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FROM THE “RALLY ‘ROUND THE FLAG” EFFECT TO A SOCIAL CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE. POLAND AND SLOVAKIA IN THE FIRST YEAR OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Agnieszka TURSKA-KAWA, Peter CSANYI and Rudolf KUCHARČÍK¹

The pandemic COVID-19 became a challenge for both societies and governments. While most countries and citizens reacted similarly to the unknown strength of the virus at the start of the pandemic, the situation in each country began to vary more and more each month. Poland and Slovakia are interesting cases in this context. One year after the WHO declared a pandemic, these countries are experiencing one of the worst crises in history. In Poland, despite the initial social mobilisation, after a very short time, many government decisions ceased to be perceived as protecting citizens. In the first period of the pandemic, the Slovak government coped with the situation much better, which changed significantly in the autumn of 2020. The article aims to analyse how an active “rally ‘round the flag” effect and the resulting natural potential for social mobilisation to fight the pandemic were wasted in Poland and Slovakia due to irresponsible political decisions undermining the citizens’ trust in the governments’ good intentions.

Key words: pandemic restrictions; the “rally ‘round the flag”; civic society; political behaviours.

1 INTRODUCTION

On January 30 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a “public health emergency of international concern” (Li et al. 2020). The pandemic became a challenge for both societies and governments. The unknown

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mechanisms of the virus, as well as consecutive reports about the situation getting out of control in many countries, made governments respond by imposing numerous restrictions on their citizens in the public space. They were supposed to contain the spread of the virus and indirectly to provide a sense of security and to restore the prospects of returning to the much-anticipated normality. Their effectiveness required, to a large extent, coherence and determination on the part of all citizens. Consistent behaviour, based among other things on the belief in the rationality of the decisions made by the government, was one of the key factors in the fight against the pandemic. Citizens should believe that what the government does makes sense (Malešič 2021). Gaining public trust through responsible decisions was important from the point of view of implementing rapid and profound changes (Coromina and Kustec 2020; Vera-Valdés 2021). In addition, engaging in justified social behaviours requires knowledge and is difficult when often conflicting or incomplete information keeps flowing in from different sources (Siegrist and Zingg 2014). Trust is one of the ways of reducing the complexity of unclear situations (Luhmann 1989) and, consequently, facilitating its understanding.

While in the early days of the pandemic, most countries and citizens reacted similarly when confronted with the unknown strength of the virus, the situation in individual countries started to differ increasingly with each passing month. Poland and Slovakia are interesting cases in this context. One year after the WHO declared the pandemic, these countries are experiencing one of their worst crises ever. In Poland, despite the initial social mobilisation, after a very short time, many of the decisions made by the government ceased to be perceived as ones providing protection for the citizens, but rather generated a few discussions about their political context, namely using them to gain certain political resources or support of interest groups. In the first period of the pandemic, the Slovak government coped with the situation much better, which changed significantly in the autumn of 2020. At that time, subsequent government decisions destroyed the potential, which had been maintained for a long time. We put forward the proposition that one of the key factors contributing to the collapse of the social and political situation after a year of fighting against the pandemic was the breaking of trust in the actions of governments by politicians themselves. Central decisions were supposed to give citizens a sense of security, which, from the point of view of the diagnoses showing the deteriorating psychological, social and economic condition of societies (Augustyniak et al. 2020; 'Kondycja Psychiczna Polaków' 2020), has certainly failed. The governments of Poland and Slovakia have faced a huge wave of criticism over their actions aimed at stopping the spread of the virus. The legitimacy of their decisions was publicly challenged, and the public opinion was that they were chaotic and ill-considered. In March 2021, the OECD published the results of a survey on citizens' trust in governments. Poland ranked 21st (out of 24) among the surveyed European Union countries, scoring 27.3 per cent, which represents a decrease by half vs the 2019 result. Slovakia accompanies Poland at the bottom of the ranking list, coming 19th with a score of 30.7 per cent, which still represents a slight increase compared to the previous survey ('General Government - Trust in Government - OECD Data' 2021). The reflection presented here shows how an active "rally 'round the flag'" effect, along with the resulting natural potential for social mobilisation to fight the pandemic, was wasted in Poland and Slovakia due to irresponsible political decisions undermining the citizens' trust in the governments' good intentions.

2 THE “RALLY ‘ROUND THE FLAG” EFFECT. POTENTIAL FOR SOCIAL MOBILISATION EARLY ON IN THE PANDEMIC

In a pandemic situation, where direct contact between people is limited to the necessary minimum, and several restrictions have to be respected for the common good, governments faced the extremely difficult task of maintaining civic cohesion as restrictions were being introduced limiting civic freedoms and liberties. The arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Europe and its rapid spread generated consistent reactions on the part of citizens in most countries, horrified by the lack of answers to many fundamental questions concerning the pandemic. The initial potential which the governments should have tapped was valuable and conducive to the introduction of even the toughest restrictions for citizens (Kukovič 2021). This is due to the “rally ‘round the flag” effect. It appears in situations of profound crisis, shaking the citizens' sense of security on many levels, generated, for example, by terrorist attacks or natural disasters.² As a result, support for the government temporarily increases (Mueller 1970), which stems from three main sources: *communicative*, *institutional* and *psychological*. The first source is related to the focus on the government's action taken to counteract the crisis, dominating the political discourse in the media. They highlight in a natural manner the politicians' intentions to protect and restore the social order that has been lost (Baker and Oneal 2001). The second source involves the reduction of the potential for criticism of the government's actions by the opposition through the need to cooperate with the government to counter the crisis. Consequently, the level of polarisation, measured by the dispute between the government and the opposition, decreases. This makes it possible to form a united front in the fight, regardless of the party labels. This may lead to a situation in which voters who used to be opposed or neutral begin to support the government (Baum 2002). The third source is anxiety, related to the sense of security being suddenly shaken and to the difficulty in finding clear answers to fundamental existential questions, concerning above all the prospects for the coming days, weeks and months. Anxiety can also increase support for the government's difficult policy, restricting civil liberties (Huddy, Feldman and Weber 2007).

The “rally ‘round the flag” effect makes citizens start to believe to a greater extent than before that the government takes actions in their interest, supporting and trusting them. This is a potential that, accompanied by appropriately moderated directions in the fight against the difficult situation, makes it possible to overcome it with significantly higher social support than in stable periods. The role of trust in the moderation of attitudes towards the restrictions proved important in many studies carried out during the H1N1 influenza pandemic. Trust was a key driver of compliance with the recommendations concerning the pandemic in Italy (Prati, Pietrantoni and Zani 2011) and in the UK (Rubin et al. 2009). Research results showed that individuals presenting a higher level of trust towards the Ministry of Health were more likely to adopt the recommended behaviours than others. Trust in the government also correlated positively with the willingness to get vaccinated in a study on the H1N1 pandemic in the Netherlands (van der Weerd et al. 2011). Similarly, trust in the US government correlated positively with the readiness of the US public opinion to get vaccinated during the H1N1 pandemic in 2009 (Quinn et al. 2009).

² See Prebilič and Kukovič (2021).

In Poland and Slovakia, the “rally ‘round the flag” effect was clearly visible in public opinion polls. In Poland, in March, right at the start of the pandemic, a one-month improvement in ratings of the government’s actions and of the political situation in Poland was recorded (*‘Nastroje Społeczne w Pierwszej Połowie Marca’ 2020*). In the monthly ranking of trust in politicians for March, the Minister of Health, Łukasz Szumowski, came in third, 46 per cent with a record increase in trust by as many as 27 percentage points, just behind President Andrzej Duda with 62 per cent (with an increase by 2 pp versus the result recorded in February) and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (59 per cent with an increase by 4 pp). (*‘Marcowy Ranking Zaufania Do Polityków’ 2020*). In Slovakia, the situation was quite similar, and the citizens’ trust in their politicians were obvious. In the monthly ranking of trust in politicians for March, the “faces” of the fight against the virus, Peter Pellegrini with 74.2 per cent (then-PM) and Igor Matovič with 63.5 per cent (opposition leader and PM-elect), were ranked in the top three, just behind President Zuzana Čaputová with 78.2 per cent (*‘Dôveryhodnosť politických lídrov’ 2020*). In the case of both (all three) Prime Ministers, the numbers were better than before.

3 PHASE ONE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST OF VIRUS – SPRING 2020

The first period of the pandemic shows two completely different relations between the ruler and citizens in Poland and Slovakia. Both countries started fighting the pandemic with a similar social potential - citizens who were ready to follow the most difficult restrictions to return to a stable situation in the country as soon as possible. The potential of trust generated by the crisis made it possible to believe that restrictions are necessary and that the readiness to comply with them obliges everyone regardless of their position in the country. In Poland, however, civic readiness was quickly destroyed by the decisions of the rulers. In the first period of the pandemic, Slovakia became an example of cooperation and responsibility of the authorities and citizens in fighting the crisis.

In Poland, the first patient infected with the new type of coronavirus was diagnosed on March 4, 2020. On March 13, 2020, shortly after the first death was reported as a consequence of a COVID-19 infection, the Polish government recognised the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic as a serious threat to the citizens and declared a state of epidemic emergency (*Journal of Laws Dz.U. of 2019, items 1239 and 1495*). This situation made it possible to impose the first restrictions, by which the government began the process of curbing the spread of the coronavirus. Among other things, border control was reintroduced; a 14-day quarantine was imposed on people returning to Poland; some of the shops in shopping centres were closed; the activity of restaurants, pubs and bars was significantly restricted; school and university students started distance learning. The first restrictions were introduced following the example of other European countries faced with a hitherto unknown threat, but they did not improve the situation.

Initially, citizens mobilised to fight the pandemic. As they watched the tragic situation in China and in Italy unfold, people were united by fear faced with the difficult situation, regardless of their political views. However, already in the first few weeks, the government’s decisions caused ruptures in the civic community. The foundation of trust in the key ministry, the Ministry of Health, was severely undermined, among other things, by the so-called face mask and ventilator scandals. The first case involved the purchase, for over PLN 5 million, by the

Ministry of Health, of worthless face masks which did not meet the Polish standards. The goods were sold by a ski instructor, a friend of the family of Łukasz Szumowski, Minister of Health. The other incident concerned the signing, by the Ministry of Health, of a contract with E&K for the supply of 1,241 ventilators. The respective company, owned by an arms dealer according to the media, did not perform the contract in its entirety, delivering 200 ventilators without a warranty. Court proceedings were then initiated to secure assets and for payment, but the case was much amplified in the media, mainly due to the contractor's past.

The authority of the public media also suffered in the early days of the pandemic. Faced with distance learning, the Polish state television TVP and the Ministry of National Education offered the "School with TVP" project on March 30. This involved classes whose content was supposed to follow the core school curriculum, broadcast on free-to-air, universally available channels. The quality of the distance education provided on television was criticised by professionals and parents and by the students. Almost every lesson was criticised, parodied and ridiculed not only for the boring scripts but above all for the numerous factual errors in the material. The criticism was further fuelled by the government's decision, made a few weeks earlier, to allocate PLN 2 billion to public media favourably inclined towards the government.

The general public was becoming increasingly afflicted by the restrictions with every passing week. At the same time, the media widely commented on situations showing that the government in Poland was bound by completely different laws than the citizens. Examples worth indicating include the 10th anniversary of the Smolensk crash, when Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of the Law and Justice party (PiS), and a group of the party's politicians went to visit the victims' memorial, not wearing masks and without social distancing. Not only this event met with criticism, other was manifested in the musical and public success of Kazik Staszewski's song "Twój ból jest lepszy niż mój" ["Your pain is better than mine"]. The lyrics criticise the politician for visiting a cemetery closed due to the pandemic, at a time when other people were not allowed to visit the graves of their loved ones. On May 15, the song topped the Polish Radio Three music chart, but the result was subsequently annulled by the radio's management (Oworuszko 2020). Also, in May, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's Chancellery published a series of photos showing the prime minister sitting at a table with colleagues and restaurant owners without face masks. In Poland, stringent restrictions applied at that time in restaurants.

Despite the restrictions introduced, the attempts to stop the virus from spreading in Poland failed. The number of infections continued to rise. However, it became increasingly difficult to maintain civic cohesion: many people lost their jobs, the economy was hit hard, and there was growing disgust with the government's actions. Despite the difficult pandemic situation, the government announced that it was loosening the restrictions from April 20 due to the worsening economic situation in Poland. Subsequent stages of unfreezing the economy and of loosening restrictions imposed on various areas of public life were also announced, scheduled for 4 and 18 May. The decision – totally unjustified from the point of view of protecting the public of the virus – could be considered dictated by the deteriorating ratings of the government, but it also prepared the ground for the presidential election, the first round of which was originally scheduled for May 10, 2020, before the pandemic.

After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, PiS sought to push through its plan for an entirely postal vote. This raised many concerns, including in relation to the risk for postal carriers and to the difficulty of voting while complying with the sanitary regime. Despite the protests of many milieus, on April 16, Mateusz Morawiecki ordered the Polish Post and the Polish Security Printing Works (PWPW) to prepare the postal voting. On May 7, the National Electoral Commission announced that the vote planned to take place three days later could not be held. Ultimately, the 2020 presidential election was held on June 28 (first round) and on July 12 (second round), using a mixed mode in which people could vote by post. In July 2020, the Polish Sejm enacted rules under which entities implementing the Prime Minister's order related to postal voting in connection with counteracting COVID-19 could apply to the head of the National Electoral Office for one-off compensation to cover the costs incurred. According to the Office's decision, the Polish Post received PLN 53,205,344, while the Polish Security Printing Works was granted PLN 3,245,061. In September, the Provincial Administrative Court in Warsaw ruled that Mateusz Morawiecki's decision obligating the Polish Post to prepare the postal voting in May had been invalid and in gross violation of the law. The Prime Minister lodged a cassation appeal against the judgment with the Supreme Administrative Court, and the resolutions to transfer the funds were passed in December.

In Slovakia, in response to the deadly coronavirus, which has spread to several countries, Slovakia adopted several preventive measures. At the end of January, the first steps of the then-Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini were to be prepared for the potential outbreak and to control airports, border crossings, and hospitals. One month later, a crisis staff was established at the Health Ministry, and an information campaign was launched on how to behave and protect oneself from coronavirus. The coronavirus made an official appearance in Slovakia during the first week of March (by this time, Slovakia was an island of no infection). The panic that most sensible observers feared much more than the actual virus had, of course, broken out even before that, as news about the rising numbers of patients was coming in from surrounding countries. On March 9, five cases had officially been confirmed in the country ('Number of new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases confirmed in Slovakia' 2020), but the situation in Slovakia remained stable. Despite the relatively stable situation, a state of emergency was announced, and the outgoing government took several preventive measures.

The main concerns voiced in connection with a possible wider outbreak of the infection in Slovakia included the ill-preparedness of the country's health care system, the apparent incapability of the authorities to communicate with each other and with its citizens, and the exchange of governments that was expected to take place within a few weeks. Due to the spreading of coronavirus in the country, the former government announced additional measures. All small retail shops and service providers were closed apart from grocery shops, pharmacies, newsagents, petrol stations, veterinary ambulances, and shops selling animal food. The government announced a national emergency for health care. Under this regime, some professions, including health care workers, fell under state orders. This way, the state was able to move health care staff and material between hospitals.

Besides, all health care providers had to stop providing planned surgeries that were not linked to life- or health-threatening cases. The Foreign Ministry was assigned to organise the repatriation of Slovak citizens who were located outside the country. All those who returned within the repatriation efforts of the

government were required to remain in quarantine facilities provided by the government ('Governmental measures' 2020).

After the parliamentary elections at the end of February 2020, the President appointed the new cabinet of Igor Matovič on March 21. Igor Matovič and his cabinet of ministers took over from Peter Pellegrini amid the biggest public health crisis in Slovakia, caused by the virus and partially by the previous governments of Smer-SD due to the country's health care system. President Zuzana Čaputová called on the government and the whole country to act as a coherent and compassionate community. She was a real connection between the government and the citizens. The newly-appointed Prime Minister, Igor Matovič, noted that Slovakia had had many problems, mainly the lack of trust in the state, but the historically biggest challenge was the pandemic. The government had a remedy for the coronavirus. It was the solidarity, responsibility, and determination of the people who care about Slovakia (Henčeková and Drugda 2020). The newly appointed crisis staff and Igor Matovič's cabinet came up with a set of measures to add to the already existing ones that had been valid in Slovakia since March 16. From the generally applied measures, probably, the most important one was to wear a protective face mask, which was obligatory outside in the streets.

Slovakia did well in the first period of the pandemic. The country's adopted measures align by and large with those adopted by many EU countries and gained the support of the Slovak population. Over 60 per cent of Slovaks, furthermore, expressed trust in the information communicated by both the outgoing and new prime ministers, thereby putting a counterweight to any populist tendencies in the region (Kudzko 2020). According to available data, we may state that Slovakia was among the most successful countries in Europe in preventing the COVID-19 spread in spring 2020. When the risks became evident, the Slovak government delivered swift and strict responses that had started in Slovakia even before the first case was detected in the country. In early March, schools and universities were closed on a voluntary basis, without a central order. Several other critical measures were implemented very fast, such as restriction of visits in hospitals, social care establishments and prisons, prohibiting any mass activities, closing borders, closing schools, closing shops and services (with exceptions), a special regime in hospitals, limiting non-emergency treatments, compulsory wearing of protective face masks in all public spaces, limiting any kind of mobility, etc. As indicated, the speed and scale of measures were supported by the fact that Slovak citizens have behaved very responsibly! The slogan "Stay at Home" was promoted and accepted; face masks used regularly. The Slovak COVID-19 pandemic results during spring 2020 were almost perfect from the epidemiologic point of view (Nemec and Spacek 2020). However, not everything was perfect in Slovakia - media and experts criticised the government over fragmented, often confused, and inconsistent communication and the lack of a systematic approach to the COVID-19 response.

One of the important factors that supported Slovakia's initial success in fighting the pandemic in spring 2020 was the fact that the government was publicly informing citizens about the pandemic and all its aspects. Besides, probably the most important factor was that Prime Minister Igor Matovič and all other government officials used protective masks when staying in public spaces. However, the Prime Minister caused some troubles and brought a kind of citizens' frustration thanks to his very often appearance in the media. The information was frequently chaotic and did not propose using penalty code

sanctions to punish non-compliance. The lack of active cooperation with NGOs, civil society, and self-governments in explaining measures, uniting society, and encouraging compliance with the requirements brought more negative aspects and reluctance to the Slovak society (Chubarova et al. 2020). Also, the government passed a law on a short-tracked procedure to allow state authorities to use localisation data from mobile phone operators. This step of the government brought more displeasure to the citizens. Despite all these facts, the citizens followed the rules, followed the restrictions and trusted the government's capability to handle the virus.

4 PHASE TWO OF THE FIGHT AGAINST THE VIRUS – SUMMER 2020

June brought relaxation both in Poland and Slovakia. The decisive decline in people infected with the virus loosened the restrictions and encouraged citizens to take summer rest. However, the announcement of the victory turned out to be premature. The situation worsened with each passing week of vacation.

In early June, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki summed up the fight against the coronavirus epidemic, judging it as far more effective in Poland compared to other countries. Finally, in June, the social situation was considered to have normalised sufficiently to lift the obligation to cover one's nose and mouth in open spaces, air traffic was restored, and hotels and other hospitality establishments reopened. The organisation of small childcare groups at nurseries and kindergartens was permitted. The situation allowed some people to go on holiday. It also encouraged voters to take part in the presidential elections: "We should not be afraid; I am saying this to senior citizens in particular. Let us all go and vote. It is important to be able to continue along this fair line of development" (*Rzeczpospolita* 2020). The victory narrative that was introduced was reflected in public opinion polls, showing an increase in positive ratings of the political and economic situation in the country since June ('Nastroje Społeczne w Drugiej Połowie Sierpnia' 2020). However, stability did not last long in Poland. Already in August, due to the deteriorating situation, it was announced that some of the restrictions would return in individual counties, with the largest number of infections. The Ministry's idea was to divide dynamically the counties into zones: red (highest risk), yellow (emergency), and green (safe), and to deliberately target the new restrictions at the areas at risk. Although public sentiment calmed down faced with the deteriorating epidemiological situation, the medical community intensified the alarm. Accusations launched against the government were related, among other things, to the failure to consult decisions with the Supreme Medical Chamber, as well as to the small number of tests performed, to the law on medical rescue services, and to the restriction of the group of physicians authorised to refer patients for tests. Because of the difficult situation, on August 17, Janusz Cieszyński, Deputy Minister of Health, resigned, followed by Minister of Health Łukasz Szumowski, who resigned on the following day.

In Slovakia, in early June, the restrictions were lifted as well as travelling into and out of the country, which resumed during the tourist season. The state of emergency ended on June 14, and the schools were reopened for the last month of the school year. Everything looked better, but in July, the seven-day average was again in double digits. The numbers continued to rise to three-digit numbers at the end of August - e.g., 114 cases on August 28 ('Number of new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases confirmed in Slovakia' 2020) and the epidemiological

authorities in Slovakia called for tighter restrictions. Family celebrations and weddings were among the riskiest events, and therefore the Slovak citizens were warned by the Health Department to organise any similar events. Here comes the first big failure of PM Igor Matovič. After the confusing communication and chaotic information, the new level of the government's ignorance was the PM's attendance at the wedding of the chairman of the OĽaNO³ group, Michal Šipoš. One hundred fifty guests were at the celebration, including Finance Minister Eduard Heger, the Head of the Government Office Július Jakab, Gábor Grendel, Deputy Chairman of the National Council of OĽaNO, and almost none of them had a mask (Gehrerová 2020). It was the beginning of the citizens' rising dissatisfaction with the new Prime Minister.

The Slovak Pandemic Commission recommended introducing a so-called "COVID Automat" Traffic Light System in Slovakia to divide the counties into three zones: red (highest risk), yellow (emergency), and green (safe) and to deliberately target the new restrictions at the areas at risk. This system was changed several times and was finally extended by four more zones (colours) by the Ministry of Health in February 2021.

5 PHASE THREE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST THE VIRUS – AUTUMN 2020

Autumn turned out to be extremely difficult for both countries on many levels. Countries' social and economic situation did not look good - national economies were falling into disrepair, citizens were already tired and impatient with the restrictions, and - apart from being afraid of getting sick - increasingly afraid of losing their livelihood. Moreover, the growing number of cases and deaths took away the prospect of a return to a stable situation. In this deteriorating condition of citizens and societies, support from the rulers based on reliable information and consistent actions aimed at dealing with the virus was essential. Meanwhile, both in Poland and Slovakia, finding a coherent strategy and responsible actions was difficult. Moreover, the crisis in Poland was used to introduce a controversial act regulating the abortion law.

In early October, the number of infected people in Poland exceeded 100,000, and the increase was becoming more and more dynamic. Consequently, on October 8, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared the whole of Poland a yellow zone, with red zones in the most severely affected areas. The worsened situation led the government to impose new, more stringent restrictions in its announcements dated 16, 23, October 30 and November 9.

Despite the deteriorating pandemic situation, the government decided to redirect its activity into another area and amend the abortion law. On October 22, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled that the provision permitting termination of pregnancy if prenatal tests or other medical circumstances pointed to a high likelihood of severe and irreversible foetal impairment or an incurable life-threatening disease of the foetus was contrary to the Polish Constitution ('Planowanie rodziny...' 2020). These circumstances were considered insufficient for the permissibility of abortion. This decision triggered mass-scale anti-government social protests that took place in several hundred Polish cities. The matter was widely reported on in foreign media. According to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Center for Reproductive Rights, the

³ Former Prime minister Igor Matovič is the leader of this political movement.

Constitutional Tribunal's decision on abortion constitutes a violation of human rights. The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, in its statement of position of October 22 2020, said that "the so-called judgment of the Constitutional Court constitutes an unprecedented attack on women's rights, family rights and individual freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment" (Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka 2020). Despite the huge social mobilisation, which constituted an increasingly large threat to the health and lives of citizens given the intensifying pandemic, PiS did not retract its decisions.

Late October saw a total of 300,000 SARS-CoV-2 infections. The government announced its decision to close cemeteries on All Saints' Day. Due to the Catholic identity of the majority of the population, this is an important celebration for most Poles. The decision was communicated to the public at the last moment, affecting flower growers and vendors. It intensified social frustrations. Flowers and candles were placed outside Law and Justice Offices across Poland. Many citizens expressed their solidarity with the vendors against the government.

In October and November, the ratings of Poland's situation dropped by half compared to March ('Nastroje Społeczne w Listopadzie' 2020), and ratings of Mateusz Morawiecki's government also went down by 20 pp ('Stosunek Do Rządu w Listopadzie' 2020).

On October 29, Prime Minister Morawiecki officially opened a temporary hospital at the National Stadium in Warsaw. It was announced that it would support other hospitals in their difficult situation. The target was to place 1,200 hospital beds there, along with new, expensive life-saving equipment. Meanwhile, the hospital became a symbol of national success propaganda. It turned out that patients whose lives were not threatened were sent to that hospital. Physicians who had volunteered to work there granted interviews, talking about the above-average accommodation provided and about the large amount of free time in which they had hoped to be saving patients' lives instead.

The critical negative specifics of Slovakia are connected with the "Second wave" of COVID-19 spread from summer 2020. Despite the experience with effectively managing the "First wave", the government argued by the end of September that everything had been under control and the newly growing number of COVID-19 cases (from mid-July) was fully manageable. Before early autumn 2020, Slovakia functioned in relaxed regimes, introduced in early summer, when COVID-19 almost disappeared. Only when the numbers of infected achieved record numbers, the Prime Minister publicly announced the return to strict anti-pandemic measures, but in a different way. He made the accusation that people's limited discipline was the core source of problems. Due to the restrictive measures started too late and people were not ready to comply, the "Second wave" was not under control, and the numbers of infected and deaths were several times higher compared to spring (Nemec et al. 2020). In Slovakia, the number of newly infected in late October per day was higher compared to the total numbers for the "First wave", and it was only the beginning. This negative change could be the fact that political support for harsh measures or even lockdown was much weaker in autumn 2020 compared to spring 2020. Another critical element should be the administrative capacity. In spring 2020, the country mobilised its administrative capacities to the "over-maximum" level. Slovakia, which has occasionally been evaluated as one of the least good administrative performers in the European Union (Palaric et al. 2017), managed tasks connected with the pandemic spread in spring really well. However,

already in spring, the country's capacity to deal with economic and social consequences turned out to be very limited. Slovak socio-economic reactions seem to be very limited, especially from the point of the total sum and correct allocation of resources pumped into the national economy.

The Slovak government defined countering disinformation and hybrid threats as one of its main goals for the next four years. In its manifesto, the government named the fight against disinformation as a priority in foreign politics, defence, education and the media. However, since the beginning of the pandemic, the destructive power of disinformation manifested itself clearly for the first time. While during the "First wave" of the pandemic, Slovakia saw itself as a "winner" of the crisis, largely thanks to the responsible behaviour of the general public, strict early measures and obligatory masks, autumn 2020 brought a much stronger "Second wave" than the country feared. The huge disinformation campaign was reflected in the bad results because the number of cases, as well as the number of deaths, had been increased significantly. People in Slovakia were unsure what information about coronavirus they could trust. Support for government-mandated restrictive measures had decreased considerably as well as their trust in government leaders. The major manifestation of the frustration and anger caused by misinformation about COVID-19 and against the government's restrictions were witnessed few times in autumn when hundreds of people joined unannounced and illegal protests in Bratislava (German Sirotnikova 2020). There were two large protests against the government and its restrictions in Bratislava (but several more in the whole country). It was a reaction to the fact that the Slovak government declared a state of emergency (later it was extended several times) on October 1 due to a rise in COVID-19 cases and later introduced new restrictions, including a ban on church services and other mass events, as well as the closure of gyms, pools, and other fitness centres, and schools switched again to online learning.

With increasing numbers of cases and casualties in October, the government decided to take the next step, and Slovakia became the first country to attempt COVID-19 testing on a national scale (Markowitz 2020). The decision of the Slovak Government to test all its adult population for SARS-CoV-2 infection sparked controversy in the country. The country made international headlines as, over the last weekend of October 2020, Slovak authorities tested almost all the country's adult population for coronavirus. A total of 3.6 million people - out of an estimated 4 million target population - were tested that weekend with a countrywide positivity rate of 1.06 per cent. Testing was repeated the following weekend in selected areas where the rate had been above 0.7 per cent. The government turned to the plan as a way of trying to halt what it said at the time was an alarming acceleration in the virus spread, with an economically costly strict three-week lockdown as the only alternative. However, infectious disease experts in Slovakia urged the government to abandon plans to repeat nationwide testing of millions of people for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) amid warnings it would be a waste of resources and doubts over its effectiveness (Holt 2021). Despite of this, PM Igor Matovič announced in mid-November that further nationwide testing would be carried out over the first three weekends of December. The experts, including few scientific experts of the government's own pandemic advisory commission, kept arguing that while the nationwide testing had been a success, further rounds would exhaust the already stretched capacity of medical workers.

In fact, COVID-19 infections fell in Slovakia after the rollout of rapid population-wide testing, but experts were not sure how much of the drop was a result of testing, as other restrictions were introduced at the same time (Pavelka 2020). The truth is that the better numbers were only temporary, and the numbers increased again very soon.

6 PHASE FOUR OF THE FIGHT AGAINST THE VIRUS – WINTER 2020

The situation in winter was a consequence of the autumn events. Regardless of the socio-political situation, November was the most dramatic month in the post-war history of Poland. Over 64,000 people died - about twice as much as the average in previous years. Despite this, Prime Minister Morawiecki, on November 30, announced on Facebook: "Data does not lie. We are winning against the epidemic!". The victory, however, was showed neither statistics nor public moods. November brought an alarming situation to Slovakia too. The seven-day average of confirmed COVID-19 deaths exceeded 20, and the numbers kept increasing ('Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases' 2020). In contrast to the Polish PM Morawiecki's "positive attitude", the Slovak PM Matovič and his government were aware of the worsening situation in the country.

In December in Poland, as Christmas was approaching, the government decided to open shopping centres, allowed to operate under a strict sanitary regime, and permit shops to open on three Sundays to counteract the excessive concentration of people in shopping facilities.

Due to the expected large circulation of people and family gatherings potentially contributing to coronavirus spread, the Polish government decided to impose a so-called national quarantine, supposed to be in effect from December 28 until January 17. During this time, it was announced that shopping centres and hotels would be closed, the latter also for business travellers. A total ban on movement was also announced, supposed to apply from 7 p.m. on New Year's Eve, December 31 2020, to 6 a.m. on New Year's Day, January 1 2021. Exceptions were made for those going out for business reasons and in emergency situations. While this idea was discussed in the public space and most definitely expected by at least some citizens, the government reinforced it by postponing the winter holidays for schools and suspending the operation of ski lifts. The annual winter holidays in Poland last two weeks and start on three different dates for various regions, so as not to prevent an excess accumulation of children in the resorts. It was announced that the holidays would start for all provinces of Poland at the same time, on January 4, lasting until January 17, with no travel due to the restrictions in place. This caused frustration not only among children and young people but above all among the owners of ski lifts, accommodation facilities and restaurants in tourist areas, as well as organisers of all sorts of camps, for whom this period is a key and often the only, source of earnings during the year.

In 2021, Poles entered full of frustration but also hopes related to a vaccine against the virus. The vaccination process started on December 27, 2020. However, the statements of the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, did not clearly encourage such precautions and were subject to wide criticism. Just before Christmas, in an interview with the Catholic newspaper "Gość Niedzielny", the President said: "Because I had COVID-19, I developed immunity, I also have antibodies, I donated plasma, so if I get vaccinated, it is the last thing. Vaccination should not be compulsory (...) "(Łoziński, 2020). In another

interview, he shared his reflection that " he does not like it when someone uses a needle "in the area of his" arms, forearms or any other part of the body "(Bereza 2020).

The beginning of 2021 is also the growing frustration of Poles - primarily entrepreneurs - against the restrictions. Some restaurants and clubs opened, and they were quickly visited by the police and the health department. After the "guerrilla", some guesthouses and private quarters were also opening.

The severe restrictions seemed to have worked. Given the decline in infections, the restrictions were loosened in February 2021. In February, however, the government decides to ease off a bit more boldly. From February 12, they can operate - although in the sanitary regime and with customer limits - incl. hotels, cinemas, theatres, swimming pools, slopes. That same weekend, the internet was filled with photos of crowded Krupówki, the main promenade in Zakopane, where people gathered to sing and dance.

In Slovakia, responding to the worsening development of the coronavirus pandemic and the increasing number of hospitalised patients suffering from COVID-19, the central crisis staff agreed on several lockdown measures in December (closing outdoor terraces, toughening up conditions in hotels and ski centres, and restricting the operation of shops). Despite of the lockdown, the number of new cases reached its historical maximum on New Year's Eve - 6315 new cases ('Number of new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases confirmed in Slovakia' 2020) and the number of daily deaths on January 4 - 204 deaths ('Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases' 2021).

The government's record was largely disappointing at the end of December and the beginning of January. Slovakia was experiencing one of the worst health emergencies in Europe, largely due to the Matovič government's chaotic management. The country topped the list of European virus deaths per million inhabitants and patients hospitalised with COVID-19 in a 14-day period. In terms of infection rates, Slovakia ranked third in Europe, according to official EU statistics ('COVID-19 situation update for the EU/EEA' 2021). The Slovak society became confused by the changing restrictions and even more frustrated than before. Health officials complained of poor cooperation with authorities and pointed out that sometimes no systematic infection data was even available. It also seemed that compliance with general restrictions or quarantine measures for infected persons was hardly monitored (Verseck 2021).

The infections in Slovakia had begun to spiral again to the point where it became the nation with the most COVID-19 deaths by the size of the population in the world at more than 111 deaths per million people ('Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases' 2021). The reaction of the Slovak government was to introduce Slovakia's COVID Automat Traffic Light plan, scheduled to come into effect on 8 February 2021, nationwide. It is a system of automatically implemented disease control measures at both the national and regional levels. The system observes several real-time indicators of how well the spread of the virus is being contained and how stressed the national healthcare delivery system is and assigns one of seven colour-coded phases. Each colour-coded phase has a corresponding set of restrictions on daily activities, including mask requirements, mass gathering caps, and shop closures. The Ministry of Health makes phase determinations, both nationally and regionally, approximately every week.

7 PHASE FIVE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST THE VIRUS – SPRING 2021

The record daily new cases and deaths culminated in both countries differ in spring. While in Slovakia, the negative numbers peaked in mid-March and then started to decrease (with a two-week exception in April), Poland reached its negative COVID deaths record in mid-April ('Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases' 2021). It seems that the "getting back to normal" process will take a longer time than the citizens and governments of both countries expected.

The winter easing of restrictions ended quite quickly in Poland. Further restrictions were tightened in specific provinces of Poland. However, the high daily increase in the number of COVID-19 infections led rather quickly to a decision to impose nationwide restrictions. Consequently, from March 20, hotels were closed, distance learning was reintroduced for years one to three of primary school, the operation of shopping centres was restricted to shops selling essential goods, and the activities of cultural institutions and sports facilities were suspended. On March 25, beauty and hairdressers' salons, kindergartens and nurseries were closed (care was provided only to children of parents working in the medical profession and in law enforcement services when on duty), so were large-format DIY stores, and stricter limits were set regarding the number of persons allowed at the same time in retail outlets that remained open and in places of religious worship.

In the second half of April, the stage of easing the restrictions was started, but initially, decisions were made concerning voivodships based on the situation in their area. Socially challenging to accept was the decision to open hotels and other accommodation only from May 8, i.e. after the so-called Long May weekend, during which many Poles organise a short break away from home. As a result of the decline in infections and deaths, all students returned to school in May. While maintaining the appropriate rules of the sanitary regime, the gastronomic, sports and cultural sectors were opened.

Spring in Slovakia brought a new affair of PM Igor Matovič. The Prime Minister purchased an unauthorised vaccine - Sputnik V, which caused a huge coalition crisis and meant the end of his prime ministerial position after just a year in post. Finally, Igor Matovič formally resigned from his post to resolve the country's political crisis, and the country's former Deputy PM and Minister of Finance, Eduard Heger, was tasked with forming a new government to avoid an early election. After his chaotic first year, the former Prime Minister's nomination to lead the powerful department in charge of the public finances raised many eyebrows, but his partners said it was necessary if the coalition deal on the new cabinet were not to collapse. It was a political nomination and part of the political reality. In fact, the Slovak government was the first European government to collapse due to a decision regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Slovakia started opening up after the winter lockdown on April 19. Non-essential shops and some schools reopened, along with swimming pools, museums, galleries, libraries, zoos and botanical gardens. More restrictions were lifted a week later. At the same time, people were allowed to travel between districts again, while new rules concerning travel across borders and wearing masks in public came into force as well. Still, some rules remain valid, such as the stricter curfew in place after 9:00 pm, the ban on travelling abroad for a holiday, and the requirement to show a negative test result in certain cases. Rules for curfew

changed from May 3, meaning that in some districts with the better situation, people might visit each other during the day, which had not been allowed previously.

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The situation in which almost all societies found themselves in the first months of 2020 was challenging - new, unpredictable, requiring quick decisions on the part of the government and social cohesion in implementing the introduced restrictions. In situations of a deep crisis, generating an imbalance in the sense of security on many levels, the rally 'round the flag' effect appears in a naturally playful manner, which in essence gives more decision-making consent to the rulers. The article aimed to analyse Poland and Slovakia's actions, which led to the squandering of the active rally 'round the flag' effect. This effect brought a natural potential for social mobilisation to fight the pandemic, which could be used to improve the situation. This improvement resulted primarily from the following consistent decisions of governments, concerning which the society express higher levels of trust, and from the belief that the decisions made are to serve the common good. The case of Poland and Slovakia is slightly different. In Poland, the first government decisions in March 2020 started the systematic weakening of the rally 'round the flag' effect. On the other hand, the effect in Slovakia in the initial period was exploited, and it largely avoided the "First wave" of the pandemic. In autumn, however, Slovakia lost its social potential, which led to a crisis between the rulers and citizens and a political crisis, which resulted in the reconstruction of the government.

In Poland, from the very beginning of the pandemic, it is difficult to talk about any strategy for the government to take action to counter the virus. In addition to general restrictions introduced by most governments worldwide, most decisions made by the Polish government can generally be reduced to three categories. The first was absurd decisions, which showed the citizens that the authorities had more rights than the citizens. It was the leading politicians who could pay tribute to the monument to the Smolensk victims or organise meetings in restaurants without observing the basic rules of the sanitary regime. The second was terrible decisions that had good intentions, but the effect was quite the opposite due to the careless implementation or inclusion of particular interests. This group includes the mask and respirator scandal or the project "School with TVP". The third group consists of reactive decisions aimed at saving the declining image of the government, such as the project of a national hospital or the opening of shopping malls every Sunday in December 2020.

Moreover, many decisions were made at the last minute, and individual social groups severely felt the consequences of which. Among them, it is worth highlighting the closing of cemeteries just before the All-Saints' Day or the rescheduling of school holidays to the period of national quarantine. In addition, the government used the time of the pandemic to implement controversial laws, including changes in the abortion law. All this, month by month, disrupted the natural mobilisation potential created on the brink of a pandemic.

In June 2020, Slovakia was a public health success story. The restrictions and rules were clear, and the citizens' willingness to cooperate with the government and to fight the virus together was obvious. The new Prime Minister promised to handle the situation and to support the citizens and businesses suffering during

the pandemic. Citizens felt informed by the government about the current pandemic situation, decisions made by the rulers were consistent, and politics gave citizens no reason to undermine trust.

However, it turned out that managing a pandemic is a marathon, not a sprint. Approaching the pandemic as a marathon certainly does not preclude drastic measures to flatten the curve, but the time bought with those measures must be used to put long-lasting policy tools in place - particularly an effective regime of testing, tracing, and isolating new cases. Unfortunately, Slovakia largely missed that opportunity in the past few months.

It would be too daring to name the former PM Igor Matovič and his government as the reason for all Slovakia's COVID-19 troubles, but they all together played an (probably the most) important role in this case. The government half-heartedly tightened restrictions, closed restaurants, reintroduced mask mandates, and closed schools for students above the fifth grade. Desperate to avoid harsher measures, Igor Matovič became obsessed with the idea of nationwide mass testing as a solution. The appeal was obvious: Instead of shutting down economic and social life again, try to identify and isolate all positive cases. In fact, the situation temporarily improved, but the mass testing obsession backfired when it came to isolation. Although trips beyond the home and other activities required proof of a negative test, enforcement was poor in practice. The border regime remained loose, allowing new cases to slip in undetected. Most importantly, negative test results provided a false sense of security, resulting in more indoor socialisation and higher mobility within Slovakia.

It is important to mention that the absence of political leadership, besides the wrong decisions of the Prime Minister, is part of this problem. It was an expectation before parliamentary elections in February 2020 that Igor Matovič would end up leading an emerging centre-right coalition. However, it is also important to say that he built his political career around anti-corruption activism directed at the ruling Smer-SD party. Organised primarily around Matovič's mercurial personality, his own party never developed a coherent platform. Its appeal limited to disillusioned voters across the political spectrum. Igor Matovič has relied on frequent displays of bombastic, impromptu protests and publicity stunts to dominate the news cycle. This form of half-politics, half-entertainment worked greatly as a campaign strategy. However, not a mode of governing during a crisis. Matovič has urged to remain the centre of attention while refusing to take ownership of any difficult policy choice does not exactly inspire the public trust needed to navigate the pandemic. In a coalition of four political parties, the former Prime Minister invariably blamed Slovakia's failure to defeat the coronavirus on others. Unpopular lockdown decisions were outsourced to ad hoc committees of experts, shielding him from political responsibility. Now, it is the new PM Eduard Heger's task to handle the fight against the virus.

The pandemic was a huge crisis that at the same time exposed the weaknesses of governments and governance. The situation directly shook the citizens' sense of security both in the economic and social dimension (loss or the prospect of losing a job, salary reduction, lack of support from family and friends) and psychological (internal imbalance, the need to isolate oneself, overload with social roles). In such a strained condition of citizens, the role of the rulers became even more important. Only with the support of often difficult to accept central decisions, often restricting citizens' freedoms, could the fight against the pandemic be successful. In the initial period of the pandemic, the rulers were given a powerful

tool, namely the rally 'round the flag' effect. Regardless of previous experiences, natural civic mobilisation and readiness to suffer sacrifice appeared. However, the condition for this was a joint fight. In the first months of the pandemic, Slovakia was an example of the perfect use of this effect. However, in autumn, the country entered the path of Poland. Each subsequent decision showed more and more that it was not a joint struggle and that with each successive month, the rupture between the ruling and the citizens were turning into an abyss.

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OD UČINKA "ZBIRANJA OKROG ZASTAVE" DO DRUŽBENE KRIZE ZAUPANJA. POLJSKA IN SLOVAŠKA V PRVEM LETU PANDEMIJE COVID-19

Pandemija COVID-19 je postala izziv tako za družbe kot tudi za vlade. Medtem ko se je večina držav in državljanov na začetku pandemije odzvala na neznano moč virusa precej podobno, so se razmere v vsaki državi kasneje začele vedno bolj spreminjati. Poljska in Slovaška sta v tem kontekstu zanimiva primera. Leto zatem, ko je WHO razglasila pandemijo, države doživljajo eno najhujših kriz v zgodovini. Na Poljskem so kljub začetni družbeni mobilizaciji po zelo kratkem času številne vladne odločitve prenehale dojemati kot namenjene zaščiti državljanov. Slovaška vlada se je v prvem obdobju pandemije precej bolje spopadla s situacijo, kar pa se je jeseni 2020 bistveno spremenilo. Namen članka je analizirati, kako deluje aktivno »zbiranje okrog zastave«; avtorja ugotavljata, da je bil naravni potencial družbene mobilizacije za boj proti pandemiji tako na Poljskem kot tudi na Slovaškem zapravljen zaradi neodgovornih političnih odločitev, ki spodkopavajo zaupanje državljanov v dobre namene vlade.

Ključne besede: omejitve povezane s pandemijo; zbiranje okrog zastave; civilna družba; politična ravnanja.