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Do Economic Recovery Packages Open a Window of Opportunity for Corruption and Mismanagement? The Case of Italy in the Aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
This paper explores the effects of the pandemic on corruption and mismanagement in Italy, a country where the Covid-19 crisis is supposed to have significantly increased the risk of corruption. It proposes a novel operationalization of safeguards for accountability that are attached to the disbursement of recovery funds. Emergency law decrees and their implementing acts have been coded to assess whether the discretion in the allocation of recovery funds has been constrained by transparency requirements and enforcement provisions. Findings reveal that safeguards for accountability have been strengthened over time but that they have followed various patterns across recovery measures targeting businesses and people.

Keywords Pandemic · Transparency · Regulatory policy · Crisis management · Learning

In addition to the health emergency, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a multitude of cascading crises that have affected society, economy, and governance (Boin et al., 2021). In an effort to control the spread of the disease, many governments in various

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regions have established stringent lockdown measures, restricting the mobility of hundreds of millions and paralysing large sectors of the economy. Consequently, in addition to the large investments in medical supplies that governments have had to make to face the health crisis, vast quantities of resources have been allocated in the form of economic rescue packages to mitigate the effects of the crisis and shield people and businesses that are most vulnerable.

However, the vast amount of resources allocated to respond to the urgent needs presented by the crisis, combined with relaxed accountability, provide a fertile ground for corruption and mismanagement to flourish (Rose-Ackerman, 2021; United Nations, 2021). The disbursement of rescue packages without adequate safeguards for accountability increases the discretion of public officials, and this may create opportunities for abuse that could offset the full potential benefits of the measures aimed at promoting recovery after the pandemic (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020a, b).

This paper examines the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on corruption and mismanagement by exploring the "post-Covid pathway" (Boin & 't Hart, 2022) in Italy. More specifically, it assesses whether safeguards for accountability have been relaxed throughout emergency legal frameworks in the disbursement of recovery funds. Among advanced democracies, Italy is a country where the Covid-19 pandemic is supposed to have significantly increased the risk of corruption (European Commission, 2021). The high risk of corruption and mismanagement poses a major challenge to tackling the effects of the pandemic in countries like Italy where there are weak governance institutions, lack of accountability, limited supervision and enforcement, low levels of social capital, and lack of trust in government institutions.

Italy was the first Western country to face an outbreak of Covid-19. It has documented more than 12,000,000 Covid-19 cases over the course of the pandemic and has confirmed more than 151,000 deaths as of February 17, 2022. Given the lack of preparedness, the Italian healthcare system came close to collapse in the regions most affected in the first months of the pandemic (Mattei & Vigevano, 2021). This prompted the Italian government to lead the way in Europe with regards to the introduction of nationwide mitigation measures (social distancing, isolation of confirmed or suspected cases, and closure of schools and universities), which implied the suspension of all nonessential production throughout the country during spring 2020. Further rounds of mitigation measures have been adopted as a response to the three waves of contagion that hit the country from late summer 2020 to winter 2021.

To deal with the severe economic repercussions of mitigation measures, the Italian government has adopted a series of recovery packages to support people and businesses. Under crisis conditions of radical urgency and uncertainty, Covid-19 recovery packages have been subject to path dependence as the Italian government displayed weak confidence in the administrative capacity to deal with the repercussions of the pandemic (Capano, 2020). Most of the recovery measures deployed in response to the Covid-19 crisis were rolled out as temporary and ad hoc solutions that have been around for some time in the aftermath of natural disasters (Di Mascio et al., 2020b). Although the country has been waiting decades for effective reforms aimed at simplifying ordinary administrative procedures, governments have usually opted for fast-track measures to deal with disasters. Prompt action has been ensured by these special measures, which run in parallel with ordinary administrative procedures. The latter are deemed not suitable for supporting recovery after disasters given the highly legalistic behaviour of Italian bureaucracies, which slows the disbursement of funds. In many cases, however, presumably temporary fast-track measures have lasted decades and have proven to be vulnerable to corruption and mismanagement (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021).

It remains to be ascertained whether opportunities for corruption and mismanagement have arisen from the adoption of fast-track measures for swift Covid-19 recovery in Italy. On the one hand, it is likely that well-established historical patterns have been reproduced in the context of the Covid-19 recovery, meaning that resources have been disbursed without safeguards for accountability as it had already happened in the aftermath of natural hazards prior to the onset of the pandemic. This is also the theoretical expectation put forward by the literature on the effects of crisis on corruption that is reviewed in the next section.

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting that crises give rise to a "meaning-making battle" between multiple policy actors who sponsor a variety of crisis frames (Boin et al., 2009). In contexts like Italy, where concerns for corruption and mismanagement have significantly increased over the last few decades to the point that a major anticorruption reform package was adopted in late 2012, it is not out of the realm of possibility that policy actors have exploited the magnitude of the Covid-19 crisis to push for transparent and accountable disbursement of resources. In other words, it may be hypothesized that the sheer magnitude of the Covid-19 recovery package has further increased concerns for corruption and mismanagement, eventually relaxing political and institutional constraints that have hindered the implementation of anticorruption reform. The Italian National Anticorruption Authority is the main entity in charge of coordinating the implementation of anticorruption reform (Merloni, 2019). It supervises the adoption of entity-specific anticorruption plans by public administrations, with a focus on the mitigation of corruption and mismanagement risks. It also provides support to public administrations in the implementation of provisions that mandated the proactive online disclosure of government information (Di Mascio et al., 2019). Over the years, the Italian National Anticorruption Authority has emerged as a political actor in its own right, acting as an institutional advocate that exploited recurring corruption scandals to call for more ambitious measures sustaining the implementation of accountability mechanisms (Di Mascio et al., 2020a).

To preview the main findings of the empirical research, concerns for corruption and mismanagement have played a limited role in the early stage of Covid-19 recovery in Italy, which is when most of the recovery funds were disbursed without adequate safeguards for accountability. However, recovery measures have been recalibrated in the later stages of the crisis when more conditions and regulations were attached to the distribution of funds. The temporal dimension set the Covid-19 crisis apart from other types of critical events. It is much more difficult for governments to leave concerns for corruption and mismanagement out of recovery strategies in protracted crises like Covid-19. A protracted crisis generates a sequence of "flash crises" (Boin & 't Hart, 2022), including scandals that encourage policymakers to signal commitment to enhance public integrity. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section two outlines the research hypotheses. The following section presents the research method. The empirical section tracks the safeguards for accountability that have been attached to the most relevant recovery measures over the course of the pandemic in Italy. A discussion and conclusions follow.

Research Hypotheses

Empirical research on the effects of crises on corruption and mismanagement started only recently (Alexander, 2017; Frailing & Harper, 2017). This strand of the literature has highlighted that both preconditions for misconduct—willingness and opportunity—are present in the case of crises. As a crisis hits, individuals are more likely to lose their jobs, income, savings, and livelihood. Hence, there may be less inhibition to engage in corruption and fraud. Furthermore, disaster relief and recovery packages represent windfalls that may encourage misappropriation (Leeson & Sobel, 2008; Nguyen, 2017; Nikolova & Marinov, 2017). In addition, several factors contribute to obstructing the transparency and accountability of decision-making processes during crises (Calossi et al., 2012). The urgent requirement for rapid assistance may lead to an improper needs assessment. The resulting poor targeting, over-supply, or under-supply of support create opportunities for exploitation. The exceptional nature of the situation under which recovery funds are managed also hinders the evaluation of results, given the lack of terms of reference. The complexity brought about by the multitude of actors involved in the management of recovery funds helps to camouflage potential abuse. Lack of coordination among the actors that deal with the emergency, each following its own policies and procedures, may lead to corruption and mismanagement of funds.

International analyses have confirmed that major crises create an environment of moral hazards in which corruption and other forms of misconduct are likely to increase (Escaleras & Register, 2016; Yamamura, 2014). However, these analyses have focused on natural disasters whose high frequency in specific areas plays a significant role in increasing corruption and mismanagement as actors may seek compensation in disaster-prone areas. Conversely, unprecedented, exceptional situations that are not delimited in time and space like Covid-19 may give rise to concerns with regards to the particularly high marginal value of money spent in terms of reducing harmful consequences for society in other ways, and such concerns may demotivate officials from participating in corrupt practices (Fazekas et al., 2021).

Major crises also offer possibilities for reform in corruption-prone contexts. Crises typically arouse widespread attention and delegitimize the status quo (Boin et al., 2009). In corruption-prone contexts, this implies that exceptional critical situations may entail greater oversight by society and policymakers. First, more actors might be interested in auditing the details of spending. Second, misuse of relief and recovery packages may lead to a loss of voters, which may drive incumbents to avoid any corruption and mismanagement scandal. The crisis may also increase the integrity with which public money is spent if policymakers realize that the public wants action to reform the status quo. In other words, they recognize the "window of opportunity" to implement measures curbing corruption and mismanagement that have seemed out of reach under normal circumstances.

Drawing on this review of the literature, this paper investigates the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on corruption and mismanagement in Italy with a view towards two countervailing mechanisms: (a) more opportunities for rent-seeking due to the time pressure and the considerable quantity of resources; and (b) stronger oversight in an unprecedented situation. Three hypothetical scenarios are formulated with respect to the configuration of the relationship between the two countervailing mechanisms in the post-Covid-19 Italian pathway.

In the first hypothetical pathway, the primary concern to quickly spend large amounts of resources to offset the effects of the pandemic has forced the government to relax administrative procedures. Policymakers have succeeded in imposing an exogenous crisis narrative to divert attention away from the major flaws in the integrity framework of the existing system. In other words, the priority is on promoting a swift recovery from an exogenous shock. The dominant frame imposed on the population is that attaching burdensome requirements to the public spending needed to support Covid-19 recovery will slow the process down too much.

In the second hypothetical pathway, recovery measures place transparency and accountability at the centre of government efforts to rebuild in the wake of Covid-19. In this scenario of "reformist crisis exploitation" (Boin & 't Hart, 2022), people are persuaded that the conventional methods of counteracting crises cannot work in the exceptional situation of the pandemic. In contexts like Italy, where robust anti-corruption mechanisms have not been implemented, corruption and mismanagement are likely to undermine fair, efficient, and equitable Covid-19 response and recovery. This concern increases the willingness of policymakers to propose a set of radical measures that reduce the exposure of recovery packages to corruption and mismanagement. The dominant frame imposed on the population is that accountability is one of the best instruments to ensure that spending is being used effectively and recovery objectives are achieved.

Crisis-induced learning is at the heart of the third hypothetical pathway (Moynihan, 2009; Stern, 1997). Time during a disaster is an important factor for policy learning, especially within the context of long-duration crises such as pandemics. Learning can be said to have occurred when the proximate causes of policy failure revealed by a critical event are subsequently addressed by changes in policy (Birkland, 2006). This scenario casts the Covid-19 pandemic as a stress test that exposes systemic policy failure in the course of responding to the crisis. Learning is induced by the temporal dimension of the pandemic, which can be understood as a "creeping crisis" (Boin et al., 2020). This type of crisis generates regular outbursts without reaching closure. It can change meaning during its lifespan. Attention can reach different levels with various audiences at different times. In other words, enduring crises can open multiple windows of opportunity to address different, boundary-spanning policy problems revealed by the aggregation of events over time (DeLeo et al., 2021). Thus, a shift of the theoretical understanding is required to account for long-duration crises and potential learning along the way that can occur as a result. This implies that the two mechanisms under investigation can influence various stages of the recovery process. In early stages, the emphasis is put into swift action, meaning that large amounts of resources are spent without keeping corruption and mismanagement under control. In later stages, the socioeconomic impact of corruption and its implications for governance systems are revealed by scandals that direct attention to the lack of accountability. This may lead policymakers to re-examine recovery measures and recalibrate them.

To test these hypothetical scenarios in the subsequent empirical section of this paper, data on recovery measures in Italy were collected with the help of a new method, which is presented in the next section.

Research Method

The empirical research focuses on four fast-track measures that the Italian government has introduced to support recovery in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. The first measure relates to the guarantee funds that have been introduced to alleviate funding constraints for Italian businesses in the aftermath of the national lockdown. The Italian Credit Export Agency ensured such a guarantee in favour of banks and other credit institutions. The second measure permitted the utilization of the ordinary redundancy fund for temporary suspension of work or working time reductions due to the Covid-19 crisis. It also introduced a special redundancy fund for private employers not covered by the ordinary benefits, who suspended or reduced their activity for events attributable to the Covid-19 crisis. The National Social Security Institute (INPS) received applications for access to the redundancy funds, but the procedure involved many public bodies and stakeholders (Ministry of Welfare, regions, banks, and trade unions). The third measure awarded a one-time allowance to various groups of self-employed workers, partially or totally prevented from working due to the Covid-19 outbreak, that were not eligible for other income support measures. The INPS received and managed applications for the one-time allowance. The fourth measure introduced an emergency income to support households experiencing economic difficulty caused by the Covid-19 crisis that are not beneficiaries of any other income support scheme. The INPS also received and managed applications for the emergency income.

Three criteria were considered in selecting these fast-track measures. First, the four measures under investigation are among the most relevant in terms of financial impact and of recipients' scope (Ufficio parlamentare di bilancio, 2020, 2021). Second, these four measures support different categories of recipients: Two of them provide resources to businesses (the guarantee and redundancy funds), and the other two support people (the allowance for self-employed workers and the emergency income). This allows to check whether the design of fast-track measures has drawn on risk assessment, which typically prioritizes risks by taking the potential adverse impact into account. The expected adverse impact is much higher for measures supporting businesses because they channel higher amounts of financial resources in each transaction with recipients if compared with measures supporting citizens. Furthermore, measures for businesses were more exposed to coordination issues because of multiple actors' involvement in the distribution of funds. Third, the four measures have been introduced in response to the first wave of contagion in spring 2020. They were then subsequently strengthened and extended by further rounds of law decrees and their implementing acts (where required and available), adopted from summer 2020 to spring 2021. This allows to check whether the protracted nature of the Covid-19 crisis has stimulated a process of learning, meaning that safeguards for accountability have been attached to the disbursement of funds in the later stages of the recovery process.

The latter can be divided into three phases:

1. The first phase refers to the response to the epidemic that was aimed at slowing the spread of the virus in the period March–May 2020. It was characterized by the escalation of mitigation measures, which culminated in the complete lockdown of the country in late March 2020. This phase was characterized by an ultimate sanitary emergency on the one hand and a lack of preparedness on the other. In the first quarter of the year, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) decreased by 5.3% compared to the previous quarter, the worst performance ever. The economic impact of the epidemic worsened the condition of a country already exhausted by the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis. To guarantee quick economic recovery, the government was allowed to bypass the parliament in the definition of legislative interventions. As a result, the four measures under investigation were introduced by means of three law decrees: the Cure Italy Decree, No. 18/2020, the Liquidity Decree, No. 23/2020, and the Relaunch Decree, No. 34/2020, which in some cases were to be complemented by some implementing acts, as with the following major amendments.
2. The second phase coincides with the last 8 months of the Conte II government (May 2020 to February 2021). This phase was marked by the reopening of economic and social activities until the second wave of contagion hit Italy in fall 2020, leading to the reintroduction of restrictive measures to people's movement. The four measures under investigation were progressively simplified and extended to a wider range of recipients by a sequence of five law decrees: Simplifications Decree, No. 76/2020, August Decree, No. 104/2020, Relief Decree, No. 137/2020, Relief-*bis* Decree, No. 149/2020, and Relief-*ter* Decree, No. 154/2020. These amendments were needed because the disbursement of the guarantee and redundancy funds had been hindered by the complexity of the coordination among multiple actors involved in the management of applications (Di Mascio et al., 2020b). Furthermore, the implementation of recovery measures in the first phase highlighted poor targeting because many categories of victims had not been entitled to apply for funds. Therefore, the new provisions distributed resources to a wider range of recipients. However, the first reports of mismanagement of Covid-19 recovery funds have emerged since late spring 2020 (Irdi, 2020). This led multiple actors, including the Italian Anticorruption Authority, to raise concerns that the choice to simplify administrative procedures would have appeared disproportionate to the objective of coping with the economic repercussions of the crisis if it had not been complemented by the introduction of safeguards for accountability.

3. The third phase refers to the first months of the Draghi government in which key ministries were assigned to technical experts (February–May 2021). The new government was expected to reverse Italy's slow vaccination campaign while also drafting ambitious reform programmes to be included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan funded by the European Union (Ongaro et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the recovery measures adopted by the Draghi government mostly aligned in continuity with those issued by the predecessor Conte II. Amendments to provisions that had been adopted in the previous stages of the crisis were mainly aimed at extending funding and/or broadening categories of recipients and at simplifying the procedures, following reports of malfunctioning. The main law decrees passed in this phase were three: Emergency Decree No. 30/2021, Support Decree, No. 41/2021, and Support-*bis* Decree, No. 73/2021.

Table 1 provides a representation of the recovery measures (and corresponding implementing norms, where applicable) that were adopted across the three stages of the Covid-19 crisis under investigation.

A pair of coders double-coded the law decrees reported in Table 1 based on two standardized codebooks: one focusing on transparency provisions and another capturing enforcement. In other words, accountability safeguards attached to recovery measures have been unpacked into two dimensions. As for transparency, considerable research has been done on the beneficial effects of disclosure of government information on public demand for accountability, lending support for the contention that access to information may reduce corruption and mismanagement (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017). Lack of transparency in the use of public funds has the effect of fostering distrust in the integrity of public organizations, which in turn is expected to increase the level of corruption (Capasso et al., 2021; De Simone et al., 2017).

As for enforcement, it is not possible to achieve high standards of accountability without controls that are essential to ensure the credibility of integrity frameworks (Capasso et al., 2019). Building on this specification, core components that contribute to the accountability of recovery measures were operationalized as shown in Table 2 that lists the indicators for transparency and enforcement safeguards. Using predefined categories identifying safeguards for accountability ensured high levels of replicability of the coding process because, for each dimension, each coder essentially confirms the presence or absence of mechanisms in the law decrees under examination—and, as said, their implementing acts, where required (0/1 binary code). This approach helped to ensure full consistency between coders.

Each indicator was coded as positive according to the following criteria:

1.a Whenever decrees and/or their implementing acts required the administration to proactively disclose a preliminary or final list of benefit recipients on public webpages: Under a regime of proactive disclosure, information is provided immediately to anybody, irrespective of whether a request for information has been filed.

1.b Whenever decrees and/or their implementing acts required that conditions and requisites for application were to be public and clearly listed, and/or administrations autonomously provided for them on their websites: This requirement sets

Table 1 Relief Measures, Target Categories, and Crisis Management Phases

Target	*Phase 1* *(March–May 20)*	*Phase 2* *(June 20–January 21)*	*Phase 3* *(February–May 21)*
Businesses	**Redundancy fund I** (*Law Decree 18/2020; Law Decree 34/2020*)	**Redundancy fund II** (*Law Decree 104/2020; Law Decree 137/2020*)	**Redundancy fund III** (*Law Decree 41/2021; Law Decree 73/2021*)
	Guarantee fund I (*Law Decree 23/2020*)	**Guarantee fund II** (*Law Decree 104/2020*)	**Guarantee fund III** (*Law Decree 73/2021*)
People	**Allowance for self-employed workers I** (*Law Decree 18/2020; Law Decree 23/2020*)	**Allowance for self-employed workers II** (*Law Decree 104/2020; Law Decree 137/2020*)	**Allowance for self-employed workers III** (*Law Decree 73/2021*)
	Emergency income I (*Law Decree 34/2020*)	**Emergency income II** (*Law Decree 104/2020; Law Decree 137/2020*)	**Emergency income III** (*Law Decree 137/2021*)

Table 2 Indicators for Transparency and Enforcement Safeguards

1. Transparency Indicators	2. Enforcement Indicators
a. Disclosure of the list of recipients	a. Ex officio benefit allocation upon acknowledgement of requirements
b. Disclosure of information on the conditions and requirements	b. Ex post random/erga omnes assessments
c. Disclosure of the procedural phases	c. Sanctioning provisions
d. Disclosure of information on the criteria adopted for resource allocation	d. Enforcing authority/authorities clearly identified
e. Ad hoc website	e. Ad hoc resources allocated for enforcement

out a level playing field as all of the prospective recipients have a chance to assess whether they are entitled to the benefits, irrespective of whether they have privileged access to public organizations.

1.c Whenever the procedures for application were proactively illustrated on the institutional websites: By allowing for a complete disclosure of the procedural ongoing phases, prospective recipients are able to know the time and further steps (including possible audits and assessments) regarding their submission. This also reduces room for consultants' intermediary roles, which often reduce the transparency of the decisional process.

1.d Whenever criteria followed for benefit allocation have been published (or regulation so required), either before or after concrete assessment: Whether such criteria are available or not affects the possibility for recipients to assess the legal and factual reasoning on which the decisions are based, thus curbing the room for administrative discretion in the distribution of funds.

1.e Whenever a specific institutional website about the measure was made available, or dedicated pages were created within (or clearly linked to) previous general websites: When information is unclear, split into different sources or not properly arranged, prospective recipients with privileged access to public organizations may be favoured at the expenses of those suffering digital gaps.

2.a Whenever decrees and/or their implementing acts provided that benefit allocation was automatic upon assessment of formal requisites, without application by the beneficiaries: This condition is crucial to ensure that all potential recipients receive their due benefit without unequal treatments or malfeasance.

2.b Whenever they set out that assessments of the requisites and conditions were to be made (either randomly, risk based, or extended) after benefit entitlement: Given the emergency conditions, many measures have been allocated upon assessment of personal declarations that might provide room for false statements. The possibility that such conditions are concretely assessed should strengthen the enforcement setup and reduce that room.

2.c Whenever specific sanctions, in addition to the ordinary applicable legislation, were foreseen by the decrees and/or their implementing acts: Further penalties might prevent chances for abuses, insofar as they strengthen the enforcement setup and help show a more credible commitment to integrity.

2.d Whenever the same regulation setting out specific sanctions, or foreseeing a governance system for the benefits, also explicitly identified the authority charged with enforcing tasks: One of the main weaknesses of enforcement setups is the inability to connect possible negative consequences for misconduct to one administration (or more) in charge of enforcing them. This is even more so in emergency conditions, when reduced timings might lead to a looser auditing phase.

2.e Whenever norms set out additional (financial and/or personal) resources for the enforcing setup: This condition, besides providing administrations with direct additional enforcing assets, especially in emergency contexts, also conveys the idea of more efficiency and capacity.

Empirical Analysis

Table 3 illustrates how transparency indicators have evolved across the four measures under investigation in the three periods of the recovery process. It shows that one transparency provision—the disclosure of the list of the recipients (1.a)—has not been included in any of the law decrees adopted by the Italian government. Although this might be due to concerns for data protection in the case of recovery measures that processed the personal information of individuals and households (one-time allowance and emergency income), it is worth highlighting that the Italian government has not disclosed the list of businesses that gained access to the guarantee and redundancy funds. Conversely, three transparency requirements—the disclosure of the conditions attached to the disbursement of funds (1.b), the disclosure of the list of the procedures (1.c), and the setup of a website dedicated to the recovery measures (1.e)—have been met by all recovery measures under investigation. However, it took time before these requirements could be introduced in all four measures under investigation.

Disclosure of the list of procedures has been attached to most measures since the early phase of the recovery process before being extended to the guarantee fund in the second phase. The disclosure of the conditions attached to the disbursement of funds has been attached to most measures since the early phase of the recovery process before being extended to the emergency income in the third phase. The setup of a dedicated website has been introduced in the first phase

Table 3 Recovery Measures in Italy: Transparency Indicators

Phases	1					2					3				
Indicators	1.a	1.b	1.c	1.d	1.e	1.a	1.b	1.c	1.d	1.e	1.a	1.b	1.c	1.d	1.e
Measures															
Redundancy funds	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Guarantee funds	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
One-time allowances	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
Emergency Income	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1

for those measures (one-time allowance and emergency income) that hinged on only one actor (the INPS). With regards to those measures in which multiple actors were involved (the guarantee and redundancy funds), information about the procedures was dispersed across multiple websites before being gathered in two dedicated websites in the second phase of the recovery process. Finally, it is worth highlighting that one transparency provision—the disclosure of information on the criteria adopted for resource allocation—has been introduced only for one measure (the one-time allowance) before being extended to the other measure focusing on people (the guarantee fund) in the third phase.

As shown in Fig. 1, the four measures under investigation have followed different paths across the three phases of the recovery process. A majority of transparency requirements have been included among the provisions for the one-time allowance since the early phase, and no amendments have been introduced in the subsequent phases. Conversely, there has been a significant increase of three points in the transparency of the guarantee fund across the three phases of the recovery process. As for the redundancy fund and the emergency income, only one transparency requirement has been introduced in the second phase.

Table 4 illustrates how enforcement indicators have evolved across the four measures under investigation in the three periods of the recovery process. It shows that one enforcement provision—the allocation of ad hoc resources (2.e)—has not been included in any of the law decrees adopted by the Italian government. This finding implies that Italian public bodies have managed extraordinary procedures with the resources provided for the ordinary activity in the prepandemic period. Conversely, two enforcement provisions—ex post assessment (2.b) and the clear identification of enforcing authorities (2.d)—have been included in all the four measures under investigation since the first phase of the recovery process. As for sanctioning provisions (2.c), they have been introduced only for those measures that were focused on businesses (the redundancy fund since the first phase and the guarantee fund since the second phase). Regarding the ex officio benefit allocation upon acknowledgement of requirements, it has been introduced

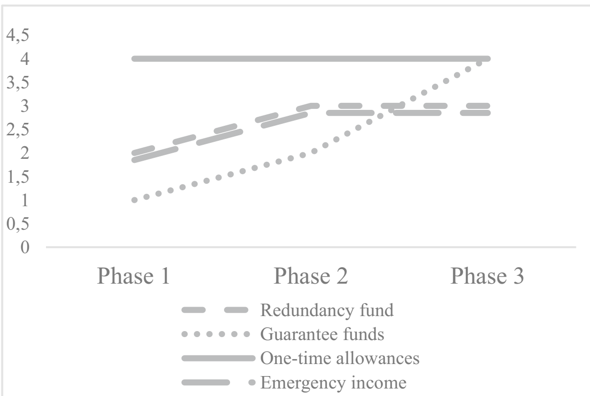

Fig. 1 Recovery Measures in Italy: Transparency Index

Table 4 Recovery Measures in Italy: Enforcement Indicators

Phases	1					2					3				
Indicators	2.a	2.b	2.c	2.d	2.e	2.a	2.b	2.c	2.d	2.e	2.a	2.b	2.c	2.d	2.e
Measures															
Redundancy funds	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
Guarantee funds for businesses	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
One -time allowances	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
Emergency income	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0

only for those measures that were focused on people (the one-time allowance since the first phase and the emergency income since the third phase).

As shown in Fig. 2, the enforcement index scored lower than the transparency one with regards to the four measures at the end of the period under investigation. If compared with the transparency requirements, provisions for enforcement have been more frequent in the first stage of the recovery process, whereas their increase over time has been less significant. Two measures (the redundancy fund and the one-time allowance) have exhibited a pattern of stability, whereas the remaining ones have increased their score over time by one point.

As shown in Fig. 3, the accountability index (transparency + enforcement) displays variance across the four measures under investigation. Whereas the one-time allowance exhibited a pattern of stability, the score of the guarantee fund has significantly increased over time. Two factors may account for the pattern followed by the guarantee fund: Its procedure involved many actors, and it took time to learn how to introduce accountability requirements without slowing down the disbursement of funds; it distributed significant amounts of resources, and this aroused concerns for corruption and mismanagement.

Figure 3 also shows that there has been no major difference between measures focusing on businesses and those focusing on people. This means that safeguards

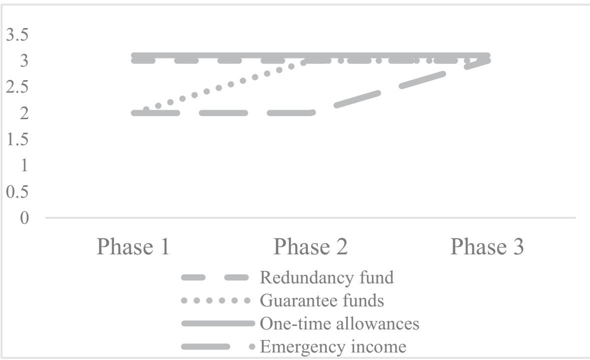

Fig. 2 Recovery Measures in Italy: Enforcement Index

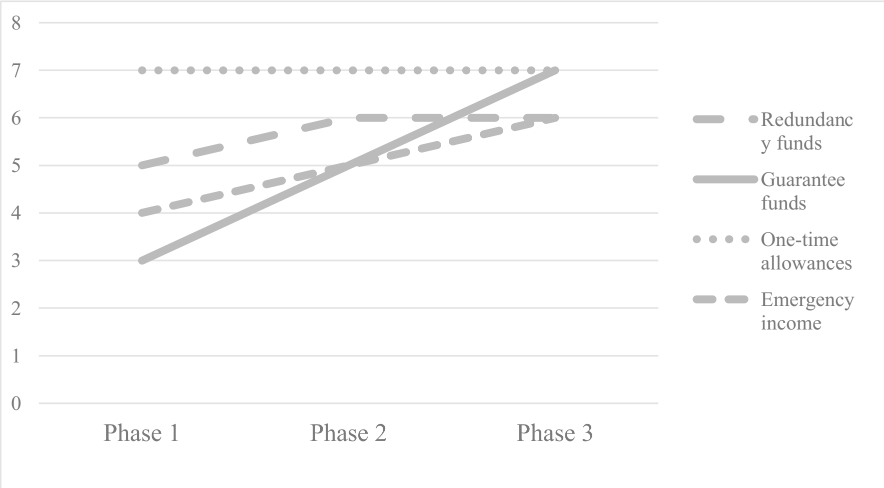

Fig. 3 Accountability Index

for accountability have not been commensurate with risks of corruption and mismanagement.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper examined safeguards for accountability that have been attached to four major recovery measures in Italy in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. By unpacking accountability into the dimensions of transparency and enforcement, the empirical analysis revealed that safeguards for accountability have mostly focused on transparency. This finding is consistent with the path that Italy followed before the pandemic, when the anticorruption framework focused on proactive disclosure of government information as the major tool for the prevention of corruption (Di Mascio et al., 2019). Furthermore, findings revealed that safeguards for accountability have not been commensurate with risks of corruption and mismanagement because recovery measures targeting businesses have not displayed a higher level of accountability if compared with measures targeting people. Finally, findings show that safeguards for accountability have increased over time, but the four measures under investigation have followed different paths across the three phases of the recovery process in Italy, ranging from stability (the one-time allowance for self-employed workers) to significant increase (the guarantee fund).

Overall, findings are consistent with the third hypothetical post-Covid-19 pathway outlined in Sect. 2. This pathway emphasizes that opportunities for corruption and mismanagement may depend on the type of crisis under investigation. In this regard, a creeping crisis like Covid-19 differs from natural hazards that have been targeted by the emerging stream of the literature analysing the impact of crises on corruption. The empirical analysis confirms that the temporal dimension sets the

Covid-19 crisis apart from other types of critical events. A long-duration crisis like Covid-19 has allowed concerns for corruption and mismanagement to grow over time in response to reports of misconduct. The sequential nature of recovery from a creeping crisis (i.e., that recovery took place in several rounds) has allowed policymakers to respond to these concerns by adjusting the safeguards for accountability between the rounds.

However, it is worth highlighting that the Italian legal framework for the distribution of Covid-19 recovery funds still suffers from major gaps, such as the secrecy surrounding the lists of businesses that gained access to funds and the lack of ad hoc resources allocated for enforcement. This means that concerns for corruption and mismanagement in the Italian Covid-19 recovery process are far from negligible. Furthermore, the empirical analysis focused only on coding the legal framework for the distribution of recovery funds, meaning that the findings ignored the effectiveness of the provisions under investigation. It is well known that concerns for corruption and mismanagement often lead policymakers to adopt safeguards for accountability favoured by anticorruption activists but without substantive consequences for actual implementation (Schnell, 2018). This holds true in Italy in particular, where previous experience with the implementation of administrative reforms revealed a large distance between the contents of what is prescribed by reform laws and the actual practice (Ongaro & Valotti, 2008).

Given the decoupling of policy adoption from actual practice typical of anticorruption reforms, it would be advisable to complement the analysis of the legal framework with data on the implementation of the formal safeguards for accountability. Furthermore, elite interviewing would help to collect a more detailed insight on Covid-19 recovery measures in Italy by uncovering the hidden elements of political action that were not clear from an analysis of legal texts. In particular, interviews to officials responsible for the design and adoption of recovery measures would help to trace the links between the rise of concerns for misconduct and the decisions taken by policymakers across the three phases of the recovery process.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the operationalization of safeguards for accountability proposed in this article contributes to the empirical analysis of recovery measures in a comparative perspective. First, indicators of transparency and enforcement may be employed in coding recovery measures that have been adopted in Italy to tackle the effects of crises predating the outbreak of Covid-19. This comparative analysis across time would help to collect a more detailed insight on the path dependence hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the early stage of the recovery process has been shaped by previous responses to those crises that hit Italy before Covid-19. This would imply that the four measures under investigation exhibited various levels of transparency and enforcement in the first phase of the recovery process because they were influenced by different arrangements that had been introduced in similar measures providing support to businesses and people hit by crises in the prepandemic period. Second, indicators of transparency and enforcement may be employed in coding Covid-19 recovery measures across countries. A cross-national analysis would help to check whether a learning process leading to the introduction of safeguards for accountability in the later stages of the Covid-19 crisis has occurred not only in Italy but also in other countries. A cross-national analysis would also help to assess the influence of a number of determinants (levels of corruption and income, among others) on the design of safeguards for accountability that have been attached to Covid-19 recovery packages.

Finally, practical implications can be drawn from the empirical investigation of the evolution of transparency and enforcement frameworks in response to a long-duration crisis. The time has come for practitioners to develop structures and procedures that reflect the context of contemporary governance in which public organizations face creeping crises, those slow-moving and ever-developing threats that require sustained attention, and effective intervention if their massive effects are to be controlled. Findings revealed that the major flaws of the Italian framework for the management of recovery packages have been redressed only partially because learning unfolded in a context marked by heightened uncertainty. This implies that new administrative capacities should be built today to prepare governments in dealing with the next long-duration crises.

Author's contribution The article is the result of a common undertaking. However, the Introductory and "Research method" sections can be directly attributed to Alessandro Natalini, sections "Research hypotheses" and "Discussions and conclusions" to Fabrizio Di Mascio, and section "Empirical analysis" to Federica Cacciatore.

Declarations

Informed consent ✓

Ethical approval ✓

Conflict of Interest None.

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