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# THE PLAY BOOK



Liberal Leadership and  
Strategic Communications  
in the COVID-19 Era

ANALYSIS

# Imprint

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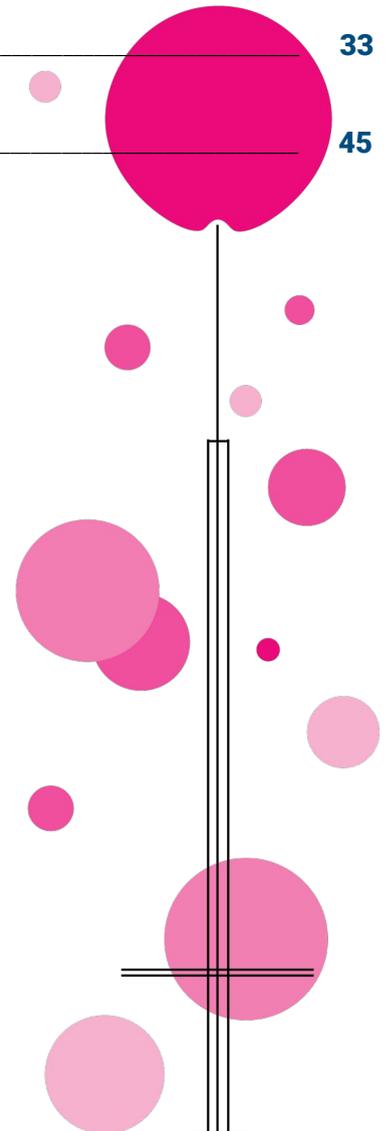
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# Executive Summary

The report discusses some of the challenges brought about by the pandemic and the questions that liberal leaders have to answer in the current context of massive uncertainty. Nine specific areas of interest, including nationalism and identity politics, globalization, and the economy and inequality, are investigated one by one. Next, it briefly analyses the reactions of public opinion and of (liberal) leaders in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

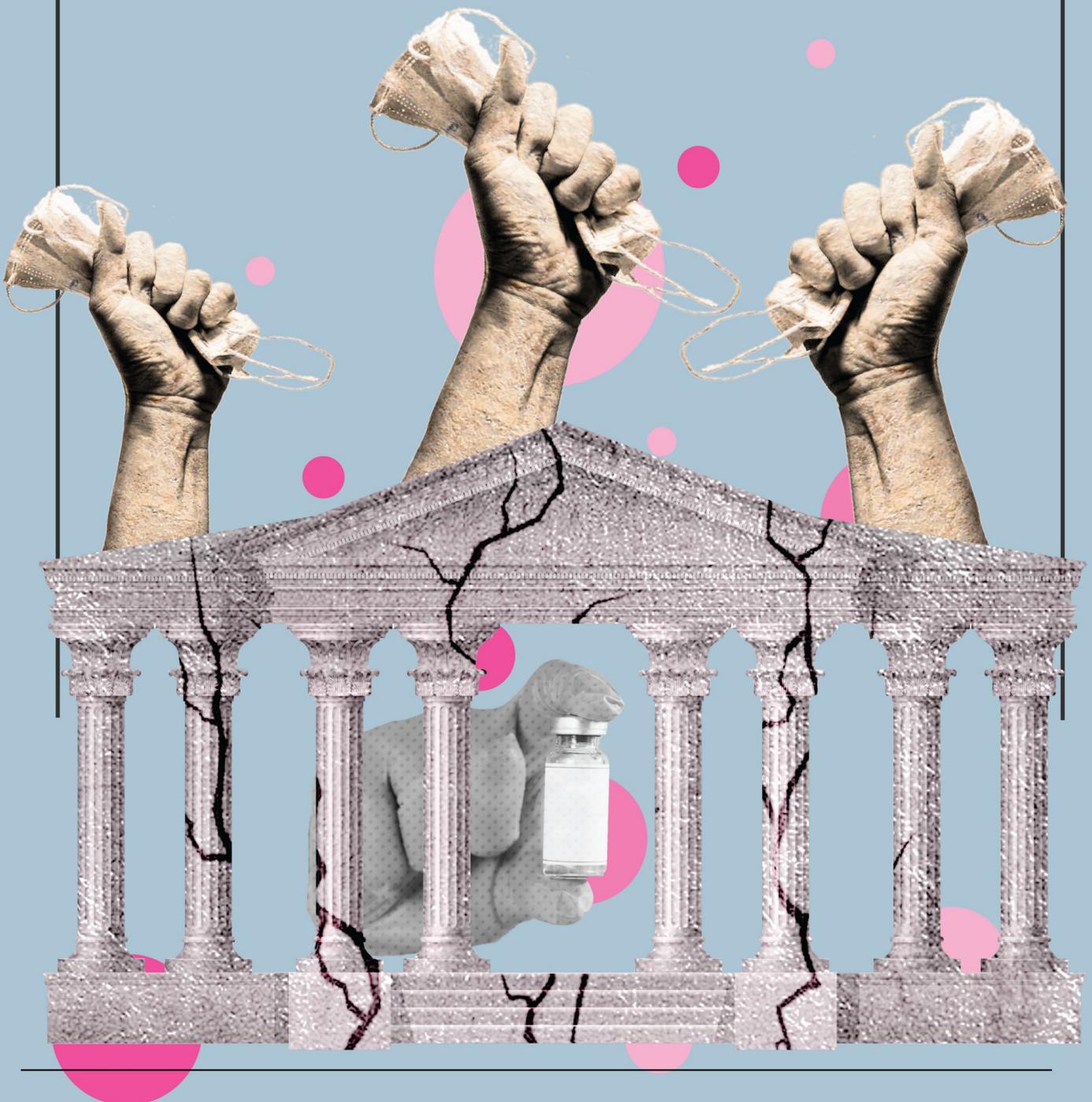
In the third section of the report, we provide some advice in terms of the 'what' and 'how' of a winning liberal narrative that addresses the current period's very difficult policy and political issues. Finally, again from a strategic communication perspective, we zoom in on the issue of the 'infodemic', while arguing for a deeper engagement with the international aspect of this worrying phenomenon.

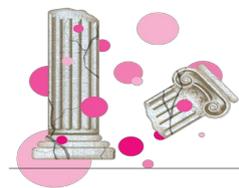
Across this playbook, the authors advocate for *soundbites* and for communications' *sense and simplicity*: indeed, Clarity, Competence, and Courage (the last mentioned meaning to combine words and actions to create trust both before delivery and via policy delivery) will make the difference in terms of success for liberal leaders and our societies during the prolonged covid19 crisis in the months and years to come.

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# CHAPTER 1

## CHALLENGES FOR LIBERAL LEADERS IN THE COVID-19 ERA





# 1. Challenges for Liberal Leaders in the COVID-19 era : old wine in new bottles or a truly critical juncture?

This chapter presents an overview of the challenges that liberal leaders will have to deal with in the coming period. Our main point is not that these challenges are new, but that some are enhanced, others redefined, and still others reframed by the pandemic. Liberal democracy and its proponents have been under fire for some years already, so what we are seeking to describe and problematize is how contestation will look like given the current context, what challenges and opportunities will have to be factored in the counterattack. The pandemic redefines issues and creates problems to be addressed by those committed both to fair elections and to the protection of human rights and liberties.

This mapping exercise is not an academic exposé about the menu of options that liberal forces can appropriate, develop, and use electorally. We want to better understand the context in which they operate, so that we can offer, from a strategic communication perspective, sound advice to liberal leaders and some guidelines related to their narratives and both strategic and policy options. Our normative commitment is consistent with the values foundational to liberal democracy and the report reflects this axiological engagement. In the end, we hope to contribute to making an informed case about what should be done to propose an efficient strategic liberal response amid a crisis that has been portrayed as earth-shattering and transformational.

Here, we discuss some of the influential topics that have been brought to the fore by the pandemic. The overarching goal is to highlight some of the questions that must be integrated into the new liberal compact/master narrative.

## 1.1. The rise of (exclusionary) nationalism

Although an ubiquitous concept, nationalism<sup>1</sup> has made a strong comeback in current political affairs. As Bieber (2018) argues, nationalism has become more prevalent in global politics in recent years. The evolution is less the consequence of transnational trends, but more the effect of how politics is conceived at the national and subnational levels, the effect of the politicization of various structural factors, and cleavages. Essentially, an anti-elite discourse (strongly related to the populist movement) and the crisis of liberal democracy are the causes of this development (Bieber 2018, 520).

Building on the work of others (Woods et al. 2020), it is worth investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the use of nationalism in domestic and international politics. Three questions are especially of interest (Woods et al. 2020): the first is how to understand the relation between nationalism and the COVID-19 pandemic; the second relates to the potential of the pandemic to fuel ethnic and nationalist conflict; and, finally, the third looks at the pandemic's consequences on the erosion or reinforcement of the nation state. Related to the first topic, some argue that nationalism is shaping the response to the pandemic and this is specially visible in the confrontation between the US and China over attaching a national origin to the virus (President Trump talks about the "China virus") or the emergence of a new type of Chinese nationalism centred around the successful containment of the virus. However, as Woods and Schertzer (2020) argue, the COVID-19 pandemic is also shaping

<sup>1</sup> We adopt Bieber's definition of nationalism: "a malleable and narrow ideology, which values membership in a nation greater than other groups (i.e. based on gender, parties, or socio-economic group), seeks distinction from other nations, and strives to preserve the nation and give preference to political representation by the nation for the nation".

nationalism and we can already see rising anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and conspiratorial anti-state sentiments in many countries (Miller-Idriss 2020). As for the second question, there is a clear potential for the *us vs them* frame to have increasing political relevance. This could lead to the amplification of ethnic nationalism and the persecution of ethnic minorities (Greenfeld 2020), together with a politics of blame underpinned by nationalism. The tendency to close borders at the outbreak of the pandemic reflects a domestic anxiety catalysed by uncertainty and the propensity to scapegoat foreigners (Kenwick and Simmons 2020). Third, on the future of the nation-state, there seems to be growing agreement that the rise of nationalism, trade protectionism, migration controls, and deglobalization more broadly should strengthen the nation-state and its role in international politics. State capacity matters when dealing with the effects of the pandemic (Bosancianu et al. 2020) and the danger is that fragile states will be further weakened. Although a case can be made for an enhanced role of international cooperation, global coordination is already in retreat (WHO has even been labelled by a Japanese Deputy Prime Minister as the “China Health Organization”).

This discussion becomes even more concrete when zooming in on the international coordination – national focus duo. We face the danger of “vaccine nationalism”, the idea that, instead of a global strategy, a plethora of countries are taking a “my nation first” approach in

The challenge for liberal leaders and thinkers is to go beyond the superficial idea that nationalism is always dangerous and illiberal. Based on the normative distinction between bad (ethnic) and good (civic/individualistic) forms of identity

developing and distributing potential vaccines or other pharmaceutical treatments.<sup>2</sup>(Woods and Schertzer 2020), this reductionist approach seems to ignore the need for people to employ salient identities as a map during times of high uncertainty such as the one we are experiencing today. The expected economic adversity can make things even worse – economic insecurity, real or perceived, can lead to exclusionary attitudes and higher support for the populist right (Gidron and Hall 2017). Finding scapegoats is also part of the typical political toolbox of populist leaders, who, in Europe and beyond (see the Salvini example), sought to connect the virus with migrants. The closing of borders, the focus on national solutions to the health crisis (at least at the beginning of the pandemic), the emphasis on the concept of self-sufficiency (which relates to this idea of financial nationalism (Johnson and Barnes 2015) or economic nationalism/patriotism and the reshoring of production) have contributed to a new type of discourse, one that can be easily derailed by political entrepreneurs driven by strategic and electoral goals.

The challenge for liberal leaders is clear: how can nationalism be employed to foster a sense of national unity (an equivalent of the rally-round-the-flag effect) essential for overcoming this predicament?

How can we avoid the consolidation of a toxic form of nationalism and its associated pernicious effects on intra- and inter-country relations? The point here is that a type (maybe a sanitized one) of nationalism should be integrated into the liberal narrative, so that its contours stop being abused by illiberal actors. Indeed, one defining aspect of liberalism is the emphasis on the rights of the individual, rather than group identities and rights, but some creativity

<sup>2</sup> For the conceptualization and details, see Rebecca Weintraub, Asaf Bitton and Mark L. Rosenberg (2020). The Danger of Vaccine Nationalism. Harvard Business Review, May 22, 2020, available at <https://hbr.org/2020/05/the-danger-of-vaccine-nationalism> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).



considerations. The challenge will be particularly difficult in diverse societies, given the fifth column argument: we already have the example of the rise of anti-Asian hate in the wake of the COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> is needed in putting forward a form of synthesis. As Gideon Rachman is arguing<sup>4</sup>, liberals have to get ready to fight back against the nationalist right and the radical left, which are united in their contempt for liberal values.

This courage to fight back involves an attempt to appropriate tools that one could consider at least nonconventional. If we forecast that nationalism will experience a boom in the coming years<sup>5</sup>, what is to be done to avoid the installation of its ethnic undertones?

## the rise of exclusionary nationalism might not be the inevitable consequence of the pandemic

As Bieber (2020) aptly puts it, the rise of exclusionary nationalism might not be the inevitable consequence of the pandemic, but this trend depends on the ability of the liberal forces to address five related aspects:

- 1) understand the surge in nationalism and its social relevance prior to the crisis;
- 2) confront the rise of authoritarianism based on reducing or suspending democratic freedoms and civil liberties (by taking advantage of emergency politics);
- 3) tackle the rise of biases against some groups associated with the pandemic (e.g. Asians);
- 4) address the rise of borders and deglobalization; and

- 5) find an antidote to the politics of fear and conspiracies.

Beyond the policy response, the political approach should integrate insights from psychology that show that the association between right-wing authoritarianism and nationalism and anti-immigrant attitudes are conditional on levels of perceived anxiety (Hartman et al. 2020). As the anxiety about the pandemic increases, so do the authoritarian tendencies. Finding ways to give people hope and reassurance is part of the strategic and discursive answer.

### 1.2. The protectionist backlash

Protectionism is closely connected to nationalism and, even more importantly, to the heightened attack against globalization. Specifically, we can observe a fault line between what experts are saying and what political leaders, responsive to a public increasingly disillusioned with free trade, tend to say to gain votes. Although the pandemic should bring about more credit given to the experts (Krastev 2020), more should be done to alleviate public concerns and the backlash against integration and globalization.

For example, one of the essential debates exacerbated by the pandemic refers to the reshoring of the supply chains, starting with the industries that are considered strategic and important for national security. A report by Packard and Watson (2020) on pharmaceutical supply chains dispels the myth that the US is too reliant on Chinese imports and shows the robustness of medical supply chains.<sup>6</sup> An autarkic response would, in this context, increase the costs paid by patients for drugs. Rather than betting on protectionism, more action would be needed at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to prohibit the export restrictions that were partly responsible for the mess surrounding the supply of drugs, masks, and medical

<sup>3</sup> Lee and Yadav (2020). The rise of anti-Asian hate in the wake of COVID-19. Items, Social Science Research Council, May 21, 2020, available at <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/the-rise-of-anti-asian-hate-in-the-wake-of-covid-19/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>4</sup> Rachman (2020). Liberals have to get ready for a fightback. Financial Times. May 11, 2020, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/07f29a7e-9363-11ea-abcd-371e24b679ed> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>5</sup> Krastev (2020). Seven early lessons from the coronavirus. ECFR. March 18, 2020, available at [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_seven\\_early\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_coronavirus](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_seven_early_lessons_from_the_coronavirus) (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>6</sup> Packard and Watson (2020). Resisting protectionism in the pharmaceutical supply chain. R Street Policy Study No. 197, June 2020.

equipment. However, this pro-liberalization, pro-deregulation, and pro-international cooperation discourse has to be made palatable to the voters. Similarly, a recent paper by three World Bank economists (Espitia, Rocha, and Ruta 2020) shows that government attempts to restrict food exports to meet domestic needs could make things worse: uncooperative trade policy actions could magnify the disruptions in the global food markets caused by the pandemic, leading to spikes in world food prices.

After the first few months of the pandemic, the danger is for a much bigger wave of protectionism in the near term, that could go beyond the medical and food industries, experts warn.<sup>7</sup> The accrued competition between the US and China and the fact that the most critical medical supplies are concentrated (China, Germany and the US export 40% of personal protective equipment, for instance) convinces some to argue that protectionism makes the coronavirus even more lethal.<sup>8</sup> With restrictions on medical equipment, vaccine nationalism, the trend to restrict/screen investments in essential industries (see the 5G controversy), and the use of national security exceptions against free trade,<sup>9</sup> protectionism and economic nationalism will continue to shape the conversation in the post-COVID-19 world. A 2017 study found that, at the time, the world's top 60 economies have adopted more than 7,000 protectionist trade measures on a net basis since the 2008 financial crisis and that tariffs amounted to more than \$400 billion.<sup>10</sup> Political dynamics has reinforced these tendencies: a study by de Bolle and Zettelmeyer (2019) finds that, since the mid-2000s, the platforms of major political parties in both advanced and emerging-market economies (the G-20 countries) have increasingly emphasized policies that stress national sovereignty, reject multilateralism, and seek to advance

national interests through measures that come at the expense of foreign interests. All in all, trade protectionism and scepticism toward multilateral organizations and agreements have increased in both advanced and emerging-market economies.

The economic and health insecurities brought about by the crisis adds another layer of complexity to the problem of the distributional effects of trade, which has undeniable overall positive economic effects, but also generates winners and concentrated losers.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, protectionism goes hand in hand with the conversation about a new form of globalization, one that is more sympathetic to the national interest – here, the reshoring of production as part of deglobalization is and will be an essential part of the story. Some even discuss the feasibility of a war-inspired economy (obviously, with adjustments). Deglobalization, defined as a process of decoupling already taking place in the global economy since 2008, will be transformed by automation and will incentivize onshoring (i.e. developing more locally embedded production networks), but the danger is that it could take an exclusionary nationalist form.<sup>12</sup>

The challenge for liberal leaders: how to credibly respond to the diatribe against free trade and globalization? How to convince the voters that protectionism is not a solution and how to efficiently compensate the losers of globalization? How to protect (pun intended!) the market as the most efficient form of resource allocation, while making the necessary adjustments, both at the national and international levels, required by the new normal? A new form of globalization should include an effort to get the public/the voters on board and this cannot happen without integrating their increasingly vocal concerns.

<sup>7</sup> Lee. Coronavirus pandemic will cause a 'much bigger wave' of protectionism, says trade expert. CNBC, April, 9, 2020, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/10/coronavirus-expect-a-lot-more-protectionism-says-trade-expert.html> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

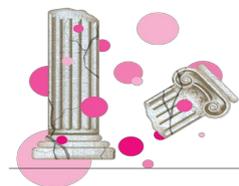
<sup>8</sup> Broadman. Protectionism makes the coronavirus even more lethal. Forbes, March, 31, 2020, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/harrybroadman/2020/03/31/protectionism-makes-the-coronavirus-even-more-lethal/#5e3910e21413> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>9</sup> Ortiz-Mena (2020). COVID-19 and Protectionism: The Worst May Be Yet to Come. Brink News, July 23, 2020, available at <https://www.brinknews.com/covid-19-protectionism-the-worst-may-be-yet-to-come-nationalism-trade-supply-chains/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>10</sup> Jones. World has racked up 7,000 protectionist measures since crisis: study. Reuters. November 15, 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-economy-protectionism/world-has-racked-up-7000-protectionist-measures-since-crisis-study-idUSKBN1DF005> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>11</sup> Frieden (2020). The political economy of economic policy. Finance and Development, June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper and Aitchison (2020). Covid-19, Authoritarianism, and Democracy. LSE Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit, June 2020, available at [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105103/4/dangers\\_ahead.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105103/4/dangers_ahead.pdf) (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).



### 1.3. Will the populists take advantage of the pandemic?

At the beginning of the pandemic, Krastev (2020) speculated that the pandemic will increase the trust in experts and expertise, which could impact public support for populist

At the beginning of the pandemic, Krastev (2020) speculated that the pandemic will increase the trust in experts and expertise, which could impact public support for populist political forces, known for their simplistic policy propositions. In April, Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche also argued that the coronavirus is exposing the populists' hollow politics and that that pandemic is renewing faith in mainstream political parties and experts.<sup>13</sup> Six months later, it makes sense to investigate whether this proposition is borne out by the empirical reality. Looking at vote intentions for populist radical right parties in Europe, Rooduijn concludes that these expectations were somewhat optimistic.<sup>14</sup> According to him, about 1 in 5 European intends to vote for the populist radical right. The support for these parties has slightly decreased in the first few months of the crisis but has stabilized afterwards. As for the future, this political scientist does not expect for the populists to suffer an electoral setback, given the size of the expected economic shock, the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and the increasing discontent with the government's coronavirus policies. Economic grievances can be a major driver for a populist surge. Here, an economic insecurity perspective emphasizes the effects of the profound changes transforming the workforce and society in post-industrial economies. Guiso et al. (2020) show that, for the European countries, economic insecurity shocks, such as the one triggered by the pandemic, had a significant effect on the demand for populism as a direct protection demand effect and also

through the induced changes in trust and attitudes. There is a growing debate about the economic and cultural roots of populism (Margalit 2019; Colantone and Stanig 2019) and the emerging consensus is that an explanation for the rise of populists should include both aspects. On the cultural side, it should not be ignored that identity is essential to populism and that the combination of job losses and migration is filtered through the perception of a threat to a shared identity.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the cultural backlash thesis, which posits that support for populists can be explained as a reaction against cultural changes that threaten the worldview of once-predominant sectors of the population (Inglehart and Norris 2016), should also be part of the discussion about what will happen to populists in the COVID-19 era. Populism, the attempt to draw a wedge between democracy and liberalism and to weaken liberal institutions (e.g. an independent judiciary, freedom of the press, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities)<sup>16</sup>, will be tested by the pandemic. As Halikiopoulou (2020) argues, different trajectories are possible for populist forces and it all depends on time and context: specifically, the populists in opposition are likely to be electorally weakened in the short-term, something convergent with what Rooduijn finds. The populists in power could gain strength through the use of emergency measures for democratic backsliding (see the discussion about Hungary and Poland by Guasti (2020), where the case for executive aggrandizement during the COVID-19 crisis can be made). This takes place even if, as Kavakli (2020) shows, strongly populist governments implemented fewer health measures against COVID-19 in February 2020 and fewer mobility restrictions in March.

In the long run, the potential economic crisis could benefit the populists, who will ask for electoral punishment of governments for their mismanagement of the twin crises of health and economics.

<sup>13</sup> Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche (2020). The Coronavirus Is Exposing Populists' Hollow Politics. Foreign Policy. April 16, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/coronavirus-populism-extremism-europe-league-italy/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/mrooduijn/status/1298506616111796224> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>15</sup> Velasco (2020). Embracing identity. Finance and Development, June 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Galston. The populist challenge to liberal democracy. The Journal of Democracy, April 2018, accessible at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-populist-challenge-to-liberal-democracy/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

and health incentives, between individual freedoms and collective security, while keeping at bay the populist tendencies already present before the pandemic. All these evolutions are not an invitation for complacency. Nick Cohen argues that a new wave of populism, born out of coronavirus-induced economic inequity, could follow the global pandemic.<sup>17</sup> The prospect of a morphed and fortified populism should not be ignored and catalyse the discussion about a new social contract. In Europe, there are many recent developments to take into account (anti-austerity measures in Greece, the rise of the far-right in Germany, increasing authoritarianism in Central Europe, nationalism in Spain, populism in Italy, the Yellow Vest protesters in France and, of course, Brexit in Britain)<sup>18</sup> and they have to be coupled with the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.<sup>19</sup> Jan-Werner Müller contends that the populists are likely to benefit from the coronavirus pandemic for two main reasons:

1) the populists who are currently in power are likely to take advantage of the rally-around-the-flag dynamic; and

2) this emergency is a good opportunity for populists to turn to their usual playbook of blaming foreigners, migrants, and minorities for all the problems that arise.<sup>20</sup>

Despite initial hopes, populism will likely be immune to, and could even benefit from, the pandemic. However, with the higher stakes brought about by the crisis, there could be an opportunity to reframe political debates in ways that do not play to populist strengths.

## 1.4. An economy under siege

The pandemic will have a massive impact on economic growth. Forecasts by international institutions (Jackson et al. 2020) confirm this assessment. On June 8, the World Bank estimated that the 2020 economic recession would be the deepest since World War II and would affect 90% of the world's economies. Their baseline estimate indicates that global economic growth will decline by 5.2% in 2020 and will only partly recover in 2021 (4.2% rate of growth), assuming that the global economy starts a positive trend in the second half of 2020. Similarly, the IMF forecasted a 4.9% rate of decline in 2020 and a recovery of growth to 5.4% in 2021. According to a June 23 forecast update, the World Trade Organization (WTO) estimated that global trade volumes could fall by 18.5% in 2020 and then recover slowly in 2021. The OECD projects that, among its members, the unemployment rate is expected to rise to 9.2% under a single wave scenario and 10.0% under a second wave scenario.

## Amid these perspectives, governments face multiple challenges

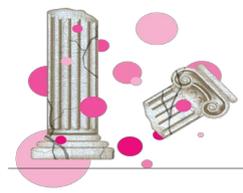
Amid these perspectives, governments face multiple challenges (Jackson et al. 2020, 1): to arbitrate between growing budget deficits and the need to increase spending to support the unemployed and those relying on safety nets; to inject massive funds into the national health systems to deal with the pandemic and, potentially, find a vaccine; to adopt monetary and fiscal policies to support credit markets and assist the businesses under financial stress, stabilize markets, and ensure liquidity.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen (2020). Beware a new wave of populism, born out of coronavirus-induced economic inequity. The Guardian, April 18, 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/18/beware-a-new-wave-of-populism-born-out-of-coronavirus-induced-economic-inequity> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>18</sup> McCaffrey (2020). Analysis: Will COVID-19 usher in a new wave of populism in Europe?, Euronews, June 9, 2020, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/05/analysis-will-covid-19-usher-in-a-new-wave-of-populism-in-europe> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>19</sup> Gopinath (2020). The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression. IMF Blog, April 14, 2020, available at <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

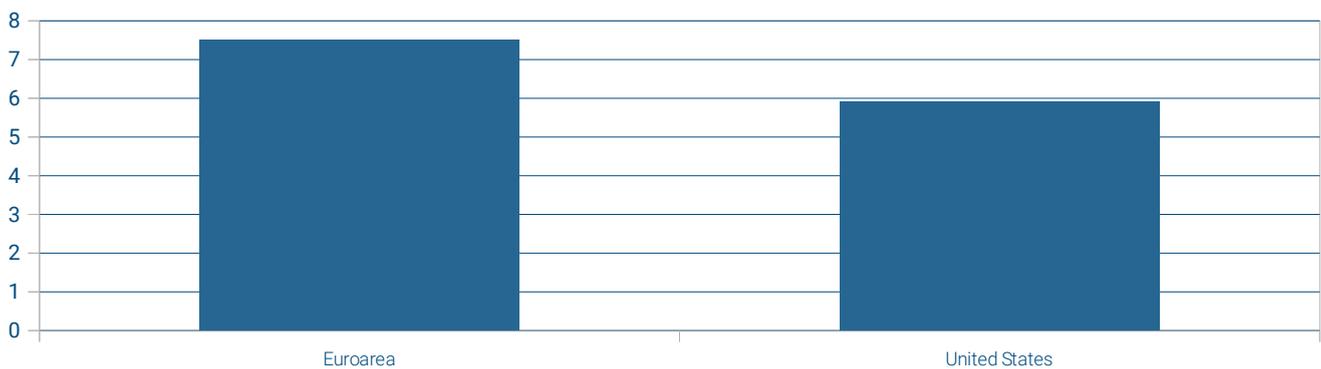
<sup>20</sup> Müller (2020). Populists Are Likely to Benefit from the Coronavirus Pandemic. Institute for Human Sciences. April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.iwm.at/closedbutactive/corona-focus/jan-werner-mullerhow-populists-will-leverage-the-coronavirus-pandemic/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).



The crisis will particularly hurt millennials, who have to confront a second downturn in a decade and whose prospects are worse than those of Generation X and of baby boomers.<sup>21</sup> The crux of the matter is the ability of the governments to balance between economic and health. Moreover, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are under threat and could add to the woes of the global economy.<sup>22</sup> The short-term solution to all these problems is to focus on providing lifelines and promoting economic recovery<sup>23</sup>, but what will happen once the initial policy and political consensus evaporates (as happened after the 2008 economic and financial crisis)?

Once the initial policy consensus evaporates, this situation will direct the public conversation towards the structural problems of (inter)national economies, income distribution, financial incentives for frontline employees, and the bigger role of the state (the state has had to expand its means and intervention tools, but should it keep them once the critical phase of the pandemic has ended?). The most recent economic crisis has led to higher support for authoritarian solutions, to declining support for democracy, lower trust in leaders and institutions, and growing political contestation and polarization.

**Figure 1 | Fall in GDP in the Eurozone and United States in 2019**



IMF

We have seen, both in Europe (at the EU-level and in the member states) and North America, massive efforts to inject money into the economy and keep the level of consumption up. Parallels have been made with the most recent global economic crisis and the question of potential fiscal consolidation will gain ground. A debate will ensue about who will foot the bill for this debacle, especially given that, in this context, one cannot easily point towards a category (as it was in the case with bankers after the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy) that is responsible for the disaster.

The challenge for liberal action and thought leaders is: what economic plans, solutions, and narratives are to be deployed so that our liberal democracies are not infected by the illiberal virus? How to navigate a period of high economic and health uncertainty in a way that will not further erode trust in democracy, institutions, and mainstream political parties?

<sup>21</sup> Adamy (2020). Millennials Slammed by Second Financial Crisis Fall Even Further Behind. The Wall Street Journal. August 9, 2020, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/millennials-covid-financial-crisis-fall-behind-jobless-11596811470> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>22</sup> Caniato, Moretto, and Rice Jr. (2020). A Financial Crisis Is Looming for Smaller Suppliers. Harvard Business Review, August 6, 2020, available at <https://hbr.org/2020/08/a-financial-crisis-is-looming-for-smaller-suppliers> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>23</sup> Kaufman and Leigh (2020). Global Imbalances and the COVID-19 Crisis. IMF Blog. August 4, 2020, available at <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/08/04/global-imbances-and-the-covid-19-crisis/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

## 1.5. A renewed discussion on inequality and new forms of taxation

Although the pandemic is of global scale, everyone will be impacted differently, which makes the analysis of the pandemic's distributional effects highly relevant.

If past epidemics are a guide, then the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to increase inequality: according to Furceri, Loungani, and Ostry (2020), the major epidemics in 175 countries between 1961 and 2017 raised income inequality and hurt the employment prospects of those with only a basic education while scarcely affecting the employment of people with advanced degrees.<sup>24</sup>

For the current crisis, a survey of top economists<sup>25</sup> finds that:

- 1) 84% agree that low-income workers who are above the poverty line will suffer a relatively bigger hit to their incomes than those further up the distribution (even accounting for all government support schemes);
- 2) 91% agree that existing gaps in access to quality education between high- and low-income households will be exacerbated by the pandemic;
- 3) 95% agree with the statement that the mortality impact of COVID-19 is likely to fall disproportionately on disadvantaged socio-economic groups.

We also know that, for each percentage point reduction in the global economy, more than 10 million people are plunged into poverty worldwide.<sup>26</sup>

As a study focused on the UK situation shows<sup>27</sup>, the specific nature of the economic shock associated with COVID-19 has interacted with many old and deep inequalities: school shutdowns are likely to accentuate the socio-economic divide in educational attainment; the additional childcare and housework will negatively impact female employment; about 30% of low-income households pre-crisis said that they could not manage a month if they were to lose their main source of household income; and age-adjusted death rates in the most deprived tenth of areas in the UK were more than double those in the least deprived tenth of areas.

These findings require policy attention and political interventions in relation to the long-term consequences of the pandemic on inequality. Many around the world were pessimistic about inequality even before the pandemic, a Pew Research Center survey of 34 countries conducted in 2019 shows.<sup>28</sup>

The nature of the pandemic – especially its characterization as an exogenous shock – will put pressure on policymakers to intervene for the worse-off in ways that go beyond one-off measures and have to envisage more structural solutions, some related to higher (and more redistributive) taxes for the better-off.

The left and the radical left have made inequality a privileged theme of their discourse, so a centrist take is waiting to be articulated. The risk analysts are anticipating growing support for tax increases and potentially more far-reaching tax reforms, especially in developed markets; in the EU, the Commission is expected to make progress towards several new types of taxes, though only the digital services tax and a

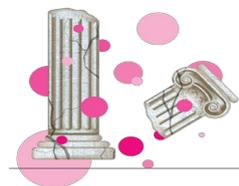
<sup>24</sup> Furceri, Loungani, and Ostry (2020). How Pandemics Leave the Poor Even Farther Behind. IMF Blog, May 11, 2020, available at <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/05/11/how-pandemics-leave-the-poor-even-farther-behind/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>25</sup> IGM Forum (2020). Inequality and the COVID-19 Crisis. April 13, 2020, available at <http://www.igmchicago.org/surveys/inequality-and-the-covid-19-crisis/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>26</sup> Vos, Martin, and Laborde (2020). How much will global poverty increase because of COVID-19?. International Food Policy Research Institute. March 20, 2020, available at <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/how-much-will-global-poverty-increase-because-covid-19> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>27</sup> Blundell, Joyce, Costa-Dias, and Xu (2020). COVID-19 and inequalities. The IFS Deaton Review, June 11, 2020, available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/covid-19-and-inequalities/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>28</sup> Devlin and Moncus (2020). Many around the world were pessimistic about inequality even before pandemic. Pew Research Center. August 6, 2020, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/06/many-around-the-world-were-pessimistic-about-inequality-even-before-pandemic/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).



few environmental taxes seem likely to be implemented in 2021.<sup>29</sup> In the UK, experts estimate that a wealth tax rise could raise £174bn to tackle COVID-19.<sup>30</sup> A new tax system is required for the COVID-19 world and some relevant questions will have to be asked: should higher taxes on the self-employed be a solution to consider?; should more generous business rates relief outlive the crisis?; and how should we tax the rich?<sup>31</sup>

Inequality has become a buzzword for our societies, but an easy fix is not available. The challenge for liberal decision-makers: how to avoid toxic fault lines and to preserve a sense of solidarity in our societies, while ensuring a higher degree of fairness in our communities? How to avoid excesses and the reality of a society that emerges from this episode more divided than ever? How to convincingly speak to the majority of voters about inequality and the associated policy measures?

### 1.6. The recession of international cooperation?

We have already discussed how the pandemic is likely to strengthen the role of the nation-state and to accelerate deglobalization trends. However, the global nature of the pandemic could offer a counterpoint to these inward-looking approaches. Rather than asking about more or less international cooperation, the question is whether a synthesis is possible. Dervis and Strauss (2020) talk about the network structure of the world, with essential functions centralized in large hubs (e.g. the US for financial activity, China for manufacturing). The interconnected nature of the world makes it likely that

shocks affecting central hubs will have systemic effects. So, according to these two experts, one trend that will emerge is of one reduced global connectedness, including travel, trade, and financial, digital, and data flows – the goal is to produce more robust systems, although it is unclear whether this will work. The more important part is to build functional redundancies into the system, so that shocks will have limited impact: reshoring is one facet of this attempt and is part of the movement that is ready, for strategic reasons, to sacrifice economies of scale and comparative advantage. The second trend of the crisis, the one that asks for greater global cooperation, could prove successful if it manages to integrate these concerns into the functioning of the global economy and international organizations.<sup>32</sup>

## An overhaul of global cooperation has been called for by public leaders

An overhaul of global cooperation has been called for by eminent public leaders. Mohamed ElBaradei, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, discusses the necessity for a new paradigm of global cooperation based on principles like human dignity, equality, inclusiveness, diversity, and solidarity. For this to happen, the international organizations have to overcome polarization and paralysis and receive the authority and resources to deal with the challenges of a globalized world; development assistance has to increase; the concept of security has to go beyond the physical and include basic human needs; while a new approach to governance should improve the balance between direct and representative democracy.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Brown and Suskind (2020) make the case that tasks involved with public health, and in particular those

<sup>29</sup> Fitch Solutions. Covid-19 Will Catalyse New Forms of Taxation, Particularly in Europe. July 24, 2020, available at <https://www.fitchsolutions.com/country-risk-sovereigns/covid-19-will-catalyse-new-forms-taxation-particularly-europe-24-07-2020> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>30</sup> Elliott (2020). Wealth tax rise could raise £174bn to tackle Covid-19, expert says. The Guardian. April 22, 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/apr/22/wealth-tax-rise-could-raise-174bn-tackle-covid-19-expert-says> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>31</sup> Adam and Miller (2020). COVID-19: will tax reform be the silver lining or the missed opportunity?. IFS, May 18, 2020, available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14842> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>32</sup> Dervis and Strauss (2020). What COVID-19 means for international cooperation. Project Syndicate. March 6, 2020, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-covid-19-means-for-international-cooperation/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020)

<sup>33</sup> Mohamed ElBaradei (2020). What COVID-19 could mean for international cooperation, according to a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. WEF. June 17, 2020, available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/coronavirus-covid19-international-cooperation-peace/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

involved in the control of an infectious disease such as COVID-19, ought to be treated as global public goods and they should be delivered through international cooperation. An example on how to use the coronavirus to foster greater global cooperation is what happened with the climate change complex regime.<sup>34</sup> The reality of the pandemic is in striking contrast with the calls for greater international cooperation and coordination made by liberal voices. Kenwick and Simmons (2020) aptly show that, after the pandemic outbreak, governments were more concerned with containing the virus by externalizing it rather than taking costly, but ultimately more effective, domestic mitigation measures. The temptation to increase control over borders is rooted in public opinion and prior propensities. The politics of borders – and especially the European and North American examples – offers clear indication that the trend does not favour greater international coordination. Moreover, the criticism directed at the WHO (the China Health Organization, as some called it) for its management of the pandemic and America's withdrawal point towards vulnerabilities that remain to be addressed.

From a liberal standpoint, the challenge could seem obvious: how to preserve cooperation in international relations while fixing the broken parts of the system? How to transform international organizations into honest brokers and entities able to deal with global public goods? How to convince the domestic public that international coordination and cooperation are essential for the spectre of issues raised by the pandemic? Once again, an effort of public education and a charm offensive is required from liberal leaders to gain momentum.

## 1.7. Are privacy and the protection of individual rights and freedoms worth putting on the line?

The danger is real: preoccupied with containing the pandemic, we risk slipping into a surveillance state.<sup>35</sup> As Krastev was suggesting in March, the appeal of big data authoritarianism, employed especially by the Chinese government, could increase. OECD discusses the importance of geolocation data and biometrics, especially facial recognition data, in the effort to track and contain the spread of the virus, but an equally important point is that few countries have frameworks in place to support the extraordinary contract-tracing and population-wide surveillance measures envisaged. Here, the privacy enforcement authorities have a key role to play as governments enact emergency legislation.

Recommendations for protecting privacy have been put forward by the OECD and they focus on accountability, cooperation, and the preservation of rights and freedoms: the responsible use of personal data; consultation with the privacy-enforcing agencies before introducing measures; focus on reducing regulatory uncertainties; international cooperation in collecting, processing, and sharing data; and transparency and accountability for all actions.<sup>36</sup> However, these good practices could be easily undermined by low trust in authorities and a broader proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. The limited public opinion data that exist on the matter shows that digital privacy issues are a growing concern of citizens and have the potential to be further politicized and problematized.

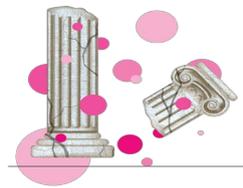
For instance, a Pew Research Center Survey indicates that six-in-ten Americans say that if the government

<sup>34</sup> Dolsak and Prakash (2020). Climate Change Helped Global Cooperation. Will Coronavirus Undermine It?. Forbes, April 11, 2020, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/prakashdolsak/2020/04/11/climate-change-helped-global-cooperation-will-coronavirus-undermine-it/#702a59d7ccfe> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>35</sup> McGee, Murphy, and Bradshaw (2020). Coronavirus apps: the risk of slipping into a surveillance state. Financial Times, April 28, 2020, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/d2609e26-8875-11ea-a01c-a28a3e3fbd33> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>36</sup> OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). Ensuring data privacy as we battle COVID-19. April 14, 2020, available at <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/ensuring-data-privacy-as-we-battle-covid-19-36c2f31e/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

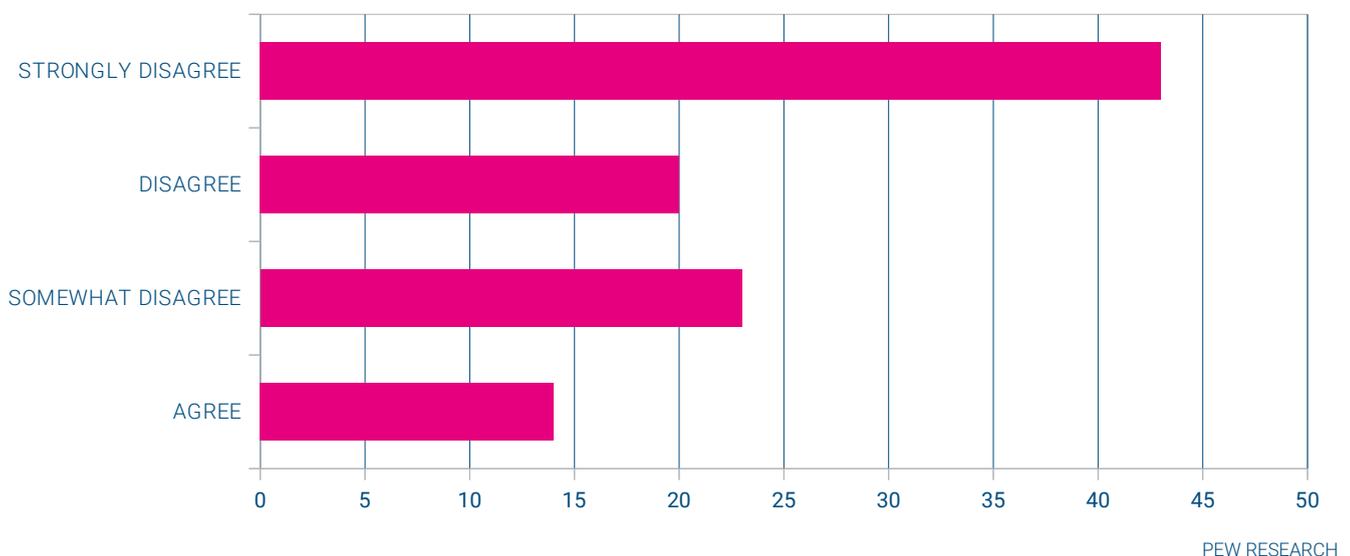
<sup>37</sup> Auxier (2020). How Americans see digital privacy issues amid the COVID-19 outbreak. Pew Research Center, May 4, 2020, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/04/how-americans-see-digital-privacy-issues-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).



tracked people's locations through their cell-phone, it wouldn't make much of a difference in limiting the spread of COVID-19; moreover Americans are split on the acceptability of using cell-phone data to trace people's movements.<sup>37</sup> There is high potential for the attempts to collect this type of information to backfire and to trigger robust societal conversations, so a solid liberal value-based and policy-anchored answer will have to be provided. Moreover, as an E & I survey among privacy professionals reveals, issues related to employee remote work, employee health monitoring, and COVID-19 data sharing are the top challenges privacy professionals are facing during the coronavirus pandemic; nearly half of organizations (45%) have adopted a new technology or contracted with a new vendor to enable remote work due to COVID-19; most employers have collected data from their employees about personal travel and symptoms,

rights at the frontline in the fight against COVID-19: the right to life and the duty to protect life; the right to health and access to health care; and the central challenge to freedom of movement. A report by the UN fleshes out what a human rights-centred narrative could look like and what the key messages should contain: 1) we must deal with the economic and social impact alongside the public health response (and this could include measures related to emergency water supplies, extended paid sick leave and unemployment benefits, emergency shelter, support for victims of domestic violence, universal income and measures to preserve jobs, and child care for essential workers); 2) we have to put forward inclusive responses to a global threat to ensure no one is left behind (especially women, health workers, the marginalized and most vulnerable, older persons, racial, ethnic, and

**Figure 2 | Number of U.S. respondents who agree with the usage of cell geolocation data to track people for the purposes of combating the COVID-19 pandemic**



and 60% are keeping records of employees diagnosed with COVID-19.<sup>38</sup> The advent of generalized remote work and the potential for it to become the norm once the crisis is over will make these topics even more salient. Moving from privacy to a broader discussion of human rights and freedoms, the gist of the matter is how to convincingly speak about the most important human

religious minorities, refugees and migrants, indigenous people, people with HIV, and LGBTI people); 3) participation in an open and the decision-making process that is transparent and accountable (this particularly concerns actions related to the freedom to public information, the freedom of the press, and the restricted use of extraordinary powers);

<sup>38</sup> E & I (2020). Privacy in the wake of COVID-19. IAPP Report, accessible at [https://iapp.org/media/pdf/resource\\_center/iapp\\_ey\\_privacy\\_in\\_wake\\_of\\_covid\\_19\\_report.pdf](https://iapp.org/media/pdf/resource_center/iapp_ey_privacy_in_wake_of_covid_19_report.pdf) (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

4) emergency and security measures, if needed, must be temporary, proportional, and aimed at protecting people (thus preventing their abuse or entrenchment – the wet dream of any authoritarian leader); 5) global threats require global responses – no one country can beat this alone and some countries are better equipped to respond than others.

The discourse about treating the pandemic as a war has opened a conversation about the trade-off between government decisiveness and respect for human rights and liberties. The exceptional situation, translated into the implementation of lockdowns and other measures to restrict movement and personal freedoms, has made this framing an appealing one (some are even asking whether privacy will be one of the victims of the pandemic<sup>40</sup>). However, this is a false dichotomy. The challenge for liberal leaders? Upholding human rights and freedoms while being effective in dealing with the virus and its consequences. The essential question is how to avoid the militarization of the debate and make central a human-rights approach to the pandemic.<sup>41</sup>

### **1.8. COVID-19 as a critical juncture in world politics? The future of the liberal global order, the EU, the US and the transatlantic relations, and the rise of China**

The liberal international order is in crisis and one can see multiple signs for this bold statement: President Trump's hostility towards liberal internationalism (visible in his approach to trade, international law, multilateralism, the environment, and, more recently, to the handling of the pandemic), the uncertainties of Europe, the retreat of liberal democracy, and the surge of populist, nationalist, and xenophobic strands of backlash politics (Ikenberry 2018).

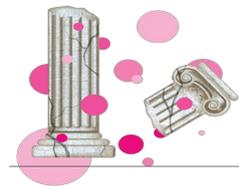
In 2018, Ikenberry (2018, 8) argued that liberal internationalism still has a future, and that, despite the weakening of American influence and the rise of China, the more general organizing ideas and impulses of liberal internationalism run deep in world politics.<sup>42</sup> Now, with the pandemic looming large over our lives, is that assertion still valid? What transformations should be factored into a liberal understanding of international relations in the COVID-19 era?

In a recent essay, Drezner (2020) analyses whether the pandemic will actually have transformative effects on world politics. His conclusion, based on how the coronavirus has affected the distribution of power and interests in its first six months, is that COVID-19 will not be as consequential for international politics. Without a shift in hegemonic ideas, 2020 is unlikely to be a tipping point in international affairs. He continues by arguing that the pre-pandemic status quo included a slow shift towards bipolarity as well as a slow trend in great-power domestic interests towards more closure (Drezner 2020, 2). Although the US was weakened by its management of the pandemic, a majority of international relations experts agree that COVID-19 did not fundamentally alter the distribution of power in world politics; US supremacy is particularly prevalent in the economic and financial realm, while China's attempts to gain soft power after the rocky initial response to the pandemic have not borne much fruit. In terms of the distribution of interests, in the context of pre-existing tendencies of closure within major trading economies and the surge of populism and economic nationalism, economic decoupling has continued during the pandemic, but the assessment shows that "neither state actors nor public opinion nor economic interests have accelerated toward closure because of COVID-19" (Drezner 2020, 12); as an example, multinational companies did not

<sup>40</sup> Renda (2020). Will privacy be one of the victims of COVID-19?. CEPS. March 23, 2020, available at <https://www.ceps.eu/will-privacy-be-one-of-the-victims-of-covid-19/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>41</sup> The surveillance state and the erosion of human rights is one of the four threats to democracy brought about by the pandemic identified by Cooper and Aitchison (2020).

<sup>42</sup> Kagan and Donfried (2016) also make the case, from an American standpoint, that the liberal order is worth defending and is capable of surviving the present challenges. They provide a roadmap based on four key areas: Strengthening and Adapting the Liberal Economic Order; Strengthening the International Security Order; Taking Advantage of the Energy Revolution; and Education, Innovation, Entrepreneurship: America's Most Desired Commodities.



alter their supply chains in response to political pressure and have not announced plans to relocate their production facilities away from China. The restrictions imposed on the global flows of people are consistent with this interpretation, as this regime is less globalized. Moreover, the US-China trade war caused “a modest diversion of trade rather than homeshoring” (Drezner 2020, 14). If the transformative aspects are not there (yet), what are the more fine-grained nuances that liberals have to take into account in the COVID-19 international world? There is already a proposal for a global strategy for shaping the post-COVID-19 world put forward by the Atlantic Council (Cimmino et al. 2020).

Two overarching goals should propel this strategy, as per the experts:

- 1) mitigation of the COVID-19 crisis and swift recovery in the economic, health, governance, and defence domains – the recovery track; and
- 2) the rejuvenation of an adapted and resilient rules-based global system. In the health domain, key actions involve creating a Counter Coronavirus Coalition of like-minded states, reforming existing global health institutions (WHO) and creating new ones.

In the economic realm, the seriousness of the moment asks for a G-7 and G-20 coordinated global economic response, secure supply chains, a globalized, free, and fair-trade system, and a better use of technologies. In terms of governance, the emphasis should be on the promotion of successful democratic models of COVID-19 (thus challenging the idea that autocratic states were better at handling the pandemic), countering disinformation, helping countries that risk autocratic backsliding, the use of technology to modernize elections and revitalize existing

Democracies, together with an increase in responsibilities for G7 and democracy-based international institutions. As for the defence field, the onus is on strengthening deterrence and demonstrating readiness, while preparing the US and its allies for the future of warfare, broadening the concept of security, and better integrating emerging defence technologies.

## A new strategy is certainly needed

A new strategy is certainly needed (Nye 2020) as a response to the threat of a world less open, prosperous, and free (Walt 2020)<sup>43</sup>, but the challenge is to gain wide acceptance for its underlying values and narratives. The credibility of the liberal comeback depends on two major issues. The first one relates to the attitude towards China of the democratic world, the second to the better management of the transatlantic relations.

The pandemic has catalysed a new narrative about China, both in the US and the EU. In the US, already structured by the trade war, the discourse has evolved towards condemning China’s initial handling of the Wuhan situation; acknowledging the threatening character of the authoritarian regime and connecting it with the developments in Hong Kong; stressing the need for economic decoupling; and putting China on par with Russia as the new global villains.

The more assertive Chinese foreign policy has triggered a European reaction as well, one focused more on the screening of Chinese investments from the standpoint of strategic and security matters and on using this strategic lens for broader cooperation (see the 5G debate); we are still waiting for a more coordinated approach to come from the European Commission at the policy level. The geopolitical turn in Europe forces more decisive actions, and the position of the European Commission to explicitly name China, together with Russia, as a source of disinformation during

<sup>43</sup> How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic. Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School. March 20, 2020, available at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/how-world-will-look-after-coronavirus-pandemic> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

the pandemic, could be a harbinger in terms of how the relationship will evolve.<sup>44</sup> The China – Central and Eastern Europe cooperation (the 17 + 1 format), although described as a potential success story to pay close attention to<sup>45</sup>, has been equally labelled an empty shell. Unity and cooperation in relation to China are key to strengthening the rules-based global economic order.

The potential for a generally unified response to the Chinese rise depends on the alignment of interests and narratives between the transatlantic partners. Here, developments have not been encouraging. The general assessment is that the relations between Europe and the US were already in poor condition before the coronavirus pandemic and that Trump's response will make tensions worse.<sup>46</sup> Two important arguments here are that the US government has shown little interest in international health or economic cooperation and that the economic fallout of the pandemic will also fuel the transatlantic spat over defence spending within NATO.

However, the need to work together on the search for a vaccine, on the sharing of data, on making preparations for a second wave, and on preventing an economic meltdown creates an agenda for the short-term that could be used to heal past wounds and have positive spillovers.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, as Brattberg argues, the coronavirus pandemic illustrates the necessity for likeminded democratic societies to join hands and shore up the multilateral system.<sup>48</sup> The gravity of the crisis and the threat of China are a serious argument for leaving behind the lack of recent US engagement in Europe, the worsening clash over multilateralism, the disjointed approach to protectionism, and the botched decoupling from China.<sup>49</sup>

The challenge for liberal leaders: how to preserve the rules-based international order and how to change institutions and practices so that the potential for political (illiberal) backlash is seriously reduced? How to offer a unified response to China's rise and how to make transatlantic relations great again? How to make this new narrative of the international liberal order 2.0 attractive?

## 1.9. The growing importance of identity politics

The debate over the impact of identity politics on liberal democracies is not new. In a provoking essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Fukuyama (2019) spoke "against identity politics". In today's world, politics is less about economic issues and more about identity topics, he contends: therefore, the left is preoccupied less with economic equality and more with the promotion of the interests of marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees, women, and LGBT people; the right has responded by emphasizing the patriotic protection of a traditional national identity, which is often explicitly related to race, ethnicity, or religion (Fukuyama 2019, 91). For him, the current use of identity is directed towards societal division, which prevents the formation of broad coalitions to fight for redistribution – "fights over redistribution frequently distract from policy ideas that could help" (Fukuyama 2019, 112). Berman (2016) makes a similar point in explaining the decline of the mainstream centre-left parties in Europe. In a robust response to Fukuyama, Abrams et al. (2019, 163) contend that identity politics has not led to the breakdown of democracy, rather, it has helped democracy thrive and has empowered marginalized groups to take part, changing politics and policy-making.

<sup>46</sup> Scazzieri (2020). Trump's COVID-19 response is deepening the transatlantic rift. Centre for European Reform. May 29, 2020, available at <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2020/trumps-covid-19-response-deepening-transatlantic-rift> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>47</sup> McCBraml and Molling (2020). How will COVID-19 affect the transatlantic relationship?. The German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). May 4, 2020, available at <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/how-will-covid-19-affect-transatlantic-relationship> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>48</sup> Brattberg (2020). The troubling impact of COVID-19 on transatlantic relations. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. May, 2020, available at <http://confrontations.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Confrontations-Revue-128-EN-Transatlantic.pdf> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

<sup>49</sup> Brattberg (2020). The Pandemic Is Making Transatlantic Relations More Toxic. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. April 2020, available at [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brattberg\\_EU\\_COVID.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brattberg_EU_COVID.pdf) (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).



politics and policy-making. Irrespective of which side of the argument we are on, a topic of interest is to what extent the pandemic will change or moderate the impact of identity politics on liberal democracy, on elections, and on what democratic leaders can do.

## Without doubt, the pandemic has provided new insights on the influential role of identity politics

Without doubt, the pandemic has provided new insights on the influential role of identity politics, as Wheatley argues.<sup>50</sup>

First, the cultural divide between liberal globalists and conservative nationalists is likely to become more polarized, as shown by the American, Brazilian, and Spanish examples.

Second, the pandemic may have huge consequences for gender politics, as it impacts on family roles related to childcare and home-schooling, but also through women suffering more significant job losses.

Third, the surge of nationalism could also mean a revival of regionalism, especially where regional governments oversee healthcare and take the key decisions on how to deal with the epidemic. This should be connected to the antagonizing tendencies experienced by societies engulfed by fear and anxiety and which have meant an even tougher time for racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, as well as for migrants and refugees. As discussed above, the pressure of dealing with the crisis was generally associated with less emphasis on the protection of human rights and freedoms

In this crisis, identity can be used either to highlight an overarching identity and a common fate or can be a tool to represent others as competitors (Bavel et al. 2020). The political leadership can orientate individuals and direct them towards the desirable outcome.

The challenge for liberal leaders: how to use identity politics as a source for recognition and empowerment, while preventing populist and anti-democratic forces from sowing division and accentuating the fault lines present in our societies? How to make sure that no one is left behind, and that discrimination is condemned and prevented from structuring our response to the pandemic? How to move beyond the pernicious distinction between us vs them, made so salient by the closing of borders, by existential and economic anxiety, and by illiberal forces? How to communicate this inclusive vision while obtaining the decisive support of voters?

✧

These, together with many others, are valid concerns and questions for liberal leaders and thinkers. They flesh out some of the issues that have been primed by the pandemic and should be integrated into a liberal master narrative. In the next two chapters, we will build on these questions and in formulating our general approach, rooted in strategic communications considerations, about what the liberals should do to transform this moment of crisis in an opportunity for rejuvenation and for electoral and policy success.

<sup>50</sup> Wheatley (2020). The future of politics after COVID-19: Four trends that are already discernible. LSE, June 22, 2020, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/politics-after-covid19/> (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

# CHAPTER 2

## THE PUBLIC OPINION & THE POLITICAL LEADERS





## 2. Public opinion and political leaders. What responses to the pandemic?

### 2.1. The public opinion's electoral, political, and policy response

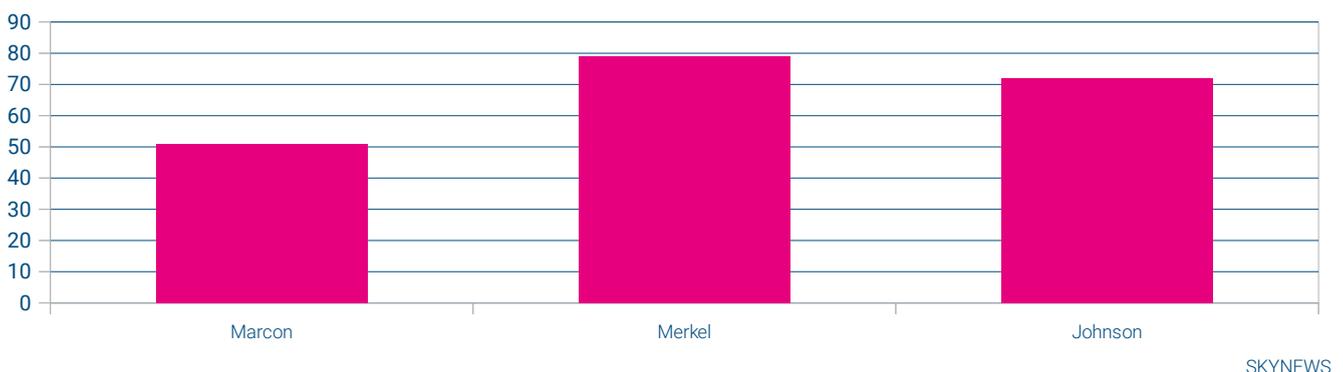
While electoral politics has taken a back seat to the management of the pandemic, the policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis have been shaped by the popularity of those in power. The first few months of the pandemic in Europe offer interesting lessons for the future and can provide examples for the liberal master narrative.

In a paper that looks at 15 European countries, Bol et al. (2020) find that lockdowns increased voting intentions for the party of the prime minister/president. However, there was no effect on left-wing attitudes, in the sense that the electorate did not become more left-wing or right-wing. Leininger and Schaub (2020) also show, in relation to the regional elections that took part in Bavaria at the beginning of March, that the pandemic benefited the incumbent party (CSU) and its candidates. Our own research, looking at the evolution of incumbent parties between January and August

in the 27 EU member states, indicates that, after February, incumbent support has experienced a 3.5% jump. There is a major difference between main right- and left-wing parties. Whereas the left-wing parties did not benefit from the pandemic, the right-wing ones saw a 2.9% increase in voting intentions. Moreover, as Roodujin finds, the support for the populist, radical right-wing saw a decline in the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak.

From a descriptive standpoint, the first phase of the pandemic has meant a rally-round-the-flag effect (Mueller 1970), with political leaders becoming more popular irrespective of their performance.<sup>51</sup> For example, Macron's approval jumped 13 points to 51%, his highest numbers since January 2018; Chancellor Merkel reached 79% in March, and Boris Johnson saw his numbers skyrocketing to 72%. The question is whether this effect will last – and the answer seems to be “no”, at least as indicated by what is currently happening with President Trump's approval ratings.

**Figure 3 | Selected Political Leaders' approval ratings during the COVID-19 pandemic**



<sup>51</sup> Jennings (2020). Coronavirus: Why Boris Johnson and other world leaders have become more popular during outbreak. Sky News, March 31, 2020, accessible at <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-why-boris-johnson-and-other-world-leaders-have-become-more-popular-during-outbreak-11965748> (Retrieved: 26/09/2020)



In this general context, it makes sense to investigate to what extent the reactions of political (liberal) leaders have contributed to these tendencies, which, obviously, will have to face the test of time. Is what we are living through a simply a rally-round-the-flag effect or the sign of a systematic and successful attempt by government to connect with and be responsive to voters? How, from a strategic communication standpoint, has the communication between these two groups evolved in the last six months?

The results of a European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) public opinion survey can shed some light on these questions and offer a more nuanced reading of the situation.<sup>1</sup> The poll was conducted in nine countries across Europe (Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden) at the end of April.

Five important findings are worth highlighting:

- 1) "only 29% say they have greater confidence in the government and, at the same time, believe that their own government has done well in the crisis"; however, "33% have lost confidence in the power of government while also holding a dim view of how their own government has performed;"
- 2) a majority of citizens in most member states do not trust experts and the authorities – "only 35% of respondents believe experts' work can be beneficial to them, while 38% believe politicians have instrumentalized experts and concealed information from the public, and 27% profess little faith in experts in general;"
- 3) 46% believe that the EU did not live up to its responsibilities during the pandemic and 47% agree that the EU has been irrelevant during the pandemic; however, 63% support the idea that the pandemic has shown the need for greater European cooperation;
- 4) the dominant view in Europe of the US and China has worsened;
- 5) when evaluating the international landscape, 29% are "DIYers" and see a nineteenth-century world of every nation for itself; 15% are "New Cold Warriors" whose position is shaped by the twentieth century and look to Trump's America to defend them from China; and 42% are Strategic Sovereignists who foresee a twenty-first-century world of blocs and regions; as per the authors, this group represents a new form of pro-Europeanism who believe Europe will need to support its own sovereignty through a joint foreign policy, the control of external borders, and re-localised production.

It remains to be seen whether these trends will persist, but they provide good insights about the European Zeitgeist and could orientate a liberal answer.

The political, policy, and communicational challenges faced by political leaders in this context are enormous. As coronavirus cases appeared and spread within countries, leaders had to react quickly and construct strategies for addressing the health-economic aspects of the pandemic. However, they not only had to think about what policies fit best, but also to find an appropriate way to address the public. Across the world, liberal leaders have sought to explain the need for restrictive measures and apply them only as a last resort. But there is a fine line between balancing the protection of people's health and upholding human rights. While at the beginning of the pandemic several surveys showed that the majority of people understood the need for lockdowns and other similar measures, approving and supporting them, things may have changed over time. More specifically, during the first wave, several countries were accused of acting too late and not prioritizing people's health over the economy or the infringement of liberties. For example, Amat et al. (2020) convincingly demonstrate how the COVID-19 outbreak in Spain made citizens more willing to sacrifice civil liberties to fight the pandemic, as well become more supportive of strong leadership. In contrast, after the first wave had passed, some people started to protest against the restrictions imposed due to the economic situation, societal tension, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, thus making their leaders' quest to find the right balance even harder, in addition to convincing voters of the need to prolong these measures.



The rally-around-the-flag literature assumes that popularity rises for the leaders or parties in power when a country is confronted with a crisis due to an external conflict, while it decreases when it is due to an economic downturn. Applied to the current situation, we should expect to see an increase in approval rates for the incumbents when countries suffer from the pandemic's health aspect and a decrease when people face its economic consequences. Hence, it is worth exploring some of the approaches taken by countries in terms of discourses and policies and their subsequent reactions.

## This is looking much like both a threat and an opportunity

This is looking much like both a threat and an opportunity: a threat, because inevitably what people will be most angry about is the economy, as they feel there is little that can be done post-factum about the pandemic, but feel that the economic situation is (or should be) manageable by the parties and politics that be. In this sense, liberals not stepping up and raising their voice on this aspect, one that ought to be much more within their comfort zone compared to other political groups, will clearly register as a lost opportunity and will be counted as a loss.

The opportunity in the situation is that liberals, being traditionally preoccupied with business and the economy, ought to have more practice in dealing swiftly with these issues and come up with a series of mitigating processes and measures. While the values and thinking have shifted, with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) and the saving of jobs now being considered as important as keeping the economy going, none the less, liberals have a chance to step up. It is important to highlight that people do not expect miraculous solutions (necessarily); a productive process will do as well, in which they are and feel consulted, involved in decision-making and in developing the choices that concern them and their communities.

This is a clear opening for political processes to be improved and to demonstrate how participation, co-creation, involvement, and responsibility by individuals are based on liberal values and are what empowers people.

### 2.2. The response of (liberal) political leaders. The policy response

Two important dimensions of the political leadership's response to the pandemic are worth a brief sketch, as they are informative for the set of choices that defines our understanding of the pandemic. The policy response has gone hand in hand with the discursive side, at a time when, more than ever and for obvious reasons, the public has really paid attention to what the decision-makers and politicians have decided and communicated.

At the policy level, two key goals have structured the intervention: 1) implementing the best available measures to protect people's health, even if this meant limitations in terms of civil rights and liberties; 2) ensuring that the economy does not collapse and that those most vulnerable receive at least a minimum of support. An inventory of the measures taken immediately after the outbreak in Europe was put together by the European Commission and, despite national adaptations, what is striking is their policies' distribution and commonalities.<sup>53</sup>

On the healthcare side, their efforts were targeted at securing personal protective equipment and ventilators while supporting research for a vaccine and reallocating resources to ensure better testing and better care for those with pre-existing conditions, who were more likely to experience the severe effects of the virus. In Europe, at least in March and April, public opinion was first defined by the competition among countries for medical supplies, a situation that made many talk about the collapse of European solidarity and cooperation.

<sup>53</sup> European Commission (2020). Policy measures taken against the spread and impact of the coronavirus – 14 May 2020, accessible at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/coronavirus\\_policy\\_measures\\_14\\_may.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/coronavirus_policy_measures_14_may.pdf) (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).



As things progressed, the member states, together with the European institutions, managed to coordinate better and to restore the idea of a unified Europe. In March, the European Commission decided to create a strategic “rescEU” stockpile of medical equipment such as ventilators and protective masks to help EU countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>54</sup> Member states decided to help each other and the equivalent of the Chinese “mask diplomacy” emerged and took an even deeper meaning: French patients were treated in German hospitals and, as Ursula von der Leyen mentioned in her State of the Union speech, Romanian doctors went to Italy to help out. The same tropes of competition emerged in relation to a potential vaccine – see the controversy about the US buying a German medical research company or the discussion about priority access to the vaccine (e.g. the scandal surrounding the initial position of French company Sanofi).

On the economic side, the measures were designed to deal with the unheard of economic slowdown and, as the European Commission reported, they were a mix of expenditure, tax, sectorial, regional, and non-fiscal measures. Those affected by the lockdown received temporary compensation, the SMEs were also able to draw on governmental funding to cope with the exceptional situation since limitations on the deficit and state aid were suspended. The scope of these measures depended on each state’s capacity and resources, and less on ideology – the return of a big, interventionist state was the norm, and no one really contested this reality after the pandemic’s outbreak. Far more debate surrounded the conversation on how the EU should address the economic fallout. In the end, the member states decided on a 750-billion extraordinary recovery effort, the Next Generation EU (NGEU).<sup>55</sup> The recovery fund includes €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in low interest loans for countries badly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The travel restrictions, border shutdowns, and the drastic decline in the movement of people are an equally important challenge for Europe, as they question one of the fundamental principles behind European cooperation and integration. Reform of the Schengen area and the entire policy surrounding migration will be hard tests for the EU in the post-pandemic era.

### **2.3. The response of (liberal) political leaders. The political narratives**

To understand the key liberal narratives on the pandemic and its consequences, one analytical method is to focus on a few speeches by top European politicians: Chancellor Merkel, President Macron, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, addressed her nation directly for the first time in her 15 years as Chancellor, besides her traditional New Year message.<sup>56</sup>

Instead of declaring war like the French head of state did, Merkel emphasized the gravity of the situation by saying that “It is serious. Take it seriously” and that “since World War II, there has never been a challenge for our country in which acting in solidarity was so very crucial”.

She also offered explanations of why restrictions are needed, declaring that “in a democracy, they [restrictions] should not be enacted lightly – and only temporarily. But at the moment they are essential – in order to save human lives”. Also, she made it clear that officials want to “explain political decisions and make them transparent”. She accented the fact that it is crucial that every citizen act responsibly and gave assurances that she “truly believe[s] that we will succeed in the task before us” and that Germany “will do whatever it takes”.

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-recovery-plan/> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5yAHW44BSA> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).



In an April speech to the Bundestag<sup>57</sup>, Chancellor Merkel put forward what could easily be described as the key points of the liberal democratic narrative for the pandemic:

- She emphasized how the pandemic is an imposition on democracy. This is music to the ears of those committed to civil rights and liberties and an aspect that was not sufficiently discussed by other political leaders during the lockdowns. If some politicians took advantage of the pandemic to acquire more power (see the Hungarian example – Guasti (2020)), Merkel sought to alleviate concerns about the politics of the state during this exceptional period and endorsed the “old” democratic norms, not the “new normal” of postponed elections and limited rights.
- She offered a realistic assessment of how the virus situation will evolve – “We will be living with this virus for a long time”. Preferring honesty to a triumphant speech that might have been a better motivator in the short term, the Chancellor decided to treat everyone as an adult and to have a straightforward societal conversation about what is likely to happen. Focusing on the long-term and avoiding being tricked by easy wins could be essential for the credibility and popularity of political leaders, especially as Europe now faces the prospect of a second wave. Setting expectations in a way that is based on a realistic assessment should not be limited to a politician who has won every federal election since 2005.
- She focused on European solidarity and cooperation – “Europe isn’t Europe when it doesn’t think of itself as Europe”. Not only did she decide on a solution that involves international cooperation (while avoiding

European criticism), but she also committed German resources to the effort of rebuilding the European economy. At a time when others were not really in a generous mood, the German leader was frank when stating that, in the spirit of solidarity and as Europe’s largest economy, Germany should be prepared to pay more into the EU budget. Aligning principles with actions is how political credibility is built and maintained, both at home and abroad.

- She firmly defended international organizations, multilateralism, and the international liberal order – “For the German government, I emphasize that the WHO is an indispensable partner and we support their mandate,” she said. The WHO was the main target of those decrying the current state of international organizations (see President Trump’s announcements about the WHO), so such a strong defence of this institution when it was needed it most was a welcome counterpoint. Before overhauling the functioning of international organizations, we first have to preserve and strengthen multilateralism, a fundamental step in a world of complex problems whose solutions cannot stop at national borders.

Merkel’s and her party’s popularity also saw an uptick, with a poll showing that 82 percent of Germans said that Merkel was doing her job “rather well,” and with the Christian Democratic Union once again far ahead of its challengers.<sup>58</sup> According to polls, CDU’s rise in public opinion, thanks to the government’s management of the coronavirus crisis, put it at the highest level since the 2017 federal election.<sup>59</sup>

Although most Germans, 93 percent, approved of the measures imposed, according to a poll conducted in April<sup>60</sup>, some Germans – most of them apparently on the

<sup>57</sup> DW (2020). Coronavirus will make life hard for a long time, Angela Merkel says. April 23, 2020, accessible at <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-will-make-life-hard-for-a-long-time-angela-merkel-says/a-53214848> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>58</sup> “How Germany Fell Back in Love With Angela Merkel”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/opinion/coronavirus-merkel-germany.html> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>59</sup> “Crisis management boosts Merkel’s conservatives in poll”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-germany-politics/crisis-management-boosts-merkels-conservatives-in-poll-idUSKBN21D106> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>60</sup> “Coronavirus: Angela Merkel’s approval ratings up amid health crisis”, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-angela-merkels-approval-ratings-up-amid-health-crisis/a-53001405> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).



far-right, but with many more that probably fell for disinformation and social media manipulation – have recently begun to take the streets in Berlin to protest the Covid-19 measures<sup>61</sup>, which begs the question of what strategies should be applied, especially as coronavirus cases are rising again.

The French President, Emanuel Macron, discussed the pandemic using the most alarming terms of all the leaders. In his address to the nation on March 16, he repeated the expression “we are at war” multiple times, while also adopting other warrior-like rhetoric.<sup>62</sup>

He told citizens that “we fight neither against an army nor against another nation, but the enemy is there, invisible, elusive, and advancing” and that the current situation represents “the worst health crisis that France has faced in a century”. In order to introduce lockdown measures, which implied restrictions on people’s freedom, Macron explained that “France has never had to make such decisions – which are, of course, exceptional and temporary – in peacetime”, and asked the French to “show solidarity and a sense of responsibility” and “make sacrifices to slow the epidemic”, but also to “keep calm”.

His way of introducing these special measures was scored 87.96, on a scale from 0 to 100 in which 100 is the strictest, in the Government Response Stringency Index created by the Oxford University<sup>63</sup>. President Macron launched a nation-wide army campaign “Operation Resilience” to support the fight against the coronavirus, while imposing a fifteen-day lockdown across the country.<sup>64</sup> He also encouraged citizens by claiming that “No French person will be left without any means of support” and announcing measures in this regard.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53959552> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020)).

<sup>63</sup> The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>64</sup> France 24. “Macron launches army Operation Resilience to support fight against coronavirus” <https://www.france24.com/en/20200325-macron-launches-army-operation-resilience-to-support-fight-against-coronavirus> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>65</sup> France 24. “Coronavirus crisis throws a lifeline to Macron’s troubled presidency”, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200405-france-s-coronavirus-crisis-throws-lifeline-to-macron-s-troubled-presidency> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>66</sup> “France at war against the coronavirus: Politics under anaesthesia?”, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/31/france-at-war-against-the-coronavirus-politics-under-anesthesia/8> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

President Macron’s March 16 televised address to the French nation was also widely discussed in the international media.

The speech is very different from the narratives proposed by Chancellor Merkel: it is meant to mobilize and unite French society, to generate a rally-round-the-flag effect, and to focus on the short-term. If the German leader emphasized the democratic dimension of the pandemic, the French president stressed security in his speech – “we are at war”.

The emphasis was not on civil rights and liberties, but on the French state’s capacity to take care of everyone, to show that it knows how to protect its population, to help the unemployed, the business sector, and many others. As we know, one of the narratives challenging liberal, democratic states is that democracies have lost their capacity to deliver growth and better standards of living for everyone. It is exactly this line of argument that President Macron sought to refute.

From a strategic communication perspective, the question is: what impact have his speeches and policies had on voters, and has he gained popularity? A poll conducted in late March after his televised address, supposedly watched by a record 35 million people, showed that 51% of the French people “have confidence” in their President – a 13-point increase on the previous month.<sup>65</sup> Other sources show similar positive trends in his popularity, with Ipsos showing him up by 14 points and Ifop up by 11. In contrast, only 27% of the French people consider opposition parties “up to the task” of dealing with the pandemic.<sup>66</sup>



Furthermore, an opinion poll conducted in July showed that the French President's popularity shot up by six points and reached the 50% threshold after clinching a deal with other European leaders on an economic recovery package and reshuffling his government.<sup>67</sup> Macron's approval rating had suffered greatly since his election in 2017 due to the ongoing "Yellow Vests" protests and pensions strikes of 2018, so is it safe to assume now that voters have actually changed their preferences or is this only a result of a rally-round-the-flag effect? Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande both enjoyed similar boosts in the polls after the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 terror attacks, but it was only a temporary phenomenon. In mid-September, the first Yellow Vest protests since France's lockdown was lifted began, whilst the second wave of coronavirus struck the country, sending the message that many people are still unhappy with Macron's pre-Corona policies and his increase in popularity might not be sustainable.<sup>68</sup> This shows the need for strong and coherent narratives to be followed up by equally powerful measures.

## This shows the need for strong and coherent narratives to be followed up by equally powerful measures.

Finally, in her September 16 speech, the President of the European Commission combined the points of what a European, trans-national answer to the pandemic should contain:

- The first point is to manage the pandemic, to save lives, to contain the pandemic, to help those affected by the economic shocks, and to strengthen the European social model. This approach is in line with President Macron's emphasis on the state's ability to deploy its resources when and where needed. Strategic stockpiling and reshoring are part of the answer.

<sup>67</sup> "Macron's popularity climbs after signing EU pandemic stimulus, reshuffling gov't", <https://www.france24.com/en/20200730-macron-s-popularity-mounts-after-he-clinches-eu-recovery-deal-opinion-poll> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>68</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-more-than-150-arrested-during-first-yellow-vest-protest-since-france-lockdown-lifted-12069788> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

Catastrophic politics (Atkeson and Maestas 2012) is fundamental because, as opposed to normal politics, it has the ability to reshape narratives and identities and reduce the role of political predispositions; being successful in the short term is essential, given that this is when change really happens. This basic, but crucial, intuition seems to underlie strategic communications by the European Commission.

- The second point refers to the role of the EU in the preservation and strengthening of the international liberal order and of the international organizations. Von der Leyen was explicit in stating that the solution is not the destruction of the WTO and the WHO, but their improvement. This should happen in a context in which Russian trespassing is not tolerated, and China is an "economic competitor" and a "strategic rival".
- The third point concerns the overhaul of the European migration system and of the Schengen area, a move to maintain the humanitarian and liberal contours of what has defined Europe since the events of 2015.
- The final point is about the rule of law and the protection of minority rights, both made more controversial by the pandemic situation.

## The pandemic response, political reactions, and strategic communication risks and opportunities

So far, we have seen crisis managers at 10 Downing Street and the White House try to either trumpet the "War" narrative like Macron, or promote the apologetic "unprecedented challenge" like Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez, or perform those wrestling moves Trump did



vis-a-vis the pandemic's outbreak. The speeches and communication strategies that produced gains in popularity amid the pandemic and stood out as examples of good practice were the those of New Zealand PM Jacinda Arden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. They, as well as some other leaders, used simple and clear language, emphasized the need for firm action, had a calm, firm, but friendly manner, used scientific reasons to back up their actions, empowered citizens, and showed empathy, while also promoting transparency and presenting reality as it is. There is a positive correlation between how well leaders communicated with the public and their popularity gains with voters. But it is still difficult to assess whether this is only a rally-round-the-flag-effect caused by the pandemic's health aspect and if these incumbents' popularity will decrease once countries feel the economic consequences. A crucial factor will be how governments will manage the economic recovery and/or a possible resurgence of the virus.

Popularity did not only rise for liberal leaders in power, but also for populist ones. For example, Giuseppe Conte's 'half-populist' leadership during the Covid-19 crisis created a positive image and broad popularity for him.<sup>69</sup>

Brett Meyer has analysed populist leaders' responses to Covid-19 and found interesting conclusions regarding voters' support. First, he divided populists' strategies into two categories: downplaying the pandemic or taking it seriously. The ones who took it seriously can next be divided by how they acted, whether in a liberal or in an illiberal way.<sup>70</sup> He finds that leaders such as Donald Trump and Alexander Lukashenko downplayed the pandemic, whereas leaders such as Viktor Orban, Mateusz Morawiecki, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan opted for a serious, but illiberal, approach.

Others such as Giuseppe Conte and Boyko Borisov took a serious and largely liberal approach. When it comes to public popularity, the study concludes that populists who have downplayed the crisis, like Donald Trump, have faced public disapproval for their actions, but populists taking a serious response, regardless of their liberal or illiberal approach, like Viktor Orban and Giuseppe Conte, have seen their poll numbers increase.

As we noted in the previous and current chapters, other challenges that liberals now face are preserving cooperation in international relations, fighting against protectionism, and ensuring solidarity within societies. Protectionist and nationalist rhetoric are easily pushed by populist and nationalist leaders when people are afraid and confused, so in order to counter these, liberals must come up with a good narrative.

Within the European Union, although its initial response has been criticized, some leaders have shown that cohesion and collaboration are possible and come with benefits. A project done by the European Council on Foreign Relations called "The European Solidarity Tracker" has collected instances of pan-European solidarity in the areas of communications, economics, and medicine, a good representation of pledges by EU leaders about unity and cohesion between countries<sup>71</sup>. Overall, since the beginning of March, 236 declarations of solidarity from the leaders of member states directed to the EU or other EU members were recorded. The countries with the most pledges are Germany, France, Spain, Estonia, and Romania.

Nevertheless, surveys, like the one by ECFR discussed in the introduction of this section, show that on average, European voters are facing "a reality in which, though they

<sup>69</sup> Marino De Luca, "The Italian style: Giuseppe Conte's 'half-populist' leadership during Covid-19" <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/06/08/the-italian-style-giuseppe-contes-half-populist-leadership-during-covid-19/> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>70</sup> "Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to Covid-19", <https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.ecfr.eu/solidaritytracker> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).



largely feel that current EU institutions have not done enough to help them address the crisis.<sup>72</sup> Some experts argue that the EU is at a critical juncture, and the EU's capacity for coordination and its leaders' power to frame regional solidarity as a vital and positive concept will shape people's stance and will therefore stand as decisive factors in the bloc's future.

## Consequently, this is the time for liberal leaders in member states to reframe existing divides within the EU.

Consequently, this is the time for liberal leaders in member states to reframe existing divides within the EU. They need to come up with substantive ideas and explain them to citizens along with the benefits brought by international cooperation. Abstract calls for the need for solidarity and cohesion are not enough, and they might in fact alienate many citizens by failing to address their practical concerns. Europeans' opinions about the rest of the world have also suffered during the pandemic. The overall perceptions of the US and Russia have deteriorated, and China has also made an overwhelmingly negative impression on Europeans.<sup>73</sup>

There is even further evidence that the EU's institutional communication appears to be heading back to business as usual due to the persistence of the same topics and narratives that existed at before the pandemic hit Europe in early 2020. This is in spite of the fact that most speeches by top political and bureaucratic leaders constantly mention the connections between economic recovery, advancing the policy agenda, and finding political entente about how to go proceed with planning the recovery of Europe. These topics appear to have little traction with a populace concerned with calming their concerns animated by COVID-19, the lockdowns, and the

risks of a crippled economy. It looks like more focused, specialized, and parallel strands of communication on the various topics of concern to the Union and the European populace is preferable. One explanation could be that integrated, high-level, concept-based communication is too comprehensive and all-encompassing for people to break down. Instead, the continuation of those good practices of some leaders at the beginning of the pandemic outbreak, who communicated one thing at a time, looks like they will be more convincing to people by making it easier to perceive how and what is being done. The recent State of the Union given by President von der Leyen seems to be a move in the right direction, at least in terms of simplifying communication and focusing on the most powerful messages. The requirements for public communication in both stressful and non-stressful situations, as well as during the looming risk of economic collapse, have prompted as early as the first half of 2020 the creation of publicly and privately funded research initiatives, some as doctoral research – in structured university-based PhD programs, and some as inter-institutional public collaborations. These are two broad trends that could be observed. One is about research on how to communicate about a crisis and stringent measures while maintaining public trust and not letting the population be swayed by disinformation online or by populist attitudes. A recent great example is the Free University of Amsterdam's programme which, in cooperation with the Dutch CDC and Institute for Public Health <sup>74</sup>, focused on values-based communication about vaccines. This comes against the backdrop of many people self-declaring their full embrace of the liberal values of freedom and self-management so that they are disinclined now to take all the required measures to protect themselves from the virus. Hence, the Dutch public ecosystem is looking into how to use people's own values to convince them to do the right thing. This is an example of policy and values in action that has a great chance of helping in the next crisis since the results will, unfortunately, only be manifest within about three years.

<sup>72</sup> "Together in trauma: Europeans and the world after covid-19", [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together\\_in\\_trauma\\_europeans\\_and\\_the\\_world\\_after\\_covid\\_19](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together_in_trauma_europeans_and_the_world_after_covid_19) (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together\\_in\\_trauma\\_europeans\\_and\\_the\\_world\\_after\\_covid\\_19](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together_in_trauma_europeans_and_the_world_after_covid_19) (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.academictransfer.com/en/294469/phd-position-innovating-the-inclusion-of-knowledge-and-values-in-vaccination-guidelines> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).



The other big trend in terms of research is preparing for the loss of jobs and economic opportunities resulting from the massive adoption of RPA (process automation) and of AI 'for everything'. This research revolves around how AI and automation could supplant people, allowing them to stay at home and do less manual work, whether in agricultural fields, in meat plants, or in car factories. The concerns are first, that without a vaccine, the virus will be present long-term; and second, that there is a need to restart economies, to keep things going, right now, but without the possibility of using people to do the jobs required to keep humans fed, dressed, and with access to their basic requirements. This includes examples of robotic, remote, and automated building and construction technologies; in spring 2020, the first houses and bridges were co-built by robots and humans. This line of research is primarily industry driven. Politically, it serves well for now – it is keeping the economy turning, helping prevent the further shutdown of activity. However, after we have a vaccine, people will find that there are fewer jobs available. There is an enormous fallout risk if people are not prepared cognitively and emotionally for discovering this new reality after a year of Covid-19 lockdown. In this case, compensation for the losers of automation becomes mandatory.

To prepare for this, liberal politicians needs to speak more to the value of offering everyone the chance to compete and build a future for themselves through education and training options for all. Though this appears to be a traditionally left-wing topic, applied, industry-based specific training for specific contexts and tasks has been a right-wing agenda item since the advent of the industrial age. This offers liberals an opportunity to call for their own version of a 'social contract', one that jumps ahead of the curve instead of just bearing the brunt of the crisis and forcing people to demand for more social support from the state. Such a new social contract could start with training people, while under partial lockdown and while state support still exists, for a new economy – a post-COVID-19 economy that no one has yet explained to the greater public.

✱

All these narratives and insights complete the substantive agenda of the liberal democrats during the pandemic. A guide of how to talk and act as liberals should integrate these elements, while simplifying the language, mastering the role of emotions, and finding a mega-narrative to bring these moving parts together. We will offer a brief introduction to this herculean task in the next section.



# CHAPTER 3

## WHAT TO DO AS A LIBERAL LEADER TO WIN





## 3. What to do as a liberal leader to win – a value-based strategic communication approach

We define winning in terms of getting and preserving the public's trust and support – a sine qua non condition for transformative and efficient leadership (which contains a fair dose of policy implementation). Thus, given the challenges and the actual observed reactions of liberal leaders during the recent crisis, what can be done better in terms of the strategic framing of the answers and subsequent policies? Based on our analysis and political experience, our goal is to distil these lessons into actionable advice for liberal politicians and decision-makers.

### The strategic communication roadmap

#### The "what"

1. Coming up with convincing answers to the questions made salient by the pandemic;
2. Reframing and reshaping the narratives and the master narrative to promote liberal values and keep challengers at bay;
3. Campaigning in the COVID-19 era.

#### The "how"

1. Building coalitions for positive change – a communication perspective;
2. Using global media efficiently;
3. Communicating issues that cut through.

What we propose is a stylized FAQ for politicians driven by liberal values who won't compromise their principles.<sup>75</sup>

### General approach

There is little room for partisan politics these days and criticism is simply not enough to get through. In fact, as discussed above, the popularity of some incumbent leaders has surged (unless they have been disastrous or visibly chaotic managers) – a natural consequence of a rally-round-the-flag effect. However, this sense of quasi-unity should not fool anyone. What we live through these days is actually very political and, once the crisis (its health component to be precise) starts to fade, the partisan and ideological underpinnings will become crystal clear during the managing of the economic and social crises. Political parties' narratives will seek to leverage the pandemic to win hearts, minds, and votes. Some political plans will be altered by E-voting solutions (campaigning will also suffer, with elections delayed for months or having to adjust to stricter health protocols), and by the public's perception of crisis leadership and management by governments and opposition parties.

A related question is what is needed for liberal parties to emerge as the winners of this 'mega-crisis': not just for themselves, but for citizens, for the society as a whole, for liberals worldwide and for the (still global and status quo) liberal-democratic model. We will emphasize some points that centrist, mainstream, and liberal politicians and decision-makers should consider and, hopefully, internalize.

<sup>55</sup> This section partly builds on our previous work on the contours of a liberal response to the pandemic challenge – see here: [https://medium.com/@radu\\_5246/leading-in-times-of-coronavirus-a-winning-global-liberal-response-bfb0519afc05](https://medium.com/@radu_5246/leading-in-times-of-coronavirus-a-winning-global-liberal-response-bfb0519afc05) (Retrieved: 31/08/2020).

Winning involves leadership (drive) and management (planning and steering), inspiration (vision), and solutions (thinking out of the box), doubled by swift action (do and be seen doing); one cannot win without this combination of form and substance, the only sustainable way to gain and keep trust and manage hope. Hopefully, the challenges highlighted in the first section of the report will offer guidance about where communication should be focused.

## a global networked exchange is necessary

This is valid for everyone in the liberal-minded ecosystem, from parties to political foundations, from youth to women organizations, from global to regional liberal networks. More than ever, a global networked exchange – and the agility to adapt and adopt good solutions – are necessary. When even the populists and anti-globalists are joining forces and share best practices to undermine the liberal democratic narrative, the liberals should do the same. Resilience is the *mot du jour*, so the focus should be on building up liberal individual, community, country, and global resilience in face of the twin health and economic crises, and also on leading by example, by using initiative, harnessing energy, and creating solutions. In a nutshell, it is time to lead, to redouble the good management of those liberals in power, and for liberals working on a come-back, to offer responsible solutions and alternatives

### 1. The “what”

#### 1.1. Coming up with convincing and coherent answers

The first section of this report discussed nine topics made salient by the pandemic and sketched out some

questions in need of credible answers. While we do not claim to know the nitty-gritty of each one, we will offer a political and strategic communication perspective on how each one could be approached. As always, nothing is set in stone and the points raised here are an invitation to a fruitful conversation.

*1. How can nationalism be employed to foster the sense of national unity (an equivalent of the rally-round-the-flag effect) essential for overcoming this predicament? How can we avoid the consolidation of a toxic form of nationalism and its associated pernicious effects on intra- and inter-country relations?*

- As the pandemic has exacerbated xenophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, and exclusionary attitudes, a necessary first step is a principled one: condemning any attitude of this type, even if it involves political allies and even if it can be, in the short-term, electorally detrimental. In the end, credibility is built by aligning principles with actions. Any hesitation on this front will only strengthen the extremists and discredit centrist and liberal politics.
- The global nature of the pandemic is the perfect setting to demonstrate the value of cross-border cooperation. Rather than only preach cooperation, showcase concrete examples of it and help disseminate the success stories. Countries did and do help each other during the pandemic, so show it and communicate it. There are minority, immigrant, and refugee frontline, essential workers, so tell their stories and how they are contributing to the wellbeing of their communities. The quest for a vaccine could be the best story we have in tackling exclusionary nationalism, given that multinational teams are involved in the research and testing stages.

<sup>72</sup> “Together in trauma: Europeans and the world after covid-19”, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together\\_in\\_trauma\\_europeans\\_and\\_the\\_world\\_after\\_covid\\_19](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together_in_trauma_europeans_and_the_world_after_covid_19) (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together\\_in\\_trauma\\_europeans\\_and\\_the\\_world\\_after\\_covid\\_19](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/together_in_trauma_europeans_and_the_world_after_covid_19) (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.academictransfer.com/en/294469/phd-position-innovating-the-inclusion-of-knowledge-and-values-in-vaccination-guidelines> (Retrieved: 27/09/2020).



The way people connect crisis preparation and the rules of supply and demand (in liberal economics), will also matter, as a new wave of (justified?) patriotism is roll-on “Some produce, some buy, we don’t need to all produce the same stuff” is a very easy and obvious thing to do during normal times, but a real drama these days. The pandemic will make people think “We need our OWN this and that”. Autonomy, patriotism, and self-sufficiency will be employed to alleviate the fears of those for whom nationalism is still a dirty word. But make no mistake, a more significant conversation will soon happen in the West about economic and strategic vulnerabilities. Entire industries will be ‘reshored’ and this will leave its mark on economic globalization and global values chains. The radical right parties will be in pole-position to benefit electorally from these changes, but it should not be this way. As said above, patriotism, autonomy, and self-sufficiency can receive their liberal twist, obviously within well-defined boundaries

*2. How to credibly respond to the diatribes against free trade and globalization? How to convince the voters that protectionism is not a solution and how to efficiently compensate the losers of globalization? How to protect (pun intended!) the market as the most efficient form of resource allocation while making the necessary adjustments, both at the national and international levels, required by the new normal?*

- Free trade needs an overhaul and the first point to start with is the functioning (or rather the paralysis) of WTO. Rather than accept the protectionist narrative, liberals have to come up with their own plan, with their own version of how trade should proceed in the new world, what institutions are necessary, and what the direct and indirect benefits to the citizens are. It should not be forgotten that, provided that their message is well delivered, voters tend to follow their leaders on policy issues (Lenz 2012).

- The discussion about reshoring and homeshoring should not prevent leaders from addressing the issue of automation, which is of even greater importance. That losers from globalization exist is not an academic construct, they exist given the distributional effects of free trade. Thus, compensation and empathy for these workers should be part of the answer, both at the national and European levels. For example, the EU has the European Globalization Adjustment Fund, which is barely used by member states; improving its use and coming up with national counterparts are ideas to consider and refine.

*3. How to expose the empty arguments of populist leaders while connecting with those consumed by economic uncertainty and cultural threat? Should the response favour economic compensation policies, a new discursive approach, or more engagement with cultural concerns?*

- Even if the experts will not gain acclaim overnight (as they have been the target of intense criticism in the last few years) – and the first polling results confirm this supposition – the pandemic has shown that their expertise and solutions are essential for fighting against the virus. “When things get real, bet on a safe pair of hands” – this should be the starting point of the come-back plan.
- Those left behind culturally and economically should not also be politically abandoned. The radical centre should be ready to use its credibility and resources to propose alternative plans based on realistic, well thought out solutions.

*4. What (new) economic plans, solutions, and narratives can be deployed so that our liberal democracies are not infected by the illiberal virus? How to navigate a period of high economic and health uncertainty in a way that will not further erode trust in democracy, institutions, and mainstream political parties?*

Today's public discussion revolves around state intervention. Everyone is asking for help, not just the employees and trade unions as one might expect. SMEs and big businesses are arguing that the gravity of the crisis requires massive stimulus packages and financial injections for hard-hit industries. We will see many discussions about who deserves to be saved/bailed out and who does not. This question was raised only a bit during the 2008–2009 crisis. This time really is different. An observable consequence of these discussions will be a certain 'normalization' of an increased role for the state and an electorate more at ease with interventionism and a restricted role of the market (both counter-liberal instincts). An economically left-wing electorate might come to dominate at least the first round of elections after the end of the pandemic. The radical left parties are currently not in great political shape (and have not really gained support in the first few months of the pandemic), but this is, for sure, an opportunity for their message: the number of people being fired will reignite their fire. Hopefully, liberals can work in coalitions with centrist versions of social-democrats. All these nationalist, populist, or extreme political predictable trends and threats could materialize unless others (e.g. liberals) succeed in integrating their own political energy with their people's needs to make a bigger story. What is important to recognize is that the tides of history work this way, and the correlation between the economy and people's choices for state control and less liberal options are in direct correlation. And, as we have seen after World War I, the extreme left quickly evolved into forms of totalitarianism, which were later called Communism and Nazism.

- There is, however, a chance for liberals to work with the flow instead of against it: join hands with the people going towards more controlled forms of economics and more involvement by the state, so that it brings the electorate towards more liberal forms within a few years.

That would require a more entrepreneurial and elastic state apparatus, as well as helping citizens be more empowered and in control of their lives. After all, what they are asking for is: a more equitable education, one that prepares them to better face the contemporary world – and no, not the 19th century industrial world from which today's education stems; a social insurance system that can accompany them through their varied careers and work arrangements; and a promise they will not be shut out from and by the system. If anything, the liberals are proposing this already, but their wording doesn't seem to be reaching the people. That is why we see things as inherently conflictual – because the programmes for unemployment compensation, health care, and pensions are rigid, suited for a world dominated by long-term 8-to-5 labour contracts but not adjusted to today's realities. So, people are asking for more state support to increase the coverage, instead of recognizing the need for more elasticity. As for the system not shutting people out, this can only be achieved by being politically involved in the system. So, liberals have their chance to have their moment and propose liberal measures that would cater to people's appetites for more 'social protection'. It is important to first rebuild bridges with the people, before 'educating' them on how the world works. One can be tempted to try and educate people before demonstrating ideas or showing results. The inflection point is when we are can demonstrate our ideas and then tell people how we think about things.

*5. How to avoid toxic fault lines and to preserve a sense of solidarity in our societies, while ensuring a higher degree of fairness in our communities? How to avoid excesses and the reality that society will emerge from this episode more divided than ever? How to convincingly speak to the majority of voters about inequality and associated policy measures?*



- Inequality has become one of the key issues of our times. The pandemic, as already discussed, is not likely to level the playing field, it will probably make the situation dramatically uneven. In the end, higher (and obscene) levels of inequality are a major blow to the essential promise of democracy to deliver for everyone.
- The liberals must come up with their own narrative and solutions to own the story of inequality. The idea that this will go away cannot be taken as a given. Obviously, addressing both the causes and consequences of inequality must be part of the bigger economic narrative and the rethinking of the role of the market and state.
- The growth in inequality in education and healthcare brought about by the pandemic will have to be addressed by tailored, dedicated plans which will ensure that the promise of equal opportunity is more than a promise. This requires not only well-designed policy, but empathy in delivery and more diversity in terms of candidate recruitment and promotion. .

*6. How to preserve cooperation in international relations while fixing the broken parts of the system? How to transform international organizations into honest brokers and entities able to deal with global public goods? How to convince the domestic public that international coordination and cooperation are essential to confront the spectre of issues raised by the pandemic?*

- Great power competition and the prospect of a second Cold War should not prevent a rearticulation of the liberal narrative by those who, in earnest, have strong arguments in favour of further cooperation. It is not like people cannot understand the need for more coordination in international affairs, they only require a convincing story to be told about what has to be done to correct what does not work and to preserve the basis of the international liberal order.

- The WHO and the WTO need to be fundamentally restructured, with new roles suited to increasing economic deglobalization and with more emphasis on security issues rather than the economy.
- The involvement of non-state actors – e.g. MNCs, INGOs – could compensate for the noticeable decline in official global cooperation and their input could be decisive in fighting problems such as the pandemic we currently face. The case for liberal political leaders could be made through such initiatives, so the keyword here becomes coalition building.

*7. How to uphold human rights and freedoms while being effective in dealing with the virus and its consequences? How to avoid the militarization of the debate and to make a human-rights approach an essential part of fighting the pandemic?*

- The protection of rights and liberties is a defining characteristic of the liberals, so this dimension of the pandemic should figure more prominently in their language and talking points. The German Chancellor can serve as an excellent example.
- Ensuring that privacy is respected, that free speech and association will resume are essential parts of the democratic process. Our political system and legislation should adapt to encourage online public conversation, to ensure inclusiveness, and to have real debate over essential social issues

*8. How to preserve the rules-based international order and how to change institutions and practices, so that the potential for political (illiberal) backlash is seriously reduced? How to offer a unified response to the rise of China and how to make transatlantic relations great again? How to make this new international liberal order 2.0 narrative attractive?*

- The international liberal order awaits its new champions, and many are trying to look beyond the US to form a coalition to compensate for Trump's reluctance to help re-legitimise the liberal global order. The field is wide open for this.
- At the same time, advancing liberal values clearly at the international level is something that could contain the appeal of the alternative model supported, to different extents, by Russia and China.
- Some complain that liberal democracy is not the only game in town anymore. But this should be seen as an opportunity to deliver a compelling, contrasting argument about the virtues of liberal democratic values in national and international politics.

*9. How to use identity politics as a source for recognition and empowerment, while preventing populist and anti-democratic forces to sow division and accentuate the fault lines present in our societies? How to make sure that no one is left behind, and that discrimination is condemned and prevented from structuring our response to the pandemic? How to move beyond the pernicious distinction between us vs them, made so salient by the closing of borders, by existential and economic anxiety, and by illiberal forces? How to communicate this inclusive vision while obtaining the decisive support of voters?*

- A balancing act is required to give equal importance to addressing the legitimate concerns of different groups and the need to unify voters around issues such as class and the broader economic agenda.
- Moreover, the growing relevance of cultural aspects over economic ones and the interplay of economic and cultural causes of economic insecurity and inequality are two of the fundamental aspects to navigate in developing the liberal master narrative. The ability not only to win elections but to govern will depend on managing the increasing complexity of our societies. In Europe, new policies on migration

and refugees will have to respond to these demands. Given that this is overwhelmingly the domain of the radical right, the liberal answer should somehow balance the public conversation.

## **1.2 Reframing and reshaping the narratives and the master narrative – Where should the reframing start?**

What both the radical left and right, just like populists and nationalists, are missing is a full story – and doable, sustainable, solutions. Their simplistic solutions are typically mono-causal and lack a positive, hope-driven twist. Again, finding the balance between extreme tendencies should be the essential task for liberal – and more mainstream – politicians (or should we say, even better, statesmen and stateswomen since politicians is now a 'dirty/toxic' word). While emphasizing their credentials and experience, the latter should not dismiss these trends/fears, but integrate them into a bigger story, one about how communities / institutions / countries / regions can leave the crisis behind and bounce back. Hope goes hand in hand with resilience. For this to successfully happen, the whole endeavour requires the clear and empathetic communication of solutions, and a lot more work on the ground before the moment online (e-leadership, to stick to health safety rules): "I hear you and I know what we have to do to get out of this together".

## **This is not new, but the pandemic should be a catalyst for change**

This is not new, but the pandemic should be a catalyst for change. Old-style globalization is living its final days, whether we like to admit it or not. Obviously, free trade and globalization have an overall positive impact, there is no arguing that here, but a lot of disgruntled citizens will be looking for scapegoats or new "enemies of the nation/people", from banks to other "more-than-less fortunate" organizations in the new crisis. The problem



emerges when looking at distributional effects — some really believe that opening borders and economies has made them worse-off. The challenge for the liberal forces will be to preserve as much as possible from the old order while selling their new tweaks as revolutionary steps to the public

## Lead the change in the liberal order, don't allow it to be demonized and replaced

or a “*RETURN TO THE JUNGLE*”; to paraphrase Churchill, liberal-democracy may be the worst or an imperfect model, but it is still the best one invented so far).

Charisma plays a part. Some personal political charm would come in handy in this context, and some liberal, national, and global leaders have an above-average ability to lead based on their natural gifts or extensive training. In any case, the liberals need a new narrative about internationalization and globalization, that should have both economic and cultural dimensions. This includes an overdue discussion about how to deal with migration and refugees in Europe and, more broadly, a consistent policy towards Africa and a cooperative response to the “Asian Century”. Also, liberals need to have continuity and adaptation plans for the world’s — or regional — major plans, from the EU Green Deal to UN SDGs.

Life must also go on, and some, if not most, priorities should continue, a full global reset of objectives and attention is not needed. For example, the crisis should not be an excuse for slowing the empowerment of women. Does it make sense for a young girl to have to wait 120 years instead of an absurd, WEF documented, 100 years, to achieve gender equality? No, and the crisis should

accelerate what also needs to be done about values. Amid a scarcity of resources (a fight for each “budget” or “aid and investment penny”) and of demonization of all kinds, we need to set the record straight on WHAT SHOULD REALLY MATTER — with words that work and proper framing and reframing — in the coming war on ideas (from country models to new world order debates). Whoever defines and pushes first for what the new normal should look like will also shape it. Let it be liberals.

In Europe, this reframing necessarily involves finding an empowering narrative about the future of the EU. Asking for a bigger role for the EU in crisis-management is not the most intuitive thing to do these days in the absence of a new integration story (although the public, as seen in the ECFR report discussed in section 2, is confused about the EU’s role during the crisis). We will frustrate citizens if we ask the European Commission for policies which this institution lacks the power to implement, so we need an adjustment to manage expectations as well as clarity about who is doing what). If the pandemic is compared to a war (not an innocuous comparison, as previously discussed), then a lot of footwork is necessary to bring a sense of urgency and channel it towards more bureaucratic build-up, in a good sense, of a smarter, swifter EU. Most importantly, the EU should be portrayed as a source of solutions, not as an additional headache. Controversial projects should be reworked, put on hold or reframed; the priority is addressing needs from the new economic and social crisis. For example, it is not clear whether the EU can afford a vitriolic debate about the European Green Deal. If more belt-tightening will be asked from the working/middle-class in a Europe with millions and millions of people laid off because of the pandemic-induced recession, then the populists and centrifugal forces will prevail. The Commission has started to rework and reframe its priorities, but much remains to be done so that it does not appear as out-of-touch with voters and out-of-sync with the current economic and social reality.

While individual solutions need not be ground-breaking, the whole package must be. The revolution of the centre will require, first and foremost, a new type of engagement with the voters, one synchronized with these turbulent times and their yearning for stability and hope.

A more humane and empathetic communication will be necessary to rebuild trust in leaders and institutions and help heal the fractures of the past. Even if austerity is doomed as an economic solution, more austere (“responsible” rewording?) behaviour by leaders will have to become the norm – in fact, politics will have to be more aligned with a regained sense of public (basic) morality.

The challenge is how to present this new normal as an interim solution, to manage hopes, and then return as soon as possible and consistently to growth (not just GDP percentages but concrete growth in different areas, the kind that brings new opportunities). This requires a wider dialogue in the liberal ecosystem about liberal economic solutions in the age of the emergency / crisis State.

For liberals in power or in opposition, the lesson is the same: dare to be different and dare to make the first move. Do not be apologetic and/ or defensive, be willing to slay a few sacred cows to gain attention and credibility.

Again, whoever can define the problem has the advantage of having a credible solution. Rather than sweep the problems of the old liberal order under the carpet, the liberal parties should directly confront them and have the willingness to work with their civic and intellectual ecosystem to re-imagine their electoral platform and to present it to voters so that they will fall in love again with the values and vision of good society for the new normal. Love and solidarity can trump hate and demonization, but this is not a given, we must work for such an outcome together.

### 1.3. Campaigning in the COVID-19 era

Political and electoral campaigning have and will be transformed by the pandemic. E-elections and online communication, now a resurgent force, will become dominant players.

Beyond the policy dimension, campaigning will continue to be about:

- Aligning life stories, will, values, and visions.
- Remembering that elections are an exercise of leadership and options, where memorable words, appropriate tone, and proper body language still are the magic trio.
- Building a liberal identity and narrative.
- Setting the agenda through thought and action leadership – raising the stake to make people aware of the gravity of the situation and of the need for fresh solutions from those with reliable characters.
- Adding empathy as the magic ingredient to how the message is conceived and delivered.
- Continuously reframing the message to win hearts and minds.
- Being on the moral side and betting on value-infused positions.

The pandemic emphasizes, among others, two essential points: people now pay more attention to politics because their livelihoods depend on political decisions more than ever; the tools of communication and engaging with voters have to be not only adapted, but fundamentally changed to capture this new reality. On the first point, where liberals can win is by elevating the debate and bringing home the idea about how big the stakes are.

On the second point, the fight against fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories becomes essential to ensure that a public conversation is really possible and that messages can really get across.



## 2. Campaigning in the COVID-19 era

The mechanics of politics are as important as the substance behind the messages. To respond to the complex informational environment, liberal leaders will have to build coalitions, to use the media well, and to find the framing that can connect with the disengaged. Here are a few things to consider about these three topics.

### 2.1. Building coalitions for positive change – a communication perspective

- Invest in the intellectual liberal ecosystem and allow new ideas into party platforms. Changing hearts and minds will not happen overnight, but these new converts have an essential role to play.
- Educate the public: prepare the market for your values, without being too pedagogical. Remember: information – and transparency – breeds confidence.
- Use the liberal ecosystem to recruit and diversify both candidates for office and public voices defending the liberal cause.
- Try to invest in such efforts not only at the national level, but also internationally, while leveraging the help of like-minded, non-partisan actors in fighting fake news and disinformation.

### 2.2. Using (global) media efficiently

- Respect the media, invest in different channels (not just one), reply quickly, avoid hyper-exposure, and check who sees/ reads what.
- Try to go beyond media bubbles and engage with everyone in their own media environment.
- Use tone, body language, and pictures to convey emotion in a media environment dominated by the visual.

### 2.3 Communicating issues to cut through

- Bet on segmentation and on finding the right spokespersons for each niche and public.
- Legitimate and values-based controversy should be embraced.
- Testing messages beyond the liberal base is equally important.
- Engage with policy not just politics but communicate policy clearly.

### Sense and Simplicity as a cross-cutting issue

One of the challenges of mainstream political leaders, liberal ones included, is the complexity of their language. This problem is evident both in media relations and in between political actors and citizens. This may be due to these leaders' high level of education or their need to act or look smart. At the same time, most mainstream parties complain that their populist competitors are oversimplifying complex realities or presenting them simplistically in black or white. In this context, our advice is to get past moaning and return to the classic KISS: keeping it short and simple.

The audience may respect you for your vision but they need to understand it first. A return to basics, or a combination of complexity doubled by simple summaries is the way forward:

- a) if possible, be simple and clear from the very beginning – “This means this, we will do that”
- b) if it's not possible, then be simple first then detailed – “We will save jobs. We will do this by increasing x% etc”
- c) another option: be yourself no matter how complex the issue is, but then please respect the target

audience by expressing yourself simply – “The IMF and the EU have underscored that in order to mount a credible GDP comeback we need (...). Concretely, this means we will put money in your pockets while giving our grandparents the safety of their lifelong worked pensions”

- d) in repetition we trust, even in other words, if we must: “We will rise again. Industrial capacity (...), agricultural production (...), technological edge (...). Our country will be back. Our nation is back”

For example, communicating a Crisis Resilience and Recovery Plan should be more than a reiteration of Brussels PR plus some local numbers and nice photos. Even the very title of specific topics should be boiled down to basics. While “recovery” is an easily recognizable word, “resilience” is not and should be explained, even via imperfect synonyms like resistance or the ability to bounce back.

When getting into the details of such a plan, one should first have a clear structure of the objectives to be achieved (“this plan will solve this problem and this is how the world/ our country / this city will look like (...)”) and outline the basic direction to be taken. In this context,

based on our political communications experience, we recommend a structure and a set of soundbites, each organized as a trilogy. The “rule of three” helps citizens to remember and energizes our base to vote for us.

Examples:

a) our plan is about people, prosperity, and the present (3P). We invest in you, in your dear ones’ well-being, and we do it now.

b) A liberal is courageous, competent, and caring (3C). Our society needs leaders who have guts, hearts, and knowledge.

c) We call on you to advise, act, and advance (3A). We need your feedback and ideas. We need you on board, moving with us in the same direction. Together, we can go forward as a nation.

While Ancient Greece may provide examples of other rhetorical techniques, a focus on clarity and trigrams as soundbites can do the job in terms of promoting liberal speech in both national and global media and in face to face situations with citizens.



# CHAPTER 4

## THE PANDEMIC & THE INFODEMIC





## 4. The pandemic and the infodemic

Given the importance this topic has received in politics, academia, and media, we will zoom in on the relationship between the pandemic and the infodemic and offer our take on this phenomenon, a take that looks at its strategic dimension and the implications for effective interventions.

### Understanding what causes what and how they connect

There are actually two conversations to be had here. One is about the pandemic and how diplomacy, domestic politics, and a minor phenomenon, sleeping at the wheel, have affected the world's chances of better responding to COVID-19. This framing of the previous statement is on purpose, not because it is non-controversial, but because it is this way of thinking that is eroding people's buy-into liberal and democratic values and behaviours. If in the US this is framed primarily as a matter of vulnerability in international relations, in Europe much of the blame is attributed internally. While some blame gaming may reflect negatively upon China, Europeans' expectations towards their own governments, political class, and bureaucracies were that they would be able to look past a variety of considerations and act better and more decisively. Any loss of lives, of jobs, of economic activity, a slowdown in growth and especially of development – particularly human development, will be charged by Europeans directly to the political class. Other parts of the world are divided between resignation due to a perception that their state is incapable of responding effectively, or due to a distrust of government, or to high levels of corruption.

Notable cases of democratic and, in their own way, liberal societies, such as Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, stand out as a distinct lessons-learned (and cultural model) case. While many have rushed to explain these countries' success based on a collectivist spirit and the "Asian society model" (despite the possible racial overtones in this way of thinking), it is also true that these countries have had to build themselves up from almost complete disaster after World War II and the independence wars (Korea 1950-53, Taiwan throughout the Chinese civil war, Singapore after the liberation from Japan and three decades of ensuing aspirational liberalism and democracy, though under a non-democratic regime). It is important not to minimize the important role lessons that learning and remembering how to work together played in these countries' success in figuring out their own response to the pandemic. This is reflected in how they learned from the epidemics of the 2000s, which were associated with disinformation, this is the main reason why they now acted swiftly and decisively – in stark contrast to Europe, which in comparison, did not manage to put together a coherent and coordinated response (at least immediately after the outbreak), regardless of how quickly they reacted once the Beijing authorities signalled the existence of the virus.

Discussing the issue of self-inflicted harm due to being asleep at the wheel and applying Cold War governance to a considerably more dynamic and alert world is of tremendous importance to liberals. The memory of the ideological confrontation from 30 years ago, when the liberal and democratic West won the Cold War, is starting to fade.

This is not about turning the world towards a second Cold War, but about remembering that thinking for yourself, taking initiative, and working for the people, as opposed to the preservation of a regime or of the national structure of state factories and companies, is what had convinced people to stay, be, and refresh liberalism and democracy. Earlier in this study we talked about the importance of the economy, which will play a significant role and have a tremendous impact on how citizens rate policies over the short-to-medium term. However, to visualize this, we are talking about maybe 50% of a people's existence and preoccupations that now create 80% of their turmoil and trouble; yet as this will gradually taper off, the importance of what today occupies maybe 10% of the people's mind and perceptions, the governance and society model they will live in, will then increase significantly, possibly overshadowing the economic topics. An example of this could be the social justice protests in the United States, which are taking place in spite of a frail economy and health risks. While they represent only a part of the population, they do animate the collective mindset of the United States and of other parts of the world. Whether or not what was known as normalcy in the 2000s, democratic, liberal, and responsible states and regimes, becomes a minority, a state of exception in the world by 2030, will represent a significant preoccupation for both

While few Europeans are interested in starting to live like Chinese do, many are wondering if directive governance and a managed economy are not a better way. This is where the liberals need to have a firm, unified, and convincing response in the sense that the Chinese system cannot exist in the absence of its liberal counterpart; the Chinese system was built to complement the functioning of the West. And that it is not necessary for us to become China in order to evolve out of some dependencies and weaknesses that were developed after the end of the Cold War, while at the same time remaining open and free.

politicians and the people. The Chinese way can easily be used as a contrasting example in the effort to reenergize the liberal democratic narrative and highlight its positive features.

The other conversation to be had is about disinformation and the infringement of civilized international relations. Calling it an infringement of diplomatic and intergovernmental accords, starting with the UN Charter and going down the list to the most recently signed cooperation agreements, which all proclaim a desire to cooperate in good faith and to maintain world peace, may be a little much. However, it is unclear what it should be called. President Trump is hung up on the initial cover-up by Beijing of the real situation on the ground. Less assertively, a few more voices have sung the same tune in Europe; hardly a unified front that asks for responsibility to be taken. Considering how China works, direct confrontation had zero chances of working. There is a better chance of not aggravating the Beijing regime and having it engage with the rest of the world if their responsibility is not stressed very much in public. And threading that needle between wanting to have a more cooperative People's Republic of China versus a hostile one is difficult for liberals, as it infringes on our values and to being true to what we preach.

The more worrisome aspects, though, have to do with the escalation and hostility with which disinformation and psychological operations were waged in the wake of the declaration of the pandemic by the WHO. Some were operated by Chinese people, others by Russians.<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to attribute responsibility and blame, or to quantify the amount of effort that went into it. But we can distinguish narratives.

### The narratives of the pandemic

The first infodemic narrative that came to global prominence as early as March 2020 had to do with "the global plot by white people to decimate the rest of the

<sup>74</sup> In a report on disinformation around the coronavirus pandemic, the European Commission explicitly stated that "foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighborhood, and globally" - [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1006](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1006) (Retrieved: 26/09/2020).



world” – a conspiracy theory fed by some voices from the Beijing Ministry of Foreign Affairs <sup>77</sup>, which stated that COVID-19 was a disease created and spread by white people (Westerners) in China and throughout the world. Miraculously, it did not catch on. There was a real risk that this would have a huge impact in Africa and with radicalized Muslims around the world. If we look back in history, a psychological warfare campaign by the KGB that claimed the HIV/AIDS was created by white Westerners in a lab in order to kill the black population in the US spread like wildfire in the 1980s and, even today, some people of colour in the US believe this<sup>78</sup>.

Had the idea that COVID-19 was created and spread by whites (the narrative had two versions, one centred on the US Military creating the virus in an Army lab<sup>79</sup>; the other that the virus was spreading from Italy)<sup>80</sup> we would have suffered incredible damage in our relations with the Global South and tragic incidents with people of colour in our own countries, as well as jihadist attacks, could have increased significantly. This was clearly a manoeuvre meant to cut relations between us and the rest of the world, while also breaking the cohesion of our own societies and trying to trigger in Europe the same kind of social unrest we see in the US about race and discrimination. It is unclear what saved us from this situation, whether this narrative hasn't had enough time to disseminate around the world during the first few months of the pandemic, or whether the fact that the virus obviously took the West (especially the US) by surprise,

and is evidently difficult to manage, discredited the notion that it was prepared here.

The Russian side of disinformation related to the pandemic (not named infodemic, as that is specific to Beijing-led disinformation), maintained its classical vectors and content:

- The corruption and sclerosis of the West<sup>81</sup> and of the international system it built;
- Incapacity to govern and protect people<sup>81</sup>;
- NATO and the European Union being organizations that prevent nation states from acting<sup>82</sup>;
- Europe being made vulnerable by the US and its global engagements<sup>83</sup>;
- Countries around the world and particularly in the West are at a disadvantage due to sanctions on Russia and by refusing to cooperate internationally<sup>85</sup>.

What changed in the Russian efforts is that they started learning from the Chinese how to frame terminology and concepts in such a way that they turn them against us. In the last bullet above it is an example of this: a distinct

<sup>77</sup> Chinese diplomat spreads conspiracy theory (CNN) - <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html> (Retrieved: 26/09/2020).

<sup>78</sup> "Operation Denver" was a KGB-Stasi operation that planted the disinformation that HIV/Aids was created by the US government in an effort to control population growth among people of color and sexual minorities. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/operation-denver-kgb-and-stasi-disinformation-regarding-aids> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).

<sup>79</sup> China accuses US Army of bringing virus to Wuhan military games <https://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-official-says-us-army-maybe-brought-coronavirus-to-wuhan-2020-3?r=DE&IR=T> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).

<sup>80</sup> Chinese state media tie coronavirus to Italy <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8150589/Chinese-state-media-suggests-coronavirus-pandemic-originated-Italy.html> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).

<sup>81</sup> Five most used Russian disinformation narratives about the West <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).

<sup>82</sup> Russian disinformation about the West's incapacity to protect its people <https://www.dw.com/en/is-russia-running-a-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign/a-52864106> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).

<sup>83</sup> Same as footnote 81 – on account of loss of sovereignty.

<sup>84</sup> The Kremlin is trying to play on the differences between Europe and Washington <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/24/russia-and-europe-stuck-on-autopilot-pub-82773> (Retrieved 26/09/2020.)

<sup>85</sup> The "successful management" by Russia of Covid-19 versus European "plague barrack" <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-illusion-of-control-russian-propaganda-covid19/> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).

liberal value is that of openness; them claiming that we are not open enough to get help when we need it is meant to bypass a reasoned reaction from us and to have the kneejerk reaction saying “but of course we are open; we can cooperate with everyone”. This would not only be in Russia’s interest to get Europe to abandon sanctions and to increase cooperation with Russia but would have demonstrated to the world that Russia’s ‘recipes’ are better in terms of governance and international relations.

This point could be made to the world, including the traditional liberal democratic societies, since the most visible liberals are populists, the presidents of the US and Brazil, who have handled the pandemic poorly in relation to the rest of the planet. When they put forth arguments for liberalism yet do not take care of business and let corporations consume the Amazon to keep exports flowing during a pandemic, that clashes immediately with our values of preserving the natural capital of the planet. Preserving our natural capital is an infrequent expression in centre-right circles, and accusations of rampant capitalism increasingly get thrown in our faces these days, the Republicans in the US are especially vulnerable to these charges.

These are some of the blatant approaches to disinformation and influencing that were brought to bear during the pandemic. Some other effects were triggered by influence operations but were not driven by external actors. This refers to both the US’s and EU’s tendency towards isolation – going through something of a “Wilsonian internationalism” moment there, in which both are applying conditionalities to engaging with the world, proclaiming strength and influence while at the same time investing less in international cooperation and focusing on protecting their interests abroad.

## Bringing in the strategic context

The current trend in the EU is to go towards more “sovereignty, strategic autonomy, data localization” and other protectionist measures.<sup>86</sup> Both the US and the EU are doing (or advocating for) partial reshoring of companies or at least of parts of their supply and value chains – if not entirely, at least bringing them closer to home. Fortunately, corporations still make these decisions and some have opted for diversification rather than complete reshoring and protectionism. Both regions are in fact decoupling from each other and from the rest of the world; one has been accused of it for the past four years, and we are yet to see evidence of it – this being the United States. Europe has never declared it, maintaining a narrative of global engagement, but has been doing it since 2019, and at an accelerated pace since 2020’s pandemic, but has not yet been called out on it<sup>87</sup>. Most of the voices<sup>88</sup> raised about this are looking primarily at internal factors and call it either quasi-wartime economic planning or protectionism.

It is fascinating to observe that the US acquired its bad reputation over the past five years thanks to first candidate then President Trump yet the EU has managed to evade such verdicts and condemnations from the international community. This goes to show that communication, even in liberal and democratic countries, is often divorced from reality, and that people’s perceptions are more likely to carry the day than what is actually happening.

It is unclear if we can say that liberals had a specific response. The same institutions that were called upon to technocratically manage countries and multilateral initiatives were also the ones that made the effort to get borders open and keep aid circulating.

<sup>86</sup> This can be seen in the recent State of the Union speech delivered by the president of the European Commission on September 16, 2020, accessible at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_20\\_1655](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655) (Retrieved: 26/09/2020).

<sup>87</sup> European Union’s strategic autonomy concept – evermore encompassing, moving from security and defence to other aspects of governance – a reaction against the United States <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019RP04/> (Retrieved: 26/09/2020).

<sup>88</sup> Von der Leyen talks about a “Marshall Plan” for Europe and Spain’s PM talks about “wartime economy” <https://www.dw.com/en/eus-von-der-leyen-calls-for-marshall-plan-for-europe/a-53021106> (Retrieved: 26/09/2020).



This was at a time when, almost across the board, political leadership and solutions collapsed or were simply absent. In spite of this shocking discovery that our politics are only as good as there is a budget to squabble over, we were also pleasantly surprised to see corporations and SMEs as more fit and better suited to succeed; the UN agencies and the European Union are now relying more on private enterprises to ensure there isn't a food crisis, or that logistics and some parts of economic activity can continue, instead of leaving this to individual states. This can make liberal politicians vulnerable to scrutiny, if people start questioning why they didn't come up with proposals and planning when they were called for; but it will increase their knowledge of, and esteem for, private enterprises as the pillars of our communities – and a pillar of society as important as a free and trustworthy press.

Liberal (international) institutions found themselves faced with the cruel fact that they cannot rely on their own forces. Everyone can observe during this pandemic that internationalists don't control everything, so claims to the contrary are obviously bogus. However, this is not something the liberals can make use of in their communication, as it would highlight the frailty of the international system which we worked so hard to build. If anything, we should decry how we have not helped the international system enough. This may not be the case in the US, but for the rest of the world, we can use President Trump's accusations against Beijing and the UN System to build up a narrative case for why and how we need to invest more in international organizations so that they do not fail us again. This may not convince everyone, but it is the only way to simultaneously emphasize the shortcomings, the importance, and the potential of having a better structured and stronger international system. Internationalism should not be on the defensive but make use of the current context to impose a story of reinvention.

### **Fighting disinformation from a strategic perspective**

Fighting disinformation is a key objective today in the West.

The main solutions, rooted in psychology and an understanding of digital and social subjects, are very specific. But they often ignore that, at the international level at least, the goal of disinformation cannot be separated from its tools. We cannot combat disinformation without having a good grasp of the mutations of the international order – this helps with understanding the gravity of the challenge and with orientating our efforts into the right direction. Let's understand the contours of the problem before deploying insufficiently scrutinized solutions!

## **The biggest international challenge for liberals is the World Trade Organization**

The biggest international challenge for liberals is the World Trade Organization. This is an independent organization, mandated neither by the UN nor the EU, but by intergovernmental agreements. It requires everyone to make it work, and that "everyone" has now ceased to exist, the same way that the post-WWII UN majority ceased to exist once newly decolonized countries fell under the sway of the Soviet Union. At the time, both sides of the Atlantic started complaining that the UN had become a dysfunctional and corrupted body that could no longer solve the world's problems. Post-colonial bias aside, there is something to learn from this example, as it demonstrated to Westerners and liberal democratic countries around the world that careful balancing of interests and coalition building, along with well-placed investments and innovative politics, were the only way to keep the UN viable and avoid the kind of collapse suffered by its predecessor, the League of Nations, which devolved into just a perpetual conference meeting after only a few years of existence. Similarly, the WTO risks becoming irrelevant if we cannot create the alliances to save it. Here is why it is critical: if the WTO system is not reformed and liberal democratic countries divest from it one after another (like the US is about to do), the WTO will transform into a huge trap for the world's nations

Power relationships are changing in the world now and it is not an equitable distribution. It is moving from a plurality (both sides of the Atlantic + G20) to a monopoly – Beijing’s China. If liberal democracies divest from the WTO (which was in fact GATT 2.0) – and don’t replace it with a WTO 2.0, which could be a viable option – the current WTO risks becoming a Belt and Road Initiative on steroids, producing structural effects globally. Of course, this would not be the worst thing in the world, if the BRI was open, equitable, and based on the rule of law, with equal terms for everyone. Also, this would happen at the same time as the International Telecommunications Union and other agencies and bodies for intellectual property, patents, standardization, and industrial development are heading the way of the WTO<sup>89</sup>, though with less drama and noise. The conjunction of all the standards-setting bodies in the world – the backbone of the functioning of an open and globalized world – turning into monopolies of the strongest economy risks irremediably upsetting the balance of the world. Ever since the creation of the United Nations, the world has functioned on the principles of legitimacy, recognition of and respect for sovereignty, and the equitable distribution of power. On the 75th anniversary of the UN, we are about to see the abdication of the West from the system it helped create. As it is essential to defend our liberal multilateral world from the pernicious effects of disinformation and the infodemic, it is equally important to come up with arguments and stories about the necessity of preserving and overhauling the multilateral liberal framework.

The abdication from multilateralism is visible in the reversal of roles between West and East, and this is something that Russia has been labouring for ever since the creation of the BRICS group, which Russia tried to lead into opposing the West and creating an alternative world power base – something the non-aligned movement could never achieve during the Cold War. Until just a few years ago, we were watching Russia and China struggle to create networks and issue-based cooperation groups in a way that clearly had them at the centre and advantaged them – often creating a parallel order.

from the universal one guaranteed by the United Nations System; we are now witnessing the retreat of the liberal West which has started shaping its own networks of friends and partners as a way of creating preferred networks parallel to the global system – in an attempt to evade the increasing influence of China and Russia.

Two distinctions are important here. First, some of the (formerly) liberal West is no longer liberal, and some of those who’ve strayed are also engaging in China’s and Russia’s networks of corruption and/or influence. Second, there are liberal democracies in the Indo-Pacific that we tend to forget about, but which are not heading the same way as the US and Europe.

On the contrary, they have taken over the mantle of multilateralism and forge ahead with their own versions of the Trans-Pacific Partnership; we may end up seeing it include India, thus comprising about half the world’s population. Currently, countries like Canada, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand are the ones that keep the past and the future together via their connections to both the Atlantic and the Pacific. And we, the West, are about to let go of the future. This is not meant to disregard Africa; it just won’t be a significant participant for a while.

The difference between Atlantic and Pacific liberals is that the former don’t consider themselves invincible. Looking at the rise of Russia and China after 2000 with a suspicious eye, they educated their populations into being more resilient and expecting shocks to come at any moment. The past century of their enduring hardship and achieving victories increased their confidence in their respective systems, while at the same time being constantly aware that they are not the ones deciding the fate of the planet.

<sup>89</sup> How China is remaking the UN in its own image <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/how-china-is-remaking-the-un-in-its-own-image/>; op-ed on China’s influence to get its representatives to head four UN agencies <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Don-t-let-China-start-dominating-UN-agencies> (Retrieved 26/09/2020).



Our pride that we are the holders of liberties, values, and freedoms did not prepare us for a time when our system would be undermined from within. This is why disinformation, more than anything else, is such an excellent instrument to destabilize the West. Also, it confronts us with the fact that there are no more providential leaders to take us out of darkness. No European population would nowadays accept a diminution of their living standards or income instability, as they did during World War II; nor would they mobilize into total economic competition, as during the competition between the French and the Habsburgs. Consequently, it is better for us to find ways to work with these passions rather than against them.

The first and most important best practice when fighting disinformation is to remember the adversary is not asking a policy question. Most of our politicians and bureaucrats are stuck in answering almost anything with a (monotonous) recital of policy. Communication and public sentiment are matters of the heart. Humour, empathy, contextual awareness, throwing the ball back into the other's court, encouraging people to unfreeze practices frozen in time in the West for the past 70 years, these will release the politicians' and the people's instincts to be entrepreneurial and to 'hustle their way into the future'.

## **Politics, regardless of colour and family, is less credible to the population because it looks like nothing is moving.**

A second good practice is to be believable – but not in a sense like you have to have a good face when saying things, or to be serious. It means putting your money where your mouth is; it means demonstrating you can move things; it means having the party's back and the party yours. Politics, regardless of colour and family, is less credible to the population because it looks like nothing is moving.

So, when you make statements, make sure that you already have in mind what can (and will) be done. That doesn't mean you should promise results; but that your attempt to hold yourself to what you said is concrete and visible. The third is to make use of disinformation (obviously, in a way that is coherent with liberal values and does not treat truth as a nuisance). Throwing it back into people's faces as fake news only angers and estranges people. If you don't engage with the topics and the disinformation, it will be safer for you politically; all communications advisers will tell you to stay away from controversy and anything risking your image.

That doesn't mean, however, that disinformation will go away. It will erode your electoral numbers without you even knowing why. Yet by engaging with it, spinning it into your own discursive ammunition, and throwing it back to where it came from, sometimes it will disarm the narrative, sometimes it will become a huge polemic. But most certainly it will be educating the public about disinformation. Studies show that whether or not people agree with political leaders on what is disinformation, the repeated labelling as fake news produces effects, resulting in people understanding what is controversial and what not to assume.

Overall, sometimes increased awareness and confidence is more important than precision. Our societies are extremely vulnerable when confronted with rumours because of the speed at which we need to make decisions and the openness of our stock market and other transactions systems.

Currently, we are open to being hit every day and there are no scientific, academic, or political leaders that have the credibility and respect of the people that can go live on TV to assuage the markets. The one person that Europe had, Christine Lagarde, got ambushed by the (liberal?) European media, press, analysts, and everyone that could, because she was speaking the truth at the beginning of the pandemic. Her role was not to play politician but to speak the truth. Now, there is nobody that can have a similar calming effect. Angela Merkel, the only other possible one, has less than a year left in office.

For a communication strategy to work, everyone needs to identify talent, skill, and competences; who are the people that can flirt with the media and the public and deliver communication with zest and flair? Who can be built into credible, unwavering, pillars of reference for the entire democratic community, and who can speak truth to power and objectively convey the realities of the world? These roles and profiles should not be mixed because of the risk of compromising them. And equally important, liberals, in particular, need to devise a K-shaped communication approach.

Part of their public will bear (and even be happy) to hear narratives about competition, leadership, and being at the forefront of developments. Another segment, also believing in liberal values but not so gung-ho on entrepreneurialism and corporatism, and who are tired of constantly being under stress by being made responsible by everyone for everything (from within the Atlantic community, but also from the Global South); they will want, first of all, to hear reassurances about ways to regain stability.

To this latter group you will probably not be able to talk about opening up and globalization without also adding a few ideas about solutions and designing new structured systems (architectures), some of them involving better compensation for their losses. For everyone, in reality, it would be ideal to have some ideas for new architectures.

And some of these can incorporate elements of protection that can be called liberal, even if some on the left have borrowed them from us a while back.

To sum up, Russia, China, Iran, and a number of non-state actors as well, in order to occupy all the ground that we are abandoning internationally, are weaponizing our need for security and our sense that we need to curl into a ball and retreat home to keep our way of life. During this pandemic, the world has not bought into high-level disinformation but it has affected the levels of trust and self-confidence. This translates into nobody being willing to join any of the geopolitical visions extant but instead joining up with those that put something on the table.

Currently, these are the Russians and the Chinese. The liberal and democratic countries of the Pacific region are making considerable efforts towards standing on their own two feet, as well as keeping the West engaged, but all the deep and comprehensive partnership agreements of the EU, US, Canada, and the UK, are only a 3-legged dog as long as our platform of liberalism and democracy does not become itself the sufficient and only platform that would ensure the free and open circulation of goods, services, capitals and people, and the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and cooperation.



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