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The Covid-19 pandemic requires immediate, simultaneous responses from countries with varying governing institutions, cultures, and geographies. Yet, we also see a wide variety of intervention strategies to mitigate its consequences within the same institutional or geographic context, e.g. between states in a federation such as Germany or the USA, between European member states, or between similar neighbors in one region. One of the most surprising phenomena in COVID-19 is the wide divergence of problem assessments, response strategies and their implementation in different jurisdictions. This divergence begs for an explanation, given the highly similar threat authorities were facing.

Though crisis scholars already knew for long that sensemaking differs between organizations and leaders in crisis situations, the idea persists in that problem perception, available expertise to reduce uncertainty and previous experience define the appropriate or likely crisis response strategy. Yet in the Covid-19 crisis, we witnessed another possible explanation that influenced crisis response strategy: resource availability.

The Resource Based View holds promise as an explanatory theory to explain the variety we observe in the responses to the current pandemic. Scholars claim that firms use a specific mix of unique internal resources as assets in competition with other firms. Not external opportunity and threats define differences in corporate success, but resources from within define the strategy of the organization. It may explain why some national authorities enforced the use of facemasks, and others did not. Or why their crisis response completely relied on testing and tracing, or isolation of incoming travelers. Why they started their vaccination campaigns vaccinating elderly, or chronically ill, or instead started with medical care takers. Many of these variations are puzzling when seen from the perspective of the external considerations, that were so similar in many cases, or even contrary to the selected response.

In this paper, we compare the crisis response strategies of Belgium, Czech Republic, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden: all EU member states facing the same pandemic threat, with access to similar epidemiological expertise, under conditions of similar uncertainty, populations between 10 and 20 million people and the similar incidence of Covid-19 within their borders. This study first looks which resources could explain variation in performance. We proceed by looking at the different strategies of the countries in terms of restrictions, and then we look into issues of availability of resources as explanatory mechanisms for the chosen strategies per case.

Building resilience through organisational learning and innovation: COVID-19, windows of opportunity, and the future of cooperation in crisis management