

# **Covid-19 handling strategy in Iceland: A case study from the local level.**



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## 1. Introduction

This paper is based on data collected in the Nordic research project *Crisis Management In a Polycentric Nordic Local Democracy: Different Governance Structures – Different Results?* (POLYGOV) financed by the Research Council of Norway, started in the fall 2021 and will go on until 2024. The project is a comparative study of the crisis management, organisation and functioning of local democracies in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark against the backdrop of the divergent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three self-governing areas Faroe Islands, Greenland and Aaland Islands are in the study too. The project compares the local and regional coordination and management strategies employed as the pandemic has unfolded from March 2020 to this day, including the vaccination strategies.

In the paper I will use material from a case study based on interviews in Akureyri municipality in north Iceland to shed a light on how and which governmental level decisions or recommendations on crisis-reactions, were made and how actors at different levels reacted to them and implemented them. The mayor of Akureyri who turned out to have a very good oversight over the process was interviewed. With this interview data I seek answers to how decisions either recommendations or restrictions from the state level were met at the local level. Were they met with local loyalty, were they met with resistance or protests (voice) or did even anyone step out? This will all be looked at in the light of how Iceland succeeded in fighting the pandemic.

## 2. Covid-19 and the pandemic governance in Iceland

Iceland can be seen as having managed the pandemic fairly well. Even though the country is today in 5<sup>th</sup> place in the world in Covid-19 cases (598.075 pr. million), deaths related to Covid-19 are not more than 617 pr. million which puts the country in 123<sup>rd</sup> place in the world ([www.worldometers.info/coronavirus](http://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus)).<sup>i</sup>

To give an insight into the governance processes at the state level, we begin with saying that three persons at two state institutions were the leading people in the reactions to Covid-19 with their recommendations and advise to the minister of health. These were

Alma D Möller the Director of Health (*Landlæknir*), Þórólfur Guðnason the Chief Epidemiologist (*Sóttvarnarlæknir*) and Víðir Reynisson (*yfirlögregluþjónn almanna-varnadeildar ríkislögreglustjóra*), an officer from the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management (a part of the national police authority). Those three were very soon “Þríeykið” (The triad) who worked close together and held public meetings every working day at least the first months of the pandemic. Of course, the Minister of Health and the government cabinet of Iceland were important actors in the context.



Figure 1. The Triad. From left to right: Guðnason, Reynisson, Möller.

The Covid-19 pandemic was declared as such and formally realized in Iceland at the end of February 2020. As in all other countries in the world this led to reactions on a national, regional and local scale. Already since end of January the same year people responsible in the relevant institutions in the society, had seen this pandemic coming and preparations were already started at highest levels. At a Cabinet meeting 28th January, the Minister of Health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir (Left-Green Movement) presented a note titled “Upplýsingar um viðbrögð vegna kórónaveiru (2019-nCoV) “.ii In this note the minister wrote that she had received memorandum from the Director of Health, Alma D Möller and the Chief Epidemiologist, Þórólfur Guðnason, concerning reactions to the Corona virus (Hrafnsson, 2020 p. 20).iii Already on 30th January WHO

declared international emergency situation. What came after this is probably more or less well known to those who have experienced the last 2 – 2,5 years.

### 3. An analytical frame

The description above indicates that the decision making on the Covid-19 reactions in Iceland was concentrated to the state level and the role of the local level was rather passive. The case study is intended to better show us how these governance structures were, how people at the local level perceive and describe this relationship with the state government.

To put this into analytical frame I will try to look at the results of this case study in a analytical frame set by Hirschman in 1970: *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*. He writes: “The deterioration in performance is reflected most typically and generally, that is, for both firms and other organizations, in an absolute or comparative deterioration of the quality of the product or service provided “(Hirschman 1970:4). For this example, we speak of that when the one who is supposed to accept the service from above or is intended to obey and implement restrictions in the case of the pandemic does not do so, due to lack of confidence or belief in the recommendations/restrictions set - it is not seen as legitimate. That is by Hirschman described as follows: „Some customers stop buying the firm's products or some members leave the organization: this is the **exit option**. As a result, revenues drop, membership declines, and management is impelled to search for ways and means to correct whatever faults have led to exit“ (Hirschman 1970:4).

Another option or type of reaction is not to exit but to protest. “The firm's customers or the organization's members express their dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen - this is the **voice option**. As a result, management once again engages in a search for the causes and possible cures of customers' and members' dissatisfaction”, Hirschman writes (Hirschman 1970:4).

A third reaction according to Hirschman is to obey or be **loyal** and accept a product, service or as in the case I try to connect the frame with here – accept a recommendation or a restriction and do as one is told or asked to do.

Governance measures in the Covid-19 pandemic were that a specialist team suggested to the Minister of Health what to do and the Minister then brought this to a cabinet meeting. The focus here will be to see the reactions from the government level below – the municipal level.

#### 4. The case: Akureyri municipality<sup>iv</sup>

The municipality of Akureyri in north Iceland is chosen as a case in this sense and the information collected is almost entirely from an interview with the mayor of Akureyri, *Ásthildur Sturludóttir* and a follow-up interview with *Halla Björk Reynisdóttir* chairman of the Town Council.

Akureyri is located in North-east Iceland, in one of the longest fjords in Iceland and is surrounded by high mountains reaching up to over 1000 meters. The Arctic Circle is only 60 km north of the town but still the climate is mild, with summer temperatures up to 25°C and winter temperatures in average around 0°C.



Akureyri is the second largest urban area outside the capital area of Reykjavík and the fifth biggest municipality in the country, with a population of just above 19.000. Akureyri is the main centre of trade and services in the whole north Iceland. It is also a

town of culture and education, building on a firm foundation. To mention some of the services provided and institutions located in the town, Akureyri Hospital is the by far biggest one outside the capital area, the University of Akureyri with 2.500 students, an airport that has both domestic and international flights, the biggest skiing facility in the country and finally to mention is that the Symphony Orchestra of North Iceland is located in Akureyri.

## 5. Method and structure

A good share of the information collected on the reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic in Akureyri is collected in an interview Mrs. Ásthildur Sturludóttir the mayor of Akureyri<sup>v</sup>, conducted on 14th February 2022. It turned out that Mrs. Sturludóttir had from the beginning of the pandemic used a notebook to register everything that had to do with it. This detailed registration and notes helped her to provide the interviewing researcher detailed and reliable information. A follow-up interview to fill up eventual gaps and to get a standpoint from a politician was taken in October 2022 with Halla Björk Reynisdóttir, the chairman of Akureyri Town Council 2018-2022.<sup>vi</sup>

The structure of the interview and therefore this case study report will be according to a phase model in an internal project note from the project POLYGOV by Baldersheim (2021) and later developed by Hye and Ögård (2022). The chronological presentation will therefore be:

1. Before the pandemic.
2. Acceptance of the situation and preparing to meet the crisis.
3. Mobilisation and implementation of actions.
4. Opening the society and learning.

## 6. Akureyri and Covid-19

### *Phase I. Before the pandemic and in the start phase.*

Nothing such as crisis reaction plans had been thought of or prepared within the administration of Akureyri municipality before the pandemic.<sup>vii</sup> The only such was through training of how to react and meet avalanches in the skiing-facilities 400-500 meters above the town in the Hlíðarfjall mountain – the biggest skiing facilities in the whole of Iceland, attracting tens of thousands of people from the capital area. These exercises ended up in the writing of a document on such reactions but this one was not published until February 2021, a year after the pandemic broke out (*Viðbragðsáætlun vegna Hlíðarfjalls, 2021*). The only kind of plans at local level Mrs. Sturludóttir could recall was that the Federation of Municipalities in Iceland had prepared a document on crisis management and procedures connected. So, as good as no crisis had been focused on or exercised within the Akureyri administration before the pandemic. Mrs. Sturludóttir was, before she came to Akureyri 2018, a mayor for eight years in a smaller municipality in Vestfjords – *Vesturbyggð* – a municipality located under a steep mountain. There, she had worked with written procedures for crisis due to a realistic risk for avalanches – much more than in Akureyri for example.<sup>viii</sup>

No special skills, training or knowledge related to crisis management or reaction were found within the town of Akureyri administration nor in its technical departments. The only skills and knowledge in town are within the local voluntary search and rescue organisation *Súlur*, a well-equipped unit which is a part of the countrywide rescue NGO organisation *Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (Landsbjörg)*. Of course, skills and knowledge are existing to some extent within the police, the fire brigade and the local power company (Norðurorka).

“We in the highest administration and the decision-making organs, first heard about that something might be coming up on 24th January 2022 and first in 6th February at a meeting in the Civil Defence Committee (Almannavarnanefnd) the pandemic is first mentioned as such into our ears – a week after the WHO declaration of international

emergency situation”, says Sturludóttir. But it wasn’t until the 27<sup>th</sup> of February when the first meeting on a reaction plan was held at the police station in town. A status meeting was held in the same committee 5<sup>th</sup> March. After this, a new organ was constructed within the municipal administration: “*The Akureyri Crisis Group*” (*Neyðarstjórn Akureyrarbæjar*) consisting of the mayor, the 11 elected councillors in the local council and 6 persons as the directors of the 6 main divisions (Svið) in the administration. This group had its first meeting 16<sup>th</sup> March and after that 3-4 times a week regularly. Very soon, more people were added into this group such as the Chief of Fire Department and various managers in the primary school sector and the kindergarten sector, which both are run by the municipality. The dominating issue at this point was reactions and preparation of a system that could be used in this struggle.

At this point all administration meetings had become digital and a lot of people were working from home. It is a fact, says the mayor, that at this point, people were really scared of being infected in the city hall. Meetings in the town council became digital on 18<sup>th</sup> March when the minister of local government officially permitted all local governments in the country to have the council meetings digital.

### *Phase II. Acceptance of the situation and preparing to meet the crisis.*

All information on the pandemic situation came from the Directorate of Health (state institution in Reykjavík), to which the Director of Health and the Chief Epidemiologist belonged. They worked closely with the officer from the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. These actors recommended to the minister of health of what restrictions should be set for meetings, schools and other events etc. The last step in this decision-making process was that the minister of health suggested these recommendations to the cabinet as a whole and the cabinet took the final decision each and every time. This was the reality for local governments in the country – all decisions on restrictions and recommendations came from above.

The pandemic was declared as a fact internationally at the end of February as Sturludóttir earlier pointed out. But she adds that in Akureyri the crisis and its scope



became very real in mid-March when the restrictions became a necessity and had to be implemented locally. School children had to be sent home, swimming halls closed as well as the skiing facility. Shifts in most of the town institutions were reorganised and the schools and kindergartens were reorganised and assembly limits (sóttvarnarhólf) set – all this to be able to meet the restrictions on how many people were allowed to be together at the same place at the same time. The same was for all the institutions for elderly and for the handicapped. The crisis had arrived in town. Reynisdóttir (the chairman) points out in this context that the wave of contagions and group contagions didn't reach Akureyri as soon as was the case in the capital area in south-west – probably due to distances and dramatic reduction of travelling between regions in the country. Therefore, the authorities in Akureyri had a little more time to prepare adapt to meet the pandemic by seeing how others reacted and with what results.

The key actors in the municipality at this point were “The Akureyri Crisis Group” (Neyðarstjórn) and people in managing positions in the school and social sector. Other key and important institutions in the context but from outside were the Akureyri Hospital (SAK) and Health Care Institution of North Iceland (Heilbrigðisstofnun Norðurlands) which operates health clinics in the region. Akureyri's connection with the central authorities in Reykjavík (Directorate of Health) was in no way direct at this time and even later. All contacts were indirect and were through links between the local and the state level. These links were: 1. The Civil Defence Committee for the Eyjafjörður area/region (Almannavarnanefnd Eyjafjarðar), 2. The Police Authority in North-East Iceland (Lögreglustjórnin á Norðurlandi Eystra) and 3. The chief of Akureyri Fire Brigade who is also responsible for ambulance services. According to Sturludóttir the situation on connections with actors at state level was similar for all municipalities in the country, except the capital Reykjavík which had direct contact from the beginning. One meeting was held though, with the minister of education – about the situation in the primary schools. This shows us that any decentralization of decision-making power to the municipal level in the context was absent. The municipalities were

just implementing what they were told to do through restrictions and regulations from the state authorities and the Triad. Reynisdóttir shares this perception of these connection.

### *Phase III. Mobilisation and implementation of actions.*

The mayor is very clear about the connection and cooperation between politics and administration. The local politicians (11 persons in council) took a step backwards and left things completely to the town administration – a clear relinquishment of power from the political side, she says.

The municipality had contacts with and cooperated with other external actors than in the public sector. However, Sturludóttir mentions that there was no direct cooperation with other municipalities on the crisis reactions – only through their mutual institutions regionally such as *Almannavarnanefnd Eyjafjarðar*. But a contact and cooperation were surely with actors in the business life in town, mostly about ensuring payments channels and on issues connected to ensuring stable transportation of goods. A contact with *Almannaheill*, which is a third sector organisation was also established. Reynisdóttir went to quarantine rather soon in the process. She tells us that she used a part of the gained time there to call up owners and managers of the biggest firms in town, just to hear how things were going. The businesses in town were not claiming or requiring anything from the municipality, just to be left alone as Reynisdóttir put it.

Digital and electronic contacts and services have taken a huge jump forward during the pandemic. Sturludóttir talks about technical breakthrough.

On the question whether there were any tendencies to protests or opposition to the state actions in the pandemic she says no. “The fear was dominating, and we never experienced any opposition or protests. People seemed to have had full confidence in what was being decided and done”. It was first when it came to the vaccinations that some protesting voices were heard, only little locally but most nationally. Even though decisions on vaccinations and vaccine types were 100% centralized, some

municipalities came significantly into the picture when they started in the early spring 2021.



Figure 2. Vaccinations in Akureyri Fire Brigade Station.

All vaccinations in Akureyri and its neighbouring area were implemented at the Akureyri Fire Brigade Station. To begin with, Akureyri municipality loaned the fire station (partly) to the state authorities, but the vaccinations continued there with contributions from the state. Additionally, the municipality put a lot of effort in spreading information about the vaccinations in the schools and kindergartens. Even handicapped were vaccinated in their homes. At this point the role of Akureyri town became bigger than before and probably bigger than in most other municipalities.

#### *Phase IV. Opening the society and learning.*

In the fall 2022, when the pandemic seems to have reduced to such low level that a total opening of the society has become a fact in most western countries, it is time to look back and see what has been learnt from this. Maybe that remains to be seen but in Akureyri there are already some things that can be mentioned.

Sturludóttir mentions changes in organisation and work procedures in the administration and politics. All meetings were digital months into the year 2022 and diverse other processes have been introduced in order to increase efficiency and safer way to communicate. Looking outside the Akureyri administration, contacts and consultation between municipal mayors has increased much consequently and all

learning from the pandemic, says Sturludóttir. Reynisdóttir points out new approaches in meetings that have lowered travelling costs, since flying down to Reykjavík for a 30-minute meeting is a history. Such meetings are now digital. Additionally, this has had positive effect on the environment as well with smaller carbon footprint.

Concerning democracy and the municipal institutions of democracy a broad political solidarity between political parties and opponents became apparent. No disputes between parties in majority and opposition came up. In Akureyri, this went so far that in the fall 2020 all 6 parties with mandates in the local council decided to work together as a whole and those three that had been in majority dissolved that cooperation. This seemed in no way have roots in disputes in the majority and was just a reaction in order to meet new challenges. The pandemic united people on the political scene much rather than split. There was never any disagreement on methods or reactions. “Our tasks were un-political” says Reynisdóttir and that there was never a question about policy or policymaking, just to react to what came up. And nobody wanted to be the boring one either, as Sturludóttir put it. It was first when it came to the vaccinations, that protests, and populist tendencies were shown. That was more seen in the society as a whole than in the political arena in Akureyri.

Let’s end this with Reynisdóttir’s view on the most important lessons to be learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. The younger people, 15-25 years were during long periods prevented from going physically to school. The social aspect was taken from them – they were among the prime victims of the pandemic. In case of another pandemic, we must be ready by having created social solutions for the younger ones so they will not be as isolated as was the case in 2020-2022, Reynisdóttir points out.

## 7. Conclusion and discussion

The case study of Akureyri municipality in Iceland helps us to identify the way in which the Covid-19 pandemic was handled and governed in Iceland. It comes out clear that the Icelandic way of handling the crisis was highly centralized in the way that

institutions at state level made all the decisions while at the local level the municipalities were just implementing these decisions – more or less. In a fresh report on the government’s reactions in the pandemic, published by the Prime Minister’s Office it is clearly stated that even though municipalities in Iceland have a constitutional right to decide in their affairs, they still are a part of the executive power and shall be seen as part of the government and are subject to the authority of ministers (Forsætisráðuneytið, Október 2022). We also see clear evidence of how the interplay between politics and administration ends in more or less a takeover by the administrative in the reactions to the crisis – to the extent the municipality had any possibilities of making any decisions. This happened in Akureyri just in the way Hye and Øgård (2022) wrote in their project note: *“It can be new situations which the municipality administration hasn’t dealt with earlier “...“Where crisis groups and professionals can look like they are overmanaging the traditional democratic arenas.”* (e. there can come up new situations which have not been met before by the municipality...where crisis groups can seem to overrule all the traditional democratic arenas). The politicians stepped back, and administrators and specialists took over. The politicians did not see this as a political issue, as the chairman of Town Council, Halla Reynisdóttir put it.

The case study from Akureyri shows the whole picture including individual level, local level and the state level. The reactions to the pandemic were characterized by *loyalty*, both at local government level towards the central state power as well as at the individual citizen level. No signs of *voice* (protest) were seen from the citizens nor from the municipal side towards the state authorities. The Akureyri case however shows us clear example of *exit*. The fact was that the local politicians stepped back and gave the power to fight the pandemic almost totally to the administrators. They took a step backwards and left things completely to the administrators. So, the exit of the politicians was clear in the case of Akureyri. The mayor and leading politician of Akureyri at the time give us this picture and even indicate that this was the case in other municipalities too. Nothing in media indicates that this was different elsewhere

than in Akureyri. It was first when it came to the vaccinations, a minority of people either refused to be vaccinated or at least protested: Some voices and some exits but a great majority showed loyalty. However, let's not forget that methodologically, results from one case do not allow us to transfer the results to others. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to state that loyalty of the people and the municipalities was the general reaction in municipalities in Iceland as well as the exit of the local politicians.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Retrieved 2nd November 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> In english: "Information on reaction to the Coronavirus".

<sup>iii</sup> Guðnason retired from his job in September 2022 at 69 years of age. He is them ost populat person ever measured in the country.

<sup>iv</sup> Most of the information on Akureyri is taken from their website ([www.akureyri.is/en](http://www.akureyri.is/en)).

<sup>v</sup> Ásthildur Sturludóttir (b. 1974) is from West Iceland. She has been the mayor of Akureyri since 2018, recruited by the left-middle oriented majority in the city council in 2018 and

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further by the right-middle majority in 2022. Before Akureyri she was the mayor in a much smaller municipality in the Westfjords, Vesturbyggð.

<sup>vi</sup> Halla Björk Reynisdóttir (b. 1967) is from Akureyri. Her career except for being in local politics since 2010 is as an Air Traffic Controller at Akureyri airport. She was re-elected to the Town Council in 2022.

<sup>vii</sup> This is confirmed by Reynisdóttir in our interview with her. She gives the same description as follows here.

<sup>viii</sup> Crisis reaction plans for several things exist in Akureyri but are not or only partly the responsibility of the municipality. There exist reaction plans connected to Akureyri airport under the responsibility of state owned ISAVIA. A crisis reaction plan for earthquakes in the Eyjafjörður region exists

[https://www.hsn.is/static/files/Vidbragdsaaetlanir/sept\\_2020/vidbragdsaaetlun-jardskjalfti-eyjafjo-utgafa-1.0.pdf](https://www.hsn.is/static/files/Vidbragdsaaetlanir/sept_2020/vidbragdsaaetlun-jardskjalfti-eyjafjo-utgafa-1.0.pdf) Hér þó dæmi um viðbragðsáætlun hjá bænum sem er v/svifryks:

<https://www.hne.is/static/files/HNE/Fundir/216-fundur-20-11-04.pdf> The power company Norðurorka owned by the municipalities in the region has its own reaction plan related to the water protection areas.

<sup>ix</sup> In English: “Defence Against a Virus. Iceland and the struggle against Covid-19.