

Preface

Trust is a central feature of human relations. The way in which we are able to build trust has significant impact on our social life, our ability to do business with each other and our position within a society. Trust impacts our decisions and behaviours in various everyday situations.

For the longest time, trust was also an essential ingredient for the reliability of political systems. It is the most important currency between the voter and the candidate. It enables leaders to find solutions for conflicts and challenges, both on bilateral and multilateral platforms. Without trust, diplomatic approaches to problem solving are often leading into a dead end. The escalating tensions between the United States of America and China, India's and Pakistan's blockade of cooperation in the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), or the Afghan peace process – all serve as examples.

But which role does trust actually play in politics today? In many countries, trust into the political leadership is on the decline, which is reflected in lower voter turnout at elections or in more votes going to populist or extremist parties. Leaders around the world have adopted a “nation first” approach, turning political negotiations into a zero sum game and making trust a rare commodity in the process. Social media campaigns and fake news reduce the trustworthiness of political actors further. This is a very concerning development not only for individual governments, but also for global mechanisms of cooperation. And it becomes an outright dangerous development in the times of crisis.

When we started to look into the question of trust in politics and decided on it as the theme of the Panorama special issue, COVID-19 was still a mostly unknown disease, mainly reported about in context of the Chinese city of Wuhan. Who would have known what this virus would bring to the world – and how relevant it would become for the issue at hand.

The pandemic appeared to be the ideal case study of which impact trust – or the lack of trust – can have on social cohesion, stability, elections and international relations. In Asia and Europe alike, the pandemic has challenged trust – within the society and between the diverse communities, between publics and governments, between political actors and scientific experts and between nations, states and multilateral institutions.

Despite the need of the hour, yet, it was important to us to further a more general understanding of “trust in politics” and the various roles it can play as the basis or the result of politics. Therefore, different themes and perspectives were invited to contribute to this special issue.

Several of the authors take up the role of trust in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While Prof. Jasmin Riedl for example analyses the role of trust at the national level, Giulia Sciorati PhD looks at the international level relating Asia and Europe.

That trust matters beyond the recent COVID-19 crisis at the national, international and global level is further shown by renowned scholars and practitioners contributing to this special issue. Prof. Mark Juergensmeyer for example analyses the rise of anti-authoritarian religious movements throughout the world. The continuous relevance of this topic was sadly proven when – despite the pandemic – the Islamic State launched its first attack on the South Asian island state of the Maldives.

Towards the end of an exceptional year, this special issue of our biannual Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs offers a kaleidoscope on the implications and roles of trust in politics in Asia and Europe – and beyond. I would like to thank all authors for their contributions, which help us to better understand the issue at hand, and to value a political currency which is hard to build and easy to lose.



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