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EDITORIAL

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The Decline of Economic and Political Freedom After Covid-19: A New Authoritarian Dawn?

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Abstract

The response to Covid-19 in both democratic countries (adopting tactics of totalitarian nations) and autocracies (ignoring the scope of the problem) posed a grave threat to life and liberty. Are we slouching towards a new authoritarian dawn? Or was the pandemic response an aberration that has corrected itself already? There are no easy answers to these questions but it is apparent that the pandemic was an inflection point for both the West and rogue nations around the world. This editorial gives an overview of the key points surrounding the democratic backsliding globally as a result of the pandemic and introduces the articles in this thematic issue.

Keywords

authoritarianism; Covid-19; democratic backsliding; economic freedom; repression

1. Introduction

Since the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–2009 and its aftermath, economic and political liberalism has been in retreat globally (Niblett, 2017). The rise of populist alternatives to mainstream parties, promising radical change and pointing fingers at corrupt elites (Devinney & Hartwell, 2020), has infected not only emerging markets but also developed economies. The seeming lack of response to economic decline, with "solutions" rooted in old-fashioned Keynesian policies of more spending and more government (Vail, 2014) coupled with the promise of cheap money (Rajan, 2015) printed forever (Kelton, 2020), has widened economic inequality globally (Siami Namini, 2022), and generated socio-political unrest (Oetzel & Oh, 2019).

On top of all of the slow recovery from the GFC came a series of additional shocks, including the Eurozone debt crisis, the Arab Spring, the first Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2014, and, most damaging of all, the Covid-19 pandemic. Unleashed on the world by an authoritarian nation that was reticent to let investigators access data regarding the first days of the pandemic, has refused any additional investigations into its own malfeasance regarding the virus' origin, and has been a paragon of censorship regarding the extent of the disease (Chang et al., 2022), Western democracies were at a loss for how to combat the new and novel coronavirus. Once it became apparent in March 2020 that Covid-19 was a major public health threat, what ensued were massive prohibitions on economic activity (colloquially called "lockdowns") and on freedom of movement and speech, embraced by governments globally to fight the disease (Simandan et al., 2024). In the United States, in particular, mandates to take one of the vaccines against the virus were often enforced by employers but cheered on by politicians, as seen in President Joseph Biden's attempt to write Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations which forced firms with more than 100 employees to institute a mandate and to fire employees who did not comply (Larkin & Badger, 2022). Such draconian measures were adopted in their extremes even by ostensibly liberal democracies, with unlimited duration and the threat of reimposition, generating massive economic uncertainty, turning institutions, and their functioning on their heads (Hartwell & Devinney, 2021).

The effect of the response to the pandemic was to generate substantial backlash in the United States, the UK, Australia, and elsewhere around the world, especially when it appeared that politicians were not following the rules that they had set for others: for example, California Governor Gavin Newsom's dinner at the "French Laundry," one of the world's most exclusive restaurants, came two hours after he discouraged families for traveling for Thanksgiving (Osentoski, 2023), and British leader Boris Johnson apparently had Christmas and other parties within Downing Street, while the rest of the UK was on lockdown (Bowman & Roe-Crines, 2023). Moreover, in addition to politicians behaving badly, it seemed that the rules were being rewritten for specific sub-sectors of the population, granting them exemptions from lockdowns, with protests against lockdown restrictions deemed a public health threat but public protests in favor of racial justice seen as permissible (Diamond, 2020). Similarly, white-collar workers were able to continue working from home, aided by Zoom and Microsoft Teams, while those in the service, hospitality, or construction industries faced furloughs, lay-offs, and an uncertain future. Finally, in the United States especially, entrenched special interests, such as teachers' unions, agitated for school closures to continue long after parents were willing to accept the risk trade-off of exposure versus interrupted learning. In one of the most famous social media missives, the powerful Chicago Teachers Union tweeted on June 12, 2020, that "the push to reopen schools is rooted in sexism, racism and misogyny."

With the removal of lockdowns and the hesitating return to normalcy by 2022, many (but not all) of the Covid-era restrictions had been unwound by governments. Although the pandemic appeared to be something that people wanted to forget in an attempt to return to "real life," echoes of the pandemic continue to reverberate simply because there was no reckoning or even ex-post assessment of what was necessary, what could have been done better, and what was an egregious overreach. Part of this lack of reckoning could be because governments do not want to question the powers that they aggrandized during the pandemic, in case they are needed again. Or it could be that the acceptance of these powers has enabled a shift in politics globally away from liberty and the sanctity of the individual and towards more authoritarian and collective politics.

This can be seen once again in the United States, for example, where the 2024 Presidential election has no explicit pro-liberty party, merely different combinations of the use of government power, from tariffs to gun control to abortion to speech. Republican nominee Donald Trump has jettisoned many of the traditional Republican proclivities towards freedom-enhancing policies, instead embracing economic interventionism and anti-immigrant sentiment in all its forms. And even though the theme of "freedom" was appropriated during the Democratic National Convention with the elevation of Kamala Harris to the presidential nomination, uneasy questions settled around her vice-presidential pick, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, and his commitment to "freedom." Though Walz (as cited in Bennett, 2024) famously said during the convention that personal choices (limited to abortion) were to be respected and neighbors should "mind your own damn business," he was instrumental in setting up a "snitch line" during the pandemic that allowed these same neighbors to report one's movements to the police if they were violating the lockdown he instituted.

This issue examines the global shift that the pandemic accelerated, furthering the decline in political and economic freedom since the GFC to explore how authoritarian governance and economics have come back into vogue. Is democracy in retreat? Is the growth of authoritarianism and does this wave harken back to earlier increases in authoritarianism? Do liberal democracies have their heart in maintaining liberalism or has a fetish been made of "democracy" to cloak deeper ambitions for power? The purpose of this issue is to explore these and other questions related to the unprecedented measures taken during the pandemic and whether or not they signal a major change in the way in which both the advanced and emerging world approach freedom.

2. The Articles in This Issue

To that end, the eight articles that make up this issue examine the democratic backsliding globally from several different angles. The first contribution from Perini and van Schie (2024) examines the uses and misuses of the term "conspiracy theory," a pejorative that gained credibility during the pandemic even when the theories it was hurled against later turned out to be true or at least subject to debate (such as the origin of Covid-19, i.e., whether it was from a lab leak or animal sources). A prime example of the mobilization of state and media apparatuses to attempt to quash undesirable speech, this article does not dispute that conspiracy theories exist nor that they can be harmful, but it arrays this understanding against the harm that can come in a democratic polity with restricting speech. The authors rightly note that academics have a role to play in fighting forces of disinformation—including those who label everything they disagree with as a conspiracy theory—by fostering open dialogue and forcing people to dismantle their inherent biases.

In a similar vein, the next two articles examine the role of technology in democratic backsliding during the pandemic. Firstly, Malagocka (2024) focuses on the issue of digital privacy worldwide and its evolution before and after the pandemic. Highlighting the tradeoffs between new technologies that can foster better health outcomes and their possible misuse by unsavory regimes, this article shows how the usage of these technologies during the pandemic reduced privacy across several dimensions. In particular, the use of contact tracing and digital surveillance used people's own locations and actions against them, and Malagocka argues for the need for clear and effective guidelines going forward to minimize the abuse of such powerful advances.

The second article to delve into the dark side of technology comes from Kneuer et al. (2024), who examine how closely governments monitored and controlled the internet during Covid-19. Focusing on the pressure

that governments exerted on digital media, this article finds that democracies and autocracies alike used the same tools to gain influence over media sources, with many democracies not letting go of these mechanisms once the pandemic had concluded. Perhaps most surprisingly, they also find that for democratic governments, the pandemic apparently constituted a catalyzing event for information manipulation, a potentially worrisome result that shows how difficult it is to rein in government no matter what its form is.

Shifting our view to the international realm, the next contribution by Feldman et al. (2024) examines how the emergency of Covid-19 changed diplomacy and relations between countries, allowing countries (much as national governments did) to set aside obligations and niceties in favor of naked preferences. Exploring the world of "disaster diplomacy," the authors show how crises tend to reinforce the selfishness of state actors while also playing into autocratic tendencies, using the examples of the Maldives and the EU during the pandemic. Importantly, the authors note that institutional quality before a crisis is no guarantee that democratic backsliding will occur but that its absence virtually guarantees that such backsliding is likely.

The next article focuses on a region that had been afflicted with democratic backsliding and the rise of populism even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Alexandrescu and Stoica (2024) focus their lens specifically on Central and Eastern Europe, using data from Hungary, Poland, and Romania to examine the drivers of support for authoritarian policies. Like Feldman et al. (2024), this article shows the importance of quality institutions—or rather, the danger of poor quality institutions—which can become doors that allow populist policies into power. Building a model of authoritarian demand, Alexandrescu and Stoica (2024) conclude that the stories in Central and Eastern Europe are complex and multifaceted, but have at their heart worries about economic security. For a region that had a state guarantee employment and security just 35 years ago, the shift towards personal responsibility has been too much for some to bear.

Beyens and Brummel (2024) follow with an interesting piece examining the politics of change in the Netherlands during the pandemic, highlighting the activities of caretaker governments in a crisis. Using as a case study the caretaker government of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who resigned during a critical moment in the pandemic, their article shows how a crisis can allow a caretaker government to actually extend and expand its mandate. The Covid-19 pandemic did precisely this for the Rutte government, as the exigencies of parliamentarism brought support for the caretaker government from potential suitors for a coalition, while those on the outside were even more vehement in their criticism of the prime minister. A cautionary tale of democratic legitimacy, this article shows how even a government that has resigned can be given a new lease on life due to a crisis.

Our penultimate article, from Marmefelt (2024), looks at the conduct of monetary policy and in particular the attempts of central banks globally to establish digital currencies. Using the tools of fiscal sociology, Marmefelt asserts that central bank digital currencies intrude on an area properly reserved for the market and would eventually overwhelm private digital currencies. We were already given a preview of this during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced payments into a digital realm (via the "lockdowns" and fears of handling cash); however, the associated fiscal and monetary responses to the pandemic, including massive stimuli, may hasten the development of central bank digital currencies as a way to facilitate more quantitative easing. This article makes a compelling case that such a reality will create the conditions for digital authoritarianism.

Given the doom and gloom of our analyses to this point, we finish the issue with an article that offers some hope for the future. Behnke (2024) uses the concept of polycentric governance as a possible safeguard against authoritarianism in the wake of the pandemic, showing how, in Germany, various strata of governance were able to generate decentralized crisis management which remained effective. Challenging the notion that crisis management needs to be centralized, Behnke's article offers a resilience perspective, a welcome change from the "sky is falling" era of crises that have dominated the 21st century. In other words, since crises are commonplace, what can we do to enable our abilities to resist their effects? And can we do it without extreme centralization and trampling of civil liberties? On a hopeful note, Behnke answers affirmatively.

3. Conclusion

The answer to the question if the world is entering a new authoritarian dawn is perhaps moot, as personal, economic, and political freedoms have been on a downward drift since the heady days of the 1990s. This drift has been accelerated by economic crises (especially the GFC) and seized on by those who would wish to expand the power of the state to intervene in all facets of an individual's life—as former President Barack Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel (borrowing from American radical activist Saul Alinsky) said amid the GFC, "never let a crisis go to waste" (as cited in Seib, 2008). The Covid-19 pandemic sent the powers of the state into hyperdrive and, famously, utilized institutions of liberal democracy precisely to shut down aspects of liberal democracy it was meant to enable: freedom of speech, freedom to peaceably assemble, freedom of movement, freedom of commerce, and freedom to be left alone. While the most draconian lockdown measures have disappeared, there is now a precedent for how a state can behave in an emergency.

Autocracy thrives in crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic was no exception: we now see autocracy cutting deep into the global liberal order internationally and democratic values internally. The aftermath of the global financial crisis and especially the pandemic is being exploited by autocracies in an attempt to remake the global landscape, using the West's abdication of the pursuit of freedom and adoption of autocratic tactics as a springboard to spread influence. Rising autocratic powers such as Russia (shown through its long-running invasion of Ukraine), Iran (by supporting terrorist groups such as Hamas and the Houthis in Yemen), and China (with constant threats towards Taiwan) are taking advantage of this situation to reshape the world from a liberal order to a multipolar one. While former President of the Czech Republic Vaclav Klaus pointed out that a "third way is the quickest way to the Third World" (said in Davos in 1990 but reiterated in Kalus, 1998), the allure of autocracy compared to the messiness of democracy is on the rise in a way not seen since the 1920s.

In that sense, authoritarianism is already dawning across the globe. The articles in this issue hope to call our attention to the different ways and locals in which it is dawning, understanding the mechanisms behind the re-embrace of authoritarian measures and how political institutions may have been changed by the pandemic. The research streams elucidated should be picked up by other researchers in political science, economics, business, and other affiliated professions to highlight where the scourge of authoritarianism is making headway, what channels it operates through, and—perhaps most importantly—how it can be counteracted. In that sense, this issue is not just a scholarly examination of an already-existing phenomenon, but the beginnings of a blueprint on how to reverse a trend that has demonstrably deleterious consequences for the world.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Rethinking the "Conspiracy Crisis": Use and Misuse of "Conspiracy Theory" Labels After Covid-19

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, this article undertakes a critical evaluation of a series of shortcomings of the view of conspiracy theories that is predominant among scholars and the general public. Reviewing numerous studies on the topic, we critically assess: (a) how justified the claim is that we are in a conspiracy-thinking emergency, (b) how the label of conspiracy theorist can be used strategically to delegitimize heterodox views, and (c) the practical consequences, for academic research and the well-functioning of democracies, of unpopular ideas being labeled as conspiratorial. The empirical sources reviewed here suggest that beliefs in conspiracy theories have not increased over time and are less consequential than commonly believed, even in times of a global pandemic. Instead, the concept of conspiracy theory has become more prevalent and its derogatory connotation evokes a stigma that tilts the playing field against dissenting viewpoints. The stigmatization and political leveraging of this notion, we argue, lead to biases not only in the public discussion on various sensitive topics but also in the academic literature on conspiracy theories themselves. We analyze these academic blind spots in light of the diminishing political diversity in academia and recent perspectives on soft censorship. We propose to complement the research on conspiracy theorists with an analysis of individuals at the opposite end of the spectrum, who are inclined to uncritically trust institutional authorities and are prejudiced against heterodox opinions. Proposed solutions include promoting balanced news coverage, fostering critical thinking through debates, and piercing information bubbles to provide access to diverse perspectives.

Keywords

academic diversity; censorship; conspiracy theories; Covid-19; critical thinking; polarization; political psychology

1. Introduction

The term "conspiracy theory" has increasingly permeated public and academic debates, gaining prominence during pivotal global events like the Covid-19 pandemic. The substantial surge in the use of the conspiracy theory label during the pandemic (Figure 1) prompts questions about whether there has been an actual increase in conspiracies or if the label served other purposes. Originally a neutral descriptor (McKenzie-McHarg, 2018), this label has transformed into a contentious term that spans a broad spectrum from the plausible to the absurd. Its evolution has not only broadened its application but also raised the socio-political stakes of its use. This article contends that the predominant attitude toward conspiracy theories reflects a form of moral panic (Cohen, 1972), being overly negative compared to what the empirical literature we review suggests and leading to harmful repercussions on democratic processes and the integrity of intellectual discourse among scholars, issues that become even more pressing against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized society and decreasing political diversity in academia (Duarte et al., 2015; Inbar & Lammers, 2012).

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, various strategies were employed to control information, including blacklisting, legal actions, biased search algorithms, and media framing that cast alternative viewpoints in a derogatory light (Amnesty International, 2021). Such tactics underscored the broader implications of labeling certain perspectives as conspiratorial. Claims regarding the pandemic's origin, transmission, and the effectiveness and safety of interventions were often dismissed with limited consideration for alternate hypotheses, highlighting a significant challenge to viewpoint diversity—a concern particularly acute in the academic sphere (Clark et al., 2023; Duarte et al., 2015; Norris, 2020, 2023). Notable examples include the zoonotic vs. lab leak origins of Covid-19. Andersen et al.'s (2020) article at the beginning of the pandemic, combined with branding dissenters as conspiracy theorists, tilted the scales heavily in favor of the zoonotic origin theory, impeding the investigation of the lab leak hypothesis (which many scientists now consider plausible; Gordon & Strobel, 2023; Wade, 2024). Additionally, the reliance on the Flaxman et al. (2020) study published in Nature for lockdown efficacy was later questioned by more rigorous analyses (Bjørnskov, 2021; Herby et al., 2023), yet skepticism was often labeled as "misinformation." These instances highlight the need for a nuanced understanding that respects the complexity of ideas and avoids dismissing alternative views based on oversimplified sociological categories.

We aim to dissect the social ramifications of the conspiracy theory concept and examine its role within societal and academic discourse. We critique the prevailing narrative that views conspiracy thinking as a societal emergency justifying restrictive political actions, a perspective intensified during the so-called "infodemic" of the Covid-19 era (European Parliament, 2023; WHO, 2020). The handling of the Covid-19 pandemic offers instructive examples of the dangers associated with prematurely dismissing ideas as conspiratorial. For instance, initial skepticism regarding the efficacy of surgical masks, broadly labeled as a conspiracy theory, later found support through rigorous scientific evaluation in a Cochrane review (Jefferson et al., 2023).

By critically examining the use of the conspiracy theory label, this article explores its impact on democratic discourse and the essential role diverse viewpoints play in sustaining a healthy democratic society. As a corollary, if our claims against the conspiracy theory emergency are correct, our analysis has broader implications for the credibility of alarmist claims by influential networks in academia, legacy media, and politics.

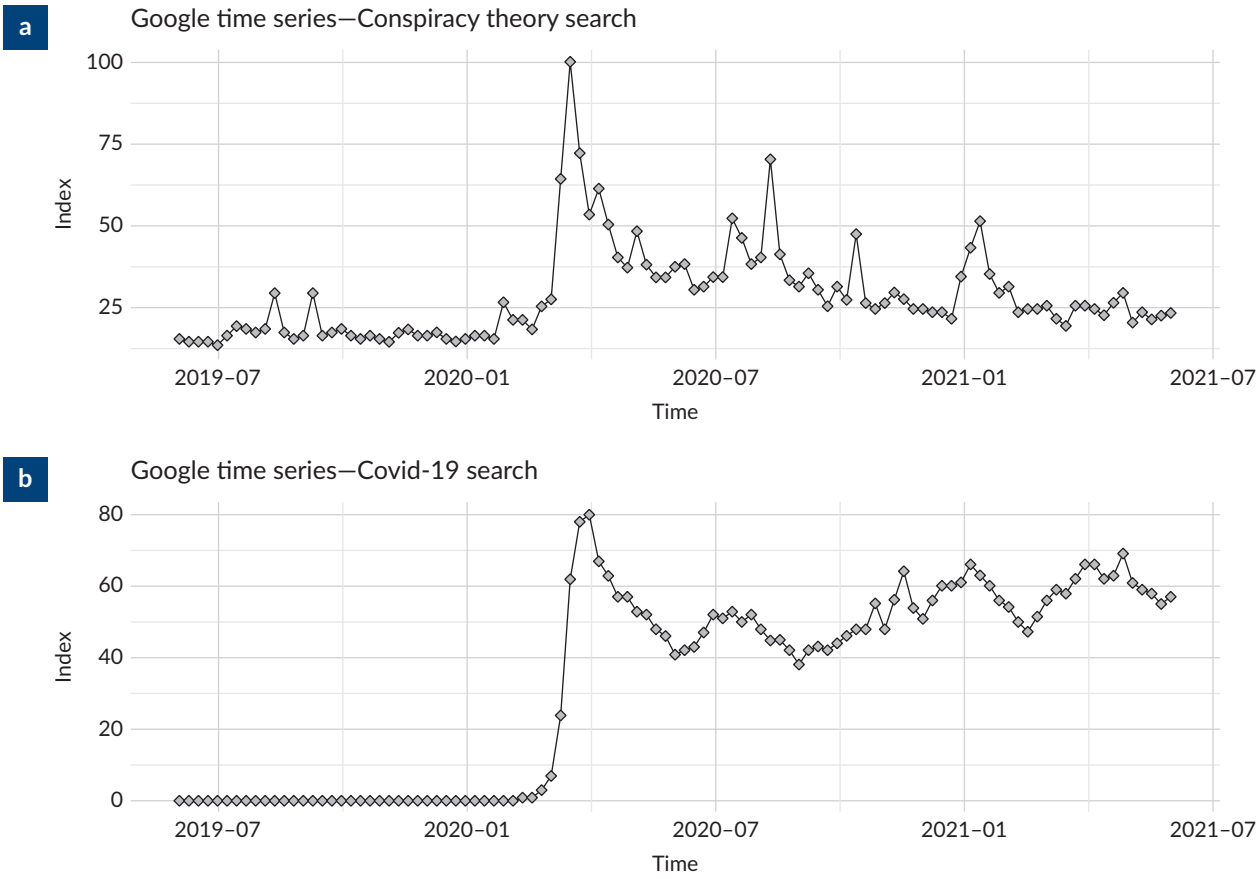

Figure 1. Time series analysis of Google search trends. Notes: The figure shows Google search trends from mid-2019 to mid-2021; (a) displays searches for "conspiracy theories" and (b) shows searches for "Covid-19"; both trends are indexed from 0 to 100.

2. The Controversial Concept of Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories can be defined as interpretations of events or practices based on hypothetical conspiracies as a salient cause (Matthews, 2023). Surveys indicate that 40% of Americans believe a select group of powerful figures manipulates global affairs, irrespective of official leadership positions (Orth, 2022). David Coady reports that approximately three-quarters of Americans think the US government regularly engages in conspiratorial and clandestine operations (Coady, 2018, p. 182). This belief is not confined to the US; for example, in the UK, 55% of individuals subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory, a sentiment echoed across other European nations (Drochon, 2018).

Colloquially, the terms conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theories are not merely used to identify those who believe in the malfeasance of a small group of manipulative rulers. The concept is also extended to those who express viewpoints that are dissenting from the mainstream narrative, even in cases where no clear malevolent intent of a small group of powerful individuals is expressed or implied. A pertinent and recent example is represented by Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who, in the House of Commons, was questioned by the opposition leader Pierre Poilievre about receiving a donation from government contractors and similar alleged cases of corruption. Trudeau replied by accusing the opposition of "peddling conspiracy theories" and refusing to further elaborate on the topic (Toronto Sun, 2024).

The ordinary use of "conspiracy theory" extends beyond merely referencing actual theories about conspiracies; it carries an evaluation of these theories as false and unjustified (Napolitano & Reuter, 2023), and presents them as individual and social pathologies, as they exploit cognitive biases and hostile tendencies and constitute substantial dangers for society at large (Basham & Dentith, 2018; Coady, 2018; Harambam & Aupers, 2015). This stigma toward conspiracy theories is so ingrained that many scholars believe the very definition of a conspiracy theory should inherently include a negative evaluation, implying that such theories are essentially baseless and false (e.g., Brotherton & French, 2014; Levy, 2019), also in light of their potential danger for society, such as promoting risky behaviors, obscuring truths, and diverting attention from more pressing issues (Cassam, 2019). This raises an important question: How substantial and urgent are the societal problems associated with conspiracy theories, and are the responses to them justified?

3. The Standard View: Conspiracy Theories as a Global Crisis

The perception that conspiracy theories represent a significant socio-political emergency is predominant in current discourse. Recent claims by journalists (e.g., Dacombe, 2023) and scholars (e.g., Dow et al., 2021) support the public belief that the prevalence of conspiracies is increasing (CBS News, 2018) and that this is fueled by the advent of social media. This sense of urgency has led to calls for policy interventions designed to mitigate the impact of conspiracy theories, which are increasingly viewed as threats to democratic processes and public health. Consequently, policymakers globally have embraced the notion of treating the spread of conspiracy theories as an "emergency," actively establishing legislative and regulatory frameworks aimed at safeguarding the public from dangerous, misleading, and conspiratorial information (e.g., Finlay, 2023; Jivali, 2023; Lewis, 2023; WHO, 2020).

The climate of emergency surrounding conspiracy theories notably intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. This period marked the emergence of the "infodemic," a term coined to describe the overwhelming proliferation of both accurate and misleading information across various media platforms, complicating the dissemination of public health messages from official authorities (WHO, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). According to Naeem and Bhatti (2020), managing this infodemic requires a coordinated response from information professionals to ensure the public receives reliable guidance. Similarly, The Lancet Infectious Diseases (2020) emphasized the challenges posed by the infodemic in managing the spread of Covid-19, highlighting the need for effective communication strategies. Despite the WHO declaring that Covid-19 is no longer a global emergency ("WHO downgrades Covid," 2024), the most recent Global Risks Perception Survey, published by the World Economic Forum in collaboration with nearly 1500 experts worldwide, viewed "misinformation and disinformation" as the main emergency the world is facing over the next few years, above any other economic, environmental, geopolitical, societal, and technological risks (World Economic Forum, 2024), with Covid-19 becoming a prototypical example of the alleged dangers of letting misinformation spread (Ecker et al., 2024).

This deep-seated concern is evident in the way academics and opinion makers represent individuals who hold conspiratorial beliefs. In both popular media and academic literature (Hagen, 2020), conspiracy theorists are frequently portrayed as irrational and unscientific (Butter & Knight, 2018), gullible (Cassam, 2016), potentially violent (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019) and supporting of violence (Jolley & Paterson, 2020), paranoid (Hofstadter, 1965), delusional (Husting, 2018, p. 115), narcissistic (Golec de Zavala & Federico,

2018), schizotypal (Georgiou et al., 2019), magical thinkers (Ferguson, 2020), neurotic (Bowes et al., 2023), pathological (Kumareswaran, 2014), alienated (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019), motivated by supernatural, paranormal, and Manichaean (good vs. evil) thinking styles (Oliver & Wood, 2014), and, overall, epistemologically crippled (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

4. Emergency or Moral Panic?

Despite widespread concerns about the impact of conspiracy theories, analyzing the empirical evidence on the diffusion and impact of conspiracy theories conveys a different picture. Notably, the narrative of a growing crisis in conspiracy theorism is contested by empirical research. Studies by Uscinski et al. (2022) employing multiple datasets spanning several decades and countries find no substantive evidence supporting the claim that belief in representative cases of conspiracies has increased over time, including throughout the pandemic. Despite the high visibility and propagation of specific theories, the overall prevalence of conspiracy beliefs has remained relatively stable.

The presumed role of social media as a deleterious force in democracy frequently emerges in modern discourse, mirroring concerns similar to those regarding conspiracy theories. Traditional media posits that platforms like Facebook and X contribute to polarization by facilitating selective exposure, where users isolate themselves among like-minded individuals, thus amplifying extremist views and conspiracy theories through a lack of exposure to conflicting viewpoints. However, the research reviewed by Bruns (2019) indicates that social media increases exposure to a diversity of viewpoints, challenging the assumption that social media isolates individuals into echo chambers and explaining why the data by Uscinski et al. (2022) reported no increase in conspiracy beliefs despite the large-scale adoption of social networks. Additionally, research conducted on social media and Covid-19 news reveals how these platforms acted in the opposite direction of what is commonly believed, amplifying the messages of scientists in favor of the main political measures adopted by governments (Ioannidis, 2022).

Further discrediting the alarmist perspective, there is reason to be skeptical about how consequential conspiracy theories truly are. Theories are examples of propositional, deliberate ("slow") thinking. Despite the importance of our intellectual faculties, their centrality in shaping our concrete behavior has been challenged by a longstanding tradition (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Hume, 1777/1998; Kahneman, 2011; Nietzsche, 1886/2003). Abstract ideas are often the product, not the cause, of intuitions, emotions, and behaviors. Accordingly, longitudinal studies on the relationship between Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs and vaccine hesitancy suggest that affective responses against vaccines—emotional and psychological discomfort—precede and shape explicit beliefs rather than merely follow them (van Prooijen & Böhm, 2024).

Historically, the view propagated by the media that vaccines might lead to autism, stemming from Wakefield et al.'s (1998) study, is often cited as one of the most dangerous cases of life-threatening misinformation. Initially, the study led healthcare professionals to adjust their recommendations, resulting in lower vaccination rates. However, when the study later resonated in the popular media, vaccination rates did not decrease but instead returned to the previous baseline (Smith et al., 2008). Worries about vaccine safety increased during media coverage (Motta & Stecula, 2021), making the behavioral finding even more surprising. Indeed, the popularity of skeptical vaccine theories is the product, not the cause, of vaccine worries, as people have resisted vaccination since their inception in the 19th century (Conis, 2015; Durbach, 2000).

5. A Poor Concept With Rich Consequences

As argued so far, widespread misconceptions surrounding conspiracy theories seem to be an example of moral panic (Cohen, 1972). The considerable size of this false alarm casts doubts on the public's ability to accurately identify true crises, particularly when professional journalists and researchers, expected to guide informed discussions, fall prey to the fascination with exaggerated claims. Despite habitual negative connotations, conspiracy theories can exhibit epistemic virtues like skepticism and critical thinking (Ritterfeld, 2021, p. 12), fundamental for a healthy democracy (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Orr and Dentith (2018) caution that dismissing conspiracy theories too readily often fails to adequately weigh the risks of false positives against false negatives. Even if a theory is likely incorrect, its potential significance should warrant further examination. This approach aligns with the economic principle of expected value, suggesting that the probability of an outcome should always be considered in light of its potential impact. Since not all conspiracy theories are without merit, dismissing them outright risks overlooking genuine concerns mistakenly flagged as conspiratorial.

Numerous authors have highlighted the issue that labeling a proposition as a conspiracy theory encourages an automatic, categorical, and a priori rejection (Bale, 2007; Basham & Dentith, 2018, pp. 89–91; Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 2; Ritterfeld, 2021, p. 12). Even justified accounts that point to historical or political conspiracies are regarded with great "intellectual resistance, hostility, and derision" (Bale, 2007, p. 47). Bale (2007, p. 47) describes how such accounts immediately "set off an internal alarm bell that causes scholars to close their minds to avoid cognitive dissonance and possible unpleasantness." Similarly, Harambam and Aupers describe this reaction as an "effort to actively downplay the similarities and exaggerate the differences between conspiracy theories and (social) scientific explanations," a practice they identify as boundary work (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 4). This boundary work risks overgeneralizing the most objectionable features of the least credible conspiracy theories to the whole category of beliefs involving conspiracies, leading to the dismissal of all theories that appear conspiratorial, regardless of merit.

The term conspiracy theory is frequently used as an attempt to delegitimize and dismiss perspectives, knowledge, or findings that threaten a prevailing narrative (deHaven-Smith, 2010; Wood, 2016), effectively marginalizing and silencing legitimate concerns within public discourse (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 46). This act of silencing has been characterized as "effectively polic[ing] the boundaries of what is sayable, knowable, thinkable, and perhaps 'feelable'" (Husting, 2018, p. 110). Similarly, Coady (2023) likened the concept of a conspiracy theory to a policing device akin to the term "heresy" during the Catholic Inquisition. The overly cautious avoidance of conspiracy theories due to potential "embarrassment" (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 82) risks overlooking actual conspiracies or at least abuses of power. As highlighted by Dentith (2018), a robust democracy necessitates taking conspiracy theories seriously. Misleading assertions by the US at the UN to promote the Iraq invasion were initially dismissed as "outrageous conspiracy theories" (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 51), as were questions about the NSA's covert activities before Edward Snowden's disclosures (Dentith, 2018, p. 16). Thus, fleeing from discussions that resemble conspiracy theories only stifles debate and suppresses necessary inquiries. We should rather, as Basham and Dentith argue, engage with each conspiracy theory on its own merits through "contact and evidential interaction" to ascertain its validity (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 84).

When authorities are allowed to censor conspiracy theories, they not only silence claims about specific facts, but also insulate themselves from criticism and inquiries into their motivations for implementing policies,

including decisions about censorship itself. As such, the increased effort of authorities in fighting conspiracy theories can be understood as reluctance to respond to criticism questioning their intentions, competence, and past decisions—an especially worrisome trend in light of the controversial actions taken during the Covid-19 crisis (e.g., Shir-Raz et al., 2023). When institutions are granted the power to censor criticism about their decisions and their intentions, their claims about what is true or false can no longer be trusted given the conflict of interest in using censorship for avoiding criticism. To make matters worse, the censorship appears unfit from a psychological perspective, as an appropriate response to widespread distrust in institutions is to openly and transparently discuss these concerns and inform the public about the decision-making process that shaped the policy in question (Halma & Guetzkow, 2023; Shir-Raz et al., 2023). The lack of collaborative and transparent responses by authorities is corroborating perceptions of potential malfeasance, further fueling distrust in the population and increasing the gap between politics and society (Halma & Guetzkow, 2023).

6. Implications for Research and the Academic Community

The indiscriminate dismissal of all conspiracy theories can also detrimentally affect the scientific value of the research on this topic. According to Orr and Dentith (2018, p. 144), research on beliefs in conspiracy theories remains biased and unproductive as the main concepts involved in the analysis of this phenomenon are laden with negative associations and derogatory preconceptions. The prevailing negative bias in much of the social science literature (Basham & Dentith, 2018, p. 90) prevents a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics that constitute what we call a conspiracy theory (Orr & Dentith, 2018).

In their article "Prosocial Motives Underlie Scientific Censorship by Scientists," Clark et al. (2023) reveal a nuanced view of censorship within the scientific community, extending beyond mere authoritarian suppression of academic freedom to include subtle forms of soft censorship motivated by ostensibly prosocial concerns. These less visible forms of censorship—rooted in a desire to protect societal well-being, shield vulnerable groups from potential harm, or uphold social cohesion—might manifest as self-censorship among scientists wary of career repercussions (e.g., "ostracism, public shaming, double standards in hirings, firings, publishing, retractions, and funding"; Clark et al., 2023, p. 2), or as institutional pressures that discourage the pursuit of certain lines of inquiry perceived as controversial or harmful.

This dynamic shows how the stigma around concepts like conspiracy theories can engender a form of censorship that, while less overt, is no less impactful. By stigmatizing certain viewpoints as conspiratorial, academic and public discourse may be marginalized and silenced through self-censorship among researchers, impoverishing intellectual diversity. With scholars becoming more homogeneous in worldviews despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion (Abrams, 2016; Carl, 2018; Duarte et al., 2015), censorship in academia is becoming more extensive and institutionalized, as shown by a worrying uptrend in sanctions against scholars for their pedagogic and critical approaches (German & Stevens, 2021; Norris, 2023).

Surveys document a concerning readiness within the academic community to support the dismissal of job applications by peers who publish contentious research outcomes. Results from the US, the UK, and Canada indicate that a notable fraction of academics, ranging from 9% to 25%, endorse the dismissal of peers for controversial research. This figure reaches 43% among PhD students, suggesting the trend will continue as new generations replace older colleagues (Kaufmann, 2021). Scholars' approval of discrimination within

recruitment, career advancement, grant allocation, and publishing based on political views (Honeycutt & Freberg, 2017; Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Yancey, 2011) compounds this concern. A national survey among US university faculty found that 91% of respondents consider themselves at least "somewhat likely" to self-censor in various academic contexts, with 25% being "very" or "extremely" likely to do so (Honeycutt et al., 2023). Notably, a deterioration in academic freedom is felt by the majority of scholars across the political spectrum, not only political minorities (Norris, 2020).

Clark et al. (2023) discuss broader societal consequences of this trend, emphasizing that such censorship stifles academic freedom and undermines public trust in scientific and academic institutions. Prosocial motives driving censorship foster an environment where research and discussion are filtered through moral and social desirability lenses, potentially at the expense of truth and open inquiry. This intellectual conformity impoverishes scientific and societal progress and deepens public cynicism towards official narratives (potentially "encouraging conspiracy theories"; Clark et al., 2023, p. 7), exacerbating polarization and distrust that censorship aims to mitigate. Thus, prosocial intentions behind scientific censorship reveal a paradox where efforts to protect society may inadvertently undermine foundational principles of free inquiry and expression that sustain it.

This picture is made even more worrisome by data revealing a pronounced political shift over the past few decades within academia, resulting in a more uniform political landscape among faculty members (e.g., Duarte et al., 2015; Inbar & Lammers, 2012). This reduction in ideological diversity means that prevailing views are more likely to align with political beliefs rather than being grounded purely in scientific evidence. When combined with overly zealous efforts to combat misinformation and with the availability of labels that too easily evoke stigma (such as conspiracy theory), this environment risks marginalizing minority scientific perspectives, evaluating them through a political lens rather than based on their scientific validity.

7. A Bipartisan Psychological Perspective

In light of considering solutions to mitigate social polarization on topics such as healthcare, climate, geopolitics, and democracy, it is relevant to examine the psychology of groups at the extremes of these debates. Whereas research has spent a great deal of attention investigating the psychology of conspiracy theorists (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023), little to no attention has been applied to understanding the psychology of individuals on the opposite end of the spectrum—namely, those who believe that institutional authorities should be systematically trusted and are willing to antagonize dissenting voices with various measures, including censorship. Here we present a first exploration of the psychology of individuals who are inclined towards system justification—a type of motivated cognition underlying the tendency to believe that that the social system and the status quo are legitimate (Kay & Friesen, 2011)—and summarize recent findings that corroborate some of these first hypotheses.

Similar to other social animals such as sheep, birds, and fish (Couzin & Krause, 2003), humans often seek out the safety of the group when feeling threatened (Dezecache, 2015; Palau-Sampio, 2021). In the case of humans, safety in numbers is not only expressed in terms of not wanting to stand out visually or spatially but also in terms of adopting viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors that are considered to be morally correct and accepted in a population (Maher et al., 2023). This conformist behavior prevents social exclusion (Rudert et al., 2023) and provides psychological safety in response to a perceived societal crisis (Wagoner &

Pyszczynski, 2024). Individuals may thus easily and unquestioningly adopt the predominant narrative (Roccato et al., 2021), especially when voiced by epistemic authorities such as experts (Bylund & Packard, 2021), to vicariously restore their sense of control (Shepherd et al., 2011).

Following this line of thinking, we expect individuals who side with the mainstream perspective to be highly trustful and respectful of institutions and authorities and to value the importance of an orderly and structured society where individuals act in accordance with the rules and regulations that are communicated to be the norm (Shockley & Shepherd, 2016). At the same time, this implies that dissenting views or behaviors that go against authorities will be perceived, by these individuals, as immoral and as a threat to the system that they have identified with. A natural response will then be to punish, censor, or stigmatize such views to prevent their broader dissemination (Fischer et al., 2007; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; Hodson et al., 2006; Wnuk et al., 2020), without considering the potential validity of these critical perspectives or their larger implications.

Two recent studies from our lab that were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic corroborate some of the core hypotheses that were outlined in the previous paragraph. The first study (Bisschops, 2023) used an online convenience sample (N = 162) from the UK, consisting mostly of vaccinated consumers of mainstream media with low conspiratorial beliefs and an average trust in institutions. Participants were asked to answer questions about (a) their negative feelings (threat, uncertainty, and lack of control) regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, and (b) their belief in conspiracy theories related to Covid-19. The order of (a) and (b) was experimentally manipulated so that we could study (c) the influence of emotions on conspiratorial belief and (d) the influence of (anti) conspiratorial beliefs on emotions. Results indicated that the initial activation of negative feelings regarding the Covid-19 pandemic caused a *reduction* in conspiratorial beliefs rather than an increase in conspiratorial beliefs as predicted by theories suggesting that conspiracy theories find their origin in existential fear and uncertainty (van Prooijen, 2020). This reduction in conspiracy belief may be understood as a system justification response, meaning that people are inclined to defend their societal systems, including the authorities, when threatened, while showing an increased tendency to reject antagonistic outgroups such as conspiracy believers who are perceived as a threat to the system (Mao et al., 2021). This evidence furthermore undergirds the idea that fearmongering may be used to nudge people into compliance (Mishi et al., 2024), while stimulating intolerance towards dissenting views. Vice versa, the initial activation of participants' (mostly negative) attitudes towards conspiracy theories caused them to feel less threatened, uncertain, and powerless with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, which corroborates the idea that part of the function of affirming one's affiliation with the system is to appease threat-induced negative emotions.

A second study (Dubey et al., 2023) compared individuals with high and low conspiratorial beliefs in their appreciation of a balanced news chatbot that provided a bipartisan selection of news articles on climate change. Results indicated that the group of participants with high conspiratorial beliefs expressed more trust in the chatbot, had a more positive attitude, and were more inclined to use the chatbot in the future, than participants with low conspiratorial beliefs. These findings argue against the view that individuals with conspiratorial beliefs are epistemologically isolated and averse to information conflicting with their perspective (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Instead, the findings suggest that individuals with a mainstream (non-conspiratorial) worldview are more reluctant to consider opposing perspectives on contested topics, in line with the dominant societal push against alternative (conspiracy-labeled) viewpoints by legacy media and regulatory authorities (Amnesty International, 2021). Vice versa, the higher trust and more positive

appreciation of the unbiased news chatbot by individuals high in conspiracy ideation may reflect their hope that alternative viewpoints will be considered more fairly in public discourse.

8. Solutions Towards Resolving Polarization

Our analyses so far point to fear and anxiety as crucial psychological factors that compel people to adopt prevailing opinions uncritically and delegitimize other viewpoints. Initiatives to resolve societal polarization may aim to prevent or mitigate psychological reactions that begin with fear or anxiety and end with out-group derogation and censorship. One practical solution would be to actively constrain anxiety-evoking news by pressing for a more balanced choice of positive and negative news messages (Soroka & Krupnikov, 2021) and a broader selection of viewpoints. The latter may help news consumers derive a more nuanced understanding of societal threats, and thereby counteract fear through understanding (Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019). Another practical solution may be to stimulate debates. Debate may promote and stimulate higher-order and critical thinking, help individuals identify novel facts, and form new opinions on controversial issues that otherwise would have been subjected to bias (Kennedy, 2009). Consequently, debates may reduce pre-existing blind spots or even shift consolidated opinions (Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999). Academia may play an exemplary role in hosting and participating in public debates, leveraging its long-standing tradition of respectful exchange of arguments and its esteemed position in society. A further solution to reduce polarization is to pierce information bubbles in which individuals are presented with a one-sided and limited perspective on currently polarized topics. Although the argument to pierce information bubbles typically targets alleged social media echo chambers and rabbit holes (Cinelli et al., 2022), this argument should also apply to legacy media. These media have been reported as selective in their coverage of contested topics, leaving out information that could threaten a prevalent societal narrative (Elejalde et al., 2018). Including alternative discourse on topics of the societal divide may prevent people from uncritically accepting parroted points as true. That is, if individuals are presented with the same information repeatedly, the processing of this information increases in fluency, which promotes a sense of familiarity, liking, and safety (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009), that causes people to experience such statements as a personally felt truth (Reber & Unkelbach, 2010). By presenting a more diversified set of opinions and facts, or by allowing news consumers to set their preferred mixture of news, the uncritical acceptance of such statements and the prejudice toward dissenting individuals may be effectively reduced (Pearson & Dovidio, 2013).

9. Conclusion

The current notion of conspiracy theory, loaded with stigma and prejudice, serves as a divisive label that marginalizes dissenting voices and suppresses critical examination, thereby impoverishing public debate and intellectual diversity which are crucial to a healthy democratic process. This tendency to silence uncomfortable opinions is intensified in times of crisis, as exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, with authorities calling for unity, and dissidents risking being targeted for their divisive ideas. Our analysis indicates the need to be vigilant about the risks of alarmist narratives diverging from reality, even when informed by academic research. Academia, in particular, bears the responsibility to lead by example, dismantling intellectual biases, and, contrary to the current trend, fostering an open dialogue that could bridge the divides that mark societal polarization. Encouraging an environment where diverse perspectives are not only tolerated but valued, can enhance society's capacity to adapt to new challenges and protect civil liberties and democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Navigating Digital Privacy and Surveillance: Post-Covid Regulatory and Theoretical Insights

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted and accelerated existing trends in digital privacy, intensifying the balance between public health needs and privacy rights. This article examines the concept of digital unfreedom and its growing relevance post-Covid-19, focusing on the balance between public health needs and privacy rights. It explores the evolution of digital freedom pre- and post-pandemic through four key concepts: control over personal information; freedom from surveillance; respectful data protection; and the right to bodily autonomy. Emphasizing the critical importance of privacy in public health strategies, this article calls for vigilant regulatory reforms to protect individual rights and ensure equitable data practices.

Keywords

data protection; digital unfreedom; personal information; privacy; privacy regulation

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the privacy landscape, necessitating a reevaluation of foundational privacy concepts amidst accelerating digitalization. This article focuses on the balance between digital privacy and surveillance in the post-Covid-19 era, emphasizing regulatory challenges and opportunities. Technologies such as contact-tracing apps have raised significant concerns regarding privacy and data misuse (Ahmad & Chauhan, 2020; AlFaadhel & Latif, 2022). The increased surveillance by governments and corporations has intensified these debates (Newell, 2021), highlighting the urgent need for balanced and adaptive privacy regulations. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, digital privacy was primarily concerned with the protection of personal data from unauthorized access and misuse, as articulated by scholars like Solove (2022) and Nissenbaum (2020). Privacy frameworks such as the General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR) in the EU and the California Consumer Privacy Act in the US emphasize data minimization, consent, and individual rights to access and delete personal data. The pandemic has significantly influenced digital privacy, highlighting the importance of addressing both business and government access to personal data as governed by frameworks like the GDPR. The widespread use of digital surveillance tools during the pandemic has highlighted the need for adaptive privacy regulations that address both public health and personal freedom.

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the conflict between public health imperatives and individual privacy rights, leading to more sophisticated surveillance mechanisms (Mello & Parmet, 2021). Such practices, including the rapid deployment of surveillance technologies and expanded data collection during the pandemic, underscore the urgent need for balanced and adaptive privacy regulations to prevent misuse and protect individual rights. Digital infrastructures enable extensive monitoring, leading to new forms of resistance and illustrating the dual-edged nature of digitalization in surveillance. The pandemic accelerated the integration of AI and medical research technologies, exposing vulnerabilities in existing privacy frameworks and intensifying the reliance on digital technologies in daily life. It is imperative that these regulations delicately balance civil liberties with the pressing needs of public health security in the digital era (Li et al., 2023; Newlands et al., 2020; Schmit et al., 2022).

The pandemic has revealed significant gaps in existing privacy regulations. The convenience and efficiency of digital monitoring may tempt authorities to extend their use beyond immediate health emergencies, potentially establishing a new norm in surveillance practices (Donelle et al., 2023; A. Ferretti & Vayena, 2022), highlighting the urgency for comprehensive privacy reforms to address new challenges. Literature reveals the significant regulatory and societal changes due to Covid-19, emphasizing the necessity for stringent privacy laws. These shifts highlight the increased relevance of digital unfreedom and the need for robust regulatory frameworks to protect digital rights in the post-pandemic world.

This article aims to delve into the significant shifts in the understanding of privacy and digital unfreedom resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. By examining the increased integration of digital technologies in daily life and the corresponding expansion of governmental and private surveillance, the article aims to determine whether the concept of digital unfreedom has grown in relevance and necessity after the pandemic. To accomplish this, the article is organized to explore several key themes, beginning with the contextualization of privacy and digital unfreedom. Discussions will focus on the changes in privacy perception and the implications of enhanced digital surveillance. This sets the stage for a comprehensive examination of four pivotal privacy concepts: control over personal information; freedom from surveillance; respectful data protection; and the right to bodily autonomy. Each section will dissect existing regulatory frameworks, critique their effectiveness in the new normal, and suggest possible reforms. The culmination of this analysis will lead to a synthesis of the findings, where the balance between individual rights and collective health needs will be debated, and legislative and policy recommendations to safeguard privacy in a post-pandemic world will be proposed. This structured exploration aims to provide a nuanced perspective on privacy, emphasizing the need for updated, resilient privacy legislation addressing the complexities introduced by digital technologies and global health emergencies.

2. Contextualization of Privacy and Digital Unfreedom

The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically altered the digital landscape by accelerating the use of surveillance tools such as contact-tracing apps and digital health passports, raising significant privacy concerns (Bennett, 2023; Meireles, 2024). Digital unfreedom reflects the expanded surveillance capabilities that undermine privacy. The pandemic has particularly highlighted how enhanced monitoring capabilities can infringe on individual privacy and freedom (Eck & Hatz, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020). Digital unfreedom is characterized by pervasive data collection, erosion of privacy, and potential misuse of surveillance technologies (Rusinova, 2022). Surveillance tools, including mobile tracking apps, digital health monitoring systems, and biometric data collection technologies, pose significant privacy risks and can lead to data abuse. Concurrently, there is a recognized need for robust privacy protections to balance these developments and protect individual freedoms (Panneer et al., 2021). The literature suggests that while digital technologies offer numerous benefits, they also pose significant risks to privacy and autonomy, necessitating a careful and balanced approach to regulation and oversight (Meireles, 2024).

The varied approaches to digital surveillance and data privacy during the pandemic underscore the importance of robust regulatory frameworks. China's case demonstrates the dual nature of digital surveillance technologies, enhancing state control and public health monitoring while posing risks to individual freedoms (Hillman, 2021). Conversely, the European experience with GDPR illustrates the advantages of a unified approach to data protection, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and individual control over personal data (Georgiadis & Poels, 2022). Future policies must balance public health needs with privacy protections, ensuring transparency and robust security measures (Renda, 2022). The pandemic has highlighted the critical need for updated and resilient privacy regulations by global entities such as the EU and national governments including China. By learning from different regulatory approaches and their impacts on digital freedom and privacy, policymakers can better navigate the challenges of the digital age. In non-democratic regimes, such as China, where the rule of law differs significantly from the EU and other democracies, digital privacy is often subordinated to state control and surveillance, whereas in democratic societies, privacy rights are emphasized, though the pandemic has tested these frameworks (Hillman, 2021). The Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) in China, while progressive in some respects, still allows significant government access to personal data (Calzada, 2022). Conversely, democratic societies tend to emphasize individual privacy rights and transparency. The GDPR in Europe sets a high standard for data protection, emphasizing user consent and control over personal data (Georgiadis & Poels, 2022). However, even in democracies, the pandemic has tested these frameworks, as seen with the rapid implementation of contact-tracing apps and other surveillance measures (Sideri & Prainsack, 2023).

3. Concepts for Understanding Privacy

3.1. Control Over Personal Information

Control over personal information refers to individuals' ability to manage and regulate the disclosure and use of their personal data. In the EU, this control is a cornerstone of data protection, particularly emphasized through regulations like the GDPR, which focus on safeguarding digital information. In contrast, the US approach to privacy is broader, encompassing both digital and non-digital information, with a mix of federal and state

laws that address different aspects of privacy (Cloarec et al., 2022; Lazaro & Metayer, 2015; C. Prince, 2018; Shulman & Meyer, 2022).

Autonomy allows individuals to control their data usage and sharing, protecting privacy and personal dignity, and setting boundaries on access (Andorno, 2022; Lundgren, 2020; Miraut Martín, 2021). However, effectively managing personal data is challenging due to opaque and complex privacy policies. This challenge is exacerbated by the varying definitions and expectations of "privacy" and "data protection" across different regions like the US and EU. The digital environment further complicates control, making effective management difficult and necessitating clear, region-specific guidelines (Fleming et al., 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the urgency of robust privacy controls, as public health measures like contact tracing required extensive data collection. This situation underlined the necessity for privacy frameworks that can adapt to the unique demands of unprecedented circumstances (Bradford et al., 2020; Martinez-Martin et al., 2020; Sharon, 2021). The pandemic also drastically increased reliance on digital technologies for remote work, education, and health monitoring, leading to a significant increase in data sharing and collection. These developments further emphasized the need for updated privacy frameworks that can address these new realities.

Contact-tracing apps and health monitoring tools have raised significant privacy concerns, underscoring the importance of robust controls and transparent data management practices. While the GDPR provides comprehensive protection for commercial data practices, it does not typically cover government access to personal data, which remains a significant concern. This access is governed separately by national laws within EU member states, highlighting the need for a more integrated regulatory approach. Government surveillance issues are often regulated at the national level in EU member states, as seen in France's state of emergency post-2015 Paris attacks. Furthermore, GDPR primarily regulates commercial data practices and does not apply to law enforcement uses of data, which are governed by national laws within EU member states.

The importance of robust regulatory frameworks has become increasingly apparent. The GDPR in the EU sets a high standard for data protection, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and individual control. GDPR has reshaped data handling in Europe, requiring clear consent and granting individuals extensive rights over their data (Mazurek & Małagocka, 2019; McLennan et al., 2020; Schäfer et al., 2023). In contrast, the US employs a sector-based approach to data protection, focusing primarily on businesses through various federal and state-level regulations, while government surveillance is regulated through separate legal frameworks (e.g., the USA PATRIOT Act). This approach reflects the varied and fragmented nature of privacy regulation in the US, highlighting the distinction between commercial data protection and government surveillance.

China's PIPL is often compared to GDPR but reflects China's unique socio-political context of state surveillance (Calzada, 2022; Determann et al., 2021). Enforcement and practical application remain concerns, particularly regarding state access to data. Other regions, such as parts of Asia and Latin America, have also been influenced by GDPR. For instance, Japan and South Korea have strengthened their data protection laws to align with GDPR standards, partly to facilitate trade with Europe (Rana et al., 2021). Brazil's General Data Protection Law mirrors GDPR principles, providing comprehensive rights and imposing strict obligations (J. T. Prince & Wallsten, 2022; Pool et al., 2024).

In democratic countries, adopting GDPR-like frameworks involves transparent legislative processes and engagement with civil society. These countries typically have robust legal systems ensuring the enforcement of data protection laws and respect for privacy rights. Japan and South Korea's regulations, for example, align with GDPR standards, reflecting commitments to human rights and international norms. Non-democratic countries face challenges in adopting similar measures due to weaker rule of law protections and state interests in surveillance. While China's PIPL includes GDPR-like provisions, its implementation is complicated by the government's surveillance priorities (Calzada, 2022). Nonetheless, international pressure and trade considerations can drive incremental improvements in data protection in these contexts.

Enhancing global data management requires improving encryption, secure data processing, and strengthening regulatory frameworks. Harmonizing privacy laws globally would provide a consistent environment for businesses and consumers, ensuring robust privacy protection (Andrew & Baker, 2021; Brough & Martin, 2021; Solove, 2022). Ongoing dialogue between policymakers, businesses, and civil society is essential to align regulations with technological advancements and societal expectations.

In conclusion, as the digital landscape evolves, data privacy frameworks must adapt. Drawing from successful models like GDPR while addressing unique regional challenges can help develop a cohesive global approach. Ensuring robust data protection supports autonomy, fosters trust, and promotes a fair digital future. Establishing predictable regulatory schemes for businesses is an additional benefit, enhancing global trade and economic stability while safeguarding individual privacy rights.

3.2. Freedom From Surveillance

Surveillance traditionally involves the monitoring, tracking, and recording of individuals' behaviors and activities by governmental organizations to ensure public safety, enforce laws, or collect data for administrative purposes. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, surveillance was often perceived through the lens of security versus privacy, with debates centered on the extent to which governments should monitor individuals to prevent crime and terrorism without infringing on personal privacy (Friedewald et al., 2017; Marwick, 2022; Nissenbaum, 2020). The pandemic has introduced new tracking technologies for public health, raising long-term privacy and freedom concerns. This necessitates a nuanced approach to balancing public health and individual privacy rights (Andrew & Baker, 2021; Marwick, 2022).

In the EU, the legal framework regarding surveillance is tightly regulated under the GDPR, which provides stringent guidelines on data minimization, purpose limitation, and individual consent. GDPR emphasizes that surveillance must be necessary, proportionate, and transparent (Aho & Duffield, 2020; Georgiadis & Poels, 2022). In contrast, the US has a patchwork of federal and state laws providing varying degrees of protection against surveillance. US federal and state laws grant varying degrees of protection against surveillance, with recent efforts focusing primarily on strengthening consumer privacy rights rather than addressing government surveillance comprehensively.

China presents a contrasting scenario where surveillance is extensively integrated into public safety and governance. The Chinese government employs a vast network of CCTV cameras equipped with facial recognition technology, alongside a robust legal framework that includes the Cybersecurity Law and the PIPL. While these laws regulate data handling and aim to protect personal information, they also allow for

significant government access to data, raising concerns about abuses of power and infringements on individual privacy (Aho & Duffield, 2020; Pernot-Leplay, 2020).

Technological advancements have significantly increased surveillance capabilities, challenging privacy. Facial recognition technology, for instance, analyzes facial features from video feeds in real-time to match them against a database of known faces. Its use has become common in areas like shopping centers, transport hubs, and city streets, tracking everything from criminals to pedestrian traffic patterns. The erosion of anonymity through facial recognition is profound; individuals can no longer assume anonymity in public spaces (Hassandoust et al., 2021; Kostka et al., 2021; Smith & Miller, 2022). This has significant implications for personal privacy and the collective freedom to assemble without being monitored. Furthermore, these technologies often operate without clear signage or explicit consent from those being observed, leading to covert surveillance (Waelen, 2023).

CCTV systems equipped with advanced analytical capabilities take surveillance a step further. Modern CCTV systems are not just passive recording devices but are equipped with software that can analyze video footage for specific behaviors, emotions, and even group interactions. These systems can trigger alerts for unusual activities, enabling a proactive approach to surveillance. However, continuous monitoring and analysis of public behaviors can create a society where every action is recorded and scrutinized, leading to a chilling effect on free expression and behavior in public areas (Murray, 2023; Stoycheff et al., 2019). These systems are often integrated with other data sources, such as social media, public records, and commercial databases, creating comprehensive profiles of individuals that detail their habits, routines, and personal preferences. This integration can lead to significant privacy loss, as aspects of an individual's life that they may not choose to disclose are nonetheless observed and recorded (Connor & Doan, 2021; Marwick, 2022).

The use of mobile location data for contact tracing during the Covid-19 pandemic illustrated another dimension of surveillance. Mobile devices, carried by virtually every adult and many children, became tools for public health monitoring. Apps designed for contact tracing could track the spreading of the virus by monitoring the movements of individuals and their interactions with others (Juneau et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023). While these measures were essential for managing the pandemic, they also demonstrated how quickly and extensively personal devices could be used to monitor individuals. The deployment of such technology has raised concerns about its potential misuse. Originally intended for contact tracing, the technology could be used for more invasive forms of surveillance, such as tracking political affiliations, attendance at events, or adherence to government mandates. Repurposing health data for surveillance purposes without stringent safeguards could lead to significant intrusions into personal privacy (Miao et al., 2024; Searight, 2024).

As these technologies become more embedded in everyday life, the potential for overreach presents a clear and present threat to personal freedoms. To navigate this landscape effectively, robust frameworks are needed to regulate the use of such technologies. These should ensure transparency in how data is collected, stored, and used, and provide individuals with the right to opt-out of non-essential tracking. Moreover, public awareness and understanding of these technologies and their potential impacts are crucial for fostering informed consent and ensuring that surveillance tools are used responsibly and ethically.

3.3. Respectful Data Protection: Ensuring Dignity and Equity in Data Practices

Respectful data protection goes beyond traditional privacy boundaries to incorporate broader considerations of dignity, fairness, and transparency in handling personal data. It emphasizes ethical standards and respect for individual autonomy in data practices, advocating for a holistic approach where data protection is not solely about securing data from unauthorized access but also about ensuring that data usage aligns with the expectations and well-being of the data subjects (Bennett Moses & Weatherall, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the critical importance of transparency in data practices. Before the pandemic, transparency primarily focused on informing users about the collection and use of their data, often in commercial contexts. However, the pandemic broadened the scope of transparency to include how personal data is utilized in public health initiatives (Yang et al., 2020). Regulatory changes pushed for greater transparency in handling personal data by governments and health organizations, including detailed disclosures about the purposes of data collection, entities involved, and measures to protect data privacy. This shift aims to build public trust and encourage participation in health monitoring programs critical for managing public health responses. Transparency empowers individuals with knowledge about how their data is handled, enabling informed decisions regarding their personal information. Transparent practices ensure awareness and understanding of data use implications, essential for maintaining public trust and compliance with data protection laws (Olorunfemi et al., 2024; Redmiles, 2022).

The GDPR in the EU is a cornerstone example of respectful data protection influencing global data privacy practices. GDPR emphasizes consent, transparency, and the right to privacy, setting a robust standard for data practices worldwide. It requires clear information about data processing activities and explicit consent from data subjects, ensuring understanding and agreement on data use. GDPR sets a transparency standard in data protection, specifying the legal basis for data processing, storage duration, and rights available to individuals, ensuring respect for individual dignity and preferences (Lancieri, 2022; Tzanou, 2023).

The pandemic challenged the resilience and adaptability of data protection regulations like GDPR. Implementing contact-tracing apps and health data analytics necessitated a reevaluation of privacy norms to balance public health objectives with transparency and ethical data usage (Goetzen et al., 2021; Sideri & Prainsack, 2023). Respectful data protection emerged as a critical concept in privacy discussions, reflecting a recognition that protecting privacy involves ensuring fair, transparent data use aligned with individual expectations and rights. Respectful data protection empowers individuals with control over their personal information, ensuring data use respects privacy and broader human rights (Akinsanmi & Salami, 2021).

The pandemic highlighted the importance of flexible yet robust data protection regulations to accommodate emergency public health measures while upholding strong privacy standards. It stressed maintaining a balance between public health security and individual privacy rights through transparent and respectful data handling practices (Campbell-Verduyn & Gstrein, 2024; Liu et al., 2023). During the pandemic, public compliance with health monitoring efforts heavily depended on trust, contingent upon transparency concerning data use, access, and protective measures (Houser & Bagby, 2023; Stalla-Bourdillon et al., 2020). The crisis catalyzed more stringent and clear regulations around data usage during emergencies, enhancing legal frameworks to ensure respectful and ethical handling of data collected for public health purposes. These adjustments set new precedents for personal data use in crises, emphasizing the need for regulations

that dynamically balance public health needs with privacy protections. They demonstrated that respectful data protection fosters a societal framework supporting ethical data usage in critical situations.

3.4. Right to Bodily Autonomy

Bodily autonomy is the right of individuals to make decisions over their own bodies without external interference. Traditionally rooted in healthcare and human rights, this concept has evolved significantly with digital technologies capable of monitoring biological parameters (Ferdowsian, 2020; Trauner, 2024). Bodily autonomy emphasizes control of personal health data, which is increasingly challenged by modern technologies. The proliferation of wearable technology, such as fitness trackers and smartwatches, impacts bodily autonomy by monitoring health metrics like heart rate and sleep patterns. While beneficial for personal health management, these devices pose privacy risks as they collect sensitive data that could be accessed by unauthorized parties. Similarly, advancements in medical technology, such as remote monitoring devices, improve patient care but raise concerns about data security and misuse.

The Covid-19 pandemic catalyzed the expanded use of technologies that monitor bodily functions for public health surveillance. Governments and health organizations employed contact-tracing apps and thermal scanners to track virus spread. While essential for public health, these technologies raised privacy concerns. Digital contact-tracing apps highlighted the tension between collective health benefits and individual privacy rights, collecting data on movements and interactions and posing risks of misuse (L. Ferretti et al., 2024; Gerke et al., 2020).

The ethical implications of technologies affecting bodily autonomy necessitate robust privacy protections and transparent data handling practices (Blasimme & Vayena, 2020; L. Ferretti et al., 2024). Concerns about "function creep," where health data collected during a pandemic is later used for intrusive surveillance or commercial exploitation without consent, have grown (Colizza et al., 2021; Sweeney, 2020). The pandemic highlighted the need for stringent privacy protections and regulations tailored to health-related data. The collection or processing of health data during emergencies must be transparent, respect user consent, and adhere to principles of minimality and necessity (Blasimme & Vayena, 2020; L. Ferretti et al., 2024).

To respect and protect bodily autonomy in the digital age, comprehensive privacy frameworks must balance the benefits and risks of health monitoring technologies. These frameworks should ensure transparency in data collection, usage, and sharing, enabling informed decisions (Renda, 2022; Trauner, 2024). Consent mechanisms must be clear, informed, and easily revocable, allowing individuals to opt out without forfeiting essential services. Robust security measures are essential to protect data from unauthorized access and breaches, while stringent regulatory oversight is required to adapt laws to rapid technological advancements (Kwan, 2023; Montanari Vergallo et al., 2021).

In democratic countries, adopting GDPR-like frameworks involves transparent legislative processes and engagement with civil society. These countries typically have robust legal systems ensuring enforcement of data protection laws and respect for privacy rights. For instance, Japan's and South Korea's regulations align with GDPR standards, reflecting commitments to human rights and international norms. Non-democratic countries face challenges in adopting similar measures due to weaker rule of law protections and state interests in surveillance. While China's PIPL includes GDPR-like provisions, its implementation is complicated

by the government's surveillance priorities (Calzada, 2022). Nonetheless, international pressure and trade considerations can drive incremental improvements in data protection in these contexts. Furthermore, international collaboration through organizations like the OECD and the UN, which have a special rapporteur for privacy, can help develop global standards for data protection and privacy ethics. These efforts should focus on aligning ethical standards across nations while respecting local contexts (Robinson et al., 2021).

The interconnection between bodily autonomy and other privacy concepts, such as control over personal information and freedom from surveillance, is evident. Control over health data is fundamental to personal autonomy and privacy. This requires robust regulatory frameworks similar to those for personal information and surveillance. The transparency and ethical considerations essential for respectful data protection are equally critical for bodily autonomy. Handling health data with dignity and fairness aligns with the principles of respectful data protection, creating a cohesive framework that upholds human rights in the digital age. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for enhanced data protection and underscored the interconnected nature of privacy rights. As technology advances, balancing public health advancements with safeguarding individual rights becomes paramount. A holistic approach integrating principles from control over personal information, freedom from surveillance, and respectful data protection is essential to uphold bodily autonomy.

4. Discussion: Integrating Privacy Concepts in the Context of Digital Transformation

The reviewed literature underscores the profound impact of Covid-19 on digital freedom, revealing significant regulatory, societal, and technological changes. These shifts highlight the increased relevance of digital unfreedom and the urgent need for robust regulatory frameworks to protect digital rights in the post-pandemic world. It is crucial for future policies to balance public health needs with privacy protections, ensuring a transparent, accountable, and secure approach to data management. In developed societies, advanced digital infrastructures have facilitated sophisticated surveillance and data collection mechanisms. These societies, exemplified by the EU and the US, have established comprehensive privacy regulations like the GDPR and the California Consumer Privacy Act (Chander et al., 2020; Naqvi & Batool, 2023). However, the pandemic revealed gaps in these frameworks, prompting calls for more resilient and adaptive privacy protection (McLennan et al., 2020). Less digitally developed societies face unique challenges in balancing digital privacy with technological advancement. These regions often lack robust legal frameworks for data protection, making them more vulnerable to privacy breaches and surveillance abuses (Ehimuan et al., 2024). The pandemic highlighted the need for international cooperation and support to develop effective privacy regulations that can protect citizens' rights in these contexts (Rana et al., 2021).

Balancing security and privacy is critical, especially as the pandemic underscored the need for public health measures that can infringe on personal privacy (Acquisti et al., 2020; Filip, 2022). The goal is to create an adaptable equilibrium that responds to evolving threats and technological advancements. Digital tools like contact-tracing apps have shown public health benefits but also raised concerns about surveillance and data collection. The challenge lies in creating a dynamic equilibrium that can adapt to the evolving landscape of threats and technological advancements. Continuous assessment and adaptation of privacy laws and regulations are required to ensure privacy is protected without stifling innovation or compromising public health and safety. To navigate these challenges, a comprehensive approach to privacy and data protection is essential, integrating the principles of control over personal information, freedom from surveillance,

respectful data protection, and the right to bodily autonomy. Each of these principles addresses a critical aspect of digital freedom and privacy, and together they form a cohesive framework for future policymaking.

Control over personal information emphasizes the individual's right to manage and regulate their personal data, ensuring autonomy in the digital age. Robust privacy controls and transparent data management practices are essential to empower individuals and protect their dignity (Cloarec et al., 2022; Shulman & Meyer, 2022). Meanwhile, *freedom from surveillance* highlights the need to protect individuals from intrusive monitoring by state and non-state actors, advocating for stringent regulations to ensure that surveillance practices are necessary, proportionate, and transparent, thus safeguarding civil liberties (Marwick, 2022; Nissenbaum, 2020). *Respectful data protection*, focusing on ethical standards and fairness in data practices, calls for transparency in data handling to ensure individuals are informed about how their data is used and that their rights are respected, building trust and encouraging participation in digital health initiatives (Bennett Moses & Weatherall, 2023). Lastly, the *right to bodily autonomy* underscores the critical importance of individuals making decisions about their bodies and health data without external interference. The pandemic has underscored the need for clear consent mechanisms and robust security measures to protect sensitive health information, ensuring that health data collection and usage adhere to principles of minimality and necessity (Ferdowsian, 2020; Trauner, 2024). Integrating these principles forms a comprehensive framework that addresses the multifaceted challenges of digital privacy, promoting a balanced approach that upholds human dignity and autonomy in the digital age. Future policies must consider technology's broader implications on society, ensuring digital advancements are matched with progressive privacy protections. Policymakers, technology developers, and civil society must collaborate to craft policies that address the nuanced implications of digital technologies. Education and awareness programs are equally important to empower users to understand and exercise their privacy rights effectively.

The integration of these four principles—control over personal information, freedom from surveillance, respectful data protection, and the right to bodily autonomy—into a unified framework will help ensure that digital technologies serve the public good without compromising fundamental human rights. As we move further into the digital age, these principles will guide the development of a society that values both technological advancements and fundamental human rights. The ongoing discourse on privacy, intensified by the pandemic, will likely continue to evolve, reflecting the complex relationship between technology, privacy, and society. By adopting a balanced approach that safeguards privacy while addressing public health needs, future regulatory frameworks can protect individual rights and promote trust in digital systems, ultimately fostering a fair and equitable digital future.

5. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has catalyzed substantial changes in the perception and regulation of digital freedom. This article has highlighted key literature illustrating these shifts, emphasizing the need for ongoing vigilance and adaptation of regulatory frameworks to protect digital rights in an increasingly digital world. Contact tracing, essential for containing the virus, has highlighted significant privacy risks, necessitating rigorous policy frameworks to ensure transparency and protection of sensitive information. Pandemic responses have increased data collection, compromising privacy and shifting towards digital surveillance and broad data-sharing, weakening safeguards for sensitive information. These observations underscore the urgent need to reform privacy laws to address pandemic-related challenges.

Understanding the intersection of privacy and public health during the pandemic is crucial for future policies. This involves developing privacy-preserving strategies that effectively balance public health responses without compromising privacy protections. Further research is needed to explore privacy-preserving techniques in pandemic response and to ensure that future digital health strategies are built on robust, transparent, and accountable frameworks. Integrating the principles of control over personal information, freedom from surveillance, respectful data protection, and the right to bodily autonomy is essential.

Control over personal information ensures individuals' right to manage and regulate their personal data, providing autonomy in the digital age. *Freedom from surveillance* protects individuals from intrusive monitoring, advocating for necessary, proportionate, and transparent surveillance practices. *Respectful data protection* emphasizes ethical standards and fairness, ensuring individuals are informed about their data use, building trust, and encouraging participation in digital health initiatives. Lastly, the *right to bodily autonomy* underscores the importance of individuals making decisions about their bodies and health data without external interference.

By adopting a balanced approach that regulates business access to personal data, as exemplified by the GDPR, while also addressing the complexities of government access, future regulatory frameworks can protect individual rights and promote trust in digital systems. These principles together form a cohesive framework that promotes human dignity and autonomy in the digital age, ensuring digital technologies serve the public good without compromising fundamental human rights. The ongoing discourse on privacy, intensified by the pandemic, will likely continue to evolve, reflecting the complex relationship between technology, privacy, and society.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Internet Control and Disinformation Across Regime Types During and After the Covid-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The unprecedented scale of mitigation measures taken by governments during the Covid-19 pandemic raised concerns about if and to what extent democracy would be affected. Empirical accounts show that media freedom was the most vulnerable. This article concentrates on interference in digital media, as attacks on the digital realm during the pandemic were particularly harmful given that media activity moved from print to online all over the world. This large-n study makes various important contributions. Firstly, it uncovers whether regime types differ in their reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic regarding the digital media sector. Secondly, it takes a diachronic approach and examines the period before 2020, during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and after the pandemic (2022–2023). This longitudinal exploration enables us to make nuanced statements about the post-Covid-19 developments in digital media. Thirdly, the analyses take into account different degrees of measures: less and more repressive as well as disinformation strategies. The results add value to the debate because they demonstrate that all regime types, including democracies, resorted to control mechanisms during the Covid-19 pandemic. Equally relevant is the behavior of these regimes after the pandemic: While democracies by no means cut back on all measures, autocracies did not strengthen all measures. Most remarkably, full democracies are the only regime type where governments increasingly engaged in disinformation after the pandemic. Thus, an important finding is that the pandemic did not constitute a catalyzing event for all regime types to the same extent. But the most worrisome effects are associated with the democracies.

Keywords

autocracy; Covid-19 pandemic; democracy; digital repression; hybrid regimes; media freedom; social media

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic caused exceptionally strong reactions by governments, which were associated with the most severe restrictions worldwide since World War II. The issue of democratic health has gained research interest as a result of the pandemic's global situation. The massive mitigation measures introduced by governments, including the declaration of states of emergency (see Hale et al., 2020 for details), soon generated concern among democracy scholars that the short-term—and possibly medium-term—consequence of these measures could be a deterioration of democratic quality and standards. Even if "the worst fears about Covid-19's contaminating effects on democracy have not materialized" (Kolvani et al., 2021, p. 5), what the long-term impact would be remains an open question.

This question has drawn particular attention to restrictions in the media landscape and on freedom of expression, with several studies agreeing that the most severe violations of democratic standards occurred in the media sector. With such violations observed in over 60% of the countries under study, this was by far the most affected area according to the Pandemic Backsliding Project (PanDem; Edgell et al., 2022). Freedom House counted 91 countries (47% of all countries) that suffered new or increased measures of restrictions on media freedom in the context of the pandemic (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020). This spotlights the media as the most vulnerable sector during the pandemic, resulting in shrinking civic spaces (Bethke & Wolff, 2020; Edgell et al., 2021; Lewkowicz et al., 2022).

In fact, the temporal distance between the years 2020–2021, which represented the peak of the pandemic and the mitigation measures, lends them to a systematic investigation that has so far been lacking. Current assessments suggest that the pandemic did not lead to further autocratization in 2020 and had a limited effect on the general downward trend of democracy globally in 2021 (Alizada et al., 2021; Boese et al., 2022; Hellmeier et al., 2021). However, several studies also point to the fact that the pandemic intensified already existing democratic deficits or already existing struggles between democratic and anti-democratic forces (Kneuer & Wurster, 2023; Youngs & Panchulidze, 2020). Therefore, it is important to study the long-term effects on democratic quality, especially in those aspects where governments massively interfere, such as media freedom. Concerns about the long-term effects are not limited to institutions (Kneuer, 2023; Kneuer & Wurster, 2023). How governments managed communication and information during the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the openness, rationality, and quality of public debate. Many governments used the pandemic as a pretext to limit the public sphere. Another detrimental effect of the pandemic refers to attacks on accurate and fact-based information—essential in democratic public spheres—in the form of deliberate disinformation by governments. In situations of post-truth and increased polarization, the pandemic intensified an epistemic crisis with fundamental uncertainty in access to accurate information and confusion over trustworthiness (Chambers, 2021; Dahlgren, 2018; Kneuer, 2023). Hence, even if visible symptoms such as the postponement of elections or other deteriorations in institutional interactions have diminished, less visibly problematic developments, such as the narrowing of the media landscape and the civic space as well as established practices of disinformation, may have persisted. This underscores the need for specifically targeting the post-Covid-19 impact on media freedom and control.

The immediate interest here is on how the massive violations of media freedom developed after 2020/2021, and whether the reins placed on the public space were loosened or even tightened in the aftermath of these acute pandemic years. This article concentrates on interference in digital communication media—also called digital repression—and is guided by two theoretical questions.

Firstly, we want to uncover the extent to which there is a variance in the approach of regime types to media freedom, i.e., whether regime types differ in their reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic regarding the digital media sector. To be able to make a statement on this, we take a diachronic approach and examine the periods before 2020, during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and after the pandemic (2022–2023). We claim that it is important to examine not only democracies and autocracies but also the so-called intermediate or hybrid regimes.

Secondly, we examine the thesis of convergence between autocracies and democracies, which has emerged in recent research on the internet. While internet control has long been perceived as an exclusive domain of autocratic regimes (Boas, 2006; Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Greitens, 2013; Rød & Weidmann, 2015), the research focus has shifted to liberal democratic states. Empirical evidence shows that digital repression has increased over time for all regime types, not only autocracies (Frantz et al., 2020, p. 8). Moreover, convergence theory (Busch, 2017; Wright & Breindl, 2013) assumes that democracies might "normalize" their regulatory attitudes towards digital communication and even be oriented towards autocratic regimes, a notion that has been referred to as "learning from autocracies" (Busch et al., 2018). The pandemic may have opened a window of opportunity for democracies to more strongly exercise internet control. A third empirically driven question focuses on disinformation and its development during and after the pandemic: Are there empirical proofs of an increase in disinformation triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic beyond anecdotal evidence?

Based on various quantitative analyses, we provide a large-n descriptive account of a broad range of internet control variables that show the linear relationships between different regime types (democracy, autocracy, and hybrid regimes) and the degrees of internet control. Moreover, we distinguish less repressive measures, such as internet content regulation, government requests for Twitter removals, and government censorship efforts, from more repressive measures, such as censorship and social media shutdowns. This gives us a more fine-grained picture of which regime type resorts to which kind and degree of measure. For these analyses, we have relied on different datasets on internet control, including Freedom on the Net (FOTN), Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Twitter Transparency Reports Data, and the PanDem. Our period of investigation covers the time period from 2006 until 2023, that is, before, during, and after the acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020/2021).

The results of our study demonstrate that all regime types, including democracies, resorted to control mechanisms during the Covid-19 pandemic. Regarding the behavior of different regime types after the pandemic, our findings are rather counter-intuitive: While democracies by no means cut back on all measures, autocracies did not strengthen all measures either. The result regarding disinformation is also quite unexpected, as full democracies are the only regime type where governments increasingly engaged in disinformation after the pandemic.

These findings are important contributions to several research debates, including the ongoing one on Covid-19-related implications on democratic processes and the debate on digital repression about when and how governments engage in limiting digital communication. Finally, our study also relates to the more general and growing research that advances knowledge on regime types as an explanatory factor for policy decisions and implementation.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. After elaborating on the theoretical background (Section 2), we present our research design (Section 3), and then our analyses (Section 4). The last section

(Section 5) discusses the results and concludes by highlighting the contribution of this article to the ongoing debates previously mentioned and suggesting further research avenues.

2. Digital Repression During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Theoretical Background

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments around the world took mitigating measures against the spread of the virus, most of which represented far-reaching interventions in public life (see Hale et al., 2020). This menu of restrictions was practically in effect globally and reached a high degree of diffusion within the international community. Given the unprecedented scale of mitigation measures taken by governments, the restrictions on democratic rights were prone to raise concerns among scholars and pundits regarding if and to what extent democracy would also be quarantined, placed in lockdown, or infected by authoritarian measures and practices. Three main scenarios have been highlighted by scholars: the pandemic as an opportunity for autocrats to intensify repression and control; the pandemic as an opportunity for illiberal incumbents to accelerate and intensify democratic erosion processes that were already underway; and the decline in democratic quality and the rise in executive and majoritarian domination even in democracies where governments had no intention to exploit the pandemic for non-democratic purposes (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021; Edgell et al., 2021; Kneuer & Wurster, 2023).

One early and systematic account, namely the PanDem (Edgell et al., 2021; PanDem, n.d.), followed the evolution of democratic violations during the pandemic years. This project shows that most countries have engaged in at least some violations of democratic standards since the beginning of the pandemic. While, unsurprisingly, the authors found that such violations were more common in autocracies, democracies were far from immune (Edgell et al., 2021, p. 9). One important finding of the PanDem project was that media freedom was the most vulnerable, with most infringements (over 60%) taking place in this domain. This resonates with studies by Freedom House, which counted 91 countries (47%) that suffered new or increased measures of restrictions on media freedom in the context of the pandemic (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020), and the World Press Freedom Index 2020 ranking (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). After analyzing three worldwide monitoring platforms, a study found that most threats to the media during the pandemic were specifically aimed at the digital media (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021, p. 1361). This finding bears great importance because, during the pandemic, journalism moved online all over the world, so attacks on the digital realm were particularly harmful. Interestingly, the authors note that, besides autocracies, even long-standing Western democracies deployed restrictions on digital media (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021, p. 1361).

While there is a wide array of case studies and country reports on the topic of media and digital repression during the pandemic, a systematic account of the development of media repression after the acute pandemic years (2020/2021) is lacking. Such a systematic account is important to assess whether there have been further encroachments on (digital) media freedom and the extent of these encroachments. Furthermore, a systematic analysis of how restrictions on (digital) media play out in the different regimes (democracies, autocracies, and intermediate regimes) is needed. There is abundant research on digital repression in autocracies (see Gunitsky, 2015; Guriev & Treisman, 2019; Hellmeier, 2016; for an overview see Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020) that provides information about a repertoire of strategies, tools, and practices of interference in digital communication as well as about its growing sophistication. However, many of these studies mostly focus on one repressive measure, e.g., either censorship or shutdown.

Kawerau et al. (2022) rightly point out that studies on digital repression by autocracies need to cover a greater variety of repressive instruments since autocratic governments rely on a repertoire of techniques to control the internet, which they use selectively and depend on the level of contention at home. Therefore, it is pertinent for empirical reasons to rely on different measures with different degrees of repression. For example, if only strongly repressive measures are considered, such as complete internet shutdowns, then liberal democracies are less likely to apply them. However, this picture can change if less repressive measures are included in the research design.

While internet control has long been perceived as an exclusive domain of autocratic regimes (Boas, 2006; Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Greitens, 2013; Rød & Weidmann, 2015), more recent literature has highlighted two different developments that might indicate a convergence. One development refers to autocracies that resort less frequently to overt violent repression "because they can better anticipate and prevent potential dissent" (Keremoğlu & Weidmann, 2020, p. 1699), which is the biggest fear of autocrats. The other development observed is that democracies have stepped up their regulatory efforts regarding the digital space (see, for example, the German Network Enforcement Act, which has been replicated in several countries). Beyond legal regulation, scholars have also noted a growing trend of convergence "in how democratic and autocratic governments are using surveillance and disinformation to shape political life" (Gunitsky, 2020). This convergence thesis assumes that democracies might "normalize" regulatory attitudes towards digital communication and even be oriented towards autocratic regimes, a notion that has been referred to as "learning from autocracies" (Busch, 2017; Busch et al., 2018; Wright & Breindl, 2013). Gunitsky (2020) cautions that immense incentives for disinformation are being introduced into democratic institutions. Even if this trend of convergence does not make democracies and autocracies indistinguishable, it calls for analyses that take both types of regimes into account and thus produce a more realistic picture of digital control and disinformation practices.

On this theoretical basis, we formulate the following expectations: Firstly, we assume that both democracies and autocracies intensified internet control activities during the pandemic but relied on different measures. We expect democracies and hybrid regimes to step up their activities, especially regarding less repressive measures, such as online content regulation, but autocracies to deploy a wide variety of measures, including more repressive ones, such as censorship and shutdowns. For democracies, and ultimately also hybrid regimes, interference in the (digital) media means a precarious balancing act (Vick, 2001), which is why they might be more reluctant to adopt restrictive measures.

Secondly, we expect democracies to engage less in disinformation but hybrid and autocratic regimes to resort more to this practice. On the one hand, it can be assumed that democratic governments are interested in the dissemination of accurate information per se. On the other hand, democratic governments operate in an open communicative space where the domestic audience (opposition parties, interest groups, media, and civil society) monitors decision-making but also the dissemination of accurate information.

3. Research Design and Strategy

The central research interest of this study is guided by a regime-sensitive approach to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the media landscape, particularly the digital media. Our descriptive account follows a longitudinal perspective and traces if and to what degree different regime types adopted different measures

during the Covid-19 pandemic that influenced digital media freedom, and if this influence persisted beyond the pandemic.

3.1. The Independent Variable

The independent variable is the type of political regime. Different concepts exist on how to classify political regimes. The most common ones are the dichotomous approach distinguishing democracy and autocracy, on the one hand, and the understanding of regimes reflected as a continuum, on the other. The latter approach implies the differentiation of both root concepts and their diminished subtypes (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). This is a meaningful way to capture the intermediate subregime types (often labeled as a grey zone), that is those cases that are neither fully consolidated democracies nor autocracies (Mainwaring et al., 2001). Different proposals for such classifications have been developed (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Lührmann et al., 2018; Merkel, 2004; Schedler, 2006). Moreover, several scholars have conceptualized a third regime type, namely a hybrid regime, as a regime type representing properties of democracies and autocracies alike (Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2002; Karl, 1995; Morlino, 2009).

Studies that undertake regime-sensitive explorations refer mainly to classifications that enable differentiated perspectives, taking into account not only democracy and autocracy but other regime (sub)types. Thus, it is pertinent to use a democracy index that offers such differentiation of regime types. We follow this approach and base our analysis on the Democracy Index produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), which distinguishes between full and flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes (EIU, 2008, p. 64). The hybrid regime category captures the grey zone of intermediate regimes between democracy and autocracy.

Democracy is a highly contentious concept, mostly reflected in the tension between thin and thick approaches. The thin approach relates to Dahl's (1971) referential understanding of democracy, e.g., as conceptualized in the Electoral Democracy Index by V-Dem. Other indices are based on thicker approaches that include the protection of liberties and the rule of law and assess constraints on the executive and legislative powers (see Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Liberal Democracy Index by V-Dem, and EIU). Only very few concepts of democracy and democracy measurement refer to maximalist concepts that include output aspects such as economic or social rights (Campbell, 2019). By using the Democracy Index of the EIU for our analysis, we adopt a mid-range understanding of democracy that goes beyond the minimum of electoral aspects by including the liberal component of democracy.

3.2. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of our study is the kind and degree of government interference in the digital landscape and digital freedom. Unlike other studies, we cover a wide array of instruments to get a more nuanced picture of the deployment of different measures of digital repression. Even if all measures are not compliant with the rules of media freedom, there are nuances in the *degrees* and *strength* of their interventions that we want to uncover. Therefore, we distinguish between less repressive measures, such as content regulation, content removal requests, and censorship efforts, and more repressive measures, such as censorship in practice and shutdowns.

3.3. Data and Method

For our analyses, we use different datasets that give us a broad perspective of measures taken by governments to interfere in internet and social media activities. We use the Democracy Index of the EIU to classify regime types (EIU, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). The EIU's Democracy Index is composed of five core dimensions and sixty subcomponents combined in a single index. The five core dimensions are electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of the government, political participation, and political culture (EIU, 2008, p. 63). The index provides data on a biannual basis for 167 sovereign and semi-sovereign countries since 2006. Based on it, we obtain a fine-grained picture of two different democracy types (full and flawed) and capture the intermediate and authoritarian regimes.

Obtaining data on how governments restrict internet and social media usage is challenging. Earlier data collected by the Freedom House is the FOTN Index (Freedom House, 2024a, 2024b). However, the FOTN only covers 70 countries. Therefore, we mainly draw on indicators retrieved from the V-Dem dataset, which provides a global perspective (Coppedge et al., 2024a, 2024b). We use the indicators internet legal content regulation, internet censorship effort, government social media censorship in practice, and government social media shutdown in practice.

To capture disinformation, we also refer to V-Dem data, namely the two indicators of government dissemination of false information domestically and abroad. V-Dem scales for these indicators range from 0 (worst) to 4 (best). We complement these disinformation indicators with data from the PanDem, which is coordinated by the V-Dem team (Edgell et al., 2020, 2021, 2022). PanDem includes data from March 2020 to June 2021 on violations of democratic standards. One category assesses official disinformation campaigns and another refers to restrictions on media freedom. The first measures government disinformation while the latter comprises five different indicators (see Appendix for details). The PanDem dataset is useful because it captures government measures specifically implemented in the context of the pandemic. This means that the period of data collection is quite limited, spanning until mid-2021. Therefore, this data can only be complementary for our purpose, because our interest lies in a longitudinal comparison that includes both the levels of interventions before the Covid-19 pandemic and the further developments after the pandemic.

Finally, we run robustness checks, replacing the EIU regime measurement by an alternative index with a thin democracy concept, namely the V-Dem EDI (see above; Coppedge et al., 2024a). We find the correlation consistently confirmed in its trend, although in all regressions the significance is higher for the EDI data (see Appendix).

In our analysis, we a) provide descriptive accounts of developments over time, as well as b) linear correlations of the regime type—full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime and autocracy—and the different indicators over time, that is before the Covid-19 pandemic, during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and during the post-Covid-19 years of 2022–2023 (all regressions and tables are included in the Appendix).

4. The Pandemic: A Trigger for Greater Digital Repression?

As a first step, we provide descriptive accounts of how the different regime types evolve in relation to the indicators. Figure 1 shows that none of the regime types reacted strongly to the pandemic regarding the internet and social media control and that only autocracies intensified control in the aftermath of the pandemic. However, these findings, have to be taken with caution, as the FOTN only covers 70 countries.

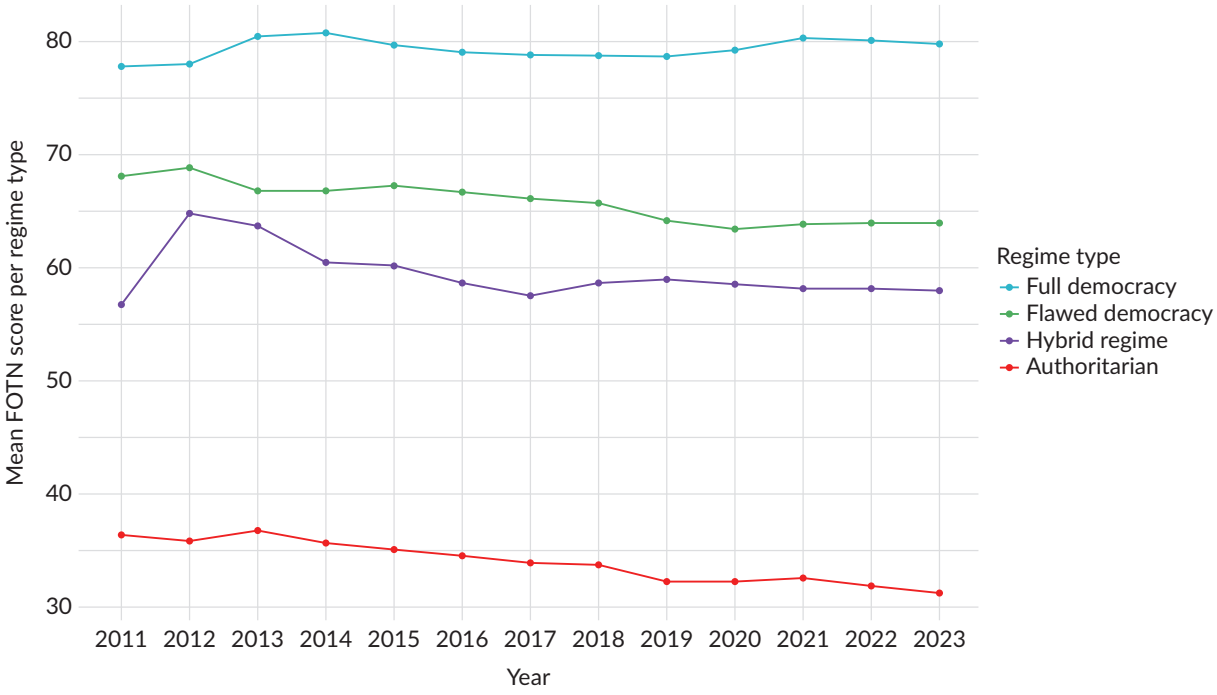

Figure 1. Mean FOTN scores per regime type over time.

4.1. The Less Repressive Measures

We now turn to the different indicators based on the broader country sample offered by V-Dem, starting with the less repressive measure of content regulation (Figure 2). Remarkably, the strongest increase in content regulation during the pandemic occurred in full democracies, while autocracies showed no such trend. Hybrid regimes showed a slight increase. After the pandemic, democracies regained (full democracies) or maintained (flawed democracies) their pre-Covid levels, while hybrid regimes and, more strongly, autocracies further intensified content regulation.

Regarding internet censorship efforts, Figure 3 offers a completely different picture, as all regime types stepped up their efforts, with democracies showing the strongest dip in the first pandemic year and autocracies responding with a delay.

Figure 4 complements these findings. Although there has been a sharp increase in removal requests to Twitter by democratic governments since 2018, this skyrocketing trend was reinforced during the pandemic years. While there was a generally smoother increase in removal requests by autocracies, the pandemic year 2020 witnessed an intensification of such requests (X Transparency Center, 2024).

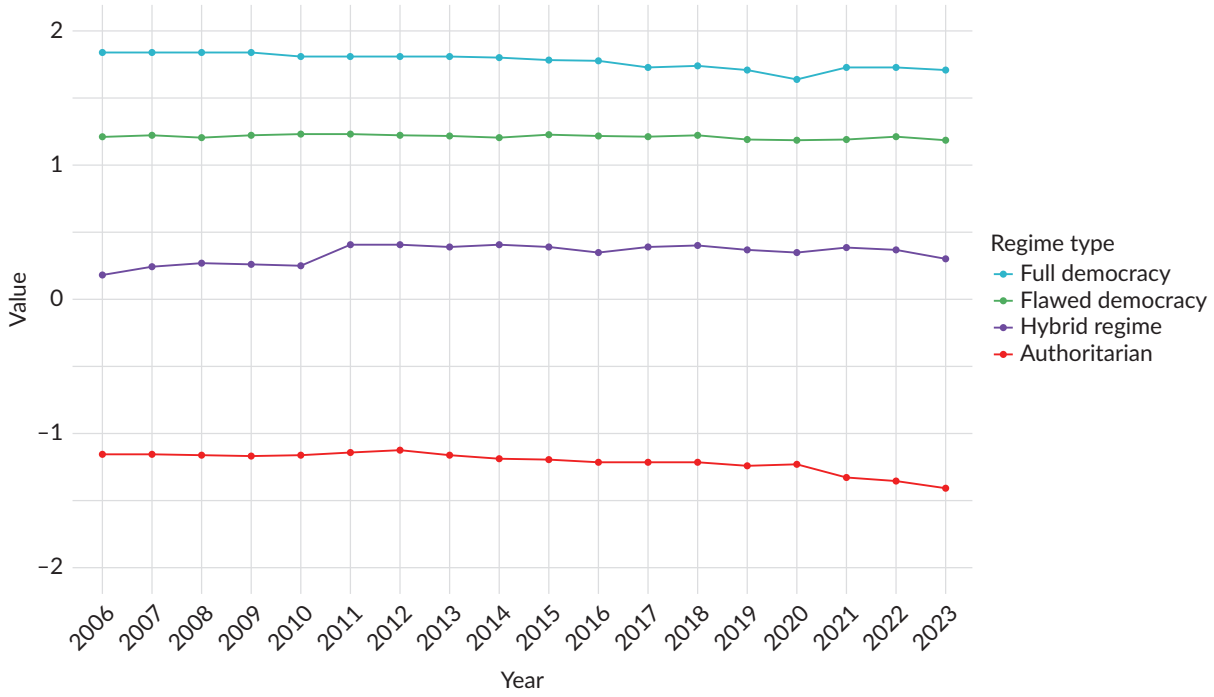

Figure 2. Evolution of mean values of V-Dem internet legal content (v2smregcon) per regime type for the period 2006–2023 according to the EIU democracy status. Note: See also Figure 6.1 in the Supplementary File.

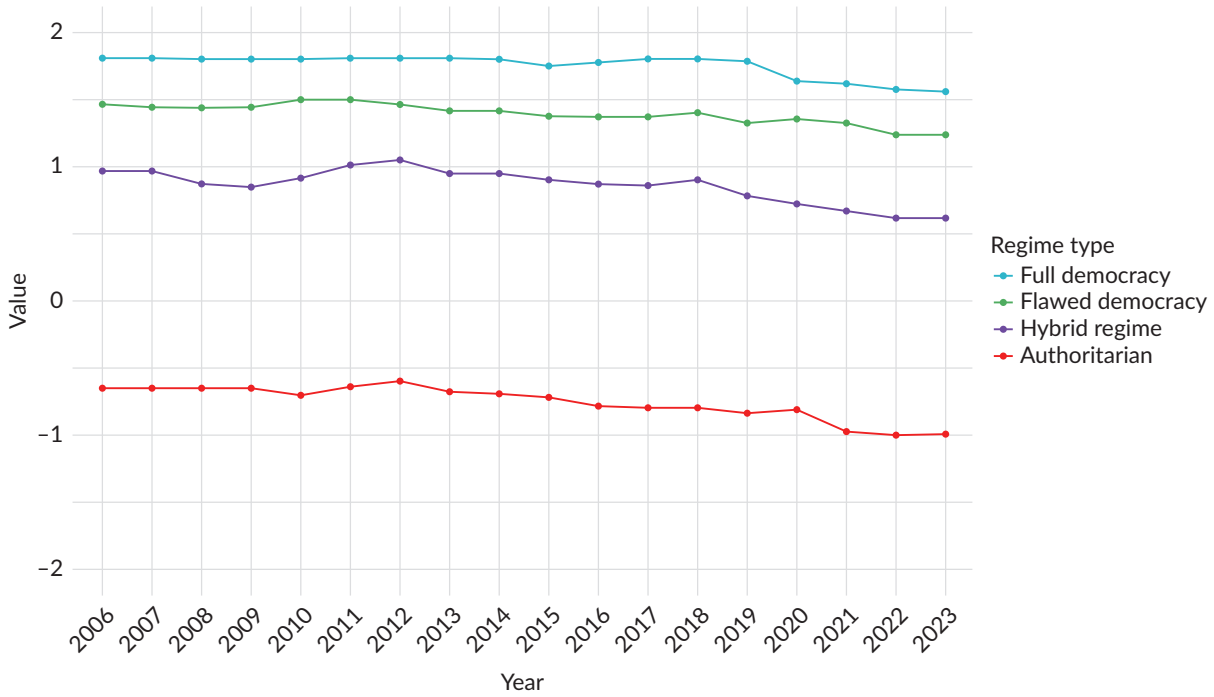

Figure 3. Evolution of mean values of V-Dem internet censorship effort (v2mecenefi) per regime type for the period 2006–2023 according to the EIU democracy status. Note: See Figure 6.2 in the Supplementary File.

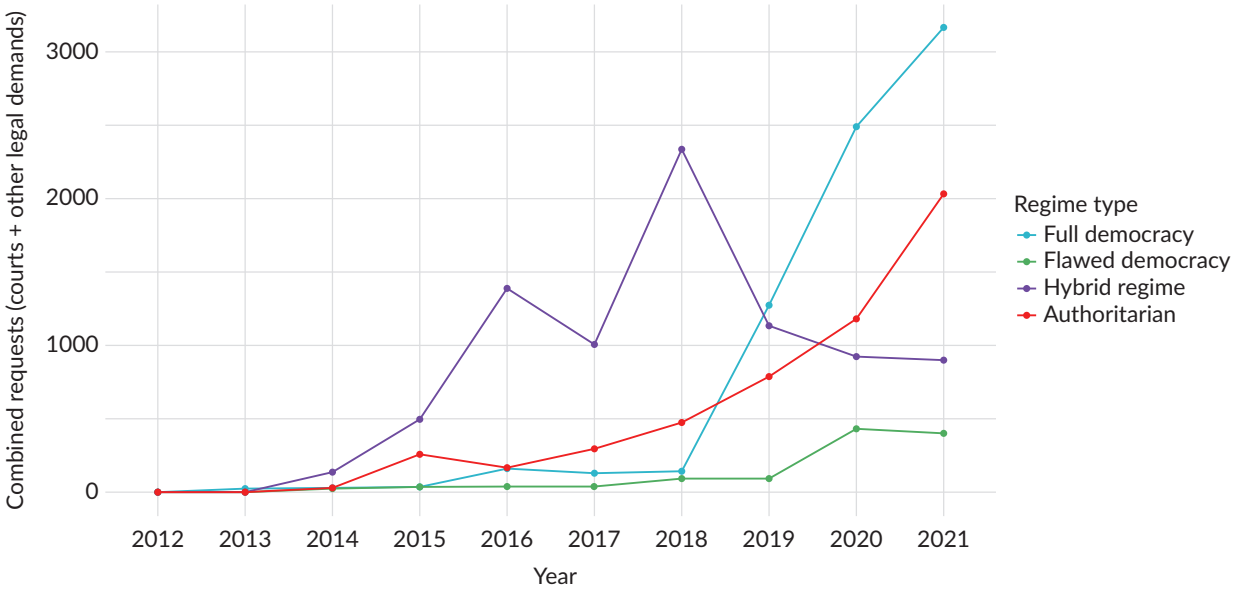

Figure 4. Evolution of Twitter removal requests per regime type for the years 2012–2021. Note: See also Figure 8 in the Supplementary File.

4.2. The More Repressive Measures

Turning to the more repressive measures, we trace how censorship efforts have been implemented (Figure 5). The remarkably evident censorship efforts of full democracies during the pandemic, only translated to "real" censorship practices in the aftermath of the pandemic. Flawed democracies showed a

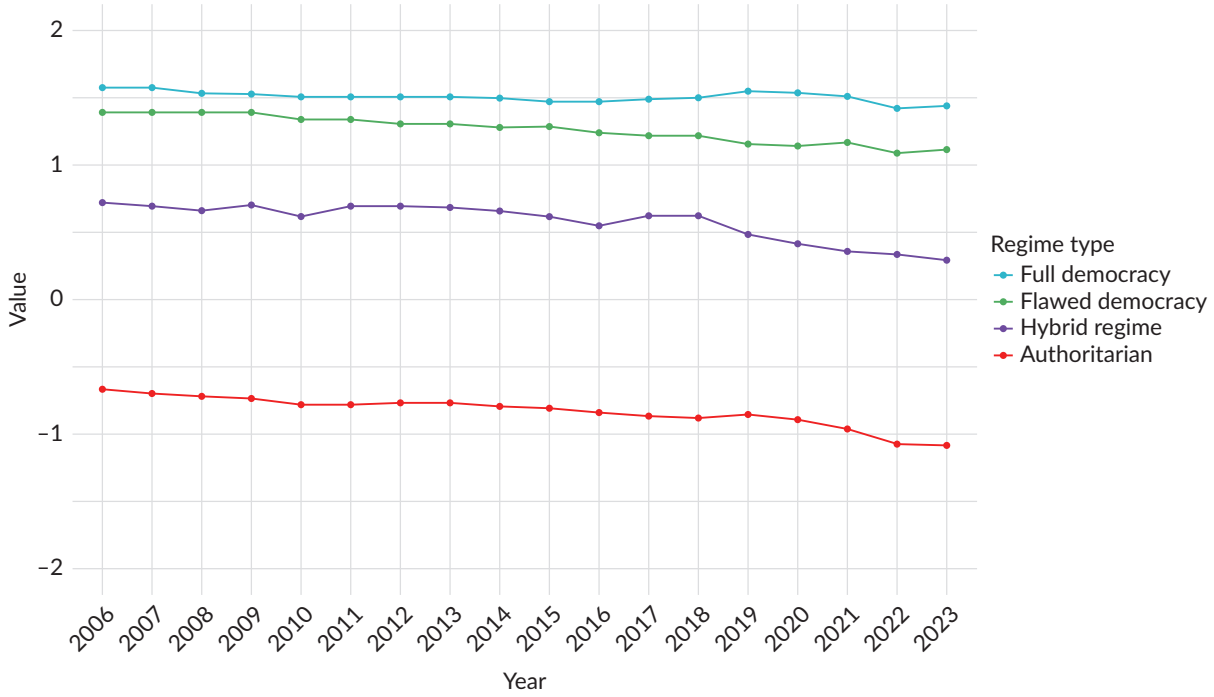

Figure 5. Evolution of mean values of V-Dem government social media censorship (v2smgovsmcenprc) per regime type for the years 2006–2023 according to the EIU democracy status. Note: See Figure 6.3 in the Supplementary File.

similar trend during the post-pandemic years. However, for both democratic regime groups, these were slight increases in censorship efforts, while for autocracies the efforts had been accompanied since 2020 by the incremental implementation of censorship measures. This also applies to hybrid regimes, although an increased implementation of censorship already started in 2019, continuing during and after the pandemic.

Regarding social media shutdowns, Figure 6 shows a wider gap between democracies (full and flawed) and autocracies on the one hand, and hybrid regimes and autocracies on the other. This confirms the results of studies that found autocracies more repressive than democracies (see, e.g., Frantz et al., 2020). Shutdowns were the preferred means of internet control by autocracies during the Covid-19 pandemic, but other regime types did not adopt this measure. Figure 6 confirms that autocracies stepped up social media restrictions during the pandemic. Unlike we saw for the less repressive measures, hybrid regimes did not employ more repressive measures. While flawed democracies did not use social media shutdowns during the pandemic, they increased them after 2021. Interestingly, full democracies also shut down social media during the pandemic but reversed this in 2023. Thus, besides autocracies, the group that is potentially susceptible to social media shutdowns appears to be flawed democracies.

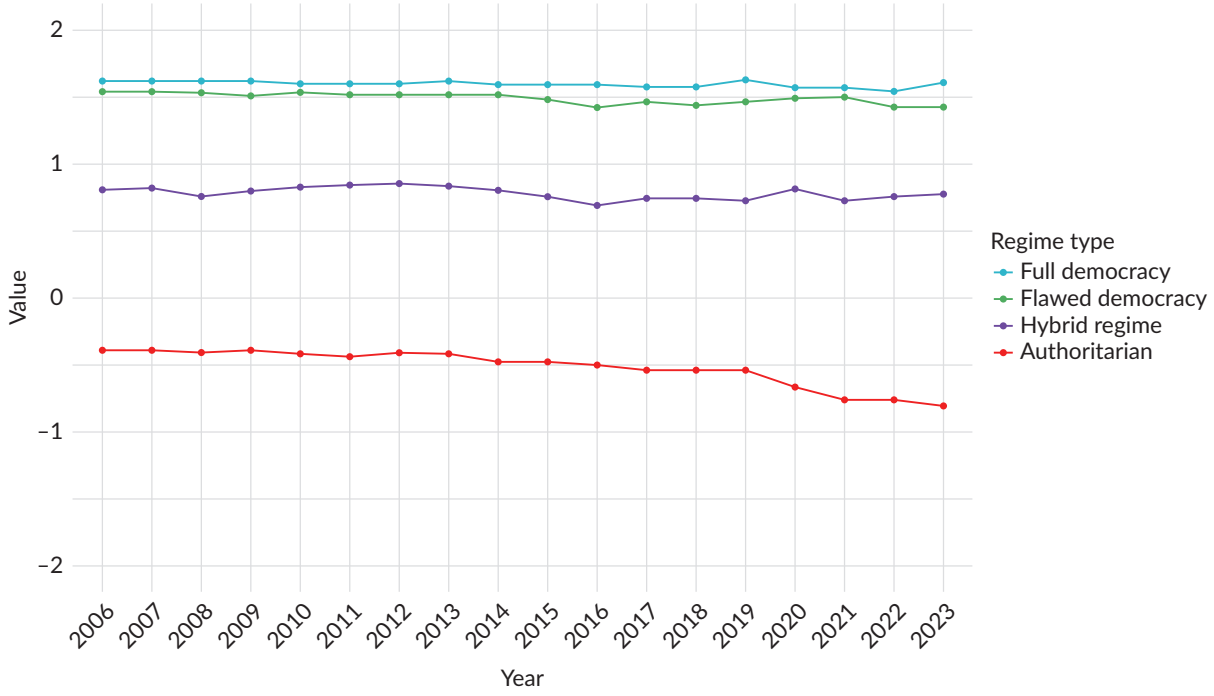

Figure 6. Evolution of mean values of V-Dem government social media shutdown (v2smgovsm) per regime type in the years 2006–2023 according to the EIU democracy status. Note: See Figure 6.5 in the Supplementary File.

4.3. Disseminating Disinformation

It is widely known that the Covid-19 pandemic generated a particular form of conspiracy narrative in societies, which in several cases developed into state-skeptical and illiberal forms or even degenerated into violent protests. What is of interest here, however, are strategies of disinformation deliberately employed by governments during the pandemic. The V-Dem indicators provide information about how often

"government and its agents use social media to disseminate misleading viewpoints or false information to influence its own population" and "citizens of other countries" (Coppedge et al., 2024b, 331). The different responses include *extremely often* (0 and lower values), *often* (1), *half the time* (2), *rarely* (3), and *never* (4).

Figure 7 depicts a dire situation for all regime types, with even full democracies shown to operate at a level where practically half of the time there was deliberate dissemination of false information. A look at the pre-pandemic period indicates that flawed democracies experienced a steady increase in disinformation from their governments in the 2010s. Interestingly, this trend did not continue during the pandemic; in fact, there has been a remarkable reversal since 2021, i.e., a clear decrease in disinformation. Against this backdrop, the developments in the full democracies are particularly striking: While there was consistently little disinformation from governments before the pandemic, there has been an increase in government disinformation since the pandemic. Thus, regarding government disinformation, full and flawed democracies behave differently, even going in opposite directions.

Regarding the hybrid regimes, the curve starts at a level of frequent dissemination of false information and gradually deteriorates. However, 2021 represents a slowdown rather than a worsening. No further deterioration is seen after the pandemic. This is very similar to the autocracies, which show a sharp increase in disinformation from 2020 to 2021, but then the rate of disinformation reduced slightly in the following years. Overall, the figures over time clearly confirm that autocracies are disinformation machines and that the pandemic represents a low point in the development of authoritarian disinformation since 2006.

We also analyzed disinformation abroad (see Figure 6.7 in the Supplementary File) and found that governments are less involved in this for all regime types, which indicates that they consider their domestic audience a more

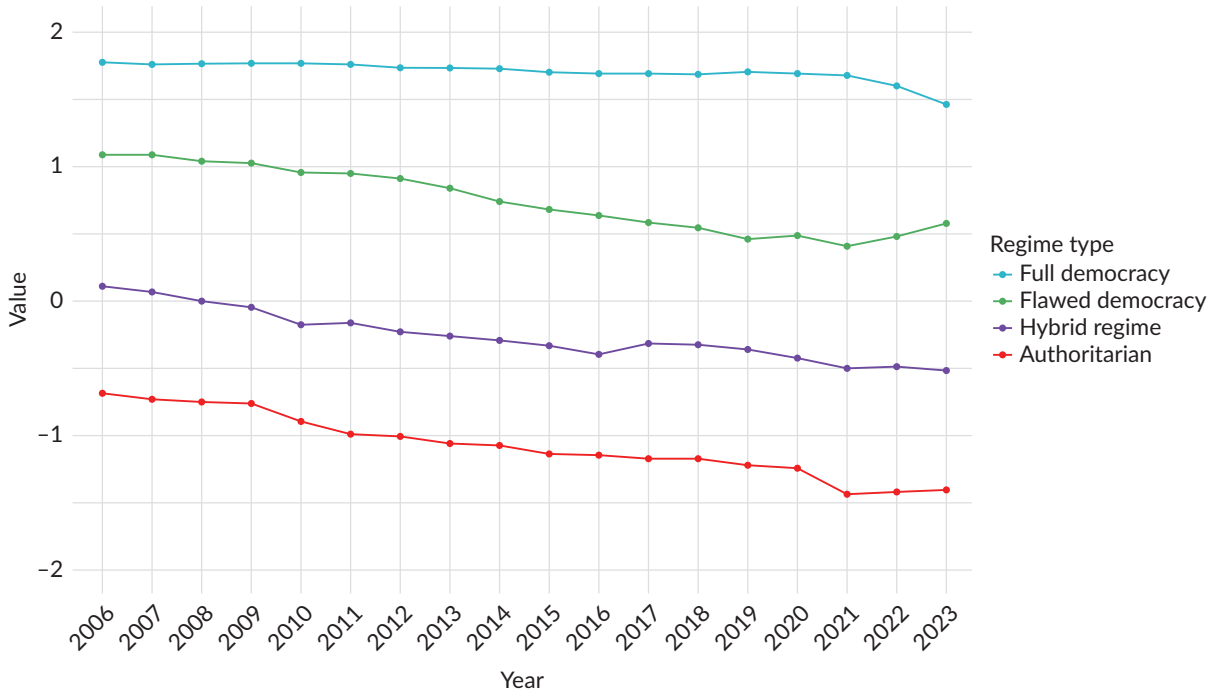

Figure 7. Evolution of mean values of V-Dem government dissemination of false information domestic (v2smgovdom) per regime type for the years 2006–2023 according to the EIU democracy status. Note: See Figure 6.6 in the Supplementary File.

important target group. Full democracies even reduced cross-border disinformation during the pandemic years. For flawed democracies and hybrid regimes, no strong effect of the pandemic is observed. This is very different for autocracies, which experienced a sharp increase in cross-border disinformation during the pandemic years (from 2020 to 2021), a trend that has persisted since 2021.

The PanDem data gives us a closer look at the acute phase of the pandemic (March 2020 to June 2021). Our analyses show a strong correlation between democratic quality with media restrictions in general (see Supplementary File, appendix C, 12.3). However, as far as official disinformation is concerned, we observe only a weak correlation (see Supplementary File, appendix C, 12.2 and 12.4). The PanDem data also provides information on restrictions on media coverage of Covid-19 imposed by governments, as well as on measures taken by governments to contain the virus. Our results show a strongly significant correlation between regime type and interference in media coverage of pandemic-related news, while the correlation with media coverage that does not concern Covid-19-related news is only slightly significant (see Supplementary File, appendix C). While this data relates to the media in general, it stands to reason that this may apply specifically to social media.

These findings prove that governments have paid particular attention to the coverage of the pandemic and mitigation measures. While this applies equally to all regimes, the difference in measures used may lie in the fact that while democratic governments may be more concerned with preventing disinformation, autocracies are often preoccupied with suppressing accurate information. It should be recalled, however, that our study only looks at the disinformation practices of governments, not how governments counter disinformation from Covid-19 deniers. This is a topic that might be covered in other studies.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The points of departure for our analyses are twofold: (a) whether different regime types vary in their reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic with regards to online media and how these reactions evolved after the pandemic; and (b) how different regime types vary regarding disinformation dissemination during and after the pandemic.

Our first expectation regarding democracies during the pandemic is confirmed, especially from 2019 to 2020. Insofar as for all measures we defined as less repressive, democracies showed a clear increase. Interestingly, this development cannot be proved for hybrid regimes. Although autocracies stepped up the less repressive measures, there was some decline in the use of such measures from 2020 to 2021. The fact that democracies intervened more strongly during the pandemic, especially in the regulation of online content, as abundantly underscored by the Twitter removal requests, can also be attributed to the intention to respond to disinformation and conspiracy narratives against mitigation measures, such as wearing of masks, vaccination, etc. It is noteworthy that flawed democracies intervened the least in internet and social media freedom.

Concerning the more repressive moves, democracies did not fully behave as we assumed: While, during the pandemic, there was no censorship of online media, there was a tendency to resort to social media shutdowns, surprisingly by full democracies more than flawed ones. An equally remarkable result is that hybrid regimes increased censorship but not shutdowns, while autocracies stepped up shutdowns but not censorship. Democracies reacted more repressively during the pandemic than expected, but this is not

entirely the case for hybrid regimes. Autocracies increased both the less and more repressive measures, with shutdowns being their most preferred strategy. If one assumes that autocracies already enforce a high level of digital repression, then it stands to reason that the use of drastic measures would greatly increase during a crisis.

Our expectations regarding the repressive measures and their evolution after the pandemic are not fully and consistently met. Full democracies did cut back on legal content regulation and social media shutdown but did not on the other measures. Flawed democracies did not return to their pre-Covid levels of repression, especially regarding social media shutdown. Hybrid regimes, which did not resort to social media shutdowns in the same way as the democracies, continued to use censorship. Also, unlike what we expected, autocracies did not intensify all repressive measures: They strengthened the more repressive tools but not the less repressive ones. One interpretation for this could be that autocracies introduced more repressive measures, such as shutdowns, because the pandemic established a context to deviate from the "softer" measures they had taken in previous years. Apparently, censorship and shutdowns turned out to be functional for autocratic governments during the pandemic so they kept on using them.

Unsurprisingly, autocracies strengthened their disinformation practices during the pandemic more than the other regime types. Remarkably, this trend was only slight in hybrid regimes, whereas democracies did not deploy disinformation during the pandemic. It is striking that the only regime type that resorted to disinformation during the post-Covid period was full democracies. This result confirms Gunitsky's (2020) warning that democracies should not be underestimated in their potential to influence the digital public sphere. A comparative view of the regime types further highlights the dramatic nature of this finding, because not even autocracies took this route. This might be because autocratic governments rely on other and more repressive means and directly censor or shut down social media.

It is most worrisome that for democratic governments, the pandemic apparently constituted a catalyzing event for information manipulation, an evolution that needs to be observed and further analyzed. To do this, we first need to consider that the erosion of democratic institutions, processes, and norms goes hand in hand with the curtailing of media activities and the spreading of disinformation (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Take the USA under Trump, for instance, where government engagement in disinformation reached its highest point since 2000 in 2020/2021 (with a value of 0,37; 0 indicating that the government *extremely often* disseminates false information on all key political issues). Similar situations were observed in Brazil under Bolsonaro and in India under Modi. These cases, which show a specific trajectory of erosion of democratic ideals, might require a separate examination.

Secondly, controlled comparisons with small-n samples (Slater & Ziblatt, 2013) may be carried out to trace processes within democracies more profoundly. Thirdly, in such an investigation, government disinformation could then be highlighted more precisely, both conceptually and practically. Under what conditions does a democratic government resort to disinformation? How does the domestic audience counter such efforts? How much do governments succeed with disinformation? As there is an emerging research debate on disinformation, it would be useful to link these aspects.

The results on cross-border disinformation are also quite informative. That democracies did not use this measure during the pandemic suggests that they were keen to foster cooperation, which includes adopting a

policy of transparency and correct information when dealing with partners and the international community. Obviously, the domestic–international nexus for disinformation is stronger in authoritarian regimes that are keen to influence the international audience, e.g., by building a better image from their crisis performance, by covering up possible unsuccessful crisis responses, or by casting them in a different light, etc. This kind of image management seems more important for authoritarian than for other regimes.

Our study makes important contributions to the available literature. Theoretically, our findings speak to the convergence theory and corroborate its assumption that democracies are becoming similar to autocracies in their practices. While this could be attributed to the special conditions during the pandemic, the fact that full democracies did not cut back all the restrictive measures after the pandemic needs further examination. This particularly applies to the most striking finding, namely the strengthening of disinformation by full democracies after the pandemic.

Furthermore, our study relates to the research on digital media restrictions, a topic that is likely to remain relevant. We have provided insights into the behavior of governments during crises with regard to the maintenance of an open public space and free exchange of information. Although the Covid-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis, it can nevertheless be used to draw conclusions about other crises. The question, particularly for democracies, is whether they would ensure that communication spaces do not shrink even in crises. Since there have been other crises since the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the energy crisis), our results can provide a useful reference for the exploration of these situations.

Our study emphasizes the relevance of cross-regime type analysis of internet control measures. This way, full democracies could be identified as capable of media restrictions and even repression as well as disinformation. At the same time, flawed democracies and hybrid regimes can be taken as cases that do not follow the logic of digital repression per se. Thus, these regime types appear less vulnerable to restricting digital communication in crises than expected. This differentiated perspective on how different regime types react in crises by restricting the digital media sphere provides important information for policymakers, practitioners, and policy programs targeting media support.

Methodologically, our study innovates in several aspects: It achieves a greater breadth by adopting a longitudinal perspective, by differentiating between regime types, and by differentiating between different measures of internet control. This way, we can determine very precisely which regime type resorts to which measures in which period. This approach allows for much more nuanced statements about the nature of the changes after the pandemic.

Finally, this article opens up avenues for further studies. One puzzle that derives from our results is how different regimes legitimize their internet control policies. We assume that democracies and autocracies, even if they both intensified their internet control activities, rely on different legitimation strategies. This resonates with anecdotical evidence that autocracies' justifications refer to the protection of public order or national interests while democracies legitimize based on preventing disinformation (Feldstein, 2022, p. 6). Still, even if all regimes are under pressure of legitimization, democracies are certainly under the greatest pressure, which means that this specific balancing act (Vick, 2001) that democracies have to perform when they use regulatory or repressive measures needs more attention. Therefore, it is important to examine more

profoundly the motivations behind government measures and how these measures are publicly justified. Thus, even if democracies, hybrid regimes, and autocracies may take similar actions, their motivations certainly differ.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Masks Down: Diplomacy and Regime Stability in the Post-Covid-19 Era

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Abstract

Natural disasters can create peaceful diplomatic interactions between conflicting parties, be they warring states or warring domestic factions. Advocates of "disaster diplomacy" argue that while events such as epidemics, earthquakes, floods, windstorms, and tsunamis result in human tragedies, they also generate opportunities for international cooperation, even between enemies. Conversely, natural disasters can also create rifts between friends and allies. Case studies of individual disasters show that while these events sometimes facilitate diplomatic efforts, they may also emphasize existing differences, creating rifts and exacerbating conflicts. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a unique opportunity to test the disaster diplomacy hypothesis on a rare global health crisis that affected many nations of various regime types and with various relations between them. We argue that pandemics and large-scale emergencies can change the rules of the diplomatic game by exposing states' genuine interests while disregarding international community norms. As such, the Covid-19 pandemic is tearing off the masks from states' faces, opening paths to cooperation with unexpected partners while creating rifts between yesterday's allies. We thus argue that post-Covid-19 diplomacy may be characterized by previously rare tendencies such as "trading with the enemy" on the one hand and abandonment of international agreements on the other. Moreover, on the domestic front, such crises tend to exhibit strong fluctuations in regime type, with a clear shift toward populist parties. Additionally, this article provides two alternative explanations for these phenomena and offers an in-depth analysis of two case studies.

Keywords

China; Covid-19; democratic backsliding; diplomacy; disasters; emergencies; European Union; international organizations; liberal order; terrorism

1. Introduction

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic not only created an immediate global health crisis but also prompted a profound re-evaluation of governmental priorities and norms worldwide. National interests were reassessed, and international norms were altered to accommodate the survival instincts of states and the emergency aspects of international interactions. The unique amalgamation of threat, uncertainty, and urgency disrupted the accustomed rhythms of political decision-making, policy implementation, and public service delivery, and uncovered the "naked truth" of self-preservation and a global solidarity crisis (Boin et al., 2021).

Viewing the global Covid-19 crisis through a disaster diplomacy perspective reveals striking parallels with other emergencies. The deep uncertainty about the course of the pandemic, along with how people perceived it and how it was discussed and treated in politics, reflects challenges often faced in other types of crises. Watching how Covid-19 was handled by the authorities in different countries, citizens struggled with a lack of knowledge and information, as well as with their fears and emotions and with how the narrative of the crisis was communicated to them.

The primary challenge confronting post-Covid politics and diplomacy arises from the persistence of altered methods, structures, and norms, even as the immediate emergency subsides. Just as pre-Covid mechanisms proved inadequate for addressing the era of global pandemics, the adjustments already made by politicians, institutions, and organizations throughout this prolonged crisis are ill-suited for addressing present and future challenges.

In essence, examining the political and diplomatic results of the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of crisis management that characterizes disaster diplomacy illuminates not only the immediate challenges faced by governments but also the enduring norms and practices that shape crisis responses and distinguish them from everyday norms. This article seeks to unravel the intricate interplay between crises and diplomacy, shedding light on how pandemics alter state priorities and unmask true intentions in an era where diplomacy is forced to "take its gloves off." We argue that natural disasters, such as pandemics, set in motion a process that forces states to reveal their true preferences, and those can be far removed from what has been known by then.

The article proceeds as follows: The next section overviews the disaster diplomacy scholarship. The third section analyzes how pandemics and global health emergencies, as a subset of natural disasters, alter state preferences and unmask norms. The next two sections evaluate the case studies of the Maldives and the EU. The sixth section ties up the ends and discusses diplomacy and politics in the post-pandemic world. The final section concludes and offers recommendations for future research.

2. Disaster Diplomacy in Theory

Disaster diplomacy is a fast-growing, eclectic, and interdisciplinary field, drawing insights from multiple areas concerned with war, peace, disasters, and humanitarian aid. The main argument advanced in the disaster diplomacy scholarship draws upon the international relations literature and emphasizes the necessary prerequisite "shocks" for ongoing conflicts to reach an end. At the heart of this argument lies the assumption that sudden and significant changes in the existing political environment are needed for rivalry to end

because shocks force decision-makers to overcome the paralysis inherent in enduring rivalries (Diehl & Goertz, 2000). However, some differences are evident since natural disasters, unlike enduring rivalries or regime changes, represent external shocks to the system or specific states that are not caused by forces inherent to rivalry politics, and this may result in a counter-reaction to the inertia in interstate conflicts. This process may proceed in a completely different direction and thus start (or initiate) peace-making between rivals.

However, the shock of a natural disaster may also lead to opposite consequences; that is, it may exacerbate existing rivalries and initiate a spiral of greater violence, especially in cases where parties can blame one another for the loss of lives or insufficient collaboration in recovery efforts. The scholarly literature has given ample attention to these two potential opposite effects in the context of climate-related disasters, particularly water-driven shocks such as droughts and floods, to explain the mixed findings reported in studies investigating the relationship between these disasters and the risk of violent conflict (Döring, 2020; Mach et al., 2020).

In a recent study on how natural disasters can escalate or defuse wars, insurgencies, and other types of conflicts, Ide (2023) uses both qualitative insights and quantitative data to explain the link between disasters and the (de-)escalation of armed conflict, and examines over 30 case studies of earthquakes, droughts, floods, and storms in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. He also examines the impact of Covid-19 on armed conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and the Philippines. To show the significance of natural disasters in recent decades, Ide offers the following data:

> Since the year 2000, such disasters have claimed 1.25 million lives. Some past events were even more devastating, such as the 1959 Yellow River flood in China (2 million deaths), the 1965–1967 drought in India (1.5 million deaths), the 1983–1984 drought in Ethiopia (300,000 deaths), and Cyclone Bhola in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1970 (300,000 deaths). To this, one can add the health effects of disasters—for example, injuries, post-traumatic stress, the destruction of housing, health, water, and food infrastructure, and post-disaster disease outbreaks. (Ide, 2023, p. 2)

This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the closest in its approach to our study of the links between natural disasters and conflict (or diplomacy and policy, in our case). The most relevant findings to our current study are the conditions under which natural disasters can lead to more peaceful relations between belligerents.

An additional contribution of Ide's study is the comparative analysis of societal resilience to natural disasters. If we assume that those are exogenous shocks to societies, we also need to acknowledge that there is a variation in how societies deal with them. Some have better capabilities and are better equipped than others to mitigate the adverse effects of natural disasters. The magnitude of natural hazards can also impact societies in various ways, depending on different factors that vary across societies.

One particular feature of Ide's (2023) research that is directly relevant to our current study is the chapter on the conflict implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the dynamics of ongoing armed conflicts between a government and a rebel group in four cases: Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Nigeria. The findings are as follows:

1. The pandemic can lead to conflict escalation, facilitate conflict de-escalation, or, in some cases, have no impact at all on conflict dynamics. These outcomes also depend on contextual variables. It is, however, unclear under what conditions these variables have more (or less) impact.
2. The effect of Covid-19 on armed conflict dynamics was much more significant in societies that are already vulnerable to health crises and "where at least one conflict party was negatively affected by the pandemic" (Ide, 2023, p. 212).
3. The strategic environment of armed groups is the variable that best explains the linkages between Covid-19 and armed conflict dynamics.

While these findings are ground-breaking in some respects and explore initial links between Covid-19 and diplomacy, Ide's (2023) study does not explore the variation under which the same conditions can lead to a crisis (a pandemic, in this case). In contrast, others can lead to (more) peaceful relations. Additionally, while Ide's research explores the impact of Covid-19 on conflict at the intrastate level, our study focuses on interstate conflict.

We identify three features that make natural disasters especially prone to affecting and potentially altering relations between rivals (Lutmar & Mandler, 2023).

Responsibility (or the lack thereof): Natural disasters (as opposed to man-made disasters) are considered a force majeure, influencing all parties' perceptions. Moreover, in natural disasters, one cannot attribute blame to any party (as opposed to cases of man-made disasters).

Universality: One cannot know where natural disasters will strike or the type of disaster (earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and wildfires) that is more likely to occur. Moreover, we cannot predict the speed with which these disasters develop and occur, and we cannot say with certainty which type of natural disaster will hit a particular area on the globe even though there is some knowledge on regional vulnerabilities to specific types of natural disasters (Stoltman et al., 2004). This unpredictability makes countries potential recipients and donors of aid. Furthermore:

> [This] makes natural disaster prevention, relief and reconstruction different from any other type of international collaboration. The universality of natural disasters implies perceiving any state's relief efforts as an impartial, benevolent act of solidarity and support. Thus, when such a proposal of collaboration on disaster mitigation, prevention or relief arises among rival parties, it carries the potential of being treated entirely differently than any other negotiation possibility. (Lutmar & Mandler, 2023, p. 4)

Transience and geographic demarcation: Given that natural disasters occur suddenly and require an immediate response from all possible sources, geographical proximity plays a crucial role in disaster relief. Therefore, a geographically close neighbor can offer help if it has good relations with its stricken neighbor or even if there are no relations at all. At the same time, the aid can be perceived as a conciliatory gesture (extending a hand) to a neighbor in cases with a history of hostile relations. The most recent examples of China offering help to Taiwan in the 2024 earthquake or of India providing help to Pakistan in 2005 showcase how disasters can create dynamics that influence and alter a rival's preferences.

3. Covid-19: How Pandemics Alter State Priorities and Unmask Intentions

3.1. Emergency Politics

Recent studies have increasingly shown how exogenous events, such as storms, rainfall shocks, and droughts, affect various domestic political factors. A key focus of this literature is on the mechanisms through which governments can use post-disaster relief measures to consolidate their control over society. Rahman et al. (2022) found a negative relationship between the frequency of storms and levels of democracy in island nations, suggesting that governments may exploit these emergencies to tighten their control over society. This mechanism is also highly relevant to health crises.

During a health crisis, governments are confronted with the imperative to emphasize collective health and safety needs. Stringent surveillance and control measures, often deemed necessary to contain the spread of disease and minimize casualties within the state, may encroach upon individual privacy rights and civil liberties. To mitigate risks and minimize uncertainties, governments may also resort to temporarily expanding executive powers, which poses inherent risks to democratic norms and institutional checks and balances (MacGregor et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the socioeconomic ramifications of health emergencies exacerbate existing disparities within impacted societies. Vulnerable populations, already marginalized by socioeconomic inequalities, are disproportionately impacted by both the disease burden and the economic fallout of control measures. In such contexts, democratic governments face mounting pressure to adopt inclusive policies designed to rectify underlying structural inequalities and ensure equitable access to healthcare and social support systems. At the same time, autocratic regimes may encounter unrest and social upheaval that threaten the regime's survival.

The rapidly worsening economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated a heated political debate on the ethical conundrum of balancing the health needs of vulnerable groups against the broader societal imperatives of prosperity and well-being. Governments were criticized for persisting with measures such as social distancing, lockdowns, and other restrictions which, while potentially prolonging the lives of the elderly and infirm, extracted a steep cost from the rest of the population. In navigating these complex moral dilemmas, politicians found themselves compelled to act within pressing time windows and under great uncertainty about the effectiveness of their decisions and the political toll they entailed (Boin et al., 2021).

This shift towards "emergency politics" was accompanied by the suspension of due processes in the name of addressing urgent threats. Furthermore, the pandemic exacerbated implicit and explicit associations between Covid-19 and the "Other"—individuals, groups, minorities, and even races. Exclusionary nationalism and racism have led to the stigmatization of specific groups as carriers of diseases, resulting in the disproportionate disadvantage of marginalized communities. In this way, the pandemic response reinforced the majority's dominance while further marginalizing vulnerable groups (Bieber, 2022).

Governments, confronted with multifaceted challenges amid the exigency of emergencies and constrained by a lack of time for traditional decision-making processes, frequently opted for expedient, occasionally populist measures with indeterminate ramifications. Prioritizing the interests of the majority over those of minority groups, opting for expedient remedies over enduring solutions, and withholding information that might cause

complications revealed the underlying motivations of political actors and their primary orientation toward their own political survival. Consequently, such practices profoundly eroded citizens' trust in various forms of authority, causing a split between politicians and the public, the reconciliation of which is a significant challenge for all governments in the post-Covid-19 era.

Several studies published in the initial stages of the pandemic argued that political measures such as lockdowns triggered a "rally around the flag" effect, boosting institutional trust in some European countries (Bol et al., 2021; Esaiasson et al., 2020). However, Schraff (2021) suggests that this apparent rise in political trust might actually stem from the initial anxiety caused by the growing number of cases. Therefore, it is more likely that initial anxiety, rather than an appreciation of government measures, explains the early surge in political trust during the first Covid-19 waves. Subsequent studies examining political trust after the first month of the pandemic indicate that political trust began to decline (Davies et al., 2021).

3.2. Pandemics Fuel the Urge to Isolate and Withdraw From Others, Fostering Selfishness

The most promising strategy for managing and ultimately mitigating any global crisis, such as Covid-19, resides in extensive, multidimensional collaboration among nations, including the exchange of vital information and resources. It is ironic, then, that the basic human instinct in times of emergencies is to turn away, to seclude oneself, and to restrict contact with others. The pandemics serve as catalysts for these natural tendencies, igniting the innate human inclination towards seeking closure and erecting barriers for protection and containment (Diamond, 2020).

In addition to implementing domestic policies to address social, economic, health, and safety issues within their own countries, governments applied their foreign policy strategies to bolster their response to the effects of Covid-19 and isolate themselves from other countries. Border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic epitomized the widespread adoption of isolationist policies on a global scale. Several governments closed their national borders to visitors from countries with high Covid-19 cases, while others closed their borders entirely. Numerous countries opted to shutter their international airports, with the transatlantic travel ban as a prominent example. These measures substantially reduced air passenger traffic, severely impacting industries such as tourism, travel, lodging, and restaurants. The ensuing economic downturn led to widespread unemployment as governments prioritized safeguarding public health and preventing healthcare system collapse over economic considerations (Alhashimi et al., 2021).

At the international level, health emergencies necessitate cross-border cooperation and diplomacy, especially as multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization take the main stage. Despite the common interest to contain and eradicate the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and divergent national interests may impede collective action, underscoring the challenges of global health governance (MacGregor et al., 2020). It was, therefore, no surprise that the Covid-19 pandemic strained intergovernmental relations, especially in federal and multilevel systems such as the EU, challenging their ability to coordinate effective responses and avoid politically harmful blame games (Boin et al., 2021).

The pandemic reinforced the primacy of the state in international relations. The rapid escalation of state intervention witnessed globally in the weeks following the pandemic outbreak starkly diverged from the traditionally limited role of the state within the neoliberal global framework (Bieber, 2022). The renewed

primacy of the state caused by the Covid-19 crisis also weakened global governance and cooperation. China's handling of the coronavirus, particularly its lockdown policy, incurred significant economic costs, potentially eroding its long-term power. However, countries such as Russia and China expanded their global influence through propaganda, power projection, and growing self-assurance, placing democracy on the defensive.

The pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of individual nations to fluctuations in global supply chains and exacerbated pre-Covid-19 challenges to the liberal international order (Lake et al., 2021). During times of health crisis, vulnerability exposes many countries to potential shortages in vital medical supplies. In addition to medical-related shortages, government control measures during the pandemic caused significant disruptions in global supply chains, leading to shortages of other critical goods. These shortages sparked both public and elite discussions about the need to promote national production and shorten supply chains. As Mansfield and Solodoch (2022) show, anxiety, fear, and economic damage fueled a rising anti-trade sentiment across the US. This sentiment, which is not unique to the US, coupled with the need to reduce strategic vulnerabilities, led to a re-evaluation of globalization, as articulated by numerous leaders. Resulting protectionism among the greater powers, such as the US and China, amplified existing rivalries (Lake et al., 2021). Smaller states bolstered nationalistic sentiment, intensifying competition for power and influence on the global stage (Bieber, 2022).

3.3. Pandemics: An Opportunity for Autocratic Tendencies

Epidemics, and particularly pandemics, demand prompt and resolute government action, providing fertile ground for autocrats to further their agendas (Diamond, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic spread amid an ongoing global backdrop of democratic decline (Diamond, 2020). Over the past decade, there has been a marked recession in freedom and democracy, with more nations witnessing a loss rather than a gain in political rights and civil liberties.

The mainstreaming of exclusionary nationalist ideas, propelled by the rise of the far-right, permeated societies across numerous countries, fostering widespread acceptance of these ideologies. This trend had already been gaining momentum before the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, laying the groundwork for a global crisis. As the pandemic unfolded, it provided an unprecedented opportunity for autocratic leaders to wield executive power, leading to the erosion of democratic institutions and checks and balances (Bieber, 2022).

In line with Stephen M. Walt's predictions, the emergency measures implemented across regimes during the pandemics have had a twofold, already observable impact (Allen et al., 2020): On the one hand, the pandemic strengthened the state and reinforced nationalism by empowering governments, with many reluctant to give up their newfound powers once the Covid-19 crisis had faded. On the other hand, we are now experiencing a severe crisis in state legitimacy and severe state weakness, which is putting ever more states at risk of becoming failed states, challenged by global crime and terror organizations. While the pandemic caused some states to strengthen their grip on society in order to survive, others' readiness and capacity to address the spill-over of global challenges into local problems is quickly diminishing.

In vulnerable, mixed regimes where the risk posed by natural disasters is higher than in autocracies or consolidated democracies, a pandemic serves as an advantageous situation for political conflicts (Nel & Righarts, 2008). Especially within nations undergoing democratization, an emergency or disaster tends to

regress the regime toward its original autocratic inclinations. Conversely, within hybrid systems initially rooted in democracy but experiencing deterioration, a pandemic that is inadequately addressed by the government accelerates the erosion of democratic values. The governmental measures designed to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic come with a threat of transforming fragile democratic systems into competitive authoritarian structures. These regimes, pivoting towards nationalism and separatism as a central legitimizing doctrine to perpetuate their authority, threaten international security and stability (Bieber, 2022).

3.4. The Post-Pandemic Era: Post-Truth, Post-Shame, and Post-Trust?

As mentioned, the pandemic induced diminished institutional trust, factual disagreement, and a blurred distinction between opinion and fact. This era heightened citizens' craving for certainty, often sought in reassuring information from trusted institutions that aligned with their existing beliefs. Confusion and uncertainty arose from conflicting facts and sources. Charlatanism, misinformation, and errors emerge in response to individuals' desires and interests aligning with comfortable, non-dissonant facts (Schulman, 2020).

While the deliberate misinformation propagated by some government officials stands out as characteristic of the mishandling of the Covid-19 response, the global dissemination of falsehoods and conspiracy theories through social media and other mass communication channels during the pandemic has shaken the basic distinction between lies and truth (Adler & Drieschova, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic created an environment where governments were more inclined to engage in willful obfuscation for various reasons: either to downplay the severity of the pandemic to maintain public calm and to avoid panic, or to manipulate information to portray their response in a more favorable light or to deflect blame for any shortcomings in their handling of the crisis. In the post-pandemic era, even if the governments themselves are not directly causing willful obfuscation, the "lead by example" effect is already in place, creating conditions that facilitate such behavior in politics and governance (Shelton, 2020). Indeed, public figures today appear to exhibit less embarrassment or remorse when their falsehoods or lies are exposed. Voters want public figures and political leaders who say and do what they believe to be true, even if those beliefs are unpopular, inconvenient, or even inaccurate (Hannon, 2023). However, when political leadership is characterized by dishonesty or misconduct without any expression of shame, people stop being surprised or feeling ashamed about their own behavior as well. It also becomes more difficult to know whom to trust. If we believe others do not feel bad about lying or behaving contrary to accepted social norms, it makes sense to trust them less.

When political leadership is marked by dishonesty or misconduct without any sense of shame, it normalizes unethical behavior among the populace. This erosion of trust and moral norms provides fertile ground for conspiracy theorists, extremists, terrorist groups, authoritarian regimes, disinformation networks, hate groups, cybercriminals, cults, and political opportunists to exploit societal divisions and sow chaos. While lockdowns and emergency measures by states may have hindered the operations of such groups during the Covid-19 crisis, simultaneously, the fact that governments' attention was diverted toward combating the pandemic inadvertently provided opportunities for these organizations to thrive (Alhashimi et al., 2021).

In the post-Covid-19 era, these dynamics have led to an increase in terrorism and extremism. The disruption caused by the pandemic has exacerbated social and economic grievances, creating fertile ground for

radicalization. Moreover, the heightened vulnerability of youth, coupled with the prolonged disruption of traditional education systems, has made them more susceptible to extremist ideologies. As governments continue to grapple with the aftermath of the pandemic and prioritize recovery efforts, addressing the root causes of terrorism and extremism, including socioeconomic disparities and youth vulnerabilities, will be crucial in mitigating the risks posed by these threats in the post-Covid-19 world.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a deep political crisis, challenging societal values and governance structures within states and on the international stage. Criticism emerged over leaders' and international organizations' handling of scientific advice, institutional effectiveness, and trust in public institutions, sparking debates on democratic resilience and the rule of law (Boin et al., 2021). Overall, the pandemic strained mutual trust, a crucial element for the survival of the highly connected national and international political systems.

Emergency diplomacy is frequently initiated by exogenous events beyond the control of policymakers. However, the policies that countries adopt to manage these initial shocks are shaped by various domestic political factors and can significantly affect society (Lipscy, 2020). In addition to the structural shifts these broad impacts impose on the international system, they may also influence national preferences in conflict.

4. Abandoning Old Commitments and Embracing New Alliances: The Maldives

The Maldives has historically had ties to India but has recently made a dramatic shift towards China. China has been investing in the Maldives as part of its "String of Pearls" strategy to create a network of military and commercial bases in the Indian Ocean. During his presidency, Maldivian President Solih and his government halted many Chinese investments and built frameworks to provide checks and balances to Maldives' relatively weak democratic institutions. He also reiterated an "India-First" policy and received considerable Indian assistance in debt relief. Solih's efforts at democratization were, however, hindered by the impacts of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

At first, the Covid-19 crisis provided another opportunity to strengthen the alliance between the Maldives and India. In 2020, India provided the Maldives with a surveillance plane for medical evacuation from isolated communities on about 200 inhabited islands, which was actually intended to help keep a close eye on the movement of Chinese vessels in regional waters. When Covid-19 started impacting the Maldivian economy, primarily due to a decline in tourist arrivals, India promptly provided assistance, which included a $150 million currency swap aimed at stabilizing the Maldivian economy, along with the delivery of 200,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccine (Thakur, 2023).

As Taneja and Bali (2021) contend, India's assistance to the Maldives should be viewed as part of a broader strategy, where India leveraged its aid to other countries to capitalize on the crisis and assert its leadership in South Asia. However, the impact of this policy was not solely determined by India's regional and global priorities; it was primarily influenced by the international Covid-19-related developments occurring in the Maldives. As time passed, the waves of the global Covid-19 pandemic severely battered the Maldives. Since 2020, the social effects of Covid-19 on the densely populated main island have drawn Maldivians towards fundamentalist rhetoric and actions. This trend heightened the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalists and extremist groups during the pandemic, as evidenced by the May 2021 terrorist attack on Nasheed by Islamic extremists (Bhim, 2024).

Maldivian supporters of the Islamic State and other jihadist factions swiftly seized upon the pandemic as a tool for propaganda. There was a resurgence in efforts to translate and disseminate Islamic State propaganda, with a focus on portraying Covid-19 as a "warrior of jihad," a divine intervention revealing the West's vulnerabilities. Anti-Western sentiments surged, alongside narratives depicting the pandemic as a heavenly retribution for societal sins and the perceived un-Islamic nature of the tourism sector. Messages advocating religious purification and a revival of "pure" Islam were propagated (Ranjan, 2023).

It is against this background that the 2023 presidential elections took place. Under Mohamed Muizzu's leadership, the current Maldivian administration campaigned against former President Ibrahim Soleh's strong relationship with India and his India-First policy. Muizzu advocated for closer relations with China and successfully stirred public discontent towards India's allegedly unnecessary military presence in the Maldives (Rajagopalan, 2024).

During a state visit to Beijing in January, President Muizzu and Chinese officials signed 20 agreements covering various areas such as infrastructure, trade, economy, green development, grants, and other development projects, representing around $127 million in aid. Praising China as one of the Maldives' closest allies and developmental partners, Muizzu emphasized the trip's significance. Subsequently, in March 2024, the Maldivian defense ministry unveiled a military assistance agreement with Beijing to bolster bilateral ties. This strategic move aligns with Muizzu's overarching efforts, initiated since assuming office in November 2023, to cultivate stronger ties with China. This shift follows his campaign promise to remove Indian troops from Maldivian territory and assert national sovereignty. Concurrently, Muizzu announced his government's decision to reassess bilateral agreements with India, including the termination of a hydrographic survey agreement signed in 2019, scheduled to expire in June 2024.

5. Rifts Between Existing Allies: The EU

As mentioned earlier, natural disasters have consequences on various dimensions: social, economic, and often geopolitical. Our goal here is to show how the pandemic altered some of the EU members' preferences. At the onset of the pandemic, even several model democracies of the EU adopted extraordinary measures (Ilyas, 2020), including emergency measures and restrictions on democratic governmental rules. As Ilyas (2020) mentions:

> [A] number of these measures are feared to be dismantling checks and balances vital to the continuity of democratic practices. As has been history, pandemics have provided states the excuse to expand their powers, as fear has made people comply [with] stricter orders. Italy, Spain, Poland, and France are heavily fining people who are out without a reason. Countries have closed their borders to any and all activity, some even leaving their own citizens stranded offshore. (p. 8)

In addition to the significant health and economic crises and democratic backsliding the EU experienced, the global pandemic struck a huge blow to the idea of international cooperation and inter-organizational cooperation. Unlike previous notable EU crises, in which specific governments and leaders could be held responsible for the crisis, the pandemic was considered a symmetrical external initial shock. Therefore, although one might have expected the absence of someone to blame would foster increased solidarity within the EU, even scholars praising the EU's subsequent response to the pandemic acknowledge that the EU initially failed to act (Quaglia & Verdun, 2023).

In particular, one of the most remarkable developments involved Italy, a member of the EU, that, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, surpassed China's number of casualties (Pratiwi & Salamah, 2020). The EU had long maintained a reputation of being an organization whose members exhibit boundless cooperation for well-being beyond the mere economic integration of its member states, and those states that did better in terms of state response and preparedness were expected to extend assistance to other EU states. Instead, amid initial anxiety and varied health impacts across member states, policymakers initially resisted a centralized response. They hoarded personal protective equipment, restricted the movement of essential supplies such as respirators, and sought national control over critical supply chains (Anghel & Jones, 2023). The pandemic exposed its lack of cohesion when none of the member states responded positively to Italy's pleas to the EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre for supplies of medical equipment in general and vaccines in particular (Ilyas, 2020), although no European state had yet suffered as badly as Italy had at that time (Braw, 2020). To Italy's huge disappointment, during the pandemic, the EU hit Italy with a €7.5 million fine in a case that had been running against Italy since 2008 (Fogli & Pastorini, 2021). In yet another inversion of its expected allies or sources of help, Italy received vaccines from China, Cuba, and Russia, furthering the lack of cohesion in the current system of not only Italy but also the Baltic states, "which [felt] abandoned by their closest neighbor, the EU, amid the export restrictions on healthcare supplies" (Ilyas, 2020, p. 12). These intra-organizational frictions, in light of extreme circumstances and in the shadow of a natural disaster, raise concerns about the strength of the alliance and the commitments that tie its members. That is, if the organization acts against its foundational expectations when a crisis arises, then what are members to conclude about future potential disagreements in the realm of security, climate change, and immigration policies—all contentious topics?

In fact, some viewed these surprising developments within the EU, and its response to the global pandemic crisis, as a de-globalization process (Grant, 2020). The pandemic provided extra ammunition to the proponents of greater national self-sufficiency in particular and European self-sufficiency in general (especially given its turn to China for help with the provision of medical supplies).

Contrary to initial reluctance to adopt centralized EU measures, member governments gradually began collaborating on collective responses, notably launching the largest multi-year recovery fund, NextGenerationEU. While hailed as a step forward, NextGenerationEU's implementation has been more complex and incomplete than the initial "Hamiltonian moment" narrative suggests. Its launch led to elite controversies and, as Bauhr and Charron (2023) demonstrate, the extent to which national governments endorsed or opposed the package significantly influenced public support or opposition. Thus, though unprecedented in scale, the financial package represents a more modest expression of European solidarity than initially anticipated (Anghel & Jones, 2023).

The pandemic presented a major challenge to EU solidarity and its coordination policies among its members, and in many ways "reawakened those acute tensions between Northern and Southern member states which had already shattered the EU several times during the 2010s" (Ferrera et al., 2021, p. 1347). This "existential crisis" was averted this time. However, it opened a sufficiently large, albeit temporary, crack within EU cooperation unity that no one can no longer be sure that crises like this will not resurface when natural disasters strike again.

6. Diplomacy and Politics in the Post-Covid-19 Era

In May 2023, media outlets covered an incident involving delegates from Ukraine and Russia in talks on Black Sea cooperation in Ankara, Turkey. A physical altercation ensued in the corridors when the secretary of the Russian delegate forcibly seized a Ukrainian flag that was on display for a photo op. The Ukrainian delegate intervened, reclaiming the flag and engaging in physical confrontation, including punching and slapping his Russian counterpart. Video footage of the scuffle was subsequently posted on the Ukrainian diplomat's Facebook page, where he expressed his indignation with the caption, "Paws off our flag, paws off Ukraine" ("Ukrainian delegate punches Russian rep," 2023). A similar event occurred in October 2020 in Fiji when tensions between China and Taiwan flared into a physical altercation between their diplomats ("China–Taiwan tensions erupt," 2020).

While it is widely known that warring Ukraine and Russia, as well as Taiwan and China, harbor deep animosity towards each other, such unfiltered and aggressive behavior in front of the camera goes against accepted norms of diplomatic conduct, such as professionalism, courtesy, and promotion of peaceful conflict resolution. Moreover, posting the behavior with pride on social networks clearly shows that the involved parties feel no shame regarding their behavior. Is it a coincidence that two such incidents occurred in the Covid-19 and post-pandemic era? We argue that the pandemic has stripped away many formalities and barriers in various dimensions of society, including diplomacy and politics. Diplomats, like everyone else, display more authentic or unfiltered behavior due to the global demand for sincerity. The stress and uncertainty triggered by the pandemic created a preference for more candid expressions of emotions or opinions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably exacerbated the crisis of the liberal international order. The once-dominant role of the US faded as the country shifted its focus inward during the pandemic, leaving its allies behind. Advanced democracies, preoccupied with internal challenges and divisions, have also seen their influence wane (Diamond, 2020). However, neither China, the EU, nor international organizations have proven capable of filling the hegemonic void. During the pandemic, all major powers hesitated to extend assistance to needy countries, while international institutions struggled to take the lead. Without a strong global leader, the diplomatic strategies of many states have become more assertive and aggressive.

The pandemic-induced shift in both global and national priorities has led governments to reassess their diplomatic objectives, priorities, and strategies. Their objectives encompassed not only addressing urgent public health and economic challenges, such as saving lives and limiting contagion, but also pursuing longer-term goals by diplomatic means, such as securing access to potential future vaccines and facilitating quicker recovery from the crisis. It is, therefore, understandable that the pandemic threatened the progress already made in multilateral promises and global agreements, which were consequently postponed or deferred.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries made repatriation of their citizens stranded abroad a top priority. This focus on bringing nationals home underscored a departure from globalization principles, highlighting a resurgence of national interests over global interconnectedness. Diplomatic apparatuses found themselves entrusted with new responsibilities aligned with each country's particular strategies for addressing Covid-19 (Alhashimi et al., 2021). Governments provided assistance to students, tourists, and migrant workers unable to remain overseas due to pandemic-related measures. Embassies and consulates

were allocated resources to support citizens in need, signaling a shift towards nationalist responses to the crisis. This tendency influenced multinational and supranational entities such as the UN and EU, as we have shown above. At the same time, while focusing extensively on domestic pandemic response efforts, governments engaged various sectors beyond their foreign ministries or equivalents. As a result, new types of diplomatic agents, such as celebrities, businesses, and social media influencers, entered diplomacy, altering the established pre-Covid-19 norms of conduct and diplomatic procedures.

The pandemic also transformed diplomats' daily operations, particularly in terms of in-person interactions and traditional diplomatic practices. Many governments were forced to implement efficiency measures in diplomatic missions, reducing staff numbers in embassies and consulates to cut costs, as well as delaying rotations and assignments to minimize expenses associated with staff transfers. For example, diplomatic staff numbers at permanent missions to the UN in New York were reduced to allow diplomats to repatriate and resume their responsibilities through virtual meetings from home.

Social distancing measures and travel restrictions rendered face-to-face meetings and events impossible, prompting a shift towards virtual alternatives such as online receptions and meetings. While these digital platforms have enabled continuity in diplomatic activities, they also had significant repercussions. Diplomacy, especially mediation, is a deeply interpersonal process that relies on a nuanced understanding of individuals and environments (Alhashimi et al., 2021). With social distancing restrictions curbing in-person interactions and online discussions frequently serving as the sole recourse, building trust and fostering the spirit of compromise essential to preventive diplomacy became much more challenging.

In accordance with Diamond's (2020) predictions, the anticipated consequences of ineffective mitigation strategies during the global Covid-19 crisis heightened international instability and insecurity. This environment facilitated the expansion of Islamist and other extremist factions, while animosity towards Western liberal democracies intensified. Since the Covid-19 crisis, international diplomacy has primarily been characterized by three trends: increased regional cooperation, tightening ties among similar governments, and status-seeking (Pedi & Wivel, 2020). The chaotic nature of national and global responses to the pandemic was a clear indicator of the post-Covid-19 international (dis)order (Rudd, 2020).

7. Conclusion and Further Research

The global pandemic has significantly fueled the proliferation of fear, with extremist groups seizing the opportunity to propagate conspiracy theories and exacerbate anxieties. This crisis has been exploited in various ways to promote diverse agendas, including undermining trust in democratic institutions and inciting violence through the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Moreover, the psychological and economic effects of the pandemic are poised to further intensify the politics of fear, while the global economic ramifications of the pandemic are expected to exacerbate exclusionary nationalist tendencies.

The analysis of the two case studies clearly shows how pandemic politics, more optimally understood with the help of a disaster diplomacy perspective, can have far-reaching geopolitical implications, in addition to economic and social consequences. These cases exemplify the shift in foreign policy priorities induced by the pandemic, altering existing alliances and forging new collaborations.

Looking ahead for promising paths for exploration, one can envision several avenues. The first is investigating how various natural disasters might affect the prospects for peaceful relations or rapprochement between belligerents. Moreover, there is a broad variation between states' resilience, but few studies have attempted to identify its underlying causes.

Many states face crises originating from large numbers of migrants, who contribute to domestic unrest and governmental instability, as well as to the rise of populist leaders and far-right parties. An interesting study would look at those countries and examine how the level of democracy and governance affects their preparedness for and management of natural disasters.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a tremendous challenge to the democratic quality and survival of many governments worldwide. The scholarly literature postulates that in countries with weak state-of-emergency regulation, major crises, such as natural disasters in general and pandemics such as Covid-19 in particular, pose a dramatic risk of democratic backsliding (Cassani, 2023). The case of the Maldives exemplifies this process precisely, with democratization processes obstructed and reversed due to the Covid-19 crisis. The case of Italy is, however, less clear. Although its democratic measures remain relatively constant, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, coupled with demographic shifts and high unemployment, have fostered the rise of nationalist, right-wing populism in Italy. Fratelli d'Italia and its leader, Giorgia Meloni, exemplify this trend, with the party tempering extreme stances on EU withdrawal and immigration while Meloni's espousal of homophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric, alongside alignment with Putin's Russia, signal democratic regression. Cultural clashes over abortion rights, surrogacy, and LGBTQ+ rights highlight this government's authoritarian tendencies.

Relatively little is known about the links between the strength of state-of-emergency regulation and the propensity of democratic backsliding in the shadow of major crises, and it is worth exploring this further. A final potential direction of future research can look at levels of aid countries provide to allies following natural disasters—as opposed to assistance to countries with which relations are tense. The motives for providing aid are diverse and can serve various interests (Lutmar & Mandler, 2019; Mandler & Lutmar, 2020, 2021). Therefore, a study of cases in which assistance is offered for various reasons, some for humanitarian aid and others in which the "masks are down," may offer important insights that might also be relevant to policymakers when they allocate resources from a fixed pie. Moreover, such research might provide valuable insights into institutional resilience and inter-organizational alliances.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Authoritarian Demand in East-Central Europe Post-Pandemic and Amid Neighbouring War

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a noticeable democratic decline worldwide, revealing a tendency of voters to elect leaders with authoritarian tendencies. In East-Central European countries, authoritarian attitudes reached unprecedented heights since their accession to the EU. Existing academic literature highlights key drivers of support for authoritarianism in this region of the continent, including anti-elite sentiments, political anxiety, economic threat, and perceived injustice. However, there is little scientific evidence related to the strength of these variables in a post-pandemic context and amid a neighbouring war. Drawing on original public opinion data collected in Poland, Hungary, and Romania, the current study identifies the main driving forces behind public demand for authoritarianism in these countries. The article develops a comparative perspective and thus contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the resurgence of authoritarianism in this part of the world.

Keywords

authoritarianism; East-Central Europe; political compass; populism; war

1. Introduction

A steep democratic decline has been evident everywhere around the world in the past few decades, with an increasing transition to non-democratic regimes since 2006. These regimes often come to power through free and fair elections, indicating a tendency among voters to elect and accept authoritarian leaders. Countries in East-Central Europe make no exception to this global trend, as they showed signs of democratic deconsolidation even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 health crisis (Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Greskovits,

2015). According to the 2023 V-Dem Report, the global level of democracy has regressed to the levels of 1986, with 72% of the world's population now living in autocracies. The report highlights an increase in the number of closed autocracies and a decrease in liberal democracies, indicating significant "autocratization" in many regions, including East-Central Europe (Papada et al., 2023).

However, the pandemic has elevated authoritarian propensity to unprecedented heights in the region since these countries joined the EU. In Hungary, the multiple crises the country has faced have allowed Viktor Orbán to consolidate his control over the political system through a radicalized public discourse supporting illiberalism and populism (Lendvai-Bainton & Szelewa, 2021). In Romania, the 2024 elections appear poised to bring victory to the country's first radical anti-EU and authoritarian party, and the most recent elections in Poland have revealed the difficulty of breaking away from authoritarianism.

Existing academic literature emphasizes that the main drivers of authoritarian demand in this part of the world are anti-elite sentiments, economic uncertainty, insecurity, and the perception of injustice (Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Enyedi, 2020; Mudde, 2007). However, there is little scientific evidence related to how demand for authoritarianism looks like after the pandemic and during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Our study utilizes an original set of public opinion data ($N = 4{,}974$) collected in 2023 in Hungary, Poland, and Romania—all of which border Ukraine. The data collected post-pandemic and amid a neighbouring war reveals insights into the main driving forces behind public demand for authoritarianism in this region. While we cannot isolate the effects of the pandemic and the war on the attitudes measured, our comparative analysis contributes to a nuanced understanding of the resurgence of this trend in East-Central Europe.

Our study provides a snapshot of the current context framed by the post-Covid-19 pandemic and by the war in Ukraine, which have amplified public fears and insecurity. Understanding the trajectory towards authoritarianism in East-Central European nations, which have faced decades of totalitarian regimes, requires a deep analysis of the complex network of social, economic, and political perceptions shaped by post-1989 democratization processes. Although the initial wave of democratization was a triumph within the third wave, a sense of democratic fatigue began to infiltrate after these nations joined the EU. Years of one-party rule left citizens unprepared for the rigours of repeated electoral contests, fostering a tolerance for autocratic governance and scepticism towards rapid democratization, often perceived as chaotic and destabilizing (Pop-Eleches, 2007).

In this article, we have chosen to observe how trends towards authoritarianism emerge from citizens towards leaders. The concept of "authoritarian demand" refers to the active support of citizens for authoritarian leaders and their behaviour. This approach is essential to understanding that authoritarian regimes arise and consolidate through popular support. Unlike perspectives that view authoritarianism exclusively as a result of elite actions (top-down), this approach emphasizes the role of citizens in supporting and legitimizing such regimes (bottom-up; Mudde, 2007).

We consider authoritarian demand to be an expression of democratic erosion that unfolds as a narrative process by which democratic norms and institutions are gradually undermined, often with popular support. This can result from a sense of dissatisfaction with democratic performance, economic instability, or perceived threats to national and cultural identity (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Stanley, 2017). This erosion is evident in East-Central Europe, where after 2010, illiberal-leaning parties in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria,

Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have exploited weaknesses in the judicial system and media to gain power (Bochsler & Juon, 2020). Moreover, the economic crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine have contributed to the eroding of trust in democracy in these countries, but also in Romania.

However, it is important to note that the direct link between various factors (as mentioned above) and authoritarianism or democratic erosion is complex and cannot be reduced to a mere causal relationship. The identified factors interact with each other and with other context-specific factors in each country. For example, the alternation of power, as seen in Poland, demonstrates that support for democracy does not vary significantly between government and opposition supporters, but democratic erosion can occur both through abuses of power by elected actors (Chiopris et al., 2021) and through a narrative that promotes distrust and insecurity.

The primary goal of political parties is electoral mobilization and a powerful tool for increasing citizens' political engagement is moralizing action (Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021). In this context, populism constructs a narrative based on emotions and identity to fuel people's resentment towards elites. Many populists articulate an electoral-authoritarian vision of the state (Paget, 2023, p. 1), often describing elites as either incompetent or corrupt. A key feature of populist appeals is exploiting gaps created by mainstream parties between electoral promises and the reality they deliver (Stoica, 2018). In East-Central Europe, post-communist economic transformation has been marked by a new social stratification, where only a limited segment of society benefited from rapid privatization. At the same time, large sections faced chronic unemployment and pauperization (Szelényi & Wilk, 2013). Simultaneously, internal political instability and major corruption scandals in these countries have eroded public trust in democratic institutions (Greskovits, 2015). In this landscape, populist leaders present their opponents as "enemies of the people" (Mudde, 2007). This narrative resonates in societies characterized by widespread disillusionment with the political class (Kriesi et al., 2008). This rhetoric, imbued with fear and distrust, provides fertile ground for consolidating authoritarianism in the region. This complexity underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of authoritarianism and democratic erosion.

2. Conceptualizing "Authoritarian Demand"

In most cases, recent academic literature identifies a series of trigger factors related to the demand for authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, which can be grouped into four main clusters: anti-elitism (Staykova et al., 2016), political anxiety (Kates & Tucker, 2019), economic threat (Bochsler & Juon, 2020), and the perception of injustice (Enyedi, 2020). Therefore, our analysis focuses on the four triggers mentioned above to provide a clear and focused perspective on the demand for authoritarianism in East-Central Europe. We hereby describe each of them.

Anti-elitism represents a resentment towards political, economic, and intellectual elites fuelled by perceptions of their corruption, incompetence, or partisan goals hidden under the mask of expertise. The erosion of democratic norms is often facilitated by hostility towards elites, perceived as being disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Populist movements exploit these feelings of distrust, building a narrative based on emotions and identity to fuel people's resentment towards elites (Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021; Hochschild, 2016). Many populists articulate an electoral-authoritarian vision of the state (Paget, 2023), describing elites as either incompetent or corrupt (Magyar, 2019). In our article, anti-elitism

refers to the prevailing sentiment that those in positions of power often attain their status through dubious means. It reflects the sentiment that there is a handful of self-serving interest groups which neglect the needs of the citizens. It also includes perceived EU attempts to enforce regulations upon member states, seen as infringing upon the sovereignty of one's country. Furthermore, anti-elitism also refers to the perception that specialists exhibit the tendency to over-complicate issues, obscuring straightforward solutions with unnecessary complexity.

Political anxiety refers to a sense of insecurity and fear regarding internal and external political instability. Economic and cultural insecurity can drive citizens to embrace authoritarian solutions, seeking stability and protection in the face of uncertainty (Norris, 2017). In consolidated democracies, cynicism about the value of democracy and openness to authoritarian alternatives become more pronounced when citizens feel threatened (Foa & Mounk, 2016). In East-Central Europe, the post-communist economic transformation has been marked by a new social stratification, where only a limited segment of society benefited from rapid privatization, while large sections faced chronic unemployment and pauperization (Szelényi & Wilk, 2013).

Economic threat refers to citizens' perceptions of job insecurity, living standards, and national economic policies. Economic insecurity can fuel support for authoritarian leaders who promise to protect the national economy (Hochschild, 2016). Economic crises deepen democratic vulnerabilities and facilitate the rise of authoritarian leaders (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Economic threat engulfs one's need to restore or at least preserve a sense of control and self-esteem, perceived as hindered especially during periods of personal or collective economic crisis. It also refers to people feeling that large companies amass excessive profits at the expense of fair wages for workers, as well as the perception that major societal economic challenges can be swiftly resolved.

Finally, the perception of social and economic injustice represents the feeling that the political system favours a select group of people and does not ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. The sense of injustice can drive citizens to support authoritarian alternatives that promise to restore equity and fairness (Foa & Mounk, 2016). The perception of injustice is an important driver of authoritarianism (Norris, 2017). When tackling perceived injustice, we refer to views according to which other national or supranational organisations (as is the EU) are accused of exploiting the goodwill of the people and the resources of one's country, or even treating one's country as a colony. It also refers to perceptions related to one's personal situation, considering to be caught in an endless cycle of adversity, with no respite in sight, or with no chance of being taken into consideration by decision-makers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly affected how governments operate worldwide, heightening public fears and changing how people view authority. Governments had to take extraordinary measures, often over-centralizing power and enforcing strict public health measures. While these were meant to protect citizens, the way they were communicated was often flawed, thus leading to a decline of trust in democratic institutions. As such, people might have started to prefer an authoritarian type of leadership, which they perceive as more capable during crises (Boin et al., 2009). This shift suggests that the pandemic has increased the appeal of authoritarianism among those frustrated with what they perceived as the ineffective responses of democratic systems to such large-scale emergencies. This trend highlights the importance of understanding how health crises can move public support towards more centralized and less accountable forms of governance (Tooze, 2021).

The war in Ukraine adds another layer to this issue, bringing more insecurity and uncertainty. The conflict's closeness to East-Central Europe has intensified nationalistic feelings and the desire for strong, protective leadership. In countries like Poland and Romania, which have significant historical connections to Ukraine, the war has increased fears of political instability and external threats. These fears likely lead to more support for authoritarian leaders who promise stability and security against perceived existential threats. Additionally, the economic impact of the conflict, such as disruptions in trade and energy supplies, has worsened existing economic fears, pushing voters towards authoritarian solutions that offer economic protectionism and resilience. It is very possible that the mix of economic insecurity and political anxiety has strengthened the demand for authoritarian leadership, which can supposedly protect national interests against foreign enemies (Norris, 2017).

Therefore, we consider the pandemic and the war to be contexts that accelerated the demand for authoritarianism, altering the socio-political landscape. These crises revealed the weaknesses of democratic institutions and highlighted the perceived effectiveness of authoritarian governance in managing unprecedented challenges. This trend was especially noticeable in East-Central Europe, where historical experiences and current crises created a favourable environment for authoritarianism. The resulting public desire for strong, decisive leadership indicates a broader narrative of democratic decline, where disillusionment with democratic processes pushes people towards autocratic alternatives.

3. Authoritarian Demand in East-Central Europe Post-Pandemic and Amid Neighbouring War

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, populist governments saw opportunities to consolidate their power in this crisis, as noted by Batory (2022). In Hungary, the Orbán government has centralized power through an emergency response to the pandemic, perceived as an extension of authoritarianism, raising concerns about the abuse of power (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020). He criticized the EU for its slow and bureaucratic response to the pandemic, amplifying Euroscepticism (Lundgren et al., 2020). In Poland, the pandemic was used by the Law and Justice (PiS) government to promote controversial judicial reforms and criticize the organization of elections under the pretext of public health, which damaged public trust and strengthened nationalism (Batory, 2022; Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020; Tatarczyk & Wojtasik, 2023). In Romania, opposition to mandatory vaccination and allegations of corruption in managing the pandemic have amplified scepticism and criticism of EU vaccine distribution, highlighting feelings of neglect and unfair treatment (Bârgăoanu et al., 2022).

The war in Ukraine has given populist leaders in Hungary, Poland, and Romania a new opportunity to adjust their speeches. The prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, adopted a position different from that of the EU, taking advantage of the situation to justify opportunistic policies (Özoflu & Arató, 2023). In Poland, populists are forced to ensure that their decisions are consistently ideological, while in Romania, newly formed political groups such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) approach the war through a nativist lens, avoiding direct condemnation of the invasion by Russia and criticizing any refusal to make peace with Russia (Kopper et al., 2023; Soare, 2023).

This section of our article describes the four main triggers of authoritarian demand in each of the three countries that represent our case studies. The particularities and similarities of the three countries offer a nuanced picture of the manifestations of authoritarianism that are present in this region.

3.1. Hungary

After Fidesz's electoral victory in 2010, Hungary underwent a series of transformations culminating in the consolidation of party power and the reduction of political pluralism, configuring a competitive authoritarian regime (Scheiring, 2020). This context allowed the government to manipulate four interdependent factors to strengthen its position: anti-elitism, political anxiety, economic threat, and the perception of injustice.

Firstly, anti-elitism flourished against the backdrop of political and economic polarization in the 1990s and 2000s, during which rising wealth and power disparities fuelled perceptions of corruption. Fidesz exploited these resentments, presenting itself as a defender of "ordinary people" against corrupt elites. Government-controlled media constantly amplified these sentiments, promoting the party's image as the nation's saviour (Kornai, 2019; Scheppele, 2018).

Simultaneously, political anxiety was cultivated through fears of losing national sovereignty and cultural identity. The government used nationalist and xenophobic narratives to portray the EU, migrants, and the LGBTQ+ community as existential threats. These strategies mobilized the population and justified the implementation of strict anti-immigration measures (Magyar, 2019).

On the other hand, the economic threat was used to justify populist policies, presenting the national economy as under siege due to foreign influences and internal corruption. Fidesz promised to protect national interests while favouring allied capitalist groups, exacerbating corruption and state intervention in the economy to ensure political loyalty (Magyar, 2019).

Finally, the perception of injustice was amplified through anti-immigration and populist rhetoric, portraying immigration as a threat to national security and culture. Statements by Fidesz leaders, such as "Hungary will not be a colony," resonated strongly with sentiments of sovereignty and resistance against external control ("Orbán: Gazdasági bevándorlóknak," 2015; Taylor, 2012).

3.2. Poland

The 2015 parliamentary elections marked a historic victory for PiS, which formed a government without coalition partners. Some authors consider that this result was influenced by electoral thresholds, not major changes in voter preferences (Markowski, 2019). However, we argue that electoral absenteeism in 2015 is a passive voice of anti-elitism as most non-active voters blame the same corrupted political class. Nevertheless, as Müller highlights, "it is thus no accident that populists in power…often adopt a kind of 'caretaker' attitude towards an essentially passive people" (Müller, 2016, p. 30). Even with a voter turnout of 74% in 2023 (compared to 51% in 2015), PiS remained in first place with 35% (compared to 38% in 2015), and the new government could only be formed through a coalition around the Civic Coalition. In fact, PiS won the top position in the last three elections by capitalizing on public fears and needs, promising economic redistribution and the protection of traditional cultural values while attempting to control the judiciary under the pretext of combating corruption and restoring national dignity (Sadurski, 2019).

PiS systematically dismantled checks and balances, exploiting anti-elitism and discrediting the Civic Platform through audits and accusations of national compromise. This rhetoric created a division between "ordinary" citizens and liberal elites perceived outside traditional Polish values (Traub, 2016).

Political anxiety was intensified through nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, targeting the EU and the LGBTQ+ community. President Andrzej Duda signed a "Family Charter" banning LGBTQ marriages and adoptions and promoted parental control over sex education. Political anxiety was also fuelled by the controversial management of judicial independence and reproductive rights, culminating in the restrictive abortion decision of 2020, which generated massive protests (Sadurski, 2019; Wróbel, 2022).

Economically, PiS emphasized persistent inequalities, criticizing the favour of foreign investors and promising to protect local capital through new criteria for foreign investments (Zbytniewska, 2022).

The perception of injustice was cultivated through anti-colonialist discourses, which criticized EU influence and amplified sovereignty sentiments. For example, PiS portrayed opposition leader Donald Tusk as "always pursuing German interests, not Polish ones" (Wintour, 2023). Judicial reforms and media control were presented as necessary measures to combat corruption, though critics saw them as attacks on democracy (Pytlas, 2016; Sadurski, 2019).

3.3. Romania

These interconnected factors were exploited by populist parties to consolidate authoritarian tendencies in Romania as well. Anti-elitism in Romania was resuscitated by populist narratives, especially during the Covid-19 crisis. The AUR exploited the pandemic to portray elites as anti-religious and opposed to traditional Romanian values such as family and faith, amplifying deeply rooted resentments against political elites associated with corruption (Dragoman, 2021; Stoica, 2021).

Political anxiety in Romania is closely linked to populist movements that combine radical nationalism with communist nostalgia. Post-EU accession political instability fuelled this anxiety, attracting voters to populist messages that promise to correct perceived injustices and imbalances, thereby contributing to the rise of authoritarian tendencies (Stoica, 2018).

Economic threats have exacerbated this authoritarian trend. Populist rhetoric promising economic revival and protectionism has exploited the perception that external forces or elites threaten economic stability. The tumultuous post-communist economic transitions in Eastern Europe have been used to rally support for authoritarian figures promising economic stability (Balaban et al., 2021).

Perceptions of injustice are strong in the Romanian context, bolstered by Euroscepticism and the feeling that the EU undermines national sovereignty. Parties like AUR capitalize on these nationalist sentiments, portraying themselves as defenders of sovereignty against external injustices and Brussels bureaucrats perceived as elites uninterested in the needs of member states (Stoica & Voina, 2023). Frequently used themes in AUR's narrative include blocking Romania's accession to the Schengen area. The leader of this party declared, "It is shocking for us to see the discrimination we face in European institutions, to see that there is a two-speed Europe and that we, as Romanians, have the status of second-class citizens of the European Union" ("George Simion despre aderarea României," 2023).

4. Methodology

The current study seeks to identify the main driving forces behind the need for authoritarianism in Romania, Poland, and Hungary, in a post-Covid-19 context and during an armed aggression in their immediate vicinity. We do this with a series of linear regressions, examining the relationship between demand for authoritarianism and variables that refer to *anti-elitism* (H1), *political anxiety* (H2), *economic threat* (H3), and *perceived injustice* (H4). The data were collected between May 9–June 30, 2023 via a political compass launched simultaneously in all three East-Central European countries. The data comprised a total of 4,974 respondents who voluntarily opted into the platform.

Generally, political compasses have the advantage of reaching a large number of observations and answers. One disadvantage is that they do not rely on random probability sampling, given the fact that users self-select. Given the nature of such data, this leads to potential limitations for our study. Usually, users of political compasses tend to be higher educated, younger, and have a greater interest in politics compared to the general population (e.g., Boogers & Voerman, 2003; van de Pol et al., 2014). We limited our sampling error by using targeted recruitment so that the sample obtained for each country closely matches the characteristics of the general population of Romania, Poland, and Hungary. Moreover, academic literature points to the fact that estimates calculated with data obtained from political compasses do not differ significantly from those of surveys (Toshkov & Romeijn, 2021), and as such are powerful tools for examining patterns of policy preferences and political behaviour.

After providing their informed consent, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire with their own opinion on 33 policy items which referred to many salient issues on the political agenda, common for all three countries that represent the case studies of the current research. Moreover, users were asked to provide background information such as year of birth, gender, and level of education. The statement "[our country] needs a strong leader who can quickly decide on everything" was defined as the dependent variable in this analysis, and the independent variables were computed using several other statements in the questionnaire. Based on the academic literature presented above, we named the four independent variables as follows: *anti-elitism*, *political anxiety*, *economic threat*, and *perceived injustice*.

Anti-elitism was measured by evaluating citizens' perceptions of the corruption and competence of political and economic elites. For example, participants were asked how much they agreed with statements such as "Usually, those who lead our society get in those positions through immoral or illegal means," or "The government is pretty much run by a few big interest groups looking out for themselves." In our current study, *political anxiety* encapsulates the sentiment of fear in the face of war, as well as of potential government actions that could disrupt the fabric of one's life. We evaluated political anxiety through questions related to the feeling of political or social insecurity. For example, respondents were asked about their level of concern regarding their country's political stability, potential external threats, or crimes committed by immigrants.

Economic threat was measured using questions that addressed job insecurity and living standards. Participants were asked about their concerns related to the profitability of large companies and employee wage levels. We used statements such as "Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the wealth of this nation," or "Large companies in our country make too much profit at the expense of a good wage for workers."

As for the *perception of injustice*, we evaluated it through statements regarding political, social, and economic equity. Participants were asked to express their opinions about the degree of fairness in how resources and opportunities are distributed in their society. One such example is "Problems of people like me never make it on the agenda of politicians." The full list of all statements can be found in the Supplementary Material.

Previous studies have intensely debated whether voters of populist parties with authoritarian tendencies in Hungary and Poland are predominantly motivated by economic or cultural factors (Bill & Stanley, 2020; Kubik & Kotwas, 2019). Our choice to focus on political and economic factors is not meant to minimize the importance of cultural ones, but to provide a specific analysis in the context of current economic and political crises. Excluding cultural factors from this analysis does not undermine their relevance, but reflects a methodological decision. Cultural factors are undoubtedly important and have been widely analysed in the academic literature. However, for this study, we chose to focus on those factors that are directly measurable and provide a clear picture of the political and economic dynamics post-pandemic and in the context of the neighbouring war. Moreover, we selected our case studies—Hungary, Poland, and Romania—by relying on the "Most Similar Systems Design" method. This method allows us to compare countries that exhibit similar cultural features (Győrffy, 2020) but show variations regarding relevant political aspects (such as parties in power, or general political and public discourse). In this way, we can isolate the effects of the variables that trigger the demand for authoritarianism.

5. Regression Analysis

Table 1 shows the logistic regression results for our three case studies. The largest explanatory power is represented by the case of Romania (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.336$), followed by Poland (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.156$)

Table 1. Regression coefficients for Romania, Poland, and Hungary.

	Romania	Poland	Hungary
Age	−0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Gender (male = 0)	0.36***	0.38***	0.35***
	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Education	−0.01	−0.13***	−0.06
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Anti-elitism	0.10	0.26***	0.12
	(0.05)	(0.50)	(0.06)
Political anxiety	0.12	0.14	0.21***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Economic threat	0.37***	0.22***	0.17***
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Perceived injustice	0.28***	0.23***	0.32***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Constant	0.55***	0.37	0.93***
	(0.07)	(0.40)	(0.30)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.336	0.156	0.102
Observations	2,502	1,234	1,238

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; standard errors in parentheses.

and Hungary (Nagelkerke R^2 = 0.102). Overall, the linear regression revealed a significant positive relationship between economic threat and demand for authoritarianism (ß = 0.37, $p < 0.001$ for Romania, ß = 0.22, $p < 0.001$ for Poland, and ß = 0.17, $p < 0.001$ for Hungary). Quite similarly, there is a significant positive relationship between perceived injustice and demand for authoritarianism in all three countries (ß = 0.28, $p < 0.001$ for Romania, ß = 0.23, $p < 0.001$ for Poland, and ß = 0.32, $p < 0.001$ for Hungary).

The analysis also reveals several particularities for each country, apart from the common features presented above. In contrast to public attitudes in Romania and Hungary, in Poland, anti-elitism works as a strong driver of authoritarian demand (ß = 0.26, $p < 0.001$). Then again, in Hungary, much more than in the other two countries, political anxiety seems to cast a strong influence on authoritarian demand (ß = 0.21, $p < 0.001$).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Our study was underpinned by four distinct hypotheses, positing that authoritarian demand is propelled by anti-elitism, political anxiety, economic threat, and perceived injustice. To test these assumptions, we relied on a robust data set (N = 4,974) collected in Romania, Poland, and Hungary after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and approximately one year after the onset of the war in Ukraine. This unique dataset forms the backbone of our research, lending it a high degree of originality. The originality of the study also rests on the fact that comparative studies related to attitudes in a post-pandemic context and in times of neighbouring war have so far been very limited. The data allowed us to empirically test the theories related to the rise of authoritarian demand in East-Central Europe, in a special context since the accession of Romania, Poland, and Hungary to the EU. Moreover, the analysis of the data is relevant since it also develops a refined image of politics in East-Central Europe in the prelude to the elections for the European Parliament. Moreover, compared to other recent pieces of research that study public attitudes in the context of a health crisis (Roccato et al., 2020), and of war (Alyukov, 2022), but do so by generally referring only to one case study, our data allows for a uniform understanding of authoritarian attitudes in a comparative manner.

The article examines trends towards authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, highlighting the critical determinants that appear to be economic threats and perceived injustice. This analysis reveals that economic instability in Hungary, Poland, and Romania drives the need to restore control and self-esteem, which is often shaken during economic downturns. This reaction confirms assumptions suggesting that crises drive support for authoritarian measures as a means of economic recovery and stability (Fritsche & Jugert, 2017; Greskovits, 2015). In Hungary, the framing strategy of national victimization and external threats significantly affects perceptions of injustice rooted in historical resentments of foreign interference. This manipulation helps justify populist narratives calling for drastic corrective action, appealing to those who feel betrayed by external forces. Poland's scenario differs slightly as anti-elitism remains a vector that significantly shapes electoral options, incorporating itself with the populist rhetoric of PiS. However, the opposition's recent electoral success suggests voters are shifting to a more balanced approach, even as they retain resonance with anti-elite sentiments. This phenomenon points to a complex relationship between voters' dissatisfaction with elites and their political choices, spanning right-wing and left-wing ideologies. In Romania, the strong correlation between economic threats and authoritarian demand highlights how economic fears, such as job losses and insecurity, can drive voters toward authoritarian options that promise quick and stabilizing solutions. In addition, significant perceptions of injustice, fuelled by inequality and systemic deficiencies, further push the electorate toward leaders who promise to fix these problems.

Our key findings indicate that economic threat and the perception of injustice are the strongest determinants of the demand for authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, but there are different explanations for each country. In Poland, the perception of injustice was most probably amplified by the restrictive abortion laws and the governmental decision of competing imports in agriculture, which prompted massive farmers' protests (Matthews, 2024), thus fuelling political anxiety and insecurity. In Hungary, political anxiety is heightened by the anti-immigration rhetoric and the government's illiberal measures, while in Romania, the economic threat and perception of endemic corruption are still dominant. These variations between cases underscore the complexity of the links between economic and political factors and the demand for authoritarianism in the specific context of each country.

Our findings underscore the complex nature of the relationship between the identified factors and authoritarianism or democratic erosion. They interact with each other and with other context-specific factors in each country. For instance, the alternation of power, as seen in Poland, demonstrates that support for democracy does not significantly vary between government and opposition supporters. However, democratic erosion can occur through abuses of power by elected actors. These insights have significant implications for the future of democracy in the region and warrant further research. Overall, the dynamics in these countries show how economic and social grievances are potent factors in the rise of authoritarian populism, with each nation displaying triggers and responses based on its historical and political context. This article provides empirical evidence to add to the debate on how East-Central European societies exhibit propensity towards authoritarianism, especially during unprecedented times since the accession of these countries to the EU.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Caretaker Conventions in Crisis Times: Dutch Government-Opposition Dynamics After the Fall of the Government

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Abstract

How does the caretaker status of a government affect party political dynamics in parliament during a crisis? Generally, caretaker governments are not mandated to introduce important policy changes. Yet major crises can demand decisive political action. This article aims to understand the consequences of the caretaker status of the Rutte III government in the Netherlands (after its resignation in January 2021) for government-opposition dynamics during the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. We first analyse party voting behaviour in parliament and then draw on a qualitative text analysis of nine critical parliamentary debates. Surprisingly, we find that differences between mandated and caretaker status have little effect on parliamentary dynamics. Opposition parties *with* coalition potential are supportive of the government and take on a cooperative tone; opposition parties *without* coalition potential are not supportive and take on a combative tone and oppose in harsher terms, yet even they barely mention caretaker status. As such, this case provides unique insights into the functioning of caretaker conventions during crises which offer opportunities for new theorising in the undertheorised field of caretaker cabinets and parliaments.

Keywords

caretaker governments; Covid-19; opposition; political parties

1. Introduction

On 15 January 2021, Dutch prime-minister (PM) Mark Rutte announced that his government would resign, following a critical investigation into a childcare benefit scandal that saw thousands of families wrongly

accused of fraud. Rutte III would then continue as a caretaker government (*demissionair* in Dutch). It is not uncommon for Dutch cabinet governments to resign before the end of their mandate (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005), but the fall of Rutte III happened at a crucial moment during the Covid-19 pandemic: the country was in lockdown and even stricter measures were being considered. According to the PM, this would not lead to problems: "no matter whether the government is fully-fledged or has a caretaker status, in any case, this country needs a cabinet that is duly-mandated on Covid-related issues. Perhaps not formally, but at least mentally" (Rijksoverheid, 2021). Still, this case leads to two interwoven questions: How does this caretaker status affect the political dynamics between government and opposition parties? And, how do caretaker conventions fare in times of crisis?

Commonly, caretaker governments are biding their time until election day or during prolonged coalition formation talks after elections (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a; McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014). They are placeholders ensuring a functioning executive and are not expected to enact major policy changes (Laver & Schepsle, 1994). Yet a crisis exposes the ambiguities and frictions of caretaker governments. Although caretakers have to act with urgency and impact in response to the immediate threat of a crisis, they do not have the full mandate and thus the perceived legitimacy to do so (see Brans et al., 2016): "The transaction costs of policy response adoption are higher to caretaker governments as they lack the necessary mandate to govern by popular consent" (Toshkov et al., 2022, p. 1017). As the parliamentary "chains of delegation" are interrupted, this leads to important concerns about the crisis responses of caretaker governments regarding their (democratic) accountability and legitimacy (Amorim Neto & Strøm, 2006; Strøm, 2000).

Meanwhile, a crisis during a caretaker period marks a "political opportunity structure" for altering parliamentary behaviour (cf. Vande Walle et al., 2021), ranging from collaborative to critical attitudes of opposition parties towards the government (Louwerse et al., 2021; Vande Walle et al., 2021). Crises during caretaker periods could strengthen a deviation from "normal" parliamentary behaviour, as norms and legitimacy are less settled under the combination of these conditions.

Caretakers are becoming more relevant in Western democracies due to growing political fragmentation and increasingly lengthy cabinet formations (cf. Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014). According to Otjes and Louwerse (2013, p. 10): "In one out of seven days [since 1945], the Netherlands was governed by a caretaker cabinet." The Dutch case remains relatively underexplored in the caretaker literature, which is rather slim and focused on Belgium. The caretaker period of Rutte III presents an exceptional case, as the cabinet maintained its caretaker status for more than 300 days. Because this long caretaker period took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, it offers a unique opportunity to study a caretaker government and its opposition in extraordinary crisis times.

This study aims to enhance our understanding of the implications of caretaker conventions during times of crisis. After explaining the theoretical framework and methods used, we present findings from a quantitative analysis of parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic disease control. We continue with a qualitative text analysis of nine parliamentary debates on crucial votes related to pandemic disease control, capturing the parliamentary narrative during Rutte III, first as a duly-mandated government and then as a caretaker government. We will end with a conclusion and a discussion of our main findings. By doing so, we seek to derive lessons from the Dutch caretaker experience during a significant crisis, contributing to the evaluation of the robustness of Dutch caretaker conventions and caretaker conventions in general.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Caretaker Conventions

The literature points out three characteristics of caretaker governments. The first is simple yet unusual for democratic government: a caretaker government cannot be fired or resign (Laver & Schepsle, 1994; Schleiter & Belu, 2015). Parliament cannot get rid of a government that is already gone, which weakens its accountability and legitimacy.

As a consequence, the second characteristic is that a caretaker can only "exert a 'bridging role' between duly mandated governments" (McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014, p. 661). Its whole point is to ensure the continuity of the executive and the public administration until a new duly-mandated government takes office. In many countries, caretaker periods only consist of a short period, but caretakers could potentially be in office for quite a long time when government formation is complex, most often in countries with proportional representation (Boston et al., 1998; Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014).

A third characteristic concerns the "restricted remit" of caretaker governments. They are generally expected to only serve the "policy status quo" (Laver & Schepsle, 1994, p. 292) and not to undertake new initiatives. Significant decisions should be postponed until a new government takes over (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a, 2021b). In most countries, this is reflected in written or unwritten "caretaker conventions" that specify what a caretaker government is allowed to do and, also, what it should not do (Boston et al., 1998; Schleiter & Belu, 2015).

However, in some circumstances, it is executive inaction rather than executive action that would upend the status quo. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, for example, Belgium did not have a "normal" federal government, yet the act of governing continued. The country assumed the presidency of the Council of the EU, got a budget approved, and even nationalised banks and sent military troops abroad (Devos & Sinardet, 2012). These events stretched the remit of caretakers yet were widely accepted. They were supported by a parliamentary majority and executive action was considered essential during the economic crisis (Devos & Sinardet, 2012). Also, in the Netherlands, the Balkenende I government provided political support to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 while it was in office as a caretaker cabinet (Oktay, 2018).

According to the caretaker conventions, these are the political actions available to caretaker governments within their limited remit: "caretaker government's responsibilities are composed of the continuation of daily administrative management, custody of ongoing concerns, and handling of urgent matters and international commitments (including NATO and the European Union [EU])" (Bouckaert & Brans, 2012, p. 174). Dandoy and Terrière (2021b) add three potential political actions to a caretaker's remit: (a) urgent matters that need attending to avoid damage to the state or its citizens, (b) legal initiatives that are decided by parliament and implemented by the caretaker government, and (c) new initiatives by the caretaker government itself. The latter action is controversial yet common as new cabinet formation drags on.

2.2. Caretaker Governments and Parliamentary Behaviour

Meanwhile, the absence of a duly-mandated government not only affects the executive branch of government; caretaker periods also have important consequences for parliamentary behaviour. The evidence

on what the effects are is mixed. Van Aelst and Louwerse (2014) observed that individual MPs' initiatives increased, a modest deviation from the norm. More recent work also found that "partitocracy still dominates federal politics" in Belgium (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021b, p. 134). We also see that a government's caretaker status reduces the divide with opposition parties in parliament (Van Aelst & Louwerse, 2014), as its role as a placeholder diminishes legitimacy for all the reasons mentioned above.

Regardless of caretaker conventions, a crisis also affects parliamentary behaviour significantly. The urgency and scale of a crisis increase executive power, which raises the question: Do opposition parties mainly oppose holding the government accountable or do they support the government to emphasise national unity and enhance the legitimacy of far-reaching containment measures among the population (Louwerse et al., 2021)? Louwerse et al. (2021) observed positive sentiment from the opposition towards the government in four countries during the first six months of the crisis, indicating an elite rallying-around-the-flag effect, especially among larger opposition parties with governing experience. Similarly, in Belgium, the minority government received support from mainstream opposition parties with governing experience, while smaller opposition parties without such experience were more likely to oppose (Vande Walle et al., 2021).

3. Case Study Methodology

We conduct a single case study of the politics of Covid-19 pandemic management of the Dutch Rutte III government before and during its caretaker status. The resignation of the Rutte III government in January 2021 offers a critical opportunity to observe the political government-opposition dynamics during a large-scale crisis. Single case studies are well-suited for theory-building purposes, as they can provide empirical evidence to explore relatively unexplored phenomena or under-researched areas, and as such, contribute to the development of new hypotheses (see Eckstein, 2000; Toshkov, 2016). This is particularly valuable for caretaker literature, as this case highlights the role the opposition plays in parliament.

The Rutte III government was installed on 26 October 2017, after the March 2017 elections. The government was led by PM Mark Rutte of the conservative-liberal VVD. VVD obtained 33 of the 150 seats during the 2017 elections for the Dutch Lower House and formed a majority government together with Christian-democrat CDA (19 seats), progressive liberal D66 (19 seats), and small Christian-democrat CU (5 seats).

On 15 January 2021 Rutte III became a caretaker government: it resigned after a critical parliamentary inquiry into the childcare benefits scandal ("Toeslagenaffaire" in Dutch). This was two months before already scheduled elections, at which the four parties that formed Rutte III were able to secure their parliamentary majority in the Lower House with 78 out of 150 seats (see Table 1). Because of a lengthy formation process, it took until 10 January 2022 to install a new government: Rutte IV contained the same four parties as the previous government. Rutte III thus became the longest-governing caretaker in the history of Dutch politics.

We select our case for three reasons. First, the imposition of caretaker status on the Rutte III government amidst the Covid-19 pandemic allows for a within-country comparison of how such a status affects government-opposition dynamics during a crisis. Second, the caretaker period of the Rutte III government lasted for more than 300 days, offering an opportunity to explore the actual functioning of caretaker conventions for a longer period. Third, by focusing on this Dutch case, we offer insights from a contrasting

Table 1. Political parties in the Dutch Lower House of Representatives, before and after the parliamentary elections of 17 March 2021.

Political parties	Ideological position in the party system	Seats won in the 2017 election	Seats won in the 2021 election
Coalition parties			
VVD	Conservative-liberal	33	34
D66	Social-liberal	19	24
CDA	Christian-democrat	19	15
CU	Christian-democrat	5	5
Opposition parties with coalition-potential			
GL	Green	14	8
PvdA	Social-democrat	9	9
Opposition parties without coalition-potential			
PVV	Radical-right populist	20	17
SP	Socialist	14	9
PvdD	Animal rights	5	6
50 Plus	Pensioners' interests	4	1
SGP	Orthodox-protestant	3	3
Denk	Multiculturalist	3	3
FVD	Radical-right populist	2	8
JA21	Radical-right populist	—	3
Volt	Pro-European integration	—	3
BBB	Farmers interests	—	1
Bij1	Anti-racism	—	1

case to the relatively small but growing body of literature on caretakers currently dominated by the Belgian case (cf. Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a, 2021b).

To capture the government-opposition dynamics, we separate the opposition parties with coalition potential (Sartori, 1976) and those without. Two parties have coalition potential: PvdA and GL. The former was in government at least once in all decades since the Second World War (except the current decade); the latter had been part of serious coalition negotiations forming Rutte III. We do not consider the radical-right PVV to have coalition potential during the time of our study, even though the party had supported the minority government Rutte II for a year and a half between 2010 and 2012. Mark Rutte, who would remain PM from 2010 until 2024, had excluded every possibility of repeating this scenario. We do not identify any parties in our analysis to have blackmail potential (Sartori, 1976), even though Rutte III did not have a majority in the Dutch Senate ("First Chamber"): the government coalition had many parties to choose from to form case-by-case majorities.

For the quantitative part of our analyses, we use the most recent version of Louwerse et al.'s (2017) dataset of Dutch parliamentary behaviour to trace voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues. We use the information on all types of votes (motions, legislation, etc.) related to pandemic disease control (*infectieziektenbestrijding* in Dutch). We focus on a two-year period between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022. As such, our quantitative

analysis covers all parliamentary votes on pandemic disease control since the start of the outbreak in Western Europe until a new and duly-mandated government (Rutte IV) was sworn in on 10 January 2022. In total, we have quantitative data for the voting behaviour of all Dutch political parties in a total of *N* = 1019 parliamentary votes on pandemic-related issues between 2020 and 2022.

To unravel government-opposition dynamics in Dutch parliament during the Covid-19 pandemic, we select nine high-profile parliamentary debates on disease control policies in the Lower House between March 2020 and December 2021. They were selected because of the far-reaching measures being implemented, some unprecedented during peacetime. We capture Rutte III in three phases: duly-mandated, caretaker before, and then after the March 2021 election (see Table 2). We use all publicly available minutes from the debates. We differentiate between the contributions of coalition parties, opposition parties with, and those without coalition potential. A coding scheme is in the Supplementary File.

4. Results

To establish a pattern of support or opposition to governmental policies, we first analyse voting behaviour in the Dutch Lower House. To trace parliamentary dynamics, we then turn to a qualitative analysis of nine crucial votes that represent unprecedented containment measures against the coronavirus (e.g., mask mandates and lockdowns). These results are organised according to three phases (see Table 2).

4.1. Patterns of Voting Behaviour in Parliament

Tables 3–5 visualise patterns in parliamentary voting behaviour of Dutch political parties on pandemic-related issues for three different phases during the Covid-19 pandemic: Rutte III with a mandate (Table 3), as a caretaker government before (Table 4), and after the elections (Table 5). In addition, Figure 1 summarises the voting behaviour of opposition parties in comparison to coalition parties for all three different periods of the Rutte III coalition government.

Table 2. Selection of high-profile Covid-19 parliamentary in the Dutch Lower House of Representatives (March 2020–December 2021).

Date	Topic
Rutte III is duly-mandated	
12 March 2020	First containment measures
26 March 2020	Intelligent lockdown
14 October 2020	Partial lockdown
4 November 2020	Continuation and stricter lockdown
15 December 2020	Lockdown
Rutte III as caretaker before elections	
21 January 2021	Evening curfew
Rutte III as caretaker after elections	
16 September 2021	Pass entry system
16 November 2021	Stricter pass entry system
21 December 2021	Sudden and full lockdown

Before the fall of the Rutte III government, on 15 January 2021, our data revealed unity within the government and considerable support from the opposition during the early stages of the pandemic. Table 3 shows congruence (92.4 percent) in the voting behaviour of the four coalition parties (VVD, CDA, D66, and CU). This is no surprise. Overall, Dutch government parties vote congruently and Rutte III (before the fall) is no exception. Using the same data we do, Otjes and Louwerse (2021, p. 61) find no meaningful difference in coalition-opposition voting after the start of the coronavirus crisis. During these first months of the pandemic, opposition parties tended to support the government on pandemic-related policies. When there was congruence among coalition members, PvdA, for example, voted in line with the coalition parties in 74.1 percent of votes, whereas the other opposition party with coalition potential (GL) did so in 73.5 percent of cases. Even the opposition without coalition potential had quite some congruence with Rutte III, including parties such as orthodox-Protestant SGP (73.7 percent) and socialist SP (71 percent). These findings indicate a rallying-around-the-flag effect at the political elite level during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (cf. Louwerse et al., 2021). We further observe that both radical-right populists PVV and FVD were less likely to vote in line with the governing parties, which we also expected as they are opposition parties without

Table 3. Parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between 1 January 2020 and 7 January 2021 ($N = 509$).

		Government				Opposition							
		VVD	CDA	D66	CU	PvdA*	GL*	PVV	SP	PvdD	SGP	Denk	FVD
Government	VVD		97.7	93.5	96.3	69.9	69.0	49.9	66.8	62.4	71.9	62.9	46.5
	CDA			94.3	97.9	70.7	69.8	49.9	68.4	64.0	72.3	64.5	45.9
	D66				95.7	73.2	73.0	51.7	70.2	67.0	72.1	67.0	45.4
	CU					72.5	71.6	52.1	69.8	65.4	73.7	65.9	46.6
Opposition	PvdA*						94.7	68.9	92.9	87.8	77.6	86.7	57.2
	GL*							68.3	91.9	90.0	77.4	87.2	56.6
	PVV								72.5	72.5	70.9	75.2	80.8
	SP									90.9	76.8	85.1	60.5
	PvdD										75.2	86.2	59.6
	SGP											77.6	63.9
	Denk												63.4
	FVD												

Notes: * Opposition parties with coalition potential; percentages reflect the level of agreement between political parties in their voting behaviour on parliamentary votes regarding the pandemic disease control.

coalition potential. When there was congruence between the governing parties, PVV cast a similar vote in 51.3 percent of cases and FVD only did for 46.3 percent of votes.

Table 4 shows similarities and differences between political parties in their parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between the fall of the Rutte III government (15 January 2021) and the parliamentary elections (17 March 2021). Still, there is a high degree of congruence in the voting behaviour of the governing parties (in 88.9 percent of the votes). This is only a small decrease compared to before the fall of Rutte III. Opposition parties, such as PvdA, GL (both with coalition potential), and SP (without coalition potential), were still supportive of the government in a majority of the parliamentary votes. Both GL and SP voted with the coalition in 70.2 percent of cases when there was congruence among governing parties, while PvdA only voted 68.3 percent. Again, these percentages are only slightly lower than before the fall of Rutte III. Notably, the SGP's support for the coalition dropped sharply from 73.7 percent to 51 percent. Both Denk and PvdD were also less inclined to vote in line with the caretaker coalition—yet, this may be related to the fact that the pandemic had become more politicised after the first few months of the crisis (Boin et al., 2021). Compared

Table 4. Parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between 20 January 2021 and 10 March 2021 ($N = 117$).

		Government				Opposition							
		VVD	CDA	D66	CU	PvdA*	GL*	PVV	SP	PvdD	SGP	Denk	FVD
Government	VVD		98.3	94.8	92.3	64.1	65.8	41.0	65.0	53.9	47.8	35.9	40.2
	CDA			94.8	92.3	64.1	65.8	39.3	65.0	53.9	47.8	35.9	40.2
	D66				92.3	69.2	70.9	42.7	70.1	59.0	51.3	41.0	41.9
	CU					66.6	68.3	45.3	69.2	61.5	53.8	43.6	46.2
Opposition	PvdA*						94.9	61.5	90.6	82.9	71.8	65.0	52.2
	GL*							58.1	92.3	82.9	68.4	61.5	50.5
	PVV								60.7	65.0	72.7	81.1	76.9
	SP									83.8	69.3	62.4	49.6
	PvdD										77.0	75.2	62.4
	SGP											81.2	73.5
	Denk												83.8
	FVD												

Notes: * Opposition parties with coalition potential; percentages reflect the level of agreement between political parties in their voting behaviour on parliamentary votes regarding the pandemic disease control.

to these parties, radical-right PVV and FVD show even less alignment with the coalition, voting similarly in 42.3 percent and 41.3 percent of votes, respectively, and remain the two opposition parties (both without coalition potential) that deviate the most from the governing parties in their voting behaviour on pandemic disease control.

After the elections, we still see a high level of agreement between the four coalition parties, although congruence is slightly lower (Table 5). Junior partner CU, in particular, seems to deviate more, although the party still voted congruently in a vast majority of the votes. We do not observe large differences in government-opposition dynamics during the caretaker period of the Rutte III government before and after the elections. Of all opposition parties, we see that those with coalition potential, PvdA (69.3 percent) and GL (69 percent), are again most likely to vote in line with the government, with almost similar scores compared to before the elections. We observe that both radical-right populist parties PVV and FVD are again least likely to vote in line with the governing parties, and their level of agreement has further decreased after the elections of March 2021 (34.3 percent and 28.3 percent, respectively).

Table 5. Parliamentary voting behaviour on pandemic-related issues between 24 March 2021 and 21 December 2021 ($N = 393$).

		Coalition				Opposition							
		VVD	CDA	D66	CU	PvdA*	GL*	PVV	SP	PvdD	SGP	Denk	FVD
Coalition	VVD		95.6	93.2	87.5	63.4	62.1	35.6	56.0	53.9	49.9	38.2	30.5
	CDA			93.4	87.3	64.7	62.9	34.9	57.2	54.7	49.1	39.0	30.3
	D66				89.8	68.7	67.4	35.9	62.4	59.3	49.7	43.6	28.7
	CU					68.2	69.5	40.0	64.3	63.4	55.8	47.5	33.8
Opposition	PvdA*						91.1	52.9	84.5	80.4	63.1	61.1	36.6
	GL*							53.7	86.8	82.2	63.8	62.9	38.4
	PVV								60.4	62.4	73.5	82.2	78.1
	SP									89.3	68.4	69.9	45.0
	PvdD										71.5	72.0	49.6
	SGP											76.6	63.4
	Denk												69.5
	FVD												

Notes: * Opposition parties with coalition potential; percentages reflect the level of agreement between political parties in their voting behaviour on parliamentary votes regarding the pandemic disease control.

Generally, the emerging pattern aligns with findings from crisis management literature, suggesting an initial rally-around-the-flag effect in the early phase of the crisis that gradually diminishes over time (Boin et al., 2021). We observe different trends in the parliamentary voting behaviour of opposition parties after the fall of the Rutte III government. Both PvdA and GL—two opposition parties with coalition potential—show high levels of agreement with the governing parties. However, the initially high support from the small orthodox-Protestant party SGP and the small multiculturalist party Denk plummets after the fall of Rutte III. Radical-right opposition parties PVV and FVD had already deviated most from the governing parties at the start of the pandemic, but seem to turn increasingly sceptical after the fall of the Rutte III government. To determine whether this trend is due to crisis fluctuations (Louwerse et al., 2021) or the legitimacy issues of a caretaker government, we now turn to our qualitative analysis of the debates.

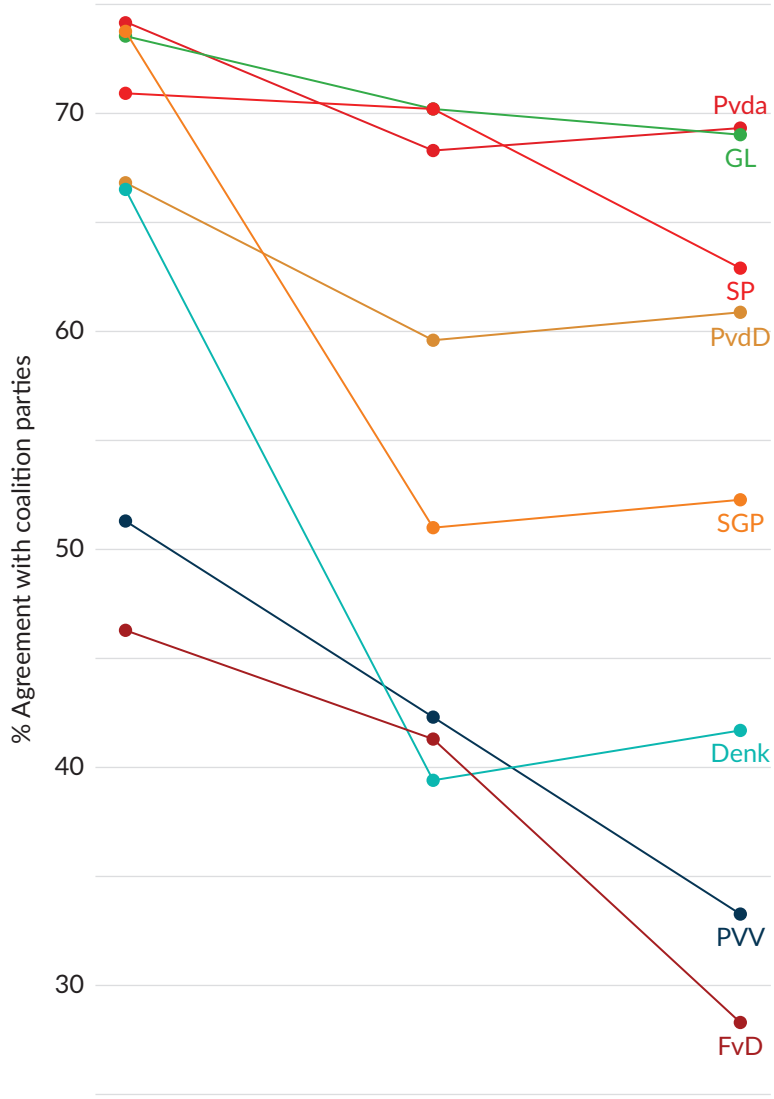

Figure 1. Percentage of agreement with coalition parties during different periods of the Rutte III cabinet. Notes: The graph shows the percentage of agreement of various political parties with the coalition parties (if consensus among coalition members) during different periods of the Rutte III government; the three time points represent, respectively, Rutte III as a duly-mandated government, the caretaker period before the elections, and the caretaker period after the elections; the total number of votes is $N = 893$.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis of Parliamentary Debates

4.2.1. Phase 1: Rutte III as a Duly-Mandate Government

The qualitative analysis of the parliamentary debates confirms the pattern established by the quantitative analysis: at the beginning of the pandemic, we observe a rallying effect. Parliament discussed the first containment measures against the spread of the coronavirus (12 March 2020) and a second batch of stricter measures (26 March 2020) called an "intelligent lockdown." During this intelligent lockdown, schools were closed, as were pubs and restaurants, and people were advised to stay at home.

The four government parties came out stating "we're all in this together" and noted there was no alternative to the proposed measures. There was some disagreement within the coalition, with D66 and CDA questioning the initial decision (recalled two weeks later) to leave schools open. In terms of tone, the coalition parties explicitly welcomed parliamentary debate, despite presenting these measures as being without alternative, arguably inviting a rallying-around-the-flag effect.

Gert-Jan Segers (CU, 12/03/2020) stated: "Meanwhile, the cabinet acts. It listens to experts and handles to the best of its abilities and knowledge. Although no-one can pretend to know everything, it is good to have this debate, because we know more together."

The opposition parties with coalition potential supported the government policy. Both social democrat PvdA and GL urged the government to take drastic steps if necessary: the latter assured the government of parliamentary backing; the former said better safe than sorry. They explicitly gave the government a mandate for far-reaching policy measures to contain the coronavirus. Lodewijk Asscher (PvdA, 12/03/2020) stated:

> I appreciate those in government trying to control the crisis. The fact that I ask critical questions in the name of my party should be seen in the light of the attempt to do as well as possible considering the circumstances.

The main opposition party without coalition potential, radical-right populist PVV, disagreed with the severity of the measures, suggesting a more invasive full lockdown. In both debates, the tone of the PVV was more combative. They called the measures long overdue and called on government parties to act instead of talk in parliament. PVV addressed governing Christian-democrat CDA: "You, not me, are the parliamentary leader of a government party. You should not be asking questions. You should arrange it." (Geert Wilders, PVV, 12/03/2020). As evidenced by Segers (the CU MP) above, the governmental parties refuted this line of questioning and heavily underlined the added benefit of parliamentary debates.

Still, all parties also used uniting rhetoric, like the opposition party without coalition potential Denk, whose position was:

> Whether you have a migration background or not, whether you vote PVV or Denk, whether you are Muslim, Jewish, or Christian or atheist: we are all people and susceptible to this infectious disease, which we have to fight together. (Tunahan Kuzu, Denk, 12/03/2020)

In these early stages of the pandemic, there is a duly-mandated government and a cooperative opposition. We observe a rallying-around-the-flag pattern, although some opposition parties want more severe measures at this stage (this will change) and their tone is sometimes combative.

Moving on to the debates of late 2020 (see Table 2 for a list), we see that this stage of the pandemic was characterised by a steady rise in infections and accompanying stricter measures. In October 2020, the cabinet announced a "partial lockdown," with more mask mandates and a limit on the number of people that could meet indoors. The November debate followed a press conference of PM Rutte announcing more severe measures because healthcare systems were "at a breaking point." In December 2020, Rutte announced a full lockdown in a rare press conference from his office. Schools, kindergartens, and non-essential shops were closed.

After the first stage of the crisis, the rallying effect had died down and parliamentary dynamics were closer to normal, including blame games and ideological positioning. Government parties disagreed about minor issues (school closures) but supported the coalition line in the end. Opposition parties with coalition potential were more critical but also constructive (i.e., social-democrat PvdA presented a full and detailed plan to combat inequality). Opposition parties without coalition potential blamed the government and hit their usual notes (PVV blamed Moroccan immigrants for not following the rules and suggested that the previous Rutte II government had had a bookkeeping mentality in healthcare, leading to hospitals not being up to the Covid-19 challenge now).

More opposition parties (PVV, FVD, Denk, PvdD, and SP) mentioned the disastrous economic consequences of the full lockdown and managed to highlight the issues they have ownership over. For instance, the animal-rights party PvdD questioned why slaughterhouses and Schiphol are still allowed to be open and warned that "we know that the climate crisis will be even more disruptive" (Esther Ouwehand, PvdD, 15/12/2020). In response, junior governing partner CU accused PvdD of using this crisis to beat their own drum on reducing meat consumption.

Radical-right FVD took a remarkable turn compared to the start of the pandemic. They labelled the lockdown and not the virus as the problem and suggested that the government was boycotting access to pharmaceuticals: "potential drugs such as Ivermectin, which this government is boycotting" (Wybren van Haga, FVD, 15/12/2020). FVD explicitly asked anyone who was against these measures to vote for them at the next election.

However, when it came to the democratic process, we saw that radical right PVV still "supports" even those rules the party leader calls "bull" (e.g., 1.5 meters distance between people when outside), because: "We live in a democracy, don't we? We all make the rules. And all of us should follow them, whether you vote for PVV or for PvdA." (Geert Wilders, PVV, 14/10/2020).

As at least six months had passed since the Covid-19 crisis began, we saw that the opposition parties with coalition potential were cooperative (PvdA) and those without (PVV and FVD) challenging both in content and in tone. It seems that in their own way, all opposition parties were preparing for the March 2021 election.

4.2.2. Phase 2: Rutte III as a Caretaker Immediately After the Fall

On 20 January 2021, just five days after the government's resignation due to the benefit fraud scandal, PM Rutte announced an evening curfew at a press conference. Despite being a caretaker government since 15 January 2021, Rutte emphasised the urgency of managing the new "British" variant of the coronavirus. He stated: "When it comes to Corona, you always have a mandate," which was later also explicitly supported by the opposition party with coalition potential GL. Following the caretaker convention, we expect a government to act in crisis circumstances to protect the policy status quo, but we also expect the opposition parties to mention this status especially when an unprecedented policy is introduced.

During the parliamentary debate, all government parties supported the introduction of a curfew, only D66 and CU mentioned they wanted the curfew to start later than proposed. Opposition parties with coalition potential (GL and PvdA) were in favour, but also the opposition party without coalition potential SP supported the curfew. Other parties voted against it for different reasons: PVV instead proposed voluntary vaccinations only for vulnerable people; PvdD disagreed with the policy because of behavioural science and human nature; SGP argued that the curfew was too crude and counterproductive for societal support; FVD defended that death is part of life and that the policy was therefore unnecessary; and Denk thought it was counterproductive because more clusters would emerge as a result.

Radical-right opposition party PVV attacked both the content of the measure and the decision-making process leading up to it. Its leader was the only one to specifically refer to the government's caretaker status in his opposition to this specific measure: "Of course a caretaker cabinet must be able to take measures against corona, but we think it is inappropriate to take a measure as extreme as this one" (Geert Wilders, PVV, 21/01/2021). Although it is possible that Wilders used the government's caretaker's status as a strategy to express his disagreement, it is remarkable that he referred to it repeatedly throughout the debate, when even opposition parties who used forceful language to protest did not. The opposition parties with coalition potential supported the measure, although social-democratic PvdA condemned the bartering process among government parties over what time exactly the evening curfew should start. GL emphasised the importance of collaboration: "We think we should work together with this caretaker cabinet and the complete Lower House to gain control over this virus" (Jesse Klaver, GL, 21/01/2021). As such, it seems that, immediately after the fall of the government and at the introduction of a far-reaching containment measure, the crisis logic trumps the caretaker logic for all but one opposition party.

4.2.3. Phase 3: Rutte III as a Caretaker With a New Parliament

The Phase 3 debates took place after the March 2021 elections but before the new cabinet (Rutte IV) was formed (see Table 2). The pandemic had also entered a new stage, with a high vaccination rate yet new political questions about how to deal with the unvaccinated within society. Particularly, the introduction of a pass entry system for citizens who were recovered, vaccinated and/or negatively tested (a 3G system), and a system only for citizens who were recovered or vaccinated (a 2G system) became a politically sensitive topic.

The pass entry system caused a schism in the governing coalition: VVD, D66 and CDA were in favour of the policy while junior partner CU was against it, because they believed the pass entry system would lead to distrust against "particular groups" in society. The opposition parties with coalition potential were divided,

with PvdA in favour (while critically questioning implementation) but GL against it. GL considered the entry pass as "a moral dilemma," because "people have the right to be unvaccinated. At the same time, we also find it a real dilemma that vaccinated people suffer from people who deliberately choose to not get vaccinated" (Lisa Westerveld, GL, 16/09/2021). Both parties with coalition potential kept their tone cooperative.

Opposition parties without coalition potential, in contrast, used a combative tone to reject the pass-entry system. Socialist SP criticised it as prone to fraud and mismanagement; radical-right PVV, orthodox-Protestant SGP, but also multiculturalist Denk considered the entry system as vaccination pressure. PVV not only disagreed with the measure they also called it "abuse of power" due to the cabinet's lack of mandate, saying the country had become "a banana republic" (Geert Wilders, PVV, 16/09/2021).

The lockdown of 19 December 2021, caused by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, felt far-reaching because it included end-of-year festivities. The measure came as a shock to many. The content of the parliamentary debate was unremarkable in the sense that most parties agreed with the necessity of the lockdown while simultaneously bemoaning its timing and its effect on business. Apart from FVD, which defended that "We don't believe in vaccination" and "This is just the next flu season" (Freek Jansen, FVD, 21/12/2021), all parties acknowledged that further restrictions were necessary. The difference of opinion between the government parties and the opposition was not about the necessity of the measure taken, but about whom to blame.

Radical-right populist PVV blamed the long-governing VVD and its structural lack of investment in healthcare that would now bring financial devastation to non-food retailers.

Other opposition parties blamed the government for not considering the policy suggestions from "the left side of parliament" (Maarten Hijink, SP, 21/12/2021). Multiculturalist Denk called out the fact that this PM had a caretaker status but saw only the PM's low approval rating as problematic: "The caretaker (and, sadly, also future) PM has a major trust problem" (Tunahan Kuzu, Denk, 21/12/2021).

Opposition parties with coalition potential (PvdA and GL) criticised the lack of long-term vision from the government. Remarkably, they disapproved of the not-yet installed new cabinet not considering the Covid crisis in their coalition negotiations yet did not mention its caretaker status as an obstacle. The governing parties also criticised the opposition parties for not having written down any long-term plans in their opposition plan (D66 about GL and PvdA). Simultaneously, they called on the opposition to work together. Corona is too important to make it into a coalition vs. opposition thing (VVD and D66) and for measures such as "2G" support of other parties is also needed. Moreover, D66 argued, in the new governing culture not everything is nailed down in the coalition agreement. Except for some minor remarks from Denk and PVV, we do not see that the caretaker status of the government is discussed during these parliamentary debates in the fall of 2021.

4.2.4. Conclusion of the Qualitative Analysis

The thick description we gave of nine crucial debates (see Table 2) confirms the pattern we established by looking at the parliamentary voting behaviour of parties. In the first phase, when Rutte III was still duly-mandated, the first debates showed a rallying effect, with all parties agreeing on the necessity of the

measures. As the pandemic continues, this changes. Opposition parties without coalition potential take a different tone and all parties manage to show their ideological colours in the debate (e.g., PvdD's focus on the zoonotic origin of Covid-19). Because this happens before Rutte III falls, we can say this is because of crisis logic and the rallying effect tapering off, not because of caretaker logic. In phase 2, immediately after Rutte III fell, we see that only radical-right PVV mentions this status to vehemently protest a newly introduced evening curfew. Although we cannot say with certainty that this is a point of principle for the party instead of a strategy, it is remarkable that the PVV leader comes back to it again and again. Phase 3, as Rutte III became a caretaker with a parliamentary majority, repeats the pattern of phase 2 (only PVV objects to disease control measures while referring to the government's caretaker status).

5. Conclusions

This article presents a case where a parliamentary democracy's legitimacy and accountability processes were challenged by two (partially) concurrent challenges. First, an unprecedented crisis, and second, a caretaker government in charge after the duly-mandated Rutte III fell over the Dutch tax service unfairly accusing mainly non-Dutch citizens of fraud.

The concurrence and longevity of these challenges put pressure, in particular, on the opposition to ensure a functioning democracy from parliament. Because growing political fragmentation across party systems in Europe will make longer periods with caretaker governments more likely, we studied this case to add a focus on parliamentary relations between government and opposition to the caretaker literature. In particular, we studied party voting behaviour in parliament and offered a thick description of nine crucial debates to highlight the role of opposition parties with and without coalition potential. The timeframe is from 12 March 2020 to 10 January 2022, which saw the emergence and persistence of the Covid-19 crisis and Rutte III as a caretaker for over 300 days.

Caretaker conventions mainly target the executive level. The "policy status quo" has to be preserved, but urgent matters are within the remit of a caretaker government to address. Our analysis shows that the Rutte III government introduced far-reaching measures to deal with the Covid-19 virus even after obtaining its caretaker status in January 2021. For example, the government introduced an evening curfew only a couple of days after its resignation, illustrating the PM's remarks from 12 January 2021, suggesting his government remained duly-mandated on Covid-19-related issues. PM Rutte's interpretation of caretaker conventions was supported by a large majority of parliament, including all governing parties. The four coalition parties were able to guarantee a parliamentary majority after the elections in March 2021, ensuring prolonged support for the caretaker government in parliament. This is reflected in our quantitative findings, showing congruence in the government parties' parliamentary voting behaviour on disease control measures. Our thick description of parliamentary debates confirms this. Opposition parties with coalition potential, such as GL and PvdA, also supported PM Rutte in his view that the caretaker government had a full mandate to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Both parties often voted in support of government policy and further adopted a cooperative rhetorical stance towards the caretaker government. Only PVV, the largest party in opposition without coalition potential, was critical of the caretaker government using its full powers to deal with the pandemic. Interestingly, these criticisms were not heavily discussed in parliamentary debates and seem at least partially strategically motivated. The caretaker status of the Rutte III government was not a prominent issue in contributions from other opposition parties without coalition potential in parliamentary debates.

Our findings extend the caretaker literature by showing that critical political events, such as crises, provide caretakers with the opportunity to extend their mandate and introduce new policies (see also Dandoy & Terrière, 2021b). We further contribute to the literature by showing that these findings do not only apply to the often-studied Belgian case but also to the Netherlands. We show that the role of the opposition is crucial when crisis and caretaker are combined in extending legitimacy to far-reaching containment measures and in holding the government accountable in exceptional times. We also demonstrate that, in this case, the opposition parties with coalition potential supported the government more than those without and that parties continued to highlight issues they had ownership over (e.g., the PvdD focusing on the pandemic origin and radical-right PVV and its focus on immigrant communities).

Our findings also matter for the crisis management literature. Shortly after the initial Covid-19 outbreak, scholars debated how policy and political settings shaped the pandemic response (see e.g., Boin et al., 2021; Maor & Howlett, 2020). We show that the caretaker status of a government might be an important factor, but perhaps not as expected. Although caretaker governments were found to act slower in the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 (Toshkov et al., 2022), we show that the caretaker status of the Rutte III government between January 2021 and January 2022 was not a big obstacle for the government's crisis management.

Meanwhile, an important question is to what extent our findings are specific to the Rutte III caretaker government. For example, it may be relevant that the coalition parties of Rutte III were able to secure their parliamentary majority after the March 2021 elections. As the caretaker literature suggests, the loss of a parliamentary majority during elections might be a reason why caretaker governments function differently before and after elections (Dandoy & Terrière, 2021a, 2021b). Separating the effects of the crisis from those of caretaker status also remains a challenge. There was broad consensus among governing and opposition parties that the Covid-19 pandemic presented a severe and urgent threat, providing room for manoeuvre for the caretaker government. We expect that different types of crises can leave a different imprint on the functioning of caretaker governments. Particularly, when crisis definitions are more politicised and more contested, caretaker governments might be more likely to face multiple challenges to their mandate. Another question would be how caretaker conventions function for "creeping" crises with a time horizon of multiple years or (even) decades, such as climate change. In addition, as prolonged caretaker periods are more common in Dutch politics than in most other countries (Otjes & Louwerse, 2013), country context may matter. For countries with less caretaker experience, it could be less clear how a caretaker government should use its powers in an effective yet legitimate way.

Finally, our findings come with normative questions about caretaker conventions and the role of the opposition. Although opposition parties cannot fire a government that has already lost its mandate, they have a role: they support the problem-solving capacity of caretaker governments during crises, while simultaneously questioning new policy critically and being aware of their constituencies (see also Louwerse et al., 2021). In times of crisis, the legitimacy of governments, including caretaker ones, not only hinges on their ability to effectively manage crises but also on their adherence to democratic norms and procedures. And the opposition has its role to play in both concerns. Although citizens may prioritise swift and decisive action over democratic procedures in times of crisis (Christensen et al., 2016), we should be aware that this output legitimacy (cf. Schmidt, 2013), based on results rather than democratic principles, can undermine the foundational values of liberal democracy. This dilemma is important for *all* governments in times of crisis but maybe even more relevant to caretaker governments.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Central Bank Digital Currencies and International Crises: Toward an Authoritarian International Monetary Order?

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Abstract

Central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) may be viewed as an adaptive response to a perceived threat from stablecoins, but international crises matter. Covid-19 induced a top-down digital transformation of the economy, a more state-led economy with contact-free payments, while Russia's subsequent war in Ukraine and the Western sanctions against Russia have further increased the incentive to use blockchain technology and CBDCs as political enterprises to neutralize the effects of sanctions, and thereby as weapons in economic warfare. This article considers Covid-19 as a turning point, amplified by Russia's war in Ukraine, and applies fiscal sociology to analyze the use of blockchain, cryptocurrencies, and CBDCs as policy tools to establish economic and political hegemony, where CBDCs may contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian international monetary order. A fragmented order, involving conflict between an autocratic society bloc and an open society bloc, would be feasible, but such a conflict may make open societies more authoritarian. In open societies, cryptocurrencies and stablecoins belong to the market square, while CBDCs belong to the public square, but CBDCs may blur the boundaries of those squares, submitting the market square to the public square. Payment systems may become public–private partnerships controlled by central banks, turning the squares into fortresses and transforming them from open access orders to limited access orders.

Keywords

blockchain; digital currencies; Covid-19; cryptocurrencies; monetary system; Russia–Ukraine war; sanctions; stablecoins

1. Introduction

Central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) may be viewed as an adaptive response to a perceived threat from stablecoins—which are a kind of cryptocurrency, a token based on distributed ledger technology (DLT)—that are backed by asset reserves such as fiat currencies and precious metals. However, digital currencies challenge central banks' control of money, so-called monetary sovereignty. A CBDC may restore monetary sovereignty if global stablecoins become widely used (Ahnert et al., 2022). Cryptocurrencies, which are based on permissionless blockchain and use DLT, are hard to regulate; in contrast, stablecoins reduce the uncertainty around their underlying value by being linked to various assets, and the global ones spurred central banks to pursue government-backed digital currencies (Arner et al., 2020). Stablecoins offer several advantages that pose a challenge to central banks. For example, because they are less volatile than cryptocurrencies and they enable large tech companies (hereafter BigTechs) to create and generate data on transactions, stablecoins could become important in terms of scale within the ecosystem, while CBDCs could counterbalance this agglomeration of data of transactions by private corporations, but privacy remains an open issue (Bilotta, 2021). Arner et al. (2020) consider the Libra project, China's digital yuan (e-CNY), both of which were announced in 2019, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2022 as systemic catalysts.

The Libra project made central banks reconsider their hesitant attitude to sovereign digital currencies (SDCs), the e-CNY was a first-mover SDC that used a token-based centralized permissioned DLT, and Covid-19 made it necessary to efficiently channel financial support and incited the e-CNY, thus inducing other central banks to follow. Arner et al. (2020) use SDC to denote "any digital form of official currency issued by or on behalf of the state that is different from traditional central bank accounts." They "treat CBDC merely as a subcategory of SDC that is issued by a central bank." There are state-led digital currencies other than CBDCs, so CBDCs are SDCs, but not all SDCs are CBDCs. Didenko and Buckley (2018) consider Venezuela's oil-backed Petro cryptocurrency to be an SDC; it is issued by the state but not tied to central bank accounts. A CBDC is a liability of the central bank, involving central bank accounts and going beyond wholesale interbank and securities transaction services, thus establishing general-purpose or retail CBDCs. Even the general public may hold central bank accounts, unless third-party mediums are used, the Bahamas' Sand Dollar being a case in point (Bilotta & Botti, 2021), thus suggesting an evolutionary selection of CBDCs among SDCs.

The Covid-19 pandemic decreased human freedom, which fell significantly in 2020 and remained low in 2021, and this included significant declines in the rule of law, freedom of movement, expression, and association and assembly, and freedom to trade (Vásquez et al., 2023). Human freedom combines economic freedom and personal freedom with equal weight. This article considers Covid-19 as a turning point, amplified by Russia's war in Ukraine, and applies fiscal sociology to analyze the use of blockchain, cryptocurrencies, and CBDCs as policy tools to establish economic and political hegemony and argues that CBDCs may contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian international monetary order. A fragmented international monetary order, which involves conflict between an autocratic society bloc (low human freedom) and an open society bloc (high human freedom), would be feasible, but such a conflict may make open societies more authoritarian and more autocratic, thus making the international monetary order more authoritarian.

This article combines fiscal sociology, considering the state and the market as nested emergent orders based on a network of political and market enterprises in a conjunctive economy (Wagner, 2007); entangled political economy, considering the polity and economy as arenas and the economic system as a polycentric network

while applying an open-ended-evolutionary approach (Wagner, 2020); and evolutionary economic analysis of the market economy as an ecosystem of commodities and social products, economic development as evolution of human artifacts, and niche expansion (Boulding, 1981). It considers CBDCs as political enterprises in the conjunctive economy and cryptocurrencies, in particular stablecoins pegged to fiat currency, as market enterprises in an ecosystem of digital currencies. In a conjunctive economy, political and market enterprises operate within a network in which they are connected to each other. By "enterprise" we mean economic activity rather than a production organization or legal entity. This leads to the research question:

> Are CBDCs, as political enterprises, likely to crowd out stablecoins, as market enterprises, from the ecosystem of digital currencies in a way that contributes to an authoritarian monetary order by giving the state total control over money?

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the literature. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework to analyze stablecoins and CBDCs. Section 4 studies cryptocurrencies, especially stablecoins, as blockchain-based market enterprises. Section 5 studies CBDCs as political enterprises and their differences to stablecoins. Section 6 addresses the impact of Covid-19. Section 7 considers the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine. Section 8 states the conclusion.

2. A Literature Review on Stablecoins and CBDCs

The literature presents stablecoins and CBDCs as the two major digital currency alternatives today. CBDCs are presented as a response to a perceived threat imposed by stablecoins on the monetary system, but this view is challenged. The assertion that BigTech stablecoins are responsible for the evolution of CBDCs is both supported and challenged, as foreign CBDCs may also contribute to their evolution. There is also a concern that CBDCs may contribute to digital authoritarianism.

Bilotta and Botti (2021) argue that stablecoins and CBDCs have the potential to obtain scale in the future, with CBDCs constituting a new form of central bank money that, in addition to cash and reserves, is held by financial institutions as a digital form of sovereign currency and, as a liability of the central bank, may replace cash. The literature considers stablecoins and CBDCs as substitutes, and they thus compete with one another.

According to Cesaratto and Febrero (2023), the issuance of stablecoins challenges the uniform currency of the monetary system because stablecoins involve different units of account. A shift from bank deposits to stablecoins could influence the way banks operate and the monetary transmission mechanism. While CBDCs are often presented as a potential response to this threat, Ahnert et al. (2022) make an even stronger claim that CBDCs are the only response to stablecoins—an explosive mix of BigTech and cryptocurrencies—which they consider to be subject to the same risk as banknotes under free banking or money-market mutual funds. In contrast, Cesaratto and Febrero (2023), who regard neither stablecoins nor CBDCs as beneficial to society, question whether CBDCs are a proper response since this could lead to a conversion of deposits to CBDCs, resulting in narrow banking similar to the Chicago Plan, which implies full reserve banking.

Arner et al. (2020), using the broader concept of SDCs, consider the evolution of CBDCs as a sequence of events in which the Libra project and China's e-CNY, which were both announced in 2019, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2022 were systemic catalysts of SDCs, and thereby CBDCs. In their analysis, the Libra

project made central banks reconsider their hesitant attitude toward SDCs, while the e-CNY was a first-mover SDC that used a token-based centralized permissioned DLT. At the same time, Covid-19 made it necessary to efficiently channel financial support and incited the e-CNY, thus inducing other central banks to follow. They argue for causality from the combined effect of these three events. In contrast, Cesaratto and Febrero (2023) argue that widespread use of stablecoins would make them difficult for central banks to control, but the same also applies to foreign CBDCs. Stablecoins could function as narrow money under a synthetic CBDC regime where they are 100% backed by central bank reserves, thus making them unproblematic. However, the collapse of the Libra/Diem project (the Libra project later changed its name to Diem before it was abandoned) illustrates that issuers would rather give up than accept regulations. Cesaratto and Febrero (2023) provide two lessons: Firstly, BigTech stablecoins did not impose a durable big threat; and secondly, they could be neutralized by central banks by requiring them to be 100% backed by central bank reserves.

There is concern that CBDCs are tools for digital authoritarianism, referring especially to China. Bilotta (2021) argues that CBDCs could adversely foster an unprecedented centralization of information to the government; fully traceable financial transactions would facilitate political surveillance in domestic markets, particularly in authoritarian regimes. Harsono (2022) points out that cryptocurrencies were restricted in China because they were viewed as competitors to the e-CNY, and they were eventually banned in 2021. Meanwhile, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), i.e., blockchain-based tokens, were used for Covid-19 passports and supply-chain traceability, and the Blockchain-based Service Network that was announced in 2019 offered unparalleled surveillance capabilities of China's population, in addition to the Social Credit System. Laband (2022) finds the e-CNY to be a dangerous tool for authoritarian social control because e-CNY wallet users may have their accounts closed when using the Social Credit System. The e-CNY can also make sanctions ineffective as a foreign policy tool if it is interoperable with other CBDCs. However, Jossey (2022) points out that since CBDCs could give governments a powerful tool for economic and social control with unprecedented intrusion into the financial privacy of individuals, some authoritarian regimes and developing countries have already embraced them while banning or discouraging nongovernmental cryptocurrencies, which is inducing Western governments to follow, claiming benefits, in many cases due to stablecoins.

In summary, stablecoins and CBDCs are seen as the two major digital currency alternatives today, but there is disagreement about both whether CBDCs provide a proper and natural response to stablecoins and their advantages and disadvantages, and there is also concern about CBDCs being used as authoritarian tools. This article aligns with the CBDC-critical strand, arguing that CBDCs are neither a proper nor a natural response to stablecoins and that CBDCs serve as an authoritarian tool. The article's contribution is to analyze the evolution of stablecoins as market enterprises and the evolution of CBDCs as political enterprises, both of which are competing to fill the same niche. CBDCs could crowd out stablecoins and establish monetary hegemony for the state, giving it full control over money and thereby making society more authoritarian.

3. A Theoretical Framework on Stablecoins and CBDCs

The theoretical framework combines fiscal sociology and the closely related entangled political economy with evolutionary economic analysis.

Fiscal sociology, following Wagner (2007), considers the state and the market as emergent orders or arenas of social interaction, calling them the public square and the market square, respectively. They are nested

together through a network of political and market enterprises in a conjunctive economy, implying that the state is an emergent order that is endogenous, like the market, and an institutional process that involves fiscal entrepreneurship. The state and the market interact with each other as spontaneous (emergent) orders rather than the state taking on the role of an organization that intervenes in the market. The public square (the state) and the market square (the market) are interdependent because they are nested through a network of political and market enterprises that are linked to each other. Wagner sees fiscal phenomena, such as the state budget, as emergent orders, and he stresses the coevolution of public and market squares. This article analyzes CBDCs as political enterprises and stablecoins as market enterprises in the digital currency ecosystem.

Fiscal sociology anticipated entangled political economy, and they are consistent. As Wagner (2020) argues, entangled political economy considers polity and economy as arenas and the economic system as a polycentric network, while economies evolve as creative and volitional systems. This implies an open-ended and evolutionary approach in contrast to the orthodox separated political economy. Along these lines, Wagner (2012) points out that macrophenomena, including holistic items such as institutions, projections of the future, and beliefs and presumptions, emerge from or supervene on micro-level actions such as the productive activities of agents, while the ecology of plans is living through entry of new plans, revision of old plans, or plan exits. This corresponds to Boulding's (1981) view of the market economy as an ecosystem in which commodities and social products interact with each other ecologically and survive if they find a niche in the free-market ecosystem, in contrast to the planned economy, where niches are determined by planners as a single biological organism, like the centrally planned chicken that follows the plan in its fertilized egg.

The market economy involves learning through social interaction, corresponding to coexistence of state and market as emergent orders in fiscal sociology as well as entangled political economy. Boulding's (1981) distinction between centrally planned chickens and free-market ecosystems corresponds to the distinction between limited access orders and open access orders following North et al. (2011). Using these distinctions, we characterize open societies as polycentric open access orders with a free-market ecosystem and an ecology of digital currencies, while autocratic societies are monocentric limited access orders with a planned economy—a centrally planned chicken—where digital currencies are subject to the centrally controlled legal tender digital currency, which is a limited access order.

A fragmented international monetary order that involves conflict between an autocratic society bloc (low human freedom) and an open society bloc (high human freedom) would be feasible, but such a conflict may make open societies more authoritarian and thus more autocratic. In open societies, cryptocurrencies, including stablecoins, belong to the market square while CBDCs belong to the public square. However, CBDCs may blur the boundaries of those squares by submitting the market square to the public square through state control over money. Payment systems may become public–private partnerships that are controlled by central banks, turning the squares into fortresses and transforming them from open access orders to limited access orders. Hence, open societies may become more autocratic, and an authoritarian international monetary order with limited access may emerge.

According to Boulding (1981), economic development is the evolution of human artifacts, and development leads to niche expansion, through which empty niches are created and destroyed. Fiscal sociology suggests that the state (the public square) and the market (the market square) are interacting ecosystems, like polity and economy in entangled political economy, so both are characterized by niche expansion. The monetary

system has a niche for cash in the public square and a niche for credit money (deposits) in the market square. For the latter, banks create money out of nothing when issuing credit, which lends to complementarity between political and market enterprises and thereby establishes some balance between the respective squares. However, the niche for digital currencies is open to both the public and the market squares, which makes CBDCs as political enterprises and stablecoins as market enterprises substitutes and thus competitors.

Replacing cash with a CBDC replaces one political enterprise with another. They are two forms of political enterprises, so the balance between the market square and the public square would not be affected. Similarly, replacing bank deposits, i.e., credit money or bank money, with stablecoins would replace one market enterprise with another. This would not directly affect the balance between the market square and the public square, but it would affect the monetary transmission mechanism and thereby the public square. Stablecoins differ from credit money; both are private, but credit money is created ex nihilo when commercial banks create deposits by granting credit. By challenging both commercial banks and central banks, and thereby the monetary system, stablecoins may affect the balance between the market square and the public square. However, a CBDC may challenge both credit money and stablecoins, filling a niche and thus making the public square dominant over the market square, which could result in 100% reserves banking. Cesaratto and Febrero (2023), who regard neither CBDCs nor stablecoins to be beneficial to society, question whether CBDCs are a proper response since they could lead to a conversion of deposits to CBDCs.

This would result in narrow banking similar to the Henry Simons and Irving Fisher's Chicago Plan, the key feature of which was the separation of the monetary and credit functions of the banking system by requiring 100% backing of deposits by government-issued money and for new bank credit to be financed through retained earnings in government-issued money or borrowings of existing government money—not by the creation of deposits ex nihilo by banks, which is a transition from privately issued, debt-based money to government-issued, debt-free money (Benes & Kumhof, 2012). This kind of narrow banking gives the government full control over money, thus giving the public square full control of the market square. This would make the monetary system more authoritarian and society more autocratic.

4. Stablecoins as Blockchain-Based Market Enterprises

The blockchain is a ledger that records all transactions in a network, and the accounts of all these transactions are distributed among the participants using DLT. The blockchain acts as a protocol for coordination, or distributed consensus over a shared digital database, and functions as a technology of trust. DLT is a system of electronic records that establishes consensus on the authoritative ordering of cryptographically validated transactions, and the ledger provides the authoritative version of these records. The distributed ledgers thus function as a universal Turing institution that can simulate the institutional characteristics of any other institution (Berg et al., 2019). The blockchain is also described as a distributed ledger that provides a payment system, where the account-keeping of all transactions taking place from the start to the present is distributed among all users in a chain of blocks (Amato & Fantacci, 2020).

Cryptocurrencies are digital assets for which consensus is ensured over the shared ledger, and they are created by solving cryptographic problems. Cryptocurrencies are both artifacts—tokens rather than money—and digital assets that maintain and ensure consensus over the distributed ledger (Berg et al., 2019), but they are also

decryption devices for encrypted messages authorizing a transaction (Amato & Fantacci, 2020) and rewards for solving the cryptographic problem necessary to add a new block, thus validating new transactions as assets that are not yet money (Malherbe et al., 2019). Hence, cryptocurrencies may be referred to as cryptoassets. Nevertheless, cryptocurrencies can serve as units of account and media of exchange in blockchains, and there are interfaces among them; stablecoins have interfaces with fiat currencies, linking political and market forces, in line with entangled political economy (Potts et al., 2022).

Stablecoins are market enterprises, but they are linked to monetary policy as a political enterprise. A stablecoin is a cryptocurrency pegged to a fiat currency (Berg et al., 2019), a synthetic fiat currency, or a tokenized version of government money (Potts et al., 2022). Stablecoins provide a new asset class that may compete with government-issued fiat currencies because of their backing by gold or other assets; cash-based backed by cash (e.g., bank deposits), asset-based backed by noncash equivalent assets (e.g., bonds or commodities), cryptoasset-based backed by cryptoassets, or unregulated—classified as (a) tokenized funds if cash, deposits, and electronic money funds, (b) off-chain collateralized stablecoin assets if securities, commodities, and cryptoassets are held by an intermediary, (c) on-chain collateralized stablecoin cryptoassets if cryptoassets are held directly on the blockchain, or (d) algorithmic if uncollateralized and based on expectations (Girasa, 2023).

Unlike unbacked cryptoassets, which are pure assets and not a liability to anyone, stablecoins are liability driven. This stands in contrast to bank money, which is asset driven. Issuers of stablecoins create a liability (stablecoins) when they receive assets, while banks create liability (deposits) ex nihilo when they create assets, i.e., grant credit (Cesaratto & Febrero, 2023). When using a permissionless blockchain, stablecoins are hard to regulate, and global stablecoins represent a real threat to the existing monetary and payments infrastructure (Arner et al., 2020). Because stablecoins are pegged to official currencies, they make the crypto ecosystem possible. This challenges official currencies in particularly because it makes stablecoins operational in the emerging Web3, and thereby leads the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) and central bankers to want to prohibit them or regulate them away (Jossey, 2022).

Facebook's now-abandoned Libra/Diem project was an attempt to create a BigTech global stablecoin. The advantages of the Libra system included a unification of global values and measures by using a basket of currencies and issuing a worldwide currency with intrinsic value that was backed by real assets with the potential to become a super-sovereign currency (Tan & Xue, 2021). However, the project's goal was never realized and what we have instead are multiple stablecoins that represent a possible denationalization of money along the lines of Hayek (1976a, 1976b) and therefore free currencies and free money rather than free banking, i.e., digital multi-currency systems. This represents a shift from the nation-state to some semi-discrete space created by the digital infrastructure and its ecosystem (Potts et al., 2022).

5. CBDCs as Political Enterprises

CBDCs are political enterprises that display elements of cryptocurrencies but use permissioned blockchains in contrast to the permissionless blockchains of stablecoins. A CBDC can be defined as the possibility for the private non-financial sector to hold current accounts at the central bank. These accounts may consist of digital banknotes if non-interest-bearing, but they may also cause bank disintermediation if interest-bearing, and in an extreme case they may lead to full disintermediation and thereby narrow banking along the lines of the

Chicago Plan (Cesaratto & Febrero, 2023), thus giving the government full control over money. CBDCs are a new form of digitalized sovereign currency, alongside cash and reserves, that are a liability of central banks and thus require design choices, such as retail (general purpose) vs. wholesale, token-based vs. account-based, and expansion of balance sheets vs. replacement of existing liabilities (Bilotta & Botti, 2021). A general-purpose CBDC is considered here.

Some countries are going cashless, like Sweden and China, making their CBDC projects more successful, but the desire to implement them differs. China is an autocratic society with very low human freedom, ranking 149th in the Human Freedom Index in 2021, while Sweden is an open society with very high human freedom, ranking 5th in the same index and year (Vásquez et al., 2023). China needs a CBDC to control digital money, while Sweden has been predicted to become the first cashless society in the world by 2023; the Swedish central bank has worked on a CBDC, the e-krona, since 2017 (Arner et al., 2020; Bilotta & Botti, 2021). By 2021, both countries had conducted pilot testing and could have introduced their CBDCs (Dupuis et al., 2021). Despite Covid-19, the Swedish CBDC has not been realized yet. One potential explanation is that Sweden is a virtually cashless open society, where digital retail payments are made through a payment application operated by banks (Swish). While cash is disappearing in Sweden, the use of cash is still widespread in Europe (Cesaratto & Febrero, 2023), even though Covid-19 has given an impetus to the use of online transactions and contactless instruments (Passacantando, 2021). Hence, there is no need for a CBDC to replace cash, as proposed by D'Ippoliti et al. (2024).

A group of central banks that represent rather open societies with high human freedom are collaborating on CBDCs together with BIS—Bank of Canada, Bank of England, Bank of Japan, European Central Bank, Federal Reserve, Sveriges Riksbank, and Swiss National Bank. This group considers CBDCs as complementary to the cash provided by central banks while highlighting the coexistence of central bank and private digital currencies in the ecosystem (Bank of Canada et al., 2020). There seems to be a commitment to the current monetary system, thus maintaining the balance between central bank money in the public square and credit money in the market square.

Berg et al. (2019) argue that rather than creating new fiat currencies (CBDCs) or cryptocurrencies that resemble hard money (stablecoins), the existence of cryptocurrencies will tether viable fiat currencies to cryptocurrency hardness. However, while cryptocurrencies open the door to the denationalization of money and currency competition, their volatility prevents them from functioning as good money unless they achieve stability in the consumer goods market as digital-community currencies (Nishibe, 2020). This would mean further decentralization, making cryptocurrencies more community-specific by adapting features of complementary currencies that are adapted to the development of the local real economy. However, central banks desire centralization, which essentially means replacing cryptocurrencies with CBDCs to re-establish the one-currency system, with bad money driving out the good. Nevertheless, BIS attributes the collapse in 2022 of the market size of cryptocurrencies and decentralized finance following its peak in 2021 to fragmentation among cryptocurrencies. BIS argues that instead of cryptocurrency fragmentation, decentralization can be achieved through permissioned DLT (BIS, 2022, Chapter 3). This would crowd out stablecoins, thus establishing public square hegemony.

Is it possible for stablecoins and CBDCs to coexist? The policy experiment Project Helvetia in Switzerland, a collaboration between the SIX Group with its Digital Exchange distributed ledger platform, the Swiss

National Bank, and the BIS Innovation Hub, explores settlement of tokenized assets in central bank money, specifically a stablecoin and either a wholesale CBDC or the extant interbank clearing system. The outcome of the experiment suggests that coexistence of a stablecoin and a wholesale CBDC is feasible (BIS et al., 2020). However, this CBDC differs from the general-purpose CBDC considered here, for which there is competition between stablecoins and CBDCs. Submitting stablecoins to government control would favor the CBDCs. Carstens (2021) argues that stablecoins need to be submitted to regulation and supervision to be useful.

In fact, BIS argues for a new monetary system in which central banks are the tree trunks surrounded by commercial banks and other private payment service providers in diverse ecosystems, but with regard to stablecoins, even if they were stable they would be unable to underpin the future monetary system, as they import their credibility from fiat currencies without being subject to the same regulation as commercial bank credit money and the central bank as lender of last resort (BIS, 2022, Chapter 3). Stablecoins are seen as undesirable because they go beyond the control of central banks. Ultimately it is not stability that is the problem, but that stablecoins challenge the central bank's position, while CBDCs are considered unproblematic and a means to preserve the two-tier financial system even though they may cause bank disintermediation. CBDCs are to be issued in a way that maintains a two-tier system within some hybrid public–private partnership, where the private sector handles payments while central banks provide backup using CBDC balances as settlements (Carstens, 2021). This suggests public square dominance, although with some room for the market square.

The Western shift from caution to enthusiasm for CBDCs was spurred by both China being a first-mover with global ambitions, and the BigTech Libra/Diem project, but the West should promote open crypto marketplaces where new entrants can compete with BigTech companies on trust (Jossey, 2022). This would be an open society response with multiple digital currencies instead of a potentially autocratic CBDC that provides governments with a tool for economic and social control, thus submitting the market square to the public square as CBDCs fill the digital currency niche. This transformation reflects a shift from open society towards autocratic society by mimicking the autocratic ones, thus submitting the market square to the public square, by letting CBDCs fill the digital currency niche, thereby making a transition from open access order to limited access order.

6. Covid-19 and the Rise of Digital Currencies

Covid-19 was an international crisis that contributed to the rise of digital currencies through a top-down digital transformation of the economy toward contact-free payments. Covid-19 was a major impetus to the use of online transactions and contactless instruments and opened the door to big commercial players. However, while the European Central Bank would create a digital euro with the aim to preserve the monetary system from the challenges of stablecoins and early-mover foreign central banks, bank disintermediation still presents a threat since European firms rely heavily on bank intermediation, thereby causing fragmentation in European payment systems, and the public might not even accept a digital euro (Passacantando, 2021). During Covid-19, a global stablecoin was initially regarded as beneficial to global exchange because it facilitated both contactless payments and a global payment system, as illustrated by the eventually abandoned Libra/Diem project. However, Covid-19 also induced an economic policy response.

The pandemic led to expansionary monetary and fiscal policy. Central banks relied on quantitative easing, while the EU launched the Next Generation EU recovery plan, a joint EU fiscal response to achieve recovery through green and digital transformation (Marmefelt, 2020). Next Generation EU raises concerns about whether member states can absorb their allocated funds and uncertainty about the repayment of the plan's massive debt, and some voices advocated making this debt permanent to address climate change, Russia's war in Ukraine, and higher energy prices (Schramm et al., 2022). As a result, the public square would expand at the expense of the market square. Helicopter money would be able to monetize that kind of debt and was proposed as a response to Covid-19 for such monetization (Galí, 2020; Kapoor & Buiter, 2020; Yashiv, 2020), and CBDCs would be able to facilitate both helicopter money and quantitative easing, thus disturbing monetary policy (Cesaratto & Febrero, 2023). A CBDC can act as a facilitator because it can be targeted, thus opening a new effective transmission mechanism for monetary policy (D'Ippoliti et al., 2024). In addition, CBDCs would help increase financial inclusion, to "bank the unbanked," with the argument that Covid-19 unveiled gaps in the financial system that CBDCs could help fill as people waited for government-provided financial relief, but access would still be constrained since there are barriers to the use of any digital currency (Jossey, 2022). Hence, the state would control money.

In addition to state control, CBDCs provide tools for digital authoritarianism. China banned cryptocurrencies in 2021, although NFTs, i.e., blockchain-based cryptographic tokens used for Covid-19 passports and supply chain traceability, were tolerated but not recognized, referred to as "digital collectibles" (Harsono, 2022). Using blockchain technology and cryptographic tokens may seem pragmatic, but it must be understood in terms of the larger context, the overall blockchain strategy, which includes CBDC promotion and digital surveillance. The purpose of China's Blockchain-based Service Network, which it announced in 2019, was to both bridge payments between digital entities through a universal digital payments network, thus supporting the e-CNY, and achieve greater digital surveillance of China's population (Harsono, 2022).

Furthermore, central-bank thinking changed during the pandemic, with growing preference for using permissioned rather than permissionless DLT. In 2020, the above-mentioned group of BIS central banks that collaborated on CBDCs considered CBDCs to be complementary to the cash provided by central banks while highlighting the coexistence of central bank currencies and private digital currencies in the ecosystem (Bank of Canada et al., 2020). However, in 2022, BIS proposed a new monetary system where central banks would be tree trunks surrounded by commercial banks and other private payment service providers in diverse ecosystems, and the international monetary order would include an ecosystem of digital currencies that use multiple CBDC (multi-CBDC, or mCBDC) platforms, where tokenized deposits could be used in autonomous ecosystems through permissioned DLT, through which decentralization can be applied to cross-border transactions when several central banks are involved (BIS, 2022, Chapter 3).

Auer et al. (2021) present three approaches to multi-CBDCs: (a) compatible CBDC systems, based on compatible standards with a multitude of private payment services; (b) interlinked CBDC systems, using a technical interface with centralized or decentralized clearing; and (c) a single mCBDC system, with a single rulebook and set of governance arrangements, a single infrastructure and ledger, and a single set of participants. Compatible CBDC systems, which would have a multitude of private payment services, would be more in line with open societies, while autocratic societies would prefer at least interlinked CBDC systems, although a club of autocratic societies could develop a single mCBDC system among themselves, favoring integration within the autocratic club. The BIS Innovation Hub, in collaboration with the Hong Kong

Monetary Authority, the Bank of Thailand, the Digital Currency Institute of the People's Bank of China, and the Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates within the Bridge Initiative, explores a single multi-currency multi-CBDC system that would prevent competition from global stablecoins, something single CBDCs would not do (Auer et al., 2021). An internationally coordinated multi-CBDC system raises many policy issues for central banks, while cryptocurrencies would facilitate remittances (Jossey, 2022).

The forest metaphor suggests an overall global ecosystem with compatible CBDCs, but an open society requires space for cryptocurrencies and stablecoins rather than top-down governance through multi-CBDCs. An open society would have an ecosystem of digital currencies rather than a single centralized CBDC. Cryptocurrencies, either digital commodity money or stablecoins pegged to a national currency, allow for multiple monetary policies in the economy rather than just one led by the central bank, while CBDCs merely allow citizens to bypass the banking system.

Before Covid-19 the focus was on how stewardship, as stakeholder governance, evolves rather than how regulation is designed. Tapscott and Tapscott (2017) propose self-organizing, bottom-up, and multi-stakeholder governance of blockchain and cryptocurrencies across three levels: platform, application, and overall ecosystem. The overall ecosystem provides a ledger of ledgers that connects the platforms, including stakeholders (Ethereum, an open-source platform for decentralized applications where stakeholders need ether as a token for operations on the platform, has six different classes of stakeholders). Decentralized autonomous organizations, as bundles of smart contracts, incorporate a system of governance for complex economic activity in economies whose constitutional level has rules set in a protocol and cryptocurrencies (Berg et al., 2019). They are not a multi-CBDC forest.

7. Russia's War in Ukraine Amplifying the Rise of Digital Currencies

Another international crisis following Covid-19, which amplified the rise of digital currencies, is Russia's war in Ukraine. This war and the subsequent Western sanctions against Russia in 2022 increased financial systemic risk, comparable to the global systemic crisis caused by the war and sanctions in 1914, according to Danielsson et al. (2022). Russia's invasion threatened European banks, and the central banks had already injected a lot of liquidity due to Covid-19, preventing them from injecting more (Danielsson et al., 2022). In the long term, Russia's invasion and the Western sanctions resulting from this invasion could lead to financial deglobalization and an international financial system with a lower demand for foreign reserves, which had already stopped growing due to the global financial crisis (Brunnermeier et al., 2022).

Digital currencies, such as cryptocurrencies, have increased the risk of sanction evasion (Wronka, 2022). However, CBDCs may render economic sanctions ineffective as a foreign policy tool. By using energy to prevent financial sanctions in 2022, a Russian presidential decree made gas transaction settlement in roubles mandatory for gas importers from countries labeled as unfriendly through the rouble trading venue MICEX, thus providing protection from Western financial sanctions (Mamonov et al., 2022). As China was preparing its CBDC, Russia and China were preparing an integrated alternative to the SWIFT transfer system using blockchain; China first encouraged pooling of cryptocurrency mining before restricting it in 2018 and promoting its CBDC (Duque, 2020). Russia is also exploring Web3 to gain strategic advantage, like China and the US (Harsono, 2022). Sanctions against Russia make an e-CNY-based alternative to SWIFT useful for a Russia–China cooperation, and the e-CNY could be a revolutionary tool for international payments, more modern and efficient than SWIFT (Laband, 2022).

Through the e-CNY, China could replace the US dollar as the dominant currency in the international payments system. By using its prime-mover advantage in CBDC development, China has the potential to merge artificial intelligence, digital payments, and blockchain to generate an unprecedented amount of data to promote China's economic and strategic interests, while a digital yuan would reshape global financial governance and trade, as a risk-free government-backed currency that would enable transactions without SWIFT, and it may link payments connected to a future Internet of Things (Slawotsky, 2020). China is now trying to export its CBDC model to BIS, and some Western democracies seem willing to follow China's lead; governments can also have a mandatory digital identification process in place to set the foundation for CBDCs, thus letting the central powers have your identity, allowing them to control the flow of money in an absolute manner (Jossey, 2022). This is a likely impact of a CBDC arms race for financial hegemony. Slawotsky (2020) argues that a digital US dollar as a response to the e-CNY would maintain sanctions power.

Fostering international cooperation among central banks within BIS could seem to be a way to prevent an economic arms race. Could there be a global solution that would prevent excessive CBDC proliferation? A global single multi-CBDC can be ruled out with Russia's war in Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions, but blocs may develop, reflecting the different approaches of open societies and autocratic societies. The BIS Innovation Hub, as mentioned above, is exploring a single multi-currency multi-CBDC system that would prevent competition from global stablecoins; this is something single CBDCs would not do (Auer et al., 2021). In contrast, decentralized autonomous organizations, in their role as self-governing systems, may play a crucial role for blockchain-based global governance within a liberal world order by addressing climate change, which involves complex coordination such as climate-related crowdfunding implemented through smart contracts on the Ethereum platform (Reinsberg, 2021). This would preserve an open society with a flourishing market square.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of CBDCs is to prevent global stablecoins from threatening central banks' control of money, essentially by crowding out stablecoins. If successful, this would submit the market square, where cryptocurrencies and stablecoins belong, to the public square, where the CBDC reigns, giving the government full control of money, especially if the government manages to establish narrow banking with 100% reserves. Along the same lines as with stablecoins, foreign CBDCs may also be perceived as a threat. When operating in the same niche, general-purpose CBDCs, which are political enterprises, are likely to crowd out stablecoins, which are market enterprises, from the ecosystem of digital currencies, filling the niche and thereby making the monetary order more authoritarian by moving from polycentric open access orders with free-market economy towards monocentric limited access orders with planned economy. BIS and central banks became more aggressive against stablecoins from 2020 to 2022, although the Libra/Diem project was abandoned. China's digital yuan, e-CNY, which is pushing Western central banks to pursue CBDCs in an economic arms race, and the Covid-19 pandemic, which strengthened e-CNY and created incentives for digital payments, were major catalysts for the rising support for CBDCs. BIS, representing central bank consensus, envisages a global multi-CBDC system, calling for a forest of CBDCs. During the pandemic, there was a shift from permissionless to permissioned DLT. This was then followed by Russia's war in Ukraine, which amplified the shift and the support for CBDCs through economic warfare channels. If central banks become tree trunks and commercial banks their branches in a forest of CBDCs, this would make the international monetary system more authoritarian.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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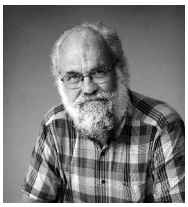

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ARTICLE

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Coping With Turbulence and Safeguarding Against Authoritarianism: Polycentric Governance as a Resilience Resource

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Abstract

Crisis management during the pandemic stimulated a bulk of analyses and debates on how states and societies coped with this challenge. In many countries, authority migrated temporarily from parliaments to executives and from the subnational to the national level, involving even violations of democratic and individual rights. Such reactions are motivated by the assumption that crisis management requires prompt, decisive, and uniform responses best delivered by a strong and centralised leadership. In contrast to this widespread assumption, crisis and disaster management research compellingly stresses the virtues of polycentric governance and processes based on flexibility, decentrality, and dispersed information in coping with turbulence. In this article, a framework is proposed for analysing empirically the question of what makes states and societies resilient. Core to this framework is the notion of resilience resources. In linking resilience resources to properties of socio-ecological systems and their reactions to turbulence, the resilience concept becomes accessible to empirical analyses. The potential of the framework is illustrated by an empirical example of the coordination of decentralised pandemic management by the German Minister-Presidents' Conference. This example shows how the resilience resource of polycentric governance is put into practice. The results of the analytical, as well as the empirical part of the article, underpin the claim that resilience is fostered by coordinated decentrality, flexible adaptation, and bricolage instead of centralisation of authority. Fostering resilience in this sense provides also a safeguard against authoritarian tendencies.

Keywords

authoritarian liberalism; coordinated decentrality; crisis management; polycentric governance; resilience resources

1. Introduction

Crisis management during the pandemic stimulated a bulk of analyses and debates on how states and societies coped with this challenge, what the appropriate institutional settings and management strategies were, and which systems ultimately emerged more successfully from the crisis than others (see e.g., Altiparmakis et al., 2021; Grogan & Donald, 2022; Steytler, 2022). Empirically, in many countries, we observed temporary authority migration from parliaments to executives and from the subnational to the national level (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021; Hegele & Schnabel, 2021), involving violations of democratic and individual rights (Kolvani et al., 2021). Such reactions were motivated by the assumption that crisis management requires prompt, decisive, and uniform responses best delivered by a strong and centralised leadership. To be sure, centralisation does not necessarily mean authoritarianism. However, in crises in particular, the centralisation of powers and violation of basic democratic and individual rights, even motivated by the goal to fight a crisis and to protect the population, is a slippery slope bearing the risk of progressing authoritarian tendencies in liberal states (Bruff & Tansel, 2020). While there is some evidence that centralised systems react faster in crises (Toshkov et al., 2022) and hierarchy fosters government capacity (Christensen et al., 2016), crisis and disaster management research recurrently stressed the virtues of polycentric institutional arrangements and processes based on flexibility, decentrality, dispersed information, and teamwork. Disaster research convincingly points out the role of local communities (Kapucu et al., 2013; Kapucu & Sadiq, 2016; Norris et al., 2008). Similarly, Boin et al. (2016, Chapter 1), while advocating leadership as an essential element of crisis management, explicitly deny the idea of the one strong person able to change the fate of history. In contrast, they make it perfectly clear that leadership hinges on teamwork, a diversified input of information, and coordination of decentralised action.

Insights from crisis and disaster management on how best to deal with turbulence (the rationale and meaning of this notion is convincingly introduced by Ansell et al., 2023) are all the more important as crises are becoming ever more frequent and follow quickly upon each other. In a situation of permanent crisis, the question of what makes states and societies resilient in the long term in coping with recurrent or nearly permanent turbulent changes in their environment becomes central. Based on those considerations, the article introduces a framework for analysing resilience. It is developed by combining concepts and insights from ecosystem resilience, crisis management, organisational decision-making, public administration, and multilevel governance theory. As resilience is a systemic notion, encompassing state actors, civil society, and the economy, as well as their interactions and interrelations embedded in their natural environment, this ensemble is captured by using the term "socio-ecological system" (SES). Ecological resilience research uses this notion to emphasise the interrelationship between man-made and environmental conditions and changes (R. Biggs et al., 2015, p. 8). A system's resilience is not a measurable quantity. To begin with, it is unclear whether system resilience relates to a system's endowment with capacities or resources *before* meeting turbulence; the procedures and strategies by which it *reacts* to turbulence; or its integrity or strength when *exiting* a turbulent situation. What is more, measuring resilience would require an independent standard or criterion against which different systems can be compared. It is, however, unclear what such a criterion or standard might be. During and after the pandemic, in some publications, the number of deaths was counted and compared as a measure of a system's resilience (Cameron, 2021). However, this criterion stresses only *one* potential dimension of resilience. With hindsight, resilience during the pandemic affected not only the health of the population but also economic factors, societal cohesion, psychological well-being, and the legitimacy of political actors and institutions.

In developing the analytic framework in Section 2, I thus resort to *resilience resources* as an empirical proxy for systems resilience, distinguishing systemic and action-related resources. The framework elaborates on which resources can be meaningfully distinguished, how they impact system resilience, and how they are fostered by institutional, procedural, or cultural properties of SESs. In a causal model, systemic properties are linked to resilience resources and resilience resources are linked to systemic reactions that can be interpreted as manifestations of resilience. In empirical investigation, it is hence possible to test the first link, the second, or both.

While all resources are important, probably the most challenging resource to put into practice is polycentric governance. To illustrate how the framework can be used to empirically assess the resilience of various socio-economic systems, in Section 3 an empirical example shows how polycentric governance was enacted in crisis management and how its effects can be measured empirically. I take the processes of intergovernmental coordination in Germany during the pandemic as an example, as Germany is a most likely case (Rohlfing, 2012, pp. 84–85) for illustrating polycentric governance. Being a federal state with a strongly decentralised power distribution, Germany has at its disposal an unusually strong cooperative culture and long-established institutions fostering horizontal coordination among the subnational units as well as vertical coordination between the subnational level and the central government. Most notably, the Minister-Presidents' Conference (MPK), an informal coordination arena between the heads of the subnational governments, evolved during the pandemic into the core coordination forum. The analysis shows how the seemingly contradictory exigencies of polycentric governance can be reconciled in practice.

Jointly, the analytic framework of resilience resources and the empirical example of enacting polycentric governance provide a strong argument against the risk of authoritarianism that comes with centralisation. Power can be centralised by curbing the separation of powers either between branches of government (from parliament to the executive) or across levels of government (from subnational to the national level). Where parliaments and subnational governments keep or re-gain independent powers, they have a chance to act as important checks on the executive, enhance the transparency of decision processes and protect democratic and individual rights (Chiru, 2024; Gardner, 2021, p. 1104). In strengthening decentralised decision-making, polycentric governance, and the individual responsibility for flexible reactions as resilience resources, the system's resilience can be enhanced not only against turbulence but also against the risk of sliding towards centralisation, personalised leadership, and ultimately authoritarianism (Ward & Ward, 2021).

2. Conditions for Fostering Resilience in an SES

When crises tend to become a permanent situation, resilience as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" (Walker et al., 2004, p. 5) gains importance. A resilient system does not fight a situation but adapts to it; it does not primarily aim at ending this situation to return to the status quo ante; rather it transforms itself to a new state which is better adapted to the turbulent and constantly changing environmental conditions. In order not to jeopardise its adaptive abilities in the long run, a resilient system must be able to use its resources sustainably. Typically, a resilient reaction to turbulence is described as a three-step process of shock absorption, adaptation, and transformation (Norris et al., 2008, p. 130; Walker et al., 2004).

In this sense, preparedness (Kapucu & Sadiq, 2016) and robustness (Ansell et al., 2023; Capano & Woo, 2018; Carstensen et al., 2023) can be seen as elements of resilience linked to the phase of shock absorption, rather than as competing concepts. Adaptation stresses the aspects of flexibility and dynamic change over the more traditional status quo orientation based on equilibrium theory (de Bruijne et al., 2010, p. 17). Adaptation can be furthered by systemic properties, but also by adaptation management (Woods, 2019, p. 53). It is important to understand that system resilience means the survival of the system as a whole, not necessarily the preservation of its elements and structural relations as they were. Survival by adaptation may come with substantial changes in the relations among the system's elements. In SESs, this may also mean creating or increasing inequalities, where some elements profit from new structures while others are threatened by them (R. Biggs et al., 2015).

Whether a system is more or less resilient cannot be measured empirically, as resilience manifests only in the long-term adaptation to changing environments and is hence hardly accessible to experimental manipulation. It is, however, possible to determine conditions that enhance an SES' resilience. Following Norris et al. (2008, p. 130, esp. fig. 1), those conditions are referred to as *resilience resources*. Applied to SESs, where adaptation is not a mere systemic reaction but follows from purposive decisions of political actors, it is useful to distinguish systemic resilience resources from action-related resilience resources. This distinction is implied in many elaborations of principles or strategies for enhancing resilience (R. Biggs et al., 2015, pp. 21–23.; Woods, 2019). As an overlapping core in various literatures, systemic resilience resources are distilled here as diversity, polycentricity, and redundancy, and action-related resilience resources as flexibility, adaptation, and bricolage.

Resilience resources are assumed to promote resilient reactions when an SES meets turbulence. If resilience resources are available, then ceteris paribus an SES will better be able to absorb shocks and adapt to new circumstances than it would be without those resilience resources. At the same time, an SES may display institutional, procedural, or cultural properties that foster the existence of resilience resources. Basically, resilience resources are thus linked to an SES both as a dependent and as an independent variable in a two-step causal connection (see Figure 1).

Analytically, according to this framework, resilience resources can be described, and used as a dependent variable (in the first causal link) or as an explanatory factor (in the second causal link), both with respect to individual cases and in a comparative perspective. Empirically, it is possible to discern whether and to what extent resilience resources exist in an SES. Regarding the first causal link, it can be argued which system properties foster resilience resources (and how). An empirical trace would be, for example, if discourses of institutional reform refer to the aim of enhancing resilience resources. Regarding the second link, it is possible to analyse which resilience resources are available in a situation of meeting turbulence and how they were activated. In the next two subsections, the six resilience resources are described concerning both causal connections, i.e., the mechanisms by which they impact resilient reactions and those systemic properties that foster or hinder their existence.

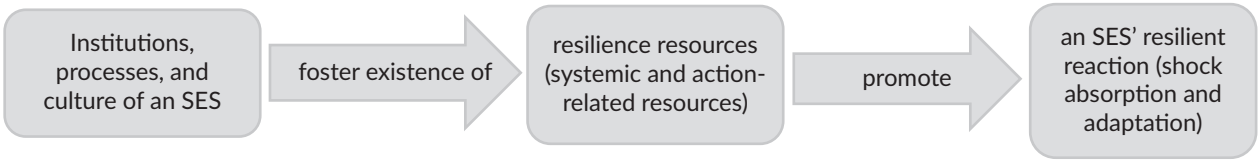

Figure 1. Causal connections between an SES and resilience resources.

2.1. Systemic Resilience Resources: Diversity, Redundancy, and Polycentricity

Research on the resilience of ecological systems highlights the importance of diversity. The progressive loss of biodiversity poses one of the major challenges for our global ecosystem (Levin, 1999). Diversity as a natural consequence of evolution is an essential resilience resource in the sense that different elements of a system fulfilling similar functions or filling similar niches provide a set of potential solutions for similar problems (Kotschy et al., 2015). Plants, for example, have developed various mechanisms to cope with drought. This variation of potential solutions proves valuable when environmental situations change or problem pressure increases. Then some solutions work better or can be more easily adapted, hence providing a template for others. In SES, diversity of institutional and policy solutions to environmental challenges is best promoted by a decentralised state structure. If regional and local units are endowed with high autonomy, then they develop individual and potentially diverging solutions which are (in theory at least) optimally adapted to the specific time- and space-bound manifestation of environmental challenges, to local settings and needs, and grounded in local values and experience.

Redundancy is closely related to diversity and complements it. According to Nowell et al. (2017, p. 125), redundancy can be created either by having more of the same elements within the system (duplication), outside the system (backup), or by having polyvalent elements that can serve as functional equivalents if other elements in the system fail (cross-functionality). A fourth manifestation of redundancy is cross-checking, i.e., the "four eyes principle" in organisations. Diversity is a necessary condition to enable cross-functionality, which is also the most robust and efficient form of redundancy, securing the survival of important functions when the system is under stress (C. R. Biggs et al., 2020, p. 18). Duplication and back-up on the other hand are resource-intense forms and hence more difficult to implement when resources are scarce. An example is public service personnel. Having more public service personnel enhances the capability of an SES to act under stress. It is, however, cheaper to reallocate personnel to the most stressed parts of an organisation (cross-functionality) than to keep a permanent stock of personnel able to cope with peak strains. Redundancy can be promoted in an SES by a stock of elements ready to be used. In this sense, decentralised state structures automatically create redundancy of functions and elements. Having slack in money, time, and personnel in critical aspects of an SES provides redundancy. Also, the intelligent linkage of parts of a system fosters redundancy, e.g., when data, information, decision-making power, and other functions are replicated between elements, creating relay structures, data hubs, or personnel pools, to give but a few examples.

Diversity alone cannot secure resilience if the various elements are not linked by polycentric governance. A polycentric organisation of diversity means that a multiplicity of autonomous elements (e.g., local or regional governments), while acting independently of each other, are at the same time interlinked in relations of competition, cooperation, and conflict (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019; E. Ostrom, 2010; V. Ostrom et al., 1961). Polycentric governance in this sense combines the advantages of diversity (dispersed information, experimentation, quick reactions, learning, etc.) with those of joint action (pooling powers and making a greater impact). To achieve polycentric governance, it is important to coordinate the decentralised units and their actions and decisions (Behnke & Hegele, 2024). This presupposes arenas in which units are loosely coupled in horizontal and vertical directions, and negotiation and decision processes deeply rooted in a cooperative culture. Complex state architectures and decision processes are better equipped to achieve polycentric governance than simple structures (Benz, 2019). For example, consensus democracies in

Lijphart's diction are better equipped to reflect and deal with complexity than majoritarian systems, because different perspectives and more information are integrated into the decision process, externalities are more systematically taken into account, and results are supported by a broader consensus. Similarly, while both the United States and Germany are federal states with a decentralised structure and high autonomy of subnational units, the dense network of cooperative bodies and interlocked decision processes in Germany as a typical proponent of cooperative federalism is better equipped to mirror and handle complexity than the more antagonistic decision structures in the dual or interstate type of federalism represented by the United States (Mueller & Fenna, 2022).

2.2. Action-Oriented Resilience Resources: Flexibility, Adaptation, and Bricolage

SESs are complex adaptive systems able to self-organise and adapt based on experience (R. Biggs et al., 2015). In this sense, the resilience of SESs is amenable to purposive action as opposed to ecological systems which adapt in evolutionary mode. Political decision-makers, crisis managers, and street-level bureaucrats analyse a crisis situation and make decisions to react adequately. Hence, action-related resilience resources are distinguished from systemic ones. Crisis management literature and organisation theory overlap in their recommendations that the institutional, procedural, and cultural conditions in a political system must be organised such as to enable and encourage the flexibility, adaptation, and bricolage of decision-makers.

Flexibility means that actions must be tailored to a situation. While contingency plans may be an important element of crisis preparedness, they must leave leeway for interpretation depending on the specific circumstances. Those actors entrusted to make binding decisions and to initiate crucial action must have the possibility to deviate from routines and do what they deem necessary (Ansell et al., 2021, p. 953). Crucial premises for flexibility are hence rules and regulations providing leeway for interpretation as well as sufficient resources (personnel, money, time) that can be used flexibly in multiple ways (Seibel et al., 2022). What is more, a political culture that encourages autonomy and responsibility, and embraces mistakes as opportunities for learning and improvement enhances flexibility for decision-makers. Risk aversion, path dependency, hierarchy, and a legalistic culture, in contrast, inhibit flexible responses to changing situational requirements.

Flexibility is a condition for *adaptation*. Decision-makers must be able to react to feedback, learn, and change their course of action as they get updated information. Organisation theory has been dealing with the problem of adaptive decision-making for nearly 80 years already, suggesting local satisficing instead of global optimising to economise on decision resources (Simon, 1997) and stepwise changes of the status quo to allow for course corrections and reduce the risk of fatal errors (Lindblom, 1959). To allow for learning and error correction, feedback loops must be systematically established, and organisations must develop a culture that openly acknowledges errors and welcomes them as an opportunity to improve. Again this presupposes a diversity of actors providing critical input, questioning decision-making, and making suggestions for improvement. Heterogeneity of perspectives and an informed public discourse are crucial aspects of a political system to foster adaptation. On the other hand, institutions that have evolved in a path-dependent manner and decision processes that are overly complex and involve many veto players inhibit adaptation and foster instead a strong status-quo orientation. Legal structures and a cultural mindset that encourage experimentation (e.g., sunset legislation) or even competition for best solutions (e.g., benchmarking) and the availability of different solutions (see diversity above) enhance the chances for adaptation and learning.

One of the major challenges of decision-making in situations of turbulence is the necessity to prepare for that which cannot be foreseen. Contingency plans and routines speed up decision-making, which may be essential in a crisis. However, they help to prepare only for known situations. Unknown situations typically require more time and resources to collect information and elaborate an adequate answer (Heiner, 1983). One way to accommodate the two contradictory needs of making speedy decisions and yet creating innovative solutions to unknown and turbulent situations is the concept of "bricolage." Bricolage, as a notion, dates back to Claude Lévi-Strauss who developed it in his book *The Savage Mind* as a way of "doing things with whatever is at hand" (Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010; Levi-Strauss, 1966). The notion was taken up by—among others—organisation theorists such as Karl Weick and public administration researchers such as Martin Carstensen, Eva Sørensen, and Jacob Torfing (Carstensen et al., 2023; Weick, 1988). Basically, it describes a way of perusing the inventory of available building blocks, bits, and pieces of problem solutions and assembling them in new ways, thereby developing creative solutions. Bricolage is the basic mechanism by which experimental science produces scientific progress. The ingenuity of the authors of solutions lies

Table 1. Indicators for analysing resilience empirically.

Properties of SESs fostering resilience resources	Resilience resource (systemic and action-related)	Impact on SESs' reaction to turbulence (shock absorption and adaptation)
Regional and local units endowed with high autonomy	*diversity* Multiplicity of elements unrelated from each other in relevant respects	Locally tailored reactions; experimentation and competition; mutual adaptation and learning
Availability of resources; Polyvalence of elements; Controlled connectedness or separation of elements in a system	*redundancy* Back-up, cross-functionality, duplication, or cross-checking	Malfunction or failure of elements can be compensated
Governance structures and processes that enable coordinated decentrality (either horizontally or vertically) in a loosely coupled manner	*polycentricity* Independent units interacting in modes of competition, cooperation, and conflict	Interaction between elements promotes experimentation, the dispersion of information, learning, harmonisation of reactions
Resources/redundancy; Norms granting leeway in decisions; A political culture valuing autonomy and responsibility more than the rule of law and due process; Constructive error culture	*flexibility* Actions and decisions are tailored to the situation; deviation from routines is possible	Decision-makers react appropriately to the demands of a situation; speedy and necessary decisions can be taken
Information and feedback loops; resources and leeway for changing courses of action; political culture embracing dynamic change	*adaptation* Actions and decisions are adapted in response to updated information	Learning from experience or competition can be implemented, hence improving the quality of the reaction to turbulence
Toolbox solutions; Culture of experimentation and creativity	*bricolage* "Doing things with whatever is at hand"	Creative new solutions are invented quickly

not in inventing something totally new but in intelligently adapting or re-assembling known parts to create new functionalities. Bricolage can be fostered by a culture of entrepreneurship, experimentation, and responsibility to encourage people to think out of the box and try out new solutions. Also, the inventory of available knowledge and expertise should be organised in a modular and toolbox-like manner rather than listed encyclopaedically. Ultimately, flexibility, adaptation, and bricolage as action-oriented resources strongly depend on the corresponding mindset of decision-makers but can, of course, be encouraged or inhibited by the respective structures and institutions.

3. Coordinated Decentrality in Federal Crisis Management

The framework developed in the preceding section offers categories and indicators to empirically investigate and analyse the resilience of SESs beyond the dominant metaphorical use of the notion. The causal links are derived mainly from plausible assumptions and existing theories. Empirical studies are needed to test whether and how the resilient reaction of an SES under stress can be fostered, focusing on one or more elements of the framework. As an illustration of such a study, an example is presented that focuses primarily on the resilience resource of polycentricity. Polycentricity presupposes a connectedness of the individual elements in various relationships of competition, cooperation, and conflict. It is unclear, however, how to achieve cooperation in practice under conditions of competition and conflict (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019, p. 928). In my view, this is best illustrated by coordinated decentrality as practised in federal countries.

Coordinated decentrality optimises two seemingly contradictory principles: decentralisation and coordination. It overlaps with the notion of "loose coupling," originally introduced by Karl Weick (Benz, 2015; Orton & Weick, 1990). Coordinated decentrality does not necessarily presuppose a strong centre; rather it can also be reached by voluntary horizontal cooperation. Decentralised action provides dispersed information and enables local and quick reactions, while coordinated decision-making contributes to pooling, distributing, and channelling relevant information, agreeing on common paths of action, and balancing potentially divergent interests. Decentrality is coordinated in structures and decision processes that are, on the one hand, interlocked to mirror the complexity of real decision situations, yet, on the other hand, leave room to act independently to a certain degree. In German federalism, the core institutions of federal coordination—the *Bundesrat* as the second parliamentary chamber and the intergovernmental councils, sectoral ministerial conferences, and the MPK as peak council—exemplify this practice of coordinating, balancing, and harmonising decentralised action (Behnke & Hegele, 2024; Hegele & Behnke, 2017).

Hence, the activities of the MPK as the German intergovernmental peak council are taken as an example to empirically uncover patterns of coordinated decentrality in decision-making during a crisis. In the MPK, the heads of government of the territorial units (*Länder*) meet regularly to discuss matters of legislation and implementation and to agree voluntarily on harmonised paths of action. Decision-making in the MPK relies on negotiation and discussion. It was founded as an informal horizontal coordination body in 1954, meeting four times a year. While two annual meetings are purely horizontal, the other two involve the federal chancellor. Meetings are prepared over three to six weeks by the *Land* that currently holds the presidency. Coordination requirements are met, first, by sequencing the process in a highly routinised way, and second by dealing with all "technical" matters at the level of civil servants, shifting only highly contentious political conflicts up the ladder to the minister-presidents (Behnke, 2021a). The meetings are held behind closed doors for intense discussion with no formal requirement to find a solution. In practice, resolutions are taken by a qualified majority (Scherer,

2009, p. 111). Although resolutions are not legally binding, they narrow the political scope of transposition or implementation at the *Länder* level. Despite its lack of formal powers, the MPK has become a politically highly influential institution and a successful coordinator of positions and actions of the *Länder*.

During the pandemic, the MPK transformed into the major coordination body for crisis management. Its routines and scope changed dramatically under increasing public scrutiny and pressure of expectations (Person et al., 2022). Instead of every three months, beginning in March 2020, the MPK met roughly every fortnight. Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel took the lead in the meetings and brought with her a large group of federal ministers and ministerial bureaucrats, transforming it into a predominantly vertical body. The elevated role of the MPK during the pandemic may itself be interpreted as an instance of bricolage, using a coordination body already at hand for extended purposes and profiting thereby from established coordination routines. The example analyses whether, how, and to what extent the MPK succeeded both in coordinating decentralised decision-making and in curbing attempts to centralise powers. If polycentric governance of pandemic management was achieved, then we would expect decision-making to expose the following characteristics:

1. The containment measures enacted in a decentralised manner in the German *Länder* are visibly based on a common concept, but allow for regional variation to adapt to specific conditions or circumstances.
2. Over time, containment measures converge towards successful solutions.
3. Attempts of the central government to encroach on subnational powers are successfully averted.

To test the first expectation, formal MPK resolutions between March 2020 and March 2021 are analysed using data collected in a former research project (see extended explanations on research design, data collection, and coding in Person et al., 2022, 2024). During these 12 months, the MPK met 26 times and issued 111 resolutions. In those resolutions, 10 subject areas were coded covering the entire bandwidth of state intervention in individual freedom rights. Those codes were compared with their transposition into executive orders of the *Länder*. The comparison was coded along four categories of implementation: "none," "partial," "full," and "more restrictive." Full transposition means that the decision taken in the MPK was transposed identically in the executive order of a *Land* that was issued after the resolution. Partial transposition means, accordingly, that parts of the resolution were retained but the *Land* executive order is less restrictive than the MPK decision. If it was even more restrictive, we coded "more restrictive." If the decision was not mirrored in the executive order, we coded "none." The resulting distribution of frequencies is shown in Table 2.

The descriptive results shown in Table 2 confirm the first expectation: All in all, the pandemic measures in the German *Länder* followed a similar pattern, yet with variation across the territory. Nearly 80% of all MPK resolutions were implemented identically, another 10% in part (Table 2). Still, regional political cultures are visible. E.g., Baden-Wurttemberg and Bavaria most often implement stricter measures (10% and 13.5% respectively). This corresponds to their values on the restrictiveness index (Table 3), where they show the highest values most of the time. On the other side of the spectrum, those *Länder* which deviated in over 20% of the cases (no or partial implementation) tend to have also lower values on the index.

The second expectation is tested by relying on another dataset that was collected in the same project. There, we coded the restrictiveness of containment measures in every *Land* over the same period (see the

Table 2. Relative frequencies of implemented MPK resolutions, by Länder (percent).

	Full	None	Partial	More restrictive
Baden-Wurttemberg	78.4	2.7	9.0	9.9
Bavaria	80.2	3.6	2.7	13.5
Berlin	75.7	8.1	10.8	5.4
Brandenburg	86.5	4.5	5.4	3.6
Bremen	76.6	8.1	10.8	4.5
Hamburg	74.8	9.0	11.7	4.5
Hesse	73.9	10.8	12.6	2.7
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	85.6	5.4	8.1	0.9
Lower Saxony	86.5	6.3	3.6	3.6
North Rhine Westphalia	79.3	4.5	13.5	2.7
Rhineland Palatinate	75.7	9.9	12.6	1.8
Saarland	81.1	6.3	9.9	2.7
Saxony	79.3	5.4	9.9	5.4
Saxony Anhalt	74.8	6.3	18.9	0.0
Schleswig-Holstein	74.8	12.6	11.7	0.9
Thuringia	74.8	10.8	8.1	6.3
Germany	78.6	7.2	10.0	4.3

Note: The total amount of possible adoptions of MPK resolutions is 1,776; 111 per *Land*.

description on data collection and coding in Behnke & Person, 2022; or on the project website: https://www.politikwissenschaft.tu-darmstadt.de/institut/arbeitsbereiche_und_nachwuchsgruppen/oeffentliche_verwaltung_public_policy/forschung_oev/Corona-VerordnungenimdeutschenFderalismus.en.jsp). The results are displayed in Table 3.

The data show again a pattern of connectedness, yet with regional variation. While the shades of red co-variate loosely over time, mirroring the number of newly infected persons, they still show that some units persistently implement stronger measures than others. As we have shown elsewhere (Behnke & Person, 2022), indeed the correlation over time with new incidents is robust, but not across units. Across units, a weak correlation could be shown with the party-political composition of regional governments. Jointly, this comes close to the expected pattern of loosely following the same path of action, yet allowing for regional variation. Also, patterns of learning are exhibited in Table 3. The standard deviation in the first lockdown (CW 17 to 21) is around 6, and in the second lockdown (from CW 46 on) around 5. This results from a more informed assessment of which measures are useful. For example, in the second lockdown in November and December 2020, children were less restricted in their contacts (e.g., playgrounds were kept open), and contact in the public space with enough fresh air was allowed more leniently.

Regarding the third expectation, the above-mentioned data set on the MPK resolutions shows an interesting detail if we disaggregate all resolutions according to subject areas of containment measures. The results are given in Table 4 (see Person et al., 2022, p. 179). They show that deviations from joint decisions were taken more often in matters of severe restriction of civil rights and liberties—curfew and contact restrictions in private spaces. These two measures were implemented in Länder executive orders fully in accordance with

Table 3. Restrictiveness index of pandemic measures in the German Länder from March 2020 to March 2021.

Land \ CW	12/20	14/20	17/20	21/20	25/20	29/20	33/20	38/20	42/20	46/20	51/20	02/21	07/21	11/21
BW	40	69	63	67	59	59	56	56	56	63	76	78	72	68
BY	58	72	75	63	55	61	61	58	58	63	76	80	77	80
BE	19	69	66	44	54	46	46	46	52	56	65	69	69	62
BB	19	72	63	62	47	45	45	46	46	54	72	78	78	60
HB	41	60	57	47	43	47	47	47	50	55	59	72	68	68
HH	29	61	61	56	54	47	47	47	53	62	64	68	68	64
HE	55	63	66	60	58	55	53	53	53	64	64	72	72	68
MV	23	63	62	59	57	55	55	55	55	63	61	65	65	61
NI	49	69	71	58	56	58	56	56	53	60	68	72	72	65
NW	33	51	58	61	50	54	54	54	57	70	70	72	72	72
RP	42	49	63	60	49	49	49	49	49	63	63	68	68	62
SL	72	68	58	59	51	53	53	53	56	66	66	66	68	64
SN	42	72	56	51	47	47	47	48	48	58	72	76	76	67
ST	19	65	68	49	41	37	37	37	37	45	56	60	60	53
SH	17	63	54	51	51	51	51	49	47	56	66	70	70	66
TH	35	67	72	54	48	48	48	46	46	50	67	73	67	67
SD	15.54	6.68	5.86	6.16	5.07	6.04	5.61	5.33	5.32	6.09	5.37	5.07	4.46	5.58

Notes: CW = calendar week; the *Länder* are denoted using the official abbreviations in alphabetical order from BW = Baden-Wuerttemberg to TH = Thuringia; *SD* = standard deviation; a darker shade of red indicates a higher value on the restrictiveness index which ranges from 0 to 100.

Table 4. Relative frequencies of implemented MPK resolutions, by type of measure (percent).

	Full	None	Partial	More restrictive	*n*
curfew	33.33	44.79	4.17	17.71	96
limited movement and sojourn in public space	81.82	7.95	9.66	0.57	176
barbers	96.43	2.68	0.00	0.89	112
hotels	87.50	7.29	2.08	3.13	96
hygienic measures	96.13	0.60	2.98	0.30	336
limited contact in public space	80.21	5.90	7.29	6.60	288
limited contact in private homes	60.16	7.81	29.69	2.34	256
duty to wear face masks	76.56	7.81	10.42	5.21	192
professional sports	78.13	6.25	13.54	2.08	96
schooling	76.56	0.00	10.94	12.50	128

Note: Total amount of possible adoptions of MPK resolutions is 1,776; 111 per *Land*.

the resolution in only 33% and 60% of all cases, respectively, while in 45% (30% respectively) of the cases, the Länder refused implementation. The evidence can be interpreted such that in the most contentious matters, decision-makers are sensitive to the potential reactions of their voters and hence willing to protect their citizens' rights even against the collective decision in the MPK. Thereby, they counter potentially illiberal tendencies from the centre.

Still, the potential of the MPK to resist centralising tendencies is limited. In April 2021, after having reached a situation of near inability to act due to strong tensions between several minister-presidents and the chancellor, the heads of government in the MPK decided to voluntarily abdicate parts of their power to decide on the appropriate containment measures and to agree on a quasi-automatic mechanism depending on the incidences of new infections (Behnke, 2021b, pp. 374–375). This regulation, dubbed the "federal emergency brake" was passed as federal law (Staatsanzeiger, 2021). Although it quickly lost practical relevance due to declining incidences, it formally remained in effect for three months. A likely explanation for the "federal emergency brake" is the pressure of electoral competition several heads of government faced in their respective *Länder*. This increased their willingness to shift accountability for unpleasant measures to the central government. The collusion of federal and party-political competition hence poses a serious threat to the power of polycentric governance to counter centralising tendencies.

4. Conclusion

In the face of quasi-permanent crisis and turbulence, the question of how to foster the resilience of modern states and societies gains crucial importance. However, resilience is mostly used as a metaphorical notion. This article proposes an analytic framework for conceptualising resilience of SESs empirically, based on the notion of resilience resources. Drawing from diverse pieces of literature, six resilience resources are developed: diversity, redundancy, and polycentric governance as systemic resources; and flexibility, adaptation, and bricolage as action-related resources. The framework outlines in detail which institutions, processes, and cultural traits of SESs foster resilience resources, and how resilience resources can contribute to attempts of an SES to absorb shocks and to adapt to changing environments, thereby enhancing its resilience. Flexible adaptation in reaction to shocks is furthered by a polycentric power structure, where the elements of the system are diverse and, in part, redundant, providing a variety of potential solutions to be tested in an experimental setting and offering templates for learning and adaptation. Political decision-makers, while expected to exhibit leadership, must be able to act swiftly and flexibly and adapt to the current situation. Flexibility must also be enabled in administrative policy implementation. The principle of bricolage provides a way of reconciling the seemingly contradictory requirements of being prepared for unknown situations and reacting quickly while inventing creative solutions.

Taking the example of the resilience resource of polycentric governance, the article illustrates how the propositions contained in the framework can be tested empirically. Federal systems in general and Germany in particular are more experienced in coordinating decentrality than unitary states. Hence, crisis coordination during the pandemic in one of the central coordination bodies of German federalism, the MPK, is analysed. The analysis shows that the coordination outcome exhibits the expected pattern of polycentric governance: First, reactions were indeed harmonised to a high degree, while leaving room for regional and situational variation; and second, the degree of restrictiveness mildly converged over time, indicating that mutual learning indeed took place. Hence, the MPK provides a good example of how polycentric governance can be managed. Importantly, the analysis also shows that the heads of governments of the German *Länder* were most reluctant to follow the chancellor's lead in matters implying severe restrictions on individual rights and liberties. Still, in a situation of enhanced conflict and under the pressure of electoral competition, the potential of the MPK to counter centralising and potentially illiberal tendencies falters.

Jointly, the analytic framework and the empirical example underpin the fact that resilience strongly relies on diversity and decentralised and flexible action. This insight thereby provides evidence against the conventional assumption that the centralisation of authority and strong leadership are important to fight crises and foster resilience. Quite the contrary, in promoting diversity and decentrality, SESs not only foster their resilience resources but also establish safeguards against authoritarian tendencies to centralise powers under the pretext of fighting crises. Still, there is reason to be cautious about the potential of polycentral arrangements as a safeguard against authoritarianism. It hinges on beneficial situational and contextual configurations (Gardner, 2021). Hence, resilience as a multi-dimensional concept should be promoted along all dimensions and supported by stable democratic institutions and culture.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data presented here can be obtained upon request from the author.

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