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BOOK REVIEW: DECISION-MAKING OF THE STATE IN A CRISIS SITUATION

Patrícia Vargová*

KOVÁČOVÁ, S. – KOVÁČOVÁ, E. 2023. *Rozhodovanie štátu v krízovej situácii [Decision-making of the State in a Crisis Situation]*. Praha: Leges, 2023, 182 p. ISBN 978- 80-7502-701-6.

The authors **Simona Kováčová** and **Eleonóra Kováčová** are academics at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, specializing in political science and international relations. **Simona Kováčová** focuses her research on public administration, with particular emphasis on models of local configurations, the characteristics of settlement structures, and the functioning of local governments across Europe. **Eleonóra Kováčová**, currently serving as an associate professor at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, concentrates on issues related to territorial self-government, specifically at the regional and local levels. Additionally, her research includes defining and applying public interests, organizing public policy problems, typologizing contemporary actors in this field, and the policymaking process.

The scientific publication *Decision-making of the State in a Crisis Situation* addresses a comprehensive set of measures, restrictions, and legislative tools implemented by competent political actors in the Slovak Republic in response to the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed at protecting the lives and health of Slovak citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic evolved into a global crisis, affecting countries worldwide, negatively impacting not only the economy but also initiating significant changes in international relations, politics, security, social issues, and the environment. It exposed vulnerabilities within democratic institutions and underscored the need for scientific research into crisis

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management. This phenomenon demonstrates that decision-making processes under crisis pressure cannot be understood from the perspective of a single scientific discipline; instead, it requires an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating various areas of knowledge. The authors **S. Kováčová** and **E. Kováčová** emphasize that multidisciplinary efforts are essential for developing effective strategies to manage crises and for critically analysing newly emerging information in rapidly changing conditions, which serves as the overarching message of the monograph.

The scientific monograph is divided into six chapters, which are further analysed in relevant subchapters. The central themes of the monograph include the transformation of political representation and the deformation of democracy, as described by **N. Urbinati**, leading to a non-political model of decision-making. Special attention is given to expert decision-making in times of crisis, where populism is viewed as a response to rational discourse, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic. The monograph also explores state crisis management, the declaration and revocation of emergency states, and the role of local self-governments in the decision-making process. The authors **S. Kováčová** and **E. Kováčová** investigate self-governments as equal partners to the state. From an economic perspective, the monograph focuses on the impact on local government budgets, the recession, the recovery of the Slovak economy, and the utilization of financial resources from European structural funds. The conclusion is centred on the analysis of trust in both political and non-political institutions, examining changes in behaviour and trust in national and international institutions, political parties, and, importantly, the media. The structure of the work clearly demonstrates the authors' interdisciplinary approach.

The first chapter, titled *The Influence of the Crisis Situation on the Nature of Political Decision-Making* (pp. 13-46), explores various aspects of decision-making during crises and how such situations can disrupt democratic processes and the rule of law. **S. Kováčová** illustrates this through the example of Hungary, where **Viktor Orbán's** government used the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen executive powers. The chapter highlights how the Hungarian Parliament passed the Coronavirus Protection Act, which allowed governance by decree without a clear end date for the state of emergency, raising concerns about potential misuse of power, threats to democracy, human rights, and media freedom (p. 14). The author **S. Kováčová** also references theories by Italian political scientist **N. Urbinati**, who warns that excessive reliance on expert authority during crises can lead to "depoliticized" governance, weakening democratic procedures. **Urbinati**

uses the metaphor of "figures" to describe how political systems are characterized by specific traits, cautioning against unchecked dominance of experts in democratic systems (pp. 18-19). The chapter further addresses changes in political representation in the context of the liberal democracy crisis, tracking the shift from traditional models to modern critiques that challenge the legitimacy and relevance of representative democracy. It explores key theories from scholars like **K. Ott, G. Sartori, J. J. Rousseau, and H. Pitkin**, focusing on formal, substantive, and descriptive representation. The author **S. Kováčová** emphasize **Pitkin's** framework, highlighting that effective representation stems from representatives acting in the interests of the represented. The theory critiques modern liberal democracies, noting alienation between citizens and political representatives, economic elite influence, and growing public distrust (pp. 22-30). The text also touches on post-democracy, advocating for the return of political power to citizens (p. 31).

The second chapter, titled *Expert decision-making in a crisis situation in the conditions of the Slovak Republic* (pp. 47-55) analyses the political crisis that arose following the murder of journalist **Ján Kuciak** and his fiancée **Martina Kušnírová**. This tragedy sparked significant civic activism and demands for reform at the highest levels of government, with the aim of restoring trust in democratic institutions and combating corruption and nepotism (p. 47). Citizens actively engaged in political discourse and articulated their demands to political elites. The mention of participatory activities highlights the importance of civic engagement in a democratic society. Key events related to political changes are noted, such as the resignations of prominent politicians and the formation of a new government under **Igor Matovič** during the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 50). The pandemic is presented as a test for the political system, emphasizing the relationship between political decision-making and expert advice (p. 52). Experts, such as epidemiologists and virologists, became significant figures in proposing measures during the pandemic. This section of the publication also discusses the dilemma between political and expert decision-making, pointing out that there is not always a single correct solution to political issues. Thus, it can be concluded that the focus is on analysing the dynamics between citizen activities and expert decisions in the context of crisis situations in Slovakia. **S. Kováčová** also address the issue of technocracy, understood as government by experts, examining how this approach influences politics and decision-making during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis explores how a technocratic approach validates expertise and scientific evidence in addressing social problems while

criticizing political pluralism and party ideologies in Slovakia. It highlights how populist leaders exploit an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, and distrust towards experts to legitimize and prioritize their political positions and decisions (p. 55). In relation to the pandemic, it analyses how **Igor Matovič's** government emphasized scientific recommendations, ultimately leading to the depoliticization of certain aspects of crisis management. These points are illustrated through examples from **Matovič's** communication (p. 62), which focused on expert authority and their decisions.

The third chapter *State management during a crisis situation in the conditions of the Slovak Republic* (pp. 71-97) primarily focuses on the legal framework and responsibilities of various governmental institutions in managing crisis situations. The legal framework consists of an analysis of laws, specifically Act No. 387/2002, which regulates the state's response to crises outside of a state of war: "*a period during which the security of the state is immediately threatened or disturbed, the constitutional authorities may declare a state of exception, state of emergency or extraordinary situation after meeting the conditions established in constitutional law or in a special act to resolve it*" (p. 72), as well as Constitutional Act No. 227/2002 concerning state security during war, a state of emergency, and crises: "*there has been or there is an immediate threat will be a threat to the life and health of persons, including in causal connection with the emergence of the pandemic*" (p. 71). **E. Kováčová** also concentrates on defining crisis situations, characterizing them as periods when the security of the state is directly threatened or disrupted. This can include natural disasters, pandemics, or other serious risks to life, health, or property. The author **E. Kováčová** emphasizes the roles of key bodies involved in state management during a crisis, specifically focusing on the Government of the Slovak Republic, the Central Crisis Staff, and various ministries (pp. 74-82). In this context, particular attention is given to the Central Crisis Staff, which is described as a temporary executive body activated during an immediate crisis. It is responsible for risk analysis, proposing solutions, and coordinating activities. The document highlights the necessity for collaboration among various entities—from the government to local authorities and private sector organizations—in preparing for and responding to crises. Legislative support, risk analysis, safety, and essential services are also deemed important. To sum up, this chapter discusses how the Government of the Slovak Republic manages crises and outlines the responsibilities of relevant authorities as established in Slovak legislation.

The fourth chapter, named *Territorial self-governments as an equal partner of*

the state in fulfilling tasks during a crisis situation (p. 98-117) addresses the position of territorial self-governments during times of crisis, specifically focusing on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as previous economic crises. The author **E. Kováčová** analyses how these crises have affected the financing of self-governments, emphasizing the importance of reliance on share taxes and personal income tax, as these revenues are crucial for their overall functioning. It is noted that the model of financing municipalities through share taxes is not sufficiently effective, as evidenced by a decline in revenues during the most challenging periods of crisis (p. 105). The chapter describes the process of tax redistribution and proposes legislative changes aimed at improving the financial stability of self-governments (p. 111), alongside the need to secure additional revenue sources. Additionally, it discusses the debts incurred by municipalities and suggests measures for their reduction, as well as collaboration between self-governments and the state in addressing financial stability issues. The conclusion of the chapter highlights the necessity of strengthening the fiscal autonomy of territorial self-governments and their capacity to respond to economic challenges.

The analysis of the economic impact of the pandemic on Slovakia is discussed in chapter five *Recession and revival of the economy* (pp. 118-129). This chapter focuses on the recession and recovery efforts during the period from 2018 to 2023. While the pandemic was initially managed well from a medical standpoint, the economic downturn became evident as early as 2020, significantly affecting the automotive industry, which is a key sector of the Slovak economy. Economic performance declined by 5,4 % compared to the previous year, a drop that was more pronounced than in many other EU countries (p. 119). The government at that time faced substantial fiscal challenges, with a projected public finance deficit exceeding 10 % of GDP due to increased expenditures and decreased tax revenues (p. 120). This crisis led to a decline in public trust, which also impacted borrowing costs, as confirmed by ratings from agencies such as **Standard & Poor's** and **Fitch Ratings**, "which published a statement on Slovakia's credit rating and awarded it lever. "A" with negative outlook "(p. 123). One of the aims of this chapter is to emphasize the importance and necessity of structural reforms in education and industry to reduce Slovakia's dependence on the automotive sector and diversify its economy. Innovation, science, and research emerge as crucial areas for future economic growth. **E. Kováčová** projections suggest some recovery in 2022; however, they also warn of ongoing challenges due to the lasting effects of the pandemic and other geopolitical events like the war in Ukraine. A continued deficit in public finances is anticipated,

underscoring the importance of strategic and effective utilization of public and European resources for recovery (p. 126). Overall, this chapter provides an analytical perspective on Slovakia's economic trajectory during a period marked by unprecedented global challenges, focusing on both immediate impacts and long-term strategies aimed at enhancing resilience and sustainable growth.

The sixth chapter focuses on *Trust in institutions* and its impact on citizen behaviour in a democratic society during times of crisis (pp. 130-150). **E. Kováčová** begins by stating that trust in public institutions is rooted in social structures, where shared norms, rules, and behavioural patterns serve as the foundation. This type of trust is considered "institutional" according to **P. L. Berger** and **T. Luckman**, "*because it is based on collectively accepted norms, rules, patterns of behaviour that are embedded in all kinds of social interaction*" (p. 130). Trust grants legitimacy to the system and fosters horizontal cooperation among citizens, as well as vertical cooperation between citizens and the state. The chapter also highlights how citizens' trust in state and supranational institutions, such as the EU and NATO, influences their satisfaction and engagement in public affairs. It explains that Slovaks exhibit greater trust in supranational organizations, particularly the V4 and the EU, compared to their own government (pp. 141-144). The decline in trust towards national institutions is linked to the current political climate and a series of crises ranging from the pandemic to the energy crisis. Emphasis is placed on the fact that during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, trust plays a crucial role. Throughout this situation, public attention shifted from politicians to experts such as epidemiologists, virologists, and hygienists. The author **E. Kováčová** clarifies that this transition of trust from politicians to experts represents "depoliticized decision-making," which should be temporary; prolonged preference for this approach could undermine the fundamental principles of representative democracy. The chapter also examines differences in political engagement across generations (pp. 132-136). Citizens who experienced totalitarianism view voting rights as an honour and duty, while younger generations, unfamiliar with the pre-1989 era, take civil rights for granted and show less interest in public matters. The importance of transparency and access to information is emphasized as a key tool in combating corruption and clientelism, which can undermine public trust in institutions (pp. 136-139). **E. Kováčová** explains that better-informed citizens regarding decision-making processes tend to have greater trust and less room for corruption. Authors also point out that ensuring trust requires collaboration among various public sector actors and non-profit organizations focused on promoting transparency,

cooperation, and providing independent oversight. **E. Kováčová** analyses the rise of populism and anti-establishment political forces as a consequence of declining trust in traditional political parties perceived as disconnected from ordinary citizens' realities. Special attention is given to the role of media and social networks in disseminating misinformation and polarizing society (p. 149). The author **E. Kováčová** warns about the influence of popular figures and influencers on public opinion, as "*they set the direction and trends, thereby influencing the vision and perception of the world through the eyes of young people and sharing it with others*" (p. 149). In conclusion, the necessity for critical thinking and legislative changes aimed at eliminating misinformation and better protecting the public sphere from hybrid threats is underscored.

The monograph *Decision-making of the State in a Crisis Situation* by **Simona Kováčová** and **Eleonóra Kováčová** highlights the complexity and multidisciplinary nature of decision-making processes during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Crises expose weaknesses in governance and democratic institutions and require, depending on the crisis' nature, collaboration among experts to create effective crisis management strategies. This publication provides a significant perspective on crisis decision-making within the context of the political and social challenges that the pandemic has introduced, drawing attention to its impacts on institutional stability in the Slovak Republic. The authors **Simona Kováčová** and **Eleonóra Kováčová** adopt an interdisciplinary approach, emphasizing the interconnections between political decision-making, public administration, security, economy, and public trust in institutions. The monograph also focuses substantially on the economic consequences of crises, their effects on local budgets, and structural deficiencies within the Slovak economy, advocating for the need for economic diversification and innovation. The primary contribution of this publication lies in its thorough analysis of the state's responses and its legislative and systemic recommendations to enhance the resilience of the public sector. For both the professional and public, this work presents a valuable source of comprehensive insights into crisis management in contemporary society and significantly contributes to current research in public policy and public affairs management.