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Multi-level governance in Europe

The case of covid-19 pandemics

Jan Zielonka (ed.)

EU3D Report 7 | ARENA Report 7/22

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This report contains the proceedings of the conference ‘Multi-level Governance in Europe: the case of Covid-19 pandemics’, organised by the University of Venice-Ca’ Foscari, the University of Oxford and ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo in Venice on 9–10 May 2022.

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ISBN 978-82-8362-053-5
ARENA Report Series | ISSN 1504–8152
EU3D Report Series | ISSN 2703–8173

Issued by:
ARENA Centre for European Studies
University of Oslo
P.O. Box 1143 Blindern
0318 Oslo, Norway
www.arena.uio.no

Oslo, October 2022



EU3D is funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement no. 822419 (2019–2023)



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Preface

The EU has expanded in depth and breadth across a range of member states with greatly different makeups, making the European integration process more differentiated. *EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy (EU3D)* is a research project that specifies the conditions under which differentiation is politically acceptable, institutionally sustainable, and democratically legitimate; and singles out those forms of differentiation that engender dominance.

EU3D brings together around 50 researchers in 10 European countries and is coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo. The project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Societal Challenges 6: Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies (2019-2023).

The present report contains the proceedings from a conference on multi-level governance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference was organised as part of EU3D's research on public opinions, debates and reforms (work package 4), which also addresses the regional and municipal level. The conference looked at the role of and interaction between EU-level, member state level and regional and particularly city-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event brought together prominent practitioners, sociologists, political geographers, political scientists and normative theorists.

John Erik Fossum

EU3D Scientific Coordinator

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Urban Governance, Re-Nationalisation and Rescaling

Filippo Celata (Sapienza University of Rome), Raffaella Coletti (CNR-ISSiRFA)

The COVID-19 crisis has rebalanced and reshaped the relationship between levels of governance in many countries. The need to improvise measures for containing the virus and managing its impacts solicited public interventions at different scales, and thus created a unique opportunity to re-negotiate the administrative, political, and symbolic role of central, regional and local/urban governments, with ambivalent and sometimes paradoxical outcomes. A critical analysis of these re-negotiations, we believe, is not only useful to highlight the effects the pandemic will potentially have on multi-level governance arrangements and the distribution of power between levels of government, but also illustrative of the ongoing struggle to mediate between the rationalities of decentralisation and recentralisation in the face of such an unprecedented and highly peculiar crisis.

In the presentation, we provide some insights and illustrations that we believe are relevant in these regards, and that may serve as a basis for discussion and further investigation. We predominantly focus on Italy, where the effects of the pandemic have been particularly harsh and (at least initially) highly uneven, ravaging northern regions and cities, the productive and economic epicentre of the country, which were previously demanding for further political and administrative autonomy.

Cities were probably the places where the impact of the pandemic has been the most visible. This is typical of any crisis, but also peculiar to this crisis, as it challenged the two dispositives upon which cities have thrived in recent years: mobility and socialisation, travel, and talk (Urry 2003), movement and encounter. Opposite reactions took place among Italian mayors, which oscillated between invitations to return to the business as usual as soon as possible and attempts to reflect critically upon the inadequacy of an urban development model that the pandemic 'suspended', and upon the potential consequences and lessons learned.

Those long-term issues, however, were secondary to the short-term need to contain the spread of the virus by any means available. To this end, the pandemic determined a resurgence of bordering into all manners of affairs (Radil et al. 2021). Not only the closure of national borders was the most diffused defensive measure adopted since the early spread of the virus, but boundaries at different scales were reinforced in an attempt to contain its diffusion (Kenwick and Simmons 2020; Coletti and Oddone 2021; Wang et al. 2020). A crucial aspect in these regards is the recurrence of geographical imaginations that emphasised a strictly territorial and 'bounded' interpretation of space (Paasi 2021), of the spread of the pandemic and of its effects. This is on the one hand contradictory to a phenomenon that, by definition, disregards any geophysical or political border, but on the other hand inherent to any attempt at 'containment' and a recurrent governmental technology in how pandemics have been historically managed.

Another peculiarity is that such bordering occurred at each of the most relevant geographical scales. Individuals were physically distanced, households isolated, urban mobility restricted to the immediate neighbourhood, the most affected sites, places and cities were fenced and declared off-limits, not only international travels but also inter-city and inter-regional movements were severely restricted, etc. More importantly, containment measures and other so-called 'non-pharmaceutical' interventions were to a varying degree differentiated both across and within cities and regions. A crucial question became if such differentiation should be dictated from above or left to the autonomous decision of each sub-national authority.

In the case of Italy, as elsewhere, the most relevant decisions about the management of the pandemic were fully centralised (Wang et al. 2020). And while the central State proposed, for example, to differentiate those measures based on the situation in each administrative region, regional governments attempted to oppose such differentiation and asked for homogenous measures. This may seem a paradox, given the strong association between sub-national autonomy and policy differentiation; but we know very well that, on the one hand, sub-national autonomy often leads to isomorphism. On the other end, central governments are even better equipped to pursue differentiation, when such differentiation is based on pre-defined criteria, and not left to the autonomous decision

of each sub-national unit, as it was the case. Regional governments were not against differentiation in principle, but against a differentiation based on criteria they could not control. The pandemic is thus an excellent occasion to reflect critically about the forms and typologies of sub-national differentiation.

Moreover, more than being simply re-centralised, decision-making was located in a peculiar terrain in between the central government, and the figure of the prime minister in particular, and ‘technical advice’, which led to present the measures to be undertaken as an objective necessity, rather than the result of a political negotiation. In this frame, the role of sub-national governments was frequently relegated to the mere implementation of measures imposed from above in a rather imperative and technocratic manner and resembled more the executive and disciplinary function they had in the past, than the autonomist and entrepreneurial one they played in the last decades. Such shift created tensions and set the framework for a potentially renewed relationship between national and sub-national politics, in some cases challenging traditional multi-level governance systems (Radil et al. 2020; OECD 2020; Lynch and Gollust 2021).

One of the most visible outcomes has been the (re-)emergence of nationalistic responses and imaginations (Skey and Jiménez-Martínez 2020; Taylor Woods et al. 2020; Allen et al. 2020; Casaglia and Coletti 2021), which not only took place at the national scale, but also at the sub-national ones (Coletti and Filippetti 2022; Radil et al. 2020). The role of sub-national politics in response to the crisis, more generally, should be considered in view of the process of rescaling of statehood occurred over the last two decades (Brenner 2004; Keating 2021), and within the perspective of growing political mobilisation based on national and regional identity (Jones and Macload 2004).

Even if they were supposed to play a merely ‘executive’ role, sub-national political leaders saw in the pandemic a great opportunity to strengthen their visibility and political agendas. In the presentation, we will categorise and show examples of the diverse strategies adopted by some sub-national political leaders in order to gain visibility and power in their fight against COVID-19 or, on the contrary, to escape their responsibilities regarding particularly unpopular containment measures.

We propose in particular to distinguish these tactics as aimed at either *replication*, *appropriation* (Coletti and Filippetti 2022), or *refusal* of decisions taken by other layers of government. With *replication*, we refer to those cases in which sub-national representatives adopted strategies, decisions and positions that are merely mimetic, echoing and reinforcing national ones. A typical example is the heartfelt appeals made by Italian mayors (in big and small cities alike) inviting their citizens to ‘stay at home’ in the first phase of the pandemic, with tones that oscillated between invitation and menace. In this respect, the threat of the pandemic and the need to enforce containment measures of all kinds, accelerated for example the tendency to rely upon ‘smart’ control and surveillance technologies.

With *refusal*, we refer to those cases where sub-national representatives have rejected the responsibilities attributed to them by national authorities, accusing the central government of discharging their responsibilities when they were asked to take charge of the enforcement of unpopular containment measures. With *appropriation* we refer to cases in which national positions were adopted by sub-national politics, with a rescaling of the issues at stake as well as of the proposed strategies. This is probably the most interesting case from the perspective of geographical studies, as it is here in particular that a variety of geographical imaginations were mobilised in the multi-level negotiation of measures and roles. Refusal and appropriation easily led to conflict, when competition and rivalry prevailed over inter-institutional co-operation, and the matter of ‘what has to be done’ intersected issues of who should do it, which level of government is most appropriate, entitled and legitimised to decide and intervene.

Consequently, if the scope and spatiality of the pandemic was supposed to inspire some sort of unbounded sense of community, such ethos was rather short-lived and the matter soon became how such community should be defined, delimited, ‘protected’, controlled, at what geographical scale and by which level of government. Whereas the long-term effects of the crisis are still to be understood, we believe that crucial attention should be paid to how it accelerated, suspended, or reversed previous dynamics regarding the nexus between boundaries, territories, technologies of government and political decision-making, within and between different scales.

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