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The Generals and Scientists Who Saved the Republic

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**ЗА ГЕНЕРАЛИТЕ И УЧЕНИТЕ, КОЙТО СПАСИХА РЕПУБЛИКАТА: ЕКСПЕРТИЗА И МОЩНОСТ В
БЪЛГАРИЯ ПО ВРЕМЕ НА ПАНДЕМИЯТА И ОТНЕГО**

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**THE GENERALS AND THE SCIENTISTS WHO SAVED THE REPUBLIC: EXPERTISE
AND POWER IN BULGARIA DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND**

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This paper indagates the “epistemic authority” of science and its political implications. To do so, it builds a comprehensive understanding of ecological relations between experts and the socio-political environment. Sometimes, it conflates the expert with the professional tout court. Other times, it is treated like the Weberian specialist vis-à-vis whom politicians are “in the position of a dilettante facing the expert.” (Weber 1922, 991) The peculiar way in which scientists interacted with politics under real-socialism is also highlighted. Finally, the paper tests the validity of this integrated theory on Bulgaria, a country little studied and deeply peculiar.

Expertise, sociology of professions, policy-making, normativity, pandemic

About me

Fabio Ashtar Telarico (born in Naples, Italy) obtained a BA in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Naples “l’Orientale”, where he studied Bulgarian language. He now attends the Joint MA in South Easter European Studies of the Universities of Graz and Belgrade while working as an analyst for the consultancy firm *Global Risk Insights*. Focusing on culture, society and politics of South-eastern Europe and the former USSR, he has published articles for several websites and magazines as well as participated in various conferences in these fields.

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§ 1 Introduction: Science, politics and their intersections

This paper inquires science's "epistemic authority" (Brown 2009) arguing that the "politicisation of science" and the "scientification of politics" are two sides of an historically-given dual process (Weingart 1982, 54) An integrated theory of the political relevance of expertise in 21st-century liberal-democracies is built drawing on Weber,¹ Talcott Parsons,² T. H. Marshall³.

Together with the State, (Tilly 1990; Gaukroger 2008) allegedly 'neutral' sciences are the most preeminent features of Western modernity. Moderns developed a 'neutrality principle' according to which "science 'in itself' is pure" and "values or politics enter only as contamination." (Proctor 1991, 3–4) Yet, with the exception of hierocracies, in contemporary politics "science is the only source of privileged knowledge, all criticism and counter movements have the existing scientific discourse as their ultimate frame of reference." ⁴ Thus, in Western-modern contexts, a policy should be aligned with scientific facts or, at least, not contradict them (Weingart 1999, 159). Governmentality(see Foucault 2004, 119–370) relies increasingly on expertise and politicians enrol expert counsellors to better propagandise their policy proposals. Nowadays, the neutrality principle allows experts to

certif[y] as value-neutral, normal, natural, and therefore not political [...] policies and practices through which powerful groups can [...] advance their priorities. [...] Thus, when sciences are already in the service of the mighty, scientific neutrality ensures that the 'might makes right.'

(Harding 1992, 568–69)

In times of crisis – like the one we're living through – decision-makers leverage this relationship and justify unpopular choices through expertise. No surprise that the CoViD-19 pandemic nailed scientist to the centre stage while elected officials have kept remarking that they "believe in" (Kamala Harris quoted in Segers 2020) and will "follow the science" (Merkel as reported by Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2019; Mike Pence quoted in Abruzzese 2020). Yet, in "post-truth politics" (Rose 2017), when it suits one's needs there is no fear of stating that "the people have had enough of experts [...] getting it consistently wrong" (Michael Gove quoted in Mance 2016) and that most likely "science doesn't know" (Trump quoted in Lemire et al. 2020).

¹ Experts are *specialists* vis-à-vis whom the "political 'master' always finds himself [...] in the position of a dilettante facing the expert." (Weber 1922, 991)

² Talcott Parsons, b. 1902, d. 1979) was a leading American sociologist whose writings influenced many successive sociologists as well as the development of the discipline itself. Unlike other sociologists, Parsons attempted to draw up a general systemic theory for the analysis of society.

³ Thomas Humphrey Marshall b. 1893, d. 1981) was an English sociologist whose fame is mainly due to his thesis on the social citizenship established together with the welfare state in many Western countries in the 20th.

⁴)

Meanwhile, scientists' fractiousness – which has never been rare – has become commonplace. 'Experts' split because of equivocal proofs (e. g. climate change, nuclear energy) and pre-constituted ideological preferences as it the case for race and abortion. Thus, as politics hold on science to stay afloat, trust in the latter has become a partisan issue even where stances are generally favourable. (see Matthew Smith 2017 for the UK; see Funk et al. 2019 for the pre-CoViD-19 US)

§ 2 Theoretical framework: experts as professionals making policies

A profession is a “paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification.” ('Profession' 2020) Hence, experts are often professionals. In the 1930s Talcott Parsons and T. H. Marshall sparred over the politics of the professional 'class'. Once integrated by the theories of professional dominance and proletarianization, those ideas are still indispensable today.

¶ 1 Professions as an institution: Talcott Parsons and the social structure

Parsons revealed that if professionals came to “occupy a position of importance in our society which is [...] unique in history,” it was not for “an automatic consequence of belief in the importance of the functions” they perform. This rise was made possible by three features of professions as an institution (Parsons 1939, 460–62). (1) First, rationality as an antonym of traditional.⁵ Under most circumstances, on the professionals are either *wertrational*⁶ – and inspired by the normative standard of “ objective truth” (Parsons 1939, 459) – or *zweckrational*⁷ job. (2) Professionals exert a specific sort of “authority” manifested by language practices:

We speak of the doctor as issuing “orders” even though we know that the only “penalty” for not obeying them is possible injury to the patient's own health. A lawyer generally gives “ advice” as the client knew just as well what to do it would be unnecessary for him to consult a lawyer. (Parsons 1939, 460)

Thus, professionals are authoritative,⁸ but only insofar as their power's scope “is limited to a particular technically defined sphere”. Finally, (3) Professionals' ethos is universalistic because “ who states a proposition is as such irrelevant to the question of its scientific value. “ (Parsons 1939, 462)

⁵ Professionals' occupations and education make them more impermeable to the *argumentum ad antiquitatem* [en. 'Appeal to tradition'], according to which something should be done in the way “ determined by ingrained habituation” Weber 1922, 25)

⁶ A “ value-rational” behaviour is “ determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some [...] behavior, independently of its prospects of success” Weber 1922, 24–25)). This is a possibility Parsons bypasses altogether Parsons 1939, 456, 465)

⁷ Meaning that they are planned in relation to “ rationally pursued and calculated ends” Weber 1922, 24). It is 'instrumentally rational', e. g. to satisfy one's client in order to make him pay a fee.

⁸ Meaning that their capability of making other people do what they ask them to (i. e. *Macht* or 'power') can count on a certain degree of automation and introjection i.e., it is seen as 'legitimate' — which makes their *Macht* a form of *Herrschaft*.

Parsons's theory implies a number of unverifiable generalisations. Lately, e. g. , universalism has been challenged by frequent 'expert' false claims believed to be because of their authors' reputation. (Upi 1982; Schneider 1983; BBC News 2010; Harrison, Simpson, and Weil 2010; Piller 2020)

¶ 2 Towards technocracy: From T. H. Marshall to recent developments

Parsons's neglect of politics constitutes a veiled political statement. His counterpart, T. H. Marshall, tinted his theory overtly "in a political vein." (Rueschemeyer 1995, 1) He thought professionals belonged in the civil service, where there are

wide areas of action left to the administrators and the professionals where the voice of the politician is but dimly heard as the distant ineffectual bleating of a wandering sheep. (Marshall 1939, 335)

Hence, Marshall concluded that it is with "professions as a whole," that the responsibility "to find for the sick and suffering democracies a peaceful solution of their problems" rests "more than with anyone else". (Marshall 1939, 340)

A "global civil society" (Salamon et al. 1999; Salamon and Sokolowski 2004) and a "global scientific community" (For the usage of the term cf. Grissino-Mayer and Fritts 1997) have emerged since the 1990s. People are growingly concerned with 'global problems' (climate change, biodiversity pauperisation) that require expert guidance (Fagan and Huang 2019; Revkin 2019). Thus, C. P. Snow was clairvoyant in writing: "there is no such [thing as] uniqueness" when it comes to experts' involvement in decision-making. (Snow 2013, 47) In effect, since 1990 experts' role in politics has been expanding. Thenceforth, 'expert governments' have led several countries. Some "of these developments were welcomed by citizens, some were fiercely criticised and opposed, while others were first welcomed and subsequently opposed." (Bertsou and Pastorella 2016) In any case, technocratic experiences shut the door of the political arena behind the experts' back.

¶ 3 The legacies of post-socialism — Attitudes towards technocracy

Before the pandemic. "scientists and their research are widely viewed in a positive light across global publics. " ⁹ A median of 36% has "a lot of trust in scientists" (Figure 1 **Error! Reference source not found.**). Yet, World Value Survey data hint at real-socialism being a decisive factor influencing preferences for technocracy. As of 2020, in West Europe ¹⁰ having "experts" to "make decisions" is

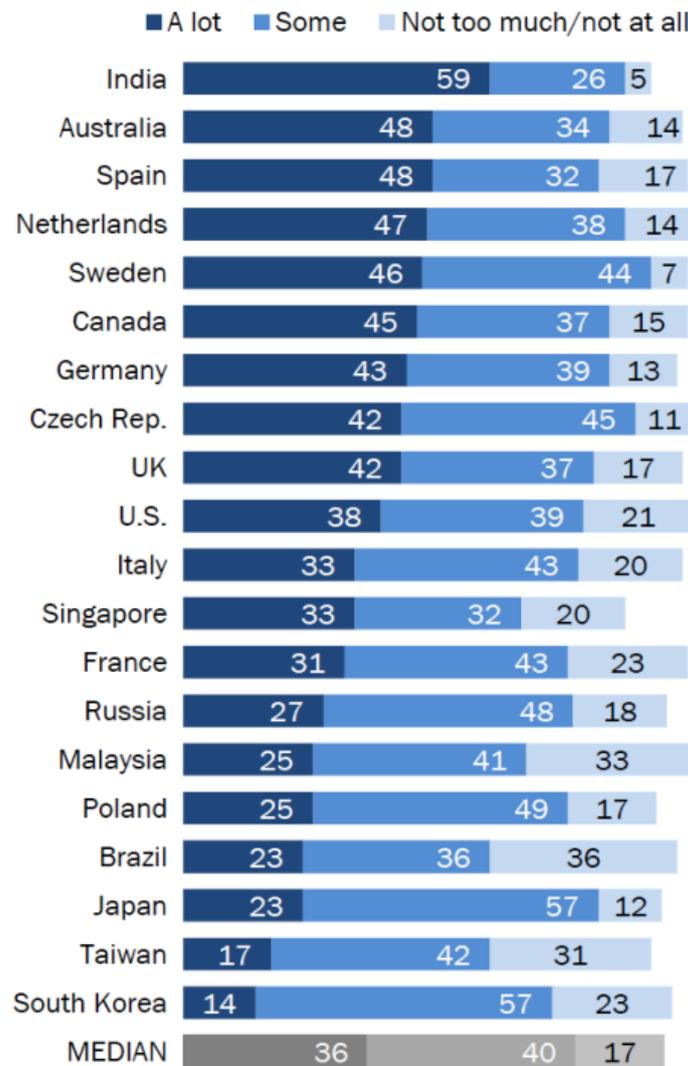
⁹ According to a Pew Research survey of 20 countries The survey involved more than 1, 000 from each of the following States: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States. Funk et al. 2020))

¹⁰ The 12 Western-European countries are: Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In total, 27, 952 people were interviewed between 2017 and 2020.

seen as “good” (Chart 1) by about 45% of interviewees (Haerpfer et al. 2020 Q236). The figure goes up to about 72% in post-socialist countries¹¹ (Figure 2).

Figure 1: The levels of trust in scientists’ decision is very variable

Share of respondent who have a lot/some/no trust in scientists to do what is right for the community.



Source: (Funk et al. 2020)

A least-square regression shows that this legacy explains about 70% of the divide between the two groups of countries, and is statistically highly significant (see **Error! Reference source not found.** and Figure 3). Hence, a meaningful theory of the experts’ political role must account for diverging historical legacies.

¹¹ The 13 post-socialist Eastern European countries are: Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Rep. , Hungary, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and North Macedonia. In total, 23, 259 people were polled between 2017 and 2020.

Figure 2: Eastern Europe sees technocracy favourably

Percentage of respondent from selected Eastern-European countries who expressed one or the other judgement on having experts, not government, take decision according to what they think is best.

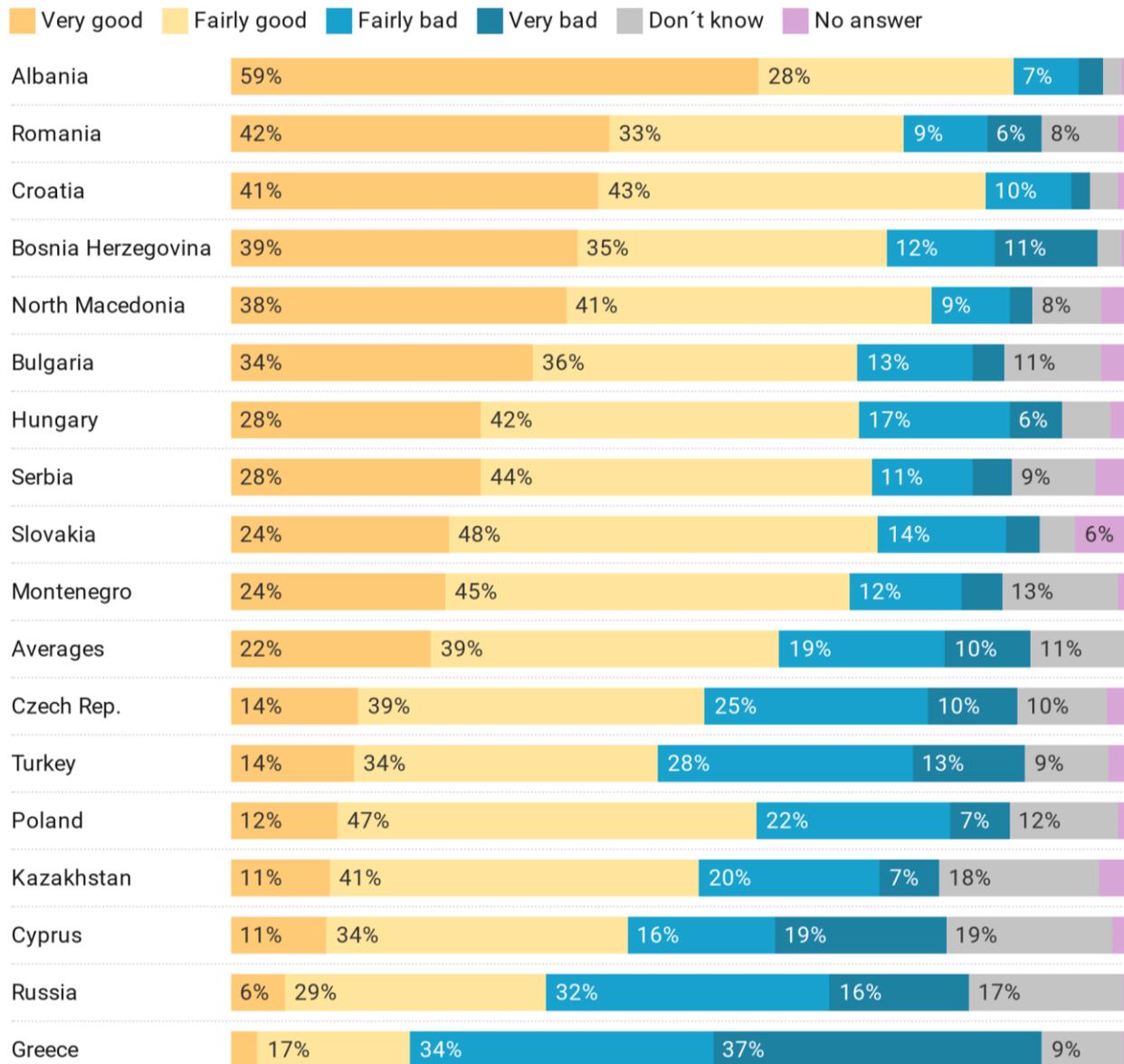


Chart by F.A. Telarico | Source: (Haerfer et al. 2020, Q236)

§ 3 Expertise and anti-pandemic policy in Bulgaria

¶ 1 Case study selection and methodology

As a case study Bulgaria may not be very representativeness of a broader group of similar countries. But the compresence of post-socialist legacies and European modernisation pose a rather unique challenge.

This case study follows an approach called process tracing, a “qualitative method for assessing causal inference through the analysis of causal mechanisms in a single-case design.” (Punton and Welle

2015, 1) In this, it tests a series of hypotheses consistent with the previously-built theory. For the limited scope of this publication the focus is on the in-depth reconstruction of experts' role in pandemic-related policy-making. Both popular perceptions and advisors' actual influence are indagated. A certain attention is devoted to General-Major Ventsislav Metodiev Mutafchiyski, who became the embodiment of pandemic expertise.

¶ 2 Experts' role in shaping anti-contagion policies

Unlike many other European countries,¹² Bulgaria responded to the pandemic mainly through laws of the Parliament. Other normative acts were also abundant (MZ na RB 2020a), but once the 'first wave' waned most of them were left to expire or retroceded to suggestions (*predlozhenia*) (MZ na RB 2020b).

Experts were pulled into policy-making by PM Boyko Borisov's "Ordinance establishing the National Operational Headquarters" (*Natsionsalen Operativen Shtab*, NOH) on February 26, 2020. Its seven members are nominated by the government, (Borisov 2020, para. 1) four of them are experts on infectious diseases and physiology. The head of the NOH, Major General Ventsislav Mutafchiiski, (Borisov 2020, para. 2) can only adjoint "other experts." (Borisov 2020, para. 4) According to the ordinance (Borisov 2020, para. 4) the NOH is an advisory body.¹³ However, Mutafchiiski's charismatic and somewhat 'unruly' personality made NOH look like the decision-making locus during the pandemic. State-run media and government-aligned outlets – as well as international media –¹⁴ depicted Mutafchiiski almost as the man of providence: The General and the Scientist who saved the Republic.¹⁵ This narrative fostered the idea of an omnipotent technocracy puppeteering the political system. The NOH-idea is one of the best hints at what a technocracy à la T. H. Marshall would look like.

¶ 3 Conflicting advices and the problem of knowledge over-supply

¹² In the UK members of the parliament have accused the government of having "got into the habit of ruling by decree." (Graham Brady 2020)) In France, the government has "issued numerous ordinances, decrees and orders implementing the measures contemplated by the Emergency Law." (Proskauer Rose LLP 2020, 2020)) Entire French cities were shut down by decree (Reuters Staff 2020)). In Spain, after the end of the so-called 'first wave', the cabinet approved "new rules, which will be in place until the government considers that the crisis is over" without need for consultations with the parliament (Linde and De Blas 2020)). On the Italian case see: De Minico 2020; and Boggero 2020)

¹³ In some cases, the NOH has been given special advisory powers to adjuvate some ministries' decisions on non-healthcare related matters. Narodno Sūbranie na RB 2020, sec. 2 sub-sec. 2-3))

¹⁴ For instance, *Deutsche Well* wrote that the NOH epitomised the cabinet's intention to organise the anti-pandemic campaign "on a military model [while ...] the virus itself was likened to an enemy invading our country situation felt like martial law and so on." The German outlet described Mutafchiiski as a "general who issued orders while civilian institutions only dressed them of a legal form." (Kostov 2020))

¹⁵ One such instance was the interview aired by private network bTV under the captivating title "Children ask, the General answers" during the news talk show *120 minutes*. (Mutafchiiski 2020)).

Societal reactions to experts' perceived centrality¹⁶ in policy-making was influenced by a variable T. H. Marshall and Parsons had not considered: the presence of dissenting voices. Their very existence created the paradox of non-experts having to choose between diverging expert advices.

Interviewed by BNT, Professor Mangarov – the most heterodox anti-NOH expert – stated that

The way the information about the coronavirus is presented [in Mutafchiiski's pandemic briefings] is extremely incorrect and frightening. If someone wants to scare, it may be because they think a frightened population is easier to manipulate.

(24 chasa 2020)

Less controversial experts like Professor Kosta Kostov also criticised the NOH. He referred to the government's management of the pandemic as “North Korean,” and suggested to replace “swords and howitzers” with “scientific arguments, [...] a white apron and a stethoscope.” (Kostov 2020) Kostov said experts were divided between those with “a responsible attitude towards society” and others imprisoned by their “narcissistic stubbornness.” (Kostov 2020) Hence, the pneumologist admitted that experts' divergent policy-advocacy strategies mirror their pre-extant ideological differences.

Prof. Ivan Chalakov¹⁷ maintained that Mutafchiiski's statements were often laughable. He defined Mangarov a “book rat” and accused Kostov of inconsistency with a typical *argumentum ad personam* (Chalakov 2020).

With at least four different expert advices between which to choose, Bulgarians were probably overflowed with conflicting information to the point that the

(over-)supply of knowledge and its politicisation leads to de-legitimation of politics and loss of authority on the part of science. [...] Thus, the boundary between science and politics has to be constantly redrawn and reiterated.

(Weingart 1999, 160)

In other words, as more expertise becomes available the lower the average level of certainty lowers.

§ 4 Tentative conclusions — What to learn from the Bulgarian case

This case study shows that the more experts get integrated in policy-making and more often they will delegitimise each other in supporting opposing policies (See e. g. Oreskes and Conway 2011), often

¹⁶ Despite his military background, Gen. Mutafchiiski never referred to it to project authority beyond wearing a uniform in most – but not all – his public appearances. On the contrary, he remarked “I feel more comfortable in my doctor's clothes. This has been my daily life for 30 years, not counting the ones I spent as a student. Coincidentally, I am a general and I am proud of all this, but these are other responsibilities.” (Mutafchiiski 2020))

¹⁷ Of the ENT clinic of the Queen Joanna-ISUL Hospital

with cherry-picked “ policy-based evidences.” (Kevles 2006; Kraft, Lodge, and Taber 2015) Against this backdrop, people’ trust in the expert community cannot but fade. Bulgaria could be more prone to extreme beliefs because of its peculiar history and relative backwardness. Yet, mistrusting experts is leading to politically undesired consequences in the entire Western world (Figueiredo et al. 2020).

In conclusion, the mirroring processes of science’s politicisation of politics’ scientification debases the two poles’ legitimacy. Politicians often make divisions amongst professionals worse by co-opting docile experts and putting them the spotlight to weaken possible oppositions. In doing so they polarise and divide the public further by forcing it to pick sides between opposing experts. In Bulgaria some refused to play this game and took refuge in “ magical thinking.” (Kozhukharov 2020) Either ways, individuals are torn apart and pushed into sect-like communities. In a crisis, the lack of trusted expert delegitimises other institutions and endangers both formulation and implementation of effective emergency policies. If power-expertise relations remain unclarified, the risk of slipping in to a state of intellectual anarchy and clinging irrationalism can only get more real.

§ 5 Appendixes

Table 1 The public in post-socialist countries is more likely to support technocracy.

Results of a least-square regression assuming that having being a real-socialist country is a predictor of the current support for technocratic government (very or fairly good).

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.8477601
R Square	0.7186972
Adjusted R Square	0.7082785
Standard Error	0.086755
Observations	29

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	1	0.51919	0.51919	68.982	6.48823E-09
Residual	27	0.20321	0.00753		
Total	28	0.7224			

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>
Intercept	5908104	0.01612	366517	1.5E-24	557735775	0.6238851	0.55773578
Post-socialist	1338819	0.01612	830554	6.5E-09	100807204	0.1669565	0.1008072

Post-socialism factor is operationalised as a dichotomous variable which equals -1 if the country has never been socialist and +1 in the opposite case. The results clearly show a high degree of significance

Calculations by F.A. Telarico

Figure 3 about here}

{Chart 3 about here}

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