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## CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT DURING A PANDEMIC (FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF SVISHTOV MUNICIPALITY, REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA)

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**Abstract:** Controlling the spread of COVID-19, in a complicating epidemic situation in towns and villages, proved to be a serious challenge for local governments as well. Taking into account the lack of established practice and anticipatory theory in pandemic situations, the present study substantiates the adequacy of measures taken and activities against the spread of COVID-19 in the municipality of Svishtov. With the help of theoretical and empirical research methods, good practices of local self-government are analyzed (through observation and monitoring) and synthesized, with limited resources (including financial, human, technological, information), for all citizens to create adequate living conditions during a pandemic. Among the key priorities are: healthcare, social activities, education, economy, safe environment, public order and security, fight against misinformation, institutional partnerships, donation initiative, communication and media policy, local restrictive measures. The paper presents systematic actions and initiatives on the territory of Svishtov municipality, in accordance with the stated national priorities, the Decision of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria to declare a "state of emergency", the Law on Measures and Actions during the state of emergency, the Decision of the Council of Ministers on declaring an "emergency epidemic situation", the recommendations of the National Operational Headquarters for combating the coronavirus in Bulgaria, the orders of the Minister of Health, the instructions and prescriptions of specialized competent bodies and institutions. In view of the above and the introduced anti-epidemic measures, the consequences for the local economy are also analyzed. The insurmountable event of extraordinary nature caused a negative effect on individuals and legal entities located in the municipality of Svishtov. The actions taken by the Municipality of Svishtov in connection with the prepared package of economic measures to support local businesses and citizens of the Municipality of Svishtov and to reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic were assessed. The results of the study show that the broad areas of competence and involvement of the Municipal crisis management structure, municipal administration and specialized competent authorities are a prerequisite for adequate implementation of measures under these key priorities and the lack of serious complications in the epidemic situation in the municipality Svishtov. The implemented activities against the spread of COVID-19 on the territory of Svishtov municipality are in accordance with the applicable national and regional policy. The package of economic measures is an adequate tool to support local businesses and citizens of Svishtov municipality, and to reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic.

**Keywords:** local government, pandemic, challenges

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The administrative center of Svishtov municipality (Central Northern Bulgaria) - Svishtov is located along the Danube, in its southernmost point. Svishtov Municipality consists of 16 settlements with a population of over 30,000 people. The global pandemic in 2020 put a serious test not only to the population but also to local governments. Taking into account the lack of established practice and anticipatory theory in pandemic situations, this paper presents good practices for measures taken and activities against the spread of COVID-19 in the municipality of Svishtov, justifying their adequacy and timeliness. They have received the approval of the Municipal Council of Svishtov Municipality, based on a report developed by the author (as part of the team of municipal administration - Svishtov) for measures taken and activities carried out during the state of emergency.

A key role in controlling the epidemic situation at the local level is played by the Municipal crisis management structure, which includes representatives of the municipal administration and experts from various professional fields. Its main goal is to organize, coordinate and monitor the actions of the competent authorities in relation to preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the municipality of Svishtov, as well as summarizing and analyzing data on the epidemic situation, and formulating proposals for the introduction of local anti-epidemic measures.

Using theoretical and empirical research methods, the following are analyzed (through observation and follow-up by the author, as part of the team of municipal administration - Svishtov) and synthesized the efforts of local governments in Svishtov municipality, with limited resources (including financial, human, technological, information), to create adequate living conditions for all citizens during a pandemic. They are presented as key priorities: healthcare, social activities, education, economics, safe environment, public order and security, fight against misinformation, institutional partnerships, donation initiative, communication and media policy.

**Healthcare** - in the event of an emergency epidemic situation, on the territory of Svishtov municipality a need has been identified for the provision of various services to preserve the health and life of the population, incl. through the activity of the municipal hospital, control study of the health situation in Svishtov municipality, provision of free assistance by a psychologist, round-the-clock pharmacy on duty, provision of specialized medical transport.

• **Municipal Hospital**

The main priority during the past pandemic year is the protection of the health and life of the population. For this purpose, the Municipal Hospital has a separate Covid-sector for the treatment of patients in an uncomplicated condition, according to the level of competence of the medical institution. With the increase in the number of patients with coronavirus infection, the bed capacity for the same has been increased several times, at the expense of the bed stock of other hospital wards. Due to the tangible need for medical staff, the team of the medical institution includes doctors, nurses and paramedics, incl. and as volunteers. In view of the unstable financial condition of the municipal hospital in the conditions of a pandemic, it received financial and material support from the Municipality of Svishtov and the Ministry of Health. With municipal funding, repairs were carried out on the premises for treatment of patients and the necessary equipment was provided. At the initiative of the mayor of Svishtov municipality, donation campaigns were launched in favor of the medical institution, as a result of which a significant amount of personal protective equipment, medical equipment, funds, etc. were provided. As of March 2020, until December 31, 2020, the municipal hospital has received targeted donations from individuals and legal entities (institutional partners and sponsors) totaling over BGN 300,000.

• **Control study of the health situation in Svishtov municipality**

Concern for the safety of people who are most at risk and are in daily contact with the population was one of the main reasons for the municipal leadership to take action for laboratory tests of various risk groups. In order to study the epidemic situation on the territory of Svishtov Municipality, the staff of the municipal hospital, social workers, pharmacies, large grocery stores, businesses, police, residents of remote settlements in the municipality, who make frequent trips and contacts with people, were tested. From other regions, groups of students from all Svishtov schools, willing citizens. The control study is funded by the Municipality of Svishtov, and its purpose is to prevent and impose adequate measures against the spread of the epidemic in case infected people are identified.

• **Providing free help from a psychologist**

As an adequate and timely form to support the general health of citizens, Svishtov Municipality provided free specialized consultations by psychologists by telephone. Stress and fear are natural states, provoked by life itself, but in the period of social isolation there is a sensitive tendency for their dominance in the psycho-emotional state in people.

• **Duty 24-hour pharmacy**

With care for the population, the municipal leadership ensured the work of a 24-hour pharmacy on duty, which would be available in case of urgent need for medication. The order of the medicines is carried out through the Call Center at the Municipality of Svishtov. The delivery of medicines to elderly people and those in difficult health situation from all settlements in the municipality is organized by the Municipality of Svishtov.

• **Provision of specialized medical transport**

In view of the restrictive measures taken after the introduction of the state of emergency, Svishtov Municipality provides free transport services with specialized medical transport to needy residents for emergency transportation to medical institutions outside the municipality.

**Social activities** - in connection with the unprecedented challenges, on the territory of Svishtov municipality was identified the need to provide social services at home to vulnerable social groups. The necessary conditions have been created in a timely manner for people in a problematic situation (elderly people over 65 with disabilities or inability to self-care, as well as people with disabilities and their families, persons quarantined by health authorities and for whom there is a social need for hourly services ) to receive social services.

• **Patronage care, home helpers, personal assistants**

According to the decision of the municipal leadership, even with the declaration of the state of emergency, the employees of the municipal structure "Home Social Patronage" take care of the people from the target groups on a daily basis. With European funding through the development of projects under EU programs, Svishtov Municipality has expanded the scope of social services provided.

Under the program "Hot lunch at home in an emergency situation - 2020" through the Social Assistance Agency, Svishtov Municipality received funding of almost 10 thousand BGN to provide a daily hot lunch for a period of 33 working days for a total of 100 people in the municipality. The target groups receiving a hot lunch are: low-income people, quarantined for the time being; elderly people over 65 with incomes below the poverty line, who have no relatives and people unable to self-care.

Under the procedure "Patronage care for the elderly and people with disabilities - Component 3" under OP "Human Resources Development", Svishtov Municipality implemented a project worth BGN 245 thousand. 37 employees were hired (social worker, technical assistant, drivers and workers performing home deliveries), which ensure the purchase of food and medicine, payment of household bills, ordering and receiving administrative services, disinfection and cleaning of the homes of 150 users of the social service. The target groups of the project are elderly people over 65 with disabilities and inability to self-care, people with disabilities and their families and adults at risk.

Under the National Program "Provision of care in the home environment" of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Svishtov Municipality appointed to the position of "Home helpers" 27 persons serving 31 users (single people with various diseases, over 65 years, with a monthly income below 5 times the amount of the Guaranteed Minimum Income for the country - BGN 375). Under the Personal Assistance Act, in March and April, 2020, another 27 "Personal Assistants" were appointed to persons/children with disabilities.

• **Social institutions and residential services**

The provision of social services in the context of a pandemic has proved to be a huge challenge, especially since the users of the services are mainly from the risk groups. An immediate reorganization of the activities in the social institutions of the municipality was made. Residential services - Home for the Elderly "Maria Louisa" Svishtov and Family Accommodation Centers for adults with dementia in the village of Ovcha Mogila switched to a restrictive regime, creating and providing a fully controlled environment. The Day Care Center for Children with Disabilities, the Center for Social Rehabilitation and Integration and the Center for Social Support switched to remote operation.

**Education** – immediately after the state of emergency was imposed, an organization for the implementation of all recommended anti-epidemic measures was established in the municipal educational establishments. Svishtov Municipality purchased non-contact thermometers for the needs of the medical offices in the schools and kindergartens, dispensers for disinfectants, disinfectants for hands, surfaces and premises, gloves and other protective equipment were purchased for the educational establishments. The buildings with all adjacent premises and yards of kindergartens and schools are disinfected with funds from the Municipality of Svishtov.

The obligatory anti-epidemic measures on a national scale necessitated the suspension of the attendance classes in all institutions for pre-school and school education. The crisis situation has led to the search for opportunities for substitute activities and maintaining interaction with students and children in school and preschool education, in order to prevent delays in the process of acquiring the necessary knowledge and competencies, and their development as individuals. All schools on the territory of Svishtov municipality introduced (from 16.03.2020) distance learning of students through the application of various electronic forms. Electronic communication has led to the full involvement of parents in the educational process through the exchange of information with teachers.

Out of 2827 students who study in the schools in Svishtov municipality, 2552 students are covered in distance learning, the other students are provided by teachers, educational mediators or social workers educational materials on paper, due to lack of opportunities for electronic forms of training. Some of the schools bought internet cards with their own funds, provided tablets and other devices to their students for the implementation of the distance form of education.

Remote pedagogical work is also carried out with the children attending the kindergartens, in order to help the parents to organize the children's time at home. Communication is carried out through e-mail, social networks and other forms, in which children at home are supported for preparation and exercises. Links are provided for access to the electronic resources of the publishing houses that teachers and children work with. Information about children and parents with the necessary instructions and practical advice for the implementation of the set tasks is constantly published.

**Economics** - after the introduction of a state of emergency on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, as of 13.03.2020, by orders of the Minister of Health, restrictive anti-epidemic measures were gradually introduced, which had the greatest negative impact on the activities of small and medium-sized businesses. In order to prevent the gathering of people, on the territory of Svishtov municipality all group forms of work with children and students, the activity of the pensioners' clubs and the centers for social services, the holding of all kinds of mass events, including sports, cultural, entertainment and scientific (cinemas, theaters, concerts, museums, conferences, sports and spa centers, gyms, etc.). A strict regime of work, enhanced disinfection and controlled access regime of the functioning business units was ordered.

Thus, the economic activity on the territory of Svishtov municipality was faced with serious trials, losses and lost profits. With the exception of grocery stores, pharmacies and drugstores, among the most affected by the introduced anti-epidemic and restrictive measures are catering establishments, drinking establishments, entertainment centers, companies offering specialized services, retail outlets, as well as transport companies. performing bus and taxi transport of passengers.

• **Program for support of the micro-enterprises affected by the state of emergency for fight against the viral infection COVID - 19 on the territory of Svishtov municipality.**

As a measure to support local business in a pandemic, Svishtov Municipality commissioned an expert study and analysis of the economic consequences of the emergency caused by the COVID-19 virus infection on micro-enterprises in Svishtov Municipality. Subsequently, through experts from the municipal administration and the Academy of Economics "D. A. Tsenov» (deliberately established Bureau for Administrative and Consulting Assistance) was provided free of charge expert assistance on issues related to crisis management of business, as well as in the preparation of project proposals under the procedure for "Support of micro and small enterprises to overcome economic Consequences of the pandemic COVID - 19 "of the operational program" Innovation and Competitiveness "2014-2020 for the receipt of a grant of up to BGN 10,000.

• **Package of economic measures to support local businesses and citizens of Svishtov municipality and to reduce the negative consequences of the declared state of emergency**

At the suggestion of the mayor of Svishtov, in 2020 the Municipal Council - Svishtov adopted a "Package of economic measures to support local businesses and citizens of Svishtov and to reduce the negative consequences of the declared state of emergency." The package of measures is aimed at tenants of municipal properties and users of municipal services. Persons who have restricted or suspended their activities as a result of the measures and restrictions imposed during the state of emergency - tenants of municipal residential and non-residential properties or properties owned or provided for management of municipal companies and secondary spending units - have been temporarily released from the obligation to pay rent (excluding rents and leases of agricultural land). There is also a temporary exemption from the obligation to pay the rental price under existing contracts for rent of movable facilities (municipal property) or areas (municipal property) for placement of movable facilities under the Municipal Property Act, in connection with Art. 56 of the Spatial Planning Act. The persons liable to pay local fees to markets, sidewalks, squares, streets and terrains for other purposes, as well as to pay local fees for the social service "Children's Kitchen" were also released from the obligation in order to reduce the negative consequences from the pandemic.

## **2. SAFE ENVIRONMENT, PUBLIC ORDER AND SECURITY**

The main prerequisite for adequate implementation of all anti-epidemic measures on the territory of Svishtov municipality is the availability of a safe environment. In this regard, in parallel with the implementation of the regulations of the Minister of Health and after a decision of the Municipal crisis management structure, the mayor issued additional local regulations to restrict travel; suspension of medical examinations, consultations and visits; termination of classes and extracurricular activities; restriction of all mass events (sports, cultural, etc.) related to gathering many people in one place. Specific local regulations have also been issued regarding the functioning of municipal markets, restaurants, and public transport vehicles; organizing and conducting festive events.

In order to ensure a safe environment on the territory of Svishtov municipality, measures were taken to introduce an enhanced disinfection regime, a strict regime of operation of the functioning structures and a controlled access regime. As a prerequisite for ensuring a safe environment, an insulator was discovered in a building of the student dormitories on the territory of the town of Svishtov with 20 rooms, which have been repaired with funds from the Municipality of Svishtov. The socially disadvantaged residents of the settlements in the municipality, the users of social services, the employees in the municipal administration, the municipal enterprises and the social centers were provided with the necessary protective equipment.

Daily disinfection activity was carried out with public funds on public places, streets, sidewalks, inter-block spaces, buildings and vehicles on the territory of the town of Svishtov and the villages, incl. the municipal hospital, the police department, bank offices, pharmacies, grocery stores, municipal market, municipal and private buildings, parks, gardens, entrance and exit of the town of Svishtov, kindergartens, schools, churches and temples, home for the elderly, cars taxi transport on the territory of Svishtov municipality. Residents of Svishtov municipality were provided with a disinfectant for personal use free of charge.

The exercise of control over public order and security is carried out in excellent partnership between the Municipality of Svishtov, the Municipal crisis management structure, the representatives of the Regional Health Inspectorate and the local police department, as well as other competent authorities in cases where immediate response and prevention is necessary. of risk situations and tensions.

It is noted that after the introduction of hitherto imposing restrictive measures in public life, there is a change in the behavior of the population, leading to the creation of new or recall of forgotten working rules.

### **3. FIGHT AGAINST MISINFORMATION. COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA POLICY.**

In connection with the declared state of emergency and the measures that were introduced on the territory of Svishtov municipality against the spread of COVID-19, Svishtov Municipality has created an adequate organization to combat disinformation of the population. In view of their timely awareness, the residents of the municipality received 24-hour up-to-date information on the course of the epidemic situation and the local measures taken on the territory of Svishtov municipality through: a deliberately established call center to Svishtov Municipality; telephone reception of the mayor of Svishtov municipality; the website of Svishtov Municipality; the deliberately created page "State of Emergency Svishtov Municipality" on Facebook; the personal Facebook page of the mayor of Svishtov municipality; publications in local, national and regional newspapers; statements in local television and radio media.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

This report presents the pandemic challenges facing local government in the municipality of Svishtov. The scope of the study includes information on specifically taken consistent and systematic local actions and initiatives, in accordance with the stated national priorities and in the protection of the public interest and public health. In accordance with the applicable national, regional and local policies, by orders of the mayor, local anti-epidemic measures have been introduced, affecting the activities of individuals and legal entities, institutions, organizations, centers and other structures located in the municipality of Svishtov. Restrictive measures have been introduced in respect of students, workers, pensioners, people with diseases, quarantined persons, schools, kindergartens, medical establishments, employers, commercial establishments, public catering establishments, drinking establishments, entertainment establishments, children's centers, clubs by interests, sports sites, cultural institutions, indoor and outdoor public places, etc. The main goal is to minimize the spread of COVID-19 in society, in order to slow down the course of the epidemic and reduce its intensity, in order to create conditions for more effective use of available funds for specific prevention and therapy.

Despite the extraordinary situation in the country, Svishtov Municipality continued the implementation of the agreed projects under various EU operational programs, as well as the development of new projects under open procedures. With its large-scale activity in all public spheres (including healthcare, education, social services and economy), the municipal leadership has proved its commitment, responsibility, empathy and concern for the most vulnerable groups, who have the hardest time with the changes in the public life. Socio-economic, health and educational needs of the local population are met with adequate, fast, anticipatory actions. In times of uncertainty, Svishtov Municipality has created employment for a significant number of people in the provision of social services for the elderly and people with disabilities. The developed package of economic measures is assessed as an adequate tool to support local businesses and citizens of Svishtov municipality, and to reduce the negative consequences of the pandemic.

In response to the challenges posed by the epidemic, the local government introduced good practices in local crisis management, in the protection of the public interest and for the prevention of the spread of COVID-19. The results of the study show that the broad areas of competence and involvement of the Municipal crisis management structure, municipal administration and specialized competent authorities are a prerequisite for adequate implementation of the actions undertaken on the analyzed key priorities and the lack of serious complications in the epidemic situation in the municipality Svishtov.

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