

POLICY AND RESEARCH REPORT 02/2022

# The Belgian and Dutch response to COVID-19: change and stability in the mayors' position

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# The Belgian and Dutch response to COVID-19: change and stability in the mayors' position

**How did Belgian and Dutch mayors experience their own role and that of local government during the first few months of the COVID-19 outbreak? This question was addressed by drawing on three analytical perspectives (functional, territorial, and political) on local government systems and using a qualitative case study design. Interestingly, the position and leeway of Belgian and Dutch mayors did not differ much during the first months of the crisis (February-September 2020).**

Belgian and Dutch mayors fulfil a critical function in managing the COVID-19 outbreak. They are responsible for upholding corona measures at the local level while giving voice to local concerns at the regional and national levels. Embedded in a multi-level governance (MLG) system geared towards managing the COVID-19 outbreak, mayors face not only known but also new and unprecedented institutional challenges and constraints, as existing MLG-structures are expanded and adjusted in response to the virus. How did mayors in both countries experience their own role and that of local government in such an environment?

Our article aims to analyse how mayors across the low countries handled the pandemic from the start of February until the end of September 2020. To grasp the institutional conditions mayors faced from the start of the pandemic, we approach them as head of the local government system. To some extent, that system differs between Belgium and the Netherlands despite the low countries' long bordering and common history.

First, the functional perspective focuses on the distribution/fusion of public functions between central, regional and local governments and on their respective (financial) autonomy to do the job. In our analysis of the first months of the Covid-outbreak, there is a clear similarity in the overall MLG-system when it comes to that functional perspective. In both cases, a clear top-down crisis structure was put in place: decisions were made at the national level and implemented at the provincial/regional and local levels. The centralised decision-making processes severely affected mayors' influence in both countries during the time period investigated: basically, they had no or very limited influence on the decisions that were made. Where the two countries clearly differ is the evolution of the crisis management structures. Belgium started with a centralised crisis

management structure where local governments felt they were not heard enough. Over time, changes were made to the crisis management structure to improve this. In contrast, the Netherlands started with a national crisis management structure in which two regional mayors had direct access to the decision-making forum. The changes to the national crisis management structure resulted in the closing down of this direct access.

From a **territorial perspective**, concerning a country's territorial structure and its local governments' viability, a striking similarity between the two countries revolves around mayors turning to each other in order to find solutions and support during the first months of the outbreak. To this end, they used existing inter-municipal networks or even created new ones; though the extent to which they looked for outside support varied per municipality.

Looking at mayors from a **political perspective** brings another striking similarity across the low countries to the fore. After all, Belgian as well as Dutch mayors had to prioritise their executive role when the virus struck their community. During this time, they had to temporarily minimise their caring role (*burgervader/burgermoeder*) and their role as trustee vis-à-vis their citizens. Most of them found this transition challenging.

In sum, our analysis shows that during the first months of the COVID-19 outbreak, the local crisis response across the low countries fitted well within their respective MLG-systems even though mayors' leeway diminished as a result of the centralisation of the decision-making processes. Consequently, Belgian and Dutch mayors' primary focus was on implementing the measures in both countries. Moreover, mayors across both countries experienced a shift in terms of (1) power and authority (respectively to the provincial governor and the federal level and to the regional mayor and the national level); (2) tasks (prioritising crisis management over other tasks); and (3) roles (increasing importance of their executive role while lamenting the effects of COVID-19 on their role as citizens' trustee and (*burgervader/burgermoeder*)). These shifts required flexibility and resourcefulness from mayors – something they have in spades as they were, for instance, pooling their resources, using WhatsApp, accessing informal/personal networks and finding creative ways to fulfil their social role. In doing so, Belgian and Dutch mayors have shown how indispensable local government and they themselves are in responding to crises.

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