CHALLENGES OF THE CENTER OF GOVERNMENT DURING COVID-19: CASE OF LATVIA

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Abstract - We have lived in a disruptive era, when the surrounding processes are influenced from different sides and there is a lot of unknown. Public administration has an important role to play in providing the necessary support to citizens; the core of public administration is the center of government, which operates in a joint hierarchical system and order of public administration. The article analyzes the most relevant competencies of the employees of a center of government and discusses four essential functions of a center of government during COVID-19 in Latvia. The results of the survey made it possible to draw conclusions about the role of a center of government in the general structure of public administration as well as made it possible to determine the direction of further research.

Keywords - Public Administration, Center of Government, COVID-19.

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has made its changes to the public administration agenda everywhere, including Latvia.The effectiveness of Latvian public administration and the ability to respond to "normal new" situations are tested on a daily basis, as it must be able to support politicians in making further decisions.In the public scientific space are many different studies of the ability of public administration to adapt to the current situation in different countries [2], [5]–[9].Analyzing this information, authors concluded that there is relatively small amount of information about the skills of the core of public administration - the center of government - during COVID-19 period.

Why is it so important to assess the capabilities and competence of a center of government during COVID-19? The center of government consists of many different institutions that report directly to the highest governing body, for example in Latvia – Prime Minister.One of the tasks of the highest governing body and the center of government is to build public confidence in the decisions made.According to different sources,public-national dialogue plays a significant role [1] in COVID-19 [2]. The center of government participates not only in the resolution of various conflicts as a mediator, but also in the integration and drafting of public policy [3].The role of the center of government is to establish cooperation among various actors in government at all levels [4], as well as to ensure effective cooperation with social partners, such as trade unions, non-governmental sector. The center of government everywhere is forced to respond faster to existing challenges with the help of new technologies [5], approaches and innovations [6], [7].

Before the COVID-19 phase, the challenges of governance of the center of government have already been highlighted and COVID-19 only expand it.The processes of public administration take place in one large complex system, which is influenced from the outside by various unforeseen circumstances - contingencies. Contingencies manifest themselves in different ways, for example, as sturdinessof public administration in terms of governance[8] or viewing in a broader context – as efficiency and effectiveness [9].

The skills and knowledge of government officials should be regularly assessed.In 2019, a survey was conducted [10], during which an opinion was requested on the necessary knowledge and skills that the Latvian public administration will need in the future. Results revealed the following future knowledge and skills – innovation ability, strategic thinking, consensus building skills, effective communication skills, cognitive flexibility, etc.The challenges posed by COVID-19 occurred at a pace that required adaptability very quickly to navigate current, sometimes changing competencies.Thus, the purpose of the article is to assess the relevance of the competences and functions of the employees of the Latvian center of government during COVID-19.

In practice [11]–[14], it is assumed that the task of employees of a center of government is to use their competencies regardless of new challenges, in order to: reach consensus, anticipate new policy challenges, demonstrate strategic thinking skills, create innovative solutions and ideas, fostering knowledge of career officials development.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Defining of the center of government

Several steps were taken in order to prepare the survey and the correct selection of respondents. A literature reviewwas conducted on the defining center of government. Authors concluded that it is possible to evaluate the center of government from several alternatives and developed division of the center of government of Latvia based on the findings of SantisoLafuente,Alessandro [15], including in the

center of government institutions closest to the highest governing body – Finance Ministry, Ministry of Justice, State Chancellery, Cross-Sectoral Coordination Center.

2.2. Selection of respondents

The employees of the center of government perform a variety of tasks–from policy planning and policy implementation monitoring to the provision of technical, administrative support within the organization. As the range of questions covered by the survey was on the assessment of certain competencies and functions, an in-depth analysis of the institutions forming the center of government was necessary. Therefore analysiswas based onthe legal framework of Latvian state administration, taking into account the functions specified in laws and regulations and regulations of the center of government institutions, which determine the structure of the institutions and the organization of their work.On the basis of the information received, departments and divisions were identified, the functions and tasks of which correspond to the questions included in the questionnaire.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. General information

The survey was conducted in the first half of 2021.The survey took place in conditionswhen public administration in Latvia basically worked remotely.87 respondents from four public administration institutions (the center of government) participated in the survey. 84% of respondents were women.Among the respondents, the majority (29%) have worked in public administration for no more than five years, while 17% of respondents have been working in public administration for 21 years or more **Fig.1**.

3.2. Assessment of competencies

The survey participants were asked to rate the relevance of the competence on a 10-point scale, where 1 means disagree and 10 means strongly agree.The following competencies were assessed:No. 1. openness to innovation in public administration;No. 2. skills to anticipate new policy challenges;No. 3. strategic thinking;No. 4. development of knowledge of career officials;No. 5. skills to reach consensus**Fig.2.**Evaluating all the answers provided, it can be concluded that each of the competencies mentioned was rated as the most important. By analyzing the data for each competency separately, it was possible to assess the level of significance of each of these functions. The highest percentage of outcomes on a scale of 8 to 10 had strategic thinking, which accounted for 90% of the responses; therefore, this competence was the least assessed as insignificant of all the above. The data obtained show that competencies No. 2 and No. 1 were the next most rated competencies on a scale from 8 to 10, which in total was 82% and 76%, respectively. Consensus-building skills, in turn, are considered the least important - 11%.

The competencies included in the survey are usually described as systems thinking skills that are especially used when institutions are faced with various internal and / or external restrictions.Thus, when assessing competencies during the COVID-19 period, it can be stated that the employees of the government center used competencies in solving various issues and establishing different levels of cooperation, while facing the restrictions imposed by the requirements of COVID-19.

3.3. Assessment of functions

Respondents were asked to rate the relevance of the functions of the center of government in the context of COVID-19.As in the assessment of competencies, the relevance of each function was assessed on a 10-point scale, where 1 means disagree, and 10 means strongly agree.The following statements were made:No. 1. In the context of COVID-19, the center of government has managed to ensure effective cooperation between different levels of government;No. 2. Under Covid-19, the government has succeeded in ensuring evidence-based decision-making;No. 3. The center of government, in the context of COVID-19, has a strategic leadership role in providing support to the head of government;No. 4. Under Covid-19, the government has managed to ensure effective and coherent communication with the public**Fig.3.**

Respondents were very critical of the center of government ability to provide functions effectively during COVID-19.For example, 50% of respondents disagreed that effective and coherent communication with the public has been achieved. 40% did not agree that evidence-based decisions had been made.On the other hand, 53% almost agreed with the statement about of the center' of government ability to ensure effective cooperation between different levels of government.A relatively low rating at the top of the scale indicates that the center of government needs support to better fulfill its responsibilities.It can also be argued that in the context of COVID-19, the center of government focused its resources mainly on supporting the head of government, because 45% (scale from 8 to 10) agreed that it was the center of government that played the leading strategic role in providing such support.

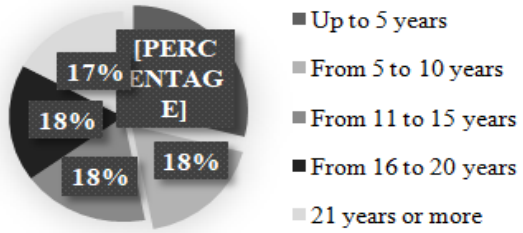


Fig.1. Work experience in public administration.

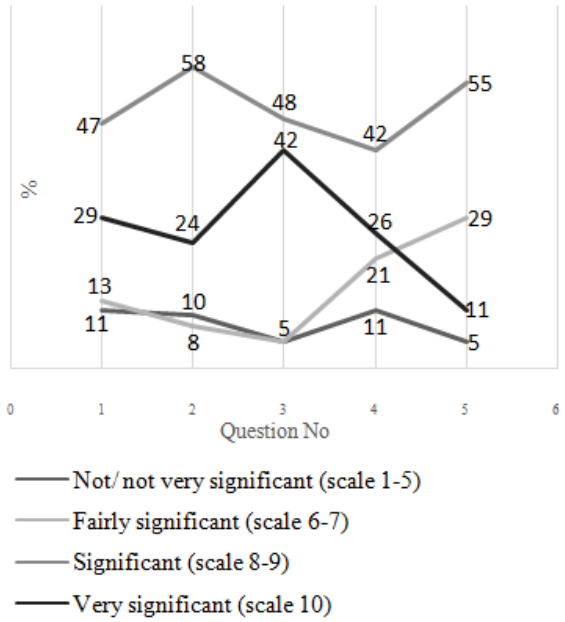


Fig.2. Assessment of competencies.

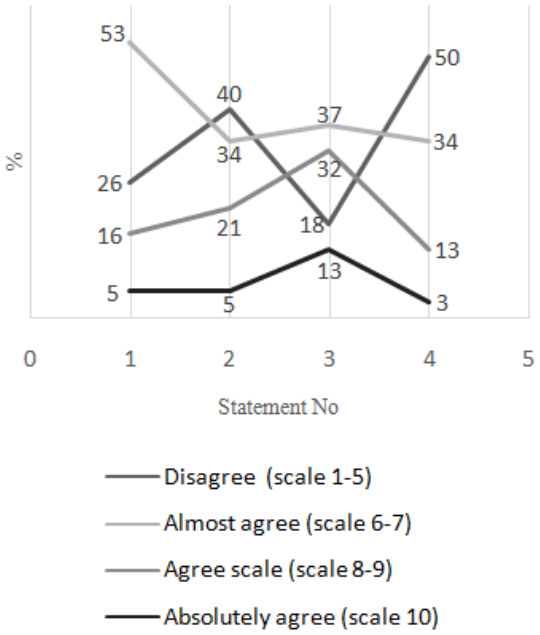


Fig.3. Assessment of functions.

IV. CONCLUSION

The key conclusions are as follows:

1. Integrity among different competencies of the center of government has a significant role in order to achieve necessary results.
2. The center of government has managed to develop a platform that facilitates the planning, management and organization of various governance processes.
3. The center of government uses resources of competence and functional resources that are focused on the ability to respond in a timely manner to changes in the internal and external environment.
4. The institutions selected in the survey can be viewed as a limitation, since their choice was based on the public administration structure in Latvia. Besides, in-depth evaluation of the functions of the institutions of the center of government took into account the range of questions included in the survey, which formed a specific restriction on the number of survey participants.
5. Authors believe that it is necessary to conduct an extended study of the roles and functions of the government center in order to clarify not only the interaction of various processes, but also to define the main functions of the government center.

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