

# GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN CO-VID-19 PROTESTS IN THE EU-27: ACTORS, GRIEVANCES, AND PROTEST FRAMES DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

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Culminating more than a decade of crisis in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has opened an important window of opportunity for institutional and policy change, not only at the “reactive” level of emergency responses, but also to tackle more broadly the many socio-political challenges caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Building on this premise, the Horizon Europe project REGROUP (*Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic*) aims to: 1) provide the European Union with a body of actionable advice on how to rebuild post-pandemic governance and public policies in an effective and democratic way; anchored to 2) a map of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of Covid-19; and 3) an empirically-informed normative evaluation of the pandemic.



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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic put public health, economic activity, and constitutionally guaranteed freedoms under severe strain. Existing research has studied the ensuing protests, predominately individuals' likelihood to have participated and the determinants of such participation. The present paper analyzes COVID-19-related protest events across the EU-27 space and examines the observed grievances, actors, mobilization patterns, and protest frames, with protest events as the unit of analysis. Relying on an analytical distinction between economic and cultural grievances, I find that left-wing protesters contested the economic effects of the crisis, while right-wing protests mobilized around cultural concerns about freedom and the importance of science. Non-partisan actors were behind much of the observed protesting and that a "rallying" effect was small and limited to cultural protests. On the Green-Alternative-Libertarian/Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (GAL-TAN) dimension, GAL actors remained relatively inactive, while TAN actors mobilized around cultural grievances. I also observe regional effects, such as the preponderance of cultural protests in Germany and the Netherlands and of economic protests in Southern Europe, and a positive association between protest incidence and centrist/technocratic governments. The paper further discusses the activation of other pre-pandemic cleavages (for instance, ethnoreligious ones) and the most pertinent repertoires of contention observed across the EU-27; a noteworthy finding concerns the diversity and, quite often, the country-specific characteristics of COVID protests. Lastly, a critical discourse and qualitative-interpretive frame analyses of press releases by protest actors in France, Cyprus, and Greece demonstrates the limits of a simultaneous activation of economic and cultural dimensions during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, protests, cleavages, framing, geography.

# Introduction

The COVID-19 health crisis led to remarkable incursions into individual freedoms and economic activity for the benefit of public health. In Europe, lockdowns, associated business/school closures, social distancing, and vaccination mandates comprised parts of a panoply of measures employed by almost all national governments. Eventually, and given the long duration of the crisis, such measures were met with public contestation and often a backlash expressed both on the ballot and on the street (Grasso et al. 2021).

The existing literature on COVID-19 protests does not always distinguish whether grievances, as they manifested in who organized protests and what their demands were, reflected older or more recent political cleavages or how these may have intertwined with new, pandemic-specific divisions, such as those related to health care provision and vaccination mandates. While we have evidence of how protesting groups changed their mobilization frames to adapt to the pandemic situation, the connection to pre-existing cleavages, frames, and repertoires remains under-researched. The present paper is an attempt to expand our knowledge on the politics of the coronavirus crisis by linking an analysis of pandemic-related protests with more established structural explanations of political mobilization.

Such an analysis is important, as it addresses a number of empirical puzzles that extant empirical findings have raised. First, although the associated costs of collective action increased, policing became more repressive, and protest activity decreased very early on in most countries, offline protesting rebounded after only a few months, sometimes even weeks (Borbath et al. 2021; Coen et al. 2022). What dynamics lay behind this temporal shift? Second, there was observable international (and intra-European) variation in the incidence/intensity of protesting, a phenomenon that has been highlighted in existing comparative studies (Kriesi and Oana 2023) or briefly mentioned in individual-level studies (Belchior 2024; Burciu and Hutter 2023). What accounts for this international variation despite regions facing the same public-health challenges? Third, protest movements against COVID-19 measures across countries adopted very different mobilization frames, even when they had similar (for example, radical-right) political starting points (Fominaya 2024). How do we make sense of such international differences through varying cleavage or issue salience?

The present paper argues that an economy-culture divide provides an analytically useful framework in explaining different forms of COVID-related protest and shows how pre-existing cleavages (left-right, GAL-TAN, regional) in the EU-27 space were activated during the pandemic in relation to such an economy-culture divide. At the same time, the analysis reveals a wide variety of frames and repertoires used by protesters across countries, often predicated on specific, preexisting protest patterns in each country that made for a particularly colourful and complex mosaic of protest. The first two sec-

tions situate the paper's theoretical and empirical contributions in the wider literature on COVID-19 protests; they also describe the protest event data and primary sources used in the analysis. The subsequent empirical analysis shows that left-wing protesters contested the economic effects of the crisis, while right-wing protests mobilized around cultural concerns about freedom and the importance of science. I also observe regional effects, such as the preponderance of cultural protests in Germany and the Netherlands and of economic protests in Southern Europe, and a positive association between protest incidence and centrist/technocratic governments. Lastly, a qualitative-interpretive analysis of important protest actors in France, Greece and Cyprus demonstrates the limits of the simultaneous activation of economic and cultural dimensions.

## Literature on COVID-19 protests and the economy-culture divide

The literature on the underlying divisions among citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, the “demand” side of voting and the “grievance” side of protests, often focuses on sociodemographic characteristics and psychological predispositions affecting acceptance of and compliance with government measures (see Brouard et al. 2020). Some of these studies, however, do not consider the pandemic as a dynamic, contentious episode. For instance, they do not comment on the impact of particular issues contested as the crisis unfolded or on pandemic-related divisions overlapping with/cutting across existing cleavages. Caramani et al. (2023), following Oana et al. (2021), have tried to correct this omission by asking who were the “winners and losers” of pandemic policies and looking at the possible emergence of a “health-economy” dimension. Yet they have found more concrete evidence that partisan and ideological (libertarian/authoritarian) divisions and (mis)trust in scientists fuelled policy preferences, at least at the level of individual survey respondents.

The empirical findings thus suggest that grievances vis-à-vis COVID-related containment policies reflected preexisting partisan and ideological predispositions (Altiparmakis et al. 2021), such as radical political ideologies and an acceptance of conspiracy theories. Relatedly, pandemic divisions are thought to reproduce the “winners-losers of globalization” cleavage that has shaped other recent European crises (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). Still, it is important to test whether this division led to collective action, whether it was reflected in protest incidence across countries, and whether/how it manifests itself in mobilization frames of these protests. Borbath et al. (2021) find that right-wing ideology was associated with street-level demonstrations, while left-wing ideology was more likely to lead to civic engagement, at least in the beginning of the pandemic. However, their survey-based study is limited to the first period of the pandemic, and it does not

cover Southern and Eastern Europe. Plümper et al. (2021) also report that the share of non-mainstream parties in recent elections is a good predictor of protest intensity. They hypothesize that protest organizers acted strategically by focusing on periods with stringent government policies and on locations with anti-establishment attitudes and low infection rates. Like Borbath et al. (2021), however, they do not offer a systematic account of expressed grievances and mobilization frames.

In a similar vein, Neumayer et al. (2021) have found that low trust in government is associated with protesting but, counterintuitively, that civil liberties are a positive predictor for the incidence of protests. This has led to the empirical paradox that those in favor of traditionalism, authoritarianism, and nationalism on the GAL-TAN sociocultural dimension (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015) are found to have been more likely to participate in COVID protests. However, this conjecture needs to be tested with more data across countries. I share Neumayer et al.'s (2021) emphasis on the strategic nature of protester decisions and mobilization dynamics, and pay closer attention to framing decisions and their relation to government policies and pre-existing cleavages/divisions.

With regard to cleavages, a central analytical distinction employed in the analysis here is one between (grievances about) *economy* and *culture*. This approach follows, but also reinterprets, standard accounts of political competition in Europe (Kriesi et al. 2006). The “economy” divide pits losers of the pandemic against those unaffected by it from a financial point of view (Caramani et al. 2023). Conversely, the “culture” divide captures the conflict between those who accepted the scientific consensus around the virus, its public-health consequences, and the necessary restrictions and mandates versus those who were sceptical about the foregoing (Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Volk et al. 2024). The divisions around economy and culture do not necessarily overlap with accounts of the “winners/losers of globalization” - for instance, tourism operators are globalization “winners” but pandemic “losers”. However, the choice to recode protest events as pertaining to economy or culture adds to the literature on the nature of cleavages in contemporary Europe (Ford and Jennings 2020) by exploring their (de)activation during the COVID-19 crisis. The following section (“Data and Methods”) provides a full operationalization of both “economic” and “cultural” protests.

In addition, whether protest movements succeeded in employing mobilization frames related to preexisting cleavages could have potentially been very important for their success. For instance, Grande et al. (2021) have found that the potential of mobilizing participants in explicitly anti-COVID protests in Germany (the so-called *Querdenker* protests) hovered around 12 percent in the general population and that the percentage of those having understanding for the protests lay at around 20 per cent during the first few months of the pandemic; however, understanding for protesters around non-pandemic issues remained at 60 per cent. In other words, bridging old cleavages with pandemic-related issues may have succeeded in mobilizing a latent demand for protest.

It is therefore worth looking at whether older mobilization frames were indeed recast during corona protests.

Last but not least, I look at evidence for a “a rally-around-the-flag” effect (“rallying effect” for short) in multiple EU countries. A “rallying effect” is observed during international (political, economic, public health, military) crises that pose severe strains on the status quo, as their occurrence opens a window of higher-than-usual public tolerance for government policies that aim to deal with an emergency at the national level. The COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as such an international crisis and case of emergency, the empirical implication being that anti-government protests should have remained muted, at least in the short/medium term. Indeed, a number of studies have pointed at an early dampening effect on COVID-19 protests in some country cases (Kritzinger et al. 2021; Schraff 2021), which later subsided once the effect of lockdowns was felt more acutely, while perceived health risks and the credibility of security measures decreased in parts of the population (Kriesi and Oana 2023). However, it is unclear whether this trend was true across European countries or for all types of protest, a clarification which would require data from more cases and more refined protest data at the subnational level.

To summarize, this paper will attempt to answer the following research questions. Did observed geographic variations across and within the EU-27 in the incidence of COVID-19 protests reflect preexisting cleavages or new ones (left-right/ideological; GAL-TAN; regional; economy-culture)? Were there pre-pandemic issues/divides peculiar to some EU countries that were activated during pandemic protests? Do we find interesting patterns in the dynamics of contagion or other kinds of temporal variation (rallying effect)? How did existing and new movements alter their communication frames to turn crisis into opportunity (Hunt 2022)? Crucially, answering these questions may reveal patterns that are generalizable for mobilization beyond the specific setting of the pandemic or the geographic scope of the EU space.

## Data and methods

The first cross-national source of primary data for the bulk of the present paper’s analysis is the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), which provides expert coding of organized protest events “directly related” to the coronavirus pandemic over a period between March 2020 and April 2023, resulting in more than 20,000 protest events for the EU-27 region (Raleigh et al. 2010; for a similar analysis to the one here using ACLED but starting from different theoretical starting points, see Neumayer et al. 2024, and for one restricted to Germany, see Plümper et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup> Besides organized demon-

1. The data was accessed in May 2023 and is available at <https://acleddata.com/curated-data-files/#-covid>.

strations against COVID-19 government policies, the dataset also includes more spontaneous protests and riots related to the enforcement of aforementioned measures, such as protests against enforcement by police forces, as well as the (less frequent) targeting of healthcare workers responding to the coronavirus.

Although the dataset covers most countries in the world, the analysis here includes the 27 EU member states to facilitate a more fine-grained coding and to explore intra-EU dynamics. In addition to being based on expert knowledge, one advantage of the ACLED is that it provides a short description of the issues and the actors in each protest event, which allows us to record these events according to the characteristics, motivation, and repertoires of the actors. Event descriptions are drawn from both national and local newspapers. Conversely, one limitation of the dataset is that it does not cover online campaigns, for instance the “anti-vax” Facebook groups formed during the later phase of the pandemic or the online manifestations of preexisting movements, which experienced a quantitative leap in this period (Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2021). It also does not cover petitions or open letters.

I have opted to use the ACLED because other datasets - such as those based on individual-level (general population, on-site, or online) surveys - capture opinions and not actual behaviour, are not as appropriate for macro-level analysis making use of geographic variation, or capture only one point in time or one period of the pandemic (see Borbáth 2024; Borbáth et al. 2021; Hunger et al. 2023). Kriesi and Oana (2023) have employed a protest-event analysis similar to ours, although their data collection was based on a semi-automated analysis of English-language newswires and not on expert coding of national and local sources; they also limited their analysis to the first months of the pandemic (until the end of 2020) and did not cover later issues, such as vaccination mandates or the obligatory wearing of masks. Additionally, Hellmeier (2023) has made use of the ACLED to highlight the differences between developed countries and liberal democracies on the one hand and developing countries on the other, but his incisive analysis did not look for variation within the former camp.

The second type of primary source employed in the last section of the paper is qualitative material produced by various social movement organizations behind movements/groups protesting government policies. Drawing on critical discourse and qualitative-interpretive frame analysis, I look at the use of protest frames in protester communications, such as speeches, press releases, and websites (for a similar method used on party communications, see Volk et al. 2023). More specifically, I explore the emergence of us-versus-them constructions and diagnostic/prognostic framings regarding the pandemic measures (Lindekilde 2014; Volk and Weisskircher 2024). Diagnostic framings identify an explanation for a problem by privileging a particular interpretation of its root causes over others; prognostic framings propose a solution (an action, a tactic, a repertoire, a strategy) to the identified problem. Particular emphasis is placed on pandemic-related



divisions, whether they express economic and/or cultural grievances and their overlap, their interaction with or replacement of preexisting issues, and their collective mobilization frames. For instance, protest movements may stop mobilizing around their core issue and focus on specific pandemic-related issues for their mobilization framings but retain the activation of the core issue as an option. As others have shown, the far-right group PEGIDA did this with the concept of “corona dictatorship”, which complemented their preexisting frame of “left-wing dictatorship” (Volk and Weisskircher 2024; Volk 2022).

One tool that is useful in this regard is “frame-bridging” (Snow et al. 1986), through which new issues are connected to older, apparently unrelated ones so that movements project ideological continuity and engage with new potential supporters. The selection of specific protest movements/groups as case studies (the *Confédération Générale du Travail* trade union in France and high-school and university students in Greece and Cyprus) was based on the frequency and intensity of their mobilization as recorded in the ACLED-based protest-event analysis. They were typically active for a long period between 2020 and 2022, achieved considerable, nationwide public recognition in three countries with high levels of protest during the pandemic, and, as is explained below, engaged in interesting frame-bridging between their core issues and pandemic-related challenges, even when doing so entailed contradictions. In any case, these types of protest actors (and these countries) have received less scholarly attention than protests in the European North. This renders them “critical cases” (Snow 2013).

## Measurement of variables and coding of incidents

For the analysis of the ACLED, more than 23,000 protest events in the EU-27 were read and hand-coded by the author. In order to avoid any pitfalls of automated text analysis with regard to complex theoretical concepts and to uncover actors, frames, and repertoires that reflect the diversity of the protests, all protest event entries were hand-coded (see the adjacent appendix for a more detailed procedure). The coding distinguished two broad categories of anti-government protests: *economic grievances* and *cultural grievances*.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the pandemic, these divisions took up specific characteristics.

*Economic Grievances.* Protest events were coded as being fuelled by economic grievances based on whether they were associated with classic labour demands, such as workers’ rights, working conditions, wages, and other general or sector-specific demands. In addition, I file under this category protests that were explicitly organized by professional groups directly affected by the pandemic, such as hotel and restaurant owners/workers, artists, or tourism operators. These are typically sectors with high “affectedness” in a public-health crisis (Caramani et al. 2021) comprised of people who

2. 16,923 events were coded either as economy- or culture- related, which amounted to approximately 73% of all recorder protest events.

protested for various forms of economic support. Lastly, protests against the closure of borders were counted as economy related, as they disrupted international economic activity.

*Cultural Grievances.* Protest events were coded as being fuelled by cultural or ideological concerns according to whether they referred specifically to COVID-19 measures, such as lockdowns and other restrictions of movement, mask wearing, and vaccination mandates, in a critical way or were organized by *ad hoc* groups that condemned such policies but did not tie them primarily to economic grievances.

As already noted, of particular interest is to what extent economic and cultural grievances overlap with existing left-right configurations that predate the pandemic. I have therefore included codings of protest events to reflect such partisan configurations.

*Left-Right Protest.* Protest events were coded as left-wing if they were explicitly organized by labour unions and/or labour and left-wing parties already active and influential before the pandemic. In addition, those protests organized by groups associated with the Green, Alternative, Libertarian end of the GAL-TAN dimension, such as anti-racist, pro-immigration, and environmentalist protests were coded as left-wing. Conversely, protests were coded as right-wing if they were explicitly organized by nativist/anti-immigrant groups or right-wing/radical-right parties that were either active before the pandemic or were formed during this period.

*Government Partisanship.* I have also coded whether national government partisanship was left-wing (social-democratic, socialist, post-communist), centrist (liberal, centrist), or right-wing (conservative, Christian-democratic, nationalist) at the time of the protest event (Rohlingen et al. 2024; Schmidt et al. 2021).

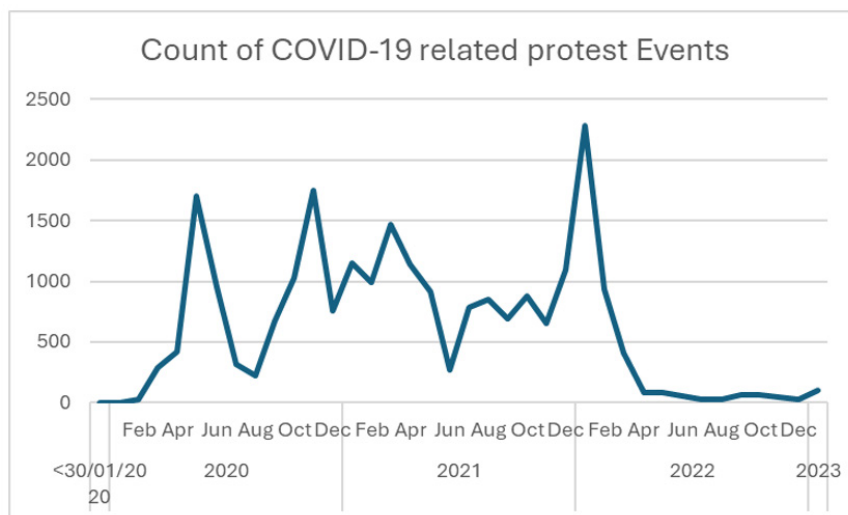
*Government Policies.* The policies implemented to curb the crisis showed considerable variation across countries and over time in our dataset (Engler 2021). As already noted, previous studies have looked at individual-level responses to these varying policies. However, more effort is required to explore any associations between the severity/stringency of policies and the incidence of collective action. To operationalize government policies over time, Oxford University's Covid-19 government response tracker was employed- see the appendix for more details (Hale et al. 2021).

*Region.* A variable accounting for whether the country is located in Northern/Southern/Central-Eastern Europe(CEE)<sup>3</sup> was included in order to examine regional effects. Such effects have been noted for Southern and Central-Eastern Europe, owing to the varying political histories of these regions (Andronikidou and Kovras 2012; Jehlicka and Jacobsson 2021).

3. North: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Sweden. South: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. CEE: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

# Temporal, geographic, and partisan variations in pandemic-related protests

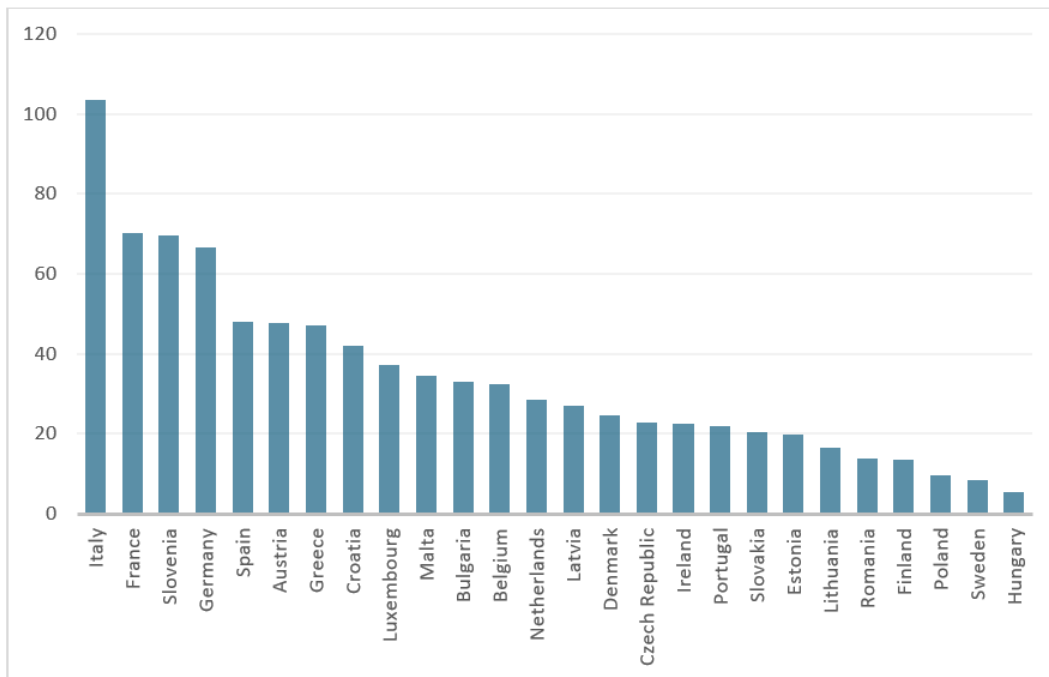
Figure 1: Total count of COVID-19 protest events in the EU-27 (by month).



Data source: ACLED.

Figure 1 demonstrates the temporal evolution of protest volume during the pandemic. I do not find evidence for an overall “rallying effect” in the EU-27 space, as protests were already recorded in April-May 2020 following the imposition of the first lockdowns and remained reliably high for the non-summer months. Relatedly, the hypothesis that protest activity became more pronounced over time as “lockdown/pandemic fatigue” kicked in (Jorgensen et al. 2022) is not supported by aggregated data across the EU-27. Mobilization peaked in the winter months of 2021-2022, when COVID passes and the associated vaccination mandates became heavily contested in a number of countries. Subsequently, COVID-related protests died down after April 2022. An analysis of the separate countries provides evidence for these peaks and troughs in mobilization taking place consistently across the EU-27, with late 2021 being the most contentious period, a time that coincided with the introduction of COVID passes and vaccination mandates.

**Figure 2: Number of protest events per million inhabitants by country in the EU-27 (excl. Cyprus).**



Data source: ACLED.

Figure 2 shows which countries were more likely to experience COVID-related protests between 2020 and 2022. Cyprus is an outlier, because it includes two *de facto* jurisdictions where protests were taking place and coded simultaneously and thus yields a considerably higher average of protests. Therefore Cyprus was excluded from subsequent analyses. Among larger EU-27 countries, Italy, France, and Germany experienced the largest amount of protest per million inhabitants. At the lower end of the distribution, one finds Scandinavian and Central/East European countries.

**Figure 3: Average of protest events per million inhabitants by government partisanship in the EU-27 (excl. Cyprus).**

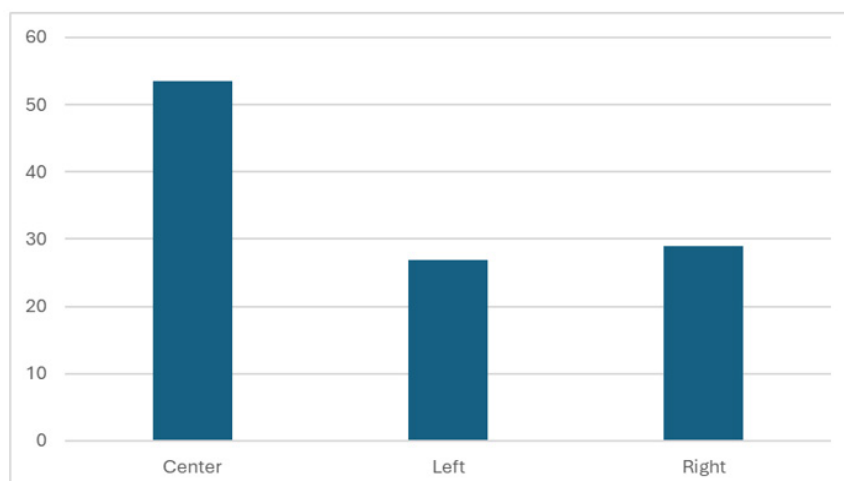


Figure 3 depicts the variation in protest according to government partisanship. Centrist (which includes liberal centrist, grand coalition, and technocratic) governments were more likely to experience protests than partisan governments. On average, right-wing governments were more likely to experience protests under their watch, but this effect is almost neutralized if we exclude Cyprus. The vulnerability of centrist governments may point at legitimacy deficits and subsequent collective mobilization on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

**Figure 4: Average of protest events per million inhabitants by region (excl. Cyprus).**

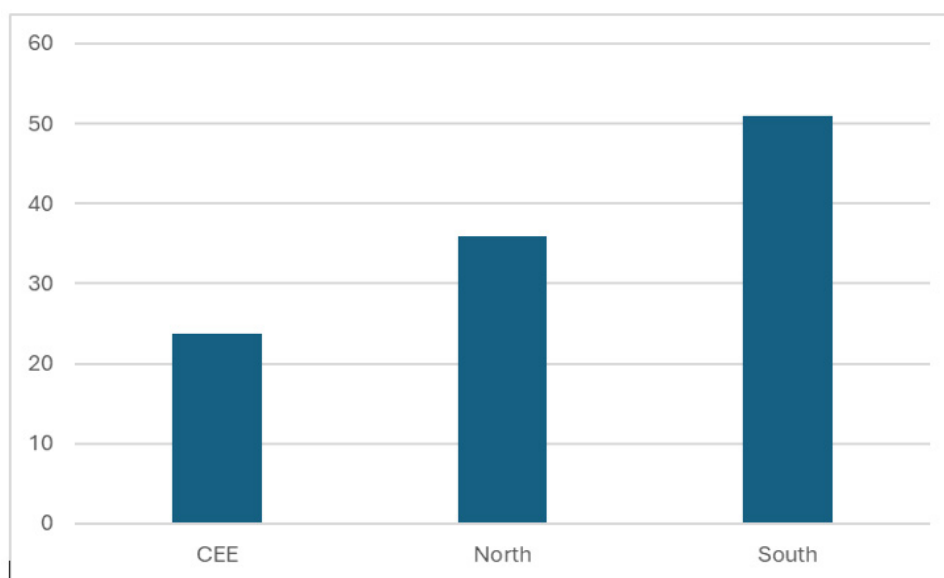


Figure 4 illustrates differences in protest among EU countries based on region. Southern European countries experienced, on average, higher volumes of COVID-related protest events, while Central-Eastern European countries, as already observed in Figure 2, saw lower volumes. This striking finding seems to confirm the agonistic protest culture in Southern Europe (which interacts, to some extent, with partisan orientation of the protesters, with left-wing actors being more present in Southern European countries), which may reflect less consensual political cultures, the historical legacies of democratic transition, or a reaction to an otherwise closed political opportunity structure - with the notable exception of Portugal (Andronikidou and Kovras 2012; Cavallaro and Kornetis 2019). On the other hand, Central and Eastern European countries exhibited lower mobilization over pandemic issues. More comparative research is needed to shed light on these regional effects.

**Figure 5: Count of protest events (by cultural vs. economic grievances) over time.**

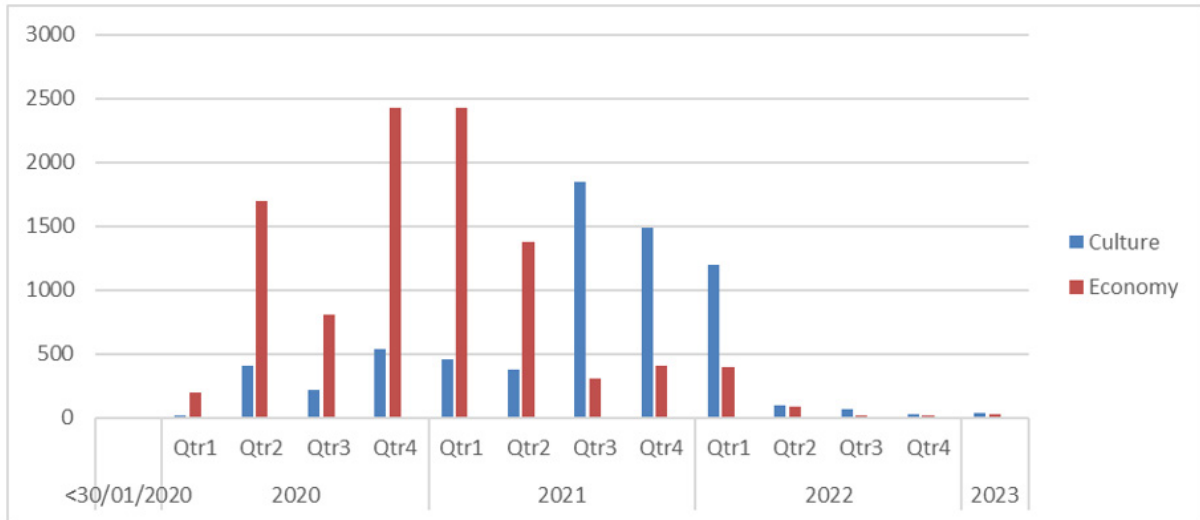


Figure 5 demonstrates whether and when protests reflected economic or cultural grievances based on the recoding of ACLED. In the first period of the pandemic, the effects of lockdowns and restrictions triggered mostly economic protests. This trend was sharply reversed in the second quarter of 2022, when the introduction of vaccination mandates and the emergence of several groups protesting for individual freedoms brought cultural concerns to the forefront of mobilization. Therefore, if one can infer the existence of a “rallying effect”, this may have been limited to culture-related protests - as economy actors protested in large numbers already in April 2020. Still, a regional breakdown reveals interesting nuances: The northern countries of Austria, Germany, and Denmark experienced consistently higher percentages of culture-based mobilization at the beginning of the pandemic, while Southern countries, including Italy, Portugal, and Spain (but also the northern countries France and Belgium), saw protests revolving consistently around economic issues and organized often at a national stage by mainstream left-wing actors, such as trade unions. Figure 6 depicts the difference across EU regions regarding whether they mobilized around economic and cultural issues over the entire three-year period covered by the data.

Figure 6: Count of protest events (by whether they took place in an EU region).

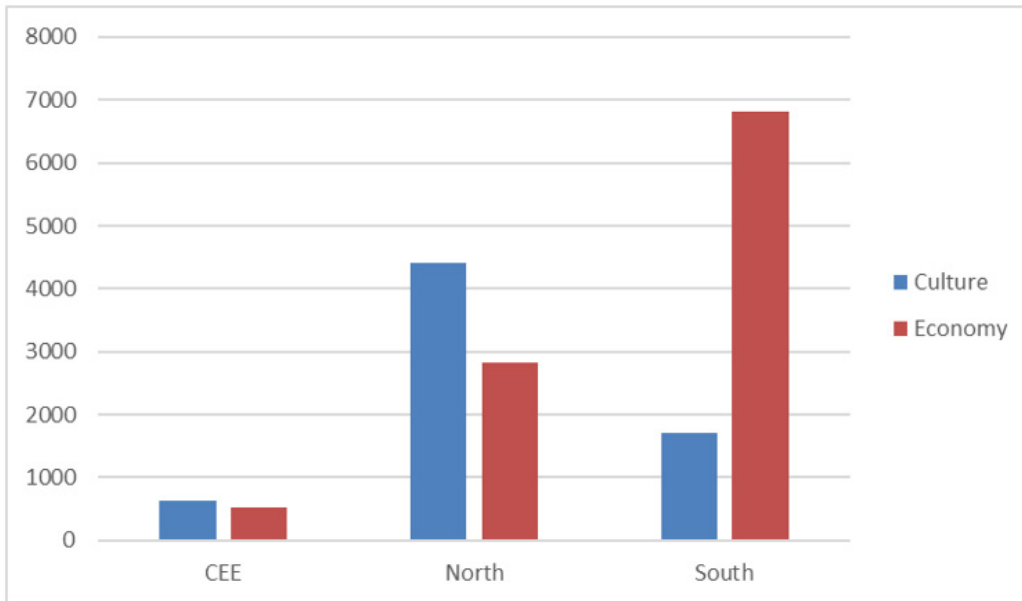
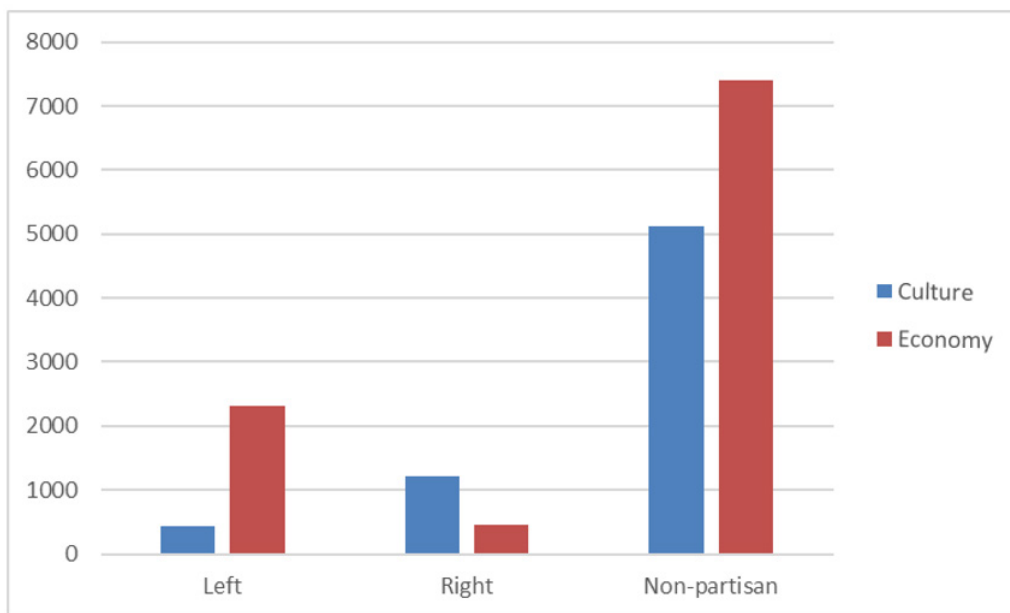


Figure 7: Count of protest events (by whether they were organized by mainstream left-wing or right-wing actors).



I also examined whether left-wing and right-wing actors mobilized behind economic and cultural grievances. Mainstream left-wing actors are found to have activated mostly economic divisions, while right-wing and radical-right actors activated cultural divisions, often contesting the scientific consensus and framing their protests as promoting individual freedoms (Figure 7). Nevertheless, it is notable that both economic and cultural protests were mostly organized by non-mainstream groups. It is certainly difficult, however, to measure to what extent mainstream actors supported, for instance, online initiatives that assumed country-wide proportions and led to nationwide street protests, such as the town-center “walks” in Germany. Still, it seems plausible that a large

share of protest during the pandemic years may have been organized by angered professionals, disillusioned high-school and university students, and groups of “concerned citizens” alongside but also beyond the organizational efforts of mainstream left-wing and right-wing actors.

**Table 1: Most important left-wing and right-wing actors behind COVID protests across the EU-27.**

COUNTRY	Left-Wing Actor	Right-Wing Actor
Austria	Vida (Trade Union)	IBOE: Identitarian Movement
Belgium	ABVV-FGTB (Trade Union)	Viruswaanzin
Bulgaria	[None Identified]	Revival (political party)
Croatia	[None Identified]	Homeland Movement
Cyprus	Os Dhame Movement; KTAMS: Cyprus Turkish Civil Servants Trade Union	Orthodox Christian Groups
Czech Republic	Million Moments for Democracy	[None Identified]
Denmark	DKP: Communist Party of Denmark	MiB: Men in Black
Estonia	[None Identified]	SATPK: Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition
Finland	SMAL - PAM (Trade Union)	Vapauden Puolesta (“For Freedom” Movement)
France	CGT (Trade Union)	Les Patriotes
Germany	Antifa	Querdenken
Greece	ADEDY: Civil Servants Confederation	Orthodox Christian Groups
Hungary	Democratic Coalition (political party)	MHM: Our Homeland Movement
Ireland	[None Identified]	Irish Freedom Party
Italy	CGIL (Trade Union)	Tricolor Masks
Latvia	[None Identified]	Law and Order; Latvia First (Political Parties)
Lithuania	[None Identified]	Lithuania Family Movement
Luxembourg	OGBL (Trade Union)	[None Identified]
Malta	[None Identified]	[None Identified]
Netherlands	FNV (Trade Union)	Viruswaarheid
Poland	KOD: Committee for the Defence of Democracy	STOP NOP: The National Association for Knowledge on Vaccines
Portugal	FESAHT: Federation of Agriculture, Food, Beverage, Hotel and Tourism Unions of Portugal (Trade Union)	[None Identified]



Romania	[None Identified]	AUR: Alliance for the Union of Romania (Political Party)
Slovakia	[None Identified]	People's Party our Slovakia
Slovenia	[None Identified]	Resni.ca
Spain	CCOO (Trade Union)	Vox (political party)
Sweden	Fridays for Future	Freedom Movement

Table 1 presents the most important left-wing and right-wing actors behind protests in all EU-27 countries and the share of protests they led as a percentage of overall mobilization in each country. Left-wing actors were predominantly trade unions, with the notable exception of Germany, where the cultural divide was much more prominent and where Antifa groups protested or counter-demonstrated considerably more often than, say, the DGB, the largest trade union in Europe. GAL actors were notably less active during the pandemic (with the exception of Fridays for Future in Sweden), although one cannot exclude the possibility that they transferred their protest activities online. In several CEE countries, it was difficult to identify umbrella left-wing organizations that organized protests (economic protests were spearheaded at the sectoral level), while right-wing groups or parties with explicitly nationalist messages were more prominent. In Poland and the Czech Republic, left-wing protests consisted of offshoots of pre-pandemic pro-democracy demonstrations against right-wing governments.

**Figure 8: Average of protest events per million inhabitants related to (a) country policy stringency (30-60) and (b) economic support policy (20-100) on average (the EU-27 excluding Cyprus).**

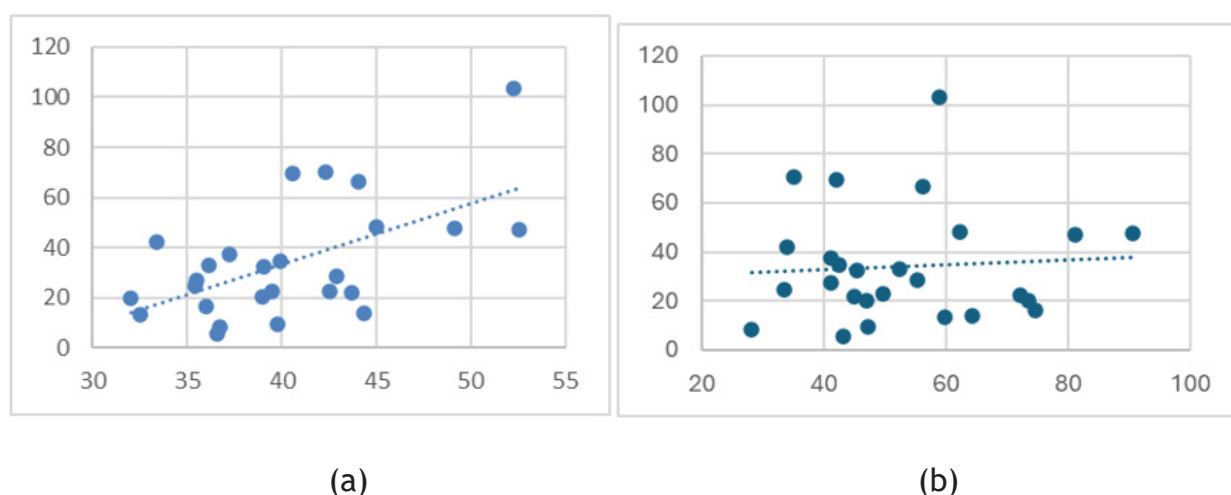


Figure 8 plots the relationship between the stringency of policies across the EU-27 and the incidence of overall protests in each country. In addition, I tested for possible correlation between average economic support policies and overall protests, as well as the corresponding relationship between vaccination mandates and overall protests. There

is a positive association between stringency in a country's COVID-19 policies and the number of protests (adjusted for country population), while no such relationship exists between protest activity and measures of economic support. Strict vaccination mandates especially increased the incidence of culture-related protest in France, Italy, and Germany (not shown here), the three countries with the most recorded protest events in the EU-27 space.

To conclude, recorded protest events related to the COVID-19 public health crisis demonstrate a “rallying effect” only with regard to culture-related protests, with important exceptions (Austria, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands). This finding challenges some existing empirical studies that have found such effects (Kritzinger et al. 2021; Schraff 2021). Economic protest became very pronounced in earlier stages of the pandemic, often spearheaded by traditional left-wing actors, such as trade unions (again, Germany was an important exception here). The cultural divide was activated in most other EU countries, such as France, Italy, and Belgium, in later stages, especially after the introduction of vaccination mandates/health passes. Right-wing parties and actors were often associated with this activation, reflecting perhaps a recasting of the GAL-TAN cleavage in the context of the pandemic (GAL actors, on the other hand, seemed to have largely stayed at home).

At the same time, one should note the prevalence of non-partisan/non-ideological actors, such as high-school students, healthcare professionals, or sectoral representatives, behind observed protest patterns. More often than not, these actors expressed economic concerns. This finding shows that actual mobilization and collective action during the COVID-19 crisis in the EU may have reflected ideological and cultural divides to a much lesser extent than studies based on individual-level surveys have suggested (Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Brouard et al. 2020). Some regional variation was also observed, with Southern European countries experiencing larger volumes of protest, in contrast with CEE countries, where right-wing activation of the cultural cleavage did not compensate for the lack of sustained overall protest. To delve deeper into these topics, the following section delves into more specific examples of actors, political divides, and repertoires present in COVID-19 protests in the EU-27 space.

# The characteristics of protest: Actors, nature of grievances, and mobilization patterns in the EU-27 space

## Political divides along cultural and economic dimensions

The recoding of the ACLED shows that the majority of protests categorized as culture-related among the EU-27 were centred around vaccination mandates and associated restrictions and somewhat less around the initial lockdowns. Steeped in fundamental science scepticism, cultural grievances were often fuelled by conspiracy theories, such as the rumour (widespread in a surprising number of EU countries early on) that the introduction of 5G networks was somehow associated with the virus, a conspiracy that led, for instance in the Netherlands, to extensive destruction of 5G towers; QAnon conspiracies; or the view (mostly in Eastern Europe) that Bill Gates and George Soros held responsibility for the crisis.

As already noted, Austria, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands stand out from a comparative perspective in that they experienced culture-related protests in the early months of the crisis, before the development of a vaccine development.<sup>4</sup> In the Netherlands, for example, cultural backlash with references to restrictions on individual freedoms took place in March and April 2020, as well as during the summer of 2020. In other words, while most other EU countries were experiencing mostly economic protest by health workers and affected labour groups, several local and national Dutch national movements (for instance, the *Viruswaarheid* and *Nederland in Opstand*) were lamenting the loss of individual freedoms and rose against presumed media misinformation.

Similarly, and already quite early, the group *Querdenken* (“Lateral Thinking”) organized protests on the cultural dimension across Germany, casting doubt on the necessity of protective measures, defending fundamental freedoms, and criticizing press coverage of the pandemic. The peculiar street-level *Kulturkampf* around the pandemic is illustrated by the fact that Germany was the only country among the EU-27 where medical students systematically organized protests to defend the vaccination campaigns. More generally, Germany recorded the most recorded counter-demonstrations by a wide margin, often pitting left-wing against right-wing groups and reflecting patterns of protest and counter-protest long present in that country.

In Austria, some of the largest marches on the cultural dimension in Europe took place in Vienna, coordinated by (sometimes overtly right-wing) groups such as the country’s *Querdenker* branch and the pre-pandemic movement *Identitarians*. In February 2022,

4. In Italy the radical-right group *Tricolor Masks* expressed concerns over fundamental freedoms very early, but tied those protests much more firmly to economic concerns.

COVID demonstrations in Austria saw protesters carrying Russian flags and advocating for government neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This convergence of advocacy for anti-vaccination and pro-Russian policy was observed after 2022 in a large number of East German municipalities as well.

In many CEE countries, as already noted, the cultural dimension and, in particular, vaccine scepticism were activated by right-wing actors, who were more often than elsewhere already established radical-right parties. These parties combined their expressed grievances with pre-pandemic demands, linking them with the broader GAL-TAN dimension. For instance, in Bulgaria, the nationalist party Revival organized the largest protests while tying the pandemic to conspiracy theories and anti-Roma sentiment, while in Estonia, the most intense demonstrations featured politicians associated with EKRE, a radical-right party, along with a right-wing NGO called the Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition. In 2022 a few COVID-related protests in Tallinn combined a condemnation of NATO membership and rising fuel prices with COVID scepticism.

In a similar vein, the Hungarian far-right MHM party became the leading force behind COVID protests in that country. Towards the end of the pandemic, this group also conflated coronavirus-related protests with a focus on geopolitics, advocating for ties with Russia and supporting the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In May 2021, in another example of protest-bridging on the cultural dimension observed in a CEE country, a 10,000-person rally against the legalization of same-sex civil partnerships and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Lithuania was merged with anti-COVID protests. This pattern was continued in large demonstrations in late 2021 when radical-right themes like opposition to LGBT rights and sexual education were combined with vaccine scepticism.

It should be noted that not all examples of mobilization on the cultural dimension stemmed from vaccine scepticism, virus deniers, or right-wing ideology. Left-wing protesters in a number of EU countries did not merely ask for financial support - they also expressed solidarity with scientists, doctors, and healthcare workers; demanded higher standards of protection, including in hospitals and schools; expedited vaccination campaigns; and ran counter-mobilization campaigns. However, the volume of left-wing cultural protests were much lower than left-wing protest motivated by economic grievances.

There were also a few cases of important left-wing actors (such as the French trade union CGT, covered in a later section) who eventually mobilized against the vaccination mandate. In another notable case, there was considerable vaccine scepticism among Cypriot leftist groups, for instance among those active in the *Os Dhame* movement, an umbrella social movement protesting against corruption, police violence, and lockdowns, which was by far the most successful protest movement in Cyprus during the pandemic period.

Moving on to mobilization of the economic dimension, the first period of the pandemic saw, as previously noted, a proliferation of economy-related protests across the continent. These were organized by representatives of the affected sectors, sometimes more centrally by left-wing labour/trade union groups. The sectoral organization of protests should not be underestimated. For example, as the lockdowns persisted, the entertainment and cultural sector in France proved particularly well-organized, with sustained and highly publicized occupations of theatres across many cities in the spring of 2021. This sector had one of the most successful campaigns anywhere in the EU-27 space. In Spain, protests were predominantly economic in nature throughout the pandemic and were diligently organized by the hospitality sector week after week. In a similar vein, in Bulgaria and Croatia, the hospitality sector proved very successful in mobilizing workers and owners far more than any other actors in the country. Interestingly, while in Southern Europe general and public-sector trade unions were at the forefront of collective action (see Table 1), in CEE, countries there was often no overarching left-wing political party or general trade union that organized protests on the economic dimension.

## **Beyond economy-culture: Existing political divides and cleavages activated during the pandemic**

Although economic and cultural concerns dominated the COVID protests, demonstrators also activated existing cleavages, political divides, and repertoires. The diversity and country specificity of grievances and protest forms during the pandemic are worth exploring, especially when they were bridged/fused with pandemic-related protest. For instance, in a number of CEE countries, anti-government protests regarding the management of the pandemic were dominated by pro-democracy/rule-of-law movements. In Slovenia, for instance, ongoing pro-democracy (and anti-corruption) protests incorporated grievances against the handling of the pandemic in the first half of 2020 with ease, leading to the country's largest sustained demonstrations during this period.

Perhaps the two most important examples of the activation of the democracy/rule-of-law divide happened in the Czech Republic and Poland. In the former, the social movement organization "Million Moments for Democracy" organized the largest country-wide events on a weekly basis; while they protested the measures against the coronavirus, their mobilization was primarily tied to criticism of Prime Minister Babis, corruption presumably endemic to his government, intervention in public-service media, and ties to Russia and China. Thus, older political divisions in the Czech Republic centred around democratization and the country's relationship with Russia were reframed through associations with the government's poor handling of the pandemic. The same pattern was observed in Poland, where the movement Committee for the Defence of Democracy combined criticism of incompetent pandemic management with condemnation of the

Law and Justice Party government. The pro-democracy movement, along with judges and lawyers, also protested against the imposition of elections via post as potentially undemocratic and unconstitutional.

In terms of transnational political divides, our coding shows that protests regarding COVID-19 remained largely national affairs. Despite the European Commission's role in coordinating with national governments on the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the implementation of COVID passes, protesters did not communicate grievances towards the EU but towards their national and sometimes regional governments. Nor were there any transnational protests in Brussels (with the exception of a truck-driver demonstration). There is thus very little evidence of "Europeanization from below" (della Porta and Caiani 2007) by protest movements during the COVID-19 crisis.

That said, international border closings were very controversial all over the continent, from Cyprus to Spain to Poland. Commuters, professional drivers, and border-region residents were at the forefront of such mobilizations. In a few cases, such as in Greece, migration-related restrictions were further (and violently) contested by displaced persons, including asylum seekers, who were forced to remain in retention centres at border zones, often in inhumane conditions. Interestingly, Portugal saw a lot of protests by Brazilians who demonstrated against the pandemic response of Jair Bolsonaro, the president of Brazil - another transnational political divide activated by the pandemic.

Some other preexisting, country-specific cleavages activated were ethno-religious in nature. Aside from the very sporadic and small-scale aggressions against Chinese nationals, such ethno-religious divides typically predated the pandemic. In Bulgaria, for instance, there were frequent protests outside Romani camps, which were widely considered to be coronavirus "hotspots", as was the case in Romania and Ireland (Irish Travellers). In Greece, the Romani themselves protested the marginalization of their communities. In Cyprus, the most intense protests at the initial stages of the pandemic took place over the closing of the crossings between the government-controlled Republic of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus, occupied by the Turkish Army. The long-standing ethnic cleavages delineating the frozen conflict on the island were thus reactivated in a way not seen in decades while simultaneously assuming an economic dimension for workers commuting between the two sides. Lastly, the regional political divide in Spain was relatively muted during this period; it was expressed mostly through the civil disobedience actions of the Catalan Committees for the Defence of the Republic, who protested the centralization of power and the presence of military personnel on the street to enforce the coronavirus measures. There were also some protests in support of a Basque separatist who had gone on a hunger strike in a Spanish prison to protest COVID-related restrictions.

Lastly, there were glimpses of the church-state cleavage expressed in anti-/pro-government protests in France and Croatia, where some Catholic groups organized protests against restrictions in Mass attendance or teamed up with parents and teachers contesting the testing and vaccination of children. However, the rarity of these occurrences and the absence of such protests in other Catholic countries like Poland or Italy points at a very limited salience of this cleavage. Still, in Greece, opposition to mask-wearing had strong religious undertones. More so than other countries, motley Greek Orthodox groups framed conspiracy theories about the virus and the vaccine as a threat to the nation and religious belief. A similar mobilization occurred in Cyprus, where Christian (Orthodox) groups were vocal about objecting to the vaccination mandate, with such responses often spearheaded by unvaccinated priests and defiant bishops.

## Repertoires and mobilizational dynamics

Similar to most examples of collective action, COVID protests did not occur in a mobilizational void, instead reflecting preexisting patterns and geographies of mobilization (and often violence). In Belgium, France, and Sweden, there were frequent and violent anti-police incidents in the suburbs, along with more conventional demonstrations highlighting the plight of urban youth in the social housing estates of big cities. Identity checks in the context of COVID-19 measures strained the already fractious relationship between urban youth and state authorities (Moutselos 2020). Among Dutch urban youth, the ban on New Year's Eve fireworks provoked riots and property destruction. Another wave of riots gripped Dutch cities in immigrant-heavy urban neighbourhoods after the announcement of a lockdown in January 2021. In France and Greece, high-school and university students were by far the most likely non-partisan group to protest across the country, reflecting decades-long trends in mobilization in the two countries. As already noted, one notable pattern (particularly in Austria, Germany, Ireland, and Greece) was the organization of counter-demonstrations. These often took the form of organized events against COVID-19 measures by the far right and were accompanied by left-wing counter-demonstrations, such as those held by anti-fascist groups. In Germany, for example, Antifa counter-demonstrations to Querdenken-, Pegida-, or AFD-organized protests were as frequent as conventional left-wing protests.

Still, innovation in the form of remoulding older repertoires into pandemic-specific ones did occur. Car rides, trucker convoys, and tractor demonstrations were mostly used in economy-related protest (see also della Porta 2024). Protesters did not refrain from the jocular: Fairground workers brought fairground cars out on the street to protest the closure of their facilities, and bicycle riders cycled with 1.5-metre hula-hoops to protest safe-distance measures. Some protesters organized “car and carnival rallies” to bypass restrictions and host carnival celebrations. Employees of sectors hit hardest

by restrictions and lockdowns ran funeral parades in several countries to mourn the passing of their businesses. In many cases, ignoring requirements to wear masks or keep distance became themselves acts of disobedience. In Germany, “Monday walks” of anti-COVID protestors and counter-walks from across the political spectrum were organized across a large number of cities every week for many months. In Spain, the well-known banging-pots demonstration was very popular amidst lockdowns, especially since it was a form of protest that could be employed in isolation on a balcony. The banging-pots protest was sometimes used as an instrument by right-wing movements, but most often it served as a modular repertoire to express dissatisfaction with government performance.

In late 2021 and 2022, some large demonstrations assumed transnational characteristics, and mobilization frames became global - often with the aid of social media. Truck drivers from Poland, Italy, and Germany drove their trucks to Brussels to protest “for freedom”, with references to the Canadian Freedom Convoy. Truck driver protests also appeared in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital; Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus; den Haag in the Netherlands; Tallinn, the capital of Estonia; and a number of French cities. A “March for Freedom” initiated in the early phases of the pandemic in the United States found imitators in Ireland; a “World Rally for Freedom” worldwide action was organized on 15 May 2021 and saw many join in Stockholm and Copenhagen, and another one in July mobilized hundreds in Thessaloniki, Greece. One last repertoire that was retransformed in the context of the pandemic and assumed transnational characteristics was that of the “yellow vests”. Aside from France, they appeared in protests in Belgium, Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, and the Netherlands (for the internal contradictions of the yellow-vests movement, see the next section).

## Ambivalent protest actors: Between economy and culture

During the COVID-19 crisis, the simultaneous activation of economic and cultural concerns by the same group, organization, or movement was observed infrequently. Actors usually mobilized on one or the other dimension, and economic protesters kept their efforts separate from coronavirus deniers and vaccine sceptics. However, there were a few exceptions that demonstrate the opportunities and challenges of frame-bridging that social movements faced during the pandemic.

Perhaps the most consistent attempt to mobilize on both cultural and economic dimensions was made by the yellow-vests movement (*gilets jaunes*), which was active in France primarily but enjoyed some transnational appeal in other European countries. The movement began as a loose, decentralized, anti-tax protest campaign that used, besides its eponymous vests, the occupation of roundabouts and street demonstrations



as their contentious repertoire (Fillieule and Dafflon 2022). During the early stages of the pandemic, the yellow vests shifted their protest focus to economic conditions in hospitals and the socioeconomic effects of the crisis. At the same time, their position on restrictions of freedom was ambivalent; eventually, their protest frames began to oscillate between economic grievances and encroachments on fundamental rights. In some French cities, the *gilets jaunes* even demonstrated side by side with Black Lives Matter protesters against police brutality. Already in late 2020, the movement became vocal against the green/health (vaccination) pass, and vaccine sceptics eventually responded to their calls to action. From the summer of 2021 onward, the French yellow vests mobilized protesters primarily on the cultural dimension, but they again retained elements of economic grievances that they linked to the pandemic, especially with regard to the cost of living. No other actor in the EU-27 space (perhaps with the exception of the Italian *Mascherine Tricolori*) was as successful in mobilizing both the economic and cultural dimensions as the yellow-vests movement.

The CGT, the second largest trade union and most active protest actor in France during the pandemic, also activated both economic and cultural dimensions and shifted its protest frames to accommodate this strategy. They thus tried to resolve the disagreement between official health policy and the preferences of some of its members (Thomas et al. 2024). In September 2020, the public-sector branch of the CGT diagnosed the problems caused by the pandemic as a class struggle wherein the state should redistribute the means to overcome the pandemic more widely or provide public health as a public good: “Those who make our country live on a daily basis, the first men and women of the task so often hailed at the peak of the epidemic, the young people today [are] sacrificed . . . [CGT] reaffirms that protective masks must be provided free of charge to the entire population. For employees, it is up to employers to take charge of individual and collective protection measures.”<sup>5</sup>

A few weeks later, they argued the solution (prognostic frame) to pandemic-related problems was a classically left-wing, economic recipe: “The current situation requires the massive and urgent presence of staff in schools, colleges, high schools. This is why we ask you to proceed immediately with the recruitment of staff.”<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, joining a number of other left-wing groups, they framed their protests and calls to strike as a safeguard of public goods against private economic profit: “This lockdown is still anchored to a strategy of economic continuity above all, which, this time, includes the opening of schools in health conditions that pose serious problems. This opening, in such deplorable conditions, has an economic function above all, while it is educational and health that must take precedence.”<sup>7</sup>

5. CGT, “Nous avons besoin d’un plan de rupture, pas d’un énième plan de relance!” 27 Aug. 2020.

6. CGT, FSU, Union Syndicale Solidaires, FIDL, MNL, UNEF, and UNL. “Face aux urgences, aux côtés des jeunes et des salarié.es!” 6 November 2020?

7. CGT, FO, FSU, SNALC, and Education Sud, “Preavis de Greve”, 20 Nov. 2020

However, by the end of 2020, their prognostic and diagnostic frames had already started shifting away from class struggle and towards the protection of individual and collective liberties. At the same press release as that cited above, the CGT-led trade unions argued, “If work continues, the real possibility of defending oneself through unions, the freedom to demonstrate, to assemble, to protest must also be guaranteed to all workers, and those who express their opinions! . . . in the wake of the reintroduction of the state of emergency which could be used to detract from individual and collective rights and freedoms, we are ‘accustoming’ the population to a repressive response as being within the realm of normality.”<sup>8</sup>

This eventually paved the way to framing vaccination as a choice and vaccination mandates as repressive instruments. Indeed, the CGT opposed two government measures passed in the summer of 2021: the introduction of the “health pass”, a proof of vaccination which provided access to public places and large gatherings, and the obligation of medical staff to get vaccinated: “While the CGT reaffirms its position on the need for vaccination to effectively combat the pandemic, it opposes its obligation, preferring the path of conviction. We denounce the hasty method and the serious consequences that such a text could have on the republican pact, fuelling a divide between citizens holding a pass and the others.”<sup>9</sup> By December 2021, they had even begun using language typically recorded in right-wing, culture-oriented protests: “Furthermore, beyond the fact that such measures are liberticidal, obligation and constraint can be counterproductive, particularly in professional sectors already under tension.”<sup>10</sup>

Another group which activated both economic and cultural dimensions were high-school and university students. Students were actually one of the most active protest actors in this period, especially in Southern Europe, but this population has remained relatively underexplored in the literature on COVID protests. For instance, in France, Greece, and Italy, students initiated more than 5 per cent of all protest events. They sometimes lamented distance learning and poor school conditions, and in other cases, they castigated police repression and vaccination mandates. This led to within-group tensions, for instance among the highly active Greek high-school students: Some were in favour of further measures and protocols, while others were vehemently against police intervention and further restrictions such as mask wearing. In the latter case, several high-school sit-ins were organized across the country. The radical aversion to the measures was a peculiar characteristic of Greek student movements, but it also extended to leftist university student groups, including radical anarchists - comparable to Cyprus’ *Os Dhame*. This phenomenon explains the larger share of culture-related protests in Greece during the first year of the pandemic (2020) compared to other EU countries.

8. Ibid.

9. CGT, “Vaccin obligatoire et extension du passe sanitaire : projet de loi à hauts risques”, 23 July 2021.

10. CGT Fonction Publique, Stop au Pass Sanitaire et / ou Vaccinal!” 21 Dec. 2021.

It is worth looking into the statements of high-school and university student groups in order to highlight challenges in frame-shifting and frame-bridging across different conflict dimensions of the pandemic and with pre-pandemic issues. To achieve this, I have selected cases of student mobilization from Greece and Cyprus, as these countries saw comparatively more of this kind of mobilization - an unsurprising finding given pre-pandemic collective action in the two countries (Malamidis 2020; Moutselos 2024).

Much like mainstream left-wing actors, high-school students in Greece and Cyprus diagnosed the lack of resources and hirings as the main problem with poor pandemic management. For example, in a national call to protest, the Cypriot Coordinating Committee of High School Students noted, “Unfortunately, they do not want to invest in education, invest in more humane classrooms, invest in upgrading buildings, invest in more teachers, invest in technological upgrading.”<sup>11</sup> This group’s Greek counterpart added specific, mostly material, demands, in preparation of nationwide protests: “No vacancies for teachers; New hirings to fill all vacancies; Responsible information from the state . . . to our students and parents about vaccination. Recruitment of school doctors . . . Free and frequent rapid tests in schools for all students without discrimination, not just self-tests.”<sup>12</sup>

Notably, the same student committee attempted to bridge this diagnosis with the pre-pandemic frame of protection from and resistance to police repression: “To the Minister of Education: Let us remind you that last year you brought us prosecutors, police, you threw chemicals at us, you arrested students, and you still didn’t stop us.”<sup>13</sup>

Such frame-bridging with pre-pandemic concerns about police repression was taken up by Greek university students. Some of the most radicalized factions organized sit-ins of the deans’ offices in the country’s largest universities and bridged repression and economy frames while reserving a place in their diagnosis for distance learning:

Naturally, the state’s recipe for managing the pandemic is to hire cops, equip security forces and implement disciplinary measures (banning movement, etc.), at the same time that screening of Covid patients for a place in the ICU is taking place, industrial production continues as normal and public transport remains suffocatingly full... Obviously, this situation is also an ideal condition for the further sterilization of academic spaces and the withering away of the movements associated with them. With the implementation of the distance learning model since the beginning of the year, the way is opened for the “Europeanization” of universities, which will make them a safe investment.<sup>14</sup>

11. Pagkypria Sintonistiki Epitropi Mathiton - PSEM (*Pancyriot Coordinating Committee of High-School Students*), “Oloi stin Apori apo ta Mathimata”, 24 Sep. 2020.

12. Sintonistiki Epitropi Mathiton Athinas (*Coordinating Committee of High School Students of Athens*), “Deftera 11 Oktovri oloi stous dromous!” 28 Sep. 2021

13. Ibid.

14. Katalipsies Pritanias EMP (*Organizers of the sit-in at the National Polytechnic Rectorship*), “Anak-

Similarly, student unions at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki linked the COVID protests to one of the most contentious issues of campus protests before the pandemic, namely the “university asylum”, a law which limited the right of the police to enter university campus areas:

Repression is everywhere. In the midst of a pandemic, the state does not take any health action for the common interest, but treats it as an opportunity to respond to all open issues with repression. “Management” measures such as lockdown, ban on gatherings/circulation, are not health-related but exist to suppress any form of resistance and establish laws such as the above. It has been announced by Chrysochoidis [The Minister of Citizen Protection] that on 15/4 the first police force will invade the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The university area that the state will attack is a site of occupations and centres of struggle.<sup>15</sup>

Student groups in Cyprus protested against the vaccination mandate imposed by public university authorities. In their justification, they did not criticize the repressiveness of the measure (these were less-radical groups than those in Greece) but rather used frames comparable to those employed by the French CGT trade unionists, insisting the mandatory health pass was discriminatory and violated their fundamental rights: “We would like to express our disappointment regarding today’s decision by the Senate to hold classes only for vaccinated students and those who have been ill in the last 6 months, essentially excluding the remaining students without giving them an alternative solution. We strongly disagree with the decision that has been made, since it will deprive our fellow students of the right to education, a right that is equally important as that of health.”<sup>16</sup>

The role of the government, these groups contended, is to use state resources to create “diagnostic testing stations within Universities” and “conduct a comprehensive awareness campaign from vaccinations”. Meanwhile, if the government measures took effect, the personal responsibility of those who were unvaccinated would be reduced to providing the results of a rapid test.<sup>17</sup>

The activation of both economic and cultural arguments to justify pandemic protests and the corresponding framing choices by the aforementioned groups were clear attempts to satisfy different preferences among their members and supporters. They also aimed to motivate protesters through the use of pre-pandemic frames, repertoires, and salient divides, even if they overlapped imperfectly with conflicts rooted in pandemic

inosi Katalipsis Pritanias EMP”, 12 Oct. 2021.

15. Fititiki Syllogi Aristoteleiou Panepistimiou (*Student Organizations of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*), “Nea Katalipsi tis Pritanias apo tous Fitites”, 13 Apr. 2021.

16. Fititiki Parataksi Kyprion Protoporia (*Cypriot Student Wing - Protoporia*), “Episimi Topothesisi tis Parataksis, Apofasi Sygklitou 24/8/2021”, 25 Aug. 2021.

17. Proodeftiki Kinisi Fititon (*Progressive Student Movement*), “Na epistrepsoun me Asfalia sta Scholia, oloi oi foitites!” 03 Aug. 2021.

conditions. Yet all such groups had to confront the lack of a coherent critique of technocratic/scientific knowledge. Without this critique, simultaneous calls for respecting individual liberties, controlling repression, and providing more resources to schools, universities, and professional sectors were superseded by the priority of public health as the most important public good for the “people”. In this respect, left-wing groups that accepted the scientific/technocratic consensus but demanded economic protections and right-wing groups that contested this consensus altogether provided more coherent frames of mobilization.

## Conclusion and suggestions for further research

The geographic analysis of COVID-19 protests in the EU-27 space in the present paper shows that pandemic-related mobilization rested upon preexisting dimensions of political conflict (for instance, left-right divides) and that only one side of the GAL-TAN cleavage (the latter) took their grievances to the street. This analysis has also yielded some interesting regional effects, such as the early cultural conflict over freedom and the virus in Germany and the Netherlands, the lack of organized trade-union protest in many Eastern European countries, and the particularly high incidence of protest (very often about, but not limited to, economic support) in Southern Europe (for a similar analysis at a global level, see Hellmeier 2023). These regional effects merit further research beyond existing studies of Western European countries (see Borbath et al. 2021). Further research is also needed to illuminate the mechanisms behind the comparatively larger amount of protesting faced by centrist, technocratic, and coalition governments.

I also find that a “rallying effect” was observed only, if at all, for protest mobilization around cultural grievances, while economic protests (often spearheaded by left-wing actors) were already occurring at the beginning of the pandemic - a finding which shows that protest patterns did not align with individual-level opinions. More generally, the present paper relies on an analytical distinction between economy and culture, as it considers this distinction more pertinent as a basis of coding of contentious episodes and collective action than other ideological or psychological indicators. There is, to be sure, an analytical overlap between what I term “culture” here and what others have termed “ideology” (Rovny et al. 2022). Still, a set of fundamental beliefs about the nature of science and the trade-off between individual freedom and science-based restrictions may only loosely be termed ideology.

In addition, although the last section of the paper commented on the coexistence of economic and cultural grievances in some movements, the coding of protest events demonstrated that this overlap was relatively rare. Why do we observe this pattern? In other words, why did catch-all, umbrella movements *not* encompass both types of

demands? The answer may lie in the efficiency gains for social movement organizations in activating individual dimensions of political competition, especially when this activation is accompanied by frame-bridging with preexisting issues (della Porta and Lavizzari 2024). Last but not least, although this paper has aimed to provide a concise analytical framework in explaining COVID-19 protests, what is also notable is the diversity of cleavages, mobilization framings, and repertoires activated in the EU-27 space. These dynamics often reflected pre-pandemic protest patterns and continuities that merit further research.

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## Appendix

The descriptions of 23,207 protest events across the EU-27 from the ACLED were read and hand-coded by the author. The codebook included the following variables:

### Grievances (Economic/Cultural/Blank)

**Economic Grievances:** Grievances were identified as economic if they were associated with classic labour demands, such as workers' rights, working conditions, wages, and other general or sector-specific demands (protests in prisons were also included). If the actor is traditionally associated with promotion of aforementioned demands (major labour or trade unions), such protest was also coded as economic. In addition, we filed under this category protests that were explicitly organized by professional groups directly affected by the pandemic, such as hotel and restaurant owners/workers, artists, or tourism operators. These are typically sectors with high "affectedness" in a public-health crisis (Caramani et al. 2021) who protested for various forms of economic support.

Prison protests were included in this category because prisoners typically protested either against the sanitary conditions of prisons or restrictions imposed on their mobility and contacts, similar to the grievances expressed by restaurant, healthcare, and factory workers.

Lastly, protests against the closure of borders were coded as economy related, as they disrupted international economic activity.

**Cultural Grievances:** Protest events were coded as being fuelled by cultural or ideological concerns according to whether they referred specifically to COVID-19 measures, such as lockdowns and other restrictions of movement, mask wearing, and vaccination mandates, in a critical way or were organized by ad hoc groups that condemned such policies but did not tie them primarily to economic grievances. Themes such as science/vaccine scepticism, low trust in government, and an emphasis on individual and basic/constitutional freedoms or civil rights were predominant motivations of protests in this category. An important distinction was made between protests of healthcare workers for pay or better working conditions - coded as economy-oriented - and protests against mandatory vaccination among healthcare workers - coded as culture-oriented.

**Coded as Neutral on the Economic-Cultural Divide (Blank):** Protest events that did not describe the goals and motivations of protesters and did not feature actors who regularly mobilized around a cultural/economic grievance were coded as neutral (left blank) on the economy-culture divide.

If a group adopted an explicitly cultural/economic grievance in one protest event but no information was provided about the group's grievances during another protest event,

then the latter protest event was coded in accordance with whether the group mobilized the economic/cultural dimension of COVID-19 grievances on multiple occasions. If a protest event featured both economic and cultural grievances, the second dimension was coded separately.

**Left-Right Protest (Left/Right):** Protest events were coded as left-wing if they were explicitly organized by labour unions and/or labour and left-wing parties already active and influential before the pandemic. We were careful not to include here specific sectoral grievances exclusively related to economic restrictions imposed in the course of the pandemic. In addition, protests organized by groups associated with the Green, Alternative, Libertarian end of the GAL-TAN dimension, such as anti-racist, pro-immigration, and environmentalist protests were coded as left-wing. Conversely, protests were coded as right-wing if they were explicitly organized by nativist/anti-immigrant groups or right-wing/radical-right parties that were either active before the pandemic or were formed during this period. In cases where the political orientation of protest groups was unclear, the secondary literature on a particular group was briefly reviewed to establish, in a reasonable way, the group's partisanship. Such cases include Italy's *Mascherine Tricolori* (coded as right-wing), the Czech Republic's *Million Moments for Democracy* (coded as left-wing), and the Cypriot *Os Dhame* (coded as left-wing).

In protest events where there was a counter-protest and the partisanship of the counter-protesters was established, a second actor was included for the same event.

**Government Partisanship (Left/Centre/Right):** We coded whether national government partisanship was left-wing (social-democratic, socialist, post-communist), centrist (liberal, centrist), or right-wing (conservative, Christian-democratic, nationalist) at the time of the protest event to check whether partisanship altered the political opportunity structure for specific protest groups (Rohlingen et al. 2024). The coding was based on the Partisan Composition of Governments Database (Schmidt et al. 2021) and the European political party membership of the party with the leading share of cabinet seats.

Left: Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Sweden; Centre: Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands; Right: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia. Germany was coded as having a centrist government because it featured a grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats.

**Government Policies (0-3):** To operationalize government policies over time, Oxford University's COVID-19 government response tracker was employed (Hale et al. 2021). The tracker includes indicators for A) containment and closure policies, B) economic policies, C) health system policies, and D) vaccination policies. To simplify the analysis,

we made use of the aggregate indices for stringency, economic support, and a vaccination mandate, assumed to have a direct effect on grievances fuelling protest and to activate salient political divides.

Data was accessed in June 2023 and is available at <https://github.com/OxCGRT/co-vid-policy-dataset/tree/main/data>.

**Region (North/South/CEE):** North: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden. South: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain. CEE: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.