Trust in Politics – Introduction to the PANORAMA Special Issue

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INTRODUCTION

Societies and states in Asia and Europe are facing severe challenges to social cohesion and the stability of the state and polity. The rise of populism and strong-(wo)man politics, perceptions of governments' inability to deal with effects of digital disruption, or more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing polarisation and rifts within the society, the decay of long-established parties and institutions, the rise of radicalism and extremism as well as the diminishing support for governments, national as well as multilateral institutions present significant changes and challenges for the hitherto established social and/or political order. While these challenges are diverse in nature, they share one essential thing: a link to the question of trust.

Out of experience, many people locate "trust" with the individual and his/her family, friends and partners. However, trust is not only essential for human relationships, trust is essential for the survival of individuals and groups. While trust enables the needed cooperation between individuals and the subsequent formation of cooperating collectives – the basic survival strategy of humankind[1] – the lack of trust, or distrust, prevents humans from easily falling prey to competitors and enemies. What was essential in the tribes of the past retains its significance even today, where the modern (nation) state has become the central entity organising cooperation. Irrespective of group size, the lack of trust impedes or prevents cooperation, and, as a result, the security and progress of the tribe, the community, or the nation – as much as the international community.

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[1] Brewer, Marilynn B. 2007. "The Importance of Being We: Human Nature and Intergroup Relations". The American psychologist, 62 (8). American Psychological Association: 728–38.

The PANORAMA special issue "Trust in Politics" examines the question of trust. It seeks to analyse and portray the varied roles trust plays in states, societies, and international relations in Asia and Europe.

To broaden the scope of case studies, to improve the understanding of processes and mechanisms as well as to diversify the perspectives, the editors invited renowned scholars of the field and experienced think tankers to contribute papers, but, at the same time, made an open call for contributions. Next to the established experts with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and areas of focus, the editors sought to include themes off the apparent agenda and moreover to provide hitherto inexperienced young researchers with the opportunity to present their perspective and insights. This has led to a wide range. However, treating trust as either independent or dependent variable, that is, either the consequences of trust – or the lack of trust – for politics or the impact of politics on trust, is what all papers have in common.

THEMES AND PAPERS

The first paper treats politically significant effects of a decline in trust in established religious institutions as the result of globalisation and social change. Prof. Mark Juergensmeyer looks into one of the consequences of distrust in established religious institutions, namely the rise of anti-authoritarian religions, and its impact on politics and society. Introducing the different movements in Asia and beyond, Prof. Juergensmeyer shows that anti-authoritarian religions can lead, among others, to religious radicalism, challenges to regimes, societal conflict and violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged governments and societies all over the world. The often deep-cutting restrictions, including lockdowns, business closures, home schooling, and obligations to keep a distance and wear a mask, have been evaluated differently by different populations. The second paper finds that in spite of significant restrictions, the German federal and state governments received immense public support. Prof. Jasmin Riedl analyses the reasons behind the comparatively high levels of political trust in the German coalition government throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, not only societies' trust in their own government, but also the trust in other governments and between states have been affected. Particularly the trust in China, where the pandemic's outbreak is located and where the Chinese government's secrecy allowed the disease to spread all over the world, has suffered, even in those states, which have joined the contested Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Giulia Sciorati PhD examines the soft power and public diplomacy strategies China implemented during the early stages of the pandemic to preserve

Italy's – the Belt and Road Initiative's European flagship country – support on the international stage. She analyses how China seeks to rebuild public trust at what Sciorati PhD describes as an exceptionally sensitive juncture for bilateral relations. In particular, in light of Italy's "special relation" with China, the paper asks whether specific tools or narratives were employed to engage the country during the crisis.

The dangers which digitalisation and new means of communication pose for the stability of systems have recently gained wide international attention. Attempting to regulate the potentially devastating effects of fake news and online falsehoods, the Singaporean government passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act in May last year. The promising young scholar Tan Zhi Han analyses how the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act is intended to preserve public confidence in the Singaporean government and examines criticisms and potential setbacks on public trust in politics.

Not only due to U.S. president Donald Trump's recent decision to hastily withdraw American soldiers from Afghanistan, the question of trust in politics is raised in the country. Looking at the political and social instability in Afghanistan, Mushtaq Rahim examines the question of how public trust relates to significant challenges, such as political divides and the expansion of armed conflict in post-conflict and fragile states. Thereby, the paper shows why trust has declined throughout the democratic transition in Afghanistan.

While some relations between agents' behaviour and trust in them seem to be intuitive, others are not. Dr. Hasan Muhammad Baniamin digs into a puzzling relationship between performance and trust: there are countries which enjoy higher levels of trust in institutions despite the institutions' poorer performances than countries with far better performing institutions. Looking at the two examples of Bangladesh and Nepal, Dr. Baniamin finds an explanation in the countries' different cultural orientations.

Climate change can be considered as a further disruption with significant impacts. Particularly in Europe, the preservation of nature and the environment has set the political agendas, manifesting, among others, in the European Union's Green Deal. But what might have positive impacts for the achievement of set goals might negatively impact the trust relations with international cooperation partners. Focussing on deforestation and palm oil production, Dr. Vicente Lopez Ibor Mayor shows how a trust deficit between the EU and some ASEAN member states has emerged and suggests ways how it could be overcome.

In the junior scholar's paper, Hiruni Nathasha Fernando suggests a way out of a long-lasting problem in Sri Lanka. Fernando looks at the current situation of inter-communal trust in post-war Sri Lanka and the manifestations of the continued trust

deficit. She points out her opinion that the solution to the lack of trust between the communities could be found in secular education.

SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON TRUST IN POLITICS

Next to the scientific treatment of trust in politics, the editors sought to account for the subjectivity of trust. Hence, a new segment is introduced to the PANORAMA journal titled "Opinion". Here, authors' subjective takes on the issue at hand are treated. Needless to say, perspectives and arguments provided in the journal are only those of the authors and do neither represent the perspectives and opinions of the editors, nor those of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. However, they represented perspectives and opinions on trust in politics in Asia and Europe and contribute to the better understanding of the issue and its relevance.

In "Opinion", Asanga Abeyagoonasekera opines that the current COVID-19 pandemic might give the long-stalled regional integration in South Asia a needed boost by allowing for building trust through medical cooperation between the South Asian states. Mahesh Bhatta presents his view on the lack of trust in the political elite in Nepal, resulting from broken hopes for substantial change after years of conflict and diverse struggles for political participation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN POLITICS

The papers and opinion pieces have shown that trust often can tip the scales for stability or disruption, peace or conflict or, to put it differently, for cooperation or confrontation. The analyses of and perspectives on trust in politics in Asia and Europe point to the need to understand it and to consider trust in political decision making. To boil down the complexities treated in this special issue: trust is more than a nice accessory. It is a vital element of politics.

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