

FIGHTING COVID-19: NATIONAL MEASURES AND THEIR CULTURAL ROOTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines governmental measures fighting the coronavirus infection in 6 countries across the world. Reviewed sources are official reports from national governmental agencies and media sources. The research method is discourse analysis. The research paradigm is based on Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions – Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, Individualism / Collectivism and Masculinity / Femininity.

Coronavirus, COVID-19, Intercultural Communication, Government, Measures

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic turned our everyday lives up-side down, resulting in an unprecedented social, economic and healthcare changes. Globalisation, a result of the expanding of world economy, is at stake because its roots lie within constant international contacts. Tourist and business travel became the cause of worldwide spread of the disease. Governments around the world demonstrate different approaches to slowing down contagion. The goal of this work is to analyze governmental practices through the lens of Hofstede's cultural orientations Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism and

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Masculinity / Femininity. The author analyzes governmental measures in 6 countries: China, USA, Italy, Sweden, Brazil and Bulgaria.

2. GOVERNMENT MEASURES

COVID-19 is a disease, caused by a newly found coronavirus, plausibly originating from Chinese wet markets in Wuhan city. Illness lasts from 2 to 6 weeks which makes a long recovery and strict social distancing measures compulsory. The new virus caused an unprecedented economic crisis with unclear consequences and not foreseeable ending. Because of that governmental healthcare and economic measures became boundary-testers for modern democracies. Societies, mainly in the Western world, are confused about the future of their civil rights. Culturally rooted approaches to social order and problem solving emerged, both shocking and soothing unease social groups all over the globe. Uncertainty is at its rise, especially because of the unpredictable future of the virus. Will it disappear? Or it will stay and we have to cope with it on a daily basis?

According to latest report on territorial impact of COVID-19 on local governance by OECD, governments are forced to operate in a so called “context of radical uncertainty” (<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/>). Countries and their local communities are impacted heterogeneously, being influenced in 3 different ways:

1. Society and healthcare – both vulnerable populations and economically underdeveloped regions suffer greater mortality rates.
2. Economy – regions specialized in tourism suffer more than those in other sectors.
3. Financial impact – local authorities were forced to increase expenditure while financial crisis is expected to have long-lasting effects with unknown ending point.

Thus, irrespective of geographical location, most parts of the world experience similar difficulties met by similar measures. That is why we focus our research on six countries from various continents. The paper presents a summary of public health measures in China, USA, Italy, Sweden, Brazil and Bulgaria. Governmental measures are systematized according to Hofstede’s dimensions, where each measure has been matched to characteristics of each dimension as seen in Figure 1.

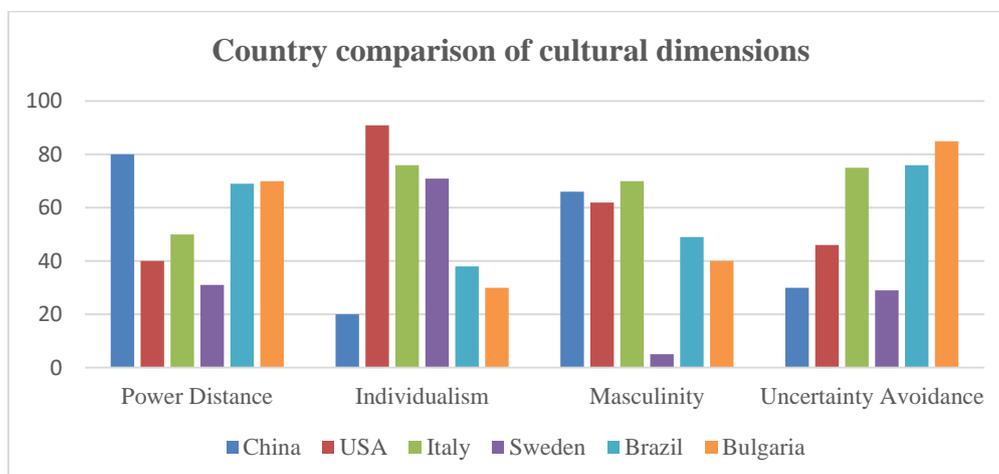


Figure 1. A comparison between studied countries' cultural dimensions

2.1. China

Chinese government's long-term goal after the SARS epidemic was to develop new approaches to coping with the spread of novel diseases. Their measures *first* started with stopping the contagion by locking down the city of Wuhan and other cities in Hubei district. The city was closed down from January 23rd to April 8th 2020, while prohibiting all public events and activities, closing down all schools and universities, the public transport and all businesses in the first 8 weeks. *Second* solution was introducing technology tracking systems, which evolved into a smartphone application "based on a health code color system that categorizes individuals into three color groups based on their health status and travel history, and then determine whether they need to be quarantined" (AITakarli, 2020). Street video surveillance with facial recognition was also introduced in order to detect and sanction citizens who do not wear a mask. Authorities in all areas of China were aiming at finding all people with symptoms who do not follow government measures (AITakarli, 2020).

The third stage of measures included using a *national reporting system* (National Infectious Disease Information System (IDIS)) and building *new healthcare facilities* (AITakarli, 2020). Doctors reported new cases daily (suspected, diagnosed, and asymptomatic cases and deaths). "As soon as a COVID-19 case is diagnosed or suspected, the responsible doctor is required to report the case electronically, where statistics will be generated for the total number in each area." (AITakarli, 2020) Provinces are required to submit daily reports to generate the national and regional epidemiological curves. New temporary hospital was constructed in Wuhan and more than 40 000 healthcare workforce from the whole country was mobilized and transported to the city.

2.2. The USA

Measures in the USA became a cornerstone for President's elections in November this year. President Trump's administration was tentative with actions against the virus, delaying lockdowns until March. US government has already developed a system of measures to help victims of disasters, like after hurricane Katrina in 2005. COVID-19 was also included in the system (<https://www.usa.gov/coronavirus>), where each department acts separately to cover the information needs of the population and sectors of economy they are responsible for. US measures are mostly focused on individual support: how to protect oneself from the virus and how to apply for financial aid (for small businesses). All states decide on the stringency of measures locally, where any social distancing or other restrictive measures are implemented on a county level. The **CARES Act** – Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, was implemented to provide "more than \$2 trillion in emergency aid to individuals and businesses in various forms including loans, direct payments, and insurance benefits intended to cushion the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak." (United States of America - Government and institution measures in response to COVID-19, 2020).

2.3. Italy

After an explosive spread of COVID-19, Italian government had to take fast measures to stop the virus. Total quarantine was administered for the whole country much to the shock of both Italians and other nations. Italy became one of the worst clusters with the disease mostly because of its closely connected and interrelated local communities. Typical Italian lifestyle includes a variety of daily social contacts, several generations living under the same roof, large family gatherings and increased human mobility for work, studying and entertainment. Situation worsened because of the huge tourist mobility, traditional for the country. Italian measures proved to be effective in European context. According to the Italian Ministry of Health “Quarantine and isolation are important public health measures implemented to avoid further secondary cases due to SARS-CoV-2 transmission, and to avoid overloading the hospital system”². Italian government issued a series of decrees to implement economic measures, including the Covid-19 Ordinary Redundancy Scheme (CIGO), which covers up to 80% of monthly salaries of all Italian employees from February 23rd to December 31st 2020. Other economic measures include remote working from home, New Skills Fund comprised of most Italian businesses and exemption from paying social security contributions for employees who have been reimbursed with 80% of their monthly salary (Italy - Government and institution measures in response to COVID-19, 2020).

Italian Ministry of Health runs an official website³ and smartphone application to help with tracking people with symptoms. Active daily surveillance via smartphones is based on civil cooperation and is not mandatory. Authorities must track people who have to socially isolate because of illness. Regions and provinces are divided into three levels of measures based on risk – yellow, orange and red, since November 3rd 2020, where level red is the highest risk in spread and stringency of measures is highest.

2.4. Sweden

Unlike the rest of the world, Sweden became an example of government that barely takes any measures and tries to preserve human mobility. Given the peculiarities of Swedish way of life – highly individualized, with lower rates of interpersonal contact except for the cities, their national government decided to be less stringent. Focus of measures is mostly on supporting small businesses with short-term lay-offs, deferral of tax payments, reorientation support and turnover-based support to sole traders.⁴ Social distancing is voluntary and most businesses and education facilities remained open. Media environment remains mostly unaffected by the pandemic. It is visible in the official governmental press-releases that COVID-19 is treated as any other event that Swedish nation has to deal with. Main focus of the government’s measures

² <http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioFaqNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=english&id=230>, Accessed 6 December 2020

³ <https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/homeNuovoCoronavirus.jsp>, Accessed 6 December 2020

⁴ <https://www.government.se/press-releases/2020/11/additional-crisis-measures-for-businesses/>, Accessed 6 December 2020

seems to be public emotional well-being rather than implementing the strictest approaches to stop the virus.⁵

2.5. *Brazil*

The South American republic remains one of the epicentres of COVID-19. The pandemic has put one of Brazil's most important diplomatic relations at stake – that with China. Both countries have had long history of successful economic relations which were practically cut off by the pandemic. On the other hand, Brazillian government seems to have great difficulties in handling the situation locally with barely any measures at all. Brazillian president Jair Bolsonaro was involved in a series of political scandals. One of which was when he dismissed COVID-19 as a “media hoax.” Bolsonaro encouraged mass public gatherings and refused to wear a mask and practice social distancing. Meanwhile, the country was experiencing a surge in active cases and deaths in March (Padgett, 2020; Watson, 2020). The government's approach still remains chaotic – lockdowns were introduced in a few counties, Brazillians refuse to take health measures seriously, especially in favelas. Economic measures are mostly focused on handling issues with international trade and supporting local businesses (KPMG, 2020).

2.6. *Bulgaria*

Governmental measures in Bulgaria started March 9th 2020 when the National Crisis-management Board was introduced. The Board declared a state of emergency on March 13th 2020 in order to limit the spread of coronavirus. The following measures were taken: all public events and activities were prohibited, education and entertainment facilities were closed down, commute between major cities was strictly controlled, wearing masks was mandatory both inside and outside public spaces. Government's measures caused a major divide between Bulgarians. Since the pandemic there is no consensus in opinions about the seriousness of COVID-19 among Bulgarian population (GALLUP International, 2020). Criticism against measures has been rising, and questions not only the economic measures to support local businesses, but medical approaches as well (Todorov, 2020).

2.7. *Discussion*

Chinese measures became a starting point for other governments to tackle the pandemic. While most governmental reactions were sporadic and disorganized, especially in Europe, the Chinese policies remained an example to follow. They also started a social debate about the role of democracy and human rights in such situation. Most European governments were late with taking measures mostly acting in disbelief to the situation. We can explain that with certain

⁵<https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/communicable-disease-control/covid-19/>, Accessed 6 December 2020

peculiarities of Western cultures in general and European cultures in particular. First the importance of individual rights and independence and, secondly, economic freedom.

After analysis of government measures, as presented in Table 1, it is evident that those are motivated by local cultural traits.

Country	Approach to measures	Application	Cultural Orientation
China	Centralised, focus on controlling human interactions collectively	Starts as temporary and local, continues as constant and at a national level	High uncertainty avoidance High Power Distance Collectivism Masculinity
USA	Decentralised, focus on economic implications and individual effort	Temporary and localized in each county supported by federal acts	Low uncertainty avoidance Low Power Distance Individualism Masculinity
Italy	Centralised, focus on health prevention and collective consciousness	On and Off measures based on surges of cases	High uncertainty avoidance High Power Distance Individualism Masculinity
Brazil	Centralised economic measures, focus on voluntary health prevention	Chaotic measures	Low uncertainty avoidance High Power Distance Collectivism Femininity
Sweden	Centralised economic measures, focus on voluntary health prevention	Non-intrusive measures focused on individual cooperation	Low uncertainty avoidance Low Power Distance Individualism Femininity
Bulgaria	Centralised health and economic measures, focus on voluntary health prevention	Constant measures with different restriction levels based on number of cases, most stringent measures are taken in the first 2 months.	High uncertainty avoidance High power distance Collectivism Femininity

Table 1. Government measures and their cultural orientations

Cultural phenomena like nepotism, typical for Bulgaria and Brazil, determine the lack of individual responsibility among authorities. Governmental chaos, either real or perceived, is also a result of collectivistic traits. Individualistic cultures like Sweden, the US and Italy rely mostly on personal conscientiousness to cope with the virus. Wearing a mask or keeping social distance is favoured as an individual choice to protect oneself. China's reaction is evident to their strong, nationally based, collectivism, unlike Bulgarian and Brazillian familial collectivism that favours only the extended family. The main reason Chinese measures succeeded and stopped the contagion in the beginning was the strong collective responsibility both enforced by the government and followed by the local population. Chinese systems of total

social surveillance seem to be favoured by their tradition to favour the collective instead of the individual's interests. United States makes an impression among these countries as the only one solely focused on supporting individual effort. American measures are focused on financing troubled businesses and are implemented locally. Decentralisation is key to individualistic cultures like the United States. Sweden is the other alternative to stringent approaches with its non-intrusive measures relying on self-discipline.

3. CONCLUSION

We presented a comparison of 6 cases of governmental measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from being a test for modern democracies, measures also show the necessity of being aware of cultural traits in order to implement successful protection approaches. Processes of centralisation and decentralisation are also interesting to observe. If we look through the lens of cultural orientations, centralised policies, for instance, characterize the power distance of these cultures. We believe cultural roots of governmental reactions to the pandemic present a fruitful basis for future research with more interculturalists being interested in the matter.

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