



ORIGINAL PAPER

Health policies during COVID 19 pandemic in Kosovo

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Abstract:

Public policy in democratic societies aims to create public value by providing quality public services, regulations and state-organized activities with the ultimate goal of creating a better service towards its citizens. Since policy failure has always been a concern for various scientists and researchers, this paper aims to contribute to improving the quality and efficiency of public policies by providing expertise to state institutions to ensure effectiveness, transparency, inclusiveness and accountability of the entire process.

The health system is one of the main pillars of public policy of every country today, and this is especially noticeable after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the world, a problem which radically changed public policies and how are they percept. Kosovo as a new state faces various political and state-building challenges. The functioning of the health system is one of those challenges, which bared the main responsibility in dealing with pandemic.

Therefore, the main focus of this paper will be to analyze the public policies introduced by health institutions and government bodies as response to the COVID 19 pandemic. In this regard we will try to answer some questions which are going to be raised within the paper such as how satisfied were the citizens with health policies in Kosovo, the readiness of the institutions and the professional staff engaged, knowledge and use of best practices.

In order to obtain the information needed to justify the main objectives of the thesis, beside the content analysis and comparative methods, we are going to conduct a survey with officials and various institutional experts that were engaged in planning and implementation of the policies in time of Covid19 pandemic, as well as with people from private sector and that of civil society.

Keywords: *Policy, health, COVID 19, Kosovo, institutions.*

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Introduction

The health system as one of the main pillars of public policy, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic has always been a concern for various scientists and researchers. COVID19 pandemic had significant negative implications all over the world in different fields, such as health, politics, rule of law, safety and socio-economics. It worsened the political instability and deepened socio-economic problems in many countries. In the Western Balkans, there was no unified approach in establishing the legal and institutional frameworks for managing the crisis. Namely, each state had its own specific approach and way of regulating this response. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, the health systems of the Western Balkans faced difficulties in financing and delivering services. Investments on health systems are significantly lower than the EU average, whereas the funds gets spend in inefficient way. This makes the region vulnerable to future epidemic outbreaks. (World Bank Group, 2020)

COVID 19 seriously tested health systems, as many countries were not prepared and were caught off guard, which led to chaotic reactions and dissatisfaction among citizens. As a result, many governments took additional measures to try to prevent the spread of the pandemic and to deal with the created situation. Therefore in this paper we focus on public policies in health system in Kosovo, by analyzing public policies which have been implemented as part of the development strategy in health, professional and operational readiness of the health institutions in municipality of Ferizaj, as well as taking into account the opinion of the citizens who are direct users of public health services. The purpose of the research is to provide an overview of the health system in Kosovo in order to understand how the various components of the health sector are integrated and how they function, citing their performance or efficiency. The paper will provide a real picture of the health system and public policies in this field, as well as will address problematic and current issues.

In order to reach the desired results, there are several research questions that will guide us through, such as how were health policies implemented in Kosovo; what factors can enable or limit the effective implementation of policies; how policies translate into practice, focusing on processes rather than results. As explained earlier, this study is about finding out which issues affect and how they affect the course of implementation processes.

Qualitative methods are more appropriate to research and understand processes and to take into account people's perceptions. The results from the survey will provide a ground base for additional research on public policy and services offered to the citizens of Kosovo. Additionally, they will give a good feedback to government institutions and officials who are interested in providing quality services to citizens of Kosovo. In this regard, some of the research questions covered by this survey deal with the level of satisfaction with the conditions and services in public hospitals in Kosovo, with privacy concerns of the citizens regarding their medical data, ethnic or religious discrimination in public health institutions, professionalism of public medical staff, human resources management in public health and the political influence on employment. Moreover, this survey will show how the government has handled the COVID19 outbreak, measures undertaken by the government, and whether the government has communicated clearly to ensure that, everyone has the necessary information to protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

Public Health Policy

Politics are a set of desires and goals related to a particular problem or set of problems, or it represents the art of governance with public institutions. As a social activity, it aims to examine and analyze the problems that preoccupy the individual or social groups. Through these policies, the interests and demands of the citizens are articulated, as well as presented in the form of a plan, program, project, and detailed instruction. In addition, politics as a social activity is interested in understanding the role of institutional actors in managing the public policies for improving the quality of services delivered by the government institutions towards the citizens. As an integral and inseparable part of collective life, it consists of people and social movements that go beyond their personal needs and narrow existential interests. Meeting the needs and obligations of citizens, as well as creating living conditions is essentially the very reason for the existence of political activity. Politics is an emotional and exciting activity where people face challenges, disagreements-conflicts in decision-making and various issues in governance. (Abdullai, 2016)

The political process in the broader sense is subject to policy analysis. It consists of the activities of political subjects in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies. For a policy analyst, such a conceptual model of political decision-making enables concentration on one policy phase or comparison between several policy phases. The formation of public policy (program), implementation and evaluation of effectiveness and justification are the main types of activities. (Grdesic, 2006) In the scientific aspect, the process of developing public policies should be analyzed, because in this way we will be able to better understand the deviations or the journey of institutional and non-institutional actors during the realization of the relevant activities in practice. The path of different actors through which public policy is developed and realized is called a political process. This political process includes agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimization, policy implementation, and policy evaluation and change. Moreover, the formulation of public policies includes the development of formal political acts (laws, orders, executive orders, administrative regulations, etc.) that are legitimate (Denhardt, 2010: 44-47)

Both governmental and non-governmental organizations play an important role in the public policy formulation process. Institutional actors during their official activities participate in decision-making at different levels and aim to deal with issues such as foreign and domestic policy, health, education, employment, economy, justice, environment, energy, transport, housing, agriculture, judiciary and a host of other issues. Depending on the position and role that institutional and non-institutional actors have in the respective organizations, their participation in the design and implementation of policies in a certain field depends. (Abdullai, 2016)

The Ministry of Health has a key role in the development of general policies in the health sector. The Ministry of Health has the following responsibilities:

- Creates the policy and implements the laws of a non-discriminatory and accountable health care system;
- Coordinates activities in the health sector to promote the coherent development of health policy;
- Establishes norms and standards and issues guidelines for the health sector respecting the relevant international standards;
- Supervise the implementation of these standards, including inspection and other services as needed;

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- Monitors the health situation and implements adequate measures to prevent and control health problems;
- Manages the use and development of infrastructure related to health care under the responsibility of this ministry;
- Supports the participation, initiatives and development of community activities related to health;
- Participates in the development and implementation of the public information campaign and other promotional projects to increase public awareness and compliance with health standards;
- Encourages the development of health education for increasing knowledge and competences in the field of health. (Ministry of Health, 2022)

According to the WHO, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. (Pushkarev, 2019). In the other hand, public health policy tries to regulate the health and wellbeing of the population through undertaking certain actions and policies that will reduce and prevent spread of diseases, and will strengthen the health capacities and readiness for combating threats towards the health of the entire population or specific groups within. Health policy analysis is a political as well as a social activity and can take a long time. However, in today's fast-paced environment, health policymakers may face a frightening reality of being forced to make important decisions in a very short period. Most of the proposed frameworks in the health policy literature use specific concepts and models to explain health policies in abstract, theoretical terms and focus primarily on health policy analysis. (Collins, 2005)

The COVID-19 pandemic hit all the countries of the region in the same way, seriously pressuring the health system, affecting sustainable development, shaking the socio-economic pillars of the states and increasing the vulnerabilities of communities. Given the extended magnitude of the consequences of the pandemic and the fact that the health crisis will have a prolonged duration, it is necessary that governments should contribute to the establishment of an efficient and effective response and recovery system towards the pandemic.

When it comes to assessing how different national and local governments have responded to the pandemic, the situation within the group is different. Although most respondents agreed that the initial strict measures were inevitable because everything was new and nobody knew what we were facing, it seems that many argue the fact that the national authorities did not take the virus seriously enough at first, and then they suddenly went to very strict measures. This created a sense of mistrust and added uncertainty among the population. Again, we have to acknowledge that austerity measures were inevitable for overcoming the pandemic, whether people liked it or not, but what we have seen is that these measures were not all respected by the citizens, nor were they strictly enforced and managed from the local and national authorities.

The main reactive and protective mechanisms adopted by the Government of the Republic of Kosovo on the health care front include:

1. Social distance. The government adopted a social distancing regulation in order to reduce the speed of transmission and allow the health system to plan resources to help people with a high tendency to have severe or even fatal consequences from the virus.

2. Increasing the capacity of personnel. As a result of the new cases, there was an increase in the number of health care professionals and clinics dealing with cases of COVID-19.
3. Overcoming critical shortages. To increase health care capacity and overcome critical shortages, the Government purchased or donated a number of test kits, masks, respirators and beds.
4. Public Communication. The government used communication as a tool to inform and guide citizens, but also to build trust and provide support to citizens. (Stiftung, 2020:7)

Table 1. Government measures in Kosovo for preventing COVID 19 (Stiftung, 2020)

HEALTH CARE	ECONOMY	EDUCATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flatten the curve (movement restrictions and social distancing) • Enhance health care system capacity • Overcome critical shortage • Test and trace • Provide information and guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide emergency financial support for individuals and businesses • Economic stimulus measures • Mandate industrial actions (closures, repurposing and airlines) • Extend deadlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Learning Platform • Internet access and Computers • Plan to Reopen Schools for the 2020- 21 Academic year

However, ineffective implementation of policies in the health sector can result in poor services with consequences that affect the well-being of the entire population. As in other countries, doctors and health workers in Kosovo contracted the coronavirus. In July, it was stated that around 500 health workers had been infected while a number of them had also died. This led to a fear that the health sector could collapse in the wake of large numbers of Covid-19 -affected patients to be cared for by an already limited medical staff. (Krasniqi, 2020)

Also, in order to There were efforts for training healthcare personnel, but majority of experts thinks that they were done late and not in accordance to the needs. There have been complaints from health personnel from clinics that are not specialized for the pandemic.

Previous Researches

There are various policy analyses that refer to general opinion on public policy. Barker argues that it is important to understand what health policy means. The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health policy as an agreement or consensus on health issues, the goals and objectives to be addressed, the priorities between these objectives and the main directions for achieving them. WHO approach to public health

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policy puts health on the agenda of policymakers across sectors and at all levels, instructing them to be aware of the health consequences of their decisions and to acknowledge their health responsibilities. However, health policy decisions are not always the result of a rational process of discussing and evaluating how a particular objective should be achieved. The context in which decisions are made is often very political - about the extent to which public health care is provided and who pays for it. Health policy decisions also depend on value judgments, which in any society are implied but are very important to understand in order for the policy to be implemented. (Barker, 1996)

Avdimetaj thinks that the health system is a vital part of the overall socio-economic system that must ensure well-being and health status that will provide support for the overall economic and social development of society. This system is an important precondition for the progress of society as a whole and vice versa. Kosovo's approach to COVID-19 was challenged by the lack of preventive and preparatory approach to emergency situations, the lack of a clear legal basis for government decisions, limitations on staff resources and capacities, fluctuations in public confidence in institutions, claims for mismanagement and discrimination, and the lack of a clear, transparent and consistent system for communicating with the public. (Avdimetaj, 2020)

A recent publication by Erdem and Lucey on Healthcare workers' losses due to Covid-19 presents a research conducted in 37 countries. The results show that mortality rate among healthcare workers in Kosovo was amongst highest in the region, with 0.22 cases per 100.000 citizens. Other countries like Romania and North Macedonia had 0.14, Bulgaria with 0.10, Albania with 0.07 and Croatia with 0 mortality rates among Healthcare Workers. Only Italy had higher mortality rate from countries nearby with 0.35. (Erdem and Lucey, 2021) Based on Selani, the number of infected among healthcare workers in Kosovo is considered to be high and one of the reasons is the lack of adequate training of doctors and nurses to deal with the pandemic. (Selani, 2020)

Another study shows that protecting healthcare workers in Kosovo should be a public health priority. Furthermore, the paper identifies insufficiency of medical staff as well as medical equipment in hospitals in Kosovo. However, the study finds that almost all healthcare workers continued with their working duties, despite the lack of information, personal protective equipment, trainings etc. (Ukëhaxhaj et al, 2022)

The Survey

In order to get the results needed to complete our paper, we conducted a survey in the municipality of Ferizaj, in the period between January and March 2022, with 174 respondents. The respondents were selected by random sampling method, while the data was processed through SPSS program.

When asked about how satisfied are with the conditions in public hospitals in the country, the answers were divided. 39.98% of the respondents said that were somewhat satisfied, 18.64% had neutral opinion, 16.95% were very satisfied, 10.17% said that they were somewhat dissatisfied, the same percentage said that were very dissatisfied, and the rest had no answer. On the other hand, when the respondents were asked, how satisfied are with the services in public hospitals, different results were gained. Almost 34% said that they are very satisfied with the services, 32.20% said that are somewhat satisfied, 18.64% had neutral opinion, 8.47% somewhat dissatisfied and 6.78% were very dissatisfied. From these results it can be concluded that generally, there is a satisfaction in terms of services provided in public hospitals in Kosovo.

When asked about how they perceive the respect in the privacy when they have to do checkup in public hospitals, 28.81% said that their privacy was always respected, 20.34% said that is usually respected, 32.20% said that sometimes is respected, and only 8.47% that it is never respected. 10.17% of respondents had no answer to this question. There is mix opinion when asked if there is discrimination in the provision of medical services based on ethnicity. Almost half, 45.76% claimed that there isn't discrimination in this regard, 33.90% said that there is discrimination, whereas a significant number, 20.34% couldn't answer this question.

More than half of the respondents, 52.54%, claim that the medical staff in Kosovo has the right level of professionalism and is well trained to perform medical services. In contrary, 27.12% claim that they don't have the right level and are not trained well. 20.34% didn't answer this question.

We received very controversial results from the respondents when asked how they perceive the hiring and the promotion process of the healthcare workers and if this process was done in a fair manner and based on their professional competences. More than half of the respondents (54.24%) claimed that this process was not done according to the procedures, and that the healthcare workers were not hired based on their professional background. Only 32.20% of the respondents claimed that healthcare workers in Municipality of Ferizaj were hired based on their professional competence, while 13.56% did not have an answer.

In terms of the influence of the political parties on the selection of the medical staff, almost half of the respondents (44.07%) said that political parties have great influence in the process of hiring healthcare workers, whereas 33.90% said that they had moderate influence. In contrary, only 16.95% claimed that political parties don't have any influence. The general conclusion is that majority of the respondents share the opinion that the political parties influence the process of hiring healthcare workers.

The general opinion of the respondents regarding the handling of the coronavirus outbreak by the government is positive, where 30.51% of the respondents claimed that the government handled very well the situation with Covid 19 outbreak, 23.73% share the opinion that the situation was handled well, while 6.78% of the respondents claimed that the Covid 19 outbreak was handled poorly. Only 5.10% of the respondents claimed that the government handled the situation very poorly. A high percentage of respondents (30.5%) had a neutral opinion and 3.39% had no opinion on this question.

In terms of the satisfaction with the measures taken by the government to address coronavirus outbreak, more than 40% of the respondents claimed that the measures taken by the government were sufficient, whereas 28.81% claimed that the measures were adequate. Nearly 20% of the respondents claimed that the measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the corona virus were excessive, while 10.17% did not have an answer.

When it comes to the evaluation of the different measurements taken by the government, we see different results. Majority of the respondents see restrictions of movement as unnecessary, whereas they see mandatory PCR testing, vaccination and mask/face covering as very appositely. Almost two-third of the respondents (71.93%) considers that the recommendations for protection from COVID-19 were appropriate, while only 19.30% claimed the opposite. In terms of satisfaction with the measures/recommendations taken by the Ministry of Health and the Government, more

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than half (57.89%) claimed that they were satisfied with the officials, 24.56% claimed the opposite, whereas 17.54% had no answer.

Finally, 44% of the respondents were very satisfied with the way the government communicated Covid 19 related information to the citizens, 28% were satisfied, while 12% were not satisfied with the way government shared the information on topics such as number of infected, number of deaths, number of vaccinated and tested people.

Discussion

If we analyze the data from the survey, we can see that the majority of the respondents acknowledge the efforts of the government in dealing with Covid 19 outbreak, despite the fact that the country was not prepared for a pandemic of this scale. In addition, the data from the Ministry of Health shows that the resources available for public health services are the lowest in Europe and the challenge remains to provide financial means and their effective use. Productivity is low and the efficiency must improve, especially regarding the introduction of modern treatment methods. Capacity utilization is low and the quality of health services must improve, especially when dealing with hospital infections, the use of clinical guidelines and protocols, and the way of patient treatment. (Ministry of Health, 2016) On the other hand, secure and timely information is of fundamental importance for undertaking public health actions, including those related to strengthening health systems for response during emergency, crisis and disaster situations, especially when faced with many fake news and disinformation. Providing timely information is essential to prevent the emergence of diseases and other acute health threats. As stated in the webpage of the Ministry of Health, information coordination between different ministries or institutions can sometimes be complex, due to financial and administrative constraints. However, the health information system must be available for the needs and requirements of all affected parties for emergency, crisis and disaster response. (Ministry of Health, 2017) In this regard, the government did well, based on the results of the survey, and this can be seen as one of the strongest element of this government. A number of experts address the success for the low rate of mortality form Covid 19 (if compared to neighboring countries) to the government information strategy. However, citizens react on government and politics involvement in the process of employment of healthcare workers. This is also seen as one of the biggest fail of the health authorities in Kosovo, since the unfair process of hiring personnel has a direct impact on the health of the others, especially on the health of other healthcare workers.

Conclusions

The impact of the Corona virus on health will pass over time, however, the effects of the global measures taken against the virus in question will not go away so quickly, and some of them will remain part of our life for a long time. Results from the questionnaire indicate that majority of citizens in Kosovo (65%), approve the measures that were taken by the government to stop the pandemic, compared to 25% of citizens that disagree. This means that despite the lack in capacity, training and supplies, the citizens are aware of government capabilities and recognize the efforts towards stopping and putting under control the Corona virus. However, implementing the Strategy of Health remains a concern and reflects the weaknesses of the institutions to overcome the obstacles and further develop the Kosovo Health System.

The staff employed in public health lacks the necessary equipment and training to conduct their profession in professional way. In addition, the employment policies in health and career advancement, the rules for fair employment opportunities should be completely implemented and not to discriminate anyone during this process. Hiring staff that is not competent for the task puts the life of the citizens as well as the life of other healthcare workers in danger.

The information and communication strategy of the government was seen as one of the strongest elements for countering Covid 19 outbreak, despite the fact that there were many fake news and disinformation during the entire time of the pandemic. The population accepted well the recommendations, while the measures taken from the government such as the vaccination, PCR testing and face covering were seen as very appositely. This made the slow start to alter into successful story for Kosovo in the fight against Corona virus.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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