



Vaasan yliopisto  
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**Crisis Management and the Development of  
Governance in the European Union: A Nordic  
Perspective**

[Subject]

School of Management  
Bachelor's Thesis in Public Management  
Bachelor's Programme in Administrative Sciences

Vaasa 2026

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**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****School of Management**

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<b>Title of Thesis:</b>	Crisis Management and the Development of Governance in the European Union: A Nordic Perspective : [Subject]		
<b>Degree:</b>	Bachelor of Administrative Sciences		
<b>Degree Programme:</b>	Public Management		
<b>Supervisor:</b>	Petra-Melisa Benschis		
<b>Year:</b>	2026	<b>Pages:</b>	<b>32</b>

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**ABSTRACT:**

COVID-19-pandemia muodostui merkittäväksi rajat ylittäväksi kriisiksi, joka haastoi Euroopan unionin hallinnan ja kriisinhallinnan rakenteita ennennäkemättömällä tavalla. Pandemia vaikutti samanaikaisesti kaikkiin Euroopan unionin jäsenvaltioihin ja loi painetta tehokkaammalle koordinoinnille, tiedonvaihdolle sekä yhteistyölle eri hallinnan tasojen välillä. Vaikka terveyspolitiikka kuuluu pääosin jäsenvaltioiden toimivaltaan, pandemia osoitti, että rajat ylittävien kriisien hallinta edellyttää myös EU-tason koordinointia ja institutionaalista yhteistyötä. Kriisi nosti samalla esiin kysymyksiä Euroopan unionin monitasohallinnan toimivuudesta, toimivallan jakautumisesta sekä ylikansallisen koordinoinnin merkityksestä kriisitilanteissa. Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella, miten COVID-19-kriisi vaikutti hallinnan ja kriisinhallinnan kehitykseen Euroopan unionissa sekä miten näitä muutoksia tulkittiin ja toimeenpantiin pohjoismaisessa kontekstissa, erityisesti Suomessa. Tutkimuksessa selvitetään, millaisia muutoksia kriisi aiheutti EU-tason koordinoinnissa, toimivallan jakautumisessa ja kriisinhallintainstrumenteissa sekä miten EU-tason kriisinhallinnan kehitys näkyi kansallisella tasolla. Tutkimuksen keskeinen tutkimuskysymys koskee sitä, miten COVID-19-kriisi muokkasi Euroopan unionin hallintaa ja kriisinhallintaa sekä miten nämä muutokset näkyivät pohjoismaisessa hallintokontekstissa. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys perustuu monitasohallinnan sekä rajat ylittävien kriisien hallinnan käsitteisiin. Tutkimuksessa hallintaa tarkastellaan erityisesti koordinoinnin, toimivallan ja kriisinhallintamekanismien näkökulmasta. Keskeisiä käsitteitä ovat monitasohallinta, kriisinhallinta, hallinnan kehitys sekä rajat ylittävät kriisit. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään hallintotieteellistä tutkimuskirjallisuutta, joka käsittelee Euroopan unionin hallintaa, kriisijohtamista sekä institutionaalista koordinointia kriisitilanteissa. Tutkimus on laadullinen kirjallisuuskatsaus, jossa analysoidaan Euroopan unionin kriisinhallintaa ja hallinnan kehitystä COVID-19-pandemian aikana. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu tieteellisistä artikkeleista, viranomaislähteistä sekä Euroopan unionin ja Suomen virallisista julkaisuista. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan Suomea tapausesimerkinä osana pohjoismaista hallintokontekstia. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että pandemia ei muuttanut Euroopan unionin muodollista institutionaalista rakennetta perustavanlaatuisesti, mutta kriisi vahvisti EU-tason koordinoinnin käytännön merkitystä. Hallinnan muutokset näkyivät erityisesti tiedonvaihdon, yhteistyön ja koordinointimekanismien vahvistumisena. Tutkimus osoittaa myös, että kansalliset hallintoperinteet säilyivät tärkeinä pandemian aikana, vaikka jäsenvaltiot toimivat samanaikaisesti osana laajempaa eurooppalaista kriisinhallintaympäristöä. Suomen tapaus havainnollistaa, kuinka kansallinen päätöksenteko ja EU-tason koordinointi toimivat rinnakkain Euroopan unionin monitasohallinnan järjestelmässä.

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**KEYWORDS:** European Union governance, Crisis management, COVID-19 pandemic, Transboundary crises, Nordic governance, Policy coordination

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## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted one of the most major transboundary crises in the history of the European Union. Unlike earlier crises such as the Eurozone debt crisis or the migration crisis, COVID-19 affected all Member States simultaneously and placed pressure on public health systems, economic stability, political legitimacy, and administrative capacity. According to Eurostat (2021), real GDP in the EU-27 declined by approximately 5.6% in 2020 due to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis rapidly moved beyond the health sector and became a broader governance challenge that required coordination between different levels of authority, institutions, and policy sectors. Although health policy remains primarily within national competence under EU treaties, the pandemic still led to an increased level of coordination and policy action at the EU level.

The pandemic also challenged existing assumptions about the division of responsibilities between the European Union and its Member States (Boin & McConnell, 2008). During the first stages of the crisis, national governments mainly acted independently by introducing border controls, emergency legislation, and public health restrictions according to domestic circumstances (Ansell et al., 2010). However, as the crisis deepened, it became increasingly evident that a fragmented response was insufficient in managing a crisis that crossed national borders so rapidly. This created pressure for stronger coordination mechanisms and more common EU-level instruments, particularly in areas such as vaccine procurement, economic recovery, information sharing, and crisis communication (European Commission, n.d).

From a governance perspective, the COVID-19 crisis can be understood as a transboundary crisis. According to Boin and 't Hart (2003), transboundary crises are characterised by their ability to cross geographical, institutional, and policy boundaries, making them difficult to manage through traditional administrative structures alone. In the context of the European Union, this became particularly visible because the EU governance system is based on multi-level governance, where responsibilities are

divided between supranational institutions and national governments (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008). As a result, the pandemic not only tested public health systems but also the institutional capacity of the EU itself. The crisis also reopened broader discussions concerning European integration and the future role of the European Union in crisis governance (Ferrera et al., 2021). While the EU initially received criticism for a slow and fragmented response during the early stages of the pandemic, new forms of cooperation gradually emerged throughout the crisis. Joint vaccine procurement, economic recovery instruments, and increased coordination between Member States demonstrated that the EU was capable of adapting its governance practices under exceptional circumstances (European Commission, n.d). In this sense, the pandemic may be interpreted not only as a public health emergency, but also as a catalyst for governance change within the European Union.

Against this background, his thesis examines how the COVID-19 crisis reshaped governance and crisis management in the European Union and how these developments were interpreted in a Nordic context, particularly in Finland. The Nordic countries provide a particularly relevant context for this analysis due to their relatively high levels of institutional trust, strong welfare state structures, and extensive public sectors. These features influenced both the implementation of crisis measures and public responses to them during the pandemic. Finland is examined more closely as a case study because it represents a Nordic administrative system while also being strongly integrated into EU governance structures.

Based on these observations, the study addresses the following main research question: How did the COVID-19 crisis reshape governance and crisis management in the European Union, and how were these changes interpreted and implemented in a Nordic context? Two sub-questions guide the analysis. First, what types of governance change emerged at the EU level during and after the COVID-19 crisis in terms of authority, coordination, and crisis management instruments? Second, how were EU-level crisis governance developments received, adapted, or resisted in Nordic countries, particularly in Finland?

In this study, governance development refers to changes in coordination structures, institutional roles, and the scope of EU-level authority within the multi-level governance system. Crisis management refers to the institutional arrangements, decision-making processes, legal mechanisms, and coordination practices mobilised in response to cross-border crises. Multi-level governance, in turn, refers to the distribution of authority between supranational, national, and regional actors within the European Union (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008). These concepts form the theoretical foundation of the analysis.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, the conceptual framework on EU governance and transboundary crisis management is introduced. Second, governance changes at the EU level during COVID-19 are analysed, with particular attention given to coordination mechanisms, authority shifts, and new policy instruments. Third, the Nordic administrative context and Finland's response are examined in order to analyse how EU-level governance developments were interpreted and implemented at the national level. Finally, the broader implications for EU multi-level governance and future crisis management are discussed.

## **2 EU Governance and Crisis Management: Conceptual Framework**

### **2.1 Governance and Multi-Level Governance in the EU**

Governance in the European Union differs from traditional state-centred models of decision-making. Instead of relying solely on hierarchical authority, EU policymaking is characterised by complex coordination between different institutions and levels of government. These governance arrangements include both formal legal authority and more indirect forms of coordination and influence between supranational institutions and member states (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008). As a result, governance within the EU is often based on negotiation, cooperation, and shared responsibilities rather than purely centralised control.

The concept of multi-level governance has become particularly important in understanding how the European Union functions politically and institutionally. Héritier & Lehmkuhl (2008), describe the EU as a system in which authority is distributed across supranational, national, and sometimes regional levels, which creates a governance structure where decision-making processes are shared between multiple actors. This structure allows flexibility and cooperation, but it may also create tensions between national sovereignty and collective European action, especially during crisis situations.

One important concept for understanding governance in such systems is the idea of the “shadow of hierarchy.” According to Héritier and Lehmkuhl (2008), governance systems may rely on flexible coordination mechanisms such as networks, negotiations, and voluntary cooperation, but these mechanisms often operate under the implicit authority of hierarchical structures. In the EU context, this means that while member states retain significant decision-making power, EU institutions can still influence policy coordination through regulatory frameworks, monitoring mechanisms, recommendations, and policy

guidance. Even in situations where the EU lacks direct legal authority, supranational institutions may shape policy outcomes indirectly.

This combination of hierarchical and non-hierarchical governance mechanisms has become particularly important in policy areas where responsibilities are shared between the EU and its member states. Public health policy is one such field, where national governments retain primary authority, yet EU institutions provide coordination, information-sharing, and policy guidance across member states. In practice, this means that governance in the EU often involves balancing national autonomy with the need for coordinated responses to cross-border challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these tensions very clearly, as member states initially prioritised national responses while simultaneously depending on European coordination mechanisms (Ansell et al., 2010).

The governance structure of the EU therefore relies heavily on cooperation and coordination between different levels of government. Under stable conditions, this structure may function relatively effectively through gradual negotiation and institutional cooperation. However, crises place additional pressure on governance systems because they often require rapid decision-making, political legitimacy, and coordinated action across institutional boundaries (Boin & 't Hart, 2003). This makes governance during crises more complex than under normal circumstances. Understanding how governance operates under such conditions is therefore central to analysing crisis management in the European Union.

## **2.2 Crisis Management and Transboundary Crises**

Crisis management has become an increasingly important topic in public administration research, particularly in the context of complex and interconnected societies (Ansell et al., 2010). Modern crises often cross political, institutional, and geographical boundaries, which makes them difficult to address through traditional governance

structures alone. These types of crises are commonly referred to as transboundary crises.

Transboundary crises are characterised by their ability to spread rapidly across sectors, administrative levels, and national borders. Because of this complexity, they often challenge established governance systems and require cooperation between multiple actors and institutions. According to Ansell, Boin and Keller (2010), transboundary crises typically involve high levels of uncertainty and require flexible governance arrangements that allow institutions to coordinate responses effectively across boundaries. In many cases, no single institution possesses sufficient authority or resources to manage the crisis independently.

The growing interconnectedness of modern societies has increased the likelihood of crises developing beyond the control of individual states (Ansell et al., 2010). Economic integration, international mobility, digital communication, and interconnected supply chains mean that crises can escalate rapidly and affect multiple sectors simultaneously. This has made crisis management increasingly dependent on coordination between governments, international organisations, and specialised agencies. Within the European Union, this creates additional challenges because governance responsibilities are already divided across multiple institutional levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates many of the characteristics associated with transboundary crises. The rapid spread of the virus affected countries simultaneously and required governments to respond not only to public health challenges but also to broader social, political, and economic consequences. The pandemic disrupted labour markets, healthcare systems, education, and cross-border mobility across Europe. Such crises create pressure for coordination between national governments and supranational organisations because isolated national responses may become insufficient when managing problems that transcend borders.

Research on crisis leadership has also highlighted the importance of effective decision-making and communication during crisis situations (Boin & 't Hart, 2003). Public leaders

must often make decisions under conditions of uncertainty while maintaining public trust and institutional legitimacy. Boin and 't Hart (2003) emphasise that crisis leadership involves not only managing immediate threats but also framing the crisis politically and coordinating responses across institutional structures. In this sense, crisis management is not purely technical or administrative, but also strongly political.

Furthermore, crises often create opportunities for political actors to introduce new policy initiatives or institutional reforms. Boin and McConnell (2008) argue that crises can become politically significant because they allow governments and institutions to promote policy changes that might otherwise face resistance under normal political circumstances. In governance systems such as the EU, crises may therefore contribute to the development of new coordination mechanisms, policy instruments, or institutional roles. The COVID-19 pandemic can partly be interpreted through this perspective, as the crisis accelerated new forms of EU-level coordination and policy cooperation.

Understanding the dynamics of transboundary crises is therefore essential for analysing how governance systems adapt during crisis situations. In the case of the European Union, crises may reveal both the limitations and the adaptive capacity of existing governance arrangements. The pandemic demonstrated that while the EU initially faced coordination difficulties, the crisis also encouraged deeper cooperation and institutional adaptation over time.

### **2.3 Analytical Framework**

This study analyses how the COVID-19 crisis influenced governance developments in the European Union, with particular attention to crisis management and coordination between different levels of government. The analytical framework builds on the concepts of governance coordination and transboundary crisis management discussed above. Rather than examining the pandemic only as a public health crisis, the study

approaches it as a broader governance challenge that affected institutional coordination, authority structures, and policy implementation within the EU.

The framework focuses on three main analytical dimensions: authority, coordination, and policy response. These dimensions were selected because they reflect key elements of governance during transboundary crises and make it possible to analyse both supranational and national responses to the pandemic (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008; Ansell et al., 2010).

The first dimension, authority, refers to the distribution of decision-making power between EU institutions and national governments (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008). While public health policy remains largely within the competence of member states, EU institutions nevertheless play an important role in coordinating responses and providing information to support decision-making. During crises, the balance between national authority and supranational coordination may shift as governments seek more coordinated responses to shared challenges. This dimension therefore focuses on whether the pandemic strengthened the coordinating role of EU institutions or reinforced national decision-making authority.

The second dimension, coordination, examines how different actors cooperate during crisis situations. Effective crisis management requires communication and cooperation between national governments, EU institutions, public health authorities, and other administrative actors. Coordination is particularly important in transboundary crises because fragmented responses may weaken the effectiveness of crisis management (Ansell et al., 2010). For example, EU-level data collection and monitoring mechanisms were used extensively to track the spread of COVID-19 and support coordination between member states (ECDC, 2020). This demonstrates how information sharing mechanisms became an important part of governance during the pandemic.

The third dimension, policy response, focuses on the concrete measures adopted during the crisis. These responses include emergency legislation, administrative measures, restrictions, public health interventions, and economic support mechanisms

implemented at both national and supranational levels (Boin & McConnell, 2008). For instance, the Finnish government used powers under the Emergency Powers Act during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis in order to manage the public health situation and ensure the functioning of essential services (Finnish Government, 2020). Such measures illustrate how national governments adapted their governance mechanisms in response to exceptional circumstances.

By analysing authority, coordination, and policy responses together, this study aims to identify how governance structures adapted during the COVID-19 crisis. The framework will be applied in the following chapters to examine governance developments at the EU level and to analyse how these developments were interpreted and implemented in the Nordic context, particularly in Finland.

### **3 Crisis and Governance Change at the EU Level**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management in the European Union relied primarily on coordination between Member States and existing governance mechanisms. The pandemic challenged these arrangements by creating simultaneous pressures across all Member States and policy sectors, highlighting the need for stronger EU-level coordination and crisis management capacity.

Crises such as COVID-19 often cross national, political and institutional boundaries and therefore require responses that involve multiple actors and levels of governance (Ansell et al., 2010). In situations like this, existing governance arrangements are often tested and may need to adapt in order to manage complex and rapidly evolving challenges.

Within the EU, the pandemic highlighted both the limits and the possibilities of multi-level governance. Member States remained responsible for most public health measures, such as lockdowns, testing strategies and restrictions on movement. At the same time, EU institutions played an important role in facilitating coordination and sharing information between countries. For example, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control collected and distributed data on infection rates and other epidemiological developments across Member States, helping governments monitor the situation and compare developments across the Union (ECDC, 2020).

This chapter examines how crisis governance developed at the EU level during the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section first outlines the main EU crisis response mechanisms that were used during the pandemic. After that, the chapter analyses governance change in terms of coordination, authority and crisis management instruments.

### **3.1 EU Crisis Response Mechanisms during COVID-19**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union relied on several mechanisms to support coordination between Member States and to monitor the development of the crisis. Although the EU has limited formal competence in public health policy, existing institutions and coordination structures were nevertheless used extensively to facilitate cooperation and information exchange between countries (ECDC, 2020). This demonstrates how governance within the EU can operate through coordination and administrative cooperation even when formal authority remains limited (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008).

One important element of the EU response was the role of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The agency provided epidemiological data, risk assessments, and comparative indicators that allowed Member States and EU institutions to follow the development of the pandemic across Europe. This information played an important role in supporting policy coordination and improving situational awareness at the EU level (ECDC, 2020). Access to comparable data became particularly important because Member States were attempting to respond to rapidly changing conditions while facing considerable uncertainty regarding the spread and severity of the virus (Ansell et al., 2010).

In addition to information-sharing, the EU also provided a broader framework for cooperation between national governments. Crises that cross national borders often require collective responses and institutional coordination beyond the national level (Ansell et al., 2010). In this context, EU institutions acted primarily as facilitators of cooperation rather than as central decision-makers. Member States remained responsible for implementing concrete public health measures, but EU-level coordination nevertheless helped align responses and improve communication between governments (Ferrera et al., 2021).

The pandemic also demonstrated how crises can create pressure for institutional adaptation. During exceptional situations, governments and institutions often seek new

ways to coordinate responses and manage uncertainty more effectively. As Boin and McConnell (2008) argue, crises may create opportunities for policy development and institutional change because extraordinary circumstances can increase political willingness for new forms of cooperation. In the EU context, the COVID-19 crisis therefore encouraged closer cooperation between Member States and strengthened the coordinating role of EU institutions in certain areas.

At the same time, the pandemic exposed some weaknesses within the EU governance system. During the early stages of the crisis, Member States often prioritised national interests and introduced different restrictions independently. This occasionally created fragmented responses across the Union, particularly regarding border restrictions and movement controls. For example, several Member States introduced different travel restrictions and border control measures during spring 2020, creating challenges for the free movement of people within the EU. However, as the crisis continued, coordination between Member States gradually increased, suggesting that governance systems within the EU were capable of adapting over time (Ferrera et al., 2021).

Overall, the EU response to the pandemic illustrates how governance mechanisms within the Union can be mobilised during transboundary crises. Even in policy areas where competence primarily remains at the national level, EU institutions can contribute to crisis management by facilitating coordination, providing information, and supporting collective responses. These developments provide an important basis for analysing broader governance change within the EU during the COVID-19 crisis.

### **3.2 Governance Change: Coordination, Authority, and Instruments**

The COVID-19 crisis also revealed important changes in how governance operates within the European Union. Although the formal division of competences between the EU and the Member States did not fundamentally change, the crisis nevertheless led to stronger coordination and a more visible role for EU-level institutions in certain areas of crisis

management (Ferrera et al., 2021). This suggests that governance change during the pandemic occurred primarily through coordination practices and institutional adaptation rather than through formal treaty reforms or major legal changes.

One important dimension of governance change concerns coordination. During the pandemic, Member States faced similar challenges simultaneously, which created a need for continuous information exchange and policy coordination (Ansell et al., 2010). EU institutions played an important role in facilitating this coordination by collecting data, sharing information, and supporting communication between national authorities. Agencies such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control provided regular epidemiological updates that allowed governments to compare developments and adapt their responses accordingly (ECDC, 2020). This type of coordination did not replace national decision-making, but it contributed to creating a shared understanding of the crisis across the Union.

Another dimension concerns authority. Public health policy formally remains largely within national competence, and Member States retained responsibility for most concrete policy measures during the pandemic. However, the crisis demonstrated that EU institutions can still influence governance through coordination mechanisms, information-sharing, and policy guidance. This reflects a broader pattern within EU governance where influence may be exercised indirectly even in areas where formal authority remains limited. As H eritier and Lehmkuhl (2008) note, governance systems often rely on indirect forms of coordination and influence even without strong hierarchical authority. The pandemic therefore highlighted how supranational coordination can become more significant during crises despite existing competence limitations (Ferrera et al., 2021).

The third dimension relates to crisis management instruments. During the pandemic, both EU institutions and national governments relied on various legal and administrative mechanisms in order to manage the crisis. At the national level, governments introduced emergency measures and temporary legal frameworks to respond rapidly to the public

health situation. For example, the Finnish government used powers under the Emergency Powers Act during the early stages of the pandemic in order to manage the crisis and ensure the functioning of essential services (Finnish Government, 2020). These measures illustrate how crisis governance often relies on temporary expansions of executive authority and emergency legislation during exceptional circumstances (Boin & 't Hart, 2003). The pandemic also demonstrated how governance systems can adapt to new challenges and develop new forms of cooperation (Ferrera et al., 2021). Existing governance mechanisms were adjusted in response to practical challenges created by the crisis, particularly regarding coordination and information management. Although many measures introduced during the pandemic were temporary, the crisis nevertheless strengthened the role of EU-level coordination in certain policy areas and increased discussion regarding the future role of the EU in crisis preparedness.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic did not fundamentally transform the institutional structure of the European Union, but it did strengthen the practical role of EU-level governance. The most significant changes were visible in increased information sharing, closer cooperation between Member States, and the wider use of common crisis management instruments. Examples of this included the role of the ECDC in producing data outputs, technical reports and scientific guidance during the COVID-19 response (ECDC, 2020), as well as the use of joint vaccine procurement mechanisms during the pandemic. The crisis demonstrated how EU institutions can support crisis management even in policy areas where formal competences remain primarily national. In this sense, the pandemic may be interpreted as both a stress test and an adaptive moment for EU governance structures. The next chapter examines how these EU-level governance developments were interpreted and implemented within the Nordic administrative context, with particular attention to Finland.

## 4 Nordic Perspective: Interpretation and Implementation

While the COVID-19 pandemic affected all European Union Member States, national responses varied depending on administrative traditions, governance structures, political priorities, and public trust. The Nordic countries provide an interesting context for examining how EU-level crisis governance was interpreted and implemented at the national level. Although these countries share many institutional similarities, their responses to the pandemic differed in certain important respects.

Nordic governance systems are often characterised by strong public institutions, relatively high trust in government, and well-developed welfare states (de la Porte & Larsen, 2023). These characteristics can influence how crisis management measures are designed and implemented. In this context, crisis governance is not only about formal decision-making power, but also about administrative capacity, public communication, and the ability of citizens to follow recommendations or restrictions. At the same time, Nordic countries remain integrated into the broader European governance framework and therefore interact with EU-level coordination mechanisms during cross-border crises.

For this thesis, the Nordic perspective is useful because it demonstrates how EU-level crisis governance does not operate in isolation. EU coordination mechanisms, such as epidemiological monitoring and information-sharing, were interpreted and implemented through national administrative systems. Finland is especially relevant as a case study because it combines a Nordic welfare state model with EU membership and a relatively strong tradition of administrative legality. This makes it possible to examine how EU-level coordination interacted with national crisis management during COVID-19.

## 4.1 Nordic Governance Traditions under Crisis

The Nordic countries share several administrative characteristics, including strong state capacity, relatively decentralised administrative structures, and a tradition of evidence-based policymaking (de la Porte & Larsen, 2023). These institutional features can shape how governments respond to crises and how public authorities cooperate with each other during emergency situations. In crisis management, state capacity is important because governments must be able to collect information, make decisions quickly, communicate measures clearly, and implement them effectively through public institutions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nordic countries adopted different policy strategies despite these similarities. According to Lindström (2023), differences could be observed particularly in the timing and strictness of government responses. For example, Finland introduced more restrictive measures earlier, whereas Sweden's initial response in March and early April was slower and less restrictive. These variations illustrate how national governance traditions and political decisions influence crisis management strategies even among countries with otherwise similar institutional systems.

The Nordic case is therefore important because it shows that similar administrative traditions do not automatically lead to identical crisis responses. Instead, crisis management depends on how governments interpret the severity of the situation, how they use expert knowledge, and how they balance public health, economic stability, political legitimacy, and individual freedoms. This is relevant for the broader argument of this thesis because it demonstrates that EU-level coordination does not remove national discretion. Member States still interpret and implement crisis measures through their own administrative and political systems.

Despite these differences, the Nordic countries also relied on similar administrative capacities when managing the crisis. Public authorities were generally able to implement public health measures, communicate policy decisions to the public, and coordinate responses across different levels of government. These governance

characteristics contributed to relatively stable crisis management systems during the pandemic. From a multi-level governance perspective, the Nordic experience shows how national administrative traditions shaped the practical implementation of crisis governance even when governments were responding to a shared European crisis.

## **4.2 Finland as a Case Study**

Finland provides a useful case study for analysing the Nordic interpretation and implementation of EU-level crisis governance. As both a Nordic welfare state and an EU Member State, Finland's response to COVID-19 was shaped by national administrative traditions as well as broader European coordination mechanisms. The Finnish case demonstrates how crisis governance during the pandemic involved interaction between national institutions and EU-level governance structures.

According to Statistics Finland, Finland's population exceeded 5.5 million in 2021 (Statistics Finland, n.d.). This is relevant because the Finnish government and public authorities were responsible for organising healthcare services, restrictions, testing systems, public communication, and other crisis management measures for the entire population through national and local administrative structures. The pandemic therefore placed significant pressure on administrative coordination and public sector capacity. This pressure became visible in the organisation of healthcare services, the organisation of testing systems, and the implementation of border restrictions during the early stages of the pandemic.

The economic consequences of the pandemic also created governance challenges for Finland. According to Statistics Finland (2023), Finland's gross domestic product increased by 3.0 per cent in 2021 following the economic difficulties caused by the first stages of the pandemic. This demonstrates that the crisis was not only a public health issue, but also an economic and administrative challenge that required governments to balance restrictions, economic recovery, and public welfare simultaneously.

Policymakers therefore had to consider, not only infection control measures but also their effects on employment, public finances, and economic activity. Economic recovery became an important crisis management priority alongside public health protection.

From the perspective of crisis management, Finland's response reflected both legal-administrative control and reliance on public institutions. During the early stages of the pandemic, the Finnish Government used powers under the Emergency Powers Act in order to manage the public health situation and secure the functioning of essential services (Finnish Government, 2020). This is significant because it illustrates how exceptional crises may temporarily expand executive authority within an existing legal framework. At the same time, Finland's response remained strongly connected to principles of legality and institutional accountability.

Finland's case also demonstrates how national crisis governance interacted with EU-level coordination. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control provided epidemiological information and comparative data that helped Member States monitor the development of the pandemic across Europe (ECDC, 2020). In Finland, this information supported situational awareness and broader policy coordination, even though concrete policy decisions remained largely national. This reflects the broader logic of EU multi-level governance, where supranational institutions may influence governance through coordination, monitoring, and information-sharing rather than direct hierarchical control.

In this sense, Finland illustrates the practical meaning of governance change during the pandemic. The formal competence structure did not fundamentally change because public health policy remained primarily a national responsibility. However, the crisis increased the practical importance of coordination between national authorities and EU-level institutions. Finland's response therefore supports the argument that the COVID-19 crisis strengthened the role of EU coordination mechanisms without fundamentally replacing national autonomy.

### 4.3 Reception of EU Crisis Governance

The reception of EU crisis governance in the Nordic context can be understood through a balance between national autonomy and European coordination. Nordic countries, including Finland, retained strong national control over public health measures during the pandemic. Governments decided on restrictions, emergency legislation, border measures, and public communication according to national circumstances. However, these national measures were implemented within a broader European context where EU institutions provided information, coordination, and policy support.

In Finland, EU-level crisis governance was not interpreted as a replacement for national decision-making. Instead, it functioned more as a supporting layer of governance. This is important because it demonstrates that EU governance during COVID-19 did not necessarily involve centralisation in a strict legal sense. Rather, national authorities operated within an increasingly coordinated European crisis environment. This corresponds with the idea that EU governance often functions through coordination, guidance, and indirect influence rather than direct hierarchical authority (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008).

The Finnish case also illustrates that crisis governance can be both national and European at the same time. Emergency powers, restrictions, and administrative decisions were mainly national, but the crisis itself was monitored and interpreted through European-level data and coordination mechanisms. For example, ECDC data helped create a common understanding of the epidemiological situation across Member States (ECDC, 2020). This type of coordination became particularly important because governments needed comparable information in order to assess developments and adapt policies during rapidly changing circumstances.

At the same time, Finland's response demonstrates that EU-level coordination does not eliminate political discretion from Member States. National governments still decide how recommendations are implemented, how strict measures should be, and how crisis policies are justified domestically. Lindström's (2023) comparison of Nordic government

responses supports this point, as Nordic countries differed in the timing and strictness of their responses despite sharing many administrative similarities. This suggests that EU-level crisis governance was filtered through national political and administrative systems rather than implemented uniformly across Europe.

Overall, the Nordic perspective demonstrates that the COVID-19 crisis did not produce a simple shift from national governance to EU governance. Instead, it strengthened the interaction between these levels. Finland remained responsible for its own crisis response, but EU-level coordination became increasingly relevant in supporting information-sharing and situational awareness. From the perspective of multi-level governance, this indicates that the pandemic deepened the practical importance of coordination within the European Union without fundamentally replacing national authority. The Finnish case suggests that EU crisis coordination was most effective when it complemented existing national administrative structures rather than replacing them. While Finland relied primarily on national institutions and legal frameworks, EU-level coordination supported information-sharing and situational awareness during the pandemic.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 What Changed, How, and Why It Matters

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed important strengths and limitations within the European Union's governance system. Although the formal distribution of competences between the EU and Member States remained largely unchanged, the crisis increased the practical importance of EU-level coordination and demonstrated how interconnected governance within Europe has become. In this sense, the pandemic did not fundamentally transform the institutional structure of the European Union, as formal competences in public health largely remained with the Member States, but it did strengthen certain governance practices and administrative cooperation within the existing multi-level governance framework.

One of the most significant developments during the pandemic concerned coordination. The crisis created an urgent need for continuous information-sharing, communication, and cooperation between governments and EU institutions. Agencies such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control became increasingly important because governments required comparable epidemiological information in order to monitor developments and adapt national responses (ECDC, 2020). This suggests that coordination mechanisms became more central during the crisis even in policy areas where formal competence remained primarily national. Examples of this included the exchange of epidemiological information through the ECDC and the coordination of vaccine procurement at the EU level.

The findings of this study also indicate that governance change during the pandemic occurred more through practical coordination and administrative adaptation than through major legal or institutional reforms. Public health policy formally remained within the competence of Member States, and national governments retained responsibility for most concrete crisis measures. However, EU institutions nevertheless

gained a more visible role in supporting crisis management through coordination, monitoring, and policy guidance. This reflects broader patterns of EU governance in which influence often operates indirectly rather than through strong hierarchical authority (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008).

The pandemic also demonstrated the importance of administrative capacity and institutional trust in crisis management (de la Porte & Larsen, 2023). The Nordic perspective showed that even countries with relatively similar governance traditions adopted somewhat different strategies during the pandemic. According to Lindström (2023), differences were visible particularly in the timing and strictness of restrictions. This suggests that crisis governance is shaped not only by institutional structures, but also by political judgement, national priorities, and interpretations of risk.

At the same time, the crisis highlighted the importance of flexibility within governance systems. Transboundary crises develop rapidly and often exceed traditional institutional boundaries, which creates pressure for adaptation and cooperation across administrative levels (Ansell et al., 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic therefore demonstrated that governance systems within the European Union must be capable of responding to situations where national and supranational responsibilities overlap. For example, while public health measures remained largely the responsibility of Member States, EU institutions supported coordination through epidemiological monitoring, information-sharing, and vaccine procurement mechanisms. In practice, this meant that effective crisis management depended on interaction between EU institutions, national governments, public authorities, and expert organisations.

The Finnish case further illustrates this dynamic. Finland retained national control over emergency legislation and public health restrictions, but the country also operated within a broader European coordination framework. EU-level information-sharing and epidemiological monitoring supported national decision-making without replacing it. This reflects the practical reality of multi-level governance during crises: governance

does not function exclusively at either the national or supranational level, but rather through interaction between them.

The COVID-19 crisis matters from a governance perspective because it demonstrated how crises can accelerate institutional adaptation and strengthen coordination practices within existing governance systems. As Boin and McConnell (2008) argue, crises may create opportunities for policy development and institutional change because exceptional circumstances increase pressure for political action. However, it remains unclear whether these coordination developments represent long-term governance change or mainly temporary crisis responses during exceptional circumstances. Although the pandemic did not fundamentally centralise authority within the EU it did increase the visibility and practical significance of EU-level governance mechanisms. In this sense, the crisis may be interpreted as an important stress test for the European Union's governance capacity.

## **5.2 Implications for EU Multi-Level Governance**

The findings of this study have broader implications for understanding multi-level governance within the European Union. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that governance within the EU cannot be understood solely through formal competence structures. Even in policy areas where legal authority remains primarily national, EU institutions may still play an important role through coordination, information-sharing, monitoring, and policy guidance (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008; Ferrera et al., 2021). This highlights the flexible and interconnected nature of EU governance.

One important implication concerns the relationship between national sovereignty and supranational coordination. During the pandemic, Member States retained responsibility for most concrete public health measures, including restrictions, emergency legislation, and healthcare management. However, governments also depended on EU-level coordination mechanisms and shared information in order to

respond effectively to the crisis. This suggests that national autonomy and supranational governance are not necessarily contradictory, but may function simultaneously within the EU's multi-level governance system.

The pandemic also highlighted some structural limitations within EU governance. During the early stages of the crisis, Member States often prioritised national responses and introduced different restrictions independently. This occasionally weakened coordination and created fragmented responses across Europe. At the same time, the crisis demonstrated that governance systems within the EU were capable of adapting over time through increased cooperation and institutional learning. This indicates that flexibility may be one of the key strengths of multi-level governance during transboundary crises.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the idea that governance within the EU often operates through indirect influence rather than strict hierarchical authority. Héritier and Lehmkuhl's (2008) concept of the "shadow of hierarchy" is particularly relevant in this context. The concept suggests that governance does not always depend on direct authority or legally binding decisions. Instead, actors may influence behaviour through coordination, guidance, and cooperation even when they lack formal control. The pandemic demonstrated how these coordination mechanisms may become highly influential even when formal authority remains limited. EU institutions were able to shape crisis governance primarily through coordination and guidance rather than through direct control over Member States.

The study also supports broader arguments within transboundary crisis research. According to Ansell and colleagues (2010), crises that cross institutional and national boundaries require governance systems capable of coordinating multiple actors under conditions of uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that this type of coordination became increasingly important within the European Union. Effective crisis management depended not only on national decision-making capacity, but also on cooperation between governments, EU institutions, and expert organisations.

Overall, the pandemic demonstrated that the European Union's multi-level governance system is both complex and adaptive. The crisis exposed weaknesses in coordination during the early stages of the pandemic, but it also strengthened practical cooperation between different governance levels over time. Rather than fundamentally transforming the EU into a more centralised system, the pandemic reinforced the importance of coordination and interaction between supranational and national governance structures.

These findings are relevant beyond the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Future transboundary crises, whether related to public health, climate change, migration, or security, are also likely to require extensive coordination across governance levels. The pandemic therefore provides an important example of how the European Union may adapt its governance practices during complex cross-border crises while still maintaining the balance between national authority and supranational coordination. The experience of COVID-19 also suggests that coordination mechanisms developed during the pandemic may remain relevant for future crises and could contribute to stronger EU-level preparedness.

## 6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a major transboundary crisis that challenged governance and crisis management within the European Union. The crisis affected all Member States simultaneously and created pressure for coordination across national and institutional boundaries. Although public health policy formally remained largely within national competence, the pandemic nevertheless increased the practical importance of EU-level coordination and highlighted the interconnected nature of European governance.

This thesis examined how the COVID-19 crisis reshaped governance and crisis management in the European Union and how these developments were interpreted and implemented within a Nordic context, particularly in Finland. The findings suggest that the pandemic did not fundamentally transform the formal institutional structure of the European Union. However, the crisis strengthened coordination mechanisms, increased the visibility of EU institutions in crisis management, and demonstrated the importance of multi-level governance during transboundary crises.

The study showed that governance change during the pandemic occurred primarily through coordination, information-sharing, and administrative adaptation rather than through major legal reforms or treaty changes. EU institutions played an important role in supporting communication and coordination between Member States, particularly through epidemiological monitoring and information-sharing mechanisms such as those provided by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC, 2020). This reflects broader patterns of EU governance in which influence often operates indirectly through coordination and guidance rather than through strong hierarchical authority (Héritier & Lehmkuhl, 2008).

The Nordic perspective further demonstrated that national governance traditions remained highly important during the pandemic. Although Nordic countries shared many institutional similarities, differences could still be observed in the timing and strictness of crisis measures (Lindström, 2023). Finland illustrates how national crisis

management operated simultaneously within domestic administrative structures and a broader European coordination framework. This suggests that EU-level crisis governance complemented rather than replaced national authority.

From the perspective of transboundary crisis management, the findings support the argument that modern crises increasingly require coordination across governance levels and institutional boundaries (Ansell et al., 2010). The pandemic revealed both the limitations and the adaptive capacity of the EU's multi-level governance system. During the early stages of the crisis, coordination between Member States was sometimes fragmented. However, cooperation and institutional coordination gradually strengthened as the crisis evolved.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as an important stress test for governance within the European Union. The crisis demonstrated that while Member States remain central actors in public health policy, EU-level coordination mechanisms have become increasingly significant in managing cross-border crises. The findings of this thesis therefore suggest that future crises are also likely to increase the importance of coordination, information-sharing, and cooperation within the EU's multi-level governance framework.

Although this study focused specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic, its findings may also be relevant for understanding future transboundary crises related to public health, climate change, migration, or security policy. As complex crises increasingly cross national and institutional boundaries, governance within the European Union will likely continue to depend on the interaction between national autonomy and supranational coordination.

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