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# Scientific Committees, Government and the Management of the COVID-19 Emergency in Italy Some Empirical Insights Drawn from the Study of the Decision-Making During the «First Lock-Down»

Giuseppe Ieraci

The case of the management of the COVID-19 emergency in Italy showed by the growing influence of professionals from the medical environment on the institutional decision-making bodies. To investigate this phenomenon, an analysis of the decision-making arena during the first wave of the pandemic crisis (February-May 2020) was conducted resorting to the minutes of the meetings of the Technical Scientific Committee (TSC), appointed by the Civil Protection Department (CPD) of the Italian government. The analysis revealed an 'actor constellation' in which the TSC centralized the decision-making and exercised a permanent influence on the government, while the circuit of the political representation (national legislature, regional and local government) resulted marginalized.

*Keywords:* Experts; Democracy; Crises Management; Technocracy; Actor Constellation; Public Policies.

«[A] government of experts is admissible in regards to means, not ends»  
(Sartori 1987, 423)

## 1. Introduction

The reasons that led to the increase in the weight of technicians and of technical knowledge in the political decisions in contemporary democracies have been subjected to extended investigation, and they range from the capacity of experts to gain autonomy from the political institutions, and consequently control over policy areas, to their ability to set the terms of policy problems according to their preferred values (Snow 1961; Meynaud 1969; Gunnell 1982; Radaelli 1999;

Bertsou and Caramani 2020; Tortola and Tarlea 2021). There is substantial conceptual agreement that technocracy refers to the overwhelming role in the policy making of unelected experts over politicians, although quite often these experts are co-opted in the control room by the politicians themselves. Normally, this process of co-optation is justified by the need to select the consistent means to a certain set of ends or values to be achieved, assuming that the politicians may not be competent enough to identify the straightest and most effective means-ends link over a given policy problem. This attitude is the effect of the assumption that the relationship between experts and politicians is somehow sequential in policy-making (Tortola and Tarlea 2021, 1953), that is the former intervene before the decision is made, providing to the politicians with the «intelligence needs» to come to a correct decision (Lasswell 1951).

This research deals with expertise and technical committees in the case of the recent management of the COVID-19 emergency in Italy. The objects of the investigation are the role of the Technical Scientific Committee (TSC) appointed by the Civil Protection Department (CPD) of Italian government in early 2020 and of the «actor constellation» (Scharpf 1997) that can be traced in the policy arena invested with the problem of managing the COVID-19 emergency in Italy in the most critical phase (February-March 2020). The recommendations of the TSC did in fact constitute in this phase an essential guide to the action of the Italian government, which resorted to a series of executive decrees inspired by the TSC. The main source of the research were the minutes of the meetings held by the TSC in the period.

The purpose of this research was to obtain a picture of the arena of power that outlined the policy choices in the COVID-19 emergency. This research cannot therefore have a rigidly hypothetical-deductive approach (*if ... then*), in the sense that it does not intend to explore specific causal and predictive links, but rather to provide an atheoretical case-study that can guide future theoretical hypotheses or corroborate those already existing (Lijphart 1971)<sup>1</sup>. The research essentially intends to identify the actors who were present in that specific policy arena and to provide a measurement of their specific weight within the same. This type of measurement, as will be better clarified in Section 3, was obtained by resorting to a proxy variable, specifically the frequency of references to the actors as drawn from an analysis of the minutes of the meetings of TSC.

<sup>1</sup> Atheoretical case studies «are entirely descriptive and move in a theoretical vacuum: they are neither guided by established or hypothesized generalizations nor motivated by a desire to formulate general hypotheses» (Lijphart 1971, 691).

Nonetheless, a basic working hypothesis was selected, according to which *if* it can be assumed that the impact of technical-scientific knowledge in politics is increasing, *then* we should observe that the content of government policies and decisions should be strongly guided by recommendations of the scientific technical committees. This working hypothesis (*if* technical-scientific knowledge grows in importance in politics, *then* the decisions of the authorities should reflect it consistently) should prove to be particularly fertile precisely in a case study on an emergency problem such as the one presented here.

It should also be clarified that the TSC was considered as a unitary actor, that is, that its indications and proposals were assumed as maximally coherent and cohesive. The reason for this assumption is twofold. Conceptually, the assumption of the unitary character of the TSC is functional to the research design conducted here. In fact, the aim of the research is a mapping of the arena of power and an evaluation of the impact of a specific technical committee in the decision-making of the Italian government. The proposals and indications of the TSC were presented as unitary by their proponents and assumed as «technically binding». Consequently, any internal differences between the members of the TSC were overcome by the presentation of the recommendations as unanimous.

Secondly, the deconstruction of the TSC's action in the multitude of micro-actions of its members would not have been possible from an analysis of the minutes of the meetings and would have required different investigation techniques, such as participatory observation which was impossible due to procedural and legal limitations (the sessions of the CTS were obviously not open to the public). Ultimately, the abandonment of a research strategy conducted on micro-behaviours and internal dynamics of the TSC appears functional to the purposes of this research, which are placed more at the macro-level of the analysis of the arena of power as a whole.

The methodological approach here employed is inspired by Lasswell's concept of arena of power, later taken up and developed by Lowi (1964) in the context of policy studies. For Lasswell, the arena of power «is the situation comprised by those who demand power or who are within the domain of power» (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 78). Lowi circumscribed this definition, making it more immediately applicable to policy studies. For Lowi, «each arena tends to develop its own characteristic political structure, political process, elites, and group relations» (Lowi 1964, 689-690). In this research we will take a less ambitious path, limiting ourselves to trying to define the composition of the power arena that managed the first phase of the COVID-

19 emergency in Italy. In section 2 of this article, some preliminary and conceptual analysis over the role of technicians and committees in political decisions is put forward. In section 3 the research methodology is illustrated. In section 4 the findings of the research will be presented, and particularly the composition of the actor constellation in the policy arena over the management of COVID-19 emergency in Italy. In the final section 5 of the article some conclusions will be drawn on the role of expertise in the policy process and on the phenomenon of technocracy.

## 2. Technicians and Committees in Political Decisions

Recent research in the field of public policy analysis have in fact shed light on the growing influence of area experts in policy decisions, especially in cases of emergencies and environmental disasters (Collingridge and Reeve 1986; Collins and Evans 2002; Ieraci 2019). The management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy offers an interesting further verification of the evidence of those researches. In the months of lockdown in Italy, from February 2020 onwards, there was an evident eclipse of politics and the field was occupied by the technocrats of the Higher Institute of Health (*Istituto Superiore di Sanità*) and of the Civil Protection Department (*Dipartimento della Protezione Civile*) of the Italian government.

There are at least three reasons that could explain this transformation of the democratic political process in the event of national emergencies and/or environmental crises. Firstly, the technical complexity of decisions and the collection and management of quantitative data to support them de-legitimize the political class and can make it unreliable in the eyes of public opinion. We need answers of the type «if ... then», such as those typical of the scientific explanation. In the COVID-19 case we needed a systematic collection of data on the spread of the infection and «definite» answers on how to contain it. Ultimately, crisis and emergency management favor the implicit transformation of any technical unit into a political unit, as only technical units control the know-how and inevitably end up playing a central and political role in problem formulation and solution. In emergencies, decisions are made on the basis of shared values and are legitimized by technical and scientific information provided by experts, technical committees and other external agencies.

Secondly, the complex constitutional and parliamentary procedures required to pass bills and the times of democracy seem

incompatible with the necessary speed of decision in times of crisis. The expert and the scientist do not argue, except with their peers. The expert commands, using his cognitive authority and inhibits criticism in the recipients. In this way, rapid and unambiguous decisions are reached, and the suspension of democracy seems necessary to reach effective decisions.

Thirdly, when managing a crisis, the political class may be reluctant to expose itself at the risk of failure and find convenient to leave the field to the experts, who speak out of «incontrovertible» scientific authority and technic expertise. In the acute phase of the pandemic crisis in Italy we have witnessed the eclipse of representative democracy and the government has acted through decrees legitimized by the opinion of experts in the area. In this way, the political class does not assume a direct role in crisis management, any decision is legitimized by the emergency and by the opinion of experts and eventually the political class cannot be blamed for any failure in the electoral stage.

The first aspect recalled (the technical complexity of decisions) is linked to the perspective of Lasswell's scientific policy making. This scientific nature of the decision seems undisputable in the management of emergencies. Technicians and scientists manage complex quantitative data and forecast models. The second aspect is typical of the rational-legal procedures of politics in the democratic sphere. The acts of power are validated through a predictable procedure and a legal-rationality (as Max Weber called it). These procedural steps are normally subject to administrative control and very time-consuming, but when a health or an environmental emergency is declared, «normal» time-consuming rational-legal practices are not compatible with the request for an immediate solution to the problem. It cannot be excluded, therefore, that in emergency situations the perception of the cost of the decision, also in terms of consent in the event of a failure of the solution, pushes the political class into taking a step back, leaving the field to technocracy and disclaiming any failure.

The technical committees or technocracies, which intervene in defining the scientific contents of the policy, ultimately occupy an internal and crucial position within certain epistemic communities, because they hold the technical knowledge which these communities use to support their value choices. Haas (1992) defined «epistemic communities» as a network of knowledge-based experts who «play in articulating the cause-and-effect relationships of complex problems, helping states to identify their interests, framing the issues for collective debate, proposing specific policies, and identifying salient points for negotiation» (*ivi*, 2). Epistemic communities can consist of experts

from various professions and disciplines, who tend to share a set of norms and principles, an interpretative causal scheme (deriving from their knowledge and research), an intersubjective conception of knowledge validation and, finally, who share practices associated with the problems towards which their professional competence is directed (Haas 1992, 3; Zito 2001; Dunlop 2013). Galanti (2017, 251 and 259) and Caselli (2020) discussed the impact of policy advisory systems in contemporary decision-making, showing both their institutional and non-institutional character and the nature of their intervention, which can be procedural or substantive, of short or long term.

The idea that political decisions are influenced by non-primarily political actors (i.e. by actors who formally do not occupy power positions) has been naturally inherent in group theory since its inception and has branched out in the directions taken by the analysis of public policies, briefly referred to above. Collingridge and Reeve (1986) already noted that the use of experts and scientists in decision-making processes is linked to the continuous growth of the complexity of the issues. Haas (1992) similarly observes that some global impact problems (very often the environmental problems) present increasing elements of uncertainty and technical complexity. Decision makers may therefore not have the knowledge and skills required for the solution of the technical-scientific problems posed by the decision. The concept of «epistemic community» and similarly that of «advocacy coalition» (Sabatier 1988, 1993, 1999) certainly contribute to giving connotations to the idea of the network of actors, public and private, which is also evoked by policy network approaches (Rhodes and Marsh 1992; Smith 1992; Giuliani 1996). Ultimately, in the case studied here, the technical-scientific content of the decision forced the government to select a committee of experts to whom to delegate the content of the decision (definition of the cause-effect link, definition of the risk thresholds and consequent behavioral constraints). The case presented here shows how the technical-scientific content of a decision and the use of expert committees can marginalize the representative political institutions (government and parliament). The management of emergencies, sometimes in the environmental field, lends itself very much to highlighting the role of expertise (Collins and Evans 2002). In these areas, in fact, expertise leverages the principle of competence, and scientific knowledge comes into play to define the positions of value of the political and social actors. The relationships that are established tend to be asymmetrical, as the authority of the experts is cognitive and draws a boundary between science and other forms of culture. Ultimately, in many decision-making processes with

a high technical-scientific content, expertise tends to establish itself as the exclusive principle of legitimizing a decision (Collins and Evans 2002; Pellizzoni 2011, 16-17), but thus sometimes removing it from the political debate and to some extent depoliticizing it. Weiss (1980) already underlined how scientific knowledge can provide decision makers with a background for empirical generalizations and ideas that insinuate themselves into policy deliberation. These traits will be easily recognizable in the description of the COVID-19 emergency management in Italy.

### 3. The Research and its Methodology

The methodological assumption of this research is behaviourist and linked to the perspective of actor-centered institutionalism:

The basic idea is that the solutions (identified by substantive policy research) to a given policy problem must be produced by the interdependent choices of a plurality of policy actors with specific capabilities and with specific perceptions and preferences regarding the outcomes that could be obtained (Scharpf 1997, 69).

The concept of «actor constellation» developed by Scharpf (1997) is central in the methodological approach here employed. The actors can be individual or collective, they are involved in the policy process and their choices determine the outcome of the process, as each actor is «characterized by specific capabilities, specific perceptions, and specific preferences» (*ivi*, 43). Therefore, «the constellation describes the players involved, their strategy options, the output associated with strategy combinations, and the preferences of the players over these outcomes» (*ivi*, 44)<sup>2</sup>.

Although this schematically outlined approach implies a formalized analysis of these strategic options and combinations of strategy, we have adhered to a more behaviourist and traditional interpretation of the network of relationships between actors within an arena of power.

Groups and actors are part of decision-making interaction systems, to which reference is made in the analysis of public policies (policy network analysis, policy subsystems, issue networks, policy communities, advocacy coalitions, to name a few very widespread approaches: Hecló 1978; Sabatier 1988, 1993, 1999; Jenkins-Smith and

<sup>2</sup> An application of the actor-centered institutionalist approach is offered by Kriesi and Jegen (2001).



Sabatier 1993; Howlett and Ramesh 1995). This research tries to account for the network of relationships and influences that have manifested themselves during the decision-making process: How were the contents of the government decrees for the management of the first phase of the COVID-19 emergency determined? What was the actor constellation that most influenced the policy content of the government decrees?

In decision-making with a strong technical-scientific content, the identification of the actor constellation reveals the importance of the role of experts and scientific committees in determining the objectives of the policy. Ultimately, the illustration of this role is the main result of this research. Experts and scientific committees offered an immediate «technical» answer to the problem, which the government took into account when formulating the decrees. As has already been anticipated, the research question that we want to test here is whether the consulting action of the technical-scientific committees in politics is concretely reflected in the contents of government policies, thus assuming in a hypothetical key that the more the contents government policies correspond to the recommendations of the scientific technical committees, the more marked are the influence and power of the latter. In other words, this implies that we can speak of technocracy as a new form of power if we observe that the political decisions, even if not taken directly and formally by technocrats, are however definitely guided and influenced by them.

To define the actor constellation that managed the COVID-19 emergency in Italy, we resorted to a combination of positional and decision-making criteria. A positional criterion was used to identify the actors in the constellation and their relative potential for influence. The regulatory provisions, in fact, attribute a certain position to each actor in the decision-making process and define the limits of their intervention.

The positional analysis was exclusively conducted on the formal documents of the Italian government and parliament, with reference to the appointment and establishment of the TSC, the definition of its composition and the range of action within the system of government departments. The documents consulted were essentially the government decrees establishing the TSC and other provisions concerning the National Service of Civil Protection within whose jurisdiction the TSC for the COVID-19 emergency was established (see below section 4).

The static picture that emerges from the positional survey was combined with the decision criterion. The TSC was set up by the Italian government as an advisory body meets 83 times during the

selected period of observation February-May 2020, which was the most acute phase of the crisis culminating at the end of the first lockdown. The method used was the analysis of the content of the minutes of the 83 meetings of the TSC in the observed period. All the minutes of the TSC meetings were analysed, noting the presence of or reference to other actors, the content of the recommended actions and their targets. No weighted scores were attributed to the occurrence of the references, so as not to determine any manipulation on the data collected. Each time an actor was referred to, a point was recorded and the sum of the points achieved by each actor constituted an absolute measure of its «weight» or «relevance» in the perception and attention paid to it by the TSC. Furthermore, to avoid possible distortions of the collected data, the repetitions of the references to each actor in every minute were not recorded. That is to say that for each minute the references to the various actors were recorded, omitting the subsequent repetitions. This choice was necessary for the reason that in the passages of the minutes with a specific technical content an actor (e.g., an agency or even a competent authority) was sometimes quoted in succession in the formulation of a problem, but without an increased informative value or in any case without any «political» significance being attributed to this frequency of references. It is evident that these surveys conducted on the minutes of the 83 meetings of the TSC combined a quantitative method (counting of references) with a qualitative method (exclusion of subsequent references considered as simple repetitions).

The basic assumption of this decision-making perspective was that the references to other actors in the minutes of the TSC, or the presence of other actors in its meetings, could be considered a proxy indicator of the incidence of those same actors in the decision-making circuit. The proxy variable character of this data must be emphasized. It is difficult to obtain an objective measure of the political weight of an actor within a decision-making process, but if, following Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), we consider the «weight of power» as a measure of the «degree of participation in the decision-making process» then we can conclude, albeit with some caution, that the more an actor is referred to and cited in the formal documents pertaining to the decision-making process, the more this actor should have participated in the decision-making process itself, exercising in it either direct influence (modification of the course of action) or indirect influence (simple intervention in the course of action)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> On the employment of these notions of «direct» and «indirect influence», cfr. Dahl (1961).

Subsequently, the recommendations of the TSC were compared with the content of the government decrees (Decrees of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, DPCM) in the same period, in order to detect the degree of correspondence between the DPCM and the recommendations themselves. This survey also followed the logic of the content analysis, albeit conducted with a qualitative strategy. The comparison of the formal documents, on the one hand the minutes of the TSC meetings and on the other the DPCM, was not carried out using automated software for text analysis, but by qualitatively comparing the content of the two classes of texts. It did not appear appropriate to use software for content analysis due to the differences in the comparative texts. In fact, the minutes of the TSC meetings have a low degree of juridical-legal formalization, since they are texts that convey recommendations for political action. Furthermore, the minutes of the meetings contain entire sections of little political interest or in any case not relevant for the purposes of this research, as in the case of specific indications of medical practices or validations of health and pharmacological procedures. On the contrary, the DPCM have the juridical-legal form typical of any legislative measure. Consequently, a qualitative comparison was made between the texts of the two classes of documents to verify the degree of transposition of the content of the former (recommendations contained in the minutes of the TSC meetings) in the latter (legal provisions enforced through the DPCM).

The basic assumption was that the higher the correspondence between the recommendations of the TSC and the DPCM, the more influential and decisive the action of the TSC could be considered. The rationale for this assumption can be easily explained. Normative acts are communicative or linguistic «facts» – that is, more or less complex linguistic utterances – and at the same time prescriptions about «doing» and «not doing», that is, concrete content of action that is intended to be imposed on social actors in a given environment. On this basis, excluding the comparison of the recommendations of the TSC and the DPCM as communicative and linguistic «facts» for the reasons given above, the traceability of the recommendations of the TSC in the DPCM could be considered evidence of the direct influence exerted by the TSC on the government, which adopts prescriptions about «doing» and «not doing» consistent with the recommendations of the former.

#### 4. The Actor Constellation of the Policy Arena Over the Management of COVID-19 Emergency in Italy

Crisis management in Italy has its operation center in the CPD, which is a structure of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (the Italian government). The CPD was established in 1982 and starting from 1992 strengthened its position and role, becoming a sort of central co-ordinating agency for the National Service of Civil Protection<sup>4</sup>. The enactment of the Civil Protection Code in 2018 centralized in the CPD the management of all national resources useful for ensuring assistance to the population in the event of an emergency. This centralization of powers and resources has been the subject of controversy over the years.

On January 31, 2020 the Italian government declared a state of emergency, for a duration of six months, as a result of the health risk associated with the spreading of COVID-19<sup>5</sup>. The initial reaction of the Italian government was characterized by poor coordination and a rather limited capacity for policy response (Capano 2020). The Head of the CPD was entrusted with the coordination of the interventions necessary to deal with the emergency on the national territory. At the beginning of February 2020, the spreading of the pandemic was clearly manifest in Italy, and several meetings followed between the Prime Minister at the time, Giuseppe Conte, the CPD and the competent ministers. The particularity of the emergency, which was not environmental, i.e. connected to climatic events or geophysical phenomena as in the experience of the earthquake, made it necessary to mobilize new skills in the health, scientific and medical fields. This was the situation that on February 5, 2020 prompted the Head of the CPD to establish a Technical Scientific Committee (TSC) with the competence of consulting, supporting and coordinating the actions in order to combat

<sup>4</sup> Over the decades, many environmental emergencies in Italy had shown a lack of coordination between civilian structures (firefighters, police forces, forest guards, doctors and health facilities) and the military in the initial stages of rescue. This criticality had emerged in all its gravity on the occasion of the earthquake in the mountain area of *Irpinia* (Campania) in 1980 and was the impetus for the creation of a structure that would deal permanently with civil protection.

<sup>5</sup> The state of emergency has been subsequently extended with the following measures: decree-law of July 29, 2020 (until October 15, 2020); resolution of the President of the Council of Ministers of October 7, 2020 (until January 31, 2021); decree-law of January 14, 2021 (until April 30, 2021); decree-law of April 22, 2021 (until July 31, 2021); decree-law of July 23, 2021 n. 105 (until January 31, 2021). With the Council of Ministers of December 15, 2021, the extension was set for March 31, 2022.

the epidemiological emergency due to the spread of COVID-19, although the TSC was not the only task force established by the government to cope with emergency (see Galanti and Saracino 2021). The TSC was made up of experts and representatives of the State Administrations, who were recruited on reputation and with the task to provide consultancy and advice (*ibidem*)<sup>6</sup>. The research conducted here is limited to the TSC as part of the system of task forces set up to deal with the management of the COVID-19 emergency, not only because this broader system has already been investigated (*ibidem*)<sup>7</sup> but above all because the TSC was the first of these task forces to be created, it was undoubtedly the one that exerted the greatest impact on the social system, it determined with its choices the reflective choices of the other task forces, and finally it was the last to be dissolved. Its political centrality in the management of the COVID-19 emergency is therefore quite clear.

Table 1 shows the data relating to the meetings of the TSC in the two-year period 2020-21, which highlight the concentration of activities in the phase here examined when the CTS met 83 times (13 meetings in February, 27 in March, 23 in April and 20 in May).

<sup>6</sup> Its original composition (26 members, see Galanti and Saracino 2021, 281) was established with the Order of the Head of the DCP no. 663 of April 18, 2020 and then with the Ordinance n. 673 of May 15, 2020. On March 17, 2021, the composition of the TSC was redefined with Ordinance no. 751. The main change in this reorganization of March 2021 consisted in the rebalancing between the administrative and the technical-scientific components, after which the latter became almost exclusive. Furthermore, given the need to rationalize its activities and to optimize its functioning, the number of members of the TSC was reduced, while experts in the statistical-mathematical-forecasting sector and of epidemiology were included to carry out the analysis of the data collected. The TSC ceased to exist on March 31, 2022. For reference of the actual composition and the names of the experts recruited in the TSC, cfr. <https://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/it/notizia/emergenza-COVID-19--on-line-la-composizione-del-comitato-tecnico-scientifico>.

<sup>7</sup> Other task forces created for the management of the emergency were the CEES (over macroeconomics topics), the Task force «Liquidità» (macroeconomics), the Task force Dati (technology), the Task force fake news (technology), the Task force Mir (education), and the DNR (civil rights). See (Galanti and Saracino 2021, 279-282).

Table 1. *Number of Meeting of the TSC (2020-21).*

	2020	2021
January	–	10
February	13	11
March	27	7
April	23	9
May	20	10
June	8	8
July	6	7
August	7	4
September	6	6
October	12	2
November	9	5
December	9	2
Totals	140	81

The minutes of the 83 meetings in the period considered were analyzed to identify the actors to whom TSC refers, the prevailing content of the TSC recommendations and, finally, the policy targets of the recommendations themselves<sup>8</sup>. The study of the contents and targets of the TSC recommendations is useful to verify the degree of conditioning exercised by them on the decisions taken by the government in the period considered, that is, on the decrees that the government issued at that stage. Table 2 reports the recurrences of the content of the recommendations expressed in the 83 meetings. The underlying hypothesis is that if the technical-scientific knowledge was evoked by politicians to supply their intelligence needs and to cope with their relative difficulty in solving complex problems, then we should check whether these recommendations were actually followed by the government.

<sup>8</sup> The minutes of the meeting are accessible at <https://emergenze.protezionecivile.gov.it/it/sanitarie/coronavirus/verbali-comitato-tecnico-scientifico>.

Table 2. *Frequency of the Contents of the TSC recommendations (February-May 2020).*

	Restrictions imposed for arrivals from areas at risk (quarantine, forced hospitalization), travel and activity restrictions	Adoption of containment and isolation measures	Swabs, health checks and protocols, health and social health structures, health personnel	Movement of goods, personnel, production workers, work
February	6	2	6	4
March	9	–	52	10
April	2	2	50	6
May	–	–	30	3
Totals	17	4	138	23

Swabs, health checks, social and health protocols, measures in social health structures, and with regard to health personnel constitute the main contents of the recommendations of the TSC (138 references), in the acute phase of the crisis (March-May 2020), when the pandemic was spreading rapidly and the recorded number of deaths for or with COVID-19 reached its peak<sup>9</sup>. Restrictions imposed on arrivals from areas at risk (quarantine, forced hospitalization), and travel and activity restrictions (17 references) were drastic from the beginning, as it will be pointed out below, and similarly with the adoption of containment and isolation measures (4 references), and measures concerning the movement of goods, personnel, and of production workers (23 references).

The policy targets of the TSC recommendations (see Table 3) were consistent with their content. Public events were immediately limited and effectively prohibited, the use of new methods (remote working and telematic teaching) was imposed on school and higher education.

<sup>9</sup> The failure to distinguish between «deaths from» COVID-19 (as a direct and only cause) and «deaths with» COVID-19 (as a concomitant factor of death) has been a source of controversy in the Italian case. The *Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (ISS, a key player in the constellation described below) opted throughout the crisis to avoid this distinction. According to data from ISTAT (the Italian Statistical Institute), in the period March-May 2020 there were 34079 COVID-19 related deaths in Italy. Cfr. [https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/03/Report\\_ISS\\_Istat\\_2020\\_5\\_marzo.pdf](https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/03/Report_ISS_Istat_2020_5_marzo.pdf) (p. 9).

Table 3. *Frequency of Policy Targets of the TSC recommendations (February-May 2020).*

	Labor	School	Higher Education and University	Public and Private Transport (train, planes, ship)	Military and Diplomatic Personnel, Police	Public Events (sport, show business, culture, religious functions, entertainment)
February	–	3	2	4	2	5
March	1	4	1	8	3	13
April	11	5	5	7	4	2
May	4	5	1	–	–	16
Totals	16	17	9	19	9	36

Military and diplomatic personnel and work environments were subject to guarantee and control measures. These contents and policy targets were systematically acknowledged by the Italian government, which used them to trace the lines of executive intervention to face the pandemic. The instrument used was that of the emergency decree, allowed by the Italian Constitution<sup>10</sup>.

To verify the degree of compliance of the government with the actions requested by the TSC, an indirect method is offered using a comparison between the timing of the meetings of the TSC itself and the issuing of the decrees. A simple consequentiality can be hypothesized between the recommendations expressed in the TSC meetings and the subsequent measures adopted by the government. In other words, if consequentiality were to be verified, we could assume it as an indication of the fact that the government acted only after the recommendations of the TSC. In any causal link, synchronism is one of the conditions necessary for its verification, that is to say that if  $x$  causes  $y$ , then  $x$  must precede  $y$  and between  $x$  and  $y$  there is a temporal continuity (Nagel 1961, 4). Furthermore, a more direct method of verification can be used, comparing the content of the recommendations of the TSC expressed at time  $t_1$  with the subsequent implementation of the same in the Government decrees at time  $t_2$ . Checking the timing is

<sup>10</sup> Art. 77 of the Italian Constitution establishes that the government can be delegated by the parliament to issue decrees («in extraordinary cases of necessity and urgency») which have the value of ordinary laws. The delegation of the parliament to the government is expressly requested. The Italian constitution does not specify what these «extraordinary cases of necessity and urgency» are, and during the history of the Republic governments have often used art. 77 to bypass the ordinary parliamentary procedures and speed up the executive action. In the conclusion this point will be addressed.



very easy and has a fairly obvious outcome, after all in the most critical months of the pandemic the Italian public got used to the almost daily declarations of the Minister of Health Mr. Speranza, or the Prime Minister Mr. Conte who said, paraphrasing, «We asked the TSC to tell us if... », or «We are waiting for the TSC to tell us if... ». Ultimately, any political action and Government decision went through a prior approval by the TSC. Furthermore, the Italian public soon got used to the daily appearance in the media of TSC members, in official or informal communications, which anticipated the content of future Government measures. In Table 4, however, an attempt is made to apply both the criteria of synchronicity and that of content.

Synchronism is detected simply by counting the number of TSC meetings that precede the issue of each government decree. Of course, this data cannot assure with certainty the causative character of the TSC's action on that of the government, but simply the government's caution and its willingness to make its decisions after the issue of the TSC recommendations are indirect proofs that there had to be a quite consistent exercise of influence of the latter. The correspondence of the content of the TSC recommendations with that of the decrees was instead evaluated in a more qualitative way, by comparing the minutes of the TSC meetings with the text of the decrees themselves.

The decree of February 25, 2020 is preceded by 8 meetings of the TSC, which on February, 22 (Minute n. 7) explicitly recommends «the isolation of the areas in which SARS-CoV2-19 transmission is taking place» (the Regions of Lombardy and Veneto). This decree created the first «red zones», isolated from the outside and with restrictions on circulation and socio-economic activities. From here on there was a progressive extension to the whole national territory of the limitations already imposed on these «red areas» of Lombardy and Veneto, particularly through the following decrees of March 1, 4 and 8. During the meeting held on March 4, 2020 (Minute n. 18), one of the rare episodes of tension between the TSC and the government is recorded. The government had just decided to close schools and universities, despite the TSC arguing that

There are currently no data that irrefutably address the usefulness of school closures regardless of the local epidemiological situation. Some predictive models indicate that the closure of the school could guarantee a limited reduction in the spread of viral infection [...] Given that the Council of Ministers has decided to suspend the frontal teaching activities of schools of all levels on the national territory, the CTS deems it appropriate to point out that this decision is a further precautionary measure, in a strategy to contain the contagion [Minute n. 19, March 5, 2020].

Table 4. *Synchronism between the TSC meetings and the issue of the Government decrees and correspondence of the contents of the recommendations of the TSC and of the Government decrees (February-May 2020).*

Synchronism			Correspondence of the contents	
N. of TSC Meetings held before the issue of each Government Decree (DPCM)	Dates of TSC Meetings	Issue of the Government Decrees (DPCM)	Synthesis of the recommendations of the TSC	Synthesis of the measures enforced by Government Decrees (DPCM)
8	7, 10, 12, 14, 18, 21, 22, 24.02	25.02	«[...] in light of the current epidemiological situation, [the isolation of the areas in which SARS-CoV2-19 transmission is taking place] is strongly recommended – provided it is timely – for the reduction of the circulation of the virus outside the affected areas, [...] in agreement with the President of the Lombardy Region» [Minutes no. 7 of the meeting held at the Ministry of Health, on 22 February 2020].	– Isolation of areas of first spread of COVID-19 (Lombardy and Veneto); – Measures relating to conduct of sporting events, organization of school activities, health prevention in prisons, organization of cultural activities and tourism.
4	26, 27, 28, 29.02	01.03	«There are currently no data that irrefutably address the usefulness of school closures regardless of the local epidemiological situation» [Minute n. 18 March 4, 2020].  «Given that the Council of Ministers has decided to suspend the frontal teaching activities of schools of all levels on the national territory, the CTS deems it appropriate to point out that this decision is a further precautionary measure, in a strategy to contain the contagion» [Minutes n. 19 March 5, 2020].  <i>On March 7, 2020, the CTS recommends a national lockdown until April 3, issuing a detailed list of all the required measures</i> [cfr. Minute n. 21 March 7, 2020].	Extension and standardization to whole national territory of measures already adopted at regional level (Lombardy and Veneto).  Further containment and management measures. The two DPCM of March 1 and 4, 2020 cease to produce effects.
3	1, 2, 3.03	04.03		
3	5, 6, 7.03	08.03		
–	–	09.03		National lockdown: – the measures enforced by the DPCM of March 8, 2020 are extended to entire national territory. – Any form of gathering of people in public places or places open to the public is prohibited. – Measures envisaged for containment and management of epidemiological emergency from COVID-19 are applicable throughout the country.

Table 4. *Synchronism between the TSC meetings and the issue of the Government decrees and correspondence of the contents of the recommendations of the TSC and of the Government decrees (February-May 2020) (continued).*

Synchronism			Correspondence of the contents	
N. of TSC Meetings held before the issue of each Government Decree (DPCM)	Dates of TSC Meetings	Issue of the Government Decrees (DPCM)	Synthesis of the recommendations of the TSC	Synthesis of the measures enforced by Government Decrees (DPCM)
2	9, 10.03	11.03	The ISS provide daily pandemic data relating to the previous 24-48 hours.	Over entire national territory: – Closure of all commercial and retail activities, with exception of food stores, basic necessities, pharmacies and parapharmacies.
11	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21.03	22.03	In this phase, the CTS mainly decides on aspects relating to compliance with medical protocols and prescribed procedures. Furthermore, its organization is articulated and strengthened: – with the establishment of Working Groups (Protective devices, ventilation equipment, biocides); – with the inclusion in its composition of representatives of AIFA and INAIL.  CTS announces that it will organize a meeting with heads of the Press Offices of the various Institutions on communication strategies.	Over entire national territory: – Closure of non-essential or strategic production activities. – All persons prohibited from travelling by public or private means of transport to a municipality other than the one in which they are located, except for proven work needs, or of absolute urgency for health reasons.
5	24, 25, 27, 30, 31.03	01.04	The Head of Cabinet of the Ministry of Health communicates to the CTS the «possibility of confirming the containment measures of the epidemic so far in force, presumably extending them [...] Furthermore, given the need for timely interventions, it is necessary that the CTS pronounces itself with a document that specifically indicates the activities to be carried out for an attenuation of the measures where the scientific conditions existed and all the investigations were carried out».  With regard to possibility of restarting production activities, the TSC emphasized that there were no solid and conclusive data on the spreading of the epidemic and reaffirmed the continuation of the decreed measures, allowing the possibility to children and teenagers of leaving the house for exercise and sport activities [Minute n. 40 March 31, 2020].	On the entire national territory: – Extension to 13 <sup>th</sup> April 2020 of the measure of the DPCMs 8 <sup>th</sup> , 9 <sup>th</sup> , 11 <sup>th</sup> and 22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2020.

Table 4. *Synchronism between the TSC meetings and the issue of the Government decrees and correspondence of the contents of the recommendations of the TSC and of the Government decrees (February-May 2020) (continued).*

Synchronism			Correspondence of the contents	
N. of TSC Meetings held before the issue of each Government Decree (DPCM)	Dates of TSC Meetings	Issue of the Government Decrees (DPCM)	Synthesis of the recommendations of the TSC	Synthesis of the measures enforced by Government Decrees (DPCM)
8	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9.04	10.04	<p>«The CTS discusses the possibility of removing the restriction measures currently in force [...] The CTS reserves the right to deepen the discussion in the light of the analyses that the ISS is finalizing, as well as to convene representatives of the world of work and the competent institutions in the next few days».</p> <p>«In order to implement mitigation strategies of contagion containment measures, the CTS preliminarily agrees that control actions should be gradually reduced [...] The lockdown must be removed progressively and in successive phases, based on the assessment and hierarchy of the risk in each structure of social importance» [Minutes nn. 42 and 49 April 2, and 9, 2020].</p>	<p>Over entire national territory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extension of all restrictive measures to May 3, 2020.</li> <li>- From April 14, opening of stationeries, bookstores and clothing stores for children and babies is allowed, and forestry and wood industry are included among permitted production activities.</li> </ul>
10	11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24.04	26.04	<p><i>At this stage, the TSC turns its attention to the vaccination campaign and the "socio-political" effects of the lockdown:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- «The CTS expresses strong concerns about the news coming from the territory on the reduction of vaccination activities, which could significantly reduce vaccination coverage with a consequent increase in the incidence of infectious diseases such as measles».</li> <li>- <i>The requests of Government Ministers to reopen the universities are considered, but</i> «The CTS reserves the right to express a definitive opinion, in the light of the acquisition of information relating to the more comprehensive remodeling of the contagion containment measures (transport, availability of airway protection for the population)» [Minutes nn. 50 and 52 April 11, and 15, 2020].</li> </ul>	<p>Over entire national territory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Measures for containment of the COVID-19 emergency during phase two.</li> <li>- Reopening of manufacturing, construction, real estate brokerage and wholesale activities.</li> <li>- Catering with take-away is allowed but with the prohibition of consuming the products inside the premises and the prohibition of parking in the immediate vicinity of the same.</li> </ul>

Table 4. *Synchronism between the TSC meetings and the issue of the Government decrees and correspondence of the contents of the recommendations of the TSC and of the Government decrees (February-May 2020) (continued).*

Synchronism			Correspondence of the contents	
N. of TSC Meetings held before the issue of each Government Decree (DPCM)	Dates of TSC Meetings	Issue of the Government Decrees (DPCM)	Synthesis of the recommendations of the TSC	Synthesis of the measures enforced by Government Decrees (DPCM)
15	27, 28, 29, 30.04 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16.05	17.05	The TSC continues its activity of monitoring protocols and procedures. The requests for mitigation of the lockdown are presented by the Government to the TSC.	– With specific decrees and ordinances, state, regional or municipal, the movements of natural persons and the methods of carrying out economic, productive and social activities can be regulated.
–		18.5		– Amendments to article 1, paragraph 1, letter cc), of the DPCM May 17, 2020.

Sources: Our own elaboration from: [www.gazzettaufficiale.it](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it); [www.governo.it/it/lorestoacasa-misure-governo](http://www.governo.it/it/lorestoacasa-misure-governo); <https://emergenze.protezionecivile.gov.it/it/sanitarie/coronavirus/verbali-comitato-tecnico-scientifico>.

The whole sequence can be observed and evaluated in Table 4, without it being necessary to go into a detailed account here. The general impression is that there was a maximum degree of convergence of the content of the government decrees with the recommendations of the TSC. The fundamental passage is registered on March 7, 2020, when the TCS recommended a national lockdown until April 3, 2020, issuing a detailed list of all the required measures [cfr. Minute n. 21, March 7, 2020]. This list of measures to contain the epidemic were all meticulously taken up in the decree of March 9, 2020 which imposed the national lockdown, i.e. the extension to the whole national territory of all the measures already adopted for the «red zones» with the decree of March 8, 2020. Among these was the prohibition of any form of gathering of people in public places or places open to the public. Further restrictions imposed by the decree of March 22, 2020 were preceded by 11 meetings of the TSC. These restrictions were the closure of non-essential or strategic production activities, and the prohibition of all persons from travelling by public or private means of transport

to a municipality other than the one in which they were located, except for proven work needs, or absolute urgency for health reasons.

In this phase, the TSC was strengthened on an organizational level and also began to formulate recommendations of a more explicitly political nature. From an organizational point of view, the establishment of Working Groups (protective devices, ventilation equipment, biocides)<sup>11</sup> and the inclusion in the TSC of representatives of AIFA (Italian Pharmaceutical Agency) and INAIL (Italian National Institute for the Insurance against Accidents at Work)<sup>12</sup>, are worthy of note, in so far as they testify to the intent of the TSC to extend its technical-scientific expertise and finally even to guide the government in the field of labour policies. Furthermore, the TSC initiated the practice of regular meetings with the media to communicate its guidelines, complaining that its action was presented in a prejudicial manner by the press and that therefore it was necessary to establish a channel of direct communication with national public opinion<sup>13</sup>.

In the waning phase of the pandemic spread (April-May 2020), the TSC imposed caution and counteracted the pressure of the Government and the various stake holders for the easing of restrictions and the resumption of socio-economic activities:

The TSC takes into consideration the possibility of removing the restriction measures currently in force [...] The TSC reserves the right to deepen the discussion in the light of the analyses that the ISS is finalizing, as well as to convene representatives of the world of work and the competent institutions in the next few days... [while] In order to implement mitigation strategies of contagion containment measures, the TSC preliminarily agrees that control actions should be gradually reduced [...] The lockdown must be removed progressively and in successive phases based on the assessment and hierarchy of the risk in each structure of social importance [Minutes nn. 42 and 49 April 2 and 9, 2020].

We can therefore deduce from this close analysis of the sequence of the TSC meetings and the issuance of the decrees that the action of

<sup>11</sup> The Working Groups were set up on March 13 (Cfr. Minute n. 26, March 13, 2020), and their composition was decided on March 14 (Cfr. Minute n. 27, March 14, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of the Director of AIFA was requested by the TSC to the Department of Civil Protection on March 16, 2020 (Cfr. Minute n. 29) and his first participation to a TSC meeting was reported on March 21 (Cfr. Minute n. 34). On March 17, 2020 INAIL officially delegated its representative in the TSC as an expert in the fields of labour health and security.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Minute n. 27, March 14, 2020.

the Italian government in the very first stage of the pandemic (February-May 2020) was clearly guided by the indications of the TSC itself, to a degree that raises doubts on the autonomy of the Italian government with regard to the former.

However, if it can be inferred that the TSC was the central actor of this new arena of power, who were the other actors of the constellation that made it up?

Table 5. *References of the TSC to Actors (February-May 2020).*

	TSC meetings ( $m$ )	References of the TSC to Actors ( $r_a$ )				
		ISS	Government Ministers	AIFA	State-Regions Conference, Regions	WHO and other International
February	13	2	6	–	1	–
March	27	36	12	4	23	9
April	23	12	21	16	8	6
May	20	15	18	18	–	–
Totals	83	65	57	38	32	15
Relevance Index ( $r_a/m$ )		.78	.68	.45	.38	.18

Note: AIFA, Agenzia Italia del Farmaco (Italian Pharmaceutical Agency); ISS, Istituto Superiore della sanità (Higher Institute of Health); WHO, World Health Organization.

In Table 5 the references of the TSC to other actors of the hypothetical constellation have been counted, omitting the duplications and limiting the survey to the 83 meetings held during the period under observation. The data in this elaboration were also obtained from the study of the minutes of the meetings. Considering that the references were counted without duplications over the whole set of the 83 meetings of the TSC, the Index of Relevance ( $R$ ) in Table 5 calculated as a simple ratio between the total number of references to each actor ( $r_a$ ) and the total number of meetings ( $m$ ) can vary from 0 (no reference) to 1 (one or more references per each meeting). Therefore, if  $R=r_a/m$ , then the more  $R$  approaches 1, the more relevant the actor will be.

The very first impression one gets is that of a very centralized and national arena. In fact, references to institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or other international regimes are very rare, just 15 in 83 meetings ( $R=.18$ ). As other studies have highlighted

(Vampa 2021; Vicarelli and Neri 2021), the management of the COVID-19 emergency has exacerbated the competition between the State and the Regions in Italy which in some phases has turned into a real confrontation. Ultimately, as shown very well by Baldi and Profeti (2020), decision-making centralization feeds the conflict and the mobilization of the regions against central administration for various reasons: the spread of infections varies from region to region; the control of health expenditure is borne by each region<sup>14</sup>; the composition of political coalitions in regional governments differ; there is no clear distinction between state and regional spheres of competence (*ibidem*, 286-293)<sup>15</sup>. The Regions have tried to defend their capacity of autonomous political response from the interference of the central administration, on aspects such as the management of the health emergency, the regulation of socio-cultural activities, and the closure of the territories to the outside world. The establishment of the TSC and the relative marginalization of the regions in the circuit of the decision-making has contributed to accentuate this contrast<sup>16</sup>. Table 5 indicates, in fact, how the TSC refers not too frequently (32 references) to the Regions and to the so-called «system of Conferences» ( $R=.38$ )<sup>17</sup>.

The real counterparts of the TSC are the Government ( $R=.68$ ), which delegates competent ministers (in particular the Minister of Health Mr. Speranza) in 57 meetings out of 83 held during the period<sup>18</sup>, the AIFA (38 references,  $R=.45$ ) and above all ISS (65 references,  $R=.78$ ).

<sup>14</sup> For the implementation of the health measures in Italy at the regional level, see Capano and Lippi (2021), according to whom the first response to the pandemic depended on the health policy organizational capacity, decentralized health systems (i.e. Italy, Sweden) implement very differentiated first responses.

<sup>15</sup> See also Casula *et al.* (2020) and Toth (2021) who stress the effect of the regionalization of the Italian health system on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar tendencies by the government to centralize decision-making to the highest degree, marginalizing the regions, were also reported in the management of the Recovery Fund. See Profeti and Baldi 2021.

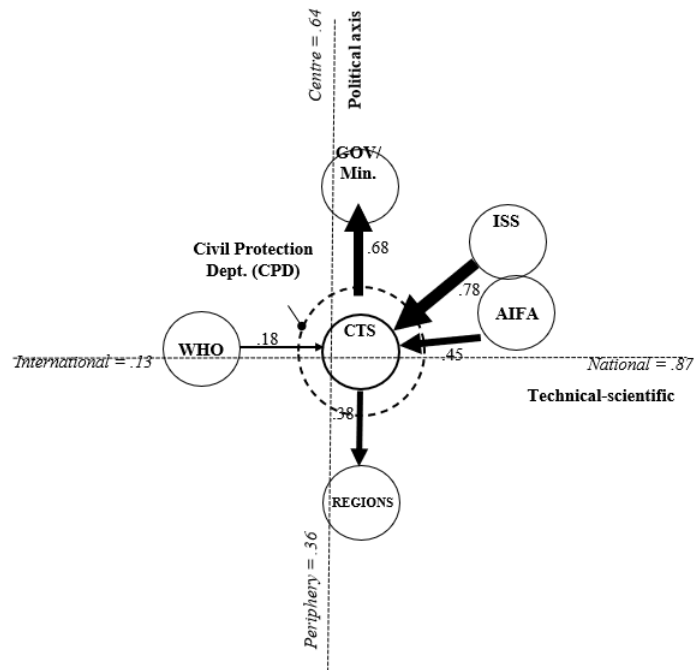
<sup>16</sup> The unstable equilibrium between center and periphery in the management of the pandemic was underlined also by Parrado and Galli (2021).

<sup>17</sup> The multi-level relations in Italy, in a complex administrative structure with the State at the top, follow by the Regions, Provinces and Municipalities as well as other local bodies, have recently been channeled into a system of Conferences that facilitate the meeting and the negotiation of policies: the State-Regions Conference, the Conference of Presidents of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces, and finally the Unified Conference (which brings together the first two).

<sup>18</sup> It is worth mentioning that during the period under observation certain government ministers put forward to the TSC 11 petitions or questions, and auditions with various ministers were held, particularly in the policy area of sport, tourism, labour, transport.



FIG. 1. *The Actor Constellation of the Policy Arena over the Management of COVID-19 Emergency in Italy (February-March 2020).*



These actors stand out in the constellation that is described in Figure 1 where the width of the arrows has been drawn according to each actor's relative  $R$ , while in a more qualitative way they point towards the subordinate actor in the asymmetrical relations. Furthermore, two axes of relations have been hypothesized. The horizontal one has been named Technical-scientific and shows the relationships between external or international actors, such as international organizations and regimes, and national actors, whilst the vertical has been named Political and concerns the center-periphery relationships among the political institutions in the multilevel Italian structure of government.

Among the international actors, only the WHO was a referent of the TSC, which adopted its guidelines on the pandemic and often referred to the international framework of the pandemic as presented by the WHO. However indirect and not particularly strong, the relationship between WHO ( $R=.18$ ) and TSC signifies the dependence of

the CTS on the guidelines of the WHO. Always on the Technical-scientific dimension, but oriented towards the National semi-axis, there can be seen the references of the TSC to the ISS ( $R=.78$ ) and AIFA ( $R=.48$ ), which are the two national agencies that mostly influenced the recommendations of the TSC to the government. While the ISS provided daily data on the progress of the pandemic in Italy, the AIFA played a fundamental role in the validation of protocols and in the certification of anti-COVID therapies and drugs.

Ultimately, Figure 1 shows with some clarity that in the center of the actor constellation involved in the management of the crisis lay the TSC of the CPD. It is equally evident that in that constellation the actors of the national and central arena dominated, namely the government (but in a subordinate position with respect to the TSC), the ISS and AIFA, with a consequent relative marginalization of the Italian regional system. We are therefore in the presence of a highly centralized decision-making process at national level, in an actor constellation dominated by technical agencies and technical-scientific experts. The actors of the democratic representation circuit (government, parliament, regions, local power institutions) were marginalized and substantially excluded from the decision-making process.

## 5. Conclusion

The action of the TSC in the management of the COVID-19 emergency can be framed as an excellent example of the effects of policy advice, understood as a relationship of influence exercised by making knowledge available in the policy process (Hoppe 1999; Galanti and Lippi 2018). In the case study here presented, the importance of professional figures outside the decision-making bodies and the phenomenon of the externalization of policy advice (Craft and Howlett 2013) can be clearly observed. Both the effects of hybridization (cooperation between bureaucrats and politicians, on the one hand, and professionals and scientists, on the other) and those of legitimation (recognition of the validity of the cognitive contribution in the policy process) are quite clear in the analysis of the action of the TSC and the management of the COVID-19 emergency in Italy. Following Craft and Howlett (2012), there is evidence that the TSC's action concerned short-term reactive advice and substantive content, «whereby the members of the executive, the executive offices and political staff, and also external consultants [...] give substantive advice in rapid reaction» (Galanti 2017, 258).

In terms of hybridization, the TSC was indeed made up of experts, scientists and representatives of the State Administrations, while their legitimation was ensured by their ability to handle technical-scientific knowledge needed by the politicians to cope with their relative difficulty in solving complex problems. The data relating to the meetings of the TSC in the two-year period 2020-21 highlighted the concentration of activities in the phase February-May 2020 when 83 meetings were held. The content analysis of the minutes of the meetings of the TSC and of the subsequent DPCMs confirmed that the recommendations of the TSC were actually followed by the government. Swabs, health checks, social and health protocols, measures in social health structures, and with regard to health personnel constitute the main contents of the recommendations of the TSC. Public events were immediately limited and effectively prohibited, the use of new methods (remote working and telematic teaching) was imposed on schools and higher education. These contents and policy targets were systematically adopted by the Italian government, and the lines of executive intervention to face the pandemic were drawn from the recommendations of the TSC.

The Italian governments in the very first stage of the pandemic (February-May 2020) were clearly guided by the indications of the TSC, and the policy process took place in a very centralized and national arena. The establishment of the TSC and of other task forces in this policy arena determined the relative marginalization of the regions in the circuit of the decision-making. Furthermore, in this research two axes of relations have been hypothesized, a technical-scientific one (relationships between external or international actors), and a political one (center-periphery relationships among the political institutions in the multilevel Italian structure of government). The former axis (see Figure 1) appeared to be predominant over the latter. The center of the actor constellation involved in the management of the crisis was the TSC of the CPD, the actors of the national and central arena, namely the government (although in a subordinate position with respect to the TSC), the ISS and AIFA, dominated. Consequently, there was a relative marginalization of the Italian regional system. The decision-making process was highly centralized at national level, in an actor constellation dominated by technical agencies and technical-scientific experts.

The case of the management of the COVID-19 emergency signaled a relative marginalization of the political class and of the parliament (Feltrin 2020). Decisions were in fact made by technicians and professionals, who were not politically responsible and who exercised

discretion in their actions. The complex relation between means-ends in the decision-making chain was stated by Simon (1947)<sup>19</sup>, and it involves the commitment of technicians, expert, scientists and advisory agencies in politics, something which has been lately referred to as the phenomenon of politicization of the expertise (Craft and Howlett 2013). The reconstruction of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Italian case revealed how crisis and emergency favour the implicit transformation of any technical unit into a political unit, technical and scientific information provided by experts, technical committees and other external agencies confine the political class into a minor position and relegate it to the margins of the decision-making process.

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<sup>19</sup> For a reappraisal of this problem, see Ieraci (2020).

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