



CHAPTER 5

Navigating the Pandemic: Coordination and Communication in Small Czech Municipalities

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Local governments were at the forefront of combating the pandemic, which imposed substantial strains on their human and financial resources. Despite these challenges, they endeavoured to sustain essential services for citizens, often through significant dedication and effort (Clement et al., 2023).

Czechia faced unprecedented crises that exacerbated economic turbulence, including rising inflation and energy prices. It was also one of the most affected European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 43,000 COVID-19-related deaths (Mathieu et al., 2024). The

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situation in Czechia was further complicated by significant settlement fragmentation, which caused the crisis to affect municipalities of varying sizes and their governments in different ways.

While many studies have focused on the effects of COVID-19 on governance and public administration at the national level, the local level remains less comprehensively explored. Moreover, the pandemic presented a new challenge for small municipalities—one that was, until the onset of the energy crisis and the Ukrainian refugee crisis, likely unprecedented in the twenty-first century. To enrich the current debate on how crises impact public administration and governance systems, we focus on the local level, using Czechia as a case study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of small municipalities.

In this chapter, we draw upon the experiences of small Czech municipalities in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. We investigate the role of small municipalities in governance robustness through interlinking responses to the following research questions:

1. What challenges did small municipalities in Czechia encounter at the onset of and during the COVID-19 crisis?
2. How did small municipalities manage the challenges of dealing with the impacts of the pandemic?
3. To what extent did organisations from higher tiers of public administration assist small municipalities in addressing these challenges?

The data for this chapter were collected through semi-structured interviews with mayors of small municipalities with populations of up to 2000 inhabitants. Since small municipalities in Czechia lack a formal administrative apparatus, mayors frequently serve as the primary administrators. As such, this chapter is grounded in the perceptions of both the political and administrative leaders of small municipalities.

5.2 MANAGING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE

The literature provides few examples of intergovernmental relations from countries with highly fragmented local governments, despite the potential impact on governance robustness and crisis management. Kuhlmann et al. (2021, p. 501) hypothesise that in highly decentralised administrative

systems, crisis management will be more reliant on voluntary adherence to rules, negotiation, and coordination across all levels. Although this may result in diverse and inconsistent solutions, they may be better tailored to local needs.

In the EU, Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, and Spain have a high number of municipalities, with over 50% having fewer than 2000 inhabitants (OECD, 2023). The existing literature indicates that these countries have addressed the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways.

Austria managed the pandemic using a centralised yet cooperative approach between the federal and state levels. During the initial phase of the pandemic, decision-making was predominantly centralised. However, in subsequent phases, actions were guided by the pandemic law enacted early in the pandemic (March 2020), which delineated executive powers between the central government, individual federal states, and, to a limited extent, local governments (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021; Bußjäger & Eller, 2021). However, despite limited powers, no area of municipal responsibility remained unaffected by the crisis. The closure of schools, kindergartens, and other facilities required a rapid response and support for key professions, while important municipal services and facilities also had to be closed. Municipalities were thus key players in managing the crisis in Austria (Bußjäger & Eller, 2021).

Due to their fragmentation, local governments in Czechia cannot be regarded as a homogeneous entity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas some lacked visibility in the public sphere because of constrained administrative and financial capacities, others navigated the situation successfully, often owing to effective leadership. Despite the challenges posed by this fragmentation, it occasionally fostered innovative municipal solutions and a personal approach by mayors, thereby enhancing local governance and potentially bolstering the confidence and future development of subnational governments (Jüptner & Klimovský, 2022; Plaček et al., 2021).

Du Boys et al. (2022) describe President Macron's initial 'hypercentralised' approach to the first COVID-19 measures, including a strict lockdown. As the dynamic nature of COVID-19 allowed subnational governments to reassert their roles, this centralised strategy was gradually replaced by a more decentralised, multi-layered approach. The central state's rigidity starkly contrasted with the adaptability of local governments, which, under Macron's presidency, were often led by opposition

parties; meanwhile, local governments in France enhanced inter-municipal cooperation and expanded networks with non-state actors: citizens, associations, and businesses (Bergström et al., 2022; Du Boys et al., 2022).

Kuhlmann and Franzke (2022) describe shifts in multilevel governance in Germany during the pandemic and the vital roles of subnational and local authorities, especially at the beginning and end of the pandemic's first wave. Local authorities generally responded appropriately to the crisis, proving themselves viable actors in managing pandemic challenges even as they continued to deliver services, albeit in a reduced form. This viability can be attributed to their territorially comprehensive mandates and the flexibility to coordinate resources and administrative units effectively. Nevertheless, significant shortcomings of this response from local authorities emerged, such as a lack of digital preparedness, which constrained citizen-related services and led to closures during the pandemic. Local health authorities also faced institutional overload due to insufficient federal and Länder policies and the comprehensive tracking and tracing system, which pushed them to their capacity limits.

In Hungary, the government used the COVID-19 crisis to reinforce its authoritarian central power at the expense of local autonomy and weaken the institutional and organisational capacity of local governments. During the pandemic crisis, policy responses were strictly centralised. While policy coordination within the central government appeared effective, political opponents and ombudsmen highlighted issues in coordination with local authorities, citing a lack of information and support. The government exploited the pandemic crisis to strengthen its position against the opposition, intertwining pandemic issues with its anti-immigration stance, while also using it as an excuse to suppress political demonstrations against the government (Hajnal et al., 2021; Schweiger, 2022).

In Spain, a deeply decentralised country, coordinating between different levels of government became particularly challenging due to COVID-19. This required high levels of collaboration, which tested inter-governmental relations amid Spain's jurisdictional conflicts and territorial tensions. Local governments in Spain have limited responsibilities in health matters, but they actively provide social services and promote local economies by interacting with other government levels through associations like the Spanish Association of Municipalities and Provinces. Despite limited functions and financial means, local governments effectively adapted to the pandemic by combining traditional and innovative policy tools, leveraging their detailed territorial knowledge. This demonstrated

the flexibility of Spain's decentralisation system, which adapted well to different phases of the health crisis. Amid tensions between central and regional authorities, local governments confirmed their role in the multi-level political system: active and resilient, yet secondary (Navarro & Velasco, 2022; Barroso & Mayoral, 2022).

In Slovakia, the central government delegated several pandemic response activities to municipalities and cities, responding to citizens' expectations for local solutions; however, the reimbursement for the increased costs incurred by local governments was delayed by several months (Ručinská et al., 2023).

The literature above addresses the issue of pandemic management at the local level, irrespective of the size of the municipalities. Few authors, however, have focused on small municipalities.

5.2.1 Distinctive Features of Small Municipalities

The descriptions of multilevel governance during the COVID-19 pandemic rarely mention the specifics of small municipalities. Complicating matters is the relative scarcity of countries (aside from the aforementioned countries with highly fragmented municipal structures) that have genuinely small municipalities. When we find manuscripts concerning 'small' municipalities, they typically refer to those with populations of 5000, 10,000, or more.

For example, Pagani et al. (2023) conducted a case study on the small town of Peccioli, Italy (with nearly 5000 inhabitants), and generalised that local Italian governments were pivotal in enforcing emergency measures, ensuring the continuation of essential services, and collaborating with local businesses to mitigate the pandemic's impact on jobs and income. They also determined that the allocation of specific funding to local governments for rapid response within their competencies, such as providing food vouchers, exemplifies effective emergency policy and positions the municipal level as crucial in managing emergencies.

Several works have addressed pandemic governance in small municipalities in Czechia. Jüptner and Klimovský (2022) highlight that small Czech municipalities were not consulted when national authorities adopted restrictive measures, and although they were directly involved in implementing these measures, they had limited opportunities to apply their own initiatives. In addition, these researchers identified several independent initiatives by proactive mayors who were dissatisfied with the

state's insufficient information supply and delayed provision of protective equipment due to inadequate communication and coordination. Nemeč and Špaček (2020) emphasise another issue in pandemic governance: revenue losses. In their research, they note that municipalities in Czechia faced significant revenue losses in 2020. Revenues from local accommodation fees, public space usage fees, rental incomes, and municipal companies were adversely affected, and small municipalities were the most vulnerable, experiencing revenue declines of up to 35% compared to 2019, according to the Czech Finance Ministry. These topics are further explored in several additional studies (Plaček et al., 2021; Klimovský et al., 2021).

5.3 THE PANDEMIC CRISIS IN CZECH MUNICIPALITIES

5.3.1 *The Dynamics of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Czechia and the Literature on the Local Level Response*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Czechia had already adopted basic crisis-related legislation and national crisis management strategies. The key responsibilities of involved bodies are defined in the 'Crisis Act' (Act no. 240/2000), which remained unchanged during the COVID-19 crisis. It mandates all public authorities to ensure crisis preparedness within their areas of responsibility, such as the duties of ministries and central authorities in establishing crisis management units, preparing crisis plans, analysing threats, and cooperating with other public authorities.

In addition, the Crisis Act designates specific national and subnational bodies for various levels of government. At the local level, this primarily involves 205 municipalities that have extended powers and perform state administration through delegated authority over other municipalities within their administrative districts (Bureš et al., 2004). Mayors of these municipalities with extended powers bear the responsibility for the preparedness of their respective administrative districts. They are also tasked with coordinating crisis management efforts such as informing and warning citizens and other crisis management bodies, establishing a Security Council and Security Committee, and adapting crisis plans accordingly.

In 2011, in response to the 2009/2010 influenza pandemic and based on WHO recommendations, the 'Pandemic Plan of the Czech Republic' was approved. This plan's objectives included ensuring preparedness for future pandemics and integrating this preparedness into existing crisis plans.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Czech government responded relatively swiftly to the emerging threat, with initial measures implemented as early as March 2020. Decision-making was centralised and adhered to a top-down approach primarily directed by the government, Prime Minister Babiš, and the Ministry of Health. The national government's ad hoc responses, which were focused on immediate needs and disregarded the pandemic plan, exposed significant deficiencies in the country's preparedness at the planning, organisational, and financial levels. The pandemic prompted Czech politicians and public administrators at all levels—as well as society at large—to rapidly absorb critical lessons. As the pandemic progressed, the lack of experience with similar crises became increasingly apparent, despite existing strategies. Contrasting these challenges, a positive national-level factor in managing the pandemic was the robust health-care infrastructure (see e.g. Špaček, 2020; Jahoda et al., 2021).

A similar situation prevailed within local government structures: Although city crisis plans included provisions for serious infectious diseases, there was a lack of prior experience or specialised preparation for such events. However, unlike their national-level counterparts, regional and local-level structures were able to improvise and adapt to new, unforeseen circumstances when chaotic or delayed communication from higher authorities resulted in unclear directives.

Local governments and their partners, such as organisations and non-profits, played crucial roles in implementing and monitoring pandemic responses. The number of people involved in pandemic discussions increased as crisis teams expanded to include city council members and representatives from hospitals and public health organisations, enabling rapid decision-making. The composition of these discussion platforms varied during the pandemic, which often reflected the issues at hand and was in response to uncertainties about the virus's behaviour and the pandemic's progression.

The responses of individual local governments were highly individualised. Plaček et al. (2021) demonstrate that at the local level, approaches varied in the extent to which local governments relied on the central government and in the degree of their autonomous managerial activity. Some municipalities exhibited minimal activity and relied heavily on central state assistance, implementing only mandated restrictions without organising local protective measures and focusing on austerity rather than investing in inhabitants' welfare, a behaviour termed 'municipal passivism'. This passivity reflects a dependency on a paternalistic state and low managerial

capacity. Conversely, other municipalities actively responded to crises by preparing plans, imposing pre-emptive restrictions, distributing protective equipment, and implementing local economic measures based on health conditions—actions collectively referred to as ‘municipal activism’. This proactive approach demonstrates confidence in central support and their competence in effectively mitigating the COVID-19 crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis not only highlighted the urgent need for enhanced planning and the development of robust frameworks for implementing and coordinating emergency measures—it also underscored the importance of strengthening public–private cooperation to respond more swiftly and effectively to future crises. Some of the newly developed tools and strategies may prove valuable for future emergency management.

Notably, although the available information on municipal activities during the pandemic generally focused on municipalities as a whole or on larger municipalities, the vast majority of the 6258 municipalities in the Czech Republic are very small: 88% have fewer than 2000 inhabitants. Municipalities in the Czech Republic vary significantly in their degree of democratic deficit, budget size, administrative capacity, and other factors. Due to the lack of a previous focus on small municipalities in the literature, there is a specific gap in knowledge, which this study aims to address.

5.3.2 The Development of COVID-19 Cases in Czech Municipalities

This subsection examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the number of cases over time, focusing on municipalities. Before proceeding, we will present the structure of municipalities in the Czech Republic based on their size and population (see Table 5.1). The overwhelming majority of municipalities have a population of fewer than 2000 inhabitants. Specifically, 88.6% of municipalities fall into this category of population size and house 27.4% of the Czech Republic’s population. Conversely, there are only ten large cities with populations exceeding 80,000, including the capital city of Prague, and these cities are home to a quarter of the population.

The course of the pandemic in Czechia was initially characterised by a calm period with a limited number of cases in the spring of 2020 (still, the relatively minor rise in cases during March and April 2020 was regarded as the first wave of the pandemic). The number of infections began to rise in the fall of 2020 (see Figure 5.1) due to the reluctance of the strongest

Table 5.1 The size structure of municipalities in Czechia

	<i>Population size of the municipality</i>	<i>Czechia</i>
Number of municipalities by population size		
1–499	3394	
500–1999	2153	
2000–4999	443	
5000–19,999	208	
20,000–79,999	50	
80,000–400,000	9	
Prague	1	
Total	6258	
Percentage of residents living in municipalities		
1–499	7.9	
500–1999	19.5	
2000–4999	12.7	
5000–19,999	18.2	
20,000–79,999	16.3	
80,000–400,000	13.2	
Prague	12.1	
Total number of inhabitants	10,516,707	
Median population size of the municipality	440	

Source: <https://www.czso.cz> and own computations

party in the government, ANO 2011, led by then-Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, to implement effective anti-epidemic measures (Guasti et al., 2021). This reluctance was, amongst other factors, driven by the desire to avoid deterring their voters from participating in the upcoming regional elections. There were ultimately three successive waves of new infections between September 2020 and March 2021. After a relatively calm summer, infections began to rise once more in the fall, again due to inadequate anti-epidemic measures, resulting in the two largest waves of the COVID-19 pandemic at the turn of 2021 and 2022 (Table 5.2).

The spatial distribution of COVID-19 incidence across municipalities of all population sizes during these five waves is illustrated in Figs. 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6; each cartogram shown in these figures employs the same five-category scale of COVID-19 incidence to ensure comparability. The number of new COVID-19 cases was monitored over consecutive 30-day periods during which the number of new cases peaked. Figure 5.1 and Table 5.2 provide a more straightforward orientation for the cartograms in Figs. 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6.

Table 5.2 COVID-19 incidence rates for selected periods, adjusted per 100,000 inhabitants

Population size of municipality	Incidence from 2020-10-13 to 2020-11-11		Incidence from 2020-12-22 to 2021-01-20		Incidence from 2021-02-16 to 2021-03-17		Incidence from 2021-11-16 to 2021-12-15		Incidence from 2022-01-17 to 2022-02-15		Average incidence for five selected periods	Relative index	
	200-499	500-999	1,000-1,999	2,000-4,999	5,000-9,999	10,000-19,999	20,000-49,999	50,000-79,999	80,000-400,000	Praha	Czechia		
1-199	3037.6	2283.8	3309.9	3923.0	7119.7	3934.8	0.87						
200-499	3064.1	2553.1	3412.1	3972.1	7865.9	4173.5	0.92						
500-999	3133.7	2697.0	3397.3	4405.0	8471.3	4420.9	0.98						
1000-1999	3151.7	2728.4	3305.0	4757.7	9039.8	4596.5	1.02						
2000-4999	3092.6	2715.1	3256.5	4752.2	9145.6	4592.4	1.02						
5000-9999	3203.3	2755.3	3330.3	4694.3	9389.0	4674.4	1.03						
10,000-19,999	3140.9	2568.0	3584.7	4403.4	9465.4	4632.5	1.02						
20,000-49,999	3162.5	2709.3	3148.5	4443.2	8867.8	4466.3	0.99						
50,000-79,999	2731.8	3042.0	2620.8	4935.3	8894.5	4444.9	0.98						
80,000-400,000	2815.2	2826.5	2898.5	4768.8	9704.3	4602.7	1.02						
Praha	2281.5	2294.0	3065.9	4031.4	10467.7	4428.1	0.98						
Czechia	2978.9	2673.3	3217.6	4515.7	9221.9	4521.5	1.00						

Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19>, <https://www.czso.cz>, and own computations

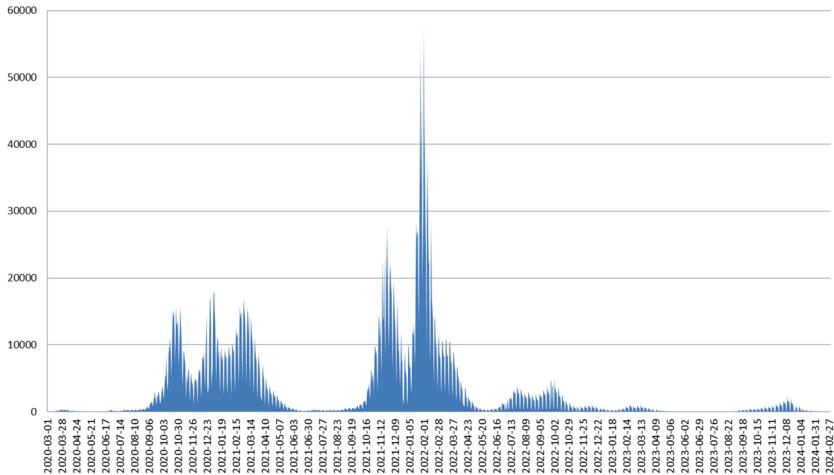


Fig. 5.1 New cases of COVID-19 daily between 1 March 2020 and 1 March 2024. Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/COVID-19> and own computations

Regarding geographical distribution, the pandemic hotspots shifted between different regions during the three consecutive waves between September 2020 and March 2021, with the first and second waves being less pronounced and the final wave in the spring of 2021 being the strongest. In terms of municipality size, municipalities with populations up to 50,000 were disproportionately more affected during these three waves, whereas large cities with populations over 80,000, including Prague, were relatively less affected. In the second of the three waves mentioned, the smallest municipalities (fewer than 200 inhabitants) were also relatively less affected by the spread of the pandemic.

Following the decline in cases in the summer of 2021, the next two big waves occurred in quick succession at the turn of 2021 and 2022. During the first of these (at the end of 2021), incidence rates were higher than during the previous three waves at the turn of 2020 and 2021, and the eastern half of the country was the most affected. Municipalities with populations of up to 500 were the least affected, whereas cities with populations between 50,000 and 80,000 were the most affected. At the beginning of 2022, the final major wave of the pandemic followed, during which incidence rates reached the highest levels of all the waves. The entire

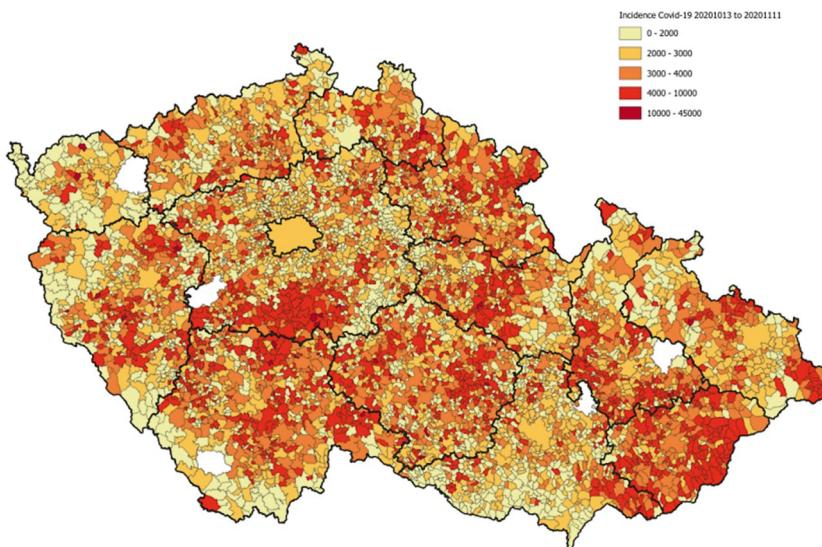


Fig. 5.2 Incidence of new COVID-19 cases between 13 October 2020 and 11 November 2020 (per 100,000 inhabitants). Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19> and own computations

country was intensely affected. Moreover, Prague's situation changed significantly during this fifth wave; along with the Central Bohemian Region, it became the most affected region. Small municipalities with populations of up to 1000 were the least affected.

Overall, in terms of municipality size, smaller municipalities with populations of up to 500 inhabitants had lower incidence rates. This may partly be because the residents of small municipalities had less access to testing sites due to their distance, leading to more of their cases going unrecorded in official statistics; it was also easier to maintain social distancing in rural areas, where there is less reliance on public transportation.

We acknowledge that certain areas may have been more severely affected outside the described waves (e.g. the districts of Cheb, Sokolov, and Trutnov experienced the most significant impacts between the second and third waves from the end of January to the beginning of February 2021, leading the government to close the borders of these districts to restrict movement). These analyses are intended not to describe the entire course of the pandemic but to focus on how municipalities of varying sizes

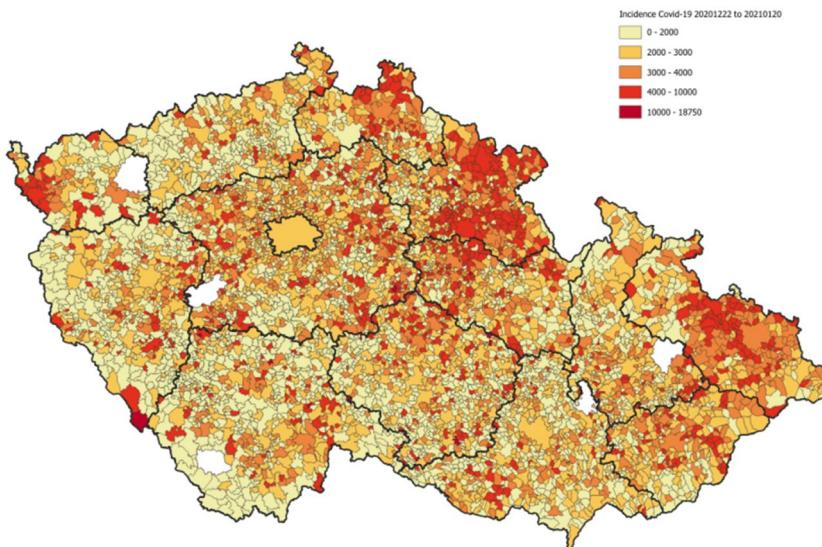


Fig. 5.3 Incidence of new COVID-19 cases between 22 December 2020 and 20 January 2021 (per 100,000 inhabitants). Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19> and own computations

were impacted during periods of maximum increase in new cases, thereby representing the greatest burden on public administration and healthcare at all levels of government.

5.4 METHODS AND DATA

We conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews, primarily with mayors of small municipalities in the Czech Republic, to investigate the impact of the two most recent major crises: COVID-19 and the Ukrainian refugee crisis. These interviews were conducted between June and November 2023. The primary research objective was to determine the necessary adaptations within small Czech municipalities during these crises and explore their contributions to enhancing the robustness of crisis governance.

We defined small municipalities as those with populations not exceeding 2000 residents. Our sample encompassed a diverse range of such municipalities, as detailed in Table 5.3. In selecting municipalities for

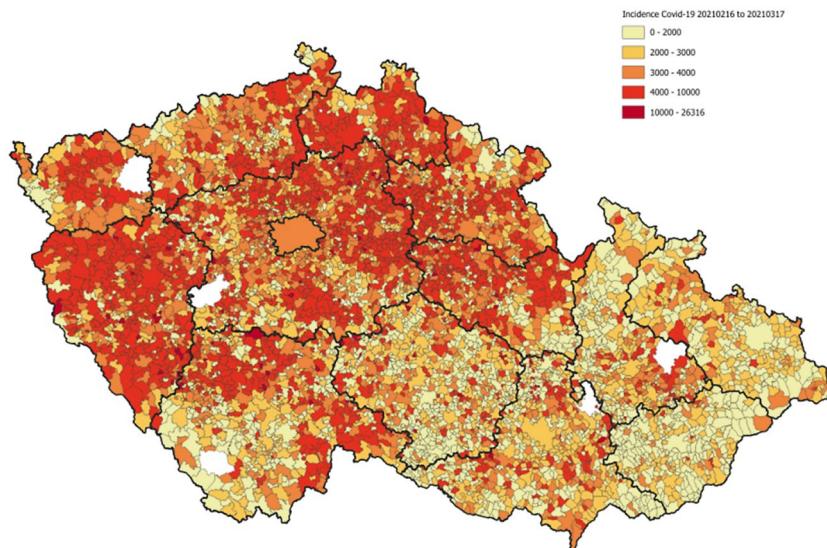


Fig. 5.4 Incidence of new COVID-19 cases between 16 February 2021 and 17 March 2021 (per 100,000 inhabitants). Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19> and own computations

interviews, we focused particularly on those with high proportions of COVID-19 patients using data from the Ministry of Health (onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz), and those with significant numbers of Ukrainian migrants using data published by the Ministry of Interior on migrant distribution by municipality. Specifically, we utilised data on the number of migrants as of the end of March 2022, the end of September 2022, and the end of March 2023. The proportion of migrants in our sampled municipalities ranged from 1.1% to 22%, with an average of 10.6%.

The selected municipalities are situated across various regions and range in size from 153 to 2000 inhabitants as of 2023. Most mayors from these municipalities serve in a full-time capacity (referred to as 'freed' from their previous employment), although two mayors from municipalities with populations over 1500 serve part-time while maintaining their regular jobs. Almost all participating mayors were in office during both the pandemic and migration crises. In two cases, where the current mayor was unavailable, the deputy mayor or a long-serving municipal secretary provided the necessary insights. All interviewees possessed substantial

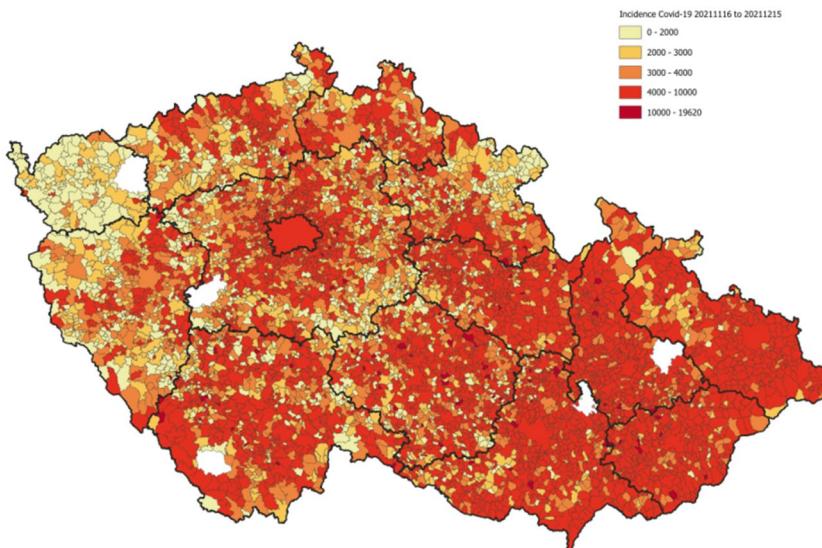


Fig. 5.5 Incidence of new COVID-19 cases between 16 November 2021 and 15 December 2021 (per 100,000 inhabitants). Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19> and own computations

knowledge of how these crises impacted their municipal administration (Table 5.3).

Although each municipality adopted unique approaches tailored to their specific circumstances, common patterns and solutions still emerged from the interviews. Per saturation guidelines (Saunders et al., 2018), we chose not to conduct additional interviews with similar municipalities once no new insights were generated, rendering further data collection superfluous. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using MAXQDA software and qualitative content analysis methods (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2014). Two researchers independently coded the initial two interviews and then refined them in collaboration with a third researcher. This process resulted in a comprehensive coding structure that was applied by the two researchers when analysing the remaining interviews. After coding the other interviews, the two main researchers reviewed and consolidated their findings; again, a third researcher provided feedback on the analysis once the interviews were all coded.

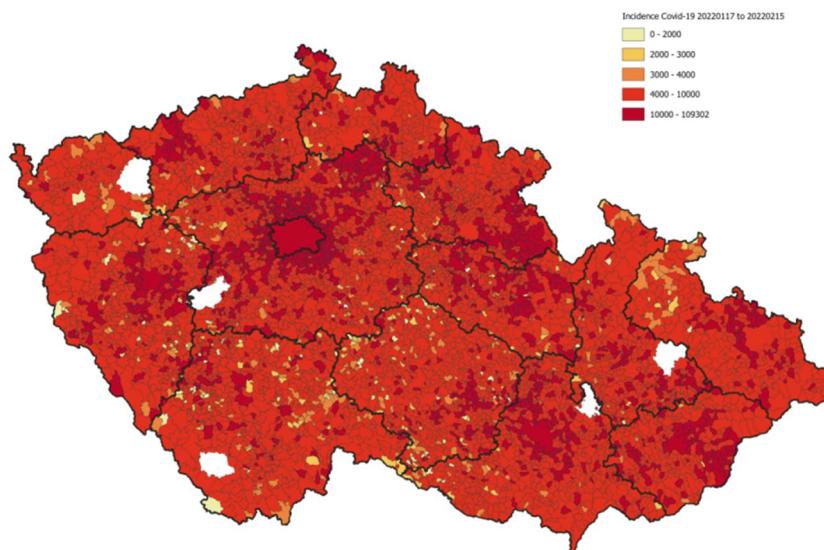


Fig. 5.6 Incidence of new COVID-19 cases between 17 January 2022 and 15 February 2022 (per 100,000 inhabitants). Source: <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19> and own computations

Table 5.3 Small municipalities in our sample

<i>Size category</i>	<i>Number of municipalities included</i>	<i>Main characteristics of sub-groups of municipalities from our sample</i>
0–500	3	No primary school, 5–7 councillors, an often disengaged mayor
501–1000	11	Often first grade of primary school and nursery school; 7–15 councillors
1001–1500	5	Very often primary school, 7–15 councillors, most of the mayors working full-time
1501–2000	5	A primary school in all municipalities; some have a board of councillors

Source: Authors

5.4.1 *Interviews with Mayors*

For some mayors, particularly those from municipalities less affected by COVID-19, ‘COVID’ events were overshadowed in their memories by other, much more pressing issues related to municipal governance. This influenced some of the interviews, with mayors tending to recall a general sense of uncertainty and chaotic and confusing communication from state authorities at the onset of the pandemic, but they did not remember details, such as which specific state authority provided the information. As the mayors stated, information was communicated from various authorities.

Based on the mayors’ testimonies, six of them had been involved in local politics for durations ranging from 17 to 30 years. Their long-term perspectives enabled these mayors to reflect on current crises (initially the pandemic and later the Ukrainian refugee crisis) within the context of previous crises that had affected their municipalities, as well as the long-standing issues their communities have faced. The most cited crises were floods or droughts. Among long-term issues, the mayors frequently mentioned the difficulty of placing children in schools in neighbouring municipalities when there was no elementary school in theirs.

5.5 MAIN FINDINGS

5.5.1 *COVID-19 Crisis and Small Municipalities*

5.5.1.1 *National Measures, Coordination, and Communication Towards Small Municipalities*

Most mayors characterised the onset of the pandemic as marked by uncertainty, confusion, and ineffective communication from state-level authorities. As one mayor succinctly noted:

At the beginning, almost no one knew anything; it was very chaotic, and the media provided most of the information for us. So, when there was a press conference about what is being restricted [and] what is being adjusted, the media immediately sat down and immediately provided the information. The state administration officially got the information to us only two days later. (Mayor 5)

Information was disseminated from various hierarchical levels (national and regional) and authorities, including municipalities with extended

responsibilities, public health offices, the Fire Rescue Service of the Czech Republic, and various ministries. This frequently resulted in informational overlap. Residents and mayors commonly became aware of new measures such as district lockdowns and school closures or reopenings via media sources before receiving formal notification from higher authorities. Mayors reported that the information provided to them was often ambiguous and challenging to comprehend due to its reliance on legal terminology.

On a Sunday afternoon, I approached four mayors, later ten fellow mayors, whom I simply approached [to discuss how] there was some regulation, which sometimes came three times a day ...[and was] written in a language that no one understands, and there was some change. And we didn't understand at all—like what the document says—then we threw it into the group of mayors, where we discussed [how] none of us knows what it means, ... And I spent three hours, maybe, to find out what the regulation is telling me [and] conclude that it doesn't affect us in any way. (Mayor 23)

In the initial phase of the pandemic, municipalities faced insurmountable obligations, such as shortages of respirators and disinfectants, as well as ineffective collaboration with public health offices. Despite these challenges, mayors recognised the unprecedented nature of the crisis and its associated difficulties. They thus endeavoured to comply with regulations as conscientiously and knowledgeably as possible, anticipating a lenient evaluation of any errors made during the implementation of fluctuating measures due to adverse conditions:

Well, honestly, we didn't pay much attention to the legislation. We knew what needed to be done. So we somewhat expected that if we violated something, there would be a general pardon for that period. (Mayor 2)

Over time, mayors reported enhanced communication and cooperation with state administrative bodies despite persistent challenges related to information clarity and overload. They characterised their relationships with regional authorities and their municipality with extended responsibilities (ORP) as predominantly neutral or positive during the later stages of the pandemic. The interviews also revealed that in some regions, mayors collaborated more frequently with regional administrations, whereas in others, they worked more closely with municipalities with extended

responsibilities. Some mayors relied on established networks within voluntary municipal associations or partnerships with neighbouring municipalities, finding social media and messaging apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp useful for communication and coordination:

You know, we have a handy chat on Facebook with mayors from the voluntary association of municipalities, and we discuss everything there. Everything that life brings us. (Mayor 21)

Several mayors highlighted the absence of specific data on infected individuals within their municipalities due to personal data protection regulations. They indicated that this information would have enabled them to implement targeted measures to curb the virus's spread by, for example, proposing quarantines for work collectives, as public health offices were overwhelmed.

5.5.1.2 Impacts on the Functioning of Small Municipalities

The interviews indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the lives and administration of small municipalities. Mayors rely on elected councils for decision-making, and they encountered challenges in this regard because regular council meetings were severely restricted during the pandemic, despite the possibility of holding them online. However, the small-municipality mayors we interviewed reported rarely utilising this option. Instead, they arranged meetings in large spaces such as halls or gyms where attendees could maintain appropriate distancing, or they postponed regular meetings until gatherings of a certain size were permitted. Mayor 14 stated, 'We only met in person; we didn't conduct any meetings online.' This meant that council meetings and municipal board meetings were held less frequently during the restrictive measures.

Another constraint arose when municipality officials or councillors had to stay home as caregivers, particularly during the closure of kindergartens and primary schools, or during periods of illness or quarantine. This typically led to a significant reduction in office hours at the town hall. However, this did not imply that contacts among municipal officials were also limited, as mayors utilised WhatsApp or Facebook groups as well as council meetings to communicate with councillors.

In a context marked by a lack of information, conflicting reports, and frequently changing directives, mayors often had to rely on their own judgement to determine the best course of action for their municipality

and its residents. This may have empowered mayors. The urgency of decision-making precluded collective council decisions, and in some instances, it was impossible to depend on relevant decisions from higher authorities due to the unique situations in each municipality:

Sometimes, the information was either absent or overwhelming, leading one to rely on rational judgement. Despite attempting to use available information, there was often a need to navigate independently, aiming to do one's utmost while acknowledging the solutions weren't always perfect. (Mayor 23)

This was most problematic during the first wave of the pandemic. In subsequent waves, small municipalities, despite their personnel limitations, benefited from having a less extensive and complex agenda compared to larger cities.

5.5.1.3 Everyone Helps Each Other

Beyond their standard responsibilities in securing antiviral equipment (e.g. masks, disinfectants) and implementing epidemiological measures within their communities, many mayors provided additional services to their citizens beyond their usual duties, such as delivering meals or groceries to those who were sick or in quarantine, providing medical supplies, and arranging transportation for vaccinations or doctor's appointments. Some municipalities introduced hotlines or a 'senior taxi' for their elderly residents. Notably, mayors were not alone in these efforts: Municipal employees, council members, active local association members, and engaged citizens all contributed to managing the pandemic in small municipalities. Mayors coordinated these community initiatives or maintained communication with those who managed them:

It was nice, that people suddenly began to act spontaneously, whether it was local associations or representatives of local entrepreneurs, who tried to help before the state apparatus could catch its breath. (Mayor 24)

Well, everyone here did what they could. (Mayor 1)

Most of the interviewed mayors mentioned the pivotal role of volunteer fire brigades in managing the initial critical wave and subsequent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. These brigades delivered food,

blankets, and medicine; distributed leaflets; distributed or delivered disinfectants; sanitised public spaces; and provided transportation to testing sites.

Firefighters are always the primary solution to everything. ... Without a doubt, our firefighters were exceptional individuals who went above and beyond, assisting us in every possible way—truly the backbone of our community. (Mayor 20)

5.5.1.4 Provision of School Education

As municipalities or associations of municipalities are frequently the founders of primary schools, a significant challenge arose in ensuring the continuation of education (both in-person schooling and distance learning during school closures) under challenging epidemiological conditions. Some municipalities supported schools by providing technology and software for distance learning to schools and students from families that lacked the requisite equipment:

Teachers complained that the demands of online teaching and remote care for students were significantly greater than when they had students in the classroom. Consequently, they (teachers) delivered assignments to students' homes and tried to maintain contact with them in various ways. The teachers had to learn new computer skills that they did not have before. Naturally, this led to requests for better computer equipment from us. They wanted us to provide them with more computer software, and it became evident that the internet connectivity was insufficient. Some issues simply became apparent. (Mayor 1)

Based on our interviews with school directors from various cities in a separate project, the relationships between primary schools and local government bodies were significantly more intensive in small municipalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In larger municipalities, however, school directors played the most critical role in managing the pandemic.

5.5.1.5 Communication with Citizens

Mayors acknowledged that communicating the measures to citizens was challenging due to their complexity. They endeavoured to disseminate information through various available channels, a time-consuming task given the numerous and frequently changing measures. Often, mayors employed a combination of media to reach diverse socio-demographic

groups, sharing information via SMS, Facebook, wired radio, websites, leaflet distribution, and municipal notice boards. In small municipalities, citizens often have the mayor's mobile number and communicate directly; this proved particularly convenient during the pandemic, as communication via phone and email increased due to reduced face-to-face contact.

Sure, (we use) Facebook, websites. We have a very open office, and people are used to communicating with us [and] coming in to ask questions. I have a public mobile phone, so people have no problem calling, sometimes at any time with any issue. But I really believe that if someone calls me and I don't answer, they know I will call them back. They truly know that we have no problem with anything—that if anyone asks me anything, we really try to provide all the information. They know that we try to help them with everything. (Mayor 6)

Elderly individuals, in particular, frequently sought clarification on existing ordinances and regulations they had learned about from the media, which positioned the mayor as both an information broker and a representative of the state to whom citizens turned. Mayors often leveraged their authority to reassure citizens, both individually and through local media channels.

5.5.1.6 Impacts on Community Life During and After the Pandemic

The pandemic had unforeseen impacts on community life, as residents from larger cities frequently sought refuge in nearby attractive rural areas. This influx of visitors in some municipalities necessitated addressing, among other issues, unauthorised parking and activities conducted in public spaces. As small municipalities typically do not have their own police forces, mayors would often assume the role of local law enforcement.

Still, mayors of small municipalities appreciated the location-based advantages of small municipalities. For example, residents typically had easy access to nature and forests, and unlike cities, small municipalities typically have no crowding in public transportation or public spaces. As such, it was not challenging to maintain the necessary social distancing measures during the pandemic.

According to some mayors' statements, the pandemic also had long-term effects on people's morale and mental well-being. People interacted less with each other during the pandemic, which, combined with an uncertain outlook for the future, led to some residents in the

municipalities becoming extremely anxious and concerned about their future, the well-being of their loved ones, and their livelihoods.

Several mayors have observed a lingering decline in community life within their municipalities in connection with the pandemic. People increasingly tend to stay at home and refrain from participating in public events and activities organised in the municipality. As Mayor 6 stated, 'There used to be gardeners organising dances and athletes hosting events, but now no one does anything; they have lost interest.'

The mayors attribute this both to how people became accustomed to staying home during the pandemic and a decline in living standards from inflation. According to their statements, the revival of community life has met with mixed success; some municipalities have experienced a recovery, while others have not.

It came to life here. We renovated the pub with the athletes, with the municipality's help, of course; otherwise, it wouldn't have been possible. So, the place improved, and there's now some infrastructure where people can meet. It has gotten better. I have to say that when we organise events like the witch-burning festival, International Women's Day celebrations, masquerades for children, or children's days, even though people didn't attend five years ago, it seems like attendance is increasing now, and people are starting to come together, which makes us happy. (Mayor 22)

5.6 SUMMARY

In Czech municipalities, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was characterised by uncertainty, confusion, and ineffective communication from state-level authorities. Mayors reported that initial information about restrictions often came from the media before official notifications arrived, and official information was disseminated from various hierarchical levels and authorities, generating overlapping and ambiguous directives. Inadequate collaboration with public health offices and the unavailability of essential supplies like respirators and disinfectants compounded these difficulties.

Over time, mayors reported improved communication and cooperation with state administrative bodies, yet issues related to information clarity persisted. Some mayors relied on networks within voluntary municipal associations or partnerships with neighbouring municipalities and used social media and messaging apps for communication and coordination.

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly disrupted the administration of small municipalities. The pandemic forced mayors to rely more on their judgement, empowering them to make decisions independently due to the urgency of the situation and the lack of timely guidance from higher authorities. Mayors endeavoured to comply with regulations as best as they could while expecting leniency for any errors made under such unprecedented conditions.

Beyond their standard responsibilities, many mayors provided additional services to support their communities, such as delivering meals, providing medical supplies, and arranging transportation for vaccinations. Under the coordination of the mayor, the collaborative efforts of municipal employees, council members, local associations, engaged citizens, and volunteer fire brigades were crucial in managing the crisis. In the face of the pandemic's disruptive impact, these efforts underscored the resilience and resourcefulness of local leaders and communities.

Despite such efforts, the pandemic had unforeseen impacts on community life, such as a decline in public participation in events and activities due to increased homebound behaviour and reduced living standards caused by inflation. Efforts to revive community life met with mixed success, indicating the long-term effects of the pandemic on social dynamics in small municipalities.

5.7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, we have described the experiences of small Czech municipalities in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis highlighted systemic problems within Czech public administration, particularly in decision-making, coordination, and communication at the onset of the pandemic. Mayors of small municipalities faced significant delays in the national-level response, which lacked precise and complete information and instead provided chaotic and sometimes irrelevant data, increasing these municipalities' administrative burden. In this context, these mayors were left to manage the crisis largely on their own. They focused on the well-being of citizens, aimed to maintain the quality of the local community, and worked effectively with other levels of public administration and local stakeholders. Rather than merely defending the status quo, these mayors were developing the capacity to adapt to new and rapidly emerging challenges.

Local governments must respond immediately to crises, which often impact localities suddenly and require them to utilise all available human, material, and economic resources to the best of their ability at that moment. In the absence of a clear framework and policy directives from higher levels of government—that is, in cases of uncertainty—they act based on their judgement and previous experiences and consult their fellow mayors from nearby municipalities within the horizontal networks they have maintained over the long term. The robustness of crisis management can thus largely depend on local governments, particularly in the early stages of a crisis.

Municipal offices in small municipalities have a limited number of employees, typically only a few, and even fewer—or none, aside from the mayor—in the smallest municipalities. This situation underscores the importance of the mayor in times of crisis, as they are most familiar with the local context, aware of the human and material resources available to the municipality, and informed of which actors at various levels of governance should be contacted in different situations. The mayor is also who citizens are accustomed to approaching to resolve local and (sometimes) personal issues. It is thus unsurprising that during the COVID-19 pandemic, mayors of small municipalities acted significantly beyond their usual duties.

Our study also found that national bodies treat municipalities of various types as if they were all the same size, despite substantial differences in their population sizes; numbers of elected officials, council members, and municipal staff; resource availability; and budget sizes. Therefore, when preparing any measures or solutions, municipalities must be carefully distinguished based on their population size because their specific needs depend on this factor. One such consideration is that municipalities of various sizes should not be burdened with regulations that are unnecessary for them. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a contradiction: Although higher authorities required that municipalities protect the population (e.g. by providing and using masks and disinfectants), they created obstacles that prevented these municipalities from becoming more involved in that effort. For example, while municipalities sought assistance in ensuring quarantine and providing greater care for the sick, they did not receive detailed information about infected individuals.

Navigating crises reduces mayors' trust in the state's ability to address matters effectively and strengthens their inclination to act independently, particularly in the absence of clear guidelines or regulations. Due to their

prior experience with such situations, mayors often have clear ideas about the steps needed to prevent and remedy them. This study thus finds that it would be appropriate for higher levels of government to listen to mayors and reflect on their experiences and recommendations (e.g. establishing clearly defined authorities as well as communication channels and strategies). Moreover, in light of the impact of the pandemic on community life in small municipalities, it would be beneficial for the recovery efforts to involve local governments and more conceptual solutions, such as targeted grant programmes for rural revitalisation. Finally, the support of volunteer fire brigades in municipalities where they exist has proven crucial. These brigades provide a range of services that are especially irreplaceable during crises, help maintain and develop community life, and align with the expected roles of firefighters.

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