NAVIGATING DEMOCRACY IN A PANDEMIC: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PUBLIC DEBATE AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Maja Pucelj ✉
Faculty of Organisation Studies-NM (SVN) iD

Angelo Viglianisi Ferraro ✉
Università Mediterranea-CA (ITA) iD

Anthony K. Hunt ✉
University of Texas-AUS (EUA) iD

Contextualization: This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democratic discourse across nine European countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, and Spain. The research focuses on key challenges such as governmental decision-making, transparency, trust in institutions, scrutiny of the electoral process, and the influence of media and social protests on shaping public debate. The study is part of the EU CERV HEARD project.

Objective: The primary aim is to investigate how the pandemic affected democratic discourse, with a focus on the perspectives of under-represented European citizens. The study also explores the relationship between health crises and social inequalities and highlights the importance of legal measures that safeguard democratic engagement during crises.

Method: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyze qualitative data from panel debates held in nine countries between April and June 2023. A total of 313 participants contributed, and the discussions were transcribed and systematically coded to identify key themes related to the pandemic's impact on democratic processes.

Results: The findings indicate that the pandemic negatively impacted democracy, with reports of power exploitation by national politicians and a rise in misinformation. The study also highlights how the pandemic worsened social inequalities, particularly in democratic participation. However, the conclusions are limited by a lack of diversity among participants, and future research should include a broader demographic and assess the long-term effects of the pandemic on democracy.

Keywords: COVID-19; Public Debate; Disinformation, Fake news; Public Trust in Institutions.

NAVEGANDO A DEMOCRACIA EM UMA PANDEMIA: O IMPACTO DA COVID-19 NO DEBATE PUBLICO E NOS PROCESSOS DEMOCRATICOS

Contextualização do tema: Este estudo examina o impacto da pandemia de COVID-19 no discurso democrático em nove países europeus: Bulgária, Chipre, França, Itália, Grécia, Portugal, Eslovênia, Suécia e Espanha. A pesquisa foca em desafios-chave, como a tomada de decisões governamentais, transparência, confiança nas instituições, escrutínio do processo eleitoral e a influência da mídia e dos protestos sociais na formação do debate público. O estudo faz parte do projeto EU CERV HEARD.

Objetivo: O principal objetivo é investigar como a pandemia afetou o discurso democrático, com foco nas perspectivas de cidadãos europeus sub-representados. O estudo também explora a relação entre crises de saúde e desigualdades sociais, destacando a importância de medidas legais que protejam o engajamento democrático durante crises.

Metodologia: A Análise Temática Reflexiva (ATR) foi utilizada para analisar dados qualitativos de debates em painéis realizados em nove países entre abril e junho de 2023. Um total de 313 participantes contribuiu, e as discussões foram transcritas e codificadas sistematicamente para identificar temas-chave relacionados ao impacto da pandemia nos processos democráticos.

Resultados: Os resultados indicam que a pandemia impactou negativamente a democracia, com relatos de exploração do poder por políticos nacionais e um aumento da desinformação. O estudo também destaca como a pandemia agravou as desigualdades sociais, especialmente na participação democrática. No entanto, as conclusões são limitadas pela falta de diversidade entre os participantes, e pesquisas futuras devem incluir uma amostra mais ampla e avaliar os efeitos de longo prazo da pandemia na democracia.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; Debate Público; Desinformação; Notícias falsas; Confiança Pública nas Instituições.

NAVEGANDO LA DEMOCRACIA EN UNA PANDEMIA: EL IMPACTO DE LA COVID-19 EN EL DEBATE PÚBLICO Y LOS PROCESOS DEMOCRÁTICOS

Contextualización: Este estudio examina el impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19 en el discurso democrático en nueve países europeos: Bulgaria, Chipre, Francia, Italia, Grecia, Portugal, Eslovenia, Suecia y España. La investigación se centra en desafíos clave, como la toma de decisiones gubernamentales, la transparencia, la confianza en las instituciones, el escrutinio del proceso electoral y la influencia de los medios de comunicación y las protestas sociales en la formación del debate público. El estudio es parte del proyecto EU CERV HEARD.

Objetivo: El objetivo principal es investigar cómo la pandemia afectó el discurso democrático, con un enfoque en las perspectivas de ciudadanos europeos subrepresentados. El estudio también explora la relación entre las crisis sanitarias y las desigualdades sociales, destacando la importancia de medidas legales que protejan el compromiso democrático durante las crisis.

Método: Se utilizó el Análisis Temático Reflexivo (ATR) para analizar datos cualitativos de debates en paneles realizados en nueve países entre abril y junio de 2023. Un total de 313 participantes contribuyeron, y las discusiones fueron transcritas y codificadas sistemáticamente para identificar los temas clave relacionados con el impacto de la pandemia en los procesos democráticos.

Resultados: Los resultados indican que la pandemia afectó negativamente a la democracia, con informes de explotación del poder por parte de políticos nacionales y un aumento de la desinformación. El estudio también destaca cómo la pandemia agravó las desigualdades sociales, especialmente en la participación democrática. Sin embargo, las conclusiones están limitadas por la falta de diversidad entre los participantes, y se recomienda que futuras investigaciones incluyan una muestra más amplia y evalúen los efectos a largo plazo de la pandemia en la democracia.

Palabras clave: COVID-19; Debate Público; Desinformación; Noticias falsas; Confianza Pública en las Instituciones.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out at the end of 2019 and spread rapidly around the world, had a significant impact on public health, the economy and political structures. The implementation of measures to contain the transmission of the virus, such as the imposition of lockdowns, the imposition of travel restrictions and the enforcement of social distancing, has also had an impact on democratic processes and institutions worldwide. These measures often limited the ability of individuals to participate in democratic activities and articulate their opinions, which emphasizes the importance of ensuring the inclusion of different perspectives in a democracy. And the word "democracy", which derives from ancient Greeks words that mean people (demos) and rule (kratos), foresees that the key part of democracy stems from the fact that people have a voice. Which was not the case in the covid-19 pandemic, where we could see different groups of people, being left without the possibility to raise their voice (like vulnerable people, marginalized communities, and people, lacking access to digital platforms). This lack of representation highlights the need for reliable and accurate information, as Pajnik and Hrženjak noted: "A public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic brings many uncertainties and requires reliable and accurate information."[1] Mentioned information can be obtained by examining the broader implications of crises on democratic structures. As mentioned by Merkel[2] and Sorsa and Kivikoski[3] democracy tends to be inextricably connected with crisis. Democracies are frequently seen as being in a state of crisis because they lack certain characteristics that we view to be essential to democracy. Crises such as financial, social or political crises tend to expose the weaknesses of democratic institutions and at the same time cast doubt on their ability to withstand and overcome challenges. On the other hand, Sorsa and Kivikoski[4] and Przeworski[5] point out that although various democratic theories emphasize different aspects of democracy, there is broad consensus that external shocks, particularly significant crises like financial downturns or pandemics, are crucial in testing the resilience of democratic institutions and practices. Large-scale crises typically pose challenges to democracy and often have detrimental effects. However, these crises can also lead to a recovery and, in some cases, even a strengthening of

---

[1] PAJNIK, M.; HRŽENJAK, M. The Intertwining of the Covid-19 Pandemic with Democracy Backlash: Making Sense of Journalism in Crisis. **Journalism Practice**, v. 18, n. 5, p. 1175–1192, 2022

[2] MERKEL, W. Is there a crisis of democracy? **Democratic Theory**, v. 1, n. 1, p. 11–25, 2014.

[3] SORSA, V. P.; KIVIKOSKI, K. COVID-19 and democracy: A scoping review. **BMC Public Health**, v. 23, p. 1668, 2023.

[4] SORSA, V. P.; KIVIKOSKI, K. COVID-19 and democracy: A scoping review. **BMC Public Health**, v. 23, p. 1668, 2023.

[5] PRZEWORSKI, A. **Crises of democracy**. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

democratic systems. This emphasizes the dual nature of crises in democratic systems. Crises can undermine and weaken the core elements of democracy by exacerbating existing weaknesses. On the other hand, these same crises can serve as triggers for revitalization and restructuring, forcing democratic institutions to adapt and evolve if we seize the opportunity to learn and grow from such moments as countries and individuals.

This dynamic becomes particularly clear when analyzing specific metrics that capture the state of democracy during crises. An important indicator to evaluate how the COVID 19 crisis has affected the democratic debate is the Democracy Index, a global measurement that is taking place annually in all countries and reveals insight of the citizens perspective about the level of democracy in their country. The indicators of this index include the quality and participation in the elections, the functioning of government, the political participation, the democratic political culture, and the enjoyment of individual liberties. Figure 1 shows that the period of COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the democracy index.

Figure 1. Democracy index for researched countries, Europe and the World
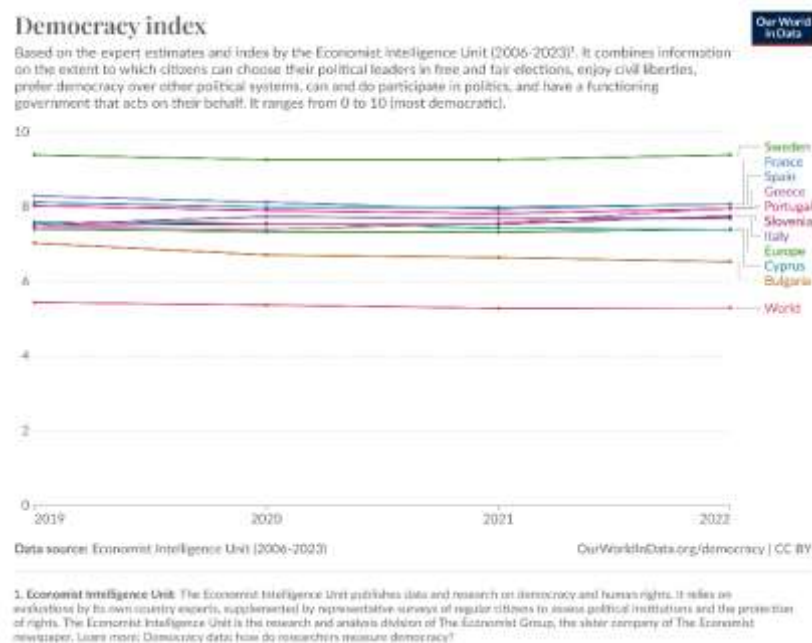
Source: Adapted from Herre et al. (2023)

According to the Democracy Index, the average global democracy score fell from 5.44 in 2019 to 5.37 in 2020, marking a significant decline and the worst score from year 2006, when the index was first produced.[6] The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected democracy globally, as seen in the postponement or cancellation of elections in at least 79 countries or

---

[6] EIU. Covid-19 pandemic causes a global democracy slump. **The Economist Intelligence Unit**, 2 feb. 2021. Available at: https://www.eiu.com/n/covid-19-pandemic-causes-a-global-democracy-slump/. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

territories, increased crackdowns, arrests, and torture of protesters, and the use of military force and coups to consolidate power, while international election participants were often absent due to quarantine restrictions.[7] The worsening of democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic was also highlighted in a report by Freedom House, which noted a decline in democratic conditions and human rights in 80 countries, with the most severe effects observed in unstable democracies and highly repressive regimes.[8]

As noted by Kortum et al.[9] and Lewkowicz, Woźniak, & Wrzesiński[10], the public policies, which were prepared in response to the COVID-19 pandemic reflected complicated social life and democratic processes. For example, over 100 countries, including 78% of authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning states, have seen significant protests; while nations like Chile and Sudan have witnessed democratic advancements due to these movements, 158 countries imposed new restrictions on protests, underscoring how a global health crisis has evolved into a broader crisis for democracy.[11]

When comparatively researching the experience of Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden, we found out that Portugal and Sweden had comparatively higher levels of public trust, with Portugal managing a combination of measures effectively and Sweden emphasizing individual accountability. On the other hand, there was considerable public dissatisfaction and concern about trust in Bulgaria and Slovenia. The fundamental issues in all countries were transparency and the proportionality of the measures. Greece, Slovenia and Cyprus discussed these issues intensively and expressed concern about the excessive exercise of executive power and the existence of outdated legislation. France, Spain and Italy faced the challenge of finding the right balance between safeguarding civil liberties and protecting public health. The introduction of lockdowns and surveillance measures in France and Spain led to privacy concerns and public protests. Sweden's particular approach of imposing fewer restrictions led to a particular form of democratic discourse centered around the effectiveness of such policies, while other countries imposed stricter measures, leading to discussions about the necessity and

---

[7] U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COALITION. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World. 2024. Available at: https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

[8] FREEDOM HOUSE. NEW REPORT: Democracy under Lockdown - The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Freedom. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-democracy-under-lockdown-impact-covid-19-global-freedom. Accessed: 19 February 2024.

[9] KORTUM, P. et al. How human factors can help preserve democracy in the age of pandemics. **Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society**, v. 62, n. 7, p. 1077–1086, 2020.

[10] LEWKOWICZ, J.; WOŹNIAK, M.; WRZESIŃSKI, M. COVID-19 and erosion of democracy. **Economic Modelling**, v. 106, p. 105682, 2022.

[11] USGLC. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World. 2021. Available at: https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/. Accessed: 23 October 2023.

proportionality of these measures. The pandemic posed a global challenge to democratic institutions, with varying levels of public confidence and government response. Portugal and Sweden had higher levels of public trust, but Bulgaria and Slovenia faced significant public resentment.

When researching mentioned countries, we can see, that the democratic debate in Bulgaria during the pandemic was marked by significant dissatisfaction among people and their low trust in the government. The handling of the pandemic was perceived as chaotic, which lead to protests and public negative perception against both pandemic measures and government corruption. Similar perception was noted in Slovenia, where the democratic debate in Slovenia was marked by challenges to public trust in the government's handling of the pandemic, reflecting in public questioning transparency and eligibility of enforcement of the measures.

In Cyprus, debates revolved around the application of colonial-era quarantine laws and concerns about executive overreach, while corruption scandals and the handling of protests further undermined popular trust. In France, the democratic debate focused on balancing public health measures with civil liberties. Lockdowns and the use of digital tracking tools raised significant privacy concerns and sparked public debates. Similar debates about the balance between health measures and democratic freedoms was noted in Spain, where high infection rates led to strict measures, which sparked protests and public dissent.

In Greece, we could see dissatisfaction with the transparency and proportionality of pandemic measures. Debates highlighted the effectiveness and fairness of the government's response. Italy faced strict measures at the beginning due to the severe impact of the pandemic. The democratic debate revolved around the necessity of these measures and their impact on democratic freedoms.

Compared to mentioned experiences, we noted two relatively positive experiences, which arrive from the experience of Poland and Sweden. Portugal managed to maintain a relatively high level of public trust, where debates focused on the proportionality and necessity of the measures but were generally seen as balanced. On the other hand, Sweden's approach was unique, focusing on personal responsibility rather than strict measures. This led to debates about the effectiveness of this approach and its impact on public trust.

According to the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, rebuilding democratic systems is a crucial aspect of pandemic recovery and long-term development.[12] This motivated us to

---

[12] U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COALITION. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World. 2024. Available at: https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

explore the under-researched views of residents and participants on the state of democracy in European countries. We aimed to excavate these perspectives by conducting a reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data from panel debates in nine European nations: Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, and Spain. The underlying research question that guided our study "How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect democratic debate?"

1. METHODOLOGY

Before beginning data collection, the study was carefully structured to comply with all relevant ethical principles and guidelines. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously upheld by securely storing the data, anonymizing or encoding personal details, and ensuring that the results were reported without any identifiable information. Additionally, participants were thoroughly informed both verbally and in writing about the study's purpose, the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point. As a result, informed consent was consistently obtained and maintained throughout the research process.

We employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) in our study, with an inductive perspective to examine qualitative data obtained from panel discussions. In addition, we utilized Atlas.ti to enhance the organization and examination of the data. Unlike other qualitative data analysis methods, such as grounded theory[13] [14] or interpretative phenomenological analysis,[15] reflexive thematic analysis is characterized by its lack of dependency on specific theories or epistemologies. This flexibility allows it to be broadly applied across various epistemological frameworks, including both essentialist and constructionist paradigms.[16]

We utilized Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) by employing an inductive, interpretive methodology to examine qualitative data obtained from panel conversations, adhering to the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke.[17] This involved a comprehensive procedure of becoming acquainted with the data, generating initial codes, conducting a rigorous search for patterns, reviewing the detected patterns, developing and categorizing the

---

[13] GLASER, B. G. Basics of grounded theory analysis: **Emergence vs. forcing**. Sociology Press, 1992.

[14] CORBIN, J.; STRAUSS, A. Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014.

[15] SMITH, J. A.; OSBORN, M. Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In: SMITH, J. A. (Ed.). **Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods**. London: Sage Publications, 2003. p. 51-80.

[16] CAMPBELL, R.; POUND, P.; MORGAN, M. et al. Evaluating meta-ethnography: Systematic analysis and synthesis of qualitative research. **Health Technology Assessment**, v. 15, n. 43, p. 6-7, 2021.

[17] BRAUN, V.; CLARKE, V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. **Qualitative Research in Psychology**, v. 3, n. 2, p. 77-101, 2006.

themes, and lastly preparing a detailed analysis. We have focused on reflexive theme analysis since it allows the researcher to have control over the final output and focus of the study, instead of being limited by a certain theoretical framework. By employing this method, we were able to extract complex and meaningful observations and patterns directly from the data, accurately expressing the authentic experiences and perspectives of the participants. The use of induction in our methodology allowed for the organic emergence of themes from the data. This method led to a thorough and well-grounded understanding of the viewpoints of the participants. This methodology not only guaranteed the robustness and dependability of our topic advancement but also enhanced the credibility of our findings.

The table below displays the sequential phases that were undertaken in the Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Table 1. Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Analytic phase	Description	Actions
Data familiarization	• Immersing oneself in the data to understand depth and breadth of the content • Searching for patterns and meaning begins	• Transcribing audio data • Reading and re-reading data set • Note taking during the panel debates and also during the transcribing audio data of the panel debate and comparing mentioned data
Initial code generation	• Generating of initial codes to organize the data, with full and equal attention given to each data item	• Labelling and organizing data items into meaningful groups
Generating (initial) themes	• Sorting of codes into initial themes • Identifying meaning of and relationships between initial codes	• Diagramming or mapping • Writing themes and their defining properties
Theme review	• Identifying coherent patterns at the level of the coded data • Reviewing entire data set as a whole	• Ensuring there is enough data to support a theme • Collapsing overlapping themes • Re-working and refining codes and themes
Theme defining and naming	• Identifying the story of each of the identified themes • Fitting the broader story of the data set to respond to the research questions	• Cycling between the data and the identified themes in order to organize the story
Report production	• Presenting of a concise and interesting account of the story told by the data, both within and across themes	• Writing a compelling argument that addresses the research questions • Writing beyond the simple description of the themes

Source: Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006) and Campbell et al. (2021).

The dataset was initially obtained via the panel debates conducted as part of the European project CERV HEARD, which focused on examining the influence of the COVID-19 crisis on various democratic perspectives, with a particular emphasis on gender perspectives. The panel talks were place in the partner countries of Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy

(in two distinct locations: Bari and Lombardia), Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. The panel debate included project partners[18], field specialists, and participants from the project partner countries. The research inquiry that directed our investigation was: "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the democratic debate?" The dataset comprised transcripts derived from audio recordings of panel debates held in various researched countries between April and June 2023. A panel discussion was conducted about democracy and COVID-19.

The panel debate, which examined the influence of the covid-19 pandemic on democratic discourse, involved a total of 313 participants from various partner countries. The participants were from the following countries: Bulgaria (n=28), Cyprus (n=2), France (n=32), Italy (in two different regions: Bari and Lombardia; n=60), Greece (n=42), Portugal (n=30), Slovenia (n=35), Spain (n=33), and Sweden (n=30).

The panel discussions described lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted in the original languages of the project partners in all the countries involved in the project. All participants in the experiment provided written and oral consent, which was documented confidentially and stored securely at the Faculty of Organisation Studies. This process ensured that ethical standards were followed, and participant confidentiality was maintained.

The recruitment process involved both virtual and physical invitations to participate in panel debates. These invitations were distributed through various channels such as direct emails, Mailchimp emails, Facebook and LinkedIn posts, personal face-to-face invitations, and Microsoft Forms invitations. The questions utilized in the panel debate were formulated based on a comprehensive analysis of theoretical discoveries, previous research on the influence of the covid-19 on democracy, and polls completed in all partner countries involved in the project, as described before. The project coordinator devised the proposed questions, which were then validated or appropriately adjusted by other project partners. The collaborative process of mutually validating questions by project partners enhanced the dependability and contextual significance of the discussion material, showcasing a consensus among field specialists and project partners.

A diverse group of individuals, including people of different ages, genders, professions, and work experiences, was selected for a snow bowling activity. The inclusion requirements for participants were being over 18 years of age and expressing voluntary willingness to engage in the panel discussion. We refrained from employing theoretical

---

[18] We would like to extend our sincerest appreciation and gratitude to the following project partners who were instrumental to this research: Adrià Vila Cucó (Spain), Sheila Rono (Sweden), Justine Coatmellec (France), Foteini Sokratous (Cyprus), Nevena Dobreva (Bulgaria), Alessia Marzotto (Belgium), Luigi Balacco (Italy), Irakleia Alevra (Greece), and Fernando Vieira (Portugal).

sampling as our sampling technique was guided by the diversity in age, gender, profession, and work experience, rather than seeking new insights into the evolving theory. In order to address the inherent constraints of the snowball sampling method, such as its susceptibility to bias during the selection process, we implemented various strategies to enhance the variety and inclusivity of our sample. These efforts involved actively seeking out members from various networks outside those initially involved and using specific strategies to engage under-represented groups, thus minimizing the risk of a lack of diversity. Furthermore, we performed a thorough analysis of the data to detect and remove any prejudices that could have resulted from the sampling approach. This methodology ensured that our research findings encompassed a diverse array of experiences and perspectives, hence enhancing the credibility and applicability of our results. The process of sampling and data gathering was carried out until no new conceptual insights were produced and the researchers verified theoretical saturation.[19] All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In the mentioned panel debate, participants were questioned on following themes:

- First key thematic area was "Government's power," where under the sub-subject "The lack of transparency," questions included the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on democratic debate, views on political transparency during COVID-19, and the observation of gender differences in participation within democratic debates. Participants have discussed about their perspectives, including comparisons to Sweden's approach, and handling future pandemics.

- The next sub-subject "The Governments of experts" explored the legitimacy of experts in decision-making, trust in chosen experts, and perceptions of expert efficiency in urgent situations. The second thematic area was "Trust in institutions," focusing on politician scandals and the electoral process. Questions delved into their perception about politicians disrespecting laws, the impact of scandals on accepting restrictions, and the electoral process during the pandemic.

- The third thematic area was "Public debate," encompassing the role of media and social protest. Discussions covered media's role changes during pandemics, strategies for detecting fake news, and ways to better address social discontent, including the potential for participative democracy to consider social protests.

The qualitative data comprised 10 transcript documents of the panel debate and

---

[19] CORBIN, J.; STRAUSS, A. **Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory**. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014.

10 reports from the mentioned panel discussion, obtained from 10 project partners representing the 9 countries previously mentioned. The files were titled in a way that accurately reflects the topic, thereby providing a distinct identity for the source.

We have thoroughly reviewed and become acquainted with the data and have generated preliminary code from the data. The initial codes were derived inductively from the data, enabling the identification of themes from the participants' tales and debates without any preceding classifications. Codes were derived from a thorough examination of the data, allowing for the identification of themes based on the extensive and detailed accounts provided by the participants. This methodology, which prioritizes the procedure, facilitated a meticulous and all-encompassing analysis of the data. The data highlighted the distinct and evolving features, contributing to a comprehensive comprehension of the participants' viewpoints. We employed Atlas.ti 23 as a tool for data management, wherein researchers worked together to collectively uncover and analyze themes and trends. Regular team meetings fostered dialogue and reflective involvement with the data, guaranteeing a thorough and reliable analysis.

Throughout the whole process of coding (including open, axial, and selective coding), new data was compared to previous findings using the principles of constant comparison. The data from panel debate talks was first analyzed, and then codes and themes were extracted. The coding researchers performed a comparative analysis of existing codes and novel categories by coding and categorizing fresh data, establishing a strong alignment between the new categories and the preexisting ones. All researchers were involved in a conversation analyzing the parallels and differences. The point of theoretical saturation was deemed to have been reached when the categories were found to be substantially concentrated, and no additional open codes could be obtained from the data.

The coding method was independently conducted by two distinct teams of researchers for data processing. The transcripts were examined by assigning a code to each line using open coding. The open codes were later classified using axial coding. While analyzing the transcripts, preliminary themes were formed using selective coding, in addition to open and axial coding. The selected codes were thoroughly discussed in a series of four sessions involving all the coding authors, until a consensus was reached over the fundamental themes. Analyzed primary ideas to build a full comprehension of the subject matter, making links between different categories. Subsequently, a series of important problems were presented to all scholars and discussed thoroughly during a consensus meeting.

Ultimately, we performed an extensive examination of each individual subject, discerning the storyline presented by each theme and assessing the extent to which each theme contributed to the overall narrative of the entire dataset in relation to the study

objectives. Team meetings were held to discuss each of the subjects and ensure their uniformity across all instances. The members of the project team participated in talks to share their personal viewpoints on the research findings, with the goal of thoroughly analyzing all aspects of the data. The themes were not considered conclusive until the project team conducted a comprehensive examination of all the data and assessed the coding to guarantee the reliability and validity of the findings. The team methodically coordinated and restructured the themes until consensus was achieved, ensuring that all team members were content with the presentation and arrangement of the material in a meaningful and practical manner, thereby adopting a consensus-driven strategy.

2. RESULTS

2.1 Pre-Existing Governance Challenges

According to our research, participants reported that countries with existing governance and infrastructure problems had greater difficulty in managing the pandemic effectively. Countries such as Greece, Italy and Slovenia, which had higher levels of corruption, poorer financial systems and lower levels of trust in institutions prior to covid-19 pandemic, faced greater challenges in managing the public perception of the pandemic compared to countries such as Sweden and Portugal, which are known to have higher levels of trust in their governments. In particular, participants from Greece compared Sweden's reliance on voluntarism, which is successful due to its culture of trust, with Greece's difficulties in mentioned area. In addition, the inflexibility of the Slovenian administration was recognized as an aggravating element, pointing to the need for more adaptable responses in upcoming emergencies.

2.2 Governance and Expertise in Pandemic Crisis Management

Participants agreed that an all-encompassing decision-making process, involving both experts and politicians, is essential for the effective management of a pandemic. There was widespread concern that politicians are not complying with their own laws, leading to public dissatisfaction. Participants observed a clear correlation between compliance by those in authority and the public's adherence to pandemic restrictions. In addition, there were cases of politicians abusing their power during the pandemic, leading to a loss of trust and raising doubts about the legitimacy of their actions.

Participants noted that the effectiveness of the pandemic response varied depending on the population density of each country. It was observed that Greece, with its higher population density, especially in cities such as Athens and Thessaloniki, required different approaches than less densely populated Sweden. This emphasizes the importance of

tailoring responses to demographic characteristics.

Participants expressed concern that policymakers do not recognize credible experts from different fields who could provide accurate information on the progress of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants expressed concern about the high attrition rate among those perceived as representatives during the pandemic. Fluctuations in the trustworthiness of experts have had a detrimental effect and additionally caused a growing mistrust among the population. Slovenian respondents also noted that there has been significant corruption during the pandemic. They suggested implementing more stringent oversight of the procurement of medicine supplies for critical conditions that pose a risk to life.

Participants recognized the crucial role of specialists in the pandemic as they advise and support the government in its response. Epidemiologists, virologists, public health specialists and other relevant experts conducted data analyses, monitored the virus and made policy recommendations. Their involvement was critical in developing public health efforts and influencing decisions on lockdowns, social distancing measures, testing and contact tracing laws, and the allocation of healthcare resources. These experts played a crucial role in providing evidence-based knowledge that was critical to properly managing the pandemic and mitigating its impact on the population.

Participants emphasized that the engagement of politicians in discussing professional issues related to the disease, as seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, affected their credibility. They felt that this engagement should be delegated to professionals. Participants emphasized that trust is more likely to be placed in professionals with an extensive grounding in scientific research, relevant expertise and recognition by reputable institutions or organizations in their respective professions. In addition, trust can be fostered through transparent selection procedures and effective communication of specialists' qualifications. They also argued that the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for an overhaul of policy structures in several European countries, including Slovenia. The Slovenian participants emphasized that the problem in Slovenia is that decision-making is delayed and there is a lack of proactive willingness in politics, especially in dealing with scandals. They emphasized the need for improvements in this area.

Participants saw the manifestation of unease and confusion among citizens, along with a decline in trust and notable resentment when they realized that politicians were ignoring the rules they had set. While participants acknowledged that some limits were perceived as ridiculous, they believed that citizens would be more inclined to adhere to the standards if politicians and recognized experts strictly adhered to them during the pandemic. Politicians in Greece and Slovenia were found to have breached legislation by violating

lockdown measures, disregarding travel restrictions, neglecting to wear masks and socially isolate, and attending dangerous gatherings and events. Participants disagreed that the status of politicians or specialists should justify different treatment. Participants observed the excessive exercise of authority by national politicians during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was not in line with the original aim of controlling the spread of the virus. Participants emphasized the importance of a clear and fair decision-making process that includes scrutiny by parliament to ensure that limits are justified and based on evidence. The Slovenian participants questioned the constitutionality of the measures, which were adopted without scrutiny by the legislature.

The vast majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the handling of the pandemic in their respective countries and expressed a strong desire to prevent such mismanagement in future pandemic scenarios. Nevertheless, they cited Sweden as an example of competent pandemic management and emphasized the importance of adaptability, data-driven decision-making and careful assessment of public health and economic factors. In addition, they recommended that future responses to pandemics should priorities international cooperation and building public trust, while considering the above lessons. Sweden pursued a policy that emphasized voluntary advice, prioritized individual responsibility and avoided strict restrictions on business and public activities. This approach differed from that of most other countries, which adopted lockdown measures to varying degrees. Participants emphasized that the Swedish model relied heavily on the willingness of the population to accept government advice and willingly adhere to measures such as social distancing and mask wearing. In addition, the Swedish method was often associated with the idea of achieving herd immunity through natural contagion. The government believed that the spread of the virus in the population, which mainly affected healthy people, would ultimately boost immunity and protect susceptible people. However, participants from Sweden also noted that Sweden received mixed responses. Critics argued that the country has a higher per capita COVID-19 mortality rate compared to its neighboring countries, which have taken more successful measures. Supporters of the Swedish strategy emphasized the potential long-term benefits, such as the reduced economic impact and the eventual development of herd immunity. When thinking about "optimal strategies for future pandemic management"," it is important to recognize the ever-changing nature of the pandemic. Several countries have implemented different strategies that consider their particular circumstances, healthcare infrastructure and political variables. The effectiveness of a plan depends on several factors, including the characteristics of the virus, the preparedness of the population and the capabilities of the healthcare system. Lessons learnt from past pandemics such as COVID-19 can serve as a guide and influence future tactics and measures. In addition, it is crucial to constantly review and improve pandemic preparedness methods in response to advancing

scientific knowledge and practical experience. The most effective techniques for managing future pandemics are likely to be early detection and immediate response, comprehensive testing and contact tracing, immunization initiatives, public awareness campaigns and global collaboration. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging in both collective and individual self-reflection as a community to prevent the perpetuation of attitudes and behaviors that reveal our innate self-centeredness and individualism. Furthermore, they noted a notable lack of co-operation at European level in managing and responding to the measures. They therefore believe that an integrated and customized response, appropriate to the particular circumstances of each nation, is of paramount importance.

2.3 Electoral Integrity and Adaptability During Pandemics

The participants unanimously agreed that the covid-19 pandemic had a significant influence on the political process, both within their own country and on a global scale. They noted that the involvement of politics in certain factors affected decision-making, and there was a clear tendency for a prompt change in the present government. The aforementioned tendency was also noted in the necessity for governments and election authorities globally to adapt their procedures in order to priorities the well-being of voters and election personnel. Consequently, there were modifications made to voting procedures, campaign approaches, and techniques of effectively interacting with voters.

Furthermore, there was an observation that the general public voiced dissatisfaction regarding the government's management of the pandemic, alleging corruption, excessive legislative pressure and the conduct of pandemic authorities. As a result, they decided to pursue a new kind of governance. The restrictions on movement enforced during the pandemic had a significant influence on the election campaign. Nevertheless, the participants did not support the idea of postponing the election during the covid-19 pandemic, as they considered that the results would not change significantly. Participants observed a decrease in the transparency of elections due to the necessary reforms and alterations in campaigning strategies. Participants expressed mixed feelings regarding the importance of holding elections during the pandemic in future. While some individuals claimed that the main focus during a pandemic should have been on the welfare and safety of the general population, expressing concerns that holding elections during such a crisis put voters, election workers, and political candidates at potential risk, others argued that the functioning of democracy should continue even in challenging conditions. Those in favor of election during the pandemic times, stated that electoral processes are a crucial element of democratic systems, and postponing them could set a dangerous precedent.

2.3 COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC TRUST IN PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Participants pointed out the great mistrust during the Covid-19 pandemic and expressed the desire to learn more about the hidden elements of the pandemic. In addition, they urgently needed access to vital resources such as COVID-19 tests and masks, which were either in short supply or constantly rising in price during the pandemic.

Collaboration between the government and experts was and should continue to be crucial to improve understanding of the novel virus, develop public health policies and ensure a comprehensive strategy to combat the pandemic outbreak. This interdisciplinary approach to dealing with a public health emergency of this magnitude demonstrates the importance of consulting with experts from many fields. The declaration emphasizes the importance of fostering a collaborative and mutually beneficial engagement between policy makers and professionals to effectively tackle the pandemic. Critics of giving experts a prominent role in the pandemic claim that this could lead to a situation where a small group of individuals with biases or limited perspectives exert disproportionate influence, undermining democratic decision-making principles that rely on input from a wide range of stakeholders. Furthermore, they emphasized that filling these roles with experts could give them the power to be centrally involved in the decision-making process. Occasionally, specialists may have conflicts of interest, be influenced by political or economic forces, or simply make mistakes.

Participants emphasized the importance of involving a wider range of professionals from different fields (e.g. medical practitioners, psychologists, anthropologists, etc.) in formulating the government's strategy for dealing with future pandemic outbreaks. It was emphasized that these professionals should be involved in the planning process now. They also emphasized the importance of maintaining a partnership between politicians and experts. Participants noted that the military strategy as applied in Slovenia has proven to be ineffective. The participants believe that the most effective strategy is a co-operative one. Experts can provide valuable perspectives and recommendations, while politicians can use their judgement to consider this information and make decisions that serve the public good. While operational preparation is important, it should not take precedence over strategic thinking, which is equally important for long-term planning and policy development. Participants emphasized the importance of politicians maintaining balance in all their decisions, especially when guided by experts. They must also ensure that the rights and freedoms of citizens are upheld in accordance with the constitution. Participants agreed that the best approach involves a balanced integration of expert viewpoints and political judgement, with an emphasis on the ability to adapt and respond effectively to both current

emergencies and long-term strategic planning. Collaboration between experts and policy makers can lead to more thorough and informed decision-making processes.

2.4 NAVIGATING TRANSPARENCY AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT DURING PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

Participants recognize that the challenges posed by the pandemic were unprecedented and that governments were obliged to take swift and conscientious decisions to protect public health. At times, measures were taken that could be seen as limiting openness, such as the introduction of emergency powers, restrictions on information sharing or expedited decision-making processes. However, they emphasized the importance of taking into account the particular circumstances in which these activities were carried out. Authorities were faced with rapidly changing circumstances, limited data and the need to balance public health concerns with socio-economic consequences. Sometimes the lack of openness may be due to the urgency and complexity of the situation rather than a deliberate attempt to conceal information.

Nevertheless, all participants agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably influenced the democratic discussion after the end of the officially declared state of emergency, whether through direct or indirect means. All participants agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the democratic discourse during the officially declared state of emergency. The delegates from Cyprus emphasized that the impact of Covid-19 on the democratic debate was not harmful per se. Rather, it has encouraged a mentality among voters to actively seek transparency in politics. This was also evident in the increase in remote voting and virtual participation in legislative processes, leading to notable procedural improvements and greater public awareness of important issues such as healthcare, welfare systems and the government's obligations in times of crisis. The report recognizes the good element but also highlights the need for continued efforts to ensure transparency, accountability and public participation in government decision-making. This is of paramount importance not only in times of crisis, but also in the long term. The importance of achieving a harmonious balance between responding to crises and upholding the fundamental values of an open and inclusive democratic system was also emphasized. In addition, the pandemic has brought a wide range of political and social issues to the fore, including public health policy, economic recovery plans and socio-economic inequalities. These issues sparked fierce debates and discussions that continue to influence the political sphere even after the officially declared end of the pandemic. The ongoing impact of Covid-19 on healthcare systems, the economy and public trust in institutions influenced democratic discussion as societies grappled with the consequences of the pandemic and endeavored to manage its lingering effects.

Participants noted that the perspectives of individuals were not sufficiently taken into account and that more and more decisions were being made without full consideration. Participants also noted that despite the significant impact of the pandemic, a large proportion of people were not engaging with it. After the official end of the pandemic, many people preferred to ignore the events and instead focus on building meaningful relationships with their loved ones.

Participants agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic showed a lack of political transparency, which had a negative impact on democratic discourse. Some participants said that a lack of openness was necessary to avoid undue anxiety among people, while most participants agreed that the lack of transparency was unjustifiable.

The gender gap in participation in democratic dialogues was more pronounced for women than for men, especially in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Sweden (although it was less pronounced in Slovenia). Participants emphasized that the pandemic has exacerbated an already existing gender imbalance and created additional barriers to women's participation in democratic discussions. As previously mentioned, women were underrepresented at the systemic level and in democratic discussions both before and after the onset of COVID-19. In addition, they claimed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, women were exposed to greater hardships, had to cope with a more arduous daily life and took on more responsibilities, which led to increased psychological stress. This phenomenon was especially evident in women who are also mothers, as they were exposed to increased levels of duties and pressures throughout the pandemic, including periods of childbirth. Participants also emphasized that during the lockdown, women were predominantly employed in key occupations such as cashiers, nurses and teachers. This fact can be perceived in two ways: Firstly, these women were heavily involved in their work, which meant that they had little time to keep up to date and participate in democratic discussions. Conversely, working on the front line gave them the opportunity to have direct conversations with individuals. Participants also noted that the shift to online platforms for policy discussions and decision-making during the pandemic has presented a unique set of challenges. Women found it difficult to obtain technology, get an internet connection and find quiet places to engage. In addition, they have faced cyberbullying and gender bias, which can discourage them from enthusiastically participating in democratic discourse. Nevertheless, the majority of participants emphasized that women face significant obstacles when it comes to actively engaging in democratic processes and participating in discussions. These problems usually stem from limitations in terms of time, energy and willingness. Furthermore, it is assumed that this difference is due to pre-existing gender inequalities, sexism, social norms and the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities, which are often taken on by women.

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the frequent changes and low communication in the appointment of experts, which had a decisive influence on the decision-making process during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants emphasized the need for unambiguous, direct and precise communication. The Slovenian participants emphasized the importance of the gradual adoption of legislation.

Participants noted that the line between transparency and non-transparency has become more blurred amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The lack of consensus among experts on the topic of Covid-19, coupled with the widespread dissemination of information, has led to increased doubts and reduced trust in their expertise. Participants also express concern about the efforts to cover up the mistakes made, which has exacerbated the lack of trust among the population.

Participants emphasized the importance of government transparency in maintaining public trust, especially in times of crisis. It allows citizens to understand the decision-making processes, evaluate the actions of those in power and hold them accountable for their decisions. While they recognize the valid reasons for introducing information requirements during a pandemic, such as preventing widespread panic or ensuring the effectiveness of public health measures, it is important to strike a balance between transparency and the imperative to protect public health. However, they believe that the fear of causing panic among citizens as the main reason for a lack of openness could gradually undermine democratic principles and weaken trust in institutions. Italian respondents emphasized that there is a widespread belief, especially among young people, that news and information is distorted. Participants warned that insufficient dissemination of information by state systems can create a favorable environment for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, as was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.5 Media Integrity and Information Management in Pandemic Times

In the midst of the pandemic, an important shift occurred in the media in response to the unique challenges and responsibilities that arise during a health crisis. Normally, the media disseminates information and news on various topics such as politics, business, culture and entertainment. Their main aim is to disseminate information, impart knowledge and entertain the public while ensuring accountability for the activities of organizations and individuals. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, the media has focused on disseminating important and timely information about the outbreak. This includes data on disease incidence, safety measures, vaccine distribution and any other important updates related to the pandemic. Accuracy and reliability are becoming increasingly important as misinformation and hysteria can spread quickly during a health crisis. Therefore, participants emphasized that

the media played a crucial role in providing information on current events and legislation during the pandemic. They acted as intermediaries by liaising between experts, policy makers and the public, facilitating the exchange of information and ensuring transparency. The media was also criticized during this period for spreading misinformation, which had a significant impact on its reputation. Participants noted that the spread of misinformation was not limited to specific media platforms but spread equally across all types of media.

Participants noted that many segments of society were unable to navigate a wide range of controversial perspectives and misleading information. Even among highly educated individuals, the prevalence of conspiracy theories and illogical ideas was noted. Nevertheless, they used various approaches to recognize misinformation during the pandemic, including checking official sources and more reputable companies. However, there were some ambiguities and inconsistencies regarding the veracity of the content. They noted that the media was portrayed as a harmful element during the pandemic, mainly due to the wide dissemination of false information and related concerns. Participants emphasized that the pandemic has shown the increased influence of social media as a quick source of information, especially among younger populations. Participants emphasized that the rapid dissemination of information through various digital channels has enabled the spread of false or erroneous information. Certain media, particularly online and social media platforms (such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook and dedicated forums), were susceptible to the widespread dissemination of misinformation. The spread of misinformation on popular TV channels, newspapers and other platforms was somewhat limited, but still noticeable.

While discussing techniques to detect misinformation during the pandemic, participants expressed distrust of all news and the concept of living in a state of incomplete truth. They also expressed doubts stemming from their lack of trust in authoritative media. To identify misinformation during the pandemic, people have relied on trusted sources such as primary and secondary educational institutions, official documents, employee associations, government websites and verified sources such as official health organizations and government advisories. These sources provide the latest and most accurate information about the pandemic. Most participants indicated that they had a comprehensive understanding of the situation and were nuanced in their assessment of the news they came across. In addition, they were skeptical about the veracity of the information they received by consulting with healthcare professionals, checking information from various sources and using websites and fact-checking tools. They also relied on conventional media platforms such as newspapers, radio and TV evening news. Strategies such as talking to family members and actively seeking out the original source of information were emphasized as ways to verify information and distinguish between truth and deception. In addition, they relied on online educational

lectures and discussed with friends and family members.

In 2022, participants from Cyprus presented the results of a study conducted by the Cyprus Journalists Association. The results of the study showed that 36 per cent of the participants showed skepticism towards the media, while 46 per cent showed trust in the media in Cyprus. Participants indicated that 31 per cent of respondents felt a lack of trust in journalists, while 51 per cent expressed trust. Most of the respondents get their knowledge mainly from television. According to the upcoming 2023 study, trust in the media has declined. The aforementioned Participants also warned against the psychological exploitation of the media and emphasized the difficulties journalists face when reporting on sensitive issues such as the Cyprus negotiations. In order to preserve the general reputation of Cyprus and the impression of the public, journalists should refrain from reporting on the mistakes and unethical behavior during the negotiation process. This is especially true in the context of the Covid-19 scenario, where several scandals were deliberately suppressed by the media (although not all). The authors of the posts referred to a commendable strategy followed in their country during the Covid-19 pandemic. A Facebook page called "Fact Check Cyprus" was set up to disseminate numerous fake articles that had surfaced during the pandemic, helping the public to recognize fake material. Furthermore, they emphasized that the dissemination of false information in Cyprus is already punishable by a maximum sentence of two (2) years imprisonment. Furthermore, they referred to a current dispute in Cyprus about the possible enactment of laws that would make fake news a criminal offence.

2.6 Democratic Engagement and Public Voice in Times of Crisis

Participants argued that the protests have arisen because professionals and politicians have not heard people's concerns, either because they were unwilling or unable to do so. Participants emphasized that the individuals expressed their discontent but were not heard - this discontent was also expressed in more radical ways, such as protests. The implementation of restrictions on demonstrations in the midst of the pandemic has provoked a range of reactions. Some people supported the decision to impose restrictions or ban protests, citing concerns about public health and the potential spread of viruses. They emphasized the importance of controlling the spread of Covid-19 and protecting the population. They recognized that these restrictions are essential to prevent mass gatherings and reduce the risk of infection. On the other hand, some people felt that the restriction of protests violated their democratic rights and their ability to express their opinions freely. They argued that non-violent protests are an important means for individuals to articulate their grievances, exercise their democratic rights and demand political accountability, even in times of unrest. Some individuals argued that while protests should have been allowed, some measures should have been taken to mitigate potential risks, such as strict adherence to social

distancing and the requirement to wear masks. To more effectively address the dissatisfaction of the population during the pandemic, participants suggested that governments should actively address the concerns and frustrations of the population. This can be achieved through various approaches, such as active participation in citizen-initiated projects, creating venues for public input and discussion, and including diverse perspectives in decision-making processes.

Participants commented that banning the protests would have been a sensible step to ensure the safety of the population. The demonstration could perhaps be allowed, but only if participants were instructed to take alternative precautions to reduce the spread of infection. Participants emphasized that discontent can be expressed through online e-democracy, the use of digital platforms and participation in online activism. The internet provides a platform for individuals to voice their concerns, share information, organize campaigns and raise awareness of social issues. During the discussion, participants reported using social media, live streaming and online petitions as methods to voice their discontent and promote reform. Nevertheless, participants conveyed the feeling that individuals were not actively involved in the decision-making processes. However, the uneven distribution of technology meant that the most marginalized voices in certain groups were excluded from participation. Ultimately, it is crucial that governments listen carefully to people's concerns and create channels for transparent communication and feedback.

Participants emphasized that preparations for future pandemics must be initiated immediately to ensure that both individual countries and the European Union as a whole are better prepared for such emergencies. Furthermore, they stated that their findings are supported by theory, which states that a participatory management style is better because it benefits from the combined knowledge and ideas of multiple people. Using participatory democracy as a strategy to manage social unrest provides an opportunity to create a more direct and inclusive connection between the government and its citizens. By using techniques that encourage public participation in decision-making processes, this strategy allows residents to voice their concerns and hopes, ensuring that policy decisions are influenced by a broader range of perspectives.

Participants emphasized the need to involve all people in the decision-making process during the Covid-19 pandemic. They emphasized that this strategy ensures that the views of the people most affected by the crisis are recognized and considered. They also emphasized the importance of providing mental health resources and social support networks. They emphasized the importance of fostering a culture of resilience and preparedness to mitigate social discontent in times of crisis. Governments and organizations must priorities the provision of resources for strategic planning, education and infrastructure

development to strengthen society's resilience to anticipated future disruptions.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, participants emphasized that internet platforms and online activism are a powerful means of expressing discontent. The internet has become an important forum for individuals to voice their grievances, disseminate information, coordinate advocacy efforts and draw attention to social issues. The use of tools such as social media, live streaming and online petitions have proven to be effective in expressing discontent and advocating for needed change.

Participants observed that the use of disproportionate force and repression by law enforcement during the demonstration in the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak led to a significant drop in support for this type of protest. However, it seems that other approaches that have the potential to achieve better results have not yet been found, leaving many people unsafe to voice their displeasure. Nonetheless, participants gave recommendations on how to express discontent through alternative means without the need to protest. They emphasized the importance of the government ensuring that these alternative avenues are noticed by decision makers, e.g. by participating in discussions in round tables or community forums.

- Interact with elected officials.
- Write letters or emails to the relevant authorities.
- via various social media channels.
- File a formal complaint with the police at the global level.
- Submit formal requests or appeals.
- Requesting the help of experts.
- Engaging in open and honest communication, especially with the media, exploring legal options, community mobilization and artistic expression. Undoubtedly, using these strategies alongside demonstrations can enhance the effectiveness of the message and increase its persuasiveness.
- Use official surveys and other tools to gather public opinion to increase acceptance of decisions through community involvement.

Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing the delicate balance between protecting public safety and upholding democratic norms, particularly in the context of protests. While it is important to priorities maintaining order and protecting the well-being of citizens, an outright ban on protests should only be considered as a last resort.

Most participants agreed that the inclusion of participatory democracy measures, such as public consultations, deliberative forums or participatory budgeting, can improve

democratic processes and ensure a more inclusive decision-making process. Proponents argue that the use of these methods would give locals the opportunity to voice their concerns and actively participate in the development of regulations, especially in the context of social protests during the pandemic. Some see participatory democracy as a way to ensure the involvement of a wider range of perspectives and viewpoints. This may have alleviated the concerns of residents who feel that their views and needs are not adequately represented in traditional decision-making structures. By encouraging greater citizen participation, participatory democracy could have helped to create a policy framework that is more representative and inclusive. Some people see participatory democracy as a means of reconciling public health concerns with the right to protest. By using participatory methods, it would have been possible to collectively establish standards and norms for protests in the midst of the pandemic. These arrangements would have taken into account both the objectives of protecting public health and maintaining democratic discourse. Despite the skepticism expressed by several participants regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of participatory democracy in times of crisis. They point to challenges related to time constraints, logistical considerations and the complexity of decision-making processes. Implementing and realizing a system of participatory democracy during a rapidly changing crisis such as a pandemic can be difficult as it requires adequate resources, infrastructure and a robust framework.

3. DISCUSSION

According to our research, countries with existing governance and infrastructure challenges have had more difficulty effectively managing the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is a lack of specific studies that directly confirm these findings, a recognizable pattern is emerging. Greece, Italy and Slovenia, which have faced higher levels of financial vulnerability, high public debt and political instability before the pandemic, faced higher level of public criticism for government's handling of the crisis and showed lower levels of public trust. In contrast, countries such as Sweden and Portugal, which enjoy a higher level of public trust and a more robust governance framework prior to covid-19 pandemic, were generally seen as more effective in dealing with the pandemic.

An all-encompassing decision-making process, involving both experts and politicians, is essential for the effective management of a pandemic. This corresponds with the study conducted by the Mukherjee et al.[20] that contends that multisectoral approach, involving experts from various fields, is crucial for effective crisis management and that their

---

[20] MUKHERJEE, S. et al. National and subnational governance and decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria: An empirical analysis. **BMJ Global Health**, v. 8, e012965, 2023.

findings need to be integrated into policy-making decisions.

As our research shows, there is a clear correlation between compliance by those in authority and the public's adherence to pandemic restrictions. This finding is supported by Fancourt, Steptoe, and Wright[21], who observed that trust significantly influences people's willingness to follow rules and guidelines, which is crucial for controlling infection and mortality. Additionally, similar conclusions are drawn from studies by Marien and Hooghe[22] and Bargain and Aminjonov.[23]

The effectiveness of the pandemic response varied depending on the population density of each country, which emphasizes the importance of tailoring responses to demographic characteristics. This aligns with research by Wong and Li[24] and Sutton, Shahtahmassebi, Ribeiro, & Hanley[25], which noted that higher population density in urban areas led to increased COVID-19 transmission, requiring more stringent measures to control the spread of the virus.

That the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant influence on the political process, both within their own country and on a global scale, as noted in our study, was confirmed also by the King's College London.[26] Participants also noted that policy involvement significantly influenced decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with the research findings of Bosancianu et al.[27] and Hilhorst and Mena[28], who have shown that political considerations have often influenced pandemic policies, sometimes at the expense of public health objectives, and that they have also instrumentalized Covid-19 to strengthen their control and agenda. The need for governments and electoral authorities to adapt their procedures to priorities the welfare of voters and electoral staff led to changes in electoral

---

[21] FANCOURT, D.; STEPTOE, A.; WRIGHT, L. The Cummings effect: Politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. **The Lancet**, v. 396, n. 10249, p. 464-465, 2020.

[22] MARIEN, S.; HOOGHE, M. Does political trust matter? An empirical investigation into the relation between political trust and support for law compliance. **European Journal of Political Research**, v. 50, n. 3, p. 267–291, 2011.

[23] BARGAIN, O.; AMINJONOV, U. Trust and compliance to public health policies in times of Covid-19. **SSRN**, 2020.

[24] WONG, D. W. S.; LI, Y. Spreading of COVID-19: Density matters. **PLOS ONE**, 2020.

[25] SUTTON, J. et al. Population density and spreading of COVID-19 in England and Wales. **PLOS ONE**, 2022.

[26] KING'S COLLEGE LONDON. The ongoing political consequences of the pandemic. 7 oct. 2022. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/the-ongoing-political-consequences-of-the-pandemic. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

[27] BOSANCIANU, C. M. et al. Political and social correlates of COVID-19 mortality. **Perspectives on Politics**, 2021. Available at: https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/ub3zd. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

[28] HILHORST, D.; MENA, R. When Covid-19 meets conflict: Politics of the pandemic response in fragile and conflict-affected states. **Disasters**, v. 45, suppl. 1, p. S174-S194, 2021.

procedures and campaign approaches, which is consistent with the research of Asplund et al.[29] and Balova et al.[30] Accordingly, these changes were essential for maintaining democratic processes while ensuring public safety.

The pandemic forced significant changes in the way elections were conducted. Participants in this study echoed these concerns and expressed mixed feelings about holding elections during the pandemic. While some argued in favor of postponing elections and focusing on public health, others emphasized the importance of maintaining democratic processes even in times of crisis. A study by James and Alihodzic[31] stated that if the elections need to be conducted in pandemic times, then implementing or enhancing low-tech solutions like early voting, improving risk management, and ensuring transparency and inclusivity in decision-making are the most effective measures to maintain electoral integrity.

Public dissatisfaction with pandemic management was more pronounced in some countries and less pronounced in others, which is consistent with Darmanin's survey showing that half of Europeans are dissatisfied with the EU's pandemic management.[32] This dissatisfaction led to calls for new governance approaches, as seen in many countries where the response to the pandemic was perceived as inadequate. The pandemic presented us with unprecedented challenges that required swift government action, sometimes at the expense of openness. Moon's research indicates that while emergency responses were crucial, they often undermined transparency and public trust, with key factors for addressing these concerns being an adaptable approach, transparent risk communication, and voluntary citizen cooperation.[33] Participants in our research also noted that although some restrictions on information sharing are unavoidable, maintaining a balance between transparency and public safety is critical to democratic integrity.

Participants emphasized the crucial role of achieving effective collaboration

---

[29] ASPLUND, E. et al. Elections and COVID-19: How election campaigns took place in 2020. International IDEA, 2 feb. 2021. Available at: https://www.idea.int/news/elections-and-covid-19-how-election-campaigns-took-place-2020. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

[30] BALOVA, S. et al. Voting during pandemics: Making democracy resilient in turbulent times - Experiences from Central, South, and Eastern Europe. **EPS Paper Series**, mar. 2022. Available at: https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/220524-elections-observations-web.pdf. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

[31] JAMES, T. S.; ALIHODZIC, S. When is it democratic to postpone an election? Elections during natural disasters, COVID-19, and emergency situations. **Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy**, v. 19, n. 3, 2020.

[32] DARMANIN, J. Half of Europeans dissatisfied with EU pandemic management. **Politico**, 2021. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/half-of-europeans-dissatisfied-with-eu-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic-management/. Accessed: 15 October 2023.

[33] MOON, M. J. Fighting COVID-19 with agility, transparency, and participation: Wicked policy problems and new governance challenges. **Public Administration Review**, v. 80, n. 4, p. 651-656, 2020.

between governments and experts in managing the pandemic effectively. Research by Biddel et al.[34], El-Jardali, Fadlallah, & Daher[35] and Williams[36] supports this, acknowledging that interdisciplinary approaches involving different experts, like medical practitioners, psychologists, and other experts lead to more comprehensive and effective public health policies. However, critics like Konig[37] argue that over-reliance on experts can undermine democratic decision-making by concentrating power in a small group of individuals.

The pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities, as women faced greater challenges in participating in democratic processes. Generally, women faced different challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, research conducted by Alon et al. confirmed that women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.[38] International IDEA found that the gender gap in politics remains the largest among all sectors, with women continuing to be marginalized and underrepresented at every level of government globally; as of 2022, women accounted for 36% of local deliberative bodies and 26.1% of national parliaments.[39] UNDP observed that the pandemic exacerbated specific challenges for women, particularly regarding gender-based violence and the increased burden of unpaid care.[40] Our research also noted that the shift to online platforms for policy discussions presented additional barriers for women, including access to technology and exposure to cyberbullying. Although the rapid adoption of digital tools has provided a unique opportunity to expand public participation and decentralize decision-making, it also risks amplifying the existing digital divide and worsening existing

---

[34] BIDDELL, C. B. et al. Cross-sector decision landscape in response to COVID-19: A qualitative network mapping analysis of North Carolina decision-makers. **Frontiers in Public Health**, v. 10, 2022.

[35] EL-JARDALI, F.; FADLALLAH, R.; DAHER, N. Multi-sectoral collaborations in selected countries of the Eastern Mediterranean region: Assessment, enablers and missed opportunities from the COVID-19 pandemic response. **Health Research Policy and Systems**, v. 22, p. 14, 2024.

[36] WILLIAMS, A. Global cooperation: Why cross-sector collaboration is key to building more resilient communities. **World Economic Forum**, 10 January. 2024. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/collaboration-key-resilient-communities-davos/. Accessed: 15 February 2024.

[37] KONIG, A. Expertise versus democracy: A false choice. Young Academy of Scotland, 16 October 2020. Available at: https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/expertise-versus-democracy-a-false-choice/. Accessed: 15 February 2024.

[38] ALON, T. M. et al. The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality. **National Bureau of Economic Research**, 2020.

[39] INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE (IDEA). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in politics. 2022. Available at: https://www.idea.int/events/impact-covid-19-pandemic-women-politics. Accessed: 9 February 2024.

[40] UNDP. COVID-19 and the Crisis of Governance: The Impact of the Pandemic on Peace, Justice and Inclusion (SDG 16). Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-07/COVID-19%20and%20the%20crisis%20of%20Governance.pdf. Accessed: 1 March 2024.

inequalities.[41]

Previous studies, such as those by Hilbert[42] and Robinson et al.[43], identified a persistent digital divide even before the pandemic, with women facing significant barriers to technology access. These challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Research by UN Women supports this assertion, emphasizing the rise in cyberbullying and online harassment experienced by women during the pandemic, which further impeded their participation in digital spaces.[44]

The role of the media during the pandemic was crucial for the dissemination of information, but also for the limitation of the spread of misinformation. The mention is consistent with research by Pennycook et al.[45] and Ferreira Caceres et al.[46], which highlight the significant impact of misinformation on public behavior and trust. The participants emphasized the need for reliable and accurate media reporting to combat the spread of misinformation and maintain public confidence in health guidelines.

The restrictions on protests during the pandemic sparked debates about democratic rights. Participants argued for a balance between public safety and the right to protest, with some suggesting that protests should be allowed with appropriate safety measures. Research by Wood supports this, suggesting that protests can be safely managed with appropriate health protocols.[47]

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of our research show that successful governance of covid-19 pandemic and public trust in mentioned governance was connected to prior (un)successful governance as it was noted that countries with existing governance and infrastructure challenges have had more difficulties effectively managing the COVID-19 pandemic. The need

[41] UNDP. COVID-19 and the Crisis of Governance: The Impact of the Pandemic on Peace, Justice and Inclusion (SDG 16). Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-07/COVID-19%20and%20the%20crisis%20of%20Governance.pdf. Accessed: 1 March 2024.

[42] HILBERT, M. The end justifies the definition: The manifold outlooks on the digital divide and their practical usefulness for policy-making. **Telecommunications Policy**, v. 35, n. 8, p. 715-736, 2011.

[43] ROBINSON, L. et al. Digital inequalities and why they matter. Information, **Communication & Society**, v. 18, n. 5, p. 569-582, 2015.

[44] UN WOMEN. Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19. 2020. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19. Accessed: 9 July 2023.

[45] PENNYCOOK, G. et al. Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention. **Psychological Science**, v. 31, n. 7, p. 770-780, 2020.

[46] FERREIRA CACERES, M. M. et al. The impact of misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic. **AIMS Public Health,** v. 9, n. 2, p. 262-277, 2022.

[47] WOOD, S. L. The right to protest during a pandemic: Using public health ethics to bridge the divide between public health goals and human rights. **Bioethical Inquiry**, v. 20, p. 169-176, 2023.

for an all-encompassing decision-making process, involving both experts and politicians and also ensuring interdisciplinary approaches involving different experts, like medical practitioners, psychologists, and other experts lead to more comprehensive and effective public health policies, was perceived as essential for the effective management of a pandemic. The research also showed that the effectiveness of the pandemic response varied depending on the population density of each country, which emphasizes the importance of tailoring responses to demographic characteristics.

Our research also showed that, if possible, we should avoid holding elections during the pandemic, but if they need to be conducted, we need to implement alternative ways to ensure retainment of public health. Our research noted that the pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities, as women faced greater challenges in participating in democratic processes. In our research, the role of the media during the pandemic times was amplified as crucial for the dissemination of information, but also for the limitation of the spread of misinformation, so there is a need to ensure reliable and accurate media reporting to combat the spread of misinformation and maintain public confidence in health guidelines. The research also showed a need for ensuring a balance between public safety and the right to protest, with some participants argued that protests should be allowed with appropriate safety measures.

According to mentioned, we can conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the democratic debate by emphasizing the importance of transparent governance, expert involvement, gender equality, accurate media coverage and the balance between public safety and democratic freedoms, which answers our research question. The study emphasizes the need for adaptable and transparent governance to effectively manage crises.

For future recommendations it is important that (1) future pandemic responses involve a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating expertise from various fields to ensure comprehensive policymaking, (2) we establish and maintain public trust. In connection to mentioned, it is crucial that governments prioritize transparency and adherence to their own laws to foster public compliance with restrictions, (3) we take into account demographic characteristics such as population density when preparing pandemic response strategies, (4) we address gender disparities in digital access and participation in democratic processes, so it is crucial that policies aim to bridge the digital divide and protect women from cyberbullying and online harassment and that reliable and accurate media reporting is ensured in order to counter misinformation. The recommendations can be further enhanced by those outlined by

the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition[48], which emphasized the importance of safeguarding and investing in election integrity, combating both domestic and foreign disinformation, and ensuring the protection of free and independent media to deliver accurate information about the virus and its transmission.

Our research was subjected to some limitations. The study provides a time-limited perspective of the impact of the pandemic on governance and public perceptions but lacks longitudinal data to assess long-term impact and change. Relying on participants' statements may introduce bias, as individuals' perceptions are influenced by personal experiences and media exposure, which can vary widely. RTA has also limited applicability to larger populations or other contexts due to the risk that different regions or populations were not included in the original panel discussions. The above limitation is related to the use of the snowballing method in recruiting participants for the panel discussions, which could potentially lead to sample bias. However, we have tried to overcome the mentioned limitations by including a wider range of participants from different European countries, regions or demographic backgrounds to ensure a broader applicability of the results. The RTA method also carries the risk of subjectivity due to researcher bias. We tried to avoid this risk by involving all project partners to cross-check the researchers' findings. The researchers also continuously reflected on their assumptions, beliefs and biases throughout the research process and held discussions in the project team meetings and with external experts involved in the project to contribute to the policy discussions and peer briefings.

REFERENCES

ALON, T. M. et al. The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality. **National Bureau of Economic Research**, 2020.

ASPLUND, E. et al. Elections and COVID-19: How election campaigns took place in 2020. International IDEA, 2 feb. 2021. Available at: https://www.idea.int/news/elections-and-covid-19-how-election-campaigns-took-place-2020. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

BALOVA, S. et al. Voting during pandemics: Making democracy resilient in turbulent times - Experiences from Central, South, and Eastern Europe. **EPS Paper Series**, mar. 2022. Available at: https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/220524-elections-observations-web.pdf. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

BARGAIN, O.; AMINJONOV, U. Trust and compliance to public health policies in times of Covid-19. **SSRN**, 2020.

---

[48] U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COALITION. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World. 2024. Available at: https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

BIDDELL, C. B. et al. Cross-sector decision landscape in response to COVID-19: A qualitative network mapping analysis of North Carolina decision-makers. **Frontiers in Public Health**, v. 10, 2022.

BOSANCIANU, C. M. et al. Political and social correlates of COVID-19 mortality. **Perspectives on Politics, 2021.** Available at: https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/ub3zd. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

BRAUN, V.; CLARKE, V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. **Qualitative Research in Psychology**, v. 3, n. 2, p. 77-101, 2006.

BRAUN, V.; CLARKE, V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. **Qualitative Research in Psychology**, v. 3, n. 2, p. 77-101, 2006.

CAMPBELL, K. A. et al. Reflexive Thematic Analysis for Applied Qualitative Health Research. **The Qualitative Report**, v. 26, n. 6, p. 2011-2028, 2021.

CAMPBELL, R.; POUND, P.; MORGAN, M. et al. Evaluating meta-ethnography: Systematic analysis and synthesis of qualitative research. **Health Technology Assessment**, v. 15, n. 43, p. 6-7, 2021.

CORBIN, J.; STRAUSS, A. **Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. 3rd ed.** Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014.

DARMANIN, J. Half of Europeans dissatisfied with EU pandemic management. **Politico**, 2021. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/half-of-europeans-dissatisfied-with-eu-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic-management/. Accessed: 15 October 2023.

EIU. Covid-19 pandemic causes a global democracy slump. **The Economist Intelligence Unit**, 2 feb. 2021. Available at: https://www.eiu.com/n/covid-19-pandemic-causes-a-global-democracy-slump/. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

EL-JARDALI, F.; FADLALLAH, R.; DAHER, N. Multi-sectoral collaborations in selected countries of the Eastern Mediterranean region: Assessment, enablers and missed opportunities from the COVID-19 pandemic response. **Health Research Policy and Systems**, v. 22, p. 14, 2024.

FANCOURT, D.; STEPTOE, A.; WRIGHT, L. The Cummings effect: Politics, trust, and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic. **The Lancet**, v. 396, n. 10249, p. 464-465, 2020.

FERREIRA CACERES, M. M. et al. The impact of misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic. **AIMS Public Health,** v. 9, n. 2, p. 262-277, 2022.

FREEDOM HOUSE. NEW REPORT: Democracy under Lockdown - The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Freedom. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-democracy-under-lockdown-impact-covid-19-global-freedom. Accessed: 19 February 2024.

GLASER, B. G. Basics of grounded theory analysis: **Emergence vs. forcing**. Sociology Press, 1992.

HERRE, B.; RODÉS-GUIRAO, L.; ORTIZ-OSPINA, E.; ROSER, M. Data Page: Democracy index, 2023. In: Democracy. Data adapted from Economist Intelligence Unit, Gapminder. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

HILBERT, M. The end justifies the definition: The manifold outlooks on the digital divide and their practical usefulness for policy-making. **Telecommunications Policy**, v. 35, n. 8, p. 715-736, 2011.

HILHORST, D.; MENA, R. When Covid-19 meets conflict: Politics of the pandemic response in fragile and conflict-affected states. **Disasters**, v. 45, suppl. 1, p. S174-S194, 2021.

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE (IDEA). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in politics. 2022. Available at: https://www.idea.int/events/impact-covid-19-pandemic-women-politics. Accessed: 9 February 2024.

JAMES, T. S.; ALIHODZIC, S. When is it democratic to postpone an election? Elections during natural disasters, COVID-19, and emergency situations. **Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy**, v. 19, n. 3, 2020.

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON. The ongoing political consequences of the pandemic. 7 oct. 2022. Available at: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/the-ongoing-political-consequences-of-the-pandemic. Accessed: 1 February 2024.

KONIG, A. Expertise versus democracy: A false choice. Young Academy of Scotland, 16 October 2020. Available at: https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/expertise-versus-democracy-a-false-choice/. Accessed: 15 February 2024.

KORTUM, P. et al. How human factors can help preserve democracy in the age of pandemics. **Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society**, v. 62, n. 7, p. 1077–1086, 2020.

LEWKOWICZ, J.; WOŹNIAK, M.; WRZESIŃSKI, M. COVID-19 and erosion of democracy. **Economic Modelling**, v. 106, p. 105682, 2022.

MARIEN, S.; HOOGHE, M. Does political trust matter? An empirical investigation into the relation between political trust and support for law compliance. **European Journal of Political Research**, v. 50, n. 3, p. 267–291, 2011.

MERKEL, W. Is there a crisis of democracy? **Democratic Theory**, v. 1, n. 1, p. 11–25, 2014.

MOON, M. J. Fighting COVID-19 with agility, transparency, and participation: Wicked policy problems and new governance challenges. **Public Administration Review**, v. 80, n. 4, p. 651-656, 2020.

MUKHERJEE, S. et al. National and subnational governance and decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria: An empirical analysis. **BMJ Global Health**, v. 8, e012965, 2023.

PAJNIK, M.; HRŽENJAK, M. The Intertwining of the Covid-19 Pandemic with Democracy Backlash: Making Sense of Journalism in Crisis. **Journalism Practice**, v. 18, n. 5, p. 1175–1192, 2022.

PENNYCOOK, G. et al. Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention. **Psychological Science**, v. 31, n. 7, p. 770-780, 2020.

PRZEWORSKI, A. **Crises of democracy**. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

ROBINSON, L. et al. Digital inequalities and why they matter. Information, **Communication & Society**, v. 18, n. 5, p. 569-582, 2015.

SMITH, J. A.; OSBORN, M. Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In: SMITH, J. A. (Ed.). **Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods**. London: Sage Publications, 2003. p. 51-80.

SORSA, V. P.; KIVIKOSKI, K. COVID-19 and democracy: A scoping review. **BMC Public Health**, v. 23, p. 1668, 2023.

SUTTON, J. et al. Population density and spreading of COVID-19 in England and Wales. **PLOS ONE**, 2022.

U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COALITION. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World. 2024. Available at: https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/. Accessed: 1 May 2024.

UN WOMEN. Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19. 2020. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19. Accessed: 9 July 2023.

UNDP. COVID-19 and the Crisis of Governance: The Impact of the Pandemic on Peace, Justice and Inclusion (SDG 16). Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-07/COVID-19%20and%20the%20crisis%20of%20Governance.pdf. Accessed: 1 March 2024.

USGLC. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World. 2021. Available at: https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/. Accessed: 23 October 2023.

WILLIAMS, A. Global cooperation: Why cross-sector collaboration is key to building more resilient communities. **World Economic Forum**, 10 January. 2024. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/collaboration-key-resilient-communities-davos/. Accessed: 15 February 2024.

WONG, D. W. S.; LI, Y. Spreading of COVID-19: Density matters. **PLOS ONE**, 2020.

WOOD, S. L. The right to protest during a pandemic: Using public health ethics to bridge the divide between public health goals and human rights. **Bioethical Inquiry**, v. 20, p. 169-176, 2023.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Maja Pucelj

Graduated from the Faculty of Public Administration in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Management in Koper, and received her master's degree from the New University Faculty of government and European Studies and the European Faculty of Law. She completed her first doctorate at Alma Mater Europaea - ISH in the field of humanities, and completed her second doctorate by New University Faculty of government and European Studies in the field of international studies with an emphasis on human rights. She started her career as a policewoman, where she also participated in a special police unit, she continued her career as a risk manager, head of legal services in the field of leasing and banking, as a director of marketing and auditor in an audit company. Before joining EMUNI and FOŠ, she worked as an advisor to the Minister of Education, Science and Sport in the fields of pre-school education, primary education, secondary and higher education, adult education and the quality of education and as an undersecretary in the Cohesion Policy department at the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. She is an author of numerous works in the field of integration of Muslims into Western countries, Islamophobia and questioning the meaningfulness of the ban on covering the face in the context of the human rights of Muslim women.

Angelo Viglianisi Ferraro

Aggregate Professor and the Erasmus Coordinator, Department of Law, Economics and Human Science. Mediterranea University of Reggio Calbria.

Anthony K. Hunt

Human Resources Director with an extensive educational and professional background. He holds a Ph.D. in Human Resources Development from Texas A&M University, a Master's in Business Administration from Oklahoma State University, a Master's in Human Resources and a Master's of International Relations, both from the University of Oklahoma, and a Bachelor of Business Administration from the University of Central Oklahoma.

HOW TO CITE