COVID-19 will reshape our world.
We don't yet know when the crisis will end.
But we can be sure that by the time it does,
our world will look very different.

JOSEP BORRELL

Battling the Coronavirus:
Social Values, Political Mindsets and Regime Legitimacy

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Observations

- The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalysator for accelerated change of global order, arguably a process of structural power transition from a global hegemon, the US, to a rising challenger, China.

- The pandemic has also exposed the strength and weaknesses of political systems across the globe and their ability to maintain social cohesion and regime legitimacy in times of life-threatening crisis.

- The pandemic has unveiled the **political mindsets** of political elites which strongly impact and shape the management of the coronavirus crisis and its international fallout.

- It has also highlighted the **social values** of citizens in countries going into 'crisis-mode'.

- **Regime legitimacy** has been deeply affected by governments' anti-epidemic politics in every country.

Questions

➢ What have we learned from the pandemic in terms of the relationship between social values, elite political mindsets and regime legitimacy across the globe?

➢ What is the relationship between the domestic and foreign policy dimension of anti-epidemic politics?

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Working definition:

A political mindset is a mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person's responses to and interpretations of political situations in the real word. It is therefore critically important for political action.

(Authoritarian) China

Elite political mindset

➤ *Nationalist!*
Declaring a people's war: all what counts is the people's eventual victory over the virus under the core leadership of Xi Jinping.

➤ *Technocratic-authoritarian!*
All necessary means to fight the virus are decided at the top and must be strictly enforced at the bottom; individual freedom and rights come second to safeguarding collective public goods (like public health).

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Crisis methodology

- Switching from normal to crisis mode, in which there is a high degree of alertness for 'unified thinking' and pressure to ensure political compliance across the bureaucratic apparatus and by the populace.

- Construction of new narratives to cover up regime failure (at the beginning of the crisis) and embolden regime legitimacy, also by accentuating China's willingness to become a global leader:

➢ *Narrative 1:*
The Communist Party (i.e., Xi Jinping) has rescued the nation. China has come out of the crisis stronger than any other country!

➢ *Narrative 2:*
China delivers on three demands to global leadership in the ongoing crisis: managing the problem at home; supplying global public goods; managing (representing) a global response to the pandemic
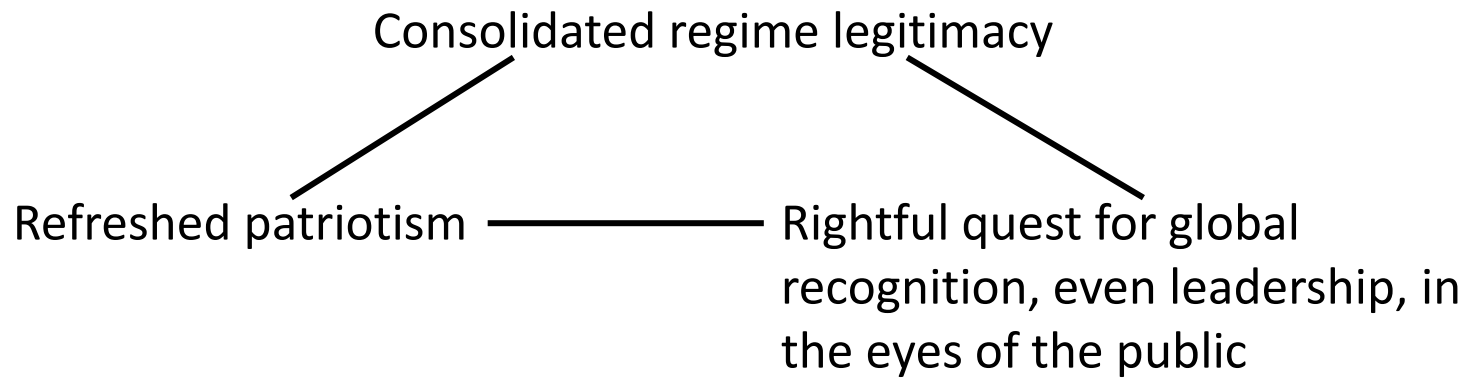
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Responses from society

- Initial criticism of (local) government crisis response (quickly suppressed)

- From 'rally around the flag' to strong support for the government

- Acceptance of the official narratives

Domestic consequences

Consolidated regime legitimacy

Refreshed patriotism ——————— Rightful quest for global recognition, even leadership, in the eyes of the public

International repercussions

- Tensions with the U.S., but also with Europe and Asia, have risen considerably! China's quest for global recognition and leadership is contested.

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(Democratic) Taiwan

Elite political mindset

➢ *Patriotic!*
Fighting the crisis requires the government and the people standing closely together. The government must lead and protect the people

• *Technocratic!*
The government must have all necessary leeway to decide and implement strict measures to safeguard collective public health; individual rights (e.g. on data protection) can be legitimately compromised for this purpose.

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Crisis methodology

- Centralization of most crisis-related decision making in the Ministry of Health (CECC)

- Revision of relevant laws

- Fostering a 'zero-case mentality' by which the government makes itself the guarantor of each and any citizen's well-being and seals the island off from the world

- Applying 'bio surveillance': fomenting and maintaining a sense of crisis alertness within the populace by implicitly linking the pandemic to the 'China threat'

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Responses from society

- High-level support for the government

- Internalization of 'crisis behavior' (self-disciplining)

- Strong demands to the government to continuously deliver effective protection (a 'zero-case' performance sheet) for all citizens

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Domestic consequences

- Inward-looking mindset

- Citizen pride feeding into a consolidating Taiwanese national identity

- Strengthened regime legitimacy

International repercussions

- Global recognition of Taiwan's crisis performance and … existence!

- Increasing Taiwanese alienation from China, hence exacerbating growing tensions between the U.S. and China

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(Trumpean) USA

Elite political mindset

- *Nationalist-Populist!*

Crisis methodology

- Initial denial and belittlement of the crisis, then 'muddling through' coupled with blaming China

- Spreading populist ideology: Individual freedom and rights come first, economic prosperity comes second, public health comes last

- Delegating crisis-responses to the state governors with minimal cooperation of the central government

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Responses from society

- Blind support for or deep alienation from the federal government

Domestic consequences

- Disintegration of the political system

- Increasing political and social polarization

- Strong and weak support for the government at the same time, resulting in eroding regime legitimacy, if not regime decay

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International repercussions

- Erosion and forfeiting of U.S. global leadership

- Increasing tensions with China and alienation from Europe

- Accelerated global power shift to the detriment of U.S. global interests

(Federal) Germany

Elite politicial mindset

➢ *Democratic-deliberative!*
The state must lead in the crisis but seek approval and consent by the people constantly; individual rights may be restricted but doing so requires deliberation and a regular assessment of adequacy

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Crisis methodology

- Crisis management is calibrated between central and federal states' interests; hence anti-epidemic measures deviate in scope in the states and even from county to county in one state, depending on infection figures, local occupancy rates in emergency care units, or other political preferences of state governments

- A most recently revised 'Infection Protection Law' does now provide for more uniform anti-epidemic measures forcing federal states into line.

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Responses from society

- Overall strong support for strict measures to contain the virus, but frustration with the 'federal rag rug'

- A vocal minority of 'denialists' and 'conspiracists'

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Domestic consequences

- Crisis management is protracted and has become increasingly difficult over time due to the pressure of multiple political interests in a federal system with little central state power concerning health policies.

- The circumvention of the parliament by a non-constitutional decision-making body, the "Conference of the Central Government and Federal State's Prime Ministers" (Bund-Länder-Konferenz) has resulted in decreasing political legitimacy of the state' anti-epidemic policies and, arguably, of the federal system.

International repercussions

- Germany, as much as the European Union, has failed, in the eyes of many, in delivering an effective crisis response; there is no common European approach as member states pursue their own strategies.

- Joint purchase of vaccines at E.U. level has weakened regime legitimacy in each member state and did not help the E.U. to bolster its own political legitimacy.

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International repercussions

- The E.U. has been targeted by China's 'Covid-19 diplomacy', shortly undermining its internal unity. This has reinforced a process of self-reflection concerning Germany's and the E.U.'s future China policy.
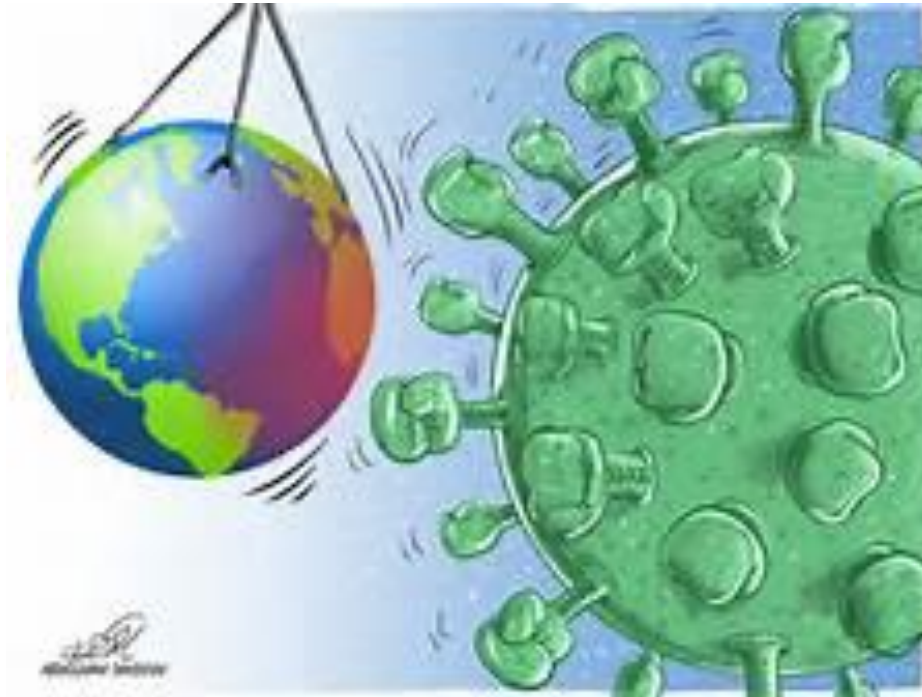
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Conclusion

- The coronavirus crisis has affected political systems and regimes in very different ways, and democratic and authoritarian systems have mastered it better or worse. Hence, there seems to be no 'systemic answer' to a health crisis. Populism, though, seems to have done bad across the board!

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Conclusion

- In terms of its international effects, the coronavirus crisis has accelerated China's rise, though this has come with a price: China faces a negative public image and increasing political reserve in the U.S. and Europe.

- At the same time, the U.S. and Europe have suffered politically and must cope with a reputation of systemic failure that helps China to assert is relative superiority in many parts of the world.

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**Thank you!
Stay healthy!**