# Populist Crisis Communication during the early Covid Pandemic in Slovakia

By

Veronika Budaiová

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Political Science

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts/Sciences

Supervisor: Róbert Sata

Vienna, Austria

2022

# Abstract

Political leaders frame their responses to the actual crisis in different ways. Even though the Covid-19 crisis caught many leaders unprepared, they needed to adapt their communication style to respond to the new reality. This thesis focuses on the crisis communication of populist leaders. In particular, how the populists in power presented the crisis when unpopular regulations needed to be adopted while maintaining the popular support of 'the people'. Qualitative content analysis is used to analyse different communication patterns while following the discourse of former Slovak PM, Igor Matovič, during press conferences on the issue of Covid-19 from March 2020 to April 2021. The main finding of the research shows that when unpopular decisions were adopted, the populist leader emphasised the necessity and diverted attention towards experts who recommended the regulations. Moreover, the partisan division between 'the people' and 'the elite' / 'others' strengthened when the situation worsened and, at the same time, the latter group expanded including anyone who disagreed or did not follow the regulations. The study contributes to the larger discussion on populist discourse in time of crisis.

# Acknowledgements

I cannot begin to express my thanks to my supervisor Róbert Sata, who guided my steps throughout the whole process and inspired me to finish this project. I also want to thank Robin Bellers from *Center for Academic Writing* for consulting every version of the thesis with me. Finally, I am grateful to my family and friends who were always supporting me.

# Table of Contents

CEU eTD Collection

# List of Figures

# List of Tables

# Introduction

The response of political leaders at the beginning of the Covid pandemic showed the inability of many leaders to deal with a sudden disruption of the status quo. It needs to be acknowledged that political leaders, as well as experts (epidemiologists, doctors), did not have the necessary information and had to adopt policies in a very short period. At a time of uncertainty, the interpretation of the situation for the public carries significant importance. This interpretation can vary considering how the nature of the crisis is perceived or the amount of available information or data. Crayne and Medeiros (2020, 1) argue that the crisis is not influenced by socio-political differences among countries, but is affected by the ability of political leaders to respond. Nevertheless, the influence of the socio-political differences needs to be recognized as a factor altering the overall development of the crisis. On the other hand, Crayne and Medeiros convincingly argue that the response and the adopted policies depend on the decisions of political leaders as well as the decision of how to present the crisis to the public. Therefore, the 'strategy of response' depends on the leaders. Political leaders respond to every major or new situation based on various factors such as values, ideology, or available resources (Coman et al., 2021; Hier, 2021; Watkins and Clevenger, 2021).

Populist leaders are in a special category when it comes to communication as they claim to "speak for 'the people'" while being *a part of* 'the people' (Mudde, 2004).Populism in this thesis is understood as a political strategy with a distinct communication style. It can be assumed that the patterns of response to a specific crisis situation would differ considering their populist discourse. As Wodak (2019b, 31) claims, populist leaders self-represent "as a part of 'the people', they have the same problems, visit the same bars, and speak the same

1

language". The strategy of populist leaders is to directly represent 'the people' and try to appeal to 'the people'. This often involves a shift in the use of political language to the informal language of the "ordinary man".

Populist discourse diverges from usual patterns of political communication and brings informal language to a formal institution. The populist narrative itself can have negative consequences on political communication and challenge the formal norms/rules of political communication. Crisis communication in itself requires new response patterns from leaders which can depend on several factors, from their ideology to the amount of power they hold (Crayne and Medeiros, 2020). Patterns of crisis communication for populist leaders are distinct in the sense that populist leaders depend on support from the public, concretely, the group they frame as 'the people'.

The main focus of this thesis is on the leaders who claim to represent 'the people' and how they approach the presentation of the crisis when unpopular regulations need to be adopted while maintaining the popular support of 'the people'. I claim populist leaders follow specific strategies in crisis communication. The two main hypotheses are formulated based on these claims.

H1: In the crisis communication of populist leaders, the narrative of making decisions for 'the people' is emphasised while the populist leaders present decisions taken as the demand of 'the people'.

H2: Populist leaders shift the attention from themselves to others when unpopular regulations need to be adopted, thus shifting the blame to others.

There is an emerging literature on pandemic crisis communication. Some studies focus on the leaders' narratives of the initial response to the pandemic (Boin et al., 2020; Crayne and Medeiros, 2020), and others on the narrative strategies themselves (Martikainen and Sakki, 2021; Wodak, 2021a). Recent literature focuses on the development of the narrative during the pandemic of the populist leader, Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil (Burni and Tamaki, 2021), patterns of US response during Covid (Clevenger and Watkins, 2021), the narrative of a crisis in Canada with an emphasis on the moral dimension (Hier, 2021), or the comparison of the crisis communication of leaders in different countries (Lilleker et al., 2021). The focus of this study is on the development of the narrative over time with an emphasis on the shift in the frames most used by the populist leader. The thesis contributes to the literature on crisis communication and populist discourse and tests whether patterns of crisis narrative of populist leaders, such as Moffitt's six steps: identify a failure, elevate the crisis level, frame 'the people', use media to propagate performance, present simple solutions and strong leadership, and continue to propagate the sense of crisis (2015), are applicable to the case.

To analyse the development of the narrative of the crisis communication by a populist leader, Slovakia is taken as a case study. During the pandemic, Igor Matovič of the populist party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLANO)[1] was acting PM until he was forced to step down after public pressure in April 2021 for mishandling the pandemic, which led to the coalition crisis. Matovič and his party were elected at the beginning of the pandemic in February and their narrative was consequentially built around the topic of the pandemic even though the public voted for the party on the issue of fighting corruption. Matovič identifies himself as an ordinary person and OLANO is recognized as a centrist populist party by the

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[1] Hnutie OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti (OĽANO), NOVA, Kresťanská únia (KÚ), ZMENA ZDOLA founded in 2011 by Matovič.

database PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2019). This was the first time Matovič was in the coalition and it was debatable how he would change his behaviour as the political leader of his country. To analyse his approach to crisis communication, press conferences from March 2020 to April 2021 during his entire mandate as PM are used for data collection.

The press conference is a formal act that needs to follow established rules and norms that can be divided into two parts, the statement and the answers to journalists' questions and comments. Therefore, the change in narrative from the scripted statement to the off the cuff comments is easily observed during press conferences and the use of informal speech is more noticeable. The first part of the press conference, the statement, is used to provide context to the theme of the conference. The second part of the press conference, the interview, is used as the main data source for the analysis.

The main finding of the thesis is that during the development of the crisis, the shifts in the narrative are determined by public support and the pandemic situation in Slovakia. Therefore, with more negative development (increase in or public disapproval of the government, rising number of those who tested positive for Covid or deaths caused by Covid) the number of scapegoats increases and the division between those who are responsible and those who are irresponsible deepens, while the second category broadens. The self-representation of Matovič himself is that of protector of the people, thus putting himself into the position of a saviour while presenting simplistic solutions in the name of 'the people'. However, when these "solutions" fail, the attention shifts to scapegoats responsible for the failure.

The thesis is divided into four main sections. The first section introduces existing literature on the concepts of populism, crisis communication and political communication. The second

section gives background information on the case - Slovakia. The third section expands on the

used methodology and the framework. The last section presents the analysis that focuses on

the changes in the narrative in detail and in what forms the established frames were used..

# Chapter 1. Populism, Political Communication and Crisis Communication

The aim of this chapter is to set the thesis' main framework within the literature on populism, political communication, and crisis communication. Populism is an ambiguous term without a clear definition, therefore, it is necessary to identify what is the understanding of populism in the thesis. Populism has a specific style of communication and rhetoric that brings informal language to the formal sphere. The informal style of language in the public sphere can normalize new aspects of speech. This is true also for the time of crisis when leaders need to react to a new reality. Every leader decides on the strategy that fits their already established discourse from the process of sense-making in the new situation to the justification of their actions while unpopular decisions need to be made. In this chapter, I explain the processes, patterns and strategies populist leaders adopt in crisis communication. Moreover, each sub-chapter is the basis for a set of codes used to capture the political narrative that is key for the analysis, therefore, the logic behind a selection of specific coding categories is included (a preliminary list of coding categories is summarized in Appendix 1).

## 1.1 Populism

The definition of populism can differ depending on the understanding of the nature of the concept. Kriesi sums up some of the most prominent approaches to populism in four categories: populism as an ideology, as a political strategy, as a project of political renewal, and as a political communication strategy (2018, 6). Not all of the categories have the same relevance in the literature and there are other conceptualizations of populism (e.g., populism as a socio-cultural and performative approach, symptom, regime). The most acknowledged

definition of populism comes from Mudde and refers to a thin-centred ideology where the core concept is 'the people' as an opposition to the enemy, 'the elite', while populist leaders represent the general will of 'the people'. Populism as a thin-centred ideology can be combined with other ideologies like communism or nationalism (2004, 544). Populism often polarizes society by adopting the Manichean outlook which divides society into 'the good' and 'the bad'. 'The people' are presented as pure. In contrast, 'the elite' are the corrupt ones who are threatening 'our' way of life. This can refer to a number of groups such as political elites, media, state, intellectuals, or economic powers (Burni and Tamaki, 2021). The division depends on who 'the people' are in a particular context for a specific political party or movement, who 'the elite' are, and what or who is recognized as a threat.

Weyland's (2001) definition of populism as a political strategy is also popular in the literature He sees populism as a political-strategic approach where populist parties and movements are associated with the leaders. His definition is built around personalistic leadership where populist leaders are strong men who embody 'the people'. The leaders gain support through direct contact and try to win a large number of voters. Populism as a project of political renewal is most clearly explained by Urbinati (2014) as both an organic polarizing ideology and a strong leader who mobilizes the masses. Both are elements that lead to a project of political renewal that will bring democracy to its natural roots (in Kriesi, 2018).

Populism understood as a political communication strategy is a common conceptualization in the literature. In this approach, the element of ideology remains but the practices of communication are mostly recognized as a set of beliefs expressed by discursive patterns to establish the Manichean outlook (Kriesi, 2018). Hawkins and Kaltwasser understand populism as an ideational approach that defines populism as a set of ideas with reference to a

cosmic struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite' (2017, 533). Similarly, Brubaker (2017) defines populism as 'a discursive and stylistic repertoire' with a focus on the common trades of all populist parties and movements in their discourses and rhetoric (in Wodak, 2019b, 25). Wodak herself defines four main dimensions of populism with a focus on right-wing parties as nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, authoritarianism in the sense of a charismatic leader/a saviour, and conservativism or historical revisionism (2019b, 26).

The definition of populism used in this analysis is a combination of populism as a political strategy together with a discursive approach. Thus, populism is recognized as a strategy with common discursive patterns and rhetoric used to appeal to 'the people' in contrast to 'the elite' or to 'others' through establishing a Manichean outlook while emphasising the right of 'the people' to rule.

One of the strategies to establish a threat is through fear which is a strong emotion easily invoked by referring to something unknown. Wodak claims that populist leaders construct fear through scapegoats that are "blamed for threatening or damaging our societies" (2015, 1). These scapegoats usually belong to a minority, depending on the context, the minorities can be ethnic, religious, political, or sexual (Wodak, 2015). While scapegoats are blamed, populist leaders need to establish their legitimacy and show their capability to deal better with the situation than 'others'. Based on Wodak's perspective, the patterns of the language of legitimation can be divided into four categories: authorization (referring to authority), moral evaluation (referring to value systems), rationalization (referring to knowledge, claims, or common wisdom), and mythopoesis (achieved by narratives through story-telling) (2015, 6). These patterns can be used by leaders to make sense of the situation while keeping popular support.

Scapegoating is a common strategy of blame-shifting. Hanson argues that in order to respond to blame, leaders can adopt two tactics of manipulation. The first is directed towards the perception of the loss when the reason for blame is belittled. The second changes the agency where the harm could have been done unintentionally, unknowingly, or done by someone else. Scapegoating in this sense refers to artificially created groups or positions blamed for trouble or for causing potential failure or discontent (Hanson, 2015, 4). They are the shortcuts in argumentation. Populist leaders use the tactic of blaming someone else for why the problem happened and who caused it. The leaders in power, in general, can have difficulties adopting a scapegoating strategy in a time of crisis since they are directly responsible for the decision making and the adoption of countermeasures. Therefore, some leaders, especially populists who build their narrative around the idea of blaming others, can use scapegoating more aggressively and blame 'the elites' and 'others' for the threat directly or for the lack of resources.

After becoming a part of the coalition or gaining real power, populists must learn new roles since the role of critics is not enough. The need for effective leadership is even more pressing during a time of crisis. Populist leaders argue in the abstract form referring to the cosmic struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite' (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017) or 'heartland', which is the return to the ideal land (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" is an example of the 'heartland', where Trump refers to the past when America was in its ideal state. The proposed discourse appeals to a group of voters in the abstract form.

The concept of 'heartland' is, in the context of the Covid crisis, the pre-pandemic state. It can be expected that all the patterns are reinforced in the populist discourse during the time of the crisis. Moreover, populist leaders use strategies to appeal to 'the people' by using the notion of a threat while portraying themselves as a part of 'the people' who are chosen by 'the people' to represent them. Therefore, the leaders gain legitimacy directly from 'the people'. In other words, they are the ones 'the people' have chosen on their behalf because populists can best represent their will. In this sense, populist leaders can be perceived in a religious sense as Messiahs, who would represent the true people and know what people want (Zúquete, 2017).

Populist leaders adapt their communication strategy depending on the context. Moffitt (2015) offers six steps of how populist leaders frame or present the crisis or idea of the crisis to strengthen the division between 'the people' and 'the elites' who are blamed for the crisis. The first step is to identify a failure that brings the element of urgency. Failure is elevated to the level of crisis by connecting it to a salient issue in society. The second step is to elevate the crisis level by placing it in a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension. This step presents the connection of the failure within a larger framework and is symptomatic. The third step is to frame "the people against those responsible for the crisis. 'The people' are portrayed as the most affected by the crisis while populist leaders shift the responsibility to someone else who is to blame. The fourth step is to use media to propagate performance, which keeps the presence of crisis salient. The fifth step is to present simple solutions and strong leadership while the populist leaders seem to have the right and unique solution to the crisis. The last step is to continue to propagate the sense of crisis so that the notion of crisis is still present in society. This can be done by switching the sense of crisis or expanding the size of the emergency, building a larger scheme of crisis.

## 1.2 Political communication

All the distinct aspects of populist communication strategies, simplifying problems within a Manichean outlook, scapegoating as a blame-shifting strategy, and referring to the idealized past, can have a negative impact on political communication as a whole. Political communication differs from ordinary communication in its form and purpose. The main goal of political communication is not simply to inform but also to persuade. Therefore, the danger of populist speech lies in its form and the attempts to use a language and style close to 'the people'. The strategy used by the populist leaders is in line with the concept to represent 'the people' while the populist leaders are part of this group thus the patterns of communication are based on the strategy of being part of the ordinary people. The use of ordinary language in political discourse can harm the culture of political communication thus turning the official type of speech into an informal one.

According to Chilton, the strategic function of the speech can be summarized into three categories: coercion, legitimisation and delegitimisation, representation and misrepresentation (2004). These three strategies are used in political communication as tools of language to influence public discourse. The use of coercion strategy depends on the resources and power of the leaders. Coercion also refers to which topics are prioritized in conversations and which view can be accepted. Chilton's second strategy of legitimisation and delegitimisation refers to the representation of the voters. The strategy is common in the populist narrative of representing the general will of 'the people' (Mudde, 2004). Delegitimisation is understood by Chilton as the others or the opposition who are established through the language of blaming, accusing, or insulting. The last strategy of representation and misrepresentation refers to different attributes of speech, concretely, secrecy, qualitative misrepresentation, and

11

euphemisms. Qualitative misrepresentation is described by Chilton as one of the most extreme types which includes omission, verbal evasion, and denial. Some of these strategies are not visible to the public and can be abused and some are not accepted by the general public in a democratic regime.

Populist leaders define the standards of political culture and prioritize language of extreme polarization. Wodak et al. argue that the populist discourse contains anti-political elements breaking taboos (2019a). The taboos can be related to the specific context or specific type of speech. Ignoring the culture of political communication and bringing the element of the language of ordinary people can lead to the normalization of such behaviour. One of the predefined forms of political communication is political press conferences where concrete norms and rules need to be followed. According to Wodak et al., press conferences are "distinctly formalised frontstage activity" (2021b). During press conferences, political actors need to use a formal type of language to address a concrete issue. The language needs to be clear and informative during the statement, which is usually written or edited by a third party and during the interview part, where the political actors are answering questions from journalists. Wodak et al. in their analysis of "shameless normalization of impoliteness" focus on the analysis of press conferences of Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi. Impoliteness in their understanding refers to a negative attitude towards specific behaviours in a specific context (2021b, 370).

The impolite situation thus occurs when there is a conflict between the expectations (the norm) and reality. Shameless normalisation is connected to the rise of populist leaders to power and the repetition of unconventional, populist, discourse in the mainstream media. Wodak et al. (2021b) characterize the concept as crossing the boundaries of what can be said

which leads to an 'anything goes' approach. The language is used as a remark or commentary, not as an argument. The criticism towards the leader is dismissed and ignored. The boundaries between formal and informal language are blurred. Strategies adopted by populist leaders and un-political communication in the political sphere can be appealing to some audiences in usual circumstances. However, while dealing with a pressing crisis situation, public expectation shifts toward competent leaders who can adopt policies to help the situation (Crayne and Medeiros, 2020).

## 1.3 Crisis communication

The understanding of the term 'crisis' can differ either depending on the nature of the crisis (health or political) or on the values and political inclination of the leaders. De Rycker and Mohd Don (2013, 8) offer an extensive list of definitions of crisis. In their work, the meaning of the crisis can be divided based on the level of change and the nature of the change. The level of change refers to either individual, institutional, or state levels. The nature of change can refer to the status quo, the values of the polity, the polity itself, or the official interpretation of history. Therefore, the understanding of the crisis itself can be based on several factors. The Covid pandemic in this context is interpreted as a crisis on both individual and institutional levels when political leaders were not able to timely respond to a new challenge due to factors such as the poor health system. The pandemic caused changes in the status quo in a majority of the countries. The norm shifted to the acceptance of new regulations (wearing face masks or lockdowns). A threat of a new "wave" of the spread of the virus is still present in societies and the saviour is represented as vaccination.

Political leaders were forced to interpret the Covid situation to the public and offer a solution. Boin et al. (2020, 190) list four major problems which policy-makers had to take into

13

consideration when the pandemic started: sense-making (understanding a crisis), making critical decisions and solving emerging problems, crisis communication, and terminating a crisis through 'exit strategies'. Sense-making in their context is understood only as a part of the process. On the other hand, Crayne and Medeiros present their understanding of the concept of sense-making as "the process by which individuals interpret cues within a changing environment and use that interpretation to explain what has occurred and to promote future actions" (2020, 2). However, how can a certain situation be explained when political leaders do not have sufficient information about the crisis?

The initial responses and initial process of sense-making, presented by Crayne and Medeiros (2020), can be divided into three main categories based on the type of leader. The first type is a charismatic leader, who focuses on positive emotions and the future. The goal is to motivate or inspire people by imposing hope. The second type is an ideological leader, who bases their response on already established values and traditions in order to appeal to their followers. Return to glory or the past is the main strategy while the present situation is described using negative emotions. The last type in their framework is the pragmatic leader, who is characterized as looking for the rational/problem-focused perspective of the situation. This approach is not offering one definite solution or perspective, rather the strategy is to adapt to the new situation and motivate through rational argumentation and persuasion. The last approach is favoured by the authors but can be adopted only by a certain type of leader.

The patterns of crisis communication used can be derived from the three types of leaders. The definition of crisis communication used in the study is based on Wodak (2021a, 4), who describes the concept as a discourse adopted by leaders to persuade people to follow restrictive measures and to reduce fears and uncertainties. The legitimacy is often derived

14

from appealing to authority and quasi-rational arguments (Wodak 2021a, 1). Wodak develops four frames of crisis communication based on findings from an analysis of governmental discourses during the global lockdown from March 2020 to June 2020 in five countries: sequentially Austria, Germany, Sweden, France and Hungary. Wodak's frames are: religious, dialogic, emphasising trust, and leading a war. Each frame is characteristic of employing a specific type of language as a reaction to a new situation. The assumption adopted in Wodak's study is that the patterns of response are based on leaders' political categorization and value system, rather than the cultural traditions of the country.

Let us now discuss on what basis the frames are adopted by leaders. Wodak's first frame is 'religious' adopted in Austria, which emphasizes the narrative of the safety of the whole nation while referring to the nation as a family. The leader is portrayed as a quasi-Messiah. The message of resurrection is reinforced with a promise of returning to normal after suffering. The presence of death is repeated in discourse as an unknown threat and we need to suffer now for a better future while using 'victory of life over death'. This approach is similar to Crayne and Medeiros' charismatic leaders, who use positive language with a vision for the future.

Wodak's second frame is 'dialogic', adopted in Germany where the emphasis is on the notion that 'we are dealing with the crisis together' placing citizens and leaders at the same level. Leaders do not command, but rather advise or encourage people to commit to a certain behaviour. The leaders' role is to inform citizens and the relationship is based on rational dialogue. Another characteristic is the message of empathy as "facing the difficult time together" or "we can save elderly people" while appealing to the communal spirit (2021, 13). In Crayne and Medeiros' framework, this approach is in the category of pragmatic leaders.

Wodak's third frame is 'emphasising trust', adopted in Sweden where the narrative was that people are responsible for themselves and their actions. Everyone is equally responsible for the situation and there is no hierarchical leadership. Therefore, people cannot be ordered rather they can be politely advised. The narrative of avoiding 'regulated freedom' was present in society. While the information was available on official websites, it was the choice of every individual in what course of action they would apply. In this case, the leaders are not directly present.

Wodak's fourth frame is of 'leading the war' frame adopted in France and Hungary, which emphasises the emergency of the situation and the need to follow the regulations. She shows that while both leaders, Macron and Orbán, adopted the same narrative, the patterns differ in the overall nature of the message. Macron in his narrative claims that the virus is a threat and to win the war against the threat, France needs to work together and follow all regulations imposed while appealing to national unity. However, the narrative is still to a large extent using positive language and the leader tries to motivate people (2021a). In Crayne and Medeiros' framework, Macron is leaning more towards a charismatic leader than an ideological one.

Orbán employed a different strategy in line with his populist leadership. In order to win against the virus, the invisible enemy, the fight needs to start immediately to protect people. The feeling of fear was present in the narrative together with urgency to act. People are not trusted to follow the rules, therefore the leader and the state need to impose strict regulations. In contrast, in Crayne and Medeiros' framework, Orbán is an ideological leader. Populist leaders can be in a general sense categorized as 'ideological leaders' in this framework while

16

defining populism in terms of ideology and discourse. The discourse typical for ideological leaders is that of the war based on Wodak's frames of response to the Covid crisis. The assumption is that the narrative of the threat shifts to the ('invisible enemy') virus itself. The patterns of blame-shifting are presented from the Manichean outlook and according to a pre-established 'enemy'.

The new studies of responses to the Covid crisis show the different approaches and strategies of political leaders to address the new situation. These studies show that some countries were more prepared and able to communicate with the public more efficiently than others. The eagerness of people to be informed resulted in the higher attention on the decisions of politicians and the type of communication that showed the inability of leaders to deal with new situations. The reasons for failed communication were the lack of consistency together with contradicting messages as it was in the case of the US (Callahan, 2021). In Brazil, the main problems were internal disagreement and a lack of coordination between ministries and the President (Joathan, Medrado and Madeiros, 2021). Bolsonaro as well as Trump often trivialised the threat of the pandemic at the early stages thus downplaying the threat (Burni and Tamaki, 2021; Joathan, Medrado and Madeiros, 2021). On the other hand, the threat in the Czech Republic was voiced from the beginning and the government tried to appear well equipped to deal with the pandemic. The style of communication was more reactive than proactive which led to the problem with the predictability of further actions (Eibl and Gregor, 2021). The role of experts in crisis communication is also necessary to address. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, politicians represented science and government while in other countries (e.g. France, Germany, Norway), experts stood alongside politicians (Lilleker et al., 2021).

17

The style of giving the information differed among countries together with the type of message they wanted to convey. Lilleker et al. (2021) point out that political leaders often decided on a personalized style of communication. Trump in the US had a strong social media presence with sometimes dangerous suggestions on how to treat Covid-19 (Callahan, 2021). Bolsonaro in Brazil and Orbán in Hungary posted the new information on Facebook. Orbán had a strong presence on Facebook, where new posts showed every day together with video messages which resulted in the perception that Orbán himself is the head of crisis management in Hungary.

Press conferences became a common tool through which leaders could share new information with the public. National leaders, ministers, and experts often shared the stage, however, the centre of the stage was dedicated to one person (Lilleker et al., 2021), who was in the majority of cases either the president of the country or the PM. Lilleker et al. (2021) list frames that appeared in the majority of countries they analysed, which are building unity, a feeling of national struggle, the threat from outside, and doing it for us. The goal of political leaders was to incentivize the sense of 'we-ness', as Lilleker et al. name the phenomenon, and appeal to collective responsibility. Every case differs and political leaders choose the style of communication that suits best their personality.

## 1.4 Measuring the narrative

For the purpose of the study, substantive coding categories need to be established to evaluate and measure the narrative. The main source of the initial list used in the analysis is based on existing literature on populism, blame-shifting, and crisis communication. Populist leaders often rely on informal language and include several elements. Therefore, each coding category has a set of rules regarding what type of statement can be included and vice versa.

Additional data collected from the press conferences assess the overall behaviour of the populist leader. The reason relates to the performative part of the discourse, concretely, how the populist leader wanted to be perceived.

Based on the literature on populism discussed above, the coding categories can be divided into four main groups: the basic characteristics, dimensions of populism, and legitimization strategies. The first group includes the basic characteristics of populism acknowledged in the study of populism ('the people', 'the elites', and the Manichean outlook) and the basic communication aspects (being part of 'the people', presenting the general will of 'the people', Impoliteness). The purpose is to identify the division in the society and how the populist leaders frame themselves in relation to 'the people'.

The second group is based on Wodak's (2019b) characteristics of populism (nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, authoritarianism, and conservativism or historical revisionism) with a specific focus on right-wing parties. The characteristics are included in Wodak's study of populism from the aspect of discourse and rhetoric which is also the subject of this thesis. The third category covers the populist legitimization strategies thus on what discourses basis do populist leaders legitimize their decision deriving from Wodak's (2015) categorization (authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis). This category helps to identify, aspects on which populist leaders rely, whether they rely on authorities of some sort or on common sense. The last category derives from Hanson's definition of tactics of manipulation (scapegoating and establishing the 'threat'). The purpose of the category is to identify who is blamed and on what basis. All these coding categories relate to and cover the different aspects of populism and populist discourse.

19

The cases discussed above show different approaches to crisis communication. To analyse the development and changes in the style of crisis communication, the coding categories used for assessment are based on the discussed literature, concretely, frames identified by Wodak (2021a) in her analysis. All four frames ('Leading a war', Religious, Dialogic, 'Emphasising trust') are included in the analysis even though only the first 'Leading a war' frame was adopted by a populist leader. The reason is to control for other tactics of crisis communication style.

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# Chapter 2. Setting the Ground

The case of Slovakia is used in this study to analyse the different patterns of populist crisis communication. Concretely, Matovič's press conferences related to the Covid crisis during his time as Prime Minister of Slovakia from March 2020 until April 2021. The aim of the chapter is to offer context information and the reasons why Matovič was selected as the focus of the analysis. Matovič has a specific style of communication and eccentric behaviour that is described below.

The 2020 parliamentary election in Slovakia was characterised by the demand of the public for a change in the style of governing. OLANO, in this context, used its anti-corruption agenda and populist rhetoric to win the election. Nevertheless, the Covid crisis began to be a salient issue in March 2020 in Slovakia when the number of those who tested positively started rising (korona.gov.sk, 2021a). The development of the crisis presupposed that the new government, with OLANO as a leading party in the coalition with the highest percentage of votes, would primarily deal with the issue and crisis management instead of fighting corruption.

Matovič's party, currently named *Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLANO), NOVA, Christian union (KU), Change from below* but commonly referred to as Ordinary People and Independent Personalities or with the abbreviation OLANO, was established in 2011 as a political movement of various political personalities without a concrete ideology; in the party are representatives of liberal as well as conservative ideals. OLANO had been part of the opposition after the election in 2012 while gaining 8.55% (SME, 2016) and in 2016 while gaining 11.02% (SME, 2016). The parliamentary election in 2020 meant a significant

success for OLANO with 25.8% of the popular vote. The shift reflected the demand of society

to fight against corruption after the murder of Jan Kuciak and his fiancée,[2] which triggered

nationwide protests in Slovakia (Mortkowitz, 2020). The main points in OLANO's agenda

since its creation are anti-corruption, public transparency, and judiciary reform (EuroNews,

2020).

OLANO is a populist party with a leader who was known for eccentric behaviour. According

to Křtínová (2013), OLANO matches the aspects of a populist party in the Manichean

division of society to ordinary people and the corrupt elite. While representing the ordinary

people as one hegemonic group, OLANO is positioning itself into the role of representative of

the ordinary people, which can be also observed in their list of candidates. These aspects can

be found in their party program named "Honestly, boldly, for people" (Úprimne, odvážne, pre

ľudí). The program repeatedly states the need to give power to 'the people', while

distinguishing between two groups in society - the ordinary people and the corrupt elites

(OLANO, 2020).

By building the study on the case of Matovič's discourse, the analysis can lead to the

exploration of additional aspects of populist discourse. OLANO was for the first time a

leading party in the coalition and needed to adapt to the new role as decision-makers. The

pattern of the response of populist parties after gaining enough support to join the ruling

coalition can differ from their time in opposition. According to Taggart, there are three

possible reactions of populist parties once they are in coalition. First, populist leaders

accommodate the already established system and political culture, thus they become a more

conventional political party. Second, the populist party tries to change the context of the

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[2]Jan Kuciak was an investigative journalist working in Slovakia. He and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, were murdered as a response to his investigation of the presence of the mafia in Slovakia in 2018 (Aktuality.sk, 2021)

system and institutions of the country to fit their narrative. Third, the narrative and behaviour of the party stay the same as it was in opposition (2021). The last approach can be observed in the case of OLANO when the party members have not changed their approach after moving to the coalition.

The unpreparedness and lack of knowledge led to chaotic management and in some cases inconsistent presentation of the crisis and regulations. The unpredictability of the situation and attempt to maintain popular support from the public had a negative impact on OLANO's support, which significantly shifted in November 2020 to 14% (SME, 2021). This development can be explained by the measures which were adopted at that time. A major regulation unique to Slovakia was the first round of nationwide testing that took place from October 31 to November 1, where every adult was advised to participate (korona.gov.sk, 2021b). The second round was advised for certain regions with the worse pandemic situation. Nationwide testing was presented as an alternative to lockdown (MO SR - KOd, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, the appeal to personal responsibility was reinforced while referring to nationwide testing. The nationwide testing's code name was "Collective responsibility" (Spoločná zodpovednosť) and the official website "I am responsible. I will get tested" (Som zodpovedný. Dám sa testovať). The narrative was reinforced by the leading members involved in crisis management mostly from OLANO (MZ SR, 2020). However, despite the high number of people who were tested, the number of infected was still increasing, resulting in the lockdown which was adopted in the middle of December (TASR/MV SR, 2020).

Another turning point during the pandemic was when Matovič stepped down from the position of PM. The reasons were connected to the mishandling of the pandemic which was one of the causes of the crisis in the coalition. The case with the Sputnik V vaccine represents

Matovič's last decision regarding the pandemic. Matovič bought a vaccine Sputnik V without the approval of the members of the coalition and the infrastructure for distributing the vaccine was missing (Černická, 2021). Consequently, the pressure from the side of the public and the coalition caused that in April 2021 Matovič was replaced by Eduard Heger in the position of PM (FORBES, 2021).

The case of Matovič was selected to examine the impact of crisis communication on the support from the public and other coalition partners. The case has three main characteristics. First, he held the position with the biggest amount of power in Slovakia. Second, he is the president of the leading populist party OLANO. Last, he had no prior experience in either crisis management or having a responsibility connected to leading the coalition. Despite the fact that party OLANO won the largest support from the voters, Matovič was forced to step down from his position as PM after a year due to his unpredictable and chaotic crisis management.

All the factors allow us to observe how populist leaders react in a crisis situation when they are in charge. The press conferences are traditionally recognized as formal acts when certain rules and norms must be followed (Wodak et al., 2021b). Moreover, the discourse used during the press conference is set in a context that reacts to the issues present in society. Moreover, Bates and Hayek consider press conferences as one of the most trustworthy forms of political communication and an effective way to convey political messages (2021). Several country leaders relied on press conferences during the pandemic as a way to 'directly' communicate with the public. Nevertheless, this style of communication can have negative aspects, for example, in the case of the Czech Republic most decisions were presented by leader Andrej

Babiš,[3] who had chosen reactive communication which led to quick change and thus a lack of

predictability regarding the adoption of regulations (Eibl and Gregor, 2021).

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[3]PM of the Czech Republic from 2017 to 2021 and leader of the political party *Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (*ANO - Akce Nespokojených Občanů) founded in 2012 by Babiš

# Chapter 3. Methodology

The methodology chapter explains the approach used in the analysis of the press conferences to determine the development of the crisis communication of the populist leader. The method and collection of data are described in detail as well as the limitations.

To determine how the crisis was described in Matovič's discourse, qualitative content analysis is used as a primary method. Content analysis, in general, is defined as a *systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics* (Neuendorf, 2017, 19). However, content analysis is not exclusively a quantitative method and in recent years, studies using content analysis as a qualitative method started to dominate. However, content analysis is not seen as a pure method of counting words. Stemler describes the value of content analysis in terms of reliance on coding and categorizing, while the category is regarded as *a group of words with similar meaning or connotation* (Weber, 1990 in Stemler, 2000, 2). This understanding is deepened in the qualitative approach toward content analysis which includes the aspect of how a certain event or category is portrayed (Hameleers, 2019). Hameleers further points out that content analysis in this understanding offers insights into the discursive construction of certain groups or understanding (2019, 806). Based on Hameleers' approach, the aspect of context and context-dependent change in discourse can be studied by using qualitative content analysis.

Previous studies of crisis communication use different variants of content analysis. Lisi and Borghetto look at election manifestos to assess populist claims in the case of Portugal during the economic crisis, where the main objective is to trace changes in blame-shifting strategies (2018). The method chosen for the analysis is a qualitative content analysis where claims

were placed into pre-established coding categories based on populist literature (2018). Ladi and Tsagkroni look at the case of Greece during economic and political crises and analysed parliamentary debates in two stages. The first stage consists of a manual examination of the text to determine the characteristics and context of the messages. The second stage is qualitative computer-assisted textual analysis (2019). Their analysis also focuses on the mechanisms of blame-shifting and finds a strong tendency for historical blaming of the previous government (Ladi and Tsagkroni, 2019). Drewski (2015) uses systematic content analysis to find the public discourse on the topic of the Euro-crisis in German and Spanish newspaper editorials. However, systematic content analysis is based on a classical understanding of the method as quantitative. An and Gower (2009) use content analysis of crisis news frames in 2006 regarding the coverage of the most prominent crisis of known businesses. They, similarly to Hameleers, focus on frames.

The method used in this study is a quantitative content analysis of press conferences where statements of the former PM of Slovakia are divided into pre-established coding categories (as is in the case of Lisi and Borghetto, 2018) based on the literature on populism, blame-shifting, and crisis communication (see Appendix 1). To determine the relevance of coding categories or include new categories, a pilot analysis was conducted. The main focus is on the change in crisis communication during the Covid pandemic and how the discourse and portrayal of actors or the events developed with respect to the contexts. Other aspects of the analysis are to observe the key actors who were referred to in the discourse and how the crisis discourse was constructed in general. While dealing with populist discourse, several practices are necessary to consider such as the Manichean outlook which represents a strong polarization or adoption of the regulations for 'the people'. The initial expectation was that the blame-shifting would

be heavily repeated in the discourse as well as stressing the importance of the regulations when unpopular decisions are adopted.

The entire process of empirical research was moved to manual transcription of relevant parts of the speech and coding of those relevant statements. For these purposes, a form in Appendix 2 was created for the collection of basic information about each press conference, the context of the conference that was recorded based on the statement part, and then sorting of the relevant parts of the speech into coding categories from the interview part. All statements were directly translated from Slovak into English. Another step for counting frequencies of the codes together with the most relevant information, for example, if the code Scapegoating appeared it was coded as 1, and the complementary information refers to who was blamed (e.g. previous government, Sulik, experts). To limit the errors in the coding process, the analysis of press conferences was divided into the first round when all press conferences were watched and coded in detail and the control round which took place two weeks later where the first round of coding was reassessed.

108 press conferences were collected and regarded as relevant (see Appendix 3). Two main aspects were considered for including a press conference as relevant. First, the main topic of the press conference was related to crisis management or introducing general information regarding the pandemic situation. Second, press conferences that consisted only of the statement part were not included since the interview part was the main focus of the analysis. However, press conferences starting with the interview part are still an object of analysis and the records of those press conferences are stored.

Considering the interview part as the object of the analysis is connected to the nature of the responses which are unscripted and show more natural language of the responding person. Some press conferences were eliminated for the reason that Matovič left after giving a statement, was present but did not respond to the questions, or his responses were not pandemic related. Based on the literature described in the theoretical part of the thesis, the initial coding categories were established before pilot coding. These categories contained codes specific to the characteristics of the populist discourse (1-13), the mechanisms of blame-shifting (14-15), and different approaches to the Covid crisis (16-42) (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1**. The initial list of coding categories used in the analysis

| 1. 'The people' | 15. Threat | 29. Resurrection |
|---|---|---|
| 2. 'The elites' | 16. Fighting the virus | 30. Death as the unknown |
| 3. Manichean outlook | 17. The war against the virus | 31. The promise of a better future |
| 4. Nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism | 18. Victory over the virus | 32. The victory of life over death |
| 5. Anti-élitism | 19. Defending country | 33. We are all on the same boat |
| 6. Authoritarianism | 20. Emergency | 34. Explaining the situation |
| 7. Conservativism/Historical revisionism | 21. An emotional appeal to fear | 35. Appeal to rationality |
| 8. Authorization | 22. Need for regulations | 36. Togetherness |
| 9. Moral evaluation | 23. Legitimacy from 'the people' | 37. We can save people |
| 10. Rationalization | 24. Comparison/Justification through comparison | 38. Admitting the un-democratic side of regulations |

| 11. Mythopoesis | 25. Protecting ourselves and the country | 39. Appeal to personal responsibility ('own' responsibility) |
|---|---|---|
| 12. Being part of 'the people' | 26. Attacking 'others' | 40. Advice rather than regulation/order |
| 13. Impoliteness | 27. Need for a change | 41. Death as a sacrifice for the well-being of the majority |
| 14. Scapegoating | 28. Decisions for 'the people' | 42. Emphasis on interpersonal and institutional trust |

(The source of the coding categories can be found in Appendix 1)

After the pilot analysis ran, several categories needed to be excluded due to irrelevance and several new categories needed to be included because the statements relevant for the analysis did not fit into the pre-established list. Coding categories "Comparison/Justification through comparison", "Protecting ourselves and the country", "Attacking 'others'", "Need for a change", and "Decisions for 'the people'" were added to complement categories based on the literature. A form used for the collection of basic information about the conference and the most relevant statements divided into the coding categories is in Appendix 2. The benefits of using this type of form are that it offers a space for describing the context and the general topic of the conference, the frequency of statements is controlled, and the nature of the statement is captured (what the statement was referring to).

Coding categories that appeared less than 10-times during the first round of analysis were eliminated based on relevance to the study. The frequencies considered were a sum of the appearances for all 108 press conferences (when the code appeared it was counted as 1 and if not 0) leaving 17 categories for the empirical research of the press conferences (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** The final list of categories

| 1. Authoritarianism | 7. An emotional appeal to fear | 13. Protecting ourselves and the country |
|---|---|---|
| 2. Authorization | 8. Need for regulations | 14. Attacking 'others' |
| 3. Impoliteness | 9. Scapegoating | 15. Need for a change |
| 4. Fighting the virus | 10. Threat | 16. Decisions for 'the people' |
| 5. The war against the virus | 11. Legitimacy from 'the people' | 17. We can save people |
| 6. Emergency | 12. Comparison/Justification through comparison | |

Most of the coding categories based on the literature on populism were eliminated because the discourse did not fit in the simplistic categories and the discourse contained the elements of crisis communication, for example, the clear division of society based on the Manichean outlook needed to be understood in the context. Therefore, the division of people who behave responsibly and irresponsibly was present but referring to those who are irresponsible included elements of blame or were "attacked" for their behaviour. On the other hand, those who were behaving responsibly (followed recommendations and regulations) were presented as those who protect themselves and others. The notion of elites, who are according to OLANO's previous discourse mainly represented as the previous government, were blamed for the situation with, for example, missing medical supplies or not having a guideline on how to deal with the pandemic. Therefore, the categories for populism were not sufficient in addressing all the elements of the discourse.

Another category of codes that was to a large extent eliminated was based on Wodak's coding categories developed on the analysis of responses to the Covid pandemic with an exception for categories in the frame "The War Against the Virus" and two categories from the "Dialogic frame". The frame "The War Against the Virus" was developed from an analysis of the responses from Victor Orbán and Emmanuel Macron. On the other hand, the "Dialogic frame" was developed based on the discourse of Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, the categories were used in a different manner than they were in Wodak's original analysis. The codes were not used with a positive connotation. On the contrary, the statements included in the category "We can save people" were usually used as a response to the irresponsible behaviour of people and appeal for following the regulations. An important aspect similar to Matovič's presentation and Angela Merkel's is the presence of experts (epidemiologists, virologists) during press conferences. Matovič in the first half of his premiership invited experts to give a statement on, for example, new regulations\the reason for the pandemic situation or to respond to questions. The expert who reappeared most frequently was the chief hygienist, Jan Mikas. The role of the experts changed with the development of the pandemic situation and is discussed in more detail in the analysis part of the thesis.

The main outcome of the analysis was the establishment of frames via the merging of coding categories that have a common link or theme. Fames can be defined differently depending on the analysis. Wodak defines frames as a *thematic dimension of texts* (2019a, 5). On the other hand, Goffman (1986) understands frames as *schemes of interpretation that help us perceive and evaluate the world around us* (quoted in Drewski, 2015, 269). Frames in this analysis are understood as thematic patterns of discourse that define the interpretation of the situation in the society. The framework established from the final coding categories consists of 3 frames.

The frames were established based on the interconnectivity of coding categories, the representation of other actors, and self-representation.

Frames

1. Blame-shifting and Scapegoating – Authorities // Others (coding categories: Scapegoating, Authorization, Attacking Others)

2. Leader for the People

    a. War Fighter (coding categories: Authoritarianism, Fighting the virus, and The war against the virus)

    b. Saviour of the People (coding categories: Decisions for 'the people', We can save people, Need for a change, Legitimacy from 'the people', Emergency, Emotional Appeal to Fear)

    c. Responsible Leader (coding categories: Authorization, Need for regulations, Comparison/Justification through comparison, Threat)

3. Common Responsibility – People (coding categories: Protecting ourselves and the country, We can save people)

Populist leaders claim to represent 'the people'. In crisis communication, the claim can be translated into protecting 'the people' or making decisions for them. Therefore, the second frame needs to be divided into three sub-frames that focus on the self-representation of Matovič and is divided into three categories: "War Fighter", "Saviour of the People", and "Responsible Leaders". While all of the sub-frames deal with the mechanisms of how Matovič presented himself to 'the people' during the press conferences, each of them has a different strategy. The reasoning for his behaviour and new regulations is due to the people's demand and Matovič is given power by 'the people' who gave him a mandate in the 2020

33

elections. The division of the frames is, therefore, based on self-representation and what is the best solution for the people.

Populist language differs from traditional political communication, therefore, the attention is also on the use of expressive words, the language of ordinary people, simplifying the situation, and the use of metaphors in context. In addition to "breaking" the rules of the traditional language, the visual tools used during the press conferences were observed. Matovič has built up an image of eccentric behaviour during his previous years in politics. A famous example is from 2013, when he brought a paper model of, at that time, PM Robert Fico with the text "Gave Slovakia to the rich" (Daroval Slovensko zbohatlíkom), which led to a fight in parliament (ta3, 2013). Similar practices were common to the point when the National Council of the Slovak Republic prohibited the use of visual tools in parliament in 2016 (Pravda, odu, 2021). The use of visual tools is also recognized as a part of a discourse and considered in the analysis.

The main limitation of the study is connected to the lack of tools for the transcription of videos, as well as no transcripts of the press conferences. Existing software used for the transcription of the videos is lacking in the Slovak language. The market for the Czech language is wider but not usable for several linguistic differences between the languages. The second reason why software for the transcription was not used is connected to the nature of the populist use of language. Some words were self-created by Matovič and are not part of Slovak vocabulary.

The second step regarding the transcripts of the press conferences was to contact news agencies, parliamentary officials, and NGOs for the possibility of sending already existing

transcriptions. During this process, the Governmental Office, News Agency of the Slovak Republic, party OLANO, news channel ta3,[4] and NGO demagog were contacted. The responses were either negative or referred to another party that had already been contacted. Only OLANO did not respond to the email. The option of reconsidering the source of data from visual to text sources was not viable for the uniqueness of Matovič's press conferences during his premiership. The perception of the press conference changed during the time period not only in content but also in length. The longest press conference in the research period took place on October 28, 2020, and lasted 1 hour and 42 minutes. Another aspect is the authenticity of speech mentioned in previous sections.

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[4]ta3 is a Slovak private news channel owned by Blumberg Media. The news channel started officially broadcasting in 2001.

# Chapter 4. Analysis of Crisis Communication

# in Slovakia

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the results of the analysis of the collected data from Matovič's press conferences during his time as a PM. The primary set of data presents the frequencies of the statements on a monthly basis divided by waves. The changes in the discourse can be explained by the context of what was happening in society, how the support of the public varied, and Matovič's presentation of the situation. Included are several of his statements from press conferences that identify the main actors and issues in the given time period. The logic in which the results are presented is that first changes are visible from the data are presented, then the differences in the frames themselves, and a brief summarization of the waves. The analysis is divided by waves of the pandemic relevant to the studied time period. The first wave lasted from March until September 2020, while the second wave can be framed from October 2020 until March 2021.

## 4.1 First Wave

The new government was established on March 24, 2020, consisting of OLANO, Freedom and Solidarity,[5] We are family,[6] and For the people.[7] The main premise and promise of the government were to create a new Slovakia, reform the institutions, and clean the country of corruption and the practices of the previous Smer-SD government.[8] However, the new coalition had to deal with a new situation, caused by the pandemic, right after being elected,

which postponed the promises of change from the election campaign. The issues of the new government mainly concerned the development of the pandemic as well as the reaction to these developments.

The general characteristic of the discourse relates to the establishment of an image after Matovič comes to power. His inability to immediately react to some shortages and the lack of experiences in governing led to the increase in blaming the previous government. To this notion, other scapegoats are established depending on the development of the pandemic situation. The populist leader also needed to create his own image that was more inclining to the saviour and responsible leader rather than to the war fighter. The reason is in the style of deciding for 'the people' and based on their interests. Matovič has been reinforcing the image of someone who can save Slovakia even before pandemic. However here the issue referenced was public health and lives of people while before the pandemic, he built his agenda on saving the country from the corruption and corrupted elites. The image of war fighter was used to establish a perception of an enemy and the need to "fight the enemy" then the frame is present only on the lower margins. Similarly, the appeal to common responsibility is not prominent in the discourse because the emphasis is on the leader himself rather than people which shows a shift in the agency to Matovič.

The first wave starts slow and the peak starts in April 2020 (see Figure 1) when the number of those who tested positive was significantly rising. During this time all frames were strengthened and used more frequently in comparison with the whole period of the first wave. The challenges were constantly evolving, however, consistent with reactionary communication style. The crisis communication depended on the PM even though other actors surrounded him from ministers to experts. The peak can be interpreted as gaining

37

control over the virus itself and the consequences (economic or social) connected to the pandemic. The new policies and initiatives were presented at that time (explaining the responsibilities of the task force and introducing financial aid to those most affected or various sectors) which was supposed to represent an image of preparedness as opposed to the previous government that was not able to ensure a supply of basic medical material. After the initial response, the situation was presented as stabilized and one of the best in Europe, the number of press conferences (see Figure 2) as well as the overall discourse (see Figure 1), appeared to be more relaxed. Some press conferences presented the relaxation of regulations and positive predictions for the upcoming summer months. At the end of the first wave, new concerns were brought out regarding the start of the school year and the limitations of social events. The rise in the number of press conferences as well as crisis discourse is visible that foreshadows the beginning of the second wave.
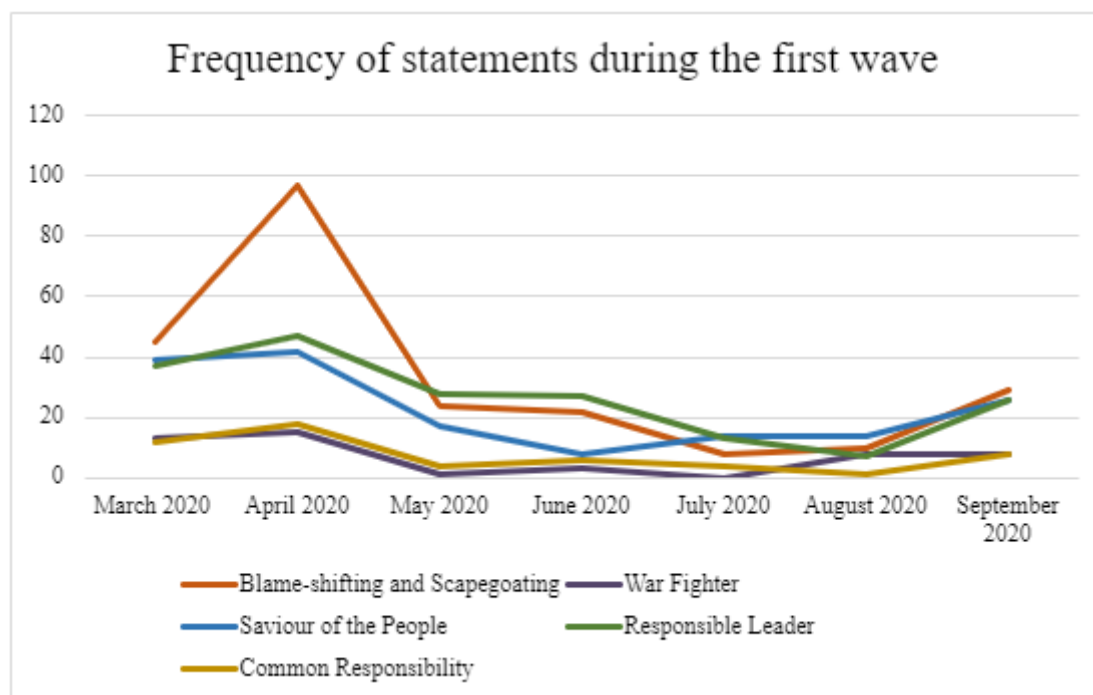


**Figure 1**. Frequency of statements throughout the first wave of Covid
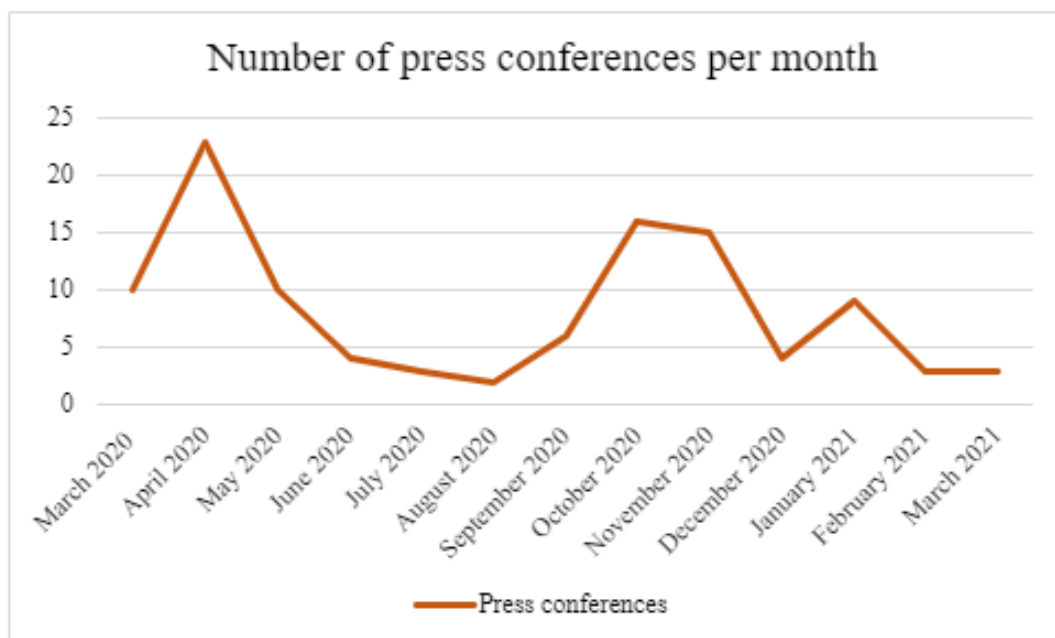
**Figure 2.** A number of Matovič's press conferences addressing the pandemic throughout the whole period of analysis

## 4.1.1 Blame-shifting and Scapegoating

At the beginning the main group subjected to blame was the previous government because they allegedly left Slovakia unprepared for the crisis and this scapegoat was preserved throughout the study. While the previous government was constantly blamed, three changes are identified in the discourse. The first change was that Matovič would specifically name people such as Peter Pellegrini, party Smer-SD, or Kajetán Kičura.[9] While referring to these groups, Matovič used more aggressive language, which means that his language contained swearing, insults, or words with a strong negative connotation. *"Smer holds onto Kicura until the very end, a corrupted bastard who was stealing our money at the time when we needed every euro to buy something overly expensive"* **(**April 1, 2020). The second change is characteristic of the polarisation of the society that continued onwards. The typical populist division of the society is into two groups

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[9]Kičura held the highest position in the Slovak National Reserves from 2012 to 2020.

'the people' and 'the elite' / 'others', however, Matovič divided 'the people' into responsible and irresponsible people who do not follow the regulations. "*There will be those who won't follow the restrictions and they will feel like a man when they don't follow the system. I hope that the rest of us, responsible ones, will see them not as heroes but as losers. Today, those people can pose a danger"* (April 5, 2020).

The third change was in the shift relative to experts. The experts were considered as a group of people who do not have answers to a worsening situation. The scapegoating in this situation is not based on blaming an individual or a certain group for the current situation, but rather the mechanism of "even the experts do not have the answers" (*We, in Slovakia, neither these experts nor anyone in Slovakia has the key to opening the Slovak economy* - May 4, 2020) and "the decision is on the experts" (*Experts need to decide on what ground and with what limitations we can take patients into hospitals* - April 11, 2020). Hansson (2015) points out that a particular way of arguing in a public debate situation can be either manipulating the perception of loss or arguing that the harm has been caused unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily or by someone else. To apply Hansson's position to the situation when the harm is not yet done, the reaction to the pandemic situation was limited due to missing information and even the experts did not know the effective response to a worsening situation or propose effective regulations. Nevertheless, experts still held a major position in Slovakia during the pandemic.

## 4.1.2 War Fighter

This frame focuses on defining the enemy and presenting the pandemic situation in the context of war, as was shown in Wodak's analysis (2021a). After the establishment of the narrative of enemy and war, the frame was used more scarcely. In the beginning, the virus is

presented as an enemy and the pandemic situation as the war, the regulations and policies adopted to "fight" the enemy are more acceptable. In the context of war, the need for unity is also stressed. "*We are at war against the virus which we fight together*" (April 1, 2020). Some of the regulations were called "weapons" to fight or destroy the virus. At the same time, the self-presentation of Matovič in this regard developed over time. Matovič was calling for discipline and the need to secure this discipline with the presence of a strong leader. The reason why there is a need for a strong leader is, in this case, that people are not responsible enough or need someone who would tell them what to do. "*We need someone who will set the rules*" (March 28, 2020). The situation in Slovakia was often compared to other countries that undermined the fight and now are struggling. "*We are after 5 months of battle against Covid-19 when I tried to act as a leader and adopt regulations. The result is that we are number 1 in Europe*" (August 12, 2020).

### 4.1.3 Saviour of the People

A closer look at the *Saviour of the People* frame shows under what grounds Matovič was making his decisions. The main source of legitimacy were the people who voted him into office, thus giving him trust to make decisions in the name of 'the people'. Therefore, all decisions were made for the people and for the safety of public health. Matovič puts himself in the position where people's lives are the priority and people need a protector who would even change the law to protect people more effectively. "*I don't follow politics. The lives and protection of lives are priorities for me*" (March 31, 2020). This also shows a populist approach where he does not pursue a political agenda but the need of the people which is his priority. One of the key components of the frame is to create an atmosphere of fear. The nature of what is the source of fear develops with the situation. While in the beginning, there was a broad narrative of fear of infection (*"We don't know when we will be infected"* - April

41

14, 2020), later the source was presented in more concrete terms (*"All of us in Slovakia fear the 2nd wave because it will have a very very negative impact on health, economy, unemployment, etc."* - June 19, 2020). By creating this type of atmosphere, the leader created a need for a saviour who would bring a solution.

### 4.1.4 Responsible Leader

The *Responsible Leader* frame stresses the need for sensible decisions and regulations that are based on experts' advice and are responsive to the danger which is represented by a threat that can be from the outside or inside. The experts were placed at the highest position in society and their opinion was more valuable, especially in comparison to the opinion of politicians. "*Firstly, I want to know the opinion of epidemiologists and then the opinion of everybody else"* (April 1, 2020). An essential part of this frame is to define the threat. In this case, the nature of the threat is constantly changing based on who or what causes the rise of numbers (% of infected). *"If we don't manage the situation we will have thousands infected daily"* (April 8, 2020) or *"...infected people are among us and we need to be careful"* (July 9, 2020). The identification of threats can show the mechanisms under which the officials were making decisions. As a response to the worsening situation, regulations that needed to be adopted which were often justified based on experts or inspiration from the outside were also taken into account, either as good practice or a possible worse scenario used mostly to scare the public.

### 4.1.5 Common Responsibility

During the pandemic, people were encouraged to behave responsibly to protect themselves and especially the elderly. "*We are shutting the virus down and protecting our grandparents"* (March 31, 2020). Society was divided into responsible and irresponsible people. The

responsible ones were praised and the irresponsible were blamed for worsening the pandemic situation. "*We have the cure for corona, it is our responsibility, discipline, cooperation and solidarity and when someone says 'no, we won't comply' and he won't control if there are others except elders in stores then we will close the store. Today, in this situation, the state has this possibility*" (March 24, 2020). From the start, the need to protect the vulnerable ones is presented as our shared responsibility. This can lead to pressure from the society to follow official rules as well as to divert the attention from governmental incompetence to a more close group of the "irresponsible ones". The *Common Responsibility* frame was not prominent in the study. This can be explained by the focus on the negative message of blaming and shaming that focuses on the "irresponsible" part rather than motivating people with positive messages.

The first wave largely confirms the first hypothesis in the sense of the established narrative. It shows what style of crisis communication Matovič adopted from the beginning of his premiership. His election promise to be more transparent in comparison to the previous government and answer the demand of 'the people' is shown in his actions. He established the narrative of speaking for 'the people' on a basis of election results but he took the agency from people. The need from the beginning was to follow the regulations and behave responsibly. In other words, Matovič makes decisions on the demand of 'the people' who voted him into office while the decisions are based on experts' recommendations thus portraying himself as a responsible leader who can act for 'the people'. Although it confirms the first hypothesis, an element of taking agency from 'the people' needs to be added to complement the claim.

43

The second hypothesis is confirmed, although, an element of emphasising a reactionary communication approach needs to be included. Matovič constantly expanded the group of scapegoats blamed for the worsening situation. On the other hand, blame-shifting was targeted toward every group that did not obey the regulations and experts who were proposing unpopular decisions. This approach corresponds with the reactionary style of crisis communication that acts to the immediate situation while not considering consequences, such as accusing people of not following the regulations can lead to increasing disapproval of the government. In general, populist leaders blame 'the elite' or 'others' but do not blame a part of 'the people' which is seen in this case.

## 4. 2 Second Wave

Autumn brought new worries that were speculated about in summer and confirmed the new strict regulations as well as a state of emergency. The number of infected people and deaths increased significantly. At the beginning of this wave, a "milestone" was reached when more than 1 000 people were infected, the highest number thus far (Debnár, 2020). The new regulations, among which the most notable were: wearing a face mask outside, restaurants could only be open for take-out, or a limited number of people in shops (Trend.sk, 2021), were greeted with demonstrations of the radical side of society. As a reaction, Matovič expanded the list of scapegoats and took a simplistic and "common sense" approach to stabilize the situation.

Slovakia was not nearly as successful with the crisis response as it was during the first wave, which led to a few reckless decisions that were supposed to prevent lockdown or decrease the number of deaths from the Covid. After the failure of these decisions, a lockdown was adopted to deal with the bad pandemic situation in December when the discourse dropped due

to Matovič's unwillingness to comment on the situation. Nevertheless, he still attempted to keep the narrative of a saviour who had the solution that could prevent lockdown but the 'others' were not cooperating enough. The constant blame-shifting and introduction of simplistic 'solutions' that were not efficient while groups in the society most impacted by the pandemic (small businesses, medical staff) were neglected led to the perception of the government being incompetent. The crisis discourse appears to normalize at the end of Matovič's term, when his replacement was agreed upon in the middle of March 2021.

The frequency of *Blame-shifting and Scapegoating* from the side of the former PM can be a result of the worsening situation together with increasing opposition to his decision and public dissatisfaction with the handling of the crisis. The long-feared second wave came in October 2020 and lasted beyond the observed period in this study. Nevertheless, some similarities and differences can be observed from the initial interpretation of the data. At the beginning of the second wave, the number of press conferences (see Figure 2) and the crisis discourse are at their peak ( see Figure 3). However, there is no clear normalization period based on the development of discourse. The frame *Blame-shifting and Scapegoating* is overall more prevalent than the other frames. The rise can be explained as a reaction to the rising disapproval of the government and the worsening pandemic situation to divert the attention of the public to other directions. In addition, two major gaps are visible between the frames, the first between *Blame-shifting* and *Saviour of People* with *Responsible Leader,* while the second is between *Saviour of People* with *Responsible Leader* and *War Fighter* with *Common Responsibility* that are both near the bottom.
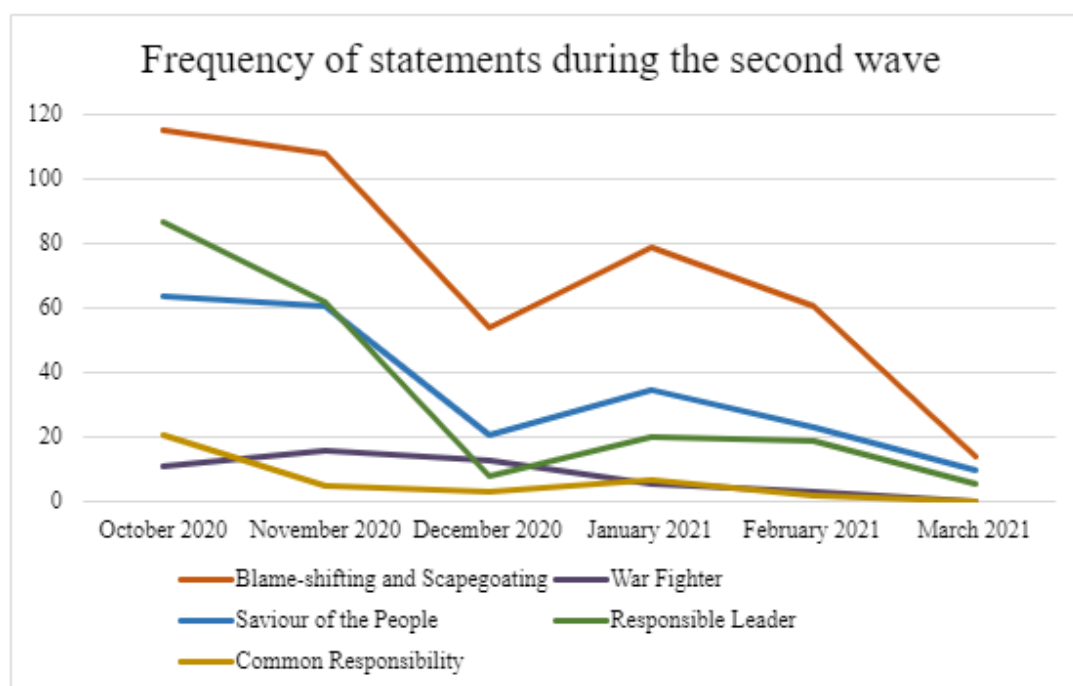
**Figure 3.** Frequency of statements throughout the second wave of Covid

## 4.2.1 Blame-shifting and Scapegoating

When the situation worsened and the new regulations were not stabilizing the numbers of those who tested positive and deaths, the group of scapegoats expanded. The main reason for the blame was a public disagreement with Matovič's decisions. The targeted scapegoats were concretely named and the response towards them was more aggressive than during the first wave. The groups of scapegoats can be divided into stable and reactionary. The stable ones are appearing constantly and the reason for blaming is in the same narrative. Reactionary scapegoats can become stable, however, the initial trigger was a direct disagreement or disobedience of the regulations/recommendations. This development is most vividly portrayed by Richard Sulík.[10] He became a target of verbal attacks for his statements calling for opening restaurants and easing the regulations to the point when it would not cause any damage to public health. "*Sulík is damaging public perception of the pandemic*" or *"Sulík*

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[10] minister of Economy in the new coalition and the chairman of the coalition party SaS

*caused rising numbers and possible strengthening of regulations in future"* (October 12, 2020). After the initial disagreement, Sulík became a stable scapegoat reappearing throughout the course of the second wave. An example of a pure reactionary group of scapegoats are mayors who were only blamed at one point of a time and for one instance of "lack of preparedness". *Each mayor who cares about their citizens should prepare for testing"* (January 15, 2021).

### 4.2.2 War Fighter

When the numbers of infected people started to rise after summer, the presence and danger of the enemy were emphasised together with the need to fight. Moreover, a need for a strong weapon that would help to "fight an invisible enemy" was more vocal. "*PCR tests are not good enough weapon to fight the virus. We need one strong attack"* (October 28, 2020). This type of narrative of establishing the need for a stronger and more aggressive solution that led to a partial justification of an unorthodox 'solution' was repeated in the second wave (first with nationwide testing and later with the purchase of Sputnik V[11] vaccines without knowledge of coalition partners. Nevertheless, this frame is not as prominent in the study as other frames which indicates that Matovič put significance on the other narratives that would emphasise himself as the one doing the decisions for the people while the others are pursuing their own agenda. The result is that after the virus is established as something dangerous the need for this type of narrative is not as present as it was at the very beginning. Matovič created a sense of enemy and offered 'weapons' to fight it, however, he prioritized the saviour and responsible leader type of self-representation to motivate people to follow him and motivate his regulations.

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[11]a vaccine produced in Russia and not approved by the European Medicine Agency (EMA) at the discussed time

### 4.2.3 Saviour of the People

After the pandemic situation worsened in autumn, the support for Matovič himself and his government started to decrease and was perceived as ineffective in many instances. The negative perception motivated Matovič to offer common-sense solutions that would improve the course of the pandemic and, at the same time, would not restrict people to the extent of lockdown. When the 'solutions', which often were not based on experts' recommendations, failed Matovič adopted a more aggressive language towards people who were not following the instructions while putting himself in the position of the saviour who wanted to help improve the pandemic situation. "*I was looking for a way to survive the crisis*" (December 16, 2020). Another change in the frame relates to the exploitation of the feeling of fear which was more present at this time. Fear was used as a tool for justification of the new more aggressive 'solutions'. "*I don't want the situation where doctors and nurses will be dying here*" (November 18, 2020) or *"We need to realize that lives and health are at stake"* (January 15, 2021). The mechanism of discourse can be put into chronology: establishing the sense of urgency through fear, then he proposed simplistic 'solutions' and when they failed, Matovič shifted the attention from himself to scapegoats who did not comply with the plan enough thus strengthening the frame *Blame-shifting and Scapegoating.*

### 4.2.4 Responsible Leader

The main shift in the frame was in the source of justification. When the regulations proposed by the experts are not enough then the leader had to look for another base for his decisions while still appearing as responsible. Even though the importance of the role of experts still remains prominent together with the narrative of following the recommendations of the experts, the main source of justification of regulations shifted to the comparison with other countries and emphasising the presence of a threat. The reason for the change is the lack of

48

support from the experts for Matovič's initiatives. The comparison with other countries increased significantly together with a more aggressive language. While during the first wave, the comparison was in a more positive wave towards Slovakia (narrative of "we are the best in Europe") to more negative of what can happen 'here'. "*The only solution with these numbers is lockdown so we won't have the same situation as was in Bergamo or NYC*" (October 12, 2020). The nature of the threat is similar to the first wave. "*we can have 5 000 cases a day which is 3-times more but it also means 3-times more dead people*" (November 13, 2020). Aside from the reluctance from the side of experts, the situation was worsening in Slovakia and in neighbouring countries. Matovič wanted to prevent large-scale lockdown which was also in the interest of the majority of Slovaks. Therefore, he decided on a simplistic solution to the situation while being perceived as a saviour and responsible leader at the same time.

### 4.2.5 Common Responsibility

Even though the frame was the least significant in the analysis, two major changes can be concluded in comparison to the first wave. The first is the expansion of the group of 'the vulnerable people' that need to be protected. In the first wave, the reference was to mainly the elderly while in the second wave medical personnel were included. "*When we want to avoid putting nurses and doctors under enormous stress then we need to have 'Collective responsibility'*[12]" (October 26, 2020). The second is the strengthening of the division of the society and can be connected to the third change which represents the shaming of people into responsible behaviour. "*...person who comes to the testing understands the importance of it as well as the meaning of protecting the health and life of others...*" (October 26, 2020). The

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[12]Nationwide testing was addressed as a special operation and the name of this operation was "Collective responsibility" (Spoločná zodpovednosť).

practice of shaming is manifested in a way that when a person does not agree or participate in the regulations they are automatically placed in the category of 'irresponsible' thus putting people around them in a danger. The positive motivation was not as present as in the previous time period. The development can relate to the failure of Matovič's initiatives and the need to divert attention.

To the lesson learned from the first wave needs to be added the creation of an image of a saviour and responsible leader who proposes simplistic solutions to the complex problem in hope of avoiding the unpopular decision. The second wave in comparison to the first one shows more aggressive language and an emphasis on following the regulations. During the first wave, the agency was limited in regards to 'the people' and was complemented by the need for a responsible leader. The second wave was more problematic for Matovič for the worse pandemic situation, the need for more unpopular regulations, and increasing public distrust. Therefore, the new initiatives and simplistic "common sense" solutions were presented. The legitimacy for these solutions was the demand from the public to prevent (unwanted) lockdown. Matovič created a need for radical simplistic regulations by stressing the presence of threat thus establishing the feeling of fear. The best regulations for the people were no longer based on experts' recommendations but came directly from the leader who tried to strengthen an image of a saviour.

The second hypothesis needs to include the element of expanding the group of 'others' when the pandemic situation worsens which is more visible in the second wave. Blame-shifting and scapegoating follow the same logic in both waves. The difference is the more aggressive approach in the second wave with more regulations and people hospitalized because of Covid than in the first wave. People who raised any type of objection or counter-argument to

Matovič's decisions were blamed for destroying public morale and motivating disobedience. The reactionary style of blaming is similar to both waves, however, some of the reactionary scapegoats later turn to stable ones and are more present in the discourse.

## 4.3 Overall behaviour

Populist leaders are those who claim to represent 'the common people' and one of the strategies is to use the same language and behaviour as the group they present as 'the people'. However, when a new unexpected crisis appears and the populist leaders need to respond, they often try to appear as legitimate people to deal with the situation. Matovič, like many other leaders, involved experts to be a part of the process of decision-making. During the press conferences, this is shown when on a podium he stood with experts, ministers, representatives of various sectors and companies, and researchers. The chief hygienist and minister of health were prominent personalities who were present at the press conferences and sometimes had the main position in answering the questions from journalists. Nevertheless, the involvement of other people at the press conference differs in the first and second waves. While during the first wave, a named group of people were often present during the introduction of new regulations and explaining the benefits of their proposals, in the second wave the involvement was limited to the key ministers and a significantly reduced number of experts. To increase legitimacy, Matovič presented data and simplified tables/figures to support his point.

Journalists often questioned the reliability of the presented information/data and asked about concrete failures of implementation of policies or the impracticality of the decisions on their own. Sometimes the reaction of the leader escalated to the extent that it can be called impolite. As mentioned in theory, several types of impoliteness are recognized. Two

prominent types dominate in this analysis, which are "Challenging or unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions" and "Dismissals" (Wodak et al., 2021b). The impolite behaviour was not connected to a concrete topic of the press conference but rather depended on the mood of the former PM. The peak of the frequency (see Figure 4) was at the beginning of the pandemic. Another rise can be observed in in the middle with a significant decrease in by the end of studied period. The former PM often questioned the preparedness of the journalists and their abilities *"Were you here during the previous part of the conference? Yes? That was exactly the topic"* (April 7, 2020) *"why do you think I am doing this press conference?"* (February 19, 2021). The reasons for dismissal were often connected with questioning the powers or reason to adopt some policies *"You haven't understood the idea"* (November 13, 2020) or *"I advise you to google studies…"* (June 9, 2020).

It can be concluded that the use of impolite language is purely reactionary and specific to a concrete situation. Populist leaders are shown to use informal language during a formal situation which can mean the use of impolite language toward someone who asks 'unpleasant' questions or criticise the leader (see Wodak, 2021b). This phenomenon was confirmed in this study when the journalists asked concrete questions and Matovič was not willing to answer, he used aggressive language. The logic that was observed in the study of frames, concretely, when the situation worsens or the preferences for the leadership decrease the used language is more pressing or aggressive, was not proven with this coding category.
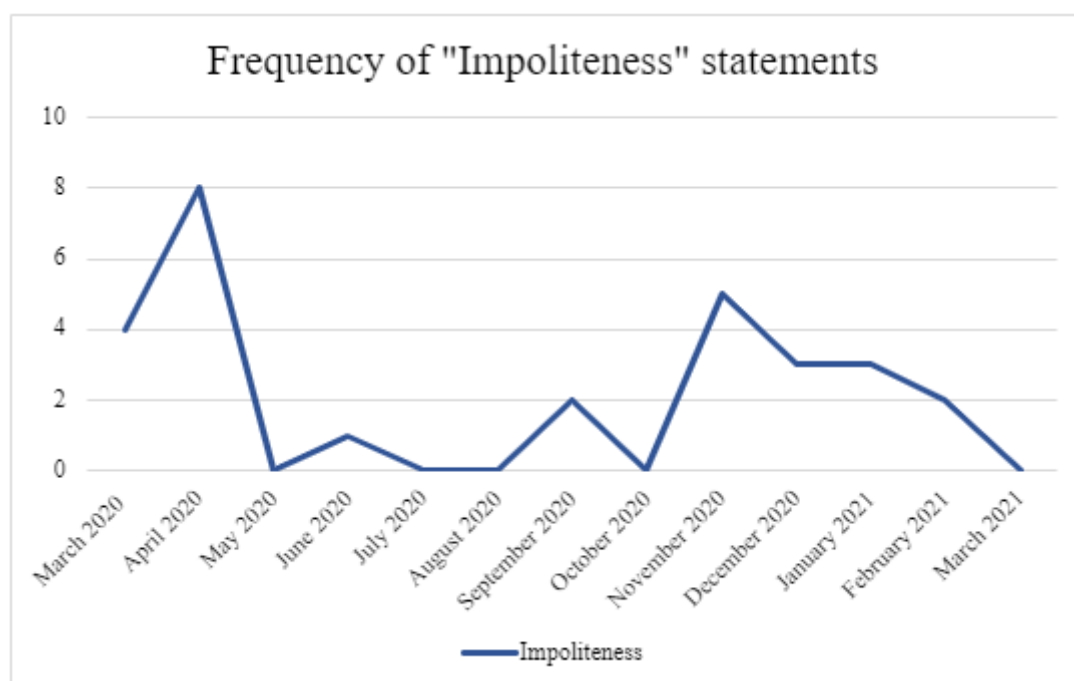
**Figure 4.** Frequency of "Impoliteness" statements throughout the whole period of analysis

53

# Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to capture some of the mechanisms of crisis communication of populist leaders, in this case, Matovič who had recently gained power, to make decisions. In this regard, populists need to respond on the spot and legitimize their decision. Another element of populist crisis communication is how the response to the situation changes when unpopular regulations need to be adopted while keeping the support of 'the people'. Two main hypotheses were stated at the beginning of the thesis. First, in populist leaders' crisis communication, the narrative of making decisions for the people will be emphasised, while the populist leaders present the regulations as the demand of 'the people'. Second, populist leaders will shift the attention from themselves to others when unpopular regulations need to be adopted, thus shifting the blame. To test the hypotheses, a framework of coding categories based on previous literature on populism and crisis communication was established. The analysis shows a more complex picture in comparison to the initial hypotheses.

The regulations were presented as demand from 'the people' and for their benefit, however, the hypothesis covers only part of the framing. The logic by which the populist leader justified his approach as a strong decision-maker has three steps. Firstly, the leader took away people's ability and initiative from the picture. The frame *Common Responsibility* reflects the assumption of appeal to 'the people' to behave responsibly during the pandemic is not present in the analysed period thus disregarding people's role. Secondly, the populist leader is perceived as the one who represents 'the people' who voted him into office and consequently gave him the power to rule in their name. Lastly, the populist leader presented himself as a *Responsible Leader* and *Saviour of the People* who has the interest of 'the people' as their main priority.  The solutions that were presented as in the best interest of 'the people' were

often simplistic and based on common sense. However, when these solutions were not as effective then the fault would be on those who did not follow the decisions, were opposed, or the solution was not realized in its potential (for example, there were not enough rounds of nationwide testing that would prevent large-scale lockdown). The first hypothesis can be reframed based on the analysis as "the role of the people is reduced and populist leaders present themselves as the ones with the solutions which are usually simplistic and novel on the basis of their representing 'the people'".

When unpopular decisions needed to be adopted, the populist leader, Matovič, decided to emphasise the necessity and claimed that the regulation was on the basis of experts' recommendations. This type of approach gives legitimacy to the decision and shifts the attention to the experts who are responsible and blamed for the decision. However, he decided on his own projects (nationwide testing) that would "solve" the rise of numbers thus positioning himself into the role of saviour. The major spikes of the blame-shifting were connected with the failure of his decisions, which led to the increasing opposition toward his decisions and worsening situation. Therefore, all these factors need to be taken into account while evaluating the second hypothesis.

A further finding of the analysis is broadening the group of those 'irresponsible'. Populist leaders divide society into two groups 'the people' and 'the elites' / 'others'. In this case, 'others' substantially expanded that included all those opposed to him, ordinary people who did not follow regulations, and the previous government. Consistent with this claim, the group of 'responsible', which represents 'the people', becomes narrower. The reframing of the second hypothesis based on the analysis can be formulated as "with the worsening situation

55

and failure of the initiative of populist leader the group of 'others' broaden while the leader position himself as the saviour".

In the actual crisis situation, populist leaders do not need to create an image of crisis in contrary to the 'performance' crisis, where the perception of crisis needs to be invented and thus create an image of emergency. The style of crisis communication changed based on the context development, thus following the reactionary style over a concrete logic of response. This can be portrayed by following Moffitt's model of populist 'performance' of crisis, which shows a concrete logic of response. The model identifies six steps of identifying the crisis, setting it to a larger narrative, identifying the actors, and presenting the solution. Even though the populist leader chosen for the analysis mentions the failures of the previous government, for example, to secure medical supplies and establish the groups of those who behave 'responsibly' and 'irresponsibly' thus consequently deepening the polarization. The solutions to the crisis are presented as common sense and ideas of the populist leader himself. However, there are no significant or coherent references to a larger narrative of crisis which is a necessary part of Moffitt's model. The narrative during the Covid crisis in this case is reactionary, therefore, Moffitt's model cannot be fully adapted.

The contribution of this thesis to the larger literature on populism is in the study of a populist leader who rises into power after being part of the opposition, together with the urgency to deal with a crisis. Several findings from the previous literature on the initial response to the Covid crisis were not confirmed. A most visible example is the notion of "fighting the virus" (Eibl and Gregor, 2021; Wodak, 2021a) which was not prominent in this analysis in comparison to other frames. The overall conclusion is that the populist leader, in this case, has not changed his approach and continued with an oppositional style of communication.

56

Summarizing crisis communication can be contrasted with Lilleker et al.'s analysis of crisis communication of several leaders across countries. The overall characteristics of communication are personalization, strengthening the role of expertise, and expanding polarization within the society. Lilleker et al. (2021) point out that the majority of leaders, including Orbán or Bolsonaro, took a personalized approach when one person would represent the main communication source in the country. Experts and other ministers would be present during the press conference, however, the communication is still centred around one individual. In connection to the first characteristic, while the experts were not at the centre, they were still an important part of the communication.

The regulations were presented as based on the opinion and recommendations from the experts which provides legitimacy to the decisions. Lilleker et al. (2021) mention a factor of building unity in compliance with the notion of national unity. In the case of Slovakia, the framing differs in terms of expansion of the group of 'others' who are representing the threat together with the virus itself. The 'others' present a group of people who did not agree with the regulations or had a different opinion than the populist leader. The logic of them being framed as a danger is in posing a threat to the public health while only the populist leader, who derives legitimacy from 'the people', can effectively represent the interests of the public.

The main implication of the study is in the understanding of the populist style of communication during a crisis situation. While populist leaders rely on the division between 'the people' and 'the elite' / 'others', in crisis this division is reinforced and the latter group expands. By focusing on one particular leader throughout a longer period of time, the study offers a better understanding of various mechanisms of populist crisis communication.

Populist leaders justify their right to govern on a basis of representing 'the people' and acting for their benefit. It shows the attitude of the leader whose attempts of implementing popular decisions failed and the unpopular regulations had to be adopted as a result.

Future research on the topic could focus on the comparison as well as an in-depth analysis of the development of crisis communication of populist leaders in various contexts. What are the main traits of communication? Does the existing polarization in society strengthen or does the group of 'others' expand, as was the case in Slovakia? What are the deciding factors that affect the communication style? This thesis provides ideas on how to construct a framework for such future research.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Sources for preliminary list of coding categories

| Populism (based on Mudde's general definition) | 'The people' |
| --- | --- |
| | 'The elites' |
| | Manichean outlook |

| Dimensions of populism (based on Wodak, 2019b) | Nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism |
| --- | --- |
| | Anti-élitism |
| | Authoritarianism |
| | Conservativism/Historical revisionism |

| Populist legitimization strategies (Wodak, 2015) | Authorization |
| --- | --- |
| | Moral evaluation |
| | Rationalization |
| | Mythopoesis |

| Populist communication aspects (Wodak, 2021b) | Being part of 'the people' |
| --- | --- |
| | Impoliteness |

| Blame-shifting (Hansson, 2015) | Scapegoating |
| --- | --- |
| | Establishing the 'threat' |

| 'Leading a war' frame (Wodak, 2021a) | Fighting the virus |
| --- | --- |
| | The war against the virus |
| | Victory over the virus |
| | Defending the country |
| | Emergency |
| | An emotional appeal to fear |
| | Need for regulations |

| The religious frame (Wodak, 2021a) | Resurrection |
| --- | --- |
| | Death as the unknown |
| | The promise of a better future |
| | The victory of life over death |

| Dialogic frame (Wodak, 2021a) | We are all on the same boat |
| --- | --- |
| | Explaining the situation |
| | Appeal to rationality |
| | Togetherness |
| | We can save people |
| | Admitting the un-democratic side of regulations |

| 'Emphasising trust' frame (Wodak, 2021a) | Appeal to personal responsibility ('own' responsibility) |
| --- | --- |

| | Advice rather than regulation/order |
|---|---|
| | Death as a sacrifice for the well-being of the majority |
| | Emphasis on interpersonal and institutional trust |

# Appendix 2. Template for collection of basic information about press conferences

Speech number:
Date:
Title:
Topic:
Present:
Prompts:
Length:
Location:
Date of editing:
Link:
Context:

| 'The people' | the pure ones<br>majority<br>unified entity<br>representing 'the good' | |
|---|---|---|
| 'The elites' | the corrupt ones<br>minority<br>destroying 'our' way of life<br>representing 'the evil' | |
| Manichean outlook | dualistic division<br>no 'middle ground'<br>good or evil, right or wrong | |
| Nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism | emphasising homeland<br>emphasising ethnos/community defined in nativist terms (referring to blood-relation)<br>nation/homeland under a threat (invaders/the others) | |
| Anti-élitism | EU scepticism<br>strive for a 'true democracy'<br>democracy reduced to the majoritarian principle (the rule of 'the people') | |
| Authoritarianism | a saviour<br>leader in the role of Robin Hood (protecting the welfare | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | state, supporting the 'simple folk')<br>leader in the role of 'strict father'<br>a leader needs the power to guarantee 'law and order' and 'security' | |
| Conservativism/Historical revisionism | representation of tradition/conservative values preserving the status quo or a return to former 'better times'<br>narrative, of an idealized past<br>betrayal and treachery by 'the others' | |
| Authorization | legitimacy based on referring to authority<br>authority as a person<br>authority as a tradition<br>authority as a custom<br>authority as a law | |
| Moral evaluation | legitimacy based on referring to morals<br>morality based on the value system | |
| Rationalization | legitimacy based on referring to common sense<br>reference to knowledge claims<br>reference to arguments<br>based on the rationale of common experience "It happened to all of us" or "We all experienced this" | |
| Mythopoesis | legitimacy achieved by narratives<br>"telling" small stories or fragments of narrative structures about the past or future | |
| Being part of 'the people' | positioning of the leader as a part of 'the people' while legitimizing their 'right to power' as coming directly from 'the people'<br>having the same behaviour as | |

68

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 'the people' and same use of language<br>distancing from 'the elite' | |
| Presenting general will of 'the people' | implying that 'the people' have a unified and unchanging will connected to Being part of 'the people' narrative thus populist leaders can represent general will because they are part of 'the people' and having the same general will | |
| Impoliteness | rude behaviour towards 'the elite' (the opposition, journalists, public individuals, etc.)<br>"I do not need to play your game" attitude<br>violating of norms and expectations in the context | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Fighting the virus | general portrayal of the virus as a threat or as an enemy<br>the narrative of we need to fight against the enemy | |
| The war against the virus | pandemic is a war against an invisible enemy<br>military jargon | |
| Victory over the virus | focusing on the future<br>positive language of achievements<br>justification based on the "What we need to do in order to win" | |
| Defending country | the country is in a war<br>appeal to national unity | |
| Emergency | need to implement a state of emergency<br>appeal to the urgency of the situation | |
| An emotional appeal to fear | the constant presence of death and an invisible enemy | |

| | everyone is in danger | |
|---|---|---|
| Need for regulations | in order to save lives "we need to follow the regulations" regulations need to be placed in order to protect 'ourselves' emphasising the necessity people do not know how to protect themselves, therefore, regulations are necessary | |
| Scapegoating | a group blamed for posing a threat can be part of the minority or 'the elite' the strategy of blame-shifting when leaders allocate the blame put on them to another group emphasising incompetence of the previous government or management of the institutions | |
| Threat | a threat to 'our' way of life or to 'our' society can be a minority group in society or 'the others' who do not belong to 'the people' thus do not possess the same values a threat in the context of a pandemic is a threat to 'our' health or poses a risk to 'our' lives | |
| Legitimacy from 'the people' | establishing a narrative that the regulations are for the good of the public the legitimacy of the decisions is based on people's trust | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Comparison/Justification through comparison | establish a positive image of the 'our way of handling things' through comparison with other countries or other governments justification of the decisions through comparison | |

| Protecting ourselves and the country | there is a need to protect ourselves and the country by following the rules and supporting decisions made by the government acting for the general good of 'the people' | |
|---|---|---|
| Attacking 'others' | 'the others' are those who are not presenting ideas who are the best for 'the people' their decision is based on the popularity pools and not the good for 'the people', therefore, they act against 'the people' | |
| Need for a change | the emphasis is on the need or necessity to change the laws (or constitution) or to pass new laws the legitimacy for the action is based on the argument of helping 'the people' or delivering the needed aid for 'the people' the change can be also presented on a larger scale as the need for a change of institutions or system | |
| Decisions for 'the people' | the government is implementing regulations and decisions in order to help people at the same time, the regulations or decisions are for 'the people' the regulation and decisions are presented as the necessity to ensure public good and protect people from either economic or health position | |

| Resurrection | a reference to Christianity an allusion to the redemption | |
|---|---|---|
| Death as the unknown | death is portrayed as the true | |

71

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | unknown<br>used to morally legitimise the restrictive measures while using the natural fear of death | |
| The promise of a better future | in the religious narrative, the promise of a better future is connected with suffering<br>the better future comes after a sacrifice implying that people need to endure the restrictions to ensure the future without the virus | |
| The victory of life over death | connected to a frame of *The promise of a better future* but with a more direct implication<br>people first have to suffer and make large sacrifices in order to be saved and resurrected<br>often connected with a metaphor of a catastrophe when people are innocent and powerless and need to endure the catastrophe | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| We are all on the same boat | positioning the government and citizens on the same level<br>government and citizens have the same responsibilities in 'fighting' the virus | |
| Explaining the situation | rather than commanding, the government explain the situation and the threat of virus and the usefulness of the regulation | |
| Appeal to rationality | appealing to the rational understanding of the crisis<br>the regulations are the rational response to the development of the situation | |
| Togetherness | appeal to collective responsibility<br>narrative of 'we are all in it together and we need to act together' | |

| We can save people | the actions of individuals can have an impact on others associated with the need to protect the elderly and those who can be affected the most | |
|---|---|---|
| Admitting the un-democratic side of regulations | not justifying the regulations rather emphasising the necessity and the uniqueness of the crisis | |

| Appeal to personal responsibility ('own' responsibility) | the mutual trust between citizens and institutions is established<br>citizens are trusted to be responsible and to protect themselves | |
|---|---|---|
| Advice rather than regulation/order | the regulations are not binding citizens are politely advised to keep follow the instructions rather than ordered by legislation and being punished | |
| Death as a sacrifice for the well-being of the majority | death being normalized and seen as unavoidable consequences of the crisis death of the elderly or the vulnerable is seen as a sacrifice for the benefit of the majority which can lead a relatively normal life (as before the crisis) | |
| Emphasis on interpersonal and institutional trust | possible in a society with high trust in institutions<br>the government trust citizens and vice versa | |

# Appendix 3. List of press conferences

| No. | Date | Topic | Link |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 22.03.2020 | The state of the reserves and the plan of the testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172238/tb-i-matovica-a-m-krajciho-o-stave-statnych-hmotnych-rezerv |
| 2 | 23.03.2020 | The responsibilities of the task force, order of the tests, effective ways of dealing | www.ta3.com/clanok/172318/tb-i-matovica-o-zriadeni-permanentneho-krizoveho-stabu |
| 3 | 24.03.2020 | Presenting new regulations | www.ta3.com/clanok/172352/tb-predstavitelov-vlady-o-novych-opatreniach-proti-nakaze |
| 4 | 25.03.2020 | New economic regulations and purchase of medical materials | www.ta3.com/clanok/172426/tb-premiera-i-matovica-a-ministra-r-mikulca-o-nakazenych-a-respiratoroch |
| 5 | 25.03.2020 | New social aid for people and how it will be implemented | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172436/tb-i-matovica-a-m-krajniaka-o-socialnej-pomoci |
| 6 | 26.03.2020 | The new method of testing and involvement of private laboratories | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172532/tb-premiera-i-matovica-po-stretnuti-so-zastupcami-laboratorii |
| 7 | 27.03.2020 | The increase in testing and the process of testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172606/tb-i-matovica-a-m-krajciho-o-vyssom-pocte-testovanych |
| 8 | 28.03.2020 | Introduction of new regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172687/tb-i-matovica-a-m-krajciho-o-vysledkoch-zasadnutia-krizoveho-stabu |
| 9 | 29.03.2020 | First aid for employers, entrepreneurs, and companies | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172728/tb-predstavitelov-vlady-o-ekonomickych-opatreniach |
| 10 | 31.03.2020 | The prediction for the following month | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172846/tb-i-matovica-a-m-smatanu-o-predpoklade-sirenia-koronavirusu |
| 11 | 01.04.2020 | Establishment of the Cooperation Fund and possible 'blackout' | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172943/tb-i-matovica-a-koalicnych-partnerov-o-fonde-vzajomnej-pomoci |
| 12 | 01.04.2020 | Testing in Roma settlements and blackout | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/172964/tb-i-matovica-a-buckovej-a-p-pollaka-o-akcnom-plane-pre-romske-komunity |
| 13 | 03.04.2020 | The Second financial aid | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173123/tb-i-matovica-a-e-hegera-o-odlozeni-splatok-po- |

| | | | dohode-s-bankami |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | 05.04.2020 | The restrictions during the Easter holidays | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173275/tb-i-matovica-o-navrhu-na-obmedzenie-pohybu-pocas-velkej-noci |
| 15 | 06.04.2020 | The results of the meeting with unions and creating better conditions for employees | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173306/tb-i-matovica-a-m-magdoska-po-rokovani-s-odborarmi |
| 16 | 06.04.2020 | The number of tested and the usefulness of regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173308/tb-i-matovica-a-j-mikasa-o-aktualnych-vysledkoch-testovania |
| 17 | 06.04.2020 | The limits on the free movement | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173354/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-vlady-o-prijatych-opatreniach |
| 18 | 07.04.2020 | Development of Slovak test | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173379/tb-i-matovica-a-r-mistrika-o-testoch-od-slovenskych-vedcov |
| 19 | 07.04.2020 | Future aid for large companies | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173393/tb-i-matovica-po-stretnuti-so-zastupcami-zamestnavatelov |
| 20 | 07.04.2020 | The conditions with leasing companies | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173394/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-s-lizingovymi-spolocnostami |
| 21 | 07.04.2020 | Regulations during the Easter holidays | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173398/tb-i-matovica-o-pocte-novych-nakazenych-koronavirusom |
| 22 | 08.04.2020 | The failure to implement new regulation | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173510/tb-i-matovica-o-naraste-nakazenych-koronavirusom |
| 23 | 09.04.2020 | The enforcement of new regulations in Roma settlements | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173562/tb-i-matovica-k-vyskytom-koronavirusu-v-romskych-osadach |
| 24 | 11.04.2020 | Availability of new quarantine centres | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173720/tb-i-matovica-a-r-mikulca-o-novych-priestoroch-pre-repatriantov |
| 25 | 14.04.2020 | The preparation of a new plan of opening the economy | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173853/tb-predstavitelov-vlady-a-odbornikov-o-ekonomickych-opatreniach |
| 26 | 15.04.2020 | The economic prediction | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/173924/tb-e-hegera-a-i-matovica-o-novej-makroprognoze-mf |
| 27 | 17.04.2020 | The role of the economic task force | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174093/tb-i-matovica-po-stretnuti-s-ekonomickym-krizovym-stabom |

| 28 | 17.04.2020 | The new version regulations and current situation | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174104/tb-i-matovica-a-j-mikasa-o-vysledkoch-krizoveho-stabu |
|---|---|---|---|
| 29 | 20.04.2020 | Introduction of a new plan | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174282/tb-premiera-a-krizoveho-stabu-o-postupnom-otvarani-ekonomiky |
| 30 | 21.04.2020 | Some of the new regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174350/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-spusteni-planu-na-uvolnovanie-opatreni |
| 31 | 24.04.2020 | The update on the economic regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174587/tb-i-matovica-a-e-hegera-po-ekonomickom-krizovom-stabe |
| 32 | 25.04.2020 | The results of quarantine in Bystrany | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174656/tb-premiera-i-matovica-po-navsteve-romskej-osady-v-bystranoch |
| 33 | 28.04.2020 | The epidemiologic situation in Slovakia | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/174838/tb-premiera-i-matovica-po-stretnuti-s-epidemiologmi |
| 34 | 04.05.2020 | Relaxing of the regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/175254/tb-i-matovica-a-konzilia-odbornikov-o-uvolnovani-opatreni |
| 35 | 13.05.2020 | The gift for Slovakia | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/175889/tb-i-matovica-a-j-nada-o-dare-pre-slovensko |
| 36 | 15.05.2020 | Presentation of the 1st Slovak tests | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176032/tb-i-matovica-o-vyrobe-100-tisic-slovenskych-testov-na-koronavirus |
| 37 | 18.05.2020 | Entering the 4th phase | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176231/tb-i-matovica-o-stvrtej-faze-uvolnovania-opatreni |
| 38 | 19.05.2020 | Launch of the e-quarantine | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176299/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-spusteni-smart-karanteny-a-jej-podmienkach |
| 39 | 20.05.2020 | The aid for tenants, renters, and travel agencies | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176372/tb-i-matovica-a-r-sulika-o-pomoci-pre-najomcov-a-cestovne-kancelarie |
| 40 | 21.05.2020 | The new economic agreement | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176464/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-hospodarskej-a-socialnej-rady |
| 41 | 25.05.2020 | The results of the meeting with the fitness centres union | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176703/tb-i-matovica-po-stretnuti-so-zastupcami-fitnescentier |
| 42 | 25.05.2020 | An update to regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176720/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-konzilia-o-uvolnovani-opatreni |
| 43 | 27.05.2020 | Answers questions from | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/176866/tb- |

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| 45 | 04.06.2020 | State of emergency | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/177464/tb-i-matovica-a-r-mikulca-o-nudzovom-stave |
| 46 | 09.06.2020 | Relaxing regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/177751/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-konzilia-o-dalsom-uvolneni-opatreni |
| 47 | 19.06.2020 | An update to the new version of regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/178459/tb-i-matovica-j-mikasa-a-epidemiologov-o-dalsom-uvolnovani |
| 48 | 02.07.2020 | An update on regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/179393/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-konzilia-odbornikov-epidemiologov |
| 49 | 09.07.2020 | Reaction to increasing numbers | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/179393/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-konzilia-odbornikov-epidemiologov |
| 50 | 13.07.2020 | The results of the analysis regarding the pandemic situation in Slovakia | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/180143/tb-i-matovica-j-mikasa-a-m-krajciho-po-rokovani-konzilia |
| 51 | 12.08.2020 | An update on the pandemic situation | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/182188/tb-i-matovica-a-dalsich-predstavitelov-vlady-po-rokovani |
| 52 | 14.08.2020 | An impact of regulations to economy | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/182340/tb-i-matovica-a-m-klimeka-aj-o-vyvoji-slovenskej-ekonomiky |
| 53 | 14.09.2020 | Update on regulations regarding cultural and sports events | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/184412/tb-i-matovica-o-vysledkoch-rokovania-ustredneho-krizoveho-stabu |
| 54 | 16.09.2020 | New regulations with a focus on social events | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/184524/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-protipandemickych-opatreniach |
| 55 | 22.09.2020 | The economic prediction and current situation | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/184925/tb-e-hegera-a-i-matovica-o-makroekonomickej-prognoze |
| 56 | 23.09.2020 | Worsening situation in Slovakia | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/184988/tb-premiera-i-matovica-k-aktualnym-krokom-proti-pandemii |
| 57 | 25.09.2020 | Introducing new regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/185305/tb-i-matovica-a-j-mikasa-o-vysledkoch-rokovania-ustredneho-krizoveho-stabu |

| 58 | 28.09.2020 | New regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/185305/tb-i-matovica-a-j-mikasa-o-vysledkoch-rokovania-ustredneho-krizoveho-stabu |
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| 59 | 09.10.2020 | A gift of PCR tests | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186049/tb-premiera-i-matovica-a-vedcov-o-dare-pcr-testov-slovensku |
| 60 | 9.10.2020 | Justifying the presence of armed forces in hospitals | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186033/tb-predstavitelov-vlady-aj-o-nasadeni-ozbrojenych-sil-do-boja-s-pandemiou |
| 61 | 11.10.2020 | Adopting new regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186178/tb-ustredneho-krizoveho-stabu-o-sprisnenych-opatreniach |
| 62 | 12.10.2020 | Explaining the statements spread by Richard Sulik | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186267/tb-predsedu-vlady-i-matovica-o-vyrokoch-r-sulika |
| 63 | 14.10.2020 | Details on the aid | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186378/tb-i-matovica-a-predstavitelov-jeho-vlady-o-prvej-pomoci |
| 64 | 17.10.2020 | Introducing the idea of nationwide testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186589/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-celoplosnom-pretestovani-slovenska |
| 65 | 18.10.2020 | Details on nationwide testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186645/tb-po-rokovani-vlady-o-celoplosnom-testovani |
| 66 | 20.10.2020 | Appeal to medical staff to volunteer during testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186745/tb-i-matovica-a-m-krajciho-o-zapojeni-zdravotnikov-do-testovania |
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| 68 | 21.10.2020 | Details on the current situation | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186826/tb-i-matovica-po-rokovani-vlady-o-testovani-a-moznom-lockdowne |
| 69 | 22.10.2020 | Details on testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186928/tb-i-matovica-a-ministrov-po-rokovani-uks-o-lockdowne-a-testovani |
| 70 | 23.10.2020 | The last details on testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/186999/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-pilotnom-testovani-na-orave-a-v-bardejove |
| 71 | 26.10.2020 | Results of pilot testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/187129/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-vyhodnoteni-pilotneho-testovania |
| 72 | 26.10.2020 | Decision on nationwide testing and evaluation of pilot testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/187147/tb-i-matovica-j-nada-a-m-krajciho-o-celoplosnom-testovani |

| 73 | 28.10.2020 | Details to testing | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/187256/tb-po-rokovani-vlady-o-celoplosnom-testovani-a-obmedzeni-pohybu |
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| 74 | 29.10.2020 | A reward for the medical staff | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/187349/tb-predsedu-vlady-i-matovica-o-mimoriadnej-odmene-pre-zdravotnikov |
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| 77 | 01.11.2020 | Evaluation of the situation in Komarno and expressing gratitude to Orban | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/187501/tb-i-matovica-a-r-mikulca-po-navsteve-odberneho-miesta-v-komarne |
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| 84 | 11.11.2020 | Information on the pandemic situation and options | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/188101/tb-i-matovica-a-m-krajciho-o-nudzovom-stave-i-financovani-vszp |
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| 86 | 16.11.2020 | New regulations | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/188407/tb-predstavitelov-vlady-o-navrate-deti-do-skol-i-rezime-na-hraniciach |
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| 93 | 16.12.2020 | Evaluation of the current situation | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/190226/tb-premiera-i-matovica-po-rokovani-vlady-o-zakaze-vychadzania |
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| 104 | 19.02.2021 | Information on the discussion regarding Sputnik V | https://www.ta3.com/clanok/194293/tb-premiera-i-matovica-o-vakcine-sputnik-v |
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