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"Performing control" of the Covid-19 crisis

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"Performing control" of the Covid-19 crisis

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Table of contents

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Editorial: "Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis

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KEYWORDS

COVID-19, pandemic, performance, authority, response, social media analysis, government control, discourse

Editorial on the Research Topic
"Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis

Power is performative and performance is power. Our collection testifies performance of crisis and of power in the inevitably uncontrollable situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Political will and collective subject were articulated to address the crisis and the enemy that was slowly becoming more possible to tackle. Neither the process of the virus nor its response was even: in each context, leadership was performed, and it evoked contestation. The Research Topic *"Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis* includes 11 articles analyzing the responses to COVID-19 in nine countries. In 2020, we expected to see curbing-in nationalism and performance of statehood, contestation between the various levels of administration and expertise. The articles, carried out by 19 researchers from the universities in eight countries, give testimony of the early pandemic and develop new methods to study social media and government relations from Europe to Aoteaora New Zealand from a diversity of discursive-rhetorical perspectives (Table 1).

One of the main performances dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic was the strategy regarding the limits and the justifications of sovereign power. Considering Judith Butler's approach with affect theory, Lehtinen and Brunila argue that the management of the pandemic reveals both the political ontology of war central to the foundation of our political communities and how this ontology is used by the nation state to manage feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Arguably, this frame leads to failure, influencing a potentially racist and nationalist affective climate in which the "enemy" is no longer felt to be the virus, but members of other nations as well as minorities.

Pandemic-performative power relations were different in each of the case countries. Even in the European Union the restrictive nature of the policy options chosen, and the severity of their enforcement mechanisms varied considerably across countries. However, the structural determinants of each country shaped policy-making decisions more than the factors related to the magnitude of the crisis at stake, as the article by Egger et al. underlines by analyzing several countries' first responses.

Most of the articles studied social media to understand pandemic performances of control. The first of the cases was Italy. Blasio and Selva highlight the emotional repertoire mobilized by the Italian government in its communication: the ability to display empathy toward citizens' sufferings, the will to engage in dialog with social stakeholders, confidence in expertise, and the pride and determination to negotiate within the EU. In this early stage, the performance of the prime minister in expressing his emotional states has nurtured the conception of post-COVID statehood, consolidating his individual leadership and flawing the spaces of political conflict.

Through a contrasting case in which a nation shielded itself from the virus, Gilray analyses the Aotearoa New Zealand response to COVID-19, considered by popular assessment to have been successful, by a mixed methods and data approach. The research identifies three distinct nodal points that unfolded as key to the nation's ability to control the pandemic—the hegemonic "us"; iwi regionalism; and the rhetoric of kindness, although not without aspects of the antagonisms that also beset other nations. In also less affected Finland, Koljonen and Palonen analyse the interaction between the citizen's "hashtag landscape" and the Sanna Marin's all-female government, comparing regular government and authorities' info sessions and Twitter flow. The research shows the Finnish government's attempt to communicate to different audiences and to express control in the 1st year of the pandemic.

Contestation between local and federal levels (Germany) and the capital's locals and the president (Czech Republic) appears also through onsite/online mobilisations and images. Volk's analysis of local, state and federal level communication in Angela Merkel's Germany emphasizes the different political styles of performing and contesting institutional control and reveals that political performances of control were closely linked to articulations of democracy as an empty signifier, and to claims for safeguarding democratic principles as such. Hartikainen, studying Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš' Facebook profile in the two peak moments of the crisis in the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, explores how a technocratic populist can visually perform the authenticity and connection to "the low" as key to a populist performance while also maintaining the performance of expertise that is central to technocratic populist success.

TABLE 1 Summary of the Research Topic "Performing control" of the COVID-19 crisis.

References	Article	Focus/country	Method	Data/actors
Lehtinen and Brunila	A Political Ontology of the Pandemic: Sovereign Power and the Management of Affects through the Political Ontology of War	Theoretical	Affect theory; Butler	Nation states, war
Egger et al.	I Do it My Way: Understanding Policy Variation in Pandemic Response Across Europe	Comparative/Multi	Bootstrapped bivariate analysis; Three policy-making scenarios	Policy responses implemented in 23 European Union countries
Volk	Political Performances of Control During COVID-19: Controlling and Contesting Democracy in Germany	Multi-level policy and protest/Germany	Discourse theory; Online ethnography	Ethnographic online data (Merkel [federal], Kretschmer [Saxony], PEGIDA [Dresden])
Linnamäki	Gendered Articulations of Control and Care on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hungary	Gender in social media/Hungary	Discourse theory; Qualitative Content analysis	Official and social media website data (Orbán, Hungarian government, Operational Group)
Blasio and Selva	COVID-19 in Italy: Performing Power and Emotions	Emotions in governance/Italy	Discourse–historical approach (DHA)	Press conferences, interviews, addresses, TV-appearances (PM Conte)
Gilray	Performative Control and Rhetoric in Aotearoa New Zealand's Response to COVID-19	Government, Māori communities/New Zealand	Rhetoric-performative discourse theory	Official and social media website data (Government and health authorities)
Chiruta	The Representation of Roma in the Romanian Media During COVID-19: Performing Control Through Discursive-Performative Repertoires	Media scapegoating ethnic minority/Romania	Discourse analysis; Post-foundational discourse theory	The main Romanian broadcasters; online news portals
Palau-Sampio	Pseudo-Media Sites, Polarization, and Pandemic Skepticism in Spain	Disinformation on pseudo-media sites/Spain	Content analysis; framing analysis	Pseudo-media sites
Koljonen and Palonen	Performing COVID-19 Control in Finland: Interpretative Topic Modelling and Discourse Theoretical Reading of the Government Communication and Hashtag Landscape	Government-citizen communication/Finland	Rhetoric-performative discourse theory; Topic modelling	Twitter; videos of government info sessions (Finnish Government and Health Authorities, Twitter public)
Hartikainen	Authentic Expertise: Andrej Babiš and the Technocratic Populist Performance During the COVID-19 Crisis	Populist leadership/Czech Republic	Performative analysis	Facebook data (PM Babiš)
Turunen et al.	Performing control in the Swedish Twitter sphere or: How a 1920s' Russian linguist helps us understand dynamics of digital authority	Digital authority/Sweden	Voloshinov's reported speech, Digital authority	Tweets (Governmental health authorities and popular responses)

The performance of control also strengthened stereotypes in the dynamics of crises. The Hungarian government's Facebook communication during the first wave of the pandemic revealed to Linnamäki a reinforcement of the traditional gender roles division: care work was performed as a female task, police and military masculinity were called on to tackle the control of potential disruption of the system of care. Analyzing Romanian early pandemic media narratives, Chiruta uncovered how historical patterns of stigma vis-à-vis Roma communities in Eastern Europe were activated by sensationalizing the episodes in the pandemic involving the Roma minority, employing a logic of polarization to assist the authorities in retaking control of the pandemic and health crisis in Romania.

Palau-Sampio article from Spain shows that along with social media platforms, pseudo-media contributed to producing and disseminating misleading content during the pandemic. She points to the framing of measures to stop the virus as harmful and ineffective, especially regarding vaccination. Clear links emerged with the far-right ideology and a polarized discourse with belligerent, offensive expressions to refer to institutions and to disseminate conspiracy theories and disinformation.

In the Research Topic, particular attention is paid to how (social) media was used, and it opens up many avenues to study the discursive performance of control. For example, Koljonen and Palonen combine Laclaudian discourse theory with LDA topic modeling in a novel way. Studying Sweden, Turunen et al. apply Valentin Voloshinov's classical theory on reported speech, developed in the 1920s, to the concept of digital authority in the Twitter-sphere of the 2020s. In this last article of the set, the authors draw on data from four Swedish state agencies during the first 15 months of the COVID-19 crisis. Findings underline that retweets are generally used to affirm and spread information, thus strengthening the digital authority of the origin of the tweet, whilst replies and quote-tweets are used to undermine the credibility of the sender and the content of the original tweet, often by resorting to irony. Criticism increased as the pandemic advanced.

The comparison emerging from these papers underlines the value of first-response studies and interpretive approaches to pandemic, hybrid-mediatized politics providing more nuanced understandings of the relationships between the pandemic and democracy in a situation of an ultimate lack of control.

Author contributions

DP-S has listed the arguments of each author. EP edited the argument, sequence, the abstract, and compiled the table that DP-S edited. DQ and VS have provided excellent comments and contributions in the editorial of the topic everyone has contributed as editors. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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I Do it My Way: Understanding Policy Variation in Pandemic Response Across Europe

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To contain the spread of the COVID-19, governments have designed and implemented a large range of exceptional measures. Yet, the restrictive nature of the policy options chosen and the severity of their enforcement mechanisms considerably vary across countries. Focusing on the case of the European Union—a group of closely connected nations which develop some forms of supranational policy coordination to manage the pandemic—, we first map the diversity of policy responses taken using two original indicators: the stringency and scope of freedom limitations and the depth of control used in their enforcement. Second, we elaborate three theoretical scenarios to explain cross-national variation in pandemic policy-making. Our exploratory results—based on bivariate statistical associations—reveal that structural determinants (the level of political and interpersonal trust, a country's overall resources, democratic experience and, to a lesser extent, political check and balances) shape crisis policy-making more than crisis-related factors such as the magnitude of the crisis at stake. These results call for further research into the determinants of crisis policy-making that we propose to address with a new research project focusing on the modalities, determinants and impacts of exceptional decision making in times of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, exceptionalism, policy making, crisis mangement, trust

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led governments all over the world to take multiple and diverse policy responses to contain the lethality of the virus. After Asia, Europe was the second continent struck with the first cases of contagion recorded in Italy on January 31, 2020 (Ritchie, 2020). On March 13th, the number of cases in Europe exceeded that in Asia, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare Europe as the epicenter of the crisis with 40% of the global cases and 68% of the deaths (WHO, 2020). With the notable exception of Italy and Spain where the number of cases respectively peaked on March 22nd and on March 27th, European countries were quasi simultaneously affected by the COVID-19 disease. France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom reached their peak in the first 20 days of April 2020 (Dong et al., 2020). In less than two months, several European governments were overwhelmed by the expansion of the pandemic. Contrary to their Asian counterparts, European decision-makers had little recent experience of coronavirus-induced respiratory infections. The last serious influenza pandemic dated back from 1968 and affected European countries mostly unequally (Viboud et al., 2005). In addition, at the end of January 2020, little scientific evidence was available on the virus while in March 2020 expert advices were highly

conflicting. The spread of the virus among children, its airborne nature, the mechanisms of immunity and their duration were among the most notable known unknowns.

This situation places decision-makers in government and politics in high uncertainty (Capano et al., 2020). Faced with such uncertainty, we could have expected European decision-makers to develop at least some similar protocols especially as the European Union (EU) offers coordination mechanisms in public health that go beyond the general guidelines of the WHO. In particular, the adoption in 2014 of the EU Agenda on Health Systems precisely aims at strengthening the resilience of European public health systems to crises (European Commission, 2020b). In addition, joint crisis-management mechanisms—through the EU civil protection instrument—are long established among European countries (European Commission, 2020a). Nevertheless, governments reacted to the pandemic in multiple and sometimes contrasted ways—and continued to do so well into autumn 2020. For example, whereas France implemented one of the toughest lockdowns in Europe, Sweden relied on no lockdown at all to manage the pandemic. As a result, the cross-national variation in COVID-19 policy responses in Europe is very high. Policy responses regulating individual behavior in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis vary along two dimensions: a) the *types and scope* of the crisis-management policy tools chosen and b) their *enforcement* modalities. The types of policy tools refer to the various legal codification of the strategies used by policy-makers to limit the spread of the pandemic (mask wearing, closures of workplaces, schools, restaurants, restrictions of liberties,. . .) while enforcement strategies rely on different agents using various levels of coercion (increasing police powers, creating new verifications tools, amount of fines, prison sentences, deployment of the military. . .).

The diversity of policy responses of closely connected nations on one continent, which have various forms of crisis-management coordination mechanisms and are facing the same crisis suggests that domestic specificities have largely led decision-makers to "do it their way." To capture this diversity, empirical research has already been initiated on governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hale et al., 2020a; Cheng et al., 2020; Desvars-Larrive et al., 2020). Nevertheless we still know very little about the determinants of cross-national variation in policy-making in time of Sars—CoV-2 pandemic. So far, all existing studies are of a descriptive scope and give preference to the collecting of a few indicators—e.g., on state of emergency declarations (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020) or lockdown approaches (Hale et al., 2020a)—in a large number of countries over an analysis of the diversity of the policy responses.

This paper contributes to political science scholarship on crisis policy-making by unpacking the drivers of cross-national variation in crisis-management policies in European Union countries. Crises—no matter their causes—challenge ordinary policy-making processes and trigger various forms of exceptional policy-making[1] Yet, existing political science scholarship on crisis management primarily focuses on how long-established democracies manage foreign policy crisis but rarely on the management of domestic disasters (Allison and Zelikow, 1971; Janis, 1989; Welch, 1989). When they do so, studies mainly focus on crisis decision-making by assessing styles of emergency leadership but rarely investigate the role structural factors play in shaping policy responses to crisis (see for example, Zhou et al., 2018). In contrast, public health scholarship puts forward models of pandemic management distinguishing between the level of decentralization and coerciveness of health crisis management (Desvars-Larrive et al. 2020: 2). The pandemic hence offers an opportunity to bridge the gap between both fields. Understanding cross-national variation in crisis policy-making in Europe is essential to increase the level of preparedness of European countries not only to future pandemic but also, more largely, to future crises such as climate-induced natural disasters or terror attacks. It is even more important as exceptional measures can durably affect democratic resilience by negatively impacting democratic legitimacy and stability (Posner and Vermeule, 2003).

We contribute to this topical debate by developing an original measure of exceptional policy-making in crisis settings focusing on the types and scope of *freedom limitations* and on the *depth of control* used to enforce such limitations. We construct this indicator for the 23 largest EU countries. Focusing on Europe allows to maximize the variance of the policy options and to connect them with a comprehensive set health, economic and political factors likely to shape crisis policy-making. At the same time, because of policy-coordination taking place at the EU level, this case study allows to primarily focus on the domestic drivers of crisis policy-making. To unpack the drivers of cross-national variation, we derive from existing theories three policy-making scenarios likely to explain cross-national variation in the severity and intrusiveness of pandemic policy responses.

Our first scenario conceptualizes crisis policy-making as a trade-off between the magnitude of the sanitary crisis, the pandemic management capacities of a country and the expected degree of people's compliance with the adopted measures. The second scenario argues that policy responses are shaped by the room for (political) manoeuver of policy-makers. Implementing stringent policies is difficult in democratic systems as the counter-powers and political opponents can contest the chosen policy option. Finally, the last scenario focuses on policy-makers-makers' preferences. These preferences may vary across countries due to different degrees of tolerance with restrictions in the rule of law and civil liberties. Within country variation is shaped by the preferences of the ruling party during the crisis.

Our preliminary assessment of the rationale behind pandemic policy-making reveals that structural factors—the level of political and interpersonal trust, a country's overall resources, and democratic experience and, to a lesser extent, political check and balances—shape crisis policy responses more than situational drivers linked to the magnitude of a crisis or to specific crisis-management capacities. Compared with these long-term, structural factors, political leaders' ideology hardly influences policy choices. Our exploration of crisis-management

[1]We define exceptional policy-making as departing from the legal foundations of governance, both the separation of powers and the limitations of freedoms defined in national constitutions.

determinants also allow to identify research and data gaps we intend to fill with the development of a new research project.

"Introduction" section of the paper presents the analytical framework of the research. "*The Determinants of Variation in Pandemic Policy-Making*" section of the paper presents the analytical framework of the paper. The "*Data and Methods*" " section presents the research design and data used. "*European Pandemic Policy-Making Compared*" presents the results while the conclusion discusses their contribution to broader debates on crisis politics and identifies further avenues for research.

THE DETERMINANTS OF VARIATION IN PANDEMIC POLICY-MAKING

Our analytical model puts forward four key sets of drivers to explain cross-national variation in pandemic policy-making. First, the level of scientific evidence on the pandemic, framing the nature of the policy problem at stake. When the virus struck Europe, the few evidence available confirmed the magnitude of the health threat as the virus was known to spread at an exponential level, with most of the patients showing little to no symptoms (while being contagious) and a unknown rate of elder patients or patients with comorbidities affected with life-threatening symptoms. Yet, before the launch of national research programs on the COVID-19, this limited scientific evidence was made available to all European countries at the same time and hence should not explain variation in policy-making across countries. Second, the magnitude of the health crisis shapes the level of governmental response as a very acute crisis is likely to trigger more stringent types of policy. Third, crisis policy-making options are influenced by the capacities and resources a government has at its disposal to take action. Fourth, political institutions and culture matter in crisis settings. Institutions operate as a framework making specific set of policies more likely and acceptable than others while the political culture shapes the assumptions policy-makers make on the strategies needed to ensure people's compliance. **Figure 1** below displays the key determinants of our analytical framework. In what follows, we expose the mechanism linking each driver to a specific policy response and break them down into testable hypotheses.

The declared objective of crisis policy-making is to protect a state's population and its institutions against the disruptive impacts of crises. In the case of a pandemic, policy responses aim to limit the spread of the virus to avoid a collapse of health systems, which are not equipped to cope with extraordinary public health crises, a situation which would lead to an aggravated death toll. The most certain way of reaching this objective consists in exercising a stringent and multi-faceted control over a population's movement and activities. The likelihood and attractiveness of such extreme policy option depend on the combined influence of the above-mentioned factors. Our conceptual framework argues that policy-makers need to arbitrate between these factors in three types of decision-making scenarios: the trade-off, checks and balances and ideological scenarios.

First, the tradeoff scenario assumes that increasing control through multifaceted and stringent crisis-management measures is both politically and morally costly for decision makers. Voters care about their rights and policy-makers do so too. A tradeoff thus exists between protecting people from the pandemic and guaranteeing civil liberties and fundamental rights. On the one hand, too stringent policy responses could trigger protest and jeopardize the election prospects of political leaders in democratic regimes. On the other hand, a failure to act can equally have detrimental consequences on the stability and legitimacy of a political system as well as on the credibility and popularity of decision-makers. According to this scenario, we expect policy-makers to opt for stringent policies when the situation they face does not offer any plausible alternative.

Second, the checks and balances scenario assumes that limiting the impact of the pandemic is the most preeminent political issue decision-makers are interested in. Yet, the crisis offers an opportunity to increase their power, which is, in itself, attractive for all European decision-makers. The key difference lies in their unequal capacity to do so. Some European democracies are better designed than others to prevent the incumbents from unduly increasing their control over society. According to this scenario, the existence and nature of institutional counter-powers are expected to reduce the level of stringency and diversity of the measures.

Last, the ideological scenario assumes that decision-makers do not have similar preferences in terms of crisis management styles. Some favor more stringent options while others prefer to guarantee human rights. The policy responses opted for hence depend either on the political culture of each country or on the political ideology of each government.

These three scenarios lead to the formulation of eight preliminary hypotheses seeking to account for cross-national variation in European policy responses to the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic.

Pandemic Policy Making as a Trade-Off

The key objective of crisis policy making is to address the disruptive consequences crises have on people, institutions and societies. This impact can be of limited scope or of a high magnitude, posing life threat to a large range of people or endangering the stability of a political regime. In assessing policy options, we argue that policy-makers strive to design policies commensurate to the threat they face. An over-reaction or an under-reaction to a crisis can be damaging, not only for re-election prospects but also for the stability or legitimacy of the political system. The cognitive ability of policy-makers to process data on the nature and evolution of crises however remains an open question in existing literature on crisis management (Wilensky, 1967; Turner, 1978; Kam, 1988). In particular, some authors argue that this ability is particularly low in the case of rapidly-evolving crises—such as a pandemic—(Kehinde, 2014; Staupe-Delgado, 2019). Recent research focusing on the declaration of the state of emergency during the COVID-19 pandemic nuances such statement by showing that the level contamination in a country influences the

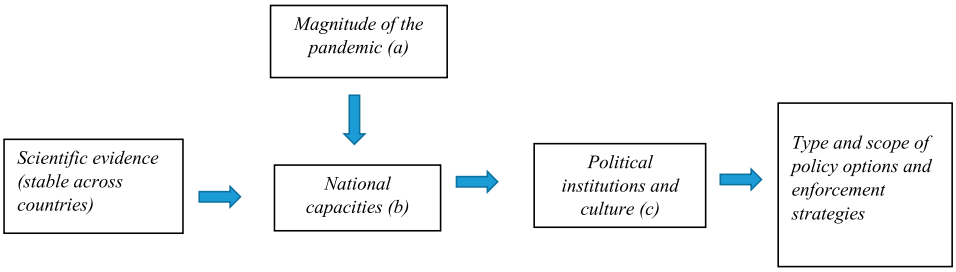

FIGURE 1 | Determinants of variation of pandemic policy-making.

likelihood of a government declaring the state of emergency (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020).

As a result:

Hypothesis 1.a: The severity of the pandemic determines the stringency of the policy response.

Faced with a crisis of the same magnitude, policy-makers face different constraints. An extensive literature, both on the current pandemic and other types of crises, stresses the importance of policy capacities in explaining cross-national variation in policy responses (Keman, 2002; Capano et al., 2015; Capano et al., 2020). We argue that such capacities play at two different but interconnected levels. The first refers to the resources allocated to specific crisis-management instruments. In the pandemic case, the magnitude of the crisis mainly derives from the exponential spread of cases, which can rapidly overwhelm the capacities of healthcare systems. As a result, better-equipped health systems are also more able to manage the sanitary crisis without relying on extraordinary measures. For example, the fact that Germany has the highest number of beds in intensive care units per inhabitant has frequently been invoked as an explanation for its resilience to the current pandemic (Schneider et al., 2020). A well-resourced healthcare system allows to identify cases rapidly and to treat the complications in an efficient way. In contrast, weak healthcare systems are more quickly overwhelmed. A high investment in healthcare resources should hence reduce the magnitude of the crisis and the need for stringent policy responses.

Hence:

Hypothesis 1.b: The higher the healthcare resources of a state, the less stringent the policy response chosen.

The second level lies in the overall capacity of a government that allows it to design responses in various range of policy fields but also to allocate new resources to crisis management. This capacity includes the level of resources a country currently has but also its capacity to raise more resources on financial markets through the issuing of national debt. The fact that countries with a low-level indebtedness resist better to crises has already found some support in existing literature (Marto et al., 2018). When the public debt is high, governments lack liquidity to invest in crisis response and provide financial or technological incentives to ensure citizens comply with the measures. An information-based policy style implies that governments are able to invest resources in research but also on public awareness campaigns to make their policies known and understood. In contrast, states lacking capacities can do little but opt for a more authoritarian approach, redirecting their enforcement resources to the management of the crisis.

We hence argue that:

Hypothesis 1.c.: The higher the financial capacity of a state, the less stringent the policy response chosen.

Beside capacities, policy-makers also have expectations on how people will respond to the measures they take. Policy-makers make assumptions all the time about whether and to which extent people will comply (Schneider and Ingram, 1990). The higher the expected compliance with government policies, the less coercion is needed to bring about the desired behavior. And policy-makers will avoid coercive mechanisms, which include fines, police force and even imprisonment, whenever they can (De Groot and Schuitema, 2012; Landa and Tyson, 2017). The reason for this is that a widely shared belief in the justness, or legitimacy of these measures is a much stronger driver of political support—not only for the measures in question but also, through spillover processes, for those who designed them (the political authorities) and for the regime (Gibson, 1989; Rothstein, 2012) . Compared with a reliance on legitimacy beliefs, relying on coercion to obtain compliance is always at most a second-best option. This current pandemic provides us with an excellent chance to observe these theoretical expectations at work in a real-life setting. It is well established that countries differ with regard to the extent to which their citizens believe in the legitimacy of social institutions, government or democracy. Several southern-European nations such as Spain and Italy show significantly lower levels of trust in the governmental institutions than other countries (van Ham et al., 2017). These differences are also reflected in the extent to which people are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country: the patterns are similar. Finally, countries also differ in the extent to which citizens trust each other. According to several surveys (World and European Values, European Social Survey), notably the Nordic countries can be characterized as "high-trust" whereas in Europe countries like Spain and France show much lower levels of interpersonal trust.

As a result:

Hypothesis 1.d: The higher political legitimacy and interpersonal trust, the less coercive, and stringent the selected policy options can be, since citizens and politicians alike can expect compliance without coercion.

Pandemic Policy-Making as an Outcome of Domestic Institutional Constraints

In democratic systems, departing from ordinary policy-making requires the consent of domestic political stakeholders. The nature of the political institutions and the extent of counter powers' controls vary across countries. In particular, a process of policy change –especially of the magnitude required by the management of crises—is more complicated when many veto players are involved. The dispersion of veto players has already been found to generate policy rigidity and a lack of resilience in the case of financial crises (MacIntyre, 2001; Burns et al., 2018). Yet, neither the role of veto players in the management of other types of crises, nor their impact on the types (and not on the mere presence or absence) of policy responses have been researched so far. This neglect is surprising as crises induce risks of power concentration by the executive, leading policy-makers to be appealed by the implementation of more stringent and coercive policies than in non-crisis times. Check and balances should play a central role in making such option more costly for policy-makers.

As a result:

Hypothesis 2.a.: The more the check and balances, the less stringent the policies

In some instances, the control of veto players is not stable throughout the crisis period. Countries that have provisions for forms of emergency decision-making grant veto players a strong role at the beginning of the crisis when authorizing exceptional decision-making. This control then lapses for the limited period of time when emergency provisions are activated. We may then expect the freedom limitations and depth of control of crisis policy responses to be influenced by the existence of emergency decision-making provisions in a country. Such provisions are not uncommon. Today, 90 countries in the world have policy-making mechanisms for emergency situations designed in their national constitution (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2018a). Such "emergency constitutions" (*Idem*) allow restrictions in human rights and democratic processes to fight against a crisis. The very existence of such provisions explains why some countries declare state of emergency in the event of crises more often than others (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2018b). Because emergency constitutions emancipate governments from democratic control, we expect that countries declaring a state of emergency adopt more restrictive and intrusive measures than countries that did not activate such mechanism.

Hence:

Hypothesis 2.b: When a state of emergency is declared, policies are more stringent

Pandemic Policy-Making as Political Ideology

Beyond political institutions, the political culture of a country determines which types of political practices are deemed tolerable and influence the preferences of political elites. According to the recent history of a country, authoritarian decisions are considered more or less exceptional or acceptable. In countries where political attitudes are more authoritarian, leaders have more leeway in choosing harsher policies. A number of EU countries have experienced a recent transition from authoritarianism to democracy, mainly in the Eastern and Southern part of Europe. Therefore, we can assess whether authoritarian past experiences may lead policy-makers to opt for stringent and coercive decisions since they themselves were socialized in less democratic settings, and since they assume that they would be tolerated by the public. The existence of such a mechanism has already been attested in the case of Southern Europe (Morlino, 2010).

As a result:

Hypothesis 3.a An authoritarian political culture increases the likelihood of stringent and coercive policy responses.

Policy-makers preferences also differ according to the party they belong to. This, in turn, leads political choices to vary according to the political ideology and agenda of the ruling party. When it comes to the rule of law and to fundamental liberties, ideological differences between rulers are rather strong in Europe. The Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban, for example, leads his country in an "illiberal constitutionalism" which could exacerbate freedom limitations in a crisis context. He was, indeed, the only leader in Europe who declared the state of emergency without any time limit (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020). In contrast, the prime minister of Sweden Stefan Löfven argued that the government could not ban everything and that individuals will take responsibility for their own health and the health of the community (Bolsover, 2020). Actually, the way governments solve the dilemma between protecting civil liberties and reducing contagion can be influenced by their ideological approach. This is particularly true in situations where there is high uncertainty and no established protocol are in place. Therefore, we expect that the preferences of the ruling party influence the stringency of its policies:

Hypothesis 3.b: Authoritarian parties' ideology increases the likelihood of an aggressive policy response.

Note that the proposed scenarios are not necessarily conflicting with each other. In designing crisis-management policies, policy-makers can assess the level of risks they are able or ready to take (trade off scenario) while selecting among possible options based on their political constraints or ideological preferences. Yet, the proposed scenarios have the merit to comprehensively map the drivers of crisis policy-making.

DATA AND METHODS

Our research design engages in the preliminary assessment of each scenario. To understand how each of the above-identified factors shapes policy-makers' decisions, we opt for focusing on the initial stage of the pandemic when the first cases were recorded and exponentially grew in Europe. This allows us to consider the highest period of uncertainty and, arguably, the most acute phase of the crisis. Subsequent policy-making does not only build on these initial experiences but also on an expanded evidence base. Our empirical analysis focuses on the types of

policy responses implemented in 23 European Union countries[2] that have been quasi simultaneously struck by the COVID-19. The analysis covers the first four months of the spread of the virus on the European continent, from February 1st, 2020 to May 30th.

Overall, 17 countries in our sample have experienced a peak of contagion between March 27 and April 12, hence over a period of only 17 days. The analysis of a limited set of highly interdependent countries allows us to collect detailed data on the measures taken and to control for variation in the geopolitical context and international factors. Compared to other pandemic-affected countries, EU countries engaged in intensive coordination mechanisms at the supranational level. In particular, the European Center for Disease Control issued guidelines and risk assessment reports at the very start of the pandemic and updated them regularly. In addition, the European Council activated the EU integrated political crisis response (IPCR) holding weekly meetings gathering EU institutions, EU agencies experts and representatives of affected member states. At the implementation level, the Union joint civil-protection instrument coordinated the deployment of medical teams and established a common European reserve of emergency medical equipment (European Council, 2020). Despite these early coordination efforts, resources in public health crisis management at the EU level are scarce and mechanisms of a soft nature: EU member states retain primary decision-making powers and capacities in public health matters (Jordana and Triviño-Salazar, 2020). In many ways, the situation of EU countries bear similarity with the one of federal states—such as the United States and Canada –where the federal government mainly holds coordination and information powers while states, at the subnational level, are in charge of designing the policy response they see fit for their context. Lessons learned from the EU context can, to some extent, be applied to other decentralized political contexts.

The observed variation in crisis policy-making in Europe shows that, confronted with an external shock, national public authorities have great latitude in framing the nature of the policy problem at stake and the adequate policy responses. This leads policy-makers to sometimes present the crisis as extreme as when the response to COVID-19 was coined "warfare" by some leaders (Hungary, France) or explicitly rebuffed this expression (the Netherlands, Germany) (Roché et al., 2020). This definition of a situation as an exception does not only occur at the symbolic level when a leader addresses the people, but also on a legal and practical basis. As a result, our dependent variables seek to capture this different level of exceptionalism by especially focusing on two dimensions through which crisis policies are imposed on the public: "freedom limitations" and "depth of control."

Freedom limitations may take different meanings, covering civil rights (equality before the law), political liberties (freedom of speech, of assembly, of conscience), basic rights (such as freedom of movement, to privacy) as well as social rights (right to education) and economic rights (to do business). In tackling the threat caused by the COVID-19 crisis, the most radical governments aimed to exercise control over any unapproved interpersonal contact outside households, even preventing family gatherings. For example, some governments such as the French one went as far as prohibiting any family member to attend to funeral while others such as Spain totally confined people in their homes. When, in times of COVID-19, a government decides that being outside one's home is illegal, all types of freedom limitations are at stake although with some forms of national variations: freedom of assembly (no gathering), of movement (limited in several ways), of privacy (with surveillance of allowed movements, use of dedicated applications, searching bags when exiting a department store or on the streets), of social and economic nature (with a shutdown of selected businesses or compulsory work of others). Some limitations such as school closures are means to an end, and not an end in themselves. Yet, in more intrusive forms of policy responses, being on the street becomes a public order issue requiring police action, as if it were a special kind of (one person) illegal protest.

Given the variation in national situations, our first construct "freedoms limitations" needs to incorporate as many dimensions as possible, as well as the geographic scope of the lockdown, which are not available in other constructs such as the Oxford tracker (Hale et al., 2020b). We use for that purpose a combination of two sources of information: the communication on March 26, 2020 by Frontex, the EU agency in charge of external borders security detailing the measures taken in Europe, and press information gathered at EU level. Frontex provides information on restrictions in four aspects of social life: public gathering, school closure, road transportation within the country, and lockdown. Each of these restrictions are coded 0 for open/allowed, 1 for restricted and 2 for closed/banned). In order to account for the geographical scope of the limitations, we decided to integrate into the construct an additional, media-based score which increase the range of the freedom limitations construct: the score increases when a lockdown is implemented "nationally" compared to "locally." We hence multiply the lockdown score by a coefficient of 2 when a government imposes a national lockdown. Raw lockdown score ranges from 0 to 2 before the integration of the geographical score, and from 0 to 4 after, which represents a maximum of 2 additional points in the freedom limitations construct for countries imposing a national lockdown. Theoretically, the freedom limitations score ranges from 0 (no limitation according to Frontex) to 10 (maximum Frontex scores for public gathering, school closure, road transportation (6) and maximum Frontex score on lockdown (2) multiplied by 2 if implemented nationally (4)). A lack of reliable cross-national data prevented us from incorporating limitations imposed on the mobilization of critical citizens and opposition parties.

Figure 2 shows the differences in freedom limitations across EU countries. It reveals that all the countries of our sample implemented some forms of freedom limitations to tackle the pandemic. Yet, the scope of limitations varies from single to double. Sweden and the United Kingdom opted for the less stringent measures—even their leaders refuse the speak of a strategy of an "herd immunity" strategy while Greece scores

[2]We added the United Kingdom which is still in transition period after the Brexit referendum and excluded EU countries for which data on independent variables were partial.

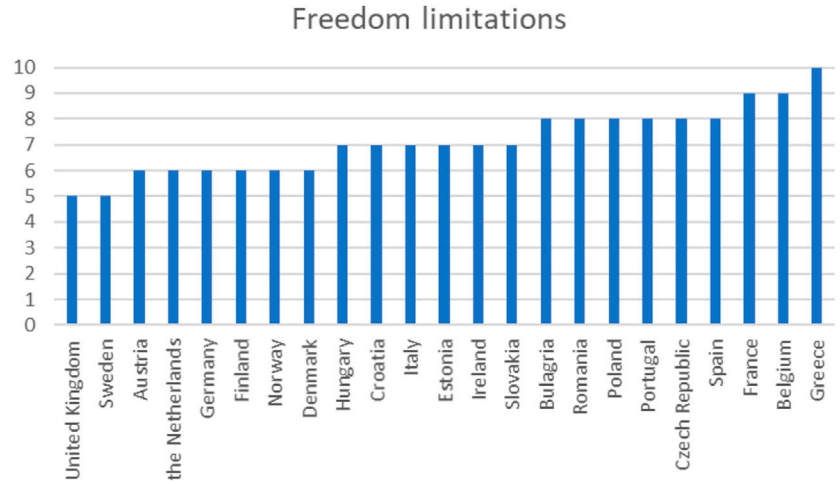

FIGURE 2 | Types and scope of freedom limitations, entire sample.

the highest on our index. Surprisingly, France and Belgium score higher (9) than all the Eastern European countries (score 8). Nordic countries—including Germany, the Netherlands but to the exception of Sweden—are situated in a middle ground between the less stringent and the most stringent policy responses.

Relying on the measures decided upon is not enough to fully grasp cross-national variation in crisis policy-making. Each measure –be it a legal or administrative act—allowing to limit freedoms may be enforced more or less coercively. An in-depth control of citizens' behavior will be achieved through two main strategies: creating more legal obligations, and involving more agents with extended powers to ensure citizens compliance. Our second output variable seeks to assess variation in enforcement strategies, adding value to existing data initiatives which only collect information on the decisions taken. Our indicator captures three original dimensions in an additive construct. First, some governments compel citizens to record any movement outside of their home (electronically or with paper and pencil) with a self-established declaration. This tool is potentially associated with more fines being distributed as compliance with the regulation can be assessed and sanctioned by the police or any other mandated authority. Such an enforcement authority may go as far as encompassing the police's ability to enter someone's home for check on her presence without any mandate of a judge. Three indicators are used to code such practices. 0 for the absence of such tool, 1 for authorizing police to check the self-declaration for a movement and 2 for police's ability to enter home. Second, the mobilization of enforcement agents may vary across countries. In some cases, the army may be mobilized for non-health-related actions, for example to back up regular police (protecting selected areas) or to serve as a policing force for checking and fining citizens. Here again, three indicators are used coded 0 for no such involvement, 0.5 for military acting as a policing force and 1 for military back up of the police. In other instances, the power to arrest people and sanction them was extended to additional types of non-military and non-police agents which did not have such power prior to the COVID-19, for ex. local or transportation police. We coded this extension 0.5 for the involvement of other forces and 0 in other cases. The depth of control construct does not include the maximum penalty incurred, or the number of fines distributed over the studied period since we could not access this information systematically.

Figure 3 presents variation in enforcement modalities over our sample of countries. It shows that variation at the enforcement level is much higher than at the decision level. In 12 countries, no exceptional tools were used to enforce the policies. However, when exceptional controls are exercised, the level of control considerably varies. Germany used very limited means (0.5) while Bulgaria relied on a large range of strict enforcement mechanisms (4).

Both indicators (freedom limitations, FL and depth of control, DC) are strongly correlated, the Pearson coefficient being 0.60 and significant at conventional standards ($p < 0.01$). However, the correlation can be explained by the fact that, when decisions are the less stringent (low FL score), their enforcement does not rest on highly coercive means (DC null or almost null). In contrast, countries taking more stringent measures (high FL) considerably vary in the enforcement mechanism they use. For example, Belgium and Portugal decided of very stringent restrictions (FL = 9/8), yet without relying on exceptionally coercive enforcement means (DC = 0). In contrast, Poland or France opted for restrictions of a similar stringency and relied on exceptional means to enforce them (DC = 3).

We use these indicatorss to explore the determinants of restrictive policies in European Union countries. Due to the cross-sectionalism of our data and to our limited number of cases, we are not able to perform any sophisticated statistical analyses. We instead rely on preliminary, bootstrapped bivariate analysis—a method also employed in public health research (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010)—to assess the association of our output variables with the factors identified in our three policy-making scenarios. The results have to be understood as a general discussion to assess the

plausibility of each explanation. They also lay the foundation for further research on the modalities and determinants of political exceptionalism in times of crises.

EUROPEAN PANDEMIC POLICY-MAKING COMPARED

This section highlights the overall congruence of each hypothesis with our data. Before presenting the results of each bivariate analysis, we discuss the operationalization strategy used for each independent variable. Overall, the selection of our indicators builds on past research on crisis and pandemic management but also aims to maximize the relevance and validity of each indicator by comparing how our dependent variable is associated with different measures. **Table A1 in Appendix** presents the descriptive statistics for all of our variables. We check the robustness of our results by relying on bootstrapping techniques, applied to correlation analysis (Alemayehu and Doksum, 1990).

The Trade off Scenario

Our first scenario holds that crisis policy responses depend on the severity of the crisis, the crisis-management capacities of a country and the level of compliance policy-makers expect from people. As current research on COVID-19 cases suggests that the reporting of cases highly depends on the quality of the monitoring systems in place at the national level (Lau et al., 2020), we rely on several indicators to analyze the relationship between the magnitude of the public health crisis and the types of policy responses implemented. We use three direct and two indirect indicators. First, building on past research on the determinants of the declaration of state of emergency during the COVID-19 crisis (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020), we use the number of positive cases in a country, relying on the dataset published by Our World in Data based on the curated estimates from the European CDC (Ritchie, 2020). As the responsiveness of crisis-management policies varies across EU countries, we first opt for recording the total number of positive cases in each country of our sample over a 30 days period following the first 10 declared cases (*contagion*). This estimate allows capturing the initial pace of the spread of the pandemic in each country, an indicator likely to reflect the sense of urgency felt by policy-makers as well as the magnitude of the public health threat. Second, we estimate the same indicator but for the number of COVID-19 related *deaths*, namely the total number of deaths over a 30 days period following the first 10 recorded deaths. It should be noted that the impact of both measures highly depends on the overall population of a country. Our third indicator captures the stress caused by the pandemic on a country health resources; we use the COVID-19-related occupancy of intensive care units (ICU) during the week preceding the adoption of the first restrictions. Although this indicator allows capturing the severity of the pandemic in a reliable manner—as hospitals have specific protocols and testing capacities for COVID-19 patients -, data is missing for half of the countries of our sample.

To indirectly assess the threat posed by the pandemic, we rely on two indicators. The first pertains to the *density of the population* (Ritchie, 2020) as complying with social distancing measures is easier in countries that exhibit a low population density. In contrast, the virus spreads more quickly and easily in densely populated areas. We also take into account that the share of persons at risk of life-threatening complications also varies across countries. To do so, we use the share of people aged 70 (*aged_70*) as elder people are among the most vulnerable patients.

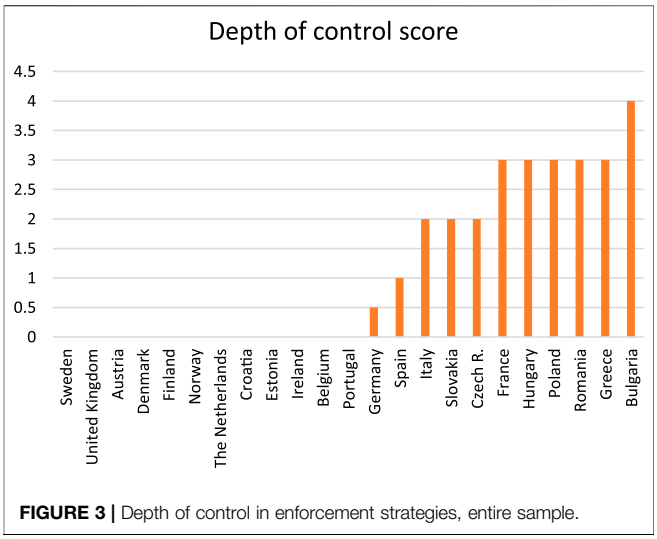

FIGURE 3 | Depth of control in enforcement strategies, entire sample.

To the exception of the obvious correlation between the number of *deaths* and the pace of the *contagion*, no correlation is observed between our indicators of the severity of the pandemic. **Figure 4** exemplifies the results and highlights the relationship between the depth of control and the variable *contagion* and between Freedom limitations and *aged_70*. We decided to isolate one commonly used direct indicator and one reflecting the size of the most vulnerable group. Our bivariate analyses also reveal that none of our indicators pertaining to the severity of the pandemic is statistically associated with our dependent variables, the scope of freedom limitations and the depth of control used in enforcing the measures. The absence of statistical relationship stays when each of the bivariate correlation is bootstrapped. This result is surprising as, taken together, our variables capture several dimensions of the severity of the pandemic.

As shown in the **Figure 3**, the absence of statistical association is not due to specific groups of outliers such as the Scandinavian, Eastern European and Southern European countries.

Our theoretical framework also argues that the type of national policy responses is influenced by the capacity of the healthcare systems. Several indicators are available to assess it, ranging from the level of expenditures in the health sector to the availability of health professionals. Yet, not all of these indicators are relevant to assess the nature of the stress the COVID-19 pandemic poses on health systems.

We select two key indicators likely to capture the specificity of the COVID-19 public health crisis. The first relates to the level of investment in the national health infrastructure. To avoid a spurious correlation with the GDP per capita—richer countries mathematically have higher health budgets than countries with more limited means—we rely on the health expenditure as a

FIGURE 4 | Types of policy responses, contagion and size of vulnerable groups.

share of GDP for 2019 (OECD, 2020). Despite this choice, the variable is still strongly correlated with the GDP per capita ($R = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$) As it assesses the overall health budget, this broad indicator also includes resources spent in sectors that are not central to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. To compensate for these limitations, we also use a more specific indicator, namely the number of hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants (*beds*) (Ritchie, 2020). This enables to capture the specificity of the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19, namely the lack of resources to save the share of people who can become critically ill because of the virus.

Our results only display a correlation between the health expenditure as a share of GDP and the depth of control used in the implementation of the measure (and −0.44 for DC, $p < 0.05$) which resists in bootstrapped estimates. Countries with larger health budgets adopt less intrusive policy responses but not necessarily less severe ones. Limited health resources hence lead governments to rely more on coercion to limit the stress on their health capacities. More surprisingly, the relationship between the number of beds is statistically associated with DC but goes in the opposite direction (0.54 $p > 0.01$ for DC). **Figure 5** displays the observed patterns and also sheds light on the distribution of hospital beds in our sample that informs the validity of the relationship observed. Hospital beds are largely available in Eastern countries—which also implemented some of the most stringent policies—but are scarcer in Scandinavian countries, which adopted less restrictive policy responses. This distribution leads to an unexpected correlation and suggests that the availability of the hospital beds is not a relevant indicator to explain cross-national variation in the stringency of crisis-management policy responses. In addition and albeit at the aggregated level, healthcare expenditures are correlated with the measures in the expected direction, many exceptions can be identified. For example, France is characterized by a generous healthcare budget but adopted stringent policies while Ireland implemented less stringent policies despite its limited investment in healthcare.

The overall capacity of crisis-affected states also shapes their policy responses. States with higher resources enjoy an higher room of manoeuver in the design of their policy responses than states with more limited financial means. Following other research on the governmental response to COVID-19 (Bjørnskov and Voigt, 2020), we use the GDP per capita in 2019 (World Bank, 2020), which roughly captures the capacity of the state. Yet, this indicator also captures many other aspects that go well beyond state capacity. High GDP per capita countries are also characterized with higher institutional quality and stronger inter-personal and social trust (Dollar and Kraay, 2003; Butkiewicz and Yanikkaya, 2006). To mitigate such bias, we also assess the relationship between the level of indebtedness of a country (*debt % GDP*, Eurostat, 2020, last quarter 2019) and the type of policy responses implemented. Commentaries of the policy responses to COVID-19 in the EU largely reveal how highly indebted countries in the EU were limited in the design of their policy responses due to an incapacity to raise liquidity on financial markets (McMenamin et al., 2020). Although this indicator is more reliable, it also assumes that the management of the pandemic implies a rise of the national debt. This may however not be the case for all countries.

Our preliminary results are ambiguous. The GDP per capita is highly correlated in the expected direction with both FL and DC (respectively, $r = -0.50$ and -0.65, $p < 0{,}01$) even when bootstrapped. A positive correlation is only found between FL and the level of indebtedness ($r = 0{,}47$, $p < 0.05$) which resists bootstrapping. **Figure 6** shows that a low GDP per capita is characterized by more depth of control. However, some countries tend to be too (especially France) or not enough coercive (Croatia, Portugal and Estonia) when their level of wealth is considered. Regarding the relationship between GDP per capita and freedom limitations (not displayed), outliers also exist, such as France, Belgium and Ireland.

Figure 6 also displays the significant association between the level of indebtedness and freedom limitations. However, it shows that Eastern countries tend to increase limitations despite of their relatively low debt. This group of countries further shapes the lack of relationship between the public debt as a share of GDP and the

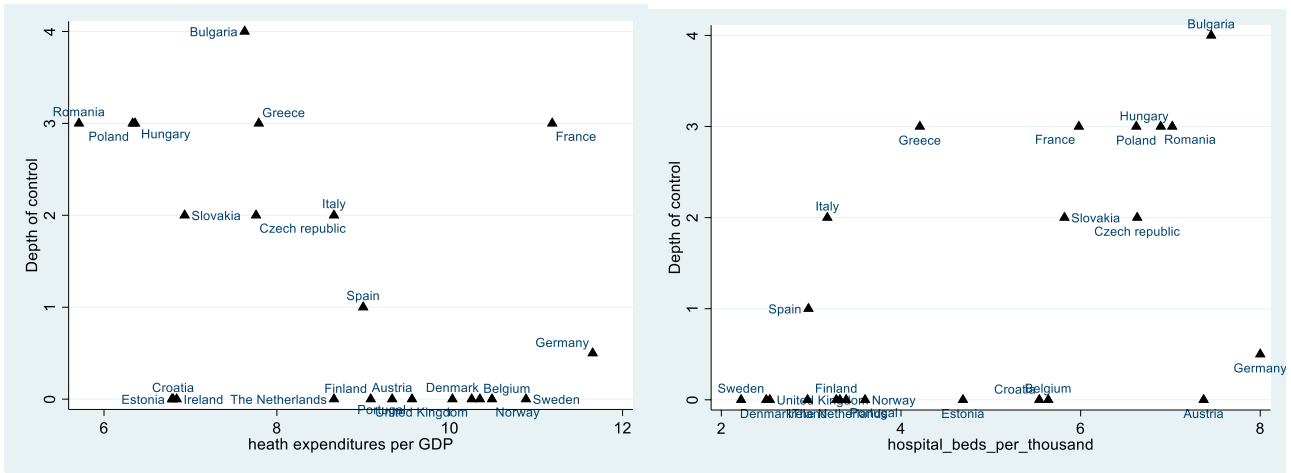

FIGURE 5 | Types of policy responses and capacity of health systems.

depth of control as many it shows that Eastern countries are highly intrusive in the management of the pandemic.

Lastly, we rely on the last wave of the European Values Survey (conducted in 2017 and 2018) to assess the relationship between the level of stringency and coerciveness of policy responses and political and interpersonal trust. Regarding the former, we take into account the fact that most crisis policy-making gives a predominant role to the executive and first use the level of confidence in the government. Second, as the implementation of the measures is mainly left to the police, we also include an assessment of the level of trust in the police. Both indicators vary from 1 = a great deal of confidence to 4 = none at all. As the management of the COVID-19 pandemic implies a high degree of compliance by the population, we also include estimates of the level of interpersonal trust, using a question focusing on the degree of confidence respondents have in other people (1. most people can be trusted, 2. you can't be too careful in dealing with people). Finally, the level of satisfaction with the political system (1 = not satisfied at all, 10 completely satisfied) is usually associated with trust and compliance (Zmerli et al., 2007).

While these data are not collected just before the sanitary crisis, they have the advantage to be comparative, complete and based on large samples. Data from the last Eurobarometer survey before the pandemic, in November 2019 does not reveal fundamental differences in the trust in government and satisfaction in democracy. However, these more recent data do not include interpersonal trust and trust in police. In addition, trust-related indicators are rather stable over time and a two-year timespan is not enough to trigger visible evolutions in trust rates, especially as no external shock is likely to have affected positively or negatively the level of trust in EU countries.

Even when aggregates are taken into account, these variables are strongly correlated with each other (the Pearson coefficient is between 0.72 and 0.91). Yet, each of them captures slightly different dimensions of the propensity to comply with governmental directives. Some capture whether people trust that institutions take right decisions while others capture the importance of pro-social behavior in a community. As we keep the original coding, we expect a negative correlation between the variable of (dis)trust and the measure to limit freedom or the depth of control. In addition, we expect a positive relationship between satisfaction and the output variables.

All the trust-related indicators are significantly correlated in the expected direction with both freedom limitations and depth of control. The highest coefficient is found for interpersonal trust (FL $r = 0.70$, DC $r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$), followed by regime satisfaction (respectively −0.63 and −0.58, $p < 0.01$), then trust in police (0.58 and 0.61, $p < 0.01$) and finally trust in government (0.66 and 0.52, $p < 0.05$). Note that all these coefficients stay significant when correlations are bootstrapped.

Figure 7 shows the relationship between interpersonal (dis) trust and the output variables. On the one hand, distrust characterizes all the countries that score 7 or higher in freedom limitations while, on the contrary, trust is high in all the countries that score 6 or less. A similar pattern is observed for the depth of control. Only Croatia stands out as combining low levels of interpersonal trust with low levels of controls.

Political Constraints and Pandemic Policy-Making

Our second scenario argues that policy-makers are constrained by counter-powers when designing crisis policy responses. Yet, the extent of this constraint depends on the institutional set up of each country. In all democratic systems, crisis policy-making gives a central role to the executive. Yet this role is conditioned by the approval of the national parliament. Getting such approval may be more or less easy for governments. To capture the checks and balances exerted by legislative powers in a country, we rely on the level of power-sharing within the parliament. We compute the percentage of seats held by the main party of the ruling coalition *perseat*) at the beginning of the pandemic updating the data compiled by Teorell et al. (2020). The counter-powers are

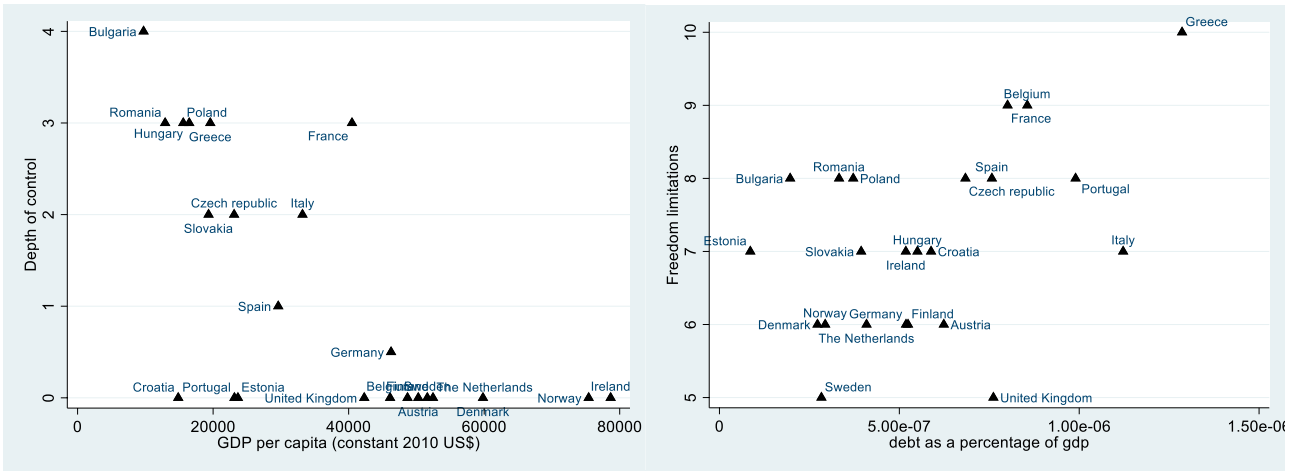

FIGURE 6 | Type of policy responses, GDP per capita and level of indebtedness.

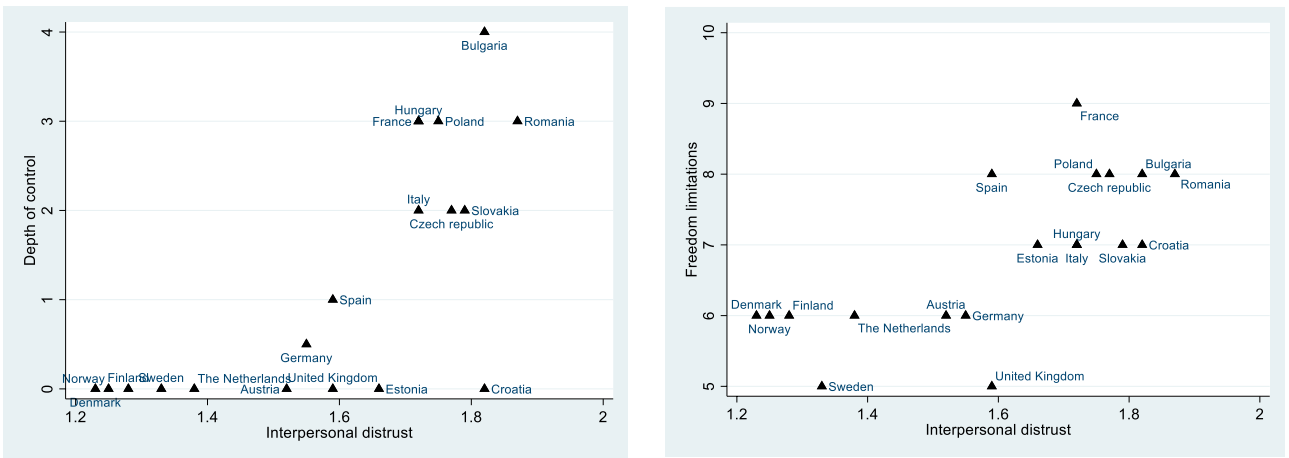

FIGURE 7 | Type of policy responses and interpersonal (dis)trust.

therefore either part of the ruling coalition, or outside of it. We argue that when the main ruling party has a low number of seats in the parliament, it has to seek approval for its exceptional measures from a potentially large set of other represented parties.

Power-sharing is also taking place outside of the parliament and concerns various political institutions such as the judiciary which controls the legality of the measures taken, and subnational entities which have a strong role in health policy-making in decentralized political systems. To capture the role of these diverse political stakeholders, we use a more comprehensive indicator of political constraints (*polcon5*) the executive has to face in policy-making. It accounts for the veto players of the executive and is structured in an index ranging from 0 to 1, where 1 is the strongest level of constraints (Henisz and Mansfield, 2006). We use the last release of this commonly used index in comparative political research (see, among others, Freitag and Bühlmann, 2009; Weymouth, 2011) dating from 2017. As with trust indicators, the stability of political institutions over time minimizes the impact of the absence of data for 2019. We expect the percentage of seats held in the parliament by the ruling party to be positively associated with the severity of freedom restrictions and the depth of control while the influence political constraints would be negative.

Both indicators are significantly correlated in the expected direction with the DC (%seats, $r = 0.51$, Polcon5, $r = -0.45$, $p < 0.05$), but not with FL, even after bootstrapping This is surprising when we take into account that, on the one hand, %seats and Polcon5 are not correlated with each other ($r = 0.07$, $p > 0.7$) and, on the other hand, DC and FL are highly correlated.

Figure 8 sheds further light on results related to DC. Among the five countries with the highest number of seats for the ruling party (>50%), four exert a particularly strong control particularly on their population (scores 3 or 4). Only the United Kingdom did not implement exceptional control, even if the ruling government was widely supported in the

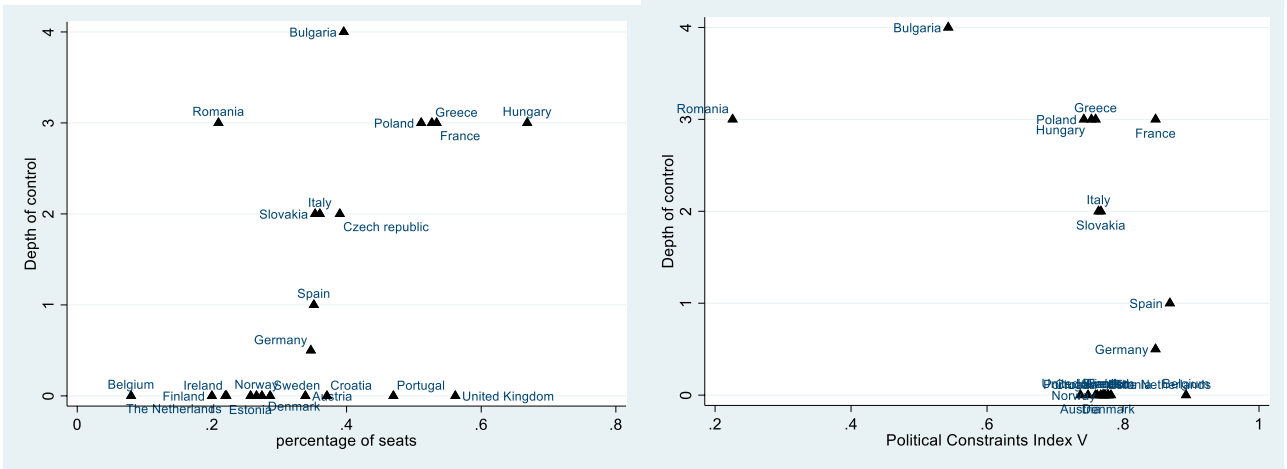

FIGURE 8 | Depth of controland checks and balances.

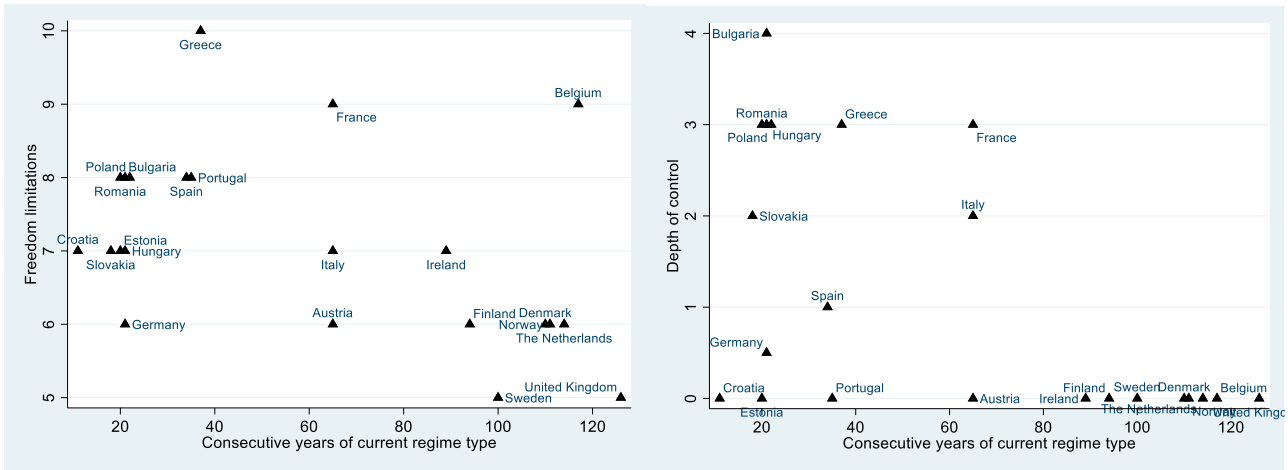

FIGURE 9 | Types of policy responses and authoritarian culture.

parliament. On the other hand, among the nine countries where the leading party in the government holds few seats (<30%), only Romania controls citizens more intensively than before the pandemic. When using *polcon5*, the relationship is less obvious and strongly shaped by two outliers: Bulgaria and Romania that have particularly low counter powers and rely on very intrusive enforcement mechanisms.

While similar patterns hold for the association between these variables and freedom limitations, some slight differences explain changes in the coefficients and their significance. Regarding the perseat variable, Belgium is the country that weighs the most on the overall results, as it has the weakest government, no exceptional control over residents' behavior, but high levels of freedom limitation. Belgium also influences the relationship between polcon5 and freedom limitations, though to a lesser extent.

We also record all the governments which declare a state of emergency based on media sources and computed a dummy variable *state of emergency* that identifies the 13 countries that have called a state of emergency. Although the procedure for such a declaration varies across countries, once approved, a state of emergency grants additional discretionary powers to the executive allowing the curtailing of freedom to manage an extraordinary crisis. Unlike the other indicators of check and balances, having declared a state of emergency is correlated with FL ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.1$), but not with DC. The bootstrapping of the correlation confirms the positive, significant relationship with FL and leads the correlation between DC and state of emergency to reach the 10% significance level.

The correlation with FL is not surprising since in many systems, declaring a state of emergency is a necessary

condition to restrict individual rights. However, this does not necessarily mean that enforcement powers are made more intrusive. Note that this result is likely to be due to the fact that five countries (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Portugal) did not exercise a stronger control on their citizens after declaring a state of emergency while Greece and Poland did so but without relying on a state of emergency. This explains the relative instability of the relationship between the declaration of a state of emergency and the depth of control.

The Ideological Scenario

Political culture encompasses a large set of different attitudes, beliefs and preferences related to a political process that gives to this concept a rather fuzzy nature (Welch, 2016). Our analytical framework is especially concerned with a specific set of attitudes, namely the tolerance for authoritarian rule that varies across countries. We proxy these attitudes by collecting data on the political past of a country. Our argument claims that countries that have experienced authoritarian rule in their recent past are more prone to relapse into it when faced with a crisis.

We hence count the consecutive years of current regime type (based on Boix et al., 2012) to capture the consecutive years spent under the current regime (CYCR, ranging from Croatia = 21 years to the United Kingdom = 136 years). We also updated, in the same database, the past democratic breakdowns (PDB) variable. This variable takes into account all the democratic history and shows little variation across our sample, since only eight countries have experienced a democratic breakdown and only two have done so more than once (France and Greece). The variables are not correlated with each other ($r = -0.3$, $p > 0.1$).

Both variables are correlated with FL in the expected direction (CYCR $r = -0.43$ $p < 0.05$, PDB $r = 0{,}63$ $p > 0.01$). Only CYRC is significantly correlated with DC ($r = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$), while PDB slightly exceeds the conventional 10% level ($r = 0.36$, $p = 0.11$). These results hold when bootstrapping techniques are applied.

Figure 9 shows that the CYCR is associated with depth of control because it isolates the Northern European countries that both are long-established, stable democracies and did not increase the depth of control during the pandemic. However, when these countries are left aside, no correlation is observed. Regarding freedom limitations, Northern countries are also gathered at the bottom right of the graph (a group also including Belgium) and the Eastern countries are together at the top left. As expected, the number of past democratic breakdowns is correlated with both dependent variables essentially because France and Greece have known more than one breakdown in their history and practiced highly restrictive policies.

Last, we focus on the ideological drivers of policy responses. Yet, to capture the ideology of the main party in power, ideological families are not very helpful. For instance, being labeled as communist does not refer to the same tradition and attitudes in Western than in Eastern Europe. The same applies for nationalists or conservatives. To avoid this problem we use the data from the Manifesto Project that provides parties' policy positions derived from a content analysis of parties' electoral manifestos (Krause et al., 2020) in the last national election. We select six topics: 1. Freedom (Favorable mentions of importance of personal freedom), 2. Human Rights (Favorable mentions of importance of human and civil rights), 3. Democracy (Favorable mentions of democracy minus the statements against the idea of democracy), 4. Authority (Favorable mentions of the desirability of a strong and/or stable government), 5. Order (Favorable mentions of strict law enforcement minus rejections of plans for stronger law enforcement), and 6. Military (sentences promoting military minus sentences criticizing military). The three first scores are expected to decrease restrictions and control, the last three to increase them. Pearson coefficients do not display significant coefficients, except for the association between democracy and FL. However, the relationship goes in the opposite direction: when the incumbent party has promoted democracy in the latter election, it also implements more stringent restrictions to face the COVID-19 pandemic (FL $r = 0.52$ $p > 0.01$).

When bootstrapping techniques are used, results are more congruent with expectations. Freedom becomes negatively associated with FL ($r = -0.31$, $p < 0.05$) and human rights negatively associated with DC ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that our results are highly influenced by the presence of outliers in our sample, that **Figure 10** below also reveals. First of all, a greater emphasis on human rights appears to lessen the depth of control over individuals. However, one notable outlier also stands out: the Spanish Socialist Party exerted a relatively low control (1 out of 4) after having strongly campaigned for human rights. Without Spain, however, the correlation stay significant and negative, as expected by our theoretical framework. In particular, when human rights are salient in manifestos (>1) the depth of control is low, while in the five countries that exerted more control over residents, no one is ruled by a party which made this issue salient during its electoral campaign.

Regarding the relationship between the defense of freedom in manifestos and the stringency of freedom limitations, **Figure 10** shows that the Austrian government led by the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) disproportionately campaigned in favor of individual freedom and, coherently, implemented few limitations. Many countries follow a similar yet less extreme pattern (Norway, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Germany). In contrast, the Greek New Democracy's manifesto does not consider freedom as a salient political issue indeed considerably restricted them in pandemic times. This relationship however remains unstable due to many counterexamples such as the French majority party, *En Marche!* which promoted freedom and greatly limited it faced with the crisis or the Danish Social Democrats, which did not predominantly campaign on freedom, but nonetheless protected them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although preliminary—and limited by our sample size—our results shed new light on crisis policy-making and open further avenues for research. As **Table 1**—summarizing the results of our analysis—shows, none of the three identified scenarios are clearly supported.

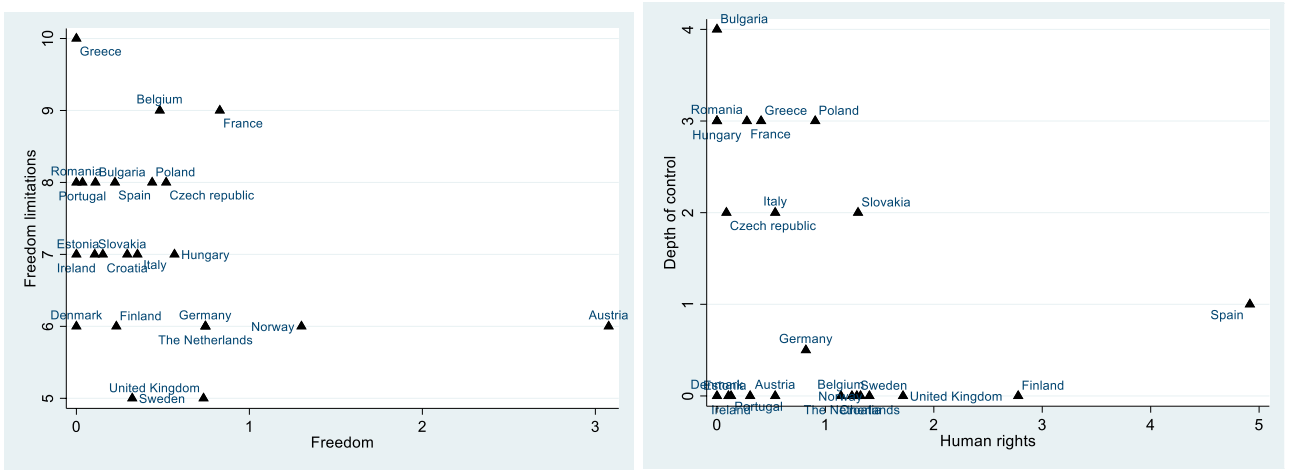

FIGURE 10 | Types of policy responses and importance of freedom and human rights in ruling parties' ideology.

First, the idea that policy-makers face a trade-off in crisis settings receives mixed support. In our conceptual framework, a trade off leads policy-makers to arbitrate between three key elements: a) the magnitude of the threat posed not poses by the pandemic, b) the capacities they have to design various policies and c) the assumed level of compliance of the population with the measures taken. Whatever the indicator used, the characteristics of the pandemic are not associated with the level of stringency of crisis-management policies. The pace of the contagion, number of deaths, size of the vulnerable population or population density are not correlated with the measures taken. This suggests that policy-makers do not fully consider the available epidemiological data in the design of their policies. However, this result does not mean that the severity of the pandemic is an irrelevant driver of policy responses. First, risk perception matters and can be differently assessed by governments based on, for example, the historical experience of a country. Second, the adoption of a time series design—that our data do not allow—would have likely revealed that stringent measures are implemented when deaths dramatically increase or when the hospitals are full. What our results simply suggest is that the initial levels of stringency and intrusiveness of policy responses are not associated with the absolute level magnitude of the pandemic. Similarly, regarding the capacity of treating patients, only the healthcare expenditures as a share of the GDP are negatively associated with restrictions, but more accurate measures—such as the share of hospital beds—do not confirm this finding. Regarding the overall state capacity, results are mixed. Many debates revolve around the impact of state's indebtedness on their capacity to face crisis, but we only find a relationship between the debt as a share of GDP and the level of freedom limitations. On the other hand, GDP per capita is strongly and negatively associated with all the restrictions. Finally, trust, whatever the indicator used, is also clearly correlated with the restrictions. It is difficult, however, to identify a clear scenario because trust, in turn, is also strongly correlated with the GDP per capita and with the level of healthcare expenditures. At this stage, our data do not fully support the trade-off scenario. However, we can conclude that long-term structural variables, such as wealth or trust, are more relevant to explain cross national variation in pandemic policy-making than conjectural factors, like the evolution of the pandemic or the capacities of the hospitals to treat respiratory emergencies. Moreover, this result is confirmed for both indicators of restrictions, freedom limitations but also the depth of control relied upon to enforce the measures.

TABLE 1 | Summary of the results.

Statistical significance level 5% level	Freedom limitations	Depth of control
Trade-off scenario	6/13	6/13
Positive cases	No	No
Deaths	No	No
ICU occupancy	No	No
Density of the population	No	No
Share of people aged 70	No	No
Health expenditure (% GDP)	No	Yes
N hospital beds (1,000 inh.)	No	Yes (unexpected)
GDP per capita	Yes	Yes
Levels of indebtedness	Yes	No
Trust in Gouvernement	Yes	Yes
Trust in police	Yes	Yes
Trust in other people	Yes	Yes
Satisfaction with democracy	Yes	Yes
Checks and balances scenario	1/3	2/3
% Seats in parliament	No	Yes
Political contraints (polcon 5)	No	Yes
State of emergency	Yes	No
Ideological scenario	3/8	2/8
Consecutive years under democracy	Yes	Yes
Past democratic breakdowns	Yes	No
Promoting personal freedom (manifestos)	Yes	No
Promoting human and civil rights	No	Yes
Promoting democracy	Yes (unexpected)	No
Promoting strong government	No	No
Promoting strict law enforcement	No	No
Promoting military	No	No

The second scenario put forward by our analytical model claims that policy-makers are constrained in the policy options they can select, because of the control of counter-powers. Our results do not confirm that counter-powers are particularly suspicious of the action of the executive in crisis times. Interestingly, however, while our different measures of check and balances do not predict freedom limitations, they all predict the depth of control used. As noted, this difference is particularly due to a specific case, Belgium, in which the executive power is the weakest in the Europe Union. It is also one of the two countries—with Portugal—where the limitations are stringent, but the control not stronger. This specific case suggests that an alternative mechanism may be at stake. Check and balances protect citizens against abuses in the enforcement of the measures, but not against the decision of implementing very stringent ones. Pandemics, as other crises, seem to trigger a rally around the flag effect leadings all political stakeholders to support the action of the executive, at least in the early stages of a crisis. The likelihood of declaring a state of emergency is not higher when the counter-powers are weak. However, the powers of the police or of the army increase less when counter powers are strong, even under state of emergency. At this stage, however, we cannot confirm this result that could be a simple statistical artefact. Moreover, it must be noted that our indicators of checks and balances, while not correlated with each other, are both associated with GDP per capita and, therefore, spurious causality is highly probable.

Lastly, our results suggest that the political preferences of the rulers play an ambiguous role in crisis response. On the one hand, countries having a long democratic experience are less likely to implement stricter restrictions in freedoms than the others are. This could be associated with a lower appeal for authoritarian rule, especially among the politicians. On the other hand, the differences in political manifestos among the rulers of different countries are not clearly associated with the level of restrictions adopted. Whether they explicitly support freedom, democracy and human rights or rather privilege order, authorities or the army, ruling parties' ideologies do not strongly shape crisis management policies, even though some significant relationships can be found with a party's emphasis on freedom and human rights. Again, as in the previous scenarios, structural drivers seem to better explain the restrictions than the specific situation in which the country faces the pandemic.

All in all, none of our scenarios are clearly supported, but our results draw some directions for further research. First, our initial findings systematically contradict the idea that pandemic-management policies are associated with the situational sanitary situation of a country. The severity of pandemic, the number of beds, the number of vulnerable people, the level of indebtedness and the ideology of the party in charge are weakly or not associated with the severity of the measures taken. In contrast, long-term structural factors are much more predictive: the level of interpersonal and political trust, the GDP per capita, the democratic experience and, partly, the existence of counter-powers are all associated with restrictive policies. While our results do not allow identifying which of these causes are the most explanatory ones, answers have to be found among these inheritances of the past, be they political culture, institutions or the state of the economy. Our limited sample size and the use of cross-sectional data do not allow to draw any meaningful generalization from our results. Yet, these preliminary analyses nonetheless inform the analysis of crisis policy-making. First, our results call for collecting more fine grained data not only on the types of exceptional measures adopted in the wake of a crisis but also on the range and coerciveness of the modalities used to enforce them. Second, they shed new light on the nature and challenges of supranational coordination in crisis management at the EU level. The fact that the timely activation of coordinated crisis-management mechanisms did not prevent member states from opting for their own course of action does not mean that EU governments did not cooperate or emulate each other. Our data for example reveal that close countries characterized by shared political experiences and history—such as the Nordic countries or the Eastern European ones—followed a very close course of action. When compared with the United States or Canada, crisis-management capacities at the EU level are far more restricted. The interconnectedness of EU members states is also likely to trigger policy coordination among EU subnational regions and cities, a pattern our data do not allow to grasp so far. Given the importance our results give to such capacities in shaping policy responses, our analysis calls for further strengthening fiscal and budgetary solidarity among member states if more coordination is to be achieved at the EU level for future crises. To answer these questions in a more fine grained manner and further develop the potential of our data we have started a project mapping the modalities of exceptional decision-making in all the subnational regions of the European Economic Area. We especially intend to collect data on seven dimensions of political exceptionalism[3] covering both the decision taken and their enforcement mechanisms based on a combination of automated and manual coding of policy decisions[4]. We expect these data to further allow unpacking how governments respond to crises and how each of the factors of our theoretical framework influences different types of measures. For each event, the emergency instrument used [both at the national and subnational (regional) level], its coverage, target groups as well as its degree of implementation (degree of constraints, enforcement mechanisms such as fines, jail sentences…) are identified. We expect such data to allow to better understand the impacts and determinants of political exceptionalism in a context where societies are increasingly exposed to various types of crises.

[3]The identified dimensions are 1. State of emergency (SE): democratic governance and check and balances under crisis contexts (e.g., suspension of parliamentary sessions, or local powers); 2. Restrictions of fundamental rights and civil liberties (e.g., freedom of movement, speech or press); 3. Legal restrictions of daily liberties (e.g., wearing masks, COVID10 tracking app or quarantines); 4. Closures/ lockdown (e.g., closing schools or ban public events); 5. Suspension of international cooperation and commitments (e.g., including suspensions of visa delivery or closing embassies); 6. Police mobilization (e.g., transportation, federal, local police and their size): 7. Army mobilization (e.g., deployment in the street or in border or public and private buildings).

[4]For more information on the project, please visit https://exceptius.com/

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CE: Paper framing, theoretical framework, data collection and analysis, mansucript writing, review and finalisation. RMB: theoretical framework, data collection and analysis, manuscript writing and review. SR: data collection on dependent variable, manuscript review and section on methods. KA: theoretical argument on trust, article review.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

APPENDIX 1 | Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Obs	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max	p1	p99	Skew.	Kurt.
ICU occupancy	11	1.965	2.493	0	6.708	0	6.708	1.128	2.767
Health expenditure (per GDP)	23	8.613	1.755	5.71	11.654	5.71	11.654	0.044	1.782
Trust in government	19	2.85	0.265	2.36	3.39	2.36	3.39	0.105	2.392
Trust in police	19	2.137	0.309	1.59	2.73	1.59	2.73	0.241	2.246
Political satisfaction	19	5.219	1.097	2.87	7.3	2.87	7.3	–0.037	2.753
Trust in others	19	1.598	0.21	1.23	1.87	1.23	1.87	–0.557	1.932
%seat	23	0.356	0.14	0.08	0.668	0.08	0.668	0.329	2.708
Military	23	2.429	2.266	–0.737	6.891	–0.737	6.891	0.641	2.147
Freedom	23	0.49	0.656	0	3.077	0	3.077	2.829	11.713
Humanrights	23	0.923	1.12	0	4.915	0	4.915	2.158	8.177
Democracy	23	1.924	2.667	–0.036	12.424	–0.036	12.424	2.899	11.714
Authority	23	0.304	1.173	0	5.666	0	5.666	4.433	20.789
Order	23	4.993	3.164	0.283	14.516	0.283	14.516	1.043	4.632
PDM	21	0.524	0.814	0	3	0	3	1.634	5.228
CYCR	22	59.818	40.529	11	126	11	126	0.32	1.481
Polcon5	22	0.747	0.134	0.226	0.893	0.226	0.893	–2.91	11.888
State of emergency	23	0.565	0.507	0	1	0	1	–0.263	1.069
Freedom limitations	23	7.043	1.107	5	9	5	9	–0.292	2.031
Depth of control	23	1.152	1.41	0	4	0	4	0.628	1.768
GDP per capita	23	36,230.28	19,810.22	9,737.601	78,660.96	9,737.601	78,660.96	0.543	2.374
Debt per gdp	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.618	2.843
Contagion	23	9,806.304	18,224.23	196	75,641	196	75,641	2.781	9.705
Deaths	23	2,798.435	4,462.216	28	15,238	28	15,238	1.73	4.706
Population density	23	135.622	117.853	14.462	508.544	14.462	508.544	1.773	5.886
Aged_70	23	12.716	1.882	8.678	16.24	8.678	16.24	–0.271	2.969
Hospital beds	23	4.862	1.885	2.22	8	2.22	8	0.145	1.524

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COVID-19 in Italy: Performing Power and Emotions

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The article charts the notion of statehood emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the emotional repertoire and the themes addressed in the government's crisis communication. The conception and performance of statehood and power in Italy during the COVID-19 emergency rely on four interrelated nodal points: (1) the state's relationship to citizens, (2) the state's relationship to regions and local governments, (3) the state's relationship to politics and the Italian parliament, and (4) the state within international sphere. For each of those nodal points, we have analyzed relevant themes and rhetorical devices following a discourse-historical approach (DHA). Specific efforts have been made to identify the emotional repertoire mobilized by the Italian government in its communication. In the interplay between the dramatic context of crisis and an enduring trend toward the personalization of the government's leadership, the source of legitimacy has shifted from traditional democratic procedures to the use of emotional capital. The analysis of the Italian government's communication reveals the features of the emotional capital used during the pandemic, like the ability to display empathy toward citizens' sufferings, the will to engage in dialog with social stakeholders, confidence in expertise, and the pride and determination to negotiate within the EU. The article concludes that the performance of the prime minister in expressing his emotional states has nurtured the conception of post-COVID statehood, consolidating his individual leadership and flawing the spaces of political conflict.

Keywords: leadership, emotions, performance, communication, populism

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INTRODUCTION

Our democracies have been confronted with many challenges, some deriving from enduring trends of change and some arising from critical junctures in history. In the last 20 years, for instance, the process of democratization has undergone serious moments of crisis, such as during the Great Recession and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic; at the same time, a neoliberal hegemony has constrained the welfare state and pushed advanced democracies toward processes of depoliticization (Fawcett et al., 2017). The insurgence of far-right populist parties and the authoritarian backlash have further complicated the road toward democratization (see, for instance, Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Pappas, 2019; Crouch, 2020).

In those crucial years, some trends have consolidated. First, the dissolution of political parties as a means for organizing social demands, confronting collective interests, and recruiting government executives has led to a "partyless democracy" (Mair, 2000). Second, personalization of politics begins with the individualization of political power in the hands of a single individual and necessitates the search for a direct relationship between the leader and his electorate (Viviani, 2015). In such a novel

social relationship, two elements acquire more importance than they have borne in the past: the personality of the leader and the performative/communicative dimension of the process of consensus-building (De Blasio et al., 2012).

Particularly in critical times, the personality of the leader, his performance and discourse, can modify how the State is organized and perceived. As crises open the possibility for a restructuring of social and political institutions, the narrativity emerging from such crises is the foundation of structural transformations of the state (Hay, 1999; Jessop, 2016). During the pandemic, for instance, communicative acts have reacquired their capacity to shape the reality and ways of living: What the government has announced during these crucial months has constituted the "new normality" of the post-COVID era. Hence, performing statehood and power is not only a matter of communication and rhetoric but also of specific policy actions undertaken (i.e., policies and regulation).

This article studies the interplay between the performance and notion of statehood and the personalization of the leadership during the pandemic's first wave. We analyze the case of Giuseppe Conte's communication in Italy for two main reasons. First, Italy was the first Western country to be severely hit by the coronavirus and to declare a national emergency followed by a "hard lockdown." Therefore, studying the communication by the Italian government means looking at the first phases of the pandemic crisis, assuming that other countries might have been inspired by the best and the worst practices undertaken in Italy as an initial example. Second, the leadership of Giuseppe Conte presents a quasi-experimental case: When he took office, Conte had not had a political career or a clear ideological leaning, and during the COVID-19 crisis, he had come to lead a second Cabinet with a totally different majority than the first one. Although Conte's original mandate was to exercise a warranty role, and his main credit was that he came from outside the parliament, the management of the COVID-19 crisis has seen the consolidation of his political leadership.[1] The analysis of his communication is therefore oriented to estimate how emotions might have contributed to the construction of his credibility as a political leader.

In particular, the process of building and personalizing leadership during the COVID-19 crisis is scrutinized through the lens of the political sociology of emotions, a field of study that is receiving increasing attention for its ability to connect communication, political sociology, and psychology. Here, we argue that the emotional repertoire used by a leader forms part of his emotional capital and that such capital can be in turn exchanged for more traditional procedures of power legitimation. While we acknowledge that the role of emotions in democratic processes might be ambivalent, we want to underline that we need to assess such a role on a case-by-case basis, rather than simply dismiss it as harmful and alien. Emotions play an important part in extraordinary, critical contexts (which in turn occur more and more frequently) as well as in ordinary processes of political leadership-building (most of all when a political history for a figure or group is lacking). Although the concept of audience democracy (Manin, 2010; Sorice, 2014; Urbinati, 2014) is not new, we aim to clarify the role of emotions in the consolidation of those structural transformations of contemporary democracies in the post-COVID era.

PERFORMANCE OF LEADERSHIP AND EMOTIONS

At the beginning of the 20th century, research in the psychology of crowds identified emotions in politics as precursors of unexpected, unpredictable, and perilous collective behaviors. The rise of Nazism and fascism and the Holocaust have contributed to the success of this negative evaluation of emotions in politics (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019). Later, the affirmation of a rational, deliberative ideal of the public sphere has constituted a normative benchmark that has excluded emotions from politics (De Blasio and Selva, 2020a). Increasingly in recent years, we are witnessing a revival of the interest in studying emotions as a key feature of social change, with ambivalent judgments on the so-called emotionalization of the public sphere (see, for instance, Higgins, 2008; Saccà, 2015; Sorice, 2020b). For some, the increasing use of emotions in politics has been interpreted as a substitute for the loss of ideological roots, as a way to win power within the context of dissolving political parties, and as a result of the general downgrading of the possibility of rational deliberation in the public sphere. For others, emotions have maintained a positive allure because they are conceived to contrast with attitudes of technocratic élites, and for this reason, emotions are exploited most of all (but not exclusively) by populist actors pretending to be genuine and authentic (Wodak, 2021). The "right" or "efficient" use of emotions is still seen as a quality of a political leader's ability to build a relationship with her/his supporters.

The emotional turn describes a very vibrant debate in the social sciences. Jan Slaby and colleagues, for instance, have talked about an "emotional reflexivity" to describe the tendency to study the social world through the lens of emotions and affects (Slaby and von Scheve, 2019). Although social scientists have produced many perspectives on emotions,[2] here we rely on social constructivism and psychoanalysis (particularly Lacanian) to conceive emotions as elements that reveal the power structures of modern times as they are embodied in people's behaviors

[1]Several opinion polls have estimated that the public trust in Giuseppe Conte has increased from 37% before the pandemic to 58% at the end of the first wave in late May 2020, with a peak of 71% in March; see for instance https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/05/20/sondaggi-fiducia-stabile-poco-sotto-al-60-per-conte-e-governo-la-maggioranza-promuove-lesecutivo-per-emergenza-e-decreto-rilancio/5807426/ and https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/12/30/news/sondaggi_nell_anno_delcovid_il_primato_e_di_conte_salvini_il_meno_amato-280507928/.

[2]The sociology of emotions has built different taxonomies of emotions (e.g., distinguishing between positive and negative, moral and individual, and primary and secondary) and provided definitions for all related concepts such as sentiments, feelings, moods, and, most of all, affects. For a comprehensive overview on those concepts, see TenHouten (2007) and Slaby and von Scheve (2019). This article follows a phenomenological and cultural approach to the emotional component of social and political life, meaning that "rather than asking 'what are emotions?,' I will ask 'what emotions do?'" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4).

(Clarke, 2003). The most important consequence of this approach is that while emotions might be universal, the ways to identify, describe, and enact them are mediated by specific social and cultural contexts. "Structures of feeling" have a historicity and emerge as a result of historical processes of domination and struggles for emancipation (Ahmed, 2014): They identify the meanings, practices, relationships, and discourses that ground human behaviors according to specific settings. Linking emotions to history means acknowledging that they also have a normative side and that emotions accumulate over the lifetime, contributing to the building of political subjectivities.

As new political subjects emerge from society, political parties and leaders also ride emotional hegemony with differing results: Some leaders appear to be more effective in exploiting (or exhibiting) a sentimental connection with the people (Sorice, 2014, 2019), while others show specific emotional repertoires that tend to be highly polarizing and divisive (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). While early studies in the sociology of emotions and psychology have focused on emotional intelligence and other personal characteristics of a leader, contemporary scholars tend to see emotionalization as a communication strategy: as a matter of performance rather than ontology. The theoretical grounds for this conception are the dramaturgical model sketched by Erving Goffman (1969): Power, as much as any other social relationship, is exercised through screenplays that are adapted to the settings of interaction. In this model, a certain degree of publicness is always present in every "stage" in which the agent/actor intervenes, as the boundaries of the stages are defined by the situations of social interaction. According to the studies on the charismatic performance, for instance, a leader's career should be assessed through the analysis of its appearances in the dramas it has written and played in (Joosse, 2017). Such studies have stressed the ephemerality of political leaders who perform a pseudo-charisma based on popularity and visibility in the media (Massidda, 2020; Viviani, 2020).

As leadership is performed through actions and communicative actions in particular (Moffitt, 2020), emotions are part of the screenplay. In this perspective, the distinction between charisma and pseudo-charisma is problematic: For instance, while recognizing that far-right leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini did not adhere to the Weberian concept of charisma, Eatwell (2006) warns that the social consequences of such a "manufactured charismatic bond" were equivalent. Identifying this factor is a way to normalize manipulation in communicative processes, acknowledging that any public performance or any social interaction relies on a certain degree of fictionality or artificiality (Sorice, 2020a). Other far-right leaders (e.g., Jean-Marie Le Pen and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and more recently Matteo Salvini and Donald Trump) sustained an emotional bond and the personification typical of the charismatic/plebiscitarian leadership ideal-type (Eatwell, 2018). We could also add that the bond between the leader (whether charismatic or pseudo-charismatic) and the people rests on a certain quota of emotions *mise-en-scene*, but it would be almost impossible to determine empirically if such emotions are truly *felt* by the leader or just pretended.

In this article, we try to use the peculiar angle of the sociology of emotions to study the discourses surrounding notions of statehood, authority, and power, as they have been deployed during the crucial times of COVID-19. This approach allows focusing on two different but interrelated aspects of contemporary democracies: First, emotions have frequently been used to maintain social order and power structures (Isin, 2004; Fortier, 2010; Di Gregorio and Merolli, 2016). We have already observed elsewhere that this is particularly true during the COVID-19 pandemic, as compliance to rules of containment has been solicited by the dramatic context and by the dramatization of such a context by governments (De Blasio and Selva, 2020b). Second, emotions are employed in a tactical dimension by leaders in their communication, as tools to consolidate a relationship with the public. This use is widely covered by literature on political communication and populism (De Blasio et al., 2012; De Blasio and Sorice, 2018); at the same time, there is nothing to support the claim that only populist leaders use emotionalization as a communication strategy or that only populist leaders are able to express empathy.

The possession or lack of "emotional capital" by political leaders is part of the research agenda of the sociology of emotions. Echoing Pierre Bourdieu, emotional capital can be defined as "an *embodied* form of cultural capital, understood as a trans-situational capacity to express, manage, and feel emotions in a manner that is 'in tune' with dominant emotion norms and cultures" (Heaney, 2019, p. 234, italics in the original); it is a form of capital in the sense that it can be converted to and exchanged with political capital. At the same time, the ability to use emotional capital and to transform it into political capital is highly differentiated among leaders. By approaching emotions in the analysis of discourses and performance of statehood, our aim is to highlight how emotional capital can be built recursively over time as a source of legitimacy in challenging times.

A TIMELINE OF COVID-19 AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE IN ITALY (MARCH–SEPTEMBER 2020)

Italy was the first Western country to be hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. The first native (i.e., non-touristic) cases were reported in the last 10 days of February 2020, but the outbreak has been registered during the first week of March (**Figure 1**). From January 31, the prime minister declared a state of emergency, suspended flights from and to China, and mobilized the Department of Civil Protection, the Ministry of Health, and the National Institute of Health to monitor the situation. On February 5, 2020, a Technical-Scientific Committee (abbreviated CTS) was created, an advisory board comprising experts and public executives providing evidence and models to support the government during the decision-making process for the whole period.[3]

[3]See the composition of the Technical-Scientific Committee on the Ministry of Health website, retrieved from: http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioContenutiNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=5432&area=nuovoCoronavirus&menu=vuoto [Accessed January 9, 2021].

Given that the high rate of cases situated in Lombardy and Veneto were isolated in two clusters, on February 23, 11 towns were placed under quarantine[4] (that area was declared a "red zone," a terminology further used to identify the gravity of the pandemic). In the meanwhile, several mayors and governors of regions undertook similar measures, such as the closure of bars and restaurants at night, the obligation to wear face masks in public offices, temporary school closures, and so on.[5] But the containment of the red zone was not timely enough to block the mushrooming of other cases in other parts of Italy.

During the first weeks, the situation was underestimated by some media pundits, industry associations (e.g. Confindustria), and political representatives (e.g., the mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, the Democratic Party's secretary Nicola Zingaretti, and the League leader Matteo Salvini).[6] The overall message was to try to carry on business as usual, dismissing the pandemic as a sort of "enhanced" seasonal flu. Carrying on with business as usual became unsustainable from the early days of March. That approach was punctuated by a sequence of law-decrees by the Cabinet and decrees by the prime minister (DPCM), an executive order that does not necessarily require a collegial agreement within the cabinet or a parliamentary control[7] (a timeline of all measures is sketched in **Table 1**).

Each of those provisions was accompanied with a press conference, a TV address to the nation, and sometimes also a Facebook live streaming that saw the Prime Minister as the main actor. Press conferences were held jointly with other minister, most of all the Minister of Finance, Roberto Gualtieri; the Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza; and the Minister of Education, Lucia Azzolina. At the same time, the Department of Civil Protection hosted a daily press briefing giving official statistics about case spreading, hospitalization, and deaths.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of this article, all communication by the Prime Minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte has been included in the analysis. As the head of the executive body, the prime minister has taken a leading role since the early days of the crisis. He has concentrated all communication and actions by the Cabinet by engaging in frequent press conferences, interviews, and addresses. We acknowledge that this approach to communication with the public is neither a neutral choice nor a necessary outcome[8]; hence, it stresses a peculiar aspect of the personalization of the government and of the performance of power during the COVID-19 crisis.

The corpus includes press interviews, press conferences, addresses, and TV interviews for the period between February 23 and September 3, 2020 (at the beginning of what has been called "the second wave of COVID-19"), for a total of 58 texts, as depicted in **Table 2**. All materials have been retrieved from the official website of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

The corpus has been analyzed following a discursive historical methodology (Meyer and Wodak, 2015; Charteris-Black, 2018). According to this approach, the political subgenres of communication (i.e., the types of content included in the corpus, distinguishing among press conferences, addresses to the nation, and social media contents) are to be considered in their totality, as different tools used for the same goals. The aim of a discourse–historical approach (DHA) is thus twofold: From the one side, it focuses on the themes addressed within discourses, and from the other side, it considers discourses as emerging from intertextuality, considering their coherence and cohesion as guarantees of their efficacy and recognizability over time (Reisigl and Wodak, 2015; Wodak, 2021). In such a vein, discursive strategies can be highlighted, such as nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, intensification, and mitigation.

The concept of nodal points is rooted in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory: With this term, the authors refer to the major ideas, words, or signs to which a meaning is assigned, which are frequently disputed, and which are occasionally reimagined over time. Hence, the concept opens to the definition of discourse in terms of a power struggle. In theory, nodal points can emerge from any discourse in different formats; in origins, nodal points could be

[4]See the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers, February 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/02/23/20A01228/sg [Accessed January 9, 2021].

[5]See the collection of news articles published during February 2020, retrieved from: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/22/news/coronavirus_in_italia_aggiornamento_ora_per_ora-249241616/ [Accessed January 9, 2021].

[6]See for instance "Dal coronavirus all'influenza stagionale: ecco i tassi di mortalità, numeri alla mano," Il Sole 24 Ore, February 13, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/dal-coronavirus-all-influenza-stagionale-ecco-tassi-mortalita-numeri-mano-ACQQd2IB; "Coronavirus, la direttrice del laboratorio di analisi dell'ospedale Sacco: non è pandemia, mi sembra follia. Ma sbaglia i dati," *La Stampa*, February 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/02/23/news/coronavirus-la-direttrice-del-laboratorio-di-analisi-dell-ospedale-sacco-non-e-pandemia-mi-sembra-follia-1.38506371; "Coronavirus: nell'80-90% dei casi è come l'influenza, per gli altri rischio polmonite," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, February 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/coronavirus-nell-80-90percento-casi-e-come-l-influenza-gli-altri-rischio-polmonite-ACQ4pMLB?refresh_ce=1; "Coronavirus, il presidente dei biologi: "Non è più grave di un'influenza, il panico è peggiore della malattia"," *Tgcom24*, February 25, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/coronavirus-il-presidente-deibiologi-non-pi-grave-di-uninfluenza-il-panico-peggiore-della-malattia_15288332-202002a.shtml; "Coronavirus, parla il medico guarito dopo il contagio nella zona rossa: "È come un'influenza e ammalarsi non è facile," *La Repubblica*, February 26, 2020, retrieved from: https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/26/news/coronavirus_il_medico_guarito_niente_panico_-249646477/. On politicians' early perspectives, see "Sala ha detto che la campagna "Milano non si ferma" è stata un errore," *Il Post*, March 23, 2020, retrieved from: https://www.ilpost.it/2020/03/23/coronavirus-milano-non-si-ferma-sala/[All links accessed January 9, 2021].

[7]The opportunity and validity of the DPCM are disputed not only by parliamentarians (namely, from the opposition parties) but also by some law experts. Giuseppe Conte has repeatedly addressed the parliament to defend his choice to use the DPCM as he reputed them the most suitable tool for fast interventions and frequent updates.

[8]For instance, in the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson's communication has been judged as overcentralized, but vague and contradictory (Dagnall et al., 2020; Newton, 2020). Moreover, as the successor of Giuseppe Conte in managing the pandemic, Mario Draghi's communication has been marked by an opposite strategy of understatement, limiting his public appearances and leaving the floor to the ministries during several press briefings.

TABLE 1 | Timeline of the Italian government's measures.

Date	Type of measure	Relevant measures
February 23, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Conferring the cabinet with special powers (i.e., limitation of personal freedom)
February 23, 2020	DPCM	Establishing a red zone in some towns of Lombardy and Veneto
February 24, 2020	Decree by the Minister of Finance	Suspending tax duties and mortgages for residents in the red zone
February 25, 2020	DPCM	Limiting recreational activities and restricting access to some public services
February 28, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Providing economic support for families, workers, and companies
March 1, 2020	DPCM	Extending the scope of the red zone to some other towns in Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, and Marche
March 4, 2020	DPCM	Closing schools and universities until March 15
March 8, 2020		Extending the scope of the red zone to all Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna
March 9, 2020	DPCM	Declaring a national red zone until April 3
March 9, 2020	*Start of lockdown*	
March 11, 2020	DPCM	Disposing the closure of all commercial activities except food groceries and drugstores on all national territory
March 20, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health	Prohibiting recreational and sport activities outdoors
March 22, 2020	DPCM	Disposing the closure of all industries except food processing and strategic sectors
March 22, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of the Interior	Prohibiting traveling between towns in the same region
March 25, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Conferring the cabinet with special powers further limiting personal liberties
March 28, 2020	*Highest number of daily deaths: 971*	
April 1, 2020	DPCM	Prolonging the duration of the lockdown to April 13
April 10, 2020	DPCM	Reopening some commercial activities
April 26, 2020	DPCM	Starting "Phase 2" from May 4
May 4, 2020	*End of lockdown*	
May 15, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Extending national emergency and special powers from May 18 to July 31. Regions and towns can rule autonomously on personal movements. National boundaries reopen from the early days of June
May 16, 2020	DPCM	Executing the law-decree
June 3, 2020	*Reopening borders between regions*	
June 11, 2020	DPCM	Reopening some commercial and recreational activities (including theaters)
June 30, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health	Restricting activities
July 9, 2020	Order by the Ministry of Health	Restricting access to outdoor public spaces
July 14, 2020	DPCM	Extending the duration of the rules until July 31
July 30, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Extending the national emergency and related special powers until October 15
September 3, 2020	Law-decree by the Cabinet	Restricting opening and access to schools and universities

Source: own elaboration from the Italian government's website.

TABLE 2 | Corpus under study.

Type of content	No. of documents
Press interviews	35
Press conferences	16
Addresses	6
TV interviews	1
Total	58

"floating" or "empty" signifiers indicating many meanings (they are polysemic) and referring to a broader "field of discursivity." Terms such as "the people," for instance, are frequently used by opposite factions with vastly different meanings. At the end of a power struggle, the dominant meaning is temporarily fixed, but the door is open for further resemantization. The notion of statehood, as we; as that of state power, is an excellent example of "floating signifier"; since its origins in the early modern age, it has changed its structure, functions, and relationships with the private sector and civil society many times and regularly requires further clarification (Jessop, 2016). Following this perspective, the meaning of discourses is always the result of a negotiation among multiple actors. In particular, the "idea of the State" results from the relationships between the government and several actors (ibid.). Given the scope of the research topic, we have focused our analysis on four interrelated nodal points we have found to ground the study. The nodal points that sustain the conception and performance of statehood in Italy during the COVID-19 emergency emerge from a relational perspective that puts emphasis on the actors the state interacts with: (1) citizens, (2) regions and local governments, (3) politics and the parliament, and (4) the international sphere. For each of those nodal points, we have analyzed relevant themes and rhetorical devices.

Specific efforts have been made to identify the emotional repertoire mobilized by the Italian government in its communication. The concept of emotional repertoire refers to the array of emotions that are recalled through words, tone of voice, gestures, scenography, and choreography, and constitute a sort of "glue" among individuals who feel they belong to a community (von Poser et al., 2019). Charting the emotional repertoire through a discourse–historical approach means analyzing the ways in which emotions contribute to the discursive strategies, in terms of valence (positive or negative) and intensity (dramatization or mitigation). The valence of emotions has been coded by looking at psychoevolutionary theories that distinguish between primary and secondary emotions (TenHouten, 2007). This distinction is an attempt to

TABLE 3 | Discourses of statehood in Conte's communication.

Statehood and citizens	Statehood and local governments	Statehood and politics	Statehood in the international sphere
Preparedness of the healthcare system	National unity	Avoiding politicization	Resilience of the country
↓	↓	↓	↓
Rhetorical devices: use of stats and figures, appeal to rationality, display of international endorsements Emotional repertoire: confidence, gratitude, pride, and tranquillity	Rhetorical devices: defining a national "red zone," exercising a superior authority leaving little room for regional governance Emotional repertoire: responsibility, and determination	Rhetorical devices: partisanship is opportunistic, the times require consensus Emotional repertoire: responsibility, determination, and anger	Rhetorical devices: emphasis on status as role model, first responses, strength of the health system, and economic stability Emotional repertoire: pride, solidarity, and unity
Economic support to families and companies	Coordination and dialog	Expertise and decision-making	Negotiations within the EU
↓	↓	↓	↓
Rhetorical devices: recalling institutional duties, highlighting the unprecedented conditions of the economic emergency, and emphasizing the concrete presence of the state Emotional repertoire: sacrifice, empathy, solidarity, and moral duty (Omitted) Enforcement of containment measures Rhetorical devices: appeal to individual responsibility Emotional repertoire: sacrifice, love, and solidarity	Emotional repertoire: solidarity and confidence	Emotional repertoire: determination and confidence	Emotional repertoire: pride, determination, and anger

classify and simplify the complexity of emotional statuses felt by humans and animals: Primary emotions include four pairs of oppositional emotions: acceptance and disgust, joy and sadness, anger and fear, and anticipation and surprise. Secondary emotions such as love, pride, curiosity, anxiety, embarrassment, and so on descend from pairs of positive and negative primary emotions. The validity of this typology resides in the possibility of atomizing feelings into more simple elements that can be categorized by researchers; at the same time, as with any attempt to simplify social processes, it suffers from strong limits of comprehension. Trying to overcome those limits, we have considered all emotions performed in the government's communication for their positive or negative valence; at the same time, we have also charted the intensity of emotions relying on the DHA opposition between dramatization and mitigation. The result will be a chart of the themes according to the emotional repertoire they rely upon.

To summarize our technique of analysis, for each theme identified in the texts, we have tracked how it is argued and linked to the other ones, reunited in a specific nodal point; we have also highlighted relevant rhetorical devices and the emotions mobilized to anchor each theme.

DISCOURSES OF STATEHOOD AND EMOTIONAL REPERTOIRE IN ITALY

The features of the four nodal points are synthetized in **Table 3**, accompanied by examples of rhetorical devices and the corresponding emotional repertoire.

Statehood and Citizens

The first theme to emerge from the earliest communications is the degree of preparedness of the national healthcare system. Although Conte has shifted from far too confident declarations ("Italy is a safe country," February 25) to more nuanced claims, the efficacy of the healthcare system has remained a key issue for the whole period. Two basic arguments were proposed. The first was a message of pride, confidence, and gratitude toward medical workers "fighting the virus on the frontline"; the Italian health system was described as a symbol of excellence to be proud of. Second, as long as the pandemic was spreading, the responsibility of every citizen to avoid unnecessary medical treatments was stressed, while the government was committed to enhancing medical equipment and infrastructure. Widespread testing was not recommended, to avoid dramatization and overload. Social distance and personal hygiene also formed part of citizens' responsibility. During one of the last press conferences before the end of the first lockdown, on April 26, Conte summarized his relationship with citizens with a simple and direct message: "If you care about Italy, you keep social distance." The accent is on the first part of the sentence, where the emotional attachment to the country is to be proven. The most frequent discursive strategy is perspectivization: Particularly during the lockdown, Conte indulged in expressing his empathy toward citizens, workers, families, and children for the sacrifices they were doing. For instance, on May 16, he acknowledged he was receiving many letters from citizens suffering from economic difficulties and answers them: "I am aware that for some sectors reopening will not mean recovery." And on June 3, he claimed that numbers suggested "a renovated sense of confidence and enthusiasm,"

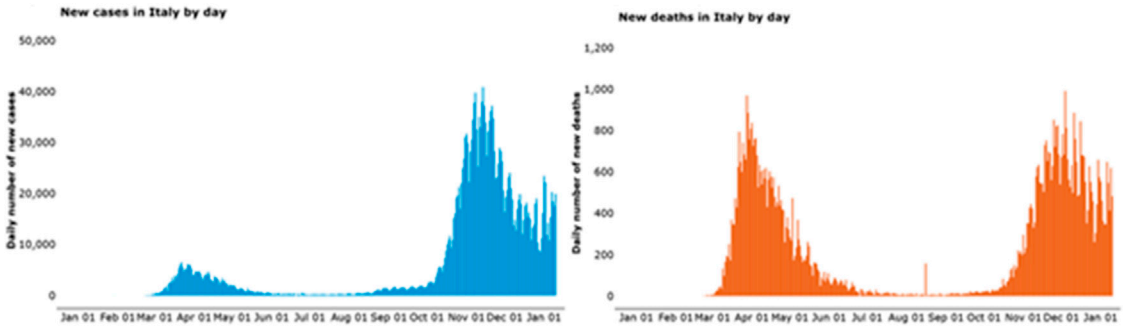

FIGURE 1 | COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths in Italy by day. Source: WHO dashboard.

which is fully legitimate, as "we deserve smiles and joy, after weeks of hard sacrifices."

As the government asks citizens to be united in the effort to fight the pandemic (also using metaphors such as "we are all on the same ship") and stresses individual responsibility, it also highlights its role in supporting workers and companies economically. The emergency is depicted as both health-related and economic, and this latter aspect opens a space of dialog with the opposition. At the same time, "there is no differentiation of roles" (March 5), meaning that the government maintains a specific power to steer economic policies and to decide whether to ask productive sectors for sacrifices in the name of citizens' health. In his address on March 11, Conte frames the trade-off between health and the economy as a matter of personal conscience, assuming a fully personal responsibility. Again, on March 21, he repeats "the State is there, the State is here," addressing workers and companies that were suffering the consequences of the lockdown. Later on, Conte defines his government's economic relief package as "tremendous" (May 7). He frequently stresses his personal proximity to the private sector by using the locution "the Italy System" (for instance, on April 26 and June 3) to highlight the organicity and integration of the country. This locution is intended to emphasize that everything is well-functioning and project a real recovery (through infrastructure, funds, and economic reliefs), a message launched to two main addressees: domestic interest groups (i.e., Confindustria) and European partners. The newly elected President of Confindustria, Carlo Bonomi (formerly President of Assolombarda, the main industrial association of Lombardy), has repeatedly criticized the Italian government since taking the position. Solicited by a journalist, Conte replies to the last attack by inviting Confindustria to "bring forward-looking projects, not limited to just reducing taxes" (June 3), at the so-called General States of the Economy, a venue for allowing a dialog among all social forces, including Confindustria, other associations of enterprises, and trade unions (held on June 13–21). This remains the most explicit reply to Bonomi's criticisms. On the issue of safely reopening schools in September, Conte highlights that "this is not a challenge to Minister [of Education] Azzolina, to the President of the Council, to the government; it is a challenge we must win together, with school deans, officers, unions; we always want them to participate" (June 16).

The issue of enforcement of containment measures has arisen at different moments, but particularly in the earlier days of the lockdown and during the summer. Interestingly, the issue has been treated much more thoroughly by the media than by the government itself, in the form of a blaming and shaming campaign that stigmatized some behaviors (such as running outdoors or going to crowded streets, beaches, and nightclubs). The ability of the state to enforce the rules of containment is rarely put into question by the government, determining a sort of omission. The issue is not how to control citizens' compliance but to convince them that compliance to containment rules is an act of patriotism. For instance, the prime minister is frequently acknowledging how much patience and spirit of responsibility the citizens must have. Even in the most dramatic moment of the crisis, when the pictures of army trucks transferring COVID-19 coffins out of Bergamo inundated the newspapers (**Figure 2**), Conte stressed the need to follow containment rules at the individual level.

Statehood, Regions, and Local Governments

The main theme in this relationship is the avoidance of possible conflicts between the national government and the regional governors. The conflict is both administrative and political. The Italian Constitution's reform of Title V (back in 2001) has granted to regions the management of healthcare, and some regional governors exploit their positions to consolidate a political leadership that is also effective at the national level. The decision to enact a national lockdown has exacerbated conflict: Regions such as Sardinia and Calabria have been subjected to the same constraints as Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, despite very different levels of contagion (**Figure 3**).

The gaps among different regions have paved the way for contrasts between the central government and a number of governors, particularly from Southern Italy. Italy is suffering a historical fracture between the North and the South in terms of economic and social development; these previously existing difficulties have worsened the impact of the pandemic, and the Southern regions pressed for a more nuanced approach. The decision of the government was to avoid any possible fragmentation of the national territory, not only from a precautionary point of view but also from a political perspective. The leadership of regional governors has also been

FIGURE 2 | Italian army trucks taking coffins out of Bergamo, March 19. Source and credits: ANSA.

perceived as a possible threat to the national government's legitimacy because the Conte cabinet is sustained by a floating parliamentarian coalition made up currently of Five Stars Movement, the Democratic Party, and Italia Viva, but formerly constituted by the Five Stars Movement and the League (which lasted until September 2019).

In this scheme, the appeal to union and collaboration is not just a matter of rhetoric but a precise strategy of leadership consolidation. The government has highlighted the unity of the state beyond the specific competences of regions on health issues management. In communications, the emphasis is put on the appeal for responsibility and the determination to pursue an equitable environment: No matter the discrepancies in the spread of the virus across the different regions, all Italian citizens are called to stay at home in a move of national solidarity. It is important to notice that in the first wave, the northern regions (and in particular Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna) suffered most from the contagion, whereas in the south, the cases were relatively low. The decision to close down all the regions has been criticized by some governors of the southern regions and has no longer been pursued since the beginning of the second wave in September 2020. These polemics are not explicitly recalled by Giuseppe Conte in his speeches, which solely emphasize the appeal to national unity and responsibility of all.

Instead, governors and mayors are frequently called to act in coordination, collaboration, and dialog. Every action by the government is undertaken after intensive colloquia with governors (together or singly). On March 28, for instance, mayors were defined as "our first sentinels," motivating a transfer of funds from the central to the local governments, with the aim of distributing food supplies to families in need. From the end of lockdown, regions have been entitled to collect data about the contagion and forward it to the national authorities (May 16). Finally, from April 27 onward, the prime minister visited the towns in Lombardy where the virus had spread most, to display his emotional vicinity to local communities.

Statehood and Politics

As in any other state, the Italian government has made frequent appeals to the opposition to avoid unnecessary political conflicts during a terrible time for the country. On March 4, at the very beginning of the emergency, Conte was already claiming that "the challenge of the COVID-19 has no political color." That phrase soon became a refrain on any occasion of political discordance. It is not by chance that when addressing this theme, the emotional repertoire mirrors that of the relationship between the government and the regions. As regional governors are actors in the political parties and run for electoral offices, their leadership in regions is frequently a springboard to acquire more power at the national level. The political conflict was further enhanced as soon as the European Union starts to reflect on a common financial strategy to address the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic. Since April, the *casus belli* is the use of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM)[9]: the Conte Cabinet has engaged in complex negotiations with its European partners to avoid using the ESM, in an attempt to take distance from austerity reforms.

At the same time, transparency and truth are described as "the first vaccines against conspiracies and polemics" (February 23). Conte repeatedly claims that his government is oriented to ensure the maximum degree of transparency of the policy-making process. Most times, Conte is refusing an explicit statement by the opposition. On the contrary, on April 10, Conte explicitly addressed Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, two leaders of the far-right, accusing them of "irresponsibly" spreading fake news regarding his willingness to adhere to the ESM. On that occasion, he affirmed that "this government does not work under cover of darkness. [This government] looks Italians in their face and speaks clearly." His gestures (pointing an accusing finger and looking into the camera) and tone of voice express anger and determination, while at the same time he depicts his competitors as false and irresponsible.

After the lockdown, the time for economic relief policies has come, bringing with it a reappraisal of political conflicts. The negotiations "with all stakeholders of the Italy System" are thus described as intense and difficult, as the Italian government must "overcome any resistance toward change, partisan reconstructions, reductive visions" with "courage, foresight, great determination" (June 3).

The relationship between politics and decision-making also calls into question the role of the experts. In this matter, the government emphasizes that the judgment and evidence provided by the CTS are informing all decisions. The expertise and capacity of the members of CTS are used as a shield for any possible attack on the legitimacy of the government's decisions, hence providing a sort of reassurance for citizens, who can feel that those in charge know what to do. From April, the government has also been supported by other technical expertise in matters of socioeconomic development and recovery; the task force led by the former manager Vittorio Colao was intended to guide the so-called Phase 2, in which containment measures were meant to gradually relax. The task force is described as crucial for the "organic program of recovery" launched on April 10. The task force is also joining religious representatives from the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), an entity that is accredited as a partner above

[9]The European Stability Mechanism was created in 2012 to recover from the Great Recession: It consists of an intergovernmental framework of emergency loans among member states that have agreed on rigid parameters for public finances that often imply major reforms (such as the reform of welfare, pensions, the health system, and public sector). It has been one of the cornerstones of austerity programs.

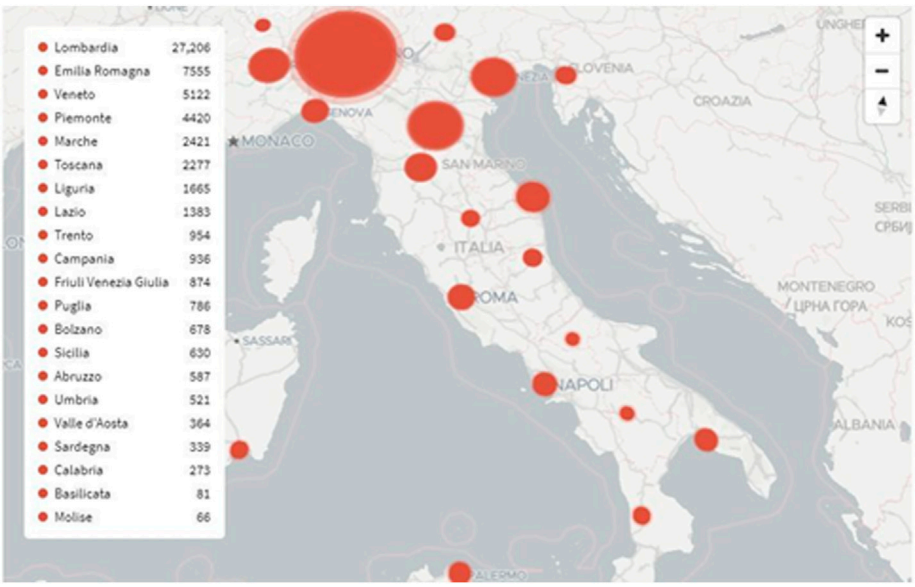

FIGURE 3 | Numbers of cases differentiated per region (March 22, 2020). Source: Il Messaggero with data by Ministry of Health.

others, given the importance of faith in citizens' lives (April 27). On May 7, the government signed a protocol with the CEI for reopening churches and celebrating Masses.

At the same time, on April 1, when asked about its role, Conte clarified that the CTS was formulating "only recommendations" (that can be followed or not, as opposed to binding decisions) but that "politics maintains its primacy," meaning that the decision-making is still led by the government. This point is particularly relevant considering that in Italy a "technical government" is associated with periods of economic crisis and austerity (as during the Mario Monti Cabinet in 2012). The prime minister is thus seeking a point of balance between the necessary reliance on technical expertise (given the delicate and complex matter of an unprecedented pandemic) and the performance of autonomy and power typical of a solid political leadership. It is also quite ironic considering that Conte in his political career as a law professor called to exercise a caregiver role for a fragile coalition government, back in June 2018.

Statehood in the International Sphere

Conte indicates two main arenas in which Italy can play an international role: the European Union and the G7. In both cases, he first highlights how "the other countries" are praising Italy's resilience and capacity to respond to the emergency, both from a sanitary and an economic point of view. Italy is depicted not only as the first country to confront the pandemic, but also as the most effective and careful, adopting a principle of precaution leading to hard containment measures such as the lockdown. The prime minister encouraged the recovery after the lockdown by claiming that "the world is watching us, let's say it with a bit of pride, and admiring us, also because of our actions" (April 26). While announcing the full reopening of regional boundaries, on June 3, Conte highlighted that "Italy is among the first European countries able to afford a restart of social and economic activities". He always recognizes that "Italy being a model for other countries is a great collective merit" (August 9).

Also, both the EU and the G7 are referenced as allowing the most appropriate response to COVID-19, although implying an increase of public budget and debt. Accordingly, the pandemic is described as "a European match, to be played with a spirit of collaboration, a shared strategy of help and solidarity" (March 16), and "the most serious challenge since WWII" (April 10). The initial negotiations among European member states are judged as largely insufficient, as the prime minister is determined to ask to bypass the ESM and institute new common responses (e.g., Eurobond, common insurance framework, new credit lines with fewer conditions, and constraints on public spending). Since April, the Italian government has engaged in intense maneuvers to seek allies within the EU; Conte is one of the signatories of a letter of intent together with Emmanuel Macron and Pedro Sánchez, among others, to pursue a shift in the European financial policies. His position is made clear: "the response must be courageous, or it will not be a response at all" (April 10). In this respect, Conte speaks alternately of negotiations and battle. Each time, he highlights how his personal commitment is to represent the point of view of the Italian people (in his first day in office, he famously referred to himself as "the people's advocate"). He constantly operates a superimposition between the people and himself; for instance, in the aftermath of the first gains, he says that "the Italy System" has gained ground, convincing the European Union of its firmness and responsibility (April 26). He translates his engagement, promising that he would have not signed any agreement unless new tools were invented. His discourse about the role of Italy in the EU is paralleled by a vision of the EU both more united against the virus and able to compete at the global level.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Italian government's communication regarding the crisis has highlighted a multifaceted conception

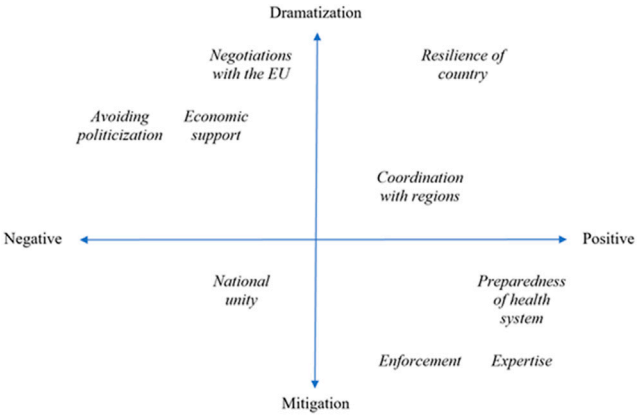

FIGURE 4 | Chart of statehood conception according to the emotional repertoire. Source: own elaboration.

of statehood, confronted with multiple challenges and engaged in redefining its role. Besides the specific themes that each of those challenges posits, we have also focused on how an emotional repertoire was used to underpin and reinforce a particular conception of statehood during the first wave of COVID-19 in Italy. Elsewhere (De Blasio and Selva, 2020b), we have privileged a temporal evaluation of the emotional repertoire used by Conte, showing that it begins by focusing much more on care, anger, and pride and that it acquires more variance over time, leaving room for confidence, hope, spirit of sacrifice, and gratitude. Here we want to emphasize the general tone of his communication during the first wave, charting the whole spectrum of emotions that are mobilized to depict the "idea of the State." **Figure 4** provides a synthesized chart of the themes addressed by Giuseppe Conte in his discourse during the emergency; the themes are located alongside two continua between positive and negative emotions (horizontal axis), and dramatization and mitigation strategies (vertical axis).

The performance of the state in its relationship with citizens is marked by an ambivalent emotional repertoire: from the one side, the themes of the preparedness of the health system and of enforcement of containment measures are addressed with a mitigation strategy that aims to induce confidence and tranquillity; from the other side, the theme of economic support to workers and families is much more dramatized. In particular, Giuseppe Conte builds a relationship of empathy with citizens, acknowledging their sufferings, sacrifices, and difficulties. He is always center stage (although sometimes accompanied by other minister), explaining every action undertaken and how decisions have been made. This empathic relationship is the foundation for a notion of statehood able to guarantee concrete support, in terms of economic aid or public services (such as enhancing healthcare spending or the education system). The dramatization of the relationship of empathy is thus a strategy for legitimizing economic policies that will increase public spending. In such a rhetorical strategy, the overlap between the leader, the people, and the welfare state radically secures his decisions from political conflict: Whoever is criticizing the leader, or his policies, is not sensitive to Italians' sufferings. At the same time, Italians are embodied in many actors with whom Conte displays a practice of dialog and collaboration, such as industrial associations, trade unions, interest groups, NGOs, religious entities, and so on.

The notion of statehood emerging from its relationship with regions and local governments is characterized by both positive and negative emotions. The political conflict with governors is mitigated by a strategy of national unity during the lockdown. While the policy of containment limits the powers of governors, the prime minister adopts an argumentation strategy which seeks to involve local governments (i.e., mayors) in monitoring and measuring the situation, in terms of contagion, health system response, and situations of extreme deprivation. This double articulation of domestic governance might appear rational and efficient, but it is also driven by the fact that the Five Stars Movement does not govern any region but has strong roots in several Italian towns.

The notion of statehood is also derived from the relationship that the leader performs with politics and decision-making at large. We have already discussed how a methodology of dialog and collaboration is emphasized in Conte's discourse. Members of opposition parties, such as regional governors and mayors, are part of this choreography, but they are not included in the category of stakeholders, whose involvement is much more underscored. Most notably, consultations and dialog with political representatives happen outside the parliament, either in more formal (i.e., consultations with the Cabinet) or informal ways (i.e., phone calls and similar). Another distinctive principle that he attributes to his methodology is transparency, defined as a means to avoid the risk of conspiracy theories. This point is particularly relevant when it comes to the involvement of experts in the decision-making. The theme is addressed through a mitigation strategy that involves positive emotions, such as confidence and trust.

Finally, the state must interact with international partners, among which the European Union plays a major role. This nodal point is addressed through the most intense dramatization strategy, involving both positive and negative emotions. On one hand, an international outlook is always described in terms of appreciation, solidarity, and unity, as a sign of the country's resilience in the face of an unprecedented crisis. On the other hand, the negotiations with the European partners are described as hard and intense, to be carried on with determination, pride, and foresight.

CONCLUSION

The crisis due to COVID-19 has established a dramatic context further stressing the trend toward a leader democracy in Italy. What this article seeks to explain, therefore, are the emotional characteristics of the current leadership. In other terms, the emotional repertoire shown by the prime minister during this turbulent time has constituted his main source of legitimacy for the limitations of personal liberties and for the reappraisal of economic policies. Such a repertoire has become part of his narrative and political strategy as much as his policies and decision-making criteria. In that sense, Conte has succeeded in consolidating emotional capital during the pandemic and constitutes an interesting case study for a political sociology of emotions.

This emotional capital is accompanied by a display of competence by Professor Giuseppe Conte. He has acted as a representative of the people ("the people's advocate," as he famously defined himself)

thanks to his competence, but he has portrayed himself as one of those people, performing compassion and acknowledging citizens' difficulties. Also the recognition that any success is collective and conquered through distributed efforts made by "the System Italy" has reinforced this narrative of unity and identification. At the same time, the main party that supports his leadership, the Five Stars Movement, has been created and nurtured by a sequence of populist leaders. His belonging to the Five Stars Movement and his reliance on the party's staff contribute to the shaping of his character as a leader. Despite the consensus he has built inside the Movement and by the general public, at the end of January 2021, Conte was forced to resign.[10] At the moment of writing, his future is still unclear, but he will probably continue to lead the Five Stars Movement.

As indicated earlier, the implications of this kind of leadership for notions of statehood and authority derive from the acceleration and dramatization due to the context of the crisis. As time passes, we will witness how long a leadership built on emotional capital can last and how it will enrich or weaken democratic institutions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. These data can be found here: http://www.governo.it/.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both EB and DS have jointly discussed and drafted the present article (50% and 50%) and are fully accountable for its content.

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[10]On January 13, 2021, three cabinet members of Italia Viva (the movement led by the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi) resigned. The government went to the Italian parliament to ask for a confidence vote: Although it won 156 votes in the Senate, it did not reach the absolute majority of 161. After having consulted the political forces to form an alternative cabinet (with the same alliance among the Five Stars Movement, Democratic Party, Free and Equals, and Italia Viva), the president of the Republic gave Mario Draghi the mandate to form a new government. At the time of writing, the Draghi government is supported by almost all political parties (with the exception of the far-right Brothers of Italy).

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Political Performances of Control During COVID-19: Controlling and Contesting Democracy in Germany

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Drawing from interpretive, namely discursive-performative approaches to both institutional and grassroots (populist) politics, this article explores political performances and counter-performances of control in Germany during the so-called first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Methodologically, the article constructs a comparative analytical framework including three cases from both within and outside of the federal institutional structure of Germany: at the institutional level, the cases comprise Angela Merkel, long-term federal Chancellor of Germany, and Michael Kretschmer, the regional Governor of the state of Saxony; at the grassroots level, the selected case is the populist protest movement "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident" (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, PEGIDA). Based on original empirical data generated using the toolkit of qualitative-interpretive methodology, notably online ethnography, the comparative analysis focuses on a few key counter-performances of control, among them a TV address (Merkel), a visit to an "anti-lockdown" demonstration (Kretschmer), and virtual protest events (PEGIDA). Emphasizing the performed, dynamic, and contested character of political control in Germany in spring 2020, the empirical analysis yields the following results: first, it sheds light on the different political styles of performing and contesting institutional control, including the habitus, modes, and (emotional) tones of the communication of the performers, and the scripts, stages, intended audiences as (imagined) constituencies, and modalities of transmission of their performances. Second, the discourse-theoretical perspective of the analysis reveals that political performances of control were closely linked to articulations of democracy as an empty signifier, and to claims for safeguarding democratic principles as such. Third, the article demonstrates the value of interpretive approaches to politics to generate more nuanced understandings of the relationships between the pandemic, democracy, and populism in a situation of an ultimate lack of control.

Keywords: control, discursive-performative approach, Germany, Merkel, PEGIDA, protest, Saxony

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INTRODUCTION

"It is serious. Therefore, take it serious," were the most quoted words of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the televised "address to the nation" of March 18, 2020. By that date, the COVID-19 pandemic had hit each of the 16 federal states of the country, Germany had registered more than 10,000 infections with the new coronavirus, and more than 30 people had died. In

response, the German national and regional administration had largely "locked down" public life, closed the external borders, and appealed to the population to practice "social distancing." In her TV address, Merkel justified the extraordinary regulations by marking the historic dimensions of the crisis caused by the pandemic: "since German Unity, no, since the Second World War, our country did not face a challenge in which it depended so much on our common solidary actions." To commentators, Chancellor Merkel's TV address stood out due to its unexpected emotional appeal and genuine empathy (Jahn, 2020; Seminar für Allgemeine Rhetorik, 2020). Taking account of its extraordinary format and content as well as the modalities of its transmission, the speech can also be approached as a formidable attempt to "perform control" during the crisis: it was carefully staged and disseminated to construct Merkel as "being in control" of the development of the pandemic and the institutional responses to it. As an outstanding example for the "showing of a doing," it qualifies as a political performance aiming to demonstrate Merkel's "political presence, activity, progress, and engagement" (Gluhovic et al., 2021, p. 15).

Similar to Merkel, numerous political and public actors in Germany staged and disseminated performances of control in spring 2020. Next to the federal health minister, the heads of the regional governments, namely the 16 regional Governors and mayors of the *Bundesländer*, were among the most visible actors. In fact, due to the federal structure of Germany, important competencies relating to the execution of health policies decided at the federal level lie with the federal states, thus creating a much-criticized state of legal uncertainty throughout the first wave of the pandemic (Behnke, 2020; Merkel, 2020). Additionally, two expert institutions, namely the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the German federal government agency responsible for disease prevention and control, and Christian Drosten, virologist and then-director of the largest university hospital in Berlin, became chief public performers (Moser, 2020). At the same time, oppositional actors contested federal and regional institutional responses to the pandemic: both established and new protest actors, the latter mainly associated with the emerging so-called *Querdenken* ("lateral thinkers") movement (Teune, 2021), staged and broadcast counter-performances in virtual and public spaces to demonstrate their rejection of the institutional claims to being in control and constituting themselves as performers of control.

In light of the struggles to perform control over and during the pandemic, this article explores how a few political actors performed control at both the institutional and grassroots levels of the federal structure of Germany during the so-called first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the article compares the performances of control by two institutional actors in executive roles within the German federal polity, namely the federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the regional Governor of the state of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer, and by one counter-institutional grassroots actor, that is the Dresden-based far-right populist protest movement "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident" (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, PEGIDA). The time period of the study ranges from mid-March to mid-May 2020. Besides showcasing some of the political styles used to perform and contest institutional control, the comparative analysis reveals that political performances of control in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic were crucially characterized by constant appeals to the idea(l) of democracy when framing the pandemic and "lockdown." Even though Germany figured within the European average with regard to the legal restrictions to democratic freedoms (Engler et al., 2021), the articulation of democratic principles, especially the trade-off between pandemic-related restrictions and civil rights, played a dominant role from Merkel's TV address onward and further crystallized in the context of the particularly strong anti-lockdown *Querdenken* mobilization in Germany. The salience of the concept and lived reality of democracy in Germany during the crisis distinguishes the German case from other European countries and renders it interesting for further analysis.

This article aims to contribute to scholarship in various ways: from a theoretical perspective, it offers a novel approach to studying political control, drawing from interpretive (Bevir and Rhodes, 2016), and specifically discourse-theoretical and performative approaches to politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Saward, 2010; Moffitt, 2016; Rai et al., 2021). In contrast to legal perspectives which understand control as static competencies prescribed to institutions in legal texts, and in line with the notion of the "representative claim" proposed by Saward (2010), the article highlights the performed, dynamic, and contested character of control in democratic contexts. Taking a constructivist stance on what it means to "be in control," it argues that control is nothing that a political actor inherently possesses but something that needs to be constantly (re-)articulated in political performances. As the "showing of a doing," it conceives of performances as carefully staged and purposefully disseminated discursive events that aim to articulate political meaning (Rai, 2014; Rai et al., 2021). In politics, they constitute the primary tool to articulate "being in control," namely by demonstrating "political presence, activity, progress, and engagement (or so the actors and organizers hope) and an opening to critical appraisal and accountability of the leader or official" (Gluhovic et al., 2021, p. 15; Rai, 2014). The article thus conceptualizes performances of control during the COVID-19 pandemic as strategic discursive events that construct political meaning, namely the performer as "being in control." Also, it proposes that the particular design and aesthetics of individual performances disclose specific political styles (Saward, 2010; Moffitt, 2016).

In addition, this study uses the notion of "counter-performance of control" to refer to the articulation of counter-hegemonic political meaning by the far-right populist movement PEGIDA, including the contestation of hegemonic meaning-making, namely institutional control during the crisis. The theoretical take thus emphasizes that performing control during a crisis is not only a crucial task of the elected representatives and that, in fact, performing is similarly important in the context of grassroots social movement actors who lack institutionalized means of communicating with constituencies and attracting public attention. Therefore, social movement actors employ counter-performances such as demonstrations and

strikes to impact political meaning-making practices and create alternative meanings (Apter, 2006; Eyerman, 2006). Students of contentious politics typically refer to such counter-performances as "contentious performances" (Tilly, 2008) and point to their constitutive power (Casquete, 2006). The present study provides new insights into how contentious performances contribute to constituting an event-focused protest movement in times of "lockdown."

Further contributions to scholarship and knowledge concern the methodology and empirical results of this article: it makes a proposition on how to analyze political performances of control as discursive events based on the toolkit of qualitative-interpretive methodologies (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). The comparison of a few key performances of control sheds light on some of the political styles in which control was performed and contested in Germany during the so-called first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, an original empirical dataset, including rich ethnographic data on the PEGIDA movement is generated, which provides novel insights into both institutional and grassroots politics. The analysis offers a basis for a nuanced understanding of the political situation in Germany ahead of the 2021 parliamentary elections and elaborates on the contested meaning of democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Afsahi et al., 2020; Merkel, 2020; Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020; Stasavage, 2020; Engler et al., 2021).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The underlying research strategy of this study is the qualitative-interpretive analysis and comparison of a small number of cases within the broader German political context (Moses and Knutsen, 2007; Landman, 2008). Rather than constructing the cases according to the standardized logics of "most similar" and "most different system designs" (Przeworski and Teune, 1970), the analysis first looks at them as single cases, and then puts them into dialogue, tracing how they relate to, respond to, and contest each other. As summarized in **Table 1**, these cases are political actors at different hierarchical and (non-)institutional levels of the German polity. The cases were selected according to the theoretical and empirical interest in first instances of institutional performances of control, and second instances of counter-hegemonic contestation of institutional control and counter-performances. The selection moreover aims to constitute a coherent geographical framework of closely intertwined national, regional, and local levels of politics. The time period of the study ranges from mid-March to mid-May 2020, that is the dates of the imposition to the partial lifting of the coronavirus regulations in Germany, which are understood as the turning points in the institutional and public crisis response.

On the institutional side, the two cases selected are that of Chancellor Angela Merkel as head of the federal government and that of regional Governor Michael Kretschmer as head of the government of the *Bundesland* of Saxony. Both Merkel and Kretschmer belong to the conservative governing party Christian–Democratic Union (*Christlich–Demokratische Union*, CDU). The contrast between national and regional representatives of the government draws attention to the peculiarities of political crisis management and institutional competition in a federal context. In turn, on the grassroots side, the case in focus is the most persistent far-right populist

TABLE 1 | Overview of research design: case selection and corpus.

Cases	Corpus
Federal level: Germany *Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, CDU*	Introduction to the pandemic and political context in Germany: • On the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany: Web pages of German governmental institutions, namely federal government, federal ministry of health, and Robert Koch Institute, as well as web pages of German medical publications, namely "Doctors" journal' (*Ärztezeitung*) and "Pharmacies Survey" (*Apothekenumschau*) • On the institutional responses to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany: Web pages of German political institutions, namely federal government, federal ministry of health, and federal parliament Performances of control by the federal Chancellor: • More than 80 videos posted on the official web representation of Chancellor Angela Merkel, specifically the televised video entitled "Ansprache der Kanzlerin" of 18 March 2020 • Media reports on the address of 18 March 2020
Regional level: Saxony *Regional Governor Michael Kretschmer, CDU*	Introduction to the pandemic and political context in Saxony: • On the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic in Saxony: Web page of Saxon government • On the institutional responses to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Saxony: Web pages of Saxon government and Robert Koch Institute Performances of control by the regional Governor: • 3 videos posted on the official web representation of regional Governor Michael Kretschmer • 2 tweets by @MPKretschmer, Kretschmer's official Twitter account, of 16 May 2020 • Media reports on the visit to the "anti-lockdown" demonstration of 16 May 2020
Grassroots level: Dresden *Far-right populist movement PEGIDA, specifically its leading activist Lutz Bachmann*	• 20 posts on PEGIDA's official web representation • 7 videos of protest events (6 virtual events and 1 offline event) on Lutz Bachmann's YouTube channel • More than 40 videos of news-style "political commentary" by Lutz Bachmann and other PEGIDA activists on Lutz Bachmann's YouTube channel, specifically the videos entitled "18.03.2020 EXTRA-LUTZiges zur Merkelansprache" of 18 March 2020, and "18.05.2020 LUTZiges – Demoinfos" of 18 May 2020

Source: Volk, 2021 (this study).

movement in Germany, "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident" (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, PEGIDA), as the challenger and counter-performer. PEGIDA constitutes an interesting case not only due to its persistence even during the crisis, but also because as a far-right populist movement (Druxes and Simpson, 2016; Vorländer et al., 2018; Volk, 2020), its populist style has a propensity to "perform crisis" (Moffitt, 2015) and to claim to represent truly democratic politics (Volk, forthcoming; Mudde, 2007). Finally, the case of Saxony constitutes a pertinent example for a federal state due to its allegedly unique political culture (Jesse, 2016), and the geographic origin of PEGIDA in Dresden, the capital of Saxony, thus allowing for geographically coherent analysis.

In line with the non-essentialist theoretical approach to politics, the methodological framework is informed by qualitative-interpretive methods of data generation and analysis (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Specifically, it draws from ethnographic and performative approaches to politics to allow for an in-depth analysis of the performative contexts of speech and discourse (Alexander and Smith, 2010; Saward, 2010; Aronoff and Kubik, 2013; Rai, 2014; Moffitt, 2016; Rai et al., 2021). Specifically, it gathers and analyzes data relating to the performers, including their habitus, modes, and (emotional) tones of communication, scripts, stages, intended audiences as (imagined) constituencies, and modalities of transmission. Therefore, the article uses an ethnographic approach to data generation, gathering a corpus that allows the exploration of political meaning in its performative context. In particular, the corpus was generated by conducting an online (or virtual) ethnography, which uses the internet both as a source of data and a field itself while still striving for immersion into the culture under study (Hine, 2017). The ethnographic approach to data generation particularly relates to novel forms of real-time participant observation of protest events set in the virtual sphere.

The analytical framework furthermore draws from discourse theory associated with the Essex School and its recent applications, which emphasizes the constant (re-)articulation and transformation of meanings in discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Marttila, 2019). Building upon a constructivist ontology and interpretive epistemology, this approach takes interest in the meanings of political "objects" and the processes of meaning-making. Based on the notion that language is not only descriptive but constructs the meaning of the world and constitutes objects as such (Austin, 1962; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Butler, 1990), this interpretive, non-essentialist stance proposes that meaning is not natural and inherent in objects. Rather, meaning emerges in processes of interaction between social actors and is purposefully articulated in performance. In Laclaudian vocabulary, the central concept used to analyze the transformation of meanings is the "empty signifier," referring to terms invested with antagonistic meanings by different actors over time. "Floating" within and across discourses, empty signifiers typically constitute points of contestation. Also, they are key to understanding specific discourses because, as "nodal points," they order individual articulations into a more coherent discursive framework. Applying the discourse-theoretical framework to this study, the idea of "(controlling) democracy" is identified as a core nodal point characterizing political performances of control during the so-called first wave of the pandemic and "lockdown" in Germany. Conceptualizing democracy as an empty signifier, the comparative framework aims to develop a deeper understanding of the coinciding articulations, antagonistic meanings, and dynamic transformations of the floating signifiers "control" and "democracy" among and between discourses.

RESULTS

The comparative analysis identifies and then focuses on a few (counter-)performances of control included in the corpus, which qualify as key discursive events due to their disruption of the "normal" and their exceptionally broad reception as public events (Handelman, 1998; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). The individual cases do not only constitute interesting examples and structurally important discursive events as stand-alone instances of performances of control but gain further analytical weight due to their inter-relatedness. The performances identified for the three actors are the following: first, for Chancellor Merkel, the key performance of control was the televised "address to the nation" of March 18, 2020. Second, for Governor Kretschmer, the most important performance was a broadly mediatized and publicly discussed visit to an "anti-lockdown" demonstration in Dresden on May 16, 2020. Finally, for PEGIDA, key counter-performances of control were the immediate reactions of a leading activist to the institutional performances by Merkel and Kretschmer, and the organization of both virtual and later physical protest events.

Informed by an ethnographic perspective on data generation (Alexander and Smith, 2010; Aronoff and Kubik, 2013), the following sub-section briefly outlines the development of the pandemic in Germany as a whole and Saxony as a *Bundesland* in order to imbed the instances of institutional and grassroots (counter-)performances of control into the broader pandemic and political context of spring 2020. The subsequent in-depth analysis provides further insights into the performances themselves. To begin with, the types and styles of performing control are explored by conducting disciplined, interpretive case studies (Odell, 2001) of the performers and performances, thus acknowledging their important structural differences. The comparison of the individual cases reveals some of the similarities and differences in the performative styles of the three studied actors (summarized in **Table 2**). The second part of the analysis concentrates on the antagonistic articulations of the floating signifier of "democracy" among and between discourses (summarized in **Table 3**). While the rich corpus of this study would yield even more detailed results regarding the individual cases, the comparative framework demands the focus to be only on a few examples in the latter part of the analysis.

Introduction to the Pandemic Context

The first known case of an infection with the new coronavirus was registered in Germany on January 27, 2020. In the following

TABLE 2 | Overview of research results: political styles of performing control in Germany during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, mid-March to mid-May 2020.

Cases	Style			Intended audience as (imagined) constituency	Modalities of transmission
	Habitus	Mode(s) of communication	(Emotional) tone		
Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, CDU	Informer of the people	Monological, unidirectional	Empathic, caring	National media audience	Conventional media
Regional Governor Michael Kretschmer, CDU	Interlocutor of the people	Dialogical, multidirectional	Engaged, brave	Local immediate audience; regional and national media audience	New media; partially immediate
Far-right populist movement PEGIDA	Enlightened leader of the people	Monological and plurilogical, unidirectional	Enraged, mocking	Regional, national, and transnational media audience	New media

Source: Volk, 2021 (this study).

TABLE 3 | Overview of research results: articulations of "democracy" as an empty signifier in German political discourses during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, mid-March to mid-May 2020.

Cases	Floating meanings of "democracy"		
	Dominant meaning	Hierarchical dynamics	Safeguarded by
Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, CDU	Openness of the decision-making procedures	Top-down	Governmental accountability and transparency
Regional Governor Michael Kretschmer, CDU	Civil rights, especially freedom of speech	Bottom-up	Dialogue between elected representatives and citizens
Far-right populist movement PEGIDA	Civil rights, especially freedom of speech; Rule of law	Bottom-up	Citizens' activism and protest

Source: Volk, 2021 (this study).

weeks, the number of infections first increased only slowly, and then skyrocketed: whereas the daily infection numbers stayed low in February, they increased to more than 1,000 new cases per day by mid-March and more than 5,000 new cases per day by the end of the month. Accordingly, the total number of infections in Germany reached more than 1,000 individuals by March 9, 10,000 individuals by March 19, 50,000 individuals by April 2, and the preliminary maximum of more than 64,000 individuals by April 7. Similarly, the number of fatal cases of infections with the new coronavirus rose rapidly: after the first two deaths registered on March 9, daily death figures reached the preliminary maximum of 250 on April 10. At the same time, the situation started to ease: first, the numbers of daily new infections dropped, falling below 1,000 infections on April 27 and stagnating at 300–400 infections by the end of May. After May 23, the total number of active cases dropped below 10,000 and stabilized at around 5,000 active cases throughout the summer. Yet, in the fall of 2020, Germany again saw a rapid rise in daily infection numbers, reaching the total number of more than 370,000 active cases per day at the end of the year.

The institutional response to the arrival of the new coronavirus in Germany was immediate, but initially rather small-scale. Indeed, throughout February, the institutional response primarily concerned the isolation of the first German patients infected with the new coronavirus, and the return of German citizens located in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic at that time. Only from late February 2020 onward did the federal institutions expand and coordinate their efforts to contain the spread of the virus. The first step was the launch of a taskforce on February 27. Gathering members from both the ministry of health and the home office, the taskforce met repeatedly over the following days and weeks, determining measures on both internal and external matters. One of the major concerns was about preparing the German healthcare system for the expected rise of the lung disease, i.e., COVID-19 and the possible shortages of equipment such as ventilators and professionally trained medical staff. Hence, among the first measures were restrictions to the export of medical equipment and the appeal to hospitals to reschedule planned operations and recruit more staff. In addition, the taskforce decided upon measures aiming to lower the infection rates. These comprised the ban of public events with more than 1,000 participants and restrictions to cross-border travel, namely a general travel warning for German citizens and limited access to Germany for non-nationals, both issued by the foreign ministry in mid-March.

A legislative response followed only on March 23, when the German federal parliament adopted the first "Law to protect the population in the event of an epidemic situation of national concern." The law clearly marked the spread of the new coronavirus as a national rather than regional or municipal issue. Comprising both limited and unlimited provisions, it prescribed

several measures of "social distancing," namely the ban of public events, the temporary closure of gastronomic services, and limitations to the individual right to freedom of movement. Some 6 weeks later, in mid-May, the parliament adopted a second law of the same title, prescribing further measures to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, namely the better protection of vulnerable groups, strengthening of administrative processes of tracing infections, and financial compensations for the medical staff.

With regard to the geographical spread of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic across Germany, a high level of variety in daily infection numbers among the German federal states characterized the spring of 2020: whereas some towns and districts had already registered infections in February and developed into local and regional hotspots in March and April, other *Bundesländer* registered cases only in March and had extremely low levels of infections throughout the entire first wave. Indeed, most of the early infections were located in the two southern states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg and associated with returning ski tourists from South Tirol and Austria. The early hotspots of coronavirus infections mostly grew out of folkloric events such as the Carnival and beer festivals in North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria. The most famous hotspot of infections nationwide was the district of Heinsberg in the Rheinland: following a mass Carnival celebration, Heinsberg registered case numbers far above the national average and introduced strict local curfews to contain the spread of the pandemic. In contrast, the pandemic arrived only a few weeks later in the eastern and northern states, which also had comparatively low levels of cases throughout the first wave of the pandemic and the summer. The federal state of Saxony registered the first case on March 2, 1 month after the new coronavirus arrived in Germany. Throughout the entire first wave, the numbers of daily new infections among the ∼4 million inhabitants of Saxony stayed comparatively low: new infections never exceeded 250 per day during spring and dropped to <50 new cases per day by late April.

Due to the important legislative competencies of the German federal states, the regional administrations were responsible for the majority of measures to contain the rise of infection rates among the population, especially during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to a temporarily chaotic legal situation, as the *Bundesländer* adopted rather different measures: for instance, whereas Bavaria called the state of emergency, other federal states were opting for a more moderate response, especially if infection rates in their region were low. In response, starting from March 12, federal and regional levels of government took up a series of coordination meetings in which nationwide regulations were devised to be implemented by the federal states in "corona protection decrees." Yet, a certain amount of legal uncertainty persisted throughout the crisis, as regional governments regularly opted out of federal decisions. Thus, the details of contact regulations, curfews, and quarantine rules, and the modalities of school closures, differed widely among the federal states.

The Saxon government did not call the state of emergency in 2020, yet its response to the crisis was timely and comparatively strict, particularly when taking the low infection numbers into account. From March 10, a special taskforce, gathering members from the regional ministry of health and, later on, from the home office, took measures to contain the further spread of the coronavirus in Saxony. With this aim, it consecutively banned the organization of public and private events, regulated the visits to old age homes, introduced certain types of curfew, and, on March 23, closed schools and kindergartens. In national comparison, the prescriptions for individuals to only leave their house based on "relevant reasons" and to stay within a radius of 15 kilometers was especially strict. Saxony also introduced fines of up to €25,000 and imprisonment for not complying with the measures.

From March 31, the Saxon government issued a series of "corona protection decrees" that spelled out the details of the restrictions to public and private life and the fines to comply with the measures. In these decrees, Saxony went ahead of other *Bundesländer* in introducing measures that would later concern all federal states. For instance, the second decree introduced hygiene and safety measures such as the obligatory wearing of masks in public transport and in shops. The decrees issued from April 30 slowly eased the measures. This time, Saxony was one of the first federal states to reverse some of the regulations. For instance, Saxon schools and kindergartens were the first to reopen in Germany. The Saxon population re-gained the right to be in contact with ever more individuals and households. In mid-May, cultural institutions such as theaters, cinemas, and concert halls, as well as the tourism industry were allowed to reopen with targeted concepts to ensure hygiene.

Types and Styles of Performing Political Control

The comparative analysis of the (counter-)performances of control by the three individual actors, namely the federal Chancellor Angela Merkel, the regional Governor Michael Kretschmer, and the protest movement PEGIDA, discloses some of the different styles of performing and contesting political control during the so-called first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The individual performances bear similarities and differences in terms of the styles of control, specifically in relation to the habitus, mode of communication, and (emotional) tone of performances, the intended audiences as (imagined) constituencies, and the modalities of transmission (summarized in **Table 2**). With regard to these dimensions, the individual performers sometimes contrast sharply, and at times resemble each other to a surprising extent.

Performing Control at the National Level: Angela Merkel

Notwithstanding her role as the highest executive, Angela Merkel was neither the first nor the only performer of control during the COVID-19 pandemic at the national level. Initially, Merkel did not perform by "showing of a doing" (Gluhovic et al., 2021) but delegated the responsibility to react to the situation to the federal minister of health. Merkel started to assume an active role in governmental action and communication by attending a press conference at the ministry on March 11, 2020, finally demonstrating her "political presence, activity, progress, and

engagement" (Gluhovic et al., 2021, p. 15). From that day onward, Merkel stayed one of the main performers of control during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. Throughout 2020, she issued a multitude of statements in press conferences, during question time in sessions of the federal parliament, and also in audio and video podcasts.

The most widely disseminated and undoubtedly the most extraordinary measure taken to perform control during the crisis was Merkel's "address to the nation," a video message broadcast on public TV channels in Germany at prime time on March 18. The stage, reach, and modalities of transmission (Saward, 2010; Moffitt, 2016) were utterly remarkable: for the very first time throughout her long-term chancellorship, Merkel chose the format of a video message widely broadcast on public television in order to communicate to the German population in the context of a major crisis. The Chancellor had not communicated an issue directly to the citizens during the global economic and financial crisis of 2008, the crisis of nuclear energy associated with the Fukushima catastrophe in 2011, or the European "refugee crisis" of 2015/2016. Rather, the format of the "address to the nation" had been reserved to her traditional TV greetings for New Year's Eve since 2005. The exceptional character was moreover demonstrated by the modalities of its transmission: the video interrupted the scheduled program of the German public TV channels, forcing the audiences, imagined as "the German people" to watch the speech of the Chancellor while waiting for delayed media contents.

Merkel's message "to the people" was a 13-min prerecorded video whose format, setting, and visual aspects impressively constructed control, statehood, and democratic legitimation, thus acknowledging some of the most fundamental goals of performing executive control in a representative democracy (Rai, 2014; Rai et al., 2021). The message visually constructs the notion of statehood due to its setting in the building of the state chancellery at the center of Berlin. Two large flags, one German and one European, are placed on the left side of Merkel, marking the speech as both German and transnational discursive event. In the background, the building of the federal German parliament with its glass cupola appears, visually framing the speech as a democratic act through the iconic appeal to the principal democratic symbol of the country. Whereas these formal and visual aspects remind of the past New Year addresses, the video also breaks with some of the previously established norms. Counting 13 min, it is nearly twice as long as the typical New Year's Eve address. Moreover, it is set in bright daylight, contrasting with the vespertine atmosphere of her past video messages. Due to the lighting and plain outfit of Merkel, the mood is not festive or solemn, but rather serious and concerned.

Regarding argumentation and speech, the Chancellor articulates governmental control with affirmative statements relating to the functioning of the German state, public institutions, the economy, and the supply of goods. Toward the beginning, Merkel plainly asserts that "The state will continue to function." Countering popular fears of a shortage of food stuff, she stresses that "supply will, of course, be secured," explaining that "if the shelves are emptied for a day, they will be refilled." Merkel also attempts to strengthen popular trust in the German healthcare system, arguing that "Germany has an excellent healthcare system, possibly one of the best in the world. This can give us confidence." With regard to the detrimental impact of the so-called lockdown on the economy, she emphasizes that "The federal government is doing everything possible to absorb the shock for the economy—particularly to keep jobs," and ensures the flexibility of the government: "as government, we will keep checking what can be corrected … we will stay agile to be able to change course and react with different instruments at all times."

Yet, the scripts of the performance of Merkel give away some of the limits of institutional claims to control, revealing the constructed rather than the factual character of political control during the crisis. In fact, the text modules articulating control alternate and interact with modules qualifying the ability of the government to stay in control. Among these qualifiers are rather rational and emotional modules, both spread out throughout the speech. The rational passages explain and evaluate the situation and aim to convince the population to support the governmental measures, thus creating a dense net of diagnosis, explanation, prognosis, and appeal. For instance, in the first sentences of her speech, Merkel asserts that "It is serious. Therefore, take it seriously. Since German Unity, no, since the Second World War, the country did not face a challenge in which it depended so much on common solidary actions" (diagnosis), unfolding that "as long as there is no therapy against the coronavirus and no vaccine, there is only one guideline to the actions: to slow down the spread of the virus, to stretch it over months and to gain time" (explanation). In this context, she predicts that "we will pass this task" (prognosis) and immediately underlines the need for individuals to cooperate by qualifying her hopeful statement: "if all citizens understand this task as their task" (appeal).

The emotional qualifiers to government control express empathy with the German population and thank people directly involved in responding to the situation. Merkel assures her understanding of the severity of the regulations, referring to them as "dramatic," "difficult," and "hard." In this context, she recognizes the self-employed and small business owners among the working population as the groups particularly negatively affected, alongside children and students. She also appeals to the empty signifier of democracy, framing democratic rights as a historical achievement of the German state. In particular, she draws on a historical comparison, involving her experience as a former citizen of the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), to underline the exceptionality of the measures implemented by the government: "let me assure you: for somebody like me, for whom freedom of travel and movement were rights fought for hard, such restrictions are only justifiable in the situation of absolute necessity." Moreover, Merkel addresses direct thanks to the professional groups working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, most importantly, the medical staff in the hospitals whose efforts she denotes as "tremendous," and also supermarket employees "who do one of the hardest jobs that currently exists."

Finally, the scripts of the performance of Merkel involve various text modules that emphasize the universal value of human life, draw attention to the vulnerability of society and

construct Germany in this light as a solidary community. For example, Merkel demands to regard infections and deaths not as "abstract numbers of statistics," but as "a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner, human beings." She creates an immediate connection between the universal value of human life and Germany as a community of individuals: "we are a community in which every life and every human being counts." According to Merkel, this community must build on mutual solidarity, hence she argues that "just like indiscriminately each and every one of us can be affected by the virus, everybody must now help … by not thinking for only one moment that he or she does not really make a difference. Everybody counts, our common effort is necessary." In addition, Merkel highlights the vulnerability of the German society, stating clearly that "the epidemic shows us how vulnerable we all are, how dependent on the considerate conduct of others."

The modalities of transmission and reception in the days and weeks following its publication mark TV address of Merkel as an exceptional performance of state control during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Both conventional and new media widely discussed the speech over the following days. A broadcast of the German public radio station *Deutschlandfunk* called the address "Merkel's best speech," comparing it with celebrated speakers and speeches such as Barack Obama or Winston Churchill whose speech on "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" to the British House of Commons on May 13, 1940 (Jahn, 2020). In December, Merkel's address received the award of "speech of the year" by the Tübingen-based Institute for Rhetoric Studies. Evaluating dimensions such as argumentative structure, stylistic quality, and impact, the jury referred to the address as "an impressive appeal to responsibility and community which links the clear presentation of complex scientific insights to empathy and political prudence" (Seminar für Allgemeine Rhetorik, 2020). On top of that, the address had its own entry on the online encyclopedia Wikipedia by the end of March 2020.

Performing Control at the Regional Level: Michael Kretschmer

Beyond the national level, performances of control of Merkel were complemented and, at times, rivaled by regional performers of control. In the *Bundesland* of Saxony, the main performer was the comparatively young regional Governor of Saxony, Michael Kretschmer. Being in office only since 2017, Kretschmer was nevertheless experienced in dealing with political and social crises at the outbreak of the pandemic: during his 15-year service in the national parliament as a deputy of Görlitz, the easternmost city of Saxony, he had witnessed the disruption of German institutional politics following the rise of the far-right anti-establishment party AfD. The AfD had been especially successful in Saxony, winning over his electoral district of Görlitz.

Michael Kretschmer constituted himself as a public performer of control from mid-March onward. In particular, he delivered three speeches in front of state and federal legislative bodies, namely the Saxon parliament on March 18 and April 9, and the *Bundesrat*, the German "upper house," on May 15. These speeches explained and justified governmental measures taken to contain the spread of the coronavirus and the new "opening" taking place in Saxony from mid-May. In contrast to these speeches, which were not widely received, the most outstanding performance of control was the visit of Kretschmer to a so-called anti-lockdown demonstration taking place in Dresden on May 16, 2020. Accompanied by a few bodyguards and a small camera crew, Kretschmer publicly "showed a doing" (Gluhovic et al., 2021), namely by spending about 1 h at the demonstration located in a large public garden close to the city center of Dresden. At the site, he actively engaged in conversations with some of the ∼400 demonstrators. He performed his interest in a casual exchange with the demonstrators by arriving and moving around on a bike and by not using a face mask.

The visit constituted an attempt to regain control over the increasing polarization of Saxon society in light of the growing popular contestation of the regulations. Indeed, "anti-lockdown" demonstrations against the restrictions had regularly been taking place all over Germany since late March (Teune, 2021), and eventually also set off in Saxon cities, including the regional capital Dresden. Media and political observers compared the rather opaque mobilization with the anti-immigration protest wave of 2015 and 2016 (Gathmann et al., 2020), pointing to the possible threat of increasing societal polarization and the further rise of far-right AfD in Saxony and beyond. Hence, at the demonstration and later in both traditional and new media, the Governor staged himself as the first politician to enter into dialogue with the growing anti-establishment coalition: initially at the demonstration itself, later that day on the ministerial Twitter account, and finally in media interviews. The relevant tweets give insights into how Kretschmer performed statehood at the site. For instance, he wore an outdoor jacket featuring the Saxon corporate design, namely the phrase: "this is Saxon style" ("*So geht Sächsisch*") on bright green ground, embodying his claim to represent Saxon statehood.

A widely shared video included in his tweets provided a stage for the performance of statehood and governmental accountability of Kretschmer in the context of justifying the regulations. During the publicized exchange with a middle-aged male demonstrator, the Governor based his argument for the restrictions on an emotional comparison with the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. In response to the question by the protestor of how Kretschmer dealt with being responsible for allegedly increasing anxieties among children, the regional Governor asserted: "i am so glad that there are no big convoys of trucks with corpses here like in Bergamo … Every decision we had to take was bitter. I could not sleep for many nights … But I did not want to have the responsibility for … being in a similar situation due to our actions."

The reception of performances of Kretschmer by his immediate and media audiences, imagined as the local and regional population, was rather ambiguous. At the demonstration itself, Kretschmer received both praise and confronted contempt: while some demonstrators recognized his "effort to listen," others called him names and harshly asked him to leave, thus rejecting his claim to control as illegitimate. In the hours and days following the visit, demonstrators, commentators, political allies and opponents, and social media users publicly discussed Kretschmer's performance of control on

both traditional and new media platforms. Many commentators, including members of his Saxon governing coalition, criticized Kretschmer for creating a stage for far-right extremists and conspiracy theorists. At the local level, however, Kretschmer's action yielded a rather positive echo, accepting his claim to control. The local newspaper evaluated the visit as a genuine attempt to start a dialogue with people holding different opinions, fitting in with the authentically dialogical political style of Kretschmer (Winzer, 2020).

Contestation and Counter-Performances of Control: PEGIDA

Institutional performances of control in Germany during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic did not stay uncontested. Besides the previously mentioned "anti-lockdown" protests against the regulations, some actors among the "established' protest scene continued their activism during the pandemic and lockdown. One of these actors was PEGIDA, the largest far-right populist protest movement in Germany. PEGIDA is a grassroots organization managed by a small team of activists from the eastern German city of Dresden since 2014. At its core are public protest events on the streets and squares of Dresden, namely fortnightly demonstrations. The demonstrations are usually non-violent events (Volk and Weisskircher, forthcoming) consisting of a couple of speeches and a march. Mobilizing against a multicultural society and the political establishment, PEGIDA's ideology is representative of the broader populist far-right in Europe (Druxes and Simpson, 2016; Vorländer et al., 2018; Volk, 2019; Caiani and Weisskircher, 2021). In the past, PEGIDA had reached extraordinary mobilization successes with up to 25,000 participants, on average male and middle-aged members of the working population. In the months before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the regular events gathered around 1,500 demonstrators and special events, such as anniversaries, up to 3,000 participants.

As an organization that had principally relied on and constituted itself through counter-hegemonic public protest for more than 5 years, the restrictions to mass events posed a major challenge for PEGIDA's activism, and the activists complied with the regulations only reluctantly. Indeed, PEGIDA insisted on organizing a scheduled demonstration on March 16, 2020, despite the previous ban of public events by the Saxon state government as well as the attempts of the city administration to convince PEGIDA to suspend the event. Notwithstanding the final decision of the municipal authorities to forbid the demonstration, leading activist Lutz Bachmann announced a "patriotic week" full of "spontaneous appearances" in Dresden and surroundings on his YouTube channel. Eventually, however, PEGIDA was unable to stage contentious performances that week due to the absence of leader Bachmann, who got stuck in his residence on the Spanish island of Tenerife following the travel bans in Europe.

Hence, in the following weeks of spring 2020, PEGIDA staged virtual counter-performances to articulate counter-hegemonic political meanings (Eyerman, 2006; Tilly, 2008). The virtual counter-performances both contested the legitimacy of institutional politics, in particular, governmental control during the crisis, and claimed control for grassroots actors like PEGIDA and their allies. They included live broadcasts of political commentary by Bachmann and other PEGIDA activists as well as virtual protest events, which replaced the typical demonstrations.

Bachmann's Enraged Contestation of Institutional Control

One of the first instances of contestation of institutional control by PEGIDA was Lutz Bachmann's response to Chancellor Angela Merkel's televised "address to the nation" of March 18, 2020. His immediate response was a 10-min live broadcast on his YouTube channel, namely an enraged monolog denying the expertise of the Chancellor to deal with the crisis and governing a country writ large. The particular staging marks Bachmann's response as a spontaneous reaction rather than a rehearsed performance: set in the outdoor spaces of "a friend's place" in Tenerife, the YouTube video features Bachmann dressed in a polo shirt in front of a swimming pool and a sling chair, with the roofs of southern-style houses and a few meridional trees in the background. Despite the leisure time scenery, Bachmann's response constitutes a counter-performance of control in that he is "showing a doing," namely creating counter-hegemonic meanings regarding both institutional politics and PEGIDA as their challenger. His performance reached 18,000 views on YouTube by the end of 2020, more than twice that of "regular" videos posted that month.

Bachmann's counter-performance to governmental control is in line with PEGIDA's previous populist, notably anti-elitist discourse and style (Vorländer et al., 2018; Volk, 2020). Indeed, Bachmann blames the Chancellor for "having run down" the German healthcare system, educational sector, and public defense, and secondly, letting the economy "crash" in the context of the pandemic. He claims that Merkel lacks basic knowledge of the market, private enterprise, and economics in general, rejecting the rationale of the governmental measures as "halfhearted" and eventually detrimental to the economy, particularly for the self-employed and small businesses. He articulates his anger by using strong, emphatic language, and expressive gestures and mimics, including some instances of mockery of Merkel's style of speech and gesture: "each crisis which this woman tackled until now became worse at the moment when she took over control. We saw this in 2015, we saw this before … it always went completely wrong, and this time it will happen exactly the same."

Specifically, drawing from the repertoire of populist articulations of the empty signifier of "the corrupted elites" (Mudde, 2004), Bachmann's performance denies Merkel the moral integrity to successfully take control of the crisis and governmental affairs in general. Principally, he suspects her of artificially prolonging the lockdown in order to conceal her "past failures" concerning the healthcare system, as well as to delay parliamentary elections and to gain time to "refurbish her image as a great crisis manager." In addition, he incriminates her for her "audacity," "lack of conscience," and "callousness" to thank the medical staff rather than doubling their pay. Also, he blames her for "panic-mongering" based on her statement that it was yet unknown how long the pandemic would last and how many

deaths it would produce. Not least, he maintains that Merkel would accept bribes by large companies, suggesting she has "a deal" with the telecommunications service Skype based on her reference to the provider as a means to stay in contact with other individuals during the lockdown.

Typical for populist counter-performances to representative claims (Saward, 2010; Moffitt, 2016; Volk, 2020), Bachmann proposes himself as a PEGIDA activist and eastern German citizen as an expert and therefore a superior performer of control in the situation of crisis. He suggests introducing an even stricter lockdown comparable to other countries, arguing that: "if you take measures and supposedly take this so seriously like her, then you do proper measures in one go, like other countries are doing it, like China did it, like Italy does it with curfews, like Austria does it, like Spain—I am stuck here!—exactly like they are doing it, and that's it." Bachmann draws on PEGIDA's eastern German roots to argue that the German population will be able to act as a solidary community during the period of strict lockdown and curfews: "everybody really has to stand together for 4 weeks then. Solidarity within the people will then be needed. And this solidarity does exist … at least in central Germany (*Mitteldeutschland*) … There is still cohesion, the people will help each other … and then this whole story will work out fine."

Bachmann staged yet another virtual counter-performance of control in reaction to the Saxon Governor's visit to the "anti-lockdown" demonstration in Dresden on May 18, 2020, which is 4 days after Kretschmer's controversial performance of control. Again in the form of a live YouTube broadcast, Bachmann re-articulated his critique of institutional politics. This time, he chose a more professional setting, staging his performance in front of an empty wall, which usually served as the backdrop to his videos of "political commentary." Re-articulating his claims to the moral superiority of grassroots activism vis-à-vis the moral inferiority of institutional politics, he criticized Kretschmer for not having worn a face mask and rejected his justification to show his respect to the demonstrators as a "lame excuse." In the video, Bachmann mentions the regional Governor of Saxony as a negative example in order to construct PEGIDA as a more responsible political actor, appealing to their supporters to properly cover their noses and mouths at the occasion of the first post-lockdown demonstration scheduled for the early evening of May 18. With this aim, he also underlines that PEGIDA's aims go beyond the critique of corona regulations, as they include the "protection of the rule of law and civil rights in Germany" alongside the opposition to migration.

PEGIDA's Counter-Performances

Besides Bachmann's live broadcasts contesting institutional control, PEGIDA's major means of performing grassroots control in the context of the crisis was the staging of virtual protest events in April and May 2020. Purposefully designed and well-rehearsed, these so-called "virtual marches through the living rooms of the patriots" publicly showcased the dedication and persistence of the movement during and beyond the period of "lockdown." Replacing the originally planned demonstrations on the streets and squares of Dresden, these contentious performances highlighted that PEGIDA was able to mobilize despite difficult context conditions. PEGIDA thus contradicted the many media and political observers who had long predicted the demise of the movement due to low participation numbers and negative media reports. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic offered PEGIDA yet another occasion to perform their long-term critique and counter-identity. Activists repeatedly expressed their pride by claiming that PEGIDA is "Europe's largest active civil movement" (website entry of 14 May 2020), despite pandemic and "lockdown."

Similar to Bachmann's YouTube monologs, PEGIDA's counter-performances of control re-articulated previously used populist and especially anti-elitist discursive patterns to contest institutional claims to control. The virtual events developed the idea that the regulations were part of an elitist conspiracy against "the people." With this aim, the meaning of the populist empty signifier of "the corrupted elites" (Mudde, 2004) was broadened, including not only the German political and media establishment but also the World Health Organization (WHO) and the founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, one of the main donors of WHO. PEGIDA suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic was artificially created to enable the total surveillance and oppression of the population *via* the "corona-application" and "compulsory vaccination." At a virtual event on April 13, activist Wolfgang Taufkirch asserted that: "the WHO plans to go from house to house and practically test everybody for corona … first of all, everybody's DNA will be taken, and second, inconvenient contemporaries can be removed if their test 'happens' to be positive." With regard to Bill Gates, he predicted in the same speech: "gates stands in for the total surveillance of individuals by the state and corona comes just in time … Gates views the coronavirus pandemic as the perfect occasion to further develop and apply the technology of microchips … mass vaccinations could contain a microchip-implant on which one's DNA will be readable, which everyone would have to get on the recommendation of the WHO and inconvenient critics could be removed."

In addition, virtual protest events of PEGIDA also contained an invert dimension, namely the performance of control over its own long-term protest ritual. The activists performed control over the ritual by designing the virtual events in terms of structure and content as similar to the conventional demonstrations as possible, signaling the persistence of the "brand PEGIDA" in the context of crisis. For instance, the virtual events took place at about the same hour on the same day of the week. Also, their structure involved typical elements of the established protest events such as the movement "anthem" at the beginning, followed by several speeches by Bachmann, his co-organizers, and some guest speakers, as well as the German anthem as a closing act. Even the traditional march was represented in the virtual format, namely as a high-speed display of a video recording of the real-life march at a previous event. Another means of performing control were the modes of networking and coalition-building with other organizations. Specifically, PEGIDA refrained from building coalitions with the emerging *Querdenken* movement, preferring to strengthen existing networks associated with the German and European populist far-right. The guests at the virtual events

were activists who had visited PEGIDA demonstrations in the past: three activists related to the German and Austrian branches of the Identitarian Movement, two authors and editors from "alternative news" outlets, three AfD politicians, and one politician of the Belgian far-right party Flemish Importance (*Vlaams Belang*). In contrast, PEGIDA did not invite the organizers of the Germany-wide "anti-lockdown" mobilization to the virtual events nor did they advertise their events, even though Bachmann recognized the protest wave as part of a "larger movement of patriots and resistance fighters."

Contrasting National, Regional, and Grassroots (Counter-) Performances

The in-depth analysis of the cases exposes a high degree of variation among the actors in terms of performative styles. As summarized in **Table 2**, the performers chose different modes of communication, namely monological, dialogical, and plurilogical as well as unidirectional and multidirectional forms of communication; displayed emotional tones from being empathic and caring over engaged and brave to being angry and mocking; and performed different styles of individual habitus, including the habitus of the informer, interlocutor, and enlightener in their quest to perform and contest control. Additionally, the performances differed in relation to their intended audiences as (imagined) constituencies, reaching from local and immediate audiences to regional, national, and transnational media audiences, as well as their modalities of transmission, including both conventional and new media as well as direct forms of communication.

Unexpectedly, the comparative analysis shows not only that the institutional and grassroots actors performed control very differently but also that the two institutional actors differed strongly, even though they occupy similar executive roles within their respective levels of the German polity and belong to the same party, the conservative CDU. The two contrasting political styles both complement and contest each other as fundamentally different approaches to staging institutional control during the crisis. Indeed, Merkel's style of top-down "informer" based on a monological, unidirectional mode of communication "to the people" contrasts sharply with Kretschmer's style of bottom-up "interlocutor" rooted in a dialogical, multidirectional mode of communication "with the people." Similarly, the Chancellor's empathic and caring emotional tone is quite different from the Governor's engaged, pro-active, and somewhat brave behavior. In line with her top-down attitude of "informer of the people," Merkel's performance relied solely on the conventional medium of public television in order to reach a national constituency, which is the largest possible share of the TV-watching German population. In contrast, the regional institutional performer Kretschmer sought to reach more varied audiences, ranging from local demonstrators to a regional (Saxon) constituency and national media audiences. With this aim, he employed immediate interactions with both demonstrators and new media platforms.

At the same time, on the grassroots side of politics, PEGIDA's style of performing control bears unexpected similarities with institutional styles, particularly with the monological and unidirectional informer style associated with that of Merkel. First, PEGIDA staged the movement as an "enlightening" force that "uncovers" the lack of legitimacy of institutional performances of control and claims the role of an oppositional "leader of the people." Also, despite his fundamental critique of the Chancellor, Bachmann's monological, unidirectional mode of communication is surprisingly similar to that of Merkel, namely excluding the possibility for exchange with fellow citizens or followers. Even though PEGIDA also uses a polylogical mode of communication in its counter-performances, the mode of communication stays unidirectional. The tone in which PEGIDA activists contest institutional control ranges from enraged to mocking, thus displaying a similarly high emotional involvement in the crisis as Merkel, although the emotional landscape differs strongly from that of the Chancellor.

With regard to the intended audiences of the performances of control, the comparison of the cases points to very different imaginations of the represented constituencies. While not at the core of the analysis of this article, the notion of imagined constituencies also sheds light on whom the actors regard as part of the social entity they seek to control. The performances by Merkel and Kretschmer appealed to, broadly speaking, German constituencies at the local, regional (Saxon), and/or national levels, suggesting that the two executives, according to their respective institutional roles, indeed sought to perform control over their national and regional electorates. In contrast, PEGIDA's counter-performances were addressed toward a transnational audience. Claiming to represent a European constituency (Volk, 2019, 2020; Caiani and Weisskircher, 2021), the imagined constituencies of PEGIDA's counter-performances included not only the followers of the international guest speakers from Belgium and Austria but also a vague notion of "Europeans" writ-large. The differences between institutional and grassroots politics seem to confirm the so-called renaissance of the nation-state during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of institutional politics. In turn, grassroots actors such as PEGIDA carried on their activism in the transnational realm.

Performing Political Control of Democracy

The comparative analysis discloses that political performances of control in Germany during the so-called first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 were closely linked to claims of safeguarding democracy. Indeed, both institutional and grassroots performances of control linked the pandemic to the concept and lived reality of democracy in contemporary Germany, suggesting to control the persistence and guarantee of democratic principles during the pandemic. With this aim, the actors framed their individual performances as "democratic acts" rather than "acts of crisis control." Stylistically, they supported their claims to performing democratic acts by displaying political and state symbols such as iconic buildings (Merkel), corporate design (Kretschmer), and Germany's key legal text, the *Grundgesetz* (PEGIDA). A further key tenet of the claim-making performances was the allusion to the recent past of the country, namely the socialist dictatorship in eastern Germany, as a negative example for state organization and civil rights in the country (Merkel and PEGIDA).

In discourse-theoretical terms, the performances prominently articulated meanings associated with the empty signifier of democracy. Moving and transforming within and across institutional and grassroots discourses, the empty signifier turned into a nodal point of crisis discourses in that period. Thus, its specific articulations by the federal, regional, and grassroots actors bore a high degree of antagonism and contestation. The foregoing analysis shows that individual understandings of what constitutes democracy and democratic values widely differ among the cases. On the institutional side of politics, top-down and bottom-up understandings of democracy competed with each other. For the federal Chancellor, democracy relates to the top-down notion of governmental transparency and accountability: as a government, to be democratic entails providing free access to information. Merkel thus motivated her TV address asserting, "This belongs to an open democracy: that we make political decisions transparent and explain them; that we justify our actions and communicate them to make them understandable." The regional Governor of Saxony, in turn, articulated the meaning of democracy as freedom of speech and deliberation, thus taking a bottom-up perspective closer to individual citizens. Hence, he framed his visit to the "anti-lockdown" demonstration as an attempt to strengthen democratic values by engaging in dialogue with the protestors. He made this claim explicit in the context of a media interview some days later, underlining that "We live in a liberal democracy. Here everybody can say his opinion and contradict the elected representatives. It would be wrong not to take these people seriously" (Gaugele and Kretschmer, 2020). In the same context, he proposed that the interaction with the growing numbers of critics of the "lockdown" was crucial to prevent further divisions in German society: "the number of demonstrators will increase if everybody who has a critical position is forced into a corner and excluded as an interlocutor."

As a counter-hegemonic force within and against the German federal polity, PEGIDA rejected institutional claims to representing democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus fleshing out previous movement discourse on the assumed lack of democracy, rule of law, and civil rights in reunited Germany (Volk, forthcoming). In both antagonistic and polarizing fashion, the movement propagated that democratic values do not lie with the elected politicians and denied both federal and regional authorities of having the legitimacy to be in control. Activist Bachmann's YouTube monologs and PEGIDA's virtual counter-performances of control construct the allegedly undemocratic federal and regional politics as examples of broader shortcomings of democracy in eastern Germany since the demise of communism. Typical of PEGIDA's established discursive strategies, the activists draw on a historical comparison of contemporary Germany with past dictatorships, evaluating the state of democracy as at least as bad as that during the Nazi and communist regimes. For instance, claiming that "we exchanged the rascals against full-grown criminals in 1989 and 1990," Bachmann suggests that the contemporary political leadership suffers from lesser degrees of legitimacy than the leadership of the GDR. In a similar vein, he proposes that some of the oppressive structures of the GDR, including the state party and the secret service, have been reinstated in reunited Germany.

Tying in with the populist argumentation patterns of articulating and representing "the people" (Canovan, 2005; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2007), PEGIDA moreover offered itself as a truly democratic force and therefore as more apt to be in control than the elected representatives. Hence, PEGIDA defended a bottom-up understanding of democracy as individual civil rights and freedoms (Volk, forthcoming). In addition, the movement constructed the idea of the individual responsibility of German citizens for the safeguarding of democracy. Indeed, PEGIDA advertised the virtual events as "virtual marches for our constitution," "for our freedom of speech," and "for our civil rights." The claim to represent constitutionality and civil rights was supported by the use of historical and political symbolism. For example, activist Taufkirch ostentatiously placed a copy of the German constitution, decorated with a black ribbon, in the background of his video on April 27. Similarly, he displayed the so-called Wirmer flag, the symbol of the anti-Hitler coalition around Graf von Stauffenberg, thus constructing a historical parallel with past resistance forces. In the same context, he called upon citizens to take responsibility for the fate of democracy in Germany, warning them about repeating mistakes made in the past: "if our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, who also followed a mad man without resistance exactly 87 years ago, were still alive, they would have started a revolution long ago, so this does not happen again. They would be ashamed of how a nation gives up what they fought and struggled for after the war and later after the revolution of 89, within 3 weeks and in a docile and apathetic manner."

DISCUSSION

This final section discusses the results of the comparative analysis of institutional and grassroots (counter-) performances of control in Germany during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of recent research on democracy and populism in times of crises. These reflections underline how the discourse-theoretical perspective on performances provides more nuanced understandings of the relationship between the pandemic and democracy and emphasize the strength of the performative approach to politics in a situation of an ultimate lack of control.

Democracy and Populism in/During Crisis

Political literature has mostly pointed to the dangers that the COVID-19 pandemic posed to democratic systems worldwide. Both theoretical and empirical work highlights that the crisis had had detrimental effects on democratic systems across the globe (Afsahi et al., 2020; Stasavage, 2020; Engler et al., 2021). Most obvious is the temporary cutback in the democratic rights of citizens such as freedom of movement, expression, and assembly. At a systemic level, democratic states have struggled and oftentimes failed to uphold democratic decision-making processes in favor of a centralization of powers at the level of the executive (popularly referred to as the "hour of the executive"). Even though Germany, as an established democracy, was to

expect a less severe impact than newer or weaker democracies (Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020), scholarship enumerates a few significant effects of the pandemic on the German democratic system. Specifically, the crisis caused the regression of individual democratic freedoms and the loss of importance of legislative bodies in favor of the executive as well as science as a non-elected "semi-sovereign" (Hildebrand, 2020; Merkel, 2020; Ramadani, 2020; Engler et al., 2021). The decline of democratic decision-making processes was accompanied and possibly reinforced by the temporal "self-silencing of the opposition in both politics and society," notably also of the media, leading to a wide acceptance of the "new normality" (Merkel, 2020). Arguably, these decisive changes to the democratic system have turned Germany into a "coronacracy" (in German: *Coronakratie*) (Florack et al., 2021).

Additionally, the literature discusses flourishing conspiracy narratives as threats to democracy (Gollust et al., 2020; Hafeneger et al., 2020; Vériter et al., 2020). The so-called "infodemic" or "political communication crisis" constitutes major threats to democratic societies across the globe. By spreading false information regarding the origin of the virus and the aims of vaccines, among other things, they reinforce distrust in state institutions as well as social polarization. Also in Germany, "fake news," "alternative facts," and conspiracy narratives flourished during the pandemic, both in the context of established far-right populist actors like the empirical case of PEGIDA in this study and also the massive anti-lockdown mobilization starting from April 2020 (Hentschel, 2020; Grande et al., 2021; Pantenburg et al., 2021). For instance, conspiracy narratives posited that the political establishment had purposefully installed a "corona-dictatorship" in order to attain personal benefits.

"Coronacracy" and/or "corona-dictatorship"? The results of the comparative analysis in this study contribute a possibly more nuanced perspective on the status quo of democracy in Germany during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. While democratic principles have undoubtedly been impeded, notably legislative decision-making processes and individual freedoms, this study's findings demonstrate that the crisis has contributed to a high level of politicization of the concept of democracy as such. Indicated by the antagonistic articulations of the empty signifier of democracy in both institutional and grassroots discursive contexts, it seems that the concept has been put on the agenda of political debates much more so than during previous crises. Most importantly, in the "hour of the executive," long-term federal Chancellor Angela Merkel's performance of control underscored governmental accountability and transparency. In contrast, Merkel did not stage a TV address "to the people" to explain and justify her decisions during the last major crisis her government was confronted with, namely the "refugee crisis." In 2015, she famously proclaimed "We will manage!" (*Wir schaffen das*!) in a press conference rather than rendering governmental decisions transparent to the population. Similarly, as civil rights and freedoms were legally restricted, regional Governor Michael Kretschmer discursively reinforced their value at the anti-lockdown demonstration and beyond, articulating democracy in terms of freedom of speech and dialogue between citizens and elected officials.

With regard to the articulation and antagonistic contestation of the concept of democracy, the German case arguably takes a rather unique position in the European and international context. In fact, around the world, public debates at the outset of the pandemic were dominated by biopolitical perspectives focusing on public health and life as such rather than democratic principles (Winter, 2021). Accordingly, the heads of states and governments of other large European countries such as the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, French President Emmanuel Macron, and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, did not appeal to democracy in speeches that were comparable to Merkel's TV address in March 2020 (Gobierno de España, 2020; Government of the United Kingdom, 2020; Le Palais de Elysee, 2020). Even in Sweden, the only European country not to introduce a "lockdown" in spring 2020, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven did not justify the course of the country with the argument of safeguarding democracy (Regeringskansliet, 2020). Raising political consciousness for the need to safeguard civil rights in the context of crisis, the salience of democracy generated by the constant (re-)articulation of the empty signifier might have beneficial consequences for the German democratic system in the long term: as the pandemic situation underlined that democracy does not exhaust itself in legal texts and institutionalized power structures, but needs to be publicly performed and contested, it might create openings for democratic renewal (Ramadani, 2020).

In addition, this study's findings contribute a more nuanced perspective on the concept of populism in times of crisis and ultimately make a claim for discursive-performative approaches to populism. This concerns the relationship between populism and liberalism in particular. Whereas populism as "democratic illiberalism" is commonly associated with the opposition to liberalism (or, the constitutional pillar of modern democracy) in favor of majoritarianism (Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2016), the discourse-theoretical lens is able to show how the empty signifiers of democracy and liberalism were articulated alongside each other in the populist discourse during the crisis. Indeed, rather than expressing opposition to liberalism and constitutionalism, the populist PEGIDA movement appealed to the safeguarding of democratic principles in conjunction with the concepts of constitutionality and rule of law. The activists thus articulated a certain reading of constitutionality, focusing on civil rights, as a core component of the democratic system even in times of pandemic. Common also in other spatial, temporal, and organizational contexts (Moffitt, 2017), the parallel articulation of theoretically distinct or incommensurable ideas manifests the explanatory power of constructivist discursive and performative conceptualizations of populism vis-à-vis the more static ideological or ideational approach (Laclau, 2005; Aslanidis, 2016; Moffitt, 2016).

Performing (the Lack of) Control

The results of the foregoing comparative analysis of institutional and grassroots (counter-)performances of control in Germany during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic moreover make a more general methodological claim for the performative

approach to politics: as the further development of the crisis, notably the outbreak of additional infection waves and repeated "lockdowns," revealed, the pandemic confronted administrations across the globe with a fundamentally uncontrollable situation. In Germany, the degree of complexity of decision-making in times of COVID-19 was seen as comparable to the period of the major regime change in 1989/1990 due to the high level of uncertainty (Korte, 2020). Arguably, the level of uncertainty is even higher during a global pandemic. Politics confront an ultimate lack of control vis-à-vis a highly infectious virus, and thus "being in control" of the pandemic can only be a political illusion (Sabrow, 2021; Vorländer, 2021).

In this extraordinary context of uncertainty, "performing control" becomes the most viable methodological lens to analyze politics (Koljonen and Palonen, 2021). Indeed, the interpretive, non-essentialist lens of the performative approach is best suited to capture the ultimate lack of control experienced by the representatives at the federal and regional levels. Whereas the political actors in different institutional and non-institutionalized roles were keen to suggest that the situation was under control, their performances unveil the ultimate lack of control. For instance, the lack of control experienced by Chancellor Angela Merkel is expressed in at least two ways. First, while the TV address undoubtedly constituted a formidable means of performing state control, the exceptionality of the format and content of this measure also gave away the desperation and increasing loss of control on the side of the executive. Second, the sudden shift of Merkel's political style after 15 years in office, moving from her typically sober and monotonous way of talking to a much more empathic and intimate rhetoric, marked the dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic as vaster than those of previous crises. In a similar vein, the "unmasked" visit of Saxony's regional Governor Michael Kretschmer to an "anti-lockdown" demonstration, as well as his account of the visit on conventional and new media, powerfully illustrate the loss of control of the state government. Admittedly, he was able to preserve his genuine political style based on "listening to the people." Yet, the fact that he did not wear a face mask as a means to "pay respect" to the demonstrators, thereby jeopardizing his own health and failing to comply with the law, indicates that initially counter-hegemonic discourses and practices were gaining power.

The institutional lack of control is reflected in the rapid decline of popular support for strengthening executive powers in the early phase of the crisis. According to survey data, popular support for a stronger national executive skyrocketed in March, but fell below the 50% mark in April 2020 (Juhl et al., 2020). Again, the interpretive lens contributes to the understanding of quantitative data: the analysis of institutional performances of control suggests to explain the decline of popular support for strengthening the executive by drawing attention to the shortcomings of Merkel's performances of control, for example, related to the loss of control expressed by the extraordinary format of the TV address and her change of style. In turn, while sociological data do not indicate increasing levels of social polarization with regard to popular attitudes in summer 2020 (Beckmann and Schönauer, 2021), the analysis of PEGIDA's counter-performances foreshadows the decline of grassroots support for institutional politics at an early stage of the crisis. In fact, the case of the most persistent far-right movement in Germany serves as a useful lens for explaining how larger segments of the German population lost trust throughout the spring and summer of 2020, powerfully expressed in the large-scale "anti-lockdown" mobilization that culminated in the attempt to "storm" the federal parliament in the context of a large-scale demonstration, organized by the *Querdenken* movement in late August 2020.

Notwithstanding the increasing visibility of counter-hegemonic politics throughout the spring of 2020, the analysis also exhibits the limits of grassroots counter-performances during the pandemic. At the outset of the crisis, PEGIDA experienced a loss of control of the urban space of the city of Dresden, which it had prominently occupied for more than 5 years, revealing a loss of control over its own long-term protest ritual. The design of a structurally similar virtual form of protest as a substitution for the street demonstrations reinforces the notion of the public space as the premium "mass medium" (Warneken, 1991) for movements to articulate claims and to display the numbers, unity, commitment of the activists to the cause, and the worthiness of public attention (Tilly, 1995). Beyond the performance of claims, the interpretive approach to the virtual protest events demonstrates the constitutive power of performance: PEGIDA, as a social entity, constitutes itself in and through the protest ritual. In other words, the demonstrations are not something the organization does but constitute what the organization is. Therefore, in as early as mid-May 2020, when the Saxon state government partially lifted the rules for mass gatherings in public, PEGIDA returned to the streets and squares of Dresden with fortnightly demonstrations. At this point, further research is needed to shed light on how grassroots actors constitute themselves as socio-political entities over extended periods of "lockdown" and under the impression of the increasing digitization of the public sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset cannot be fully made available, however, individual pieces of data may be shared upon request. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to SV, sabine.volk@uj.edu.pl.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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The Representation of Roma in the Romanian Media During COVID-19: Performing Control Through Discursive-Performative Repertoires

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This article investigates the narratives employed by the Romanian media in covering the development of COVID-19 in Roma communities in Romania. This paper aims to contribute to academic literature on Romani studies, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, by adopting as its case study the town of Ţăndărei, a small town in the south of Romania, which in early 2020 was widely reported by Romanian media during both the pre- and post-quarantine period. The contributions rest on anchoring the study in post-foundational theory and media studies to understand the performativity of Roma identity and the discursive-performative practices of control employed by the Romania media in the first half of 2020. Aroused by the influx of ethnic Romani returning from Western Europe, the Romanian mainstream media expanded its coverage through sensationalist narratives and depictions of lawlessness and criminality. These branded the ethnic minority as a scapegoat for the spreading of the virus. Relying on critical social theory, this study attempts to understand how Roma have been portrayed during the Coronavirus crisis. Simultaneously, this paper resonates with current Roma theories about media discourses maintaining and reinforcing a sense of marginality for Roma communities. To understand the dynamics of Romanian media discourses, this study employs NVivo software tools and language-in-use discourse analysis to examine the headlines and sub headlines of approximately 300 articles that have covered COVID-19 developments in Roma communities between February and July 2020. The findings from the study indicate that the media first focused on exploiting the sensationalism of the episodes involving Roma. Second, the media employed a logic of polarization to assist the authorities in retaking control of the pandemic and health crisis from Romania. The impact of the current study underlines the need to pay close attention to the dynamics of crises when activating historical patterns of stigma vis-à-vis Roma communities in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: COVID-19, performing control, Roma (Gypsies)-Eastern Europe, Romania, media discourse analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Among the plethora of problems caused by the COVID-19 infection, the ethnic component of many societies was affected by a sharp rise in xenophobic and discriminatory discourses (Karalis Noel. 2020; Woods et al., 2020). The magnitude of COVID-19 generated fertile ground for discourses infused with xenophobic and racialized elements that affected marginalized groups (Devakumar

et al., 2020). Attempts to control the virus in isolated communities created a stream of social stigmas and prejudices against minorities (Roberto et al., 2020). As the virus spread into most societies, the quest to apportion blame, amongst the uncertainty caused by the novel Coronavirus, was fostered by the media's coverage and social media's interpretation of the phenomenon. Studies indicate that the social and cultural elements of one's society have shaped and sharpened xenophobic and racist views during COVID-19, especially in the case of minorities (Perry et al., 2020; Elias et al., 2021). Elsewhere, academics have noted the role of some mainstream media as discriminatory catalysts. The media's disproportionate coverage of minorities have exacerbated social stigma, xenophobia and discrimination during COVID-19 (Matache and Bhabha, 2020).

In Romania for instance, where approximately 2 million Romani live according to the Council of Europe (2015), accounts of the media's disproportionate reporting vis-à-vis minorities were framed on defining the ethnic component as a community transmission vector (Costache, 2020; Plainer, 2020). As the events began to unfold, the Roma people were fashioned as vectors of transmission (Creţan and Light, 2020). Several causes led the Roma to be cast as transmission vectors – ranging from the diaspora's inflow and the preserved social constructs of the Roma's ethnicity – and these underlined the foundations of these discourses in Romanian society. In addition, incidents from the border with Hungary involving Romani people moved the diaspora's guilt to a niche discourse aimed at the Roma. As time passed, the Romanian people, like the rest of the world, began to cope with the psychological impact of COVID-19 and stigmatization (c.f. Javed et al., 2020). Inside the country, other incidents involving the Roma communities during lockdown caught the media's attention and, implicitly, generated racist attitudes and hate speech on social media (Costache, 2020). Subsequently, two narratives began taking form: are the Roma people a transmission vector given their precarious condition in society? And how will the Roma communities cope with the new restrictions imposed by the authorities? Primarily abetted by the media's disproportionate coverage of Roma-related incidents, the discourse reconstructed the ethnicity's premises by casting the Romani people as those who were rebuking the Government's measures to control the pandemic. To echo Judith Butler's work (1988), Roma identity was not only performed; it also was performative.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the dynamics of the Romanian media in performing control through discursive-performative repertoires in the case of Romani communities during the early months of COVID-19 in Romania. The aim of the paper is to understand how the image of Romani people and communities were fashioned by the media's language in times of crisis. Herein, I wish to make two contributions to the field of Romani Studies. First, I include a disciplined interpretative case, i.e., the town of Ţăndărei – a southern town in Romania, which was at the core of reporting in the first half of 2020. At this juncture, I seek to bring social theory and media studies together with academic literature on Romani studies to understand the performativity of Roma identity through absence, as a result of implicit understandings employed by the media. To do so, I have developed a theoretical approach based on the works of Butler (1988), Bell (1999), Butler (2007) on performativity. Then, I intersect Laclau's and Mouffe's (2001) understanding of discourse with Brubaker's theory of ethnicity (2004) as a liaison between the agency of discourse and the agents, i.e., the mainstream media and Roma. And finally, I have added notions of media stereotyping and the profiling of minorities (Ross, 2019; Ross et al., 2020) to understand their dynamics in times of crisis. Within this framework, I look at how linguistic and syntactic structures perform the identity of Roma in times of crisis through absence and oversimplify the characterization of the Romani people as vectors of virus transmission.

Second, I look to contribute to Romani academic literature by applying the notions of post-foundational theory, i.e., antagonistic logic and hegemonic articulation. With these lenses, I provide a deeper understanding of how the Roma minority's identity is performed when portrayed in antagonistic contexts, opposite law enforcement, and as representative of the dominant majority. Research needs to explain how the mélange between linguistic markers and the identification of certain territorial spaces determines isolated communities, albeit lacking any ethnic denomination and slur in the press, to be recognized immediately as "unlawful Roma." Also, research needs to explain why the antagonism between specific ethnic communities and law enforcement in specific areas determines the identity of Roma as being "violent." Are historically embedded stereotypes so engraved that these markers determine the identity of Roma if provided any contexts? Besides wishing to contribute to existing Romani academic literature, I also look to connect the present study with already existing academic literature. For instance, it was noted that the distrustful attitude of Roma toward institutions is a result of the latter's enforcement of stereotypes and that the language the media often uses to describe Roma people tends to criminalize them. Also, Roma communities are often associated in the media with marginality.

The structure of this paper is as follows: The next section develops the conceptual framework of the study. The former revolves around the assortment of post-foundational theory, media studies and Romani studies. In *Method and Material*, I explain the methodological framework, the methods of data generation and analysis, and the limitations of the study. *Results* highlights the results facilitated by the methodological framework of the study. Using the NVivo software tool on the data collected for this study, the language-in-use discourse analysis provides two findings. *Discussions* positions the results within existing Romani academic literature. Lastly, in *Conclusion*, I present the conclusions of the study and underline new pathways of research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is a good example of how the discursive-performative makeup of Roma's ethnicity takes place in times of crisis and is

utilized to perform control of COVID-19 and abet the legitimacy of the authorities. This study contributes to Romani studies, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Since the fall of Communism, this region has constituted a fertile ground for stereotyping and discriminating against Roma (c.f. Ringold, 2000; Cooper, 2001; Tamás, 2013). Academic literature proves that the Roma are the most socially unaccepted, denigrated and discriminated ethnic minority in CEE (Pogány, 2006; Tileagă, 2006). Due to their distinctiveness, Roma are oftentimes "portrayed as beggars, criminals, profiteers, and lazy, being a target of marginalization and social exclusion, as well as perpetual discriminatory and violent practices on an interpersonal, institutional, and national level" (Sam Nariman et al., 2020, p. 1). Studies have shown that anti-Roma attitudes are expressions of dominant social norms in Eastern Europe (Kende et al., 2017). Empirical research indicates that Roma awareness varies across countries like Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary, from a threat to national security, to sympathy, and empathy (Sam Nariman et al., 2020). Since the fall of Communism, many of these impressions have been shaped by public institutions and the media.

Research has revealed that the media is prone to articulating ethnic opinions and stereotypes if the reporting circumstances facilitate this sort of discourse (Sedláková, 2006; van Dijk, 2012). Schneeweis (2012, p. 675) argues that the Roma are often represented under two stereotypes. One provides a romanticized version of Romani music and folklore, whereas the most common classifies the Roma as "poor, dirty, unhealthy, genetically inclined to commit crime, irresponsible, promiscuous, and, above all, the racially inferior and unwanted other." Such narrative structures are common in the media and other institutions (Csepeli and Simon, 2004). Thus, it is by no coincidence that societies manifest strong antagonism and antipathy toward the Roma through an array of xenophobic and negative attitudes (Schneeweis, 2012). For instance, Erjavec (2001) showed how Slovenian media legitimized and naturalized discrimination against the Roma through syntactic structures. Elsewhere, Weinerová (2014) showed how the Czech media stereotyped the Roma culture, and implicitly the Romani people. Yuval-Davis et al. (2017) show that media discourses on Roma in three countries including Hungary are shaped by the label of "otherness." Research argues that these sorts of conditions are the product of power relations between in-groups and out-groups (Elias and Scotson, 1994). The migration issues of Romani communities often determine the Roma as an "out-group" or the "other" (Uzunova, 2010). Davis (2019) consider that the migration issue is usually connected to the Roma's sense of belonging. This is elaborated below. That is why the combination between stereotypical frameworks and attached identity markers is a strong incentive in harboring negative attitudes toward the Roma (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Hadarics and Kende, 2019). After all, during these processes, facilitated by institutional settings, the in-groups can preserve their dominance and assert their power to the detriment of the Roma.

Such processes backfire. Recent studies that have examined these dynamics in CEE have shown that Roma are distrustful of legal institutions because these bodies have supported historical patterns of stigma and have a strong internalization of racial stigma (Creţan et al., 2020). The same patterns are signaled by Duminică (2020). Other studies have indicated how transnational workers and Roma from Eastern Europe are subjected to racism and labeled under stereotypical frameworks as "criminals" (Humphris, 2018). Because these dynamics between institutions and the Roma facilitate disbelief and skepticism, scholars have pointed out the need for Roma communities to cultivate empowerment. In their study, Málovics et al. (2019) argue that the Roma need to be better represented both in the public and private spheres, in both state and private institutions. Such policymaking would raise awareness both outside and within the Roma community, mitigate the prevalence of the usage of stereotypes, and increase the representation of the Roma in both the public and private sectors. Despite successful examples of policy interventions that have mitigated Roma's marginality (Berki et al., 2017), new policy interventions are needed to adjust the welfare of marginalized Roma people in CEE. Also, policy interventions are needed to modify the inequalities and poverty that prevail among Roma communities from CEE. Matache and Bhabja argue that the Roma need "humane and protective measures that ought to recognize Roma's structural inequalities and which must be tailored to Roma's racialized vulnerability – access to water, community facilities, health care assistance, direct cash payments, and income supplements to counterbalance inevitable drop offs in daily wage labor." (2020, p. 380) Others suggest that despite the frail political and socio-economic progress attained by the Roma through policymaking, their relationships with the non-Roma majorities are still governed by disproportionate power structures (Thornton, 2014). Some agree that these power structures were fostered in CEE during Communism and have continued under the guise of social norms since the transition to democracy (Guy, 2001). Two dynamics have resulted thereafter. On the one hand, these have fragmented the trust of Roma in institutions and have propelled their marginalization, while also downgrading their contributions to societies and casting doubts vis-à-vis their belongingness. On the other hand, the enclosed reactions of the Roma have consolidated and maintained the stereotypes of the majority ethnic groups.

Returning to the variable of belongingness, scholars argue that this may heighten the friction between the Roma and the majority ethnic groups (Rachel, 2019, pp. 12–13). The rift between the majority ethnic groups and the Roma is, perhaps, founded on the understanding of the former vis-à-vis notion of "nation"; and that of seeing the Roma through the lenses of "ethnicity." This conceptual distinction enlarges the social divide between the majority ethnic group and the ethnic minority, thereby creating fertile ground for misrepresentations, stereotypes, and anti-Roma attitudes. Designating the Roma under the migratory and nomadic classifications, unlike indigenous, scholars observed that stereotypical frameworks are built on the premises of one belonging to one's nation (Brubaker, 1996; Harff and Gurr, 2004). Historically, the issue of Roma belongingness constituted fuel for far-right movements, which often target the Roma (Creţan and O'Brien, 2019).

In the realm of ethnic studies, the boundaries between the majority and minority have always been determined by the social constructs of discourse (Hartsock, 1987; Verkuyten, 2005). To this discussion, Bourdieu (1992) added that language provides the means for one group to maintain power over another. Take, for instance, the cases of Romania's largest ethnic groups. The identity of ethnic Hungarians from Romania is constructed through the repetition of specific scripts, a series of political acts that reinforce the idea of "otherness" (Culic, 2006). In the Roma's case, the identity has been constructed by repeating a language that re-counts how marginalized the community is in Romanian society. This enforced the notion of "othering" (Creţan and Powell, 2018; Creţan and O'Brien, 2019). The process of "othering" a minority is not new in political science. Laclaudian discourse theorizes the construction of social meaning through the logic of polarization that ultimately is constituting the "other" (2001, pp. 94–95). In the asymmetric relationship between the majority and minority, the process of "othering" is maintained through a set of sedimented practices that define the hegemonic articulation of the majority across time and concerning other minorities. Studies revealed that it is quite common for the majority to employ different sorts of "othering" or "otherness" vis-à-vis various minorities (c.f. Palonen, 2018; Goździak, 2019; De Cesari and Kaya, 2020). Not only does the nature of polarizing discourses constitute the contingency of "othering" a minority, it also attaches the geographical space that "the others" inhabit (Creţan and Powell, 2018). From the performativity side, Bell (1999, p. 3) adds that "ethnic affiliation can be performed to a lesser extent depending on the context within which 'the Roma' finds him or herself." In both contexts, the existence of a dominated group is outlined when being differentiated from the majority through the representation of stereotypes. While these sorts of scripts rearticulate the majority's hegemony, the identity of the minority is effectively distorted and reduced to a malign "other." By reducing the Roma to marginalized communities, grounded by an archaic system of rules and often in conflict with the authorities, their identity is ultimately demarcated. Thus, Roma's essence is assembled from the set of sedimented practices and stereotypes cultivated and preserved, in time, by a society ingrained in its hegemonic discourse.

The role of performativity in constructing ethnic identity has previously been researched (c.f.; Lahiri, 2003; Shimakawa, 2004; Sullivan, 2012; Clammer, 2015). In Romania, performativity – with respect to ethnic studies – has been constructed through the reproduction of discourses that include stereotypical or nationalist repertoires that, on the one hand, define the premises of power relations between the majority and minorities, while, on the other hand, constituting the sedimented practices that subvert the nature of discourses. Herein, discourse is understood through the post-foundational lenses. Building on Laclau's (2001) work, this study understands discourse as the process with which meaning is determined by repeating its subjects' social circumstances. Such practices constitute "through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 519) the discursive identity of Roma as an ethnicity. The latter, Brubaker (2004, p. 11) theorizes as an entity that engulfs "practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects." Indeed Brubaker (2017), Brubaker (2020) agrees with the premises of Laclaudian discourse, i.e., built as a set of articulated signs, which give meaning to a social field represented in a binary worldview. Thus, the interrelation between Laclaudian discourse and Brubaker's take on ethnicity defines the social construct whereby the subject is identified. It also outlines the subject's distinct categories, which act as signifiers when recognizing and distinguishing the nature of the minority, say, from that of a majority.

However, there are other ways in which a group can be recognized *via* discourse, either *via* verbal elements or nonverbal elements related to the use of language (Kittleson and Southerland, 2004). Schröter and Taylor (2017) have theorized that individuals or groups can be performed through absence. Ward and Winstanley (2003) revealed that the representation of minorities is dependent on both the presence and absence of terms. From this perspective, Sullivan (2012, p. 436) asserts that "individualized ethnicity is shaped by discourse." Concerning discourses, one can recognize the context of Roma not by necessarily naming them directly but by layering the social context in which they reside, their customs and societal organization, the specific actions they do, and by underlining the stereotypical characteristic of the community as opposed to the majority or authorities. All these are sedimented practices that have stood the test of time.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

In the context of media, the stigmatization of minorities results from "distorted narratives" (Ross, 2019) that reduce the identity of the minorities to misrepresentations. In the eyes of Bell (1999, p. 2), "one needs to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed, effectively, passionately and with social and political consequence." In this study's case, the stereotypical identity of Roma has only been reported by the media after the incidents appeared in Roma localities, as actions that disregarded the authorities' measures. By casting the Roma's stereotypical identity (see Creţan and Light, 2020, p. 8) alongside the law enforcement's symbolic attributes, the media's coverage attempted to control the COVID-19 narratives.

This article adopts as its case study the town of Ţăndărei, which was widely covered by the media during its pre- and post-lockdown stages. In analyzing the media's coverage of Roma during COVID-19, Matache and Bhaha (2020, p. 380) argue that "media outlets have been broadcasting similar narratives blaming Roma, especially those recently returning from other countries, for spreading COVID-19. The Romanian media is one of the worst examples." In focusing on the events happening within Romania, Plainer (2020, p. 9) adds that "in the case of Ţăndărei the media representation of the events could also have been a trigger for stereotyping and labeling." Structurally, the Romanian media system belongs to a Polarized Pluralist Model (c.f. Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The polarized model incorporates the relative control of media by political parties, extended

clientelism, late democratization and the weaker development of rational authorities.

Some consider the Romanian mainstream media to lack independence, which could affect the standards of everyday reporting (Negrea-Busuioc et al., 2019). One could argue that the context of the Romanian media is a largely revenue-driven milieu centered on creating strategies that connect audiences and viewership with bombastic headlines and clickbaits. For example, three outlets, i.e., Romania TV, Antena 3 and Kanal D, which were also selected for this research, make a living, according to Watchdogs, out of clickbaits (Paginademedia.ro, 2020b), sensationalist headlines and misrepresentation against the Roma (Paginademedia.ro, 2020a). Despite fines from the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) for their reporting, these broadcasters, i.e., Romania TV, are revenue driven and sensation-prone media outlets. Previous studies have documented the usage of misrepresentation by the Romanian media in the case of migrants, Muslims and Romani people. For example, examples of stigmatization in the Romanian media have been studied previously during the migrant crisis (Marinescu and Balica, 2018). Other documented misrepresentations of Muslims and Islamophobia have included exaggerated coverage (Pop, 2016). In the area of Romani studies, Alina Vamanu and Iulian Vamanu indicated the degree of pejorative representations of the Roma in the Romanian mainstream media after 2007 (2013). They showed that the Romanian media constructs a binary strategy under the cover of sensationalist headlines that promotes discrimination, which accentuates Roma's societal marginality and sharpens the divide between the majority ethnic groups and Romani communities.

In the wake of the events from Ţăndărei and other communities, a survey was conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES)[1]. Although the survey does not apply to the entire population, it stressed some interesting findings that are related to the present study. First, 52% of the population who participated in the survey read or heard about Roma during the state of emergency, 83% of them received this information from television, and 7% from social platforms. The proportion of negative news about Roma was almost double compared to positive news: 41% negative news *versus* 28% positive news. Building on the negative coverage of Roma underlined by the IRES research and on the comparative studies of Erjavec et al. (2000) about Slovenian media and Sedláková (2006) on Czech media, I hypothesize that the media normally does not cover Roma-related topics, nor does it employ stereotypes unless Roma's actions generate instability, create conflict, or are a threat to the homeland majority. Erjavec et al. contend that media coverage rests on "using special techniques, like stereotypes and generalization to concentrate particular 'negative traits' of the Roma" (2000, p. 7).

With these in mind, this study asks how the language employed by the Romanian media to describe the events revolving around Roma communities undertook discursive-performative practices of control during COVID-19 and eventually performed the identity of Roma? How were the usage of crisis and Roma-related stereotypes used in the media reportages to reinstate the control of the dominant society?

This study used primary data from the main Romanian broadcasters grounded on their audience-based ratings from early 2020 during the pandemic (see Paginademedia.ro, 2021). Also, online news portals were used as primary data. Aside from this, eleven Military Ordinances are analyzed and connected with the process employed by the media thereafter. The data from media consisted of five national broadcasters: ProTV (15), Antena 1, and Antena 3 (all part of the Intact Media Group) (22), Kanal D (8), Digi24 (15), and Romania TV (34), and six online news portals Libertatea.ro (56), Adevarul.ro (46), Evenimentul Zilei.ro (29), Hotnews.ro (19), Mediafax.ro (31), and G4Media.ro (14). Furthermore, this research added other articles from other online news portals that were widely accessed according to the Google Search Interest index. The latter showed which pieces of news were the most accessed and read during February–July 2020. Likewise, by looking at the Google index, one can reveal what syntactic constructions determined the readership/viewership to enquire about specific pieces of news. In total, this study collected 291 specific examples. The timeline for data collection is February–July 2020. The latter encompassed the response of the Romanian health care system when facing Covid-19 cases domestically, the return of diaspora, government responses, the first municipal lockdowns, the introduction of the state of emergency, the International Romani Day (8 April), the Orthodox Easter (12 April), and the end of the state of emergency.

The association between the spikes in COVID-19 cases between 23 March and 16 May and the measures adopted by the authorities augmented the notoriety of the Roma in the media. Following the national lockdown, the increased COVID-19 cases were associated with the events unfolding in some Roma localities. The number of infections grew exponentially compared with the rest of the country. These surges brought the Roma into the spotlight. As the media began to cover all Roma-related incidents, the demand from the public increased. Between March and May, Google queries about "Roma," "Ţăndărei," and "Coronavirus" news increased (see **Figure 1**). The articles were selected based on Google's Search Interest index. Additionally, the data-search included the words "Roma," "quarantine," and "Ţăndărei." Largely, this study focused on the case study of this article, e.g., Ţăndărei,. Between February and July 2020, a noticeable increase of Roma-related content, particularly from Ţăndărei, was registered by the above-mentioned repository.

For analysis, this study considered analyzing the headlines and subtitles of the pieces. Two factors justify the choice of titles and subtitles selection. On the one hand, the editorials of journals are known to employ hyperbolic language to foster news consumption as part of a media logic (Blom and Hansen, 2015; Ross, 2019). On the other hand, the behavior of news consumers is shaped by a headline's effectiveness, and they likely

[1]Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES). (July 5, 2020). Perception of Roma during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scribd. https://www.scribd.com/embeds/467755005/content?start_page=1&view_mode=scroll&access_key=key-wEDbuUn8Oy3JWE9CyXNT. Link accessed on December 4, 2020.

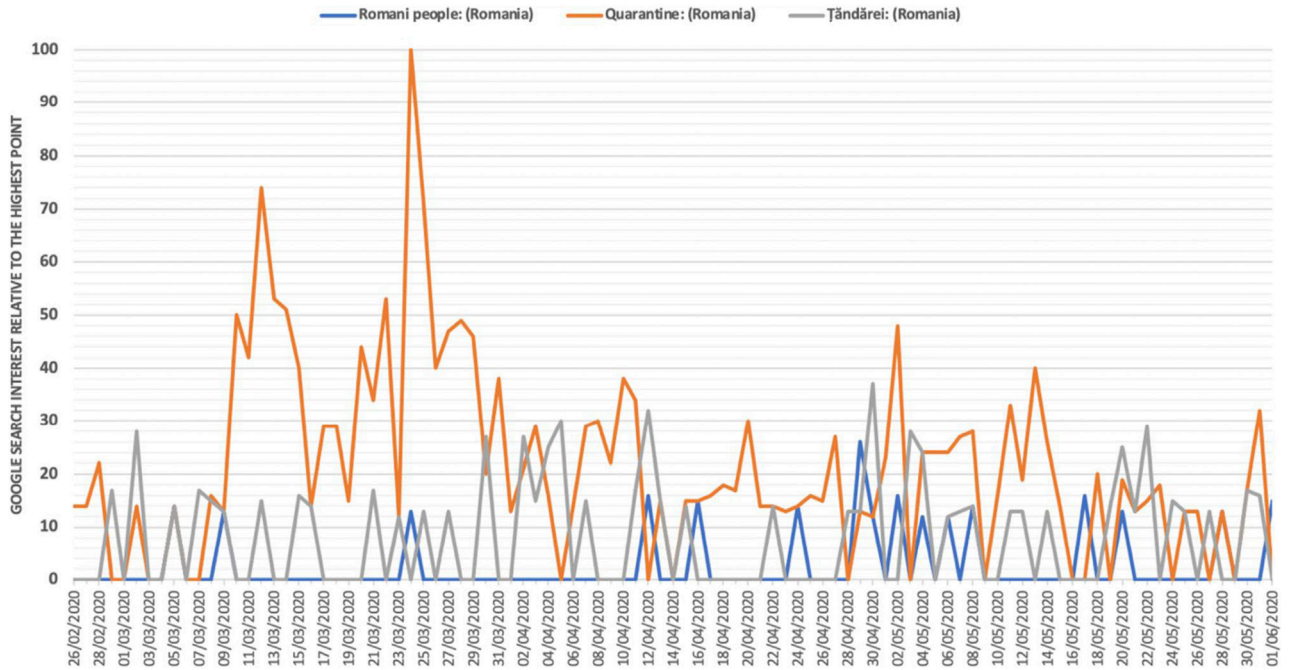

FIGURE 1 | The Romani people, quarantine, Ţăndărei topics looked by Romanians on Google between 26th February and 1 June Romania. The search results indicates that the series Romani people are marked with blue, while the search results marked with orange indicates the series quarantine. The series □ăndărei is marked with gray. The value 100 represents the peak of popularity, the value 50 represents that the topic is half as popular, while 0 indicates that there is not enough data. The **Panel 2** was created using data from the Google trends website.

take the information from it at face value, without reading the rest of the content (Kuiken et al., 2017; Science Post, 2018). The Romanian NVivo language package was installed to help with the transcription of the corpus of text. The results were then translated into English by the author of the study. The whole corpus of the 291 articles amassed 17,330 words.

After it was compiled, the NVivo software was used to determine the word frequency and the cluster analysis of the nodes "Roma", "Ţăndărei", "Coronavirus", and "police." Because the nodes are grounded on attribute and contextual values, one can visualize the prominent themes from the dataset by observing the relations between the main nodes and their contextual connectors. To make this more visible, I set the difference between the nodes "Ţăndărei," "Coronavirus" and "Roma", "police" in pairs demarcated by the colors red and blue. In this manner, one can see how the architecture of syntaxes is likely to connect the main nodes with connectors. To make this evident, I have also added a temporal element to the analysis to separate the shift in language reporting, in the likeness of Military Ordinance No. 7. The latter reflected the governmental decision to quarantine Ţăndărei and the most likely event that changed the premises of media coverage, i.e., from hidden to an overt ethnic coverage of COVID-19 events. Eventually, these theses can help during the second stage of this study's methodological process, i.e., language-in-use discourse analysis. Additionally, several parameters were added to make the analysis effective: 1) stemmed words for the main nodes "Roma", "Ţăndărei", "Coronavirus", and "police"; 2) the display of words was set to 50; and 3) their minimum length was set to four. The text was also manually cleaned. The interjections, conjunctions, or prepositions (e.g., "in", "from", etc.) were removed. Second, based on the software results, this study employs a language-in-use discourse analysis of the data to "discover the micro dimensions of language, grammatical structures and how these features interplay within a social context" (Salkind, 2010). This discourse analysis aims to show that the results determined by the NVivo software constituted a vocabulary. Then, the analysis of grammatical structures from the 291 articles is brought into dialogue with the theory of performativity (Laclau, 2001) to explain how the performative control and hegemonic articulation are operationalized in the study. These are understood as follows: hegemonic articulation is the agency with which media underscored that the state's power is totally and evenly dispersed within the boundaries of marginalized communities. Performative control reflects the ability of the media to convey and regulate the stereotypical identity of Roma (e.g., violence, lawlessness, etc.) in grammatical structures.

The limitations of the study are presented based on the framework advanced by Price and Murnan (2004). Thus, this study's limitations rests on its small sample (n = 291) i.e., newspaper and media items. Although the sample encapsulates the pieces published by the largest broadcasters and major news portals from Romania from February to June 2020, the results of the study could have been richer if pieces from some local newspaper outlets were considered for analysis. However, the inclusion of such local outlets was disregarded

on the basis of reachability, time-taking strategies to connect the readership to reporting, and capacity to inform the readership and viewership. Take for instance the Observatorul, Observatorul de Prahova (2020), with the title "You, lazy people who didn't pay taxes and came back to steal and kill us! How long will we have to endure your thick-skin, quarantine, hospitalization, behavior?" (2020). Indeed, the content of this piece depicted hate speech, stereotyping frameworks and could have influenced the analysis somewhat. However, the reachability of local newspapers is limited to their regions, regardless of social media dissipation. In contrast, the reach of the selected broadcasters and online portals is national, consistent, and subject to a far-reaching audience. When considering the exclusion of local reporting, the arguments of van Dijk (2000, p. 34) were considered. Van Dijk contends that media's reporting, in the case of minorities, rests on well-crafted strategies, it adopts specific roles during reporting, and it reproduces prejudices and stereotypes of ethnic minorities "between the lines." Also, the media strategies of reporting minority-related topics are consistent and employed during longer periods of time; and these are replicated across all media. So, while opinion pieces from local newspapers could add more details to the analysis, their reporting does not fall under what Richardson argues as "a product of a complex process of a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories" (2006, p. 77). Instead, the national media is part of such processes. They retain coverage consistency and can inform viewership/audience more widely.

RESULTS

During the early months in Romania, the control of COVID-19 was performed by the Government and by the media. On the one hand, the Government assessed the situation generated by the growing cases of infections and decreed Military Ordinances to control the transmission rate. The language used by the Government was formal, albeit with some differentiations related to localities predominantly inhabited by Roma people. Although the official vocabulary used by the Government did not stress the ethnicity of Roma, the language of the Military Ordinances stressed the names of the geographical spaces predominantly inhabited by Roma, thus performing an "ethnic affiliation to space" (Bell, 1999, p. 3) to which Roma are linked. One such case is the Military Ordinance No. 7, which instituted total lockdown in Ţăndărei. As media already focused on the ethnic component that determined the increase of COVID-19 cases in Ţăndărei (Stefanescu, 2020), the language of the Military Ordinance No.7 formalized the identity of whom is to blame for this crisis, albeit the lack of ethnic denomination. On the other hand, the media broadcasted the Government's safety measures and covered the incidents whenever the Military Ordinances were disregarded. These situations outlined the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis, thereby enlisting a sense for hyperbolic coverage. Also, any contempt or nonconformity from the Roma generated a public and governmental uproar, which in turn, reinforced the stereotypical identity of the ethnicity.

The media used two kinds of language scripts. First, the media employed a hyperbolic choice of words when reporting events happening in Roma communities. It did so by linking the increased number of infections and local quarantine with the Roma ethnicity in several cases. Second, the media employed a repetitive script infused with stereotypes that outlined the "logic of antagonism" (Laclau, 2001) between the Roma and law enforcement. While the language used by the Government when performing control of COVID-19 was formal, one can argue that by emphasizing the localities' names predominantly inhabited by Roma, without naming them, the officials drove the attention of the media to continue the story by attaching a "symbolic and ethnic affiliation" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 434) between the space and the people. The gravity from some localities inhabited by Roma, both determined by increased infection cases and conflicts between Roma and police, forced the authorities to introduce lockdowns. These polarizing situations incentivized the media to report on the stories through stereotypical characterizations, resulting from an "unconscious bias or newsroom pressures" (Ross, 2019, p. 401). Next, this study outlines the Government's discursive-performative practices through the use of Military Ordinances and normative acts. This paper highlights how the media moved from its logic of a revenue-aimed strategy to employing a polarization logic.

The Discursive-Performative Practices of Government

The discursive-performative practices of the Government employed a "hegemonic articulation" (c.f. Laclau, 2001). Their role cemented the Government's "condition as a particular social force (which) assume(d) the representation of a totality" (Laclau, 2001, p. 10).

On March 17, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued its first Military Ordinance[2] to tackle the virus's spread. The implication of the military terms created anxiety, as the new procedures were not explained to the public. On March 21, the second Military Ordinance was issued[3]. This legislation instituted curfews from 10 pm to 6 am, banned groups larger than three people on the streets, and all shopping centers closed, except for supermarkets. On March 22, the officials reported the first three casualties, as the number of cases grew from 66 cases on March 21 to 143. Consequently, on March 24, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued the third Military Ordinance, which instituted a national lockdown, ordered the military to support police's efforts, and

[2]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (March 17, 2020). ORDONANŢĂ MILITARĂ nr. 1 din 17 Martie 2020 (Military Ordinance no. 1 from March 17, 2020). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-1-din-17-martie-2020. Link accessed on November 12, 2020.

[3]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (March 21, 2020). ORDONANŢA MILITARĂ nr. 2 din 21.03.2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19 (MILITARY ORDINANCE no. 2 of 21.03.2020 on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-2-din-21-03-2020-privind-masuri-de-prevenire-a-raspandirii-covid-19. Link accessed on November 12, 2020.

restricted outside movement, except for work activities[4]. On March 28, Romania reported 308 new infections. And in response to the rise of cases, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a fourth Military Ordinance, which granted law enforcement the power to impose fines and sanctions[5].

The Military Ordinance no. 5, adopted by the Romanian Government, banned all international travel[6]. Toward the end of March, the Romanian hospitals, ill-equipped and mismanaged, started to report rapid new cases among its healthcare workers and patients, "resulting in hospitals and even entire cities being quarantined" (Dascalu, 2020, p. 3). The first example to be quarantined by Military Ordinance No. 6 was the Suceava county hospital, which experienced many infections amongst its staff and patients[7]. Shortly thereafter, the entire municipal area of Suceava county was placed under total quarantine. The events happening in Suceava began being repeated in other regions of the country. Concomitantly, at the western borders, Romanian expats were waiting to enter the country in long queues mainly because of the tense political relationship between Hungary and Romania (Creţan and Light, 2020, p. 6). In response, the Romanian authorities issued several statements urging the diaspora not to come home, overburden the healthcare system, and jeopardize their families' safety. By the end of March, almost 950,500 people arrived in Romania before Easter, mostly from Spain and Italy. Less than 3.29% of the people who arrived were tested at the borders (Pora, 2020).

The Border police's errors, coupled with the disregard of some people for the Government's measures, generated local transmission hubs. Inside the country, the media began reporting about localities that were considered for quarantine. As Romania entered its last two weeks before Easter, the restrictive climate was disregarded by many people who participated in large social gatherings at religious events (Dascalu, 2020). Specifically, social gatherings from Roma localities increased community transmission, pressing the officials to issue new measures (Mateescu, 2020). At this point, the discursive-performative practices of control moved from national to local level. Its incentive was the manner the locals from Ţăndărei concentrated its dominance despite the restrictive measures. Hence, the authorities discourse framed, based on hegemonic articulation, the means to reorganize power relations by decentralizing the relative dominance of the locals from Ţăndărei *via* "new formation of power" (Laclau, 2001, p. 16).

Hence, by 3 April, Romania recorded 430 new infection cases. Such record numbers prompted the Ministry of Internal Affairs to issue its seventh Military Ordinance on 4 April[8], which extended the national lockdown and imposed a local quarantine in the town of Ţăndărei which (see **Figure 2**). The new discursive-performative practices of control indicated the "discursive location" (Laclau, 2001, p. 93) where hegemonic articulation was needed to retake control. Ţăndărei became a transmission hub after the arrival of its large diaspora disregarded the restrictive measures. Although the quarantine usually would take 14 days, the officials kept the town of Ţăndărei in total lockdown for forty-two days due to events happening in the community. The social reality composed of social interaction between authorities, media, and the people from Ţăndărei, consolidated the locality "as a symbolic social sign" (Butler, 1988, p. 519) in the discursive-performative practices of control. In the end, it took Military Ordinance no. 11 on 11 May to lift the lockdown in Ţăndărei. Three more military ordinances are issued during this time, mainly to provide new guidelines for food provisions. On May 14, two days after Easter was celebrated in Romania, the officials issued Military Ordinance no. 12, which ended the nationwide state.

Nonetheless, the events that both proceeded and continued throughout the lockdown from Ţăndărei became the main headline in Romania, implicitly raising the media's interest in the Roma events. Three factors generated intense media scrutiny during the Ţăndărei lockdown. First, Ţăndărei has a large ethnic Romani diaspora dispersed across Europe. Some of Ţăndărei's Roma were previously involved in human trafficking – stories that scandalized Romanian society before COVID-19 emerged (Sandu, 2019). Second, the incoming of Ţăndărei's diaspora posed both a logistic and security problem for the Romanian police. The latter supplemented their forces, first to quell emerging conflicts between rival Roma factions and then to enforce control toward the Roma, who disregarded the restrictions. Third, the subsequent confrontations between the police forces and ethnic Romani during the lockdown accentuated the socio-cultural debate about Romani's status in Romania. Stimulated by the Government's actions in Ţăndărei and other localities, the media joined the efforts to recentralize control. Hereafter, the study presents the results of the software analysis. The NVivo results are separated into two sections: the frequency distribution of the TreeMap and the subsequent cluster analysis. Both tools are considered during the language-in-used discourse analysis.

[4]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (March 24, 2020). ORDONANŢA MILITARĂ nr. 3 din 24.03.2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19 (MILITARY ORDINANCE no. 3 of 24.03.2020 on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-3-din-24-03-2020-privind-masuri-de-prevenire-a-raspandirii-covid-19. Link accessed on November 12, 2020.

[5]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (2020, 29 March). ORDONANŢA MILITARĂ nr. 4 din 29.03.2020 (MILITARY ORDINANCE no. 4 from 29.03.2020 on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-4-din-29-03-2020. Link accessed on 12 November 2020.

[6]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (2020a, March 30). Ordonanţa Militară nr. 5 din 30.03.2020 (Military Ordinance no. 5 from 30.03.2020 on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-5-din-30-03-2020. Link accessed on November 30, 2020.

[7]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (2020b, March 31). Ordonanţa Militară nr 6 din 30.03.2020 (Military Ordinance no. 6 of 03.30.2020). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-6-din-30-03-2020. Link accessed on November 30, 2020.

[8]Ministry of Internal Affairs. (2020, 4 April). Ordonanţ Militară nr 7 din 04.04.2020 (Military Ordinance no. 7 of 04.04.2020). https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/ordonanta-militara-nr-7-din-04-04-2020. Link accessed on November 13, 2020.

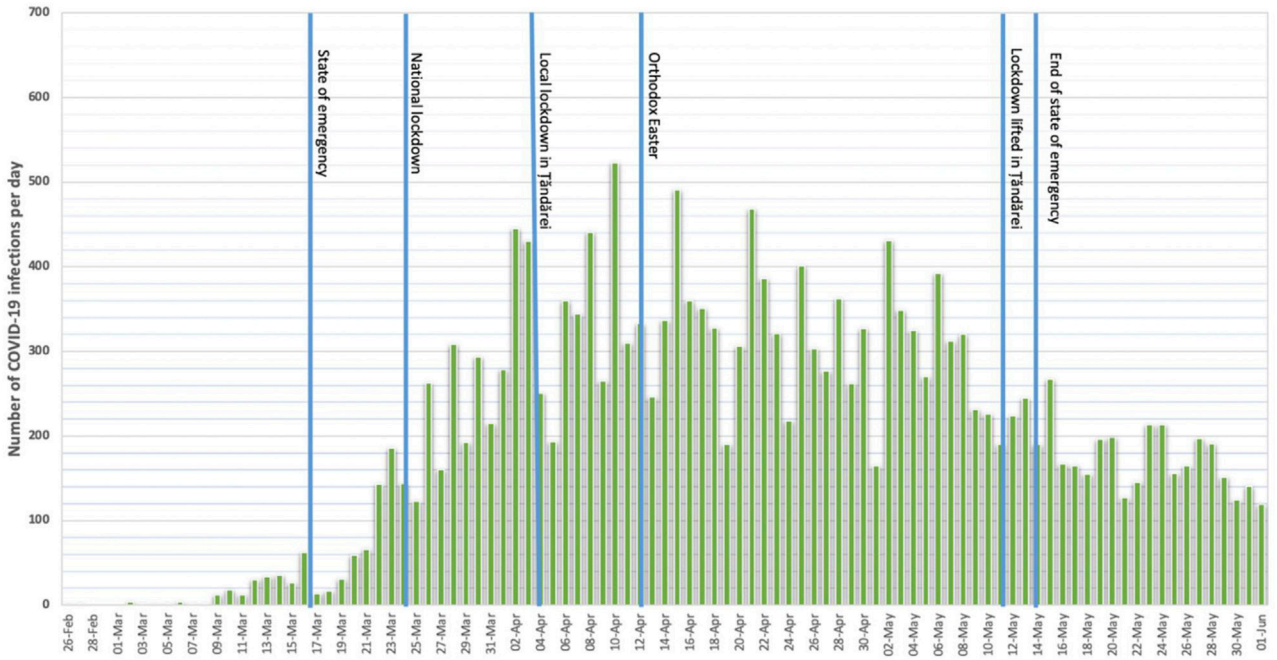

FIGURE 2 | shows the number of daily COVID-19 infections in Romania between 27th February and 1st June 2020 with green, while the governmental actions connected to the lockdown of Ţăndărei are highlighted with blue. **Panel 2** was created with data provided by the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Analysis of Media Control: Results of the TreeMap

This analysis showed what words are predominantly used by the Romanian media to describe Roma-related events and to capture the readership/viewership's attention. The analysis revealed that the media concentrated its coverage on the Roma and Ţăndărei. This fact is shown by the results of the frequency distribution of the TreeMap (**Figure 3**). The latter revealed 232 mentions of "Roma" with a weighted percentage of 2.47%, and 147 mentions for "Ţăndărei" with a weighted percentage of 1.57% in all 291 titles and subtitles, respectively. Moreover, the analysis shows that the usage of words like "quarantine" (143), "city" (125), "police" (94), and "Coronavirus" (93) were the most encountered. On the one hand, the representation of larger boxes suggests the presence of the aforementioned words in the structure of the titles, as these offered direct and informative content to their viewers.

On the other hand, at the lower level, the analysis showed the presence of words such as "infected" (44), "scandal" (43), "gendarmes" (40), "returning" (38), "fines" (32), and "attacks" (29) with a similar number of coding references that might imply their usage in the subtitle of the articles. Journalistic practices attribute the presence of subtitles whenever the readers are looking to find an experience that gives substance to the main headline. Both the high percentage and lower percentage of the coding references from the dataset suggested two prominent themes. First, the media outlets provide direct and informative content in their headlines by associating the protagonists of their stories, i.e., Roma and the police forces from Ţăndărei, to capture the attention of readers or viewers through clickbait titles. Second, the content underlined in the headers is substantiated with additional information that Offered the readers and viewers an experience, which mostly Conveyed a negative setting. In the dataset's case, NVivo found that the titles are composed of pejorative-aimed words such as "scandal", "attacks", and "fines", and are closely connected with words such as "police" and "gendarmes." These repetitive interconnections were perhaps used to sensationalize the content and arouse the attention of news consumers. This finding confirmed the IRES survey results, which asserted that half of Romanians knew Roma-related incidents during the COVID-19 crisis because of the negative coverage received during the pandemic.

Although the public's perception vis-à-vis the Roma minority was negative beforehand, the negative contexts indicated by the findings could indicate the media capabilities to refresh the viewers' reality *via* stereotypical representations. Likewise, this finding might indicate the viewers' and readers' lenience in accepting negative perceptions when being flooded with hyperbolic content that strengthened their stereotypes, especially if a powerful, informative mechanism commonly conveys the image of minorities. According to the IRES survey, the public perception apropos Roma is fragmented. This study finds that the vocabulary used in the all-encompassing media coverage, coupled with the pandemic setting, did not aggravate society's perception of the Roma. Rather, the media portrayed Roma-related incidents in its broad coverage and thereby relocated the Roma image from a marginalized entity into the national spotlight. To echo Bell's words (1999, p. 3), "identity is the effect of performance." This

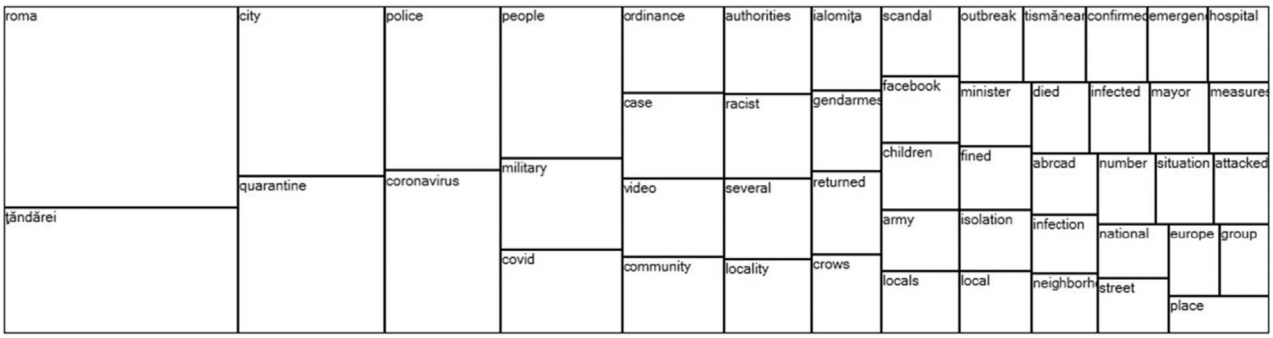

FIGURE 3 | Reveals the Tree Map result. From the left to the right, the size of the boxes determines for frequency of the coding references and the contextual themes of the dataset. The main boxes are "roma" and "Ţăndărei." Each are followed by smaller connector that define the theme associated by the media. **Figure 3** was obtained with data (n = 291) gathered by this study.

mediatic process revitalized dormant stereotypes against the Roma by "enacting cultural conventions" (Butler, 1988, p. 525). The results show that although not present in the major coding references, some contain a small number of references that insinuate the blaming context attributed to Roma in the pieces' subtitles. For example, repeated references like "infected" (44), "situation" (36) "isolation" (33) "leave" (30) "outbreak" (30), and "measures" (25) are in close proximity with nodes that have similar values, including "military" (54), "ordinance" (48), "gendarmes" (40), and "fines" (32). Notice that for each of the repeated words that denoted negative contexts or crises, other words denote safety and control. In the academic literature of performativity, "social action requires a performance which is repeated" (Butler, 1988, p. 526). So, while the media acknowledged and repeated the words that concocted the meaning of the crisis, they also performed control of COVID-19 by equally repeating words that balanced the crisis's gravity with words that denoted management and organization.

Stylistically, the visualization of the coding references from the Treemap might indicate the construction of the blame narrative *via* the close association between the nodes representing "Roma", "Ţăndărei", "coronavirus", and "police". To relativize this finding, this study presents a cluster analysis to reveal the manner the general scripts amalgamate. In the following, the cluster analysis determined that the media's language during the crisis used two scripts. First, the press reported the misdeeds and the increase of COVID-19 cases amongst Roma hyperbolically. Second, responding to local incidents, the media outlined the antagonism between Roma and law enforcement in violent settings, for one thing, and how authorities reclaimed control on the other side.

Media Control: Results of the Cluster Analysis

This analysis showed the architecture of media's language used to describe the Roma-related events during COVID-19. The cluster analysis yielded two overall scripts connected with the main nodes "Ţăndărei", "quarantine", "Roma", and "police" (see **Figure 4**). The analysis showed that the architecture of the first script is likely determined by connectors like "military", "measures", "isolation", which are more likely to be positioned in syntactical constructions alongside the main codes' "quarantine" and "Ţăndărei." The analysis revealed that the shift between the two scripts is determined by the temporal element of Military Ordinance No.7, which instituted total quarantine in Ţăndărei and changed the architecture of the second script. The first script, marked with green, conveyed the contexts in which authorities adopted several measures to control the virus's community transmission in localities predominantly inhabited by the Roma. This chronology of this script is determined by the arrival in the country of the diaspora and the evolution of COVID-19 in several localities inhabited by the Roma. This script's main nodes are "Ţăndărei" and "quarantine." Their contextual connectors designated the space and reaffirmed through a "symbolic identification" (Sullivan, 2012), without naming the Roma, the people for which the restrictive measures are adopted. Hence, in this script, the media performed the identity of the Roma through absence (Schröter and Taylor, 2017), as the ethnicity is being conveyed by both in the presence of connectors such as "Ţăndărei", "returned", "quarantine", "military", measures", and "isolation" and in the absence of words such as "Roma."

Conversely, the discursive-performative practices of control, embodied by the second script, are marked with blue. The architecture of this script conveyed the period reported by the media after the Military Ordinance No.7 was adopted and the confrontations between the Roma and law enforcement started. This event changed the syntactical format of the media, which abetted by the certification of the government, begun performing control. The control practices are determined by the main nodes "Roma" and "police." This script conveyed Roma's identity in opposition to that of the police. These forces' dichotomy outlined the "logic of polarization" (Laclau, 2001) between the "police" and "Roma." Also, the connectors of the main nodes highlight how the Roma's identity is performed. On the one hand, the Roma's identity is performed by "a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already established" (Butler, 1988, p. 526). The

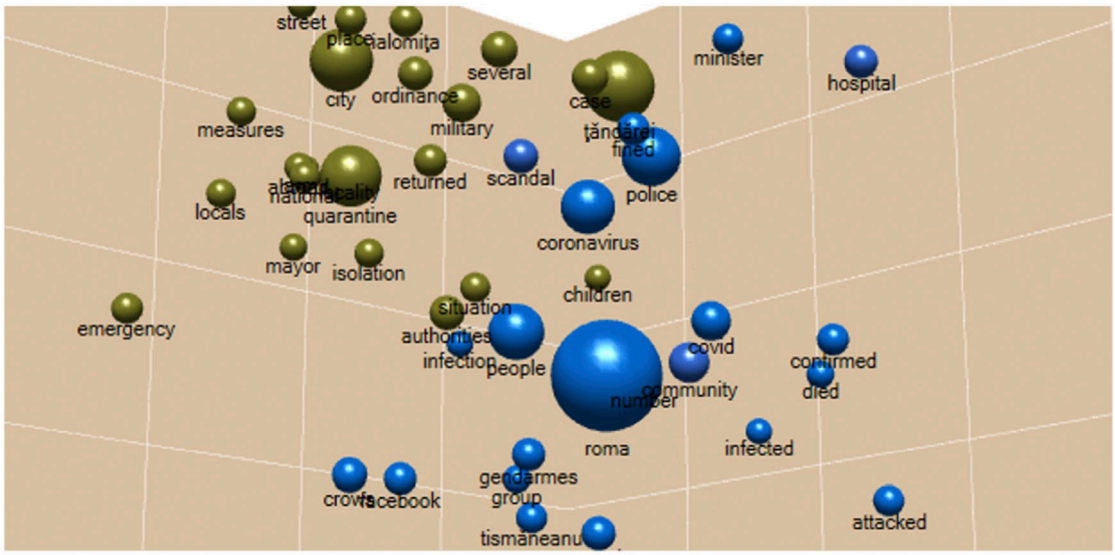

FIGURE 4 | Reveals the cluster analysis of the nodes Roma, □ăndărei, quarantine, police from the corpus of text of the 291 articles collected for this research. The NVivo software differentiated the context of the four nodes into two colors. First, Roma and the police along with their contextual connectors are marked with blue. Second, Ţăndărei and quarantine along with their contextual connectors are marked with green. **Panel 1** was obtained with the data (*n* = 291) gathered by this study.

meanings are conveyed by the connection between "Roma" "police", and "gendarmes." This interrelation might indicate the stereotypical representation of the Roma identity in Romanian culture through the lenses of "othering." By positioning alongside the signs of control, the identity of Roma is reduced to stereotypical frameworks. The repetition of stereotypes, along with the antagonism between law enforcement and Roma, constructed the identity of Roma and performed a discursive control of Roma during the pandemic. It did so by placing Roma opposite the police enforcements, at a time of crisis, when the ethnicity's actions were estimated to jeopardize the quarantine efforts.

Comparatively, the first script determined by the nodes "Ţăndărei" and "quarantine" differed from the second script that is constructed by the nodes "Roma" and "police." The language of the first script underscored a positive context, whereby for each action, there is a counteraction that keeps a contextual balance. For instance, the connectors "several", "locals", "returned", "case", and "infected" are balanced by the media in the contextual framework with connectors like "isolation", "quarantine", "ordinance", "emergency", and "measures". These contextual connectors might indicate the meaning of seizing control of the space through a "hegemonic articulation" (Laclau, 2001). In this script, the media's coverage focused on conveying a sense of control over the area that bears "cultural meanings" (Butler, 1988) for the Roma. Reporting the sense of control of the space (i.e., locality of Ţăndărei) and then continuing to the individuality of the people inhabiting the space might indicate the process adopted by the media when performing control of COVID-19.

Oppositely, the language of the second script determined by the nodes "Roma" and "police" conveyed a negative framework. Herein, the presence of negative connectors is not counterbalanced by an almost equal number of connectors that indicate "social actions" (Butler, 1988). Instead, the presence of negative connectors constructed Roma's identity as a "group." The latter were "fined," they are who "attacked," they are who produced "scandal." In contrast, the values of "police" and "gendarmes" are determined by the social paradigm attributed by the media, i.e., exercising control. Also, this script, unlike the first one, defined not only the identity of Roma but also connected the identity of Roma to the consequences generated by the COVID-19 "community", "infection", "infected", "confirmed", and "died." Unlike script one, where the focus is on the agency and space, in script two, the media focused on the agents and performing control *via* polarization. Also, unlike script one, where the agency is represented with an equal number of causes and reactions, in script two, "police" and "gendarmes" are likely represented as balancing and sufficient forces that recentralized control of COVID-19.

Furthermore, the cluster analysis revealed that contextually, connectors and nodes from both scripts are interlinked. For example, the nodes "Ţăndărei" and "police" are intertwined, despite belonging to different clusters. However, it is their connectors that provided background to the interrelation between the two nodes. So, the connectors "case" and "fined" established a contextual relationship between the two nodes, as in the first stages of the COVID-19 lockdowns from Ţa conte, the increased number of "cases" forced the authorities to consider lockdown and eventually "fine" people who disregarded the measures. Next, this study investigates through a language-in-use discourse analysis the two scripts determined by the cluster analysis.

Language-in-Use Discourse Analysis

The languages of the two scripts are different, as both scripts developed differently in time. One script performed control of the

space, while the other recentralized power from the Roma. Depending on how the situations developed in Ţăndărei, the language of media changed from descriptive and informative content to a blaming content. The media coverage is influenced by the manner the authorities enforced order, by how they lost it temporarily, or when they reinforced it *via* an augmented force. For instance, the semantics of script one is grounded in the media's logic (Ross, 2019). This means that the media linked hyperboles and negative coverage to generate interest from their audiences and stimulate revenue.

However, as the authorities' efforts were disregarded and the number of cases increased, the media changed its semantics in script number two. Therein, the media's discursive-performative practices of control changed. It did so through a language that underscored the antagonism between the Roma and the police. Taking a cue from the post-foundational studies, the media's language in the second script constituted the "other" as opposed to the "self" (Laclau, 2001). Reechoing a language that harnessed the fear of Roma, the media controlled how the identity of the Roma is performed *via* sedimented practices. This discursive-performative practice validated the future more aggressive actions of the police as necessary steps in recentralizing control.

Media Logic – Employing Hyperboles to Cover Roma's Whereabouts

In the search for broader audiences, both visual and written media expanded their coverage during the health crisis by adopting a media logic. The latter focused on the creations of hyperbolic titles to sensationalize the news and, thus, to increase revenues.

Emphasis on the Roma was reported shortly after accounts of the Roma's misdeeds shifted the narratives. For instance, Romania TV, the third-largest broadcaster, reported the following accounts. "The Roma from Suceava returned from Italy and lied at customs that they were coming from Germany." "I liken the quarantine period to prison" (Romania TV, 2020a). In other instances, the media highlighted individual cases of Roma stranded at the border due to a lagging Border police system. Romania's biggest media outlet emphasized the "Border scandal with several Roma families" (ProTV, 2020). As the border police updated their sorting system, the media's attention shifted domestically toward localities like Ţăndărei, which reported the return of hundreds of people that overburdened the officials' capabilities. Apart from some irregularities, the incentives that grasped media's coverage were the religious rituals, like burial processions, which, according to the Military Ordinance no. 6, restricted the partaking of a large number of people. Few religious gatherings in some Roma communities were presented in a bombastic manner by the media "Unbelievable! Hundreds of people at a funeral in Baia Mare. All restrictions violated!" (Evenimentul Zilei, 2020c). Other impromptu events that had religious connotations, in which Roma were the protagonists, were sensationalized in the headlines "IMAGE OF THE DAY: Dozens of Roma prayed to God, on their knees, on the street, to get rid of the Coronavirus. The police fined them" (Romania TV, 2020b). Despite sensationalizing the event, the headline employed a discursive-performative practice of control by aligning a content that may imply the milieu of Roma and their reduced identity in the Romanian society. Although similar events happened in areas inhabited by the ethnic majority, the media's attention focused on the topics that highlighted Roma-related events.

The Military Ordinances affected the Roma communities, as their freedom of movement was restricted. Studies suggest that the movement constraints affected Roma's socioeconomic position (Creţan and Light, 2020). While human-rights groups pleaded with the Government to assist these vulnerable groups, Roma-related coverage increased. The socioeconomic factors involving Roma communities were next covered under a language deliberately exaggerated, which combined hyperboles and Roma-related stereotypes like "Hallucinatory situation. The Roma are asking for help: We have no more money because we cannot steal" (Evenimentul Zilei, 2020a). In early April, the Roma community leaders warned that the situation would only worsen for their peers in Romania. The lockdown and the military ordinances affected the livelihoods of the Roma. Consequently, jobs like metal scrapping were not possible anymore.

The Government's measures were accepted with difficulty in the Roma communities, as these mitigated the financial means of Roma to make ends meat (Plainer, 2020, p. 7). Decades of mistrust in state's authorities and marginalization, coupled with Roma's archaic community systems, made communication difficult with the local officials, who reported new numbers of infections and deaths in the Roma communities. Consequently, the intervention of police forces in Roma communities was underlined under a hyperbolic language that emphasized the gravity of COVID-19 infections and a high number of deaths. Bombastic headlines from the written media moved from providing direct and concise information to creating larger-than-life emotions and impressions for its readers: "COVID-19. The time bomb from Ţăndărei" (Recorder, 2020). In other cases, intentional hyperboles like "carnage" were used in headlines to describe power-relations in Roma communities. One title claimed, "Carnage between the underworld from Sighet. Protection money is also paid during a pandemic" (Evenimentul Zilei, 2020b), while another underlined "the carnage from Bolintin Vale" (Evenimentul Zilei, 2020d). The use of hyperboles and the stereotypes associated with the Roma communities conveyed an intentional negative exaggeration.

The Polarizing Logic – Outlining the Antagonism Between Roma and the Police

As the events unfolding in Ţăndărei forced the authorities to supplement their forces on the ground, the media "reinforced the production of stereotypes" (Ross et al., 2020, p. 75). Roma's stigmatization was observed under two recurring themes: the promotion of violence within the Roma communities and antagonism toward the authorities. Academic literature on the media and stereotypes argues that ethnic groups are typically marginalized during crises that generally depict them narratively in stereotypical roles and as the problematic other (c.f. Ross, 2019). The additional measures adopted by the Government in Roma-inhabited localities, highly mediatized by the media,

strengthened the social stigmatization and moved the "othering" from a dormant to a proactive position. The images constructed in the headlines and subtitles moved the minority to an even more marginalized role. The forms of articulation employed by the media during this logic, coupled with specific structural moments, gradually modified Roma's identity.

First, the stereotypical representation was reinforced by emphasizing violence between the community members. The fifth-largest broadcaster, Romania TV, highlighted several times during its daily reporting the violence and tribalism of Roma communities. For instance, one consistent coverage underlined that "Video – Fighting between Roma clans from Vlaşca, Ialomiţa county" (2020d). Other broadcasters followed suit. Written media reported similar incidents in consecutive editorials. While underlining the inter-community violence, the latter stressed the clannish characteristics of Roma in negative settings. For example, the daily Libertatea depicted a scandal between Roma families by stressing the elements of difficulty and law enforcement "Scandal stopped with difficulty by the police between two Roma families from Ploieşti. Nine people were detained" (2020). Again, the discursive-performative practices of control combined inter-group violence with hegemonic articulation that determined the "identity of social agents" (Laclau, 2001, p. 77).

Another example in which the clannish element is highlighted is a piece from the daily Evenimentul Zilei (2020e) which reported an incident between rival families as follows: "Disclosures. The clan war in Baia Mare was confused with a robbery" (2020e). Notice that the author kept, under a headline meant to grasp the reader's attention, Roma's stereotypical characteristics perpetuated in the oral tradition of the Romanian society, i.e., "robbery." The academic literature on stereotypes also corroborates this assertion (c.f. Creţan and Powell, 2018). Another daily, Adevarul.ro, reported a case from a Roma neighborhood in Săcele, Braşov county. The event was widely mediatized by most of the outlets due to its violent content and background story that focused on the tribalistic elements of Roma communities. The headline from Adevarul.ro was selected as the title with the most negative rhetorical elements associated with Roma. Adevarul.ro presented the incident as follows: "VIDEO UPDATE Scenes of rare violence in a neighborhood in Sacele. Dozens of thugs quarreled with pitchforks, axes, and clubs in front of police" (2020a). In this headline, the rhetorical power is centered on the emphasis of "rare violence." Then the dominant tone is set on defining the space the marginalized group from Săcele inhabited. The headline continued by designating the perpetrators with additional rhetorical elements that consolidated the violence's negative framework: "pitchforks", "axes", and "clubs." The rhetorical component of "police" acts as the measurement tool of the "violence" committed by the Roma, besides the unlawfulness of the incident. By focusing on the rhetorical power of "violence," alongside "police," the media "criminalized the language" (Ross, 2019, p. 400), describing the Roma as "thugs". Likewise, the emphasis on the inter-community incidents, behaviors, and attitudes may have underlined the tribal aspect of Roma's structural and societal organization. The result of this rhetorical exercise was "othering" the image of the Roma.

Second, the opposition toward the authorities emerged as the most encountered in the data analysis. Espoused by both written and TV media, the "logic of antagonism" (Laclau, 2001) was depicted as a clash between two forces – an act that "depicted negatively as the problematic other" (Ross, 2019, p. 397), the Roma. The use of strong language and the over-dramatization of facts simplified the contrast between the protagonists of the storytelling. On the one hand, law enforcements were victimized. On the other hand, the Roma people were portrayed stereotypically as the aggressors, who were unwilling to comply with the rules. For instance, the second-largest broadcaster over-dramatized the context of violence by associating it with the symbolism of a religious event "The peace of Easter is disturbed by the most violent street conflicts in recent years" (Antena 1, 2020b). Hence, the symbolism of the Orthodox Easter is conveyed under the noun "peace." Consequently, the natural condition of Easter was disturbed by the street conflicts, whose unparallel violence is showcased as a series of events that disturbed the symbolism of the religious rite. Herein, the emphasis on Easter is important. As the academic literature on media and stereotypes suggests (Ross, 2019, p. 397), such categorization indirectly described the people disturbing the usual peace of the feast "as violent and 'less' than dominant groups", i.e., loutish, uncultivated, etc.

Elsewhere, the accent fell on the damages caused by the riots of Roma. Thus, one daily reported an incident in Galati as "Scandal erupted, and cars were destroyed in a Roma community in Galati. Special forces intervened to resolve the conflict" (Mediafax.ro, 2020c). The intentional depiction of Roma as rioters reinforced the "othering" image in the public's eyes, as Roma's activities are attached to the value of destroyed goods. The discursive-performative practice of control is defined by the adjective "special" and the noun "forces." Other dailies focused on the severity resulted from the conflicts with the police. Its processes included associating the sensationalism and violence from the events with the performance of control enforced by police. As to illustrate an example, one daily showcased the events as acts of revolt, "The Roma went on the attack. A gendarme was injured, and a car was vandalized" (Evenimentul Zilei, 2020b). The antagonistic nature of this journalistic account stressed the resulting processes of their mutiny by associating the violence exhorted on the gendarmes and the property of the law enforcements.

Other accounts stressed the gravity of Roma's actions. Namely, one daily reported not only the violence resulting from the conflicts with the Roma but gave accounts of the disorder regarding both the local deputies and police forces – "Gendarmes attacked by Roma in Brasov. "They will destroy the mayor's office. We risk being attacked on the highway" (Evenimentul Zilei, 2020c). In other instances, the media sensationalized the nature of the incidents by revealing to their audiences the shocking factor that exposed the violence from the Roma communities "Images captured during the Teliu scandal. One of the attackers arrested. The teenager, who beat a gendarme with a club, fled" (Mediafax.ro, 2020a). Elsewhere, the

media's headlines galvanized the public perception with a new account that underlined the results of violence in Roma communities "UPDATE video. Four people detained after the violence in Codlea/A gendarme and several policemen injured after being attacked by Roma with shovels" (Mediafax.ro, 2020b).

As the coverage continued depicting the antagonism between the Roma and police, by defining Roma's identity through stereotypes, the media ultimately changed their narratives. At this stage, the logic of polarization adopted by the press moved from "narrowly stereotyped roles" (Ross, 2019, p. 397) to discursive-performative practices of control. Through their focus on the antagonism between the two protagonists, the media incentivized the police to reinstate a sense of order in the community and legitimize the police's aggressive further acts. In other words, the stereotypical depiction of the Roma as violent and rioters created a fragmented society. This, in turn, acted as a prerequisite for a hegemonic articulation. To echo Laclau's words (2001, p. 13), "hegemony will emerge precisely in a context dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations between different struggles and subject positions." Take, for example, the case of DIGI24 (see **Supplementary Image S1**). This broadcaster covered the developments from Ţandarei with a title that said: "Ţăndărei is empty. The army has its eyes on the locals." In another example, the third most-watched broadcaster presented the events from Ţăndărei in the following manner: "VIDEO | Ţăndărei, a militarized city. The risks of becoming the next red dot on the pandemic map" (Kanal D, 2020). Elsewhere, Romania TV covered the events unfolding in Ţăndărei with the following headline "The army intervenes in Ţăndărei where hundreds of Roma returning from abroad are not respecting the isolation" (Romania TV, 2020c). Other outlets reacted more decisively "Armed soldiers patrol the Roma neighborhoods of Ţăndărei. No one leaves, no one enters" (Aktual24.com, 2020). In the end, the media settled the discourse on the idea that control was reinstated to the detriment conferred by the image of the Roma people.

DISCUSSIONS

This study has surprisingly found that the media's language vis-à-vis the Roma may be associated with a predisposition of the wider society to associate and understand criminality and lawlessness to be a Roma problem. Similarly, Erjavec (2001, p. 718) and (Sedláková, 2006) found that news report schema from Slovenia and Czechia centered on presenting the Roma through stereotypical frameworks. It was discovered in the analysis, that the written media covered more thoroughly the events than visual media. Some broadcasters like Romania TV used a more overt ethnic description of the COVID-19 events from Ţăndărei unlike other broadcasters. The written press made use more often of hyperboles to describe the events. Like in the study of Erjavec et al. (2000, p. 7), it was discovered in the present study that Roma-related coverages are highlighted if their actions affect the ethnic majority's dominance. That is why, the hypothesis of this study is confirmed by the analysis and interpretation adopted in the current paper. The events from Ţăndărei, for instance, were underscored in the media because the historical lawlessness of Roma from that space was associated with their unwillingness to obey governmental decrees during COVID-19, thereby posing a threat for the dominant majority.

Another finding suggested that Roma's social actions are reported through the use of a criminalizing language. This is confirmed by Romani studies literature who noticed the usage of a criminalized language (Thornton, 2014) to describe the Romani individuals, or when the issues of Roma criminality are attached as community values (Creţan and O'brien, 2019). This combination can shape collective identities and "distort the picture that audiences see of different groups" (Ross, 2019, p. 398). Representing vulnerable groups such as Roma with epithets that constructed violent contexts and unlawfulness inevitably positioned the Roma below the dominant majority. Such narrow and oversimplified characterizations can only radicalize even further the minority already ousted at the periphery of a society (c.f. Creţan and Powell, 2018). Similar to other studies that underlined patterns of stereotypes (Schneeweis, 2012; Creţan and Light, 2020), the current study showed that the Roma communities were characterized during the COVID-19 as violent, backward, promiscuous, and especially irresponsible. This may suggest that engraved and historical patterns of Roma stigmatization and anti-Roma narratives are dormant frameworks that are refreshed during crises. Comparative research (Creţan et al., 2020), who analyzed cases in Hungary, agree that the stigmatization of Roma has deep historical roots, which may affect policy advanced to mitigate the Roma stigmatization and advance empowerment (Berki et al., 2017).

Another unexpected finding that puzzled the researcher of this study was how the media's discursive-performative practices of control apparently provided legitimacy for further assertive and disproportionate actions against the Roma communities (c.f. Matache and Bhabha, 2020). This study interpreted this unexpected finding as an opportunity for the authorities who wielded power to reinstate their "hegemonic articulation" (Laclau, 2001, p. 112) during a time of crisis on all social agents and not to lose political and civil credibility. Erjavec (2001, p. 718) found that media's coverage of a scandal involving Roma in Slovenia was written to "offer the readers the representation that the majority population is defending itself from the minority Roma (thereby) it needed to maintain its dominance." During the crisis from Ţăndărei, at the Roma's expense, the authorities provided testimony of their strength, which, in turn, revalidated their credentials to continue performing control of COVID-19 elsewhere. However, such measures would be insufficient in the dynamics of performing control if it would not be for the media to acknowledge the "hegemonic articulation of power" (Laclau, 2001, p. 105) as opposed to the mechanism the "othering" "reinforced through the production of the stereotypes" (Ross et al., 2020). Oversimplifying Roma's identity through stereotypes is no longer a self-sufficient incentive to enforce control. As studies showed previously (Creţan et al., 2020; Creţan and O'brien,

2019), the combination between stereotypes and a criminalized language that describes the Roma established the premises of justification in front of the dominant majority. Thus, by coupling the reproduction of stereotypes with the arbitrary categorization of crimes and violence as innate ethnic components, it justified the discursive-performative practices of control.

As shown in the material, the case of ţăndărei and other localities inhabited by Roma represented cases in which control was exercised by the media and performed by law enforcement. The developments from certain localities determined the balance between the two entities. Control of the pandemic remained mostly centralized throughout the pandemic, with the Government emitting Military Ordinances to control community transmission. The essence of the ordinances determined the identity of the people who augmented the crisis by connecting the space's representation with their ethnicity. The same pattern is noticed in the Romani studies by the work of Creţan and Powell (2018). Without so many words, the focus of the Military Ordinances determined the people's identity by naming the area but identifying the individuals through absence (c.f. Schröter and Taylor, 2017). Even so, the "social constructs" (Verkuyten, 2005) underlined in the media eventually constructed the people's ethnicity. For instance, hitherto to Military Ordinance No. 7, which instituted total quarantine in Ţăndărei, the media already reported the increased rate of infection from Ţăndărei; and who was to blame for this cause (Adevarul.ro, 2020b; Recorder, 2020). Hence, the language of Military Ordinance No. 7, which focused on the space Ţăndărei, performed the identity of Roma through absence, as the context was already established by the media previously. By the time, the government acknowledged the situation, the media already highlighted who is threatening the ethnic majority.

Other analyses of Roma-related incidents confirm that the "negative traits" (Erjavec et al., 2000, p. 7) espoused in the Slovenian media certify their identity. Re-depict the movie Twelve Angry Man (1957). In it, everybody from the room, the audiences included, know that, when some jurors talk about "them as violent", "them as liars", "they cannot be trusted," the identity of Black people is designed cognitively. Through the same mechanism the identity of Roma is conveyed. This could be the result of historically engraved stereotypes accepted as societal norms accepted by a majority population to the detriment of a minority. Romani studies literature showed that the social norms adopted in time and espoused when an ethnic majority feels threatened by an ethnic minority are means to self-preserve the dominance of in-groups (Uzunova, 2010, p. 301). The same, could be argued, happened in Ţăndărei and other localities that became the focus of reporting. The presence of high number of COVID-19 infections, repetitive breaches of quarantine rules, and violence against the police, were seen as threatening by the institutions of the ethnic majority. Consequently, these were highlighted during coverages as dangerous for the general society and presented as features of a specific ethnicity.

In the literature, the term "ethnicity" refers to the meaning, context, and social and political actions employed by a specific group. Although a term that carried many controversies surrounding its meaning, Brubaker (2004) eventually determined that the context and cultural idioms attached to one group determine its distinctiveness. In the eventuality of a crisis, such features became articulated as part of "cultural conventions" (Butler, 1988, p. 525) that are already established at collective level. According to research that focused on ethnicity, the discourses that seem to be constructed on social conventions can be altered by a selective narrative (Sullivan, 2012, p. 431). One such example is the Roma. Their descriptions are not built by the group but by the majorities of the societies in which they share. Hence, the features of criminality, non-assimilation to the society's standards and rules, and isolationism are all part of the collective narratives representing the Roma in Romania. Once they became reinforced by the media's representation, the Roma's identity is reduced to stereotypes, and the deeds of the few are generalized as the deeds of all. Thus, when the media underlined the presence of isolated conflicts in some localities inhabited by Roma, they rearticulated and refreshed the "cultural convention of violence" as features characteristic to the Roma. Studies show that institutions and the media typically depicts minorities as the criminal others involved in crime (Allen and Bruce, 2017; Creţan and O'brien, 2019; Creţan and Powell, 2018). The same strategy was noticed by Erjavec et al., in Slovenia during a situation of crisis. They argue that "the Roma are the protagonists of negatively evaluated acts of crime, which represent a threat to the social order" (2000, p. 7). Along these lines, the academic literature argues that if this sort of branding is applied to specific people, it can also "add up to a picture of crime and danger for whole neighborhoods or areas" (Ross, 2019, p. 401). Similar cases were observed by this research during the early months of COVID-19 in Romania. Marginalized neighborhoods from cities (e.g., Strachina) and sidelined communities from local communities of Roma (e.g., Ţăndărei, Bolitin Vale) were depicted in the media as "criminals" and "dangerous others." Other studies show that marginalized minorities are more often criminalized and less likely to be depicted as victims (Dukes and Gaither, 2017). Other studies pondered on the role of marginalization being a significant feature when covering minority-related events (Ewart and Beard, 2017). The case of Roma is no different from that of African Americans, Muslims, or Maori. Indeed, one can argue that the caste system (c.f. Wilkerson, 2020) can be considered in the case of Roma. Not only did their racial features lead them to be marginalized; so did their coexistence with the dominant majority, which reinforced its hegemonic space in time and attributed a specific ethos to Roma. Scholars who analyzed the dynamics of Roma discrimination in Romania, concluded that parts of this mechanism is due to entrenched Roma marginalization and ghettoization (Creţan and Powell, 2018). These actions preserved Roma stereotypes and fostered Roma discrimination.

The Roma still retain the outsider factor in Eastern European societies (Loveland and Popescu, 2015; Kapralski, 2016; Kóczé and Rövid, 2017). Never entirely accepted and integrated into Romanian society in the later years following the end of Communism, the Roma have always dressed the mantle of an outsider in a society entrenched within the construction of stereotypes and prejudices based on socio-cultural incentives.

Similarly, scholars who analyzed the dynamics between COVID-19 and the Roma communities in Romania argue that he Coronavirus crisis "heightened the existing discrimination and stigmatization of Roma (and consolidated the Roma) as an outsider" (Creţan and Light, 2020, p. 7). Years of ghettoization and marginalization have defined the cultural stereotypes associated with Roma, even in the media. Similar with the findings advanced by the present study, Erjavec et al., argue that the marginalized image of Roma communities is connected with the differentness, criminality, and otherness (Erjavec et al., 2000, pp. 38–39). The academic literature on stigmatization revealed that Roma's outside group status both heightens the social bias of stigmatization (Powell and Lever, 2017) and, in parallel, preserved the "threatening other" label (Powell, 2008; Loveland and Popescu, 2015). The incentives that drive a society to stigmatize Roma are "group images and stereotypes of Roma as benefit scourgers lacking notions of self-restraint and social responsibility" (Creţan and Powell, 2018, p. 1). During Covid-19, the academic literature suggests that "stigma has also intertwined with other structural issues and ills of the society such as poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion increasing the risk of community transmission" (Peprah and Gyasi, 2020, p. 2). Three decades of the ghettoization and separation of the Roma at the peripheries of cities have widened the gap between them and the ethnic majority's societal rules.

By extension, the majorities make up the narratives that construct the identity of the Roma. Their mechanisms alter Roma's social construct by casting it as a marginalized identity or characterizing it as a non-adaptable community to social standards. In the case of the Roma from Ţăndărei, the media engaged in a "logic of polarization" (Laclau, 2001) that preserved the difference between the "othering" who disregarded the quarantine measures and the "self" who is and, above all, can institute control as mandated by its hegemony. As shown in the material, the Roma's identity can be modified both by the media's logic and by a logic of polarization. Also, as revealed in the analysis, media do adopt strategies when covering Roma-related incidents. This is also confirmed by analyses of Roma-related incidents from Slovenia (Erjavec et al., 2000; Erjavec, 2001) and Czechia (Sedláková, 2006). Like in the cases of the present study, media engages Roma-related incidents through the prism of techniques that generalize the violence of Roma and transportation of the guilt. Unlike other studies, this paper showed that the media can concoct a strategy of reporting Roma-related incidents by aligning the antagonism between the Roma and the law enforcements as a justification to future assertive actions. This, nonetheless, is not surprising in the literature. Van Dijk (2012; 2000) points out that media adopts strategies of justification to answer the provocations espoused by the Roma minority. Similarly, media from Romania justified the assertive actions of police on the grounds of Roma's increased violence against law enforcement and the risks posed to their respective societies. In their analysis on media representation of Roma from Slovenia, Erjavec et al., noticed the same pattern of justification (2000, p. 28).

However, unlike other studies, this paper showed that media justified the intervention on the grounds of performative control and reinstitution of state's hegemonic articulation in the areas associated with Roma violence; and which posed a danger for society. For instance, when covering the events from Ţăndărei, media recentralized the hegemonic articulation of the state's power as totally and evenly dispersed in the locality. That is why, the ensuing performative control, espoused thereafter by the Romanian media, mitigated the stereotypical identity of Roma (e.g., violence, lawlessness, etc.) in syntactical structures and highlighted the sense of control reinstated by state's institutions. The discourses performed by the media enabled the "self" as a non-culpable entity while attaching the blame for infections, for disregarding the societal order, on the "other", i.e., the Roma.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has contributed to the academic literature on Romani studies in Central and Eastern Europe. In this region, since the fall of Communism, anti-Romani narratives and stereotypical frameworks have been preserved by institutions and the media. From afar, Romania is not an exception. This study has shed light on the performative control and Roma identity shaping strategies employed by Romanian mainstream media during COVID-19 pandemic. This study has showed that the theoretical sequence between the works of Butler (1988, 2007) and Bell (1999) on performativity, Laclau's (2001) understanding of discourse with Brubaker's theory of ethnicity (2004), and Ross (2019) on media and stereotypes is useful for the field of Romani studies. By doing so, this paper highlighted the role of communication in shaping Roma identities and societal perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis of media coverage during the early months in 2020 from Ţăndărei and other Romani communities has confirmed the presence of binary grammatical structures and of sensationalist, hyperbolic, and stereotypical narratives related to the criminality and violence of the Roma. I have analyzed the Romanian mainstream media representation of Roma communities during the early months of COVID-19 crisis against a backdrop of articles gathered from the most watched, accessed, and read media outlets from Romania. The methodology applied for this study, i.e., NVivo software and language-in-use discourse analysis, has proved useful in understanding how the media constructed its coverage and how specific events shifted the premises of discourse. Although the sample picked for this study is small, and only focused on the headlines and sub headlines of articles, the results of the paper are representative for how the Romanian mainstream media usually treats Roma-related topics. The results of this study confirmed the hypothesis adopted for this paper, i.e., that the media normally does not cover Roma-related topics, nor does it employ stereotypes unless Roma's actions generate instability, create conflict, or are a threat to the homeland majority. Similarly, comparative analyses of the representation of Roma from Slovenia (Erjavec et al., 2000)

shows that the media report on the Roma when their actions create conflict or affect the majority ethnic group's dominance.

The main results of this study indicate that the media used two strategies to cover Roma-related events during the early months of COVID-19 in Romania. The media focused on exploiting the sensationalism of the episodes involving Roma, and it employed a logic of polarization to assist the authorities in retaking control of the pandemic. This study has revealed that Laclau's theories of hegemonic articulation and logic of polarization are useful to adopt when looking at crises involving minorities and dominant groups. Also, the analysis of syntactic structures indicated that because Roma stereotypes are so engraved in Romanian societal consciousness, the identity of Roma can be performed through absence. This study revealed that the Roma's identity is performed by narratives that affix specific territorial spaces, the sense of marginality and ghettoization, and characteristics of assertiveness.

In light of this study's findings and considering its limitations, this paper proposes two academic avenues to contribute further to Romani studies in CEE. The first follow-up research is to understand the extent of how the reportage of local and regional newspapers across several counties is different from the mainstream when covering Roma topics. Second, I propose a study that analyzes how the supply and demand of Roma-related topics, i.e., cultural and ethnic stereotypes, are developed further in echo-chambers from Facebook.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/**Supplementary Material**, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

No permission was required from the broadcasters and the online portals selected for this study, as the articles gathered for analysis are in the public domain and public library. Every item chosen for this study is free to access. The websites of the media selected are not protected by paywalls meant to restrict access to news content, which, otherwise, would be accessed through a paid subscription. Except for the name of the broadcasters and online portals, no direct or indirect identifiers of authors or people mentioned in the articles were used. The rights and integrity of persons discovered in the titles and subtitles were respected. Every reference of particular individuals was anonymized. Finally, no images of people are used in the analysis of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2021.663874/full#supplementary-material

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Gendered Articulations of Control and Care on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hungary

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP government´s discursive practices of control and care during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper researches the Hungarian government's communication on the official Hungarian COVID-19 Facebook page during the first wave of the pandemic. Its aim is to answer the question how the Hungarian government articulated control and care to reinforce sedimented gendered division of care work and institutions of control to tackle the potential disruption of the system of care before the widespread vaccination of the elderly population was available in the country. The paper argues that the pandemic has allowed the government to exert control in areas, such as the crisis in the workforce market and health care system, as well as in the destabilized system of care work. The main finding is that in the material the government performs control over care work, whose intensified discussion during the pandemic could lead to a potential disruption within the illiberal logic on two different levels. First, physical care work related to immediate physical needs, like hunger, clothing, pain enacted by female shoppers, female health care workers and female social workers, is newly defined during the pandemic as local, family-bound and a naturally female task. Second, the government articulates care work, either as potentially harmful (for the elderly population and thus indirectly to the government's familialist politics), or as vulnerable and in need of protection from outside influences (portrayed through the interaction of health care workers and "hospital commanders"). This enables the government to perform full state control over care workers through the mobilization of police and military masculinity and to strengthen and re-naturalize the already existing hierarchies between traditional gender roles from a new perspective during the pandemic. This state of affairs highlights the vulnerability both of the elderly population, on whom its familialism builds, and of the system of informal care work, which builds on the unpaid care work of female citizens, who paradoxically are also articulated as potential harm for the elderly and for the system.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, Hungary, care work, control, familialism, illiberal democracy

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INTRODUCTION

Established gender roles highly contribute to the level of economic, health, and physical risks certain social groups face during a pandemic (Davies and Bennett 2016; Smith 2019; Connor et al., 2020). Women in Europe and the United States, limited by sedimented and unquestioned social gender norms, are, for instance, often expected to augment their caregiving roles during disease outbreaks (Smith, 2019; Connor et al., 2020). During national lockdowns due to the outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) additional care-related tasks, such as daytime childcare, have been the responsibility of women as well. It has resulted in a higher "caregiver burden" women in general need to face, that is a "multidimensional toll that caregivers experience to their social, emotional, spiritual, financial, and physical wellbeing" (Adelman Ronald et al., 2014; Connor et al., 2020). Julia Roth (2020) states that the COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health-related crisis, but functions "as a sort of prism or burning glass though which manifold systemic and structural pitfalls, inequalities and injustices became visible in new dimensions". She points out that, as a consequence, the COVID-19 pandemic made topics that have "often been reduced to feminist niches," such as gendered care work and the divisions of labor, more visible for the general public. This was clearly the case in Hungary, for example, especially after the closure of secondary schools when such gender disparities became immanent (Milanovich 2020; Roth 2020; Ti mit csináltok, 2020; UNICEF 2020). Moreover, some scholars even state that the pandemic has the potential to disrupt certain implicit pacts regarding the division of care work among genders and generations within and beyond families (Alon et al., 2020; Gregor and Kováts 2020).[1]

In Hungary, due to the economic tolls caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the state has decreased its social services, which has resulted in an increasing amount of unpaid and informal care work falling on women, especially in areas of childcare, elderly care, and health care (Ti mit csináltok, 2020; Fodor et al., 2021). Moreover, the cases from Hungary show how women tend to leave their lower income jobs more often than their male partners to provide extra care work for the family during the pandemic (Gregor and Kováts 2020; Ti mit csináltok, 2020). As recent research points out, even though on average Hungarian men have also increased their contributions to household duties, women's contribution still grew significantly more than theirs and the pandemic has generally increased gender inequalities in terms of domestic care work (Fodor et al., 2021). The gender inequalities within the Hungarian informal care system became unsustainable after the closure of schools and the isolation of the elderly from the rest of the population in March 2020 (Ti mit csináltok, 2020). These two events have played an especially important factor in the organization of care work, as the contribution of elderly family members to care work within families, often manifested as childcare, cooking or help with children with disabilities (Ti mit csináltok, 2020), formed one of the bases of the Hungarian government's social and family politics (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008; Gregor and Kováts 2020). However, as the elderly fall into the risk group, this population needs to stay in their own homes, even if they are healthy and mobile. This not only results in their isolation and the demand for extra care of their needs from the municipality–this care usually being provided by women working in daycare (Ti mit csináltok, 2020) but also in the suspension of the contribution of the elderly to the care work in many families. This dramatic change, paired with the closure of schools, results in additional childcare and teaching duties falling on families (Ónody-Molnár 2020). This situation could potentially lead to a crisis in the current informal caregiving system and the social politics of the government, which strongly builds on familialism, traditional division of work and the unpaid care work of women (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008; Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Gregor and Kováts 2020).

According to Roth (2020), the pandemic brought to light an institutionalized lack of gender equality and the crisis of systems of care work in many countries, which could potentially be used by anti-hegemonic right-wing populist groups to mobilize people against the hegemonic power holders. This points to the argument that gender as a "symbolic glue" often serves to affectively mobilize nationalistic, religious or anti-immigration policies (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 799; Gunnarsson Payne et al., 2019; Aharoni and Féron 2020). Roth (2020) also argues that conservative political actors in hegemonic positions, in order to take control over the possible disruptions during the pandemic, need to reinforce and re-naturalize the idea of "the heteronormative family and the respective role models" as well as "the feminization and racialization of care work." In Hungary the right-wing Fidesz-KDNP government has stabilized its hegemonic position and has since 2010 won the parliamentary elections with a landslide on three consecutive occasions. Thus, from their perspective the visibility of inequalities within the care work system can be seen as a threat that potentially disrupts their familialist social politics and opens up the discursive field to anti-hegemonic voices within the country. Accordingly, the government framed the COVID-19 pandemic as yet another crisis (similar to recent political, financial, or natural crises) (Orbán 2020, 00:2:20-25) that destabilizes the country's health, economic and legislative system (Koronavírus, 2020, March 23). This paper argues that the pandemic has allowed the government to exert control in other areas, such as the crisis in the workforce

[1]The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on intensifying established gender order has resulted in Hungary, and in many other countries, in an increase of reported cases of domestic violence against women (Nők elleni erőszak, 2020). This "shadow pandemic" (Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen 2020) is often associated with the lockdown regulations in many countries around the world. The explanation is that being locked up together increases violence in families, which is often affected by culturally sedimented gendered ways of coping with the increased levels of stress during the pandemic (Nők elleni erőszak, 2020; Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen 2020). According to research, men often abuse alcohol to cope with increasing levels of stress associated with financial difficulties (Dunaway, 2018) and isolation (Posfai, 2020) during pandemic outbreaks or economic recessions. Moreover, due to the decreased opening hours or the shut down of public service providers during lockdown – in Hungary this includes courts – reporting cases of domestic violence is also harder and even the progress of reported cases is slower than usual. Hence, many victims face isolation leading to even more stress and violence (Nők elleni erőszak, 2020; Posfai 2020).

market and health care system, as well as in the destabilized system of care work. The paper researches the Hungarian government's communication on the official Hungarian COVID-19 Facebook page during the first wave of the pandemic. Its aim is to answer the question how the Hungarian government articulated control and care to reinforce sedimented gendered division of care work and institutions of control to tackle the potential disruption of the system of care before the widespread vaccination of the elderly population was available in the country.[2]

HUNGARY

The political landscape of Hungary is described as an illiberal democracy, a hybrid political system where an exceptional degree of power is concentrated within a parliamentarian democratic setting (Krekó and Enyedi 2018, 39). The idea of transforming Hungary into an "illiberal state" originates from PM Viktor Orbán, who defined illiberalism as a state-organizing logic that is based on nationalism, community, work, and Christian values, rather than liberal values, such as freedom, that are dominant in Western-European states (Orbán 2014). The "illiberal turn" in the Hungarian polity started in 2010 with the landslide electoral victory of the right-wing Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége (FIDESZ)–Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP) coalition over the left-liberal camp (Laczó, 2018). The illiberal turn means an increasing centralization of political power and a decrease in checks and balances, indicted by the government´s growing control over the courts, media and civil society. A lack of pluralism was justified by renewing the perceived threats against the polity, and a change in the electoral rules and the Constitution permanently weakened the political opposition. These changes have been in power for the last three electoral cycles (Bustikova and Guasti 2017, 168-174). In Hungary, the illiberal hegemony is constituted through the exclusionary imperative of "liberal" values and a "symbolic-constitutive rejection of the liberal left as illegitimate to rule or participate in (defining 'real') democracy" within and beyond the country's borders (Palonen 2018, 9). The rejection of liberal values and a return to Christianity and a work-based society has also affected the Fidesz-KDNP government's gender politics. Even though in Hungary, as opposed to the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, so far there are no civil anti-gender movements, current research draws attention to the anti-gender right-wing political discourse of the Fidesz-KDNP government (Kováts and Pető 2017). The government connects the term "gender" to the ideological control of the liberal European Union (Félix 2015; Kováts and Pető 2017). Therefore, after their landslide victory in 2010 they launched their family mainstreaming policies as a reaction to the allegedly anti-family and anti-Christian gender mainstreaming policies of the EU. Family mainstreaming has offered an illiberal solution to the problem of declining demography, which it sees in increasing the birth rate as opposed to immigration, which it connects to the EU's liberal gender mainstreaming (Juhász 2012; Grzebalska and Pető 2018).

Accordingly, scholars see ideological familialism as "a form of biopolitics which views the traditional family as a foundation of the nation, and subjugates individual reproductive and self-determination rights to the normative demand of the reproduction of the nation" as a "key tenet of the illiberal project" (Kemper 2016; Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 167). In Hungary, however, besides ideological familialism a strong social familialism is present as well that is rooted in a widespread lack of social trust (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008). This means that family relations enjoy more strength and trust in the country than any other social relations, which are often based on obligation and are easy to destabilize (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008). This leads to a generally positive attitude among Hungarian citizens towards the family as a value as well as traditional gender roles associated with families, independently of their stand on gender equality (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008; 2014). Thus, traditional gender-based work division within families has remained generally intact in the country, even if the employment status or stand on gender equality shows variety among Hungarian citizens (Dupcsik and Tóth 2014). In general, more than 75% of care work, most typically laundry, cooking, and cleaning, is done by females, a division which typically none of the family members finds unfair (Dupcsik and Tóth 2014, 231). Accordingly, the Fidesz-KDNP government's family mainstreaming policies can be understood as a way to combine ideological familialism in the name of illiberalism with a strongly present social familialism in citizens' attitudes in order to gain electoral popularity. In the name of family mainstreaming, a Family Protection Bill became part of the Hungarian Constitution in 2013, which defines "family" from a traditional, heteronormative and Christian perspective. In 2012 the Catholic Church's influential Lexicon (2003) was translated into Hungarian.[3] The publication, which has triggered anti-gender civil movements throughout Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), introduces the doctrine of complementarianism, a central demand of current anti-gender movements throughout Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Complementarianism, which has replaced the doctrine of female subordination, acknowledges basic women's rights and their equally important work in public life as that of men. However, it also stresses the naturally different nature of men and women and especially women's "special responsibilities for the family" (Case 2016, 7-8). The fact that the *Lexicon*'s most important parts on gender roles have been translated separately and published in advance in a journal for caring professionals (Kováts and Pető 2017, 119), points to the government's highly gendered understanding of care work both within and beyond families. Even though later on the government highlighted the idea that family mainstreaming does not oppose but nourishes gender

[2]During the second wave of the pandemic similar governmental tendencies concerning control and care can be observed. However, the government set up a rapid vaccination process for the elderly and for teachers, which also suggests that the government did take some actions to tackle the disrupted system of care work.

[3]Lexicon of the Family, Családlexikon 2012

equality (Kováts and Pető 2017, 122), the government's understanding of gender equality is comprehensible only within Christian teachings on gender complementarianism (Case 2016 13), as its gender polices "are often framed in a way that assumes and reaffirms traditional gender roles" (Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 167). As these roles disadvantage female citizens with higher education (Grzebalska and Pető 2018) and lessen the chances of women with children to re-enter the labor market, leading to a marginalization for women with small children (Fodor and Kispeter 2014), the family policies of the government only benefit women in traditional caregiver roles, in particular, as "mothers" (Grzebalska and Pető 2018).

However, in spite of the widely spread ideological and social familialism that results in generally positive attitudes towards traditional gender roles and a gender-based division of labor within families, the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated still ongoing public discussions on the systematic inequalities and limitations of the informal caregiving system (Laborczi 2020; Milanovich 2020; Ti mit csináltok, 2020; UNICEF 2020; Ónody-Molnár 2020; Bánlaki, 2021; Szabó, 2021). From the perspective of ideological familialism, discussions problematizing the power structures within traditional family constellations, that is, the amount of care work falling on women and the unfair division of labor between family members and between families and the state, mean a threat to familialism. Emancipatory discussions tend to see families as potential spaces of oppression, while familialism defines them as emotional units (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008). Moreover, emancipatory discussions potentially lead to the emergence of other (feminist) ideologies that could challenge the ideology of familialism, a challenge which, according to research, has been historically missing from Hungarian social and political discourses (Dupcsik and Tóth 2008). Thus, the turbulent gender-related consequences of the pandemic could potentially renew the gender mainstreaming versus family mainstreaming discourses and shed light on how the government's family mainstreaming in effect hinders gender equality (Kováts and Pető 2017, 122; Ti mit csináltok" 2020). The government, instead of addressing the need for more female care workers during the pandemic (Ónody-Molnár, 2020), tried to prevent discussions about the crisis in care work (Laborczi 2020; Milanovich 2020; Ti mit csináltok, 2020; UNICEF 2020; Ónody-Molnár, 2020) by, for example, framing the closure of schools as fulfilling a request initiated by concerned (caregiver) parents (Grád-Kovács 2020; Ti mit csináltok, 2020), supporting and reinforcing their caregiver roles. Moreover, in its discursive practices the government also tried to re-naturalize traditional gender roles and feminize care work. It is these discursive practices that this paper aims to analyze.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To capture the core ideas that the Fidesz-KDNP government has communicated during the pandemic and to embed the manifest content of their communication into its illiberal and anti-gender politics, I used the method of qualitative content analysis (Drisko and Maschi 2015). This holistic view on the communicated content favors the explanatory research design this paper is applying, in which the knowledge about the context in which the content is embedded is more clearly defined than in a basic and descriptive content analysis (Drisko and Maschi 2015, 91; Krippendorff 2013). Following the methodological steps of iterative qualitative sampling (Drisko and Maschi 2015), I defined my sample based on a cyclical process between data collection and data analysis. Collecting data from several sources, such as the official Hungarian COVID-19 homepage, the homepage of the government and several Facebook pages using the iterative sampling process, I decided to concentrate on the official Hungarian Facebook site on the COVID-19 pandemic as the source of material for the analysis. The page is maintained by the government and it provides the most material for analyzing the research question, namely the gender aspects of the government's control, which is often articulated implicitly, and can be best captured through the analysis of the published visual material. In addition, recent research points out that Facebook is the most relevant and widely used social media in Hungary (Lévai 2018). Accordingly, the platform plays a crucial role in communication during the pandemic: the state of emergency was announced on the Facebook page in a video format; official announcements from both the Hungarian PM, Viktor Orbán, and the Operational Group (the Operational Group Responsible for Defense against the Coronavirus-infection; in Hungarian: A Koronavírus-fertőzés Elleni Védekezésért Felelős Operatív Törzs) were also live-streamed on Facebook. According to the Facebook page's own introduction, the audience can read "trustworthy, controlled information in connection to the novel coronavirus and the defense against it" (Koronavírus 2020). The site defines itself as a governmental page and as the official Facebook page of the Operational Group. The Facebook page actively promotes the official governmental homepage on COVID-19 in Hungary, which serves as a source for the information published on this Facebook page and with which the content of its daily shared information often corresponds. The Facebook page, however, publishes more visual and less written content than the COVID-19 homepage. With more than 212,000 followers, the page has a relatively wide outreach in the country and received more than 190,000 likes by the end of 2020. According to visitors' ratings, the page has a higher than average rating, obtaining 3.6 out of 5 stars. This number shows among the 126 respondents who rated the page how many recommended or did not recommend it, either by leaving a recommendation on the page itself or recommending it to other friends on Facebook. The biggest criticism from people who did not recommend the page is that the information posted is not objective and that the page instead creates panic, either by "blowing up" the importance of the coronavirus or by spreading governmental "propaganda" (Koronavírus 2020). Nevertheless, the posts receive a high level of reader engagement. On average each post from March and April, the most active phase of information sharing during the research period, has received more than

1,000 likes, more than 250 comments and was shared almost 180 times.[4]

I collected data from the page between 11 March and 18 June 2020, indicating the launch day of the Facebook page and the date when the state of emergency and the Enabling Act were withdrawn in Hungary (Koronavírus 2020). That is, the material concentrates on the first wave of the pandemic in Hungary. However, in terms of the findings, the performativity of control and its gender aspects continued throughout 2020 as well. The material from the data collection period consists of 365 posts and 757 images.[5] The largest amount of information was published in March and April. As of 30 April 2020, the situation in the country stabilized and the national lockdown was lifted; in May and June the number of posts significantly decreased. First, I coded the posts as holistic entities, meaning that I coded both the published images and the texts they contain with nominal themes to describe the structure of the data. Throughout this phase I applied a combined deductive–inductive coding plan, combining previous preconceptions focusing on the theme of control and their gender aspects, such as the portrayal of male and female figures and their gender roles with an inductive "open-coding" approach to the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Drisko and Maschi 2015). In March the main themes were the case of a group of Iranian exchange students who were first diagnosed with the virus in the country and apparently refused to cooperate with the police; the announcement of the state of emergency and the closure of schools, which happened on the 16th of March; and the risk elderly people face combined with the reported extra care for them within the families as well as in the country. In April the most frequently mentioned theme was the lockdown, paired with photos showing law enforcement workers in operation, referring to the government's heightened legislative control over the pandemic and over citizens during the lockdown. A large number of the posts were dedicated to the theme of available health care instruments and the state of facilities in the hospitals, such as the government's control over the crisis through imported health care supplies and newly built hospitals. In addition, the visual portrayal of the work of health care workers became a regularly occurring theme. Later the economic action plan of the government was introduced, portraying the government as being in control of the financial consequences of the pandemic. At this time, the discussion on the elderly moved to the discussion on elderly homes, which became a hotspot for the virus and where most COVID-19 patients died during the researched time period. Visual portrayals of several elderly homes were published on a regular basis, presenting the investigating, and controlling national bodies taking over control in these institutions. In May the economic action plan, and especially the need and established possibilities for work were thematized the most, portraying the government as calm and optimistic about taking back control over the virus. In June mostly practical information was posted about the reopening of restaurants and borders. The government ended the state of emergency and numerous posts reported the successful defense against the virus, portraying the government as successfully controlling the virus.

As the next step, I qualitatively analyzed the connections and conflicts between the content categories (Krippendorff, 2013). The epistemology that guided the analysis and interpretation was the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The analysis was based on the theoretical categories of discourse, articulation, and nodal point, which I will briefly define before presenting the results. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) displace the term "ideology" with "discourse" when talking about hegemonic struggles and thus they open up "reality as a site of [discursive] struggle" (DeLuca, 1999, 334). Importantly, discourse is not restricted to speech but is understood as "both the use of words and the actions" (Laclau 2006, 106), based on which (Palonen, 2019, 181) highlights the material means and consequences of its meaning-making processes. Using this understanding of discourse, the paper analyzes the posted texts and images in relation to the government's legislative actions, which I conceptualize both as a contextual background to and as part of the government's discourse, often occurring within the material. In Laclauian discourse theory, meaning is created through articulation, a practice that links together certain contingent–linguistic and non-linguistic, natural and social–elements into a partially fixed system. This system is established through relationality among the elements, which relations establish (fix) their meaning (Howarth, 2014, 5). Such meaning-producing relations are organized around a nodal point, meaning certain privileged signs that other signs in the articulation are ordered around, and whose meanings are defined in relation to them (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112-113). The nodal point I was concentrating on when designing the study was control, and during the analysis I particularly examined how the system of care work is included in the government's articulation of control. Accordingly, during the analysis I focused on the relation of the content categories care and control and my goal was to answer the question how their connections shed light on the gender aspects of control and how they potentially address the gender-related consequences of the pandemic.

RESULTS

Gendering control and care

In its articulation of control, the Hungarian government has widely used war metaphors during the pandemic, which,

[4]In comparison, posts on the most popular Facebook page in Hungary, that of the airplane company Wizz Air, with over 3 million likes, had on average similar user engagement numbers just before the pandemic outbreak in the country (Wizz Air Facebook statistics, 2021).

[5]This paper is designed in line with the most recent ethical guidelines on social media research (Townsend and Wallace 2016) and the privacy policies of the online platforms from which the material is collected (e.g., "Terms of Service" 2019). As all actors included in the research are public figures and the COVID-19 Facebook page is openly accessible for the public with hundreds of thousands of followers, it is reasonable to consider the data from there as public. As the aim of, and reasonable expectation for, the platform is to reach as many people as possible with their contents, the data are not considered sensitive and their direct republication is not considered to pose any potential harm to their publisher (cf. Townsend and Wallace 2016).

according to recent literature (Van Rythoven 2020), can serve to reduce the insecurities by connecting the time of the pandemic to well-known war-related collective memories and images (Goode et al., 2020). Already the introduction of the emergency law that refers to Articles 48–54 of the Constitution, which "provide for special emergency powers in case of an imminent danger of war and external armed attack and in the event of a natural or industrial disaster" (Kovács B., 2020), invoked the "war against the pandemic" metaphor, as it did in several other countries in Europe as well. Moreover, in January 2020 the government appointed the Coronavirus Operational Group, responsible for the defense against the disease, consisting of "many more army commanders in uniforms than healthcare professionals" (Kovács B., 2020). Since the state of emergency, three members of the Coronavirus Operational Group held a live-streamed session on national television every day at noon, where they reported on the latest progress of the pandemic, announced new rules and regulations, and gave advice for the time of the quarantine. They regularly appeared in the posts of the Coronavirus Facebook Page. Most of their press conferences were streamed live and stored to the page in video format, and captured stills of the members with added citations from the press conferences were used as visual material for the posts. The trio consisted of two male law enforcement workers, often a police officer and a soldier, and Cecilia Müller, the national Chief Medical Officer, leader of the National Public Health Center, who, due to her practical everyday advice and caring manner, became "the grandmother of the country" (Presinszky 2020). Müller is usually pictured in news about the health aspects of the virus, either reporting on its general spread in the country (*e.g.*: Koronavírus, 2020, April 3); drawing attention to the heightened care that the elderly population requires (Koronavírus, 2020, March 28); giving practical advice to families how to take care of them (Koronavírus, 2020, April 1); giving instructions on how to visit their family members in hospitals (Koronavírus, 2020, March 11); informing the public about the available health care services (Koronavírus, 2020a, May 15); or emphasizing and thanking the "devoted work" of the health care workers throughout the pandemic (Koronavírus, 2020a, May 12). The images of Róbert Kiss, Police Lieutenant Colonel and Tibor Lakatos, Colonel in their police uniforms, on the other hand, illustrate news on stricter border control (Koronavírus, 2020, April 21); or statistics on how many people were sanctioned for breaking the restrictions (Koronavírus, 2020, March 30; Koronavírus, 2020a, April 19). This gender division attributed to news about health care and control reflects the gendered articulation of care and control, which is striking in the imagery used by the government during the pandemic.

Control

References to a fight against the virus are constant on the COVID-19 Facebook page as well. In March 2020, for instance, Orbán announced that defense against the virus was organized on four fronts: police, military, health care and economic (Koronavírus, 2020, March 23). Since then, the presence of law enforcement and military masculinities significantly increased in the media in general, and accordingly, on the Facebook page as well, as military masculinity took over control on all four of the above-mentioned fronts. Thus, the visual articulation of control is strikingly gendered: the images illustrating the posts in this category represent police officers (85%) and soldiers (95%) with male actors.

First, police officers were portrayed as embodiments of legislative control over the pandemic. Since 4 March, as a heightened level of control was announced to be necessary, the power of law enforcement forces was widened, and emergency laws were introduced. In the material, police control was initially exerted over the first diagnosed COVID-19 patients, the "non-cooperative" Iranian students (Koronavírus, 2020, March 9). Their behavior in the hospital was framed as a crime by the Hungarian police and the short criminal proceedings ended with the controversial and, according to the civil protection organization Helsinki Committee, illegal deportation of 13 Iranian citizens from the country (Koronavírus, 2020, March 8; Az iráni diákok kollektív kiutasítása, 2020). Besides, control was regularly performed over people in home quarantine, in the material usually by publishing data on how many people had been ordered to stay in home quarantine and how many of them did not obey the laws, making police interventions necessary. The visual illustrations usually feature images of police officers (Koronavírus, 2020, March 20; Koronavírus, 2020a, April 23; Koronavírus, 2020, May 14).[6] Further, since 28 March a strict lockdown was introduced: people could only leave for work and shopping purposes, which were patrolled by police officers (MTI 2020). Since 27 April the usage of obligatory masks was also controlled and the absence of masks was penalized by police officers first only in Budapest, but later extension to a national level was also discussed (Kötelező maszkviselést, 2020; Kötelezővé teszik, 2020). In the material, regular reports were published on how many people violated the lockdown and face-mask rules and were sanctioned by heavy fines or were involved in criminal proceedings (*e.g.* Koronavírus, 2020, April 8; Koronavírus, 2020b, April 19). The visual illustration of the information contains albums with 5-10 images portraying sanctioning and disciplining police and military authorities walking on the streets, interrogating people, or potentially giving out fines (Koronavírus, 2020, April 7; Koronavírus, 2020, April 8; Koronavírus, 2020b April 19).

Second, another frequent war-related metaphor is the war over the health supplies. Orbán, for example, frames health masks imported from China as "the loot of the Eastern raids" (Koronavírus, 2020, March 24). The military is highly involved in controlling and distributing the necessary health supplements, and military forces are portrayed as helping the government by taking supplies from airplanes and distributing them among health care facilities, such as hospitals and homes for the

[6]To reinforce the war rhetoric, it is worth noting that those in compulsory home quarantine needed to post a sign from the authorities ("a red card") on their door, which can easily be connected with the segregation of Jewish citizens during the Second World War (Kovács K., 2020).

elderly. Military forces also took over control of hospitals. On 30 March Hungarian military officers were appointed as "hospital commanders" to the head of each hospital. These positions were filled either by police officers or soldiers and were represented, apart from one image, by male figures, reflecting the social reality of gendered work segregation in Hungary (AEEK 2019). Officially, their task is to control and manage the material and human resources of the hospitals (Béres 2020), activities which are also regularly photo-documented on the Facebook page (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, March 30, Photo album: "Védőeszközök és a kórházparancsnokok"). Further, military forces also built an emergency hospital in the small town of Kiskunhalas within two and a half weeks of Orbán personally visiting (Koronavírus, 2020, April 11) and regularly disinfected homes for the elderly, which was also thoroughly documented in visual albums in the material (*e.g.*: Koronavírus, 2020 April 17). Finally, on the economic front, military officers took control over the production of the country's strategic companies, such as the Hungarian Oil Company (MOL) and directed it to produce disinfection liquids (MOL Hygi) that they then distributed to hospitals and homes for the elderly (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, 2020, April 16, Photo album: "Fertőtlenítőszerek is érkeznek a kórházakba"). In addition, the Hungarian Army has stepped up as a strategic new employer for everyone who was left without a job after the pandemic (Koronavírus, 2020b, April 23; Koronavírus, 2020, May 19). The articulation of control thus connected the government's more controlling (centralized) legislative measures with its aspiration to control (or lessen) the pandemic's negative health-related and economic consequences. This gives control a double meaning: its meaning as lessening freedom, that is regulation, causally relates to its meaning as lessening damage, that is protection, a more outward looking and conflict-oriented version of care. Control, both in terms of regulation and protection, is connected to masculinized state institutions, such as the police and the military, which masculinizes control and embeds it into a conflict-based, militarized war-topology.

Care

Following the example of Cecilia Müller, besides military and police masculinities, femininized health care workers are portrayed in a large number of Facebook posts with photo albums capturing them during work, containing 9-15 individual images each (*e.g.*: 30 April 2020, Photo album: "Sok a munka a Szent János Kórházban is"). On the textual level, the group of health care workers who are particularly thanked due to their "devoted work" are the nurses, family doctors and the trained volunteers who work as auxiliary nurses during the pandemic (Koronavírus, 2020, April 30; Koronavírus, 2020b, May 12). This list concentrates on health care workers either with the least amount of education in health care (nurses and volunteers), or who are employed by local municipalities as opposed to the state (family doctors), engaging with the direct needs of the patient, as opposed to specialists or doctors (Kovács K., 2020; Blaskó 2020). Visually, health care workers in direct physical contact with patients are almost exclusively portrayed through female figures, performing the gendered act of care work: bending down to patients with a smile and touching them gently (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, 2020a, May 15, Photo: No title added), whereas among the patients there was no significant difference in terms of gender representation. This reflects the binary social reality, as according to statistical data there are significantly more female than male workers among nurses, however there are more male workers among doctors (AEEK 2019). Importantly, however, although their body is almost fully covered with the protective gear obligatory in hospitals when working with COVID-19 patients, thanks to various tactics in their portrayal, their bodies are still visibly gendered. Such tactics are, for instance, close shots of the facial area, close shots of the hair area that makes the length of the hair visible even if it is covered by a protective cap, or in some cases shots of handmade writings (for instance "Dr Dóri") and drawings (for example a flower) on the protective gear, the flower assumedly being made by and referring to the person who wears it (Koronavírus 2020, April 30, Photo: No title added).[7] Care is thus strongly feminized in its articulation. Care work is articulated as it does not require high education and, in contrast to the masculinized state institutions of control, is organized locally by the municipalities, both in the cases of the hospitals as well as the homes for the elderly. Care differs from the protective understanding of control–which is articulated as conflict-oriented, focusing on threat and organized on the state level–as it is based on help and compassion, focuses on those in need, and is connected to the personal and physical dimensions of direct interactions.

Controlling care

Firstly, the articulation of control in relation to care sheds further light on how the masculinized institutions of control and the feminized interpersonal tasks of care relate to each other. Importantly, in the visual representation of law enforcement workers during their controlling and sanctioning activities in public spaces, 77 percent of the civilians they encounter are female figures. These figures are often pictured during their shopping activities either near a supermarket carrying shopping bags or in a market hall browsing among goods. The reason behind the high number of such images is the regulation that restricted the time to between 9 and 12 a.m. for only the elderly population to visit the stores. To ensure that citizens follow this regulation, law enforcement workers organized systematic raids in market halls, food stores, and pharmacies (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, 2020, March 31, Photo album: "A kijárási korlátozás 4. napja"). As these locations are visited mostly by female citizens–in any age group–providing care work for their families, the illustration usually portrays female figures during typically female everyday activities, such as doing the shopping and browsing among products. This is counterbalanced with a

[7]When male and female health care workers are portrayed together, a certain gendered hierarchy is visible among them with the male body occupying a central and higher position, whereas female bodies—usually more than one near to a single male body—occupy the lower positions of the listener or the assisting helper, for instance when the male figure is getting into his protective gear (Koronavírus 2020b; May 15, Photo: No title added).

controlling male figure, usually a police officer, talking to the female figure. The figure of the police officer is usually portrayed as taller or bigger and with a more relaxed body composition than the female figure, which establishes a hierarchized and gendered connection between care and control (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, April 2, Photo: No title added). On the textual level, this portrayal is framed as an act of caring protection as, for instance, the following image description shows: "The police uses "reassuring, helpful, empathetic and loyal measures" to encourage the public to comply with the curfew" (Koronavírus, 2020, April 2, Photo: No title added). Besides, as women who are portrayed on such images are labelled as "elderly people" in the description, these images articulate control as "empathetic" protection first and foremost, of the elderly population (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, 2020; March 29, Photo: No title added). However, in some images younger women are portrayed, and the capitation of those images refers to the sanctioning meaning of control, such as: "In the last 24 hours, police officers have taken action in 1255 cases against those who violated the rules of curfew" (Koronavírus 2020, April 10). Accordingly, these portrayals might represent younger female figures as potential harm towards the elderly, who they endanger if they do their shopping outside the permitted hours. This means also a potential harm indirectly towards the government's politics of care, because this politics centers on the contribution of the elderly to care work within families and thus depends on the safety of this population (Dupcsik and Toth 2008; Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Gregor and Kováts 2020).

Secondly, another theme that pictures control as protection of the elderly, and thus indirectly of the government's politics of care, relates to the mass COVID-19 infection in old people's homes caused by not following hygiene rules in several of these institutions. Controlling groups representing the "epidemiological authority of the government" were sent to many of these institutions to check the professional competence of the care workers in the institutions and whether they complied with the epidemiological and hygiene rules ordered by the government (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, 2020, April 11, Photo album: "Ellenőrzés a Pesti úti idősotthonban"). Members of the controlling group are often portrayed with the elderly residents of the institutions. In such cases, they are pictured in a caring position, for instance with a smile, and use various techniques to lower their body position, such as taking a seated position, or bending over towards the residents (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, June 18, Photo: No title added). Accordingly, control is articulated again as care and protection towards the elderly. However, when portrayed with social workers, the posture of the controllers' change. In their portrayal, social workers, mostly women, are pictured in lower body positions, for instance lowering their heads or looking upwards towards the controlling figures (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, May 14, Photo: No title added). On the contrary, members of the controlling groups are pictured in higher body positions, and even if they are not homogenously gendered–meaning there are just as many female as male figures among them–they are portrayed as bigger in comparison to the female social workers. Further, they often carry sheets of papers with them while questioning the social workers (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, May 14, Photo: No title added). Thus, the hierarchy between care and control is immanent. Besides, the feminization of care work is again striking as all social workers portrayed in the material are female. Moreover, the social workers are wearing more homey outfits, for instance, slippers, and only a face mask to protect themselves. By contrast, the controlling figures are always wearing full-body protective gears, gloves, covered outside shoes and hair protection (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, May 14, 2020, Photo: No title added). This portrayal can refer to a gendered private-public differentiation between care and control. In addition, repeated posts reported that doctors were not present at old people's homes in Budapest during the time of the official control, so they could not execute professional medical control over the residents and over colleagues (*e.g.:* Koronavírus, 2020a, April 24). This further emphasizes that care work in its most direct and physical form (such as the care work provided by social workers, nurses, and volunteers during the pandemic) needs professional control either from a doctor, or from the government's authorities.

Thirdly, the hierarchical relation between care and control is expanded from physical care work to health care in general when law enforcement workers appeared in the hospitals. According to the COVID-19 Facebook page, the appointed "hospital commanders" fulfilled two roles. On the one hand, they provided hospitals with enough medical and protective gear to protect health care workers who are in direct contact with the patients, who, as I showed above, are mainly gendered as female. On the other hand, they ease the workload of medical directors and hospital directors, who are exclusively male actors in the material, which again reflects the existing hierarchized gender segregation within Hungarian health care (AEEK 2019). This articulation of control further nuances its meaning: control as a means of protection is targeted at feminized health care workers, whereas with male hospital directors, control acquires the meaning of help and assistance. When female health care workers are portrayed with "hospital commanders," they are usually placed in the background as passive figures, watching the male figures and waiting for them, for example, to unpack protective gear (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, April 3, Photo: No title added). On the other hand, images of "hospital commanders" offering help to the hospital directors picture them on a similar eye level, as coworkers, which is also signaled by their shared activities (*e.g.:* Koronavírus 2020, March 30, Photo: "Fábián Bertold rendőr alezredes"). Thus, whereas protection refers to a built-in hierarchy between protector and protected, help and assistance is portrayed as cooperation between two equals.

Finally, the articulation of control and care has a geographic dimension as well. For instance, the largest old people's homes with the highest numbers of infections and death cases are in the capital. Here the frequent negative portrayal offered an opportunity to highlight a Budapest versus countryside division in the material. Furthermore, discourses on homes for the elderly also emphasized the centralized nature of control over the locally organized care work, as the management of old people's homes and the care of the elderly in general (for example, home deliveries, etc.) were reportedly the responsibility of the municipalities and not the government. Thus, performances of control became the exclusive

responsibility of the centralized government, who controlled local municipalities, who in turn performed care work (Koronavírus, 2020, March 25). The geographic differentiation has its gender aspects as well. People in the countryside are pictured as female and are referred to in the material as in need of help. They are portrayed as waving to police officers from their doorsteps, who according to the description of the images visit them to offer help (*e.g.*: Koronavírus 2020, April 20, Photo: No title added). The capital area, however, is continuously referred to as a place "where police officers have a lot to do" in terms of controlling and sanctioning those who do not cooperate with the lockdown regulations. They are often shown to be women, for example jogging outside in front of a huge outdoor banner that says, "Stay home" (Koronavírus 2020 April 2, Photo: "Koronavírus - Maradj otthon!"), walking without masks (Koronavírus 2020, April 7, Photo: No title added) or getting a fine (Koronavírus, 2020 April 10).

In conclusion, in the analyzed material, control is articulated both as regulation and protection, tightly bound to the masculinized state institutions of the police and the military. In relation to care, which is articulated in a highly feminized way, on the one hand, control means protection: first and foremost, the protection of elderly people, but also of care workers, and citizens from the countryside. On the other hand, control regulates and sanctions care work when it is portrayed as a potential harm to the elderly population. Care work as a potential harm is performed by young female citizens who shop in the time frame reserved for the elderly, and by female social workers in old people's homes who do not comply with hygiene rules. Care and control are articulated in a gendered way both on the visual and on the textual level of the material. On a visual level, caregivers are portrayed as women in their own environment (wearing slippers and informal clothing), where control appears as an external factor, mostly portrayed by male figures or masculinized positions. On the textual level, nurses are thanked for their "devoted work," where passion and humanity are the most important factors, proven by that fact that even briefly trained volunteers are suitable to execute it (Koronavírus, 2020b, May 12). The work of law enforcement workers, however, is framed as a highly professional duty in the material (Koronavírus, 2020a, April 24), referring to a gender-based differentiation that renders feminized care work to the realm of the informal, private sphere, whereas masculinized control is associated with the institutionalized public sphere. The government performs control over care work, whose intensified discussion during the pandemic could lead to a potential disruption within the illiberal logic on two different levels. First, physical care work related to immediate physical needs, like hunger, clothing, pain, enacted by female shoppers, female health care workers and female social workers, is newly defined during the pandemic as local, family-bound and a naturally female task. Second, the government articulates care work, either as potentially harmful (for the elderly population and thus indirectly to the government's familialist politics), or as vulnerable and in need of protection from outside influences (portrayed through the interaction of health care workers and "hospital commanders"). This enables the government to perform full state control over care workers through the mobilization of police and military masculinity and to strengthen and re-naturalize the already existing hierarchies between traditional gender roles from a new perspective during the pandemic. This state of affairs highlights the vulnerability both of the elderly population, on whom its familialism builds, and of the system of informal care work, which builds on the unpaid care work of female citizens, who paradoxically are also articulated as potential harm for the elderly and for the system.

DISCUSSION

In this paper I analyzed the Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP government's articulation of control and its relation to care work in the material published on the official governmental Facebook page during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The material shows that the government has used the pandemic to articulate a new crisis and thus, that the health crisis, often framed as global disruption in everyday practices, served to maintain the continuity of performing control in the country. First, on the level of execution, the government performed strong control by strengthening its centralized illiberal position though the announcement of emergency laws–like the Enabling Act, which provided it with even wider executive powers than before–regulations, and by strictly controlling all public information in connection to the pandemic and sanctioning everyone who did not comply with these rules. Such executive control was performed by the government-controlled state institutions through frequent appearances of law enforcement workers, police and military officers. Second, in relation to care, the articulation of control gained a double, somewhat contradictory meaning. In the material control in relation to care was articulated either as protection, first of the elderly population and second of the health care workers, or as a regulatory and sanctioning act towards female citizens who by performing care work also potentially harm the elderly population and thus indirectly the government's familialist politics. Importantly, the above-mentioned articulations of care and control, have an immanent gendered layer. First, portraying care work of the sick and elderly with female figures can be seen as an attempt to feminize care work through re-naturalizing its gendered portrayal and to re-naturalize its place in the private sphere to support the government in its neoliberal social politics to give out as little financial support and aid as possible during the pandemic. Second, the feminized care work is also articulated as in need for state control, portraying female citizens, especially those who provide care work in the informal or lower paid professional spheres, as a potential threat towards the elderly and government's familialist politics. Even though further research is needed to elaborate this point, this portrayal might refer to the government´s attempt to create new scapegoats for the instabilities of its social care system instead of addressing its shortcomings (Szikra 2018). This potential harm of female citizens to the elderly has a geographic emphasis as well. As "gender mainstreaming" is usually framed as the

ideological colonialism of the West in Hungary (Kováts and Pető 2017, 120) and is associated with the urban ruling elite, thus the capital area (Graff et al., 2019), the illiberal anti-elitism intertwines with anti-gender stances. In the material, female citizens are more often portrayed as potentially harmful in the urban than in the rural settings. Further conclusions would require additional research. Still, this portrayal resonates with a recent sociological finding, according to which the pandemic particularly increased the gender inequality in terms of household work in the cities, by increasing the amount of care work especially among middle class, highly educated city dweller females (Fodor et al., 2021, 95). They, accordingly, potentially represent the biggest threat to disrupt the government's social and family politics. In Hungary, the government exerts control over care work, whose intensified discussion during the pandemic could potentially lead to a disruption within the illiberal logic during the first wave of the pandemic, when rapid vaccination of the elderly and of care workers (health care workers, school and kindergarten teachers) was not yet available to stabilize the disrupted system of care work. Sedimented gender roles and control over the care system are successfully reinforced to prevent any possible feminist anti-hegemonic mobilization within the country. In the long term, this gives an opportunity for the government to strengthen its anti-gender family politics in which care work can be understood as a constellation of private and unpaid cross-generational and cross-gender transactions, and to create new scapegoats in the portrayal of city dweller female citizens. Further research would, however, be necessary to explore how the visible structural and systemic inequalities influenced feminist anti-hegemonic articulations within the researched period (Roth 2020).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/koronavirus.gov.hu.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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Pseudo-Media Sites, Polarization, and Pandemic Skepticism in Spain

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The Coronavirus pandemic has triggered an authentic infodemic, which is a global epidemic of disinformation that has spread throughout most of the world. Social media platforms and pseudo-media outlets have contributed to the problem by producing and disseminating misleading content that is potentially dangerous to public health. This research focuses on a rather unknown phenomenon, which involves digital sites that mimic the appearance of news media but provide pseudo-information. Five Spanish pseudo-media have been analyzed with the aim of enhancing understanding of the issues and the frames presented. The results show clear links with the far-right ideology as well as the presence of a populist, polarized discourse through the use of belligerent, offensive expressions to refer to institutions and their representatives. Politics is the main issue represented, with a frame that clearly points out the incompetence and cynicism of the Spanish government. Conspiracy theories associate the origins of the pandemic to a Chinese laboratory and emphasize a global plan to establish systemic control. Measures to stop the virus are framed as harmful and ineffective, linked to a euthanasia scheme targeted at older people, especially regarding vaccination, which is presented as a solution offered for economic interests.

Keywords: hyper-partisan media, polarization, pandemic skepticism, COVID-19, right-wing ideology, populism, Spain, pseudo-media

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has fomented a wave of conspiracy theories (Boberg et al., 2020), as well as skepticism (Brubaker, 2020) regarding preventive measures and the vaccination program against Covid-19. From the outset, authorities warned of the dangers of disinformation, including the General Director of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, on February 15th, 2020, when he made the following statement: "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic." The term "infodemic" has been promptly adopted by scholars (Bechmann, 2020; Cinelli et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020) in order to explain how the current hybrid media context (Chadwick, 2017) has fostered the dissemination of conspiracy theories (Bruder and Kunert, 2020; Romer and Jamieson, 2020), as well as disinformation regarding the coronavirus (Nguyen and Catalan, 2020). Most of them have been fed by a cluster of digital pseudo-media (Rathnayake, 2018), created worldwide in the last few years, whose aim is to serve as a loudspeaker for far-right parties and collectives, but at the same time to take advantage of the economic gains of the clickbait economy (Munger, 2020).

Among a plethora of definitions for alternative media (Wasilewski, 2019), most emphasize the aim of these outlets to present unconventional coverage of the social reality, unorthodox compared to the offering of the mainstream media. The criticism offered by the former involves the newsworthiness factor as well as the production and distribution process (Holtz-Bacha, 2020). "Alternative journalism proceeds from dissatisfaction not only with the mainstream coverage of

certain issues and topics, but also with the epistemology of news" (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1). Alternative media challenge the power of mainstream media and try to reverse the leading role of political and economic issues and actors, in order to empower social groups usually silenced and marginalized (Atton, 2008).

The terms "alternative media," or "alternative journalism," have been associated with left-wing activism since the 1970s when many "left-wing movements founded their own media outlets to counter mainstream media companies which were seen as a part of the establishment" (Haller and Holt, 2019: 1868). Some researchers, however, have noted the ambiguity of these terms and presented more suitable options, such as "community media," "radical media," "citizen media" or "activist media" (Downing, 2001; Rodríguez, 2001; Waltz, 2005). Controversy is especially acute since "alternative" is also associated with far-right media platforms that portray themselves as "alternative" to mainstream media and politics (Wasilewski, 2019). Figenschou and Ihlebaek highlight the "upsurge" of far-right alternative news providers over the last decade (2019: 1223). Heft et al. add that "despite being a rather new phenomenon, right-wing alternative news sites have rapidly become a cornerstone of the broader right-wing digital news infrastructure" (2019: 3). In fact, they present themselves as "journalistic outlets in their own right" (2019: 3), rather than mere opinion suppliers (Benkler et al., 2017).

Unlike the original progressive counter-hegemonic media, right-wing outlets fall short of strengthening democratic culture (Downing, 2001), empowering their users (Wasilewski, 2019), or encouraging openness. As emphasized by Atton, they represent "a community with closure, where the principles of authoritarian populism prevent any meaningful debate and work against any notion of democratic communication, insisting instead on hierarchical control" (2006: 575). The "relative absence of creativity, freedom and exploration of ideas and arguments," "with similarly curtailed forms and styles of presentation and structure" (Atton, 2006: 575) focus on the "collective repetition" of stereotypes (Wasilewski, 2019).

Haller and Holt (2019) affirm that most research on alternative media focuses on the left-wing spectrum and its positive effect on democratic discourse, "inspired by anti-global, anti-capitalist viewpoints" (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019: 1223). Nonetheless, other studies suggest that they are also linked to conspiracy theories, disinformation and populism (Van Prooijen et al., 2015), even if this reality is more prominent among right-wing media (Krouwel et al., 2017; Douglas et al., 2019). Until recently, little attention has been paid to right-wing media (Atton, 2006; Haller and Holt, 2019; Heft et al., 2020). However, the role of the *Breitbart News* in the 2016 United States Presidential elections and the increasing number of digital platforms in diverse countries has raised awareness of the relationship between the rise of populism and hyper-partisan media (Benkler et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2020).

Although the term "alternative media" has been associated with the "far-right media" (Atton, 2006) or "hyper-partisan media" (Benkler et al., 2017), its ambiguity prevented us from adopting the concept. We consider the term "pseudo-media" to be more appropriate, as these outlets mimic "compositional forms and styles used by mainstream journalists" (Rathnayake, 2018), while infringing journalistic conventions and mixing information, commentary, and ideology (Del-Fresno-García, 2019). This term is also consistent with research that highlights the blended nature of such texts that combine "moderate levels of sensationalism, disinformation, and partisanship to provide antiestablishment narratives" (Mourão and Robertson, 2019: 2077).

Unlike the positive connotation of alternative, the term pseudo-media clearly indicates the fraudulent character of the outlets that try to hide their real character. In fact, criticism directed at the mainstream media is not based on rational, democratic dialogue, but on "an emotional judgement that seeks to create mistrust" (Figenschou and Ihlebaek, 2019: 1224). By focusing the research on a country such as Spain, which is part of a media system defined as a Mediterranean, or as a Polarized Pluralist Model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), the term pseudo-media is more accurate than any derivative term associated with partisan. Pseudo-media is also associated with "pseudo-information," a concept that includes "all types (of) false or inaccurate information" (Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2021: 165). As the authors emphasize, "pseudo-information is not a counter concept to information. Rather, it is still under the umbrella of "information," but discerns information causing harmful consequences or social externalities on information subscribers" (2020: 165).

Waisbord (2018) perceives the current communicative condition and populist beliefs in terms of "elective affinity" linked to the right-wing spectrum that embraces "post-truth." In a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), where traditional media are facing high levels of mistrust–82% of Spanish people have little or no trust in the media (Fernández, 2020)–, right-wing alternative media have found a breeding ground in which to flourish. The growing presence of the latter in terms of users and social media sharing can be considered as "one example of an ongoing polarization and fragmentation of the political discourse in liberal democracies" (Haller and Holt, 2019: 1668). Mistrust toward the mainstream media is related to the support of the populist agenda (Fawzi, 2019). Despite the vagueness of the term "populism," it is often referred to by its ideological and communicative style (Schulz et al., 2018; Boberg et al., 2020). In this sense, it is characterized as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde, 2004) with "three sub-dimensions: anti-elitism attitudes, a preference for popular sovereignty, and a belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people" (Schulz et al., 2018); and, on a communicative level, by its focus on "emotion-eliciting appeals" (Wirz, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the right-wing pseudo-media ecosystem in Spain regarding disinformation provided in relation to the coronavirus issues. Our study harnesses an important source, which is web-based content from digital outlets that try to imitate the formal aspects of the news media, yet produce misleading, biased, and polarized content that contributes to the problem of disinformation on fundamental issues such as public health. This research attempts to offer insight into the issues and frames in which the pandemic has been presented in several right-wing pseudo-

TABLE 1 | Pseudo-media and their audiences.

Media	Year	Unique visitors		Launched by
		August 2020	January 2021	
Euskalnews	2019	220,000	420,000	Euskalnews, ltd
Altavoz de sucesos	2019	660,000	240,000	Jorge bayer sáez Cid (2020)
El diestro	2016	737,636	1,501,653	El diestro editorial, ltd.
Alerta nacional	2018	31,815	41,891	Alerta digital, ltd.
		November 2020: 155,495		
El correo de españa	2018	540,000	280,000	Sierra norte digital, ltd.

Source: SimilarWeb/Prepared by the Author

media outlets, in order to know whether they adopt populist strategies and how they exploit the pandemic. The study adds a comparative perspective to this emerging field of research and contributes to a better understanding of the communicative ecosystem.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on the analysis of five right-wing digital outlets (**Table 1**) that are prominent in the Spanish disinformation ecosystem. Based on an extensive search of online information and bibliographic references (Hernández Conde and Fernández García, 2019; Vila Márquez, 2020), we first compiled a list of potential outlets to include in the research (11). From this group, we finally selected five: 1) digital news providers offering at least a rudimentary form of "current, nonfiction content with a given periodicity"; 2) the inclusion of a self-description as alternative, or anti-mainstream, among others; 3) a right-wing adscription explicitly stated or displayed in their topic focus, and 4) country-based, in this case Spain (Heft et al., 2020: 28). The selection added two more prerequisites: their regular activity between March 2020 and February 2021, and the ability to conduct specific word searches in their archives. Based on these requirements, outlets such as *Diario Patriota*, *Despiertainfo* and *Caso Aislado* were discarded due to their lack of activity or regular updating. Sites not offering a consistent system of word searches were also rejected, such as *Mediterráneo Digital* or *La Nación Digital*, as well as one that described itself as a "personal blog" (*Contando Estrelas*).

Although *El Diestro* was the only outlet that openly admitted being the "benchmark newspaper of the Spanish right," the ideological background of the other four is also connected to right-wing extremist ideology. In spite of their self-presentation, an assessment of the founders' identities clearly reveals links to far-right ideology. In fact, *Euskalnews* was launched by David Pasarín-Gegunde, leader of the *Liga Foralista* party, a Basque version of far-right ideology (Del Moral, 2020). *El Correo de España* is led by Eduardo García Serrano, who worked in the past for different far-right media, and portrays himself as a "Falangist." The team of collaborators includes a wide group of names associated with the remains of the dictatorship, and even includes the president of the Francisco Franco National Foundation, dedicated to extolling the figure of the dictator. The organization also channels its activity through the *SND Editores* publishing house, which is dedicated to far-right topics and actors. *Altavoz de Sucesos* is owned by Jorge Bayer Sáez (Cid, 2020), founder of *Diario Patriota* and *Caso Aislado*, both characterized by the spread of disinformation (Ramírez and Castellón, 2018). *Alerta Nacional* and *Alerta Digital* both belong to Armando Robles, an entrepreneur who portrays himself as the "Spanish Donald Trump," who was also the previous communication manager of Jesús Gil, a populist businessman and politician during the 1990s (Del Castillo, 2020).

Despite ideological connections, the analyzed outlets assure their journalistic independence. *Euskalnews* affirms that it offers "current affairs news in the Basque Country without censorship." Similarly, *El Correo de España* portrays itself as "a newspaper independent of any political party that aims to fulfill the commitment with our readers." Moreover, *Altavoz de Sucesos* underscores that they "work daily to report all national and international news with a team of professionals who work from all parts of Spain to bring all the events to your home first." The newsroom team has just three people and the director. Considering the above, we pose the following question:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of the pseudo-media?

In order to obtain a sample for analysis, three data selections were made, coinciding with the three first waves of the coronavirus in Spain, according to the Spanish Ministry of Health (2020). Data gathering was carried out at the peak of each wave–March 15th, 2020, October 20th, 2020, and January 15th, 2021–and included the 30 following days as well. The first step in selecting the sample was to search for the word *covid* on the internal search engine of each media archive to identify the news items published in the periods analyzed. We completed the sample with a new search with specific terms: *lockdown*, *mask*, and *vaccine*, in order to access the main articles published about the pandemic (N = 1,330). After removing duplicates and press release news, the sample was reduced to N = 1,009 articles, including *Euskalnews* (EU, n = 152), *Altavoz de Sucesos* (AS, n = 79), *El Diestro* (ED, n = 89), *Alerta Nacional* (AN, n = 413), and *El Correo de España* (CO, n = 276). The links to these items were saved in an Excel file. The following research questions have been analyzed by using qualitative and quantitative methodologies:

RQ2: What are the most relevant topics addressed in quantitative terms?
RQ3: What are the dominant frames regarding pandemic topics?

Content analysis of the final sample involved analyzing each text completely to identify 1) the main topics of the items; and 2) the frames associated with the topics. To guarantee reliability and consistency in the qualitative analysis, the one codifier used performed a test-retest of 33% of the registers until complete agreement was reached before continuing to complete the entire data codification. With the aim of delving into the arguments highlighted by the pseudo-media, once the main topics were determined among the publications gathered, we analyzed which frames were used to refer to those topics in order to discover the main ideas associated with each. To frame something involves a process of "selection" and "salience," by which the definition, diagnosis, moral evaluation, and proposal of solutions concerning certain topics are developed (Entman, 1993: 52). Framing analysis (Scheufele, 1999; Tankard, 2001) has been part of the communication research field in recent decades for the purpose of gaining knowledge regarding the central message of a news item and the proposed interpretation.

RESULTS

The three following sections present the quantitative and qualitative results of the research conducted in order to answer the research questions above.

Pseudo-Media Characteristics

The five sites analyzed can be defined as pseudo-media, considering that even if they seek to mimic the appearance of traditional media, none of them respects the minimum standards of journalistic practice (**Table 2**). Firstly, the published texts almost never identify the sources and, when they rarely do so, the data is based on social networks or unreliable outlets, as they refer to other pseudo-media, mostly from other countries. However, in some cases they provide the source, but it is not the most appropriate for assessing the risk of infection after vaccination [i.e., an orthopaedic surgeon rather than an epidemiologist (*Euskalnews,* January 23, 2021)], or they offer a misleading interpretation of the data obtained from official sources [i.e., *El Correo de España* published that in 2020 fewer people had died in Spain than in the five previous years (January 24, 2021)]. The absence of ethical and professional criteria is reflected in the fact that most of the articles seemingly presented as news are not bylined. Secondly, the texts included on the sites do not meet the professional rule of separation between news and commentary. In fact, they rely on biased headlines that explicitly show an orientation toward right-wing extremist ideology. Thirdly, their publications are detached from deontological codes and ethical concerns (i.e., the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ, 2020), particularly regarding sensitive topics such as public health or migration.

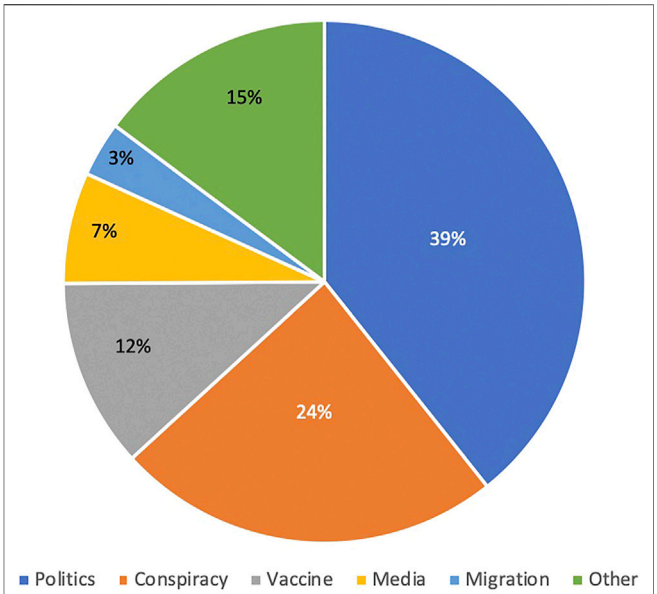

FIGURE 1 | Main topics (%).

The outlets analyzed are not only examined and contested frequently by fact-checking platforms in Spain due to their overriding tendency to publish disinformation, but some have even been involved in legal proceedings as a result of their activity (Sánchez Castrillo, 2021). Their willingness to portray themselves as anti-mainstream (Heft et al., 2020) encourages them to display the image of being the victims of censorship. On its Facebook webpage, *Euskalnews* claims it is "the most censored media on the internet," and adds, "There must be a reason." Likewise, *El Correo de España* asserts on the same social network that it "has become the main communication media with a dissident line in Spain and is being persecuted by Facebook and the rest of the *verifiers,*" referring to the fact-checking platforms.

The five sites show large discrepancies, not only in the number of items published on the covid-19 issue, but also regarding the type of texts disseminated. Two principle models can be identified. The first, which *El Correo de España* follows, is characterized by its productivity, with nearly 550 articles published and two clear approaches: one focused on press release news (n = 272) and another on a mix of pseudo-information and commentary with a clear bias toward far-right ideology (n = 276): "Morocco invades Spain since 1975: the Canary Islands, its springboard" (November 20, 2020) or "Squandering the money we do not have with subsidies to "*feminazi* issues"" (November 9, 2020). Considering the aim of this research, we analyzed only pseudo-information and commentary, in order to avoid distorting the data. The second model, which the four remaining outlets follow, also involves differences in production and style. *Euskalnews* and *Alerta Nacional* mostly publish non-bylined pseudo-information while the majority of the articles gathered from *Altavoz de Sucesos* are bylined. *El Diestro* offers pseudo-information and commentary that is indistinguishable one from the other, with irregular criteria for bylining them. The models identified are

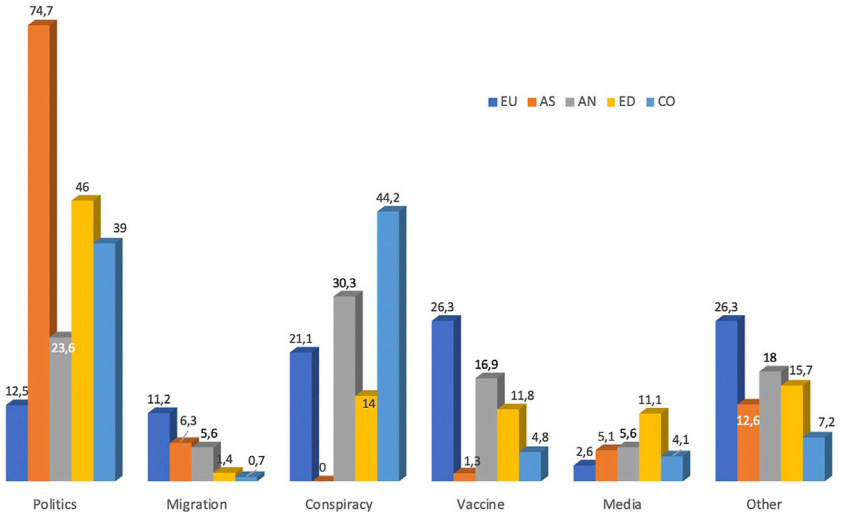

FIGURE 2 | Topics published by outlet (%).

relevant in order to show the diversity of options adopted and the need to avoid generic approaches.

Issues

In order to answer RQ2, the news items were first classified to define the main issues covered. Five main issues were identified, in addition to a sixth that included other. We proceeded by assigning one issue to each item, except in the case of 16 items, which were linked to two issues (N = 1,024). The results show that politics is the main issue among the outlets analyzed, composing four out of ten of the items gathered (see **Figure 1**). The majority of them refer to the representatives of the Spanish government, mainly the Socialist Party President Pedro Sánchez and the second Vice President Pablo Iglesias, leader of the Podemos party. Conspiracy theories regarding the origins, interests, and decisions made about the pandemic appear in nearly a quarter of the texts, while the vaccination program to fight it are present in 11.7%. Finally, nearly 7% of the items focus on criticism directed at the media and journalists for their coverage of the coronavirus, while migration (an issue that is *a priori* issue and not even linked to the pandemic),–received attention as well.

Even if the pseudo-media rely on similar strategies to feed disinformation, they are not homogeneous in their publishing interests (**Figure 2**). The vaccine was the main topic for *Euskalnews* (26.3%). However, it was irrelevant for *Altavoz de Sucesos*. Nonetheless, the latter outlet focused on politics, with 75% of the items devoted to that topic. *El Diestro* also showed interest in politics, though to a lesser extent, without downplaying the importance of conspiracy theories and vaccines. The former, conspiracy theories, was the most relevant topic for *El Correo de España* and *Alerta Nacional*, with politics being the second most important issue for both of them.

Frames

After having identified the issues, a framing analysis was carried out in order to determine which values and interpretations are present in each pseudo-media. The qualitative research developed in the following sections is summarized in **Table 3**. The issue of *conspiracy theories* was the most productive, with six associated frames, while *vaccination* and *politics* were each linked to three frames. Despite the fact that the frames associated with vaccines involve some kind of conspiracy, the issue *Vaccine* has been disassociated from *Conspiracy*, as it was considered to be a stand-alone issue.

Euskalnews

This media outlet focuses on the negative effects of vaccination by presenting the vaccine as the cause of hundreds of deaths and side effects, as well as new outbreaks of the disease. This is done through the use of misleading headlines that link receiving a vaccination with increased mortality, disregarding the nuance that there is no evidence to support an allergic response: "The coronavirus vaccine can kill a person in 25 min: it happened in New York" (February 10, 2021). The site gathers this pseudo-information from foreign countries, relying on second hand sources from unreliable outlets (*mpr21. info, Daily Mail*), without additional verification or contextualization for the Spanish audience. It also echoes all types of objections and warnings, regardless of the background or specialization of the doctor cited–"Does Pfizer's vaccine increase the risk of COVID infection? A French doctor believes a link exists" (January 23, 2021)–or taking advantage of a clickbait strategy in a headline by stressing the alleged *scoop* that is not even developed in the text: "Bombshell! The WHO questions the effectiveness of the vaccines due to new virus mutations" (February 11, 2021).

The site also employs a sensationalist style to highlight a second frame: the forced vaccination of the most unprotected members of the society, which include the elderly–"Two Alicante judges order forced vaccinations of two disabled elderly people despite strong opposition from their families and assistants: Scoundrels!" (January 27, 2021)–, and minors–"Six-year-old children used as guinea pigs to experiment with the controversial Oxford-Astrazeneca vaccine" (February 14, 2021). Both headlines are misleading because they leave out key information.

TABLE 2 | Characteristics.

	Genres	Bylined	Headline style
Euskalnews	Pseudo-information	Less than 10%	News structure, misleading content, clickbait
Altavoz de sucesos	Pseudo-information	More than 70%	News structure, editorial slant
Alerta nacional	Pseudo-information	Less than 10%	Extended, editorial slant, clickbait
El diestro	Pseudo-information	Less than 20%	Extended, editorial slant, clickbait
	Commentary	More than 90%	
El correo de españa	Press release news[a]	-	Short, editorial slant
	Commentary	More than 90%	

[a]*Not included in the sample analysis Source: Prepared by the author.*

In *Euskalnews,* conspiracy theories play a key role, with three focuses of attention: the origins of the pandemic, the corruption of the different institutions managing the crisis, and the ineffectiveness of the measures taken to combat it. The thesis of a laboratory-created virus not only insists on referring to the pandemic as the "Chinese virus" (January 20, 2021), but includes headlines that explicitly appeal to the readers: "In China they celebrate Halloween with massive parties without masks or social distancing. Are they joking with us?" (April 2, 2020), or they insinuate that there is evidence that will soon be announced by relying on a British tabloid: "*Daily Mail* claims Pompeo will reveal evidence about the true origin of the Coronavirus" (January 15, 2021). The second frame insists on the idea of corrupt and deceitful institutions: "More corruption in the WHO. One of its researchers received money from the Communist party of China" (February 14, 2021). The willingness to undermine the legitimacy of the WHO is also expressed in the following example: "The WHO ridicules everyone about the origin of the coronavirus. Now they say it came from foreign frozen products" (February 2, 2021). Both the start of the headline and the text express an explicit ideological position over the issue, yet they fail to mention that it was published by *Breitbart*.

By giving voice to scientists who are not specialists in epidemiology, such as the dean of the Euskadi Professional Institute of Biologists, this media outlet frames the ineffectiveness of the measures and the economic interests involved. More than a third of the items gathered are related to this issue. While stressing that the source is a "leading member of the Euskadi Biologists organization" (October 28, 2020), the outlet also reproduces the tweets of a Spanish singer to reinforce the view that the pandemic aims to scar the country: "They lie about figures and deaths" (January 20, 2021).

It is also important to underscore the focus on migration, whether to note the contagion among minors in reception centers or to criminalize them in various ways, among which is not having a home where they can stay during lockdown. This fact is used to show them as privileged and not subject to the strict regulations: "Coronaprivilege: seven violent *magrebies* roam uncontrollably through Bilbao while the rest are bored at home" (March 27, 2020).

Altavoz de Sucesos

Politics plays a central role for this media outlet, as three quarters of the gathered items focus on the coronavirus topic. They represent a collection of strongly critical statements that frame governmental incompetence and serious irregularities: "The Supreme Court puts the Sánchez Government on the ropes: it will analyze its disastrous management of the coronavirus" (April 1, 2020), publishing misleading headlines that are unsubstantiated in the text: "The Imperial College confirms Government negligence: the 8M triggered the contagion of up to two million people" (April 2, 2020). A second frame stresses the aim of left-wing parties to curtail freedom of expression–"Podemos presents an initiative to monitor social networks and eliminate hate messages" (October 25, 2020)–and to act as censors of political freedom: "The left uses the riots throughout Spain to call for VOX to be outlawed: "It's a criminal organization"" (November 1, 2020). To emphasize these ideas, *Altavoz de Sucesos* echoes a plethora of attacks expressed by political opponents, gathered on social networks, and introduced by using demeaning language: "Trump tramples Pedro Sánchez and points to his administration as an example of what the United States should avoid" (March 31, 2020), "Isabel Díaz Ayuso puts Pedro Sánchez in his place in the online meeting" (March 29, 2020), or "Toni Cantó dismantles communist totalitarianism in six wonderful minutes that sink Podemos" (October 29, 2020).

A third frame related to politics shows their members as cynical, wasteful public sector managers who are "incapable of stopping the increase of coronavirus deaths": "The Government spends 28,000€ to install screens in official cars to protect its members from the coronavirus" (April 14, 2020), "The Government of the PSOE-Podemos coalition spends nearly 56 million euros a year on "silver-spooned" personnel and advisers" (October 31, 2020), or "Irene Montero wastes a fortune on a frivolous study that concludes that the color pink oppresses girls" (October 29, 2020).

Though to a lesser extent than politics, the issue of uncontrolled migration is severely criticized by this outlet–"The lack of immigration control continues: more than 350 illegal immigrants arrived in Spain in the last few hours" (November 2, 2020)–and blames migrants for the unrest and thefts during a protest against coronavirus restrictions, while getting preferential treatment: "The Ministry of Justice offers its condolences to Muslims and ignores the more than 13,000 deceased Spaniards" (April 6, 2020). Attacks on the mainstream media are clearly framed in this headline: "The Government will give 15 million in subsidies to TV channels such as La Sexta and Antena three in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic crisis" (March 31, 2020).

Alerta Nacional

Conspiracy theories are built on the foundation of para-normality. The pandemic is predominantly framed as a "previously anticipated" phenomenon, a "prophecy fulfilled"

TABLE 3 | Frames associated with the main issues of the pandemic coverage.

Issue	Frame
Conspiracies	The pandemic is a lie, a "Plandemic" aimed at globalization
	The coronavirus was created in China, and this can be proven
	The pandemic is linked to a euthanasia scheme aimed at the elderly
	The World Health Organization (WHO) is a corrupt, deceitful institution
	Safety measures (lockdowns, masks) are ineffective and harmful
	Covid-19 is an alibi for political control and restriction of freedom
	Prognosis: Only military control will address the situation in Spain
Politics	A new constitutional order must stop misrule and governmental incompetence in Spain
	Politicians lie, deceive, and mislead the people
	Citizens must rebel against the government
Vaccine	Vaccination causes hundreds of deaths and side effects
	There is a business agenda behind vaccination
	The elderly are undergoing forced vaccination and children are being used to test vaccinations
Migration	Migration is out of control and represents an invasion
	They receive preferential treatment while Spanish people have to follow the rules
Media	Mainstream media and journalists lie and manipulate, and they are bought off by the government

Source: Prepared by the author.

(March 22, 2020), heralding the "apocalypse" (March 17, 2020) and causing a "viral holocaust" (March 20, 2020) with Biblical references to the "Angel of Death" (March 19, 2020). However, at the same time, covid-19 is portrayed as "a deliberately created Chinese virus," "hidden" by the "communist regime" (April 10, 2020). Secondly, conspiracy theories are framed within the argument of the "extermination of the elderly": "(TREMENDOUS VIDEO) They are letting the elderly DIE in nursing homes without treating them: VERY RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT" (March 31, 2020). Moreover, they insinuate a type of elderly genocide: ""The old must die." Netherlands criticizes Spain and Italy for admitting "people who are too old" into the ICU" (March 30, 2020). The plot ends with a third frame that also emphasizes that left-wing parties in power in Spain take advantage of this situation in order to "nationalize banks" (March 17, 2020), "conduct a coup d'état" (March 20, 2020), or force an "Orwellian society" (April 13, 2020). Globally, the pandemic will be the alibi for various constraints: refugee camps for violators of COVID rules, compulsory vaccination, and identification: "The Number of the Beast in everyone: Bill Gates plans to implant chips in all humans to "fight" COVID 19" (March 28, 2020).

Although *Alerta Nacional* does not publish items framing vaccination as having serious adverse effects, it insists on its ineffectiveness: "The pharmaceutical company MERCK abandons the development of its vaccine AND IT TELLS THE TRUTH! "Catching the virus and being cured is much safer and more effective"" (February 1, 2021). However, the site extols the virtues of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V by relying on previous items published by *Russia Today* (RT). *Alerta Nacional* frequently includes capital letters to stress polarizing messages.

Items related to politics are associated with two frames. The first portrays an incompetent government that lies to its citizens, buys fraudulent tests, and does not implement the economic measures required, while the number of covid deaths and infections increases. The second insists on the scarce criticism received, both from civil society –"A nation of sheep begets a government of wolves" (March 30, 2020)– and from political opponents –"This is how the Government LIES to us with the permission of the drooling, dumb opposition from the PP: COME IN AND SEE! THEY LAUGH AT YOU!" (October 25, 2020).

Despite the fact that the *media* issue only includes five items, this outlet does not miss the opportunity to accuse the mainstream media of complicity with the government: "Sánchez forces the self-employed to pay two more installments while preparing 100 million euros in advertising for the media mafia" (April 8, 2020), and they attack any effort to stop disinformation by echoing other pseudo-media along the same lines.

El Diestro

Politics is the main concern of *El Diestro*, with nearly 40% of its publications focused on the issue. The analysis shows that two frames play a central role. The first is the thesis of Spanish "misrule" in the hands of an irresponsible government that despizes its citizens. In order to build this argument, this outlet not only rejects any intention to inform, but also uses abusive expressions to discredit the government: "We are in the hands of lunatics!!" (April 5, 2020), "(President) Pedro Sánchez laughs during his speech in Congress. Can a person be more despicable?" (April 9, 2020) or "Carajillito' (coffee with cognac) (minister of Transport and Mobility José Luis) Ábalos demonstrating, once again, that if he bites his tongue he will be poisoned" (April 13, 2020). To reinforce the attacks, *El Diestro* reproduces a wide variety of critical expressions found on social networks, particularly Twitter and YouTube, adopting a type of war language that fuels political mistrust: "How the rabid left lies, manipulates, and invents" (April 2, 2020). Secondly, this media focuses on economic measures in order to accuse the government of lying and making false announcements, particularly toward self-employed workers: "The lie of 200 billion euros in public investment to reactivate the economy" (March 24, 2020), or "Never before seen: The government of Pedro Sánchez THREATENS the self-employed to pay" (March 22, 2020).

Conspiracy theories had a secondary role in the texts gathered. On the one hand, the goal was to stress the limitation of rights and censorship. This frame is expressed in headlines such as, "The declaration of a state of alarm violates our fundamental rights" (March 19, 2020), or "The genocidal coup government of Pedro Sánchez" (March 21, 2020), or "Sánchez and the Gag Law of the 21st century" (April 10, 2020), which emphasize that the government took advantage of the health situation to impose their policies, even on sensitive issues like justice –"With the excuse of the coronavirus, the government controls Justice" (March 28, 2020) –or property –"Scandalous!!! Be very careful with this: In today's *BOE*, the communist government charges private property" (March 31, 2020) –or freedom of expression–"Be careful with what you publish because the Government, with your taxes, is going to censor you in networks" (April 11, 2020). References to the use of masks, lockdowns, and globalism can only be found in texts gathered at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021–"What is Globalism? This is how it all began, and the reasons why the current situation around the world is taking place, and the RESET (Davos 2021)" (October 26, 2020). On the other hand, the second frame is connected with conspiracy theories, and it links the pandemic to a euthanasia scheme, especially aimed at the elderly–"Future elderly, current corpses"–and insinuates an attempt to hide it: "They want to hide the real pain that exists in Spain, these are the photographs that the government doesn't want you to see" April 8, 2020).

In absolute terms, *El Diestro* is the media outlet that focuses more attention on the vaccination issue. Moreover, the items are concentrated in one month, coinciding with the beginning of the program. This media includes approximately fifty items that frame vaccination as a danger with the potential for hundreds of deaths and side effects, linked to murky economic interests as well. The first idea is encouraged by using alarming pseudo-information from different countries as well as from Spanish retirement homes, with misleading headlines that refer to the death of people not yet immunized. The second idea is framed by headlines that insist that vaccination is a business ploy–"The big historical lie: first the vaccine was created, and then the pandemic, not the other way around" (January 28, 2021), or "Pfizer announces staggering revenues for the year from vaccines" (February 02, 2021)–or asserting that denouncements about some politicians being vaccinated irregularly are uncertain and are intended "to create the desire to do so among the population" (January 24, 2021), in a kind of "childish psychological game" (January 29, 2021).

The frame that accuses traditional media and progressive journalists of lies and manipulation, *El Diestro* attacks both groups. However, at the same time it praizes those who criticize the coalition government of the Socialist Party and Podemos, or have been closed down due to accusations of disinformation. Language connotation is used to describe prominent TV anchors–"the submissive Xavier Fortes" (April 14, 2020) or "Ferreras continues to demonstrate a pathetic and ridiculous sectarianism that is even embarrassing" (April 14, 2020)– or to make a joke using the name of the fact-checking platform Newtral, launched by a journalist: "Ana Pastor, the *Newtrolera*" (April 10, 2020). The same journalists are always displayed as being at the service of the government in power and receiving benefits for it: "Scandalous: The government intends to pay for the services rendered by Wyoming, Mejide, Griso, Ferreras, Pastor, Vázquez and company" (March 31, 2020), while accusing them of giving misleading information about the most conservative representatives: "The progressive press never stops lying about Díaz Ayuso" (April 14, 2020).

Xenophobic discourse is present when framing migration as an "organized invasion" (November 8, 2020) to "destroy us" (Spanish culture) (November 15, 2020), mixed with references to the alleged privileges of migrants compared to the restrictions of local people: "The new affront of the government: Ramadan yes, Holy Week no" (April 11, 2020).

El Correo de España

This site has turned the coronavirus into a great opportunity to disseminate an endless variety of conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic, devoting half of its texts to the idea. *El Correo de España* builds its strategy with five interlinked frames. The first, expressed by the term "Plandemic," refers to a denial strategy that rejects not only scientific explanations, but even deaths. Mixing unconnected data, opinion, and a typical clickbait headline, the texts "Ten certainties that confirm a Plandemic" (October 18, 2020), and "Remembering thirty pieces of evidence that demonstrate the Big Lie of the coronavirus" (October 28, 2020), underscore the idea that "The pandemic is a lie: fewer people died in Spain last year than in the last five" (January 24, 2021).

The second conspiracy frame emphasizes the thesis that the pandemic was created in China and uses different expressions with ideological and xenophobic biases that link the "yellow virus" (April 13, 2020), the "communist dictatorship" (March 31, 2020), and the "communist *putsch*" (March 26, 2020) with a plan to replace the "cosmopolitan, liberal West." Though possibly inconsistent with the previous statement, as a third frame this media insists there is a "complot" designed and orchestrated by a "New Global religion" (November 14, 2020) associated with the Global Economic Forum and powerful businessmen such as Bill Gates and George Soros, aimed at a "Global reset" and the "extermination of nation-states" (March 15, 2020). Conspiracy theories are also supported by using a strategy of fear toward measures that are paradoxically causing the deaths: "Lockdown has killed more elderly than the alleged covid-19" (November 12, 2020).

The fourth frame highlights that the coronavirus is "the perfect alibi to establish a communist dictatorship" (March 31, 2020), to control justice, sink the economy, and end private property. Along these lines, it refers to the measures taken as examples of the "covidian dictatorship" (January 25, 2021) and crimes committed against humanity. The site calls the lockdown a "house arrest" (October 21, 2020), and the state of alarm declaration a violation of fundamental rights. After portraying this chaotic scenario, the fifth frame emerges as the only option to overcome the situation with the following headline: "For massive evil, the military is the remedy" (April 7, 2020). Far-right appeals to military intervention are common in the texts analyzed, including one entitled, "There is only one way to save Spain"

(March 28, 2020), which concludes that the country is "at war," and compares "today's dictatorship with the authoritarian social democracy of the Franco regime" (February 3, 2020).

The permanent attack on government decisions characterizes the first frame associated with the issue of *politics*, with no argument other than insults, as in the case of "The ever-so-evil left," "Not just fools, even worse," or "The Government is the real virus in Spain" (January 24, 2021). The thesis of the pseudo-media, which has launched a "call for a new constitutional order" (November 5, 2020), is linked with the last conspiracy frame, especially when restoring references to the dictatorship–"The desecration of Franco's tomb was only the first step in everything we are seeing, and everything yet to come" (January 16, 2020)–or, in the article "Catatonic Spain," the call for "the emergence of leadership without fear of anything, with firm convictions" (October 31, 2020), released by the president of the Francisco Franco foundation. Following the previous frame, the second stresses that the government deserves harsher criticism from citizens–"Finally a neighborhood federation protests against the Sánchez Government" (January 26, 2021), or "The Government deserves more protests than (King) Felipe VI" from political opponents. While the most extreme are applauded–"VOX is not a political caste, it is leading by example" (April 4, 2020), or "Madrid resists social-communist harassment" (November 11, 2020)–lukewarm criticism is questioned: "Casado whitewashes the Government" (October 24, 2020).

Though less so than the previous one, references to the mainstream media emphasize the frame of buying allegiance to silence the media and connivance with politicians, as this headline suggests: "The big media press the Government: "Either subsidies or criticism for the management of Covid-19" (May 5, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The relevance of this research is founded upon the increasing levels of disinformation and polarization and their implications for democracy (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Casero-Ripollés, 2020), particularly in a country such as Spain with low levels of trust in the media (Newman et al., 2019). Dissatisfaction with the mainstream media is an important driving force (Müller and Schulz, 2021) in the emergence of these pseudo-media outlets. This situation has been occurring simultaneously with an upsurge of far-right wing parties such as Vox and the latter's entry into Spanish democratic institutions for the first time in 4 decades (González-Enríquez, 2017). From the time it entered the Andalusian Parliament in December of 2018, this party has obtained representation not only in various regional parliaments, but in the Spanish National Parliament as well, where it has consolidated its role as the third political force based on representation.

Although certain characteristics define the five media analyzed as "pseudo-media," they are not homogenous in their style or editorial focus, nor even in their frequency of publication, which reveals diverse patterns (Haller and Holt, 2019). This indicates a variety of models, strategies and interests, and prevents "simplistic interpretations of hyper-partisan media" (Heft et al., 2020: 38). Our research shows two organizational models that range from a more conventional appearance, regular publishing, and structure (*El Correo de España* and *El Diestro*), and to a lesser extent *Alerta Nacional, Altavoz de Sucesos*, and *Euskalnews*. *El Correo de España*, for instance, presents a dual model that combines press release news–mainly from local and regional institutions of Madrid in the hands of the Popular Party–together with a blend of pseudo-information and commentary. These results are consistent with research that stresses the increasing difficulty that audiences have in differentiating between hyper-partisan and standard online news (Heft et al., 2020).

A clear emphasis on the issues and the frames used to outline such issues show the heterogeneity of editorial interests regarding the coronavirus coverage that range from turning the health crisis into an opportunity to attack the Spanish government to focusing on conspiracy theories. While criticism of the government and claims of a new political order in Spain are more prevalent in *Altavoz de Sucesos* and *El Diestro*, conspiracy theories are mostly associated with *Alerta Nacional, Euskalnews*, and *El Correo de España*. In the last case, frames discrediting the progressive government are also significant. *Euskalnews* completes this approach with two common obsessions of far-right wing media, such as vaccines (Douglas, 2021) and migration (Rone, 2020), even if its connection to the coronavirus is tangential. In all cases, one can clearly identify the pattern of a populist (Müller and Schulz, 2021; Rae, 2020) and polarized discourse (Stroud, 2010), aligned with far-right ideology.

The populist approach is framed by using expressions that describe the elites of politics, science, and the media as betraying, deceitful people (Schulz et al., 2018). The Spanish government, as the representative of the political elite (even worse, a progressive left-wing coalition) is the target of attacks due to its incompetence and deception of citizens. The political authorities managing the health crisis are portrayed not only as incapable of carrying out the task, but as detrimental to the people, causing them severe harm and even exploiting the situation for their own political interests, limiting the fundamental freedoms of their citizens. Though not the first target, international institutions such as the WHO are portrayed as corrupt and contemptible (Mudde, 2004).

Criticism of the mainstream media, one of the cardinal points of the populist strategy (Haller and Holt, 2019), is easy to recognize with frequent accusations and personal attacks on renowned journalists and TV anchors, who presumably conceal relevant information in complicity with the establishment and, accordingly, receive financial support from the Spanish government. However, the pseudo-media analyzed rely on their "media peers." They use diverse online outlets and social media programs on platforms as references–from Spain and abroad–to feed and support their content. That not only reinforces their editorial viewpoint but also provides feedback to the far-right alternative ecosystem and, consequently, enhances selective exposure and the echo-chamber effect (Bruns, 2017).

Our research also confirms the link between populism and disinformation (Müller and Schulz, 2019; Corbu and Negrea-

Busuioc, 2020) as the items analyzed are mostly developed on the basis of using misleading headlines (Mourão and Robertson, 2019), or even reframing the mainstream news media (Holt et al., 2019). The hostility toward expertize as an expression of scientific elitism is replaced by the proliferation of quasi or pseudo-experts. Curiously, these outlets quoted several scientific sources with two prerequisites: their lack of specialization–doctors, but not epidemiologists–and their contribution to feeding conspiracy theories. Moreover, they capitalized on the superabundance and accessibility of pandemic-related data to exacerbate the "systemic and long-standing" crisis of expertize (Brubaker, 2020: 6).

The ideological strategy is reinforced by a communicative style that relies on a sensational approach aimed at eliciting emotion (Wirz, 2018). To this end, they capitalize on clickbait patterns to present headlines characterized by expressiveness, appeals to the reader, and colloquial language (Palau-Sampio, 2016). In fact, headlines not only mislead, but they also emphasize the ideological content by means of vocatives, capitalizations, and frequent abusive expressions. The latter often occurs when the main people involved are representatives of the political and media realm, who represent the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). Likewise, this is a clear expression of the political polarization fueled by these pseudo-outlets. The use of belligerent language to harshly criticize certain actors turns the public sphere into a battlefield, and prioritizes confrontation over dialogue and the exchange of ideas (Stroud, 2010), with obvious costs to issues such as public health and the pandemic (Makridis and Rothwell, 2020).

The three-fold rejection of politics, expertize (including the WHO), and the mainstream media allows for a plethora of pandemic disinformation, bolstered by pseudo-information that even rejects the very existence of covid-19, thereby confronting these populist outlets with a paradox. Ordinarily protectionist, they are challenging the restrictions and promoting skepticism toward the preventive measures (Brubaker, 2020), while polarizing audiences. Even more importantly, some of these pseudo-media are capitalizing on the complex scenario to fuel emotional responses by means of calling people to action and protest, and prognostic frames that encourage military intervention.

Despite the audience fluctuations of these five outlets, it is striking that they have reached 2.5 million monthly unique users (February 2021). Even if the research has noted that the consumption of these pseudo-outlets accompanies the use of other traditional media information (Rauch, 2015), it reveals a strong demand for this type of pseudo-information (Heft et al., 2020). The findings confirm, as Schulze suggests, that right-wing alternative online media "should not be underestimated or dismissed as a peripheral phenomenon" (2020: 16).

This research is not without limitations, and these should be addressed in future studies. Firstly, pseudo-media outlets warrant more research in order to understand their diversity and interests, as well as their characteristics at the organizational, structural, and financial levels, including the clickbait economy. Secondly, this research sampled five Spanish pseudo-media that focused on the pandemic, and consequently, it has not provided information regarding the entire scope of interests of these organizations. Moreover, the research focuses on right-wing outlets but does not explore the involvement of left-wing outlets in the pseudo-media ecosystem. Finally, it is essential for future studies to evaluate the impact of these pseudo-media outlets on the public discourse and their potential to polarize attitudes.

This article contributes to mapping out the far right-wing pseudo-media outlets in Spain and identifying their characteristics. The research carried out reveals a three-way relationship between disinformation, polarization, and populism. These pseudo-media not only publish half-truths and distorted information but also encourage polarization by means of war expressions and frames that repudiate political, scientific and media expertize. Rooted in populism, this strategy found a perfect breeding ground during the pandemic. Exploiting the potential of emotion, the pseudo-media has capitalized on this aspect as an opportunity to expand right-wing ideology cloaked in conspiracy theories and discourses against vaccination and migration.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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A Political Ontology of the Pandemic: Sovereign Power and the Management of Affects through the Political Ontology of War

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The COVID-19 pandemic has made relevant questions regarding the limits and the justifications of sovereign power as nation states utilize high degrees of power over populations in their strategies of countering the virus. In our article, we analyze a particularly important facet of the strategy of sovereignty in managing the affects caused by a pandemic, which we term the ontology of war. We analyze the way in which war plays a significant role in the political ontology of our societies, through its aiming to produce a unified political subject and an external enemy. Taking our theoretical cue from Butler's thinking on frames of recognizability we extend her theory through augmenting it with affect theory to argue for how the frame of recognizability produced by the ontology of war fails to guide our understanding of the pandemic as a political problem, a failure that we analyze through looking at the affective register. We argue that the main affect that the nation state tries to manage, in relation to the pandemic, through the ontology of war is anxiety. We show that the nation state tries to alleviate anxiety by framing it through the ontology war, this leads to the appearance of a potentially racist and nationalist affective climate where the "enemy" is no longer felt to be the virus, but members of other nations as well as minorities. We argue that the pandemic reveals both the political ontology of war central to the foundation of our political communities, and how this ontology is used by the nation state to manage feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Ultimately, as we will discuss at the end of this article, this leads to failure.

Keywords: sovereignty, political ontology, war, affect theory, insecurity, anxiety, COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, the unfolding pandemic has provoked an overwhelmingly state-centric response that seeks to deal with the negative impact that the pandemic has on a medical, social, economic, and political level. The limits and justification of political power have thus once again become relevant during the pandemic, in reaction to which the states are exerting their sovereignty in a highly visible manner. Even though the worldwide pandemic, at least at first, did not bring about institutional reforms, it definitely brought more attention to the state, which has during the pandemic been a central institution in looking after the citizens and slowing down the rate of contagion.

The traditional narrative has been that sovereignty and law are founded on violence. This has allowed scholars to make a distinction between sovereign power and biopower, which operate according to different rationalities (e.g. Oksala 2010, 38; Oksala 2013, 321). Even if such a distinction

can be made, our discussion in this article shows that a reference to violence is not enough to explain sovereignty. What we want to argue in this article is that the current pandemic has illuminated an important aspect of sovereign power that cannot be reduced to law and violence. By this, we refer to the fact that, almost immediately, the political crisis that followed the outbreak of the pandemic was enveloped in a rhetoric of war to justify strong governmental measures. This is by no means accidental. In a war-like situation—as those inciting this type of rhetoric would want it—strong coercive methods that contradict the rights of the citizens must be utilized in order to stop the political system from collapsing. As war is an exceptional situation par excellence, many who sought to justify sovereign use of power saw it as a clear analogy to the pandemic. Therefore, as we will discuss in this article, in many parts of the world March 2020 brought the problem of sovereignty into focus, or made it visible in a spectacular manner. The ongoing comparisons between the pandemic and war are perplexing. We find it unintuitive that war has in many contexts become one of the primary ways of conceiving the unfolding public health crisis. War is a political and social event *par excellence*, as it is a way of managing relations between differentiated political communities, and poses, in the case of a public health crisis, a questionable way of apprehending a threat that does not distinguish between communities. It is this intuition that has driven us to examine why the almost obsessively repeated comparison of the pandemic to war has been so pre-eminent.

In this article, we discuss the understanding of the pandemic as a "war against an invisible enemy", as Emmanuel Macron and others have described the situation. It is quite obvious, as many in the press have pointed out, that war cannot actually be fought against an entity that lacks intentionality altogether. However, the imagery of warfare used to describe the pandemic has been pervasive. For example, Joe Biden declared in a speech that the virus has "divided us, angered us, set us against one another. I know the country's grown weary of the fight, but we need to remember—we're at war with the virus, not one another" (BBC 2020). This quote brings to the forefront the reason why politicians wish to utilize this type of imagery. In a war, internal tensions and conflicts must be put aside for the time being in order to defend the nation against the enemy. To defeat the external enemy requires unity among citizens.

Our leading thought is that the pandemic is so frequently compared to war because it is a way to politically manage the anxiety caused by the pandemic by giving anxiety a referent that converts anxiety into the controllable affect of fear. As "anxiety theorists" have claimed, fear is an affect with a determinate object which means it can be controlled, while anxiety is a more unfocused affect. We propose to understand this process through Judith Butler's philosophy regarding the framing of situations through a political ontology. When a situation such as the pandemic is framed, it is drawn into different frames of recognizability that lean on different political ontologies. It is this process of framing events through different political ontologies that make them intelligible as political events in different ways. We propose that it is the political ontology of war that must be analyzed to understand how the pandemic is framed and that the friend-enemy distinction of the political ontology of war produces a specific subjectivity understood as a unified national belonging and a specific object of fear, which is understood as the non-nationals, different others, who are to be feared. In this way the state can then manage the anxiety of its subjects through closing borders, limiting movement, migration and so on. In this article, we elaborate our understanding of the political ontology of war through a reading of Thomas Hobbes's and Carl Schmitt's political philosophy. This means that we will first establish a metatheoretical framework through wedding "anxiety theory" to Judith Butler's political philosophy that we then apply on the specific political ontology of war that we analyze through reading Hobbes and Schmitt in order to understand the prevalence of the comparisons between the pandemic and war.

Our intention is not to analyze only the "discourse of warfare" as a rhetorical device or level (cf. Spadaro, 2020; Forsberg, 2020). We want to point out that by remaining only on the level of rhetorical analysis we risk sidestepping many important facets in the constitution of the political and social world. Among these facets rhetorics certainly play an important role, but we wish to stress the need for an analysis of sovereign power, which takes into account political ontology. Such an account brings out the contingency of our present political configurations and their ontological commitments. Exposing such commitments, as Johanna Oksala emphasizes, is philosophy's critical task. (Oksala 2012, 19). The discourse of warfare stems from a structure in the political ontology of communities based on sovereignty. This means that the recurring framing of the virus through the political ontology of war exposes how our way of conceiving of political events is historically and affectively conditioned by an intelligibility offered by the ontology of war.

In the first section of this article, we construct our metatheoretical argument concerning the framing of affects by political ontology through discussing the subfield of affect theory known as "anxiety theory" and Judith Butler's political philosophy. In this section, we will first discuss the role anxiety and fear play in the pandemic by focusing on how anxiety is turned into fear so as to be easier controlled or managed. We will then situate the discussion of anxiety within the context of Judith Butler's work on frames of recognizability to show how such frames are tied to a conception of political ontology in her thought. This will let us highlight how framing is tied to certain political ontologies that produce certain kinds of political subjects.

In the second section of this article, we elaborate on the working of the specific political ontology we label as the political ontology of war through reading Thomas Hobbes's and Carl Schmitt's political philosophy. We claim that analyzing the governing of the pandemic must take into account the ontological aspect of our political systems, an aspect we label the political ontology of war. War is at the very core of political communities that are based on the idea of sovereignty; it is a framework of recognizability established in order to tackle exceptional situations. Our claim is that sovereignty is defined by a political ontology of war, which allows for transposing anxiety into fear of a common enemy.

To be sure, the state's role during a pandemic has transformed multiple times during political modernity. As Foucault has

discussed it, pandemics, such as leprosy, the plague, and smallpox, have generated different practices of governing (Foucault 1975, 228–233; Foucault 1976, 186; Foucault 2004, 11–12; cf. Erlenbusch-Anderson 2020, 12) Whereas the plague called for partitioning the city space into sectors and quarantine in some of them, smallpox called for a wholly different way of approaching health and utilizing biopower (e.g. statistical tools, vaccinations etc.) (Foucault 2004, 12; Lemke 2019, 192–193). These transformations that concern biopower, the power that has the population as an object of medical and biological practices, is distinct from the state's sovereign power (Foucault 1976, 181; Foucault 1997, 214; Oksala 2010, 36; Oksala 2013, 321; Lemke 2019, 136–137; Erlenbusch-Anderson 2020, 8). Biopower, which is not based on law in the same way as sovereign power, complements sovereign power in the sense that it allows for new areas of human life to be governed (Foucault 1976, 187–188; Foucault 1997, 219–220).

Biopower does not do away with law, but it alters and complements it with other techniques. "Biopolitical rationality", as Oksala points out, "treats the law as *one* administrative technique among others that can be utilized to regulate and improve the life of the population" (Oksala 2013, 322; emphasis added). Different forms of biopolitics wield biopower[1] in ways that have transformed the role of the state and its manner of governing.[2] Following Agamben's famous claim that sovereign power and biopower are not distinct anymore, Sergei Prozorov claims that it "is no longer meaningful to simply oppose biopower to sovereignty" (Prozorov 2013, 191; cf. Agamben 1998 122). However, we follow Oksala in her claim that even though these two forms of power are definitely complementary and overlapping, they should still be analyzed as distinct rationalities (2010, 38, 41–42). Foucault points out that the problem of sovereignty regards both the rights of the sovereign and "the legal obligation of obedience" (Foucault 1997, 23–24). The latter refers to the role of the citizens who make up the sovereign political body (Foucault 1997, 30–31). The juridical model of sovereignty establishes the legal basis of subjectivity and the subjectification of individuals (Foucault 1997, 37–38). Similarly, even though Hobbes and Schmitt are far apart when it comes to developments in biopolitical techniques, our analysis focuses on what distinctly characterizes sovereign power and what problems it faces during a pandemic. We do not mean to deny the fact that pandemics are a concern for biopower, but, as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic[3], they are also a legal issue. Biopower and sovereign power are definitely not exclusive, but it is in our interest to analyze how sovereign power in both Hobbes and Schmitt relies on a political ontology, which is still relevant today and needs to be analyzed in order to establish critical perspectives on practices of pandemic governance.

In the third section, we will discuss how the ontology of war is deployed in managing the anxiety caused by the pandemic. We will first discuss the overbearing role that the nation state has taken in leading "the offensive" against the virus, which has led to precisely the kind of mobilization of nation state subjectivity that the ontology of war produces. Second, we will draw attention to how the frame established around the pandemic by the ontology of war constantly pulls in the direction of framing the enemy, not as the virus, but as non-nationals, foreigners and migrants. The third argument we put forth is how the framing of the virus through the ontology of war can misfire in such a way that produces potential for even more anxiety, which can be seen in the increased policing internal to communities. We end the chapter with a discussion of the anti-lockdown movements, which construct the nation as an object to be feared, while still retaining elements of the kind of exclusionary framing that is emblematic of the ontology of war.

We wish to underline that the shortcomings that the pandemic reveal concerning the ontological basis of our sovereign political communities also points towards a need to overcome it. The virus is obviously not an enemy in the war-like sense of the concept, but it did not take long to locate enemies among the people. Here, we follow Judith Butler's insight that "even as the war is framed in certain ways to control and heighten affect in relation to the differential grievability of lives, so war has come to frame ways of thinking multiculturalism and debates on sexual freedom, issues largely considered separate from 'foreign affairs'" (Butler 2009, 26). As we will discuss in the third section of this article, it did not take long for politicians to blame the situation on the people of another state, whether it was the Chinese or—in the case of Northern Europe—Southern European states (cf. Rafi 2020). Locating the enemy therefore always slips into racist, hateful and exclusive categories that allow for shifting blame and drawing borders between friends and enemies.

Furthermore, our critical analysis is based on Butler's insight that, on some level, all borders between groups are fundamentally illegitimate. Our bodies, Butler insists, are not self-subsisting entities, but are "given over to others in order to persist" (Butler 2020, 49). Nobody can survive without others, and creating a limit or establishing a "frame" that separates those to be protected from "others" is always a decision that requires power to establish borders between different bodies. However, all such productions, as Butler points out, are partial (2016, 7). This applies to the pandemic as well. The states have strengthened their border security to limit entry, but while this obviously helped to contain the contagion, the issue of vaccine nationalism, the dissymmetry between the ability of different states to respond economically to limiting the circulation of people and goods, and other inequalities between states point towards the fact that solving the crisis triggered by the virus will require us to transcend state borders. Even if a state has brought down the infection rate to a halt, it has obviously not overcome the pandemic if the rest of the world suffers from severe stages of contagion. As we suggest at the end of this article, as social beings we are fundamentally interconnected. Following Butler's

[1]For the distinction between these two concepts see Erlenbusch-Anderson (2020, 8).

[2]The most extreme and well-known example is in Foucault's analysis of Nazism as the generalization of biopower (Foucault 1997, 232; cf. Oksala 2013, 323; Groulx 2015, 211). [not available in Crossref, PubMed]

[3]For example, in Germany reforms were made to laws concerning epidemics (in Germany, this meant the "*Gesetz zum Schutz der Bevölkerung bei einer epidemischen Lage von nationaler Tragweite*") (Lemke 2020, 158–159, 182).

normative idea, interconnectedness means that ultimately the pandemic—originally meaning all (*pan*) people (*demos*)—forces us to grapple with the political ontology that is at the core of our political communities and transcend it.

ANXIETY, FRAMING AND POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

As our intention is to show how the anxiety caused by the pandemic is managed by the political ontology of war, we will in this chapter sketch out the metatheoretical lens, through which we will approach the issue. To build our chosen theoretical framework we lean on affect theory in general and the subfield of anxiety theory in particular, as it will help us understand the affective dynamics at play in the pandemic. To understand how affects are "captured" by socially and politically pre-given ways of making sense of the world, which means that they can be enveloped within certain systems of management, we turn to Judith Butler's theory for a concept of framing and political ontology. With Butler's concept of framing, we denote how events and things such as the pandemic are pulled in by political and historical shared networks of meaning, which we will denote as "political ontologies". Through framing affects in certain ways, these political ontologies then produce certain kinds of subjectivities that react to situations such as the pandemic in ways that are intelligible within the political ontology that is doing the framing. We will now first explicate our understanding of the affect of anxiety as we employ it in this article and after that we will discuss how to understand the process of managing this anxiety through linking it to a reading of Judith Butler's conception of framing and ontology.

We have chosen to focus on anxiety in particular, as we will argue it is one of the defining affects of the moment, which will help us to better understand the political dynamics of the present moment. In our analysis, we are not engaging the so-called "pandemic anxiety", framed as a medical or psychological issue (see for example Allespach et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; McElroy et al., 2020), but anxiety understood as a generalized social and political issue that has to do with the affective register of human coexistence. As Massumi (2015b notes 124), an affect is not the subjective content of human life, it is formed by a relational field that overflows the individual and it has to do with a collective emotional substratum lodged within coexistence. Affects are moreover formed in an unthematized way and feed on the collective memories of society that resemble those experiences that society goes through in the present moment. Affects lodge themselves into these memories and produce collective emotions that form a blend of older sedimentations and life in the present. These affects push the subject towards the future and open possible ways for the subject to act and react, which are not necessarily in line with the logic of linear time (see for example Massumi 2015a, 194).

There is a growing literature that conceptualizes the present age as affectively supercharged by anxiety. This signifies "a widespread sense of loss of control and alienation, alongside more general feelings of cultural and/or national loss," which is linked "to the significant deadly powers of nuclear weapons, pandemics, or climate change, the uncertain random violence of terrorism or cyber war, or the precariousness brought about by a weakening welfare state in conditions of globalization in the North" (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 243). The role anxiety has played in relation to political events has been the object of research for example in relation to terrorism (e.g. Huddy et al., 2005), nationalism and racism (for example Hirvonen 2017) and recently in relation to climate change (for example Robbins and Moore 2013) and has begun to form its own microcosm of "anxiety theory" (see Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 242; Hunt 2009, 509). As an anxiety-inducing event, the pandemic has thus landed in the middle of a milieu already laden with pre-existing anxieties.

As an affect, anxiety can be characterized by being an "unpleasant and aversive state" (Eysenck 1992) that prompts the persons experiencing it to seek out a threat in their environment. However, what is important to note is that anxiety is characterized by uncertainty regarding its object (Steenbergen and Ellis 2006). Anxiety "involves uncertainty about the consequences of a threat that is not present and may not occur" (Ledoux 2016, 31). This is echoed by the way that anxiety has been conceptualized by philosophers from Kierkegaard (see Kierkegaard 1981) and Heidegger (for a discussion see Magrini 2006) to Sartre (Sartre 2007) as an affect that, in relation to fear, lacks a specific intentional object (for a discussion see Freeman and Elpidorou 2020). This definition has been reworked by Ekhlund et al. to a definition of anxiety where "the object of danger or fear is either absent/non-identifiable, or in such a proximity that no reassurance can be offered" (Eklundh et al., 2017, 5). In our opinion, there can be no doubts about the coronavirus being a potent trigger for anxiety. The virus is a perfect target for anxiety, as it is neither living nor dead, and potentially very close or very far. Public health crises such as viral pandemics create the perfect conditions for widespread anxiety.

That public health crises are potent triggers of anxiety has been noted for example by Albertson and Gadarian (2015) who, in their discussion of the H1N1 - influenza (the "swine flu") in 2019, distinguish between framed and unframed triggers of anxiety. Unframed triggers are triggers that involve an immediate and concrete danger to life (a concrete attack by terrorists, for example) and are in this sense more general than framed triggers, which are events that have passed through a process of social coding (the War on Terror as a way to socially code terror attacks, for example). What they find is that "Public health scares often trigger widespread anxiety, whereas framed threats involve more subjective or temporally removed harms that generate anxiety for some" (Albertson and Gadarian 2015, 63). This is in line with the theoretical figure of anxiety as something that lacks clear intentionality and signifies a general precariousness and fear as something with a specific and fixed object. Anxiety thus leads to a situation where "subjects have lost their stabilizing anchor, their ability to sustain a linear narrative through which they can answer questions about doing, acting, and being," which naturally leads subjects on the path to "constantly seeking this always elusive state of perfect security"

(Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 246). For our argument it is important to note that one such possibility of alleviating anxiety is through transposing "anxieties into identifiable objects of fear" (*ibid*., see also Kinnvall 2004). Effectively this means that anxiety is managed by giving it a common referent that identifies the object to be feared for the subject. This alleviation happens as Cossarini notes because "fears, once identified as such, can be controlled" (Cossarini 2017, 146). The objects that come to be chosen to represent the object of fear are in no way arbitrarily chosen, as Bourke (2007) and Weiss (2012) have shown. Instead, they are constituted in an evolving social-historical elaboration; the objects that get established as objects to be feared thus vary depending on socio-cultural milieu. The objects of fear are thus linked to networks of social and shared historical meaning in which the object of fear enters the realm of politics through being something that can be politically managed or controlled. We will denote these networks of social and shared historical meaning as *political ontologies*. It is through the process of framing that political ontologies are impressed upon things. In our case the anxiety that stems from the pandemic will become framed through the political ontology of war, which turns the unframed trigger of anxiety into the framed object of fear, subsequently to be controlled.

The affective field does not vanish when framed. Rather, it is modified, as anxiety is modified to fear, in a way that produces a certain kind of subjectivity. Thus, the attachment of any signifier to the anxiety caused by the virus can relieve it by giving it a referent. The virus is invisible, it does not offer itself as an intelligible object of fear in the same sense that the army of the enemy would do. In addition to this, we have to note that the anxiety that fear of the virus triggers is first and foremost confronted in meetings with and between people in so far as it is other people who carry the virus in their bodies and transmit it through their bodies. The virus can thus be carried by anyone, or by no one at all, which means that any human can be experienced as a threat. We clearly do not think that all our fellow human beings are enemies. It is rather the invisibility of the virus and its character as an "unobject" that causes anxiety, and which makes it possible that the object that gets chosen to be the object of fear can be localized to an infinite amount of different positions within the social world. The object which will become the nodal point to which the anxiety caused by the virus will be cathected is, as we noted, not an arbitrarily chosen object. In the case of the pandemic, it is given to us, through the frame of recognizability established by the ontology war of the nation state.

We will now shortly situate our discussion within the context of Judith Butler's political philosophy to explain how the process of framing an affective situation leans on political ontology and produces subjects that then react to social and political events framed through a certain political ontology. Here, we work with the understanding of political ontology that Judith Butler has elaborated. According to her, referring "to 'ontology' in this regard [...] is not to lay claim to a description of fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organizations. On the contrary, none of these terms exist outside of their political organization and interpretation." (Butler 2009, 2.) This means that the understanding of ontology that we and Butler are operating with is one which moves away from understanding political ontology as uncovering a truth about politics. Instead, we commit to an understanding offered by Markell (see Markell 2003), of which Chambers and Carver argue that it also applies to Butler's thinking, that ontology can be understood in a way "that already inflects it toward the political register: an implicit or explicit interpretation of the fundamental conditions of life in the social and political world, the kinds of things that exist [in that world], and the range of possibilities that [that world] bears" (Chambers and Carver 2008, 104). As such, political ontology simply denotes the historically constituted political things that are taken to exist, their relations, effects, and the range of possibilities that these lead to. Understood in this sense, political ontology comes to constitute a social and political network of meaning that binds together and determines the way humans structure and understand the social and political world and events that have to do with it. Natural events such as pandemics can thus be framed through the political ontologies of a given society, which constitute what Butler calls a "frame of recognizability". In *Frames of War* Butler makes use of this kind of notion of ontology to investigate how life becomes constituted as visible and grievable, through understanding how the production of ontology generates ontologies of the subject. Our project takes a similar kind of understanding of how political ontology influences the actor as its starting point. However, we will not look at grievability or life, but at how certain kinds of subjectivities of the ontology of war emerge during the pandemic as an answer the anxiety felt in society.

According to Butler, the frames that bring political ontology to bear on different situations produce differentiation and "organize visual experience" (one could also think of Ranciere's *partage du sensible* here) but over and above this, they also "generate specific ontologies of the subject" (2009, 3). The subjects constituted by the process of framing are according to Butler furthermore not to be understood as simply effects of power, they are a changing whole in which the reiterations of framing "produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized" (*ibid*. 3–4). Framing, or producing recognizability, thus entails that there is some kind of prior intelligibility that the framing taps into, otherwise the framing would just seem alien to us and would not move us to act as subjects. Butler importantly underscores how affects are implicated in the subject's response to events in the world, they influence our interpretation of situations: "Interpretation does not emerge as the spontaneous act of a single mind, but as a consequence of a certain field of intelligibility that helps to form and frame our responsiveness to the impinging world" (Butler 2009, 34). Affects thus exert an immediate influence over subjects that criss-cross different temporalities and are nourished by the past of social life, a past that can be understood as taking part in the political ontology of present societies. We can link the affective dimension of social life to political ontologies through the power that institutionalized frameworks of intelligibility have on individuals by referring to what Butler calls the "passionate attachments" that bind subjects to their frameworks (for a longer discussion see Thiem 2008, 37–50). Institutionalized frameworks constituting political ontologies, such as the nation

state, work through producing subjects that reproduce the framework producing these subjects, or as Butler puts it, "frames are subject to an iterable structure: they can only circulate by virtue of their reproducibility" (Butler 2009, 24) which means that the action undertaken on the basis of these frames also reproduces the subjects produced by the frames. As Thiem notes, this Butlerian view on the reproduction of subjects means that we cannot access what subjects are outside of the frames forming them (Thiem 2008, 22). This does however not constitute a reduction of what a subject can be to a normalization of subjects conforming to institutionalized frameworks of intelligibility as the framework that "forms the subject is not an integrated and harmonious network" (Butler 2015, 44). This is to say that there are multiple possible frameworks of intelligibility and "passionate attachments" to such frameworks present in society among which some "are culturally prevalent and dominant; others are relegated to the margins" (Thiem 2008, 25). Would this not be so, critique would be constitutively blocked and we would be doomed to repeat a single political ontology ad infinitum. Hence, the Butlerian affective subject being reproduced by political ontologies comes to being as an always historical subject (for further discussion, see Shams 2020, 43–44).

THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF WAR

This section analyses the basic structure of the political ontology of war, which we claim to mark a distinctive way in which sovereign political communities are constituted. Based on the theory of anxiety laid out above, our idea is to elaborate on a political ontology that brings out structures that are relevant for an analysis of sovereignty in a time of pandemic. The point is not to explain exhaustively what sovereignty essentially is—we are not analyzing the ontology of sovereignty—but to describe a political ontology of war as the basis of certain practices of sovereign power. The outcome of this section is to elaborate on a political ontology of political communities that are constructed around the possibility of war and certain practices that anticipate and counter this possibility of war—an ontology that produces specific kinds of subjectivities for the political community.

The reason why we want to analyze theories about sovereignty, and not the state as such is because we're less interested in concrete practices and institutions (such as the army) and more interested in analyzing the political ontology that produces the basis of a political community that gives legitimacy to the state.[4] Theories of sovereignty claim that the state is not only a monopoly of the means of violence, but a legitimate one at that. Sovereignty, as we will point out, is about striving to produce consent to the sovereign order. The different theories that placed sovereignty at the center of political communities believed that sovereignty needs to appear different from mere monopolies of violence. Books like the Leviathan are specifically meant to establish the legitimacy of state power. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau pointed out that "a pistol in the hand [of a bandit] is also a power," but this type of power is very different from sovereign power (Book I, iii). Sovereignty, it is claimed, requires securing (at least minimal) consent of those subjected to sovereign power in order to establish its difference from a mere criminal organization. We will discuss this aspect in more detail below.

Sovereignty as a concept is about locating the basis of order within a political community, which becomes especially relevant during extraordinary circumstances.[5] Theories of sovereignty deal with exceptional situations and they have been theorized under exceptional circumstances: from civil wars religious (Bodin) and political (Hobbes) to class struggles (Schmitt). Perhaps during the pandemic new theories of sovereignty will emerge—and perhaps this article will anticipate their becoming. Essential for governing during an exceptional situation is maintaining unity within the political community. Such a unity is, for practical reasons, neither absolute nor universal. Sovereign power could not operate if it had to secure complete unanimity for every one of its actions. Rather, the unity we are referring to is what founds the legitimacy of sovereign power to begin with and not specific actions. As Rousseau declares, governing might mean majority rule most of the time but, in order for the political community to be sovereign, it "assumes that on one occasion there has been unanimity" (Rousseau 2008, I, §v). Unity here then means a normative concept that seeks to limit civil unrest to a minimum.[6] As Schmitt claims, "plurality" within a state becomes something that can only be tolerated to the extent that it does not destroy the political unity (Schmitt 1932/

[4]For this reason, we are also talking about a subject that is different from Foucault's lectures on governing populations. We agree with Foucault that sovereignty is relevant in understanding how within a population certain things circulate (2004). In our case, it is the circulation of affects. However, whereas Foucault was interested in how populations became an object of science and power in tandem, we are more interested in the latter aspect. For example, when it comes to vaccinations Foucault is interested in the entanglement of science and regulation, whereas we are focused on the ontological basis of such political phenomena as vaccine nationalism.

[5]The exceptional is always potential or else the justification for sovereign power within a civil society would become void. This means that state of nature (or exception) is never fully resolved, because if social negativity were to be overcome completely, the need for sovereignty would cease. This reciprocal role of the state of nature creates a difficulty in interpreting sovereignty's relationship with the state of nature. Agamben's interpretation is that the "identity of the state of nature and violence [. . .] justifies the absolute power of the sovereign" (Agamben 1998, 35). According to Sergei Prozorov, one prominent line of interpreting this issue—most notably by Agamben and Esposito—is by interpreting it so that there is always a "remainder" of the state of nature within society that cannot be transcended completely (Prozorov 2015, 59). Hobbes, in particular, is an "illustrative or striking example of a tendency in modern political thought to constitute and legitimize authority by conjuring the negativity that it then interprets as natural and seeks protection from" (Prozorov 2015, 58; cf. Helmisaari 2020, 23). The fiction of the state of nature is meant to give legitimacy to the sovereign, and as a fiction, it is not natural but a potentiality that establishes the justification for sovereignty (Helmisaari 2020, 63). Therefore, as Agamben claims in Homo Sacer, potentiality is essential to sovereign power (Agamben 1998, 46–47). According to Derrida, 2005, this "allows at one and the same time for war to be waged at the political's condition of possibility without it being for all that, in any respect, the aim, the finality or even the content of the political" (2005, 126).

[6]In *The Social Contract* Rousseau writes that "the sole means that they still have of preserving themselves is to create, by combination, a totality of forces sufficient to overcome the obstacles resisting them, to direct their operation by a single impulse, and make them act in unison" (Book 1, vi).

2015, 42). According to him, the methods the state has at its disposal are essentially instituted for the function of "making uniformity possible and its daily restoration" (Schmitt 1928/1995, 37). Obviously, the sovereign's strive towards unity can practically never be complete, but it is still central to legitimizing its practices that try to minimize protests and dissent.

Our argument is that transposing anxiety into fear is a crucial mechanism in producing and upholding this type of original unity. In order to achieve this, we elaborate on a political ontology that is centred on war. This is not an analysis of war and its ontology, but a political ontology centred on the possibility of war. During a war, the citizens must remain unified against the enemy. A political community, to hold the enemy at bay and deter a war from happening, must also remain unified in a pacified situation. Similarly, slowing down the pandemic necessitates the citizens to consent to the methods being used to slow down the rate of infection. We will elaborate on this political ontology by analysing its role in theories of sovereignty. Hobbes is obviously crucial here but so too is Carl Schmitt, the legal theorist who introduced the problematic of sovereignty into the 20th century and who infamously claimed that the political is the distinction between friend and enemy. We will first look at Hobbes as the basis of a theory of sovereignty and how anxiety relates to it. A similar study in a much more extensive manner has been done by Bahar Rumelili (2020), who argues that anxiety is central in Hobbes's understanding of the state of nature. Next, we analyse Schmitt's theory of the enemy as a paradigm example of how enmity is crucial for a political community.

The state of nature as the war of all against all is not a state of constant fighting but the "disposition" to do so. As there is no common power to prohibit fighting it is always a potential possibility, so that "every man is Enemy to every man." (XIII, § 62.) The problem that individuals face in a state of nature is not that life is constant fighting but the lack of trust towards others. Since all are equal in capacities in a state of nature, it is not specific individuals that cause the lack of trust as the feeling of uncertainty is constant. Even those who would otherwise be content with modest means, Hobbes claims, will have to amass more power simply for their own security (XIII, § 61). Lack of trust and the experience of insecurity forces people to remain in the disposition of war, which is not directed against anyone in particular. Such a situation can be best analysed through our analysis of anxiety. As Ruhelili writes, "the 'perpetual fear' generated by the unknowability of the future and limits of human knowledge make not only self-preservation at present, but also the foresight of future self-preservation an ultimate concern" (2020, 263). In a state of nature, the experience of uncertainty and insecurity is constant and it has no specific object that would cause it. Hobbes writes precisely that in a state of nature there is no "common Power to feare." The sovereign is that power which establishes consent through fear, that is, manages anxiety by framing it into fear of punishment.

However, it is not only fear of the sovereign that frames anxiety. What is so crucial about defining war as a disposition is that it basically means that even when there's no fighting, a war might still be taking place.[7] As Hobbes claims, the state of nature does exist between states, so that they are "in continual jealousies, and in the states and posture of Gladiatiors; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another" (Hobbes 2018, XIII, § 63). A disposition to fight remains between states, and it is this disposition that the citizens should be aware of at all times. As commentators have pointed out, this allows Hobbes to further his argument of strengthening the power of the sovereign (cf. Tuck 2001; Poole 2015; Koskenniemi 2017). The existence of enemy states necessitates certain capacities, such as collecting taxes for maintaining an army. More important for our argument, however, is that the existence of an external enemy establishes uniformity within a political community. As Hobbes writes, the objective of the institution of sovereignty is "the peace of the subjects within themselves, and their Defence against a common enemy" (Hobbes 2018, XXI, § 111). Without a common enemy, according to Hobbes, the citizens would become restless and fight against one another. It is not only the sovereign that the citizens must fear but the enemy as well. The sovereign, in order to maintain stability, must frame the anxiety of the citizens into a fear of an enemy that is external to the community. The sovereign therefore externalizes mistrust among citizens into an enmity towards another state. It is precisely this type of externalization of anxiety that frames it as fear of a specific object that legitimates sovereign power.[8]

Theories of sovereignty tend to link violence and power together, if not completely equate them.[9] Without sovereign power, there is no order that would limit the disposition to fight. (Hobbes 2018, XIII, § 62–63.). Coercive power is essential because words alone are not enough to create obligations (Hobbes

[7]Further, Nordin and Öberg (2015) criticize theories that equate war with the concrete event of fighting.

[8]The need for security implies a state of insecurity that justifies the establishment of a political system. As Achille Mbembe succinctly summarizes this, "the security state thrives on a state of insecurity" (Mbembe 2019, 54). Rousseau - another theorist of sovereignty - puts it thus: "What is the purpose of political association? The security and prosperity of the associates" (Rousseau 2008, III, § ix.) There is definitely disagreement among different theories of sovereignty. One example is the famous disagreement between Hobbes and Rousseau concerning what constitutes security and what kinds of powers can be justified. Notwithstanding these differences, as Frédéric Gros elaborates, both Hobbes and Rousseau are in unison about the centrality of the concept of security in their political theories, and about the essential difference between the state of nature and civil state (Gros 2019, 75). Similarly, our point is to bring out a basic understanding of the political ontology that is essential to political communities of sovereignty—not to analyze the finer details of these thinkers. "Security," Gros emphasises, "is simultaneously as the principle of the state's foundation, the ultimate cause behind civil societies, the source of legitimacy for the authorities, and the objective of instituting political communities" (Gros 2019, 76). Security then justifies both the institution and the constitution of a state and allows for evaluating the state's functioning.

[9]Because of the obvious authoritarian implications of this link, Arendt makes a clear distinction between power and violence so that "power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow." This means that consensus creates power, but the power over means of violence can never reflectively create consensus (Arendt 1969, 37, 52–54.). Derrida's succinct description is worth quoting here: "The abuse of power is constitutive for sovereignty" (Derrida 2003). Similarly, Joan Cocks, 2014 discusses sovereign power as a form of "foundational violence" (47ff).

2018, XIV, § 63–64). "Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, of no strength to secure a man at all" (Hobbes 2018, XVII, § 85). Without coercive power, everyone is in a situation to "make warre upon each other for their particular interests" (Hobbes 2018, XVII, § 87) because in a state of nature nobody has any reason to fear punishment for misdeeds (XVII, § 85–86), whereas in a state the sovereign has coercive means to force people to hold on to their covenants (XIV, § 71). The only way to establish a Commonwealth, which is able to defend from invasion and injury, is to transfer all power to the sovereign who will "reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will", that is, to form the sovereign is to submit will and judgement to the sovereign (Hobbes 2018, XVII, § 87). Following this formulation, sovereignty is about interpreting power as coercion, of which Foucault summarizes succinctly that "law is always referred to as a sword" (Foucault 1976, 189).

It is true that the state has a power over its subjects' lives due to its monopoly on legitimate means of violence. To quote Schmitt: "The state as the substantial political unity has an immense power concentrated in itself: the possibility to lead a war and thereby usually to command over the life of the people" (Schmitt 1927/1988, 70; Schmitt 1932/2015, 43).[10] When it comes to the internal issues within state territory—and this is crucial—the state has complete powers to ensure "peace, security and order" and therefore to "establish the normal situation." (Schmitt 1932/2015, 43.) Therefore, sovereignty is about establishing a space within which internal conflicts become de-legitimized. This is due to the fact—which Agamben would describe as "thanatological" and Mbembe as "necropolitical" (Agamben 1998; Mbembe 2019; cf. Balke 2005; Oksala 2013, 321)—that the sovereign has the right to sanction and punish those unwilling to limit themselves.

However, we are neither interested in a general discussion regarding security nor in looking at sovereignty merely as a centralization of the means of violence. In order for a state to be sovereign, a lot more than weaponry is required. Unlike Foucault's summarization in the quote above, law is not based on mere coercion but those subjected to it need to consent to it. This requires specific forms of subjectivities and therefore an analysis of security must also take into account the context of framing affects. The casting of the feeling of insecurity is central here. Sovereignty is not established merely through violence but through a political ontology that wards off anxiety. As Rumelili points out, even for Hobbes fear needs an object and therefore it is produced politically (Rumelili 2020, 263). Here, we analyse giving anxiety an object or referent, that is, an enemy, based on which a political ontology of war transposes anxiety and the feeling of insecurity into a fear that then legitimates the existence of a sovereign. Once anxiety is framed as a fear of an object, that is the enemy, what emerges is subjectivity that consents to state power, thus making it sovereign. As we will point out below in this section, the possibility of war is what frames these affects.

As we pointed out above, sovereignty is connected to producing consent to political power. From the perspective of those who wield sovereign power, the lack of dissent or, at the very least, limiting it to a bearable minimum, allows for the smooth functioning of its practices. What sovereign power needs is to manage dissent to a minimum that is bearable. In order to do this, sovereign power has to at least appear as if it was based on some form of consent. This does not mean a constant need of unanimity but, instead, using a very weak form of consent as a way to delegitimize all who oppose the operations of sovereign power. Theorizing politics through the concept of sovereignty, to quote de Lagasnerie, "essentially works by countering protest movements and mobilizations by reminding them of the political order" (de Lagasnerie 2020, 59). Violence used by the state and against it are both forms of violence, but from the perspective of sovereign power state violence is legitimate because it is used to minimize illegitimate violence. As Katrin Meyer points out, "the socially destructive force of violence becomes a normatively justifiable praxis only when it can legitimize itself as *violence against violence*" (Meyer 2016, 51). For distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate violence, as we will point out next, consent needs to be defined in a weak sense.

Hobbes's understanding of consent, which is crucial for our argument, is that covenants that have been agreed to under fear are valid (XIV, § 69).[11] Humans act in order to gain something or avoid harm, and therefore to avoid something out of fear is consistent with an individual's will (XXI, § 108). The political order and its maintenance necessitate that subjects limit their freedom as humans, because "as long as every man holdeth this Right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of Warre" (Hobbes 2018, XIV, § 65). The establishment of the commonwealth and sovereignty means the creation of an obedient subject that is willing to limit itself for the sake of political order (XIV, § 65; XVI, § 79–80). The state of nature produces consent and agreement, because "all men agree on this, that Peace is Good and therefore also the way, or means of Peace" (XVI, § 80). To be a citizen therefore is to act according to the different obligations such as not to dissent, in order to secure peaceful coexistence. It is true, to quote Foucault, that consent in this context can be interpreted as the preference to favor life over death (Foucault 1997, 82). Whereas in a state of nature, where nobody had any reason to fear punishment for misdeeds (XVII, § 85–86), in a state the sovereign has coercive means to force people to hold on to their covenants (XIV, § 71). However, to understand how consensus is established, an analysis of the "thanatological" or "necropolitical" aspects of sovereignty is not enough, as we have pointed out above. Instead, the sovereign must frame anxiety as fear of an external enemy.

[10]As Foucault points out, theories of sovereignty posit sovereignty as a power that unites and as the "unity of power" (Foucault 1997, 37).

[11]Here we agree with Foucault's idea that the *Leviathan*'s core idea is that the fact of civil society reigning and the state of nature not being at hand means that subjects have consented to the covenant. The possibility of the state of nature, therefore, provides a valid consent that legitimizes sovereignty (Foucault 1997, 84–85; cf. de Lagasnerie 2020, 61.). Foucault's idea is therefore that the concept of the state of nature allows for de-legitimizing rebellion, and to claim that not rebelling implies consent (Foucault 1997, 83–84; cf. Hobbes 2018, XX, § 103–104; de Lagasnerie 2020, 57). Similarly, Schmitt claims that the only reason to submit to somebody is security and protection through power. "Who looks for protection and accepts it, does not have to right, to refuse obedience." (Schmitt 2017, 14.)

This brings us to the political ontology of war, which refers to how the legitimacy of this subjection is established. The political ontology of war is not an ontology of war as an event, but an ontology of sovereignty and its justifications that are founded on the possibility of war. As Schmitt points out, "war is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics. But, as a real possibility, it is an ever-present presupposition [*Voraussetzung*], which determines in a characteristic way human action and thinking and thereby creates a specifically political behaviour." (Schmitt 1932/2015, 33; cf. Kennedy 1998, 101.) the possibility of war is essential to the political as such. Therefore, this means that war itself is not the content or the aim of politics, since war is only a means to reach a certain goal, but, rather, it defines the structure of the political as such.

This is what brings us to Schmitt's definition of the political as the distinction between friends and enemies (Schmitt 1927/1988, 69; Schmitt 1932/2015, 26). War establishes specific forms of vertical and horizontal relationships. A political unity assumes (*setzt voraus*) the real possibility of an enemy (Schmitt 1932/2015, 50). The political is about the possibility of a concrete political formation. As Schmitt states, the political is the "real possibility of grouping friends and enemies", that is, "based on the power of [the political unity's] decision, the real possibility in a certain situation to determine the enemy and fight against it" (Schmitt 1927/1988, 69; Schmitt 1932/2015, 42). The actuality of a political unity is based on the possibility of war, so that if this possibility were to be removed, that is, "when the real possibility of struggle is ruled out and every friend and enemy grouping has become impossible" (Schmitt 1927/1988, 73; Schmitt 1932/2015, 33, 52). The enemy is someone against whom "in extreme cases a conflict is possible" (Schmitt 1932/2015, 26), so that the enemy becomes an opponent and not merely different in some lesser sense. The enemy is always a public one - "a private citizen has no political enemy" (Schmitt, 1927/1988, 72) - because only the political unity has the strength to make that distinction.

The contradiction between the political unity and its enemy has to be understood in the context of war. Not all nations, Schmitt points out, are capable of waging war and therefore they are no longer political in the proper sense. The political unity is properly political only when it has the possibility to engage in warfare against its enemies. (1927/1988, 69–70; cf. Pankakoski, 2017, 657–658). In a civil war, if the contradiction between internal opponents becomes so intense that no one is strong enough to take over the capacity to decide over war and peace, then the political unity ceases to exist. Either there is a force that is capable of establishing a political unity, which means having the means to fight against an enemy and being strong enough to distinguish between friends and enemies, "or [the political unity] is in general not at hand." (Schmitt 1932/2015, 37; cf. Kennedy 1998, 100.) Here, many scholars have pointed out that Schmitt's background in establishing this definition of the political comes as a reaction to the Versailles treaty's limits to the Weimar Republic's sovereignty and his attempt to argue for national unity in the face of domestic political tensions (cf. Balakrishnan 2000, 114; Kennedy 2004, 106–107; Kervégan 2011, 176–179). An enemy is therefore central to producing national unity. This means that the distinction between friends and enemies dictates that conflicts among friends can never be legitimate because they would threaten the capacity of the political unity to fight against the enemy. To go against this distinction, Schmitt emphasizes, means to "place oneself in the order of things on the side of the enemy" (Schmitt 1932/2015, 49).

There is nothing extraordinary about this interpretation of Schmitt's theory of the political.[12] Mouffe (2005), for example, describes the Schmittian idea of the enemy as the "constitutive other" of a political unity. Without exclusion - the idea claims - there is no identity. However, what we wanted to point out was that the Schmittian distinction is one that produces unity through the possibility of war. The sovereign, with the capacity to wage war, upholds the unity among friends in order to defend against the enemy. It is the existence of the enemy that necessitates unity. As we have already analyzed, the fear of the enemy is central to producing this unity. Internal conflicts and exceptional situations must be deterred in order to remain unified against the enemy. This is the main take-away that we get from Schmitt's attempt to defend state sovereignty. War is at the heart of political communities and evoking it means to uphold unity and produce consent. Therefore, the enemy is designated to govern effectively and ward off internal tensions.

The issue with the political ontology of war is that the uniformity of citizens is achieved by turning them against an enemy. As has been evident during the pandemic, for many it was not the virus that was the enemy, but some other group of people who are allegedly irresponsible when it comes to slowing down the pandemic. A notorious example was the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, who infamously called COVID-19 a "chinese virus" (Liu 2020; Rafi 2020). We will discuss this in more detail below but let us state here the obvious and say that an enemy is not a necessary requirement for mutual cooperation among the citizens.

The pandemic as an exceptional situation is, of course, not completely unique. The pandemic is not the event that has finally made us realize the political ontology of our political communities. Instead, similar types of framing do take place in other exceptional situations as well. For example, in the "war against terror" after the 9/11 attacks similar framing of affects can be seen. Joanne Esch has analyzed how in the political discourse after the attacks the rhetoric of war seeks to establish a traditional civilization vs barbarism -distinction in order to normalize and legitimize certain state actions (Esch 2010, 386; cf.; Ditrych 2013). Similarly, based on Arendt's political theory, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl makes a point similar to ours that the attacks in 2001 were "immediately analogized to Pearl Harbor. In a flash, the American people were encouraged to assume that the American response should be war, as though al-Qaeda were a nation state like Japan." (Young-Bruehl 2008, 13.)[13] The anxiety caused by terrorism was managed by locating a public enemy, against which a war could be waged. As Scheuerman points out, the discussion regarding Schmitt's ideas was revitalized after the

[12]For a detailed discussion of Schmitt's understanding of war, see Pankakoski (2017); Teschke 2016.

[13]Also from the Arendtian perspective, Joan Cocks writes from the Arendtian perspective on how traditional ideas regarding sovereignty were present in USA's war on terrorism as "an actual war against a weak sovereign state as a substitute for its shadowy antagonist" (2014, 24).

start of the war on terror (Scheuerman, 2017, 560–561). However, our point is not to say that the pandemic has once again made reading Schmitt relevant, but that sovereignty as a concept that is distinct from biopolitical considerations should once again become a relevant object of inquiry.[14]

Lastly, the political ontology of war is about the management of affects relevant to the unity of the political community. Hobbes infamously claimed that the sovereign must have power over the intellectual doctrines within a state. For the sake of security, the sovereign must produce consensus. Schmitt notes that there can be unity through both power and consensus. "Real power produces true consensus and true consensus produces true power." (Schmitt 1933/1958, 370.) However, Schmitt sees it so that during exceptional times when the political unity is threatened the former is preferred. The central question then becomes, who is the sovereign that has the authority to uphold unity during an exceptional situation (Schmitt 1930, 35.) As we claim below, this means that the sovereign must rule over and manage the political affects of the citizens. As Schmitt claims, humans are susceptible to affects and therefore in need of governing to remain united (1932/2015, 55).

Therefore, to conclude, the political ontology of war is about recognizing the differences between subjects. As Butler points out, the logic of war functions at the basis of our political communities to "distinguish lives worth safeguarding from those that are not—populations conceived as collateral damage, or as obstructions to policy and military aims" (2020, 62). This ontological aspect is based on establishing war as a potentiality, which then justifies certain institutions and exclusion of certain subjects from those that are to be protected. Important here is the concept of the enemy, the definition of which is supposed to help distinguish those subjects that are under the protection of the sovereign. We want to analyze the ontological and affective aspects of this issue to better understand the basis of the utilization of the rhetoric of war during the pandemic. To wage war against the virus means to demand the political community to act together and unanimously to defeat its enemy. For example, Macron has called on unity among citizens in the face of the war against the virus (Le Monde 2020) and massive state-sponsored informational campaigns around the globe have interpellated citizens to act responsibly and in a unified manner. The political ontology of war is therefore a way to identify differences between subjects, to counter those subjects that have been deemed on the side of the enemy, and, lastly, to establish a necessity for uniformity among citizens.

[14]This means to go in a different direction than Catherine Malabou or Falk, who both discuss sovereignty and biopolitics in tandem (Malabou 2015; Falk, 2011). As Agamben would put it, "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (Agamben 1998, 7).

DEPLOYING THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF WAR ON THE PANDEMIC

To sum up our discussion so far, we have argued for understanding the virus as an event that produces anxiety, which is then framed through political ontology to give the anxiety a referent, which turns it into fear, an affect that can be controlled and managed. We then attached this managing of anxiety onto a political ontology that we analysed in the context of sovereignty. Framing anxiety as a fear of the enemy, as we pointed out, is central to sovereign power in general. Therefore, our argument is not that the COVID-19 virus has once and for all revealed the essence of sovereignty because the framing of affects we have described is neither novel nor unique to governing during a pandemic. Instead, we argue that understanding the production of consent in the context of sovereignty tells us something about how our political communities operate during a pandemic that biopolitical analyses might leave out.

Sovereign power, according to Foucault, can be formulated as the right to take lives or to let live ("le droit de faire mourir ou de laisser vivre"). (Foucault 1976, 178.). "Law cannot be nothing but armed, and its weapon, par excellence, is death; for those who transgress it, law responds with this absolute threat, at least as a last resort. Law always is referred to as a sword." (Foucault 1976, 189). However, even if sovereign power might be in some ultimate sense reducible to violence, our discussion above has shown that a reference to violence is not enough to explain sovereignty. As we pointed out, framing produces a particular kind of political subjectivity. The political ontology of war constitutes the very specific form of framing and a concomitant ordering of social relations in our societies. Here, war does not refer to an actual event, but forms a central part of the political ontology that is being called on in framing the pandemic. The possibility of war establishes a demarcation between those subjects that are friends and those that are not. Schmitt claims that the political unity is "definitive" in that it defines the people that take part in it. The political unity (i.e. a state) upholds the distinction between friends and enemies and, therefore, upholds the definitive identity of friends, too. (Schmitt 1932/2015, 28, 41.). The existential threat of the enemy necessitates that certain political structures, hierarchies, exceptional measures and so on, are instituted to ward off this possibility.

In this part, we will discuss how the ontology of war is deployed in managing the anxiety caused by the pandemic. The first phenomenon we wish to note is the overbearing role that the nation state has taken in leading "the offensive" against the virus, which has led to precisely the kind of mobilization of nation state subjectivity, that the ontology of war produces. The second phenomenon we wish to draw attention to is how the frame established around the pandemic by the ontology of war constantly pulls in the direction of framing the enemy, not as the virus, but as non-nationals, foreigners and migrants. The third phenomenon concerns how the framing of the virus also misfires in such a way that produces a potential for even more anxiety, visible in the increased policing internal to communities. We close this section with some remarks on the anti-lockdown protests, which manifests a framing that seems to lean on other frameworks that try to alleviate the anxiety of the pandemic by framing the state to act as an object of fear in different ways. In Butlerian terms, the virus escapes a certain "recognizability" that the political ontology of nation state

constitutes, as recognizability crafts a "living being into a recognizable subject, though not without errancy or, indeed, unanticipated results." (Butler 2009, 5.) As the nation state constitutes a frame of recognizability through its production of political ontology it also produces, as Butler notes, errancy or unanticipated results, as well as dissent. The errancy of the recognizability in relation to which the nation state construes the position of the subject and the virus can be understood as the "misfiring" of the framing of the virus by the nation state, which leads to heightened anxiety.

As we have argued, anxiety can be understood as a widespread sense of loss of control, it is felt especially in the face of situations where the object that causes a feeling of losing control is hard to locate. It is in the first place the threat to life that the virus poses, and especially its hidden and potentially omnipresent character, that causes anxiety. This is further strengthened by the material consequences of the pandemic, financial, and social. The anxiety that the pandemic gives rise to is ultimately based on the unpredictability of its transmission. The pandemic has made the concept of infection a political phenomenon. This means trying to fit the spread of the disease into a symbolical frame that operates by relieving the anxiety related to its uncertainty (cf. Lohm et al., 2015). Here, our argument is that anxiety caused by the pandemic is a serious issue for sovereignty. In order to manage anxiety, secure social relations and avert internal conflicts, the state needs to govern affects and ensure uniformity.

During the global pandemic in 2020, in most parts of the world, the state has put itself in the position of the political institution responsible for managing the pandemic.[15] This is made very clear by how strongly states have exerted their political powers by closing down borders, limiting migration, business and the freedoms that citizens normally enjoy in Western societies. In an exceptional situation, as Schmitt would have it, the sovereign reveals itself (Schmitt 1921/2015, 13). In relation to preceding contemporary pandemics such as the H1N1, SARS, MERS, Ebola, HIV-AIDS pandemics, or in relation to historical pandemics such as the Spanish flu or the Black Death, the COVID-19 pandemic has been, as Woods et al. argue, handled as "a direct function of nationalism" as "none of the previous pandemics involved worldwide lockdowns, cessation of normal activities and massive state sponsored and state-controlled mitigation" (Woods et al., 2020, 811). What the pandemic seems to have revealed was that the contemporary role of protecting citizens still belongs to the state. However, as we have pointed out, it also revealed a central imaginary nexus in our understanding of political institutions in the form of the political ontology of war, with the need for the unity of the citizens that we have already discussed. The ontology of war offers the state an essential tool in securing a "strong national identification as their state assumes the major responsibility to protect them during a crisis" (Su and Shen 2021, 171. See also; Bieber 2020).

Within the nation state's frame of reference, warfare is talked about precisely in terms of the valiant sacrifice that citizens do for the common good. As Schmitt would have it, political unity demands the "readiness to die and to kill" (*Todesbereitschaft und Tötungsbereitschaft*), or else it is not political in the real sense (Schmitt 1932/2015, 43). The war against the virus therefore produces a certain level of unity between citizens and seeks to influence our way of acting in society, thus it seeks to limit ways of acting that could be perceived as dissenting in relation to the employed framing. The political ontology of war is certainly not the only ontological founding that could produce the desired action and manage our anxiety within the frame of reference provided by the nation state, save for the ontology of war that we have analyzed here.[16] However, it has certainly become central for a reason. The kind of management of anxiety that the ontology of war does produces hierarchies and obedience. In this style, Donald Trump talked about himself as "a wartime president" (White House, 2020). The Prime Minister of the Chezch Republic, Andrej Babiš, "seized every opportunity to stress that the nation was fighting a war" (Kleio in Pandemia 2020) and the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis remarked that "we are at war with an enemy who is invisible" (Reuters 2020); many more examples could be summoned. Obedience in war means adjusting one's own behavior to accommodate collective needs. War thus works through producing unity because of the historical structures of the nation state. In the name of what other event than war, could Macron demand "full mobilization" (Le Monde, 2020)? Similarly, during his presidency Trump urged that "every generation of Americans has been called to make shared sacrifices for the good of the nation," which he then likened to the sacrifices made during the Second World War (The White House, 2020).

It is important to note that there is variation in the responses to such authoritative acts of framing, both within the population and across populations. As was noted in the first section of this article and above, there are different frames and political ontologies present in and between societies, which effectively means that there can be political contexts where the framing of the pandemic isn't present to the extent it is in certain contexts (Sweden is sometimes used as an example of such a context, see for example Strang 2020; Dagens Arena 2020). It also follows that in different contexts where the political ontology of war is used to frame the pandemic, there will be differing levels of mobilization and unification enacted in its name as well as differing levels of dissent in relation to the framing (e.g. the case of Trump provoked a backlash, see Kleiner 2020; Washington Post 2020).

The affective subject called on by the ontology of war is naturally not performed into being solely on a command issued by the leader of a nation, instead it has to tap into the collective political ontology of society, its historically constituted memory and way of understanding itself, to bring about the kind of national subjectivization that the pandemic has done. For example, in Finland this has been done by tapping into "the memory of the bloody civil war, the role of both external and internal threats to the existing societal order during the post-World War II years, and the longstanding state-

[15]Regarding the pandemic and the state in the context of human rights treaties, see Chia & Oyeniran (2020).

[16]As Alyeksyeyeva et al. write, "in times of crises, war rhetoric appears the most persuasive and appealing tool to influence the collective mind of the public, since militarisation of crisis discourse helps to restrict the recipients' conceptualisation of the situation to a war frame as well as undermine or marginalise other conceptual representations of this crisis" (Alyeksyeyeva et al., 2021, 98).

orchestrated efforts to construct a coherent nation state" (Moisio 2020, 600). For example, Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. (2020, 10) have discussed such examples in the German and Italian context of the pandemic response, where "historical references are made to install a sense of community, and they all embrace the notion of active citizenship through pointing to the role the individual plays for the common good". The collective memories created by these kinds of historical understandings work together with the ontology of war to mobilize national subjectivity, they give collectively recognizable and affectively binding substance to the framing.

The effort of constructing the subjectivity of the ontology of war is also echoed clearly by sentiments of national pride that underscore the fruits of the national struggle during the pandemic, statements such as that made by Italy's prime minister Conte, who said that "Italy, we can say it loudly, with pride, is proving to be a great nation, a great community, united, and responsible" (quoted in Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, 6). Appeals to the specifically excellent character of the people of the own nation state have been circulated in a host of national contexts, such as the Danish prime minister's calls that Danes "are made of particularly strong material and have a unique ability to act driven by a sense of solidarity with other Danes" (Villadsen 2020, 230). These appeals could obviously only work against a shared background of understanding, where being of a certain nationality constitutes a substantial mode of political identification.

The central problem with the political ontology of war as a way to manage anxiety and establish uniformity is that it leads to a feeling of hate against different groups of people, and which can only be described as racist (Liu 2020; Rafi 2020). To manage anxiety, the ontology of war seems to transfer the target of the affect from the virus to another people to be feared. In the spirit of a transubstantiation, the ontological frame that the ontology of war constitutes has directed societies to blame the pandemic on groups outside of one's own community, expelling, or sealing off such groups have been measures that have been undertaken in order to manage anxiety. During the Black Death, Jews were blamed for spreading the disease (Burke 2007), while the Chinese have been made to account for the spreading of the disease during the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu 2020).[17] An infamous example here is the former president of the US, Donald Trump, who has been intent on attaching the anxiety to the Chinese. In a White House press briefing (from March 18, 2020) Trump's introductory remarks were on "a war on the Chinese virus." According to him, the virus is originally from China and therefore it is they who are to blame for the spreading of the virus and its consequences.

These ways of framing events and distributing the burdens of guilt have not come into being arbitrarily as the friend-enemy-distinction, based on the ontology of war, is a part of the affective ground of these frames. Racism against Asians has since been ramped up in the US but also in Europe, as Wang summarizes "people with Asian faces [have] in Denmark, Italy, France, Germany, Finland, and Estonia experienced multiple forms of xenophobia and discrimination connected with COVID-19", moreover "there is evidence of xenophobic rumors blaming Muslims, Jews, Roma, and refugees for hosting the virus, even culminating in the extreme nationalists advocating for social exclusion" (Wang 2020, 30–31). Over and above Xenophobia in the West, similar results have been discovered in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where there is growing evidence that the "COVID-19 pandemic is affecting migrants" who have reported on "increasing racism and xenophobia" (Dionne and Turkmen 2020, 221–222).

When subjects are formed through iteration of the frame of the nation state, the subjects are freed from uncertainty because the nation state promises the subjects certainty and control, at least this is the implicit promise delivered to the citizenry. As was discussed earlier, there will always be differing measures of dissent and alternative frames in play, which will lead to variation in how believable such promises of certainty and control seem in the eyes of the citizenry. The content of this promise is echoed strongly by Hobbes' philosophy, where the principal task of the sovereign is precisely to safeguard its subjects, especially from war. The subject, that the framing enacted by the nation state attempts to iterate, acts in this regard all the time as though it was waiting for the nation state to protect the subject from the dangers of war. The impossibility of neatly localizing the virus within the frame of the friend-enemy-distinction offered by the sovereign nation state's political ontology produces unclarity in the relation between sovereign and subject. Leaning on Zevnik's (2017, 189) theory it is possible to argue that this unclarity, which concerns the feasibility of the sovereign's claim to protect the subject, will push the subject to act as the subject would expect the sovereign to act: it will make the subjects exercise control in regard to each other and demand ever stricter restrictions. The aforementioned way of controlling uncertainty through enmity now shifts in the direction of a confrontation between citizens. The subject's fantasy of the unlimited scope of sovereign power, which is born of the powerlessness of the singular nation state in the face of the virus, makes the subjects reproduce and re-enact the sovereign's potentially unlimited use of power, which can for example be seen in the urge to control other citizens and the hopes and calls for more effective restrictive measures. This kind of dynamic testifies to the fact that managing uncertainty is not only about localizing the enemy; it is also used as a measure to control friends, as the aforementioned need for control between

[17]That Jews were persecuted as a consequence of the Black Death could be connected to a specific political ontology at play in some parts of Medieval Christian Europe during the epidemic in the 14th century. As Claude Lefort has discussed, the theologico-political configuration born of the Medieval Christian societies conceived of social unity "beneath the sign of the spiritual" (Lefort 1988, 229), the Black Death found its natural place in this theologico-political ontology as "a divine scourge, a retribution for the sins of mankind" (Slack 2020, 436). As such the Black Death acted as a powerful moral and political force that wrought down God's wrath on those groups that were Other, it "therefore predisposed men to action of various kinds: a search for scapegoats [...] a condemnation of the infected, especially if they were poor or otherwise disreputable" (Slack 2020, 438). As such it should not come as a surprise that "the rhetoric of fear", employed during this time, "reinvigorated a latent anti-Semitism and xenophobia" (Barney and Scheck 2010, 7; for a more detailed discussion see for example; Finley and Koyama 2016). At the same time the Black Death coincided in Christian Europe, with the "the extension of state powers" (Slack 2020, 442), a fact stressed also by Silvia Federici who argues that the counter-revolutions triggered by the Black Death led to the first steps taken on the road to the absolute state (Federici 2004, 44–50).

citizens shows. Leaning on the recognizability that the war against the virus activates thus generates both unity and a way to use power that are characteristic for the nation state.

The nation states have however provoked open dissent because of their employment of restrictions and protective measures. There has of course been an abundance of citizens calling out the government for failing to deal with the pandemic by not imposing more or tighter restrictions, very visibly in India and the US for example, but there have also been waves of anti-lockdown protests across the US and Europe. The salient feature of the anti-lockdown protests is that the protesters take aim at the legitimacy of the state as a political actor itself, as Gerbaudo writes "the key grievance mobilized in anti-lockdown protests is the very condition of the lockdown", the "protesters participating in these events claimed that lockdown measures were not motivated by defense of the public good, but were rather a manifestation of a conspiracy" (Gerbaudo 2020, 68). In many of the anti-lockdown protests there appears to be a disconnect between the state as the sovereign actor facing down the pandemic, and the frame of war. The latter seems to be present, taking as its target some version of the state, which leads to the state becoming the target of hostility, an object to fear and resent. Construing the state as the enemy could, in the case of anti-lockdown protests, thus be understood to be another object to be feared in order to fend off anxiety. The libertarian anxieties take on the state as an object of fear because of its restrictive power over the individual. But as Bratich has shown, such libertarian sentiments behind anti-lockdown protests often are also congruent with the logic of the mobilization that the nation state enacts when it shifts the target of the virus to the person who is other. As Bratich exemplifies, "this sentiment was found in the Texas lieutenant governor's infamous line 'There are more important things than living, and that's saving this country for my children and my grandchildren and saving this country for all of us.'", here "the 'us' [...] is an extension of 'my,' invoking blood (family) and soil (nation), while predicated on 'the exclusion or subordination of those outside'" (Bratich 2021, 258). This would mean that even if the action of the state or the state itself is felt to be illegitimate from the perspective of this framing, the ontology of war still exerts its grip on the affects of citizens.

The ontology of war present in this general libertarian affective attunement behind many of the anti-lockdown protests is supercharged in those cases where it is backed up with "conspiracies about a "deep state" and an apparent new convergence among anti-government groups across the political spectrum—including anti-vaxxers and flat Earthers, QAnon conspiracy theorists, guns' rights advocates, patriot militias, and White supremacist extremists" a concoction that creates a "combustive mix that brings a high risk of serious violence" (Woods et al., 2020, 817). It would seem plausible to argue that as these kinds of anti-statist conspiracy theories have at their core an understanding of the "deep state" as the *de facto* locus of power, they can be seen as another try at alleviating the anxiety that is reactivated when the framing of the pandemic by the nation state is experienced to misfire. However, in these cases, the object of fear is constituted as the "state within the state", that tries to hurt the people by imposing draconian restrictions, implanting microchips in people during vaccination and so on. Here the people are put into war with the "deep state", instead of being the national subjects of the state in war with other non-nationals. A political ontology constructing an antagonism in relation to "the deep state" has been extremely visible in the protests in the US, a reason for this could have been the fact that Trump continuously downplayed the importance of the virus which gave credit to the demonstrators' claims about the virus not being dangerous, while lockdown measures were simultaneously being imposed by other government levels, leading to a more complex target for the dissent. As has been noted by for example Pantucci and Ong, 2021 the "propaganda linked to COVID-19" that these anti-statist groups disseminate "has focused on racist, anti-Semitic, and other tropes" (6), the consipracies that these fringe groups focus on as objects of fear often seem to involve xenophobic elements. The affective attunements behind many of the anti-lockdown protests thus simultanously seems to lead to a questioning of the legitimacy of the state, framing it as an object of fear, while at the same time being implicated in the same kind of xenophobic outlook that the ontology of war leads to in state-centric accounts as well.

Our discussion poses an obvious ethical and political issue that brings us back to Butler's theory. As Butler emphasises, the recognizability of certain subjects is always partial: "The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things." (Butler 2009, 9.) It is especially during the pandemic that we have come to see the limits of the political ontology of war as a basis for distinguishing those to be protected and those left without protection. The traditional state system might have helped us buy time to understand the situation, but ultimately all frames, like Butler points out, are partial and they are all the time being transcended. In the last section of our article, we will discuss some takeaways of our analysis. It is not our task here to speculate on the different ways that we could reorganize the basis of our political communities in a way that does not try to establish uniformity by means of locating an enemy. We simply want to point out that our present political ontology is a terrible foundation for governing during a pandemic.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The pandemic has brought to light the profoundly sad situation we are in, the nation state seems to be unable to allocate resources and work for the common good without any other pretext than war. The frame of war that the nation state puts into action thus reveals the significant inadequacy of the political ontology that the nation state rests on, especially so concerning the failure of this frame to capture the central problematic of the virus. What the political ontology of war amounts to is a splitting up of the world into several unified bodies of subjects, closed off and walled in by the anxiety-managing operations of the nation state. Concerning this relationship between sovereignty, territory and bodies, Butler notes that:

> If we accept the insight that our very survival depends not on the policing of a boundary-the strategy of a certain sovereign in relation to its territory-but on recognizing how we are bound up with others, then this leads us to reconsider the way in which we conceptualize the body in the field of politics. We have to consider whether the body is rightly defined as a bounded kind of entity. (Butler 2009, 52.).

In the spirit of this ethos, the pandemic has underscored the urgency of undertaking a sustained reflection concerning the political ontology structuring our political subjectivity as well as the relations between territories, sovereignties and bodies, both physical and political, that this ontology produces. We know that the virus does not stop at the border of any state. We know that the solution to the pandemic cannot be a total closure of all nation states for eternity, even though this might be the latent claim and desire communicated through the political ontology of war. We also know that we cannot, and should not, desire an extension of the political ontology of the nation state to the whole globe. These seemingly commonsensical statements should be taken to structure the coming theoretical and practical work that remains to be done and redone concerning the complex interwoven character of political bodies and subjects.

As we construe it, the political problem posed by the pandemic is not only rhetorical; it concerns the organization of politics in our societies. It is rather the framing of the pandemic as something other than war that seems tempting and that calls on us to think about the political ontology of the political community and its structures in a way that contests the political ontology of the nation state. In other words, an analysis that takes note of political ontology will lead us to notice how the rhetoric of war is not our primary problem, instead we should focus on more fundamental historical and social structures, the feelings that anchor actors to these structures and the ways in which the political praxis of the nation state is organized. In the political sphere, it is not possible to direct affective expectations, desires and fantasies towards the virus. Especially such expectations, desires and fantasies that are grounded on hatred can within the frame of the political ontology of the nation state only be directed against other humans. We are not able to feel hatred towards the virus by leaning on our political ontology, it is instead perceived through the frame of the network of meanings that the nation state's political ontology of war leans on. This hatred that fantasises about war, has often been understood (see for example Castoriadis 1991, 150–151) to stem from narcissistic self-hatred and is directed towards the outside along the axes provided by the friend-enemy-distinction and is founded on a feeling that one wants others to be the same as oneself. As we have argued the friend-enemy-distinction fails to structure us as subjects at war with the virus and instead structures us as subjects at war with other peoples. As Butler notes concerning the ontology of the nation state: "Lives are divided into those representing certain kinds of states and those representing threats to state-centered liberal democracy". (Butler, 2015, 54.). In this way, the ontology of war also creates a moralistic and antagonistic position in relation to other nationalities.

According to Butler, the political ontology of war carries out a binary division between subjects, where the protection of some subjects is justified at the expense of others (Butler 2009, 31; 54). A highly urgent development that proves Butler's point is the tendency of what often has been called "vaccine nationalism", the thought that one's own nation should have priority access to the vaccine at the expense of other nations. The discussions concerning the distribution of vaccines display the full force of the political ontology we in this article have analyzed, the question of obtaining vaccines has also been framed through the ontology of war as an "arms race" (see for example Evening Standard 2020; Fortune 2020; New York Times 2020). That the vaccine produced in Russia is called Sputnik, a throwback to a cold-war era imperialism, reveals how even the object that is the vaccine becomes a vessel of nationalistic pride. The basic argument in defense of vaccine nationalism has been presented by Ferguson and Caplan, as they argue that the argument for a self-interested vaccine nationalism is morally justified because of one's primary commitment to one's own nation (Ferguson and Caplan 2020, 1–4). Needless to say, it is "epidemiologically self-defeating and clinically counterproductive" (Foreign Policy 2021) to defend vaccine nationalism in the case of COVID-19, and it might even ultimately work against the purported self-interest of the nation state. However, vaccine nationalism—in line with our argument—is a course of action that dominates the vaccine politics of the US (see Bollyky and Bown 2020) and "other countries—including China, India, the United Kingdom, and members of the European Union" (Fidler 2021, 749).

The border between us and others, inherent to our institution of political ontology, can however also be conceptualized in a way that highlights the fragility of this border, our survival is always dependent on others (Butler 2009, 44; 54). According to Butler, no singular body can be understood to be self-sufficient, bodies are always dependent on others. Butler's conception of the ultimate impossibility of localizing borders that would define who the survival of any one singular body is dependent on is in stark contrast with the theory of sovereignty, where the body gives itself to be protected against the enemy in accordance with the ontology of war (2020, 49; 62). The pandemic testifies to the flickering character of drawing such borders, and even for its impossibility. To end on an illustrative example: ridding the world of smallpox required societies to transgress the borders and the frame of the ontology of war and to notice that a politics that seeks to counter a virus requires political action that rises above antagonism.[18]

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All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

[18]Here, some forms of international institutions that wield biopower might be more suitable. This is because biopower targets populations instead of citizens bound within territorial borders (Foucault 1976, 183; Foucault 1997, 216–217; Foucault 2004, 13, 22–23; Oksala 2013, 321; Lemke 2019, 96–97, 135; Erlenbusch-Anderson 2020, 12, 20). The limits of a population, especially during a pandemic, are very different from the limits of nation states. It might be that the development of international travel has made humanity into a single population in need of international practies of biopower.

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Performative Control and Rhetoric in Aotearoa New Zealand's Response to COVID-19

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This article analyses how specific nodal points of performative control developed and consequently structured the discourse on Aotearoa New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies these points by adopting a rhetorical-performative approach to uncover three particular performances of control that articulated the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, from the diagnosis of the first COVID-19 case in the country in February 2020 through to October 2020. This period of analysis covers the emergence, subsequent nationwide lockdown, elimination, and re-emergence of the virus. There are three distinct nodal points that unfold as key to the nation's ability to control COVID-19: the hegemonic "us"; iwi regionalism; and the rhetoric of kindness. A mixed approach of content analysis of government data, Facebook data, and key imagery is employed to constitute these nodal points' relevance and how they structured the performative control that threaded through the nation's initial response as a whole. The article demonstrates how Aotearoa New Zealand, considered by popular assessment to have been successful in its response to COVID-19, managed to eliminate the virus twice in 2020, but not without aspects of the antagonisms that have beset other nations. These include the exacerbation of internal dichotomies and questions about the legality of Government mandates. As the country's response to COVID-19 is traced, the employment of a rhetorical-performative framework to identify the key nodal points also highlights how the framework could be applied to Aotearoa New Zealand's continuing response as the pandemic endures.

Keywords: COVID-19, Aotearoa New Zealand, performative control, rhetoric, discourse theory of laclau and mouffe

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INTRODUCTION

International assessments of Aotearoa New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been of a job well done. However, there were frictions evident in New Zealand society as a result of its response. Discursively read, as is done here from a Laclaudian-Mouffean (1985; c.f. Howarth, 2018; Palonen, 2018) perspective, internal antagonisms led to hegemonic struggles that were prevalent throughout the course of 2020. Aotearoa New Zealand was not unique in its performances of control, and contestations of performativeness, in response to the pandemic. The rapid transmission of the virus meant that despite its geographical isolation and relatively low population density, the country had to quickly consider enforcing the same public restrictions as other nations in a bid to limit the virus's potential spread in the community. It also meant that Aotearoa New Zealand was just as susceptible to the political nature of the virus that led to the stigmatization of others, particularly based on ethnicity, and the curbing in of previously exceptional nationalistic tropes (Roberto et al., 2020).

This article presents a rhetorical-performative analysis, based on Ernesto Laclau's poststructuralist discourse theory and then developed by Emilia Palonen (2018), of Aotearoa New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This enables the use of nodal points, which are moments that can inhabit the center of a discourse and provide both meaning and nodal linkages (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Thus, this article identifies three key nodal points that articulated the logics of the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand *via* performative control, and structured the discourse of its response to COVID-19. By articulating the hegemonic "us", iwi regionalism—in this case, those in Māori tribal areas asserting regional border enforcement—and the rhetoric of kindness as crucial nodal points, the article provides a unique viewpoint to Aotearoa New Zealand's widely acclaimed COVID-19 response. Particularly the first nodal point highlights the argument Palonen has advanced that for Laclau and Mouffe, it is the "us" that is in itself a temporary performative articulation—here, countering COVID-19—and its temporary state is specifically of importance (Palonen, 2021).

Although there are studies that discuss aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's socio-political landscape *via* post-foundational and specifically Essex School—based frames of reference (Stuart, 2003; Phelan and Shearer, 2009; Tregidga et al., 2014; Salter, 2016; Horvath, 2018), there has not been the range of examination applied using such a framework as there are in particularly Europe and the Americas. In current Kiwi political science literature, wider aspects of the Essex School have successfully enhanced knowledge of polarization (Satherley et al., 2020); populism, or at least the lack thereof of a radical right (Donovan, 2020); and gender (Golder et al., 2019). Here, the utilization of a rhetorical-performative analysis through which to interrogate Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response allows the identification of meaning-making and discourses that are unique to the country. Further, the conflict that exists within the Kiwi response, including the bringing of a court case questioning the legality of the lockdown and the subsequent judgment, is an affirmation that Aotearoa New Zealand's version of democracy is robust and "inhabited by pluralism" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 34). Demonstrating that there is space for disagreement even in the pandemic period, it is in line with the radically democratic perspective to democracy that contests the role of consensus as a basis of democracy and highlights taking stands, and even disagreeing (Mouffe, 2005). The radical democratic perspective of Mouffe that positively endorses disagreement is a unique lens through which to view Aotearoa New Zealand's version of democracy, especially considering the emphasis on consensus within the nation's pandemic response. However, positively viewing the disagreements that do exist allows us to highlight crucial dimensions of the nation's democracy that might otherwise be difficult to open up.

The literature on Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response has emphasized the country's initially successful approach that led to it declaring its elimination of the virus on 8 June 2020. The country has been highlighted as one from which lessons can be learnt, alongside similar relatively efficacious countries such as Taiwan, Iceland, and Singapore (Foudaa et al., 2020; Summers, et al., 2020). Others have highlighted Māori mobilization (Dutta et al., 2020; McMeeking and Savage, 2020), and particularly Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's effective crisis communication and leadership (McGuire et al., 2020; Wilson, 2020). The politicization of the virus *via* the heavily partisan nationalistic, diasporic, and prejudicial race-based discourses that framed some overseas responses to the virus (see, in particular, Linnamäki's and Chiruta's contributions to this Research Topic) are not as apparent in Aotearoa New Zealand. This inclusive hegemonic articulation (Palonen, 2021) has been one of the peculiarities of the nation's response; however, battles of discursive togetherness are still in evidence. Based on a sustained study of online ethnography of Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response and overlaid with a rhetorical-performative analysis, the key contribution of this article is to unveil and investigate the diverse moments of performative control that structured Aotearoa New Zealand's pandemic discourse, and identify how they emerged.

The article begins by outlining its theoretical framework, operationalizing aspects founded in Laclau's and Mouffe's construction of discourse, concept of hegemony, and frontiers building into a rhetorical-performative analysis of the performative control of the COVID-19 crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand. The powerful argument of Laclaudian-Mouffean analysis is that any political community ought not to be taken for granted and always seeks articulation (Palonen, 2021). In a crisis situation, communities are performed through a rhetoric of unity, and sometimes difference, in order to perform said crisis, as is the ethos in this Research Topic. Highlighting Aotearoa New Zealand to investigate performances of control allows turning to community-forming practices and rhetoric, and this framework is contextualized in the Results section. After the outline, I continue by identifying key nodal points, in part *via* official Facebook images, that also work to perform meaning-making and help to articulate performative control (Palonen, 2018) in Aotearoa New Zealand's experience of the pandemic. These nodal points highlight the control that must be performed in a crisis such as a pandemic, but in doing so I argue that these particular nodal points are a distinctively Kiwi response to the threat of COVID-19 that have served to reinforce the nation's constructed identity. The article concludes with a short discussion and offers ideas for future research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research resulted from contextualizing Aotearoa New Zealand's response *via* online ethnography (Hjorth, 2016) of majority Aotearoa New Zealand—based news websites. As a Kiwi living in Finland, which had its own relatively lauded path in responding to COVID-19 in 2020, the critical distance to my home country as a case study enabled a unique perspective that has made the nodal points identified particularly clear against a European context.

I concentrate the operationalization of a discursive framework onto the material used for this article, which comprises of publicly

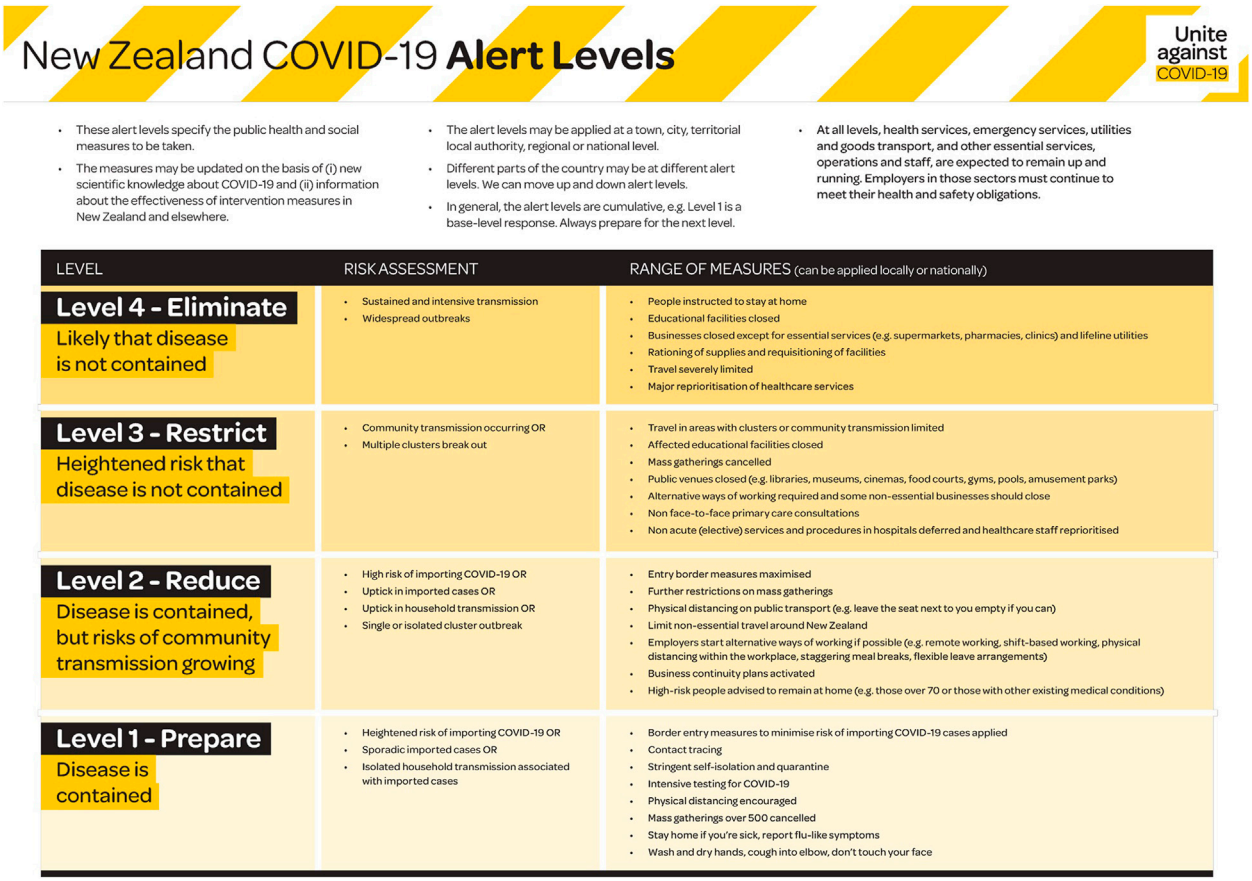

FIGURE 1 | New Zealand's framework of COVID-19 alert levels. Source: New Zealand Government's Unite against COVID-19 Facebook page, 21 March 2020.

accessible mixed data, to articulate the discursive lens through which the key nodal points are identified. These include Facebook, which was a vital communication channel for the Government, especially in the first nationwide lockdown; government agency data and official websites; and national and international media analysis, for the time period 26 February 2020 – 7 October 2020. The material collected from this period includes images from public Facebook posts, domestic media articles, and the Ministry of Health's detailed COVID-19 case details database. The start of this date selection marks the diagnosis of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand, which made it the 48th nation worldwide to have a confirmed case (Ministry of Health, 2020b). The end of the date selection is when the whole of the country returned, after an outbreak of community transmission, to Alert Level 1, the least serious level within the adopted alert level framework.

In order to analyze the data and understand the particularities and dominant Kiwi narratives of COVID-19 and the performance of control, I utilize a rhetorical-performative analysis based on postfoundational discourse theory (Palonen, 2018). This relies particularly on Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of discourse to conceptualize discourse, hegemony, and identity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). This approach is sensitive to transformations in the "discursive field", composed of meanings that are unevenly laid out and crisscrossed with antagonism (Ibid., p. 105). This means that political forces as well as citizen groups always need to articulate meanings and fix their relations in the discursive field through nodal points—i.e., the privileged signs around which other signs are ordered (Jørgenson and Phillips, 2002). Although nodal points initially lack meaning in and of themselves, through articulation they are constructed as important discursive signs, even though it is not possible to permanently connect the meaning of any of the elements to a conclusive actuality (Jørgenson and Phillips, 2002, p. 28). The role of the analyst is to locate those nodal points that are central in the discursive field, shared by or competed over by several political forces that would enable them to enhance our knowledge of the logics of articulation in this case (Palonen, 2019). In this way, the three nodal points that are located are also subject to identity changes and could be otherwise identified depending on which discursive meanings they can connect with. Likewise, the notion of performative control can also identify differently relative to its ability to connect with discursive meanings. If to be performative only exists relative to its ability to be performed (Butler, 1988), then the performance of control can only siphon meaning *via* its relation to discursive meaning. As such, meaning-making is performed across multiple articulations, including the

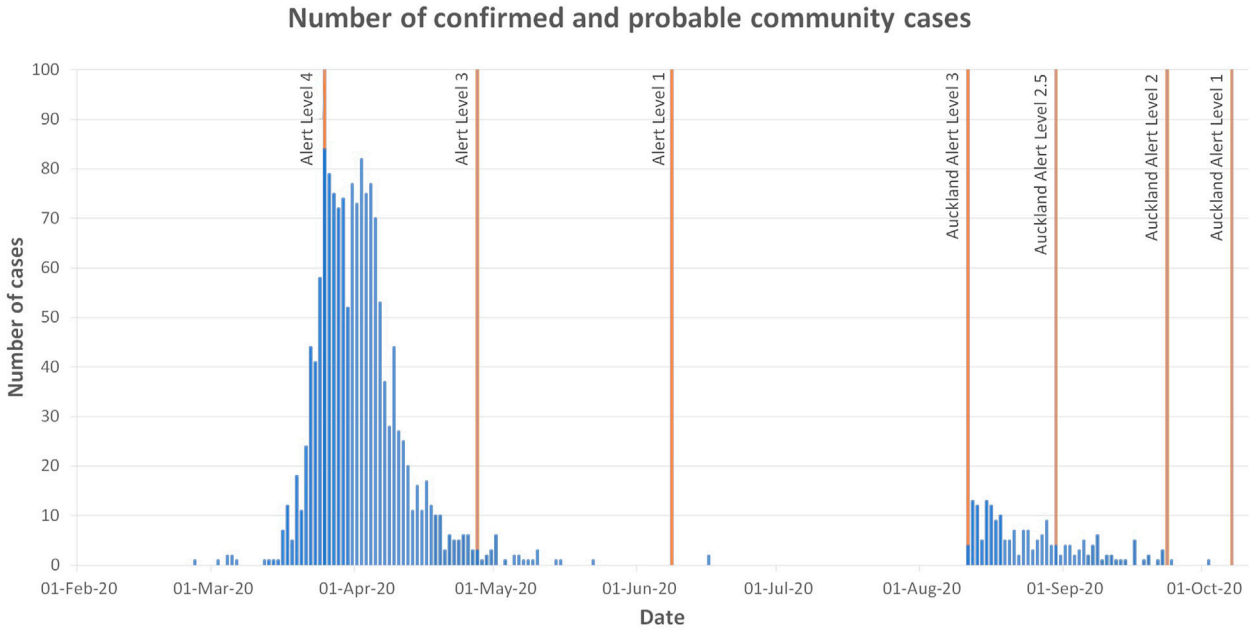

FIGURE 2 | New Zealand's confirmed and probable community cases of COVID-19 from 26 February 2020 to 7 October 2020 and corresponding alert levels. Before 17 June 2020, cases at the border were included in the total of the relevant district health board. Source: Data is from the New Zealand Ministry of Health, 31 January 2021.

rhetoric and imagery concentrated on in this article (Palonen, 2018).

In order to fully understand the development of the discursive field in Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic and performances of control by key actors, I will next go through an overview of the pandemic in the country and Government responses to it. Then I will analyze in more detail how central nodal points were formed, and what their political roles were during the pandemic.

RESULTS

The control performed by the Government in response to the emerging threat of COVID-19 developed in a cautious manner that was benefitted by Aotearoa New Zealand's geographic boundaries and isolation in the South Pacific. With 28 cases confirmed by 19 March 2020, all from overseas arrivals, the Prime Minister announced that the country's borders would be closed to incoming arrivals, apart from citizens and permanent residents and their partners and/or children (Radio New Zealand 2020a). This was a historic move. The four-tier alert level system shown in **Figure 1**, similar to Singapore's Disease Outbreak Response System Condition model, was announced on 21 March as the Government's control framework based on the spread and severity of the virus, and the country was placed at Alert Level 2 (Abdullah and Kim, 2020). The immediate elevation of the country to Alert Level 2 indicated not only that the Government was not wary of performing control *via* immediately implementing an increased alert level, but also that the virus had already broken control of the barriers set up days and weeks earlier to prevent its spread.

With Aotearoa New Zealand's first case of community transmission confirmed on 23 March and an increase of confirmed cases to 102, the country moved to Alert Level 3, with the Prime Minister stating that the country would move to Alert Level 4—i.e., a nationwide lockdown—at midnight on 25 March (Ardern, 2020a). It meant that all educational facilities and non-essential services were closed, and the idea of a personal household "bubble" within which people could interact entered the national vernacular.

An exceptional control lever was applied, with a State of National Emergency in force from 25 March until 13 May 2020, with each 7-day state extended seven times (New Zealand Government, 2020). The level of control that this enabled is a rare occurrence for the nation; it was the second-ever declared its history, the first being after the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes. The declaration of the State of National Emergency, in combination with the issuance of an Epidemic Notice the same day and subsequently a number of Orders under the Health Act, empowered the Government, the police, and other public servants with wide-ranging powers, the likes of which had not been seen for over 60 years (Science Media Centre, 2020).

The nationwide lockdown did not immediately impact the virus's spread. Similar to other affected countries, particularly in Europe, the transmission chains of the virus were spread throughout the country, but were particularly high in tourist areas, and across age groups where large private occasions—for example, weddings—took place (Robert, 2020). Aotearoa

New Zealand had its first fatality caused by COVID-19 on 29 March, and by 2 April the number of new cases reached its daily peak of 82 new cases, with 899 total cases (Ministry of Health, 2021a). However, as **Figure 2** demonstrates, although the effect of the nationwide lockdown did not occur straight away, its success could be seen in the relative brevity of Alert Level 4.

With Parliament adjourned (due to the nationwide lockdown) on 25 March until 28 April, an important signifier of the bipartisan political response to COVID-19 was established: the Epidemic Response Committee, which existed until 26 May. The online-based committee of MPs was chaired by the then Leader of the Opposition, Simon Bridges, with its purpose to scrutinize both legislation in the absence of Parliament, and Government and official decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, given the range of powers and control enacted under the State of National Emergency. The organized and comparatively consensual national response demonstrated the political center that Aotearoa New Zealand still has today, different to most modern democracies that the country tends to compare itself to that nowadays tend to have a split center.

However, the control the committee could exercise was tested. First, its ability to summon witnesses was challenged when the Minister of Tourism, Kelvin Davis, cancelled a scheduled appearance before the committee, days after he had been "grilled" at the committee (Brunton, 2020). Instead, the Minister appeared on a Facebook Live event, giving credence to the notion of the Government seeking to highlight its own preferred avenues of communication, particularly Facebook (Coughlan, 2020). Here, the control lay with the Minister, who did not schedule a make-up appearance, instead of with the committee charged with parliamentary oversight.

The committee's lack of control was emphasized by Government members again once Parliament resumed. Despite the committee still being active, the then Leader of the Opposition tweeted an email from a ministerial advisor to Ministers counseling them to decline invitations from the Epidemic Response Committee (Bridges, 2020a). The rational provided was that Parliament's other select committees were functioning again and Ministers should prioritize them (Devlin, 2020); however, it also displays the lack of control of the committee overall. Despite the committee being set up as a parliamentary substitute, in reality the Government's focus was on its own communication *via* press briefings and the Prime Minister's Facebook interactions. Given the ability of Ministers to reject appearing before it, the Epidemic Response Committee could instead be seen as the Government performing the impression of bipartisanship, when in fact the control itself was concentrated, at least in terms of the public face of the pandemic, on the Prime Minister and the Director-General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield.

With varying levels of compliance regarding a requirement since 14 March for arrivals in the country to self-isolate, by 9 April the Government announced that all citizens and permanent residents travelling to Aotearoa New Zealand would have to enter 2 weeks of publicly-funded Managed Isolation Quarantine (MIQ) at hotels that were turned into guarded facilities, with returnees monitored and mostly confined to their rooms for the duration of their stay (Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment, 2020). With daily cases declining, on 27 April the country moved down to Alert Level 3; although the country did not have zero cases overall, the virus had been eliminated from a public health perspective, as any new cases could be contact-traced (Bloomfield, 2020). On 8 June, the country moved to Alert Level 1, with no active cases in the community and all constraints essentially removed, bar those at the border. Aotearoa New Zealand was officially free of COVID-19, with its last remaining confirmed case recovered and it having been 17 days since a case was diagnosed. However, on 11 August, following 102 days without any community transmission of COVID-19, four cases from within one family were confirmed (Ministry of Health, 2020a). This saw the Auckland region, where the cases were based, moved back to Alert Level 3, whilst the rest of the country moved up to Alert Level 2. At the time of writing, the source of the cluster, which led to 179 new cases from community transmission, has not been identified (Ministry of Health, 2021b).

Opposition MPs, particularly the leader of the right-wing ACT party, questioned the legality of the police attempting to restrict residents to their suburbs during Alert Level 4 (MacLennan, 2020). This questioning was borne out when the validity of the initial stages of Aotearoa New Zealand's lockdown were challenged in the High Court by a former legislative drafter, who was concerned not about the necessity for a lockdown but about the legality of it. The court ruled in August 2020 in favor of one of the three causes of action that had been brought, stating that although the lockdown was required and reasonable, it was contrary to Aotearoa New Zealand's Bill of Rights and not authorized under the law (Borrowdale v Director-General of Health, 2020). An order by the Director-General of Health, under section 70 of the Health Act, enforcing the lockdown restrictions was not made until 3 April, making the directives to stay home—which, in its evidence, the Government stated were intended to be informative and were merely guidance—unlawful for the 9 days prior (Ibid). Without having the legal strength behind the directives to stay at home, instead the control used by the Government was a reliance on fear of the virus to motivate people to limit their personal movements. Compliance with what were presented to the public as legal requirements instead relied on a collective will to fight the virus's spread.

In response to the judgment, the Attorney-General ascertained that "In the end the measures taken by the government worked to eliminate COVID-19" (Parker, 2020). The discipline and adherence to the rule of law that was emphasized in the early days of the lockdown did not apply to the Government in what is a fragile stage in any democracy: a state of the exception. The public health emergency and the steps taken to eliminate the virus in Aotearoa New Zealand led to an emphasis of the uniqueness of the situation, with the Prime Minister stating that there is no rule book for a pandemic (Young, 2020). The antagonism that the court ruling discloses can be framed in anti-elitist terms: the Government, as "the elite", utilized hegemonic decision making that was outside its legal remit to ensure that what it thought was best for "the people" was enacted by community consensus to follow the Government's "strong signals, guidance and nudges" (Knight, 2020). The Government's approach to "go hard and go

FIGURE 3 | Give Nothing to Racism Campaign. Source: New Zealand Human Rights Commission Facebook page, 2 March 2020.

early" (Ardern, 2020b) was initially vindicated with the elimination of community transmission of cases by the end of April 2020, but this does not repudiate the lack of legality in the first days of Alert Level 4. However, the conflict that exists with the bringing of the court case and the subsequent judgment is an affirmation that New Zealand's version of democracy is robust and "inhabited by pluralism" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 34). Demonstrating there was space for disagreement even in the pandemic period, it is in line with the radically democratic perspective to democracy that contests the role of consensus as a basis of democracy and highlights taking stands, and even disagreeing (Mouffe, 2005).

With cases declining, Auckland moved to a modified "Alert Level 2.5" on 30 August and to Alert Level 2 on 23 September, with the remainder of the country moving to Alert Level 1 on 21 September. Auckland joined Alert Level 1 on 7 October (New Zealand Government 2021). The pandemic seemed to be over again. Next, I will turn to the particular nodal points that performed a significant role in the discursive field during the analyzed pandemic period.

Key Nodal Point 1: Performative Control *via* the Hegemonic "us"

COVID-19 has seen a rearticulation of Aotearoa New Zealand as a nation, perhaps as imposed by its geographic boundaries—being an isolated set of islands—as by any party-political speak since the start of the pandemic. The ease with which the country can physically bar any person or form of transport at its borders inherently feeds into an us vs. them dichotomy. Aotearoa New Zealand's physical isolation has meant that such a dichotomy has always existed to a degree; however, its realization as nationalism tends to be inconspicuous at best. Since the signing of the divisive Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 until the latter quarter of the 20th century, the overriding tenets of Aotearoa New Zealand's culture stemmed from the United Kingdom. Burgeoning multiculturalism and especially a growing appreciation and regard for the Māori culture has seen a unique character evolve, but these bonds are complex and problematic, and dominate late-night radio talkback.

This evolution has hastened in recent years by two tragedies that will continue to affect the long-term character of the nation: the Christchurch mosque terrorist attacks on 15 March 2019, and the Whakaari/White Island volcanic eruption on 9 December 2019. Both had already brought about versions of a "new normal" for Aotearoa New Zealand, such as more police bearing arms and increased unease about the relationship between the volatile nature of the country's geography and its biggest export industry, which is tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about another perceptible shift in the nation's consciousness. The ability to control Aotearoa New Zealand's borders as part of its COVID-19 response has fed a "curbing in" of the country's latent nationalism. Ethnonationalism became more pronounced. This was seemingly predicted in the early stages of the pandemic, with the Director-General of Health feeling compelled to emphasize the Kiwi citizenship of the first diagnosed cases (Stuff, 2020).

There is a complicated duality to the emergent state nationalism, or identification of the hegemonic "us", in Aotearoa New Zealand during the pandemic that has also been witnessed worldwide. Its affective force encouraged compliance with Government mandates for the benefit of fellow Kiwis; however, it has also led to an othering of not only other countries but also those returning to Aotearoa New Zealand (Antonsich, 2020). This identification is not necessarily fixed; "the people" is not a demographic category, but the role of politics is to generate such a temporary "us" (Palonen, 2021). The majority of returnees are citizens or permanent residents, but there is a sense of exclusion as to their role in the task of preventing COVID-19's spread. It is a duality that is reflected throughout the country's COVID-19 experience, as it was both the Government's comparatively swift and complete national lockdown as well as its geographical borders that formed its successful defensive structure against the virus.

Such othering continued to spread internally in the nation. Reports of racist incidents against the Asian community related to COVID-19 encouraged the Human Rights Commission to launch its "Racism is No Joke" campaign in July 2020, extending its previous "Give Nothing to Racism" campaign (Human Rights Commission, 2020). **Figure 3** from the Human Rights Commission's Facebook page shows one of its campaign images, attempting to ensure people do not conflate the virus with racial linkages as to who has it or where it came from. Prejudice intensified following the cluster that emerged in South Auckland on 11 August 2020, which ended Aotearoa New Zealand's 102-day COVID-19—free streak. However, the focus

changed when the family at the center of the cluster was identified as Pasifika, in part because the area of South Auckland itself is stereotyped as low-income and predominantly made up of Māori and Pacific Islanders. A rumor was posted on Reddit as to how the virus had entered the community that, despite being deleted hours later, spread throughout social media (Farrier, 2020). The rumor led to a Facebook post on 15 August on a conspiracy theory page "Expose Hatred in NZ" that leant heavily into the stigmatization and prejudices that some within the nation's hegemony negatively associate with Māori and Pacific Islanders, including of single motherhood, breaking the law, unemployment, and being familiar to government agencies (Ibid). Interim Minister of Health Chris Hipkins denounced the rumor as comprising "vile slurs" (Deguara, 2020). Stigmatization of those who were deemed based on ethnicity to be outside the hegemonic "us"—the 70 percent of Kiwis who identify as of European descent (Statistics New Zealand, 2020)—is part of what leads to the development of this nodal point as an important part of Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response, especially as it feeds into the two other identified nodal points, through discrimination and a lack of kindness.

It was a signification of hegemony and of "othering" that are both underlying tensions in Aotearoa New Zealand at all times amongst socioeconomic and cultural subsets, but was particularly obvious with the cluster outbreak. By singling out a family as deliberately behaving against Aotearoa New Zealand's best interests and by focusing on their socio-cultural background and where they lived, it embodied a lack of societal unity that was an antithesis of Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 strategy. It was exacerbated by the then Deputy Prime Minister—and leader of New Zealand First, the country's closest example of a right-wing populist political party—Winston Peters claiming to Australian media days earlier that he had heard from a journalist that the cluster had originated *via* a quarantine breach (New Zealand Herald, 2020). Both Government Ministers and agencies refuted the rumor and repeated pleas for people to trust official sources regarding COVID-19. It was a rare moment in Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 experience where the control of discourse regarding the virus was lost by the authorities, especially as it was further exacerbated by the Prime Minister's own deputy. It also displayed a level of distrust with the Government and the information being provided to the public.

Health authorities were compelled to clarify, for example, that at least the second case that was diagnosed in Aotearoa New Zealand involved specifically "a Kiwi family" after they faced sustained abuse on social media (Martin, 2020). The threat of moralism and stigmatization on those who have had the virus has been a continual undercurrent in Aotearoa New Zealand since the pandemic started. Initially there was an "othering" of non-Kiwis when the pandemic first began to threaten Aotearoa New Zealand's borders; however, it was internalized and exacerbated with the South Auckland cluster. The discovery of the cluster led to the greater Auckland area moving to Alert Level 3, and the rest of the country to Alert Level 2, on 12 August until 30 August in an attempt to control the outbreak (Ministry of Health, 2020a). The exceptionalism of the Auckland region was not new—the common derogatory vernacular for an Aucklander throughout the rest of the country is JAFA, or Just Another Fucking Aucklander (Bardsley, 2014)—but the sociological and physical divide (with travel between Auckland and other regions severely restricted) was, and it led to both a forced and metaphorical regional curbing in by the rest of the country. The rhetoric of unity was somewhat splintered with the exceptionality of the Auckland region; however, as is detailed *via* the next nodal point, it was not for the first time during the nation's lockdowns.

The hegemonic "us" that has been detailed stands out for Aotearoa New Zealand, as the country has not experienced the same contemporary swell in radical right-wing politics as the democracies it is often compared with. This is its importance as a nodal point that gave structure to the nation's response, and it developed alongside the evolution of the virus in Aotearoa New Zealand, intensifying as case numbers intensified. It also splinters the egalitarian sociopolitical structure that the country prides itself in. The inherently exclusionary actions that led the nation's response to the virus, such as the closing of borders, fed a narrative of stigmatization and rumor-mongering that picks up on Laclau's and Mouffe's logic of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), but the antagonism was fractured between the hegemonic "us" and those in the ethnic minority assumed to not be citizens, or the "others".

Key Nodal Point 2: Performative Control *via* Iwi Regionalism

Aotearoa New Zealand's domestic politics are structured in an outwardly straightforward manner, with its three governmental tiers of Parliament, regional councils, and local councils. However, multiple tensions exist within each of these tiers, particularly around the incorporation of tikanga Māori (generally defined as Māori cultural practices) and specific Māori representation at all levels of government. The institutional antagonisms that exist cause Māori to be inherently apprehensive of most Government mandates, and any performativity of statehood by iwi (Māori tribes) tends to be at a local level, apart from when Treaty of Waitangi settlements are made. In pre-colonial times tribal boundaries were constantly disputed antagonistic frontiers, and even today they often overlap; regardless, they are superseded at a national level by designated Māori seats in Parliament, of which there are seven out of the usual 120 seats that constitute Parliament. The real political power for iwi comes from Treaty of Waitangi settlements—compensation for losses stemming from the Treaty—and the subsequent apologies and return of assets included with the settlements. However, this does not compensate for the worse health outcomes that Māori tend to experience, compared with Pākehā (non-Māori) (Graham and Masters-Awatere, 2020).

With the borders closed, the coronavirus narrative shifted inwards and highlighted already existing social and cultural divides. The day before the nationwide lockdown, iwi in some parts of the country began setting up roadblocks on main roads into their area, questioning those driving into the area as to their

purpose for travel. This mobilization was motivated by reported hostile treatment in the state health sector, and was borne out with Māori 50 percent more likely to die from COVID-19 than Pākehā (Steyn, et al., 2020). Additionally, the roadblocks were focused in geographically isolated areas that had fewer public health services available.

In the Bay of Plenty, on the East Coast of the North Island, the iwi Te Whānau-ā-Apanui was the first to announce their intentions to block entry into their area to non-residents and non-essential workers, with community members manning the western and eastern borders into the area 24 h a day (Hurihanganui, 2020). In the Northland/Te Tai Tokerau area of the North Island, a roadblock was set up on the main state highway into the area. When asked as to the legality of the roadblocks, the Deputy Police Commissioner emphasized the importance of supporting the cultural response (Radio New Zealand, 2020b). The roadblocks can be seen as a microcosm of the wider national pandemic response; early on in the pandemic the shortage of ventilators countrywide was emphasized as a cause for the "go hard and go early" approach (Dutta et al., 2020).

Imagery around the roadblocks had stark contrasts. Photos from May 2020 from the public Facebook pages of now Māori Party members of Parliament Debbie Ngarewa-Packer and Rawiri Waititi show the roadblocks as running collegially with police present, inquiring as to travelers' reasons for moving within regions during a period of heavy restrictions (during Alert Level 3). Conversely, the New Zealand First party's Facebook page took a deliberately more divisive image of men physically blocking the road, no police presence, and the national Māori—or tino rangatiratanga; Māori sovereignty—flag displayed. The legality of the roadblocks were debated in the media, and images such as the New Zealand First one worked to emphasize already existing antagonisms. Māori manning the roadblocks were likened to "empowered mobs" and "vigilante thugs", with a talkback radio host labelled the actions as "silly . . . bullshit . . . all about separatism." (Jackson, 2020; Peacock, 2020). Checkpoints were instigated in other areas of the North Island during Alert Levels 3 and 4, although by the end of April they had reduced to single figures (Burrows, 2020). Anxiety about the virus, a desire to protect communities with predominantly Māori demographics, and a lack of trust regarding the ability or will of authorities to aid Māori, led to iwi exerting their own performance of control over the virus (Dutta et al., 2020).

The roadblocks not only constituted a performative practice of control by a vulnerable population in isolated areas, but also they were a symbol of meaning-making sovereignty for Māori. It was a representation of tino rangatiratanga by iwi, which is a regular cleavage in Aotearoa New Zealand's domestic politics. This was emphasized in a meeting of the Epidemic Response Committee: when the Chair stated that the roadblocks were unlawful in every context, the Police Commissioner disputed that (Harris and Williams, 2020). The hegemonic rhetoric surrounding the checkpoints also reflected division, possibly for the purpose of preventing stigmatization. Both the Prime Minister and the Police Commissioner initially referred to the roadblocks as variations on "community-led checkpoints", instead of iwi-led (Dutta et al., 2020), homogenizing the checkpoints and the iwi manning them. Regardless, the fact that the police framed their response as merely visitations to the roadblocks showed that much of the discursive power lay with iwi. It also feeds into the logic of who can define borders. Aotearoa New Zealand is not required to engage in space-claiming practices to constitute its borders; they are geographically set. Perhaps this makes the contestation of borders within the nation more antagonistic; however, many iwi boundaries predate colonial settlement. The split in the country's collective unity that the roadblocks signified was a shift in the narrative, from blame on those bringing the virus into the country to targeting those who were attempting to reduce the potential spread of the virus within their own communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Key Nodal Point 3: Performative Control *via* Rhetoric of Kindness

The two main mediums used for communication and engaging with the public by the Government, particularly during the nationwide lockdown, were televised press briefings and Facebook. There were near daily 1pm press conferences on weekdays over the course of the virus's emergence in Aotearoa New Zealand and the subsequent lockdown, with the Prime Minister and the Director-General of Health updating the country on the latest COVD-19 figures and allowing time for questions from reporters. They became a fixture of lockdown when the majority of people were at home, and made a national celebrity out of Bloomfield. The continuity of having, for the most part, Ardern and Bloomfield present the Government's communications increased the perception of consistent and stable control over the pandemic. A survey conducted by Massey University after the first nationwide lockdown had Ardern's communication rated at 8.45 out of 10, and Bloomfield's as 8.19 out of 10 (Thaker and Menon, 2020).

However, there was a missing link between the Prime Minister's consistent appearances on Facebook and the willingness of other Ministers to speak, especially during the nationwide lockdown, with local media outlets reporting in May that they had been denied the ability to interview relevant Ministers, with only the top-ranking Ministers available to speak to the media (Manch, 2020). The Government's belief in its level of control over its pandemic response was highlighted by an email from one of the Prime Minister's advisors that was forwarded to unintended recipients in May 2020, in which colleagues were told "There's no real need to defend. Because the public have confidence in what has been achieved and what the Govt is doing. Instead, we can dismiss," (Manch, 2020). With rhetoric of any kind dismissed, instead reliance was on the performance of control having been accepted by the public.

The second main avenue of communication that the Prime Minister used was Facebook Live. This was not new, as Ardern often provided short updates or condensed versions of recently announced policies, along with the live streaming of press conferences and major parliamentary speeches, such as the Budget. Aotearoa New Zealand has a history of expecting its leaders—not only political, but across all spheres—to be

FIGURE 4 | Messaging from the New Zealand Government. Source: Nelson City Council Facebook page, 25 March 2020; Unite against COVID-19 Facebook page, 14 May 2020 and 21 March 2020.

unpretentious and casual no matter the context, to ensure that they are still one of "us" (Holmes et al., 2017). The use of Facebook Live during the pandemic exemplified the "all in this together" narrative with an intimate, spontaneous conversation of sorts with the Prime Minister, who interspersed repetition of pandemic-related announcements and key messages with answering viewer questions (Ardern, 2020a).

It also aided in bridging the traditional limitations female leaders face regarding the gendered divide between public vs. private, and politics vs. domestic (Johnson and Williams, 2020), as *via* the Facebook Lives Ardern delivered targeted messaging on the controls the Government was leveraging to minimize the risk of infection from her Wellington-based home, in a lounge chair and apologizing for her casual wear (Ardern, 2020c). What could be seen as a particular, domestic performativity of gender was counterbalanced with some of the Facebook Lives and of course press briefings being conducted in more formal business wear, maintaining the balance between care and authority that is not required of male political leaders. The gendered leadership style was emphasized by the media highlighting of countries led by women being considered more successful at managing the pandemic—commonly cited examples, along with Aotearoa New Zealand, are Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, and Taiwan. The balance between politics and the domestic not only accentuated the "fictive solidity" of gender and leadership (Hey, 2006), but also the certain solidity of performative camaraderie and of ensuring that Kiwis viewed the Prime Minister—and, therefore, the Government and other pandemic decision-makers—as one of "us". This "us" performativity and its consistent employment in Government rhetoric, most obviously with the "team of five million" refrain as seen in **Figure 4**, was crucial for aiding in public compliance with the lockdown restrictions, as it fostered a sense of collegiately amongst the nationwide community.

The use of Facebook as a main communication channel not only aided in the impression of genuineness but also aided in co-creating the crisis with the people of Aotearoa New Zealand, further providing credence to the togetherness of the lockdown (McGuire et al., 2020). Instead of being in contrast to the initial authoritative stance taken in the run-up to the implementation of the lockdown, this closeness and perceived transparency forged trust and the feeling of a common ground among the Kiwi public.

Figure 4 shows examples of the messaging used by the Government during at least the early stages of the pandemic. The usage of the "team of five million" as an inclusionary metaphor worked on several levels. First, its appeal for the nation to work together to eliminate the virus *via* empathetic consensus was in contrast to other nations launching their battles on the virus—for example, Emmanuel Macron declared that France was "at war" against the virus (Erlanger, 2020). This was further highlighted with the official New Zealand Government page for information on the pandemic called "Unite against COVID-19". Second, "it fed into an "us" vs. "them" dichotomy and into Aotearoa New Zealand's underdog persona, if we take "us" as the nation and "them" as other nations, or perhaps even Kiwis overseas." Third, New Zealand's "compassionate liberalism" (James and Valluvan, 2020, p. 1240) as a signifier helped feed into the "team of five million" metaphor. The discursive formation "of the metaphor" also effectively isolated those opposed to the nationwide lockdown or to the Government's wider virus response as them not being part of the team.

The overarching kindness signifier was underlined with several key phrases that have been the foundational axioms underpinning Aotearoa New Zealand's coronavirus approach. With the announcement of restrictions on 14 March, the Prime Minister emphasized the need for the country to "go hard, and go early" with its pandemic response (Ardern, 2020b). The shared language as a "team of five million," and the cooperation and behaving for the greater good that they infer, aided the nationalism previously discussed at least during the nationwide lockdown. The discursive dominance of those terms were key in defining Aotearoa New Zealand's defense strategy.

The collective rhetoric worked in ensuring that Kiwis were mostly compliant with the lockdown measures, emphasized and enforced by a neighborhood form of control: the police website set up for people to report suspected lockdown breaches during Alert Level 4 initially crashed, with over 9,000 reports from people "dobbing in" individuals and businesses for suspected lockdown breaches in its first 3 days (Roy, 2020). The irony of this is that, as was previously detailed, the time period when these reports were made was within the High Court's ruling that the order to stay at home was unlawful. There is also an element of individual performative control visible, as it is an indication that those in lockdown—with the lack of control over, for example, their personal movements and who they could have personal contact with—sought to exert control *via* active surveillance over others by reporting them to the authorities.

The distinctive employment of kindness that is a hallmark of the Prime Minister's leadership rhetoric can be traced back to her speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2018, when she emphasized that the "one concept that we are pursuing in New Zealand it is simple and it is this: kindness" (Ardern 2018). This was consolidated and extended as a form of crisis communication after the tragedies of March and December 2019, providing a benchmark that the country was already familiar with. It has become one of the prevailing hegemonic discourses in Aotearoa New Zealand. As the dominant discourse, although it may be difficult to argue that kindness is political, it could always have its hegemonic status challenged by a new, antagonistic discourse within both Aotearoa New Zealand's politics and society. Kindness as an objective reality can always become the political again. The kindness discourse was not only from the Government; in line with Aotearoa New Zealand's bipartisan approach to crises, the then Leader of the Opposition, Simon Bridges, tweeted at the start of the lockdown of the importance of staying at home, using the "We're all in this together" refrain (Bridges, 2020b).

The meaning-making evident in the Prime Minister's crisis communication was consistent throughout the first year of the pandemic, and that helped to ensure buy-in from the public when the country was in its national lockdown. Humans are inherently driven to both create and continue meaningful self-narratives, and in Aotearoa New Zealand the key phrases that emerged have fed its self-narrative regarding COVID-19 (Mackay and Bluck, 2010). Going back to the argument that the "people" are not taken for granted in politics, but that that articulation of the people is a key to performative politics (Palonen, 2021), we can also point, through the theory of hegemony of Laclau and Mouffe, to both inclusive and exclusive processes, universal claims and claims of particularity, which go hand in hand in politics (Laclau, 1992). The inclusive political rhetoric that evoked the importance of kindness emerges as a key nodal point because its meaning-making was a central factor in Kiwis complying with lockdown regulations and forging a community consensus. As was seen with the descriptor of iwi checkpoints as community checkpoints, the rhetorical focus was on having Aotearoa New Zealand concentrate on its supposed homogeneity as a "team of five million".

DISCUSSION

This article has positioned key aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response in a rhetorical/discursive-performative analysis framework. The multiple facets to any country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic means there are multiple nodal points that could have been extrapolated. The three nodal points chosen help to explain the generalized success of Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response in comparison with other nations, and how they bound together as an inclusive, if temporary, articulation that is both performative and hegemonic. However, it has also disclosed internal exceptionalisms evident in the nation's response. The material shows that throughout the pandemic, the framing of the nation's response as reliant on kindness and working together as a team has not been able to completely avoid the hegemonic divisiveness of not only other nations but also those within the country who were either singled out for blame, such as the South Auckland family, or singled out for attempting to protect their communities, as with the iwi roadblocks.

First, an emphasis on the hegemonic "us" was performed throughout the pandemic in 2020. It began with the rearticulation of nationalism in Aotearoa New Zealand due to the virus being brought in from overseas, but it devolved into race-based attacks and particularly the scapegoating of some minorities in the community. The country's natural borders and the closure of travel to all but citizens and permanent residents performed control as a blunt instrument, organically feeding the emphasis on hegemony that occurred. However, ironically this insular focus helped aid the electoral dismissal of the Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, who had previously campaigned on such a nationalist angle. Second, the performative control shown by some iwi in setting up roadblocks to prevent the spread of the virus in vulnerable communities also displayed underlying antagonisms regarding the social and cultural divides with Māori. It constituted a performative practice of statehood that was a regional version of what the nation had enacted, but highlighted the deep-seated cleavage that exists over the tino rangatiratanga—Māori sovereignty—that is held by Māori. Third, the consistent communication delivery methods of the Prime Minister, the rhetoric of kindness, and the "team of five million" metaphor were central in forging control by consensual compliance. Despite the early days of the nationwide lockdown later being challenged in court, the performativity of willing everyone to be part of the "team of five million" saw wide compliance for the strict measures.

The kindness rhetoric was used as a mobilizing device and as a performative aspect of statehood that reinforced the need for consensus in order for the nationwide lockdown measures to work as intended. Whether this will be the case if the virus is to emerge again in the community is unknown. As the chains of equivalence and thus the nodal points of the discourse on Aotearoa New Zealand's pandemic response transform as the pandemic endures, a rhetorical/discursive-performative analysis framework could be operationalized further to develop nodal points that are emerging at the time of writing. Complications such as a lack of PPE for staff within

MIQ, intermittent travel corridors with Australia and the Pacific Islands, and vaccine delivery are proving to be challenging for the country's continued management of COVID-19.

The Laclaudian-Mouffean approach enables us to see the performative political articulation, where the hegemonic "us", iwi regionalism, and the rhetoric of kindness are the three key nodal points that have been identified as significant in structuring the discourse on how Aotearoa New Zealand responded to COVID-19 *via* performative control. The country has both structural and socio-political advantages that have aided in its, so far relatively successful, management of the crisis, but there has also been the re-emergence of domestic cultural, geographical, and social frontiers that will become more evident if the virus is to return to the community.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-case-demographics (COVID-19 case details through 31 January 2021).

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Performing COVID-19 Control in Finland: Interpretative Topic Modelling and Discourse Theoretical Reading of the Government Communication and Hashtag Landscape

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This article discusses discursive transformations in the performance of the government and the "hashtag landscape," studying Twitter discussions and the female-led government of one of the youngest Prime Ministers in the world, Sanna Marin of Finland. Among the countries in Europe, Finland has been, in the period of analysis of March 2020 to January 2021, one of the least affected countries by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our datasets from both Twitter discussions and the government's press conferences in 2020 reveal which were the emerging topics of the pandemic year in Finland and how they were discussed. We observe a move from consensual governmental political control to control in the hands of the authorities and ministers responsible, performing a different basis for the pandemic. On the "hashtag landscape," facemasks continually emerge as an object of debate, and they also become a point of trust and distrust that the government cannot ignore. In terms of comparative governance, this article also notes how the emergency powers legislation shifted control to the government from regional authorities and municipalities in spring 2020, and by that autumn, those powers were returned to regional and local bodies. We recognize several themes that were contested and the discursive field's transformations and interplay with the authorities.

Keywords: COVID-19, discourse theory, topic modeling, control, Twitter, interpretive analysis, Finland

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INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the performance of control in press conferences and in Twitter discussions related to COVID-19, in a country that survived the pandemic well in 2020. The female-led government of the young social democratic Prime Minister Sanna Marin was faced with a historic challenge merely months after its appointment in 2019 (Palonen 2020) but also online harassment (Van Sant et al., 2021). Control in pandemic politics is a paradox. It is impossible to be in control of a border-crossing, air-transmitting virus. Similarly, it is impossible to be in control of politics in a democracy. Political communication and commentary on Twitter are constitutively performative acts. The government and authorities appear as if they were in control and convincing the people of their pandemic measures relying on expert advice and leadership. In their seminal work on government communication, Sanders and Canel (2013, 331) wrote "window-dressing exercises to give

the appearance of open government communication," which we find crucial when considering the performativity control. From a post-foundational perspective, we do not take leadership for granted, but the task of politics is to fill the ultimately empty space of power (Laclau 2014; *see* Palonen 2021).

The numbers of COVID-19 cases in Finland in 2020 were contained: the state of emergency, social distancing, and other lockdown acts resulted in fewer hospitalized cases caused by other respiratory infections and shrunk the RSV and influenza seasons (Kuitunen et al., 2020). To discuss ethical approaches by different governments, Häyry (2021, 43) identified four main approaches for dealing with the pandemic. The first, containing and mitigating the disease, chosen in many countries, would "flatten the curve," to enable healthcare systems to be better prepared to provide effective care. In spring 2020, the virus was spreading in the Helsinki metropolitan region, and foreign travel was restricted. In an exceptionally warm year, many from south Finland had planned to travel north to enjoy the record amounts of snow or to go to their vacation homes, but the government decided to use emergency powers legislation to ensure containment of the virus in the region. It ordered a lockdown and regional closure of the metropolitan Uusimaa region, with police and the Finnish Defense Forces in place to restrict unnecessary border-crossing from 18 March to 14 April, covering the Easter holiday break (Willberg et al., 2021). In contrast, in Sweden, and especially those from the capital Stockholm region, people traveled to the Alps for their winter holidays: the virus was already rampant in Sweden when the state epidemiologist opted for the second "herd immunity" approach. In May, Finland, like Germany and others, adopted the third approach, "a test, track, isolate, and treat model to manage and control the pandemic" (Häyry 2021, 46; emphasis original), to keep down virus reproduction (RE) through measures that minimize infection rates and identify spread, loosening some, and imposing other lockdown measures. Sometimes suppression, the fourth approach, was also mentioned in Finland. Singling out "control" is important for our argument and research question of how the government performed pandemic control and how was it received and contested. Häyry (2021, 43–44) points out that the government managed to express its recommendations in such a way that they were interpreted as legislation by citizens. For us, this points to performative control.

The Nordic expectation of openness also has demanded transparency of governance, but in practice, the demand for transparency is meant only superficially (Erkkilä 2012). Government communication includes ceremonial elements, and it is disconnected from the policy itself (Vesa 2015). Finns generally trust their authorities and argue Kääriäinen, Isotalus and Thomassen (2016). The question of speaking the truth or lying emerges as pivotal in the Finnish "mask gate" debate of autumn 2020, when the issue of masks, as it was argued in the spring by the government, was negated. Considering healthcare crisis leadership from an ethical communication point of view, Häyry (2021, 47) argued that the Swedish government, in its outspoken heard immunity policy, was more truthful than the Finnish one but that historical circumstances in Sweden allowed for that better than in Finland and other countries where legitimacy for the situation was sought differently. The government and the health authorities articulated or performed their statehood (Palonen 2018; Vulović, 2020) and their control of the virus. When discussing March 2020, Moisio (2020, 600) captures the turn to the nation states and highlights minuscule resistance in Finland, citizens complying with the requirements of a newly performed bordered history-aware state entity.

The existing literature notes the pandemic's effects on democracy in Finland. The pandemic brought centrism to the policy process of network governance in Finland (Neuvonen 2020). Another approach stressed co-creating and sharing ideas, including new forms of knowledge production in the "post-liberal" Finnish case, "with a readiness to share its sovereignty in decision-making with experts and activate participation of healthcare workers, parents, teachers, local authorities, and, finally, children themselves" (Makarychev and Romatshko (2021, 80, 73). Indeed, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), the main body advising the pandemic strategy in Finland, gathered 116 social media posts prior to the first press conference on 27 February, "to analyze risk perceptions and trust towards public authorities in the context of coronavirus disease," recognized five central types of risk perceptions, and proposed answers to them: catastrophic potential, probability of death, reasons of exposure, belief of controllability, and trust in authorities (Lohiniva et al., 2020). This legitimized our research design: the communicating authorities that we studied also followed Twitter discussions.

Twitter enabled the Finnish close-knit virtual elites to perform their "politics of presence," Ruoho and Kuusipalo (2019, 81) argue that "the myth of the mediated center seems to persuade politicians and journalists from all levels of society to join a special kind of Twitter network dominated by the "inner circle" of top-level political and media elites." The interplay between the elected officials and the expert organizations and authorities is also visible in our data. We study the authorities and the debating "hashtag publics" (Rambukkana 2015), the co-occurrence and ministerial presence of government press conferences, and social media discussions, through interpretative analysis of the themes of communication and contestation. Existing research explores forms of government criticism or interaction on COVID-19 on Twitter (between two approaches in Finland: Väliverronen et al., 2020; overall topic modelling analysis of Spring 2020; Agarwal et al., 2020 and Doogan et al., 2020). Existing research has also demonstrated that female politicians, including the Finnish Prime Minister, face harassment online, as NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence's study unveils (Van Sant et al., 2021). Our data, as well, unveil critical points to assess also of gender and misogyny as constitutive antagonism in Twitter discussions.

We agree with Lindgren (2020) that data science requires some anarchism and that open-ended discourse theory fits with cracking large datasets. We were forced to be creative, mapping the pandemic's transformation through a longitudinal analysis. Our period of investigation, 11 January

2020 to 11 January 2021, stretches from before the virus officially arrived in Finland to the first sets of vaccinations.

Recognizing the constitutive power of rhetoric in articulation (Laclau 2014), we merged two types of performative data. Government by appearing in press conferences takes the space of representation becoming the faces of control and the social media response performs citizenship, sometimes critical of the authorities, contesting their role and policies as the non-homogeneous hashtag public. Developing on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) Essex School of post-structuralist discourse theory, for us meanings are relational and transform the discursive field, where structures of meaning are contingent and antagonist rather than smooth. Research offers snapshots of this transforming discursive field, which is difficult to capture. Our interpretive, non-essentialist, post-foundational approach focuses on relationality, drawing on large social media datasets. Therefore, our methodological key research question is as follows: how can we study the contingent structures of the uneven, contested discursive field and *see* how control is performed and contested through interventions during the pandemic?

Our methodological solution was to combine topic instrumentalism with rhetoric-performative interpretive analysis (Palonen 2019; Pääkkönen and Ylikoski 2020). More sophisticated analytical tools have been called for Laclaudian discourse theory (Marttila 2019), and we enhance post-Laclaudian approaches with an interpretive take on LDA topic modelling also going beyond a search of "nodal points" (Isoaho et al. 2019), to addressing temporal transformation through "floating signifiers." This resulted in a novel way of analyzing two diverse types of data, present in our rich section on analysis and in the multiple annexes, which we present in depth. We hope it adds to other strategies of studying hegemony discursively through topic modelling (Jacobs and Tschötschel 2019).

Borrowing from both Rambukkana's "hashtag publics" and from the discursive field of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we developed the term "hashtag landscape" for Twitter discussions as traced by hashtags and keywords. Rambukkana's notion focuses on contingent community-building and eventness, which we consider important in this process. COVID-19 was an event that became a "social imaginary," a constant reference point, while at the same time debate over policy continued. When the hashtags are universalized and hence stopped being meaningful or used as a hashtag, the keyword and replacement hashtags offered a snapshot of the discursive field in the social media. Our term "hashtag landscape" captures how, just as the discursive field, the social media landscape is crisscrossed with antagonisms. It allows us to go beyond observing meanings produced by accounts or actants (which drawing on Latourian network theory Rambukkana considers hashtags), still retrievable within the gathered data. The transformation of the debates can be investigated on an aggregated and thematic level, beyond studying key individuals, politicians, or agencies in detail. Hashtag landscape would capture shifts, ruptures, and social imaginaries on the discursive field.

Controlling the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has little to do directly with the performance of control through the presence and absence of ministers or Twitter discussions. However, from our perspective, uncovering the interaction between shifts in being the faces of authority or embodying the place of power in press conferences, on the one hand, and debating this in the public forum, on the other hand, are significant in exploring contemporary mediated governance. Uncovering shifts in policy themes and debates, ministerial relationships, and who appears to be in control gives input to research network governance. Mapping debates and criticism in contemporary debates on Twitter highlights the rhetorical and performative side of politics (Laclau 2014; Moffitt 2016). Our further research contribution highlights the online presence of politicians and administrators and their political communication in hybrid media environments. Our reading of the authorities' political communication and public social media discussion enhances the study of not only the pandemic in Finland but also contemporary politics that relies on constitutive public performativity (Palonen 2021).

TABLE 1 | Description of data: periods and tweets.

Period	Number of tweets
11 January–22 March 2020	32,233
21 March–26 May 2020	87,272
1 August 2020–10 January 2021	157,630

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Three different Twitter datasets with an analysis of the Finnish government's videoed press conferences serve as samples of contemporary public discussions (Twitter) and government communication (press conferences). We interpret them through discourse analysis and making use of machine learning. Topic modelling is a useful tool for interpretive analysis: the first layer of interpretation is done by the machine, which then proposes sets of related terms in the data to the researcher to analyze and interpret further. Following discourse theory, these data samples enable discursive structures to be found (Lindgren 2020). Our data-driven research relies on readings of both sets of materials qualitatively and is assisted by machine-learning, but the existing literature already presents a central problematization: the role of the government in COVID-19 communication. The analysis reveals the key points for each period and follows their transformation through press conferences and peaking topics' tweets.

The government's pandemic communication concentrated on regular press conferences that aimed to address citizens' concerns and communicate government actions and later health information on the pandemic. They were widely followed *via* both the online service of national broadcaster YLE and YouTube, and the pandemic increased TV watching by 21 percent in MarchApril 2020. News and related program watching on TV doubled with the government's press conferences on 25 March and 4 May, and the news on 12, 16, and 30 March and 4 April were among the 20 most popular programs in 2020 (Finnpanel

2021). For our analysis, we followed who was present, what was talked about, and the visual illustrations that highlighted the mood and transformation of events, including the use of facemasks from only 8 October. Full-scale visual analysis falls out of the scope of our study. Our data reveal that Twitter discussion topics often peaked synchronously with the government's press conferences. In the timeframe of our analysis (**Table 1**), the first period saw the transformation of COVID-19 as a Finnish issue in the government's daily press conferences from 16 March 2020. The second period covers the first wave of COVID-19 in Finland, as pandemic restrictions were underway and control of the situation was established, including the closure of the Uusimaa region, and confirmed COVID-19 cases declined from over 600 per week to 200 per week. In June, cases reduced to circa 50 per week. The relaxing of regulations was an issue in June in press conferences, which we also included in this analysis, and travel restrictions and the EU package were discussed in July. Our third period starts at the return to work from school summer holidays and again at the end of the festive season in January. This period also witnessed the beginning of vaccinations and the start of the discussion on their availability.

The first two sets were gathered by web search on Mecodify with specific hashtags and keywords (*see* Annex 12). In early spring 2020, hashtags were used in discussions to signal addressing the pandemic as an issue, and we chose to focus on tweets signaling contribution to general discussions and even generating "hashtag publics" (Bruns and Burgess 2015; Rathnayake and Suthers 2018). In the second period, hashtag use was declining (*see* Annex 13). It signaled the hegemonic presence of the pandemic in Twitter users' lives; using the hashtag would single out a contribution to public debate, but in the all-pervasive pandemic condition, using a hashtag would not make sense. The volumes of the first two gathered datasets had fewer tweets than they would have had with keywords, which we applied for the third set for the above-mentioned reason (McKelvey, DiGarzia and Rojas 2014). The urgency of the pandemic faded as the country survived the first wave and attention turned to the government's pandemic choices.

To analyze the large Twitter datasets, we apply computational topic modelling, a computational method used to identify a pre-determined number (k-number) of topics or clusters in textual big data. We use the common topic modelling method Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Blei et al., 2003). LDA topic modelling arranges words to a predefined number of topics *via* the co-occurrence of the words in the data. It assumes that each data unit, here a tweet, is a mixture of topics, and the algorithm calculates a probability for each tweet and each topic. Previous research (Wilkerson and Casas, 2017) of topic modelling has shown the instability of the results and of reliably validating the results (e.g., Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). To counter this instability, we validate the topic modelling results using the actual tweets. Our approach corresponds to the topic of instrumentalism, where "modelling is not taken to measure theoretical constructs but instead to provide information about word patterns, which can be usefully employed to guide subsequent interpretation of the primary text materials" (Pääkkönen and Ylikoski, 2019).

We conducted two topic modelling analyses for each of the three sets. The first analysis was a "small-k" analysis with an arbitrary six-topic model, to get an overview of the contents of each dataset. The second analysis was a detailed "large-k" analysis, where the number of topics for each set was based on an estimated optimal number. Next, we established topic timelines which were calculated by counting tweets per day for each topic. For the "small-k" overview model, we did the timelines for all six topics per dataset. For the "large-k" detailed modelling, we did timelines for the 20 most occurring topics. We examined the topics of both the "small-k" and "large-k" analysis of each three datasets and the set of 100 most probable tweets related to each topic. Based on this, we formed a general interpretation of each topic/tweet, and then, we selected the topics/tweets that were related to the performance of control for closer investigation. More details of the topic modelling can be found in Annex 11.

From the perspective of post-structuralist or post-foundational discourse theory, a form of interpretive political science (Bevir 2010), topic modelling offered us a machine-learning perspective to transforming for structures of the discursive field. Instead of discussing Twitter handles here, we operate on an aggregate level, enabled by our take on the continuously transforming "hashtag landscape." Contingency, flows, and contestation are crucial to our approach: while research on topic modelling typically lists keywords for the whole period, we also provide a timeline of activity for each topic and compare the transforming salience (peaks highlighted here) of a particular topic. Besides discussing first six topics on a more macro level, in more detailed and qualitative analysis, we go through a larger set of topics and topic-associated tweets. For us listing topics is not enough: scratching the surface unveils that each topic can include several even seemingly contradictory themes to interpret. Qualitative analysis allows us to investigate individual tweets at key moments for understanding what the topics are about. The contents of the topics can be diverse, and, besides recognizing the intensity of tweeting within topics, discursive reading of topic modelling also includes analysis of the tweets across time within the topic (*see*, e.g., **Figure 1**). As the timeline for each of the period, we pursue thematic macro-level analysis with ministers as key signifiers. This resulted in a lengthy analysis, but for this experimental study, we thought of writing it out.

RESULTS

Dividing the period into three periods, we were able to see the particularities of these historical moments and track some returning debates. We are interested in the contents of those discussions, their spikes, and their relative strength within the periods. In the first period, each of the press conferences was led by PM Marin, starting from 27 February. In the second period, there were different sets of responsible ministers involved, but most press conferences were led by ministers—by elected officials rather than bureaucrats—in the period from 20 March to 27 May. During summer (June and July), six of the seven press conferences were led by ministers: out of those, only two took place in July; one of

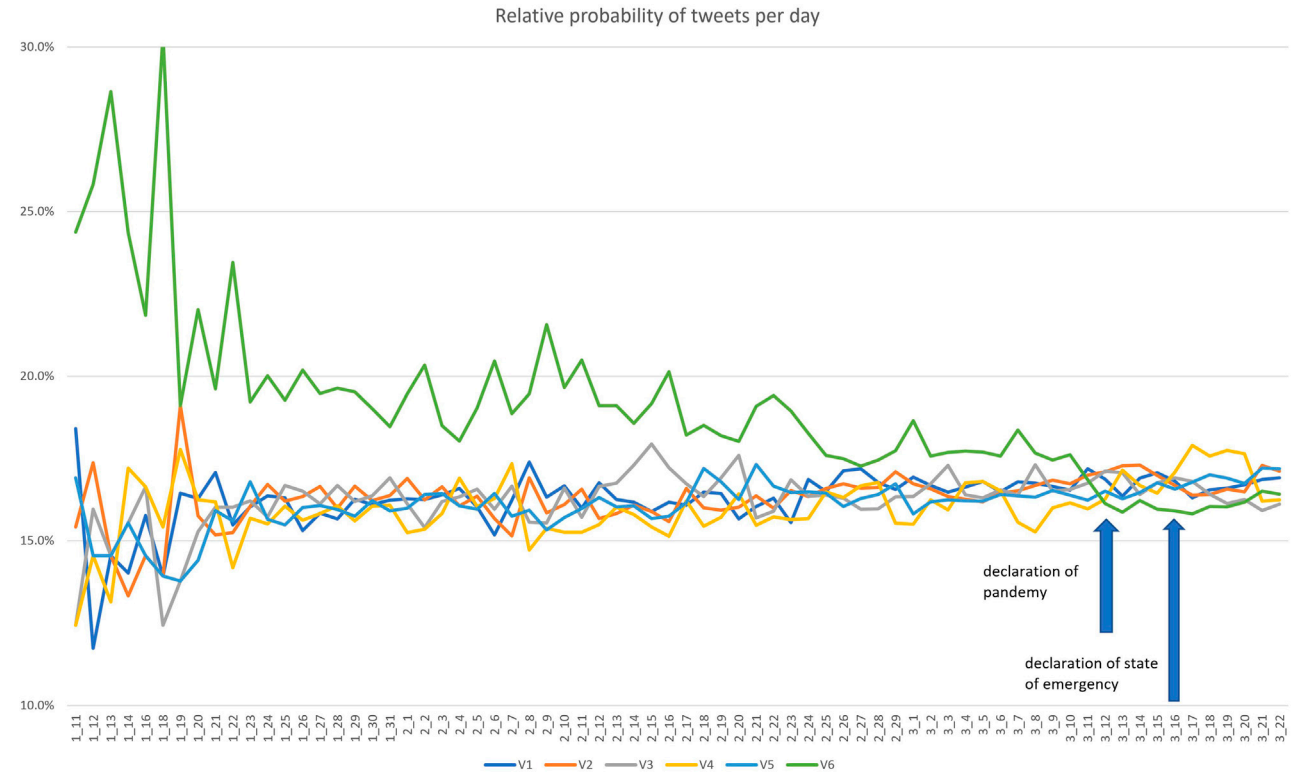

FIGURE 1 | The first period's overview of the topics: the average relative probability of tweets per day in the 6-day model. Note, there were only one to two tweets per day before 20 January 2020.

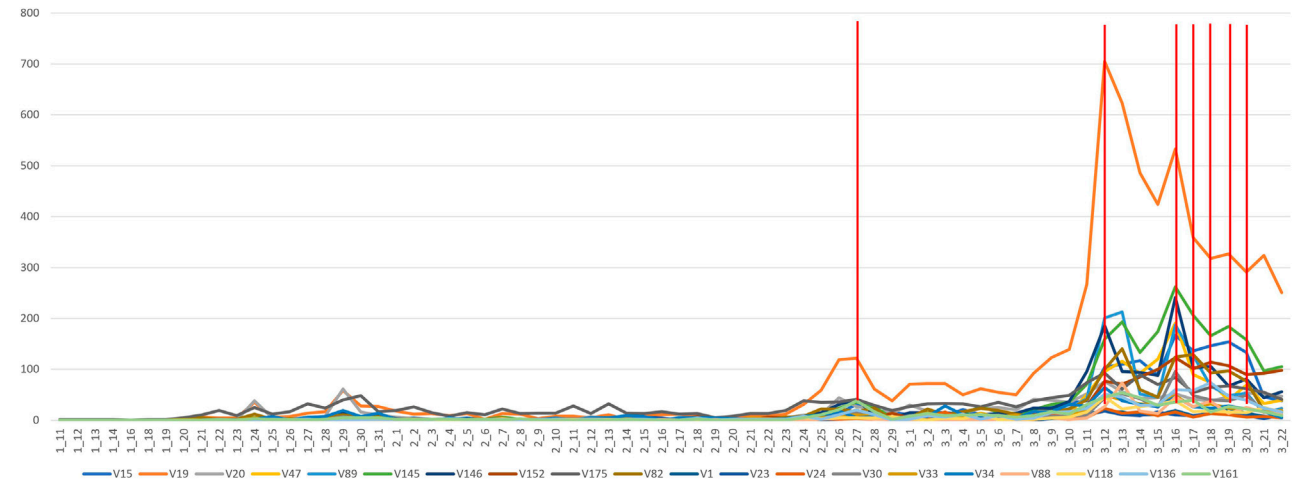

FIGURE 2 | The 20-topic set and press conferences in the first period.

them was led by PM Sanna Marin on the EU package. We left this out of the study as the pandemic was not much debated at that time, but it started again in August and with vaccinations starting after Christmas. The third period saw increased criticism of the government and responses that seemingly satisfied the hashtag publics.

First Period: The Emergence of COVID-19 as an Issue in Finland and the Government's Response

The first period covers the turning of COVID-19 from an international into a Finnish topic. The first dataset spans from

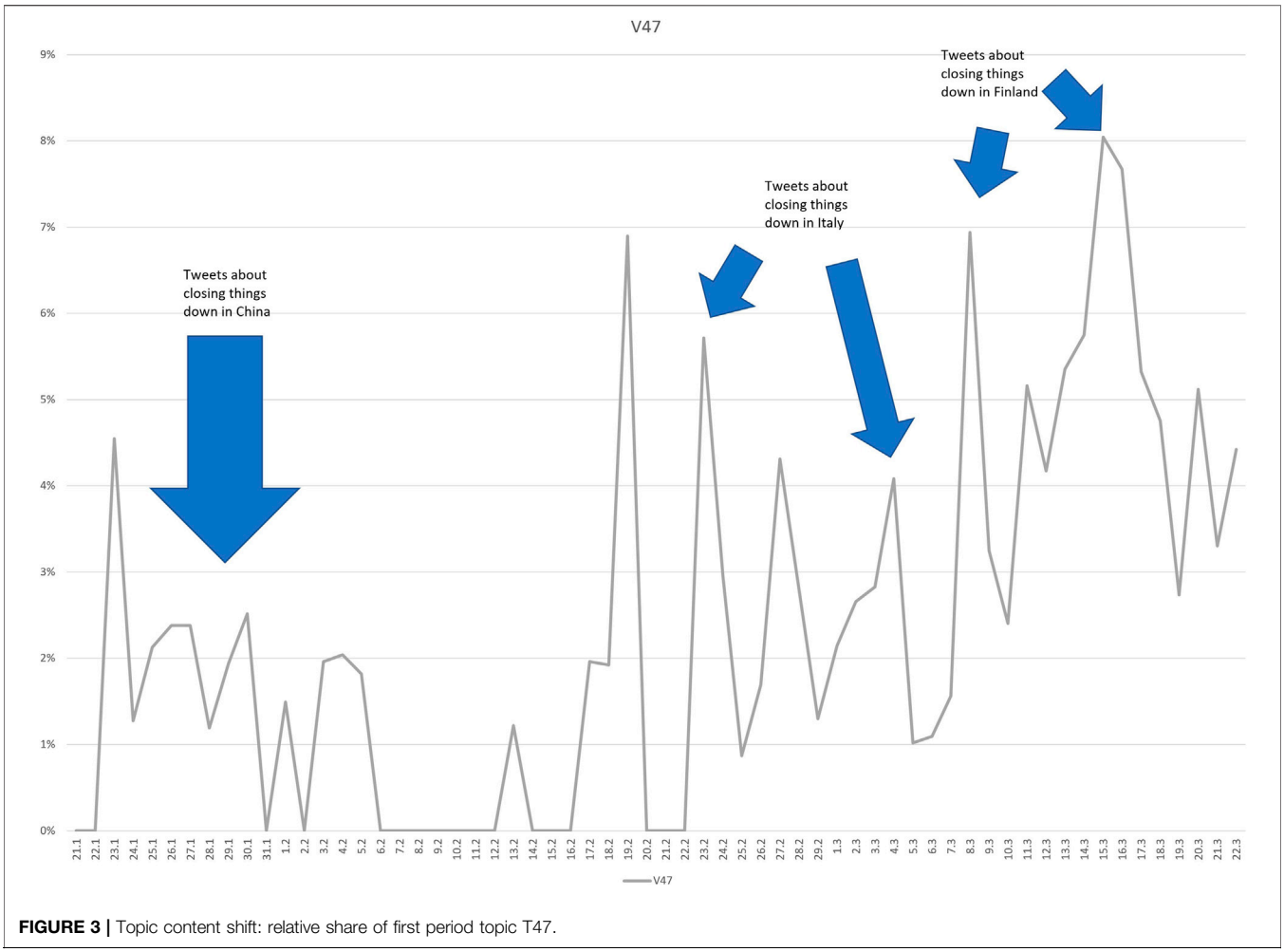

FIGURE 3 | Topic content shift: relative share of first period topic T47.

11 January to 22 March 2020, thus covering the beginning of COVID-19 in Finland. COVID-19 became highly debated through the hashtags we followed for this period, particularly with and after the declaration of the pandemic. The buzz on Finnish Twitter started at the declaration of the pandemic on 11 March (*see* Annex 13 for tweets per day in the first period).

Of the six macro topics (*see* Annex 2 for topics and Annex 5 for individual figures, and **Figure 2**), topic on the government, the PM, and on people following government instructions (T1) includes both criticism towards the government and the selected corona strategy, and tweets supporting the government and its corona strategy. Topic two gathers sentence structures, but the tweets and discussions related to T2 share their experiences and feelings related to the pandemic. Topic on schools, travels, and quarantine (T3) also includes cancellations of travel arrangements and restrictions to public amenities. Topic on working and entrepreneurship as well as guidelines, public communication, and information (T4) unveil information related to COVID-19 to entrepreneurs, entrepreneur interest group requests of support towards government, and press releases of employer and employee unions about the pandemic and work. Topic on the politics of the COVID-19 crisis, sustainability, government, and state of the exception (T5) includes tweets about general discussion related to the crisis, politics, state of emergency, and the economy. Topic on the situation and spread of COVID-19 in China, Italy, and Finland (T6, *see* **Figure 3**) demonstrates the transformation of foreign epidemy into a pandemic and domestic issue.

We observed a transformation between the strengths of the different topics, and, as **Figure 3** demonstrates, how and when the pandemic and the Finnish state of emergency were declared; other topics overtook the relative importance of the international spreading of the virus (T6). To explore in more depth through multiple topics and matching the dates of the governmental press conferences on COVID-19, we worked on a larger list of topics (175 for the same period, **Figure 2**).

We grouped these 20 topics into five groups according to the tweets that they refer to. The first group is a general discussion related to COVID-19, which includes mainly private persons discussing different aspects of COVID-19 (G1); second is related to organizations and discussions about organizational

TABLE 2 | Government press conferences and topic peaks 11 January–22 March.

	27.2	12.3	16.3	17.3	18.3	19.3	20.3
G1: General discussion related to COVID-19							
V19	X	X	X				
V145	X		X			X	
V33	X	X	X		X		
V1		X	X			X	
V23	X	X			X		
V136	X	X	X		X		
G2: Organizations and discussions about organizational announcements							
V15	X	X	X			X	
V89	X	X	X				
V34		X	X			X	
V161	X			X		X	
V88	X		X		X		X
G3: Government and official announcements about the COVID-19 situation and discussions							
V82			X	X		X	
V47	X		X				X
V30	X	X	X				X
V24		X	X		X		
G4: News about COVID-19 and the discussion related to the news							
V175	X	X	X			X	
V20		X	X				X
G5: Critical and supportive discussion about government and official response to the COVID-19 situation							
V146	X	X	X				
V152		X	X		X		
V118		X	X				

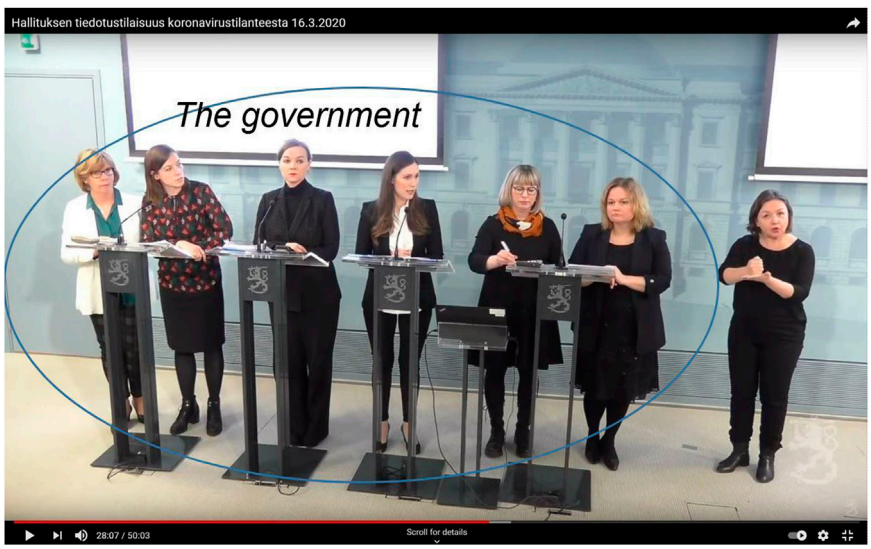

FIGURE 4 | In the picture from 16 March, the Finnish Ministers and party leaders, apart from Minister of Interior, Maria Ohisalo (Green League). The sign language interpreter is in the picture. (Modified video screenshot.)

announcements (G2); third is related to government and official announcements about the COVID-19 situation, and discussions about these announcements (G3); fourth is about news about COVID-19, and the discussion related to the news (G4); fifth is related to both critical and supportive discussions about the government and official response to the COVID-19 situation (G5) (see Annex 8 for details). Topic peaks and government press conferences are shown in **Table 2**.

To reflect on the discursive transformation within a topic that gathers similar types of tweets, we chose the topic on closures (G3: T47), where the emergence of the phenomenon was discussed in China first, then in Italy, and finally, in Finland (**Figure 3**). It couples with our earlier analysis of how it was felt increasingly as a European and potentially Finnish issue and then as a Finnish issue. As with the six-topic model, the trend emerging on 24 February is that the international topic was overtaken by domestic issues this week with the declaration of the pandemic.

The few tweets in the first phase in this period, 11 January to 24 February, focus on the pandemic in other countries (see **Figure 3**). Notably, the recorded numbers of cases of COVID-19 were very few in Finland. The first case was diagnosed in the north of the country, Lapland, on 29 January. By the week including 27 February, it reached 7 cases, and the week after 34 cases. Furthermore, people were tested only if a link to COVID-19 was found; by 17 February, one could be tested only with respiratory infection symptoms and a link to China (THL 2020a). By 25 February, the list of countries to test for COVID-19 predeparture was extended to Iran, South Korea, and parts of Italy (THL 2020b). Tweet activity demonstrated pressure on the government to communicate although numbers in the native tweet hashtags we gathered were still low.

The major Twitter discussions relating to COVID-19 in Finland began on 24 to 27 February, before the government's first COVID-19 press conference on 27 February (**Figure 2**). None of the topics that already existed or appeared between 24 and 27 February disappeared before the end of our study period. After 24 to 27 February, COVID-19 became something felt also in Finland. Tweets related to all groups peaked on 27 February, the day of the first government press conference. Of these, T146 relates to direct and often critical references towards the government or official tweets discussing or questioning the government and officials' preparedness to deal with the then upcoming pandemic.

The government press conference on COVID-19 on 27 February was defined by increased Twitter discussions. While cases were not emerging due to the restricted testing, the worsening of the situation globally paved the way for the 27 February conference, on the topic of the status of COVID-19 and related preparations in Finland. Four of the five government parties were represented, with Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Social Democratic Party, SDP), responsible Minister Anna-Kaisa Pekonen (Left Alliance), and Ministers Krista Kiuru (SDP) and Katri Kulmuni (Centre). Marin stated that there was no epidemic in Finland. Pekonen stressed the responsibility of her ministery: they would be active and vigilant, and Finland had good preparedness. She argued that the masks in the country's stockpiles, discovered to be beyond their expiry date, could be used.

From 11 March to 16 March, extremely high activity was recorded in Twitter related to COVID-19. The landslide in Twitter commentary happened with the declaration of the pandemic on 11 March, with cases of COVID-19 going from 61 that day to beyond 100 the next. All discussions in all groups peaked on the pandemic declaration and press conference day of 12 March (*see* **Table 2**). The government decided on the pandemic measures proposed to the parliament to decide on. All three G5 topics peaked on 12 March: in T146 and T152, tweets criticized the government for not enacting strict COVID-19 restrictions, a lack of leadership from the government, and the government not taking the COVID-19 situation seriously enough. The more radical tweets claimed that the seemingly inactive government would "have blood in their hands." The THL was also criticized for being incompetent and for giving the government false advice to act upon. In T118, tweets also praised the President of Finland Sauli Niinistö's (National Coalition) speech on the same day. On Thursday, 12 March, the second government press conference about the COVID-19 situation was held to outline recommendations to limit the spread of COVID-19 in Finland, including recommendations to limit attendance of public events, additional budgetary means, recommendations to workplaces, and preparations in social and healthcare. The government parties had met on the matter and invited all parliamentary parties to discuss options, which included school closures. The PM opened the discussion, and Pekonen took responsibility again, with Kiuru's and Kulmuni's support. With or without the press conference, the declaration of the pandemic was a tone changer: it would be affecting ever more people.

The Twitter discussions seemed to retreat on most topics after their zenith for the weekend 13 to 15 March (**Figure 2**) but peaked again on 16 March, when the government announced in a press conference to state in cooperation with the President that the country was in a state of emergency. The momentous press conference urged citizens that "every Finn can make a difference" maintaining distances and staying at home and declared preparedness to adapt crisis legislation. Several measures were to be taken, and those over 70 were declared as a vulnerable group. Interestingly, it was phrased that other age groups could take on this virus, but there was a need to protect elderly people. The emergency measures included distance work, travel restrictions, and closure of museums and theatres. Teaching would be moved online, but schools and day-care facilities would serve onsite children on the lower grades of key workers and those not in distance work. The female-led government was present, apart from the Greens, including Minister of Justice and party leader Anna-Maja Hendriksson (Swedish People's Party) and the Minister of Education and party leader Li Andersson (Left Alliance) (see **Figure 4**). They emphasized that the recommendation to distance work did not imply an end to transportable work or teaching. Finland, as a hi-tech country, had good telecommunications across the country: many schools provided tools for distance learning, and workplaces already had portable phones and laptops.

Unsurprisingly, several topic discussions peaked on 16 March (*see* **Table 2**). In the critical and supportive discussions about the government and official response to the COVID-19 situation (G5), the tweets related to the topic T146 are quite critical of the government in the early part of the day. The government was criticized for being too inactive and not showing leadership and was said to be incompetent. The tone of tweets in T146 changed after the press conference. Most of them supported the government's decisive action and the leadership shown by the

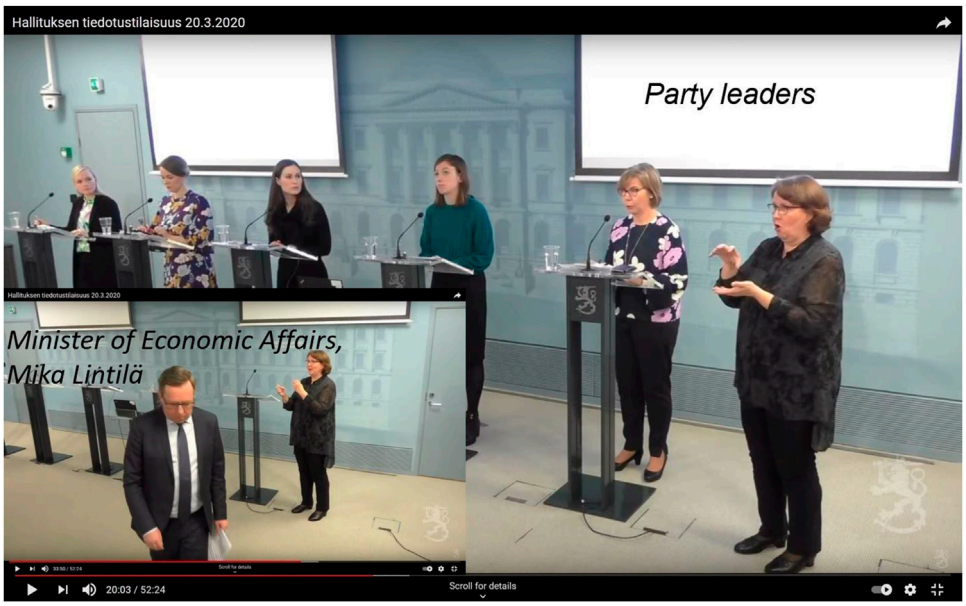

FIGURE 5 | Juxtaposition: After party leaders, Maria Ohisalo (Green League), Katri Kulmuni (Centre), Sanna Marin (SDP), Li Andersson (Left Alliance), and Anna-Maja Hendriksson (Swedish People's Party) stressed the case, Minister Mika Lintilä (Centre) went to substance. The sign language interpreters are in the picture (modified video screenshot).

government, PM Marin, and the President. Similar reactions appeared in T152 and T118. Some tweeters criticized the government's perceived herd immunity strategy. Comments could be dismissive of the government, echoing misogynist rhetoric, and supportive of President's leadership.

The last phase of the first period spanning from 17 March to 22 March was defined by slightly receding Twitter discussions. The government was holding daily press conferences to introduce measures on COVID-19 control and to remind the population of their civic responsibility. On 17 March, six ministers from all parties but the Centre addressed in the press conference border control, 14-day quarantines, and limiting meetings to 10 people. The PM was joined by the Green party leader, Minister of the Interior Maria Ohisalo; Minister of Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto (Greens); Minister of Transport Timo Harakka (SDP); and Ministers Hendriksson and Pekonen. Co-occurring with the 17 March press conference, there were some organizational and governmental announcement peaks (**Table 2**). After peaking on 16 March, the critical and supportive discussions (G5) declined, but the critique towards the government and THL persisted. In the "hashtag landscape," the government received criticism for being indecisive and lacking leadership and the THL for being incompetent. Some tweets praised the President for clear leadership in a situation where government appeared chaotic. Few tweeters voiced doubts over the need for a state of emergency and its violation of individuals' rights.

On 18 March, the PM was joined by Minister Andersson and Minister of Culture, Science and Sports Hanna Kosonen (Centre). The day-care facilities would remain open, but it was recommended that children of those who could stay at home would remain at home. Children under 10 yr of age of critical workers would be able to stay in school. On the same day, general discussion of some G1-3 topics peaked. On 19 March, practicalities of the pandemic, details of the virus, hygienic practices, and details of reaching help and healthcare capacity were discussed in the conference, under the leadership of the PM, and Ministers Kulmuni and Pekonen. Notably, the Director of Infectious Diseases, Professor Mika Salminen of THL, joined the event for an epidemiological overview, which then became a regular feature of the press conferences. On the same day, other topics (G1-4), but not the critical and supportive topics, peaked.

The first of four all-government parties' press conferences ended the week on 20 March and delivered a unified message to citizens, following a narrative structure where each minister's delivery followed from the previous minister's last point, presenting a unified message. The press conference dealt with the economy and the amending budget, with provisions for diverse groups. Leaders of each of the government parties divided the task of explaining the measures, often focusing on issues related to their core voters. In addition to the PM, present were Kulmuni, Hendriksson, Andersson, and Ohisalo (**Figure 5**). Mika Lintilä, the Minister of Economic Affairs, presented the substance. We chose two screenshots to present the event, where G1-2 and G4 topics peaked.

From 27 February to 20 March, period one, the conferences were all-female panels, and the PM started each of the press conferences followed by responsible ministers. **Figure 5** shows what a female-led government looked like on 20 March and how Lintilä, as Minister responsible, presented on his own. Compared with the first photos on 16 March, when the phenomenon was hitting Finland and responsible ministers crammed into the view

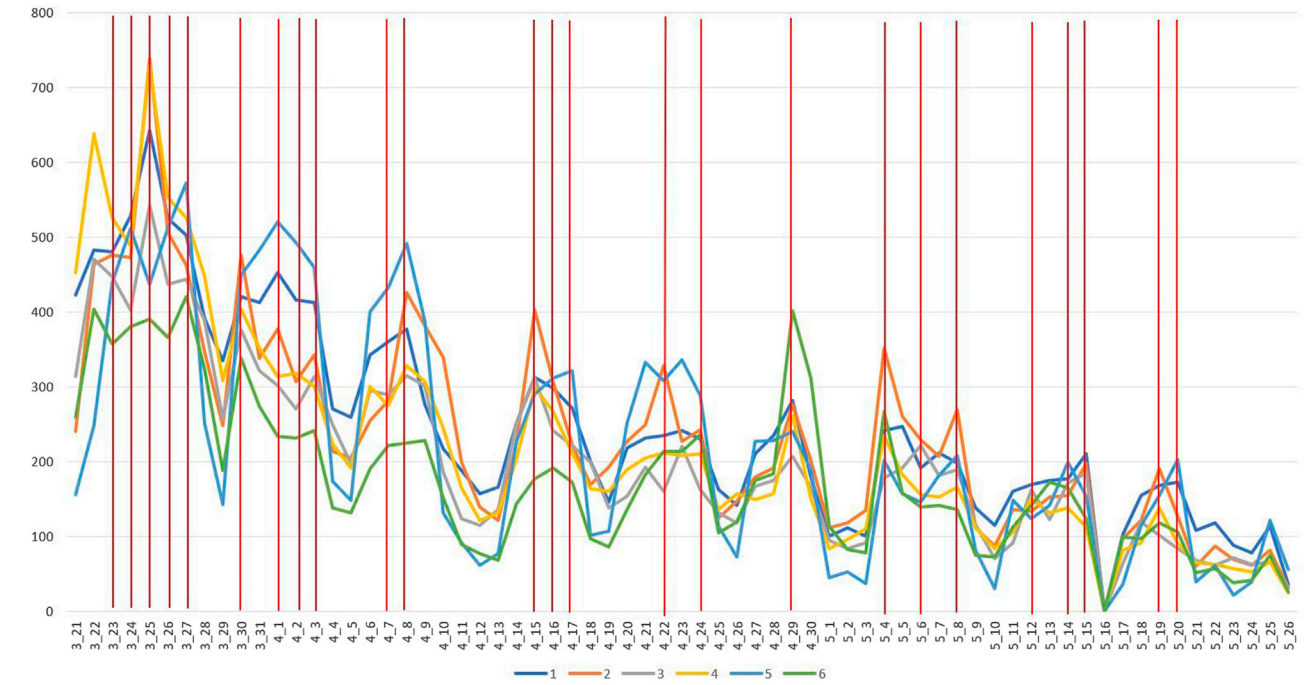

FIGURE 6 | Second period six topic model topic tweets and government press conferences.

(**Figure 5**), by the formal address on 20 March, safety distances were in use. The topic was indeed survival of the industry and the additional budgets, demonstrating being in control of the livelihoods of the citizens in several categories. The next period would witness firmer actions, with the government taking measures to control the epidemiological situation.

Second Period: United Through the First Wave

The second period saw some momentous government decisions on restrictions and then the lifting of restrictions, heavily tweeted about. The second dataset spans from 21 March to 26 May 2020. The government claimed political responsibility for the pandemic measures, and authority over the President's advice, but increasingly, it gave space to experts and the administration. As **Figure 1** shows, the discussion was thriving on Twitter in the beginning and quieting down by the end of our second period although there were some relevant press conferences on masks after 26 May. In the six-topic model, news and discussions related to the COVID-19 situation (T1, focused on the situation in Finland, including the number of infected people and deaths, but also mentioning other countries) seemed to prevail its relevance. Government's COVID-19 strategy and its implications for politics and the economy (T2, included tweets either critical towards or supportive of the government) peaked in key moments. General discussions about COVID-19 (T3, referred to discussions about the COVID-19 situation and how to deal with it, but also religious content and beliefs) were the least visible. General discussions about the COVID-19 situation and how it affected the everyday lives of people (T4, on stress, quarantines, and comments on other people's behavior) were particularly high in the beginning. Information and support on COVID-19 offered to entrepreneurs and small-to-medium companies, or support reception, hardships, and challenges to companies (T5) were particularly relevant during and right after the Uusimaa closure. Discussion on schools and children, including general discussion about the COVID-19 situation and dealt with the opening of schools, May Day celebrations, and spring (T6) peaked on when school openings were announced. Six-topic model of the second period is shown in **Figure 6** (*see* Annex 3 for topics and Annex 6 for individual figures).

Figure 7 (also *see* Annex 13) is based on our detailed topic modelling analysis with 200 topics in this period, where we show the distribution of the 20 most prominent topics per day and government press conferences. Peaks co-occur with press conferences and drop in weekends.

We divided the topics into five loose groups according to the themes of the topics, which are listed matching topic peaks with press conferences (*see* **Table 3**). The topic T26/G6 is considered here a technical topic and not included in our analysis (*see* Annex 9 for details). As seen in **Figure 7**, the general trend is that the discussions related to COVID-19 decreased during the second period. In late March, the most prominent topics had over 300 tweets per day, but during April, only one topic amounted to more than 200 tweets per day, except for 29 April. After 4 May, when the government declared it was re-opening society, the

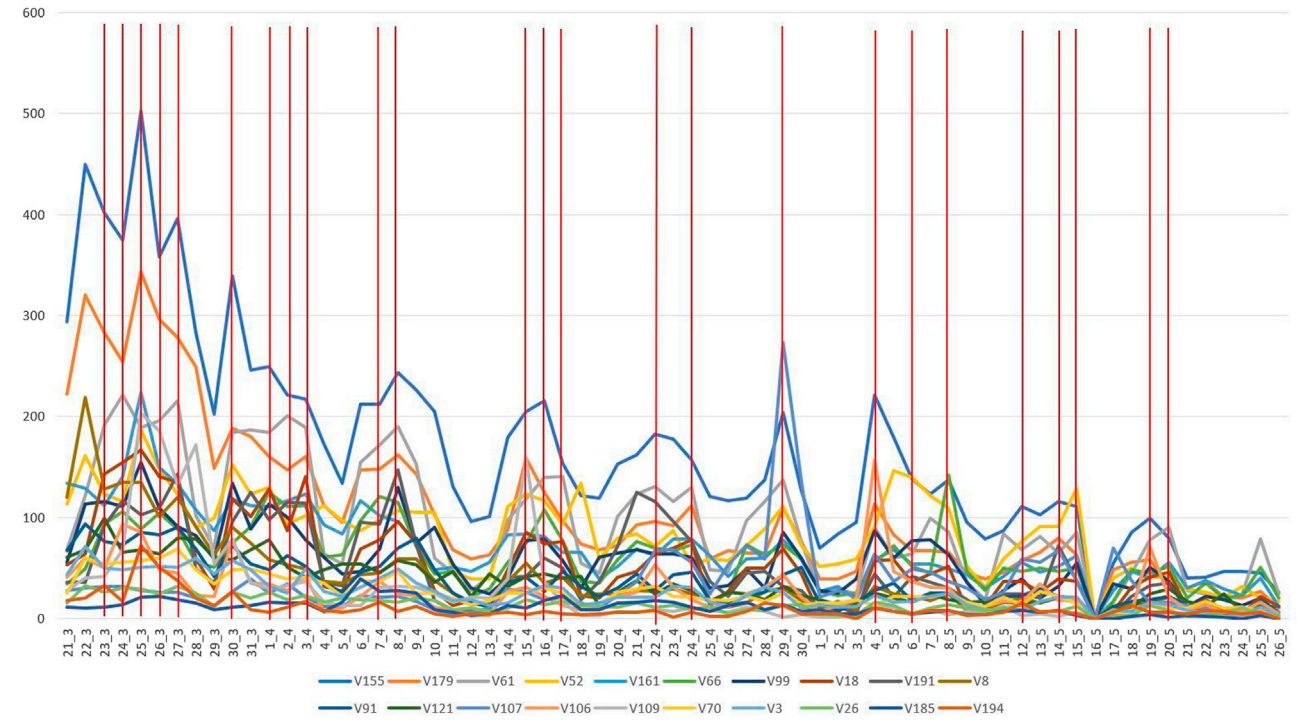

FIGURE 7 | The 20 most prominent topics and press conferences in the second period.

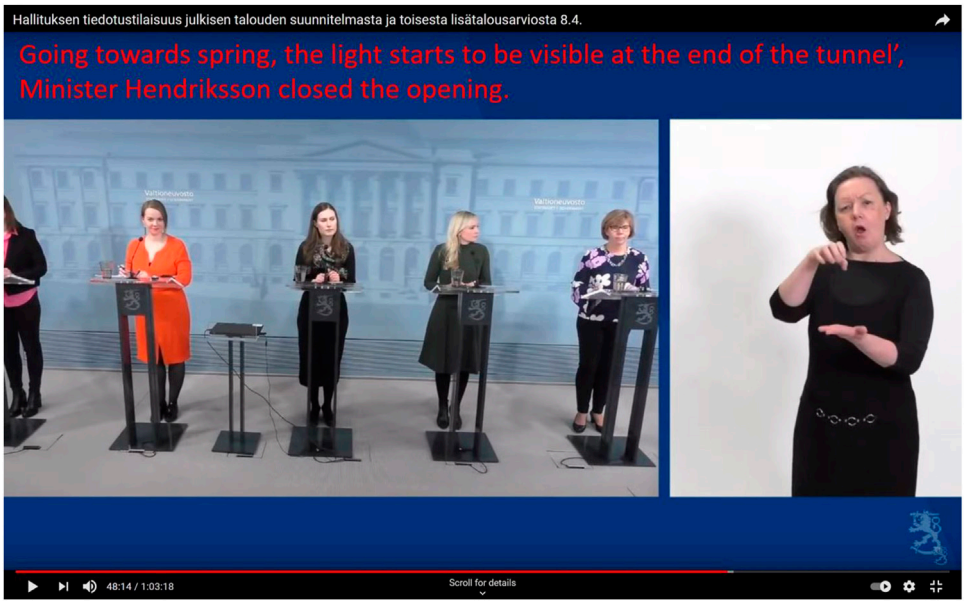

FIGURE 8 | The five-party all-female leaders' government on 8 April: Ministers and party leaders Andersson (Left Alliance), Kulmuni (Centre), Marin (SDP), Ohisalo (Green League), and Hendriksson (Swedish People's Party) struggle to fit the same main picture, and now the sign language interpreter is in a separate picture (modified video screenshot).

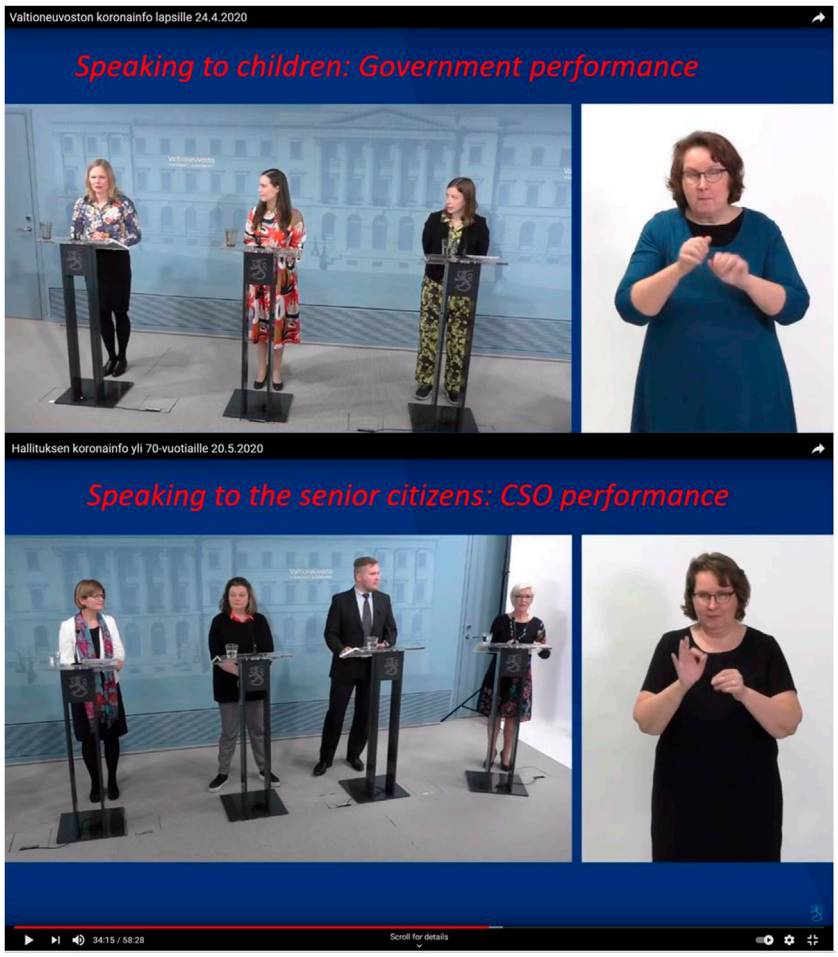

FIGURE 9 | Juxtaposition: The government's COVID-19 conference for children on 24 April included Minister Kosonen, PM Marin, and Minister Andersson. On 20 May, the conference was set for over-70-yr-old citizens. Päivi Topo, Ikäinstituutti (Age Institute), Sari Aalto-Matturi, Mieli ry; Panu Könönen, Suomen Latu (the Outdoor Association of Finland), and Pirjo Nuotio as moderator. Minister Kiuru was also present on the left outside the panel pictures, usually present as a separate speaker. The sign-language interpreter is in a separate picture (modified video screenshot).

discussion frequency decreased. Considering the co-occurrence of the press conferences, and particularly G2 and G3 topics, we would argue that the press conferences were a significant part of the discussions of the pandemic in Finland in the hashtag landscapes.

At the beginning of this period, the government held press conferences daily. On 25 March, the PM and ministers from all-government parties—apart from the Left Alliance, whose leader had already been on stage on 23 March—announced 118 measures that would be taken to the parliament for decision-making. They grounded these on the capacity of health services: at that stage, every third person who had to be hospitalized would also be taken to intensive care. The measures included closure of the Uusimaa region, including the Helsinki metropolitan area, where it was hoped that the coronavirus could be contained. On 25 March, PM Marin and several ministers announced measures that would be taken to the parliament, as the government worried that the virus would spread to the rest of the country from the Uusimaa region. The announcement to restrict travel to and from the Uusimaa region co-occurred with a major spike in topic T109 related to the Uusimaa closure. The tweets of topic T109 on 25 March were mostly from private persons discussing distinct aspects of the planned Uusimaa closure. T109 peaked next on 28 March, which was the day when the closure was enforced. Both the announcement of the planned closure on 25 March and the enforcement of the closure on 28 March witnessed major related discussions in T109, more prominently after the announcement than after the actual closure. On 25 March, both G5 topics T52 and T99 peaked, with criticism on the role and actions of THL. Many tweets criticized THL for being too lenient about the pandemic, and stricter control mechanisms were needed. This criticism extended from THL to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM), Minister Pekonen, and the government. The government was also criticized for mishandling testing and for not securing incoming passengers' safe entry through the Helsinki airport. Later, this same topic included tweets on facemasks.

TABLE 3 | Government press conferences and topic peaks 21 March–26 May 2020.

	23.3	24.3	25.3	26.3	27.3	30.3	1.4	2.4	3.4	7.4	8.4	15.4	16.4	17.4	22.4	24.4	29.4	4.5	6.5	8.5	12.5	14.5	15.5	19.5	20.5
G1: General discussion related to COVID-19																									
T155			X			X					X		X				X	X						X	
T179			X									X				X		X				X			
V91					X	X		X				X		X		X									X
V121	X				X		X				X							X				X			X
V107																X		X				X			
G2: Organizations and discussions about organizational announcements																									
T61		X			X			X					X		X	X	X	X					X		X
V191		X			X			X			X		X					X	X			X			
V185				X										X			X	X		X	X	X		X	
V194	X		X			X			X	X								X			X				
G3: Government and official announcements about the COVID-19 situation and discussions																									
V18			X			X	X		X		X	X				X	X	X		X		X			X
V8					X	X						X						X							
V109			X									X													
G4: News about COVID-19 and the discussion related to the news																									
V161			X														X								
V66		X		X			X			X			X							X					
V106		X				X			X	X					X		X	X						X	
V70					X	X					X		X		X		X			X				X	
G5: Critical and supportive discussion about government and official response to the COVID-19 situation																									
V99			X			X	X				X	X	X				X	X					X	X	
V52			X			X											X						X		
G6: Non-substantial topic about time in COVID-19 tweets																									
V26		X			X	X	X		X									X		X	X		X	X	

In March, many of the topics peaked, coinciding with press conferences (**Figure 7** and **Table 3**). We specify the peaks of different topics that coincide with conferences: 24 and 25 March were peak days of the week between 23 and 27 March, when daily press conferences were organized to prepare for the pandemic responses. On 30 March, when the second female-led government press conference was held on the extension of the measures until 13 May, 10 topics peaked. Restaurants would be closed for everything but take out. Schools would have distance learning from the fourth grade on and for most 1–3 grades, with a recommendation to also keep children at home from day-care facilities. The Uusimaa region's closure for other than necessary travel would last until 19 April, including over the Easter holiday break. On 30 March, there was also a peak in G5 topics T52 and T99 criticizing the government for insufficient testing capacity, stating that the aim of the COVID-19 strategy should be to suppress the epidemy and to question THL's non-recommendations on mask usage. The tweets referred to the letter sent by the President on 30 March to the government, where he suggested forming a specialist leadership group ("*koronanyrkki*"/"Corona fist") to deal with Finland's pandemic governance and criticized the government for turning the President's suggestion down.

The week of 30 March to 3 April, press conferences took place daily again. On 8 April, Twitter lit up, when the third all-female government press conference addressed the worry of economic recession (see **Figure 8**). On several occasions, particularly at the government press conference on 8 April, where all parties were present, emphasis was on not repeating the mistakes of the economic recession of the 1990s in Finland, when the fall of the Soviet Union led to the undoing of favorable trade links with the Eastern neighbor. The signifier economic downturn represented a generational trauma: waves of bankruptcies and worsening municipal economies deeply affected families and schools when the millennial party leaders were growing up. In 2020, cheap loans were available, and the Eurozone was seen as sustaining the Finnish economy, and the Minister of Finance Kulmuni argued: "The municipalities are among the state's most important partners in helping businesses and families." Although Finland never entered a full lockdown in 2020, the government acknowledged that it suffered from the closures of particularly the service industry, and culture and arts, and sought to remedy them. The second press conference held on 8 April included only officials from responsible ministries and agencies (STM, NESA, TEM, and UM) to give answers to questions about protection equipment. This press conference co-occurred with a major spike in tweets related to topic T173 on insufficient preparation on protective equipment, or "maskigate" ("mask gate"). Interestingly, T173 peaks on 9 April, a day after a press conference responded to questions concerning the actions of the National Emergency Supply Agency (NESA), but this, in fact, may have strengthened the theme.

The epidemiologic situation improved, and a week later, on 15 April, the Uusimaa region's travel restriction was lifted. The virus had already spread beyond the Uusimaa borders, but the measures had lessened its movement, and from a constitutional perspective, the government could not maintain such restrictions on citizens' liberties. The travel restriction zone had been controlled by the police with the help of the Finnish armed forces in multiple shifts, and it was also quite expensive, so lifting it would enable the police to have more resources to address domestic violence, which had been on the increase, as Minister Ohisalo stated on 15 April. The Uusimaa closure T109 peaked. On 16 April, the economy was discussed, and on 17 April, the President and CSOs appeared at Marin's press conference on societal resilience, including representatives from CSOs such as the Finnish Red Cross and Mieli Mental Health Association. In the last week of April, there were a few topics peaking, with government press conferences on 22 and 24 April. On 22 April, Marin declared a new strategy for controlling the spread of the virus, with enhanced management of the pandemic, and stated that while public events would remain banned until the end of July, the reopening of schools would be announced before the end of the month. On 24 April, the Marin government organized a conference for children receiving a lot of positive attention in T91 and worldwide in the press. Children asked questions about the epidemic situation, including when they could go to school, and the vaccination would be ready (see **Figure 9**).

On 29 April, PM Marin and Minister of Education Li Andersson declared that schools would re-open on 13 May. It was the most active day in April tweets. Both G5 topics T52 and T99 peaked: tweets criticized the government and THL for a perceived change in pandemic strategy, where suppressing the epidemy was no longer the target. Critical tweets claimed that the government's indecisive actions implied a herd immunity approach, which would increase casualties. Some tweets criticized schools re-opening; others called for mandatory mask wearing. A few days later, trade unions declared their concern about safety regarding reopening. **Figure 7** shows a clear spike in the discussions related to this topic prior to 1 May and in mid-May.

From 4 May, the government started planning to lift restrictions, and the last press conference with all-government party leaders declared a new strategy of testing and tracing. Responding to public debates, they promised a study of the usefulness of masks. Criticism on the lack of a recommendation regarding mask use started peaking T52 already on 4–6 May and, around school openings, on 15 May. At the end of the period, an administration-led press conference launched a study that said there is no evidence of mask use protecting the user. On 15 May, they still recommended that elderly people avoid contact, and on 20 May, the government had a conference for over-70-year-old citizens, with a retired TV anchor as the moderator. Tweets in our topics do not pay much attention to the elderly, with some mentions in T185 on health service access peaking on 6 April. The conference addressed the generational worry of not having seen grandchildren and the assertive nature of government recommendations (Häyry 2021).

Looser measures were followed by some other tougher lines, after expert meetings recommended tougher lines. One such example was whether Finns should stay in their cottages during the crisis: on 23 March, Pekka Timonen from the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM) argued that Finns were better off at their cottages. But the government soon sided

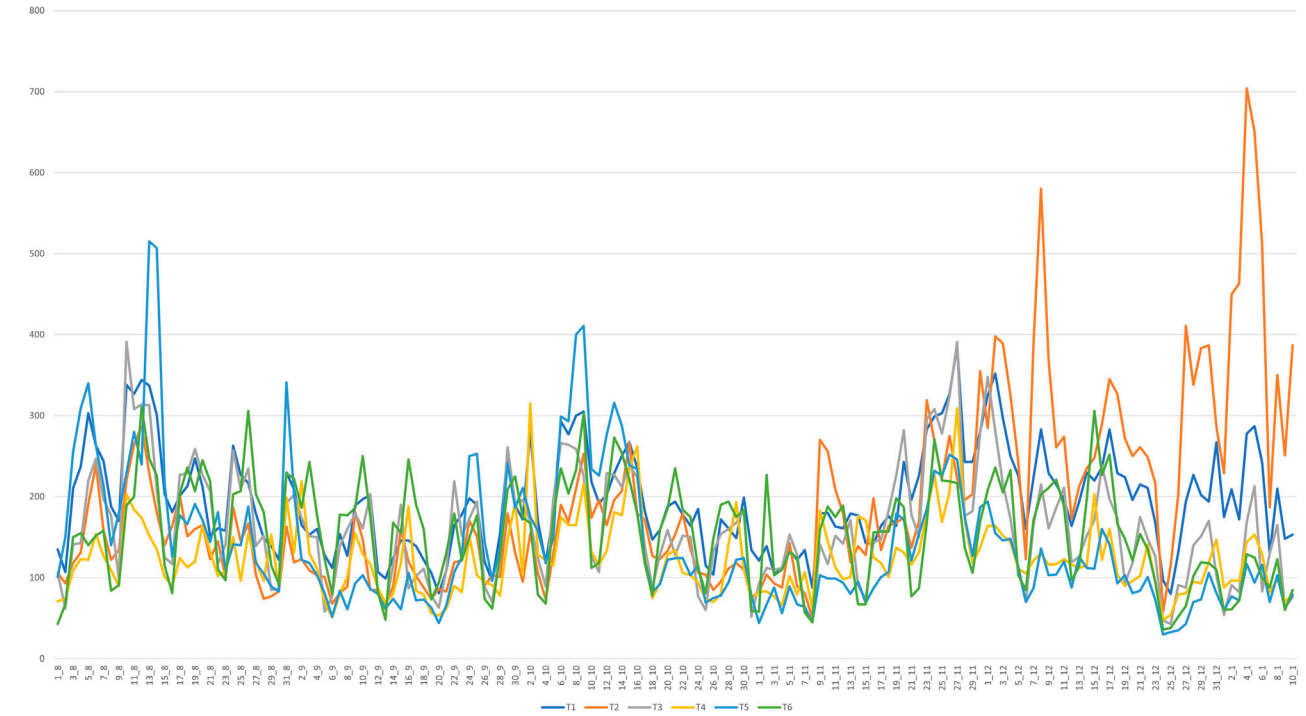

FIGURE 10 | Third-period overview of the topic six-topic model.

with suggesting staying at home, and PM Marin urged even after the lockdown on 15 April that it was "no time for going to the cottage." Something particular to this government was that it sought to convey empathy and attention to special groups that suffered from the situation, bringing citizens, CSOs, and experts on the stage. The performance of control was no longer as tangible in the 30 March or 8 April events, and five-party all-female conferences were no longer apparent: potentially because social distances were kept, and the sign language interpreter was embedded in the video on parallel in a separate picture (*see* **Figure 8**).

Third Period: Administrating Control and Managing Criticism

Our third period spans from 1 August 2020 to 10 January 2021 (*see* Annex 13 for the number of tweets per day). Given the discussion above on the overall declining COVID-19 hashtag use, we also took keywords in this set (*see* Annex 12). Twitter activity regarding COVID-19 fluctuated a bit, with more activity in August, early October, and from late November, but it dropped before Christmas. Weekly fluctuations refer to weekends. Tweets related to all six topics seem to stay on similar levels during most of the period, with on mask use (T5, featuring tweets about experiences with masks, encouragement, and instructions) peaking in mid-August and early October. Topic on COVID-19 vaccines (T2) overtook others from early December steadily increasing towards the end of the period, just as knowledge of vaccinations increased. Discussions on the COVID-19 crisis and politics and the economy (T6, about the financial consequences of COVID-19 for individuals, entrepreneurs, and companies, and discussions on the Finnish economy and increasing debt) fluctuated, with an increased share in early September and then late October. General COVID-19 discussions grouped fear and anxiety even in religious tone and vocabulary (T1), short responses to large chains of Twitter discussions (T4), or COVID-19 cases and authorities (T3). **Figure 10** shows our six-topic model from this dataset (*see* Annex 4 for topics and Annex 7 for individual figures).

The detailed topic modelling analysis was done with a 100-topic model (*see* Annex 12 for differences between datasets). The 20 most prominent topics and the government press conferences are shown in **Figure 11**. The description of the topics is in Annex 10.

For period three, we divided the topics into four loose groups according to the themes of the topics (*see* **Table 4**), including peaks with press conferences. The general discussions category in the third dataset contains more topics than in the two datasets of topic model analysis from spring. Therefore, the general discussions category is divided into two sub-categories: discussions about masks, tests, vaccinations, and general discussions (*see* Annex 10 for details). Topic frequency (**Figure 11**) shows slightly less-pronounced monthly and weekly fluctuations, as in **Figure 10**. Press conferences included scenarios on 10 December and vaccination

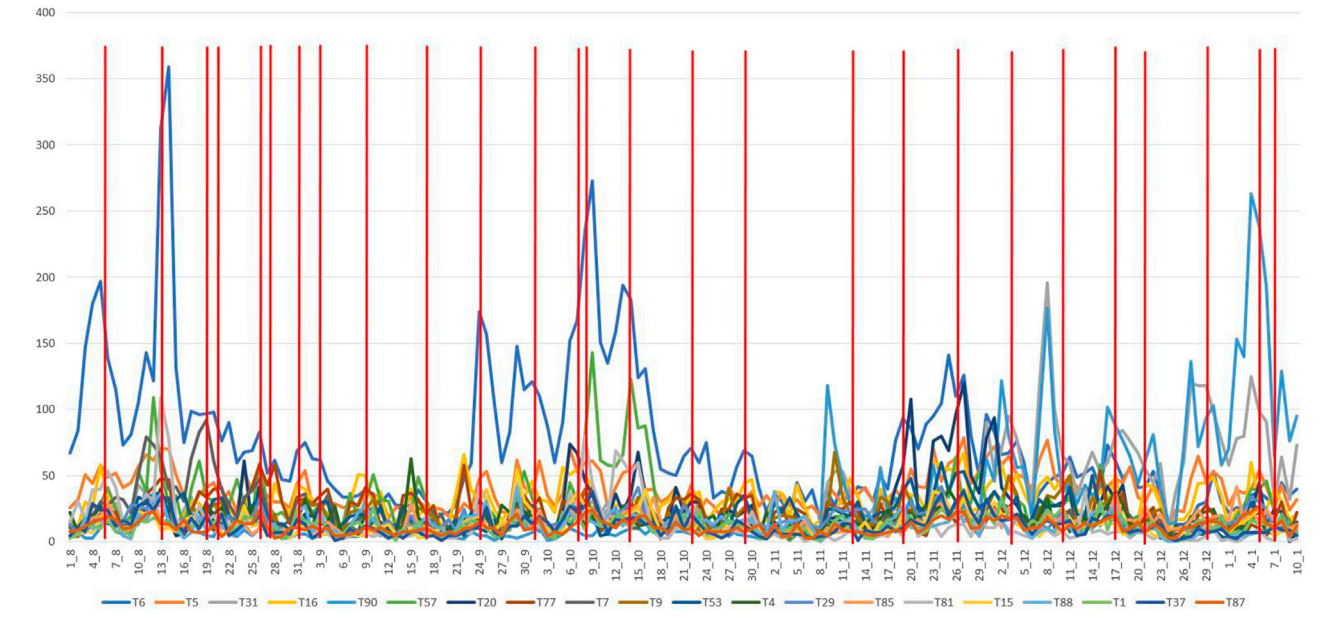

FIGURE 11 | August-January model topics and government press conferences.

availability on 17 December, and on 22 December it was promised that vaccinations would be offered to everyone. The European Union vaccination strategy was discussed, and the first vaccinations were given on 27 December. Twitter discussions emerged prior to the 29 December and 5 January press conferences (**Figure 10**).

August showed a slightly declining trend on overall tweets. The first government press conference was held on 6 August, which also showed a total of 10 topic peaks co-occurring with the press conference. The G4 and G1 topics co-occurred with this press conference (**Table 4**) on T81 about general mask usage. Some tweets referred to the press conference and asked why the mask recommendation was not announced already. Peaking G3 topics included some critical tweets towards the government (T57 and T29), deeming the government indecisive and not taking the required action fast enough regarding the pandemic in Finland. In addition, some tweets claim that the government was using the pandemic to transform the European Union into a federal state via the COVID-19 recovery pact.

On 12 August, the government's perceived inaction was persistently criticized. Some tweets commented on the apparent intragovernmental disagreement between Ministers Kiuru and Lintilä regarding forced quarantine measures at the borders of Finland. On the evening of 12 August, PM Marin attended the main TV discussion program A-Studio (YLE 2020), leading to both praise and criticism on Twitter. The next day she held a press conference that included a recommendation to wear masks on public transport. Mask-related T6 and T81 peaked also on 6 August. T81 was about officials and organizations announcing the mask recommendation, and tweets related to T6 were about people tweeting about their experiences wearing masks, people reporting whether they have seen other people wearing masks in public transport and in public spaces and discussing mask recommendations. The tone of the tweets related to both topics was supportive, but there were some tweets where THL instructions were criticized. Overall, tweets supported the government's mask recommendations.

Travel was the topic of the next press conference, but the end of August also demonstrated how the opposition woke up to contest governmental control. The 26 August press conference was an interior ministry press conference about COVID-19 security at the borders of Finland, co-occurring with eight topic peaks. These included G3 topics T29, with critique towards government and local authorities about insufficient COVID-19 testing, and an absence of mandatory testing at the borders of Finland and at Helsinki-Vantaa airport. T57 was, however, non-related to the topic of the press conference. After long months of consensus, the opposition woke up. On 26 August, the Finns Party leader Jussi Halla-Aho outlined the main targets of the party for the upcoming 2021 spring municipal elections, with one of the main themes being the economy. In many tweets related to T29, the critique is about how the government used the COVID-19 situation as an excuse to mishandle the economy. In addition, on 26 August, there were some tweets attacking the National Coalition party based on Coalition party leader Petteri Orpo's opinion that he was concerned about the rise of nationalism. The political consensus of the pandemic spring was gone, and the opposition had room to maneuver.

Activity related to COVID-19 on Finnish Twitter seemed to recede in early- to mid-September. Government press conferences were held on 3, 9, and 17 September. On 3 September, the PM and Minister of Justice Anna-Maja Hendriksson (RKP) launched the Safety Investigation

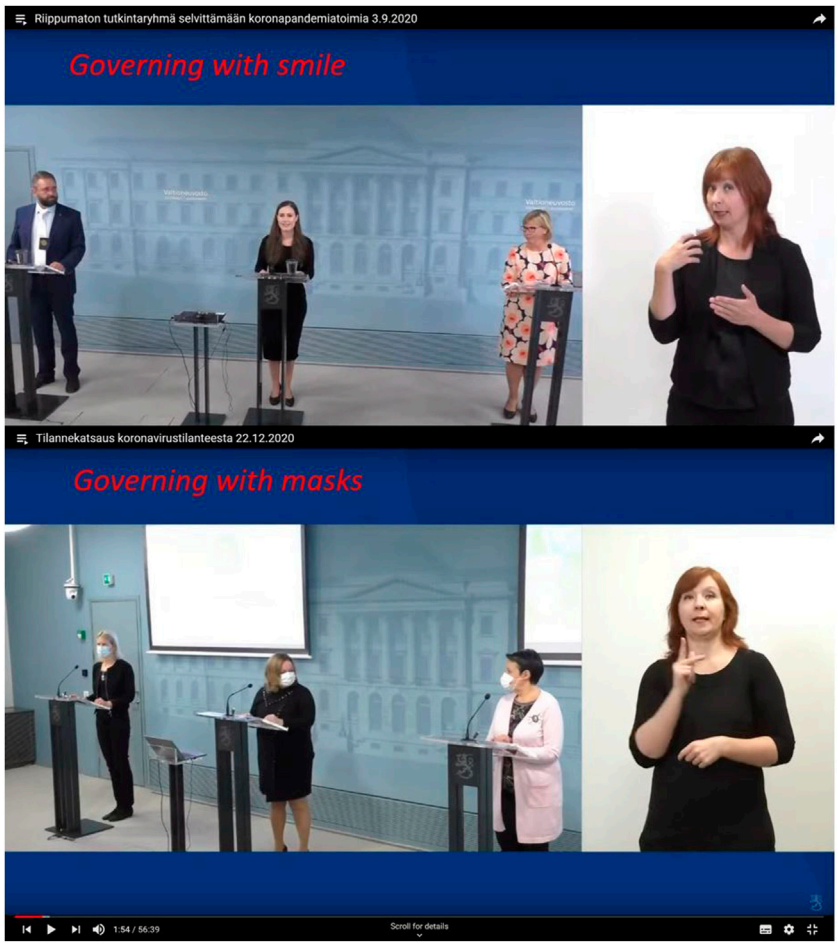

FIGURE 12 | Juxtaposition: Mood change that also indicates how late mask wearing started in Finland. A rare appearance of the PM in Autumn 2020 press conferences to stress the importance of opening an investigation to crisis control of the pandemic on 3 September: Veli-Pekka Nurmi, director, SAI; PM Marin, and Minister Hendriksson. On 22 December, STM and THL host an information session on COVID-19: Marjo-Riitta Helle, Finnish Medicines Agency, Fimea; Minister Kiuru; and ministry's most senior public official Kirsi Varhila. The sign language interpreter is in a separate picture (Modified video screenshot).

Authority's independent investigation to measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic: no villains would be sought but the first investigation phase would build the sequence of events from January to July (SAI 2020; see **Figure 12**).

In September, it becomes obvious to the authorities that some measures ought to be used: from 17 September, a regional facemask recommendation was taken, and on 24 September, Puumalainen (THL) stated that "I think new measures ought to be adopted." On 24 September, the press conference declared that updated mask recommendations would include interior public spaces, coinciding with a major peak in mask-related topics T6 and T81. Tweets in T81 addressed organizations announcing their own mask recommendations related to the official announcement and individual Twitter users sharing and discussing the updated recommendations. Tweets in T6 discussed updated recommendations, tweeting their experiences with masks, and reporting how other people were using masks. Overall, the tone of the tweets in both topics was supportive of mask usage, but some tweets criticized THL's perceived change of stance on facemasks, questioning why the institute now recommended a mask, even though in spring no recommendation was given. Some tweets criticized that the recommendation was not strong enough and that a mandatory mask requirement should be enforced. In the G3 topic T29 peaking on 22 and 25 September, tweets criticized both the government and THL for lacking a mandatory mask requirement and the government for being too slow to act.

From the end of September to mid-October, discussions related to COVID-19 increased, with mask topic T6 as one of the more pronounced discussion subjects in this period. Both mask topics T6 and T81 significantly increased from 6 October to 9 October, with T6 peaking on 9 October and T81 on 8 October. The government press conference on 7 October was about local authorities and new restrictions of restaurant opening hours and alcohol sales. Kiuru appeared to talk about regional authorities' role and introduced some regulations on restaurant openings. From 8 October, the presenters wore masks: Salminen (THL) stressed how the COVID-19 infection situation was worsening in

TABLE 4 | Government press conferences and topic peaks 1 August 2020–10 January 2021.

	6.8	13.8	19.8	20.8	26.8	27.8	31.8	3.9	9.9	17.9	24.9	1.10	7.10	8.10	14.10	22.10	29.10	12.11	19.11	26.11	3.12	10.12	17.12	22.12	29.12	5.1	7.1
G1a: Discussions about masks																											
T6		X									X						X		X								
T81	X	X									X			X													
G1a: Discussions about tests																											
T7			X		X									X		X				X				X		X	
G1a: Discussions about vaccinations																											
T31			X						X							X					X						
G1b: General discussions																											
T5				X												X										X	
T4		X	X						X				X									X	X				
T85	X										X										X		X				
T15	X												X													X	
T87	X				X						X												X			X	
G2: Organizational announcements and discussion																											
T9					X									X					X		X		X				
T53								X				X			X		X			X							
T1	X		X				X															X	X	X			
T37		X			X		X		X																		X
G3: Government and official responses and discussion																											
T57	X				X										X					X	X						
T20	X	X	X		X						X															X	X
T29	X				X		X															X					
G4: News and discussion about news																											
T16		X		X			X											X	X			X	X				X
T90	X								X																		
T77				X	X				X						X	X		X	X					X	X		
T88	X	X						X	X	X					X	X		X	X	X		X	X				X

Europe and in Finland. T6 tweets on 6–9 October debated masks and their protection, usage, and user experiences. T81 tweets questioned the government's mask recommendations and requested a mandatory mask-wearing policy. With the frequency of both T6 and T81 tweets increasing already from 6 October, it seemed that the government press conferences were not the driver for increased Twitter discussions. Especially on 8 October, T81 tweets also questioned the government and officials' mask stance in spring 2020, with some being extremely critical towards the government and even claiming that the government lied about the mask situation. Critical tweets referred to April's mask and protective equipment supply problems. In G3 topics T29 and T57, the government was attached for not recommending the use of facemasks in the spring. As a reaction to the public discussion, including accusations of lying, Minister Kiuru's press conference on 14 October addressed the mask situation in spring arguing that expert knowledge did not support mask usage and comprehensive guidance could not be issued. T81 peaked on 12 and 15 October, and receded after 16 October, signifying an end to the "mask gate" discussion. We argue that the press conference on 14 October positively contributed to closing the discussion about the mask situation in the previous spring: an expression of control by the government reaction to the public discussion. Overall, 6 October was one of the most active Twitter days in the autumn period with the mask-related tweets in topics T6, T81, and T57. The "mask gate" was one of the main points of contestation in the autumn-period hashtag landscape against the government.

After late October, Twitter discussions related to COVID-19 receded, but there was an increase again in Twitter discussions from mid-November onwards. The first government press conference of the month was held on 12 October, and the next government press conference was held on 19 October, with five topics peaking the same day. The mask topic T6 started to increase after 17 November, reaching its peak on 25 November. It included discussions and arguments as to how much masks help, the experiences of people using masks, and people reporting how much other people are using masks. G3 topic T29 peaked on 24 November: government was criticized for not enacting strict COVID-19 restrictions and for lack of leadership. Some accused Kiuru of making confusing statements. Tweets blamed the government for using the possibility of a state of emergency as a threat. PM Marin appeared with Kiuru, for first time since early September, at the 26 November press conference addressing the rapidly increasing number of cases. She urged people to act more responsibly. Topic T7 on COVID-19 tests peaked, and the government was criticized for not showing proper leadership and for issuing confusing communication in relation to COVID-19 measures (T57). This suggests that the government reacted both to increase in COVID-19 infections and to increase public discussion about the rising infections.

During December and early January, discussions receded from late November levels but remained active besides the Christmas period from 23 to 27 December. T31 and T90 related to vaccinations started to peak. Only 3 and 22 December press conferences were held with ministers. The message from Kiuru was stern: cases were increasing, and contacts should be reduced. On 22 December, she promised that there would be vaccinations "to all who want them." Vaccinations started in Finland on 27 December. The first press conference in 2021 on 5 January covered COVID-19 vaccinations and the vaccination strategy. Already on 4 January, discussions related to government response in topic T29 peaked, with doubts about the government vaccination strategy, as the government was accused of being too slow or even delaying vaccinations.

Overview on Pandemic Transformation

We chronologically generated and investigated data on press conferences for who was there and what was said, leaving other features of the press conferences outside this study. The timing of press conferences offered chronology to the study. We periodized our research into three segments and generated both a wider perspective with five to six topics, and a more refined analysis with multiple topics. Here, we studied the topic peaks and qualitatively analyzed tweets in those moments, investigating transformations in the "hashtag landscape" capturing the discursive field, crisscrossed with antagonism but also public building performing control, and contestation through Twitter.

In the first period, the Marin government performed collective responsibility for COVID-19 measures by presenting a unanimous voice and staging ministerial presence through press conferences. Space was given to ministers responsible for different policy areas, and most ministers were involved in the pandemic situation. In the Twitter data, we can recognize criticism towards the government and the expert body THL. The second period saw a fragmentation of the faces of control in press conferences from a presence of multiple ministers to experts for epidemiological and technically defined topics such as masks. There were also fourth sector actors and citizens. Economic resilience, rather than restrictions, featured as the main topic of the first all-female government's press conference on 20 March. The PM also started the second such event on 30 March with thanks to individuals and businesses. At the next conference, on 8 April, she argued that in the middle of a crisis, it was important to help individuals and businesses to survive. The tweets contested leadership, siding with the presidential suggestion of the "covid fist," criticizing Uusimaa closure, finally re-opening of schools, and lax approach to facemasks.

The government communicated the graveness of the situation via several ministers, which also unveiled cross-sector effects and attempts to solve it in the spring and summer. This showed the strength of the government and legitimated the use of the emergency powers legislation in government control. In the performative sense, the appearance of several ministers in the press conferences, and even the info session for children on 24 April, demonstrated the government's control of the issue. The conferences always started with ministers' speeches and the political control of the situation, followed by the health authorities' overview of the situation and questions from the audience of media onsite or over video or phone link—or selected children, in the case of the children's info session (**Figure 9**). At other times, they included the senior citizens and CSOs. The

autumn showed COVID-19 had become business as usual and governance of the crisis normalized. Financial consequences were discussed in August, and some of the measures of the government were criticized publicly; particularly, the opposition parties took this opportunity.

In the last period, the ministers did not perform pandemic control together, with PM Marin appearing on stage three times. The strongest presence of multiple ministers was on 3 September, when in two distinct conferences on the same day Kiuru presented the plan to regulate the COVID-19 situation, and then the PM and Hendriksson presented the SAI investigation. After 3 September, if any of the ministers attended the press conference, it was Kiuru and the health authorities that handled the performance of control in the ongoing COVID-19 situation. This all suggests that if the second wave pandemic strategy of the government were to fail, Kiuru (SDP) would be responsible. Indeed, in normal conditions in Finland, the control is on the regional authorities to regulate the health districts and municipalities based on the advice and recommendations of the health authorities, THL and STM. This model was explicated on 28 August in the health authorities' press conference and by Kiuru on 7 October and 26 November. After delegation, however, regaining hold of the performance of control is difficult.

DISCUSSION

Our aim was to test and launch a novel way to study social media and politics through mixed methods and mixed data. We developed an interpretive topic instrumentalist and rhetoric-performative approach to the hashtag landscape, captured in a snapshot with keywords and ever-developing hashtags, using diverse data in tandem. We used topic modelling as the first reading of the large dataset and as a tool to analyze deeper discursive shifts. Instead of looking for strict causality, we investigated patterns and co-occurrence (Glynos and Howarth 2007), and instead of treating the probability of topics and terms as absolute measures of reality, we used it to better understand and interpret discursive shifts and antagonisms. This machine-learning approach suited our non-essentialist data-driven approach, where rich data would also offer different emphasis and readings. We wanted to make transparent how to read Twitter data discursively, longitudinally, and as a discursive field rather than a set of predefined actors.

By matching the topics with periodization marked by the press conferences as tuned into temporal pointers, any country or crisis case could be studied, offering tools of non-essentialist, post-structuralist approaches to comparative politics, political communication, and governance even comparatively. Looking closer at topic timelines and the actual tweets in different moments, we could see shifts in the contents of the topics as new meanings emerged in the vocabulary that the LDA topic modelling provided. With the attention that relationality in discourse analysis stresses, we were able to interpret discursive shifts and emphasis in the hashtag landscape. Contextualizing through an alternative dataset, here the press conferences, was useful for interpretation. In turn, the juxtaposition with the hashtag landscape offered a new perspective to the official communication.

In the Finnish case, existing literature's comments of complying citizens' minuscule resistance at the face of re-territorialization (Moisio 2020), and argument on the style of COVID-19 communication as a moral coercion of the public opinion (Häyry 2021 43-44), would in the light of our data apply to some degree. The case of COVID-19 and the discussion on ethics of both policies and communication continue and fall beyond the scope of this article. We could, however, observe points of contestation. A crisis imaginary with economic decay was a powerful nodal point in press conferences in the spring and the hashtag landscape also in the autumn. Issue of mask use dominated our data in the hashtag landscape. Adopting different policies, multi-level governance, and the precise question emerging in the tweets of whether the government had been lying in the spring about masks point to the pertinence of ethical debates in pandemic politics.

Our approach to "hashtag landscape" captures discursive shifts, transformations, nodal points, and imaginaries within the discursive field. Regarding discussions related to masks, in spring, discussions masks were related to specific events like emergency supply problems or the opening of schools, or general critique towards the government. In autumn, the mask discussion was a topic of its own on Twitter, as people tweeted about their everyday experiences wearing masks and reported whether other people were wearing masks. Still, masks remained a controversial topic during the autumn, when tweets criticized and blamed the government for lying about the mask recommendations.

Regarding the critique, a consistent theme was the perceived lack of action by the government. In both spring and autumn, the government was criticized for not taking decisive action on the COVID-19 situation. In addition, critics claimed the government was not showing leadership. The government's lack of leadership was expressed as "hiding behind the health authorities" (or scientific knowledge) and was contrasted with the leadership shown by President Niinistö. Another consistent point of critique was towards THL and Salmela, on incompetence. The emergency supply mask crisis, or "mask gate," was one of the more salient issues that the government was criticized for in spring and briefly in the autumn period. The government got criticism for the (lacking) COVID-19 checks at Helsinki-Vantaa airport in the spring and the European Union recovery package in the autumn.

Discussing governance, a central shift in the communication, was from an affective all-government performance to the institutionalization of pandemic governance into an administrative matter dealt with by mask-wearing bureaucrats and on occasion the minister responsible, Kiuru. This changed the mood of who was performing control and how, as well as what control is about. The government's current struggles in spring 2021 to convince people to reduce contacts, wear masks, and contain virus variants derives from the transformation within the performative process of control. The paradox of controlling the uncontrollable or appearing in control of the fully uncontrollable

also unveils the uneven, heterogeneous, and antagonistic discursive field captured through our methodological approach.

Our analysis of themes and criticism shows that at least some government press conferences ended even satisfied discussions on contested themes. In the autumn, the government left the floor of COVID-19 control to the experts and administration. The absence of the full government in the autumn press conferences meant that a collective responsibility for COVID-19 measures was not similarly performed and control claimed. The appearances of Kiuru and on occasion PM Marin provided a weak, temporary symbol of control compared to the spring 2020, when the all-female government made a powerful performative claim on controlling the pandemic. In the hashtag landscape's critical voices that on occasion included misogynistic attitudes and science-skepticism, the Marin government's youthful, multivocal presence in its female-led press conferences was contrasted with one strong (male) President's aura of control in crisis, indicating that the presidentialist undercurrent in the Finnish population (Paloheimo et al., 2016) still exists.

In spring 2020, the performance of control was palpable as the faces of the crisis and key nodal points in the hashtag landscape became ministers and the national authority. The emergency powers legislation shifted control to the government from regional authorities and municipalities in spring 2020, and by autumn, those powers were returned to the regional and local bodies. This meant that control was also decentralized, and the second wave took speed while contestation emerged on both the economy and the masks, until vaccinations became the dominant issue around Christmas. The unveiled administrative-discursive shift and performative absence of the government in the autumn could partly explain developments in spring and summer 2021. The performance of control and contestation between distinct levels of governance, persistent with the extension of the pandemic, would merit further investigation.

A detailed analysis of 2021 was out of scope of this dense study, yet we could have used the same method of matching government press conferences with the hashtag landscape. Potentially, similar developments as in 2020 could have been uncovered. The absence of the central performative control by the Marin government was however notable: issues were delegated to Kiuru, and the regions and the delegated performative control would be difficult to regain without a stress on a crisis, which in turn could have backfired the government's own policy. The discussion on COVID-19 persists in new virus variants and issues of vaccinations. In the theme of vaccination, the Astra Zeneca skepticism would have emerged in spring 2020. By August 2021, the delta-variant wave hit Finland, whose vaccination coverage was 66 percent for first dose and 35 percent for second dose (THL 2021). The nodal points of the discursive field we found, from reluctance to mask wearing, economic insecurity, Marin and Kiuru's policy (too strict for some, too loose for others), travel restrictions, school closures, to vaccinations, would re-emerge in the hashtag landscape. New themes and explanans could also emerge crunching the big data piñata of 2021. Furthermore, it would be useful to engage with the questions of which kinds of discursive developments and entanglements appear in the hashtag landscape. Further research could include zooming to the account level within the same machine-read data.

With this article, we highlight the importance of the study of social media in political analysis. It is a pertinent part of investigating discursive and hegemonic confrontations on the wider, contingent discursive field. To hold governmental power at the face of a pandemic or crisis requires constitutive performance. In social media, captured through the hashtag landscape, this performance is contested and ratified by emerging hashtag publics. Through our novel research method of interpretive topic modelling and discourse theory, exploring a social media and government interaction, we hope to have demonstrated both the contingent nature of control and articulations of power at the crux of contemporary politics.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation. The videos used as data are available from the Finnish Government's YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSt7xZBp-uM&list=PLbR0oH-F5gDWj9Z6AuIi3wi4bcN3tiZL4.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors have equally contributed to the study. Datasets 1 and 2 were gathered by EP on the Mecodify tool on the University of Helsinki server, and Ass. Prof. Walid Al-Saqaf provided dataset 3 through a request on the latest version of the Mecodify software he has developed (https://github.com/wsaqaf/mecodify). The topic modelling was done by JK. Interpretation was by both authors.

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Authentic Expertise: Andrej Babiš and the Technocratic Populist Performance During the COVID-19 Crisis

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This article studies how a technocratic populist can visually perform the authenticity and connection to 'the low' that is key to a populist performance while also maintaining the performance of expertise that is central to technocratic populist success. It relies on the case study of Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš and uses Facebook data from his profile in March and September–October 2020, the two peak moments of the crisis in the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. After offering a timeline of the Czech COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, it applies a dramaturgical analysis to four representative photos from Babiš' Facebook page. It finds that Babiš was able to simultaneously articulate both expertise and authenticity, thereby both creating a connection to 'the people' while also articulating himself as an expert capable of handling the pandemic. He articulated expertise through a technocratic bodily performance, presenting himself as a cosmopolitan leader with international symbols of power like neutral-colored suits and elegant surroundings. At the same time, he also articulated himself as an authentic politician by showing his Facebook followers backstage imagery like a disorganized table and by showing himself as a busy man and an exceptionally hard worker. By illuminating the visual performance of technocratic populism, it offers insight into how technocratic populists constitute the expertise that their success rests on and that can also pose a threat to democratic societies, especially in a time of crisis.

Keywords: technocratic populism, performance, visual politics, Andrej babiš, Facebook, COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a rise in studies focusing on technocratic populism as a distinct variant of populism (e.g., de la Torre 2013; Buštíková and Guasti, 2019; Castaldo & Verzichelli 2020; Perottino & Guasti 2020; Snegovaya 2020). Guasti and Buštíková (2020, 468), define technocratic (sometimes referred to as managerial (Havlík 2019) or centrist (Havlík & Voda 2018)) populism as an "output-oriented populism that directly links voters to leaders via expertise," wherein leaders present themselves as experts and present a "direct, personalized link" to their people, crossing over traditional left-right divides. Understanding populism as a "mode of articulation" (Laclau 2005) that creates an antagonistic frontier between "the people" and "the Other," technocratic populists present themselves as representative of the ordinary people, pitted against the elite political establishment as the Other. It emerges as a response to perceived bad governance (Buštíková and Baboš, 2020); technocratic populists often position themselves as anti-corruption fighters, such as Igor Matovič in

Slovakia, or leaders from business who can translate their experience into good governance, such as Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic. Similarly, entrepreneurial populism (Heinisch & Saxonberg 2017) appears when success in business forms the basis of a leader's claim to power. Entrepreneurial populist parties are socially moderate and centered around a highly trusted leader with a background in business, who claims that he will run the country like a business; Heinisch & Saxonberg (2017) note that this type describes Babiš particularly well.

In considering populism through Laclau's lens as a mode of articulation, this study views populism as a performative act (Moffitt 2016; Palonen 2018) and a process of political meaning making (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). "The people" and "the Other" do not exist before they are articulated, and thus constituted, in opposition to one another. These meaning making processes take place not only through spoken or written language, but also through rhetorical, stylistic, or visual articulations or actions, which are constitutive because of their performative character (Palonen 2019). In other words, it views populism as form rather than content (Laclau 2005; Palonen 2021); both "the people" and "the Other" are empty of meaning until a political actor constitutes them. In a technocratic populist movement, then, 'the people' would generally be constituted expansively rather than exclusively in a national or ethnic sense, and "the Other" is more likely to appear as the political elite behind the perceived bad governance. The technocratic populist claims to represent the people in the "empty space of power" (Palonen 2021) by articulating himself as an expert who can more effectively work on their behalf.

The core logic of technocratic populism thus lacks the strong nativism and nationalism that characterizes the more frequently occurring right-wing populist movements, although technocratic populist movements can and sometimes do incorporate nativist and nationalist elements in their discursive frameworks; Babiš, for example, articulated immigrants as part of the constituent Other in his pre-2021 parliamentary election campaign messaging (Andrej Babiš, 2020e, September 23, 2021). Technocratic populism has anti-democratic potential in that it aims to quash debate in the name of prioritizing expertise (Buštíková and Guasti, 2019; Havlík 2019; Guasti 2020b). It delegitimizes political opponents and leads to apathy among potential voters (Buštíková and Guasti, 2019). Amidst the growing awareness of technocratic populism as a potential cause of democratic backsliding, the COVID-19 pandemic offered an unprecedented opportunity for it to shine. Even beyond previous findings that crises both provide an opening for and often are an inherent element of populist politics (Moffitt 2015; Moffitt 2016; Brubaker 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2018), technocratic populism and its politicization of expertise hold a unique appeal in a crisis demanding expertise in public health (or at least the appearance of it) above all else (Guasti & Buštíková 2020). At the same time, people are open to losing civil liberties if a trusted expert made the decision to take them away (Arceneaux et al., 2020). This allowed technocratic populists in the Czech Republic and Slovakia to follow a similar playbook in their handling of the crisis. In addition to bypassing previously established and institutionalized methods of responding to the crisis and going about policy making in an erratic way, responsive to public demands—both features of general populist crisis responses—technocratic populists additionally politicized and thereby weaponized medical expertise to gain legitimacy (Buštíková and Baboš, 2020). In the Czech Republic, this playbook worked well during the first wave, but then fell apart in the second wave when Babiš' responsiveness to public demands of openness pushed him to delay the government's response to the increasing case numbers in the late summer and early fall.

Populist politicians, however, do not simply appeal to their potential electorate through policy proposals and decisions, technocratic or otherwise. They make affective connections with supporters through their physical performances; what they do with their bodies and the way that they behave is just as important as what they say (Casullo 2020a: 29). Elements like a populist politician's clothes, hairstyle, posture, and hand gestures, in addition to their words and diction, all come together as part of a populist political style, which attempts to appeal "the people" against "the elite" and often relies on "bad manners" (Moffitt 2016: 44) or "flaunting of the 'low'" (Ostiguy 2017), that is, abnormal political behavior, in order to do so. These physical and linguistic discursive articulations are performative, producing the effects that they name (Butler 1993). Social identities are formed, according to Butler, 1988 (529), through the "stylized repetition of acts through time," acts which obtain meaning through their relative position in a discourse. The meaning granted to any individual performative action is also unfixed, but it is based on the meaning acquired by previous iterations of the same or similar actions (Peck, et al., 2009). To claim the mantle of control that technocratic populists claim their level of expertise must grant them, then, they must perform this quality of expertise through recognizable articulations that constitute it. When these articulations take place on social media, as is the focus of this study, it is worth remembering that they are usually the work of a professional PR team crafting the populist politician's ultimate performance, a fact widely known and publicized in Babiš' case (e.g., Ryšavá & Dolejší 2018); however, these curated social media performances still contribute to the overall bodily performances of populist leaders.

Casullo (2020a, 30) describes these articulations as the technocratic bodily performance, which "erases the marks of subjectivity and . . . is as impersonal as possible." It relies on "proper" clothes from the professional world, such as neutral colors, business suits, and simple hair styles. It rejects anything ostentatious and limits the use of status symbols, thereby allowing the politician him or herself to appear transparent, a carrier of expertise rather than a flawed human. The elements here are cosmopolitan rather than connected to a certain national or ethnic identity; they are international symbols of expertise and leadership that cross the lines of business and politics.

It is important to study these bodily performances because the populist leader embodies the whole movement and thus also "the people" (Casullo 2020b), becoming an empty signifier that represents all the movement's demands. However, the technocratic bodily performance might seem incompatible with the functions that a populist leader's body performs. According to Casullo (2018, 2020b), the populist leader's body

has three functions: there is always something that connects him to the "lower" traits of the people; he always has something that differentiates him from his followers; and he always displays a symbol of power. Symbols of power are easy to find in a technocratic populist's bodily performance, perhaps a business suit or the elite surroundings where the leader is photographed. The same goes for elements that differentiate the leader from his followers: while for Hugo Chavez this was an expensive watch that went along with his more common dress (Salojärvi 2020), the technocratic populist might employ any number of subtly placed designer items—a watch, glasses, electronic tools, etc.—that contribute to the performance of expertise.

The connection to the "lower" traits of the people—in other words, the "bad manners" that make up part of Moffitt (2016) conception of the populist political style—must look different for technocratic populists than they do for politicians whose main source of appeal was not expertise, however. Examples of this type of link to the people, such as Donald Trump's "inappropriate" rhetoric or Timo Soini's football scarfs (Salojärvi 2020), could harm the image of expertise. At first glance, technocratic populists maintaining expertise as a key part of their appeal appear more closely connected to Ostiguy (2017) conception of the "high," rather than the transgressive "low." This marks an important distinction between technocratic populists and many other populist leaders, but an expansive view of "the low" reveals angles that connect it to a technocratic performance. The "low" marks a politician as "one of ours" (Ostiguy 2017: 6) in the eyes of a voter; in a political-cultural sense, it appears as personalistic and strong leadership (Ostiguy 2017: 9–10) or even "ballsyness," (Ostiguy 2017:10), the propensity to take action rather than merely talk about it. Articulations that fit into these categories within "the low" may still not appear to be transgressive or "bad manners," which points to a limitation in the approach to populism as a political style. However, the "low" element of the populist leader's body could also take the form of a performance of political authenticity, which entails four main dimensions of a politician's performance: consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy (Luebke 2020). Populist politicians often show their "authentic" natures in so-called backstage imagery (Salojärvi 2020), which often presents them as something other than an ideal, manicured politician. They often blur the lines between front stage and backstage, relying on backstage imagery (Timo Soini's greasy hair, for example) even in official photographs. This produces an effect of transparency and authenticity, which helps to connect the populist leader to "the people."

With the different technocratic populist embodiment of "the people," however, the backstage imagery that constitutes political authenticity must take a different form, producing the effect of expertise rather than a connection to the people through the low. Just as the technocratic bodily performance relies on internationally recognizable symbols of power and expertise, the technocratic performance of authenticity might rely on recognizable visual elements signifying hard work, exhaustion, or access to high places—that is, the backstage and usually unseen elements that come together in the end to produce the front stage expertise and power that the technocratic populist uses to work for the people (see **Table 1**). Through this performance of authenticity, technocratic populists can both appear cosmopolitan and "high" while still connecting to the personalistic "low" as they show the backstage process that goes into creating the "high." Rather than transgressing by breaking the rules, a technocratic populist does so by "authentically" revealing the underside—the hard work, the time spent, the messy office spaces—of what goes into following them.

This paper builds on Buštíková and Baboš (2020) study of the policy decisions that technocratic populists made during the COVID-19 crisis, turning instead to how they perform the expertise that technocratic populists claim to have. Relying on a broad conception of the populist leader's bodily performance to include not only his costume and physical presence but also his props, staging, and backdrop, this paper will consider how a technocratic populist visually performs technocratic expertise and thereby embodies the people through visual backstage imagery in a crisis situation, using the case study of Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš. It finds that while Babiš maintained the technocratic bodily performance that is not typical to populist leaders, he also deployed non-bodily backstage imagery in order to forge a link with the people.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The first section of the results gives a timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic during the time of study, between March 2020 and October 2021. I began by observing the progression of the pandemic virtually, following Babiš and numerous other politicians and journalists on Facebook and Twitter and visiting Czech-based media sites in Czech and English on a weekly basis throughout the first 7 months of the pandemic (March–October 2020). The media organizations included Seznam zprávy, Český rozhlas, Respekt, Hospodařské noviny, Radio Prague International, Expats.cz, and Prague Morning, among others. Based on this observation, I determined the turning points around which I structured this study and gathered the Facebook data that I analyze below. The observation revealed three concrete phases of the early pandemic in the Czech Republic regarding the level of control that the government was trying to impose over the country: the initial onset and subsequent restrictions, the near-return to pre-pandemic life over the summer, and the second period of crisis in the fall after case numbers started to rise over the summer. This corresponds to three turning points: the beginning of the first wave, the loosening of control, and the beginning of the second wave. As the aim of this study is to explore the performance of a technocratic populist in crisis, I gathered data focused around the two turning points that launched the crisis periods, i.e. the moments when the government declared a state of emergency to mark the beginning of the first and second waves. While the second wave had already begun in epidemiological terms well before the government declared the state of emergency, the tone of the government messaging noticeably shifted at that point.

TABLE 1 | Technocratic bodily performace + technocratic performance of authenticity.

Technocratic bodily performance (Casullo 2020a)	Hypothesized technocratic populist backstage performance of authenticity
• Cosmopolitan symbols of power and expertise	• Elements signifying hard work, e.g., unkempt desk or clothes
• Business suits	• Imagery from "behind the scenes" (e.g., outside of the public eye, in private spaces or meetings, etc.)
• Neutral colors	• Evidence of long working hours
• Simple hairstyle	• Status symbols in the form of tools for work (e.g., fancy electronics)
• Lack of status symbols	—

The data analyzed in this article consists of all of the photographic posts on Andrej Babiš Facebook page from two time periods: March 1–31 2020, and September 11–October 10, 2020. In addition to being the most used social media network in the Czech Republic (Macková et al., 2017), Facebook is also the platform that Babiš uses most comprehensively to communicate with his supporters. While he has nearly double the amount of followers on Twitter (445,100 on Twitter vs. 271,721 on Facebook, as of February 2021), his Twitter feed consists almost entirely of retweets and receives very little engagement. On Facebook, however, his posts regularly receive thousands of reactions and hundreds of comments, and he occasionally breaks news exclusively on his Facebook profile. While Babiš has a PR team dedicated to crafting his image on Facebook, the posts still go out under his name and in his voice on his public page, so this study considers him as the 'owner' of the posts; as such, the curated posts are also articulations that constitute Babiš' performance as a technocratic leader, even if someone else chose and posted them. Facebook posts thus provide suitable data to analyze Babiš' performances as a leader. Both of these periods encompass the time both immediately before and immediately after the onset of the crises brought on by the first and second waves, respectively. According to the timeline laid out below, this paper defines the onset of crisis in the first wave as March 12, when Babiš' government first declared a state of emergency. It considers the onset of crisis for the second wave to be September 21, when then-Health minister Adam Vojtěch suddenly resigned. The two sets of data thus encompass a comparable amount of time both before and after the beginning of the crisis period.

In order to concentrate on Babiš' own visual performance during crisis, the data set includes only posts that contain at least one new photo posted to Babiš' timeline. That is, it includes posts with one photo or a photo album, but it does not include photographic posts shared from other Facebook profiles or pages, and it also does not include a large photo album posted to Babiš' profile in early October that only included photos which had previously appeared on his timeline during the year prior to the actual post. It also excludes posts that contained exclusively text, videos, infographics, and other non-photographic visuals. In total, it consists of 134 posts, 62 from March and 72 from September and October.

In order to account for the character of the data set as a whole, this study first employed a loose content analysis (Rose 2001) using a coding scheme developed through the process of analyzing the March data and then applied to the September/October data. I developed the coding scheme by creating a category for each of several elements from each photo: the main explicit or implicit themes in the photo; the location where the photo was taken, if it was either visibly clear or clear through a location tag; whether Babiš was alone in the photo, and if not, who else was in the photo with him; and what key props (Goffman 1959; Salojärvi 2020), if any, were present in the photo. As new themes, locations, people, and props appeared, I created new categories for each and then did a second round of coding on the March data using the full coding scheme. I then used the same coding scheme for the September-October data, only adding categories that were unique to that data set (e.g., locations in Brussels or various EU and other foreign officials). To select the representative photos, I counted which of each element—themes, locations, people, and props—appeared most frequently in each of the data sets and then found the two photos from each set that featured all of, or the greatest number of, the most frequently appearing elements.

To these photos I then applied dramaturgical analysis (Goffman 1959; Salojärvi 2020) adjusted for analysis of visual material on social media (Hendriks et al., 2016). The dramaturgical approach views political activity on social media as a performance through which actors construct their desired political selves (Marichal 2013), thus accounting for the planned, curated nature of a politician's social media feed. It views the social media data as essentially theatrical, asking the same questions about it as one would about a play in a theatre: who are the characters? What is the plot? What is the setting, and what props are used? How does the audience receive it? This approach blends particularly well with the performative approach to populism, because it analyzes the data through a performative lens, breaking down the material into its constituent elements and asking how they come together in the final performance, i.e., each of the Facebook posts analyzed. Each of these elements, after all, constitutes its own small part of the populist movement as a whole, and an in-depth dramaturgical analysis breaks down each post, or performance, to reveal the individual elements and explore how they come together. Thus, a qualitative analysis of a limited number of representative posts reveals valuable insights about the often-overlooked details that make up a technocratic populist performance that a broader empirical quantitative analysis would overlook.

Hendriks, et al.'s analytical framework for dramaturgical analysis of social media material consists of two dimensions (scripting and staging), with a series of questions for each (see **Table 2**, below). This includes a question on audience reception, which I modified to fit this data set: "How do Facebook commenters respond to the scripting and staging of the post?"

TABLE 2 | Questions for dramaturgical analysis (Hendriks, et al., 2016).

Dimension	Definition and questions
Scripting	Creating a particular political effect by casting the characters in the performance and directing their expected behavior "What is the central narrative?" "Who are cast as the main characters and what role do they play in the performance?" "Who is the imagined audience?" "What happens to the scripting and performance in any discussion forums?"
Staging	Organizing, managing, and directing materials and audiences to ensure that the performance "works" "Who manages the performance?" "What role do they play on the stage (center or backstage)?" "What props, images, and sounds are used and how?"

I used this as a starting point for my analysis of the Facebook comments. As this was only a small part of the dramaturgical analysis, I did not independently code the comments, but instead I looked at the first 20 "recommended comments" that Facebook offered for each post to gauge how and whether they reflected the scripting and staging of the post as explored through the other questions. I then added the question of whether the photo shows the front stage or the backstage of politics (Salojärvi 2020), as an additional method of gauging the authenticity that it can constitute. Based on the dramaturgical analysis of the representative photos from Babiš' Facebook feed, I will then discuss how he performed both authenticity and expertise during the COVID-19 crisis. I analyze authenticity using Luebke's definition of political authenticity as consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy combined with Salojärvi's conception of 'backstage imagery' as a conveyor of authenticity. I rely on Casullo (2020a: 30) description of the technocratic bodily performance as the framework through which I understand expertise.

RESULTS

Timeline of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Czech Republic

The Imposition of Control

When the Czech Republic began imposing broad restrictive measures across the country in response to COVID-19, it was among the first wave of European countries to do so (Due to the spread of the coronavirus the government has declared a state of emergency and on March 12, 2020 further tightened preventive measures, 2020). By March 10, there was already evidence of community spread in numerous Czech regions, and on March 11, the day before WHO declared COVID-19 to be a true pandemic, the Czech government closed all schools except kindergartens. From that point forward, the Babiš and his government charged ahead with a series of restrictions that, at the time, largely went unchallenged. They imposed a state of emergency on March 12, claiming the additional powers that went along with it. The government approved a nationwide quarantine, which began on March 16, and the Czech Republic became one of the first European countries to close its borders the same day. On March 18th, they imposed the first face covering regulation in the EU, which set off loud criticism as the supply of masks and other PPE could come nowhere close to meeting the demand. Private citizens thus began making masks and giving them to each other in a notable show of nationwide solidarity.

This initial imposition of control relied on expert technocratic advice (Guasti 2020a), but concerns soon emerged about the transparency of the government's response and the chaos and poor communication that characterized it. The unity granted by the opposition in the beginning of the pandemic collapsed when the government tried to push through legislation that would have benefitted Babiš by giving the government power to bypass parliament even after the end of the emergency powers declaration (Vláda má nápad, jak uhájit zákazy. Nový zákon dá pravomoc ministerstvu, 2020), which the opposition blocked by threatening to take away their support for the emergency powers declaration. The government then faced a further loss of control when the Prague Municipal Court ruled several measures to be illegal, including limits to the freedom of movement and travel abroad and the closures of large stores. Guasti (2020a) writes that this pushback from the opposition, guided by additional democratic safeguards like investigative journalism and healthy civil society, protected Czech democracy when the pandemic threatened it. By the time that the government's temporary grip on power began to slip, the country had already succeeded in bending the curve of the pandemic.

During this period, the key nodal point to emerge were the facemasks. The Czech Republic was the first country in Europe to mandate broad mask usage (B. 2020), a move which received acclaim in the international press. While recommendations regarding facemask usage from WHO and numerous other countries were still ambivalent, the Czech Republic mandated that no one could leave home without a face covering, be it a surgical mask or a repurposed scarf (Willoughby 2020). A YouTube video sharing the Czech experience with masks in English went viral enough that then-Health minister Adam Vojtěch added a statement to it, recommending that his colleagues in other countries institute a similar mandate. Babiš also "claimed" the video, congratulating its creators and sharing it twice on his Facebook—once through a *Washington Post* link, in a post where he also wrote (in Czech) that he sent it to the European leaders and President Trump (Babiš, 2020e), and once with a direct link to the video with a caption in English, exceptionally, urging people to join the Czech Republic in wearing masks (Babiš, 2020d).

While the government celebrated its success in limiting the spread of the virus and largely attributed it to the masks, others noted that the government had mandated mask use at a moment when there was a severe shortage of medical supplies. In lieu of government support in acquiring masks and despite well-publicized attempts to get them from abroad, it was actually a grassroots effort that spread masks throughout the populace (Lokšová & Hoření, 2020) with hundreds of people banding together in a united effort to sew each other masks. During this time, Babiš celebrated the unity of the Czech people in a time of crisis on his social media pages while mostly ignoring the critics saying that his government had not done enough. From the mask mandate forward in the initial crisis period, Babiš wore a mask in all photos or videos posted to his Facebook. The masks were either surgical or fabric, with the fabric ones often displaying either a Czech flag or at least the colors of the flag. When he did respond to criticism about the mask mandate coinciding with an overall lack of PPE in the country, he excused the government's action by claiming that the situation was the same in countries across the world and highlighting a particularly bad situation in Slovakia (Babiš, 2020b).

Through social media, Babiš presented himself as a prime minister for all, employing a civic conception of the Czech nation and using the flag as a rallying point both on Facebook and in Prague; every time he announced that a COVID patient had been cured, he represented this as a victory for the nation. While he still received criticism from opponents, for example about the unavailability of masks or his attempt to push through legislation that would benefit from him, there was little debate about whether the country had mounted a successful COVID response. Babiš celebrated the country's victory, ignoring the discussion over whether the credit should have gone to himself and his government or the grassroots movements of people banding together.

The Loosening of Control

Just as it had imposed restrictions earlier than many other countries, the Czech Republic also began to loosen these restrictions earlier. It had become clear that the country's effort to track and trace cases of the virus were succeeding, despite the appearance of hotspots. The emergency powers declaration ended in May, and the government lifted many regulations even earlier than initially planned, once it began appearing as though the loosening of restrictions was not causing an uptick in viral spread. By late May and throughout June, the daily number of new cases was in the dozens. People flocked to expanded outdoor dining and drinking spaces, and later indoor spaces as well. A sense of success reigned; not only had the country stopped an epidemic in its tracks, but the opposition and civil society had also prevented executive overreach from Babiš (Guasti 2020a). The international press held the Czech Republic up as a positive example of having successfully handled the pandemic. Babiš stopped appearing exclusively in masks and moved on to publicly focusing on other public health issues, specifically the fight against cancer (Bartoníček et al., 2021). When the opposition demanded a concrete plan for a potential second wave of COVID-19, Babiš responded by saying that "We shouldn't scare people about a second wave; we're prepared for it" (Bartoníček et al., 2021).

Throughout the summer, various outbreaks of the virus kept cropping up, for example in the Karviná mine in Silesia in May and June (McEnchroe, 2020) and in a Prague nightclub in July (Nováková, 2020). The country's collective embrace of the renewed openness remained through the beginning of September, then, as case numbers began to tick back up. On August 31, Babiš took part in a panel discussion with the other Višegrad Four leaders in Slovenia at Lake Bled, where he referred to the group's success in confronting the virus as a past event that they had already completed, referring to the V4's "results" rather than recognizing it has an ongoing struggle (STA - Slovenska tiskovna agencija, 2020).

Attempt at a Reimposition of Control

Case numbers started rising rapidly in the first third of September, when daily infections rose first over 1,000 and then over 3,000 for the first time on Sept 18 (Czech Republic Exceeds 3,000 Daily COVID-19 Cases for First Time, 2020). The government reimposed mask mandates in most indoor public spaces, but the mandates included many exceptions and changed frequently, and there were no attempts to limit people's activities. Amidst rising discontent in the public and the media, Health Minister and ANO member of parliament Adam Vojtěch suddenly resigned on September 21 ('Chci dát prostor pro řešení epidemie. 'Ministr Vojtěch rezignoval na funkci ministra zdravotnictví, 2020), saying that he was proud of his and his team's work during the first wave; in a separate statement on Facebook, Babiš also congratulated him for managing the first wave "unbelievably" (Babiš, 2020f) while neglecting to mention anything about the second wave. Given the concentration of power in ANO around Babiš alone, many media reactions to this claimed that Vojtěch was, in effect, taking the fall for Babiš' inaction in confronting the second wave. Roman Prymula, an epidemiologist who had become a highly trusted apolitical public figure during the first wave, became the new Health Minister.

The country re-entered a state of emergency on Oct 5 (Today Starts the State of Emergency. What You Need to Know, 2020), but government restrictions remained inconsistent and confusing, which resulted in much criticism. When cases continued to rise, the government began increasing restrictions, culminating on Oct 21, when they reimposed the strictest lockdown since the spring, and Babiš gave a press conference apologizing for his government's handling of the pandemic since May (Smith-Spark & Kottasová, 2020). On October 22, however, a major Czech tabloid captured photos of Prymula, among others, without a mask on, coming out of a Prague restaurant when restaurants were supposed to be closed (Právě on vyhlašuje nejpřísnější opatření: Pod rouškou tmy si Prymula bez roušky vyrazil do restaurace, 2020). Prymula resisted even Babiš' calls for him to resign (Prymula byl v restauraci s Faltýnkem a bez roušky, 2020), claiming that he had not done anything wrong and that the media had overblown the situation (EuroZprávy.cz, 2020). On October 27, however, Babiš named pediatrician Jan Blatný as the new Health Minister, and he officially took over on Oct. 29.

TABLE 3 | Results of the content analysis.

Relevant results of the content analysis (in % of total photos)					
March	—	%	Sept and Oct	—	%
Themes	Calming	12.90%	Themes	Non-pandemic	13.90%
	Long hours	14.50%		Foreign partnerships	12.50%
	Non-pandemic	16.10%		The EU	9.70%
	Foreign partnership	17.70%		—	—
	Press conference	14.50%		—	—
Location	Strakovka (Office of Government)	37.10%	Location	Strakovka	33.30%
	Airports	12.90%		Airports	19.40%
	Warehouse	6.40%		Brussels	25.00%
	Prague Castle	6.40%		—	—
	Overlooking Prague	6.40%		—	—
People in the photos	Babiš alone	30.10%	People in the photos	Babiš alone	38.90%
	Unnamed coworkers	24.10%		Unnamed coworkers	19.40%
	Blue-collar workers	11.20%		Military officials	8.30%
	Karel Havlíček (Minister of the Economy)	11.20%		Health Minister Roman Prymula	5.50%
	President Miloš Zeman	6.40%		—	—
	Health Minister Adam Vojtěch	6.40%		—	—
Props	Full suit and tie	45.10%	Props	Full suit and tie	59.70%
	Face covering (any type of mask)	35.40%		Respirator	51.30%
	Surgical mask (specifically)	21.00%		Messy desk	27.80%
	Messy desk	14.50%		Glasses	27.80%
	Suit, no tie	12.90%		Video conferencing screen	26.40%
	Video conferencing screen	12.90%		—	—

After that, the government remained a constant object of criticism and mistrust, and the Ministry of Health fell to ridicule, as Blatný's eventual replacement, Petr Arenberger, lasted less than 2 months before resigning, only to be replaced by Adam Vojtěch in May 2021. The epidemic remained out of control for months after Prymula's resignation. From the beginning of November 2020 until the spring of 2021, the country went into and out of strict lockdown measures, and Babiš and his government received criticism for confusing guidelines and for not being willing to fully shut down activity. The series of lockdowns, fluctuating between looser and stricter, did not soon result in an improved epidemic situation overall. In early 2021, the Czech Republic was among the worst in Europe in terms of cases per 100,000 inhabitants (as of Jan 13, 1119/100,000) and deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (as of Jan 13, 15.58/100,000).

While the health system has so far been able to maintain the capacity to treat all COVID patients, there were concerns about the number of front-line health care professionals catching COVID. A further problem is the rise of disinformation, resistance to mask wearing, and conspiracy theories regarding the vaccine. The government received media criticism for failing to adequately communicate with the public early about the vaccine, which may have been one cause of the vaccine hesitancy now circulating online (Kabrhelová 2021). Overall, Babiš has ended up in a very unpopular position due to his government's handling of the pandemic and to the perception—which he promotes—that he is ultimately in control. While he and his government received praise after handling the first wave, and his ANO party received its highest level of support in 6 years, 2020 ended with support for Babis and ANO slipping in favor of the opposition parties (Vachtl 2020), with the parliamentary elections coming up in October 2021.

The rest of the data and analysis will focus on the key inflection points gathered from this timeline: the initial imposition of control in March at the beginning of the first wave and then the attempted reimposition of control in September/October at the beginning of the second wave. These were the moments during which the situation was most in flux and therefore direction and expertise from the prime minister would have been the most in-demand. They were also the points at which the pandemic was the main, if not the only, focus of the news, and therefore also of Babiš' Facebook feed.

The Results of the Content and Dramaturgical Analysis

Table 3 shows the key results of the content analysis, which I will divide into the March and the September/October data sets.

The March Data

In the March data, five themes turned up significantly more than any others. Eight posts (12.9%) offered a calming message, for example a photo taken at a warehouse full of food on March 13, when the trend of panic buying was spreading across the globe. Nine posts (14.5%) included a press conference. Nine posts (14.5%) emphasized Babiš' long working hours, either through explicit mention or through the time when they were posted. 10 posts (16.1%) centered non-pandemic related themes, but the last of these was posted on March 11—1 day prior to the crisis onset. The most prominent theme among those categorized was foreign

partnership, with 11 posts (17.7%) featuring this theme. Within this category, four foreign partners came up: the European Union (four posts, 6.4%), China (three posts, 4.8%), Russia (two posts, 3.2%), and the Višegrad 4 (two posts, 3.2%).

The location category was less varied. 23 posts—over a third, or 37.1%, of the whole March set—were taken at Strakovka, the Office of Government, where Babiš' main office is located. These included, for example, photos taken in Babiš' office and photos taken at the main press conference area. The only other prominent location category was airports, with eight posts (12.9%); these posts documented the cases in which the Czech Republic received medical material from abroad (namely from Russia and China). Finally, there were four photos (6.4%) each at a warehouse, at Prague Castle, and overlooking Prague.

In the category of people in the photos, 19 photos (30.1%) featured Babiš alone. In the photos either of Babiš with other people or other people without Babiš, the group of people most frequently present were non-recognizable figures who appeared to be aides or people who Babiš was meeting with; 15 photos (24.1%) included this category of people. Another seven photos (11.2%) included blue-collar workers, for example airport or warehouse workers. The only public figure who showed up frequently was Karel Havlíček, the Minister of the Economy, who appeared in seven photos (11.2%). President Miloš Zeman and Health Minister Adam Vojtěch appeared in four photos (6.4%) each.

The props coding category was varied, including both Babiš' clothing and the items that surrounded him in the photos. By far the most frequently occurring prop was a particular outfit: a full suit, including a tie, which showed up in 28 photos (45.1%). The second most common prop was a surgical mask, which appeared in 13 photos (21.0%), although in total some type of mask (whether a surgical mask, cloth mask, or respirator) appeared in 22 photos (35.4%). There were three other prominent props: Babiš desk, always strewn with papers, appeared in nine photos (14.5%); he was wearing a suit with no tie in eight photos (12.9%); and a video conferencing screen appeared in eight photos (12.9%). Based on this analysis, a representative post from the March data set would be taken at Strakovka (the Czech Office of Government) with Babiš alone, wearing a suit and possibly also a mask, and the post would thematize either a foreign partnership, emphasis on Babiš' long working hours, or a press conference.

The September/October Data

The data from Babiš' Facebook in September and October showed much less variation. Thematically, the posts were much less defined than the March data. Many posts simply involved Babiš in his office during normal working hours, which often did not specify what he was working on or even emphasize long working hours, a pronounced theme in the March data. The most pronounced themes in this data set were explicitly non-virus business (10 posts, 13.9%), foreign partnerships (9 posts, 12.5%), and the EU (7 posts, 9.7%). This, however, left the majority of posts uncategorized according to the framework developed during the initial analysis of the March data.

Similar locations to those in March showed up in the September and October data, however. There were 14 posts (19.4%)) at an airport, although in this dataset they portrayed Babiš himself in transit rather than him meeting shipments of medical material on the tarmac. A further 18 posts (25.0%) came from when he was in Brussels for EU meetings. However, by far the most frequently occurring location was Strakovka, with 24 posts (33.3%), including 18 posts (25.0%) within that category of photos specifically from Babiš' office.

There was also very little variation in terms of who turned up in the photos. Babiš was pictured alone in 28 posts (38.9%), by far the most prevalent category. There were 14 posts (19.4%) featuring unnamed or unrecognizable officials or coworkers, most of them appearing alongside Babiš. There were another six posts (8.3%) featuring military officials. The only recognizable public figure who appeared in more than one post was Roman Prymula, who was named the health minister on Sept. 21, but he was only pictured four times (5.5%) in this dataset.

The props category, however, presented a larger collection of prominent objects than any of the previous categories in this dataset. The object that turned up the most was Babiš' fancy suit, which appeared in 43 posts (59.7% of the total posts). The second most frequently occurring item was a respirator, which was present in 37 photos (51.3% of the total posts). Babiš' desk strewn with papers and his glasses both appeared in 20 posts (27.8% of the posts), and immediately following those was the video conferencing screen, in 19 photos (26.4% of all posts). From this analysis, a representative post from the Sept-Oct data would be uncategorized by theme and would feature Babiš alone in Strakovka, wearing a fancy suit. There would also be a respirator in the photo and it could contain some combination of the following props: the desk covered in papers, Babiš' glasses, and the video-conferencing screen. Based on the qualitative content analysis of the full dataset, the next section will now report the results of the dramaturgical analysis of four representative photos, two from each period. The overall results of the dramaturgical analysis can be found in the following **Table 4**.

Representative Photo #1: March 17, 2020

This post (**Figure 1**) is representative of the March dataset in that the location is Stromovka (evident both from the location tag and the photo in the background to Babiš' left), Babiš is pictured alone, he is wearing a full suit and a surgical mask, and it was taken during a press conference. Given that the date is March 17, less than 1 week after he declared the state of emergency, there is no need to specify the theme of the press conference. Beginning with Hendricks et al.'s rubric, we turn first to the scripting of the post. The main and only visible character in the post is Babiš himself, and the central narrative is that Babiš is informing the public about the government's discussion on the COVID-19 crisis. Due to the photo angle, it is conceivable that Babiš is the only government official taking part in this press conference, which gives him a leading role in both combatting the crisis (because he was at the meeting) and informing the public about the crisis (because he is the one speaking about it). The imagined audience is twofold: because it was posted to Facebook, the audience is Babiš' followers on Facebook; however, the media

TABLE 4 | Results of the dramaturgical analysis.

Dimension	Definition and questions	Photo #1	Photo #2	Photo #3	Photo #4
Scripting	"What is the central narrative?"	Babiš alone, informing the public about the pandemic	Babiš engaging in the international Višegrad 4 partnership	Positive narrative of Babiš working with an external group	Intragovernmental cooperation between national and regional levels, led by Babiš
	"Who are cast as the main characters and what role do they play in the performance?"	Babiš is the main and only character, the "hero" in charge	Babiš, busily working and engaged; Matovič, taking part in discussion	Babiš engaged in the meeting with a lot going on; faces of those in the meeting obscured	Babiš, as the only character without his face obscured; he is listening and focusing
	"Who is the imagined audience?"	Facebook, media professionals	Only Facebook	Only Facebook	Only Facebook
	"How do Facebook commenters respond to the scripting and staging of the post?"	Mostly buried under criticism re: mask availability	Mostly ignored	Mostly ignored	Heavily discussed, both supported and criticized
Staging	"Who manages the performance?"	Babiš/photographer	Babiš/photographer	Babiš/photographer	Babiš/photographer
	"What role do they play on the stage (center or backstage)?"	Babiš center, photographer behind the camera	Babiš: on the sideline; photographer behind the camera	Babiš, seen from behind and in profile; photographer behind the camera	Babiš seen in profile; the work is centered
	"What props, images, and sounds are used and how?"	Suit and tie, podium, flags, backdrop: place Babiš in a position of government leadership; mask: indicates crisis, incites angry reaction	Suit; surroundings indicate government power and elite status; video conference screen as a status symbol; mask indicates crisis	Props showing hard work: papers, tablet, video conference, drinks on the table; crisis indicated in respirator and hand sanitizer	Props creating hard work: papers, glasses, drinks, tablet, video conference' crisis indicated in respirator and hand sanitizer

FIGURE 1 | Representative photo #1. Caption: "Presser after a meeting of the government." (Babiš, 2020a, March 17, 2020).

professionals present at or otherwise watching the press conference are the implied audience to the scene portrayed in the photo. Turning to the staging of the post, the manager can be seen as either the photographer, whose perspective is the same as the audience at the press conference, or as Babiš, who takes ownership of the post as a whole by putting it up through is Facebook account; this result is the same for each of the representative photos. Babiš in effect controls the choice of photo and the choice of what information goes into the caption, because both go out in his name, regardless of whether he has a social media team actually making those decisions. In this sense, Babiš is both the central character of the post and its manager. Many of the props in this post all point to a position of leadership: the full suit and tie, the uniform of power both in government and in the private sector; the press conference podium, which confirms that the person in the photo is trusted enough to speak to the public; and the flags behind Babiš, which sediment him in a position of government power rather than simply managerial power. The position of the flags mean that Babiš is visually backed by both the Czech Republic and the EU.

The one additional notable prop is the surgical mask, which communicates the crisis and which was, in effect, the main symbol of the Czech first wave. At the point when Babiš put up this post, masks were required anywhere outside of the home for the country's entire population, but at the same time, there was also a shortage of PPE that was affecting both health care workers and the rest of the population alike; this resulted in the grassroots movement of people sewing masks for each other. Delving into the comments on the post, it immediately becomes evident that this issue of mask availability took much of the focus away from the central narrative of Babiš in control. While some of his apparent supporters left positive comments thanking him, for example, for his work as prime minister and for leading by example, the majority of the "most relevant" comments that Facebook displays are from people criticizing Babiš for giving himself access to surgical mask after having made the mistake of not being able to provide them for the rest of the country. Both sides of this, however, do grant Babiš control over the situation. From his supporters, Babiš receives full credit for leading the country in crisis; from his detractors, he receives full blame for not ensuring an adequate supply of masks. Moving outwards to the question of front stage vs. backstage, this photo represents the front stage of politics. There is nothing intimate or revealing about a photo from a press conference; in fact, this photo could have appeared just as easily in the mainstream media, representatives of which were surely present when it was taken. Rather than constituting authenticity, photos such as this one contribute to the constitution of Babiš, previously the CEO in charge of a company, as Babiš, now the government official in charge of a country.

Representative Photo #2: March 26, 2020

The next representative photo (**Figure 2**) comes from Babiš' office on March 26, 2020. Beginning with the scripting, the central narrative is about Babiš engaging in the regional Višegrad 4 (V4) partnership. The photo leaves out two of the V4 partners—Hungary and Poland—and thus leaves Babiš, the main character, alone with Igor Matovič, the then-prime minister of Slovakia, as the supporting character. Slovakia, having once belonged to the same country as the Czech Republic, is still regarded as a "brother nation" of sorts, far more so than Hungary or Poland. The imagined audience is solely on Facebook; the empty table and empty space surrounding Babiš implies that no one is in the meeting besides him and the other country leaders. While the audience does not learn anything about the content of the meeting, the framing of the photo suggests that the audience on Facebook is getting a behind the scenes look. In terms of staging, the photographer is backstage—literally behind Babiš—even Babiš himself is not centered in the photo. Instead, he is across from Matovič, and while Matovič is farther away from the audience's perspective, the angle of the shot puts his face in the picture instead of Babiš'. The audience reaction in the comment section, then, is quite mixed on this photo, with very few of the top comments referring to the meeting. While some commentors congratulate Babiš on an unspecified job well done, others criticize him on various fronts: for wearing a mask while alone in a room, for ignoring "Greece and the new wave of migration," for not having a plan to address the crisis.

Two props show up in both photos: the full suit and the surgical mask. Babiš' surroundings are a key difference, however. The trappings of government still appear in the photo: the Slovak and EU flags in the video, and the Czech coat of arms and portrait of Czech president Miloš Zeman on the wall. The photo does not come from a public space, though, but rather from Babiš' office in Strakovka, which would not necessarily be recognizable to viewers if the post did not include a location tag (although regular followers of his account would most likely find it familiar, because it shows up in so many of his posts). Looking around the office, though, it contains symbols of power that would be applicable in both the government and corporate realm, like Babiš' suit, the polished wood table with matching chairs, the chandelier, and the video conferencing screen. The less formal elements of the scene, then, are the papers in front of Babiš on the table and his hunched posture. These less formal elements in particular place this photo in the backstage category. Babiš gives an "authentic" look backstage through the framing of the photo, which does not appear to be posed, and which visually centers the work in front of Babiš (the papers and the conversation with Matovič) rather than himself. It shows Babiš ignoring the publicity while visibly focusing on the work—even his line of sight appears to be directed at his papers.

Representative Photo 3: October 14, 2020

The first photo (**Figure 3**) from the September-October dataset takes us back to the same location: Andrej Babiš' office in Strakovka. Babiš is once again the central character, as the photo offers a clear view of neither the names nor faces of the people on the video conferencing screen. The imagined audience is once again Babiš' Facebook followers, although in this case the possibility remains that he is not alone in the office. There are at least two potential central narratives here. For those who know that the Change for the Better group aims to work towards "a restart of the Czech economy," then the narrative lies in Babiš working with an external group to better the Czech Republic

FIGURE 2 | Representative photo #2. Caption: "V4 meeting" (Babiš, 2020b, March 26, 2020).

economically speaking. Those who do not recognize the group, though, will still grasp a generally positive narrative of Babiš working with an external group to help the country somehow. As was the case with the previous photos, the scripting and the narrative do not form the basis of the discussion in the comment section, which instead consists of a mix of his supporters defending him and pledging their support and his detractors offering unrelated criticism. In this case, though, several of the top comments included plays on the name of the external group, like "A change for the better will happen when you resign. Don't draw it out!."

In this photo, the government-related props are almost entirely absent, leaving instead the image of a busy and important person. Props like the papers on the table, the video conference (which takes up a significant portion of the space available in the photo), the tablet computer on the table, and the tea pot and water jugs together all create the impression that the meeting is a long and important one, requiring preparation work (the papers) and not allowing time for breaks (the drinks). The crisis is also present in the photo, though, through the respirator that Babiš is wearing and what appears to be hand sanitizer or another sanitizing spray on the table. This is another backstage photo, giving followers a glimpse into a private meeting between Babiš and the Change for the Better group. Through a photo like this, followers can see his modus operandi at work in, for example, the fact that he prepares for a virtual meeting with physical papers and still uses a tablet. Even this backstage shot, however, still displays a sense of grandeur through the chandelier overhead.

Representative Photo #4: October 14b

This photo (**Figure 4**) contains many clear visual similarities with the previous one, which was taken on the same day. Instead of external cooperation, this narrative is of intragovernmental cooperation between the national and regional levels. While the central narrative of the previous photo left the crisis out, viewers would most likely understand it to be implied here; Babiš posted this photo the day after announcing a new, restrictive set of regulations, at a time when cases were rapidly rising. Babiš is once again the main character, with the blurred pictures of the governors in the background as the supporting characters. He plays a leading role, both visually and through his position, which is literally above the governor level. As this is another backstage photo, Babiš' followers on Facebook are the audience again. Babiš and the photographer manage the photo again, and again Babiš is in a central position, although he is giving attention to

FIGURE 3 | Representative photo #3. Caption: "Videocall with the Change for the Better group" (Babiš, 2020c October 14a 2020).

the meeting at hand rather than the photo. In the comment section, where the usual mix of his supporters and detractors turn up, various threads of the central narrative do appear repeatedly. Some congratulate him on his handling of the pandemic, others criticize it; some point out ANO was not able to win many of the regional governorships; still others make specious claims about the pandemic and how the new restrictions are unnecessary, because, for example, "it's just another flu."

Because this is also a post involving the regional governors, then, Babiš can be seen as the manager on multiple levels, as it is expected that he would be running the meeting in addition to running his Facebook page. The props are very similar to the previous photo, constituting Babiš as a busy man hard at work; this photo additionally shows a pen and a pair of glasses, both tools indicating focus. The crisis is also present again in the props, with the respirator and sanitizer. The visual governmental props are also absent from this photo, but the caption makes it clear that the post focuses on government business. Finally, this photo is also similar to the previous one in that it gives a backstage view of running the state like a firm. Again, followers can see an "authentic" look at how Babiš works with some of his most important governing partners, a glimpse into a meeting that may have been reported on later but which was evidently not open to the public, if it took place in Babiš' office. While the photo still displays symbols of wealth and power, like the designer glasses and the video conference screen, there are also displays of Babiš' personal imperfections—again, the glasses.

Overall Results of the Dramaturgical Analysis

Each of the representative photos includes several of the visual elements of the technocratic bodily performance. Babiš is wearing a suit in every photo, and all of them are the same neutral, dark grey color. There is no obvious change in his hair, which is just a simple, short cut. In addition to wearing the business suit as a uniform of power and expertise, the pictures also show Babiš in settings that communicate a similar message: the press conference and his elegantly appointed office. The designer glasses are a present, yet subtle, status symbol connected to Babiš' bodily performance; they are also a display of a personal imperfection. Babiš' technocratic performance in this set of representative photos, then, is nearly exactly as expected.

We now turn to how, as a technocratic populist, Babiš visually performs authenticity as an embodiment of the people within this technocratic bodily performance. Three of the four representative photos did fit the hypothesis that this authenticity would be based on backstage visuals showing Babiš as a hard worker. The first photo, which shows Babiš at a press conference, is strictly a front

FIGURE 4 | Representative photo #4. Caption: "Videocall with the regional governors right now" (Babiš, 2020d, October 14b 2020).

stage image; nothing about it fits the criteria of authenticity, besides the fact that it helps to build up the quality of consistency when viewed along with the rest of the visual posts that show how Babiš spent the entire working day. The other three photos, however, show Babiš in backstage settings in terms of both the content of the image and the staging. All three of them show him in exactly the same place: in his office, at a big table covered with papers, having a virtual meeting on the big screen. They also all show him at non-frontal angles, with the photographer positioned either behind or to the side of him, and in none of these cases is he actually looking at the camera. This creates the impression that the audience is getting special access to the backstage side of expertise, or the work that goes on behind the scenes in order for the expertise to come about. This, we are led to believe, is what it looks like and what actually goes into running the state as a firm.

The three backstage photos also come together to constitute Babiš as a rather disorganized person, who works from papers strewn across a table even during a video call. His desk is always shown as a busy, full space, creating the impression of ongoing work that requires a great deal of information and access for it to happen. Rather than maintaining a bodily 'backstage' performance of an unkempt or ethnically particular populist leader, Babiš' disorganization bleeds into his working style, which he makes visible through these photos. While there were photos in the dataset that showed him wearing less formal attire, for example a shirt without a jacket or a sweater, the full suit appeared in far more of the photos. By combining the technocratic bodily performance with the images of disorganized work, Babiš was able to both create a veneer of transparency and authenticity linking him to the people while also not dropping the technocratic performance nor the appearance of expertise.

This performance of the hard worker did not, however, include posts showing Babiš working exceptionally long hours. This would be very easy to achieve on Facebook, simply by posting photos of Babiš working late in the evening or on weekends. While there were posts in the dataset that did thematize long working hours, though, none of these representative photos did so. On the contrary, they were all posted on weekdays during normal daytime hours, and they all show Babiš working with other people during the working day rather than on his own at times when other people would not be expected to be working.

The representative photos did show Babiš surrounded by a series of status symbols, however. They reveal that Babiš has access to technology that many people working from home would never be able to own—the combination of the big screen and the tablet, not to mention the formal office surroundings, such as the furniture and the chandelier. While there is nothing physically on

TABLE 5 | Babiš' technocratic bodily performance and performance of authenticity.

Technocratic bodily performance (Casullo 2020a)	Babiš' bodily performance	Hypothesized technocratic populist backstage performance of authenticity	Babiš' backstage performance of authenticity
Cosmopolitan symbols of power and expertise	Yes: surroundings, attire, accessories (glasses)	Elements signifying hard work	Yes: messy desk, drinks on the table
Business suits	Yes	Imagery from "behind the scenes"	Yes: photos in his office, in private meetings
Neutral colors	Yes	Evidence of long working hours	No
Simple hairstyle	Yes	Status symbols in the form of tools for work	Yes: video conference screen, table, fancy surroundings
Lack of status symbols	Yes		

Babiš' body that differentiates him from his followers as Chavez's Rolex did for him (Salojärvi 2020), the location and surroundings of Babiš' body in these representative images serve the same function without interfering with the performance of technocracy. He occupies an elite space while still keeping a distance between his physical body and that space. The technology used in a work environment also contributes to the performance of the hard-working technocrat, particularly in the context of the COVID crisis. By holding these meetings virtually and posting photos of them, Babiš was in effect posting reminders both of the ongoing crisis and the fact that he was working to address it; the same can be said for the masks, respirators, and hand sanitizer that appear in the photos as well. While the specific content of the press conference and each of these meetings remains unsaid, the presence of the pandemic-safe elements like the virtual meeting and the face coverings leave open the possibility—and indeed suggestion—that the pandemic is in fact the topic of discussion.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I analyzed Andrej Babiš' visual performance of technocratic populist expertise during the COVID-19 crisis in order to explore how a technocratic bodily performance could be combined with backstage imagery (Salojärvi 2020) in order to maintain a link to "the people" in a uniquely technocratic populist way. It found that Babiš did align himself with Casullo (2020a) conception of a technocratic bodily performance in terms of the cosmopolitan symbols of power and expertise, business suits, neutral colors, simple hairstyle, and lack of status symbols actually connected to his body, but that these elements leave out the potential visual articulations appearing in his surroundings. Understanding a performance of expertise to include not only the actor's body, but also their actions, requires a broader look at what appears around them, and this study found that the backstage elements of Babiš' performance did appear around him rather than connected to him. Whereas departing from Casullo's technocratic bodily performance could have inhibited the performance of expertise that made technocratic populists so appealing early in the COVID-19 crisis (Guasti & Buštíková 2020), including backstage imagery as Babiš' surroundings positioned him as both a technocratic expert and an exceptionally hard worker (see **Table 5**).

This study found that the main backstage imagery appearing in Babiš' visual performance included behind-the-scenes locations, disorganized working spaces, and non-bodily status symbols. The behind-the-scenes backdrop of his office contributed to the performance of transparency and authenticity that is so important for populist leaders (Salojärvi 2020); the photos visually removed the barriers between Babiš' private working space and the public, offering the perception of access and availability. This can be seen as analogous to other populist leaders such as Chavez bringing their bodies—and thus their populist movements, which they embody—into large groups of "the people," (Casullo 2018) but in the reverse. Rather than going out to meet his supporters, Babiš brings "the people" into the seat of power along with him by so frequently publishing pictures of himself there. The disorganized nature of Babiš work, then, serves a similar function as Timo Soini's greasy hair or football scarves, as an example of "bad manners" (Moffitt 2016) linking him to "the low." Instead of impinging on his impeccable performance of technocratic expertise, however, a disorganized workspace full of papers and drinks is a recognizable signifier of hard and prolonged work. It assures followers that Babiš' is exercising his expertise and treating the situation with an adequate level of urgency, while at the same time we can regard his technocratic bodily performance as assurance that he has the situation under control. Without the signifiers of active work, the performance of expertise alone might not actually contribute to the perception that Babiš was engaged in solving the problem. At the same time, the disorganization also lends Babiš some relatability and ordinariness, one of the elements that contributes to political authenticity (Luebke, 2020).

Babiš' photos also included articulations of the ever-present crisis, another key element of the populist style (Moffitt 2016), in the form of the masks, respirators, hand sanitizer, and to some extent even video conference screen. This remained the case even when it was not strictly necessary, as several Facebook commentators noted regarding his use of a respirator while he was alone in his office. However, in three of the four photos, the crisis was only present, rather than centered; the photos articulated crisis amidst expertise, rather than vice versa. Once again, this contributed to the melding of a technocratic performance with a populist performance. This particular crisis, however, provided the additional opportunity for crisis to become an element of Babiš' bodily performance, as the most visible signifiers of the crisis were the masks and respirators that Babiš was wearing. In this way he was able to perform the crisis,

while at the same time performing, and placing himself in the middle of, its remedy. This could also have contributed to the technocratic populist appeal during the pandemic (Guasti & Buštíková 2020), and this finding also opens the door for further research to explore how technocratic populists articulate crisis in the absence of a genuine public health crisis.

Notably, the technocratic populist actions during a crisis that Buštíková and Baboš (2020) found of bypassing established an institutionalized methods of crisis response, erratic policy making, and politicizing and weaponizing medical expertise were not at all evident from Babiš' visual performance. This highlights the importance of research that views politics through a performative lens, as it offers another explanation of how a technocratic populist might be able to step into the empty space of power in order to take those actions. His visual performance does, however, exemplify another result of technocratic populism: the sidelining of the opposition and thus the degradation of democracy at the hands of technocratic expertise (Havlík 2019; Guasti 2020a; Guasti & Buštíková 2020). Babiš was physically alone in all of the photos, and the other participants in the virtual meetings came from either outside of government or outside of the Czech Republic. The photos thus articulated him as the sole individual responsible for the Czech COVID-19 response and the only person capable of crafting it. Strategically, this may not have been the best choice, as Babiš' poll numbers never fully recovered to their highs from before pandemic, and the center-right SPOLU coalition ended up narrowly beating ANO in the fall 2021 parliamentary elections. There are manifold reasons for this defeat at the polls, likely including Babiš' appearance in the Pandora papers, which were published a week before the election, and the resulting fallout, which has included multiple investigations into his finances and transactions (Alecci 2021). While time and further research will be necessary to explore this potential connection, performing full responsibility for a crisis response so widely perceived (and experienced) as a failure could have contributed to ending Babiš' tenure as prime minister.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Performing control in the Swedish Twitter sphere or: How a 1920s' Russian linguist helps us understand dynamics of digital authority

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Social media has created new public spheres that provide alternative sources of social and political authority. Such "digital authority" has conventionally been interpreted in metric terms, without qualitative distinctions. Based on Twitter data from four different Swedish state agencies during the first 15 months of the COVID-19 crisis, this paper looks at the different kinds of modes of interaction Twitter enables and their impact on state agencies digital authority. Theoretically this paper applies Valentin Voloshinov's classical theory on reported speech, developed in the 1920s, to the concept of digital authority in the Twitter-sphere of the 2020s. Besides these theoretical contributions to media and communication studies, the main findings are that retweets are generally used to affirm and spread information thus strengthening the digital authority of the origin of the tweet whilst replies and quote-tweets are used to undermine the credibility of the sender and the content of the original tweet, often by resorting to irony. As the COVID-19 crisis prolongs, we observe increasing share of critical commentary and diminishing overall attention to government actors in Sweden. The roles of different state agencies are mirrored by the type of interaction they generate. This article also shows the usefulness of qualitative study of social media interaction in order to reveal the dynamics of digital authority construed in social media.

KEYWORDS

COVID, crisis communication, digital authority, Sweden, Twitter, Voloshinov, reported speech

Introduction

Crises, such as those that arose from and were performed against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, call for leadership (Alexander, 2015; Brubaker, 2021). German conceptual historian Koselleck saw in the concept of crisis a breach in the temporary flow of things (Koselleck, 2006). Indeed, the word crisis etymologically refers to a radical opening in the normal way of life, requiring decisions concerning the future course of action (Kornberger et al., 2019). Crisis situations provide opportunities for state agencies to pool power and gain authority.

But while crises certainly tend to increase the support for incumbents (Murray, 2017), efficient crisis management does not necessarily require centralized leadership. In Sweden, with its long history of decentralized governance, a distribution of power as well as a "scientization of politics" are considered desirable during crises (Jacobsson et al., 2015; Eyal, 2019, p. 97). In fact, much of the alleged Swedish exceptionalism during the COVID-19 pandemic can be traced back to a system of crisis management that emphasizes the role of politically independent experts and legal circumstances that favor voluntary recommendations over legally sanctioned measures (Baldwin, 2020; Ludvigsson, 2020; Pierre, 2020).[1] Historically, the reliance on recommendations and voluntary compliance, rather than rules and laws, has led to—and was in turn made possible by—high levels of trust in government agencies among the population (Rothstein, 2002; Esaiasson et al., 2021). However, there are indications that this universal trust is becoming brittle, at least amongst those in vulnerable socio-economic positions (Holmberg and Rothstein, 2020, p. 10; Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall, 2021).

Sweden's decentralized governance gives crisis communication a central position in the everyday experience of legitimate state authority and leadership during periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, two of the agencies responsible for the pandemic policies have their primary task as communication (Krisinformation) and coordination (MSB). In this context, the increasing role of social media has arguably changed how authority is experienced and reacted to Kornberger et al. (2018) and Turunen and Weinryb (2020). A digital public space has emerged that needs to be reckoned with in its own right (Bernard, 2019; Casero-Ripollés, 2021). Gortitz et al. (2020) argue that an analysis of political authority of leadership in modern societies must consider the "digital authority" of respective state agencies. They take the amount of interaction different actors can elicit as an indicator of digital authority. Following Valentin Voloshinov's theory of different forms of reported speech [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930)],[2] we contest this merely quantitative definition and argue in the following that not all types of (Twitter) interaction indicate digital authority. Some forms convey and create distrust, pointing toward a contest between more established legal-rational and change-seeking charismatic types of authority in the sense of Weber's (2019) typology.

The objective of this article is four-fold. First, to provide a more elaborated concept of digital authority. Second, to analyse how this authority has evolved in Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, to appraise what effects different forms of Twitter interaction have on digital state authority. Four, to discuss the implication of a more qualitative understanding of digital authority, especially regarding the legal-rational foundations of a modern state.

Our explorative case study (Yin, 2003) examines these questions by analyzing the Twitter communication of government agencies tasked with dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The analyzed data covers the period from January 2020 to March 2021 and includes the two first waves of COVID-19 in Sweden. During these waves, vaccines were still not an option of pandemic management, and Sweden, like other countries, had to rely on conventional pandemic measures like social distancing and basic hygiene requiring discipline from the population, as well as clarity, precision and ultimately, authority, from the state agencies in their communication with society.

We will next discuss our dataset and methodological premises before turning to the concept of digital authority and how it is reflected in interaction on Twitter. Here, we will roll in Voloshinov's insights on reported speech that allow us to place Twitter's technological affordances into a socially meaningful context.

Methods and dataset

We look at the communication of four governmental Twitter accounts: (i) the Public Health Agency (*Folkhälsomyndigheten*, @Folkhalsomynd) tasked with the epidemiological information and policy, (ii) the Swedish Agency for Civil Contingencies (*Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredska*p, @MSBse) tasked with an overall coordination of crisis situation in Sweden, (iii) the Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*, @socialstyrelsen) tasked with the coordination of medical supplies and resources, and (iv) the web-platform Crisis Information (*Krisinformation*, @krisinformation) tasked with collecting and publicizing emergency information from Swedish authorities.

Our main dataset includes all tweets between 1.1.2020 and 31.3.2021 (a) that were sent by one of the four governmental accounts (including their retweets) and (b) that engage in direct interaction with those government accounts by including one of the account names with or without the @-sign. Altogether

1 Other observers have noted the lack of prior experiences of more serious societal crises (Häyry, 2021), political overreaction to the 2009 swine flu pandemic (Anderberg, 2021) as well as personal clout and convictions of key decision makers in the Public Health Agency (Andersson and Aylott, 2020).

2 There has been some doubt as to Voloshinov's real identity. Some authors, especially in the 1980s and 1990s have argued that Voloshinov is just Mikhail Bakhtin's alter ego. Especially Michael Holquist in *Dialogism. Bakhtin and His World* (1990) has championed this position. However, more recent research has supported separate identities of all Bakhtin circle scholars—Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Voloshinov, and Pavel Medvedev. For a detailed discussion, see Brandist, C. (2002). We do not deem it necessary to take part in this debate and accept the authorship of Voloshinov as it is stated in the book.

this yielded 166,692 tweets (285,329 with retweets). We have used Mecodify to collect the data (Al-Saqaf, 2016; Al-Saqaf and Berglez, 2022). We have not limited the search thematically, yet the vast majority of tweets in our dataset is related to COVID-19. As our focus lies on the interaction government agencies trigger, we focus on the tweets that were most retweeted, replied to, or quote-tweeted. While this still represents only a fragment of what has been said about the Corona crisis in the Swedish Twitter sphere, it enables us to conduct a more thorough analysis of the government channels' digital authority. It must, however, be pointed out that in Sweden, with about 2,5 million Twitter accounts, not even 50 tweets from the state agencies gained 100 or more retweets between January 2020 and March 2021. Moreover, of these tweets, 38 were posted during March and April 2020, i.e., during the initial period of the Corona crisis. As the crisis prolonged, the state agencies' accounts quickly lost their momentum.

The dataset has been used to investigate and unfold the dynamics of digital authority exercised by the state agencies. The dataset has been filtered for different parts of the analysis to focus on different kinds of interaction: retweeting, replying and quote-tweeting. We have also filtered the dataset to see how (and why) mentioning or naming government accounts function in relation to digital authority. We further focus in more detail on two specific peak periods: March–April 2020 as the beginning of the pandemic, and December 2020–January, 2021, coinciding with the second peak of COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden. Our approach to treat Twitter data is inspired partly by Fuchs (2018) qualitative study of selected Twitter accounts in order to shed light on a broader political phenomenon (populism) as well as Lindgren (2020) view of bringing classical sociological theory to pursue grounded theory inspired "deep dives" (Markham and Lindgren, 2014) into Twitter mediated social interaction. For Lindgren, the aim of social media analysis is not to confirm or verify social relationships with big amounts of data; rather he encourages researchers to think of actors and structures and their interplay in the big data.

The qualitative analysis was carried out as follows: the tweets were sorted by metrics of interaction and then read individually and coded according to Voloshinov's theory of reported speech (as described below), paying attention to what is the sequence of retweeting, replying or quote-tweeting.

Theory

Digital authority

Gortitz et al. (2020) talk about the concept of digital authority as an asymmetrical relationship. They draw on literature on global governance utilizing a notion of authority based on its legal sources and perceived expertise. Zürn, working on Weber's sociology of domination, calls this reflexive authority (Zürn, 2018). Reflexive authority emphasizes the continuous, interactive, construction of social contracts as the sources of Weberian rational-legal authority (Zürn, 2018; Weber, 2019). For Zürn, reflexive authority departs from the logics of appropriateness and consequentiality. The legitimacy of authority results from recognition of one's own limitations and an authority's perceived superior or impartial perspective. Zürn's conceptualization of reflexive authority in international relations is in line with Rosanvallon's claim that the domestic legitimacy of public authority "must be demonstrated *in practice*" (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 96). Both Zürn and Rosanvallon emphasize that authority should be studied as reflexive action not as a status or attribute. According to Zürn, most attempts to question reflexive authority do so on epistemological grounds, i.e., they do not question the actual facts in the "superior perspective" but rather question the foundations of the perspective, i.e., they decline to be reflexive in the sense of recognizing the limits in their own perspective (Zürn, 2018, p. 46).

Gortitz et al. turn this interactively constructed legitimacy into a digital authority which is based on recognition, enables influence, and is exercised in online social networks forming a "digital public sphere" (Gortitz et al., 2020, p. 6). Alongside expertise and moral authority, digital authority is an additional dimension of the *de facto* authority that correlates but is not identical with the *de jure* authority of public institutions (i.e., their formal legal position and power). Conceptualized in this manner, digital authority is not limited to official state bodies but can equally be acquired and exercised by private institutions and individuals. Indeed, most studies on digital authority focus on other than state actors. Digital authority is a factor that has the potential to support or weaken public actors (Casero-Ripolles, 2018; Dagoula, 2019).

Digital authority as a measure of control, or influence, over the digital public sphere is tied to the affordances of different social media platforms. Twitter has emerged as the primary networking tool in the political sphere (Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Jungherr, 2016; Gortitz et al., 2020; Casero-Ripollés, 2021) because users tend to have a public profile and because hashtags facilitate the emergence, identification, and visibility of public debates. Furthermore, it combines wide outreach to politically relevant accounts, online real time coverage of political events, as well as convenient and informal ways of interaction.

Digital authority focuses on the interactive dimension of social media platforms, more specifically on the number of times an account is the addressee of communication, or its message is shared by others (Gortitz et al., 2020; see also Maireder and Ausserhofer, 2013; Riquelme and Gonzalez-Cantergiani, 2016). Gortitz et al. operationalise digital authority as the sum of retweets, replies and mentions a tweet generates. Alternative ways of operationalisation of digital authority include, for instance, Casero-Ripollés (2021) focus on tweeters' eigencentrality, i.e., the Twitter account's connections in the

network. Yet, both rely on quantitative understanding of digital authority. Gortitz's et al. operationalisation, however, has the advantage of taking the *tweet* as the central unit of analysis, which also allows for the inclusion of the content of that tweet into the analysis of digital authority. Unfortunately, this potential is left unexplored by Gortitz et al. Their logic seems to be that all publicity is good publicity in stark contrast to Zürn's and Rosanvallon's account of reflexivity at the core of authority relations. In this article, we add to the metric-based view on digital authority a qualitative analysis of the content of the tweet in order to shed light on the dynamics of digital authority beyond mere mass of interaction. This should yield a better understanding of how social media interaction contributes to, or undermines, actors' authority in the digital public sphere.

Two observations especially support the suggested "qualitative turn" of an analysis of digital authority. First, different forms of Twitter interactions with government tweets and accounts (such as retweeting, replying, quoting or mentioning) indicate different relations to that authority. Thus, each form of interaction already contains an unpronounced qualitative dimension, determined by the specific logic of the applied social media. While approval or contestation both indicate the recognition of someone or something as an authority, continuing contestation may well have detrimental long-term effects to authority. Our longitudinal data covering the period from January 2020 to March 2021 allows us to study not only who is posited as an authority in the digital public sphere, but also how one's relationship to that authority evolves. Second, Gortitz's et al. study is based on data from global governance on climate change, and thus cannot be compared with a situation of an unfolding crisis. The differences in our data enable testing digital authority in a context of a crisis. As noted above, crisis situations are prone to rally people around the government, but how long does such an exogenous support for the government last? How do public authorities fare in the contest for digital authority—a dimension of authority they are clearly interested in, but cannot compete for under the same premises as non-government actors?

For Weber, legal-rational authority has an inbuilt tendency to flip to traditional or charismatic authority (Weber, 2019). Whilst traditional authority is prone to inertia, charismatic authority carries the potential of constant revolution. The question of how social media contributes to state agencies' digital authority in practice is not just a question of their digital performance, but also concerns the sources of potential change in the way public power is legitimated. As many studies indicate, social media favors individualized frames of reference (Bennet and Segerberg, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015; Gustafsson and Weinryb, 2020), which are not necessarily "reflexive" in the sense Zürn or Rosanvallon use the term. Basing the legitimacy of public authority on interaction may induce reflexive "subjugation" but also charismatic questioning of the legitimacy of public authorities.

Pairing Voloshinov and Twitter: Hashtags, retweets, quote-tweets, and replies as elements of reported speech

Going beyond social media as a network requires interpretation of both, the meaning of the tweet and the interaction around it. The affordances of Twitter encourage interaction that builds on other account's tweets: retweeting, quote-tweeting and replying; or recognition of another tweeter: mentioning. In linguistic terms, all these actions can be characterized, and will be analyzed by us, as different forms of reported speech [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930); Holt and Clift, 2007]. In addition to the intricacies of reported speech, we also need to understand the context in which such reporting takes place. This context can, in Twitter, be approached through hashtags and the abovementioned sequence of reported speech. Focusing on both, the more algorithmic, or automated, big data of hashtag dynamics and the more qualitative and human mediated acts of retweeting, quote-tweeting and replying we hope to tackle the structure and agent relations (Lindgren, 2020) in Twitter mediated digital authority.

Below we will discuss Voloshinov's theory on reported speech before moving on to look at how hashtags and different forms of interaction function in Twitter. The reason we prefer Voloshinov—writing in the 1920s—over more modern contributions is that Voloshinov's work on reported speech is foundational to this research field, and he was interested in the ideological and social contestation conveyed in reported speech (Coulmas, 1986; Holt and Clift, 2007). This suits our purposes to explore the dynamics of digital authority.

Interactivity of social media is central to its functioning but appears often undertheorised (Vitak, 2012; Georgakopoulou, 2017). In order to provide new insights on how interaction beyond network analyses can be studied, we turn to Russian theoretician of language Voloshinov and his inquiries into reported speech in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930). Succinctly, Voloshinov understood reported speech as "speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 115, italics in original]. Whilst the former refers to the borrowed, i.e., other person's content of the speech, the latter dimension refers to the structuring capacities of reported speech: it inevitably becomes a commentary and analysis of the content. Reported speech occurs in a triadic nexus between the original message, the context of the reporting about this original message and the audience to which this message included in the reported speech is addressed.

For Voloshinov, language represents power relations between its users. This originally Marxist premise has since become a standard paradigm in discourse studies and sociolinguistics. It allowed Voloshinov to argue that reported speech is always an active appropriation of another's speech,

which is then presented to the third person. The way in which both the speech is appropriated, and the reported speech is received, is conditional upon societal power relations reflected in language [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 117]. The reported speech, like any speech, is always addressed to someone and exists in a concrete context: "*Any utterance*, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, *is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication*. But that continuous verbal communication is, in turn, itself only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive, generative process of a given social collective" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 95, italics in original]. This places the act of reporting in a broader social continuum of power relations [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 96].

Reported speech requires grammatical complexity (Spronck and Nikitina, 2019). For instance, it involves deictic shifting (I *now* recall that John *yesterday* said that it would rain *today*), but also temporal incongruence (recall, said, would rain). Also, subordinate clauses (John yesterday said it would rain today) can become the main information bearers. The relationship between the act of reporting and the content that is reported is revealed by the grammatical choices. Grammatical complexity in other words reveals the ways in which speech is appropriated in a given social context.

Voloshinov distinguished between two socially relevant variants of reported speech: factual commentary and reply or retort. Whilst the former focuses on commenting on the factual content, the latter is a personally motivated evaluation, retort or *Gegenrede*, of that content. Although both are always present, one is usually dominant. Any analysis of the factual commentary or its retort is only possible against the background of the context in which the reported speech is invested, thus making the relevant unit of analysis that "dynamic interrelationship of these two factors, the speech being reported (the other person's speech) and the speech doing the reporting (the author's speech)" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930)), p. 119] in its social context of power relations.[3]

Voloshinov identified two basic directions as to how the interrelationship between the reported speech and the authorial speech develops. The first is to preserve the authenticity and distinctiveness of the reported speech. In this case, the focus lies on the content of what is being reported, and the speech is received as a holistic content with its own distinctive message and style. This type of reception is also possible if the original message is received as authoritative or dogmatic: "The more dogmatic an utterance, the less leeway permitted between truth and falsehood or good and bad in its reception by those who comprehend and evaluate, the greater will be the depersonalization that the forms of reported speech will undergo" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 120]. This coincides with requirements of reflexivity and subjugation to authority in Zürn's account of reflexive authority. The other dynamic focuses on the possibilities of reporting and reported speech infiltrating one another. This process normally takes impetus from the reporting context, permeating the reported speech with its own intonation such as humor, irony, or enthusiasm [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 121] effectively undermining the autonomy of the original speech. However, also the contrary is possible where the reported speech hijacks the reporting context diluting the authority and objectivity that are normally invested in the reporting context. For Voloshinov, "the dissolution of the authorial context testifies to a relativistic individualism in speech reception" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 122]. This coincides with attempts to contest authority.

Voloshinov argued that all speech is addressed to someone. Yet not seldom is it difficult to delineate that audience, especially in the case of social media. Voloshinov argued that the function of audience can be approached through the concept of "social audience" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 86], which refers to an internalized environment in which "reasons, motives, values and so on are fashioned" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 86]. This social audience affects the way utterances are formulated. Utterances are composed of words; a "*word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant. As a word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 86]. Because words have the capacity of acting as bridges between interlocutors, the utterance, made up of words, is a way to construe the linkage between the speaker and the audience. From this follows that the audience as a *posited* audience—we cannot know beforehand the "real" audience in Twitter (followers are just an indication) any more than we can control how our speech in practice is taken up by listeners—serves the purposes of constructing a desired identity of the speaker, bridging between the speaker and the posited audience. In other words, the posited social audience signals the evaluation of the utterance; or yet in another way: the posited social audience can be used as a signal of the identity of the speaker.

We will now move on to operationalise Voloshinov's theory on reported speech in the context of Twitter by looking at the different affordances of Twitter. Hashtag (#) as a user-generated keyword is the standard way of claiming a certain external, or "material" context and audience for the tweet. Keywords, in turn, can be understood as an authoritative system of classification of information as in library sciences. In this case, the information content determines which keyword should

3 To exemplify this point, reporting the speech "Well done! What an achievement!" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 128] cannot be done by simply repeating the words in a reported speech: "He said that well done and what an achievement" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 128]. Instead, to try to convey the meaning of the original speech, the reported speech must interpret its context and alter the message accordingly: "He said that that had been done very well and was a real achievement" [Voloshinov, 1973 (1930), p. 128]. Both cases show that reporting somebody's speech inevitably also introduces power relations into the act of reporting.

be assigned to best categorize it. On the other hand, keywords function as a means to condense the essence of an historical epoch or a political programme acquiring an emotional tag. Thus, hashtags are keywords that organize tweets as well as attach some with emotional and political charge as illustrated e.g., by #MeToo (Bernard, 2019, p. 38). The modern hashtag fuses these functions making it "an index and a slogan at the same time" (Bernard, 2019, p. 42). This double function of a hashtag brings along some far-reaching consequences. The indexing function of the hashtag "emancipates" the users to create his or her own public sphere and audience, but the slogan function subjects the hashtag to both the media logic and the affordances and algorithms that regulate the social media platform: while some hashtags succeed and become "trending," most fall into oblivion. This concerns not only the hashtags, but also the political identities created through the hashtag. In Twitter, using hashtags means taking part in the competition for attention of the social audience; opting out of hashtags is to claim alternative functions of tweets than that of the market logic.

Retweet means forwarding the message of another user to one's own account's followers and readers. Retweets can further be classified in two sub-categories, "pure retweet" and "quote-tweet." The former, hereafter "retweet," directly forwards the original message including any metrics concerning likes and further retweets. A retweet does not exist independently: if the original tweet is deleted, all retweets become deleted, too. A retweet also preserves the dynamics of the original tweet: any replies to retweets are passed on to the original Twitter account. Given these dynamics, retweets are generally seen as endorsements of the original tweet (Metaxas et al., 2015). This is even confirmed by the common label that "RTs (retweets) are not endorsements," which nevertheless does not annul the fact that retweets help the original tweet to gain broader audience and establish affirmative connection between the tweeter and the posited social audience.

A quote-tweet embeds another account's tweet in one's own tweet and allows one to comment on the original tweet. New context and content is added, and quote-tweet acquires grammatical complexity that reveals the ways in which the other's words are appropriated and what social structures come into play in this appropriation. For example, the content of the original tweet can be explicitly endorsed or rejected (including an explanation why), but also criticized, ridiculed, or acclaimed. Most importantly, the quote-tweet becomes "independent;" it can be retweeted as described above, and even a deletion of the original tweet will leave it intact—in a Voloshinovian understanding it has been appropriated as reported speech in a new utterance. In a reply to such a quote-tweet, the author of the original tweet will not be added automatically (Also, you will be able to see the metrics of the quote-tweet, in contrast to a pure retweet). A quote-tweet is removed from the original context and new content may be inscribed to it. Its audience has become unspecified, reflecting the posited social audience of the new tweeter. Like in the first case, the quote-tweet seeks to construe a specific identity of the speaker, this time by exercising control over the meaning of the original tweet, sometimes for the speaker's own advantage.[4]

A reply is an answer to a tweet. It automatically addresses the author of the tweet, but also any other twitter handle (username) mentioned in it (further usernames can be added manually). The audience of a reply is by default thus the same as that of the tweet replied to, but it will also appear in the newsfeed of those following the replying account. In the Twitter timeline, replies are visually placed under the tweet they refer to. Replies to replies (and replies to those) are possible. A quote tweet allows for addressing one's own followers, whilst when reaching out to someone else's audience, a reply is the better option. A reply thus has the function of through appropriation of the tweet to place it in a new context in front of the original addressees.[5]

The last case, mentions, differ from the above-described forms of interaction, because, if placed manually (and not automatically, as in a reply), they do not refer to a specific tweet but to an account/user. By including one or several usernames in the tweet one can address somebody publicly, like an open letter. The mentioning ensures that the mentioned user will see your tweet in his/her notifications, and that your own followers understand to whom your tweet is directed (other users will see such mentioning only if they search for them).

All forms of interaction described above—retweets, quote-tweets, replies and mentions—make a distinction between the original content of the tweet and its originator and the commentary layer of meaning brought about by reporting this content. For example, applying Voloshinov's terminology of utterance we can see that a pure retweet has the purpose of conveying an authoritative message to the audience—and thereby with the help of the posited audience, construe a

4 Here we would briefly like to mention another subcategory, which evolved due to certain mechanisms on Twitter. A quote-tweet further distributes the original tweet and addresses/informs the originator, even if the framing has changed. Often this is intended, although for a various number of reasons. Sometimes, however, neither any interaction with the original tweeter nor the further distribution of his/her tweet (beyond the own followers) may be desirable. The "screenshot quote-tweet" provides a solution. It is technically an original tweet, that includes the image of another tweet which most often is critical, negative, scornful, and avoids spreading the message of the original tweeter, even excludes him/her from the conversation, and is directed to one's own followers.

5 In recent years, replies to one's own tweet have become a method to circumvent the character-length limit of individual tweets, allowing the tweeter to open a "thread" that contains many replies to the original tweet. Twitter eventually added a threading feature that makes this approach more formal as it allows influencers to write a rather long textual message with relative ease, although some prefer using the image uploads (e.g., readable images of formal letters).

TABLE 1 Development of Twitter followers from selected accounts from late-2019 to mid-2021.

	Krisinformation	Socialstyrelsen	MSB	FHM	SVT Nyheter	SvD	DN
End of 2019	98.000	13.000	30.000	9.000	143.000	206.000	219.000
Mid 2021	128.000	19.000	42.000	57.000	196.000	224.000	242.000
Increase	31%	46%	40%	533%	37%	9%	11%

Krisinformation: https://web.archive.org/web/20191229105701/https://twitter.com/krisinformation; https://web.archive.org/web/20210616031732/https://twitter.com/krisinformation.
Socialstyrelsen: https://web.archive.org/web/20191106153254/https://twitter.com/socialstyrelsen; https://web.archive.org/web/20210707064635/https://twitter.com/socialstyrelsen.
MSB: https://web.archive.org/web/20191021113402/https://twitter.com/MSBse; https://web.archive.org/web/20210702023604/https://twitter.com/MSBse.
FHM: https://web.archive.org/web/20191114072309/https://twitter.com/Folkhalsomynd; https://web.archive.org/web/20210622115656/https://twitter.com/Folkhalsomynd.
SVT Nyheter: https://web.archive.org/web/20191210022104/https://twitter.com/svtnyheter; https://web.archive.org/web/20210615040251/https://twitter.com/svtnyheter.
SvD: https://web.archive.org/web/20191223022811/https://twitter.com/svd; https://web.archive.org/web/20210624022547/https://twitter.com/svd.
DN: https://web.archive.org/web/20191223235924/https://twitter.com/dagensnyheter; https://web.archive.org/web/20210622074833/https://twitter.com/dagensnyheter.

certain desired identity for the retweeter. Similarly, replies and quote-tweets in Voloshinov's theory would have the function of infusing the reported speech with a new meaning varying from acclaim to scorn or irony. To interpret, e.g., ironic meanings, it is necessary to understand the context of the tweet. We have suggested above that this context can fruitfully be reconstructed by taking into account Twitter's two logics of operation explored here, the first dealing with accumulation and commodifying one's hashtags, making them trending, the other by studying concretely the dialogical sequences in which retweets, quote-tweets, replies and mentions occur. Retweets and quote-tweets enable one to address one's own audience whilst reply and mention enable one to reach out to new audiences, namely those of the original tweet and/or account. Both modes of interaction can be used to work on one's own identity or the addressee's identity. In a competitive situation over authority, such identity work can easily assume a zero-sum mode: one's gain is the other's loss.

Digital authority as a purely quantifiable dimension of interaction cannot include this interactive context and therefore misses the purpose of such interaction. Complementing the operationalisation of digital authority with the analysis of the sequence and content of interaction, we will provide a more nuanced and factual picture of the reality of digital authority of the four government agencies tasked with the Swedish COVID-19 strategy.

Analysis

The analysis will proceed in three stages. We will first look at the dataset as a whole as well as the broad context as construed by used hashtags. We will then zoom in on two peak periods coinciding with the first and second wave of COVID-19 in Sweden to better understand the changes in digital authority of the government accounts. Third, we will look more closely at a few peak events to gain detailed information about the practices around digital authority in Sweden.

The government accounts

The four government accounts have varied followership on Twitter. As Twitter does not store the number of followers for individual accounts, we have reconstructed the historical followership with the help of web.archive.org. Before the Corona crisis, Krisinformation was followed by 98 k Twitter accounts, MSB by 30 k, Socialstyrelsen by 13 k and FHM by 9 k (see Table 1). Their followership increased during the Corona crisis. By mid 2021, Krisinformation had 128 k followers (30% increase), MSB 42 k (40% increase), Socialstyrelsen 19 k (46% increase) and FHM 57 k, an increase of 533%. To compare, we looked at two major Swedish news outlets, *Dagens Nyheter* and *SvD,* which increased their followership from pre-crisis 219–242 k (11%) and from 206 to 224 k (9%) respectively. The public television SVT's Twitter followers rose from 143 to 196 k (37%). The increase of the followers of the government accounts, especially that of FHM, indicates the importance of expert knowledge in contemporary politics as well as public agencies' conscious attempts to reach out to the public through social media. Still, even in the eye of a global pandemic, with all its possible implications, traditional mass media sources of information continue to be more popular than governmental channels specifically aiming at crisis communication.

The four government agencies have different roles in crisis management. Krisinformation is responsible for collecting and publicizing information, MSB is tasked with coordination whilst FHM and Socialstyrelsen produce expert information and policy

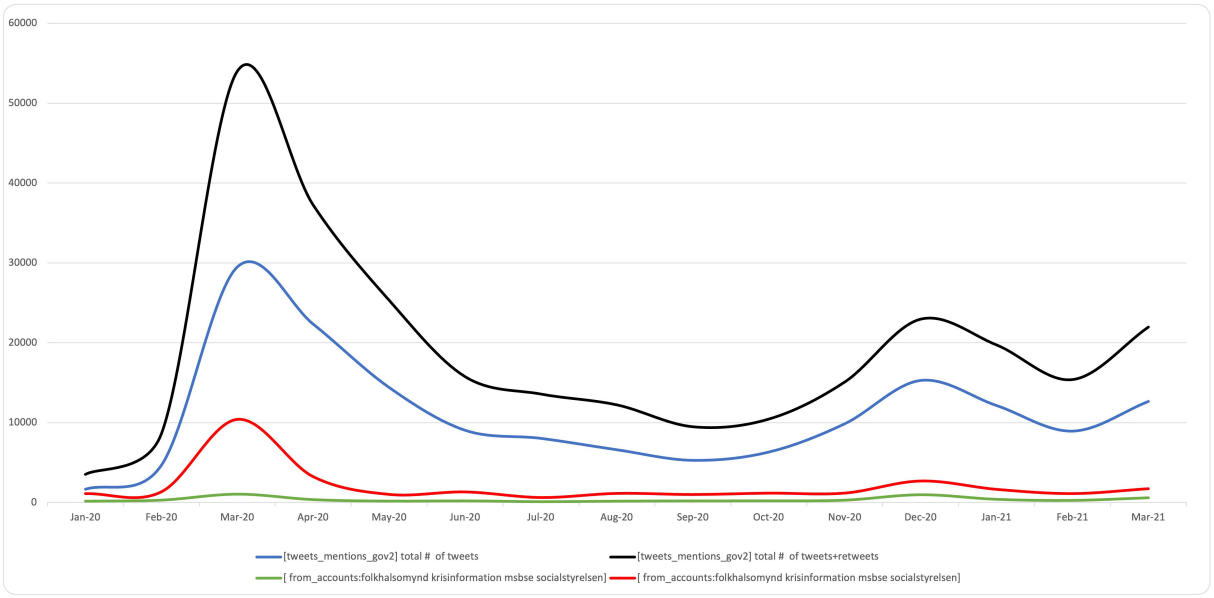

FIGURE 1
Total tweets (monthly). The green line shows the tweets from the four government agencies @folkhalsomynd, @krisinformation, @MSBse and @socialstyrelsen (5,387). The red line includes in addition the retweets of these tweets (31,026). The blue line includes in addition all replies to and mentions of the governmental accounts (166,692). The black line includes in addition also the retweets of replies to and mentions of governmental accounts (285,329).

recommendations, FHM in the field of epidemiology and public health and Socialstyrelsen in relation to health care provision.

Claiming control over the Twittersphere through interaction

One of the foundational ideas of social media is the logic of accumulation: one needs to generate attention. The concept of digital authority, too, builds on the idea of how much interaction one can generate. Of course, not every actor in social media needs to acknowledge or follow that logic, and there are indicators that accounts of public agencies more often than others deviate from that logic. In some cases, this may be a conscious decision, while in others it is due to the lack of expertise or personnel.

Measuring accumulation of attention is a multifaceted task. One could simply aggregate all government Twitter activity and put it in relation to all generated retweets. Figure 1 shows the monthly breakdown of the "total" number of tweets from the four government accounts and their retweets and all those tweets that in some manner mention or engage with the government accounts. The government accounts do not tweet frantically: in March 2020, they sent out 1,053 tweets and over 53,000 tweets were interacting with or discussing them; in April they sent 354 tweets and since then it has hovered around 200 until the second peak of 982 tweets in December 2020. However, the initial high ratio of retweets declines rapidly after March 2020, even though the government accounts enjoy relatively high interaction ratios throughout the whole analyzed period.

Zooming in on individual agencies (Table 2) we see that FHM's Twitter activity is most often retweeted (1 to 14) followed by a fairly even distribution between Krisinformation and socialstyrelsen, and MSB holding the lowest score. Looking at the *kind* of Twitter activity the government accounts produced, we see that out of the total 5,387 tweets sent, as many as 4,391 (82%) are replies—leaving 996 (18%) what we term *agency-initiated tweets* appearing on the agency's main timeline (Table 2). The agencies also use the reply function differently. Krisinformation's and MSB's main activity on Twitter consists of replying, whilst expert agencies FHM and Socialstyrelsen mainly tweet new information. Instead of looking at the total Twitter activity, one could argue that only the tweets that the account initiates and thus appear as default on their timeline should be used to assess how much attention they generate. Focusing on agency-initiated tweets we see that not FHM's, but Krisinformation's tweets are the most retweeted (1–42). Even this simple breakdown of different kinds of interactions allows for a more nuanced quantitative analysis of digital authority.

What is the purpose of replies in this attention-seeking social media logic? One could argue that it is part of government agencies' tasks to ascertain that reliable information reaches the public, including clarifying replies to citizens' questions. Indeed, taken together, most government agencies' Twitter activity consists of replying. Krisinformation and MSB stand

TABLE 2 Government agency Twitter activity and accumulation of retweets.

	Krisinformation (incl retweets)	FHM (incl retweets)	MSB (incl retweets)	Socialstyrelsen (incl retweets)	Total (incl retweets)
Total tweets (retweets)	3,545 (21,363)	469 (6,356)	1,278 (2,799)	95 (508)	5,387 (31,026)
% of total tweets	65.8%	8.7%	23.7%	1.7%	100%
Agency-initiated tweets (retweets)	422 (17.589)	334 (6.039)	153 (1.443)	87 (498)	996 (25.569)
% of all agency-initiated tweets	42.4%	33.3%	15.4%	8%	100%
Reply tweets (retweets)	3,123 (3,774)	135 (317)	1,125 (1,356)	8 (10)	4,391 (5,457)
% of all reply tweets by agencies	71.1%	3.1%	25.6	0.2%	100%
% of self initiated tweets/% of replies	12%/88%	71%/29%	12%/88%	92%/8%	18%/82%
Tweet to retweet ratio of total tweets	1–6	1–14	1–2	1–5	1–6
Tweet to retweet ratio of agency-initiated tweets	1–42	1–18	1–9	1–6	1–26
Tweet to retweet ratio of agency's replies	1–1.2	1–2.3	1–1.2	1–1.3	1–1.2

TABLE 3 Distribution of top 50 and top10 most retweeted, quote-tweeted, and replied to agency tweets.

	March 2020–April 2020	After 1/12/2020
Distribution of 50 most retweeted agency tweets (1st retweeted 733 times; 50th 87 times)	37 (64%)	5 (10%)
Distribution of 10 most retweeted agency tweets (1st retweeted 733 times; 10th 229 times)	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
Distribution of 50 most quote tweeted agency tweets (1st quote tweeted 168 times; 50th 17 times)	19 (38%)	22 (44%)
Distribution of 10 most quote tweeted agency tweets (1st quote tweeted 168 times; 10th 47 times)	0 (0%)	9 (90%)
Distribution of 50 most replied to agency tweets (1st replied 294 times; 50th 38 times)	14 (28%)	27 (54%)
Distribution of 10 most replied to agency tweets (1st replied 294 times; 10th 99 times)	2 (20%)	8 (80%)

for more than 96% of all replies. However, it seems that the affordance of a reply function was used neither systematically nor consistently. Instead, reply communication appears mainly random and without a clear strategy. For example, FHM generally seems to avoid replying, but under certain periods does so even extensively (nearly one third of their tweets are replies). It seems that there is no coherent policy, and the agencies' engagement depends on the personnel assigned and his/her social media preferences.

Let us look at the public side of engagement with the government accounts. The centrality of FHM to the public is clear in our data. Of the 140 k tweets replying to or mentioning the four agencies 112.5 k refer to FHM (14.5 k Krisinformation, 10 k Socialstyrelsen and 12.5 k MSB). The prevalence of FHM can be explained by the significance given to science in contemporary politics and pandemic strategy in Sweden. Moreover, FHM organized daily "government" press meetings, hosting Ministers in their premises if necessary. Finally, the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell at FHM emerged as the face of the Swedish COVID-19 policy. FHM emerged as *the* social audience to or against which many on Twitter felt a need to establish some kind of affective relationship and construe their own identities. Despite the quantitative superiority of Krisinformation when it comes to tweets sent and retweets generated, FHM has the dominance regarding mentions and replies.

The public's way of engagement with the government accounts, however, underwent a change during the period we studied. In the early period, government tweets were mainly retweeted. As the crisis prolonged, replies and quote-tweets increased in proportion. Of the 50 most retweeted government tweets in the dataset, 37 (64%) are posted in March and April 2020 and only 5 (10%) after 1 December 2020 (Table 3). However, only 14 (28%) of the 50 most replied to and 19

TABLE 4 Top ten hashtags among tweets interacting with the four government agencies.

Hashtag	No. of uses March 2020–March 2021	Hashtag	No. of uses March–April 2020	Hashtag	No. of uses December 2020–January 2021
#svpol	5,138	#svpol	1,724	#svpol	831
#covid19	4,207	#covid19	1,529	#covid19	565
#covid19sverige	2,407	#coronasverige	898	#covid19sverige	414
#coronasverige	2,261	#covid19sverige	844	#coronasverige	379
#corona	1,449	#coronavirussverige	739	**#bytstrateginu**	235
#bytstrateginu	1,388	**#corona**	666	**#sweden**	215
#coronavirussverige	1,342	**#coronavirus**	573	**#tegnell**	192
#coronavirus	1,206	#covid19sweden	417	#coronavirussverige	181
#tegnell	1,158	**#covid-−19**	370	**#krisinformation**	154
#covid19sweden	1,088	**#coronaviruset**	314	#covid19sweden	142

In bold typeface are hashtags that appear only in one of the periods under scrutiny.

(38%) of the 50 most quote-tweeted tweets were sent during March and April 2020, while 27 (54%) respective 22 (44%) appear after December 1st, 2020. When zooming in on the respective top 10, standing for the vast majority of all generated retweets/quote-tweets and replies, this shift becomes even more dramatic: The 10 most retweeted tweets were all posted in the early period, while 80% and 90% of the most replied and most quoted tweets respectively appear after December 1st, 2020. Following Voloshinov, such a change from treating information as authoritative to appropriating it and infusing it with new contexts, indicates a growing contestation of the legal-rational authority of the state agencies as the crisis prolongs.

Hashtags as social audience

By looking at the hashtags that dominate, we can further poke the actual context with which the government accounts were engaged in interaction. Among the ten most frequent hashtags (Table 4) in our dataset are #svpol (5,138 tweets) (1st), #covid19sverige (2,407 tweets) (3rd), #coronasverige (2,261 tweets) (4th), #bytstrateginu (1,388 tweets) (6th), coronavirussverige (1,342) (7th) and #tegnell (1,158 tweets) (8th), all of which are Twitterspheres more or less critical of the Swedish Corona strategy and the state agencies involved in it.

The use of critical hashtags increases as the crisis prolongs. Some hashtags, such as #bytstrateginu ("change the strategy now") could only be articulated after the communication of an official COVID strategy (see Figure 2). The hashtag appears for the first time in May 2020 and peaks in June 2020, a month of overall low Twitter activity in our dataset. Its use declines during the summer and peaks again in December 2020.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the use of hashtags in our data. First, the use of hashtags is not as common in our dataset as one could expect. There is no single dominant hashtag that unifies the public sphere, or successfully commodifies the Corona crisis. It appears that there is no hegemonic public sphere formed by one or a few trending hashtags; instead, fragmentation prevails. Second, the posited social audiences become increasingly more critical—and less reflexive—of the Swedish Corona strategy as the crisis prolongs. The most prominent hashtag *#svpol* is an alternative right-wing self-identifier, but it is also accompanied by other government-critical hashtags. Looking at the changes in the hashtags between March–April and December–January, we can see that more neutral hashtags such as *#corona* (6th) and *#coronavirus* (7th), and *#coronaviruset* (10th) have disappeared[6] and more specific hashtags such as *#bytstrateginu* and *#tegnell*, both of which gather mainly critical voices of the Swedish Corona policy, have become more prominent. Other newcomers like *#sweden* reflect the global, critical, interest in Swedish strategy and *#krisinformation* relates to a singular event connected to the "SMS to the people," that was sent in November 2020. The fact that these hashtags emerge from the data that interact with the government means that despite their criticism, the accounts behind the hashtags still engage with the government information. Following Gortitz's et al. interpretation, this should be a sign of digital authority, but we find this doubtful. Rather, we argue that this indicates the emergence of a more charismatic authority contesting the state's legal-rational authority in the digital sphere as the crisis prolongs. Third, government agencies systematically opt out from social media logics by not using hashtags. This may appear as implying they have not understood how social media and Twitter works, but, as Bernard (2019) argued, hashtags delineate certain publics and create segmented public spheres. Thus, the opt out can be interpreted as a

6 *#coronavirus* and *#covid-−19* were in fact used by Bloomberg together with @folkhalsomynd on one day, and retweeted globally placing them among the top ten hashtags.

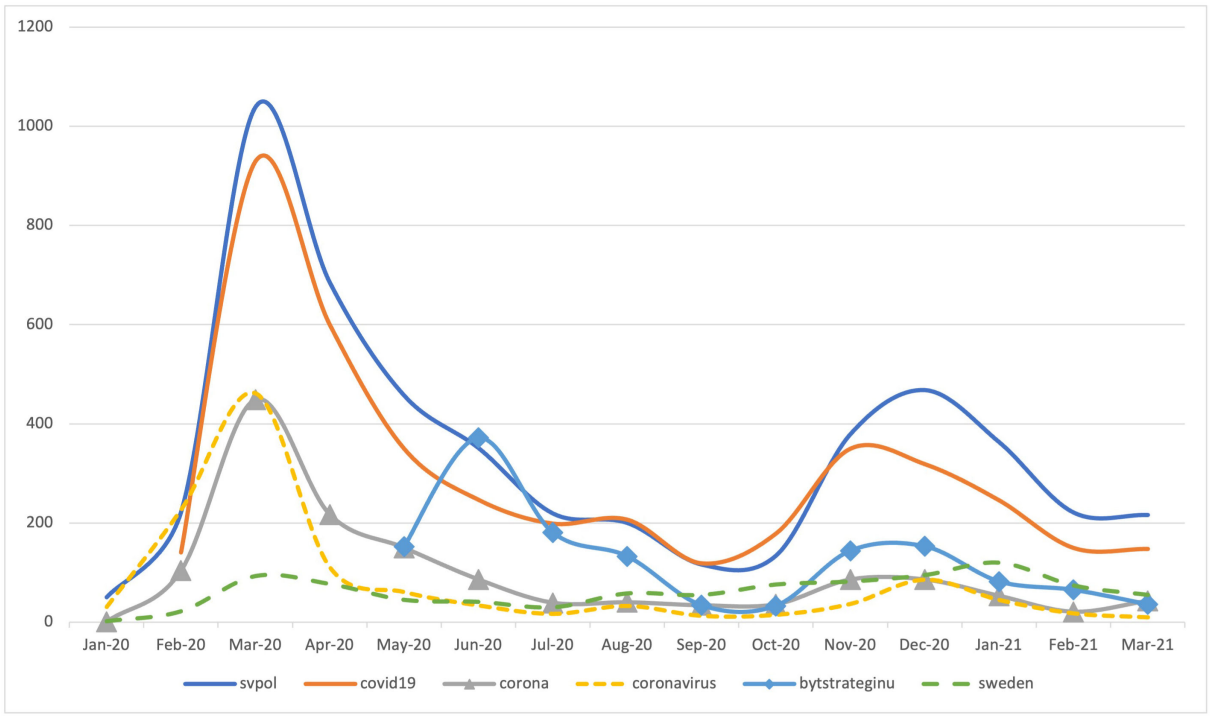

FIGURE 2
Ebbs and flows of selected hashtags.

conscious strategy of claiming neutrality. In Voloshinov's terms, they try to emphasize the (authoritative) content of information by implying its impartiality and universality, not to whom it is addressed or the form in which it is packaged as is the case in the charismatic contestation of legal-rational authority.

Dynamics of digital authority: Retweets, quote-tweets, and replies as qualitatively different forms of interaction in Twitter

Retweet is a form of reported speech that emphasizes the factual content of the original message. Retweet was the dominant form of engaging with the government during the early period in our data. For Voloshinov, this kind of reported speech signals "authoritative" relation between the content and the reporting situation. Consequently, looking at *what* is being retweeted, reveals what is popularly approved in the (digital) society. For the period March 1st, 2020, to April 30th, 2020, there are 51,849 tweets (91,256 with retweets) in our dataset, representing 31% of the total number of tweets. Among the 20 most retweeted, there are twelve from the government accounts (11 Krisinformation, 1 FHM), two from other public actors, one news site, and five tweets from individuals. Of the five individual tweets, two are positive, and three voice critical views of the Swedish Corona strategy and the agencies implementing it. The government accounts, especially Krisinformation, dominate the communication initiated by and about themselves. If we exclude the tweets sent from governmental accounts the content of the top 20 most retweeted tweets during March and April 2020 changes: there are 15 tweets from individuals, 3 from other public agencies and 2 from news sites. Among the tweets from individuals, three are positive, two are neutral and ten are negative. One of the news sites is positive, one negative; three tweets from other public agencies are neutral. Already during this early phase of the pandemic, the digital authority of the government does not remain uncontested.

By the end of the year, during the period December 1st, 2020, to January 31st, 2021 (27,430 tweets, 42,691 with retweets) there are only seven tweets from government accounts among the 20 most retweeted in our dataset; the remaining 13 tweets come from individuals (12 tweets) and from a civil society organization (1 tweet). Two of the individual tweets are from foreigners reporting neutrally on Sweden; the remaining 11 are critical of the Swedish Corona policy. If we exclude the government tweets, we have among the top 20 retweeted three neutral tweets by foreigners reporting on travel conditions in Sweden; the rest levels criticism against the Swedish Corona strategy and agencies involved in implementing it.

For Voloshinov, retweet indicates an authoritative relation to the content of reported speech. This combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of the most retweeted tweets in our dataset shows that as the crisis prolongs, the government agencies not

only decrease as the source of interaction about themselves, but this interaction is also more often framed critically. In other words, what is considered authoritative information becomes increasingly negative of the government line.

Let us now look at the two other forms of twitter interaction: replies and quote-tweets. The distinction between these two, based on Voloshinov's account on reported speech, is that the former is addressed to the sender directly while the latter is a general statement about the "facts" conveyed in the tweet. To address the sender directly has the function of affecting the sender's social status; to comment on the factual base of the claim has a function of re-evaluating the facts stated. In contrast to a retweet that signals authoritative relation to the content, the appropriation of the original content in replies and quote-tweets adds grammatical complexity to the act of reporting infusing the reported speech with new layers of meaning.

Table 5 shows the distribution of different forms of interaction with the government agencies. Krisinformation is responsible for a vast majority of the 50 most retweeted agency tweets, reflecting its position and function as a source of (authoritative) information. FHM, by contrast, stands for more than half of the 50 tweets that were most often replied to, and during the early phase of the pandemic even for more than 80%. This is, interestingly enough, despite FHM's comparable low engagement in reply-communication. The most quote-tweeted tweets are rather evenly distributed between Krisinformation and FHM.

Both FHM and Krisinformation receive the most attention, while MSB and especially Socialstyreslen play a minor role. Already during the early phase of the pandemic, FHM—often impersonated by Tegnell—became the "face" of the Swedish Corona strategy. FHM in relative terms was most often replied to government agency in our material. FHM in other words appears as an actor in the crisis, whilst Krisinformation—at least in the early stages—was a source of (authoritative) information to be retweeted.

Let us look at the replied tweets first. Among the most replied, there are several that inform not about the Corona virus, but about the FHM's work during the Corona crisis. The most replied to tweet refers to a study showing that FHM enjoys high trust among the population (March 14th, 2020). The next one relates to the claimed ineffectiveness of school closure (March 1st, 2020). Other tweets are calls for the daily press meeting (seven examples), which nevertheless receive replies that criticize FHM for their policies. Such replies bear no direct relevance to the invitation but are used to call into question the soundness or logical consistency of FHM's recommendations and arguments concerning Swedish Corona policies. The same applies to other tweets through which FHM informs the public about their activities. FHM's tweets that inform about the Corona situation in society are replied with outright negation of the information. The tweet in which FHM claims inefficiency of school closures reads in its simplicity: "Locking down healthy school children no effective measure—Swedish Public Health Agency"[7] referring to their own website for more information. On the website, we learn that "FHM assesses that locking down healthy school children is not an effective measure. It is unlikely that healthy school children could cause the spread of the virus."[8] This tweet and information is replied to by, for instance: "You will see you're so wrong… But then it might unfortunately be too late. Only a few people in Sweden believe in you, and rightly so,"[9] or as "I hope you are right, but how do you define a school child? Does one suddenly begin to spread the virus when one turns 20? Or is it a growing scale?" or pointing out alleged illogicalities in the formulations of FHM, as in the following example: "The virus cannot with all thinkable logic distinguish whether it will be spread by a child or an adult… Where is the respect for our elderly? How do you protect the already overwhelmed health care system?" Such replies merge aspects of known weaknesses or failures of the Swedish Corona strategy, such as the failure to protect the elderly or the constant lack of and delays in recommendations, to question the competence of the FHM. Reported speech requires grammatical juggling. The free combination of tenses—the future ("You will see") in contrast to FHM's present tense "assesses" draws attention to the long-term consequences of FHM's actions, whilst the grammatical change from the nominalisation ("the spread of the virus") to an active agent ("The virus cannot with all thinkable logic distinguish…") discredits the FHM's implicit claims to be in control of the virus granting the virus the agency in the crisis. The agentification of the virus also works as a grammatical attack against FHM's posited agent of "healthy school children." These are techniques for appropriation of others' speech and giving it new meaning in reported speech. The replies indicate very little or no reflection of one's own epistemic limits as is the case in Zürn's reflexive authority, and unashamedly question or attack the sender's authority based on subjective convictions as Voloshinov's reported speech implies.

As pointed out before, quote-tweets offer the possibility to engage with the factual base of the message. There is some overlapping between most replied to and most quote-tweeted tweets. During March–April 2020, the most quote-tweeted tweet comes from FHM informing they have found a mistake in an earlier report. The tweet received substantial international interest, and in the quote-tweets Swedish and international accounts reconstruct the context and refer to earlier statements about herd immunity, indicating that FHM may not have undisputed expert knowledge, as ironically constructed here:

7 https://twitter.com/Folkhalsomynd/status/1234053874438299649

8 https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/nyheter-och-press/nyhetsarkiv/2020/mars/avstangning-av-friska-skolbarn-ingen-effektiv-atgard/

9 Links to all tweets not coming from state agencies are withheld and translated to English to ascertain anonymity.

TABLE 5 Distribution of different top 50 retweeted, quote-tweeted, and replied to government agencies tweets.

	March 2020–April 2020			December 2020–January 2021			Whole period		
	50 most retweeted	50 most quote-tweeted	50 most replied to	50 most retweeted	50 most quote-tweeted	50 most replied to	50 most retweeted	50 most quote-tweeted	50 most replied to
Krisinformation	39	22	6	33	28	17	38	23	16
FHM	9	24	41	13	18	27	11	21	27
MSB	2	4	3	3	3	6	1	6	7
Soc.styrelsen	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0

"One is called a tin-foil hat if one questions these stars…" Another one applauds to "👏TRANSPARENCY👏" and a third one ridicules Sweden's herd immunity plans: "Seems like Sweden's herd immunity might just have to wait a while."

Among the most quote-tweeted tweets is also the one where FHM claims that opinion polls show high trust in their work. This tweet is quoted mainly by pointing out the temporality of the result thus changing its context from general trust to that of a very context specific, and possibly isolated, piece of information as in this quote-tweet from March 15th: "It won't last if one continues to deal with COVID-19 as a normal seasonal influenza. The virus mutates and one lets it spread freely. Scandal" or in this from July 5th, 2020, months after the original March 14th: "That was back then." The honesty of the reported high levels of trust is also doubted: "You may wish so."

A tweet from Krisinformation warning about spreading disinformation about COVID-19 is also questioned in terms of its factuality or ability to convey factual information. One quote-tweet tries to make fun of the grammatical formulation Krisinformation used, another quotes the tweet by adding "At the same time we really have to be source critical as a lot of disinformation is circulating" implying that it is Krisinformation that is guilty of disinformation, and yet another quotes Krisinformation as "applies to all" adding the hashtag "#fakenews." Such ironic appropriations of the tweet indicate how the change of context renders the content of the tweet quite the opposite from its initial meaning. In our data it appears that replies are most often used ironically to ask for a clarification or to post a follow-up questions, but at times also to explicitly undermine the authority of the sender. Quote-tweets, on the other hand, tend to cast the *content* of the original tweet in ironic terms. Such a usage of quote-tweets is not exclusive but seems to occur more often in communication with official and perceived authorities. In other contexts, we have seen quote-tweets also provide a positive framing for the original tweet, claiming/appropriating some of the fame of the original tweet.

The ways in which replies and quote-tweets are used during the second peak of COVID-19 infections in December–January, 2020–2021, overall follows patterns of the first peak. However, one clear difference is that there appear tweets that are not Corona-related, but report on totally unrelated matters, such as testing of the public alarm (Hesa Fredrik) or firework regulations ahead of the New Year's celebration (which were possible given no lockdown in Sweden). Among the 20 most quoted tweets there were two, and among the 20 most replied tweets altogether five of those. We will look only at the Corona-related tweets here. One tweet from Krisinformation informs about a coming public sms to Swedish mobile phones, the so called "sms to the people." The imminent sending of this SMS was announced to the public on Friday, December 11th, 2020, in the presence of two ministers and representatives of FHM and MSB. The public was informed that for the first time the Swedish government attempts to send a public SMS to all mobile phone numbers in Sweden (Press Conference, 2020).[10] There were concerns that SMS could be perceived as a bluff, hence a press conference announcing the coming of the SMS. In this context Krisinformation tweeted on Saturday, December 12th, 2020, the following:

"Important information before Monday's sms:

- Sender row: "Fohm, MSB."
- Text: "Information from State agencies: Observe the harder advice in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Read more on webpage Krisinformation."
- Link: none.

If you get a similar sms with a link, do not click."[11]

As earlier, replies to the tweet attack the sender, its competence, and judgement: "I honestly wonder if there is one, who believes that this sms will have an inch of effect. How many tax millions this kidsfest cost? Cheaper, better, more effective would have been to send: Use a face mask that protects both you and the ones nearby." Another goes: "Unbelievable. Not even this can you handle. Other countries have no problem. If you now succeed, which can be doubted, why does this come so darn late? Apparently because Eliasson and the government are involved." Most replies show direct attack of the person

10 https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/12/sms-till-allmanheten-om-radande-lage-avseende-coronapandemin/

11 https://twitter.com/krisinformation/status/1337737958493982722

or authority identified with the tweet—and the effects are felt even in Krisinformation's replies, one of which directly asking "What have we done wrong now..?"[12] Yet, besides attacks on persons, there are also replies that appropriate the context of the original tweet and twist it ironically. One reply goes: "If this is the teaser/trailer I don't think I will wanna watch the movie."

In our material, irony emerges as the dominant device for appropriating reported speech. For Voloshinov, such ironic appropriation of the *context* of the original Tweet is a way of passing an evaluative judgement of the *content*, which in this case turns the great efforts of pandemic management by the government into a failed movie trailer. Irony is here understood as turning away from the intended meaning and creating infinite indeterminacy (De Man, 1996); in Voloshinov's discussion on reported speech this infinite indeterminacy is achieved by manipulating the context of the original tweet through different techniques of replying and quote-tweeting. Similar appropriation of the context is evident in a number of other replies. Most replies to Krisinformation's video clip about Corona-angst[13] point out that it is not the angst that is the problem, but the Corona virus causing the angst. Similarly, when FHM on December 30th, 2020, announced that they will recommend the use of face masks from January 7th, 2021 onwards,[14] many replies twist the context by wondering whether masks are not effective *before* January 7th, or in other ways point out the arbitrary *timing* of the recommendation. Replies by appropriating the semantic or temporal context of the tweet and by introducing elements of irony into the relationship between the original tweet and its uptake are able to render the meanings in the tweets indeterminate—and their senders to appear as incompetent and out of control of the events.

Among the most quote-tweeted tweets, we find the one on mass-SMS as well as the one on open schools and children's health. The quotes of the SMS-tweet provide an interesting case of comparison between a reply and a quote-tweet. One quote-tweet wonders if the point is to "verify if the SMS is genuine by comparing if the content is exactly the same as a text you have received by other means?!" Another one laments: "Oh Lord, wash your hands is no longer included. Disappointed" and a third twists the context even further: "I think I will also start to twitter my sms before I send them." Again, the common topic of the tweets is summarized as "Information feed *about* the Monday's COVID-sms is certainly bigger than the information contained in the sms. So, that makes it then one more successful information campaign, right?" Many quote-tweets also refer to the replies the tweet has generated: "I send a thought to all who work with replying to the criticism against the sms, including among others, in this thread. Factual and polite, but at times unnecessarily hard words." Quote-tweets are thus able to detach the meaning of the original tweet and turn attention to not *what* is said, but *how* it is said, thus making the Twitter feed the focus rather than what is referred to in those tweets. Again, the act of reporting as Voloshinov understood it, embeds the original message and its sender into a new context wherein the original meaning acquired a new, and often ironic, content.

The examples here have shown that Twitter replies and quote-tweets are often used to criticize the government agencies and the Swedish Corona strategy. In a Voloshinovian sense both are forms of reported speech that incline toward criticism. This will be elaborated on below.

In the last part of the analysis, we will be zooming in on specific days, in order to show what kind of events or tweets trigger interaction in Twitter and reveal the practices of constructing and contesting digital authority. In the whole analyzed period, the top ten daily peaks for interacting, i.e., *mentioning, retweeting, quote-tweeting or replying* one of the four governmental accounts in tweets, inclusive retweets, are in the range of ∼1,700–2,500 Twitter actions. Of these daily peaks, five are in the middle of March 2020 and one in April 2020, confirming the identified general peak in March-April 2020. The other four peaks are on December 14th, 2020, February 9th, 2021, and March 17th and 26th, 2021.

The peaks of March 2020 fall into a period of general interest in the Corona crisis, later daily peaks can often be explained with specific events. The tweets on March 15th, 2020—the highest peak in our data—deal with various COVID related issues, most tweets from December 14th, 2020—another peak—refer to the "sms to the people" that was sent by Krisinformation and FHM to the whole population. Other daily peaks were formed by individual tweets that were retweeted overproportionally, such as on March 26th, 2021, when a tweet in English by a Swedish biostatistician working in the US mentioned FHM. Its retweets count for 75% of the total ∼2600 tweets and retweets for that day.[15] The peak on March 17th, 2021 is directly connected to communication strategies of Krisinformation. The day before, Krisinformation's Twitter account was managed by "Marie," who, in contrast to previous practice, actively searched for tweets mentioning Krisinformation and replied to them in an ironic and non-chalant style. "Marie's" replies have now been removed, but screenshots are still available. Here an example:

12 https://twitter.com/krisinformation/status/1337766671180816384

13 https://twitter.com/krisinformation/status/1354799279504764929

14 https://twitter.com/Folkhalsomynd/status/1344256952017281024

15 Martin Kulldorff, a Swedish biostatistician, working in the USA, with more than 200k twitter followers, tweeted the following quote by Johan Carson, then Director of the FHM in Sweden: "Some believed that it was possible to eliminate disease transmission by shutting down society. We did not believe that and we have been proven right" and mentioned both Carlson's and FHM's accounts. Martin Kulldorff, a signatory of the Great Barrington Declaration arguing against lockdowns tweets this in affirmation of the Swedish Corona strategy https://twitter.com/MartinKulldorff/status/1375451856051265545.

> Hej [Name removed]! It is difficult to give a full answer to your somewhat unclear question in just 280 characters. As you call yourself an Angry Man on the Internet, perhaps that suffices also as an answer? That is, to be angry? And then you can enjoy being just that. Hopefully it feels better tomorrow! Cheers, Marie.[16]

"Marie" used a similar style in other replies on that day. The following day, when Krisinformation after protests had to apologize for their communication, Twitter became filled with support for "Marie" and hashtags such as #jesuismarie and #backamarie emerged.

Whilst irony has been successful in parodying the government accounts, the same does not go the other way around. Legal-rational authority, here exemplified by "Marie," is limited to the context of the legal-rational state. "Marie's" attempt to appropriate the context of the tweet as something posted by "an Angry Man on the Internet" does not produce ambiguity, but an official apology from Krisinformation. Yet, once the legal-rational authority had acknowledged its mistake, the response from the public could be ironic again: hashtags like #jesuismarie did rendered Marie's faith ambiguous: misunderstood and unfairly persecuted voice of conscience or a parody thereof?

For Weber, authority is a relationship. It is an attribute based on traditional or legal-rational grounds, or due to exceptional personal characteristics. Zürn's concept of reflexive authority, on which the idea of digital authority is based, focuses on the reasons for subjecting oneself to rule: the recognition of one's own (epistemic) limitations. Our material shows that much of the contestation of the legal-rational authority that in Weber's account is attributed to charisma takes the form of irony. Irony is certainly nothing new to politics, but social media communication with the legal-rational authority of the state is a contemporary phenomenon. Recent research on alt-right has placed irony among the key terms of political analysis, seeing in it traits of ambiguity, affective group building as well as mainstreaming racist and misogynist language (Nikunen, 2018; Askanius, 2021) in stark contrast to more philosophical (Rorty, 1989) or literary (de Man's, 1996) interpretations of irony as something liberating and critical. For de Man, irony cannot be defined, because it is an interpretative practice, an attitude toward the text; and ironic text is something that constantly "turns away" from the meaning.

For Voloshinov, the question in this regard would be *how* does irony appropriate the reported speech. As an interpretative practice toward authority, irony in our material thwarts the idea of *public* communication and turns official tweets into individualized playgrounds of verbal wittiness, drawing on personal experiences and preferences. Irony plays out on two fronts: in the verbal appropriation of government tweets, and in the situational context (for instance in FHM's acknowledgment that herd immunity strategy was based on miscalculation). The first we call verbal irony and the latter situational irony (Muecke, 1980). The manipulation of context as the main strategy of ironic appropriation of reported speech detaches the context of reporting from the real situation, thereby lending the ironic reported speech an aura of objectivity.

We can further probe the effects of irony on authority. For Voloshinov, different techniques of reporting speech mark different stages of literary evolution; change from one form of reporting speech to another is always also a question of changing power relations at the level of the (literary) system: new techniques are challenging earlier dominant ones. The same can be applied to authority in politics. Consider for instance the reply "👏TRANSPARENCY👏" quoted above. It essentially repeats what FHM tweeted earlier, but places FHM's "transparency" in a new context, that of a sham transparency, reduced to procedural steps bereft of substance. Yet, at the same time, "transparency" is pointing out the disguised political dimension in the scientific expertise of FHM. The same goes for many other cases of reported speech, such as replies asking FHM to define "child" or demanding respect for the elderly, where irony discloses the political content of something that is presented as stemming solely from scientific evidence. Irony affects authority also in so far, as it discloses a "real problem" that hides behind what the state agencies present as their problem. For an example, consider the replies to Krisinformation's advice not to read the news to avoid Corona-angst that point out that any fear is caused by the virus itself, not the reports about it.

In our material irony does not function as a medium of critical and reflexive interaction with government agencies. Following Voloshinov, the ironic appropriation of government tweets indicates a shifting power dynamic where the authoritative perception of the government tweets has decreased as a result of growing appropriations that blur and trivialize government policy. For Voloshinov, such effects of reported speech are brought about by the changed social relations of power prevalent in the medium of communication—irrespective of any individual intentions in the act of reporting. In contrast to Rorty's irony and Zürn's idea of reflexive authority, there are no signs that irony generates reflexivity, critical distance, and growing awareness of one's own epistemic boundaries in our material; irony has the function of challenging the system.

Discussion

This article has explored and elaborated on the interactive dynamics of "digital authority." Gortitz et al. conceptualized digital authority as the interaction in which a certain Twitter—or

16 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/twitteranvandare-visar-stod-for-krisinformations-medarbetare

social media—account is engaged. Yet, their operationalisation of this interaction was just a metric sum of all interaction with the underlying logic that all publicity is good publicity. Viewing digital authority through Voloshinov's theory of reported speech, we could unveil different dynamics that aggregate metrics disguise.

Twitter's different forms of interaction can be classified as either enabling spreading tweets considered as authoritative information or appropriating tweets, putting them in a new context and reporting them further with a new intention and new content. These functions of reported speech are properties of natural communication, explicated by Voloshinov in the 1920s and found still relevant in the algorithmic Twittersphere of the 2020s. They reveal that even in the era of social media, human interaction is able to claim the technological affordances and use them to pursue avenues of reported speech that have long preceded those technological solutions. This is our modest contribution to the emerging ways of looking at social media as an interactive medium. The contrast we found between the metrics of digital authority and the qualitative dynamics of digital authority points toward the need to treat social media as a form of human interaction—mediated by certain technological affordances but not limited to them. This entails including both the quantitative and qualitative dimension in the analysis of social media.

Through our integrated qualitative and quantitative analysis, we can observe a decline of the authority of the state agencies. As the crisis prolongs, the retweeting of government tweets decreases, signaling a diminishing "authoritative relation" to these accounts and their content. Instead the interaction with these accounts takes place in the form of replies and quote tweets rather than retweets. Following Voloshinov, we have shown how retweeting establishes an authoritative relation to the original message and may therefore be conducive to authority, while replies and quote-tweets embed the original tweet in a new context and often infuse it with irony. This creates ambiguity and undermines the legal-rational foundations upon which state agencies base their public communication. In other words, as the crisis prolongs what is perceived as the authoritative content from the government accounts decreases and what is taken as material for retort and ridicule increases. Similarly, what is retweeted extensively toward the end of our data period are tweets that are critical of the government position.

Voloshinov provided us with the insight that changing patterns of reported speech are indicators of ongoing contest over relations of power in society. A recurring theme in our data is the ironic or parodic depiction of legal-rational authority's conduct as procedurally correct but substantively empty. This may be caused or at least be fuelled by Swedish attempts to keep scientific expertise and political responsibility distinct from one another, as herd-immunity, open schools, or no masks are policies that rely as much on expertise as on political stance. Claiming the opposite has become the prime target of ironic appropriations in different forms of reported speech that contest legal-rational authority during COVID-crisis.

The data further shows that whilst irony has turned out to be an effective strategy for the public to appropriate government messages, the same does not work for a legal-rational authority. Most often irony is perceived as a force to counter any authority—a theme developed both in literature and philosophy—but in recent years irony has become a banal excuse for politically incorrect rant. For Rorty, irony can serve as a critical force that renders the contingency of any conviction apparent (Rorty, 1989). This would enable a realization of one's epistemic limits, something that Zürn's concept of reflexive authority builds upon. For Zürn, the conscious subjugation to authority is possible in face of acknowledgment of one's own limits of knowing, yielding to recognition of authority's superior competence. There seems to be two different kinds of irony, Rorty's liberal irony that reveals one's contingency and the more recent irony of dilettantism and consequent cynicism (Grimwood, 2021). The problem here for a legal-rational authority is that Twitter allows for an easy fusion of verbal and situational irony, i.e., verbal wittiness and situational events perceived as ironic. To counter that, legal-rational authority needs to prove its ongoing engagement with events on the ground, much like Rosanvallon's observation that the legitimacy of authority must be demonstrated and it is earned *post-hoc*.

Finally, this article has shown that communication in social media, although regulated by all powerful algorithms, nevertheless yields to classical qualitative textual analysis. All too often the medium of social media is conceived of in (solely) technical terms muddling the human action that it conveys. Big data has diverted social media analysis to confirming correlations between variables that perhaps lack an obvious relationship substituting content with the volume of data. The common turn to "metrics" as an indication of different social relations is an example of that. Looking at the "volume of interaction" more closely and with a Voloshinovian perspective reveals clear patterns of human interaction through Twitter. The technological affordances of Twitter do *affect* communication, but they do not render it a meaningless mass. This finding—currently based on one case study and focusing on individuals' relations to public authorities—opens a new potential way to operationalise digital authority. For example, future quantitative undertakings to measure authority in the digital space could differentiate between retweets on the one hand and replies and quote-tweets on the other. One could further refine the operationalisation of such studies by considering the distinction between replies and quote-tweets where the former tends to undermine the authority of the sender whilst the latter the credibility of the content. Such quantitative follow up studies are essential to corroborate the theory.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for the study in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The data was sourced in accordance with the institution's Twitter API licensing agreement.

Author contributions

JT and SW are the main authors. WA-S provided Mecodify support, collected and organized the empirical data, and contributed with expertise on Twitter. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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