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Living with COVID-19: Opportunities for the Usual Socio-Political Life in an Unusual Situation

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic stressed national and international systems and relations and demonstrated the vulnerability of modern societies. The governments were forced to implement restrictive measures in order to protect public health. The most challenging aspect was balancing between public health protection and the functioning of the economy. As this wasn't easy to reach, some of the governments faced challenges in communicating with the society, resulting in protests. Under these brand-new challenges, the protests only made the task of the governments harder and threatened to harm the fragile political stability. Thus, the aim of the current study is to identify the problems related to the communication between the society and the government and to identify the possible solutions for ensuring the dialogue in such situations. The study focuses on EU citizens and their attitudes toward government measures related to the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Our materials and methods include review of scientific literature on the topics under considerations. We also performed a secondary processing of quantitative data from Eurobarometer using IBM SPSS v. 26. The results show that the measures limiting civil liberties lead to social tension even if the governments adapt their approach and search for new opportunities. This leads to the conclusion that in order to ensure the normal functioning of the social systems the governments should find ways to include the stakeholders in the decision-making. The latter is possible through digital tools and by developing a system to be implemented in times of crises even if the crisis is not caused by pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19, political stability, Eurobarometer, digital solutions, digitalization

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Жизнь в условиях COVID-19: новые возможности для обычной общественно-политической жизни в необычной ситуации

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Аннотация. Пандемия COVID-19 поставила под удар многие национальные и международные системы и отношения и продемонстрировала, насколько уязвимы общества. Правительства были вынуждены принять ограничительные меры в целях защиты общественного здравоохранения. Наиболее сложным аспектом было достижение баланса между охраной общественного здравоохранения и функционированием экономики. Поскольку этой цели было достичь нелегко, некоторые правительства столкнулись с проблемами в коммуникации с обществом вплоть до протестов. В условиях совершенно нового вызова протесты усложнили задачу правительств и грозили нанести ущерб хрупкой политической стабильности. Цель настоящего исследования заключается в выявлении проблем, связанных с коммуникацией между обществом и правительством, и определении возможного решения для обеспечения диалога в таких ситуациях. Объектом исследования являются граждане государств — членов ЕС, и в центре внимания находится их отношение к правительственным мерам, связанным с пандемией в 2020 и 2021 гг. Наши материалы и методы включают обзор научной литературы, посвященной этим темам. Параллельно мы провели вторичную обработку количественных данных Евробарометра с использованием IBM SPSS v. 26. Результаты показывают, что меры, ограничивающие гражданские свободы, приводят к социальной напряженности, даже если правительства адаптируют свой подход и ищут новые возможности. Это приводит к выводу, что для обеспечения нормального функционирования социальных систем правительствам следует найти способ вовлечения заинтересованных сторон в процесс принятия решений. Последнее возможно с помощью цифровых инструментов и разработки системы, которая будет внедряться во время кризисов, даже если этот кризис не вызван пандемиями.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, политическая стабильность, Евробарометр, цифровые решения, цифровизация

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic put under stress numerous national and international systems and relations and demonstrated how vulnerable the societies are. The processes of globalization and internationalization in fact forced the spread of the

disease all over the world. The governments had to change their priorities and transform the long-term policies. However, such transformations require adaptability, time, high expertise, considering the needs of numerous stakeholders, etc. and the effectiveness of such changes are highly dependent on the specific leadership of the country at that time. Thus, the approaches varied across the countries and across time. It seemed that there isn't a consistency in the policies, and this affected every social system on group level and personal level. Thus, it is important to think of a way to ensure normal functioning of the systems even if unusual situations occur. As the governments are responsible for the decisions in such critical situation, they need certain level of stability in order to develop a strategy. However, the society can be patient but for a limited time, and the governments need to learn how to maintain the political stability in time of crisis. Thus, the aim of the current study is to identify the problems related to communication between society and government and to identify the possible solution for ensuring the dialogue in such situations. The object of the study are the citizens of the EU member states and the focus is their attitudes toward government measures related to the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Our materials and methods include review of scientific literature focused on the topics. We also performed a secondary processing of quantitative data from Eurobarometer using IBM SPSS v. 26.

COVID-19 and the political (in)stability

According to Hurwitz, political stability may refer to “the absence of violence”, “governmental longevity/duration”, “the existence of a legitimate constitutional regime”, “the absence of structural change” and “a multifaceted societal attribute” [Hurwitz 1973]. Furthermore, according to Eckstein, the term stability implies three conditions — “persistence of pattern, decisional effectiveness, and authenticity” [Eckstein 1966]. The first condition, namely persistence of pattern, refers to the fact that “a government will tend to be stable if its authority pattern is congruent with the other authority patterns of the society of which it is a part” [Eckstein 1966]. The congruence between the society's expectations and government's actions is required for ensuring the stability of the political system. Thus, this is the aspect of the stability that we are focused on in the current research. It should also be noted that the stability and sustainability of the state system can be assessed [Vilisov et al. 2021], which can work as an early prevention of system disruptions.

COVID-19 has caused an unbelievable and unpredictable change in our way of living and daily routines and has caused tremendous human suffering and challenging the most basic foundations of societal well-being. The pandemic changed our lives fundamentally, affecting both professional and personal relationships, including interpersonal trust and sense of security¹. This brand

¹ *COVID-19: Protecting people and societies* (OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)). (2020). [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)]. Retrieved June 07, 2020, from <http://doi.org/10.1787/e5c9de1a-en>

new situation has forced the governments all over the world to act rapidly and to apply innovative solutions in order to ensure protection for various stakeholders [Hammad et al. 2021]. Furthermore, the international cooperation was hindered because each of the countries had its own serious challenges and it required time to adapt to the new situation and think of joint solutions [Pereirinha, Pereira 2021]. In such situation the governments need to act in flexible manner and to “provide critical tools to support real time sharing of lessons on what is working, what is not, what could work and for whom”².

In this context at the beginning of 2022 the Organization for economic cooperation and development identified fourteen key insights from evaluations of COVID-19 responses³. Alongside with the measures concerning healthcare system, economy, internal communication, care for most vulnerable groups, etc., there are two insights directly related to the current study, namely:

- “More targeted, informed and coherent messaging is needed to foster trust.”
- “Governments could involve civil society, the private sector and local actors more to increase transparency in decision-making and facilitate the implementation of crisis management responses.”

OECD stresses the importance of well-structured communication between the central and the local levels. It draws attention to the options of “using both traditional and new digital platforms for internal communication can lead to greater buy-in from stakeholders”⁴.

The pandemic put pressure on the governments and their decisions caused various reactions across the societies. “If populations suffer shortages of food, jobs, or medical supplies, one outcome, if governments are perceived as unable to respond to social concerns, we may see this become a source of political discontent or civil unrest in some areas” [Burns 2020]. There are studies which identified a correlation between the stringency of measures and political instability. The results show that “the introduction of stringent measures was less likely to occur in countries characterized by political instability” [De Simone Mourao 2021]. Such results are explainable as the pandemic itself and the measures against it led to civil movements, unrest and protests [van der Zwet et al. 2022]. In fact it became obvious that the Coronavirus is not threat only to health and economy but to the political stability as well [Woods et al. 2020]. One of the reasons is the economic insecurity, which is a prerequisite for decreasing level of trust and thus may cause political instability [Perry 2021]. There is evidence that protests against the governments are symptom for political instability and the restrictions, economic challenges and civil liberties limitations can trigger such civic unrest [Herbert, Marquette 2021].

² OECD. (2022). *First lessons from government evaluations of COVID-19 responses: A synthesis*. OECD. Retrieved June 7, 2022, from <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/first-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-covid-19-responses-a-synthesis-483507d6/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Methodology, Results and Discussion

In order to achieve our goal, we used a secondary processing of quantitative data. The latter comes from Eurobarometer 93.1⁵ performed in July–August 2020 and Eurobarometer 95.3⁶, performed in June–July 2021. We examined four main indicators:

- 1) satisfaction with the coronavirus measures;
- 2) justification of coronavirus restrictions;
- 3) determination of the EU priorities in fighting the pandemic;
- 4) assessment of the balance between health and economy.

The relevance of the selected indicators is based on the main conceptual framework of the current study, namely the attitudes of the citizens and the potential for political instability based on these attitudes.

For data processing we used IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26. We performed Descriptive Statistics using Crosstabs.

Satisfaction with the coronavirus measures

The data presented on Fig. 1 shows that there is a decrease in the satisfaction with the COVID-19 measures, taken by the national governments of the EU member states.

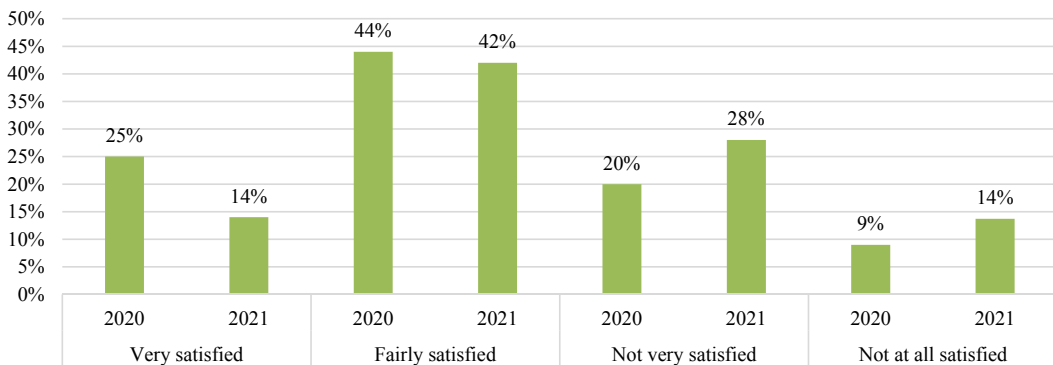


Fig. 1. Satisfaction with the measures of the national governments, July–August 2020⁷ and June–July 2021⁸

Source: Based on data from Eurobarometer 93.1 and Eurobarometer 95.3.

⁵ European Commission, Brussels. (2022a). *Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020) Eurobarometer 93.1 (2020): Standard Eurobarometer 93 (COVID-19 Pandemic): Standard Eurobarometer 93 (COVID-19 Pandemic) (2.0.0)* [Data set]. GESIS. <http://doi.org/10.4232/1.13866>.

⁶ European Commission, Brussels. (2022b). *Eurobarometer 95.3 (2021) Eurobarometer 95.3 (2021): Standard Eurobarometer 95 (COVID-19 Pandemic): Standard Eurobarometer 95 (COVID-19 Pandemic) (1.0.0)* [Data set]. GESIS. <http://doi.org/10.4232/1.13826>.

⁷ The respondents were asked “In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by the (NATIONALITY) government?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

⁸ The respondents were asked “In general, how satisfied are you with the measures taken to fight the coronavirus pandemic by the (NATIONALITY)?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

In the summer of 2020 ¼ of the EU citizens (25 %) were very satisfied with the anti-Covid measures, but obviously the governments didn't manage to keep the level of trust. Thus, in 2021 the level of absolute satisfaction decreased with 11 percent points reaching 14 %. As for the satisfaction of the EU citizens with the measures it is obvious that there is a decrease in the satisfaction in 2021 compared to 2020. The total share of citizens who were rather satisfied in 2020 is 69 % and in 2021 it is 56 %.

Justification of coronavirus restrictions

Dealing with the pandemic required measures to limit the spread of the disease. Such measures were grasped as limiting the civil liberties [Flood et al., 2020]. This belief may harm the trust in public authorities and lead to discontent and thus to instability. The data displayed on Fig. 2 shows that at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 almost half of the citizens of the EU member states absolutely justified the measures while in 2021 they constituted less than 30 %. However, the overall share of citizens who rather justify the measure didn't decrease too much. In 2020 it was 83 % and in 2021 it was 73 %. This demonstrates a high level of rationality in the assessment of the situation. Nevertheless, it is not just the share of those who don't justify the restrictions but the level to which they disapprove them and whether they are determined to fight against the restrictions [van der Zwet et al., 2022].

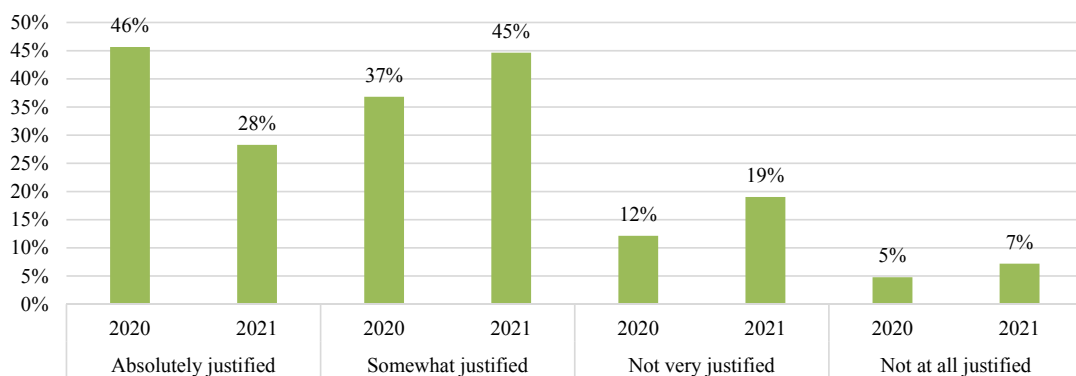


Fig. 2. Justification of the restriction measures of the national governments, July-August 2020⁹ and June-July 2021¹⁰

Source: Based on data from Eurobarometer 93.1 and Eurobarometer 95.3.

⁹ The respondents were asked “Thinking about the measures taken by the public authorities in (OUR COUNTRY) to fight the Coronavirus and its effects, would you say that...”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

¹⁰ The respondents were asked “Thinking about the restriction measures taken by the public authorities in (OUR COUNTRY) to fight the coronavirus and its effects, would you say that they were...?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

Determination of the EU priorities in fighting the pandemic

The data on Fig. 3 shows that in 2020 according to the EU citizens the top priorities of the EU regarding the response to Coronavirus are the vaccines and the development of strategy for facing similar crisis in the future. In 2021 the top priority for the EU according to its citizens should be the establishment of strategy for similar crisis (Fig. 4).

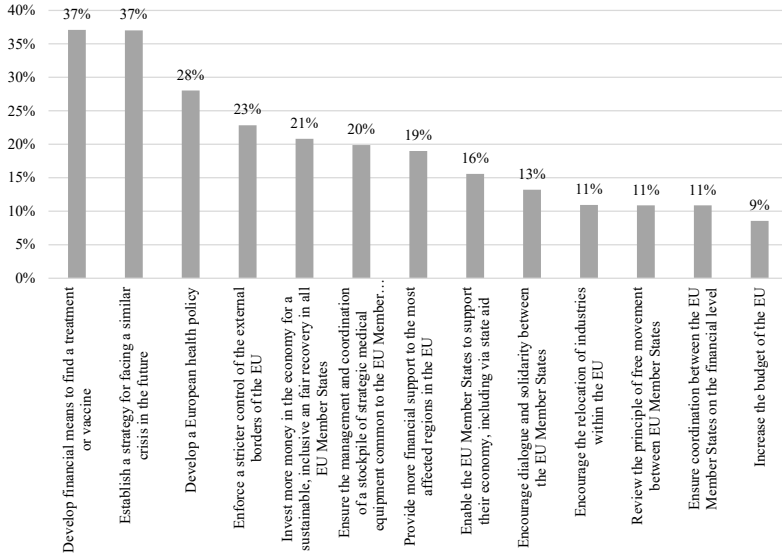


Fig. 3. Priorities of the EU response to Coronavirus, July-August 2020¹¹

Source: Based on data from Eurobarometer 93.1.

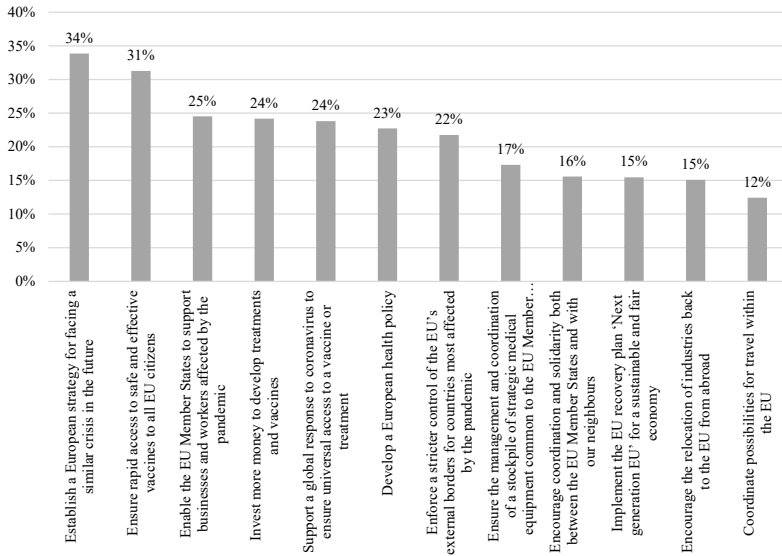


Fig. 4. Priorities of the EU response to Coronavirus, June-July 2021¹²

Source: Based on data from Eurobarometer 95.3.

¹¹ The respondents were asked “And what should the European Union now prioritise in its response to the Coronavirus outbreak?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

¹² The respondents were asked “And what should the European Union prioritise in its response to the coronavirus pandemic?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

Assessment of the balance between health and economy

A crucial issue in dealing with the pandemic and ensuring social peace is the balance between the protection of health and economy [Seghieri et al., 2021; Pronk & Kassler, 2020; Mandel & Veetil, 2020]. Thus, we aimed at testing the views of the citizens of the EU member states on whether the measures benefit health or economy. The results for 2020 displayed on Fig. 5 show that 43 % of the respondents thought that the measures ensured the balance between the health and the economy. It was followed by the group of those, who believed that the measures were in benefit of the health and only 21 % believed that measures benefitted the economy.

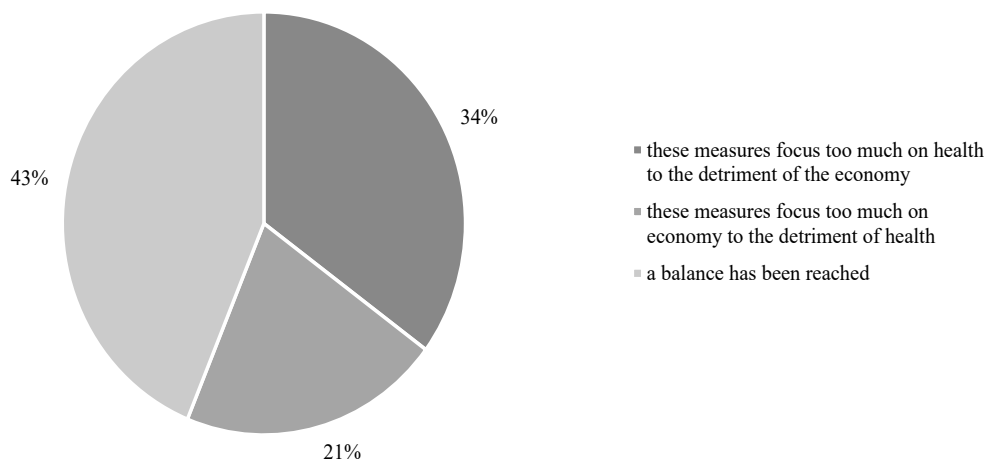


Fig. 5. Balance of health and economy, July-August 2020¹³

Source: Based on data from Eurobarometer 93.1

The study of 2021 lacked an identical question, but the Eurobarometer provides an assessment on the balance between the health benefit and economic damage. The first three columns of Fig. 6 display the share of citizens who would rather support the position that “the health benefits are greater than the economic damage.”. Their share in 2021 was 58 %.

The results show that the citizens give credit to their national governments in times of crises, but it is limited. During the crisis we have observed that the EU as a whole and its member states have made efforts to improve their approach in handling the crisis, while the satisfaction with the measures has decreased. On one hand, this can be an indication of the failure with the measures, but on the other hand, this can be a result of higher expectations and lack of patience among citizens. However, in both cases the governments need to be aware of society’s concerns and must be able to answer them before they grow into protests. The traditional approach for having data on citizens’

¹³ The respondents were asked “Thinking about the measures taken by the public authorities in (OUR COUNTRY) to fight the Coronavirus and its effects, would you say that...?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

attitudes and preferences is sociological study, but the processes of digitalization reinforced by the pandemic provided the governments with new tools to identify the expectations of citizens [Volodenkov, Fedorchenko 2022]. The authorities can also directly engage the stakeholders in decision making by creating a platform for such interaction [Pastarmadzhieva et al. 2022].

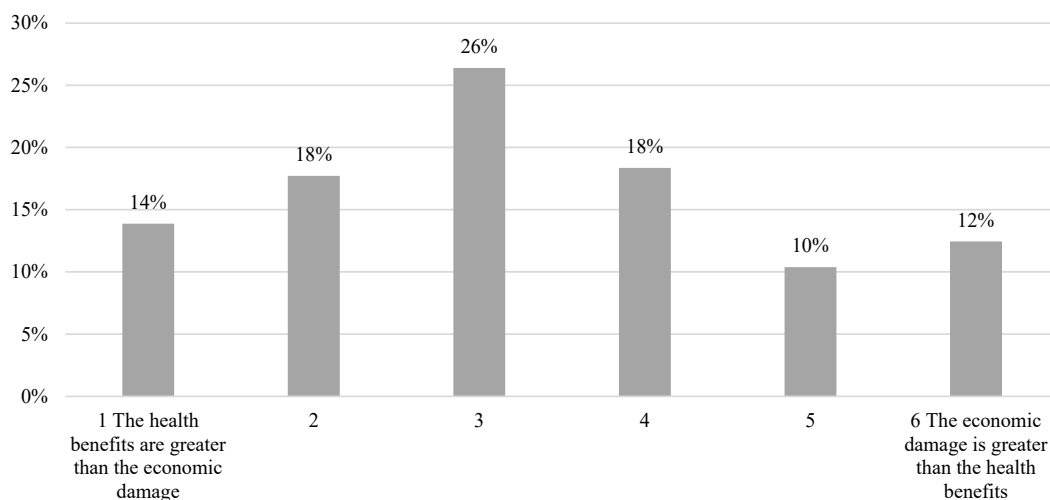


Fig. 6. Balance of health and economy, June-July 2021¹⁴

Source: Based on data from Eurobarometer 95.3.

Conclusion

COVID-19 forced politicians, experts, scientists to think of solutions in unusual situations to be able to continue living as usual. The biggest challenge is to consider the needs of all stakeholders. In this regard, the hardest choice for the governments is to balance between the healthcare system and the economy. The new digital tools provide opportunities for effective interaction between the authorities and the stakeholders. Thus, the government may adopt strategies in line with the expectations of the society, and this is a prerequisite for protecting political stability and preventing social unrest. However, such approach requires certain level of digitalization across the societies, and this is an area which needs further examination.

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¹⁴ The respondents were asked “Thinking about the measures taken by the public authorities in (OUR COUNTRY) to fight the Coronavirus and its effects, would you say that...?”. The figure shows the share of the people who selected the corresponding answer.

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