

Holding back the Old Demons in the Euro-Mediterranean Region in Post-pandemic Times: Populism and Authoritarianism

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The COVID-19 pandemic can, in all respects, be considered among the most consequential geopolitical events of recent times. It has basically affected all countries in the world, drastically changing our everyday lives and severely hampering economic activities on a global scale. According to the available data at the time of writing, the pressure of the novel coronavirus on public healthcare systems in Europe and the broader Mediterranean region is mostly on the wane, although some countries such as, in particular, Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon and Turkey are experiencing a new increase in the number of infections after the decision to ease lockdown measures and restart economic production. Yet, the impact of the pandemic has hardly been limited to national healthcare structures or the economic sphere, rather encompassing society as a whole and provoking deep effects on both governance and political decision-making. While it remains difficult to predict both the duration and long-term implications of the virus, a set of relevant trends has already started to take shape.

To begin with, the need to enforce quarantine and social distancing policies has prompted a suspension of public activities and radical restrictions on social spaces, with some governments even adopting curfews and state of emergency laws that, to a different extent, directly reduced civil and constitutional rights. This, in turn, has given authorities the chance to strengthen their authoritarian power by banning public demonstrations, cracking down on opposition groups, and silencing or arresting jour-

nalists and social activists under the guise of safeguarding public security. Secondly, as the primacy of civil rights, personal freedom and democratic rules was partially suspended or even downplayed in some states, populist and nationalist movements have become more vocal in their rhetoric, manipulating the pandemic to belittle political opponents and target vulnerable communities in order to gain consensus among a disoriented and more suggestible public opinion. These dynamics risk worsening, in a broader framework of mounting economic distress and social uncertainties, with some countries, such as Tunisia and Morocco possibly seeing their recent democratic achievements frustrated, and others, such as Algeria and Egypt, perhaps moving further towards authoritarianism and systematic domestic repression.

This article seeks to explore the impact of COVID-19 on socio-political dynamics in Europe and the broader Mediterranean by looking, specifically, at its implications on authoritarian and populist trends, in order to understand whether the ongoing pandemic may emerge as a boosting factor for authoritarianism and populism or, conversely, could have detrimental consequences for these political manifestations.

A Threat Multiplier? Covid-19 and Authoritarianism in Europe and the Broader Mediterranean

When looking at both European and Mediterranean countries, political nationalism and authoritarian tendencies were already in place and, in quite a few cases, even politically influential or dominant, before the spread of COVID-19. Authoritarianism, intended as a particular type of political regime, was

first conceptualized by political scientist Juan Linz in his 1975 classic *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*,¹ and has since received extensive academic attention, becoming associated with the absence of free and fair political competition – often exemplified by a dominant or privileged one-party rule – a weak or lacking freedom of expression and the systematic disregard of access to information as well as freedom of association. Still, to better appraise the heterogeneous manifestations of authoritarianism in the broader Mediterranean and how these have been impacted by COVID-19, it may be useful to adopt Marlies Glasius' analytical focus on authoritarian practices, defined as “patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice.”²

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To be sure, the pandemic spread quickly through a region already grappling with the effects of a decade of uprisings, failed or incomplete political transitions, state collapse, civil conflict and international meddling. In some countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, and Egypt, where popular protests against corruption and poor governance made a painful reemergence during 2019, the virus has overshadowed the very reasons behind the demonstrations and offered state authorities an unexpected opportunity to impose harsher social control measures and buy themselves time.

The Increasing Recourse to Authoritarian Practices

In Algeria, the pandemic forced protesters to call off their peaceful Friday marches for the first time in over a year, helping the new government of Abdelaziz Djerad to intensify its repression campaign against opposition movements and arrest hundreds of civil and political activists on the pretext of safeguarding national security. Despite new President Tebboune's pledge to regain the trust of the population through a season of socio-economic reforms and more transparent governance, freedom of speech and human rights standards remain widely disregarded, while the country's dire economic situation only risks deepening social inequalities and pushing governing elites backed by the army towards a more authoritarian drift, as a tactical scapegoat to deter a new wave of dissent.

In Lebanon, the government led by Hassan Diab – but practically dominated by Hezbollah and its allies – imposed a state of emergency in mid-March to facilitate the issuing of official decrees governing restrictions on movement and shutdowns of public spaces, with security services that repeatedly dispersed protesters and torched the latter's tents in Beirut. As the domestic economic situation worsens and the price of basic goods grows unbearable for most of the population, the government's practice to hide the real dimension of the financial crisis from the public is proving more useless every day, and the protests that have so far remained substantially peaceful may soon turn into violent revolts, with potentially devastating consequences for the country's fragile political arrangement.

In Egypt, the military regime led by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has exploited the COVID-19 crisis to extend emergency powers that have been in force since 2017, further strengthening the military's grip on power. This move adds to a series of constitutional amendments that have made the military the *de facto* ultimate authority in the country. In practical terms, this has plunged Egypt deeper into “the worst human rights crisis of its history,” with Egyptian authorities imposing a new and harsher crackdown on freedom of expression and accusing any political op-

¹ LINZ, Juan. *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*. Boulder – CO, Lynne Rienner, 2000 (first publ. 1975).

² GLASIUS, Marlies. “What authoritarianism is ... and is not: a practice perspective,” *International Affairs*, 94: 3, 515-33, 2018.

ponents of spreading misinformation on the country's health situation.³ Alarmingly, these measures did not even spare foreign reporters, with journalists working for *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* accused of reporting higher numbers of infections than officially estimated, while Egypt's Minister of Endowments (*waqf*) openly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of attempting to spread the virus among the security forces and state apparatuses, thus prompting a new wave of mass detention.⁴ Given the government's evident shortcomings in containing the pandemic, the regime has prioritized controlling the narrative over fighting the spread of the virus itself.

Misinformation and Identity Politics

The practice of misinformation concerning the virus on government-aligned media has emerged as a recurrent tactic in all those countries in the broader Mediterranean characterized by autocratic regimes or even hybrid political systems. But this dynamic has also gone hand in hand with growing nationalistic tendencies built upon identity politics. Egypt and Turkey are cases in point. Egyptian state-media and official circles initially belittled the indications by the World Health Organization on the seriousness of the pandemic, and joked about the need to shut down economic activities, going as far as to advance the Egyptians' alleged immunity to the disease. In a similar vein, Turkish authorities and state-controlled outlets have repeatedly underplayed medical bulletins and reports on the magnitude of the contagion, even turning a blind eye to the repeated harassment and public intimidation of doctors and political activists who criticized both the government's slow response to the emergency and President Erdogan's early decision to reopen most of the country's economic activities.⁵

These populist and nationalistic rhetorics, however, have also surfaced in Israel and many European countries that are classified as "democracies" according to the Democracy Index of the Economist

Intelligence Unit.⁶ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for instance, managed to form a coalition government with a reticent Benny Gantz after having convinced the latter to dismiss a governmental alliance with the Israeli Arabs Joint List, which Netanyahu repeatedly and publicly slurred as "supporters of terrorism" in spite of its legitimate political role.⁷

The Rise of the Surveillance State and the Threat to the Rule of Law

Beside identity politics, the COVID-19 pandemic has also induced subtler – yet highly invasive – authoritarian practices by governing authorities, political groups and private corporations alike. In particular, there has been a worrying increase in cyber-surveillance both in Europe and southern Mediterranean countries. Israel, for instance, has expanded digital surveillance without parliamentary approval, invoking emergency orders to contain the contagion, while Italy and other European countries have promoted – but so far not imposed – the use of so-called backtracking applications to geolocate and control population movements in order to model the spread of the virus. At the same time, law enforcement agencies have made extensive use of surveillance drones to monitor citizens' movements and guarantee the respect of social distancing measures.

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The problem with increased state monitoring is that abandoning monitoring technologies after the pandemic has passed may not be so easy. However, it

³ ARDOVINI, Lucia. "Resilient Authoritarianism and Global Pandemics: Challenges in Egypt at the Time of COVID-19," *Pomeps Studies* 39:58-60, 2020.

⁴ DUNNE, W. Charles. "Authoritarianism and the Middle East in the Time of COVID-19," *Arab Center Washington DC*, 2 April, 2020.

⁵ WOERTZ, Eckart. "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa: Reactions, Vulnerabilities, Prospects," *GIGA Focus Middle East* Number 2, 2020.

⁶ "Democracy Index 2019. A Year of democratic setbacks and popular protest," Economist Intelligence Unit, January 2020.

⁷ DUNNE W. C. op. cit.

seems premature to declare the rise of a surveillance state, although such a risk certainly cannot be ruled out. In parallel, the mantra of national emergency has been used by governments to justify the adoption of extraordinary powers which have temporarily eroded the rule of law. One of the clearest examples is Hungary, where Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used his two-thirds majority in the Hungarian Parliament to pass emergency legislation enabling him to rule by decree until the COVID-19 crisis is over. Recently, the Parliament voted and revoked the measure, but human rights groups have warned that this has set a dangerous precedent for the government to rule by decree and undermine the rule of law. Overall, these developments demonstrate the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on governance and political dynamics, with the virus also representing a threat to human security that is prone to manipulation by forces hostile to the protection of human rights.⁸ Nevertheless, the pandemic has also sparked a wave of solidarity and humanitarian assistance among countries, giving new impetus to the debate over the importance of multilateralism and integration, while raising awareness on the utmost need to safeguard democratic rules as well as civil and political freedoms.

The COVID-19 Impact on Populism across Europe

At first, the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe seemed like a blessing for European populist movements. Weeks into the crisis, the French President Emmanuel Macron had warned that the virus could profoundly alter the balance between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics, strengthen nationalist stances and allow the spread of more extremist groups. This perception was a clear expression of the past decade's experience when, in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, a wave of political turmoil, renewed authoritarianism and populism pounded and questioned numerous perceived norms of Europe's political discourse.

In March, as many European countries, like France, Germany, Italy and Spain, were experiencing the first signs of early outbreaks, the threat that some politicians would have exploited the crisis by diffusing misinformation and blaming specific groups or individuals was already real. With the worsening and spreading of the crisis worldwide, far-right political movements in Europe demanded the introduction of strict border controls, blaming governments for the inadequate response to the crisis. Alice Weidel, the leader of *Alternative für Deutschland* at the German Parliament, labelled the spread of the virus in Germany as a direct outcome of "the dogma of open borders." Similarly, Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* criticized the European Union's "religion of borderlessness."⁹ In Italy, the first European country to face the epidemic outside of Asia, the leader of the far-right League party Matteo Salvini called in late-February for national "armour-plated" borders, seeking COVID-19 as a means to advance his party's restrictive political agenda.¹⁰

Unexpected Trends

Nonetheless, it seems that the pandemic has reversed expectations, moving things, albeit slightly, in the opposite direction. Populism traditionally represents society within the antagonistic frame of genuine people against corrupt elites. Conversely to the global financial crisis of 2008, which accelerated the populist surge in Europe, the coronavirus cannot be blamed on the elite. Moreover, the seriousness and magnitude of this shared crisis have required unity and reduced the polarization that allows populism to prosper. Instead of fuelling a surge in both nationalism and Euroscepticism, the coronavirus epidemic has undermined several of the drivers that fuelled populist support and exposed their shortcomings. Identity politics has been one of the first populist critical drivers severely undermined by the COVID-19 crisis. Within the broad framework of the EU's political battle over migration, populist movements have traditionally attempted to instill fear among citizens regarding the threat posed by foreigners or minority

⁸ COOPER, Luke; AITCHISON, Guy. "The Dangers Ahead: Covid-19, Authoritarianism and Democracy," *LSE Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit*, June 2020.

⁹ ZERKA, Pawel. "Ill will: Populism and the coronavirus," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 March, 2020.

¹⁰ NUGENT, Ciara. "Italy's Far-Right Seeks to Gain from Coronavirus Outbreak," *Time*, 24 February, 2020.

groups, in terms of, for example, the influx of migrants from the Middle East and Africa to Europe. Early on in the health crisis, the first signals of tensions between northern and southern European Member States raised fears that COVID-19 was going to reinforce the reasons of those who have long called for a “fortress Europe.” However, the borderless and all-encompassing nature of the virus (whose effects could be seen across all different strata of society, regardless of race or identity) opposed the ethnic nationalism triggered by the refugee crisis.

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Traditionally, populist movements have benefited from citizens' disaffection towards parties belonging to the political centre. Nevertheless, the evident failure that populist leaders manifested in answering adequately to the coronavirus crisis (not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world) has exposed the empty rhetoric of these leaders and their parties, emphasizing the necessity for qualified and competent governments. From Boris Johnson in the UK to Donald Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil, several political leaders have indeed often underestimated the crisis, launching conflicting messages to the nation, promising excellent antidotes or labelling the health crisis the result of foreign interference. In Germany, the AfD far-right populist party is struggling in the polls, while Angela Merkel's center-right Christian Democratic Union is experiencing steadily rising approval ratings.¹¹ Similarly, the Italian far-right leader Matteo Salvini's public support has dropped to its lowest point since 2019, leaving political space to Giuseppe Conte, the Prime Minister whose crisis management is recognized by polls as efficient.

Post-pandemic Populism: What Lies ahead?

In this perspective, it seems that COVID-19 has brought about a shift in Europe's political scenario. The main issue remains the disparity of visions towards the relationship with the European Union, which is affecting the internal integrity of individual parties, especially those who based their political message on radical and populist approaches to Europe. Many populist and nationalist parties like the National Rally in France, as well as the Northern League and the Five Star Movement in Italy, which only a few years ago promoted their countries' withdrawal from the euro, now found themselves in government positions that impose a friendlier and pragmatic attitude of alignment with the policies of Brussels. Nowadays, to avoid alienating the pro-European majority, their intent is not to be seen to be taking an anti-European stance but instead offering a refoundation of Europe – one that will allow countries to resist migration and reclaim sovereignty from European institutions. This approach would enable them to portray themselves as “champions of change,” rather than regretful guardians of the status quo.

Nevertheless, assuming that today's populist transformation would transpose into earnings for liberal democracy would clearly be naive and ill-considered. Instead, it would be more realistic to presume that parties will adapt to become politically viable, introducing changes brought about by the post-coronavirus environment and ushering in a new brand of populism. The upcoming economic challenges triggered by the pandemic clearly represent the main issue that the new populists will surely benefit from. Crisis-driven unemployment, financial insecurity and growing inequality – especially among low-income and informal workers – are trends that would exacerbate divisions easily exploited by new populists. But emerging trends among European democracies suggest that future populists will likely usher in more nationalist or overtly authoritarian tendencies. On the one hand, the pandemic is pulling at divisions within the EU's borders. In Italy, many citizens blame other EU Member States for not responding to the Italian government's activation of the European soli-

¹¹ On the latest developments in the German political landscape see, for instance: www.politico.eu/germany/.

parity mechanism, while neighbouring countries have reerected borders. A recent poll shows that 63 percent of Italians believe that the EU did not rise to the pandemic challenge.¹² If divisions among nations grow, the new populists could step in and exploit them. Moreover, the new political context is also likely to allow the implementation of further autocratic measures. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has recently passed an act that enables him to govern for an indefinite length of time.

Similarly, journalists in Hungary could be jailed if the government considers their publications to be “false information.”¹³ If in power, the next wave of populist leaders could likely seize on these currents to consolidate their control.

Conclusion

As the pandemic is still unfolding in many areas, it seems premature to consider the elements outlined in this article as exhaustive and consolidated. Nevertheless, there are enough indications to reasonably assume that the existing trends towards authoritarian revival in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the metamorphosis of populism in Europe, have been reinforced and will continue in the post-pandemic scenario. Still harder to evaluate is how these domestic developments may affect the international dimension of trans-Mediterranean relationships. In light of this, the pandemic’s consequences should remind us of the paramount role of international and multilateral organizations in ensuring that the post-COVID period does not witness the establishment of a new standard in which corruption and kleptocracy can thrive more easily.

More generally, the challenge for democracies in Europe (and elsewhere) is not only to oppose the attitudes that seek an increasing – or even permanent – centralization of state power under the cover of

COVID19, but also to advocate for socio-political reforms that would redistribute power to citizens. In parallel, multilateralism and concrete humanitarian efforts will be crucially important to prevent authoritarian and illiberal tendencies from making new inroads in poorer states, while also safeguarding the rights of vulnerable communities in a context of global emergency.

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At the same time, in a global multilateral system increasingly affected by the ranging confrontation between the United States and China, Europe should consider strengthening its “strategic sovereignty,” in its attempt to preserve Brussels’ values and to increase the space for renewing the European project. This geopolitical approach would allow Europe to expand its reach towards its strategically relevant southern neighbourhood, enhancing close collaboration with reliable EU partners such as Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon, while reminding strategic countries and other partners, such as Egypt and Turkey, that human rights and democratic values remain essential preconditions for any constructive cooperation. To achieve this ambitious aim, members of the governing class across Europe should bridge their divisions and put aside contrasting ambitions, instead pursuing a more concrete and unified agenda. Otherwise, they risk wasting the chance to restructure Europe’s position in the region.

¹² KRASDEV, Ivan; LEONARD, Mark. “Europe’s pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public’s worldview,” 24 June, 2020.

¹³ BOND, Ian; GOSTYŃSKA-JAKUBOWSKA, Agata. “COVID-19: can the EU avoid an epidemic of authoritarianism?”. Centre for European Reform Insight, 9 April, 2020.