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Averting institutional disasters? Drawing lessons from China to inform the Cypriot response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Using 't Hart's (2014) typology of crises, we explore the Republic of Cyprus's initial response to the COVID-19 crisis and contend Cypriot leaders indirectly drew lessons from the Chinese experience to prevent a situational crisis from metastasizing into a much broader institutional crisis. The lessons Cyprus drew from China to secure this outcome reinforced the critical nature of transparency and timeliness in sharing epidemiological information, swift intervention efforts to minimize virus transmission, and privileging expert involvement in shaping the response plan. We conclude with implications for public leadership and lesson-drawing under crisis.

KEYWORDS

China, COVID-19, crisis management, Cyprus, lesson-drawing

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the 2011 movie *Contagion*, Alan Krumwiede (played by Jude Law) terrifies his audience by noting how fast a novel lethal virus may spread worldwide: *"On day one, there were two people with it, and then there were four, and then it was sixteen, and you think you've got it in front of you. But next it's two hundred and fifty-six, and then it's sixty-five thousand, and it's behind you and above you and all around you. In thirty steps, it's a billion sick"* (Contagion Best Quotes, 2011).

Similar to the film, we view COVID-19 as a transboundary crisis that spans multiple domains involving various actors with conflicting responsibilities, and for which there are no conventional or

ready-made solutions (Boin, 2019; Versluis, van Asselt, & Kim, 2019). To date, there has been substantial variation in national responses to this crisis (Capano, Howlett, Jarvis, Ramesh, & Goyal, 2020) although convergence has been observed as well (Comfort, Kapucu, Ko, Menoni, & Siciliano, 2020). We examine lessons that the Republic of Cyprus drew indirectly from China, which was the first country to deal with the outbreak and whose response had an effect on how European countries made sense of the crisis. We draw from 't Hart's (2014) typology of crises, as *situational* or *institutional,* to explain the Cypriot response between February and May 2020. Cyprus had the benefit of retrospective knowledge from the Chinese experience. Its response involved stringent lockdown policy measures, but the crisis was not viewed as regime threatening. Understanding interconnections in disparate national responses yields important theoretical and empirical insight. In this instance, not only can we learn more about the response of the Republic of Cyprus to the COVID-19 crisis, but we can also better understand the processes of lesson-drawing and the politics of crisis response. The indirect lessons Cyprus drew from China to secure this outcome reinforced the critical nature of transparency and timeliness in sharing epidemiological information, of swift intervention efforts to minimize virus transmission, and of privileging expert involvement in shaping the response plan.

After a brief overview of the literature, we outline key points of the Chinese response that indirectly informed the Cypriot response, which we also present and analyze. We conclude with implications for public leadership and lesson-drawing under crisis.

2 | SITUATIONAL CRISES AND INSTITUTIONAL DISASTERS

As 't Hart (2014) argues, different crises elicit different responses. According to 't Hart, situational crises typically concern exogenous events that call for emergency management actions, which play out at the operational level and require technocratic, evidence-based, and problem-solving actions. In this characterization, the crisis occurs in the physical world "out there," with citizens portrayed as passive victims and the media's primary role involves the reporting of events. Emergency management actions are taken within public agencies with the objectives of physical damage control and ensuring community recovery. Conversely, institutional crises, which are often triggered by situational crises ('t Hart, 2014; Drennan, McConnell, & Stark, 2015), occur in the political realm and involve perceptions, passions, players, and positions. Institutional crises are exacerbated by intrinsic institutional faults, long-term neglect, and a general malaise brought into sharp relief during a situational crisis ('t Hart, 2014). In this context, citizens are viewed as active advocates, while the media frames and (re) frames interpretations of the situation. Consequently, institutional crises, which play out in "on-site" operational agencies and coordination centers, necessitate crisis leadership since incumbent leaders are easier to blame and must actively engage in political damage control. Ultimately, a poorly handled institutional crisis at a minimun diminishes regime legitimacy and may even potentially precipitate regime change.

The distinction between situational and institutional crises and the ensuing emergency management and crisis management responses respectively is not watertight: situational crises may highlight (latent or hitherto unnoticed) institutional flaws in foreseeing, mitigating, and responding to threats. National responses ostensibly aim at crisis amelioration, but they provide opportunities for incumbent leaders to exercise political power. Additionally, the increasing societal complexity and interdependence may hide vulnerabilities that hinder crisis responses ('t Hart, 2014; Boin,'t Hart, Stern, & Sundelius 2017). Given that a situational crisis may morph into an institutional crisis, analytical focus

has to be placed on the management of conflict, the latter dubbed by Schattschneider (1975, 69) as *"the crucial problem in politics"*.

As we demonstrate below, the initial Chinese COVID-19 response illustrates power being exercised to address a situational crisis, while simultaneously preventing an institutional crisis from occurring. Government authorities obfuscated the flow of timely and accurate epidemiological information while they also limited the degree of expert involvement in shaping the response plan. Importantly, such efforts were supplemented with an evolving and strategic narrative that bolstered the Chinese Communist Party's governing regime. Subsequently, Cyprus indirectly drew lessons from the Chinese response as a means to prevent a situational crisis from sliding into an institutional disaster. Were an information flow constraint combined with a narrative valorizing the regime in power to take place in a liberal democracy, we would expect, at a minimum, public outcry and considerable social unrest. The lag from the time the virus outbreak unfolded in China before reaching Cyprus (a period of some 9–10 weeks) provided leaders an opportunity to look to China for lessons regarding how to best respond.

3 | LESSON-DRAWING AND CRISIS RESPONSE

Lesson-drawing explains national responses as a constructive learning process, where experiences from other countries are used to improve national policies. Lesson-drawing helps us understand the extent and circumstances under which a program that works elsewhere will work here (Rose, 1993). It is a judgment call that implies a process of editing, filtering, and interpreting key elements of similar experiences elsewhere to either avert crises and/or improve results at home. Lesson-drawing is more likely to be prompted in periods of crisis, situational or institutional, and by new problems when preferences are not well formed and scientific knowledge is limited, thereby stimulating interest in workable solutions elsewhere (Stone, 1999, 54). Because China was the first country to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and despite differences in regime type, we expect Cyprus and other European countries to selectively use parts of China's experience as highlights to inform the situational crisis response at home. Given the urgency and nature of the pandemic, we also assume the learning curve was very steep. As a result, the process was condensed, meaning important institutional filters (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Rose, 1993) were by-passed in favor of a speedy response. What makes the Chinese experience important from a learning point of view is the fact that it was the first country to at least temporarity, contain the contagion of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Reliance on epistemic communities serves as the main lesson-drawing mechanism in health policy (Löblová, 2018). Openness to foreign models, by necessity in this case, and closer contacts between communities especially through international networks aided by the World Health Organization (WHO), directly or indirectly facilitate lesson-drawing (WHO, 2020). Akin to Dolowitz and Marsh's (1996, 349) concept of indirect coercive policy transfer, just as technology "forces" governments to seek new ideas because of the speed of change, so do novel common threats. Because governments do not know how to respond, they turn to each other for workable precedents, inspiration or prudent avoidance. Similarly, Boin et al. (2017, 130) conclude that pandemics have the potential to expose *"a deficit between a threat and the governmental capacity to deal with it [indicating that] new skills and competences might be in order."* Hence, crises prompt searches for competence or skill-based lesson learning, including in this instance, various prophylactic measures to stem the rate of contagion.

The spread of COVID-19 presented Cyprus with a situational crisis. The Chinese experience suggests errors of commission could have potentially turned the situational crisis response into an institutional disaster. We examine the impact of three lessons the Cypriots drew to ensure the crisis did not

threaten the regime, namely: swift intervention efforts to minimize virus transmission; the relatively free flow of information, and privileging expert involvement in shaping the response plan.

4 | CYPRUS DRAWS LESSONS TO RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The tree-month time lapse between the COVID-19 situational crisis hitting China and then subsequently Cyprus provides a valuable lesson-drawing context. Chinese health authorities detected the outbreak of a novel virus in the central city of Wuhan in December 2019, positioning China as the first country forced to respond to the disease. Conversely, Cyprus reported its first two confirmed COVID-19 cases on March 9th as the country became the 27th and final European Union (EU) member state to report a confirmed case. More than half of the initial Chinese cases were later traced to a bustling wet market, while the initial two Cypriot cases stemmed from individuals who had returned to Cyprus from abroad—one from Italy and one from the UK (Reuters, 2020). With comprehensive non-pharmaceutical interventions such as case identification and isolation, social distancing measures, contact tracing, and inter-city travel prohibitions indicating successful crisis management, the Chinese public health situation gradually improved over the following three months. By April 8, with COVID-19 still ravaging many parts of Europe, quarantine restrictions in China were lifted at a time when Chinese officials reported only a trickle of new infections and no COVID-19 deaths for the first time since the outbreak began. Consequently, China presented a successful model of "flattening the curve," albeit with problems—akin to a series of dos and don'ts (Moritsugu, 2020). The numbers of COVID-19 infections and resulting deaths in Cyprus has initially beenrelatively low. As of June 2nd, 2020, 24 deaths had been reported in Cyprus, with a mortality rate of 2.7 per 100,000 population (Epidemiological Surveillance Unit of the Ministry of Health & Cyprus, 2020).

Boin and 't Hart contend that effective crisis response requires both resolving the so-called "on the ground" events and managing the resulting "political upheaval and instability" (2006, 53). The Chinese government's COVID-19 response reflects such a duality as its initial situational crisis response reveals a series of delays and obfuscations that nearly triggered a regime-threatening institutional crisis, ultimately forcing the regime to strategically craft an ongoing crisis response narrative. Indirectly, this combination of delay and deception, along with accompanying state narratives, would offer valuable lessons for Cypriot leaders.

In retrospect, Chinese leaders perceived the situational crisis in the following three phases: crisis denial, crisis as a threat, and crisis as an opportunity ('t Hart, 2014). President Xi Jinping's first public acknowledgment of the pandemic (then still considered as only an epidemic by WHO) did not occur until January 20, three weeks after the epidemiological alert and just days ahead of the widespread lockdown. Days later (January 27th), President Xi eschewed a personal visit to Wuhan by sending Premier Li Keqiang to inspect and direct virus control efforts, a move perceived to provide insulation from blame in the event of the crisis worsening. Even though the local government in Wuhan and the National Health Commission promptly responded according to protocol by shutting down the local wet market and reporting new cases of "unknown pneumonia" (Mei, 2020, 314), in the crisis denial phase, central governing authorities instead reprimanded several Wuhan doctors, hundreds of journalists, and several prominent video loggers for "spreading rumors" and "causing social panic."

In Cyprus, there was no crisis denial phase as the government immediately treated COVID-19 as a national threat. Prior to the first announced Cypriot case, President Nicos Anastasiades had been in *"close contact with Chinese authorities and the Chinese embassy since the start of the outbreak, receiving regular updates on the effectiveness of the measures taken by China"* (Xinhuanet, 2020).

In a March 6th interview, he told Chinese state media: *"Despite our joint efforts, much remains to be done in preventing the spread of the coronavirus…we stand ready to enhance our cooperation with China in responding responsibly to the potential threat of the virus"* (Xinhuanet, 2020). Fully aware of the Chinese case, President Anastasiades issued a public address on March 13th, announcing 19 confirmed cases and explaining the rationale underpinning the set of measures to be announced. His address aimed at striking a balance between maximizing public health and minimizing economic disturbance: *"[o]ur top priority is the protection of the public health of our fellow citizens, while ensuring the economic survival of the working people, small and medium-sized businesses and the vulnerable groups of the population"* (PIO 2020a). Even though the first cases did not appear until March 9th, the Ministry of Health imposed restrictions on those from China on January 23rd (PIO 2020a). This is not an insignificant measure given the extent of Chinese investment on the island and the governmental policy regarding Cypriot citizenship and foreign investment (Miao & Wang, 2017; Ministry of the Interior 2020). It tells us that the Cypriot authorities had studied the Chinese case, knew cases were not isolated in a single province, and were prepared to act swiftly and openly—unlike their Chinese counterparts. In total, 25 decrees were issued by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Transportation between March 11th and May 8th (PIO, 2020b).

Beyond acknowledging cases of infection and death, both countries took extensive intervention measures, seeking to prevent virus transmission by locking down their populations. However, the timing of such actions can be revealing in differentiating a situational from an institutional crisis. In China's case, the quarantine of Wuhan and later Hubei province garnered considerable international attention, primarily stemming from the perceived draconian nature of the quarantine as well as of the total number of people affected by the lockdown. The January quarantine of Wuhan, a city of 11 million inhabitants (more than ten times the size of Cyprus), and days later of the surrounding Hubei province eventually led to significant movement restrictions on at least 760 million people nationwide. Yet, the Wuhan quarantine did not go into effect until January 23rd, nearly one month after the government recognized the emerging epidemiological crisis. Indicating close monitoring, Cypriot authorities imposed travel restrictions on exactly the same day. More broadly, in acknowledging the critical and timely nature of expert advice, President Anastasiades conceded that *"the scientific team advised us minute-by-minute…we listened to our experts from the very first moment"* (Hadjicostis, 2020).

Conversely, the timing of the lockdown in the Cypriot case reflects important lesson-drawing on the part of government. The Council of Ministers activated the Cyprus Crisis Management Center and suspended four crossing points between the Republic of Cyprus and areas in the north administered by Turkish Cypriots on February 28th (PIO 2020a). Unlike in China, this meant that lockdown measures were instituted nearly two weeks prior to the first publicly confirmed case. On March 11, just two days following the initial case disclosures, schools closed in Nicosia and gatherings of over 75 people were banned, effectively limiting religious services until they were altogether banned on March 24th. On March 13th, Cyprus effectively closed its borders allowing only Cypriot citizens to return. By March 24th, with all hotels, entertainment venues, malls, and restaurants closed, a partial curfew was imposed, enabling citizens to go out only for limited purposes and only after obtaining permission by text message. Noncompliance carried on-the-spot fines, initially at €150 and later raised to €300. On March 19th, in the interest of preparedness, all privately registered doctors were placed under the instructions of the Ministry of Health, meaning they had to comply by law with the Ministry's directives (Ampersand, 2020). The next day, President Anastasiades expressed via Twitter his appreciation for China's support in sharing medical supplies and scientific expertise.[1]

Once incumbent leaders make sense of an emerging situational crisis, their attention naturally shifts to the construction of convincing crisis narratives. The key point is to communicate the narrative to the public, shaping a collective understanding of what the crisis entails and what the appropriate

action should be. Aware of the chaos created by initial policy fragmentation and denial (Mei, 2020, 315), Chinese President Xi Jinping's first public acknowledgment of the pandemic on January 20th signaled a shift by authorities away from crisis denial toward the overt perception of the crisis as a threat. Aside from the plans for an unprecedented lockdown of Wuhan and the surrounding area, President Xi called for the marshaling of substantial national resources, including the erection of several temporary hospital facilities to be constructed in under two weeks and the mobilization of "medical assistance teams" to the virus epicenter eventually totaling more than 42,000 medical workers. By early February, President Xi declared a "people's war" against the pandemic as the party's clearly shifted to a more offensive narrative vis-à-vis the virus. As Prof. David Bandurksi notes, *"Wars invite people to cast aside their squabbles and dissent and to come together.…[they] make heroes – and heroes are the stuff propaganda thrives upon"* (Moritsugu, 2020).[2] Yet, such bold, symbolic messaging initiatives belie a number of earlier, critically important information suppression efforts by the Chinese governing regime, including repeated governmental denials of human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 (despite evidence to the contrary) and, once the virus genome was first mapped by several different laboratories in early January, orders by the National Health Commission for those laboratories *"to either destroy their samples or send them to designated institutes for safekeeping"* (Associated Press, 2020a). These efforts prevented governmental and non-governmental medical authorities from sharing warnings about such findings or from publishing them without government authorization.

Alternatively, the measures taken by the Cypriot government in the first phase of the COVID-19 response concur at almost all points with 't Hart's typology of a *situational crisis*. The pandemic was a crisis that came, literally, from the outside. Even though only just under 48 percent of people surveyed answered that they trust their national government a lot (Ortiz-Ospina, 2020), almost 75 percent trust doctors and nurses (Ortiz-Ospina, 2020). Cyprus recently initiated a single payer, socialized healthcare system, though a number of private healthcare alternatives still remain. Early political and centralized decisions were aimed at isolating the virus and keeping the levels of contagion under control. Science advisory team member Dr. Leontios Kostrikis acknowledged the two-way relationship between government authorities and scientific experts: *"The politicians truly listened to the scientists and the scientists gave them a correct strategy"* (Hadjicostis, 2020). In countries such as Cyprus, where trust in the public sector is relatively low, the public's default is noncompliance to rules and regulations, be it smoking bans in bars or a strict curfew. The steep fines mentioned above were the way to ensure enforcement.

Such situational crisis decision making also influenced governmental and non-governmental narratives. Although the decisions in Cyprus were political in the sense that decrees were issued by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Transport, they were communicated to the public by experts emphasizing the importance of scientific knowledge and the fact that they were in consultation with WHO and the European Union; (PIO, 2020c, 2020d), as was the case in Ireland (see Colfer, 2020, this issue). Experts in transnational epistemic networks transmitted lessons learned from the Chinese experience, namely, the effectiveness of lockdown measures but also the ineffectiveness of the politicization of science when responding to a pandemic. In the first phase of the crisis response, for instance, the main objectives involved limiting the contagion rate as much as possible through stringent lockdown measures. The Quarantine Decree issued by the Ministry of Health directly refers to the fact that *"the protection of public health and the health care system"* is the government's responsibility and aims at *"preventing any possible collapse of the health care system by the spread of the virus […]"* (PIO, 2020d). Moreover, the media reported on events, largely praising the government's actions (Associated Press, 2020b). Critical voices, however, alluded to patronizing decisions, power grabbing, and a trend toward the curtailing of civil liberties in the interest of health (Christoforou, 2020).

Ultimately, the quelling of the virus in terms of both transmission and morbidity enabled government authorities in both countries to shift into a crisis mode that included a variety of domestic initiatives focused on controlling the narrative and consolidating the respective regimes' governing authority. Though this mode remains ongoing following the initial viral outbreak in China, at least two important lessons are applicable to the Cypriot case. First, as Gold (2020) acknowledges, the timeline of the *"Chinese narrative begins with the lockdown in Wuhan and the resolute action of the party to control it."* This reinforces several crisis management themes pertaining to damage control, physical recovery and aiding citizens as victims. A second important lesson pertains to the prioritization of crisis leadership issues. *"In terms of priority,"* Kirchgaessner, Graham-Harrison, and Kuo (2020) maintain, *"controlling the narrative is more important than the public health or the economic fallout… It doesn't mean the economy and public health aren't important. But the narrative is paramount."* Drawn from the Chinese experience, these two lessons offer important lesson-drawing opportunities in crafting national responses.

Cyprus had the benefit of retrospective knowledge. The Chinese leadership was faced with both physical and political damage control, in an effort to avert a political crisis on top of the pandemic. In contrast, the Cypriot emergency management response was predominantly operational and technocratic, but also politically sensitive. For instance, the decision to increase border controls in Cyprus was not an uncomplicated one, given the division of the island since 1974, just as the politically sensitive decision to ban church services was made despite the power of the Greek Orthodox Church in Cypriot public and political life. Looking to the Chinese experience, the Cypriot lockdown measures were stringent, aiming to protect public health and the healthcare system from a crisis coming from the outside. The one point which diverged from 't Hart's (2014) typology of situational crisis responses was the role of citizens. While in the typology they are categorizedas passive victims, we found citizens to be active participants in the emergency management response. Stringent measures that deeply affect social life are not easily enforced, especially in a country with low trust in the public sector such as Cyprus. The nature of the COVID-19 crisis and its consequences on everyday life turned citizens from passive victims to active crisis management participants. Engineering acceptance necessarily had to go beyond appealing to solidarity to a level where individuals overcame their general lack of trust in the public sector. Compliance with the stringent, government-imposed measures was facilitated by the use of experts and scientific information featuring the relatively free flow of information. Taken together, government authorities in tandem with public health experts tended to depoliticize the issue and to reassure citizens that the government was pro-actively seeking to stem the contagion rate while also remaining optimistic that the important summer tourist season would be partially salvaged.

Ultimately, the lag between the initial Chinese reaction and the subsequent Cypriot response allowed for indirect lesson-drawing. Enacting stringent measures in a democratic regime, where coercion is limited to fines or regulatory instruments, entails citizen buy-in and some level of trust in governmental and other public health officials. Although overall trust in the Cypriot government is relatively low, trust in health professionals remains (relatively) high, which makes reliance on experts in communicating measures the best way to convince the population to comply and thus to stem the rate of contagion. As the virologist Dr. Kostrikis acknowledged: *"People got scared. And people felt more comfortable that scientists were handling the situation and not politicians"* (Hadjicostis, 2020).

5 | CONCLUSION

In our examination of the Cypriot response to the COVID-19 crisis, we analyzed the lessons the government drew from the Chinese experience to prevent a situational crisis from turning into an

institutional disaster that could threaten not only lives but the regime itself. The nature of the pandemic and our research design limit the broader generalizability of our findings. Nevertheless, our case contributes to the literature on lesson-drawing as well as on crisis management. We confirm the competence/skills-based learning in pandemic crises. Despite institutional differences between the two countries, ambiguity, uncertainty, and urgency were problems that Chinese authorities had to manage before the virus reached Cyprus, providing valuable information to Cypriot leaders in structuring responses. In addition to technical skills, Cyprus had the benefit of observing measures that seemed successful, such as a hard lockdown, which admittedly was challenging given the paucity of citizen trust in the public sector in general, but that was mediated by the relatively high trust in doctors and public health officials. The transboundary and urgent character of this crisis allowed for policy learning even between countries as politically different as China and Cyprus. Lesson-drawing, in other words, may depend not only on institutional similarities, as the literature contends (Rose, 1993), but also on the nature of the crisis. Although more research is needed to bolster and possibly refine our argument, a novel but similar threat, such as the pandemic of COVID-19, may trigger a condensed lesson-drawing process that is a menu for choice: do what is necessary to effectively respond to and prevent institutional crises while by-passing (democratic) institutional filters.

To return to the film *Contagion*, a key factor in successfully crafting the right response to the "right" crisis is understanding that lesson-drawing is a contested political process (Robertson, 1991). Success implies willingness to learn and act despite the cost. Political buy-in is critical in ensuring success, especially in light of the steep political and economic losses the stringent lockdown measures entailed. Preventing the slide into a crisis of regime legitimacy necessitates a proactive desire to act in a prudent and timely way. Quite often this means not only that structures of decision making must change but political preferences also. Popular acceptance and political legitimacy may be bolstered by explaining the utility of initiatives to all the actors involved and by creating communities of supportive stakeholders. This will not prevent crises from occurring, but it will lower the risk of them morphing into institutional disasters.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Tweet read: *"we are deeply grateful to President Xi Jinping, the Government of People`s Republic of China and the @AmbassadorHuang for the tangible support in providing us with medical supplies and sharing their scientific expertise in the common fight against #Covid19"* (Parikiaki 2020).

[2] In a televised address on the eve of the Cypriot national lockdown, President Anastasiades similarly invoked war symbolism, declaring: "We are truly at war…a war that can be won if we stay sheltered" (Tugwell and Georgiou 2020).

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