

**ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS:
INSIGHTS FROM REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF
TRANSNATIONAL PANEL DISCUSSIONS**

**AVALIANDO O IMPACTO DA COVID-19 NOS DIREITOS
FUNDAMENTAIS: INSIGHTS DA ANÁLISE TEMÁTICA REFLEXIVA DE
PAINÉIS DE DISCUSSÕES TRANSNACIONAIS**

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ABSTRACT: This study addresses the research question "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected fundamental rights?" by analysing qualitative data from panel discussions in 9 European countries using a reflexive thematic analysis. The aim is to examine the far-reaching impact of the pandemic on fundamental rights, highlighting challenges such as restricted freedom of movement, freedom of peaceful assembly, restricted human rights on a general and psychological level, disruption of democratic processes and social polarisation. The results of the study, conducted as part of the EU CERV HEARD project, show the deepening of existing inequalities and weaknesses in the protection of fundamental rights in times of pandemic. This study explores the underrepresented views of European residents and citizens on how the pandemic has impacted human rights. It offers new insights into the intersection of health crises and social inequality and emphasises the need for robust policies that protect rights and promote equitable protection. However, the findings are limited by the diversity of the participant sample, so future research should broaden the scope and examine longitudinal effects to improve the generalisability of the research.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; fundamental rights; social inequalities; public health policy; pandemic response; human rights; reflexive thematic analysis.

RESUMO: Este estudo aborda a questão de pesquisa "Como a pandemia de COVID-19 afetou os direitos fundamentais?" analisando dados qualitativos de painéis de discussão em 9 países europeus, utilizando uma análise temática reflexiva. O objetivo é examinar o impacto abrangente da pandemia nos direitos fundamentais, destacando desafios como a restrição da liberdade de circulação, a liberdade de reunião pacífica, a restrição dos direitos humanos a nível geral e psicológico, a perturbação dos processos democráticos e a polarização social. Os resultados do estudo, realizado no âmbito do projeto UE CERV HEARD, mostram o aprofundamento das desigualdades e fragilidades existentes na proteção dos direitos fundamentais em tempos de pandemia. Este estudo explora as opiniões sub-representadas dos residentes e cidadãos europeus sobre o impacto da pandemia nos direitos humanos. Oferece novas perspectivas sobre a intersecção das crises sanitárias e da desigualdade social e enfatiza a necessidade de políticas robustas que protejam os direitos e promovam uma proteção equitativa. No entanto, os resultados são limitados pela diversidade da amostra participante, pelo que futuras investigações devem alargar o âmbito e examinar os efeitos longitudinais para melhorar a generalização da investigação.

Palavras-Chave: Pandemia de Covid-19; direitos fundamentais; desigualdades sociais; política de saúde pública; resposta à pandemia; direitos humanos; análise temática reflexiva.



1 INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 coronavirus pandemic has affected our lives in many ways and manifested itself in many undesirable forms, such as negative consequences of coronavirus on individual lives, it has caused many deaths, the negative impact has also been seen on the global economy and employment, and on the quality of life in society in terms of restrictions on social rights, such as the right to protection from poverty and social exclusion, the right to housing and education, and restrictions on medical care. It is necessary that we focus on recognizing these negative consequences and limiting them in such a way that we limit the possible further adverse effects on our quality of life. Marija Pejanović Burić, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, pointed out, “While the virus is resulting in the tragic loss of life, we must nonetheless prevent it from destroying our way of life – our understanding of who we are, what we value, and the rights to which every European is entitled. There is an urgent need to co-ordinate states’ responses, to exchange good practices, and to help each other in the quest for a quicker recovery”¹. The search for an adequate response to overcome the crisis that occurred during the pandemic of covid-19, should be a result of the participation of involvement of various social partners, civil society and decision making bodies of a given state—involving the aforementioned partners in the phase of planning, implementation and also in the evaluation of all the measures to overcome the given situation, with the main objective of ensuring and measuring the impact in terms of respect for the rule of law, democratic values and the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, with special attention to the social rights of citizens and residents of the given state.

To examine how the covid-19 crisis has affected the enjoyment of fundamental rights, the Faculty of organisation studies (FOS) from Slovenia together with Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (iED) from Greece, CBE Sud Luberon Val de Durance (CBE SL) from France, Municipality of Vimercate from Italy, Centre For Advancement Of Research And Development In Educational Technology Ltd (Cardet) from Cyprus, Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education (FECE) from Bulgaria, Federação Das Associações Juvenis De Braga (Fajub) from Portugal, Municipality of Mislata from Spain, Nordic Diaspora Forum (NDF) from Sweden and Associazione

¹ MIJATOVIĆ, Dunja. 2020. Covid-19 and human rights – Lessons learned from the pandemic. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights [online], p. 4. [Accessed 2024-07-05]. Available from: <https://www.coe.int/sl/web/commissioner/-/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-human-rights-and-how-to-move-forward>



InCo-Molfetta from Italy, engaged from 2021 to 2024 in the EU CERV HEARD project titled “The impact of covid-19 crisis on diverse democratic perspectives through gender perspective”. This article aims to analyse the links between the impact of the pandemic and the areas of fundamental rights. It places this research within the overall picture of social structures and the different responses that different countries have developed to this unusual challenge. The research is informed by the realization that covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in terms of democracy and gender.

The research in the present article employs Reflexive Thematic Analysis and focuses on the following important question: “How has the covid-19 pandemic affected fundamental rights?”. We are leading the research process with the aim of providing practical insights for policy and campaign design. We want to ensure that the recovery from the pandemic leads to the development of stronger, fairer, and more inclusive societies, where the rights and dignity of every individual are at the centre of our collective recovery and rejuvenation efforts.

2 THEORETICAL FINDINGS

As we have seen, “the coronavirus has had an impact on many aspects of democracy in countries around the world — from postponing elections to crackdowns, arrests and torture of citizen protesters to using military force to resolve long-standing conflicts and consolidate power”². Equality and Human Rights Commission pointed out different irregularities during the covid-19 pandemic: “/.../. Older people, ethnic minorities and some disabled people, particularly those in care homes, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. The increased demand for social care has threatened the financial resilience of the sector, potentially impacting its users and workers. This has led to an increased reliance on unpaid carers, who are more likely to be women. There has been a rise in reported domestic abuse and we have concerns about the ability of survivors to access justice. Covid-19 control measures in the criminal justice system potentially undermine the effective participation of some disabled defendants / accused and victims.”³ We have also seen raise of distrust of

² USGLC. 2021. COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Democracy Around the World [online], p. 2. [Accessed 2024-07-02]. Available from: <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/democracy/>

³ EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION. 2020. How coronavirus has affected equality and human rights [online], p. 3. [Accessed 2024-07-05]. Available from: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/equality_and_human_rights_commission_how_coronavirus_has_affected_equality_and_human_rights_2020.pdf



science and medicine and in connection with that various conspiracy theories or the words of non-experts on various social networks, combined with fake news rise, polarization of people in subgroups, like the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, on those who believe in the existence of covid-19 and those who do not.⁴

On the other hand, if we take a closer look at the public sphere, we can see that the exchange of opinions through conferences, public debates within a country or even between different countries was very limited. As the coronavirus increased gender disparities in the EU⁵, we also missed a focused debate on the issue of women in the coronavirus situation, who were more affected by the situation as they were overrepresented in the main sectors, starting from the healthcare workforce, and had to take care of the household and family in addition to the professional challenges. We could see that the pandemic had a negative impact on women in the areas of work, money, knowledge, time, power, health, and an increase in domestic violence. As the United Nations noted, "from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of covid-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex".⁶

Bearing mentioned in mind, we have to acknowledge that covid-19 pandemic had put pressure on the countries to take decisive steps to ensure the limitation of the spread of the virus and ensure adequate protection of their citizens and residents by introducing "emergency measures that constrain individual freedoms, social and economic rights and global solidarity"⁷. As such limitations have serious consequences for human rights, many questions arise as: "How can basic human rights standards guide country efforts to respond to the health crisis? How can parliaments exercise their legislative and oversight functions to ensure that government actions are compatible with their human rights obligations? What is the balance between upholding the right to health and mitigating the undesirable effects of confinement measures on social and economic rights?"⁸

⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. 2021. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on women [infographics]. [Accessed 2024-07-05]. Available from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20210225STO98702/understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-infographics>.

⁶ UNITED NATIONS. 2020. Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women. [Accessed 2024-07-05]. Available from: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf>.

⁷ SEKALALA, Sharifah, et al. 2020. Health and human rights are inextricably linked in the COVID-19 response. *BMJ Global Health*, [online] 5(9). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003359> [Accessed 10 July 2024].

⁸ INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION. n.d. Human rights and COVID-19: A guidance note for parliaments. [online] Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/human-rights-and-covid-19-guidance-note-parliaments> [Accessed 1 July 2024].



Mentioned and similar questions have risen due to different response from the countries around the world, which reflected in lower or greater infringement into human rights of people around the world. But nevertheless, as Laing stated: “/.../ the level of interference with human rights was, for most people, the greatest they will have experienced in a lifetime. The impact of the pandemic on human rights has been worse for certain people in society.”⁹ The consequences of pandemic have spanned from financial, democratic, psychological and health challenges, reflecting even more significantly on the vulnerable groups. OHCHR (2022) agreed with mentioned, as they stated that: “The global covid-19 crisis has been fuelled by deepening poverty, rising inequalities, structural and entrenched discrimination and other gaps in human rights protection.” Mentioned is also reflected in the findings of Gostin et al., which state: “The pandemic exposed deep structural inequities, contravening the core human rights principle of non-discrimination. Impoverished communities have been most affected. Inadequate social protection has pushed tens of millions of people into hunger, homelessness, and poverty, undermining their economic and social rights.”¹⁰

Human rights have been seriously endangered and violated during the pandemic, as the ultimate goal of preservation of overall health of population was misused for attracting political voices, financial gains and consequently power. Mentioned was (at least partly) also acknowledged by Mijatović, which stated “2020 has been a disastrous year for human rights in Europe. While, increasingly, commitment to upholding human rights standards has been faltering all over the continent for several years, the covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the erosion of the democratic fabric of our society, on which protection of human rights ultimately depends. /.../ It has also provided many governments with an ideal pretext to exploit fears and crackdown on dissent, restrict people’s rights and pass emergency legislation that risks having long-term consequences, beyond the health crisis.”¹¹ Mentioned thought was acknowledged also by the researchers Gostin et al., which stated: “From the pandemic's beginning, with Wuhan officials in China concealing early data on the outbreak and information on

⁹ Judith LAING, The impact of Covid-19 on mental health and human rights, [online] 2021, May 28, House of Commons Library, Available from: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-mental-health-and-human-rights/> [Accessed 5 July 2024].

¹⁰ Lawrence O. GOSTIN et al., Human rights and the COVID-19 pandemic: A retrospective and prospective analysis, *The Lancet*, 2023, 401(10371), pp. 154-168, Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01278-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01278-8)

¹¹ MIJATOVIĆ, Dunja. 2020. Covid-19 and human rights – Lessons learned from the pandemic. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights [online], p. 4. [Accessed 2024-07-05]. Available from: <https://www.coe.int/sl/web/commissioner/-/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-human-rights-and-how-to-move-forward>



human-to-human transmission, governments have violated civil and political rights—from suppressing information and silencing truth-tellers to detaining critics and using intrusive surveillance to control them. Authoritarian leaders used the crisis to grab power.”¹²

Mentioned does not reflect the fact that “under international human rights law, the exercise of certain fundamental rights can never be curtailed, even during states of emergency. These “absolute” human rights include the prohibitions on torture, on slavery and on retroactive criminal laws. Most rights, however, are not absolute in character. States can limit the exercise of these rights for valid reasons as long as they respect a number of conditions. This includes the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly and of movement, and the right to privacy.”¹³ Reflecting the mentioned, the following question has been raised: How can the protection of fundamental rights be combined with the strict requirements of controlling the covid-19 pandemic? It is believed that the answer lies in the delicate balance of ensuring public health without falling into the extreme of a “fascistoid-hysterical hygienic state” (faschistoid-hysterischen Hygienestaat).¹⁴ Also, the possibility of exercising rights necessarily includes reducing discriminatory practices, overcoming deficits of social inclusion, addressing inequalities, and access to services, markets, and public spaces. As already mentioned, the coronavirus pandemic “exposed” and further reinforced inequalities, discriminatory discourses, fake news, and hearsay narratives that anyway circulate in a highly problematic media space that often stifles reasonable social dialogue and blurs and degrades perceptions and the attitudes of different social groups towards each other.

During the desk research, we concluded when preparing the project, we identified the gap of retrieving feedback of handling the pandemic directly from the citizens and residents of European countries. Bearing mentioned in mind, we decided to fill mentioned gap and prepare below mentioned research through conducted panel debates in 9 different European countries and 10 different regions in order to fill mentioned gap and process the data with Reflexive Thematic Analysis, presented

¹² Lawrence O. GOSTIN et al., Human rights and the COVID-19 pandemic: A retrospective and prospective analysis, *The Lancet*, 2023, 401(10371), pp. 154-168, Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01278-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01278-8) [Accessed 2 July 2024].

¹³ INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION. n.d. Human rights and COVID-19: A guidance note for parliaments. [online] Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/human-rights-and-covid-19-guidance-note-parliaments> [Accessed 1 July 2024].

¹⁴ Hans Michael HEINIG, Gottesdienstverbot auf Grundlage des Infektionsschutzgesetzes, *Verfassungsblog*, 2020, March 17, Available from: <https://doi.org/10.17176/20200318-003209-0>



below in order to answer the following research question: "How has the covid-19 pandemic affected fundamental rights?"

3 METHODOLOGY

Our research utilised a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) method with an inductive perspective to analyse qualitative data from panel discussions. We also used Atlas.ti to improve the structure and analysis of the data. "In contrast to other approaches to qualitative data analysis, such as grounded theory¹⁵ or interpretative phenomenological analysis¹⁶, reflexive thematic analysis is described as independent of theory and epistemology¹⁷. This independence from a specific theoretical framework permits broad, and flexible application of the analytic approach across a range of epistemologies - including essentialist and constructionist paradigms"¹⁸.

We employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) using an inductive, interpretive approach to analyse qualitative data collected from panel discussions, following the principles outlined by Braun & Clarke¹⁹. This entailed an in-depth process of familiarising with the data, creating preliminary codes, doing a thorough search for patterns, examining the identified patterns, establishing, and labelling the themes, and ultimately preparing an in-depth analysis. Our emphasis has been on reflexive thematic analysis due to its capacity to empower the researcher in determining the final outcome and focus of the study, rather than being confined by a particular theoretical framework. This approach enabled us to extract subtle and profound observations and patterns straight from the data, accurately representing the genuine experiences and viewpoints of the participants. Our methodology, which is based on induction, facilitated the natural formation of themes from the data. This approach resulted in an in-depth and well-founded comprehension of the perspectives of the participants. This technique

¹⁵ Barney G. GLASER, *Basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence vs. forcing*, Sociology Press, 1992. Anselm STRAUSS and Juliet CORBIN, *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998.

¹⁶ Jonathan A. SMITH and Michael OSBORN, "Interpretative phenomenological analysis," in *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, ed. Jonathan A. SMITH (London: Sage Publications, 2003), pp. 51-80.

¹⁷ Virginia BRAUN and Victoria CLARKE, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

¹⁸ R. CAMPBELL et al., "Evaluating meta-ethnography: Systematic analysis and synthesis of qualitative research," *Health Technology Assessment* 15, no. 43 (2021): 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.3310/hta15430>.

¹⁹ Virginia BRAUN and Victoria CLARKE, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.



not only ensured the strength and reliability of our topic development but also improved the credibility of our findings.

In the table below, we can see the phases, which were followed during the Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Table 1 - Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis²⁰

Analytic phase	Description	Actions
<i>Data familiarization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Immersing oneself in the data to understand depth and breadth of the content Searching for patterns and meaning begins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transcribing audio data Reading and re-reading data set Note taking during the panel debates and also during the transcribing audio data of the panel debate and comparing mentioned data
<i>Initial code generation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generating of initial codes to organize the data, with full and equal attention given to each data item 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Labelling and organizing data items into meaningful groups
<i>Generating (initial) themes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sorting of codes into initial themes Identifying meaning of and relationships between initial codes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diagramming or mapping Writing themes and their defining properties
<i>Theme review</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying coherent patterns at the level of the coded data Reviewing entire data set as a whole 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring there is enough data to support a theme Collapsing overlapping themes Re-working and refining codes and themes
<i>Theme defining and naming</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the story of each of the identified themes Fitting the broader story of the data set to respond to the research questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cycling between the data and the identified themes in order to organize the story
<i>Report production</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presenting of a concise and interesting account of the story told by the data, both within and across themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing a compelling argument that addresses the research questions Writing beyond the simple description of the themes

A dataset was originally acquired from the panel debates during the execution of the European project CERV HEARD “The impact of covid-19 crisis on diverse democratic perspectives through gender perspective”. Mentioned panel debates were physically executed in following partner countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy (in two different landscapes: Bari and Lombardia), Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. Panel debate participants were project partners, experts from the field and participants from the project partner countries. The research question, which guided our research, was: “How has the covid-19 pandemic affected the enjoyment of fundamental

²⁰ Adapted from V. BRAUN and V. CLARKE, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>; as cited in R. CAMPBELL et al., "Evaluating meta-ethnography: Systematic analysis and synthesis of qualitative research," *Health Technology Assessment* 15, no. 43 (2021): 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.3310/hta15430>.



rights?”. The dataset consisted of transcripts from audio-recorded panel debates, conducted from May to September 2023.

The total number of the panel debate, which focus on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on human rights debate, consisted of 333 participants, which have taken part in the panel debates in different partner countries, were from: Bulgaria (n=28), Cyprus (n=15), France (n=33), Italy (in two different landscapes: Bari and Lombardia; n=83), Greece (n=48), Portugal (n=30), Slovenia (n=34), Spain (n=32), and Sweden (n=30).

Mentioned panel discussions about impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the human rights lasted around 60 minutes and was facilitated in native languages of the project partners in all mentioned project partner countries. Written and oral consent was obtained from all participants as part of the project's confidential documentation, securely archived at the Faculty of Organisation Studies, ensuring both ethical compliance and participant confidentiality.

The recruitment process was performed through the virtual and physical invitation to join the panel debates, which was shared through the available channels of the project partners (direct emails, Mailchimp emails, Facebook and LinkedIn posts, personal face-to-face invitations, Microsoft Forms invitation, etc.). The questions used in the panel debate, were formed through conducted review of the theoretical findings, and already executed research on the impact of the covid-19 on human rights. Project coordinator formed the suggested questions, which were than confirmed or accordingly modified by other project partners. The process of jointly verifying questions by project partners improved the reliability and contextual relevance of the discussion material and demonstrated a shared agreement among experts from the field and project partners.

A snow bowling method of general population representatives was recruited for those who varied in age, gender, profession, and work experience. Inclusion criteria for the participants were: their age greater than 18 years and their voluntary willingness to participate in panel discussion. We did not conduct any theoretical sampling, because the variation in age, gender, profession, and work experience directed our sampling strategy rather than new insights being gained into the developing theory. To overcome the inherent limitations of the snowball sampling method, including its vulnerability to bias during the selection process, we employed several strategies to improve the diversity and inclusion of our sample. These included proactively recruiting participants



from diverse networks outside of the initial responders' social circles and conducting targeted efforts to reach out to underrepresented groups to reduce the potential for a lack of diversity. In addition, we conducted a comprehensive examination of the data to identify and eliminate any biases that may have arisen from the sampling methodology. This ensured that our findings reflect a wide range of experiences and viewpoints, increasing the validity and relevance of our research findings. Sampling and data collection continued until no new conceptual insights were generated and the researchers confirmed theoretical saturation²¹. The audio of all the interviews was recorded and transcribed.

The qualitative data consisted of 10 transcript documents of panel debates and 10 reports from the executed panel discussions from 10 project partners out of 9 above mentioned project partner countries. All files were named to represent the topic in order to ensure a unique identifier for the source.

We have read and familiarized with the data and made an initial production of codes from the data. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, allowing themes to emerge from the participants' narratives and discussions without preexisting classifications. Codes were generated through a direct analysis of the data, enabling the emergence of themes from the rich, detailed narratives of participants. This technique, which focuses on the process, allowed for a thorough and comprehensive examination of the data. It emphasised the unique and emerging characteristics of the data, which helped to develop an adequate understanding of the perspectives of the participants. We used Atlas.ti 23 for data organization, with researchers collaboratively identifying themes and patterns. Regular team meetings facilitated discussion and reflexive engagement with the data, ensuring a comprehensive and credible analysis.

During all phases (open, axial, and selective coding), new data was evaluated against prior findings utilising the principles of constant comparison. Initially, the results of panel debate discussions were examined, and then, codes and themes were derived from the data. The coding researchers conducted a comparison of current codes and new categories by coding and categorising new data, ensuring that the new categories aligned well with the previous ones. All researchers engaged in a discussion discussing the similarities and differences. The point at which theoretical saturation was considered to be achieved was when the categories were determined to be highly concentrated, and no new open codes could be derived from the data.

²¹ J. CORBIN and A. STRAUSS, *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014).



Each coding process underwent independent data processing by two separate teams of researchers. The transcripts were analysed by coding each line using open coding. The open codes were subsequently categorised using axial coding. During the process of analysing the transcripts, preliminary themes were developed using selective coding, alongside the open and axial coding. The chosen codes were deliberated upon in four meetings with all the coding authors until a consensus was achieved regarding the essential themes. Through an analysis of the main themes, a comprehensive understanding of the entire subject matter was developed, establishing connections between different categories. Following this, significant issues were introduced to all researchers and deliberated upon in one consensus meeting.

Finally, we conducted a comprehensive analysis for each specific topic, identifying the narrative given by each theme while also evaluating how each theme contributed to the overarching narrative of the entire data set in connection to the research questions. Team meetings were conducted to deliberate on each of the topics and guarantee their consistency across each instance. The project team's individual members engaged in discussions to provide their personal perspectives on the research findings, aiming to comprehensively analyse all elements of the data. The themes were not deemed definitive until the project's team thoroughly examined all the data and analysed the coding to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. The team systematically organised and rearranged the themes until agreement was reached, ensuring that all team members were satisfied with the representation and display of all the material in a meaningful and practical way, ensuring a consensus-driven approach.

4 RESULTS

4.1 LIMITED MOVEMENT

The participants pointed out different points of view on the measures related to restricted freedom of movement and freedom to assemble peacefully. The majority felt that travel restrictions within their country were too strict or even unjustified. They argued that such strict measures and the fines imposed by the police — often without a clear explanation — should not be repeated in future health crises. They also argued that the travel restrictions, which were seen as overly broad and without regard to individual circumstances, have undermined trust between the government and the



public, negatively impacting compliance with what were seen as arbitrary regulations. Mentioned restrictions were perceived as detrimental to the economy and individual freedoms, as extended restrictions on international travel had a negative impact on businesses and families. The irrationality of the arbitrary distribution of travel restrictions according to the size of municipalities in Slovenia was pointed out, as well as the paradoxical closure of educational institutions despite the revival of the economy. Participants expressed great frustration with the contradictory regulations that directly impacted their daily lives and highlighted shortcomings in effectively addressing the problems caused by the epidemic.

Conversely, some participants emphasized the need for early protective measures and consistent monitoring of compliance to protect public health. They also emphasized the importance of properly understanding fundamental rights, recognizing that while rights are protected, they can be limited by laws and societal agreements. They also pointed out that the main aim of these measures was to prevent overburdening the health system, contain the spread of the virus and ultimately save lives, acknowledging that these restrictions undoubtedly had a significant impact on daily life and the economy, but they served to protect public safety and minimize the loss of life, so they were perceived as necessary and proportionate. The aforementioned participants also agreed that the lifting of restrictions on free movement within the European Union during the covid-19 pandemic was a delicate balancing act between public health concerns and economic recovery and added that the restrictions were lifted at a reasonable pace.

Participants agreed that a partial lifting of restrictions on free movement in their country could also be the right response in future pandemic situations, especially if restrictions evolve with knowledge about the virus. However, some participants stated that the restrictions were not justified at all and that everyone should be responsible for their own health and its protection. They added that it would be useful to complement free movement within the country with additional means, such as introducing quarantine protocols, border controls, digital health passports or strengthening health infrastructure (such as increasing medical staff and ensuring appropriate medical equipment), in order to find a balance between ensuring public safety and minimizing the economic and social impact of such restrictions. The participants agreed that in the event of a highly contagious disease in future pandemic situations, it would be necessary to close the country and ban movement outside the country (except for



employees abroad). Due to the constant mixed closures between countries, it was not possible to achieve certain common effective measures to prevent the spread of disease. A closure should be proposed for the entire EU in the same period in order to better solve the problem. The participants suggested that one of the measures that would be more suitable for a future pandemic would be a 14-day lockdown for the whole of Europe. They also pointed out that complementing free movement within national borders with a comprehensive strategy is crucial to effectively manage public health while minimizing social and economic disruption. Freedom of movement is a fundamental right, but it must be balanced with measures such as efficient testing and contact tracing, timely dissemination of accurate information, targeted quarantine measures and a robust public health system. Implementing a well-coordinated response that incorporates these elements can help strike a balance between enabling the free movement of essential activities and controlling the spread of the virus. In addition, investing in digital technologies for remote working and education, promoting telehealth services and fostering a culture of adherence to public health guidelines can further improve the resilience of society and the economy during a pandemic, ensuring both safety and the ability to adapt to new norms in challenging times. The participants also pointed out that opinions of professional institutions should be considered.

4.2 FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

While there was agreement that peaceful gatherings could potentially contribute to the spread of the virus, there was disagreement about the impact of these restrictions on people's freedom of expression, common sense, and their link to cases of state repression. While some participants felt that the measures were not justified during the pandemic, other participants stated that the lockdown measures were justified at the beginning to be able to contain the spread of this virus that we knew nothing about. Participants who spoke out against the restrictions on peaceful assembly explained that many individuals and groups expressed dissatisfaction with these measures, citing concerns about their impact on personal freedoms, economic livelihoods, and overall quality of life. These protests often revolved around issues such as lockdowns, mandatory masks, social distancing, and mandatory vaccination. The aforementioned participants also pointed out that public demonstrations are the result of public frustration stemming from a variety of reasons, including political discontent,



economic hardship, and social injustice, and stated that it would be wrong to deny the connection between government restrictions and popular demonstrations. Throughout history, government measures such as imposing curfews, restricting freedom of expression or suppressing the opposition have repeatedly led to large-scale protests. These restrictions are often seen as encroachments on basic civil liberties and human rights, causing public outrage and discontent. They added that the internet and social media have dramatically improved the ability of citizens to quickly organize and mobilize to respond to unjust government actions. These platforms have been instrumental in connecting like-minded people and facilitating the coordination of protests, making it easier for grievances to escalate into large demonstrations.

While participants mentioned that mainly protesters attempted to voice their concerns peacefully, there were instances where protests grew into larger and sometimes contentious gatherings, sparking debates about the balance between public health measures and civil liberties. The Slovenian and Italian participants discussed their governments' approach to public demonstrations in the context of covid-19, pointing to the use of law enforcement to control crowds and comply with pandemic regulations. They emphasized that these measures, including tear gas and physical interventions, were aimed at minimizing the transmission of the virus, but their appropriateness remains controversial. The protests, driven by economic strain and demands for government support and a reassessment of restrictions, ranged from peaceful to confrontational, reflecting broader concerns about personal freedom, vaccine mandates and regulatory consistency. This underscores the challenge of finding a balance between public health and the impact of the pandemic on society.

Participants pointed out the need to find a balance between the right to peaceful assembly and public health in future pandemics. They suggested various strategies, such as better planning of protests to ensure social distancing and the wearing of masks, the use of technology for virtual protests and online advocacy, setting clear government guidelines for gatherings, conducting education and awareness campaigns, and designating certain areas for protests with social distancing in mind. These approaches should aim to protect both public health and the ability to exercise the fundamental right to peaceful assembly. They added that an alternative option would be an online portal/forum where people could express their opinions/suggestions related to the epidemic/pandemic, but would have to identify themselves (name, surname, picture). It would also be necessary to ensure that



someone (at the authorities) takes such suggestions seriously. Participants also pointed out that an alternative would be to form teams of multidisciplinary experts who could analyse all aspects to be considered in order to determine effective, efficient, and proportionate measures to address public health needs without eliminating the right to peaceful assembly. Participants also pointed out that governments and public health authorities can work together in the future to develop policies and protocols that balance the need for public safety with the right to peaceful assembly. By working together and remaining vigilant, we can ensure that our rights are respected and that we and our communities remain safe and healthy.

4.3 LIMITED RIGHTS

Participants highlighted the human rights implications of the pandemic, including challenges in accessing healthcare, such as difficulties in contacting doctors, reliance on digital communication for medical consultations and the problem of rapid, unassessed diagnoses. Concerns were raised about unequal access to covid-19 testing and treatment, particularly given that free rapid tests are not available for the unvaccinated in later stages. They pointed to problems with health management and possible delays in diagnosing serious illnesses. In addition, the pandemic has increased reliance on humanitarian aid and stoked fears, highlighting the need for equitable access to healthcare in future crises.

In Italy and Slovenia, coordinated efforts by governments and health authorities ensured broad access to testing, with a focus on symptomatic or exposed individuals and equitable access to public health treatment. Despite initial challenges such as testing shortages and regional differences in healthcare provision, ongoing improvements aim to ensure equitable access to testing and treatment. In contrast, inequalities in treatment and vaccine distribution have been highlighted in Sweden, pointing to systemic issues such as income and racial disparities, with wealthier people receiving better care. This situation highlights global health inequalities, as wealthier countries acquire more vaccine doses and leave lower-income countries vulnerable, exacerbating health inequalities and pandemic risks.

The transition to online learning in Europe has been challenging due to a lack of preparation, resulting in slow adoption of digital tools and inadequate training of teachers and students. This led to slow adoption of digital tools and insufficient training



of teachers and students. The impact of the pandemic on the quality of education, student mental health and the effectiveness of online teaching has been significant, highlighting the need for investment in digital infrastructure and training. Despite the challenges, there were also some positive aspects, such as the increased involvement of parents in students' learning. Future actions should focus on bridging digital divides and supporting all stakeholders in the education system.

The use of testing in schools to curb the spread of covid-19 has been a controversial issue. While some felt this was a sensible safety measure, others raised questions about privacy and accuracy. The applicability of this approach in future pandemics was seen as dependent on the circumstances and risks involved. Regarding restrictions on physical education and extracurricular activities, there were differing views on their duration and appropriateness. A common concern was to strike a balance between public health considerations and students' physical well-being. Participants also pointed out that there was a lack of parental involvement, and no parents were willing to support teachers during the process. In future pandemic situations, we should improve the process and involve parents more and also ensure that the lifting of restrictions on physical education, which took too long during the covid-19 pandemic, can be improved in the future. They also argued that sport and physical activity are one of the foundations of good mental and physical health. They help to strengthen immunity and it is therefore counterproductive to deprive children of sports training. The participants also pointed out that the capacity for online teaching needs to be improved.

4.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Participants pointed out that the restrictions on fundamental rights during covid-19 have exacerbated anxiety and mental health issues and noted the lack/inadequacy of government measures to support mental health, particularly for vulnerable groups. They emphasized the need for positive mental health strategies in future pandemics, including accessible outdoor meetings and expert support. In addition, long waiting times for professional mental health help exacerbated the situation. The varied responses to the government's covid-19 vaccine information campaigns showed a divide in public perception. Some felt reassured, while others felt increased mistrust and hesitation due to concerns about the development of the vaccine and an overly



invasive approach.

The emphasis on mental health, particularly for vulnerable groups and frontline workers, has increased, with Italy improving telemedicine and counselling services, although the “free counselling from the psychologist” provides limited coverage. Public campaigns raised awareness of mental wellbeing and emphasized self-care and coping strategies. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic disrupted routines and increased anxiety, highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health support. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the negative impact on mental health is evident across multiple sectors, highlighting the increased demand for services and the importance of addressing long-term mental health challenges for the recovery and wellbeing of society.

The participants pointed out that although vaccination is recommended, it is not mandatory. Restrictions apply to unvaccinated people, such as frequent testing and the requirement to present a secure passport. Opinions on the vaccination campaign were divided, reflecting the broader societal divide between vaccination supporters and opponents, leading to conflict and perceived rights violations, particularly in relation to mandatory vaccination for travel, healthcare work and access to public facilities. While some saw these measures as discriminatory, others saw them as necessary for public health. Government efforts to promote the safety and efficacy of vaccines through various media were acknowledged, but the effectiveness and reach of these campaigns were debated, highlighting the need for improved communication strategies to combat vaccine hesitancy.

Participants emphasize the need to include mental health in pandemic plans and advocate for open communication to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. They call for early intervention, accessible services, and public awareness campaigns to promote a proactive approach to mental health in public health policy. The discourse on mandatory vaccination reveals a divide and emphasizes the need for a balanced consideration between public health benefits and individual rights. A comprehensive strategy that prioritizes mental health, the expansion of telemedicine and tailored programs for vulnerable groups is crucial. In addition, promoting workplace health initiatives and evaluating vaccination policies in terms of personal autonomy are seen as essential for future preparedness in order to protect both public health and individual freedoms.



5 DISCUSSION

The complex relationship between public health measures and individual rights was present already before the covid-19 pandemic, as acknowledged by Bayer - he presented in his research, that "the first tensions over the scope of public health and the acceptability of its measures arose during the fight against infectious disease in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries"²². And during covid-19 pandemic "an emerging awareness that governments must strike a fair balance between protecting and promoting public health"²³ was acknowledged also by our participants.

Participants also expressed great frustration with the contradictory regulations that directly impacted their daily lives and highlighted shortcomings in effectively addressing the problems caused by the epidemic. Mentioned findings of challenges of communication and management during the pandemic was also reflected in the research of Setiawan, Pawito, and Hastjarjo²⁴ and Abrams and Greenhawt²⁵ one of the potential ways to ensure appropriate risk communication is to use social media channels and establish a consistent and sustainable media presence.

Many countries around the world have introduced travel limitations and limitations on gatherings, as noted also by International Organization for Migration²⁶, while World Tourism Organization²⁷ in its report covid-19 Related Travel Restrictions: A Global Review for Tourism stated that mentioned percent reached 100% of all destinations worldwide, as they all had some form of covid-19-related travel restrictions in place. The restrictions mentioned were seen by some as crucial for public health, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, while others perceived these measures as too strict or arbitrary, which had a negative impact on trust and compliance. While

²² R. BAYER, "The continuing tensions between individual rights and public health. Talking Point on public health versus civil liberties," *EMBO Reports*, vol. 8, no. 12, pp. 1099-1103, 2007. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7401134>

²³ N. HOSTMAELINGEN and H. B. BENTZEN, "How to operationalise human rights for COVID-19 measures," *BMJ Global Health*, 2020. Available from: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/5/7/e003048.info>

²⁴ B. SETIAWAN, P. PAWITO, and S. HASTJARJO, "Communication in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic," *Informasi*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. i-iv, 2021. DOI: 10.21831/informasi.v51i1.42066. Available from: <http://doi.org/10.21831/informasi.v51i1.42066>

²⁵ E. M. ABRAMS and M. GREENHAWT, "Risk communication during COVID-19," *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology: In Practice*, vol. 8, no. 6, pp. 1791-1794, 2020. DOI: 10.1016/j.jaip.2020.04.012. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaip.2020.04.012>

²⁶ INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, Labyrinth of travel restrictions [online]. [Viewed 1 July 2024]. Available from: <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-9/labyrinth-travel-restrictions>

²⁷ WORLD TOURISM ORGANIZATION (UNWTO), Restrictions on tourism travel starting to ease but caution remains, 2020. Available from: <https://www.unwto.org/news/covid-19-restrictions-on-tourism-travel>



researchers like Grepin et al. noted that “cross-border travel measures may limit the spread of disease across national borders, specifically in terms of reducing the number of imported cases and delaying or reducing epidemic development”²⁸, they noted that the certainty of the reviewed evidence was low to very low. Mentioned is also confirmed by the Errett, Sauer, and Rutkow that “there is very little evidence to suggest that a travel ban eliminates the risk of the disease crossing borders in the long term”²⁹.

The economic impacts of prolonged travel prohibitions were also noted by the participants. Mentioned reflects in the findings of Bazak et al., which noted the “/.../ evidence of the negative impacts of covid-19 on socioeconomic outcomes such as labour markets, production supply chains, financial markets and gross domestic product (GDP) levels”³⁰. To address the challenges, our participants suggest that in future pandemics, a partial lifting of movement restrictions could be effective based on evolving virus knowledge. They suggest a 14-day Europe-wide lockdown as an appropriate measure. Complementing this, a strategic approach to public health management— that balances the fundamental right to free movement with robust testing, contact tracing and timely information— could mitigate the social and economic impact while ensuring public safety. In addition, improving digital infrastructure for remote work and education, promoting telemedicine and supporting compliance with health guidelines can strengthen social and economic resilience during pandemics.

Although participants noted that the restrictions on peaceful assembly were originally intended to prevent the spread of the virus, they sometimes clashed with public expressions of discontent. This reflects broader societal tensions in the ongoing challenge of balancing health security and civil liberties, which was exacerbated when enforcement methods such as tear gas and physical interventions were used during protests. Mentioned is reflected in Human Rights Watch findings, as they stated that at least 83 governments worldwide have used the covid-19 pandemic to justify violating the exercise of free speech and peaceful assembly, while adding that authorities have “attacked, detained, prosecuted, and in some cases killed critics, broken up peaceful

²⁸ GRÉPIN, Karen Ann et al., Evidence of the effectiveness of travel-related measures during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid systematic review, *BMJ Global Health*, 2021, 6(3): e004537. [online]. DOI 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004537. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/6/3/e004537.info>

²⁹ ERRETT, Nicole A. et al., An integrative review of the limited evidence on international travel bans as an emerging infectious disease disaster control measure, *Journal of Emergency Management*, 2020, 18(1). [online]. DOI 10.5055/jem.2020.0446. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.5055/jem.2020.0446>

³⁰ BAZAK, Y. L. et al., The economic impact of international travel measures used during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review, *BMJ Global Health*, 2024, 9(2), e013900. [online]. [Viewed 12 July 2024]. Available from: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/9/2/e013900.info>



protests, closed media outlets, and enacted vague laws criminalizing speech that they claim threatens public health”³¹. The participants emphasised the need to balance the right to peaceful assembly with public health during a pandemic. They suggested strategies such as planning protests that allow for social distancing and the wearing of masks, utilising technology for virtual participation and setting specific guidelines for physical gatherings. In addition, they suggested setting up an online portal for public feedback on pandemic-related measures, which would require identity verification. They also recommended forming multidisciplinary teams to develop a balanced public health policy that respects the right of assembly and ensuring cooperation between governments and health authorities, which is crucial to protect public health while preserving civil liberties. Participants also highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on different vulnerable groups in our society, like those in informal employment, who often faced greater difficulties in accessing healthcare and economic support, which was acknowledged also by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations³².

Educational disruption challenges were another critical issue, with the shift to online learning revealing significant inequalities in access to technology and support and a significant impact of the pandemic on the quality of education, the mental health of students and the effectiveness of online teaching. Mentioned was also acknowledged by the findings of Kuhfeld et al., which pointed out that “schools have faced severe staff shortages, high rates of absenteeism and quarantines, and rolling school closures /.../ students and educators continue to struggle with mental health challenges, higher rates of violence and misbehaviour, and concerns about lost instructional time”³³. Equality and Human Rights Commission has tried to show the enormous impact of the pandemic on educational system by stating: “Young people have experienced significant interruption to their education, which threatens previous gains in attainment levels. Differences in support for remote learning during the pandemic threaten to widen inequalities for those who already perform less well than

³¹ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, Covid-19 triggers wave of free speech abuse: Scores of countries target media, activists, medics, political opponents, 2021. [online]. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/covid-19-triggers-wave-free-speech-abuse>

³² FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS, Impact of COVID-19 on informal workers, 2020. [online]. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/d83045ac-51d1-447a-ad91-539cd0138292/content>

³³ KUHFIELD, Megan et al., The pandemic has had devastating impacts on learning. What will it take to help students catch up?, 2022, March 3. [online]. [Viewed 12 July 2024]. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-pandemic-has-had-devastating-impacts-on-learning-what-will-it-take-to-help-students-catch-up/>



their peers, particularly boys, Black pupils, some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, pupils who need support in education, and those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.”³⁴ Bertoletti and Karpiński³⁵ agreed with mentioned by noticing, that the students have exhibited a learning loss during the pandemic times, which was acknowledged also by the Gambi and De Witte³⁶, or their well-being, leading to feelings of isolation from their peers and a lack of emotional support (Bertoletti & Karpiński³⁷; Copeland et al.³⁸; Hoofman & Secord³⁹). Participants stated that future efforts should aim to increase involvement of the parents, at lifting of restrictions on physical education and to improve the capacity for online teaching needs.

The impact of the pandemic on mental health was evident and profound, exacerbated by social isolation and constant concern about health. Mentioned impact was acknowledged also by Semo and Frissa⁴⁰, Al Dhaheri et al.⁴¹, Wang et al.⁴², World Health Organization⁴³, Kupcova, Danisovic and Klein⁴⁴ and others. Participants emphasised the importance of integrating mental health support into future pandemic plans. They suggested strategies such as improving access to outdoor settings,

³⁴ EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION. 2020. How coronavirus has affected equality and human rights [online], p. 3. [Accessed 2024-07-05]. Available from: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/equality_and_human_rights_commission_how_coronavirus_has_affected_equality_and_human_rights_2020.pdf

³⁵ BERTOLETTI, Andrea and KARPIŃSKI, Zbigniew, Investigating the effect of COVID-19 disruption in education using REDS data, Large-scale Assessments in Education, 2024, 12(5). [online]. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40536-024-00195-x>

³⁶ GAMBI, Lorenzo and DE WITTE, Kristof, The resiliency of school outcomes after the COVID-19 pandemic: standardised test scores and inequality one year after long term school closures, FEB Research Report Department of Economics, 2021.

³⁷ BERTOLETTI, Andrea and KARPIŃSKI, Zbigniew, Investigating the effect of COVID-19 disruption in education using REDS data, Large-scale Assessments in Education, 2024, 12(5). [online]. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40536-024-00195-x>

³⁸ COPELAND, William E., et al., Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health and wellness, Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry, 2021, vol. 60, no. 1, pp. 134–141.

³⁹ HOOFFMAN, Jessica, SECORD, Elizabeth, The effect of COVID-19 on education, Pediatric Clinics, 2021, vol. 68, no. 5, pp. 1071–1079.

⁴⁰ SEMO, Bazghina-werq, FRISSA, Souci, The mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for Sub-Saharan Africa, Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 2020, vol. 13, pp. 713-720. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S264286>

⁴¹ AL DHAHERI, Ayesha et al., Impact of COVID-19 on mental health and quality of life: Is there any effect? A cross-sectional study of the MENA region, PLOS ONE, 2021, vol. 16, no. 3, article e0249107. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249107>

⁴² WANG, Limin et al., Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and potential solutions in different members in an ordinary family unit, Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2022, vol. 12, article 735653. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.735653>

⁴³ WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. Mental health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact. [Scientific brief]. 2022. Available from: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/352189/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci-Brief-Mental-health-2022.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

⁴⁴ KUPCOVA, I., DANISOVIC, L., KLEIN, M., et al. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health, anxiety, and depression. BMC Psychology, 2023, vol. 11, p. 108. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01130-5>



expanding telehealth options and support services, and promoting community support mechanisms. They also emphasised the importance of addressing long-term mental health challenges for the recovery and wellbeing of society and pointed out that open communication to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support.

The participants pointed out that the debate on vaccination policy reveals a strong division in public opinion and illustrates the challenge of implementing health measures that require broad public co-operation and trust. The tension between individual freedom and collective health security was highlighted, with differing views on requirements and restrictions based on vaccination status. Mentioned division and tension was reflected also in a report, prepared by The Lancet Regional Health – Europe⁴⁵, where they add that: “people unwilling to get vaccinated are perceived as a threat to society by many and angst and frustration is often demonstrated against them, dividing society in two groups: vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.”

6 CONCLUSION

The already complex relationship between public health measures and individual rights, evident before the covid-19 pandemic, as noted by Bayer⁴⁶, has been significantly intensified during the pandemic. Participants in present study expressed dissatisfaction with conflicting and confused regulations that impacted their daily lives, mirroring the communication and management challenges, which were also highlighted in the research by Setiawan, Pawito and Hastjarjo⁴⁷. As confirmed by Abrams and Greenhawt⁴⁸, appropriate risk communication could be enhanced through consistent social media engagement and sustained media exposure. Many countries have implemented travel and assembly restrictions, which were perceived by some as critical to public health and by others as too strict, impacting trust and compliance. Grepin et

⁴⁵ The Lancet Regional Health – Europe. The vaccinated and unvaccinated need to coexist with tolerance and respect. *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe* [online]. 2022, vol. 13, p. 100326. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepi.2022.100326>

⁴⁶ R. BAYER, "The continuing tensions between individual rights and public health. Talking Point on public health versus civil liberties," *EMBO Reports*, vol. 8, no. 12, pp. 1099-1103, 2007. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7401134>

⁴⁷ B. SETIAWAN, P. PAWITO, and S. HASTJARJO, "Communication in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic," *Informasi*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. i-iv, 2021. DOI: 10.21831/informasi.v51i1.42066. Available from: <http://doi.org/10.21831/informasi.v51i1.42066>

⁴⁸ E. M. ABRAMS and M. GREENHAWT, "Risk communication during COVID-19," *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology: In Practice*, vol. 8, no. 6, pp. 1791-1794, 2020. DOI: 10.1016/j.jaip.2020.04.012. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaip.2020.04.012>



al.⁴⁹ and Errett, Sauer and Rutkow⁵⁰ stated that while travel restrictions can temporarily limit the spread of disease, they are faced with limited long-term effectiveness and significant socio-economic impacts, as emphasised also by Bazak et al.⁵¹. To address mentioned challenges, the participants suggest that future pandemics will require a nuanced approach that balances public health measures with respect for individual rights. This includes a partial lifting of movement restrictions based on evolving knowledge about the virus, complemented by robust public health measures such as efficient testing and timely information dissemination. Investing in digital infrastructure for remote working, promoting telemedicine and adherence to health guidelines can strengthen social and economic resilience.

Restrictions on freedom of assembly to prevent the spread of the virus have often clashed with public expressions of discontent, highlighting the ongoing challenge of balancing health safety and civil liberties. It is important to develop strategies that enable peaceful gatherings while protecting public health by considering the use of technology for virtual participation and specific guidelines for physical gatherings. The impact of the pandemic on the economy and mental health has been profound and has caused significant disruption to education and labour. Future efforts should focus on ensuring adequate assistance to the economy and labour force, with particular attention to vulnerable groups, while in education the focus should be on greater parental involvement, an immediate lifting of restrictions on physical education and improving capacity for online teaching. Mental health support should be integrated into pandemic plans by improving access to open spaces and expanding support services to address long-term challenges to societal wellbeing.

This discourse suggests that future pandemic preparedness must consider strategies that (beside already mentioned actions) include a robust public health infrastructure, transparent and fair policy implementation, and active engagement of community stakeholders to promote a collaborative and trust-based approach to managing public health crises. The promotion of workplace health initiatives and the

⁴⁹ GRÉPIN, Karen Ann et al., Evidence of the effectiveness of travel-related measures during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid systematic review, *BMJ Global Health*, 2021, 6(3): e004537. [online]. DOI 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004537. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/6/3/e004537.info>

⁵⁰ ERRETT, Nicole A. et al., An integrative review of the limited evidence on international travel bans as an emerging infectious disease disaster control measure, *Journal of Emergency Management*, 2020, 18(1). [online]. DOI 10.5055/jem.2020.0446. [Viewed 10 July 2024]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.5055/jem.2020.0446>

⁵¹ BAZAK, Y. L. et al., The economic impact of international travel measures used during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review, *BMJ Global Health*, 2024, 9(2), e013900. [online]. [Viewed 12 July 2024]. Available from: <https://gh.bmj.com/content/9/2/e013900.info>



assessment of vaccination policies in terms of personal autonomy are seen as essential to protect both public health and individual freedoms. This disparity points to the need for more inclusive and equitable health and social policies that ensure all members of the community have access to necessary resources during a health crisis. A comprehensive strategy that prioritises mental health, the expansion of telehealth and tailored programmes for vulnerable groups is critical to future preparedness.

Our research encountered limitations in that Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) has limited generalisability to larger populations or other contexts due to the risk that different regions or populations were not included in the original panel discussions. The aforementioned limitation is related to the use of the snowball method in recruiting participants for the panel discussions, which could potentially lead to sample bias. However, we have tried to circumvent the mentioned limitations by including a wider range of participants from different European countries, regions or demographic backgrounds to ensure a broader applicability of the results. The RTA method also carries the risk of subjectivity due to researcher bias. We tried to avoid this risk by involving all project partners to cross-validate the researchers' findings. The researchers also continuously reflected on their assumptions, beliefs and biases throughout the research process and held discussions in the project team meetings and with external experts involved in the project to contribute to policy discussions and peer debriefings.

For future research, we recommend that longitudinal studies are concluded in order to track the long-term effects of pandemic-related restrictions on individual rights and public health. In doing so, we should focus on the impact of public health measures on vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities, older people and marginalised communities such as migrants and refugees. We also emphasise the need to explore the role and effectiveness of digital technologies used during a pandemic, such as contact tracing apps and telemedicine services. An important line of research should be dedicated to investigating the psychological impact of long-term public health restrictions and identifying effective mental health interventions during such crises. We also suggest that the ethical implications of mandatory vaccinations, travel restrictions and lockdowns be explored.



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