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How is Croatia managing the crises it is caught up in?¹

The whole world is currently in a unique crisis that has stopped and altered normal ways of functioning, supply routes and a regular life. The crisis caused by the uncontrolled spread of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that causes disease (Covid-19) affects all layers of society and no one is immune to its consequences. This crisis is truly unique because in a very short time (the effect of globalization) it has spread all over the world and no one can negate it, as was the case with the 2008 global financial crisis, and it is the first global crisis of contemporary times that affects the whole humanity. Regardless of what their name suggests, World War I and World War II did not reach the whole world, nor did the effects of the 2008 financial crisis affect all states and people. The current crisis is the first that is or that will affect all pores of societies in all countries of the world. Therefore, it deserved full attention, monitoring, analysis and collecting observations on all segments of the crisis as well as the responses of the competent authorities.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that according to eminent organizations and websites specialized in the monitoring and analysis of natural crises and disasters (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Center for Disaster Epidemiology Research in Brussels, Directorate-General of the European Commission for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Operations, PreventionWeb site and others), the number of natural crises and disasters is increasing all over the world, as are their effects and impact on people, the environment and lifestyle. Natural disasters cause the temporary or permanent displacement of a larger number of people than the effects of conflict and violence. When we add to this the number of engineering-technological and anthropogenic crises and disasters around the world, along with global climate change (which represents a global crisis per se), overcrowding of urban areas, lack of drinking water in many parts of the world, pressure on critical infrastructures and services, we

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come to a realization that the number and complexity of crises increases, as well as their consequences, while prevention, preparedness and response mechanisms generally remain at the same level. Definitely, the 21st century is a century of complex crises.

Therefore, this article has three aims: first, to outline the theoretical nature of the crisis, its character and properties, and what should the crisis response mechanisms look like; second, to analyze the current level of management of the COVID-19 crisis in Croatia, which is also the main interest of this research; third, to propose specific recommendations for further consideration and management within this crisis situation.

The term „crisis“, used on a daily basis, does not have an unambiguous nor a generally accepted definition, as many other key concepts (such as security, terrorism, the system, etc.), which is certainly a great challenge for discussing this topic. Since there is no uniform definition of the term crisis, it opens space for a subjective approach to the term itself, as well as difficulties in delineating it with other important terms in this field, such as an extraordinary event and catastrophe. Therefore, we can say that the term crisis presents a social construction that is differently understood and interpreted around the world, but also within the same environment, depending on the circumstances.

Therefore, we investigate and manage crises based on their essential characteristics and properties. Here we will specify just a few of them. Common features of all crises are: threat, time pressure, uncertainty and lack of information. When we talk about the elements of crisis, we are talking about surprise, the threat to society and the community, the short decision time and the need for change. In regards to the classifications of crises – of which there are many – it is necessary to distinguish: causes of occurrence, affected space, frequency, dynamics of duration, impact and consequences, possibility of forecasting and possibility of management. According to the securitization theory, any crisis can also become a key security issue, and according to Ole Holsti, there are four reference levels for crisis analysis: the state, organization, group and individual. These levels are not a strictly given form because there are numerous interactions and interdependencies between them. Each crisis has its own cycle, and we try to manage it and its risks through four stages: prevention, preparedness, reaction and recovery. And for risk, and thus crisis management, to be as effective, rational and meaningful as possible, it is necessary to have a crisis management system that is



comprehensive in addressing all risks and threats, integral to the involvement of all capabilities, resources, knowledge and experts, as well as flexible in dealing with the daily dynamics and inevitable changes that occur during a crisis. All these parameters are significant in the discussion on crises and will be mostly used in the next section related to the analysis of the current state of COVID-19 crisis management in Croatia.

At the beginning of 2020, Croatia found itself in a very complex situation in several crises of different character, dynamics, causes, current and far-reaching future consequences. For the first time, the country finds itself in the presidency of the Council of the European Union at a stage when the Union is alone in a deep structural crisis on multiple levels; as the UK withdraws from full membership, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatens and pushes refugees and migrants to Europe, and the Union is finding it difficult to find answers to a growing number of questions. Croatia, which – as warned by Eurostat reports and many scientific papers and analyzes – has a highly bureaucratic public administration with low efficiency level, has directed significant resources, attention and human resources into the EU Council Presidency. In addition, at the beginning of this year, like all the countries in Southeast Europe, Croatia was again affected by illegal migration and pressure from certain circles in the country and Europe regarding how to deal with this crisis. In this case, too, Croatia is devoting considerable resources to properly address this challenge. Furthermore, we are also in a cyber crisis. INA, d.d. oil company has publicly announced that it has been facing serious cyber-attacks for a longer period of time. Under attack are some other major companies, which did not disclose it because they want to protect their reputation and brand, which is also part of the problem because state institutions that need to analyze, investigate and repel such attacks do not have a broader picture of how we as a society are exposed to cyber-attacks, also the infrastructure and ultimately the state itself. That these are serious issues is also reflected in the attention given to this issue in the latest Public Report of the Security and Intelligence Agency of the Republic of Croatia for the year 2018. Croatia is the target of a series of cyber-attacks, characterized by a high level of expertise and organization in selecting the targets of the attacks, and it is reasonable to suspect that the attacks are sponsored by individual countries. In this area, too, Croatia is deploying a significant amount of its own resources to protect and defend itself on a daily basis from such threats and attacks. Moreover, there is also the COVID-19 crisis we have been facing and dealing with since the



end of February, as well as the aftermath of the earthquake (which in itself caused another crisis) that hit Zagreb, its surroundings and parts of Zagorje on March 22, 2020 and activated significant resources of civil protection, firefighting and numerous other services. It should be pointed out that in all these parallel and to some extent overlapping events, our resources in many sectors are very strained, in some cases individual services are engaged in multiple tracks, which puts individuals and systems under great pressure and stress. This combination of circumstances and the number of simultaneous crises would put even the most powerful states, organizations and systems in great challenge, therefore Croatia is currently in a very complex situation.

Focusing specifically on the crisis caused by COVID-19, it is necessary to highlight what we currently know and put it in an analytical framework so that observation and analysis can be viable. The Republic of Croatia recognizes the risk of epidemics and pandemics and analyzed them in both the Disaster Risk Assessments for the Republic of Croatia in 2015 and 2019. It is noted that pandemics are the kind of danger that can get out of control and turn into a catastrophic event. The description of the scenario envisages exactly the same course of events that is currently happening to us (a virus that developed in Asia, from where it spread to Europe, and then to Croatia, through international travel). It is predicted that in the most likely adverse event, „the epidemic could last at least 9 weeks. Within 9 weeks 860 people die from the flu and its complications (0.01% mortality).“ In the worst-case events, it is predicted that „a total of 2,580 people out of infected persons would die in 9 weeks (mortality of 0.2 %).“ We are far from scenarios like this at the moment, but we need to keep them in mind. Therefore, the 2017 National Security Strategy also states that the integrated health system, accessible to all citizens of the Republic of Croatia, will continue to develop prevention and capacity building measures in the field of public health care aimed at preventing infectious and mass noninfectious diseases. In this case, it is the Croatian Institute for Public Health, the leading institution of the health system responsible for the development of public policies and guidelines for public health, and in this case the rules of procedure in the period before, during and after epidemics and pandemics. The materials created so far by the Croatian Institute of Public Health, with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, serve as the basis on which other competent bodies (the Crisis Headquarters of the Ministry of Health and the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia) formulate measures



and instructions for dealing with this crisis situation. With all the information published by the Institute on its website even before the outbreak of the crisis, as well as instructions to citizens, we can say that Croatia has in this part successfully completed the phase of prevention of this crisis. The part that has proven to be an open question here is the amount of all protective equipment we have available in the country for this kind of crisis.

Croatia has also successfully completed the preparedness phase. The Crisis Headquarters of the Ministry of Health was activated in late January, the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia in mid-February, while the first case of a coronavirus infection in Croatia was recorded on 25 February. The timely activation of these two headquarters enabled quality preparations for what was obviously an inevitability that would happen to us. This should be emphasized because each country has understood the stages of prevention, preparedness and response differently. For example, Denmark and Sweden, are two highly developed (neighboring) countries, with two totally different approaches. Some countries have neglected the standby phase, such as Italy, and are currently suffering serious consequences. Some have acted surprisingly, like the US and UK, which represent global leaders when it comes to crisis management, but have denied or had different initial approaches and after the crisis hit them hard changed their approach. But now it will be harder for them to cope with the crisis because the preparations were not managed well. What worries is the example of Brazil, whose president Jair Bolsonaro still (at the end of March) does not trust scientists and recommendations, and therefore does not introduce any safety protection measures. Therefore, they found themselves (in Brazil) in the paradoxical situation that movement bans and social distance measures began to be implemented and supervised by street gangs. These extremes tell us something what Ivan Đikić has pointed out several times – that politicians should not be trusted completely because they do not know or are not informed enough, and that the professionals are heavily influenced by politics. Ursula von der Leyen had a similar statement regarding politicians underestimating this crisis. For Croatia, we can say that it has not underestimated the crisis in the health and safety field and has prepared according to its possibilities – unlike some other sectors which we will mention further in the article.

The COVID-19 crisis, and in particular its response to it, has uncovered and confirmed many scientifically described things and situations. International organizations either do not have



the power, so they act on the recommendation principle like the World Health Organization, or like the European Union, they again get caught up in the situation and react quite late. While we do not expect more from the World Health Organization, the Union has again shown that it has problems and challenges in crisis forecasting and crisis management, which in turn have led Member States and those seeking full membership to close and / or turn to alternative solutions. In addition, we see a worryingly low level of solidarity and cooperation between Member States. Moreover, at the Union level, and level of many countries, we see that we mostly have institutions and systems built in the past and designated to deal with regular situations and working hours which are difficult and slow to adapt to new conditions – quite the opposite of the requirements that the crisis sets in front of systems and key individuals. This is seen in some sectors in Croatia as well.

This crisis in Croatia is extremely multilayered and affects all segments of our society. The mentioned health and security part has been well managed and directed so far. The Civil Protection Headquarters holds daily meetings, monitors the situation, issues measures, and provides instructions on how to proceed. The crisis response needs to be viewed through three levels. The strategic level, which through the handling and guidance from the Headquarters, works very well and effectively, and the professionals and the politicians through this Headquarters act in an organized, planned manner, tirelessly communicating with different types of public and provide instructions. At the tactical level, there was a certain lack of coordination, insufficient communication and handling, which all gets corrected and uniformed over time. The same can be said for the operational level of implementation. Overall, we can say that for now the system is working successfully. The biggest challenge here is the citizens who do not follow the instructions of the Headquarters and the health professionals.

While we can be more or less satisfied with the part described above, there are areas of crucial importance, such as financial, economic and tourism management where we surely cannot be satisfied. This crisis has shown that these sectors do not have crisis plans, that their leaders are not trained in crisis management, and that they are having difficulties or are hardly adjusting to crisis conditions of operating. We also see a situation where most businessmen expect ready-made solutions and assistance from the state, and only a small number of them have the



readiness and ability to cope with the crisis. This is certainly a big challenge because we, as a state, society and individuals, are undeniably dependent on these sectors. This leads to the fact that the overall measures of the Government of the Republic of Croatia came late and are insufficient in these sectors at the moment, that the crisis challenge is underestimated in this part, but also points to the unwillingness of the majority of the real sector for crises – which will leave numerous unintended consequences. As a „firefighting measure“, the Government proposes the establishment of a Crisis Headquarters for the economy, involving representatives of the public, business and scientific sectors. This is a good decision, but it had to be implemented before the crisis, because now there are many consequences that can no longer be changed. It is worth pointing out that in this situation, the parliamentary opposition is not coping well either; there are no constructive proposals and debates, which makes it evident that the crisis has caught them unprepared as well.

Although this crisis has many aspects that need to be explored in order to draw lessons for the next crises, we will only highlight here two more segments that need to be highlighted. The first is communication, which is necessary and must be continuous. In regards to the health and security part of the crisis, it is done in a quality manner, coming everyday and timely, while the part of the financial, economic and tourism sectors is inconsistent, insufficient and imprecise and must be rapidly upgraded by those responsible. What is worrying and what does not present good communication is the way how the crisis was announced and presented by the Prime Minister himself and his closest associates: statements such as „that Croatia is at war“ and that it „must defeat the enemy“. Wrong and politically failed. Croatia knows what war is because it has been exposed to enemy action. This crisis is not of such nature, and instead of working to calm the situation and calm the people, such statements have pushed the course of the crisis in its communication part to the wrong track.

The other thing is still a certain mystery, but it does indicate a certain lack of management from the very top of the country. In its 2017 Homeland Security Act, Croatia defines a crisis as follows: „A crisis means an event or situation that threatens national security, health and life of citizens, significantly damages the environment or causes significant economic damage, and responding to such an event or situation requires a coordinated action by several national authorities and the coordinated application of measures within the competence of



those authorities.“ The current situation, the COVID-19 crisis, corresponds to a exemplary definition of crisis in the mentioned Law. So it is currently unclear why the Government did not apply this definition, all the options and tools available to it from the Act, but went ahead with a proposal to the Parliament that the Parliament gives the Government the power to adopt decrees with legal force from the scope of Parliament powers. This situation is very interesting, it requires deeper insight and analysis that could be conducted after more material would be available about it.

What to say about the recovery phase? We should start planning the recovery phase now, at this point. We should never wait for the crisis to end and then think about that. Now is the time to task the institutions and, if necessary, set up a headquarters for recovery issues, which should, sectorally and cross-sectorally, start planning recovery, which is likely to be time-consuming, difficult and expensive. So the measures should already be planned for that phase.

In conclusion, we will make seven recommendations for our current situation. First, we cannot view this crisis separately from other events and crises we are facing in the Republic of Croatia, our environment and the situation in the European Union. In this situation, we must have a comprehensive approach. Second, Croatia's COVID-19 crisis is currently well managed in the health and security sector, weaker in the sectors already mentioned above. Action in all sectors needs to be rapidly improved. Third, this crisis is global, yet the responses are local and uncoordinated. Croatia, within its EU Council presidency term, needs to do more on a united European response (not only on the the Union level but the entire continent). Fourth, the key to the solution lies in the treatment and decision-making of politicians and citizens, where professionals are at their disposal through guidance and advice. Both need to show more respect for the profession at this moment and generally. Now it is necessary to put into operation the public-private-academic partnership, which is otherwise mentioned in all national strategies, but it has not yet come to life, because it is obvious that this crisis cannot be managed by the public sector itself. Fifth, this crisis is extremely unpredictable and can, due to subjective and / or objective circumstances, quickly turn into a disaster. Therefore, it is constantly necessary to take and manage current events and processes as seriously as possible. Therefore, it is necessary to record all observations from all possible perspectives, so that when the crisis is over from these observations we can make lessons, and



some of them will be lessons learned after implementation into new procedures and practices. Sixth, the crisis has not yet reached its peak, and already some parts of the system are very strained (like the entire health care system, where all employees should be greatly thanked and respected for everything done so far, as well as for all others that are involved), so we all need to be patient, calm and very cautious together. Seventh, every crisis is also an opportunity, it would be a shame not to use this crisis for significant changes and improvements in many sectors and processes of our society.

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