

From Transformative Hope to Political Reality. A Conceptual Analysis of Post-Pandemic Government Agendas in Europe



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ABSTRACT

It is easy to discern an inherently optimistic outlook in much of the COVID-19 literature. The pandemic perhaps represents an opportunity to redesign the existing parameters of society or even initiate new forms of the social contract. This article seeks to examine to what extent, and in which ways, post-pandemic official political agenda-setting realistically reflects these hopes. Through a comprehensive conceptual framework consisting of ethical, pragmatic, contractual and temporal sets of notions, the article analyses post-pandemic governmental programmes and prime ministers' speeches in six European countries, paying attention to general descriptions of the world, issues of security in the context of multiculturalism, as well as work and resilience. The article's main argument contends that similarities prevail across the countries, implying a functionally shared European polity informed by a general crisis modus, but these similarities do not contain any profound transformative elements with regard to future policies or societal developments.

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In the early stream of COVID-19 literature, a strong optimistic or even idealistic undercurrent is clearly detectable. The diagnoses themselves tend to be dismal: the pandemic accentuated inequalities across societies and in terms of gender, generation, ethnicity, class, mental health and access to global commons; and it demonstrated how deep polarisation and hardnosed populism can be detrimental for restrictive action under crisis conditions. But beyond these negative ramifications associated with the pandemic, many scholars noted, the successes of disease management also revealed how democratic state institutions and an active public sphere more generally can function efficiently when so required by an emergency; bringing this lesson forward would be important for mitigating similar future crises. Many commentators also emphasised the senses of mutual trust and solidarity that surfaced as the virus began spreading and even contemplated whether it was possible to turn the sense of ‘all of us being in this together’ into a global ethical maxim for the long term.¹

In this vein, Escobar (2022) dreams of the ‘recommunalization of social life’ and ‘the depatriarchalization, de-racialization and decolonization of social relations’ once the virus has ebbed. Susan Neiman sees the coronavirus as an ultimate opportunity that could possibly overcome ‘the Tyranny of Self-Interest’ (Neiman 2020), whereas Allen (2022, 99) talks of the possibilities ‘to rethink the pursuit of happiness’. In systematic efforts to draft possible scenarios for the post-pandemic world, transformative views are also common. Bringel (2022, 277) writes of three possible avenues for the future: the recovery of an aggressive mode of the capitalist system; adaptation to a greener form of capitalism and the ‘transition to a new model which implies a radical change in the ecological, social and economic matrix’ of society. The subtitle of the report, *A New Era for Europe*, produced by a high-level expert group commissioned by the European Commission, is also telling: *How the European Union can make the most of its pandemic recovery, pursue sustainable growth and promote global stability* (2022). (Cf. the notion of transformative resilience in Pankakoski, this issue.)

In the ensuing pages, we seek to assess to what degree and in which ways this transformative optimism regarding post-COVID societal development possibly materialises in current national official politics across the European continent. Is it possible to identify any distinct patterns by way of which real-life political agendas reflect the hopes of building a new kind of society under circumstances infused by the sensibilities of multiple crises? Do leading politicians currently emphasise some sort of novelty or new beginnings for their societies? Ultimately, did the pandemic somehow change the parameters of a desirable future?

Empirically, we focus on ‘post-pandemic’ prime ministers’ inaugural speeches in six EU countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Italy and Sweden, supplemented with the respective formal coalition agreements or government programmes when available. The speeches display a sense of personal commitment and are manifestly comparable across all the countries, whereas the agreements/programmes tend to be formal in their language, whilst their format varies considerably, if they

¹ This crisis-as-a-possibility logic is, of course, by no means new. Beck (2015), for example, argues, in reference to Hurricane Katrina, that through traumatic experiences such as environmental crises, new normative or emancipatory horizons can emerge and replace the existing societal orders.

were ever even written. Said countries organised national elections between June 2022 and April 2023, which means that the analysed documents were drafted in conjunction with coalition negotiations held after the first three waves of the coronavirus and, importantly, the onset of the Ukraine war. We have not conducted any systematic historical comparisons with respect to earlier governmental agendas in these countries, but to understand the country-specific differences of argumentation, we did review the equivalent older documents from the mid-2010s onwards. Our analysis is qualitative and country-comparative, grounded in the multidimensional *conceptual framework* that we introduce below. Employing and 'testing' this framework is a further objective of the article: we have yet to encounter any comparable comprehensive efforts to capture the most important dimensions of pandemic recovery in scholarly literature.

The select governments represent centre-right coalitions, apart from Denmark, where the social-democrats now share executive power with two liberal parties from the centre right (*Venstre* and *Moderatene*), continuing to hold the post of prime minister (see Appendix). We will naturally bear in mind the political inclinations of the governing coalitions and their prime ministers in our interpretation of the materials, recognising that these parties usually qualify as preservationist rather than transformationist. It is noteworthy that the recent gains of right-wing parties in our country sample may be interpreted as symptomatic of people's conservative security concerns under conditions of crisis-driven uncertainty (cf. [Akkerman 2012](#)) – a viewpoint we will return to following the sections on the conceptual and methodological settings of the article.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Let us begin with a bold assumption. Much of the discussion on the management of recent crises in Europe, including the pandemic and the subsequent hopes of recovery from them, has revolved around four sets of mutually interrelated concepts. We refer to these four attributes as *ethical*, *pragmatic*, *contractual* and *temporal*. Viewed together, they form a heuristic framework with the help of which we can attempt to make sense of the kinds of empirical materials analysed here and, in the process, even illustrate Europe's current political constellation in more broad terms. We thus believe that, to the extent we can identify specific crisis sensibilities and recovery-related determination in government agendas, these derive inspiration from the four conceptual dimensions and their combinations in one way or the other. The framework is comprehensive and complex – not unlike the European politics of recent years – and within the limited space here, we cannot discuss its philosophical underpinnings with any considerable degree of sophistication.

The *ethical* dimension includes such normative ideals as *justice*, *equality*, *solidarity*, *altruism*, and even *sacrifice*; it might also be possible to include here different forms of *freedom*. The efforts to cope with the pandemic ascribed new nuances to these ideals. Take solidarity, for example. Those workers who suffered particularly gravely during the pandemic, such as performing artists or nurses, have appealed to general societal solidarity to seek reasonable compensatory policy measures for them ([Kinsella et al. 2023](#); [Torssonen](#), this issue). Inter-state or cross-border solidarity within the European Union was also a significant question during the heyday of the virus (e.g. [Papageorgiou and Immonen 2023](#)), and the absence

of global solidarity with respect to such challenges as international vaccine delivery was much discussed during the various COVID-19 waves (cf. [Sinkkonen and Ruokamo 2022](#)). In the analysed documents, these ethical principles can be employed, a priori, in an exclusive manner, within the national community only, or inclusively, that is, with an international disposition.

The *pragmatic* patterns of argumentation cover such ideas as *security*, *efficiency*, *preparedness* and, above all, *resilience*. All these notions relate, in one way or another, to society's overall capacity to cope with crises and manage them in a reasonable manner. In the early stages of the pandemic, for example, economic efficiency and human security often seemed to act as opposing logics in many politicians' minds ([Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021](#)). Themes such as psychological or educational resilience, as well as corporate and supply chain resilience, have frequently been analysed in COVID-19 literature. The pandemic also provided additional weight to the European Union's strong resilience-boosting agenda of recent years, for example, as a principle informing economic and trade policies ([Jacobs et al. 2023](#)). It is noteworthy that these values have regularly been attached to *national* crisis management capacity or even the identity of the state in question, perhaps more often than the values listed under the other three dimensions (cf. [Immonen et al. 2024](#)).

The *contractual* dimension includes references to societal values such as the willingness to institute various kinds of new *social contracts* or seek *consensus*, *compromise* and *reconciliation* across society's cleavages – cleavages that crises generally deepen. Pavolini et al. (2022), for example, speak of 'Reconciliation policies in Covid times' in Italy and Spain, arguing that the engagement of trade unions significantly facilitated crisis management in both countries. In essence, however, the question is about fostering elements of *trust* towards co-citizens, civil society and the political system itself; trust is a mutual relationship rather than an ethical principle. Schraff (2021; cf. [Zahariadis et al. 2023](#)), for example, argues that general trust towards political institutions clearly increased during the early stages of the coronavirus as people seemingly tended to rally around the flag.

The *temporal* dimension – composed of notions such as *future*, *novelty*, *short- and long-termism*, *legacy*, *normality* and temporally defined *sustainability* – necessarily underlies all the other dimensions. In discourses on the post-pandemic societal constellation (a temporal notion), the inherent hope is that the potential positive after-effects of the crisis, such as increased sense of justice and resilience, become *permanent* attributes of society. The desired 'return to normality' figured as one of the key slogans during the early pandemic waves, but for many, this new normality ought to significantly differ from the parameters of the old; Adam and Gorišek (2022), among others, emphasise how we should find 'an alternative to the simplified return to pre-pandemic "normality"' in a sustained manner in the health sector.

It is noteworthy that the temporal implications of crisis situations have generated a lively scholarly debate in recent years. Jordheim and Wigen (2018) even emphasise that the idea of 'crisis' has assumed such a significant position on the Western mental map that it now habitually replaces the inherently temporal 'progress' as the central organising principle of social reality; unlike progress, crisis implies 'presentism and a world that is fundamentally out of sync' (p. 426). Crisis materialises in the here and now; it synchronises the world but does not create a world that is synchronised

(cf. in the context of COVID-19, [Lundström 2022](#)). As we will see, the government programmes do not necessarily reflect this type of presentism.

It is evident that these four sets of concepts are often overlapping and intertwined, while several of them can feature in political argumentation simultaneously. It is also obvious that the dimensions can be mutually conflictual and be *politicised* and *depoliticised* in many ways. There may be an inherent conflict between, say, pragmatic efficiency and reasonable justice in the world – but the conflict can presumably be resolved by way of a new societal contract that political leadership could propose.

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE: READING THE DOCUMENT MATERIAL

As mentioned at the outset, we analyse the post-pandemic government agendas, that is, prime ministers' inaugural speeches and available coalition agreements, in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Italy and Sweden. We believe that these documents are the most authoritative expressions of policy preferences within these coalitions – and thus reflect majoritarian attitudes in society. In general, these types of programmes and declarations show what the coalition wishes to achieve, differentiate the coalition from the opposition and constrain the coalition parties' behaviour, binding them together (e.g. [Müller and Strøm 2008, 170](#)). The country differences with respect to government agendas are remarkable. In Denmark, Estonia and Finland, coalition parties officially publish documents that are literally called 'coalition agreements' or 'governmental programmes'; the documents are public and extensively reported in the media. In Sweden, the cabinet parties do not present an official 'coalition agreement', but negotiate a document that fulfils the same function. In France and Italy, the governments do not typically publish any public document of their policies, but the prime ministers do set the tone of the new government in their substantial inaugural speeches for the parliament.²

By utilising a type of concept-driven content analysis (cf. [Selvi 2019](#)), we search for those formulations in the documents that make use of the four value dimensions discussed above. Importantly, these formulations come forth in the context of several broad key themes that, in our view, frame the essence of the governments' *recovery agenda* – and organise the presentation below. Establishing what these themes ultimately ought to be proved the most difficult task of our research endeavour. In the absence of any evident 'advanced' method, we simply had to rely on systematic cross-reading, with the aim of thematic categorisation, of all the documents (the original versions in parallel with the English-language translations). We ended up distinguishing between three key themes: the general crisis constellation; security in the context of multiculturalism; and work, resilience and long-termism. In a nutshell, then, the article demonstrates in which concrete ways the different value dimensions inform government policy guidelines concerning these key themes and what the mutual relationship between said values is.

Several (potential) problems in our undertaking are worth noting. First, the types of political declarations that we scrutinise are filled with grandiose expressions that are hardly meant to materialise in the form of concrete policy. Such formulations

² On country-specific practises, see Klüver & Bäck (2019, 2024–2026).

are simply meant to impress the parties' own supporters – but this is nonetheless important (cf. [Johanson et al. 2017](#)). Second, different national traditions determine, to an extent, the nature of argumentation, including the rhetorical twists, and these differences may complicate the comparisons. There are countries in which bold rhetoric self-evidently belongs to political culture (France, Italy) and others with more mundane traditions of argumentation (Sweden, Finland). We do possess specific country expertise of the analysed countries, but a systematic scrutiny of the historical continuities and the role of rhetorical traditions in each state would go well beyond the scope of this article.

Third, it was indeed possible to identify strong efforts to advance specific value settings included in our framework, but it was difficult to determine to what extent the pandemic may or may not affect these formulations. The pandemic factor is in most instances inseparable from the other pending crises, primarily the war in Ukraine; explicit references to the COVID-19 pandemic are in fact surprisingly rare in the documentation. This multifaceted general crisis mode is, as we will see, a truly decisive factor in the analysed programmes.

Fourth, prime ministerial declarations and government programmes try to envision the desirable development of society as the government sees it, but these documents surely also omit crucial standpoints for the sake of political compromise or because mentioning them might be counterproductive for the coalition's ability to promote some other objectives. We believe, however, that the policy objectives that are crucial for each governing party are indeed spelled out in the documents, which thus underscores the credibility of our analysis (see [Eichorst 2014](#); [Klüver & Bäck 2019](#)).

ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT DECLARATIONS

With the four value dimensions in mind, this section presents and contextualises some of the most telling formulations that we identified in the documentation. We begin with the general accounts of the state of affairs in each country and the world. The next section is devoted to issues of security and multiculturalism. The third sub-section analyses the ways in which work, innovations and resilience are believed to contribute to the achievement of a new or better world in the foreseeable future.

THE STATE OF AFFAIRS: SOCIETAL COHESION AND SOLIDARITY AS COUNTERWEIGHTS TO CRISES

The depictions of the state of the world under which each new government was about to begin implementing its policy agenda closely resemble each other. It appears almost a truism in the declarations that the situation is, in the words of Italy's Prime Minister Meloni ([2022](#)), 'more difficult than at any time since the Second World War'. This calls for an unprecedented degree of compromise and cohesion in society – a conclusion that, in fact, all the prime ministers affirm in one way or the other. The *contractual dimension*, frequently coupled with *ethical* considerations, is thus omnipresent in the descriptions of the world, arguably more than is usual under 'normal' societal conditions. This also regularly involves a *national* dimension, pleas for a specific national form of unity or solidarity.

'An age of crisis' is thus the dominant storyline, a multiple crisis framework. The Danish government's declaration from December 2022 sets the stage in a straightforward manner: 'The times are serious for our continent and for Denmark', the preamble signed by the three coalition party leaders begins; this means that 'We will therefore be tested by our sense of community spirit (*sammenholdt*)'. The challenge for the future is thus to build a stronger fundament for society – a fundament that would guarantee ever larger freedom for people and epitomise the best elements of true Danishness. Perhaps this also reflects the fact that Denmark has a tradition of minority governments, whereas the new coalition will now have to bridge the gap between the left and the right. The preamble continues:

And we choose by ourselves.

Do we build an even stronger foundation for our society? Create new opportunities? Guarantee more freedom for the individual? And give direction to the *zeitgeist*?

Or do we try to make it all fit together – only just – and somehow try to get by?

We can surely do the latter.

It's just not very ambitious. Or especially Danish. ([Danish Government 2023](#), 4)

In Sweden, the current post-pandemic coalition is a minority government led by the moderate right-wing (or 'liberalkonservativ') *Moderaterna* under the premiership of Ulf Kristersson, supported in parliament by the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats, the priorities of which are clearly visible in the government's agenda – controversially in the view of many commentators. This possibly determines, to an extent, Kristersson's choice of words in his inaugural speech of October 2022, as he emphasised the idea of a united national community within which value pluralism and willingness to cooperate prevail, much in the same way as in the Danish case above. In theory, one could interpret this inherently de-politicising emphasis on consensus and cohesion in light of the tradition of consensus democracy, an epithet regularly attached to the Nordic countries, but the French and Italian governments proved in fact equally outspoken in this respect (cf. [Götz & Marklund 2015](#)).

I hope that we as parties – and as citizens – are willing to support one another again. Not because we share the same beliefs about everything, because we don't. Let us honour Swedish democracy by debating openly and doing what our friends in Ukraine currently cannot. But at the same time let us see the opportunities to cooperate.

I will now form a government for the whole of Sweden and for everyone who lives here. A government based on strong values, which therefore has no difficulty respecting the values of others.

([Kristersson 2022](#))

Particularly in the case of Estonia, it is the war in Ukraine rather than the pandemic or climate emergency that dominates the governmental perception of the world. Ms. Kaja Kallas, the leader of the liberal right *Reformierakond*, was given a renewed mandate as Prime Minister after the elections of March 2023, but the parties in her coalition changed. Dark tones dominate her inaugural speech before the parliament *Riigikogu*, with a great number of references to the tragedy in Ukraine; that war seems to determine almost everything. The past had been considerably less dark: the programme of Kallas' 2019 government had still supported 'good

neighbourly relations throughout the region, including with Russia'. Now she starts off by emphasising how the coalition programme was a necessary *compromise* under conditions of war:

This treaty is certainly not the view of any of the coalition partners, it does not mirror any of us. It is a compromise, a result of our search for common denominators. In fact, it is possible to say that the compromise has the face of war. [...] The war has changed everything – our economy, the livelihoods of our people, energy prices and supply etc. etc. But the war has also changed the challenges we are confronted with and the ways in which we find solutions to them. (Kallas 2023)

Kallas (2023) also later notes that the war will be costly and investing in defence requires a significant change in the state's budget priorities – 'there is no alternative' is the blunt assessment. This, however, 'won't be easy, it means sacrifices for all of us, and I have to ask all Estonian people for patience and understanding.' Here, in other words, the contractual dimension also involves an explicit ethical element in an intertwined manner. In the context of this current war, these types of explicit calls for *individual* sacrifices may still appear unusual, whereas in discourses on climate change, they have traditionally been essential, for example, by way of calls for downshifting in people's personal life (e.g. Kelleher 2015).

From a critical perspective, one can ask to what extent this poly crisis mode ought to be seen *not* merely as a temporary operating environment but rather as a calculated, strategic outcome fostered by institutional incentives (Truchlewski et al. 2021). A widespread sense of crisis has often proved to increase support for public office holders and their policy agendas (Boin et al. 2009; Rauh 2022, 3). Moreover, the logic of urgency and necessity can generate timetables that enable powerful actors to propose policies to which the powerless can only react, rapid action instead of real choices between normative options (Kreuder-Sonnen 2018, 98, 107; Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2022, 955). We believe that whatever the strength of these arguments, they are mitigated by the (surely rhetorical but also genuinely intended) calls for consensus and cooperation that all the analysed governments emphasised; there is indeed a shared awareness that overly deep cleavages, coupled with serious crises, can be harmful for overall social development.

It is noteworthy that in these governments' mindset, cohesion and cooperation typically also encompass the European Union and even the institutions of global governance. The EU and its crisis management efforts gain unanimous support across the analysed declarations, and collaboration between the EU countries is seen as crucial for paving the way for recovery; a shared European polity does exist. To counter those who see her merely as a Eurosceptic populist politician, Meloni (2022) emphasises her European credentials and notes that Italy in its EU policies wants to foster 'integration towards more efficient responses to crises and external threats and towards an approach that is closer to citizens and businesses'.

More often than not, the motivation for these European views arises from traditional security concerns aggravated by the war. The leaders thus emphasise shared determination in the field of security or even Europe's strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the other major actors of the world. Prime Minister Borne (2022) of France merges the French and European views in this respect: 'The war in Ukraine reminded us that we have to stand together to make our voices heard. The migratory crises have shown

us the need for European solidarity and the need to always better protect our borders. The European Union protects us and projects us into the future. A stronger Europe is a stronger France’.

In a similar vein, Denmark’s governmental programme strongly appreciates Ukraine’s war efforts as ‘Europe’s fight for freedom’, noting that ‘we must stand together with our allies in the fight for the values that we have fought for generations’ (Danish Government 2023). But this situation, this profound change of the world, also opens global windows of opportunity for a country like Denmark in various fields of economic exchange, including the green and digital transitions advanced by the EU. The programme strongly emphasises these new opportunities – and the spirit of work that their fulfilment necessarily requires, almost in an ethical manner:

The international world order is changing – geopolitically, economically and militarily. It requires closer cooperation and an understanding that conditions such as trade, climate, migration, technology, research and development are now largely related to security policy. It requires responsiveness and commitment globally. And that requires Denmark to strengthen our security and continuously maintain our work in order to make an international impression.³

SECURITY AND MULTICULTURAL CHALLENGES: DEMANDS FOR NEW SOCIAL CONTRACTS

‘Pragmatic’ security concerns do not only pertain to the international level in the government agendas but surface in a range of different domestic policy prescriptions. Above all, questions of immigration and multiculturalism, as well as crime ostensibly related to these issues, feature highly in all six country cases. This is unsurprising given the dominance of right-wing parties in these governments: issues of physical and military security within the national boundaries have traditionally played a central role for these parties, coupled with a tendency to advance citizenship legislation grounded on cultural and ethnic values rather than democratic or legal norms (Akkerman 2012, 516). It is conceivable that under the current crisis mode, these inclinations will only grow stronger. ‘Security’ would then be increasingly defined in an exclusive manner, primarily pertaining to one’s own national orbit. However, this raises an important question: to what extent do these articulations of security concerns epitomise these parties’ ideas of *responsiveness* towards the own voters, rather than display general *responsibility* in terms of setting future societal objectives with systemic constraints in mind (e.g. Bardi et al. 2014)?

Be that as it may, it is evident that security concerns now gain more attention in policy agendas than a decade ago. In her declaration, Prime Minister Meloni of Italy – for many, representative of a typical populist far-right leader – clearly seems to believe that security is *the* primary good the citizens of her country now long for – and that had been, in her view, in short supply during the preceding governments:

³ Denmark’s international duties in the upcoming years may partly explain this emphasis: the country will take over the presidency of the EU for 6 months in 2025, and serve on the UN Security Council in 2025–2026.

Italians are feeling the unbearable weight of unsafe cities, where there is no immediate protection and the absence of the State is tangible. [...] We want to make security a distinctive feature of this Government, alongside our public security forces, whom I wish to thank here today for the self-sacrifice with which they carry out their work, in often impossible conditions and with a State that has sometimes given the impression of being more supportive of those who undermine our security rather than those who risk their lives to guarantee it! (Meloni 2022)

Sweden has experienced an unprecedented wave of violent crime over the past few years – a wave that undoubtedly relates to the failures of the country’s integration policies, traditionally based on a highly liberal and welcoming ethos. Sweden’s previous social democratic government already strongly emphasised the need to cope with the increasing levels of criminal violence, but in the vernacular of the current right-wing coalition, the issue seems predominant. By employing a logic of securitisation along the contractual dimension, Prime Minister Kristersson (2022) sees a serious danger to the existing social order: ‘No other country in Europe has had the same trend of violence as Sweden. Such crime is a threat to the system. It damages the confidence and trust on which Swedish society is built, and is a greater threat to the social contract than any previously experienced by any Swedish politician working today’.

Kristersson’s reference to the importance of a body-politic type of social contract is not the only one in the analysed documentation. It is in fact fascinating to see how clearly it is believed that the primary requirement of societal security is a functioning social contract between different strata of society, though this understanding is not always explicated; immigrants also need to obey the rules of said contract in order to become part of it. Virtually all declarations invoke direct or indirect references to norms, rights and duties that must be respected in society. In exchange for the benefits of the welfare system, immigrants are expected to *respect* the fundamental values of society and somehow contribute to its development. Denmark’s version is exemplary in this respect:

We want an active and well-functioning effort to integrate immigrants and refugees into the labour market. An effort based on right and duty. We must meet all people with expectations to contribute and participate in society. Everyone must respect our fundamental values of freedom, democracy and gender equality. (Danish Government 2023, 44)

There are also other types of examples of how security concerns around immigration can be (rhetorically) attached to society’s ethical and political norms. In France, the values of liberty, equality and fraternity are still held to shape the Republic in a fundamental manner. Prime Minister Borne (2022) also emphasises these values on a fairly personal level, and in invoking them strongly calls for compromise across the current deep divisions in society: ‘Building together does not mean giving up one’s identity. Mine, as you know, has as its unalterable foundation in the values of our Republic: liberty, equality, fraternity, and secularism’. The reference to secularism, *fraternité*, is particularly noteworthy here. It is clearly directed against radical Islam, for many representing the most serious security concern in the country. The passage continues as a distinctly securitising speech act, emphasising that no *new* social contract needs to emerge, but the old one ought to be preserved:

‘Secularism is a pillar of our republican pact. Against it, separatism and Islamism are mortal dangers. They attack our republican unity. They are the breeding ground for radicalisation and terrorism. My government will continue to fight it with all its might’.

Perhaps Borne seeks to demonstrate that it is not only the populist *Rassemblement National* that is willing to act decisively with respect to the nation’s alleged problems of migration. This is, indeed, a matter of responsiveness rather than responsibility, or an example of the efforts with which the ‘mainstream’ parties seek to counteract the growing support of the populist right-wing within the polity (e.g. [Green-Pedersen & Otjes 2019](#)).

WORK, RESILIENCE AND LONG-TERMISM

In addition to various types of security concerns, the *pragmatic dimension* is, unsurprisingly, also otherwise strongly present in the declarations. It primarily materialises by way of calls for investment in work, education and the environment, as well as in society’s overall resilience. Moreover, as previously indicated, the (European) green and digital transitions figure in all agendas in a highly positive light; ‘energy transition and clean technologies offer opportunities to create jobs, exports, economic growth and prosperity’, reasons the Finnish programme (p. 7). Work, in particular, is commonly seen as *the* key to future success and perhaps even recovery; the ultimate values of high employment and economic prosperity go hand in hand. The governing parties thus understand work in a conventional manner, as the following affirmations of prime ministers Ulf Kristersson and Elisabeth Borne illustrate:

Nothing creates prosperity in a country like work. Nothing counteracts poverty at the individual level like having a job. And nothing enables social mobility like getting your very first job. ([Kristersson 2022, 4](#))

Yes, work is an essential value: work is the key to emancipation, it is the creation of wealth, the freedom to undertake, the sharing of value, additional resources for our social model, a stronger ambition in corporate social and environmental responsibility. We all have to win! ([Borne 2022](#))

In this type of reasoning, work certainly also represents the primary way of increasing society’s *resilience*, its capacity and its preparedness to cope with any major challenges and threats. Resilience has been, as is well known, very much on the agenda of European (Union) politics over the past few years, both internally and in relations with third countries (e.g. [Joseph & Juncos 2019](#)). It is thus almost self-evident that the analysed declarations also emphasise it in various ways (cf. [Ketola 2023](#)). The Danish programme offers a particularly eloquent formulation in this respect: ‘Danish society must be made more robust in the face of future threats, challenges and crises. Therefore, the government will take the initiative to strengthen the organization and prioritization of community preparedness, crisis management, critical infrastructure and security of supply’ ([Danish Government 2023, 36](#)). The government also makes financial commitments to match this call for preparedness: In its finance plan for 2023, it sets aside funding reserves, or a ‘war fund’ (*krigskassen*), ‘in light of covid-19’ ([Danish Government 2023, 58](#)), with the aim to assist the country’s support for Ukraine.

In a similar vein, ‘matters of preparedness and resilience’ constitute a key priority of the new Finnish government (2023). Various policy objectives are meant to serve this cross-cutting resilience framework: new measures in education, industrial support, healthcare and social welfare services, as well as cooperation between the EU and NATO, specifically in the protection of critical infrastructure. In Italy, for its part, resilience appears to be a question of some sort of modernisation, perhaps echoing the critical views of resilience as a mechanism with which neoliberal values such as focusing on individuals and entrepreneurship are being promoted (e.g. Nelson, 2014). In Giorgia Meloni’s (2022) view, the European Recovery and Resilience Plan, the main component of the NextGeneration EU, is incremental in this respect, it is ‘an extraordinary opportunity to modernise Italy; we all have the duty to make the most of it’. Meloni also emphasises resilience in terms of supply change security or, more precisely, ‘full food sovereignty’.

As the benefits of work and investments, in combination with efforts to boost resilience, only materialise over the long term, it is almost self-evident that *temporal* references are common in the context of this broad discourse. The current crises awareness thus translates into anticipation of future crises and into more or less explicit long-termism. The calls for consensus and cooperation also serve this objective: the governments stress the importance of collective awareness vis-à-vis any pending future challenges and seek *permanent* collaboration across the borders of government opposition to meet these challenges. In the Estonian context, for example, Kallas (2023) first strongly advocates investments in economic competitiveness, green reforms and modern tax policies, but then notes: ‘Our common desire is to make forward-looking decisions in changing times in order to increase the well-being of our people, offer better services, preserve the Estonian language and culture, and ensure a better tomorrow’.

Long-termism seems to be a particularly important concern in the Finnish government’s agenda, possibly because of the exceptional foresight system the country has developed since the 1990s, with the Parliament’s Committee for the Future as its pinnacle (Boston 2016, 401; Koskimaa & Raunio 2020, 166). Ideals regarding the future were, however, possibly even more apparent in the policy targets of the previous left-liberal government, that is, the short-term economic imperatives play a stronger role in Petteri Orpo’s current coalition agenda. But even in that latter case, the central ‘Principles of the Government’, commence with an intergenerational pledge that ‘The Government will build a well-functioning, safe and fair society. Finnish society will guarantee its people opportunities for success and prosperity across generations’ (Finnish government 2023, 8). And the last of these pledges, on that same page, further reiterates: ‘The Government will also look beyond today’s challenges. It is vital for Finland to find a vision for the kind of country we want to leave future generations’. However, from a critical perspective, these types of fanciful formulations can also be employed to justify the government’s policies, say, in terms of strict budgetary frames; state debt should not become a burden for future generations.

It is a truly interesting question to what extent the current crises can concretely lengthen the time perspectives of decision-making; whether mechanisms of systematic long-termism can make their way to governmental policy-planning. Based on the analysed declarations, it seems plausible that efforts in that direction do exist, although it may be that the meta-crisis of climate change is simply so widely recognised at the moment that long-term impact assessments enter political

agendas almost unavoidably. This appears paradoxical: on the one hand, crises require and lead to immediate action, but they also make it blatantly clear that only by way of intensified consideration of the long-term consequences of any political decision will the preparedness to face future challenges increase.

Finally, it is worth noting that none of the analysed programmes explicitly mentioned the (temporal) idea of *normality* in any way. This means that the drafters of these documents did not, in actuality, really foresee an end to the crises modus that the world is currently finding itself in. In the general line of argumentation, the question is simply about piecemeal improvements to the state of society within a general permanent crisis framework; no major utopias are conceived of. But the belief in the possibilities of these minor improvements appears to be strong indeed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The comparative inspection presented above has brought forth numerous points that deserve special emphasis – and additional reflection in the future. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that the overall picture that we have painted is also important itself: we believe that the three broad themes that we took up are indeed characteristic of the general political constellation of European politics at the moment. The picture is thus representative of the ways in which politics is currently being articulated across the continent; it would not necessarily change all that much had we added more countries to the comparative framework.

First, the analysis demonstrated how *general* crisis awareness prevails in today's Europe, with the war in Ukraine clearly as the central concern. The role of the COVID-19 pandemic, or of any other pre-war crisis, as an independent factor proved very limited; the pandemic had virtually disappeared from these official political discourses. Promoting some sort of cohesion and cooperation across the different strata of society, on the one hand, and increasing the chances of resilience by way of work, education and investments, on the other hand, proved to be the most important methods for overcoming this crisis mode in these coalitions' understanding of the world. This was a matter of de-politicisation and cohesion rather than politicisation and contestation.

We did recognise, however, particularly in the context of immigration policies, formulations that were surely meant to be *responsive* towards a party's own supporters, formulations that the opposition would surely be willing to politicise, although all declarations *rhetorically* managed to emphasise the government's general *responsibility* towards overall societal development. Moreover, the governments occasionally sought to capitalise on the sense of solidarity, trust and collective will accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine and, by appealing to these shared values, gather support for their specific political priorities. Further, the governments perhaps even exploited this consensus to make it possible to employ policy measures that, under 'normal' conditions, might be unacceptable to the wider public.

Second, the *similarities* between the declarations proved striking, even between the two large southern member states and the four smaller northern countries. This can surely be attributed to the relatively conservative party constellations of these governments – but only partly. More importantly, similarities may be explained as a symptom or consequence of the prevailing crisis modus on the continent and the fact that *these countries have essentially tried to cope with the crises within the distinct*

framework of European Union politics and policies. The most significant proposed solutions to the current problems originate almost exclusively from the Union, the green transformation, the digital future and the objective of strategic autonomy. Indeed, the sense of a shared European polity is stronger than we expected. All governments seemed to emphasise their willingness to be good Europeans – contrary to the arguments that the ‘poly-crisis’ leads to a wave of Euroscepticism (Zeitlin et al. 2019).

Third, we were unable to identify any major new openings with respect to the desired societal development in each society. There was no utopia, as it were, at least not in the sense we anticipated at the outset. The crises, in the mindset of these governments, have not provided reason for any major new, radical or progressive political ideas that would explicitly redraw the parameters of society. The prevailing idea offers a return to the growth curves of the past, to the past trajectories of society, perhaps only in a little more resilient form; the question is of adaptive rather than transformative resilience. If we wanted to be critical and normative (bearing in mind that these are democratically elected governments), we could even ask: ‘Was this a missed opportunity?’

In this respect, our conclusion might come close to what Habermas (1990) once thought of, almost sadly, when he described the revolutionary end of communism in Eastern Europe in terms of catching up or bringing back (*die nachholende Revolution*). In his view, the countries East of the Iron Curtain just wanted to shake off the communist system without any clear idea of the desired direction of society; they simply wanted to follow the path of the West. This conclusion was, however, far too simplistic, it did not consider the small everyday ideals and utopias that people had in mind under the conditions of post-communism (cf. Ray and Stoyanova 2020). Perhaps we should now, also, turn to the ideas of the people and civil society with respect to any alternative paths of societal development. Or perhaps it is just a tiny minority in these countries that have really pondered the desired future parameters of their lives under the crisis modus. Politicians hardly show the way, in any case.

Finally, the framework of four conceptual value dimensions with which we have operated in the article proved both useful and problematic. The different values that we identified usually did not exclusively belong to any one dimension, or it was regularly a matter of interpretation as to which category an individual formulation actually elucidates. Despite this, it is reasonably safe to argue that all four dimensions were strongly present in the government agendas in various ways. The pragmatic and contractual dimensions seemed to dominate, unsurprisingly. The temporal references were also common; there was an element of inherent long-termism in the programmes. The temporal perspective was generally fairly short, however; the crises, the immediacy, seemed to be a constraining factor in this respect after all. What we found interesting is that ethical considerations in terms of *justice and equality* were seldom explicitly spelled out; there were hardly any ideas related to the foundations of a just and fair society, apart from the references to intergenerational justice, perhaps. It seems to go beyond the imagination of European political leaders to define their resilience-related policy objectives in terms of general societal justice or even freedom.

In conclusion, we do thus believe that it makes sense to try to think of the ways in which society seeks to recover from any kinds of crises from the combined perspective of these four dimensions. We could not uncover any other significant categories along the way.

APPENDIX

Parliamentary elections in the analysed countries 2022 to 2023.

COUNTRY/ ELECTION DATE	PRIME MINISTER	COMPOSITION OF GOVERNMENT/GOVERNING BOARD	POLITICAL ORIENTATION	PARLIAMENTARY SUPPORT
Denmark 1 November 2022	Mette Frederiksen (S) (since 2019)	Social Democrats (S), Venstre, Liberal Party of Denmark (V), Moderates (M)	Social democrat, conservative liberal, centre	Majority
Estonia 5 March 2023	Kaja Kallas (RE) (since 2019)	Estonian Reform Party (RE), Party Estonia 200 (E200), Social Democratic Party (SDE),	Liberal, social democrat	Majority
Finland 2 April 2023	Petteri Orpo (KOK)	National Coalition Party (KOK), True Finns (PS), Swedish People's Party in Finland (SFP), Christian Democrats of Finland (KD)	Liberal conservative, national conservative, liberal, conservative	Majority
France 12 June 2022	Élisabeth Borne (LRME)	The Republic Onwards (LREM), Democratic Movement (MoDem), Radical Party (RAD), Act-The Constructive Right (AGIR), Horizons (HORIZONS)	Liberal, centre, conservative liberal, liberal conservative	Minority
Italy 25 September 2022	Giorgia Meloni (FDI)	Brothers of Italy (FDI), League (LEGA), Forward Italy (FI)	National conservative, right-wing populist, liberal conservative	Majority
Sweden 11 September 2022	Ulf Kristersson (M)	Moderate Coalition Party (M), Christian Democrats (KD), Liberals (L)	Liberal conservative, conservative, liberal	Minority Supportive party: Sweden Democrats (SD)

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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