

## THE ROLE OF THE CIVIL PROTECTION SYSTEM IN MANAGING THE CRISIS CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 DISEASE EPIDEMIC

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**Abstract:** *This paper elaborates the role of the civil protection system in the management of the crisis caused by the epidemic of the disease COVID-19, whereby the emphasis is placed on: activating the national and local headquarters of civil protection, the establishment of the logistics center of the Civil Protection Directorate, participation in setting up and equipping additional capacities for the needs of medical institutions, distribution of vaccines and implementation of vaccinations, timely and transparent crisis communication, continuous supervision over the implementation of measures prescribed by the Decisions of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia and international cooperation in the framework of civil protection (bilaterally and through the Union civil protection mechanism). The paper was prepared with the aim of presenting the chronology of the development of the epidemic in Croatia from the beginning in January 2020 until the official end of the pandemic worldwide as well as in the Republic of Croatia. The key question is how and in what way Croatia approached the epidemic and what were its responses, which took place in several cycles.*

**Keywords:** *coronavirus, epidemic, Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia, Civil Protection Directorate, civil protection system*

### *1. Introduction*

From the very beginning of the appearance and spread of the coronavirus in China, the relevant institutions in the Republic of Croatia monitored the development of the situation in order to avoid dramatic scenarios and relieve the healthcare system. The Civil Protection Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior exchanged information with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Croatian Institute of Public Health through the Civil Protection Operations Center. Aware of the fact that the spread of the virus to Croatia is inevitable, all adequate preparatory activities were undertaken immediately.

The paper utilized qualitative analysis of daily reports from the Operational Center of Civil Protection and official documents, specifically the Decisions of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia, a comparison with practices in other countries, and an analysis of the trend in the number of infections during the epidemic.

### *2. Civil protection's involvement in the battle against the coronavirus*

During the three year fight against the spread of the coronavirus, the Republic of Croatia was hit by several waves of the epidemic.

After the first case of the disease was recorded in Croatia on February 25, 2020, the Government of the Republic of Croatia immediately called a meeting of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia (hereinafter: the Headquarters), and for the first time in the history of Croatia, all 576 civil protection headquarters were activated (county, city and municipal), with a total of 4,600 members.

### *3. The Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia*

The Headquarters was activated on February 25, 2020, and the implementation of the necessary epidemiological measures began on March 19, 2020.

Namely, the pandemic of COVID-19 represented an event, that is, a situation that could not be predicted and that could not be influenced, so there were no appropriate legal solutions that would enable an adequate response to such a situation, which the Government of the Republic of Croatia immediately recognized and Croatia proposed an amendment to the Law on the Civil Protection System to the Parliament under an urgent procedure, which enabled the Headquarters to implement the necessary epidemiological measures.

Already on the first day when it became legally possible, the Headquarters adopted the first four decisions that were the basis for preventing the spread of the disease:

- The Decision to limit social gatherings, work in retail, service activities and the ban of sports and cultural events
- The Decision on closing the borders of the Republic of Croatia
- The Decision on border crossings through which transit traffic of freight vehicles will take place across the territory of the Republic of Croatia
- The Decision on the ban on entry of cruise ships.

From then until the adoption of the Decision on declaring the end of the COVID-19 epidemic of caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Headquarters made a total of 531 decisions.

It is important to emphasize that the Headquarters made all its decisions and acted in all segments while respecting the following principles:

- all the introduced epidemiological measures were primarily intended to protect human life and health
- the opinion and recommendations of epidemiological experts and scientists were the first to be taken into account
- maintaining daily coordination with local headquarters
- through various crisis communication channels, citizens were informed in a timely and transparent manner on the development of the epidemiological situation and educated on the need to adhere to epidemiological measures and the recommendations and instructions of the Croatian Institute of Public Health
- priority was given to educational and preventive actions over repressive actions, whenever possible
- the importance of personal responsibility and behavior of each individual in preventing the spread of the disease COVID-19 was continuously emphasized.

It should also be noted that in its work, the Headquarters was primarily focused on protecting people's lives and health, but that it also had to find the right balance between protecting people's lives and health and maximally preventing the spread of the COVID-19 disease and preventing the collapse of the economy of the Republic of Croatia. This is why a series of coordination meetings were held with prefects and heads of county headquarters, as well as representatives of various state bodies and economic associations (trade sector, food industry, music industry, sports, etc.).

At the end of the summer of 2020, when the epidemiological situation was significantly different in certain areas of the Republic of Croatia, the Headquarters took a decentralized approach in introducing measures and immediately reacted to the proposal of the county headquarters and county epidemiological services and introduced the necessary epidemiological measures only for the areas individual counties or local self-government units where the epidemiological situation required it.

All measures introduced by the decisions of the Headquarters were introduced solely with the aim of protecting the population during the global pandemic and national epidemic caused by the disease COVID-19. In this way, the freedoms and rights of citizens guaranteed by the Constitution were limited at all times only to the extent that was necessary and that corresponded to the nature of the need for limitation.

Therefore, it can be said that the Headquarters, successfully performed the very responsible and complex task of preventing and limiting the spread of the COVID disease -19 entrusted to it by the Government of the Republic of Croatia.

The Headquarters was recognized by the public mostly for the decisions it made, with the emphasis that the Headquarters did not only make decisions to introduce necessary epidemiological measures, but also managed the COVID crisis, whereby it attached particular importance to:

- introducing necessary epidemiological measures
- maintaining daily coordination with local headquarters
- informing the public in a timely and transparent manner through various channels of crisis communication
- educational and preventive actions were favoured against repressive ones
- raising the level of personal responsibility and behavior of each individual in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 disease
- raising awareness of the necessity of vaccination as the most important way to prevent the spread of the virus.

#### *4. The role of the Civil Protection Directorate and the civil protection system in general*

One of the most important segments in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 disease was the well-organized and functional system of civil protection that provided complete logistical support to the health system, and an irreplaceable contribution in monitoring compliance with the introduced measures was provided by the police officers of the Police Directorate,

inspectors of the Civil Protection Directorate and of the State Inspectorate, as well as inspectors of other state bodies who participated in the supervision of compliance with the introduced measures.

In the first months of the epidemic, more than 18,000 members of the CP system, police officers and members of the Croatian Army were engaged.

#### *4.1. Activities of the National Civil Protection Intervention Unit*

From the beginning of the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, members of the National Civil Protection Intervention Unit (DIP CZ) were actively involved in mitigating the consequences of the epidemic throughout Croatia.

During the mitigation of the consequences of the epidemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, members of the DIP CZ conducted the following activities:

- provided logistical support for the distribution of protective equipment to medical facilities
- set up containers and tents for the needs of health and social institutions
- participated in the unloading, storage and distribution of medical equipment arrived from abroad
- provided support to police officers during field inspection patrols with unmanned aerial vehicles.

For example, in the Arena Zagreb sports hall, in a very short time, together with other officials of the Civil Protection Directorate, they set up equipment for the care of 749 patients suffering from the coronavirus, as well as for the needs of the medical staff.

In accordance with the Law on the Civil Protection System, a total of 111 professional and mobilized reserve members of the DIP CZ participated in all activities during the epidemic.

Reservists were engaged on days of increased scope of tasks (e.g. unloading of equipment delivered from abroad, etc.) and continuously for work in the warehouse, they were placed on 24/7 call, and on monitoring tasks of the implementation of measures together with members of the police.

Members of the DIP CZ set up a total of 184 containers and 162 tents throughout Croatia.

#### *4.2. Activities of the logistics center of the Civil Protection Directorate Jastrebarsko*

Due to the epidemic, as well as the Zagreb earthquake in March 2020, the Civil Protection Directorate, in cooperation with the Directorate for Commodity Supplies, initiated procedures for the procurement of protective equipment (masks, gloves, disinfectants, etc.) for medical institutions and other users in need of protective medical equipment.

On March 22, 2020, the Logistics Center of the Civil Protection Directorate was established in Jastrebarsko, as a central place where the purchased equipment was received and distributed to all users in Croatia. The logistics center, which was operational 24-hours a day, was also a link to the zone warehouses in Zagreb, Rijeka, Split and Osijek.

Employees of the Civil Protection Directorate in the Logistics Center made great efforts every day so that all entities, more than 3,500 of them were supplied with the necessary equipment as soon as possible.

From the beginning of the epidemic until May 11, 2023, when the end of the epidemic was declared, approximately 129.9 million items, or more than 7,000 tons of protective equipment, passed through the logistics center of the Civil Protection Directorate and the zone warehouses in Zagreb, Rijeka, Split and Osijek.

#### *4.3. Activities of providing outpatient accommodation and quarantine*

When, due to the increase in the number of coronavirus patients, hospital capacities were rapidly filling up, one of the key operational activities of the Civil Protection Directorate was the establishment of quarantine facilities for people who did not have the option of self-isolation and the mobilization of facilities for the needs of out-of-hospital accommodation for patients with milder symptoms.

During the epidemic, the Civil Protection Directorate issued 61 mobilization orders to legal entities for the purpose of setting up locations for quarantine. Additional outpatient accommodation capacities were set up in the area of the cities of Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Varaždin and Osijek. These locations were mostly set up in sports halls with a total capacity of approx. 2,360 beds.

In accordance with the Decision of the Headquarters, the Civil Protection Directorate mobilized the Arena Zagreb sports hall as a tertiary center for the treatment of coronavirus patients.

Hotel Park Čakovec was mobilized in Međimurje County, and the Ozalj Center for providing services in the community was prepared in Karlovac County.

#### *4.4. Crisis communication activities*

During the epidemic, special attention was paid to continuously and accurately informing the public about the epidemiological situation in the country, providing all the necessary information, instructions and guidelines.

Since February 26, 2020, the Headquarters started holding press conferences and issued press releases. During epidemic, it held more than 200 conferences for the media. Members of the inner and wider staff of the Headquarters participated in numerous radio and television shows.

Every day on the official website of the Civil Protection Directorate, press releases from the Headquarters were published, and by the end of the epidemic a total of 1,122 regular and extraordinary press releases were published.

The Civil Protection Operational Center prepared daily situational reports with all relevant information regarding the decisions of the Headquarters, the epidemiological situation, data on sick and vaccinated persons and persons in self-isolation, conclusions and opinions of county headquarters, etc.

The Civil Protection Directorate set up an e-mail address to which citizens could send inquiries and in two years, a total of 114,680 were answered.

In the same way, all activities were regularly monitored, and all relevant information, as well as content from the press conferences of the Headquarters, were published on the social networks of the Civil Protection Directorate and the YouTube channel.

#### *4.5. Calls to numbers 112 and 113*

In the first days of the onset of the disease all 112 county centers worked with the highest capacity of people on shift. During the declared epidemic, 199,792 calls in 112 county centers related to the coronavirus epidemic were answered in this way.

In March 2020, a new number 113 was introduced as a free number for all information related to the coronavirus an during epidemic it received 1,016,010 calls, which mainly related to clarifications (interpretations) of certain decisions, instructions and recommendations Headquarters and the Croatian Institute for Public Health.

#### *4.6. Issuance of e-passes*

At the beginning of the epidemic, there was a significantly increased risk of transmission of the disease COVID-19 in certain areas, the Headquarters, through its Decision of March 23, 2020, limited leaving the place of residence and permanent residence, except in emergencies.

At the same time, e-Passes were introduced, which were issued by responsible persons in the legal entity (employers), elected general practitioners or competent civil protection headquarters at local levels.

During the ban on leaving the place of residence, from March 23 to May 11, 2020 and from December 21 to 29, 2020, the Headquarters and local civil protection headquarters issued a total of about 2,200,000 passes.

#### *4.7. Distribution of the vaccine against the disease covid-19*

The first 9,750 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine arrived to the Republic of Croatia on December 27, 2020.

Since then, the Civil Protection Directorate was continuously involved in the distribution of vaccines, and was also involved in the implementation of the national campaign for vaccination against the coronavirus by providing logistical support (providing protective equipment, medical and material resources, delivery and installation of equipment at vaccination sites), as well as organizational assistance at vaccination locations.

#### *4.8. Support activities for Croatian tourism during the COVID crisis*

The entire time that the COVID-19 epidemic threatened the tourism industry, the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the Headquarters and the tourism sector invested maximum efforts and undertook all the necessary preparatory activities to promote Croatia as a safe tourist destination.

Timely attention was paid to the introduction of epidemiological measures aimed at strengthening security.

Also, the website [entercroatia.mup.hr](http://entercroatia.mup.hr) was put into operation on May 28, 2020 in ten foreign languages, through which tourists could get relevant information about the epidemiological

measures in force. At the same time, filling out the form simplified and accelerated the entry of tourists into Croatia.

Thanks to this, Croatia built a reputation as a safe and responsible destination. The efforts made, in addition to tourists, were also recognized by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), which gave Croatia a special designation as a destination for safe travel.

#### *4.9. Carrying out inspections*

All the inspection services of the Civil Protection Directorate, police officers, inspectors of the State Inspectorate and other state administration bodies and members of the operational forces were engaged in the supervision of compliance with the decisions of the Headquarters. They visited legal entities daily and carried out supervision.

Inspectors from the Civil Protection Directorate continuously visited and supervised the implementation of measures primarily in catering facilities, at public gatherings and events, and in public traffic, but the goal of inspections was not to penalise, but rather raise awareness and serve as a preventive action.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic, the inspectors of the Civil Protection Directorate, in cooperation with police officers and the State Inspectorate, carried out 298,545 inspections, and issued warnings and misdemeanor orders to legal and natural persons who violated the decisions of the Headquarters.

Violations of the measures mainly related to working outside the permitted working hours, a larger number of guests than permitted in catering establishments and nightclubs, not wearing protective face masks, etc. In total, 7,420 warnings were issued until the end of the epidemic was declared, and 429 misdemeanor orders or indictments were submitted.

#### *4.10. EU digital COVID certificates*

Croatia was the first EU member State to successfully pilot test the system of free digital green certificates in May 2021, the so-called COVID passports, which enabled our citizens and EU citizens to cross the border more easily during the epidemic. Therefore, on May 31, 2021, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted a Decision on the establishment of a national system for issuing EU digital COVID certificates. Thus, the Republic of Croatia became the first EU member to launch a national system for issuing digital COVID certificates, which were issued based on vaccination, testing and recovery.

With the upgrade of the system in June 2021, the free mobile application CovidGO was established, which enabled the validation and storage of QR codes on certificates issued in the Republic of Croatia and EU member states.

During the fourth wave of the epidemic from August to December 2021, in which the delta variant of the EU coronavirus prevailed, digital COVID certificates were implemented in the health and social care system and public legal bodies, in order to prevent the spread of infection among the most vulnerable groups.

## *5. International activities*

On January 1, 2020, the Republic of Croatia took over the six-month presidency of the EU Council, and in that role, due to the emergence of the coronavirus and the speed of the spread of the infection, it activated the available mechanism of the European Union.

### *5.1. The Integrated Political Response to Crisis (IPCR), the Civil Protection Union Mechanism (MUCZ) and the repatriation of Croatian citizens*

The Integrated Political Response to the Crisis (IPCR) is arrangement that enables the exchange of information, collection of data and strengthening the ability to make quick decisions at the EU political level. At the same time, a large number of citizens of the Republic of Croatia and the EU were outside their home countries. Therefore, on January 29, 2020, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism was activated, within the framework of which assistance was provided to member states in organizing flights for the repatriation of citizens.

In the first wave of the coronavirus epidemic, more than 2,500 Croatian citizens were repatriated from 19 member states of the European Union, the United Kingdom of Great Britain, Northern Ireland and third countries.

They were returned by repatriation flights organized by the diplomatic network and consular offices in cooperation with the Civil Protection Directorate within the UCPM, in this way the costs of the flights were co-financed by the European Commission.

### *5.2. Aid and donations received*

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease, which caused a rapid escalation of the crisis, there was an increased use of protective medical equipment and depletion of supplies, resulting in shortages on a global scale. Therefore, in the first wave of the epidemic, the Republic of Croatia received help in the form of medical masks, protective suits, gloves, disinfectants, etc. Through the UCPM and rescEU capacities (additional capacities to respond to the crisis within the UCPM).

The Republic of Croatia also received aid within the framework of bilateral cooperation from the United Arab Emirates, China, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Likewise, Croatia provided assistance in the form of protective equipment to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania in the amount of 1.215.500 kuna.

Also, bilaterally and within the framework of UCPM, Croatia donated a total of 620,000 doses of vaccines to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Vietnam, Bhutan and Rwanda.

The Civil Protection Directorate coordinated international aid activities, as well as the activities of receiving donations and purchased protective equipment.

## *6. Anti-epidemic activities in the Republic of Croatia in figures*

- In addition to the Headquarters, all 576 local civil protection headquarters were activated, with a total of about 4.600 members of the civil protection headquarters

- The Headquarters made a total of 531 decisions
- During the peak days of the epidemic, over 18,000 members of the CZ system forces, the police, the Croatian Army and 72,000 medical personnel were engaged.
- A total of 111 professional and mobilized reserve members of the National Civil Protection Intervention Unit were activated
- 129.9 million items, or about 7,000 tons of protective equipment, passed through the Logistics Center of the Civil Protection Directorate
- The Civil Protection Directorate issued 61 orders for the mobilization of facilities for quarantine and outpatient accommodation
- Inspectors of the Civil Protection Directorate conducted 298,545 inspections
- The Headquarters held 201 conferences for the media
- The number 112 received 199,792 calls
- The number 113 received 1,016,010 calls
- More than 114,680 inquiries from citizens were received
- The Civil Protection Operational Center created 779 situational reports
- The Civil Protection Directorate published more than 1,000 regular and extraordinary press releases of the Headquarters of Civil Protection of the Republic of Croatia
- During the epidemic, 2.200.000 passes were issued.

### *7. Conclusion*

A large part of the problems that Croatia faced during the epidemic of the disease COVID-19 were predicted in the scenario elaborated in the Disaster Risk Assessment for the Republic of Croatia, a document adopted by the Government of the Republic of Croatia in November 2019. The document recognizes the risk of outbreaks of epidemics and pandemics in the Republic of Croatia, which is elaborated with a flu pandemic scenario that is very similar to the development of an epidemic with the new coronavirus. The development of events predicted by the scenario that precedes the crisis, which included the way the virus originates and is transmitted, the assumption of the burden on the health system, the need to include emergency services, additional accommodation capacities, the implementation of anti-epidemic measures such as travel restrictions, closing borders, schools and other institutions, as well as the consequences for the health and life of people, the economy and social stability, it greatly helped in the context of looking at the overall picture of the corona virus epidemic in the Republic of Croatia, and thus making timely decisions.

As there are always circumstances that no scenario, no matter how complex, can predict, the civil protection system has shown readiness and responded professionally and efficiently even in such situations.

During the long and uncertain fight against the epidemic of the disease COVID-19, cooperation at all levels, from local to state, including all sectors and components of the civil protection system, international organizations and, of course, our citizens, was of key importance for the success achieved.

All decisions made by the Civil Protection Headquarters of Croatia were carefully considered and based solely on the assessment of the health profession, with the primary goal of protecting human lives, but also the functioning of the economy.

Likewise, the importance of personal responsibility and behavior of each individual in preventing the spread of the disease COVID-19 was continuously emphasized, as well as the importance of vaccination, especially of the elderly population, with the aim of achieving milder symptoms in case of illness and relieving the burden on the health system.

Furthermore, through various communication channels, from the very beginning of the crisis, emphasis was placed on timely and transparent information to the media and citizens.

It can be said that Croatia found a way to successfully fight against this global health crisis, which is also proven by the fact that the Croatian crisis management model is recognized in Europe and the world.

At the same time, the role of national and local civil protection headquarters, as well as all participants of the civil protection system in supporting the health system in response to COVID-19, was recognized as one of the key segments in the fight against the spread of the virus. Ultimately, the declaration of a global pandemic and a national epidemic caused by the disease COVID-19 resulted in discussions and concrete actions within the international community, and it can be said that in the future, the strengthening of intersectoral crisis management will continue to play a major role in prediction, prevention, preparedness and response to extraordinary events.

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