

European Local Governments Facing the Crisis: Pandemic Governance in the Multilevel System

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Abstract

Crises seem to have become 'a chronic and endemic condition for modern governance' (Ansell et al., 2022: 3). The crisis landscape has changed significantly; it is no longer just about dealing with individual, localized, or temporary crises. Rather, public decision-makers are increasingly dealing with the simultaneous occurrence and interactions of various acute and gradual crises, as well as the fact that the measures taken to overcome earlier crises become the causes and triggers of subsequent crises. It goes hand in hand with the fact that mastering crises is becoming a permanent task for the state and administration and that institutional issues of crisis governance have increasingly become the focus of administrative policy and scientific attention. However, the municipal level has been conspicuously neglected in the relevant research to date. This is all the more worthy of criticism as the local governments in some European countries have considerable discretionary powers in crisis-related policymaking and in deciding on specific measures in the event of a local disaster. This article presents a European comparative analysis of local and multilevel crisis governance, which looks at different political-administrative contexts and administrative cultures and makes it possible to derive lessons for more resilient governance structures. The study focuses on a comparison of France, the United Kingdom (England), Sweden, Poland, and Germany using the example of the corona pandemic. From an administrative science perspective, the focus is primarily on institutional and governance-related aspects as well as questions of coordination, task allocation and decision-making in crisis management. The research gap described above will be addressed by focusing on local governments as (potentially) resilience-promoting key institutions and their coordination with the higher administrative levels. The aim is to work out what influence the different administrative cultural contexts had on the institutional design of crisis governance and administrative action during the pandemic crisis.

A. Introduction and Research Objectives

Crises seem to have become 'a chronic and endemic condition for modern governance' (Ansell et al., 2022: 3). The crisis landscape has changed significantly; it is no longer just about dealing with individual, localized, or temporary crises. Rather, public decision-makers are increasingly dealing with the simultaneous occurrence, iteration, and interactions of various forms of crises, including the so-called fatal remedies or measures taken to overcome earlier crises that later become the causes and triggers of subsequent crises. This emerging challenge is often referred to as a 'polycrisis' (cf. Henig & Knight, 2023). It goes hand in hand with the fact that mastering crises is becoming a permanent task for the state and administration and that institutional issues of crisis governance have increasingly become the focus of administrative policy and scientific attention.

However, the municipal level has been conspicuously neglected in the relevant research to date. This is all the more worthy of criticism as local governments in some European countries have considerable discretionary powers in crisis-related policymaking and in deciding on specific measures in the event of a local disaster (cf. Bauer et al., 2022; Kuhlmann et al., 2023, 2024). Additionally, they must implement decisions made at higher levels locally, which requires acceptance and willingness to follow up from local citizens. Local governments are usually the first public institution to be called upon in the event of disruptive crisis events and disasters of any kind, regardless of whether they are formally responsible or not. This forces them to switch quickly and unbureaucratically from routine administrative mode to crisis mode. Local governments should therefore also be seen as key players in the crisis resilience of the entire administrative system (cf. Boin & Lodge, 2016). The effectiveness of crisis management is crucially dependent on the ability to act and solve problems, as well as on capacities of the local level.

The neglect of the local level, but also of the multilevel perspective when researching crisis governance, applies particularly to international comparisons. Apart from a few exceptions (cf. Bergström et al., 2022; Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2021, 2022), there have been no systematic comparative studies on crisis governance in multi-level systems and the role of the local/municipal level in this setting. A number of country reports on crisis action in different national political and administrative contexts are now available (see, for example, Silva, 2022; Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2021, 2022; Kuhlmann et al. 2021a, 2022b, 2023; Bouckaert et al. 2020; Bergström et al. 2022). However, there is a lack of systematic comparisons, especially on the contribution of local governments to crisis management. The question of what influence local self-government has on crisis management, to what extent municipalities/counties have proven to be capable of acting or rather powerless, and what explanatory factors account for country differences cannot be answered on the basis of the research available to date. There is also a lack of international comparative analyses of the coordination between municipal institutions and higher political and administrative levels, meaning that no empirically valid statements can be made about any country differences and their conditioning factors.

This is where this article comes in, by presenting a European comparative analysis of local and multilevel crisis governance, which looks at different political-administrative contexts and administrative cultures and makes it possible to derive lessons for more resilient governance structures. The study focuses on a comparison of France, the United Kingdom (England), Sweden, Poland, and Germany using the example of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is primarily treated as a socio-political phenomenon and crisis event that placed public institutions and political-administrative decision-makers under stress but was also shaped and influenced by them. From an administrative science perspective, the focus is primarily on institutional and governance-related aspects as well as questions of coordination, task allocation and decision-making in crisis management. In contrast, the analysis or evaluation of individual policy instruments and containment measures will not take center stage.

The background for selecting the countries is the intention to include typical representatives of different administrative cultures in Europe, aiming to identify patterns of interaction between administrative traditions on the one hand and crisis governance on the other. The research gap described above will be addressed by focusing on local governments as (potentially) resilience-promoting key institutions and their coordination with the higher administrative levels. The aim is to work out what influence the different administrative cultural contexts had on the institutional design of crisis governance and administrative action during the pandemic crisis. Against this background, the article focuses on the following three key questions:

- Which institutional variants of local crisis governance can be identified in the countries analyzed? What role do local governments and coordination in the multi-level system play?
- How did the relationship between centralization and decentralization develop in pandemic management? What variants of interdependence and decoupling occurred?
- What influence do different European administrative cultures and institutional path dependencies have on local and multilevel crisis governance?

The main focus of the study is on the institutional design variants of crisis governance (dependent variable) and how these are characterized by different administrative cultures (independent variable). Although the COVID-19 pandemic is at the center of the empirical analysis, in view of the polycrisis problem that the local level in particular is confronted with, the interweaving of different earlier or parallel crises is also taken into account. The focus is less on the respective crisis phenomena and adopted policies/measures than on the governance patterns that become visible in the crisis context.

The study is based on a research project at the University of Potsdam, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research². Methodologically, it relied on a comprehensive secondary analysis and expert interviews. The former comprised 350 documents, which were identified and analyzed for the framework topics ‘crisis governance’ and/or ‘pandemic management’ for the five countries under investigation. In addition to English-, German-, and French-language sources, which formed the focus of the analysis, sources in Swedish and Polish were also included, which were made accessible using translation tools. The latter was based on 14 semi-structured interviews with academics and representatives of subnational administrations, as well as so-called ‘practitioners’ who, due to their professional careers or parallel commitments, were able to report from both a practical and an academic perspective, thus combining both ‘worlds’ in an almost ideal way. In addition, the study draws on the results of other research projects on crisis management conducted since 2020 under the direction or with the participation of the author (for the results, see Kuhlmann et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022b, 2023, 2024; Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2021, 2022; Bergström et al. 2022; Bouckaert et al., 2020).

This chapter is structured as follows: First, we present the theoretical framework of the study drawing on the concepts of crisis governance and administrative cultures/comparative public administration (Section B). This is followed by a country-comparative analysis of crisis governance during the pandemic in France, the United Kingdom/England, Sweden, Poland, and Germany. The focus is on the legal regulations and their local application on the one hand, and on the coordination of local governments with upper levels of government on the other, outlining key similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses of the countries' crisis governance systems (Section C). In Section D, the explanatory factors of crisis governance are discussed, with a distinction made between. Finally, Section E presents the conclusions and lessons learned.

B. Theoretical Framework: Crisis Governance and Administrative Cultures

1. Crisis Governance

The study focuses on the institutional variants of local and multilevel pandemic governance from a country comparative perspective. It examines the extent to which different administrative contexts and historical-institutional path dependencies (cf. Lehmbruch, 2001) have characterized and influenced the country-specific choice of crisis governance during the pandemic (cf. Kuhlmann et al., 2024). We proceed from an administrative science perspective on crisis governance aimed at comparatively examining and explaining organizational frameworks, coordination mechanisms, interaction in multi-level systems, as well as processes of centralization and decentralization. Drawing on pertinent studies on crisis governance and inter-administrative relations (Oehlert & Kuhlmann, 2024; Bogumil & Kuhlmann, 2022; Hegele & Schnabel, 2021; Bogumil & Gräfe, 2023), crisis governance is operationalized on the basis of two dimensions (see Figure 1).

- (1) Distribution of tasks in the multi-level system (decentralized vs. centralized);
- (2) Inter-governmental relations (coordinated vs. decoupled).

The first dimension relates to the responsibilities of the different administrative levels in pandemic management (federal/central government, regional and local levels). On the one hand, the legally provided decision-making and implementation powers, especially of the local governments, are taken into consideration. On the other hand, beyond the formal structures, the factual activities and informal interventions of local governments are referred to, which were applied in pandemic management, sometimes beyond/contrary to the legally stipulated rules.

The second dimension deals with the interactions and interdependencies or the decoupling between administrative levels (Hegele & Schnabel, 2021; Laffin et al., 2024). In this dimension, we analyze the extent to which the actors involved in crisis management at different levels consider it necessary to act in a coordinated manner during the crisis, making joint decisions and harmonizing measures. The focus is on the vertical interplay or decoupling of central, regional and municipal levels in crisis management (see also Oehlert & Kuhlmann, 2024).

2. Administrative Cultures/Comparative Public Administration

Based on relevant typologies of comparative public administration (see Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019; Kuhlmann et al., 2022a; Peters, 2021), five country clusters of European administrative cultures are distinguished, each characterized by typical combinations of institutional and cultural characteristics. One country representative is picked out in each case (for details see Table 1):

- Anglo-Saxon cluster: United Kingdom (England)
- Continental European-Federal cluster: Germany
- Continental European-Napoleonic cluster: France
- Central Eastern European cluster: Poland
- Nordic cluster: Sweden

Table 1: Administrative Profiles and Local Government Models in Five European Countries

Indicator	France	Germany	Poland	Sweden	UK (England)
Administrative Profile					
Structure of the state	Unitary-centralised	Federal decentralised	Unitary-decentralised	Unitary-decentralised	Unitary-centralised
Administrative Culture	Rule-of-Law/Legalist	Rule-of-Law/Legalist	Rule-of-Law/Post-Soviet	Rule-of-Law/Legalist	Public Interest
Functional and Territorial Profile of Local Governments; Local Autonomy					
Task profile	Strengthened since Decentralisation	Comprehensive; all purpose	Relatively strong	Comprehensive; all purpose	Weakened since NPM
LG share public expenditure (%)	20,1 %	18,2 %	34,3 %	50,9 %	22,8 %
LG share public employees (%)	36%	38 %	27%	81%	38%
Average municipal size (number of inhabitants)/Territorial Type	1.929 South European Type	7.699 Mixed*	15.499 Towards Northern European Type	35.444 Northern European Type	176.245 Northern European Type
Local Autonomy					
Local Autonomy Index 2.0	75,63	66,11	61,94	76,19	49,71
Share of tax revenues in total Local Government revenues	51%	35%	33%	55%	12%

Source: Adapted from Kuhlmann et al. 2024 (with further references).

*Three German *Länder* Northern European, ten Southern European. For the three city states not relevant.

In line with historical institutionalism (see Pierson, 2004; Steinmo, et al., 1992), it is assumed that institutional contexts and historically characterized administrative cultures significantly influence how different countries deal institutionally with crises (Peters, 2013; Pollitt, 2013) and respond to external shocks. Accordingly, the ways of addressing newly emerging problems are prestructured by existing institutional arrangements and problem-solving patterns that have been practiced over the long term. The neo-institutionalist historical perspective plays an increasingly important role in comparative public administration as it focuses on institutional path dependencies, legacies, and predetermined corridors of action for administrative reforms and crisis responses. National administrative cultures (cf. Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019; Painter & Peters, 2010; Peters, 2021) are of particular importance here, as they reflect deeply ingrained institutional arrangements and historically entrenched structures that significantly influence the decision-making behavior and limit the corridor for change. The vertical structure of government (centralized/decentralized; federal/unitary), the local government system, and the legal tradition (legalistic vs. public interest culture) must be taken into account here. If the assumption that institutional reactions to crises are determined by institutional path dependencies (Hall & Taylor, 1996: 941) and cultural legacies is correct, considerable variations in the crisis governance of different countries can be expected.

C. Country-Comparative Analysis of Crisis Governance

In the following sections, the institutional designs of crisis governance (dependent variable) are compared:

- firstly, by analyzing the legal bases and their local implementation, and
- secondly, by analyzing the key players in the pandemic regime, in particular the role of local authorities and their coordination in the multi-level system.

Furthermore, significant shifts and changes in intergovernmental governance over the course of the pandemic will also be analyzed.

1. Legal Basis

The initial legal situation of pandemic management is strikingly similar in that all the countries analyzed—with the exception of Sweden—had constitutional options for declaring a state of emergency and thus for enacting far-reaching emergency regulations on the part of the government. However, none of the countries made use of this option. Instead, they predominantly relied on existing secondary legislation, such as the Law on the Protection against Infection (IfSG) of 2000 in Germany, a comparable law from 2008 in Poland, and the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 in the UK. While Sweden and the United Kingdom decided not to declare a national health emergency, the governments in France, Germany and Poland resorted to inventing and introducing new legal constructs. The implementation of these new legal constructs was accompanied by expanded executive powers, such as governing by decree/ordinance, bypassing parliaments. In this context, France can be seen as one extreme pole of particularly far-reaching (health) emergency regulations, while Sweden represents the other ex-

treme pole with particularly moderate and permeable pandemic regulations. Not only were emergency laws constitutionally excluded there, but secondary law also left little scope for legitimizing the restrictions practiced in other countries (although this is not the only or most important reason for the deviant “Swedish approach”; see Kuhlmann et al. 2021b).

As a result, a health emergency law was in place in France at an early stage, securing the far-reaching executive powers that were in force from March 2020 to July 2022. The other countries responded by adopting specific COVID-19 laws of varying scope and interventional powers, some of which also amended a number of existing laws. Sweden, with its COVID-19 law, which was only passed in 2021 and provided for general restrictions such as a ban on gatherings or the closure of establishments, again represents a case of particularly cautious and sensitive regulation, whereby even the restrictions made possible by law were used extremely moderately (mainly only in connection with retirement homes and mass events, whereas there were never any formalized school closures).

From a temporal and systematic perspective, Poland is comparable to France in that a special coronavirus law (the COVID-19 statute) was also passed there relatively early (March 2020), on the basis of which the previous Infection Protection Act was amended and a “state of epidemic” was declared in mid-March 2020. However, while the Polish COVID-19 statute still provided for regular parliamentary participation in all measures to be adopted, the new legal construct of the “state of epidemic” allowed the government to act largely autonomously by decree and—again comparable to France—to impose nationwide restrictions.

Germany and the United Kingdom differ in their regulatory responses to the crisis both from Sweden’s special approach and from the centralized approach in France and Poland. It is true that secondary legislation (IfSG) was also used in Germany. However, the constitutionally enshrined administrative and executive federalism, which included the implementation of the IfSG under the responsibility of the federal states, did not allow the federal level to directly adopt nationwide restrictions, which distinguishes the legal situation in federal Germany from all the countries considered here. Nevertheless, regulatory centralization was also pushed for in Germany and a national health emergency without precedent in German history was declared in March 2020 (“epidemic emergency of national concern”), which remained valid until November 2021. Although the health emergency in Germany—in contrast to Poland, France and the UK—did not enable the executive centralization of pandemic powers, it nevertheless created the legal basis for securing the restrictions on freedom issued by state/local executives by ordinance under federal law and also for extending some executive federal powers. In addition, the various amendments to the IfSG also effectively created a special corona regulatory body, which, in turn, means that Germany has similarities with the other countries under investigation.

Table 2 summarizes the main legal bases of the pandemic regimes examined, provides an overview of the legal situation at the beginning and the end of the pandemic, and lists the respective national health emergencies.

The preference for secondary law—rather than the constitutional state of emergency regimes that are legally possible in most cases—can be explained differently in the countries under investigation. While in Poland, for example, secondary law provided the government with more leeway than a constitutional state of emergency would have allowed. In contrast, the decision not to use secondary law in Germany was primarily due to the fact that the federal level, which was inexperienced in disaster management, did not want to become the central actor in crisis management overnight, a shift that constitutional emergency law would have triggered.

Table 2: Legal Basis of Pandemic Management from a Cross-countries and Over-time Perspective

Legal Basis/ Country	France	UK/ England	Sweden	Poland	Germany
Legal basis at the beginning of the pandemic	State of Emergency (Law Nr. 55-385 1955)	Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984	Law on communicable diseases 2004	Law on the Protection against Infections 2008	Law on the Protection against Infections (IfSG) 2000
Legal basis at the end of the pandemic (special Corona regulation)	Health State of Emergency (Law Nr. 2020-290 23.3.2020)	Coronavirus Act (im März 2022 teilweise ausgelaufen)	COVID-19 Law (expired in September 2021)	COVID-19-Statut from 3/2020 onwards	Epidemic emergency of national concern since 28.3.2020, following IfSG-amendment
Health emergency applied from to....	Initially 23.3.2020 –10.7.2020, renewed 17.10.2020–31.7.2022	-	-	"State of epidemic threat" 14.-19.3. 2000; 15. 2022–30.6. 2023; "State of epidemic" 20.3. 2020–30.4. 2022.	Epidemic emergency of national concern 28.3.2020–25.11.2021.

Source: Adapted from Kuhlmann et al. 2024

The introduction of the new legal construct of a national health emergency, which was applied in Germany (3/2020–11/2021), France (3/2020–7/2022) and Poland (3/2020–6/2023) and legitimized, among other things, corresponding restrictions on freedom, shows similarities in that it often temporarily granted extended or even excessive executive powers while restricting parliamentary powers. However, this was also possible without emergency health legislation, as the British case shows. In Sweden, on the other hand, where—as in the UK—the declaration of a public health emergency was waived, the new COVID-19 Act granted certain extended powers to the national health authority in particular.

Finally, from a comparative perspective, it is noteworthy that the implementing regulations, which were issued on the basis of the national COVID-19 laws and translated them into concrete containment measures, were predominantly issued in a decentralized manner in the country sample examined. This applies both to the German federal states and local governments as the main players in corona regulation and to the Swedish local governments, which were able to adapt the centrally issued measures to local conditions. Even in the United Kingdom, there were regional COVID-19 regulations (England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) in view of the devolution-related shifts in responsibilities, although no decision-making powers were transferred to the local level in England. In France, the traditional centralist regulatory regime remained dominant; neither the regional nor the departmental or municipal level had the necessary powers to specify the national COVID-19 laws through their own subnational regulations. The same applies to Poland, where the government or its regional representatives (*voivode*) were able to decree all direct COVID-19 containment measures, which were then implemented by the respective territorial self-governments.

2. Actors and Coordination in the Multi-Level System

Role of subnational (self-)administration: Although subnational actors played an important role in the implementation of crisis management on the ground in all countries, there are significant differences in the regulatory and administrative powers of local self-government. While central government dominated the regulatory design in France, Poland, and England, in Germany it was primarily the state governments (*Länder*) and local governments that issued the corresponding ordinances. In Sweden, too, it was up to the local governments to implement the national recommendations (and later the few binding regulations), which adopted them autonomously and adapted them to the respective local circumstances. A decisive difference between France, England, and Poland on the one hand, and Germany and Sweden on the other, is that in the latter, the central or federal government had a predominantly consultative role and was only able to make recommendations on containment measures, which were not legally binding for subnational actors. In Germany, these recommendations only became legally binding through state (*Länder*) and local ordinances that were issued in all federal states. In contrast, such codification was largely dispensed with in Sweden, giving local governments and citizens a high degree of freedom of action and discretion in dealing with the crisis.

Types of crisis governance and intergovernmental relations: With regard to the two key dimensions of task allocation (centralized/decentralized) and intergovernmental relations (coordinated/separate), our analysis revealed a considerable degree of variation between the countries. In Germany and Sweden, a clearly decentralized pattern can be identified, which in this respect corresponds to the key role of local self-government in these two countries, as determined by the administrative culture. However, in Germany there was a high degree of coordination between the levels from the outset, which applies both to the relationship between local authorities and the states (*Länder*) as well as between the latter and the federal government (decentralized-coordinated type). This

was particularly evident in the unusually strong position of the so called “Federal-*Länder* Summits” (also called “peak ministerial councils”) as a coordinating body. While we can therefore speak of decentralized, coordinated crisis governance in Germany, Sweden is more of a decentralized, decoupled type of crisis governance, characterized by a de facto lack of coordination and communication mechanisms between the levels, or at least extremely weak ones (decentralized-decoupled type). With regard to Sweden, this can be attributed to the high level of local autonomy in crisis management on the one hand and the lack of a legally binding containment regime on the other.

France and England predominantly correspond to the type of centralist, decoupled crisis governance (centralized-decoupled type), as the local governments were only given a marginal role in crisis management and state actors dominated throughout, although the local governments in England did have significant formal competencies in this area. What both countries also have in common is that the lack of cross-level coordination mechanisms is one of the most important points of criticism and conflict in pandemic management. In France, the central state was accused of significantly mistrusting the local governments, leading to consultation and cooperation that occurred only selectively. In England, the conflict-ridden and mistrustful relationship between central government and local authorities is one of the basic patterns of the policy process anyway (Laffin & Diamond, 2024), and accordingly, a “centralized but fragmented system with little incentive for cooperation” dominated pandemic management (cf. Thomas, 2020).

Poland represents a fourth type of crisis governance (centralized-coordinated type), as the degree of functional and regulatory centralization was high. At the same time, however, apart from the initial phase in spring 2020, a comparatively high intensity of cross-level coordination and an enrichment of corona centralism through cooperative and consultative elements can be observed, which was particularly evident in the prominent role of the “Joint Commission of the Government and Territorial Self-Governments” as an important factor in the coordination of crisis management.

To summarize and simplify, the five countries studied can be classified as follows with regard to their crisis governance (see Fig. 1).

Change over time: Although these five countries can be ideally assigned to different variants of crisis governance, it should also be noted that there were (temporary) shifts in some cases over the course of the pandemic. In Poland, the initially clearly centralist, decoupled crisis governance, which at the beginning of the pandemic was characterized by autonomous central government rule with subnational actors largely ignored, changed towards a more cooperative approach in the multi-level system. The central government increasingly relied on local capacities, consulted local authorities, and coordinated pandemic measures more closely with local actors, drawing on relevant inter-governmental coordination structures. Thanks to effective crisis management, the Polish territorial self-governments were able to expand their scope of action in crisis

Centralized	
Disjointed	<p>Centralized-Disjointed (France, England)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Predominance of (central) state in administrative and operative crisis management ➤ Lack of intergovernmental coordination and communication
	<p>Centralized-Coordinated (Poland)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Predominance of (central) state in administrative and operative crisis management ➤ Institutionalised patterns of intergovernmental interaction
Decentralized	
Decentralized	<p>Decentralized-Disjointed (Sweden)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Crisis management mainly falls with local/subnational government ➤ Lack of coordination between levels of government
Coordinated	
Decentralized	

Source: Adapted from Kuhlmann et al. 2024

Figure 1: Institutional Design Variants of Pandemic Governance:
Task Allocation and Intergovernmental Coordination

management and gain greater acceptance from the central government as a cooperative partner.

In marked contrast to Poland, but also to England and France, there was a basic tendency towards centralization in Germany—despite the general dominance of the decentralized-coordinated approach. Germany clearly confirmed the traditionally important role of local governments in crisis management, which in comparison to other countries, occupy an extremely strong position in that they are responsible for deciding on containment measures (such as closing facilities, imposing curfews, etc.) on their own territory, ordering them, enforcing them and—in the event of non-compliance—imposing sanctions. From the outset, this gave the German local governments an almost uniquely strong position, which is not found in this form in the other countries compared. Nevertheless, during the crisis - as a reaction to the pointedly decentralized approach - striking (temporary) surges of centralization can be observed, which were reflected on the one hand in the various new versions of the IfSG with increased federal powers and finally the introduction of the federal emergency brake as the climax of the centralization dynamic. On the other hand, the dominance of the “peak ministerial councils” (see above) as non-codified core institutions of pandemic coordination reveals a form of “intergovernmental centralism” and unitarization that was previously unknown in this form in German administrative federalism.

There have also been temporary shifts in the pandemic-related control logic in England, France, and Sweden. In France, for example, there was a certain degree of municipal scope for action before the adoption of central government guidelines, and isolated local initiatives were also launched in the meantime. In addition, representatives of French local governments note a pragmatic, functioning cooperation between the levels towards the end of the pandemic, which certainly differs from the early phases. Nevertheless, the mode of centralist, decoupled crisis governance remained dominant

throughout the pandemic.

Similarly, there were no fundamental shifts in Sweden, even though the adoption of the COVID-19 Act of 2021 resulted in a more vertically coordinated control logic that restricted the scope for action by the local governments, but without even approaching the autonomy restrictions that are characteristic of France and England. For England, it can also be noted that a certain degree of coordination with the regions took place in phases of crisis escalation and that an increasing willingness on the part of central government to negotiate with the regions became apparent in the later course of the crisis. Overall, however, the centralist, decoupled control logic remained dominant in England as well, with the London-centric approach to local authorities maintained for the entire duration of the pandemic. Against this background, the selective shifts and deviations in crisis governance that occurred briefly in Sweden, England, and France appear rather minor compared to the more far-reaching underlying trends that were observed in Poland (increased coordination and cooperation) and Germany (temporary centralization and unitarization).

Formal vs. actual competencies: Finally, it is worth noting that the legally defined responsibilities of the local governments in pandemic management deviated significantly from their actual activities in some cases, partly because they went beyond what was formally permitted (Poland), and partly because the local governments were unable to make full use of the legal options available to them (England). Only in Germany and Sweden did the powers formally assigned to the local governments largely correspond to the powers they actually exercised in the context of pandemic management. With regard to these last two countries, we can therefore speak of a match of formal and actual municipal competencies in crisis management, while in the other countries there was a mismatch. On the one hand, the local activities in the Polish case clearly went beyond the competencies formally assigned to the local governments, which was also attempted in French cities, whose mayors occasionally dared to act alone in pandemic management, but without being able to have a lasting effect. In England, on the other hand, it was the other way around, as the local governments were not put in a position by central government to perform the crisis management tasks legally assigned to them.

D. Explanatory Factors: Administrative Culture and Politics

1. Context and Administrative Cultures

Historical path dependencies: A country comparison shows that the institutional designs of crisis governance were shaped to varying degrees by the respective country-specific administrative profiles and cultures. Except for Poland, which as a post-socialist country, represents a (historical-administrative-cultural) special case, the argumentation of historical institutionalism, which emphasizes the significance of institutional path dependencies and contextual conditions, is confirmed. From the point of view of the findings presented here, the impact of administrative cultural contexts is thus a key explanation for the fact that there were striking differences in the degree of decentralization/centralization on the one hand, and in the extent of coordination or decoupling between

levels of government, on the other, during crisis governance.

Decentralized administrative culture: The pointedly decentralized crisis management that is characteristic of Germany and Sweden—regardless of temporary centralization approaches—reflects the decentralized-local administrative culture typical of both countries, which generally gives subnational actors, especially the local governments, a key role in dealing with social problems and in territorial policy-making. The fact that the mode of strongly coordinated governance in the multi-level system was consistently dominant in Germany, even though the functionality of this coordination was often criticized and considered to be deficient for crisis management, also reflects the typical pattern of action for German administrative federalism. The latter aims to achieve solutions to problems only through interaction between levels, cooperation, and communication, which is usually accompanied by pronounced administrative interdependence and often mutual blockages to action (Bogumil & Kuhlmann, 2022; Oehlert & Kuhlmann, 2024).

Decoupling of the levels: Although such vertical coordination structures and a practice of increasing central government regulation of local action have also increasingly developed in Sweden over the decades (cf. Oehlert & Kuhlmann, 2024), a higher degree of decoupling of the levels is characteristic of the Swedish administrative profile. This is reflected, among other things, in the extremely high degree of autonomy of the Swedish local governments, which is based on an intergovernmental relationship characterized by trust, with broad scope for the local governments and which limits direct central government controls and intervention. Sweden's local government system, which has evolved over the course of administrative history and does not recognize a dualism of delegated state tasks and municipal self-government tasks (see Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019), also reflects the traditional decoupling of the levels. Accordingly, all tasks performed by the Swedish local governments are genuine self-governing tasks that are subject to the decision-making and control rights of the local councils, meaning that direct state instructions and interventions are excluded here. This initial condition of comparatively decoupled spheres of action of central state and local actors also had an unmistakable effect on the design of crisis governance.

Centralist administrative cultures: France, England, and Poland correspond to the type of centralist crisis governance, which also seems plausible in view of the institutional starting conditions. In France, the historically deeply rooted Jacobin tradition of the strong central state, which seeks to assert its institutional presence in the territory and is also responsible for the majority of subnational policy implementation, has undoubtedly had a massive impact and has determined the mode of crisis governance. Against the backdrop of decades of attempts to transform France into a decentralized republic, which is now even enshrined in the constitution, the enormous impact of this institutional legacy is overwhelming. Apparently, the historical path dependencies of the centralist-Napoleonic system have become so radically established in the context of the crisis that progress made towards decentralization in the meantime has been almost completely eclipsed. At the same time, the decoupling of the central state and

subnational levels in pandemic management also reflects the fact that France does not have a formalized coordination body that negotiates between the central state and the subnational authorities. In addition, the crisis brought to light old patterns of behavior that were thought to have been overcome, such as the patronizing, sometimes ignorant attitude of state authorities towards local concerns, while the “taming of Jacobinism” achieved in the course of decentralization faded into the background.

Poland as a special case: Poland represents an interesting (special) case of post-socialist administration, although typologically it can be assigned to the decentralized variant of Eastern European administrative systems (see Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2019). As has been shown, Poland has a markedly centralized crisis governance. Nevertheless, the subnational units, especially the local governments and their umbrella organizations, occupy an important position within this constellation, so that Poland corresponds to the centralized-coordinated governance type. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, it can be argued that, on the one hand, institutional legacies of “socialist centralism” became increasingly effective during the crisis—especially when promoted by authoritarian traits in government action—which partly explains the centralist mode of Polish crisis governance. On the other hand, the increasing involvement and consultation of local authorities as the pandemic progressed in Poland testifies to the role they had grown to play in the meantime and to their right to shape and participate. In this respect, the system-break after 1989 marked a change of path that contained and weakened the impact of historical and institutional legacies, although it did not completely eliminate them.

The centralist-coordinated mode of crisis governance in Poland thus represents a kind of compromise between the centralist-authoritarian legacies of the outdated regime and the new municipal freedoms that were achieved in the course of the post-socialist transformation process and that marked a clear change of path. In the Polish case, it is therefore possible to speak of a hybrid pattern in which institutional path dependencies continue to be formative, but their effectiveness is limited due to the new course that has been set in the meantime.

2. Politics, Actors, Windows of Opportunity

Crisis as a window of opportunity: While administrative cultural conditions and path dependencies are essential explanatory variables for the design of pandemic management in the countries under consideration, they are not sufficient to explain specific decisions or even deviations in governance mode between countries of the same administrative profile (e.g., between the Nordic countries, see Baldersheim & Haug, 2024). To this end, it is necessary to focus on the role of actor interests and political lines of conflict (cf. Laffin et al., 2024), which can be seen as the reason why the crisis was also used as a window of opportunity and was politicized accordingly (cf. also Bouckaert et al., 2020; Kuhlmann et al., 2021c). This is because crises represent a welcome opportunity for political actors to demonstrate leadership and effective governance, for example, and thus gain leeway in political competition or to readjust the “rules of the game” (e.g., in the di-

rection of fewer checks and balances through more centralization). Thus, major crises that occur as sudden external shocks can open windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009) for fundamental institutional changes in the multi-level system, which can lead to improvements or deterioration. However, such windows of opportunity are usually only open for a short period of time, especially at the beginning of a crisis.

Politicization of the crisis and blame shifting: It is known from relevant research that, depending on institutional contextual conditions and situational circumstances, crises are used massively for political strategies of blame shifting (Hood et al., 2016; Hinterleitner et al., 2023) and for opportunity management (cf. Kuhlmann et al., 2021c). This means that institutional responses to a crisis are not always (or predominantly) the result of evidence-based decisions and rational factual analysis, but rather occur due to the fact that the situation is strategically and consciously used for predefined preferences. Existing solutions are contingently applied to new problems, and responsibilities are shifted, attributed, or claimed depending on the situational context (blame shifting/credit claiming; see Souris et al., 2023). The crisis offers a prime opportunity to obtain support and backing for changes and upheavals that would not have been possible in normal mode without a crisis. Against this background, actor- and policy-related factors, interests, preferences, and power strategies come into play. These have proven to be factors influencing concrete decisions in crisis management in all the countries examined here - in different ways in each case. Crisis governance was politically charged to varying degrees in the five countries, with the degree of politicization in Sweden being the lowest, while it was particularly high in Poland, England, and France. The pandemic was also highly politicized in Germany, although it was easier to mitigate and diffuse heated political conflicts and to shift responsibility back and forth (blame shifting) within the structures of the federal-decentralized system, which are geared towards consensus building and conflict stratification.

Changing the institutional rules of the game: Classic examples of pandemic politicization are the specific design and timing of containment measures during the course of the crisis, which often followed political and electoral considerations. For example, there were deliberate delays in the imposition of lockdowns in France and Poland in order to allow the local and presidential elections to take place under normal circumstances as much as possible, and also to rule out possible losses of votes that could have caused a postponement of the elections (especially in Poland).

In addition, the crisis was sometimes used to change the “rules of the game”, which was all the easier the fewer veto players and checks and balances a system generally had. In France, for example, the new legal construct of a health emergency with corresponding central government decree and intervention rights was introduced relatively smoothly. This was different in the German case, as there are comparatively many veto points, and institutional interventions are therefore more difficult to manage. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the “pandemic emergency of national scope”

that was codified in Germany did not represent a genuine change to the “rules of the game” in the multi-level system, but rather reaffirmed the powerful role of the state executives and thus the existing rules of the game, even if-taking the opportunity in this respect-extended federal rights were provided for.

In Poland, the PiS party succeeded in expanding its authoritarian grip on national policymaking, for example by using the changes to Parliament’s rules of procedure made necessary by the pandemic to restrict the possibilities of parliamentary opposition after the successful presidential elections. In England, the already virulent conflicts between Labour-led local governments (e.g., Greater Manchester) and the Conservative central government in London, and between the latter and the regional governments, were exacerbated by the crisis, as top-down measures were implemented without consulting sub-national actors. In Germany, the politicization of the crisis was particularly evident in the relationship between the federal and state governments. In particular, individual state governments—especially in the context of election campaigns (state elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate in March 2021, in Saxony-Anhalt in June 2021, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in September 2021 and the federal elections in September 2021)—attempted to set their own pandemic policy priorities that (moderately) contradicted the agreed “federal line”, for example by calling for more permissive or even stricter containment regulations out of political calculation. This occasionally reinforced the-already predominant-decentralized orientation of German crisis governance, which gave rise to a well-known criticism of the federal “patchwork” (*föderaler Flickenteppich*) and then, in turn, (temporarily) promoted centralizing measures. In addition, the crisis in Germany was used by federal political actors to boost the (long-simmering) debate about an increased role for the federal government in disaster and civil protection.

In Sweden, the politicization of the crisis was the least pronounced compared to other countries, meaning that political polarization was also less pronounced. On the one hand, this is due to the generally more moderate and more balanced interventions in social life that characterized the “Swedish way” of managing the pandemic. On the other hand, the lower level of politicization can probably be explained by the fact that politicians in Sweden only played a subordinate role in pandemic management anyway, which is institutionally also due to the independent position of central government authorities/agencies (health authorities), which enjoy greater trust among the population than political decision-makers.

E. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Finally, based on the findings from the country comparison, some conclusions and possible recommendations for action for the improvement of crisis governance, especially with regard to the municipal level and coordination in the multi-level system, are put forward.

Strengthening governance capacity: A key finding that emerges from all country

studies and the country comparison is that too little attention has so far been paid to the governance capacity of public administration at both the state and municipal levels when preparing for and managing crises. Although there is a consensus in the relevant academic literature that the quality of government, the state's ability to solve problems, and governance capacity are closely linked (see Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; Christensen et al., 2016; Lodge & Wegrich, 2014), some glaring deficits have become apparent during the pandemic. This applies both to governance in the multi-level system and specifically to the role of local authorities.

With a view to future (poly)crisis situations, the governance capacity of public administration should therefore be strengthened in order to become more capable of acting, problem-solving, and implementing interventions during crises. The different dimensions of administrative governance capacity need to be addressed: coordination, regulation, implementation, analytical capacity, and resources. Crisis prevention in this context includes, in addition to the provision of resources and technical know-how, the improvement of coordination between levels and actors involved (coordinative capacity), the adoption of practical and enforceable regulations for crisis management (regulatory capacity), and the administrative ability to ensure polycrisis management and public service provision for citizens in parallel (enforcement and implementation capacity).

Finally, data management and knowledge utilization (analytical capacity) are also addressed, which have shown particular deficits during the pandemic. The need to optimize these ranges from reducing serious digitalization backlogs and data gaps (e.g., for crisis-related evaluations of measures) to solving problems in the exchange and use of existing data and eliminating department-specific "data hoarding", transparency deficits in policy advice, and evidence deficits in decision-making. In order to strengthen the analytical capacity of the administration in future crisis management, it seems necessary to take corrective action in all of these deficit areas and achieve rapid improvements.

Decentralization as a resilience-promoting institution in crisis management: Our research findings have shown that decentralized governance solutions in crisis management have proven themselves in many respects, while centralized models, in which local rights and powers of participation were ignored or taken for granted, showed clear weaknesses, acceptance problems, and, in some cases, low problem-solving capacity. Despite some difficulties, the municipal-decentralized approach has proven to be a particular strength and advantage in international comparison. This applies not only to the regional variability and adaptability of the intergovernmental coordination structures in the German federal system, which are "trained" to resolve conflicts and balance interests, a capability lamented as a considerable deficit in other countries (e.g., England). This observation also relates in particular to the local governments, which, as multifunctional, crisis-tested institutions, have made a decisive contribution to maintaining the provision of public services in parallel with local crisis management.

The local governments (Germany, Sweden) demonstrated remarkable stability and

contributed significantly to the robustness of the overall system by providing a reliable and trustworthy institutional basis even in times of high uncertainty and turbulence. Against this backdrop, a key concern must be to strengthen the capacities and ability to act of subnational and local actors so that they can better fulfill their important role in crisis management. In addition to adequate resources and funding, this also includes the expansion of analytical capacities (data availability, knowledge generation, policy advice), better coordination and consultation with higher levels, including the increased use of digital formats, as well as regulatory relief, in particular by reducing bureaucracy in enforcement implementation of practical legislation.

Important role of intergovernmental bodies – yet danger of joint decision-making traps: The country comparison has made it clear that intergovernmental bodies play an essential role in crisis management and have also proven to be beneficial in those countries that have relied to such bodies. The trend observed in some countries towards strengthening coordinative capacity (e.g., Sweden, Poland) illustrates that even in administrative systems with less pronounced interdependency structures, a particular need is recognized to manage decisions and implementation processes across levels in the event of a crisis. In contrast, the lack of such coordination mechanisms (e.g., England) has proven to be detrimental to crisis management.

For Germany—in contrast to the centrally governed countries—a strong coordinative orientation of crisis management was characteristic from the beginning, which, as explained, is related to the administrative-cultural and political-institutional starting conditions. However, our analyses have also shown that there is a considerable need for optimization in Germany with regard to governance in the multi-level system, although this does not primarily address a centralization of competencies. Instead, the aim is to optimize the structures and mechanisms of intergovernmental coordination while maintaining the advantages of decentralized flexibility, for example by strengthening the coordinating role of established federal institutions (e.g., Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance - BBK). The risk (trade off) of joint decision-making traps characteristic of institutionally interwoven settings, needs to be taken into account (and minimized) when intensifying coordination mechanisms in multilevel systems.

Use bundling and platform approaches: Furthermore, it would be advisable to involve and pool the expertise of technical experts at the enforcement level to a greater extent. In addition, intergovernmental bodies should strive for a clearer separation of operational specialist tasks and strategic crisis decisions, which should prove functional in Germany, for example, for federal-state coordination. Finally, it should also be examined to what extent a functional reallocation of crisis-related (analytical, coordinative, regulatory) tasks in the multi-level system according to the model of platform approaches (“government as a platform”), in German administrative federalism—with greater use of digitalization potential—could be useful and promote resilience.

Promote pragmatic administrative action: The discrepancy between what is legally

permissible and what is factually necessary or politically expected, which is sometimes typical of crisis situations, presents administrative actors with a considerable dilemma. Particularly in administrative cultural contexts with a strong legalistic character, such as the German or French, there are hardly any incentives for pragmatic and agile administrative action, at least in “normal mode”, which is particularly in demand in emergency situations. This conflict has led to considerable irritation and dissatisfaction at the enforcement level, as the German example in particular has shown.

Against this backdrop, it would be advisable to adapt procedural regulations for the guidance of all parties involved in crisis situations so that pragmatic administrative action can be promoted, and a problem-solving approach can be taken in response to acute emergencies. This should also be accompanied by an improvement in the general level of knowledge about disaster management among managers in public administrations, in order to better dovetail professional task fulfillment and crisis management. Well-functioning personal contacts and networks between the actors involved have a beneficial effect and can promote pragmatic administrative action (“knowing people in a crisis”; cf. Kuhlmann et al., 2023: 120). In the longer term, a change in organizational culture towards a culture of learning, instead of a culture of safeguarding and justification also appears necessary, which also requires corresponding adjustments in the areas of training, recruitment, and personnel development.

Overcoming silo thinking: A typical deficit in crisis management is the dominance of traditional silo thinking in public administration instead of overall management across tasks. Furthermore, as the pandemic was initially only treated as a health crisis in the narrower sense in all countries studied (except Sweden) and the social, economic, and political consequences of the crisis measures were ignored, the focus was primarily on the health administration and the public health service, even though they lack the expertise to coordinate systemic crises.

Better regulation: The classic approach of dealing with the crisis primarily through bureaucratic or legal instruments (e.g., by means of containment ordinances or general decrees) quickly reached its limits in terms of content, administration, and communication, of which the strongly legalistic systems (Germany, France) provide illustrative examples. The various, rapidly changing “corona hygiene regimes”, which were mainly introduced by state and local administrations under great time pressure, proved to be overly complex, impractical, and not well thought out in terms of their concrete social impact on various social groups, both from the point of view of administrative enforcement and from that of the addressees of the regulations. Future crisis management should therefore aim for more enforceable and practicable regulations, less regulatory density, complexity and volatility, more local scope for action and discretion and a stronger focus on the effectiveness of regulation, which also includes prompt monitoring of (intended and unintended) effects and, if necessary, corrections.

Upgrade communication between levels: Another weakness in crisis management

that became apparent in several countries was the lack of communication between local and state levels. In Germany, this applies not only to the relationship between the federal government and the federal states, as described above, but also to the relationship between the federal states and local authorities. The latter learned of many decisions, some of them far-reaching, not through official channels but from press conferences and the media. If at all, the local governments were not involved in a timely manner in decisions on measures that directly affected them and which, in some cases, had to be implemented by them in the shortest possible time. For example, the local governments were ordered to take various containment measures without having the corresponding ordinances in place to ensure that they could act in a legally secure manner.

Against this backdrop, an important conclusion from the crisis experience is to review the communication channels between relevant higher-level authorities and local governments, and to generally increase the involvement of local governments in crisis-related decisions at higher levels.

Develop polycrisis governance: The intertwining of the pandemic with other parallel crisis phenomena or with fatal consequences of measures that served to overcome previous crises (e.g., the global financial crisis of 2008/2009), which can be observed in all countries, has considerably increased the pressure to act and solve problems in the sub-national area. Acute crises, such as the corona pandemic, the refugee crisis, or, most recently, the consequences of the war in Ukraine, interact with permanent or creeping crises of different types and causes, such as climate change, the crisis of confidence in state institutions or the energy crisis (see Pattyn et al., 2021; Zaki et al., 2022; Wayenbergh, et al., 2022).

The management of these overlapping and mutually influencing multiple crises is also embedded in a highly dynamic transformative context (demographic change, digital transformation), which influences crisis management. In addition, unintended (negative) effects of crisis management strategies from earlier phases (e.g. privatization as a reaction to financial crises; lack of evidence-based and impact monitoring of crisis measures) are themselves important as (partial) causes of institutional overload/failure in subsequent crises (e.g., lack of nursing staff, loss of trust in the state and politics, social polarization).

Against this backdrop, it is becoming increasingly necessary to move away from conventional singular crisis responses, which focus on sectoral and spatially limited crisis phenomena in specific time phases, towards integrated polycrisis governance, without allowing the crisis mode itself to become a permanent state. However, the aim is to provide institutional solutions, control mechanisms and forms of organization to enable state and municipal actors to react flexibly and agilely to different types of crises and to the particular problems of polycrises.

Exit crisis mode; avoid fatal remedies: At the same time, polycrisis governance sys-

tems must be designed to be particularly sensitive and responsive when it comes to exiting crisis mode, which should generally be the goal. They should therefore include effective precautions and institutional levers to enable a flexible and low-threshold transition from crisis mode back to normal mode. It is also recommended that interventions in polycrisis contexts be continuously and data-based reviewed for their necessity and effectiveness in order to avoid them being applied for longer or more massively than necessary, or even being “worse” in their overall effect than non-intervention would have been (so-called fatal remedies), which then consequently drives the polycrisis cascade further. The polycrisis perspective also makes it necessary to “think together” different crisis phenomena in terms of their institutional implications (governance capacity). In Germany, for example, lessons can be learned from the administrative handling of extreme weather events, e.g., the now well-documented flood disaster in the Ahr Valley in July 2021 (cf. Gnielinski, 2023), which may be transferable to other crisis responses and are generally relevant to the concept of polycrisis governance.

Multifunctional crisis management: If mastering crises actually becomes a permanent municipal task (see section A), then established instruments, responsibilities, routines, and resources must be put to the test. At the municipal level, the focus should be on more integrated, multifunctional approaches that can be used and activated flexibly in different crisis constellations, but which also include binding provisions for the necessary “exit” from crisis mode. It is obvious that the local governments, as politically and democratically directly legitimized, multifunctionally active, and territorially anchored institutions, represent a particularly suitable basis for this in view of their extensive experience in local crisis and transformation management and should therefore be strengthened.

Eliminating the evaluation gap: Independent scientific evaluations of pandemic policy and crisis management are now available in many countries, for example, Sweden (see Ludvigsson, 2023), the United Kingdom (see Barr & Norris, 2023), and Denmark (see Folketinget, 2021), which were often also initiated by parliaments or parliamentary committees of inquiry. In June 2022, the report of an expert committee pursuant to Section 5 (9) IfSG was also presented in Germany, in which the legal basis and measures of the pandemic policy were evaluated (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022). However, this evaluation was commissioned directly by the responsible Federal Ministry of Health, and it does not contain any concrete statements on the effects of the various pandemic measures and governance arrangements. According to the evaluation commission, the rather moderate results of the report are not least due to the fact that the experts were involved too late, could not rely on sufficient and stringent accompanying data collection, as this did not take place during the pandemic, and that the evaluation period was too short. It was therefore hardly possible to evaluate individual measures or packages of measures (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022: 11).

In addition, no independent scientific evaluation of pandemic management has taken place in Germany to date, even in the majority of federal states. Yet a solid evidence

base is essential in order to make future crisis management more functional and effective, and to prevent the aforementioned polycrisis cascade from being “fueled” even further by crisis management measures proving to be fatal remedies that lay the foundation for the next crisis in the worst case. Only through systematic evaluations of findings from previous crisis management strategies and independent scientific (interdisciplinary and academically pluralistic) evaluations can the necessary information basis for more data- and evidence-based crisis governance be created.

Promote the use of knowledge: However, the availability of information, data, and evidence is not the same as their use for policy decisions, as information and power logic can potentially conflict with each other. In addition, scientific evidence and databases are generally not “uncontroversial” but are often ambiguous, provisional and volatile, especially in novel crises. Evaluation of crisis governance therefore appears all the more urgent, whereby effectiveness data should not only be provided ex-post, but also during the process, permanently and taking into account unintended (negative) effects. In addition, more incentives must be set in politics and administration, and precautions taken to ensure that data and knowledge are actually incorporated into decisions and not sidelined or ignored for political reasons.

Independent scientific expertise: In order to achieve this, various institutional options-known from administrative reform research-are available. On the one hand, it would be conceivable to separate the area of scientific departmental research and expertise more clearly from strategic policy operations through stronger organizational decoupling, for which agency models or other variants of organizational outsourcing could be considered. On the other hand, it is also a matter of reviewing and rethinking the decision-making and communication, management and coordination structures in the interaction between departmental research/expertise on the one hand and political decision-makers on the other. The aim should be to create more transparency and traceability regarding which knowledge and which data on crisis-relevant issues are generated in which way and via which paths and channels it is fed into decision-making processes or kept out of them. In order to better ensure political accountability in crisis situations and reduce blame-shifting options, structural and process changes in the relationship between departmental research/scientific expertise and “political operations” seem appropriate. As a result, it should become clearer which knowledge and evidence base underlies concrete political decisions or for which (possibly quite legitimate) reasons certain decisions are made according to other criteria (and according to which). Creating more transparency and traceability in the interaction between knowledge and decision-making or between science/advice and politics is a crucial lesson from corona management and a fundamental prerequisite for democratically responsible, knowledge-based crisis action.

Research desiderata and outlook: There is a need for further research on crisis governance from an international comparative perspective. How effective are different crisis governance solutions? To what extent, and under what specific conditions, can vari-

ous solutions be transferred from one administrative context to another and where are the limits? Furthermore, the aspect of polycrisis governance should be examined more systematically in order to shed light on the influence of specific crisis sequences and nested crises, including the follow-up effects of crisis management measures (second round effects), on governance arrangements and their effectiveness.

From a comparative perspective, the inclusion of a broader set of explanatory variables would appear appropriate by, among other things, more systematically taking into account the respective national and local actor constellations, policy preferences, discourse coalitions, and national/local contingencies (e.g. politically salient events such as elections etc.). It should be clarified in what way specific combinations of historical-institutional, actor-, policy-related, and external variables influence crisis governance and its outcome. Ideally, this should be tested with a larger sample of countries in order to uncover significant causal relationships.

Notes

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