

352:005:[616.98:578.834-036.21(497.7)]

THE MUNICIPAL HEADQUARTERS IN FUNCTION OF DEALING WITH THE PANDEMIC OF COVID 19 IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: At the beginning of 2020, the world faced an epidemic caused by the Covid 19 virus. Due to the intensity of its virulence and the speed of its spread among the population, different percentages of the countries' population became infected. The World Health Organization declared a Covid 19 as Pandemic.

First registered case of the virus in Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) was in February 2020. The first hotspot was the municipality of Debar. In order to successfully manage the virus a state of crisis was declared over the territory of the municipality of Debar and Centar Zhupa. In addition, the city was quarantined. By the beginning of the summer in all municipalities, cases of Covid 19 infection were registered. President of the State declared a state of emergency which in the following period in 2020 was extended 5 (five) times. The state of emergency enabled efficient use of the available resources of the state.

Management of Covid 19 at regional and local level, was taken over by the headquarters established in the municipalities. The paper aims to detect the strengths and weaknesses of this operational approach.

Keywords: management, pandemic, municipal headquarters.

Introduction

In 2020, countries around the world faced the challenge of a highly contagious coronavirus called COVID-19.

Human-to-human transmission of coronavirus COVID-19 was officially confirmed on January 23, 2020. Its expansion reached the level of a global pandemic, officially declared on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Depending on the conditions and circumstances, a state of emergency was declared in many countries in the period that followed. It was most often followed by the closure of state borders and measures to restrict the freedom of movement of citizens. In addition,

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other urgent actions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic COVID-19 were also taken.

Republic of North Macedonia experienced state of emergency for the first time. It was declared by the President of the Republic for the period of March 18, 2020 to June 22, 2020.

Management of Covid 19 was taken over by the headquarters established in the municipalities at regional and local level. The paper aims to detect the strengths and weaknesses of this operational approach.

General characteristics of the pandemic COVID 19

According to its origin, sources of threats can be divided into natural disasters and other incidents. Natural disasters and other incidents that lead to serious disruption of the functioning of the community or society by widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, thus exceeding the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources are called disasters.⁶⁵

According to the National Strategy for Protection and Rescue⁶⁶ natural and other disasters are increasingly making an impact to the people and environment by affecting many countries and even continents. Consequently, to deal with the consequences, states have become mutually dependent in undertaking a jointly coordinated response. It is the reason why the countries have opted for a new approach in protection and rescue. Priority for each government is to build a safer world based on common interest and sharing responsibility for saving human lives. It is accomplished through technology transfer and information exchange as well as common access to prevention and mitigation activities.

One of the criteria which is vital for protection and rescue measures is that in terms of hazards and consequences the measures for protection and rescue should be prioritized by scale, frequency of occurrence, damage and the need for more frequent interventions. Moreover, they should be involving almost all entities in the system at all levels. This does not mean that the other measures are not equally important. But, radiological, chemical and biological protection measure should go thru a reform process. This measure will have to be transformed into four new measures. Moreover, protection and rescue from biological disasters will include epidemics, epizootics and epiphytotic.

In addition, when talking about Covid 19 it is important to point out the basic general data that it is a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The virus causes acute viral respiratory disease. Human-to-human transmission is possible by touch and by droplets (sneezing, coughing etc.). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new coronavirus, called SARS-nCoV-2, first discovered in China in December 2019. COVID-19 is primarily spread through drops of saliva or secretions from the nose of an infected person when he sneezes or coughs. At the moment, there is a specific vaccine and a number of laboratories and hospitals are testing and clinical trials are taken to find the remedy.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Proposed Updated Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction, UNSDR, Geneva, August 2015,11

⁶⁶ National Strategy for Protection and Rescue "Official Gazette of RM" no. 6/14

⁶⁷ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Crisis management and rescue systems in the Republic of North Macedonia in the local self-government units

Crisis management system is organized and implemented for prevention, early warning and management of crises that pose a risk to the well-being, health and life of humans and animals. They are caused by natural disasters and epidemics or other risks and dangers that directly threaten the constitutional order and security of the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) or part of it, for which there are no conditions for declaring war or state of emergency.⁶⁸

In RNM, protection and rescue are organized as a single system for protection and rescue, for detection and prevention of occurrence and elimination of the consequences of natural disasters and other incidents.⁶⁹

The unit of local self-government (LSGU) is a community of inhabitants of a certain area, determined by law, which through its bodies and through the administration and organized public services enables the performance of competencies prescribed by law.

Within the protection and rescue system, the LSGU works on preparations and undertakes measures for protection and rescue of citizens and material goods from natural disasters and other incident and their consequences on its own territory. In that line, the LSGU does the following:

1. Determine the obligations of the public enterprises, institutions and services, of local character that they have established in the area of:

- extinguishing fires and rescuing people and property in traffic, technical-technological and other accidents;
- clearing of local roads and streets and other infrastructure facilities in case of impassability due to snowfall, snow drifts, hail, drifts caused by heavy rainfall, landslides, landslides etc.;
- providing first aid in case of increased number of sick and injured and preventing the spread of infectious diseases;
- Protection of animals and plants in case of diseases, pests and other natural disasters.

2. Establishes protection and rescue forces;

3. Develops a plan for protection and rescue;

4. Undertakes other activities.⁷⁰

Also, spatial protection and rescue forces are being formed within the LSGU. Spatial forces in the LSGU are formed as headquarters and protection and rescue units. The headquarters are organized in municipal and local protection and rescue headquarters. The units are organized in universal and specialized protection and rescue units⁷¹.

⁶⁸ Law on Crisis Management, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 29/2005, Article 1

⁶⁹ Law on Protection and Rescue (consolidated text), Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 93/2012, Articles 2 and 3.

⁷⁰ Law on Protection and Rescue, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 36/2004, Articles 34-36.

⁷¹ Decision on determining the personnel and material composition of the forces for the Armed Forces, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 124/2006.

According to the Law on Crisis Management, LSGUs do not establish crisis management headquarters.

The Municipal Headquarters for Protection and Rescue consist of 10 members. Members are appointed based on the military service commitment, protection and rescue obligation and the work-related obligation. Staff members have higher education qualification in the respective profession. Supporting services have secondary education qualification.

Selection of human resources in the Municipal Headquarters for Protection and Rescue is based on previously prepared lists of potential candidates for deployment, staffing plans and the positive norm for staffing the forces. Planners select conscripts to fulfill the formation duties in the protection and rescue forces.

Only pregnant women, mothers and single parents who are caring for a child up to the age of 7, or 2 and more children up to the age of 10 and conscripts who have a deployment in the Army reserve and Ministry of Interior (MOI) are exempted from the selection in the protection and rescue forces⁷².

Each member of the headquarters for protection and rescue has appropriate tasks by which contributes to the performance of the tasks of the headquarters as a whole. Tasks of the staff members depend on the type and tasks of the staff.

The Commander of the Headquarters is responsible for the overall organization, ability and action for protection and rescue in the implementation of protection and rescue actions. This person, adopts protection and rescue plans; proposes organizational-formation structure of the protection and rescue forces in the respective area; is responsible for training for protection and rescue; approves the risks assessment over the territory by natural and other disasters; manages the work of the headquarters and the actions for protection and rescue of the population and material goods. This person cooperates with other entities that are in the interest of protection and rescue. For decision making, he/she uses a complete, abbreviated and direct method of decision making. *The Chief of Staff* is responsible for: the work of the headquarters; planning and use of measures for protection and rescue; proposing the organization of the protection and rescue forces; implementation of protection and rescue measures; preparation of protection and rescue plans; monitoring the situation and taking timely measures depending on the development of the situation. The Chief undertakes other measures and activities in the field of protection and rescue arising from his/her duty and the tasks entrusted to him/her by the Commander of the Headquarters. *The Assistants to the Chief of Staff* are responsible for the preparation and implementation of appropriate protection and rescue measures; training of the appropriate protection and rescue units; participation in the preparation of plans in the area for which they are assistants to the chief; preparation of a timely and correct risk assessment of the area; achieving cooperation with other entities of interest in the measures and tasks they perform in protection and rescue. The Assistants to the Chief of Staff also perform other tasks arising from their duties in the Headquarters and from the tasks entrusted to them by the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief of Staff.

⁷² Law on Protection and Rescue, (consolidated text) Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 93/2012, Article 42.

Activation of Municipal Headquarters in case of natural and other incidents is to eliminate the consequences of natural disasters, and other incidents and lasts until basic living conditions are provided⁷³.

The decision to engage forces and means in the actions to deal with the occurred natural and other disasters is taken by the responsible person of the entity that forms the protection and rescue forces. The decision for engaging the municipal headquarters for protection and rescue is taken by the mayor of the municipality. The decision to engage the municipal headquarters for protection and rescue is made in a peaceful time, crisis, emergency and a state of war.

Declaring crisis and state of emergency in the Republic of North Macedonia

By detecting the first case of an infected woman on February 26, 2020, but also the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19 in other residents of Debar, conditions were created to declare a state of crisis in RNM. Based on Article 58 paragraph 1 of the Law on Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases, the Government of RNM on March 12, 2020 adopted a Decision on measures to prevent the introduction/import and spread of coronavirus COVID-19⁷⁴. This was immediately followed by a Decision on the existence of a crisis situation on part of the territory of RNM, in order to prevent the introduction/import and spread of coronavirus COVID-19⁷⁵, for the area of the municipality of Debar and Centar Zhupa, with duration of 30 days. This decision was made on the basis of Article 31 paragraph 1 of the Law on Crisis Management⁷⁶.

The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia has adopted a Decision on establishing the General Coordination Crisis Staff to ensure full coordination of state administration bodies, legal entities established by the state, as well as the LSGU, regarding the prevention, introduction and spread of Coronavirus COVID-19, under no. 44-2147 / 3-1 from March 14, 2020⁷⁷. The General Coordination Crisis Staff has been established as an operational body to ensure full coordination of state administration bodies, state-established legal entities, as well as local self-government units, regarding the prevention, introduction and spread of Coronavirus COVID-19.

The challenges with the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19, led to frequent meetings of the Security Council, but also a wide consultation of the President of RNM on the declaration of a state of emergency. The decision for determining the existence of the state

⁷³ Law on Protection and Rescue, (consolidated text) Official Gazette of RM, No. 93/2012, Article 5.

⁷⁴ Decision on measures to prevent the introduction and spread of coronavirus COVID-19 published in the "Official Gazette of RSM" No. 62/20120 of 12.03.2020, <http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/099b0abae78442ddab217ec729d2d9e1.pdf>

⁷⁵ Decision on the existence of a crisis situation on part of the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, in order to prevent the introduction and spread of coronavirus COVID-19, published in the "Official Gazette of RNM" No. 62/20120 of 13.03.2020, <http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/04ff2f2c-47114ce5bf9cee74d38633bc.pdf>

⁷⁶ Law on Crisis Management "Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" no. 29/05, 36/11, 104/15, 39/16 and 83/18

⁷⁷ Review of the problems and challenges during the state of emergency, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, General Secretariat of the Government, February 8, 2021

of emergency was made on the basis of the reasoned proposal of the Government of RNM no. 44-2329 / 1 dated 18.3.2020 to the Assembly of the RNM, which determines the existence of a pandemic epidemic declared by the World Health Organization as a new type of virus that has spread to all continents and covers the territory of the RNM and the notification by the President of The Assembly of RNM no. 09-1690 / 2 dated 18.3.2020 that the Assembly of RNM in accordance with the Decision for disbanding of the Assembly of RNM "Official Gazette of RSM" no. 43/20, cannot convene a session at which the proposal submitted by the Government of RNM will be considered. This decision establishes the existence of a state of emergency on the territory of RNM for a period of 30 days in order to protect and deal with the consequences of the spread of Coronavirus COVID-19.

On April 14, 2020, the President of the Republic, adopted a new Decision on determining the existence of a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RSM" no. 104/2020). Subsequently, the President of RNM made 4 more decisions to continue the state of emergency.

Operational activities of the municipal headquarters during the covid pandemic 19 in 2020

In conditions of crisis and state of emergency, great responsibility for dealing with the pandemic in addition to state bodies, state administration bodies and other entities at the national level, was taken over by the LSGU. Within them the so-called municipal pandemic headquarters were engaged.

Municipal headquarters in times of crisis and emergency as operational bodies met regularly in 2020, with increased intensity in the first half of 2020. The headquarters were convened by the mayors of the municipalities. The material for the sessions was prepared by the persons in charge of defense and protection. The composition of the participants in headquarters was different. Municipal staffs have played a huge role in tackling the pandemic caused by Covid 19, showing the advantages of such an approach, but they have also faced a number of challenges and signaled a number of weaknesses. Some of them are detected in the following research.

Results of the research in the local self-government units

The sample of the research consists of 15 LSGU municipalities. They are: Aerodrom, Bitola, Gevgelija, Gazi Baba, Debar, Demir Hisar, Karposh, Kumanovo, Mogila, Novaci, Resen, Strumica, Tetovo, Chair and Shtip. The sample includes:

- mayors = 15
- employees in the municipality = 45
- Representatives of the municipal council = 15

This research includes a total of 75 people. Representatives of the councils and the employees of the municipality are persons who on various grounds were included in the municipal headquarters to deal with the pandemic caused by Covid 19.

The respondents were asked the following questions:

1. What structures have been organized by your municipality, to deal with natural disasters and other incidents?

2. Which representatives of institutions are present / participating in your headquarters for dealing with the pandemic of Covid 19?
3. List the advantages and disadvantages of the operational action of the municipal headquarters to deal with the pandemic of Covid 19?
4. What is the level of equipping of your municipality to deal with Covid 19?
5. Has your municipality appointed a person in charge of protection and rescue or you have established a department?

By using a Questionnaire in our research, we wanted to assess the situation of the municipalities for dealing with the virus at the local level, their operational approach. In addition, whether and what kind of municipal headquarters have been established to deal with the Covid 19 pandemic, as well as their management carried out by the headquarters formed in the municipalities. By conducting the research, we aimed to detect the strengths and weaknesses of the existing operational approach, and recommendations come from them for improving the future organizational and operational approach.

The answer to the first question is evident in the answers, but it is also noteworthy that the staffs formed by the respondents are named as: evacuation and rescue headquarters, municipal crisis headquarters, municipal headquarters for protection and rescue, crisis headquarters. In addition to the headquarters, protection and rescue forces have been formed. They are formed in the municipalities in various forms and with various strength.

The second question lists representatives of: the municipality, territorial firefighting units, public utilities, the Ministry of Defense - defense departments, the Army, the Ministry of Interior - departments / departments of interior, the Directorate for Protection and Rescue - regional departments, Crisis Management Center - regional centers, public health facilities, Red Cross branches and other governmental, municipal and non-governmental institutions. The number of representatives from meeting to meeting is variable.

The third question about the advantages of this approach features: good coordination, staffing, preventive protection of the population, regular meetings, etc. Disadvantages include: incompletely defined norms, lack of procedures and protocols for dealing with the pandemic, inadequate definition of the competencies and responsibilities of the institutions, inconsistency, not useful presence of some institutions, lack of sufficient necessary resources, etc.

The answers to the fourth question vary. Larger municipalities have at their disposal sufficient equipment and assets (material and technical means) to deal with the pandemic of Covid 19, as opposed to smaller ones that have partially or very little equipment and assets to deal with the pandemic of Covid 19.

Regarding the fifth question, respondents answered affirmatively that in all municipalities there is an employee, i.e., an authorized person or an established department for protection and rescue. In the larger municipalities, departments have been established, while in the smaller municipalities it is the employees, i.e., authorized persons for protection and rescue.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the conducted research it can be concluded that given the specific circumstances, Republic of North Macedonia relatively successfully overcame the state of

emergency in 2020. It was regulated by several constitutional provisions. Moreover, solutions that required quick decisions, which had to respect the fundamental constitutional values and human rights were created in accordance with international documents and standards.

The gained experience of the state institutions and the municipalities pinpoints the urgent and necessary need for further regulation and precise regulation with legal provisions of the state of emergency. Hence, it will provide a clear distinction and understanding of state of emergency, war and crisis.

The municipal headquarters that were activated as operational bodies in this composition are not normatively prescribed. This imposes the need for reorganization of the municipal headquarters and a normative regulation.

There is also a need to regulate the procedures for the actions of the municipalities during crisis and emergency.

Also, to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the systems as well as there is a need to reform the systems for protection and rescue and crisis management.

The conducted research on the operational management of the Pandemic, proved the need for precision and further explanation, with special emphasis on the coordination of the entities at regional and local level, which proved to be a basic problem.

LSGUs need to invest more resources to procure equipment and assets to deal with future natural and other incidents.

This issue should be regulated through active involvement of the municipalities by organizing debates, panel discussions, working meetings given the importance of the rights and the consequences of the legal matter.

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