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**Corona Pandemic and  
Crisis Management**  
A Cross-Country Perspective

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## **Corona Pandemic and Crisis Management A Cross-Country Perspective**

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## Editorial

Seit Anfang 2020 lähmt die COVID-19-Pandemie viele Bereiche der Gesellschaft in nahezu allen Teilen der Welt. Dabei versuchen die Regierungen auf teils sehr unterschiedlichen Wegen der Pandemie Herr zu werden. In fast allen Fällen haben die getroffenen Maßnahmen zur Eindämmung der Pandemie jedoch erhebliche Folgen für das soziale, wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Leben der Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Bei der Abpufferung dieser Folgen werden einmal mehr gravierende Unterschiede zwischen den Ländern sichtbar.

Das zwölfte Heft der Zeitschrift für angewandte Politikwissenschaft widmet sich dem staatlichen Krisenmanagement der COVID-19-Pandemie in vergleichender Perspektive und bringt zu diesem Zweck zwanzig kurze Fallstudien aus Afrika, Amerika, Asien, Europa und Ozeanien zusammen, die in vielerlei Hinsicht ein sehr breites Spektrum abdecken. Wichtig war uns bei der Fallauswahl, dass nicht nur jene Fälle in den Fokus gerückt werden, die ohnehin stark in der öffentlichen Debatte präsent sind, sei es aufgrund einer besonders drastischen Entwicklung der Erkrankungs- und Sterbefallzahlen oder aufgrund außergewöhnlicher staatlicher Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Pandemie. Und so finden sich unter den behandelten Ländern auch Beispiele von weniger im medialen Rampenlicht stehenden Staaten, deren Krisenmanagement auch in der wissenschaftlichen Fachliteratur bislang eher wenig reflektiert wurde. Als Autorinnen und Autoren konnten wieder eine Vielzahl von Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern sowie Praktikerinnen und Praktikern gewonnen werden, die die Entwicklungen der Pandemie zum Großteil direkt vor Ort beobachten konnten. Zur zeitlichen Eingrenzung und besseren Vergleichbarkeit wurde der Fokus auf das erste Jahr der Pandemie, beginnend mit dem Auftreten der ersten Fälle außerhalb von China im Frühjahr 2020, gelegt.

Als übergeordnete Leitfrage steht über dem Heft die Frage: Wie haben die Regierungen in so unterschiedlichen Staaten wie Ghana, Brasilien, Kirgistan, Österreich und Neuseeland auf die Pandemie reagiert? Die einzelnen Fallstudien orientieren sich jeweils – teils explizit, teils implizit – an den folgenden Fragestellungen, die damit auch als Vergleichskategorien zwischen den behandelten Ländern dienen können:

1. Welche Maßnahmen wurden von der Regierung getroffen, um die Pandemie einzudämmen, und wie effektiv waren diese bisher?
2. Welcher Wandel, welche Veränderungen lassen sich bei der Bekämpfung der Pandemie über die Zeit beobachten?
3. Welche politischen und gesellschaftlichen Narrative und Erzählungen existieren rund um die Pandemie und ihrer Bekämpfung?
4. Was hat die Regierung unternommen, um die sozioökonomischen Folgen der getroffenen Maßnahmen abzufedern?
5. Wie beurteilt die Bevölkerung das Krisenmanagement und die Krisenkommunikation der Regierung?
6. Was können andere Länder von dem betrachteten Land hinsichtlich Krisenmanagement und -kommunikation lernen (und was nicht)?

Es versteht sich von selbst, dass es eine abschließende Antwort auf all diese Fragen naturgemäß erst in einigen Jahren geben kann. Es geht hier also nicht um eine abschließende Beurteilung, sondern vielmehr um eine erste Bestandsaufnahme.

Wir wünschen allen Leserinnen und Lesern eine spannende und erkenntnisreiche Lektüre!

Jakob Lempp, Angela Meyer, Jan Niklas Rolf

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## Italy

### Giovanni Finizio

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#### 1. What measures have been taken by the government to control the pandemic, and how effective have these measures been so far?

Italy was the first European country hit hard by the virus. By 19 March 2020, the death toll in Italy had already surpassed that of China (Di Todaro 2020). The government led by Giuseppe Conte, in office since September 2019 and supported by an unprecedented “yellow-red” coalition between the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Democratic Party (PD), at first reacted with uncertainty and inaccuracy. For instance, it initially played down the problem to reassure the population and looked at China as a “science fiction movie that had nothing to do with us” (Horowitz, Bubola and Povoledo 2020). Moreover, the decision to ban direct flights from China did not prevent arrivals by indirect flights (Berberi 2020). Very soon, however, the government became more determined and resolute using the tool that has proved the most effective in controlling the pandemic: restrictions on individual freedom and social relations to contain contagion.

The restrictions first affected 11 municipalities in Veneto and Lombardy (23 February 2020), then the entire Lombardy Region (7 March) and finally the whole country (9 March). Italy was the first Western country to go into lockdown, closing most economic activities and banning people from leaving their homes.

In March 2020, a Special Commissioner for the COVID-19 emergency was appointed, with unprecedented powers in the history of the Republic (Petroni 2020): He could bypass any administrative procedure and was responsible

for supplying and distributing medicine, equipment and medical personal protective equipment; strengthening hospital facilities; and supporting the Regions in exercising their powers in the area of health.

#### 2. What changes can be observed in pandemic control over time?

While the restrictive measures, which were gradually eased starting on 4 May 2020, were effective thanks to their drastic nature and the unsuspected compliance of the population, the strategy of preventing a second wave was unsuccessful. In fact, infection tracking through a Bluetooth mobile phone app did not work due to the technical ineffectiveness of the app and citizens’ unwillingness to download it. Moreover, the pressure of economic interests led to risky re-openings (discos, for example) and restriction fatigue caused people to lower their guard against the virus.

As a result of increasing pressure from below, the government’s approach to the second wave of the pandemic was marked by greater flexibility. On 3 November 2020, Regions and Autonomous Provinces were classified into three areas – yellow, orange and red – corresponding to three risk scenarios, for which specific restrictive measures were foreseen. However, this new system did not prevent a new national lockdown over the Christmas period, nor the advent of a third wave in February 2021, thus resulting in new restrictions.

Only the start of the vaccination campaign in January 2021 and its acceleration, also thanks to the appointment by the new Draghi government (in office since 12 February) of a new extraordinary Commissioner from the army and logistics expert, has enabled a gradual return to normalcy in social and economic activities starting from 6 April.

The control of the pandemic, however, was the result of a combination of national and regional actions. Under the 2001 constitutional reform, the Regions were given extensive legislative and management powers, and health is their most important competence, accounting for 80% of their budget. However, the responsibility for “international prophylaxis” remained with the State, and a vague division of responsibilities led to institutional

clashes and recurrent mutual recrimination (Petroni 2020).

### **3. What has the government done to mitigate the socioeconomic consequences of the measures taken?**

In the socio-economic field, the impact of the pandemic has been particularly severe, also because it affected an economic system already characterised by low growth, low productivity, high unemployment and low spending on research and development. Starting from 17 March 2020, the government's response consisted mainly in banning companies from laying off their employees, the simultaneous extension of the Derogatory Wages Guarantee Fund for companies, and growing support for businesses, VAT number holders and individuals affected by the crisis. These measures were judged by many to be insufficient and ineffective. Sub-optimal technical choices by the government, which did not take into account the limitations of the Italian bureaucratic system, delayed aid delivery; and the size of the informal economy made the determination of the beneficiaries of the support measures, based on a comparison with income from the previous years, ineffective. Above all, the scope of the aid was limited by Italy's huge public debt (2.409 billion euros in December 2019, equal to 134.8% of GDP). Therefore, the Conte government placed itself at the forefront of negotiations in the EU to establish a European public debt that could finance a major public investment plan to boost the economy. After the *Next Generation EU* programme was introduced into the Italian public debate as a victory for Italy over the so-called "frugal" group of countries, the very need to quickly prepare a high-quality Recovery and Resilience Plan to propose to the EU for funding was one of the causes of the fall of the Conte government in favour of a Government of National Unity led by former President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi.

### **4. How does the population assess the government's crisis management and crisis communication?**

In December 2020/January 2021, the measures of the Conte government to protect public health were judged positively by 58% of Italians (negatively by 28%) and the measures of regional and local governments by 59% (26%). The measures to protect the economy, on the other hand, were supported by 46% of Italians (39%) (Mancosu, Vassallo and Vegetti 2021, 9-10). Government approval was particularly high in the most critical phase of the emergency, also as a result of the "rally around the flag effect", which went from 44% to 71% between February and March 2020 (Demos and Pi 2020, 8). The unwise and inaccurate communication regarding the pandemic was probably the most criticised aspect of the government's actions and contributed to the gradual decline in approval and the development of growing support for the possibility of a Draghi government (68% as of February 2021; Demos and Pi 2021, 7). For instance, the initial downplaying of the problem created a false sense of security in the population, thereby fostering the spread of the virus (Horowitz, Bubola and Povoledo 2020). A leak about the decree that was to close the Lombardy Region caused a dangerous mass exodus southward of those seeking to return to their places of origin (Foschi 2020). The short notice (only one day, in some cases) given by the government to announce restrictive measures and the transition of Regions from one colour zone to another aroused strong protest from the Regions and from economic sectors, which were struggling to plan their activities.

### **5. What political and societal narratives exist around the pandemic and pandemic control?**

The pandemic has put scientists and research activity in the spotlight, fueling a political debate on whether or not to follow their indications. At the same time, it has triggered a number of conspiracy theories, some of which have gained public acceptance, including one stating that the virus may be a biological weapon spread by China (supported by 26% of the population) and that the virus was spread by pharmaceutical multinationals for profit (19%) (Mancosu, Vassallo and Vegetti 2021,



19). These narratives are more widespread among the electorate of right-wing parties, the League and Brothers of Italy (FDI), but also the M5S. However, while the latter, as a government party, avoided feeding them, the League did not do the same after joining the coalition of the Draghi government. These narratives are reflected in the greater resistance to vaccination among the electorate of these parties,<sup>3</sup> who are also convinced that employment and individual freedom should take precedence over health protection (Mancosu, Vassallo and Vegetti 2021, 13) and that to tackle the crisis more national independence is needed, rather than more international cooperation. Moreover, a consistent but variable portion of the electorate of all the parties (64% PD, 80% League) believes that the handling of the pandemic has demonstrated the limits of liberal democracy (DISPOC/LAPS and IAI 2020, 7, 9).

#### **6. What can other countries learn from the country under consideration in terms of crisis management and crisis communication (and what not)?**

Italy has set up the first laboratory to handle the pandemic in the West. It has demonstrated the effectiveness of severe restrictive measures to control contagion and the difficulties of implementing them within the context of a liberal democracy. It has also demonstrated the limits of a strategy based on chasing the pandemic in order to cool it down, without preventing its resurgence when restrictions were eased. Finally, it has shown how the crisis has led to a “restoration of expertise” in society (with important scientific contributions in controlling the pandemic) and politics (Draghi’s appointment as the head of a national-unity government that has downsized parties’ protagonism), after its role in both areas had been eroded by a season of populist pressures.

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<sup>3</sup> Survey conducted by Demos and Pi in May 2021, available at <http://www.demos.it/a01853.php>.