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Introduction to the Special Issue

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The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing global state of emergency have fostered a new global debate on whether the current 'state of exception' makes differences between democracies and non-democracies, as well as liberal and illiberal regimes less politically relevant. There are many arguments that seem to lead us towards an affirmative answer. Many authoritative voices in global academia assume that all governments nowadays face similar challenges and similarly react to them (Kimmage 2020). In accordance with this logic, what matters is not the nature of political regimes (democracy or autocracy), but rather the resourcefulness and decisiveness of the government that translates into the state capacity to control and discipline the society badly affected by the deadly virus. Indeed, one may agree that all governments have to deal with the pandemic using a set of standard methods, in many respects constraining liberal rights – the rights to public assembly, free travel, or privacy, just to name the most salient among them. This shift towards what might be dubbed *"monitory democracy"* often *"makes the demarking line between authoritarian power and democratically elected government almost indistinguishable"* (Navarria 2014: 77).

Some opinion makers would go so far as to claim that liberal democracy is incompatible with robust crisis management and the fight against the virus, which makes the Covid-19 pandemic a part of the broader discussion on the transformations within the liberal order. This reasoning is largely based on Giorgio Agamben's claims of *"the collapse of the rule of law into the state of exception"* and the concomitant *"impotence of the Western liberal democracies"* that always have to confront the challenge of sovereign power (Sharpe 2006: 103). Against this background, liberalism may be declared as a major loser of the coronavirus, whose positions have been undermined by *"pandemically successful social polities"* of non-Western states with a higher social cohesion and a better sense of collective social responsibility (Therborn 2020).

From a geopolitical perspective, this discourse translates into a vision of Europe losing its global subjectivity: the most important structural feature of the world shaped by Covid-19 *"is not the multilateralism Europeans dreamed of, but rather a competition between China and America, the EU's two most important economic partners"* (Leonard 2020). Apart from that, the EU's Eastern Partnership programme might be severely

damaged by Covid-19, at least in the sense of visa-free travel arrangements with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. This major achievement, which was conducive to a de-bordering between the EU and its eastern neighbors, is now temporarily scrapped.

With all due recognition of some validity of these arguments, they might be counterbalanced by an opposite logic positing that the pandemic did not annul the distinction between democracies and non-democracies. With a few exceptions (such as, for example, Hungary), the pandemic didn't change much in the procedure of democratic governance. It is true that there is no direct correlation between the level of democracy and the Covid-19 statistics, yet so far procedurally democracies managed to survive (Niblett – Vinjamuri 2020), and many of them learned how to incorporate exceptional measures into the system of democratic governmentality (Raimondi 2016: 53).

In fact, the pandemic seems to have shattered some dictatorial regimes by exposing their incompetence and inefficiency in dealing with the threat. Thus, in Belarus, the Covid denialism of its authoritarian ruler seems to have alienated even many of his former supporters, leading to mass protests which erupted on a hitherto unprecedented scale, following the rigged presidential election in August 2020. Similarly, illiberal and populist leaders in democratic countries also had their image tarnished by mismanagement of the crisis. There is, therefore, no linear dependence between the pandemic and consolidation of authoritarianism, nor is there grounds to argue – as some do – that democracies have proven to be relatively weaker in the face of this challenge (see for instance Lu 2020 or similar Chinese 'soft power' attempts).

Moreover, the logic of sovereignty, with its bans and closures, works only in a very limited sense. Usurpation of power and riddance of democratic procedures – as theorists like Carl Schmitt would have expected – was not a central point in the political agendas of Western governments. The retrieved national sovereignty actualized by Covid-19 is to be better conceptualized as post-sovereignty, an agglomeration of specific practices (Loh – Heiskanen 2020) that are *"intrinsically linked to life as a biological force and to the body"* (Stepputat 2015: 130). In other words, sovereignty can be approached *"as a territorialized technology of (b)ordering bodies"* (Nayar 2014: 133), which differs a lot from sovereignty as a product of the political will that requires a friend-foe distinction.

However, the limitations that sovereignty has to face were not results of the progression of human rights or the rise of supranational cosmopolitism, as some theorists have expected (Gümplová 2015). Sovereignty revealed itself as a precarious and vulnerable construct due to its high dependence on multiple actors and factors beyond the direct reach of the government – health care infrastructure, medical expertise, volunteering, and corporate and individual responsibility (Makarychev – Romashko 2020). In other words, top-down coercion works only partially, or fails to work at all, and the general trend in Europe is to rely more on social responsibility (responsibilization) than on punishment and repression.

Against this background, the eruption of Covid-19 made us return to the Foucauldian interpretation of liberalism. The latter comes to be understood not merely as a political ideology that sees individual rights as a limit to state power, but as a mode of governing and disciplining human subjects through these very individual freedoms. Liberal governance allows them to play out according to the autonomous laws of social life. This, however, also implies managing the inherent risks *"by regulating human bodies and by controlling the natural and artificial conditions of life"* (Renault 2006: 162).

What the Covid-19 pandemic also made clear is that democracy comes in a broad variety of versions and forms, some more liberal and some less liberal. This variety of policies reflects the uncertainty existing within medical expertise itself. As Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2020: 8) put it, for instance, the pandemic has *"revealed the deeply political character of scientific input in critical junctures as well as the very political agency of experts themselves"*. As an illustration of their claim they point to the contrasting

cases of Greece and Sweden, where the appointed professional epidemiologists Professor Sotiris Tsiodras and Anders Tegnell adopted divergent approaches. This contrasting example elucidates a 'crisis of expertise'. We lack *"a broadly shared definition of the situation"*, with interpretations of Covid-19 varying from 'the greatest danger of our lifetimes' to 'merely a seasonal flu' (Brubaker 2020). Accordingly, the anti-pandemic measures can be viewed both as vital and indispensable and, on the contrary, as ineffective and detrimental to the economy. Evidently, this variety of approaches among professionals creates additional space for political manipulations and machinations within democratic polities. For instance, one of the lessons learned after the Fukushima tragedy was that *"even when exact radioactive measurements of food or soil are known, there is a diversity of opinion about what is a safe level and about who should be involved (government, merchants, farmers, consumers) with setting safety standards"* (Davis – Hayes-Conroy 2018: 726). Similar distinctions among professional epidemiologists complicate decision making in the case of Covid-19 too.

This collection of papers makes several important contributions to the ongoing debate on Covid-19. First of all, it shows that old lines of distinction became more contextual and less certain, which includes not only the lines between liberalism and its opposite but also those between the political and the depoliticized or technocratic. In their contribution *Zuzana Maďarová, Alexandra Ostertágová* and *Pavol Hardoš* pointed to a paradoxical function of scientific knowledge, namely that it could be used as a tool of othering, from differentiation of lives to discursive production of *"lives of no value"*, ungrievable non-lives. This public effect of academic cognition as a policy instrument is particularly visible in times of crises and emergencies. Long before the outbreak of Covid-19 some authors predicted that the *"familiar distinction between illness and health can no longer hold… [T]he line of differentiation between interventions targeting susceptibility to illness or frailty on the one hand, and interventions aimed at the enhancement of capacities on the other, is beginning to blur. […] [I]dentification of high-risk plus biological incorrigibility can switch the affected individual – or potential individual – onto the circuits of exclusion"* (Rose 2001: 34).

Some of the articles in this special issue assume that the Covid-19 pandemics might become a factor triggering intrinsic transformations within the liberal doctrine. *Ahmed Maati* and *Žilvinas Švedkauskas* start their analysis with references to 'old liberalism' and its focus on citizens' individual rights, yet we know that today's protestors against lockdown measures that unfold under similar slogans aggregate a patchy agglomeration of different groups, from left- to right-wingers, and it is very likely that many of them have very little to do with ideas of classic liberalism. Importantly, it has also argued that there is no fixed correlation between 'liberal' and 'illiberal' discourse on the one hand and the state of democracy and rule of law on the other. This falls into a broader trend of rhetoric being decoupled from practice. During the pandemic some authoritarian regimes (e.g. Belarus) have opportunistically pursued a 'liberal' discursive strategy, resisting economically undesirable restrictive measures in the name of individual rights and freedoms, such as the freedom of worship or movement. On the other hand, metaphors of war and conflict have visibly oozed into the discourse of democratic politicians who used them as one of their mobilization tools as part of the crisis management strategy.

By the same token, Covid-19 might contribute to transformations within the phenomenon of populism. As the Ukrainian case demonstrates (see the article by *Yuriy Temirov* and *Ivanna Machitdze*), Covid-19 does not seem to kill populists in power, as some commentators have predicted (Rachman 2020); moreover, it may create new niches for them. The comparative study of Ukraine and Georgia which the authors pursue demonstrates that there can be a variety of outcomes in terms of how the so-called hybrid regimes respond to pandemic challenges, ranging from a 'success story' to a triumph of incompetence. In future research, the Covid-19 'crash test' is thus likely to provide a new

perspective on this type of regime and, consequently, new food for thought in terms of how the application of the category of 'hybrid' might be in need of reevaluation or further specification.

Also focusing on Eastern European hybrid regimes, *Makarychev*, *Goes*, and *Kuznetsova* provide a Foucauldian analysis of the Russian Covid-19 crisis management. Contrary to a more traditional view of Russia as a hypercentralized polity over which the Kremlin exercises single-handed sovereign power, the authors see it through the lens of biopolitics and governmentality. They argue that Moscow's relegation of crisis management to regional authorities becomes *"an important contribution to the gradual decentralization of the Russian political system"* and stimulates the demand for autonomy in some of the regions. The pandemic thus exacerbated and made more visible multiple tensions between the centre and the periphery which existed alongside Putin's 'vertical of power', perhaps even sowing seeds of its future transformation.

Against this background, one may also predict that Covid-19 may foster a further conceptual divorce between liberalism and democracy. The latter is very likely to survive as procedural and institutional democracy, while the former will increasingly face new limitations related to the crisis of the liberal conception of society as composed of rational and therefore inherently free human beings. As *Maďarová, Ostertágová* and *Hardoš* suggest, it is the crisis of the liberal notion of self-sufficient and self-secured human subjects that can partly explain the vast proliferation of demands for empathy and care (Borovoy – Zhang 2017), which, during the pandemic crisis, were politically instrumentalized by EU-critical narratives of 'abandonment' in such countries as Italy, but in many other places as well.

At the same time, some of the articles identify issues that, due to their complexity, can't have a single conceptualization. Thus, *Temirov* and *Machitdze* claim that, on the one hand, in times of the pandemic crisis many illiberal regimes seem to be quite vulnerable, which may be illustrated by the examples of the mass scale protests in Belarus (after August 9, 2020) and Kyrgyzstan (in October 2020). Evidently, in both cases the main triggers of the street protests were fraudulent elections, yet the mismanagement of the pandemic crisis by the authorities was a significant factor that fuelled the discontent. Yet, on the other hand, as the two authors explain, a major factor of Georgia's relative success during the first wave of Covid-19 was the concentration of informal tools of governance in the hands of the country's wealthiest oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, a development which has very little in common with liberal democracy.

Looking at the broader post-Soviet context, one may see that Covid-19 became a factor that complicates foreign policies of illiberal and dictatorial states. Thus, the closure of the Russian-Belarusian border by the initiative of Moscow became an irritant for Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Here, the pandemic exposed the extent to which dictatorships – which had long taken pride in the rhetoric of sovereignty and self-sufficiency – are structurally dependent on cross-border flows of goods and people. On the other hand, Lukashenka's decision to hold a military parade dedicated to Victory Day on May 9, 2020 – against the background of Putin's decision to cancel this highly ceremonial event in Moscow – can be interpreted as a symbolic competition between the two regimes in the sphere of memory politics. Some elements of this story are touched upon by *Sergey Pakhomenko* and *Iryna Gridina*. What might be added to their analysis is that the border lockdown between Russia and EU member states has complicated the practical implementation of Russian soft power, which is largely understood as a series of policies promoting a Russia-friendly world outlook in general and Russian memory politics in particular. Here, the comparison of Latvia and Russia is useful as it outlines similarities and differences between the effects of the pandemic crisis on memory politics in democratic and authoritarian states. Restriction measures played a key role in limiting the power of popular protest both as an instrument of shaping democratic decision making in the sphere of memory politics and

as a potential niche for authoritarian subversion engineered by external actors like the Kremlin. One of the notable similarities is that in both cases, the Covid-19 crisis intensified the securitization of collective memories, thus bearing an effect on a domain of social life which, at a glance, would seem distant from the pandemic agenda. Furthermore, the closed borders further distance Russia from Russophone communities in such countries as Latvia and Estonia and can potentially contribute to the Russian speakers' better integration with these countries' national mainstreams. A similar problem of cultural and linguistic integration, namely that of the Azeri minority, also exists in Georgia, which demonstrates the importance of effective information policy for successful crisis management.

In sum, the special issue offers a variety of case studies that demonstrate how broad and profound the political effects of the 2020 pandemic crisis are likely to become for increasingly *"medicalized societies"* (Boggs 2015) with 'digitalized' and *"biocoded bodies"* (Colman 2015). Above all, the lesson to be learned from them is that fixed correlations and linear dependencies between the pandemic and its effects on social and political life are an exception rather than a rule. The reverberations of the crisis tend to differ from case to case, and sometimes even the *most similar* cases can yield varying outcomes. So far, the existing research has also suggested that many trivializing, 'commonsensical' assumptions about the ramifications of the crisis need to be taken with a grain of salt. If in some cases, the state of crisis and emergency does indeed seem to have helped strengthen populist and 'illiberal' leaders and weakened liberalism, other instances clearly demonstrated the opposite. Thus, Donald Trump's erratic response to the pandemic clearly did not improve his public image in the runup to the 2020 US presidential election. In some places (e.g. Belarus), the pandemic even visibly spurred the anti-authoritarian momentum, shattering the legitimacy of dictatorial regimes that previously seemed stable to most observers. Finally, the pandemic exposed once again the complex and ambiguous relationships between key notions of modern politics such as the tension between the *liberal* and the *democratic* for instance, or between the *technocratic* or *epistocratic,* on the one hand, and the majoritarian and politicized, on the other. The triumph of *expertise,* which, at some point, seems to have replaced the global triumph of populism, simultaneously became its crisis, as under conditions of grave uncertainty, the inherently *political* nature of crisis management measures became increasingly obvious.

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What Makes Life Grievable? Discursive Distribution of Vulnerability in the Pandemic

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Abstract: This article examines Judith Butler's concepts of vulnerability and grievability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and biopower practices introduced in the name of the protection of the people. An analysis of the elite political discourse in Czechia, Germany, Great Britain, and Slovakia in the first three months of the pandemic explores how vulnerability was constructed and distributed among the respective populations. We identified two prevailing discursive frames – science and security. Within the first, vulnerability was constructed in terms of biological characteristics, rendering elderly, disabled, and chronically ill bodies as already lost and ungrievable. Within the security frame, Roma or migrant populations' vulnerability to the virus has been discursively shifted into being seen as a threat, while vulnerability itself was recognized more as a feature of institutions or society. Thus, despite the claims that 'we are all in this together', the pandemic has exposed how our vulnerability and interdependency are embedded within existing social structures.

Keywords: COVID-19, vulnerability, precarity, grievability, pandemic politics.

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The COVID-19 pandemic revealed our vulnerability. Anyone could get infected and everybody has been constantly reminded about the risk through daily reports of new cases of infections and deaths. States have taken measures that were unprecedented – borders, schools, shops, and many working places were closed, and people were required to stay at home whenever possible – all to 'protect and save human lives'.

However, even though anyone could get infected, the pandemic has also shown that some types of people were more likely to get sick, had more severe symptoms, or died from the virus more often. Since the very beginning, the World Health Organisation (2020a) has defined the so-called 'most vulnerable' or 'at risk' groups: elderly people

and people with medical preconditions. Gradually, further information about affected populations started to emerge. Up to half of COVID-19 related deaths have been related to long-term care facilities, and the figure was 80% in some high-income countries (WHO 2020b). Persons with disabilities, who already face social and employment exclusion, face higher risk of losing their job and experience greater challenges in returning to work (UN 2020). For a third of the Roma people in the EU, the precautionary measures, such as washing hands with warm water, pose a challenge (EC 2020). Poor working conditions of seasonal migrant workers across industries in the Western European countries, such as Italy, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden, have resulted in numerous coronavirus outbreaks and affected thousands of workers (Schneider – Götte 2020). The pandemic thus has had a more devastating impact on some populations than others not only in terms of a higher risk to their health and lives but also in terms of their social, political, and economic safety and wellbeing.

Even though the term vulnerability has been used to describe a particular characteristic that makes people more susceptible to the virus, this term also represents an analytical and theoretical concept that has been elaborated in the past years by various scholars (see Cole 2016). The work of Judith Butler (e.g. 2004, 2016a, 2016b, 2020c) provides one of the most important contributions to the theoretical elaboration of vulnerability. Butler challenges the understanding of vulnerability as a characteristic intrinsic to a particular body, human or population. According to her, a human body is never vulnerable by itself but always vulnerable to something – a person, situation, or social structure – that can injure or destroy the body or, on the contrary, protect it and make it flourish (Butler 2020c). The degree to which human bodies are exposed to risk of loss is not distributed equally among different populations. *"Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'"* (Butler 2004: 32). The different distribution of vulnerability and the distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives follow the structural and systemic power relations – systemic racism, sexism, and capitalism create such relationships that put some people at a risk of loss, often in favour of a better protection of the lives of others (Butler, 2020b, 2020c).

With our analysis, we would like to contribute to this growing interest in using the concepts of vulnerability, precariousness, and precarity in studies of politics and international relations, as well as in critical studies of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we would also like to register important connections to scholarly work done in critical IR studies on issues of global health, securitization of infectious diseases, and the politics of pandemic prevention.

Critical IR scholars have noted how politics of global health are constructed and securitized (Davies 2010; McInnes – Lee 2017; Nunes 2014, 2020; Wenham 2019), and in particular how health and infectious diseases have come to be framed as security issues (Davies 2008; (Ingram 2005; Kamradt-Scott 2015; Kamradt-Scott – McInnes 2012; Rushton 2011; Weir – Mykhalovskiy 2010) with the concomitant 'medicalization of security' (Elbe 2011). IR scholarship has also recognized vulnerability as an aspect of *"the very nature and embedded norms of international society"* (Clark 2013: 2). Our vulnerability, though presumed to be shared by all equally, can be either reduced or aggravated by the fact of how international society's norms and rules are set up. Clark (2013) notes how the international regimes tasked with management of violence, climate change, human movement, and global health impact who is made more vulnerable and how. In the case of global health, he notes how *"international society […] has encouraged particular ways of thinking"*, promoting *"a biomedical approach that, by itself, can be insensitive to its social dimensions"* (Clark 2013: 12).

Framing new but also re-emerging infectious diseases through the prism of risk-management of global health security may be appealing for its semblance of scientific objectivity. However, McInnes and Roemer-Mahler (2017) have noted that this does not extricate it from challenges of politicized value judgements. Instead, by focusing on future disasters and potential technological fixes it can neglect existing health problems and their socio-economic roots. This recalls Rushton's earlier observation (2011) of how the regimes of health security have focused on containment rather than prevention. Viewing the related diseases primarily in terms of risks to both global public health and national economic security has led to 'emergency vigilance' (Weir – Mykhalovskiy 2010) and the design of 'preemptive forms of control' where both the states and the World Health Organization have framed their policy response through a discourse of preparedness (Sanford et al. 2016; Hanrieder – Kreuder-Sonnen 2014). The result of such a framing is that diseases are separated from the socio-economic contexts in which they appear. It also risks dictating a biopolitical scope of democratic action that *"legitimatiz[es] the current social and economic order, by naturalizing it"* (David – Le Dévédec 2019: 367).

It is with these considerations in mind that we wish to examine how vulnerability and grievability have been constructed in the elite political discourse during the first three months of the pandemic in four European countries – the Czech Republic, Germany, the Slovak Republic, and the United Kingdom. Identifying the dominant discursive frames as the frames of science and security, we explore what criteria have been used to construct an individual or collective body as vulnerable; whether the elite political discourse was able to recognize the situatedness of vulnerability within the social, political, and economic relations; and how certain vulnerable populations were rendered ungrievable.

THE NEXUS OF VULNERABILITY, PRECARIOUSNESS, PRECARITY AND GRIEVABILITY

Judith Butler's philosophical project posits an ethical subject that is both 'discursive' and 'material' and she uses this material/ontological fact of human life to ground her claim for equal treatment of all humans (Hekman 2014). An embodied subject is also at the centre of pandemic discourses – vulnerable bodies, management of bodies, and counting, shielding, and healing of bodies. While the context of disease incites a predominantly biological understanding of bodies, in this text we conceptualize bodies as historically and politically created and produced through a process of materialization. This materialization of the body is a process consisting of a variety of practices that create a sense of a 'natural' body (Butler 1993). We see the anti-pandemic measures as well as the pandemic discourses as part of such practices that produce 'the vulnerable bodies' they aim to shield and protect. In other words, we adopt the concept of performativity as *"the aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names"* (Butler 1993: 33). However, this is not a one-way project. Bodies are not stripped of their agency, as the practices of materialization are formed in relation to bodies (Wilcox 2015). Bodies that tend to be seen as managed, hurt, lost, and saved in the pandemic are *"deeply political bodies, constituted in reference to historical political conditions while at the same time acting upon our world"* (Wilcox 2015: 3).

Within the theoretical framework developed by Butler over time, bodies are not separate 'units' and embodied subjects cannot be considered as autonomous individuals. Following up on the previous feminist scholarship (e.g. Adriana Cavarero or Carole Pateman), the interdependence and vulnerability of human bodies serve as a core assumption.[1] This allows Butler not only to avoid essentializing particular groups or identities, but also to challenge the prevailing liberal notions of sovereign individuals constructed in the story about the state of nature – the political theory narrative about a prehistory of social and economic life (Petherbridge 2016; Butler 2020c). This fantasy, according to Butler (2020c), wipes out the social bonds between people and the very condition of (not only) human

existence which is dependency and interdependency. Living beings rely on social and material structures as well as on each other. Bodies are exposed; they all can be injured or killed, which means people are bound to others in their vulnerability (Wilcox 2015). In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, one's breath can clearly mean danger to others (Butler 2020b), which provides a new background for rethinking the individual self and boundaries of the body. Moreover, this experience of the mutual interdependence and vulnerability invites us to build relations based on empathy (Petherbridge 2016) and care.

The vulnerability scholarship has flourished over the last years (cf. Brown et al. 2017; Cole 2016), which can be attributed to several factors: the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars, the current economic structures and labour relations, the intensified migration and refugee crises, as well as the failed international responses these engendered (Cole 2016). Even more writings on vulnerability can be expected to come in the context of the pandemic. While Butler's work on precarious life helped initiate a great deal of these discussions, her account of vulnerability is specific in at least three ways: in terms of the careful distinction between vulnerability and precarity; regarding the considerations of the power dynamics in the process of signification of 'the vulnerable'; and in seeing vulnerability as 'a portal' to political actions and resistance (Butler 2020b).

In Butler's work, vulnerability is conceptualized as ontological rather than historical, but as an ontology it needs to be understood within the context of social and political relations (Lorey 2015). Vulnerability is not a subjective state, an attribute of a subject, or part of an (individual or collective) identity. Vulnerability is rather an inevitable feature of shared or interdependent lives; it is a feature of social relations (Butler 2020c: 46): *"Perhaps we can say that we are vulnerable to those environmental and social structures that make our lives possible, and that when they falter, so do we."* Isabell Lorey (2015) goes beyond Butler and claims that this fundamental social dependency highlights the significance of care and reproductive work, which is specifically relevant in the context of a pandemic. Beings are not able to survive without care, protection, and security.

Precariousness is a narrower concept than vulnerability. Precariousness refers to the inevitability of our death, fragility, and insecurity related to an absence of control.[2] The consequence of precariousness is the possibility of loss – loss of life or loss of physical and emotional or psychological features (e.g. food, bodily safety, integrity, dignity), whereas the consequence of increased vulnerability is indeterminate (Butler 2016a; Gilson 2014). Precariousness is a condition of living beings; vulnerability is a condition applicable to systems or institutions. Vulnerability in Butler's work indicates a more pervasive instability and uncertainty and can lead to insecurity and destabilization. Vulnerability is also a condition that is not limited to life, as is the case for precariousness (Gilson 2014).

Shared precariousness – similarly to vulnerability an essential feature of life itself – is distributed unequally. The enduring dependency of all beings on social and economic forms of support for life implies that we are exposed to a certain vulnerability when we are left unsupported. *"When there is nothing to depend upon, when social structures fail or are withdrawn, then life itself falters or fails: life becomes precarious"* (Butler 2016a: loc. 642–643). Certain populations suffer more from the absent or failing infrastructures characterizing social, political, and economic lives and become differentially exposed to harm, violence, and death (Butler 2016a, 2016b). This politically induced condition is what Butler calls precarity (2004, 2016a, 2020c). It can be understood as an effect of the social, political and legal regulations that are supposed to protect against general precariousness (Lorey 2015); it *"emerges because lives are perceived through the lens of certain dominant frames"* (Gilson 2014: 45).[3]

The COVID-19 pandemic has put in stark relief our shared human vulnerability and the unequal distribution of precariousness as well as precarity. While all people are vulnerable – at potential risk of getting the virus, some populations are in more precarious conditions as they face more serious consequences of the illness, such as people

with medical preconditions. The consequences of the illness itself and of the anti-pandemic measures differ for populations whose situation mirrors a failing social system, such as homeless people or women experiencing intimate partner violence. Such differences illustrate the unequal distribution of precarity among populations.

However, many of these precarious conditions have not been recognized as such. Certain lives are highly protected against the virus, but this level of protection can change over time and under the economic and political circumstances. Other lives have been less valued or have not been recognized as lives at all and we see them being left to die (Butler 2020a, 2020b). What we are interested in is what norms are invoked to distinguish lives worthy of protection from those that are dispensable and already lost. We see this as *"a larger operation of biopower that unjustifiably distinguishes between grievable and ungrievable lives"* (Butler 2020c: loc. 710). In other words, grief and the possibility of grief (i.e., grievability) indicate that a loss was acknowledged and felt, that a life was valued as life. If life is considered grievable, all possible measures will be taken to preserve it and protect it against harm and destruction (Butler 2020c; Willig 2012).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The process of distinguishing between grievable and ungrievable life in the pandemic has been realized greatly through the discursive distribution of vulnerability. In this article we examine how vulnerability was constructed in this case and how certain populations were rendered ungrievable within two discursive frames – science and security. To do so, we analyse the elite political discourse in the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, and Slovakia over the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis of frames provides us with a viable analytical framework to uncover the discursive distribution of vulnerability, precarity and (un)grievability. Discursive frames are structures and partial symbolic apparatuses that people use to make sense of themselves and what is happening around them (Nesbitt-Larking – Kinnvall 2012). They provide categories for thinking about certain issues, set the problems to be addressed and establish limits of discussion (Nesbitt-Larking – Kinnvall 2012). Moreover, frames refer *"to the packaging of a rhetorical message in a way that particular responses will be encouraged and others discouraged"* (Bartel 2010: 311). In the context of the pandemic, discursive frames determine the 'representability' of lives – the frames provide criteria upon which certain lives at a certain moment are considered valuable and worthy of protection while other lives (or even the same lives at a different point in time) are not fully recognized as lives and thus their loss would not be grieved (Butler 2016a; Kobová 2013). Through the identified frames we were able to trace the process of attributing vulnerability and depriving of grievability in the pandemic.

When selecting the countries, we aimed to cover countries from both the West and the East of Europe (in order to grasp the East/West dynamic) with differences in the spread and severity of the virus impact, as well as the governmental response to it. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker provided a helpful comparison of European countries based on 17 indicators following containment and closure policies, as well as economic and health system policies (Hale et al. 2020). As we planned to analyse discourse, the language criterion was also important. Taking into consideration these three criteria (East/West; deaths/government response; our language capacities), we have decided to cover political discourses in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. However, we did not aspire to conduct a comparative analysis of these countries; rather we approached them as four examples of one pandemic discourse.

The object of our analysis was the main communication channels of the governments in relation to the pandemic – namely the key governmental media briefings and podcasts during the selected period (CZ – 39 sources, DE – 43, SK – 59, UK – 82; 1 March – 31 May 2020). The state representatives and key public health actors used these channels to

communicate the key developments in their countries, as well as their policy measures. In this material we looked at how the virus was presented and how vulnerability was constructed – what populations were considered vulnerable and what criteria were used to construct vulnerability. Based on this initial step we were able to identify the two most common frames in the political discourses – the frame of science and the frame of security – as well as the populations or even institutions that were constructed as vulnerable.

In the second round of the analysis we examined how certain populations at higher risk of contracting the coronavirus or experiencing more serious consequences (of the virus or anti-pandemic measures) were rendered ungrievable within these two discursive frames. We cover the situations of elderly people, people with disabilities, Roma people, and workers in the meat industry. These populations were selected because they were all discussed (even though to different degrees) in the elite political discourse. In the analysed material, the situations of these populations provide the most complex example of the wider phenomena of discursive vulnerability and ungrievability in the pandemic. Finally, they also illustrate the different socio-economic relations within and among countries and their relation to the public health crisis.

NATURALIZATION OF DEATH WITHIN THE FRAME OF SCIENCE

The frame of science

The discursive frame of science was built through the experts present at media briefings who were quoted or referred to, as well as through the medical and technical language. COVID-19 was framed as a scientific problem calling for 'scientific solutions' (Moran – Green 2020). However, in this case science was implicitly understood in positivist terms and was characterized by determinism, system closure, empiricism, as well as a focus on measurements and modelling (Steinmetz 2005). Such a frame assumes that *"the ethical and moral issues faced by policymakers can be reduced to questions of 'best evidence', and that what is actually going on in the world can be equated with what the chosen metrics indicate is going on"* (Greenhalgh – Russell 2009: 307). Therefore, it hardly offers sufficient tools to include the understanding of power structures and social relations, including structural inequalities impacting the consequences of the pandemic, in political decisions.

The scientific frame was present in all four countries from the very beginning of the pandemic and was mostly tied to the field of medicine. The press conferences were often joined by medical experts or their expertise has been transmitted to the conferences via political representatives. In Slovakia, the new Prime Minister Igor Matovič not only invited the country's chief hygienist Ján Mikas to be part of his conferences, but Mikas was often the first person to speak. The Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel explained that *"anything I tell you about it comes from the constant consultations between the federal government and the experts from the Robert Koch Institute and other scientists and virologists"* (Bundesregierung 2020b). Legitimation of political decisions through science or just constantly referring to science has been a practice at the Czech and UK press conferences. As summarized by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak (The UK Government 2020a): *"we have been guided by scientific advice and have been making the right decisions at the right time."* The scientists advising on policies during the pandemic were mostly epidemiologists, virologists, and clinicians (for Slovakia see ÚVZ SR 2020) with IT specialists in Czechia (The Czech Government 2020a) and behavioural scientists and engineers in the UK (Carrell et al. 2020). In an exceptional approach, Germany enlisted humanities scholars, including philosophers, historians, theologians, and jurists, to advise the state on loosening the pandemic restrictions (Deutscher Ethikrat 2020).

Medical and biological distributive criteria of vulnerability

While in general the elite political discourse acknowledged that we are all vulnerable and everybody can be exposed to the virus, the scientific frame focused the discussion on biology and medicine as the key criteria of vulnerability. In all the analysed countries, the 'vulnerable groups' or 'high risk groups' were constructed pursuant to the World Health Organization's guidelines, according to which the virus impacts *"people older than 60 years old or who have health conditions like lung or heart disease, diabetes or conditions that affect their immune system"* (WHO 2020a: para 1).

The categories of age and pre-existing medical conditions were pointed out when reporting new cases of the coronavirus, particularly deaths, and introducing policy measures. In the latter case, the political discourse stressed the need of protection and mostly produced the vulnerable, helpless, and supposedly docile bodies it aimed to protect (Butler 1993). In the first case – when informing about the coronavirus deaths – the categories of age and pre-existing medical conditions served mostly as a 'reassurance' that serious conditions do not concern the general population; these categories became a tool of othering (Abrams – Abbott 2020; Goggin – Ellis 2020). For instance, the Czech Minister of Health Adam Vojtěch (The Czech Government 2020b) claimed that *"this illness is not deadly […]. If we talk about deaths, those are elderly people, people with polymorbidity, people suffering other illnesses, maybe oncological patients, but this illness really is not deadly for the majority of the population. […] It is necessary to reassure citizens that there is no need to panic and fear this illness as a deadly illness."*

Following the discourse of the WHO, the 'vulnerable groups' within the scientific frame have been predominantly defined in categories that are directly related to the physiological and biological characteristics of the body or symptoms expressed by or 'on' the body (in line with the use of the term clinical characteristics in medical research; see Wei-jie Guan et al. 2020). Such a construction does not allow for recognizing that the body is a social phenomenon and its persistence *"depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to 'be,' in the sense of 'persist,' it must rely on what is outside itself"* (Butler 2016a: loc. 883). The biological and medical construction of vulnerability thus contradicts Butler's conceptualization of vulnerability as a feature of social relations and a condition of all beings (Butler 2020c: 46). Moreover, it renders invisible the social, economic, and political relations that contribute to the increased precarious conditions of certain populations and allow for understanding their lives as *un*-valuable and thus ungrievable, as we show below.

Conditions left behind the scientific frame

The biological category of age as a criterion of vulnerability during the pandemic has already been challenged. As Tremain (2020) and Hebblethwaite et al. (2020) argue, the higher vulnerability to the coronavirus of elderly people needs to be understood in the context of financial instability, ageism, unstable housing, social exclusion, and health inequalities that older people face. As Hebblethwaite et al. (2020: para 3) summarize following argumentation of Judith Butler: *"Older lives have been enabled and disabled by politically induced precarious conditions that disproportionately expose some populations to different degrees of moral injury and violence."* The politically induced precarity contributes significantly to the disproportionate vulnerability of older people to the coronavirus; the pandemic just rendered the long-term precarity of older bodies visible. A particularly important example is provided by the situation of people living in care homes in the UK.

As a report of the *Office for National Statistics* (2020) shows, the number of deaths of UK care home residents significantly increased during the first months of the pandemic. In April 2020, this number was nearly three times higher than in April 2019. According to McGilton et al. (2020), among the factors that may have led to higher mortality rates

in care homes were insufficient staff, low wages, and poor working conditions. The fear of getting sick and losing their livelihood might have led some workers to avoid their care jobs, since care homes were among the last facilities to be provided with adequate protective equipment. The high prevalence of temporary employment that forces care workers to have multiple jobs also might have contributed to the spread of the virus from one facility to another (McGilton et al. 2020).

This state of the workforce in care homes reflects the global care crisis (Baines – Cunningham 2015; McGilton 2020), which has deepened since the 2007/2008 financial crisis and the implementation of austerity measures (Baines – Cunningham 2015). Besides other effects, the restriction of the public spending for care provision accompanied by poor pay and working conditions led to a recruitment and retention crisis in the paid-care sector in the UK (Pearson 2019). The available data show that the care and health facilities are largely understaffed. A 2017 survey among 30,000 nurses in various facilities (including care homes) in the UK revealed that there are prevalent shortfalls in planned staffing of registered nurses or health care support workers during their shifts and many of the nurses also reported that some necessary patient care was not done due to a lack of time (Senek et al. 2020).

To put it in Butler's terms, these social, economic, and political relations constitute precarity and make the lives of both the elderly people living in care homes and the people who take care of them more exposed to harm, injury, and even loss of life. In the official political pandemic discourse in the UK, however, these relations remained largely unrecognized. The global care crisis, which was brought to boil during the pandemic, was patched up by allowing nursery and midwifery students to join the 'frontline' and receive *"the salary and the pension that is appropriate to their level"* (Jenrick, quoted in The UK Government 2020b), i.e. a salary that belongs among the lowest in the country (Office for National Statistics 2019).

The scientific frame and its focus on pre-existing medical conditions was particularly harmful also for people with disabilities. Several authors (Abrams – Abbott 2020; Goggin – Ellis 2020; Ignani – Erickson 2020; Liddiard, 2020) have already noticed that the current pandemic discourse asserts the value of lives through their *"meeting the standards of compulsory able-bodiedness"* (Ignani – Erickson 2020: para. 3) and economic productivity (Abrams – Abbott 2020: para 18). One way of looking outside of the dominant frames is through the prism of disability studies claiming that the focus should shift from disabled bodies to the collective life and intersecting conditions that nurture life regardless of its ability. *"This means moving strictly from lacking bodies to highlighting a cruel division of labour, where the most socially vulnerable are the most likely to die of COVID-19"* (Abrams – Abbott 2020: para 14). In order to do so we look at the situation of people with disabilities and chronic illnesses in the Czech Republic and structural conditions for care work.

A small-scale but so far the only Czech study about the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, as well as for their carers (AIP 2020), found out that more than 80% of the participants experienced deteriorated access to basic care during the lockdown. Both informal home care and care provided by volunteers, neighbours, or acquaintances, as well as care provided by registered social and health care providers were limited in the pandemic, while the need for social care substantially increased. At the end of the lockdown, one third of the participants handled the situation with significant problems or did not handle the situation at all. At the same time, 37% of people with disabilities and their care providers stated either that they are unable to pay for their basic living needs or that they worry about it (AIP 2020).

The current deficits in the system of long-term health and social care in the Czech Republic stem from the process of deinstitutionalization and marketization the care system went through over the last 20 years (Kubalčíková – Havlíková 2016). Due to the

budget cuts after the 2007/2008 financial crisis the system of assessing disability changed, resulting in decreases in incomes as well as the scope of eligible recipients (Sokačová 2013). The cuts also contributed to a fall in the funding for social services helping caregivers and institutions in providing assistance to people in need. For some people dependent on long-term care, especially those living in small municipalities, it is impossible to find the necessary services (Koldinská – Štefko 2018). As claimed by Sokačová (2013), care work thus remained on the shoulders of families, primarily women, and is mostly unpaid.

However, within the scientific frame, the discussions about people with pre-existing medical conditions focused mostly on their bodily predispositions and medical consequences of the virus, while their everyday experiences related to the limited access to care were left unnoticed. Such an approach has also prevented making a connection between the lack of available care services, the poor working conditions, and insufficient institutional structures on the one hand, and the Czech care workers travelling across the closed borders during the pandemic to provide social and health care in Austria and Germany on the other (Vlasáková 2020; Zacharenko 2020).

Naturalization of death leads to ungrievability of lives

As the scientific frame helped strip bodies of their social, economic, and political relations, it left them described purely in biological and medical terms. Such a discursive setting enabled making the deaths of elderly people in care homes, as well as people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, seem natural and unavoidable in the pandemic. As illustrated by the UK's Chief Medical Adviser Chriss Witty (The UK Government 2020a): *"Some people will get it and will have no symptoms at all. […] Of those who do have symptoms, the majority will have either a mild disease or a moderate disease […]. But obviously, a small minority […] will get significant disease requiring hospital care. A small proportion of those will go on to need intensive care. And sadly, some people will go on to die."*

Particularly in the case of elderly people – as already stated by Tremain (2020) – the clinical criteria of vulnerability served as a legitimation of their death, which could be constructed as an understandable consequence of both their inherent bodily vulnerability and the inevitable circumstances of the pandemic. Following this logic of the scientific frame, the high death rates of the care home residents were excused by the clinical definition of vulnerability, which was originally meant to protect them. That this 'protection' was failing was evinced in the UK, where letters were sent to people with disabilities both announcing that they *"would not be abandoned"*, and reminding them they should not expect to be resuscitated in case of severe Covid-related illness (Abrams – Abbott 2020; BBC News 2020). In such a frame, the death of the vulnerable bodies does not matter, and their lives do not matter either; they become ungrievable.

In Butler's terms, we might think of a pandemic as *"dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all"* (Butler 2016a: loc. 949). The elite political discourse, presenting the pandemic via the frame of science, made the death of the elderly people and the people with disabilities and chronic illnesses expected, natural, and even unavoidable; it contributed to the production of lives with no value, non-lives, ungrievable lives. It thus further reinforced the structures of ageism and ableism it was embedded with.

PROTECTION OF THE MAJORITY, THE ECONOMY, AND THE STATE REPUTATION WITHIN THE SECURITY FRAME

The frame of security

The perspective we aim to describe has been addressed as a frame of war (Benziman 2020; Pfrimer – Barbosa 2020), martial rhetoric (Opillard et al. 2020), hero discourse

(Einboden 2020), military metaphors (Olimat 2020), militarized discourse (Acheson 2020; Laucht – Jackson 2020), and securitization of COVID-19 (Baysa-Barredo 2020; Gaudino 2020). Building on critical security studies and based on the analysed discourses, we consider the analytical concept of a security frame most appropriate as it can also include aspects of militarization[4] and the rhetoric of war (Wenham 2019).

The security frame was built through the visibility and participation of actors and through the security and military jargon. Benziman (2020: 254) summarized that within the frame of security the pandemic is described as a war, enemy or threat; political elites are able to present themselves as those having a plan to 'defeat' the virus and 'defend' citizens; medical personnel are called heroes; isolation and lockdown can be presented as patriotism; and governments can communicate their activities as *"joining a global effort to overcome it while creating a distinction between 'our' unique (and better) treatment of it [and other treatments of it]".* The time aspect also proved important. When COVID-19 started to spread in the analysed countries, the frame of security allowed them to present the pandemic as a war that has an end-point and assert that all the costs are bearable if the fight against the pandemic ends successfully (Benziman 2017, 2020).

The framing of COVID-19 as a security threat has been supported by the presence and activities of the military in all four of the analysed countries. Already in March, the UK, Germany, Czechia and Slovakia announced that their militaries were ready to support the respective governments in response to the pandemic crisis. The militaries provided equipment, were active at the borders, and in setting up local healthcare facilities, and provided testing, but also assisted in securing quarantines in marginalized Roma settlements in Slovakia (Folentová – Osvaldová 2020; Ministerstvo obrany ČR 2020; Ministry of Defence UK 2020; Schulz 2020). At the same time, security and military officers took part in advisory and decision-making bodies during the pandemic. While the security personnel made just a few appearances at the media briefings, the elite political discourse was highly securitized itself. For instance, the Slovak Minister of Finance Eduard Heger (TA3 2020c) claimed that *"we are fighting against an enemy who is a killer"* and the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (The Czech Government 2020d) threatened the citizens by saying that if they do not obey the government's rules, *"we will have to use law enforcement"*.

From vulnerability to a threat

Through the security frame the coronavirus has been constructed as a threat to all. Vulnerability seemed to concern everyone. Political leaders deployed the frame of security to mobilize people to behave in the desired way, as Angela Merkel's speech (Bundesregierung 2020b) illustrates: *"This is what the epidemic shows us: how vulnerable we all are, how dependent on thoughtful behaviour of others but thereby also: how we can protect ourselves and strengthen each other through acting together."* The 'responsible behaviour', i.e., behaviour following the government guidelines, was constructed as necessary to cope with the pandemic (Benziman 2020). The virus as an enemy was used to discipline people – as *"everybody who follows the rules can be a life rescuer"* (Merkel, quoted in Bundesregierung 2020c) – and unite them under the principle of interdependency and patriotism. As Boris Johnson pronounced, *"this enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable – and we know how to beat it and we know that if as a country we follow the scientific advice […] we will beat it"* (The UK Government 2020a).

At the same time, it was obvious that some populations were more likely to contract the virus than others. The political representatives repeatedly talked about the elderly or people coming home from abroad; however, within the frame of security, the populations at risk or the already sick were viewed mostly as a threat – to other people, the healthcare system, the labour market or the economy in general. Therefore, the politicians asked people *"not to endanger their doctors"* by visiting them, (Pellegrini, quoted in TA3

2020a) or not to endanger stores by stockpiling (Babiš, quoted in The Czech Government 2020c). As summarized by Merkel, *"we want to preserve the structure of our economy. Of course, we also must preserve the structures of the state to make our country go on. These are the priorities – and, of course, also the medical care"* (Bundesregierung 2020a).

Therefore, we argue that in relation to vulnerability, the security frame facilitates two discursive shifts – vulnerability to the virus has become a threat, and vulnerability has passed from people to society and institutions. We illustrate these processes with two cases: the situation of the marginalized Roma settlements in Slovakia and that of the migrant workers in the meat industry in Germany.

Conditions left beyond the security frame

Precarity, understood as a politically induced condition of being more at risk of loss (Butler 2016a, 2020c) that was experienced by certain populations before the pandemic, made these populations even more vulnerable to the virus and its consequences. This is also the case of the Roma people living in segregated communities in Slovakia (Rorke – Lee 2020). Overcrowded housing and lack of infrastructure, including lack of running water, represented substantial barriers to upholding the hygienic measures of frequent hand-washing and self-isolation. Inadequate access to health care services (FRA 2020; Hellebrandt et al. 2020) put these people's health and lives in an even greater jeopardy.

Moreover, the public institutions enforced measures that were strongly criticized as racist and may have endangered the lives of Roma people in segregated communities even further. Several Roma settlements were locked down in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia. At the end of March, the local government of Gelnica decided to lock down a settlement because one of its inhabitants did not comply with the self-isolation orders after returning from Great Britain. The lockdown was organized even though the man did not display symptoms of COVID-19, nor was he tested positive for the virus (Rorke – Lee 2020).

A week later, the government started extensive testing in the marginalized Roma settlements with the help of the army. The presence of the army evoked fear among many members of the Roma communities due to their common experiences of racism and violence from the 'uniforms' and also due to a lack of information (CKO 2020). Within the first days, the testing revealed 31 cases in a total of 5 settlements of around 6,000 inhabitants. The settlements were subsequently locked down overnight. The quarantine was announced late in the evening, and the next morning the police and the army already secured the areas (German Sirotnikova 2020: para 5; Holt 2020).

Serious doubts about the legitimacy of these government decisions have been raised by both human-rights non-governmental organizations and initiatives, and the office of the public defender of rights. The government broke its own procedures according to which a whole area or facility may be locked down only after at least 10% of its inhabitants are tested positive. Concerns also arose about how the health and well-being of those who are locked down will be protected (Rorke – Lee 2020; VOP 2020). Even though basic supplies have been provided to people under quarantine, there were also doubts about the appropriateness and affordability of the deliveries (German Sirotnikova 2020: para 34). Moreover, several cases of police violence against Roma people (including children) for breaking the quarantine have been reported (Rorke – Lee 2020).

The condition of precarity – a consequence of racism, deteriorating living conditions, and the economic situation intensified by neoliberal changes to the economy (Emigh – Fodor – Szelényi 2001; Klimovský et al. 2016; Ringold 2000) – put Roma people at greater risk of both infection and violation of their human rights.

The situation of migrant workers (mainly from the Eastern and Central European countries) in the German meat industry offers another example of depriving of grievability within the frame of security. After the borders were closed, these workers were forced to

return to their home countries. As they often came from the poorest regions, these regions, e.g. Romania, consequently recorded the biggest concentrations of COVID-19 cases (Creţan – Light 2020). However, the workers' return home caused a serious lack of workforce in Germany. The German government thus agreed on travel exceptions with the sending countries. Thousands of workers travelled back to Germany across the closed borders to work in fields and factories with insufficient or lacking precautionary measures (Creţan – Light 2020; Rasnača 2020; Schneider – Götte 2020).

Following the workers' return, several COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in the agriculture and food industry, with slaughterhouses and meat-packing plants being hit the hardest. More than two thousand workers were infected by the end of June 2020, most of them coming from Central and Eastern Europe (Schneider – Götte 2020). The reason why meat workers are particularly vulnerable to the virus can be found in the poor working conditions, the weak social and health protection, the low wages and the subsequent poor and overcrowded housing in this industry (EFFAT 2020; Schneider – Götte 2020). *"One of the main reasons why working conditions are so poor is the subcontracting system that for almost twenty years has been a major cause of social dumping within the sector in Germany but also across Europe,"* stated the European Federation of Food Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (2020).

Approximately a quarter of the workers in the meat sector are employed through sub-contracting companies and these workers mostly come from Central and Eastern Europe (Birke – Bluhm 2020; EFFAT 2020). Several intersecting practices contribute to their condition of precarity: they often pay recruitment fees and travel costs to reach the destination country; temporary contracts and abusive practices allow employers to escape liability – as became obvious in the pandemic; and low wages and linkages between accommodations and work contracts force workers stay in overcrowded places where it is practically impossible for them to keep a physical distance from each other (Birke – Bluhm 2020; EFFAT 2020; Schneider – Götte 2020; Wagner – Hassel 2016).

Besides the poor working conditions in the meat sector, the COVID-19 pandemic also threw into sharper focus the reliance of Western European countries on Eastern European workers doing low-paid jobs (Creţan – Light 2020). However, the security frame and its focus on institutions and practices diverted the attention from the lives of migrant workers and their embeddedness in unequal social, economic, and political relations between the East and the West of the EU (for a reflection of care chains see Kováts 2020; Zacharenko 2020; Zacharenko – Kováts 2020).

A threat to society will not be grieved

After briefly presenting the condition of precarity of the Roma people in Slovakia and migrant workers in Germany, in this last part we examine how their precarity and consequent increased vulnerability to the coronavirus were constructed as a threat to society and institutions.

During one of his press conferences, the Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič (TA3 2020b) reflected that due to their material deprivation Roma people face additional challenges in dealing with the pandemic (in comparison with the majority): *"Really, when we make a campaign among ourselves to wear masks, to be responsible, to wash our hands, there will hardly be a fertile ground for this in the settlements where we have failed as a state when we were not even able to arrange running water there within 30 years after the Revolution."*

The long-term material deprivation was described as a reason why the Roma people were more vulnerable to the virus and consequently also a reason why the state needed to protect them. However, the state of precarity of the Roma's lives was simultaneously presented as a threat to the majority population. As Matovič explained (TA3 2020b), *"thus, we have to deploy really special procedures there to ensure hygiene and to minimize the*

probability of spreading the infection because when those people then spread around – infected – then we all will pay for it." The risk of a fast spreading of the virus due to the poor living conditions became a discursive tool of othering. Distinguishing 'these people' (poor, dirty, wild, uncontrollable) and 'the rest of us' (nothing like them) – as the Prime Minister put it (TA3 2020c) – legitimized the special way of 'protection' in the form of the immediate lockdown of the Roma settlements secured by the police and the army. Despite frequently repeating that the lockdown of the Roma settlements and the presence of the military there are not hostile acts, or that the Roma people are not responsible for their illness, within the security frame, the elite political discourse constantly portrayed the Roma people as a threat and the majority as those who should be protected. The argument that the quarantines should also protect the Roma people was overshadowed by the much more frequent reminders that the Roma people could become the 'centre of infection'.

While the lives of Roma people were constructed as a potential threat to public health, the situation of the migrant workers in Germany was presented mostly as a threat to the meat industry and the country's reputation. *"They [the workers] have the right to health and social protection. Therefore, I assume, together we must find a solution. I want to add that it also has an economic meaning. In Coesfeld, many people were looking forward to relieving the measures,"* explained the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Hubertus Heil (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales 2020a). Similarly to the securitized discourse in Slovakia, the need for policy measures aimed at redressing the situation of a more vulnerable group was legitimized by a greater good, as if the lives of migrant workers did not suffice.

The objects of governance, however, were not the (potentially infected) bodies of workers but rather the practices that may have disrupted the principles of the German labour system. The measures announced to resolve the situation focused mainly on strengthening the control. According to Heil (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales 2020a), it was necessary *"to perform effective control"* and, *"as a federation, to take responsibility for ensuring the legal framework in the meat industry".* In such a way, the German political, social, and legal system has also been constructed as the object of protection; instead of focusing on the preservation of the lives of the migrant workers which were actually at risk, the main political discourse attempted to safeguard its political principles. *"What is more important is that in this country, the dignity and health of employees count, no matter where they come from,"* added Heil (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales 2020b).

The focus on fixing and safeguarding the principles of the German labour system shifted the attention from the lives and bodies of the migrant workers and even enabled diminishing the level of exploitation of (not only) the migrant workforce. The violation of social and working rights – and also often of human dignity – was described as the individualized behaviour of a few, just an error in the otherwise functional system: *"We experience that the situation in our country, for example the strong welfare state, is good also in the international comparison of various countries. However, we also experience behaviours that were not all right even before Corona and that became an extraordinary problem during this time of crisis"* (Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales 2020b). The lasting inequalities of the European labour market system – embodied in hundreds of infected migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic – became an exception rather than an integral part of the unequal relationships between Western and Eastern European countries.

Within the security frame, the main force that rendered people ungrievable was constructing their vulnerability as a threat. The Roma people living in marginalized settlements were more vulnerable to the virus; however, through implicitly describing them as the dirty, uncontrollable and wild 'other' in need of (military) control, as well as through the

reminders that it is necessary to protect the Roma people in order to protect the majority, they became a threat to the general population. If a threat is lost, there is no need to grieve.

A similar process occurred in the case of the migrant workers in the meat industry in Germany. They were more vulnerable to the virus due to their poor working and living conditions. However, in the elite political discourse the focus was placed on the economic, social, and political system, constructed as endangered by the situation of the workers. Thus, the people themselves and the precarity in which they live became a threat to the political principles, the economy, and even the reputation of Germany. Within the securitized discursive frame, vulnerability travelled from the at-risk groups living in precarity to the privileged majority, or to the institutions and social, economic, and political systems. The lives of certain populations thus did not have value in themselves; they were rendered ungrievable. They deserved protection mostly because by securing them, others were protected.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article looked at the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Judith Butler's concepts of vulnerability, precariousness, and precarity. The virus unveiled the shared interdependency of all living beings. But it also exposed the way the social, political, and economic structures shape how vulnerable to the virus people become and how the anti-pandemic measures will affect them. As summarized by Butler (2020b), the virus is unthinkable outside the framework of social and economic inequalities.

We explored how vulnerability and ungrievability have been constructed in the political discourse of the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, and Slovakia over the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the analysis of the main government press conferences and podcasts, we identified two dominant discursive frames: science and security.

Within the frame of science, vulnerability was mostly constructed in terms of biological and medical characteristics. Vulnerability was treated as an inherent feature of certain bodies, mostly elderly people and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. The frame of science has also contributed to stripping people of the social and relational features of their lives. Such a construction put those identified as 'the vulnerable' at further risk of being abandoned in the healthcare system and being seen by others as almost dead. As their lives were understood as already lost, in Butler's terminology they would be understood as ungrievable.

The security frame facilitated two discursive shifts – specific populations' vulnerability to the virus has become a threat, while also transferring vulnerability from people to society and institutions. As illustrated by the situation of the Roma people in Slovakia and the migrant workers in Germany, the main force rendering people ungrievable was constructing them and their vulnerability as a threat. The Roma people living in marginalized settlements in Slovakia were considered a threat to the white population living in their neighbourhood, as well as a threat to the majority in general. In the case of the coronavirus outbreaks among the migrant workers in the meat industry in Germany, the abusive practices against workers were understood primarily as a threat to the labour and social system of Germany, as well as to the country's reputation. Within the security frame, the politically imposed precarity of certain populations was used to construe these populations as a threat; therefore, there was no reason grieve for them if they were lost.

While focusing on the discursive frames of science and security in the four countries, we did not aim for a comparative country analysis. We focused, however, on the similarities between discourses embedded within national contexts. Based on the analysed material we can very generally maintain that the UK discourse was mostly aimed at reassuring the general population and framed in terms of science, despite being rather contradictory and

unclear. Germany preferred calls for unity in the EU and, mostly within the frame of security, focused on principles, systems, and rules. The Czech discourse has been marked by the technocratic and managerial approach, and, similarly to the Slovak discourse, was also patronizing towards both the general population and the 'at risk' groups. The discourse in Slovakia was characterized by the change of government and lack of clarity, and, through the new Prime Minister, was also charged with emotions. However, more in-depth analysis is needed to examine the details of the country discourses.

In terms of similarities, all the analysed countries tend to either downplay the role of prevailing social and economic inequalities in vulnerability to the pandemic, or even use them against the disadvantaged populations. This applied to all the countries regardless of their situatedness in the East or the West, the severity of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic or the level of populism in their discourses. Yet the pandemic illuminated the need to redress the inequalities between the East and West in the EU and raised the question of how the dependency of Western social and economic systems on the exploitative work of Eastern European workers challenges the narrative about the one-way support flowing from the West to the East (Zacharenko – Kováts, 2020).

The pandemic also illuminated the need to move beyond ad hoc solutions, including those regarding public health. Our analysis supports the scholarship critical towards treating diseases as a personal issue, as in such treatments bioethical considerations are directed at individual autonomy and obedience to the state, not at acting in solidarity with others (Gardiner – Fulfer 2020). Our analysis is more in line with public health ethicists (Baylis et al. 2008; Kenny et al. 2010) – among others – who have stressed that a more relational view should be adopted. Such a perspective would treat persons and populations as socially situated beings with different features, opportunities, and burdens shaping their life outcomes. It would view vulnerability, pace Butler, as a feature of social relations and a condition of all beings. It would recognize not only people's interdependence and vulnerability but also the structural inequalities and how diseases might impact them differently.

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[1] Butler's grounding of ethics on the category of vulnerability has also come under feminist criticism. The notion of vulnerability can be said to contain an unproductive ambiguity, since using it as a starting point cannot guarantee what response might follow. Connected with this is the worry that emphasizing vulnerability as a category invites heightened forms of governmentality and paternalism (see Petherbridge 2016 for an overview of these critiques). Butler reflects on this criticism and especially in her latest book *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020c) she elaborates a critical perspective on the process of construction of 'the vulnerable'.

[2] Butler's use of precariousness as a generalized ontological experience of every human life is thus 'fundamentally distinct' from the understanding employed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the economist Guy Standing, who use the term to denote a labour condition and a class category, respectively (Millar 2017).

[3] While *Precarious Life* focuses on bodily vulnerability, in *Frames of War* Butler carefully distinguishes between precariousness and precarity, and precariousness becomes the central concept of a number of her writings (Gilson 2014). In her latest work, such as *Vulnerability in Resistance* and *The Force of Nonviolence*, Butler mostly focuses on different aspects of vulnerability.

[4] Wenham (2019: 1102) argues that the securitization of global health has moved beyond the rhetorical to the direct involvement of the military in health management: partly as self-fulfilment of the securitization discourse, and partly as a potential 'mission creep' of the military in times of relative peace.

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The Covid Biopolitics in Russia: Putin's Sovereignty versus Regional Governmentality

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Abstract: In this article, we discuss the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic as a biopolitical challenge that – along the lines of the contemporary academic debate on biopower – may be approached through the concepts of sovereignty and governmentality. Within this general framework, the authors look at the challenges Russia faces due to the corona crisis from the viewpoint of domestic transformations within the ruling regime, mainly focusing on centre-periphery relations as a core element of the power structure in Russia that demands a stronger emphasis on governmentality. We outline several forms of regions' distancing from the federal centre: digital empowerment, the resistance of the North, and the demand for "people's governors". Our main conclusion is that the relative administrative autonomy obtained by the regions reflects the ongoing process of decentralization of the Russian political system, which will affect the structural characteristics of Russian federalism in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, centre-region relations, governmentality, sovereignty, Russia.

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This article proposes an interpretation of the Covid-19 crisis as a biopolitical challenge that – along the lines of the contemporary academic debate on biopower – may be discussed through the double prism of sovereignty and governmentality. Within this general framework, we look at the challenges Russia has to face due to the pandemic from the viewpoint of domestic transformations within the regime of governance, and more specifically from the vantage point of centre-periphery relations, which have always been one of the core elements of the power regime in Russia.

The international scholarly debate over the global pandemic is to a large extent grounded in the earlier discussions on the state of exception and the sovereign decision dating back to Carl Schmitt's theorizing. This apparently securitized and militarized approach implies

a shift towards a re-centralized model of policymaking during extraordinary situations, with more bans and restrictions, and a greater concentration of power in the hands of top decision-makers. However, in some countries (Russia included) this trend was – even if temporarily – counterbalanced by an opposite tendency of redistributing power between the central government and non-central authorities. In an unprecedented reversal of the decade-long policy of the "vertical of power" and de-federalization, in April 2020, as a part of the anti-crisis package, President Putin has relegated a bunch of practical powers to sub-national authorities for more effectively tackling the crisis, including the regulation of regional labour markets, provision of social benefits, and administration of some elements of social and health care policies. This sharing of policy competencies between the federal centre and regions was widely discussed from the viewpoint of the ensuing consequences for the entire political system. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that Putin has transferred additional powers to regions against the background of a series of recurrent conflicts that spurred mass-scale protests against the Russian Orthodox Church in Ekaterinburg, environmental actions in Shiyes (Arkhangelsk oblast), the contestation of the results of the recent mayoral election in Buryatia, and the border disputes in the Northern Caucasus (Blok 2020).

To discover discrepancies in the new Russian policies towards regions, we offer new insights into the process of interaction between them and the centre, and discuss the dynamic of the hybrid nature of power in Russia. Based on a number of regional cases, we seek to unpack the perspectives of the decentralizing momentum in Russian politics from the viewpoint of the concept of governmentality, and uncover its importance for the regime's transformation, taking into account another important factor of change – the constitutional reform initiated by Vladimir Putin in January 2020 and legitimized by the plebiscite held on July 1, 2020. More specifically, we wish to find out how Covid-19 contributed to the regions' search for more governmental autonomy from the federal centre, how the Kremlin's policies spurred this process, and how it might develop in the future.

Our empirical material is based on several regional cases that have been identified by the bulk of Russian analysts in multiple comments and reports as the most illustrative of the basic trends that are primordial for the evolution of the Russian political regime. This group of regions includes those where the voting results at the July 1, 2020 plebiscite on constitutional amendments have been the most critical of the Kremlin (mostly in Russia's North), and those that became known for digital innovations in the sphere of policy management (mainly Tatarstan and Nizhny Novgorod). We used both primary sources (such as published interviews with representatives of authorities, statistical material and official information of federal and regional governments) and secondary sources (such as media analyses), in each specific case focusing on the scope of power resources beyond the Kremlin's direct reach as well as considering existing regulations that the Kremlin can impose upon subnational authorities. In conclusion, we discuss possible projections of these trends into the future developments in federal relations and relate them to the wider debate on illiberal politics.

First, in the beginning, we outline the frame of the debate on federalism and regional governance and explain how modes of sovereign power and governmentality work in Russia. Second, we point to the inter-relations between the federal centre and particular regions and demonstrate how the eruption of Covid-19 has added new complexities to the already precarious balance of power between Moscow and the regions. By focusing on a variety of local practices of governmentality, we examine four points of the sovereignty-governmentality nexus in greater detail: manoeuvering between the policy frames set by sovereign power and operators of governmentality, attempts of regional elites and the public to distance themselves from the Kremlin, informal and semi-formal arrangements between the centre and regions, and ways of overcoming the legacy of Russia's domestic colonization of territories. Finally, we discuss how the transfer of responsibilities from

the federal centre to regions as a part of the crisis management contributes to the decentralization of the Russian political system.

ILLIBERAL FEDERALISM AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE: FRAMING THE DEBATE

From an institutional perspective, Russia is often dubbed a hybrid regime combining both democratic and authoritarian elements when it comes to elections, the mass media, and the organization of the state apparatus (Petrov et al. 2014). In our analysis of the Covid-19 impact on the Russian political scene, our ideas stem from a different understanding of the hybrid nature of power in Russia. On the one hand, the Putin-created system heavily invests in constructing a highly mythologized and close to sacrosanct sphere of Russia's sovereign grandeur that combines discourses of civilizational authenticity and self-sufficiency with an explicitly retrospective memory politics glorifying old military victories. On the other hand, Putin's regime has borrowed a lot from technocratic and largely depoliticized models of governance, which are to a large extent grounded in neoliberally managerial approaches to political and societal change.

We build our analysis upon the general idea of the *"mutual interplay and interpenetration of sovereign power and governmentality as two different power arrangements"* (Braeckman 2019: 667). With all due cognizance of the Foucauldian roots of these concepts, we deem that they can be used as helpful epistemic frames and tools for analyzing countries beyond the Western liberal core, since *"techniques of advanced liberal government that were invented to reduce an excessive and inefficient governmentality are redeployed [...] to strengthen the state (as, for example, in post-Soviet Russia, where neoliberal reforms of social welfare have actually intensified during the period of Putin's rule)"* (Collier 2009: 99).

There are at least four points that make the sovereignty-governmentality nexus applicable to Russian studies. First, both concepts exemplify two complementary forms of power, making political actors *"switch between governmental and sovereign rationalities and politics"* (Vasilache 2019: 699). In other words, domestic political actors (parties, regional elites, business associations, civil society groups) might be seen as manoeuvering between the policy frames set by sovereign power and operators of governmentality, searching for their niches and policy roles at the intersection between the two.

Second, *the* concept of governmentality rejects *"the idea that power derives from the state as a coherent and centralized actor, that it follows a vertical formal logic of order and obedience"* (Vasilache 2019: 685). In the specific case of Russia this argument makes subnational governmentality part of regions' attempts to refederalize Russia through the weakening of the 'power vertical' and acquiring new policy making resources. What we discuss in this article is different attempts of regional elites and regional publics to distance and even detach themselves from the power vertical constructed by the Kremlin, and diminish their dependence upon Moscow, yet without excessive politicization of these attempts.

Third, governmentality cannot be contained and shaped by purely legal instruments and means of regulation; it constitutes *"an excess to these regulations"* (Braeckman 2019: 2). This point opens up the concept of governmentality to the plethora of informal and semi-formal arrangements between the centre and regions, which is of particular importance for illiberal regimes like Russia, with their traditions of nepotism, grey economy and personal connections largely defining career opportunities.

Fourth, a certain part of the Foucault-sympathetic literature looks at governmentality from a post-colonial perspective (Teo – Wynne-Hughes 2020). This aspect appears to be particularly salient for Russia due to a variety of voices discussing decentralization and refederalization from the viewpoint of overcoming the legacy of Russia's domestic colonization of many territories, particularly in the Far North and the Far East (Inozemtsev 2020).

International scholars who have already made efforts to apply the governmentality framework in Russia studies claimed that this approach is an opposite to seeing *"power as possessed by a body (e.g., Putin) or amassed at a centre (e.g. the Kremlin)"* (Kangas 2015: 483). In this vein, "entrepreneurial governmentality" was coined as a concept explaining the adjustment of the first post-Soviet generation to market capitalism, and demonstrating the hybridity of mechanisms of governance (Yurchak 2002). "Geo-governmentality" was introduced to look at Russia's energy sector beyond its material or physical background and discuss a palette of practices (spatial, societal and media-related) that unfold on the basis of extractive industries (Tynkkynen 2016). And environmental governmentality might offer a helpful lens for looking at the sphere of ecology from the viewpoint of managing 'green' technologies of sustainable development at regional level (Tynkkynen 2010). What is of utmost importance for our study is that the Foucauldian theorizing about governmentality does not necessarily require a pure liberal political milieu: in his vision, governmentality appears to be compatible with police power and pastoral power (Elden 2007: 568), both having an undeniably strong totalitarian potential. In the Russian context all these forms of governmentality imply a certain distance or autonomy from the sway of sovereign power (though this distance is differently calibrated in each case, depending on many factors); rationality of governance, and knowledge of local conditions.

Covid-19 is a particularly illuminating case for governmentality studies since it brings together human and material factors in the sense that epidemics *"are not passive objects. They are, as Bruno Latour reminds us, actants, dynamic forces in social life, constantly surprising those who would harness and control them"* (Li 2007: 4). One of these surprises comes from the dispersal and fragmentation of political competences during the crisis, which exposed the inherently unstable structure of power relations even in autocratic states. The Covid-19 emergency has become one of the situations in which the generalized outlook at power politics was superseded by the growing attention to – and importance of – specific local practices and experiences of risk reduction and crisis management. It is from the governmentality perspective that one may spot new policy niches emerging due to the pandemic, as related to political campaigning and mobilization, organization of voting procedures, or control over people's mobility under the state of emergency. Most of these policies require new knowledge and expertise, which is an inalienable part of the governmentality paradigm. Thus, *"instead of seeing any single body – such as the state – as responsible for managing the conduct of citizens, this perspective recognizes that a whole variety of authorities govern in different sites, in relation to different objectives"* (Rose et al. 2006: 85). Ultimately, the Foucauldian approach is helpful for arguing that *"any macro-level order is a shifting, provisional constellation; an overcoding of the multiple lines, confrontations and encounters which the microphysics emphasize"* (Walter 2012: 14). It may also offer new insights into the productive capabilities of power: what statuses, types of communication and hierarchies do non-central authorities produce, and how important are they for the prospects of centre-periphery relations in Russia?

Against this polemical background we look at regional experiences of the Covid-19 emergency from the vantage point of a variety of local practices of governmentality. Below we will discuss the above mentioned four points of the sovereignty-governmentality nexus in greater detail. It is important to bear in mind that these points are overlapping with each other and do not exist in pure form but rather in a system of complex and interactive relations.

BALANCING BETWEEN SOVEREIGN POWER AND GOVERNMENTALITY

The presumption of the *"widening gaps between sovereignty itself and the associated bureaucratic apparatuses"* (Naishtat 2012: 54) is not new in the extant literature. In

Russia, as in many post-Soviet countries, there is a profound cleavage between the two, since sovereignty is overwhelmingly understood as a possession of the power to subjugate and repress, while governmentality boils down to the technical administration of the everyday routine. This gap by and large corresponds to the well-articulated conceptual distinction between political and managerial dimensions of power, which keeps the two at a distance from each other as one of the strategies used by different illiberal regimes. The idea behind this separation is to keep off the bearers of sovereignty from the direct responsibility for possible managerial risks and failures, and thus to create a politically sterile space of utmost convenience and safety for sovereignty holders, many of whom are more interested in shaping global politics (Salzborn 2015) than properly governing their societies. Russia seems to illustrate that *"the performance of sovereign power is therefore visible in the discursive formulation [...] of what constitutes an 'imminent threat' to the population as well as in the specification of preventive or defensive measures needed to secure it"* (Fournier 2012: 25).

In Russia, with its centuries-long traditions of sacralization and mythologization of sovereign power, the differentiation between its holders and policy operatives was always essential. It is this distinction that explains the Kremlin's inherently ambiguous relations with the 'United Russia' party, the government, the parliament and regional governors: all of them, being – in a wider sense – crucial elements of the so-called 'party of power', still in one way or another are distanced from the presidency as an incarnation of political sovereignty. This distance, of course, varies depending on the situation, but it was always a constitutive element of the technology of power. This explains multiple cases of legal prosecution of mayors and governors all across Russia, or the over-saturation of the State Duma with politically marginal figures bereft of political experience – all of them serve as an army of technical nominees (even if formally elected) and – in case of necessity – potential scapegoats for policy failures.

The constitutional reform initiated by the Russian president on January 15, 2020, which started as a sporadic series of amendments disconnected from each other yet ended up with giving a green light to two additional presidential terms for Putin, serves as a perfect illustration of the logic of sovereign power. Its core element is a purely instrumental attitude to all other bodies, whose utility is measured by their ability to sustain the supreme authority. The Duma, the Constitutional Court and regional legislatures have obviously given their formal support to the entire package of amendments that Putin himself has signed into law in March 2020. With the legal part of the process being over in a matter of about two months, the only element that remained pending was the so-called "people's voting", an extra-legal procedure that, nevertheless, became a key source for legitimizing Putin's long-term plans. This ambiguity at the outset puzzled many commentators: why did the Kremlin announce the legally redundant plebiscite that has ultimately turned into a headache for the regime with the outbreak of the pandemic?

One of the possible answers to this question might be found in the very nature of Putin's vision of sovereignty as reaching far beyond purely technical and even legal procedures. Putin's sovereign power is a quasi-religious and deeply populist construct that regularly requires symbolic investments imitating the supreme ruler's connection with the people. The Victory Day parade (rescheduled from the usual May 9 to June 24, 2020) and the people's approval of the constitutional change were expected to be the two most essential cornerstones of Putin's power mythology, complemented by the state's ability to withstand the Covid-19 virus. It is this highly symbolic – and primarily political – dimension of sovereignty that became the most vulnerable, particularly due to the sociologically identified fall of Putin's popularity among Russian voters and the concomitant decrease in the ability of the regime to legitimate its policies (Zimnii 2020) against the background of a widely spread sense of annoyance and frustration in the society, and the growing perception of a weakening of the presidential power (Petrov 2020). This explains

the unprecedented – even by Russian standards – degree of falsification during the plebiscite, which the Kremlin – for the first time in Russia – extended to one week, which further decreased the technical possibilities for independent monitoring of and control over the procedure.

Remarkably, in the course of the Covid-19 emergency, Putin has voluntarily divested himself of the central position in the biopolitical domain of combatting the pandemic. With his direct blessing, major crisis-management powers were transferred to the government of the prime minister Mikhail Mishustin, to the Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin as the head of the crisis management board, and to regional governors. It is the reluctance of the federal centre to take full responsibility for the anti-crisis management that explains the relegation of power from the Kremlin to the governors (Bovt 2020), which also included the option of cancellation of the regional parades dedicated to Victory Day. Russian media reported that many regional leaders have seen Sobyanin as being more effective in tackling Covid-19 than the federal government (Pertsev et al. 2020).

The Covid-19 crisis has made clear that Putin's sovereignty drastically differs from the model envisioned by Carl Schmitt, for whom sovereign rule *"consists in deciding on the state of exception"* (Bradley – Cerella 2016: 210) and manifests itself through a personal decision to suspend normal laws (Hoelzl 2016: 237). Arguably, in Schmittian political theology, the sovereign ruler *"equals a strictly personalistic God, both wilful and powerful, whose persona enjoys absolute freedom from any deterministic limitations"* (Bielik – Robson 2016: 297).

The 2020 pandemic was not the first case in which *"the electoral-authoritarian system shelter[ed] Putin from controversies"* (Wilson – Lee 2020: 46). For instance, *"despite the economic crisis in 2008–2009, there was no noticeable drop in support for the regime"* (Feldmann – Mazepus 2018: 66), which could be explained by Putin's tactics of remaining in the shadows while the most controversial decisions were being taken. Sam Green's analysis of the unpopular pension reform concluded that: *"at no point does Putin come out with a full-throated endorsement of any of the [least popular] policies. As analysts, we cannot know why Putin stays on the sidelines in these fights; perhaps, he is not sure he will win them and wants to remain untarnished, or perhaps he simply doesn't care. But we can put ourselves in the shoes of ordinary Russian citizens and ask what this silence looks like from their point of view. What structural factor of Russian power might a Russian citizen discern from the fact that the one part of the state that matters – the president – seems not to believe in the state's ability to produce public goods?"* (Greene 2018: 344).

Covid-19 has sharpened this question and reinforced the incongruence between the two spheres of power relations, sovereign symbolism and technocratic governmentality, both constitutive for Putin's regime, which created what might be termed "fragilized sovereignty" (Naishtat 2012: 47), with meaningful repercussions for the centre-regions relations that for years were a matter of scrupulous scholarly analysis (Lynn – Novikov 1997). Under Putin's reign the highly centralized and top-down system of governance did not leave many chances for effective regional management (Gel'man 2020). The Kremlin-constructed "vertical of power" was for years mainly busy with securing the predominance of the ruling party in local bodies through marginalizing and neutralizing the opposition, and masterminding regions' solidarity with the Kremlin in core issues of the 'high' (geo)political agenda. The reluctance of the Kremlin to take under its direct control the tackling of the Covid-19 biopolitics has gradually expanded the space for regions' manoeuvering. Protests in Ingushetia against the lockdown measures, along with a bickering between the prime minister and the head of Chechnya over anti-pandemic policies (Souleimanov – Aliyev 2020), gave rise to some expectations of the growing importance of regions due to the Covid-19 outbreak as a sign of future changes in the whole fabric of Russian federalism, while sociological data attested to the unusually high

level of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the federal centre and its regional envoys in the bulk of the regions (Gruppa Belanovskogo 2020).

Thus, the eruption of Covid-19 has added new complexities to the already precarious balance of power between Moscow and the regions. When it comes to the federal centre, the major issue at stake was that *"while zeroing term limits signaled a further personalization of power, a decentralized response to the pandemic could be interpreted as a sign of weakness and degradation of presidential power"* (Burkhardt 2020). A widely discussed indication of the administrative indecisiveness and ambiguity was Putin's reluctance to declare a state of emergency, and his preference for a much vaguer language of "extended holidays" and "measures of self-isolation". However, the situation on the ground was de-facto exceptional, with borders being closed, businesses badly damaged, regular social communication interrupted, and people all across Russia facing detention for violation of the "social distancing" rules. Restricted mobility was another element of the new exceptionality, of which the Kremlin took full advantage by suppressing any form of public protests against the constitutional reform, as well as regarding other political matters. This temporary depoliticization, vindicated by the predominance of the biopolitical agenda of protecting people's lives at the expense of their freedoms, was extended to measures of dissipating the mass-scale protests in the city of Khabarovsk in the Far East, which erupted in July 2020: without engaging with protestors in a substantive dialogue, the authorities put a strong accent on the inappropriateness of public gatherings of any sort while the epidemiological situation remains shaky.

INFORMAL AND SEMI-FORMAL ARRANGEMENTS BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND REGIONS: DOES IT HELP TO COMBAT THE VIRUS?

One of the key instruments of the federal government has always been and remained the power to appoint and sack the regional cadre. During the pandemic in 11 regions, local health ministers were ousted, which attested to the deficit of qualified crisis managers (RBC 2020). A similar problem exists at the level of regional chief executives, which explains the Kremlin's frequent preference for filling gubernatorial positions with outsiders, who are dubbed "Varangians" (aliens, or strangers) in the regions. This was the case with the Republic of Komi, where at the outset of the Covid-19 crisis Putin replaced the incumbent governor with a former deputy federal Health Minister named Vladimir Uiba, who in September 2020 won the gubernatorial election largely due to his medical background that allowed him to play the role of a saviour of the region (Polyakov 2020).

The case of the Murmansk region is also emblematic in this respect. Since March 2019 it is run by Andrey Chibis, another "Varangian" with good working connections in Moscow. Since the Murmansk region became one of the first regions in Russia where COVID-19 was detected, its governor had to resort to a direct plea for help from the President. After that a new mobile field hospital was constructed in a record time of less than three months. These crisis management skills were an important factor that explains the majority of votes cast on July 1, 2020 for the constitutional amendments (62,54 percent), though the scale of the opposition (36,33 percent) was also quite impressive (Bi-port 2020).

These cases show that it is the sphere of governmentality that became primordial for practically tackling Covid-19 at subnational level, which confirms the argument of a conflation between governmentality and biopower (Jose 2010: 693) as two sides of one coin. In a practical sense, the pandemic created a new role niche for governors – not as technical projections of the federal authorities, but rather as care-takers with substantial powers. However, some Russian experts deemed that *"decentralization or devolution in the realm of fighting Covid-19 in Russia is anything but federalization or regional empowerment. This is mostly the part of 'the blame game' where costs of painful measures are shifted to the regions and 'good news' are [sic] delivered by the president"* (Zavadskaya – Gorbacheva 2020). Arguably, *"already centralized federations are likely to*

become even more centralized after a significant crisis at the national level" (Busygina – Filippov 2020); this option might become feasible due to a lack of experience of tackling the pandemic and a shortage of funds for redeveloping medical infrastructure in regional governments. Regional healthcare workers were evidently not ready to fight the coronavirus as they did not have adequate personal protective equipment, sufficient medical expertise and technologies, or pertinent information. Moreover, having received new powers, regional authorities, in the opinion of some Russian commentators, used them for introducing measures far from liberal – such as blocking transportation between regions and boosting the rhetoric of local patriotism (Mukhametshina 2020), which was to a large extent grounded in complaints about Moscow (Novye Izvestia 2020).

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT AS A FORM OF DISTANCING FROM THE "VERTICAL OF POWER"

The pandemic has boosted the governmental facets of the regime, which took full advantage of what is known in the academic literature as "algorithmic governance", a type of authority based on *"(a)normative or (a)political rationality resting on the automated harvesting, aggregation and analysis of massive quantities of data"* (Cooper 2020: 30). Apart from having strong disciplinary components, algorithmic governance allows building policy arguments on the basis of data calculation, for which the fight against Covid-19 created new opportunities. A number of local practices of governmentality that were meant to soften Moscow's sway over regions and transform the 'power vertical' into a more horizontal type of relations between the national capital and non-central territories became more important and visible. The development of regions' IT resources as a basis for self-support and local empowerment made some regions frontrunners in the sphere of electronic surveillance and e-voting.

The case of Tatarstan is emblematic of the progress regions can achieve in advancing towards what might be dubbed "algocracy", or "algorithmic governance" (Martynov 2020), which has been widely discussed with the outbreak of the Covid-19 emergency and its biopolitical repercussions (Medvedev 2020). For Tatarstan, with its ethno-religious specificity and long record of trade-offs of financial and administrative resources with the federal centre, its introducing of its own system of e-passes during the pandemic was one of the means for its further regional self-assertion and technological leadership among regions sharing similar challenges. Indicatively, in May 2020, in the middle of the lockdown, the 'Rating' Centre has ranked the head of Tatarstan Rustem Minnikhanov as the top regional chief executive in Russia (Natsionalniy Reyting 2020).

The pandemic has created a new demand for digital technologies for controlling people's mobility within large urban centres, thus making regional authorities choose between adopting the technical solutions offered by the federal government, and relying on local – evidently limited – resources. However, *by mid-May, only five regions had opted for the federal application. The large majority of regions [...] had actively resisted such a federal policy for a range of reasons instead (the pandemic is under control, it is too expensive, or technically too complicated or insecure to implement). The regional policy experimentation points ... to a lack of coordination, apparently driven by a lack of political will, to implement a coherent monitoring of lockdown measures"* (Burkhardt 2020).

Tatarstan seems to nicely exemplify this preference of most of the regions for self-help and self-securing as parts of governmentality measures over technological dependence on Moscow. The experience of Tatarstan during the pandemic is illustrative of the manoeuvering abilities of regions, namely their abilities to plug into the general guidelines of federal policies yet in the meantime maintain their – always relative – autonomy from the centre. Kazan was one of the first cities in Russia to introduce a system of electronic permissions for mobility, as it did so on April 1, 2020, and was the first to cancel e-passes,

doing so on May 12, 2020, after which all personal data gathered during this period was destroyed in the presence of high-level public servants and non-governmental observers. In multiple comments this experience was largely assessed as positively setting high standards of good practices of emergency governmentality.

From a technical perspective, the specificity of Tatarstan boiled down to the locally designed SMS-based form of e-registration connected to ABCloud developed by the AkBars Bank in 2019, which differs from the system of QR-codes used in Moscow and advertised by its mayor and the head of the national crisis management board Sergey Sobyanin. The preference for this option – allegedly a "more conservative" one – was articulated in implicitly biopolitical categories of governmentality as being for the benefit of those local residents who don't have smartphones (Sobytiya 2020). The Tatarstani media were replete with interviews with local public servants and providers of digital services who argued that *"in the region the system is well established, while all federal solutions need some adjustment and fine-tuning"* (Sokolova 2020). By the same token, Tatarstan's authorities claimed that many other Russian regions were interested in learning from them and replicating this experience of digitalization in public service.

However, the Yandex self-isolation index has placed Kazan at the very bottom of the group of cities with a population over 1 million, which basically meant that in this case, e-passes, designed as an instrument to restrain people's mobility, did not help much in this regard (Pljushhev 2020). Besides, the very idea of e-passes was heavily criticized by lawyers (Nilov 2020) and local activists as potentially being able to encroach upon people's rights (InKazan 2020) and thus charting a perspective of enhanced control and regulations over citizens' mobility justified by security reasons or public safety in times of pandemics.

As for e-voting, given the mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 "state of exception", the Russian Central Electoral Committee has introduced a possibility of online voting, which was experimentally applied only in two regions – the cities of Moscow and the Nizhny Novgorod oblast. In the latter case this was optimistically perceived as a sign of acknowledgement of this region's progress in digital technologies of e-governance (Nizhegorodskie Novosti 2020). E-voting was widely referred to not only as a convenient technical solution for people with limited mobility (Argumenty i Fakty 2020), but also as a step forward towards the future, an investment into a new experience that will be increasingly in demand all across the country in the years to come, particularly in large cities (Orlov 2020).

Initially, the head of the Communist Party Gennady Ziuganov, on behalf of the so-called "systemic opposition" (parties represented in the parliament and largely loyal to the Kremlin), called upon President Putin to reject the idea of e-voting as, in his view, it was more susceptible to fraud and less secure (Krasnaya liniya 2020). Some experts have wrongly predicted that e-voting might lead to a higher percentage of pro-Kremlin votes (Politanalitika 2020), but Nizhny Novgorod has shown an opposite pattern: in the regular poll stations the correlation of forces was 79.31 percent (yes-vote) to 20.16 percent (no-vote), while among e-voters, only 59.69 percent supported the constitutional amendments, while 40.31 percent rejected them (Yushkov 2020), which was widely commented on as one of the strongest anti-Kremlin votes in the entire country. The Russian political commentator Gleb Pavlovsky claimed that these numbers demonstrate the real balance of forces within the Russian society, and make Putin face a new reality, namely that about half of the active electorate are ready to contest his policies and challenge his personalistic rule (RTVI 2020). Indeed, in Russia, online voting was predominantly a space for mid-career urban professionals unhappy with Putin's regime of sovereign power and protesting against it, which in the future might lead to some restructuring of the political landscape in the country, particularly should these dissenting voices consistently look for a better political representation (Teplouhov 2020). However, despite all the risks and criticism of the e-voting, the Central Electoral Committee pledged to extend the scope of

the regions that will be able to vote online in the next parliamentary election, which is to take place in 2021 (VSE42.RU 2020).

OVERCOMING THE LEGACY OF INTERNAL COLONIALISM: THE NORTHERN RESISTANCE

In this section we look at different forms of resistance to the top-down management of regional issues from a post-colonial perspective, which in the academic literature is often integrated into the governmentality paradigm (Dutton 2010).

The "people's vote" on the constitutional reform has formally ended up with 77.92 percent of the votes being in support of Putin's amendments. However, if looked at through the regional prism, the picture on the ground was quite complex and diverse. The Russian political analyst Ekaterina Shulman has referred to certain regions as generators of much less pro-Kremlin attitudes than the national average (Shulman 2020) – among them are the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Yakutia, Kamchatka, and the regions of Omsk, Khabarovsk, Murmansk, Irkutsk, Tomsk, and the Republic of Komi (Kemenova 2020), forming an arc of provinces stretching from the European North to the Far East. In this large group, we focus on a regional cluster that can be labelled the "Russian North". Many of the Northern regions were known for their protest activity before the pandemic; Covid-19 has widened the gap between the federal centre and the Northern regions that for years were insisting on their capability of conducting their policies by relying more on their own resources than on Moscow's guidance. These expectations were reinforced after they received signs that due to the pandemic Moscow is willing to delegate more power to the regional level.

The best example of this trend is the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO), the only region where the majority (58.28 percent) voted against the amendments. NAO is a region with strong ethnic specifics, as well as one of the most prosperous regions in Russia due to its oil and gas extraction industry (Galimova et al. 2020). The negative voting was directly related to local protests against Moscow-supported plans to merge NAO with the neighbouring Arkhangelsk region (Galimova et al. 2020), which the bulk of the local residents rejected as an encroachment upon their local competences and autonomy.

One more example of protest voting came from the Murmansk region, where four out of five "closed administrative territories" (ZATO), or territorial units under the jurisdiction of the Defence Ministry, voted against the amendments (Balyuk 2020). Another municipality in the Murmansk region, the Pechenga district, has also rejected the constitutional reform. This district, due to its location on the border with Norway with a special visa-free zone between the two countries, was particularly affected by the border closure since March 12, 2020, when the majority of local residents found themselves isolated and disconnected from Murmansk as well as from the neighbouring Kirkenes, an important hub for trade and shopping (Staalesen 2020).

One more Northern region – the Republic of Komi – well demonstrates a high level of protest voting as well. Formally, the results of this region's vote on the amendments to the Constitution were favourable to the Kremlin, yet commentators and observers were perplexed with what many considered as electoral manipulation: the processing of the initial 5 percent of the protocols showed 68 percent of votes cast against the amendments; nevertheless, the final results gave a dramatically different picture, with 65.08 percent being supportive votes.

Yakutia, where 40.65 percent of the voters obstructed the constitutional reform, represents another Northern region with a high level of discontent. This outcome may be interpreted as a protest of a significant part of the local population against the operation of Russia's largest companies in which they extract the mineral resources located in Yakutia, with *"all the money going to the federal centre"* (Pronko 2020). Apart from that, the high number of critical votes is an effect of Yakutia's disagreements with Moscow's

heavy emphasis on the idea of a single and unified all-Russian nation that is locally perceived as a disregard for the ethnic and linguistic plurality of minorities and their needs (News.Ykt 2020).

Against this backdrop, one may claim that local identity remains an important marker of differences between the centre and the Northern regions, but also all across Russia. The regions' annoyance with the politics of the federal centre became especially visible during the public acts of protest, during which regional flags and symbols were used to visualize the symbolic distance between the regions and the Moscow officialdom. Thus, in the Arkhangelsk region, the ethnonym *Pomory*, which was historically applicable to the White Sea maritime dwellers, was regaining popularity. In its turn, Murmansk is branding itself as a "capital of the Arctic", which – with all the loyalty of the local governor to the Kremlin – evoked some concerns in the pro-Kremlin media, which claimed that robust regional identities might eventually undermine the "vertical of power" (Stanulevich 2020). In the Republic of Komi, the local environmental activists have publicly displayed an alternative Komi flag to visualize their disagreements with the federal authorities. The design of the unofficial Komi flag resembles Finno-Ugric and Scandinavian symbols of free people that historically have always rejected serfdom or slavery (Finugor 2015).

The case of the "Northern resistance", which was reinvigorated by the pandemic, is illustrative of the growing importance of grass-roots agendas of governmentality related to nature protection, indigenous environmental activism, or the state of local health care systems, rather than the enthusiastic support for such symbolic attributes of the sovereign power as strong national unity, a uniform identity, and militarization of foreign policy. Many of the regions we have referred to as belonging to the Northern cluster are deeply divided polities struggling to legitimize their own needs, interests, and demands. In this respect, Russia's Northern regions might be juxtaposed with their European counterparts, the Nordic margins, which for centuries were ascertaining their right to an alternative vision of the world. As Parker (2019: 483), an authoritative voice in margins theory, suggested, *"elevating oneself to the core leads to a blindness to difference, if not anger and brute force in the face of the awkward fact of difference between oneself and others"*. Actors on the margin, in their turn, may pursue two strategies – *"emulating, trying to become, or claiming you are already like the centre; or challenging the centre as something alien, or even threatening"* (Parker 2019: 482). This distinction seems to be applicable to Russia, which shows different options of marginal regions' self-positioning vis-a-vis the central power, and unveils a crucial distinction between the mostly inward-oriented local agendas formulated in categories of governmentality, and the much more geopolitically explicit attitude to the idea of the North in Moscow (Khaldei 2020).

The Kremlin's policies also faced strong opposition in Russia's Far East, namely in the city of Khabarovsk, where by the decision of the federal centre the 'old' governor was removed and then replaced by an unpopular MP representing the Liberal Democratic Party. With the growing sensitivity of the regional public (urban activists, opinion makers, and independent civil society groups) towards relations with Moscow, the so-called "Varangians" are increasingly perceived as external managers lacking in due connections with – and knowledge about – the regions they were mandated to govern.

Thus, the management of the Covid-19 crisis in Russia has amplified all the multiple challenges that the federal government has been facing for years when dealing with subnational regions. The strongest among them is the deeply rooted and widely spread perception of Moscow as a colonizing power that transports its waste materials to remote areas (Shiyes), or as a source of hyper-centralization that allows the Kremlin to decide on arbitrarily opening legal cases against elected governors whose popularity – and therefore legitimacy – is quite strong among local residents (Khabarovsk). The anti-Moscow feelings have always existed in many regions unhappy with their maltreatment

by the central authorities, and the pandemic has accelerated the attempts at distancing from the centre, thus multiplying the extant distinctions and disagreements between the national capital and the provinces. Several regions faced serious local outbursts of Covid-19, with the following lockdown of cities and areas. The consequences of these anti-pandemic actions are not fully displayed yet, but the malfunction of the local medical health care system, problems with online education and unequal access to the Internet and technical devices, the uneven application of quarantine rules and the misuse of them for political purposes all became evident in a short period of time and strengthened the already existing dissatisfaction in the regions.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE TRENDS

The governmentality approach that we have applied in this study appeared to be instrumental for reaching beyond the figures reflecting economic consequences of the lockdown or public opinion polls; it is also helpful for finding an alternative to the dichotomic characterization of the Covid-19-related power sharing between federal and regional authorities as a 'positive' or 'negative' development, or dividing the society into 'virus-fearful' and 'economy-supportive' groups. Governmentality offers a different pattern of looking at the political scene: what is colloquially known as a 'vertical of power' turns out to be an archipelago of different practices and experiences of governance when it is placed under scrutiny from the position of governmentality.

The pro-Putin social contract between Moscow and the regions included *"the belief that 'delegating' all power into the hands of the President is the best way to discipline and mould state and society"* (Blackburn 2020: 52). Under these strained conditions, regions typically built their policies towards Moscow *"not to oppose federal policies and programmes, but to mould them to local conditions, and thus to assert a level of autonomy within the federation. […] Such an approach allows both the centre and the regions to retain their reputations as powerful agents among their populace"* (Fondal et al. 2019: 61). However, the balance of relations between the federal centre and subnational units has been becoming dislocated due to a number of factors. Two of them are of particular importance for our analysis. One is the growing Moscow-sceptic attitudes in many regions which had always existed in a latent form: in the periphery, Moscow is often associated with undue affluence and arrogance, and is seen as a source of unfair distribution of the national wealth (Kalinina 2020). These sensitivities were drastically accelerated by the mass-scale protests against the construction of a landfill facility in Shiyes, a remote locality at the border of Arkhangelsk oblast and the Republic of Komi. The construction works for storing and reprocessing huge amounts of waste coming from Moscow took by surprise local activists, who quickly managed to mobilize ecological groups and the general public in what they saw as a battle against Moscow's nefarious plans to turn the North into a destination point for a garbage dump. During the pandemic, as observers noted, these anti-Moscow sentiments were transformed into the widely spread demands to ban Muscovites – who were largely perceived as the bearers of the virus – from visiting "our" cities and spreading the disease among the locals; some regional authorities went as far as prohibiting "guests from Moscow" from renting apartments, or even preventing them from checking into hotels in their respective regions (Alpaut 2020).

Another disintegrative factor is the ethnic, linguistic and cultural specificities of many Russian territories that local public activists consider as being historically colonized by Muscovy. Illustrative in this sense is the fact that most of the ethnically non-Russian regions in one way or another developed policies fostering their distancing from Moscow during the pandemic. Some analysts refer to the increased popularity of Moscow-wary attitudes in many provinces, which are often articulated in anti-colonial and anti-imperial terms. Not incidentally, ideas of a new wave of federalism have resurfaced in the midst

of the pandemic (Tushin 2020). Russia's North and the Far East are particularly referred to as territories colonized by Russia and nowadays looking for more autonomy and self-governance (Inozemtsev 2020).

Regions perceive their soft detachment from the Moscow-constructed 'vertical of power' as non- or extra-ideological and, in a broader sense, de-politicized. However, the conflictual potential of the growing tensions between the federal centre and regions seems to override other existent cleavages, such as that between the dominant 'United Russia' and the systemic opposition, or that between the Kremlin and the radical opposition, which – partly due to the introduced restrictions on public gatherings – failed to effectively campaign against the constitutional amendments. In the long run, the Covid-19 crisis might contribute to a process of dissipation of Putin's model of the hyper-centralized regime of governance. Thus, presidential representatives in federal districts – aggregated regions created by Putin's decree during his first presidential term – did not play any significant role in the crisis management at all. Their de-facto exclusion from the decision making process and disappearance from public politics might signal the ultimate failure of the very idea of "large regions". The regions' boycott of the Kremlin's plans for merging some neighbouring regional units also points to this possibility. This might mean that Putin's whole vision of centre-region relations is increasingly under stress, which might lead to a new configuration of Russian domestic regionalism, with relations of horizontal solidarity being formed not on a purely territorial principle, but rather on cultural and historical connections or common agendas in such spheres pertaining to governmentality as environmental protection, fair distribution of revenues, health care, and public medicine.

Due to the growing legitimacy of regional leaders and the expanding space for protest actions some subjects of the federation are likely to receive new trump cards in bargaining and negotiating with Moscow. The biopolitics of Covid-19 has augmented the demand for a new model of "people's governors", as opposed to the Kremlin's technical nominees, which might imply a widened gap between the sovereign power, mostly concerned with issues of 'high politics' in general and geopolitics in particular, and the local practices of governmentality, with care-taking and fostering citizens' responsibilities at their core. It is indicative that the recently appointed acting governors of the two regions affected by the Shiyes protests, the Republic of Komi and the Arkhangelsk oblast, have ultimately spoken out against the Moscow-patronized project of the landfill construction, thus preferring to remain closer to people's demands than to business projects propelled by the capital.

Looking at our analysis through the prism of the unprecedented public protests that erupted in Khabarovsk in mid-July 2020 after the arrest of the local governor, we may easily find in this event a confirmation of our thesis of regions' growing potential for public actions meant to dissociate them, in one form or another, from the centre's patronage, and safeguard a degree of their local autonomy. This political vector can positively contribute to meaningful transformations in centre-periphery relations in Russia. However, we also see that most of the regional protests are bent on ostensibly localized agendas and can't reach beyond narrow and region-specific demands for Moscow's non-interference into "our affairs". These demands clearly show a growing gap between the locally embedded agendas and the sovereign power, which is concerned more about force projection and neo-imperial ambitions than about issues of governmentality. Yet in the meantime, regional protests represent instinctive, impulsive and reactive acts of local self-respect and autonomy, and politically remain, as the Russian philosopher Mikhail Berg assumed, parochial analogies of the French Jacquerie (Newsader 2020). Importantly, none of the forms of localism we have identified in our study questioned the constitutive elements of the sovereign reassertion as understood by the Kremlin, including the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the confrontation with the West, the Soviet

nostalgia, and the creeping rehabilitation of Stalinism. In this sense, one may expect that sovereignty and governmentality are bound to co-exist as two forms of power that are different from each other but not necessarily confrontational.

This leads us to the last point in our analysis: the transfer of a significant amount of governmentality functions from the Kremlin to regions, being a major element of the crisis management framework, became an important contribution to the gradual decentralization of the Russian political system, and created a stronger demand for self-rule in many of the peripheral regions. However, these small steps so far did not affect the structural characteristics of Russian federalism, which remains illiberal in the sense of leaving much space for the discretionary power of the centre over subnational regions. The structural changes towards a more profound federalization of Russia require a much greater emphasis on decolonization of both Russian sovereign power and practices of governmentality. It is only through developing a Russia-specific decolonial politics that the force projection towards Russia's post-Soviet neighbours and the blatant disregard of environmental sensitivities in the Northern margins might be regarded not as two separate matters, but as two sides of the same coin. In this respect, the movement towards a more liberal (and less hierarchical) model of federalism coincides in Russia with a debunking of both the Kremlin's neo-imperial exposures and the century-long internal colonization of the country.

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Framing the Pandemic and the Rise of the Digital Surveillance State

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Abstract: The pandemic caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus has provided a pretext for many countries of the world to extend executive powers, and their digital surveillance capacities in particular. Aiming to identify how different regimes frame digital surveillance, this paper employs qualitative content analysis to compare the government framing of digital surveillance in India, Israel and Singapore. Although due to their different working dynamics, one would expect democracies and autocracies to frame digital surveillance in different ways, our findings reveal an overlap between liberal and illiberal rhetoric across the cases and point to unexplored illiberal peculiarities within the category of 'democratic backsliders.' We conclude by cautiously speculating how heightened extents of digital surveillance and tracking may become the new normal across regime types, and how governments might exploit and recycle these same frames to justify digital surveillance after the COVID-19 crisis is over.

Keywords: Digital, surveillance, privacy, human rights, framing, regime types, democratic backsliding.

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The global pandemic caused by the SARS-COV 2 virus is changing the world in a few remarkable ways. Besides its economic toll, it has provided a pretext for many countries of the world to extend executive powers. This includes the extension of government surveillance, and particularly, digital surveillance.[1] In the light of present-day autocratization (Freedom House 2019; Lührmann – Lindberg 2019; Hartmann 2020), this calls for a scrupulous academic examination evaluating the risks inherent in the use and promotion of digital surveillance for fundamental civic rights, first and foremost, privacy (Cath et al. 2017; Raso et al. 2018).

In this article, we investigate the government rhetoric surrounding the use of digital surveillance as a widely promoted countermeasure during the COVID-19 pandemic. We do not judge or analyse whether particular measures are of a liberal or illiberal nature. Instead, we focus on liberal and illiberal ways in which governments frame and justify

digital surveilance. By drawing on rhetorics, we also seek to contribute to this special issue by providing a better understanding of whether, where, and how COVID-19 may practically blur the border between liberal and illiberal politics. Since the literature on crisis communication (Coombs 2010; Schwarz et al. 2016) suggests that talking about and responding to a crisis are intimately intertwined, our framing analysis is a step toward better understanding the future of liberalism after the COVID-19 crisis.

Although due to their different working dynamics, one would expect democracies and autocracies to frame and justify the extension of their surveillance in different manners, the literature on emergency politics as well as historical precedents, such as the rise of Nazism in the Weimar Republic (Agamben 2005), illustrates that crises can facilitate an emergence of illiberal discourses in democracies as well. Additionally, the accumulation of cases that could be labelled as "soft" or "competitive" autocracies (Levitsky – Way 2010) and debates about the coming of a new international order set to replace the liberal international order – the ideational and normative project led by the United States after the end of the Cold War (Walt 2011; Alcaro 2018; Makarychev 2020) – further complicate the expectations one may have towards how different regimes would "speak" about digital surveillance.

Whereas differences in the framing of digital surveillance might be clearer between consolidated autocracies and consolidated democracies, democratic "backsliders" and "soft" autocracies can exhibit overlaps in the ways they frame and justify digital surveillance. To test this, we ask how "soft" autocracies and democratic "backsliders" frame digital surveillance during the COVID-19 crisis and whether these different regimes do so differently.

We present an explorative analysis of three cases: Israel, India and Singapore. To answer the questions posed above, we follow framing theory and do two things. First, we investigate and compare how each of these governments talks about the "problem" – the pandemic – and the corresponding digital surveillance policy actions. To establish a benchmark for comparison, we draw from theoretical literature to define relevant liberal and illiberal rhetorical components. Second, we investigate different combinations of these elements and the frames they produce in each of our cases. In doing both, we analyse official government statements using tools of qualitative text analysis. Our findings reveal an overlap between liberal and illiberal rhetoric across cases and point to unexplored illiberal peculiarities within the category of democratic "backsliders". We conclude by discussing the relevance of this variation within and across regime types. We then speculate about how digital surveillance may become the new normal and how governments might exploit and recycle the same frames to justify digital surveillance after the COVID-19 crisis is over.

THEORETICAL EXPOSITION: SPEAKING LIBERALLY, SPEAKING ILLIBERALLY

In defining liberal and illiberal rhetoric, which are central to our investigation, we subscribe to the position expressed by Philippe Schmitter, who pointed out that *"liberalism, either as a conception of political liberty or as a doctrine about economic policy, may have coincided with the rise of democracy. But it has never been immutably or unambiguously linked to its practice"* (1995). Based on his analysis, we believe that some of the mainstream political science literature has put too much stress on inter-linkages between democracy and liberalism, arguing that liberalism is inseparable from a strong consolidated democracy (Schedler 2013; Freedom House 2014). While these claims apply to a few contemporary cases, historical precedents and the present-day accumulation of illiberal, defective democracies, or democracies "with adjectives" (Collier – Levitsky 1997; Merkel 2004) complicate this picture.

Thus, following Schmitter's line of argument, we treat democracy and liberalism as two distinct phenomena. For the purpose of our analysis, the former represents a regime

type, rules about *"who gets what, when, how"* (Laswell 1936) or *"the formal and informal organization of the center of political power, and of its relations with the broader society"* (Fishmann 1990: 428), whereas we understand the latter as a political *Weltanschauung*, an ideology, and an overarching normative system of values and beliefs about how society and government *ought to be* organised, rather than an objective representation of it (Stråth 2013). Thus, by aiming to locate and compare liberal and illiberal framing justifying digital surveillance, we take interest in the deeper normative visions of the regimes under our scrutiny, and their ideas about the underlying relationship between individuals, society and government, which are exposed by the corona crisis and locatable in their crisis communication. This follows from the lessons that students of international crisis communication are well aware of. The way in which political regimes, like other organizations, perceive and practise crisis communication, the way they "co-create" the meaning of crisis, is intimately contingent on values. In our case, liberal and illiberal values shape the regime's perception, communication, and behaviour in the face of a crisis (Schwarz et al. 2016: 3; Coombs 2010: 19).

Liberalism has meant different things to different scholarly fields at different historical junctures. As argued by Michael Freeden and Marc Stears, it is thus *"not a single phenomenon, but an assembly of family resemblances, with a rich and complex historical story and with numerous contrasting contemporary formations"* (2013: 330). For instance, to economists, liberalism refers to the school of thought that crystallized in the 19th century around the works of Adam Smith (1776), which were broadly centred around individual freedom to participate in a competitive market economy. Various scholars have later turned Smith's legacy into different economic sub-doctrines (see von Mises 1912; Hayek 1944; Friedman 1962). For scholars of international relations, liberalism refers to both a theory explaining international relations, and a world order in which economic interdependence gave rise to political interdependence and the creation of multilateral organizations to govern the international sphere (Keohane – Nye 1989; Moravcsik 1997).

Here we focus primarily on political liberalism with roots in the works of political theorists like John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls. These thinkers stressed individual rights to act as political subjects rather than objects, and called for respect of civic and human rights. Based on their work, despite different meanings that liberalism had for different scholars across various academic fields, at least three common denominators of liberalism and liberal rhetoric can be identified. First, liberalism is a socio-economic and political ideology that is centred on individualism; that is, that the individual, and her freedom, welfare, wellbeing, and interests are the normative reference points of all political and social organization (Mill 1859).[2] As formulated by Mill, "free development of individuality" should be prioritized, since human growth is primarily facilitated by the exercise of natural individual mental and moral capacities. Second, liberalism stresses the importance of civic rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of participation in collective decision making (Berlin 1979). Going all the way back to John Locke, liberal thinkers have tied the legitimacy of the government with the consent of the people and considered individual civic and human rights to be derived from the natural state, where equality between individuals has been assumed to prevail (Locke 1947 [1689]). In a similar vein, for John Rawls, liberalism is conceived as an *ethical* theory which prioritizes the interests of individuals as autonomous, rational and purposive agents capable of collectively seeking the common good rather than solely striving for the fulfilment of particularistic personal interests (2005). Finally, in the liberal vernacular governments and states are both necessary and – if left unchecked – perilous. They have to protect the socio-political and economic order to secure individualism, the free market, and freedoms; at the same time, the role of the state needs to be balanced and constrained so as not to infringe on these same individual rights (Paine 1776; Rawls 2005).

The aforementioned values are of an overlapping and sometimes of a contradictory nature; they also vary regionally and in their classic and modern liberal interpretations (Börzel – Zürn 2020). Moreover, all of them, individually and collectively, have suffered many attacks and false intellectual appropriations (Freeden – Stears 2013: 330). However, it is largely agreed that these contested values in the multiplicity of their interpretation form the core of the liberal *Weltanshaaung*, and thus should be detectable in any form of contemporary liberal rhetoric.

Following the aforementioned discussion, in this paper, we expect liberal rhetorical elements to be *those which stress the perpetuation or protection of individual civic rights and liberties, stress the right of individuals to question, participate in, or influence government policy, and emphasize the inclusion of different individuals regardless of ethnic, linguistic, religious, or other differences*.

Illiberalism and the tradition of illiberal rhetoric, on the other hand, can be traced all the way back to *The Prince*, a classical 16th century political treatise by Niccolò Machiavelli, a diplomat and statesman of the Florentine Republic under Medici rule. Machiavelli is known for describing political power as the end goal of politics and propagating an "all means necessary" approach for maintaining it (2008 [1532]). Arguing along similar lines, the works of Carl Schmitt, probably one of the most prominent critics of liberalism, are by far the most informative about characteristics of illiberal rhetoric. Previously used to justify political reforms in Nazi Germany, they are contemporarily utilized by populist and undemocratic political actors around the world.

One of the main tenets of Schmitt's thought is that politics are defined by an ontological friend-enemy distinction. Enemies are never individuals but are collective, and thus Schmitt criticized liberalism for overlooking the inherent inequality of politics, arguing that friends cannot be treated equally to enemies (1932). Schmitt formulated a theory of plebiscitary authoritarianism in which political order is assured by a connection between a sovereign leader and a united people, relying on an almost mystical bond between the two (Lewis 2020). Therefore, once entrusted with power by the people, Schmitt's leader does not seek to consult or deliberate, but rules at his own discretion.

Arguing against individualism and pluralist freedom of opinion, Carl Schmitt propagated a "moral hegemony of the majority" (Lewis 2020). Contrary to liberal deliberation, Schmitt's *"sovereign is he who decides on the exceptional case"* (Schmitt 1922). Ascribing this freedom of political choice to a sovereign, Schmitt's political theory is profoundly anti-universalist and anti-cosmopolitan, as he stands against the "spacelessness" which he asserts to be the essential feature of the liberal order (Lewis 2020). The same conflict also plays out today on global and domestic stages, where liberal internationalists clash with illiberal nationalist and populist political forces, which is exemplified by the contentious relations between the European Union and populist far-right political parties, and between transnational institutions and strongman political leaders like Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin or Viktor Orbán.

Based on the aforementioned traits of illiberalism, for our inquiry we expect illiberal rhetorical elements to be those which *stress conflict, define collective enemies, support a normative hegemony of the majority, emphasize the decision-making sovereignty of a leader or a small clique over deliberation and participation, and perpetuate an anti-universalist and anti-internationalist rhetoric*.

FRAMING THE PANDEMIC AND DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

Used in studies of agenda-setting, social movements, and public policy, the concept of framing has aimed to give us a better understanding of how, when faced with uncertainty, different actors will seize on different elements and linkages to construct diverging views of reality (Rein – Schon 2013). In the words of Anthony Zito, much emphasis has been

put on "how people key on specific elements of an event to understand what is going on and how they should behave" (2011: 3).

According to Martin Rein and Donald Schon, the first step in framing involves a *policy debate* in which different policy contestants seek to prevail with their policy story frames, including rhetorical persuasion, evidence, and symbols. In the second step come *action frames*, which are focused around the debate over policy practice in which actors argue and develop policy stories that influence the creation of procedures and policy instruments (1993). Similarly, scholars studying social movements provide a tripartite typology. First comes the *diagnostic* framing of current events, which seeks to discredit the prevailing framing and offer a new interpretation. Second, *prognostic* framing involves the rhetorical construction of a solution to the problem. Finally, *motivational* framing focuses on the conceptualization that triggers people to join the social movement (Snow – Benford 1988).

Looking at these different strands of literature, we identify two consistent stages of framing: one component diagnoses the situation (*diagnostic frames*), and the other describes the treatment recommendation (*action frames*). As Robert Entman summarizes, it *"involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described"* (1993: 52). In turn, we further focus on policy story/diagnostic and policy action/prognostic subframes, which can be combined to "speak" to citizen audiences about the nature of COVID-19 as a problem, and digital surveillance as a corresponding policy prescription. In our analysis, we firstly aim to provide an answer to the *how* question and locate and explicate how diagnostic and prognostic subframes materialize empirically. In the second step, following the tenets of framing theory, we explore different combinations of these elements and the frames they produce in each of our cases.

Building on previously provided characterizations of liberal and illiberal rhetoric and recent literature, we discern seven pairs of liberal and illiberal rhetorical components as theoretically mutually exclusive dichotomies (see Table 1).

We expect to detect these elements while analyzing statements of different political regimes when they justify the use of digital surveillance in the face of COVID-19. First, concerning the policy story of the public health threat itself, we expect liberal framing to be inclusive, and to portray the virus as an indiscriminate threat along the lines of the United Nations Development Program (1994), stress universal individual rights to health, and thus not make any distinctions based on social identities. In contrast, illiberal framing should portray the pandemic as especially threatening to a particular national, ethnic, or religious majority, or any other identity-based majority. As explicated by Mehmet Efe Caman's study on the framing of human rights violations in Turkey, the majority can be loosely defined by othering and singling out of any group opposing the regime's policy story and by portraying it as a threat to the majority (2019).

As students of decision-making and international relations may expect, illiberal framing should also engage in blame-shifting by portraying regional and international relations and interdependencies, rather than environmental, biological or governance factors, as the root causes behind the pandemic (Hood 2002; Bartling – Fischbacher 2012; Heinkelmann-Wild – Zangl 2019). It can even formulate demands for retribution, mobilizing nationalistic discourse and seeking for a "rally round the flag" effect, as exemplified by Amanda Woode's research on framing of the electricity crisis in Central Asia (2014). In contrast, liberal framing of the pandemic should embrace aspects of international interdependence at the origins of the crisis, portray it as an issue of international governance, and call for heightened international cooperation, whether bilateral, multilateral or facilitated by international organizations (Keohane – Nye 1989; Moravcsik 1997; Barnett –

Table 1
Pandemic Subframes

Policy story/diagnostic subframes (What sort of a problem is COVID-19? Whom does it endanger?)		**Action/prognostic subframes** (How is digital surveillance justified? What sort of a measure is it?)	
Liberal	**Illiberal**	**Liberal**	**Illiberal**
Indiscriminate threat (UNDP 1994)	Othering/exclusive majoritarianism (Schmitt 1922; Caman 2019)	Deliberation and participation (Locke 1947 [1689]; Mill 1859; Berlin 1979; Rawls 2005)	Sovereign regime action (Schmitt 1922; Makarychev 2020)
International interdependence (Keohane – Nye 1989; Moravcsik 1997; Ikenberry 2009; Alcaro 2018)	International blame-shifting (Hood 2002; Bartling – Fischbacher 2012; Woode 2014; Heinkelmann-Wild – Zangl 2019)	Individual freedoms and rights (privacy) (Locke 1947 [1689]; Mill 1859; UDHR 1948; ICCPR 1966)	Pandemic response over individual freedoms (Schmitt 1992)
The pandemic falls within "normal" politics	A securitized pandemic (Wæver 2012; Balzacq 2010; Watson 2012)	International/regional endorsement (Finnemore – Sikkink 1998; Barnett – Finnemore 1999; Alcaro 2018)	Inspired by authoritarian gravity centres (Kneueur and Demmelhuber 2016)
		Admits criticism (Börzel – Zürn 2020)	Delegitimizing critics (Lewis et al. 2018; Caman 2019)

Finnemore 1999; Ikenberry 2009). In the words of Riccardo Alcaro, liberal speakers should acknowledge that *"states are members of an international society rather than isolated units"* (2018) and that this creates mutual responsibilities in the face of the pandemic to further engage with other players of the international system rather than self-isolate.

Whereas it is not always illiberal to speak about or diagnose a situation as a security threat, diagnosing a public health issue – in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic – as a security threat, to our reading, is an instance of illiberal rhetoric. Following Scott Watson (2012), we believe that securitization and framing are substantively similar research programmes. We thus expect that diagnosing the pandemic as a security threat may lead to an illiberal framing of digital surveillance measures. The literature on securitization suggests that by securitizing an issue, and constructing it as a security threat, decision makers are able to envision "extraordinary" measures (Wćver 1993).

Metaphors, images, and emotions are contextually and purposefully mobilized by political actors to prompt sensations and intuitions on the part of an audience towards a particular event, individual, or group with a view of awakening an "aura of unprecedented threatening complexion" around it, implicating that an unprecedented political act is needed to block its development (Balzacq 2009: 63). The literature on the matter has compiled an impressive number of case and comparative studies on the global war on terror, migration, minority groups and other topics, illustrating how securitization leads to policy measures clashing with liberal ideals of individual autonomy, civic and human

rights, the idea of deliberation and the political consent of the people (see for instance Balzacq 2010; Donnelly 2013; van Baar et al. 2019).

In contrast to securitization, we envision a "de-securitized" diagnosis of the pandemic on the liberal side of the nexus. We use it to test if such a subframe that presents COVID-19 as something that should not derail "politics as usual" and stresses the organization of the "normal" political cycle, appears at all and whether it actually stands in contrast with attemps to securitize the pandemic.

Concerning action subframes, we expect governments to talk about digital surveillance differently as well. Liberal subframes will focus on deliberation and participation aspects in introducing surveillance measures (Mill 1859; Berlin 1979). Among individual freedoms and rights, privacy will be highlighted and, in the light of international human rights instruments (UDHR 1948; ICCPR 1966), liberal framing will stress the proportionate and non-transgressive nature of the digital surveillance measures applied. It will also frame it as corresponding to prescriptions of international liberal institutions like the World Health Organization and good practices of regional groupings (Finnemore – Sikkink 1998; Barnett – Finnemore 1999; Alcaro 2018). Finally, liberal subframes admit and engage with the criticism voiced towards digital surveillance, since, as Tanja Börzel and Michael Zürn argue, criticism from the "inside," enabled by the guarantee of the freedoms of thought and speech, constitutes an integral part of – what they define as – the liberal script (2020).

On the other end, illiberal subframes ought to justify digital surveillance by sovereign privileges of the government to act swiftly according to its judgment, and contrast it with the indecisiveness of liberal deliberation (Schmitt 1922). Unlike liberal framing, they should oppose prescriptions stemming from the international community and speak about the COVID-19 response measures as a matter of the regime's "illiberal freedom of choice" (Makarychev 2020). This also implies that the illiberal pandemic framing should prioritize the pandemic response over any individual rights. Illiberal subframes can identify digital surveillance as an international practice worth imitating, but are more likely to refer to digital surveillance cases in so-called illiberal authoritarian "gravity centres," illiberal capitalist autocracies facilitating the diffusion of illiberal norms and practices in their respective regions (Kneueur – Demmelhuber 2016). Finally, following Carl Schmitt, we expect illiberal framing to seek for a hegemony of ideas and values and thus not tolerate opponents of digital surveillance, but aim to delegitimize them by discursively marginalizing critics by portraying them as the internal "fifth column" that is antagonistic to the interests of the state (Lewis et al. 2018).

Table 1 and the discussion above map our theoretically-informed understanding of how liberal and illiberal rhetoric surrounding digital surveillance *may* sound in the face of the corona crisis. After the presentation of our case selection and methodological approach, we test to what extent these frames are relevant in individual cases and explicate where and how liberal and illiberal subframes complement one another to form complete liberal, illiberal, and mixed frames.[3]

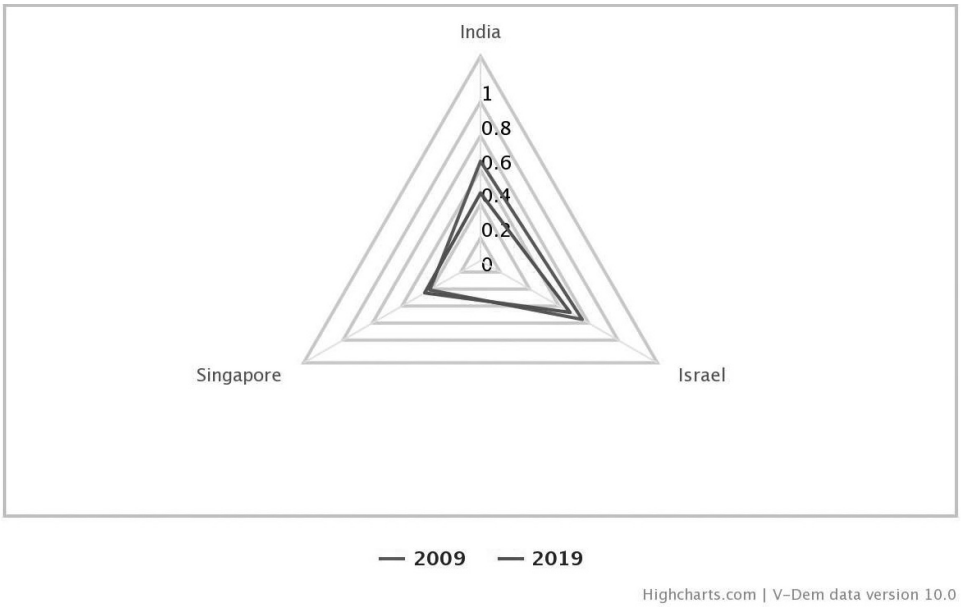
CASE SELECTION: THREE OF A KIND

Despite their many differences, Israel, India, and Singapore share remarkable features, but differ in their political regimes. All of our cases have been similarly hit by the SARS-COV-2 virus and have employed similar digital surveillance measures to respond to it. They have all been using and developing various digital tools before the pandemic and they all enjoy very diverse societies.[4] On the other hand, Singapore differs from the other two in its regime type – authoritarianism.

Israel and India are both democratic "backsliders" but at different stages. Singapore is a dominant party autocracy which, despite allowing for a level of political pluralism, does not achievethe procedural minimum of democracy (Dahl 1973). Various indices testify to this. Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" report (2020) categorizes both

India and Israel as free countries. Nevertheless, Israel enjoys more civil liberties than India and scores five points higher than India in the general freedom score (76 and 71 out of 100, respectively). More importantly, both countries witnessed different paces of freedom regression during the last years. In 2017, India scored 77 points out of 100 in the Freedom House report; Israel scored 80. Despite the recent erosion of democratic institutions and practices in India and Israel, there seems to be enough evidence to suggest that Israel and India did not yet transition to authoritarianism and can be positioned on the opposite side to that of Singapore on the regime nexus. The starker backsliding of democracy in India is even more evident when seen in a longitudinal light. "Varieties of Democracy" data show that between 2009 and 2019, India has substantially regressed on the index of "liberal democracy." Israel has experienced a milder regression on the same index (see Chart 1).

Chart 1
Liberal Democracy Index: India, Singapore and Israel in 2009–2019



Source: Variable Radar Chart, v-dem.net/en/analysis/Radar2Graph.

India, Israel and Singapore have all been using and developing various forms of surveillance before the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of our cases, Singapore and Israel, are among the 30 most ICT-developed countries in the world, whereas India comes in at number 133 (ITU 2017). The level of ICT development does not necessarily indicate the level to which our cases had used digital surveillance before the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the pandemic as a public health issue provoked a fast and more visible employment of digital surveillance, the scarcity of reliable data on the usage of digital surveillance prior to the COVID-19 pandemic makes it hard to make a sober assessment of the extent of its previous employment. However, existing evidence suggests that all three countries have used similar types of digital surveillance technology in the past (Carnegie Endowment 2019).

In the face of the corona virus, two similarities between the cases are crucial in our case selection. First, they have all been comparably hit by the pandemic. Despite the differences our cases manifest in their infection and death rates per one million population,

they were all places where the pandemic hit strongly, affecting every aspect of normal life and provoking various responses from their governments. Israel was one of the early-hit countries with the first major spike in cases taking place on the 25th of March 2020. After an initial decrease in the number of newly diagnosed patients starting in the second week of April 2020, the pandemic started taking hold there again at the end of May (World Health Organization 2020a). In Singapore, the first major spike in the number of newly infected patients was on the 17th of April 2020. Despite the fact that the number of newly reported cases started to decline in the second half of May, Singapore has one of the highest infection rates per one million population (World Health Organization 2020b). India, on the other hand, has been, comparatively speaking, a late-comer. Reported cases there have continued to consistently rise since May 2020. By June 17th, the total number of positive cases was more than 350 thousand with no indication of an imminent decrease in the rate of infection (World Health Organization 2020c). In addition to that, all of our cases chose to impose lockdown measures to fight the spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus.

Second, all of our cases employed techniques of digital surveillance to combat the spread of the disease. All of them have developed and used contact-tracing applications and quarantine enforcement digital surveillance. India and Israel recycled anti-terrorism and war surveillance measures to enhance contact tracing and quarantine enforcement. Israel has re-purposed its half secret Shin Bet surveillance programme, which uses GPS and mobile phone tracking, to monitor whether individuals who received a quarantine order are following it. The programme was originally only legally employable in cases of countering imminent terrorist threats. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially issued an emergency order that allows the usage of the Shin Bet surveillance to track coronavirus active cases as well as their past movements for 30 days (Halbfinger – Kershner – Bergman 2020). These 30 days were extended to 60 days by the cabinet (Privacy International 2020b). On the 19th of March 2020 attempts by civil society actors motivated the supreme court on to threaten the ban of such re-purposed usage of the programme unless a due regulatory process took place by the 24th of March within the Knesset (Privacy International 2020a). Under the same conditions, it banned the police usage of cell phone locations to track coronavirus patients and those who are ordered to quarantine. These constraints were soon lifted, however, when the parliament re-opened to start the process of legislation (Winer – Staff 2020). The Shin Bet system uses GPS location, credit card purchase data, and more to locate people who came in contact with positive cases within two meters for more than ten minutes and orders them to self-isolate (Gross 2020). The location data of quarantine violators is also shared with police authorities. In addition to the Shin Bet surveillance programme, Israel launched the corona tracing mobile application HaMagen to enhance contact tracing and the tracing of the spread of the pandemic. Unlike the Shin Bet surveillance, HaMagen saves the user's GPS locations locally on their mobile phone. Once tested positive, the user has to upload this history to a central server of the Ministry of Health. The ministry updates this information for all such users, and those who came in contact with the positive case during the last 14 days are notified (Ministry of Health 2020a).

Singapore has used a wide range of digital surveillance methods to combat the spread of the pandemic. To enforce quarantine orders, Singapore employed the Stay-Home-Notice Reporting System, which legally binds people who are ordered to quarantine to share their location with the Ministry of Manpower. The system requires users to upload photographic proof to make sure that they are at the same place as their digital device (Privacy International 2020c). To facilitate contact-tracing, shopping malls and other businesses were required to use the programme Safe-Entry, which uses QR codes to log the names, NRICs, and mobile numbers of individuals who enter high-traffic places or business buildings. Individuals can be denied entry into these places if they refuse to scan the QR code and provide their information. To track symptomatic individuals and prevent them

from entering public places, an artificial intelligence-equipped temperature screening system called VigilantGantry simultaneously screens real-time temperatures of multiple individuals (Yang 2020). The automated thermometer can be augmented with facial recognition software in order to personally identify symptomatic individuals (Yang 2020). Finally, to enhance contact-tracing, Singapore has developed the Trace-Together application. The application uses Bluetooth technology on digital devices to continuously record users' close contacts. The data is collected in an anonymous form and saved locally on the user's device (Singapore Government Agency 2020a). If a user tests positive, he or she will be asked to provide their recorded contact data to the Ministry of Health, which will, in turn, notify the users who came in close contact with the positive case and order them to quarantine (Privacy International 2020c).

In India, digital surveillance responses to the pandemic have been numerous and much more decentralized than those in Singapore and Israel. This is not surprising given its decentralized federal system. The only digital surveillance method employed federally there is the contact-tracing application Aarogya Setu. Similarly to the application used in Singapore, the application uses Bluetooth to record contacts, stores data locally, and uses data of positive cases to trace their contacts (Government of India 2020a, 2020b). On the state and union levels, digital surveillance responses have aimed at enforcing quarantine, controlling the movement of positive cases, and tracing their contacts. This has been done in three different ways: the first is by utilizing command and control centres in smart cities. These command and control "war rooms" are equipped, depending on the smart city, with a combination of CCTV, face recognition software, and GPS tracking. The second is by using local contact-tracing applications which work similarly to the federal one. The third is by using mobile tower signals provided by ISPs and GPS locations to control individuals who are ordered to quarantine (Privacy International 2020e).

These similarities allow us to test for the impact of the political regime on the way in which our cases frame their digital surveillance responses to the pandemic. We test how they compare to each other in their framing and identify points of difference and overlap.

THE METHOD AND MATERIALS OF THE ANALYSIS

In the light of the explorative nature of our research, we situate our methodological approach at the intersection of directed qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2004; Hsieh – Shannon 2005) and grounded theory (Glaser – Strauss 1967; Strauss – Corbin 1998). This means that we combine our matrix of deductively derived pandemic subframes with inductive insights derived from the data.

Initially, for each case over 800 text units published in the period from the 1st of March to the 17th of June 2020 were screened. We analysed statements of government officials with a special focus on the speeches and press releases of the heads of state, governments and health ministers. In addition, we analysed texts found on official government websites and contact-tracing-applications' websites, and press releases by relevant ministries. Moreover, official government and national newspapers were also screened for identification of relevant government statements. We located 24 relevant documents for Singapore, 11 for Israel and 46 for India.

All our data was originally found in the English language. In India, English is one of the official languages; all the Indian governmental websites known to us are available at least in the English, Urdu, and Hindi languages. Similarly, in Singapore English is one of the official languages; the official government website is available only in the English language. All of the Singaporean ministerial speeches are available in English, Tamil, Mandarin, and Malay. The original languages of the speeches tend to alternate from one event to another. In Israel, despite the fact that English is not an official language, the government's official communication is available in various languages, including English,

the accuracy of which we checked by comparing the collected documents with their equivalents released in Arabic, one of the officially used languages of the state of Israel.

We used MAXQDA 2018 software to code segments in these documents three times and checked for inter-coder agreement two times.[5] When we assessed the extent to which our cases differently employ the subframes, we treated each document as one unit of analysis. That means that we considered the mere existence (or lack thereof) of each code within each single document. We do not quantitatively examine the number of times a code is mentioned in a single document, or the length of the coded segments. Instead, we focus on complementing our thick qualitative description with a descriptive quantification of the number of times a single code appears in a respective case. In a second step, with a view of identifying emerging frames, we explored diagnostic and prognostic rhetorical elements co-appearing at the document level.

DIAGNOSING: WHAT SORT OF A PROBLEM IS THE PANDEMIC?

Concerning diagnostic rhetorical components, the Israeli, Indian and Singaporean governments all diagnosed the coronavirus as an indiscriminate threat and elaborated on the fact that it calls for an embrace of international interdependence rather than self-isolation. We detected an illiberal securitization of the pandemic in all three cases, but it was by far the most pronounced in the case of the democratic "backslider" India.

Interestingly, in the general atmosphere of global turmoil, our cases do not attempt to shift the blame for the pandemic to other countries, for instance China, where the coronavirus presumably originated. Moreover, there were no attempts to engage in "othering" by explicitly excluding a particular identity-based group from the national COVID-19 response efforts. The Singaporean and Indian ministers of health only implicitly discussed heightened infection risks for migrant workers (Singapore Government Agency 2020e; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2020j). This was, however, clearly counterweighted by numerous communications by government officials from both countries, framing COVID-19 as an indiscriminate threat to the "well-being of every Indian" and "Singaporeans from all walks of life" (Singapore Government Agency 2020e; Ministry of Electronics & IT 2020a). As a vivid example of liberal diagnostic framing of the pandemic, the Singaporean Ministry of Health has explicitly declared its determination to centre its response efforts around migrant workers rather than single them out: *"While the community cases are coming under control, we have seen a rise in migrant worker cases, particularly in the dormitories. We moved in quickly, set up medical posts in all the purpose built dormitories [...] We are making progress, and will continue to do our best to care for our migrant workers"* (2020c).

Even in the case of Israel, known for the contentious relations between its Muslim citizens and Jewish-dominated government, the framing of the pandemic has been explicitly inclusive. In a joint statement with the general directors of the ministries of health and finance, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu directly addressed Israeli Muslims: *"Ramadan is almost upon us. Just as the Jewish citizens of Israel acted during Passover, I now request that you have the Ramadan meals only with your nuclear family. I ask you to preserve the whole and thus take care of yourselves and your loved ones"* (Prime Minister's Office 2020b). Finally, in all three cases the framing of the pandemic as an indiscriminate threat was substantiated by multi-lingual government communication addressing every major linguistic group in the respective countries.

Likewise, all of our cases are similar in that they all embraced the pandemic as a shared global challenge. This was well illustrated by Singaporean and Indian officials highlighting national inputs into the global efforts to develop a vaccine led by the World Health Organization (Singapore Government Agency 2020e; Ministry of Science & Technology 2020a). In addition, the leaders of Singapore and Israel have both presented their COVID-19 counter-measures as coordinated with the relevant regional groupings,

namely with ASEAN and the European countries respectively (Prime Minister's Office Singapore 2020a; Prime Minister's Office 2020k), rather than as domestic achievements.

The most obvious difference between Israel, India and Singapore in terms of diagnosing the pandemic is the degree to which it has been securitized. Singapore makes implicit references to COVID-19 as a security type of a threat (Singapore Government Agency 2020e; Ministry of Health 2020c). Similarly, Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu has referred to a "war on corona" and "fighters in the campaign against Corona" in a couple of instances (Prime Minister's Office 2020c). The India government, on the other hand, has been unequalled in the frequency and intensity of its framing of the pandemic as a security concern. In more than every fourth unit of analysis in this case, we identified instances of this frame. The press releases by the Indian government and speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi were very colourful in their militant language, describing integrated "COVID-19 war rooms," labelling essential workers – doctors and nurses, sanitation workers and the police force – "corona warriors," and calling the government to work on "war-footing" (Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs 2020g; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2020b; Prime Minister's Office 2020d).

The securitization of the pandemic by the Indian government contrasts with the case of Singapore, where the only instance of framing the pandemic in the broader framework of "normal" politics was identified. In an intervention at the ASEAN Summit, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted*: "We should also not lose sight of the work that is in progress. Therefore, I propose ASEAN should still aim to sign the RCEP this year and should also continue pursuing the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement with the European Union. Dealing with the immediate crises, while not losing sight of the longer term objectives is the best way to enable our economies to survive this crisis, and to bounce back after COVID-19 passes"* (Prime Minister's Office Singapore 2020a). Though this remains the only empirical example of "de-securitized" framing of the pandemic, Loong's intervention complements Singapore's policy-action liberal components and explicates how autocracies can be well-versed in using the liberal "tongue."

In sum, the qualitative mapping of the liberal and illiberal framing employed by the Israeli, Singaporean and Indian governments illustrates how when standing on different sides of the regime demarcation line, "backsliding" democracies such as India and Israel can employ illiberal rhetorical elements, whereas stable autocracies can define crises such as COVID-19 in liberal ways. A brief look at the frequencies of the liberal and illiberal diagnostic codes also supports such a proposition (see the electronic annex to the publication).

TREATING: RESPONDING WITH DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE

The following paragraphs explicate our finding that all of our cases use a combination of liberal and illiberal subframes while talking about digital surveillance. They do, however, differ in regard to the following. First, not all the subframes are employed (equally) across our cases. Second, our cases differ in how they combine liberal and illiberal rhetorical components. Third, our three cases differ in the way they talk about contact-tracing applications.

Unlike India, both Israel and Singapore make significant effort to frame their contact-tracing applications as being compatible with individual rights and freedoms, including the freedom of choice and privacy rights.[6] In Israel, the official website of the HaMagen application mentions several times that the information remains on the users' phones and highlights elsewhere that the Ministry of Health's data *"is updated and sent to [the user's] device one way"* (Ministry of Health 2020b). Similarly, in Singapore, the Govtech website assures users that *"given the* [*TraceTogether*] *security and privacy safeguards"*, their data, including their mobile phone numbers, *"remain secret"* and that *"there is no way for the government to locate* [the users'] *whereabouts with this app"* (GovTech Singapore 2020a).

In India, less effort is put into such framing of its Aarogya Setu app; in the 42 coding instances in India only two very brief references to such framing appear – compared to seven such references in the 44 coding instances in Singapore and two in the 19 coding instances in Israel.

All three countries encourage the willing participation of their citizens in digital surveillance measures, particularly by encouraging them to use contact-tracing apps.[7] However, whereas Singapore and Israel frame their applications as having been developed in a deliberative and participatory manner, India does not. For instance, Israel frames its HaMagen contact-tracing application as an open-source application which is developed *"on the values of communal responsibility"* and allows *"programmers in Israel and around the world to help and support this effort"* (Ministry of Health 2020a). In Singapore, the government consistently refers to TraceTogether as a "community driven" effort (Smart Nation and Digital Government Office 2020; GovTech Singapore 2020g). In India, the government frames Aarogya Setu as a successful effort of the Indian government: *"*[The] *Prime Minister observed that the States where* [the] *Aarogya Setu app has been downloaded in large numbers are witnessing positive results. Efforts should be made to increase the reach of the app, he said"* (Prime Minister's Office 2020j).[8]

India enjoys two peculiarities. First, the way in which the government encourages citizens to use contact-tracing apps proved qualitatively different than the corresponding measures in Singapore and Israel. We inductively created a subframe called "indirect encouragement" to capture this nuance. In Singapore and Israel, the government talks directly to citizens, encouraging them to participate in the contact-tracing because the fight against COVID-19 *"requires all of us* [Israelis] *to join the effort"* (Ministry of Health 2020c) or requires the people (in this case, Singaporeans) to *"support one another to live life normally and safely"* (Singapore Government Agency 2020a). In India, on the other hand, the central government often indirectly states that the local states *"have been asked to advise individuals to install the Aarogya Setu"* (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020b). These indirect and sometimes patronizing instances of encouragement might reflect the peculiarities of the decentralized Indian political system.

Second, India employs an *illiberal "othering"* of its contact-tracing applications that is aimed against specific groups of people. As a result of its political system, India has used not only its national contact-tracing app, but also sub-national contact tracing apps, many of which sync their information with the national Aarogya Setu. It illiberally frames national and sub-national apps' usage in containment zones and against travellers and returnees.[9] For instance, the central government in India celebrates that Surat Smart City forces recent travellers to it to fill in a health-status questionnaire on its tracker app twice a day; the user has to also send a selfie (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020a). In the same manner, the central government directs local governments to enforce a *"100% coverage of* [the] *Aarogya Setu app among the residents of the Containment Zone"* (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020b). This "othering" in its rhetoric surrounding contact-tracing apps sets India aside from Singapore and Israel.

Similarly, Singapore enjoys two peculiarities. The first is that it stands out in its emphasis on the international and regional support behind its contact-tracing app.[10] This is not surprising; in fact, Singapore has relied and worked for decades on constructing its image as one of the world's leaders in advanced digital infrastructure (Chang 2003: 97). This image resonates well with international organizations as they continuously praise Singapore for utilizing digital tools in promptly responding to the pandemic (UNDP 2020). The second is that it is the only one of our three cases that does not make a single reference to the necessity to compromise on freedoms because of the pandemic.

Besides contact-tracing apps, all other digital surveillance measures in Israel, Singapore, and India are framed in an overly illiberal fashion. In Israel, the Shin Bet surveillance is framed as a sovereign decision by the government that will identify

people who need to quarantine and will be *"enforced without compromise"* (Prime Minister's Office 2020b). The government justifies this on the grounds of the emergency situation of the pandemic that necessitates a calculated compromise on individual rights and freedoms. In Singapore, SafeEntry and the Stay-Home Notice are framed as necessary measures taken and enforced by the government, the instructions of which are communicated to the citizens in a form close to orders: *"All persons under SHN must remain in their place of residence at all times. They will be subject to close monitoring of their whereabouts, through electronic monitoring as well as physical spot-checks. Strict enforcement action will be taken against those who breach the requirements of the SHN"* (Singapore Government Agency 2020h). In India, whereas most policy-action subframes – including illiberal subframes – revolve around contact-tracing applications, some occasional, more general references to evoking the Disaster Management Act and to using *"technology to conduct surveillance on people"* are employed.[11]

In all three cases, contact-tracing apps are the subject of most liberal subframes. However, India – the world's biggest democracy – employs liberal subframes minimally compared to Israel and Singapore.[12] At the same time, our two democracies employ illiberal policy action subframes more than Singapore; the most extensive employment of illiberal policy action subframes is found in India.[13]

EMERGING FRAMES: MIXING LIBERAL AND ILLIBERAL

In a second step, we followed framing theory and identified patterns of co-appearance between diagnostic and prognostic rhetorical elements in the same document, which form comprehensive frames of their own. In all three cases, different combinations of liberal and illiberal subframes appear, forming mixed frames that blur the line between liberal and illiberal framing. Mixed frames occur more in Singapore than in India or Israel. In the case of India, 2 mixed frames appear out of 139 coding instances. One frame combines the diagnostic liberal subframe international interdependence and the illiberal prognostic subframe sovereign government action. The other combines the illiberal diagnostic rhetorical element of securitization and the liberal prognostic rhetoric of deliberation. In the case of Israel, 1 instance of mixed framing occurs among 44 coding instances. The mixed frame combines the diagnostic subframes securitization and deliberation. In the case of Singapore, 4 mixed frames occur among 99 coding instances. One of these mixed frames combines the diagnostic rhetorical element of indiscriminate threat with the prognostic illiberal subframe of sovereign government action. As for the other three, the mixed frame "securitization-deliberation" occurs 2 times and the "othering-deliberation" frame once.

While Israel and India employ more illiberal frames than Singapore, Singapore employs more liberal frames than India and Israel. In the case of Israel, 1 illiberal frame occurred in 44 coding instances. In the case of India, 2 instances of illiberal framing occurred in 139 coding instances. In comparison, Singapore does not employ illiberal frames; not a single illiberal frame occurs in the 99 coding instances in this case. On the other hand, Singapore employs 14 liberal frames in its 99 coding instances, whereas the corresponding figures for Israel and India are 2 in 44 and 6 in 139, respectively.

All the illiberal frames employed by Israel and India are "securitization – sovereign government action" frames. For instance, in one press release, the government of India sketches various local employments of "war rooms" to contain the pandemic. One of these war rooms – the one in Bengaluru and Tumakuru – uses technologies to *"surveil on* [sic] *people within* [an] *8-km radius of a confirmed patient"* (Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs 2020g). In his remarks in the joint statement with the Health Ministry (Prime Minister's Office 2020c), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also announced various extra measures to be taken as part of the "war on corona." He justified the use of "digital means" to *"locate and quarantine Corona patients"* as part of the related joint efforts of various ministries, including the Defence Ministry.

Singapore not only employs liberal frames more frequently, but also engages a wider range of liberal frames compared to India and Israel. At the same time, Israel uses the lowest number of different liberal frames. Whereas all three countries employ the liberal frame "indiscriminate threat – deliberation" and "indiscriminate threat – individual rights," Singapore is the only case that uses the liberal frame "normal politics – international endorsement." Israel is the only case in which the liberal frame "international interdependence – international endorsement" does not occur.

These findings are largely consistent with the ones presented in the previous sections. Singapore frames digital surveillance in the pandemic situation more liberally than the two democratic "backsliders," India and Israel. Singapore does not employ illiberal framing of digital surveillance, whereas Israel and India do. The only different finding on the level of the frames is that Israel, compared to the total number of codes, does employ slightly more full-fledged illiberal frames than India, whereas India uses more illiberal diagnostic and prognostic subframes.

CONCLUSION: INTERROGATING DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE FURTHER

At the time of writing, in the Fall of 2020, the SARS-COV-2 virus is still a major global challenge. Vaccine trials by various research groups around the world are ongoing, but are also sometimes put on hold due to safety concerns, whereas mass vaccination remains a mid– to long-term rather than a short-term goal. Though some forecasters predict that the pandemic should *"end for the rich world by the end of 2021, and for the world at large by the end of 2022"* (Levy 2020), scientists admit that there are still too many unknowns about the virus and features of COVID-19 immunity to make sound predictions. In this atmosphere of uncertainty, surveillance and contact tracing, even in regions where cases of infection are on the decline, are suggested as the best approach (Scudellari 2020). Based on this, it is very likely that the COVID-19 pandemic will have societal repercussions for years to come.

In our analysis of diagnostic and prognostic subframes, we aimed to locate the particular types of framing employed by the Israeli, Indian and Singaporean governments, as they stand on different sides of the democracy-autocracy nexus. We have borrowed from theoretical works to discern liberal and illiberal pandemic subframes and constructed an analytical matrix (Table 1) which can be edited and repurposed to analyze government communication about digital surveillance in other situations and countries. Using tools of qualitative text analysis we found that in our analysis of diagnostic and prognostic subframes, the "backsliding" case of India showcases the most developed illiberal vernacular. Though it has talked about the pandemic as a threat to the "well-being of every Indian," it has also overwhelmingly securitized the coronavirus in general, describing it in a colourful militant language. This complements the illiberal Indian policy action subframes: "othering" rhetoric, describing digital surveillance as a successful "top-down" initiative, and even showcasing instances of the government patronizing citizens. In contrast, Israel (a democracy which has seen a lesser degree of democratic recession) and Singapore (a "soft" autocracy) are way more liberal. In these cases, COVID-19 is not as securitized, but painted as an indiscriminate threat, while the respective government calls for an embrace of international cooperation. These regimes invest a lot of energy in portraying digital surveillance solutions as being in line with human rights and freedoms, and as being developed in a deliberative and "open-sourced" manner.

In the second part of our analysis, we further followed the tenets of framing theory, and explored different combinations of the diagnostic and prognostic rhetorical elements to uncover the frames they produce in each of our cases. The analysis indicates that Singapore uses more liberal and mixed frames to portray digital surveillance during the pandemic than the two democratic "backsliders" India and Israel. At the same time, India

and Israel use more illiberal frames than Singapore by combining illiberal diagnostic and prognostic rhetorical elements.

Our research calls for extending and combining the research agendas on "democratic backsliding" and crisis communication. On both levels of analysis, we find that democratic "backsliders" might find emergencies highly suitable for consolidating their illiberal tones, whereas stable "soft" autocracies like Singapore do not. By focusing on emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic we could identify and sructinize pivotal moments, in which democratic "backsliders" may rhetorically outperform some autocracies. By integrating regime type and trajectory variables into the toolkit of crisis communication research, we could better understand how and why governments differently "speak" about emergencies and also better predict their policy responses.

Comparing our findings on India and Israel, we can speculate that different stages of democratic "backsliding" bear influence on the balance between the uses of liberal and illiberal rhetoric. At a more deteriorated stage of its democratic "backsliding," India employs more illiberal diagnostic and prognostic subframes. Moreover, despite the uneasy history of inclusive domestic politics in Israel, India still outperforms it in terms of exclusivist framing. Nonetheless, scoring higher on indices of democratic "backsliding" does not neccesarily have a linear effect on the extent to which and how governments employ illiberal and liberal framing. Whereas India uses more illiberal rhetorical elements than Israel, Israel employs more full fledged illiberal frames. This suggests that while the regime type and trajectory can play a role in the extent to which governments "talk" liberally or illiberally, other factors are also at play.

Our findings suggest that there is a multifaceted non-linear relationship between a pandemic crisis situation and politics. We do not only examine the relationship between the pandemic and the rhetoric employed by different regime types. We also analyse such rhetoric in relation to digital surveillance – a global phenomenon which will likely transform the ways we understand and practice politics in the next years. In this light, our findings suggest that, because they require swift coordination, isolation, tracing, and communication, pandemics will motivate all political regimes to employ new digital tools at their disposal to respond to crisis situations. However, different regime types will "talk" differently about these tools, which is relevant for the future of both liberal and digital politics.

Democratic "backsliders" might find it convenient to "recycle" frames we idenitfy and justify the extended use of digital surveillance by references to a prolonged "warfare" against the virus, laying the path for introducing digital surveillance initiatives, which will be framed as "government-led" rather than "deliberative" measures. On the other hand, the case of Singapore illustrates that stable autocracies may actually find it beneficial to engage in liberal framing of the pandemic. Consistent usage of liberal diagnostic and prognostic subframes by the Singaporean government implies that, on a global level, autocracies won't necessarily employ more illiberal speech in times of crises, but will surround their policies with a combination of liberal and illiberal rhetoric.

Irrespective of the regime type, we also find that the type of digital surveillance matters. Interestingly, mass contact-tracing applications which require consent are framed in more liberal ways than CCTV temperature screening systems, GPS- or credit card-based tracking and similar digital surveillance solutions. This variation may be beneficial in further research on human rights and privacy in democracies, and in studies of digital toolkits in authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007; Keremoğlu – Weidmann 2020), especially in the light of the technological tendency towards decentralization and the rise of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Governments across the regime nexus should see internalization of surveillance (Foucault 2012) as cost-efficient and are likely to repurpose the liberal subframes we detect to justify digital surveillance solutions, which require individual consent. They should do so by stressing a balance between individual

rights, privacy safeguards, personal benefits of individual participation, and "open-sourced," internationally endorsed aspects of these tools.

The analytical approach presented in this article allows for a systemic follow-up and further interrogation of digital surveillance framing. Our empirical efforts can be continued by additional rounds of data collection. This would provide a more longitudinal view not only on the particular digital surveillance tools employed, but also on the evolving strategies of government surveillance framing. Such an effort is worthwhile, especially when bearing in mind that some framing elements that we derived theoretically have not yet been identified but may play an important role at later stages.[14]

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[1] We define digital surveillance to be the direct collection of information, whether anonymous or identifiable, about individuals or groups using methods made available by digital technology.

[2] It is important to note the tension between analytical concepts like liberalism, which originated in the West, and the extent of their applicability in analyses concerned with the non-Western world (see for instance Acharya – Buzan 2007; Burnell et al. 2017). Here we subscribe to the understanding of the liberal script formulated by Tanja Börzel and Michael Zürn (2020), who claim that liberal ideas have borrowed and evolved through global encounters and intellectual exchange (which we unfortunately do not have the space to trace in this article) and thus are "travelling" concepts, which, though contested, can be globally applicable.

[3] We distinguish between subframes, diagnostic and policy action rhetorical elements, and frames as more complex units consisting of different combinations of particular subframes. For the sake of simplicity, we define both the usage of subframes and the employment of frames as an action of "framing."

[4] For a detailed overview of the ethno-linguistic composition of our cases, we used the data from the CIA country factsheet (Central Intelligence Agency 2020).

[5] Around 30 percent of the coded material has been double coded to check for inter-coder reliability.

[6] The majority of Singapore's liberal rhetorical instances are in reference to its contact-tracing app *TraceTogether*.

[7] Singapore encourages its citizens to also use *SafeEntry* for contact tracing in public places.

[8] Similar references to the success of its contact tracing app are also found in Singapore. In Israel such references are made only to justify the usage of the Shin Bet anti-terrorism surveillance.

[9] In Singapore, the few rare illiberal rhetorical instances in regard to its contact tracing app TraceTogether related to its employment in work-places.

[10] India has only one instance that belongs to the set of "international and regional support".

[11] In Singapore, similar general references are used, but they appear more in relation to other digital surveillance measures and not to its contact-tracing app.

[12] Out of the 19 policy action rhetorical instances in India, only 11 were liberal. Despite their different regime types, Israel and Singapore use liberal rhetoric to a similar extent. In Israel, out of a total of 14 rhetorical instances, 9 were liberal; in Singapore, it was 21 out of 32.

[13] In India, out of 19 rhetorical instances, 8 were illiberal; in Israel, 5 out of 14 were illiberal; in Singapore, 9 out of 32 were illiberal.

[14] These are: the "international blame-shifting," "endorsement of authoritarian gravity centres" and "admittance of criticism" frames.

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Hybrid Regimes' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: "The First Wave" Evidence from Ukraine and Georgia

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Abstract: Hybrid regimes have been largely overlooked in the scholarly discussion on the effectiveness of halting the new COVID-19 virus, not least due to the lack of conceptual clarity, as such regimes are considered as the halfway or "grey area" on the authoritarianism-to-democracy path. Hence, the present paper aims to contribute to the pool of research on the internal dynamics of hybridity through exploring the responses towards the pandemic by two stable post-Soviet hybrid regimes, namely Georgia and Ukraine. The "most similar systems" comparative research design allows us to demonstrate that the two countries' different crisis management and communication strategies explain Georgia's relative success in halting the virus spread in comparison to Ukraine throughout the first wave. The application of Henry Hale's "single-pyramid" and "competitive pyramid" models of patronal politics highlights the lack of competitiveness in the formal and informal governance processes in Georgia's case, as opposed to the chaotic mode of decision-making as well as plurality of informal actors in Ukraine's case.

Keywords: hybrid regimes, regime dynamics, COVID-19, crisis management, Ukraine, Georgia.

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Upon the unexpected arrival of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic at the forefront of academic journals and analytical assessments, prescriptions for effective halting of the virus spread as well as the respective strengths and weaknesses of particular regime types in this regard seized the attention of scholars and experts in the field. The initial focus centred on Beijing's ignorance of the pandemic's consequences on the global scale and criticism of its one-party rule, and its censure and silencing of those eager to inform the world about the developments inside the country (Roth 2020; Yang 2020; Fukuyama 2020). China's case revealed the pattern of authoritarian regimes behaving as enemies of their own people, prioritizing their unchallenged grip on power over millions of lives of their citizens as in the cases of Iran, Turkmenistan, etc. In Venezuela, Turkey, Hungary, Israel and Egypt, despite these countries occupying diverse positions on the

authoritarianism-democracy continuum, handling the pandemic equally served as an excuse for violating the courts' independence, violating rights to mass protests or limiting the possibility to introduce constitutional changes due to the state of emergency.

Concerning the countries of the former Communist bloc, the case of Hungary and Viktor Orban's so-called "COVID law", envisaging a rule by decree without clear time limits, stands out as a vivid demonstration of autocratic trends in the region. Prioritizing support of large state-sponsored businesses and the absence of an effective policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic for small and medium enterprises as well as average citizens in Belarus, Russia and Central Asian countries contributed to revealing the fragility and lack of maneuvers of seemingly eternal authoritarian leaders under the conditions of systemic challenges (Gehrke 2020). The unprecedented wave of protests against the falsified presidential election outcomes in Belarus of August 9th 2020 as well as the ousting of the President of Kyrgyzstan as a result of vote rigging on Oct. 5th 2020 proved that the safety net of autocratic rule can be put on trial for crisis mishandling, as in the case of COVID-19. Both cases also stand out as the instances of the gravest ignorance of the pandemic outcomes for the lives and economic prosperity of the people, which caused massive dissatisfaction and irritation (Stiglitz et al. 2020).

In this light, relative merits of democracies in addressing the virus spread – trust towards institutions, emphasis on transparency of decision-making, and civil society's role in monitoring the response – stand out on the opposite side of the spectrum of assessments (Berengaut 2020; Frey 2020; European Committee on Democracy and Governance 2020). Balancing public health and economic challenges with the social wellbeing of citizens re-emerged among the challenges to be effectively addressed. The rising costs for democratic regimes in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic have been stressed in discussions of the dissemination of the contact-tracing applications and their compliance with the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms granted by constitutions (Verhofstadt 2020). As democracies' effectiveness lies in the availability of information to citizens, accountability and the monitoring mechanisms of the popular reaction towards quarantine measures turned into another strand of preliminary observations by political scientists. Initially, in countries like the US, France, Spain, Italy and South Africa high approval rates were noticed for the measures taken by the respective governments. However, in the beginning of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, global dissatisfaction with the partial restrictions and lockdowns to be introduced was on the increase. Hence, lesson learning, state capacity, and mass mobilization stand out among the topics high on the COVID-19-related research agenda. The lack of congruence among the political scientists and those studying public health, political economy issues and public compliance make the elaboration of complex interdisciplinary approaches even more challenging in the short run (Greer et al. 2020).

While already existing analyses offer an engaging discussion on the political regimes' strengths and weaknesses in effectively addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid regimes as "grey areas" in-between authoritarianism and democracy have been largely overlooked in this respect. At the same time, overarching systemic challenges such as COVID-19 offer a laboratory for an in-depth examination of response patterns stemming from the complex nature of "hybridity". Hence, the goal of the present inquiry is to explore the internal dynamic of this regime brand on the example of two post-Soviet countries, Georgia and Ukraine. The legacy of the Soviet past and similar challenges to democratic consolidation in the two countries, the supermajorities of the ruling parties in their legislatures as well as the equal timing of their nationwide elections combined with the informal governance endemic to each of the cases make explaining the differences in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic even more necessary for grasping the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes. While Georgia was praised as the regional role model for the effectiveness of its COVID-19 policy response, Ukraine did not manage to occupy

a place among the high-achievers. With a view to respond to the puzzle, the paper consists of six sections.

The first section of this paper introduces academic polemics on the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes as well as their features with a focus on the post-Soviet area. The second section presents the puzzle guiding the inquiry, explains the case selection as well as the empirical data used. Utilizing an approach that is highly similar to the systems approach of Przeworski and Teune, this section introduces the measurements according to which the different response strategies in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia towards the COVID-19 pandemic are best explained through the concepts of "patronalism", "competing pyramid" and "single-pyramid" models of hybrid regimes (Hale 2015). The following two sections of the paper explain the responses undertaken by the governments of Ukraine and Georgia through the prism of the analytical concepts mentioned above. The conclusions reiterate the findings, namely that the effective crisis management strategy elaborated by the Government of Georgia stems from its lack of competition and highly hierarchical "single-leader type" of informal governance, which, in combination with the Government's solid grip over the core decision-making institutions and the weak, fragmented opposition, explains the effective and prompt handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia. In the case of Ukraine, the "divided-executive type of decision-making" and "competing pyramid model" of patronalistic networks ensured the opposition's criticism of and discontent with the policy responses undertaken by the incumbent Government.

EXPLAINING THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF HYBRID REGIMES

The abundant polemics on the constituent features of hybrid regimes ranging from the pioneering research of 2002 by Larry Diamond through the notion of "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky – Way 2002, 2010) to that of "defective democracies" by Wolfgang Merkel (2004) may lead to a conceptual confusion, taking into account the impressive diversity of political regimes characterized by hybridity. Moreover, building on the scholarly contribution, the democracy measurement datasets (Freedom in the World, Nations in Transit, the Economist Intelligence Unit, Bertelsmann Stiftung, IDEA and others) have developed a sophisticated and rather diverse set of criteria against which to measure the type of political regime in each particular case.

While seeking to explain the challenges to stability of hybrid regimes, two major strands of discussions can be singled out, with one being labelled as the organizational approach – addressing the question of the dominant party repeatedly winning elections. Hence, stability in this case implies government continuity, and instability means the ruling party's electoral defeat (Brownlee 2007; Levitsky – Way 2010). In the opinion of the organizational approach's proponents, a high voter turnout and electoral victories by huge margins as well as grandiose electoral campaigns – a signal of a stagnant and fragmented opposition – raise considerably the cost of voting for and/or defecting to the opposition camp. Therefore, the ruling party (coalition) absorbs control over the governmental apparatus and legislature over a longer time period.

The second approach, namely, the economic one, discusses why and how a ruling party repeatedly wins elections over an extended period in a context of limited multiparty competition (Magaloni 2006; Green 2007). In this regard, for such a party, provision of socio-economic benefits to the populations involved outweighs the request for accountability, transparency and fair competition. Economic crises may destabilize the regime only when repeated crises or prolonged economic stagnation take(s) place. Departing from the general discussions of the regime dynamics and entering a cluster of area-based research, Eleanor Knott (2018) addresses the question of the democratic-authoritarian equilibrium in hybrid regimes, specifically dealing with the cases of Ukraine and Moldova. This author distinguishes between democratic backsliding (as in the case of democratic deterioration

processes taking place, for instance, in Hungary, which was previously categorized as a consolidated democracy, or in cases of semi-consolidated democracies such as Romania and Bulgaria) and backsliding in hybrid regimes. The latter is defined as the processes whereby periods of democratic deterioration and improvement interchange without causing qualitative changes in the equilibrium of the hybrid regime. This occurrence takes place in the form of increased fraud practices throughout elections, infringement against certain civil liberties, or a decrease of independence of judicial branch institutions. Knott also emphasizes the central role of extra-incumbent actors for hybrid regimes' persistence, as these are so-called "grey cardinals" linked to representatives of business circles not occupying any formal positions throughout the decision-making process. These actors bear the burden of responsibility for the state and/or media capture taking place. Another feature characteristic for the resilience of post-Soviet hybrid regimes is the weakness of the link between the civil society and its influence on the actions of the incumbents.

Knott's arguments refer to Bela Greshkovits's (2015) research emphasizing the difference between backsliding and hollowing (the latter being the process of citizens' disengagement from politics). These two processes may take place simultaneously or in different time frames and are not distinguished by a causal relationship. Joakim Ekman (2009) contributes to the discussion on persistence of hybrid regimes by singling out three dimensions (the electoral agenda, executive-legislative relations, and the judiciary) through which he stresses the difference between a competitive brand of an authoritarian regime and one in the process of transition to a consolidated democracy (Ekman 2009: 9). According to Ekman's analysis, Georgia and Ukraine are the only instances of post-Soviet countries clearly fitting the category of hybrid regimes (in the sense that they have four or five hybrid regime characteristics). Moldova, currently the third instance of a hybrid regime according to the Nations in Transit report, only has two of the hybrid regime characteristics. Nevertheless, these research findings do not reflect on the recent developments of the last decade. Ekman's findings relate to Greshkovits's hollowing argument, as in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia's hybridity, its sustainability rests upon the lack of interconnection between the people and the opposition due to these countries taking less care of pluralism, and their lack of activism.

Henry Hale develops a cutting-edge argument on the dynamics of post-Soviet political regimes by emphasizing the *"trap of patronalistic social equilibrium"* that rests on gaining political and economic benefits through acquaintance networks and the "rewards and punishments" mechanism over a lengthy period of time (Hale 2015: 423). The case of the post-Soviet hybrid regimes demonstrates that their persistence is linked to extended patronage networks that reach out to a wide array of institutions and are divided into single or competing pyramid patterns. These two types of patterns determine whether constitutions provide a divided or united and powerful executive, which in turn sends a signal towards the patronalistic networks on how they should continue to operate. The strength and length of a network's survival depends upon the allegiance of its existing members and its ability to recruit new ones, according to Hale (2015: 424). In this respect, elections are of importance to patronalistic networks due to their revealing the winners who manage to place a bet on the right elite and, hence, continue to preserve or increase the survivability of the networks. Hale departs from several analytically productive arguments which create the basis for a dynamic model of hybrid regimes. First of all, he suggests *"replacing a theory of the ideal with a theory of the real"*, and also puts in doubt the widespread belief *"that regime types are best identified in snapshots rather than dynamic patterns"*, and stresses the need to *"augment the study of regime change with a science of regime dynamics"* (Hale 2015: 422). Importantly, Hale also adds: *"A momentary overwhelming surge in popularity for one party can set in motion a tip toward single-pyramid politics even when the parliamentarist constitution provides for high executive divisibility and multiple formal electorates"* (Hale 2015: 423).

While in both Ukraine and Georgia color revolutions took place with a difference of roughly a year between them, still they did not result in a ruination of the single-pyramid politics; they only led to brief moments of competing-pyramid dynamics and then returning to a single-pyramid mode again. According to Hale's classification, both Ukraine and Georgia belong *to "the polities experiencing lame-duck syndrome with low popular support for the President"* (Hale 2015: 423). The case of Ukraine's brand of hybrid regime is discussed by Yuri Matsievsky (2016). He argues that its core characteristic is the relation between the formal and informal institutions, rather than that of democratic and authoritarian features. As Matsievsky claims, *"hybridity implies the façade function of the formal institutes for those of [an] informal character. The latter outweighs the former throughout the political process"* (Matsievsky 2016:16). In the case of Ukraine, among the informal institutions sabotaging the proper functioning of the formal ones, are corruption, clientelism, nepotism and favoritism during the distributing of administrative and political appointments. The informal pacts between the political players range from electoral competition to "state capture". Moreover, the author defines clientelism, nepotism and informal agreements along with corruption as the operational code of the political culture of Ukrainian elites. Hence, Matsievsky approaches the persistence of hybrid regimes by using the case of Ukraine as one in which the outcome of the "institutional trap" translates into an ineffective institutional equilibrium.

Finally, Robert Nalbandov (2014: 102) enriches a rather modest scholarly discussion on hybrid regime stability with the *"logic of expected consequences"*, implying that the selection of the "most anticipated utility" and the choices for political, economic and cultural institutional patterns proved to be effective in the surrounding environment in the hybrid regimes. While explaining the regime choices in Ukraine and Georgia (prior to 2014), Nalbandov introduces the concept of regime mimicry – the complex process of institutional change in which a set of democratic institutions is adopted without uprooting the previous setting, which in turn prevents the complete process of embedding these institutions from taking place.

Recognizing the value of the above-discussed scholarly polemics on the post-Soviet hybrid regime variety (Hale 2015; Knott 2018; Stewart 2012; Nalbandov 2014; Greshkovits 2015), our inquiry sticks to Leonardo Morlino's conceptualization of a hybrid regime, namely: *"a set of institutions that have been persistent, be they stable or unstable, for about a decade, have been preceded by an authoritarianism, a traditional regime (possibly with colonial characteristics), or even a minimal democracy and are characterized by the break-up of limited pluralism and forms of independent, autonomous participation, but the absence of at least one of the four aspects of a minimal democracy"* (Morlino 2009: 282).

The above-given definition stands out as the most encompassing for grasping the internal dynamics of post-Soviet regime hybridity through the examples of Georgia and Ukraine. First, it avoids defining the concept through a dichotomy of democracy/authoritarianism, gives a clear-cut understanding of the regime component – which is understood as a set of institutional arrangements with a long-lasting character – and, finally, approaches hybrid regimes as a distinct type of its own. Secondly, Morlino makes it clear that a hybrid regime fails to meet the minimal barrier (threshold) for democracy to be constituted as consolidated, with free and fair transparent elections, media pluralism, more than one party, and universal suffrage. No less important is compliance with constitutional and real-time limitations for the "non-elected actors" that must be in place, as stated by Karl and Schmitter (1991). Thirdly, Morlino stresses the centrality of the limitations for pluralism, and competition with the existence of powerful domestic or external veto players interested in preserving their final say in the processes. As Hellman argues (1998: 204–205), *"Instead of forming a constituency in support of advancing reforms, the short-term winners have often sought to stall the economy in a partial reform*

equilibrium that generates concentrated rents for themselves, while imposing high costs on the rest of society."

Finally, the added value of Morlino's hybrid regime conceptualization is emphasis on the institutional memory, where, in other words, the institutions that were formed in the beginning of the transition still leave a long-lasting imprint on its further path as well as invisible politics under the influence of the non-elected actors. The given conceptualization of hybrid regimes, apart from overcoming the dichotomous approach, draws a difference between the transitional type of regime and the stabilized one (the category to which the two cases analyzed in the paper also belong). Understanding this distinction is of special relevance for discussing the internal dynamics of Ukraine and Georgia's hybrid regimes. By highlighting the different responses to the challenge of effectively handling the COVID-19 pandemic by two long-term post-Soviet hybrid regimes, the present research contributes to the scholarly and analytical polemics presented above. The obtained findings allow one to properly grasp the peculiarities of the decision-making process endemic to hybrid regimes with predominantly similar features. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need to further study the manner in which patronalistic networks and the patterns of informal governance they induce, interact with the formal decision-making process.

ARGUMENT & METHODOLOGY

Firstly, as mentioned in the previous section, while presenting the core argument of the study, we depart from Leonardo Morlino's conceptualization of hybrid regimes as distinct, independent types of political regimes and not their transitional phases. Secondly, understanding the internal dynamics of hybrid regimes based on Henry Hale's notion of "patronal politics" and "patronalistic networks equilibrium" allows one to assess the internal decision-making process throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of both formal and informal governance. Being instrumental to grasping the by far most outstanding specifics of the decision-making process in hybrid regimes, *"patronalism refers to a social equilibrium in which individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments"* (Hale 2015: 20).

The puzzle guiding the inquiry is the noticeable difference in the handling of the first wave of COVID-19 in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia despite the similarities (see Table 1). With a view to carve out explanations for the core question guiding the research, the qualitative comparative approach is employed. The selected strategy, rather than producing generalizable data for a wide range of cases, explores each case in-depth using the concepts of the "single and competitive pyramid" models, and traces the processes of response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the application of these analytical concepts. This strategy follows David Collier's understanding of small-N analysis and its three core goals: first, *"a systematic examination of covariance among the cases for the purpose of causal analysis"*; secondly*, "the examination of a number of cases with the goal of showing that a particular set of concepts usefully illuminates the model"*, and finally, "*examining how the parallel processes of change are laid out in different ways within each context"* (1993: 108). In this manner, the explanations obtained in the final stage of the comparative inquiry suggest avenues for exploring similarities and differences between other instances of hybrid regimes in the post-Communist countries, namely the mode of their reaction to systemic challenges. The section below presents the empirical data employed to provide an account of the COVID-19 pandemic handling in each case.

With a view to draw a comparison of public opinion towards the policies of the pandemic handling, the present research uses evidence from the Caucasus Resource Research Centre's "Caucasus Barometer – Covid-19 Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Monitor 2020" dataset presenting six waves of data collection throughout the late April –

early June timeframe. Our research uses the outcomes of the first wave of surveys carried out in April and the beginning of May 2020. In the case of Ukraine, the surveys carried out by the "Rating" sociological research group serve as a basis for inquiring into the public opinion on the handling of the pandemic. These surveys, with the title "Ukraine on Quarantine – Monitoring of Public Opinion", were held in three waves in March and April 2020.

The second group of empirical evidence employs the analysis of the COVID-19 responses by the responsible decision-making bodies reflected in leading online news outlets of Georgia and Ukraine throughout the period of February – July 2020. These are the online media outlets ambebi.ge, News.On.ge, Netgazeti, and Civil.ge. in the case of Georgia, and BBC Ukraine, Radio Svoboda, and Ukrainska Pravda, which are utilized as additional sources for the analysis of the COVID-19-related developments and governmental actions undertaken in the case of Ukraine.

The third group of sources employed for the comparison is the analyses of democracy performance and decision-making process transparency by international watchdog agencies such as Transparency International, Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit. As regards local agencies whose monitoring of the COVID-19 developments were instrumental to presenting the analysis, they are the following: the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), IDFI (the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information), and Georgia's Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA).

In order to select the factors in possession of explanatory power for the puzzle, the present inquiry employs "the most similar systems" design, which is extensively used in political science (Collier 1993: 110–111; Przeworski – Teune 1982: 32–34). As Przeworski and Teune argue in *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* (1982: 34), firstly, *"the factors that are common to the countries are irrelevant in determining the behavior being explained"* and secondly, *"any set of variables that differentiates these systems in a manner corresponding to the observed differences in behavior can be considered as explaining the patterns of this behavior"*. To put it differently, in case a significant difference occurs in the outcome (the dependent variable – the effectiveness of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic), it can be assigned to the relatively small number of different factors designated in the process of data analysis. The rest of the similar features are controlled for (in other words, they do not account for the different outcome in the dependent variable). Therefore, upon application of "the most similar systems" design presented in Table 1 the difference in the dependent variable can be attributed to the difference in the crisis management and strategic communication performed by the Governments of Georgia and Ukraine. In turn, the difference in their management of COVID-19 is explained through the concepts of "single pyramid and competitive pyramid" models of hybridity for Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. The first four explanations presented in Table 1 are similar in both cases; hence, they do not account for the different outcomes in the dependent variable.

As stems from the variables presented in Table 1, upon examining the actions undertaken by the responsible stakeholders in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, the difference between them is noticeable in two particular areas: the strategic communication throughout the first wave of pandemic, and the crisis management strategy. The time framework for carrying out the research is limited the period before the end of July 2020, which allows us to assess the preliminary outcomes of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the first wave, namely, the critical first 6 months, when the degree of uncertainty about the features and survivability of the virus was at its highest. The COVID-19 phenomenon has so far demonstrated only preliminary outcomes and has entered its second wave in September 2020. This condition turns out to be a major limitation for the research, since when it comes to the long-term consequences, they remain to be assessed after the global pandemic reaches its end.

Table 1
Research Design – Georgia and Ukraine – "the Most Similar Systems" Design

No.	POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS	The Case of Georgia	The Case of Ukraine
1.	The legacy of the Soviet past & similar challenges to democratic transition	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
2.	Regime type – a Hybrid post-Soviet regime – a stable hybrid or transitional regime (according to the Nations in Transit Report, Freedom House) ranging from 3.01 to 4.00 points on the Report's scale of 0 to 7.	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
3.	A supermajority in the Parliament ("Servants of the People" in the case of Ukraine and "Georgian Dream" in the case of Georgia each control 66% of seats in the legislature)	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
4.	The timing of the nationwide elections, decisive for the ruling party in power: Ukraine – local elections (Oct. 25th, 2020) Georgia – the parliamentary election (Oct. 31st, 2020)	SIMILAR (controlled)	SIMILAR (controlled)
5.	Strategic communication throughout the pandemic	DIFFERENT	DIFFERENT
6.	Crisis management throughout the pandemic	DIFFERENT	DIFFERENT

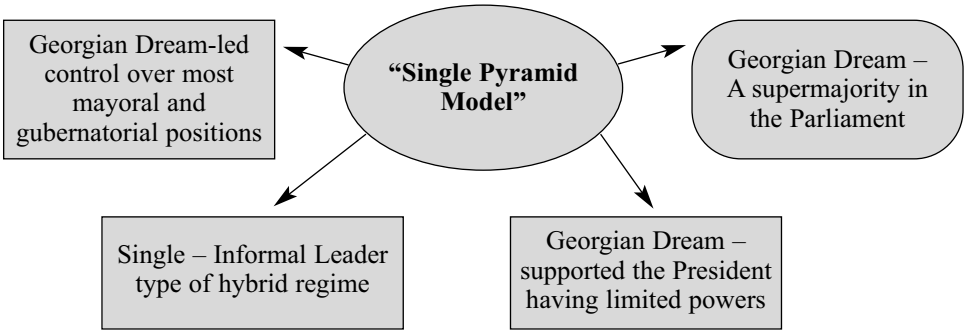
THE CASE OF GEORGIA: A "SINGLE – PYRAMID MODEL" OF THE HYBRID REGIME

As stressed in the Argument and Methodology section, in both cases, namely those of Georgia and Ukraine, informal governance stands out as the key to understanding the specifics of decision-making in a hybrid regime with its patronal networks. In the former case, Bidzina Ivanishvili is the country's richest person with unprecedented influence over the formal institutions. Ivanishvili holds the position of the leader of the ruling party Georgian Dream since 2018, when he reentered this position after leaving it in 2013. After Georgian Dream's first parliamentary victory in 2012, Ivanishvili also served as Georgia's 10th Prime Minister for slightly longer than one year. Since the 2018 presidential elections and the victory of Salome Zurabishvili, the independent candidate supported by the Georgian Dream block, all key decision-making positions were under the control of GD. This situation was also caused by the 2017 municipal elections, which resulted in an unprecedented victory of the Georgian Dream block. As Figure 1 demonstrates, despite the fact that Georgia is in the process of completing its transition towards a parliamentary system with the country's Electoral College being responsible for electing the President in 2024, the transfer does not introduce any qualitative changes in the unquestionable

domination of the Georgian Dream political block. Furthermore, since the 2013 presidential elections the President's powers were significantly reduced in favour of the Prime Minister's.

In an effort to preserve its supermajority in the Parliament in the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream swiftly departed from its initial 2019 promise to carry out the October 2020 parliamentary elections according to the proportional electoral formula instead of the initially scheduled year 2024, when the transformation to the parliamentary system is to be complete. The unfulfilled promise caused a crisis and criticism on the part of the opposition parties, which was resolved in March 2020 with the mediation of Georgia's Western partners, the US and the EU in particular (Tskipurashvili 2020), a change in the distribution of the proportional/majoritarian parliamentary seats from 77/73 to 120/30 respectively and the reduction of the threshold for getting to the Parliament to 1% (Parliament of Georgia 2020a).

Figure 1
The "Single Pyramid Model" Explained – the Case of Georgia



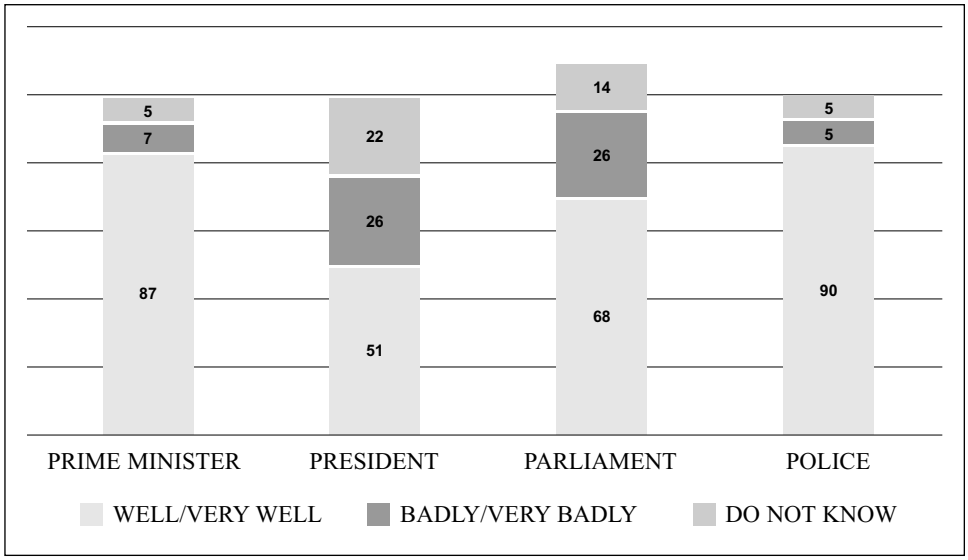
Georgia's persistence in the hybrid regime category can be assessed through the Nations in Transit report published by Freedom House in the 2009–2020 timeframe[1]. Along with the two other cases of hybridity in the post-Soviet space, Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia is nested in the transitional/hybrid regime category of states that received 3.01–4.00 in the report's rating system, exhibiting an internal dynamic of its own with periods of democratic openings and closure. Relating to Knott, Greshkovits and Morlino's arguments addressed in the scholarly polemics section, these slight variations, though, have never resulted in a transfer of Georgia to a qualitatively different category (a semi-consolidated democracy or a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime).

The effectiveness of the communication strategy as well as the crisis management in handling the COVID-19 pandemic is best explained through the concept of the "single pyramid model" of patronal politics, which becomes especially relevant in the light of the upcoming parliamentary elections and the close eye of the international democracy watchdog agencies monitoring the transparency of the decision-making process in Georgia. Despite the concentration of administrative resources and core decision-making institutions under the control of the Georgian Dream-led representatives, the Caucasus Barometer survey shows an unprecedented support for the measures undertaken throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic spread in Georgia (see Chart 1). On February 13th, 2020 the Inter-Institutional Coordination Council was inaugurated, consisting of representatives of core ministries. The local NGOs are also responsible for observing the transparency process inside the Coordination Council. Upon the very first instances of the COVID-19 infections, the Government and the Coordination Council, with the strong support of the Parliament and the President, introduced expansive measures against COVID-19,

including a lock-down of the largest cities, travel restrictions, and mandatory quarantine zones.

In Georgia, the state of emergency was introduced on March 21st, whereas the curfew was introduced on March 30th. The initial timeframe of the state of emergency caused confusion among the population, especially in regard to the retail conditions, work-related activities, and curfew violation-related penalties. Nevertheless, after only a brief time period, the Georgian Government's efforts to halt the pandemics on its territory were referred to as a "miracle", and praised by the World Health Organization. Georgia became one of the first 15 countries on the EU list of countries resuming their international flights due to a low level of COVID-19 cases and a high level of individuals already cured (Turp-Balasz 2020). As for Georgia's managing of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the "Public Attitudes in Georgia" survey conducted by the NDI and the CRRC, 41% of the public partially trusts and 44% fully trusts the information on the pandemic provided by the Government. For the sake of comparison, in this regard the Government is only outnumbered by the NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control), with the percentage of those fully trusting it at 59%. The traditionally influential Church representatives did not receive such a high level of trust (35% – fully trust, 26% – partially trust); journalists and media are in the "partially trusted" category in this respect.

Chart 1
Governing Institutions' Effectiveness in Halting COVID-19



Source: Own compilation based on the data from COVID-19 Monitor, 1st wave, April 29 – May 3 2020 (caucasusbarometer.org).

TV and social networks are the major sources of the information obtained by those surveyed according to the NDI Public Attitudes Report (National Democratic Institute 2020). At the same time, roughly 58% of the respondents consider some of the information spread about the coronavirus false. As Chart 1 shows, according to the COVID-19 Monitor data the most effective institutions in halting the pandemic are considered to be the Prime-Minister and the Police, although an overall positive assessment should be noticed in the respondents' answers to all the questions. Interestingly enough, the Lugar Laboratory's effectiveness is assessed positively by 88% of those surveyed as opposed to only 1% assessing it negatively. The Lab does not belong to the decision-making institutions;

however, its founding and opening in Georgia in 2013 with the assistance of the US Government is considered to be one of the major factors behind Georgia's success in coping with the pandemic spread. Along with a significant level of trust towards the Government and the related agencies responsible for effectively halting the spread of infections, immediately concerns also arose about the danger of authoritarian seduction for the single-party-led Government. Georgia's Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) warned of the potential threat of the Government overusing the powers which it obtained in the framework of the state of emergency. For instance, attempts to appoint the judges for the Supreme Court under the state of emergency were effectively delayed due to the timely criticism of civil society watchdogs. *"Despite the declared state of emergency, the democracy and the political processes and promises we pledged to the society still remain the priority. Naturally, the agenda also includes the Parliamentary oversight which our society will witness today again. I appeal to you to take maximal part in this process and hold the comprehensive political discussion"* (Parliament of Georgia 2020c).

The second major criticism addressed to the Georgian Dream-led Government, was voiced by Transparency International Georgia's analysis of public procurements throughout the state of emergency period. A decrease in competition was noticed along with a decrease in the number of tenders. The construction sector obtained most tenders (out of 460 mln GEL, 266 mln GEL) (Transparency International Georgia 2020a). Roughly 1/5 (127,2 mln GEL) of all the tenders were carried out through the simplified procedures, and 35% of those tenders were won by companies belonging or close to the ruling Georgian Dream or the President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili.

In light of these developments, public opinion polls in Georgia demonstrate that 59% of the respondents do not consider Georgia as a democracy, whereas 33% do so. When asked about the meaning of democracy, the highest share of the respondents (54%) consider it to be freedom of speech, freedom of media and hearing different views; in contrast only 3% of the respondents mention "the Government responding to their concerns" as their closest association with democracy (National Democratic Institute 2019).

Another episode in which the actions of the Government were criticized, but it did not lead to benefits for the weak and fragmented opposition, concerned the feasibility of COVID-19 related policies. According to the opposition's concerns, the 3.5 bln GEL apportioned by the Government was not enough for easing the socio-economic hardships of those suffering as a result of losing employment. Instead, their suggestion was to assign 6 bln GEL for compensation purposes, envisaging more generous and long-term benefits (1TV 2020). In the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March 2020, opposition figures such as the representatives of the "Lelo for Georgia" political party, a relatively new player on the Georgian political scene, criticized the Government for its allegedly insufficiently strict quarantine measures (especially as concerns the functioning of banks and supermarkets). *"The Government is putting forth an effort to undertake something, but rather late and slowly"*, argued one of the representatives of "Lelo for Georgia" (Formula News 2020).

Other opposition party members, such as those of the party European Georgia, mostly focused on criticism of the socio-economic policies of the Government, while the representatives of the Labour Party demanded the cancellation of the limitations set by the emergency regime (the curfew, the limits on the numbers of passengers in private vehicles). Considerations about human rights under the emergency conditions were voiced as well. Independent MPs, such as the long-time member of Parliament Eka Beselia, requested a commission establishment which would give a floor for the opposition to monitor the actions of the Government; it would consist of healthcare, economic and human rights policy subcommittees. Overall, criticism was also directed at the Government for allegedly serving private commercial interests instead of the interest of its citizens. In

particular, much of the responsibility was put on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the leader of the Georgian Dream party, and the wealthiest, most influential oligarch in Georgia. Needless to say, the criticism of the Government by the opposition in the Parliament and some political parties outside of it (but willing to become part of it after the Autumn parliamentary elections) has not turned out to be effective due to the Government's successful policies of combatting the spread of the pandemic, as proved by the public opinion polls, and the lack of agreement on points of criticism of the Government among the rest of the political parties. Hence, the attempts to discredit the Georgian Dream-led Government and its Head, PM Giorgi Gakharia, were futile.

A major impulse for criticism was given to the opposition when after the end of the state of emergency on May 23rd six MPs representing the ruling party Georgian Dream tabled the draft bill entitling the Government to additional powers till July 15th and aimed at preserving the achievements in the realm of healthcare: *"...b) with the present law or/and in accordance with the normative act issued in compliance with the present law the measures are to be applied temporarily with the goal to protect the population in the face of the pandemic and/or societal health threats and may envisage an order different from the one of other normative acts in Georgia, among others, temporary implementation of the corresponding measures with regard to public institutions, institutions that are part of the executive branch, legal entities of public law, other legal entities' administrative and other types of activities, provision of public services, individuals' movement, property, employment, professional or economic activity, illegal migration/ international protection and/or delivering of social activities."* (Parliament of Georgia 2020b).

Despite the criticism from the opposition and human rights watchdogs as well as the Public Defender's Office, the law was passed with 80 votes "for" and 0 votes "against" with the opposition (in particular, the National Movement of Georgia) boycotting the vote, referring to it as an attempt to establish a dictatorship and make use of the pandemic in a Viktor Orban-like manner (Civil.ge. 2020). However, as of July 15th, its effect was not prolonged, thus preventing the Government from losing credibility in the eyes of the population.

While the case of the weak and fragmented opposition and the discussion of the formal and informal governance instruments concentrated in the hands of the Georgian Dream-led block as well as its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili show specific features of the single pyramid model, effective communication and crisis management did not come into effect in the two cases reviewed below. The first one is the case of the Orthodox Church, which enjoys an unprecedented autonomy of its own as opposed to the other religious confessions in Georgia, and the second one is that of the ignorance and underestimation of the need for an effective communication strategy for the ethnic minority-settled areas of Georgia. While the two cases have not changed the success of handling the first wave of the pandemic, they emphasize the peculiar features of Georgia's hybridity and selective approach when it comes to exercising an effective management strategy.

In contrast with the Government's impressive effectiveness in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, its complete failure to take an effective control over the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in this regard was illustrated through the Synod decision of March 20th, 2020 which prioritized the internal rules of the Orthodox Church over the Governmental decisions regarding the framework of the quarantine measures. The Georgian Orthodox Church's decision stood in stark contrast to the unconditional compliance by other religious denominations' representatives with the measures, as the latter recognized the importance of due implementation of the lockdown measures under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center 2020). According to the 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: *"GOC members constitute 83.4 percent of the population, followed by Muslims at 10.7 percent and members of the AAC at 2.9 percent. The remaining 3 percent includes Roman*

Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, growing numbers of "nontraditional" religious groups such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and individuals who profess no religious preference" (US Embassy in Georgia 2019).

In the light of the governmental decision of March 23rd prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 persons, the Church's decision, which was not mentioned as an exception to the rule, stands out as a violation of the Law on Public Healthcare. This law equips the Government with the tools to take the lead over religious authorities in case of societal danger. Doubtless, the COVID-19 pandemic belongs to such dangers (On.ge. 2020). When asked the question of whether the limitations also concern the Church, PM Giorgi Gakharia replied in a rather blurred manner that the limitations concern each and every one. Hence, the case of the Orthodox Church has demonstrated the autonomy of the "patronalistic networks" and their unwillingness to lose this capacity even under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The GOC is considered an especially influential social actor with a high degree of political involvement; namely, it is an important source of continuous electoral support for the Georgian Dream political bloc throughout the elections. Therefore, the Church and its representatives reaffirmed their positioning above the law and the Government's decisions.

The final COVID-19-related episode that requires consideration here is the spread of the virus in the eastern part of Georgia (the area of the compact settlement of the Azeri ethnic minority), where, since the beginning of the pandemic, the infection rates continued to be high, resulting in the quarantine and closure of certain settlements. Despite the COVID-19 application's accessibility in languages such as Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhazian and Ossetian, Azeris who do not speak Georgian mostly get their information about the COVID-19 dynamics from the Turkish and Azerbaijani media outlets, which makes them especially vulnerable (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center 2020).

In light of Morlino's emphasis on the centrality of the limitations for pluralism and an actor's unwillingness to face competition from other potential veto players, Georgia's ethnic minorities' lack of integration continues to persist, which is comforting for the ruling party since its standing is not challenged by the minorities. The Government has long been criticized for the absence of an effective strategy of integration of and communication with its ethnic minorities (Armenians, Turks and Azeris for the most part, as these groups constitute roughly 1/6 of the total population). The COVID-19 pandemic has only reaffirmed this condition. Due to the lack of information from the Government and also trust towards it among the minorities, these were local activists informing the minority populations voluntarily. Hence, at the end of March local municipalities were only planning to start distributing leaflets on COVID-19, and there were also plans for cars to drive around the streets of the villages with compact settlement of Azeris and distribute information. In spite of that, since then, epicentres of the pandemic continued to appear throughout the region (Radio Tavisufleba 2020).

Nevertheless, as an outcome of these developments, inside the Georgian society rumours and fake news accusing the Azerbaijanis of disseminating COVID-19 started to spread. In stark contrast to their impressive effectiveness in halting the pandemic, the outbreak of xenophobia went virtually unnoticed among the decision-making institutions. In response, the activist NGOs dealing with human rights and protection of ethnic minorities launched the "I am a Citizen of Georgia" campaign after the ethnonationalism wave began to take place. Transparency International Georgia, along with other leading NGOs, has voiced its concerns over the xenophobic messages and posts in social media which appeared when certain settlements (Marneuli and Bolnisi) were closed for quarantine after the first COVID-19-infected person of Azerbaijani descent was discovered (Transparency International Georgia 2020b). The poor conditions of the information campaign are the outcome of deeper and far-reaching systemic problems such as the minorities' poor language

knowledge, higher risk of disinformation, low level of integration into the host society, lower levels of political activity, etc. The episode of the Azerbaijani settlements in the eastern part of Georgia revealed not only the poor communication strategy of the Government as well as the absence of proper integration strategy. *"The pandemic and the closure of the Marneuli/Bolnisi municipalities reveal two issues that were never properly addressed: first, the deep and non-erasable dividing lines of inequality and racism, and second, the issues of the centre and the periphery, and the trivial nature of the elites and the discriminated ones' ignorance"* (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center 2020). Hence, Georgia's hybrid regime has indeed demonstrated its impressive capacity to effectively handle systemic crises such as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The explanation of the effective crisis management and communication strategy of the first wave lies in the concentration of informal governance instruments in the hands of the single richest person in Georgia, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Furthermore, the Georgian Dream-led block occupies core decision-making positions at all levels under the close eye of its leader. At the same time, along with the effective overall management, a selective approach is being observed in the instances of the Orthodox Church's autonomous decision-making, and the communication strategy towards the compactly settled ethnic minorities, both of which serve as long-term unresolved issues of Georgia's hybrid regime brand.

UKRAINE – A CASE OF "COMPETING PYRAMID DYNAMICS"

As in the case of Georgia, the assessment of Ukraine's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is gauged by the specifics of its internal dynamics. According to Leonardo Morlino's classification of hybrid regimes, Ukraine, throughout Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency (since May 2019), falls into "the democracy without state" type, *"a situation of widespread illegality in which the state is incapable of performing properly due to poorly functioning institutions"* and where *"the state can be conceived as a 'government based on the primacy of the law'"* (Morlino 2009: 288–289). The hybrid regime in Ukraine at its different stages was gravitating to the features of interaction of institutional actors (the army, bureaucracy, single party rule) and societal actors with a high level of political involvement (churches, competing large business interests, etc.) (Morlino 2009: 284).

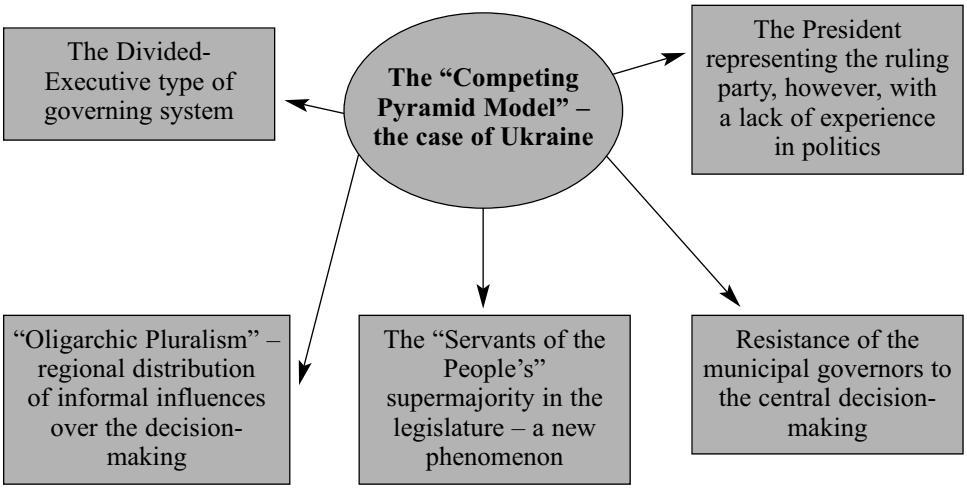
As seen in Figure 2, the "competing pyramid model" in the case of Ukraine rests on the constitutional division of powers between the President and the Government led by the Prime Minister. At the same time, the sweeping victory of Volodymyr Zelensky in the 2019 Presidential elections and the "Servants of the People" political party's success in the consecutive July 2019 snap parliamentary elections made a single-party supermajority possible in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine for the first time in its modern history (Petsa 2019). Hence, despite the relatively stronger powers of Ukraine's President in comparison to the Georgian case, current circumstances outline a similar pattern in Ukraine with the President and the PM belonging to the same political force.

Nevertheless, the supermajority in the legislature, and the President and the PM belonging to the same political force did not result in a performance of an effective communication strategy by the central decision-making bodies. Furthermore, the measures of additional quarantine zones to be introduced all over Ukraine were criticized by the mayors of large regional centres such as Ternopil', Kharkiv, and Khmelnyts'ky that were assigned the status of "orange" or "red zones". The core reasoning for the lack of acceptance of the limitations from the centre was unclear, and there was a non-transparent methodology in assigning the respective statuses, potentially resulting in a worsening economic situation, further social deterioration, and increased dissatisfaction among the people. For instance, in Lviv, local authorities refused to close hotels and fitness clubs as it would threaten the socio-economic wellbeing of its inhabitants (Radio Svoboda 2020). Therefore, the assigning of the zones and the negotiations over the issue became the

responsibility of the PM of Ukraine Denys Shmygal', who had to take the decision to delay the final divisions into zones only after discussions with the local governors. Another problem in this respect turned out to be claims by the local governors about the lack of communication, and the PM consulting with them while taking such potentially stressful decisions (DW 2020).

Another instance of delayed decision-making was the establishment of special ad-hoc bodies designated for the task of overseeing the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike in the case of Georgia, where the Coordination Council responsible for coping with the virus's spread was established prior to its arrival, in Ukraine the Council to Counteract COVID-19 was only initiated during the 2nd wave, on October 20th, 2020. The draft bill for the COVID-19 Council stood out as a joint initiative of the "Bat'kivschyna" parliamentary faction's leader Yuliya Tymoshenko, the leader of the "Servants of the People" David Arakhamia, and the Deputy Leader of the "Voice" faction Yaroslav Zheleznyak (Ukrayinska Pravda 2020a). The initiative envisages the establishing of the Council under the leadership of the President of Ukraine, mass COVID-19 testing, increasing the labs' capacity as well as reprofiling of hospitals for treating COVID.

Figure 2
A Competing Pyramid Model – the Case of Ukraine

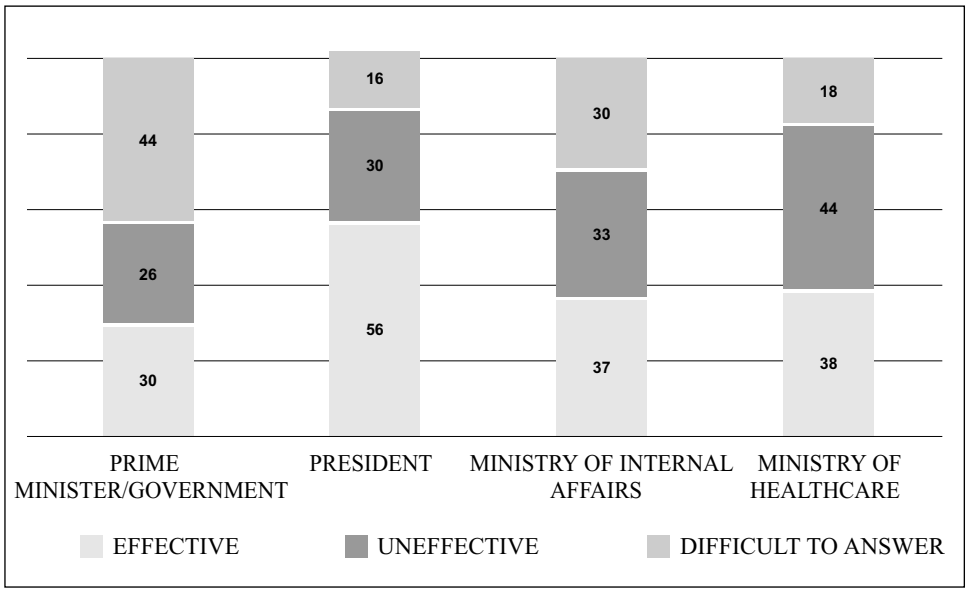


Hence, the key feature of Zelensky's Presidency and the constitutional majority of the "Servants of the People" party in the Verkhovna Rada is highlighted through poorly functioning institutions. Poorly functioning institutions have been continuously present in the Ukrainian type of hybrid regime; however, they became especially vivid in summer 2019. In the Democracy Index of 2018 "the functioning of government" indicator for Ukraine was at 3.21 (Democracy Index 2018: 38); in the following year its value deteriorated to only 2.71, whereas the other indicators for Ukraine demonstrated a positive change (Democracy Index 2019: 12). The chaotic disorder in the public administration realm has consequently led to the decrease of trust in and popular support for the governing institutions, according to an analysis by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation carried out throughout the period of July 9–20, 2020 (Ilko Kucheriv Foundation 2020).

According to the outcomes of a survey carried out by Rating Sociological Group in March 2020, among the governing institutions the most positive assessment was given to the President (a 56% positive assessment), followed by the Ministry of Health (38%), the

Ministry of Internal Affairs (37%) and, finally, receiving the least positive assessment, Denys Shmygal' for both his activities as Prime Minister and his earlier activities in the Government (30%).

Chart 2
Governing Institutions' Effectiveness in Halting COVID-19



Source: Own compilation based on data from a "Rating" sociological group survey, March 2020 (https://www.ratinggroup.ua/).

Another survey, carried out by the Razumkov Centre in August 2020, demonstrates that despite the majority of the respondents considering the Ministry of Health as bearing the core responsibility for the effective response to the COVID-19 pandemics (50,7%), some of the respondents feel that doctors and those employed in the healthcare system deserve praise for dealing with the pandemics (34,9%), while the local and central decision-making institutions received approval ratings of only 21% and 19%, respectively (Razumkov Centre 2020).

Two interrelated factors which during the reign of Volodymyr Zelensky became consistent flaws of the Ukrainian political regime should be stressed: the populism and unprofessionalism of the government. Both of these phenomena have created preconditions for the inefficiency of government institutions in fighting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at its early stages. In the same time frame, it became clear that this vital area of state activity was infected with one of the most dangerous diseases of the new government – an excessive fascination with the "demonstrative" and "theater staging" side of the political process, which the newly appointed officials brought in from their previous jobs, which were mostly related to the entertainment business. The journalist Andriy Harasym has aptly called it the "New Sanjar Syndrome", referring to the performance that was arranged around the observation of the Ukrainian citizens who arrived in Ukraine from the Chinese city Wuhan (Harasym 2020). He makes the relevant argument that this event turned into the starting point for all decisions of the Ukrainian authorities regarding the virus and had a long-term impact on its anti-epidemic policy. It is also difficult to disagree with another assessment by Harasym, which concerns not only the fight against the coronavirus, but also the overall management efficiency: *"there is an*

impression that Zelensky-led governance exists only till the moment of taking a systemic, organizationally difficult decision" (Harasym 2020).

Further developments only confirmed the above-mentioned opinion. Although Ukraine alone introduced the national quarantine early in the second week of March, closed most public places, abolished international and domestic passenger traffic, and restricted the operation of public transport, the more or less organized and well-thought-out action ended there. As Judy Twigg, a professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University, aptly put it, *"officials in Kyiv seemed to believe that the quarantine was all they needed"* (Twigg 2020). Given the timing of these publications, more recent examples of the inefficiency of state institutions should be added here. First of all, there is the situation with the Fund to Combat COVID-19. On July 24, 2020, the newspaper *Ekonomichna Pravda* reported that only UAH 3.2 billion were left out of the 64.7 billion the Fund originally had in its possession. At the same time, only 16% of the funds spent to combat COVID-19 went directly to healthcare and the improvement of medical infrastructure (Ekonomichna Pravda 2020). The data provided by the experts were confirmed by the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine (Ministry of Finance of Ukraine 2020).

The instances of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic mentioned above vividly highlight the features of a "dysfunctional state" and "poor leadership". Two other examples serve as additional evidence: Volodymyr Zelensky's attempt to transfer a share of the burden of responsibility to oligarchs by allocating certain regions to their supervision, and the new wave of the volunteering movement (the previous one being caused by Russia's aggression in the east of Ukraine). Both phenomena prove the argument that hybrid regimes are characterized by an interaction of formal and informal institutions (Vorobiov 2020).

As regards "social trust" and the quality of communication between the Government and the population, in the case of Ukraine the conditions have deteriorated under the impact of the already mentioned populism and "staging" approach towards the political process waged by the "Servants of the People" and the Zelensky-led decision-makers. First of all, there are the daily briefings of the Healthcare Minister Maksym Stepanov that mostly stressed the deadlock condition of the Government rather than its effectiveness and did not lead to any increase of trust in it. Furthermore, the trust towards the Government is irrational, as it is caused by populist promises and oligarch-controlled media outlets rather than a values system and ideological beliefs.

Thus, at the moment, the Ukrainian authorities demonstrate a rather reactive stance in the fight against the coronavirus, and a lack of systematic analysis of the situation and strategic planning, resulting in low efficiency and an imbalance, including in the areas of "lives and livelihoods" and "health and GDP". Limiting the scale of the pandemic is achieved through considerable economic losses with medium-term and long-term negative impacts (including the almost 300 billion UAH budget deficit), which the government is not aiming to recognize and take measures against (so as to avoid the possible future crisis), or productively minimize. The main sources of such an ineffective pandemic policy are, above all, populism and unprofessionalism. In turn, poorly functioning institutions are an important feature of the authoritarian component of the hybrid regime in Ukraine, which suggests a strong correlation between the hybrid nature of the political regime and the level of effectiveness of the pandemic policy.

Despite the proposed argument about the impact of hybridity on the effectiveness of the COVID-19 policy, the answer to the question of the pandemic's repercussions for the hybrid regime in Ukraine is not as obvious and requires a lengthier perspective to observe the outcomes. It is important not to confuse the consequences for a particular format of power (in this case, V. Zelensky and the ruling party "Servants of the People") with the consequences for the hybrid regime as such, for its stability. First, although a decline in the popularity of both the President and the party is observed, it is still difficult to single out the contribution of the failed COVID-related pandemic policy to this decline. Despite

the fact that a poll conducted jointly by the Ilko Kucheriv Foundation for Democratic Initiatives and the Razumkov Centre is entitled "Half a Year in a Pandemic: What Has Changed in the Attitudes and Electoral Preferences of Ukrainians", the pandemic itself and the policies' effectiveness were not explicitly addressed in the framework of the survey. Second, a change in the "party" affiliation of the government in Ukraine is likely to result in a change in the type of hybridity of the political regime, including the potential vector of transformation (transition to democracy vs transition to authoritarianism). At least for the time being, the sympathies of the population, which President Zelensky and the "Servants of the People" lost, are becoming more evenly distributed between Yuri Boyko and Petro Poroshenko, respectively, between the Opposition Platform for Life and European Solidarity (Ukrayinska Pravda 2020b).

Third, a rather specific format of communication between Zelensky's government and the population should be taken into account. This mode proved to be flawed in the arrangement and planning of the fight against the pandemic, but is quite effective in creating public illusions related to the activities of the government, which has been systematically elaborated in another area presenting a systemic challenge for Ukraine's type of hybridity, namely, the area of countering the Russian-led aggression since 2014.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the COVID-19 pandemic's outcomes for political regimes' trajectories worldwide in the mid-term and long-term perspective are yet to be witnessed, our inquiry into the post-Soviet hybrid regimes' response to it, particularly utilizing the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, contributes to an in-depth understanding of internal regime dynamics throughout the systemic crises (such as COVID-19). First, in spite of their common features and similar positioning as hybrid regimes in the democracy measurement datasets, Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate different outcomes in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic with the former standing out as the first wave success story in the post-Soviet area, while the latter joins the majority of the other post-Soviet countries with mostly ineffective responses to the spread of the virus. Second, in light of Morlino's conceptualization of hybrid regimes, we depart from the dichotomous understanding of the typology of political regimes along with a simplified understanding of hybridity as the transitional condition in-between democracy and authoritarianism.

Thirdly, in line with the organizational approach discussed in the scholarly polemics on hybrid regimes' features as well as Henry Hale's concepts of "single and competing pyramid models" of hybridity, Georgia's Georgian Dream-led government being praised for its effective handling of the pandemic adds to its legitimacy and staying unchallenged in its dominant-party status after the decisive October 2020 parliamentary elections and recent electoral reform. Georgia's brand of hybrid regime rests upon three pillars: the ruling party's unchallenged role, a weak and fragmented opposition and increased social trust towards the Government, which is perceived as an effective decision-maker in the eyes of the population. As these pillars were combined with a still immature civil society that is still rather too weak to mobilize a significant part of the population in criticizing the flaws and dubious features of the Government, Georgia managed to present itself as an effective role model due to the readiness of each of its institutional and social actors to cooperate in order to preserve its own survival in the complex pattern. Finally, Georgia stands out as a case of stable and lasting patronage networks with the single-handed informal rule of Bidzina Ivanishvili overseeing the actions of the ruling party and ensuring the enhanced centralization of the decision-making process.

As regards the case of Ukraine, its lack of an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be traced back to the following factors: the dysfunctional state apparatus demonstrating a low capacity to address potential systemic challenges in the face of a polarized society, the condition of the protracted war in the east of Ukraine, and

competing patronal networks posing more challenges for the Government in which it has to present itself as an effective manager, unlike in the case of Georgia. Furthermore, a readiness of the institutional and social actors to cooperate is not observed in the case of Ukraine. Hence, compared to Georgia's case, in Ukraine the lack of effective communication between the President, the Prime-Minister and local governors protesting against the quarantine measures, has contributed to the decrease of the Government's legitimacy in the eyes of the population. The major finding, which the "most similar systems" comparative research of the two cases suggests, rests on the intersection and symbiosis of an informal governance network and formal institutions under the "single pyramid model" overseen by the single most influential informal leader. Meanwhile the competitive character of the "competing pyramid model" observed in Ukraine contributes to a protracted and predominantly ineffective crisis communication strategy due to the plurality of informal actors as well as their clustered influence over the formal decision-making institutions. We believe that further observing the COVID-19 pandemic-related developments in hybrid regimes allows one to explore new patterns of patronal networks' dynamics, making it a continuously curious case for research and further generalizations on the topic.

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[1] For more detailed information, classification criteria and changes in the scores see Freedom House, Nations in Transit report (2020), Georgia.

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Securitization of Memory in the Pandemic Period: The Case of Russia and Latvia

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Abstract: The article examines the processes of memory securitization in the Russian Federation and Latvia during the coronavirus crisis. The key factor that allowed the authors to make such a statement about the problem was the temporary coincidence of the pandemic with the 75th anniversary of the final defeat of Nazi Germany and the so-called Victory Day. As a theoretical basis for the study, we use the constructivist understanding of security in order to study, with specific examples, how the threat in the form of a pandemic became a frame for securitization of memory. The authors identify the peculiarities of the articulating of security problems by political elites in two states with different memory regimes framed by the pandemic as an external factor.

Keywords: Securitization, memory, Russia, Latvia, Covid-19 pandemic.

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Having turned into a politics, historical memory, both internal and external, changed its cause-and-effect relationships. Previously being an argument in justifying and legalizing the adoption of certain decisions by governments, memory has turned from an object into a subject, from a consequence into a cause, often determining certain actions of the policy makers. The coincidence of the "commemorative mainstream" (in our case, the anniversaries of the Second World War) with the *Covid-19* Pandemic has created a new, as yet unexplored reality/unreality, which, in our opinion, will define new outlines of the symbolic politics, significantly increasing the population's susceptibility to its impact due to its forced isolation. And although this impact can hardly be considered as direct and immediate, the authors believe that quarantine measures have changed not only the scenario of the planned events related to the 75th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany and Russia's celebration of Victory Day, but also the very nature of the system of historical remembering regarding issues of international security in Russia and Latvia. This, on the one hand, led to a temporary weakening of the influence of Russian foreign political propaganda, and, on the other hand, forced Russia to compensate for the

lost commemorative domination with an authoritarianization of domestic policy (under the guise of quarantine measures) and rather aggressive declarations in foreign policy, which in fact represents a new round of memory securitization.

In turn, for Latvia, the pandemic indirectly led to favorable opportunities for a more rigid fixation of the national narrative. Through their activity at the domestic legislative level and their remarkable joint statements with the leaders of Estonia and Lithuania, the political elite of Latvia took an active part in promoting the Eastern European commemorative vision of the events of 75 years ago in its national vision based on the ideas of "two totalitarianisms" and the Soviet occupation.

Thus, the subject of this study is the processes of securitization of memory in Russia and Latvia during the coincidence of the celebrations of the anniversaries related to the Second World War and the quarantine measures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the goal thereof is to identify the peculiarities of the articulating of the "security problems" by political elites in the two states with different memory regimes framed by the pandemic as an external factor.

As a theoretical basis for research, we take a constructivist understanding of security in order to study, with specific examples, how the coincidence in time of the pandemic and the memorial events became a framework and an external factor for the securitization of memory. As a hypothesis, the authors believe that the coincidence of the coronavirus pandemic with the symbolic date of the end of the Second World War caused not only significant adjustments to the commemoration scenario, but also changes (possibly temporary ones) in the balance of the power of the Russian and Latvian mnemonic actors (actors in the system of remembering). What we are trying to show is the unexpected results the Covid pandemic can have for such a seemingly distant issue as historical politics.

Based on the above research objectives and hypotheses, we consider it appropriate to structure the article as follows. The first part is devoted to determining the feasibility of studying the memory policy in the security concepts, while describing the approaches and methods adequate for the research. The second part is devoted to the study of the changes that the Covid-19 pandemic has made in Russia's policy of instrumentalization of memory, and the transformation of the Russian memory policy from an object of internal and external securitization into a security dilemma (mnemonic confrontation) in the international arena. In the third part, with the use of the example of Latvia, the external and internal factors of consolidation of the main plots of the official mnemopolitics in the construction of identity are studied as the basis of the ontological security of the state in conditions of an unfavorable geopolitical situation (threats from the Russian Federation) on the one hand, and against the background of an emergency situation facilitating the securitization policies on the other.

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY AND SECURITIZATION

The subject and object field of research that we have designated presuppose the use of the concepts of "security" and "securitization" as the core ones. The authors rely on the constructivist approach to understanding security that was systematically structured in the studies of the Copenhagen School. They consider security as a socially constructed phenomenon and define identity protection as one of its main goals. In accordance with this approach, the correlation between memory and security can be traced from at least three angles. First, similarly to security, a collective memory is also socially determined. Second, the collective memory underlies the various configurations of identity, including the national identity. Third, collective memory is not only an object of protection (securitization), but a resource on the basis of which the security actors identify the threat, form the image of the enemy and determine the means of protection.

According to the constructivist awareness of security, the threats to it can be determined in terms of subjective perceptions, understandings and interpretations of the threats by

politicians or other security actors who directly influence the decision-making process, relying, among other things, on historical experience that lies within the framework of the collective memory. In addition, the subjective threats can not only be postulated by the politicians, but also be born and circulate in public opinion, the generation of which depends on various factors, including the influence of another state. Thus, Russian propaganda, by permanently actualizing the risks to Russian identity in Latvia, maintains a certain degree of the perceived threat to the social security of the Russian community. This once again confirms the thesis about the relativity of security subjectivism. Intersubjectivity in this case means that since people live in groups, their decisions about whether something is a security issue or not are not their individual decisions (Buzan – Wæver – de Wilde 1998: 31, quoted in Rostoks 2010: 64).

Thus, the awareness of the threat on the part of the reference object of security (in our case, the historical memory) determines its securitization. Securitization is, on the one hand, an analytical basis that has been developed in the framework of security research and, on the other, a set of practical measures that actors take to counter the existential threats that endanger value reference objects, especially an identity (Rostoks 2010: 70). The founder of the theory of securitization, O. Wæver, wrote that it is a process of identifying a threat that occurs through a speech act. This act is a fixation of the threat that the actor produces (Wæver 1995: 57).

Despite this classical definition (threat identification), various authors highlight different stages of this process, writing specifically about memory securitization. M. Mälksoo considers memorial laws to be a securitization of memory, especially those that criminalize individual historical events and public attitudes towards them (Mälksoo 2015). A. Miller declares that securitization is the very perception of discussions about history and collective identity through threats to national security (Miller 2020a). V. Apryshchenko and V. Strukov consider securitization as a whole system of mnemonic actions, or multimodal announcements, including symbolic exchanges and various types of iterations, such as art, cinema, etc. (Strukov – Apryshchenko 2018: 5). In all these cases, however, the focus is on the historical narrative. A narrative that offers a coherent picture of a chain of historical events is the main format for representing the past in both historiography and political discourse (Malinova 2018: 37). Mnemonic narratives underlie securitization strategies, and conversely, securitization emerges as a system of narratives used by government officials, regulators, cultural entrepreneurs, etc. Conflicts arising from conflicting narratives set the stage for further securitization steps (Strukov – Apryshchenko 2018: 18).

The crucial components in the structure of the securitization are the subject(s) of the securitization, the reference object, the threat created and the audience that accepts the threat per se (Gaufman 2017: 15). The general public accepts the securitization if it feels a threat to its ontological security and, above all, its identity. E. Gaufman emphasizes that in the process of identifying the "foe" as a threat, its image is transformed into the image of the enemy, which is personified, discursively formed and visually presented. Collective memory plays a major role in this, since it contains images, stereotypes and entire narratives of historical enemies (Gaufman 2017: 6). Thus, the threat must resonate with previous threat constructs (collective memory) and be broadcasted at the government level in order to be successful (Gaufman 2017: 6). To gain adherents, the securitization actor must link the applied discourse to the external reality. In our case, such a context appears to be the Covid-19 pandemic, and the direct/indirect response to it in the states being considered – the strategic use of discourse against the background of facilitating the conditions can be described as discursive framing (Olesker 2018). Such framing can be defined as the ability of an actor to influence the actions of others, and shape the course of a debate on a given issue. According to Entman (1993), certain aspects of reality are selected and emphasized in such framing. Thanks to this, the subject can apply a certain

concept of defining a problem or a threat, their causal interpretation or recommendations for a solution.

Thus, the constructivist understanding of security, with its understanding of the historical memory as a reference object of securitization, allows us to determine how the securitization process led to the adoption of political measures in the framework of certain conditions (the emergency regime in Latvia, the quarantine measures in Russia due to the Covid-19 pandemic). Based on this, the main sources for the analysis were as follows:

1) Performative speech acts (utterances) of the subjects of the securitization (mnemonic actors): The main emphasis was placed on speeches, statements, and declarations of heads of powers and governments, ministers, deputies, and other officials, which were regarded by the authors as performative speech acts. The time interval of the analysis was directly related, on the one hand, to the celebration of the anniversaries related to the Second World War and, on the other hand, to the quarantine measures that came at about the same time (January 2020 – the end of June 2020).
2) Normative legal acts and legislative initiatives (political measures) legitimizing the processes of the securitization and associated with the performative speech acts of the subjects of securitization: In addition, we analyzed the regulatory documents that were adopted earlier, but created certain conditions for the secutization processes (e.g. the *European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (2019/2819(RSP)*).
3) Expert assessments, articles, and interviews with historians and political scientists of Russia and Latvia who act as the subjects of securitization (Latvia), or form the securitized discourse (Russia).
4) Sociological data on the public reactions to securitization processes.
5) Reactions to the "speech acts" (memorial events) in the media and social networks.

SECURITIZATION OF MEMORY IN A RUSSIAN WAY: SECURITY AS A MEANS

The Russian media landscape and political debate are riddled with threat stories and images of Russia's enemies that are endorsed and cultivated by the government and the state-controlled media (Gaufmann 2017). Recently, a discursive field of the "memory wars" has been artificially formed in Russia (Miller 2020a, 2020b). On the one hand, it presents Russia as a victim, and on the other, it performs a mobilization function. The "wars of memory are beneficial to the Russian political elite, since the official concept of the emergence of the Russian state is a reaction to external threats. Therefore, the imperative of survival remains the most important imperative in Russian history (Cygankov 2010: 81). That is, in this view, the fight against threats is the key to survival. If there is no threat, then a threat must be formulated and at the same time built into the collective memory (Gaufmann 2017: 6), which is what happened with the myth of the "Great Patriotic War".

The main objectives of Russia's European security policy remain unchanged, regardless of the degree of their implementation: strategic control over the post-Soviet space, minimizing the consequences of NATO and EU enlargement by creating an "internal buffer zone" in Eastern Europe, and transforming the existing NATO security system in Europe to maximize the political influence of Russia (Menkiszak 2019: 4). Instead of the tragedy of Russia's defeat in the Cold War, the collapse of the socialist camp and the collapse of the USSR, V. Putin needed to create a non-conflictual image of the past which, in addition to the communicative function, would play a significant role in ensuring the security of the state, outlining the circles of "us" and "foes", providing a cultural and historical sense of space and time, and securitizing the internal space (Apryshchenko 2016: 97) (and as time has shown, the external one as well). The memory mode in which the president is the "chief historian" – a mnemonic actor and the main subject of securitization – has formed a unified reference object with the only semantic construction shared by the

majority of the population (a "bond" between them) – the historical myth of the "Great Victory" in the "Great Patriotic War". According to Malinova (2016), "the Great Victory" has become the main pillar of the memory policy aimed at the formation of Russian identity, since it is actually the only event in Russian history that meets all the criteria of "political suitability" in accordance with the concepts of securitization: it is actualized in the mass consciousness by numerous "speech acts" and through the creation of a branched infrastructure of memory (places of memory), and has a wide range of symbolic meanings for defining "ours" (positive) and "foes" (negative), and in the conditions of the state monopoly on the politics of memory it is not the subject of opposite assessments. In addition, the memory of the Second World War plays the role of a defensive / offensive weapon aimed at the past against the traumatic events of the Soviet totalitarianism and occupation in the national narratives of Eastern European countries, including Latvia. The rejection of the Russian narrative of the history of the Second World War by the Eastern European Baltic countries transfers them into the category of the "foes", as this transfer was first consolidated in the new edition of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015) (Oficiaľnyj sajt prezidenta Rossii 2015) and more recently in the "updated" Constitution (Gosudarstvennaya Duma Federaľnogo Sobraniya RF 2020).

A. Miller defines the policy of memory of the Russian Federation as forcedly securitized: *"if earlier people were looking for reconciliation in conversations with the neighbors about the past,"* now *"the essence of the policy of memory is understood as an irreconcilable confrontation between the political opponents, in which one must win and the other must lose. With such an approach, there is no place for a dialogue and for searching for joint interpretations as well"* (Miller 2020b). In fact, this is an articulation of the official version of shifting the blame for the so-called "wars of memory" to the countries of Eastern Europe, which replaced the "cosmopolitan approach" to the politics of memory dominating in the EU with an "antagonistic" one, replacing the *"old European idea of the Second World War, with its focus on the Holocaust and Nazism"* with *"the legend of two totalitarianisms, Soviet and Nazi, on which (and only on which) supposedly lies all the responsibility for the nightmare of war"* (Miller 2020b). Calling 2020 a "turning point" in the field of memory politics, and pointing to its beginning – Putin's "shock visit" to Israel, A. Miller stresses the importance of his symbolic dividends: *"In January, Putin goes to Israel – a monument to the victims of the blockade is being opened there. This is a very important step because the survivors of the siege are placed on the same pedestal with the victims of the Holocaust"* (Rossiya v globaľnoj politike 2019). The fifth World Holocaust Forum, which took place on January 23 at Yad Vashem, was preceded by the unveiling ceremony of a monument in honor of the heroic residents and defenders of the besieged Leningrad, the "Candle of Remembrance", in the central Jerusalem park, Gan Sakere. The unveiling of such a memorial in the context of the largest international commemoration ceremony for the victims of the Holocaust created the most convenient context for promoting the Kremlin narrative: in his speech there, Putin equated "anti-Semitism" with "Russophobia" (Lihachev 2020).

Thus, in Jerusalem, the Kremlin was beginning to work systematically to build a chain of commemorative and political events timed to coincide with the anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The result of this symbolic campaign was a reformatting of Russia's foreign policy image. In addition, in Jerusalem, Putin came up with an initiative to hold a summit of the founders of the UN – the permanent members of the Security Council (Russia, China, the United States, France and Great Britain), which was also timed to coincide with the jubilee anniversary of the UN General Assembly, which can be considered as a call for an analogue of the Yalta world order, in which the "great" powers – the victors in the war – based on their ideas about the national interest, would divide the spheres of influence (Lihachev 2020).

Trying to find allies in "memory wars" Putin focused on the East and on April 24 signed the law, previously approved by the State Duma, on postponing the commemoration of the date of the end of World War II from September 2 to September 3 (Oficial'nyj internet-portal pravovoj informacii 2020). At the same time, the bill was included in the Defense and Security thematic block, and it was explained in the explanatory note that the changes were aimed at *"strengthening the historical foundations and patriotic traditions, [and] preserving historical justice in relation to the winners of the Second World War"* (Sistema obespecheniya zakonodatel'noj deyatel'nosti 2020). At the same time, the Russian Federation President's Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights opposed the postponement of the date, since September 3 is the day of remembrance for the victims of the terrorist attack in Beslan. Thus, in the manipulation of the memorial dates, internal security – the negative reaction of interested actors – was ignored in favor of the external commemorative policy.

Conducting the Victory Parade in Moscow to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II was of key importance for the Russian leadership in the context of the culmination of the Kremlin's policy of instrumentalizing the memory of the war, through which V. Putin hoped to, firstly, demonstrate to the world the mobilization and military strength of a "great power" and, secondly, unite the invited guests with a common mnemonic ritual; these two acts together should have significantly improved the shaken image of Russia and brought it out of its isolation in connection with the sanctions. However, the pandemic has made its own adjustments to the plans to convert the symbolic capital of the victory over Germany into a legitimization of the regime both domestically and in the international arena.

Back in January 2020, Putin began preparations for the celebration. In order to preserve the historical memory and in honor of the 75th anniversary of the victory in the "Great Patriotic War", 2020 was proclaimed as the "Year of Memory and Glory" in Russia (Oficial'nyj sajt prezidenta Rossii 2020). As already mentioned, all the grandiose events to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the victory were of great importance for both domestic and foreign policy. Within the state, they were aimed at creating a sense of universal enthusiasm and consolidating mass support for the changes to the Constitution as a result of which Putin was able to rule the country until 2036. Maybe for this purpose, articles on the construction of the memory of the war were added to it: the prohibition of *"diminishing the value of the heroic deeds of the people in defending the fatherland"*, and the *"rights and obligations"* of the state *"to defend the historical truth"* (Gosudarstvennaya Duma Federal'nogo Sobraniya RF 2020), which can be regarded as another round of the securitization spiral. In the international arena, Putin was preparing for a diplomatic breakthrough, hoping for the presence of the leading world leaders at the parade.

However, the existential threat in the form of the pandemic revealed a complete disorganization of the management, starting with Putin himself and ending with the mayors of the cities. It was one more proof that the fight against the internal and external enemy is the only thing that unites various state and near-state actors (Stepanova 2020). The pandemic has exposed the ineffectiveness of Putin's political model. In the fight against the coronavirus, the state was where it should not be, and it was not where it should be. The self-isolation of Putin in Novo-Ogaryovo, which has been popularly dubbed as the "bunker", led to a pandemic paradox: the majority of the leaders of Western democracies grew in terms of their rating during the epidemic, while Putin's rating fell (Kolesnikov 2020). Data from the Levada Center (as of April) on the approval rating of the president's activities showed a historical anti-record – 59% (Levada-centr 2020).

At public online meetings on the situation with the coronavirus, which V. Putin held on a weekly basis, priority was given to information of an exclusively optimistic nature, which clearly contrasted with the situation on the ground. At one of these meetings, V. Putin, defining the tasks of combating the pandemic in the context of protecting the national

security and protecting Russia's national interests, resorted to historical analogies: *"All things must pass, [and] this too shall pass. Our country has gone through serious trials more than once: both the Pechenegs and the Polovtsy tormented it – Russia coped with everything. We will defeat this coronavirus infection too. Together we will overcome everything"* (Oficial'nyj sajt Prezidenta Rossii 2020). This speech act simultaneously contained a hint of a "thousand-year"history – the reference to "Polovtsy and Pechenegs" – and the mobilizing statement saying "we will win", as Russians always won. However, the perception of this performative speech act led to almost exactly the opposite effect. "Pechenegs" and "Polovtsy" became a popular meme which quickly spread in the social networks and opposition media, and references to historical memory acquired an ironic meaning, which has been reflected in numerous jokes on the social networks: *"That is, [Putin] read the history books before the Pechenegs; the Polish ambassador can breathe easy for now; Constantinople at the ready"; "Me: – I hope that Putin will stop constantly remembering the Great Patriotic War and will find something else that Russia can be proud of. Putin: – Pechenegs"* (Meduza 2020).

Observing the events, and their reflections in the media, it can be argued that V. Putin did not want to cancel the parade, which, however, is understandable given the planned scale of the celebrations: military parades were to be held in 28 Russian cities, and solemn events with the participation of military troops were to take place in 475 cities and towns of Russia. On May 9, the largest monument in the history of modern Russia was to be opened – the Rzhev Memorial to the Soviet Soldier. However, the opening ceremony was first postponed to June 22 and then to June 30. As part of the celebration, the grandiose Main Temple of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was consecrated and the "Memory Road" museum complex was opened on its territory.

Public assumptions about the possibility of the holiday events being canceled or postponed due to the quarantine were officially recognized as fake (Oganesyan – Luk'yanova 2020). But when information appeared in the press about the infection of the participants of a rehearsal of the parade (DW 2020), the press secretary of the President D. Peskov said on the TV program *Moscow. Kremlin. Putin* that *"the decision to postpone the Victory Parade was not easy for Russian President Vladimir Putin; however, people's health is an absolute priority for the Russian leader"* (RIA 2020). It should be noted that some fears of the patchy response to the postponement of the parade date have been justified. The huge campaigning work in anticipation of the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the victory's culmination and the funds spent thereon have not been justified and thus caused indignation. A part of the population was dissatisfied with the postponement of the parade date, which, in their opinion, led to the loss of Russia's monopoly on the victory: *"Voluntarily, we abandoned the Victory Parade, putting on the pandemic masks due to the decision of the pandemic idiots. The logical result is that the official White House declared the USA, Great Britain and [...] the American spirit to be the victors over Nazi Germany"*. Many people lamented the huge expenditure of money in difficult times for the people: *"Every year is just a waste of money. It would be better to help the veterans and internal front workers with some medicines. That would be more useful"* (Sib.fm 2020).

The holding of the Victory Parade in neighboring Belarus not only hit the pride of the Russian ruling establishment, but also threatened Russia with a loss of its monopoly on the symbolic role of the "victors over fascism" (from social networks: *"Cancellation of the Victory Parade in Moscow and holding of the Victory Parade in Minsk is only the top of the iceberg. Putin didn't just postpone the parade. He desacralized the date"*) (Ravreba 2020). On June 18, the American magazine *The National Interest* published an article by Putin about World War II, which was announced in December 2019 and titled "Real Lessons from the 75th Anniversary of World War II". It was also printed in *Rossiskaya Gazeta* the next day. The article itself and the discussion thereof distracted

the focus from the postponement of the parade. The very emphasis in the title on the word "real" can be interpreted in different ways: on the one hand, from the point of view of relevance for the present day, and on the other hand, in a way which, according to the authors, has a greater symbolic meaning, and points to the uniqueness and peremptory nature of the conclusions. Like the previous statements of V. Putin, the article sharply criticizes the resolution of the European Parliament; in the article it is argued, among other things, that Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia voluntarily "joined" the USSR in 1940 with the consent of the authorities of the Baltic countries, that their *"accession […] corresponded to the international and state law of that time"*, and that the Baltic states *"retained their state bodies, [and] language"* and *"were represented in the highest state structures of the Soviet Union"* (Putin 2020). And there is one more aspect of the article's discourse which attracts attention in the current geopolitical situation. In his article, V. Putin emphasizes that the Second World War did not happen suddenly: *"it is the result of many tendencies and factors of the world politics of that period. All the pre-war events lined up in a single fatal chain. But, of course, the main thing that predetermined the greatest tragedy in the history of mankind is the state egoism, cowardice, the indulgence of an aggressor gaining strength, [and] the unwillingness of the political elites to seek a compromise"* (Putin 2020). The passage about the threat to the fundamental principles of the world order, which points to the desecration of the historical memory and allusions to the "meanness and cowardice" of the destroyers of monuments, creates a performative projection of the period from the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War to the present, in which Western politicians are not ready to compromise with Russia and recognize its "legitimate interests". And the whitewashing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and Stalin's aggressive policy in the article justifies Putin's own imperial policy: his real one in relation to Ukraine, and his declared and potentially dangerous one in relation to the Baltic states and the countries of Eastern Europe. Thus, V. Putin's article, having once again demonstrated his status as the main mnemonic actor, became a message mainly to the West, and created a new round of memory securitization inside the country (accentuation of the "foe"), which was supposed to compensate for the effect of the ritual commemorative events that failed during the quarantine.

On the eve of the parade, V. Putin gave an interview on the all-Russian channel "Russia-1",: in which, he made another performative utterance of existential threat: *"... if this or that republic became part of the Soviet Union, but received a huge amount of Russian lands, traditionally Russian historical territories, and then suddenly it decided to leave this union, then at least it should leave what it came with"* (Rossiya. Televidenie i radio 2020). Such a statement clearly articulated the threat of encroachments of the territorial integrity of Russia and the desire to restore the imperial-Soviet borders of the times of 1945. This articulation was a deliberate act of securitization in both domestic and foreign policy.

The carefully constructed securitization ended with the failure of the "speech act". The parade, which took place on June 24, 2020, was dubbed by the media as a "ceremonial absence": 13 Russian cities refused to hold it, and even loyal Asian and Caucasian leaders refused to participate therein, diplomatically using the pandemic as a reason. This led to image losses and a discrediting of the Russian regime in the world public opinion: *"… to deal with him [Putin] isn't worth the effort. Nobody wants to go to Moscow without a special need"* (Polovinko 2020). It nullified all the efforts to convert the symbolic politics, at least at the external level.

GENERAL CONTOURS OF THE LATVIAN MNEMONIC LANDSCAPE

The main factor providing the complexity and ambiguity of the Latvian mnemonic background is the ethnic dualism of the Latvian society and the presence of a large Russian-speaking community there. Here we are talking not only about a single minority,

but about the dominant minority, which includes other minorities on a linguistic basis – thus 37.6% of all residents of Latvia use Russian as the main language in their families (Ozolina 2016: 13–29). That is why in this study we use the broader term "Russian-speaking" instead of "Russian". In recent years, this term has been increasingly used to build a homogeneous group with common values and characteristics from a diverse selection of heterogeneous groups and individuals (Cheskin 2012). Because of this, according to A. Cheskin, history (not language) is what separates Latvians, drawing a clear line according to the ethnolinguistic criterion (Cheskin 2012).

Through the efforts of the mnemonic actors (the Saeima, the President, nationalist and centrist parties, etc.), a nation-oriented historical narrative has been established in Latvia, the key points of which are the Soviet occupation of Latvia and the associated deportations and repressions, as well as the idea of the legal and political continuity of the Republic of Latvia in 1918–1940 with a modern Latvian statehood. The historical politics defines these plots as central, which determines the corresponding infrastructure and the commemorative calendar.

According to V. Apryshchenko and E. Gaufman, the meanings of security are formed by the past historical experience (Apryshchenko 2018: 29; Gaufman 2017). For Latvians, the deportations were the main trauma and the axis around which their identity has been formed. The anthropologist V. Skultans argues that this tragic plot of their history has the same meaning for them as the Holocaust for Jews (Skultans 1997). This historical traumatic experience defined the meaning of the Latvian security, which assumed that the occupation was the main cause of the Latvian people's suffering, and viewed the USSR and Russia as the main threat.

However, in the specific conditions of Latvia, such an active assertion of the national-ethnic narrative simultaneously turned into a serious threat in the form of stigmatization of the Russian-speaking community. The majority of Latvian Russians did not accept the national narrative of the occupation. Moreover, under the influence of Russia's aggressive historical policy, the Russian minority of Latvia adopted the narrative of their historical homeland with an understanding of the events of 20th century history that is the opposite of the Latvian one, as in the Latvian Russians' understanding, the central plot is the Soviet "liberation" of Latvia from the Nazis and the commemoration of May 9 as Victory Day. Numerous polls show that the majority of the Russian-speakers support a pro-Soviet narrative that tends to rationalize the occupation of the Baltic states and justify the Soviet repression. According to a 2012 poll 58.5% of the Russian-speakers believe that Latvia ended up in the USSR as a result of its voluntary decision (Kaprans 2016). A poll conducted in the summer of 2015 showed that 26% of the respondents had celebrated May 9 in the previous five years, with a huge difference between the answers of the Latvians and the Russian-speakers – only 7.5% of the Latvians celebrated it, but the figure for the Russian-speakers was 65.8% (Zelče 2018).

With the special status of May 9, the Second World War Victory Day celebrations are a significant element of the collective myth for Russian speakers in Latvia, as it has become part of their national identity, while this special holiday has simultaneously become a natural form of identity demonstration for the Russian speakers. As a result, any form of refusal to celebrate this holiday by Russians in Latvia is associated with a threat and is very painfully perceived in the context of the fear that may arise as a result of the thought of losing this viable myth.

MEMORIAL INITIATIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ANNIVERSARIES AND THE PANDEMIC

The quite expected exacerbation of the mnemonic politics took place in 2020 in connection with two symbolic dates that are the benchmarks of two respective narratives – the 80th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the 75th anniversary of the end

of the Second World War. In Latvia (as well as in other Baltic countries), the 2019–2020 period was marked by the final transition of the issues of the historical memory from the plane of ideological framing of identity to the plane of national security, which took shape in a number of international and national documents.

A quantitative comparison of the securitization acts of the previous periods, namely those that resulted in the adoption of an appropriate legislative decision in the period of the first half of 2020, suggests that the period that coincided with the pandemic and the memorable dates was characterized by a greater density and frequency of securitization. Thus, the corresponding acts of the memory securitization in Latvia stretched out over the past three decades and their peak was in the 1990s, when the national narrative was being formed. Among the main ones are the declarations of the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia "On the Occupation of Latvia" (dated August 22, 1996), "On the Occupation of Latvia" (Latvijas Republikas tiesibu akti 1996), "On Latvian Legionnaires in the World War" (dated October 29, 1998) (Nacionala Apvieniba 1998), and "On the condemnation of the totalitarian communist occupation regime of the USSR that was carried out in Latvia" (dated May 12, 2005).

In Latvia prohibitive measures against communist and Nazi symbols were introduced gradually and under the influence of the political conditions. At first, the use of symbols of the USSR, the Latvian SSR and Nazi Germany was prohibited at political and public events, which is mentioned in the Law on Assemblies, Processions and Pickets. In turn, the prohibition did not apply to entertainment, festive, commemorative and sports events. In the early 2010s, there was a rapid strengthening of the alternative narrative of the counter-memory, which contradicted the Latvian official one and was stimulated by the historical policy of Russia. The central plot of this narrative was the "liberation" of Latvia and the Victory Day on May 9. Its celebration was accompanied by a massive use of Soviet symbols and anti-state rhetoric (Pettai – Pettai 2015: 164). Therefore, in 2013, some amendments to the law on the safety of public entertainment and festive events were adopted, which introduced a prohibition of the use of the stylized forms of flags, coats of arms, anthems and symbols of the former USSR, the LSSR and Nazi Germany, such as the Nazi swastika, signs of the SS, the Soviet hammer and sickle and a five-pointed star, at such events. The use of the uniforms of the armies of the USSR and Nazi Germany was not prohibited, however.

To some extent, the intensity of the securitization increased in 2014 and this was due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, one of the ideological frames of which was the historical memory of the amendment to the Criminal Code which criminalized the denial or justification of aggression committed by totalitarian regimes (Kaprāns 2016: 82). In 2014, amendments to the Criminal Code were adopted that further criminalized the denial or justification of aggression committed by totalitarian regimes, and also an amendment to the relevant law specifying the deadline for the full opening of the KGB archive – in 2018 (Kaprāns 2016: 82). And finally, also in 2014, the main paradigm of the Latvian national narrative – the paradigm of two evils – the Soviet and the Nazi occupation – was introduced into the Latvian Constitution (Latvijas Republikas tiesibu akti 2019). Nevertheless, the first half of 2020 differs from 2014 in that during such a short period 5 legislative initiatives that securitized the national narrative were submitted.

In the pre-Covid 2019, the most significant of them were the European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe and the new National Security Concept of Latvia. The former fully and systematically included the Eastern European narrative including what is important for us – the Baltic historical narrative of the Second World War with the concept of two occupations, the equality of Nazism and totalitarianism, and the condemnation of the historical revisionism of the Russian Federation. The concept of the national security has designated the historical memory as a sphere of national security.

Table 1
Memorial legislation and initiatives

Proposed leagal act	Actors	Referent object	Threat	Audience	Brief description	Result
Amendments to the Law on the Safety of Public Entertainment and Celebrations (Latvijas Republikas tiesibi akti 2020)	National Alliance, President		Popularization of the symbols of the totalitarian regimes	Latvian Saeima	A ban on the use in public events of clothing that identifies the wearer as belonging to the former USSR, its republics or the armed forces of Nazi Germany or law enforcement agencies (repressive institutions), as well as the elements thereof	Adopted with amendments by the President
Amendments to the Law on the Safety of Public Events and Celebrations; Amendments to the law On meetings, processions and pickets (Latvijas Republikas Saeima 2020c)	National Alliance	National narrative of the Second World War	Popularization of the main symbol of the Russian narrative of the Second World War and Russian hybrid expansion	Latvian Saeima	Prohibition of the St. George Ribbon	The Latvian Saeima Commission on Human Rights and Public Affairs supported the draft law at its meeting
Law on the Freedom Monument and the Riga Brotherhood Cemetery (Latvijas Republikas Saeima 2020d)	National Alliance	Memorial sites of the national narrative	Discrediting and disrespecting the main places of the memory of the national narrative	Latvian Saeima	The Liberty Monument and the Riga Brotherhood Cemetery are transferred from the care of the Riga municipality to the care of the state. Penalties are established for expressing disrespect to these places of memory.	Adopted

Table 1 – continuation

Proposed leagal act	Actors	Referent object	Threat	Audience	Brief description	Result
Proposals of the President of Latvia to improve the draft law Amendments to the Law on Holidays, and Memorable and Celebrated Days	President of Latvia	National narrative	Doubts about the continuity and succession of the Latvian statehood during the two totalitarian occupation regimes	Latvian Saeima	A proposal to establish a Memorial Day for the National Resistance Movement on March 17	Under consideration
The bill to establish December 15 as the Day of Remembrance of Anti-Soviet Fighters	National Alliance	National narrative	Memorial initiatives of the President as a competitive mnemonic actor	Latvian Saeima	The proposal to establish a Day of Remembrance of Anti-Soviet Fighters on December 15	Under consideration

The coronavirus crisis became a frame for the further securitization process. Latvia has chosen a "soft" response to the pandemic situation: the closure of educational institutions, the cancellation of public events, social distancing and hygiene. The possibility of such an approach was due to, on the one hand, the low population density and, on the other hand, the unwillingness to severely restrict medium and small businesses (as this was impossible for economic reasons, namely reasons of insufficient state support), which created quite optimal conditions for controlling the pandemic within the country. Through the method of personal observation, one can also assert that there was a relative solidarity of the local media (including pro-Russian resources) in their positive assessment of the effectiveness of the actions of the Latvian government in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against the background of the relative successes in curbing the pandemic and some confusion and demobilization (also due to the pandemic) of the internal supporters of the pro-Russian narrative, the main national mnemonic actors performed a number of actions leading to its further securitization. We divide these actions into the following groups: 1) memorial legislation and initiatives that securitized the national narrative and 2) acts of commemoration of the traditional symbolic dates. In the following table, we introduce the first group of actions – the memorial legislation and initiatives.

The first three initiatives meant not only a tough securitization of the narrative, but also the removal of important symbols and commemorations of the Russian narrative beyond the legal framework. In each case this was preceded by rather harsh statements by representatives of the political elite, which can be characterized as speech acts declaring a threat and giving space to the discourse of securitization. To give two examples, there was the statement of President Egils Levits that those who celebrate May 9 cannot be Latvian patriots (PRESS 2020), as well as the words of the deputy chairman of the Saeima Dagmara Beitnere-Le Gall: *"those who use the St. George Ribbon do not want to belong to Latvia"* (Beitnere-Le Galla 2020).

The fourth and fifth initiatives are attempts to add to the official calendar two new commemorative dates associated with perpetuating the memory of the national anti-Soviet partisan movement. This group of mnemonic events primarily reflects the attempts to adjust the national narrative and the competition between its main actors – the President and the National Union.

In October 2019, the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, proposed to the Saeima that it adopt the proposed amendments to the "Law on Holidays, and Memorable and Celebrated Days". According to one of them, March 17 should be the official Day of Remembrance of the National Resistance Movement in Latvia. On this day in 1944, under the leadership of Professor Konstantins Čakste, the Latvian Central Council completed the collection of signatures for a memorandum in which a demand was put forward on behalf of the Latvian people for the actual restoration of Latvia's independence, and confidence was expressed in the belief that the Latvian state and its Constitution would legally continue to exist (Latvijas Valsts Prezidents 2019).

In this case, one can see three reasons that motivated E. Levits to come up with such an initiative. First, there was the desire to consolidate the anti-Soviet consensus in the Latvian historical policy, which again became relevant in the context of Russian historical revisionism. Secondly, the proposed holiday's chronological coincidence with Legionnaires' Day on March 16 would make it possible to somewhat decorate this unofficial, but very popular holiday, which led to a gathering of a fairly large number of people and thus worried the EU. On the other hand, the new holiday would make it possible to transfer the commemoration of March 16 into a legitimate area. Thirdly, President Levits believes that the Day of Remembrance of the National Resistance Movement will become an important reminder of the continuity and succession of Latvian statehood during the two totalitarian occupation regimes. Today, the period of

the Second World War is considered to be an interruption of the existence of the Latvian state. With this initiative, the President in a certain way fills this gap in the historical memory, demonstrating the continuity and anti-totalitarian orientation of the state aspirations.

At the same time, one cannot speak of the proposed March 17 holiday as an initiative completely imposed by the government since traditions of celebrating this day have already existed in a certain part of the Latvian civil society; therefore, here we can see a certain coincidence of the political (descending) and the social (ascending) memory.

The President has scheduled several big events to be held by that date. Specifically, the National Resistance Movement in the Historical Memory of Latvia Forum was to be organized and held in the castle of Riga. The agenda of the Forum included laying new traditions of memory by commemorating Professor Konstantins Čakste and sites of commemoration such as the Ilskiy Bunker along with spreading of commemoration idias region wide. However, in connection with the introduction of the state of emergency in Latvia, these events did not take place, and the commemoration of the date was limited to a single candle lighting by the President near the Liberty Monument and his short address to the nation.

The initiative of a number of Saeima deputies to establish another commemorative holiday – the Day of Anti-Soviet Fighters – seems to be strengthening the anti-communist narrative. This initiative is aimed at commemorating the participants of the post-war underground resistance movement in Latvia, who, unlike, for example, their counterparts in Lithuania, have not yet been identified in the symbolic pantheon of the memory. The bill provides for the introduction of a day of remembrance for the anti-Soviet fighters which is to be held on December 15, the day on which Gunars Astra, a member of the national resistance movement, gave his last word in a political trial in 1983 at the Supreme Court of the Latvian SSR. His speech was similar to a diplomatic accusation of the USSR of occupation and violation of the rights of citizens of the Republic of Latvia. The authors of the law linked it openly with the need of the people of Latvia to *"protect their country"* (Upleja 2020). This initiative was almost imperceptible, there are no comments on it from Latvian experts, and nothing was written about it in the Russian-language media. On social networks, there was some discussion about the advisability of introducing such a commemorative date, especially in connection with the presidential initiative to make March 17 a memorial holiday. According to M. Kaprāns, in this case there was a competition of the mnemonic actors within the framework of the national narrative. The politicians from the National Alliance strive to designate their primacy in the formation of the national narrative (Kaprāns 2020).

Commemorative dates and rituals, and their status and scale are one of the main elements that determine the memory politics. As mentioned above, the memory mode in Latvia can be designated as split. The apogee of the controversy is two unofficial commemorative dates that have become practically the symbols of the identity of the two ethnic communities in Latvia – Legionnaires´ Day on March 16 and Victory Day on May 9. In this table we introduce the commemorative rituals (mnemonic events) in Latvia during the state of emergency.

From the presented table, two groups of mnemonic events can be distinguished. The first is the traditional official dates of commemoration – March 25 and June 14 (the Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Communist Genocide and the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Communist Terror and Mass Deportation, respectively) and May 4 – the Day of the Restoration of Independence. Due to the coronavirus restrictions, they passed without mass events, and the main actions were the addresses of the President and the Speaker of the Saeima, and the individual layings of flowers at the Liberty Monument. Let us note two indicative points related to the intervention of the pandemic in the planned scenarios of the events. Firstly, in the speech acts of the leaders of the state,

Table 2
Acts of commemoration of the symbolic dates

Date	Mnemo event	Status	Places of memory	Originally planned commemoration rituals	The rituals held instead due to the pandemic
March 16	Legionnaires' Day	Informal	Freedom Monument	A procession, laying flowers near the the Monument Funeral, a ceremony at the Lestenes fraternal cemetery	A single floral tribute at the monument
March 25	Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Communist Genocide	Official	Freedom Monument, Memorial to the victims of deportations – a cattle car at the station	A procession from the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia to the Freedom Monument on Freedom Square, a solemn changing of the guard, and a laying of flowers there with the participation of deputies of the Saeima, members of the government, the leadership of the National Armed Forces and diplomats. Minutes of silence at the monument, wreath-laying, and meetings. Wreath laying and a memorial service near near the carriage.	A single flower-laying, lighting candles
May 4	Independence Restoration Day	Official	Freedom Monument, Saeima, a memorial plaque dedicated to the adoption of the declaration on May 4 (2020) was installed near the building of the Saeima	A solemn meeting near the Freedom Monument, a procession of brass bands, a procession of people in folk costumes, concerts of musical groups, a craft market for folk art	A virtual ecumenical service in the Riga House. A speech by the President during a virtual excursion along the cognitive path in Old Riga, where the declaration of the restoration of Latvia's independence was discussed, written and adopted. The individual sports campaign titled "Thank You" #*PaldiesParBrivibu*!

Table 2 – continuation

Date	Mnemo event	Status	Places of memory	Originally planned commemoration rituals	The rituals held instead due to the pandemic
May 9	Victory Day	Informal	Monument to the Soldiers – the Liberators of Riga	Mass meeting, a flower-laying "field kitchen", a concert of musical groups	Laying flowers in groups, keeping a distance
June 14	Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Communist Terror and Mass Deportation	Official	Freedom monument, the memorial to the victims of deportations – a cattle car at the station	A procession from the Museum of Occupation to the Freedom Monument, a solemn changing of the guard, and a laying of flowers there with the participation of deputies of the Saeima, government members, the leadership of the National Armed Forces and diplomats. Minutes of silence at the Freedom Monument, and at the Škirotava and Tornakalns stations. Laying of wreaths and meetings. Laying of wreaths and a memorial service near the carriage.	The President's meeting in the Riga Castle with people who survived the exile to Siberia, and participants in the school works competition "Children of Siberia". A meeting near the Freedom Monument.

a symbolic connection was traced between the historical trials of the Latvian people and the current pandemic. The latter was presented as a test for the nation, which it must overcome with honor.

On March 25, Inga Murniece, the Head of the Saeima, in her address on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Communist Genocide, urged Latvians to survive the current hardships by drawing inspiration from the example of Latvian peasants who survived the deportation: *"However, we are clearly aware of the power that has allowed the deported people far from home, in dire conditions, to survive and abide the dark times. Let us, in the current difficult situation, recall the past together and draw strength from the Latvian peasant who wanted to be the owner of his yard and did not join the collective farm. Let's learn from this power!"* (Latvijas Republikas Saeima 2020b). A similar leitmotif sounded in the Address of President Egil Levits on the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Communist Terror and Mass Deportation: *"The course of the history of our people gives confidence that by rallying forces, we overcome great obstacles and find the right ways in crisis situations*" (Latvijas Valsts Prezidents (2020b).

References to the current pandemic were also present in the speeches of state leaders on the Day of the Restoration of Independence of Latvia: "*We are forced to be on our own, with our closest family members only, or at least two metres apart from each other. I am certain that we can overcome even these circumstances and restore our strength, as we have our Latvia, where we are always together*" (Latvijas Valsts Prezidents 2020a). And in a solemn address, Inga Murniece drew attention to the success of Latvia in curbing the pandemic: *"The measures we have chosen to take during the COVID-19 pandemic are among the most successful ones. Without introducing strict prohibitions or a full lock-down, we have achieved the most important goal – to flatten the infection curve. This ensures, most importantly, that each patient receives the best medical care possible"* (Latvijas Republikas Saeima 2020a).

Another example is the following statement by Levits from his Address on the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Communist Terror and Mass Deportation: *"In the historical experience of our people, we can also gain strength to overcome today's difficulties, comparing modern problems with the more difficult times that our parents and grandparents had to endure"* (Latvijas Valsts Prezidents 2020b).

Secondly, in the public space, an idea that was voiced was that the official events on the day of remembrance of victims of deportations should be abandoned in the future, and that the focus should rather be on the remembered events' personal, sorrowful character. This idea was expressed by the deputy of the Saeima and the European Parliament Sandra Kalniete: *"This year, when due to restrictions we cannot get together in a large procession, may become a turning point where we start thinking that it can be mentioned in a different way"* (LSM. Lv. 2020).

The second group of mnemonic events is the informal commemorative dates, which, as a rule, resonate more with the public and have a potential for conflict in Latvian society – March 16 (Legionnaires' Day) and May 9 – Victory Day.

The traditional informal procession on Legionnaires' Day was canceled, and the commemoration was carried out by a single laying of flowers by some right-wing politicians and members of the public at the Freedom Monument, while they kept a distance from each other.

Meanwhile, Russia, which introduced strict coronavirus restrictions much later than Latvia, did not abandon its planned measures which were directly related to the mnemonic confrontation with Latvia and were part of the war of memories. Thus, on March 16, at the International Press Center of MIA "Russia Today", a round table was held and the report "Companions of Nazi Crimes. 96 Veterans of the Latvian Legion Who Are Still Alive" was published. It was organized by the Historical Memory Foundation and the Foundation for the Support and Development of Jewish Culture, Traditions, Education

and Science, and one of the authors of the report was V. Semendey, a well-known critic of the historical policy of Latvia. The publication revealed the names of 96 Latvian legionnaires who still live in various countries of the world, including Latvia, the USA, and Canada (Sputnik Latvija 2020).

Despite the assurances of the round table participants about the possibility of the former legionnaires being prosecuted, the report does not provide any evidence of the participation of these persons in war crimes and, obviously, the publication first and foremost had a symbolic goal – to provide a Russian propaganda response to the historical policy of Latvia.

Due to the state of emergency, the celebration of the most important commemorative date of Latvia's Russian-speaking community, May 9, was relatively quiet and intimate. However, a fairly large number of people (20 thousand people) participated in it, and they came to the traditional place of the celebration – the monument to the Soviet "liberators" of Riga. However, in the information space, this date again caused the expected tension. This was due to two episodes. Firstly, there was the scandal caused by the expulsion from a Jurmala cafe of a couple of Russian tourists wearing St. George ribbons. The owner of the cafe, a local government deputy from the National Union, demanded that the visitors remove the ribbons, and after their refusal, he did not let the couple into the cafe (M!XNEWS 2020). This caused a widespread discussion in the Russian-speaking and Latvian-speaking segment of Facebook (GRANI. Lv 2020; Uzulēna 2020).

The second episode was a case of non-observance of social distance by people who came to the monument to the "liberators of Riga" on May 9. The Prime Minister, K. Karins, even demanded an official explanation from the Minister of Internal Affairs in this regard (DELFI 2020).

Thus, the "mnemonic competition" with the Russian Federation, intensified in the context of the symbolic anniversaries and framed by a new social and political situation in connection with the pandemic, led to a re-actualization of the historical experience and the collective trauma of Latvians associated with the Soviet occupation, and accelerated the formation of meanings of security that imply a strengthening of the political and legal measures to protect the national narrative as an element of identity.

CONCLUSION

The constructivist approach, formalized in the studies of the Copenhagen School, seems to us the most optimal when studying memory politics. The case of Russia and Latvia proves that the protection of an identity through the securitization of memory is one of the main goal-setting meanings of national/state security, a component of the national interest. The constructivist construction of the meanings of security and the collective memory is the main prerequisite for their interconnection and mutual influence.

Discourses of memory would hardly be a successful guarantee of securitization if they were not, to a certain extent, correlated with current threats. Referring the historical memory to the subject field of national security in Latvia was a reaction to Russia's actions to disavow Latvia's historical narrative. In case of Russia, disagreement of those countries having a different concept of the securitization of memory to accept the WWII narrative promoted by Russia is perceived as an external threat to Russia's national security. The processes of securitization of memory are connected with the external reality, which does not depend on a speech act or any other expression of discourse and is a favorable/unfavorable condition for the use of memory discourses. In our case, the COVID-19 pandemic became a factor in the external reality.

The coincidence of the coronavirus pandemic with an intensification of historical politics, which was in turn associated with two symbolic anniversaries that were important for two respective narratives – the 80th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and

the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War – led to changes (perhaps only temporary ones) in the balance of power of the mnemonic actors, in our case along the line of confrontation between Latvia and Russia. At the same time, these changes were characterized by the memory securitization in both countries, but with different degrees of success in each case.

For Russia, the pandemic created unfavorable conditions for the Russian authorities to use the opportunities that were provided to them by the implementation of a large-scale program to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the "Great Victory". On the one hand, the paternalistic feelings of Russians were undermined due to the inability of the government and the president to fully control the situation. On the other hand, the carefully constructed "speech act" of using the anniversaries in the symbolic politics at the external level failed, which forced the subjects of the securitization (particularly V. Putin) to use a clearly aggressive rhetoric in an attempt to rehabilitate their image after the losses it suffered. Holding the Victory Day parade in the neighboring Belarus on May 9 under the conditions of the pandemic not only hit the pride of the Russian ruling establishment, but also created the threat of Russia losing its monopoly on the symbolic role of the "victors over fascism".

For Latvia, the coronavirus crisis has unexpectedly created a favorable political and social situation for a more painless securitization of memory and an even more serious defining of the main subjects of the official mnemopolitics. From March to June 2020, five memorial bills were put forward in Latvia. Against the background of its relative successes in curbing the pandemic and a certain confusion and demobilization (also due to the pandemic) of the internal supporters of the pro-Russian narrative, Latvia made a number of decisions that additionally securitized the national historical narrative in its anti-communist orientation, which gives us grounds to speak of the final transition of issues of the historical memory from the plane of ideological framing of identity to the plane of national security.

A quantitative comparison of the securitization acts of the previous periods allows us to speak of the greater density and frequency of such acts during the coincidence of the pandemic and the memorial dates. If the previous acts of securitization of memory were stretched out over almost three decades, then it was during the quarantine measures that it became possible to avoid a great public outcry and opposition of the pro-Russian forces in reaction to the adoption of the memorial laws and initiatives important for the national narrative. That allows us to consider the acts of securitization to be successful.

Summing up, it seems important to us not only to record the facts and events described and analyzed with the use of the concepts of securitization, but also to express some value judgments. We consider our research to be a definite contribution to the study of pandemic "framing" of symbolic politics, including the politics of memory. In other words, we define the pandemic as an immediate contextual condition and part of the external "support" for memory securitization. In this case, we see the new act of securitization both in Russia and Latvia not as an isolated case, but as a case that becomes a trend. Evoked by anniversaries and related memorial events and unexpectedly coinciding with the pandemic, this trend makes it easier for state authorities to manage symbolic politics. In the case of Latvia, it is easier for the state to consolidate and strengthen its national narrative, due, firstly, to the strengthening of its national reputation, thanks to the competent counteraction to the pandemic, and, secondly, to the distraction of society and potential counteragents of memory to the problems of fighting the Corona crisis. In the case of Russia, the pandemic created unfavorable conditions for the implementation of the vast program of the 75th anniversary of the "Great Victory". On the one hand, the pandemic undermined the paternalistic feelings of Russians due to the inability of the government and the President to fully control the situation. On the other hand, it spoiled the opportunity to use the carefully prepared anniversary in symbolic politics on the

international level and forced the use of clearly aggressive rhetoric in an attempt to rehabilitate the image losses as well as pushed the President into the pathway of reinforcement of authoritarian power.

Russia's search for new memory allies – for example, China – with the fixation of new commemorative dates, can lead to tactical successes, but in the long term it can create a security dilemma in a multinational state with numerous identity memories. The performative "gathering of lands" of the former USSR has already provoked a negative reaction from Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Belarus, not to mention Ukraine and the Baltic states. Though he uses the memory securitization for geopolitical purposes, that is, to expand the Russian sphere of influence, V. Putin may face a completely opposite effect, namely resistance, both within the state and on the part of other actors in foreign policy, from among which he could lose even his most loyal allies.

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