EDITORIAL

EPA
EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

After the "honeymoon", what is next? COVID-19 policies in Europe beyond the first wave

This special issue is the sequelto the issue on COVID-19 policies published in European Policy Analysis in fall 2020, which focused on the European countries' early responses to the pandemic. The collection aims to go beyond the "honeymoon" phase of the outbreak, that is, the first wave. The selected cases—Sweden, Greece and Cyprus, Germany, Turkey, Hungary, and the Eurozone—provide a variety of national features in terms of political systems, institutional structures, and policy styles. The featured articles adopt different theoretical perspectives and are authored by scholars from a variety of disciplines, who pursue both interpretative and explanatory goals by focusing on policy adoption, policy perception, and learning opportunities, but also on local pandemic management and policy outcomes. A fil rouge unites the featured contributions: they all show the importance of analyzing change over sufficiently long timeframes, to capture the complexity of existing trends.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This issue on COVID-19 policies is a follow-up to the publication of a special issue of *European Policy Analysis* in fall 2020 in the wake of the first wave that took stock of European countries' initial reaction to the pandemic. This first 2020 issue gathered contributions focusing on more than 15 countries with the aim of using policy analysis instruments to make sense of an unprecedented and deeply disruptive situation. This initial special issue underlined that the COVID-19 pandemic provided "an opportunity to assess the role and functioning of state institutions and programs in people's lives—and even to reimagine what the fundamental role of the state can be in the 21st century" (Colfer, 2020, p. 128). Some of the governance challenges put forward in this special issue included multi-centric and multilevel governance, the politics of risk management, the role of experts in democratic governance, and the state–citizen relationship when civil liberties are restricted. The purpose of this follow-up special issue is to address the later evolution of COVID-19 policies after the shock of the first wave. The first wave has often been framed as a "rally-round-the-flag" (e.g., Kritzinger et al., 2021; N. Zahariadis, Petridou, et al., 2020) or a "honeymoon" phase, characterized by a general political consensus around strong measures, before a generalized cracking resulted in strong political blame games and open dissent (Greer et al., 2022).

Among various reasons leading to the end of the honeymoon are so-called COVID fatigue affecting both politicians and the population, the rise of domestic protests against exceptionally strong measures, the worsening of the economic situation, and the fact that the state of affairs has become chronic. Hence, the prolongation of the crisis paved the way for a diversification of pandemic management models at the international level. While some crisis management measures, such as generalized lockdowns and border closings, were widely shared at the very

beginning, the unity around policy paths has increasingly crumbled since the lifting of the first wave's lockdowns (Jahn, 2022; Sager & Mavrot, 2020). Therefore, this special issue delves into the ways various countries and governments have tackled the subsequent pandemic waves during this time of diversification, a question which is beyond any doubt rich in lessons for policy analysis. The focus is thus on the interaction between the requirements of prolonged crisis management and national politics and characteristics. In fact, as exceptional as the situation might be, national policy styles and institutional set-ups inevitably come into play when it comes to crisis governance (Capano, 2020; Malandrino & Capano, 2022; Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020). In other words, examining the dynamic of pandemic management over the course of the waves allows one to observe how precrisis politico-institutional traits moderate the handling of the crisis (Vampa, 2021). The "democratic dilemma" that governments faced during the crisis was so deep that the collective choices that were made can only be explained by the political principles on which each country fundamentally relies, beyond pandemic-related factors (Engler et al., 2021).

It is also worth mentioning that, from an analytical perspective, in spite of the spectacular nature of the crisis, "the stars have not fallen from the sky," and political science has instruments for understanding the diverse reactions to the crisis (McConnell & Alastair, 2021). The cases selected for this special issue—Sweden, Greece and Cyprus, Germany, Turkey, Hungary, and the Eurozone—provide a variety of national characteristics from the perspective of their political systems, institutional structures, and policy styles, providing stimulating insights into the dynamics of policy-making in a high-pressure situation.

2 | CONTENT OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE: LONG-TERM PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT IN COUNTRY CASES

Exploring the relationship between **Turkey**'s policy style and its pandemic management, Lacin Idil Oztig (2022) shows how the core features of the political regime strongly affect the way the crisis was handled. Understanding policy styles as "a set of political and administrative routines and behaviors heavily influenced by the rules and structures of the civil service and political system in which it is located" (Howlett & Tosun, 2021; 20), the article defines Turkey's pandemic governance style as exclusionary, hierarchical, and authoritarian, albeit in a different form than usual due to the exceptional circumstances. For instance, the author argues that, although the inclusion of experts in the COVID-19 decision-making process might at first sight look like a move towards a more inclusive approach to policy-making, it was "rather a governmental strategy to increase public compliance to COVID-19-related measures" and a strategy for depoliticizing the issue (Zahariadis et al., 2020). The approach to pandemic management remained overall marked by a top-down presidential approach with limited participatory pluralism. This was also reflected in the fact that some bottom-up local initiatives from opposition municipalities were blocked by the Ministry of Interior (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2021), in the exclusion of major civil society players, and in the government's hostile attitude towards the media throughout the pandemic press coverage.

Similar dynamics have been observed in the **Hungarian case**, with peculiarities inherent in the economic policies of the national government. In light of a conceptual framework of authoritarian populism as a political practice or strategy (Weyland, 1996, 2021) and as democratic illiberalism (Pappas, 2019), Zoltán Ádám and Iván Csaba (2022) analyze the response to the pandemic of the Orbán regime in Hungary. They frame the economic policies

from a historical perspective and argue that in spite of being adopted by a right-wing government, these policies embody a partial return to a traditional version of left-wing economic populism that can be traced back to the pre-2010 period in Hungary. Providing a data-informed narrative of the problematic dimension of the pandemic and of the policies adopted in response to it, and with a look at the perceived credibility of both Fidesz and the political opposition, the authors provide a case study of what they call "an authoritarian populist regime in action," which constrained civil liberties and jeopardized the rule of law to strengthen its own power. They argue that both the restrictive measures taken and the (unsustainable) expenditure-increasing and tax-cutting economic policies adopted are functional to the preservation of the government's public standing. All in all, they show how authoritarian populist regimes are characterized by policy flexibility, a feature that can be found in other like-minded regimes all over the world.

Social and economic support policies have proven to be a key instrument employed by policymakers in times of crisis. Acknowledging the existence of contrasting theoretical perspectives on support for social policies, Ebbinghaus et al. (2022) offer an analysis of the pandemic's influence on welfare state support in **Germany**. On the one hand, they argue, it can be expected that increased need, heightened risk perception in relation to social issues such as unemployment and the perception of little control over the pandemic will lead to more support for welfare-state measures (Knotz et al., 2022; Oorschot et al., 2017; Oorschot, 2000; Rehm et al., 2013; Rehm, 2016). On the other hand, the authors recognize that a competing expectation sees public opinion as a thermostat that sends signals just as long as the actual policy temperature differs from the preferred one (Wlezien, 1995), so that variations in welfare state support, if any, will be rather short-lived. The authors first illustrate the social protection measures adopted in Germany during the pandemic in the fields of health care, pensions, unemployment benefits, and family policies. Through a survey analysis of public attitudes toward social policies based on the German Internet Panel (GIP), the authors show the trends of support for social policies between continuity and change.

Change is not only relevant to the way citizens perceive public policies but also to policymaking and its outputs. In turn, policy change can originate from policy learning, in which policymakers may learn from their past experience as well as from other actors. This is a fascinating phenomenon that can also be approached as a major goal of public policies that target citizens' (and non-citizens') learning. In light of the central role that education plays in building human capital and economic competitiveness, Shehaj (2022) proposes a study of the education policies adopted in **Eurozone countries**. She argues that exogenous shocks affect policy preferences in a way that is similar to pre-existing policy commitments, which make political actors heirs before choosers (Pierson, 2000; Rose, 1990). According to the hypothesized mechanism, exogenous shocks would therefore emphasize the dependence of policy outputs and outcomes on pre-existing conditions. Leveraging existing data from international data sources, she finds out degrees of variation across the examined countries in the domains of policy infrastructure and education continuity, which in turn affected learning outcomes. She identifies factors of this variation in the pre-existing conditions in which the analyzed countries found themselves in terms of access to education, digital capacity, and selective partnerships. By looking at the available evidence, she shows in words and data that "If you are not prepared for the (un)expected, you can be only what you already are" (Capano, 2020). In the pandemic, however, she identifies learning opportunities for the post-pandemic world (Malandrino & Sager, 2021).

Turning their attention to the local response to the pandemic, Sparf et al. (2022) investigate how municipalities reacted to COVID-19 in **Sweden**. The authors show the existence of a "conditioned politicization" at the municipal level, sometimes taking the form of the activation of extraordinary crisis management committees; however, preference was given to administrative logics over politics. The authors underline their interest in focusing on the overlooked dimension of infra-national response to the pandemic. Relying on theories of politicization (Hay, 2007), the study uncovers the relationship between politics and administration at the municipal level. It shows that, while the possibility of setting up a local crisis committee granting politicians with extended powers was institutionally foreseen in the Swedish system, such emergency structures were far from being automatically activated. Local administrations wanted to avoid any excessive politicization of the issue, while local politicians appreciated being kept away from unpopular decisions. Bureaucracy and its technical expertise hence generally kept the upper hand in crisis management at the local level. This was made possible by key national politico-institutional characteristics such as a good level of trust between politicians and administrations, a historically strong administration enjoying a high degree of freedom to fulfill its tasks of provisioning welfare services, and a sense of regional self-government in Sweden's unitary system.

Finally, focusing on the outcomes of COVID-19 policies, Zahariadis et al. (2022) examine the effectiveness of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in **Greece and Cyprus** in 2020. Tackling one of the government's main dilemmas during the crisis, the article assesses the performance of these interventions from the perspective of both their contribution to pandemic containment and their economic repercussions. On the basis of a modified health belief model, the authors investigate the factors that explain the outcomes of COVID-19 interventions at the policy level. Statistically investigating the trade-offs between the health-related and economic dimensions of COVID-19 policies enables them to provide insights about the timing (due to the time lag effect), targeting, and combination these interventions needed to be optimally implemented. The article shows that NPIs actually achieve their objectives—referred to as flattening the curve—but in the medium to long term (4–6 weeks), whereas the economic drawbacks are tangible in the short run. This leads the authors to underline that this "is good news from a public health point of view but not from a political perspective." From a pandemic management point of view, this result underlines the dilemma governments face, as this trade-off is likely to produce political polarization effects (Chatzopoulou & Exadaktylos, 2021).

3 | CONCLUSIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST IN RESEARCH

The articles featured in this Special Issue adopt different perspectives and theoretical frameworks of reference and are authored by scholars from a variety of disciplines, including political science, political economy, and sociology. The authors examine different socio-economic contexts and political systems, with both interpretative and explanatory goals. They also focus on different aspects of public policies, examining the (contextual) factors that triggered the adoption of policy measures, the perception of these policies by citizens, and the types of and opportunities for learning, without disregarding pandemic management at the local level and the pivotal question of the outcomes of public policies. Policy subject-wise, the articles embody a varied scholarly interest in a range of policy domains, including employment,

tax, family, pensions, education, and healthcare. There is, however, one main *fil rouge* that unites them: they all show the importance of analyzing change and patterns over sufficiently long timeframes and in perspective, to capture complexities and provide reliable pictures of existing trends. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic with its numerous waves has been an effective litmus test for weaknesses and potentialities inherent in the pre-existing politico-institutional arrangements of the affected countries. At the same time, it has been and still is a stimulus and an opportunity for policy learning and policy change. While policymakers in Europe and elsewhere have the power and resources to capitalize on this experience heritage, scholars from all disciplines bear the responsibility of being earnest in tracking the connections of what has happened during the pandemic with both past dynamics and future projections. This Special Issue moves in that direction.

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