Crisis communication and crisis management during COVID-19

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This paper presents results from a comparative and qualitative discourse-historical analysis of governmental crisis communication in Austria, Germany, France, Hungary and Sweden, during the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown from March 2020 to May 2020 (a ‘discourse strand’). By analysing a sample of important speeches and press conferences by government leaders (all performing as the ‘face of crisis management’), it is possible to deconstruct a range of discursive strategies announcing/legitimising restrictive measures in order to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic where everybody is in danger of falling ill, regardless of their status, position, education and so forth. I focus on four frames that have been employed to mitigate the ‘dread of death’ (Bauman, 2006) and counter the ‘denial of death’ (Becker, 1973/2020): a ‘religious frame’, a ‘dialogic frame’, a frame emphasising ‘trust’, and a frame of ‘leading a war’. These interpretation frameworks are all embedded in ‘renationalising’ tendencies, specifically visible in the EU member states where even the Schengen Area was suddenly abolished (in order to ‘keep the virus out’) and borders were closed. Thus, everybody continues to be confronted with national biopolitics and body politics (Wodak, 2021).

Key words critical discourse studies • discourse-historical approach • legitimation strategies • strategies of denial • macro-frame analysis • body politics • ‘liquid’ fear • discourse strand.

Key messages
• Most governments employed specific modes of crisis communication vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, depending on the respective socio-political context and historical tradition.
• Crisis communication attempted to persuade people to follow restrictive measures; the legitimisation strategies employed usually appealed to authority and quasi-rational arguments; however, sometimes mythopoesis occurred.
• In times of a pandemic, denial of death does not work anymore; dread of death becomes ubiquitous.
• Four macro-frames, embedded in nativist and nationalistic rhetoric, were used to argue for, and legitimise restrictive measures. Some heads of state (or prime ministers) instrumentalised the crisis to install ever more authoritarian practices.
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 emphasises 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; this finally succeeded in the northern hemisphere autumn and winter of 2020 and, in December 2020, the first elderly patients in the UK were vaccinated (Diaz, 2020).

In the spring of 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’ (Bauman, 2006: 22–4). In 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 autumn of 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). Moreover, horrific Islamist terror attacks occurred in France and Austria in October and November 2020 respectively; these incidents reinforced existing fears and uncertainty. A 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 emphasise,

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. From a TMT [Terror Management Theory] perspective,
it is currently far more difficult for virtually all of us to manage the terror of death.\textsuperscript{5}

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 (2006: 39). Quite similarly, in his seminal book \textit{The Denial of Death} (1973/2020), 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’, in order 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 by some governments to deny the danger caused by the pandemic, in March 2020 its impact could not be ignored anymore.\textsuperscript{6} According to the prominent medical journal \textit{The 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. … However, many countries are still not following WHO’s clear recommendations on containment (widespread testing, quarantine of cases, contact tracing, and social distancing) and have instead implemented haphazard measures, with some attempting only to suppress deaths by shielding the elderly and those with certain health conditions. 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.

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; for example, \textit{Marin}, 2020). 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 (\textit{Wodak}, 2020a; 2020b). Although Iceland’s government declared Ischgl a ‘Corona-hotspot’ on 2 March 2020, skiing lifts were shut down much later, on 12 March (\textit{Statista}, 2021).

When confronted with such failures, politicians quickly turned blame into credit, for example when claiming to be saving the country/nation/fatherland from danger. The related argumentation was based on emphasising one’s own qualities (\textit{argumentum ad verecundiam}), evoking the audience’s emotions (\textit{argumentum ad populum}) and the use of fallacies (for example, false analogies; \textit{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’ in order to cast themselves as saviours (for example, \textit{topos of saviour}, \textit{Wodak}, 2021: 76).
By 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’ (2006: 31). Yet, some governments have instrumentalised the pandemic for their authoritarian aims. For example, security measures have been implemented which have had a huge impact on citizens’ fundamental rights. 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 legitimised? By whom?

It is, of course, impossible at present 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 can only present interim findings – findings which cover a clearly defined discourse strand, that is governmental discourses during the global lockdown from March 2020 to June 2020 (as discussed later). By analysing a sample of important speeches and press conferences by European government leaders (all performing as the ‘face of crisis management’) in Austria, Germany, France, Hungary and Sweden, it is possible to deconstruct measures and procedures deemed adequate for coping with this pandemic. Due to limitations of space, however, I have to omit oppositional voices to governments’ decisions and COVID-19 deniers in government: those leaders who denied and trivialised the danger caused by the pandemic, such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and – at least initially – Boris Johnson.

In this paper, 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 emphasising ‘trust’, and a frame of ‘leading a war’. Importantly, these frames are discursively legitimised in significantly different ways. Due to the fact that threatening economic and political crises trigger a patriotic nationalism, a unification of ‘us’ against ‘them’ which even transcends traditional cleavages of left and right, it is not surprising that this has also been the case with COVID-19. Even the Schengen Area was suddenly suspended in response (in order to ‘keep the virus out’) and borders were closed.

Crisis and the Emergence of Fear

Bauman analyses the pervasiveness and consequences of fear in contemporary Western life, drawing on his earlier work *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Liquid society per se is characterised 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 disintegrating, overlapping and remixing. There seem to be no more distinctions between global and local, or between work and non-work, between public and private, between conservative and progressive, or between mediated and non-mediated experiences (Vint, 2009). Hence, life in liquid
modernity is characterised by endemic uncertainty, which – during a pandemic – is, of course, reinforced and mobilised.

In his research, Bauman analyses the consequences for our ability to engage in meaningful social action and to produce a viable future in spite of such fear and uncertainty. Liquid fear is a derivative fear resulting from the interiorisation of ‘a vision of the world that includes insecurity and vulnerability’, which ‘even in the absence of a genuine threat’ (Bauman, 2006: 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 (Hewer, 2020).

Such derivative fear – as will be illustrated in the following sections – is instrumentalised by governments in various ways in order to persuade people to comply with restrictive measures in view of the pandemic. For example, religiousisation 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’ (2006: 116).

Governments frequently legitimise 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’. Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic also follows this pattern.

**Discourse, Frame and Legitimation**

*The Discourse-Historical Approach*

The discourse-historical approach (DHA) allows for a systematic relating of macro and mezzo levels of contextualisation to the micro-level analyses of texts. Such analyses consist primarily of two levels, the ‘entry-level analysis’ focusing on the thematic dimension of texts (the ‘frames’) and the ‘in-depth analysis’ which deconstructs the coherence and cohesion of texts in detail. The general aim of the entry-level thematic analysis is to map out the contents of analysed texts and, through that mapping, to assign them to particular discourses (see Wodak, 2020c; 2021 for more details).

The key analytical categories of thematic analyses are discourse topics, which, ‘conceptually, summarize the text, and specify its most important information’ (van Dijk, 1991: 113). These discourse topics characterise relevant frames and interpretation frameworks. The in-depth analysis, on the other hand, is informed by the research questions. The in-depth analysis consists of the identification of the genre (for example, TV interview, policy paper, election poster, political speech, or website), analysis of the macro-structure of the respective text, the strategies of identity construction and of the argumentation schemes, as well as of the other means of linguistic realisation it uses.

The DHA views discourse as a set of ‘context-dependent semiotic practices’ which are ‘socially constituted and socially constitutive’, ‘related to a macro-topic’ and characterised by a ‘pluri-perspective’ – that is, linked to argumentation (Reisigl and
Wodak, 2009: 89). This approach focuses on texts – be they audio, spoken, visual and/or written – as they relate to structured knowledge (discourses), are realised in specific genres, and must be viewed in terms of their situatedness. That is, many texts cannot be fully understood without considering different layers of context (such as the four-level model of context; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 40ff). In this paper, I investigate a specific discourse strand, from the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020 through to the relaxation of restrictive measures in June 2020.

Discourse strands are defined as topical threads within discourses (Rheindorf, 2019: 210–11). Ideally, such strands can be investigated through subsets of data within a corpus representing the discourse they are part of. In brief, discourse strands are distinguished by topical continuity and boundedness, strong intertextual links (often explicit) and temporal proximity between its textual elements, an often-limited group of social actors, and high keyness values (for distinctive elements in the subcorpus, using the total corpus as reference). In many instances, an initiating event or events can be identified as triggering debates that feed into such strands (for example, the official announcement of the lockdown in March 2020; Rheindorf, 2018: 182–3). This delimitation in turn allows for a focused contextualisation, making ‘discourse strand’ a useful perspective in tracing the dynamics of discursive shifts, such as peaks, changes and normalisations.

In sum, the DHA focuses on the ways in which power-dependent semiotic means are used to construct positive self and negative other presentations (US and THEM, in our case the contrast between successful coping with the virus, on the one hand, and failures, on the other). A thorough DHA ideally follows an eight-stage programme. Typically, the eight steps are implemented recursively (see Wodak, 2020c for more details). As the research presented here consists of a qualitative comparative study, the first five steps are conducted in a recursive manner:

1. **Activation and consultation of preceding theoretical knowledge** (recollection, reading and discussion of previous research).
2. **Systematic collection of data and context information** (depending on the research question, various discourses and discursive events, social fields as well as actors, semiotic media, genres and texts are focused on).
3. **Selection and preparation of data for the specific analyses** (selection and downsizing of data according to relevant criteria, transcription of tape recordings, and so on).
4. **Specification of the research question/s and formulation of assumptions** (on the basis of a literature review and a first skimming of the data).
5. **Qualitative pilot analysis, including a context analysis, macro-analysis, and micro-analysis** (allows testing categories and first assumptions as well as the further specification of assumptions; see example below).
6. **Detailed case studies** (of a whole range of data, primarily qualitative, but in part also quantitative).
7. **Formulation of critique** (interpretation of results, considering the knowledge of the relevant context, and referring to the three dimensions of critique).
8. **Practical application of analytical results** (if possible, the results might be applied or proposed for practical application aiming at having social impact and changing discourses).
Framing and Legitimising

In this analysis, I draw on Robert Entman’s approach to ‘framing’ (who in turn adopts Erving Goffman’s salient theory; for example, van Dijk, 2020). As Entman (1993) 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) 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’ (Fillmore 1976: 23). 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 organised in specific ways. Fillmore goes beyond the study of isolated word meanings and advocates a study of communication and messages. Interestingly, Fillmore stresses not only notions such as frames as relevant for discourse, but also the notion of context.

In the discourse-historical analysis below, I combine legitimation analysis with frame analysis (see, for example, Wodak, 2018; 2019b; 2020a). Frames serve as ‘interpretation frameworks’, as worldviews or – speaking in the terminology of TMT – as ‘cultural worldviews’. ‘Interpretation framework’ (Deutungsrahmen) is the label for ‘frame’ used in the paradigm of sociology of knowledge (for example Gotsbachner, 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 (for example, Cicourel, 1975). Such presuppositions and expectations are picked up by the respective audience, through which the statements made are invested with their complete meaning (‘dialogicity’; Bakhtin, 1982). 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.

The epistemic knowledge that is shared among a community allows the audience to categorise the isolated text components in such a manner that unspoken or missing elements can be added while polysemous or contradictory statements can be understood according to the broader context. As mentioned above, the entry-level thematic analysis allows for those discourse topics to be detected which condense the respective frame; in our case, the strategic choice of a specific mode of governmental crisis communication to cope with the dread of death triggered by the pandemic. Obviously, governments have to legitimise their choice of measures. Given its socio-political nature, it follows that legitimation routinely draws on recurring argumentation schemes in order to persuade the public of the acceptability or necessity of a specific action or policy.
Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) introduced a framework for analysing the language of legitimation with four major categories: authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation and mythopoesis. Legitimation qua authorisation 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 moralisation 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 rationalisation references either the utility of the social practice or some part of it (instrumental rationalisation by way of goals, means or outcomes) or to assumed ‘facts of life’ (theoretical rationalisation by way of definition, explanation or prediction). Rationalisation may be established as ‘common sense’ or by experts in the domains of knowledge used for legitimation, for example 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.

These main types involve a number of sub-types and are also frequently connected. 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; Rheindorf and Wodak, 2020). As elaborated by Wodak (2021: 84), legitimation can also involve problem denial, combined with a counter-attack, accompanied by negative Other-presentation, that is, attacking the (sometimes only alleged) accusation and accuser. 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, relativising and trivialising strategies occur, frequently by using (fallacious) comparisons or strategies of equation: ‘the “normal” flu is also dangerous’.

**COVID-19 and Renationalising 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 COVID-19 seriously. A re/nationalising 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 (Musollf, 2010; Wodak 2019a; 2019b; 2021; Boin et al, 2020).

For example, in Austria, no one could doubt who should ultimately be considered the ‘saviour 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 conceptual metaphor of the ‘nation as a family’ (Lakoff, 2004). Fear and renunciation, so the promise, are followed by hope and salvation. Overall, the often-quoted nationalistic ‘closing of ranks’ has a calming effect. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz emphasised 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.

At around 6 pm every day, ‘I am from Austria’, a famous pop song from the 1970s, was played on the streets by the police while some people waved red-white-red flags and the critical workers received much-deserved applause from the windows. This was an obvious return of the so-called ‘banal’, everyday nationalism (Billig, 1995; Lehner and Wodak, 2020; Corbett, 2020). The many interviews and press conferences left no doubt that ‘we as the Republic of Austria were one of the first countries in Europe to act with restrictive measures by reducing to emergency operation’ (Kurz, ZIB Spezial, 30 March 2020).

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

‘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 really stressful and challenging sporting effort: ‘this is a marathon’ (Kurz, ZIB Spezial, 20 March 2020).

The Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte also weathered the huge crisis by creating reassurance, introducing severe restrictions and unifying the people with much empathy and some but not exaggerated pathos, for example by evoking Winston Churchill’s famous ‘Call to War’. Conte became the ‘face’ of the crisis, always televised sitting alone at his desk and addressing the Italian people. He imposed a lockdown, at first localised, on 22 February, which he extended to the entire peninsula on 9 March. On that occasion, Conte stated that ‘there is no more time – our future is in our hands’, thus employing the *topos of urgency* and the TINA-argument, and simultaneously appealing to the Italian people with the inclusive pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’. Rationalisation legitimation coupled with legitimation qua expert authority was here employed. Conte argued that everybody – ‘we’ – would have to change their – ‘our’ – lifestyle, promising state support for everybody and concluding on the positive note that there would be an end to the crisis (pronouns indicating unity are marked in bold):

The figures show *we* are experiencing a serious increase in infections, an increase in people hospitalized in intensive care – and an increase, unfortunately, in deaths. *We* need to change our lifestyle. *We* need to change it
now. … The health emergency, as we foresaw, is turning into a full economic emergency, but I want to say to all of you that the state is here, the state is present. The government will take extraordinary measures that will allow us to stand up again and restart as soon as possible. (ITV News, 2020)

In the face of horrific daily pictures of the many dead, the strategies of unification and the vision of a ‘normal’ future proved enough to confront the dread of death. Conte’s slogan ‘Today we don’t hug each other, only to hug each other all the more tomorrow’ became the hegemonic, patriotic imaginary for many (Braun, 2020), indicating legitimisation qua mythopoiesis. Of course, the ‘Italian success story’ depends heavily on how the looming economic crisis will be coped with – and this still remains unpredictable (Lazar, 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, have to be punished and suffer the consequences of their actions.

During the first months of the COVID-19 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 (Spring and Wendling, 2020), thus reinforcing a nativist body-politic. Large protests and demonstrations against the regulations, the experts, the government – the elites – have taken place in Berlin and other capital cities (for example, 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.

Four Frames and Their Legitimation

The Religious Frame: Legitimation Qua Moralisation

In the Austrian hegemonic discourse, the Christian 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 Christian 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 legitimised 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 in vienna.at, 2020). Here, Austrian citizens were confronted with legitimation qua mythopoiesis:

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’.

A similar religious frame to cope with the fear of uncertainty and death was employed by the conservative Greek government. For example, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis addressed the Greek people before Easter in a speech (Mitsotakis, 2020) full of religious concepts, following his main argument formulated in analogy to the Passion of Jesus, namely that people first have to suffer and make large sacrifices in order to be saved and resurrected in a ‘victory of life over death’. Aside from this analogy, the conceptual metaphor of a natural catastrophe (a storm) was employed, a storm which forces everybody to stay at home and wait until it has passed. Such metaphors imply that human beings are powerless but also innocent; they cannot prevent the storm, they have to be patient.

I indicate the religiously connotated wording in bold in the extract below; this semantic field explicitly indicates legitimation via moralisation and authorisation. The argumentation scheme is easy to deconstruct: If we remain humble, faithful, suffer patiently, and do not lose hope, then our sacrifices will be rewarded.
I shall conclude with the following thoughts: In our previous communication, I stressed that in the fight against Covid-19, April would be the most critical month. Today I am telling you that this is the most critical week! A true Holy Week, reflecting our Passions and sacrifices this year, for us to overcome the Golgotha of the pandemic and achieve the Resurrection. We will remember this Easter as the Easter of Love. But also as the Easter of Responsibility. We will be celebrating apart from our loved ones. And perhaps far away from our places of origin. And with no church worship. I know it is very difficult. It is not our faith that is at stake, but the health of the faithful. In this way, however, we will uphold the true message of this great celebration: the victory of life over death. Thus, this Holy Week acquires a special spirituality. … So let us stay home, in order for us to meet again, healthy and strong, when the storm passes. If we stay at home, we will emerge as winners. Because victory is only separated from disaster by a thread; if we do not follow the advice of the experts to the end, we may tear apart all we have accomplished. (Mitsotakis, 2020)

The combination of religious framing with strict measures during the lockdown and appeals to responsibility proved effective in managing the COVID-19 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) led to a shockingly fast rise in the number of positive cases during the summer and autumn of 2020.

A Dialogic Frame: Legitimation Qua Rationalisation and Authorisation

Germany (and inter alia New Zealand) engaged in a quasi-dialogue with their citizens. One could view Chancellor Angela Merkel as a caring mother attempting to explain the complexity and dilemmas of the crisis step by step. Merkel addressed Germany’s citizens only a few times via TV and press conferences, with medical experts and virologists instead taking the stage and becoming the ‘face’ of the crisis.

Every day, the renowned virologist Christian Drosten, Director of the Institute for Virology at the Charité Hospital in Berlin, held highly authoritative lectures on YouTube, which were viewed by millions, including outside Germany (Schumann and Simmank, 2020). The decision making of the German government was made transparent. Merkel used little pathos and instead justified the restrictive measures, which were usually conveyed in a list, with scientific arguments, thus via rationalisation legitimation. Importantly, she appealed to everybody to participate in the effort to contain the virus. It was, she said, everybody’s responsibility to support this effort, without invoking threat scenarios and, therefore, without triggering fear.

On the contrary, through her calm attitude and rather technical discourse, Merkel was able to provide much reassurance and trust in the government and the experts (legitimation qua authorisation and rationalisation); she explained the measures in detail and emphasised the complexity of the crisis. However, she also foregrounded a nation-unifying rhetoric, in the sense of ‘we are all in the same boat’, with much empathy. Importantly, she maintained that she was fully aware of the fact that these measures were undemocratic and that some of these measures actually violated
fundamental rights: they were ‘an imposition on democracy’. She stated that she had hardly ever had to make such a difficult decision as this curtailment of personal liberties (BR24, 2020).

Merkel talked to the people with much respect, establishing a quasi-egalitarian relationship, always providing a more holistic orientation at the beginning of her presentations (Merkel, 2020), before listing new rules explicitly and clearly. Before doing so, she thanked the government and the regional governors for reaching such a unanimous decision, and she thanked the citizens, too. This was also the point where she emphasised her own feelings: Merkel was moved and happy that ‘we can save elderly people’ (speech from 22 March 2020). In the following extracts from this speech, I mark all lexical items and phrases employed to establish a relationship with the audience (‘the people’) in bold. Items expressing emotions are printed in italics. Finally, speech acts announcing and explaining the measures are underlined.

Before I explain in detail the expanded guidelines agreed upon today by the federal and regional governments, I would like to directly address all of those who are currently adhering to the necessary behavioral regulations. I thank you. I know that these mean relinquishments and sacrifices, both economically and personally, with stores having to close, not being able to simply go out in public anymore and, what is perhaps more painful, not being able to meet one’s grandparents or friends. We will all have to do without these things for a while. I am very moved that so many people have adhered to these behavioral regulations. We have thus demonstrated our commitment to the elderly and those with prior illnesses, for whom the virus is most dangerous. Put simply: We are thereby saving lives.

She concluded on a typically positive note, conveying the hope that everybody would be able to survive the crisis if they behaved rationally and followed the necessary measures together. No threats were uttered, fear was not evoked:

It is greatly encouraging to see today how millions and countless more millions of people are very pragmatically adhering to these relinquishments out of communal spirit and caring for endangered groups. I am convinced that this communal spirit, this ‘standing up for each other’, will bring us all through this difficult time together.

Like in most countries where governments took the COVID-19 crisis seriously, Merkel also received much positive feedback. Her popularity swiftly rose in all opinion polls to 64 per cent, with many commentators even speculating about the possibility of a fifth period of office for Merkel (Merkur.de, 2020). Indeed, on the basis of an in-depth abductive and qualitative study, Hattke and Martin (2020: 2) claim that ‘Germany [is] a critical and politically important case in point to counter the calls for more centralized and hierarchical approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic’. Coordination, collaboration, and cooperation (and emerging dilemmas), they maintain, were adequately solved by collective action (Hattke and Martin, 2020: 9–10) and ‘for tackling complex crises that resemble wicked problems that are characterised by high degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity and the absence of evidence-based solutions’ (Hattke and Martin, 2020: 13).
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, shops, bars and restaurants remained open. A few rules were introduced (for example, gatherings were limited to 50 people) but mostly, the government decided to propose recommendations that experts, and specifically Sweden’s state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, believed to be relevant and effective in order to contain the spread of the virus. Rarely did the government turn to and appeal to the people, though virtually every Swede listened to Tegnell’s daily updates on TV and radio.

The people seemed to have trusted the government in spite of 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 qua rationalisation and moralisation). 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 emphasised that Sweden had not protected its elderly people adequately in order to maintain ‘normality’.

As Simon (2020: 49) notes in an in-depth study comparing crisis management in the Nordic countries, some political speeches also displayed the attributes of attempting to promote and export 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 in order 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 a number of 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 (Bergenfalk, 2020; Helsingen et al, 2020; Pierre, 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 decentralised system and on trust. In the same vein, Simon (2020: 54) summarises 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.\(^{11}\)

This implied that the people were receptive to information and instruction, that depending on interpersonal trust, the best way to have a feasible action plan was if people willingly submit themselves to a kind of ‘auto-isolation’, in contrast to an enforced one. 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 (legitimisation qua moralisation). 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 not only presupposed an open society with mutual trust between all the nation’s citizens, it also aimed to guide society and identity further in this direction. Thus, the strategy, it was presupposed, would produce citizens capable of implementing and practising a ‘regulated freedom’ (Bergenfalk, 2020: 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.’ The law is thus implemented to the smallest degree possible. For example, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven described new strict regulations at a press conference on 27 March 2020 in the following way:

We will never be able to regulate everything by law, we will never be able to prohibit all deleterious behavior. Instead, it is now a matter of common sense [folkvett]. There is an individual responsibility and each individual must take responsibility for themselves, their peers, and their country. (Overgaard, 2020)

An official website (in many languages) was launched that listed all the regulations and provided a lot of information.\(^{12}\) 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;\(^{13}\) the old and fragile were – so to speak – sacrificed for ‘the welfare, happiness and general health of the majority’ (Bergenfalk, 2020). This implies a quasi-rational cost-benefit biopolitics (legitimation qua rationalisation) which stands in huge contrast to the decision making in other countries, where the restrictions were mostly legitimised due to different values: as a means to protect and save the elderly.
The ‘War Against the Virus’

Most politicians used war metaphors at some point during the COVID-19 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 authorisation). 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 rationalisation 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 from 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 instrumentalised 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 to 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 the defense along four lines. We have to 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 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 favour and 53 votes against) in order to combat the pandemic, thus giving Orbán extra powers to unilaterally enact a series of sweeping measures. As CNN reported: '[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 and Halasz, 2020). Thus, journalists could be punished 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 and 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 on the highest level of EU law making, in the European Commission, the European Parliament (2019), and the European Court of Human Rights (see Grabbe and Lehne, 2019; Wodak, 2021). Orbán is thus continuing his path towards illiberalism and neo-authoritarianism, facilitated by the COVID-19 crisis, which he has been able to instrumentalise for his interests.

**Conclusion: Lessons for the Future?**

Historian Reinhart Koselleck notes that we at least know for certain that the uncertainty caused by crises will always come to an end:

> It is in the nature of a crisis that a decision is due but not yet taken. The general uncertainty in a critical situation is thus pervaded by the certainty that – uncertain when, but certain, uncertain how, but certain – an end to the critical state is imminent. (Koselleck, 1973: 105)

But – we could add here – what happens if crises do not end? Or if one crisis leads to or flows into another, as is the case with which we are currently confronted, as the COVID–19 crisis will obviously lead to a social and economic crisis?

Other theorists, such as the anthropologist Viktor Turner (1987), perceive positive moments within crisis situations, which he calls ‘liminality’, a state ‘betwixt and between’. In crises, one is forced to question and challenge the given. Thereby, possibilities for change become visible, borders can be crossed, one can move between
old, already broken and violated, and new, not yet consolidated structures. Of course, every crisis is different, affects different areas, and fuels different fears and uncertainties.

On the one hand, many commentators emphasised 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 reorganise 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 and Weidenholzer, 2020).

Many threat scenarios failed to materialise. The four frames 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, legitimised in significantly different ways: the nation conceptualised as family, with a quasi-Messiah as leader (religious frame, legitimation qua moralisation and authorisation). We also encountered leaders who talked to their people on an equal level, establishing a rational dialogue and unifying relationship – full of empathy – with the citizens, employing legitimisation qua authority and rationalisation. The framing with trust implies self-responsibility and no hierarchical leadership (legitimation qua rationalisation and moralisation) and, finally, ‘fighting a war’ implies emergency situations where leaders carry the entire responsibility and the people have to follow orders (legitimation qua authority and mythopoesis).

In December 2020, several heads of states and prominent politicians were vaccinated immediately after the vaccines had been approved by the EU Commission and other health agencies (in the US, Israel and so forth). This was broadcast widely to counter conspiracy theories disseminated by opponents of vaccination (see Euronews with AP, 2020). Russia publicised its vaccine ‘Sputnik 5’ in August 2020 although it had only been tested with small groups of people (Rainsford, 2020). China has also developed several vaccines, which have not undergone enough standardised trials (Tan, 2020). In spite of such rapid success stories, many factors related both to the illness and to its treatment remain unknown; for example: for how long does the protection due to vaccination last? (VFA, 2020) Can vaccinated people continue to spread the virus? (McNamara, 2020) And so forth and so on.

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.

Notes
1 I would like to thank Matthew Johnson and anonymous reviewers for their constructive
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to András Kovács, Salomi Boukala, and Philippa Smith, who provided some relevant
data from Hungary, Greece, and New Zealand, respectively. Of course, I am solely
responsible for the final version.
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 refer readers to this (and other similar) websites for more
information.
3 See for example EFE/Reuters (2020). For the Italian case specifically, see Pankl (2020).
4 For example, the peak of the pandemic in Austria in the spring was characterised by
30 deaths (8 April 2020). 17 December 2020 saw 218 deaths (https://www.profil.at/
wissenschaft/corona-virus-entwicklungen-gefahr-osterreicher-live-11360953). Similarly,
in Germany, on 15 December 2020, 510 deaths were documented; 22 December 2020,
however, saw 986 deaths (https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1104173/
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-19 positive cases (in
relationship to population numbers), in the autumn of 2020.
5 TMT draws on Becker’s ideas and provides experimental socio-psychological evidence
of the many ways in which self-esteem is used as a coping mechanism against anxiety.
Self-esteem, TMT claims, draws on firm and positive beliefs in one’s cultural worldview
which can serve a death-denying function (for example, Pyszczynski, 2004; Greenberg
et al, 2015; Jost et al, 2017). Although the many quantitative empirical studies in the
tradition of TMT illustrate individuals’ range of activities in view of danger, including
during the COVID-19 crisis (for example, Pyszczynski et al, 2020: 9), TMT and its
methodology do not lend themselves to a discourse-oriented abductive approach which
considers authentic and non-experimentally induced interaction such as political leaders’
persuasive rhetoric to legitimise specific restrictive measures in view of the pandemic,
as investigated systematically and in-depth in this paper (see also Crayne and Medeiros
2020).
6 I refer readers to Van Dijk (1992: 87–9); Flinders and Wood (2018: 608); Wodak (2021:
145–6) and Hansson (2015) for more details on the range of discursive strategies of
denial.
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 five EU member states due to limitations of space, although the extended data
set also includes Poland, Greece, Italy and New Zealand. Nevertheless, I mention some
eamples of the latter in passing. Of course, the selection necessarily remains subjective.
Moreover, I have to neglect details of the socio-political and historical contexts, and of
the looming economic crisis, all of which trigger a huge dilemma: to save ‘the people’
or to save ‘the economy’? Fear of death is reinforced by fear of unemployment and vice versa (for example, Schmidinger and Weidenholzer, 2020). Obviously, more deaths occurred if the health system had suffered significant cuts due to austerity politics due to the financial crisis 2008, like in Italy, Spain, Portugal, France and the UK.

8 See, for example, Stern (2020); Khoo and Schimpfössl (2020) and Novy and Winckler (2020) for analyses of COVID-19 management in the US, the UK and Brazil.

9 See Pyszczynski (2004); Triandafyllidou et al (2009); De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013) and Neüff (2018) for examples of nationalising tendencies in times of crises.

10 See, for example, Powers and Xiao (2008); Stråth and Wodak (2009); Angouri and Wodak (2014) and Huang and Holmgreen (2020).

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.’

12 The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020) launched a multilingual official website, which was updated almost daily, with a lot of accessible and transparent information.

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).

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


Crisis communication and crisis management during COVID-19