



Peer reviewed article

Centralized leadership, ministerial dominance, and improvised instruments: The governance of COVID in Finland

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Abstract

Analyzing the governance of the COVID crisis in Finland, this article shows that in terms of organization and communication, the strategy combined elements of centralized leadership, ministerial dominance, and scientific expertise. The government adopted an uncertainty avoidance approach in mid-March 2020, declaring the state of emergency and imposing strict anti-pandemic measures. The first wave of the pandemic was characterized by a sense of national urgency both in terms of policy and public opinion, which appreciated the active leadership of the government. Subsequently, the government shifted to a more decentralized pandemic governance under normal legislation, with targeted regional solutions favoured more instead of nation-wide measures. This produced occasional tensions between regional authorities and the government. The Prime Minister's Office was in charge, but the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health retained most of the actual decision-making and horizontal coordination, while communication created some challenges. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare was highly visible throughout the crisis, but occasionally the views of the health authorities and the executive differed.

Keywords: COVID, Finland, governance, leadership, strategy

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Introduction

During the COVID pandemic Finland has received a lot of positive coverage in international media, with Finland categorized among the 'best-performing' countries in handling the crisis.¹ Indeed, the number of infections and deaths has remained low, which, in addition to any specific government policies, is probably explained by various factors, including the tendency of Finns to obey authorities and a cultural respect for personal space.

In this article we do not evaluate the effectiveness of governmental COVID policies in Finland. Instead, we examine the governance of the pandemic in Finland, with a particular focus on leadership and organizational choices. The analysis also shows the linkages between policies and the political and legal regime of the country. The time period we cover is from early 2020 to the summer of 2021. After the initial three-month state of emergency, Finland primarily followed the hybrid strategy, defined here as "a move from extensive restrictive measures to enhanced management of the pandemic. Alongside the controlled dismantling of restrictive measures, the strategy focuses on testing, tracing, isolating and treating" (Tiirinki et al., 2020, p. 653). Overall, the government, acting under considerable pressure and uncertainty, needed to improvise and design policies never tested before. While Finland is a unitary state, the government at times found itself constrained by sub-national authorities. Another interesting dimension is the status of expert knowledge, with the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) highly visible throughout the crisis. Yet, there were also policy differences between health authorities and the executive.

Leadership analysis in turn shows centralization in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) combined with Ministry of Social Affairs and Health responsible for much of the actual policy-making. The coalition cabinet led by Prime Minister (PM) Sanna Marin stayed mainly cohesive, in part by delaying difficult decisions until the pandemic is over. In line with the 'rally around the flag' phenomenon where nations unite around their leaders during crisis (Mueller, 1970), normal politics was initially 'put on hold' and the public was highly supportive of Marin and other leaders. Standard patterns of party-political contestation started to emerge gradually, but the opposition at no point truly engaged in strong criticism of governmental COVID policies. Throughout the crisis, governmental communication and discourse created unnecessary confusion that could have been avoided.

¹ For example, 'Finland: Europe's quiet success in Covid-19 fight', *EURACTIV*, 4.11.2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/languages-culture/news/finland-europes-quiet-success-in-covid-19-fight/>; 'Der Spiegel: Finland best at handling pandemic', *Yle*, 11.7.2021, https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/der_spiegel_finland_best_at_handling_pandemic/12017084.

The next section of the article briefly explains the political context during the pandemic. The empirical analysis consists of two parts, with the first one focusing on COVID policies and the role of experts, while the latter analyzes organizational arrangements and leadership. The concluding discussion reflects on what COVID governance tells us about the Finnish administrative and political culture.

The political context

The Finnish political system is normally categorized as semi-presidential, with the executive functions divided between an elected president and a cabinet that is accountable to the Eduskunta, the unicameral national legislature. However, the new constitution, which entered into force in 2000, completed a period of far-reaching constitutional change that curtailed presidential powers and brought the Finnish political system closer to a normal parliamentary democracy. Presidential leadership has been replaced with rule by oversized coalition cabinets that typically bring together parties from the left and the right. These ideologically quite heterogeneous cabinets have tended to enjoy comfortable majorities in the Eduskunta. (Karvonen et al., 2016)

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, Finland had received quite a lot of international publicity due to the left-leaning, five-party cabinet formed after the April 2019 elections that includes 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 Social Democrat PM Sanna Marin was 34. The government controlled 117 of the 200 Eduskunta seats. Already before COVID there had been serious speculation about both the internal coherence and the effectiveness of the Marin cabinet. It was accused of delaying both budgetary cuts and climate change measures, with the main rift between the socially conservative Centre and the other more liberal parties in the coalition. The largest opposition parties were the populist and anti-immigration Finns Party and the National Coalition (conservatives).

Finland is a unitary state, with no elected regional bodies.² The exception is the autonomous Åland Islands. Yet, as our analysis will show, the regional authorities do matter. The Regional State Administrative Agencies (*aluehallintovirasto*) and Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (*ELY-keskus*) are the primary regional actors. The former deals with the realization of basic rights and legal protection, accessibility of health and social services, sustainable use of the environment, domestic safety and healthy and safe

² During COVID the government finally managed to agree on a reform of social and health services. As part of that package, Finland has directly-elected regional councils, with the first elections held in January 2022.

living and working environments, while the latter focuses on advising businesses and promoting regional development. Nor does Finland have a constitutional court. Instead, the Constitutional Law Committee of the Eduskunta issues *ex ante* statements on the constitutionality of government bills and other matters, including on the various policies enacted during the pandemic.

Public sector agencies are typically to the sectoral ministries. The same applies to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, which works under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. THL studies, monitors, and develops measures to promote the well-being and health of Finns. It gathers and produce information based on research and register data and provides expertise and solutions to support decision-making. It serves a variety of actors, not least the government and municipal and regional authorities. It is important to emphasize that the actual decisions regarding COVID policies were taken by the government or other authorities and that they are not obliged to follow THL's advice.

It is commonly argued that the Finnish political culture leans towards the Hegelian tradition of national unity. The culture is also legalistic and state-centered, with Finns used to the strong role of the state in different spheres of life. (Saukkonen, 2003; Alapuro, 2004) While exact causal mechanisms are obviously impossible to confirm, this observant attitude towards rules and public authorities was probably a factor in the low number of infections and deaths, but at the same time it contributed to the low or almost non-existent levels of contestation about COVID policies.

Policies and expertise

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 Emergency Powers Act.³ 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, and restaurants were closed from early April to the end of May. A wide range of financial support measures were introduced, ranging from additional R&D funding and alleviations to tax and bankruptcy legislation for companies, to a communicable disease allowance to compensate individuals for losses caused by absences due to covid. Throughout the pandemic, the government introduced several additional

³ Valmiuslaki 29.12.2011/1552. Available in Finnish and Swedish at <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2011/20111552>.

budgets, direct aid packages, and other fiscal stimuli to troubled sectors. In late March, the government imposed its most extensive measure by isolating the capital region of Uusimaa from the rest of the country. Roadblocks and checkpoints were set up by the police 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.

The first phase included many improvised moves, and the legal basis of some measures were considered 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. As the first phase of covid measures was characterized by a sense of national urgency and unity, people and businesses adhered to restriction measures – even proactively, at times. Since April 2020, Statistics Finland has carried out regular surveys on COVID, on behalf of the government. In the first survey, 96 % of respondents reported having followed the instructions of officials well or somewhat well.⁴ Furthermore, 87 % characterized themselves as willing/glad or somewhat willing/glad to follow such instructions (Statistics Finland, 2020).

The number of COVID cases declined during the summer of 2020, and the government gradually lifted its exceptional measures, with the state of emergency abolished on 16 June. No policy to obligate the general public to use face masks had been issued during the spring, as experts and officials in THL and Ministry of Social Affairs and Health were divided on the topic. THL turned in favor of a mask recommendation (not mandatory) for crowded situations like public transport in mid-August. Overall, this second phase of Finland's covid response, during summer 2020, was one of eased restrictions. 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”.⁵ Confirmed cases increased towards the winter, putting the hybrid strategy to the test, and starting what we call the third phase of COVID measures in Finland.

To balance travel and health security, the government ordered THL to prepare a “traffic light” tier system to help citizens assess the risk of traveling abroad, with countries categorized into red, orange, and green groups in terms of the severity of their COVID situation. However, the government soon augmented the traffic light system by raising the

⁴ The survey questions we report here had 5-step ordinal scales for answers.

⁵ Similar slogans were used in other countries following the so-called TTI-strategy.

maximum COVID incidence rate⁶ in the target country that would enable quarantine-free return.⁷ This was a political decision aiming to ease travel restrictions, especially with neighboring Sweden. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (led by Social Democratic Minister Krista Kiuru) had opposed the decision behind the scenes⁸, while Mika Lintilä, the Minister of Economic Affairs from the Center Party, told evening news that the previous threshold was “based on the Danish example, that is, nothing really”.⁹ The governance of the pandemic was gradually being politicized.

In September 2020 the government announced its domestic 3-tier system, an implementation of the hybrid strategy: 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”.¹⁰ The community transmission phase represents a situation where the majority of contagions cannot be traced, and the capacity of intensive care is at risk. This tier system aimed at regional variation in containment measures, with regional authorities able to target restrictions on public gatherings, schools, restaurants etc. 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.¹¹ The system enabled the government to balance between limiting the spread of COVID and keeping the society and economy running. Furthermore,

⁶ 14-day case notification rate per 100 000 inhabitants. The strict Finnish threshold of 8 was raised to 25, still behind many other European countries, for instance, the German 50.

⁷ MTV, ‘Kymmenen Uutiset’, 19.8.2020, <https://www.mtv.fi/sarja/kymmenen-utiset-33001001003/keskiviikko-19-8-klo-2200-1282641>.

⁸ Lehtimäki, E. & Berg, A., ‘MTV Uutisten tieto: Hallitus aikoo höllentää matkustusrajoituksia – STM haraa vastaan ja kompromissiesitys avaisi tällä hetkellä vain Latvian, Liettuan ja Kyproksen’, *MTV Uutiset*, 9.9.2020, <https://www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/mtv-utisten-tieto-hallitus-aikoo-hollentaa-matkustusrajoituksia-stm-haraa-vastaan/7921886#gs.96dj0y>.

⁹ MTV, ‘Kymmenen Uutiset’, 19.8.2020, <https://www.mtv.fi/sarja/kymmenen-utiset-33001001003/keskiviikko-19-8-klo-2200-1282641>.

¹⁰ PMO, ‘Government discusses action plan to manage COVID-19’, press release, 4.9.2020, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-kasitteli-toimintasuunnitelmaa-koronavirustilanteen-hillitsemiseksi?languageId=en_US. The government originally communicated these in English as base level, acceleration stage and spreading stage, respectively. Since the English vocabulary evolved in later press releases, we opted here for the latest official terminology. The Finnish concepts have remained unchanged.

¹¹ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, ‘Ministry of Social Affairs and Health updates the action plan to manage COVID-19’, press release, 22.12.2020, https://stm.fi/-/stm-on-paivittanyt-toimintasuunnitelman-koronaepidemian-hillitsemiseksi?languageId=en_US.

the objective was to control the virus without the government having to resort to emergency legislation. By November 2020, the capital region reached the “community transmission phase”, and 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, once again.¹²

On 25 January 2021, more contagious variants of the corona virus prompted the government to tighten its response once again. This was done by introducing yet another 3-tier system of measure levels, on top of the existing scale explained above. This time, the levels were simply called tier 1, 2, and 3. In essence, tier 1 called for implementation of the previous system, while tier 2 would entail enforcing “community transmission phase” level restrictions on a national scale. Thus, the new system represented a possibility of reversing the policy of regional COVID governance, with a return to nation-wide measures and government control. Transition to tier 2 would require separate government approval. Tier 3 would see the state of emergency declared and restrictions on movement in addition to existing measures.¹³ PM Marin emphasized that tier 3 was to be avoided, for its extensive implications on basic rights.

Meanwhile, to solidify its hybrid strategy, the government had been working on amendments to the Communicable Diseases Act all throughout the winter of 2020–21. The reform entered into force on 22 February 2021. Ironically, however, just days later increasing infection rates forced the government to resort to the state of emergency for a second time. Transition to tier 2 measures was declared on 25 February. PM Marin also announced a three-week lockdown period, that was to come in March. This created confusion among the public, with many medias reporting on the “lockdown” in quotation marks, as its relation to the increasingly convoluted, overlapping tier systems was unclear. Journalists tried to decipher the situation for the public, as the lockdown was declared before the state of emergency.¹⁴ In practice, this second lockdown meant transitioning

¹² Kokkonen, S-M., ‘Suomessa ei ole epidemian leviämisvaihetta enää missään’, *Ilta-Sanomat*, 15.6.2021, <https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000008058455.html>.

¹³ PMO, ‘Government decides to supplement action plan for COVID-19 hybrid strategy’, press release, 25.1.2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-linjasi-hybridistrategian-toimintasuunnitelman-taydentamisesta?languageId=en_US.

¹⁴ Niemonen, R., ‘Mikä ihme on "sulkutila"? 5 polttavinta kysymystä ja mahdollisimman yksinkertaista vastausta’, *Yle*, 25.2.2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11809218>; Lapintie, N., Suvinen, T. & Manninen, L., ‘Suomeen julistetaan kolmen viikon sulkutila – tätä se tarkoittaa’, *Ilta-Sanomat*, 25.2.2021, <https://www.is.fi/kotimaa/art-2000007825065.html>.

children over 13 to distance teaching, discontinuing their group hobbies and closing down restaurants for three weeks. On 1 March, the state of emergency was officially declared.¹⁵

In addition to tighter restrictions, the government now decided to enhance the role of the Communications Department of the PMO by centralizing communications efforts under it to prevent confusion caused by overlapping and contradictory communications by various officials.¹⁶ As this affected the flow of information, it was carried out as an exceptional measure under the Emergency Powers Act, accompanied by a brief but worried debate among journalists and experts. Furthermore, the government decided to postpone municipal elections scheduled for 18 April to 13 June. The Finns Party was the only party opposing the rescheduling of the elections, and the elections were held in June.

During this second lockdown period, the government also 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 simply lacked the jurisdiction *vis-à-vis* regional authorities to carry out necessary measures: e.g., mandatory testing on borders was not for the government to decide on.¹⁷ Indeed, there was a strong 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 restrictions on individual movement never entered into force, as the legislative proposal was submitted to the Eduskunta on 25 March and withdrawn on 31 March after being deemed too vague and, thus, unconstitutional by the Constitutional Law Committee.¹⁸

¹⁵ PMO, 'Government decides on immediate transition to tier 2 of COVID-19 prevention and is prepared to declare a state of emergency', press release, 25.2.2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-linjasi-siirtymisesta-valittomasti-koronaepidemiaan-torjunnan-tasolle-kaksi-hallitus-valmis-ottamaan-poikkeusolot-kayttoon?languageId=en_US; PMO, 'Finland declares a state of emergency', press release, 1.3.2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/suomessa-vallitsevat-poikkeusolot-1?languageId=en_US.

¹⁶ PMO, 'Prime Minister's Office decides on management and coordination of COVID-19 communications', press release, 19.3.2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/valtioneuvoston-kansialta-paatos-koronaviestinnan-johtamisesta-ja-yhteensovittamisesta?languageId=en_US.

¹⁷ Hevonoja, J., Sullström, H. & Vaaherkumpu, S., 'Marinilta kovaa kritiikkiä aluehallintoviranomaisille ja kunnille: Pakkotestaus rajoilla ei hallituksen vallassa', *Yle*, 13.3.2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11835329>.

¹⁸ PMO, 'Government submits legislative proposal to Parliament on temporarily restricting freedom of movement and close contacts', press release, 25.3.2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-antoi-eduskunnalle-lakiesityksen-liikkumisvapauden-ja-lahikontaktien-valiaikaisesta-rajoittamisesta?languageId=en_US; PMO, 'Government withdraws proposal on temporarily restricting freedom of movement and close contacts', press release, 31.3.2021, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallitus-peruutti-esityksensa-liikkumisvapauden-ja-lahikontaktien-valiaikaisesta-rajoittamisesta?languageId=en_US; Hakahuhta,

Meanwhile, the contagion numbers kept decreasing under existing measures. The government subsequently started lifting restrictions: the second state of emergency was lifted on 27 April, and the national level tier system (tiers 1–3) was quietly abolished in early May to once again “focus on regional restrictions and recommendations”.¹⁹ This is not surprising, given that the national COVID management tier system had caused friction inside the government from the outset, as Yle reported on 19 February: “According to Yle sources, the whole government no longer seems to stand behind the system. The Center Party wants easier restrictions on the rest of Finland, than is the case for the capital region.”²⁰ Regarding vaccinations, Finland experienced an anxiously sluggish vaccine roll out during early 2021. However, by 17 August 2021, 2.4 million people (or 42.8 %) of Finland’s 5.5 million population had received two shots. The cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases at that point was 118 647, with 1 006 deaths.²¹

Turning to the role of expertise, the government regularly cited expert opinion throughout the pandemic, particularly that of THL, e.g., when declaring the state of emergency and in relation to face masks. The programme of PM Marin’s government 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.”²² THL was in a central role, with particularly the director of its Department for Health Security Mika Salminen often appearing alongside ministers in press conferences. Even when the scientific community disagreed about particular issues, such as face masks, Marin and her cabinet consistently referred to available scientific evidence when justifying their policies. Furthermore, the government has benefited from the Finnish

A., Stenroos, M., Koskinen, A.L., & de Fresnes, T., ‘Hallitus peruuttaa esityksensä liikkumisrajoituksista – perustuslakivaliokunta piti liikkumisrajoituksia perustuslain vastaisina’, *Yle*, 31.3.2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11864983>.

¹⁹ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, ‘COVID-19 prevention in Finland to focus on regional restrictions and recommendations’, press release, 6.5.2021, https://stm.fi/-/koronaepidemia-torjunnassa-painotetaan-jatkossa-alueellisia-rajoituksia-ja-suosituksia?languageId=en_US.

²⁰ Stenroos, M., ‘Hallitus hermostui THL:n ravintola- ja hiihtolomatiedottamisesta – THL:n Tervahauta: Emme voi jäädä katselemaan, virustilanne voi karata käsistä’, *Yle*, 19.2.2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11799382>.

²¹ Yle, ‘Koronavirus lukuina’, 17.8.2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11300232>, accessed 17.8.2021.

²² PMO, ‘Inclusive and competent Finland – a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society’, Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s Government 2019, available at <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/marin/government-programme>.

political culture, characterized by trust in scientific expertise and a deferential attitude towards authorities (e.g., Ruostetsaari, 2017; Tiedebarometri, 2019).

The government and health experts spoke with a particularly unified voice during the first lockdown in the atmosphere of a national crisis. However, it was later revealed that the steadfast leadership approach exhibited by PM Marin's government in March 2020 was preceded by a couple of months of disagreement over the severity of COVID-19. Based on memos obtained from THL and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* wrote on 15 February 2021: "The political leadership of Finland had to be woken up to see the threat of corona virus in early 2020. The picture that ministers communicated to the public was in stark contrast to health officials' assessment of the situation."²³

As mentioned, towards the end of 2020 the management of the crisis became increasingly politicized. The same applies to the relations between experts and the government, where the gap between experts' public accounts on COVID measures and the governmental policies grew over time. Many problems stemmed from discrepancies between the national steering of pandemic governance and regional measures. For instance, on 18 February 2021, THL undermined the government's novel tier system (tiers 1–3), just three weeks after it had been unveiled, by publicly recommending a three-week shutdown of restaurants in the capital area. In essence, THL bypassed the government and proposed tier 3 measures, while the national government was still operating on tier 1. The government, angered by this improvisation, reprimanded the leadership of THL, whose Director-General Markku Tervahauta told Yle news that "the virus does not adhere to the philosophy of tier systems, we have to look outside that, as well" and "we really don't have the possibility to not do things, either".²⁴ As discussed, above, the three-week restaurant shutdown was subsequently implemented by the government – along with a takeover of communications powers under the Emergency Powers Act.

Leadership and organization

The decision-making style was quite hierarchical, top-down leadership, with the PM and her office in a central role. PMO has risen in stature and in size in recent decades. It coordinates decision-making in the ministries, operates as a broker in the case of disputes within or

²³ Lakka, P. & Waris, O., 'Muistiot paljastavat: Näin hallitusta piti herätellä koronan uhkaan – Niinistö ehdotti kulisissa kovempia ratkaisuja', *Ilta-Sanomat*, 15.2.2021, <https://www.is.fi/politiikka/art-2000007803415.html>.

²⁴ Stenroos, M., 'Hallitus hermostui THL:n ravintola- ja hiihtolomatiedottamisesta – THL:n Tervahauta: Emme voi jäädä katselemaan, virustilanne voi karata käsistä', *Yle*, 19.2.2021, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11799382>.

between ministries, and monitors the implementation of the government programme. Despite various existing documents, strategies and preparatory work for crisis situations, the government needed to improvise and come up with organizational solutions as well as policies in a very short period of time. On 26 February 2020, a high-level COVID-19 Coordination Group was established in the PMO. Chaired by Marin's state secretary²⁵, it brought together the leading civil servants (permanent secretaries) from sectoral ministries, director of Government Security, director of Government Communications, head of the Operations Centre, and the head of THL, and was supported by the ministries' heads of preparedness and preparedness secretaries. While there has been criticism of the passive role of the Coordination Group, it did nonetheless facilitate horizontal coordination. The Government Situation Centre and the Operations Centre were also located in PMO. The former is responsible for maintaining situational awareness based on information from the authorities, while the latter, established on 1 April 2020, maintains an overall picture of the progress made in implementing governmental decisions.²⁶ The Operations Centre was criticized for remaining in the background during the first stage of the crisis.

Since the turn of the millennium, the crisis leadership capacity of PMO has been gradually strengthened, both procedurally and in terms of resources. However, the early evaluations of leadership during COVID contain strong recommendations for further increasing the resources and powers of PMO in crisis situations (Mörttinen, 2021; VNK, 2021; Tiihonen, 2021). Governments appointed since 2003 have tried to improve horizontal coordination inside the cabinet, mainly through government's intersectoral policy programmes (which were used from 2003 to 2011) and other coordination instruments such as various government strategy documents and the 'mid-term review' session (see below) (Tiili, 2008; Kekkonen & Raunio, 2011; Virtanen et al., 2016). But horizontal coordination remains challenging due to the silo mentality of the ministries and as the cabinet parties safeguard the positions of their 'own' ministries (Raunio, 2021).

²⁵ State secretaries were introduced in 2005. State secretaries as well as ministers' special advisers are political appointees whose terms coincide with those of the respective ministers. They are thus normally from the same party as the minister, and their job is to assist the minister in her or his duties. Most ministers have state secretaries, while the number of special advisers has varied both between cabinets and between individual ministers.

²⁶ See the following government press releases: <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/information-on-coronavirus/central-government-management-of-the-coronavirus-situation>; <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10616/valtioneuvoston-koronajohtamista-vahvistettiin>; and <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10616/valtioneuvoston-kanslia-perusti-operaatiokeskuksen-tukemaan-koronavirustilanteen-johtamista>. In addition, sectoral ministries, particularly the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, also established various working groups.

Starting from the first press conference, the focus was on Marin. Her solid, fact-of-matter speeches and behaviour received praise from across the political spectrum and attracted international media coverage. Given her age, many questioned in advance her ability to steer the country through troubled times, but Marin quickly dispelled such doubts. Throughout the crisis, Marin steadfastly supported her cabinet ministers. This applies particularly to Krista Kiuru, the Social Democratic Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services who was in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in charge of most COVID regulatory instruments. The same ministry also has the Minister of Social Affairs and Health, from the Left Alliance, but due to division of labour inside the government, her role remained much smaller. In line with the Communicable Diseases Act, handling COVID fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Kirsi Varhila, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, also appeared regularly in the media during the pandemic, explaining the governmental policies.

Decision-making centered around the trio of PMO, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and THL, with Marin and Kiuru clearly forming the nucleus of government decision-making concerning the pandemic. Hence, the COVID period differed from the standard situation where the finance minister, held since the 2019 elections by the Centre, is the second most important portfolio in the cabinet (Raunio, 2021). Kiuru also received the brunt of the criticism, including occasional public criticism from her ministerial colleagues. In October 2020 she survived a non-confidence vote in the *Eduskunta* tabled by the National Coalition regarding conflicting accounts of face masks instructions.²⁷ The whole government also convened more often into informal sessions, particularly in the initial stages of the crisis, with active coordination and joint press conferences by the chairs of the five coalition partners. There was apparently confusion among ministers about procedures and the preparatory work ahead of government meetings as well as criticism of the dominance of the Ministry of Social Affairs, but at least partly these problems were caused by the urgency of the crisis situation (Mörttinen, 2021; VNK, 2021).

The coalition government had faced serious challenges, both in terms of policy outputs and internal unity, before COVID. But as soon as the seriousness of the pandemic became evident, these problems were pushed aside in favour of cohesive leadership. Yet, conflicts started to emerge, and they mainly occurred between the Social Democrats and the Centre Party. The Centre represents more sparsely populated areas with much lower infection

²⁷ See 'Minister wins confidence vote over mask guidelines confusion', Yle, 14.10.2020, https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/minister_wins_confidence_vote_over_mask_guidelines_confusion/11595071.

rates, and held key ministerial portfolios related to finance and economy. Thus, it expressed discomfort with the tighter restrictions favoured by the Social Democrats. Marin essentially chose the strategy of delaying difficult decisions concerning state finances and climate change, but gradually conflicts inside the coalition began to surface. The coalition almost fell in April 2021 during the so-called 'mid-term review' session. In the mid-term review session, the entire cabinet comes together halfway through the four-year electoral period to talk more freely about what the government has achieved, where it has failed, and whether its targets should be re-adjusted for the remaining two years. Previously these sessions have lasted around two days, but now it lasted nine days. The drama was not just about the Centre needing to prove that its voice counts in the cabinet, but about how soon the government should return to 'normal' and start enforcing budgetary discipline (Kujanen & Raunio, 2021).

Crises tend to concentrate power in the executive branch, but in Finland it is hard to detect any real weakening of the legislature. This may have been due to Finland having a broad coalition cabinet (cf. Bolleyer & Salát, 2021) but is also explained by the presence of strongly institutionalized participation and information rights of the *Eduskunta*. During the state of emergency, parliamentary approval is needed for government decrees implemented on the basis of the Emergency Powers Act. The government was thus responsible for the emergency measures, but they all required the consent of the *Eduskunta*. The government's use of emergency powers did nonetheless raise concerns among members of the parliament (MP), and the Constitutional Law Committee issued several highly critical statements of governmental decrees (Neuvonen, 2020). But as all attention was on governmental press conferences and the key ministers, the *Eduskunta* plenary hardly provided a forum for COVID debates. And when the parliament did debate the various emergency measures, the lack of any genuine alternatives did not facilitate meaningful exchange between the government and the opposition.

Overall, the public has remained supportive of both the government and the lockdown measures. From a comparative perspective, Finns trust their leaders and political institutions with interpersonal trust also high, and such trust is associated with positive evaluations of government performance during COVID (Altiparmakis et al., 2021 Jørgensen et al., 2021). Initially, normal party politics was put on hold, with solid public support for lockdown measures and the PM. In the first stage the media and the public seemed to appreciate the swift action and tough line, and, interestingly, essentially no politician or media proposed less stringent policies or earlier relaxation of the emergency measures. The opposition could hardly criticize the government for not taking the situation seriously. Instead, the government had to justify why no further restrictions, such as compulsory use of face masks, had been introduced. Also, comparisons with other countries, not least Sweden, conveyed

the message that Finland had chosen the right course of action. In fact, it was quite remarkable, or perhaps even worrying, how strong the consensus was. There was literally no public debate about potential alternative ways of handling the crisis, although some critical voices, including many constitutional lawyers, pointed out that the state of emergency should be declared only in truly exceptional circumstances.

The public also agreed with the relaxation of measures during the summer, but from autumn 2020 onwards politicians, experts and citizens increasingly disagreed about the COVID regulatory instruments whilst other policy issues returned to public debates. However, throughout the crisis, the opposition has not seriously questioned governmental COVID policies (cf. Louwse et al., 2021). This applies even to the Finns Party, which probably understood that the 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 COVID-19 crisis. While Marin and the government continued to enjoy high approval ratings, party support figures gradually started to resemble those before the pandemic, and in the municipal elections held in June 2021, the Social Democrats finished second, almost four percentage points after the National Coalition.

As explained in the previous section, the government has not helped matters with its ever-changing vocabulary of “tier systems” and other concepts of pandemic governance, resulting in confusing communication. This applied particularly to the second and third phases, with the ministers and health experts at times sending different signals about various issues such as the use of face masks. As Finnish cabinets typically contain three or more parties, achieving cohesive government communication is challenging even in normal times. But COVID experiences will no doubt intensify demands for further centralization of government communication to the PMO, a development already under way before the pandemic started (Niemi et al., 2019; Johansson & Raunio, 2020). Overall, the communication strategy was clearly linked to the jurisdictional disputes between the national and sub-national levels referred to in the previous section. Marin, Kiuru and other leaders and experts repeatedly appealed to national unity and observance of instructions, stressing that ‘together’ we can survive the crisis. Marin also emphasized that the government would have to impose tougher lockdown measures, including a return to the state of emergency, should people and regional authorities not follow the recommendations. Occasionally, there was also discrepancy between government communication and the letter of law, with the ministers – intentionally, perhaps – not clarifying whether their instructions were recommendations or legally binding orders.

COVID also consolidated prime ministerial leadership in Finland, a country where the president was the supreme leader until the early 1990s. It was Marin and her cabinet who

were responsible for introducing the various safety and health measures deemed necessary in dealing with the pandemic. It is also the government that represents Finland in the European Union (EU) meetings where the coronavirus is discussed. 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. And, as described in the previous section, on 16 March 2020, having consulted the president, the government adopted the decree declaring the state of emergency.

Elected to his second six-year term as an independent candidate in the first round of the presidential elections held in early 2018, President Sauli Niinistö, the former long-standing chair of the National Coalition, remains hugely popular. Niinistö adopted an active role during the initial stages of the crisis – appearing frequently in various media, giving more interviews than usual, making ‘virtual visits’, and commenting also actively on the virus situation. Certainly, Niinistö behaved like a respected, elder ‘statesman’, and according to surveys, a large part of the public appreciated his input. In an interview with *Dagens Nyheter*, a Swedish newspaper, Niinistö defended his role by stating that he is, after all, the president.²⁸

Marin on multiple occasions pointed out that while she has throughout the crisis cooperated with the president, the government is responsible for the decisions, and that 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 special decision-making body, a so-called ‘corona fist’, for dealing with the crisis, but Marin had rejected the idea. Apparently, Niinistö had brought up the idea of the ‘corona fist’ already before that. The Social Democratic party sent a letter to Niinistö, recommending that the president stays clear of matters belonging to the competence of the government. Sources from the offices of the president and the prime minister assured that there was no rift between the cabinet and Niinistö.²⁹ A couple of days later, Marin thanked Niinistö in a press conference for his role as a ‘value leader’, which can also be interpreted as a gentle reminder to the president of the fact that it is the government’s responsibility to deal with the virus pandemic.³⁰ (Mörttinen, 2021; Tiihonen, 2021) Subsequently, a division

²⁸ Laurén, A-L., ‘Sauli Niinistö: Finland värderar att skydda sig’, *Dagens Nyheter*, 14.4.2020, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/sauli-niinisto-finland-varderar-att-skydda-sig/>.

²⁹ See for example Muhonen, T., ‘Näin presidentti Niinistö ehdotti hallitukselle ”nyrkkiä” ja näin Marin vastasi – HS julkaisee viestit kokonaisuudessaan’, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 30.3.2020, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006458166.html>.

³⁰ Hallituksen tilannekatsaus 1.4.2020.

of labour between the two executives emerged: the president reminded Finns of the seriousness of the pandemic while the government took the decisions. Finns have thus learned that also during times of emergency, it is the government, and not the president, who rules the land. From the point of view of power relations, this is perhaps the most important outcome of the COVID crisis.

Conclusions

What lessons, if any, can we draw from the COVID period? In terms of policies, the government prioritized protecting the population, especially risk groups, and maintaining the capacity of the health care system. According to an independent report on the beginning of the crisis by the Finnish Safety Investigation Authority, Finland had faced 7500 confirmed cases and 333 deaths related to COVID by the end of July 2020, significantly less than most European countries (OTKES, 2021, p. 56). However, the same report pointed out that the pandemic underlined existing inequalities and increased social distress and mental health issues. Furthermore, the country's economy and public deficit deteriorated. Overall, the numbers of infections and deaths remained comparatively low, and for the most part the hybrid strategy managed to find a balance between lockdown measures and keeping the society and economy running. Faced with a high level of complexity and uncertainty, the government had to improvise and listened closely to scientific expertise, but also occasionally party-political interests dominated over the views of the experts.

Government communication and policies left room for improvement. The three-tier pandemic management system introduced by the government in January 2021, built on the foundations of a previous three-tier system, was the third such typology communicated to the general public within the first year of the pandemic. Furthermore, with the government, health experts, and regional officials giving competing accounts of the situation and measures, it can be argued that communication was one of the weakest areas of Finnish COVID governance. Throughout the crisis, the government has used too complex and confusing terminology.

The division of labour and occasional jurisdictional disputes between subnational authorities and the government also created confusion. This is noteworthy, for often the regional level has been viewed as just an administrative extension of the national executive branch. Regional differences in the severity of the epidemic sparked public and political discussion over the legitimacy of strict nation-wide measures from the outset, as many rural areas in Finland took months to contract a single case of the disease. In this sense, the shift towards varying regional measures was arguably warranted both in terms of legality and legitimacy. National measures proved a source of friction within the government, as there is pressure

for the Centre Party to defend its constituents' interests, particularly with regard to Lapland, where income from tourism is highly important.

Already during the pandemic there were calls for strengthening both the leadership of PMO and horizontal coordination in crisis situations. While PM Marin is the leading authority, and the president was firmly in the background, she on several occasions vented frustration with the limited powers of the PMO and the national government. Actual COVID policy-making was meanwhile firmly located in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, with the new coordination structures in PMO remaining in the background. However, it is difficult to judge whether any new bodies, such as the 'corona fist' suggested by the president, would facilitate better crisis responses. Here we must remember the ideological diversity found in Finnish multi-party coalitions. The individual cabinet parties have their own interests to protect, and they also defend the jurisdictions of their ministerial portfolios. The same challenge applies to communication: organizationally it can be centralized further to PMO, but this does not necessarily prevent ministers and other senior party figures or health experts from publicly challenging government decisions.

Finally, in terms of contestation and political culture, public approval of the PM and other authorities remained high. The observant attitude towards authorities and experts among Finns probably matters, but it is also noteworthy how little, if any, contestation there was initially over the main COVID policies. Nonetheless, over time and particularly during the third phase of the crisis normal party-political dynamics have emerged. A particular question, raised by some constitutional lawyers, concerns the state of emergency. There was broad consensus among the political elites for resorting to it, but did this simultaneously lower the threshold too much for its subsequent use?

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