

Strategic crises management in Finland: government responses to COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – This article examines the strategy formation in the Finnish government's pandemic management during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing a research gap by exploring the possibilities for strategy formation in guiding government policy formation.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilizing perspective of strategic planning and emergent strategies influenced by the authorizing environment, the article emphasizes the importance of strategy development in government. The management of COVID-19 pandemic serves as a case study for investigating public strategies in policy formation, underscoring the significance of the authorizing environment in integrating predefined strategic plans with emergent strategic avenues.

Findings – The management of pandemics has led to changes in legislation and modes of government decision-making, resulting in learnings for coordinating subnational governments and allocation of resources. The government actions evolved from extracting components from predefined strategic plans and drawing on the experiences of other countries. The emergent properties emerged from amalgamating these elements into an umbrella strategy with a variety of new responses.

Research limitations/implications – The examination focuses on the view from the nexus of government. Although, informed by the subnational developments and stakeholder responses, the study adopts a bird's eye view on the COVID-19 management.

Practical implications – The examination raises needs for legislative changes, improvement of cross-sectoral coordination within central government and improvement for the decision-making capability within subnational government.

Originality/value – By focusing on the Finnish government's measures in pandemic management, this article contributes to the discourse on pandemic management. The findings provide insights for strategic crisis management in the public sector.

Keywords Emergent strategy, Strategic planning, Authorizing environment, Strategic management, Crisis management, COVID-19 pandemic

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Crisis situations portray focusing events attracting the attention of decision-makers and general public (Birkland, 1998). Even more importantly, crises provide a testing ground for government capability for solving immediate and pressing threats. The management of COVID-19 pandemics showcases Finnish government ability to respond to sudden incident by using its mandate, policy tools and methods of adaptation to deal with changing situations. In the discussion of health, the strategic approach to managing pandemics often

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refers to containment and mitigation policies as two main strategies to fight against pandemics such as COVID-19. Containment strategies aim to minimize the risk of transmission from infected to non-infected individuals to stop the outbreak and mitigation strategies aim to slow the disease and to reduce the peak in healthcare demand (Anttiroiko, 2021). However, in administrative reality, the strategy used for coping with the crises cannot easily be distinguished from other government actions.

With the plethora of existing research on COVID-19 pandemic, this article aims to fill in specific research gap identified by previous research (Zaki and Wayenberg, 2023). The focus is on studying framework conditions for strategy and design which shape the conditions for preferences and enable policy learning and contribute to certain policy outcomes. The article contributes to the discussion of the responses to crises in the public sector, as well as the discussion of the implications of strategies in government and the formation of public policies. The article puts forward an image of political maneuvering in which pieces of ready-made strategic tools are assembled together with new elements into a malleable policy object. The article responds to the question of how the Finnish government has employed measures to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. The article extends the discussion of tackling the pandemic with governments in Nordic countries (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020) and elsewhere (Troisi and Alfano, 2022; Gao and Yu, 2020; Huang, 2020).

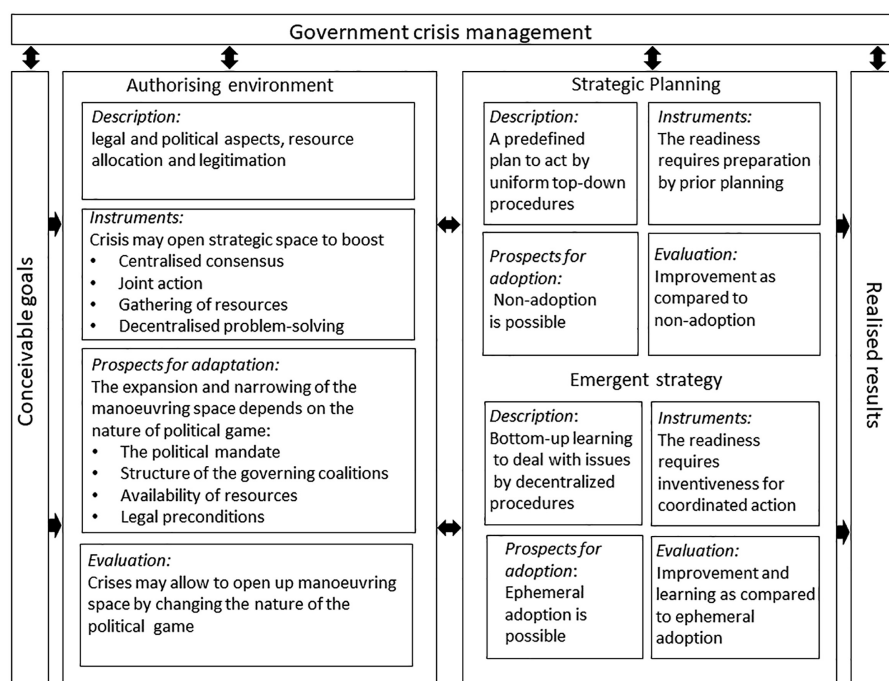
The article is structured as follows: First, it presents framework for the examination of crises management from government point of view based on insights from discussion of the authorizing environment within government, strategic thought and policy design, distinguishing between prior planning and processual adaptation. The result section deals with the strategic developments of the Finnish government in orienting its actions to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, and the discussion provides further insight into strategy formation in government followed by conclusions portraying the role of authoritative environment, strategic planning and processual adaptations.

Background

Figure 1 introduce the framework integrating authorizing environment, prior planning and emergent strategies. Firstly, the following discussion elaborates on the definition and content of these aspects in the management of the COVID-19 pandemics. Secondly, the main instruments employed within these strategic dimensions during times of crisis are described. Thirdly, the prospects of adopting these strategies within the context of crises are considered.

Authorizing environment. Strategy might be defined as “a concrete approach to aligning the aspirations and the capabilities of public organizations or other entities in order to achieve goals and create public value” (Bryson *et al.*, 2018). Strategy is about purpose, direction and goals (Johanson, 2009). Moore (2013) points to the role of the authorizing environment in creating public value. These aspects include the legal and political aspects of society, as well as resource allocation and legitimation to operate for the common good, respectively. Although the role of public managers is to find new opportunities to achieve goals by using their cunning in an “imaginative value search”, fairness and accountability are what legitimize them. Legitimacy does not stem only from political consensus; it includes harnessing stakeholder support from service users and local communities. Legitimacy does not result from keeping a suitable distance from others; it is a result of constant and repeated actions of integrity before multiple audiences.

There is the idea that exceptional circumstances such as COVID-19 crises might broaden the policy issues and enlarge the possibilities for operation within authoritative environment (Bryson, 1981). For example, subnational governments may be able to operate in a concerted effort shielded by controversies in the central government, the extra financial burden may be more easily tolerated, the crises may increase the possibilities for reaching consensus, and



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1.
Potentials of strategy
in crisis management

comprehensive solutions may become available on the political agenda if the normal controversies are set aside for the duration of the immediate threat.

Strategic planning. Strategy is related to the means of facing the future with present understanding. Most often strategy formation takes place through planning. Strategic planning is not a single entity but instead combines number of concepts and procedures in thinking about purpose and agenda by evaluating strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a systemic framework. It takes into consideration the stakeholders such as elected and appointed officials and embraces the possibility that future projections might in practice include emergent developments (Bryson *et al.*, 2018). Anticipating future circumstances based on current knowledge sets the perspective for any planning exercise, but looking ahead includes a variety of methods (Iasbech and Lavarda, 2018). It may proceed through simple projections, more elaborate forecasts and complicated plans (Myers and Kitsuse, 2000; Manoharan *et al.*, 2015). Although projections and forecasts only offer rudimentary glimpses into the future, they help guide strategy formation. For instance, projections and forecasts offer insight on the likelihood of extreme weather incidents and pandemics (Rodó *et al.*, 2013) and complex models can be constructed for the anticipation of variety of rare adverse incidents (See Sornette 2009). Studies on public strategic management suggest that carefully drafted and forward-looking strategic planning has positive impact on policy outcomes (George *et al.*, 2019; Boyne and Walker, 2010).

The ability to anticipate future gives government opportunities to find organized policy solutions to pressing problems. Peters and Fontaine (2022) see policy design as an analytic framework, which integrates different aspects of policy in an overall intervention strategy to make policy work. It involves policy problem definition as causal assumptions between cause and effect, provides possible instruments for problem-solving (e.g. application of compelling

legislation “Stick”, financial incentives “carrot” or persuasive argumentation and information “Sermon” (Bebelmanns-Videc *et al.*, 2017), and enables evaluation of the match between aspired political values and the achieved outcomes. The formulation of intervention strategy requires planning, but it also involves learning and reflexive activities.

Emergent strategy. It is apparent that several variables can intervene between the setting of a goal and its realization. The changing situations may require emergent solutions to take into account unforeseen circumstances changing the course of predetermined actions (Jorgensen and Mintzberg, 1987). The emergent qualities imply that goals cannot be easily separated from the implementation and that strategy formation is a learning exercise (Whittington, 2018). The emergent formation of strategy emphasizes that in uncertain conditions, unknown factors are likely to affect the outcome.

Within policy design framework there are multiple options for emergent strategy formation through policy learning. First, the redefinition of problems offers alternative courses action, Second, selection of alternative policy tools enables options for policy implementation, evaluation gives opportunities to get feedback information on the consequences of action, and design thinking offers possibilities for learning by experimentation. According to the studies of COVID-19 pandemic experience both design and reflexivity is needed as policy learning requires oversight structure to enable learning (Zaki and Wayenberg, 2023).

Finding emergent solutions through policy learning runs counter to the top-down policy formation processes and following of predefined plans. In other words, the relationship between the planned “intended strategy” and the actual outcome “realized strategy” is complex signifying the theoretical and empirical challenges in combining top-down and bottom-up policy processes (Sabatier, 1986). In practice, the realized strategy is typically a combination of prior planning and emergent elements. Furthermore, it is not only prior planning that may fail to materialize, but emergent solutions can also lose momentum, leading to only ephemeral adoption (Mirabeau and MaGuire, 2014).

The context of the study

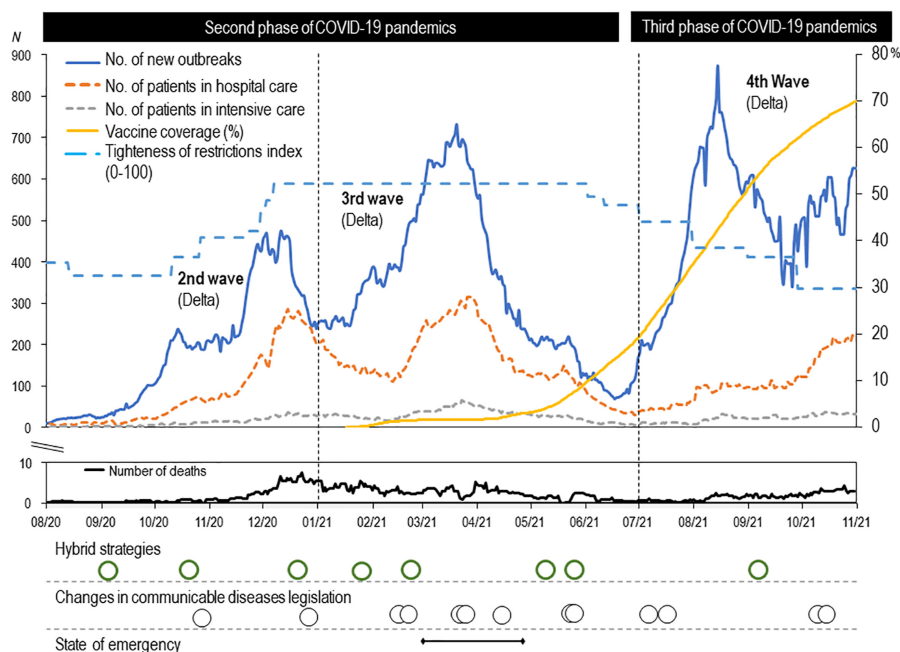
The first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic hit Finland in the winter of 2020, leading to the adoption of emergency powers and the declaration of a state of emergency. Measures implemented during this period included a lockdown of the metropolitan area, the closure of educational institutions and restaurants, and a ban on mass gatherings. This first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic is outside of our examination.

The focus of this study is on the second and third phases of pandemic management, which occurred between the autumn of 2020 and the end of 2021 (Figure 2). From a governance perspective, the most significant difference between the first and subsequent phases was that while the central government played a central role in the first phase, it began delegating operational management to regional government authorities at the start of the second phase. A three-stage traffic light model, based on fluctuations in the spread of the virus, was developed to adjust pandemic measures according to changing regional conditions. Additionally, Finland joined the EU program for vaccine acquisition during this phase.

The third phase of the pandemic was characterized by the near completion of administering the first dose of vaccinations to the adult population and an increase in the number of booster doses. This led to a blur in the relationship between the occurrence of new outbreaks and the severity of restrictions (Hale *et al.*, 2021).

Data and methods

The primary data for this article consists of 42 interviews, most of which were conducted between September and November of 2021. However, some additional interviews were



Source(s): Adapted from Stenvall *et al.* (2022); Authors' own work

Figure 2.
Developments in the
second and third
phases of pandemics in
Finland

conducted in early 2022. Of the interviewees, 14 held positions as heads or in related roles of preparedness or security in central government agencies, 11 were top managers of ministries (e.g. Permanent Secretary), 7 were top managers of other state agencies and 10 were in political leadership positions (e.g. ministers and state secretaries). The interviewees represented all 12 branches of government within the Finnish central administration.

The secondary data consist of the reported findings of interviews with representatives from trade and industry ($n = 21$) in December 2021 and January 2022 as well as the analysis of social media discussions among citizens was informed by data obtained from an artificial intelligence pilot project organized by the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(2022\)](#), which monitored pandemic-related discussions on various social media platforms since 2021.

We have applied directed content analysis for the analysis by using the conceptual framework (Figure 1) as a starting point for coding the interviews. Thus, the coding categories are not formed from the data but from our framework and is tested and extended by the reading of the data from the perspective based on the previous research (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). We have chosen a way of representing the findings under the directing themes derived from our conceptual framework but then discussing the findings with previous literature in the discussion and concluding sections. The interpretation of the themes and codification of the extracts proceeded in a pairwise manner. Basically, two members of the team of five were responsible for results of the individual themes to secure intercoder reliability and for the triangulation of the interpretation.

As is often the case, open-ended questions for collecting the interview data were used. The interview guide for collection consisted of thematic questions that covered the sequence of corona activities, the interviewees' roles and networks in COVID-19 management, the division of labor and responsibilities among government bodies and other societal actors

during crises, the anticipation and use of knowledge, the balance between health, individual rights and financial considerations, hybrid strategies, the balance between administration and politics, the challenges of multilevel governance, the balance between COVID-19 management and other government activities and evaluative questions on the overall success of government actions.

The interviews lasted from 45 min up to two hours, resulting in over 800 pages of transcribed material. Interviewees were assured of anonymity. In addition to the interviews, we have used public documents to review the findings.

The empirical findings

Authorizing environment

The legal preconditions are an important part of the authorizing environment that guides the actions of public authorities. One of the idiosyncrasies of the Finnish political system is the *ex ante* scrutiny of the constitutionality of bills performed by a parliamentary committee. This practice sometimes slows down decision-making but also emphasizes the importance of interpretations offered by legal experts who provide their opinions on the matters at hand (Pekkola *et al.*, 2023). Among the contradictions between restrictive and enabling measures is the constitutional guarantee of securing human rights for individual freedoms such as freedom of movement and freedom of assembly and expression. However, these fundamental rights might contradict more collective rights such as the right to life and well-being. Thus, a restrictive government policy might constitute an enabling policy for individual citizens and vice versa. In the data, civil servants complained on several occasions that the interpretations of legal experts limit the political and administrative room to maneuver.

The biggest problem with this in our system is the constitution and the fact that every issue has to go to its foundation. The law and the interpretations of the constitution are such that none of the measures that have been possible elsewhere have been possible in Finland.

In addition to constitutional stipulations, the Communicable Diseases Act established the most important authorizing environment for COVID-19 actions. The purpose of the law is to prevent infectious diseases and their spread and to prevent the harm they cause to people and society. It was renewed in 2016 and took effect in 2017. The Communicable Diseases Act contains provisions on, among other things, the certification of COVID-19 upon arrival in Finland, measures on passenger transport to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, and the national use of the EU digital corona certificate. The articles of the Act were refined and amended throughout the pandemic. For example, there were 13 existing legislative amendments made during the period under review.

The interviewees acknowledged the importance of the Communicable Diseases Act for COVID-19 actions but expressed widespread discontent with its nature, as illuminated by one of the interviewees:

I have to say that I would have immediately revised the Communicable Diseases Act in the spring of 2020 and actually completely rewritten it. It has been so full of holes all along. It was identified from the beginning that it doesn't make any sense to have certain restrictions apply only to certain premises. It doesn't make any sense. The epidemic doesn't spread based on the type of premises, for example . . . It feels absolutely absurd, to be honest.

Some of the procedures outlined in the legislation, such as the rule to make individual quarantine decisions (See Almazrouei, 2021) for those infected by local medical examiners, were difficult to implement. However, the required changes to the Communicable Diseases Act were made quickly compared to the adoption of other legislation. This was due not only to the rapid preparation of amendments but also to the prioritization of legislative work and

the lack of obstruction by opposition parties. These aspects jointly contributed to the speedy progress of the amendments. Yet, the informants expressed dissatisfaction with the continuous legislative changes. The specific point of complaint was the lack of a flexible enough legal framework to cope with the different phases of a pandemic.

Emergency powers. While the communicable diseases legislation presented a restrictive obstacle to effectively managing pandemics, governments have enabling measures to confront sudden disruptions. In exceptional circumstances, authorities may be granted powers that go beyond their normal jurisdiction. These powers may only be used if the situation cannot be managed by the authorities' regular powers. To highlight the exceptionality of this measure, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency powers and subsequent declaration of state of emergency were employed after WWII only once during the oil crisis to secure the energy supply in 1973.

Availability of resources. A key aspect of Finland's corona policy was the provision of financial support, particularly subsidies granted by the state. The purpose of these subsidies was not only to finance corona measures but also to reduce social problems caused by the situation. They were also intended to prevent a recession by helping businesses survive the decrease in demand for services and products during the crisis imposed by government restrictions. Additionally, the government offered to compensate local governments for the extra financial burden caused by the pandemic measures.

The conditions for granting financial support were favorable. In the short term, pandemic actions did not create a financial crisis for public finances. The costs of COVID-19 measures were financed through additional borrowing by the state, and funds were readily available to compensate for the losses of private businesses and increased expenditure in local government. As a result, there was no need to prioritize COVID-19 measures from a budgetary perspective, which facilitated the management of the crisis in Finland. Debates on how to, for example, value health security in relation to the damage to the economy were practically non-existent.

Strategic planning

The government had three readily available strategic instruments at its disposal during the crisis:

- (1) The government programme,
- (2) Security strategy, and
- (3) Declaration of the state of emergency by adopting emergency powers.

The actual developments of these strategic options are described in turn.

The government program is the most important political steering document outlining what the government aims to achieve during its term in office. It directly impacts government policy-making, policy implementation, resource allocation and strategic decision-making in ministries, as well as local and regional administration. It is an action plan approved by the members of the government coalition and includes the most important plans and actions of the government for its term (Johanson *et al.*, 2017). Although flexible in its composition, the government program is a *de facto* binding agreement prepared through negotiations between the parties in the government coalition. It has become more restrictive in the sense that new policies or additional spending are usually not included in the government agenda if they are not already part of the program. Thus, the program adopts a strategic planning approach in guiding government action and resource distribution throughout the electoral cycle.

The government did not include COVID-19 measures as part of its program but relaxed spending limits to cover the additional costs induced by the pandemic measures. The role of

the government program in handling the crisis was frequently brought up during the interviews. Civil servants, in particular, discussed the practical consequences of excluding pandemic measures from the government program, stating:

You also referred to the social and healthcare reform, which has been a question that we have been considering here. It [COVID-19] has not been elevated in the government programme, where it would replace something in the programme. Instead, we have been fully committed to implementing the government programme, and on top of that, there has been the issue of COVID-19 . . . This social and healthcare reform, of course, falls under the same ministry as the central issue of the pandemic, which does not allow for the transfer of resources as the intention was.

It would be possible to interpret that the COVID-19 pandemic was not considered important enough to displace or modify the government agenda, which already included the implementation of a major and long-awaited social and healthcare reform. However, the chosen government action of non-inclusion involved purely political aspects. The formation of the government was preceded by political distrust between two major coalition partners, the Social Democrats and the Center Party, in the autumn of 2019. This led to a change in government and prime minister but left the government program and the parties in the coalition intact. Therefore, opening the government agenda in a volatile political situation presented a political risk for the coalition's continuity.

The security strategy. The government made a resolution on the security strategy in 2017 ([Security Strategy for Society, 2017](#)) and a supplementary risk assessment in 2018 ([National Risk Assessment, 2018](#)). The security strategy embodied contingency planning aimed at anticipating a variety of possible future circumstances. The resolution included preparedness measures such as contingency planning, advance preparation, training and preparation exercises. In the event of a disruption, the government was to direct the safeguarding of vital societal functions along with corresponding actions by ministers within their respective administrative branches. The Ministry of Interior assumed responsibility for coordinating regional joint preparedness.

The threat scenarios included disruptions to the health and welfare of the population and identified the possibility of serious human infectious diseases. In preparation for biological threats, the resolution highlighted influenza pandemics as possible threats and acknowledged potential delays in producing vaccines for new viruses. However, the 2018 risk assessment did not anticipate an increased likelihood of pandemic influenza or similar epidemics ([National Risk Assessment, 2018](#)).

The government did not adopt the security strategy but implemented certain aspects, such as meetings of preparedness officials, information provided by the Prime Minister's office and meetings of permanent secretaries, as a backbone for administrative coordination. Many interviewees pointed out that the security strategy was not well-suited to address health crises and seemed more oriented towards dealing with military incidents. This argument aligns with the key players identified in the security strategy: the Ministry of Defence (army) and the Ministry of Interior (police).

State of emergency. The government embraced the use of emergency powers by declaring that Finland was under a state of emergency during the epidemic in early 2021. The state of emergency came into effect in March 2021 and lasted for approximately two months. Subsequently, the Parliament approved the implementation decree, which pertained to the control of the operation of social and healthcare units and the relaxation of time limits for non-urgent care. The emergency measures meant imposing restrictions on the opening hours of restaurants and pubs. Additionally, powers concerning emergency communications and the resolution of conflicts of jurisdiction were introduced. The declaration of state of emergency signifies not only a graveness of the situation but also the waking up of the dormant strategy, which waits for its adoption ([Llewellyn and Tappin, 2003](#)).

The concentration of power in health-related matters in dire circumstances makes sense, but the desire to introduce regulations that would grant the cabinet the authority to centralize public relations and resolve administrative conflicts of authority was not well-motivated. The interviewees pointed out the discrepancy between the problem framing and the actual nature of the problem. In the problem framing, the government's intention was to address conflicts of interpretation between public agencies by providing more coordinated and uniform information to other public authorities. However, the actual challenges often related to policy issues that fell within the intersection between branches of government, in a jurisdictional void that did not seem to belong to any public authority. As one respondent expressed it:

There may have been some grey areas left, such as difficulties in certain border operations at the beginning or organizing health-safe actions at the borders. Perhaps it is more about how to fill the gap. On the other hand, there has also been a lot of discussion about where everyone's powers extend and who should be responsible for what.

In this sense, even the most explicit provision of information could not have resolved the inherent lack of proper division of labor. Furthermore, both public relations and jurisdictional disagreements were issues that the government could have addressed without resorting to the means provided by the emergency powers.

Emergent strategies

By the second stage of the pandemic, the government had time to formulate a number of responses to prolonged crises. The aims of the crisis management moves varied as follows:

- (4) Immediate action to confront the ongoing crisis situation (hybrid strategy),
- (5) Recovery from the pandemic (exit strategy),
- (6) Cooperation between public authorities (coordination strategy), and
- (7) Clarifying the content of actions to the general public (communication strategy).

Hybrid strategy. Most importantly, as an alternative approach to amending its program or adhering to its security strategy, the government initiated a "hybrid strategy to manage COVID-19". The hybrid strategy was a policy adopted by the government to slow down the progress of the coronavirus while keeping society open to the extent that the disease situation allows. A key component of the strategy was the test, track, isolate and treat action model (TTIT). The hybrid strategy formed the basis of Finland's COVID-19 measures from the first phase of the crisis, and it was amended several times during the second and third phases of the pandemic. Furthermore, five of the hybrid strategies decided by the government were referred to as "action plans" and can be seen as separate strategic entities.

Overall, the TTIT model proved to be effective. For instance, it facilitated continuous improvement in contact tracing practices. Testing was primarily conducted by public health operators. According to the assessments from the interviews, the emphasis on public health care was a deliberate choice to enhance testing capacity and the quality of test results. There was a strong focus on contact tracing, and its importance was emphasized in government decision-making. For example, in August 2020, the government launched a mobile application for citizens to receive alerts about potential exposure to COVID-19. The necessary skills were enhanced through staff training in collaboration with educational institutions, but personnel shortages affected the tracing capabilities during the peaks of the epidemic.

Implementing the TTIT model placed a significant burden on public authorities, particularly health operators. The availability of intensive care facilities was a critical

resource in hospital care, and it could not be quickly augmented due to shortages of skilled healthcare professionals and lack of advanced technical instruments. Consequently, intensive care unit capacity became a key performance indicator in assessing healthcare limitations and determining the intensity of administrative containment measures.

The hybrid strategies included some problems. Firstly, the perspective of the functionality of Finnish society has been secondary in hybrid strategies. The health and safety issues were key framing devices which has downplayed other possible frames such as politics, family, police or money (Radin, 1997). Secondly, another problem is that when the COVID-19 situation changed, a revised hybrid strategy was needed. In this sense, hybrid strategies have been more of a collection of policy tools related to managing a certain disease situation than strategies for longer-term survival. Thirdly, hybrid strategies can be seen as deficient from the perspective of governance and leadership. They generally contained number of guidelines for regions and local government, but there were relatively few guidelines for how COVID-19 measures should be managed within central government.

Exit strategy. Based on an expert report that examined the short and long-term consequences of the pandemic on society (Valtioneuvosto, 2020), the government adopted a program to phase out COVID-19 measures in the summer of 2020. The exit strategy, prepared by the Prime Minister's Office, was announced in April 2021. It outlined a timetable for lifting pandemic restrictions based on the occurrence of infections. The strategy included the return to classroom teaching in primary and secondary education, the reopening of restaurants, allowing for group activities for children, permitting the organization of public events and easing some restrictions on international travel by the end of August 2021. The exit strategy took into account social and economic aspects, rather than solely focusing on health issues. The gradual reopening of society continued throughout the summer of 2021.

However, the arrival of the new Delta variant of the virus changed the pandemic situation, leading to a postponement of the easing of restrictions and a reassessment of the implementation of the exit strategy in late autumn 2021. The exit strategy was praised by the informants for its comprehensive perspective.

Coordination strategy. Within the government, horizontal coordination between ministries is not well developed, and there are few guiding rules to facilitate cooperation between them. In terms of collegiality and unity in cabinet decision-making, government negotiations became an important discussion forum. Government negotiations are informal meetings of ministers called by the Prime Minister. During the early stages of the pandemic, government negotiations were lengthy and involved all cabinet members. These negotiations played a crucial role in reconciling issues and adopting crisis measures. According to one of the interviewees:

At the central administration, the government learned about its own internal workings, which meant that the negotiations between the government became shorter and better as this went on, and the government learned this kind of internal working.

As the COVID-19 situation progressed, the working methods of the government changed. Government negotiations were still held quite frequently but less so than in spring 2020. For example, in late 2021, the government agreed, during a negotiation, to tighten restrictions in response to the worsening pandemic situation. Government negotiations continued to effectively coordinate actions and resolve challenging political issues, but the informal status of government negotiations as a decision-making forum is problematic, as most decisions have to be formally made in cabinet plenary meetings. Therefore, government negotiations were used to agree on and prepare issues that were subsequently decided in the plenary sessions. The role of the plenary session gained strength, and the normal formal decision-making model was reinforced as the pandemic continued.

Communication strategy. Government communication serves as the third regulatory arm by providing information to the general public with the aim of influencing citizens' actions. It is

based on recommendations rather than legal obligations or financial incentives. The data indicate that, due to the slow legislative process, the government has been compelled to rely on information guidance instead of legal obligations for practical reasons. The interviewees expressed complaints that the COVID-19 measures relied too heavily on recommendations rather than restrictions, although the recommendations were largely followed. However, government communications were somewhat contradictory, and the distinction between prescriptive regulations and guiding recommendations was not clear-cut to the general public.

Information governance or “sermons” was extensively employed to promote pandemic actions, such as increasing vaccination coverage (see [Noto et al., 2023](#)) and inducing compliance with various restriction measures. However, civil servants criticized that the information guidance did not always adhere to established administrative procedures. In practice, government information guidance indirectly reduced the powers of regional and local authorities, as it was difficult for them to deviate from the recommendations made by the central government, even when they were not legally binding.

The stakeholder view of government communication varied over time. As the epidemic prolonged, citizens’ satisfaction with government communication decreased. Analysis of social media (see [Fissi et al., 2022](#)) discussions indicated continuous discontent with the ambiguity of government communication and an increase in vaccine hesitant viewpoints. The business community indicated that they had limited direct contact with public authorities and that their interests were not well taken into account in political decision-making, as explained by one of the respondents:

Those networks didn’t exist, and in a way, it has come then, perhaps from the Government’s side, from the political actors, that they have to be built. And in a way, the political side then took that . . . The Prime Minister had to go into a situation where she probably counted to a hundred, and then she started having discussions with the business sector about these matters.

In summary, the chosen approach deviated from prior planning ([Figure 3](#)). The readily available and up-to-date security strategy was abandoned, and the pandemic measures were not incorporated into the government program as the most important strategy document during the electoral cycle. Thus, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic pointed to the predominance of emergent strategy formation and policy learning.

Discussion

Despite encountering some obvious hurdles and critical incidents, the overall management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland was quite successful. The healthcare system has been able to handle the heavy burden of the crisis, and the restrictions imposed have been less severe compared to many other countries. Additionally, the mortality rate has remained low ([Hale et al., 2021](#)).

Resource allocation played a vital role in mobilizing additional resources for crisis management and compensating for pandemic-related losses. In this aspect, the government had a good opportunity to cater for the demands of the stakeholders. Despite growing criticism, the government was able to maintain its legitimacy, as evidenced by compliance with government guidance and a lack of open resistance among the general public.

Although, there were opposing voices, the fact that the COVID-19 did was not incorporated into the government program might have been a blessing in disguise. It meant that COVID-19 measures were not frozen into the difficult-to-change stipulations of the most important strategy document, but instead allowed for changes in responses and local adaptations to evolving conditions.

The examination has some limitations. The examination focused on top politicians and senior civil servants within the central government in strategy formation. Although,

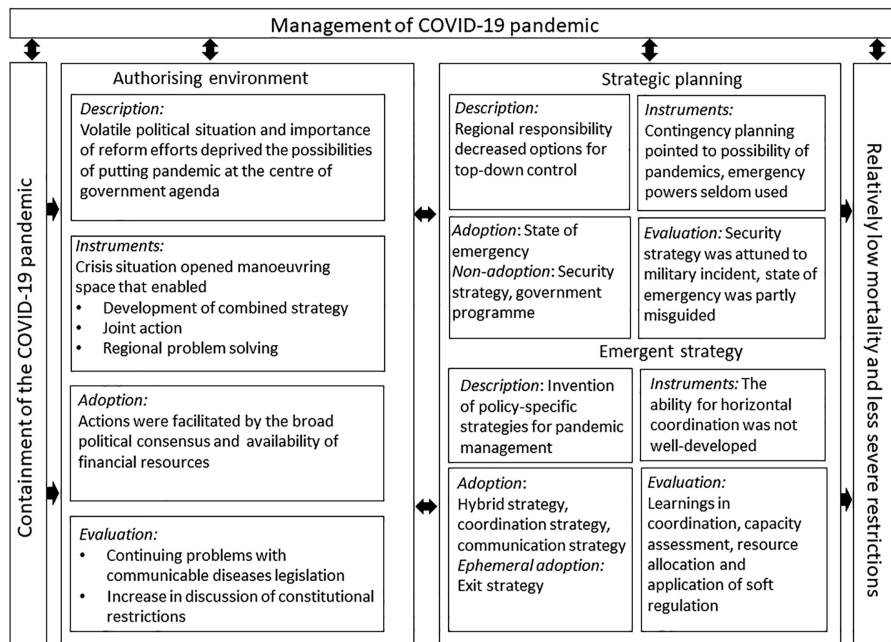


Figure 3. The role of authorizing environment, strategic management and emergent strategy during the second and third phase of the COVID-19 pandemics in Finland

Source(s): Authors' own work

informed by the stakeholder responses, the article highlights the perspective of seeing policies from the bird's eye view. In other words, it emphasizes the interpretation of strategy-making at the heart of the government nexus rather than that of subnational governments or public agencies.

In international comparison, all Nordic countries could be considered as belonging to the state-oriented risk culture in contrast to individualistic or fatalist cultures. In this sense, there is a shared assumption that crises are preventable and the government is the prime actor in achieving this. The main difference in handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, was that while Denmark, Norway and Finland imposed lockdowns and restrictive measures, Sweden followed a more permissive strategy based on recommendations on social distancing rather than command and control. Restaurants and schools remained open, and the use of facial mask was not required (Johansson *et al.*, 2023). Overall, none of the Nordic countries seemed to suffer financially from the COVID-19 pandemics, but although Sweden adopted more relaxed COVID-19 measures there is no evidence that this had any short-term economic benefits, while costing disproportional mortality numbers compared to neighboring countries (Irfan *et al.*, 2022).

The framing of the pandemics within Finnish government circles was first and foremost a health issue which has overshadowed the social aspect of the pandemics. The emphasis to society as large appear only to a minor extent in the strategy documents and government action. Consequently, the taming of the problem proceeded by bracketing out many of the long-term social concerns. However, the choices between restrictive and enabling government strategy is not only a balancing act between virtues of liberty and vices of constraint as it produces contradictions between individual and collective freedoms. This poses a difficult question "How to tread a fine line between pleasing the individual citizen without annoying the community?"

Conclusions

The theoretical framing put authorizing environment, prior planning and emergent strategy as a framework for studying COVID-19 management. The examination demonstrated how the authorizing environment can become a subject for strategic action. In the case of COVID-19, the legal framework governing the actions of public authorities in dealing with infectious diseases did not provide clear guidance for administrative actions. Consequently, the emergent nature of the actions resulted from numerous changes made to rectify its shortcomings. The difference between national and international fora is interesting here. The existence of rule of law upheld by the democratic process complicates the coordinated effort domestically, but internationally the rudimentary global legal framework and lack of the backing of the democracy has been suggested as a major hurdle for effective joint efforts (Cassese, 2012). This points to the importance of suitable content in addition to the proper form of the authoritative environment.

The examination brings forth an apparently soft strategic posture of government in dealing with pandemic using financial compensation “carrots” and on formational guidance “sermons” rather than hard methods of command and control “stick”. However, it is evident that even more stringent measures would have been adopted if the legislative process and constitutional directives would have allowed for swift decision-making. In this way, legislative obstacles hindered the application of many hard methods of control. Internationally, the general pattern has been that restrictions are implemented as the number of infections increases, followed by the relaxation of those restrictions during the downturn of the epidemic. The Finnish strategy was characterized by imposing relatively few restrictions on its citizens, but it has also been one of the slowest in terms of dismantling them (Edouard *et al.*, 2020).

The article puts forward political tinkering in joining together prior planning with the fabrication of new emergent responses to quickly changing circumstances. The abundance of prior plans offered government plenty of choice options to begin with administrative procedures. The existence of prior planning enabled extracting workable parts from the previous, predefined strategies. The emergent new properties arose from joining these pieces together with borrowing from the experience of other countries in an umbrella strategy with number of new responses. The resulting hybrid approach was malleable enough to allow for adaptation of public officials while providing plausibility in the government devotion to action in the eyes of the citizens. Opening government coffers for the compensation of losses and a bit of luck paved way to more controlled pandemic mitigation efforts.

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Further reading

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