

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-534-1-103>

**THE LEGAL AND POLITICAL STATUS OF CRISIS STAFFS  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
A REGIONAL CASE STUDY<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction - Establishment of the Crisis Staff**

The activities and functioning of Crisis Staffs were tested by the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis Staffs had to respond to such a large-scale pandemic, which had not appeared in the Slovak Republic for decades. It was in the work of the Crisis Staffs that the degree of their preparedness as well as the determination of their members to take important, albeit often unpopular, measures became apparent. Specific regulations were supposed to be taken primarily by Crisis Staffs at district level, where special departments focused on crisis management operate. Unfortunately, it is the district level Crisis Staffs who have most often failed and their role has been replaced by Crisis Staffs at the municipal level, which, however, do not have the necessary competences and decision-making powers. This issue has been addressed by inviting the Heads of District Offices to the municipal Crisis Staff meetings, which has given them the necessary legitimacy. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus posed problems for the management of crisis processes at both municipal and district level from the outset. This situation also occurred in the Považská Bystrica District. Although crisis management falls within the competence of the District Office, it did not convene a Crisis Staff.

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<sup>1</sup> The study is based on the model case of the District and the Town of Považská Bystrica. The Považská Bystrica District covers not only the Town of Považská Bystrica but also 26 other smaller municipalities. The District Office is the highest local authority of state administration. It is managed by the Head of District Office, who is appointed to the post of the Head of District Office by the Government of the Slovak Republic on the proposal of the Minister of Interior. Municipalities cover local self-government functions. They are headed by a Mayor who is directly elected by the inhabitants of the municipality.

Subsequently the Town of Považská Bystrica responded. The Mayor of the Town took advantage of the legislation in force, which allowed him to establish a Crisis Staff and thus he convened the Crisis Staff of the Town [1]. The role of the Town Crisis Staff of Považská Bystrica was to ensure operative, professional and flexible adoption of measures to deal with the crisis situation and to coordinate the activities of organisations within the scope of the Town of Považská Bystrica. According to the legislation in force, the Crisis Staff of the Town was the executive body of the crisis management authority. The scope of the Crisis Staff's competence, under the applicable legislation, encompassed the management and execution of tasks related to internal security, defense, and protection, as well as the resolution of crisis situations within the territorial jurisdiction of the Town of Považská Bystrica, which were intended to affect the Town's population and necessitated the prompt and flexible adoption of measures aimed at eliminating the consequences of the crisis situation. Since its convocation, the Town Crisis Staff became a permanent advisory body of the Mayor of the Town, whose task was to analyse on a daily basis the risks of the crisis situation, to propose measures to resolve it and to coordinate the activities of the entities within its authority in the period of the crisis situation [2].

#### Statute and Composition of the Crisis Staff

The Crisis Staff of the Town of Považská Bystrica operated in accordance with the Statute of the Crisis Staff. The composition of the Crisis Staff corresponded to the crisis situation. The Mayor of the Town became the Chairman of the Crisis Staff. The first Deputy Mayor of the Town was appointed as Vice-chairman of the Crisis Staff. The members of the Crisis Staff were the second Deputy Mayor of the Town, the Head of the Municipal Office, the Director of the local hospital with a polyclinic in Považská Bystrica and the crisis management officer of the Municipal Office. The position of a member of the Crisis Staff was created by a special decree of appointment. The number of members of the Crisis Staff has not been definitively closed. If required, the Mayor had the authority, in accordance with the Statute, to expand the Crisis Staff with additional members, which was enacted in response to the deteriorating health situation. The Mayor regularly exercised this provision, inviting members of the Municipal Assembly, who were also members of the Municipal Council Board of the Town of Považská Bystrica, to participate in the Crisis Staff. This enhanced the legitimacy of the measures adopted. As a result, the Crisis Staff of the Town of Považská Bystrica convened concurrently with the Municipal Council Board of Považská Bystrica, ensuring that the decisions of the Crisis Staff were simultaneously recognized as decisions of the Municipal Council

Board. The flexibility and coordination of the Crisis Staff and the Municipal Council Board was also enhanced by the fact that the two Deputy Mayors and the Hospital Director were all permanent members of the Crisis Staff. All three of them were also members of the Municipal Council Board, which has eight members and similarly to the Crisis Staff is chaired by the Mayor. The interconnection of the Crisis Staff and the Municipal Council Board allowed for flexible management, as the conclusions of the Town Crisis Staff were immediately put into practice by the Municipal Council Board through its resolutions [3].

In response to the worsening health situation, the Head of the Regional Public Health Office of Považská Bystrica, who performed the function of regional hygienist, was also invited to meetings of the Crisis Staff of the Town of Považská Bystrica. Her participation was very important to the operating of the Crisis Staff, as she kept the members informed at the meetings of the latest actions being taken at the national level and guided the Crisis Staff's work to ensure that its conclusions and the Municipal Council Board's resolutions were in compliance with the regulations of the Public Health Authority of the Slovak republic. She also made suggestions for regional solutions of the situation. Over time, she became a permanent member of the Crisis Staff and was invited to all of its meetings during the period of its functioning. Representatives of the largest churches operating in the Town were invited to the Crisis Staff meetings. The Dean of the Roman Catholic parish office in Považská Bystrica and the pastor of the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession were invited due to the adoption of measures that restricted the holding of worship services, thereby necessitating an explanation of the situation to the faithful. During the decision-making process regarding the closure of schools within the Town's territorial jurisdiction, the Head of the Department of Education and Social Affairs of the Municipal Office in Považská Bystrica was present. As instances of non-compliance with the adopted measures emerged, the chief of the Municipal Police also became a member of the Crisis Staff. The measures imposing restrictions on municipal public transportation were executed by the representative of Municipal transportation company of Považská Bystrica, while the administrative operations related to the functioning of the Crisis Staff were overseen by the Head of the Mayor's Office Department [4].

#### First and decisive measures

As the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, it was necessary to adopt regulations that went beyond the functioning of public administration and also affected the private and business sectors. Therefore, the Vice Chairman of the Board of the Regional Chamber of the Slovak Chamber of Commerce

and Industry, who was also a member of the Council for Economic and Social Development of the Town and the Head of the District Office of Považská Bystrica, was invited to the meetings of the Crisis Staff. The participation of the Head of the District Office was specific, as he was the one with direct and legislatively defined responsibility for crisis management at the regional level. However, he respected the functioning of the Town Crisis Staff and regularly participated and attended its meetings. Initially, he did not convene the Crisis Staff at the district and regional levels and measures adopted by the Town Crisis Staff were also implemented into the decisions of the District Office. Although the solution given was non-standard, it turned out to be the right approach. The municipal office, as a local self-government body, was much more flexible in addressing the crisis situation and could take more prompt independent decisions. As a state administration body, the District Office was obliged to fully respect the decisions of higher authorities, which were often late and contradictory. The excellent cooperation at local level between the representatives of Municipal Office and District Office thus contributed to clear and credible information for residents, who gradually accepted the measures taken, which resulted in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic without any major problems [5].

The Town of Považská Bystrica did not intend to underestimate the situation caused by the spread of the coronavirus in Slovakia, but it also did not want to cause unnecessary panic among the residents, so it decided to take adequate measures. The purpose of the Crisis Staff meetings was to adopt measures and responsible decisions to prevent large numbers of people from gathering. Therefore, measures were taken that had a really significant impact on the lives of the residents of the region. Among the most important measures taken back in March 2020, the Crisis Staff issued decisions on the immediate ban on public events, on the obligation to quarantine and on the prohibition of visits to hospitals. An important piece of information that calmed public opinion was the announcement that the Hospital with Polyclinic in Považská Bystrica was in the state of operational readiness. Following the implemented measures, it met all the criteria established by the Chief Public Health Officer of the Slovak Republic and the Central Crisis Staff of the Slovak Republic. The hospital was prepared to be capable of complying with all epidemiological and hygiene measures in the event that persons with coronavirus were suspected to be present in the region. This can ensure that the coronavirus is not spread further, either to other patients or to hospital staff. It was also stated that up to the day of the Crisis Staff meeting, no person had tested positive for the virus causing COVID-19 in the region. In the event that positive cases of the virus were found, the hospital with a

polyclinic had sufficient protective equipment available. This was the case at the initial contact in the adult and paediatric primary care outpatient clinics, in the internal admission clinic, trauma clinic, etc. The regional hygienist from the Regional Public Health Office in Považská Bystrica also provided information to the Crisis Staff. She informed the members of the Crisis Staff about the current epidemiological situation in the Považská Bystrica District. She did not recommend closing schools for the moment. Nevertheless, she informed the members of the Crisis Staff that the Regional Public Health Office will accept the decision of the Town if it comes up with such a proactive measure. She considered it important to urge parents to keep children with suspected COVID-19 disease at home with their parents. She did not recommend that they stay with grandparents, who are the most high-risk group not only for COVID-19 but also for influenza and influenza-like illnesses. She emphasized the need to maintain personal hygiene. She considered it necessary to wash hands frequently and thoroughly, use disposable tissues, and avoid contact with eyes. She recommended limiting attendance at social, cultural sporting events, avoiding shopping malls and offices where there is a large accumulation of residents. Representatives of churches spoke in the discussion and demanded guidance on the upcoming worship services, as the Central Crisis Staff of the Slovak Republic has banned not only social, cultural and sporting events, but also worship services. The faithful were meeting together in churches for worship services, so the church also took a certain stance to prevent the spread of the virus. Churches were supposed to remain open for private prayers, but public worship services were cancelled. The fears of residents were also reflected in the fact that even on the last Sunday before the Crisis Staff meeting, fewer worshippers came to the worship service than usual. Those that did come, however, were very respectful and consistent in obeying the regulations. Prayer books were not left in the churches, the sanctuaries were empty and people respected the removal of the sign of peace [6].

Following the conclusion of the discussion, the Crisis Staff of the Town of Považská Bystrica adopted several resolutions and critical preventive restrictions to ensure the highest level of health protection for its residents against COVID-19, caused by the coronavirus. These actions were undertaken based on the information from the Central Crisis Staff of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic dated March 8, 2020, and Decision No. OLP/2405/84443 mandating measures in response to public health threats, issued by the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic dated March 9, 2020. In consideration of the situation at that time, the Town considered the most important of the preventive measures to be the

suspension of the educational process in primary schools, kindergartens and nurseries under the founding authority of the Town, as well as the closure of the leisure centre and sports grounds - the indoor swimming pool, the winter stadium and the sports hall for public events. The Crisis Staff also decided to suspend the distribution of meals to outside caterers in school canteens and facilities for the elderly under the founding authority of the Town. and not to provide the premises for public events to third parties. At the same time, it was decided to increase the disinfection of contact surfaces on the premises of municipal organisations. Upcoming social events and events in the Town were cancelled with immediate effect. The Town also closed the indoor swimming pool on its own initiative until further notice, public skating was cancelled and public events were banned at all Town sports grounds [7].

The problem was that the Town was not entitled to mandate the shutdown of facilities and the cancellation of activities in relation to third parties, i.e. other than municipal organisations. However, in order to effectively prevent the spread of the coronavirus, restrictions on other establishments and compliance with the measures ordered by the competent authorities also appeared necessary. The Town could issue only an advisory opinion on these establishments. The Town Crisis Staff therefore advised all entities in the Town to follow the relevant regulation of the Slovak Public Health Office in the event of influenza-like symptoms (cough, muscle aches, weakness, fever). This meant not to visit medical facilities but to inform the crisis hotline about the situation. The residents were advised not to visit public offices and places with a potentially high concentration of visitors and they were advised to preferably use telephone, electronic or written communication when communicating with the authorities. The Crisis Staff also advised strict adherence to hygiene rules and quarantine measures to be observed by Town residents who have visited areas infected with the coronavirus in recent days. Founders of non-public nurseries, kindergartens, primary schools, and art schools were advised to temporarily suspend the educational process. A resolution of the Crisis Staff regarding these measures was subsequently adopted [8].

In order to ensure maximum protection of the health of the residents of Považská Bystrica against the disease COVID-19 caused by the coronavirus, the Crisis Staff of the Town of Považská Bystrica further recommended on the basis of the information from the Central Crisis Staff of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic dated March 8, 2020 and the Decision of the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic No. OLP/2405/84443 dated March 9, 2020 mandating measures in response to public health threats, the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic recommended the residents

of the Town of Považská Bystrica not to visit health care facilities in case of influenza-like symptoms (cough, muscle pain, weakness, fever), but to inform the crisis line 0800 221 234 about the situation [9].

#### Conclusion

The measures taken by the Crisis Staff had an immediate effect and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was eliminated in Považská Bystrica. The number of infected people did not increase and remained below the national average. The hospital, which has undergone gradual reprofiling to cope with a possible increase in the number of patients, also functioned excellently. Again with the generous help of the Town of Považská Bystrica and its Crisis Staff, which provided the hospital with the needed protective equipment, masks and, later, pulmonary ventilation. Regrettably, as the pandemic progressed, central authorities assumed increasingly extensive powers, whose frequently non-expert interventions and decisions, such as nationwide COVID-19 testing, significantly exacerbated the epidemiological situation. Their decisions often changed several times a day and caused chaos in the regulations. Nevertheless, the Crisis Staff of the Town of Považská Bystrica continued to operate with a high level of professionalism, convening at regular intervals and consistently providing residents with clear and credible instructions throughout the pandemic period. As a result, it earned respect and recognition not only within the Town but across the entire region.

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-534-1-104>

**DEVELOPMENT OF PARTY SYSTEMS IN THE VISEGRAD  
COUNTRIES OF EUROPE IN THE CONDITIONS  
OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSIT**

**РОЗВИТОК ПАРТІЙНИХ СИСТЕМ КРАЇН ВИШЕГРАДСЬКОЇ  
ЄВРОПИ В УМОВАХ ДЕМОКРАТИЧНОГО ТРАНЗИТУ**

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У відповідності до транзитологічної парадигми вагомий вплив на розвиток партійних систем мають такі особливості демократичного переходу: 1) початкова точка з якої відбувається рух до демократії; 2) результати «установчих» виборів; 3) моделі переходу від авторитарних режимів до демократії; 4) особливості демократичного транзитиву (вертикальна структура демократичного переходу) [1; 3; 6].

Однією з особливостей формування партійних систем країн Вишеградської групи було те, що перші політичні партії не відображали чинні соціально-політичні поділи, а поставали як універсальні / всеохоплюючі, оскільки намагалися представляти усі верстви суспільства. Опозиційні сили при цьому називали «форумами», «рухами», «фронтами»: «Громадянський форум» (Чехія), Угорський демократичний форум, «Солідарність» (Польща), «Громадськість проти насильства», «Громадянський демократичний союз» (Словаччина) [3].