

РЕГІОНАЛЬНЕ УПРАВЛІННЯ ТА МІСЦЕВЕ САМОВРЯДУВАННЯ

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THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Abstract. The publication is devoted to the current problem of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author of the article analyzes the impact of the pandemic on local and regional governments in the European Union. Based on the analysis of scientific research of such scientists as K. Baran, W. Burek, M. Gibek, F. Morawski, J. Żochowska and others. On the problems of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on local self-government and governance in the EU member states, the key directions of transformation of the relevant government and administrative activities with the use of digitalization potential are substantiated.

He emphasizes that as a result, local governments have faced the most difficult and painful test of their ability to seek and achieve political, economic and social responses to this health crisis. The author of the article pays special attention to the dynamically introduced digitization, which made it possible to conduct remote meetings of individual authorities in the local government. However, it would not be possible if it were not for the proper preparation of this entire process, both in terms of the functioning of the commune and its institutions, as well as the preparation of residents to use on-line tools, or the implementation in a new way of compliance with the processes related to customer service and reprogramming thinking about new processes. The author notes that it is also a challenge for local governments in terms of using these experiences, introducing new management systems, and securing various spheres for which they are responsible against similar threats in the future.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also showed that local authorities began to be more important to local communities than state authorities. Local leaders turned out to be much more responsible and more efficient in action aimed at taking care of local communities. Many of the initiatives undertaken indicated not only the immediate reactions of local authorities, but also the strategic economic protection of both individuals and business entities.

Keywords: pandemic, Covid-19 pandemic, European Union, local government.

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ВПЛИВ ПАНДЕМІЇ COVID-19 НА МІСЦЕВІ ТА РЕГІОНАЛЬНІ УРЯДИ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОГО СОЮЗУ

Анотація. Публікація присвячена актуальній проблемі пандемії *Covid-19*. Автор статті аналізує вплив пандемії на діяльність органів місцевого та регіонального самоврядування Європейського Союзу. На основі аналізу наукових досліджень таких учених, як К. Баран, В. Бурек, М. Гібек, Ф. Моравські, Й. Жолондковська та ін. щодо проблем впливу пандемії *Covid-19* на місцеве самоврядування та управління в державах-учасницях ЄС обґрунтовано ключові напрямки трансформації відповідної владної та управлінської діяльності з використанням потенціалу діджиталізації.

Підкреслюється, що місцеві органи влади зіткнулися з найскладнішим і найбільшішим випробуванням своєї спроможності знаходити і досягати політичних, економічних та соціальних відповідей на нинішню кризу охорони здоров'я. Особливу увагу приділяється динамічно впроваджуваній діджиталізації, яка дала можливість проводити дистанційні засідання окремих органів у системі органів місцевого самоврядування. Однак, ці новації були б неможливими, якби не гідне організаційне забезпечення цього процесу, як з точки зору функціонування комун (громад) та іх інститутів (установ), так і в частині підготовки жителів до використання он-лайн інструментів, або переосмислення регламентування процесів, пов'язаних із обслуговуванням споживачів у нових реаліях. Зазначається, що це також виклик для органів місцевого самоврядування з точки зору використання подібного управлінського досвіду, впровадження нових систем управління та захисту різних сфер життєдіяльності в межах компетенції від подібних загроз у майбутньому.

Пандемія *Covid-19* також продемонструвала, що місцева влада стала важливішою для місцевих громад, ніж державна. Місцеві лідери виявилися набагато відповідальнішими та ефективнішими у діях, спрямованих на піклування про місцеві громади. Багато ініціатив, що вживаються, свідчать не лише про негайну реакцію місцевої влади, але й про стратегічний економічний захист як окремих осіб, так і суб'єктів господарювання.

Ключові слова: пандемія, пандемія *Covid-19*, Європейський Союз, місцеве самоврядування.

Formulation of the problem. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the functioning of European countries. Governments had to face the dynamic development of the coronavirus and often make quick decisions to introduce specific restrictions [1, pp. 49-63]. Also, local governments faced the most difficult and painful test of their ability to seek and achieve political, economic and social responses to this health crisis [2, pp. 9-30].

Analysis of recent research and publications. This important issue has not yet been elaborated on. Most of the previous analyzes were an attempt to investigate various aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the impact of the pandemic on society and law (K. Baran, W. Burek, M. Gibek, Impact of Covid-19 on society and law. Selected aspects of Polish and European regulations. Legal Journal of Public Administration 2020, No. 6, pp. 282-299), analyzes of restrictions related to, for example, the prohibition of movement (F. Morawski, Prohibition of movement in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic in the light of the constitutional right to move, "Przegląd Praw Publicznych" 2020, No. 9, pp. 7-17), or the very idea of the rule of law in the times of Covid-19 (J. Żochowska, Idea of the rule of law in the times of COVID-19, [in:] Państwo i prawo w czasach COVID-19, ed. K. Stępiński, Warsaw 2020, p. 16.). However, there was no comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on local and regional governments in European countries.

The aim of this article is to deepen the knowledge about the impact / actions as well as the responses of local and regional government authorities in select-

ed European Union (EU) Member States to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Presenting main material. The main research questions posed in this article concern the following issues: How are local governments coping with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? What are the consequences (political, economic or social) of it and which of them are the most difficult to deal with? Has this crisis affected local democracy? What challenges will local governments face in the post-COVID-19 era?

COVID-19 spread quickly from Wuhan to the rest of the world [3, pp. 52-55]. By the end of June 2020, it had infected more than 10,000,000 people and caused more than 500,000 deaths in almost all countries around the world, causing a global crisis worse than all previous epidemics and pandemics. It began to pose a threat to humans at any age, but the elderly and adults as well as people with certain basic diseases turned out to be more at risk, and it was in these people that the disease was often more severe [4, pp. 151-155].

Citizens were informed that the virus spreads via droplets and that it could maintain its vital potential on the surface for up to several days in an appropriate condition. It has been argued that people who touch these surfaces and then touch the face, mouth, nose and eyes can become infected. The possibility of fecal-oral transmission was also indicated, which, however, has not been proven.

The basic clinical symptoms that occurred in most patients were upper respiratory tract infection, fever, dry cough, sore throat, obstruction of the upper respiratory tract, dyspnoea, headache, fatigue, muscle pain and joint pain [5, pp. 18-19]. Studies (including international

ones) confirm that the disease was more severe in people with comorbidities such as hypertension, chronic heart disease, chronic lung disease, and diabetes [6, pp. 1-6].

According to the recommendations and other reports of the World Health Organization (WHO), the vaccination strategy against COVID-19 is one of the most effective and main methods of preventing / treating the disease, which has become a priority for governments, international organizations [7, pp. 317-339] and public health organizations around the world. It was recognized that vaccination against COVID-19 will minimize the spread of the virus and reduce global morbidity and mortality, thus helping healthcare systems to adequately respond to new epidemics [8, pp. 5-15].

At the end of 2019, no local government predicted that the COVID-19 virus would spread worldwide within a few weeks. The crisis management that followed resulted in separate solutions by central and regional authorities, often leading to inarticulate responses in the same country. Local authorities in the Member States of the European Union had to rethink their mode of operation and carry out a rapid digital transformation [9, pp. 27-46] of their modus operandi, which had a definite impact on both the administrative [10, pp. 37-48] and political dimension of local self-government. And although local democracy has not been suspended, the relationship between executive and legislative bodies at the municipal level and the supervisory powers of municipal assemblies have changed significantly. Some city councils postponed their ordinary meetings, limited or even suspended meetings of specialist committees, and even limited pub-

lic intervention [11]. Others switched to remote mode, using the videoconference and remote voting system [12, pp. 27-46].

In Poland at that time the remote mode of the sessions of the bodies of local government units was not the preferred statutory form of holding meetings of collective bodies, be it bodies of units or their internal bodies. It even seemed to contradict the principle of openness, which is a constitutional principle defined in Art. 61 sec. 2 of the Polish Constitution [13]. However, the legislator decided to extend the new duties of the chairman of the council / provincial parliaments with regard to deciding on the remote form of conducting sessions and meetings of internal committees in the decision-making body, using electronic means of communication, including the live broadcast of the meeting of its members with the possibility of discussion, proposing possible amendments to draft resolutions and voting. Thus, it should be considered that the provision of Art. 15 of the Act on special solutions related to preventing, counteracting and combatting COVID-19, other infectious diseases and crisis situations caused by them [14], constitutes an independent legal basis for the launch of remote sessions of bodies constituting local government units.

An important element of each session is the correct calling of a remote session along with the agenda, in accordance with the order of the chairman of the council [15] / provincial parliaments, but taking into account the current statutory conditions, i.e. ensuring the openness of draft resolutions and the possibility to become familiar with them by councilors and residents a given self-government community.

The introduction of the possibility of conducting remote sessions should be considered as a solution to improve the functioning of the constitutive and executive organs during a pandemic. Remote sessions are exceptional solutions [16, pp. 91-118], therefore it is used only during the period of epidemic threat or epidemic state, although it would be worth considering introducing this solution permanently to the statutory regulation. This regulation is of a special nature in relation to local government statutes, which mode of processing during the session left to be regulated in the statute of a given local government unit. It should be emphasized that none of the acts of an extraordinary nature (e.g. the act on the state of natural disaster or the act on the state of emergency) grants the decision-making bodies of local government units the competence to organize sessions in a remote mode during the period of the state of emergency.

Therefore, it is worth emphasizing that the remote mode of processing of organs, as a rule, seems to be an opportunity to legally exercise the mandate of a councilor, however, it may create certain limitations in the scope of functioning of organs constituting the subject of external openness.

It is *de facto up* to the chairman of the council / provincial parliament whether the remote mode of deliberations of councils / sejmiks will not limit the residents' right to access the meetings of collective bodies and those coming from general elections. The hitherto practice of self-government in Poland shows that self-government communities are trying to ensure full implementation of the principle of openness when introducing a remote mode of processing at sessions

and meetings of internal councils / provincial parliaments [17, pp. 29-36]. They also ensure full implementation of the rights and obligations of councilors, including active participation in the work of bodies and open voting [18, 129-138].

In the Czech Republic, the pandemic contributed to the strengthening of co-operation at the level of municipalities, cities and regions. The regional self-government turned out to be particularly involved in the fight against the virus, as it created an appropriate level of aid and effectively supported civic initiatives and their activities [19, p. 12]. As an example of activity, it can be mentioned the launch of the production of disinfectants, nanomaterials and their use for the production of protective equipment. The broad, spontaneous involvement of the society, manifested in the sewing of masks, their distribution, care for seniors and other forms of volunteering, was also particularly important. Therefore, it should be recognized that local governments and society of the Czech Republic "took matters into their own hands" at the beginning of the epidemic, filling the gaps in the state's activities, especially when the purchase and distribution of protective measures at the central level did not function sufficiently [20].

During the EU's annual regional and local barometer (12/10/2020), President Ursula von der Leyen indicated that when the pandemic broke out, local governments reacted immediately to the threat. And Europeans know well what they owe to their mayors, regional presidents and councilors. Therefore, regional and local leaders will be at the heart of our reconstruction efforts. The measures of the Next Generation EU instrument will be primarily aimed at strengthening

our health systems. Thanks to European funds, it will be possible to invest in new hospitals, better equipment and more resilient healthcare systems. And local governments will be in charge of these projects, and not – as yet – stuck in the passenger seat [21].

In 2020, many analyzes indicated that the pandemic would pose a significant threat to the finances of municipalities and regions throughout Europe. As many as 86% of cities and regions in the EU forecasted an increase in spending, while 90% expected a decrease in revenues, which was to have a negative impact on public investment [22].

In the short and medium term, local governments were concerned about the “scarcity effect” associated with rising spending and falling incomes, which could undermine their ability to make public investments. On the one hand, 86% of regions and cities expected a large or moderate negative impact on their spending, in particular on social services (64%) and social benefits (59%). On the other hand, 90% forecast a decline in income [23].

In March 2020, the European Committee of the Regions announced the launch of a platform to support local governments across Europe in the fight against COVID-19. This tool was to provide local government officials with regular and practical information, e.g. on EU measures to resolve the crisis. The CoR also called for additional money for this purpose [24].

In July 2021, the Committee of the Regions called on the European Commission to extend the flexible rules for EU funds. Among the postulates were the extension of the possibility to apply the 100% EU co-financing rate, the extension

of the “N + 3” rule and a temporary increase in the state aid threshold [25].

The reason for these actions was that regions and cities were asking the European Commission to extend the use of exceptional flexibility measures to deal with the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of a survey conducted by the European Committee of the Regions indicated a clear need for local and regional authorities to extend the flexibility measures introduced in 2020 to mobilize EU structural funds and state aid in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to local government officials, extraordinary rules for regions and cities had to be maintained to ensure continuity of investments in emergency situations and to implement key initiatives such as job retention programs. This request was included in a letter signed jointly by the CoR head Apostolos Cicikostas and the Chair of the EU Budget Committee of the Committee of the Regions (COTER), Izabelle Boudineau, to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and EU Commissioners [26].

At the time, the Committee of the Regions indicated that in 2020, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was cities and regions that took on the main part of crisis management. Two coronavirus response investment initiatives (CRII and CRII+) introduced unique and useful flexibility measures to enable Cohesion Policy funds 2014-2020 to be used to finance measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as investments in the healthcare sector, support for SMEs and the labor market. In addition, Member States have started to implement the new REACT – EU program to support the most

affected EU countries and regions. Under this extraordinary legislative initiative, EUR 47.5 billion was to be made available through the Structural Funds [27].

Financial aid has undoubtedly played a crucial role in coping with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is worth noting that this coronavirus not only affected the economies of countries, but also had a fundamental impact on the democratization of societies: power and privileges, money, origin or positions did not protect against this virus. On the other hand, it contributed to the creation of a new social order, connected by experience, which began to question values, reasons and ideologies. Social, economic and political differences deepened rapidly, but also new divisions and exclusions emerged, as in the case of elderly and lonely people isolated at home or migrants unable to return to their countries [28].

The pandemic also showed that local authorities began to be more important to local communities than state authorities. Local leaders turned out to be much more responsible and more efficient in action aimed at taking care of local communities. Many initiatives indicated not only the immediate reactions of local authorities, but also the strategic economic protection of both individuals and business entities: exempting parents from fees for nurseries and kindergartens, concessions for entrepreneurs, assistance for local gastronomy or support for hospitals (e.g. purchase of equipment, security measures). Delayed responses from local government officials triggered the aforementioned quick reactions, as well as actions covering a wide range of local issues. The active attitude of local government officials had multiple im-

pacts on local communities – it allowed them to strengthen local ties, increase the sense of the caring role of local governments, and at the same time constituted a positive response to fear or even loss of trust in state institutions. However, maintaining financial and economic stability and satisfying the needs of residents in the long term depend not only on the inventiveness of local government officials, but also on cooperation with state administration bodies at the national level.

Conclusions. Since we live in a global society, any event can spread quickly between individuals, from a local to a global scale. Diversity in the socio-political and economic fields has made it possible to implement a variety of policies to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and consolidate initiatives that develop interactions within local communities, increasing local democracy. This is because the regional and local impact of the COVID-19 crisis is highly heterogeneous, with significant implications for both crisis management and policy responses.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly shown that an important factor is a good preparation of the digitization process – both in terms of the functioning of the commune and its institutions, as well as the preparation of residents to use online tools, implementing a new perception of customer service and reprogramming thinking about certain processes. It is also a big challenge for local governments in terms of using these experiences, introducing new management systems, securing various spheres for which they are responsible against similar threats in the future.

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