

Urban Post-COVID Recovery in the V4 Countries

(22220018, Strategic Grant)

International research project

implemented at the Institute of Political Science of the University of Wrocław
in the period of 2022-2025

Mid-term Report



The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.

Wrocław 2024

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Project official website:

<https://politologia.uwr.edu.pl/en/granty-i-projekty-badawcze/urban-post-covid-recovery-in-the-v4-countries/>

Project official Facebook account:

<https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>

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General information concerning the project

Project consortium

The project 'Urban Post-COVID Recovery in the V4 Countries' is implemented on the basis of the cooperation between representatives of eight entities: six universities and two public institutions. These are the entities from Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary and France. It should be emphasized that the representatives of these entities have extensive, documented experience, both scientific and practical, in the scope of the project issues. In this sense, the cooperation implemented during the project comes down to the exchange of opinions and experiences of experts focused on the issues of local governance, urban policies and intersectoral cooperation in the Central European region, namely four Visegrad Group countries: Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary.

Importantly, the entities participating in the project have experience in mutual cooperation, also in the field of implementation of other projects financed by the International Visegrad Fund. This type of experience is one of the elements that ensures that the project is implemented smoothly and, what is important, in accordance with prior assumptions.

It is worth emphasizing that not only the typically scientific, but also the application nature of the project is the result of the cooperation between entities belonging to these two groups (researchers and practitioners). The combination of potential, both scientific and applied, allows for the implementation of the project's goals. What is more, it makes the project results addressed not only to the scientific community but also, and perhaps above all, to practitioners (more on this later in the report).

Project partners

- **University of Wrocław (Poland) - the leader of the consortium**



Website: <https://uwr.edu.pl/en/>

The University of Wrocław (UWr) has a rich and documented organizational experience in the topic of public governance and urban policy in Central Europe (conducting conferences, symposiums, and workshops as well as publishing books, chapters and papers). What is more, UWr - especially Institute of Political Science, Department of Political and Administrative Systems - has a significant experience in implementing similar projects, including projects financed by the International Visegrad Fund, e.g.:

- 'New Public Governance in the Visegrad Group' (ID: 11510022),
- 'Understanding Identity and Regions - Perspective on V4 and WB' (ID: 21820078),
- 'Urban Policy System in the Strategic Perspective - from V4 to Ukraine' (ID: 21920304),
- 'Urban policy in the COVID-19 pandemic. The case of the Polish and Swedish central metropolises (Warsaw and Stockholm)' (ID: 2020/04/X/HS5/00147),
- 'Strengthening the European integration of academic networks in V4 and EP/Western Balkans',
- 'Entrepreneurship Weekend - V4 Entrepreneurship experience'.

- **Metropolitan University Prague (Czechia)**



<https://www.mup.cz/en/>

Metropolitan University Prague (MUP) is one of the leading academic institution conducting research and didactics in the field of social sciences, with the particular emphasis on political science. It is worth to mention an experience in the project topic, including the conditions, mechanisms and results of the functioning of local self-governments.

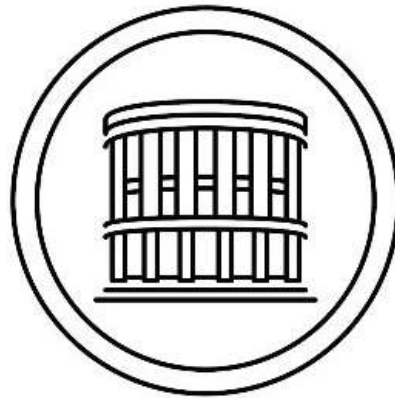
- **University of West Bohemia (Czechia)**



<https://www.zcu.cz/en/index.html>

As one of the leading Czech universities, the University of West Bohemia (UWB) conducts research in many areas of political science, including local self-government theory and practice.

- **Comenius University (Slovakia)**



<https://uniba.sk/en>

Comenius University (CU) is known for its top-quality research and teaching based on innovative teaching methods. Knowledge transfer and collaboration with external stakeholders are the key areas of the university's activity, including the collaboration with representatives of local governments, namely municipalities.

- **University of Szeged (Hungary)**



<https://uniba.sk/en>

As representatives of the best university in Hungary, employees of the University of Szeged (US) conduct research on the intricacies of the functioning of local self-governments.

- **The Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas (France)**



<https://www.eurometrex.org/>

METREX is an international network of metropolitan governments in Europe. Thanks to its knowledge and extensive experience, METREX promotes and supports research projects focused on urban functioning.

- **The Angelus Silesius Academy of Applied Sciences (Poland)**



<https://www.ans.edu.pl/>

The Angelus Silesius Academy of Applied Sciences (ANS AS) is a significant centre for education and research in southern part of the Lower Silesia region. It's worth emphasizing the staff's commitment to addressing the challenges of the local level, including the municipal level.

- **City of Wrocław (Poland)**



<https://www.wroclaw.pl/en/>

Wrocław is the third-largest city in Poland. Over the years, the city has hosted numerous cultural, sporting, and educational events of international scope. What is more, Wrocław acts as a hub for research and development activities. Importantly, Wrocław's municipal self-government administration has extensive experience in programming as well as implementing numerous sectoral policies, with particular emphasis on challenges such as the pandemic crisis and the post-pandemic recovery.

Project goals

It is hard to disagree with the statement that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the functioning of cities and towns. It led to a reduction in budget revenues, made it difficult to provide public services in many areas of urban policy (in many sectoral policies) and, what is connected, forced the response of municipal self-government administrations. According to the data published by the United Nations (UN 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2021a, 2021b), the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedentedly destructive impact on the functioning of municipalities and their inhabitants.

Taking the above into account, the project focuses on the urban post-COVID recovery in the V4 countries. The cooperation of researchers and practitioners (representatives of public institutions and NGOs) from Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary enables the diagnosis of the mechanisms of the response to the post-COVID pandemic crisis at the municipal self-governments level (cities and towns). It is worth to mention that there is no such an analysis which concentrates on the V4 countries and contains the recommendations aimed at practitioners - representatives of public institutions (mostly municipal self-government administrations), local/urban NGOs and, what is important, municipalities' inhabitants. Therefore, the project fills this burning gap. What is more, it allows one to determine if there is a common 'pattern' of urban post-COVID recovery in the V4 countries and, whether the V4 countries can follow the experiences of the 'old' EU countries (cf. Odze et al., 2020).

According to the project assumptions, the cooperation of the researchers and practitioners (representatives of public institutions and NGOs) from V4 countries allows one to create a catalogue of good practices of fighting with the destructive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic at the urban level. Therefore, the cooperation of the researchers and practitioners allows one to define how to create such a unique, both effective and efficient response. Building the lacking catalogue of the good practices in the field of urban post-COVID recovery contributes to the improvement of the quality of the

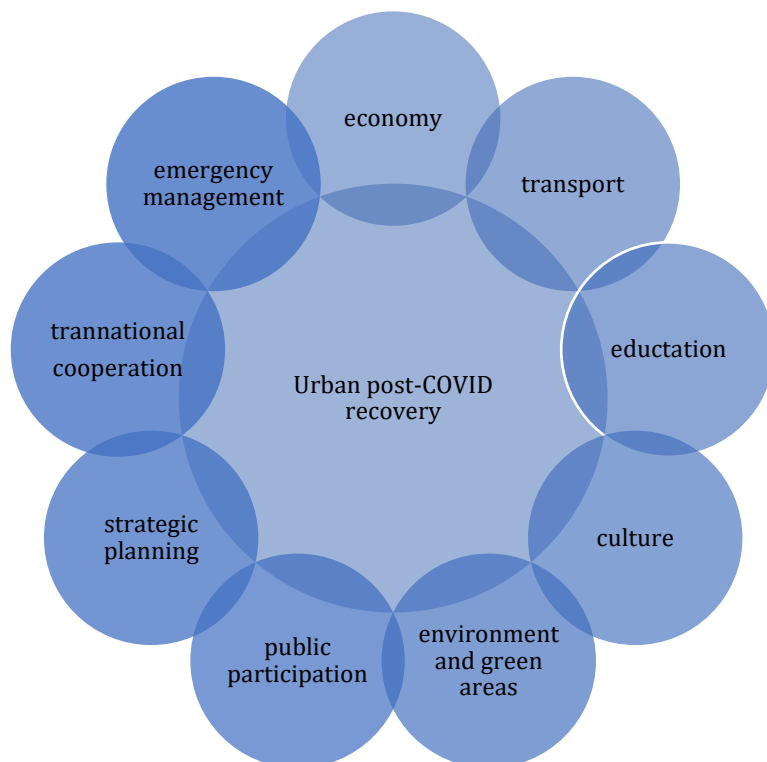
functioning of the public institutions (mainly municipal self-governments), NGOs and citizens in all V4 countries.

Due to the created catalogue, the public institutions, NGOs and citizens in V4 countries have at their disposal the source of knowledge specifying how to organize and conduct the whole process of the creation of urban post-COVID recovery in such urban policy areas as:

- UP1: economy,
- UP2: transport,
- UP3: education,
- UP4: culture,
- UP5: environment and green areas,
- UP6: public participation,
- UP7: strategic planning,
- UP8: transnational cooperation,
- UP9: emergency management (see Graph 1).

The final outcome of the project – it is a monograph in the form of an e-book – will be a useful source of knowledge on this subject improving the functioning of urban communes. The English-language book, treated as a summary of the project, will be a universal source of information, data and good practices analysis on the post-COVID recovery conducted by municipal self-governments (cities and towns) in V4 countries. The chapters published in the book will be written by the representatives of the applicant and the partners, as well as the invited practitioners. The book will be of a high competence level which will be guaranteed by the editorial reviews prepared by the outstanding specialists in the field of urban governance.

Graph 1. Urban post-COVID recovery – sectoral policies approach



Source: own compilation.

It is worth to mention that the book will therefore arouse the interest of not only theoreticians (scientific workers and academics) but also practitioners (representatives of public institutions, NGOs and the interested groups of citizens) from V4 countries. It will therefore allow one to improve the quality of the functioning of the cities and towns in V4 countries, as a consequence, (directly) contribute to the improvement of the life quality of the local societies (inhabitants of cities and towns) in the post-COVID era.

Project recipients

The significance of the project is derived from a wide range of its recipients. They are not only theoreticians (researchers/professors as academia representatives), but most of all practitioners (i.e. representatives of public institutions, mainly municipal self-governments; representatives of NGOs operating in cities and towns; representatives of private sector; students and doctoral students as well as all the citizens of the V4 countries with an interest in the problems of municipal self-governments functioning). The project therefore stands out from other projects. It combines two components: scientific (research) and practical (application) which guarantees high-quality outputs and reaching a wide audience including entities from all V4 countries.

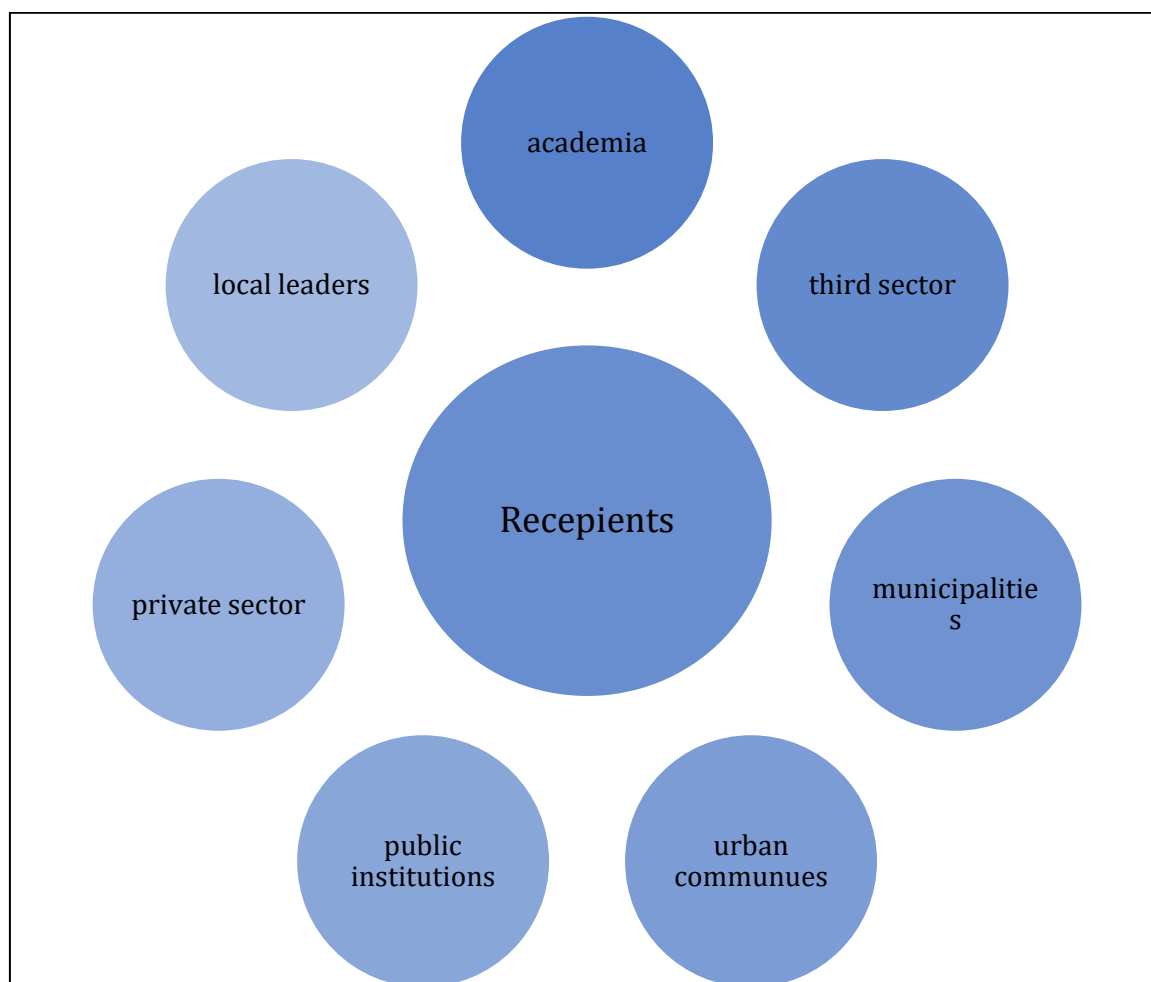
The analysis and diagnosis of the creation of urban post-COVID recovery in V4 region is important due to the two reasons.

Firstly, the V4 region should be the ‘natural area’ of implementing urban post-COVID recovery due to the destructive consequences of the pandemic for the functioning of municipal communities in all these countries (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2024; Gawłowski, 2023; Glinka, 2021, cf. Guasti 2020, 2021). Large cities with significant demographic potential deserve special attention. On the one hand, research proves that due to the intensity of interpersonal contacts, large cities were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic crisis and faced the need for post-pandemic recovery. On the other hand, it is worth to mention the self-repositioning of the cities within the Multi-Level Governance (MLG) system, including the functioning of the European Union legal and institutional framework (see Brenner 2004, 2009).

Secondly, V4 countries can share their experiences especially while taking into the account the creation of the catalogue of good practices in the field of the response to the urban post-COVID crisis, with active participation of civil society (NGOs and inhabitants) and, what is strictly connected, on the basis of systemic relations and sources (see Easton 1965a, 1965b). Due to the realization of the project, not only theoreticians but also practitioners from the region, namely from all V4 countries, gain the universal source of knowledge about the urban post-COVID recovery in the long-term, both strategic and

operational (tactical) perspective. This is important that so far no comprehensive study has been developed emphasizing the regional perspective (V4 perspective) of counteracting the destructive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic at the urban level. The project therefore has the potential to answer key questions from the perspective of urban communities facing the challenges of post-pandemic recovery in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. This answer seems to be particularly important because it was the V4 countries that implemented a partially different model of response to epidemic threats than other EU member states.

Graph 2. Projects recipients



Source: own compilation.

Project implementation

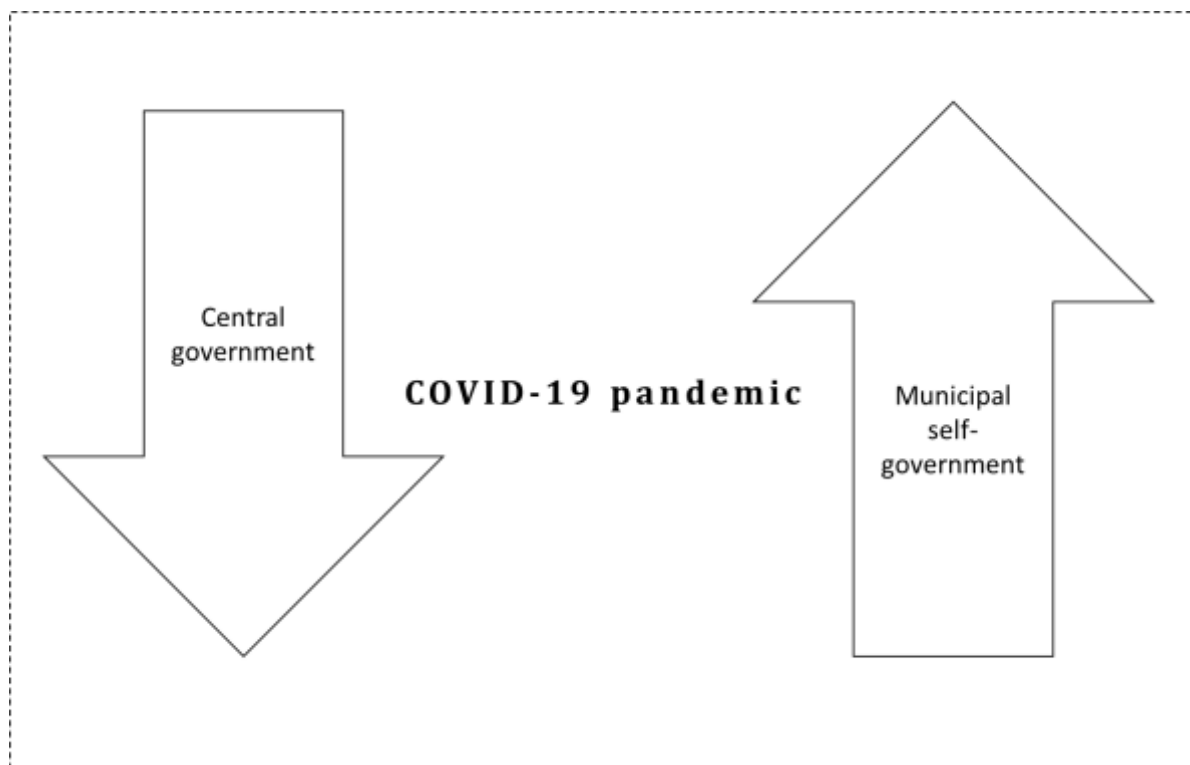
Theoretical background

Assuming that the nation state in its traditional, hierarchical formula is losing its previous position, one may be tempted to say that local government units, including cities and towns, are the new, increasingly important actors in politics – namely the policies (in the developmental sense). It is precisely cities, due to their undeniable development and demographic potential, that are exerting an increasing influence on what political scientists call governance. In other words, cities - or rather municipal self-government administrations - are gaining new instruments for exerting influence on development processes, as if 'in isolation' from decisions and resolutions originally reserved for the central level (Jessop, 2013; Glaeser, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic, treated as an unprecedented crisis caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, was and still is a kind of serious 'test' for the axiomatic nature of the above statement. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic is a 'test' of the extent to which municipal self-government administrations are able to respond independently to the challenges of the pandemic crisis and post-pandemic recovery, and to what extent their potential is limited and actually oriented towards the actions of central actors. The point here is therefore to 'measure' the tension between the central level and the local (urban) level and to define the scope of the so-called local autonomy (Ladner et al., 2019; Ladner, Keuffer & Baldersheim, 2016). In this case, the aim is to answer the question about the scope of local autonomy enjoyed by municipal self-governments in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary (see Graph 3).

The question about the level of local autonomy seems to be particularly important as Central European countries, including the V4 countries, have developed a relatively high, stable structures of local self-governments after 1989. Awareness of such a situation leads to an examination of whether the pandemic crisis has not caused the central administration, in order to effectively counteract the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, to limit the competences of local self-governments, including municipal self-governments (Klimovský, Pinterič & Jüptner, 2019).

Graph 3.

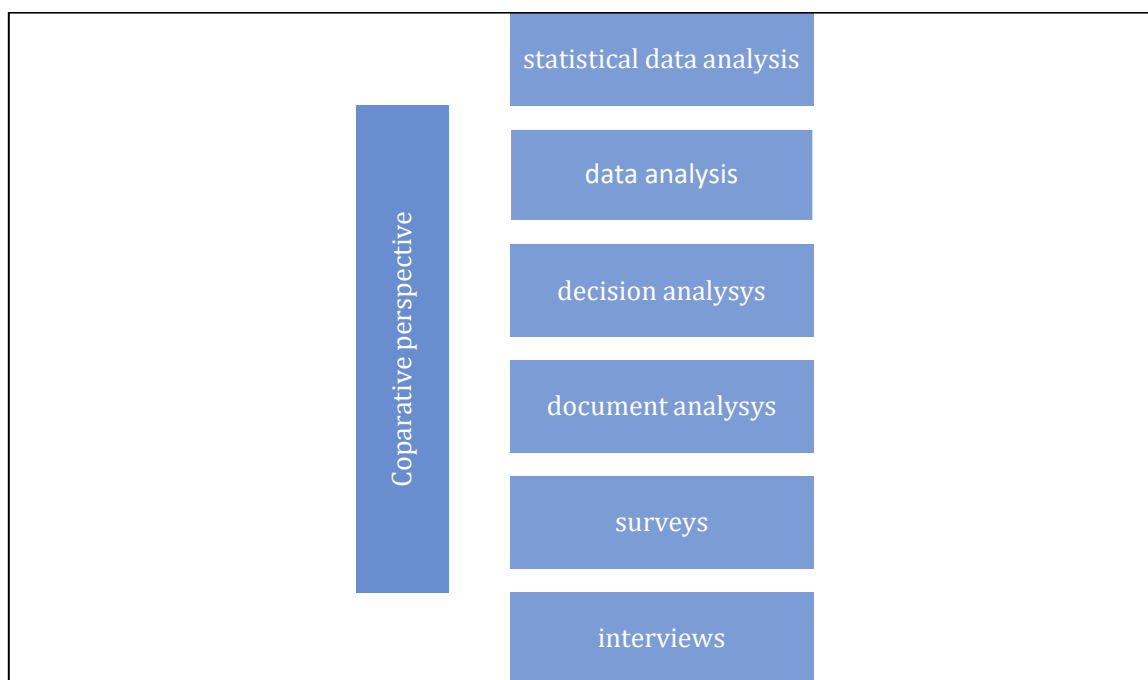


Source: own compilation.

Research methods and techniques

The research conducted within the project is based on classical theoretical and methodological approaches for social sciences, mostly political science. Due to the comparison of four cases – namely cities and towns in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary – comparative analysis plays a key role. It allows for capturing key similarities and differences in the response of V4 municipal self-governments to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated threat. This perspective (international comparative studies) also assumes the use of several other research methods and techniques (see Graph 4).

Graph 4. Methodological approach



Source: own compilation.

In addition to the existing data analysis (primarily statistical data), it is worth to mention the decision analysis (in relation to the process of formulating key legal acts determining the shape and nature of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic) as well as the document analysis (primarily, but not exclusively, made available by the offices of the cities studied). An important role was played by the analysis of legal acts - in this case, acts of international, national and local law. Where deemed appropriate, surveys and interviews were conducted with representatives of municipal communities. The analysis of statistical data also provides valuable information on the mechanisms of response to the post-pandemic crisis.

It is worth noting that the selection of research methods and techniques determines that the analyses of the conditions, mechanisms, forms and results of post-pandemic housing at the urban level in the V4 countries will be based on both quantitative and qualitative orientation. Taking into account the current trends in the field of social sciences, with particular emphasis on political and administrative sciences, it seems that the combination of these two orientations offers an opportunity for the most complete (comprehensive) illustration of the difficult-to-grasp, multi-level and multi-subjective phenomena and processes related to urban post-COVID recovery in the V4 countries.

Forms and deliverables

The project implementation is based on intensive cooperation between partners. In other words, the project is implemented using the following forms (cf. Graph 5):

- exchange of information and data between scientists and practitioners representing members of the project consortium.

This exchange is carried out systematically and continuously, based on previously established contacts and communication channels. Importantly, it enables smooth cooperation in preparing all other forms and deliverables of project, with particular emphasis on public events and a monograph in a form of an e-book.

- organization of events constituting key stages in achieving the project objective (the first event took place in 2023 in Wrocław, the second in 2024 in online formula, the third in 2024 in Wałbrzych, and the fourth is planned for 2025 to be organised in Szeged).

According to the project's assumptions, each event is a forum for the exchange of experiences, observations and opinions on the methods of rebuilding municipal governments. What is more, each event is attended not only by scientists, but also by practitioners - representatives of the public, private and social sectors as well as students and doctoral students. It may be tempting to say that this is, in a sense, a unique formula that guarantees a broad view of the issues raised by all interested parties. In order to ensure the widest possible access to events, each event is live streamed, which will allow for a measurable expansion of the recipient catalogue.

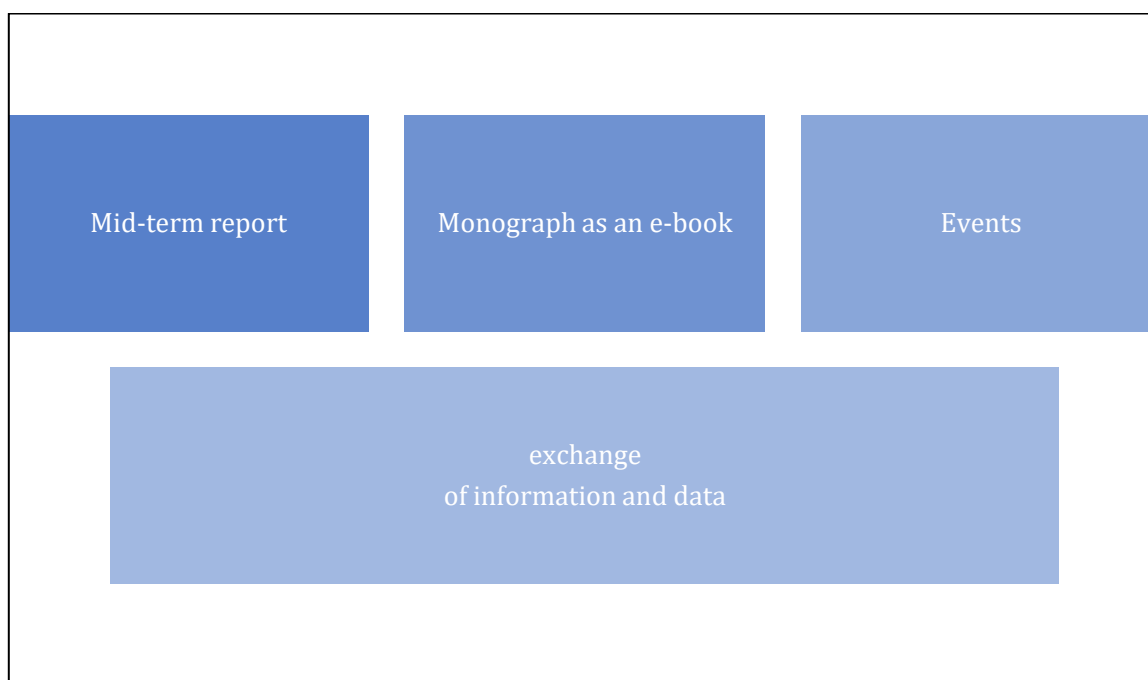
- preparation of a peer-reviewed scientific monograph (in a form of a e-book) presenting the overall results of the project.

In line with the project's assumptions, the monograph presents key findings made during the comparative research. These are the findings that are not only important from a scientific point of view but also important for practitioners – mainly (but not only) representatives of the local/municipal

sector who are looking for answers to the question of how to respond to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The book contains chapters prepared according to the cascade approach, in which detailed analyses follow analyses of a general nature and an introductory role.

- preparation of mid-term report (which is this publication available online in open access).

Graph 5. Projects forms and deliverables



Source: own compilation.

Project events

The first project event

Wrocław, April 25th-26th 2023



Opening Academic & Practical Workshop

"Urban Post-COVID Recovery - Experiences, Challenges and Future Pathways"

under the honorary patronage of

Section of Administration and Public Policies of the Polish Political Sciences Association

Institute of Political Science of the University of Wrocław

April, 26-27th 2023



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On April 26th-27th, 2023, the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław hosted the participants of the first event organised within the project 'Urban Post-COVID Recovery in the V4 Countries'. The event was divided into several parts.

In the first part of the event, the representatives of leading Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian universities presented the results of the scientific research devoted to the project issues. All presentations were met with great interest from the audience and were the subject of in-depth comments and remarks.

The part two was an opportunity for an interdisciplinary discussion devoted to the problems of post-COVID urban recovery in Central and Eastern Europe. The debate was not aimed only at researchers – the representatives of Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia, but also the practitioners from Poland and France interested in the subject of the project.

In the next part special workshop for students and doctoral students were organized. The participants of these workshop had the opportunity to learn the conditions, forms and mechanisms for building the mechanisms of public involvement at the urban level during the post-pandemic period. A special attention was devoted to the strategic and operational dimension of this process. The workshop participants were introduced to theoretical issues as well as had to complete a task, according to the data-based approach.

It is worth noting that the event was held under the honorary patronage of the Section of Administration and Public Policies of the Polish Political Science Association.

To sum up it is worth emphasizing that the first event met with the keen interest of not only researchers from involved universities, but also practitioners, doctoral students and students.

Recordings from the event are available on the official Facebook account of the project: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>

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The first project event.

Day 1:



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>



Author: Olga Grajek

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The first project event.

Day 2:



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>



Author: Olga Grajek



Author: Olga Grajek



Author: Olga Grajek

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The second project event (online)

May, 6th – 7th 2024



On May 6th-7th, 2024, the Institute of Political Science at the University of Wrocław hosted the participants of the second event organised within the international research project 'Urban Post-COVID Recovery in the V4 Countries' financed by the International Visegrad Fund. The online event consisted of three parts.

In the first, academic part of the event, the representatives of leading Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian universities presented the results of the scientific research devoted to the project aims and assumptions. Moreover, introductory papers were presented by special guests – the key speakers: Professor Patrizia Magaro (Universita di Genova, Italy) and Professor Javier Lorenzo Rodriguez (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain). The guests presented the in-depth analyses on the opportunities and barriers to urban post-COVID recovery. The presentations generated significant interest and generated lively debate. Importantly, the experts' statements allowed for a broader research perspective in the form of an "outside-in" look at the post-pandemic recovery in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary, in a situation where the research is dominated by the Central European point of view. Moreover, the guests' presentations made it possible to determine whether, and if so, to what extent, the post-pandemic recovery in the V4 countries draws on the experiences of the so-called Western European countries.

The part two took the form of a round table debate devoted to the problems of post-COVID urban recovery. The debate was attended by not only scientists, but also the practitioners representing the private and social sectors, including project partners. As intended, various approaches to the recovery of municipal self-governments were confronted and discussed. It is worth to mention that Henk Bouwman, representing METREX Network of European Metropolitan Regions and Areas, among others, presented his reflections on the challenges of recovery.

In the third part of the event the workshop aimed at students and PhD students were organized. The participants gained knowledge about the mechanisms of post-pandemic recovery and presented their own proposals on this topic. The presented ideas met with in-depth interest and raised questions and discussions.

To sum up, it is worth emphasizing that the organized event was an online event and met with the keen interest of not only researchers, but also practitioners.

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Recordings from the event are available on the official website of the project:

<https://politologia.uwr.edu.pl/en/granty-i-projekty-badawcze/urban-post-covid-recovery-in-the-v4-countries/second-project-event-online-may-6th-7th-2024/>

Second project event.

Day 1.

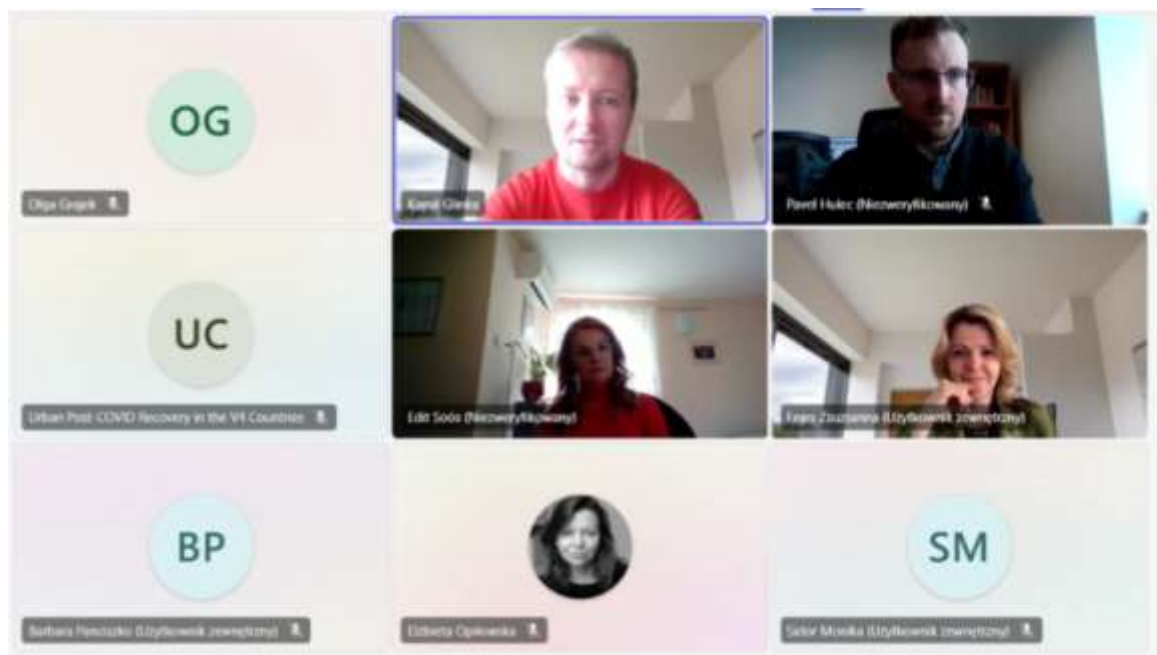


Source: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nFInFUWSx-I?si=qhijkpOpy-hluq9U>

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Source: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nFInFUWSx-I?si=qhijkpOpy-hluq9U>



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THE POST-COVID RECOVERY MECHANISMS

Hungary's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) –May 2021

- counteracting the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak;
- increasing the resilience and sustainability of the economy; and
- preparing for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transition.

On 23 November 2023 the European Commission positively assessed Hungary's modified Recovery and Resilience Plan, which includes a REPowerEU chapter

- 47 investment streams and 67 reforms

- The revised plan places a very strong emphasis on the **green transition**, allocating 67.1% of available resources to measures supporting climate objectives (compared to 48.1% in the original plan).
- In terms of increasing the resilience of local authorities, the **digital efforts** in the revised Hungarian plan are noteworthy (29.1% of the total amount of the plan). - supported the digital transition by investments and reforms in the education and the public administration, as well as the digitalisation of the health, energy and transport sectors.
- The economic and **social dimension** remains important in the revised plan. In addition to the major reforms and investments in the original plan, a number of additional measures are aimed at improving the resilience of society and increasing the effectiveness of public administration systems.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nFInFUWSx-I?si=qhijkpOpy-hluq9U>

Unemployment in the context of COVID- 19

◆ Economic disruptions	◆ increase of 0.5 percentage points compared to 2019
◆ Impact on specific industries	◆ population of unemployed individuals increased by 14.6 thousand people during 2020, i.e., by 31.6%, with the average increase in the country being 20.8%.
◆ Challenges for small businesses	◆ Women accounted for 58.3%
◆ Vulnerable groups and youth	
◆ Psychological and social impact	

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nFInFUWSx-I?si=qhijkpOpy-hluq9U>

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Second project event.

Day 2.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nFIInFUWSx-I?si=qhijkpOpy-hluq9U>



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/live/nFIInFUWSx-I?si=qhijkpOpy-hluq9U>

- Visegrad Fund



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The third project event

Wałbrzych, October, 10th – 11th 2024



URBAN POST-COVID RECOVERY: BETWEEN THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

10-11.10.2024

PLACE: THE ANGELUS SILESIUS UNIVERSITY
OF APPLIED SCIENCES
(WAŁBRZYCH, POLAND)



CONTACT

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On October 10-11, the third event organized as part of the project took place. The event took place at the headquarters of one of the project partners, namely Angelus Silesius Academy of Applied Sciences in Wałbrzych.

In accordance with the assumptions, the event was divided into three parts. The first included a round table discussion, in which scientists and practitioners participated: representatives of the local government, non-governmental and business sectors.

The second - scientific - part was a form of exchange of opinions on the results of research conducted as part of the projects. The chapters prepared by the consortium participants, which will be published as part of the monograph, were analyzed.

The third part met with keen interest from students, who had the opportunity to learn about the conditions, forms, mechanisms and results of conducting urban policy in the conditions of the post-pandemic crisis.

The event has been supported by the honorary patronage of:

- Member of Parliament of the Republic of Poland Dr. Sylwia Bielawska,
- President of the City of Wałbrzych Dr. Roman Szełemej.
- Chairman of the City Council of Wałbrzych Krzysztof Kalinowski,
- President of the Foundation for the Development of Social Economy (Pol. *Fundacja Rozwoju Ekonomii Społecznej*) Zenon Matuszko,
- CEO of InWałbrzych Arkadiusz Grudzień.

The event provided an opportunity for experts to discuss how to develop cross-sectoral cooperation to ensure that the post-pandemic recovery in the V4 countries proceeds smoothly, effectively, and efficiently. As the invited guests' statements suggest, the key to cooperation lies in understanding that despite the different resources available to public, private, and social actors, their goals are often aligned. This goal is to meet the collective needs and expectations of members of the urban community.

Recordings from the event are available on the official Facebook account of the project: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>

The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.



Third project event.

Day 1.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>

The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.



Source: www.walbrzych24.com



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Third project event.

Day 2.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/upcrV4>

The project is co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.



Author: Wirginia Grochowska



Source: www.walbrzych24.com

The fourth project event

Szeged, October 2025

University of Szeged (Hungary)



<https://u-szeged.hu/english>

The event planned to be organized in Szeged will be a final event devoted to the presentation of the results of the project.

According to the project assumptions it is worth to mention that the event will be a great opportunity to present the results of the research published in a form of an e-book. Importantly, as was the case with the three previous events, the final event will provide an opportunity for researchers as well as practitioners representing public institutions and the third sector to exchange opinions and observations, and to formulate conclusions and recommendations. The event will be open to all interested in the issues of urban post-pandemic recovery in the V4 countries. Students and PhD students will also take part in the event.

Analysis

National context: COVID-19 pandemic as a challenge for the state

As can be seen from the analysis of extensive literature on the subject, specialist reports and media reports (see: Literature), the COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to the state: its bodies and institutions. One might be tempted to say that the pandemic crisis was a kind of 'test' for the effectiveness and efficiency of the public sector: central governments and local self-governments, with the particular emphasis on municipal self-governments. It turned out that the previous mechanisms of action, successfully programmed and implemented for years, lost their functionality. The pandemic threat - and we are talking not only about the period of the COVID-19 pandemic itself, but also about the post-pandemic period - has therefore remodelled the established patterns of performing public tasks in many sectoral areas as economy, housing, education, culture, sport, health, social care, etc. (see Nemec & Špaček, 2020; Plaček, Špaček & Ochrana, 2020; Pászto, Macků & Burian, 2022).

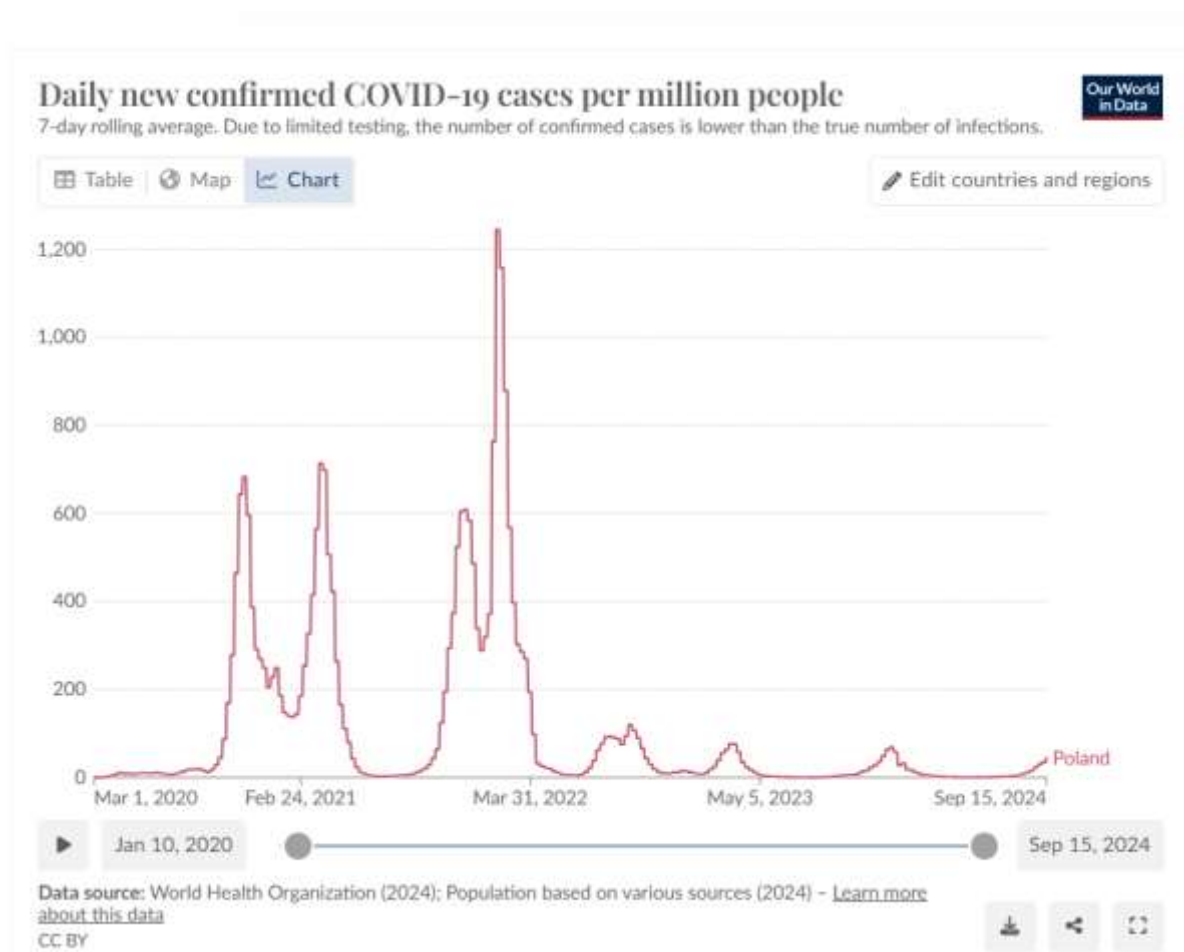
The COVID-19 pandemic, like other European countries, affected the countries of the Visegrad Group. The response of the V4 countries was special because it was characterized by a kind of 'decisiveness' of action, including in the form of introducing wide-ranging restrictions and limitations, especially while taking into the account the first and the second wave of the pandemic COVID-19.

Using publicly available statistical data, one may be tempted to attempt to illustrate selected actions aimed at 'fighting' the COVID-19 pandemic which were undertaken by the V4 countries, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-COVID-19 pandemic period (Reviglio, 2023).

The analysis of these activities is preceded by an illustration of a key indicator that allows for an assessment of the scale of the pandemic crisis faced by Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. What seems to be obvious, this indicator is the number of people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Regardless of the different methodology for collecting data on infections for each of the V4 countries (as it may be debatable due to the some different research positions on this topic), certain key trends can be indicated.

Poland

Chart 1.

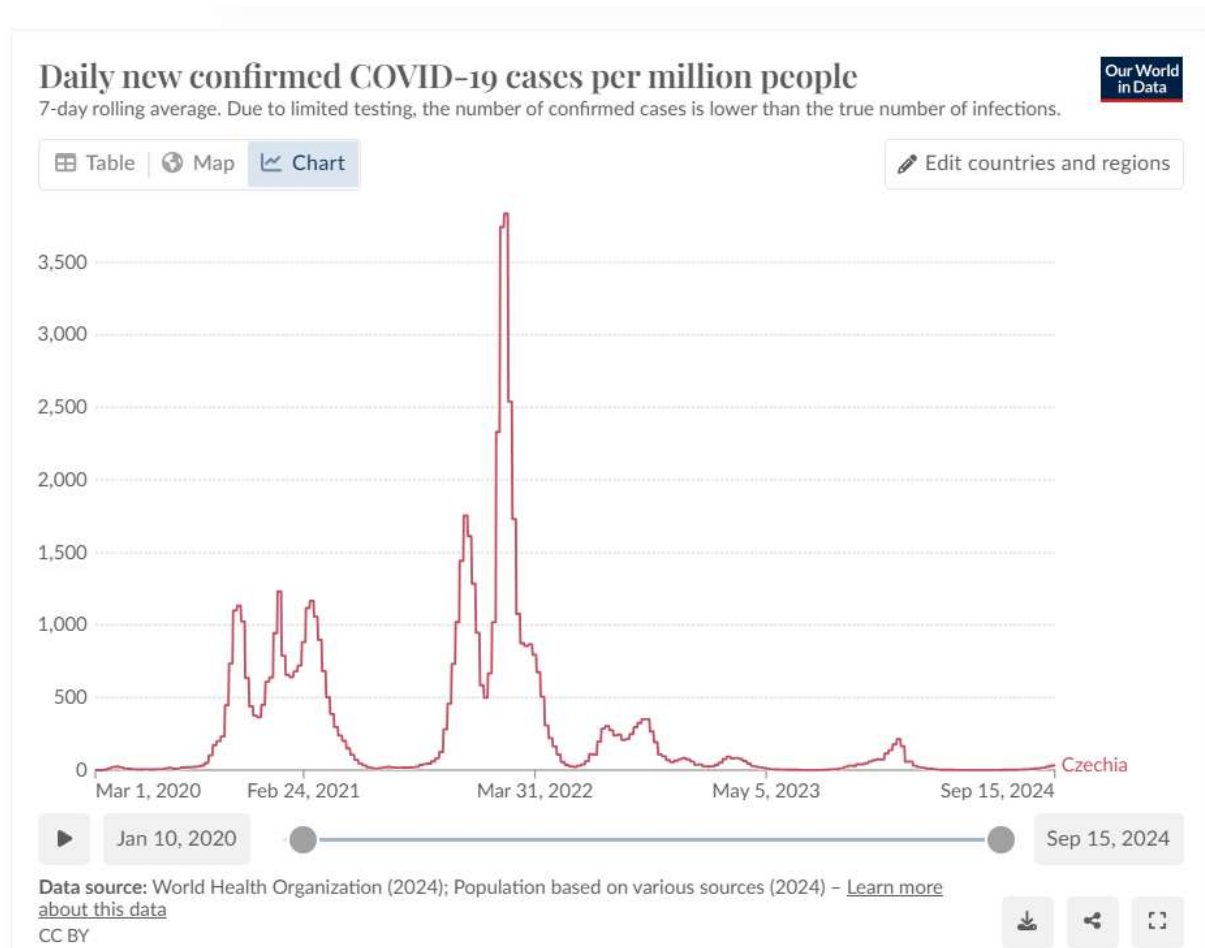


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#coronavirus-country-profiles>

As can be seen from the data presented in the above chart, the highest number of infected people in Poland was recorded in spring 2022. The increase seems to be clear and visible compared to spring 2020, spring 2023 and spring 2024.

Czechia

Chart 2.

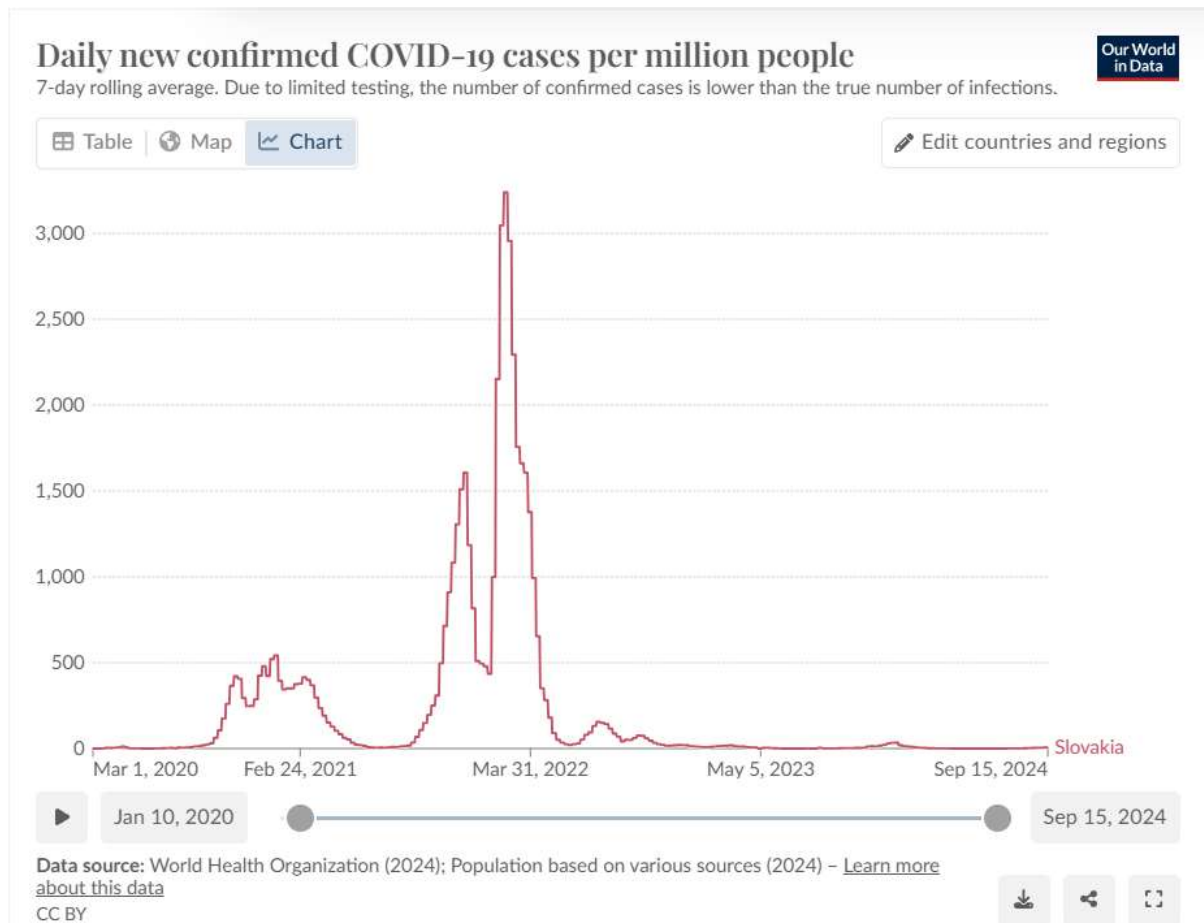


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#coronavirus-country-profiles>

Similarly to Poland, in Czechia the highest percentage of people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was recorded in early spring 2022. However, the peak of disease incidence is higher than in Poland.

Slovakia

Chart 3.

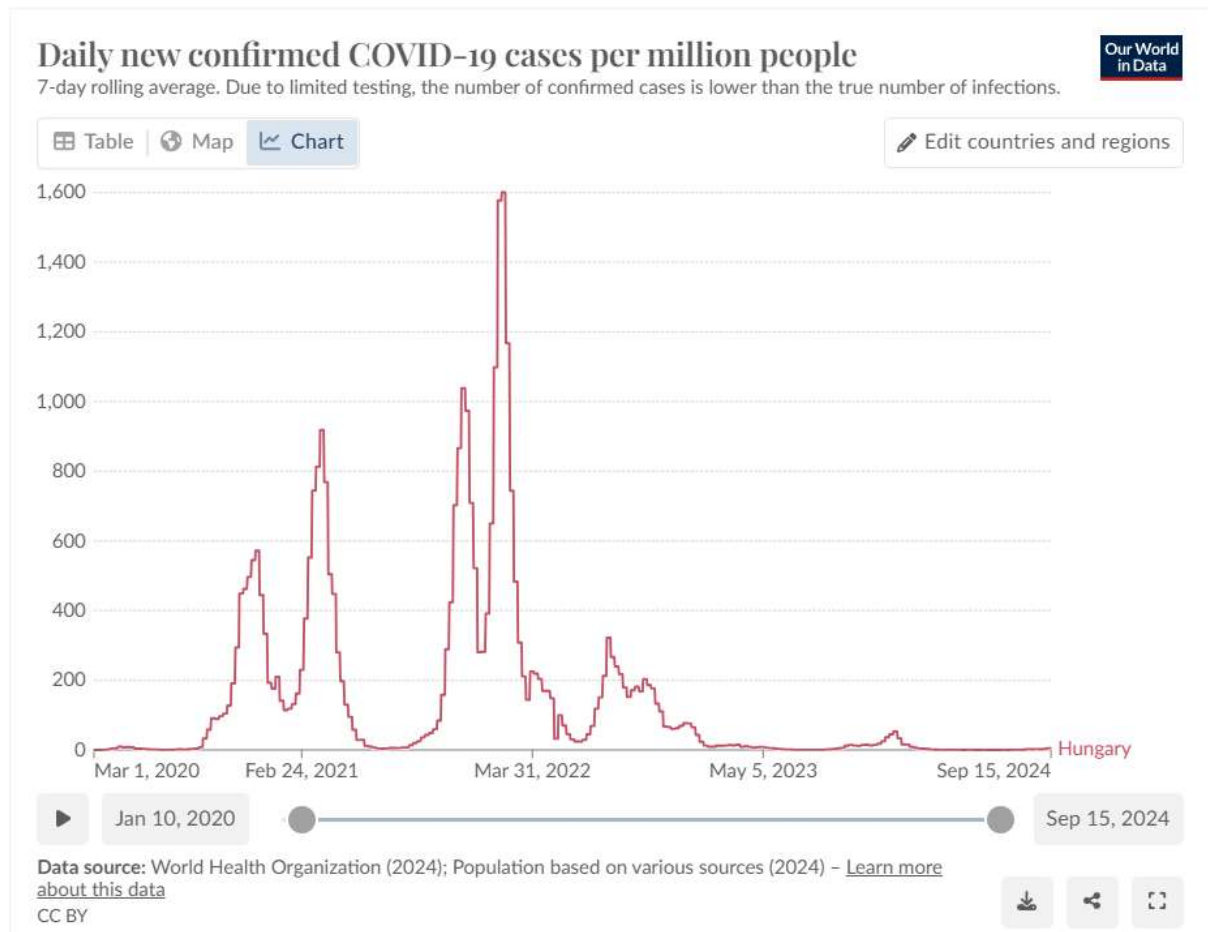


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#coronavirus-country-profiles>

Exactly the same trend regarding the number of positive cases of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus infection can be noted in Slovakia. The peak of the cases is reflected by the situation taking place in spring 2022, as it was indicated in Poland and Czechia.

Hungary

Chart 4.



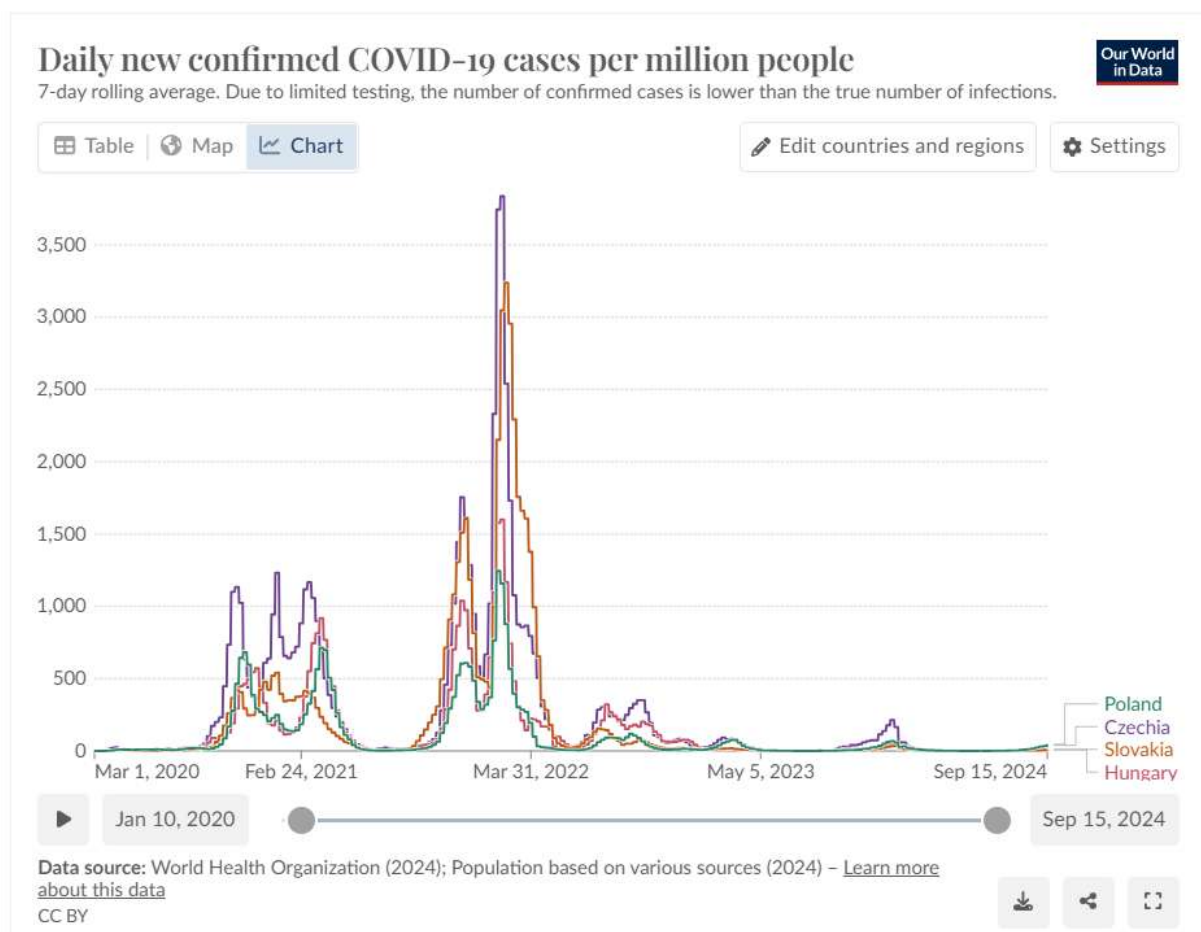
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#coronavirus-country-profiles>

As it is indicated in the Chart 4 the pandemic situation is no different in Hungary. The peak of SARS-COV-2 coronavirus cases in this country occurred in early spring 2022. The years 2023 and 2024, i.e. the post-pandemic recovery period, show a clear decline in the number of cases.

As can be seen from the analysis of Chart 5, the peak of the crisis related to the number of infected citizens of the V4 countries falls in practically the same period. To sum up, one can be tempted to say that it was the early spring of 2022 that forced the V4 countries, including the municipal self-governments, to take special actions aimed at reducing the destructive effects of the pandemic crisis. The spectrum of conducted activities was wide, however it is worth to mention that all of them were oriented on the decreasing of the number of cases.

V4 countries – a comparison perspective

Chart 5.



Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#coronavirus-country-profiles>

When seeking an answer to the question about what these actions were, it seems justified to take into account the scale and scope of the limitations and restrictions which, in accordance with the intentions of the V4 governments, were to be an effective and efficient tool in counteracting the destructive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next five charts (Chart 6, Chart 7, Chart 8, Chart 9, Chart 10) illustrate the restrictions introduced in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. Importantly, they include nine different restrictions as follows:

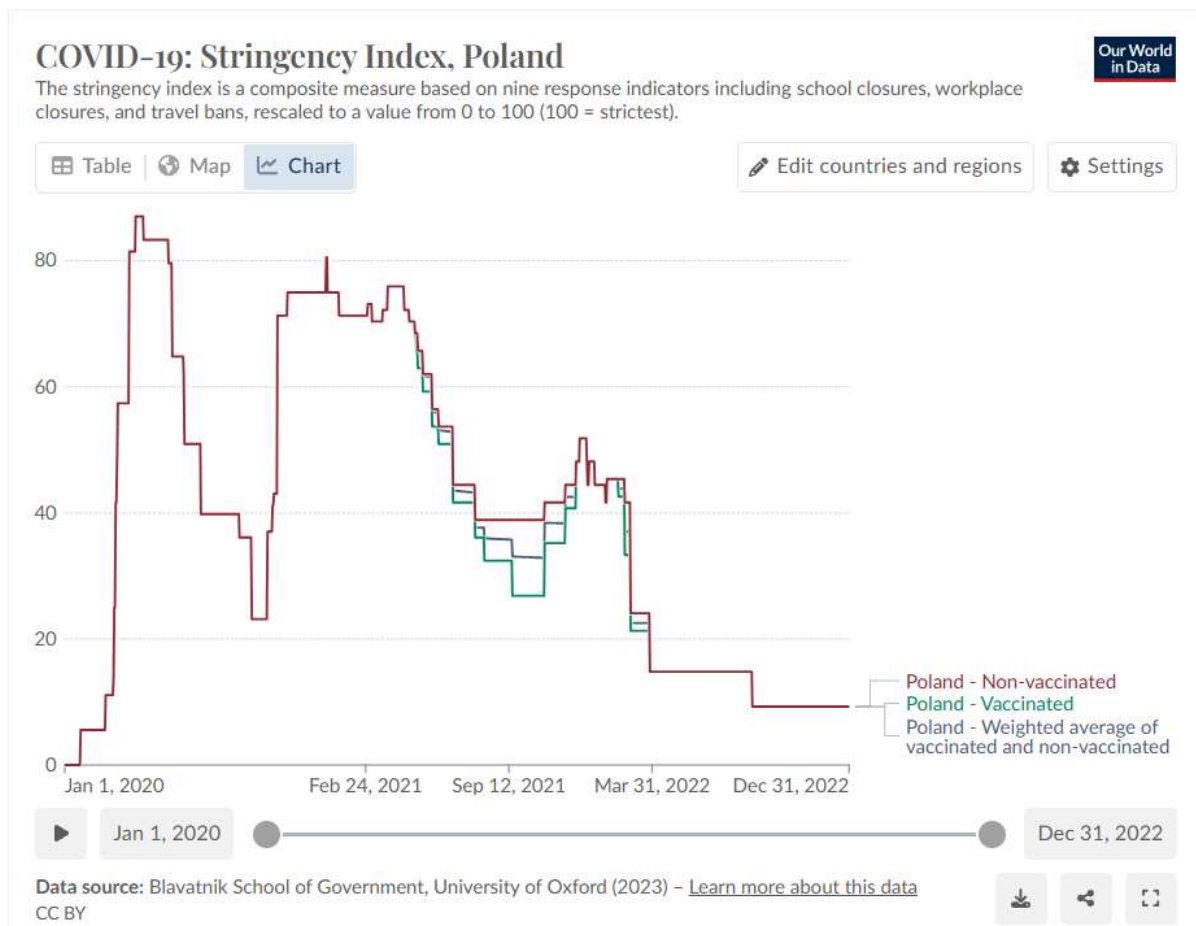
- school closures;
- workplace closures;
- cancellation of public events;
- restrictions on public gatherings;
- closures and/or limitations of public transport;
- stay-at-home requirements;
- public information campaigns;
- restrictions on internal movements;
- international travel controls;
- supporting/conducting the vaccination campaigns (cf. Glinka, 2021).

The combination of these elements provides a significant, although obviously imperfect, picture of how the V4 countries 'fought' the COVID-19 pandemic.

This does not change the fact that individual tools used to "fight" the pandemic crisis were used to varying degrees and scope. It is hard to disagree with the statement that much depended on the decisions not only of central governments but also of local self-governments, including municipalities, which assessed the state of their resources and implemented actions appropriate to those resources.

Poland

Chart 6.

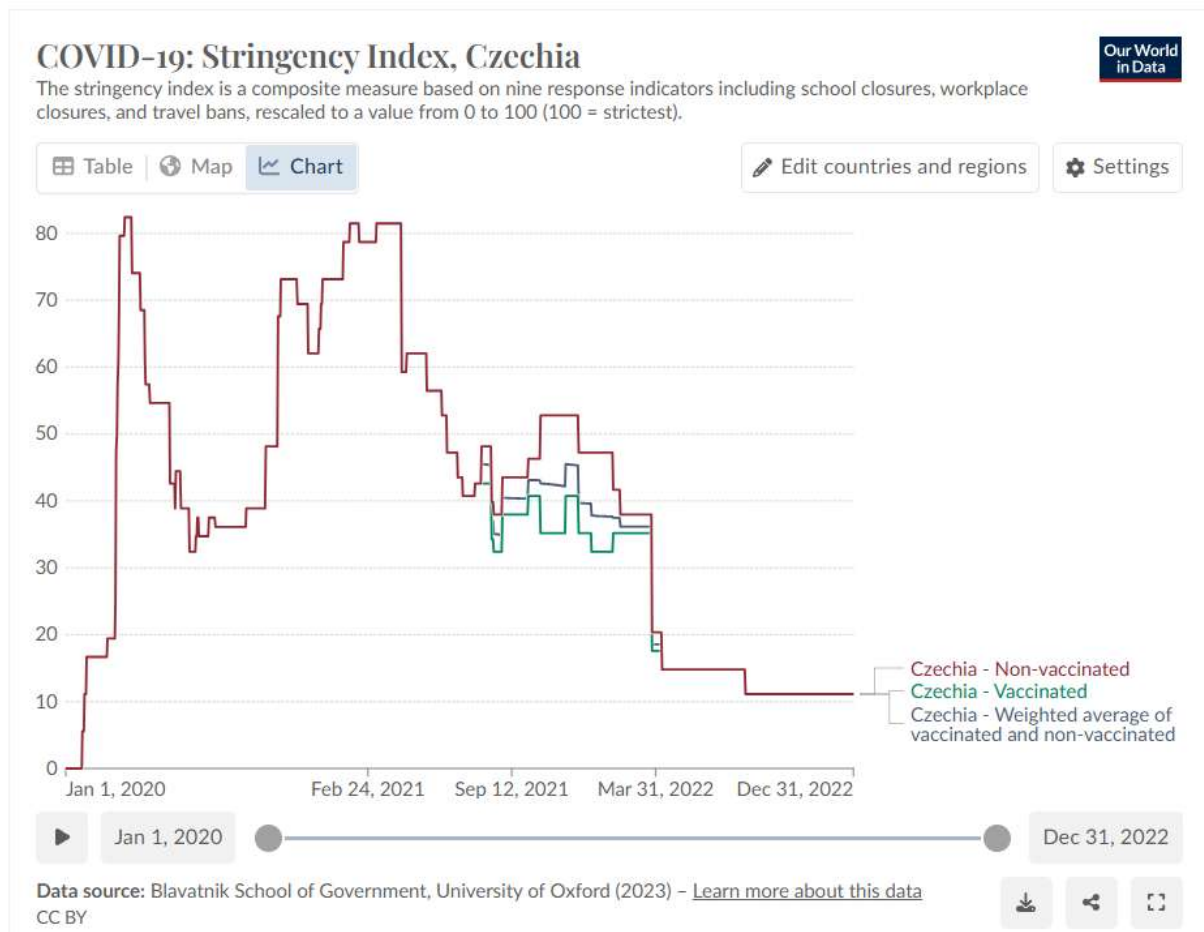


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

In contrast to the data illustrating the number of cases of people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, the peak of restrictive measures introduced in Poland occurred during the so-called first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (spring 2020). A high level of restrictions also occurred in spring 2021. It was a reaction to the increase in the number of cases, but also the result of the current political dispute on how to effectively and efficiently 'fight' the pandemic crisis.

Czechia

Chart 7.

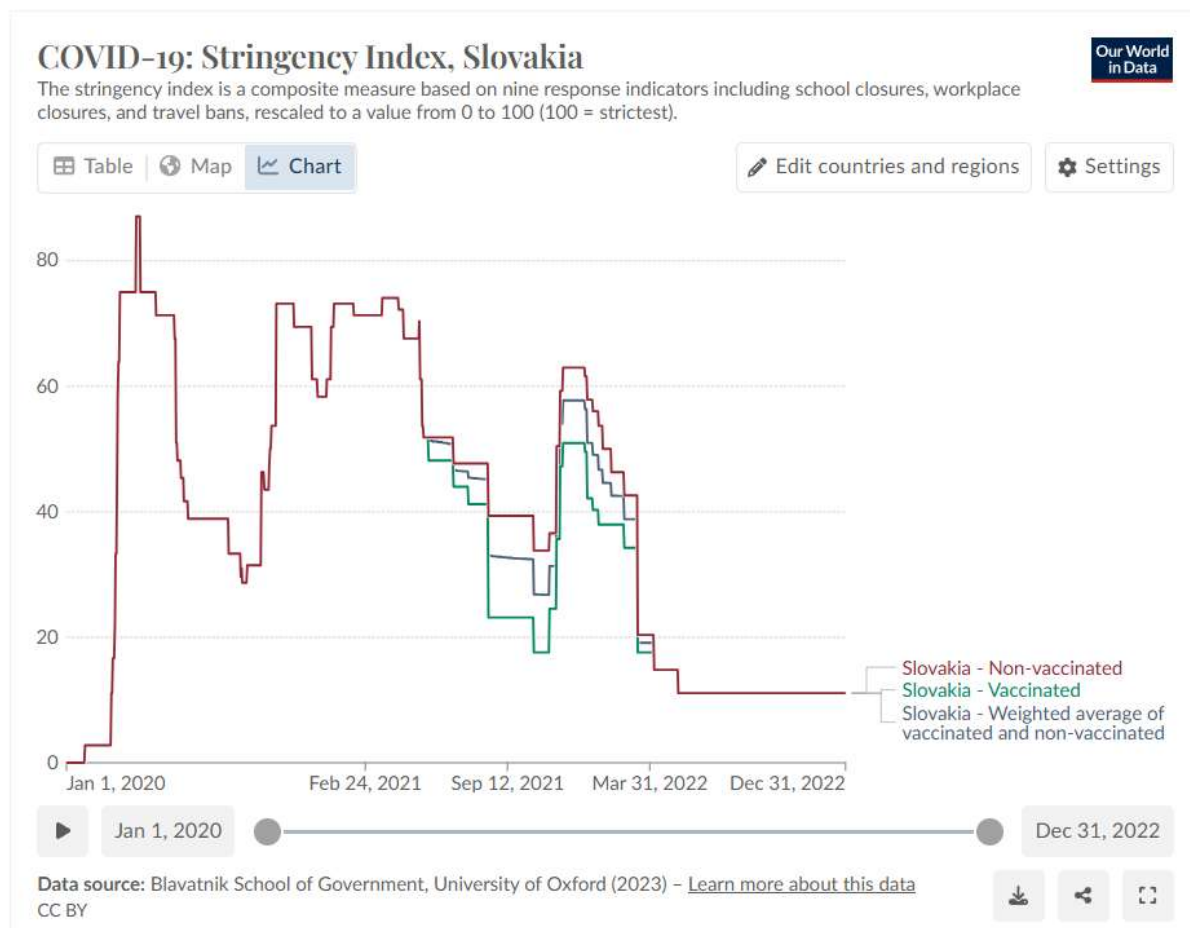


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

Analysing the case of Czechia, one might be tempted to say that the peak of restrictions falls on two, in a sense, twin periods. These are spring 2020 and spring 2021. Taking into account the above statistical data, it should be noted that this situation seems to be 'twin' with the one that took place in Poland. As in Poland, in Czechia the scale and dynamics of the introduction of restrictions were also the subject of a lively public debate, which engaged not only politicians but also experts, scientists as well as the formal representatives of employers and employees.

Slovakia

Chart 8.

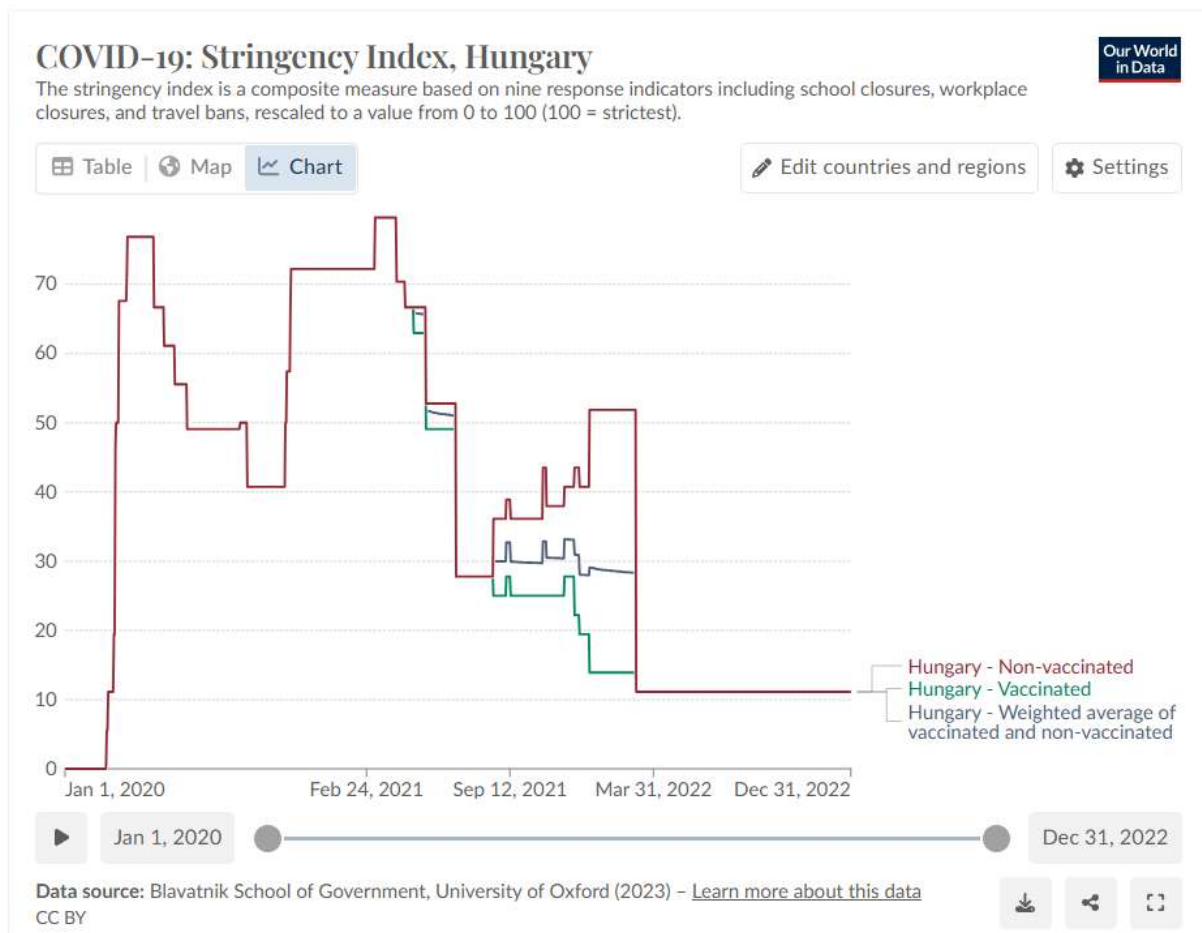


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

In the case of Slovakia, the intensity of restrictive measures seems to be 'stretched' over time. This is evidenced by the data relating not only to spring 2020, but also to a significant part of 2021. Analysis of the data presented in the chart above leads to the conclusion that Slovakia was another country from the V4 group in which the level of restrictions introduced was in line with a certain regional trend.

Hungary

Chart 9.



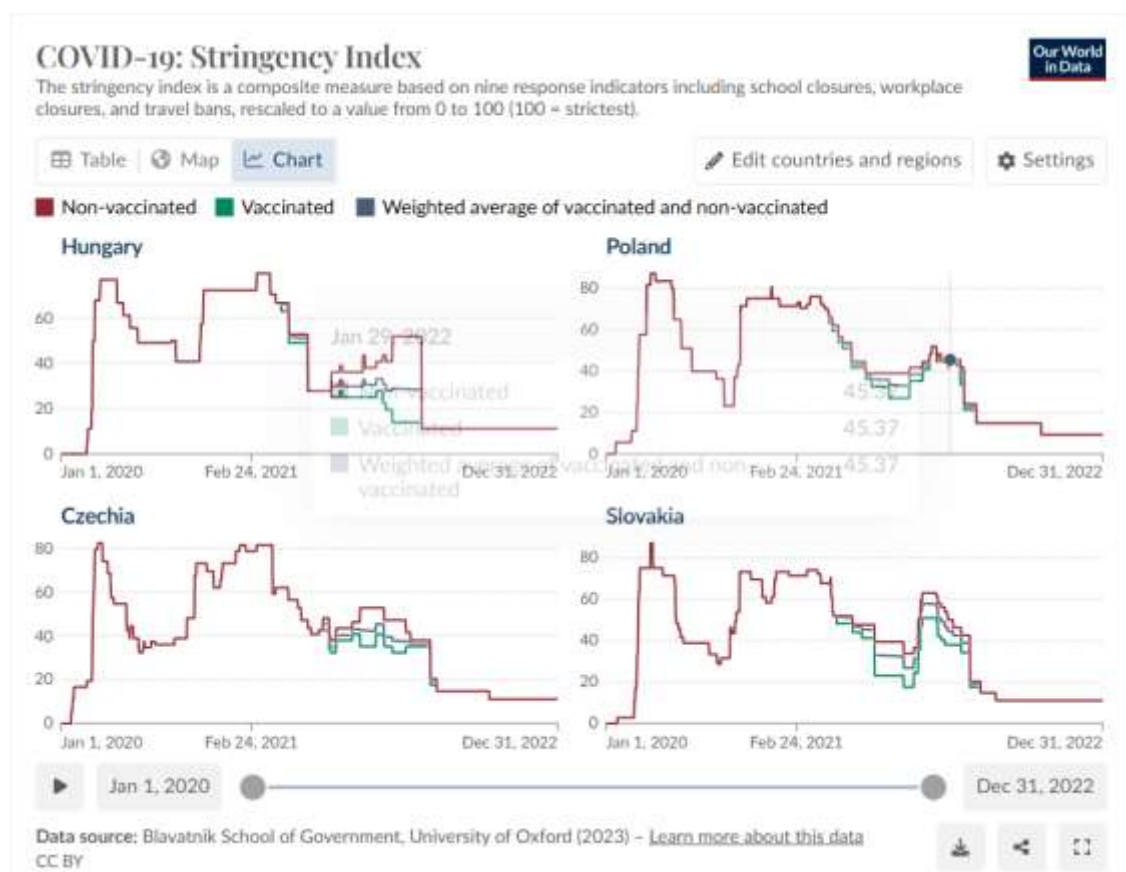
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

The case of Hungary is special because the restrictions introduced in the spring of 2021 are greater than those introduced in the spring of the previous year. The year 2022 (especially spring) is of particular note, as it was the time when the scale of the restrictions was still noticeable and should therefore be noted. Given the above, one might be tempted to say that the Hungarian case was, in some ways, different from those of Poland, Czechia and Slovakia. A common element among all four V4 countries was the heated debate on how best to respond to the pandemic threat and how to communicate (and justify) decisions to citizens.

Although the overall assessment of the restrictions introduced in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary is similar, the case of Hungary seems to be unexpected while taking into account the solutions implemented in the other V4 countries. Analysing the reason for such a difference, one may be tempted to say that the reason was a different strategy to 'fight' the COVID-19 pandemic implemented by the government in Budapest (see Chart 10).

V4 countries

Chart 10.



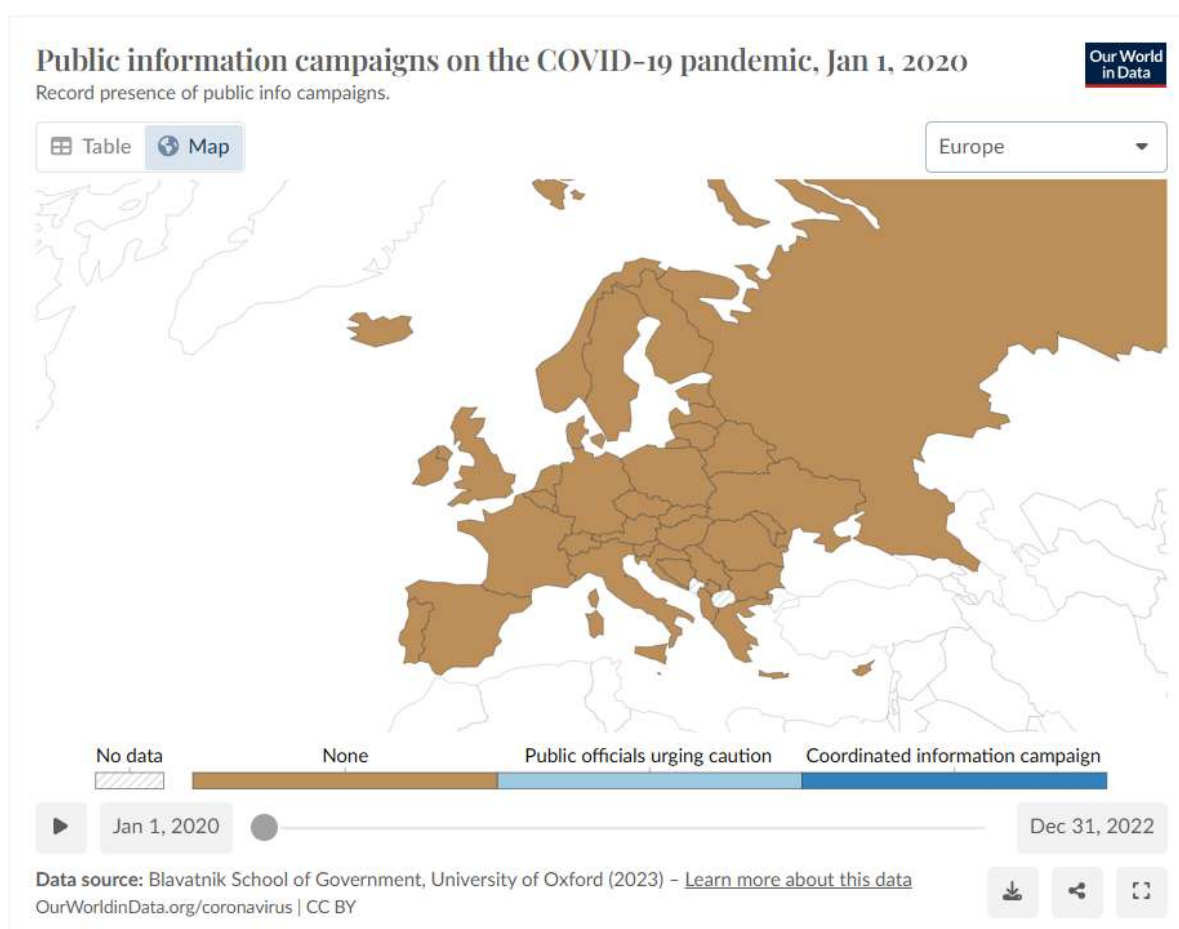
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index>

When analysing the 'response' of the V4 countries to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth mentioning **two more seemingly key manifestations of activities**.

The first of them are **information campaigns** aimed at transferring knowledge and shaping social attitudes related to counteracting the destructive consequences of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Based on available data, the above charts illustrate the extent to which and how the V4 countries communicated with their residents about the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to other EU Member States (see Chart 11).

Europe/V4

Chart 11.



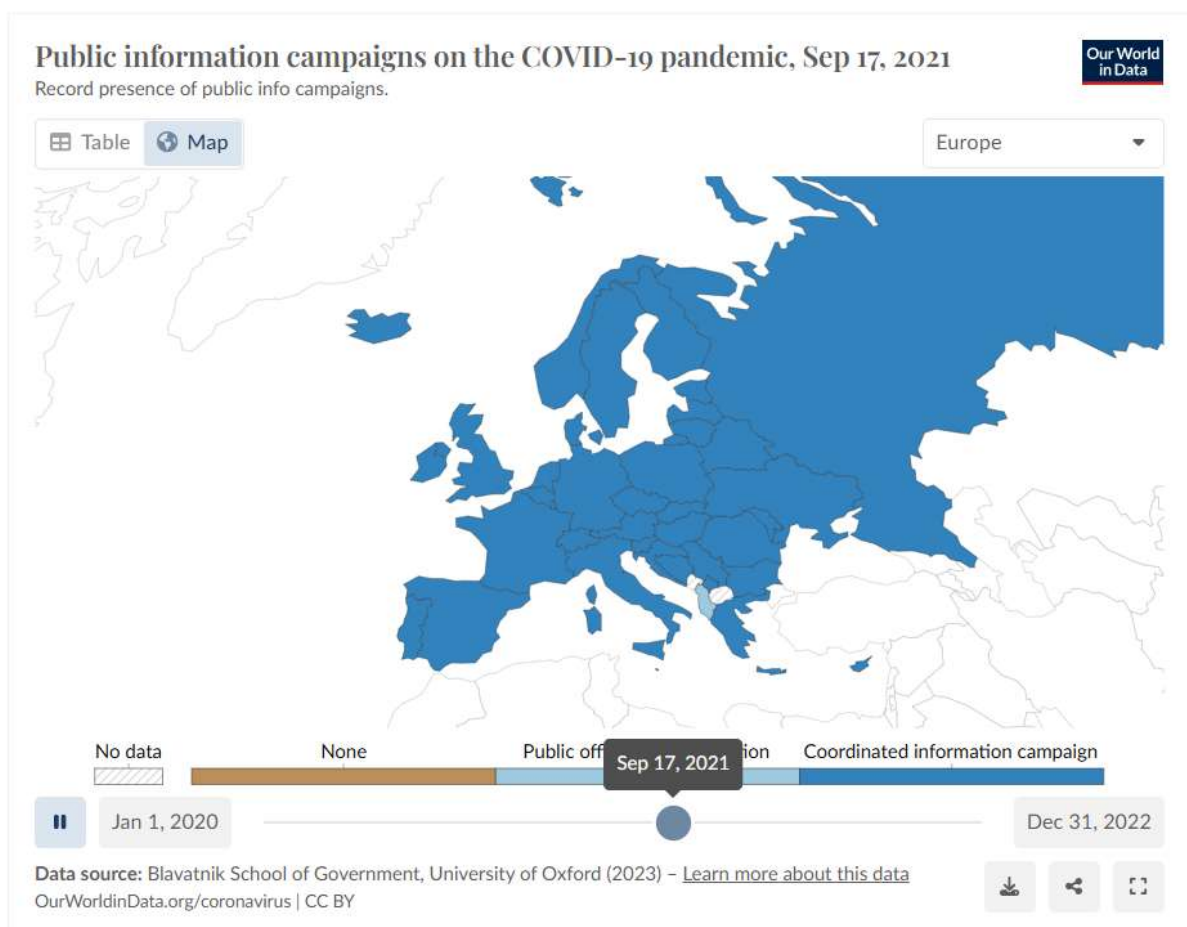
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-public-information-campaigns>

As can be seen from Chart 11, in January 2020 no country, including the V4 countries, made any effort to organise appropriate campaigns, despite the fact that information about the difficult situation in China (and then in Italy) had already engaged the attention of the mass media and public opinion.

The situation changed dramatically in 2021. Chart 12 proves that literally all European countries, including the V4 countries, implemented coordinated nation-wide campaigns at that time.

Europe/V4

Chart 12.

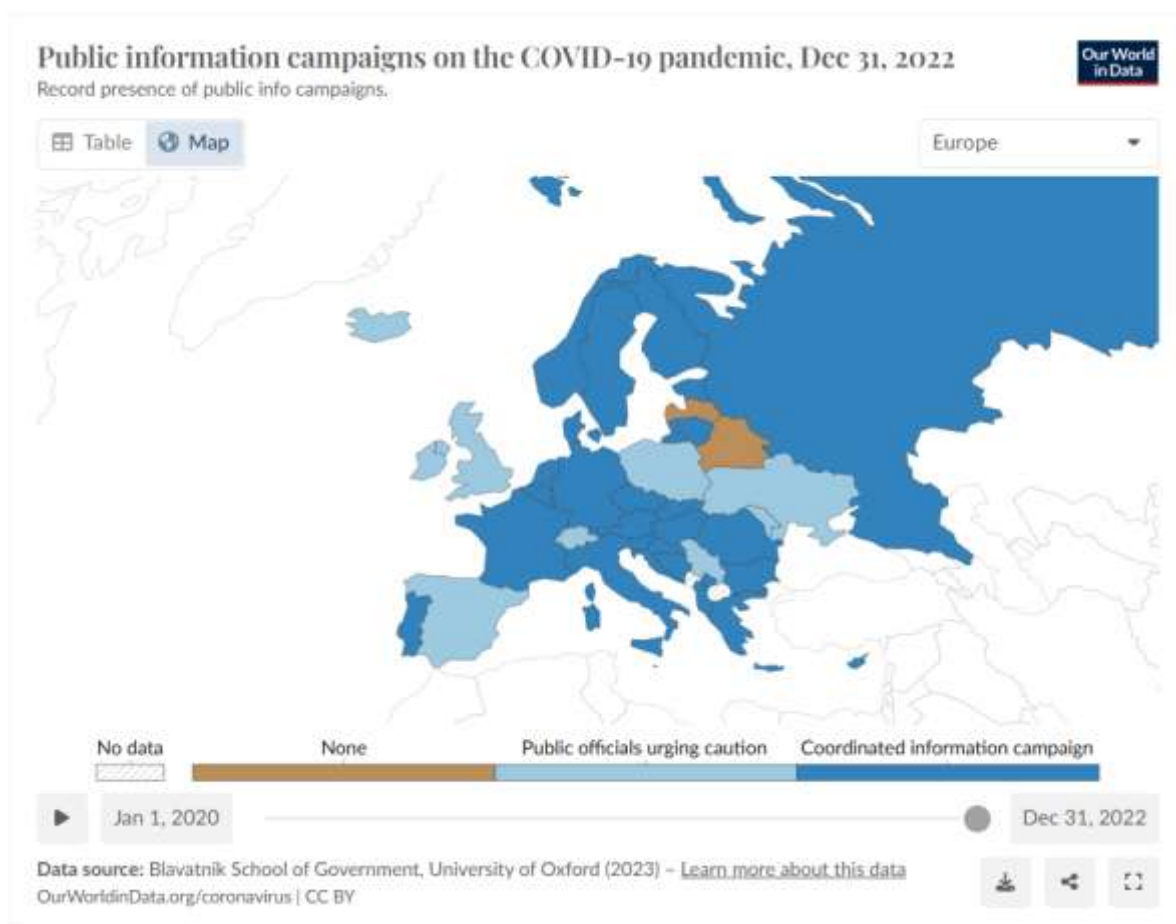


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-public-information-campaigns>

Taking into account the data from December 2022, it should be emphasized that Poland was the only V4 country that did not implement a coordinated campaign oriented on information sharing and social behaviour promotion (see Chart 13).

Europe/V4

Chart 13.



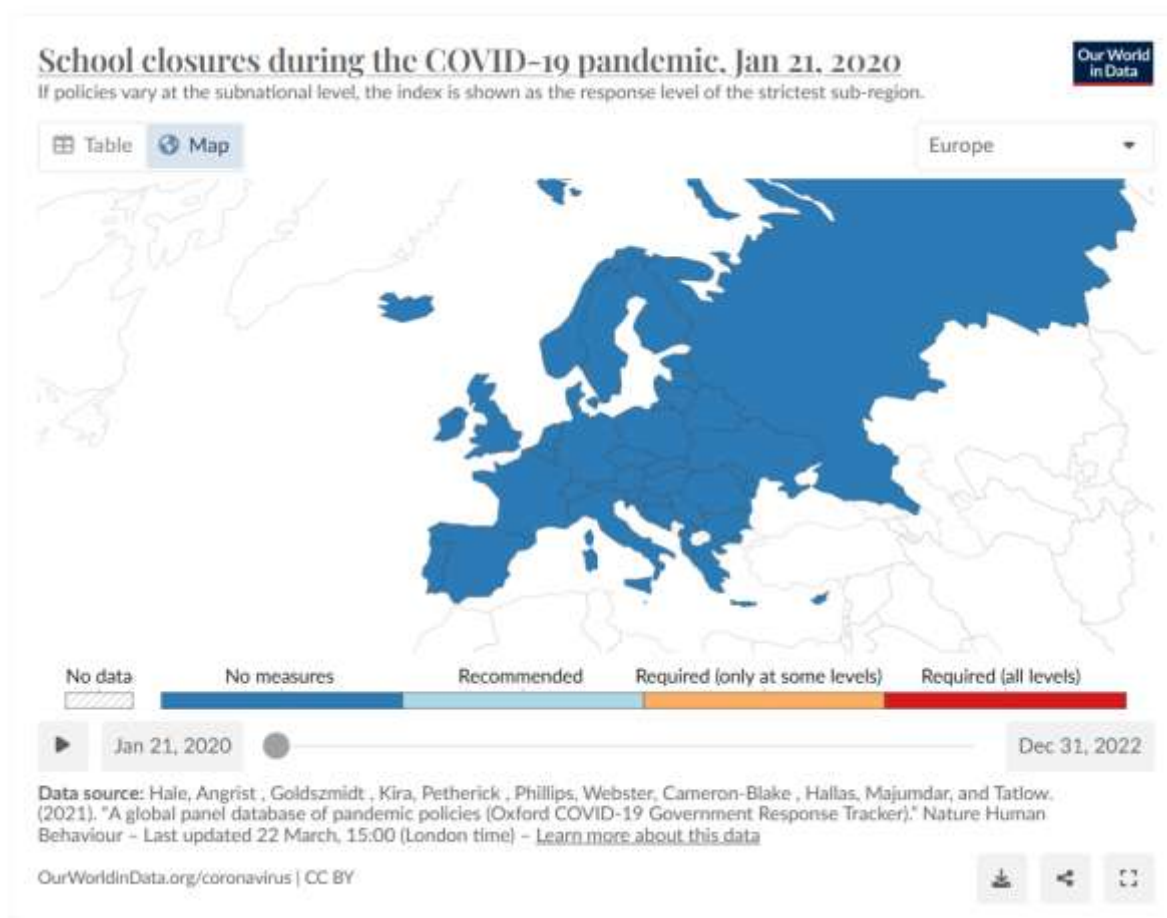
Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-public-information-campaigns>

The practice of managing the **functioning of schools** is the second extremely important element of the actions aimed at combating the COVID-19 pandemic. One might be tempted

to say that this is a 'litmus test' of the response to the threats related to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

Europe/V4

Chart 14.

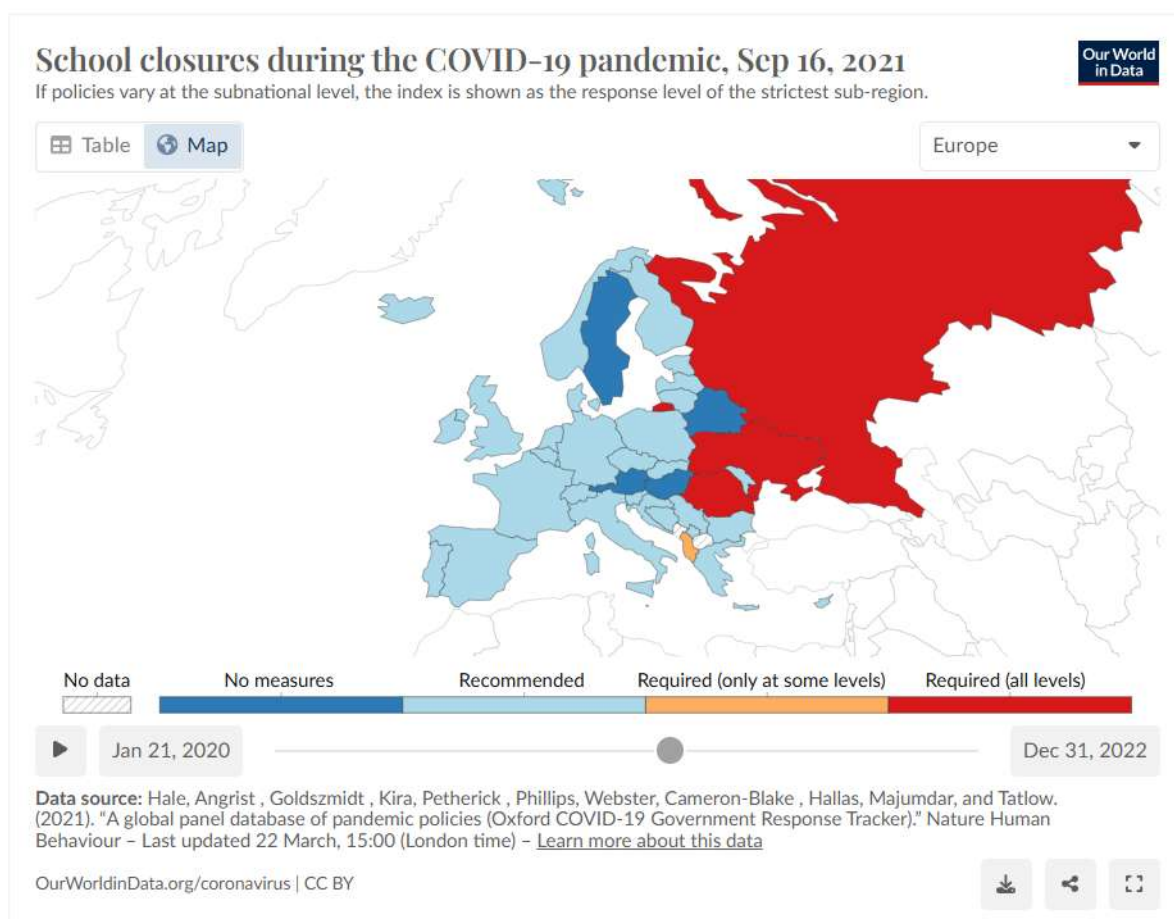


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-school-workplace-closures>

The data analysis from Chart 14 shows that in January 2020 schools in all European countries operated as usual. With summer 2021 in mind, three of the four V4 countries recommended restrictions on the functioning of schools. Hungary was an exception as evidenced by Chart 15.

Europe/V4

Chart 15.

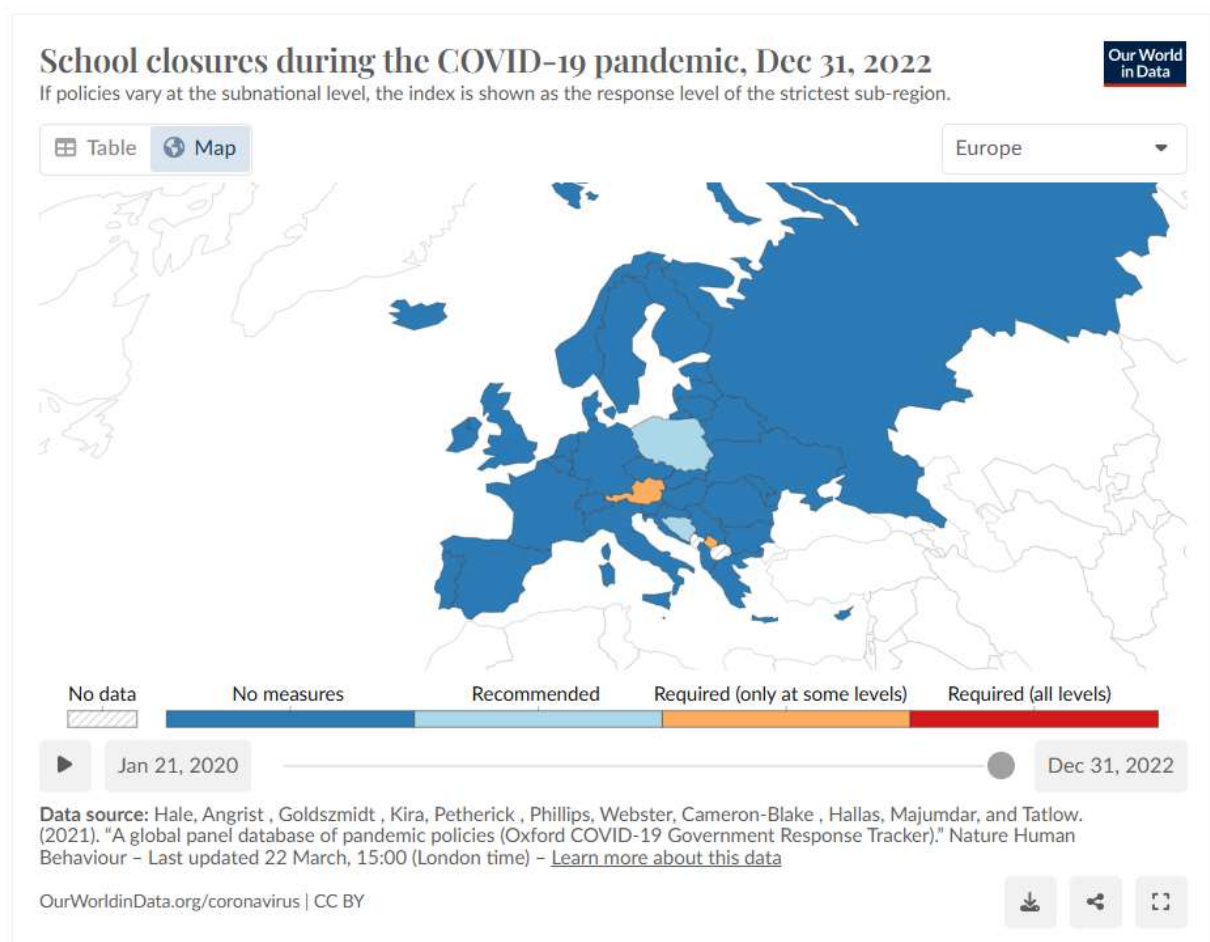


Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-school-workplace-closures>

December 2022 brought another change. Poland was the only V4 country to recommend restrictions on the functioning of schools (see Chart 16). This situation raised many doubts and was the subject of debate on the functioning of the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts have repeatedly emphasized the need to balance concerns about limiting the number of cases, on the one hand, and the mental well-being of children and young people, on the other.

Europe/V4

Chart 16.



Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-school-workplace-closures>

The statistical data presented above relating to the V4 countries and other European Union countries provide a certain picture of the response to the threats and challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is of course not a comprehensive picture, but - and this is worth emphasizing - it indicates certain trends.

It's hard to deny that the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges associated with post-pandemic recovery have posed an unprecedented challenge for the state and its institutions. The situation has forced us to take actions that had not been undertaken before.

The data constitute an important element of the analysis dedicated to cities and municipal self-governments which, due to their demographic potential, found themselves under particular pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is evidenced by the findings presented not only in the scientific literature, but also in specialist reports.

COVID-19 pandemic at the urban level

It is hard to disagree with the statement that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the functioning of states and societies. Due to its undeniable development and demographic potential, it has seriously 'affected' the functioning of local government units well as their inhabitants (WHO 2020a, 2020b; WHO Europe 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cities has been reflected in many reports prepared at the request of international and scientific organizations. The number of such studies is significant and reflects an unprecedented scale of the crisis.

Considering the purpose of the project, attention is drawn primarily to such reports and policy briefs that focus on the activities of municipal self-governments. This is therefore a perspective that experts in the field call the perspective of municipal self-government or municipal self-government administration. This perspective is justified to the extent that municipal self-governments are responsible for meeting the collective needs of residents which are manifested in many areas of urban policy devoted to sectoral problems.

Table 1.

Organization	Reports/policy briefs
United Nations	<p>UN: COVID-19 in an Urban World</p> <p>https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/covid-19-urban-world</p> <p>https://unhabitat.org/un-secretary-generals-policy-brief-on-covid-19-in-an-urban-world</p>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	<p>OECD: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on regional and local governments https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-crisis-on-regional-and-local-governments_fb952497-en.html</p> <p>OECD: The territorial impact of COVID-19: Managing the crisis across levels of government https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-territorial-impact-of-covid-19-managing-the-crisis-across-levels-of-government_d3e314e1-en.html</p> <p>OECD: More resilient public administrations after COVID-19 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/more-resilient-public-administrations-after-covid-19_8d10bb06-en.html</p> <p>OECD: Improving subnational governments' resilience in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/improving-subnational-governments-resilience-in-the-wake-of-the-covid-19-pandemic_6b1304c8-en.html</p> <p>OECD: First lessons from government evaluations of COVID-19 responses: A synthesis https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/first-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-covid-19-responses-a-synthesis_483507d6-en.html</p>
European Union	<p>EU (EC): Cohesion policy action against coronavirus https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/coronavirus-response_en</p> <p>EU (EP): Urban areas in the post-Covid era: Challenges and future pathways https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729284/EPRS_ATA(2022)729284_EN.pdf</p>
ECR	<p>ECR: OECD Survey https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/econ-cor-oecd-survey-covid-19-results.aspx</p>

CEPR	CEPR: State and local government finances in the time of COVID-19 https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/state-and-local-government-finances-time-covid-19
Other	Our World in Data: Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus ECPR: Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Local Governments: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PanelDetails/10811

Source: own compilation.

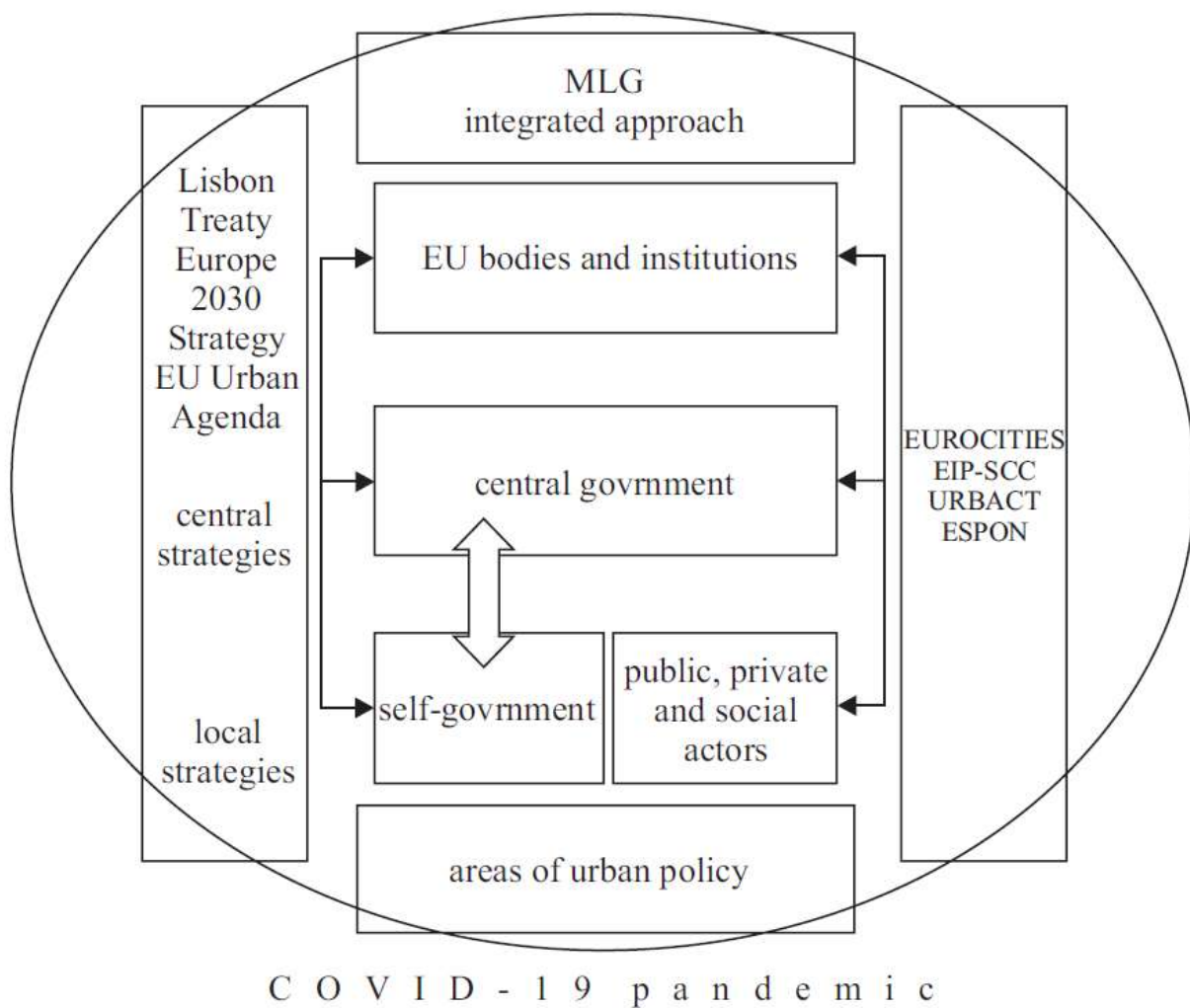
As it is evidenced by the already mentioned reports the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local self-governments, including municipal self-governments, is unprecedented. This impact is manifested not only during the COVID-19 pandemic itself but also in the post-pandemic period associated with recovery. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic 'paralyzes' or destabilizes activities carried out in already mentioned key areas of urban policy (UP) such as:

- UP1: economy,
- UP2: transport,
- UP3: education,
- UP4: culture,
- UP5: environment and green areas,
- UP6: public participation,
- UP7: strategic planning,
- UP8: transnational cooperation,
- UP9: emergency management (see Graph 6).

Answering the question about the model of the 'response' of local governments, including municipal self-governments, to the COVID-19 pandemic plays a key role, especially if we take into account the dualistic perspective. We are talking about a situation in which this

'response' not only integrates the activities of local governments themselves (bottom-up activities), but is also a result of initiatives undertaken by the central/governmental administration (top-down activities).

Graph 6. COVID-19 pandemic response – an urban perspective



Source: Glinka, 2021, p. 51.

As the above graph shows, analysing the response of cities and towns as well as their governments to the COVID-19 pandemic is not an easy task. This is determined by the extraordinary complexity of the modern urban sphere which integrates the activity of not only public actors, but also private and social ones. Importantly, the city is subject to the impact of not only local actors, but also those who operate at the regional, national and international level.

As can be seen from the analysis of the above reports, the response of local self-governments, including municipal self-governments, to the COVID-19 pandemic took specific, relatively uniform forms. However, what is important in the context of the assumptions of this research project is the illustration of the response of the V4 countries both during the COVID-19 pandemic itself and in the post-pandemic period related to recovery.

The initial comparison of the data presented in the reports with the level of local autonomy enjoyed by municipal self-governments in the V4 countries allows to conclude that there is a connection between the actions of municipal self-governments aimed at the pandemic crisis and the scope of local autonomy they have. It is justified, on the one hand, by the case of Hungary (the lowest level of autonomy) and, on the other, by the case of Poland, Czechia and Slovakia (the relatively high level of autonomy) implementing the particular actions in the areas of urban policy (UP1 – UP9).

It is hard to disagree with the statement that:

'The Covid-19 pandemic and its social and economic impacts have highlighted a number of previously underestimated or neglected issues connected with the functioning of contemporary cities. The scale and strength of the effect of a pandemic on urban life and development depend on a number of factors, including those linked to the size, functions, location, the quality of development policies, and the effectiveness of their implementation'

(Dudek-Mańkowka & Grochowski, 2024, 19).

Given the above, it is important to emphasize the special role of well-thought-out and properly coordinated actions aimed at optimally utilizing available resources (financial, organizational, human, etc.). These actions are led by municipal self-government administrations, which, in collaboration with private and social actors, face the difficult task of implementing sectoral policies at a level equivalent to, or at least comparable to, the pre-COVID-19 pandemic level.

The key questions that arise in this difficult situation are the following:

- 1) what are the key activities implemented by municipal self-governments in terms of post-COVID recovery?
- 2) how to conduct urban sectoral policies in an effective and efficient manner in order to meet the collective needs and expectations of residents to the greatest possible extent?
- 3) what action strategies should be implemented in a situation in which the central government, not local self-governments, shapes the main path of the 'fight' against the pandemic and post-COVID crisis?
- 4) is the exchange of knowledge and experience between municipal self-governments a factor that promotes effective and efficient post-COVID recovery?

Research design

In order to achieve the project's goal of illustrating the 'responses' of municipal self-governments in the Visegrad Group countries as well as to answer the above questions, it was decided to conduct an analysis covering several fundamental stages.

Firstly, a review of the literature on the subject devoted to the project's issues was conducted. One took into account the monographs, chapters in monographs, articles in journals, encyclopedia entries on public management, local government, urban policies, Multi-Level Governance in the Visegrad Group countries. Importantly, this review also included reports and policy briefs (see: pages 60-62) prepared by international and scientific organizations. Press releases published through the traditional (printed) press and online editions also proved to be a valuable source of information.

Secondly, an analysis of statistical data presented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Union, and the governments of the Visegrad Group countries was conducted. These were the data relating to the transformation of the functioning of the public sector, the social sector and the private sector, with particular emphasis on problem areas corresponding to areas of urban policy.

Thirdly, an analysis of statistical data held by offices of selected cities and towns of the Visegrad Group countries was carried out. Considering the statistical data, it should be emphasised that these were the data illustrating the condition of areas of urban policy in a comparative perspective. Therefore, a comparison was made between the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period related to recovery.

Fourthly, an analysis of documents and materials held by city offices from the Visegrad Group countries was carried out. These were the documents and materials of various rank and provenance.

A key role was played by the multi-factor analysis of development strategies, specialist strategies dedicated to individual areas of urban policy and organisational regulations of offices. The analysis also included reports relating to the cooperation of public actors,

private actors and social actors at the city level. The aim was to examine the conditions, forms, mechanisms and results of cooperation between the municipal local government administration and its stakeholders in the face of the challenges related to counteracting the destructive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fifth, interviews were conducted with representatives of selected city offices from the Visegrad Group countries. The particular significance of these interviews stems from the fact that they are a source of unique, unavailable expert knowledge on the mechanisms of the 'response' of city governments to the challenges and threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sixth, the key role in the conducted study was played by the use of comparative analysis. Considering the aim of the project and the research perspective, it should be emphasized that the usefulness of this method resulted from the possibility of illustrating similarities and differences between the studied cases. In this case, it concerns the countries of the Visegrad Group (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary) and municipal governments undertaking activities in these countries.

Seventh, the use of elements of decision analysis was an important step in the implementation of the study, especially when taking into account the process of formulating assumptions of urban policies. It should be remembered that this process was particularly difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only due to objective technical limitations, but also, and perhaps above all, due to the need to adapt the priorities and forms of urban policies to the requirements of the crisis situation.

Eighth, an important element of the research procedure was to take into account the objective indicators/measures indicating the condition of municipal self-governments in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic period.

Bearing in mind that the project focuses on the V4 countries, the difficult task of verifying the following research hypothesis was undertaken: there is a specific model of response to the COVID-19 pandemic implemented by the V4 countries, which distinguishes them

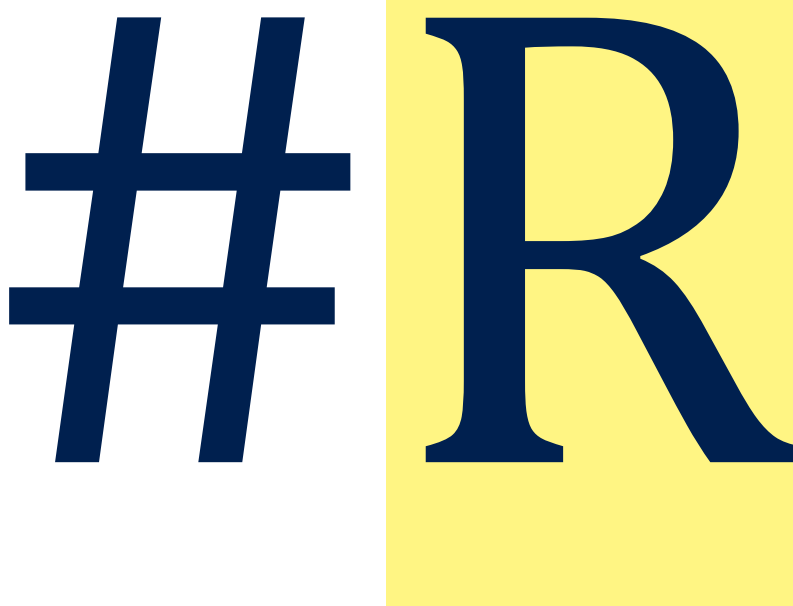
from other EU countries. Capturing this possible model based on multi-factor and in-depth analysis will allow, in accordance with the project assumptions, to formulate useful source of knowledge as well as the so-called good practices for practitioners.

Regardless of the initially mentioned assumptions, as well as some difference between countries in question, it seems justified to formulate **recommendations** for representatives of municipal self-governments. This is about such recommendations that allow to conduct activities within the efficient post-pandemic recovery.

Recommendations (initial) for practitioners

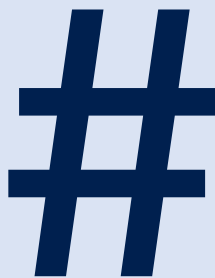
As already mentioned, in addition to measurable scientific results, the project also provides the solutions useful for practitioners - representatives of local (municipal) self-governments and other actors who cooperate with these governments. The preliminary nature of this report makes these recommendations preliminary (general). Nevertheless, they provide key answers to questions about how to counter the destructive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It should be emphasized that the recommendations are general and preliminary in nature. They are the first attempt to guide practitioners' actions towards implementing mechanisms and standards of operation that are helpful in post-pandemic recovery, regardless of the specific sectoral area in question. The recommendations are therefore intended to sensitize practitioners to the "paths" of activity that will allow them to achieve the goal of meeting the collective needs and expectations of residents in the post-pandemic crisis.



Recommendation No. 1

Programming of activities conducted in areas of urban policy

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Programming of activities, regardless of the sectoral area of activity in question, plays a key role in effective and efficient public management. It is a *sine qua non* condition for a long-term, and therefore well-thought-out and phased approach to meeting the needs of recipients of the activities conducted. It should therefore be emphasized that the success of all kinds of initiatives and undertakings (both soft and hard) aimed at urban affairs may depend on programming.

Programming should take the form of a professional approach based on the development of a specialist strategic document (strategy, plan, program, etc.). What is important and worth emphasizing is the fact that such a document, regardless of its final name, should be prepared based on a specific scheme.

The key role is played by the inclusion of the widest possible group of entities (public, private and social actors) in the process of developing the assumptions of the document. The participation of these actors is important in terms of conducting an in-depth review of the conditions in which the local government unit finds itself.

Regardless of the detailed approach used, a professional strategic document that meets the basic programming criteria should contain the following elements:

1. Analysis,
2. Goals,
3. Recipients (target groups),
4. Instruments (tools),
5. Sources of financing.
6. Monitoring and evaluation.

1. **Analysis** of the initial situation covering one of three models:

SWOT:



Source: own elaboration.

SWOT analysis requires the local government unit – the city – to be placed in two dimensions. The first dimension (internal) includes strengths and weaknesses. The second dimension (external) includes opportunities and threats.

PEST:

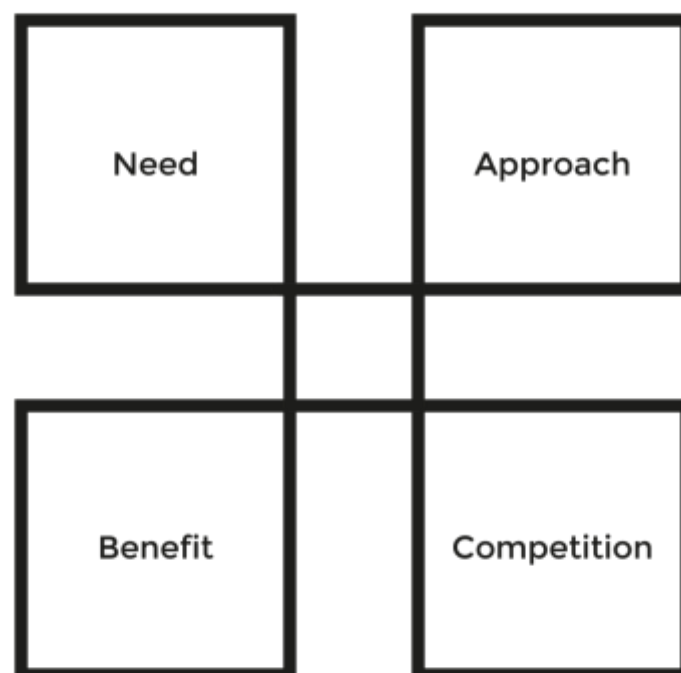
Unlike the SWOT analysis, the PEST analysis takes into account the widest possible range of factors that determine the actions of local government units. These are factors as:

- political,
- economic,
- social,
- technological.



Source: <https://54.144.41.209/guide/strategic-analysis/what-is-pest-analysis/>

NABC:



Source: <https://medialabamsterdam.com/businessstoolkit/method-card/nabc-method-2/>

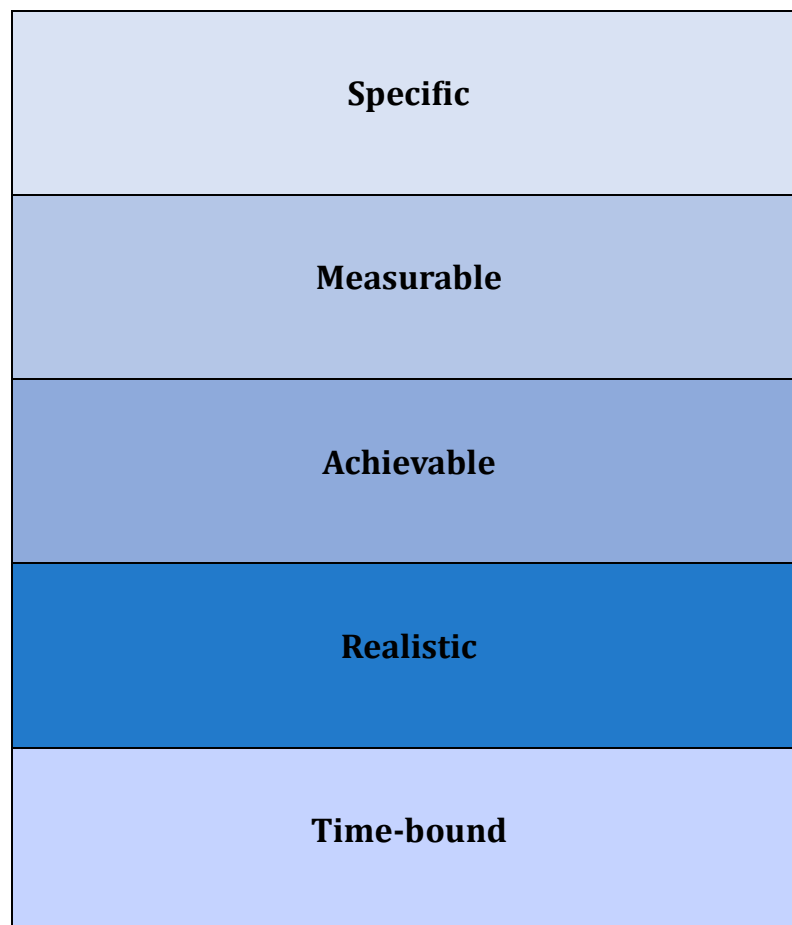
The third analytical model - NABC - focuses on the need. If we assume that the need is to meet the collective needs of city residents during the pandemic and post-pandemic crisis - we need to consider how to achieve the goal defined in this way. It is worth therefore to take into account the approach, benefits and competition.

Importantly, the analysis should be based on the use of existing data (statistics, previous documents), surveys/interviews with the participation of local government unit stakeholders, etc. In other words, all three models - SWOT, PEST, NABC - although important and useful from the expatriate and cognitive point of view, cannot replace precise activities aimed at assessing the initial situation of the particular local government unit.

2. Precise definition of the **goals** that are to be achieved. The application of the SMART approach is useful in this respect.

The SMART approach to defining goals is useful in the sense that it allows for a specific definition of what we want to achieve. With local government units and implemented activities in mind, e.g. in the area of public transport, one may be tempted to say that the SMART approach allows for determining how many passengers, at what time and by what means will be able to move in pandemic and post-pandemic conditions.

SMART:



Source: own elaboration.

3. Precise definition of the **recipients (target groups)** of the activities.

It is worth mentioning that while taking into the account the decision the following dimensions should be taken into account:

- internal stakeholders - meaning employees of local government offices and organizational units subordinate to them,
- external stakeholders - the list of these is wide and may include groups such as:
 - residents,
 - investors/entrepreneurs,
 - tourists,

- passing-through people,
- students,
- public institutions at the regional, central and international levels,
- entities of the so-called third sector,
- etc.

The most important role, which results from legal solutions in all V4 countries and the essence of the functioning of the municipal self-government administrations in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary, is of course played by the residents.

4. Precise definition of **instruments (tools)** used for the purpose of achieving (maximizing) a defined goal.

Considering the instruments (tools) used to achieve the defined objectives, it should be emphasized that their catalogue is potentially broad and, consequently, very diverse. However, when attempting to catalogue them in the context of recommendations addressed to practitioners, it is worth noting that these instruments (tools) can be divided into the following instruments (tools):

- legal,
- organisational.

In the first case (legal), it is about introducing such regulations (the aforementioned strategic documents and other, less important regulations) that allow urban actors to act effectively and efficiently within the limits and based on the provisions of the currently applicable law.

In the second case (organizational), we are talking about the appropriate division of tasks and responsibilities between office employees and their stakeholders/collaborators. The division of portfolios is a condition for effective and efficient operation.

Moving on to a more detailed level of discussing instruments (tools), it should be noted that they can be:

- announcements, information,
- events,
- sectoral programs,
- public services.

A clear-cut definition of operational activities is practically impossible and unjustified. It should be emphasized that the decision to implement specific activities is a result of an assessment of the situation of local government units and, consequently, the capabilities of municipal self-government administrations.

In this sense, the spectrum of actions they can and should implement is broad and diverse. This fits into the responsive potential of municipal self-government administrations related to the ability to assess the situation and select appropriate actions. Another issue is what kind of responsive potential of this administration should be discussed and taken into the consideration, especially in the context of the current discussion on limiting the level of local autonomy.

5. Providing **sources of financing** for ongoing activities

It is hard to disagree with the statement that the success of implementing activities aimed at achieving goals depends on the involvement of appropriate financial resources. These resources are of course not necessary to implement all activities (e.g. informational activities conducted via social media), but in most cases they are essential. Their importance increases in a situation in which it is necessary to implement so-called traditional (infrastructure) projects.

Among the financial sources aimed at implementing activities, the following are listed:

- local government units' own resources,
- government resources,
- European Union resources,
- private entity resources (public-private partnership).

6. Selection of mechanisms for **monitoring and evaluating** activities

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are a key element of strategic management. They allow for a reliable assessment of whether and to what extent previously defined goals have been achieved.

Monitoring is defined as systematic, structured collection of data on implemented activities. In turn, in the case of evaluation, it is necessary to take into account such solutions that allow for a comparison of assumed goals with achieved goals, based on data collected as part of monitoring.

Taking into account the above elements, programming is an important step towards an appropriate response to the challenges and threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of the pandemic period itself and the pandemic period related to reconstruction. Therefore it is recommended to conduct programming activities.

Programming activities can be pursued in three ways (see Graph 7):

- Internal,
- external,
- mixed.

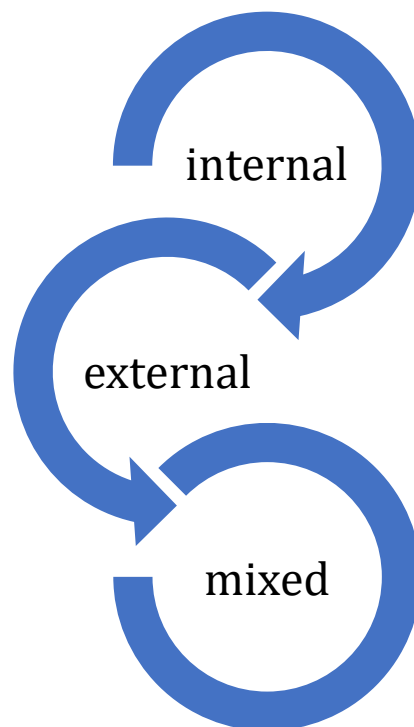
In the first case, (internal) programming relies on the activity of office employees who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies in this area. This knowledge, skills, and competencies are most often the result of training and courses conducted by experts and specialized entities.

In the second (external) variant, the entity responsible for programming is a specialized external entity. As a result, the activities of office staff are essentially reduced to operational (tactical) activities related to implementing the assumptions of the externally developed document (strategy, program, plan, etc.). This approach to programming is used especially when the urban policy areas shows a relatively high level of complexity that cannot be handled by office employees.

The third and final variant (mixed) is a combination of the first and second approaches. Its essence lies in the appropriate balance between the activity of office staff and the activities of a specialized external entity that possesses not only the knowledge, skills, and competencies, but also experience in the field of programming.

Regardless of the approach to programming we are talking about, each of them can prove to be an effective tool for conducting sector-oriented urban policy.

Graph 7.



Source: own compilation.

Recommendation No. 2

Cooperation with urban policy actors

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It is hard to disagree with Patsy Healey claiming that the functioning of the local government unit, including cities, can be defined through the prism of *'(...) complex mixture of nodes and networks, places and flows, in which multiple relations, activities and values co-exist, interact, combine, conflict, oppress and generate creative synergy'* (2007, p. 1).

Taking into account the complex nature of the processes indicated, the cooperation with actors - public, social and private - becomes increasingly important, which can help in achieving the assumed and programmed goals, as it is proved and discussed within *governance* concept.

This is determined by the fact that each actor has different resources that they can share and, at the same time, realize their own goals and expectations. The key resources that are the subject of exchange include:

- knowledge,
- experience,
- information and data,
- skills,
- competences,
- financial resources,
- health resources,
- organisational resources,
- contacts.

The exchange of resources, which is actually the main goal and dimension of intersectoral cooperation, determines whether, and if so, to what extent, problems can be overcome and the collective needs and expectations of residents can be met. This is a key issue, especially if we once again emphasize the objective shortages of resources and the still clear deficits in the mechanisms of continuous cooperation.

We assume that a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic recovery requires cooperation between public, social, and private sector entities. This cooperation significantly determines the success of actions aimed at meeting the collective needs and expectations of the urban community. In a situation where resources and possibilities of action are seriously limited due to certain objective conditions, intersectoral cooperation will allow for at least partial elimination of deficits.

It is fair to say that current organizational and legal arrangements, which actually determine the activities of municipal self-government administrations in the V4 countries, are an important determinant of cooperation with urban policy actors. It is also worth mentioning, however, that despite the solutions in place, cooperation is often insufficient in scope and dynamics. This is, therefore, an area for municipal self-government administrations, both legislative and executive bodies, to be active.

Given the above, it is recommended to create or leverage existing collaboration mechanisms based on available tools. Maintaining communication is crucial, and ICT can facilitate this.

It seems that using ICT as a platform for exchanging experiences, information, and data, and as a platform for implementing joint projects, both hard (infrastructural) and soft (social), should be a standard activity for municipal governments. Due to the relatively low costs of use, ICT enables the acquisition of opinions and insights, as well as the conduct of debates and discussions on topics important for urban post-COVID recovery.

Recommendation No. 3

Changing the organizational structure of offices

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As it results from the analysis of not only the extensive literature on the subject, but also from the observation of local government practice, the proper organizational structure plays a significant role in the implementation of previously defined goals.

Each office - and we are talking about offices of local government units - operates on the basis of a specific organizational structure, focused on the implementation of public tasks in individual areas of urban policy. However, the crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the requirements of post-pandemic reconstruction forces a change in the current structure, especially if two elements are taken into account.

Firstly, a change in the organizational structure of offices is necessary in a situation in which local authorities make a decision on the development of a specialist strategic document (see: earlier arrangements regarding strategies, programs, plans, etc.). It turns out that the implementation of the assumptions of such documents requires a minor reconstruction of the system of competences within the office (i.e. the liquidation of some organizational units or the creation of new ones).

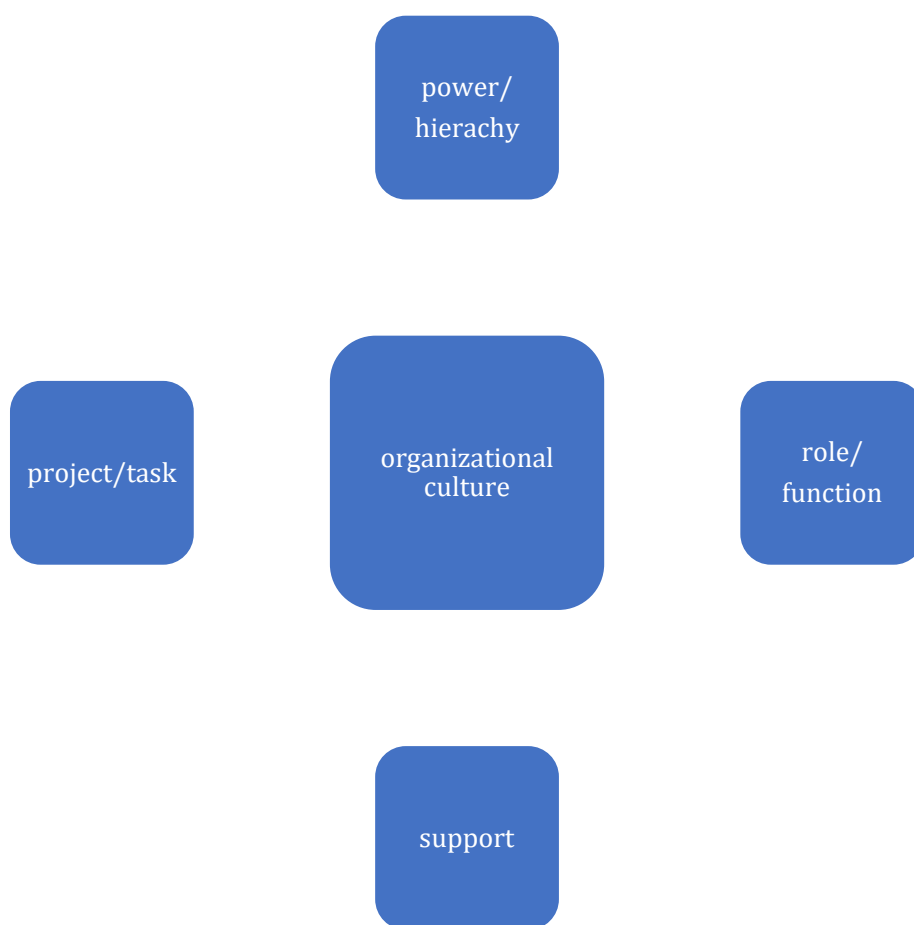
Secondly, the professionalization of activities resulting from the development of a strategic document requires a certain kind of openness to the knowledge, experience and skills of so-called external entities. In this sense, the organizational structure of the office should be ready to delegate some tasks to other, specialized entities that operate outside the office itself.

Taking the above into account, it is recommended to establish not only a specialist organizational unit conducting activities in the area of crisis management (and such a crisis is undoubtedly the COVID-19 pandemic), but also the most precise possible division of tasks between the appropriate units conducting activities in relation to the areas of urban policy, while ensuring their capacity and readiness to cooperate.

In order to ensure the effective implementation of multi-sectoral public tasks, it is worth paying attention to the organizational culture that prevails in a given local government unit.

Taking into account the dominant types of organizational culture (power/hierarchy culture, role/function culture, support culture, project/task culture), it is worth considering the potential related to shaping of the project/task culture.

Graph 8.

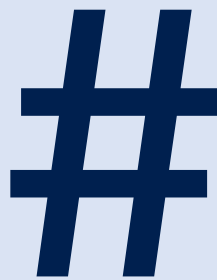


Source: own compilation on the basis of: Harrison 2010.

Placing projects at the heart of the project office's operations means that its employees are able to focus on achieving specific goals, often beyond their direct reporting lines and across existing, traditional areas and paths of action. This can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of activities conducted in sectoral oriented urban policy areas.

Recommendation No. 4

Using the experience of other local government units

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The exchange of experiences on public management forms, mechanisms and results, especially in the face of such a challenge as the COVID-19 pandemic, is a condition for the successful implementation of activities. It turns out that other related local government units, primarily cities, may have knowledge and information useful from the point of view of counteracting the destructive consequences of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

With the exchange of experiences in mind, it is recommended to:

- organize meetings with local authorities and city office employees to discuss problems and methods of overcoming them,
- exchange the so-called good practices relating to individual (sectoral) areas of urban policy,
- prepare
- joint reports, guides and handbooks,
- participate in national and transnational associations, project and expert networks, which involve representatives of local government units interested in the development of urban policy areas,
- conduct common projects devoted to particular areas of urban policy, financed by external entities, e.g. European Union.

In a situation where local government units, firstly, carry out a huge number of public tasks, and secondly, the scope of their autonomy is under pressure from the central government, the cooperation of local governments, including municipal self-governments, can be an instrument for conducting effective and efficient urban policy. Importantly, such cooperation does not require the involvement of significant financial and organizational resources, but rather results from a willingness to go beyond the established patterns.

In order to institutionalise and thus strengthen such cooperation, it is recommended to develop a programme of cooperation with local government units, both within the internal as well as external sphere (see Recommendation No. 1) and to sanction cooperation agreements in the form of council resolutions.

As it was already mentioned the **recommendations** formulated are preliminary in nature and are appropriate for a study such as a midterm report. Nevertheless, it can be said that they allow for drawing attention to key elements that can be treated as a condition for a proper response to the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In other words, although the final results of the project will be presented in a peer-reviewed scientific monograph in a form of an e-book, it is worth noting that the effectiveness and efficiency of actions taken by municipal self-governments are in a full sense dependent on their approach to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to 'fight' the pandemic threat and then the potential for recovery is a derivative of appropriate preparation on both a strategic and operational level.

The presented catalogue of recommendations is important in the sense that its implementation by entities responsible for urban affairs (municipal self-government administrations cooperating with private and social actors) is in fact a *sine qua non* condition for the successful implementation of activities in the period of post-pandemic recovery.

Implementing each of the four recommendations requires some effort. This does not change the fact that, as the preliminary results of the study indicate, some municipal self-governments in the V4 countries have already implemented, at least partially, the recommendations, even before the pandemic crisis, i.e., the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is important and worth emphasizing, however, is the noticeable weakness or superficiality of strategic and operational management mechanisms, which in many cases do not guarantee effective and efficient activities.

Therefore, much remains to be done at the municipal level to implement the initial recommendations (see Table 2).

Table 2.

#R1	implementation of professional strategic programming mechanisms
#R2	creating stable mechanisms of intersectoral cooperation based on real, not simulated dialogue
#R3	reconstruction of the organizational structure in line with a modern, goals-oriented and network-centred approach
#R4	effective exchange of experiences based on two-way information flow and a based-evidence approach

Source: own compilation.

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