Blame-Avoidance and Fragmented Crisis Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Switzerland

Céline Mavrot*, Fritz Sager **

*Institute of social sciences, University of Lausanne, Switzerland, ORCID: 0000-0001-9603-5790

**KPM Center for Public Management, University of Bern, Switzerland, ORCID: 0000-0001-5099-6676

Abstract

This article studies how the prolonged pandemic situation impacted crisis governance in the federalized governance system of Switzerland. It examines how in this acute crisis situation, the responsibility for decision-making fluctuated among governance levels, placing subnational states in a situation of uncertainty that caused a *fragmented crisis management,* and therefore sub-optimal policy learning processes. The study is based on the case of COVID-19 governance in Switzerland, where, as in many other European countries, the management of the first pandemic wave was very centralized. However, the federal government avoided taking a strong lead during the subsequent waves. Consequently, pandemic management was marked by numerous fluctuations regarding who was in charge of the main COVID-19 decisions between the federal and subnational governance levels. A media analysis (February 2020-March 2022) and an analysis of the gray literature show that crisis governance and policy learning processes were scattered across levels of governance, which impeded the accumulation of knowledge and know-how. The article analyses how crises can give way to blame games between the levels of governance, thus hampering a coordinated crisis management and policy learning processes across the different stages of the pandemic.

Keywords

crisis governance; blame games; multilevel governance; federalism; policy learning; policy coordination.

Introduction

This article analyzes how the features of the COVID-19 pandemic affected crisis management in the federal political system of Switzerland. The COVID-19 pandemic was a disruptive event that put a huge strain on political authorities worldwide and disturbed established governance routines. In the Swiss federal system, the disturbed governance routine principally regarded coordination procedures between the federal state and the cantons on the one hand, and among cantons on the other hand. As in other types of political systems, the pandemic challenged the functioning of national institutions and pushed them to put new procedures in place to tackle the crisis, or to at least to adapt existing procedures. The pandemic created turmoil within federal systems regarding the division of tasks and the coordination between governance levels (e.g., Freiburghaus et al. 2022; Kettl 2020). First, back and forth shifts in decision-making competences between the federal state and the subnational level altered the normally established division of tasks. Second, although federal systems can rely on their traditional horizontal and vertical coordination procedures between subnational states and the federal state, the crisis challenged them. We analyze this disruption of federal coordination procedures using the example of Switzerland, which is considered to be one of the most strongly decentralized federal systems internationally (Vatter 2018). These uncertainties led to a fragmented crisis management, and strongly impeded the policy learning processes. Hence, the shifts among governance levels impeded knowledge accumulation by disrupting politico-administrative routines in the Swiss federal system. We posit that the conceptualization of policy learning, which is usually considered in the mid- to long-term perspective, should be refined in view of crisis situations and pressing policy issues.

To face the first pandemic wave in spring 2020, the Swiss authorities opted for an unprecedented centralization of competences through the declaration of an "extraordinary situation" that granted full decision-making power regarding COVID-19 measures to the federal state. During the second pandemic wave, the situation was downgraded to a "special" one, which still granted federal authorities with special power. However, they were now required to exert this power in consultation with the subnational states. These exceptional conditions led to three governance issues. First, because the entire pandemic governance system had been conceptualized at the federal level because of the juridical "extraordinary situation" during the first wave, subnational states had to cope with these changes in

governance level by putting their own crisis management systems in place in the course of the pandemic, This especially happened during the second wave, when the cantons suddenly regained important decision-making competences. Because they happened against the backdrop of strong blame games between the federal state and the cantons, these shifts in governance levels had been poorly anticipated and thus constituted an important challenge for the cantons. Second, as the subnational level regained decision-making power, pandemic management became polycentric with 26 local government entering into play (i.e., creating a variety of sub-national COVID-19 decisions and policies). The participation of so many different subnational states generated coordination issues and incoherent subnational measures regarding key dimensions of the pandemic management, such as the rules regarding the opening of restaurants and bars, masks-wearing obligations or limitations in public gatherings. Hence, federalism adds a complexity layer because when cantons regained strong competences regarding public health policy-making, they passed heterogenous COVID-19 measures. This local fragmentation hindered the fight against the global pandemic, which would have required both a stronger intercantonal coherence, and also a better intersectoral policy integration (Maggetti & Trein 2022). Third, the unplanned shifts across governance levels during the different COVID-19 waves and the hasty flow of events strongly challenged the usual coordination and policy learning mechanisms institutionalized in this federal system. At the subnational level, interstate policy learning was hampered by time pressure, and subnational governments did not have the experience of the first wave's pandemic management. These issues led to a situation of *fragmented crisis management* and created unfavorable conditions for policy learning among governance units. There was a lack of know-how capitalization between the first wave – governed at the central level – and the subsequent waves – jointly managed by the central and subnational levels.

The main goal of the article is to shed light on these processes. The interest therefore is empirical rather than theoretical. Still, from a theoretical perspective, COVID-19 gives us the opportunity to shed a new light on policy processes in an acute crisis that turned out to be a prolonged situation, given that the entire pandemic management lasted for at least two whole years. On the one hand, this pandemic provides the opportunity to study multi-level dynamics in federal contexts in an unprecedented situation in which there was no clearly pre-established division of tasks between the cantons (i.e., the 26 subnational governments) and

the federal state. The way various governance levels negotiated their respective roles and competencies can thus be observed as they occur, especially in a crisis case with the presence of strong blame avoidance strategies. Because of the need to take unpopular decisions with very direct economic and social consequences and because of the unclear allocation of responsibilities, interventions aimed at fighting the epidemic were quickly caught in blame games.

These blame games have a direct effect on governments' learning capacities. The temporal development of the crisis thus serves as a laboratory to assess learning processes. While there was a legitimate hope that there would be a learning curve throughout the pandemic, it was made difficult by the situation. Learning processes about effective policy measures did not fit the political events and temporality, because the fragmentation of the crisis governance system across time greatly complicated the picture. The pandemic drove the political system to modify the division of tasks (centralization of power at the federal level and weakened role of the subnational levels) and its related coordination procedures (loosened vertical coordination with the federal state and horizontal coordination among subnational states). Subnational authorities were forced to improvise, which sheds light on the requirements of policy learning in emergency situations. Blame avoidance is a context condition that strongly contributed to the outcome, i.e., fragmented crisis management: the political blame games produced shifts among governance levels (the federal state and the sub-national units) that made it difficult for the cantonal governments to engage in proper policy learning.

In the next section, we present the theoretical tenets of the article based on the literature on policy learning, blame avoidance, and crisis management. We then present Swiss federalism as the specific context in which policy learning took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a next section, we present our empirical strategy and case study before we discuss the findings in light of our theoretical expectations. We conclude with an outlook on potential lessons for policy learning in future crises.

Theoretical Framework

We begin the section by discussing the theoretical background. We apply this approach to the Swiss system, which serves as an example of extensive federalism. We then propose four

general expectations that we summarize in the analytical model in Figure 1 that guides our empirical inquiry.

Crisis Governance, Blame Games, and Policy Learning

Policy Learning in Crises

Generally speaking, learning can be defined "as the updating of beliefs based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis or social interaction" (Dunlop & Radaelli 2013: 599). Policy learning thus refers to such updates regarding the governance of specific policies. It occurs when policy actors "uptake new information about how to address a problem" that has been recognized as significant (Crow et al. 2023: 13). Importantly, "learning is a possible result of the 'way of managing and responding to crises'" (Radaelli 2022). In this article, as we observe short term learning occurrences happening during a crisis, the focus is on the process of learning (i.e., trough which mechanisms and in which platforms did policy-makers learn during pandemic management), and less on the results of learning. It has been argued that the literature on policy learning and on lesson-drawing has focused on normal times rather than on crisis situations (Powell & King–Hill 2020). This paper hence addresses an understudied topic. Additionally, we tend to know more about inter-crisis than intra-crisis policy learning (Moynihan 2009). The wave-shaped dynamic of the pandemic may have led to the expectation that an intense policy learning process would take place across the different stages of the crisis and that governments would have the opportunity to assess and compare the success of various national strategies over time and to prepare for the next peaks (Hantrais & MacGregor 2021). As an "intense global shock" with low room for failure, the COVID-19 crisis should have indeed opened the door to lesson-drawing (Zaki & Wayenberg 2021: 15-16).

The pandemic has given rise to calls in the policy analysis community to test the theoretical toolbox considering an unexpected crisis that put the politico-administrative system under high pressure. Claire Dunlop et al. (2020) identify *policy learning* as one of the core challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic and as a phenomenon to be explored under a new light. The authors especially underline that "while policy learning in conceptual terms is well-covered, we know far less about the micro-mechanisms of learning" (Dunlop et al. 2020: 369). Moreover, while policy learning is usually "assumed to be linear and incremental" (Dunlop et

al. 2020: 370), a crisis provides the opportunity to explore what might also occur in a chaotic context marked by fragmented governance processes. The concentrated nature of the crisis, its global dissemination, and its high pressure for action allow us to capture how governments improvised policy learning processes in a relatively short time frame. Moreover, the wave-nature of the COVID-19 crisis, characterized by regular outbursts and a difficulty to find closure (Boin et al. 2020), provides a particularly good opportunity to study policy learning processes.

Taking a closer look at what type of network management works best in crisis, Schomaker & Bauer (2020: 845) found that "knowledge management and resource sharing—both among administrative units and with civil society—increase organizational ability to perform well in crisis situations," and that "administrations do best when lessons learned in crises are accessibly stored." Knowledge transfer has in fact been recognized as one of the main dimensions of organizational and institutional learning in crises such as the COVID-19 one (Lee et al. 2020). This discovery thus raises the question of the role of knowledge accumulation and sharing capacities for a prompt reaction in the face of unexpected events. Following Howlett (2012), we refrain from adopting a fully instrumental definition of policy learning (policy learning as intended to optimize policies), and a fully cynical one (policy learning as only used to avoid policy failure and the related blame). Learning serves both the betterment of the policy and of the political performance (Howlett 2012: 541).

Blame Avoidance in Crises Situations

In addition, the pandemic serves as a case in point of the deployment of political *blame games* (Dunlop et al. 2020; Hinterleitner et al. 2023; Mavrot forthcoming; Zahariadis et al. 2020), which, as we will show, have crucial consequences on policy learning dynamics. Like retrenchment policies, COVID-19 policies strongly affected all fundamental aspects of many people's lives without having visible short-term positive effects (Bandelow et al. 2021). This characteristic makes COVID-19 policies good candidates for political blame games. Blame games consist in a confrontation between political adversaries—incumbents and opponents—around a salient controversy (Hinterleitner 2020: 18; Hinterleitner 2023). The blame avoidance framework highlights the negativity bias that leads politicians to overestimate the possible sanctions that could be triggered by their decisions, thus encouraging self-preservation strategies and attitudes of political avoidance (Hood 2007; Weaver 1986). Hence, in politically risky situations, politicians tend to adopt avoidance strategies due to a strong

perceived potential for dissatisfaction and the anticipation of possible negative reactions from the electorate (Hood 2007). By systematically bringing together empirical evidence on the phenomenon and observing regularities, this approach aims at challenging the idea that scandals and crisis develop along totally chaotic and unpredictable dynamics (Hood et al. 2016).

There is a specific paradox in crisis situations, as the pressure for politicians to show that they engage in learning is particularly high in a context of high scrutiny, while at the same time, learning is a particularly challenging endeavor in such contexts (Dekker & Hansén 2004). In this sense, the literature needs to learn more about learning patterns during crises (Dekker & Hansén 2004). As observed in other countries, the blame-game across levels of governance during the pandemic is likely to wind down the political answer to the crisis (Capano 2020). In the Swiss governance of the COVID-19 crisis, blame diffusion patterns varied across pandemic waves and involved varying degrees of blame deflection onto experts, the cantons, and the population's behavior (Hinterleitner et al. 2023). During the first wave, the federal government followed experts' recommendation to a certain extent (Eichenberger et al. 2023), while also shifting a considerable part of the blame to them. While this dynamic led to a sort of constructive blame avoidance strategy, which allowed the federal government to act decisively in the name of public health, subsequent waves paved the way for detrimental blame avoidance dynamics in which the federal state increasingly blamed citizens for noncompliant behavior and also continued to pass the buck to the cantons, leading to blockages and a general delayed political response to the crisis (Hinterleitner et al. 2023; Mavrot forthcoming).

Crisis Management and Federalism

The COVID-19 has been categorized as a creeping crisis, which is a slow-burning crisis with a long incubation time and without clear closure (Boin et al. 2020a). Crisis management regards the deployment of resources, structures, and procedures to minimize the negative effects of a disturbing event (John-Eke & Eke 2020). Key findings of the literature are that crisis governance is a highly political process (as opposed to rational problem-solving), that organizations are not designed to detect crises, and that the ownership of crisis management is often ill-defined (Boin et al. 2020a). In addition, common features of crises are that they imply politicization and polarization dynamics, and require politicians to persuade the

population to make sacrifices to overcome the problem, which poses difficulties in terms of political communication (Boin et al. 2020a). Finally, the management of the COVID-19 raises important challenges as it is a transboundary crisis generating high levels of uncertainty (Boin et al. 2020a).

This crisis also raises specific challenges for *federal systems*. Federal systems have the advantage of being able to fine-tune policies at the local level. However, they must also act quickly to produce a strongly coordinated response at the national level in times of crisis, and this response may not be in line with federal politico-institutional traditions (Rozell & Wilcox 2020). The tension that emerged between exceptional power at the federal level and member-states' autonomy has been characteristic of the COVID-19 crisis in federal countries (Dunlop et al. 2020). However, coordination between the center and the regions has also been identified as a major challenge of pandemic governance in non-federal decentralized policy systems (Mattei & Del Pino 2021). While many governments centralized pandemic governance following the shock brought about by the first wave of the pandemic, most governments progressively pursued decentralization from the second wave on and engaged in strong credit claiming and blame avoidance games (Greer et al. 2022). These governance shifts against the background of a highly politicized situation are worth closer study as they remind us that the formal division of competences is not set in stones.

The COVID-19 pandemic granted insights into the strategies pursued by various states. Early observations of COVID-19 management in a system like the one in the US might lead to the conclusion that interstate relations during crisis are the most reliable and successful element of federal systems. While the relationship between the US national government and the states was marked by high levels of discord and contention, neighboring states managed to harmonize some of their key COVID-19 measures to avoid cross-border spillover effects from a public health perspective (Benton 2020). However, multi-level governance did not always function smoothly in the context of the pandemic. In the Spanish regionalized unitary system, there was limited horizontal cooperation, and it only occurred on an ad hoc basis without wider orchestration (Casula & Pazos-Vidal 2021). Italy experienced a similar lack of cooperation. Multilevel pandemic governance has been qualified as a "weakly cooperative regionalism" that negatively affected crisis management and resulted in a large amount of sometimes contradictory measures (Baldi & Profeti 2020, cited in Vicentini & Galanti 2021).

Overall, the pandemic highlighted the need for effective *policy coordination* mechanisms to define a coherent disease contention strategy across national and supra-national territories. To the present day, COVID-19-related studies have focused more on the issue of vertical coordination in multi-level crisis governance than on the horizontal coordination between constituencies. Policy coordination can be seen as the minimal necessary condition to initiate collective learning mechanisms. In Switzerland, horizontal intercantonal coordination occurred during the pandemic through the invention of new forms of "deliberative layering" (Freiburghaus et al. 2022: 217). Some ad hoc, multi- and bilateral forums were created among cantons, which was in line with the tradition of horizontal mechanisms of joint support in Swiss federalism (Freiburghaus et al. 2022: 223). At the vertical level, the minimum coordination between the Confederation (federal government) and the cantons occurred through the representation of the cantons in a national COVID-19 crisis unit during the extra-ordinary situation,[1] and then through regular consultations between these players after the national crisis unit was dissolved.

Based on these developments, our first two theoretical expectations read as follows:

Expectation 1: *The characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis (long-lasting crisis requiring unpopular measures, novel situation altering the usual division of tasks among national and subnational authorities) opens the door for strong blame games across levels of governance.*

Expectation 2: *These blame games lead to policy fragmentation in pandemic management across levels of governance (uncertainty and variations as to which level is in charge in the various pandemic waves).*

Swiss federalism as specific context for the production of policy coherence

Switzerland is a highly federalist system that follows the principle of subsidiarity: all tasks that can be performed at a lower level shall be performed at a lower level. Communes and cantons therefore enjoy extensive autonomy. Cantons in particular are fully-fledged political systems in their own right and are comparable to states in the US. Each canton has a government, a parliament, and a full-fledged administration whose degree of professionalization depends on

---

[1] EDI/KSBC, Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern/Krisenstab des Bundesrats Corona KSBC (2020). *Schlussbericht Krisenstab des Bundesrats Corona, KSBC*. Bern: Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft.

the size of the canton. Public policy implementation chiefly takes place at the member state level. The cantons not only implement federal policy; they also have the right to adjust federal decisions to their specific needs and political preferences. Moreover, cantons have consequent policy-making capacity on various policy areas. Most health matters are the prerogative of the cantons (hospitals, healthcare organization and delivery). A key feature of the Swiss political system is the consensus democracy. Consulting the cantons before each federal government decision is characteristic of this consensus, as are the wide consultations with social partners before a new regulation is passed (Papadopoulos 2001). Cooperation between the federal state and the cantons is all the more crucial that Switzerland is a functional federalism, as opposed to jurisdictional federalism (Braun 2000). In jurisdictional federalism, federal governments have the full formulation and implementation capacity in their exclusive area of jurisdiction (e.g., Canada). In functional federalism, subnational entities have an important implementation discretion and therefore the capacity to distort policy goals defined at the national level, hence the cooperation requirement (Montpetit et al. 2005).

The literature identifies various ways through which coherence can be reached between and among the federal levels in times of non-crisis, including top-down processes through member state implementation and horizontal processes in the form of policy diffusion, transfer, or learning among sub-national units. At the same time, the federal relations also open channels for blame deflection when policies fail at a given tier (Hinterleitner et al. 2023; Mavrot forthcoming).

The first way is the most usual. Member state implementation lies at the heart of Swiss federalism. Basically, all policy decisions taken at the federal level are passed down to the cantons for implementation. The cantons enact so-called implementation laws that specify how they will implement the federal decision. These laws may change the original policy to a certain degree. As a result, there is no unique implementation of federal law in Switzerland. Each policy has 26 implementations, while at the same time a common background is ensured. This system has the advantage that the population tends to be more accepting of federal decisions if they adapt to their immediate situations. However, one downside of this system is the marked distributive injustice that may occur if cantons strongly differ in how they provide services that fall within the same federal policy.

A second way policy coherence can be achieved in federal systems includes mutual learning processes among the cantons (Kuenzler 2018). Intercantonal policy learning is part of the Swiss governance's DNA: while cantons are highly autonomous, they are also strongly interconnected and mutual learning is usually a full part of the policy response (Freiburghaus et al. 2022). The fragmentation that might result from having 26 fully-fledged cantonal governments is compensated by firmly established multilateral collaboration and cooperation processes (Freiburghaus et al. 2022). Most importantly, the 26 cantons organize regular "inter-cantonal conferences" around many different topics and policies to exchange and coordinate policy solutions. These conferences are well-established and are a key part of intercantonal relations. Cantons may copy paste other cantons' policies. Policy diffusion may have functional drivers if, for example, a canton is successful in solving a problem also faced by another canton (Gilardi et al. 2009). Diffusion or transfer can also stem from ideological proximity or outside pressure to respond to urgent problems.

Considering the described forms of producing coherence within Swiss federalism, only the first one is formally institutionalized by constitutional federalism. The second is institutionalized in inter-cantonal conferences but not necessarily binding. There is coordination among governance units when they gather around an issue to concert their intervention and possibly elaborate a coherent policy answer. Policy learning happens when governance units influence one another regarding good practice, be it regarding how they produce a policy (e.g., creating a cantonal COVID-19 task force), or regarding the content of the policy itself. Coordination can lead to policy learning, but not necessarily. Finally, policy incoherence refers to situations in which the policy interventions of a governance units produce effects that go against the efforts and objectives of another governance unit (and vice versa for policy coherence). Based on these insights, we formulate two general expectations on policy coordination during crises:

Expectation 3: *Because of the deeply rooted politico-institutional vertical and horizontal coordination in federal systems, we expect the cantons to rely on the established, formal coordination procedures in a crisis*.

Expectation 4: *When traditional coordination procedures fail, we expect cantons to rely on informal coordination procedures in order to engage with policy learning*.

Hence, the main research question addressed in this article is how the features of the crisis affected crisis management and policy learning (as an essential dimension of crisis management) in the Swiss federal system. From an analytical perspective and based on the presented theoretical insights, we first expect the strongly disruptive COVID-19 crisis to trigger political blame games because of the sensitivity of the issue. Second, these blame games will induce uncertainties and variations about which governance level (national or cantonal) is in charge of crisis management. Third, this will lead to a fragmented crisis management in the Swiss federal structure, as the 26 cantons responsible for health policies have to navigate this uncertainty with little possibilities to plan and coordinate their reaction. In this context, we finally expect formal established coordination procedures to be unable to fully function, and henceforth policy learning to be fragmented and to rely on informal procedures. Figure 1 pictures the analytical model and the four expectations of the article.

Figure 1: Analytical Model
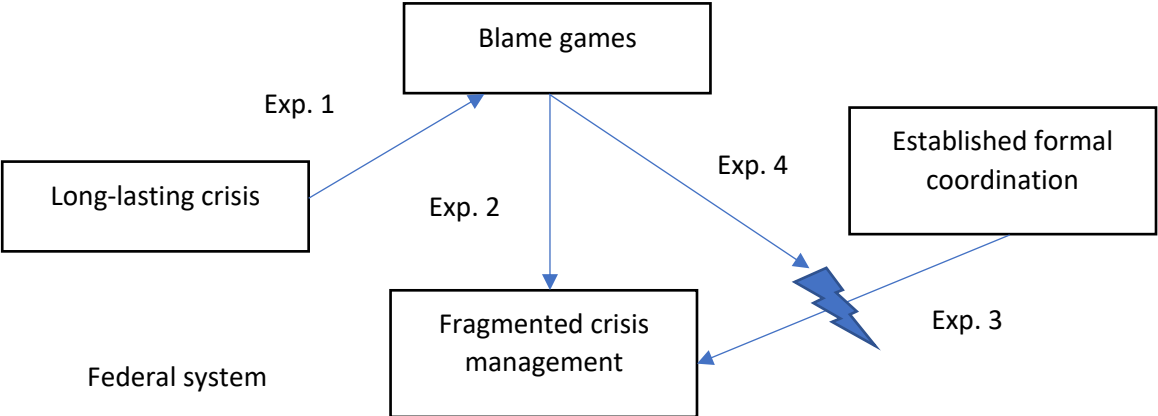
Research Design, Methods and Data

We present a single case study of the COVID-19 policy response across the pandemic waves, from February 2020 up to March 2022. As our interest lies in the question of policy learning, we focus on policy-formulation and not policy-implementation. The study draws on complementary data.

First, we observe the timeline of events and the positions of the various players through an analysis of the press coverage of the crisis. We reviewed articles to identify those that directly pertain to the research question (federalism, division of powers and shift in governance levels, horizontal (intercantonal) and vertical (federal-state) policy coordination, and decision-

13

making processes related to COVID-19 policies). We identified the relevant articles by searching the press by keyword, and narrowed the search around specific episodes that had been identified as critical regarding the pandemic management in Switzerland (i.e., the declaration of the extra-ordinary and of the special situations, the debates around the two semi-lockdowns, the Omicron wave). The selected articles were used in the case study in an illustrative way. The second type of data focuses on grey literature and includes all reports, position papers, and analyses from relevant key players (e.g., intercantonal conferences, the COVID-19 Task Force, official evaluation report on crisis management). This includes a report of the intercantonal conference on COVID-19 management, all the publicly available written production of the Task Force, and reports of the federal authorities on COVID-19 management (e.g., externally mandated evaluation reports, a report of the Federal Chancellery, reports of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, a report of the parliamentary control of the administration). To identify these sources, we rely on (Hirschi et al. 2022). We operationalize expectations 1 and 2 by identifying the shifts in governance levels across the pandemic management and the discourse that surround them. We operationalize expectations 3 and 4 by identifying the activation of formal and informal coordination mechanisms between governance units.

Results

In the following, we address the empirical elements that are directly related to the four expectations derived from the literature: vertical coordination and blame games across levels of governance, fragmented crisis governance, horizontal coordination, and policy learning.

From centralized to shared crisis management: shifts in governance levels

The country experienced three different governance regimes throughout the pandemic from February 2020 and spring 2022. According to the Epidemics Act[2], the federal state can declare the state of an extra-ordinary situation if the situation requires the centralization of the competences at the national level to fight an epidemic. Switzerland declared the extra-ordinary situation during the first wave of the pandemic, between March and June 2020. Under this regime, the federal government has the right to issue national measures in all policy areas that are valid for the whole country without having to consult with the subnational

---

[2] https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2015/297/en

states. These national measures include health policies, which are largely a cantonal prerogative in normal times. The "special situation," also foreseen in the Epidemic Act, grants the Confederation with the same exceptional powers but requires it to consult the cantons before issuing any decision. The Confederation downgraded the situation from extra-ordinary to special at the end of the first wave in July 2020, until the end of March 2022. The country's legal situation returned to normal on April 1, 2022 (see Table 1). The Confederation mainly consulted with the cantons throughout the different waves through the *Conference of cantonal governments* (the horizontal coordination platform of the 26 cantonal governments)[3] and the *Conference of cantonal Health Directorates* (the horizontal coordination platform of the 26 cantonal Health Ministers)[4].

Table 1: *COVID-19 Governance Regimes in Switzerland across time, according to the Epidemics Act*

Extra-ordinary situation	Special situation	Normal situation
March-June 2020	June 2020-March 2022	April 2022
Exceptional power to the Confederation (policy measures for the whole country) No obligation to consult with the cantons	Exceptional power to the Confederation Obligation to consult with the cantons	Cantons mainly in charge of communicable diseases

First Wave: A Sub-Optimal Vertical Coordination between the Federal States and the Cantons

During the first pandemic wave in spring 2020, Switzerland experienced an "overnight centralization of political powers" (Freiburghaus et al. 2022: 217) in favor of the federal government. This centralization was in sharp contrast to the country's traditional highly decentralized federalism. After a few months, the cantonal governments issued a common report in December 2020 that was quite critical of the federal management of the pandemic. The extraordinary situation was depicted as "drastically limiting the cantons' leeway," and it was stated that "cantonal governments have not been strongly included" by the federal state

---

[3] The *Conference of cantonal governments* "enables the cantons to mutually form their opinions and get involved in federal policy in a targeted and coordinated way, when their interests are at stake" (translated from the French). https://kdk.ch/fr/qui-sommes-nous/but-et-organisation

[4] https://www.gdk-cds.ch/fr/

in the first wave's crisis management. While the cantons recognized the legality of this situation under the provisions of the Epidemics Act, they underlined that it raised many problems, including preventing them from preparing timely communications with the media and the population in their role as implementing authorities. They also argued that the Confederation's (voluntary) consultation of the cantons strictly served as an alibi procedure (i.e., only dealt with already formulated and pre-decided policies). On some occasions, the federal government even cancelled cantonal decisions when cantons decided to go beyond national COVID-19 measures, for instance by passing a general lockdown (Uri) or specific restrictions for the elderly (Ticino) at the beginning of the first wave. The federal government ruled that these restrictions went against the national legal provisions set by the Confederation (Willi et al. 2020). In the second phase of the pandemic (special situation), the cantons once again highlighted that although the Confederation was required to consult with them before taking any decisions, it did so with such a short turnaround time that the cantons did not have time to consolidate their positions nor to gather the opinion of the key cantonal players. The cantons also criticized the unclear division of duties between the governance levels. To put it briefly, "vertical coordination" was neither "global" nor "coherent" in the cantons' eyes.[5] One of the major issues highlighted by the cantons was that they had little decision-making power regarding COVID-19 policies during the extra-ordinary situation. They however still had to enforce federal decisions in their territory.

Subsequent Waves: Governance Shifts between the Federal State and the Cantons against the Backdrop of Blame Games

The cantons suddenly regained substantial decision-making competences under the "special situation", i.e., from the end of the first wave. This abrupt change in coordination between the federal states and the cantons occurred dramatically when the Confederation refused to take the lead on the second wave of the pandemic (from summer 2020 to February 2021). Despite growing criticism from some cantons, medical experts, as well as some political parties, the Confederation had been slow to enforce protection measures during this period. After having taken a strong lead during the first wave, the Confederation took a significant U-

---

[5] Conférence des Gouvernements cantonaux (2020). *Rapport intermédiaire. COVID-19 : gestion de la crise durant la première vague, le point de vue des cantons*. Berne : Maisons des cantons, p. 4. Hereafter referred to as: Report of the cantonal governments, pp. 4-10.

turn and claimed that the cantons were better positioned to pursue the restrictions that would fit their local situations. However, the cantons never knew in advance if, when, and how the Confederation would finally decide to take the upper hand again and pursue centralized measures or not.

In December 2020, many cantons asked for a federal intervention to limit the social activity for the holiday season. From its part, the Confederation urged cantons to act individually when their situation was a source of concern.[6] The Confederation finally decided on 8 December 2020 to close restaurants at 7 pm at the national level and to limit private gatherings to five people except for Christmas and New Year's Eve. This measure was judged insufficient by many observers. Some cantons however criticized the Confederation for these new limitations that were enacted so quickly after the local reopening of restaurants. This controversy involved the fact that some cantons (mostly from the French-speaking part of the country) had individually pursued strict restrictions in October and November (restaurant closures and time-limitations) and carried the political burden for it. They had thereby improved the local epidemiological situation and announced an easing of the COVID-19 policies at the local level. When new restrictions were decided at the federal level immediately after they had eased local measures, they felt as if they had endured a double penalty: "A day and a half before the reopening of the restaurants, announcing that we are going to do things differently is unbearable for the players in the industry. And it discredits the cantonal authorities, who (…) had just communicated on the subject."[7]

After that, under high media pressure, the Confederation finally reissued a second semi-lockdown for the whole country, beginning on 18 January 2021 (Mavrot forthcoming). The Confederation had let the end of year celebrations pass before taking this decision because the closing of shops and restaurants during the Christmas period was politically controversial. However, without strong and coherent national COVID-19 measures, the epidemiological situation had considerably deteriorated during September 2020 and January 2021, leading some experts to talk about a high number of pandemic-related casualties that could have been avoided. The same exact scenario repeated itself a year later when the media and part of the

---

[6] https://www.admin.ch/gov/fr/accueil/documentation/communiques.msg-id-81477.html, December 4, 2021.
[7] https://www.letemps.ch/suisse/conseil-federal-fache-cantons-romands-nouvelles-mesures-contre-coronavirus, December 8, 2020.

cantonal players once again pushed the Confederation to take a stance on whether it was going to take the lead at the national level in the face of the quick-spreading Omicron variant. In December 2021, most cantons voiced their desire for a generalized tightening of measures.[8] The Confederation finally decided to take action and strengthened national policies on the 20 December 2021. It decided on a 2G/2G+[9] rule for access to restaurants, culture, leisure, and sports facilities, and mandated teleworking. In the meantime, cantons were not sure about whether to act at the local level.

The blame game between governance levels was very salient. During the first wave, the Confederation had passed numerous policies that have weighed on personal and economic liberties in an unprecedented manner. However, in doing so, it acted like most of the countries worldwide and showed that it took strong measures to save lives and protect its population. As the pandemic continued over time, several factors led the federal government to avoid assuming this lead role anymore. First, the economic situation as well as the population's patience with the restrictions declined with the time. Second, after the initial consensus due to a general state of shock, there was increased pressure from diverse interest groups and political parties who started to question the national strategy and to ask for policy alternatives. Third, the quite homogenous policy path adopted at the international level during the first wave (lockdowns, social distancing, school closures…) started to crumble and diversify during the second wave. Faced with this situation, the Confederation was willing to pass the ball to the cantons and to avoid assuming alone the political costs of unpopular COVID-19 policies. This marked the beginning of the federal government's strong blame avoidance processes, which started to point out the cantons' political responsibility to issue restrictions at the local level (Mavrot forthcoming).

The federal minister in charge of health (Head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs) called on the cantons most impacted by the pandemic to "play their part" and act to slow

---

[8] "Les cantons souhaitent un durcissement des mesures," *RTS Info*, December 15 2021, https://www.rts.ch/info/12720130-la-suisse-compte-11167-cas-supplementaires-et-41-deces-en-24-heures.html

[9] In Switzerland, the 2G rule concerns vaccinated or healed people, while the 2G+ rule concerns vaccinated or healed people that have been tested negative or people that have been vaccinated or have recovered within the past 120 days.

down the curve in the face of the "highly worrying situation."[10] This type of direct intervention in cantonal policy affairs by a member of the federal government is very rare in Switzerland. The blame game lasted throughout the entire pandemic, as illustrated by the statement made by the head of the crisis management section at the Federal Office of Public Health in winter 2021 (i.e., at the beginning of the fifth wave), that "the cantons can, and should, take measures" to avoid reaching a critical situation.[11] This illustrates the long-lasting confusion about who was in the driver's seat for the pandemic governance.

Local management of a global pandemic: A Fragmented Crisis Governance among Cantons

The uncertainty surrounding pandemic governance was detrimental for the cantons for several reasons. They did not know at which point they had to prepare a decision at the local level or whether the Confederation would issue measures at the national level. Setting up a decision-making process (consulting the local social partners, working out executive drafts, involving the cantonal parliament when needed, preparing the communication and implementation) at the cantonal level would have required planning, which was hampered by the constant hesitations of the federal state to take control. The reluctance of the Confederation to retake the upper hand in pandemic management also opened the door to intense controversies in local politics. The various players pushed in different directions – either calling for strict measures prioritizing public health and preventing the hospital system from collapsing or arguing in favor of safeguarding the local economy.

Uncertainty and Cantonal Disagreements: An Impeded Horizontal Coordination

This hectic situation also hampered intercantonal policy coordination, which pandemic governance would have required. While the Swiss system counts with firmly established coordination procedures to ensure a certain degree of coherence among cantonal policies in their area of competences, the urgency of the situation, the uncertainty surrounding the division of tasks, and the salience of the issue led the canton to act separately. When the Confederation started to deflect the blame onto the cantons by claiming that the rising second

---

[10] « Alain Berset appelle les cantons alémaniques à se ressaisir », *RTS*, 4 December 2020. https://www.rts.ch/info/suisse/11798438-face-a-une-situation-instable-le-conseil-federal-prend-une-serie-de-decisions-pour-le-ski-et-les-magasins.html
[11] « Un dernier appel à la responsabilité avant des mesures du Conseil fédéral ? », *Le Matin*, 23 November 2020. https://www.lematin.ch/story/un-dernier-appel-a-la-responsabilite-avant-des-mesures-du-conseil-federal-620073506930

wave was their responsibility, cantonal governments were not united on the matter. Some cantonal governments wanted to regain the lead of the pandemic management while others asked for national decisions to ensure decisive and coherent action. The latter were mostly cantons with high contagion rates and burdened local hospital systems (cantons with big cities and a high population density and cantons with international borders), while the former were cantons that had been mostly spared by the pandemic (rural cantons from central Switzerland). Local political preferences also played a role by drawing a line between cantons that were leaning towards state intervention and those who prioritized economic life. The debate among cantons about whether to ask the Confederation to take centralized measures again during the second wave was so intense that a rare institutional procedure was activated. In January 2021, the *Conference of cantonal governments* put the question of pandemic governance to an internal vote. Twelve cantons voted in favor of a motion that would have officially (but not mandatorily) requested that the federal government return to the state of "extraordinary situation." To have been accepted, this request would have needed a qualified majority of 18 cantons.[12] This episode shows the sharp dividing lines between cantons' views on the federal division of tasks in this situation. However, in their common statement, the cantons agreed that regional policy variations should be limited and that in a state of "special situation," they "should be able to harmonize their practice, based on unified decision criteria" (p. 11).

For its part, the Confederation stuck to its new narrative that the pandemic could now be better managed at the cantonal level according to the local specificities: number of COVID-19 transmissions, R value, and hospital occupancy rate. After having insisted on the necessity of centralizing the crisis governance during the first wave, the federal minister in charge of health backtracked to argue in favor of the importance of federalism in the Swiss political system. He replied to cantonal criticism regarding the lack of federal leadership by highlighting that federalism was a historical legacy as well as a key condition of the *vivre ensemble*. [13]

The areas covered by the exceptional powers conferred to the Confederation during the first wave included: the closing of school and educational institutions, the banning of public, associative, and private manifestations, the restricting of private gatherings, the closing of

---

[12] "Zwölf Kantone wollen die ausserordentliche Lage," *Tages-Anzeiger*, 12 January 2021.

[13] Alain Berset, "La protection des écoliers incombe aux cantons, rappelle Berset," *RTN/ATS*, 28 August 2021.

non-essential shops, bars and restaurants, and obliging remote working (Sager & Mavrot 2020). Most of these areas usually fall within the canton's jurisdiction within the federal division of tasks. While the cantons were merely in charge of implementing the restrictions decided at the national level during the first wave, they were in charge of the decision-making regarding these areas for most of the subsequent waves.[14] Important incoherence arose as the cantons decided on different policy paths from this point on. As the holiday season approached and the epidemic curve arose, some cantons decided to take strict measures, fearing an increase in contagions due to celebratory gatherings. This was, for instance, the approach taken by the government of Geneva, which declared a state of emergency and had already enforced a local semi-lockdown on 1 November 2020. The neighboring canton of Vaud, however, decided to keep shops and restaurants on its territory open throughout this period, which caused intense tensions among the two governments. As the cantonal health minister of Geneva stated, "that risk [of incoherence] is there, and it is unfortunately the other side of the coin with federalism. It is obvious that if the people of Geneva decide to do in the canton of Vaud what they cannot do in their home canton, it won't work."[15]

A similar situation happened when the canton of Zurich canceled a big traditional event – a watch fair that would have attracted many visitors – while the nearby canton of Basel-City did not.[16] These situations of intercantonal policy incoherence were found in various regions. Such local policy fragmentation in a small geographical territory like Switzerland was inappropriate in the fight against a large-scale pandemic. Another dramatic issue included intercantonal hospital coordination. Under the "special situation," hospital coordination was voluntarily enforced by the cantons. In case of a hospital overload in a canton, the hospitals of neighboring cantons could act as substitutes to absorb the inflow of patients. During the critical epidemic peak in the winter 2020-2021, the cantonal governments did not manage to reach agreements and the Confederation had to intervene to force them to find solutions.[17]

---

[14] Except when the Confederation decided on a restaurant closure from the 22 December 2020 followed by a partial, second semi-lockdown between the 13 January and the end of February 2021. This second lockdown did not include school closures.

[15] Mauro Poggia, « Genève décrète l'état de nécessité et repasse en semi-confinement », RTS, 1st November 2020. https://www.rts.ch/info/regions/geneve/11719290-geneve-decrete-letat-de-necessite-et-repasse-en-semiconfinement.html

[16] Interview with a representative of cantonal health authorities (Hirschi et al. 2022).

[17] "Interview d'Alain Berset", *RTS Play*, November 4, 2020. https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/19h30/video/19h30?urn=urn:rts:video:11728206

The situation was quite tense in most of the cantons and those who still had a few beds left wanted to keep them as a reserve. Cantons had to learn how to manage these policy-making responsibilities and to horizontally coordinate in the midst of the pandemic, without being able to refer to similar experiences from the first wave.

Impeded accumulation of knowledge: informal coordination and policy learning

The main issue for the cantons was not knowing at which point and to which degree they would have to decide on major anti-COVID-19 policy measures for themselves. This precarious decision-making environment was part of each new epidemic wave. There were recurring debates over whether the Confederation should take action for the entire country, and these debates usually lasted for weeks before each new major announcement. At the threshold of each new epidemic development the cantons still did not know what the level of regulation would be, and they were therefore reluctant to make the first move or launch the whole decision-making process at the local level, especially if it would potentially be for nothing.

In addition to these hesitations and inconsistencies, several cantons claimed that "they were ill-prepared to the transition toward the special situation." To compensate for the lack of communication and predictability with the federal authorities, the cantons tried to activate the traditional inter-cantonal coordination procedures and platforms. For instance, the offices of cantonal physicians (chief physicians embedded within the cantonal administration and responsible for medical and public health issues in each canton) established regular meetings and dialogue across cantons throughout the whole pandemic. However, "some cantons felt that the [inter-cantonal] conferences had difficulty exercising their role as coordination at the beginning of the crisis. The cantons then multiplied bilateral contacts to compensate (…) these consultations mainly took place with neighboring cantons or with cantons belonging to the same regional conference."[18] These solutions were not ideal as the scale of the pandemic and the logics of virus transmission do not match linguistic and geographical institutional divisions. In addition to the regional or bilateral coordination conferences between neighboring cantons, several cantons also sometimes established case-by-case collaborations on specific topics. For instance, a COVID-19 social media prevention campaign created by the highly professionalized and well-endowed canton of Basel-City was later shared with its neighbor

---

[18] Report of the cantonal governments.

canton (Freiburghaus et al. 2022). Hence, intercantonal coordination was scattered around multiple bi- or multi-lateral processes. Additionally, all cantons do not possess the same governance capacity, some have small and less professionalized politico-administrative structures while others have large and professionalized ones.[19]

Another unplanned issue was that the entire expert advisory system had been set up at the national level during the first wave. A *Swiss national science COVID-19 Task Force* had been created at the onset of the pandemic in February 2020 to advise the federal government on COVID-19-related matter. This Task Force produced literature reviews, data modeling, and policy briefs on relevant topics such as transmission rates and means and the efficacy of various containment strategies. When the canton regained considerable policy-making power, they would have needed access to such expert resources. However, the transition had not been foreseen and although the task force was theoretically available to the 26 cantons for queries, very few contacts took place between them. There were no established communication channel and no previous experience of collaboration. The Task Force, which had been attached to an interdepartmental crisis unit during the first wave, and to the Federal Office of Public Health since the second one, remained in close contact with the federal authorities throughout the whole pandemic. Having been conceptualized at the national level, the system of scientific policy advice did not fit the new federal reality in play since the special situation.[20] Some cantons replicated this model and created their own expert Task Forces to advise authorities at the cantonal level. Others put their forces together and shared a joint network of experts. Cantons are, however, unequally endowed with expert resources, depending on whether they have a cantonal university hospital or a university.[21] This situation also hampered the process of knowledge accumulation for the pandemic management.

In the next section, we will link the case evidence back to our four expectations that we derived in the theory section.

Discussion

---

[19] Report of the cantonal governments.

[20] Interviews with representants of the scientific COVID-19 Task Force and of federal authorities (Hirschi et al. 2022).

[21] See for instance Vaud: https://www.letemps.ch/suisse/vaud-se-dote-dun-conseil-scientifique-covid19

Based on the literature, we formulated four expectations about crisis management and policy learning in Swiss federalism during a crisis. The overall expectation is that through the blame games it produces, a crisis might hamper knowledge accumulation and policy learning processes by disrupting the division of tasks and politico-administrative coordination procedures. These disruptions are not specific to federal system, and tensions between central and local crisis governance have been observed in numerous political systems (e.g., Ye et al. 2023). One of the tensions raised in a federal system like Switzerland is that cantons are used to having a leading role on public health policies. It also raised specific challenges because when the federal state gave back to the cantons the main responsibility to deal with the crisis, given their extensive competences in health matters, cantons had to put in place fully-fledged pandemic management procedures and systems. They however had to do so in a hasty way because of the lack of predictability regarding shifts among governance levels.

Our first expectation was formulated based on the exiting literature on the COVID-19 crisis and held that *the characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis (long-lasting crisis requiring unpopular measures, novel situation altering the usual division of tasks among national and subnational authorities) opens the door for strong blame games across levels of governance.* This expectation was confirmed. At the beginning of the crisis, the tense political environment put pressure on incumbent governments (in our case the federal authorities) to display their responsiveness capacity (Boin & 't Hart 2022). The Confederation assumed responsibility during the first wave and acted decisively. However, in the wake of this long-lasting creeping crisis, "exhausted policymakers" increasingly had to deal with societal impatience and were unable to rely on ready-made "scripts to deal with extended periods of volatile adversity" (Boin et al. 2020b: 198). This situation quickly led to blame games among governance levels in Switzerland. The federal government progressively wanted cantonal authorities to take their share of unpopular measures and decisions. We observe that the federal structure offers federal authorities with an "exit" by giving them the opportunity to pass the responsibility to subnational governments (Mavrot forthcoming) – which wouldn't be imaginable in a strongly centralized system.

In this sense, we hold that this *exit* possibility gave the federal level the opportunity to lean towards a "quick organizational fix" (i.e., passing the responsibility to the cantons) rather than leading to draw more "structural lessons" (Dekker & Hansén 2004: 218) about how to further

govern the crisis in this highly politicized environment. The crisis has been a challenge for the Swiss "functional federalism" (Braun 2000). In normal times, these types of federalisms produce concerted decisions between the federal state and subnational governments, for which they take a joint responsibility (Montpetit et al. 2005). This is rather in jurisdictional federations that political blame can usually be clearly directed at one or the other governance level (Montpetit et al. 2005). Hence the pandemic has challenged this pattern, creating room for blame games across governance levels because of the turmoil in the division of tasks. This analysis is based on the case of the Swiss highly decentralized, functional federalism. Further studies would be necessary to assess the effect of the crisis on other types of federalism.

As for Expectation 2, we find evidence for our statement that the *blame games led to policy fragmentation in pandemic management across levels of governance*. The whole ambiguity of an unprecedented crisis characterized by its wave dynamic calls the traditional division of tasks into question. The COVID-19 crisis created ambiguity regarding the location of decision-making power between central and local authorities, along with inducing constant variations between policy definition and policy implementation duties across governance levels (Malandrino & Demichelis 2020). In decentralized systems, there are many possible scenarios for the allocation of tasks in a pandemic management – from cantons merely having an implementing role to cantons acting as the primary policy-makers. Hence, bridging the gap between policy designing and policy implementation would have been a prerequisite of a successful crisis management during the COVID-19 crisis (Zaki & George 2022). Crisis management was characterized by variations in governance levels that depended on the ongoing political blame games. As seen in the case study, the federal state sometimes refused to take the lead. Eventually, it had to do so in several occasions in the face of the strong pressures. In parallel, the cantons had to improvise their decision-making on whether to launch whole policy-making processes at the local level or to wait for national measures. As observed elsewhere, in the Spanish case of COVID-19 management for instance, subnational authorities are torn between claiming back their power and autonomy while simultaneously wanting to enjoy mechanisms of responsibility-diffusion at the political level (e.g., national criteria to define the mitigation measures) (Casula& Pazos-Vidal 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic created a shift from "'business-as-usual' federalism" to "emergency federalism," which granted space for new types of relationships between federal and sub-federal

authorities (Migone 2020: 397). Each governance level had to find new role in this situation in which time was of the essence. Governance was fragmented and sometimes loosely coordinated, which reinforced the variance among cantonal policies.

The third and fourth expectations related to policy coordination. Policy coordination can be hectic in decentralized system that face a crisis of the scale and nature of COVID-19, especially in terms of the "unpredictability about which level of government should take certain decisions that have never been adopted or implemented before" (Mattei & Del Pino 2021: 279-280). The challenge lies in being able to plan stronger intergovernmental relations for future crises, to ensure that political blame games do not extensively affect policy coordination (Mattei & Del Pino 2021). In Expectation 3, we stated that *because of the deeply rooted politico-institutional vertical and horizontal coordination in federal systems, we expect cantons to try to activate the usual procedures in a crisis*. We found limited evidence to corroborate this expectation. Some attempts were made to use usual coordination platforms such as intercantonal conferences to discuss COVID-19. However, the pandemic generated a high degree of polarization between the cantons, which sometimes impeded their willingness to cooperate. This was due to the uncommon situation that some cantons were dramatically affected by the pandemic while others were not, and that no one wanted to take the blame for unpopular measures at the local level. Cantonal authorities sometimes worked under the assumption that the neighboring cantons would not make sacrifices, which would thus neutralize the potential effects of COVID-restrictions in one's own territory.

Our fourth expectation stated that in case of low activation of the traditional coordination procedures, the cantons would rely on informal flows and procedures to engage in policy learning. This was the case, as the lack of intercantonal unity resulted in cantons frequently relying on ad hoc bilateral exchanges or coordination with neighbors to tackle specific issue. On the one hand, this shows the resilience capacity of cantonal authorities and their ability to activate local resources and ad hoc processes. This also shows the robustness of the Swiss federalism regarding its historically institutionalized (informal) procedures of horizontal coordination. Being able to formulate an effective answer sometimes depends on the capacity to go off the institutional track: "intracrisis learning implies the direct reflection and adoption of new processes or adjustments regarding structures and actors whenever traditional schemes can no longer be usefully applied" (Schomaker & Bauer 2020: 847). On the other

hand, leaving the institutional track did not result in coherent policy solutions. This is the issue we identified as resulting from the *fragmented crisis governance* among cantons. In such a configuration, the horizontal exchanges do not benefit all cantons and there is a lack of systematic activities, which hampers the accumulation of know-how. This phenomenon goes with sub-optimal policy learning processes, as each sub-national governance unit only has fragmented information at disposal.

In fact, the fragmentation of the learning opportunities during a crisis such as COVID-19 is all the more acute because of the crucial role played by the content of the policy mix chosen to contain the pandemic, which needs a good stringency, timing, and sequencing (Capano et al. 2020). This raises the crucial question, "exactly what type of learning does a given constellation of actors need?" (Dunlop & Radaelli 2013). Theoretically, the COVID-19 pandemic could serve as a tailor-made crisis to test different approaches and sort out the most successful ones (Kettl 2020). However, time pressure did not allow such mechanisms to take place in the COVID-19 case. In addition, the multiplication of poorly coordinated taskforces at the local level can also fragment the overall strategy and its readability, such as what happened in Italy, where "contradictory views and different diagnostics emerged, along with the mediatization of expertise and increased numbers of experts and task forces at the various territorial levels" (Vicentini & Galanti 2021: 12).

Leveling mechanisms are therefore of particular interest for crisis management. They are identified as a key feature of horizontal cooperation processes in federal systems as they act as redistribution mechanisms that compensate asymmetries and pursue an equilibrium between more or less well-off member states (Freiburghaus et al. 2022). They can be a matter of fiscal repartition, but they can also have to do with the sharing of cognitive resources. It has been acknowledged that the varying analytical, operational, and political capacities of each governing unit constitute crucial factors that explain the performance of their reaction to the COVID-19 crisis (Capano & Lippi 2021, based on the framework of Wu et al. 2018). In the studied case, such mechanisms entered into play among member states in the context of the unequal repartition of expert resources and administrative capacity to face the pandemic. However, inter-state relationships were also marked by self-preserving attitudes by the various authorities, in a mix of conflict, calculative and cooperative federalism (Benton 2020).

Hence, the overall performance of federal systems in tackling the pandemic is contrasted. This does not mean that federal systems score poorly compared to other systems. However, federal systems faced particular challenges because of the potential autonomy of their member states that faced difficult coordination challenges to provide a united front in face of the pandemic. In Switzerland on the one hand, existing horizontal procedures could be partially activated by the cantons to coordinate themselves. On the other hand, vertical coordination procedures have been used to ensure a constant communication between the federal state and the cantons, but also presented flaws in this specific context. As observed by Igor Francetic, while other federal countries might have done an acceptable job coordinating the cross-governance levels efforts to fight the pandemic, better performance should be the goal in the future in the Swiss case: "the Swiss Government shied away from strong coordination of the response across Cantons, often waiting until the situation escalated instead of anticipating the natural progression of the epidemics" (2021: 8; Willi et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis management posed acute challenges at the crossroads of multi-level governance and policy learning processes. The crisis situation showed the adaptive capacity of some core politico-institutional features of a federal system put under high pressure. This raises the question of how to face the unforeseen in multi-level systems in which the disturbance of coordination procedures – especially regarding the division of tasks across governance levels – forces authorities to improvise. This study investigated what happened once the "honeymoon" phase of the first wave had passed and had given way to generalized policy blame games around the prolongation of strong policy measures (Greer et al. 2022) that political authorities were increasingly reluctant to carry out. After the federal authorities took the responsibility out of the hands of the cantons during the first wave to demonstrate their political ability to act, subnational authorities were put in a position of constant uncertainty regarding the next steps. The key feature in the studied federal configuration was that while common and centralized policy learning mechanisms among subnational authorities would have been desirable for capitalizing knowledge and know-how, it was impossible due to the uncertainty caused by last-minute decisions and political fluidity.

In this disruptive context, blame games caused hesitations and variations as to which governance levels were responsible to act. These hesitations resulted in both a fragmentation

of crisis governance, and a fragmentation of learning processes across levels and among subnational states. While relying on policy coordination and learning mechanisms, member states take shortcuts by coordinating with, and engaging in learning processes with their closest neighbors, be it from a geographical, linguistic, or informal network viewpoint. This perspective opens the door to the study of intra-crisis policy learning in suboptimal conditions where there is high pressure to learn – especially given the lives at stake – that combines with a relatively short temporal window of action. This study was limited to a single-country case. It would be worth exploring the dynamics of fragmented crisis management in various configurations of multi-level governance to learn more about this phenomenon. The study of multi-level contexts with more or less established mechanisms of inter-governmental coordination might add some variations to the observation of the systems' coping mechanisms. Finally, this brought together a theoretical perspective on crisis governance, blame games, and policy learning, that could be further studied in relation to each other.

References

Baldi, B., & Profeti, S. (2020). Le fatiche della collaborazione. Il rapporto stato-regioni in Italia ai tempi del COVID -19. *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche*, *3*, 277-306.

Bandelow, N. C., Hassenteufel P., & Hornung, J. (2021). Patterns of Democracy Matter in the COVID-19 Crisis. *International Review of Public Policy*, *3*(1), 121-136.

Benton, J.E. (2020). Challenges to Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations and Takeaways Amid the COVID-19 Experience. *The American Review of Public Administration*, *50*(6-7), 536-542.

Boin, A., Ekengren, M. & Rhinard, M. (2020a). Hiding in Plain Sight: Conceptualizing the Creeping Crisis. *Risks, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, *11*: 116-138.

Boin, A., Lodge, M., & Luesink, M. (2020b). Learning from the COVID-19 crisis: an initial analysis of national responses. *Policy Design and Practice*, *3*(3), 189-204.

Boin, A., & 't Hart, P. (2022). From crisis to reform? Exploring three post-COVID pathways. *Policy and Society*, *41*(1), 13–24.

Braun, D. (2000). *Public Policy and Federalism*. Farmham, Ashgate.

Capano, G. (2020). Policy design and state capacity in the COVID-19 emergency in Italy: if you are not prepared for the (un)expected, you can be only what you already are. *Policy and Society*, *39*(3), 326–344.

Capano, G., Howlett, M., Jarvis, D.S., Ramesh, M., & Goyal, N. (2020). Mobilizing Policy (In)Capacity to Fight COVID-19: Understanding Variations in State Responses. *Policy and Society*, *39*(3), 285–308.

Capano, G., & Lippi A. (2021). Decentralization, policy capacities, and varieties of first health response to the COVID-19 outbreak: evidence from three regions in Italy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *28*(8), 1197-1218.

Casula, M., & Pazos-Vidal, S. (2021). Assessing the Multi-level Government Response to the COVID-19 Crisis: Italy and Spain Compared. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *44*(11-12), 994-1005.

Crow, D. A., DeLeo, R. A., Albright, E. A., Taylor, K., Birkland, T., Zhang, M., Koebele, E., Jeschke, N., Shanahan, E. A., & Cage, C. (2023). Policy learning and change during crisis: COVID-19 policy responses across six states. *Review of policy research*, *40*(1), 10–35.

Dekker, S., & Hansén, D. (2004). Learning under Pressure: The Effects of Politicization on Organizational Learning in Public Bureaucracies. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *14*(2): 211–230.

Dunlop, C.A, Ongaro, E., & Baker, K. (2020). Researching COVID-19: A research agenda for public policy and administration scholars. *Public Policy and Administration*, *35*(4), 365-383.

Dunlop C.A., & Radaelli C.M. (2013). Systematising Policy Learning: From Monolith to Dimensions. *Political Studies*, *61*(3), 599-619.

Eichenberger, S., Varone, F., Sciarini, P., Stähli, R., & Proulx, J. (2023). When do decision makers listen (less) to experts? The Swiss government's implementation of scientific advice during the COVID-19 crisis. *Policy Studies Journal*, *51*(3): 587–605.

Francetic, I. (2021). Bad law or implementation flaws? Lessons from the implementation of the new law on epidemics during the response to the first wave of COVID-19 in Switzerland. *Health Policy*, *125*(10), 1285-1290.

Freiburghaus, R., Mueller S., & Vatter A. (2022). Switzerland: Overnight centralization in one of the world's most federal countries. In R., Chattopadhyay, F., Knüpling, D., Chebenova, L., Whittington, & P., Gonzalez (Eds.). *Federalism and the Response to COVID-19: A Comparative Analysis* (pp. 217-228). London, New York: Routledge.

Gilardi F., Füglister, K., & Luyet, S. (2009), Learning from others: the diffusion of hospital financing reforms in OECD countries, *Comparative Political Studies*, *42*(4): 549-573.

Greer, S.L., Rozenblum, S., Falkenbach, M., Löblovà, O., Jarman, H., Williams, N., & Wismar, M. (2022). Centralizing and decentralizing governance in the COVID-19 pandemic: The politics of credit and blame. *Health policy, 126*(5), 408-417.

Hantrais, L., & MacGregor, S. (2021). Incorporating complexity into policy learning: the case of COVID-19 in Europe*. LSE European Politics and Policy blog*. Retrieved from:

https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/02/22/incorporating-complexity-into-policy-learning-the-case-of-covid-19-in-europe/

Hinterleitner, M., Honegger, C., & Sager, F. (2023). Blame avoidance in hard times: complex governance structures and the COVID-19 pandemic. *West European Politics*, 46(2), 324-346.

Hinterleitner, M. (2020). *Policy Controversies and Political Blame Games*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hinterleitner, M. (2023), Blame games and democratic responsiveness. *European Journal of Political Research*. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12563

Hirschi, C., Hornung, J., Jaton, D., Mavrot, C., Sager, F., Schlaufer, C. (2022). *Wissenschaftliche Politikberatung in Krisenzeiten in der Schweiz: Eine Analyse der Finanzkrise, des Fukushima-Unfalls und der Covid-19-Pandemie*. Study commissioned by the Swiss Science Council. Universities of Bern, Lausanne, St. Gallen. https://wissenschaftsrat.ch/images/stories/pdf/de/SWR_2022_Wissenschaftliche_Politikberatung.pdf [last accessed September, 13].

Hood, C. (2007). What happens when transparency meets blame- avoidance?, *Public Management Review,* 9(2): 191-210.

Hood, C., Jennings, W., & Copeland, P. (2016). Blame avoidance in comparative perspective: reactivity, staged retreat and efficacy. *Public Administration*, *94*(2): 542-562.

Howlett, M. (2012). The lessons of failure: learning and blame avoidance in public policy-making. *International Political Science Review*, 33(5) 539 –555.

John-Eke, E. C., & Eke, j. k. (2020). Strategic planning and crisis management styles in organizations: a review of related literature. *Journal of Strategic Management*, *5*(1): 36 - 46.

Kettl, D.F. (2020). States Divided: The Implications of American Federalism for COVID-19. *Public Administration Review*, *80*(4), 595-602.

Kuenzler, J. (2018). The Hard Case for Learning: Explaining the Diversity of Swiss Tobacco Advertisment Bans. In C.A. Dunlop, C.M. Radaelli & P. Trein (Eds.). *Learning in Public Policy. Analysis, Modes and Outcomes* (pp. 267-294). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lee, S., Hwang, C., & Moon, M.J. (2020). Policy Learning and Crisis Policy-Making: Quadruple-Loop Learning and COVID-19 Responses in South Korea. *Policy and Society*, *39*(3), 363–381.

Maggetti, M., & Trein , P. (2022). Policy integration, problem-solving, and the coronavirus disease crisis: lessons for policy design. *Policy and Society*, *41*(1): 53–67.

Malandrino, A., & Demichelis, E. (2020). Conflict in decision making and variation in public administration outcomes in Italy during the COVID-19 crisis. *European Policy* Analysis, *6*(2), 138– 146.

Mattei, P., & Del Pino, E. (2021). Coordination and Health Policy Responses to the First Wave of COVID-19 in Italy and Spain. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis. Research and Practice*, *23*(2), 274-281.

Mavrot Céline (forthcoming). Gestion du Covid-19 en Suisse : expertise scientifique et démocratie de consensus en temps de crise. In : Jean Michel De Waele, Michel Perottino, Christophe Premat (dir.), *Le gouvernement des experts dans la gestion du Covid-19* (p. 218-244). Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.

Migone, A.R. (2020). Trust, but customize: federalism's impact on the Canadian COVID-19 response. *Policy and Society*, *39*(3), 382-402.

Montpetit, E., Rothmayr, C., & Varone, F. (2005). Institutional vulnerability to social constructions. *Comparative Political Studies*, *38*(2): 119-142.

Moynihan, D.P. (2008). Learning under uncertainty - Networks in crisis management. *Public Administration Review*, *68*(2), 350–365.

Moynihan, D.P. (2009), From intercrisis to intracrisis learning. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, *17*(3), 189-98.

Papadopoulos, Y. (2001). How does direct democracy matter? The impact of referendum votes on politics and policy-making, *West European Politics*, *24*(2), 35-58.

Powell, M., & King–Hill, S. (2020). Intra-crisis learning and prospective policy transfer in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *40*(9/10), 877-892.

Radaelli, C. M. (2022). Policy Learning *and* European Integration. *Journal* of *Common Market Studies*, 60(1): 12-25.

Rozell, M.J., & Wilcox, C. (2020). Federalism in a Time of Plague: How Federal Systems Cope With Pandemic. *The American Review of Public Administration*, *50*(6–7), 519–25.

Sager F., & Mavrot, C. (2020). Switzerland's COVID-19 Policy Response: Consociational Crisis Management and Neo-corporatist Reopening. *European Policy Analysis*, *6*(2): 293–304.

Schomaker, R.M., & Bauer, M.W. (2020). What Drives Successful Administrative Performance during Crises? Lessons from Refugee Migration and the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Public Administration Review*, *80*(5), 845-850.

Trein, P., Meyer, I., & Maggetti, M. (2019). The integration and coordination of public policies: A systematic comparative review. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, *21*(4), 332-349.

Vatter, A. (2018). *Swiss Federalism: The Transformation of a Federal Model* (1st ed.). London: Routledge.

Vicentini, G., & Galanti, M.T. (2021). Italy, the Sick Man of Europe: Policy Response, Experts and Public Opinion in the First Phase of Covid-19. *South European Society and Politics*. Doi: 10.1080/13608746.2021.1940582

Weaver, K.R. (1986). The Politics of Blame Avoidance. *Journal of Public Policy*, *6*(4), 371-398.

Willi, Y., Nischik, G., Braunschweiger, D., & Pütz, M. (2020). Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: Transformative Governance in Switzerland. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, *111*(3), 302–17.

Wu, X., Ramesh, M., & Howlett, M. (2018). Policy capacity: Conceptual framework and essential components. In X. Wu, M. Howlett, & M. Ramesh (Eds.), *Policy capacity and governance* (pp. 1–28). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ye, Z., Ma, B., & Li, Y. (2023). Wrestling with multiple accountabilities in times of crisis: Findings from the experiences of Chinese local governments in responding to COVID-19. *Review of Policy Research*, 00, 1–21.

Zahariadis, N., Petridou, E., & Oztig, L.I. (2020). Claiming credit and avoiding blame: political accountability in Greek and Turkish responses to the COVID-19 crisis. *European Policy Analysis*, *6*(2), 159–169.

Zaki, B.L., & George, B. (2022). New development: Policy learning and public management—a match made in crisis. *Public Money & Management*, *42*(2), 129-132.

Zaki, B.L., & Wayenberg, E. (2021). Shopping in the scientific marketplace: COVID-19 through a policy learning lens. *Policy Design and Practice*, *4*(1), 15-32.