

The territorial politics of coronavirus: is this the hour of central government?

*In times of crisis, central governments have often increased their power. Comparing the territorial arrangements of countries facing the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, **Daive Vampa** argues that centralising power would be misguided, and instead we should look to examples of successful coordination within multi-level forms of governance.*



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The recent outbreak of Covid-19 is likely to change many dimensions of contemporary politics. One in particular will be heavily affected: the distribution of authority between national and sub-national governments. It is perhaps too early for a full assessment of how different political systems have responded to the challenges posed by the new virus. A debate seems to have already started about the effectiveness of authoritarian versus democratic regimes in tackling the crisis. Some might point to the potential ability of the former to enforce stricter containment measures, while others could stress the greater transparency and readiness of the latter to share data and information. Ultimately, the crisis is forcing us to stand between two principles that, until recently, were widely considered as mutually reinforcing: the right to life and individual freedom. The virus is creating a new tension between the two: in order to protect life, we need to significantly restrict our individual freedom. Only now are we starting to grasp the huge implications that all this has for the future of liberal democracies.

There is another political question that at first may seem trivial but, in fact, is directly linked to the current management of the crisis and may also have important long-term consequences for the lives of millions of people: where should political authority lie? We tend to focus on the 'who' and the 'what' of power, that is, on leaders and their actions and decisions. By contrast, the 'where' – meaning the territorial dimension of politics – often remains in the background. This time it may be different.

The Covid-19 crisis is clearly global, with all countries affected by it. Yet, so far, we are not seeing the emergence of a global response to it. Supranational organisations, like the UN and the EU, do not seem to have the capacity and flexibility to deal with the immediate, day-to-day dimension of the emergency. Perhaps in a more distant future, when post-virus reconstruction will start, they will play a more active role. For the moment they are powerless. In a situation of general panic, national governments appear to lack the willingness, and the patience, to use supranational institutions as arenas for political coordination.

However, when we talk about 'territory' we should not only consider how national and supranational dimensions are linked to each other. We should also look at the other side of a multi-layered system of governance: the relationship between national and sub-national levels. We can observe a lot of cross-country variation in the way authority is allocated between 'centre' and 'periphery'. This variation is significant even among advanced democracies and might in turn explain part of the differences that we observe in the way they are coping with the crisis.

It is therefore not surprising that observers have started weighing up the positives and negatives of federalism and decentralisation in the current situation. So far there does not seem to be a clear consensus on whether we need a stronger central government or more active sub-national institutions. A lot of evidence has been used against decentralisation. Look at the cases of [Italy](#) and [Spain](#), where decentralised systems are believed to have led to confusion in the first crucial stages of the pandemic, when more territorial coordination might have helped slow down the spread of the contagion. Closing schools, testing, preparing hospitals did not always follow a national strategy. It was not clear initially which institutional level was responsible for what. So in Italy the first days of the crisis were wasted in long disputes between central government and regions. [For instance, national authorities and representatives of some regional administrations were engaged in a heated debate on whether schools should be closed](#). Lombardy was accused by the national government of mismanaging the hospital where the first cases of infection were detected, while the region responded that it was just following the procedures decided by Rome. And so on. Coronavirus even undermined the general understanding that decentralisation, while damaging for poor communities, would benefit rich regions. We all saw [Lombardy](#) and [Catalonia](#), two European 'powerhouses', which prided themselves in their efficiency and first-class health systems, collapse in a matter of days.

Supporters of a stronger central government could also point to the US example, [where each state is following a different strategy and federal institutions, which are also internally divided, have been hesitant to take the lead](#). This very loose network of relations is reminiscent of an ineffective face mask: the holes between different governmental actors are so wide that there is plenty of space for the virus to spread. The dramatic recent numbers clearly confirm this. The [British system has also struggled to find a balance between the high level of centralisation in England and the different levels of autonomy granted to devolved administrations](#). For instance, there have been problems linked to the geographical distribution of tests and territorial differences in the way the [lockdown was implemented](#). Additionally, the autonomous health strategies pursued by Scotland and Wales, which are consistent with their devolved powers, raise the question of where the boundaries of the National Health System lie. What does 'national' mean in this time of emergency? Is it still a UK-wide system? What implications does this have for the concept of social citizenship?

Generally, in periods of crisis, when an external shock is threatening the very foundations of the economy and society, and total mobilisation of national resources is required, the role of the central government may be re-discovered, with effects that last even after the crisis is over. Famous examples include Roosevelt's New Deal, which significantly expanded the power of federal government (and of the US President) in the 1930s and in the following decades, and the post-World War II situation in Europe, when governments presided over the reconstruction of national economies. A strong state needs a strong central government, this is what evidence from the 20th century seems to suggest.

Is this the trajectory that we will have to follow then? Is centralisation going to be the new recipe for salvation in these uncertain times? It is difficult to provide a straightforward answer to these questions. True, Italy, Spain and the US stand as examples of the inefficiencies of decentralisation and its dramatic effects on citizens' well-being. Yet we have another example of federal system, [Germany, which seems to provide evidence in support of very different conclusions](#). Having a 'polycentric' system of government might allow a more diffuse use of resources. So, for instance, testing may be more extensive and, at the same time, more intensive, since the existence of sub-national authorities ensures that all relevant procedures are closely monitored.

Decentralisation also favours policy ‘experimentation’. Central governments might be more consistent and rapid in implementing their action plans, but what if they choose a wrong strategy in the first place? After all, national governments, too, make mistakes, particularly when the nature of the challenge is not very well understood. Giving some autonomy to regions allows them to act as laboratories, and this in turn increases the chances of finding more effective solutions. For instance, it is true that some Italian regions – Lombardy in particular – have struggled to cope with the emergency. At the same time, however, the second largest region of the Italian North, [Veneto](#), [launched a strategy of mass testing, which is now regarded as a model to be exported to other regions](#) (and even countries). Of course, such policy innovations are likely to remain confined to limited geographical areas unless there is an overarching mechanism of policy ‘diffusion’, which brings regions together and allows them to learn from each other.

It is also useful to separate the concept of strong state from that of powerful central government. A strong public sector is not necessarily incompatible with a certain level of decentralisation. Even generous welfare systems, like those in Scandinavia, are based on a tradition of active local authorities. What characterises them is a [high degree of integration and coordination between different levels of government](#). This combination of decentralisation and coordination is even more evident in the German system. Attributing the success of the German model to federalism alone is not entirely correct. [Germany represents a particular, highly coordinated, type of federalism](#), in which states (the *Länder*) are engaged in mutual learning and in reaching consensus with the federal government. In the post-Covid-19 era this is what many countries might need. Transferring all power to central institutions would be a simplistic solution, probably a mistake in societies which are much more complex and plural today than in the 1940s and 1950s. What we need is to promote a form of empowerment of local and regional communities that is inspired by the principles of ‘cooperative’ federalism and sheds its more ‘competitive’ features.

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