

# REFLECTIONS ON THE QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE IN PANDEMIC TIMES

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**Abstract:** Governance arrangements played a critical role in countries response to the global pandemic, reminding us that strong institutions make a difference. The paper discusses the main principles, values and dimensions of good governance and offers an overview of available assessment methodologies of the quality of governance. It also shows that, in the case of Romania, the pandemic challenged the governance dimension where Romania is performing worst – the effective provision of public services.

**Keywords:** *governance, quality, impartiality, corruption, accountability, effectiveness, integrity*

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## **Introduction**

COVID-19 brought to the fore, once again, the idea that institutions and public governance matter. During these pandemic times, facing unprecedented uncertainty people started to look at public institutions as being the main actors responsible and, at the same time, empowered, to safeguard the general wellbeing. At the same time, limitations in their functioning became more obvious than ever.

Starting from the general World Health Organisation recommendations, regarding lockdowns, social distancing and mass testing, governments and sub-national governments reacted differently, both in terms of fighting the virus and in terms of recovery plans. Citizens also reacted differently to officially imposed measures: civil unrest cases were registered against lockdowns and social distrust was manifested against the requirements of wearing face masks, self-isolation or quarantine. Our goal is not to assess the COVID-19 response measures

from a quality of governance point of view, as it was seen that different countries had different problems and different responses at different territorial levels; and above all, the pandemic is ongoing. Still, the global situation allows us to reflect, in a comparative manner, on the quality of governance in different countries and regions.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governance arrangements have played a critical role in countries' immediate responses to the crisis and will continue to be crucial both to the recovery and to building a "new normal" once the crisis has passed. The World Bank prepared a stream of work on institutional reforms that support countries in strengthening their response to the crisis. The Council of Europe is preparing a toolkit which will enable local authorities to measure their resilience and their capacity to manage emergency situations at institutional, administrative and civil society levels, involving all the stakeholders into the decision-making process. Several questions mobilize this paper: What is good governance? What is the quality of governance in different countries and regions? What is Romania's performance in terms of good governance? How is the quality of governance affecting the pandemic response?

## **Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The globalisation and the shift from the industrial society to knowledge-based society brought several challenges and opportunities. Natural disasters, disease outbreaks, food insecurity, climate change and widening economic disparities require systemic approaches, above the traditional state-centric approach. No single government can resolve these complex problems anymore, but difficulty remains in obtaining a joint commitment of the whole society. In dealing with these challenges, a shift was registered from the prevalence of governments, referring to the state level decision making process, towards governance, expressing a "polycentric configuration"<sup>1</sup> of power, an overall shift in modern policy-making.

The concept of governance has been defined by many scholars, coming from different fields of research. In European Studies the

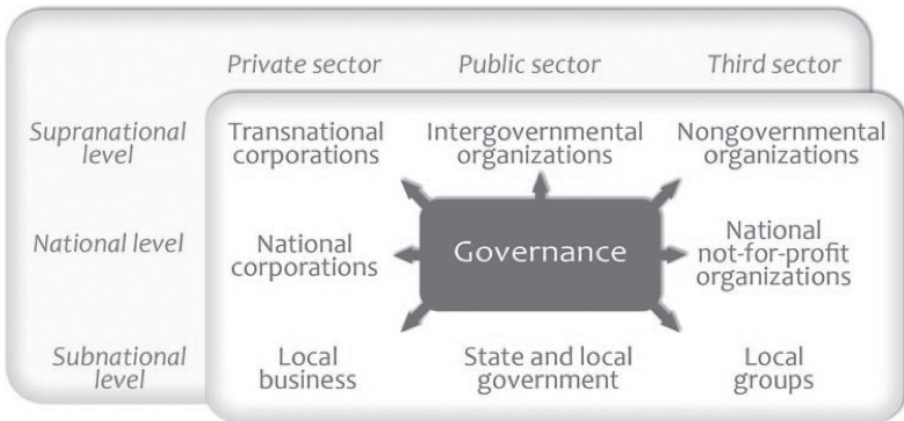
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1 Sabine Saurugger (2010) *Théories et concepts de l'Intégration européenne*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, p, 227.

concept was introduced in the years 90-2000, and used by scholars such as Lisbeth Hooghe, Gary Marks, Thomas Christiansen, Ian Bache and Beate Kohler-Koch. As a general perspective, the term governance expressed a general vision over a socio-economic and political system as diffusion of authority between different actors, private and public, acting at different levels.

In governance, decision making powers extend beyond government to various actors in society, placed at different levels. Nye & Kamarck (Fig.1) described governance as the simultaneously diffusion of state functions in several directions in response to “incongruence between state capacity and increasingly complex challenges”<sup>2</sup>.

Fig. 1. Diffusion of governance (Kickbusch and Gleicher, 2012 *apud* Nye and Kamarck, 2012)

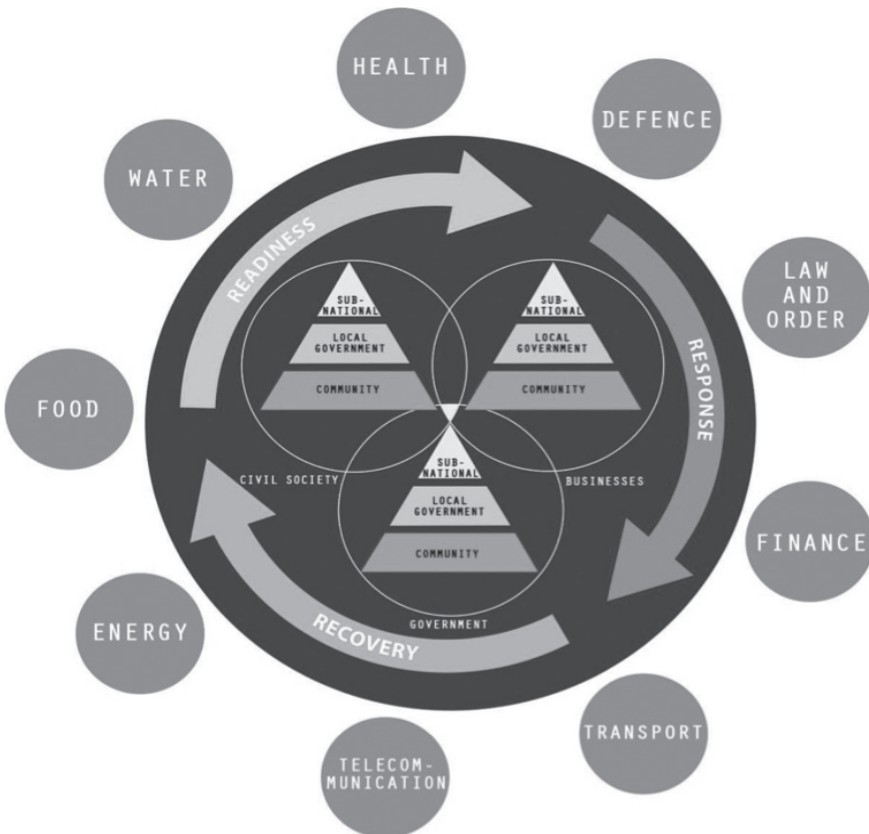


The World Health Organisation (WHO) developed in 2012 a readiness framework to prepare the whole of society to react to a disease outbreak<sup>3</sup>, highlighting interconnected levels of potential action, involving government, businesses and society, while having the local community and the sub-national levels of government at its core (Fig.2).

2 Ilona Kickbusch and David Gleicher (eds) (2012) “Governance for health in the 21st century”, *World Health Organisation*, p.18.

3 Ilona Kickbusch and David Gleicher (eds) (2012) “Governance for health in the 21st century”, *World Health Organisation*, p.8.

Fig. 2. Readiness framework to prepare the whole of society to a disease outbreak (Kickbusch and Gleicher, 2012)



Several comparative studies assessed the quality of governance, highlighting its main values and dimensions. We will mention the research commissioned by the World Bank and the European Commission.

### Values and dimensions of good governance

Governance imply value-based management, as “good governance starts with an agreed set of principles and values widely shared”<sup>4</sup>. While there is no right or wrong compilation of values, each public governance having its own mix, OECD summarised 16 principles and values of

4 European Commission (2015) “Quality of Public Administration. A Toolbox for Practitioners”, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p.20.

modern public administration.<sup>5</sup> The three main principles of modern governance - *legality*, *integrity* and *impartiality* are complemented by the following values: inclusiveness, openness, user-centricity, responsiveness, connectivity, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, vision, reflection, innovation and accountability.

Specific dimensions of public governance (Fig. 3) create trust between citizens and government. Trust is “one of the most important foundations upon which the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems are built”<sup>6</sup>, key for social and economic outcomes. It creates social cohesion and well-being and enables government to govern by increasing its efficiency and effectiveness.

Fig. 3. Dimensions of public governance relevant for building public trust ( based on OECD, 2013, p.15)

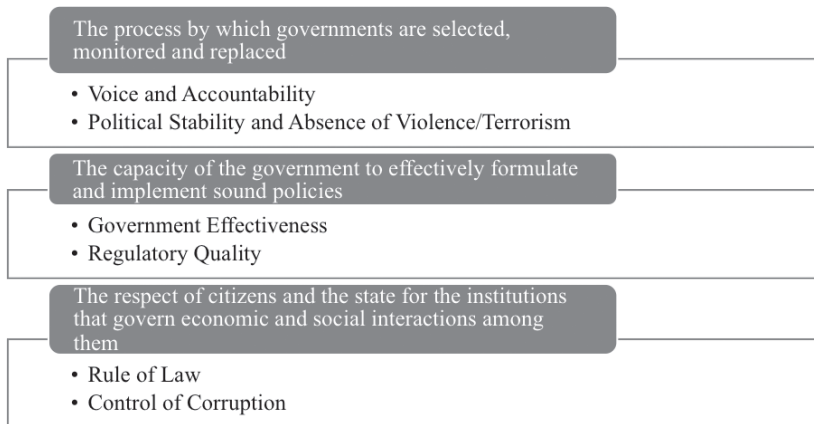
<b>Dimensions of Governance</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Reliability</i>	the ability of governments to minimise uncertainty in the economic, social and political environment of their citizens, and act in a consistent and predictable manner
<i>Responsiveness</i>	the provision of accessible, efficient and citizen-oriented public services that effectively address the needs and expectations of taxpayers
<i>Fairness</i>	the ability of offering public policy making processes and decisions that are understood as being fair and meeting locally accepted standards
<i>Openness and inclusiveness</i>	a systemic, comprehensive approach to institutionalizing a two way communication with stakeholders, whereby relevant, usable information is provided, and interaction is fostered as a means to improve transparency, accountability and engagement
<i>Integrity</i>	the alignment of government and public institutions with broader principles and standards of conduct that contribute to safeguarding the public interest while mitigating the risk of corruption

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2012) “Strategic lessons from the comprehensive public governance reviews”, GOV/PGC(2012)14.

<sup>6</sup> OECD (2013) “Trust in Government. Assessing the evidence, understanding the policies”, GOV/PGC(2013)1, p.8.

Taking into consideration these principles, values or dimensions, researchers aiming to assess the quality of governance built specific methodologies. Research commissioned by the World Bank mentioned a comprehensive definition of governance, by Kaufman, Kray and Mastruzzi: “the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes (a) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; (b) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and (c) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them”<sup>7</sup>. The definition is highlighting both the input (a, c) and output (b) legitimacy of political systems and represents the starting point of the annual analysis of good governance in over 200 countries, starting with 1995. World Bank Governance Indicators assessed six dimensions of good governance (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Dimensions of Good Governance (Kaufman, Kray and Mastruzzi, 2010)



The European Quality of Government (QoG) Index filled a knowledge gap, assessing the quality of governance, not only at state-level, but also at regional level, in 28 European countries. Three surveys were issued until present time, in 2010, 2013 and 2017. QoG was seen as “a broad, latent multi-dimensional concept consisting of high **impartiality** and **quality** of public service delivery, along with low **corruption**. The survey thus aimed at capturing average citizens’ perceptions and experiences with *corruption*,

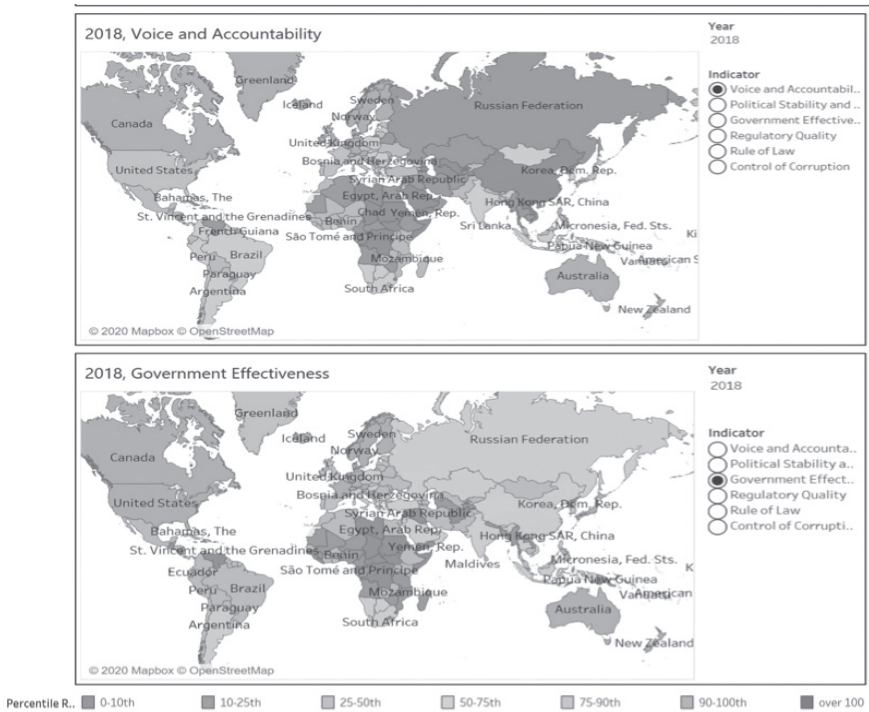
<sup>7</sup> Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay and Massimo Mastruzzi (2010) “The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues.” *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, No. 5430, p.4.

and the extent to which they rate their public services as *impartial* and of good *quality* in their region of residence”<sup>8</sup>. The three public services analysed are relevant in today’s context: health, education and law enforcement. We will present a selection of relevant results in the following section.

### Quality of governance - comparative results

Starting with World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, we selected the most recent available data, the year 2018, and we extracted the results for four indicators – voice and accountability, effectiveness of governance, rule of law and control of corruption<sup>9</sup>. As we see in Fig. 5 and 6, countries are assigned percentile ranks on each of the six governance indicators.

Fig. 5. Indicators of governance for the year 2018 (Kauffman and Kray, 2010)



8 Nicholas Charron and Victor Lapuente (2018) “Quality of Government in EU regions: Spatial and Temporal Patterns”, University of Gotheburg, *Working Papers Series*, No. 2, p. 5.

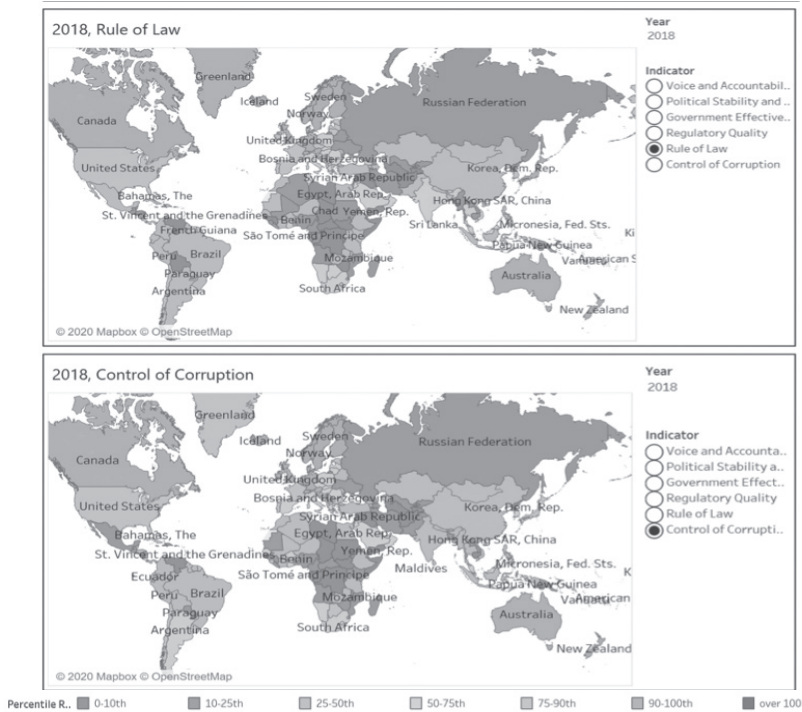
9 See all data at World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/> (accessed 23 July 2020)



In general terms, the best results belong to North America, Western Europe and Australia. Romania's performance is comparable with the one of Latin America and Southern Africa in terms of Voice and Accountability (percentile 50-75th) and with Latin America, Eastern Europe and Northern Africa in terms of Effectiveness of Government (percentile 25-50th).

Figure 6 shows that Romania, along with other Eastern and Southern European countries have similar performances in terms of Rule of law and Control of corruption (percentile 50-75th). These results were confirmed by the European QoG data which showed that, while most regions in Northern Europe have remained among the top performers in quality of government, recent years have seen a fall of numerous Southern regions, particularly in Italy, Greece and Spain.

Fig. 6. Indicators of governance for the year 2018 (Kauffman and Kray, 2010)

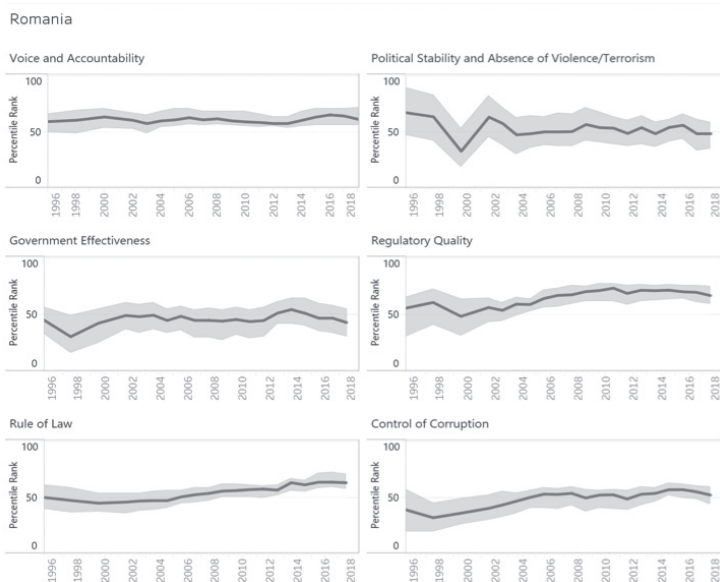


Zooming in on Romania, in a longitudinal perspective on all six indicators, we observe (Fig. 7) a progress of one percentile rank (from



25-50th to 50-75th) regarding two indicators: Rule of law and Control of corruption. The indicator Government Effectiveness is declining, representing the lowest rank among the six indicators (percentile rank 25-50th).

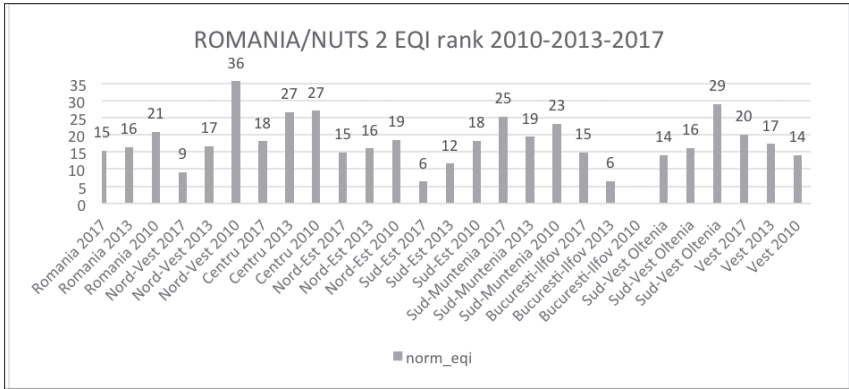
Fig. 7. Romania – time series on all indicators, 1996-2018 (Kauffman and Kray, 2010)



In order to offer a more detailed territorial analysis, we used the European QoG Index (EQI), the only measure of institutional quality available at the regional level in the European Union, which investigates the performance of 202 European regions. The conclusion of the European Commission based on EQI data is that the list of regions with the most significant improvements in quality of government in the period 2010-2017 is dominated by Eastern regions. Still, the three EQI surveys collected in 2010, 2013 and 2017 show that Romanian NUTS 2 manifested a decrease in quality of government, from 2010 (mean rank-last 21 regions) to 2017 (mean rank – last 15 regions). During this period, all Romanian regions were placed among the last 36, out of a total of 202 analysed units. While the best performing Romanian region was Nord-Vest, ranked in the last 36 regions in 2010 (downgraded since then), the last performing region was Sud-Vest, placed in 2017 in the last 6 regions, out of 202. Vest region was the only Romanian NUTS

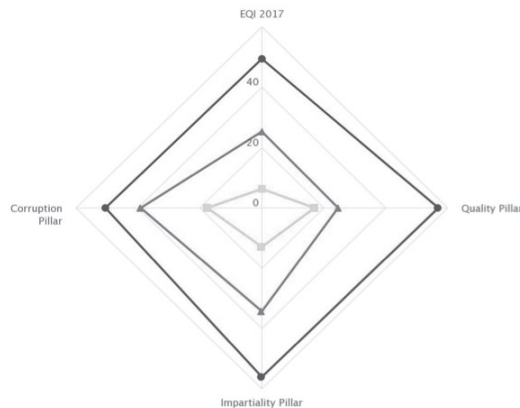
2 region perceived in a constant improvement of QoG (from rank 14 in 2010, to rank 17 in 2013 and rank 20 in 2017).

Fig. 8. EQI ranks – Romania (based on Charron and Lapuente, EQI Data - Regional Level - 2010, 2013 & 2017)



Moreover, all eight Romanian NUTS 2 regions are placed below the EU mean in terms of EQI. Fig. 9 shows that both the best performing Romanian NUTS 2 region (Sud-Muntenia –rank 166 out of 202) and the lowest performer (Sud-Est, rank 196 out of 202) are placed below the mean EQI. Also, when speaking about the three indicators which compose EQI, the Romanian NUTS 2 regions are, in average, furthest away in providing quality of public services.

Fig. 9. Romanian NUTS 2 regions - best (red) and worst (green) performance, against mean EQI in EU countries (blue) (Charron and Lapuente, EQI Data - Regional Level - 2017)



The global health crisis is challenging the weakest points of Romanian government: its ability to offer qualitative services, in terms of healthcare, education and law enforcement. The pandemic is already enhancing the rural-urban divide regarding access to education, due to the fact that children coming from disadvantaged socio-economic environments face higher probabilities of disconnecting from school<sup>10</sup>. The pressure on the health systems unravelled the consequences of several known problems<sup>11</sup>, such as corruption in public procurement procedures and in access to the medical profession. Law enforcement is hampered by poor regulatory quality: in the absence of a Quarantine Law (finally approved by Parliament in July 2020) the measures to prevent the epidemic spread, introduced through a Government Ordinance, were contested at the Constitutional Court and their implementation was put in stand-by<sup>12</sup>. Other normative ambiguities in the post-lockdown transition, after 15th of May 2020, lead to a hard to control situation, producing worrying medical statistics. Moreover, since 2020 is an electoral year in Romania (local elections were supposed to take place in May) the political competition does not stop: the rhetoric of civil liberties proliferates, to the detriment of the fundamental right to life.

### Quality of governance and pandemic response

All international organisations are highlighting the fact that governance matters more than ever: countries with better governance provide better responses and results in coping with the pandemic than poorly governed countries, as suggested by the association between COVID-19 testing ability (Fig. 10.a) and infection rates (Fig. 10.b) and various governance dimensions<sup>13</sup>.

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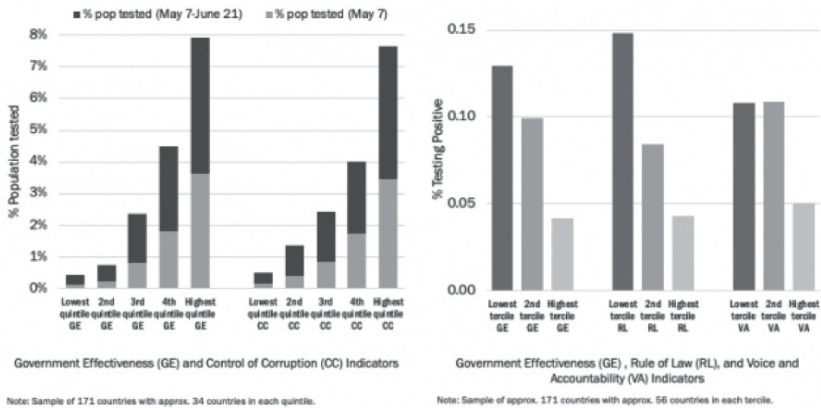
10 Florian, Bogdan and Sebastian Țoc (2020) "Policy note: Educația în timpul pandemiei. Răspunsuri la criza nesfârșită a sistemului educațional românesc".

11 Direcția Națională Anticorupție (2018) "Corupția în sistemul public de sănătate".

12 Mirel Bran, (2020) "En Roumanie, se protéger du Covid-19 est « anticonstitutionnel ». Une décision de la cour constitutionnelle roumaine freine les mesures prises par le gouvernement pour gérer la crise sanitaire", *Le Monde*, 08.07.2020.

13 Daniel Kauffman (2020) "What the Pandemic Reveals About Governance, State Capture and Natural Resources", Natural Resource Governance Institute.

Fig. 10 a. % of population tested, by quality of governance  
 Fig. 10. b. Reported positive cases as a share of tests, by quality of governance  
 (Kaufmann, 2020)



The pandemic brought to the fore the need for effective, inclusive and accountable governments, able to perform several roles: to ensure the continuity of the decision-making process, to reprioritize public resources, to prepare solutions for mitigating the economic and social shocks, to provide essential public services, starting with health and other critical areas, to engage citizens and businesses in collaborative problem-solving projects and to communicate and act transparently and in an accountable manner. Prior to the pandemic, several countries and regions were already experiencing low quality of governance. The crisis has exposed, once again, their vulnerabilities such as weak public institutions, corruption, the challenge of solving problems with limited resources and the difficulty of collective action in providing public goods, such as public health.

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