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What makes democratic institutions resilient to crises? Applying a novel analytical framework to the case of Finland

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ABSTRACT

To curb the COVID-19 pandemic, governments took exceptional measures impacting citizens' daily lives, the economy, and democratic institutions. The literature has already discussed the various measures and their short-term consequences for institutions and decision-making, highlighting the risk of democratic backsliding. However, little is known about how and why consolidated democracies survived the pandemic without substantial damage to their democratic institutions and practices. Drawing on the flourishing literature on democratic resilience, we contribute to theory-building through a novel analytical framework consisting of three inter-related and complementary dimensions that make a country resilient to crisis: institutions, instruments, and actors. The accumulation of imperfect layers offers adequate protection against backsliding. Examining the case of Finland, this article shows how institutional design, legal rules, and political culture combined to confer a high level of protection against the weakening of democracy.



KEYWORDS

Resilience; democracy; backsliding; COVID-19; Finland

Introduction

Recently scholars have documented a worrying trend: democracies have turned into autocracies and even in more advanced democracies leaders have introduced reforms weakening both political institutions and citizens' rights (Boese et al. 2021; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). This phenomenon has engendered flourishing literature providing country-specific and broader explanations of *how democracies die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) and why some countries display more resilience (Boese et al. 2021). The concept of resilience generally refers to the preservation of democratic institutions and practices (Boese et al. 2021, 887). More precisely, it relates to the ability of a political system to preserve its democratic status despite internal and external challenges (Merkel and Lührmann 2021, 872). For example, research has focused on the consequences for democracy of the 2008 financial crisis (Pinto, António, and Teixeira 2019) or the recurrent crises in the 1920s and 1930s (Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning 2020).

Beyond the crises, the literature also focused on more long-term trends in democratization and democratic decline. The literature has developed comparative quantitative tools to explore how democracies evolve and decline (Coppedge et al. 2020, 2022). These empirical tools and mainly the V-dem data (V-Dem Institute 2022) offer the opportunity to explore general trends and macro-explanations. The literature highlights variations in the paths towards democracy or, on the other hand, towards backsliding (Boese et al. 2022). It also

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shows the importance of a multidimensional approach to better appreciate the trends. Focusing on a single indicator or, more problematically, adopting a dichotomic perspective (authorization vs. democratization) is misleading and fails to capture the dynamics of the process (Boese et al. 2022; Wilson et al. 2022). Democratization, resilience and backsliding are multidimensional processes with a large set of covariates.

Another set of literature, more qualitative and country-specific, provides micro-level evidence of resilience or backsliding. For example, research on Singapore has shown the importance of opposition parties and intraparty democracy to prevent backsliding (Abdullah 2020). Populist breakthrough has also been identified as a key cause of backsliding in Central Europe (Hanley and Vachudova 2018) whereas constitutional court activism is seen as a way to preserve democracy (Smekal, Benák, and Vyhnánek 2022). Elsewhere, the importance of an autonomous civil society has been highlighted (Rakner 2021). There is thus a multitude of country-specific explanations providing evidence that resilience (conversely, backsliding) can take a number of forms and that many elements should be considered.

This article adopts a median approach combining the advantages of both traditions. Case studies are particularly beneficial for understanding specific mechanisms, but the diversity of approaches and focuses makes it difficult to draw any general conclusions. Considering more general indicators and their multidimensionality offers the opportunity to test a framework that can be applied beyond the case under study. Specifically, we are interested in factors safeguarding democratic institutions during crises. We introduce a new theoretical and analytical framework for assessing the resilience of a democratic system. Previous literature has mainly listed elements of a resilient democracy without really explaining how they interact, whereas our framework highlights a compensation effect between the various elements as suggested but not theorized by some country-specific research (Rakner 2021; Smekal, Benák, and Vyhnánek 2022). These compensation effects may be generalized to develop a new theoretical framework. We argue that resilience is made of layers of various elements with compensatory effect: a democratic system is resilient when the failure of one element is compensated by another. The framework is illustrated by analyzing a most-likely case of democratic resilience: the management of COVID-19 pandemic by Finland. We deliberately focus on Finland, as it is generally acknowledged as one of the more robust democracies in the world (V-Dem Institute 2022) and its management of COVID has been assessed as broadly respectful of democratic norms (Engler et al. 2021) – although several aspects have also been criticized (Kihlström et al. 2022). Yet, our analytical framework is designed for examining more broadly the resilience of countries during various crises.

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic to challenge democratic institutions and practices (Barry 2005), but provides an excellent context for examining democratic resilience, as it affected virtually all countries in the world. There is obviously a huge number of publications about COVID and its societal impact, and scholars have produced rich evidence of the mainly negative consequences of the pandemic on national democratic institutions. It forced executives to take exceptional measures, challenging the traditional work of liberal democracies (Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Engler et al. 2021). Countries adopted severe measures impacting citizens' daily lives, the economy, and democratic institutions (Engler et al. 2021; Lynggaard et al. 2023). Now that the world is recovering, we can analyze the lessons of the COVID period with the benefit of hindsight and ask what made certain countries resilient while others suffered at least temporary 'backsliding' effects.

The next section introduces the concept of resilience, its current limitations, and develops our analytical framework. After that we analyze the Finnish institutional set-up and decision-making procedures and the way the country managed the COVID pandemic. Based on the case study of Finland, we then explain what it teaches us about resilience. In the concluding section, we summarize the findings and suggest new paths of research.

Theoretical framework: what makes democracies resilient

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a real-world case of a crisis impacting virtually all countries in the world. The comparative literature has shown that in some countries basic democratic norms were upheld while in others they were jeopardized (Guasti 2020; Youngs 2022). Yet, most of these publications deal with existing theories and approaches without really explaining what the management of the pandemic can teach about resilience. In this article, we are thus not directly interested in COVID policies or the motivations of political actors. Instead, we aim at contributing to the theoretical literature on resilience through an inductive strategy. We argue that resilience is not just a catalogue of elements a democratic country should possess to avoid backsliding. There are no necessary and sufficient elements, but an accumulation of imperfect layers of protection. Each layer compensates for the failures (or breaks) of the others.

To be resilient, a crisis may be handled in three ways: to withstand, adapt, and recover (Merkel and Lührmann 2021, 872). There are four interrelated dimensions to be considered when assessing the ability of a democratic regime to prevail (Merkel and Lührmann 2021). The first contains the macro-level rules and institutions, with the division of authority between the executive, legislative, and judiciary fundamental in this context (Linz 1978; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). Second, are the actors taking part in the political competition. Their support of democratic norms is essential, as is their role as gatekeepers preventing authoritarian individuals from accessing office (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). The third dimension is civic culture among individuals and citizens: democracy is more resilient when democratic values are widely shared among civil society (Maletz 2005; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). The fourth dimension is societal polarization and conflict. Unequal and conflictual societies would jeopardize the *de facto* agreement between elites to adhere to standard democratic rules (Merkel and Lührmann 2021).

Research has mainly focused on the first dimension and underlined the strengthening of executive decision-making (Hájek 2023; Pedersen and Borghetto 2021). Scholars have differentiated between authoritarian and democratic regimes, but backsliding or at least temporary weakening of institutions may also occur in established democracies, including during the COVID pandemic (Lührmann et al. 2020). For example, emergency laws allowed the governments to bypass parliaments, thus weakening legislatures and democratic procedures (Mills 2020). At the same time, executive empowerment may correlate positively with saving lives. Comparing Danish and Italian parliaments, Pedersen and Borghetto (2021) concluded that countries such as Italy that faced more severe challenges to their democratic practices were better in fighting the crisis. Decision-making was efficient but happened at the expense of broader democratic norms. On the other hand, democratic procedures perdured in Denmark, and, more importantly, the parliament regained its lost powers. Studies have reported a ‘rally round the flag’ effect which resulted in unprecedented support from the opposition for government measures, at least during the early stages of the pandemic (Louwerse et al. 2021), even though, again, exceptions occurred (Hájek 2023). A major study by the European Parliamentary Research Service highlighted the diversity in the capacity of European parliaments to scrutinize executives and be active participants in policymaking (Chiru 2023). A weakening of the parliament (and the counterpart, the strengthening of the executive) is therefore by no means self-evident and, more importantly, not as widespread as we could have expected.

The literature also highlights the value of certain institutional rules or actor constellations and democratic compensators in preventing democratic backsliding during crises (Massart et al. 2021). Massart et al. argue that parliamentary veto power and, more generally, the multiplication of veto players prevents countries from sliding towards authoritarianism. In other words, ‘Reinforcing the ability of democracies to be resilient to crises may entail the development of structural reforms, strengthening counter-powers at the parliamentary and subnational levels’ (Massart et al. 2021, 133). Further, scholars explain that judicial constraints on the executive matter (Boese et al. 2021).

Independent courts and judicial review of bill proposals and/or acts, for example, make a political system more resilient. These are factors we incorporate into our analytical framework.

The literature cited above was published during the COVID period, with most of the empirical data dealing with the early stages of the pandemic. As a result, the reported short-term changes may have been temporary, particularly those adopted under various emergency laws. More importantly, the research on institutions has primarily concentrated on executive-legislative relations, whereas the literature on democratic resilience underlines the broader institutional framework. We argue that resilience can be theoretically formalized in three interrelated elements – institutions, instruments, and actors – that correspond to the four dimensions of Merkel and Lührmann (2021). ‘Institutions’ cover the main political organs (parliament, government, president) and the public administration and experts. ‘Instruments’ refer to what kind of policy instruments were used and how the government was constrained by existing laws. Finally, ‘actors’ refers to the behavior and attitude of the public, the political parties, and the key decision-makers. We are interested in how widely democratic values are spread and whether government and opposition parties exploited the unusual situation.

The framework is designed for examining how countries react to pandemics and other major crises. Its three elements refer to the basic characteristics of democratic governance. None of the elements is necessary nor sufficient for a democracy to withstand, adapt or recover. However, when a country can count on strict democratic rules, a stable institutional framework, and actors sharing basic democratic norms, there is no objective reason for a democracy not being resilient. To better appreciate the theoretical expectations related to each element as well as their articulation, we have set a detailed framework in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Democratic resilience: a framework.

	Institutions	Instruments	Actors
Definition	Formal and informal structures and organizations that participate in decision-making.	Types of policymaking options that are used to manage the crisis.	Individuals relevant for managing the crisis and public. This includes elected officials (including opposition parties, administration, and experts at different levels of governance.
Process	Stable institutional setting and strong legal basis limiting the possibility for an actor or a coalition of actors to gain enough power to change the arrangements.	Decision-makers have different options when it comes to addressing the problems. Not all instruments have the same role and have the same consequences for democracy. Options that are chosen may have an impact beyond the initial target.	A key element of an advanced democracy is that elected politicians, other holders of public office, and the public comply with basic democratic norms and rules.
Empirical articulation	How institutions are working during the crisis and whether their operations differ from ‘normal’ times. Institutional arrangements should be able to withstand, adapt or recover.	Scope of the decision and its implementation. Does the instrument affect sectors and processes beyond the initial scope? The rules regarding the termination of the instrument (new vote/decision or automatic termination set in law).	Actors should not use the exceptional situation to gain powers or influence in other spheres of democratic governance.
Empirical examples of resilience	Operational executive-legislative relationships. No changes in the separation of powers. Preservation of constitutional rules. Role and power of the parliament is maintained or adapted to the situation. Role of constitutional courts.	No <i>ad-hoc</i> instruments created for the occasion. Use of existing legal framework. No decisions made to reform the highest legal framework (constitution, rule of law, etc.). High levels of preparedness and clear legal division of labor. Fixed-term legislation.	No abuse of power. Respect of basic democratic norms. Respect of the tasks and duties associated with the positions the actors hold.

Resilience cannot be conceived only from one point of view or, to phrase it differently, what makes a system resilient is the articulation and interconnection of the three elements. Our model holds that democratic resilience comes from a balance between the elements: if one is weakened, another one compensates for it. For example, if an actor does not respect democratic norms, the institutional settings should be robust enough to prevent such actors from using the crisis to introduce reforms that undermine democratic governance. Or the other way around, if actors respect democratic norms, they will not exploit opportunities offered by a weak constitutional framework. In a country with weak institutions, the consequences of actors not sharing basic democratic values will be greater. Similarly, the likelihood of actors actually trying to benefit from the situation will also increase. The framework aims thus at assessing the ability of an advanced democracy to withstand, adapt or recover. Before proceeding to our empirical analysis, we introduce the main properties of the Finnish political system.

The main features of the Finnish political system

Nordic countries are typically characterized as consensual regimes, although Finland may not be as consensual as in the past (Arter 2016). A period of far-reaching constitutional change that curtailed presidential powers and brought the Finnish political system closer to a normal parliamentary democracy began from the late 1980s onwards. It culminated in the constitution, which entered into force in 2000. Leadership by majority governments replaced leadership by presidents. Notably, the constitutional reform was an orderly, calm process based on broad party-political consensus, with essentially all parties represented in the *Eduskunta*, the unicameral national legislature, agreeing on the new macro-level institutional rules.

Despite majoritarian elements, the Finnish polity still contains several consensual features: broad partisan consensus in foreign and security policy, corporatism, close ties between various elite groups, the universal welfare state regime – and, most importantly, oversized coalition cabinets and party-political cooperation across the ideological spectrum. Political parties and their leaders are engaged in an almost constant negotiation process, and the art of making compromises and logrolls is an essential feature of daily politics. Due to the growing fractionalization of the party system, forming majority cabinets is impossible unless the government has at least three parties. Party-political cooperation extends to the populists, with the Finns Party included in the centre-right cabinet from 2015 to 2017. Overall, the Finns Party has sought to keep a distance from the consensual decision-making arrangements, thereby underlining its anti-elitism and presenting itself as an alternative to the mainstream parties (Karvonen, Paloheimo, and Raunio 2016).

Patterns of coalition governance and parliamentary work display considerable stability. From a comparative perspective, the main features of Finnish governments are their ideological heterogeneity, the limited autonomy of both the prime minister (PM) and the line ministers, and the importance attached to the government program and other *ex-ante* coalition management mechanisms. While the PM has emerged from the president's shadow as the undisputed political leader of the country, the prime minister and the individual line ministers are strongly constrained by the firmly entrenched practices of cabinet decision-making. The PM is expected to provide leadership, but she must respect the established rules while paying close attention to the preferences of the coalition partners. Quite simply, there are clear, stable, codified rules regarding how governments operate, and these rules also dictate the division of labor between ministers, ministries, and the public sector agencies (Raunio 2021).

The *Eduskunta* is, without doubt, an institutionalized 'working parliament'. Its internal structures have evolved gradually over the decades, and party discipline is strong. Both MPs and civil servants know the rules of the house, and there is no pressure either from the inside or the outside for changing how the parliament functions. Committees meet behind closed doors, and they are the central arena for constructive argumentation and party-political cooperation, including between government and opposition parties. Plenary debating culture is quite cautious and polite, and

procedural matters are decided rather consensually, mainly by the Speaker's Council, which brings together the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, and the chairs of all committees (Poyet and Raunio 2021d).

A peculiarity of the Finnish institutional framework is the lack of a constitutional court. Instead, the Constitutional Law Committee of the Eduskunta issues *ex-ante* statements on the constitutionality of government bills and other matters (Lavapuro 2010). It ranks among the most prestigious Eduskunta committees, has a proportional representation of all party groups, and receives regular media coverage. It is supposed to be above 'party politics' and base its opinions on legal evidence provided by expert witnesses, mainly select law professors (Keinänen and Wiberg 2012). More broadly, the Finnish political culture has been argued to be legalistic and state-centered, with Finns used to the strong role of the state and the public sector in different spheres of life (Alapuro 2004). Interpersonal trust and trust in institutions are high, and the political culture is characterized by confidence in scientific expertise and a respectful attitude towards authorities (Kiljunen 2020; Ruostetsaari 2017).

Empirical analysis

The empirical section is structured around the three interconnected elements introduced in the theoretical section – institutions, instruments, and actors. The data consists of official documents, media coverage, and existing reports and research on COVID governance in Finland. As the objective of our article is to explain the resilience of democracy, our analysis focuses on those features essential for the observed resilience. Hence, although we acknowledge the impact of institutional design on pandemic management (Freiburghaus, Vatter, and Stadelmann-Steffen 2023; Wagschal 2022), it is important to emphasize that we are not analyzing the 'success' of Finland during COVID, either in terms of organizational effectiveness, communication, or public health strategies.¹ Due to our research design, we also opted against collecting more comprehensive behavioral data. For example, while indicators such as the number of laws or topics of parliamentary questions help illuminate essential aspects of politics during COVID (mainly the ability of the state to perform almost as normal), they are not central to our argument.

Institutions

Let us first examine the key political institutions, which in Finland include the government and the broader executive branch, the parliament, the president, and the health experts. According to previous research, crises tend to empower executives at the expense of legislatures. In Finland, the legal-institutional framework constrained the PM and the government and shielded them from presidential interference.

Before the pandemic outbreak, Finland received quite a lot of international publicity due to the left-leaning, five-party cabinet formed after the April 2019 elections that included the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. In spring 2020, all five governing parties were chaired by women, with four of the party leaders between 32 and 35 years old. The government controlled 117 of the 200 *Eduskunta* seats. The Finns Party and the National Coalition (conservatives) were the largest opposition parties.

The beginning of the pandemic saw an interesting turf battle between the president and the PM Sanna Marin (Social Democrats). Elected to his second six-year term as an independent candidate in the first round of the 2018 presidential elections, President Sauli Niinistö, the long-standing former chair of the National Coalition, remains hugely popular. Niinistö adopted an active role during the initial stages of the crisis – appearing in various media, giving more interviews than usual, making 'virtual visits', and commenting actively on the situation. Indeed, Niinistö behaved like a respected, elder 'statesman'. In an interview with *Dagens Nyheter*, Niinistö defended his role by stating that he is, after all, the president (Laurén 2020).

But as the president's constitutional prerogatives are essentially limited to co-leading foreign policy with the government, Marin and her cabinet were responsible for introducing the various safety, and health measures deemed necessary in dealing with COVID-19. Yet there is one exception: the Emergency Powers Act. The government, acting together with the president, determines whether the societal conditions necessitate the use of the emergency law. On 16 March 2020, having consulted the president, the government adopted the decree declaring the state of emergency. Marin, on multiple occasions, pointed out that while she cooperated with the president throughout the crisis, the government is responsible for the decisions. It was also the government's idea to resort to the Emergency Powers Act.

During the last weekend of March 2020, media reported that Niinistö had suggested to the government the establishment of a new decision-making body, a so-called 'corona fist', but Marin had rejected the idea. The Social Democratic Party sent a letter to Niinistö, recommending that the president stay clear of government matters. Sources from the offices of the president and the PM assured there was no rift between the cabinet and Niinistö (Muhonen 2020). A couple of days later, Marin thanked in a press conference Niinistö for his role as a 'value leader', which can be interpreted as a gentle reminder to the president that it is the government's responsibility to deal with the virus pandemic. Subsequently, a division of labor between the two executives emerged, with the president reminding Finns of the seriousness of the pandemic while the government took the decisions. Finns thus learned that even during times of emergency, it is the government, not the president, who rules the country. From the point of view of power relations, this is perhaps the most important outcome of the COVID-19 crisis. The episode showed that the institutional rules were strong enough to ensure that the constitutional division of powers was respected from the perspective of resilience.

Decision-making centered around the trio of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL). Apart from Marin, the spotlight was on Krista Kiuru, the Social Democratic Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, who oversaw most regulatory instruments as, in line with the Communicable Diseases Act, handling COVID-19 fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.² Some temporary institutional adaptations included forming a high-level civil servant coordination group in PMO. Still, overall, the pre-existing rules about the division of competencies between ministries acted as a check on the PM. Tellingly, the early evaluations of leadership during COVID-19 contain solid recommendations for further increasing the resources and powers of PMO in crises (Mörttinén 2021).

It is hard to detect any fundamental weakening of the legislature. It may be due to Finland having a broad coalition cabinet (Bolleyer and Salát 2021) but is mainly explained by the presence of strongly institutionalized participation and information rights of the *Eduskunta*. Similarly, the Emergency Powers act does not reshuffle the separation of powers by offering additional formal influence of one actor over the other. Hence, during the state of emergency, parliamentary approval is needed for government decrees implemented under the scope of the act. The government was thus responsible for the emergency measures, but they all required the consent of the *Eduskunta*. Given the exceptional situation, the Constitutional Law Committee had to operate under considerable time pressure, but its 'green light' was nonetheless required. However, the government's use of emergency powers raised concerns among MPs, and the Constitutional Law Committee issued several highly critical statements of governmental decrees (Neuvonen 2020). Outside of the state of emergency, the usual rules applied, meaning that parliamentary approval is needed for all legislation. During the pandemic sectoral committees performed their usual scrutiny function in relation to COVID-related and normal bills. But as all attention was on governmental press conferences and the key ministers, the *Eduskunta* plenary hardly provided a forum for COVID debates.

The government regularly cited expert opinion throughout the pandemic, particularly THL, a state agency in charge of gathering information and producing research on public health. The government programme formed the backbone of this attitude: 'We commit to knowledge-based policy-making and systematic impact assessment in all legislative preparation. We will engage in deeper cooperation with the scientific community' (Marin 2019). THL is the leading epidemiological

authority and an integral part of decision-making concerning the pandemic (Mörttinen 2021). The director of its Health Security Department, Mika Salminen, often appeared alongside ministers in press conferences. Even when the various experts disagreed about specific issues, such as face masks, Marin and her cabinet consistently referred to available scientific evidence when justifying their policies. However, towards the end of 2020 the management of the crisis became increasingly politicized, also in the relations between experts and the government. Mainly the government opted for less strict instruments than THL and other health authorities saw fit for the situation. Nonetheless, overall, the government listened to the experts and followed their recommendations. Therefore, the experts acted as a check on governmental power, but of course, one can also argue that the executive used expert advice as a justification for the enacted policies.

To conclude, the macro-level institutional rules perdured during the pandemic. The constitutional framework shielded the PM from presidential interference and ensured that *Eduskunta* was not procedurally weakened. Inside the executive branch, the rigid and legalistic decision-making process safeguarded the roles of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the health experts.

Instruments

The first phase of the Finnish corona response, from mid-March to June 2020, included strict measures to protect the population, especially risk groups, and the capacity of healthcare services. The state of emergency was declared on 16 March 2020, and the government soon took up additional powers under the existing Emergency Powers Act. Events and other large gatherings were banned. Borders and most public facilities were closed. Distance work was strongly encouraged and proactively assumed by employers wherever possible. Schools switched to distance teaching. Restaurants were closed from early April to the end of May. Predicting grave consequences for the economy, many financial support measures were introduced. Throughout the pandemic, the government introduced several additional budgets, direct aid packages, and other fiscal stimuli to troubled sectors. Simultaneously, the capacity of healthcare was buffed and reorganized to face the virus. In late March, the government imposed one of its most extensive measures by isolating the capital region from the rest of the country. The police set up roadblocks and checkpoints with support from conscripts and regular staff of the Defence Forces. The operation, deemed historical for post-war Finland, lasted for 19 days before being lifted by the government as no longer necessary. However, this first phase included many improvised moves, and the legal basis of some measures proved dubious (Mörttinen 2021). This applied, for instance, to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health instructing people over the age of 70 to maintain quarantine-like conditions.

The number of COVID cases declined during the summer, and the government gradually lifted its exceptional measures. The state of emergency was abolished on June 16, with the government shifting its focus to preparing an 'exit strategy' from the pandemic. No policy to obligate the public to use face masks had been issued during the spring, as THL and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health were divided on the topic. With no vaccine in sight, the only available option was to follow and refine the hybrid strategy, the motto of which was 'test, trace, isolate and treat'. Eased restrictions increasing social activity and travel made it possible for the virus to start spreading again. Confirmed cases increased towards the winter, putting the hybrid strategy to the test, and forcing the government to react again.

On 3 September 2020, by reforming the Communicable Disease Act, the government announced its domestic 3-tier system: the incidence rate was very low on the 'baseline' of the epidemic (as during summer 2020), exceeding 10–25 at the 'acceleration phase', and exceeding 18–50 at the 'community transmission phase' (Prime Minister Office 2020). This tier system aimed at regional variation in containment measures, with local and regional authorities able to target restrictions on public gatherings, schools, restaurants, etc. The government aimed to decentralize the decision-making process and decided, thus, to voluntarily step back. It was seen, at that time, as the most efficient way to deal with the pandemic by accounting for the large disparities between the regions.

The ultimate goal was to avoid making decisions that could have applied in areas where they would have been deemed irrelevant. However, in late December 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health tightened the system, calling for proactive measures to keep regions from reaching worse stages on the scale (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2021). The system enabled the government to balance limiting the spread of COVID and keeping the society open. Furthermore, the objective was to control the virus without the government having to resort to emergency legislation anymore. By November 2020, the capital region reached the 'community transmission phase'. Many other regions were to follow, moving back and forth on the scale during the winter and spring. It took until 15 June 2021, to get all regions out of the community transmission phase (Kokkonen 2021).

To solidify its hybrid strategy and enable local and regional authorities to fight off the pandemic without emergency legislation, the government worked on amendments to the Communicable Diseases Act and the reform entered into force on 22 February 2021. However, just days later, increasing infection rates forced the government to resort to the state of emergency for a second time. PM Marin also announced a three-week lockdown period that was to come in March. This created confusion among the public, with journalists deciphering the situation for the people, as the lockdown was declared before the state of emergency (Lapintie, Suvinen, and Manninen 2021; Niemonen 2021). On March 1, the state of emergency was officially announced (Prime Minister Office 2021a). In addition to tighter restrictions, the government decided to enhance the role of the Communications Department of the PMO by centralizing communications efforts to prevent confusion caused by overlapping and contradictory communications by various officials (Prime Minister Office 2021c). It was carried out as an exceptional measure under the Emergency Powers Act, accompanied by a brief but worrying debate among journalists and experts. Furthermore, the government decided to postpone municipal elections scheduled for April 18 to June 13. The decision received broad backing in the *Eduskunta*, with only the Finns Party opposing it.

During this second lockdown period, the government prepared additional restrictions on the rights of individuals to move freely outside their homes amidst massive publicity and speculations of a possible curfew to come. Marin publicly lamented that the government lacked the jurisdiction *vis-à-vis* local and regional authorities to carry out necessary measures, as mandatory testing on borders was not for the government to decide on: 'As Prime Minister, I, of course, wish that we would have a certain kind of machinery, a line organization for a crisis situation like this. And that this organization, the whole public administration, would jump when the PM says so. But this isn't the case' (Hevonoja, Sullström, and Vaaherkumpu 2021).

There was a solid rhetorical dimension to Marin's activities during this time, with speculation that the PM was resorting to threatening the public with further restrictions to enforce existing ones. Additional limits on individual movement never entered into force. The legislative proposal was submitted to the *Eduskunta* on March 25 and withdrawn on March 31 after being deemed too vague and, thus, unconstitutional by the Constitutional Law Committee (Prime Minister Office 2021b). Meanwhile, the contagion numbers kept decreasing under existing measures, and the second state of emergency was lifted on April 27. From that point on the remaining restrictions were gradually abolished as the share of vaccinated grew and, in general, the worst scare was over. By spring 2022 essentially all restrictive measures were lifted.

The analysis of instruments uncovered two essential features. First, the government had to operate within the framework of existing legislation. Even emergency powers were subject to a tripartite agreement by the government, the president, and the parliament. The crisis was managed by adapting the existing laws, mainly the Communicable Diseases Act that was reformed several times to account for the changes in government strategy. The amendments to the Communicable Diseases Act were temporary, and a set duration was fixed. Hence, any extension (in time and content) would require a vote in parliament. The Constitutional Law Committee also demanded that the government acts within the existing framework and does not abuse the opportunities offered by the Emergency Powers Act. In other words, managing the crisis did not require new legislative instruments that could have been damaging for the democratic institutions.

Secondly, the instruments reveal the competencies of the regional authorities, especially the Regional Administrative Agencies, that acted as a further check on the government. On several occasions, the government – mainly Marin and Kiuru – criticized the regional authorities for being too slow to react. Kihlström et al. show also how there was considerable confusion regarding the competencies of the different levels of decision-making, and that cooperation and communication between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the sub-national authorities left much room for improvement (Kihlström et al. 2022). Regional authorities may therefore have frustrated the government, but again pre-existing rules were obeyed, and the regional authorities defended their competences. Overall, the *Eduskunta* and its Constitutional Law Committee refused to be overridden and acted as a safeguard. Hence, the management of the crisis was mainly done through the existing legislative instruments and by respecting the jurisdictions of the regional authorities. The existing instruments were deemed efficient and, equally important, when they suffered from limitations they were reformed in a way that did not result in enlarging the competences of the main decision-making authorities (mainly the government). These were key factors in ensuring resilience during the pandemic (Lachmayer and Matthias 2022).

Actors

'Actors' refer to the public, the political parties, and the leading decision-makers. Here the critical question concerns the attitude and behavior of both citizens and politicians and their respect of democratic norms.

In terms of public opinion, civic culture, and political parties, the COVID period shifted from a national consensus supporting restrictions towards a more frustrated and divided nation. However, overall, the public and the opposition parties remained supportive of both the government and the measures. From a comparative perspective, Finns trust their leaders and political institutions with and interpersonal trust also high, and such confidence is associated with positive evaluations of government performance during COVID (Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Jørgensen et al. 2021). During the pandemic Finns trusted public authorities and the main media channels (Jallinoja and Väliverronen 2021), and citizens' compliance with COVID recommendations was directly linked to political trust (Kestilä-Kekkonen, Koivula, and Tiihonen 2022). Initially, everyday party politics was put on hold, with solid public support for measures and the PM. In the first stage, the media and the public appreciated the swift action and tough line.

Interestingly, essentially no politician or media proposed less stringent policies or earlier relaxation of the emergency measures. The government had to justify why no further restrictions, such as compulsory use of face masks, had been introduced.

The first phase of COVID was thus characterized by a shared sense of national urgency and unity (rally round the flag), with people and businesses adhering to measures – even proactively, at times. Since April 2020, Statistics Finland carried out regular surveys on COVID on behalf of the government. In the first survey, 96% of respondents reported having followed official instructions well or somewhat well. Furthermore, 87% characterized themselves as willing or somewhat willing to follow such instructions (Statistics Finland 2020). It was perhaps even worrying how strong the consensus was. There was no public debate about potential alternative ways of handling the crisis. However, some critical voices, including many constitutional lawyers, pointed out that the state of emergency should be declared only in genuinely exceptional circumstances.

From autumn 2020 onwards, politicians, experts, and citizens increasingly disagreed about the COVID regulatory instruments while other policy issues returned to public debates. However, the opposition did not seriously question governmental COVID policies. This applies even to the Finns Party, which probably understood that pandemic is not the right time for anti-establishment rhetoric. Initially, in late spring 2020, the support of the Social Democrats had soared in the polls, while that of the other cabinet parties and the opposition dropped or stayed at roughly the same level as before the crisis. While Marin and the government continued to enjoy high approval ratings,

gradually party support figures started to resemble those before the pandemic. In the municipal elections held in June 2021, the Social Democrats finished second, almost four percentage points after the National Coalition.

Inside the *Eduskunta*, the standing orders were changed to ensure operation during the pandemic. During March – April 2020, parliamentary groups and the Speaker's Council agreed that only 50 MPs (out of 200) would be present in the chamber and that there would be no abuse of temporary majorities during votes. Pleas were made for the government only to send urgent matters to the *Eduskunta*. Standing committees were to handle urgent issues only. Various measures to make distance work possible were introduced as 2020 progressed and these distance work routines were maintained well into 2021 (Eduskunta 2020).

It appears that MPs adopted a rather pragmatic and consensual approach to the necessary adjustments. There was essentially no public criticism of how the *Eduskunta* worked, and the populists agreed to the imposed constraints. Nor was there any evidence of political parties trying to exploit the unusual situation to their advantage. The high point of party-political COVID criticism probably occurred in October 2020 when Kiuru survived a non-confidence vote in the parliament tabled by the National Coalition regarding conflicting accounts of face masks instructions (Lehtonen and Parkkonen 2020). The vote was preceded by considerable societal confusion about the use of face masks.

Returning to our theoretical framework, we note the effects of pre-existing societal trust, including in political institutions. The public was obedient and supportive of the leaders, although less so as the pandemic continued. In fact, also the gradual return to normal patterns of party-political contestation and increasing criticism of leaders should be viewed as a positive development, as it is important that the civil society is not overly obedient vis-à-vis the government. Perhaps more significantly, neither the government nor the opposition attempted to exploit the crisis to their advantage. There were isolated calls for more centralized decision-making, but, overall, the rules were not publicly challenged. This implies that the relevant actors had at least a sufficiently shared understanding of and respect for the institutional framework, an understanding no doubt facilitated by the close networks among different elites in Finland (Ruostetsaari 2015).

Concluding discussion

The motivation for our article was primarily theoretical. The literature on COVID had already examined in detail the various lockdown measures and regulatory policies and their short-term consequences for national institutions and decision-making. Many of these publications highlighted the risk of democratic backsliding, including at least temporarily even in more consolidated democracies. However, little was known about how and why certain countries could survive the pandemic without substantial damage to their democratic institutions and practices, neither during nor after the crisis.

This article has proposed that the concept of democratic resilience offers theoretical and analytical tools for understanding this phenomenon. Our theoretical framework emphasized three inter-related dimensions that make a country resilient to crisis. 'Institutions' covers the main political actors, the public administration, and experts. 'Instruments' refer to the type of policy instruments and how the government was (or was not) constrained by existing laws. Finally, the third element, 'actors', refers to the behavior and attitude of the public, the political parties, and the key decision-makers.

Drawing on the illustrative case study of Finland, the article showed the pertinence of the theoretical framework. Engler et al. (2021) highlighted Finland (together with Sweden) as the country with the smallest score on their index of freedom restriction during COVID. Their main explanation was that the pandemic management was not concentrated in a small number of hands. Our article echoes those findings while paying attention to additional features strengthening the resilience of the Finnish political system. Besides the institutional setting limiting the

power of individual actors (such as the prime minister/PMO), the article highlighted the importance of the legalistic regime, the limited use of emergency laws, and the general support for the measures. Also, the consensual decision-making and the political culture incited political actors not to benefit from the situation or undermine other actors. Moreover, the article showed the interconnectedness between the elements. A breach in one aspect is likely to be compensated by another element. For example, the willingness of minister Kiuru (backed by PM Marin) to take the lead in decision-making about restrictions bumped into the legal-institutional framework (Communicable Diseases Act) according to which those issues belong to the jurisdiction of the Regional Administrative Agencies.

The article has two significant implications. First and foremost, it underlined the importance of conceiving democratic resilience as a multidimensional conceptual and empirical framework encompassing three interconnected elements (institutions, instruments, and actors). Although none of these elements is either sufficient or necessary for a democracy to survive a crisis, we argued that together they confer a high level of protection. A breach in one element may have minor consequences if another element compensates. In other words, the accumulation of imperfect layers offers adequate protection against backsliding. We thus believe that our multidimensional framework helps analyze how countries react to crises.

Second, it encourages scholars to go beyond comparative statistical indicators. We are not arguing against using such indicators, quite the opposite. However, macro-level indicators may not be sufficient for capturing domestic specificities and particular elements of political culture. The close relationship between elites in Finland contributed to how the country managed the crisis. It is a micro-level element that probably escapes the attention of comparative indicators. The same applies to the crucial role of the Constitutional Law Committee in setting *ex-ante* limits to governmental actions. And as rightly stated by Merkel and Lührmann (2021), sharing democratic values is as essential as having a robust institutional design.

The article also has two limitations that subsequent studies should address. First, it focused on one case and one crisis. As we argued in the introductory section, Finland can be considered a most-likely case of resilience: it is a stable democracy, with an active civil society and a consensual approach to policymaking. Scholarly understanding of politics during exceptional times would therefore undoubtedly benefit from similar studies in other polities, including in the other Nordic countries where crisis management was different (Christensen et al. 2022). Finland shares strong commonalities with Scandinavian countries (Arter 2016), and it would be interesting to know whether our explicative model also applies there. In Norway, the government adopted a more centralized decision-making approach, but experts continued to play a significant role (Christensen and Lægreid 2020) helping the country to manage the crisis using the regular instruments and processes. As in Finland, compliance with the rules was high. Investigations of very different cases would also improve the assessment of our model's suitability. Germany would be an interesting case. Its decision-making largely differs from the Nordic countries, but our model could help explain its ability to survive the crisis. The role played by the *Bundestag* (lower chamber) and the consultations between the federal government and the *Länder* contributed to checks-and-balances. Also, each *Land* was able to retain most of its competencies during the crisis and they were encouraged to coordinate their efforts. The institutional design and mainly the division of powers between the levels of governance made it difficult for one actor to benefit from the crisis since agreements between a large number of actors was needed for decision-making. In Germany, not all actors were as consensual as in the Nordic countries and one major political party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), strongly opposed the restrictions. Together with bottom-up movements, AfD was able to mobilize a non-negligible share of the population in many protests around the country, but the consequences for the democratic system were minimal.

Conversely, the model could be applied to a democratic country that experienced backsliding. An interesting case is Slovakia. The pandemic hit the country a few weeks after a general election and the newly elected government – with a strong majority in parliament – made use of the emergency

powers to introduce judicial and constitutional reforms despite the attempts of the president to veto many of these new regulations. These reforms challenged the role of the Constitutional Court that was only partially able to perform its tasks (Podmaník 2023; Steuer 2021). In the Slovakian case, the actions of the government could only be mildly mitigated by the institutional design or other actors, eventually impacting rule of law.

More work is clearly needed before reaching any firmer conclusions, but available evidence suggests the pertinence of the model and the need for several compensatory layers to ensure the stability of the whole system.

Incidentally, one question is what would have happened had Finland been more strongly impacted by the pandemic? There is no clear answer, but our analysis shows that everyday practice prevailed even during the first stage of the pandemic, when the number of unknown parameters was high.

Second, our article may also suffer from a lack of internal validity. Although our explicative model aimed to cover the whole spectrum of a polity, alternative explanations for successfully preserving democratic institutions and everyday decision-making in times of crisis may, of course, emerge. Elements of policy learning theories, for example, may be interesting to include in the models. The rationale is that Finnish policymakers do not operate in a vacuum, and the experiences of foreign countries and mainly Scandinavian neighbors can serve as examples. Moreover, as a European Union (EU) member state, Finland had to consider specific requirements such as those relating to the freedom of movement.

Notes

1. The existing reports on Finland's response, while overall positive, also point out various weaknesses, not least regarding the lack of adequate preparation to the pandemic and communication between various authorities. See particularly Mörttinen (2021), Kihlström et al. (2022), and Stenvall et al. (2022).
2. Kihlström et al. (2022) make the important point that through the central role of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health COVID became framed primarily as a public health crisis instead of a broader societal crisis necessitating horizontal coordination between the different ministries.

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