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ISLAND



COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Croatian Islands

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

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Croatian islands

There are 78 islands, as well as 524 islets and 642 reefs and rocks.¹ The next census will likely show fewer than 50 inhabited islands.

Total size: 3,300 km² with the largest island of Krk being 406 km². Population, according to the 2011 Census: 125,000 residents on 50 inhabited islands²

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¹ The Island Act, Article 6, Official Gazette 73/2020.

² Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2011, Croatia Bureau of Statistics 2013.

³ Source <https://www.ezilon.com/maps/europe/croatia-maps.html>

COVID-19 on the Croatian Islands

Civil protection in Croatia is hierarchically organized and controlled by the National Headquarters of Civil Protection (NHCP), 22 county headquarters (CHCP) and 556 municipal headquarters (MHCP). The measures prescribed by the NHCP are compulsory on all three levels. The regulations of the NHCP concerning the COVID-19 epidemic were given in the form of several laws enacted in February and March 2020. The Plan for Health Protection in the Republic of Croatia was enacted on February 14, 2020.⁴ The NHCP has been passing decrees ever since. On March 10, the Ministry of Health declared a state of epidemic. Since April 17, NHCP has operated under direct supervision of the Croatian Government. The web site of NHCP is in English.⁵ Although it is updated daily, it does not report data at the municipal level. Thus, no data have been officially available for Croatia's 51 island and 8 island-mainland municipalities. The only more or less available sources are a few island municipal web sites. As there are only four islands with only one municipality (others have 2-8 municipalities), the accuracy and credibility of collected data is low. Although the data refer mainly to county and mainland-island municipal statistics, it appears that during the so called first wave that hit the country in Spring 2020, the pandemic did not affect the islands to any significant extent. The exceptions were the mid-Dalmatian islands of Murter and Brač.

So far COVID-19 measures have been designed and implemented at the national level with no consideration for regional or municipal variations, including on islands. The only exception has been the measure that dealt with island – mainland connections, where all but

essential occupations were prohibited from travelling outside of their area. Since all residents have island-specific identification, this was easier to enforce on the Croatian islands. Schools and kindergartens were closed on March 13, and on-line education activities in the entire country were made compulsory on March 19. On the same date the following measures were applied nationwide, including islands: restrictions on gatherings of more than 5 persons, social distancing, sport events with no spectators, half of employees in the public institutions working at home and closing of border crossings including islands' ports of entry. Contact tracing and 14 day self-isolation were also prescribed. The lockdown reached its peak on March 23 when it was forbidden to leave your place of residence. Towards the end of April most measures were relaxed and by the beginning of May the lockdown was lifted.

The only NHCP decree that referred particularly to islands was passed on March 21 restricting the mainland-island and inter island maritime and air travel.⁶ Only the state company ferries could operate and bus lines on larger islands were cancelled. Five small island sub-archipelagos and three detached small islands with no ferry connections were given one ship connection with the mainland a day. On March 24 yet another small archipelago was allowed a catamaran connection after it had been discovered that it was not covered by the earlier decree. On April 20, the NHCP lifted a ban on movement within counties. It meant that, except for the most southern islands, mainland – island connections were reopened across the archipelago.

So far restrictions of all kinds have been strictly prescribed, relaxed and prescribed again in six

⁴ Official Gazette 19/2020.

⁵ <https://www.koronavirus.hr/en>.

⁶ Official Gazette 34/2020.

island-mainland counties, but no island specificities were taken in account. The elementary schools went on-line already in March 2020, without consideration of small outer islands with no internet signal.⁷ The three-layer hierarchy of civil protection administration does not cover small islands whose municipal seat is on the mainland or on a nearby larger island, so that measures that apply to municipalities are not applicable to the situation on small islands. The state of alert that the health care institutions have been in⁸ means almost nothing to small islands as medical staff there may consist of only one nurse. Samples, if taken at all, are sent to the nearest laboratory on the mainland and it takes days for the results. In the meantime, the virus spreads in the closed island community faster than on the mainland.

The only island-targeted measure was passed on November 23, 2020. An islander from the outer island of Dugi Otok (2,800 inhabitants) contracted the virus on the mainland, got back home and created community spread. The usual restrictions (e.g., masks, 2 meter social distancing, restricted gatherings in closed spaces) were imposed.⁹ The islanders responded by retreating to their homes relying on homemade supplies and the virus was gone in two weeks. There were such cases on other islands but the data remain buried in the county reports. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the first wave affected only a couple of islands, whereas the second one reached most of the larger islands.

The epidemics paused on the Croatian islands in the summer of 2020 and the Autumn looked promising. However, as in other places in the world, recovery had to be postponed when the second wave gained momentum in October

and reached its peak beginning December 2020. The situation then improved and the number of cases fell towards February, 2021. Although vaccinations commenced in March, the number of cases have started to rise again as threat of the third wave becomes apparent.¹⁰

Key socioeconomic pressures in the Croatian Islands during COVID-19

COVID-19 paused society and the economy everywhere giving islanders the opportunity to better understand which sectors of the island society and economy were more fragile *vis à vis* a shock and which were stronger. What has proved to be fragile in some cases is precisely what was considered a strong island asset before COVID-19, tourism. Fortunately, it was not affected as much as had been predicted. Towards the end of May Croatia was self-proclaimed as a virus free zone, the borders were open and tourist inflow reached some 50% of the usual annual inflow. Being close to the European tourist markets, the northern islands performed quite well under the circumstances. The Southern islands were disadvantaged, but did better than expected. The main obstacle was the lack of a qualified work force in tourism. Seasonal tourism workers who normally come from the mainland in summer were halved. However, due to unreliable statistics only rough estimates can be made. The same holds for other less significant island sectors, such as fishing, small scale agriculture, and small scale manufacturing (e.g., shipyards, canneries, etc.) which, anecdotally, were not affected to a significant extent.

⁷ Official Gazzete 29/2020.

⁸ Official Gazette 35/2020.

⁹ Official Gazette 129/2020.

¹⁰ <https://www.koronavirus.hr/en>.

The suspension of most transport connections revealed the dependence on the mainland. Island health care services proved too weak to handle the case numbers and medics on the mainland were too far away. However, perception of islands as refuges persisted at least during the first wave in Spring 2020. Before the lockdown, individuals, families and even ad hoc groups from the mainland flooded the islands expecting the virus would not follow. Commonly referred to as "corona refugees" by the islanders, they acted in a corona-free way, forgetting that while the risk may be lower on the island, the probability of contracting the virus once it found its way across the sea is much higher than on the mainland. During the first wave this happened on Murter and Brač islands, where a couple of islanders came back from the mainland bringing the virus that so many "refugees" had tried to evade. The virus did not spread much but the perception changed overnight. Almost immediately, the tourists were queueing in ferry ports to return to the mainland. The outer islands experienced a wave of visitors arriving on private boats. There is no official evidence about that but notes that could be found on municipal web sites reveal that most of them sailed in already in March avoiding island ports of entry. In the beginning of the tourist summer season 2020 when it seemed (it was even officially claimed) that the epidemics was over, quite a few "boat refugees" extended their stay as legitimate tourists.

Post Covid-19 recovery on Croatian Islands

The National Island Development Program, adopted back in 1997, defines principles of island sustainability and provides an adequate policy framework.¹¹ The Island Act passed in 1999 prescribes sustainable development measures.¹² The new version of the Act passed in 2018 provides a step forward and incorporates resilience and the smart island concept into the set of island development policy.¹³ Thus, resilience and sustainability coupled with an active role that small islands should have in the overall (mainland & island) development have been well defined prior to COVID-19. Due to the low institutional capacity and insufficient coordination between policy makers in different jurisdictions and departments (e.g., ministries, counties, island and mainland-island municipalities) the implementation of these concepts and legal provisions has lagged. The crisis was labelled an opportunity in the political narrative, but it is not clear as yet how such statements are going to be operationalized. Legally prescribed island resilience and sustainability have been acknowledged as a framework in which future island (and mainland) development should be guided. It is too early, however, to predict how the policy makers and implementing bodies will act post COVID-19. In any case the measures that the NHCP and coastal CHCPs have been passing since the beginning of the epidemics are not encouraging.

As for the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) none has ever explicitly appeared in island development discourse in Croatia. Goals like *No poverty*, *Zero hunger*, *Clean water and Sanitation*, and *Gender equality* are

¹¹ National Island Development Programme, Ministry of Reconstruction of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb, 1997.

¹² Zakon otocima (The Island Act) Official Gazette 34/1999.

¹³ Zakon otocima (The Island Act) Official Gazette 116/2018.

not really an issue in the context of the pandemic, whereas *Decent works* and *Economic growth* have been prematurely considered resolved due to the expansion of tourism. Since the islands are close to the mainland, the mainland infrastructure networks (electricity supply in particular) cover them all. In this way *Affordable and Clean Energy* is not considered as an issue either (proponents of smart islands and green technologies are still a minority). On the other hand, *Climate Action*, *Life Below Water*, *Quality Education* and *Good Health and Well Being* do appear in the National Island Development Program and various island development plans and programs, but they are not recognized as SDGs. After Croatia accessed European Union in 2013, EU development documents and goals (European Parliament Resolution on the Special Situation of Islands (2016) in particular) have replaced United Nations documents to quite an extent. As for the post COVID recovery policies which may retrieve SDGs, they are yet to come. We are in the midst of the third wave now, hoping that it will pass before the first tourists come.

Useful Sources

- The official web site of the National Headquarters of Civil Protection:
<https://www.koronavirus.hr/en>
- The official web site of the Croatian Institute of Public Health:
<https://www.hzjz.hr/en/>

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

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| #6. Åland Islands. November 2020 | #15. Newfoundland and Labrador. March 2021 |
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