Globalization and COVID-19: The Role of Local and Regional Authorities In Context Of International Relations

Blanka Wurst Hašová[1,*], and *Pavla* Varvažovská[1]

[1]Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Faculty of Economics and Management, Department of Humanities, Kamýcká 129, Praha 6 – Suchdol, Czech Republic

Abstract.

Research background: International Municipal Cooperation in context of globalization and decentralization can be considered as a widely researched phenomenon. Still, the recent COVID-19 Pandemic prepared unexpected developments at all levels of the society.

Purpose of the article is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on models/forms of cooperation between crucial players in the international relations arena, with a special focus on the international-regional/local cooperation axis.

Methods of content and comparative analysis based on primary sources and scientific literature review are used. In the methodological framework of the Multi-level Governance Concept (Marks, G., 1993), reactions of relevant International Organizations on COVID-19 with regard to local and/or regional Self-Government Authorities are analysed.

Findings and value added: The crisis deepened the importance of local and regional Self-Government Authorities in the recovery process and urged international players to pay an increased attention to mutual cooperation and subsequent implementation of measures needed. Especially the Multi-stakeholder Partnership has been strengthened. This paper intended to contribute to current academic and public policy debate**.**

Keywords: *globalization; international organizations; local self-government; multi-stakeholder partnership*

JEL Classification: *F53; O19; R58*

[*]Corresponding author: hasovab@pef.czu.cz

1 Introduction

International Municipal Cooperation in context of globalization and decentralization can be considered as a widely researched phenomenon. Still, the recent COVID-19 pandemic prepared unexpected developments at all levels of the society. The pandemic brought into sharp focus different levels of federal, national and subnational decision-making, intervention and efficacy [1, 2]. As the reaction from the international/supranational level has been limited [1], national governments and their policy measures – including funding – have been, on the other hand, critical in mobilizing public health measures [1, 4, 5]. The high level of uncertainty caused by the novel nature of the COVID-19 disease opened up more discretion in the political and official responses to expert advice than would normally be the case for crises with better-known causes and outcomes [6]. As governments at all levels, and in particular local and regional authorities, were being called upon to provide emergency services, communicate on how to contain the spread of disease, coordinate efforts, and mitigate as far as possible the impact on economies [7], the assumption that the division of functional responsibilities among different levels of government increases the efficiency and responsiveness of governments [3], became a new challenge to be proven.

2 Methods

Purpose of the article is to examine, in the research framework of the Multi-level Governance paradigm, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local democracy, investigate the reaction of relevant local and regional authorities on current situation and analyse how far the Multi-level Governance concept corresponds with the assumptions of efficacy and relevancy of current emergency response. The factors of governance structure and institutional arrangements are emphasized, special focus is laid on the international-regional/local cooperation axis. Methods of content and comparative analysis based on primary sources and scientific literature review are used.

3 Results

3.1 COVID-19, emergency response and Multi-level Governance

3.1.1 Governance structure

Interpreting and responding to pandemics is always a political act [1]. As Lee et al. (2020) stated, „the political context is often important to understanding how the government deals with transboundary, unique, uncertain crises. For example, the Trump administration's policy choices might be affected and often limited by political calculations concerning the coming presidential election, while the Abe administration's initial response to COVID-19 appeared to be affected by the international debates about the possibility of rescheduling the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games" [10].

Moreover, when it comes to strategy, capabilities and ideological preferences, states often have multiple identities [11]. According to Capano et al. (2020), pandemics are a difficult policy problem to conceptualize and structure [6]. Even if existing governance systems and institutional arrangements are a key determining factor for effective emergency

responses [4, 14], the overall picture is complicated and cannot be explained by the formal structure of political systems per se [1]. Palermo (2020) states that „the effectiveness of responses to the pandemic does not depend on governance structures, but on the quality of governance", saying that „decentralisation allows for responses adapted to needs when they are justified" [9]. As in the context of the COVID-19 response, there is an absence of information on governance and institutional arrangements (e.g. gaps, overlaps in jurisdictional responsibilities, institutional coordination issues, financing mechanisms and budget impacts, transparency), some implications for governance may be drawn only indirectly.

Moreover, the most prominent governance sphere that is addressed across these remains the national level [4]. Dodds et al. observe that federal systems, with their division of power and responsibility, shed a light on how regional and state-level interventions either coordinate or clash with national policies and strategies [1]. In this context, Dodds et al. (2020) ask if there is evidence that federal systems are handling the pandemic any better than unitary systems? [1] As Greer et al. argue (2020), formal political institutions matter. Federal states are often reproached for coordination problems but in several cases, central governments shirked their responsibilities, forcing subnational governments into leading roles [12]. Even in the United States of America, Rocco et al. (2020) observe that „in the first months of the crisis, subnational authority over public-health regulations has enabled governors and mayors to play a powerful agenda-setting role during the pandemic [14]. On the other hand, some authors praise the political system of their country as being able to act more autonomously and effectively, due to the historically based experience and well founded health care [13].

For instance, Migone (2020) argues that different national political systems affect both how power is distributed, and how policies are processed in the administrative and political systems leading them to generate and maintain specific policy styles [13]. Some unitary states such as South Korea, Singapore and New Zealand have been lauded for their rapid health interventions [1], whereby in the case of South Korea, the aspect of past policy experience with the handling of the MERS outbreak crisis in 2015, is evident. The Korean government was able to learn from this experience and take a successful and effective policy measures [10]. Finally, in accordance with Palermos´ (2020) statement about the dependence of quality of governance and quality of emergency response [9], the state capacity is connected with the state capacity to act [12]. There were middle and lower income states such as Mongolia, Montenegro, and Vietnam implement a more effective public health response to COVID-19 than some higher income countries [12]. Furthermore, Vasilyeva et. al. observed that in many countries, significant progress has been made in healthcare without considerable growth of incomes [15]. On the other hand, having strong state capacity does not mean it will be used well – as the public health systems of the United States and United Kingdom have proved. In the same time, strong or weak state capacity changes available policy options substantially [12].

3.1.2 Covid-19, its implications on local democracy and response from local and regional authorities in European context

From the point of view of local democracy, measures taken were severe: the right to move, to assemble, to demonstrate and to attend religious services was quashed [1], participation of citizens in the local political process was hindered [8]. These are truly extraordinary times, which will require parliamentary democracies in particular to think about how and when they recalibrate the relationship between the executive and legislature, as parliaments

had been placed aside, stated Greers et al. (2020) [12]. Dodds et al. (2020) obsereve that nations deliberately suspended civil and political rights but they did so with strong public support [1]. Other authors were wondering weather the pandemic will support nationalism and tighter borders even in the longer-term [16]. One could speak about a 'pandemic populism', authoritarian opportunism and geopolitical skulduggery. (Greers et al., 2020) [12].

A pandemic is a proverbial shot in the arm for ideologues who wish to stop immigration, build walls and 'take back control' (Dodds et al., 2020) [1]. European Committee of the Regions, a bridge between local and regional authorities of the Member states of the EU and its institutions, proclaimed that "at all costs it must be avoided to exploit the crisis to justify toughening national positions" [7]. On the contrary, this should be a wake-up call for national capitals that crises know no borders and only a strong, well-funded Union can support its members, regions and cities [7]. More recently, COVID-19 bears implications for governance, with citizens'trust in governments increasing in some countries, especially for local politicians, and decreasing in others [5]. The Bureau of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe expressed its concern about the democratic self-governance and financial autonomy of local and regional authorities, in particular in view of recovery plans in the aftermath of the crisis [8]. It highlighted the fact that some governments have imposed, within or outside the context of states of emergency, measures with far-reaching consequences for fundamental rights and freedoms and the democratic functioning which have also impacted the sub-national level - be it through relocation of powers, increase of central states' surveillance or postponement of local and regional elections [8]. According to the Congress, national/state governments even usurped decisive decision-making power [8, 9]. Professor Francesco Palermo, constitutional adviser to the Congress, addressed in his speech on "The COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges for multi-level governance," held during the Governance Committee meeting of the Congress, how the pandemic has resulted in an urgent "recentralisation" of multi-level governance structures for many European countries, regardless of the fact that regional and local levels were sometimes much more reactive in responding to related challenges [9]. The expression of mayors who questioned current democracy at local level – labelling the recent situation even as „the lockdown of local democracy" [8], corresponds with the opinion of this expert (Palermo, 2020) who stated that it would be important that COVID-19 "should not kill multi-level governance" in the name of false impressions, while "recentralisation is not a miracle cure for the pandemic" [9].

Therefore, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities called to remove restrictions and restore democratic functioning at the local level, in full compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Governance, as extraordinary measures must always be temporary only and under democratic control [8]. Another of relevant institutional bodies, the European Committee of the Regions, focused, on the other hand, on the "assistance, information, engagement and representation of regions and cities across Europe" [7]. In its "Action Plan to help regions and cities fight the COVID-19 in the European Union", the CoR formulated the steps necessary to be taken, as to „foster EU support to local and regional authorities in the health sector, make available an exchange platform to foster cooperation and facilitate mutual support between cities and regions across Europe, provide through CoR mechanisms concrete feedback from the local and regional level on how to address the health, emergency response, social and economic aspects of the pandemic and their impact on people and their local communities, provide regular and practical information to local and regional authorities about EU measures to address the crisis and facilitate a reality check on the ground of the EU's measures to fight the pandemic; gather

evidence to improve EU policies based on the experiences of the local and regional level" [7].

As already mentioned, concerning local democracy, only the warning against nationalism has been proclaimed [7]. For supranational and international organizations, the pandemic will continue to provoke serious questions about their efficacy. As already noted, the European Union has played a limited role [1]. It has focused on coordination at the global, regional and national levels, avoiding fragmentation and duplication of efforts, and promoting an efficient humanitarian-development nexus and, finally, on the reinforcement of synergies between the health response and the socio-economic response, understanding that effective policies require a multidimensional lens and a whole-of-government approach [17]. Positively, the European Commission has proposed a recovery package that aims at relaunching economies while maintaining the Green Deal at its core [1, 17, 18]. The pandemic might yet reinvigorate the EU and lead to a new initiative to fund and enhance pan-European integration in emergency planning and public health provision [1]. Also the UN and the OECD highlighted the opportunities connected with the current crisis. „Old structural mistakes" shall be abandoned and the situation shall lead to a more sustainable way of living, especially in context of SDGs. In the same way, current crisis shall prepare the field for a more intense use of digital tools thanks to currently deepened on-line/digital communication between all levels of government and further stakeholders [2, 5, 16, 25].

3.1.3 Cities response in global context

While most national governments were taking the lead to minimise the spread of the virus, cities in many countries played an important role to complement responses to COVID-19 policy challenges on the ground [5]. Cities are clearly important drivers of economic growth, but the implications of their changing role and function are highly uncertain [19]. In context of the crisis, OECD (2020) has defined the role of cities two-fold. „On the one hand, cities have acted as implementation vehicles of nation-wide measures such as the local support to and enforcement of the confinement measures, thanks to their resources and capacity or their local prerogatives; on the other hand, cities have been spearheading more bottom-up, innovative responses while resorting to technology or other resources and building on their unique proximity to citizens [5]. OECD has defined 6 categories of city policy response: social distancing and confinement, workplace practices and commuting patterns, targeted measures for vulnerable groups, local service delivery, notably water and waste, support to business and economic recovery, and communication, awareness raising and digital tools [5].

In the face of COVID-19, several mayors and local administrations have developed innovative ways to inform, reassure and communicate with the public [5, 7, 8]. They have also developed a wide range of digital tools to cope with daily needs and health issues. „Through public information programmes, websites, posters, advertisements and social media, cities are tapping into a vast array of outreach possibilities. They are also sharing real time information on the stage of the pandemics in their cities through online portables, digital platforms or open data. In many cases, Mayors in person lead the charge to reassure their residents with a range of creative options from engaging with public figures or cartoonists, to using social media to address live questions [5]. This development has confirmed that – as previously stated by Torfling et al. (2020), the public sector is more innovative than its reputation, and persistently explores and exploits opportunities for developing and implementing new ideas that disrupt common wisdom and established practices at the level of service production, public policy and societal problem solving [22].

4 Discussions/Recommendations

4.1 Place-based governance and its role in Emergency response

To date, national- and state-level governments are leading the COVID-19 emergency responses in just about all countries [4]. At the same time, local governments take on the roles as service providers, implementers and emergency operators on the ground [4, 5]. COVID-19 had asymmetrical impacts across territories but many policy responses were place-blind and uniform [5]. Instead, according to OECD (2020), place-based and people-centred approaches are crucially needed [5]. Morisson & Doussineau (2019) define a place-based policy as 'a long-term strategy aimed at tackling persistent underutilization of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places through external interventions and multilevel governance', while regions are „highly unequal when designing and implementing place-based policies due to differences in the quality of their governments, their capacities to absorb funds and their institutional capabilities [20]. Place-based governance reforms are critical to accelerate the responses from subnational governments to the global health and climate crises, natural disasters, extreme and growing inequalities, unrest, socio-economic and political shocks, and a more fragile global economy [4]. Regional dimension is not to be forgotten, as – according to Bailey et al. (2020), the economic problems caused by the current pandemic tend to be region specific [18]. Economic impacts will vary with the local industry base and general regional conditions [18], as regions act as key drivers of innovation [21], innovation will be also at risk. National policies will be insufficient to account for these differences, so a region-specific policy approach is essential in understanding such issues [18]. While coordinated policy actions at the supra-national and national levels are essential to cope with health, economic and environmental challenges, region-specific policies also need to be implemented to take into consideration regional heterogeneity and the uneven spatial effects of COVID-19 [7, 18]. More specifically, as global and complex emergencies become more frequent, urgent questions arise regarding the extent to which urban and regional governments are equipped to take rapid and radical action where needed [4].

4.2 Collaborative Governance, Multi-stakeholder partnership and the role of digitalization

Another significant aspect of the crisis is the strengthening of collaborative governance and multi-stakeholder partnership. Current experience shows the importance of mutual networks [4], as well as the involvement of stakeholders from different tiers of government both horizontally and vertically, research and academic institutions, multilateral organisations and banks, philanthropic foundations and funder, and community-level stakeholders [5]. Urban and territorial governance cuts across a variety of coordination models among different actors responsible for governing cities, metropolises, regions and wider territories [4]. As OECD stated in one of its strategic COVID-19 response papers, "this situation is calling on all levels of government to work together in a coordinated, coherent, and ideally collaborative, manner to design and delivery effective policy, for this crisis and beyond, whereby main accent shall be laid on digitalisation, innovation, or new ways of working with governance partners and citizens [2]. As in general, performance of implementation depend on „increased understanding of regional experts and decision

makers as regards to views of citizens and increased openness and collaboration between citizens and the public sector enhanced possibility for citizens to influence regional development [21], multi-disciplinary experts and citizens have been playing an important role not only in ensuring that strategies are more comprehensive and multi-sectoral, but also in making the processes more inclusive for consensus building and increased ownership [5].

Arguments in favour of collaborative innovation include the idea that multi-actor collaboration helps to produce a more precise and nuanced understanding of the problem at hand, bring forth a greater richness of ideas, stimulate mutual learning, facilitate negotiated risk management, build joint ownership over new and bold solutions, enable coordinated implementation and adaptation, and accelerate the diffusion of successful innovations [22]. Many local governments, particularly in cities with global outlook or narrative, turn to their national government and the private sector for partnerships in technology and innovation [23]. The pivotal role of digitalisation in emergency responses to the pandemic has pushed many cities to systematise the use of smart city tools more permanently, while staying alert and monitoring the risk of contagion [5]. The development of technology and open access to the Internet has favoured the accumulation of knowledge with the potential to transform the social environment [24].

The virtual space is further becoming integral as information, participation, cultural resources and municipal services are digitalised. However, cities cannot fix the magnitude of the challenge on their own [5]. The process has been complicated further by accusations that public messaging is being made harder by rampant social media ecologies [1], moreover with a hardly existing global legal framework for cyber governance, this appearing to remain a fragmented area of international law for the foreseeable future [11]. When we consider that in times of crisis, trust in institutions and their transparency in communicating with the public is even more essential than usual, then, according to OECD (2020), digitalisation, a major game changer during the crisis, will remain a key component of a "new normal", although teleworking ability varies both across and within countries [5]. Private sector actors such as Facebook, Google and Amazon are integral to all of this. The pandemic demands something that the prevailing data ecology has not hard-wired: an open-access data-sharing economy. What we have had instead is the stockpiling, harvesting, monitoring and archiving of privatized data [1]. Therefore, the actions should be mainly based on digital tools globally as well as focus on how the EU is and can support local and regional governments and their communities [7].

5 Conclusions

This paper analysed impacts of COVID-19 on local democracy and the reaction of local and regional authorities on this situation. From the point of view of regional and local authorities, the crisis prepared unexpected threats for local democracy, starting with the limitation of basic civil rights until the threats of executive powers on sub-national level, being described as the "lockdown of local democracy" [8-9]. On the other hand, from the point of view of international organizations (OECD and the UN, partly EU), this situation prepared a way, or an opportunity, to abandon "old structural mistakes" and use the situation for a more sustainable way of living, especially in context of SDGs and the Green Deal concept [2, 5, 16 - 17, 25]. Similar reaction can be observed in the cities´ level response, as "many cities are already planning for life after COVID-19 with a range of investments to pair economic recovery with environmental sustainability" [5]. As further findings one could consider a) the deepened multi-stakeholder partnership and

collaborative governance, vertically as well as horizontally, which played a decisive role in the efficiency of emergency response; b) the role of digitalization in communication between all levels of governments and further stakeholders, while pointing out the need for effectiveness and security of (not just) sensitive data. The social media context and cybersecurity issues will be more important in the debate of the private and public sectors. Finally, the need of place- resp. regional-policy based responses has been emphasized, while respecting the national-centred powers. As it is too early in most cases to identify the effect of policy decisions on the course of the ongoing pandemic [12], it is evident that recovery from the crisis should be a shared responsibility across all levels of government [5]. Still, governance issues, from global regulation to local collaboration and capacity building, might present the biggest challenge for research and action [18].

References

1. Dodds, K., Castan Broto, V., Detterbeck, K., Jones, M., Mamadouh, V., Ramutsindela, M., Varsanyi, M., Wachsmuth, D., Yuan Woon, Ch. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Territorial, political and governance dimensions of the crisis. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 8 (3), 289-298.

2. OECD (2020). The territorial impact of COVID-19: Managing the crisis across levels of government, 16, June. Available on-line at: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-territorial-impact-of-covid-19-managing-the-crisis-across-levels-of-government-d3e314e1/#biblio-d1e5202, retrieved on 16.9.2020

3. Lago, I., Lago-Peñas, S., Martinez-Vazquez, J. (2020). Decentralization after the Great Recession: Fine-tuning or paradigm change? *Regional Studies*, 54(7), 877-880.

4. UCLG (2020). Covid-19 monitors of relevance to urban and regional governance. Emergency governance initiative for cities and regions analytics note nr. 01, 4, June. Available on-line at: https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/egi_analytics_uclg_metropolis_lse.pdf, retrieved on 16.9.2020.

5. OECD (2020): Cities policy responses, 23, July. Available on-line at: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=126_126769-yen45847kf&title=Coronavirus-COVID-19-Cities-Policy-Responses, retrieved on 16.9.2020.

6. Capano, G., Howlett, M., Jarvis, D. S. L., Ramesh M., Goyal, N. (2020) Mobilizing policy (in)capacity to fight covid-19: understanding variations in state responses. *Policy and Society*, 39(3), 285-308.

7. European Committe of the Regions (2020). CoR action plan to help regions and cities fight the covid-19 in the European Union, 24, June. Available on-line at: https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Documents/CoR-Action-plan-on-Covid19_24March2020%20.pdf, retriever on 17.9.2020.

8. Council of Europe (2020). Declaration on the impact of central government COVID-measures on local and regional authorities, 9, June. Available on-line at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/congress-bureau-adopts-a-declaration-on-the-impact-of-central-government-covid-measures-on-local-and-regional-authorities, retrieved on 19.9.2020.

9. Council of Europe (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges for multi-level governance – speech of prof. F. Palermo at the Meeting of the Governance Committee

of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 15, September, available on-line at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/recentralisation-is-not-a-miracle-cure-for-the-covid-pandemic-congress-expert-says, retrieved on 20.9.2020.

10. Lee, S., Hwang, Ch., Jae Moon, M. (2020). Policy learning and crisis policy-making: quadruple-loop learning and COVID-19 responses in South Korea. *Policy and Society*, 39(3), 363-381.

11. Henriksen, A. (2019). The end of the road for the UN GGE process: The future regulation of cyberspace. *Journal of Cybersecurity,* 5(1).

12. Greer, S. L., King, E. J., Massard da Fonseca, E., PeraltaSantos, A. (2020). The comparative politics of COVID-19: The need to understand government responses, *Global Public Health*, 15(9), 1413-1416.

13. Migone, A. R. (2020). Trust, but customize: Federalism's impact on the Canadian COVID-19 response. *Policy and Society*, 39(3), 382-402.

14. Rocco, P., Beland, D., Waddan, A. (2020). Stuck in neutral? Federalism, policy instruments, and counter-cyclical responses to COVID-19 in the United States. *Policy and Society*, 39(3), 458-477.

15. Vasilyeva, T., Bagmet, K., Bilan, S., Seliga R. (2020). Institutional development gap in the social sector: Cross-country analysis. *Economics and Sociology*, 13(1), 271-294.

16. Gössling, S., Scott, D., Hall, M. C. (2020). Pandemics, tourism and global change: A rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), 1-20.

17. European Commission (2020). EU Coronavirus Global Response Summit: External Response Factsheet, 8, April. Available on-line at: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/coronavirus-global-response-summit-external-response-factsheet_en.pdf, retrieved on 22.9.2020

18. Bailey, D., Clark, J., Colombelli, A., Corradini C., De Propris, L., Derudder, B., Fratesi, U., Fritsch, M., Harrison, J., Hatfield, M., Kemeny. T., Kogler, D. F., Lagendijk, A., Lawton, P., Ortega-Argilés, R., Iglesias Otero, C., Usai, S. (2020). Regions in a time of pandemic. *Regional Studies,* 54(9), 1163-1174.

19. Clark, J., Harrison, J., Miguelez, E. (2018). Connecting cities, revitalizing regions: the centrality of cities to regional development. *Regional Studies,* 52(8), 1025-1028.

20. Morisson, A., Doussineau, M. (2019). Regional innovation governance and place-based policies: design, implementation and implications. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 6(1), 101-116.

21. Roman, M., Varga, H., Cvijanovic, V., Reid, A. (2020). Quadruple helix models for sustainable regional innovation: Engaging and facilitating civil society participation. *Economies,* 8(2), 48.

22. Torfing, J., Cristofoli, D., Gloor, P. A., Meijer, A. J., Trivellato, B. (2020). Taming the snake in paradise: Combining institutional design and leadership to enhance collaborative innovation. *Policy and Society*, 39(4), 592-616.

23. Spiliotopoulou, M., Roseland, M. (2020). Urban sustainability: From theory influences to practical agendas. *Sustainability*, 12(18), 7245.

24. Romero-Rodríguez, J.; Ramírez-Montoya, M.; Aznar-Díaz, I.; Hinojo-Lucena, F. (2020). Social appropriation of knowledge as a key factor for local development and open innovation: A systematic review. *Journal of Open Innovation, Technology and Market Complexity*, 6(2), 44.

25. UN/DESA (2020): COVID-19: Embracing digital government during the pandemic and beyond, 14, April. Available on-line at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-61-covid-19-embracing-digital-government-during-the-pandemic-and-beyond/, retrieved on 24.9.2020