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to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences
Department of Public Administration and Management

Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences

Special Issue / November / 2020

Public Administration's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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CONTENTS

- Karina ARIAS YURISCH
Karina RETAMAL SOTO
Camila RAMOS FUENZALIDA
- 5 **COVID-19:
Network Effectiveness of Intermunicipal Self-Organized Response in Chile**
Jakub BARANOWSKI
- 24 **Participatory Budget and the SARS-COV-2 Pandemic in Poland**
Ubaldo COMITE
- 38 **The COVID-19 Emergency in European Public Health: An Evaluation of Measures
in the Transition from Healthcare Services to Healthcare Profiling**
Laura-Alexandra FARCA
Dacian C. DRAGOȘ
- 60 **Resilience in Times of Pandemic:
Is the Public Procurement Legal Framework Fit for Purpose?**
Dan LUPU
Liviu-George MAHA
Elena-Daniela VIORICĂ
- 80 **COVID-19 Incidence in Europe: Drivers and Government Interventions**
Veaceslav MIR
- 94 **Post-Pandemic City: Historical Context for New Urban Design**
Georgeta-Bianca SPÎRCHEZ
Nicolae BÂRSAN-PIPU
- 109 **About the Fair Balance of Competing Rights
in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic**
Laura ȘTEFAN
Cezara GRAMA
- 121 **Rule of Law in Tough Times – A Case Study
on the Romanian Sanctioning Policy During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Rita TOLEIKIENĖ
Irma RYBNIKOVA
Vita JUKNEVIČIENĖ

- 149 **Whether and How Does the Crisis-Induced Situation Change E-Leadership in the Public Sector? Evidence from Lithuanian Public Administration**

Tudor ȚICLĂU
Cristina HINȚEA
Bianca ANDRIANU

- 167 **Adaptive and Turbulent Governance. Ways of Governing that Foster Resilience. The Case of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

WHETHER AND HOW DOES THE CRISIS-INDUCED SITUATION CHANGE E-LEADERSHIP IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR? EVIDENCE FROM LITHUANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

In the course of the pandemic, the remote working and e-leading (leading through information and communication technologies) have also become the usual mode in public administrations, yet research on their consequences for employees in the public sector remains scarce. The aim of this article is to reveal what challenges and tensions emerge in relation to e-leadership in Lithuanian municipal administrations and how the pandemic influences e-leadership and its effects on municipal employees. A qualitative exploratory empirical study based on semi-structured interviews was conducted in a Lithuanian municipal administration before and during the pandemic caused by the COVID-19. It was found that, before the pandemic, e-leadership was mostly initiated by individual supervisors in municipal administrations who encouraged employees to use various e-tools for communication and daily performance of tasks; however, it was poorly supplemented by teleworking. The crisis-induced situation made e-leadership mandatory because of implemented teleworking. It has led to a massive agglomeration of e-leading tasks by supervisors who play the crucial role in instructing employees to use e-tools, gathering and sharing the information, monitoring and reviewing the division of functions and tasks. We also discuss the critical effects on employees, such as multitasking and total availability, resulting from e-leadership and teleworking.

Keywords: e-leadership, municipality, ICT tools, teleworking, COVID-19.

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1. Introduction

Like many other public sector organizations, a municipality is facing the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this governance level is the closest to citizens, it is required not only to continue its performance but also to become the front leader to manage changes in public service provision, continuation of important projects and managing its resources. The crisis-induced situation of 2020 has led to a massive relocation of the workplaces to employees' homes with the introduction of mandatory teleworking (Raišienė *et al.*, 2020). While public sector organizations appeared in the crisis mode both trying to meet basic requirements of their customers (citizens) and ensuring the well-being of their employees, leaders are expected to help systems and individuals overcome limitations and challenges and boost their performance by using various instruments (Dirani *et al.*, 2020).

Considering that leadership and information and communication technologies (hereinafter ICT) affect and transform each other constantly (DasGupta, 2011; Avolio *et al.*, 2014; Fernandez and Shaw, 2020), public sector organizations started using ICT in their daily practice, including external and internal management processes, before the pandemic occurred. Leadership in municipal administrations becomes inseparable from digitalization and increasingly turns to e-leadership by adapting ICT tools and digital communication methods for management and communication processes (Savolainen, 2013; Mackenzie, 2010).

E-leadership in public administration emerges as a sub-topic of the main tendency to digitalize many activities in the public sector: starting with processes connected to citizens-oriented activities, such as e-government (Gaulė and Žilinskas, 2013; Cordella and Tempini, 2015; Bernhard *et al.*, 2018) and e-services (Milė and Junevičius, 2013; Panayiotou and Stavrou, 2019, etc.), and ending with internal processes, such as organizational management (Rybnikova *et al.*, 2015; Pyszka, 2018), including leadership (Bronkhorst, Steijn and Vermeeren, 2015; Rybnikova *et al.*, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020 as a crisis-induced situation which required municipalities to react immediately and to act in more appropriate ways to continue to perform under pandemic circumstances. Therefore, ICT usage in the daily routine of the municipal administration became mandatory. It could be assumed that the pandemic and the crisis-induced situation accelerated the integration of ICT tools in public administration in general, and in the leadership process in particular. The aim of this article is to reveal what challenges and tensions emerge from e-leadership in Lithuanian municipal administrations and whether the pandemic situation leads to changes of e-leadership and its effects on employees.

This paper presents the results of an empirical exploratory research which was undertaken in a Lithuanian municipality in July 2019 and July 2020; the research involved qualitative semi-structured interviews. We organize our paper in the following way: first, we discuss both main features of e-leadership in general terms and specifics of e-leadership in the public sector; second, we present the method of our

exploratory study; third, we consider the findings of our study in terms of main challenges and tensions of e-leadership in Lithuanian public administration before and during the pandemic situation.

2. Previous research on e-leadership in general and in the public sector

In a nutshell, e-leadership refers to leadership processes, such as communication, motivation, social influence, through ICT (Van Wart *et al.*, 2019, p. 82; Avolio *et al.*, 2014, p. 107). ICT is used for the communication between the leader and the employee, as well as for the collection and dissemination of information required to support organizational work (Avolio and Kahai, 2003; DasGupta, 2011). Leader characteristics, situational factors, like virtual design characteristics, subordinate characteristics or task characteristics, alignment with ethical values and citizen trust are the main factors which were considered to affect the success of e-leadership (Montgomery, Roman and Pierce, 2016). The literature on e-leadership particularly often focuses on personal traits and social skills, such as vigilance, responsiveness, willingness to learn and re-learn, honesty, sociability, a sense of adventure, vision, altruism, interaction, and trust-building, the so-called e-leaders have to possess (Annunzio, 2001; Savolaine, 2013). These leader characteristics are closely related to those which are needed to successfully manage any crisis: scanning the environment, strategic planning, decisiveness, problem solving, decision making, informing, managing innovation and creativity, planning and organizing personnel, motivating, managing teams and team building, networking and partnering, flexibility (Kapucu and Ustun, 2018). Moreover, previous research cases reveal that employees want to believe that, in spite of their distant location, they are important for the organization and expect the e-leader to be reachable (a 24/7 orientation) (Savolaine, 2013; DasGupta, 2011). This highly contributes to the trust-building between the leader and the virtual team, whereas low trust may cause problems of collaboration (Rusman *et al.*, 2009).

E-leadership increasingly expands in the business and non-profit sectors (Li *et al.*, 2017; Guerra-Brown, 2017). Although the public sector is particularly aware of the fact that ICT usage can ensure the provision of public goods and satisfaction of public interest in terms of e-democracy and e-services, e-leadership and ICT usage for internal organizational processes have been receiving quite low attention from scholars to the present.

Despite the fact that public administrations are well-prepared to respond to new challenges (Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg, 2014), since they are expected to deal with any crisis, to continue their activities under any circumstances and to ensure fast decision-making, the implementation of e-leadership may bear considerable challenges for public administrations because of structural reasons. The first significant tension rises from the dichotomy of politics and administration (Overeem, 2005). While the political support for ICT usage in administrative activities may appear as an engine motivating supervisors to enable e-leadership, the bureaucratic tradition on the side

of public administration (strict rules, limited managerial flexibility, steady and routine processes) may stand in contrast to that (Boin and Lodge, 2016). As e-leadership requires more flexibility and creativity from leaders, as well as non-routine solutions, sensitive and timely communication between leaders and teams, it may cause a range of additional challenges for supervisors and employees. Effective management of relations among leaders, teams and individuals is one of the challenges in e-leadership. E-leadership obliges leaders to find ways for collaboration, i.e. to make individuals work collectively while using ICT and to create a culture that allows all voices to be heard (Pulley and Sessa, 2001; DasGupta, 2011). As team members predominantly communicate and coordinate their work via the electronic media, e-leaders have to inspire people from a distance to develop self-management capabilities (Kerfoot, 2010). Moreover, e-leadership deals with isolation and confusion (DasGupta, 2011) of team members, as caused by the physical, social, and interpersonal distance (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020; Montgomery, Roman and Pierce, 2016). E-leaders in public administration are expected to work openly, inspire individuals and teams to mobilize, concentrate on problems and results, guide rather than control, and concentrate on motivating rather than directing (Kapucu and Ustun, 2018). Whereas supervisors are expected to possess a broad range of competencies and skills, the development of competencies, in the usual case, depends on the organizational policy. Supervisors are dependent on getting institutional support, such as training, decision support system, and simulation (Kapucu and Garayev, 2011; Van Wart *et al.*, 2017) to improve their ICT usage and decisions making skills, especially in the crisis context. The lack of such institutional support may become one more challenge for e-leadership in the crisis-induced situation.

Additionally, the cyber security can become another challenge for e-leadership in public administration, especially in the crisis-induced situation, since social networks, free software and open source have become popular instruments for management processes in public administration, too (Kapucu, 2005), with local public administration rapidly becoming an attractive target for cybercriminals (Montgomery, Roman and Pierce, 2016; Chen, 2017; Coppolino *et al.*, 2018).

To sum it up, it should be emphasized that e-leadership in public administration can be affected by various tensions connected to the nature of public administration and challenges rising due to human-machine interactions. The global digitalization and the threat of a new crisis exert new pressures regarding e-leadership in the public sector and public administrations, such as municipalities. It could be assumed that ordinary interaction between supervisors and employees in municipalities during the pandemic became even more digitalized under the quarantine conditions; this fact indicates a potentially increased importance of e-leadership in public administration under the pandemic conditions. The analysis of the performance of leaders and employees in a particular public administration institution under the real crisis-induced situation may reveal the *status quo* of e-leadership as well as identify weather and how the pandemic has changed e-leadership in the public sector.

3. Study method

Given the fact that e-leadership in the public sector represents an evolving topic still lacking empirical data, we decided to conduct an exploratory qualitative study, since it allows us to analyze local practices of e-leadership as well as challenges and tensions resulting from it in more depth. We carried out semi-structured interviews with two representatives of municipal administration in Lithuania, one in a supervisory position and one in a subordinate position, because we aimed at more comprehensive findings from both perspectives involved in e-leadership. It is worth mentioning that, in the second phase of the research, the second interviewee has changed her position from an employee to a vice-chairperson of the structure; thus, the person was able to consider subordinate as well as supervisory perspectives in her interview as well.

In the course of the research project on e-leadership in public administration in the Baltic States, we talked to our interviewees for the first time in July 2019. Led by the aim of the present study, we conducted follow-up interviews with the interviewees during the pandemic situation in July 2020. Hence, the resulting design includes time frames before and during the pandemic situation and allows us to compare both periods in relation to peculiarities and challenges in e-leadership as well as to figure out the changes in e-leadership in municipal administrations that resulted from the pandemic.

We developed two interview guides. The interview guide for the first interview included a broad scope of issues, such as e-governance and digitalization in the organization, tools of e-HRM and e-leadership, as well as effects of e-leadership on employees and supervisors alike. The second interview guide for the time during the pandemic situation focused on both leadership processes under conditions of remote working and changes in leadership experienced by municipal employees.

Despite the pandemic situation, all interviews took place face-to-face in the offices of the interviewees. Both interviewed persons represented the department of social affairs in one Lithuanian medium-sized municipality that was selected purposefully because in 2015 it was acknowledged as the most successful municipality implementing e-democracy in Lithuania (Information Society Development Committee, 2015).

The interviews lasted from 32 to 58 minutes. Their recordings were transcribed and codified in order to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees: S_1 to E_2, where 'S' stands for a supervisor and 'E' stands for an employee in the phases 1 (before the pandemic situation) or 2 (during the pandemic situation) of the research. Additional details on interviewees and interviews are summarized in Table 1.

We undertook a thematic analysis of the interview material, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Grounding on our material, mainly inductively, we developed first-order codes. On that basis, we singled out major themes and subthemes as broader units of meanings including similar codes.

Table 1: Main characteristics of the interviewees and interviews

	Supervisor	Subordinate employee
Size of municipality	Medium-size (100,000)	
Field of activity	Department of social affairs	
Work experience in position by 2019, in years	17	3
Age of interviewees by 2019	48	45
Gender of interviewees	w	w
No. of persons supervised	150	0
Length of interview (1 st time/ 2 nd time)	58:10 min./ 32:32 min.	45:41 min./ 33:01 min.

Source: Authors' data

After reviewing and refining emerging themes and subthemes, we concentrate on several main themes related to challenges of e-leadership before and during the pandemic situation. These are: (1) preconditions of e-leadership, such as technical equipment, required skills, and knowledge, (2) practices of e-leadership, such as task division, time management, and (3) effects of e-leadership, such as multitasking, working hours and availability and consideration of a good performance.

4. Results

4.1. E-leadership in Lithuanian public administrations before the pandemic situation

Trying to reveal the practice of e-leadership in Lithuanian municipalities before the pandemic, several tensions, challenges, and changes were identified.

Lacking electronic systems in the municipality. Despite already implemented e-systems, such as the document management system 'Hive' or the strategic planning system 'Stradas', which enabled leaders to distribute tasks to employees, control and perform tasks and finance flows, Lithuanian municipalities felt the lack of electronic systems that allow to link all available information about planned activities, financial resources or quality management systems actually before the pandemic. According to the supervisor in the municipal administration, additional electronic systems may help to manage the available resources, allocate them in a planned manner without wasting time: *'I expect a lot from centralized bookkeeping, i.e. from modern financial management. (...) At the same time, it is useful when achieving results. (...) At the end of the year, you retrieve a report and that's it. All this feedback could be facilitated by an electronic system'* (S₁). Leaders, identifying this lack of electronic systems, initiated the search for freely available electronic tools to solve the above-mentioned problems: *'This is what we initiate ourselves: we think about how to make our activities more efficient'* (S₁). At the same time, the incompatibility of electronic systems was seen by interviewees as one of main challenges: *'In addition, our institutions have different*

programs; our municipal program is different from that of the Ministry of Finance, which is kind of a 'mess' (S_1). Moreover, overlooked user-friendliness of the implemented e-systems is identified as an additional challenge: *'It is considered that the strategic planning system is not perfect yet. (...) The system is complex, time consuming'* (E_1).

Individual initiatives towards using ICT. The lack of helpful training oriented to digitalization issues is experienced as a serious problem; employees were not encouraged to take an interest in the use of new ICT: *'We get more psychological, managerial training on how to empower our employees, but not about e-systems, tools'* (S_1). As a result, the interviewees believe that individual learning is the most important: *'Most of our employees in their 40s and 60s are self-taught, and nobody taught us how to use a computer when they joined, then we worked on it ourselves'* (E_1). It is then barely surprising that the introduction of new electronic systems and tools in the workplace caused fear and dissatisfaction for employees because well-known activities needed to be re-learned: *'When we talk about that new system, it is, like any innovation, doubtful, judgmental, fearful and frustrating because you start performing your basic functions in a different way'* (E_1).

Altogether, a personal example of the supervisor becomes an important incentive for employees to apply ICT tools, too: *'I think everything depends on the leaders. What example you show, how you teach, how you educate'* (S_1).

Due to lacking electronic systems in the municipality, supervisors initiated the use of external sources. They searched for simple forms of electronic tools by themselves and used tools, such as e-mails, phone, messages, Google calendar, Messenger, already before the pandemic. Employees acknowledge that they must follow their supervisors and use the same ICT tools for the purpose of efficiency: *'We work using Google docs, and it's much faster'* (E_1); *'We also use them, the so-called 'clouds'. We use it because it would be very difficult to coordinate the planning if it did not exist. It came afresh from such a peculiar disability'* (E_1).

Teleworking. Before the crisis, only employees of the municipality without any direct contact to citizens were allowed to work remotely for no more than one working day per month at a time agreed with his/her supervisor and the director of administration in advance. Moreover, even if an employee chooses to work remotely and still has to physically attend the meeting of a working group, that employee must arrive at work: *'You still have to come to the work groups'* (E_1). Therefore, teleworking was neither broadly allowed nor popular with municipal employees before the crisis-induced situation.

Effects of e-leadership. Increasing multitasking caused by the need to divide the attention while performing many tasks via heterogeneous electronic tools is a challenging effect: *'It's not so easy, sometimes you feel so divided, but I accepted that and there is no other way. Without it, I really couldn't do so much'* (S_1). The phone became the integral part of leader's and employees' work tools: *'A smart phone is always nearby and has all available communication networks in it'* (S_1). Employees, following the example of the leader, use the phone for their daily work communication. New

tools also caused additional stress for the employees, as they speed up the retrieval of information and lead to multitasking: *'For example, you are attending one working group, your supervisor is in another, and you get a supervisor's task. This is also an additional stress because, while you are performing one task, you already get another'* (E_1).

Furthermore, in relation to teleworking, interviewees indicate the blending of work and home spheres as a problem: *'Even though when working at home, I am always available thanks to these technologies, 'they are following me' (laughs)'* (E_1). It becomes difficult to separate the working and personal time, and this leads to extended working hours: *'Some look at remote working as an employee motivation, but sometimes I think of it as of an intrusion into your personal space. And we work more hours then, because you don't need to be changed, at 7 a.m. you already sit at your computer, drink coffee at your computer, and have lunch at your computer. And, automatically, the working day is extended'* (E_1).

The risk of an inaccurately or incomprehensibly formulated task set by a supervisor, assuming the employee's fear to ask him/her, is an additional effect of e-leadership and may become a reason for not completing the task: *'I send a message, without specific characters, without spaces... You do not complete the task. Then I check what I wrote. And I see that the way you had to do that was written in an incomprehensible way'* (S_1). As long as electronic communication can be combined with live meetings, this risk can be reduced.

To sum up, our findings reveal that, before the crisis, the ICT and e-leadership occurred to be used mainly due to the individual initiative by the municipality supervisor and the employees, since the institutional policy or support (specific training, guidelines, instructions, etc.) was mainly missing. Although technical knowledge and skills are considered by interviewees as self-evident, at the same time they stated that only a smaller part of the personnel of the municipality could be able to work remotely: *'Maybe only 30% understand, could and would be able to do such work'* (S_1). This statement indicates how challenging the COVID-19 crisis may have been to municipal employees because of mandatory remote working.

4.2. E-leadership in Lithuanian public administration during the pandemic situation

On the 16th of March, 2020, the Government of the Republic of Lithuania has introduced the quarantine in the entire country as a response to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The duration of the quarantine regime was from the 16th of March to the 17th of June, 2020. Although the quarantine has been cancelled on the 17th of June, certain security measures remained mandatory. However, public administration employees returned to their work places. Changes at the national level raised some tensions and challenges due to the adoption of legal acts regulating activities of the business and public sector organizations.

Tensions and challenges of teleworking. The lack of proper computer hardware and software, as well as the quality of the Internet connection, was the main

tension of teleworking. The municipality made it possible for employees to use the municipality's computer hardware and software at home, but it was observed that the equipment was not adapted for teleworking: *'We have new computers but our computers are not equipped with video cameras and microphones'* (E_2).

Additionally, because of the urgency of changes, learning how to work with new electronic tools took place alongside accomplishing the set tasks, 'here and now', with supervisors becoming informal teachers of their employees: *'I had to learn to organize the work, and to divide groups, and to give tasks... In fact, there was no time for learning'* (S_2); *'I know that I taught some people by myself. I don't remember how I have learned myself...'* (E_2).

In a very short time, municipal administrations and the staff of public sector organizations had to learn to use a variety of electronic platforms that would allow them to organize meetings in a remote mode: *'We tested all possible platforms. Let's say, there was the Teams program for connections with the Ministry, here we had the Zoom'* (S_2). Additional working groups were organized for the search, adoption, and implementation of solutions; consultations were held in a remote mode, and collective decisions were made.

As a result, during the quarantine, leaders of the municipality have radically changed their attitude towards the teleworking: it became considered not as a privilege anymore, but as a necessity and normal way of working: *'It's just another work place, another way of working'* (E_2).

Effects of e-leadership during the crisis. Interviewees identified the multitasking as a high challenge. Due to the rapidly changing situation and in order to manage the crisis, leaders had to work on several tasks and even use several equipment tools at once: *'We live in a time when it is necessary to monitor both the phone and two computers at the same time, and, even if there is some information on the Internet, to monitor what is happening'* (S_2).

Accessibility of the leader and of the employees was emphasized as another challenge during this research. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an agreement between supervisors and employees that everyone should be available throughout all day and on weekends, thus, working hours became close to 24/7 in order to quickly respond to unplanned issues and to make urgent decisions. Because of that, there was an agreement between supervisors and employees to react to any inquiry within 15 minutes by responding or withdrawing. At the same time, working hours of public servants increased massively: *'Whether it's working hours or not, there were extra issues that had to be dealt with suddenly'* (S_2). The increase in working hours appeared not only because of an increased number of meetings but also due to the disruption of the Internet connections and late meeting time as a means to avoid it: *'We also had those Zoom meetings after the working hours, when the Internet works better. Both at seven o'clock in the evening and at eight o'clock, and on Sundays to prepare for the new week, and we connected every day at eight o'clock in the morning'* (S_2). Given this fact of increasing working hours, it is indicative that interviewees

point to the attempts to structure the time more strictly, e.g. by fixing and reducing the duration of Zoom meetings.

At the same time, stress, isolation and the lack of live communication prompted higher willingness to talk to colleagues on the phone for a longer time than usual, acting as the expression of emotions and fears. As a result, some employees had to spend more time listening to colleagues and motivating them to perform assigned activities: *'You call a colleague from another department who stays at home for a month and wants to talk very much. Then you talk for a while not about relevant topics but rather about the situation in which we all found ourselves'* (E_2).

Furthermore, the combination of work and family needs becomes an acute challenge because of both parents and children having to work or learn remotely and simultaneously. Tensions are barely to avoid when children need technical support, whereas parents at the same time have to attend their business meetings. Because of this, the municipal administration introduced a general lunch break for public administration and city schools in order for families to have a lunch break together.

Organizational changes. As the crisis-induced situation has affected the ordinary performance, the redistribution of responsibilities was needed in the municipal administration: *'The COVID-19 has brought new works that don't seem to belong to anyone. This is when the leader has to appoint those new jobs to someone'* (E_2).

The crisis influenced the employees' attitude towards their responsibilities. According to interviewees, the stressful emotional state of employees manifested at a high level of mutual listening and the dedication for activities carried out in the organization: *'People were scared and they listened... While that tension was huge, the listening was highly attentive... Somehow, I haven't heard that 'we will not connect on Sunday because it does not rest with me''* (S_2). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a number of cases when supervisors in the administration assisted heads of other departments and started performing activities and functions that were not listed in their job descriptions, like the head of the Sport Department, who asked for an additional task to volunteer in order to help colleagues from busier departments.

By transferring the entire performance to the electronic space and by introducing mandatory teleworking in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, e-leadership became an essential and normal part of the municipal administration. Supervisors and employees had to learn individually and quickly how to master electronic tools allowing them to communicate with each other when resolving issues, making urgent decisions and discussing uncertain situations.

4.3. Comparison of e-leadership in Lithuanian public administration before and during the pandemic situation

While comparing activities before and during the period of the crisis, we can point out several changes. *Before* the pandemic, *the quality of computer hardware and software*, used by the municipality, was assessed as *sufficiently meeting the needs* of the organizational performance. Working *under conditions of the quarantine* has revealed

weaknesses in available hardware. The suitability of the computer equipment for teleworking may become one of the main priorities in planning public procurement for buying computer hardware and software.

Individual learning of how to use ICT tools was a usual practice for leaders and employees in the analyzed municipal administration already *before the pandemic.* *During the crisis, the need to learn how to master virtual meetings has risen up.* Supervisors were initiators of and consultants on the usage of new e-tools both before and during the crisis.

The urgent development of e-leadership inspired by the crisis-induced situation and quarantine conditions has led to the *institutionalization and acknowledgement of teleworking* at all levels and positions of the municipal administration. *Before the crisis,* the law allowed employees to take advantage of this form *only one day a month,* whereas *supervisors had no such opportunity* at all. The municipal employees used the opportunity of teleworking rarely. *During the crisis,* complete teleworking *became legal and mandatory* for all municipal employees, and *the perception of top leaders has changed* towards teleworking as a successful way to complete tasks and reach organizational goals.

During the pandemic, the scope of communication (mode, channels, and tools) *has changed.* Face-to-face, mainly bilateral, communication has been replaced by virtual multilateral (teams) communication. ICT tools used before the pandemic, such as phone calls, e-mails, 'Hive', 'Stradas', Messenger, remained, but virtual meeting software, such as Teams and Zoom, live conferencing, groups of Facebook were introduced during the crisis.

The lesson of *better time management* was one of the stated advantages of this crisis-induced situation. Leaders and employees *had to learn how to plan time more rationally* under conditions of very flexible and intensive schedule, with a highly increased number of virtual meetings, depending on extraordinary issues. Teleworking helped to eliminate the loss of time for traveling to the venue of a meeting. Additionally, after the first weeks of the quarantine, *virtual meetings,* online conferences, and even phone calls *became shorter, more structured, and clearer* because of the need to control time.

The focus on the delivery of tasks, as one of main functions of a leader, has changed, too. *Before the pandemic,* seeking timely response, *extraordinary tasks were delivered personally,* often via phone call or virtually (via e-mail or Messenger). Some misunderstandings due to the content of urgently sent messages were not avoided. *During the crisis,* leaders focused on *the clarity of virtually delivered requests and expected urgent response within 15 minutes.*

Multitasking remained a challenge *during the crisis,* but its frequency has *changed from occasional to permanent.* Multitasking became a normal practice as, during the pandemic, the leader embodied the role of a mediator because of the need to receive and to provide information from and to heterogeneous stakeholders.

The *crisis* has massively *affected working hours*. The availability 24/7 became an informal norm despite of officially remaining at 40 working hours. The work–life imbalance has obviously increased.

The criteria of expected *good performance* have slightly changed, too. Instead of ‘just’ accomplishing their tasks, *during the pandemic* good employees are expected *not to express any dissatisfaction* or objection to work long hours or on weekends, *to voluntarily ask for additional tasks* and responsibilities. This could be due to the employees’ awareness of financial insecurity because of the crisis that increases their willingness to perform their duties properly and without grievance and also to go that ‘extra mile’. Leaders perceived this phenomenon as organizational citizenship (Organ, 1997; Bakhshi, Sharma and Kumar, 2011) and evaluated it remarkably positively. All mentioned changes are concisely presented in Table 2.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The considered Lithuanian municipality is a specific one, since it belongs to progressive public administrations in terms of digitalization. Digitalized tools have already been used here before the COVID-19 crisis. This municipality was particularly suited for the aims of this study because e-leadership has yielded its substantial experiences as well as sensitivity towards emerging tensions and challenges. At the same time, consideration of e-leadership in relation to the pandemic situation in the considered municipality enables, to a certain degree, a view into the future of public administration work under digitalized conditions, including challenges and tensions resulting from that.

The analysis of the results before and during the crisis-induced situation has contributed to some theoretical implications regarding e-leadership. The pandemic situation inspired quick and creative decisions of the municipal administration, which generally contradict the principles of bureaucratic organization, such as steady rules, routines, standardization. A supervisor from a Lithuanian municipality had to demonstrate the main characteristics needed for e-leaders even before the crisis, as described by Annunzio (2001) and Savolaine (2013): being open, willing, and ready to learn how to use new ICT tools and systems, as accepting the benefits of the digitalization. Even *before the crisis*, the supervisor used her *personal example for ICT implementation* (Montgomery, Roman and Pierce, 2016). *During the pandemic*, the supervisor reinforces this role by becoming a *technical consultant for her subordinates*. However, the need for the institutional support in learning ICT usage, explained by Kapucu and Garayev (2011) and Van Wart *et al.* (2017), was neglected by the municipal top leaders. Instead, competencies required for ICT use were considered as self-evident and had to be self-learned during the crisis. Although workplace learning as a staff development practice is not very common in Lithuanian municipalities (Dačiulytė, 2011), the study reveals that for e-leadership this was the case. Altogether, the findings of our study point to the utmost importance of supervisors in initiating, implementing, and supporting digitalization and e-leadership in public administration.

Table 2: Summary of the research findings

	Before the crisis	Criteria	During the crisis
Preconditions of e-leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical and computer equipment of the institution acknowledged as sufficient - Adapted for document storage and transmission - Learning occurs due to and on supervisors' own initiative - Few training sessions provided by the institution 	<p><i>Technical equipment</i></p> <p><i>Learning how to use ICT tools</i></p> <p><i>Teleworking</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limitations of technical equipment by the institution become obvious because of poor Internet connection, absent high-quality video cameras, microphones, sound cards, etc. - Urgent need for learning how to use e-tools and platforms - Individual learning initiated by supervisors - Supervisors became technical consultants for colleagues and employees - 100% teleworking becomes allowed by law - Distrust of supervisors in teleworking as an efficient working mode is considerably reduced
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bilateral communication dominates - Main communication channels: face-to-face, audio-mode, written mode - Main ICT tools: phone, e-mail, SMS, 'Hive', Skype, and Messenger 	<p><i>Communication mode, channels, and tools</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multilateral communication dominates - Main communication channels: audio, video, written mode - Main ICT tools: phone, Zoom, e-mail, Facebook Groups, 'Hive', Teams
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearly structured working schedule - Long-term and regular (weekly) meetings - Lunch break according to the schedule - Used ICT Tool: Google Calendar 	<p><i>Time management</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexible work schedule - Short-term and irregular on-demand meetings - The number of meetings sharply increases - Reduced meeting time to avoid 'redundant' talks - Lunch break at the same time in all public sector organizations - Used ICT tools: Google Calendar, Zoom or Teams calendars
E-leadership practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tasks are delivered mainly in short in a written form; any clarifications are presented in person - Vague expectation of timely responses and the quality of the task implementation 	<p><i>Delivering tasks</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explicit attention given to the clarity of the request or of the tasks via email in order to assure the quality of their performance - Explicit norms of urgent responses (i.e. max. 15 min. to respond)

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	Before the crisis	Criteria	During the crisis
Effects of E-Leadership	-Multitasking occurs occasionally because of the need for quick communication and response	<i>Multitasking</i>	-Multitasking occurs permanently because of the need to receive and to provide information from and to heterogeneous stakeholders (Government, different departments, employees, community) -Additional communication requirements due to the crisis-induced situation (e.g. video conferencing to inform citizens about the status quo) -The usage of ICT multitasking tends to increase (e.g. phone calls during Zoom meetings with a deactivated camera)
	-Expected high availability despite the official limit of 40 working hours per week -Work-life imbalance as a result	<i>Working hours and availability</i>	-Considerable increase of working hours (i.e. up to 10–12 hours per day) -Availability 24/7 as a new informal norm -Private and family-related issues as secondary to the job issues
	-The main focus on performance of functions that are formally assigned to the position -Extra-Role-Behavior is not explicitly expected by supervisors	<i>Conception of good performance</i>	-Individual ICT proficiency, accepting high working hours and absence of complaints as main elements of good performance by employees -Extra-Role-Behavior of employees is expected as part of good performance, e.g. employees willing to perform additional tasks

Source: Authors' analysis

Because of the crisis, teleworking becomes an inseparable part of public administration and confirms the statement of Kowalski and Swanson (2005, p. 239) having it that ‘implementing effective teleworking programs is no longer an option, but a necessity for most organizations’. However, urgent introduction of a form of teleworking in the municipality at all levels required *strong competencies of time management and re-structuring of activities* (Turoff, White and Plotnick, 2011) that caused additional stress and tensions for employees.

Among other, *increased multitasking* performed by supervisors and employees emerged as one unusual effect of e-leadership under conditions of crisis. Like in the study of Stan (2018), multitasking turns out to be a self-debilitating, but ‘normal’, practice in the public sector already before the crisis; however, during the pandemic it was perceived as inevitable in public administration.

The study points out that the usage of e-tools creates a working environment where employees can be available in a 24/7 mode, with employees in the municipality considered as willingly meeting this challenge. Even the *constant accessibility* is important to establish a trustful relationship between the leader and employees (Savolaine, 2013), a previous research shows that the existing practice of long working hours may lead to the increased failure in maintaining work–life balance (DasGupta, 2011).

During the crisis, *e-leadership* became a ‘*new normal*’ leadership; those municipal administrations seem to deal with this ‘new normality’ well and to experience quite few challenges where digitalization had already progressed before the crisis. Nevertheless, this ‘new normal leadership’ bears considerable changes to leadership work. As it became obvious from our result, leaders play a significant role in gathering and sharing the information, monitoring and reviewing the division of functions and tasks, and motivating their employees to use ICT tools. E-leadership in public administration seems not so much to add a technical dimension to the regular tasks of leading employees, but much more to agglomerate managerial tasks and to considerably increase their complexity, since a broad array of functions and challenges has to be dealt with. The findings of our study indicate that in the course of e-leadership, supervisors tend to *focus on the technical and directly task-oriented demands* solely. Such issues as motivation of employees and supervisors, their well-being or work–life balance, remain neglected or are perceived as secondary. It might be a high challenge of e-leadership to re-acknowledge these effects as relevant topics, since leaders have to explicitly deal with conditions of electronic and remote work.

As the present study is an exploratory one with a small sample being its main limitation, some future research directions can still be identified. Future research could address similarities and differences of e-leadership practice in municipalities involving different levels of digitalization. A comparative analysis of the international practice of e-leadership could also significantly extend our knowledge on e-leadership and its peculiarities in public administration. As our results indicate that during the quarantine leaders and employees willingly accept extended (if not total) working hours and low work–life balance, without complaining and voluntarily asking for ad-

ditional tasks, the future research could explore in depth the factors that lead to this kind of self-sacrificing behavior in public administration. The question that could be raised in relation to it might be whether this kind of organizational behavior can be traced back to the crisis-induced situation, or much more to e-leadership and digitalization? The questions of organizational and national working culture are strongly linked to it, too. It also remains open in terms of whether such organizational behavior has to do with the post-socialist and neo-liberal context of public administration, like this is the case in Lithuania.

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