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To cite this article: Hanspeter Kriesi & Ioana-Elena Oana (2022): Protest in unlikely times: dynamics of collective mobilization in Europe during the COVID-19 crisis, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2022.2140819](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140819)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140819>



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Published online: 07 Nov 2022.



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# Protest in unlikely times: dynamics of collective mobilization in Europe during the COVID-19 crisis

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## ABSTRACT


Based on an original protest event analysis (PEA) dataset covering 30 European countries, this paper provides three sets of results. Despite its unlikelihood due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, protest during COVID-19 has hardly been put to a halt even if, as a result of the restrictions imposed by the lockdown measures on the opportunities of public collective actions, protest occurred at significantly lower levels compared to pre-COVID-19 times, in terms of number of events and, above all, in terms of the number of participants. Moreover, protest was refocused on COVID-19-related issues, in particular on protest against the restrictions imposed by the government lockdowns, while non-COVID-19 issues, in particular economic issues, were crowded out. In addition, protest during the COVID-19-crisis also responded to highly contingent national context conditions which varied between the different regions of Europe.

**KEYWORDS** Protest; COVID crisis; semi-automated protest event analysis; Europe; anti-restrictions; crowding out of economic protest

## Introduction

Political protest is 'highly unequally distributed across time and space. Much of it is concentrated in intense waves of contention with a broad scope in geographical and social space' (Koopmans, 2004, p. 40). Protest waves as periods of intense and widespread contention are characteristic for times of crisis. While political protest is rare and intermittent in normal times, in times of crisis, uncertainty and contingency are likely to give rise to positive feedback processes, i.e., endogenous processes of reinforcement and suppression that spread protest across time and space (see Biggs, 2003; Koopmans, 1993; Tarrow, 1989, 2011).

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2140819>.

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Since the incidence of a great crisis is likely to vary across space, the spread of protest is expected to be constrained as well.

The COVID-19 crisis had a strong impact on all European countries. The pandemic did not stop at the national borders but swept across the continent. Moreover, with the exception of Sweden, the governments of all the countries reacted in a similar way to the pandemic's threat: they closed the borders and shut down public life to a previously unimaginable extent. Starting in March 2020, in a rapid succession, one country after the other adopted lockdown measures, which prevented citizens from leaving their homes. While these measures provided an incentive to protest by increasing grievances, they also constrained the opportunities to do so in the streets, hence making it, at face value, rather unlikely. However, as the crisis dragged on, the stringency of the national measures increasingly varied, which suggests that the protest in reaction to the crisis is also likely to have varied across countries. We study the extent and intensity of protest across 31 European countries in the COVID-19 crisis in order to document this variation and its possible causes. In addition, we also ask to what extent protest mobilization became focused on the crisis, what kind of actors were mobilizing protest during the crisis, and in what kind of formats.

There are a few analyses of protest in the COVID-19 crisis which ask similar questions, but they all have their limits. On the one hand, there are a handful of studies focused on overall protest levels during the crisis or on the crisis' repercussions on civil society organizations based on survey data (e.g., Borbath & Hutter 2021; Borbath *et al.*, 2021), but these studies are unable to account for the temporal evolution of protest and its specific goals. On the other hand, there are a few studies relying on protest event analysis (PEA) data that allow studying such trends, but these studies are limited in their geographical, temporal, or substantive scope (Brennan, 2020; Metternich, 2020; Neumayer *et al.*, 2021; Plümper *et al.*, 2021). What we are lacking so far is a systematic dataset that includes all or most European countries and a variety of types of protest during the COVID-19 crisis. Our study is based on such an encompassing dataset. Its limitation is that we focus on protest mobilization that occurs mainly in the streets and that is reported in the media. This means that we are not able to answer questions about whether, in reaction to the constraints imposed by the crisis, challengers have increasingly resorted to online forms of protest or forms of mobilization happening predominantly behind closed doors, such as lobbying.

Our paper proceeds as follows. We start with the presentation of some theoretical considerations. Next, we turn to the data and design of our study. Even if we do not have information on online mobilization, our analyses of the protest mobilization during the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 are based on a unique dataset with a wide geographical and substantive coverage. This section will also introduce our key dependent

variables – monthly frequency of protest events (extent of protest) and average monthly participation per event (intensity of protest). We then proceed with the presentation of our results in three parts – the impact of the lockdown on protest in general, the mobilization of COVID-19-specific protest, and the mobilization of protest with regard to other, non-COVID-19 related issues, which reacts to contingent national and global stimuli. The final section summarizes our results and concludes.

## Theoretical considerations

The COVID-19 crisis triggered a series of policy responses from the governments that shut down the national borders, shut down public life within national borders, and provided a modicum of economic support for those most heavily hit by the lockdowns. The pandemic posed a threat to public health and the survival of each member of society, but the policy measures adopted by the governments to counter this threat, in turn, posed a threat to individual social and political rights and to economic survival. As social movement theory has pointed out, not only opportunities, but also structural threats, like the threat posed by COVID-19, may stimulate collective action (Almeida, 2019). The threat alone is, however, not sufficient for mobilization. Whether or not defensive collective action against the ‘suddenly imposed grievances’ triggered by a crisis is being mobilized depends on the structural context, as Walsh (1981, p. 18f) has already observed a long time ago, in particular on the resources of the aggrieved constituency, the availability of a suitable interpretative frame, and the opportunity to mobilize. For example, in the financial crisis, the macroeconomic context (the unemployment rate), certain policies (social policy spending) (Grasso & Giugni, 2016), the level of political mobilization (Kurer *et al.*, 2019) as well as state capacity and international interventions (Kriesi *et al.*, 2020) strengthened the link between economic grievances and protest participation.

In the COVID-19 crisis, the policies adopted by the governments to fight the pandemic proved to constitute the decisive context conditions. As social movement theory has argued, by designing and implementing public policy, governments shape both the opportunities and the likely grievances for collective action among target populations (Costain, 1992; Mettler, 2005; Meyer, 2004; Meyer *et al.*, 2005). In terms of opportunities, the COVID-19 crisis severely constrained the possibilities for collective action: by shutting down public life, the governments’ lockdown measures decisively raised the threshold for political mobilization in the sense of publicly visible collective action organized by trade unions, political parties, or civil society groups, which made large-scale public collective action highly unlikely. This applies to protest with all kinds of content, not only to those related to COVID-19. In other words, we expect the constraints imposed by the governments’

lockdown policies to have above all reduced the number of participants (intensity of protest), even if it may have had a smaller effect on the number of protest events (the extent of protest). Moreover, given the enormity of the exogenous shock of the pandemic, the government initially benefited from a rally-around-the-flag effect (Mueller, 1970). Several studies point to such a rallying effect in the early stages of the pandemic (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021; Baekgaard *et al.*, 2020; Bol *et al.*, 2021; Dekker *et al.*, 2021; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2021; Schraff, 2021). This rallying effect was, however, fading rather rapidly as the threat imposed by the lockdown measures for individual rights and for the economy became increasingly more salient and more strongly felt by some constituencies in European societies. Moreover, as the problem pressure diminished towards summer 2020, the stringency of the lockdown measures became less credible (Neumayer *et al.*, 2021). The constraints imposed on mobilization persisted, but the combination of a reduced rallying effect and of reduced credibility of the lockdown measures provided a powerful incentive for mobilizing against such measures, although not for other types of protest.

With respect to the publics' grievances, the COVID-19 crisis was a multifaceted crisis that at the same time raised concerns about public health, economic policy, and individual rights. In each one of these policy domains, a range of actors are legitimated to speak/act on the domain-specific policy issues, and there are domain-specific cultural logics, frameworks, and ideologies those actors bring to bear in constructing and narrating the problem and the appropriate policy responses (Meyer *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, in each policy domain, contrasting concerns could have been raised by the various actors. Thus, in the public health domain, for some constituencies, the adopted lockdown measures have not gone far enough, while for others, they have gone too far. Similarly, for the economic measures some constituencies have wished the governments to provide more support, while for others, they have spent too much on support for households and firms. Survey studies show that these contrasting grievances as well as a reappraisal of society did, indeed, exist in the European publics (Dekker *et al.*, 2021; Mijs *et al.*, 2022). However, they did not all equally provide incentives for protest.

We expect the grievances of the anti-restriction position to have been more pronounced and more likely to be mobilized for collective action than those of the pro-restriction position. First of all, with the exception of Sweden, the governments' restrictive measures went very far. Moreover, the individual manoeuvring space of the anti-restriction constituency was more severely constrained by the governments' measures, as the members of the pro-restriction constituency could always take additional unilateral precautionary measures on their own. This means that the pro-restriction constituency had less of an incentive to mobilize. Third, public protests in the

streets typically meant trespassing the lockdown rules imposed by the governments, which also served to discourage the protests of those who basically supported the governments' restrictive measures, while it provided an additional incentive for the anti-restriction constituency to mobilize. If they protested at all, we expect a much larger share of pro-restriction constituencies to be focused on forms of mobilization that do not involve gathering and trespassing social distancing rules, such as work stoppages or petitions. By contrast, we do not expect anti-restriction protestors to have been hindered by such considerations. In addition, and in line with the greater propensity of opponents of lockdown measures to mobilize, we expect protest to have become more vocal in countries where the lockdown measures have been particularly stringent.

Compared to the public health measures, we expect the economic measures to have been generally less likely to have exerted a mobilizing effect. The compensatory economic measures provided relief for firms and employees in the short run but increased public debt in the long run. In spite of their unprecedented size, the short-run effects of these measures may not have been enough to make up for the costs imposed on some sectors of the economy and some types of households, but proponents of the measures had to acknowledge that the governments did what they could, which arguably varied from one country to the other as the capacity of welfare states to buffer the social and economic consequences of the crisis were quite unequal (Grasso *et al.*, 2021). In addition, the pervasive 'devaluation of the future' effect (Soman *et al.*, 2005), according to which the value of future costs is considered to be smaller than their present value, served to reduce the incentive to mobilize the opponents of these measures.

In the COVID-19 crisis, the executive decision-making mode prevailed (Bojar & Kriesi, 2022), which implies that the policy-specific institutionalized non-governmental actors such as political parties, trade unions, economic interest associations, and professional organizations had rather little to contribute to the policymaking process. Nevertheless, most of the established political actors were generally supportive of government actions, as they shared the governments' perspective on the crisis. Accordingly, we expect protests to have been organized mainly by non-institutionalized actors representing the opposition to COVID-19 restrictions. Such actors benefited from the possibility to organize by social media, which considerably lowered the threshold for mobilization for them, even if their mobilizing capacity remained rather limited, which is yet another reason for us to expect a lower intensity of protest than before the crisis. As is shown by research on the German 'Querdenker', an important anti-restrictions group that sprang up in the COVID-19 crisis, such non-institutionalized groups were successful in mobilizing people who were alienated from the conventional political process and drifting towards the radical right (e.g., Grande *et al.*, 2021; Hutter & Weisskircher,

2022; Koos, 2021; Nachtwey *et al.*, 2020), ultimately accentuating the polarization of German party politics (Heinze & Weisskircher, 2022).

Even if the COVID-19 crisis is expected to have put the brakes on protest mobilization and, within the limits of the given constraints, to have focused it on the governments' measures to fight the crisis, it is well known that political protest responds to highly contingent stimuli (Kriesi *et al.*, 2020). From this perspective, we expect that, in addition to the COVID-19 crisis, protest in various countries responded to additional stimuli, some country-specific, and some more global. The most glaring examples of such specific stimuli come from countries outside of the EU. Thus, in spite of COVID-19, the US witnessed the mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement against racial injustice and police brutality, perhaps the biggest social movement in the country since decades. In the summer 2020, millions of people took to the streets (between 15 and 26 million, depending on the estimate) and were distributed over an unusually large number of locations.<sup>1</sup> This movement has spilled over to Europe, as we shall see. Another instance of a massive movement, in spite of COVID-19, is the Belorussian movement against the flawed elections that kept President Alexander Lukashenko in power. Starting at the end of May 2020, this movement mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens for several months until it succumbed to state repression. But there were also country-specific events that stimulated protest in the various European countries which did not centre around COVID-19. We expect that the extent to which protest targeted other, non-COVID-19-specific issues depends, among other things, on the degree to which the country was hit by the pandemic. The greater the pandemic pressure in a given country, the more limited the expected room for mobilization concerning other issues. With respect to COVID-19-specific protest, the expectation is less clear: on the one hand, the greater pandemic pressure leads to greater related grievances that may give rise to additional COVID-19-specific protest. On the other hand, the same constraints that operate on other issues also apply to COVID-19-specific protests. Moreover, greater pandemic pressure may diminish the incentives to mobilize against lockdown measures, since their justification appears to be more credible.

To conclude our argument, it is important to stress that the policy measures adopted to fight the COVID-19 pandemic have been taken by national governments. In particular, the EU has not adopted any lockdown measures on its own but focused on the coordination of the national measures. Therefore, protest related to COVID-19 is unlikely to have targeted the EU or to have involved EU policies. In the past, contentious events involving the EU have generally been quite rare. Thus, in an analysis of European protest covering the period 1983–1995, Imig and Tarrow (1999) found that just around 4 per cent of the events were related to the EU – mostly domestic protests against EU policies or against EU institutions. We expect EU-related

protests to still be rather rare events, except for protest related to Brexit in the UK, where the relationship of the country to the EU was in the focus of public attention throughout 2020.

## Design of the study

As we already pointed out in the introduction, there are a few analyses of protests in the COVID-19 crisis, but they all have their limits. On the one hand, there are a handful of studies focused on overall protest levels during the crisis or on the crisis' repercussions on civil society organizations based on survey data (e.g., Borbath & Hutter, 2021; Borbath *et al.*, 2021), but these studies are unable to convey a picture of the temporal evolution of such protest and its specific goals. On the other hand, there are a few studies focusing on protest event analysis (PEA) data that allow studying such trends, but these studies are limited in their geographical, temporal, or substantive scope. Thus, Metternich (2020) has shown a clear decline in protest in the early weeks of the COVID-19 crisis (up to 30 April 2020), based on ICEWS data.<sup>2</sup> This result is, however, limited to the first few weeks of the crisis. For the United States, Brennan (2020) also finds, based on GDELT data,<sup>3</sup> that the number of protests diminished significantly at the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020 but increased in mid-April and accelerated following Trump's Liberate Tweets on April 17. The dataset overwhelmingly represents anti-lockdown protest. Plümpner *et al.* (2021) used the ACLED dataset to identify roughly 1300 protest events against the government's containment policies in Germany.<sup>4</sup> They find evidence that more anti-restriction protests take place in German districts where COVID-19 containment policies are stricter and where COVID-19 mortality rates are lower. More populous, more densely populated, and more centrally located districts also saw more protest events. Their data are, however, exclusively focusing on Germany and on a particular subset of COVID-19 protest, i.e., anti-restriction protest. What we are lacking so far is a systematic dataset that includes all European countries and all types of protest during the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Our paper is based on an original PEA dataset collected in the framework of the SOLID research project 'Policy Crisis and Crisis Politics, Sovereignty, Solidarity and Identity in the EU Post-2008', which provides such systematic data. Methodologically, our PEA dataset relies on a media content analysis of the various features characterizing protest events. Specifically, the dataset was collected using semi-automated content analysis, combining machine learning for corpus refinement and relevant document identification with human coding for the identification of the fine-grained features of each protest event.<sup>6</sup> This semi-automated procedure relies on a vast media data corpus comprising ten English language newswires<sup>7</sup> including several



hundreds of thousands of news reports. Using such a large corpus provides us with two important benefits: first, it helps us better mitigate source selection bias, and second, the very permissive strategy of document retrieval helps us reduce the number of false negatives (missed protest events) in our data.

Beyond its methodological merits, the main advantage of this data collection strategy is that it allows for an extended substantive coverage of protest before and during the COVID-19 crisis. Geographically, our dataset has an ambitious cross-sectional and temporal scope, covering the EU-26 countries (without Croatia) plus four non-EU members (United Kingdom, Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland). In terms of temporal coverage, the dataset used for this paper covers a period of two years, 2019 and 2020, capturing mobilization dynamics both before and during the COVID-19 crisis and enabling a comparative lens on the changes in mobilization patterns brought about by the crisis. Finally, our dataset captures virtually all protest forms of action taking place in the streets and reported in the media irrespective of their goals together with a wide range of characteristics describing them. These characteristics include the form of action (coded into six categories: demonstrations, strikes and industrial action, blockades and sit-ins, petitions and symbolic protest, violent protests, and other forms of action), the number of participants, the actors undertaking the action (coded into 18 categories covering political parties by family, unions, occupational and social groups, other (non-)professional organizations, and general citizens), and the issues they address (coded into 16 categories, including opposition to COVID-19 restrictions, support of COVID-19 restrictions, healthcare, and economic issues).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the dataset also includes descriptive word strings for each event that allow us to qualitatively assess the nature and goals of protest beyond the fixed categories listed above. We use these strings to further identify issues and goals in the mobilization of both COVID-19 and non- COVID-19-related protest.

The three sets of results presented here employ a variety of empirical strategies based on this dataset. In the first set of results, we focus our analysis on the contextual drivers of mobilization. For this purpose, our key dependent variables are the *extent of protest*, measured by the monthly raw frequency of protest events, and the *intensity of protest*, measured by the average monthly number of participants per protest event.<sup>9</sup> As independent variables, we introduce several country-specific indicators measuring the *stringency of the lockdowns* and the *pandemic pressure*. Regarding the stringency of the lockdowns, we use a weekly index based on nine measures, including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans (based on the Oxford COVID-19 database (Hale *et al.*, 2021)). For measuring the pandemic pressure, we resort to confirmed weekly COVID-19 infection and mortality rates (based on the Centre for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University database (Dong *et al.*, 2022)), which we adjust by country size.<sup>10</sup> As our

data has a panel structure, we present models with two-ways fixed effects for countries and weeks. Since we are interested in the immediate effect of lockdowns and pandemic pressure and for reasons of simplicity, we resort here to presenting contemporaneous models without more detailed expectations about the temporal structure of these effects. In the second set of results, we focus on a descriptive analysis of the more fine-grained characteristics of COVID-19-related protest. Specifically, we compare the forms of actions and the actors involved in pro- and anti-restrictions mobilization, but also the extent to which each camp gets involved with economic issues. Finally, in the third set of results, we employ a descriptive analysis of the goals of the protest to study the mobilization of other, non- COVID-19-related protest across European regions and specific countries.

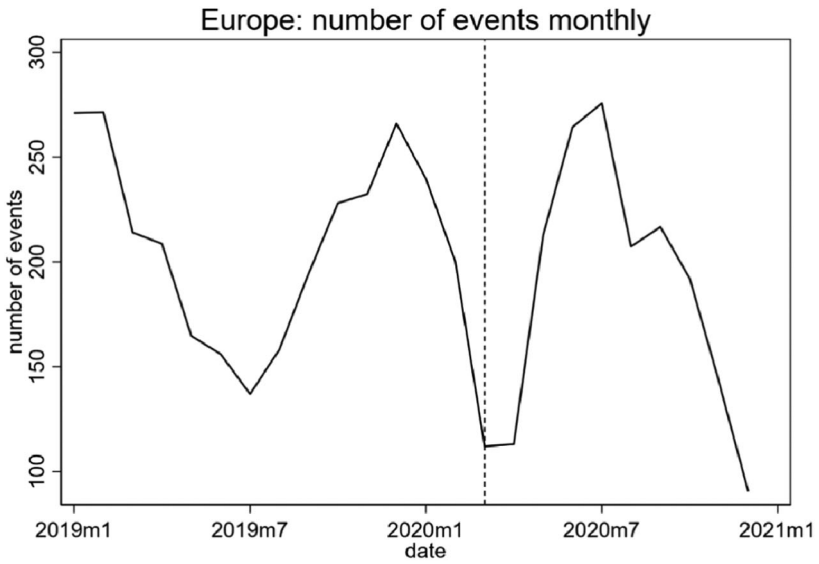
## Results

### *The impact of the lockdown on protest in general*

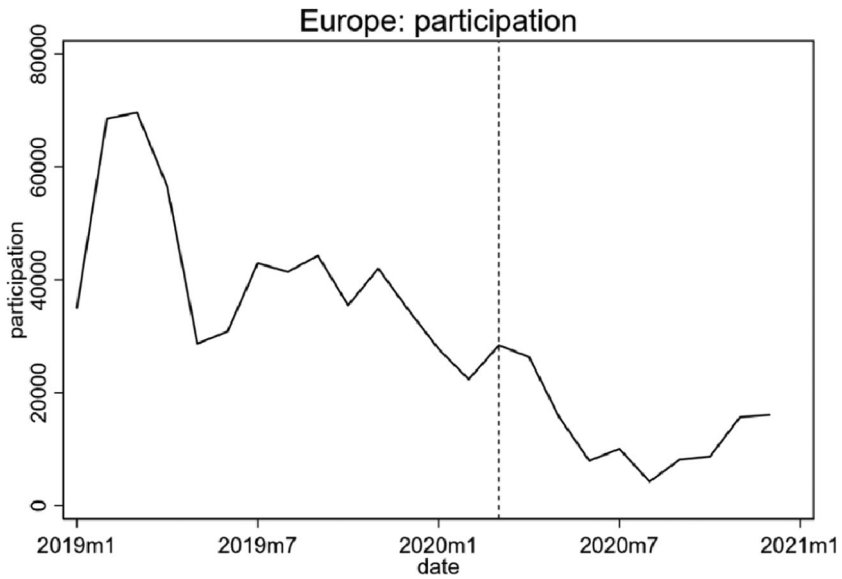
We expect protest overall to be reduced and to be re-focused on COVID-19-related issues, given the lockdown measures which the governments across Europe have adopted during the COVID-19 crisis. [Figure 1](#) presents the development of protest overall across Europe during the years 2019 and 2020 for our two indicators – the number of protest events (a) and for the average number of participants per protest events (b). The dashed vertical line in the graphs indicates the beginning of the crisis in March 2020. Arguably, setting the starting date of the crisis in March 2020 is somewhat arbitrary. The pandemic manifested itself already before March 2020 and governments already took measures earlier. Thus, the virus was first confirmed to have spread to Europe on January 31st, when two Chinese tourists were tested positive for the virus in Rome. In Italy, the first European country to have been hit hard, clusters of cases were then detected in Lombardy and in Veneto with the first deaths occurring on February 22. In February, eleven municipalities in northern Italy were placed under quarantine. But it was only on March 9 that the government adopted lockdown measures for all of Italy, the first country to adopt such measures in Europe.

As [Figure 1](#) shows, the number of protest events initially precipitously declined in Europe, confirming the results presented by [Metternich \(2020\)](#). Europe was, indeed, in a state of shock which paralysed the countries also in terms of protest. But after a lull lasting roughly one month, the number of protests quickly picked up again, peaked in summer 2020 in between the first two waves, and then declined again during the second wave. As a comparison with 2019 suggests, such ups and downs in the course of a year are nothing unusual. However, in line with our expectations, the average number of monthly events declined between the pre-crisis period

a) Number of events



b) Number of participants per event

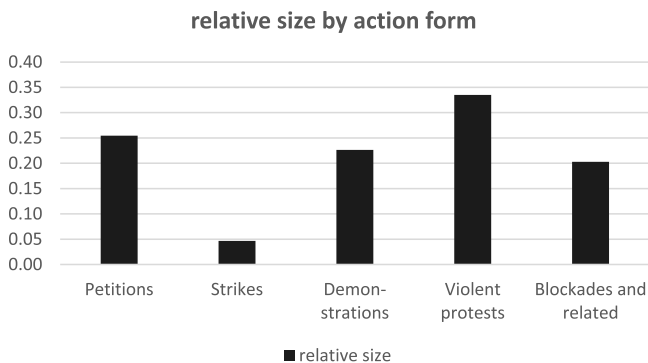


**Figure 1.** Protest mobilization overall, three-monthly averages. (a) Number of events and (b) number of participants per event.

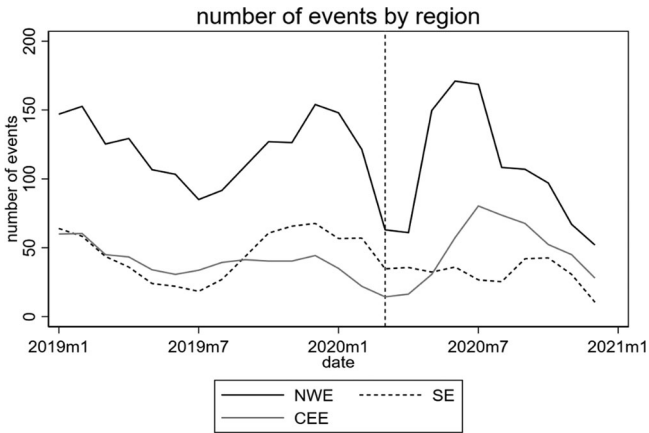
(= 250), the first wave (= 191), and the second wave (= 166). The development of the average number of participants per event which is presented in the second part of [Figure 1](#), declined to an even greater extent. Compared to the preceding year, the intensity of the protest as measured by the number of participants per event has been much lower throughout the year 2020 than before the crisis. While the average event counted roughly 41,700 participants in pre-COVID-19 times (January 2019-February 2020), the respective number dropped to roughly 15,000 participants during the first wave in 2020, and to roughly 10,000 participants in the second wave.

The number of participants decreased for all action forms, as is shown in [Figure 2](#). One might have expected that petitions, which can also be signed online, would be less affected than the other types of action which take place in the street, but this is not the case. Just as demonstrations, blockades and other confrontative actions, as well as violent protests, petitions were substantially reduced in size – by between 65 and 80 per cent of their initial size in the previous period. Strikes were even more drastically re-dimensioned – their average size shrank by roughly 95 per cent with respect to the previous period.

As in the case of the Great Recession, the development of protest mobilization differs across European regions, but the differences are less pronounced and southern Europe no longer sticks out as the region that mobilized most. On the contrary, southern Europe is the region where protest mobilization declined the most during the first two waves of the COVID-19 crisis. This is illustrated by the next two figures. [Figure 3](#) presents the slightly smoothed monthly development of the number of protest events in the three regions in 2019 and 2020. This figure shows that the overall development in [Figure 1](#) is most heavily shaped by the protest mobilization in north-western Europe. By contrast, the southern European number

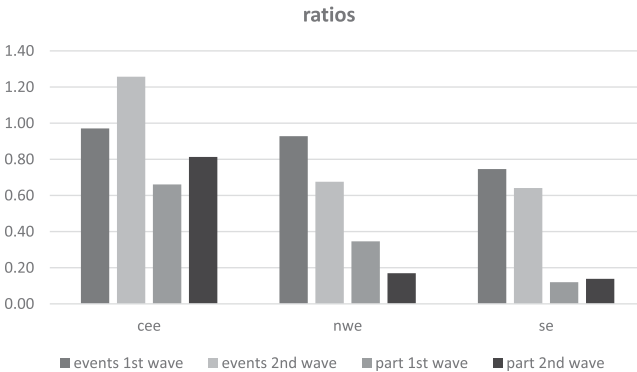


**Figure 2.** Relative size of events during COVID-19 (both waves) as compared to previous period, by action form.



**Figure 3.** Number of protest events by region, three-monthly average.

of protest events is more or less steadily declining over the duration of the first two waves of COVID-19, while the eastern European development peaks in between the two waves of the crisis. **Figure 4** provides summary measures of the extent and intensity of protest mobilization in the three regions during the two waves of the COVID-19 crisis. As we can see, in north-western and southern Europe, the number of events and, above all, the participation per event decreased in the first wave and even more so in the second wave. In eastern Europe, however, the number of events was stable during the first wave and even increased during the second wave. Participation decreased in this region as well, but nowhere near as much as in the other two regions. This points to the impact of context-specific stimuli (see below).



**Figure 4.** Number of events and participants by COVID-19 waves and regions compared to pre-crisis period (January 2019-December 2020): ratios of respective wave over the previous period.

With respect to the type of issues that have been articulated by protest during the COVID-19 crisis, we expect protest to focus on ‘COVID-19 issues’, i.e., lockdown-related issues and public health issues. Moreover, we expect other issues to be crowded out to some extent. Among these other issues we distinguish between economic issues, cultural liberalism issues (anti-racism, women’s rights, LGBT rights, abortion, peace, etc.), political issues (opposition to specific governments, political scandals, democratic decline, etc.), environmental issues, immigration, and EU-related issues, as well as a residual category including among others cultural conservatism, education, and regionalism. Note that EU-related protest events may address policies which at the same time refer to other issue categories, as when farmers protest against EU agricultural policy, or when the EU’s trade, copyright, or migration policies are attacked by NGOs. Where EU policies were at stake, we coded the protest as EU-related, whatever the policy involved. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the overall issue composition of protest before COVID-19 and during the two waves of the crisis.

As [Table 1](#), COVID-19-related issues constitute an important part of protest during the first two waves of the crisis, but they did not entirely crowd out other issues. As a matter of fact, two thirds of the protests across Europe were still triggered by other issues. Among them, it was above all protest on economic issues that got crowded out during the crisis. In other words, although the governments’ lockdown measures had an enormous impact on the economies of the European countries, economic protest not only did not increase but actually declined drastically throughout the first two waves. This confirms our expectation that it was above all the governments’ public health measures that triggered protest. A more detailed analysis by regions shows that Covid-related issues crowded out other issues to a greater extent in southern Europe than in the other two regions: in the two first waves of the Covid crisis, Covid-related issues accounted for more than half (54 per

**Table 1.** Issues by period, percentages.

	Before COVID-19	First wave	Second wave	Total
COVID-19 issues	1.8	27.5	33.1	12.4
Cultural liberalism	11.3	31.9	16.6	16.3
Political	15.5	14.1	10.6	14.4
Environment	13.7	4.8	9.3	11.2
Economic	23.4	4.9	6.3	16.7
Immigration	4.3	2.4	4.6	4.0
EU-related	5.0	0.7	1.3	3.5
Others	25.1	13.5	18.3	21.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>n</i>	2982	955	831	4768

Note: We have a small percentage of protest related to what we call COVID-19 issues in our dataset on the one hand due to the fact that all healthcare protest was recoded as a COVID-19 issue protest and on the other hand due to some small instances of COVID-19 related protests before European outbreaks, such as protest against food imports from Asia.

cent) of the protest events in southern Europe, but only for roughly 30 per cent in north-western Europe and about 20 per cent in eastern Europe.

In addition, and in line with our expectations, EU-related protest got crowded out. Such protests were rather rare to begin with, making up only 5 per cent of the protest events across Europe before the crisis hit, but they virtually disappeared during the crisis. Moreover, a large part of these protest events were concentrated in Britain, where roughly a third of the protest (30.6 per cent) that was EU-related happened in the pre-Covid-19 period and mostly focused on Brexit. In the rest of Europe, EU-related protest made up just 2.7 per cent of all protests before the Covid-19 crisis. As EU-related protest collapsed during the crisis, it did so both in the UK and in the rest of Europe, where it was reduced to 0.5 and 1.1 per cent, respectively. This means that the crowding out effect of EU-related protest was particularly important in the UK, where Covid-19 effectively wiped-out Brexit-related protest as Brexit was completed by the time the pandemic started. Importantly, not a single EU-related protest event was linked to the Covid-19 crisis. The few remaining EU-related protests were focusing on migrant issues, climate change, and (in Poland) on the government's plan to exit the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing domestic violence. This confirms that the protesters did not perceive the EU as the actor to blame for their predicament during the crisis.

In an attempt to systematically account for the increase in Covid-19-related protest and the decline of protest on other issues, we introduce two indicators characterizing the situation in a given country – the *stringency of the lockdown measures* adopted by the governments and the *pandemic pressure* operationalized by infection rates and confirmed COVID-19 mortality rates adjusted by country size. As the stringency of the lockdown measures increases, we expect an increase of Covid-related protests and a decrease of other protests. As the pandemic pressure increases, we also expect protest on other issues to decrease, but with respect to Covid-related protest, our expectations are less clear-cut. Our dependent variable in this analysis is the weekly number of respective events in a given country.<sup>11</sup> We estimate two contemporaneous models for both types of protest – one each for the two indicators of pandemic pressure.<sup>12</sup> Table 2 presents the results, which largely confirm expectations.

As expected, the more stringent the lockdown measures in a particular week, the more numerous Covid-related protest, though with a small effect size (an increase of 60 in the stringency score on the 0–100 scale produces on average a new protest event in the same week). However, other types of protest do not appear to react to a change in stringency during the week. This could be due to the fact that these other types of protest targeted specific issues in each European region with specific temporal distributions that depended more on when these particular issues became salient rather

**Table 2.** Determinants of the number of weekly protests in a country (January 2020–December 2020) with country-week fixed effects: OLS regression coefficients, *t*-values and significance level.

	<i>Dependent variable</i>			
	Covid protest (1)	Other protest (2)	Covid protest (3)	Other protest (4)
Stringency	0.016*** (0.006)	0.005 (0.010)	0.017*** (0.006)	0.003 (0.010)
Cases (1000, pop. adj.)	0.018* (0.010)	−0.046*** (0.017)		
Deaths (1000, pop. adj.)			−0.393 (0.374)	−2.084*** (0.655)
Constant	−0.232 (0.407)	2.149*** (0.714)	−0.273 (0.408)	2.114*** (0.713)
Observations	1272	1272	1272	1272
$R^2$	0.201	0.324	0.199	0.326
Adjusted $R^2$	0.150	0.281	0.148	0.283
Residual std. error (df = 1194)	1.666	2.919	1.668	2.914
<i>F</i> -statistic (df = 77; 1194)	3.904***	7.435***	3.858***	7.508***

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

than on lockdown pressure (as shown in the last section of the paper). Also, in line with expectations, the higher the infection and mortality rates, the less frequent protest is on other issues in the same week (every 1000 new deaths result in a decrease of two protest events on average, while every 100,000 new cases result in a decrease of four to five protest events on average). With respect to Covid-19-related protests, the effect of pandemic pressure is, indeed, less clear-cut: an increase in infection rates seems to have a very small effect in increasing Covid-19-related protest (every 100,000 new cases would result in an additional two protest events on average), while a high mortality rate appears to not affect such protest. These models confirm the results of Plümper *et al.* (2021), who performed a similar analysis for anti-Covid-19 protest in the different regions of Germany covering the period from March 2020 to January 2021, finding a positive effect for the stringency of lockdown measures on anti-Covid-19 protest.<sup>13</sup>

As shown in Tables A6–A8 in the Appendix, these results vary considerably by region. Thus, more stringent lockdown measures trigger additional Covid-19 protests more prominently in southern Europe, while higher infection and mortality rates reduce other types of protest in north-western Europe. In eastern Europe, finally, higher infection and mortality rates actually increase Covid-19 protests. These results, to some extent, reflect the regional experiences with the pandemic: the countries of southern Europe, and in particular Italy and Spain, experienced very high infection and mortality rates during the first two waves of the crisis, and their governments imposed comparatively more stringent lockdown measures. By contrast, eastern Europe was relatively spared by the pandemic during the first two waves, which



allowed its governments to be more relaxed with respect to lockdown measures. The average infection rates were twice as high in the countries of southern Europe (17,100) than in the countries of eastern Europe (8100) from March to December 2020, with north-western European countries closer to the southern European ones (15,900). Mortality rates were almost three times higher in southern Europe (510) than in eastern Europe (180), with north-western Europe again situated in between (370). At lower levels of infection and mortality rates, eastern Europeans may have, at the same time, been more sensitive to increases in these rates and less constrained in protesting against Covid-19 measures. North-western Europeans, finally, appear to have been most constrained in their protest activity by the problem pressure of the pandemic.

### The mobilization of COVID-related protest

As we have seen, while not entirely crowding out other issues, the first two waves of the crisis have been characterized by a stark increase in the share of Covid-19-related issues. We now turn our attention to the characteristics of such protest. Figure 5 shows the prevalence of anti- and pro-restriction protest<sup>14</sup> across the countries in our dataset<sup>15</sup> in the first two waves of the pandemic. As expected, much of the public protest in the streets typically meant trespassing lockdown and/or social distancing rules. Because of this, we can see that the engagement of those who basically supported these

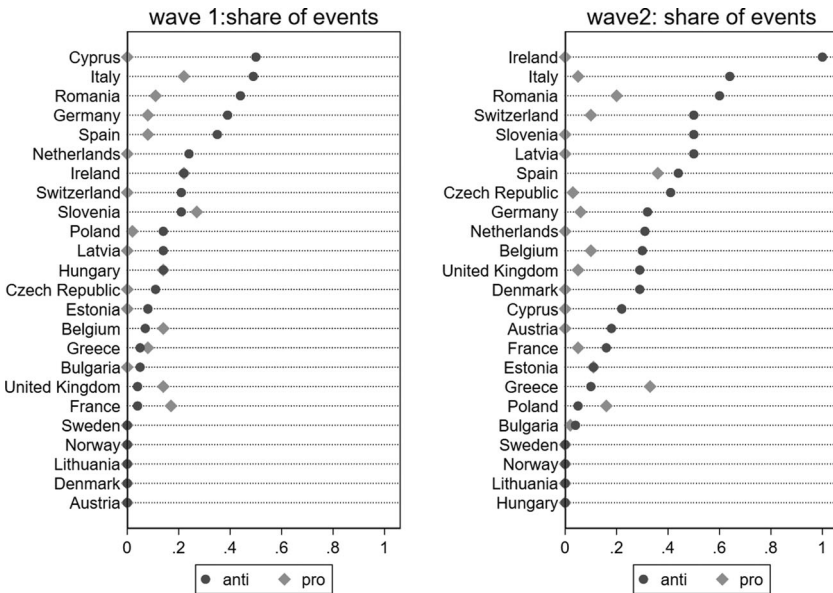
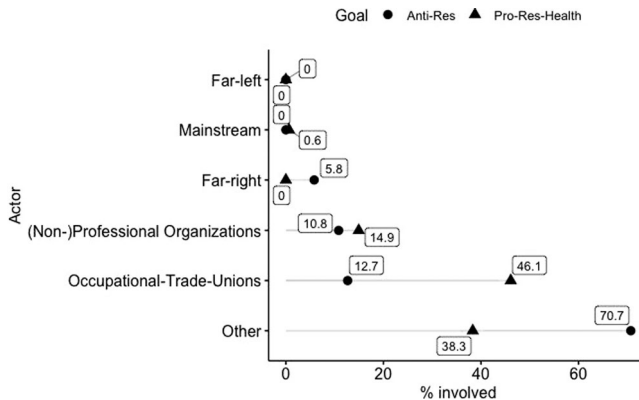


Figure 5. Covid-related issues by wave and country: types of issues.

measures is at fairly low levels across all countries in both waves. With a few minor exceptions, anti-restriction protest surpassed pro-restrictions protest across virtually the entire continent. Moreover, looking at the difference between the two waves, we can see that anti-restriction protest intensified as the pandemic dragged on and the initial rally-around-the-flag effect began to subside and to make room for more criticism of the government-imposed measures.

In terms of the actors engaged in Covid-19-related protest, our data indicate a substantial lack of involvement of political parties. Previous findings on the engagement of party actors in protest during crisis periods already showed that party-sponsored events are relatively rare and distinct, with only 14 per cent of such events during the Great Recession (Borbath & Hutter, 2021). During the Covid-19 crisis, party-sponsored protest reached new lows. Only around four per cent of all protest taking place in the March 2020-December 2020 period (Covid-19-related or not) involved political parties. Figure 6 shows that there are, however, small differences between pro- and anti-restrictions protest. If pro-restrictions protest involved hardly any party actors, the far-right participated in about 6 per cent of anti-restrictions events.

Beyond party-sponsored protest, and in line with our expectation, a stark difference in the involvement of institutional actors can be observed between the two camps. Anti-restriction protest is primarily organized by other, non-institutionalized actors (70.7 per cent of anti-restrictions events) such as citizens' action groups or various social groups, while (non-) professional organizations, occupational groups, and trade unions get involved in such protest to a much more limited extent (10.8 per cent, and 12.7 per cent respectively). By contrast, the pro-restrictions and healthcare camp is characterized by a greater involvement of these actors with close to half of the protests



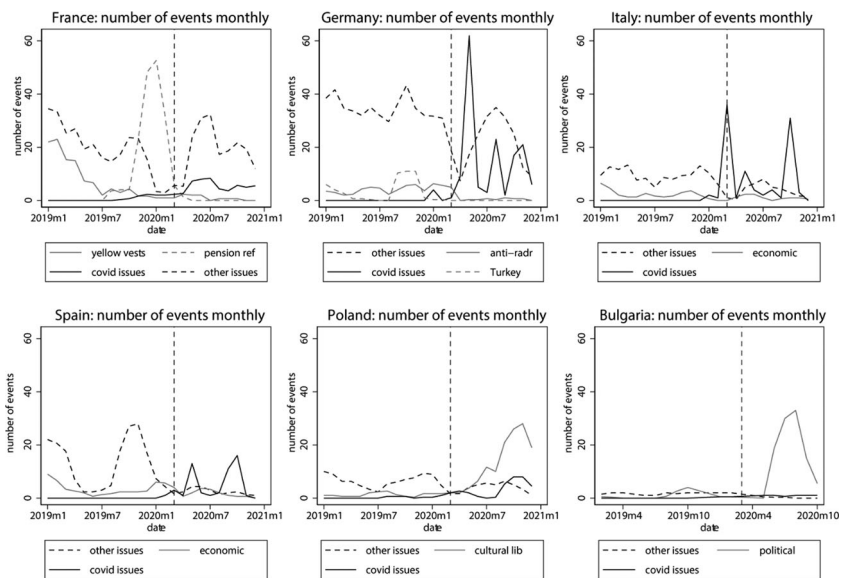
**Figure 6.** Actors involved in anti-restrictions and pro-restrictions protest (March 2020-December 2020).

organized by trade unions and occupational groups and another 14.9 per cent by (non-)professional organizations. Only about a third of the pro-restrictions protest (38.2 per cent) is organized by non-institutionalized groups such as general citizens and various social groups.

### **The mobilization of other, non-COVID-19-related protest**

We have already seen that the Covid-19 crisis has had a differential effect on protest in the three regions of Europe. It crowded out more protest events targeting non-Covid-19-related issues in southern Europe than in the other two regions. As we have also argued, this can partly be accounted for by the higher incidence of the crisis in southern Europe and by the more stringent reactions of the governments in this region during the period covered. In addition, we would now like to argue that the differential effect of the crisis is also related to the country-specific context conditions during the crisis. We shall show this based on the development of protest in six selected countries, which we present in [Figure 7](#).

France and Germany illustrate the pattern of north-western European countries. Before the crisis hit, protest in *France* was dominated at first by the yellow vests, who demobilized, however, already before the beginning of the crisis, and by President Macron's pension reform, which gave rise to



**Figure 7.** Number of monthly protest events by issue category in six countries, smoothed three-monthly figures and monthly figures (Covid protest in Germany, Italy, and Spain).

a wave of protest in fall 2019. Pension reforms have typically unleashed such protest waves in France. The most recent previous mobilization occurred in fall 2010 against the attempt of President Sarkozy to impose such a reform, and already in fall 1995, there was a huge mobilization against the pension reform attempted by Prime Minister Juppe's government. All these mobilizations were union-led and all of them succeeded in blocking the reform. Compared to the yellow vests and the pension reform protests, Covid-19-related protest as well as other types of protest in France remained rather limited, even if the spillover of the Black Lives Matter movement to France was quite strong. In *Germany*, by contrast, the reaction to the Covid-19 lockdown measures gave rise to an important protest wave. A new organization called 'Querdenker' ('cross-thinkers'), which started as a local group in Stuttgart but rapidly spread across the country, coordinated these protests. The government's measures cannot explain why protests against lockdown measures were so much more widespread in Germany than in France, given that the stringency of the measures was comparable in the two countries. France was, however, hit harder than Germany during the first two waves. Thus, the monthly mortality rates were, on average, twice as high in France, which, as argued previously, may have served to more credibly justify the lockdown measures in France than in Germany.

Comparing Italy and Spain, the two largest southern European countries, we note the demobilization of other types of protest in both countries, but especially in Spain. *Spain* had seen waves of regionalist protest in Catalonia in the course of 2019, protests which virtually disappeared in the Covid crisis. In *Italy*, the protest arena had already been very calm prior to the crisis. The Italian Covid-19-related protests that erupted very early in the crisis are of a very special kind: they broke out in several Italian prisons, where inmates revolted violently against the lockdown measures, which involved the suspension of family visits. The Covid-19-related protests during the second wave in Italy were more of the typical anti-restriction kind.

Finally, Poland and Bulgaria illustrate the specificities of eastern Europe. After the *Polish* Constitutional Court, filled with acolytes of the ruling PiS government, decided to ban abortion even in cases of foetal defects on October 22, the street response was immediate: across the country, people blocked roads and entered churches during mass. Hundreds of thousands walked through the streets in what turned out to be the largest protests since the fall of communism, demanding a return to the former, still highly restrictive, abortion law. In *Bulgaria*, the protests, which began in July and lasted for several months, were directed against the Borisov government and the general prosecutor. With the support of the President, the protestors demanded the resignation of the Borisov government. In the end, they triumphed as the government resigned in April 2021.

## Conclusion

While political protest is usually rare and highly unequally distributed across time and space, crisis periods are often considered to have a unique activation potential through the uncertainty they bring about and the grievances they create. In this paper, we set out to examine protest across 30 European countries in the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 by means of an original PEA dataset covering virtually all forms of protest taking place in the streets and reported in the media. We explored both the extent and the intensity of Covid-19 as well as non-Covid-19 protest, together with its contextual drivers, its content, the actors involved, and its variation across different target issues and European regions.

The governments' lockdown measures in the Covid-19 crisis constitute a unique opportunity to study the impact of public policy on collective public protest. As social movement theory has argued, by designing and implementing public policy governments shape both the opportunities and the likely grievances for collective action among target populations. In terms of opportunities, the Covid-19 crisis imposed severe constraints on the public mobilization of protest. In terms of grievances, it created strong incentives to protest against the restrictions imposed by the governments among a constituency that was ready to disregard the constraints on mobilizing and had the capacity to mobilize effectively. In addition, our results also speak to the importance of contingent stimuli for the mobilization of protest. Even with severe constraints on public collective protest, suddenly imposed grievances can mobilize some constituencies which have the capacity to do so.

Our first set of findings show that, as a consequence of these lockdown measures, protest was, indeed, reduced and re-focused during the Covid-19 crisis but was hardly brought to a halt. If the first wave of the pandemic in Europe initially stopped protest for about one month starting in March 2020, the number of protests soon picked up again, peaking in summer 2020. However, though by no means interrupted and in line with restrictions imposed by the lockdown measures on the opportunities for public collective actions, protest occurred at significantly lower levels compared to pre-Covid-19 times in terms of number of events and, above all, in terms of the number of participants. This confirms earlier studies were more limited in time and space.

Our second set of results shows that protest was refocused on Covid-19-related issues, and, in particular, on protest against the restrictions imposed by the government lockdowns. Indeed, anti-restriction protest surpassed levels of pro-restriction protest across almost all countries and intensified as the pandemic dragged on. This confirms our expectations, as the opponents of restrictions had greater incentives to protest than supporters

of restrictions, and were more ready to trespass rules. As Covid-19-related protest was primarily anti-restriction protest, it is obvious that it reacted to the stringency of the lockdown measures in the same week. However, the stringency effect can only be observed in southern Europe, where lockdown measures were particularly strong. Moreover, Covid-related protest was not unequivocally related to the pandemic pressure. It increased in Eastern Europe as pandemic pressure increased but was not affected by it in other regions. In addition, while both pro- and anti-restriction camps experienced low levels of political party involvement, pro-restriction protest benefitted from the engagement of trade unions and (non-)professional organizations, while anti-restriction protest was mainly organized by non-institutionalized actors such as the German 'Querdenker'. Non-Covid-19 issues, in particular economic issues and (especially in the UK) issues related to the EU, were crowded out, but at differential levels in the three regions of Europe. Specifically, protest targeting non-Covid-19-related issues were reduced to a greater extent in southern Europe than in the other two regions. However, non-Covid-19 protest was reduced most prominently in reaction to pandemic pressure in north-western Europe and not in southern Europe, where it was the stringency of the lockdown measures that increased Covid-19-related protest to the detriment of non-Covid-19 protest.

Finally, our third set of results show that protest during the Covid-19-crisis also responded to highly contingent national context conditions. In north-western Europe, issues related to cultural liberalism have come to dominate protest in the first wave as a consequence of the spillover of the Black Lives Matter movement to Europe, and environmental issues have become somewhat more important during the second wave in reaction to the renewed mobilization by Fridays for Future. In eastern Europe, non-Covid-19 related protest was mostly focused on domestic political issues, particularly on corruption, but also on the very restrictive abortion law in Poland. By contrast, southern Europe, as the hardest hit region in the period under study, experienced the demobilization of all other types of protest except for Covid-19-related ones.

In conclusion, our paper shows that, despite its unlikeliness due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, protest during Covid-19 has hardly been put to a halt. On the one hand, goals of protest observed in pre-pandemic times have continued to be the focus of mobilization to varying extents across Europe, depending on the stringency of lockdowns, the pandemic pressure, and other country-specific factors. On the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis had its own mobilization potential bringing about a new set of issues to the fore. In this respect, our results show that anti-restriction actions came to dominate much of the protest in the streets in 2020. Nevertheless, we are limited here in capturing only the beginning of this trend. Unsystematic observational evidence seems to indicate that this trend hardly reversed in the further development of the pandemic in 2021/2022,

as anti-restriction protest has further intensified, capturing media headlines across Europe. Additionally, while our data indicate that such Covid-19-related protest involved institutional actors such as political parties to a very limited extent in the first two waves of the pandemic, we expect that this new issue has the potential to become more institutionalized as political parties begin to position themselves more clearly in the pro-/anti- restriction debate and as vaccination issues and related policies bring about a new dimension to this conflict. Going further with the aim of testing these expectations, enlarging the PEA dataset used for this paper and enabling the study of protest trends in the later stages of the pandemic is a priority in our future research agenda.

## Notes

1. See Buchanan *et al.* (2020).
2. The Integrated Crisis Early Warning System.
3. Global Database of Events, Language and Tone Project (GDELT), an open-source academic resource providing information on various 'events' stretching back to 1979.
4. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data set (Raleigh *et al.*, 2010), see also Neumayer *et al.* (2021).
5. To be sure, there also are qualitative studies of specific movements and movement organizations, such as the study by (Zajak *et al.*, 2021), which shows how pro-migrant groups in Germany adapted to the conditions of the COVID-19 crisis by the hybrid use of online and offline protest and by frame bridging, i.e. by linking migrant issues to the aggravation of social inequalities in the COVID-19 crisis.
6. The main data collection steps involved: raw document identification via an extensive keyword search on LexisNexis, classification of relevant protest documents using several machine learning algorithms, and manual annotation of the selected documents remained following the previous steps using a dedicated codebook and online coding platform. For details on the exact steps of the data collection, see the Kriesi *et al.* (2020) codebook available at: [https://poldem.eui.eu/downloads/pea/poldem-protest\\_30\\_codebook.pdf](https://poldem.eui.eu/downloads/pea/poldem-protest_30_codebook.pdf).
7. Agence France Presse, ANSA, Associated Press, British Broadcasting Corporation, Baltic News Service, Czechoslovak News Agency, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, MTI Hungarian News Agency, Press Association, Polish Press Agency.
8. The codebook of categories included in our PEA dataset can be found in the Appendix of the paper in Tables A1, A2, and A3.
9. Note that our participation data is limited to slightly less than half of the events in our dataset given the fact that many protest mentions in the media do not report the size of an event.
10. We use the logarithm of the population size in order not to overcorrect the data for these transformations.
11. Since this variable is an over-dispersed count variable, some suggest to estimate the corresponding models with negative binomial regressions (e.g., Plümpner *et al.*, 2021). Given that we are only interested in the general pattern of effects and for reasons of simplicity, we stick to OLS-regressions.

12. In Appendix Table A5, we also estimate a contemporaneous model with lagged dependent variables with robust results.
13. Note that their analysis distinguished between German regions.
14. Pro-restriction protest includes protest related to healthcare issues, such as expanding healthcare capacities or measures of protection for healthcare workers.
15. [Figure 5](#) only presents the results for 24 countries in our 31-country dataset that experienced at least 10 protests in the period of time under study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The authors are grateful for financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that facilitated the funding of a workshop at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute, which cofounded and hosted the workshop where an earlier version of this paper was presented. The research on which the paper is based has been funded by the SOLID-project, ERC SYG\_2018 Grant n. 810356. H2020 European Research Council.

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