Guest editorial

COVID-19 governance: issues, responses, implications
1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic and its social, political and economic implications have confirmed that a more thorough debate on our societies' capacity to respond to crises is needed. At the heart of this conversation, lies the question of governments and their ability to effectively use the tools at its disposal, including, of course, regulatory measures as well as digital or information and communication technology (ICT)-enhanced tools. Even if a commendable attempt at coordinating the effort of taming the spread of the pandemic was conducted at the global level, mostly via the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Collaboration and Development (OECD), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and others, including for instance the European Union (EU), the crux of the response to the crisis was limited to the jurisdiction of national governments. Indeed, the need for diverse stakeholders, domestically and internationally, to communicate, to coordinate and to collaborate tested the resilience, interoperability and efficiency of the existing modes of governance (Lytras and Visvizi, 2020; Visvizi, 2015). On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications highlighted the salience of social networking sites and their profound role in official and unofficial government communication strategies. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the state of emergency that it prompted, served as a shield for some governments to instrumentalize COVID-19 and the safety measures introduced to tame the spread of the virus. From a different angle, the COVID-19 crisis has also fostered new ways of collaboration among governments and international organizations. In a similar fashion, grass roots movements have played a substantial role too. As the papers included in this special issue highlight, a variety of issues and topics need to be discussed in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. These include questions of democracy and accountability, of regulatory efficiency of respective political systems, of an overfit of tools at the governments' disposal and of societies' acceptance of the measures introduced and subordination.

A great number of submissions from all over the world were received in response to the call for papers. Of these, following the regular double-blind peer-review process, eight papers are included in this Special Issue; the remaining papers will be published in regular issues of the journal. The papers accepted for publication address the following topics: national responses and strategies to address COVID-19 and its implications; coordination of local, regional, national and international responses to the COVID-19 pandemic; international organizations and the COVID-19 pandemic; the use and abuse of social networking sites, including questions of fake news, in times of the COVID-19 pandemic; and the instrumentalization of COVID-19, including questions of democracy, civic liberties and individual freedom.

2. Key lines of the debate on COVID-19 governance
The papers included in this Special Issue may be divided into two groups, i.e. papers dealing with broad, overarching issues relating to the process of managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including democracy and accountability (Parry *et al.*, 2020) as well as regulatory issues (Sokołowski, 2020); papers elaborating on national case studies, including the cases of South Africa (Naudé and Cameron, 2021), Botswana (Mandiyanike and Moeti,

2021), South Korea (Yeo and Lee, 2020), Indonesia (Hartanto and Siregar, 2021), Kazakhstan (Bokayev *et al.*, 2021) and the USA (Johnson *et al.*, 2021). The topics that the authors highlight include the efficiency and drawbacks of national responses to the pandemic. Here, the cases of South Africa and South Korea offer an interesting and contrasting view of ways in which "failing to pull together" (Naudé and Cameron, 2021) and "whole community co-production" (Yeo and Lee, 2020) may yield strikingly different results. The cases of Kazakhstan (Bokayev *et al.*, 2021) and of the USA (Johnson *et al.*, 2021) will allow the reader to understand the caveats of the government response to the crisis as viewed from the perspective of education systems and the necessity to switch to distance education (Visvizi *et al.*, 2020; Visvizi and Daniela, 2019). The collections of papers included in this volume of Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy (TGPPP) offer an incisive, yet by no means exhaustive, coverage of issues and topics that define the debate on COVID-19 governance. As mentioned earlier, the discussion on COVID-19 and its broad implications, including how it transforms government, will continue in the forthcoming volumes of TGPPP. This volume may thus be seen as an introduction to the conversation. The details of the content of this volume are outlined in the next section.

3. Content of the special issue

The COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of an efficient medical treatment and the implications of the disease rendered it necessary for several governments in the world to introduce diverse forms of emergency in their countries and, relating to them, restrictions on mobility. This may have taken different forms, as the cases of, for instance, South Korea, Greece, Poland and Germany indicate. In brief, however, for the sake of containing the spread of the disease, substantial restrictions to individual liberties were introduced in democratic societies, thus raising serious questions about their admissibility and legality. These issues and their complex implications are discussed by Parry *et al.* (2020) in their paper entitled "Democracy in flux: a systemic view on the impact of COVID-19." As a follow up to this discussion, Sokołowski (2021) suggests that addressing the pandemic should be based on knowledge and should, therefore, be based on a framework of rules, standards, authorization, permits and guidance, which are both pragmatic and flexible. The author supports his points by referencing the cases of the USA, Canada, the UK, France, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

The following group of papers addresses the national-level responses to the crisis. Naudé and Cameron (2021) examine South Africa's response to COVID-19. The authors argue that both the government and the business sector's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been problematic. These key actors have been failing to "pull together", leaving South Africa's citizens in between corrupt and incompetent officials on the one hand and lockdown skeptics on the other. The case of Botswana, examined by Mandiyanike and Moeti (2021), reveals that the restrictions on the freedom of movement imposed by the government, commonly referred to as "lockdown", resulted in near-death experiences for some patients with chronic conditions. Yeo and Lee in their paper on South Korea demonstrate that the successful response to the pandemic is attributable to a nationwide whole-community co-production among multiple actors, including government, various industries, sectors and jurisdictions. In a similar vein, Hartanto and Siregar (2021), by elucidating the case of Indonesia, stress the importance of good governance and, therefore, also the capacity to mobilize all actors, in effectively responding to the pandemic. The following two papers focus on specific dimensions of the government response to COVID-19, namely, the field of education. Specifically, the case of Kazakhstan, examined by Bokayev *et al.* (2021), reveals that the transition to distance/online learning may be a very challenging endeavor, because

of weak internet infrastructure and a lack of effective interaction with all stakeholders, as well as biased statistical and analytical information. The case of the USA, discussed by Johnson *et al.* (2021), raises the issue of how and to what extent ideology, in that case of states with liberal/non-liberal ideological orientation, influenced the decision to open/close higher education institutions during the pandemic.

4. Concluding remarks

This special issue touches upon some of the complex aspects of the multiscalar process of governing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the local, regional, national and global levels. The papers included in this special issue, as well as papers that will be published in the forthcoming issue, speak to this complexity by highlighting national case studies, the varieties of contingencies besetting efforts at governing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, the COVID-19-driven research agenda has only begun to consolidate. More research and more thorough insights into the complex process of dealing with and responding to current crisis, as well as preempting the still-nascent risks, are needed if our governments are to respond to future ordeals comparable to that of COVID-19 more efficiently than they have done so this time.

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