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RSOG INSIGHT

MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER EDITION



IN THIS ISSUE

With the COVID-19 impacting countries at various stages, everyone is trying to understand what is required to protect themselves and their communities.

We spoke to some of our friends around the world, on how it has affected them and their views of the situation.

ABOUT OUR GUEST

Wolfgang Drechsler is Professor of Governance at the Ragnar Nurkse Department at TalTech, Estonia; Honorary Professor of University College London, Institute of Innovation and Public Purpose; and Associate at Harvard University's Davis Center. His focus areas are Non-Western Public Administration (Southeast and East Asia); Public Administration, Technology & Innovation; and Public Management Reform generally. Wolfgang has a PhD from the University of Marburg and a SocScD from Corvinus University of Budapest. In our region, he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Malaya, at Gadjah Mada University, at NIDA, and at the Lee Kuan Yew School, National University of Singapore. Last fall, he was an Australia-New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) Visiting Scholar. Within civil service, Wolfgang has been Advisor to the President of Estonia, Executive Secretary with the German Science Council during Reunification, and, as an APSA Congressional Fellow, Senior Legislative Analyst in the United States Congress.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in the article are of their own and do not reflect the opinion of Razak School of Government.

VIEWS FROM GERMANY

In this edition, we spoke to Professor Wolfgang Drechsler, a German Governance and Public Administration scholar and advisor, who holds appointments in Tallinn, London, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and who has been visiting Malaysia and Razak School of Government since 2012.

RSOG: How has the pandemic affected your daily life?

Professor Wolfgang Drechsler: Professionally speaking, I am quite used to distance lessons and distance conversation. Estonia is famously sympathetic towards digital solutions, and it will always opt for rather than against digitality if there is a choice. It is a great loss to miss the direct interaction with students and colleagues for a while, yet it was no problem at all for me to switch courses online. We can also rely, at least more or less, on all students having the capacity to follow instructions remotely. The same goes for guest lectures, direct talks and meetings. Research is always more or less a solitary enterprise, at least in the humanities and social sciences, so this is not much of a disruption either. I actually enjoy that it is easier to participate in many of the truly exciting seminars and lectures by my colleagues all over the globe, which one can follow now on an unprecedented scale. Personally, that social distancing and other limitations of daily life are severe goes without saying; however, I do think this is a price well, indeed very well, worth paying. What is truly regrettable is that all conferences and visiting appointments, fieldwork and consultancy, in my case often in Southeast and also East Asia, have been cancelled for this year.

Talking about which, there has been much talk here in Europe about the duty to wear masks. For some people, mask duty seems to be the most limiting of all the new rules, even more than physical distancing, the banning of soccer matches and the like, because it allegedly goes against the local culture of the face showing as a vital part of human interaction. As an Asianist, not only am I very much used to wearing masks, both for courtesy (cont.)



(cont.) if I might have a cold, something that I learned in Japan during my first visit to Meiji University, and because of pollution – which you find elsewhere as well, of course, but often without sensible self-protection measures. Anti-mask propaganda makes no sense scientifically, and its practice seems to bring out the stubborn four-year-old in a lot of adults, resisting for their own sake. The anti-mask stories (perhaps to save masks for front-line health workers) by public health officials have seriously damaged their credibility and were a price not worth paying.

Finally, I would add for context that I actually lived through a virus epidemic before. This was the first outbreak of the Marburg Virus, named after my native city, where I am now unexpectedly, due to the COVID-19-induced travel restrictions. (The name isn't good PR for the city, but nobody here has ever seriously complained about it.) This happened almost half a century ago, so I don't have any personal memories, but as my father became Lord Mayor of Marburg a few years later, and stayed on for 25 years (here in Hessen, this is not a ceremonial position only but also includes the city manager function), I was very aware of the threat and the counter-measures and protocols in place.

Marburg is one of the vaccine capitals of Germany, if not globally, as it was here that Emil v. Behring discovered the vaccines for both diphtheria and tetanus (by inoculating horses) over a century ago. He won the Nobel Prize for it, the first-ever in medicine, and created a spin-off, the Behringwerke, which still exist today, if as part of a more global conglomerate. The Behringwerke still do large-scale vaccine research and development and always have, but in doing so, things can go very wrong, and in the late 1960s, some freshly-imported monkeys carried a weird virus that infected staff and others. It was quickly contained, although it broke out again in other places. The Marburg Virus is not very contagious, but once it does infect a person, it is very lethal – between 25% and 100%, depending on the outbreak. And the death caused by the Ebola-like Marburg Virus is right out of horror movies. This has led to three perhaps unusual features of life in the city where I am now. First, here in Marburg, we do know epidemics can happen; COVID-19 did not come out of the blue. Second, some of us regard anything better than a 3:1 chance of surviving an epidemic as a real break! And third, if there are cities which are better prepared for virus outbreaks than others, this may be one of them. And – knocking very hard on wood that it remains that way – so far, the situation here is comparatively good, according to all the numbers we have.

RSOG: In your opinion what would be the top three leadership lessons that we can learn from this global pandemic?

Professor Wolfgang Drechsler: As has been said, by now everything has been said about COVID-19, just not yet by everyone. So let me make three points that merit, I think, underlining:

First, numbers never speak by themselves. Indicators are not “real” or natural; someone constructed them. Things aren't determined in time and space; we place them there. “Believe in science” is an oxymoronic call. There is no “neutral” science; science needs to be communicated, and while it may be true that “all models are wrong, but some are useful,” let's not forget the first part of that quip. There is no science one must or even can trust – scientists, true scientists will always tell you that themselves. As my philosophical teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer famously argued, the difference between an expert and a scientist is that the former always has, and must have, the last word, whereas a scientist knows that there is no such thing. That is why a good public policy has moved from data-driven to data-based; from evidence-based to evidence-informed; numbers can't drive anything by themselves, and if they are said to, someone behind the curtain does the driving. Post-normal science is a thing, scientism is unscientific, and science alone will not save us. That is my first leadership lesson: You can't outsource anything to science, or models, or data, or indicators, or evidence – you can only use them. But your own responsibility remains.

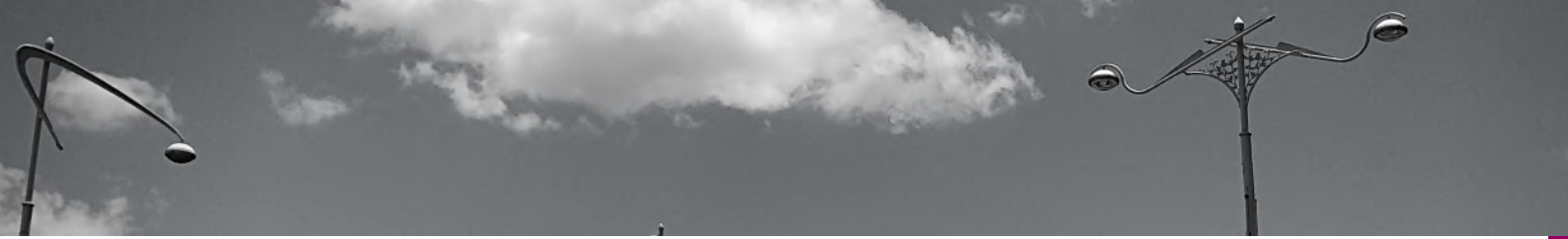


Second, bureaucracy really works – this is an especially important point for RSOG. Some of us thought or even think that a history of pandemic response – like my Marburg case – or advanced status in e-Governance would be what is leading to an optimal crisis response right now; as a matter of fact, important as they are, a highly competent civil service has been, or so I would argue, the main variable here. (As an aside: good digitalisation and good previous crisis response with a learning effect, in turn, depend on good Public Administration to begin with!). Of course, the pandemic is still on-going, but for now, and with all cautious humility, I would suggest that all countries or areas that have dealt successfully with the pandemic are currently characterised by a competent, high-capacity, responsible and responsive civil service. Those that were or are still wrecked by the horrors of the New Public Management and its illegitimate transfers from the private sector into the public one are suffering terribly – both in the public health area, where privatisation has often led to decapacitation, and as crisis response generally is concerned. Certainly, for the post-2020 world (I do not want to say post-COVID-19, as we can't be sure that this will be a correct characterisation of that world to come), we need to rethink many of our own arrangements for the happiness of the human person. And subsidiarity – having things solved on the lowest or smallest functioning level – is indeed a key approach in this context. But for now, the senseless hatred of the state and fashion- and coolness-driven anti-state reforms by the greedy and the avaricious, too often under the false label of public-sector innovation, has shown to be catastrophic, whereas the classic, allegedly outdated strong state has often been a great responder so far. There is a reason why the military is primarily hierarchical. Thus, the second leadership lesson is, don't let fashion drive your public-sector arrangements, they are way too important – and don't kill the state, you might need it.

Third, beware of confirmation bias. My third point will in a way question my previous two, but exactly this kind of self-questioning seems to me to be part of the order of the day as well. There is a strong confirmation bias – i.e. that we see confirmed what we believe already – throughout the pandemic by social scientists as well as politicians or generally engaged people, most strongly perhaps among journalists, and especially ugly on Twitter. This means that people use the pandemic to prove, and rehash, their old own ideologies and prejudices – it is really rare to see someone acknowledging that the pandemic has altered their own dearly held views. As almost nothing can change your worldview after a certain age, I understand this very well, but this makes it even more impressive and noteworthy when people are able to revisit and at least adjust their old positions and out of that process contribute to our understanding of, and policy response to, the pandemic. Especially now, two months after what for most of us was the real outbreak, the time has come to self-reflect a bit and to be more daring in admitting how the pandemic has altered, or should alter, our world view. The third lesson, therefore, is that to question oneself and one's assumptions at all times, without allowing this to lead to inertia, is always good leadership.

RSOG: Any messages you would like to share with our alumni and everyone involved whether directly and indirectly in curbing the COVID-19?

Professor Wolfgang Drechsler: *First, filter out the white Corona noise.* There were too many opinions too soon, and they're still there – social media has not played an altogether positive role during this pandemic, and “panic scrolling” was everywhere. This is not a new thing to say, as, again, none of my points really are, but I would really say that what kept people sane during COVID-19 was relying on selected news sources that you really need. I think consensus now is that one international, one national and one very local traditional media outlet are necessary to be followed about once or twice a day, not more. Otherwise, I think that as so often, listening to your own direct network, to people you know you can trust, is the most helpful thing you can do. The best people to listen to now are those who are experts in the field that you want, but especially if they are people you already knew, and trusted, before the pandemic. (Just like masks and sanitisers produced before the pandemic are safer as well.)



Personally, I am very lucky that I already knew several colleagues at the T.C. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard, because that is also one of the leading public health centres globally, to begin with. From predictions of two peaks and lessons of the Spanish Flu, via realistic vs. pessimistic models and their use, to the absolute necessity to wear masks, I have learned a lot, and am learning a lot, from them.

Second, self-discipline really matters. This is really a very old-fashioned point, and many have abandoned self-discipline as an archaic value, as somehow 19th century, in favour of more fuzzy and perhaps self-indulgent concepts. But the opposite is true, and one can see now how important self-discipline in all matters really is. That is not only so for the people directly and indirectly around you, who are not interested in, let alone helped by, any form of breakdowns (and even not excessive whining, happen though it does), but also for yourself. The stiff upper lip seems somewhat military or, we would say here, Prussian, but this is really something that functionally carries you through the worst times of the pandemic and other crises. (That and your faith, if you have one.) Meditation and similar exercises are also key, but that is fortunately not something you need to preach to the leadership community these days. Self-discipline, however, seems to need a little more promotion.

Third, the opposite of timidity is not bravery, it's recklessness. What I want to say with this classic Aristotelian example is that one of the main issues of the pandemic has been whether to be cautious or too cautious, whether it is important to lock down to save every life or whether the economic opening isn't also important, often before the background that either every life matters or that other lives might also be damaged if lockdowns harm economic development. I am not sure – and I say that not only as a German with a very specific legacy in this regard – what kind of ethical standards could lead you to sacrifice older people in a triage (a concept only valid in a hot war where the point is to save those you can still “use” in combat); I find that as bizarre as the fact that some professional ethics people in professional ethics councils seem to be arguing in favour of this theory. But in a crisis situation, as we know from hostage studies, being timid is actually not safe. In a building-attack situation, huddling down, hoping the enemy won't catch you, may be smarter than confronting it, but trying to escape is often the even better choice. The value of some sort of bravery, of boldness, is actually at the heart not only of human survival but of human unfolding, of self-realization. In the Holy Month of Ramadan, we might also recall that this is what the Holy Quran teaches. So, some bravery and boldness are the attitudes that are required to get you, your loved ones and the community for which you are responsible most safely through a crisis. That doesn't always work, and it is a general point for leadership, but it is a point particularly worth making during the times of COVID-19.

