



GOVERNANCE, STATE AND DEMOCRACY IN A POST-CORONA WORLD

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Introduction

For over a decade, we have been living through consecutive global crises that have brought the concept of **governance** in national and global politics to the forefront. The security crisis triggered by the 9/11 attacks, the 2008 global financial crisis with its specific repercussions in the Eurozone, and the refugee crisis with the onset of the Syrian civil war were particularly instrumental in highlighting the centrality of competent and effective governance in managing often unanticipated crises extending national borders and requiring international cooperation. The current epidemic with the new coronavirus (COVID-19) is no exception. Like the other crises of the past decade, the coronavirus is also a test of governance, where competence, transparency, trust, capacity, effective leadership, and efficiency lie at the core of success in fighting the pandemic. The extent to which states possess the capacity to address the crisis, the degree of inclusiveness through governance, and the complementary relationship between inclusive governance and democracy are key issues that we need to focus on in assessing the global response to the epidemic.

Although we are still in an early stage to identify the exact factors that lead to the relative success in fighting the epidemic and reducing the number of deaths in countries, a quick look at World Bank data suggests that good/inclusive governance may be a better fit in explaining the lower number of deaths in countries than other variables such as regime type. Indeed, while some democracies such as South Korea and Taiwan fared relatively well in controlling the pandemic, others such as the United States and Italy lagged behind. In a similar vein, while some authoritarian states like Singapore and Vietnam also performed well in fighting the coronavirus, others like Iran largely failed, with an estimated number of deaths in the thousands.¹

The governance test brought on by the coronavirus emerges in a global context where multilateralism has already been in decline and nativist, **populist authoritarian leaders** have been rising to power in a considerable number of countries. As we have argued elsewhere, populist parties and leaders seem to capitalize on the fears of the people through the

discourse of “managing” and “containing” “risks” in society. In doing that, they play into the sense of ontological insecurity among their citizens, conveying the message that “delivery” from these “immediate” risks trumps the significance of rights and freedoms.² They justify the use of “strong leadership,” their low regard for checks and balances, and the exclusion of “intermediary powers” between the “people” and the “leader,” such as political party apparatuses, free and professional media, and free civil society, on the basis of delivering fast and effective responses to these risks and crises.

With its key role in substantially increasing the degree of ontological insecurity in individuals, the coronavirus epidemic thus creates the ideal context within which populists’ commitment to “**deliver**” in crisis situations can be put to the test. Their track record so far has not been promising, suggesting that the key instruments of the populist authoritarian playbook may indeed be the main hindrance in the effective governance of a crisis the size of the coronavirus epidemic. Rachel Kleinfeld has convincingly argued in an earlier paper that in addition to previous experience in responding to an epidemic such as SARS, the other two factors which seem to play a key role in the relative success in the handling of the coronavirus crisis are the presence of a legitimate political system and strong state capacity, both tied to effective governance.³ Both elements seem to suffer in the hands of authoritarian populists, which impedes the effective governance of the epidemic.

Governance, State Capacity and Building Trust

Many populist leaders, such as Trump in the United States, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Johnson in the UK, downplayed the gravity of the epidemic in the early days of the outbreak and were forced later to change their positions, leading to a considerable delay in response that added to the rising death tolls in an epidemic that does not tolerate inaction. Part of the explanation for their delayed response can be attributed to the way in which these leaders generally do not want to be associated with “bad news,” which runs in stark contrast to their polished image as capable and effective deliverers.

Another key element of the populist playbook that has impeded effective governance of the crisis is related to these leaders' **aversion to checks and balances**—both at the horizontal level concerning the separation of powers between the branches of government and at the vertical level regarding the division of powers between the national and the local levels. The disdain for checks and balances not only erodes public trust in the government but also prevents the effective use of state capacity—both crucial for the effective handling of the crisis.

Concerning **trust in the government and its institutions**, the tendency to fuse powers in the hands of the executive, often a single leader, leads to a lack of transparency and the prevalence of corruption, which in turn diminishes public trust in the government's measures as well as the necessary public compliance with them. In fact, in some countries governed by authoritarian populists such as Hungary, Turkey, India, and Venezuela, publishing information on the coronavirus that contradicts government accounts is punishable by law. Public trust is further damaged by the fact that for many of these populist leaders, polarization is a key political strategy to advance their partisan agenda even during an epidemic, despite the epidemic requiring the full trust and cooperation of the masses across ideological and/or partisan divides. The lack of inclusive governance shrinks the space for individual and societal participation, further diminishing trust in the government and its institutions.

For instance, in the case of the United States, where Trump has not refrained from using the epidemic to demonize the opposition, citizens' perceptions of the coronavirus and the measures required to fight it remain divided across partisan lines. In Turkey, a similarly polarizing strategy along ideological (secular/conservative) and partisan lines fuels distrust in the government and its measures in almost half of the population, most recently evidenced in the reactions to a last-minute curfew where the public gathered in crowds for supplies, risking further infections, not sure of how long the curfew would last and the conditions under which it would be implemented. This is in stark contrast with those states where the degree of public trust and socio-political cohesion is relatively high, such as Germany, South Korea, and Taiwan, which have suc-

cessfully blended strong state capacity with rights and fared relatively well in their struggle against the coronavirus. These states effectively employed widespread testing, monitoring and transparent reporting, and achieved a high degree of cooperation from their citizens.

Populists' **disdain for checks and balances at the local level** and their exclusionary approach to governance have also produced results that have been detrimental to the effective governance of the crisis by further diminishing trust in the government in places where the local governments or states (in federal settings such as the United States) are controlled by the opposition and also by curtailing effective responses at the local level by curbing their powers. For instance, in fear of the prospect of their rising popularity during the crisis, rather than adopting inclusive measures and prioritizing governance over politics, both Orbán and Erdoğan have imposed measures to limit the powers of the oppositional local governments during the pandemic, despite the fact that local governments are at the frontline in fighting the coronavirus. Trump's ongoing bickering with Democratic governors has largely contributed to different states adopting starkly contrasting measures in dealing with the pandemic, with no coordinated national approach to the crisis.

States and International Cooperation

So far, the justificatory arguments of the populist authoritarian playbook have suffered damage in the context of the coronavirus epidemic. Effective governance defined as trust in the government and its institutions as well as strong state capacity seem to be important factors in effective delivery, which these governments largely lack. Yet, this is only the national part of the story. This crisis has also demonstrated that **international cooperation** is also a significant factor in the fight against an epidemic of this scale. This epidemic has occurred not only in the context of rising populist authoritarianism but also in an era of weakening international cooperation. The ineffectiveness of the World Health Cooperation (WHO), the early confrontation between the United States and Europe on flight controls and later over the development of potential vac-

cines, the hostility between the United States and China that prevented much-needed cooperation at the onset of the epidemic, and European Union (EU) member states' initial national reflexes with no sign of intra-European solidarity all attest to the fact that nation states were largely on their own in tackling this crisis. Coupled with the disruption in global supply chains, these instances provided fuel to the long-standing nationalist and nativist calls of populist authoritarians for isolationism and the mercantilist state. Nonetheless, it is also becoming more visible over time that international cooperation is of crucial importance in fighting the epidemic, particularly in producing and distributing medical supplies, ensuring that all nations have access to mass testing and treatment, as well as preventing a total collapse of the global economic system. Hence, in the medium to longer run, we should be thinking of ways in which strong state capacity and effective international cooperation complement each other in dealing with regional and global challenges that will extend beyond the current epidemic, such as migration and climate change.

The international institution that is currently best positioned to take the lead on this front is the EU. While its member states indeed struggled to show intra-EU solidarity and develop a common response in the early days of the crisis, there are signs that this may be changing. Health policy in the EU is a predominantly national policy area, leaving the EU with no effective authority and capability to tackle a crisis of this scale on its own. Hence, it is of no coincidence that member states panicked and turned inward when they were initially faced with the gravity of the problem. This, however, seems to be changing. The Council recently adopted considerable measures worth 540 billion EUR to offset the socio-economic effects of the pandemic on EU member states. After the initial confusion, EU border policy is now much more coordinated, medical equipment flows freely in the single market, and member states are receiving citizens of other member states who are in need of intensive care.⁴ Furthermore, the EU has also begun to extend its gaze outward, with a new "Team Europe" initiative that provides more than 15.6 billion EUR in assistance in fighting the epidemic to its partner countries in the East and the South, including Tur-

key and the Western Balkans. Its current assistance to the Eastern neighborhood by far trumps that of Russia and China.

The EU's relevance and credibility in re-building and sustaining a rules-based multilateral system will largely depend on its power to attract partners such as other international institutions and like-minded states including South Korea, Japan, and possibly the United States, depending on whether the administration changes in November. However, this power will also hinge on the ways in which the EU will choose to deal with its own autocrats at home. Its failure to adopt any effective measures toward Orbán's erosion of Hungarian democracy is an important reminder that this will not be an easy task. As Daniel Keleman has argued in a recent article, the EU suffers from an "authoritarian equilibrium" where the EU's system of party politics protects these countries from EU intervention, while EU finance and investment help them sustain their domestic power.⁵ Albeit difficult, the EU has to find ways to punish its autocrats and discourage those that follow in their footsteps in various other member states.

This will be all the more necessary in a post-corona world where we also have to discuss the changing meaning of **citizenship and its relationship to democracy**. The epidemic forces us to rethink the rights and responsibilities of individuals not just vis-à-vis the state but also to each other in the context of morality and virtuous citizenship. As some observers have rightly pointed out, the coronavirus epidemic is akin to the 9/11 events in the sense that citizens all across the world are once again sacrificing their rights and fundamental freedoms for the sake of their security. Various surveillance mechanisms are being rapidly put into effect, and emergency decrees curbing fundamental freedoms are being implemented. In strong democracies, thanks to the presence of checks and balances, there is a strong chance that these measures will be subject to judicial review and reversed as the epidemic is controlled. This may not be the case in other states that have weak democracies or competitive authoritarian systems that may take advantage of the current state of affairs to put into place lasting new measures in curtailing the public's fundamental rights. Hence, a balance will have to be found

between respecting the **fundamental rights of citizens and building effective state capacity** where a post-developmental understanding of citizenship should meet with the caring state. International institutions such as the EU could assist in the delivery of this combination both inside and outside of their borders through a credible fight against undemocratic practices at home and through meaningful engagement with their partners in dealing with common crises that does not merely rest on piecemeal transactional actions. The coronavirus epidemic invites us to seriously think about the relationship between governance, state capacity, democracy, and international cooperation: although far from over, it could also provide a silver lining to that effect.

Endnotes

- 1 | For a more detailed assesment of the relationship between regime type and the fight against the coronavirus, see Frances Z. Brown, Saskia Brechenmacher, and Thomas Carothers, "How will the Coronavirus Reshape Democracy and Governance Globally?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>.
- 2 | Senem Aydın-Düzgıt and E. Fuat Keyman, "The Trump Presidency and the Rise of Populism in the Global Context," *IPC Policy Brief* (Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center, January 2017), 4.
- 3 | Rachel Kleinfeld, "Do Authoritarians or Democratic Countries Handle Pandemics Better?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>.
- 4 | Brad Heath, "Americans divided on party lines over risk from coronavirus: Reuters/Ipsos poll," Reuters, March 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-polarization/americans-divided-on-party-lines-over-risk-from-coronavirus-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN20T2O3>.
- 5 | See Nathalie Tocci, "How Coronavirus will Upturn the Global Order," Politico, April 9, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-upturns-global-order-china-united-states/>.
- 6 | R. Daniel Keleman, "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium," *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): 481–499.

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