

The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

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Abstract

This special issue was envisaged to cover diverse scholarly contributions of an empirical nature that focus on various questions linked to the COVID-19 crisis in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The choice of countries was intentional; after all, the Czech Republic and Slovakia both experienced controversial developments during 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic found them unprepared and inexperienced in the field of serious epidemics yet also saw them gain international recognition for the very positive results gained from their initial responses. The second half of 2020 provided a very different story. Both countries were hard hit by the epidemics immediately after the summer, and the situation worsened month by month. These negative developments escalated at the end of 2020 and in early 2021 when the number of new cases rapidly increased and the total number of patients at risk of dying began to exceed the capacities of public hospitals. This summary offers an overview of the research by authors included in this special issue. It compares their findings with the results of others in order to suggest a set of policy implications that are based on empirical analyses. There is also an attempt to estimate several avenues of further multi-disciplinary research focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant policy responses. Within this context, this special issue is useful for both researchers and policy makers.

Keywords

Czech Republic, Slovakia, COVID-19, Policy Making, Policy Response

JEL Classification

E61, H12, H72, H75

Introduction

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Taking into account the classification of governments offered by Capano et al. (2020), one can classify the Czech Republic and Slovakia as having governments that were unprepared and that lacked any recent experience in relation to large-scale epidemics. Such governments are initially complacent and then shocked by their true nature; because of their lack of preparedness, they are initially late and slow in reacting before having a stronger yet panicky response. In addition, there is usually no room for real robustness in policy design (see Howlett,

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Capano, and Ramesh, 2018). The Czech Republic and Slovakia also have a limited quality of governance and administrative capacities (Thijs et al., 2017). Taking into account this background, any attempt to explain why they managed to limit the spread of COVID-19 so effectively in the spring of 2020 before so clearly failing later on – and what policy-making challenges occurred under the circumstances of the pandemic – deserves great attention.

This summary offers an overview of the research by authors included in this special issue. It compares their findings with the results of others in order to suggest a set of policy implications that are based on empirical analyses. There is also an attempt to estimate several avenues of further multi-disciplinary research focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic and relevant policy responses. Within this context, this special issue is useful for both researchers and policy makers. Of course, we are aware of the many limitations of the conducted research activities as well as the interpretations of their results. We are not offering any panacea. For instance, the policy fields discussed in the research articles of this special issue are rather limited, and our conclusions in regard to policy responses have a limited validity (on this matter, see also Bel, Gasulla, and Mazaira-Font, 2021). However, we still consider the presented knowledge and experience important in terms of further directions for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts.

Offering a summary of main contributions, this text begins with a presentation of the economic and fiscal consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Besides the national perspective, we offer a perspective from the sub-national level of government. These parts are followed by contributions focusing on crisis management and administration under the circumstances of the pandemic. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of social services are also presented.

The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of the COVID-19 Crisis at the National and Sectoral Levels

The macroeconomic impacts of the pandemic and its impacts on the state budgets in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are similar to those in other countries. Strict lockdowns in the spring of 2020 and stagnation in the service industries caused a significant drop in national GDP. According to preliminary data, the GDP decrease in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is expected to be close to the EU average (7.4%) for 2020. No EU country was able to follow the rules of fiscal stability, but some differences were visible (e.g., Morda, 2020). While the Czech negative budgetary balance is expected to be one of the lowest in the EU (slightly above 2% of GDP), Slovak preliminary data are much more negative (an expert estimation is close to 8% of GDP). However, it is assumed that Czech public debt crossed the maximum limit (60% of GDP) in 2020, whereas Slovak public debt remained below this level.

An area where both countries seem to fail is in the scope and scale of support for affected individuals and industries. On 23 April 2020, EU leaders endorsed a €540 billion package of three safety nets for workers, businesses, and member states. The EU also took action to redirect EU funds to help its member states: €37 billion from structural funds to support EU countries and their citizens in their fight against the outbreak; up to €800 million through the EU Solidarity Fund, which has been amended to provide support to member states affected by public health crises like the one caused by COVID-19; and an additional €3.1 billion that was unlocked from the 2020 budget. This enormous amount of aid, together with national resources and borrowing, was expected to help affected stakeholders. To assess the results of such aid, the European Parliament published a special report entitled “Impact of State Aid on Competition and Competitiveness During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Early Assessment” (Van Hove, 2020) in mid-December 2020. According to the data from this report, the Czech Republic has a high percentage of state aid related to COVID-19 (approximately 12%), with only Estonia, France, Italy, and Germany spending more in relative figures. Slovakia was much less successful, having only slightly more than half of the Czech level. Limited state aid for affected industries and individuals is a critical problem, because in most cases socio-economic problems are directly evoked by various state restrictions or other anti-pandemic measures. Such impacts should be fully compensated under the rule of law.

The economic severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has been stressed by Fernandes (2020), who reported that the economic effects of the pandemic were underestimated in the first half of 2020 due to an over-reliance on historical comparisons with SARS and the 2008/2009 financial crisis. He estimated that due to the high number of jobs at risk, service-oriented economies in particular could be negatively affected. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant spillover effects throughout supply chains since its very beginning, and therefore countries that were highly dependent on foreign trade could be more negatively affected. Motta and Peitz (2020) added that supply chain disruptions and demand shocks had differential effects on various sectors in all countries, which meant that some sectors needed very little to no support while others were in dire need. A worldwide atmosphere of economic fear and unclear future development led many national governments to focus on fiscal policy instruments, including state aid to companies and various sector-specific support schemes. According to Motta and Peitz (2020), these instruments should only be used when there are clear market failures (i.e., when there are good reasons to believe that the market would not deliver efficient and equitable outcomes). Aid should also be effective and proportional to the aims it intends to achieve.

While some of these instruments were based on various macroeconomic models, some others were rather experimental. The adaptation of some macroeconomic models to simulate the macroeconomic effects of a pandemic and study the effects of different types of fiscal policy instruments looks like an interesting yet tricky task. For instance, Faria-e-Castro (2021) studied the effects of the present pandemic outbreak in the United States and the subsequent fiscal policy response in a nonlinear DSGE model; he focused on the utility of contact-intensive services that were among the most affected sectors. The effects of fiscal policy in the presented model were extremely state-dependent. The model confirmed the following: (1) programmes that involve transfers of some kind to households seem to be effective; (2) unconditional transfers are likely to be less costly in terms of implementation and deliver somewhat similar (but weaker) results; and (3) firm liquidity assistance programmes are effective at maintaining employment overall and have longer-lasting effects (Faria-e-Castro 2021).

The articles in this issue do not cover the global picture. They rather focus on sectoral socio-economic impacts and aspects of the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, Miřková and Mlynarovič (2021) identify two economic sectors in Slovakia (Recreation/Other Services and Transport) that faced the most significant sales decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They also show the possible effects of sector-specific support from the state for various industries during the crisis. They conclude that the government's subventions during and after the pandemic should support the Recreation/Other Services sector. These findings are similar to other studies from other economies; for example, Fernandes (2020) considered the Recreation/Other Services sector to be the most affected due to social distancing and official stay-at-home policies.

Vitáliřová et al. (2021) analyse the impacts of the pandemic on Slovak government policy concerning the cultural and creative industries. They demonstrate that the most affected areas of the cultural and creative industries are those requiring direct contact with the audience. Slovakia has lagged behind other EU countries in providing relevant state aid to the cultural and creative industries since the very beginning of the pandemic. In addition, a missing strategic evidence-based approach of policy making in this field was identified by Vitáliřová et al. as one of the most serious obstacles for the further post-pandemic development of culture and the creative industries in Slovakia. Šebová, Réveszová, and Tóthová (2021) focus on the same issue. Whereas Vitáliřová et al. provide both a microeconomic and macroeconomic perspective, Šebová, Réveszová, and Tóthová employ a case study to show the insufficient level of aid for the cultural and creative industries as well as a lack of a long-term multi-level approach to these industries in Slovakia. The case study shows that even a city with a successful cultural policy such as Kořice has been hit hard by the pandemic. Neither local nor national measures to support the cultural and creative industries in the city have fulfilled promises. State support remained insufficient and too fragmented in 2020. Furthermore, budgetary cuts to the city budget during 2020 did not represent a proper response by local government to protect local culture and the creative industries.

This topic is underrepresented in COVID-19 related literature; however, a few studies have reached similar conclusions. According to an OECD report entitled "Culture Shock: COVID-19 and the Cultural and Creative Sectors" (Travkina and Sacco, 2020), these sectors have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic, putting a great number of jobs at risk. The impacts vary across sub-sectors, and venue-based activities and related supply chains are the most affected. Moreover, according to the report, policies to support firms and workers in the cultural and creative industries during the pandemic may be poorly adapted to non-traditional business models and forms of employment in the sector.

The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of the COVID-19 Crisis at Sub-national Levels

The economic and fiscal consequences of the COVID-19 crisis have become one of the most discussed topics. Szarowská (2021) describes the situation of regional governments in the Czech Republic; according to her, regional governments had to cope with a less stressful situation in 2020. First of all, they had always been heavily dependent on various state transfers and subsidies. Under such circumstances, the negative impacts of the crisis are usually more limited as the central government partly provides compensation for the increased costs resulting from it (Chernick et al. 2020). Her research findings also confirm the good financial condition of regional governments in the Czech Republic preceding the pandemic. In addition, a more detailed analysis of the behaviour of a selected regional government revealed a financial buffer from previous years as well as a cautious and economically responsible form of financial management that was introduced at the beginning of the pandemic. Highly cautious financial management was introduced despite some Keynesian-driven calls for higher public investment.

Černěnko, Neubauerová, and Zubařová (2021) provide a deeper look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tax revenues of local governments in Slovakia. They note that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tax revenues of local governments was only -2.23% (i.e. -71.39 million euros) in 2020 in comparison with total budgeted revenues. Thanks to the fact that tax revenues (especially the personal income tax yield) are the most important revenues of local governments in Slovakia, they were not at risk in the short term in 2020. However, one can expect that a combination of significant shortfalls of non-tax revenues (e.g., local fees) with a significant drop in the labour market will lead to very serious shortfalls of revenue for local governments in the long-run, and they will become more dependent on state subsidies or other external aid.

Their estimation is supported by the conclusions of Čajková, Butoracová Šindleryová, and Garaj (2021), who analyse shortfalls in the budgets of local governments in Slovakia and their immediate responses. The Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic promised state subsidies by means of a mechanism of repayable financial assistance. However, local governments in 2020 could hardly estimate when they would realistically be forced to use mechanisms beyond the usual ones in order to achieve greater savings (e.g., reductions in staff costs and operating costs). Therefore, the majority of their representatives preferred to support a broad use of repayable financial assistance from the state under these conditions. Čajková, Butoracová Šindleryová, and Garaj show that the assistance was used for regular public service delivery as well as for covering payroll costs. This means that the payroll costs of the local governments in Slovakia remained high in 2020, because fiscal pressures induced by the COVID-19 crisis did not lead to significant and rapid layoffs of local government workers.

Thanks to the activation of a strict top-down crisis management in the spring months of 2020, sub-national governments had to cope with some additional tasks as well as related costs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The most visible (and probably most significant) additional costs of Slovak local and regional governments stemming from COVID-19 were costs linked to the preparation and organization of nationwide (and subsequently region- and municipality-wide) blanket testing that was introduced by the central government. Sub-national governments had to assist in the implementation of this measure, and the state declared its readiness to refund these extra costs. Although this approach was in compliance with the recommendation offered by Ahrens and Ferry (2020), who stressed that contingency response planning should be framed beyond the local level, several experts from various fields, including the economy, public policy, and epidemiology, pointed out that the costs linked to the preparation and organization of blanket testing were too high and that this measure did not bring the expected improvements. Unsurprisingly, it led to open resistance from some mayors and local councillors.

The fiscal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemics on sub-national finance in the Czech Republic and Slovakia at least slightly differed from the situation in other countries, where drops in revenues and increases in expenditures were more visible. According to Gordon, Dadayan, and Rueben (2020), who looked at the finances of state and local governments in the United States in mid-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting recession put an enormous strain on state and local government budgets. They pointed out that some personal income tax losses stemmed from filing deadline extensions and would be recovered later in 2020 or in 2021. However, governments at various levels also contended with increased direct and indirect costs stemming from COVID-19. Green and Loualiche (2020) demonstrated that many state-level governments in the United States announced the closing of non-essential businesses during the first wave of the pandemic. Their specific anti-pandemic policies had large impacts on local economies as well as on local government budgets, and one of the most immediate fiscal impacts of the pandemic was an employment reduction in state and local governments.

In looking at developments in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Papcunová and Hornyák Gregářová (2021) and Žitek and Klímová (2020) called for the introduction of fiscal tools leading to the financial resilience of local and regional governments. In contrast to the suggestion by Ahrens and Ferry (2020), who stressed that financial resilience and contingency response planning during large-scale crises should be framed beyond the local level, the fiscal developments of local budgets in the Czech Republic and Slovakia were not proportionate to the situation on the central level (Nemec and Špaček 2020). In 2020 the central governments' measures were rather insufficient. If there is no significant qualitative shift, the smaller local governments in particular may find themselves trapped in 2021. Any significant layoffs of local government workers would lead to the insufficient capacity of local governments to properly perform their tasks. Those small local governments that are wary of significant layoffs would also likely suffer in the regular performance of their tasks because of limited financial resources in 2021.

On this matter, interesting findings have emerged in studies covering other countries. Ahrens and Ferry (2020) evaluated the situation in the United Kingdom and argued that the financial resilience of local authorities has been a serious concern over the past decade due to austerity; the scale and suddenness of the shock from COVID-19 has only exacerbated these problems. According to Anessi-Pessina et al. (2020), public budget formats and classifications should be revised after COVID-19 to better support decision making and accountability, and citizen involvement should be promoted by providing intelligible reports as well as through more active forms of engagement, including direct participation of citizens in budgeting. A similar experience was seen in the case of Nepal, where Bhusal (2020) identified a similar group of COVID-19 crisis obstacles. One research article included in this special issue contributes to this topic: Bardovič and Gašparík (2021) discuss the impact of COVID-19 on citizen involvement within budgetary processes and participatory budgeting in particular. According to their findings, while more than fifty local governments declared their willingness and readiness to use participatory budgeting in Slovakia at the very beginning of 2020, only thirteen resolved to continue in its implementation up to the approval stage. The most often used reasons of suspension or the cancellation of participatory budgeting were either insufficient capacities linked to the use of digital technologies (e.g., various e-tools), volatile and uncertain circumstances that made decision making very complicated, and predictions of a significant decline in the revenues of local governments. Taking into account the consequences of the pandemic on participatory budgeting in other countries – for instance, in the Czech Republic (Sedmíhradská, Kukučková,

and Bakoš, forthcoming) – we can identify the broader use of digital technologies as the most crucial determinant for the adoption and active use of this participatory tool under the volatile conditions of the pandemic. However, if our thoughts go beyond the facilitation of public participation, we can also suggest that the pandemic is an accelerator of digital transformation in public service delivery in general (e.g., Agostino, Arnaboldi, and Diaz Lema, 2021; Bokolo, 2020; Horvat et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2020).

Crisis Management and Administration

Legal regulation and the fast introduction of strict restrictions became one of the crucial elements of the successful fight against COVID-19 and its spread during the first wave of the pandemic. The restrictive approach opened up a discussion on the proper balance between the protection of public health and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. In terms of large-scale epidemiological crises, the poorly experienced and unprepared Czech and Slovak governments tried to react through effective and diverse policy responses introduced through a strict legal regulation. However, no robust systemic strategies were adopted; as a result, chaotic and confusing regulation and poor top-down communication prevailed in later developments.

Several issues had the nature of a Pandora's box under these circumstances. One of them was the regulation of cross-border commuting, which clearly showed tensions between economic interests and the concerns of the public. The reactions of high-level politicians were very volatile, and in many cases they preferred populist solutions instead of evidence-based ones. Surprisingly, this topic is not well covered by current research in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Novotný (2021) tries to contribute to this research gap; he focuses on a small piece of the bigger picture, i.e., the regulation of cross-border commuting between the Czech Republic and Germany. He demonstrates that a lack of experience with such situations, supported by the general panic caused by the onset of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic, led to several unsystematic measures of a regulatory nature. As a result, commuters became economic victims, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. Interventions from the German side, alongside the pressure of some local initiatives and a few court decisions, consequently improved and calmed down the situation. Nonetheless, this case uncovered a sensitive issue for the public, media, and policy makers.

Obviously, the Czech case is not unique. The rapid spread of COVID-19 led to the closure of national borders in all regions of the world, including EU borders, and this is covered in many articles. For instance, Korkea-aho and Scheinin (2021) demonstrated how the inexperienced central government in Finland failed in their adoption of a soft law; border travel there had non-binding guidelines and recommendations that resulted in much confusion among the public. The failure based on the incorrect use of a soft law to fight the spread of COVID-19 in Finland revealed that there are fundamental misunderstandings about the processes and circumstances under which instruments conceived as soft laws can be issued as well as a lack of attention to their effects from a fundamental rights perspective.

According to Medeiros et al. (2020), in Europe, where close to two million commuters cross national borders on a daily basis, the reality linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the many restrictive measures provoked significant setbacks to people's lives. These events of "covidfencing" have already highlighted the need for improving cross-border cooperation with a view to mitigating adopted and persistent pandemic-driven restrictions. An important requirement of meaningful cross-border cooperation was pointed out by Henning (2021). She highlighted the importance of civil society actors and sub-national political authorities in times of crisis as well as effective, bi-directional, and balanced multi-level coordination.

The scope of turbulent problems has evoked intensive debates on the pandemic, crisis management, and responses at all levels and across the world since the very beginning of the pandemic. The quality of these responses has been measured by means of various surveys. Several scholars focused on the satisfaction of citizens and entrepreneurs; Zilincikova and Stofkova (2021) presented the satisfaction of these two groups of stakeholders with electronic public services during the pandemic. Paradoxically, public servants' opinions on the pandemic-driven changes to their work conditions and their satisfaction with them were not investigated. Within this context, it is possible to consider the work of Skorková et al. (2021), who contributed to this special issue, to be pioneering in terms of its particular academic and practical importance. Skorková et al. show that the creation of a proper basis for the reliable, transparent, and fast sharing of information was a crucial requirement supporting team performance in crisis management within public organizations and institutions in Slovak local governments in the initial stage of the pandemic. Moreover, the on-time sharing of relevant information was understood to be a key element of successfully coping with volatile problems during the pandemic alongside the satisfaction of public servants. Members of middle management were recognized as very important in terms of effective crisis management. They need to maintain the trust of their subordinates but also be capable of translating orders and requirements from top managers, because crisis management requires clear vertical coordination. At this point, it is important to keep in mind the decision-making tasks of public managers. Decision-makers could be seriously affected by five factors under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic: a lack of professional competence, fear of the consequences of decisions made at a time of crisis, a lack of decision-making skills, a lack of others' confidence in decisions, and a lack of information (Al-Dabbagh 2020). One of the

most important policy implications is the introduction of the continual delivery of supporting evidence for public managers and public servants and the maintenance of problem-oriented training aimed at challenges resulting from large-scale crises.

According to Mian and Khan (2020), it is important for governments to be transparent and to deliver clear and accurate information to the public in the face of a pandemic as otherwise citizens can become confused. They argue that many government leaders all around the world were not consistent in their messages towards the public and thus lost the citizens' trust. Additionally, it is dangerous for politicians to politicize this pandemic. Instead, they should deliver evidence-based policies, specifically policies based on what they can learn from experts and critical stakeholders.

The situation worsened in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as technocratic populists weaponized medical expertise for political purposes (Buščíková and Baboš, 2020) and was because of an affective polarization that was purposefully used by some government representatives and other high-level politicians. Druckman et al. (2020) tested whether those who exhibit high levels of affective polarization politicize ostensibly apolitical issues and actors. Thanks to results stemming from an experimental approach linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, they concluded that even ostensibly neutral communications could become politicized by those who were highly polarized. This confirms our policy implication that efficient education and training as well as an open flow of correct information are the correct responses to such events.

Social Welfare Consequences

Besides the protection of public health and economies, governments across the world have had to deal with social protection and the alternative delivery of various welfare services. Only one of the articles in this special issue contains a related analysis. Jahoda, Malý, and Špaček (2021) show that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a range of family policy measures in the Czech Republic that were aimed at the economic situation of families. Although the Czech government strived for a proactive policy to address families as a vulnerable social group, several social issues remained overlooked in 2020; in particular, multi-generational families living in the same households did not receive sufficient support. Interestingly, there was a lack of public debate on the measures as well as a lack of a comprehensive analysis providing guidance in fighting against the rapid spread of COVID-19 within families who live in the same households. The official family policy regulation approved in the Czech Republic did not follow any robust strategy, and in 2020 it was event-driven rather than evidence-driven. Last but not least, an insufficient expert and public debate on the budgetary implications of the implemented measures in family policy will likely lead to some fiscal tensions as the pandemic continues.

Their findings confirm that the nature of COVID-19 endangers family policies in particular and social policy and welfare in general. According to Stokes and Patterson (2020), it is necessary to keep in mind that if one family member is exposed to the coronavirus, older adults who are at high risk of complications from the disease could become a source of transmission. Furthermore, the resources that they provide to others could be cut if they fall ill. These risks may be especially heightened for family members who work outside the home and provide care and for those who care for multiple generations. Another risk dimension is the limited capacity of individuals to work under lockdown conditions. Palomino, Rodríguez, and Sebastian (2020) identified certain distributional economic costs such as potential wage losses caused by social distancing and lockdown measures. On this matter, large families and single-parent families were at a particular risk of poverty. During a turbulent crisis, it is crucial to implement proper and effective measures rather than try out experiments that have questionable impacts.

Another article in this special issue dealt with aspects of social policy. Ryšavý (2021) presents an analysis of opinion trends from 2010 to 2020. He looks specifically at trends in the Czech public's attitudes towards different areas that the welfare state is concerned with; housing policy is given special attention. The results of his research show that the COVID-19 pandemic did not reverse the rise in housing prices in 2020. However, it has had a clear impact on citizens' evaluations of the state's social priorities. Whereas Czech citizens have ranked health care as the highest welfare priority since 2010, in 2020 this became even more apparent. The biggest advancement in the ranking in 2020 was measured in citizens' support for education and training. Clear increases were also measured in cases of active employment policy and unemployment benefits. These shifts in citizens' preferences help us understand the directions of their policy concerns. The concerns towards health care can be explained through the poor results of the Czech Republic in the second half of 2020. Expert estimations and numerous restrictions limiting many common economic activities naturally caused concerns in regard to employment policy. However, the concerns of citizens towards education policy offer room for more explanations. Citizens may have been dissatisfied with the quality or accessibility of remote education, which was repeatedly introduced by primary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic in 2020. The rapid and unpredictable developments of the pandemic, accompanied by the very different responses of various national governments and international stakeholders have opened the door for the presentation of many official and hidden interests. This put people with a lower education or limited access to information at a real risk of information confusion. It is understandable that people living in quarantine, in isolation, or with the risk of an

infectious disease outbreak are likely to experience psychosocial stress and adverse health outcomes, which may provoke an interest in learning more about the disease. However, such situations require an assurance complemented by a flow of correct information (Tasnim, Hossain, and Mazumder, 2020).

Discussion: Political and Policy Elements of the Crisis

According to some existing findings (e.g., Nemeč, Drechsler, and Hajnal, 2020; Nemeč, 2020), politics and the capacity to deliver consistent policies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia were factors behind the success during the first COVID-19 wave, whereas their failure was related to the following wave. This issue is not covered by the authors of the articles in this special issue; however, it needs to be discussed.

During the first wave of the pandemic, all core stakeholders in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (with few exceptions) managed “to work together”. For instance, stakeholders in Slovakia respected the popular public statement that they could “do it together”. This also influenced politics in both countries. In Slovakia, parliamentary elections were held on 29 February 2020 and resulted in significant changes on the political chessboard at the national level. The ruling coalition lost its position, and the opposition parties quickly agreed on a new ruling coalition supported by a constitutional majority in parliament. One might expect that such a significant change at the national level, just at the onset of the pandemic crisis, would lead to large-scale political, administrative, and management problems. However, this did not happen. Despite his clear election defeat, the departing Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini decided not to wait for the “takeover” with limited and merely formal action. It is also thanks to his personal involvement that Slovakia adopted several effective anti-epidemic measures at the right time and in a very comprehensive way. Moreover, during the final days of Pellegrini’s cabinet, the prime minister-designate Igor Matovič was invited to participate in all important meetings related to the management of the crisis. Thanks to these events, the new government did not need to start from scratch after coming to power on 21 March 2020. Politics and possible tensions between the coalition and opposition were almost set aside in March and April 2020. The opposition parties voted in favour of many of the bills focusing on the fight against the pandemic that had been proposed by the new government. As for the reactions of citizens, a clear majority of them supported the central government’s anti-pandemic measures and would have welcomed even more restrictions in late March 2020.

The Czech government’s response at the start of pandemic was fast, albeit a bit slower compared to Slovakia; it was designed in close collaboration with epidemiological experts. Similarly to Slovakia, it was only marginally objected to by opposition parties. However, the media, opposition parties, and a significant part of the public (including some “first-line” workers) criticized the government for its fragmented, often confusing, and inconsistent communication; a lack of a systematic approach to the COVID-19 response; and its rather late implementation of standard legal procedures foreseen by the law to deal with crises. This kind of criticism was much more visible compared to the very “calm” situation in Slovakia.

The summer months became the turning point in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia. Many citizens spent their holidays abroad. For instance, the central governments supported and facilitated direct train connections to the Croatian coast because these regions had been popular as friendly tourist destinations for Czech and Slovaks; they were presented in official statements as “safe areas”. In addition, intensive domestic tourism and an insufficient adherence to social distancing were typical both in densely populated areas as well as in the countryside. The first signs of the second wave occurred in July and August 2020, but neither the Czech nor Slovak governments reacted in the proper way. Both prime ministers and their governments argued until the end of September that everything was under control and that the growing numbers of COVID-19 cases from the middle of July were fully manageable. As a result, the early autumn of 2020 in both countries saw a relaxed set of rules; it was only when the numbers of infected achieved record levels that the prime ministers publicly announced the return to strict anti-pandemic measures. In addition, they did this in a different way. Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš apologized for the delayed reaction, whereas Igor Matovič accused Slovak citizens of having limited discipline (“People, you let me down”). By contrast, some local and regional governments in both countries were more sensitive towards epidemic developments, and their reactions were much faster. Unfortunately, due to the extreme fragmentation of both countries, the individual activities of some local and regional governments could not save the countries as a whole and they became the hardest hit area of the EU following the summer.

Under these circumstances, the central governments started to lose political confidence and citizens’ trust; both the Czech Republic and Slovakia faced problems in healthcare provision and various spillover effects. The autumn months of 2020 were full of chaotic decisions that were not supported by relevant evidence. Official steps forward were followed by steps backwards. Instead of some incremental improvement, both countries experienced a sharp deterioration in the overall situation. In Slovakia, these events even opened up discussions on the effectiveness of democratic mechanisms. Furthermore, in Slovakia the COVID-19 pandemic became a point of political conflict between the coalition and the opposition (as in the Czech Republic) as well as within the coalition itself. The most visible fight was between Matovič and the minister of the economy, Richard Sulík. Matovič officially called his own minister “an idiot”, and their mutual relationship further deteriorated in January

2021 when Matovič directly accused Sulík of causing 4,300 preventable deaths because he had seemingly ignored an order to purchase antigen tests.

Developments in the Czech Republic were a bit less dramatic but still critical. Two health ministers were replaced during the second wave of the pandemic, but this did not improve the situation. In late February 2021, the Czech parliament did not vote for the extension of the state of emergency, a purely political decision in difficult times, when strict social distancing measures and specific support for health and other sectors (enabled by this situation) were unavoidable.

An interesting story can be found within the context of regional elections in the Czech Republic. Regional elections were held on 2 and 3 October 2020. The highest peak of newly confirmed cases of COVID-19 before the official announcement of the second state of emergency (3,795 cases) was achieved on the first day of these elections. As a direct consequence, and just a few days later, the state officially declared a second state of emergency and immediately introduced several restriction measures. However, it seems this was too late; the Czech Republic became one of the hardest hit countries in the world within a few weeks. We have no statistical data confirming any direct relationship between the organization of regional elections and the rapid deterioration in public health. However, it is interesting to take into account the results and conclusions of some other research activities. For instance, Landman and Splendore (2020) offered an initial assessment of some risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the conduct of genuine and transparent elections. Within this context, a very interesting analysis was offered by Bertoli, Guichard, and Marchetta (2020), who focused on the consequences of the decision of the French government to hold the first round of the municipal elections on 15 March 2020 on local excess mortality in the following weeks. According to their results, a higher turnout was associated with a significantly higher death count for the elderly population in the five weeks after the elections. Similar results were reported in a preprint by Cassan and Sangnier (2020), who analysed the same elections in terms of the spread of COVID-19. These results confirmed that the organization of elections in person are risky events under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to look at such a possible externality for the Czech regional elections as well.

The Czech and Slovak prime ministers were strongly criticized by opposition parliamentarians, experts, media, and the public, but there was one important difference in the beginning of 2021. The Czech prime minister and his cabinet enjoyed open support from the president. In Slovakia, the president tried to calm down all political tensions in late 2020; however, she later became directly critical towards the prime minister's style of communication as well as some central government measures. Undoubtedly, politics and poor public relations based on inappropriate communication impacted the capacities of the central governments to implement necessary anti-pandemic measures in both countries during the second wave of the pandemic. Despite several forecasts by various experts, the governments failed to use the summer months for a proper preparation for the second wave. Instead of evidence-based policy making, the governments preferred decisions that were emotionally and politically driven. More precisely, government leaders were not able, or perhaps even willing, to engage all the relevant stakeholders and listen to them. Protective and restrictive measures were often declared without any consultations with stakeholders. For example, the Slovak Medical Chamber openly protested against several chaotic anti-pandemic measures, particularly blanket testing; in retaliation, the prime minister publicly accused the chamber of being "misbelievers" shortly before the blanket testing began. This nicely shows how expert opinions and advice were rejected, and in some cases even ridiculed. Unsurprisingly, some experts (e.g., reputable epidemiologists, Rastislav Maďar in the Czech Republic and Vladimír Krčméry in Slovakia) stepped down from expert advisory teams in such an atmosphere.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this special issue demonstrate several interesting features of the Czech and Slovak COVID-19 experience. The articles responded to the main research question: "What have we learned from the first wave and the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of public policy, public management, and public administration?" They also respond to several critical sub-questions which were defined in the call for papers.

The Czech and Slovak experience of the COVID-19 pandemic serve as interesting national studies that demonstrate important and interlinked aspects of politics, policy making, and administration during a crisis. While still young democracies with a path dependence on communism and without any recent experience of a deep crisis of an epidemic nature, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had to face turbulent problems that were characterized by their novelty (Capano et al., 2020). Most of the problems covered by the research articles in this special issue are similar to situations in other countries that have been investigated in many studies. However, some of the identified issues may be seen as specific to the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In a similar vein to studies done on other countries (see Fernandes, 2020; Motta and Peitz, 2020; Faria-e-Castro, 2021), several articles in this issue investigated the economic effects of COVID-19 on Czech and Slovak reality on the national and sub-national levels. These effects included recession, growing public debt, growing

unemployment, and specific negative impacts on the most vulnerable industries, such as tourism and the cultural and creative industries (Novotný and Pellešová, 2021). Compared to the situation in many other countries (Ahrens and Ferry, 2020; Gordon, Dadayan, and Rueben, 2020; Green and Loualiche, 2020), the fiscal impact of the pandemics on sub-national finances has not yet been that critical. The cash revenues of municipalities did not decrease significantly. The need to cover the extra costs connected with the pandemic has been somewhat settled also thanks to cautious financial management on the local level. While in the 2008–2010 period local and regional self-governments received lump-sum grants from the central governments, this measure has not been employed since the beginning of the pandemic. In addition, the self-governments have had to cover most COVID-19 extra expenditures, such as those for blanket antigen testing in Slovakia.

Crisis management and administration are interesting issues when discussing the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Despite lacking experience, both countries introduced new legal regulations and strict restrictions very rapidly; this became one of the crucial elements of the successful fight against COVID-19 and its spread during the first wave of the pandemic. However, no robust systemic strategies were adopted, and chaotic and confusing regulation and poor top-down communication prevailed in later developments. As a result, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had some of the worst mortality and morbidity levels during the second phase of the pandemic from the autumn of 2020 to the spring of 2021.

The list of articles dealing with similar developments is still very small. Indeed, the core story here is that these unprepared countries with a limited quality of governance and with limited administrative capacities (almost) perfectly managed to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 yet visibly failed later on. The Czech and Slovak situations suggest that some short-term “ultra-mobilization” leading to positive results is possible but that serious failures are unavoidable in the long term. More precisely, short-term success is possible when all stakeholders collaborate and a positive social atmosphere is created (the fact that the actual lethal threat was overestimated by all stakeholders most likely served as a catalyst for joint action). However, such a situation seems unsustainable for countries like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where limited capacities and the long-term impact of the pandemic (serving as a catalyst) visibly led to some massive governance failures in terms of the prevalence of COVID-19.

The limited quality of collaborative governance (Klimovsky, Maly, and Nemeč, 2021) and the limited administrative capacity in both countries should represent critical limits determining their long-term results. For example, Christensen and Lægreid (2020) have argued that a collaborative decision-making style with the involvement and participation of stakeholders is crucial and that co-production between government actors and citizens was needed. Bouckaert et al. (2020) stressed the importance of contingencies, national administrative standard operating procedures in preparation for crisis situations, dynamic learning, fast feedback, and accountability mechanisms, while also highlighting problems arising from policy failure and blame avoidance.

Thanks to a well-developed welfare state, the social consequences of the pandemic are not so visibly critical in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both governments strived for proactive policies to address the most critical social problems connected with COVID-19, especially in terms of unemployment risks. However, it was not possible to solve everything. For instance, the pandemic triggered a range of family policy measures, caused specific negative impacts on the most vulnerable groups (pensioners and segregated Roma communities), and led to various lockdown-like measures accompanied by all the related negative effects; this is similar to what happened in other developed states (OECD, 2020).

This special issue has also uncovered many gaps and possible directions for further research focused on COVID-19 in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. From the perspective of public administration and public policy, it is impossible to define all the priorities for future research; after all, the pandemic is still continuing and new shocks may come. However, taking into account some recent international research initiatives (e.g., Bobba, and Hubé, 2021; Deslatte, Hatch, and Stokan, 2020; De Vries, Kroukamp, and Van Jaarsveldt, 2020; Hajnal, Jeziorska, and Kovács, 2021; Kuhlmann, and Franzke, 2021; Moon, 2020; Van Dooren, and Noordegraaf, 2020), we can try to propose at least ten interesting areas that might attract multi-disciplinary research initiatives: (1) the political fights at various levels (e.g., drivers of conflicts between stakeholders); (2) the quality of collaborative and network governance (e.g., the quality of the involvement of relevant stakeholders as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of various forms of involvement); (3) the quality of knowledge management (e.g., the capacity to use relevant expertise and the willingness of public managers and decision makers to hear experts’ advice and the readiness to store and re-use knowledge and experience); (4) the impacts of limited administrative capacity on the preparation and performance of the mechanisms of anti-pandemic measures (e.g., delays in decision making and reasons for controversial decisions and poor communication); (5) the extent of the possible limits of fundamental rights and freedoms in times of turbulent problems, especially in countries where the natural level of compliance and the enforcement capacity of government are rather limited; (6) authoritarianism as an effective or even necessary approach in times of large-scale crisis (e.g., significant changes in decision-making procedures under volatile circumstances); (7) crucial shifts in inter-governmental relations (e.g., adjustments of vertical and hierarchical distribution of powers and responsibilities); (8) the socio-economic impacts of the global crisis following the pandemic (macro-, mezzo-, and micro-level perspectives); (9)

alternative forms of public service delivery (the pros and cons of co-production, outsourcing, and other alternatives); and (10) the importance and limits of digital technologies (e-solutions) during the period of social distancing as well as in the post-pandemic period in the fields of communication, coordination, and public service delivery.

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