

Article

The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland during a Public Health Emergency*

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Abstract

This article aims to give insight into discursive means used by rulers in Poland to claim the right to rule during a public health emergency. Grounded in Johannes Gerschewski's, Christian von Soest's and Julia Grauvogel's theory of legitimacy claims and Gideon Lasco's theory of medical populism, the study identifies the evolution and characteristics of legitimacy claims at pandemic junctures critical to political regime stability. By using content and thematic analysis of news distributed by partisan media, the study uncovers justifications for autocratic rule in Poland aimed at shaping elite cohesion, opposition activity, and the potential political support of the ruled. Legitimacy claims rested upon non-medical and medical populism to a large extent. The latter provided semantic structures useful to account for the unprecedented extension of the ruling party's power competencies and limitation of personal and civic freedoms. Moreover, while claims of dramatic restrictions and lockdowns marked the pandemic's beginning, its further stages brought out a "vaccine messianism" and optimism related to crisis management performance.

The coronavirus pandemic has considerably impacted ongoing political conflicts, power struggles, and (in)stability of political regimes across the world. Election campaigns and elections are vital for the final results of this impact. It is due to the tremendous risk a public health emergency poses to the ability of state authorities to provide safe, universal, equal, genuine, and transparent elections. From this perspective, critical elements of the electoral cycle include

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cancellation, postponement, postal voting, electronic voting (Landman and Di Gennaro Splendore, 2020, pp. 1061–1062), and candidates' access to the mass media while running campaigns (Francia, 2018).

In Poland, the right-wing ruling Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) was not eager to postpone the presidential election, which was to be held during a public health emergency even in the face of rising infections, deaths, and widespread criticism (Bill and Stanley, 2020). The incumbent president Andrzej Duda, and at the same time the PiS candidate, was the frontrunner to win a second five-year term. However, as the number of infections and deaths from coronavirus disease increased and the inefficiency and weaknesses of the Polish health care system were exposed, the level of public support for Duda began to decline (Pytlas, 2021). The independent media strengthened the image of Duda as an indecisive, passive president, following the president of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński's orders. At the same time, the most influential politicians of the ruling party, including Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, were engaged in maintaining, increasing, and rebuilding support for the incumbent president (Rezmer-Płotka, 2021). Significant support also came from partisan institutions, especially state media subordinated to the ruling party since 2015, which engaged in the discursive legitimisation of Duda and the delegitimisation of his counter-candidates and opponents organising resistance (Rak, Bäcker, and Osiewicz, 2021). As the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights underlined, for the first time in democratic Poland, the public broadcaster TVP failed to meet its legal duty to provide fair and balanced coverage (ODIHR, 2020, p. 4).

For the ruling camp, the loss of the president's position in favour of any other candidate, mainly supported by the opposition, would mean slowing down or weakening the ongoing autocratisation (Bill and Stanley, 2020). Therefore, the pandemic-driven campaign was a time of increased sustaining and seeking public support for Duda and PiS to rule. Meanwhile, the burning issues of public health and crisis management could not remain unanswered. They uncovered new social needs, expectations, and forced the search for novel ways of gaining political legitimacy to rule. These observations motivate the following research question: what discursive means did the ruling party use to claim the right to rule at pandemic junctures critical to political regime stability?

Accordingly, the study aims to give insight into self-legitimising political statements, i.e., discursive means used by the ruling party to claim the right to rule during the pandemic. By adopting a dynamic approach, I identify the evolution and characteristics of legitimacy claims at pandemic junctures critical to political regime stability. In addition, I delve analytically into the widely distributed semantic structures to uncover justifications for autocratic rule in Poland aimed at shaping elite cohesion, opposition activity, and the potential political support of the ruled.

I advance a thesis that the incumbent president, the representatives of PiS, and the state media on behalf of the ruling party (hereinafter: rulers) used medical and non-medical populism to claim the right to autocratic rule. They served them as “a legitimacy idea” (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 18) behind intensified autocratisation. Moreover, legitimacy claims drew upon medical populism

to a large extent. The latter provided semantic structures useful to account for the unprecedented extension of rulers' power competencies and limitation of personal and political rights of the ruled. Medical populism is understood here as a set of discursive means based on references to public health crises, in which ruled, supported by rulers, oppose entities acting to the detriment of the former (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1417). It builds the image of political reality upon antagonistic relationships between selected political subjects (Lasco and Curato, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, I argue that legitimacy claims evolved in the line of early predictions regarding the development of medical populism. Accordingly, while claims of dramatic limitations and lockdowns marked the pandemic's beginning, its further stages brought out a "vaccine messianism" and optimism related to crisis management performance (Lasco, 2020a, p. 1802).

The paper proceeds as follows. I first discuss the current literature on legitimacy claims and expose the coronavirus-induced vacuum in justifying new power relationships between the ruling party members, rulers and the opposition, and rulers and ruled. Then, I combine the theoretical framework of claiming the right to rule with the theoretical category of medical populism to explore the identified gap. Building upon the literature on the dimensions of medical populism as the components of legitimacy claims, I offer theory-grounded methodological assumptions for an empirical study. The remainder of the article delivers research results on the evolution and distinctive features of medical and non-medical populism used to make legitimacy claims. It also provides representative examples to illustrate arguments. The study sheds light on the changing distribution of simplifying the pandemic, dramatisation of the crisis, forging of divisions, and invocation of knowledge claims (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1417) within the model of legitimacy claim-making in Covid-driven Poland.

Literature Review

Current research indicates that legitimacy claims form a political system's means of rule and stability (Tannenberget al., 2021, p. 80). In a time of ongoing autocratisation, intensified by a pandemic (Thomson and Ip, 2020), legitimacy research is essential to understand the dynamics of changing political systems (Alagappa, 1995, pp. 31–32). An analytically efficient theoretical basis for recent studies on the essence of legitimation is Johannes Gerschewski's theory, which applies to examine all current political systems. It emphasises that anti- and non-democratic rulers cannot rely only on their abuse of power in the long term. Since they have to seek legitimacy, a "legitimacy idea" underlies any political order. According to Gerschewski, legitimacy, repression, and co-optation can thwart the threat of political system breakdown "that could stem from three sources: from the ordinary citizens whose non-compliance usually takes the form of popular uprisings and rebellions; from oppositional actors that organise resistance; and lastly from intra-elite splits in which strategically important elites deviate from the ruling elite's course" (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 18). This theoretical model shows that the lower the acceptance for rulers' actions gained from other members of the political elite, the opposition, and ruled, the more likely the loss of legitimacy to rule and the resulting collapse of the political system. Accordingly, legitimacy claims have critical poli-

tical consequences regarding elite cohesion, opposition activity, and potential regime support (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015, p. 7).

Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel develop Gerschewski's theory by arguing that strong claims to legitimacy build collective identity, strengthening the cohesion among the ruling elite (2015, p. 7). However, they also set relationships between rulers and ruled. As Marcus Tannenberg et al. show, the sources of legitimation determine the structure of power and domination, including the types of obedience, administrative staff developed to ensure it, and a means of exercising authority (Tannenberg et al., 2021, p. 80). Claims to legitimacy understood as the right to rule are a helpful tool to create populations' perceptions of the legitimacy of authoritarian rule. Thereby, they serve rulers to maintain their entitlement to rule, which is especially important in times of crisis (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015, p. 7). Notably, claims to legitimacy can serve to justify coercive power and create political authority regardless of the type of political regime. At the same time, they are used to justify, or at least sanction, the existing political authority. By asking for legitimacy, rulers justify the proposed scopes of their power competencies and the expected extent to which ruled relinquish their power competencies.

Gerschewski underlines that a democratic regime protects civil freedoms. Those freedoms are exercised in line with (e.g., voting during elections) or against rulers' interests (e.g., exercising the freedom of assembly as a means of anti-government protest), which results from internalised political values. However, those values are not from the outset but might be worked out over time through claims to legitimacy to stabilise any political structure under construction (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 14). Claims to legitimacy change over time, and their changes reflect shifts in the basis on which rulers justify their right to rule (Tannenberg et al., 2021, p. 80).

Tracking the dynamics of claim-making is helpful to comprehend the moment, nature, and direction of structural changes in political regimes. It is crucial in times of crisis because it sets the direction of change to ensure a way out of such a crisis. Note that the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic-induced crisis in Poland might have involved reversing or reinforcing authoritarian tendencies.

What is more, claims to legitimacy create a structure within which ruled can shape rulers' decision-making processes, including manifesting dissent (Tannenberg et al., 2021, p. 80). At the same time, those claims restrict the agenda by saying who can criticise rulers and in which ways (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015, 7). It entails setting the boundaries of allowed political participation.

When faced with pandemic-related challenges, rulers made statements that fell into the patterns of the current strands of populism. Nonetheless, the forms of populism used so far across the world have turned out to be insufficient to justify rulers' role in the novel power structure. The ruling camps had to explain their increased powers competencies, the introduction of lockdowns, the associated reduction of income, and restrictions on personal and political freedoms. Simultaneously, ruled demanded answers to questions about the sources of the pandemic, when it ends, and ways to protect their health, life,

and lifestyles. They wanted a swift response to a public health emergency and expected the ruling to overcome the social and economic crisis it caused (Eberl, Huber, and Greussing, 2021, p. 273).

As a result, the ruling turned to medical populism that could also be observed, e.g., during recent infectious disease outbreaks like H1N1 and Ebola (Hedges and Lasco, 2021, p. 74). Medical populism is a set of discursive means based on references to public health crises, in which ruled, supported by the rulers, oppose entities acting to the detriment of the former (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1417). Like other forms of populism, it builds the image of political reality upon antagonistic relationships between selected political subjects (Lasco and Curato, 2019, p. 1). However, as Gideon Lasco emphasises, medical populism draws on a public health emergency, whereas other forms of populism draw energy from cultural and economic insecurity (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1419).

Lasco determines four essential features of medial populism. The first, simplifying the pandemic, assumes devaluating the situation's complexity through discursive practices. They include delivering fast, common-sense solutions, promising quick fixes, downplaying the severity of the threat, arguing for limiting freedoms and economy in the name of public health, replacing scientific knowledge with first-hand experience. The second feature is the dramatisation of the crisis. It consists of depicting the situation to look more dramatic than it is, which often rests upon exaggeration and distortion. Populists overstate threats from which they promise to protect the people, their reaction to a crisis, and actions to restore public order. Thus, they justify achieving new emergency power competencies. The third characteristic listed by Lasco is the forging of divisions. Political actors divide society into two camps and include themselves in "the aggrieved people" against whom "the others" act. The latter camp puts public health in jeopardy. The last feature is the invocation of knowledge claims. Populists make knowledge claims to simplify, dramatise, and split a political structure. Conjectures regard the development of the crisis, medical solutions, science, and the future (Lasco, 2020b, pp. 1418–1419).

In sum, Lasco's four dimensions of medical populism can be used to examine legitimacy claims related to health emergency threats. At the same time, this theoretical tool applies not only to measure authoritarian claims to the right to rule. It is useful to investigate all political claims that contain references to any medical threat since it allows researchers to delve into provided justifications in terms of benefits for audience for accepting the claims. However, researchers cannot assume that the pandemic-induced vacuum in justifying new power relationships between the ruling party members, rulers and the opposition, rulers and ruled is the only one to be fulfilled (Fischbacher-Smith 2021, p. 303). Instead, struggles for public goods unrelated to the public health crisis generate constant needs to justify existing and expected power relationships. Therefore, it is analytically efficient to differentiate between medical and non-medical populism to comprehensively capture the basis of all legitimacy claims. Hence, by drawing on Lasco's model, the article considers simplifying the political situation/pandemic, dramatising the crisis, the forging of divisions, and invocation of knowledge claims (Lasco, 2020b, pp. 1418–1419) as the discursive components of legitimacy claims.

Methods and Sources

In this article, I engage with the above theoretical framework to make sense of medical and non-medical populism, included to legitimacy claims by rulers in Poland during critical moments for its political regime stability. I do so by delving analytically into how they claimed the right to rule. To provide an insight into the changes in claims to legitimacy, the study adopts a dynamic perspective. The analysis covers the first two waves of the pandemic.

The first one lasted from March 4, 2020, to August 3, 2020, and required legitimacy to rule in times of crisis and support for political decisions that changed the way of life of Poles and limited their personal and civic freedoms (Rezmer-Płotka, 2021). At that time, the presidential campaign was also going on. In March 2020, in Poland, the government confirmed the first case of coronavirus infection (March 4), introduced (March 10) and strengthened the first Covid-19-induced restrictions (March 16), imposed a national lockdown (March 16), and officially announced an epidemic (March 20) after the World Health Organization declared a pandemic (March 11). On August 3, 2020, the Supreme Court (*Sąd Najwyższy*), composed of the Chamber of Extraordinary Control and Public Affairs (*Izba Kontroli Nadzwyczajnej i Spraw Publicznych*), based on the election report presented by the National Electoral Commission (*Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza*) and after examining the election protests, adopted a resolution on the validity of the president's election made on July 12, 2020 (Uchwała Sądu Najwyższego, 2020). It meant the final victory of Duda and the ruling camp in the elections. Those events coincided with the end of the first wave of the pandemic in Poland.

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when the second wave of the pandemic commenced and ended. For this article, the time frame is October 17, 2020–May 12, 2021. In early summer 2020, the level of infection was low and stable, with a sharp increase in September. From the perspective of the need to obtain legitimacy, an important date was October 17, 2020. The government introduced a sanitary regime and divided Poland into yellow and red zones, i.e., regions with stricter and milder restrictions depending on the number of new coronavirus case rates for 10 000 inhabitants. However, the red zone and new rules came into force in the entire country on October 23. The government tightened the existing and imposed further restrictions during the following months. It was not until April 2021 that the restrictions were relaxed, and the government accelerated their lifting on May 12, 2021. The government's response to the second wave involved the most severe restrictions of civil liberties in democratic Poland so far. Therefore, their justification required unprecedented efforts from rulers.

Additionally, the second wave coincided with the second phase of anti-government protests against the tightening of abortion laws in Poland (the first took place in 2016–2017). They lasted from October 22, 2020, to the first half of 2021. While protests against government policies continued during the successive waves of the pandemic, they were less attended and numerous. The cause of the mass mobilisation, one of the largest in the history of Poland, was the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal (*Trybunał Konstytucyjny*) on the non-

compliance with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of abortion due to the suspicion of severe and irreversible foetal impairment or an incurable life-threatening disease. Bioethical issues polarised Poles and the ruling elite (Tucak and Blagojević, 2021, p. 857). The government struggled with social protests and had to stop the emergence of a revolutionary situation. Only 13 per cent of Poles supported the government in this matter (TVN24, 2020). Meantime, the cohesion of the ruling elite has decreased because the level of support for changing the anti-abortion law divided it. Despite the unaccomplished goals, there was a social demobilisation due to the inefficient use of the social movement's resources, the common desire to return to the routine of everyday life, and the routinisation of innovative and entertaining types of protests (Rezmer-Płotka, 2021).

Hence, the first two waves were critical in keeping the political elite coherent, united, and gaining at least passive acceptance from the opposition and ruled. During the successive waves, the government relaxed and imposed lighter restrictions on civil liberties, the existing regulations were routinised, and there were no strict lockdowns. Activists, exhausted by unsuccessful protests, often gave up political activity. The resources of the so far active social movements have shrunk. Mass mobilisation gave way to single anti-government assemblies, not very numerous, with low turnout. They were fragmented and concerned with various issues ranging from anti-vaccine demands, through opponents of covering the mouth and nose in public space, to the impoverishment of entrepreneurs and farmers (Žuk and Žuk, 2020). Such protests did not pose a severe threat to the government, as they could not undermine its political legitimacy.

The qualitative source analysis considers partisan media used as a pro-government propaganda tube by the ruling party. Their inclusion in the corpus of sources was necessary to evaluate claims to legitimacy aimed at gaining public support among the ruled. After the 2015 parliamentary election, PiS passed a media law that gave the government complete control over public broadcasting, i.e., TVP all-Polish and local channels. The former had extensive coverage and allowed the ruling party to get their message across to a broad audience and influence public awareness. On the one hand, state media had one of the lowest brand trust scores in Poland. On the other hand, they were one of the most opinion-forming media during the pandemic. The highest score among TVP channels achieved a news channel TVP Info (Institute for Media Monitoring, 2020).

Let us delve into the details of partisan media-derived sources. In 2020, *Wiadomości* (a major news release on TVP1) attracted an average of 2.2 million viewers, *Teleexpress* (an afternoon news release on TVP1 and TVP Info) – 1.99 million viewers, *Panorama* (a major news release on TVP2) – 1.11 million viewers, while the major news programmes of commercial broadcasters, i.e., *Wydarzenia* (a major news release on Polsat) – 1.71 million viewers and *Fakty* (a major news release on TVN) – 2.68 million viewers (Koziełski, 2021). Whereas Polsat and TVN attracted liberal audiences mainly from large cities, TVP was selected by a conservative audience from provinces. The independent media were critical of the government, selectively conveyed politicians' statements,

and presented their various interpretations. Giving space to government press conferences, comments, and interviews with the ruling camp representatives, TVP enabled the ruling to disseminate their claims to legitimacy in an expected form.

Accordingly, the corpus of sources includes *Wiadomości* (TVP 1) – a major news release at 19:30, *Teleexpress* (TVPI and TVP Info) at 17:00, and *Panorama* (TVP 2) – a major news release at 18:00. These are news programmes with the highest viewership in state-owned television on the two most important all-Polish channels. In addition, it includes news spread online on the news portal TVP Info because the Internet was the primary source of news in Poland, even though older generations still obtain information from television. Facebook and Twitter were not included in the corpus of sources since they were little used as a means of public communication with the ruled. Rulers used their public accounts on these platforms to duplicate the content broadcast on TVP.

The iterative process of source analysis consisted of skimming, detailed examination, and interpretation of every twentieth news from the corpus of sources. It involved content analysis and thematic analysis news (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). Audio and written content providing descriptions and interpretations of power relationships in the Polish political structure was considered a vehicle for legitimacy claims. Visual content offered the images of speaking guests, journalists, and contentious performances. Nonetheless, it was of secondary importance due to acting as a background to the other types of content, and hence it was excluded from the corpus of sources.

The units of analysis were text passages delivering a whole idea of a justification for the right to rule. The analysis commenced with identifying text passages that contained direct references to power relationships between rulers and ruled, the ruling party members, rulers and the opposition in the Polish political structure. This step was followed by organising information into categories related to the four theory-driven medical and non-medical populism dimensions. The categories included simplifying the political situation/pandemic, dramatising the crisis, forging of divisions, and invocation of knowledge claims (Lasco, 2020b, pp. 1418–1419). The theoretical framework consisted of the qualitative indicators of medical populism manifestations proposed by Lasco.

The thematic analysis allowed me to determine themes pertinent to individual dimensions of medical populism. Re-reading and reviewing the identified text passages fuelled a manual thematic analysis that rested upon coding and category building based on data characteristics (Bowen, 2009, pp. 31–32). The data- and concept-driven coding of news content drew on establishing the properties of legitimacy claims derived from Lasco's theoretical framework. I found the latter useful to differentiate between medical populism expressions in terms of their four analytical dimensions. Besides, I supplemented Lasco's model with the distinctive features of non-medical populism to develop its exploratory range. In an extended form, it served me to build a continuum to measuring a share of medical populism in populist legitimacy claims.

The first dimension covered simplification of the political situation or the

pandemic for non-medical and medical populism, respectively. Simplification is a common feature of these two types of populism (Brubaker, 2020; Lasco and Yu, 2021). However, they differ in a subject of simplification. A medical variant occurred when somebody devaluated the complexity of a health emergency situation by delivering fast, common-sense solutions, promising quick fixes to pandemic-induced problems, downplaying the severity of the health threat, arguing for limiting freedoms and economy in the name of public health, replacing scientific knowledge with first-hand experience (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1418). A non-medical variant drew upon delivering similarly fast and straightforward solutions but to problems unrelated to the pandemic threat.

The second dimension included dramatising peculiar to populism in general (Brubaker, 2018; Lasco and Larson, 2020). However, depending on what is made to seem more serious, important, or exciting than it really is, one can differentiate between its types. Dramatising the political situation or coronavirus crisis is typical of non-medical and medical populism, respectively. It was confirmed when somebody presented a problem so that it looked more dramatic than it was, exaggerated, and distorted facts to justify achieving new emergency power competencies or unpopular political decisions. Indicative was the rhetoric of conspiracy, emergency, and war (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1419). The threats from which somebody promised to protect the people were spectacular; their reaction to a crisis was tremendous, aimed at restoring, maintaining public order, and providing general security.

The third dimension was “the forging of divisions.” It is characteristic of both types of populism (De La Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019, p. 81; Lasco and Yu, 2021), and appeared when somebody divided society into two camps and included themselves in “the aggrieved people” against whom “the others” acted. Nonetheless, it was typical of medical populism that “the others” put public health at risk (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1419). In turn, a non-medical variant involved a menace to other public goods.

In line with Lasco’s framework, the fourth dimension, invocation of knowledge claims peculiar to both types of populism (Singer, 2021; Lasco and Larson, 2020), supported the others. Medical populism rested on presumptions about the coronavirus’s origin, epidemiology, pathophysiology, suggested cures, solutions, projections, and prognostications about the pandemic development and post-pandemic future. In contrast, non-medical populist knowledge claims covered the same type of presumptions but were unrelated to public health protection. Such knowledge claims ranged from those inconsistent with established scientific facts to fake news (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1419).

An inductive approach bolstered data analysis using a constant comparative method. The latter enabled me to spot the data’s theoretical characteristics of medical and non-medical populism. Furthermore, a back-and-forth interplay with the data served me to examine codes and concepts. I mutually juxtaposed pieces of data derived from the corpus of sources and used codes to organise ideas behind legitimacy claims. The codes allowed me to define clustering concepts and uncover the use of medical and non-medical populism at the theoretical level of its dimensions (Bowen, 2009, p. 37). Finally, I identified consistent themes and patterns across legitimacy claims.

Research Results

During the first wave of the pandemic, rulers expressed their understanding of the seriousness of the novel threat to public health. The priority was to limit the transmission of the coronavirus. However, they devaluated the complexity of a situation by delivering fast and common-sense solutions typical of medical populism. Rulers presented a simplified picture of the spectacular fight against the pandemic, arguing that the restrictions of personal and civil liberties, especially the freedom of movement and public assembly, economic activity, public transport, and strict lockdowns, would contribute to ending the pandemic (e.g., “These restrictions are to protect all citizens against the development of an epidemic that threatens human health and life” (TVP 2020, May 17)). Immediate limitations aimed to prevent the spread of the pandemic and protect human health and lives (e.g., “The decision was made ‘to save the lives of many Poles’” (TVP 2020, March 24)). Rulers replaced scientific knowledge with first-hand experience and other pro-government media’s supportive opinions by arguing for limiting freedoms and the economy in the name of public health (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1418). They showed the need to strengthen their executive powers at the expense of the sovereignty of the political nation to tackle a public health emergency. The observance of restrictions and total submission were dramatised and recognised as expressions of patriotism. Meanwhile, there were no substantive arguments for the efficiency of these regulations and no justification for the unequal distribution of public goods. The latter took the form of allowing only ruling party members to visit graveyards during All Saints’ Day, hold, and participate in gatherings. Other citizens became deprived of these rights.

Rulers promised quick fixes to pandemic-induced problems and praised the high efficiency of current policies (e.g., “Impressive increase in Poles’ salaries”, “Unlike many other countries, we have managed to significantly reduce layoffs. Successive Anti-crisis Shields strongly influenced the market and stabilised the situation” (TVP 2021, April 22)). The government’s flagship program was Anti-crisis Shields, i.e., packages of solutions to protect the Polish state and citizens against the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The shields drew on the following pillars: job protection and worker safety, financing of entrepreneurs, health protection, strengthening the financial system, and public investment. Despite the criticism of the involved, rulers expressed faith in the policies’ great importance for saving the domestic market (e.g., “We are doing everything within our Anti-crisis Shields to ensure that the [economic] collapse in Poland is significantly lower [than in Great Britain]. Also, the level of unemployment does not reach these 20 per cent, because unemployment was such a nightmare of the Third Republic of Poland for 25 years” (TVP 2020, May 3)). They promised that Poles would enjoy the government’s usual support and social programmes when the epidemic ends. While the promises of a quick eradication of the virus from everyday life and the economy’s recovery were typical of the first wave of the pandemic, the alleged evidence of fulfilled promises emerged during the second wave.

First, prognoses and predictions regarding a fast return to normality focused

on pending vaccine development and approval. At the same time, there was no substantive discussion about the search for drugs or the results of research on them. However, rulers warned against frauds selling counterfeit drugs and thereby claimed to protect Poles from risking their own lives, health, and losing money. In spite of the inefficiency and the increasingly apparent failure of the Polish health care system, rulers maintained that crisis management was efficient if Poles obeyed restrictions and followed their recommendations. Then, prognoses went on to draw upon the occurrence of vaccine and expected mass vaccination. Rulers dramatised their efforts to obtain vaccines for all Poles who wanted to be vaccinated, distribute vaccines, and share them with other countries. They also highlighted the success of crisis management actors in preventing the spread of the virus. The government was cast in the role of a saviour that provided Poles with free vaccines and efficient public service and thus acted to restore public health. “Vaccine messianism” and optimism related to crisis management performance were peculiar to the second wave (Lasco, 2020a, p. 1802).

In terms of simplifying and dramatising a public health emergency, medical populism prevailed and was very intense during the pandemic junctures critical to political regime stability. The pandemic was the subject or context of simplified images of political events. It served rulers to describe the developments of political significance. A non-medical variant was of low intensity and employed to comment on politically irrelevant issues and hence useless to shape the power relationships.

Civic subordination, relevant to an image of the pandemic development, was closely related to contentious politics. Whatever the subject of protest, they were all labelled anti-government, which simplified a picture of the political situation. Participation in contestation meant exclusion from “we” and determined major divisions. Accordingly, “the others” excluded from the community hampered implementing the government’s recovery plans. Their behaviour reduced the effectiveness of crisis management.

Rulers constantly included themselves in “the aggrieved people” against whom “the others” acted. Although the structure of divisions changed, it was not dependent on the dynamics of infections, death rates, or the social sense of threat. Instead, it was closely related to the level of resources deployed to express opposition to the government (e.g., turnout during and a number of anti-government protests), a sense of threat and threat to the ruling position. Creating and consolidating divisions was an indicator of the fear of the collapse of the political system.

At the beginning of the public health emergency, rulers strengthened pre-pandemic divisions by drawing on medical populism. They excluded the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (*Komitet Obrony Demokracji, KOD*) and the Citizens of Poland (*Obywatele RP, ORP*), the civic organisations and protest movements established after the Polish Constitutional Court crisis of 2015, from “we.” For the sake of clarity, the constitutional crisis has disrupted the balance between different branches of power in Poland. The executive power claims the right to verify Constitutional Tribunal’s judgments and declines to recognise and execute them (Szuleka, et al., 2016, p. 6). These social move-

ments were against autocratisation and extending the ruling party's power competencies at the expense of reducing the sovereignty of the Polish political nation.

Rulers insisted that KOD and ORP should have finished anti-government protests because such public gatherings put human lives and health at risk, and successful recovery from the pandemic required solidarity and unity (e.g., "They act like they were aliens. They completely do not comprehend that today people expect from the authorities the reduction of the number of infections among Poles in order to protect them against epidemics, illnesses, and deaths. The authorities do it. Warning over the idea of protest is against public opinion. If the opposition wants to continue to lose respect and credibility, let it lose" (TVP 2020, March 16)). The creation of this division was intended to reduce support for grassroots civic initiatives led by protest movements. Rulers warned citizens against joining anti-government protests to keep them from being with madmen who would pose a threat to themselves and others (e.g., "I see something insane in the eyes of these people" (TVP 2020, March 6)). At the same time, having been aware of the insufficiency of the health system and political structure, rulers aimed to avert the threat of destabilisation or breakdown of the political system under construction.

However, the exclusion of protest movement participants from the community of Poles rested on non-medical populism as well. Rulers assumed the role of guardians of public morality and supporters of rational civic activity. In their opinion, long-lasting strikes, creation, and living in the Tent Town "Freedom" next to the Sejm building were associated with functioning in inhuman and humiliating conditions (e.g., "The plague is growing in front of the Presidential Palace" (TVP 2020, March 16)). At the same time, the political importance of the protesters was diminished (e.g., "They are a small but vociferous group" (TVP 2020, March 6)). According to rulers, anti-government protests were joined by people who took part in all possible demonstrations on a daily basis, regardless of their claims. Thus, the credibility of actual opposition to government policy was called into question (e.g., "A strange composition in general (...) a strong mix of all people anti-everything" (TVP 2020, May 16)).

During the first wave of the pandemic, in May 2020, there was a breakthrough in creating divisions. By imposing a ban on organising and participating in public assemblies, the government illegalised protests and meetings President Duda's counter-candidates held with their voters. In 2015, the ruling party amended the law on public assemblies so that the legal definition of a public assembly does not include assemblies organised by state bodies. Thus, the ban, justified by the pandemic threat, did not apply to Duda's meetings with his followers and potential voters.

Firstly, the legal change underlay a division into those who could exercise their civil rights, i.e., the ruling party and its supporters, and those who could not, i.e., the opposition, Duda's counter-candidates, and citizens gathering for a purpose other than to support the government. It served rulers to set the boundaries of allowed political participation. Secondly, rulers divided Poles into criminals who broke the law and law-abiding citizens. They included themselves in the latter. On the one hand, the so-called criminals risked their

own and others' lives and health (e.g., "vicious violations of all safety rules" (TVP 2020, May 8)), which was characteristic of medical populism. On the other hand, rulers took advantage of non-medical populism. The acts of illegally assembled people were directed against the protection, creation, and distribution of other public goods such as public order, safety, bodily integrity of law enforcement officers, property, and uninterrupted road traffic (e.g., "typical street banditry," "hooligan quirks" (TVP 2020, May 27)).

Duda's re-election did not bring about the disappearance of divisions. Although the incumbent's opponents were no longer treated as a threat to his position and the ruling party, protest movements were still active. Participants in protests against the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal were portrayed as aggressive criminals (e.g., "the gathering is illegal due to anti-epidemic restrictions" (TVP 2021, March 8), "Marta Lempart kept provoking the crowd to press against the officers protecting the politician's house. She was vulgar and aggressive, (...) strove for force confrontation" (TVP 2021, January 29)).

During the second wave of the pandemic, the activity of protest movements was still presented as a threat to Poles' lives and health. Participation in public assemblies was a manifestation of extreme social irresponsibility. Rulers ignored the varied postulates but drew the audience's attention to the anti-government tone of contestation actions. The mass mobilisation initiated by the All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK) was treated the same way as the activities of KOD and ORP. The division rested on both medical and non-medical populism. However, in contrast to KOD and ORP, a characteristic element of OSK's slogans and banners was their vulgarity, which was supposed to symbolise the helplessness and extremity of protest measures. Rulers consistently quoted the words of activists to show that they were not part of a polite and mutually respectful community (e.g., "Poles as a civilised nation do not want such people to function in public space" (TVP 2021, March 9)). Protests were described as brutal clashes between aggressive opponents of the government and peaceful police officers defending Poles (e.g., "Previously, they thought that they could go unpunished, but now they realised that the punishing hand of the Polish state operates and the enthusiasm of many for street brawls evaporated" (TVP 2021, March 9)). Rulers dramatised protesters' civil disorder and the partisan police's actions to restore public order and provide general security.

Moreover, rulers continued to discredit oppositional actors that organised resistance by pointing out that they were at odds, plunged into quarrels, fragmented, and without a coherent programme. The lost presidential election was deemed to confirm the weakness of the opposition. Simultaneously, the image of a strong ruling camp enjoying broad social support, which proved its strength with electoral victory, was reinforced. Rulers divided Poles into the winners who supported the ruling party and the losers who constituted the political minority. The latter did not have a leader who could reverse the situation. Leaders were portrayed as weak and acting in their own, not collective, interest e.g., "The voice of frivolous people, not to be reckoned with. They are detached from this movement and try to pursue their own interests" (TVP 2021, May 5). Leaders were often ridiculed to undermine their claims to rule

“The political theses about the self-dissolution of the government, capitulation, and submission to their dictatorship, formed by these people, were even of a cabaret character” (TVP 2021, May 5). Accordingly, the opposition had no leader capable of representing citizens.

In terms of the forging of divisions, the distribution of medical and non-medical populism changed over time. The intensity of the former was very high at the beginning of the pandemic. Later, the threat to public health ceased to be the only public good to which references structured divisions. With the increase in the threat to the ruling party’s position of power and the resulting need to enhance legitimacy, non-medical populism began to be included in legitimacy claims. The lower the legitimacy, which was manifested in decreased public support, increased activism of oppositional actors that organised resistance, and progressive intra-elite splits, the more numerous the public goods at risk were presented in the state discourse.

Rulers avoided making the origins of the coronavirus a reference point to their legitimacy claims. Instead, they widely referred to suggested cures, solutions, projections, and prognostications about the pandemic development and post-pandemic future (Lasco, 2020b, p. 1419). Invocation of knowledge claims was consistently based on the opinions of other journalists supporting the government (e.g., from “Gazeta Polska Codziennie”), experienced politicians (e.g., Mateusz Morawiecki), medical practitioners (e.g., “American doctors”), experts (e.g., from state institutions such as the Chief Sanitary Inspector (*Główny Inspektor Sanitarny*)), and academics (e.g., Cory M. Smith). The most popular ones included “American scientists.” Most of all, the group of specialists contained, but was not restricted to, on the one hand, those who supported the ruling party with their research and statements, legitimising its actions, and, on the other hand, academics unrecognisable in the scientific community, for whom it was the only chance to appear in the all-Polish media coverage.

With respect to the invocation of knowledge claims, the intensity of medical populism was very high and constant during the whole period under analysis. Assertions about the development of the public health crisis, medical solutions, science, and the future supported and illustrated simplification, dramatisation, and the forging of divisions. Non-medical populism emerged along with the need to justify why “the others” endangered the distribution of public goods other than public health and why “they” had no appropriate leader to represent “them.” Accordingly, in this dimension, the changes in the distribution of two variants of populism reflected the variation in the forging of divisions.

Conclusion and Discussion

At the start of the pandemic, when fear of infection by an unknown and deadly virus was greatest, the government met little resistance to imposing restrictions and increasing their executive powers unlawfully. It was at the expense of reducing the sovereignty of the political nation. Besides, such decisions were made quickly and justified only after their implementation, which was inconsistent with the rule of law. Simultaneously, the government feared the aspirations of the political nation to regain its sovereignty. To prevent such a situation, rulers accounted for the government’s role in the power structure.

Medical and non-medical populism-based justifications for autocratic rule in Poland aimed to shape the potential political support of the ruled, opposition activity, and elite cohesion.

The greatest realised threat was posed by ordinary citizens, whose opposition to government policy escalated over the first two waves of the pandemic. In the state discourse, the threat to the ruling elites was transformed into danger to ordinary Poles, and in the next phase of discursive delegitimation, it was dimmed by ridicule. The government claimed the right to rule to save ruled from this threat.

Moreover, the simplified and dramatic picture covered the relationships between the three significant collective political entities. The first involved protesters who put their own and others' lives and health at risk, were aggressive and irrational criminals. The second included government supporters who required and received social, economic, and medical help. The third was the ruling, i.e., saviours and defenders who offered their help and protection to all Poles. Repressions, civil rights restrictions, and the increase in executive powers were described as the cost and means of controlling those who refused to conform, thus hindering the fight against the pandemic and crisis management efficiency.

Opposition politicians, especially those who led the protest movements or were Duda's counter-candidates in the presidential election, also put the government at tremendous risk. Rulers discursively included the opposition in the category of protesters, thus attributing to them the characteristics attributed to protesters and marginalising their political significance. The lack of a trustworthy and widely supported leader on the opposition's side was considered an argument for the non-alternative nature of the ruling party. Rulers were also afraid of splits within the ruling elite, which was manifested in calls to stay united and fight the pandemic together. During the crisis, the government ascribed to itself a unique ability to represent citizens and manage the public health crisis efficiently. In the face of the lack of opposition, the ruling camp in its present shape was the only one capable of governing in crisis-ridden Poland. This image was supposed to stop the unspoken emergence of intra-elite splits.

To sum up, legitimacy claims rested upon medical populism largely since the latter provided semantic structures useful to account for the unprecedented extension of the ruling party's power competencies and limitation of the political rights of the ruled. In line with Lasco's framework, while claims of dramatic restrictions and lockdowns were characteristic of the pandemic's outset, its second stage brought out a "vaccine messianism" and optimism related to crisis management performance. Non-medical populist claims to rule strengthened the image of saviour protecting the other public goods endangered by offenders. Thereby, rulers produced a black-and-white, coherent, and comprehensive image of power behind their legitimacy claims.

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