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DIPLOCAT AGORA 6

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# Centralization vs Decentralization against COVID-19

Which strategy is best to fight  
against COVID-19?

Digital debate organised by DIPLOCAT and the Catalan Center for  
Contemporary Studies on 25 June 2020

DIPLOCAE

 Generalitat de Catalunya  
Departament d'Acció Exterior,  
Relacions Institucionals i Transparència  
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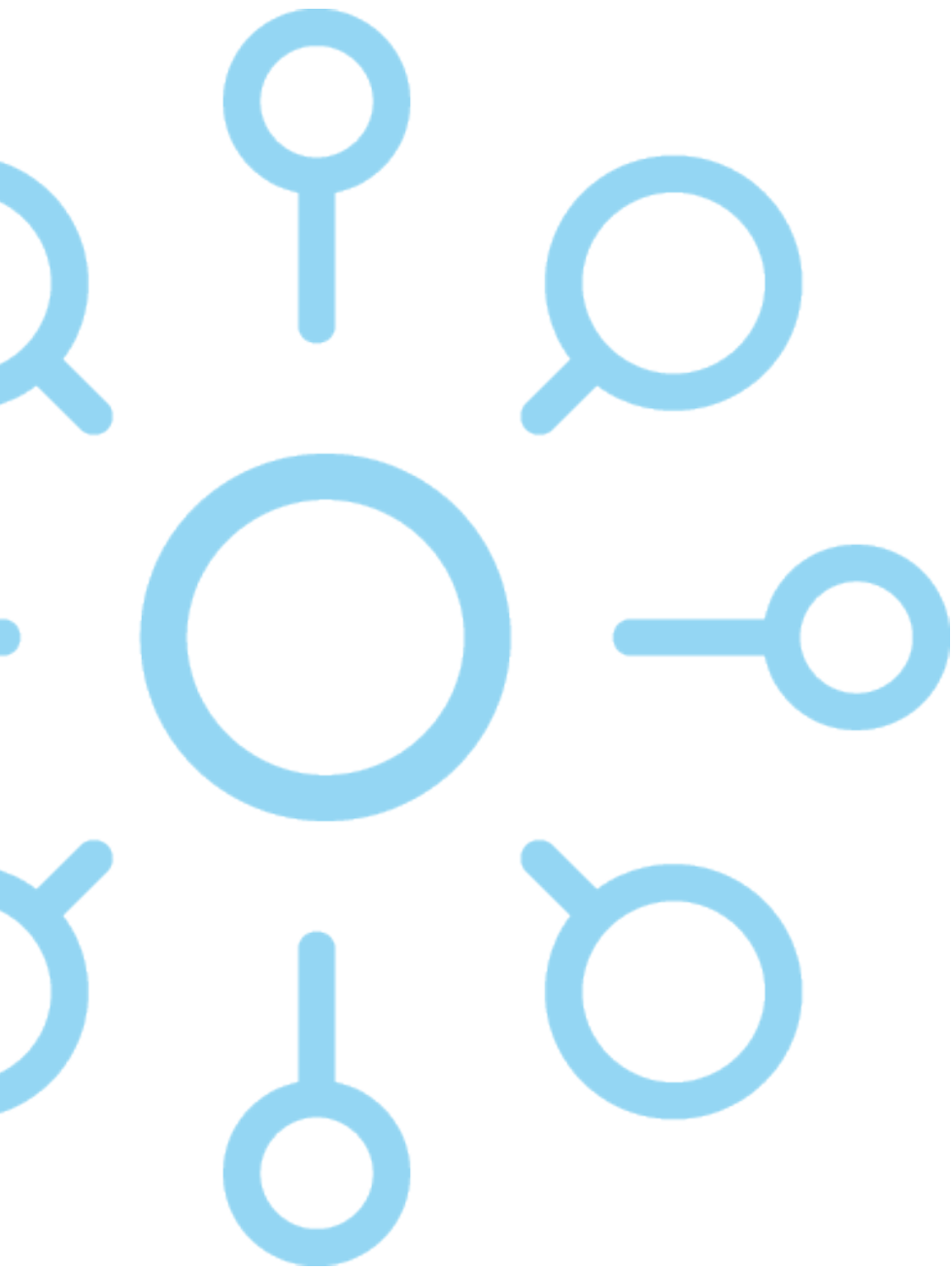
## Briefing with the collaboration of



Generalitat de Catalunya  
**Institut d'Estudis  
de l'Autogovern**

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# 1. Introduction

DIPLOCAT has launched the Diplocat Digital Talks series, online debates that analyze the world after COVID-19 in the light of the experiences of some decentralized political systems. This debate is also part of a series of events organized by the Center for Contemporary Studies and IDEES evaluating the impact of COVID-19 in our societies.

The document you are holding (or looking at onscreen) is the outcome of the first Digital Talk held on 25 June 2020. It is a summary of the main ideas presented by the different speakers and seeks to be yet another contribution to the debate on how to face the pandemic and manage to pave the way into the immediate future. Experts on the field, experts on federalism and multi-level governance and territorial conflicts took part in the panel to talk about centralization and decentralization policies against COVID-19.

I D E E S

**Centralization vs. Decentralization  
Against COVID-19**

Thursday 25th June | 12 pm (CEST)

▶ Online session. Registration required

Generalitat de Catalunya  
Departament d'Acció Exterior,  
Relacions Institucionals i Transparència  
Centre d'Estudis  
de Temes Contemporanis

DIPLOCAE  
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I D E E S

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## 2. Contextualization: Why this talk?

This is an extremely relevant academic debate in our days. As stated in his introductory remarks by Marc Sanjaume, Professor of Political Science at *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*, Adjunct Professor at *Universitat Pompeu Fabra* and member of the Political Theory Research Group, there has been some research related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a good opportunity to talk about policies to fight against this virus and how these policies are related to the territory and to the territorial design of political systems. We do already know a lot about this pandemic and about the institutional responses to the crisis. We do also know that the more varied the responses have been, the higher the success in fighting the virus. In this sense, governments that have been more responsive and haven't taken earlier measures to counteract the virus effects have been more successful in avoiding deaths and the spread

of the pandemic. However, we also ignore many other relevant aspects. Related to the territorial dimension, we still need perspective to understand which specific territorial settings have proven to be more adequate to tackle the pandemic. We have seen that federal and decentralized countries have generated many diverse responses. We have seen countries that have reacted in a very centralized way: Spain for instance, and India. In these countries, the triggering of institutional mechanisms addressed to deal with exceptional events (such as declarations of state of emergency) has brought about a recentralization from regional and federal powers towards the central governments. However, we also have seen responses to the crisis that have followed the lines of the federal spirit. In this sense, we have to highlight that Canada, Australia and Germany, for instance, have been reacting in a federal and decentralized way. Therefore, we would like to know more about this phenomenon and its territorial dimension. This is not only relevant from an academic perspective and for scholars working on federalism, but also for policy makers as it is a matter of public interest. The more we know about the design and impacts of public policies fighting the virus, the more effective governments can be.

Both the Center for Contemporary Studies and DIPLOCAT organized this discussion to analyze one of the crucial issues in terms of political power and territorial politics on managing the coronavirus crisis. As stressed by Pere Almeda, Director of the Center for Contemporary Studies, in-house think tank of the Catalan Government, the title of the debate, “Centralization vs Decentralization against COVID-19”, wanted to reflect from a comparative perspective how different countries have dealt with this unprecedented emergency. The purpose of this debate was to learn from best practices of different political systems and, thus, draw some conclusions to be better prepared for future scenarios.

In her opening remarks, Eli Nebreda, Secretary for Foreign Action and the EU of the Government of Catalonia, stated that there is no denying the COVID-19 crisis has put us through some challenging times. The threat to our health systems, the economy, our rights and freedoms, among others, has been almost unprecedented. As we sailed into uncharted waters, many tough decisions caught governments unequipped, unprepared and, at times, even uninformed. Moreover, this emergency exposed the political structure and culture of each country. In countries like Canada, for instance, with a strong federal background, the burden of these decisions was shared among the various levels of governance, and the same happened in many other countries with a federal system. However, in Spain, a country where the autonomous regime is less firmly established, the government declared the state of alarm and as a consequence, it established a single decision body in Madrid that withdrew de facto all the competences from the autonomous communities. In this sense, thus, the decentralized system established by the Spanish Constitution was disregarded during these exceptional times.

According to Laura Foraster, Secretary General of DIPLOCAT, in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, regional, local and sub-state governments, mainly in Europe and the United States, established their own approaches in the face of the recommendations, statements and instructions of their respective central and federal governments. Indeed, the role of regional, local and sub-state governments in the recovery process will be important, given that many of them have responsibilities in the areas of economic, touristic and cultural dynamism. Catalonia should push, as it has always done, towards a redefinition of the European framework that prioritizes multilevel governance and decentralization.

# 3. Brief analysis of the link between the response of each country to the crisis and the territorial dimension

## United Kingdom

Countries have approached the pandemic differently. Some federal countries have step up their intergovernmental coordination. In other cases, there has been a centralization of power. In the United Kingdom, as explained by Nicola McEwen, from the University of Edinburgh, we have seen neither but a muddling through. To understand the developments in the UK we need to think about its peculiar nature of multi-level government and its very deep asymmetry: devolution in Scotland, in Wales and in Northern Ireland, but the largest English nation being governed solely by the UK government. That has shaped the response to COVID-19. It is probably helpful to think of the response in three phases. The first phase we might call “the Four Nations approach” phase. In this early phase of the pandemic, the governments worked very closely together as they tried to get an understanding of the virus and its spread. They worked together and in concert to reach decisions over lockdown and to coordinate some of the practical policy responses as well. It was very much a uniform approach.

However, none of that went through existing machinery of intergovernmental relations. None of it was through new processes of intergovernmental relations. Instead, what happened was that all was decided within the UK government’s already existing machinery, specifically the Civil Contingencies Committee, a committee that handles and coordinates the UK Government responses to emergencies (this committee goes by the name of COBR, popularly known as COBRA). Moreover, all of that was initiated very quickly and very rapidly. However, in this case the ministers from the devolved governments were invited to attend and through that process they cooperated together to reach common decisions. The high point was an action plan document issued in early March, which was simultaneously published by the four administrations and appears very much as having an intergovernmental approach, even though the processes underpinning it were very much within the UK government’s machinery. Part of what underpinned that common approach was the fact that so much of this was driven by science. The scientific advisory committee that is advising the UK government is also advising the other administrations as well. So they were drawing upon a common scientific knowledge and that helped to nurture cooperation between the health officials that were advising each of the administrations and it helped to ensure that in the early stages they were doing things broadly together and at the same time.

Phase two is the easing of lockdown. In this phase, the collaborative approach appeared to have broken down. There was still common scientific base. They were still drawing on scientific knowledge to the extent that they were doing so and there might be some variations between the administrations. In fact, we saw each administration which had its own policy responsibilities for public health in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, was making slightly different decisions and at slightly different times. In addition, we saw the UK government making policy for England, which was going at a much faster pace in terms of easing the lockdown than we saw in the devolved territories. Part of that was

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about politics and it was about the concern for the economy. In this sense, the UK government had constitutionally much more responsibility for the economy and for economic recovery, so that might be thatching into the situation as well. The consequence of that was that there were elements of confusion. Sometimes we saw minor differences in policies that do not always made a lot of sense or it was difficult to see the sense in them. The communication in the coordination that was there in the early phase appeared to have broken down. However, McEwen thinks as we move further into the easing of the lockdown and into phase three (the economic recovery although we are not there yet but that would come once the immediate emergency is passed) then, that's where the really big political differences might come to the fore.

Moreover, here there is an asymmetry in the constitutional responsibilities of the administrations where each of the governments equally have responsibility for public health. The UK government controls the fiscal levers that will be needed to address the economic challenges ahead. It is not clear yet whether they will seek to use them in cooperation and in collaboration with the devolved governments, or whether some of the tensions between the administrations, that have been a pattern for quite a long time long before COVID, would come to the fore. Every country is going to have enormous economic challenges coming out of this. In the UK, we also uniquely have the challenge of BREXIT happening at the same time. BREXIT has created some tensions between the governments. They are at very different places with respect to BREXIT and that is possibly influencing their approach at phase three of the pandemic as well. Therefore, McEwen thinks that there are very big tests ahead in the way that the UK and the different governments in the UK managed the ongoing easing of lockdown and in particular the recovery period as well. Much of that is taking place within a wider context in which the relationships between the governments have been strained particularly by BREXIT but in the case of the Scottish Government also by the wider constitutional debate over Scottish independence. Those issues have been side lined in the midst of the emergency but they are very much so part of the relevant context and they add to the stakes that are there for all of the government's and in the decisions that they are confronted with and would have to make.

## Italy

The situation in Italy was pretty much the same as in the UK, as stressed in his intervention by Francesco Palermo, from research center EURAC in Bolzano/Bozen (South Tyrol). As in the UK, in the first phase, the most critical moment of the emergency, there had been uniformity and regions had kind of accepted it and played around the national rules. Then, in the second phase, differentiation became much more acute and there had been some litigation. The challenges we had to face were particularly with regard to the intergovernmental relations because, like in the UK, these were not sufficiently developed. Italy is an extremely decentralized country without being a typical federal country and without the federal culture. This is why, to tackle this crisis, informal mechanisms had been established and put into place. There is a stronger asymmetry actually, what has happened and is happening shows the pros and cons of decentralization. To broadcast this situation Palermo explained that already on 31 January, the government's declared the state of emergency based on the Law on Civil Protection, and not based on the Constitution because the Constitution in that respect does not say anything. The Constitution provides for the possibility for the government to adopt acts, which have the same standing as laws and need to be ratified by Parliament within a two-month period. This has been actually the legal basis for adopting some emergency measures, administrative acts, issued by the national government. Regions were left very little margin in the first phase and, as stated by Palermo, they were happy with that initially. They got angry later on, when the measures started to be eased and almost entirely lifted step-by step, because then, of course, the regions came back in the scenery and clearly wanted to use their powers. This tension between the national power with regard to public security, on the one hand, and the regional power with regard to health care, on the other, has brought about institutional confrontation and a lot of litigation has emerged in that respect.



Palermo also pointed out that the Italian asymmetry was not only in terms of division of powers, but also in terms of the impact of the pandemic. Actually, Italy was hit first but, in practice, almost 70% of the cases were originated in only one region, Lombardy. Of course a very important one and the most populous, the area around Milan. However, a couple of other regions had some severe problems but managed them very well, while Lombardy did it very badly. So again, we can see pros and cons of a federal type of approach. In this second phase some regions started to adopt their own measures; the national government was not overly happy with that and challenged most of them in the administrative courts. Only one region, the South Tirol, the northernmost region at the border with Austria, where professor Palermo is based, and with a predominantly German-speaking population, passed a law, which caused some scandal initially: "How dare regions to adopt their own laws!" Thus, the Italian government challenged the South Tirol law to the Constitutional Court. The decision is still pending although the political scandal is over and, actually, the implementation of the law has worked pretty well. All this shows the lack of federal culture Palermo was referring to at the beginning of his intervention. Now, the debate is whether further centralization should be put into place. Some voices claim that this crisis has shown that actually a differentiated approach is much more efficient. Perhaps, we need a better response in terms of the instruments for coordinating the action of the various regions. Therefore, the debate is open.

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## Germany and Switzerland

Both these countries lend themselves very nicely for a comparison because their approaches were and have been very different. Johanna Schnabel, from the University of Kent and the University of Lausanne, explained that in Germany, and that is quite surprising, the *länder* were in charge of introducing the main measures to contain the spread of the virus. In this sense, they had decided to ban mass gatherings, to close schools... The role of the federal government was to coordinate. Thus, it could issue recommendations and it fulfilled its role as a coordinator in the weekly meetings with the premiers of the *länder*. Usually these meetings were followed by a joint press conference in which they announced their agreement on the introduction of a number of measures. Therefore, there has been a quiet coordinated approach between the governments. Having said that, though, the *länder* also had their own initiatives. Especially in the crisis, the *länder* decided to close schools even before the above-mentioned meetings with the federal government took place. Bavaria had been, in a way, like Lombardy. It was the land to be firstly hit, much more than the other *länder*. Bavaria had pushed ahead quite early on and had enacted quite strict measures. Later on, after Germany reached its peak, we could see the *länder* had been pushing for easing the restrictions. The federal government had been quite reluctant initially but eventually agreed that the decisions on the easing of the restrictions would be left to each region as well as the implementation of these restrictions. Therefore, the *länder* had been playing a quite important role.

In Switzerland, the situation was very different. Since in Switzerland the federal government has significant powers, it decided to ban mass gatherings, to close schools and restaurants and so on. Ticino is Switzerland's Bavaria or Lombardy. Ticino was hit first and in much more severe way than the other cantons. Moreover, since Ticino reacted earlier, it imposed stricter and stricter measures but as soon as the federal government took action, Ticino had to play the federal government's rules. However, to acknowledge Ticino's specific situation, the federal government had allowed stricter rules. The federal government had even overruled decisions by the cantons such as imposing them on senior citizens,

which has led to quite some frustration by their governments. Whereas in Germany the introduction of measures had been coordinated, in Switzerland coordination has been limited to the implementation of the measures. Because even though the federal government decided on the introduction of the measures, the cantons implemented them and coordinated the implementation phase. After the peak of the pandemic, the federal government ended the State of Emergency and returned powers to the cantons. From then on, the cantons were again the ones in charge of imposing restrictions and the next steps would a second wave occurred. We see a strong degree of decentralization with coordination in Germany and a quite unusual degree of centralization in Switzerland.

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## Catalonia and Spain

For Mireia Grau, from the *Institut de l'Autogovern* of the Government of Catalonia, the first reaction in trying to sort out this talk was to think about whether decentralization responses or centralization responses were more efficient in dealing with the crisis but she found out that we do not have enough data nor enough perspective to assess this. However, during all this time we have seen several academic posts analyzing the answers the different governments have provided to the pandemics. The first thing that strikes Grau is to think that this could be an institutional choice, that is, that governments could decide between carrying on decentralized or centralized options in such a rush time and providing a quick answer. In this sense, however, France, as a centralized country, could not have reacted differently apart from acting "centralizedly", but federal countries could decide or choose between being and reacting in a more centralized or more decentralized way of doing.

The case of Spain is that of a hyper-centralized response and this was neither a mystery nor a surprise. From the first moment, the lower chamber of the Parliament (*Congreso*) declared the State of Emergency so there was no intervention of other institutional actors but that of the members of the *Congreso* and the government declaring the State of Emergency that redevolved the powers of the autonomous communities to a single commandment under central government. All constitutionally impeccable and it shows that the margin of institutional manoeuvre that central government had was actually very small: there was no much way of dealing, institutionally speaking, than recentralizing everything and very intensively. Grau highlight how easy it was to redevolve all the powers to a single commandment lead by central government. Although there was a single commandment to deal with the pandemic, the autonomous communities had implemented in the territories the health system and its management all these years. Therefore, a kind of intergovernmental relation had to be established. Moreover, they realized how this intergovernmental machinery (the intergovernmental conferences) was so poorly stablished, another weakness of the system. These conferences, that had long existed, had only called twice before and there was not a practice of the political system to decide jointly on these issues. Moreover, intergovernmental relations have never had to do anything at all with joint decision-making and most of the autonomous communities had ever not thought about this, but suddenly it becomes clear to everybody that the autonomous communities have no access to state decision-making and all the measures that were decided centrally.

At one point central government, in minority, realized that just for party politics reasons they needed to concede some aspects that the autonomous communities, through the parties that were represented in the *Congreso*, had to say and suggest. So we went from the initial months of a highly centralized decision-making process to a second phase in which the representatives of the government of the autonomous communities through party politics mechanisms in the *Congreso* started a negotiation

process in some issues. However, the point is that from the perspective of the institutional setting, the whole process of triggering and implementing the state of emergency did not allow any intervention of the autonomous communities. There were no mechanisms for share rule and that is incredibly interesting because it has generated a debate for the first time, everybody seems to agree: that share rule is unexisting in Spain. And for the same principle that share rule is unexisting in Spain we can start talking about something that is highly controversial which is whether self-rule in Spain is enough. Because share-rule cannot exist without a established self-rule, and self-rule cannot exist without an established share-rule. So, in all, the hyper-centralized response to the pandemic that left aside the autonomous communities, was not a political or strategic choice, it was the only choice the institutional system could offer. Therefore, this institutional constraint turns to be an indicator of the real nature of decentralization in Spain.

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As stated by Sanjaume in his closing remarks for the first topic of the debate, there is a lot of variation across countries with huge differences between the case of the UK, Italy and Spain, also internally in each country and between these cases and the cases of Germany and Switzerland. The latter have reacted to the crisis following federal whereas in the other cases, there is a more centralized approach, at least in the first moment. There are also internal time-variations with an initial centralizing reaction, at least in Italy and Spain, and then, a second phase in which there was more leeway to the regions in the de-escalation phase in these two countries.

## 4. Recommendations from the participants

During the second part of the debate, we addressed the subject from a more analytical perspective. Sanjaume asked the participants their opinion on which approach could have been better to fight the pandemic. Finally, even though he thinks we do not have enough evidence yet, he asked as experts on this topic whether they could indicate some recommendations to governments in relation to the territorial dimension in fighting the crisis.

### United Kingdom

Before answering the question, McEwen underlined that uniformity and centralization were not the same thing. Saying so, in the UK in the early phase the approach was uniform but such uniformity was a decision agreed and made by all the administrations. The central authority did not decide it. Even though she thought that it was too early to tell which was the most effective, she suggested that centralizing powers was not necessarily the most effective approach, and nor indeed was uniformity of approach either. They had some strengths, they could clarify the legal picture and they could make it easy for

people to understand the message if there was only one message. However, it was not sustainable in a multilevel system. Even in the countries where we have seen centralization to begin with or uniformity to begin with, we started to see variation emerging at later stages.

McEwen considered interesting what we identified in the cases of Italy, Spain and in the UK where there was a lack of a federal culture. In the UK the lack of a federal culture did not lead to resentment at variation. It was more related to a lack of understanding within England about devolution and actually sometimes within the UK government about devolution. So, one of the legacies could be that there was greater later understanding here as well. One of the reasons why she thought uniformity was not necessarily the best approach was that it could come at the cost of policy innovation. If you uniformly made a bad policy choice then it would affect everybody in the same way. So some of the reasons why we had multi-level government in the first place might be also some of the reasons why it was attractive and appealing, and probably appropriate to have at least the opportunity to tailor policies to local needs and local preferences into local institutional structures. In the cases where there had been the permission to have variation, centralizing powers could also lead to resentment in the short, medium and longer term. In addition, that created additional challenges for governing in complex territorial and plurinational states, and she thought we have heard some of that already in the contributions. Therefore, it was difficult to talk about whether one approach was more effective than the other was. They had both advantages and disadvantages, and they had risks and opportunities. For McEwen what was interesting was that we did not yet understand that while Spain, Italy and the UK approached the crisis in ways that we might have expected them to, we had also some examples, such as the Swiss and the Australian cases, which maybe approached this in ways that we would not have expected them to. That had not quite been with the tradition and those were interesting things to unpack and explore in the future.

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**One of the reasons why she thought uniformity was not necessarily the best approach was that it could come at the cost of policy innovation.**

## Italy

Palermo did agree with these differences between uniformity and centralization and he added one more layer of complexity to the debate stating that coordination was different from centralization. What we had seen in many countries was that they mixed up these two things. For instance in Switzerland, which is probably one of the most decentralized countries worldwide, the national government, especially in the most delicate moments, could have a coordinating effect. In Germany even more and the Robert Koch Institute because of its expertise had seized the power even from the national government. There was very little room for the Lander. Still nobody was imposing. It was about really coordination and federalism does not mean that everyone goes its own way. Federalism means that there is a meaningful system to coordinate actions. Of course, even the national dimension has been far too small for these things. Palermo stated that you could not fight a pandemic at the municipal level; even at the state or national or continental level, they were also too small. What we needed was better coordination, which it did not mean imposition from the top. In another issue, which went even beyond centralization and decentralization, he added that constitutions have proven overall to be not fully equipped. In that respect, he explained that the Italian parliament presented a few proposals for a constitutional amendment just copy-pasting article 116 of the Spanish Constitution. Even if there were some doubts about this solution, Palermo thought that at least you had a provision establishing some procedural mechanisms to deal with these issues.

Regarding the recommendations, Palermo thought that we could not recommend much because the lack of data. Nevertheless, he sketched some potential ways. The best argument for a decentralized

approach, which does not mean “each one goes its own way”, was the two most dramatic failures we witnessed in Brazil and the United States, which are two federal countries. So only for that reason, he thought a more decentralized structure would help. However, you could have mistaken at sub-national level too, what had happened in Lombardy in Italy was clearly an example of that. While we could not avoid mistakes, we had many more reasons from learning from one another. To sum up, Palermo thought that while we could not make clear recommendations, we could at least see that the advantages of a decentralized solution combined with strong intergovernmental processes were certainly a much more meaningful way of approaching this sort of problems.

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**In another issue, which went even beyond centralization and decentralization, he added that constitutions have proven overall to be not fully equipped.**

## Germany and Switzerland

Adding to what McEwen and Palermo already said, Schnabel stated that individual regions or constituent units had been exposed to different degrees to the virus. In every country, we had a few regions that much more severely exposed to the virus than others had. One advantage of decentralization, then you could tailor the measures to the degree of exposure. For example, there had been some dissatisfaction in the German-speaking part of Switzerland about the strictness of measures as they were mainly based on the situation in the Lake Geneva area, the French-speaking part. Thus, more responsibilities on the subnational level would help to tighten these measures to the degree of exposure. Nevertheless, if you lived in a border region, it might have been quite difficult to know what the rules were in one of the Lander, and if you crossed the border, you would not know anymore what the rules were there. Schnabel thought there was this trade off involved in decentralization. Centralization seemed to do more justice to the national scope or the bigger scope of the crisis.

Nevertheless, then, it obviously came with the disadvantages of this blanked approach that had just been described. That is why she agreed with Nicola and Francesco that the discussion about centralization versus decentralization was not the only one we should have had when it came to federalism or territorial politics. Germany and Switzerland, who represented these two different approaches, had both done very well. Which relates to factors that were completely more independent of the federal system. Federalism, usually our decentralized systems, existed for reasons that were independent of emergency management. Therefore, Schnabel thought that, in a way, crisis management needed to operate within the existing framework, and this is why coordination was so important. It is naive to believe that either one level of government could handle the crisis on its own. We had observed that there had been much more coordination in the lockdown phase of this public health crisis. This was because there was more pressure to coordinate, but also because the strong problem’s pressure made it easier to coordinate, parties could put their conflicts aside for the time being. That was much more difficult once the public pressure declined.

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**Crisis management needed to operate within the existing framework, and this is why coordination was so important.**

What was coordinated? Here we could see that in Germany the introduction of measures and their implementation were coordinated. In Switzerland, only the implementation was coordinated. She thought that best practice was that coordination needed to include both, decisions and implementation. Where did coordination happen? Both Germany and Switzerland had very well developed systems of intergovernmental councils, coordinated practices, arrangements and so on. It helped to have these

arrangements and then used them. She added that in Germany so much coordination had happened because in Germany everything is always coordinated. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that crises lead to long-term centralization. Even in Switzerland, the federal government had afterwards returned power to the Cantons. In any case, she ended stating that these coordination problems were what we should look at, and what we should learn from to prevent further crises

## Catalonia and Spain

Following the arguments given by McEwen, Palermo and Schnabel, Grau stated that the word was coordination but the exact meaning differed from country to country. Years ago, in Spain there was always this idea of mixing centralization with cooperation. The idea of a hierarchical way of cooperation was inserted in central government institutions. The good thing was that the whole crisis had made relevant in all countries this need to cooperate with all levels of government, not just at the national level but also internationally speaking. We could also add locally. Municipalities should also have had an active role apart from obeying the rules. All that was very difficult if you did not have a background on this institutional way of moving. But coordination from the Spanish central government point of view was just imposition. Academics, politicians, civil servants realized they did not have a voice in all this system. Moreover, that had an impact overall legitimacy of the institutional setting. The good news was that, at least, it had inserted this idea on the political debate.

In the meantime, as far as there were no effective and legitimate institutional mechanism to ease this coordination, the problem was that these issues immediately move to party politics and became unstable, depending on majorities or on coalitions. Grau stressed that all systems should learn from the failure of coordinating structures, especially in multi-level countries. If the distribution of powers provided different decision-making areas and, therefore, different policy instruments and approaches, then coordination could be based on imposition. All countries had more or less already defined this issue as an institutional problem derived from the crisis. Would they learn from it?



**The good thing was that the whole crisis had made relevant in all countries this need to cooperate with all levels of government, not just at the national level but also internationally speaking. We could also add locally.**

## 5. Final debate

During the debate, the participants answered the questions from the audience regarding how the pandemic had affected the polarization and territorial conflict in some European regions; in terms of communication if just one single message from the central government was more effective than multiple messages across territories; and finally about the role played by the EU during this crisis.

Regarding the territorial conflict in some European regions, we saw sustained levels of support for independence in Scotland, suggesting increases in support as well. McEwen thought that the way that the governments responded in the crisis, the way that they acted and they were perceived, would still have an effect on that wider constitutional debate. There were very big challenges ahead particularly related to the economic recovery. Back to that coordination point again, if the governments could

coordinate and work together or if they were competing with each other and that would fit into the constitutional question.

Grau said that the biggest problem was that the Spanish institutional setting and the central government structures were hyper centralized. The structure of the ministries were the same as 50 years ago. The good thing about the crisis in terms of federalism or institutional setting was that it had put light on that. The debate on coordination had made evident that shared-rule did not exist because of the lack of cooperative mechanisms and culture, but also because self-government was very limited. In this sense, the crisis had put light, had focused on some areas of the institutional setting on which the debate had not been engaged before. Because how easy it was to redevolve everything, all the powers to central government. It was constitutional. We needed to think about this in terms of institutional warranties.

In accordance with Grau, Palermo said that if there is something that we could learn from the Spanish and Italian experiences was that the systems were actually much more centralized than they looked on paper. The crisis has certainly unveiled this. The question was whether we accepted that or not. In the same line, when we talked about secessionist movements and trends, they were by far not all the same. One thing was to speak about these issues in the context of Scotland or Catalonia. Another thing was to speak about that in the context of South Tyrol, for example, where there are some relevant political forces claiming for secession, but not being in Parliament, not being in government, and not coming up with strong arguments. So again, it was difficult to generalize and the impact might be different case-by-case.

Regarding the message, McEwen stated that it depended on the message and on the messenger. In the UK context, when you had a prime minister who was very polarizing, then having a single message would not necessarily be more effective or incur more compliance. Whereas the message coming from the Scottish government was generally more trusted than the UK government.

Because that is obviously a very high ceiling issue in the UK: where there have been demands for a new independence referendum in Scotland. Demands that have been rejected by the UK government. The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, made a decision to park the independence process so that her sole focus was on addressing that pandemic. Officials who were working on that, will be deployed and she has been at pains to stress that normal politics, including constitutional politics, have to be left to the side. However, it that does not mean that they are not still there.

Is the single message more effective? Palermo said that not at all, rather the opposite. A single message implied that you had to take the maximum common denominator, not the minimum one. If you had a region, again like the case of Italy, where you had about 70 percent of the Covid cases, well the message and the measures had to tailor to that case. Otherwise, it would a disaster, which means that you would completely neglect the situation in all the other territories. In this sense, he thought that we should start to fight intellectually the easy message. Because on this path, then the consequences might be extremely dangerous. And here we were talking about fundamental rights of people

Finally, Palermo's opinion was that the expectations about the European Union probably were wrongly posed. This was because of the simple message idea, probably. The European Union is not the fastest reacting institution. It takes time. It needs compromise again because it is likely not in the position to impose things, but it needs to digest some difficult decisions. However, you might like it or not but in the end it was working. It had shown some leadership, it had provided for something. We could disagree about the contents, of course, and the countries were still disagreeing. But he would not say the European Union had been failing at least not to the extent that opponents tended to say. Everything could be better, but certainly, the European Union simply needed time. If you needed a prompt reaction mechanism, you should not had to turn to the European Union.

Grau stated that the European Union had no power to have an immediate reaction. Moreover, states kept the initial and the final word for what they had to say on these areas. We also learned from the pandemic where the real power lies in. Based on this lesson we could start restructuring it if we wanted to.

McEwen agreed on the European Union analogy and discussions of it being a slow responder, partly to do with the political and the institutional culture. However, it may also lead one to think that if you had a system of cold decision among multiple partners, then that would inevitably slow your response. In this sense, this was partly what drove the utilization and involvement of centralization and emergency power. What we could learn from this and from looking at the issue comparatively, was that coordination did not have to be slow. If we could learn from the places that had managed to coordinate their decision-making that did not need to be uniform, it could allow for variation and to do that efficiently and effectively, then, she thought that would be a very valuable insight for other countries as well



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# The member entities of the consortium

## » Public institutions and municipal entities

- Government of Catalonia
- Barcelona City Council
- Tarragona City Council
- Girona City Council
- Lleida City Council
- Vielha e Mijaran City Council
- Barcelona Provincial Council
- Tarragona Provincial Council
- Girona Provincial Council
- Lleida Provincial Council
- Conselh Generau d'Aran
- Catalan Association of Municipalities and Counties
- Federation of Municipalities of Catalonia

## » Entities of the business sector

- General Council of the Official Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Catalonia
- Entrepreneurs association Foment del Treball Nacional
- Association of Micro-, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises of Catalonia (PIMEC)
- Confederation of Cooperatives of Catalonia
- Multi-Sector Business Association (AMEC)
- Private Foundation of Entrepreneurs (FemCAT)

## » Entities of the social, trade union and sports sector

- The Group of Entities of the Voluntary Sector of Catalonia
- Trade union Unió General de Treballadors de Catalunya (UGT)
- Trade union Comissions Obreres de Catalunya (CCOO)
- Football Club Barcelona

## » Universities, business schools and academic institutions

- University of Barcelona (UB)
- Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)
- Technical University of Catalonia (UPC)
- Pompeu Fabra University (UPF)
- University of Lleida (UdL)
- University of Girona (UdG)
- Rovira i Virgili University (URV)
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