

Tamir Bar-On and Bàrbara Molas (Eds.)

**Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic
by the Radical Right**

Scapegoating, Conspiracy Theories and New Narratives

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Foreword

Cas Mudde

The Coronavirus pandemic is at least the fourth major ‘crisis’ of the still relatively young 21st century—after 9/11, the Great Recession and the so-called ‘refugee crisis’—but it is by far the most global and personal. The vast majority of the global population has been in some form of lockdown, from draconian in places like China to fairly loose in countries like Sweden, and most have seen their school or work situation change considerably.

The pandemic has also led to an economic downturn that is expected to be even worse than the Great Recession, from which most of the world had only barely recovered. In the US, for example, unemployment numbers are now higher than during the Great Depression, with more than 30 million Americans having lost their job since March 2020, disproportionately minorities and women in low-income jobs.

No wonder, then, that the possible political consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic are hotly debated, and, in a world dominated by populism, which has largely become shorthand for the far right, this has too often been reduced to the question: how will the Coronavirus pandemic impact populism?

This edited volume brings together some of the key writings on the topic, focusing on the relationship between the Coronavirus pandemic and the far right from both sides; i.e., how did the Coronavirus pandemic affect the success of the far right and how has the far right responded to the Coronavirus pandemic? Short and accessible, and written by true experts, they go beyond the often ill-informed and sensationalist ‘hot takes’ in the media and provide clear insights into a broad range of cases across the world.

These first takes are necessarily preliminary, however, and, as I will argue later, might have to be revised significantly in the case of a near-certain second wave. In this short foreword, I will outline my own first take, linking the discussion to some of the key points from my recent book *The Far Right Today* (2019), while also looking ahead to what is yet to come.

Media coverage of the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the electoral and political fortunes of the far right has often been determined by the specific (national) case they focused on. Those focusing on US

president Donald Trump, or Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro have emphasized their denial and incompetence with regard to the pandemic and have predicted an electoral backlash—partly backed up by recent polls. But media focusing on Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (RN) in France or Matteo Salvini’s League in Italy have argued that the far right stands to profit from the upcoming electoral backlash—so far not supported by the polls. Who is right?

Both could be, potentially, because the far right today is a heterogeneous political phenomenon. While it was mainly an outside political challenger in the third wave of post-war far right politics (1980–2000), the far right has mainstreamed and normalized in the current fourth wave. Today, three of the five biggest democracies have a far-right leader (Brazil, India, US), two EU member states have single-party far right governments (Hungary and Poland), and far right parties are part of government coalitions in several other countries (e.g., Bulgaria and Estonia). Given this diversity in political contexts, it makes little sense to expect one single effect of the Coronavirus pandemic on *the* far right.

At this moment, most far right parties in power profit from the government bonus that national crises tend to create, just as is the case of non-far right governments. There are two major exceptions to this general rule, however: Bolsonaro and Trump. Both stereotypical far right strongmen have largely denied or downplayed the threat of the pandemic, refused to wear facemasks (to showcase their ‘masculinity’) and fallen out with traditional supporters over their response. Nevertheless, the fall in popular support for the two leaders is also related to other issues, such as allegations of abuse of power (Bolsonaro) and institutional racism and police brutality (Trump).

Most far right parties in opposition have been struggling, starved from their key issues and (therefore) media attention. Salvini’s *Lega*, which had been in a downfall since blowing up the Italian government in late 2019, is polling at its lowest in two years. Similarly, Sweden Democrats (SD) has lost all the gains it made in the second half of 2019, while Alternative for Germany (AFD) is polling in the single digits for the first time in years. However, there are exceptions. While Salvini’s League is losing, the pandemic has not stopped the rise of Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy (FdI). Similarly, Belgium’s Flemish Interest (VB) is unaffected by the pandemic. Overall though, most shifts in voting preferences are small for all opposition parties, far right or otherwise.

In terms of response to the Coronavirus pandemic, as the various chapters illustrate, far right organizations and parties have mainly used their traditional repertoire of authoritarianism, nativism and populism. Conspiracy theories and fake news campaigns have also been widespread, aided by anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as well as dubious online networks, some linked to Russia.

While all far-right groups have emphasized the virus' link to China, not all have used it for targeted anti-China campaigns like Salvini and Trump. They have also all linked it to immigration, playing on age-old racist tropes about 'Others' carrying and spreading disease. Obviously, covert and overt anti-Semites did not miss the opportunity to link the pandemic to their eternal enemy, 'the Jews', often through the familiar persona of US-Hungarian investor-philanthropist George Soros.

While this nativism plays well among the base, and does resonate more broadly, it does not seem to pull in many new supporters. This is in part because practically all governments decided to close the national borders at the beginning of the pandemic, thereby taking away the far right's main standard 'solution'. Outside of a few countries, like India and the US, China is not among the common foreign enemies of nationalists, and Chinese immigrants are either ignored or seen as 'model immigrants' who work hard and don't make claims on the majority. An important reminder that 'positive' stereotypes are still that—stereotypes—and can easily change into negative stereotypes—just as philo-Semitism is mostly based on anti-Semitic stereotypes.

This leaves the opposition far right mainly with populism, accusing the government of corruption and incompetence, putting 'the people' at risk to appease big business, foreign countries, or international organizations. The content of the critique differs by country and is more determined by the government response than by far right ideology. For instance, while far right groups in Italy and the US have opposed the lockdown, their brethren in the Netherlands have criticized the Dutch government for being too lax in its response to the Coronavirus pandemic—before making a 180 turn and calling for a quicker reopening of the country.

So far, the populist campaigns of far right groups have met with only modest success, but the real political struggle over 'the right response' is yet to come. And, in some countries, it might not even come as they have already moved on to new topics, like institutional racism and police brutality.

In the end, the second wave of the pandemic might be so close to the end of the first, if it ever really ended in countries like the UK and the US, that the past few months were probably just foreplay for the real political debate. One thing is clear, many people will be much less supportive of a second lockdown—ironically, in part because the first lockdown kept the number of deaths much lower than early scenarios predicted—which will put enormous pressure on governments to enact and enforce an effective response. It will also create a huge opportunity for far right groups—in government and opposition—to become the voice of the dissenters, and present themselves as the defenders of individual freedoms and the national economy.

Whatever the actual outcome, the various contributions in this volume will help us to better understand what is going on right now and what will happen in the future. It may not be a happy read, but it is an important one.