

Crisis management in “lousy autocracies”: The case of COVID-19 crisis management in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract: What appears to be a global tide of autocratization / de-democratization has recently been investigated in terms of a broad variety of public policy and public governance implications. Typically, these studies look for – and, frequently, find – some sort of a linear relationship: the more autocratization there is, the more (or the less) of some policy or governance outcome results. Our study is distinctly different: we suggest that there is a particular U-shape relationship between autocratization and the stringency of COVID-19-related public health measures. At the one extreme of the “liberal democracy-autocracy” continuum established autocracies such as the People’s Republic of China has employed a vast arsenal of harsh COVID-19 restrictions, including full-scale lockdowns in commercially and economically important regions or cities. At the other extreme of the same continuum, genuine liberal democracies, such as most West European countries have, similarly, employed considerable restrictions on the freedom of movement and the freedom of assembly during COVID-19.

In contrast, regimes in-between, i.e., those exhibiting a relatively mild form of autocracy (what we call ‘lousy autocracies’) appear to differ from either ends of the above continuum in terms of their stringency in public health measures. Specifically, they tend to adopt fewer and less stringent restrictions and/or for more limited time periods than the other two groups of jurisdictions. Their policy responses differ in yet another respect: they use the COVID-19 emergency to introduce restrictions on some basic human rights such as the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, and the freedom of assembly.

In this paper, we set out to empirically investigate the above proposition; additionally, we look at how this relationship works out across different political regimes and levels of economic development. The study relies on a comparative case study of suitably selected Central and Eastern European countries, and builds extensively to comparative data compiled by the V-Dem project and the Oxford Blavatnik School.