

Human Resources Management in Local Self-Government - phase 2



LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS IN SERBIA: SURVEY ON THEIR FUNCTIONING DURING THE CRISIS CAUSED BY COVID-19 VIRUS

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Programme Human Resources Management in local self – government – phase 2 is jointly funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe and implemented by the Council of Europe in close cooperation with the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self – Government (MPALSG) and Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM). The implementation of the Programme started in December 2018 and will be completed by the end of December 2021. The total budget of the Programme is 4 million EUR. The Programme is based on the achievements and lessons learned from the Programme Human Resources Management in Local Self – Government (2016 - 2017) which aimed to support local self – governments in implementing the Law on Employees in Autonomous Provinces and Local Self – Governments units in Serbia referring to the provisions of Human Resources Management (HRM) and professional development of employees.

Following new legislative solutions and establishment of the new system for professional development at central and local level, the second phase of the Programme is focused on supporting local self - governments in Serbia to further develop HRM system and professional development of employees in line with the requirements of the new legal framework. The Programme will also support local – self-governments to align with the European standards of modern, merit based public servant system and the main principles of the Council of Europe European Charter on Local – Self Governments. Besides direct support to local self – governments the Programme supports public institutions responsible for implementation of professional development programmes, such are National Academy for Public Administration and the Council for professional development of employees in local self-government units.

SURVEY GOALS

The general objectives of the survey are to identify the needs and challenges that cities and municipalities in Serbia has faced during the emergency caused by the COVID-19 virus pandemic, to map potential areas and topics for improvement and support in the coming period and to prepare an adequate response through donor and project activities to address identified needs and challenges.

Within the defined goals, the research tried to:

- Identify the key challenges faced by local government employees during an emergency;
- Identify proposals for priority reforms in order to improve the work of the administration;
- Identify recommendations for adapting the way the project activities are organized in order to cover the needs of its beneficiaries as much as possible.

SAMPLE

The research sample consists of 110 adult citizens of Serbia, employed in municipalities, cities and city municipalities in the Republic of Serbia. Participants of the survey are mostly employed in human resources management (HRM) or in departments/sections that deal with, among other things, HRM jobs within city and municipal administrations in the Republic of Serbia.

The research was conducted through an online survey, which participants filled out on personal computers in their offices and homes. The questionnaire was sent to their e-mail address on 22.4.2020 and participation was possible until 30.4.2020.

In order to fill in the questionnaire, the participants did not have to leave personal data, so a high level of anonymity of the participants was ensured in order to achieve the most open and honest answers.

The questionnaire was divided in 2 parts:

- Functioning of the city/municipal administration in a crisis situation;
- Measures to improve the work of the city/municipal administration in the period after the end of the crisis related to COVID-19.

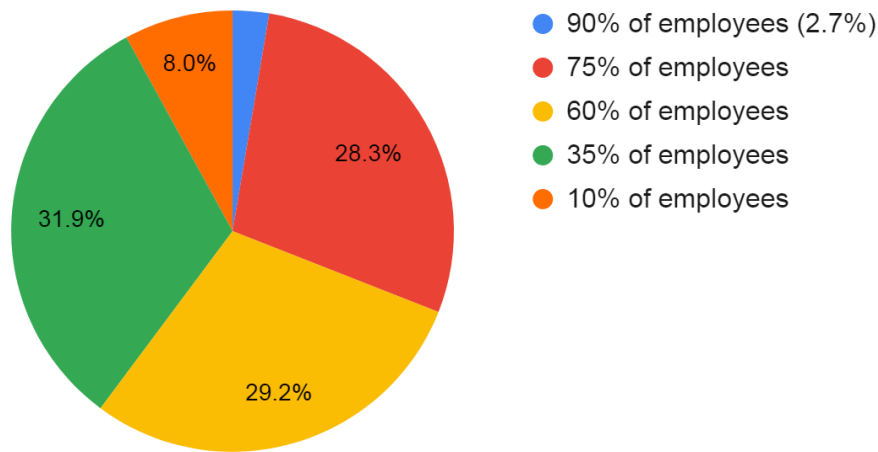
The questionnaire consists of 3 types of questions:

- Closed questions with one possible answer;
- Closed-ended questions with multiple possible answers;
- Open-ended questions, where participants write their answers;

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

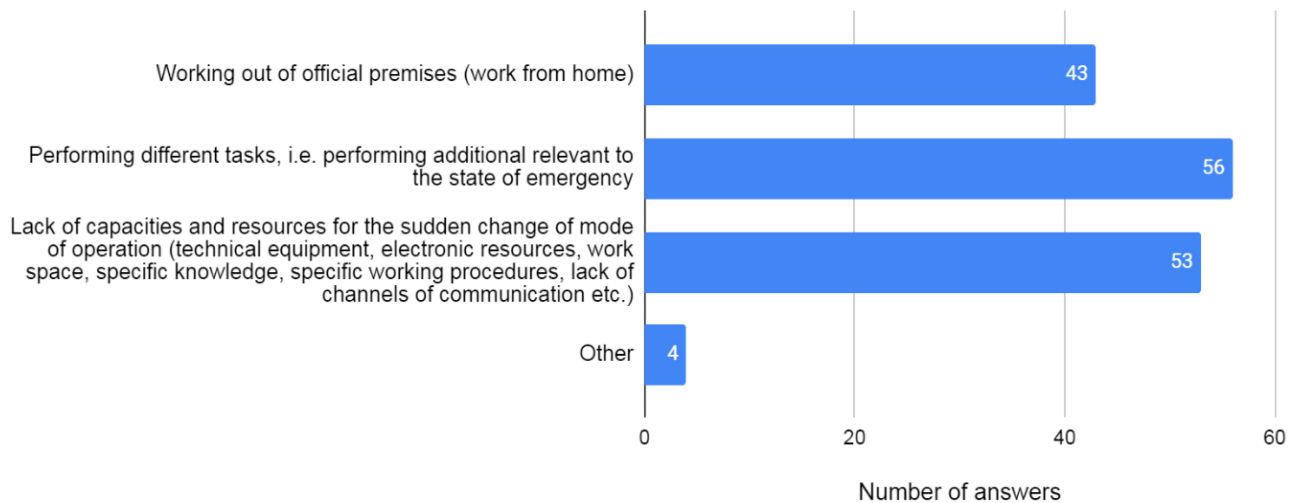
1. Participants were asked to assess to which extent the municipal/city administration has transferred its work to the work from home. It was possible to answer the question by choosing one answer offered in advance. 110 respondents answered the question.

Please assess the percentage of employees working currently from home



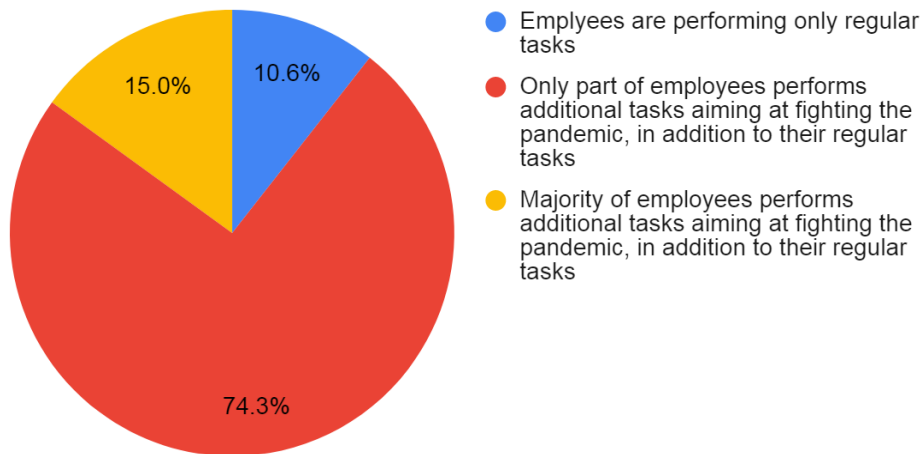
2. Participants were asked to estimate what are the biggest challenges they are facing during the state of emergency. It was possible to choose more than one offered answers. 110 respondents answered the question.

What are, in your own view, the biggest challenges faced by the employees during the state of emergency?



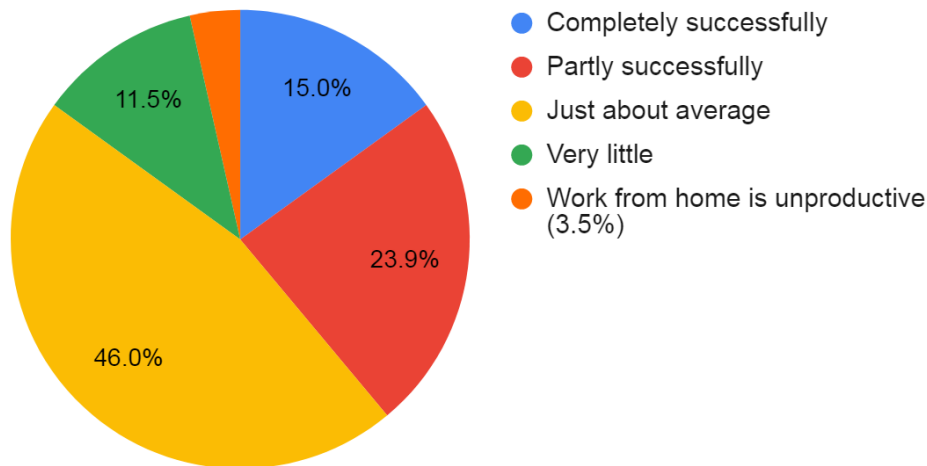
3. Participants were asked which additional tasks they were performing during the state of emergency. It was possible to answer the question by choosing one answer offered in advance. 110 respondents answered the question.

Are employees performing additional/emergency tasks in addition to their regular ones?



4. Participants were asked to estimate how successful is working from home. It was possible to answer the question by choosing one answer offered in advance. 110 respondents answered the question.

To what extent are tasks successfully performed through teleworking (from home)?



5. Participants were asked to identify key problems in functioning of the administration during the state of emergency. This was an open question and respondents were writing their own answers. 95 respondents answered the question.

In data processing, participants' answers are grouped into categories according to the content of the answers themselves. These are the categories that have been identified and the characteristic answers:

a) Overall fear of the pandemic- characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Overcome the fear of illness, of the employees who cannot work from home, those employees who work in business premises.*

b) Challenges in work with citizens/clients - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *A large number of clients still do not have the material capacity or technical knowledge to file the requests electronically or to take advantage of e-government, and the administration is unable to act;*
- ✓ *Inability to work with clients.*

c) Systemic problems - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *The Administration was not prepared for such a state of emergency scenario in a timely manner, but implemented it in the most appropriate way during the implementation of the measures;*
- ✓ *Clear division of competencies and tasks; employees for emergency situations are not ready (motivation or ignorance) for specific jobs during the state of emergency;*
- ✓ *Lack of procedures for dealing with the state of emergency and insufficient number of employees performing tasks.*

d) Technical capacities and equipment - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Insufficient equipment with modern technology (computers, scanners ...), lack of electronic archives, lack of organizational structure, too many procedures that reduce the effectiveness of work;*
- ✓ *Extremely poor internet connection in rural areas;*
- ✓ *The biggest problem is software and electronic equipment and electronic resources for the part of work related to working with clients.*

e) Human resource capacities - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Non-independence in the work of employees sent to work from home. Reduced ability to control and supervise effective work;*
- ✓ *Age structure of employees;*
- ✓ *Insufficient number of employees to perform the necessary tasks and provide working conditions during the state of emergency.*

f) Communication - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Lack of communication between some institutions, inability to obtain certain documents, inability to certify documents, cessation of work of courts, police services and the like;*
- ✓ *Poor communication between employees working from home and employees working at the employer's premises, between themselves and with customers electronically.*

g) No major problems (we function well) - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *We function satisfactorily, we receive requests from clients electronically and respond in the same way, we communicate with each other on a daily basis, we pay our bills;*
- ✓ *There are no problems, the administration functions perfectly according to the situation in which the whole country finds itself.*

What are major problems faced by the administration during the state of emergency?



6. Participants were asked to identify what tasks were the most difficult to perform during the state of emergency. This was an open question and respondents were writing their own answers. 82 respondents answered the question.

In data processing, participants' answers are grouped into categories according to the content of the answers themselves. These are the categories that have been identified and the characteristic answers:

a) Primary tasks of local administration - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Tasks of collective bodies, because holding sessions is prevented.*

b) Inspection and other supervisory activities - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *It is the most difficult to perform tasks that by their nature are performed in direct communication of several persons (solving complex problem situations, inspections, etc.)*

c) Property affairs - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Conducting administrative proceedings, when deciding on the rights and obligations of individuals and legal entities, and you can not make contact, or it is a very complex procedure that can not be followed by Internet correspondence, especially in the field of construction and infrastructure projects.*

d) Finance and budget related tasks- characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Budget activities due to the redirection of funds to positions that are activated during the state of emergency;*
- ✓ *Going to the Treasury for payment, because it has been relocated to a larger city.*

e) Social welfare and child protection services and tasks related to volunteering - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Organize a sufficient number of people every day to work on helping the elderly and the sick, as well as people with special needs.*

f) Tasks related to the state of emergency - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *This is the first time we have encountered this way of working, so there have been changes in the way of work has been done in order to make services to the citizens as high quality and faster as possible (refers to activities related to the pandemic).*

g) General tasks (registries, electoral database, reception desk office etc.) - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Registry jobs due to registration deadlines;*
- ✓ *Maintaining a single voter list and working with clients.*

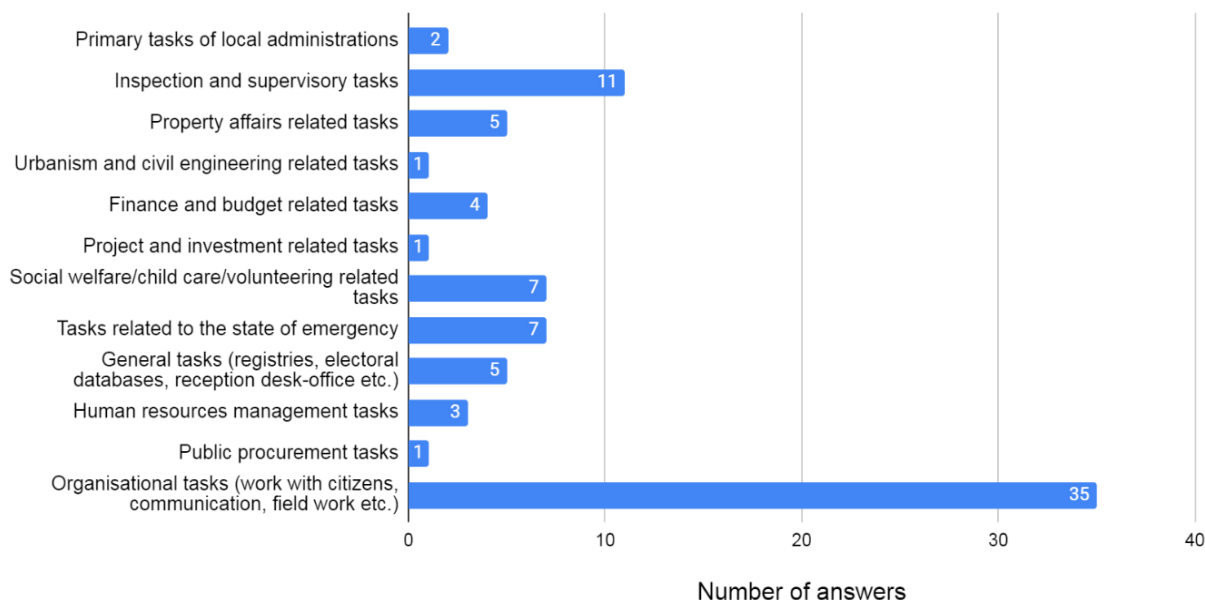
h) Human resource management tasks - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Monitoring the work of employees;*
- ✓ *Human resource management, the highest volume of work is about employees and their rights and obligations during the state of emergency.*

i) Organisational tasks (work with clients, communication, work in the field etc.) - characteristic answers:

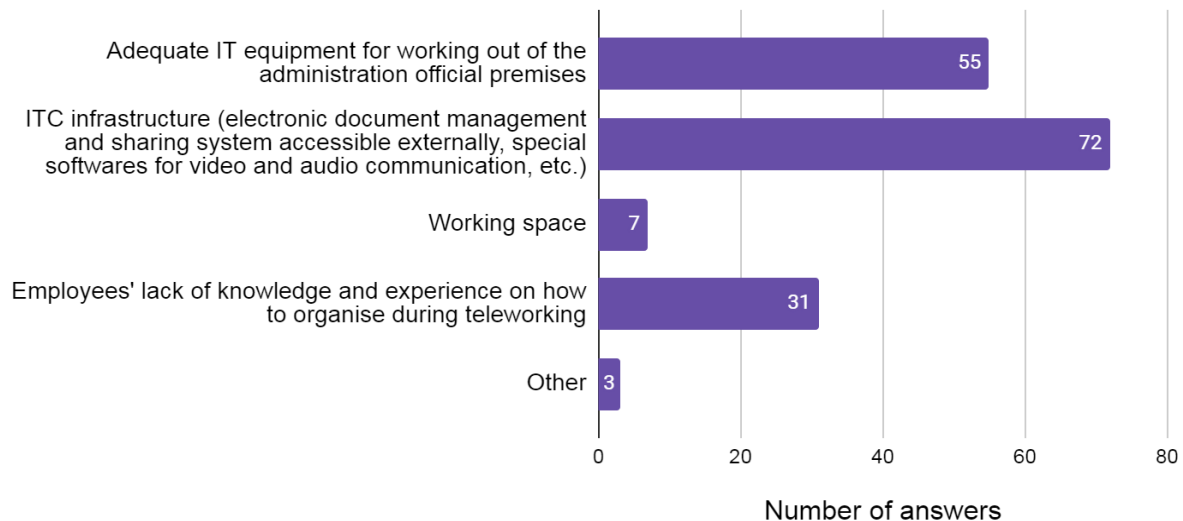
- ✓ *work with clients who cannot move due to age and are not electronically literate;*
- ✓ *jobs for which there is no electronic system for management and exchange of documents that can be accessed outside the administration.*

What tasks do you consider most difficult to perform during the state of emergency?



7. Participants were asked to identify what main resources and technical prerequisites are missing for doing work outside of the business premises. It was possible to answer the question by choosing more than one answer offered in advance. 108 respondents answered the question.

What main resources and technical prerequisites are missing for teleworking?



8. Participants were asked to identify processes of work which is possible to simplify. This was an open question and respondents were writing their own answers. 84 respondents answered the question.

In data processing, participants' answers are grouped into categories according to the content of the answers themselves. These are the categories that have been identified and the characteristic answers:

a) IT processes - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Electronic "binding" of registry books - births, marriages and deaths*
- ✓ *Delivery of documents through e-mail instead of personally*
- ✓ *Reception office work (in pandemic conditions) - improvement of the electronic delivery process*

b) Financial processes - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Work has to be adjusted to the state of emergency in order to prevent physical contact*

c) Public procurement tasks - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *The part of public procurement which relates to public opening of bids*

d) Administration processes - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Delivery of documents in paper format*
- ✓ *Issuance of various types of documents/certificates;*

e) Processes with clients/citizens - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Communication with clients – submission of the requests*
- ✓ *Providing information to interested citizens*

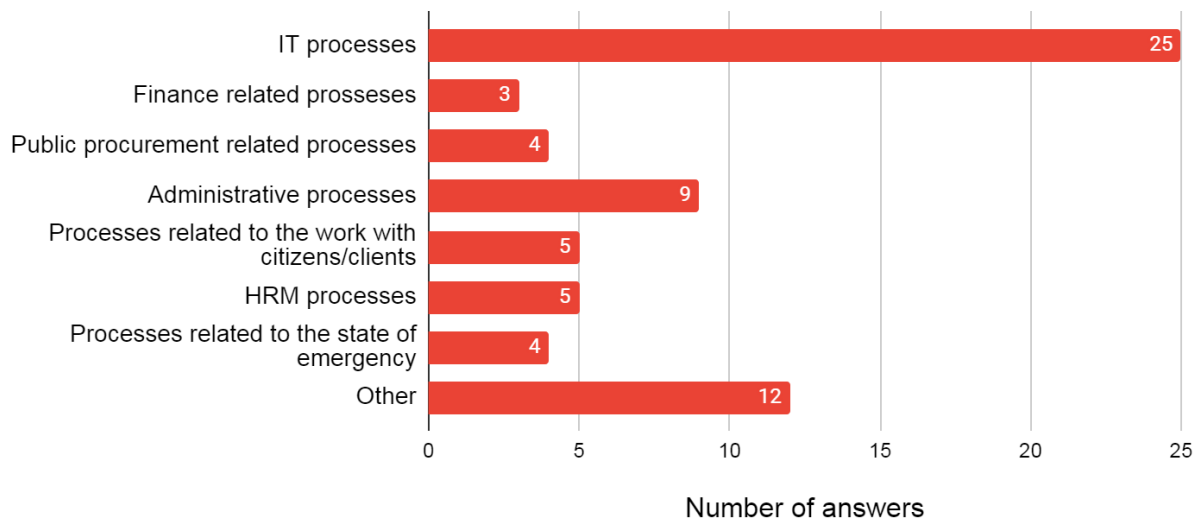
f) Human resources management processes - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Jobs of employees in the part of joint affairs:*
- ✓ *It is necessary to continue working on professional development of employees in areas related to their jobs, so the contact between employees and citizens is of a good quality.*

g) State of emergency processes - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Staff meetings can be held by phone in most cases*

What type of working processes do you consider necessary/possible to simplify?



9. Participants were asked what kind of support, in the near future, would be helpful for overcoming the aftermath of the state of emergency, or for better functioning in eventual similar situations. This was an open question and respondents were writing their own answers. 85 respondents answered the question.

In data processing, participants' answers are grouped into categories according to the content of the answers themselves. These are the categories that have been identified and the characteristic answers:

a) Improvements to communication - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Unique portal for all information and documents under the jurisdiction of LSGs.*
- ✓ *Precise information in media for users of different rights (maternity leave, humanitarian aid packages, pensioners, etc.)*

b) Improving the system of LSG - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *Clear and precise procedures for dealing with circumstances of a state of emergency;*
- ✓ *Drafting of model acts (decisions and solutions) in the field of human resources management during the state of emergency;*
- ✓ *Development of functional plans and good organization for further work, elimination of consequences and training of employees, increase in the number of employees and material support;*

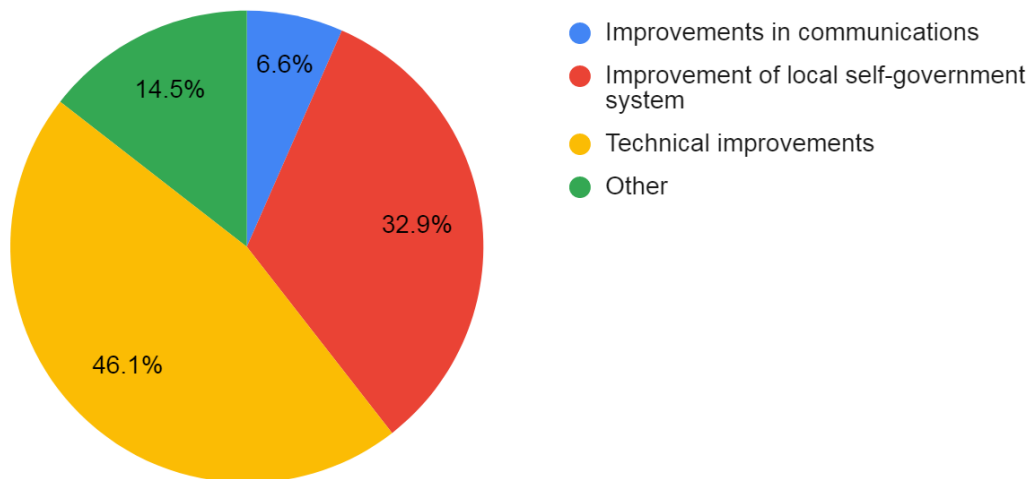
c) Technical improvements - characteristic answers:

- ✓ *System solution for data management and exchange that can be accessed outside the administration and to ensure data security and our IT system;*
- ✓ *Adequate ICT equipment;*
- ✓ *Data exchange via e-government between citizens and LSGs;*

d) Miscellaneous - characteristic answers:

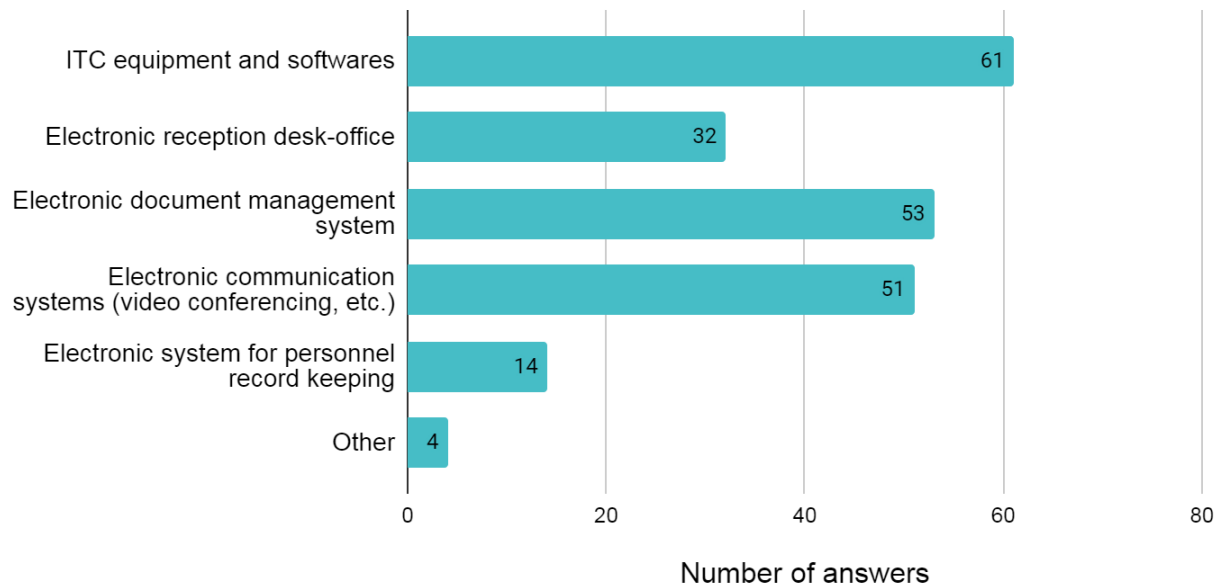
- ✓ *Better health care,*
- ✓ *To provide transportation for employees who are working in their offices*
- ✓ *Enabling new employment.*

In the near future, what kind of support would be helpful for overcoming the aftermath of the state of emergency, or for better functioning in eventual similar situations?



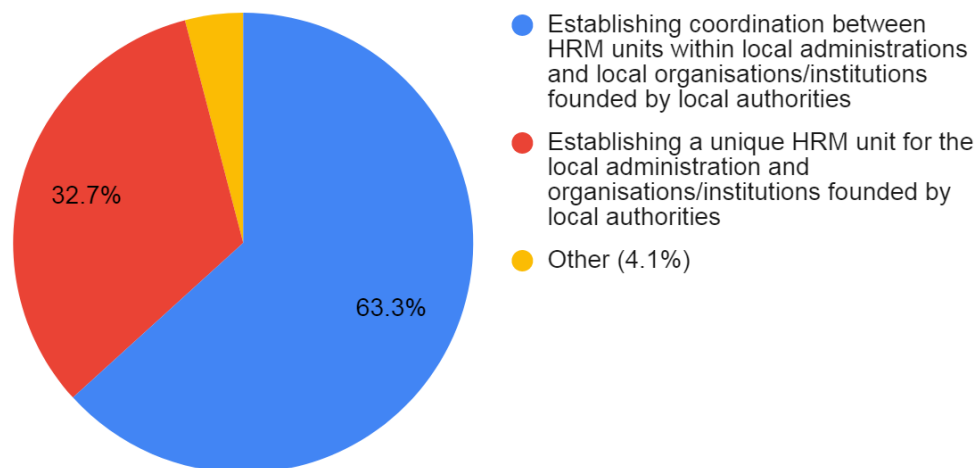
10. Participants were asked to state what are their needs in terms of electronic modernisation of the administration. In this question participants could choose maximum of 2 offered answers. 108 respondents answered the question.

What are your needs in terms of electronic modernisation of the administration?



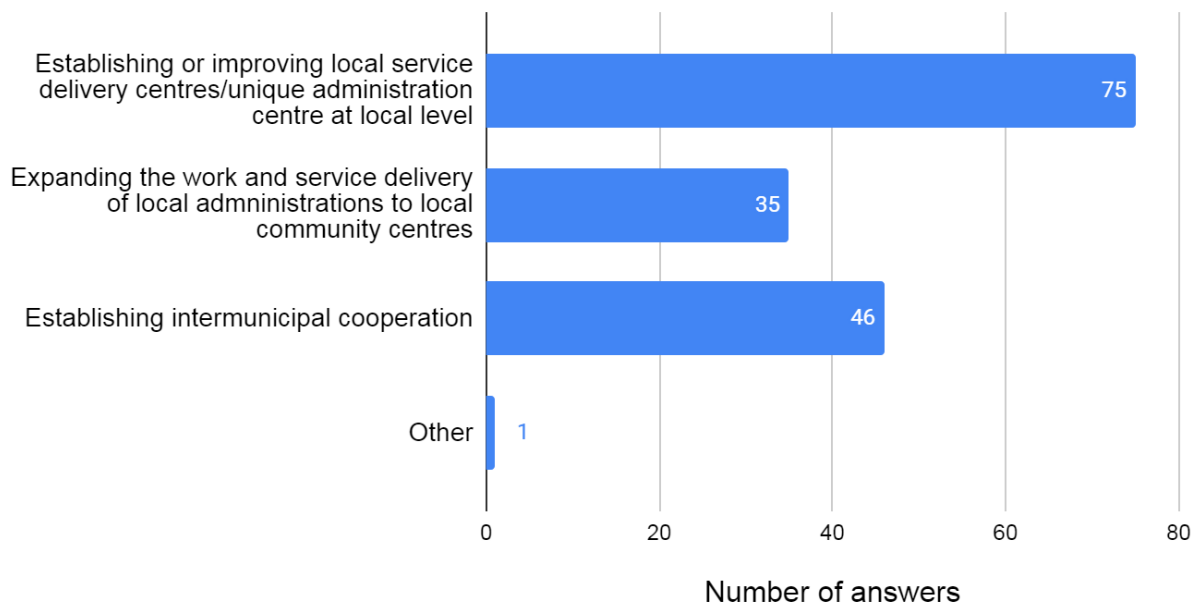
11. Participants were asked about concrete measures for improvement of local administration. In this question participants could choose only one answer from offered answers. 106 respondents answer the question.

What reforms are needed in the field of human resources management at local level?



12. Participants were asked about concrete measures for improvement of local administration. In this question participants could choose only one answer from offered answers. 108 respondents answer the question.

What reforms are needed in organising and providing services by local administrations?



13. At the end of the research, participants were asked to write down some other measures and activities they would suggest within the open question. 33 participants wrote their answers and here are the most relevant answers as they are written:

- ✓ *Mandatory training of all employees in local self-government for the use of electronic communication systems and data exchange;*
- ✓ *Training of employees to perform multiple jobs and work tasks within the competence of the local self-government. In order to minimize contact, it is necessary that each employee has the knowledge and skills to perform more jobs within the competence of the local self-government. As well as for the case of the absence of individual employees, the management can function smoothly;*
- ✓ *Mandatory professional development of employees, as an obligation and not optional;*
- ✓ *Improving work from home, if possible through networking, and without the Internet;*
- ✓ *Prescribe exactly which jobs will be able to be done from home, depending on the state of emergency due to which it was introduced;*
- ✓ *Equalize or adjust the same conditions for categories of employees under all laws that protect certain categories of employees., that one law does not protect the parents of children under 16, others up to 12 and the like. Establish clear, precise and unambiguous procedures and criteria;*
- ✓ *Find a way to pay IT professionals. There are not enough of them, they do not want to work in LSG and in this situation they played a key role because most of the work was done electronically: work from home, access, applications for call centers, permits, e-mail, signing, electronic data submission, reporting. All employees in finance have + 10%, inspectors, etc. It was now clear that without IT technology it was impossible;*
- ✓ *Introduction of remuneration opportunities for employees who "carried the job" during the state of emergency;*

- ✓ *Employment of professional staff who want to work, and not only people who come to work only to receive a salary*
- ✓ *adoption of a rulebook on work in emergency circumstances with a defined minimum work process at all times as well as procedures for conducting such a process;*
- ✓ *Standardization of procedures, forms, individual legal acts, by an expert team appointed by City Council, and non-standard independent creativity of individuals is at a minimum;*
- ✓ *Connecting all processes of organizational units, companies, organizations established by local self-government units into a single information system that enables simple supervision and control in all segments of work and functioning (personnel, finances, assets, business investments ...). To begin with, enable the citizens to post concrete proposals for improving living conditions in settlements in terms of maintaining the existing infrastructure (eg photos with suggestions of what to fix);*
- ✓ *Unification in the work of all administrations on the territory of the entire state. Procurement of programs for e.g. records of real estate in public ownership of the local self-government could be one. The Republic Property Directorate could order software from software companies to be distributed to all local government units;*
- ✓ *Training of employees in the use of programs, training in law enforcement, etc.*

CONCLUSIONS

The report on the results of the survey conducted by the Programme Team focuses on outlining raw results, quantified in the best possible way as to preserve the methodological integrity of the research. Furthermore, the Programme Team attempted to convey the flavour of the received questions, some that have been presented as quotations throughout the report, especially as the context of each question and answer is equally as important as the answer itself. To achieve this fully in such a short format is not an easy task to achieve, having in mind that there are over 500 individual responses. Therefore, we have attempted to sum up the overall results through brief conclusions and recommendations, which, although marked by our subjective views, at the same time reflects the knowledge and understanding of all responses which the participants selflessly shared with the Programme Team.

1. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of emergency caught representatives of local self-government off guard. This has been witnessed more broadly across the globe and we can safely say that this conclusion can be applied to all European states.

2. The local self-government system was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, the system was tested to its limit, but it did not break. It is clear that despite all the problems and challenges, the **local self-government system withstood the stress-test**. The main functions of local self-governments were carried out, state measures were diligently implemented, and local governments proved an important factor in mitigating state of emergency measures in local communities.

3. One of the characteristics of the local self-government system, in the time of crisis, which emerged from the research is **lack of uniformity**. This is apparent from several responses, where different local authorities took different approaches to certain issues, in turn, work from home varied between 35% and 75%. Lack of uniformity is indicative of a systemic problem which can be found in numerous answers of the respondents. This problem is the lack of a system which prescribes the essential tasks that need to be performed during a state of emergency and working from home, lack of a rulebook/guide for employees on how to act in such situations and a lack of training/preparedness of employees in such situations. In line with the survey results, one of the main recommendations would be for all respective institutions to begin their work on preparation of appropriate measures, documents and rulebooks from their respective domains in order to align and uniform approach and response of all institutions to crisis in the future.

4. There is a problem in hierarchical communication within local self-government units, which could mitigate the abovementioned problem. Number of participants stressed out lack of clear orders and instructions during the crisis, inadequate communication of short-term goals and lack of understanding of the actual role of employees in the state of emergency. Main reasons for problems in hierarchical communication are lack of a rulebook/guide for management on how to act in such situations and a lack of training/preparedness of management in crisis communication. Main recommendations would go in line with preparation of local management for crisis and trainings for the management in crisis communication, especially with their employees.

5. Number of respondents highlighted lack of inter-institutional communication and cooperation, both vertical and horizontal. Throughout respondents' answer, there is an underlining sense that communication and information sharing between institutions took place in an ad-hoc manner and was subject to improvisation rather than a systemically organised.

6. An entire section of observations could be devoted to **information technologies, supplies and know-how** as key bottlenecks in this specific prod. It is understandable that most attention was given to this area since ICT become the lifeline of the entire system – suddenly, the entire weight of work in most institutions and bodies switched to ICT without previous testing. This situation revealed all the insufficiencies of the available resource and this could be used as a significant opportunity for Serbia and its public administration to systemically solve these problems.

7. One of the suggestions that reemerged throughout the research is the possibility to create and train **polyvalent staff** in local self-governments. This would entail that besides their regular tasks, employees would also possess basic knowledge of their colleagues' jobs so that they could step in during times of crises and emergencies if necessary. This recommendation may appear as conflicting the mainstream trend for narrow specializations of employees; however, it is interesting that it comes from the employees and that they themselves do not see it as too far-fetched. Perhaps this could also be considered within strategic planning for civil society sector reforms.

8. It has been highlighted that units and employees working with human resource management can and should be at the steering wheel of their local self-government reform processes. The research has revealed that their role in towns and municipalities is still not adequately understood and accepted, and that their ideas and recommendations for institutional reforms remain low on the list of priorities. On the other hand, their suggestions for introducing central administrative hotspot, service centre, electronic reception office, staff database, professional development programmes, inter-municipal cooperation, as well as other recommendations, should be supported by the state and international organisations working in Serbia.

9. Education of citizen on their rights and responsibilities at the local level should become a priority for the public sector. It should be considered that extensive communication towards citizens should take place along three major tracks: a) understanding tasks and responsibilities of local self-governments, b) ways citizens can practice their rights, c) making best use of e-technologies (electronic reception office, etc), made available to citizens by local self-governments.