

**MEDICAL POPULISM AS A MEANS OF BUILDING A POLITICAL COMMUNITY
DURING PANDEMIC-INDUCED CIVIL DISORDER¹**

Abstract:	<i>This case study, embedded in the theoretical framework of medical populism, investigates how the TVP Info news portal, a public media entity controlled by the ruling party, strategically employed medical populism to cultivate a political community and concurrently legitimize Polish governmental actions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The research relies on a source analysis of a population of news articles about the pandemic disseminated on TVP Info. The timeframe captures the pandemic during a transition from stringent pandemic measures to a period of eased restrictions, reduced infection rates, and a perceptible shift in focus towards the unfolding war in Ukraine. The study aims to unpack dimensions of medical populism existing in the narratives throughout this critical period. The analysis reveals the strategic deployment of dramatization, common-sense solutions, expertise invocation, and the dichotomy of “us” versus “them”. It underscores the media’s actions to shape public perception and consolidate support for the government’s response to the pandemic. The conclusions drawn from this analysis contribute to enriching the understanding of how medical populism was wielded as a tool for community-building and justification of government actions during a pivotal juncture in recent history of civil disorder.</i>
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Contact details of the authors:	E-mail: joanna.rak@amu.edu.pl (1) k.owczarek16@gmail.com (2)
Institutional affiliation of the authors:	Poznań Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland (1) (2)
Institutions address:	Poland, Poznań 61-614, ul. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 5, Poland (1) (2)

Introduction

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic forced governments to implement restrictions to mitigate the public health emergency². Some governmental political decisions, including those of the Polish government, triggered widespread anti-government protests³. High was distrust towards information regarding COVID-19 spread by governments⁴. Furthermore, the Polish government stirred strong emotions to combat the pandemic, such as purchasing masks that did not meet requirements or abnormally expensive respirators from unknown medical

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² Nils Ringe, Lucio Rennó, *Populists and the Pandemic: How Populists Around the World Responded to COVID-19*, in N. Ringe, L. Rennó (Eds), *Populists and the Pandemic: How Populists Around the World Responded to COVID-19*, Routledge, New York, 2023

³ Geoffrey Pleyers, *The Pandemic is a Battlefield. Social Movements in the COVID-19 Lockdown*, “Journal of Civil Society”, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2020, pp. 295–312; Joanna Rak, *Pandemic-Era Civil Disorder in Post-Communist EU Member States*, Routledge, New York, 2023

⁴ Marta Malesza, Magdalena C. Kaczmarek, *Predictors of Anxiety During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Poland*, “Personality and Individual Differences”, Vol. 170, 2021, pp. 1-6

sources¹. The incompetence in tackling the pandemic led to protests despite legal restrictions. Still, the largest wave of demonstrations in pandemic-stricken Poland was triggered by the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on abortion termination. These protests took on a strongly anti-government form. In response to these protests, the government sought to employ various communication strategies, with the assistance of the Polish police, to justify their actions².

The pandemic was a challenge and an opportunity for the government to call for national unity and legitimise their actions. In the face of crises, citizens expect security and protection, which makes them more willing to accept social control measures larger than usual³. In times of public health crisis, medical populism played a significant role in efforts to claim legitimacy to the right to rule⁴. These claims are the subject of the following study, aiming to explain how, through medical populism, the government attempted to rebuild its legitimacy and build a community of Poles to whom these legitimacy demands were directed. The study contributes empirically to studies on legitimacy by enriching our understanding of the mechanism of generating authoritarian legitimacy in times of crisis.

The remainder of the article consists of four parts. The first presents a literature review on medical populism and its significance in community building. The second introduces methodological assumptions. The third discusses research findings embedded in the theoretical framework derived from the first part. The article concludes with a discussion of the role of legitimacy claims in community-building communication practices.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The category of claims to legitimacy is of growing importance in studies on stabilising political regimes. It refers to actions in which the ruling subjects determine why they are entitled to rule⁵. Recent studies indicate that claims to the right to rule fundamentally shape the governance methods of the regime and its stability⁶. Therefore, rulers must convince the ruled that they use their power competencies in the most efficient way possible, ultimately ensuring the stability of the political system. However, a significant part of society must become convinced to achieve stability. Hence, it is in rulers' interest to build a community that approves and supports their actions. Johannes Gerschewski highlights the interdependencies between rulers and the ruled and the impossibility of exercising power in the long term through power abuse⁷. Therefore, rulers, through claims to legitimacy, seek to maintain the stability of the political system. However, for this stability to occur, the opposition, the ruled, and the elites within political circles must accept the rulers' actions⁸. Thus, it is in the latter's hands to present policies in a way that convinces these groups of the justifiability of their actions. Organising a community that forms these groups is essential for stabilising political regimes.

Developing Gerschewski's theory, Christian van Soest and Julia Grauvogel⁹ point out that the more pronounced the legitimisation process, the higher the probability of creating collective identification. This can

¹ <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,25965040,respiratory-od-handlarza-bronia-z-czarnej-listy-onz-znamy-szczegoly.html>. (3.11.2023)

² Joanna Rak, *Delegitimization Strategies as a Means of Policing Protesters Online During the Pandemic in Poland*, "Revista de Sociologia e Politica", Vol. 30, 2020; Joanna Rak, Karolina Owczarek *Freedom of Assembly at Stake: The Warsaw Police's Partisanship During Polish Protests in Times of Pandemic*, "Studia Securitas", Vol. 16, No. 2, 2020, p. 175

³ Geoffrey Pleyers, *The Pandemic is a Battlefield. Social Movements in the COVID-19 Lockdown*, "Journal of Civil Society", Vol. 16, No. 4, 2020, p. 295

⁴ Joanna Rak, *The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*, "Journal of Populism Studies", Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020b, pp. 1–19

⁵ Marcus Tannenber, Michael Bernhard, Johannes Gerschewski, Anna Lührmann, Christian von Soest, *Claiming the Right to Rule: Regime Legitimation Strategies from 1900 to 2019*, "European Political Science Review", Vol 13, No 1, 2021, p. 79

⁶ *Idem*

⁷ Johannes Gerschewski, *The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes*, "Democratization", Vol. 20, No. 1, 2013, p. 13

⁸ Joanna Rak, *The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*, "Journal of Populism Studies", Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, p. 3

⁹ Christian Van Soest, Julia Grauvogel, *How Do Non-Democratic Regimes Claim Legitimacy? Comparative Insights from Post-Soviet Countries*, GIGA Working Papers, No. 277, 2015, p. 6

facilitate the forming of a political community and positively impact the cohesion of ruling elites¹. Simultaneously, van Soest and Grauvogel² emphasise that legitimisation actions can limit the spectrum of actors authorised to criticise a political regime and how criticism is expressed. A protest expresses opposition to a specific issue, which is vital for studying the Polish government's legitimacy claims during the pandemic-induced crisis, which was engulfed in anti-government protests for several months³. Moreover, well-formulated claims to legitimacy can influence society's perception of rulers fulfilling their political roles and reception of legitimacy claims⁴. Thus, through a carefully chosen strategy, the ruling can build a community that believes in their good intentions, thereby accepting their actions embedded in exercising power. At the same time, in addition to creating a community, rulers may deepen divisions, providing additional tools to legitimise their actions. Crises allow authoritarian leaders to gain greater legitimacy and convey the message about scenarios they create⁵.

Rulers who seek legitimisation justify their appropriateness to rule and represent the ruled. They also present the expected scope of power competencies the ruled relinquish⁶. Thereby, rulers attempt to build a political community understood as a group bound by a shared commitment to public concerns, where individuals, while pursuing their interests, also recognize and uphold the conditions that sustain their collective welfare. This community is not unified by a single goal but rather by understanding the principles and boundaries of their collective identity, shaped by a narrative that legitimizes individual aspirations and communal responsibilities. Researchers use the republic category, defined as "the public concern or consideration of cives"⁷, which recognises conditions and principles that bind societies together. Thus, a political community should not have a common goal but recognise the conditions defining their republica⁸. A political community can be built through a specific narrative in which individuals still have their interests and strive to achieve them. At the same time, they want to care for public concerns, binding them together. One such public concern during the pandemic was public health, which required special protection measures. Most governments worldwide limited fundamental rights and increased power competencies⁹. These actions must have been adequately justified to avoid social opposition and generate subordination. Nevertheless, despite the populist narrative, the classical populist approach proved insufficient¹⁰. One reason for this could be the exogeneity of the COVID-19-induced crisis, making it initially challenging to identify a political enemy and, consequently, leading to a typically populist narrative of divisions in which someone was responsible for the crisis¹¹. Therefore, rulers could seek scapegoats not necessarily accountable for causing the crisis but for its continuation or exacerbation.

¹ Sally N. Cummings, Ole Nørgaard, *Conceptualizing State Capacity: Comparing Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*, "Political Studies", Vol. 52, No. 4, 2004, p. 685

² Christian Van Soest, Julia Grauvogel, *How Do Non-Democratic Regimes Claim Legitimacy? Comparative Insights from Post-Soviet Countries*, GIGA Working Papers No. 277, 2015, p. 6

³ Joanna Rak, Karolina Owczarek, *Freedom of Assembly at Stake: The Warsaw Police's Partisanship During Polish Protests in Times of Pandemic*, "Studia Securitas", Vol. 16, No. 2, 2020, p. 172

⁴ Christian Van Soest, Julia Grauvogel, *How Do Non-Democratic Regimes Claim Legitimacy? Comparative Insights from Post-Soviet Countries*, GIGA Working Papers No. 277, 2015, p. 6

⁵ Elias Klenk, Julia Guroł, *The Role of Narratives for Gaining Domestic Political Legitimacy: China's Image Management during COVID-19*, "Journal of Chinese Political Science", Vol. 29, No. 1, 2024, p. 337

⁶ Joanna Rak, *The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*, "Journal of Populism Studies", Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, p. 3

⁷ Bhikhu Parekh, *Review Article: The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, "British Journal of Political Science", Vol. 9, No. 4, 1979, p. 495

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community*, "Community at Loose Ends", edited by Miami Theory Collective, University Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1991

⁹ Douglas W. Allen, *Covid-19 Lockdown Cost/Benefits: A Critical Assessment of the Literature*, "International Journal of the Economics of Business", Vol. 29, No. 1, 2022, p. 3

¹⁰ Joanna Rak, *The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*, "Journal of Populism Studies", Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, pp. 4–5

¹¹ Nils Ringe, Lucio Rennó, *Populists and the Pandemic: How Populists Around the World Responded to COVID-19*, in N. Ringe, L. Rennó (Eds), *Populists and the Pandemic: How Populists Around the World Responded to COVID-19*, Routledge, New York, 2023

Exploring narratives used during public health crises, Gideon Lasco points to medical populism during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the source of infection and crisis is the “others.” However, this must be preceded by creating divisions between “us” (the people) and the “others” (those deemed dangerous)¹. Therefore, it is essential to focus on the significance of creating a division, preceded by building a community in such a way that it gives a sense of belonging to the “people.” Such division can be created by dramatizing the crisis, portraying it in an emotional, exaggerated manner to justify introducing extraordinary solutions and argue for more substantial power competencies as actions for the “people” (community)². Lasco also identifies two other possible dimensions of medical populism in the pandemic. The first includes presenting quick “common-sense” solutions such as an upcoming vaccine or simplistic arguments that pit certain aspects of life (e.g., freedom and the economy) against public health. The second draws on invoking knowledge meant to simplify and present the pandemic more spectacularly. However, scientific facts do not always support this knowledge and may sometimes border on falsehood³.

In sum, rulers claim legitimacy to maintain and strengthen their power competencies, stabilising the political system. Based on Lasco’s theory, the four dimensions of medical populism narratives are creating social divisions, providing common-sense solutions, drawing on science-derived knowledge, and dramatizing. They constitute a theoretical tool for identifying claims to legitimacy concerning the public health threat that emerged with the pandemic. The application of these dimensions uncovers attempts to build a community that, during the crisis, blames the “others,” the dangerous ones, for the negative impact of the pandemic on Poles. Simultaneously, the political community involves the “people.” Those who oppose it are enemies considered the “others”. In this context, a political community is understood as a group unified by narratives that legitimise authority by creating social divisions, often framing crises by contrasting “the people” with perceived “others.” This community is bound not by shared interests or mutual goals but by a common identity constructed in opposition to those labelled as threats. In times of crisis, such as a public health emergency, this definition emphasises a collective identity reinforced by common-sense solutions, scientific rationales, and dramatic appeals to solidarity, ultimately legitimising authority through a clear distinction between the in-group and the out-group.

Methods and data

The following study rests on the theoretical frameworks presented in the second part of the article. Researchers argue that it is crucial to separate the study of medical populism from the classical approach to populism in the context of legitimacy claims⁴. Thus, this study focuses solely on the former. Medical populism refers to using populist strategies in the context of health-related issues. It involves simplifying and emotionalising complex medical information to appeal to the public. This approach often involves framing health challenges that resonate with popular sentiments, utilising charismatic figures as medical authorities, and creating a dichotomy between a “common sense” perspective and perceived elitist or expert-driven narratives. The study aims to address a research question about how the TVP Info news portal used the dimensions of medical populism to develop a political community and simultaneously justify the actions taken by the government. It is based on source analysis of news published on the TVP Info news portal, i.e., a public media entity controlled by the ruling party. It uses content analysis to unpack the dimensions of medical populism in narratives from the detection of the first COVID-19 case in Poland on March 4, 2020, until February 24, 2022. The endpoint is marked by the day the war broke out in Ukraine. Simultaneously, it was a period when restrictions were not as stringent, there were fewer reported cases of coronavirus infection, and the media shifted their focus from the coronavirus crisis that was slowly subsiding to the immigration crisis that began.

The analysis commenced with filtering news to establish the corpus of articles and videos related to the pandemic and including significant information for studying medical populism. Therefore, the news under scrutiny included the following keywords: pandemic, COVID-19, coronavirus, lockdown, and restrictions. It

¹ Gideon Lasco, *Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “Global Public Health”, Vol. 15, No. 10, 2020, pp. 1417–1429

² *Idem*

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 1418–1419

⁴ Joanna Rak, *The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*, “Journal of Populism Studies”, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, p. 4

resulted in developing a corpus of 7457 news with the keyword “pandemic,” 9408 with “coronavirus,” 1919 with “restrictions,” 1224 with “lockdown,” and 9150 with “COVID-19.” The analysis includes the whole news population about the pandemic, which was determined with the above criteria. To illustrate arguments in the research findings section, we choose the most frequently occurring statements that showed dimensions of medical populism. The typology presented by Lasco¹ served as a theoretical tool. Once a database of articles containing these keywords was created, they were read and viewed if they contained video materials. They were then grouped into theory-based themes and interpreted through a theoretical lens of the four dimensions of medical populism presented by Lasco², followed by conclusions and insights from this comparison. This process facilitated answering the research question. To maintain clarity in the study, the following section is divided into four parts, each referring to one of the dimensions of medical populism.

Research findings

The Polish government’s response to the 2020 protests, which erupted in opposition to the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling on abortion, was marked by a combination of negotiated management and escalated force law enforcement and the strategic use of populist narratives to justify its actions³. The protests, which saw tens of thousands of citizens take to the streets, were framed by the government and state media as a threat to public order and national unity, with the protesters often depicted as lawless and disruptive. In line with the populist rhetoric of “us versus them,” the ruling party and its supporters painted the demonstrators not as legitimate dissenters but as part of a broader anti-government, “dangerous” minority. This narrative was reinforced by claims that the protests posed a public health risk, especially in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, thus allowing the government to justify its harsh response, ranging from police crackdowns to legal threats, under the guise of protecting public health and safety. The use of populist framing to discredit the protests, coupled with appeals to national solidarity, sought to solidify the government’s position while portraying those who opposed it as a destabilising force, further deepening societal divisions.

Dividing a society into “us” and “them” to develop a community?

From the beginning of the pandemic in Poland, TVP Info journalists created a typical populist narrative dividing Poles into “us” and “them.” The first such articles appeared in March 2020, in which the news titles suggested that the opposition spread fake news about the actions taken by the Law and Justice government⁴. The opposition was attempting to delegitimise pandemic measures and crisis management.

Another contentious issue that simultaneously opened the possibility of dividing society was the presidential elections scheduled for May 2020. TVP Info published articles emphasising that the form of elections proposed by the ruling party was the safest and best option. Meanwhile, by opposing this form, the opposition was portrayed as endangering the lives and health of Poles⁵. The construction of a community supporting postal voting was thus implemented, simultaneously distancing this community from those who opposed the idea. The division was reinforced in the fall when Poland was strongly affected by the second wave of the pandemic. Recordings from the beginning of the pandemic showed that one of the opposition politicians suggested holding elections in the fall, claiming that the pandemic would still be ongoing by then⁶. This allowed the portrayal of opposition politicians as those who did not care about public health while depicting the rulers as right in making political decisions.

The following events used to divide society were anti-government protests, specifically the entrepreneurs’ strikes. Illegally imposed restrictions on public gatherings were justified by the need to care for public health. Polish law provides a mechanism for limiting the right to assemble, but it was not implemented

¹ Gideon Lasco, *Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “Global Public Health”, Vol. 15, No. 10, 2020, pp. 1418–1429

² *Idem*

³ Joanna Rak, *The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*, “Journal of Populism Studies”, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, p. 4

⁴ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47112848/koronawirus-politycy-opozycji-powtarzaja-nieprawdziwe-informacje-wieszwiecej> (3.11.2023)

⁵ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47437311/zbigniew-ziobro-o-wyborach-prezydenckich-wieszwiecej> (3.11.2023)

⁶ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50430776/koronawirus-premier-wlaczyl-filmik-z-budka-szef-po-chcial-wyborow-na-jesieni-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

while, according to TVP Info, protesters threatened many people¹. Thus, a division was between those who wanted to express their opposition to the regulations imposed by the Polish government and those who adhered to them. At the same time, public gatherings supporting the government were not criticised². Some articles discussing pro-government assemblies did not mention how they could affect public health, while others promoted them³.

The most significant division and the search for danger in “others” who stood against “us,” the people, began after the announcement of the controversial ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal regarding abortion. Protesters took to the streets despite the illegally enforced assembly ban. In articles on the TVP Info portal, politicians from the ruling party were quoted as presenting protesters as a “threat to people’s safety” when “the lives, health, and jobs of Poles are most important”⁴. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki appealed for solidarity and joint action, speaking about “our shared responsibility,” “let’s set aside political disputes,” or “let’s stand together”⁵. A narrative was thus constructed in which “we,” “the people,” and “Poles” must have stood together to fight the coronavirus by refraining from protests. Therefore, those who opposed the calls did not want the good of the “community.” Moreover, Morawiecki underscored that “health is our common concern” and “we need the solidarity cooperation of all generations and specialists from various fields to shape pro-health attitudes, promote responsibility for oneself and fellow citizens.” Journalists exposed that “we” could overcome the pandemic victoriously if “we mobilise and adhere to restrictions”⁶. Thus, everyone who followed the government’s orders and adhered to restrictions built a community caring for the health and lives of Poles. Over the following weeks, articles focused on the extreme irresponsibility of protesters, suggesting a high likelihood that protests would worsen the epidemic situation in Poland. It was underlined that those participating in and supporting protests disregarded Poles holding an “anti-Polish revolution”⁷. Gatherings and participation were called illegal⁸. During the peak of infections, journalists questioned whether protests held in October 2020 could have influenced the number of infections, and the answer was affirmative. People were again encouraged to refrain from protests for the good of the “community”⁹. Examples from other countries indicated that “self-discipline has slowed down the coronavirus,” including measures such as limiting interpersonal contacts and movement¹⁰.

During the third pandemic wave, the opposition was attacked again, portrayed as pressuring the government to reopen the economy a few weeks earlier than possible. When the article was published in the same week, 34 thousand infections were recorded. The same video included scrolling banners: “The stake of our actions is the lives of Poles” and “Prime Minister: ‘We need national solidarity’”¹¹. Besides, Morawiecki addressed an appeal to the opposition, emphasising that they did not know how to act in solidarity with the government and asked not to worsen the situation¹². These actions divided society: opposition politicians worsened the epidemic in Poland, whereas the Polish government did everything it could to ensure public health and safety.

¹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/48174224/koronawirus-zgromadzenia-publiczne-szef-mswia-mariusz-kaminski-prawo-do-wyrazania-pogladow-politycznych-jest-swiete-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

² Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/48324331/demonstracja-poparcia-dla-czerwcowego-terminu-wyborow-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

³ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/48305160/wybory-prezydenckie-manifestacja-przed-sejmem-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

⁴ <https://www.tvp.info/50474629/koronawirus-wyprowadzil-tysiace-kobiet-na-ulice-posel-po-atakuje-prezesa-pis-tuz-po-apelu-premiera-o-jednosc-w-obliczu-pandemii-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

⁵ Tvp Info <https://www.tvp.info/50473578/pandemia-premier-morawiecki-apeluje-o-solidarnosc> (6.11.2023)

⁶ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50501845/koronawirus-polska-zakazenia-premier-wierze-ze-przejdziemy-pandemie-zwyciesko-ale-musimy-przestrzegac-obostrzen-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

⁷Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50527225/przemyslaw-czarnek-o-politykach-opozycji-i-protestach-skrajna-nieodpowiedzialnosc-za-nic-maja-bezpieczenstwo-polakow-wieszwiecej> (6.11.2023)

⁸ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50556286/prezydent-to-ze-grupa-ludzi-wychodzi-na-ulice-to-nie-znaczy-ze-nalezy-temu-ulegac> (6.11.2023)

⁹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50698503/koronawirus-poradnik-czy-strajki-mogly-wplynac-przyrost-zakazen-koronawirusem> (6.11.2023)

¹⁰ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50719733/koronawirus-japonia-dobrowolne-ograniczenia-powstrzymaly-w-japonii-sars-cov-2> (6.11.2023).

¹¹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50473578/pandemia-premier-morawiecki-apeluje-o-solidarnosc> (6.11.2023)

¹² Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/52976025/koronawirus-premier-morawiecki-atak-opozycji-na-szefa-rzadu> (7.11.2023)

To sum up, TVP Info employed classic divisions into “us” and “them” and implemented a strategy in which “they” posed a threat to “our” safety. For over two years of the pandemic, an attempt was made to build a political community, including those concerned about public health and following all governmental recommendations without regard for action legality. TVP Info primarily blamed the opposition and participants of anti-government protests for jeopardising the health and lives of Poles. Moreover, a trend emerged during the analysis: someone was always to blame whenever the epidemic worsened, and another wave occurred. It was never those who managed the crisis measures.

Common-sense solutions as a remedy for the community?

In March 2020, the initial “common-sense” solutions appeared aimed at combating the pandemic. One of the first articles on the TVP Info website was entitled “An expert appeals: Let’s not shake hands and keep our distance”¹. A few days later, restrictions were introduced and presented. They limited fundamental rights and freedoms, including those related to public gatherings². These measures were implemented faster and more forcefully than in other countries, justified by public health concerns. Additional restrictions were introduced the following days, including limitations on leaving the house. A sense of community was fostered by appealing to adherence to these guidelines, highlighting that if people did not comply, “we would not be able to save human lives”³.

The subsequent common-sense solutions included the closure of forests⁴. Experts’ statements were then published, pointing out that the shape of the infection curve in Poland depended on citizens and their mobilisation. Simultaneously, it was noted that the Polish government made excellent decisions at the beginning by imposing stricter restrictions than neighbouring countries⁵. The theme of compliance with regulations appeared consistently, with the same argument each time – caring for the health and lives of Poles and the economy, because a higher number of infections equalled more restrictions, leading to the closure of businesses. A sense of community was thus built among those who observed regulations. In contrast, those who opposed these solutions were portrayed as not belonging to this community, automatically acting against the community of Poles.

A significant point concerning common-sense remedies was the presidential election in 2020. The ruling party proposed postal voting, which the opposition was reluctant to agree to, citing difficulties in organising it and the need for changes in the electoral code. Nevertheless, TVP Info published articles featuring statements from crucial politicians of the ruling party, including the President of the Republic of Poland, justifying support for this decision as an element that would not endanger Poles⁶. Furthermore, articles justified postal voting abroad. Various reasons were given for why it would not be possible to vote in person, and there was also mention of the passage of a new law by the Sejm regarding the presidential elections by post in 2020⁷. On the one hand, the arguments were plausible. On the other hand, Poland has an institution of a state of emergency. It was not used despite including the implementation conditions met by the pandemic. Its imposition would have allowed for a legal postponement of the election date. This political decision of non-usage was justified in an equally populist manner by the Minister of Justice, who argued that after introducing such a state, Poland could expose itself to compensation claims from foreign companies. He argued that the primary concern was safety, not financing foreign firms⁸.

¹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47089709/koronawirus-epidemia-ekspert-radzi-by-sie-nie-dotykac-wieszwiecej>. (7.11.2023)

² Tvp Info <https://www.tvp.info/47114910/premier-o-zastrzeniu-walki-z-koronawirusem-wieszwiecej>. (3.11.2023)

³ Panorama Tvp, https://panorama.tvp.pl/47257642/ograniczenia-w-przemieszczeniu?_ga=2.91409368.330922495.1699192296-2044410381.1692377639 (7.11.2023)

⁴ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47266747/warszawa-koronawirus-zakaz-wstepu-do-lasu-kabackiego-jest-interpelacja-wieszwiecej> (7.11.2023)

⁵ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47321306/koronawirus-polska-prof-norbert-maliszewski-o-krzywej-wzrostu-zachorowan-wieszwiecej> (7.11.2023)

⁶Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47423334/koronawirus-prezydent-o-terminie-wyborow-wieszwiecej> (7.11.2023)

⁷Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47566268/koronawirus-a-wybory-glosowanie-korespondencyjne-umozliwi-polonii-powszechny-udzial-wieszwiecej>.(8.11.2023)

⁸ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47573432/koronawirus-wybory-przeprowadzenie-wyborow-prezydenckich-jesienia-moze-narazic-znacznie-wiecej-polakow-wieszwiecej> (8.11.2023)

Another wave of the coronavirus reached Poland around September 2020. It was followed by the introduction of additional restrictions and the tightening of regulations. TVP Info declared zero tolerance for disregarding the DDM (Disinfection, Distance, Masks) rule¹. The increased argumentation for introducing additional restrictions emerged before the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling. New restrictions took effect on October 23, 2020, the day the ruling was announced, and protests began throughout Poland. The Minister of Health was quoted as convincing that they were introduced for the Polish people, and the coming weeks would be crucial for the further course of the pandemic. Hence, the DDM principle was essential and should have been respected². During the following weeks, the previously mentioned articles on solidarity appeared, indicating that the limitation of fundamental rights, such as freedom of assembly, was carried out only for the good of Poles and the Polish economic situation³. When the fourth wave of coronavirus began, new common-sense solutions appeared. Morawiecki stated, "The more people get vaccinated, the less severe the restrictions will be, and eventually, they will disappear completely"⁴. So, the vaccine was seen as an element that could influence restrictions rather than their absence in the future. However, the period between the last two articles is a few months, so errors and a lack of control over the pandemic are visible, as well as the recurring narrative in which two main arguments appeared: the life and health of Poles and the economic situation.

In summary, TVP Info introduced common-sense remedies, ranging from presenting first-hand accounts of celebrities to reassure the public to straightforward justifications for increasingly stringent restrictions. TVP Info featured quick solutions, such as the upcoming vaccine and subsequent vaccination programme, to protect Poles from further restrictions. The arguments in the narrative primarily focused on public health and the future economic condition of the country.

Community benefiting from dramatizing?

Populist politicians in power use dramatization and exaggeration of a crisis as a justification for their actions, mainly when these actions significantly restrict civil rights and freedoms. During the pandemic outbreak in Poland, TVP Info prepared citizens for the worst: "Is it a pandemic already? Recovered individuals get infected again"; "Bolt from the blue. Merkel predicts that the coronavirus will infect up to 70 per cent of Germans"⁵. Such constructed headlines could generate the approval of Poles for restrictions that emerged just a few days later. In the early stages of the pandemic, journalists discussed the potential growth of infections and the dramatic global struggle unfolding⁶. There were also articles stating that "Europe has become the epicentre of the pandemic" emphasising that Poland was one of the first countries to introduce quarantine and movement restrictions⁷. Like previous articles, these could prepare the public for additional restrictions as proportionate and justified precautions. The Minister of Health assured that isolation worked efficiently as protection against the coronavirus and compared his role to that of a commander-in-chief during wartime⁸. Subsequent statements also focused on justifying restrictions. TVP Info intensified the message in the headline, stating, "we have a choice: closure or hundreds of dead"⁹. However, he was referring to limiting social activity to a minimum or tens of thousands of sick individuals. An essential element that could create a field for dramatization was the election crisis and the division between the ruling party, which wanted to conduct postal voting, and the

¹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50202235/koronawirus-epidemia-duzo-zakazen-przypadkow-rzad-wprowadza-nowe-obostrzenia-sprawdz-co-sie-zmienia-nowe-przepisy-maseczki-kary-wieszwiecej> (8.11.2023)

² Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50466637/koronawirus-adam-niedzielski-w-przyszlym-tygodniu-przekonamy-sie-czy-epidemia-zaczyna-spowalniac-wieszwiecej> (8.11.2023)

³ Tvp Info <https://www.tvp.info/50556286/prezydent-to-ze-grupa-ludzi-wychodzi-na-ulice-to-nie-znaczy-ze-nalezy-temu-ulegac> (6.11.2023)

⁴ Tvp info <https://www.tvp.info/57389714/najnowszy-podcast-z-premierem-morawieckim-nt-koronawirusa-i-szczepien-kilka-tygodni-zwiekszonej-mobilizacji-i-obostrzen-to-niezbyt-wysoka-cena-za-zdrowie-i-zycie-polakow> (7.11.2023)

⁵ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/46963045/magdalena-kawalec-segond-to-juz-pandemia-ozdrowiali-zarazaja-sie-ponownie-wieszwiecej>. (9.11.2023)

⁶ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47141395/minister-szumowski-koronawirus-w-polsce-wiadomo-kiedy-przypadnie-czas-najwiekszego-nasilenia-zakazen-w-polsce-wieszwiecej>. (9.11.2023)

⁷ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47143389/who-zakazonych-w-europie-jest-prawie-tyle-samo-co-w-chinach-wieszwiecej>. (9.11.2023)

⁸ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47170879/minister-zdrowia-szumowski-podal-ile-procent-spolaczenstwa-moze-sie-zarazic-koronawirusem-wieszwiecej>. (9.11.2023)

⁹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47201060/koronawirus-lukasz-szumowski-oszacowal-ile-moze-byc-wkrotce-zachorowan-w-polsce-wieszwiecej>. (9.11.2023)

opposition, which strove to postpone the elections. Therefore, articles like “Ziobro: Presidential elections in the fall are the opposition’s madness”¹ and “Andrzej Duda: If we do not elect a president, the country will plunge into chaos”² emerged. The presented situation aimed to convince the audience to support the government’s decisions and, through dramatization, could evoke fear and, consequently, aversion to the opposition. Moreover, journalists legitimised crisis management because, against the backdrop of their articles, the solutions proposed by the ruling party seemed rational.

During another crisis, the one caused by protests related to the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling, protesters were called “death sowers”³. The police spokesperson stated, “It is not the places that infect, but clusters of people”⁴. This was used to justify issuing fines to individuals who decided to participate in demonstrations and the restrictions on gatherings. In subsequent articles, there was talk of “minimising” the effects of demonstrations with possible further restrictions⁵. By depicting the situation in this way, additional restrictions could be justified. In summary, the Polish government’s action pattern involved “observing” and, at the same time, dramatizing the situation so that citizens would not be surprised by subsequent government decisions when the pandemic went beyond its control. Dramatization pertained to the threat posed by the coronavirus and the opposition, justifying the implementation of postal voting and portraying protesters as a risk to the community. It aimed at legitimising actions at a specific moment.

Science for a newly built community?

TVP Info, referring to knowledge, used information on the fringes of falsehood and predicted the future when simplifying the crisis, spectacularising it, and creating divisions. At the beginning of the pandemic, journalists appealed to knowledge, discussing the possibility of 250,000 Britons dying if appropriate measures were not implemented. The article also emphasised statements from specialists that restrictions should have been maintained for 18 months or longer⁶. It used the invocation of specialists to dramatize the crisis and further legitimise additional restrictions imposed by the government.

Throughout the pandemic, the surname of Włodzimierz Gut, a virologist justifying some of the government’s actions, recurred in the articles. Initial comments revolved around coronavirus testing, following criticism from an opposition representative about the government’s lack of test availability for people who wanted to get tested. The virologist commented that such tests were not done “in the kitchen.” Instead, it was a complex process, and testing should have only been done when necessary⁷. The issue was complex, but the virologist provided a straightforward answer to explain the inability to test more people.

The virologist named the call for more tests “health populism” and talked about testing 38 million people every five days. However, the then-presidential candidate did not mention that every resident of Poland must have been tested but that everyone should have had the right to choose and the opportunity to get tested. Subsequent statements concerned the possibility of young people not observing restrictions and potential scenarios for further imposing additional restrictions. Gut presented dark scenarios, such as closing districts or cities, and talked about the worst-case scenario in which everyone got infected, and some died⁸. Simultaneously, the government representatives denied rumours of closing cities. This same virologist also tried to predict the future. In one of the early statements, he assumed that the return of the coronavirus in the

¹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/51430500/mateusz-morawiecki-badzmy-odpowiedzialni-w-swieta-bozego-narodzenia-i-nadchodzacego-sylwestra> (9.11.2023)

² Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47643999/prezydent-andrzej-duda-w-wywiadzie-dla-gazety-polskiej-o-koniecznosci-przeprowadzenia-wyborow-wieszwiecej> (9.11.2023)

³ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47643999/prezydent-andrzej-duda-w-wywiadzie-dla-gazety-polskiej-o-koniecznosci-przeprowadzenia-wyborow-wieszwiecej> (9.11.2023)

⁴ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50503035/koronawirus-policja-to-nie-miejsca-zarazaja-ale-wlasnie-skupiska-ludzi-wieszwiecej> (9.11.2023)

⁵ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50589316/koronawirus-protesty-premier-morawiecki-pracuje-nad-zminimalizowaniem-skutkow-protestow> (8.11.2023)

⁶ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47158803/koronawirus-eksperci-oszacowali-skutki-jakie-moga-spowodowac-dotychczasowe-dzialania-brytyjskiego-rzadu-wieszwiecej> (10.11.2023)

⁷ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47158694/prof-wlodzimierz-gut-testow-na-koronawirusa-nie-robi-sie-w-kuchni-wieszwiecej> (10.11.2023)

⁸ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47087536/dr-wlodzimierz-gut-mlodziez-nie-powinna-przechodzic-na-model-wloski-wieszwiecej> (10.11.2023)

fall was unlikely if it was well extinguished while also recommending staying at home and isolation¹. Before the 2020 presidential elections, TVP Info published expert opinions stating that postal voting was safe, did not increase the risk of infections, and that transmitting the coronavirus by mail posed minimal risk². These opinions were used to justify holding the elections via postal voting and to justify conducting presidential elections without implementing a state of emergency.

During protests the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling, experts and virologists, mainly Gut, condemned protesters. For instance, in the article "Virologist: Protesters on the streets act extremely recklessly," journalists drew comparisons of these protests to the Italian scenario. They suggested that participants would experience social ostracism, eventually leading them to comply with the imposed regulations³. It aimed to show the negative consequences of protest and spark fear. Journalists relying on references to science and expert opinions strengthened divisions and discouraged protests. The appeal to expert knowledge also included an element of forecasting. Gut expressed an opinion on how many infections could occur in Poland and assessed the pandemic-fighting strategy as pre-emptive moves necessary in case of an increase⁴. The same expert, a few days and a few weeks later, commented on the effectiveness of these restrictions, their initial effects, and predictions about future infection declines⁵. This was meant to justify and simplify the understanding of restrictions. However, shortly after that, new restrictions were introduced, and when Gut was asked about them, he expressed support, justifying it by stating, "What was allowed has been abused"⁶. Thus, a trend of supporting government actions and those who unquestionably complied with bans and condemning those who did not comply was evident. Gut uncritically embraced the COVID-19-fighting strategy employed by the ruling party, but citizens were always blamed for the increase in infections.

Gut also sought answers to questions about the rise in infections when the COVID-19 vaccine was already available. He noticed that the development of the pandemic would depend on people, particularly pointing out that those who did not believe in the coronavirus were harmful. According to him, too few people were vaccinated to impact the virus spread rate⁷. Expert knowledge served to simplify an explanation of increases in infections. Returning to the supportive opinions of Gut before the fourth wave of infections, he indicated that it would be a "falka" (slight wave) (suggesting a less severe wave) rather than a "fala" (wave). Furthermore, a month earlier, he supported easing restrictions⁸. However, three months later, in an interview with another virologist, it can be read that it is "high time for a local lockdown." In this article, the virologist justified the introduction of further restrictions and predicted a bleak scenario for the future of Poland during the pandemic⁹. It is noticeable how experts' statements were adjusted to the steps taken by the Polish government at a given time. This made it easier to convince and justify the imposed restrictions to the TVP Info audience.

In summary, the appeal to science and expert knowledge structured social divisions. One individual, Gut, often played the role of a significant expert. Other experts also appeared, albeit less frequently. His opinions aligned with the strategy pursued by the government, justifying the imposed restrictions. Some of the

¹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47411502/koronawirus-w-polsce-i-europie-prof-gut-bez-ogrodek-o-pomyslach-na-lekarstwa> (10.11.2023)

² Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47723706/koronawirus-wybory-korespondencyjne-who-niskie-ryzyko-zakazenia-ekspert-o-transmisji-wirusa-przez-listy-wieszwiecej> (10.11.2023)

³ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50480373/wirusolog-protestujacy-na-polskich-ulicach-dzialaja-niezwykle-ryzykownie-wieszwiecej> (10.11.2023)

⁴ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/50647549/pandemia-koronawirusa-polska-wirusolog-prof-wlodzimierz-gut-troche-zmniejszyliśmy-nasza-aktywnosc-spoleczna-i-zaczeliśmy-nosic-maski> (10.11.2023)

⁵ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/47573432/koronawirus-wybory-przeprowadzenie-wyborow-prezydenckich-jesienia-moze-narazic-znacznie-wiecej-polakow-wieszwiecej> (8.11.2023)

⁶ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/51376142/koronawirus-prof-wlodzimierz-gut-o-narodowej-kwarantannie-utrzymanie-poluzowania-grozi-nam-po-prostu-kleska>. (10.11.2023)

⁷ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/52775749/koronawirus-gut-wzrost-zachorowan-to-efekt-braku-odpowiedzialnosci-mlodszych-rocznikow> (10.11.2023)

⁸ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/54648799/prof-gut-nie-przewiduje-kolejnej-duzej-fali-wzrostu-zachorowan-na-covid19>. (10.11.2023)

⁹ Tvp Info, <https://www.tvp.info/56810744/koronawirus-w-polsce-wirusolog-najwyzszy-czas-na-lokalny-lockdown> (10.11.2023)

predictions were incorrect, leading readers astray. References to external expert opinions were also used to justify postal voting and simplify the issue. They allowed journalists to shift responsibility for the increase in infections onto “others” who were not part of the community following the government’s directives without regard for legality.

Discussion and conclusion

TVP Info divided society and sought to depict the government’s opponents as a threat. The latter included the opposition, entrepreneurs, pandemic sceptics, and those participating in protests the Constitutional Tribunal’s ruling. At the same time, while dividing society, emphasis was placed on “solidarity,” “acting together,” and a new dimension of patriotism. Those who fully accepted and did not question the government’s actions during the pandemic could belong to this community.

While simplifying the pandemic, the division and community-building also relied on the same scheme, which adhered to the principle of “those who are not with us are against us.” There was an effort to argue for public health by closing places like forests. Then, there were discussions about increased controls enforcing existing regulations without implementing a state of emergency, which would have fully empowered the government to make such decisions. Nevertheless, the most prominent example of a common-sense solution was the ruling party’s idea of conducting postal voting due to concerns for public health. This argument also surfaced during attempts to suppress the anti-government protests. Any restrictions on civil rights and freedoms were justified either by the above or concerns about the future state of the economy.

Simplifications also emerged regarding the upcoming vaccine, which was seen as a remedy for all the restrictions necessary during the pandemic to protect the health and lives of the community members. However, when the vaccine arrived and the coronavirus continued to threaten Poles, a simplified narrative emerged that the more people get vaccinated, the fewer restrictions would affect the community.

Dramatizing the crisis was evident from the very beginning. It was visible in headlines designed to capture the reader’s attention. However, this did not occur in a single form, as problems related to the coronavirus and politicians from the ruling party, the opposition, and participants in anti-government protests were exaggerated. Once again, a narrative emerged suggesting that those who did not adhere to restrictions belonged to the “dangerous” group. Medical populism used to convey this information was vivid, intense, emotionally charged, and capable of influencing the audience. It aimed to prepare citizens for the possibility of further restrictions being imposed.

Invoking science was the final element of building community and justifying the government’s right to rule. In most articles on the TVP Info website, the expert was consistently one person. Gut’s opinions supported the government’s actions, whether they involved tightening or loosening restrictions in Poland. He discussed the epidemiological future of Poland and often unsuccessfully tried to predict the situation. Besides, TVP Info cited external experts and their expertise on the safety of conducting elections in Poland. These opinions aligned with the government’s narrative. Expert knowledge applied to dividing society into “us” and “them,” simultaneously not only building a community but portraying “them” as a threat. Experts spoke on the increase in infections shortly after anti-government protests or sought responsibility for the rise in infections due to the low number of vaccinated individuals. However, it was also used as an element of dramatisation through strong, suggestive narratives used in headlines regarding new variants of the coronavirus.

All these dimensions of medical populism were used to build a political community and create a division into “us” – the community and “them” threatening the community. Anyone who unquestioningly supported the actions taken by the government and disregarded the legality of the introduced regulations could be included in the community because, at that moment, public concern (public health and the future of the economy) was the most important. The analysis reveals the strategic deployment of dramatization, common-sense solutions, expertise invocation, and the dichotomy of “us” versus “them.” It underscores the media’s role in shaping public perception and consolidating support for the government’s pandemic response.

This article is valuable for practitioners in the fields of media studies, political communication, and public policy, as it highlights the powerful role the media can play in shaping public perception during times of crisis. By examining how TVP Info employed populist rhetoric to influence public opinion and justify government actions, the article provides key insights into how media narratives can be strategically used to divide society, consolidate support, and legitimise political decisions. For policymakers, the findings critically reflect on the potential consequences of using media to manipulate public sentiment and the ethical

implications of such practices. For media professionals, the analysis underscores the responsibility of journalists and media outlets to ensure balanced and impartial reporting, especially regarding issues that directly affect the protection of public health and civil rights. Overall, the article serves as a reminder of the importance of media literacy, critical thinking, and transparency in political communication, which are essential for maintaining democratic processes and protecting public trust.

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