

ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL SPEECHES DURING THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF MALE- AND FEMALE-LED GOVERNMENTS

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ABSTRACT:

The pandemic of the new type of coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 is still a global problem. Among other things, the pandemic also significantly affected the political preferences of the parties and therefore significantly affected the political statements and speeches of prime ministers or presidents. In this study, we analyse the political speeches of prime ministers in the countries ruled by the parliamentary system. The analysis of the speeches of the heads of government is perceived in the comparative perspective of the V4 countries led by men and North-Western European countries led by women. We focus on the political statements given during the first wave of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic outbreak. The very differentiation of the various manifestations is set in the geographical, political, and economic context of the countries involved in the study. We apply qualitative research data analysis software – NVivo – to identify common features as well as differences between individual representatives. In the speeches, we monitor selected areas in terms of content as well as the form of language used by the country leaders in the initial phase of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic. Significant differences are observed in both the way of speaking and the content. Despite considerably better pandemic situations in the countries led by men, their messages were more negatively put, and they spread fear far more than the female group of leaders did. Female leaders were more oriented towards individuals, the vulnerable, and their messages were more of a positive nature despite having worse pandemic situations back in the spring of 2020.

KEY WORDS:

female-led countries, gender, male-led countries, pandemic, political statement, SARS-CoV-2, speeches

1 Introduction

The new coronavirus pandemic that erupted in Europe in the spring of 2020 has meant significant changes in countries' operational priorities. While the situation in the Chinese city of Wuhan seemed like a distant problem to Europeans, a few months later the problem became global. The global outbreak surprised



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not only society as such but also political leaders. The messages and statements of political leaders should contribute to stabilisation in such critical situations. Unlike other serious situations, Europe had not seen a similar problem for decades, and therefore statements by political leaders may have helped to cope with this situation. In the study, we focus on the issue of statements and speeches by the prime ministers of several European countries. The first wave of coronavirus affected different countries in Europe with varying degrees of intensity. While in Slovakia we had very few positive cases, hospitalisations and deaths during the first wave, in the case of Belgium these indicators were of a much more negative nature. As part of our research, we analyse the development of the first wave in 8 selected European countries. In our research, we focus on the words, statements, and messages made by the prime ministers of the researched countries. *“Political language has an abstract conceptual term that refers to moral rather than philosophical senses, so political language carries information so that it can communicate with the recipient, and it deals with human affairs and problems, whether simple or complex, such as war and peace issues. In addition, political language has several functions that are reflected in the speech itself. Political language masks, transforms, and deepens a specific phenomenon and is used mainly to convince the recipients of the speaker’s opinion using techniques such as explanation and analysis.”*¹

Political references significantly influence the behaviour of the population. Behaviour is also influenced by several other factors, such as the confidence of the population in a state institution, etc. The specificity of this crisis lies in the fact that most world leaders reflect and react to the same issue. As part of our research plan, we draw attention to the similarities and differences that accompany these statements. The countries are selected for several reasons. As a priority in the research, we analyse and compare countries led by men and countries led by women. Despite the data processing concerning the results of the first wave of coronavirus, we focus primarily on the political messages delivered at the time of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe. In speeches, statements, press releases, and the like, we describe and analyse not only the content of these links but also the form, which has an equally large share in the overall result of the submitted reports. The analysed speeches of the prime ministers can also be divided based on several criteria. On the one hand, we have selected 4 Central-European countries for this research, which are, among other things, united within the intergovernmental organisation called V4 (the Visegrad Group). On the other hand, we analysed the speeches of 4 heads of government in North-Western Europe. Apart from the obvious geographical distribution, the differences of these countries are important for the overall context of understanding the differentiation of statements themselves. Based on the above-mentioned, we also provide more detailed information on the socio-economic status, democracy, gender index. The gender of the prime ministers of Central-European and North-Western countries remains a fundamentally distinguished researched element.

2 Literature Review

There are several studies on the impact of gender on political expressions as well as on policy performance. The theoretical study by Deuze emphasises the role of media, which is even more visible during the pandemic.² A comprehensive view of media importance for public meaning is precisely described in the study entitled *Media Games in the Background of Slovak Parliamentary Election in 2016*³ as well as in a study by Horváth and Machyniak.⁴ Relevant for our research is, e.g., a study entitled *Leading the Fight against the Pandemic: Does*

*Gender Really Matter?*⁵ This study addresses results in terms of positive cases and deaths during the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemics but partially points to differences in the manifestations of government led by men and women.⁶ A similar problem is addressed by a global study on political leaders during the corona crisis entitled *Words Matter: Political and Gender Analysis of Speeches Made by Heads of Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic*.⁷ Both studies directly address the relation between political messages and social behaviour. Moreover, they focus on differences between countries led by male and female political leaders. Better communication by women leaders is analysed in a study called *Pandemic Performance: Women Leaders in the COVID-19 Crisis*.⁸ Gender differences seem to play a significant role in crises.⁹ In such crises, political leadership is not only needed but also highly appreciated. Gender is worth considering when looking at following protective measures, like wearing masks or respirators,¹⁰ or if we look at the problem regardless of the level of governing. *“Women mayors have also advocated for transparent, evidence-based decision-making when it comes to protection against the disease.”*¹¹ At least, leaders are supposed to lead the countries according to Latin words *primum non nocere*, which means: *“first, do no harm.”*¹² Unfortunately, political speeches are often negatively influenced by dangerous words, which could do more harm than good. Gender evidently plays a role here. *“We find that women are indeed more risk-averse than men. We find that the social preferences of women are more situationally specific than those of men; women are neither more nor less socially oriented, but their social preferences are more malleable.”*¹³ Therefore, these sources provide valuable knowledge on the already mentioned relation. A similar study deals with the problem a bit differently. Krishnatray and Shrivastava analyse the different ways of framing speeches by world leaders during the pandemic.¹⁴ The analysis, is, however, based on the content of speeches. The authors look at the support and comfort provided for citizens by leaders during the pandemic. Another study that is relevant for our research is called *An Analysis of Government Communication in the United States during the COVID 19 Pandemic: Recommendations for Effective Government Health Risk Communication*. Even though the study focuses outside of Europe, the very content of it is useful for our study too, as the problem is worldwide. Several more studies address the impact of political speeches¹⁵ and their framing.¹⁶ Different measures and different attitudes in speeches could have been seen worldwide, as it was in the case of the USA¹⁷ compared to Germany.¹⁸ The speeches also differed based on the relations between the government leaders and the scientific community.

1 AL MAJALI, W.: Discourse Analysis of the Political Speeches of the Ousted Arab Presidents during the Arab Spring Revolution Using Halliday and Hasan’s Framework of Cohesion. In *Journal of Education and Practice*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 14, p. 96. [online]. [2022-01-15]. Available at: <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1080129.pdf>>.

2 DEUZE, M.: The Role of Media and Mass Communication Theory in the Global Pandemic. In *Communication Today*, 2020, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 15.

3 HORVÁTH, P., MELUŠ, M.: Media Games in the Background of Slovak Parliamentary Election in 2016. In *Communication Today*, 2017, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 68.

4 HORVÁTH, P., MACHYNIAK, J.: Media Impact on Public Policy Making. In PETRANOVÁ, D., MATUŠ, J., MENDELOVÁ, D. (eds.): *Marketing Identity: Brands We Love – Part I*. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2016, p. 318.

5 GARIKIPATI, S., KAMBHAMPATI, U.: Leading the Fight against the Pandemic: Does Gender ‘Really’ Matter? In *Feminist Economics*, 2021, Vol. 27, No. 1-2, p. 1.

6 PISCOPO, J.: Women Leaders and Pandemic Performance: A Spurious Correlation. In *Politics and Gender*, 2020, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 1.

7 For more information, see: DADA, S. et al.: Words Matter: Political and Gender Analysis of Speeches Made by Heads of Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In *BMJ Global Health*, 2021, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 1-12.

8 ALDRICH, A., LOTTITO, N.: Pandemic Performance: Women Leaders in the COVID-19 Crisis. In *Politics and Gender*, 2020, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 960.

9 BYRNES, J., MILLER, D., SCHAFER, W.: Gender Differences in Risk Taking: A Meta-Analysis. In *Psychological Bulletin*, 1999, Vol. 125, No. 3, p. 377.

10 CASSINO, D., CASSINO, Y.: Of Masks and Men? Gender, Sex, and Protective Measures during COVID-19. In *Politics and Gender*, 2020, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 1052.

11 FUNK, K.: Local Responses to a Global Pandemic: Women Mayors Lead the Way. In *Politics and Gender*, 2020, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 970.

12 For more information, see: BURKLE, F., HANFLING, D.: Political Leadership in the Time of Crises: Primum Non Nocere. In *PLOS Currents*, 2015, Vol. 29, No. 7, p. 418-134.

13 See: CROSON, R., GNEEZY, U.: Gender Differences in Preferences. In *Journal of Economic Literature*, 2009, Vol. 47, No. 2, p. 1. [online]. [2022-01-10]. Available at: <<https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jel.47.2.448>>.

14 KRISHNATRAY, P., SHRIVASTAVA, S.: Coronavirus Pandemic: How National Leaders Framed Their Speeches to Fellow Citizens. In *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2021, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 195.

15 AJZENMAN, N., CAVALCANTI, T., DA MATA, D.: *More than Words: Leaders’ Speech and Risky Behavior during a Pandemic*. Released on 23rd April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-13]. Available at: <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3582908>.

16 DRUCKMAN, J.: The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence. In *Political Behavior*, 2001, Vol. 23, p. 225.

17 CLAUD, D., PRINGLE, P., STOKOLS, E.: *How Trump Let the U.S. Fall behind the Curve on the Coronavirus Threat*. Released on 19th April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-15]. Available at: <<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-19/coronavirus-outbreak-president-trump-slow-response>>.

18 *Angela Merkel’s Speech about the Coronavirus in Full*. [online]. [2022-01-05]. Available at: <https://ga.de/ga-english/news/angela-merkel-s-speech-about-the-corona-virus-in-full_aid-49639811>.

3 Data and Methodology

Due to the current and ongoing situation with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the matter of our study is related to this unwanted phenomenon. As the pandemic spread worldwide, it became a ‘hot’ topic within various fields of science. Our text fundamentally addresses the statements of political leaders in Europe during the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The primary goal is to find and compare themes that were most frequently mentioned during all different kinds of speeches and statements. We decided to create two groups of European countries. First, there are countries led by female leaders and second, there is a group of European countries led by male leaders at the time of the first wave of the virus in Europe. For the study, we set out a time frame starting at the beginning of March 2020 and ending at the end of April 2020. As for this study, in the first group, we include the following countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany and Norway. The second group involves the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. These countries do not only differ in the gender of their political leaders at the time when the virus became part of everyday reality, but also in terms of their political, geographical and historical development. By leaders, we mean the prime ministers of the countries as all of them are ruled by the parliamentary system. The first group was part of the so-called Western Bloc and the latter was part of the ‘Eastern’ Bloc before world bipolarism ceased to exist. This entire environment undoubtedly affects leaders’ decisions even today, so all the factors may have influenced both the content and the style of speeches and statements. The differences in perception of society we can observe by the lower sense of participation in the ‘Eastern’ Bloc.¹⁹ However, even taking all that in mind, we focused on gender itself the most. All the different factors are supportive, whether it is the economic development or the geographical position in Europe.

We decided to approach the matter within the frame of qualitative research. For analysing and coding the speeches and statements we used N-Vivo, a qualitative data analysis software. All the data was gained by searching many kinds of different sources like webpages, electronic news and journals, or official *Twitter* and *Facebook* posts. As we gathered material from countries where different languages are used, those were translated into English. Line-by-line coding was employed to monitor as much as possible in terms of different matters addressed by the leaders. Line-by-line coding is a standard measure of grounded theory. Moreover, it minimises the chance of missing an important theme or category when coding. *“A grounded theory should explain as well as describe.”*²⁰ It sets out, discovers or constructs a theory²¹ that is obtained and analysed via the N-Vivo programme in our case. Grounded theory is completely described both in Slovak²² and foreign literature.²³ All statements and speeches during the period were included except for those who did not bring any new element to what had already been coded. One hundred and fifty-four scripts were uploaded and used, with line-by-line coding, then a list of dominant themes was created.

4 Results

Through the N-Vivo programme, we sorted the data that showed us some interesting facts. In total, we analysed 154 political statements. Half of them were statements made by the men leading the V4 countries, and the women leading Belgium, Finland, Germany and Norway delivered 77. In the case of the Slovak Republic, we analysed the statements of two prime ministers, as in March 2020 there was an exchange in this

19 BRIX, R., MIKUŠ, D., ŠMATLÁNEK, D.: Specifications of Participatory Budgeting in Visegrad Group States and Possible Implementations for Slovakia. In *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences*, 2021, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 162.
 20 CORBIN, J., STRAUSS, A.: Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria. In *Qualitative Sociology*, 1990, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 5.
 21 NOBLE, H., MITCHELL, G.: What Is Grounded Theory? In *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 2016, Vol. 19, No. 2, p. 34.
 22 IGAZ, C., PROKŠA, M.: Zakotvená teória ako východisko pri hľadani učiteľových stratégií k udržaniu svojej roly v triede. In *Scientia in education*, 2012, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 17-31.
 23 See: CHARMAZ, K.: *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London : SAGE Publications, 2006. [online]. [2022-01-13]. Available at: <http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Charmaz_2006.pdf>.

post after the general election. Several selected socio-economic factors are to complete the picture of each country. We selected the following indicators: GDP per capita, unemployment rate, SARS-CoV-2 positive cases per million people, gender development index and religiosity rate. As for the numbers, we consider data for a period beginning at the end of March, ending at the end of April, as this is the approximate delimitation for the first wave of coronavirus in Europe. As for positive cases of the virus, we mention the highest rate during the period.

Table 1: Countries ranked by the Gender Development Index, GDP per capita, Unemployment Rate, Positive cases per million people, and Religiosity Commitment

| Country | Gender of the Prime Minister | Gender Development Index ²⁴ | GDP per Capita (\$) ²⁵ | Unemployment Rate (2020) ²⁶ | Positive Cases per Million People ²⁷ | Religiosity Commitment ²⁸ |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Belgium | F | 0.972 | 33,880 | 5.8% | 125 | 69% |
| Finland | F | 0.990 | 36,050 | 7.1% | 29 | 79.2% |
| Germany | F | 0.968 | 34,310 | 4.1% | 70 | 73.7% |
| Norway | F | 0.990 | 68,590 | 5.2% | 50 | 88.4% |
| Czech Republic | M | 0.985 | 17,340 | 3.0% | 26 | 21.6% |
| Hungary | M | 0.981 | 12,680 | 4.3% | 11 | 79.7% |
| Poland | M | 1.007 | 12,700 | 3.2% | 10 | 92.7% |
| Slovakia | M | 0.992 | 15,180 | 7.1% | 11 | 76.2% |

Source: Own processing

Analysing the statements, we came to various findings. Nevertheless, the most fundamental division of the sources we went through led us to five basic themes. These themes were formed based on line-by-line coding. It is fair to mention, that these themes do not cover all the topics and all the styles of speaking. During the first two months of the real presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Europe, various topics were covered in speeches all over Europe. That is why we present the table with quite a few of the socio-economic features of the countries to have a better understanding of the differences between the two groups of leaders. Once the coding was done, we created five major themes, which were present in speeches: Togetherness and Responsibility, State Paternalism, Economy Protection, Vulnerable Citizens, and Fear and Enemies. Within eight countries, 2 month-frame, 154 statements were included in the research. To make it equal, we used 77 male and 77 female political statements on the coronavirus outbreak.

Togetherness and Responsibility

Throughout almost all records, we found a significant number of those that were put positively. Since most of them were somehow related to the principles of Togetherness and Responsibility, it became our first theme. Altogether, words and messages associated with these principles were part of 41 statements. Nineteen of them were made by female leaders and twenty-two by male leaders. If we look at the epidemic situation in all the eight countries included in the research, we would assume that positive messages were more often seen in countries with mild epidemic situations. Instead, it was equal, despite the significant differences in positive

24 *Gender Development Index (GDI)*. [online]. [2022-01-16]. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-development-index-gdi>.
 25 *Real GDP per Capita*. [online]. [2022-01-18]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_08_10/default/table?lang=en>.
 26 *Euro Area Unemployment at 7.2% EU at 6.5%*. [online]. [2022-01-18]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/14084165/3-10012022-AP-EN.pdf/53ac483e-71d9-3093-5bd8-12f1ca89683a>.
 27 MATHIEU, E. et al.: *Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)*. [online]. [2022-01-17]. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>.
 28 *Least Religious Countries 2021*. [online]. [2022-01-17]. Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/least-religious-countries>.

cases, hospitalisations and deaths. Within this thematic framework, we could find various messages. The word 'cooperation' often emerged. Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, mentioned the term 'cooperation' in 9 speeches, and somehow tied it to patriotism or even nationalism. He said: *"The more we cooperate the more lives we will be able to save. We are facing a task that nobody could tackle alone. Every one of us has a responsibility (...) rather than divisions and disputes the time has come to work together."*²⁹

The prime ministers of female-led countries emphasised rather different aspects focused significantly more on individuals and did not tie the principles on a nationalism basis. One of the most used words by the women group was the word 'future'. Belgian prime minister used the term as follows: *"Better future is within reach, or it is now time to look for a better future."*³⁰ Those positive messages surprisingly emerged in a country where the prevalence of cases was 12 times higher than in the country with the least cases per million people (Poland). The biggest share of coverage of the word 'cooperation' was seen in the speeches and statements by Viktor Orbán with 5.15% coverage. In the female group of countries, the coverage was highest in the statements by Sophie Wilmes, the prime minister of Belgium, with 4.45%. When comparing the two groups there was almost no reference to nationalism within the female group. The only exception was the Belgian prime minister's statement: *"The wish to work in the interest of all Belgians equally. This great union [Belgium] is equal to the challenges of the moment."*

State Paternalism

While the first theme was predominantly characterised by positive statements leading to the feeling of togetherness and individual responsibility, the second is more about state paternalism approach messages. Of 154 sources we analysed, state paternalism was somehow mentioned in 72. State intervention in the forms of rules, recommendations and potential warnings is expected when it comes to crises. In the group of State Paternalism, we could observe a wide range of commands or rules. Within the women leaders, this emerged mainly in the case of Belgium (10 times) and Finland (9 times). Even if the situation in Germany in terms of the pandemic's seriousness was better in comparison to Belgium, the number of references to State Paternalism manifestations was significantly lower. The Belgian prime minister states: *"After the activity is over, you must return home immediately. There is no question of going to the Ardennes or the sea for the day."*³¹ The Finnish prime minister, Sanna Marin, at one of the press conferences recommends *"that people work remotely if possible, consider not going to hobbies and sporting activities, and to use extreme caution around the elderly and other at-risk groups."*³² Surprisingly, in the case of Germany, the prime minister Angela Merkel focused on state regulations only 5 times. On the other hand, Germany is a federative country, where there exists a different model of decentralisation of competencies, and therefore the prime ministers of the federal states might have been more active at this theme. Throughout this framework theme, many different issues appeared. Countless were addressed to different kinds of restrictions whether it would apply to schools, pubs or restaurants. Along with restrictions, the leaders often warned people to obey the rules as there might be sanctions, and countries can control those measures. Fines, police checks and tougher measures, if the situation gets worse, were often present in the political statements of Belgium, Finland, Germany and Norway.

The prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia incorporated the signs of State Paternalism into 33 out of 77 statements. As the change of government in Slovakia happened right during the first wave of the epidemic, we took both statements of Peter Pellegrini and Igor Matovič. The Slovak prime

29 Orbán: *Coronavirus Likely to Reach Hungary but Migration Historical Challenge*. Released on 28th February 2020. [online]. [2021-01-15]. Available at: <<https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-coronavirus-migration-challenge/>>.

30 RANKIN, J.: *Belgium Hands Powers to Caretaker PM to Fight Covid-19 after a 15-Month Stalemate*. Released on 16th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-25]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/belgium-hands-powers-to-caretaker-pm-sophie-wilmes-to-fight-covid-19>>.

31 BRZOZOWSKI, A.: *Belgium Extends COVID-19 Lockdown by Two Weeks until 19 April*. Released on 27th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-18]. Available at: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/belgium-extends-covid-19-lockdown-by-two-weeks-until-19-april/>>.

32 *Finland Bans Gatherings of 500+ People*. Released on 12th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-11]. Available at: <<https://yle.fi/news/3-11253786>>.

ministers used State Paternalism signs in 11 statements, which makes them the most active 'micromanagers' in the second group. Overall, state rules and restrictions were used similarly in men- or women-led countries, but it is necessary to mention that the epidemic situations were much more dramatic in countries led by female prime ministers, so it would be more understandable if the number of paternalistic speeches would be a bit greater in the first group. If we compare the ratio with the positive vs negative approach to citizens that are included in our first two themes (Togetherness and Responsibility and State Paternalism), the female group did use a significantly higher number of positive messages in comparison to the male group of leaders. A different paternalistic language was often observed in the male group, as documented in this speech of Peter Pellegrini, then prime minister of Slovakia: *"I want to call on citizens once again to be disciplined because they do not listen. We will also have to tighten up the repression."*³³

Economic Protection

Besides positive and negative statements towards citizens, we observe a considerable number of references to economy and business and their protection. As the pandemic does not only affect the health care system and social services but is also closely tied to economic affairs, many points within political statements were devoted to them. Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, considered the situation as really devastating as he said that: *"There is no more important task for Europe today than to come up with what one can call a new Marshall Plan."*³⁴ Economic support for all businesses was mentioned in all of the male group's statements. The V4 Group prime ministers also mentioned the economic impact of the virus and the need to solve the virus crisis as a precondition to help the economy. Economic protection was incorporated in 13 statements within the group of female leaders with the highest usage leaders being the Belgian and Finnish prime ministers. The main difference in this theme was the interest in small and big businesses. While the female leaders-led countries address the topic of small businesses 7 times within 13 statements, the male leaders-led countries did so only 3 times. Then, the German chancellor Angela Merkel refers in one of her speeches: *"To the German infection protection law, continued wage payments, the newly increased short-time work allowance, and liquidity aids for small and medium-sized businesses, which are to be introduced this week."*³⁵ Economic help was also mentioned in one of the statements of Erna Solberg, the prime minister of Norway: *"Norway has a very good financial situation; we've been trying to compensate businesses for their loss of activity and their cost levels and of course, we are giving quite good benefits to people who are out of work in the short-term. That means that the long-term effects might not be as big as for some other countries,"* she explained.³⁶

Fear and Enemies

Based on the grounded theory approach, once coding was done, we observed a very special theme emerge in the analysed statements. Even though the theme was dominant moreover in the male group, we were able to see a similar approach in the female group, with a smaller proportion. Therefore, we created a category, or a theme called Fear and Enemies as predominantly the men leaders group used it regularly during the initial introduction of the virus in Europe. The differences between the two groups were significant not only in terms of the content but also in the type of language employed. As already mentioned, the theme

33 VÝBEROVÁ, P.: *Koronavirus na Slovensku: V sobotu pribudlo 12 nových prípadov*. Released on 14th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-10]. Available at: <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/772878/koronavirus-online-slovensko-14-marec-2020/>>.

34 *Polish PM Urges 'New Marshall Plan' for Europe Amid Pandemic*. Released on 21st April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-11]. Available at: <<https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7785/Artykul/2496027.Polish-PM-urges-new-Marshall-Plan%2%80%99-for-Europe-amid-pandemic>>.

35 SCHULZ, F.: *Merkel: Germany Well-Equipped against COVID-19*. Released on 11th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-15]. Available at: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/merkel-germany-well-equipped-against-covid-19/>>.

36 PERELMAN, M.: *Norway's PM Calls for 'Stronger Multilateral Cooperation' amid Covid-19 Crisis*. Released on 3rd April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-17]. Available at: <<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20200403-interview-norway-s-pm-calls-for-stronger-multilateral-cooperation-amid-covid-19-crisis>>.

appeared more frequently in the men group, specifically 8 times more than in the latter. Of 77 statements in each group, the fear and blaming of others for the situation emerged 32 times in the men group and 4 times in the women group. In the men group, the Hungarian prime minister used it 15 times. Comparing the content and the style of speaking to the women group, the difference was immense. Each of the men group used scary messages and created enemies. In the women-led countries, we found this phenomenon 3 times in statements of the Belgian prime minister and once in a statement of the Norwegian prime minister. *“The road is still long and full of pitfalls. Our perseverance and our willpower will be put to the test again and again,”* Wilmès said. *“But the prospect of a better future is within reach. Let’s not be discouraged.”* Wilmès also said Belgium has never known such a great challenge since World War II and thanked Belgian citizens for their efforts.³⁷ This statement was among the ‘most scaring’ within the women-led countries. The other group provides us with a variety of fear sources and enemies, which are in some cases irrelevantly associated with the virus. Viktor Orbán blamed migrants in one of his interviews. Orbán was asked during a radio interview why Hungary had closed its universities but not schools in response to the virus outbreak, and said it was because *“there are lots of foreigners there”*. *“Our experience is that primarily foreigners brought in the disease and that it is spreading among foreigners,”* he said. *“So far, Hungary has confirmed 19 cases of infections, nine of them Iranians (mostly university scholarship-holders), one British national, and the rest Hungarians.”* Then he added: *“It’s no coincidence that the virus first showed up among Iranians.”*³⁸ The spreading of fear and blaming others over the virus made 7.37% coverage within his statements, which could be considered as a significant number. On the Western-European leaders’ criticism, he reacts as follows: *“I ignore these ‘words of advice’ because the European leaders who give them live in an alternate reality.”*³⁹ While the then prime minister of Slovakia Igor Matovič mentioned that he is afraid of striking out with matches⁴⁰ and the Polish prime minister Morawiecki compared the scope of the crisis to the situation after WW2,⁴¹ Orbán went on with another statement: *“We’re right in the middle of a military-like operation.”*⁴²

Vulnerable Groups of Citizens

While identifying key themes, we found numerous of them devoted to vulnerable citizens. While the Fear and Enemies theme was significantly more dominant in the men group, the emphasis put on the vulnerable was more frequently used in statements by the female group of leaders. Specific remarks towards the vulnerable were present in 19 of 77 speeches and the biggest share of the statements was recorded in remarks by Sanna Marin, the Finnish prime minister. She mentioned various vulnerable people (the elderly, the homeless, the sick, etc.) 9 times altogether. All the female prime ministers included the vulnerable at least once, of the 77 sources available. Prime ministers from V4 countries expressed their thoughts on the vulnerable 4 times out of 77. The Polish prime minister delivered his concern as he stated: *“I ask everyone, especially children and young people in the coming days, in the coming weeks – spend this time at home. Children and adolescents are carriers of the virus that spreads the fastest.”*⁴³ The former Slovak prime minister Igor Matovič focused

37 MOENS, B.: *Belgium Extends Lockdown Measures until May 3*. Released on 15th April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-22]. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-extends-lockdown-measures-until-may-3/>>.

38 *Hungary’s Orbán Blames Foreigners, Migration for Coronavirus Spread*. Released on 13th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <<https://www.france24.com/en/20200313-hungary-s-pm-orban-blames-foreign-students-migration-for-coronavirus-spread>>.

39 *Orbán on Coronavirus: Human Life Priority; No Financial Restrictions to Emergency Measures*. Released on 13th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-15]. Available at: <<https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-coronavirus-hungary-emergency-measures/>>.

40 *Budem krátky, slúbil Matovič v prejave: Za obmedzeniami si stojím, boj treba dobojovať*. Released on 7th April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-28]. Available at: <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/780711/budem-kratky-slubil-matovic-v-prejave-za-obmedzeniami-si-stojim-boj-treba-dobojovat/>>.

41 *Polish PM Urges ‘New Marshall Plan’ for Europe Amid Pandemic*. Released on 21st April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-29]. Available at: <<https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7785/Artykul/2496027>>.

42 *Coronavirus – Orbán: ‘We’re Entering a Period of Mass Infections and Have the Ammunition Needed in This War-Like Situation’*. [online]. [2022-01-22]. Available at: <<https://hungarytoday.hu/coronavirus-orban-were-entering-a-period-of-mass-infections-and-have-the-ammunition-needed-in-this-war-like-situation/>>.

43 *Poland Announces State of Epidemic Threat*. Released on 13th March. [online]. [2022-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.communications-unlimited.nl/poland-announces-state-of-epidemic-threat/>>.

his attention on the Roma community, as he was concerned: *“I am especially concerned about the situation in Roma settlements,”* he admitted in connection with the spread of the coronavirus. *“The government began to test Roma coming from abroad in Roma settlements.”*⁴⁴

In the women group, the Finnish prime minister *“advised that children should not gather in groups to play together”*. She was concerned about the elderly too, saying: *“Of course, older people can go to the shop and the pharmacy if they have no choice. Unfortunately, these people are one of the risk groups and therefore the government recommends that people avoid close contacts with others to protect their own health.”*⁴⁵ The women group also mentioned nursing homes, the death rate amongst the vulnerable or social and health care system as the Norwegian prime minister remarked: *“The virus (...) is ramming our health services and our economy, and our lives have been turned upside down.”*⁴⁶

5 Conclusions

The world experienced a relatively unstable situation during the first wave of the new type of coronavirus. The speeches of politicians during March and April 2020 in Europe were influenced by several factors. In our study, we focused on 4 countries run by men and 4 countries run by women. The economic, cultural or social context of the given countries was considered as well as the form of speeches delivered by the leaders. The study is limited by rather short time period and therefore different results could have been concluded in a different time frame. In the table on contextual information, we included cases per million people to achieve a better understanding of the then pandemic situation in the countries.

In the overall comparison of speeches given by female and male political leaders, it is essential to point out the fact that speeches by women were significantly more positive. More contributions and greater optimism were visible especially within the positive topic of Togetherness and Responsibility. On the contrary, a stronger representation in orders and regulations was demonstrated in the topic of State Paternalism among men-led countries. Interestingly, this was even though all 4 countries led by women (Belgium, Finland, Germany and Norway) had a significantly worse pandemic situation than countries led by men (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). The pandemic situation is fairly illustrated by cases per million people, as the number of patients in hospitals was not such a critical factor during March and April 2020. The number of PCR tests made could have been considerably different in analysed countries, which could slightly modify the real situation.

When it came to helping the economy and business, we noticed differences, especially in content, where men focused mainly on big companies and women on small and medium-sized enterprises and individuals. The women also included several references about the vulnerable in their speeches. We found fundamental differences in language and content between the two groups in Fear and Enemies. Examples of nationalism, pointing out the mistakes of others or denigrating other nations were present exclusively in men-led countries with the dominance of the Hungarian prime minister. Despite the significantly better pandemic situation of the V4 countries, the male leaders used the elements of fear and accusation much more. The differences between the observed groups are evident. Although this study did not look at the relationship between a country’s success in the pandemic, in terms of their leaders’ language, it provided several facts that still point to differences in government leadership as well as gender-disaggregated country speeches.

One of the goals of our study was to analyse how the reaction of individual leaders differed in response to the outbreak of the pandemic. In the study, we analysed the content of the communications of state leaders as well as their form of communication. We realise that the response to the pandemic and the results in the fight against this challenge depended on a number of other circumstances. On the one hand, it is appropriate to say that the

44 *Koronavírus: Slovensko má dve obeť vírusu, vláda rozšírila opatrenia na Veľkú noc*. Released on 6th April 2020. [online]. [2022-01-15]. Available at: <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/780043/koronavirus-online-slovensko-6-april-2020/>>.

45 *Finland Urges over 70s to Stay Indoors*. Released on 19th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-11]. Available at: <<https://yle.fi/news/3-11265277>>.

46 BERGLUND, N.: *Two New Deaths as Corona Keeps Raging*. Released on 14th March 2020. [online]. [2022-01-24]. Available at: <<https://www.newsenglish.no/2020/03/14/two-new-deaths-as-corona-keeps-raging/>>.

political statements of the governments led by men and women were significantly different in both content and manner. On the other hand, the specific environment of the state and possibly the political culture influence this fact. In other words, state leaders to some extent adapted their vocabulary to their audience. The vocabulary of representatives of individual governments also changed depending on the development of the pandemic situation and time. On the contrary, the environment and circumstances of the state equally affected the heads of state.

In the case of states led by men, we saw several statements that were largely influenced by emotions or negatively worsened the given situation. While male leaders mentioned the economy more from a general perspective, women were more concerned with the situation of specific individuals. Female leaders also emphasised more the need to help the weak and vulnerable population groups.

We observe a different style of communication within the State Paternalism group of statements. Even though the situation became significantly worse in the Western-European countries in the first wave, the female leaders avoided using such dramatic and paternalistic language. Male leaders used more commands with questionable results. A negative approach was more dominant even in statements associated with economic measures. The Polish prime minister even used the term 'Marshall Plan' in order to describe the severity of the situation. Female leaders focused more on help for small businesses, while the latter group mentioned large companies a lot more. Even though Norway is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, the words of Erna Solberg, then prime minister, were full of positivity, which showed the attitude differences within our two groups.

Negative statements were typical for male leaders, within their statements with the message of Fear and Enemies. The Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán had the sharpest language as he mentioned various nations and nationalities in his speeches. These were supposed to be to blame for spreading the virus in the first place. The Polish prime minister compared the situation to WW2. Spreading fear and blaming external enemies was almost absent in speeches given by female political leaders. All the leaders in both groups devoted part of their speeches to vulnerable people. However, the share of such statements was higher within the female group.

It would definitely be interesting to observe how individual message styles of political leaders affected compliance, e.g., wearing masks or other anti-pandemic measures. The study the results might be limited by the seriousness of the pandemic situation or the number of detected cases of coronavirus infection in the countries. These circumstances could fill the speeches of the leaders of the states both positively and negatively. Although this study did not look at the relationship between a country's success in a pandemic, in terms of their leaders' language, it provided several facts that still point to differences in government leadership as well as gender-disaggregated country speeches.

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