**Crisis Communication and Crisis Management during COVID-19[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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1. The Dread (and/or Denial) of Death

The term ‘crisis’ has a consistently negative connotation in everyday life. Crises – often exaggerated by the media and politics – cause fear, panic, insecurity, and powerlessness. Dealing with great uncertainty therefore challenges all those involved during a crisis; everyone expects instructions for action, planning, explanations, and ultimately security. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes all these factors of insecurity in his description of crises. Uncertainty primarily promotes the emergence of fear, he claims:

‘Fear’ is the name that we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and what is to be done - what can and what can’t be - to stop it in its tracks - or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power. (Bauman 2006, 2)

In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, uncertainty continues to play a salient role. The illness caused by the COVID-19 SARS virus was hitherto unknown. Successful treatments did not exist at first, therefore medical treatment was based on trial and error. Scientists across the globe started investigating the origin, composition, spread, and ever new mutations of the virus (see Gallagher 2020). They collaborated in numerous attempts to develop a new vaccine and to find adequate medication;[[2]](#footnote-2) this finally succeeded in the fall and winter of 2020 and in December 2020, the first elderly patients in the UK were vaccinated (Diaz 2020).

In the spring 2020, during the so-called first wave of the pandemic, however, the images repeatedly disseminated across the media of ill and dying patients in intensive care wards, specifically in Bergamo and other northern Italian cities, as well as the reported fact that there was no space left in some Italian, American, and Spanish cemeteries for the huge influx of coffins, necessarily triggered an unprecedented ‘dread of death’[[3]](#footnote-3) (Bauman 2006, 22-24). In the summer 2020, the numbers of positive cases and deaths dropped, and the severe restrictions were relaxed; many people assumed that the pandemic was almost over.

But this was not the case. The so-called second wave struck in the fall 2020; countries such as Germany and Austria registered more COVID-positive cases and deaths than in the spring. Strict lockdowns were implemented again by many governments (such as in Austria, Canada, France, the UK, Germany, and Italy), even over the winter holidays and New Years’ eve (Maragakis 2020)[[4]](#footnote-4). Moreover, horrific Islamist terror attacks occurred in France and Austria in October and November 2020 respectively; these incidents reinforced existing fears and uncertainty. The state of emergency was announced in both countries, on top of the strict lockdown due to the pandemic. As Pyszczynski et al. (2020, 5) rightly emphasize, ‘people are living with the very real threat of death from the pandemic, combined with challenges to their worldviews, loss of jobs, impediments to career goals, and isolation from friends and family who normally validate one’s significance.

Accordingly, *death* has re-emerged as part of everyday life; death can no longer be silenced even though, as Bauman claims – quoting Sigmund Freud –, our societies have tried to ‘eliminate death from life’, to make death invisible (ibid., 39). Quite similarly, in his seminal book *The Denial of Death* (2020 [1973]), Ernest Becker states while drawing *inter alia* on Freud, Søren Kierkegaard, and Otto Rank, that ‘[t]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity – activity designed to largely avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for men’ (p. xvii). Becker argues that human beings attempt to perceive themselves as beings of permanent value, with much ‘self-esteem’, to confront the danger of death and to make sense of their lives.

However, a pandemic such as COVID-19 changed the rules of the game; after preliminary attempts of some governments at denying the danger caused by the pandemic, in March 2020 its impact could not be ignored anymore[[5]](#footnote-5). According to the prominent medical journal *Lancet* (26 March 2020):

Over the past 2 weeks, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has marched relentlessly westward. On March 13, WHO said that Europe was now the centre of the pandemic. […] The initial slow response in countries such as the UK, the USA, and Sweden now looks increasingly poorly judged. […] The patchwork of harmful initial reactions from many leaders, from denial and misplaced optimism to passive acceptance of large-scale deaths, was justified by words such as unprecedented. (*The Lancet* 2020)

Denial did not only occur in China, the US, Brazil, Sweden, and the UK. Italy merely started implementing strict measures once Italian citizens fell ill (and not ‘only’ Chinese guest-workers employed in the textile industry in the North, e.g. Marin 2020). Denial, obviously, must be legitimized by the respective governments. Hence, a range of legitimation strategies, combined with specific argumentation schemata (*topoi*) were employed. For example, in Austria, in the first week of March, the regional government of Tyrol denied the existence of the virus in Ischgl, a well-known skiing resort; many tourists left without being informed of the danger of falling ill (Wodak 2020a, b). Although Iceland’s government declared Ischgl a “Corona-hotspot” on March 2, 2020, skiing lifts were shut down much later, on March 12 (Statista 2021). When confronted with such failures, politicians quickly turned blame into credit, when claiming to be saving the country/nation/fatherland from danger. The related argumentation was based on emphasizing one’s own qualities (*argumentum ad verecundiam*), evoking the audience’s emotions (*argumentum ad populum*) and the use of fallacies (e.g., false analogies; *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy, straw man fallacy, and so forth). Moreover, politicians trying to deny problems and avoid blame frequently employed a ‘rescue narrative’ to cast themselves as saviors (e.g., *topos of savior*, Wodak 2021, 76).

Mid-March 2020, most European governments decided that they could not deny the dangerous pandemic anymore and that they had to quickly cope with the crisis. Different modes of crisis communication have been adopted by government leaders to persuade people to abide by various measures to counteract the spreading of the virus, and thus to reduce fears and uncertainties. As Bauman maintains, ‘all human cultures can be decoded as ingenious contraptions calculated to make life with the awareness of mortality liveable’ (ibid., 31). In fact, governments frequently legitimize their policy proposals with an appeal to the *necessities of security*. Such arguments became eminent after the end of the Cold War in 1989 and were forcefully reinvigorated after 9/11, in the course of the refugee movement in 2015/16 (usually referred to as the ‘refugee crisis’), and when confronting the terrorist activities engaged in by ISIS and extreme-right terrorists. Each crisis contributes to both new and old threat scenarios, as could be observed with respect to the financial crisis, the Euro crisis, the SARS crisis, and the so-called ‘refugee crisis’[[6]](#footnote-6). Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic also follows this pattern.

Some governments have – as will be illustrated – Instrumentalized the pandemic for their authoritarian aims. Subsequently, many debates have emerged challenging such sweeping measures and appealing for more transparency in governmental decision-making procedures: Were the measures indeed necessary? How were they officially legitimized? By whom?

It is, of course, impossible – in the fall of 2021 – to take stock of the different types of crisis management and crisis communication as well as counter-discourses because the crisis is not over yet. Thus, in this paper, I present interim findings – findings which cover a clearly defined *discourse strand*, i.e., governmental discourses during the global lockdown from March 2020 to June 2020 (as discussed in section 3). By analyzing a sample of important speeches and press conferences by European government leaders (all performing as the ‘face of crisis management’) in Austria, New Zealand, France, Hungary, and Sweden, it is possible to deconstruct measures and procedures deemed adequate for coping with this pandemic[[7]](#footnote-7) (see Wodak 2021b for the analysis of more countries and data). Due to limitations of space, however, I must omit oppositional voices to governments’ decisions and COVID-19 deniers in government, i.e., those leaders who denied and trivialized the danger caused by the pandemic, such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsanaro, and – at least initially – Boris Johnson.[[8]](#footnote-8) I focus on *four frames* as the result of an abductive and comparative discourse-historical analysis, each of which is strategically employed – in respect to different socio-political contexts – to mitigate the ‘dread of death’: a ‘religious frame’, a ‘dialogic frame’, a frame emphasizing ‘trust’, and a frame of ‘leading a war’ (section 5). Importantly, these frames are *discursively legitimized* in significantly different ways (section 3). Since threatening economic and political crises[[9]](#footnote-9) trigger a patriotic nationalism, a unification of ‘us’ against ‘them’ which even transcends traditional cleavages of left and right (section 4), it is not surprising that this has also been the case with COVID-19. Even the Schengen Area was suddenly suspended in response (to ‘keep the virus out’) and borders were closed.

2. Crisis and the Emergence of Fear

Bauman analyzes the pervasiveness and consequences of fear in contemporary Western life, drawing on his earlier work *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Liquid society *per se* is characterized by instability and ambiguity and by the fragmentation of life and experience under conditions of rapid change. It is thus a society where uncertainty, flux, change, conflict, and revolution are the permanent conditions of everyday life. Bauman argues that this situation is neither modern or postmodern, but rather that traditional categories of existence are disintegra-ting, overlapping, and remixing. There seem to be no more distinctions between global and local anymore, or between work and non-work, between public and private, between conservative and progressive, or between mediated and non-mediated experiences. Hence, life in liquid modernity is characterized by endemic uncertainty, which – during a pandemic – is, of course, reinforced and mobilized.

In his research, Bauman analyzes the consequences for our ability to engage in meaningful social action and to produce a viable future despite such fear and uncertainty. Liquid fear is a *derivative fear* resulting from the interiorization of ‘a vision of the world that includes insecurity and vulnerability’, which ‘even in the absence of a genuine threat’ (p. 3) will produce a reaction appropriate to the presence of real danger. Derivative fear is used by the state to assure citizens’ obedience in exchange for supposed protection against threats to their existence.

Such derivative fear – as will be illustrated in the next sections – is instrumentalized by governments in various ways to persuade people to comply with restrictive measures in view of the pandemic. For example, *religionization of politics* and *oversimplification of problems* (by arguing away their root causes and consequences) offer, as Bauman maintains, ‘a life free from doubt, and absolution from the vexing and harrowing necessity of making choices and taking responsibility’ (p. 116).

1. Discourse, Frame, and Legitimation
   1. *Framing and Legitimizing*

In this analysis, I draw on Robert Entman’s approach to ‘framing’ (who in turn adopts Erving Goffman’s salient theory, e.g., van Dijk 2020). As Entman explains to frame ‘is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating’ text. According to Entman, framing ‘plays a major role in the exertion of political power and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power’ (1993, 52).

Historically speaking, Goffman’s interest in frames and framing coincides with frame analysis in other disciplines, especially in linguistics and Artificial Intelligence (van Dijk 2020, 35-36). For example, Fillmore (1976) already published his seminal paper ‘Frame Semantics and the Nature of Language’ two years after Goffman’s work, which led to a broad research paradigm (‘Frame Semantics’) focusing on frames as a basis especially for the study of word meanings, and later more generally research in the field of cognitive linguistics. Fillmore was interested in framing as ‘the appeal, in perceiving, thinking, and communicating, to structured ways of interpreting experiences.’ Thus, *understanding words* does not require traditionally conceived word meanings, but a more complete understanding of the *multimodal experience of the situations or events these words refer to.* In other words, frames in this case represent socially shared fragments of world knowledge, each organized in specific ways. Fillmore goes beyond the study of isolated word meanings and advocates a study of communication and messages. Interestingly, Fillmore not only stresses notions such as frames, as relevant for discourse, but the notion of context, too.

In the discourse-historical analysis below, I combine legitimation analysis with frame and argumentation analysis (due to restrictions of space, I must refer readers to Wodak 2018, 2020, for details). Frames serve as ‘interpretation frameworks’, as worldviews, or – speaking in the terminology of Terror Management Theory – as ‘cultural worldviews’. ‘Interpretation framework’ (*Deutungsrahmen*) is the label for ‘frame’ used in the paradigm of sociology of knowledge (e.g., Gotsbacher 1999). The function of ‘interpretation frameworks’ for text comprehension is to convey elements of meaning that can be invoked by speakers and writers as self-evident (e.g., Cicourel 1975). Such presuppositions and expectations are picked up by the respective audience, through which the statements made are invested with their complete meaning (i.e., ‘dialogicity’; Bakhtin1982). These elements consist on the one hand of *definitions of the identities of the speakers*, which are indexed and assigned through mechanisms of negotiating social identities and relationships. On the other hand, these are *definitions of the context* and the implied *social knowledge*.

Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) introduced a framework for analyzing the language of legitimation with four major categories: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. *Legitimation qua authorization* depends on reference to personal, impersonal, expert, or role model authority, but may also appeal to custom in the form of tradition or conformity. *Legitimation qua moralization* is based on abstract moral values (religious, human rights, justice, culture, and so forth), straightforwardly evaluative claims, or analogy to assumedly established moral cases. *Legitimation through rationalization* references either the utility of the social practice or some part of it (i.e., instrumental rationalization by way of goals, means, or outcomes) or to assumed ‘facts of life’ (i.e. theoretical rationalization by way of definition, explanation, or prediction). Rationalization may be established as ‘common sense’ or by experts in the domains of knowledge used for legitimation, e.g., economics, biology, or technology. In *legitimation through mythopoesis*, the proponents of the policy in question will rely on telling stories that may serve as exemplars or cautionary tales.

Given its socio-political nature, it follows that legitimation routinely draws on recurring argumentation schemata to persuade the public of the acceptability or necessity of a specific action or policy (see Table 1).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Authorisation** | |
| Authority | *Personal Authority*: Based on institutional status of individuals/groups  *Impersonal Authority*: Originating from laws, policies, regulations, etc.  *Expert Authority*: Academic, scientific, or other type of credible expertise  *Role Model Authority*: Popularity and acceptability of positions held by role models or opinion leaders |
| Custom | *Authority of Tradition*: Acceptability of what is claimed to have always been done  *Authority of Conformity*: Acceptability of what everyone or most people do |
| **Moralisation** | |
|  | *Abstraction*: Abstract depiction of practices that links them to moral values  *Evaluation*: Legitimation of positions and practices via evaluative adjectives  *Analogy*: Legitimation relying on comparisons and contrasts |
| **Rationalisation** | |
| Instrumental Rationalisation | *Goal Orientation*: Focused on goals, intentions, purposes  *Means Orientation*: Focused on aims embedded in actions as means to an end  *Outcome Orientation*: Focused on outcomes of actions as if already known |
| Theoretical Rationalisation | *Definition*: Characterising activities in terms of already moralised practices  *Explanation*: Characterising people as actors because the way they do things is appropriate to the nature of these actors  *Prediction*: Foreseeing outcomes based on some form of expertise |
| **Mythopoesis** | |
|  | *Moral Tales:* Narrating rewarding decisions and practices of social actors  *Cautionary Tales:* Linking nonconformist practices to undesirable consequences |

Table 1: Types of legitimation (adapted from Wodak 2018).

In a more specific elaboration of the relationship between legitimation (argumentation) and normative values (‘common sense’ as used in political legitimation), van Eemeren (2010) uses the Aristotelian term *endoxon* to define the presupposed common-sense knowledge of a specific epistemic community. Through the notion of endoxa as commonly held beliefs, van Eemeren (2010, 111) corroborates Habermas’s (1992) thesis that legal systems ultimately depend on moral systems, even if morality infiltrates law through whatever room it leaves for interpretation (e.g., Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, 111). A key strategy of the discourse-historical approach is to make tacit or implicit *topoi* explicit in the form of conditional or causal paraphrases (Reisigl & Wodak 2001, 69–80). In the context of legitimation, the analysis of *topoi* may reveal flawed logic, manipulative, and erroneous conclusions since what they ignore or sidestep can be fallacious. Previous work in critical discourse analysis has identified many content-related *topoi* in legitimizing immigration control. Due to space restrictions, I cannot comment on the many different taxonomies and must refer readers to Reisigl & Wodak (2001) and Rheindorf & Wodak (2020).

Thus, to understand the specific dynamics of legitimation in particular contexts, such as the financial crisis of 2008 or the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to focus on the typical patterns and characteristics of these discursive strategies in context. Legitimation strategies are necessarily linked to specific content-related argumentation schemes which serve to substantiate specific decisions in retroductable, frequently common-sense ways (Wodak 2018). As elaborated by Wodak (2021, 84), legitimation can also involve problem-denial, combined with a counterattack, accompanied with negative Other-presentation, that is, attacking the (sometimes only alleged) accusation and accuser (see section 4). In this case, the argumentation is frequently based on discrediting the opponent (*argumentum ad hominem*), on threatening the opponent (*argumentum ad baculum*) or on an alternative claim, applied to shift blame. Moreover, relativizing and trivializing strategies occur, frequently by using (fallacious) comparisons or strategies of equation: ‘The ‘normal’ flu is also dangerous.

1. COVID-19 and Renationalizing Tendencies

Analogies and comparisons, arguments using statistics, ratings and numbers, and persuasive rhetoric appealing to citizens to abide by regulations and measures were salient strategies adopted during the lockdown months in most countries where government leaders took the danger posed by the COVID virus seriously. A re/nationalizing tendency became apparent throughout, specifically when attempting to persuade citizens to follow the rules of the respective country. We are therefore confronted with national biopolitics and body politics (Musolff 2010; Wodak 2021; Boin, Lodge & Luesink 2020).

For example, in Austria, no one could doubt who should ultimately be considered the ‘savior of the nation’, a wise and strict ‘father’ who cares for all ‘real’ Austrians and sets rules accordingly, to put it in terms of linguist George Lakoff and his metaphor of the ‘nation as a family’. Fear and renunciation, so the promise, are followed by hope and salvation (Lakoff 2004). Overall, the often-quoted nationalistic ‘closing of ranks’ has a calming effect. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz emphasized repeatedly, for example in the ZIB Spezial (the main news channel) on 30 March 2020, ‘I have firm faith in our Austria’. Moreover, in parliament on 3 April 2020, Kurz was completely convinced that Austria or ‘Team Austria’ would successfully overcome the crisis – better, in fact, then other countries. A nationalist competition seemed to be the order of the day:

I guarantee you that Austria will survive this crisis: Austria will get through this crisis better than other countries, Austria will get out of this crisis faster than other countries, but only if we stand together and if we do one thing: persevere.

Kurz also increasingly emphasized that there was no alternative to the governmental measures; the so-called TINA-argument (‘there is no alternative’) was employed as rationalization legitimation. Decisions were thus essentialized:

‘We are doing the right thing’; ‘We are completely convinced that we are doing the right thing’; ‘The measures we are taking are the right ones’ (ZIB Spezial, 30 March 2020). ‘All studies prove: If we had not taken these steps, there would be a massive spread in Austria with up to a hundred thousand dead’ (Kurz, ZIB II, 6 April 2020).

Praise was expressed, according to Lakoff’s approach, toward the ‘good and well-behaving children’ of the Austrian family: ‘We are impressed by what you are achieving’, ‘Hang in there’, and, because the crisis could be compared to a stressful and challenging sporting effort: ‘This is a marathon’ (Kurz, ZIB Spezial, 20 March 2020).

National identity politics necessarily imply positive self and negative other presentations. From this perspective, events, statistics, and technical discourses provide resources for the context within which governments draw on binaries such as good and bad people, perpetrators and victims, experts and lay persons, healthy and sick people, old and young people, people who follow the rules and people who do not. Moreover, media panic produces and reproduces strategies of blame and denial which lead to narratives of decline, helplessness, rise or success, power or control, as well as a vehement scapegoating rhetoric (Wodak 2021). These scapegoats, according to media constructions and the proposals of some politicians, must be punished and suffer the consequences of their actions.

During the first months of the COVID crisis, the scapegoats varied, ranging from Trump’s label ‘the Chinese virus’ to the Austrian government’s ‘Croatian virus’ in reference to the people who had spent their holidays outside of Austria, in Croatia, in spite of patriotic propaganda urging everybody to remain in Austria for their holidays in order to boost the Austrian economy. Moreover, since the end of the lockdown in May 2020, we have been confronted with counter-discourses spreading conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. Bill Gates, George Soros, virologists, pharma businesses, politicians, the media, and so forth are allegedly to blame for the pandemic (e.g., Spring & Wendling 2020), thus reinforcing a nativist body-politic. Large protests and demonstrations against the regulations, the experts, the government, i.e., the elites have taken place in Berlin and other capital cities (e.g., BBC News 2020). These protests were started by worried and angry citizens and were subsequently exploited by far-right and extreme-right parties and movements, all of whom were applying their traditional protest patterns.

1. Four Frames and their Legitimation
   1. *The Religious Frame – Legitimation Qua Moralization*

In the Austrian hegemonic discourse, the Catholic Easter festival became a turning point during the COVID crisis and lent itself to the construction of a religious frame. The employment of a natural disaster metaphor served to construct dystopian scenarios and to add a haunting tune full of pathos for suffering and death:

This crisis will mean illness, suffering, and for some people death’ (Kurz, ZIB Spezial 14 March 2020). ‘The virus threatens the most important thing that exists for us, namely our health’ (Kurz, ZIB Spezial 18 March 2020). ‘This is the biggest crisis since World War Two’. ‘Many people cannot imagine what is coming in a few weeks. This is the calm before the storm’. ‘We will soon have a situation in Austria, too, that everybody will know somebody who has died of Corona’ (Kurz, ZIB Spezial, 30 March 2020).

Should the virus be defeated (here employing a war metaphor), Kurz promised a ‘resurrection’ after Easter, thus using a Catholic frame, an allusion to the redemption narrative:

‘Easter week will be a decisive week for us. It will be a week that will determine whether the resurrection after Easter that we all wish for can take place’. (Kurz, ZIB Spezial, 6 April 2020).

The religious frame offers consolation in times of dreading death. As Bauman (2006, 30) maintains: ‘Death is the ‘unknown’ incarnate; and among all other *‘unknowns*’ it is the only one fully and truly *unknowable*. Whatever we have done to prepare for death, death finds us unprepared’. Everybody is afraid of death, Bauman continues. During a pandemic, therefore, a time when many people die, people necessarily become more aware of death, one cannot deny its presence. Accordingly, ‘the prospect of eternity’ is a ‘source of perpetual joy for the good and diligent’ (Bauman 2006, 32). This frame lent itself ideally to cope with the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the inherent fear of death and thus morally legitimized even the most restrictive measures.

In addition, the official rhetoric promised a victory over the virus after a long and painful ordeal and much suffering and depicted a future full of hope, as stated in an ‘open letter of the Federal Chancellor before Easter’ (11 April 2020, quoted from vienna.at 2020). Here, Austrian citizens were confronted with legitimation qua mythopoesis:

Our Easter is taking place under special circumstances this year. […] The measures being taken demanded a lot from us but were necessary to prevent the worst. Four out of five people infected with Corona have no symptoms and therefore do not know that they are ill. However, they can still infect other people, for whom the disease is potentially fatal. This is one reason why the virus is so dangerous for our society. […] Next year at Easter, we want to be able to look back together and say, ‘good that we defeated the Coronavirus’.

The combination of religious framing with strict measures during the lockdown and appeals to responsibility also proved effective in managing the COVID crisis in Greece. In comparison to other countries that rely heavily on tourism, the death toll remained low in relation to population numbers (WKO 2021); the strict measures were relaxed very slowly, in contrast, for example, to Austria, where a speedy relaxation (pushed for by businesses and the large and powerful tourism lobbies) have led to a shockingly fast rise in the number of positive cases during the summer and autumn of 2020.

* 1. *A Dialogic Frame – Legitimation Qua Rationalization and Authorization*

New Zealand (and *inter alia* Germany) engaged in a quasi-dialogue with their citizens. One could view Prime Minster Jacinda Ardern as a caring mother employing a strategy of providing much information, explanation, and justification, as well as a positive vision for the future. She gave five speeches in which she provided updates on the current situation. In her first speech (21 March 2020), similarly to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, she attempted to reassure the people (explicitly addressing *all* New Zealanders) that the government knew what is relevant and had already set priorities and decided which measures should be implemented. By listing clear and distinct rules and making a concise and logical argument why everybody should abide by the rules, she stated that everything was under control. Moreover, she conveyed explicitly that it was understandable that people experience uncertainty – which is why she provided a clearly defined way forward. She concluded on a positive note. In the entire speech, there was no danger scenario, no warning that people could be punished for violating the rules. No competition with other countries was aimed at and the rhetoric remained completely secular, without any insinuations to religious tropes or to nativist nationalism[[10]](#footnote-10).

“I’m speaking directly to all New Zealanders today to give you as much certainty and clarity as we can as we fight Covid-19.

[…]

I understand that all of this rapid change creates anxiety, and uncertainty. Especially when it means changing how we live. That’s why today I am going to set out for you as clearly as possible, what you can expect as we continue to fight the virus together.

[…]

Today I am announcing an alert system for COVID-19. That alert system can apply to the whole country, but sometimes, it may only apply to certain towns or cities.

There are four levels to the alert system. At each level there are things we need you to do, to keep you safe. And there are things the government will do too.

[…]

We will use this alert system every time we update our cases, so you’ll know if the status in your area has gone up, or down, or stayed the same. And what you’ll need to do.

[…]

For now, I ask that New Zealand does what we do so well. We are a country that is creative, practical, and community minded. We may not have experienced anything like this in our lifetimes, but we know how to rally and we know how to look after one another, and right now what could be more important than that. So thank you for all that you’re about to do.

Please be strong, be kind, and unite against COVID-19.”

Ardern’s (and Merkel’s) main strategies to cope with the dread of death become apparent: Establish dialogue and deliver complex information in an understandable way. Establish national unity and reassurance that the government has everything under control. And most importantly, show empathy.

5.3. *Sweden’s ‘Uniqueness’ – Establishing and Maintaining Trust*

The ‘Swedish way’ differed from that of all other liberal democratic countries: Sweden never introduced a complete lockdown, thus schools remained open, all cultural institutions were closed, and some shops and restaurants remained accessible, with severe measures of social distancing. The government decided to *propose recommendations* that experts, specifically Sweden’s state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, believed to be relevant and effective to contain the spread of the virus: virtually every Swede listened to Tegnell’s daily updates on TV and radio.

The people seemed to have trusted the government despite an extremely high death rate early on (in comparison, for example, to other Scandinavian countries), while the government trusted people’s responsibility in getting on with their daily lives (legitimation via rationalization and moralization). As politicians in other countries were challenged with questions about the Swedish way and why they would not follow this example, they were quickly to reply that Sweden is very different, geographically, and politically. For example, Sweden is less densely populated. Critics emphasized that Sweden had not protected their elderly people adequately to maintain ‘normality’.

Simon (2020, 49) notes in an in-depth study comparing crisis management in the Nordic countries that some political speeches displayed the attributes of attempting to promote the ‘Swedish way’; for example, a speech by Lena Hallengren (2020), Minister of Health and Social Affairs, to the WHO:

There has been some interest internationally in our approach to combat the virus. […] But to understand our approach, it helps to be aware of some fundamental characteristics of Swedish society. Our welfare state is universal, including the health care system. It is publicly funded and accessible to all. […] There is a tradition of mutual trust between public authorities and citizens. People trust and follow the recommendations of the authorities to a large extent. The Swedish Government has, from the start of the outbreak, applied a ‘whole-of-Government’ approach. [..] Our measures aim to save lives and slow down the outbreak. We’ve carried out several reforms to strengthen our health care system so that our doctors and nurses can cope with the extraordinary challenge that COVID-19 poses.

Recent research (Pierre 2020; Helsingen et al 2020; Bergenfalk 2020) illustrates that many Swedes are very proud of Sweden and the so-called Swedish model; they believe in a unique Swedish national identity, built on a decentralized system and on *trust*. Simon (2020, 54) summarizes his analysis of critical international media reporting on the ‘Swedish way’ that ‘Sweden attempted to leverage its relatively popular and positive global brand (before COVID-19) with a value and normative based frame that was intended to enhance the national image of the country and people as capable and courageous norm entrepreneurs by making use of the crisis of information as an opportunity’. Indeed, as politicians repeatedly stated, the Swedish strategy of containing the virus was based on a model of trust and collaboration:

[Our strategy] is built upon information and providing the population with knowledge […], the success factors of our disease prevention is built on trust and faith […]. We also strived from the start to have a society that is as open as possible.[[11]](#footnote-11)

People are not *ordered*; they are politely *advised* to be considerate and to keep their distance. Everybody’s *own* *responsibility* is invoked, everybody should help build a mutual relationship of trust. The aim of this ‘Swedish trust’ was, as Bergenfalk (2020, 33) argues, to establish a quasi-symbiotic relationship between the citizens and the authorities that benefitted both parties (legitimization qua moralization). This is consistent with the fact that Swedes generally have a high level of trust in institutions. Therefore, the strategy adopted by the Swedish government aimed to guide society and identity further in this direction. Thus, the strategy, it was presupposed, would produce citizens capable of implementing and practicing a ‘regulated freedom’ (ibid., 33).

This finding is substantiated by Pierre (2020, 482), who maintains that ‘Sweden is a high-trust society, both in terms of interpersonal and institutional trust. This high level of trust facilitates informal yet efficient coordination with very low transaction costs.’

An official website (in many languages) was launched that listed all the regulations and provided a lot of information.[[12]](#footnote-12) Bergenfalk (2020, 40-43) concludes that ‘death becomes normalized, as we can see throughout the Swedish state’s response to the covid-19 pandemic, when the benefits of prosperous life for the many outweigh the suffering of the few’. Thus, death was not denied;[[13]](#footnote-13) the old and fragile were – so to speak – sacrificed for the ‘the welfare, happiness and general health of the majority’ (ibid). This implies a quasi-rational cost-benefit biopolitics (legitimation qua rationalization) which contrasts to the decision-making in other countries, where the restrictions were mostly legitimized due to different values, to protect and save the elderly.

* 1. *The ‘War against the Virus’*

Most politicians used war metaphors at some point during the COVID crisis. However, some presidents and prime ministers relied on a conceptual metaphor of ‘fighting the virus’ or ‘the war against the virus’ to frame all their public speeches, interviews, and press conferences (legitimation qua authorization). The positive outcome of such a war would be, so the argument went, a ‘victory over the virus’ by successfully ‘defending’ the respective country. This discourse was launched by the French President Emanuel Macron on the one hand and by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, on the other.

Macron justified the strict measures imposed in France by repeatedly claiming that a war had to be fought; that France was at war. He also appealed to national unity across all party lines.

We are at war and, faced with what is coming, the peak of the epidemic which is before us, I have decided, on the basis of a proposal from the Minister of the Armed Forces and the Chief of the Defense Staff, to launch Operation Resilience.

(Macron 2020)

One month later, Macron had dropped greatly in popularity because of the high death rate, overcrowded hospitals, and a shortage of nurses and doctors. Accordingly, he changed his strategy, now appealing to solidarity and equality, while referring to the French Revolution and quoting the first article of the Human Rights Declaration from 26 August 1789 (legitimation qua rationalization and mythopoesis). More specifically, he promised higher salaries for nurses, care workers, cashiers, and bus drivers. He spoke of hope if the strict measures were followed and even admitted that the government had reacted too slowly at the outset of the fight against the virus.

The strategies adopted by Orbán were significantly different than Macron’s. On the one hand, the Hungarian prime minister also viewed the crisis as a ‘war against the virus’ to be fought and won. Thus, he aimed to fight panic and fear and to defeat the dread of death. However, on the other hand, he also instrumentalized this conceptual mindset to undermine Hungarian democracy.

Viktor Orbán decided to give regular statements via TV and radio in which he continuously used military jargon, thus creating a very different semantic field than the other leaders mentioned above. For example, on 23 March 2020, he described the military operations put in place to defend the Hungarian population (my emphasis):

It was a question of waiting or acting and we decided to **take up the fight** instead of waiting. We immediately saw that in the usual order, in addition to our usual way of life, upholding our principles of life organization, within the framework of the usual legislation, we would not be able to organize Hungary’s **collective self-defense**, and we would not be able to **repel this attack.** That is why we […] declared a **state of emergency.** The **state of emergency** means that the government has been given the authority and the means to organize **Hungary’s self-defense** with a chance of success. […]

We have organized t**he defense** along four lines. We must **stand on four battlefields** right now. There is a **military defense**, **a police defense, a health defense, and an economic defense**. We also knew that there would be three stages in the spread of the virus, so we also need to **adjust the pace of defense**, what to do, and the decisions and steps to take. (Orbán 2020)

Here, Orbán already mentioned the necessity of implementing a state of emergency in Hungary. On 30 March 2020, The Hungarian Parliament voted to allow Orbán to rule by decree indefinitely (with 138 votes in favor and 53 votes against) to combat the pandemic, thus giving Orbán extra powers to unilaterally enact a series of sweeping measures. As CNN reported: ‘Its [the parliament’s] provisions go well beyond the various forms of legislation hastily put together by other EU member states in response to the coronavirus pandemic, dramatically ramping up the strongman leader’s powers’ (Picheta & Halasz 2020). Thus, punishment became possible for journalists if the government believed their coronavirus reporting was not accurate. Moreover, heavier penalties for violating quarantine regulations were made possible by this law. Third, no elections or referendums could be held while this order was in place. Orbán justified this extraordinary measure with the *topos of urgency*, according to CNN: ‘We cannot react quickly if there are debates and lengthy legislative and law-making procedures. And in times of crisis and epidemic, the ability to respond rapidly can save lives’ (Picheta & Halasz 2020).

On 16 June 2020, the state of emergency was lifted. However, as the Friedrich Naumann Foundation rightly argues, ‘at the same time as the emergency was lifted, parliament also voted in favor of a draft law on a new, so-called ‘state of medical emergency’. According to this bill, the government would be able to govern by decree again in such a case, with even less control than before’ (FNFEUROPE 2020). Both bills were adopted by Parliament on 16 June 2020. Meanwhile, debates and discussions have continued at the highest level of EU law-making, in the European Commission, the European Parliament (2019), and the European Court of Human Rights (see Wodak 2021). Orbán is thus sliding towards illiberalism and neo-authoritarianism, facilitated by the COVID crisis, which he has been able to instrumentalize for his interests.

6. Conclusion: Lessons for the Future?

Many commentators emphasized the positive side of ‘deceleration’, of slowing down, of finally having time to reflect on one’s everyday life, one’s wellbeing, one’s work-life balance, and so forth. Many reported that they finally had time to reorganize their apartments or houses, clean up their messy cupboards, and tend to their gardens – all strategies deemed successful to cope with the dread of death. On the other hand, such deceleration and reflection lent itself only to the privileged classes, not to workers in the so-called ‘critical jobs’ (such as cashiers in supermarkets, nurses, builders, police officers, pharmacists, caregivers for the elderly, and so forth) or unemployed people yearning for a new job (Schmidinger & Weidenholzer 2020).

Many threat scenarios failed to materialize. The four frames and the range of legitimation strategies discussed in this paper – resurrection, dialogue, trust, and war – illustrate significantly different ways of coping with the dread of death and emerging fears and anxieties. These frames also point to differing regimes of bio- and body politics, legitimized in significantly different ways: the nation conceptualized as family, with a quasi-Messiah as leader (religious frame, legitimation qua moralization and authorization). We also encountered leaders who talked to their people on an equal level, i.e., establishing a rational dialogue and unifying relationship, full of empathy, with the citizens, employing legitimization via authority and rationalization. The framing with trust implies self-responsibility and no hierarchical leadership (legitimation qua rationalization and moralization) and, finally, ‘fighting a war’ implies emergency situations where leaders carry the entire responsibility, and the people have to follow orders (legitimization qua authority and mythopoesis).

It is obvious that there is no ‘one size fits all’ pattern of crisis communication: Which kind of crisis communication was chosen largely depends – apart from the personality of the respective leader and the kind of government regime – on contextual factors, on individual countries’ histories, their collective memories and traumas and national traditions of governmental rhetoric. What works in one country might not work elsewhere. In any case, defeating the virus and the pandemic in general implies confronting (and not denying) facts, defeating the illness and thus, the fear of death. However, as Camus (1948, 277) legitimately argued, the plague (or any disease) can never be truly defeated:

None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

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1. This is a shortened and revised version of Wodak 2021b. I would like to thank Matthew Johnson and anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments, and Tim Corbett for editing my English language. Of course, I am solely responsible for the final version. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See WHO (2020) for daily updates on the crisis and developments in countries worldwide. In this paper, due to reasons of space, I will not be able to describe individual country contexts and instead must refer readers to this (and other similar) websites for more information (see also Wodak 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example EFE/Reuters (2020). For the Italian case specifically, see Pankl (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, the peak of the pandemic in Austria in the spring was characterized by 30 deaths (April 8, 2020). December 17, 2020 saw 218 deaths (e.g. https://www.google.com/search?q=covid+tote+in+%C3%B6sterreich&oq=COVID+Tote&aqs=chrome.3.69i57j0i131i433j0l6.9373j1j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8).Similarily, in Germany, April 15, 2020, 510 deaths were documented; December 22, 2020, however, 986 deaths (e.g., https://www.google.com/search?ei=qxHnX5SVNYubkgXV\_qyIDg&q=covid+tote+in+deutschland+2020&oq=covid+tote+in+Germany&gs\_lcp=CgZwc3ktYWIQARgBMgYIABAWEB4yBggAEBYQHjoFCAAQsAM6AggAOgQIABBDULjdB1jY-gdgkpAIaAFwAHgAgAHVAYgBkQySAQYxNi4wLjGYAQCgAQGqAQdnd3Mtd2l6yAEBwAEB&sclient=psy-ab) (accessed 26 December 2020). Austria which had been perceived as coping well with the pandemic in the spring was the country with the highest numbers of deaths and COVID-positive cases (in relationship to population numbers), in the fall 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I refer readers to Van Dijk (1992, 87-89); Flinders & Wood (2018, 608); Wodak (2021, 145-6) and Hansson (2015) for more details on the range of discursive strategies of denial. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Stråth & Wodak (2009); Powers & Xiao (2008); Huang & Holmgreen (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The chosen countries contrast richer and poorer countries (along the North/South divide in the European Union), Western and Eastern European countries, and Sweden as a country which chose a very different way of dealing with the crisis. Here, I focus only on four EU member states and New Zealand due to limitations of space, although the data set also includes Poland, Greece, Italy, and Germany. Of course, the selection nevertheless remains subjective. Moreover, fear of death is reinforced by fear of unemployment and vice versa (e.g., Schmidinger & Weidenholzer 2020). Obviously, more deaths occurred if the health system had suffered significant cuts due to austerity politics like in Italy, Spain, Portugal, France and the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, Stern (2020); Khoo & Schimpfössl (2020); Novy & Winckler (2020) for analyses of the COVID-19 management in the US, the UK, and Brazil. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Pyszczynski (2004); Triandafyllidou et al. (2009); De Rycker & Mohd Don (2013); Neüff (2018) for examples of nationalizing tendencies in times of crises. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the entire transcript of the speech, see <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/pm-address-covid-19-update> (accessed 30 July 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Johan Carlson, 2 March 2020, “Vi tror att vår strategi är framgångsrik i det här läget. Den bygger på information och kunnande till befolkningen. […] framgångsfaktorn i smittskyddsarbetet är att det bygger på tillit och förtroende. […] Vi har också från början strävat efter att så mycket som möjligt att ett öppet samhälle.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020) also launched a multilingual official website, which was updated almost daily, with a lot of accessible and transparent information. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In hindsight, the state epidemiologist Tegnell acknowledged in an interview with Radio Sweden on 2 June 2020 that “if we were to encounter the same disease, with the knowledge we have today, we would probably have to implement a strategy about halfway between what Sweden did and what the rest of the world did” (Radio Sweden 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)