends on the nature of the public policy problem of a specific area of the national economy, which can be of the nature of (1) production area - industry, agriculture, construction, forestry, or (2) non-production area - education, health, culture, science and research, defence, and security. In this sense, public policy actors usually realize social priorities of public interest in a one particular or in more different areas, while public policy process can be influenced by different actors and different interests (Malíková 2018, 28; Scharpf 1997, 521).

As it was stated by Knoepfel, Larrue, Varone and Hill (2011, 39) actors including local self-government units can take part in the emergence, identification and resolution of a problem defined politically as a public one. Municipalities and cities may fully initiate or influence the course or outcome of the policy process that they are involved in (Potůček 2017, 71). In other words, they are involved in a process of exploration of what can be achieved together with other actors, what problems can be solved, and how (Dunlop, Radaelli and Trein, 2018, 7). Municipalities and cities concentrate their power and resources to provide various types of public services, mainly with the aim to increase the quality of life in particular territory.

From the practical point of view the important role of municipalities and cities as policy actors is irreplaceable, as it was proven many times in various local public issues, such as community and sustainable development (Keller, Fehér, Vidra and Virág 2015, 79–82; Weiland, Hickmann, Laderer, Marquardt and Schwindenhammer 2021, 93; Mayer and Keyes 2005, 6–14), improving population health (Naylor and Buck 2018, 72; Cutler and Miller, 2005), social inclusion and welfare (Jeffrey 2017, 7), governing of the climate issues (van der Heijden, Patterson, Juhola and Wolfram 2019, 369–371; Kern 2019, 140–141), or economic growth and territorial marketing (Rizzi, Ciciotti and Graziano 2018, 173–175). At the same time, the role of local self-government is also very important during various natural and man-made crisis and emergency situations (Kuhlmann, Hellström, Ramberg and Reiter 2021, 556–557; Tošić, Karović and Domazet 2021, 285–286; Kapucu 2012, 541–542). Mentioned specific local issues correspond with the division between original and transferred competences of municipalities and cities. As it is generally known, both types of competences are being executed continuously and on a long-term basis.

Municipalities and cities must realize their activities toward the public interest within the public policy process, as well as various other types of policy actors. Public policy process has been constantly discussed by the theoreticians because this idea of modelling the policy process was introduced by Lasswell in 1956. Based on the growth of the field of public policy, several different variations of the stages, substages and typologies has been described by researchers and scholars. Stages of public policy process represent ideal and the most used concept that covers public policy activities in real practice.

According to the Potůček (2017, 105) public policy process starts with problem delimitation and problem recognition, continues with formulation and decision-making, implementation and finishes with evaluation. Howlet, Ramesh and Perl (2020, 100) identified four basic stages of policy cycle that consist of problem delimitation and recognition, policy decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation. Jann and Wegrich (2007, 43) argue that public policy process can be differentiated between agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Public policy process described through the complex cycle includes agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, assessment and adaptation (Dunn 2018, 43). Reasonable description of public policy process was also described by the Cairney (2016) who divides the policy cycle into six stages, namely agenda setting, policy formulation, legitimation, implementation, evaluation and policy maintenance, succession or termination. Following a various mentioned approaches to policy process, agenda setting, decision-making, implementation and evaluation, have become the conventional way to describe activities of relevant actors in a process of formulation and solving of public issues.

The success or failure of the policy process is very often evaluated within three levels, public choices, policy outputs and policy impacts, which were defined by Peters (1993, 4) as a framework for the subject of public policy that reflects connection between policy actors, public policy process and public interest. Public choices can be defined as decisions of legitimate authorities (governments, politicians, cities and municipalities, unions, NGOs and many other actors) about the implementation of public policy (Konečný 2021, 30; Peters 1993, 4). Policy outputs can be considered as activities connected with the implementation of the policy that are used with clear purpose, mainly to provide public goods and public services (Potůček et al. 2015, 133; Peters 1993, 4). Policy impacts represent the summary of all long-term effects resulting from the realized public policy, such as different types of societal changes, changes in behaviour or attitudes, economic growth or improvement of public health (Dunn 2018, 255; Peters 1993, 4). In our opinion, the selected approach can be perceived as an appropriate tool for examining how municipalities and cities compensate and support the central government's role, mainly during crisis situations. In this sense, the attention can be put on public policy and purpose of realized activities of relevant policy actors.

3.2 Involvement of municipalities and cities in policy process and their public trust

The specific role and position of the municipalities and cities in public policy process is defined by their characteristic as the smallest territorial parts of the democratic states governed by the rule of law. Simultaneously, it must be said that the role of municipalities and cities depends on their capacity to organise themselves and exercise their own, independent choices within the forms and

structures of governance that exist at local level (Harding and Brendan 2015, 27). In this regard, the specific conditions, legal and institutional framework of local self-government in the Slovak Republic were mentioned in the previous text.

Within the institutional framework, the position of municipalities and cities is strengthened by national associations of municipalities, both within policy process and democratic governance. In this regard, national associations of municipalities also must be perceived as an important public policy actor. Associations of self-government units fulfil the role of speakers and represent all units towards the national level and their bodies, mainly parliament and government (Janas and Jánošková 2022, 60). National associations of local self-government units take active part in public policy process and have various roles, mainly contribution to legislative process, promotion of modern and innovative citizen-centred governance methods, participation in national and international forums, support municipalities in their execution of competences (Kołsut 2018, 4). National municipal associations also help municipal level to demonstrate their effectiveness to give confidence to citizens and to governments that they can manage the responsibilities that decentralisation brings (Council of Europe 2007, 1). As a result of new challenges of municipalities and cities, their nature and functions have continued to evolve (Romeo 2010, 1). National associations of municipalities were created intentionally, mainly to strengthen the position of municipalities and cities and to promote mutual interests of municipal level in each country.

The importance of national associations corresponds also with the existence of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the only platform that brings together the national associations of local and regional governments from 40 European countries. National associations of local self-government units help municipalities and cities promote their interest in relations to governments, but also within the wider European perspective. However, associations cannot execute the competences of municipalities and cities. In this regard, the final formulation and implementation of national and local public policies depends on the decisions of municipalities and cities.

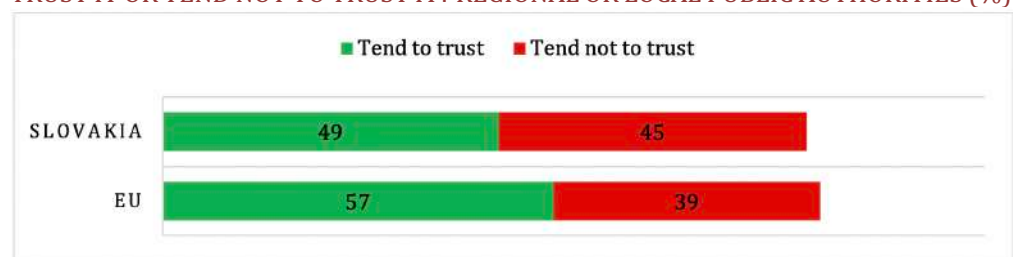
Municipalities and cities can be perceived as actors with natural tendency to face modern trends and challenges, thanks to which they can enrich their own functioning and execution of original and transferred competences, but mainly improve providing of public goods and quality of life. As an irreplaceable actor in policy process, municipalities and cities can participate in national public policies, as well as create their own specific local public policies. Sometimes, the voice of the lowest level of public administration is the only one that can affect the outcome of higher level of public policies in current states. Put differently, central governments are often unable to register and solve all public issues at the municipal level of governance. In other cases, municipalities and cities must react very quickly, because central governments need some time to formulate and implement local public policy. This tendency is also underlined by the fact that municipalities and cities represent the level of governance, which can be considered as the nearest to citizens' everyday life needs.

We see the important and irreplaceable role of municipalities and cities in the society and in the state not only as the result of legislative regulations and division of competences, but also as a natural consequence of the trust which the inhabitants place in the municipalities and cities. Phenomenon of trust, determined by people's satisfaction with public services, political-cultural

variables, demographic factors, governance quality or various structural features of society, may have a crucial role in solidifying social support for democratic rule itself (Gudžinskas 2017, 8; Christensen and Lægreid 2005, 505–507).

According to the Eurobarometer 96 (European Commission 2022, 34) as seen in the Figure 2, when the respondents have been asked about the trust in regional or local authorities, the results show, that in the Slovak Republic 49% of the respondents tend to trust the regional or local public authorities. The overall average in the European Union is with 57% higher, but despite that, in comparison to other public authorities in the Slovak Republic, the trust in regional or local public authorities is significant.

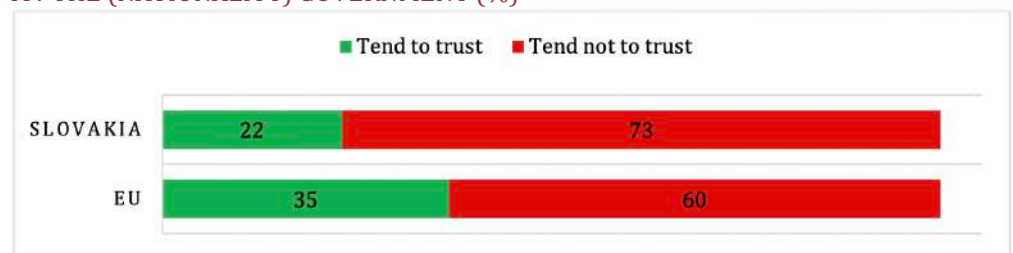
FIGURE 2: EUROBAROMETER 96: HOW MUCH TRUST DO YOU HAVE IN CERTAIN INSTITUTIONS? FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS, DO YOU TEND TO TRUST IT OR TEND NOT TO TRUST IT? REGIONAL OR LOCAL PUBLIC AUTHORITIES (%)



Source: European Commission (2022, 34).

Comparing the trust of the respondents in regional or local public authorities with for example the national government, highlighted in the Figure 3, shows that only 22% of the respondents tend to trust the central government (European Commission 2022, 36). Also, in this regard the overall European Union average is with 35% higher, but the comparison between the Figure 2 and Figure 3 demonstrates, that the respondents in the Slovak Republic tend more to trust in local authorities than in the central government.

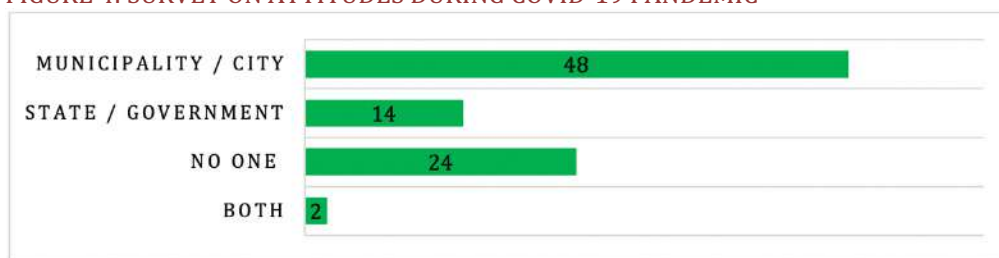
FIGURE 3: HOW MUCH TRUST DO YOU HAVE IN CERTAIN INSTITUTIONS? FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS, DO YOU TEND TO TRUST IT OR TEND NOT TO TRUST IT? THE (NATIONALITY) GOVERNMENT (%)



Source: European Commission (2022, 36).

The Slovak Republic specific statement about the trust in local public authorities can be supported also by the survey presented by the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia (2021a), which was conducted in February 2021. The respondents have been asked one question: “When you as a citizen (as a person) get into difficult life situations and problems caused by coronavirus, who helps you more to solve them? Who do you rely on more – the state (government) or your municipality (city)?”. The results as highlighted in the Figure 4 show, that most respondents tend to rely on the municipality which they are a part of. The difference in reliance between municipalities and the state / government is significant also in this survey, as it was in the Eurobarometer 96.

FIGURE 4: SURVEY ON ATTITUDES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Source: Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia (2021).

The issue of trust in public body authorities, in this case in the municipalities can be seen as important in different crisis scenarios. This was also confirmed by Kukovič (2022, 17) when concluding, that the countries with higher trust in decision makers have been able to adopt Covid-19 pandemic measure more efficiently, in comparison with countries with a lower trust, where measures resulted into scepticisms and doubts. The bottom-up response of municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic in crisis scenarios, supported by the trust in municipalities and cities could have had a significant impact in coping with Covid-19 pandemic and reacting to other crisis situations emerged in the recent past. Activities of various policy actors including Associations of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and various private non-governmental initiatives helped to mitigate negative impacts of crisis situations (Meneguzzo et al. 2021). Municipalities and cities, generally develop response activities for addressing natural disasters and other unknown crisis or emergency situations, as it was discussed in many studies (Glinka 2021, 61–63; Prebilič and Kukovič 2021, 542; Edelenbos, van Buuren, Roth and Winnubst 2017, 60–64; Guerrero, Bodin, McAllister and Wilson 2015, 8). Thus, the following sections of this paper will focus on case studies highlighting response activities of the municipalities and cities, including municipality associations, which supported and compensated the role of the central government.

4 METHODOLOGY

The ambition of the study is to contribute to a constructive dialogue about the role of municipalities and cities in compensating and supporting central government's role. The aim of the study is to examine the role of municipalities and cities as policy actors during crisis situations. More precisely, the study aims to answer the research question whether the bottom-up responses activities of municipalities and cities helped to mitigate or resolve crisis situations.

In this sense, study analyses, with the use of case study method, bottom-up responses from the municipalities and cities, strongly supported by the interest groups and associations of the municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic during crisis situations, including Covid-19 pandemic. Selected cases of bottom-up crisis response activities realized by Slovakian municipalities and cities were analysed between 2020 and 2022.

Theoretical base of this study is composed of relevant scientific papers as well as international documents processed by international organizations. Theoretical part also includes legal framework and status quo of local self-government in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. This part concentrates its attention on the importance of municipalities and cities in contemporary states governed by the

rule of law, as well as underlines the role of municipalities and cities as an actor in the policy process.

The case studies represent the appropriate tool, which was used to demonstrate how bottom-up response activities of the municipal level compensate and support central government's role. Each of case studies include description of the problem and background information on crisis situations, as well as the purpose of public policy process defined by the theory as public choices, policy outputs and policy impacts. This approach focused on selected public policy aspects was explained in chapter 3.

In the paper, the methods of content analysis, abstraction, comparison and synthesis were involved. Comparison was made between selected approaches to mitigate or resolve public issues during crisis, which were used by municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic. This method helped to identify different approaches of municipalities and cities in compensating and supporting central government's role. The comparison was realized with the focus on selected structure of case studies. Content analysis was used to analyse the response activities of municipalities and cities in the Slovak Republic. More precisely, content analysis was used to determine the presence of bottom-up response activities within given qualitative data (documents, press releases, news and information published on websites, etc.). Abstraction was used in the context of filtering those aspects of selected local self-government units' activities, which were relevant for our research. The method of synthesis was used to systematize new ideas and findings based on our research, as well as to draw conclusions resulting from the analysis.

5 CRISIS RESPONSE ACTIVITIES OF THE MUNICIPALITIES AND CITIES

Following three cases studies are covering examples showcasing activities of municipalities, cities and national municipality associations as response activities regarding realisation of online municipality council's meetings, online Covid-19 testing registration and Ukraine refugee and migration crisis. Simultaneously, case studies emphasize the role of national municipality associations in the promotion of the interest of the local self-government and enforcement of mutual legitimate interests of municipalities and cities.

5.1 Case 1 – Municipality council's online meetings

Because of the crisis and restrictions in personal meetings due to the Covid-19 pandemic, municipalities and cities were faced with the inability to organized council's meetings in person. Therefore, it was necessary to formulate and execute new public policies for proper functioning of self-government bodies.

Public choices: Several stakeholders, government, parliament, municipalities, municipality associations, formulated the need for legislative change to enable online council's meetings with the result of adopting the Act no. 73/2020 on the amendment of some laws within the scope of the Ministry of interior of the Slovak Republic in connection with the disease COVID-19, as amended in April 2020. The adopted law formulated transitional provisions during an extraordinary situation, a state of emergency or an exceptional condition in connection with the disease Covid-19 (altogether indicated as crisis) according to which a proper functioning of self-government bodies should have been enabled.

Policy outputs: Based on the newly adopted legislation, municipalities and cities were able to organize council's meetings online, using videoconference or other communication technology tools. The law, or the central government in this matter, didn't provided concrete methodological guidelines how to do so, or how to finetune nuances of the overall online meeting's management. The Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia reacted to this need in April 2020 with a recommendation manual (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2020) for municipalities and cities, which helped the self-governments to organize online council's meetings. The recommendations specified and suggested a go-to approach in the field of organisational measures before the first online council's meeting and suggestions for the amendment of the rules of procedure of the municipality council. We can claim that the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia stepped into the implementation of the public policy with clearly formulated recommendations and compensated the central government's role in case of online council's meetings.

Policy impacts: As a result of the implemented public policy, the municipality council's meetings were able to be organized online and a continuation of municipalities competence's execution was secured.

5.2 Case 2 – Online Covid-19 testing registration

Covid-19 pandemic required to implement various measures and governments had no chance to avoid negative impacts of these measures. Various approaches were implemented to mitigate negative impacts of each wave of pandemic. The Government of the Slovak Republic decided, to realize mass Covid-19 testing of citizens, which was the main part of the government's Covid-19 response policy. First obligatory mass testing of the citizens was realized at the end of October 2020, while citizens had an obligation to obtain certificate of negative Covid-19 test until the end of the second wave. In this regard, mass testing was realized as a response to the second wave of the pandemic, which took place in Slovakia from September 2020 to April 2021. Online registration of citizens of a similar scope has not yet been implemented in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, and government had not even created conditions for the implementation of this obligation. However, online registration was the best way how to manage mass Covid-19 testing of citizens.

Public choices. As a reaction on the growth of confirmed cases, the Government of the Slovak Republic created Covid-19 response policy. Government transferred responsibility for the result on to municipalities and cities. However, the financial coverage was not immediate, but the reimbursement of costs was realized with a delay of several months. Organizational part of the process was partly provided by the state, mainly logistical distribution of antigen tests and basic security aspects coordinated by the Slovak Armed Forces. Administrative and personnel aspects, as well as the performance of this transferred competence, was fully executed by local self-government units. The implementation of mass Covid-19 testing was difficult to organize, but municipalities and cities were perceived as the only part of the public administration that can organize and coordinate basically all the citizens. Municipal level is responsible for the organizing all types of elections. This competence is also transferred competence but is not realized online. However, municipalities and cities, as the most innovative component of public administration, is naturally looking for ways to make the execution of each competence more efficient. From this point of view,

the citizens primarily demanded the minimization of the waiting time before the test and while waiting for the test result. This ambition was reachable only through the electronization of the whole process.

Policy outputs. The result of local self-government policies helped to make mass Covid-19 testing more efficient. Registration systems for mass testing rounds have been developed by the municipalities and cities as their own innovative activity. Through separate web portals of municipalities and cities, it was possible to register for testing, choose a testing location and obtain the result of the testing itself electronically. In 2021, thanks to the initiative of the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia, a national wide registration system MOMs - Momky na dlani /MOMs - Moms in the palm of your hand/ was created (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2021b). This registration system was created as an opportunity for smaller municipalities and cities to handle mass testing, because separate web portals were created mainly by the larger self-government units. Thanks to another integrated registration system, citizens could easily register for mass testing, while this system was more centralized and offered opportunities even in smaller municipalities and cities to register for testing and receive the result of test electronically. At this point we must mention that the state at central level subsequently also created a registration system during 2021.

Policy impacts. The impact of the innovative approach of municipalities and cities was the simplification of citizens' access to Covid-19 mass testing registration and time savings. Simultaneously, municipal level helped to achieve higher quality of life during the pandemic, as the test result itself was needed when visiting essential shops and later also when entering employment. Thanks to the innovative solutions provided by the municipalities and cities, the citizens had at least a little more comfort in the context of anti-pandemic measures applied by the Government of the Slovak Republic.

5.3 Case 3 – Ukraine refugee and migrant crisis

Member states of the European Union are successfully managing the refugee and migrant crisis caused by the military conflict in Ukraine. Mainly border countries with Ukraine have been solving this problem almost immediately from the beginning of the conflict, also the Slovak Republic. Towards the end of August 2022, 90,416 refugees from Ukraine were registered for temporary protection and 713,588 Ukrainians crossed Slovak border with Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict (UNHCR 2022). This situation was by its nature and impacts new, unknown, and in this context, it was necessary to evolve new or reformulate existing public policies.

Public choices. Government responded with declaration of aid (legal, economic, social). However, municipalities and cities were directly affected by waves of individuals who needed immediate assistance after crossing borders. In this regard, municipal level had to coordinate various types of other policy actors, mainly NGOs, businesses, churches and individual volunteers. Government created national response policy focused on accommodation housing support, while central government will refund accommodation costs to the property owner. The realization of this competence was transferred to municipalities and cities. However, there were no exact instructions prepared by the central government. Also, in this case, the bottom-up response of municipal level was

very important to manage immediate challenges caused by the armed conflict on the Ukrainian territory.

Policy outputs. As a practical results, Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia elaborated and created various tools that helped municipalities and cities to provide various public services. National registration system for the accommodation housing of refugees was created by the Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia and associated partners (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022d). Simultaneously, model decisions for councils in connection with humanitarian aid were published (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022c). During the first month of the conflict, Guide for kindergartens, primary and secondary schools was published (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022a), as well as centralized online portal Helping Hand for Ukraine for overall aid management was created (Association of Towns and Communities of Slovakia 2022b).

Policy impacts. Municipalities and cities have been affected as the first responding part of public administration. Direct and indirect impacts can be identified in the context of various public interests, mainly public order and public health. Simultaneously, bottom-up response of municipal level helped to satisfy basic human needs of refugees, as well as provide aid by citizens, business and other policy actors more effectively. In this regard, bottom-up response of local self-government helped to mitigate negative impacts of the Ukrainian conflict, both from the refugee's point of view and execution of municipal and city competences.

6 CONCLUSION

There is no substitute for the municipalities and cities and their important role to overcome basic various challenges of the 21. century, but also crisis, unknown or emergency situations. Municipalities and cities must be perceived as policy actors with an ability to formulate own local public policies and influence formulation and implementation of the national public policies.

Bottom-up response of municipal level on to crisis has been proven in the Slovak Republic. The research confirmed the irreplaceable role of national municipality associations during crisis situations, mainly their position as the main platform for sharing of good practice examples and creator of national-wide guides and innovative solutions. The activities realized within presented case studies correspond with the high level of trust in municipal level. Summing it up, the research also confirmed the irreplaceable role of municipalities, cities and municipality associations in compensating and supporting central government's role in crisis situations.

Municipalities and cities compensate central government's role, both during the formulation and implementation stages of public policy process. As a result, this role directly influence creation of new or change of existing original and transferred competences of local self-government units. Case studies were focused on situations where the state did not react quickly enough. However, municipalities and cities had to deal with the situation immediately, but without guidance from the state. Supporting role of municipalities and cities can be perceived as implementation of state's national response policies. In this regard, municipal level executes transferred competences, because government usually

just made decision and municipal level must find the effective solutions for policy implementation. As it was proven by our case studies, compensating role has its limits, namely insufficient guidelines from the state, ad hoc solutions, insufficient or late financing of transferred competences.

To conclude, the benefit of the article is associated with fostering an interest in the examined issues of bottom-up response activities of municipalities and cities, which use innovative approaches to influence public choices, policy outputs and policy impacts. In this regard, municipalities and cities, as a policy actor, can influence the quality of public services and quality of life considerably, also in the crisis situations.

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ODZIV OD SPODAJ NAVZGOR: VLOGA OBČIN IN MEST PRI NADOMEŠČANJU IN PODPORI VLOGE CENTRALNE VLADE

Obvladovanje kriznih scenarijev, ki so bili eksplicitno izpostavljeni v času pandemije Covid-19, je pokazalo na nujnost prilagajanja in iskanja izvedljivih rešitev za izvajanje nalog in pristojnosti državnih vlad in lokalnih oblasti. Na Slovaškem je centralna vlada prenesla izvajanje več aktivnosti odzivanja na nastalo situacijo na občine in mesta. Poleg tega so občani upravičeno pričakovali in zahtevali rešitve od predstavništev lokalne samouprave, ki se jim zdijo bližje. Namen prispevka je na primeru Slovaške identificirati in analizirati aktivnosti odzivanja v kriznih situacijah, vključno s pandemijo Covid-19, od spodaj navzgor, torej občin in mest, ki jih močno podpirajo interesne skupine in združenja občin in mest. V članku so izpostavljene inovativne rešitve s poudarkom na uporabi IKT, predlagani pa so tudi najsodobnejši pristopi za zagotavljanje storitev za državljane.

Ključne besede: občine; mesta; kompetence; javna politika; krizni scenariji.