



Articulating Pandemic Recovery: Contestations and Transformations?

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The six articles that make up this special issue analyse, from different angles, the ways in which political and intellectual elites have sought to guide their respective societies free from the troubles of the Corona years – and perhaps towards a future societal constellation that could somehow be better than that of pre-2020. More precisely, the contributions reflect upon the ideas and vocabularies through which powerholders have sought to articulate the parameters of desirable recovery as well as upon the controversies that these articulations seem to have generated across European polities. There is thus a distinct top-down perspective in all the texts: the focus is on the discourses and strategies of governments, parliaments, experts and their networks, and the media, but not on the attitudes or desires of the wider public. Several of the articles are explicitly country-comparative – covering, in fact, most of Western Europe – but the analysis extends well beyond the framework of a single state in each piece.

Concentrating on the politics of *recovery* distinguishes the issue from the mainstream of social scientific literature on COVID-19, preoccupied as it has been with the governance measures and instant consequences of the disease. The fact that the pandemic was directly followed by another major crisis, Russia's criminal war in Ukraine, has possibly weakened people's willingness to comprehend their situation in terms of a genuine recovery, which may have also shaped the focus of scholarly analyses, at least in Europe. 'Recovery' in itself is one of the key notions that *Timo Pankakoski* discusses in his opening article on the metaphors with which the post-COVID transition back to normalcy has been advanced at the international, European and national levels. Pankakoski admits that the medical connotations of the concept have been intense but emphasises, interestingly, that it has also been regularly utilised as 'an expectation concept'; it refers to societies' sought-after permanent capability to 'build back better'. There is, however, hardly any idea of agency involved here, nor ideas of who or what types of institutional solutions should bring about that 'better'.

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Another concept that has been employed time and again in post-pandemic political parlance – and the contributions here – is that of *resilience*, though often only vaguely defined. In his analysis, Pankakoski even elevates the notion to the position of ‘the centrepiece of recovery discourses’, signifying an internalised ability of individuals and entire societies to recuperate from any potential future disasters. *Andreas Nölke’s* large book review essay on post-pandemic economic development that closes the issue also offers resilience a great deal of attention. Nölke reviews some 20 academic books in the fields of economics, critical social studies and international political economy, drawing the conclusion that instead of economic liberalism, the consequences of the Corona pandemic (and possibly other pending crises?) seem to lead to a scholarly emphasis on (economic) resilience, de-risking and overall security, ultimately made possible by an increasingly powerful state. Liberalism is indeed in retreat – or at least it is likely to become much more state-regulated than ever before. Again, the nature of the required institutional recalibrations remains unclear; it is difficult to conceive of what enhanced state agency will actually come to mean. Pankakoski’s micro-level and Nölke’s macro-level analyses thus enter into a discussion with each other through the vague notion of resilience – and thereby frame the special issue.

The intricacies of political *contestation*, *politicisation* and *de-politicisation* also inform, more or less explicitly, the six contributions. Needless to say, there are a great range of different societal constellations towards which pandemic recovery could be guided – and different political actors have naturally sought to advance these in various ways and to different degrees. All this has happened in a world in which the ability to bridge diverging viewpoints and find compromises between them may have weakened in general terms over the past two decades. Social and political cleavages in Europe and elsewhere have grown deeper, with ever stronger political groupings openly challenging the principles of liberal democracy and integrative cross-national cooperation. As a consequence, the capacity of the democratic system to be responsive to the often contradicting demands of the general public may begin to seem questionable. In other words, one can wonder whether or to what extent general non-dialogical and exclusively ideological politicisation has possibly undermined the building back efforts following COVID-19.

Taru Haapala’s focus lies in the actual politicisation activities and novel strategies for challenging governmental policies. In the Spanish case, she analyses, this boils down to the right-wing opposition’s efforts to contest the socialist-led government’s pandemic response measures. This has taken place at various levels of policymaking, regional, national and European, and has materialised by way of, for example, local elections, the country’s judicial oversight system, and even the European Parliament. Indeed, by using democratically justified means, such as appeals to the Constitutional Court, the opposition (has) managed to frame the country’s situation in terms of a distinction between oppositional democratic freedom and governmental autocratic restrictions – although with limited electoral success given that the social democrats managed to secure the post of Prime Minister even after the July 2023 elections. Belief in the EU’s beneficiary nature has traditionally been a consensual factor in Spanish politics, and this arguably alleviated the effects of politicisations within the national polity during the Corona years as well.

Politicisation can also, and often does, emerge in terms of ‘expertise’ or ‘authoritative knowledge’ under crisis conditions. *Johanna Vuorelma* and *Pinja Lehtonen* analyse the competing frameworks of expert knowledge and networks of expertise in the coronavirus battle. They demonstrate how ‘alternative’ networks of knowledge can emerge during

an ‘epistemic void’ such as that of the early pandemic waves, even in science-believing Finland, the focus of their analysis. Through claims for authoritativeness, the alternative experts managed to politicise the chosen policy direction while also accumulating significant public support and, in the process, possibly undermining the conditions of political trust in society. But as more robust frameworks of knowledge gradually became predominant, the members of ‘official’ expert groupings and media began to question the credibility and authority of the alternative expert network. Politicisation thus waned – but this could also be problematic in theory if it meant that the dominant frameworks of knowledge would no longer be submitted to critical scrutiny. This raises several pertinent questions about the interpretations of epistemological ‘correctness’, democratic transparency with regard to different frames of knowledge and ways of justifying and communicating the chosen policies under crisis.

For *Sami Torssonen*, politicisation primarily occurs in and through struggles for material well-being and recognition by the less privileged in society. In his Marxian analysis, Torssonen compares newspaper discourses in three European countries, Finland, Germany and the UK, and describes how these newspapers reported about the post-pandemic nurse strikes – the nurses’ legitimate efforts to improve their lot in a context where their work had just proved indispensable. Along with the expressed sympathy for the nurses, the media also often adhered to the prevalent capitalist logic of profit maximising, that is, to the argument that the compensations paid to the nurses should not exceed the constraints of economic ‘necessity’; hence the trope ‘yes but no’. The article thus indicates that following a crisis, political acts that openly question (legitimate) public authorities may easily be framed as threats to social cohesion; they potentially undermine society’s capacity to face the challenges caused by the current crisis and weaken societal resilience towards future exceptional circumstances. Successful politicisation strategies are thus difficult to fulfil in a crisis context, even if they spring from a justified moral concern.

The final noteworthy but more implicit conceptual angle of the special issue is the idea of *transformation*. Or perhaps we should here employ the notion of *political imagination* – or the shortage of it. No real revolutionary ideas have come to the fore in pandemic recovery policies across Europe, no anticipation of such policy means or institutional mechanisms that could actually transcend existing political reality. Calls for increasing resilience by no means represent revolution or profound renewal, as the prime expectation is simply that ‘what is already there, needs to be utilised better’; resilience is an inherently conservative and preservative notion. Moreover, to the extent one can point to significant new ideational or policy openings, they are hardly ever normative, intimately related to questions of justice, equality, decency or freedom in society.

Henri Vogt and *Mikko Värttö*’s analysis of the post-pandemic government agendas of six EU member states confirms the above inference. It is indeed difficult to see, in official political discourses across the continent, any new overarching transformative ideas – apart from the EU’s green and digital transitions, which may actually have gained new credibility with the crisis (cf. [Fifi 2024](#)). Security-related pragmatism and the need to work together in society in a contractual manner seem to determine European policy-making. The temporal perspectives also remain fairly short; true long-term future policy considerations hardly came to the fore. This may be natural; however, the analysed government coalitions were right-leaning and conservative – but it may be symptomatic that these coalitions had come to power immediately after the most fearful stage of the pandemic was over.

This may then support the veracity of this issue's most important overall conclusion, which is an inherently normative one: major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing recovery do require a great deal of political and ethical *imaginative thinking*, much more than we have been able to identify in European politics in recent years. This thinking should ultimately materialise in terms of *democratic institutional solutions*, with and for the sake of citizens – instead of the imprecise slogan-like emphasis on ultimately individualistic and preservative resilience; only through functioning, decent institutions can societal trust and cohesion be preserved and cultivated (cf. Margalit 1997). Existing institutions, on the other hand, should not restrict this capacity of imagination in any way, but rather a sense of transformative cohesive collective autonomy and *will* should prevail – which is of course a tall order if one's existential security has been severely undermined, as is often the case in today's Europe. If anything, these ideas seem to recall Cornelius Castoriadis' approach to the foundations of democracy, collective will and, above all, political imagination. For him, imaginative (or even revolutionary) politics arguably represent a sensitive form of intentional shared societal ordering that occasionally also requires the ability to make painful decisions (Castoriadis 1987, 95–98; Kalyvas 2001, 9; cf. Karavitis 2018). In idealistic terms, only functioning democratic institutions can possess said ability.

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