

Politico-administrative Configurations in Local Crisis Management

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Abstract

This article examines how local governments govern crises through the configuration of politico-administrative relations. It analyzes how four Flemish cities organized and adapted their crisis arrangements during the Covid-19 pandemic drawing on three analytical lenses: the political nature of crisis management, complementarity between political and administrative actors, and the role of anticipatory capacity shaped by local context. The study focuses on the following research question: How and why do crises reconfigure politico-administrative relations in local governments, and which factors explain variation in these configurations? The findings show that even within a uniform institutional framework, local actors exercised significant discretion in balancing efficiency with inclusion. Local political dynamics, leadership style, and anticipatory capacity emerged as decisive factors explaining variation across cities. Crises reconfigure politico-administrative complementarity, turning crisis cells into temporary hybrid arenas where authority, coordination, and trust are renegotiated. In doing so, the study demonstrates that crisis management is made fit for purpose rather than following a one-size-fits-all model and that different logics of “politics of governing crises” may overlap or evolve sequentially. These insights advance understanding of how local governments translate institutional constraints and contextual pressures into distinct modes of governing under crisis conditions.

Keywords: politico-administrative relations; crisis management; anticipatory capacity; local government; Covid-19 crisis

Local decision-makers are increasingly confronted with critical threats, urgency, and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2018). Complex bureaucracies are not designed or ideally suited to deal with nonroutine events (Boin, 2009), so the expectation to be agile and adaptive in their response can be challenging (Salvador & Sancho, 2023). To deal with crises, public organizations practice crisis management, meaning the processes and structures by which an organization deals with a crisis before, during, and after it has occurred. Institutional structures and regulations may limit the range of choices available, but decision-makers have a choice as to how to respond (Sandberg, 2023), starting with the design of the crisis management configuration. This study focuses on the following research question:

How and why do crises reconfigure politico-administrative relations in local governments, and which factors explain variation in these configurations?

This article employs a multiple case study, drawing on interviews with key political and administrative actors (Creswell, 2013). It situates itself within the policy literature by examining policy-related aspects of institutional configurations and governance (Blum & Pattyn, 2022).

Crisis management is a complex activity that not only involves intricate policy decisions but also tests the functioning and dynamics of public administrations. Yet, little is known about how local governments navigate these challenges, particularly regarding politico-administrative relations. This study addresses this gap by examining how crises reshape interactions between political and administrative actors at the local level. Crisis management rules and regulations provide a clear basis or response, yet decision-makers retain discretion in how they organize their approach (Sandberg, 2023), particularly in designing crisis management configurations. As Lindholm et al. (2024) note, there is no single “right” governance model, various structures can be effective depending on context. Adaptation in organizational arrangements is therefore essential, as it shapes policy outcomes and communication flows (Peters, 2018). In doing so, crisis cells can be seen as multi-actor arrangements that bring together a variety of political and administrative actors (Wolbers et al., 2021).

First, the literature regarding the politics of governing crises, crisis at the local level, and politico-administrative relations will be introduced. Second, the research design will be discussed, including case selection and a description of the context of the study. In the next section, the results will be presented, and we will conclude with the conclusions.

Literature study

The politics of governing crises

As Boin et al. (2016, p. 14) explain, crisis management “is often a deeply controversial and intensely political activity.” It is not just a technical matter, but involves conflicts and raises issues of power, trust, and legitimacy (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Boin et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2016). There is consensus that for a crisis to occur, three elements are required. Core values or life-sustaining systems of a community experience threat. Crises induce a sense of urgency, by posing immediate problems, and this perception of an urgent threat is accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty (Boin et al., 2018). Christensen et al. (2016) furthermore point out that crises with transboundary features are the most challenging, transcending administrative levels, sectors, and policy domains. An additional aspect relates to the duration, in this respect, a “creeping crisis” describes a lingering crisis that shapes a policy-making context for a prolonged period (Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023). In a turbulent environment, crises are “characterized by unclear problem definitions, complex causalities, conflicting goals and lack of standard solutions” (Ansell et al., 2021, p. 1).

Capano et al. (2026) propose three possible ways in which the politics of governing crises can occur. The first one is “governing during the crisis,” where a crisis is not defined as a problem to be solved, and the response is to reverse or normalize the situation. Second, “governing the crisis” considers a crisis as a punctual and specific problem that needs to be defined and solved directly. It entails a more proactive role for governments and leads to a response of adaptation. Third, “governing by the crisis” is characterized by a reorganization of the distribution of power in society or the political system by the government, the (de)legitimization of certain policy actors or ideas, and/or reorienting some public attitudes or values. In this sense, the crisis is the basis for policy change and reform, leading to a response of acceleration. Relevant to the politics of governing a crisis, Behnke and Eckhard (2022, p. 8) (Behnke and Eckhard, 2022) point out that “the right balance between executive leadership and parliamentary control is crucial for sustainable crisis management, yet needs to be recalibrated recurrently.”

Crisis at the local level

Local governments hold a unique position in relation to crises. Their institutional stability and normal functioning can be threatened, challenging the capacity to address public needs and deliver essential services (Eckhard et al., 2021). Operationally, the focal point of a crisis lies at the local level, with local governments being the nearest level responsible for interacting directly with citizens (Behnke & Eckhard, 2022; Wayenberg et al., 2022). The demand for immediate attention and decisive actions places substantial pressure on local decision-makers (Salvador & Sancho, 2023), and local administrations require flexibility to adjust and shift practices (Eckhard et al., 2021). Such a flexible response is not an automatic reflex but depends on administrative and political context factors (Lenz & Eckhard, 2023), such as “anticipatory

capacity” (Barbera et al., 2021). The latter includes planning, monitoring, risk assessments, as well as cognitive aspects of situation awareness and sense-making.

Politico-administrative relations and crisis management

The relationship between civil servants and politicians in local government is often described as complementary (Demir & Reddick, 2012; Grøn & Salomonsen, 2019), a situation in which political executives respect the expertise and knowledge of the administration, and in return, civil servants respect the political priorities. Politicians and civil servants strive together for sound governance (Svara, 2001), with a very reciprocal influence (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Svara, 2006), and senior public servants operating in a political world (Siegel, 2020). Empirical evidence rejects a strict dichotomy between politics and administration, where both have a distinct sphere and purpose (Demir & Reddick, 2012; Svara, 2001, 2006). Following De Wulf et al. (2023), we view politico-administrative relations not as shaped in a void, nor as a purely technical or internal matter. We recognize the possible impact of the institutional context (Bækgaard, 2011; De Wulf, 2025), viewing the administrative system as nested in a larger political system, in constant interaction with the external environment (Torfing & Triantafyllou, 2013). The politico-administrative relationship is dynamic, and may change over time (Jacobsen, 2006). Which leadership style will be appropriate to a certain crisis will depend on the nature of the crisis, as well local context factors, such as the level of preparedness (Lenz & Eckhard, 2023; Williams et al., 2017).

Noordegraaf (2004) describes crises as situations where civil servants assist politicians in urgent and risky moments, under great stress. The distinction of roles and hierarchy between politicians and civil servants blurs, as action must be taken regarding the risks, considerations, and communication. These decisions are often taken in a “crisis cell,” typically involving multiple actors that may operate at the strategic (policy-making) or operational level (e.g. police officers, firemen, ambulance) (Wolbers et al., 2021). When governments are confronted with a crisis, the term resilience refers to the ability to adapt to changing environments, learn from experience, and maintain functional capacity (Lindholm et al., 2024). Robustness refers to the ability of a policy-making framework to perform consistently and effectively across a wide range of conditions, uncertainties, and potential disruptions (Capano & Toth, 2025).

Drawing on the reviewed literature, three analytical lenses guide the analysis of how the crisis was governed (Capano et al., 2026). First, the political nature and dynamics of crisis management (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Boin et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2016) shape authority and coordination. Second, the complementarity between political and administrative actors (Demir & Reddick, 2012; Grøn & Salomonsen, 2019; Svara, 2001) highlights how collaboration shifts under pressure. Third, the role of anticipatory capacity (Barbera et al., 2021) and local context (Lenz & Eckhard, 2023) conditions how local governments adapt and respond. Together, these lenses structure the empirical analysis of actor configurations and role divisions across the four cities.

Research design

We set out to study four cases of “governing the crisis” at the local government level. The crisis under study is the Covid-19 pandemic, a transboundary (Boin & Lodge, 2016) and creeping (Zaki & Wayenberg, 2023) crisis, with a systemic scope (Capano et al., 2026). In the research design section, the methodology is first introduced. Subsequently, the units of analysis and observation are discussed, as well as the case selection. An introduction to the context of this study concludes the section.

Methodology

This study reports a multiple case study consisting of four cities in the Flemish region of Belgium, allowing for comparison. We conducted semi-structured interviews, with each interviewee adding their perspective (Marshall et al., 2013). Additionally, freely available data and documents were analyzed, as well as materials provided by respondents, thus applying data triangulation (Natow, 2020). The interviews were structured according to common themes related to the timeline of events, the crisis management structures, the role key political and administrative actors played, the relation between crisis and non-crisis structures, key challenges, the ways problems were addressed and solved, and lessons learned. Thirty-three interviews (December 2023–February 2024) reached data saturation (Marshall et al., 2013).

The coding is based on Boyatzis’ (1998) hybrid approach, combining inductive and deductive coding. Via axial coding, a coding tree was created consisting of two main branches. The first branch codes

information according to the five crisis management tasks of [Boin et al. \(2016\)](#): sense-making, decision-making, coordinating, meaning-making, accounting-giving, and learning. The second branch of the coding tree relates to additional, often descriptive information that could not be attributed to these tasks. After each piece of code, initials were placed in brackets, indicating the city and interviewee. Via the coding process roles can be ascribed to actors in each city. As each interviewee adds their point of view and experiences regarding crisis management, the general view is complemented by each individual case. The common storyline that is created can be used to contrast and confront the statements of one single interviewee with the statements of other interviews ([Natow, 2020](#)).

Unit of analysis and unit of observation

[Christensen et al. \(2016, p. 895\)](#) have argued to “go beyond the formal-legal arrangements, and study how living organizations and institutions work in practice in, and after, crises.” This study aims to contribute to filling this gap in the literature. Hence, the unit of analysis of this study is crisis management structure within cities, within the time frame of 1 February 2020–31 December 2021. Key political and administrative actors were contacted through purposive sampling. In each city, we interviewed a minimum of four politicians, including the mayor (or his/her Chief of Cabinet), two involved aldermen, and one member of the municipal council. Furthermore, a minimum of four civil servants were interviewed, including the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), the Emergency Planning Coordinator (EPC), and at least two leading civil servants.

Case selection

Four cities in the Belgian region Flanders are analyzed, where local governments play a vital role in the crisis management approach ([Descamps & Smolders, 2024](#)). Cities among the 13 cities in Flanders labeled “center city” were selected, which are cities with a relatively high number of inhabitants and possessing areas with a high population density compared to their surroundings, and which have a central function in areas such as employment, care, education, culture, and leisure. The Flemish context offers a particularly informative setting because it combines a uniform institutional framework with considerable local discretion in how crisis management is organized and enacted. Following the reasoning of [Salvador and Sancho \(2023\)](#), we chose to select medium to large cities, due to the bureaucratic machinery, human capital, and financial resources present: Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, and Mechelen. These four cities were selected as instances of the “governing the crisis” type, understood as cases in which the Covid-19 crisis represents a challenge that demanded a proactive approach by local governments ([Capano et al., 2026](#)). Despite the challenges in urban contexts, these cities seem to have managed to “govern the crisis” well, the output of the crisis response being the successful governing of the crisis. Hence, our focus is aimed at cases that seem “worth learning positive lessons from” ([Lindholm et al., 2024, p. 2](#)).

Context of the study

The characteristics of local government in Flanders, and the environment in which they operate, are instructive to understanding the results and conclusion section ([Table 1](#)). Within the political sphere, the mayor and aldermen constitute the executive, the “college of mayor and aldermen” (CMA), the dominant body in decision-making ([De Wulf & Voets, 2024; Steyvers et al., 2010](#)). Since 2007, a “management team (MT) model” has been introduced to enhance the autonomy of the administration ([De Wulf, 2025; Steyvers et al., 2010](#)), envisioning collaboration between two strong collectives: the CMA and the MT. The MT is chaired by the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), other members can be added according to the local needs, while the Mayor can join in a consultative role. The idea was that the CMA sets out the main policy directions, based on the policy preparations of the MT ([Hennau, 2020](#)), while the administration is responsible for policy implementation, coordinated by the CAO ([De Wulf, 2025](#)).

During “normal” municipal decision-making, in non-crisis setting, the mayor presides over the CMA, holding a strong position as playmaker ([De Wulf, 2025; Kopric et al., 2018](#)). Aldermen can be seen as the ministers of local government assigned with portfolios covering one or more policy domains, with extensive discretion to develop policy ([De Wulf, 2025](#)). The CAO is seen as a strategic partner, however, Flemish municipal CAOs still perceive a rather strong political influence on the administration ([Hennau, 2020](#)), with a relatively large degree of executive politicians contacting the administration directly ([Hennau & Ackaert, 2014; Rodenbach, 2017](#)). Crisis management by means of a crisis cell is expected to change these dynamics and relations profoundly, in part due to crisis management rules and regulations being

activated. Research shows that mayors held a key position in Flemish local governments during the Covid-crisis (Wayenberg et al., 2022).

Regarding crisis management, the “Royal Decree Emergency Planning” of 2019 stipulates the response and role of the local, provincial, and national levels of government when a crisis occurs. The response can be scaled up along those three levels: a municipal, a provincial, and a federal phase. When a municipal phase is declared, a municipal coordination committee meets, comprising of (Crisiscenter, n.d.): The mayor; the Emergency Planning Coordinator; a representative of each of the following 5 disciplines: 1—Relief operations, 2—Medical, sanitary and psychosocial services, 3—Police of the scene of the emergency, 4—Logistical support, 5—Information to citizens (Crisiscenter, n.d.b). Together these disciplines form a multidisciplinary “crisis cell.” Importantly, local governments may add a working group that prepares and executes certain tasks, or other profiles (e.g. experts) necessary (Crisiscenter, n.d.a).

When the crisis is scaled up toward the federal phase the governor(s) and mayor(s) involved “support the policy coordination of the Minister, in their territory, by implementing the Minister’s decisions and by taking additional decisions” (Koninklijk besluit betreffende de lokale noodplanning, 2019). During the Covid-19 crisis, this federal phase was activated on 13 March 2020. Responsibilities of the local governments included the organization of testing—and vaccination centers; implementing and enforcing top-down regulations from the federal and regional levels of government; the internal management of a city during a pandemic while providing service continuity; and developing a strategy for exit and recovery. The regional level is, in theory, absent in the crisis management regulations. However, they were involved via the newly created networks of primary care providers (e.g., general practitioners, social workers, psychologists, etc.), who were put to the test for the first time. These “First Line Zones” (FLZs) consist of one or more municipalities, created to exchange knowledge and information and to coordinate activities.

Results

This section reports the empirical findings according to the two analytical components of the research question. It first provides a comparative table of the crisis management structures across the four cities, setting the basis for understanding variation in local responses (Table 2). Next, the analysis zooms in on how crisis management dynamics shaped actor configurations and the rationales underlying these choices. The section closes by examining the politico-administrative role divisions within these configurations.

Configurations of actors

Size and composition of the crisis cell

Across the four cities, crisis cells differed in size and composition, reflecting distinct local strategies to balance decisiveness with inclusion under crisis pressure. Most opted for small, focused teams to ensure agility, while the Ghent case stood out for its broad and participatory model.

The strategic crisis cell was deliberately kept small and lean in three of the four cities under study, driven by the perception that swift decision-making required tight command and minimal deliberation. As one EPC explained: “*The composition of your crisis coordination structures has been laid down by law, precisely to avoid sitting at the table with a Mexican army: lots of stars and stripes, but no consensus being reached.*” A politician echoed this preference for efficiency: “*We honestly did not want to create a classic, broad debate. Otherwise, the alderman for tourism would want to open bars, and the alderman for public health will object... We preferred a clear chain of command.*” This logic shows how legal frameworks and leadership styles, both politically and administratively, jointly reinforced a hierarchical interpretation of crisis management. In Bruges and Mechelen a similar reasoning prevailed, favoring compact, technically oriented crisis cells, reflecting a preference for efficiency, and unity of command.

Although these smaller configurations shared a streamlined logic, they differed in internal composition. Antwerp, for instance, established a two-tiered crisis structure, consisting of a strategic and tactical level, mirroring the CMA and MT division in non-crisis settings. The strategic level comprised the mayor, his chief of cabinet and two security advisers’ part of the partisan political staff, the alderman of health, the EPC (or the deputy EPC), representatives of the police and fire brigade, and communications. Strikingly, the EPC was the only actor present at the strategic level, the CAO and MT members were not included. Next to the structures created for governing the crisis, some respondents identified a more informal “triangle” between the mayor, EPC, and CAO. The crisis cell in Bruges comprised the mayor, delegates of

Table 1. Characteristics of selected cases.

	Antwerp	Bruges	Ghent	Mechelen
Political parties in coalition and voting result	• Flemish-nationalists; mayor and 5 aldermen • Social-democrats: 3 aldermen • Liberals: 1 alderman	• Christian democrats: mayor and 4 aldermen • Social-democrats: 2 aldermen • Liberals: 2 aldermen	• Liberals: mayor and 2 aldermen • Cartel of greens and social-democrats: 7 aldermen • Christian democrats: 1 aldermen	Cartel of Liberals and Greens: mayor and 8 aldermen (absolute majority)
Mayor in function since	2013	2019 (formerly alderman for health and social affairs 2013–2018)	2019 (formerly alderman 2007–2018)	• Elected mayor in function since 2001 • Acting mayor took over 2019–2023 (after being alderman since 2018)
Number of partisan political staff	88	70	16	12
Inhabitants (01/01/2022)	528.903	118.478	264.677	86.917
Infections 01/02/2020–31/12/ 2021	92.275	18.002	43.707	14.125
Vaccinations 01/02/2020–31/12/ 2021	50.182	18.227	26.271	8.784

Source: De Wulf and Voets (2024), European Health Information Portal (n.d.), and own work.

Table 2. Comparison of crisis management structure.

	Antwerp	Bruges	Ghent	Mechelen
Size of crisis cell	Strategic level: 9-11 Tactical level: full MT, and 11 department heads	13	50	10
Mayor	Decisive	Decisive, facilitator of consensus	Decisive, moderator and facilitator of consensus	Decisive
College of Mayor and Aldermen (CMA)	Limited involvement, individual members involved after acute phase	Informed, not actively involved	Directly included in the crisis cell, leading preparatory working groups	Informed
Alderman of Health	Strongly involved	Contested, not actively involved	Strongly involved	Not actively involved
Political staff	Sounding board and advisory role	Limited involve- ment, information management	Directly included in crisis cell and the preparatory working groups	Limited involvement
Municipal council	Not actively involved	Informed and asked for input	Informed, limited active involvement	Limited involve- ment, included in the creation of a recovery plan
Chief Adminis- trative Officer (CAO)	Absent in strategic crisis cell, provider of mandate and backing	Part of the crisis cell, motivator	Internal coordination, deblocking policy issues	Secretary of crisis cell, internal communication
Emergency Planning Coordina- tor (EPC)	Decisive, day-to-day crisis manager	Crisis cell structur- ing, day-to-day crisis manager	Practical organization of the crisis cell, communication internally and with, supralocal authorities	Decisive
Management Team (MT)	Decisive	Partially included in the crisis cell	Directly included in the crisis cell and the preparatory work- ing groups	Informed, contested, limited involvement as a collective

the five disciplines, the EPC, the CAO and his deputy, the prevention advisor, the department heads for “public domain” and “communications and city marketing,” and an organizational coach. The crisis cell in Mechelen included the mayor, the EPC, the CAO, representatives of the FLZ, the police, and the domain of education, the manager of the vaccination center, and the department heads of “strategy and organization,” “facility,” and “communication.” On the political side, only the mayor was included in the crisis cell. As one administrative respondent put it: “Once the federal phase is activated, you arrive in a context where coordination is by definition led by the mayor, bluntly put as a kind of autocrat, surrounded by a group of advisors.”

Ghent, by contrast, represented the exceptional case in terms of scale, with 15 core members but meetings eventually expending to about 50 participants. This included the full CMA and MT, partisan political staff, external actors such as the FLZ, representatives of the health sector, and supralocal authorities. As one civil servant described: “The regular city structure is included in the crisis structure... that is also what we opted for in the beginning: all together in the same boat.” Another civil servant recalled how the aldermen explicitly requested to be included: “Some aldermen voiced: what is going on in this crisis cell? Then we decided: okay, just join and listen for yourselves.” The style of the mayor seems to have played a certain role, with a clear preference for consensus and taking into account multiple perspectives. Meetings followed a clear structure, as one civil servant explained: “There was a fixed “tour de table,” every policy domain was represented. For example, will a certain event be allowed? fire brigade check, police check, the legal department gave advice, others then bring up issues of mental health ... different angles, then the mayor made the decision.” To prepare these deliberations, three politico-administrative working groups were created, focusing on domain-specific issues. These working groups were led by politicians or their partisan political staff, while civil society was also present. In Ghent, the large crisis cell and high degree of involvement is rooted in

a long-standing institutional culture of inclusion. The city traditionally complements its crisis structure with external experts, a practice established well before Covid-19, when environmental and harbor representatives were routinely added. Since the pandemic, this approach has been further formalized, expanding the standard crisis cell to include the CAO and a legal representative.

In short, the size of the crisis cell across cities reflects not only structural constraints but also distinct local interpretations of what constitutes legitimate and effective crisis management, whether through lean command or broad participation.

Administrative capacity

Beyond structural design, dedicated administrative capacity proved decisive in shaping how cities managed the crisis. Cities with less capacity and preparedness regarding crisis management had less of a solid basis to rely on, and had to resort more to incremental adaptation or “bricolage.”

Antwerp stood out for its advanced administrative capacity. Prior to the pandemic, the city had cultivated a robust crisis management culture, with a higher number of dedicated staff and established contingency planning. Respondents attributed this to long-term cooperation among the main political and administrative actors sharing a common vision. The city had been paying attention for crises for a while, as one civil servant recalled: *“Our first pandemic plan was written in 2008, it was on our radar. The plan calculated 1/3 of unavailable city personnel and a severe overburdening of the health sector.”* Another civil servant added: *“The Covid-19 crisis has provided an ideal opportunity to put our ideas into practice.”* Before the Covid-19 crisis the city already possessed plans for a pandemic, detailed to issues such as: What to do when morgues are overwhelmed? Where to obtain a large amount of body bags? How to bury large amounts of people non-anonymously? The Covid-19 crisis led to more development of such plans as a basis for operations in the future. These issues indicate that Antwerp’s capacity was not accidental but the outcome of years of anticipatory governance, attention for and investment in organizational resilience.

By contrast, other cities entered the crisis with a more limited preparation, reflecting differing perceptions of risk and resource constraints. Size might play a role as well, Antwerp being the largest city under study. In Bruges, only 0.5 FTE was allocated to crisis management in the person of the EPC. There were no specific plans related to pandemics present, as pandemics were not prioritized during risk assessments. A civil servant acknowledged: *“We assumed that a pandemic would be coordinated supra-locally... Well, we pretty much started from scratch.”* The experience led to an upgrade of the EPC function to a full-time position and a backup in place to ensure continuity, a reactive institutional learning process triggered by the crisis rather than by anticipation. Mechelen had allocated 1 FTE, while Ghent formally had two but only one active at the start of the pandemic. Overall, cities with stronger anticipatory capacities could delegate responsibility to crisis experts, activate preexisting plans, whereas others developed such capacity incrementally as the crisis unfolded.

Tensions

Crisis management inevitably altered established hierarchies, giving rise to friction between key political and administrative actors.

In Mechelen, the actors who saw their role and influence reduced, particularly on the administrative side, advocated for a stronger role for the CMA and the MT in governing the crisis. More than a year into the pandemic, explicit calls for broader inclusion resulted in an expansion of meeting participation. These dynamics reflected a search for balance between decisiveness and legitimacy: while early centralization ensured speed, prolonged exclusion risked undermining internal ownership. The situation was further complicated by the prime responsibility for crisis management being in the hands of the acting mayor, who replaced the elected mayor and main political figure in the city, who had moved to a ministerial position in the Flemish, regional government. The maintaining of direct communication with the former mayor introduced additional pressures on the acting mayor, through political profiling and intercity competition. One civil servant explained: *“Politics wanted us to be the first having an operational vaccination center, it had to be ready within 24 hours, without exaggerating. The Minister of Home Affairs wanted to do the press moment in our city... eventually, another city was quicker, and the press conference was held there.”*

Administrative respondents noted temporary, and sometimes lasting, effects in terms of more direct communication between CMA members and civil servants: *“Aldermen have created a direct line with civil servants. But we have planning and prioritization. If a civil servant is directly contacted, he does not have the over-view nor the mandate to contradict the alderman.”* A political respondent defended such direct involvement:

"An alderman with own ideas seems difficult to accept for an administration. We are always accused of being too operational... but if we do not do it, it might not be realized. During a crisis, you can skip some links in the chain." In Antwerp, too, the crisis setting led to more direct linkages between politics and the wider administration, though on a more temporary basis: *"There was less need for 'chitchatting.' To act swiftly, several links were removed in the chain of command. Valid in a crisis, but it is not unhealthy that the normal hierarchy is restored afterward."* Once the acute medical phase had passed, the aldermen of education and social affairs (or his chief of cabinet) joined the strategic level of the Antwerp crisis cell as well, in doing so restoring the political balance between political groups. In Bruges, the absence of members of the CMA led to tension between the mayor and the alderman for social affairs, who also held the position of chairman of the FLZ. These tensions highlight the difficulty of reconciling political representation with the efficiency required during crisis management.

Overall, these tensions demonstrate that choices about inclusion, coordination, and communication were not merely technical but inherently political.

Role division

Political actors

Politically, mayors across all cities assumed central authority, as is standard and expected in emergency contexts. Their leadership styles and relationships with key aldermen, however, produced differing dynamics, revealing how personal authority, political balance, and local culture shaped each city's crisis management.

Whereas the mayor is already the central political player in regular times, the position becomes even more central during a crisis. In Mechelen, the acting mayor was the only politician present in the crisis cell, assuming the lead. One politician observed: *"Let's not sugarcoat it, the mayor of course partly capitalizes on this situation. Not in an abusive way, but there are plenty of moments in the spotlight... politically that is something not to be ignored."* This concentration of authority reflected the need for a single political figure to symbolize control and leadership in a context of uncertainty. Antwerp followed a similar pattern in the strategic crisis cell, with consensus that the mayor took the lead politically, although the alderman of health also assumed an important role. In Bruges, the mayor chaired the crisis cell meetings, where agreements were reached in consensus. In Ghent's broader configuration, the mayor took on the role of moderator and facilitator of consensus. To ensure smooth and efficient deliberations, the mayor urged for politico-administrative working groups, as one civil servant explained: *"Following the mayor's instructions the real discussions were held in preparation of the crisis cell."*

As a logical result, the empowerment of the position of the mayor diminished the influence of other political actors. In Antwerp, a civil servant pointed out: *"Because the crisis affected public order and health, the real power ended up in the hands of one person: the mayor. The CMA and their ideas... suddenly become obsolete."* In Mechelen, too, the CMA's role was curtailed, as one civil servant explained: *"The CMA was sidelined, not in bad faith, but on principle. The powers of other aldermen were partly overruled from the perspective of the crisis."* In Bruges, the EPC decided to exclude two aldermen as soon as the federal crisis phase was activated: *"The system in emergency planning is fast and efficient. To the other aldermen we said: the authority rests with the mayor from now on, no one else communicates about it."* This highlights how procedural efficiency and unity of command was prioritized over political representation once the emergency phase began.

However, exceptions existed. In Antwerp, the mayor was supported in the crisis cell by the alderman of health, a close ally from the same political party, who received a degree of autonomy to arrange health-related issues. In Ghent the alderman for health, representing a different political group, also played a decisive role in the crisis approach, possessing expertise and a large network within the health sector. These cases show that professional credibility or partisan ties can temporarily offset hierarchical centralization, leading to selective inclusion.

Municipal councils generally remained peripheral. In Bruges, the Covid-19 pandemic was a central and recurring theme in municipal council meeting sessions, where the mayor reported recurrently on developments, while in Mechelen, the Covid-19 theme was not a fixed item on the agenda, although the council participated in a recovery plan process. Ghent's municipal council featured some constructive debates, while the involvement of the Antwerp municipal council was minimal.

Similarly, partisan political staff, a defining feature of the main Flemish cities, played a modest role in crisis management. In Antwerp, the mayor's chief of cabinet took on the role as a sounding board, while the cabinet's security advisers provided legal expertise to the crisis cell debates. In Bruges and

Mechelen, the role of partisan political staff was limited to issues such as answering staff and citizen inquiries from citizens and civil servants and occasionally substituting the mayor in meetings. Ghent's partisan political staff were more engaged, in particular, in the preparatory meetings, at times leading these working groups.

Administrative actors

Administratively, Emergency Planning Coordinators (EPCs) emerged as pivotal figures, often stepping into leadership roles that blurred traditional hierarchies. This evolution reflected not only the legal centrality of their position in crisis planning but also their ability to act swiftly and translate political directives and changing contexts into operational action.

In Antwerp, on the administrative side, the EPC was immediately given clear responsibility and a mandate from the CAO to take the lead administratively within the crisis management structures. The EPC's role was respected by the mayor and aldermen, as one civil servant explained: *"That is the first thing the EPC does: deciding on the structure and the composition."* In the crisis cell the EPC also had a decisive voice, as one administrative actor recalled: *"When a competent and mandated EPC calls during a crisis, you don't ask 'why?', but 'by when?'"* The EPC and deputy were the only actors operating at both the strategic and tactical levels, thus performing the vital task of liaison. In Bruges and Mechelen, the EPC took the lead in the day-to-day management of the crisis and structured the crisis cell's operations. This illustrates how established trust and expertise enabled strong administrative leadership during uncertainty.

In contrast, in Ghent the role of the EPC was more limited, functioning as an operational secretariat of the crisis cell, ensuring smooth practical organization, collecting input, and taking notes of the meetings. The EPC further liaised with supralocal authorities, but in terms of crisis approach structuring and substantive input for the crisis response, the role remained more limited.

The CAO also assumed different roles across the cities. In Antwerp, the CAO delegated crisis leadership to the EPC, focusing instead on maintaining regular operations, reflecting an interesting strategic choice to maintain resilience. In Ghent, the CAO played a key role in translating crisis decisions into administrative practice and resolving internal disagreements. Together with the mayor, the CAO's office structured the crisis cell, strikingly, independent of the EPC. In Bruges, the CAO communicated decisions organization-wide, and also managed consensus around some decisions, for example, to prevent any personnel from being placed on temporary unemployment. In Mechelen, after being out of action due to a Covid-19 contagion, the CAO later assumed the role as a link between the crisis structures and the wider administration.

The management team also took on differing roles. In Antwerp, it functioned as the tactical level within the crisis structure, ensuring rapid communication with departments. In Bruges, the MT had some representatives in the crisis cell, while the MT as a collective was briefed by the CAO. When the MT is sidelined, as in Mechelen, the regular organizational functioning can be strained. One civil servant explained: *"Normally a department has the MT above. But in this case, there was a very strong interrelatedness with politics, and very direct contact. If we sent a message, an hour later, politics would call us."* Respondents observed that more operational profiles became directly involved, bypassing traditional hierarchies. One civil servant explained: *"Was the crisis modus operandi known, expected, and accepted within the organization? No. Was sufficient attention paid to make a smooth transition to the crisis mode? No, probably not. It was unprecedented: a long-lasting crisis."* This illustrates how institutional unfamiliarity with a prolonged crisis magnified the tension caused by the adaptations in organizational structure.

Conclusions

The conclusions revisit the three analytical lenses outlined in the literature review to interpret how local governments governed the Covid-19 crisis: the political nature of crisis management (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Boin et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2016), the complementarity between political and administrative actors (Demir & Reddick, 2012; Grøn & Salomonsen, 2019; Svava, 2001), and anticipatory capacity shaped by local context (Barbera et al., 2021; Lenz & Eckhard, 2023).

Even within the same legal and administrative system, local political and administrative actors made different design choices regarding crisis cell composition, coordination, and communication. This discretion noted in the literature (Sandberg, 2023) is clearly visible in how each city designed its own crisis

structure. The study departed from cases that seem worth learning positive lessons from (Lindholt et al., 2024), the findings indicate the crisis management approach in the cases under study were tailored and adapted, in part allowing the problem or task to set the team. The approach was made “fit for purpose,” as Lenz and Eckhard (2023) pointed out, depending on administrative and political context factors (Lenz & Eckhard, 2023). This underscores that a “one-size-fits-all” model cannot be readily applied to crisis management.

Design choices reflected a tradeoff between inclusion and efficiency. Some cities opted for lean, centralized structures and others favored broader inclusion, for example, to maintain coalition balance. Such choices were not merely technical but inherently political, revealing how leadership style and context shape crisis management. A strict interpretation of the crisis favors “lean decision-making” in a small team, reinforcing the mayor’s position, in line with the key position of the mayor in Flemish local governments during the Covid-crisis (Wayenberg et al., 2022). Moreover, political profiling and intercity competition further emphasize the political nature of crisis management (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Boin et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2016). Ghent stood out as an outlier, preferring inclusion over speed, explained by a consensus-oriented mayor, a fragmented coalition, a participatory culture, and a limited role of the EPC.

The prolonged nature of Covid-19 exposed the limits of structures designed for short-term emergencies. It strengthened the mayor’s position while reducing the influence of collective bodies such as the CMA, MT, and municipal council. Organizational learning and adaptation were identified, for example, by adding actors to the crisis cell to restore political balance. The findings show that newly established crisis structures may conflict with key politico-administrative actors within the organization’s preexisting non-crisis structures. As Behnke and Eckhard (2022) caution, maintaining balance between executive leadership and democratic oversight is crucial, yet our study shows that this balance was largely absent during prolonged crises.

While the four cities were selected as examples of “governing the crisis” (Capano et al., 2026), the empirical material also reveals traces of “governing by the crisis.” Adaptations driven by the crisis situation such as the direct communication lines between politicians and more operational civil servants suggest that crisis management temporarily, and possibly durably, reconfigured politico-administrative relations. These patterns indicate that the two logics may be viewed not as dichotomous but can overlap or evolve sequentially. Overall, this study confirms the crisis setting described by Noordegraaf (2004), in which the mayor holds primary responsibility and is supported by civil servants within a crisis cell, where decisions are made collectively. Both political and administrative actors described Covid-19 as a period of unprecedented cooperation between politics and administration.

Administratively, Emergency Planning Coordinators (EPCs) became pivotal figures, often assuming leadership roles that blurred traditional hierarchies. Their authority depended on trust, expertise, and anticipatory capacity. Whereas Siegel (2020) stated that senior public servants operate in a political world, in a crisis setting other civil servants enter a very political environment, confirming that politico-administrative relationships do not remain stable over time (Jacobsen, 2006). Antwerp’s case illustrates how preexisting capacity and planning enable more resilient responses, confirming anticipatory capacity as a key determinant of crisis management (Barbera et al., 2021). Antwerp possessed a significantly larger team dedicated to crisis management and resilience. The Covid-19 crisis further strengthened the position of the EPC, with the function being upgraded to “Chief Resilience Officer,” with eight FTE under its command. Our findings add to Barbera et al. (2021). Our findings extend this perspective by showing that anticipatory capacity encompasses not only formal plans and skills, but also the availability of dedicated personnel. Resilience thus depends on anticipatory investment and political-administrative trust. Crises not only test institutional robustness but also reshape boundaries between politics and administration. Revisiting Svava’s (2001) model of complementarity, the crisis cell functions as a temporary hybrid arena. The findings refine existing understandings of politico-administrative complementarity by showing how it becomes situational and negotiated under crisis conditions.

To conclude, this study refines understandings of politico-administrative complementarity by showing how it becomes situational and negotiated under crisis conditions. Although situated in the Flemish context, the findings offer broader relevance. They highlight universal tensions between inclusion and efficiency, the value of anticipatory capacity, and the influence of leadership and coalition dynamics on crisis management, mechanisms applicable beyond Flanders. These insights inform how local governments can strengthen institutional resilience for future crises.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its focus on a single institutional context and crisis type may limit generalizability. Second, it examines only medium to large cities, excluding smaller municipalities that may offer valuable insights. Third, it provides a horizontal analysis of local governments, while exploring vertical multilevel governance could be beneficial. Finally, interviews were limited to key politicians and civil servants, including operational-level staff could have added enriched the analysis.

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