



Freedom, concern, traditions

A world map of political cultures



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How social systems function and how they are accepted in different countries depends not least on the respective political culture. This culture cannot simply be derived from the world region in which a particular country is located. Rather, a colorful picture emerges globally, which the authors attempt to plot on a map of mentalities.

The phrase “Global South” refers in the broadest sense to the regions of Latin America, Asia (excluding Japan and South Korea), Africa and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). It has largely replaced talk of the “Third World” and is increasingly taking the place of terms such as “less developed countries” and “developing countries”. According to the United Nations’ Finance Center for South-South Cooperation in 2022, the Global South comprises [78 countries referred to as the “Group of 77 and China”](#). The Global North, on the other hand, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), essentially comprises North America, Europe, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand – [57 countries](#) making up about 25 percent of the world's population, but it possesses 80 percent of the world's wealth and tends to dominate the Global South politically and economically.

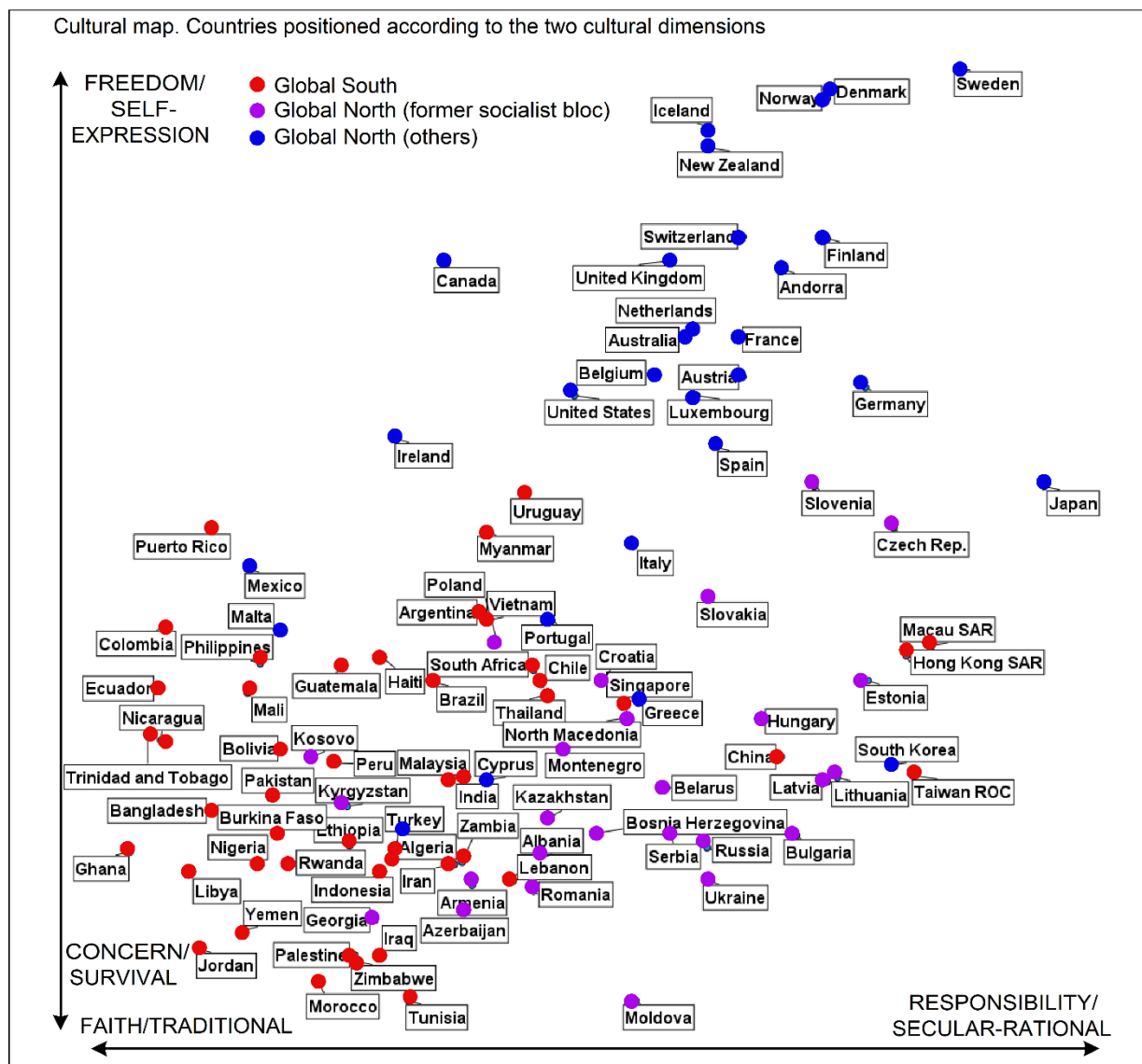
Experts of cross-cultural studies define culture as “a pattern of values, beliefs, attitudes and norms that distinguishes one group of people from another, be it a country, a region or another group” ([Anneli Kaasa and Michael Minkov](#)). These different aspects can be

categorized into cultural dimensions that provide coordinates for locating countries on a cultural map. Our map is based on the aforementioned study, for which Anneli Kaasa and Michael Minkov analyzed 25 questions from the [World Values Survey \(WVS\)](#) – the most comprehensive international survey on human values – covering as many different aspects of culture as possible. They developed two cultural dimensions.

One is the spectrum between freedom and care. This pair of opposites corresponds to what Michael Minkov described as the tension between individualism and collectivism: He used it to distinguish societies that emphasize and cherish individual freedoms, emancipation, and autonomy from societies that advocate conflict avoidance and constraints of personal freedoms in the interest of social harmony. On one side of this spectrum, there are societies where the emphasis is on freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of self-expression, freedom to decide how to live one's life, to be accepted as one is, and also to enjoy leisure time. On the other hand, there are societies in which concern dominates people's thinking: concern about survival, having constrained resources, concern with what is unfamiliar or different. All such concerns may lead to rejecting outgroups.

The second cultural dimension can be described with the pair of opposites “responsibility versus faith”. Here, countries where people value responsibility and independence are distinguished from those characterized by a belief in tradition and authorities – be it God or the state – and faith in authorities’ ability to solve problems for citizens if only they are obeyed. This dimension is similar to what Donald F. Inglehart described as the contrast between traditional and secular-rational. In 2018, Michael Minkov spoke of “flexibility versus monumentalism”: self-control and self-improvement on the one hand, pride in oneself and one's nation on the other.

Political culture can be seen as part of national culture: It comprises values, beliefs or attitudes that are closely linked to a country's political system. As Christian Welzel has put it: “Political culture is about the psychological dimension of political systems, including all politically relevant beliefs, values, and attitudes.” It can be assumed that the mentality of the people, the orientations, beliefs and values that prevail in a population are related to the type of political system in which a population lives – the political system is closely linked to the political culture. For example, if citizens are concerned about the maintenance of the status quo or even about their survival, they may feel that a strong autocratic government will protect them from any yet unknown threats. Furthermore, they may not feel it is as important to express their opinions and be involved in decision-making. This is exactly what the first of the cultural dimensions mentioned, freedom vs. concern, expresses.



Our cultural map shows that all the Global South countries are placed on the survival pole. The countries of the Global North have no legacy from the former Soviet socialist bloc lie at the other pole, “freedom”. It is therefore hardly surprising that democracy prevails in the Global North, but not in the Global South. This cultural difference is closely related to the wealth of the countries: in poorer countries, values related to survival dominate; only when basic needs are satisfied can people think about freedom and self-development. For the same reason, countries ruled by a socialist regime also tend to be on the survival pole.

If we look at the “responsibility versus faith/tradition” dimension, the division between the Global South and the North is far less clear-cut. In the Global North, there are countries with more traditional cultures (Ireland, Malta, Turkey, Cyprus), and the countries of the Global South stretch along this dimension from one pole to the other. For example, while three regions of the Global South – Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau – are located at the responsibility pole, Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Bangladesh, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Libya and Jordan sit on the faith/tradition pole, closely

followed by the other countries of the Global South. However, the map shows that most countries in the Global South are rather on the faith pole. This has important implications for the nature of political regimes.

If the mindset of societies in the Global South is strongly influenced by traditions and beliefs as well as concerns about survival with limited resources, then citizens are less interested in freedom and self-realization. They are more unwilling to take responsibility and participate in democratic processes. They might consider democratization as an unnecessary distraction or even a threat to the existing order and stability. The question therefore arises as to whether democracy can be considered desirable or potentially well-functioning for all societies.

There are democracies in both the Global North and the Global South. However, all democratic countries in the Global South are flawed democracies based on the [2023 Democracy Index](#), while the majority of democratic countries in the Global North are full democracies. This fits in with what was said above about national cultures. The mindset of the people, their desire for democracy and their willingness to participate in democratic processes are crucial for the emergence, growth and continuity of a democracy. National culture can be compared to the fertile soil that a seed needs in order to germinate and grow into a plant.

We believe that looking at national culture is useful in several ways. First, it will help us understand why democracy is not (or has not yet) taken hold in large parts of the Global South. Second, this perspective would help to reduce ideological and political bias: In countries of the Global North, there are often prejudices about non-democratic countries in the Global South, and sometimes poorly functioning democracies in the Global South (such as India, the Philippines, Namibia or Argentina) are favored. Third, we can thus realise that any attempt to transplant democracy into a country where the fertile ground, i.e. the corresponding political culture, is absent will be in vain. Afghanistan is an excellent example: After 20 years in which the US and other countries of the Global North tried to democratize the country with large financial and other investments, the Afghan government supported by the West collapsed spectacularly in August 2022 and the Taliban took over the government with great ease.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from these considerations for academic research. Every analysis must be placed in the context of local cultural, social, economic and political conditions, both in terms of theory and hypotheses as well as methodology. The theoretical approach to developing hypotheses and the methodological approaches to testing them that predominate in the Global North are not always applicable to the conditions in the Global South. In order to contextualize research in the Global South, it is essential for researchers to do the following:

First, it is useful to acquire a broader knowledge of the research sites, not only about the current cultural and economic conditions, but also about the history of the countries. Second, it is necessary to integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches (see in more detail in an article with Jaya Dantas, formerly Earnest, from 2015). This demand is not new, and there is more and more research using mixed methods, for example in health

research. Overall, however, social science research using mixed methods is still scarce. As we have shown from research in northern Uganda and rural China, researchers who rely solely on quantitative analysis are confused and unsettled by results that often contradict theories and hypotheses. Third, researchers from the North must be open and willing to adopt local knowledge and expertise that may contradict or challenge the dominant paradigm of social science research in the Global North. Not only is the research paradigm in the Global North detached from the cultural specificities of the Global South, it may also be consciously or unconsciously influenced and biased by the legacy of colonialism. Recently, public health and medical researchers have investigated [in the Lancet](#) how knowledge from the Global South has been discredited or even stolen and how local experts are excluded in knowledge transmission. This scrutiny may be a wake-up call for social science research on and in the Global South. Finally, given the cultural diversity in the Global South, there is no one-size-fits-all remedy for conducting meaningful research in these settings.

## Literature

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Image caption: Traditional temples amidst high-rises in China.

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