

# Public leadership and strategies of Czech municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic – municipal activism vs municipal passivism

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper discusses the role of public leadership and the strategic response of local governments to the external shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors examine the typical Czech response with regard to how the leadership of municipalities in the Czech Republic responded to this extremely negative external stimulus.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors use qualitative research methods for this investigation. They have chosen the case study method (see Yin, 2009; Stake, 1995; Klonoski, 2013). The general case is the Czech Republic. Mini-cases consist of municipalities from the Znojmo region, municipalities of the Central Bohemian region and the municipal districts in the capital city of Prague. Furthermore, the method of participant observation was used.

**Findings** – The authors' analysis of the problem of local government responses to the pandemic crisis shows that municipal leaders responded with a variety of (non-)adaptation strategies. It appears that certain framework factors influenced the various local governments' behavior.

**Originality/value** – The article examines the strategic behavior of Czech municipal leaders regarding the pandemic crisis based on the observation of the reactions of local governments in the Czech Republic to the pandemic crisis and strives to define their basic strategies.

**Keywords** Leadership, COVID pandemic, Local government, Czech Republic

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

Mayors and governors play a strategic role during and in the immediate aftermath of crises and disasters (Yong *et al.*, 2016). Our article discusses the strategic response of local government leaders to the external shock resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia. Since public administration in Czechia is rather decentralized and fragmented (more than 6,200 municipalities exist, of which the majority have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants), the context can be considered to be highly dynamic; this calls for an approach to public leadership that would be similar to the definition of public leadership suggested by Hartley (2018) (as presented as follows).

In Czechia, the first top-down restrictive measures against COVID-19 were approved by the central government at the end of February 2020, but most measures that impacted municipalities more directly were implemented after the state of emergency was declared at 2 pm on 12 March. They included restrictions on citizens' rights (including bans on movement without covered mouths and noses), various restrictions on services (public and



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private), new duties imposed on regional and local governments and also economic measures (see, e.g. Špaček, 2020).

In this paper, we examine how the leaders of municipalities responded to this extremely negative external stimulus. Czechia can be considered an economically developed country, which still faces the negative legacy of the transition period in many areas. This is manifested mainly by an aversion to risk by the responsible politicians and bureaucrats, as well as the formally oriented performance of the public administration (Špaček, 2020, forthcoming). This administrative setting could imply a problem with attracting good leaders (Mau, 2019).

In this paper we ask the following two research questions:

- RQ1.* What are the framework conditions and factors influencing the response of local government leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ2.* How did the local governments respond strategically to the pandemic crisis and what kinds of strategies for dealing with COVID-19 were employed by the leaders of the Czech municipalities?

This viewpoint paper presents the case of a country that has been described as rather successful with regard to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Czech Republic ranks relatively low in the deaths per million people indicator, and it is given as an example of quick government reaction in the first phase of the pandemic. This paper discusses the key factors and strategies used and outlines the problems and conflicts that are also part of the Czech story. To the best of our knowledge, the majority of published papers related to the handling of this pandemic deal with the experience of western countries; the strategies and experiences of the postcommunist countries remain less explored.

### Theoretical framework

Hattke and Hattke (2019) generally describe leadership as acting such that there is no difference between words and action. Hartley (2018, p. 203) defines public leadership as follows: “mobilising individuals, organisations and networks to formulate and/or enact purposes, values and actions which aim or claim to create valued outcomes for the public sphere.” She also suggests the following propositions for public leadership: distinguishing between public leadership and public service leadership, taking account of highly dynamic context, clarity of purpose, conflict and content, political astuteness, duality of leadership, projection from others, personal resilience of leaders, authority and legitimacy, complexity and dynamism.

It is usually emphasized that the available literature often works with various definitions of leadership and its theories (Kellerman and Webster, 2001; Liddle, 2010; Vogel and Masal, 2015; Crosby and Bryson, 2018). The concept of public leadership raises many theoretical questions for scholars, including the difference in leadership across sectors (the perennial public/private debate), how leadership operates at different levels of administrative hierarchies and the appropriate values that should be embodied by public leaders and leadership in cross-jurisdictional settings, including public–private partnerships or networks (Chapman *et al.*, 2016). According to the literature, public leaders are usually comprised of policy elites and elected officials as well as administrative leaders (Ospina, 2016).

Crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena (Boin and Hart, 2003; Demiroz and Kapucu, 2012). Nothing throws leadership into starker relief than a crisis (Hayashi and Soo, 2012), and various aspects of leadership in times of crisis have been studied. Various types of crises impact the operations of organizations, from small local nonprofit organizations to international agencies and even governments. Moreover, the numerous crises, varying in size, duration and complexity, have increased the importance of leadership in managing them (Kapucu and Ustun, 2018). Due to the dynamic potential of crises (Boin and Hart, 2003), managing them demands interorganizational collaboration and collaborative leadership skills (Kapucu and Ustun, 2018).

Recent developments resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have tested public leadership. A vast number of newspaper articles have emphasized the role of public leaders in dealing with the pandemic threat and discussed to what extent public leaders and governments were prepared for a crisis of that scale. [Bouckaert et al. \(2020\)](#) insist that the COVID-19 pandemic hit the majority of European countries unprepared. They stressed the importance of contingencies, national administrative standard operating procedures in preparation for crisis situations, dynamic learning, fast feedback and accountability mechanisms. According to them, there are also problems arising from policy failure and blame avoidance ([Bouckaert et al., 2020](#)). All these factors place great pressure on public leadership.

In the context of the recent COVID-19 crisis, we can identify several other factors that could determine the public leadership response to the pandemic. [Bouckaert et al. \(2020\)](#) describe the importance of particular administrative system settings. Using the case of Norway, [Christensen and Laegreid \(2020\)](#) explain the role of administrative capacity and legitimacy. [Moloney and Moloney \(2020\)](#) and [Huang \(2020\)](#) point out how path dependency in the sense of previous experience with similar crises helped deal with the pandemic, for example, in Australia, Taiwan and some European countries. [Dzigbede et al. \(2020\)](#) stressed the importance of information, crisis communication, shared learning, collaboration and fiscal issues. [Wilson et al. \(2020\)](#) deem that institutional collective action and formal and informal economic arrangements represent a crucial factor.

### Methodology

Our article is anchored in the ideas of behavioralism ([Kahneman, 2011](#); [Thaler and Sunstein, 2008](#); [Eccleston, 2018](#)) and extrospection ([Banerjee, 1994](#)). We observed the behavior of local governments in Czechia during the pandemic crisis and monitored their reactions to the changing conditions. As a key indicator of behavior, we consider the observable attitude of local governments toward how to start addressing the impacts of the pandemic crisis at the municipal level. We observed the attitudes of governments at the degree of their adaptation ([Nelson and Winter, 1982](#)) to the coronavirus-changed environment. Based on this procedure and several cases of municipalities, we then identify various adaptation strategies of municipal management to the pandemic crisis.

We used a combination of desk research and qualitative exploratory research methods for this investigation. Furthermore, the method of participant observation was used, when we conducted ourselves as actors involved in managing the crisis. The method of covert observation and document analysis was also used. A detailed study of municipal documents was initiated following press and media reports that pointed out the problem and led us on the path to obtain the relevant information. We obtained this additional information mainly from the web pages of municipalities and from the analysis of crisis documents of local governments. With regard to the current situation, we carried out (so far only to a limited extent) interviews with the actors from municipal management and crisis staffs.

We chose the case study method (see [Yin, 2009](#); [Stake, 1995](#); [Klonoski, 2013](#)). The general case is the Czech Republic. Mini-cases consist of municipalities from the Znojmo region, municipalities of the Central Bohemian region and the municipal districts in the capital city of Prague. The total number of municipalities included in the mini-cases was eight. The selected municipalities are comparable in terms of population (about 30,000), budget and competencies. The selection of municipalities was based primarily on availability of information about their approach to dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

### Research results and discussion

*RQ1.* What are the framework conditions and factors influencing the response of local government leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic?

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In general, as shown by [Plaček \*et al.\* \(2020a, b\)](#), the framework of action of local leaders in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries is characterized by a number of factors. In the search for a response to RQ1, we identified the following factors that might have the most influence on the behavior of local governments responding to the pandemic crisis (see [Table 1](#)).

The first factor mentioned is fiscal decentralization. Local governments in the Czech Republic have gone through groundbreaking developments over the past several decades. After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, the originally nationalized and centralized administration of municipalities moved to self-government and decentralization. From the point of view of examining the response of local governments to the pandemic crisis, it appears that decentralization creates a sufficient opportunity (a necessary framework) to deal independently with emerging crises, but in practice this opportunity has been exploited to varying degrees by municipal managers. Municipalities show different degrees of autonomy and activity. This fact is reflected in the different strategies of municipalities responding to the pandemic crisis.

The second important factor is the municipal budget. Municipalities in the Czech Republic use a combined model for funding. The municipalities have their own income and their own expenditures, while at the same time they also receive income from higher-level budgets. It turns out that the managers of municipalities react very differently to a crisis situation where extreme tensions between incomes and expenditures need to be addressed. Once again, we see a dual strategic approach of local governments, namely municipal activism and municipal passivism.

The legal order and type of administrative law are also likely to have a significant impact. The legal order of the Czech Republic generally corresponds to the standards of a democratic state. In this respect, the Czech Republic is formally no different from other democratic EU states. Administrative law of the Czech Republic is in the tradition of continental law. Supremacy law (*superioritas* or in German *Obrigkeit*) is enshrined in Czech administrative law (like the law of other CEE countries). Public authorities are organized hierarchically. This tradition of superior and subordinate is evident in both the organization and activities of public administration in the Czech Republic. The communist regime intervened in the organization and activities of public administration in Czechoslovakia. While the communists were in power from 1948 to 1989, the hierarchization of public administration had a stiff centralist character with strong state influence. Municipalities had (compared to the current situation) very limited ability to make their own decisions. The state was a paternalistic authority. For example, the managers of municipalities (headed by an official appointed by the state) did not have to worry about their municipal income at all. They received it from the state. Our empirical examination indicates that this “comfortable” (passive) attitude has not been completely uprooted.

Individual municipalities differ in their managerial potential. There are different degrees of know-how, which is evident when facing an unexpected problem of an anomalous nature (see [Kuhn, 1970](#)). The usual algorithms of the municipal administration no longer apply to such a problem. It must have creativity to solve it. If it lacks such capacity, the municipal administration will not be able to respond flexibly to manage the new situation. It will either rely on a nudge ([Thaler and Sunstein, 2008](#)) from a higher authority or passively rely on state assistance.

The last factor that can be seen in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is path dependency. It means that some historical footprint remains in the current behavior of some municipal leaders ([Dahrendorf, 1990](#); [Peters, 1999](#)). We can identify the positive and negative aspects of this situation. One positive aspect is the previous experience with crises. The Czech municipalities experienced flooding in 2002, which was the one of most significant crises in modern Czech history. Another positive aspect was the capacity of the healthcare system, which to a large extent has resisted neoliberal attempts to reduce costs through privatization and capacity cutting. A third important factor was the Czech tradition of vaccination. We can also discuss the discipline of inhabitants who largely accepted the short-term government restriction of their freedom. The negative heritage lies in formal and risk-averse behavior of elected politicians and bureaucrats.

Framework conditions and factors influencing the behavior of local government leaders in Czechia	Identified state. Basic findings	Key facts and comparisons with other EU member states
Fiscal decentralization	Decentralization creates a potential framework sufficient to deal independently with emerging crises. Municipal management bodies act as independent actors, but with varying real degrees of ability to adopt adaptation strategies in crisis situations. Due to the large number of small municipalities, coordination is more complicated for them. Large municipalities and cities have more professional capacity to deal with the crisis than do small municipalities.	There are 6,259 municipalities in Czechia. France is the only other example of such a high degree of fragmentation of municipalities in the EU
Budget	The combined model is used for financing. The dominant income of municipalities is the share of taxes (payroll, income, corporate, etc.) collected by the national government and redistributed to the municipalities. This money is distributed according to predetermined criteria. Municipalities may also receive funding from central government subsidy programs. Last but not least, municipalities also have their own income, such as property tax revenue, local taxes, rental income and property sales. Municipal administrations respond to the budgetary consequences with different strategies and show varying degrees of initiative and autonomy in obtaining resources. However, these reactions are limited by fiscal rules	The Czech Republic is a country with a relatively low level of public expenditure. Local government expenditure (2019) is 11.9% of GDP. The EU (28) average is 10.6% of GDP. Local government revenue (2019) is 12.6% of GDP. The EU (28) average is 10.6% of GDP
Legal regulations and type of administrative law	Administrative law is inherent in the tradition of the manors in Czechia. Some of the municipalities are affected by path dependence from the time of state paternalism. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, the focus on performance is dominated by the formal performance of government	In Czechia, municipalities are also required to exercise state administration that was delegated to them by the central government. There are various categories of municipalities according to the extent of delegated state administration tasks. Such an approach is rather rare in the EU member states. The score of the World Bank's Governance Indicators is rather low
Administrative capacity	Municipal management is revealed to have varying capacities to deal with a sudden pandemic crisis. In response to a crisis, different management capacities for solving the problem can be distinguished in municipal administrations. This problem has been addressed in a large number of studies, for example, <a href="#">Ochrana et al. (2016)</a> , <a href="#">Plaček et al. (2019, 2020a, b)</a> , who state that the potential of these methods is not fully exploited in the public sector and they are implemented rather formally	
Path dependency	The path dependency in the Czech case shows several interesting trajectories, which could have mixed – positive and also negative – effects on the response of public leaders <a href="#">Ochrana et al. (2019)</a>	The value of the World Bank's Governance Indicators (Voice and accountability, Rule of Law, Control of corruption) for Czechia is also rather low in comparison to other EU member states
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors based on World Bank, Eurostat and <a href="#">Špaček (2020, forthcoming)</a>		

**Table 1.**  
Key framework conditions and factors influencing the behavior of local governments

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Czechia clearly indicate that politicians as well as bureaucrats were initially taken by surprise by the speed of early restrictive measures implemented by the central government. This was reflected in their behavior. The politicians, after a short period of peace and tolerating the centrally imposed restrictive measures, began to change their behavior. They gradually grew more critical and later on, in comparison to the first period, they again preferred their party-political interests to the public interest. This was also seen before and during the flooding.

*RQ2.* How did the local governments respond strategically to the pandemic crisis and what kind of strategies for COVID-19 did the leaders of the Czech municipalities pursue?

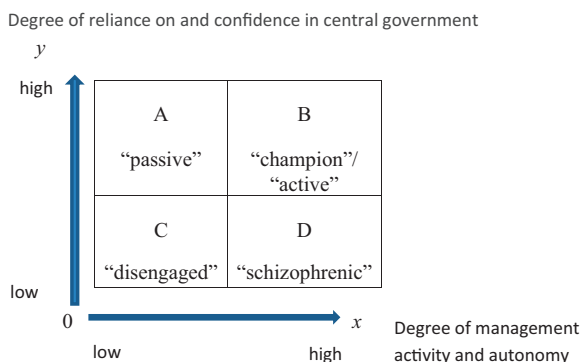
The aforementioned factors have an impact on shaping the attitude of local governments to the crisis. They are reflected in local governments' behavior and adaptation strategies. For that reason, we will seek to answer the [second research question](#) in the following part of the text.

Based on empirical research, we found that the behavior of local government leaders in Czechia can be represented by a two-dimensional model (see [Figure 1](#)) of an adaptation matrix that points to the types of behavior of municipal governments and approximates their adaptation strategies.

We chose two dimensions for the distinguishing criteria. The  $x$ -axis expresses the degree of management activity, the degree of autonomy and speed in decision-making in dealing with a sudden pandemic crisis. It is clear from the matrix that municipal management can range from passivity to high activity, autonomy and determination. The  $y$ -axis expresses the degree of reliance on central authority (the state) and at the same time we measure the confidence of local governments in the central government. Based on the information about the behavior of municipal leaders, we have identified four basic types of behavior, expressed by cells A, B, C, D. As can be seen from [Figure 1](#), there are four types of actors (and their respective strategies), which differ according to the varying combination of properties marked on the  $x$ - and  $y$ -axes.

On the basis of empirical investigation, we have identified two dominant types of leadership, type A and type B, and their corresponding (non-)adaptation strategies.

Type A is characterized by a very low degree of activity and autonomy in dealing with the crisis and at the same time a high degree of reliance on central state assistance. The state is conceived of as a paternalist, central authority, "who must take care of us." It is a strategy that has zero or very low adaptability. Such municipalities did not prepare their own pandemic crisis plan and applied primarily those restrictions that were announced and required by the central government. There was no organized distribution of protective equipment for the inhabitants in the municipalities. Actors relied on allocations of protective equipment provided by the central



Source(s): Authors

**Figure 1.**  
Types of behavior and adaptation strategies



government. The municipalities clung to an economic policy of austerity. The law allows the municipality to invest resources according to its own judgment to the benefit of its inhabitants. Instead of doing this, these local governments focused on saving money. We use the term “municipal passivism” to describe this type of behavior. It represents the opportunistic behavior of local governments in “shifting” responsibility to the central government. The municipality chooses a passive approach and only takes the steps ordered by the central government. It does not increase public spending and rather tries to save and create financial reserves. It turns out that the behavior of this type of municipal leadership is influenced by path dependency (relying on a paternalistic state) and, also, by low managerial potential.

Type B represents “champions” in a strategic response to a pandemic crisis. From the perspective of an adaptive evolutionary strategy (see Nelson and Winter, 1982), these local governments show an active response to cope with this negative external shock. This type of municipal leader is also characterized by a high degree of confidence in both the central government and also their own autonomous competence. Local governments of this type prepared their own pandemic plans and imposed restrictions even before they were announced by the central government. They closed parks, kindergartens and prohibited the use of their public transit systems without face masks. Local governments also started distributing protective equipment for free to all inhabitants. Local actors also established their own expert teams that involved important local actors from different sectors (e.g. nonprofit) in order to formulate effective anticrisis policies. They also decided on some economic measures based on information about the local health situation and the demand for assistance. These measures included free local transportation, waivers for rents for entrepreneurs and inhabitants, subsidies for local businesses and local remission. Therefore, it is not an opportunistic (waiting) strategy as in the case of the A-type actors. It is an active strategy, which we call “municipal activism.” This approach is based on local governments’ initiative, where local governments are taking action and, considering local conditions and citizens’ preferences, taking steps to cope with and mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

Type C and type D are rather rare cases. This is particularly the case for the type C leader who is totally resigned in the face of the crisis. These are cases of individual failure. Type D is already well known in the media. Type D can be characterized by a high level of leadership of a municipality (its mayor) and total disregard for the authority of the central government. This was evident in the early period of the pandemic crisis e.g. in the cases of municipalities in the Central Bohemian region, where municipal leaders – even before the crisis – were openly negatively threatened by the authority of the current central government and who, after the outbreak of the crisis, initially refused to comply with (or partly ignored) central government orders (such as measures to wear masks in public). However, soon afterward, type D municipal leaders went from being “hostile to the central government” to being “schizophrenic” because while on the one hand they opposed the involvement of the central government, on the other hand, they demanded financial assistance and support from the center.

## Conclusion

Our exploratory study of the problem of local government leadership responses to the pandemic crisis shows the importance of selected factors such as decentralization, financial condition, administrative capacity, regulatory framework and path dependency. All these factors are projected into concrete adaptation strategies by local government leaders. We have found that, from the standpoint of self-reliance and reliance on central government authority, we can distinguish between different types of actors, most of whom are type A and B actors.

At the moment, it is not possible to determine which strategy is optimal; the final consequences will not be known until later. The benefits of strategy B (municipal activism) will be manifested primarily in the short term and the main benefits will be to increase citizens’ confidence in local governments and to create optimistic expectations among its citizens.

Another positive aspect is stabilizing the local economy and maintaining social cohesion. Local businesses are given a chance to maintain their existence, and the risk of homelessness increasing as a result of eviction due to people lacking money for rent is reduced.

Strategy A (municipal passivism) envisages a fall in municipal revenue this year and beyond and seeks primarily to maintain fiscal discipline and adhere to the fiscal rules governing the maximum debt ratio of the municipality (60% of the average income over the previous three years). Municipalities thus create a reserve to be able to maintain basic functions in the longer term. The negative aspect could be the absence of any positive example on the part of local leaders, lower confidence in the public sector as a whole and an atmosphere of continuous conflict between words and actions, which could cause greater damage than the possible risks associated with financial problems.

These completely different strategies also reveal the absence of effective coordination mechanisms that would help to coordinate central government and municipal actions. The complicated and bureaucratic administrative setting did not allow key decision-makers to quickly share information and make informed decisions to devise the optimal reaction strategy in a short response time. The Czech Republic should use this lesson when dealing with similar situations in the future in order to prepare an effective system for sharing information and work to develop an effective coordination mechanism between the central government, regions and municipalities in order to ensure the same level of services for all citizens.

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