

**CHALLENGES  
OF MUNICIPAL  
MANAGEMENT  
DURING THE  
COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**

November 2020



## National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia

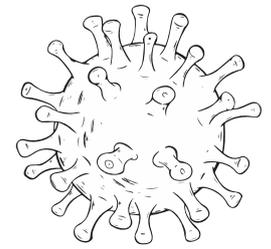


The research report “Challenges of Municipal Management During the COVID-19 Pandemic” is prepared by the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) within the ***Fostering Regional and Local Development in Georgia, Phase 2*** project implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) and the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia (MRDI). The views expressed in the report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect of the organizations listed above.

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## Brief overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered radical changes around the world. It has affected all spheres of public life and escalated into the largest economic, social and health crisis of the last decade. The role of local self-governments, as the governing bodies closest to the population, has been highlighted in the measures taken against the spread of the virus and in overcoming the crisis. At this level of governance, it has become necessary to rapidly adapt to new realities and to find innovative methods to fulfill both new and existing commitments. The purpose of this research is to study the experience of local authorities in Georgia during the first wave of the pandemic in the country. In particular, the research aims to identify changes in the management processes of Georgian municipalities, to highlight achievements and challenges, and to compare these with international experiences.

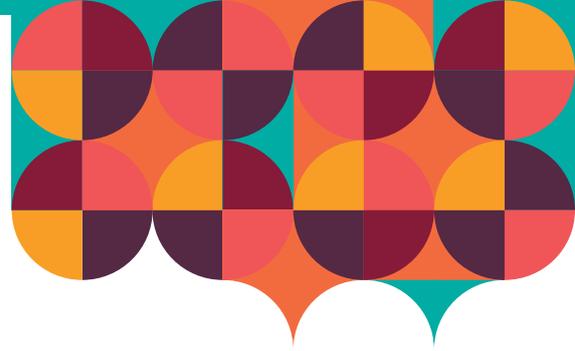
The research was conducted in three municipalities - Kutaisi, Ozurgeti, and Marneuli - and covers the period from March to May of 2020. This research analyzes the responses of 50 local authority representatives surveyed in the target municipalities to questions related to municipal management and the provision of local services during the pandemic. The research is founded upon the data, official documents, and reports from the target and other municipalities.

The findings of this study show that during the first wave of the pandemic, Georgian municipalities actively participated in the state-managed process of containment and management of the virus. They were keenly involved in the epidemiological research process, provided one-time food aid to the socially vulnerable, elderly and disabled, and enforced the quarantine regime. The role of municipalities in providing information to the population and in identifying needs has increased. The access of local populations to communication with representatives of their local self-government became particularly important after the pandemic call center (144) and the hot-line of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs (1505) encountered technical problems. Consequently, municipal employees became an intermediate link between the population and the state institutions mandated to act in a crisis situation. During spring, municipalities also played an important role in providing farmers with access to agricultural land. Under full quarantine conditions, they also participated in solving problems related to transportation and the sale of products.

The research showed that significant changes in the process of providing municipal services and managing local administrative bodies were made according to the guidelines of the central government such as a 3-month exemption from solid waste tax, suspension of municipal transport services, and switching to remote working.

The analysis of international experiences presented in this report reveal that every decision made by each administrative body during the pandemic has been determined by the political context, legal environment, and personal factors. The experience of Georgian municipalities and the municipalities of other countries has been similar with respect to awareness-raising campaigns, assisting socially vulnerable groups,

and switching to remote working. There have been significant differences however when it comes to fighting the pandemic and the associated crisis. The role of local authorities in Georgia has been limited to the implementation of decisions and measures taken by the central government, while some municipalities of EU member states have been able to define and implement policies tailored to local needs independently.

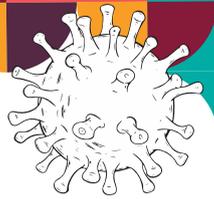


The importance of decentralization has become clear during the pandemic. Some of the municipalities in Georgia encompass a large population and a large territorial area, and it is necessary for local authorities to have sectoral competencies (economy, health, education, social protection), which would enable them to implement a wide range of anti-pandemic measures and effectively deal with the consequences of the crisis. Therefore, it is necessary to change the way in which power is distributed and to delegate not only the tasks but also, for certain issues, full authority from the central government to the local authority. Moreover, it is necessary to improve the material and technical foundations of local authorities and to develop regulations for remote working, so as not to hinder the activities of local self-governments in future crisis situations.

## Introduction

On March 11 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus a pandemic. Prior to that, the same organization had recognized the same virus as a threat to global health. The Georgian government began taking active steps as of January 29 2020 to contain the spread of the virus. In particular, international passenger traffic was suspended with countries in which the virus was highly prevalent (China, Iran, and Italy).

On February 26 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in Georgia was registered, which was detected in a traveler entering the country from Iran; on the same day, all types of passenger traffic to and from Iran was suspended. From March 1 2020, the Government of Georgia entered into an active phase of virus containment with mass events prohibited and the activities of educational institutions (including kindergartens) suspended. On March 6, a 14-day quarantine was imposed on individuals traveling from high-prevalence countries. Following the declaration of the pandemic by the WHO on March 12, all public institutions in Georgia switched to an emergency working mode. All organizations were given recommendations to switch to remote working and the summer conscription (for military service) was postponed for one month. On March 14, the first case of so-called “tertiary transmission” was detected in Georgia. The Georgian government responded by closing the land borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan the next day, and then doing likewise with Russia and Turkey the day after that. On March 16, all ski resorts in Georgia were closed and all public catering establishments in the country were instructed to switch to a home delivery service. Meanwhile, all citizens over the age of 70 were advised to self-isolate. On March 18, the borders of Georgia were closed to foreign citizens and traveling via minibuses within the country was banned as well. On March 19, the Government decided to temporarily close all commercial establishments, except for medical facilities, pharmacies, grocery stores, banks, post offices, and gas stations. On March 21, a one-month state of emergency was declared, banning any public gatherings of more than 10 people, and prohibiting municipal and intercity travel. On March 22-23, the entire combined territory of Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities was declared as a quarantine



zone. The first case of internal transmission of the virus was registered in the country on March 28, and on March 31 a full quarantine was announced in Georgia. On April 21, the state of emergency was extended until May 22. Thereafter, from May 29, the gradual lifting of restrictions began.

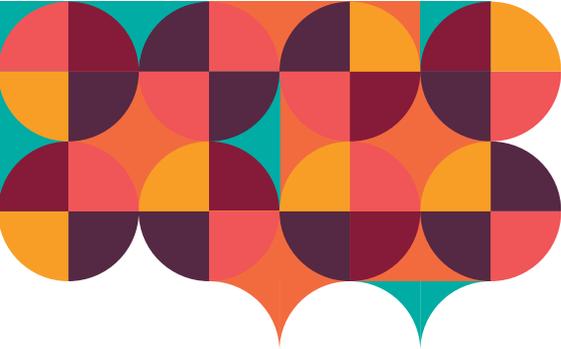
In Georgia, as in many countries around the world, the pandemic and its containment measures have had a significant impact on local self-governments. The changes imposed have affected both the delivery of municipal services and the management of municipal administration. This report presents the findings of research undertaken to identify these changes and identifying new challenges related to them. The study was conducted by the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) in the framework of the UNDP project - “Fostering Regional and Local Development in Georgia, Phase 2” implemented with the financial support from the governments of Switzerland, Austria, and Georgia. The research covers the period from March 14 2020 to May 23 2020. The presented report may be of interest to both local authority practitioners and members of the public interested in pandemic management issues. It will enrich the current knowledge and records of the Georgian experience in fighting a pandemic at the municipal level and contribute to information-sharing at the international level.

## **Goal and methodology of the research**

The aim of this research is to study the problems of municipal management during the pandemic and to identify successful examples. Moreover, this study aims to develop recommendations to improve municipal management during the pandemic based on the results of the research.

In terms of the research method, case studies were conducted. Three municipalities were selected for a detailed study. The main selection criterion was the extent to which the municipality had been affected by the pandemic. The idea was to select three municipalities which had been affected to varying degrees. Therefore, the first municipality had to have had a quarantine declared on its territory, while the second municipality would be a self-governing city (because the virus spreads faster in large cities and the populations there are more vulnerable), and the third municipality would be in the so-called green zone, where the virus had not been detected during the covered period. With this in mind, the following municipalities were selected: Marneuli (quarantined), Kutaisi (self-governing city), and Ozurgeti (green zone).

In the selected municipalities, official documents and reports issued during the research period were examined and official questionnaires were conducted. A total of 50 officials were interviewed, of which 10 were mayoral representatives/senior municipal city specialists, five were deputy mayors, five were local assembly (sakrebulo) bureau members, five were local assembly staff members, five were employees of municipal non-entrepreneurial (noncommercial) legal entities, 10 were municipal services employees, and 10 were employees of structural units of municipalities. The questionnaire included 10 closed-ended questions with multiple-choice answer options. Due to the pandemic, questionnaires were sent to the selected municipalities by e-mail. The distribution of completed and received questionnaires is presented in Table 1.



**Table 1: Number of sent and received questionnaires**

<b>Target Municipality</b>	<b>Sent Questionnaires</b>	<b>Completed Questionnaires Received</b>
City Of Kutaisi	20	18
Ozurgeti	20	17
Marneuli	20	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>50</b>

In order to make sure that the findings of the questionnaire survey could be generalized for the entire country, telephone interviews were conducted with the mayors and chairpersons of the local assemblies of Telavi, Lagodekhi, Borjomi, Akhaltsikhe, Dusheti, Gori, Ambrolauri, Tskaltubo, Zugdidi, Senaki, Kobuleti, and Mestia municipalities as well (18 interviews in total). These interviews verified whether the information received from the target municipalities corresponded to the reality for other municipalities across the country. The telephone interviews showed that the conclusions drawn from the analysis of information received from the target municipalities were largely applicable to all other engaged municipalities and the generalization of these conclusions for the whole country is thus valid.

Decrees issued by other municipalities, statistical data, and reports across the country were collected and analyzed to complement the information received from the target municipalities. In order to study international experience, reports published by the following bodies on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed at the municipal level: the United Nations Development Program (UNDP); the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); and the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UNHABITAT). The research revealed the similarities and differences between the management of Georgian municipalities and the municipalities of some EU member states. The research period covered March-May 2020.

## **The role of municipalities in the containment and management of COVID-19**

At the initial stage of the spread of COVID-19, the Government of Georgia approved a response plan to prevent further spread and to treat infected citizens (N 164.28.01.2020). According to this plan, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia was defined as the main coordinating body. As for the local authorities, in accordance with this decree, they were requested to implement rules restricting the movement of M2 category buses and to carry out disinfection works at the checkpoints. The assistance of municipalities was also



requested in the implementation of measures laid down in the Government of Georgia's resolution "On the Approval of the Rule for Wearing Face Masks" (N 368.15.06.2020).

On March 11, the Inter-Agency Coordination Council chaired by the Prime Minister was established in response to COVID-19. The Council comprises members of the Georgian government, the Mayor of Tbilisi and representatives of the National Center for Disease Control. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia was responsible for enforcing the state of emergency and observing the quarantine regime. In some cases (e.g. the quarantine regime in Marneuli municipality) Georgia's armed forces were also deployed.

By the decision of the Council, coordination headquarters were established in the regional administrative centers of Georgia and in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. Following the declaration of a state of emergency, local self-government bodies became actively involved in the fight against the spread of COVID-19. The involvement of municipalities was mainly envisioned to cover the following three directions:

**A) Participation of public health centers in the study of the virus spread and epidemiological situation** - in each municipality in Georgia there is a non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entity "Public Health Center" which coordinates with the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC). In March 2020, municipalities increased funding for these centers and provided them with additional financial resources<sup>1</sup>. The personnel of these centers assist the NCDC in conducting epidemiological research and organizing measures against pandemic in the municipalities.

**B)** According to the resolution of the Government of Georgia (N 220.03.04.2020) the local authorities (except for the city of Tbilisi) were requested **to subsidize the waste collection tax for the population** within their territory for March, April, and May 2020. All municipalities in Georgia agreed to this request and provided appropriate subsidies accordingly<sup>2</sup>.

**C) Assistance and care provided to the population** - the main task of the local authorities was to take care of and assist their own populations during the state of emergency. This was reflected in the provision of one-time food aid (the so-called basket of basic necessities) to the socially vulnerable, elderly, and homeless. Initially, such assistance was provided by Tbilisi City Hall and this charitable action was carried out in cooperation with local businesses. By the end of March 2020, all municipalities in Georgia had started providing such assistance to target groups. It should be noted that in other municipalities, food and products needed for such aid were purchased from the local budget<sup>3</sup>, as well as from the funds allocated by the municipality officials from their own salaries<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See relevant decision of Ozurgeti Municipality: <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4842308?publication=0>

<sup>2</sup> See relevant decisions of Sachkhere Municipality: <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4861031?publication=0>, Dedoplistskaro Municipality <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4854605?publication=0> and Batumi Municipality <https://www.matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4861355?publication=0>.

<sup>3</sup> See Lanchkhuti municipality: [https://www.guria.tv/index.php/u-s-news/2019-07-15-07-51-47/6302-2020-05-06-06-31-47?fbclid=IwAR31sJfczO5gQFgRbF2TrXaZh-JxK9GAXMM3ENp6\\_udkk3L5sRofJ49jQA](https://www.guria.tv/index.php/u-s-news/2019-07-15-07-51-47/6302-2020-05-06-06-31-47?fbclid=IwAR31sJfczO5gQFgRbF2TrXaZh-JxK9GAXMM3ENp6_udkk3L5sRofJ49jQA)

<sup>4</sup> See Ozurgeti Municipality: <http://oz.gov.ge/ge/news/view/meriis-iuridiuli-samsakhuris-tanamshromlebis-qvelmoqmedeba>

#### **D) Assistance in the implementation of the quarantine regime and management of exceptional cases**

local authorities actively cooperated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia to ensure that quarantine regimes were being enforced in the municipalities where a quarantine had been declared. This encompassed raising public awareness, assisting in establishing contacts of infected patients, and monitoring quarantine norms in public spaces. In Marneuli municipality, as a courtesy of special dispensation, the local self-government provided places for the wholesale sale of agricultural products, so that households could sell their agricultural products. Similarly, from the end of April 2020, local authorities issued special permits for transportation to agricultural land so that essential agricultural work could be carried out.

In addition, municipalities continued to provide utility services. Solid waste was collected and transported as usual, public spaces were cleaned, while outdoor lighting and illumination and city landscaping works were also implemented. After a two-week pause, all local infrastructure rehabilitation projects were resumed.

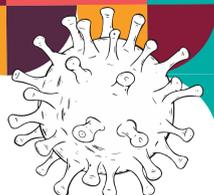
#### **Human resource management and solving organizational issues during the pandemic**

On March 12, all local authorities of Georgia received a recommendation from the central government regarding switching their personnel to a remote working mode. This did not affect high-ranking officials of the municipalities (mayor, deputy mayors, members of the local assembly bureau, and heads of City Hall services).

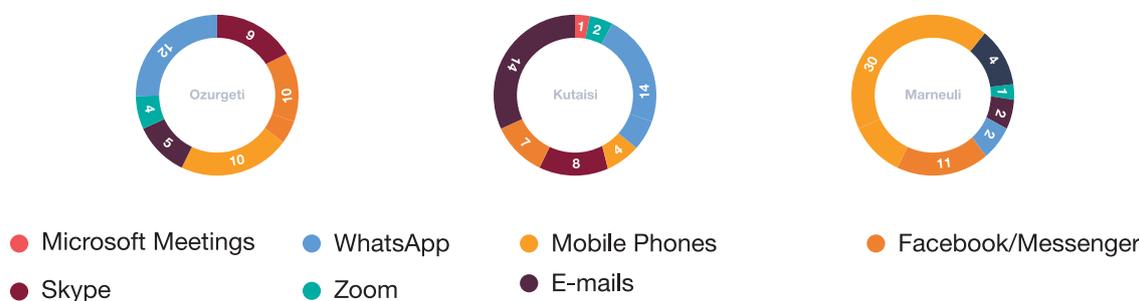
It should be noted that remote working was mainly based on a verbal agreement with a superior who would give staff permission to perform work-related tasks from home via computer. Moreover, no working timesheet system was developed for remote working, where clock-in and clock-out times would be identified.

Technical support for remote working was the responsibility of the local self-government, and employees had the right to take home computer equipment under their personal care. However, the vast majority of the employees who switched to remote working in the three target municipalities used their own personal equipment. Overall, 35% of respondents noted they had experienced difficulties when working remotely, because their children also needed a computer for distance learning. Meanwhile, 60% of the officials surveyed in the target municipalities noted that while working remotely, they periodically went to their workplaces because they needed different types of documentation or because the completion of a given task required their presence in the municipal administration building. It is important that the mayoral representatives in Marneuli and Ozurgeti municipalities noted that they did not switch to a remote working mode, as they were occupied with organizing assistance for vulnerable groups of the population.





**Chart 1. Means of communication when working remotely**



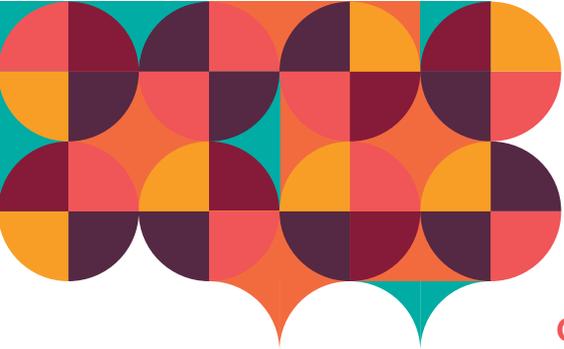
The research focused on communication tools used when working remotely. It was revealed that cell phones were used the most, for direct phone calls as well as voice and text messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp), and e-mails. In Marneuli municipality, communication was mainly done through telephone calls, while in Kutaisi and Ozurgeti groups created in WhatsApp and Viber applications were more prominent, through which both verbal communication and correspondence, as well as exchanges of documents, took place.

Most of the respondents noted that in many cases they had to go to the administrative building because official documents received by e-mail needed to be printed. Printing equipment was usually not made available to employees at home. It should be noted here that the vast majority of respondents do not have an individual electronic signature system and that usually only the mayor would have such a system.

The work of the collegial bodies was especially complicated during the state of emergency and quarantine. Meetings of executive bodies of local authorities were mainly conducted with fewer than 10 people and with social distancing observed. No difficulties were observed in the process of preparing and conducting such meetings in other municipalities as well.

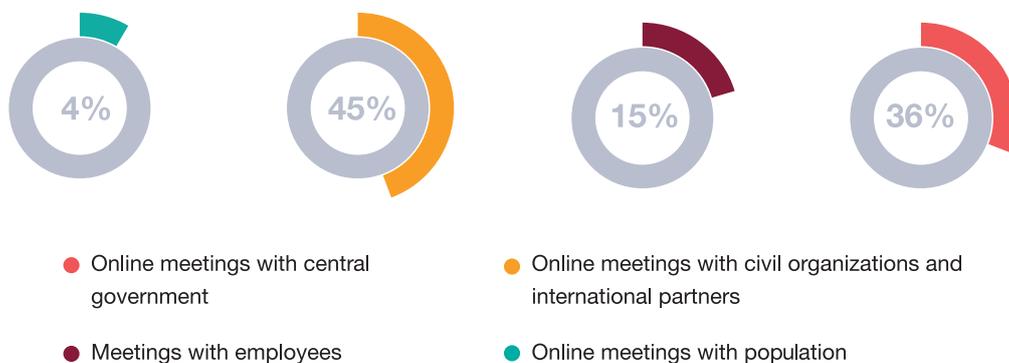
The online platform Zoom was also widely used in Ozurgeti municipality and Kutaisi City Hall. The same online platform was used by the Ozurgeti local assembly bureau to hold its meetings. Importantly, no municipality adopted a regulation on holding meetings using online platforms, nor was a rule established for preparing minutes of meetings held via these platforms. In many cases, such online meetings were recorded and stored electronically.

The purpose of the survey was to find out which online platform was used to set up most virtual meetings, and for what purpose(s) such virtual meetings were used (to communicate with municipal employees or outside persons).



**Chart 2. Use of virtual meetings**

**What did you use virtual meetings for?**



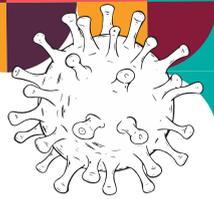
Surveys conducted in all three target municipalities showed that in most cases virtual meetings were held with outside persons (e.g., central government, civil society organizations, and international partners), internal meetings between City Hall staff were held physically or communicated via phone and through exchanging messages in WhatsApp groups. Virtual meetings with the population were not organized using Internet platforms.

In general, none of the target municipalities had any problems with collegial decision-making. If a meeting was required, it was conducted in full compliance with the established rules, and telephone and Internet communications were uninterrupted.

The activities of the local authorities during the state of emergency and quarantine period were relatively problematic. Meetings of the local assembly bureau in Marneuli and Kutaisi were conducted physically with social distancing observed. Meanwhile, Ozurgeti municipality mainly hosted virtual meetings of the local assembly bureau using the online platform Zoom. Conducting local assembly meetings was problematic as the composition of the local assembly (and the required quorum) exceeds 10 people. Therefore, the assembly of the deputation in a room designated for local assembly meetings would violate quarantine rules. In April 2020, Ozurgeti local assembly decided to hold virtual meetings using an online platform, and this initiative was subsequently taken up by several other municipalities. However, it was found that holding local assembly meetings in such a format contradicted the Organic Law of Georgia “Local Self-Government Code,” the fifth paragraph of Article 26, which states that “a meeting of local assembly is authorized if it is attended by more than half of the local assembly members.” The use of the word “attends” used in this paragraph implies the requirement of the physical presence of a local assembly member in the hall.

According to this logic, both the NALAG and the central government explained to the members of the local authority bodies<sup>5</sup> that, according to the principle of the law, virtually held meetings of local

<sup>5</sup> On 14 April 2020, the local assembly of Ozurgeti municipality applied to the NALAG for an explanation of the legality of holding a remote meeting of a local assembly. Relevant explanations were provided to Ozurgeti municipality and a circular letter was sent to all municipalities.



assembly could not be authorized. Thereafter, the local assemblies found a solution: meetings were held in the local theater hall where local assembly members were seated at intervals of two meters, wearing a face mask and gloves. Despite the pandemic situation, no amendments were made to the regulations of the local assembly and the apparatus. Entry to administrative buildings was approved by all municipalities of Georgia, which was mainly based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia.

The research revealed that there were no amendments made to the rule regarding proactive publication of local assembly decisions. The agenda of the local assembly and the decisions made were published in accordance with the established rules and deadlines. Special permits were issued to local assembly members elected through majoritarian (single mandate) as well as party lists, allowing them to exercise their powers during quarantine and to assist local residents. The main restriction arising from the pandemic here concerned the organization of mass meetings with citizens.

During the state of emergency and the quarantine regime, local assembly members in all municipalities received monetary compensation as usual. In terms of the interruption of public transport services, the representatives elected by the party list complained about transportation difficulties as permits were issued only for official or private vehicles. Therefore, a local assembly member who did not have an official or private vehicle was deprived of the opportunity to travel. Documentation for the provision of transportation for deputies of local assemblies was not prepared, however the vast majority of respondents in the target municipality denied the existence of any problems as the leadership of the local assembly coordinated provision of transport services for members of political factions.

The switch to a remote working mode has resulted in significant savings in the administrative costs of municipalities. In particular, the number of business trips within the country has been significantly reduced and international business trips have been completely suspended, which has resulted in substantial savings in local budgets.

In addition, significant savings were made in transportation and representation costs, with costs of travelling outside the municipality notably reduced. During February-June 2020, the costs of restaurant services and hosting delegations were also significantly reduced. Survey results show that in target municipalities, office costs were reduced costs were reduced by 30% and agricultural costs dropped by 10%. Municipalities did not transfer the funds saved on administrative costs to other aspects, as these savings were automatically deducted in a 10% reduction of the expenditure portion of local budgets implemented in the first half of 2020. Crucially, no difference between target municipalities in terms of administrative cost savings was recorded.



**Table 2. Comparison of business trip expenses of Ozurgeti Municipality for February-April 2020 with the same period of 2019**

	<b>Cost of Local Business Trips</b>	<b>Cost of International Business Trips</b>
	GEL	GEL
<b>2019 February - April</b>	<b>2,965.00</b>	<b>1,153.00</b>
<b>2020 February - April</b>	<b>604.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Source: Ozurgeti Municipality Website</b>		

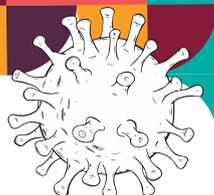
Information received from target municipalities on the reduction of local budgets was verified by officials (i.e. the mayor or the chairperson of the local assembly) of other 12 municipalities (Telavi, Lagodekhi, Signagi, Kvareli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Rustavi, Gardabani, Dusheti, Mtskheta, Tianeti, and Kazbegi) and they confirmed that the conclusions drawn from questionnaire feedbacks from case study municipalities were valid and can be generalized for the whole country. The only exception noted here was in the high mountain settlements of Tianeti and Oni, which had limited Internet access and this had created additional difficulties in the efficiency of remote working.

### **Citizen participation and awareness during the pandemic**

Clearly, during the state of emergency and the quarantine citizens' participation with local authorities was largely complicated. The ban on organizing any public gatherings, both in open and closed spaces, precluded the basic forms of participation.

The state of emergency has had a direct impact on the so-called rural assistance program. Typically, meetings with the local population within this program were held in March, allowing local municipalities to spend more time preparing and implementing projects. During the pandemic however, it was impossible to organize such meetings with rural populations and, consequently, such meetings were postponed. Such meetings were eventually held in Ozurgeti municipality in late May, and in Marneuli municipality in early June.

In order to save time and get an idea of the population's priorities, the mayors of both Marneuli and Ozurgeti municipalities instructed their representatives in the administrative units to study the local needs and to prepare a working list of priorities to be submitted to the local community after the state of emergency concluded. The research results also highlighted that tools for citizen engagement, such as the General Assembly of Settlements (GAofS) and the Mayor's Civil Advisory Council, could not work at full capacity during the state of emergency. Convening a GAofS was impossible due to the prohibition of public assembly. As for the Advisory Council, due to the suspension of public transport (both



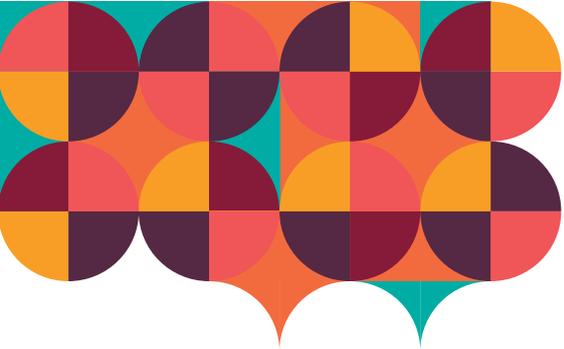
municipal and intercity), meetings of the council members became quite challenging. As for the remote hosting of an Advisory Council meetings (using a web-platform), has not been observed in the target municipalities. However, the example of Zugdidi municipality is noteworthy here, where the meeting of the Advisory Council was held remotely on March 31, where the implemented preventive measures and future plans to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were discussed.

No problems were identified in the operation of electronic participation tools. The electronic petitions tool as well as municipal websites and online interaction portals worked smoothly, while, according to the research, an increased demand for these tools during the pandemic has not been observed. Communication with the population was of great importance during the state of emergency. In general, the purpose of communicating with the population is to disseminate information about the activities of the municipality and to receive feedback from citizens. During the pandemic, two new purposes were added: a) to provide information about the pandemic to the population; and b) to collect information about the existing needs of the population.

The municipality websites and the mayoral representatives of the administrative units were used to inform the population about the pandemic. They distributed brochures prepared by the Government of Georgia about the measures taken against the spread of the virus. In Marneuli, such information materials were distributed in the Azeri language as well. In other municipalities with significant ethnic minority populations, such materials were made available in the relevant language.

Social networks were widely used for the awareness-raising campaign titled "stay at home." In large cities, including Kutaisi, local authorities used banners, information boards, and public announcements along with social networks. Together with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, local authorities ensured that grocery store owners and staff were informed about the working regime of such establishments defined by the central government.

During the first wave of the pandemic, an important task was to set up a communication line with the population to provide information about their needs in timely manner and to respond swiftly to these. In March 2020, the Government of Georgia established a unified call center – 144 – to communicate with the population about pandemic-related issues in parallel with the launch of the hot-line – 1505 – set up by the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs. Any citizen could call either of these phone numbers and ask for a permit to travel during the state of emergency or ask for help from the authorities. However, due to the large number of calls made, both the call center and the hot-line of the Ministry encountered technical problems and it was often very difficult for citizens to make contact. Later, the Georgian government decided to open a similar hot-line with the headquarters in regional administrations, and from the beginning of April 2020, the local authorities were involved in this process. The mobile phone numbers of the mayor, responsible persons of the City Hall, and mayoral representatives in administrative units were posted on the website and the Facebook page of each municipality. Moreover, it was clarified that citizens could call



these numbers at any time and ask for help. The same information was published in its entirety on the website and Facebook page of the NALAG.

Surveys in target municipalities and information gleaned from other municipalities revealed that during the state of emergency there was no system set up for recording and documenting incoming phone calls to the mobile phones of municipal officials. The lack of such a system makes it impossible to produce statistics on these calls, although after speaking with local authority representatives it became clear that the vast majority of calls were related to transport permits, with relatively few calls related to food aid.

Telephone calls to the mayoral representatives in the administrative units of municipalities became particularly intense with the onset of spring and that season's essential agricultural work. In the first half of April 2020 the mayoral representatives received five phone calls a day from the population, in the second half of April an average of 15 calls were received per day. The permit requests were especially intense in Eastern Georgia.

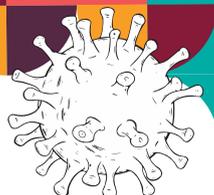
Such transport permits were issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, upon the request of the local self-government. In this regard, local self-governments needed an official, chancellery-registered application of citizens for a permit. Considering that a two-level application procedure was established to obtain permits (citizen to local authority; and then local authority to the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and the fact that the period for spring agricultural season is quite short, there was a high risk that the call center problem would recur and the local authority would not be able to process all applications. To avoid such a problem, the municipalities used the preliminary tactic, whereby permits were issued automatically (without their request) to all working agricultural machinery units (e.g. tractors), and later the restriction of movement on such vehicles was removed altogether. To ensure the transportation of workers to agricultural lands, permits were issued to all privately-owned minibuses or buses, allowing entire neighborhoods to travel in one vehicle, which significantly reduced the number of applications for permits. Later, the Government of Georgia decided to remove the restriction on traffic movement in rural areas during the day (08:00 - 19:00).

## **Managing utility services during the pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the rules and conditions for managing municipal services. During the state of emergency and full quarantine, some utilities were suspended, while others continued to operate under tighter regulations. No significant changes in management have taken place in any of the municipal departments. However, there have been a number of innovations that can be identified and shared to improve the efficiency of municipal services in general. Moreover, an analysis of lessons learned will steer municipalities away from making mistakes, if there is a declaration of a state of emergency and/or full quarantine.

### ***Municipal Transport - example of Tbilisi***

As of March 21, the movement of municipal transport stopped completely in Tbilisi (including the metro) and in all municipalities of the country. Drivers of the municipal transport companies were temporarily relieved of their duties while maintaining full pay, while the administrative apparatus of



the transport companies switched to a remote working mode. By the end of May, the metro was re-opened in Tbilisi, and from mid-June the movement of city and intercity buses and minibuses resumed in accordance with the regulations.

**Table 3. Savings of the Tbilisi Transport Company during full quarantine**

	<b>Saving (Thousand GEL)</b>
<b>Fuel Expenses</b>	<b>6,823.4</b>
<b>Electricity Expenses</b>	<b>200.8</b>
<b>Administrative Expenses</b>	<b>75.2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,099.4</b>
<b>Source: L.T.D. "Tbilisi Transport Company"</b>	

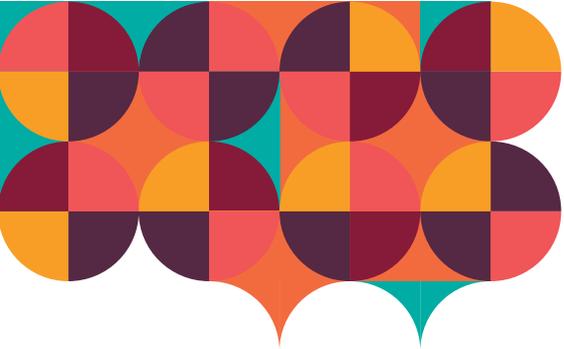
The three-week suspension of municipal transport caused a significant financial loss for transport companies, as illustrated by the example of the Tbilisi Transport Company. Prior to the pandemic, the average monthly income of the Tbilisi Transport Company was 13 million GEL, while in March-April 2020 its income was virtually zero<sup>6</sup>. Although the suspension of transport operations generated some savings (see Table 3), the absence of revenue for two months was accompanied by the imposition of additional public transport regulations (social distancing, driver protection and testing, etc.) and the cost of adhering to these significantly exceeded the savings made.

According to the forecast of the Tbilisi Transport Company, the company's revenues in 2020, compared to 2019, will decrease by 15%, which amounts to a 40 million GEL drop. It is noteworthy that the Tbilisi Transport Company routinely operates at a loss (20 million GEL in 2019)<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, with a 15% decline in revenue, the company is expected to end the financial year with a loss of 60 million GEL.

The complete suspension of municipal transport was criticized by both the public and individual experts, who highlighted the essential social role served by municipal transport and the fact that many people employed at the still-open grocery stores faced significant difficulties in getting to work without public transport. Some experts suggested that it would have been possible to keep a limited number of buses running in the city on pre-determined central routes, and that these buses could have served only those with special permits, as was the case in some German and Southeast Asian cities. In

<sup>6</sup> Financial report of Tbilisi Transport Company.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



particular, Davit Gogishvili in a paper on Georgian cities during the pandemic, noted: "Such a decision, on the one hand, reduces the mobility of citizens, which is important in the event of a pandemic or epidemic, and on the other hand leaves the city's residents with access to necessary services and takes into account the situation of families who do not have access to private vehicles"<sup>8</sup>.

The suspension of public transport in Tbilisi had a negative social effect. However, it should also be noted that during the full quarantine period when economic activity was largely stopped, there was not much demand for municipal transport, as the enterprises which were allowed to continue to operate were obliged to provide transport for their own employees.

In addition, it is also noteworthy that the decision to suspend all types of passenger transport was made by the central government during the state of emergency, and the municipalities had no influence on this decision.

### ***Preschool education***

Organizing and managing preschool educational institutions falls under the remit of local self-governments. From March 21, all educational institutions of Georgia were suspended. In addition, in all municipalities, the attendance of children at preschool institutions was suspended, while teachers and staff were temporarily relieved of their duties for the period of the state of emergency, with guaranteed full pay.

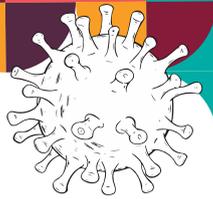
Although kindergarten activities were suspended, some contractual obligations relating to kindergartens' functioning continued. For instance, contracts to supply food to kindergartens are made annually for a period of one calendar year. Therefore, the contractors delivered products to the kindergartens on a weekly basis during the pandemic, which soon left many kindergartens with more food than they could appropriately store, especially perishable products (meat, dairy products, etc.).

In April 2020, most of the Georgian municipalities decided to provide a weekly ration to each child registered in kindergartens. This decision removed the problem of product storage and, at the same time, considering that many socially vulnerable children receive better nutrition in kindergartens than at home, this decision also had a positive social impact.

Taking the example of Ozurgeti municipality, it is clear that this decision did not carry any additional costs: food was distributed by the director of the preschool educational institution, for which a vehicle was allocated by the mayoral representative in the administrative unit (in cities, food baskets were collected at kindergartens).

According to local self-government representatives, Ozurgeti municipality purchased 26 additional refrigerators and distributed them to preschools to ensure proper storage of food supplies. The products were distributed according to the approved food ration for each child and a special register was produced, which was signed by an adult member of each family confirming receipt of products.

<sup>8</sup> Davit Gogishvili "The Local Face of the Global Crisis; Tbilisi and other cities of Georgia during the pandemic" HEINRICH BOLL STIFTUNG <https://ge.boell.org/ka/2020/05/04/globaluri-krizisis-adgilobrivi-sakhe-tbilisi-da-sakartvelos-skhva-kalakebi-pandemiis>



This distribution of food rations did not require any changes in municipal management. Moreover, the conducted survey showed that no remote working regulations were adopted and that remote working timesheet systems were not introduced.

Following the lifting of the state of emergency, the Government of Georgia developed recommendations for the resumption of kindergartens, and UNICEF developed a special guide for the operation of kindergartens during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, it was expected that by October 1, preschool institutions would again be fully operational. However, due to the second wave of the pandemic, these institutions remain closed.

### ***Collection and transportation of solid waste, and cleaning of public places***

The collection and transportation of solid waste did not stop during the state of emergency and quarantine, and the cleaning service continued to operate at its full capacity. An important change implemented was equipping cleaning crews with face masks and gloves, as well as arrangements being made for disinfection barriers in administrative buildings and recreational rooms.

Cleaning service personnel were not considered a high risk group and, therefore, were not tested. They also did not receive any financial incentives for working during the state of emergency. Due to the full quarantine, the amount of solid waste removal and cleaning required in public places was significantly reduced, but increased in households. Unfortunately, no accurate records were kept by the relevant services of target municipalities with regard to which segments decreased or increased their solid waste output during the state of emergency and full quarantine. Consequently, it was impossible to substantiate information obtained from the survey with statistical data.

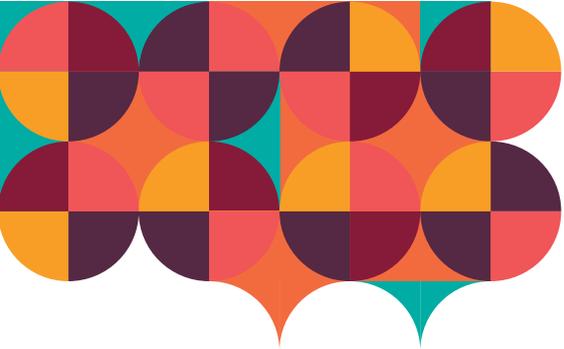
Furthermore, as mentioned above, during the first wave of the pandemic (March-May 2020), consumers were exempted from paying the solid waste fee under the initiative of the central government.

### ***Outdoor lighting and landscaping activities***

Outdoor lighting and landscaping services also operated at full capacity during the state of emergency and full quarantine. No suspensions of outdoor lighting or urban landscaping and greening work were reported. During April, greening works and projects were intensively carried out in all cities. It should also be noted that urban greening works are mainly carried out by private contractors and, consequently, compliance with pandemic regulations was mainly the responsibility of the relevant companies.

### ***Social assistance programs***

The crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 has not had a significant impact on municipal social assistance programs. The costs of treatment for patients infected with the virus, as well as quarantine costs, were fully covered by the central government budget of Georgia. During the state of



emergency, socially vulnerable people received food aid from the local self-government, while no other additional social assistance programs related to the COVID-19 crisis were implemented at the local self-government level.

During the pandemic, no significant increase in the number of citizen applications was registered in the city of Kutaisi, Ozurgeti, or Marneuli. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the local economy, although measures to mitigate negative consequences have been implemented by the central government of Georgia, with local authorities having no competence in this regard. Consequently, no changes have been made to the management of local authorities in this respect.

## International experiences of municipal management during the pandemic<sup>9</sup>

### ***Vertical coordination between government levels***

Vertical coordination between central and local self-government is an important step in responding effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>10</sup>. Coordination between these levels is needed in both federal as well as regional and unitary states, as if disorganized and unsystematic decisions are made by different levels of government, this increases the risk of the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic. National associations of local authorities play an important role in vertical coordination, acting as communicators between local and central government<sup>11</sup>. Naturally, different countries use different tools to strengthen vertical coordination. The most common tool here is the creation of a national coordination council, which includes representatives of both central ministries and local self-governments. It is also very common to create a national strategy that clearly describes the role and tasks of local self-government.

#### ***Examples from different countries<sup>12</sup>***

**Spain** - The National Council was established, which includes representatives of both central ministries and mayors of territorial associations. The task of the Council is to approve the national plan to slow down the pandemic and coordinate its implementation. The Council is accountable to the Prime Minister of Spain.

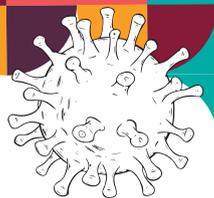
**Turkey** - Regional development agencies set up by municipalities and central government are implementing a €30 million pandemic mitigation program funded by the Turkish government. This program combines the following three main components: a) taking measures to stop the spread of the pandemic; b) increasing the preparedness of the public health system; and c) reducing the negative impact of the pandemic on the local/regional economy.

<sup>9</sup> The examples given in the current chapter are based entirely on the information contained in the publication of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): The territorial impact of COVID-19: managing the crisis across local governments. OECD, June 2020

<sup>10</sup> Official Communiqué of the World Health Organization, 17 March 2020

<sup>11</sup> The territorial impact of COVID-19: managing the crisis across local governments, OECD, June 2020

<sup>12</sup> Source: The territorial impact of COVID-19: managing the crisis across local governments, OECD, June 2020



### ***Horizontal coordination - inter-municipal cooperation***

Cooperation between subnational authorities is important to ensure the optimal use of available resources in the systematic fight against the pandemic. This is particularly true when it comes to public health, where the efforts of several municipalities to better equip the health sector or to arrange quarantine spaces, have significantly increased the flexibility and efficiency of the public health system. Inter-municipal cooperation will also be an important tool when reviving the local economy in the post-pandemic period. Joint investment projects are used here, as well as the formation of a joint investment environment and the creation of an incentivized investment environment.

Horizontal coordination and cooperation takes place between municipalities as well as between regions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such coordination is not cross-border in nature, as such cooperation is rendered impossible by border closures.

#### ***Examples from different countries<sup>13</sup>***

**Latvia** - Eight municipalities in the South Kurzeme region have combined funds allocated to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and purchased artificial lung ventilation equipment, which was handed over to the elderly citizens of these municipalities.

**Sweden** - The five largest municipalities signed a co-operation agreement to attract loans from commercial banks to purchase medical equipment. This equipment was handed over to the regional hospital and a mobile group was also set up to serve elderly patients at home.

**Belgium** - The regions have created a unified information system that provides information on medical, pharmaceutical, and food supplies. Such a system has made it possible to mobilize necessary resources in the event of shortages.

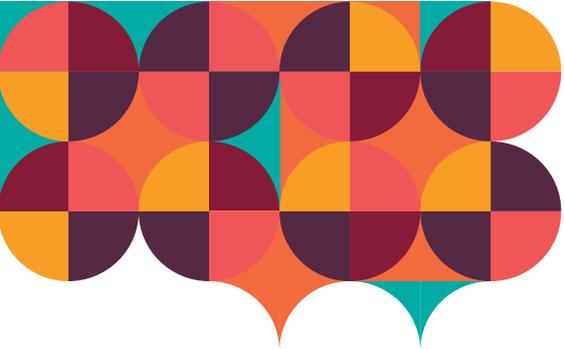
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### ***The role of local self-government in implementing the exit strategy from restrictions***

According to the WHO, large-scale testing is one of the most successful ways of allowing restrictions to be relaxed. Local self-governments play a considerable role in the organization of this. In general, local authorities in Europe have played an important role in implementing the so-called "Identification, Isolation, Testing and Treatment" strategy. Local self-governments of big cities had a particularly difficult role to play, since, in the beginning, the virus was spreading rapidly in densely-populated urban centers. Due to this fact, COVID-19 was also called a "density disease." However, recent studies have clearly shown that density is not the only factor in the rapid spread of the virus. Dr. Mary T. Bassett wrote in an opinion piece in the New York Times in May 2020 that: "Density is not a problem in itself; the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



problem is density accompanied by poverty, poor living conditions and inability to access a good health care system."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the role of city authorities is crucial in the fight against the spread of the virus, particularly with regard to improving living conditions and increasing access to healthcare for a wide range of citizens. Local self-government plays an important role in organizing the testing of citizens for the virus and in maintaining the quarantine regime.

### **Examples from different countries<sup>15</sup>**

**Japan** - Local authorities are responsible for implementing a mass testing strategy for the population. Therefore, the testing centers and the patients who receive treatment at home are under the responsibility of the municipality. Municipalities provide services to quarantined persons.

**United Kingdom** - The Cabinet of Ministers allocated an additional 300 million GBP to local authorities to develop and implement a pandemic control strategy at a local level. This funding is designated for identifying outbreaks at the local level, for ensuring epidemiological safety of housing and workplaces, and for testing people employed in the communal sector.

**South Korea** - Regional pandemic control centers have been set up by municipalities to conduct mass population testing at the municipal level. Among them are testing centers located on all major highways. A group of municipalities united around the city of Goyang have set up so-called "drive-through" testing centers to test people for COVID-19 in cars.

### **Data collection and the use of e-government tools at the local level**

International experiences have shown that municipalities have worked in three main directions: a) collecting data on infected populations and their contacts; b) increased access to health services through electronic systems; and c) used social networks and Internet resources to raise public awareness about the pandemic. Local television stations have been actively used to inform the population about the quarantine regime and corresponding measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

### **Examples from different countries<sup>16</sup>**

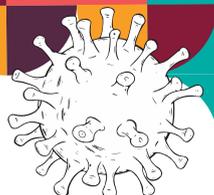
**France** - The Ministry of Health has asked departments (regions) to create a database on the number and occupancy of beds in hospitals. Moreover, it requested the creation of a special electronic map of medical institutions, with appropriate markings and directions.

**Italy** - Several regions have developed electronic maps for the spread of infection, with COVID-19-positive patient routes and meeting places monitored through telephone ID and with guaranteed anonymity. The Lazio region created a special Android app that warns users about the gathering of large crowds of people on a given route. The regions of Liguria, Lombardy, Sardinia, and Umbria have all set up a special web portal where citizens could get an online consultation from a doctor as well as download a special Android app to help them to determine if they have symptoms characteristic of the virus.

<sup>14</sup> Basset, M. (2020) Just because you can afford to leave the city, doesn't mean you should. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-cities-density.html>

<sup>15</sup> Source: The territorial impact of COVID-19: managing the crisis across local governments (OECD), June 2020

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



**Estonia** - Järva municipality created a special Android app that was used to inform citizens about anti-virus measures. It was also possible for the municipality to see how many users were using the app.

### ***Protecting and assisting vulnerable groups***

According to the OECD, vulnerable groups suffer the most from the COVID-19 crisis because "they do not have access to the best medical care and their incomes are declining most of all, due to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic"<sup>17</sup>. The local self-government aid package included food aid for the children, provision of prepared food for socially vulnerable groups, care for the elderly and the disabled, the provision of pharmaceutical vouchers, and the arrangement of sanitary centers. In this activity, the municipalities acted in coordination with both central government and the non-governmental sector and volunteers.

### ***Examples from different countries***<sup>18</sup>

**Greece** - The Ministry of Internal Affairs, in cooperation with the Association of Local Authorities and with the support of the Ministry of e-Government, launched the #CitySolidarityGR project, which aims to help vulnerable people increase their access to social assistance and volunteer services.

**Ireland** - The Irish government has launched a "Community Call" program to coordinate the activities of all levels of government at the community level. This program is administered locally and the head of the local executive branch performs a coordinating function. The key focus of this coordination is compatibility of services for elderly citizens with the needs of the local community.

**Italy** - The Italian government approved a €25 billion aid package for municipalities. Out of this package, €4.3 billion was invested in the so-called "Municipal Solidarity Fund" from which the most affected municipalities received additional financial aid. Overall, €400 million from the government assistance package was given to 8,000 first-tier municipalities to provide food aid to the vulnerable population.

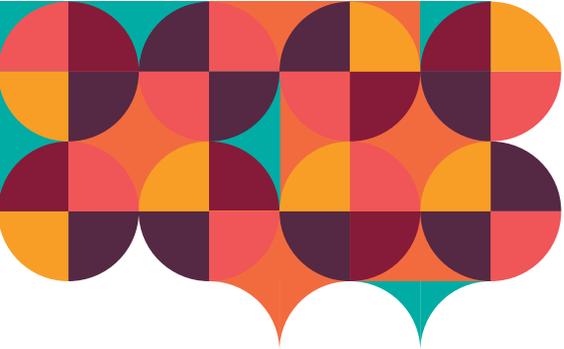
### ***Introduction of flexible administrative procedures***

Pandemic management requires flexible and effective governance procedures and institutions. Local self-governments have moved to a new style of working, with new standards set for administrative procedures, meetings, staff management, and working hours regulation. Many regional and local authorities have used virtual meetings for the activities of representative and executive branches, which significantly increased the efficiency and flexibility of the decision-making process. In addition to the flexibility of the governance process, local self-governments are also responsible for the protection of their employees from exposure to the virus and, at the same time, ensuring the proper functioning of municipal services.

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<sup>17</sup> OECD (2020), Coronavirus (COVID-19): Cities policy responses (as of 27 March 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Source: The territorial impact of COVID-19: managing the crisis across local governments (OECD), June 2020



### **Examples from different countries<sup>19</sup>**

**Portugal** - Municipalities simplified tax relief procedures. Relief on municipal taxes were automatically added to the COVID-19-related compensation package administered by the central government.

**Slovenia** - As the pandemic required municipalities to provide social and communal services in a timely manner, municipalities greatly simplified public procurement procedures, allowing necessary medical and other equipment to be promptly procured.

**United Kingdom** - Appropriate changes were made to the law in the event of the pandemic, and local councils were given the right to mobilize funds from various sections of local budgets to combat the pandemic.

## **Georgian and international experiences: similarities and differences**

The experiences of local self-governments during the crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 have been quite diverse in Georgia and abroad. Comparing these experiences reveals a number of similarities and differences.

### **Similarities**

Every decision in the field of public administration has its own preconditions, political context, legal environment, and even a personal dimension. Consequently, the decision made by each administrative body during the pandemic has been conditioned by these above-mentioned factors. However, it is clear that the activities undertaken have been largely similar across countries. Indeed, the research revealed the following similarities between Georgian and foreign municipalities:

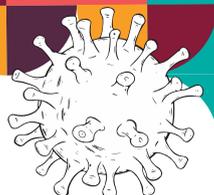
 Both in Georgia and in the European Union, municipalities have played an important role in caring for vulnerable groups and providing social protection. This has mainly been manifested in the distribution of food baskets, as well as in transportation for citizens in cases of emergency and the provision of medical services at home. In Georgia, as well as in other countries, municipalities have carried out these activities with their own administrative resources, although in some European municipalities such services were provided by volunteer organizations through a private-public partnership.

 Another similarity has been in the participation of municipalities in organizing civic education and media campaigns regarding COVID-19. Municipalities in Georgia have used Internet and media resources, and provided information brochures to the population (including brochures in the first languages of ethnic minorities in relevant regions). Municipalities have used similar tools to inform populations in the European Union.

 Municipalities switched to a remote working mode quite rapidly both in Georgia and abroad. The rule about remote working in Georgia applied only to middle- and low-ranking officials, it did not apply to high-ranking officials and elected bodies. In other countries, remote working was also obligatory for mayors, while in some EU countries the local representative bodies held meetings remotely.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



## **Differences**

There are significant differences between Georgian and foreign municipalities in measures to combat the pandemic. Such differences are mainly manifested in the development and implementation of local policies. Specifically:

 The municipalities of the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, and South Korea have independently developed and implemented policies to combat the pandemic. Municipalities have also independently developed measures to restore the local economy. To make local and central policies compatible with each other, many EU member states have used a coordination mechanism between government levels. Meanwhile, the municipalities of Georgia mainly implemented the national policy developed by the central government to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

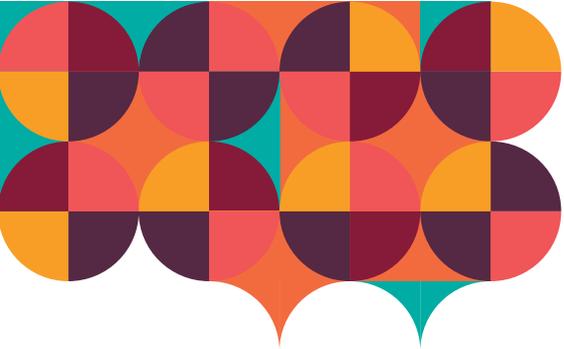
 The municipalities of the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, and South Korea have performed important tasks in the field of medicine. In South Korea, municipalities have been responsible for mass testing of the population. In most countries of the European Union, municipalities have taken care of the provision of medical institutions with relevant equipment and materials, as well as the accounting and management of medical supplies. Local municipalities in Georgia meanwhile have been mainly responsible for providing assistance to the National Center for Disease Control in organizing epidemiological research.

 The main difference between Georgian and EU municipalities in terms of increasing the flexibility of administrative services and changing management is that the EU municipalities eased their tax and licensing procedures while Georgia did not. The changes in municipal management in Georgia were mainly related to remote working.

 In terms of social protection, in the vast majority of EU countries, the central government transferred funds to municipalities, which in turn distributed the funds to vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups in Georgia were assisted directly by central government programs, and local authorities played only a supporting role.

When considering the differences between the activities carried out by Georgian and EU municipalities, we must remember that these are influenced by the level of decentralization in the country, the financial sustainability of the local self-governments, and the administrative capacity of the local self-governments. Where the level of decentralization of state power is high, municipalities tend to manage a significant proportion of public affairs and they sometimes take action in more areas. They can also independently change local tax management procedures.

Another important factor here is the level of delegation from the central government to municipalities. Unlike Georgia, the vast majority of EU countries delegate authority rather than specific tasks. This is common when the municipality has wide-ranging authority (policy-making, regulation, invest-



ment, and administration) and the role of the central government is limited to setting standards, funding, and supervision. In such a system, within their delegated authority, municipalities have the right and opportunity to tailor the services provided (if a decision is made) to the local needs. The situation is different when only a specific task is delegated to the local self-government (e.g. registration of the socially vulnerable) and where policies, regulations, investments, and administration in the field of social protection are implemented by the central government. Under such conditions, local self-government acts not as an independent branch of government but as a local agent of the central government.

## Current challenges

The presented research is limited to the period of March-May 2020, however the publication of the research report coincides with the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia. Despite a significant increase in the rate of infection, the Georgian government initially refused to re-impose strict quarantine and opted for selective restrictions. There was also initially no restriction imposed on business activity and the movement of citizens (except for selective lockdowns).

In early October, the National Center for Disease Control recommended using the remote working mode in all private and public organizations (where possible). However, at this time none of the municipalities switched to a remote working mode. Moreover, unlike March-April 2020, the organization of an educational campaign on measures to combat the pandemic by the municipalities has been relatively weak during the second wave.

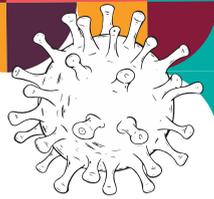
It is generally observed that municipalities, suffering from inertia from the first wave of the pandemic, are still awaiting instructions from the central government regarding the second wave.

An important difference between the spread of the first and second waves of COVID-19 is that no state of emergency has been declared yet for the second wave. Previously, in the first wave, during the state of emergency, the Law on the State of Emergency was enacted (which defined the role of local self-governments and the rules for coordination between government levels), but so far in the second wave, with a state of emergency not declared despite the infection rate reaching alarming proportions, no document has been released outlining the measures that should be taken by local authorities.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear that humanity will have to coexist with COVID-19 for a long time. Therefore, it is essential that all levels of public administration have the appropriate tools and administrative capacity to manage the pandemic.

The experience of March-May 2020 shows that Georgian municipalities played an important role in the containment and management of the first wave of the pandemic. Essentially, Georgian municipalities performed well in March-May 2020 in terms of responsiveness and efficiency in providing assistance to socially vulnerable groups and vulnerable groups in general.



The positive experiences of Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities in assisting farmers in the sale of agricultural products under full quarantine conditions are also noteworthy. Indeed, swiftly-arranged wholesale centers proved a valuable solution, providing farmers within the quarantined area with a yield and income.

During the spring, mayoral representatives in administrative units played an important role with regard to agricultural work. They provided a solution to the transportation problem for farmers and gave them access to agricultural land.

Meanwhile, Georgian municipalities were able to switch to a remote working mode quite rapidly and easily, and to adapt to the new conditions. The e-governance tools that have been introduced in Georgian municipalities for years have been effective in informing the population during the pandemic.

The research also revealed a number of issues that need to be addressed in a timely manner, so that local self-governments in Georgia can play an important role in combating the pandemic. The following recommendations are divided into two groups: systemic recommendations; and administrative recommendations.

### ***Systemic recommendations***

Georgia has large self-governing bodies, the power of which extends over a large area and large groups of the population. It would be possible for these bodies to govern a significant proportion of public affairs. Therefore, it is recommended to grant sectoral competencies (health, education, social protection, etc.) to local self-governments, which will allow them to implement a wide range of measures to fight the pandemic, as has been the case for various municipalities of EU member states.

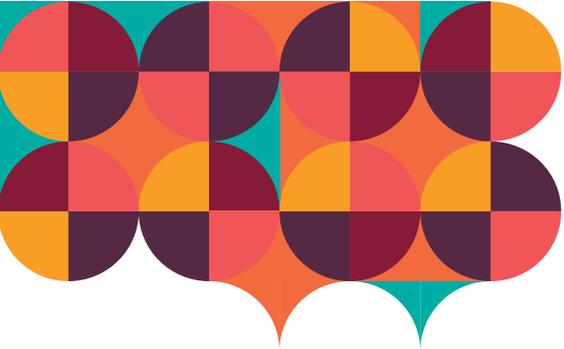
It is important that local self-governments have the powers needed to manage local economic development such as: regulating local tax rates; imposing local tax reliefs; funding private and public partnership projects; and managing state property in the municipality.

It is necessary to change the concept of delegation, and to delegate not only specific tasks but also the authority from the central government to the local self-government. This will allow local self-governments to tailor the measures implemented within their authority to the needs of the local population to the maximum extent.

### ***Administrative recommendations***

It is necessary that municipalities develop regulations for remote working, which will be implemented for all employees and will be available to the general public. It is also necessary to clearly state the rules and conditions for remote working supervision in the same regulations.

There is an urgent need to create (or purchase) modern electronic timesheet systems for remote working and to introduce them in the municipalities of Georgia. It is also important to link the payroll to the timesheet to ensure responsible use of Georgian taxpayers' funds.



It is necessary to write a norm in the Organic Law of Georgia "Code of Local Self-Government" granting the authority and means to local representative bodies to hold sessions remotely during a state of emergency.

It is necessary to improve the material and technical base of the local self-government and develop regulations for the removal, use, and storage of movable property outside the administrative building. It is also important to develop regulations for reimbursing communication costs for public officials who work remotely.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, in the interests of the economy, the focus is already being placed on its clinical management rather than on preventing the spread of the virus. Therefore, in the future, the Georgian government will have to fight the pandemic without imposing a state of emergency and, therefore, it is necessary to have a local strategy and plan in place to fight the pandemic at the municipal level, which will allow the municipalities to implement prevention measures independently.

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