

COOPERATION BETWEEN LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE CIVIL
PROTECTION IN OVERCOMING THE COVID-19 CRISIS:
AD OMNIA PARATI SUMUS

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented strike of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting aftermath pose profound challenges for local governments, from managing responses, to an unknown crisis, to ensuring the safety of citizens in the midst of extreme uncertainty. The paper discusses the management of the COVID-19 crisis, focusing on the cooperation between Slovenian municipalities and the established civil protection system. Civil protection and emergency preparedness to cope with natural, technological and other disasters is a key component of any local community. The authors examine the normative framework of the civil protection system in the Republic of Slovenia and offer insights into the results of the first empirical study to evaluate civil protection regulations, emergency response, and operations at the municipal level during the response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: local community, civil protection, emergency response, COVID-19, Slovenia

COOPERAZIONE TRA LE COMUNITÀ LOCALI E LA PROTEZIONE CIVILE PER
SUPERARE LA CRISI RELATIVA AL COVID-19:
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SINTESI

Il colpo senza precedenti della pandemia relativa al COVID-19 e le conseguenze che ne derivano pongono profonde sfide ai governi locali: dalla gestione delle risposte, a una crisi sconosciuta, per garantire la sicurezza dei cittadini che si trovano in una situazione di estrema incertezza. Il documento discute la gestione della crisi relativa al COVID-19, concentrandosi sulla cooperazione tra i comuni sloveni e il sistema di protezione civile esistente. La protezione civile e la preparazione alle emergenze per far fronte a disastri naturali, tecnologici e di altro tipo è una componente chiave di qualsiasi comunità locale. Gli autori esaminano il quadro normativo del sistema di protezione civile nella Repubblica di Slovenia e offrono approfondimenti sui risultati del primo studio empirico per valutare le normative di protezione civile, la risposta alle emergenze e le operazioni a livello comunale durante la reazione alla crisi relativa al COVID-19.

Parole chiave: comunità locale, protezione civile, reazione all'emergenza, COVID-19, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION¹

People have always tried to understand and explain natural processes. With the development of science, mankind is no longer content to understand these phenomena, but takes on the role of predictor and manager. Despite advanced science and technology enabling humanity to anticipate changes, challenges and – not least – threats, the dimensions and consequences of natural, technological and other disasters can still surprise us. In modern societies, non-military security risks represent the most common form of security challenges. The latter could also be observed in the Republic of Slovenia, which has been put to the test of managing natural and other disasters several times during the thirty years of its independence. Thus, Slovenian newspapers have reported on earthquakes, floods, landslides, hailstorms and devastating storms, ice disasters with sleet and other environmental disasters related to (self-)ignition of chemical factories and landfills. Even though the territory of the Republic of Slovenia is not equally vulnerable to the listed natural disasters due to its geographical location and spatial diversity, crisis situations endangering human life and/or health cannot be avoided, as (especially recently) natural disasters (such as sewage sludge disposal and pollution of (drinking) water) occur far too frequently because of reckless human behaviour. The consequences of such disasters are felt most strongly in local communities, and it seems that Slovenian communities are somehow used to managing and resolving crisis situations. Moreover, the protocols of the civil protection and rescue system are well established.

Nevertheless, 2020 brought a significant challenge of a magnitude that could not have been foreseen on March 4, when the first infection was detected in Slovenia, even considering the scenes from abroad that we followed via the Internet and television. The coronavirus disease SARS-CoV-2 posed at least a triple challenge, namely 1) it was a completely new phenomenon, unknown to the medical profession; 2) the disease spread throughout the entire population, which meant that – unlike natural and other disasters – its effects were not spatially limited and therefore required simultaneous activation of protection and relief forces throughout the country; and 3) the lack of experience with the disease and the rapid changes in lifestyles triggered various emotional reactions in people – from fear and anxiety to anger and loss of trust in the “crisis managers”, which undoubtedly included representatives of local communities and civil protection.²

Municipalities reacted quite quickly to the emerging situation and took a place-based approach to response

policies;³ at the same time, they also implemented national measures in response to the crisis COVID-19 (such as mandatory use of face masks and other protective equipment, restrictions on movement, lockdowns, etc.), with protective and auxiliary forces playing an important role, especially the Civil Protection. The paper discusses the management of the COVID-19 crisis, focusing on cooperation between Slovenian municipalities and the Civil Protection. Civil protection and emergency preparedness to cope with natural, technological and other disasters is a key component of any local community. In the first part of the paper, we analyse the normative framework for protection against natural and other disasters in the Republic of Slovenia using a descriptive method, focusing on the civil protection system. In the second part of the paper, we present the qualitative and quantitative data from the first post-crisis research, which deals with the evaluation of the cooperation of local municipalities with Civil Protection in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. Based on the responses of mayors and participatory observation, we conclude the paper with reflections on how to improve the existing system of (cooperation) between local communities and the protection and rescue forces.

THEORETICAL AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR THE REGULATION OF THE CIVIL PROTECTION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA

The term “civil protection” is used worldwide to describe activities to protect civilians from incidents and disasters (Mauro, 1996). This phenomenon has evolved from the earlier philosophy of civil defence, which represented control over the civilian population in the event of actual or potential aggression and, similar to all situations where operations were conducted under wartime pressure or hostility, placed great emphasis on authoritarian techniques of governing and restricting personal freedom. In contrast, civil protection has moved away from the methods of command and control and relies on cooperation and information sharing (Masri & Moore, 1995), which is one of the main differentiators between civil protection and civil defence concepts (Alexander, 2002). Today, civil protection is primarily seen as an umbrella under which various emergency services find their shelter; an organisational tool for coordinating emergency services, public enterprises, and institutions at the state and local levels; and an umbrella that still represents the international legal protection for those concerned with the protection of civilians due to military operations. Under this umbrella, the title “(system of) protection and rescue” was introduced, in

1 The study was created as part of the following two projects: “Response to the COVID-19 pandemic in a comparative perspective: organization, coordination and improvisation”, Defence Science programme group, ARRS code P5-0206, and “Climate Related Natural Disasters and the Response of the Protection, Rescue and Assistance System in the Republic of Slovenia”, ARRS code V5-2150.

2 Substantive explanation: in the study we use the term “civil protection” with the two following meanings. Written with a lowercase letters the term is understood as a general concept of protection of the population, while capitalised “Civil Protection” indicates the name of organised forces for rescue, protection and relief.

3 More on the place-based approach in Hambleton (2011); Brezovšek and Kukovič (2014); Kukovič (2015).

contrast to the system of protection from natural and other disasters, which is a somewhat broader concept (Jeraj, 2014, 106).

According to European Union (Council of the European Union, 2021), civil protection includes preventive measures to reduce the impact of future emergencies or disasters and the assistance that a government provides to the population in need after an emergency or natural disaster. Countries hit by major disasters are often overwhelmed and their response capacity is limited. A coordinated response at EU level is therefore essential to ensure that aid reaches where it is needed and to avoid duplication of relief efforts. The Union Civil Protection Mechanism coordinates the response to natural and man-made disasters at EU level. The Mechanism has three objectives: a) to foster cooperation between national civil protection authorities, b) to raise public awareness and improve preparedness, and c) to enable rapid, effective and coordinated assistance to the affected population. The Mechanism was first established in 2001 and reformed in 2013 to focus on disaster prevention and preparedness.

In Slovenia, civil protection is a special part of the system of protection against natural and other disasters, which includes administrative bodies, forces, services and facilities for rescue, protection and assistance (Protection against Natural and Other Disasters Act, 1994). Thus, Civil Protection belongs to the rescue, protection and relief forces provided in the event of natural or other disasters, which are the available capacities of the state, local communities, enterprises, institutions or other organisations for protection, rescue and relief. These forces are designed to provide first aid and emergency medical care, assist vulnerable and affected populations, provide first veterinary aid, extinguish and rescue fires, rescue from debris, landslides and snow avalanches, assist in floods and other weather disasters, as well as ecological and other disasters at sea, in rivers and lakes, etc. As far as the participation and involvement of citizens is concerned, rescue, protection and relief forces are voluntary (e.g. volunteer fire brigades, Red Cross, Caritas), professional (fire brigades, ambulance services) and mandatory, which includes the Civil Protection forces of the Republic of Slovenia and first aid forces; otherwise they can function as a combination of professional and voluntary members (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021). In the event of natural and other disasters, these forces are activated in stages: first, forces are mobilised at the municipal level, then forces from neighbouring municipalities, and finally forces operating at the national level, depending on the scale and nature of the disaster.

The system of protection, rescue and assistance falls within the competence of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, more specifically the Ministry of Defence, where administrative and professional tasks are performed by the Administration of the Republic of Slovenia for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief, which operates as an institution within the Ministry and performs administrative and professional tasks of protection, rescue

and assistance. The coordination of work is carried out within an operational structure of 13 regional information centres with 13 offices, which operate in the form of a 24-hour on-call service and represent an efficient service for assistance, rescue and support in the event of natural or other disasters (Prebilič, 2022).

If we analyse the system of protection against natural and other disasters in the Republic of Slovenia in a somewhat broader context, we find that it is a unified and comprehensive system managed by the state and local communities, which, within the framework of a specific subsystem of national security, ensure the protection of people, animals, property, cultural heritage and the environment with the main objective of reducing and preventing disasters and, above all, the occurrence of victims. The legal basis is found in the Protection against Natural and Other Disasters Act (1994), which defines protection against natural and other disasters as a right and duty that falls within the competence of the state, municipalities, citizens and other residents of Slovenia, public emergency services, companies, institutes and organisations, as well as volunteers organised in associations, professional bodies and non-governmental organisations engaged in activities relevant to protection against natural and other disasters. The basic principles of the system are aimed at taking preventive protective measures and ensuring mutual and international assistance and responsibility. The legal framework provides for a general responsibility of the state and local communities to provide publicity and inform the population about disasters and, in the case of natural and other disasters, provides for a phased approach that defines the deployment of forces and resources hierarchically.

In addition to the Protection against Natural and Other Disasters Act (1994), uniform principles and approaches to the protection and safety system are also set out in other normative documents. For example, The Doctrine on Protection, Rescue and Relief (2002) stipulates that the primary responsibility of the state is focused on regulating the system and planning development and research work, preparing protection and rescue plans, and implementing monitoring, information and warning systems. According to the Doctrine and for the purpose of efficient management, planning and implementation of the basic tasks of the system, the state is divided into regions within which are organised professional services, management, rescue and relief bodies, units, services and Civil Protection facilities, logistics centres and other operational structures that play a key role in the protection and rescue system (The Doctrine on Protection, Rescue and Relief, 2002). In addition, the Resolution on the National Programme for Protection against Natural and Other Disasters 2016–2022 (2016), based on the Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia (2010), represents a strategic programme that focuses primarily on prevention as a more effective and, in the long term, also less costly form of protection from natural and other disasters. The resolution promotes system improvements such as the development of infrastructure sy-

stems, especially information and communication systems, and the improvement of conditions for the functioning of services, departments and other formations organised by associations and other non-governmental organisations for rescue, protection and assistance.⁴

Another important document is National Protection and Rescue Plan in the event of a communicable disease epidemic or pandemic with humans (2016), which describes the action protocols for the prevention and management of infectious diseases, the system of organisation, activation, management and control of rescue, protection and assistance forces, the method of observation, information, alerting and the implementation of protective measures and rescue, protection and assistance tasks. The national plan constitutes a basic plan for protection and relief measures in the event of an epidemic or pandemic of a communicable disease and is intended for use in the event of the declaration of an epidemic or pandemic of a specific communicable disease in humans. According to the provisions of the Communicable Diseases Act (1995), an epidemic in the Republic of Slovenia is declared by the Minister of Health or the Government of the Republic of Slovenia if the infected or endangered area is the size of the entire Republic of Slovenia. The preparation and coordination of the plan is the exclusive responsibility of the state or the Ministry of Health, which is reflected in the fundamental responsibility of the state for the normative regulation of the protection and assistance system. In addition to the Ministry, the National Institute of Public Health the Republic of Slovenia and regional health care institutions play an important role. In the event of natural and other disasters, the Act also provides for the participation of the army and the bodies and units for protection, rescue and assistance as duty bearers.⁵ This plan is activated on the proposal of the Minister of Health when additional forces, protection and relief resources need to be requested in addition to the health services. The plan is activated by the Civil Protection Commander of the Republic of Slovenia, and with it other regional and partly municipal plans are activated if the epidemic affects the whole country.

The Civil Protection of the Republic of Slovenia is therefore an important factor in the protection and rescue of the population in the event of natural disasters and outbreaks of communicable diseases. The Doctrine on Protection,

Rescue and Relief (2002) states that Civil Protection acts as a complementary force of the rescue, protection and relief system at the level of the state, municipalities and enterprises, institutions and organisations in accordance with threat assessments and uniform rules for organisation, equipment and training. Civil Protection is organised as an independent unit at the level of the state, regions, municipalities, sectors or locations and enterprises, institutions and other organisations. The governing body of the Civil Protection is the commander, who is appointed at the national level by a decision of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and at the level of municipalities by a decision of the mayor. The main task of the commander is the appointment of the Central Civil Protection, which acts as a specialised service and supports the commander in the management and implementation of operational and professional tasks of protection and assistance (Jeraj, 2018).

We have clearly demonstrated that the concept of civil protection is firmly embedded in the protection and rescue system and that Civil Protection forces are an important part of any local community. Since the critical element in dealing with crisis situations is response time, effective activation and coordination of forces, as well as coordinated action of the actors involved are of crucial importance. In the Slovenian history, cooperation between local communities and civil protection forces has repeatedly proven to be synchronous and successful. In the next chapter, we put an emphasis on the mitigation, management and response to an unprecedented crisis caused by the global SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic.

EVALUATION OF THE COOPERATION OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL PROTECTION IN OVERCOMING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The first suspected case of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus infection was detected in Slovenia on 4 March 2020 and officially confirmed on the same day. In accordance with the protocol of National Protection and Rescue Plan in the event of a communicable disease epidemic or pandemic with humans (2020), the competent services searched for contacts of the infected person and informed the public about the occurrence of this new, then unknown disease. Due to the unstoppable spread of the virus among the po-

4 Further development of protection and rescue forces should be based primarily on volunteering, modular organisation and adaptability to the actual situation, while promoting awareness-raising and training of the population for personal and mutual assistance. The state is striving to ensure that the development of the protection and rescue system in the future would focus at more efficient and better organisation of the Civil Protection services. With this Resolution, the state also ensures the supply of material for the public services involved in the protection and aid system. See Resolution on the National Programme for Protection against Natural and Other Disasters 2016–2022 (2016) and Prebilič (2022).

5 Version 1.0 of this plan was created because of the Risk assessment of the Republic of Slovenia in the event of communicable diseases with humans (2016), which is designed for cases of outbreaks or occurrence of epidemics or pandemics of communicable diseases with humans and the possibility of spreading across national borders. The amendment to the National Protection and Rescue Plan in the event of a communicable disease epidemic or pandemic with humans was created in 2020 as a response to the experience in coping with the epidemic of the coronavirus disease with humans during the first wave. Version 2.0 defines that an epidemic is not only a significant public health issue, but also a broader social problem, as its magnitude jeopardises human health and life (see National Protection and Rescue Plan in the event of a communicable disease epidemic or pandemic with humans, version 2.0, 2020). Ministry of Health prepared the Health preparedness plan for the epidemic/pandemic of a communicable disease (2020), which describes the phases and scenarios of the epidemic, key stakeholders and their roles in curbing the epidemic and the epidemic management system while touching the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of healthcare. See also Prebilič (2022).

pulation, eight days later, on 12 March 2020, the Minister of Health⁶ declared an epidemic of a contagious disease on the entire territory of the Republic of Slovenia. The next day (13 March 2020), the Commander of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Slovenia activated the National Protection and Rescue Plan in the event of a communicable disease epidemic or pandemic with humans (2020), activating regional and (partly) municipal protection and rescue plans. The first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic broke out very quickly in Slovenian municipalities, partly due to an unfortunate timing that coincided with the return of (COVID-19 infected) citizens from abroad after the winter holidays, which led to the local spread of the disease, especially in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and among medical staff; later, the virus also entered nursing homes for the elderly. In the absence of a unified response to the (crisis) situation, communities had to adopt improvised measures and responses, leading to many paradoxes and corresponding actions.

The COVID-19 crisis is extremely demanding, causing deaths and endangering lives. Moreover, the disease leaves long-term consequences on the mental and physical health of people and affects the lifestyle of individuals, disrupts education, the arts, restricts human rights, alters social discourse, and has a massive impact on interpersonal relationships affecting the psychological state of individuals and society. As these are universal threats that cross physical, temporal and social boundaries, they require a joint response from countries, international institutions and non-governmental organisations. Nevertheless, Malešič (2021, 67) notes that we have witnessed the nationalisation of various policies and the erosion of crisis management tools, which leads to various paradoxes. The European Union, for which the COVID-19 crisis is the third crisis in the last decade, was also late with a common, unified response. Brglez et al. (2021, 82) describe that it took the EU more than three years after the last economic crisis to develop a unified response to possible future economic crises, while common solutions to the migrant crisis are still not fully resolved. In fact, the EU did not address the COVID-19 health crisis strategically, but focused on day-to-day measures to contain the crisis, disappointing (again) the people and member states who depended on their own innovation.

As our analysis focuses on the cooperation between Slovenian municipalities and the established civil protection system regarding COVID-19 crisis, we should devote some attention also to the local government itself, being the level of authority closest to the citizens. Its role is to represent the meaning and views of the local community. The exercise

of local self-government is a demanding task that primarily relates to the division of competences between the state and the municipality as the only local government unit in Slovenia (Kukovič et al., 2016, 303–306). According to the Local Self-Government Act (2007, Article 21), the municipality is responsible for organising rescue and relief operations in the event of natural and other disasters with a view to protection and rescue, as well as for managing all local matters of public importance.⁷ Based on the aforementioned responsibilities, local governments responded to the COVID-19 crisis in different ways, intervening on the basis of ordinances and measures in many areas, such as closing schools, restricting movement, prohibiting visits to nursing homes, prohibiting the use of public inventory and land, to name only the most common measures. Regardless of the different responses and measures, the activation, presence and work of regional and local Civil Protection headquarters have been a constant feature in ensuring protection and assistance in local communities.

Research methods

The main research method was the survey among the mayors of Slovenian municipalities, conducted between 15 June and 15 July 2021. The invitation to the survey was sent to all mayors (212), of which 76 mayors decided to participate, representing 36 percent of the mayoral population (more on the survey in Kukovič, 2021).⁸ The time frame of the analysis referred specifically to the first (spring 2020) and in smaller part also for the second (autumn and winter 2020–21) waves of the COVID-19 epidemic. The survey was divided into two parts. The first part contained closed-ended questions and the second part contained open-ended questions. While all 76 mayors answered the first part of the survey, some chose not to answer the second part, while others answered this part in particular detail. Prior to the survey, we conducted a smaller number of interviews with selected mayors to test the validity and meaningfulness of the questions. We also used a qualitative research method of participant observation, where authors were not only observers of the research participants but were also actively engaged in the activities of the research participants.⁹

Analysis

According to mayors, municipal management teams met with representatives of health facilities and civil protection headquarters to discuss and decide on measures aimed primarily at raising awareness and educating staff in

6 The Order on the declaration of the COVID-19 epidemic in the territory of the Republic of Slovenia (2020) was signed in compliance with Article 7 of the Communicable Diseases Act (1995).

7 Haček (2020, 87–88) explains that Slovenian municipalities are not responsible for performing all public functions in their territory, unlike e.g., in Germany, but only for matters of local importance. In this respect, Slovenian legislation is similar to the French arrangement.

8 We would like to thank all the participating mayors for sharing their experiences, which significantly contributed to the understanding of the studied topic.

9 In terms of full transparency, we should reveal that one of the authors is not only academic, but also long-term mayor of large Slovenian municipality, that was actively engaged in analysed crisis.

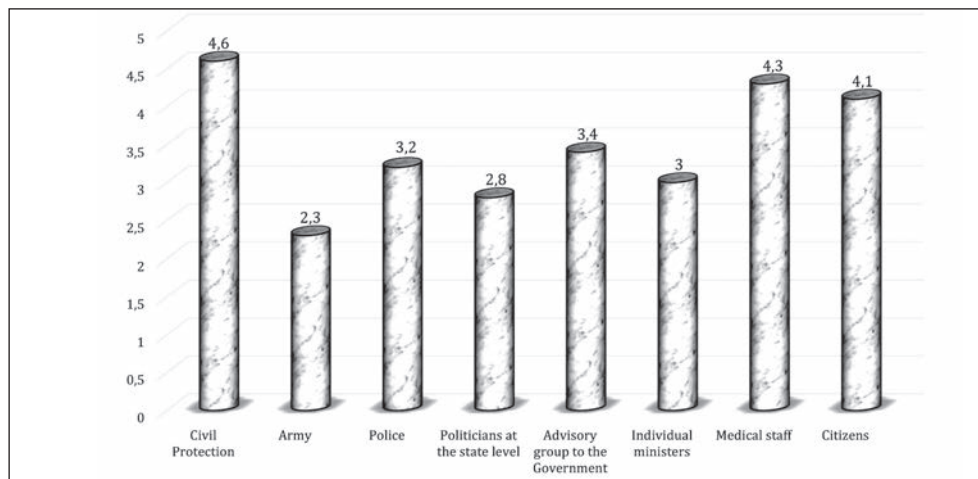


Figure 1: The most helpful stakeholder to municipalities during the COVID-19 crisis.

critical infrastructures, as well as citizens and the public. The Civil Protection Headquarters played an important role at this point, as (in addition to the internal organisation and structure of the individual units) it also developed clear guidelines for action and response in the event of the occurrence of the disease in the local environment, which is crucial for a rapid response and activation of all stakeholders in crisis situations.

Therefore, we asked mayors who was most helpful to municipalities during the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus epidemic. Using a rating scale, mayors rated eight stakeholders involved,¹⁰ of which Civil Protection received the highest rating. No less than 92 percent of respondents rated the use of Civil Protection as a 4 or 5 (latter being the highest rating), while the average rating was 4.6.

In a next step, we asked the mayors to rate the municipality's collaboration with the forces of Civil Protection during the COVID-19 crisis for each of the hierarchical levels (national, regional and local), using a rating scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant a negative and 5 meant an excellent. The results in Table 1 show that cooperation with Civil Protection is encouraging according to mayors at all three levels, as the average rating was above arithmetic mean at all three levels.

Mayors rated cooperation with the national Slovenian headquarters Civil Protection with an average score of 4, while cooperation with the regional forces of Civil Protection was rated even higher (average score 4.5); 91 percent of mayors rated the cooperation as excellent or very good. Mayors gave the highest score (average score 4.9) to cooperation with the municipal forces of Civil Protection, which was rated as excellent in 93 percent

of cases. At this point, we add another conclusion of our survey, namely that we also perceived a high level of trust on the part of the mayors in the representatives of Civil Protection.¹¹ The information presented by the representatives of Civil Protection was perceived as credible and, as such, was used as a basis for decision-making on certain actions. We were thus able to establish encouraging relations between the municipal administration and the Civil Protection forces, which indicates a coordinated and synchronous cooperation: a crucial condition for solving and managing crisis situations.

In the analysis of the normative framework, we already mentioned the established protocols and the order of activation of the Civil Protection forces, noting that, on the one hand, it is a hierarchical system, as the Civil Protection forces are activated gradually at different levels from the local to the national level; at the same time, the Civil Protection system is also centralised, as the administration and delegation is also carried out by the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Slovenia. Based on the experience of responding to the COVID-19 crisis, we asked the mayors whether, in their opinion, the current normative framework for the relationship between Civil Protection and the municipalities is adequate. From their responses, we were able to conclude that mayors were generally supportive of the existing regulation of the relationship between Civil Protection and municipalities, as 98 percent of the responses were positive. Nevertheless, some individuals added that the normative framework for relations between Civil Protection and the municipalities needs to be modernised in certain segments, especially so that both institutions can respond more effectively

¹⁰ The mayors rated individual actors using a scale of 1 to 5, where a value of 1 meant "not helpful" and a value of 5 meant "very helpful". In addition to the Civil Protection, the following stakeholders were assessed: the Army (2.3), the Police (3.2), politicians at the state level (2.8), the advisory group to the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (3.4), individual ministers of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (3.0), medical staff (4.3) and citizens (4.1). Average rating values are provided in parentheses.

¹¹ Haček and Brezovšek (2014, 3) explain that the trust people have in the representatives of a certain institution generates trust in the entire institution.

Table 1: The municipality's collaboration with the forces of Civil Protection during the COVID-19 crisis.

		EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	GOOD	SATISFACTORY	NEGATIVE	AVERAGE
		5	4	3	2	1	
1	Slovenian headquarters Civil Protection	45 %	20 %	29 %	3 %	3 %	4
2	Regional forces of Civil Protection	57 %	34 %	7 %	2 %	/	4.5
3	Municipal forces of Civil Protection	93 %	2 %	5 %	/	/	4.9

to upcoming challenges and crises, when less improvisation is required compared to the situation during the epidemic. Indeed, the mayors pointed out that we have a well-developed system for crisis management during natural disasters, with everything running smoothly; in contrast, the protocol for health crises was not sufficiently developed and there was no scenario for such cases. One of the mayors described the situation as follows:

An epidemic of this magnitude was not expected in our country and therefore there were no preventive measures and no advance planning. Many municipal administrations did not even know who was responsible for what and how to deal with the crisis situation; some did not even know what the responsibilities of the Civil Protection were and what the responsibilities of the mayor and the municipal administration were. At the beginning of the crisis, some even competed with each other as to who would propose the "more attractive measures" that would attract more sympathy. Time has shown that such measures were neither useful nor harmful, but if the consequences of the epidemic were more severe, such as long-term disruption of supplies and the like, such "posturing" could pose a serious threat to the work of members of Civil Protection and other important economic and public services. Fortunately, there were still relatively few patients, life was largely paralysed, and the supply of essentials and public goods was not interrupted. (see Kukovič, 2021)

Because the COVID-19 crisis is specific and more challenging than natural disasters and other localised disasters due to its health component, scale, and other factors, some mayors consider the current role of the local Civil Protection chief commander somewhat inappropriate. Normally, only veterinarians are part of the Civil Protection forces, but in the spirit of classical medicine, it was necessary to activate medical personnel and involve health professionals as much as possible in the crisis units to effectively design and plan mitigation measures for the COVID-19 crisis.

In practise, it has been shown that the current system of civil protection, according to which the commander of the Civil Protection at the municipal level is supposed to be responsible for protection and rescue and take appropriate measures, is somewhat problematic. The commander of Civil Protection at the municipal level can implement tasks and take care of their coordination on the ground; however, more specific formalised cooperation between the mayor and the municipal administration is clearly needed when planning actions. During the epidemic COVID-19 the mayor appointed a municipal crisis team (as an advisory body to the mayor) to monitor the situation and help plan actions; actions were then decided jointly by the mayor and the commander of Civil Protection. The commander of Civil Protection and the mayor can hardly take measures alone; therefore, a joint body is needed where all necessary actors meet regularly and prepare the necessary measures. (see Kukovič, 2021)

From this point of view, according to the mayors, the Civil Protection and its commander cannot take full responsibility for managing such a crisis, but they can indeed provide the necessary logistical and informational support. According to the mayors, the key feature of the Civil Protection forces was to ensure communication, as they provided the communities with the necessary information in the first phase and later also played an important role in the purchase and distribution of protective equipment. One of the mayors described the role of Civil Protection as follows:

We would like to mention their first action, when all municipalities in Slovenia were informed about the disease and the possible role of municipalities in solving a possible epidemic even before the first infection. In this way, municipalities were able to review their resources and means of protection and rescue and prepare initial preventive measures for the population. (see Kukovič, 2021)

To this we would like to add that several mayors highlighted as an example of excellent practise during the COVID-19 crisis the exemplary and effective cooperation of municipalities with municipal (local) and regional Civil Protection headquarters and with the Civil Protection headquarters of the Republic of Slovenia; this applies to the period of preparation for the crisis and later in the provision of protective materials, the organisation and implementation of rapid tests, mass vaccination of employees in the (local) economy and citizens. According to the mayors, the forces of Civil Protection quickly adjusted to the scale of the new, unknown crisis and addressed it – with some improvisation – in accordance with the doctrine of protection and assistance to civilians in local communities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite efforts to improve our understanding and prediction, natural disasters and other catastrophes still manage to take us by surprise. The more unprepared we are for these events, the greater devastation and more serious consequences we are left with. One such example was (and still is) the public health COVID-19 crisis that required improvisation and ingenuity despite elaborate plans, adopted doctrines, and clear protocols for activating protective and relief forces. The unprecedented blow of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the first wave, presented profound challenges to Slovenian local governments, from managing responses to an unfamiliar crisis situation to ensuring the safety of citizens in the midst of extreme uncertainty. Local communities, usually accustomed to responding quickly to natural disasters and other spatially limited disasters, once again organised themselves quite quickly by establishing crisis teams and activating the Civil Protection forces. In the present study we have dealt precisely with the former, namely with the involvement of Slovenian municipalities and Civil Protection forces. In the first part, we analysed the normative framework of the Civil Protection regulation in the Republic of Slovenia; in the second part, on the other hand, we presented the results of the first survey among the mayors of Slovenian municipalities to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Based on the conducted research as well as participant observation, we found that the mayors evaluate the cooperation of the municipalities with the Civil Protection Headquarters at the local and regional level as well as with the national Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Slovenia as both positive and effective. Furthermore, they emphasise the key role of Civil Protection forces in providing information and

communication during preparations for the crisis and later in providing protective equipment, organising and conducting rapid tests and mass vaccinations. At the same time, the mayors agree that this crisis has also revealed several shortcomings that provide an opportunity to improve the existing system of (co-)operation of local communities and protection and rescue forces.

Based on a specific crisis we conclude the study by considering possible policy adaptation and upgrades in the protection and rescue system in at least the following segments:

- To unify the organisational system of Civil Protection forces at the municipal level by defining the responsibilities between the different levels of government more precisely.
- redefine the role and responsibilities (of management) of the Civil Protection in (especially in) a health crisis and establish closer formal cooperation between the mayor, the commander of the Civil Protection and other key actors in the management of a crisis.
- develop an action plan and scenario simulations for larger scale (health) crises that are not spatially limited.
- involve local communities in the development and simulation of action plans by establishing a community crisis team and clarifying and dividing responsibilities in advance in the event of crisis situations.
- strengthen the role and involvement of Civil Protection in communication channels and modernise and improve the flow of information.
- review the HR and financial aspects of crisis management affecting local municipalities, as (especially smaller) municipalities are unable to provide sufficient resources.

The analysis of historical sources shows that mankind has had to deal with various crisis situations from the very beginning, while the earlier crisis situations rarely pose a (serious) threat in today's world. This will probably continue to be the case in the future, but we must not overlook the fact that crisis situations are becoming increasingly complex, comprehensive and formidable; both most recent crises, economic and the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 health crisis, were (and still are) very much of global nature. Therefore, it is particularly important to transform the experience gained in the crisis into knowledge and improve the protection and rescue system. So, according to the doctrine of civil protection, we will *ad omnia parati sumus* (be prepared for everything).

SODELOVANJE LOKALNIH SKUPNOSTI IN CIVILNE ZAŠČITE V PREMAGOVANJU
COVID-19 KRIZE: *AD OMNIA PARATI SUMUS**Vladimir PREBILIČ*

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POVZETEK

Kljub napredni znanosti in tehnologiji, ki človeštvu omogoča predvidevanje sprememb, izzivov in nenazadnje groženj, nas razsežnosti in posledice naravnih, tehnoloških in drugih nesreč še vedno presenečajo. Tudi leto 2020 je prineslo velik izziv, katerega razsežnosti ob zaznavi prve okužbe ni bilo mogoče povsem predvideti. Udarec neprecedenčne pandemije COVID-19 in posledice, ki so sledile, tako predstavljajo lokalnim skupnostim velike izzive, od obvladovanja odzivov na neznano krizno situacijo do zagotavljanja varnosti občanov v času skrajne negotovosti. Članek obravnava premagovanje COVID-19 krize z vidika sodelovanja slovenskih občin in vzpostavljenega sistema civilne zaščite. Civilna zaščita in pripravljenost na izredne razmere, ki nastanejo kot posledica naravnih, tehnoloških in drugih nesreč, je namreč ključna komponenta vsake lokalne skupnosti. Avtorja v članku analizirata normativni okvir ureditve sistema civilne zaščite v Republiki Sloveniji ter ponujata vpogled v rezultate prve empirične raziskave o oceni ureditve, odziva v sili in delovanja sistema civilne zaščite na lokalni ravni v boju s COVID-19 krizo. Pri tem ugotavljata, da župani sodelovanje občin s štabi Civilne zaščite na lokalni, regionalni, pa tudi z nacionalnim Štabom Civilne zaščite Republike Slovenije, ocenjujejo kot pozitivno in učinkovito. Pri tem posebej izpostavljajo ključno vlogo enot Civilne zaščite pri informiranju in komuniciranju v času priprav na krizo, kasneje pa pri dobavljanju zaščitne opreme, organizaciji in izvedbi hitrega testiranja ter tudi pri izvedbi množičnega cepljenja. Hkrati pa je ta kriza pokazala tudi nekaj pomanjkljivosti, kar ponuja priložnost za nadgradnjo obstoječega sistema (so)delovanja lokalnih skupnosti ter sil zaščite in reševanja.

Ključne besede: lokalna skupnost, civilna zaščita, odziv v sili, COVID-19, Slovenija

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