



POLICY MEMO

Improving institutional coordination and communication with the public in times of public health emergency

Purpose

Despite the good work of the Government in general and the Ministry of Health with its professional bodies in particular, , regarding the management of the public health emergency caused by COVID-19, there are some aspects which have room for improvement and would consequently contribute to the better management of this situation.

Therefore, the purpose of this short document is to provide a few recommendations to the Government regarding three aspects that constitute the problem addressed in this document:

1. Increasing or improving institutional coordination in managing the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. The optimal improvement and unification in the communication of the Government with the citizens; and
3. Publication of decisions and notices easily accessible to the public.

Problem

As can be understood from the purpose set out above, the problem identified in this document relates to three elements: first, institutional coordination, second, communication with the public, and third, public access to Government decisions and notices. All three elements are treated separately, always in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

1. Institutional coordination

To illustrate the lack of adequate institutional coordination in the time of the pandemic, we provide a few examples below. The first case of infection with the coronavirus (COVID-19) in Kosovo was confirmed by the Government through a press conference on March 13, 2020¹, while three days earlier, on March 10, the Government had approved the request of the Ministry of Health to approve the Plan for readiness and response against coronavirus and Action Plan². On the other hand, on March 15, the Government takes a decision to declare a public health emergency and requests that actions taken should be in accordance with the National Reaction Plan and the Ministry of Health is

¹ Kosovo confirms the first two cases of coronavirus (COVID-19): <https://bit.ly/3aD2QU4>

² Government of Kosovo, Decision no. 04/06 dated 10.03.2020: <https://bit.ly/2Y79L51>

appointed as responsible for managing the declared public health emergency situation. The question that arises is: what was the Plan for Readiness and Reaction and the Action Plan of the Ministry of Health approved on March 10th that proved insufficient and led the Government to move to the National Reaction Plan? Although the latter is a government document, it is drafted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (mainly by the Emergency Management Agency) and is more of a natural disaster management document based on the Law on Natural Disaster Management than a document which facilitates the management of a pandemic where the actions of the Ministry of Health are based on the Law on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases.

Furthermore, on March 12^h, the Government established the Special Commission for Coronavirus Prevention (COVID 19) chaired by the Prime Minister, in order to manage the whole process on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo and the Coordination Secretariat of the Government (CSG) is established as a body that provides administrative support to this commission³. So, the other question that arises is whether this Special Commission established on March 12 will manage the situation, or will it be the Ministry of Health according to the decision of March 15 mentioned above? Furthermore, on March 17, at the request of the President, a meeting of the Kosovo Security Council (KSC) was held to discuss the management of the pandemic situation, the need to declare a state of emergency and the institutional mechanism that should manage this situation. Unlike the *ad-hoc*-created Special Commission, the KSC has two permanent support bodies: the Secretariat for the purpose of preparing meetings and proposing analysis to the KSC and the Situation Center for the purpose of gathering information and informing the Prime Minister and the KSC on the security situation, in this case the situation with COVID-19 pandemic management⁴.

Another question is why should a Special Commission be established (and the CSG should be appointed as a supporting body of the commission) when since 2008 there is a legally established KSC which also meets in normal situations and has the Secretariat as its supporting body? This comes in question even more given that the Special Commission, created *ad-hoc* does not have executive powers as the KSC, but only proposes to the Government the measures for approval, which the KSC could also propose measures to the Government for approval about the management of the respective situation.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration decides on March 19 to activate the National Reaction Plan and establish the Inter-Institutional Group for Incident Management, coordinated by the Deputy-Minister of Internal Affairs and Public Administration while several ministers and other institutions serve as members (Minister of Health one of the members)⁵. In this case, was the National Reaction Plan activated by the decision of the Government on March 15th or should it be reactivated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration on March 19th? And, is the Special Commission set up on March 12 managing the situation, or is the Ministry of Health as authorized on March 15, or is it the Inter-Institutional Group for Incident Management the body that is managing this situation?

³ Government of Kosovo, Decision no. 01/08 dated 12.03.2020: <https://bit.ly/3aDE4NM>

⁴ Law no. 03 / L-050 on the establishment of the Kosovo Security Council, Articles 16, 17: <https://bit.ly/2KCMK1S>

⁵ Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration, Decision no. 112/2020 dated 19.03.2020: <https://bit.ly/3aydSK1>

2. Communication with the public

The second element of the problem is related to the Government's communication with the public about the management of public health emergency caused by COVID-19. What we have seen so far is that the Government has not spoken/communicated with one voice to the public because Government decisions and statements have been communicated by the Prime Minister, the First Deputy Prime Minister, the Second Deputy Prime Minister, Government Spokesman and several ministers separately according to their fields of work such as the Minister of Health, the Minister of Economy, Labor, Trade, Industry, Entrepreneurship and Strategic Investments, the Minister of Infrastructure and Environment, Acting minister of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration and representatives from other professional institutions.

While the fact that information was communicated from the Government is positive, the fact that information related to measures in times of the pandemic have been communicated by many people and at different times, has affected the inconsistency of communication and has made it difficult for citizens to follow all notifications. For example, the communication of measures regarding the postponement of the payment deadline of citizens to public enterprises, declaration of tax obligations, etc., have been communicated by the First Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Hoti at a press conference organized on March 15⁶. Subsequently, statements and notices were given by the Second Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Abazi together with the Government Spokesman on March 17 and other communications over time by the Government Spokesman and the Ministers separately. For example, business notices have been issued by the relevant Ministry, notices on the possibility of returning citizens who have remained outside Kosovo have been communicated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, then notifications about transportation and form of transport have been communicated by the Minister of Infrastructure and Environment, etc.

3. Publication of decisions and notices

In addition to the Government's decisions, there are 14 other decisions taken by the Inter-Institutional Group for Incident Management within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration, which, although published on the website of this ministry, have been publicized and commented on in the media more than the citizens have found and read them. For example, there are decisions among them about the validity of personal documents that have expired during this situation, decisions about the movement of people, businesses, companies, vehicles and other important decisions for citizens.

Moreover, decisions taken by the Minister of Finance and Transfers that were communicated as plans to be approved by the Government at the press conference on March 15 by Mr. Hoti, can be found on the website of the Tax Administration of Kosovo⁷. Similarly, decisions and notices are found separately on the website of the Ministry of Economy, Labor, Trade, Industry, Entrepreneurship and Strategic Investments⁸, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment⁹, etc.

While the publication of decisions and announcements is positive, the fact that these are very scattered makes it more difficult for many citizens to find these decisions since they have to be sought

⁶ First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo holds a press conference, 15.03.2020: <https://bit.ly/2Ĕ0Oebx>

⁷ Kosovo Tax Administration, dated 19.03.2020: <https://bit.ly/2Y4J6ĔF>

⁸ Ministry of Economy, Labor, Trade, Industry, Entrepreneurship and Strategic Investments: <https://bit.ly/2VĔm3KV>

⁹ Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment, important announcement: <https://bit.ly/3aEHcPh>

in many places and this has made access to decisions and other announcements of the Government a problem for the citizens.

Recommendations

According to the three elements of the problem, the following specific recommendations can be given to avoid them:

Institutional coordination

- The government should appoint only one inter-ministerial body (commission, council, group) as responsible for managing the situation;
- Regardless of the institutional mechanism, the Ministry of Health should be the leader of this body because the nature of the emergency is related to the work of the Ministry of Health;
- The Government, if it decides that a body other than the Kosovo Security Council should manage this situation, should still convene the Kosovo Security Council more often in a normal situation through which it provides coordination with institutions beyond the Government, such as the President's Office and Kosovo Assembly (Security Committee) which are members of KSC. Additional members with temporary status may be invited by the Prime Minister as needed;
- The Prime Minister must delegate the right to chair the meetings of the Kosovo Security Council to the Minister of Health on a regular basis, and he can only chair on special occasions and as needed;

Communication with the public

- The Minister of Health (or the Prime Minister) should address the citizens about the management of the pandemic situation;
- Updated information on a daily basis should be provided by the Government Spokesperson at a specific time during the day;

Publication of decisions and notices

- The government, specifically the IT service in the office of the Prime Minister, should create a site for the publication of all information related to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 to citizens;
- Publishing all the information on one page does not mean that the institutions should not publish them on their respective pages, but that during the time of pandemic and in order to facilitate access by citizens, they should be on one page;
- The government should oblige all ministries to send information to the IT service in the office of the Prime Minister to be published on the respective website.