Paper for NISPA Conference 2025

Politically robust government responses to Covid-19? Comparing government responses in five European countries

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Abstract

Academic interest is growing in how government responses to crisis-induced turbulence affect the political robustness of political systems. Governance research has provided significant theoretical advances. Yet, empirical studies remain few leaving us with limited knowledge about the political robustness of different government strategies and how they play out under varying cultural and institutional conditions. This article studies government responses to pandemic-induced turbulence in Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, and Italy, considering how these responses affected the political robustness of the political systems in each country. The study shows that all five governments used a variety of robustness strategies, but also that citizens in different countries did not react in the same way to similar government strategies. Another finding is that what is politically robust for an incumbent government may not be so for the political system, and that governments risk losing sight of democratic principles when they respond to crisis-induced turbulence.

Introduction

Societal turbulence is on the rise (Ansell et al., 2017). Here, turbulence refers to events that interact and change in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected, and unpredictable ways (Ansell et al., 2024). While societies always experience some degree of turbulence, it varies considerably over time, and it is currently intense. Turbulence can come in the form of more mundane perturbations, but much of the current turbulence is triggered by crises. The Russo–Ukrainian War, for instance, has affected societies around the world in terms of rising energy prices, shortages of certain agricultural products, and a sudden wave of refugees. Another example is the climate crisis, which is causing more frequent heatwaves, droughts and flooding, and puts pressures on agricultural systems, energy supply systems, urban planning and travel patterns. In such times crisis-induced turbulence that creates extensive uncertainty, it is paramount for researchers and decision-makers to find out how to cope with the disruptions it causes, and how to advance the capacity of the public sector to respond in an effective and legitimate fashion.

Recent strands of governance theory argue that those who govern must do more to tackle turbulence than merely bouncing back and recovering from the disruption. They must act robustly, which implies changing how they govern so as to fit the new conditions (see e.g. Ansell et al., 2021, 2023; Capano & Toth, 2022; Chelleri & Baravikaya, 2021; Howlett & Ramesh, 2022; Shen et al., 2022; Simonovic & Arunkumar, 2016). More precisely, they must adapt and innovate what they do in ways that are productive with respect to their efforts to continue to uphold core functions, purposes, and values, and/or to maintain key structural or operational architectures when disruptive events and challenges make it necessary or desirable (Ansell et al., 2024). In this literature, a core function for

a political system is to solve societal problems effectively. Purposes come in the shape of goals authorized by policy-makers and expressed in public policies. Values are constitutive institutional and cultural norms regarding how to govern. The structural architecture consists of formal institutions, while the operational architecture is normalized and routinized governance practices.

The surging research on robust governance has contributed substantially to our understanding of the repertoire of governance strategies for responding successfully to turbulent events (Ansell et al., 2021, 2024). It is important, for instance, to take political aspects of robust governance into account (Sørensen & Ansell, 2023). A focus on the politics of governance brings to light how robust governance is about both governing effectively *and* securing political legitimacy around government interventions (or lack thereof) in times of turbulence. Failing to secure the political legitimacy of governance responses to turbulent events can trigger political critique, resistance, and turmoil, which ultimately risks destabilizing the political system. The Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, meant that very large segments of people got seriously ill, and many died. At the same time, the efforts to reduce mortality rates, including lockdowns, mandatory mask wearing, testing, and vaccine requirements, unleashed critique and at times political resistance from the opposition and citizens in some countries. The political tensions over government interventions seeking to control the pandemic differed considerably between countries, which suggests variegated consequences for the political robustness of the political systems.

In a recent article, Sørensen and Ansell (2023: 73) provide a theoretical foundation for the study of political robustness. Building on their definition, we define political robustness as the *dynamic capacity of a political system to authoritatively allocate value in response to the tensions between political elites and the people* (Sørensen & Ansell, 2023: 73). At the heart of this definition lies the assumption that when turbulent events destabilize a political system, the way to stabilize the situation is to adapt and innovate how it operates to either meet, moderate, reshape, or derail such demands.

This emphasis on system adaptation and innovation resonates with David Easton's (1965) proposition that the stability of a political system hinges on its ability to channel political demands into a controlled political process. It also resonates with theories that view societies as social ecological that constantly adjust to destabilizing events and dynamics (Anderies et al., 2004; Folke et al., 2010). Applying this line of thinking to turbulent situations, we propose that the capacity and readiness of a political system to adapt and innovate in the face of turbulence is key to absorb unforeseen disruptive political demands and ensure political robustness. By way of illustration, this was what happened when teenagers, with Greta Thunberg in the lead, demanded action on climate change. While initially trying to quiet the youth, many national governments and international organizations, such as the UN and EU, changed their ways and invited the protestors into the conversation (Jung et al., 2020; Thunberg, 2019). However, efforts to further develop our understanding of what makes a political system robust suffer from lack of empirical research.

The purpose of this article is to begin filling this research gap by presenting the results of a study of how government responses to the crisis-induced turbulence triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic affected the political robustness of the political systems in five European countries. Assuming that the political robustness of a political system may come at the cost of its democratic character, we also consider the implications of the government responses for democracy. In short, the article aims to answer the following research question: *How did the efforts made by five European countries get citizens vaccinated affect the political robustness of their political systems, and what were the implications of these responses for democracy?* The study documents how the governments in Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, and Italy deploy a variety of robustness operational and

rhetorical strategies in their efforts to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the study shows that citizens in different countries did not react in the same way to similar government strategies. Finally, we find that what is politically robust for an incumbent government may not be so for the political system, and that governments risk losing sight of democratic principles when they respond to crisis-induced turbulence.

The article is structured as follows: After developing a heuristic conceptual framework for analyzing the political robustness of government strategies, the method used in the empirical study is accounted for, followed by a presentation of the results of the five case studies of government responses to Covid-19 from late winter 2020 until spring 2022. Description of the strategies employed by the five governments are followed by comparison of the findings to draw out insights regarding the relationship between government strategies and political system robustness. The conclusion summarizes the findings and highlight core insights that can advance our understanding of the factors affecting the political robustness of European political systems and the implications for upholding or advancing their democratic quality.

Politically robust governance strategies

The robustness of political systems ultimately hinges on how the actors inhabiting them respond to disruptive events, such as crisis-induced turbulence; that is, which strategies they apply and how committed and skilled they are when it comes to implementing them. Inspired by Mintzberg's (1987) seminal conceptualization of strategy and the Ferlie and Ongaro (2022) application of this approach to theories of strategic public management, we refer to "government strategies" as a collective designation for the visions, plans, and policy programs that incumbent governments present together with the actual actions they take. Such components of a strategy rarely stand out as a coherent whole and are more likely to be evolving than static. From this perspective, the mapping of government strategies entails the examination of evolving structural and behavioral occurrences. Of particular interest here is whether such strategies promote the political robustness of the political system.

As noted by Jen (2005) in her multi-disciplinary review of theories of robustness, there are two distinct strategic ways that a unit (e.g., a cell, machine, organization, or system) can respond robustly to perturbations. Firstly, a mutational robustness strategy aims to tackle them without changing the articulation of core functions, purposes, and values. What changes is how these core objectives are pursued; to illustrate, a government may remain committed to existing goals and visons for the health sector while insisting that attending to a crisis calls for new tools and measures, such as enrolling volunteers and pensioned health personnel in response to Covid-19. Secondly, a phenotypical robustness strategy seeks to rearticulate functions, purposes, and values by rearranging their relationships, rephrasing their meaning, or introducing new normative ideas while maintaining how the unit is structured and operates. An example is when a government redefines what it means to ensure public health and keep vulnerable groups safe while maintaining the existing institutional setups and governing methods. In other words, a government can govern robustly either by continuing to pursue a given set of functions, purposes, and values by reforming the institutional and procedural architecture or by redefining the objective to fit the existing modus operandi when upholding the existing functions, goals, and values is no longer feasible.

Other researchers have identified similar strategies. Upon revisiting the concept of robust action, Ferraro et al. (2015), identify three strategies that focal governance actors can use to promote robust action in a society: build a participatory architecture, encourage distributed experimentation, and perform multivocal inscription. Building such an architecture resonates well with Jen's notion of mutational robustness, as it is conducive to promoting a fast, flexible, and purposeful

reconfiguration of collaborative actions between a shifting set of actors. So does, secondly, distributed experimentation, which promotes and qualifies continuous adaption and governance practice innovation. Finally, multivocal inscription resonates with her phenotypical robustness strategy by referring to a dynamic discursive endeavor to redefine, reinterpret, and translate core governance objectives to make them relevant and meaningful in diverse contexts and under changing conditions.

Ansell et al. (2024) identify several strategies for promoting robust governance, each contributing in a specific way to keeping many options open for those who govern and for exploiting those options to respond strategically to challenging events while avoiding delimiting future options. Keeping many options open calls for the construction of ambiguous and open-ended story lines, and the establishment of institutional platform structures and procedures that support operative scalability, modularity, bricolage, ambidexterity, decentered autonomy, polyvalence, and problem-oriented collaboration.

Although none of these literatures pay explicit attention to political aspects of robust governance, they provide a valuable backdrop for specifying what characterizes politically robust governance strategies. Hence, they may help us to better understand the dynamic capacity of a political system to respond to challenging political demands in a manner that avoids undermining its continued ability to make and implement authoritative decisions. Inspired by the insights from these theories, we operate with two broad types of politically robust governance strategies: restructuration and rearticulation. Restructuration resonates with Jen's mutational strategy, Ferraro's participatory architecture, and distributed experimentation and Ansell et al.'s platforms, operative scalability, modularity, bricolage, ambidexterity, decentered autonomy, polyvalence, and collaborative governance. Rearticulation resonates with phenotypical strategy, Ferraro's multivocal inscription, and Ansell et al.'s open-ended storylines. As Table 1 illustrates, restructuration and rearticulation strategies differ in many ways, but they share the ambition of holding political options open to the political actors who use them. Note also how they tend to be complementary rather than competing.

TABLE 1 Politically robust strategies

Politically robust strategies	*Restructuration strategy*	*Rearticulation strategy*
Strategic elements	Dynamic restructuration of patterns of political participation that keeps options open	Creative reformulation of functions, purposes, and values that keeps options open
Favorable conditions	Stock of political participation platforms and modules available for strategic bricolage and ambidexterity	Ambiguous, abstract, and vague political storylines available for political tampering

Restructuration strategies aim to change the institutional design of political institutions, processes, and practices in ways that accommodate the channeling of political demands into a controlled political process. This may be achieved by restructuring the available forms of political participation to suit an emerging political purpose. The ability to do so hinges on the existence of a stock of modules for political participation among political elites and sub-elites as well as among citizens that can be flexibly combined to fit the situation. Distributed experiments with bricolage of

different participation modules builds government capacity to make politically robust choices. Restructuration strategies scale levels of political participation to shifting degrees of politicization and to find ways to regulate the patterns of political participation among actors who express their political sentiments in new, hitherto unseen ways. One way of doing so is to allow troublesome actors the autonomy to engage in contained collaborative political projects. Another option is ambidexterity; that is, to strategically invite actors to participate in processes of marginal importance and not in the processes where the important things are decided.

Rearticulation strategies aim to reinterpret and reshape the content of political narratives and storylines about what governing effectively and legitimately implies, what the political goals are, and what counts as constitutive functions and values. Such rearticulations may espouse obligations to serve the community, legality, or individual rights. Rearticulation can entail rephrasing the hierarchy between elements in a political mission statement, adding new meaning to an existing political program or ideology, introducing new friend–enemy imageries, and presenting new visions altering the meaning of existing policies or rendering them irrelevant or less attractive. An example is when there is a discursive rebalancing of the concerns for securing individual political rights and the state's obligation to serve the collective interest. Such rearticulations can transform the perceptions of what being a citizen and a government means, what a policy goal entails, and what counts as the core values conditioning political life. The rearticulation of core functions, purposes, and values is easier if the existing political storylines are relatively ambiguous, abstract, and vague so that they can be used for many different purposes and provide ample space for multivocal usage over time and space and between audiences within as well as beyond the boundaries of a society.

Restructuration and rearticulation strategies probably always play a role in politics, but they are *crucial* in turbulent times when governments face disruptive challenges that do not only call for new ways of governing but also political storylines designed to justify their actions in the eyes of potential critics (Ansell & Trondal, 2018; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021).

Before proceeding to consider how we can study the political robustness of government responses to Covid-19, it should be noted that political robustness is no panacea for handling turbulence. There are many trade-offs to face for those who seek to govern in a politically robust fashion. For one thing, adapting and innovating government responses to turbulent events takes time and may reduce the capacity to respond swiftly to sudden threats. When people began dying in large numbers in the first wave of the pandemic, governments had very limited time for strategic reflection. Another challenge is that strategic moves that might prove politically robust for a government in the short run might jeopardize its political robustness in the long run. Government rhetoric and action that are accepted in an emergency may meet intense criticism at a later stage. Moreover, responses that are effective in, for instance, bringing down mortality rates, might not be legitimate (and vice versa). Finally, what is a politically robust response for an incumbent government may not be politically robust for the political system, just as the cost of obtaining a politically robust political system may be a weakening of democracy. Hence, a set of government responses may help a government to stay in office but may simultaneously destabilize the political system.

We should also keep in mind whether a strategy promotes political robustness hinges on context, as the context will shape the *input* to the political system. Almond and Verba (2015) highlight political culture as a crucial contextual factor that may shape input, throughput and eventually also output. Thus, a political culture consists of specific citizen expectations (inputs) to their government: How it is supposed to operate and what it is presumed to provide in terms of outputs. Although (national)

political cultures are relatively stable and change slowly, Dalton and Welzel (2014) document that they do change over time and that they have done so in most European countries in recent decades in the sense that citizens have become increasingly assertive, i.e. critical, competent, and confident. This development can make it more challenging for governments to avoid triggering resistance. This is particularly the case if citizen assertiveness is not accompanied by allegiance, which involves general trust in government and political institutions. As we shall see, the assertiveness–allegiance mix varies consistently between the five European countries, and such variations are important to consider in any analysis of how government responses are likely to affect the political robustness of a political system (Welzel and Dalton, 2016). Finally, the type of welfare state is important for shaping political decisions and citizen expectations to the role of the state vis-à-vis other actors in providing welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1991). Differences in expectations can have a considerable impact on the choice of government actions and how citizens respond to these actions (*throughput*). In the case of the governing of Covid-19, the design and financing of the health care system and the national vaccination tradition, both trigger specific expectations to what the government is supposed to do and what it is able to provide. The chosen political strategies and citizen reactions will affect the *output* in terms of policy effectiveness, political robustness and democratic quality. Although this output may not change citizen expectations from one day to the next *feedback* to the context is to be expected thus changing the input that governments can expect to face next time they encounter crisis-induced turbulence (Luoma-aho et al., 2020).

Method

Drawing on the theoretical considerations, we have developed a heuristic theoretical framework that has structured the data collection strategy as visualized in appendix 1 and guided the data analysis. The framework presented in figure 1 follows the logic of and input—throughput—output model where input refers to the conditions for exerting robust governance in the individual countries (row 1,2, and 3 in appendix 1), while throughput refers to the dynamic feedback relationship between government strategies and public responses to crisis-induced turbulence (row 4, 5 and 6, 7). Output then signifies the impact of these dynamics on output in terms of the effectiveness of government responses, the reelection of the government, the political robustness of the political system and the state of democracy (row 8, 9 and 10). The feedback alludes to the potential impact of an output on systemic features and culture in a country.

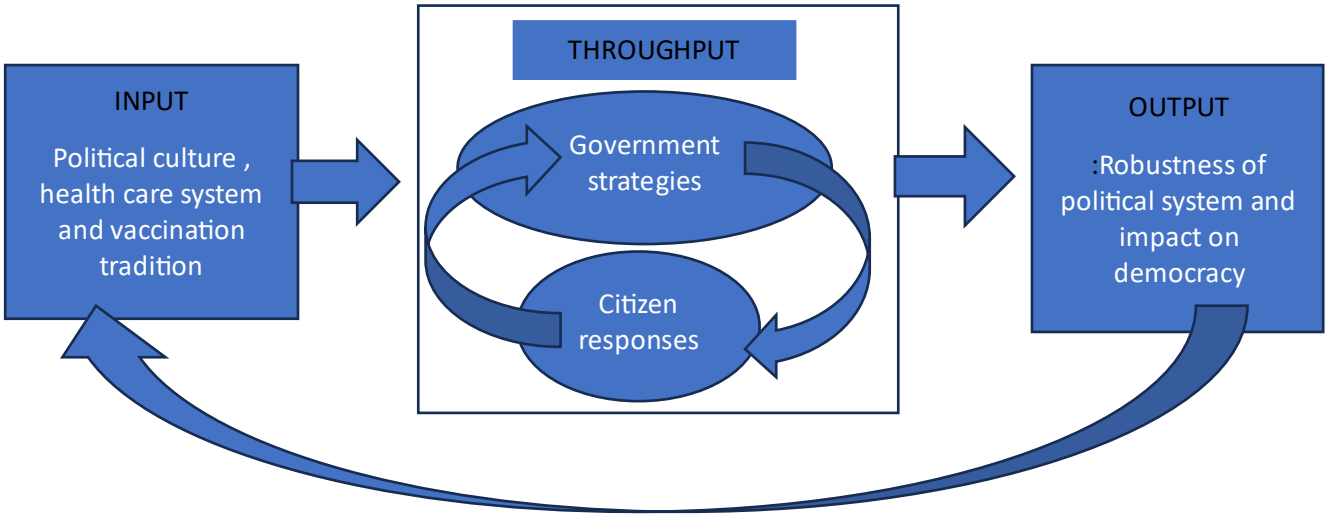

FIGURE 1 *Heuristic theoretical framework for studying the impact of government strategies on political system robustness.*

Our basic assumption is that political system robustness is a product of how governments respond to turbulent events and to the subsequent responses from citizens, which are conditioned by the political culture in a country.

The empirical analysis applies this theoretical framework in a study of the political robustness of the government strategies applied by five European governments in their respective efforts to tackle the turbulence triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic (late winter 2020 to spring 2022). Following a most dissimilar system design, the five selected countries are Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, and Italy, which represent the diverse geography, democratic regime forms, and political cultures in Europe. This diversity is conducive to capturing variations in how European governments operate and how institutional and cultural conditions influence how the strategies employed by incumbent governments affect the political robustness of their political systems and the state of democracy.

We narrow our focus to the main strategies the governments used to get people vaccinated rather than the detailed practicalities around these issues. These strategies are interesting in the present context because they tend to trigger political tension in most countries. Moreover, this focus is well-suited for comparative analysis, because the governments faced similar challenges as the pandemic evolved. The main challenges were the distribution of the scarce vaccines in the early days of the pandemic and how to cope with those who refused to get vaccinated in the later phases, when vaccines were readily available.

To allow for a multi-case analysis, in-depth single-country case studies of government strategies and public responses were prepared, based on a common analytical template to study events as they evolved over time in specific local settings. The research involved the exploration of the following sources: existing research on government approaches to Covid-19, data from speeches by leading politicians and civil society actors; governmental policy documents; and the available statistics. The mix of sources allowed an adequate level of data triangulation to be maintained, thus improving the accuracy of interpretation and analysis.

In analyzing the case studies, a classic multi-case strategy – double-step approach for content analysis – was used (Yin, 2017). First, the single-case studies were scrutinized, and their descriptive content was classified into specific thematic and interpretative codes based on the theoretical background. Second, the cross-case analysis of the data was conducted, thus locating and examining similarities and differences across the cases. The results of these studies are condensed in Appendix 1.

Case analysis

The in-depth case studies summarized in the appendix allow us to conduct a comparative analysis of the robustness strategies deployed by the governments in its efforts to get citizens vaccinated in the five countries. We also consider the impact of these strategies on political system robustness and the state of democracy. We begin by describing the differences between the countries in terms of contextual factors, such as the political culture, healthcare funding and expenditure, and vaccination traditions, which are factors that we assume to affect the feasibility and outcome of alternative vaccination policies most directly. We then compare the government strategies applied in each country before evaluating the political robustness of these strategies and examining how the public responded to them and how the governments tackled incidents of resistance. After assessing the political robustness of these responses, we discuss the broader implications of the strategies used for

the political robustness of the five political systems, just as we consider the implications for democracy. A key issue is whether the ability of an incumbent government to stay in power may in some instances come at the cost of the robustness of the political system or its democratic quality.

Input factors

In terms of input factors, the political cultures of the five countries vary notably. Key differences are the levels of general trust and trust in politicians, degrees of political polarization, voter turnout, how much political parties and government and civil society actors collaborate, and the political self-confidence of the citizenry (International Idea; European Social Survey, 2018; Welzel & Dalton, 2016). Danish political culture stands out as an outlier: In contrast to the other countries, there are high levels of generalized trust, moderate trust in politicians, low levels of political polarization, and high voter turnout, which may be related to its relatively long democratic history. There are also strong traditions for collaboration in parliament as well as between state and civil society actors, which is supported by extensive political decentralization. Traditions for decentralized political power are also found in Italy, which also has a relatively long democratic history. In contrast, Czechia, Estonia, and Hungary are new democracies with traditions for centralized political power and limited involvement of citizens and civil society. Regarding citizen attitudes toward politicians and government, the outlier is Hungary. While the citizens in the other four countries tend to be assertive and for the most part also allegiant, Hungarian citizens are neither; they are generally passive and express limited interest in politics. These differences in political culture mean that the five governments in question faced radically different challenges to respond in a politically robust fashion to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The mode and amount of healthcare funding also vary between the five countries. In Czechia and Estonia, most funding stems from social insurance, whereas the state is the main funder in Denmark, Hungary, and Italy. Healthcare spending is markedly higher in Czechia, Denmark, and Italy than in Estonia and Hungary (Eurostat, 2020). These differences could influence government responses to Covid-19; for example, high rates of state funding could render highly interventionist health measures more acceptable. Another factor possibly affecting such responses are vaccination traditions. Are there traditions for compulsory vaccinations or are they voluntary? And how do citizens normally respond to them? We assume that a break with tradition is likely to stir more unrest and resistance than a continuation of existing practices. For instance, there are traditions for voluntary vaccination in Denmark and Estonia, whereas compulsory mass vaccination has been conducted repeatedly in Czechia, Hungary, and Italy.

Throughput

We now turn to the restructuration strategies applied by the five governments. We examined both the formal legal changes and more informal modifications in government operations. Among the most manifest temporary restructurations was the declaration of a state of emergency in Czechia, Estonia, and Italy in late 2020. This enabled harsh regulations, the concentration of power with central government, and limited parliamentary oversight. The Danish restrictions were relatively mild (aside from the illegal culling of the entire mink population), and a temporary centralization of pandemic responses in the hands of the government. In Hungary, the restrictions were relatively lax from the second wave onward, but more direct messaging to citizens was introduced and restrictions were placed on information flows and media access. When vaccinations became available in 2021, all five countries (albeit only for a short period in Czechia) introduced a Covid-19 pass to incentivize people to get vaccinated. The pass can be seen as a form of highly structured voluntarism: “If you want to venture into society, you must be vaccinated.” The passes were required for a shorter or longer period in the individual countries.

There were also more permanent restructurations in the five countries. Hungary stands out as it passed constitutional changes delimiting parliamentary control with emergency responses together with laws weakening parliamentary control over the government and curbing local government influence. Other permanent changes included new restrictions on LGBTQ rights and changes to criminal law restricting the freedom of expression. Although to a much lesser degree, Denmark, Estonia, and Italy also saw some enduring legal changes, mainly in the form of reformed emergency laws that centralized power to government and hampered opposition. In Czechia, the only permanent change was informal rather than formal, coming in the shape of marked growth in fast-track legislative practices enhancing the risk of jeopardizing the thoroughness of the legislative process. In sum, restructuration appeared to be a widely used government strategy for dealing with the pandemic-induced turbulence, and the (to some extent) lasting trend in these changes was to enhance the capacity of the government to take swift and decisive action in emergency situations.

The pandemic induced turbulence also resulted in substantial rearticulations of the function, purpose, and value of public health care measures. The general trend in these otherwise very different rearticulations was a shift in focus from providing healthcare to all to rallying citizens around the collective goal of protecting vulnerable groups and avoiding overburdening the healthcare sector by changing citizens' everyday behavior. The Czech government rhetoric shifted from recommendations to a strict approach accompanied by statements like "The government orders…" It also referred to the pandemic as a state of war. The Danish government advocated for citizens to show "societal consciousness," and the Estonian government stressed the need for solidarity and civic responsibility. In Italy, the government focused on supporting the professional effectivity of healthcare workers, while the Hungarian government increasingly emphasized the importance of keeping the country running as justification for lax social distancing regulations. Another rearticulation strategy was the government rhetoric regarding who should be blamed for the causes and consequences of the pandemic. While the Hungarian government initially blamed immigrants for bringing the pandemic to the country, it later blamed Brussels for failing to provide sufficient and effective vaccines. In Czechia and Denmark, there was a growing tendency to blame anti-vaxxers for jeopardizing the safety of vulnerable people.

How effective, then, did the government responses prove to be in terms of getting citizens vaccinated, limiting death rates, and securing economic growth and prosperity? Our assessment is based on data from the Covid-19 Vaccine Tracker (ECDC, 2023), Covid-19 death rates (STASTISTA, 2024), EUROSTAT (2024) assessments of economic growth, and the World Bank (2023) Government Effectiveness Index. One predicament is that there are numerous relevant data sources, and they do not always produce the same results (e.g., Our World in Data (2023) mortality rate statistics differ from the STATISTICA figures). By combining outcome measures from databases reporting different relevant outcomes, we try to draw a reliable picture of the performance of the five governments. Note also that it is very difficult to assess the causality between government actions and effectiveness in terms of vaccination rates, mortality, and economic recovery after a pandemic. For instance, the fact that the Coronavirus first arrived in Italy most likely contributed to the high mortality rate there. Nevertheless, such data is an important backdrop for reflecting on how effectiveness affects a government's ability to legitimize its actions. The data suggest that Denmark stands out as the most effective government in terms of high vaccination rates, low mortality rates, and quick economic recovery. The Czech, Estonian, and Italian outcomes were more mixed. In Czechia, the vaccination rate was relatively low and mortality rates high, but the economic recovery was swift. In Estonia, the vaccination rate was also relatively low but so was the mortality rate, while the economic recovery was slow, which might be due to the outbreak of the

Russo–Ukrainian War. The vaccination rate in Italy was the highest of all five countries, but the mortality rate was also relatively high and the economic recovery swift. The least effective country is Hungary, with a relatively high vaccination rate but the highest number of deaths in Europe and a slow economic recovery. An interesting lesson from this comparison is how there seem to be other factors at play than vaccination rates influencing the number of deaths and economic recovery. These variations in effectiveness follow the general government performance measured by the World Bank (2023) Government Effectiveness Index.

Output

It is now time to assess how the government strategies affected the political robustness of the political systems in the five countries. At a general level, we found all five governments adapted and innovated their institutions, processes, and rhetoric as the pandemic hit and evolved. A variety of governance tools and storylines were employed that enhanced the options open to the incumbent government. Among them were rearticulations stressing the importance of citizen compliance with government policies together with restructuration strategies enhancing government authority in emergency situations and reducing the ability of citizens and opposition to criticize how they used this authority. In most countries, some of these institutional procedural restructurations were made permanent, as in the form of the use of existing emergency regulations providing governments with greater legal authority to act as they see fit and/or the introduction of informal innovative procedures for passing new laws.

The next question is whether these adaptations and innovations proved successful for the incumbent governments in their efforts to muster popular support for their responses to the pandemic, and how their ability to do so developed over time. A general trend is that the initial support for government interventions was considerable but that it tended to wane over time. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent this was related to the effectiveness of these interventions. As we saw, the effectiveness of government responses to Covid-19 varied considerably but arriving at a conclusion regarding how those variations in effectiveness affected the political legitimacy of the respective governments is no easy matter. One way is to study the connection between government effectiveness and re-election. Interestingly, only the Hungarian government managed to stay in office after the first post-Covid 19 election. In Czechia the incumbent government lost the election. In Italy all the parties, center-left and center-right, that had supported Draghi's technocratic government lost, and in Estonia and Denmark the incumbent government parties became part of new government coalition. It is noteworthy that the governments that managed to stay in power either on its own or as part of a government coalition performed very differently. Note e.g., that the Danish government was the most effective while Hungarian government was the least effective of the five with regard to mortality rates and economic recovery. This finding suggests that the political robustness of an incumbent government could be only marginally related to its effectiveness. What stands out is the importance of a government's ability to manage the public opinion either by engaging the public in conversations regarding how to respond to turbulent events (Denmark) or by excluding them from doing so (Hungary). Another interesting observation is how, of the five governments, only Denmark did not call a formal state of emergency or introduced other temporal or permanent legal restrictions on individual freedoms. This suggests that extensive use of hard power regulations that severely affect all citizens' lives can backfire in terms of public support

for the government when the immediate danger has passed. In other words, it can reduce the legitimacy enjoyed by an incumbent government.

However, what secures the perseverance of an incumbent government may not secure the political robustness of the political system. It is noteworthy that between 2019 and 2023 there was a marked drop in trust in government and public administration in Czechia, Denmark, and Estonia, but not in Italy and Hungary. This lost trust in public authorities and institutions in some countries but not others could be seen to fluctuate with citizen expectations to government performance and responsiveness; in countries where expectations are high, trust is more likely to fall when expectations are not met, which again relates to political culture.

When considering the political robustness of a political system, it is also relevant to assess the implications of the government strategies for the political regime form, which in Europe refers to the state of democracy. By this we allude to the perseverance of key political institutions (e.g., free public debate, independent judiciary, scope for the opposition to pose critique of the government, and protection of citizen's political rights). While the political system may thrive, it may do so at the cost of its democratic character. The first finding is that we saw a temporary weakening of democracy in all five countries, which stemmed from both a centralization of executive powers in some countries and the activation of emergency rules that suspended civil and political rights. This development was supported by the emergence of political rhetoric down-toning citizen rights by emphasizing what citizens are obliged to do for the state and society, as opposed to what the state and society can do protect the citizenry. Permanent restructurations were introduced in most countries, albeit with marked variations. Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, and Italy all saw the centralization of executive power in emergency situations. In Hungary, the legal changes included a constitutional amendment enhancing the government's ability to govern without parliamentary oversight together with other legal changes hampering free political debate and political opposition. The Varieties of Democracy annual reports are interesting in this context (V-DEM, 2020, 2021, 2023, 2024), which assess the state of democracy in all countries in the world on a yearly basis. Interestingly, the reports document that Czechia and Denmark, which counted as 'full-fledged liberal democracies' (LD) in 2019, dropped to 'liberal democracies', which is ranked lower (LD-) in 2021, only to regain their LD position in 2022 and maintain it in 2023. Italy experienced a similar drop but has not recovered its position as full-fledged LD. Hungary and Estonia stand in stark contrast. While Estonia maintained its position as LD throughout the pandemic, Hungary was already on a downward slope in 2019, having fallen to an 'electoral autocracy' (EA+) before the pandemic, and it continued to backslide to a 'full-fledged electoral autocracy' (EA) in 2023. These are noteworthy findings and show that the impact of government responses aiming to stabilize a given regime in the face of crisis-induced turbulence can vary significantly. Democracy can remain unaffected, it can decline for a shorter period only to return to its former strength, and in some cases the decline can be more enduring. The findings also indicate that in countries where democracy is already weak when crisis hits, a further democratic decline is likely. An interesting consideration is whether institutions and dynamics that promote regular shifts in government constellations may serve as a guard for democratic decline, whereas a government that stays in power will tend to use crisis-induced turbulence as an excuse for undermining democratic values and institutions. These findings beg the question whether European democracies are sufficiently bolstered to survive periods of intense turbulence as those we currently experience and are likely to continue well into the future.

Discussion

We found that all five governments used a variety of restructuration and rearticulation strategies in response to the turbulence created by Covid-19. The governments proved willing and able to adapt and innovate their respective governance systems to the occasion, and rather than returning to how they governed before the pandemic, the governments all made lasting formal and/or informal changes that enhanced the systemic readiness to cope with future emergencies.

More precisely, our study points to five interesting findings. Firstly, the harshness of the government strategies varied importantly, particularly in the first wave of the pandemic, where some countries forced citizens to remain at home while others introduced more lenient measures, encouraging citizens to tread carefully. In the second phase, all five countries began to incentivize rather than force the citizens to comply with vaccination requirements by means of Covid-19 passes, although some usages were more restrictive than others. One noteworthy observation is that the governments that applied relatively lenient restrictions managed to stay in office after the next election, whereas those employing more harsh strategies lost the subsequent election. This finding indicates that lenient policy responses may be more politically robust for an incumbent government, even when doing so is less effective in terms of public health outcomes. Thus, it could be more politically robust to pursue effectiveness by means of incentives placing pressure on individuals to act in a certain way and delimiting the use of restrictive measures targeting specific groups (e.g., "anti-vaxxers") rather than the public at large.

Another finding is that the citizens of the five countries reacted somewhat differently toward the same measure, such as the Covid pass. While this measure was broadly accepted in Denmark, it stirred tensions in Italy and elsewhere. This might be due to contextual factors, such as political culture, vaccination traditions, and expectations that the public healthcare system plays an important role for how governments can build support for their responses to turbulent events. To illustrate, the reasons for the rather soft governance tools used in Denmark proved politically robust for the political system included a strong allegiant political culture, lengthy traditions regarding voluntary vaccination, and high expectations to public welfare services. Another proposition would then be that the use of hard power tools and the introduction of illiberal restrictions that violate the civil and political rights of the opposition and citizen may be more politically robust in countries with fewer assertive citizens, lacking traditions for compulsory vaccination, and low expectations to public healthcare.

Thirdly, the variations in citizen reactions had implications for the effectiveness of the strategies. While the public in all five countries tended to be supportive of government policies in the early days of the pandemic, criticism increased as time passed, although more in some countries than in others. In Denmark, the criticism came late and mainly from a small group of anti-vaxxers and opposition parties that continued to criticize the government for illegally culling the mink. The support from the public remained strong, as evidenced by how the ruling party regained power in the 2022 election, albeit as part of a coalition government. The same occurred in Estonia. In Czechia and Italy, criticism and protests grew and mainly addressed the severity of the restrictions. The public resistance in both countries was stimulated by the opposition, and in Czechia and Italy the opposition managed to win the next election. It is noteworthy that most of the critical voices in Hungary were not about the severity but rather the laxity of the Covid-19 restrictions. There was also criticism of the undermining of the rights of certain groups and the political rights for all, and the use of "Eastern" (Russian and Chinese) vaccines, which many worried were ineffective.

These differentiated public reactions from the public can to some extent be explained by the character of the government strategies. In Denmark, where the government enjoyed public support throughout the pandemic, both the temporary and lasting restrictions were relatively mild, just as the government succeeded in getting people vaccinated, limiting the number of mortalities, and supporting the economy. In Czechia, Estonia, and Italy, where protests were more intense, the government started by declaring a state of emergency, although the public restrictions were more severe in Czechia and Italy than in Estonia. Nevertheless, they were less successful in keeping the mortality rate down and reinvigorating the economy than in Denmark. In Hungary, the high mortality rates and slow economic recovery may be attributed to the lax Covid-19 restrictions, and the undermining of citizens' political rights to engage in open and free debate helps to explain the limited criticism of the ineffectiveness of the Covid-19 policies.

However, explaining how the public reacted in different countries should not only account for government strategies and government performance but also the expectations of the citizens in each country and not least from differences in political culture. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that the Danish population supported the government during the pandemic more than in the other countries. While highly assertive, Danish citizens are also highly allegiant in their view on public authorities. This combination of assertiveness and allegiance is a product of long traditions regarding strong state–civil society collaboration as well as between the government and opposition, and a strongly decentralized political structure (Krogh et al 2022). This was also apparent in the preparation of the Covid-19 responses. The fact that citizens in Czechia, Estonia, and Italy are also relatively assertive but less allegiant implies that they are more inclined to be government critical. The less allegiant Czech and Estonian political cultures are possibly outcomes of the limited involvement of civil society in national policymaking and long traditions of centralized political power. In Italy, the low level of allegiance among Italian citizens goes hand in hand with a highly decentralized political system, which reflects longstanding cultural differences between the north and south of the country (e.g., civil society is more active in the former and less so in the latter). Furthermore, different local political traditions in the northern regions seem to account for different levels of civic engagement, which Putnam (1994) found to be particularly strong in the traditional leftwing regions in the center of the country (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, and Umbria), despite these local cultures having undergone profound changes in the last two decades. Another surprising finding is that some Hungarian citizens put up resistance to the government's vaccination policies and lax restrictions given that the political culture there is characterized by low allegiance together with low assertiveness.

Government response to public feedback is important when assessing political robustness. To what extent did the respective governments attempt to meet, moderate, reshape, or derail the resistance? Three types of responses seem to have been applied: hard power, incentives, and soft power. In Czechia and Denmark, the government pressed the police and legal system to crack down on demonstrations, but with little success. The Hungarian government successfully used a new penal code to oppress and punish dissidents selectively. In all five countries, a "Covid pass" with varying testing and vaccine requirements was used to incentivize individual citizens to comply with unpopular restrictions. Soft power was used in Hungary, which allowed those skeptical of Eastern vaccines to receive Western ones instead. In Estonia, the government listened to critics but did not change its behavior, while the Italian government removed restrictions that were particularly unpopular but maintained others.

A fourth finding is that there seems to be a relatively weak connection between the effectiveness and legitimacy of government actions. Hence, it is striking how the Hungarian government, which performed comparatively poorly, managed to stay in power, whereas the government constellations in the other four countries changed in one way or another. This finding indicates that political robustness is closely linked to the ability of incumbent political leaders to frame their performance as effective and successful while blaming others for failures (Sørensen, 2020; Tucker, 1995). A lesson to draw from this could be that political robustness hinges on the rhetorical skills of political leaders and the rearticulation strategies that they launch in their efforts to mobilize and maintain political followership.

Fifthly, our study points to certain trade-offs between short-term government robustness and long-term political system robustness. As noted earlier, the political robustness of an incumbent government is closely related to its ability to get reelected or, if this is not possible, to leave office without having burned all their bridges in terms of ability to regain power in the foreseeable future. As we saw, some governments managed to remain in power while others lost the following election. Moreover, we saw that what was politically robust for an incumbent government may not ensure the robustness of the political system. An indication of this is a marked drop in trust in government in all countries, except Italy, regardless of whether the government was reelected. Thus, the (short-term) robustness of a government clearly does not necessarily lead to political system robustness. One can speculate as to whether a government can survive—remain robust—when it comes at the cost of the robustness of the political system. We would assume this to be unlikely in the long run, but further studies are required to confirm this.

In sum, this study suggests that the political robustness of an incumbent government may come at the price of not only the political robustness but also of the democratic quality of a political system. By democratic quality, we allude to the ability of a political system to continue to serve key democratic functions, purposes, and values while upholding key institutional features associated with doing so. The study brings to light how governments, which engage in strategic restructuration and rearticulation of the content and form of governing in response to turbulent events and challenges, may lose sight of democratic principles or even use the turbulence as an opportunity to weaken democracy to enhance their capacity for swift action and their ability to stay in power when confronted with challenging political demands. This finding stresses the importance of further considering the relationship between political robustness and democratic perseverance and points to the relevance of developing a democratic theory of political robustness. This is an important task for future research.

Conclusion

Based on the above findings, we can now cautiously attempt to consider how the government responses to Covid-19 in five European countries affected the political robustness of their political systems, and we can ponder the implications of these responses for democracy. At a general level, it can be concluded that the many structural and rhetorical adaptions and innovations employed by the governments in their efforts to respond robustly to the pandemic came at the cost of the political robustness of the political system in Czechia, Denmark, and Estonia in terms of waning trust in government and public administration. Corresponding decline is not found to the same extent in Hungary and Italy. This is thought-provoking given that the three countries that V-DEM rank as full-fledged democracies seem to be more vulnerable to government adaptations and innovations that grant government extended authority to perform affirmative action than two lower-ranked

countries. This finding suggests that liberal democracies face specific challenges with respect to ensuring that government adaptations and innovations will not undermine the political robustness of the political system. However, it is worth noting that while these three countries regained their status as full-fledged liberal democracies, Hungarian democracy continued its decline and Italian democracy had not yet recovered in 2023. One explanation might be that in countries where citizens have relatively high expectations of the effectiveness and legitimacy of government actions, government responses (to crisis situations) that are deemed ineffective and illegitimate have a relatively strong impact on citizen trust. This raises the question of how to avoid such situations while living in turbulent times that will trigger government actions that, over time, will weaken liberal democracies while leaving weak democracies and electoral autocracies unharmed. Answering this question calls for a focused effort in the research community to consider how to advance the political robustness of liberal democracies and to identify restructuration and rearticulation strategies that the governments in these countries can apply in their efforts to respond to challenging political demands and events in a manner that will not ultimately undermine the political robustness of the democratic political system.

The paper has several limitations. Above all, it represents an initial attempt at applying a concept of political robustness in an empirical study, and much more research is needed before we can draw solid conclusions regarding what can be learned from employing a concept of political robustness to studies of how political systems can respond to turbulent events by adapting and innovating how and what they govern, together with the consequences of doing so. Secondly, there is a pressing need for more systematic studies illuminating how contextual conditions such as those mentioned in this paper affect the political robustness of government actors. Despite the shortcomings of this study, we hope to inspire other researchers to join us in developing a richer understanding of the barriers and drivers, the pitfalls and potentials, and the dilemmas and trade-offs at play when governments operate in turbulent times.

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Appendix 1

Case findings	**Czechia**	**Denmark**	**Estonia**	**Hungary**	**Italy**
1. *Political culture (European Social Survey, 2018 (0–10 scale; International Idea, 2024; Welzel and Dalton, 2016)*	Short democratic history; polarized political climate; weak ties between parties and strong civil society; low generalized trust (4.9) and low trust in politicians (3.6); moderate voter turnout average (60%); citizens with low allegiance norms (4.8) and moderate assertiveness (5.2); traditions for centralized political power.	Long democratic history; widespread collaboration in parliament, in the public, and between state and civil society; high levels of generalized trust (7.6) and moderate trust in politicians (5.2), high voter turnout average (85%); Citizens with high allegiance norms (7.1) and high assertiveness (6.2); traditions for extensive political decentralization.	Short democratic history, limited involvement of the public, civil society, and organized interests in policy-making; moderate generalized trust (5.6) and low trust in politicians (3.9); moderate voter turnout average (63%); citizens with moderate allegiance norms (5.9) and moderate assertiveness (5.5); traditions for centralized political power.	Short democratic history; high levels of political polarization; limited involvement of civil society and citizens; low generalized trust (4.8) and low trust in politicians (4.0); moderate voter turnout average (67%); citizens with low allegiance norms (4.5) and low assertiveness (3.4). They are passive and show little interest in politics; long traditions for centralized political power.	Relatively long democratic history; Adversarial political climate in parliament; active civil society in north, less so in the south; low generalized trust (4.8) and low trust in politicians (3.0); high voter turnout average (79%); citizens with moderate allegiance norms (6.2) and moderate assertiveness (5.5); traditions for extensive political decentralization.
2. *Healthcare funding and general role of public healthcare (EUROSTAT, 2020)*	Compulsory statutory health insurance; high level of equality in access; total health spending: 9.8% of GDP (relatively high in the EU).	Funded by public sector supplemented by private insurance, increasing inequality; total health spending: 10.2% of GDP (high in the EU).	2/3 financed by social insurance tax; high level of equality in access; total health spending: 7.6% of GDP (low in EU).	2/3 financed by the public sector; well-off citizens turn to private/foreign providers, creating inequalities; total spending: 7.6% of GDP (low in EU).	Mainly funded by the public sector; the decentered structure creates regional health inequalities; total spending: 9.8% (relatively high in EU).
3. *Vaccination tradition*	Compulsory, high compliance.	Voluntary, high compliance.	Voluntary, moderate compliance.	Compulsory, high compliance.	Compulsory, high compliance.

4. *Restructuration strategy (formal and informal changes)*	TEMPORARY: Relatively harsh "state of emergency" restrictions; weakening of parliamentary oversight over government; Covid pass; suspension of liberty rights in emergency law; a turn to fast-track legislation. LASTING: Fast-track legislation practices.	TEMPORARY: Relatively mild restrictions (exception: the government's illegal order to culling all mink); Covid pass; sundown law centralizing powers to government. LASTING: Doubled sentences for hindering efforts to handle the pandemic and a law centralizing pandemic control.	TEMPORARY: Immediate declaration of state of emergency and lockdowns, but later rather mild restrictions; limitation of parliamentary oversight; formation of a scientific advisory board and a "vaccination czar." LASTING: Legal amendments to several laws centralizing crisis regulation to certain government organizations.	TEMPORARY: Restrictions on information flows and media access; collection of citizens' emails to spread information and political propaganda; Covid pass. LASTING: Constitutional changes limiting parliamentary emergency control; laws weakening local government, the opposition, and rights of LGBTQ and freedom of expression.	TEMPORARY: Immediate state of emergency introducing severe restrictions; decree delegating power from parliament and regions to PM; formation of several specialized advisory task forces; Covid pass. LASTING: Centralization of emergency response powers, which could ultimately weaken the parliament.
5. *Re-articulation strategy*	Recommendations were gradually rephrased as requirements; reference to the pandemic as a state of war and the justification of restrictions gradually became to protect the elderly and health workers; Extensive shaming of anti-vaxxers.	Introduction of term "societal consciousness" to encourage compliance with regulations; justification of restrictions changed from protecting citizens to protecting the healthcare sector; introduction of the term calculated risk; Extensive shaming of anti-vaxxers.	Shift from a long domination of neo-liberalist rhetoric to voicing of solidarity and civic responsibility; Shift of purpose from economic growth to protecting the vulnerable and the healthcare system; increasing reference to collaboration as a valuable form of governance.	Shift in rhetoric from protecting lives to keeping the country running; blame for the pandemic shifted from immigrants to opposition-led local governments (esp. Budapest) and "Brussels"; Eastern (Russian and Chinese) vaccines were approved and used.	The Conte government used a paternalistic "father of the nation" rhetoric in the first phase, while in the second phase the Draghi government emphasized organizational professionalism and effectiveness.

6. *Citizen responses*	Supportive in the early days but increasing criticism and protests; government lost 2021 election; slight increase of vaccine hesitancy; the political opposition nurtured the criticism.	Apart from a few libertarians and anti-vaxxers, the public responded positively; the opposition was supportive (except for the culling of mink); the government party remained popular and won the 2022 election.	General support for lockdowns; vaccination resistance from some (ethnic) groups – mostly peaceful although a few attacks on health experts and some demonstrations ; a populist party spurred the criticism.	Some criticism of the use of the introduction of anti-liberal restrictions, the lax lockdowns, reliance on Eastern vaccines, and authoritarian governance from parts of the public and opposition parties.	There was relatively broad support for government policies but also intense protests over the severity of the restrictions, the vaccine campaign, and the Covid pass. The Brothers of Italy (who won the 2022 election) nurtured the protests.
7. *Government responses to citizen responses*	The government ordered the police to prevent some large gatherings, but this was not fully carried out in practice; adjustments made to the Covid pass.	The government ordered the police to crack down very harshly on demonstrations and tried to get participants indicted with the moderated pandemic law but lost the case; adjustments made to the Covid pass.	The government and parliament listened to critical voices but made no adjustments; there were a few confrontations between police and demonstrators.	Using the penal code, the government radically and selectively oppressed dissidents; allowed those skeptical of Eastern vaccines to choose Western ones.	Softening a number of restrictions; made Covid vaccination pass compulsory in all workplaces.
8. *Government performance (Eurostat on Economic Growth 2020–2023); Vaccine Tracker; Statista deaths/ 100,000; World Bank Government Performance Index)*	Modestly effective performance: 65.2% received at least one vaccine; 395 deaths/100,000 ; modest economic recovery in real GDP growth: from –5.5 to +0.3%; World Bank assessment of	Effective performance: 81.3% at least one vaccine; 137 deaths; effective economic recovery in real GDP growth: from –2.4 to +1.8%). World Bank assessment of general government	Modestly effective performance: 63.5% at least one vaccine; 217 deaths; modest economic recovery in real GDP growth: from –1.0 to –3.0%; World Bank assessment of general	Limited effectiveness in performance: 65.3% at least one vaccine; 496 deaths; weak economic recovery in real GDP growth: from –4.5 to –0.9%; World Bank assessment of	Modestly effective performance: 85.6% at least one vaccine; 310 deaths; modest economic recovery in real GDP growth: from –9.0 to +0.9%; World Bank assessment of general

	general government effectiveness around 1.	effectiveness around 1.90.	government effectiveness around 1.30.	general government effectiveness around 0.50.	government effectiveness around 0.40.
9. *Assessment of the political robustness of the government and the political system (Eurobarometer 2019/2023)*	GOVERNMENT: The government lost 2021 election. POLITICAL SYSTEM: Waning trust in government (from 37 to 30) and in public administration (from 61 to 55).	GOVERNMENT: After 2022 election, the government remained in power. POLITICAL SYSTEM: Waning trust in government (59 to 52), stable high-level trust in public administration (76 to 75).	GOVERNMENT: The government coalition changed between elections and the leading political power formed a new coalition after 2023 elections. POLITICAL SYSTEM: Waning trust in government (46 to 39) and in public administration (65 to 59).	GOVERNMENT: The government won 2022 election. POLITICAL SYSTEM: Stable trust in government at 48 and slight drop in trust in public administration (62 to 61).	GOVERNMENT: The parties that supported the none-elected technocratic Draghi government lost the 2022 election. POLITICAL SYSTEM: Increased trust in government (30 to 33) and a slight drop in trust in public administration (32 to 31).
10. *Assessment of the impact of government actions on democracy (V-DEM, 2020–2024)*	Methods used to curb protesters weakening democratic rights, such as freedom of speech and the ability of the public to hold government to account; fast-track procedures have centralized political power in the executive branch; V-DEM reports a weakening of democracy to LD- status (a liberal democracy that could rank lower) in 2020, and then a	Stigmatization and legal restrictions against protestors and the lasting centralization of pandemic control weakens freedom of speech and the ability of the public to hold government to account; V-DEM reports document a marked weakening of democracy to LD- in 2020, but a speedy recovery to LD (full-fledged liberal democracy).	Centralization of power to government and the weakening of the parliament, the opposition, local municipalities, and civil society actors weakens political accountability; V-DEM has continuously ranked it as a full-fledged liberal democracy (LD) and noted a slight strengthening of democracy in 2020.	"Flexible" laws allowing for selective application undermine freedom of speech, political competition, and parliamentary oversight; Reduced autonomy to local government; V-DEM reports weakening of democracy that already started before 2020 and from being ranked as an EA+ in 2019, which is a relatively democratic	Enhanced power to the executive in emergency situations that might in the long term jeopardize the key role of parliament and core democratic features, such as freedom of speech and the ability of the public to hold government accountable; V-DEM ranked Italy a full-fledged liberal democracy (LD) in 2019, but it already dropped in 2020 to LD-

	gradual recovery to LD, which is a full-fledged liberal democracy in 2023.			electoral autocracy. In 2023, it has declined to a full-fledged electoral autocracy.	and has stayed there.

Case Data

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