

MAIN NARRATIVES ABOUT COVID-19 IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

Takeaways from the first wave of
the pandemic

Research briefing



POLITICAL CAPITAL
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE

With the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom¹, Political Capital implemented a project in 2020 to investigate the narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic and their impact on the political discourse in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). With the help of our national partners, the [Institute for Politics and Society](#) from the Czech Republic, the [Institute of Social Safety](#) from Poland and the [Institute for Public Affairs](#) from Slovakia, we

executed a research and organised workshops to discuss the findings and provide practitioners from the four countries with space and opportunity to exchange experiences and good practices. The current paper is the summary of the research's key findings. The summary of the workshop with first-line practitioners and municipal stakeholders can be found on Political Capital's website [here](#).

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted with a geographical focus on the four Visegrad countries (V4) exploring the impact of the novel Coronavirus outbreak on populist radical right and far-right narratives and forces. The aim was to investigate whether the COVID-19 pandemic has induced a surge in conspiracy theories, scapegoating, xenophobia, nationalism and authoritarianism in these countries. The timeframe included the six months of the first wave of the pandemic, from March to August 2020. The research

focused on three aspects: national context, main narratives and policy initiatives. The examined actors were populist radical right and far-right actors, which meant more specifically, in some cases, both governmental and fringe actors. The used sources were written and oral statements, announcements and speeches of the examined actors, such as mainstream, populist, anti-democratic and far-right parties, politicians and opinion leaders (e.g., relevant public figures, pundits).

1. CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

In the countries of the V4, the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic was underrepresented in the communication of the governments during the first two months of 2020, for various reasons. The governments of these countries started to deal with the issue of the pandemic only in the first half of March due to the growing fear and increasing number of cases in their countries. In Slovakia, parliamentary elections took place on 29 February and the pandemic did not play a role in the election campaign. Hence, the issue of the pandemic was underrepresented in political and public discourse, especially due to the fact that the country at

that time did not record the cases of infected persons. The Hungarian government ignored the issue of the pandemic in January and February 2020, and was busy with the topics of a planned national consultation that aimed to weaken the independence of the courts. Important topics here were the supposed migration threat; the salary of prison litigation lawyers; the compensation ordered by court for Roma people, who were victims of school segregation; and alleged judicial corruption. The Polish government was not concerned with the virus until the growing number of cases forced them to. At the end of February

¹ This paper was prepared within the framework of the project "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the far right and the populist radical right in the V4 region", which was kindly supported by the [Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom](#).

2020, the Polish Minister of Development even declared that Polish economy based on small and medium-sized companies, may even benefit from the pandemic. In the Czech Republic, the pandemic was seen as an abstract issue, far from the country. The topic appeared in the public discourse when people were confronted with the worsening situation in Italy and became concerned about homecoming tourists bringing the virus to the country.

In terms of health effects, the V4 countries were not affected by the first wave of the pandemic as strong as many Western European countries. According to official statistics, in Slovakia, which has a population of 5.4 million, from 6 March 2020 to 23 August 2020, totally 3,356 people became infected, 33 people died and 2,148 were recovered. Overall, 312,822 people were tested. At the end of August, the total number of identified infected people in Hungary was 5,288, 614 people died and 3,734 were recovered. By this time, 940 people were actively infected. In the Czech Republic, till the end of August 2020, 427 people died, 24,627 people became infected and 19,501 were recovered. In Poland, 67,372 people were infected, 44,097 recovered, and 1,960 died by this time.² Compared to the health effects, the countries were hit economically much more heavily by the first wave of the pandemic, especially Hungary. According to Eurostat³, Hungary's GDP fell by 13.5% in the second quarter, compared to the same period of 2019. In the same period, the Slovak GDP shrank by 12.1%, followed by Czechia (-10.7%) and Poland (-8.0%).

All four countries implemented restrictions in March 2020. Approximately the same measures

were introduced in each country: a state of emergency was declared, education facilities, restaurants and non-essential shops were closed, public events were banned, the wearing of protective masks became mandatory. Slovakia and the Czech Republic were the fastest to implement these measures while the ruling parties in Poland and Hungary focused more on achieving their own political goals. While following other countries' actions, they used the situation to strengthen their political position and power, and to weaken the opposition.

A Hungarian public opinion poll conducted by Medián in late May, early June 2020 showed that the government stabilized its voter base in the first wave, and the supporters of the government were satisfied with the official handling of the situation.⁴ At the same time, another survey conducted by Tárki in May showed that 18% of the population experienced a significant loss of income due to the restrictions [and the lack of efficient economic support by the state].⁵ In Slovakia a survey conducted in March showed that respondents trusted the health care system the most (almost three quarters of respondents), almost two thirds of respondents trusted scientific institutions, also the military (62%) and the central crisis staff (62%). Almost half of the respondents trusted the activities of the government and the prime minister⁶. In the Czech Republic, 70% of the respondents thought that the state reacted appropriately to the situation, 18% said the state overreacted and 8% believed that it did not take enough precaution, according to a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre in May 2020. The poll also measured the public opinion towards certain groups and institutions during

2 Magda Ważna, Koronawirus w Polsce. Sierpień miesiącem rekordów, MedOnet.pl, <https://www.medonet.pl/koronawirus/koronawirus-w-polsce,koronawirus-w-polsce--sierpien-miesiacem-rekordow,artykul,21000760.html>

3 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/26e32045-847a-492c-91fb-9a98854495df?lang=en>

4 <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/06/11/orban-bukna-ha-a-30-ev-alattiakon-mulna/>

5 Tárki, Economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic: distribution and opinion of the involved parties on the measures accompanying the epidemic, https://tarki.hu/sites/default/files/2020-07/Covid_ENG_fin_FB.pdf

6 http://www.sociologia.sav.sk/cms/uploaded/3133_attach_TS_ASMS_April2020_2.pdf

the pandemic. The most positively perceived were healthcare workers, followed by rescuers and the police. The most negative rating was given to the EU, with 59% having a negative opinion compared to 30% having a positive one, followed by WHO with 51% to 35% and the media with 45% to 52%.⁷ Less than half of

Poles – only 43% – were satisfied with the level of European solidarity during the pandemic. Poles are also convinced that the government’s response to the crisis was exaggerated: 58% of respondents believe that the lockdown’s negative economic effects outweigh the health benefits, compared to 36% saying the opposite.⁸

2. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

When comparing the narratives, which have been prevalent in the four countries, we have identified five main argumentation patterns that have mainly been present across the countries. In addition, we have found one strong narrative, which was utilised in Hungary mainly.

#1 Anti-West & anti-democracy vs. pro-East & pro-autocracy narrative

‘The West and the European Union failed, the East succeeded and provided help’

One of the main common narratives within the four countries was the failing of Western democracies and the European Union in successfully handling the pandemic. Within this narrative, the European Union is described as

| Main narratives | Countries where present mainly | Main disseminators |
|--|--------------------------------|---|
| #1 Anti-West & anti-democracy vs. pro-East & pro-autocracy narrative | CZ, SK | Fringe far-right actors + fake news & disinformation platforms |
| | HU, PL | +Ruling parties and the mainstream media belonging to them |
| #2 Global control narrative | CZ, HU, PL, SK | Fringe far-right actors + fake news & disinformation platforms |
| #3 Anti-vaccine narrative | HU, SK | Fringe far-right actors + fake news & disinformation platforms |
| | PL | + Ruling party |
| #4 Anti-migrant narrative | CZ, SK | Fringe far-right actors + fake news & disinformation platforms |
| | HU | + Ruling party and the mainstream media belonging to it |
| #5 Sceptical narrative | HU, PL | Fringe far-right actors + Fake news & disinformation platforms |
| +1 Anti-opposition narrative | HU | Ruling party and the mainstream media belonging to it + Fringe far-right actors |

Overview of the main narratives and their disseminators identified in the V4 countries

⁷ <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/political/politicians-political-institutions/5222-evaluation-of-reaction-of-state-and-its-institutions-to-covid-19-epidemic-our-society-special-may-2020>

⁸ Parlament Europejski, Biuro w Polsce, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/poland/pl/strona_glowna/aktualnosci/news/2020_/opinia-publiczna-w-ue-podczas-pandemii-koronawirusa.html

a weak and inefficient organisation, incapable of and reluctant to substantially help Member States during this crisis. In this way, the EU did not fulfil its duties and instead focused on irrelevant issues. This notion of inefficiency appears also with regards to Western democracies, implying that the hegemony of the West is ending, the model presented by the West is eroding and that democracies and democratic institutions are incompetent in handling such situations. Furthermore, the importance of nation states was highlighted within this narrative.

Connected to the EU's failure and incapacity to give an adequate response to the pandemic was the narrative, in which Eastern countries have dealt better with the coronavirus and are praised for the help they provided to Europe. In this regard, China and Russia in particular had been applauded and glorified for their superior management of the current situation, which is due to the effective nature of their political system. Thus, an authoritarian system, with a strong leader and an obedient citizenry, is better at handling the situation created by the pandemic. In line with this argumentation, China and Russia came to the rescue and provided substantial support to Europe, especially in the means of protective gear, which the European Union and the West failed to provide.

While this narrative was present in all four countries, it is apparent that in the case of Hungary and Poland, it was supported by mainstream political actors, including those in government, with the support of far-right and fringe actors, while in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, fringe actors and platforms were the main promoters of this narrative.

#2 Global control narrative

'The pandemic is a tool of global control'

Another common narrative present in all four countries is that the pandemic is man-made and was purposefully created in an effort to dismantle the personal freedoms of the population and hence, to gain control. According to this narrative, the pandemic is a conspiracy, created in laboratories and those behind it will gain political or financial power in the aftermath of the outburst of the virus. Behind these efforts, there are a number of different entities, actors and institutions. It is apparent that such conspiracies were most prominent in Poland. According to the narratives present in Poland, there is a wide array of potential actors behind the pandemic, including governments, the Jews, the pharmaceutical industry, millionaires, Bill Gates, George Soros and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, to name a few. Depending on who is behind the virus, the anticipated outcomes differ significantly: gaining power over the world, economic reset, implanting human chips to enslave the citizenry, depopulating the Earth, selling drugs and vaccines. In Slovakia, the party leader of L'SNS, Marián Kotleba supposes that banks and financial groups are the initiators, while in the Czech Republic, fake news websites allege that the virus is a biological weapon produced by the U.S. or secret societies, with the aim to camouflage the redeployment of the U.S. Army to Russian borders. In Hungary, such conspiracies were not common during the first wave. It is noteworthy, however, that László Toroczkai, the leader of the far-right party Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk), was at the forefront of spreading conspiratorial messages about the virus. He argued that the WHO helped spread the virus with its misguidance and misinformation and that the organisation was taking the side of China, while he also implied that Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg may benefit from the virus financially, through the creation of a vaccine.

#3 Anti-vaccine narrative

'The pharmaceutical industry uses the virus to gain profit and control over the population'

Related to the pandemic being a tool for global control is the anti-vaccine narrative. This narrative is most prominent in Poland. According to proponents of this narrative, the pharmaceutical industry is behind the pandemic and aims to either make a profit out of the vaccine or to inject nano-chips with the vaccine to control the population. This strand of the narrative appears in Slovakia as well, with Kotleba maintaining the same line of argumentation. However, in Poland, there seems to be a wider support for this theory, as in August of 2020, a large demonstration was organised under the name "End Plandemia". The goals of the demonstration was to stand up against the censorship of corporate media, the medical dictatorship of the WHO, the EU and multinational corporations. The main driver and face of the anti-vaccination movement is Justyna Soch, and the anti-vaccine party within parliament is the far-right Konfederacja. During the presidential campaign in the spring of 2020, Andrzej Duda, the candidate of PiS, preached slogans referring to the views of anti-vaccine believers, saying that vaccination against the coronavirus should not be mandatory, but instead a personal choice.

#4 Anti-migrant narrative

'The virus being brought in by foreigners'

In the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, a narrative blaming migrants for having brought in the virus gained prominence. In this way, migrants entering the European Union, and specifically Eastern-European countries, pose a serious threat for public health, as they carry in the disease. While in Hungary, this was the leading narrative promoted by the government, and supported by far-right and fringe actors, when the virus first appeared in the country, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this narrative

was spread by fringe actors, such as the party leader of L'SNS, Kotleba in Slovakia and the SPD party in the Czech Republic. In the Czech Republic, this narrative had a nostalgic component, as before 1989, the borders were guarded by the Czechoslovak border guards serving the communist regime. There were calls to keep the borders closed and to bring back the border guards to prevent migration.

In the Czech Republic, another strand of the narrative appeared, according to which, the pandemic and the countermeasures are a camouflage to conceal migration to Europe. According to this, the virus is fake and it is used as a distraction from migrants being brought into the country.

#5 Sceptical narrative

'The pandemic is not happening'

The relativisation of the pandemic also appeared in two countries during the first wave. In Poland, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, one of the leaders of Konfederacja and a Member of Parliament, asserted that there is no pandemic, pointing to the low mortality rate and generally fewer fatalities now as a consequence of the lockdown. He also emphasized that similar epidemics happen every year and other illnesses, such as the flu or cancer take significantly more lives, than Covid-19. Similarly, far-right actors in Hungary maintained the same line of argumentation, implying that with such low mortality rates and new daily cases, Covid-19 does not pose a serious threat and cannot be considered a pandemic.

+1 Anti-opposition narrative

In Hungary, an anti-opposition narrative promoted by the government became prominent during the first wave. According to the government, in times of crises, there is a need for national unification, however, the opposition has “taken the side of the virus”, as it did not vote for the Authorization Act⁹. This sentiment was supported also by far-right figures, most notably by Ábel Bódi from Generation Identity, while Tamás Gaudi-Nagy, the leader of a nationalist advocacy organization,

believes that liberal human rights activists and “fake civilians” are acting against the national interest by opposing the Authorization Act. Furthermore, the government of Hungary sought to shift the responsibility, and the blame, to opposition-led municipalities, especially to the leadership of Budapest. According to the government, nursing homes, managed by the capital, were the focal points of the epidemic, while data proved that they were in fact state-run hospitals.

3. POLICY ANALYSIS

As briefly presented at the beginning of this paper, the V4 governments generally implemented very similar measures in the first wave to protect their populations against the novel coronavirus. However, one difference was the speed of introducing severe restrictions on citizens’ private life. Slovakia introduced tough measures on 12 March, the Czech Republic ordered a full lockdown on 16 March, Hungary only decided to do so on 28 March. All V4 members introduced some form of a short-work scheme inspired by Germany’s Kurzarbeit system combined with aid packages for industry and citizens, albeit with varying effectiveness. Hungary was last to introduce such a scheme and it offered the lowest level of support.¹⁰ Some measures in the Czech Republic were challenged in courts, which repealed some of them affecting the freedom of movement, the retail and service sectors.

Restrictions on the freedom of assembly were introduced across the V4. However, authorities’

approach to protests differed widely. In the Czech Republic, protests were allowed even if it entailed a gathering larger than what was authorized at the time. In Poland, police detained people on an entrepreneurial strike demanding help to compensate for the effect of measures, where people flocked to the streets, and some protesters might face a hefty fine. Hungarian independent MPs Bernadett Szél and Ákos Hadházy organized car demonstrations to protest against the government’s decision to empty numerous beds in hospitals – with the target later turning out to be much higher than expected. Participants of the protests received large fines even though they complied with all social distancing regulations.

Primarily Hungary, but to some extent Poland as well, stood out in the V4 for power political decisions designed to solidify their grip on power. The Hungarian ruling party approved an authorization bill allowing the government to issue decrees suspending existing laws or

9 The Authorization Act (Act XII of 2020 on the Containment of the Coronavirus) provided the Hungarian Government with a carte blanche mandate without any sunset clause to suspend the application of Acts of Parliament, derogate from the provisions of Acts, and take other extraordinary measures until the “state of danger” declared by the Government is in place. Therefore, the Authorization Act fails to comply with the democratic set of criteria for a special legal order that also derives from Hungary’s Fundamental Law. <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/background-note-on-the-consequences-of-the-authorization-act/#>

10 G7.hu (2020) Mind a három másik visegrádi ország nagyobb támogatást ad a bajba került cégek dolgozóinak, mint Magyarország. <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20200429/mind-a-harom-masik-visegradi-oroszag-nagyobb-tamogatast-ad-a-cegeinek-mint-magyarorszag/>

diverting from regulations without an expiration deadline. The ruling party introduced a law allowing the cabinet to take any decision they see fit if they believe the measures outlined in the crisis management law are unsuitable for handling the pandemic. Companies with ties to the ruling parties won 27% of all taxpayers' money spent in public procurement tenders between January and April 2020. The cabinet put state properties into the hands of pro-government oligarchs and declared some of their projects to be especially important for the national economy, removing administrative restrictions.

Moreover, the Orbán cabinet strived to cut funding from local self-governments, especially opposition-led ones. They gave them additional tasks without providing additional funding to do them, took away the vehicle tax from them in multiple steps, and increased the solidarity contribution for richer municipalities. Another decision allowed the cabinet to designate

special economic zones in certain settlements, taking away their local taxes and transferring them to county-level bodies dominated by the ruling parties.

Finally, the ruling party introduced an anti-hoax law threatening those who spread hoaxes that might hinder protection efforts during the state of danger with imprisonment. This could have had a detrimental effect on the freedom of speech, as citizens could see on live TV as some of their fellow Hungarians were detained by police for publishing government-critical Facebook posts – even if the cases were later dropped.

As for the far right, the main similarity across the V4 was that they were unable to present meaningful policy alternatives to mainstream decisions, their main focus was protesting against the lockdowns and measures focusing on individual responsibility – in stark contrast with their communitarian worldview.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research focused entirely on narratives during the first wave of the pandemic. However, we must note that the nature of misleading claims changed to some extent in the second wave currently experienced by Europe. In the second wave, we see more and more coronavirus-sceptic, anti-vaccination, anti-mask contents on disinformation sites, while claims about the EU's allegedly failed crisis management, the virus' origins are less prevalent. The main concern, at this time, is healthcare-related narratives potentially discouraging citizens from adhering to anti-COVID measures, which could lead to an increase in infections and even deaths.

Fake news and disinformation about the virus have been present in all V4 countries. However, their scale and disseminators vary. To counter harmful narratives, conspiracy theories and distrust, governments and authorities have to engage with proactive, factual, clear and transparent communications and policies.



POLITICAL CAPITAL
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.
Central Europe and the Baltic States

2020

The publication is supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is not responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) alone. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.