

Multilevel Crisis Management: COVID-19 Responses in Federal and Decentralised Politics

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a multidimensional crisis that seriously affected public health, social well-being and economic performance. To protect and support their citizens and economies governments set up a wide range of public health as well as social, economic and fiscal measures, which varied significantly across countries in their timing, breadth and scope (Weder di Mauro 2020). In multilevel systems, where (at least) two orders of government are responsible for crisis management, central governments used their broad powers and resources to tackle the crisis and took a coordinating role. At the same time, subnational governments provided essential public services and immediately assisted their population. They also played an important part in the economic recovery; being responsible for almost one third of public spending. More than half of public investments for recovery in the European Union (EU) are made by regions and cities (European Committee of the Regions 2021: 64).

Against this background, it is essential to understand how multilevel systems deal with a major crisis such as COVID-19. Based on a review of the literature on crisis management in federal and other multilevel systems, this contribution discusses the advantages and disadvantages of decentralisation and intergovernmental coordination when it comes to the management of external shocks. It then focuses on the de/centralising effects of the pandemic and presents examples from different countries to highlight variations in responses across different multilevel systems.¹

2. Decentralisation and crisis management

Scholars typically cite efficiency, proximity, accountability and increased legitimacy as positive effects of decentralisation. The ‘classic’ literature on fiscal federalism argues that decentralised public policies and services are closer to citizens’ needs and preferences and therefore increase their political commitment and ownership (Musgrave 1959; Buchanan 1965; Oates 1972). The benefits of decentralised policy-making are potentially increasing when social and economic needs of jurisdictions differ significantly (Tiebout 1956). In a “race to the top”, regions may upgrade their public services or regulatory

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standards to attract businesses (Weaver 2020: 165).² In the absence of externalities, inequalities and economies of scale, public policies should thus be designed and implemented at the lowest level of government capable of performing these tasks effectively (Prud'homme 1994).

Concerning COVID-19, the OECD (2020) highlighted the advantages of flexible and innovative bottom-up responses to the pandemic, which “create[d] space for regional and local governments to react and respond quickly.” The ability of regional and local governments to work as “laboratories of democracy” (Weaver 2020: 157) allows experimentation with innovative solutions and the sharing of best practices (Besley/Case 1995; Ayala et al. 2021). According to the ‘yardstick-competition-model’ (Case/Rosen 1993; Besley/Case 1995; Allers/Elhorst 2005), subnational governments observe their neighbours and adopt policies according to their respective situations. Since unsuccessful policies are less likely to be copied by others, social, economic and fiscal costs of policy failure, by contrast, are regionally or locally contained (Kropp/Schnabel 2021). An unprecedented crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic presented an obvious occasion for countries, regions and municipalities to look out for the most successful strategies to deal with the social and economic implications. As Saunders (2022: 381) put it: “Some of [...] early, localised actions were well targeted and effective, anticipating strategies that ultimately would be adopted elsewhere”. In Argentina, Canada, India and Kenya containment measures were introduced in a small number of jurisdictions and subsequently adopted by others. In Australia, Victoria’s strict quarantine measures in the early phase of the pandemic was a response to errors made initially by other states and served as a template to refine the quarantine regulations. In Germany, Bavaria’s early restrictions and Berlin’s incident-indicator system were also adopted in the other *Länder* (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 298). In turn, looking at the Asia-Pacific region (including Australia, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan and Solomon Islands) demonstrates how strongly centralised approaches undermined the knowledge of and responsiveness to local conditions as well as the legitimacy of measures (Saunders 2021: 8).

Despite the advantages of decentralisation, centralisation facilitates fast and consistent decision-making (Hegele/Schnabel 2021: 1055), which is important in effectively dealing with a crisis, especially in its beginning (OECD 2020). In addition, the benefits of tailoring social, economic and fiscal measures to local needs can be outweighed by economies of scale, lowering the costs of centralised provision of services (Oates 1972). Fair and equitable interregional redistribution and effectiveness are also often emphasised as positive effects of centralisation (e.g., Treisman 2007; Bednar 2009; Feld/Schaltegger 2017). In particular, when there are strong territorial inequalities, potential for economies of scale or risk of negative spillovers, subnational governments are not the optimal providers of public policy (Prud'homme 1994). Territorial disparities regarding wealth and fiscal capacity can lead to detrimental competition and citizens may move to places with better public services or lower taxes (Buchanan 1965; Boadway/Shah 2009). Cuts

2 However, there is little empirical evidence for this beyond the provision of education.

to public services may subsequently lead to “a race to the bottom” between subnational jurisdictions (Bordignon et al. 2003; Redoano 2003; Solé-Ollé 2003, 2006).

Although a wide range of studies suggest that crises trigger centralisation (Cabrera-Castellanos/Lozano-Cortés 2008; Martínez-Vazquez/Smoke 2011; Bos 2012; Arnold et al. 2020; Canavire-Bacarreza et al. 2021), the empirical evidence is more complex than this and depends, *inter alia*, on the nature of a crisis. Based on a study of non-OECD countries, Cadaval et al. (2022), for instance, observed that natural disasters trigger centralisation, which they explain by the greater capacity of the central government to mobilise additional resources at the early stages of a crisis and institutional reforms implemented in the aftermath. In contrast, Mello and Tovar (2022) concluded that natural disasters lead to higher subnational shares of public spending on frontline services and on post-crisis recovery. This underscores the role of the subnational governments in the actual crisis management.

For internal military conflicts, Cadaval et al. (2022) observed that peace agreements often promote (generous and asymmetric) decentralisation to contain centrifugal forces.

In times of economic shocks, Dardanelli et al. (2019: 206) found varying degrees of centralisation across different federations. Canavire-Bacarreza et al. (2021) and Bos (2012) present cross-country evidence of recentralisation (though only temporary) of expenditures during economic crises, whereas revenues seem to be less affected. Cadaval et al. (2022) confirm that economic downturns do not have lasting impacts on de/centralisation of powers. The share of central government expenditures typically increases during an economic crisis – albeit only slightly and temporarily – whereas central government revenue shares do not change. Similarly, Arnold et al. (2020) argue that the global financial crisis (2007–2008) did not lead to revenue centralisation in neither unitary nor federal states. This is because tax reforms and changes to fiscal arrangements are usually more controversial than altering expenditure in specific policy fields. Yet, at the same time austerity policies of central governments constrained the effective spending decisions of subnational authorities (Vampa 2021: 607).

Central governments played an extraordinary role in the adoption of the initial social, economic and fiscal responses to COVID-19. This was particularly evident in the EU, where large economic measures were adopted through the recovery plan *Next Generation EU* (NGEU) and the *Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027*. Member States temporarily suspended the *Stability and Growth Pact* and generated additional resources by approving an (also temporarily) unbalanced budget (Truchlewski et al. 2021). While central governments have the legal and financial capacities to engage in counter-cyclical spending, the implementation of unemployment policies and social assistance depended on the exiting arrangements at different levels of government (Rocco et al. 2020). In federal countries, subnational governments are usually the first ones to react by providing essential public services, including social welfare and education, and can immediately assist their population. However, as their revenue raising powers are limited, they still depend on federal transfers either in the form of shared taxes, ad hoc grants or fiscal equalisation payments. Even though centralisation tendencies might therefore be

expected over the course of the pandemic, similar to other crises, analyses on the balance of power in multilevel systems do not provide straightforward conclusions.

A number of studies (Bloom et al. 2022; Steytler 2022) claim that the pandemic led to centralisation in most federal and other multilevel systems, though often only temporarily and not uniformly (Steytler 2022: 397). Examples are Argentina, Austria, India, Italy, Spain, Germany, France, Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom (Vampa 2021; Steytler 2022: 416). Chattopadhyay and Knüpling (2022: 293), however, suggested that except for Belgium, Italy, Nigeria, Spain and Switzerland, multilevel states did not reallocate competences upwards during the pandemic. According to Vampa (2021), in some cases centralisation was part of a consensus among governments (Belgium), while in others it was imposed upon subnational governments without (France) or against their resistance (Italy), while in others a stronger role of the central government was demanded by subnational governments (Spain) (Kölling 2022: 208). By the end of 2020, many federal and multilevel states had declared a state of emergency (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 294) authorising the central government to centralise the crisis management and intervene in subnational affairs (Steytler 2022: 401ff.). Spain is one of multiple examples where the central government triggered a 'state of alarm' and adopted a top-down approach during the first wave of the pandemic (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 284; Saunders 2022: 382). In Italy, the central government also declared a state of emergency and initially introduced national regulations that the regions could not resist. The centralisation of COVID-responses conflicted with the regions' responsibilities for health policy, which resulted in constitutional disputes and diminished the effectiveness of measures (Palermo 2022: 105ff.; Bressanelli/Natali 2023: 29f.).

Despite the state of emergency, in many countries where health policy is a shared power or where the federal government provides policy frameworks, subnational governments implemented health policy with varying degrees of discretion (Saunders 2022: 380), enforced restrictions, organised test and trace schemes and delivered COVID-relief measures responsive to local needs (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022). By autumn 2020, the Spanish government realised it relied on the powers and cooperation of the Autonomous Communities to contain the pandemic effectively and adopted a more decentralised and consensual approach (Kölling 2021: 122).

In many countries, subnational governments have significant financial resources to take social and economic measures in response to a crisis (Chattopadhyay et al. 2022). Still, they operated under an asymmetric framework, in which national treasuries were largely responsible for financial planning (Maher et al. 2020). While central government controls major sources of revenue, many subnational governments faced financial pressures due to the crisis (ibid.; Capano/Lippi 2021). As they received less taxes during the pandemic but had to carry significant costs for the implementation of anti-COVID measures, subnational governments became increasingly dependent on transfers from central government. However, financial constraints also meant that regular transfers to subnational governments were gradually cut. Instead, central governments reallocated expenditure to special grants earmarked for COVID-19-related expenses (Steytler 2022: 414f.). These resources were not always strictly tied to COVID-19 but could be used by

regional governments to address social and economic recovery in the long term. In Spain, for instance, the central government approved a non-repayable unconditional fund of €16 billion for the Autonomous Communities to finance their crisis management and to increase the economic resilience (Kölling 2022: 212). Nevertheless, the OECD (2020) raised serious concerns about the fiscal impact of the crisis on subnational governments, which underlined the need to expand their fiscal powers in order to support economic recovery. The financial resources of governments were seriously affected by the pandemic and recovery of long-term fiscal sustainability and public debt management will be one of their main challenges in the years to come. For both central and subnational governments, this will have a severe impact on their capacity to deliver public policies.

3. Multilevel crisis coordination

In multilevel systems, governments can in principle make their own decisions within their area of exclusive competence. Yet, regardless of whether there are institutional incentives to collaborate with other governments or not, coordination can be desirable to reduce negative externalities (Kennett 1998), contain harmful competition (Braun 2006), avoid intergovernmental conflict (Cameron/Simeon 2002; Watts 2008; Parker 2015; Wasserfallen 2015) and prevent incoherence, inconsistency, fragmentation, redundancy, contradiction and duplication (Peters 1998, 2015; Bouckaert et al. 2010; Jensen et al. 2014). By coordinating, governments can also realise economies of scale (Painter 1998; Bouckaert et al. 2010), engage in policy learning (Füglister 2012; Füglister/Wasserfallen 2014; Wallner 2014) and achieve equity in public service delivery (Thorlakson 2003: 16; Bolleyer 2006).

The review of different studies suggests that, while there are compelling advantages for decentralised approaches, the complexity of formal multilevel frameworks – especially regarding the need to work with other governments – presents an obstacle to effective crisis management (Caravita et al. 2021). Multilevel governance increases the complexity of decision-making, blurs responsibility and accountability for outcomes, creates joint decision-making traps, which limits the room for manoeuvre and requires additional capacities to resolve conflicts (Peters/Pierre 2004; Benz/Papadopoulos 2006; Papadopoulos/Piattoni 2019).

The benefits of coordination are particularly visible in times of crisis (Boin/Bynander 2016; Migone 2020). In the case of a state-wide shock, actions of one regional or local government are likely to affect its neighbours (Cadaval et al. 2022). As cross-border mobility and commercial flows produce common problems for the societies and economies across different territories, several studies emphasised the importance of coordinated policy responses to deal with crises effectively and in a cost-efficiently manner (King 1984; Treisman 1999; Mello 2000; Martinez-Vazquez et al. 2017).

Even though several scholars argued that federal systems struggled to achieve fast and consistent decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the need to coordinate policy responses (Paquet/Schertzer 2020; Navarro/Velasco 2022), many underlined the importance of intergovernmental relations for the effective crisis management during the

COVID-19 pandemic (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 294). According to the OECD (2020), the success of responses depended mainly on the ability of governments to coordinate crisis responses to avoid disjointed crisis management and less on the degree of de/centralisation or the nature of the multilevel system. As Switzerland's experience during the first wave illustrates, a lack of consultation with and between regional governments generated frictions, jeopardised the implementation of crisis responses by regional governments and left little scope for local adjustments (Hegele/Schnabel 2021: 1070; Schnabel et al. 2023). Both vertical and horizontal coordination were particularly relevant in the EU's multilevel system. To grasp the new governance structures supporting the decision-making and implementation of the NGEU programme, scholars suggested the term "coordinative Europeanisation" (Ladi/Wolff 2021). Unlike coercive and top-down forms of Europeanisation, coordinative Europeanisation relies on consultation between Member States as well as between the EU and Member States to develop and implement feasible policy solutions (Schramm et al. 2022). Yet, whereas the EU Cohesion Policy requires the Commission and Member States to collaborate with subnational governments in the design and implementation of programmes, for NGEU the rapid implementation of programmes was prioritised over the need to pass binding multilevel agreements (between the Commission, Member States and subnational governments) (Crescenzi et al. 2021). Even though their legislative and administrative competences were affected, subnational governments had little say in the design of the reforms and measures adopted by national governments.

Based on the occurrence and intensity of intergovernmental coordination, Saunders (2022: 387ff.) and Chattopadhyay and Knüpling (2022: 279) broadly identified three approaches to crisis management. First, centralised command over most measures without coordinating with subnational governments (e.g., Ethiopia, India, Italy, Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Spain, South Africa and the UK). Second, unilateral actions at different levels with weak vertical collaboration between governments (e.g., Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil and the US). Thirdly, strong vertical coordination between central and subnational governments (e.g., Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, India and Switzerland³). As the case of Austria shows, centralised control and coordinated decision-making were not mutually exclusive but ensured state-wide measures while providing opportunities to account for specific local conditions (Hegele/Schnabel 2021: 1069; Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 287ff.).

Almost half of OECD countries introduced new institutional arrangements through which they could coordinate their actions (OECD 2022). In some states, such as Belgium and the UK, central coordinating bodies were supplemented, permanently or on an occasional basis, by representatives of the subnational governments (Saunders 2022: 388). Between January and June 2020, the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments used the *Civil Contingencies Committee* (COBR) and policy-specific ministerial implementation groups to coordinate their lockdown measures, a joint *Coronavirus Action Plan* and the *Coronavirus Act 2020*. Subsequently, however, they adopted diverging measures and

3 In Switzerland, this only started after the first wave.

competing communications (Guderjan 2023: 211). In the case of Belgium, frequent meetings only partly helped avoiding duplications and contradictions among levels (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 395), and in Spain, frequent meetings did not necessarily mean more joint decision-making. Existing intergovernmental mechanisms facilitated the coordination of the pandemic's crisis management (Lecours et al. 2021). "Germany's dense network of intergovernmental relations", for instance, enabled fast and coordinated actions throughout the various phases of the pandemic (Chattopadhyay/Knüpling 2022: 287ff).

While clear constitutional frameworks strengthened the transparency and accountability of decision-making on crisis management, interactions between the executives were often spontaneous and ad hoc without parliamentary scrutiny (Saunders 2022: 394). Apart from the allocation of powers and strength of intergovernmental arrangements, the territorial integration of the party system, the selection of the executive and problem pressure determined whether and how different levels of government coordinated their actions (Lecours et al. 2021; Vampa 2021; Saunders 2022: 376; Schnabel/Hegele 2021: 544). The competitive dynamics of the territorially fragmented party systems in Italy, Spain and the UK set clear limits to intergovernmental collaboration (Vampa 2021). Despite similar territorial disputes and the regional fragmentation of political parties in Belgium (Bursens et al. 2023: 391), Canada (Lecours et al. 2022: 522ff.; Steytler 2022: 399) and Spain, the salience of the pandemic also forced regionalist and centralist parties to work together.

In Germany, the parliamentary and integrated party systems and a long experience with coalitions at federal and federated levels of government fostered effective intergovernmental coordination whilst containing conflict (Vampa 2021: 613ff.). Due to the personalisation of politics in a presidential system, in the United States under President Trump, the integrated party system fostered blame-shifting and scapegoating between Democrats and Republicans (Lecours et al. 2021). In the presidential federations of Brazil, Mexico and Nigeria, party partisanship likewise prevented joint decision-making and led to a biased distribution of resources across jurisdictions (Steytler 2022: 399). Nevertheless, even in cases where the vertical engagement was ineffective, horizontal coordination between party-congruent governments took place, as it was the case in the US or Brazil (Saunders 2022: 382).

4. Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 challenged multilevel systems not only socially and economically but also politically. Based on a review of existing studies, this contribution summarised and discussed how multilevel dynamics shaped crisis management during the pandemic.

Looking at de/centralisation during the management of external shocks and in particular COVID-19, findings are largely inconclusive and diverse. While mutual learning of tried and tested measures and the responsiveness to local conditions speak for decentralised approaches, centralised actions facilitate fast and consistent decision-

making and the mobilisation of sufficient resources to contain the impact of crises. In some states, powers were centralised during the pandemic either without mutual agreement or by consensus with subnational governments. In many cases, central governments assumed responsibilities and intervened in subnational affairs by declaring a state of emergency; though this lasted mostly only temporarily. The different assessments of whether powers were centralised or not also reflect different understandings of what constitutes de/centralisation in the event of a crisis. Moreover, existing analyses focus on different phases of the pandemic and did not yet examine the final outcome. Even when central governments took more powers and controlled the major financial instruments, the role of subnational governments in implementing decisions was essential. Yet, the latter had to partly cover the costs for public health and safety as well as social and economic measures, which burdens their budgets enormously for a long time. Although the requirement to coordinate crisis management may slow down responses in some federal systems, there seems to be a wide consensus that multilevel consultations and agreements were important for effective and consistent actions. How well governments worked together depended on the allocation of powers, the availability and acquaintance with intergovernmental arrangements, as well as on the territorial integration of the party system, and whether the head of government is elected directly or by the legislature. Fragmented party systems tended to foster competition rather than cooperation. But this was not always the case, and an integrated party system did not necessarily prevent conflicts. For instance, when combined with a presidential system, party partisanship caused blame-shifting and favouring subnational governments led by the same party as the central administration.

While this contribution provided an overview of how multilevel systems dealt with COVID-19, there is still a potential and need for further investigations to better understand the impact of self-rule, shared rule and intergovernmental relations on governance processes and the effectiveness of crisis response. Considering the extreme circumstances under which governments had to take fast and extraordinary actions that deviated from the normal rules of procedure, questions about the political legitimacy of these actions have arisen during the pandemic. This is particularly important in multilevel systems, where responsibilities and accountabilities can be blurred or contested. Examining the legitimacy of COVID-19 measures in relation to the allocation of legislative authority, responsibilities for implementation and the incentives for mandatory and voluntary coordination between different governments can therefore support the development of a model of legitimate crisis governance in multilevel systems.

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