

## **Challenges and Opportunities for Spain in Times of COVID-19: the New Institutionalism Approach**

*Based on new sources, and the new institutionalism approach, the chapter analyzes strategy and tactics of Pedro Sanchez administration in the framework of resolving the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020—2021. In other words, this chapter examines the governance of the COVID-19 crisis in Spain for dealing with an emergency situation in the context of the erosion of international rules and institutions, an impulse to maximize the sovereignty of states as a result of the lockdown. The first wave of the pandemic in Europe occurred in spring 2020 but subsided in summer 2020. A second wave began in early fall 2020. At the end of March 2020, during first two waves of COVID 19, Spain was one of the countries most significantly impacted by the pandemic outbreak.*

*The chapter explores the Spanish healthcare system's lack of preparedness and its slow and delayed response to the pandemic, highlighting both common European problems (the growth of elderly patients; the growth of chronic non-communicable diseases; the increase in healthcare costs), and specific economic problems. As of late 2020, a massive vaccination campaigns began in the Kingdom of Spain, prioritizing the most vulnerable individuals after the approval of two vaccines (Comirnaty by Pfizer — BionTech, and COVID-19 Vaccine by Moderna) by the European Medicines Agency. A third wave of COVID-19 occurred after Christmas in January 2021 and a fourth in July 2021.*

*As in the period of financial turmoil of 2008—2009, Madrid was unable to cope with the coronavirus crisis on its own and was forced to resort to external assistance. This time, it included the participation of the Iberian country in “The Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan”, adopted by the European Union, which is designed for Next Generation EU program (2021—2027).*

*Analyzing measures taken by the Sanchez administration in the context of COVID 19 pandemic, special attention is paid to the party system, which is undergoing a new transformation (from an imperfect two-party system to moderate pluralism) and the growth of so-called “fake news” as a direct aftereffect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those factors strongly influenced the reaction of the Spaniards to the decisions of Prime Minister.*

**Keywords:** *Spain, COVID-19, pandemic, infodemic, Iberian peninsula, European Union, political parties*

## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19, 2019-nCoV), which began to spread from Wuhan no later than December 2019, was a strong blow to the contemporary world order and globalization, the ideals of which are being tested for strength. However, this strike was not so destructive as to generate significant geopolitical changes and the balance of power transformation.

Rather, it has become a catalyst that reinforces global trends. Now it is clear that COVID-19 is another «brick» in the wall of multi-level system of challenges, that the humanity is encountering. According to Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Liu Zhenmin: “The pandemic abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the SDGs and, in some cases, turned back decades of progress. The crisis has touched all segments of the population, all sectors of the economy, and all areas of the world. Not surprisingly, it is affecting the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people the most. It has exposed harsh and profound inequalities in our societies and is further exacerbating existing disparities within and among countries”<sup>6</sup>.

As of January 2022, at the time of writing this chapter, the world community has already experienced four powerful waves of the pandemic (March—April 2020, September—October 2020, January—June 2021; November—December 2021). According to Johns Hopkins University (JHU) data, more than 303 million confirmed infections and approximately 5 million deaths related to COVID-19<sup>7</sup>. “In many countries, including the United States, COVID-19 is now a leading cause of death, alongside heart disease and stroke” [Mckeever, 2021].

The European Union, like the rest of the world, caught by surprise by coronavirus outbreak, was forced to make decisions that significantly limited the rights and freedoms of its own citizens. The quarantine, which became a forced decision for most European countries, had a devastating effect on the EU economy, launching

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<sup>6</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals Report // The United Nations, 2020. P. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Covid-19 Dashboard // Coronavirus Recourse Center. Johns Hopkins University, 2021. URL: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (date of access: 01.11.2022)

another round of the economic crisis. In 2020, according to the UN report “World Economic Situation and Prospects”, Europe, amidst the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and restrictive measures “paralyzed economic activities across the board, laying off millions of workers worldwide”, because of which in 2020 the region’s GDP decreased by 7.8%. At the end of the first quarter of 2020, widespread travel restrictions and quarantine measures adopted by the national governments of most EU member states led to freezing of business activity for many sectors, such as brick-and-mortar retail, leisure, restaurants, public services and service-based industries, as well as to a contraction of the labor market.

This situation raises a number of research questions. Under these conditions, how did the EU countries develop national testing strategy due to lack of four essential components (infrastructure, equipment, trained laboratory professionals, and reagents and consumables)? How were COVID 19 vaccines in different EU countries tested? How were the questions about safety and the side effects of COVID-19 vaccines resolved and how does the vaccine skepticism influence on the national governments’ abilities to maintain public safety? What preventive measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus and fiscal support did the governments provide? How did socio-political relations evolve in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the EU member states? Are there any fundamental differences between the experiences of different EU member states in the measures against pandemic?

Since the format of the paper is limited, and the experience of the EU member states in combating the pandemic is highly diverse, we will analyze the experience of Spain as an example. The relevance of exploring this case is determined by a number of reasons.

Firstly, from its first weeks, Spain took the leading positions in Europe and the world in terms of the number of people infected and deaths. The weak government of Sanchez hesitated to take decisive action, apparently fearing to lose support (the authorities’ consideration of the special sensitivity of the Spaniards to the restriction of civil rights and freedoms associated with the long-term existence of Francoism could have played a role).

Secondly, in 2020, Spain, which had barely reached stable growth rates, faced the COVID-19 pandemic. Spain took the first

positions in the distribution of EU coronavirus funds, which means even greater uncertainty in forecasting the dynamics of the country's main macroeconomic indicators due to political difficulties in budget execution.

Thirdly, regional and municipal elections were held in the autonomies of Spain in February 2021.

Fourthly, Spain became one of Europe's vaccination champions. As of January 10, 2022, the share of the Spanish population fully vaccinated against COVID-19 reached 81.49 percent.

The proposed article summarizes the results obtained by Russian and foreign colleagues regarding the "case study" of Spain (when considering specific actions and measures to combat the COVID 19 pandemic).

## **Materials and Methods**

Studies in political management typically focus on the architecture of decision-making inside the government, with an emphasis on authority of political leaders, roles of the appointed officials in the decision-making process, as well as on relationships between the constituent parts of government. To analyze the decision-making process of Pedro Sanchez administration from a COVID-19 perspective, the concept of rational choice new institutionalism is used.

To achieve the goal of the research, four general postulates of this approach in the study of institutions, including political ones, are identified:

**a. Individuals and institutions.** The concept of rational choice is based on the idea of the ideal type of human behavior "homo economicus", striving to maximize his own utility (survival) in a complex world. Individuals operate in a complex world based on incomplete information and simple subjective models for describing it, which, due to many factors (cognitive limitations, transaction costs), are often erroneous. To solve these problems, individuals create institutions (formal and informal). In other words, "we cannot see, feel, touch, or even measure; they are constructions of the human mind" [North, 1990. P. 107]. By creating the "rules of the game", or more formally, the limiting framework, individuals

“structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic” [North, 1990. P. 3]. The set of alternatives in the “rules of the game” directly affects the behavior of the individual himself, increasing his confidence in the behavior of others and establishing the institutional equilibrium.

**b. Formal and informal institutions.** According to the previous point, individuals develop formal and informal rules of the game. “North defines institutions as all types of rules that organize individual behaviors: these rules are submitted to informal constraints as customs, traditions, or taboos, formal constraints as legal rules, property rights or constitutions; and enforcement devices dedicated to the application of all these preceding constraints” [Dutraive, 2009].

**c. Institutional transformation and stability.** The problem of transformation of institutions is closely related to the problem of stability (in some circumstances they may change). All institutions can potentially undergo changes, but in order to successfully fulfill the functions of the “rules of the game”, they must be stable. According to the concept of self-reinforcing institutions, institutional stability is a result of the interest of decision-makers in adhering to the constraints imposed on them. Every process of institutional transformation may require large expenditures, incomparable with resources available to individuals. As for the transformation of institutions, there are two main mechanisms of creation (transformation) by rational actors of formal endogenous institutions: “legalization of informal institutions” and “import”. Legalization is an evolutionary way of developing institutions from the trends already established at the level of informal frameworks, without their radical correction. Import is a revolutionary way of institutional development — “deliberate borrowing of foreign institutions during radical socio-economic reforms in the country. We can say that the import of institutions is a special case of revolutionary (radical) institutional changes carried out by politicians” [Nureev, Volchik, Strelkowski, 2020].

**d. Political institutions.** Political institutions, as instruments for rational mobilization of other people and resources for coordinated efforts to achieve political goals, are considered as:

- having coercive nature and sanctions (endogenous-mental and exogenous-penal) for violation of norms;

- striving for “collective benefit”, achieved through rational collective action — the struggle for power between actors, with a subjectively developed model of ideas about what a public good is;
- forming a certain political regime — “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area...” [Stephen, 1982. P. 186].

A fundamental complex of political institutions is the state, based on three groups of political institutions necessary to defend common interests. Accordingly, two models of the state stand out: the liberal-democratic contractual model and the authoritarian-exploitative one. The purpose of the first model is “to achieve such a distribution of property rights that maximizes the total income of society on the basis of transferring powers into the hands of those economic entities that can dispose of them in an optimal way” [Patrushev, 2006. P. 21].

The need to create the first group of institutions — cognitive-ideological for the first model — is determined by the need for political identification of individuals. These institutions, being subjective models based on a personal interpretation of a complex world of politics, form a certain idea of the individual about himself and his place in the society.

The second group of institutions is necessary to regulate the decision-making process regarding the collective benefit: how to regulate common interests (institutions of the legislative branch); how to implement these decisions (executive institutions); how to resolve controversial situations and conflicts interpreting an application of general rules (institutions of the judiciary).

The third group of institutions, inseparable from the second, regulates the political process of the struggle for power. These include institutions that determine the procedure for the formation of government bodies (the institution of elections, inheritance, appointment), procedures for the formation of relationships between actors fighting for power (political parties, inter-party alliances, social movements), as well as institutions that determine boundaries of what is permissible in the struggle for power.

The new institutionalism approach implies a qualitative research method in order to uncover the formal and informal institutional

rules that guide the Sanchez administration. These rules can be researched using written documents and through interviews with certain actors.

Based on the theory of neo-institutional rational choice, we consider the Sanchez government as a rational player seeking to maximize its own utility — to maintain power. Neo-institutional rational choice will be helpful to understand two sets of basic questions: first, what changes in terms of governance in Spain; second, who the main actor in these changes and why?

In order to answer the first question, we should explore the disruptions of (or continuities in) the path-dependencies of Spanish political history linked to the institutional rules during this critical juncture of COVID 19 pandemic, asking whether new rules replaced or were layered onto old ones. Answers to the second question, lead us to interest-based initiatives analysis of main political drivers.

### **The Response to the Pandemic**

According to the Ministry of Health (MISAN), the first case of coronavirus infection was confirmed on 31 January 2020, when a German tourist tested positive on La Gomera, Canary Islands<sup>8</sup>. The next case was reported on February 9, 2020, when a British citizen was tested positive in Mallorca. On February 24, 2020, according to the statement of the Canary Islands Health Council, tests of an Italian citizen who arrived on the island of Tenerife showed a positive result for coronavirus<sup>9</sup>. Another four cases were recorded on February 25, 2020: in Madrid (two), Castellón (one) and Barcelona (one). By March 13, 2020, cases of infection were already registered in all

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<sup>8</sup> The Junta says the second wave of coronavirus «“has been brought forward” [La Junta dice que la segunda oleada de coronavirus “se ha adelantado”] // La Vanguardia, 2020. URL: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20200823/482974130522/coronavirus-madrid-reunion-familias-contagios.html> (date of access: 01.11.2022).

<sup>9</sup> The Local. Tenerife hotel remains on lockdown after four Italian guests test positive to coronavirus, 2020. URL: <https://www.thelocal.es/20200225/hundreds-quarantined-in-tenerife-hotel-after-guest-becomes-spains-third-coronavirus-case/> (date of access: 01.11.2022).

50 provinces of the Spanish Kingdom. The next day the Sanchez administration declared a state of emergency.

Since the beginning of March 2020 (with a lag of more than a month), the number of cases began to grow exponentially: from the first case on January 31, 2020 to 6 391 confirmed cases and 195 death on March 14. This factor indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic caught the Spanish authorities by surprise. After the start of the pandemic, the government of Pedro Sanchez, weakened as a result of recent splits and apparently fearing to lose support, did not take decisive actions.

According to the new institutionalism approach, special attention should be paid to the party system. The party system in Spain has long been dominated by a stable two-party equilibrium with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the People's Party (PP) as the main actors. As a result of the electoral cycle of 2011—2016, however, the two-party system was replaced by a multi-party one (because of widespread public dissatisfaction with the economic situation and a number of allegations of corruption among members of the traditional big parties), in which Podemos, Ciudadanos and Vox began to emerge as important political players in various government coalitions.

Notably, the Sanchez administration came to power as a result of a vote of no confidence in the previous administration of the PP of Mariano Rajoy. This unprecedented operation had an unexpected result in the form of a surge in the popularity of the PSOE. So, in January 2018, according to A.A. Orlov, the gap between the parties was 3.2% (26.3% versus 23.1%), while already in August the PSOE was ahead of the PP by 9.5% (29.9% versus 20.4%), and at the end of October already by 13% (31.6% versus 18.2%).

During the elections in April 2019, Pedro Sanchez managed to create the most representative faction of 123 delegates. Other parties lagged far behind the PSOE. The left-wing coalition Unidos-Podemos won 42 seats, other left-wing parties, the Left Republicans of Catalonia, the Valencian left-wing bloc Compromis, received 15 seats and one seat respectively in the Parliament.

It seemed that creating a left-wing coalition government would not be a difficult task for Pedro Sanchez. However, despite sever-

al rounds of negotiations between Pedro Sanchez and Pablo Iglesias (Secretary General of Podemos. 15 November 2014 — 4 May 2021), an agreement on the creation of a leftist government was not reached. On September 23, Parliament was dissolved by the King Philip VI and on November 10, new elections were scheduled for the Spanish Cortes. Pedro Sanchez remained the Prime Minister after the early elections, but the left weakened their position, while the ultra-right (Vox), on the contrary, strengthened it. An increasing political fragmentation, according to many researchers, was the result of the ambitiousness and lack of response of the two left-wing leaders (Pedro Sanchez and Pablo Iglesias), as well as different views on the formation of the cabinet.

On March 9, the first measures with a broad impact on the population were introduced in areas with significant community transmission by local governments. These measures included social distancing in different area (social, educational, working), limiting all events to a maximum of one thousand members, remote occupation; closing schools and universities. Measures suggested in all Spanish domains included engaging homecare for the senior citizens, avoiding amassed spaces, keeping social distance of something like one meter and staying at home.

The government's reaction followed only on March 14, when first state of emergency (*estado de alarma*) was declared (ended on June 21, 2020). Pedro Sanchez did not cancel football matches and the demonstration in honor of March 8<sup>th</sup> in Madrid, in which at least 120,000 people participated.

In addition to the weakness of the coalition government of Pedro Sanchez, caused by political clashes between the PSOE and Unidos-Podemos, the regional fragmentation of the healthcare system had an obvious impact on the delay in the COVID-related actions. Each of the 17 autonomies has its own rules, its own bureaucracy, its own budget, and sometimes its own language that differs from Spanish.

Because of this, in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish healthcare system did not quite cope with the pandemic outbreak. There was a shortage of hospitals in the country, and the existing medical institutions lacked ventilators, tests to detect the virus and protective equipment for medical personnel. This resulted

in thousands of infected among doctors and nurses. The government agencies had to handle the situation in time-pressing conditions, which led to an increase in deaths: “between February and May 2020, Spain’s Health Ministry counted around 29,000 COVID-19 deaths. Meanwhile, the truer figure was more like 46,000 deaths, according to the public statistics agency” [McMurty, 2021]. As of January 21, 2022, according to JHU Spain had more than 8 834 363 confirmed infections and approximately 91,599 deaths attributed to COVID-19 after four pandemic waves.

Revealingly, Spain is one of the worst pandemic-affected Eurozone countries. According to William Chislett “the economic impact was also severe. GDP shrank 10.8% in 2020, the deepest recession in 80 years and the harshest in Europe... The unemployment rate, which stood at 14% when the pandemic started, close to double the EU average, rose to 16.2% at the end of 2020” [Chislett, 2021. P. 8]. In the context of the pandemic that swept Spain, a particularly difficult situation was in the manufacturing industry, one of the engines of country economic growth. According to E. Prades and P. Tello, “each week of partial closure during the state of emergency “have driven a contraction in the Spanish economy’s overall gross value added (GVA) of 17% directly and of 28% indirectly, adding in the knock-on effects on other activities” [Prades, Tello, 2020].

The Spanish government introduced numerous emergency economic measures in response to the pandemic, including favorable loans and guarantees for companies. “Eight pieces of legislation — Royal Decree-Law 6/2020, Royal Decree-Law 7/2020, Royal Decree 463/2020, Royal Decree-Law 8/2020, Royal Decree 465/2020, Royal Decree-Law 9/2020, Royal Decree-Law 10/2020 and Royal Decree-Law 11/2020 — provide initial measures to address the coronavirus (COVID) crisis” [Spain. Government and institution measures..., 2020].

On March 12, 2020, the Sanchez government approved an aid package of 2.8 billion euro to support regional governments (17 autonomous communities, two autonomous cities) in dealing with the economic consequences of the pandemic, 1.4 billion euro of additional funding for the national health ministry, and 14 billion euro in extra liquidity for small- and medium-sized companies. On March

17, 2020, the government announced a second aid package with five billion euro of expenditure for economic and social support programs, and 112 billion euro of loan guarantees for self-employed citizens and small- and medium-sized companies. In July 2020, Spain's government approved 3.7 billion euro in support for the automotive sector and 4.25 billion euro for the sector of tourism. But the government found it difficult to implement economic and social measures due to internal political disagreements. The Spanish political context is characterized by a strong division between socialists and populists, and the current government is administered by a coalition of two political parties.

As during the financial crisis of 2008—2009, due to governance problems, Madrid was unable to cope with the pandemic-related economic and social problems on its own and had to resort to external assistance. As a result of a worsening economic and social crisis, Spain became one of the biggest recipients of financial help from Troika of international creditors (National Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan — NextGenerationEU Program).

Another reason why time was lost and the country received a crushing blow was the Spanish state media, which seriously did not take into account the virus that was already raging in China and Italy. A false sense of security, coupled with extreme distrust of ordinary Spaniards in the official media, was another reason for the country's unpreparedness for the pandemic. Subsequently, growing distrust of the Spaniards in the institutions of power and official sources of information preconditioned the emergence of a broad movement of "COVID dissidents" (although it was not so widespread as in the USA or France). The vaccination campaign in Spain began only on December 27, 2020, but due to disinformation and the lack of political consensus in the government, acceptance of the vaccine against COVID-19 was low. It was revealed in the research commissioned by N. Rodríguez-Blanco et al.: 48.3% of Spaniards wanted to be vaccinated at the end of 2020, just before the start of the vaccination campaign. "In this sense, the Spanish Government insisted on the importance of a good communication strategy and equal access to it before the arrival of the vaccine to Spain" [Rodríguez-Blanco, 2021. P. 2]

After July 2021 the Sanchez cabinet was reshuffled, replacing some of most important ministers in order to “facilitate the post-coronavirus recovery, and to reduce political and social tension over the issue of Catalan independence” [Cue Carlos, Casquero, 2021].

## **Conclusions**

The chapter has mapped the key rules in form and rules in use relevant to government political management in Spain during COVID-19 crisis.

First, under the state of emergency, countries were forced to make decisions that significantly limited the rights and freedoms of citizens. As a result, quarantine caused a decline in the global GDP, a break in trade chains, and a decline in stock indices. COVID-19 crisis hit tourism, aviation and retail.

Second, new institutionalism helps to explain the behavior of actors within the framework of existing institutions, as well as to understand the specifics and features of collective development and adoption of political decisions regarding public good.

Third, the Sanchez government faces a number of unprecedented tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be compared with the reforms of the democratic transit period. It is necessary not only to find an effective economic strategy, but also to negotiate with the right- and far-right Vox, as well as the separatist regional parties providing simple majority to the current coalition government. More than that, it is necessary to distribute funds received between 17 autonomous communities of the country.

Forth, the reasons for difficult economic and social situation in 2020 in Spain is a subject of considerable debate between scholars and politicians. There are at least three topics: the proportion of the age category of residents in the country, the intensity of international tourism and the managerial weakness of the Sanchez administration.

Fifth, as the research reveals, the measures to support the economy adopted by the Sanchez administration were incomplete. In those circumstances, it could not stop the developing economic crisis without the intervention of the Troika of international creditors (National Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan — Next Generation EU Program).

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