

EDITORIAL: RESPONSE TO THE COMPLEX CRISIS TRIGGERED BY COVID-19

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The COVID-19 virus has triggered a complex crisis. It has caused serious problems in various areas of society, whether it be health, the economy, welfare, culture, politics, education, social relations and other areas of human life. The crisis also crossed borders, revealing its transnational nature: it started in China in late 2019 and within a few months its consequences were felt in many areas around the world. The epidemic quickly became a pandemic, showing that people's high expectations for their health and safety could not be adequately met by political leaders and crisis management systems. In terms of people's health, the crisis will have unforeseeable later effects that will most likely last for decades. Further, the crisis has also linked its consequences to and exacerbated other salient problems in contemporary societies. It has exposed the inadequacies of healthcare systems and economic structures, the fragility of social relations and political decision-making and, finally, the inadequate preparedness of crisis management systems.

Previous analyses revealed that national and international crisis management systems were themselves in crisis and therefore largely unable to respond to a complex crisis. In many countries, the quality of the crisis management cycle, which includes crisis exploration, detection, preventive action, preparedness, response and recovery, was questionable. It seems the weaknesses of crisis management around the world were, *mutatis mutandis*, common and predictable. They range from insufficient information at the beginning of the crisis and information overload at its height, along with organizational deficiencies, administrative regression, lack of coordination, poor inter-agency cooperation, excessive improvisation through to leadership problems and psychological pathologies. Clearly, crisis management systems for dealing with crises like COVID-19 must be more innovative, balanced and resilient, and should form part of broader "contingency thinking" (see Rosenthal et al. 2001).

It is no surprise that scholars around the world immediately started to intensively study various aspects of the COVID-19 crisis. The data and information collected thus far in several fields of study (disciplines) are already voluminous, yet also unclear. Still, as far as the social sciences are concerned, a very general scoping study suggests what the main thematic issues of current research have been.

Some scholars have examined the role of science and education in the crisis. For example, Ferreira et al. (2020) viewed the pandemic as a complex phenomenon and, hence, as a point where natural and social realities are articulated. The space of discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic should be seen as the interaction of

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different discourses that combine and reinterpret modalities of certain realities and social phenomena. Connell (2020) emphasised the COVID-19 epidemic is a medical and social catastrophe, but one that sociology has had little influence in addressing. Conventional sociological theory and methodology seem unable to cope with this situation. Sociology, along with other social sciences, is threatened, yet it could contribute to responses that mobilise community resources to address the crisis and prepare for future ones. Foss (2020) asked what strategic management research can do to make sense of the COVID-19 disruption and the implications the disruption holds for the strategy field. He argues that behavioural strategy offers a psychologically based interpretive lens that provides insight into decision-making amid extreme conditions. However, the COVID-19 experience also highlights some weaknesses: the role of models versus judgement in strategic decision-making, the deeply social (political, institutional) nature of strategy formation, and the treatment of fundamental uncertainty. Beech and Anseel (2020) warned that higher education also faces an unprecedented crisis. Leaders need to focus on short-term survival but should not neglect long-term growth and development. The authors see the current crisis as an opportunity to rethink the role of higher education in society.

Many researchers have looked at national and cross-national responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Ruiu (2020) analysed the initial stages of management of the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy by examining a mix of political, academic, media and public responses. The lack of coordination between the political and scientific levels, and between institutional issuers of formal statements and the media, suggests the crisis was mismanaged in the early stages of the virus' outbreak. Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot and Cohen (2021) found the COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted the importance of effective crisis management and its relationship with citizens' willingness to cooperate with the government during a crisis. Their findings show that citizens in Israel sought immediate results during a crisis in preparedness and readiness terms. Government responsiveness and transparency, as well as public participation in decision-making and trust in the government, are critical. ASPA (2020) presented the experience of South Korea, which had performed exceptionally well during the first pandemic wave. Its adaptive approaches and learning pathway, explored in the ASPA commentary, provide practical implications for managing possible further waves of COVID-19 and a future public health crisis. Ferlin, Malešič and Vuga Beršnak (2021) examined the degree of improvisation during the COVID-19 crisis response in Slovenia. Despite normative and to some extent operational crisis preparedness, analysis of the country's response to the COVID-19 epidemic shows improvisation in several key elements: Planning, decision-making, coordination and crisis communication. Kuhlmann, Bouckaert and Galli (2021) provided a conceptual framework for analysing the COVID-19 crisis response in the first half of 2020 from a cross-national comparative perspective. Their framework focuses on how the crisis was used as a 'window of opportunity' by different actors. Several similarities and differences were observed in crisis responses and patterns of opportunity management in various countries.

The issue of the international response to the crisis was also explored. Habersaat, Betsch and Butler (2020) believe that while most COVID-19 countermeasures prove effective they come at a high social and economic cost, and response strategies are adapted. They believe communities around the world should have a say, that they should be informed and involved, and participate in the transition phase to the 'new normal'. Goniewicz et al. (2020) described how the European Union has implemented numerous strategies to address the COVID-19 crisis. Member states have imposed measures like closing borders and significant restrictions on people's mobility to contain the virus' spread. The unprecedented

crisis coordination among the Member States has facilitated the procurement of medical equipment, personal protective means and other medical supplies. Substantial funding has also been allocated to research to find a vaccine and promote effective treatment therapies. Financial assistance has been provided to protect the wages of workers and businesses and to facilitate the return to a functioning economy. The authors believe the current crisis suggests the need to look at similar events in the future from a population-based management approach and to engage in critical thinking outside the box.

Countless other issues have been discussed in response to COVID-19. Here are just a few. Ang (2020) showed that the debate over whether autocracies or democracies are better at fighting epidemics is misguided. In China, President Xi Jinping's centralised leadership and administration have both succeeded and failed to address the COVID-19 crisis. While it was effective in containing infections within China after the virus had spread, it failed to contain the outbreak before it spread globally. The country has shown both strengths and fatal weaknesses in dealing with COVID-19. At the same time, centralised, personalised power has reinforced both the strengths and weaknesses of authoritarianism. Ansell, Soerensen and Torfing (2020) conducted analysis which suggested the turbulent problems caused by COVID-19 require robust governance solutions that are sufficiently adaptive, agile and pragmatic to sustain a particular goal/function in the face of constant disruption. Robust governance strategies for public administration and leadership are required to successfully manage such crises. Abdul-Azize and Gamil (2021) examined social protection programmes as a key tool for policymakers to address poverty and hunger and increase the resilience of both the poor and vulnerable groups to a shock like the COVID-19 pandemic. These programmes have been used to build community resilience. Abas et al. (2021) explored the role of social media during the crisis. Their study reveals how excessive social media use could increase global mental health risk in the COVID-19 event. The study's results suggest a likely link between social media use and the emotional trauma people have faced while responding to the crisis. Malešič (2021) addressed the paradoxes and associated behaviours caused by the COVID-19 virus and the response to it. The uncertainty, change and ambiguity have created several paradoxes. The virus could be successfully contained with intense international cooperation through global and regional institutions, yet these were already weakened before the crisis and during the crisis by the nationalist and populist politics in certain countries. The virus appears to have cut across various global inequalities, although its effects have been felt unevenly. The virus has increased inequality in the economy, between genders, and between generations. Supposed to be a safe haven, the home has become a place of domestic violence for (too) many people, including children. Ruiu, Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) examined similarities and differences in coping with the COVID-19 crisis and climate change. They identified key lessons arising from this comparison: 1) warning the public of the risk (severity) and reassuring the public (which options exist for action); 2) the need for multi-level collaboration that integrates collective and individual action; 3) the ability to communicate coherent messages to the public; 4) managing the risk of politicisation and commodification of the issue; and 5) the ability to trigger individual responses by promoting self-efficacy.

This thematic issue of the Journal of Comparative Politics contains five articles that contribute to the above discussion. **Simona Kukovič** presents data on affected countries, infected people and number of deaths at the time of the analysis and reiterates the COVID-19 crisis is a global crisis. Most countries in the world introduced very stringent and unprecedented measures to limit the virus' further spread and reduce hospitalisations/deaths. The author analyses and

discusses the public health measures taken in Slovenia, its four neighbouring countries Italy, Hungary, Austria and Croatia, and in Sweden. She compares the virus' spread, and the results of the measures taken in the listed countries, chiefly focusing on public trust in political institutions. She uses publicly available data on the subject and tests the hypothesis "that high levels of public trust in decision-making institutions directly correlate with compliance with public health measures and restrictions taken by these institutions to limit the spread and consequences of the novel coronavirus".

Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, **Peter Csanyi** and **Rudolf Kuharčik** stress the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for societies and governments around the world and, while it seemed that most countries and their citizens were responding similarly to the virus early in the pandemic, the situation in different countries began to vary in the months following. The authors compare the COVID-19 situation in Poland and Slovakia, which experienced one of the worst crises in their history 1 year after a pandemic was declared by the WHO. A fruitful government–citizens relationship lasted slightly longer in Slovakia than in Poland, but the situation had deteriorated significantly in both countries by the autumn of 2020. The authors' focus is to examine how the "rally-around-the-flag" effect and resulting natural potential for social mobilisation to fight the pandemic in Poland and Slovakia were squandered by irresponsible political decisions and the undermined trust of citizens in their governments' good intentions.

Anđela Đorđević and **Rok Zupančič** analyse the measures introduced by the governments of Serbia and Kosovo in northern Kosovo against COVID-19. Northern Kosovo is governed by a dual legal and administrative system led respectively by the Serbian government in Belgrade and the Kosovar authorities in Pristina. Drawing on "the theory of contested statehood", the authors argue "that the institutions of both sides, which have been vying for power in this region for years, have used almost all available means to demonstrate their respective 'statehood' (ability to exercise power), regardless of the consequences this has had for the locals".

Vladimir Prebilič considers the fight against COVID-19 in Slovenia on the local level. The state responded to the virus according to the national plan, albeit this was not the optimal basis for implementing tasks on the local level, especially during the first wave of the epidemic. Local communities responded to the crisis in different ways and used a lot of their own initiative due to the limited functioning of the protection and rescue system on the regional level. In the second wave, several weaknesses were addressed, and the response was thus better coordinated. The state–local community interaction and the progress in the response from the first to the second wave are the focus of the analysis.

Jelena Juvan conducts a cross-national analysis of use of the military as an additional force to combat the virus. Indeed, most countries have deployed their national armed forces to bring the crisis under control. However, the extent of deployment has varied and depended on the national legal framework governing the role of the armed forces in crisis management. The armed forces' role during this crisis has varied in terms of the type of forces deployed and nature of the tasks performed. What was the extent of use of the armed forces in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in selected countries, whether the armed forces were useful in the medical crisis and what were the main shortcomings and advantages of this use were the main questions guiding author's analysis.

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