

## GLOBAL AND NATIONAL PARADOXES IN RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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*The crisis brought by COVID-19 and the response to it have led to plenty of paradoxes and associated behaviour. Relying on paradox theory, the author overviews paradoxes detected on the global level before focusing on Slovenia: one of the most effective countries in fighting the COVID-19 virus during the first wave of epidemic but one of the least successful during the second one. The government has ignored the management structure already in place and designed to respond to a complex crisis, and instead decided to improvise. Despite the harsh anti-COVID-19 measures imposed during the second wave, no positive results have been visible for months. While the authorities have expected citizens to abide by the measures, certain representatives of the authorities have sometimes ignored them. Rather than dealing strictly with issues to do with the virus, the government has raised particular sensitive ideological issues and created conflict, losing precious time and energy. Despite the existence of crisis communication plans, several principles for addressing the public were missing. Civil society's protests against the measures hold the potential to attract even harsher ones. The fight against the virus has absorbed tremendous medical capacities, thereby neglecting other diseases that may be expected, on top of the COVID-19 problems, to have a long-term negative impact on public health.*

**Key words:** COVID-19; crisis; crisis response; paradox; Slovenia.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most striking paradox of the COVID-19 pandemic is that some important politicians, high-level state officials and even medical experts have asked publicly: Who could have known the COVID-19 crisis could spread so hugely and have such devastating global consequences? However, with his thesis on the “world risk society”, Beck (1992, 2008) has for decades directed attention to the integration and interdependence of the modern world, and how it is vulnerable to environmental, nuclear, economic/financial, genetic and terrorist threats. He has warned about the consequences of a complex crisis which spreads in an uncontrolled manner in space, time and society, that makes it difficult to calculate levels of fatalities, other victims and damage, thereby limiting the options for damage control and compensation. On the brink of the new millennium, Rosenthal et al. (2001) discussed future crises, their endemic nature, heterogeneity, complexity, self-perpetuation, trans-nationalisation, mediatation and politicisation. They also warned about the vicious circle of crises. In 2008, an economic, financial and social crisis hit the world, producing multi-faceted effects. Europe and certain other parts of the world saw a migration crisis of enormous proportions and profound implications between 2015 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> Today, COVID-19 confronts us with a crisis that is taking lives and jeopardising public health in the long run. It also is generating negative political and economic effects, influencing the psychological condition of individuals, groups and society while also changing the social discourse, limiting human rights, impacting our art, culture, education and sport, and having a great bearing on human relationships.

The mentioned threats are therefore universal, cutting across physical, time and social boundaries and requiring a common response from countries, international organisations and institutions, and non-governmental organisations. Yet, some years before the COVID-19 crisis we could witness the re-nationalisation of various policies globally and regionally, causing the erosion of the global and regional instruments for responding to crises. The World Health Organisation would no doubt say it has been under considerable political pressure during the crisis.

The article addresses these and other paradoxes of the COVID-19 crisis and the responses to it. The analysis of literature aimed to help consider the role of paradox in organisational theory, and to provide a basis for understanding COVID-19-related paradoxes as revealed by recent research around the world. A scoping study of the thus far limited sources was undertaken to achieve this. The observation method was used to explore instances of paradox as seen in Slovenia during the response to COVID-19: Best (1<sup>st</sup> wave) vs. worst (2<sup>nd</sup> wave) practices, measures vs. success, formal vs. improvised crisis management structure, complex crisis vs. state of epidemic, declared vs. actual behaviour, positive measures vs. side effects, trust vs. distrust, social and political culture vs. communication style, good intentions vs. bad outcomes, and focus on COVID-19 vs. neglect of other public health issues. In the conclusion, the comparative method is used to juxtapose global and national experiences as concerns the presence of paradox in the crisis response. The time period of the analysis is the beginning of March 2020 to the beginning of February 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> For more, see Malešič (2017).

## 2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Paradox may be briefly defined as a situation that is difficult or impossible to understand because it contains two contradictory facts or characteristics. Or, according to Lewis (2000, 760), “the notion of paradox can be defined as contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously”. The concept of paradox is associated with terms like contradiction, irony, inconsistency and oxymoron.

Smith et al. (2017) traced the appearance of paradoxical thinking in organisational theory back to the start of the 1980s. Initial studies revealed the notion of organisational effectiveness was inherently paradoxical. Since then, other issues have been explored: how to master the paradoxes and competing demands of organisations, the role of organisational paradox in theory and practice, the paradox of change, attraction and co-evolution, the transformation of paradoxes, paradoxical interventions in social work etc. Recently, several organisational phenomena related to paradox have been explored: the tensions of exploration and exploitation, competing identities and hybrid organisations, along with the dichotomies of stability and change, and control and collaboration.<sup>3</sup>

Guilmot and Ehnert (2017, 1–3) also conducted a scoping study of literature on paradox and phenomena linked to contradictory tensions. Paradox is relevant for managers seeking to solve tensions in organisations with a view to reconciling two or more contradictory, interrelated and co-existing oppositions. Guilmot and Ehnert (2017, 21) believe paradox is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in organisations. Paradox as a lens has been used in research into various organisational phenomena like identity, innovation, change process, governance and leadership. Organisational paradoxes have been classified as learning (stability vs. change), organising (collaboration vs. control), performing (financial vs. social goals) and belonging tensions (individual vs. collective), and been explored on the levels of the individual, dyad, group, project and organisation.

Lewis and Smith (2014, 1) note “organisations are rife with tensions, ranging from flexibility vs. control, through exploration vs. exploitation, autocracy vs. democracy, social vs. financial to global vs. local”. The research of paradox makes ever more sense due to the complexity, change and ambiguity found in management processes. That is, a paradox perspective imposes profound changes in organisational theory’s main assumptions (ibid., 23): Traditional theory relies on rational, logical and linear approaches, whereas a paradox perspective emerges from surprising, counterintuitive and tense ones; traditional theory tries to uncover truth, the paradox perspective assumes that understandings emerge over time, “created from the juxtaposition of opposing forces and focused via actors’ cognitions and social constructions” (ibid.).

Smith and Tracy (2016, 1) believe that “organizational success increasingly depends on leaders’ ability to address competing demands simultaneously”. Competing demands are related to tensions between profit and purpose, today and tomorrow, short and long term, and global and local. Theoreticians have

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<sup>3</sup> Smith and Lewis (2011, 382) analysed 12 management journals for the period 1989–2008 and found 360 articles focused on the organisational paradox.

studied this issue from institutional theory and paradox theory angles. The former stress the contradictory and oppositional nature of competing demands, whereas the latter sees them as inherent to organisational systems. Paradoxes are contradictory, interrelated and persistent, “demanding strategies for engaging and accommodating tensions but not resolving them”.

Waldman et al. (2019, 1) established that “most of the theorising and research on paradoxes had occurred on the organisational level”, yet they also propose to take account of the individual and team levels of analysis. Therefore, they emphasise “multiple levels of analysis” (ibid.) and the application of various methods, including surveys, experiments and qualitative discourse methods.

Pina e Cunha and Putnam (2019) introduced the phenomenon known as “the paradox of success”, also called “the Icarus paradox” or “the paradox of performance”. Success contributes to persistence in use of the same strategies, overlooking other options. Success leads to convergence, which lowers awareness of the important power held by divergence. In other words, a strong performance promotes a defensive mind-set that may produce dysfunctional outcomes. “Thus, the same practices that lead organizations to becoming successful often simultaneously push them to downfall” (Elsass 1993; quoted by Pina e Cunha and Putnam 2019, 96). This phenomenon might lead organisations towards narrowness and self-complacency.

Pina e Cunha and Putnam (2019, 102–103) think that research on paradox has developed into “an exciting, vigorous, and vibrant area in strategic management and organization theory”. Paradox theory suggests that defensiveness and inertia can arise from the ways actors in organisations manage various paradoxical tensions. The latter “provoke questions and confusion, encouraging both scholars and practitioners to pause and reflect” (Andriopulous 2014; quoted by Pina e Cunha and Putnam 2019, 103). Paradox theory is a crossroads at which the institutionalising of existing knowledge and exploring of new terrains meet. Theoreticians should not strictly follow one approach or another, but benefit from both, searching for synergy between the known and unknown.

Smith and Lewis (2011, 381 and 398) noted that organisational environments are becoming more global, dynamic, innovative and hyper-competitive, bringing with them contradictory and intensified demands that organisations must also resolve. Paradox is becoming a critical theoretical lens for understanding and to lead contemporary organisations. Similarly, Smith et al. (2017) believe the recent emphasis on paradoxical thinking in understanding organisational phenomena is due to two trends: 1) the increasingly complex world we live in characterised by uncertainty, change and ambiguity; and 2) the existing frameworks of theoretical thinking have reached their limits. Also important is that we are ever more confronted with questions of extremes (can too much of a good thing be bad?) and boundary conditions (when does which is true become false?).

The COVID-19 virus and subsequent crisis are definitely significantly exacerbating such trends and require that paradoxes at a global and national levels be revealed as part of the response to it.

### 3 A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON PARADOX RELATED TO COVID-19 ON THE GLOBAL LEVEL

Although the COVID-19 crisis is still underway and seems that it will have lasting consequences for human life over the decade to come, some researchers have already started exploring several paradoxes that have accompanied this period in time.

Messinger and Crandall (2020, 679) saw a paradox in respecting the precautions early on in the crisis: If social distancing was working, the spread of virus had slowed and hospital capacities had not been exceeded, some people began to claim the measures were unnecessary and demanded a return to normalcy. As we can see at the beginning of 2021, the 'flattening of the curve' of the disease during summer 2020 should not mean doing away with the protective measures. However, the authorities in many countries relaxed them, with the outcome being a serious second wave of the virus' spread that is even more intensive and devastating than the first, at least in most countries.

Banerjee (2020, 1) brought a paradox of control into the discussion. China's initial steps to curb the virus by imposing a lockdown were seen in the West as harsh, extreme and severe, but also controversial, unconstitutional in a democracy, and authoritarian. Yet, several months later, the majority of Western countries were acting similarly.<sup>4</sup> In some countries, lockdown is merely an illusion of control emanating from the intolerance of uncertainty or alternative views (ibid., 2). Measures based on computer simulations or models have led to a lot of collateral damage. Millions of people have lost their livelihoods and those with other diseases have not received treatment at the right time due to the dominant focus on COVID-19.

Official messages should calm people, yet the inconsistent communication of the role of social distancing, the effectiveness of masks, reliability of testing, tracing and isolation etc., have often stirred panic or at least confusion, also undermining public trust (Banerjee 2020, 1). Another paradox is that individuals using social media, without holding any medical training, knowledge and experience, have had a considerable influence on people's behaviour, often successfully countering the statements given by professionals based on science and data (Messinger and Crandall 2020, 679).

Danchin et al. (2020) considered the paradox of the pandemic in international law. The pandemic paradox lies in the fact that COVID-19 "has exposed the inherent logic and necessity of an effective international legal order at a moment when ideas of supranational organization and post-national sovereignty are increasingly resisted" (ibid., 3). Reasons for this are complex, but include the populist movements of various kinds we have recently observed in some countries (e.g. the USA, Brazil, Philippines, Hungary, Poland...).

The pandemic has created three key paradoxes relevant to the international legal order (ibid., 4-5). The patriotism paradox: in the name of people, populist governments wish to strengthen their national sovereignty by disengaging from international organisations, treaties and regimes. In times of COVID-19, the withdrawal of states from regimes of sovereign cooperation (e.g. the United Nations Security Council, World Health Organisation, European Union) even

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Italy was the first Western country to introduce a country-wide lockdown.

more diminishes their sovereign capacity and interests. The border paradox: the suspension or limitation of international travel and trade by states (e.g. the USA) has accentuated rather than stemmed the virus' global spread. Such an approach cannot be effective without ensuring the simultaneous implementation on a global scale of protocols related to testing, contact tracing and quarantining, as recommended by the WHO. The equality paradox: COVID-19 poses an equally lethal threat to all people and societies, yet its impact is felt unevenly since the capacities to control/limit the virus vary from one state to another. We are again witness to discrimination and injustice and therefore the international protection of human rights is needed.

Krastev (2020) identified several paradoxes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. He states COVID-19 exposes the dark side of globalisation yet also acts as an agent of globalisation. The next paradox is that the virus is accelerating de-globalisation but also exposing the limits of renationalisation. The virus is global and reveals our interdependence, meaning international cooperation is key to resolving virus-related problems. Another paradox reflects the fact that in the early stages the virus inspired national unity, but as it has gone on it has deepened the existing social and political divides. One more paradox is that the virus has put democracy on hold in many countries, but people are less willing to accept authoritarian regimes. As far as the EU is concerned, at the start of the crisis citizens' enthusiasm for the EU dropped, yet the virus is forcing governments to realise their dependence on common action within the EU. The closure of EU member states' borders has made us more European and even more cosmopolitan than ever: We are living in the same world with the same fears, concerns and discourses.

Fischetti (2020) detected several paradoxes in areas like economic inequality, impact on women, schooling from home, health and well-being, and social change: some people are earning more than ever before, others are on the brink; women are affected because they represent the backbone of the emergency response system, they are also burdened by responsibilities at home and sometimes subjected to domestic violence; family time that schooling from home provided was not always used to benefit the entire family; alcohol consumption has increased, while mental health challenges are now bigger than ever in some societies.

Bradbury-Jones and Isham (2020) warned about the paradox the pandemic is bringing into our homes. Home should be a safe place; however people's lives have been drastically altered, in turn leading to multiple new stresses, including physical and psychological health risks, isolation and loneliness, the closure of schools and businesses, economic vulnerability and the loss of jobs. The risk of domestic violence has increased along with that and its "rates are rising, and they are rising fast".

Boudry (2020) discussed one strange paradox in the pandemic: the better we manage to contain the crisis, the less we will learn from it. He criticises the 'experts' who did not accept the protective measures and asserted that panic is more dangerous than the virus itself. Although our current invisible enemy has several dangerous features: high transmissibility, long incubation time, asymptomatic spread, and relatively high mortality rates, to mention a few. It is clear that without the measures the numbers of dead would be even more catastrophic as would be the collateral damage of the virus. Another paradox is that those who underestimated the virus and criticised the measures, later on

concluded that the predictions of the majority of scientists were wrong, while overlooking that those very measures did help reduce the figures for infected, hospitalised and dead people.

#### 4 PARADOXES OF THE CRISIS (RESPONSE) IN SLOVENIA

The first case of COVID-19 virus infection in Slovenia was detected on 3 March 2020 and confirmed the next day. Nine days later, an epidemic was declared by the government. Interestingly, on the very same day there was a change of government: the centre-left coalition government was replaced by a centre-right one. The end of the first wave of the epidemic and the end of the state of epidemic was officially declared on 31 May 2020. Still, during summer and early autumn the virus-related health situation in the country deteriorated dramatically, forcing the government to again declare a state of epidemic on 19 October 2020. This second wave of the epidemic is still underway at the beginning of February 2021. On 13 March 2020, Slovenia registered 52 new cases of virus infection, whereas on 31 May there were no new cases. The highest daily number of cases in that time period was 70. On 19 October, there were 537 new cases, while on 31 January 2021 the number was very similar (596 cases). However, the highest number of daily infected people during this period was 3,354. The total number of newly infected people in the last week of January (25 to 31) was 8,643, meaning a daily average in that week of 1,235<sup>5</sup> (the author's calculations based on Johns Hopkins University statistics).

The first death due to the virus was registered on 14 March 2020. In the first wave of epidemic, there were a little over 100 deaths in total, whereas in the second wave (until 31 January 2021) of the epidemic more than 3,400 deaths were recorded. The peak of the first wave was 6 deaths on 5 April 2020, with the peak of the second wave of 66 deaths coming on 8 December 2020. The total official number of all infected on 6 February 2021 was around 168,000, whereas more than 3,500 people had died (the author's calculations based on Johns Hopkins University statistics). Unofficial estimates made by epidemiological experts suggest around 600,000 people have been infected in Slovenia, or almost 30 per cent of the population.

A huge paradox is revealed by the above figures. Namely, in the epidemic's first wave Slovenia was one of the most effective countries in the world in fighting the virus, but data for the second wave show Slovenia was one of the least successful countries, especially in the number of deaths per million inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> Such negative trends in development of disease and its consequences occurred due to the government's significant relaxation of the measures and the relaxed behaviour of the population. Many people spent their summer holidays in a foreign country, especially in Croatia where the epidemiological situation was then worse than in Slovenia and the adopted measures were not as tight or strict. The importing of the virus from Croatia and certain other countries was confirmed, with the government eventually deciding to close the border with Croatia as late as 20 August 2020. When people came back to work and children

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<sup>5</sup> Slovenia had a population of 2,111,461 on 1 October 2020 (Statistical Office of Slovenia 2020).

<sup>6</sup> According to Worldometer Statistics, only Belgium and San Marino have had a worse record than Slovenia. The explanation given by a top Slovenian epidemiologist was that the health authorities strictly followed the WHO's guidelines that required states to register all patients who had died with the COVID-19 virus, regardless other potential causes of death, including those who had the virus and died up to one month after they had fully recovered from it (Logar 2020).

returned to kindergartens, primary schools and high schools, the virus once again started to spread intensively.

After a few weeks, kindergartens (with some exceptions), schools and universities were closed, and education shifted over to various online options. Several other harsh measures were adopted in October 2020 – wearing masks outside, time limitations on restaurants and bars, the gathering of groups of people was limited, public services were restricted etc. – but the figures were still rising. That was followed by the suspension of public transport, gatherings of people outside, retail shops which were not essential were closed, travelling from one municipality to another was forbidden (with some exceptions), and for the first time since WW II a curfew was imposed on the citizens (Cerar 2020). Again, there were no positive results and in early February 2021 the situation remained very similar.

Let us check in detail the Slovenian authorities' crisis response to the above situation. As a consequence of the vast efforts of social scientists, state officials and certain politicians, Slovenia has managed to develop quite a decent (certainly not perfect) crisis management model that defines the roles of individual actors, making them more resilient and enabling them to coordinate their activities. We now consider the legal aspects of these efforts.

Article 20 of the Government Act of the Republic of Slovenia stipulates that government has its own National Security Council (NSC). It serves as a consultative and coordinating body in the fields of defence, security system, disaster protection and relief system, and for other national security issues. The NSC is supported by a Secretariat responsible for the operational coordination of the implementation of the NSC's standpoints. In a complex crisis,<sup>7</sup> the government might make a decision by which the NSC Secretariat takes over the task of coordinating the response to it, as provided by the ministries, government services and national security subsystems. The Secretariat might also propose measures in reaction to a complex crisis. An Operational Group works within the Secretariat that is responsible for ensuring analytical and professional (expertise) support to the Secretariat, and preparing situation analyses in various fields of national security.

A National Crisis Management Centre (NCMC) is also established at the Ministry of Defence to provide the spatial, technical, informational and tele-communicational conditions for the government to function in a complex crisis and in the event of other threats to national security. The NCMC prepares regular reports on the national security situation for the NSC Secretariat and its Operational Group. Part of the NCMC is the Inter-Ministerial Analytical Group responsible for providing analytical and professional (expertise) support – it monitors and assesses the security situation and the course of events.

The Decree on the National Security Council and the Ordinance on Crisis Management and the National Crisis Management Centre elaborate the structure, tasks, leadership and functioning of the above-mentioned bodies. The decision to

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<sup>7</sup> "Complex crisis is a phenomenon, event or situation of a severe threat to basic social values..., and the related uncertainty and limited response time that exceeds the response capacities of individual ministries, governmental services and national security sub-systems" (Government Act of RS 2017).

declare a complex crisis and perform crisis management<sup>8</sup> is made by the government upon the proposal of the minister in charge of the specific crisis.

A huge paradox is that the government – despite the Ministry of Health being overwhelmed by the virus – did not declare a “complex crisis” that would have triggered a more comprehensive approach to the crisis response, while also ignoring the previously mentioned crisis management structure.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the government declared “a state of epidemic” and formed its own “Crisis Staff”, a body that operated for less than a fortnight before being dismantled due to its questionable legal basis and functional value. No doubt, the government should have followed the official crisis management procedure and structure that would have allowed for the creation of a functional module, adequately and optimally adapted to the nature, scope and intensity of the COVID-19 crisis. It is difficult to estimate the probability that some of the mistakes observed in the government’s response to the crisis emanated from this initial failure.

As mentioned, a new government came into power on the very first day of the epidemic being declared. This change triggered a significant ideological and political shift in Slovenian politics. The new government of course made many personnel changes in the ministries, but many changes were also made in the institutions that should be professional and never political (police, National Investigation Bureau, National Institute of Public Health, Statistical Office etc.).<sup>10</sup> The government also intervened in the judicial system, understood as an attack on the independence of the judicial branch of power. Attempts to influence public radio and television, the Slovenian Press Agency and certain other media outlets, and to pressure individual editors and journalists were seen as well.<sup>11</sup> Conflicts between the government and parts of civil society, including art groups and individuals as well as public universities were quite frequent. In the realm of international relations, the new government expressed some sympathy for the authoritarian politics in Hungary and Poland and their protagonists, and for the policy of former American President Donald Trump, even when the whole democratic world had recognised that Joseph Biden had won the elections.<sup>12</sup> These authoritarian inclinations were noticed in international media and politics.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Crisis management is defined as “organisation and measures to provide an effective complex crisis response” (ibid.).

<sup>9</sup> It is also true that previous government did not upgrade that structure with adequate crisis management plans.

<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, this was a pattern used to a certain degree by previous governments, as well.

<sup>11</sup> Vice-president of the European Commission Vera Jourova suggested to the Slovenian government on 23 July 2020 that it re-think its amendments to the Media Act and to cease the attacks on some journalists (STA 2020a). On 16 October 2020, the European Federation of Journalists reacted to tweets by Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša about the media by issuing a warning: This demonisation of public media and journalism must stop (STA 2020b).

<sup>12</sup> Janša wrote a tweet in support of Trump immediately after the US presidential election, claiming Trump had won and, according to Janša, the mainstream media had been trying to deny this. In contrast, Janša waited to congratulate Biden until he was sworn in as the new president.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, The New York Times (2021) called Janša a “right-wing populist” who had quickly endorsed Trump’s lie about his election victory. Le Monde (2021) reported that Janša had congratulated Trump for his victory and broken the principle of European unity. The newspaper asked whether one can ignore deviations from democracy in some EU countries? Politico.eu (2021) also described Janša as a “right-wing populist” and a close ally of Viktor Orban, while reporting that some EU officials had expressed concern about the direction of Slovenian politics given that Slovenia is to assume the Presidency of the Council of the EU on 1 July 2021. According to Politico.eu, Foreign Minister Anže Logar reassured them that Slovenia would be neutral in the EU–Hungary dispute and seek political continuity within the presidency trio (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia).

We see a paradox in the fact the government should be investing all of its energy and time to overcome the negative COVID-19 related trends instead of using the tough epidemiological situation to address issues not directly related to it. Too much political and media energy has been devoted to the mentioned topics. In these circumstances, it has been very difficult to nurture trust and to form the broad coalition needed to fight the virus and its consequences. It is reasonable to ask to what extent the digression from the core tasks led to the failure in the fight against virus described above. The fact is that government was unprepared for wave 2 of the epidemic, did not adequately analyse where and why the virus' spread was greatest, while the measures it adopted were often confused, even controversial.

We identify another paradox in the government knowing about the longitudinal public opinion trends as revealed in surveys as well as the public's everyday behaviour and reactions to the different political and social phenomena, while its communication strategy has not been adapted to these trends, or social and political culture in general. The broad public and especially specific social groups have deserved more empathic communication. The public's rejection of the authoritarian, paternalistic communication based on orders and lacking in thorough explanations has been evident. Mixed with increasing restrictions placed on personal freedom this communication style has in some cases seen the public feeling humiliation, helplessness and a lack of control over their own lives (Ferlin, Malešič and Vuga 2021). The rules of crisis communication such as openness, objectivity, credibility, timeliness, proactivity, accuracy, empathy, consistency etc. have been neglected in several cases of government representatives addressing the public.

The start of February 2021 saw a unique paradoxical decision made by the Government Communication Office. In an evening television broadcast, the head of the Office decided to forbid certain ministers, other governmental employees and National Institute of Health experts from explaining details of the government policy on the fight against the virus. The press conferences held every morning at 11.00 were said to be sufficient. Still, the government adopts measures or relaxes them in the afternoon/evening as well, meaning it makes sense to explain the measures to the public throughout the day.<sup>14</sup> The motto of crisis communication 'tell it all and tell it quickly' was thereby completely ignored by the government and the Government Communication Office.

The public's diminishing trust in government has likely contributed to the failure to manage the crisis. This concerns the "risk perception paradox" (Wachinger et al. 2013) that claims a perception of high risk should lead to better personal preparedness and hence to behaviour that seeks to reduce that risk. However, this does not always occur in practice with even the opposite sometimes happening. The Slovenian case is a good example of this paradox: Despite extremely high figures for daily virus infections, hospitalised patients and deaths since October 2020, people have not respected all of the measures adopted fully and consistently.

Let us consider a few other paradoxes in the crisis response. The authorities expect the citizens to engage in protective behaviour like wearing masks while on the other hand some representatives of the authorities have ignored this

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<sup>14</sup> The International Press Institute (2021) suggested that the Government Communication Office immediately reconsider its policy and allow government representatives to once again appear in the media.

measure: the President, the Minister of the Interior and their teams visited the region close to the Croatian border and as a rule did not wear masks; some ministers were mask-less while speaking in Parliament; and the director of the National Institute of Health did not use a mask while paying for petrol at a service station. Breaches of the “stay within your own municipality” rule have also been identified. The paradox here: do what I say, not what I do.

It is also a paradox that the government closed the kindergartens, schools and other educational institutions before it closed the hotels. It was very annoying and frustrating for children/young people and their parents to find educational institutions closed from November 2020 until the end of January 2021 when the government very selectively and only gradually started to reopen the kindergartens and primary schools. With certain safety measures in place, only kindergarten children and pupils in grades 1–3 were allowed to return, and only in regions with an acceptable level of virus infection. This caused great dissatisfaction among children and their parents in certain regions, with public protests starting in several Slovenian cities. This brings us to another paradox: children, who in normal circumstances tend not to like to go to school, protesting to ensure they learn better (online schooling was seen as not the same) and can socialise with their schoolmates. In addition, some children started to ‘hate’ the computer, a tool previously fetishized considerably by them before the crisis – another paradox.

In late spring 2020, the government decided to distribute vouchers (EUR 200 for adults and EUR 50 for children) among the Slovenian population to stimulate the tourist industry. The result was mass gatherings of people in the tourist regions of Slovenia, especially on the coast, by lakes, rivers and in spa centres, adding to the risk of the virus’ spread. The paradox here: the good economic intentions of the government to support tourism and citizens helped exacerbate the COVID-19 situation in the autumn months.

Particular civil society groups organised demonstrations in the capital city Ljubljana and in other cities across the country to protest against the government measures and to fight for human freedoms and rights. Ljubljana was witness to cyclist-protesters, mass gatherings to launch art installations, parents and children protested against the lockdown of schools etc., and believing the said measures were too harsh. The paradox is that mass gatherings, especially when protective measures were not fully respected, potentially exposed people to virus infection, in turn possibly requiring new (even harsher) measures or the prolongation of the existing ones.

One tremendous paradox seems to be that the fight against the COVID-19 virus (whether successful or not) has absorbed vast medical capacities by way of hospitals, medical equipment and personnel. The data suggest the country’s medical capacities have been critically stretched for several months in a row. On the other hand, there has been a lack of medical capacities to deal with other diseases. Huge swathes of medical and dental services have been cancelled, with only a few (such as oncology and paediatrics) still functioning. The overall impact of all this will cause medical problems among the population for years to come, especially the totally neglect of prevention activities. The figures showing newly diagnosed cancer diseases seem to be much lower than before the COVID-19 crisis, not due to less cancer but the drastically lower number of medical checks performed on the primary level.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis has forced national and international actors to master the various paradoxes and competing demands that have surfaced, while also meeting the need to reconcile many contradictory, interrelated and co-existing oppositions at once. For instance, it has not been easy to reconcile public health needs associated with COVID-19 by providing economic, financial, welfare goods and services, schooling, transport, while also supporting the health needs of the population not related to COVID-19. The response of actors to the crisis is to try to find a balance between autocracy and democracy, coercion and willingness, control and flexibility. Many measures have been judged as autocratically and drastically intervening in human rights and freedoms, bypassing the traditional division of power, and ignoring formal crisis response procedures.

On the global level, the uncertainty, change and ambiguity have created several paradoxes: the virus can be successfully curbed with intensive international cooperation through global and regional institutions, but they were already weakened before the crisis and during it by the nationalistic and populist politics in some countries. Nevertheless, as the crisis developed, awareness of the pivotal role of international cooperation gained momentum. The virus seems to have cut across various global inequalities, yet its impact is felt unevenly as the capacities of countries to fight the virus vary. This is obvious in the areas of medical capacities, expertise and vaccine distribution, to mention only a few. The virus has also added to economic, gender and generation inequality. Last but not least, home, which should provide a safe haven, has become a place of domestic violence for (too) many people, including children.

A major paradox of the COVID-19 response in Slovenia is that the country was among the most effective to deal with virus in the first wave and one of the least successful countries in the second wave. The “paradox of success” and “risk perception paradox” were particularly on display. Further, the government already had in place a pre-prepared procedure and structure to respond to a complex crisis, but it chose to improvise, on a questionable legal basis. The government ought to deal primarily, if not exclusively, with virus and related problems, yet it found time and energy to deal with counterproductive ideological topics, personnel policy, apply pressure to the media and engage in conflicts with parts of civil society. Very harsh measures to curb the virus’ spread have been introduced, but their results are hard to see. Citizens have been expected to respect the measures while some representatives of the authorities which introduced these measures have ignored them. The content, timing and geography of introducing the measures has also created paradoxes. The inconsistent, sometimes confused and paternalistic communication with the public has been out of step with the prevailing political culture of the citizens and their needs in the crisis. Members of civil society have protested against the harsh measures, yet paradoxically their attendance at mass gatherings could worsen the situation and see the imposition of even harsher measures.

The analysis reveals several paradoxes in the COVID-19 response on the global and national levels, and hopefully we will be able to avoid another one in the future. Namely, the crisis offers many lessons and it would be another great paradox to not document, analyse and insert them in our future response to complex crises.

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## GLOBALNI IN NACIONALNI PARADOKSI V ODZIVIH NA KRIZO COVID-19

*Kriza, ki jo je povzročil virus COVID-19 in odziv nanjo sta pripeljala do številnih paradoksov in z njimi povezanega vedenja. Avtor ob opori na teorijo paradoksa najprej naniza nekaj primerov, ki so bili prepoznani na globalni ravni, v nadaljevanju pa se osredotoči na Slovenijo. Ta je bila ena najuspešnejših držav pri spoprijemanju z virusom COVID-19 v prvem valu epidemije in ena najmanj uspešnih v drugem valu. Vlada je ignorirala strukturo upravljanja, ki je bila nedavno vzpostavljena za odziv na kompleksne krize in je raje improvizirala. Kljub strogim protivirusnim ukrepom uvedenim v drugem valu, pozitivnih učinkov ni bilo še več mesecev po njihovi uvedbi. Medtem ko so oblasti od državljanek in državljanov pričakovale spoštovanje ukrepov, so jih določeni predstavniki oblasti občasno kršili. Namesto, da bi se vlada ukvarjala izključno z virusom, je odpirala nekatera občutljiva ideološka vprašanja in sprožala konflikte, pri čemer je izgubljala dragocen čas in energijo. Navkljub obstoju načrtov, smo v vladnem naslavljanju javnosti pogrešali upoštevanje temeljnih načel kriznega komuniciranja. Protesti civilne družbe proti strogim vladnim ukrepom so omogočali širitev okužbe in posledično uvajanje še strožjih ukrepov. Boj proti virusu je zahteval izjemne*

*zdravstvene zmogljivosti, kar je hkrati pomenilo zanemarjanje drugih bolezni, ki bodo imele dolgoročen negativen vpliv na javno zdravje.*

**Ključne besede:** COVID-19; kriza; krizni odziv; paradoks; Slovenija.