EDITORIAL

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Three years of COVID-19 pandemic: Coping with crisis governance in the long term

This special issue of *European Policy Analysis* on COVID-19 policies follows two previous ones addressing that topic. The first one was published in the fall 2020 to examine the initial reactions of governments to the shock of the crisis (Colfer, 2020), and the second one in fall 2022, to analyze how governance processes had evolved with the prolongation of the crisis (Malandrino & Mavrot, 2022). This spring 2023 marks the 3rd year of the pandemic, which gives us even more hindsight to assess the questions raised by one of the most challenging public health events faced by nations worldwide in the recent past. This new special issues hence gathers contributions that address key transversal issues related to pandemic management: how to integrate scientific evidence into crisis management, and whether the inclusion of evidence even guarantees good outcomes. Is there a national administrative style that can help explain the output performance of crisis management? What does policy learning look like when the policy cycle happens within a reduced timeframe and under high political pressure? How legitimate are the policy instruments implemented during the pandemic in the public's eyes? The questions raised in this special issue are key not only to studying the crash test the pandemic has represented for governments and democracies but also to drawing lessons for future crises that wait around the corner. These crises will no doubt share some common characteristic with the COVID-19 pandemic: the need for arbitration between various policy requirements (e.g., somatic and psychological health needs, public health and the economy), the challenge of adopting sustainable governance principles in the general context of political short-termism, finding a balance between decisive public action and the requirement of democratic processes, the integration of scientific evidence into policy-making processes and the necessity of fighting against skepticism (e.g., corona-skepticism, climate-skepticism).

At a time of returning to normalcy with the relative mitigation of the epidemics and the ending of emergency regimes in most parts of the world, two questions arise: what did the COVID-19 crisis say about political systems from a governance perspective, and how did the crisis add to our reflections from a political science perspective? Regarding the first aspect, the crisis shed light on the possibilities of over and under reactions, as well as on the importance of the level of trust in the government to navigate the pandemic in ways acceptable to citizens (Capano et al., 2020). The temporal development of the event also showed effects of policy convergence in the first phase because of the exceptional character of the situation, followed by a diversification in governance paths related to the ways policy feedback affected the political calculus in each country (Sayers et al., 2022). A fundamental tension strongly arose between the need to use scientific evidence to govern this high-uncertainty crisis during which large volumes of data were closely monitored and the necessity to avoid accusations of technocratizing the policy-making process (Kuhlmann et al., 2022). In this regard, populist governance in the pandemic has especially attracted scholarly attention given the consequences of the antiscientific attitude of populist governments in the face of a public health emergency (Bayerlein et al., 2021). More generally, the way features of political systems account for the

pandemic management style has also been assessed. Parliamentary systems are less likely to trigger a strong personalization of politics than presidential ones, which can be an asset given the importance of cohesion and nonpolarization for successful crisis management (Lecours et al., 2021). Federal systems have been found to encounter specific challenges: vertical and horizontal coordination (Schnabel & Hegele, 2012) and the need to find a balance between federal solutions and local preferences (Bandelow et al., 2021). However, centralized systems also face distinctive challenges with the concentration of political blame toward the central government (*op. cit*). In addition, the crisis has been a reminder that as exceptional as the event has been framed, pre-existing policies and power relationships have also contributed to the problem at hand (Bergeron et al., 2020). Last but not least, the crisis has shown that we are still ill-equipped to tackle social inequalities in health, defined as avoidable disparities based on a socially constructed repartition of health resources (Aïach & Fassin, 2004).

As to the consequences of the pandemic on research, we could argue that it vivified studies on key issues such as democratic legitimacy and social cohesion. The crisis has allowed the testing and refinement of analytical instruments and concepts, as this event disrupted governance routines. To cite only a few examples, the COVID-19 crisis as a global event lends itself well to the comparative study of policy learning and lesson drawing (Zaki & Wayenberg, 2021). Given the need to deploy effective policy mixes in a situation of epistemic uncertainty, policy design and instrument perspective has been a fruitful analytical lens to assess the needs and outcomes of crisis governance (Dunlop et al., 2020). A policy network approach examined how, by providing regularized patterns of interactions (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018), networks contributed to structuring the political reaction to the crisis (Weible et al., 2020). From a policy narrative framework point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its novel policy measures, has been an occasion to analyze how accurate, recognizable, and actionable narratives play a role in shaping and implementing policy answers (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020). From a multiple streams perspective, the pandemic gave the opportunity to observe how the streams of problem, policies and politics combined to open specific windows of opportunities to address questions related to public health (Amri & Logan, 2021), and, more generally, sustainability. The list could be longer, but altogether, the crisis has provided the opportunity to study the entry into emergency times, the prolongation of a crisis over the midterm and the normalization phase in the aftermath of the crisis. These various phases are rich for the study of the policy process, and post-COVID-19 policy-making in substantive policy areas will have to be studied to seek the long-term effects of the crisis (Capano et al., 2022).

This special issue is rich of learning on these two levels. In an era in which evidence-based policy is increasingly a mantra (Capano & Malandrino, 2022), Kurzer and Ornston (2023) urge policymakers to be cautious with applying what scientific advisors recommend in times of high uncertainty. Their contribution aims to explain the results of previous large-n studies that found integrating scientific knowledge into policymaking can slow down the response to the pandemic. The article looks back to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, that is, three countries characterized by relatively high levels of trust in scientists. However, in all three countries, public health agencies overlooked both the severity of the pandemic and the urgency of the measures necessary to face it, thus delaying the adoption of response measures. However, Denmark fared better than the Netherlands and Sweden, presenting lower levels of deaths from COVID-19. The authors connect this relatively good performance with the government's loss of trust in national expert advice and their consequent departure from it. This mechanism especially applies in the case of national public agencies embedded in neo-corporatist networks of societal actors and perspectives. This

embeddedness—the authors argue—pushes national public agencies to adopt "softer" and more nuanced recommendations to avoid coercion and maximize consensus, but these kinds of recommended measures might not work in such a severe context as a pandemic. In addition, this kind of approach can delay the adoption of corrective measures.

Based on administrative style theory, Casula and Malandrino (2023) analyze the case of the Extraordinary Commissioner for the COVID-19 Emergency in Italy, with a focus on the action of its administrative apparatus in two areas that played a key role amidst the governmental response to the pandemic, that is, public procurement and vaccinations. More specifically, they compare the two apparatus configurations that succeeded one another with the government change that occurred in 2021. The theoretical framework of the article is based on the concepts of functional and positional orientation of a public organization's administrative style (Knill et al., 2019). While the link between a highly functional orientation and output performance can be understood as more immediate and intuitive, the authors of this article show that under conditions of similar functional orientation, it is the positional orientation of a public organization that makes the difference. To operationalize the concept of functional orientation of the Extraordinary Commissioner's apparatus in its two configurations, they employ its contribution to issue emergence, solution-search optimization, and policy promotion variables. Likewise, to analyze its positional orientation, they rely on its support mobilization, strategic use of formal powers and advocation of competencies. All in all, their study contributes to the second generation of studies on administrative style, while leveraging the political turnover in the country to shed light on how different administrative apparatuses can face the same crisis with different approaches.

Analyzing the pandemic management in Belgium, Zaki et al. (2023) investigate different types of possible policy learning in a crisis situation. They identify occurrences of instrumental and social learning, and point out that accelerated forms of social learning might occur in high pressure situations. Identifying policy learning as a crucial mechanism to tackle complex policy issues, the study points out possible parameters for shifts in types of learning in the course of a singular event. Thereby, they highlight the nonlinear character of policy learning. The first phase of learning among decision-makers was characterized by a strong medical focus, a reliance on epidemiological experts, and an interest for the recalibration of a predefined array of policy instruments. With the prolongation of the crisis, public and political dissent increased, leading policy-makers to engage in other types of policy learning that more fundamentally questioned the previous interpretation of the crisis and the objectives of COVID-19 policies. In this social learning phase, a greater interdisciplinarity in expert advice as well as a wider understanding of the crisis as a socioeconomic phenomenon was achieved. The creeping nature of the crisis left room for such a higher-level process, as the time frame between the waves gave the opportunity to further engage in policy learning and deliberative processes.

Finally, Trein and Fossati (2023) address the crucial question of the popular legitimacy of COVID-19 measures. By doing so, the authors remind us that policy instruments designed to face crises must not only be effective, but also to enjoy a high legitimacy. The study presents the results of a conjoint survey-experiment in Switzerland. The article contributes to the study of the society-policy interface in times of crisis, by showing which type of policy measures were more or less supported by the population. Interestingly, high levels of public intervention were supported by the respondents, for instance, regarding the centralization of crisis governance and investments for future pandemic prevention. As the authors underline, this is worth noticing in the context of a liberal democracy. Mandatory contact-tracing applications were less supported, which shows concerns regarding the protection of individual liberties. The study

also captures the fact that opinions on these topics evolve along the development of the pandemic. The authors also show the need to distinguish between various profiles of respondents, as the fear of health consequences in the pandemic was associated with higher support toward strong measures. The article unveils the "micro-foundations for policy instrument design," which is crucial given the strong need for population compliance in the tackling of a pandemic. The study hence shows the potential contribution of survey experiments to policy design on the one hand, and to crisis governance in democracies on the other hand.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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