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THE ROLE OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN DEALING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC – COVID 19 IN EDUCATION

Abstract: In the last two years, the world has faced a pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. In addition to health, the pandemic has created several economic and social challenges that have also affected the work of local self-government units. Ban on organizing events in larger groups, organizing online classes in schools, maintaining social distance, reducing the number of employees, and other preventive measures. The municipality of Kumanovo and its institutions, as well as municipal primary and secondary schools, adapted their operations to the new conditions and respected the decisions of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia related to the fight against the pandemic.

During its work in all conditions of the pandemic, the municipal headquarters for protection and rescue paid special attention to the implementation of the educational process in primary and secondary schools, as well as the work of kindergartens in conditions of the pandemic. These are institutions where there is a large concentration of people who may be carriers of a virus that spreads easily.

In such conditions of the rapid spread of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, state institutions, as well as local self-government institutions, have taken measures for the safe development of the educational process through electronic communication, until September 2021, where, according to the recommendations of the Commission for Infectious Diseases and by decision of the Government, classes in primary and secondary schools were organized with a physical presence. This paper analyzes the situation with the pandemic in schools and the activities of local self-government institutions, for the safe organization of the educational process in pandemic conditions.

Keywords: Local self-government, Pandemic, Education

Local Government (Setting)

Society is continuously faced with various types of risks and threats that seek to threaten its vital values. Through its institutions, the state takes care of maintaining the legal order based on the legal order established by the parliament, the constitution, and all other positive legal acts.

History is full of many accidents and disasters, which unfortunately caused unfathomable consequences and great suffering to human civilization.

Even today, such events are not rare, which is why, like never before, the world mobilizes and undertakes joint efforts to reduce the consequences of such events, which are becoming more frequent, more aggressive, and cause great human casualties and material losses. An important feature of hazard is that it includes the concept of probability of occurrence.

Accident/disaster risk management requires risk sizing and measurement that takes into account not only expected physical damage, casualties, and associated economic losses, but also social, educational, organizational, and institutional factors. Difficulties in achieving effective disaster risk management are partly due to the lack of a comprehensive conceptual framework for disaster risk that would facilitate multidisciplinary assessment and intervention.

To evaluate the existing or necessary capacities of the competent institutions, they must have benchmarks in fulfilling their duties, which are necessary not only for measuring risk but also for the conditions for its management. For this, it is necessary to define the entities that will control

risk reduction policies as factors that will determine priorities in their management activities, and at the same time measure the effectiveness of these activities. After the natural disasters and other accidents that hit the area of Kumanovo municipality in the past period, it can be concluded that they are mostly the result of natural forces. Natural disasters in the area of the municipality of Kumanovo have so far caused mainly material damages on smaller and larger scales, but they have also posed a danger to the life and health of the population. Considering this finding, there is a need for a complete and complex determination of the situation and problems in the prevention and protection of the population and material assets.

In carrying out protection and rescue in the area of the local self-government unit, following **the Law on Protection and Rescue⁴¹**, the Mayor performs the following tasks:

- 1) Proposes a protection and rescue plan;
- 2) Monitors the situation related to the implementation of the decisions of the Council of the local self-government unit to prevent the occurrence and eliminate the consequences of natural disasters and other accidents;
- 3) Is responsible for the readiness of the protection and rescue forces formed by the local self-government unit;
- 4) Decides on the engagement of protection and rescue forces organized by local self-government units;
- 5) Leads and coordinates the protection and rescue operations carried out by the local self-government unit until the activation of the regional headquarters;
- 6) Monitors the implementation of actions to clean local roads, streets, and other infrastructure facilities in case of natural disasters or other accidents in the area of the local self-government unit;
- 7) Asks for help in engaging spatial forces for protection and rescue, which are formed by legal entities from the area of the local self-government unit and
- 8) In conditions where the protection and rescue forces referred to in point 4 of this article cannot remove the consequences of natural disasters and other accidents, it is necessary to engage the republic's protection and rescue forces.

The Role and Competencies of Local Self-government According to the Law on Crisis Management

According to Article 5 of the Law on crisis management⁴², municipalities are obliged to carry out a risk assessment for their own needs, for effective prevention and early warning of a potential crisis, within the framework of their legally established competencies. and hazards at the local level, determine needs, and plan resources.

In solving crises, municipalities also perform the following tasks:

- They monitor situations, actions, and phenomena that can lead to the emergence of a crisis in the area of municipalities;
- Create an assessment of the threat of risks and dangers of the emergence of a crisis in the area of municipalities;
- Adopt a municipal revitalization program even after the end of the crisis;
- They implement the Government's decisions on managing crises in the area of municipalities and the city of Skopje and
- Decide on the number of resources for managing crises from the municipal budget;

⁴¹ Law on Protection and Rescue (Official Gazette No. 36 of 2004)

⁴² Law on Crisis Management (Official Gazette No. 29 of 2005)

The assessment from paragraph 2, indent 2 of this article is made by the regional centers for crisis management.

In dealing with the crisis, the mayors of the municipalities:

- Ensure coordination of participants in the crisis management system at the local level.
- The forces for protection and rescue established by the Law on Protection and Rescue, in a crisis participate in removing the consequences of it.

In the prevention and handling of a crisis, public enterprises, public institutions, and services, as well as trade companies that are of special importance for work in a crisis, must protect and save the employees, the persons who happened to be with them and the material goods, as well as removing the consequences of the crisis.

In solving crises, municipalities also perform the following tasks:

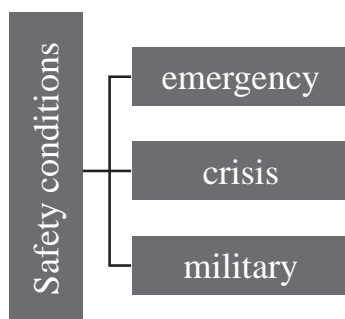
- monitor conditions, actions, and phenomena that can lead to the emergence of a crisis in the area of municipalities;
- carry out an assessment of the threat of risks and dangers for the emergence of crises in the territory of the municipalities;
- adopt a municipal revitalization program even after the end of the crisis;
- implement Government decisions related to crisis management in municipalities and
- decide on the number of funds for managing crises from the municipal budget.

In solving the crisis, the mayors of the municipalities ensure the coordination of the participants in the crisis management system at the local level.

Depending on the degree of risk, threats, and threats in society and the state, special regimes of behavior and taking special measures can be introduced. Such conditions can be of the following types:⁴³

Figure 1

Graphic representation of the types of safety conditions according to the degree of danger



According to the Law on crisis management, a crisis cannot last longer than 30 days. If there is a need for a longer term, then it must be approved by the Assembly (in this case it was not possible in 2020, given that the Assembly was dissolved) or if the period of crisis is not extended, then a state of emergency is declared.

The differences between declaring a crisis and a state of emergency are as follows:⁴⁴

- When declaring a state of crisis, the Center for Crisis Management is the competent body that must act according to the constitution and the law.
- When declaring a state of emergency, the Government is the competent body that should act by the Constitution and the law.

⁴³ Nikolovski M., Spaseski J., Gerasimoski S. Security systems, Faculty of Security, Skopje, 2010, 182

⁴⁴ Ibid, 183

In this specific case, during the period of the spread of the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the Government declared a state of emergency in its entire territory, to direct all its potential to overcome such a situation and protect the health of citizens.

Local Self-government in Pandemic Conditions

When it comes to the current situation, as in the specific case, in which a state of emergency has been declared as a constitutional possibility, but not regulated by legal acts, then an appropriate compilation of existing systemic solutions must be made, provided by the law, in the specific case by the Law on crisis management and appropriate institutional legal solutions that ensure appropriate institutional competence and competencies for responding to the situation. By finding inappropriate solutions, on the one hand, the role of Government bodies and bodies for dealing with such situations is extinguished – eliminated, by the formation of a new coordinating Government body called **the General Headquarters** and through it coordination and communication with local self-government units, state bodies, and state institutions. Institutions, formed exclusively in such situations for this purpose, are left out, shifting the focus of activity to the burden of local self-government units, through the activation of Municipal Protection and Rescue Headquarters, which is already difficult to do in such complex situations with limited capacities and resources to deal with the current situation. At the same time, standard operating procedures that are valid and refer to the manner and behavior of all institutions included in the system for handling, each separately within the framework of legal competencies, which in turn represent a framework for action in a given situation, have also been set.

In contrast to a state of emergency, a state of crisis at the regional level, in these and similar situations, the Regional Headquarters of Regional Center for Crisis Management Kumanovo is activated throughout the pandemic crisis, which represents the highest operational and professional body, and whose composition includes labor representatives from regional units, departments of ministries and others state administration bodies, as well as representatives of local self-government units, and, if necessary, representatives of other local institutions.

In the aforementioned and further activities and behaviors of local self-government units in the conditions of a declared state of emergency, one of the priority goals and tasks of the Municipality of Kumanovo is the preparation of appropriate assessments, plans, programs, and analyses. For extraordinary events – events that can threaten the life, health, and material goods of citizens and thus cause a crisis or an emergency event, crisis circumstances, or crisis.

How **important the role of local self-government and its bodies** is in the prevention and suppression of the coronavirus epidemic can best be seen from the emergence of the coronavirus epidemic and the declaration of a state of emergency. The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, at the session held on March 18, 2020, based on Article 125 paragraph 1 of the Constitution⁴⁵ of the Republic of North Macedonia, submitted a proposal – declaration of a state of emergency in the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia to prevent, spread and suppressing the COVID-19 coronavirus, and by the pandemic declared by the World Health Organization as a new type of virus that spread to all continents and affected the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia.

During a state of emergency, the Government passes decrees with legal force without passing through the legislative body. That is, all the decisions that the Government will make during the state of emergency will be implemented immediately to deal with the infection more urgently and effectively.

⁴⁵ Gazette of RM 1/92

The Work of the Municipal Headquarters for Protection and Rescue – Kumanovo, in the Conditions of the Declared Pandemic

The first case of a coronavirus patient in Kumanovo was on March 22, 2020. On the same day, the first death from the coronavirus was also recorded, also from Kumanovo.

One of the main requests of the municipal headquarters for protection and rescue to the government is the request to introduce a full quarantine for Kumanovo with precisely established protocols for the behavior of institutions, citizens, and legal entities, with control points at the entrances and exits from the city and reinforced more rigorous restriction measures, after the number positive increased to 47 people.

In dealing with crises, the Municipality is organized in such a way that there is and operates a Municipal headquarters for protection and rescue, established by the Decision of the Council of the Municipality of Kumanovo, by the Law on Protection and Rescue. The municipal headquarters is managed by the headquarters commander, chief of the headquarters, and assistants of the chief. The sessions of the Municipal Headquarters are also attended by representatives of other institutions (a representative of the Regional Center for Crisis Management, a representative of the Regional Department of the Directorate for Protection and Rescue, representatives of health institutions, representatives of local institutions, representatives of municipal public enterprises, representatives of the Kumanovo Municipality Council and others). The first positive case in the Republic of North Macedonia was registered on February 26, 2020, and by March 18, 2020, and the declaration of a state of emergency, the number of confirmed cases was 35 positive cases out of a total of 400 tested persons.

From the very beginning, that is, from the appearance of the first case of the Republic of Macedonia infected with the coronavirus on February 26, 2020, the Municipal Headquarters started holding regular meetings. The first meeting of the Municipal Headquarters for Protection and Rescue was held on March 11, 2020. The headquarters met daily. The main coordination headquarters was formed much later. During this period, the municipal headquarters has already started taking over activities on prevention and protection against the epidemic.

On March 14, 2020, by decision, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia established the Main Coordination Crisis Headquarters to ensure full coordination of state administration bodies, legal entities founded by the state, as well as local self-government units, in connection with the prevention, introduction, and spread of the coronavirus COVID -19 (Main coordination crisis headquarters).

The time frame of the research is January 2020 – December 2021, during this period the Municipal Headquarters for Protection and Rescue made significant decisions and recommendations for more successful suppression of the further spread of the coronavirus. Among the numerous conclusions, we would single out a few more characteristic ones:

- The public enterprise “Chistota i zelenilo” should intensify the activities of disinfection of public surfaces, public spaces, and facilities;
- Disinfection of common rooms and equipment (elevators) in collective housing facilities;
- Reduction of public transport, and then the complete abolition of public transport in the territory of the Municipality;
- Establishment of support teams for vulnerable categories of the population;
- free provision of personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, other equipment) for the socially vulnerable population (users of social assistance, elderly people with difficulty moving, and other vulnerable population groups);
- free meals, taking care of the socially vulnerable population (users of social assistance, elderly people with disabilities, and other vulnerable population groups);
- Ensuring exclusively free delivery of food, groceries, and medicines to the population that needs this service (through economic entities, employees of the administration, or volunteers);

- sharing information on the website of local self-government units for business entities for the delivery of food, groceries, and medicines during curfew;
- Helping operators to secure queues in front of banks, pharmacies, and institutions;
- Ensuring a special way of movement of farmers, during the curfew;
- Adaptation of cultural services in crises (outdoor concerts);
- The following means of personal protection were distributed: masks, protective gloves, protective suits, glasses, visors, hats, vests, protective glasses, and food packages for vulnerable categories of citizens.

Financial measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on the private sector:

- reduced utility tax for companies (company tax);
- reduced utility fee for leasing public space;

Local Self-government in Pandemic Conditions and Education

From infectious diseases such as the epidemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, there is no possibility of endangering buildings and infrastructure in the sense of any physical deviation, collapse, or complete demolition. In terms of the sensitivity and coverage of facilities and infrastructure that is sensitive to the risk of infectious diseases and epidemics, it is any facility that in its current work, due to the nature of the work, includes, accumulates (collects) a large number of people in the same place. Such facilities are schools, higher education institutions, nurseries (kindergartens), centers of culture, theaters, cinemas, sports halls, etc.

All of these facilities are subject to the risk of infectious diseases and epidemics, but especially as a space with a large concentration of people who are potential carriers of various viruses, parasites, bacteria, and other infectious diseases.

For the above reasons, as additional measures and activities to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, on the proposal of the Commission for Infectious Diseases of the Ministry of Health, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted a conclusion at the session held on March 10, 2020, suspends the teaching process and classes for the next 14 days to all primary and secondary schools and higher education institutions and public scientific institutes in the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. All extracurricular or additional programs such as foreign language courses and the like are also suspended.

Also, at the Government session, information with a package of measures from the field of education related to the implementation of the educational process in the conditions of the COVID-19 crisis, at the proposal of the Ministry of Education and Science, was discussed and adopted.

The first measure refers to classes in primary and secondary schools, which have been determined to be organized remotely, that is, learning from home, using means of electronic communication, until June 10, 2020.

With these two decisions, the entire education system in the Republic of North Macedonia was put to the test, and it became clear to all parties in the education sector that the system itself would face an unprecedented challenge. With the adoption of the last Decree of March 23, the school year entered its last quarter, that is, less than two months and twenty days remained until the end of the school year. As a result of the challenges faced by teachers themselves, as well as parents, and with the assumption that physical presence in schools is almost impossible, the Institute for Educational Development issued a Guide for teachers on how to evaluate students, hoping that a document to assist in the successful completion of the school year.

While students were eagerly awaiting the physical start to school in September 2020, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia at its 81st session accepted the recommendations of the Commission for Infectious Diseases for the organization of classes in primary and secondary

schools, according to which the educational program for 2020/2021. It should take place online with the following exceptions:

- 1) Students from the first to the third grade attend classes with a physical presence in the class, according to the possibilities of the schools for the implementation of the plan and protocol of the Ministry of Education and Science and with the consent of the parents. For students who have chronic diseases, classes should take place remotely (online)
- 2) Teaching with a physical presence in class can be conducted in schools with ensured sanitary and hygienic conditions for maintaining general and personal hygiene specified in the Protocols, by the epidemiological situation in the area/municipality, but only if the founder of the school, the school submits a request to the Ministry of Education and Science with an explanation of the fulfillment of the criteria and conditions according to the protocols and only after obtaining the consent of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, after receiving a positive opinion from the Ministry of Education and Science and the Commission for Infectious Diseases at the Ministry of Health.
- 3) In schools that have classes where dual education is conducted, the practical part of teaching, in companies, should take place with a physical presence at the workplace, respecting the general protection protocols and the protocols of companies where practical teaching is conducted.

With this decision of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, the educational process in the academic year 2020/2021. it took place through distance learning, which brought to the surface all the shortcomings in the educational process, the unprofessionalism of certain subjects, weak coordination, as well as the lack of professional training, as well as the unpreparedness of teachers to teach in this way.

The Situation with COVID-19 in the Area of the Kumanovo Health Home as of 31.12.2020

Status with Positive Cases in 2020

Table 1

In the area of the Kumanovo Health Center on December 31, 2020, a total of 4,676 cases of COVID-19 were reported ($I=3,258.79/100,000$ inhabitants).

Municipality	Number of patients	Incidence /100,000
Kumanovo	4171	2906,8
Lipkovo	466	1547,5
Staro Nagorichane	39	998,2
Total	4676	3258,8

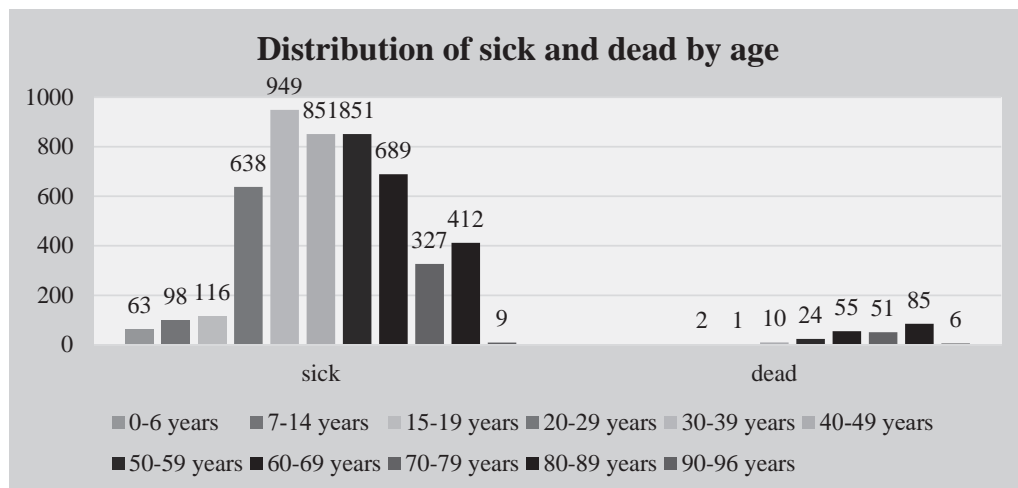
As for the date of registration, the first case in the country was registered on 26.02.2020, while in the municipality of Kumanovo the first case was registered on 21.03.2020. The first death was registered on 21.03.2020, in a 57-year-old woman, who was hospitalized at the Infectious Disease Department of the Kumanovo General Hospital, and it was confirmed that she was positive for COVID-19 on 22.03. 2020.

In 2020, the Kumanovo municipality recorded a downward trend in the number of patients in May ($n=23$) as a result of the measures taken to prevent the emergence and spread of COVID-19

before the introduced quarantine. In the coming months, an increase in the number of sick people was recorded, especially after the lifting of the quarantine, as well as due to the non-observance of recommendations to prevent the appearance and spread of COVID-19 by the population. The largest number of positives was recorded in November ($n=1363$) with a slight downward trend in December ($n=810$).

Graph 1

Distribution of patients with COVID-19 by age group, ($n=1446$) in 2020



The age of the patients is from 0 to 96 years. The largest number of patients are aged 30-39, 949 (20.3%), followed by the age groups of 40-49 and 50-59 with – 851 (18.2%), and over 90, where only 9 cases (0.19%) are registered.

171 deaths with lethality (3.6%) were registered. Most registered cases are in the 80-89 age group ($n=85$, 49.7%), followed by the 60-69 age group ($n=55$, 17.5%). 2 deaths were also registered in the age groups of 20-29 years.

Status with Positive Cases in 2021

Regarding the academic year 2021/2022 when classes in schools take place with a physical presence, the situation with COVID-19 in schools in the municipality of Kumanovo is as follows:

The total number of students in primary education in the municipality of Kumanovo in the academic year 2021/2022 is 10,209 students (16 schools for primary education).

The total number of students in secondary education in the municipality of Kumanovo in the academic year 2021/2022 is 4423 students (4 schools for secondary education).

Graph 2

The number of positive students in the academic year 2021/2022 for September, October, November, and December 2021, is about the total number of patients for the specified months in the municipality of Kumanovo.

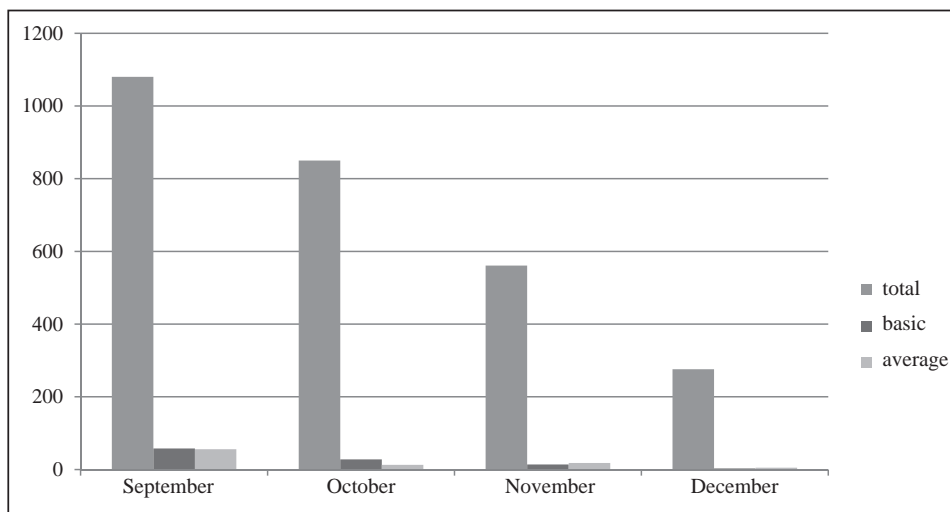


Table 2

The number of positive students in the academic year 2021/2022 for September, October, November, and December 2021 about the total number of patients for the specified months in the municipality of Kumanovo.

Month	The total number of patients in the Municipality of Kumanovo	Total number of patients in primary schools	Total number of patients in secondary schools
September	1080	58	56
October	850	28	13
November	561	14	18
December	276	3	5

From the table, it can be seen that the largest number of positive cases for COVID – 19 in September, i.e. a total of 1080 positive cases of all ages from the Municipality of Kumanovo, 114 students from primary and secondary schools, i.e. about 10%. **The next decreasing trend** in October, November to December 2021, out of a total of 276 positive cases, there are only 8 cases among positive students.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Education

The pandemic has caused serious consequences for the entire educational system in the Republic of North Macedonia. Problems in the functioning of the education system during the pandemic have further deepened because schools and teachers did not have enough material resources to carry out classes of this type. Many students living in rural areas did not have technical means to monitor lessons, did not have access to digital devices, nor did they have an Internet connection. This time, inequality in society and social differences came to the fore. Primary and secondary schools