
Shaping the Public Perception of Economic Phenomena During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Priority of Goals or Values?

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Dariusz Piotrowski¹

Abstract:

Purpose: The coronavirus pandemic has posed serious challenges to governments almost all over the world. To stop its development authorities have overwhelmingly introduced social distancing and locked down the economy. Apart from implementing measures restoring socio-economic activity, it was equally important how the government informed the society about them. The aim of this work is to determine the factors that impact the way in which the coronavirus pandemic is presented to the society in Poland.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The analyses of selected literature and case study method were used to show how government communicated the actions taken in public finance and economy, as well as socio-political life. The uniqueness of the research should be related to the fact that two presidential campaigns were run during the epidemic.

Findings: The research results indicate that the issue of the pandemic and the actions taken to combat the crisis it triggered, as well as the attitude towards social distancing, were used in the message addressed to the public with a view to achieving specific political objectives of the authorities. The coronavirus epidemic was presented differently by politicians and public media during each of the two campaigns accompanying the elections for the office of the President of Poland. Prior to the elections scheduled for 10 May 2020, the coronavirus pandemic was presented to the public as a serious threat to health and life which necessitated restrictive adherence to social distancing restrictions. In the second election campaign, those in power sent an optimistic message to society suggesting a victory over coronavirus had been achieved in terms of health and economy.

Practical Implications: The paper shows the possibility of shaping the perception of economic phenomena by means of the mass media.

Originality/Value: The research shows that topics important for the functioning of the state, such as the rapidly deteriorating condition of public finances or the entry of the economy into recession, were not the main axis of the political dispute during the election campaigns.

Keywords: finance, economy, pandemic, social distancing, post-truth, ethics.

JEL Codes: D72, E62, H12, I18, K16.

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¹Department of Financial Management, Faculty of Economic Sciences and Management, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland, ORCID: 0000-0001-8482-8064, e-mail: dariusz@umk.pl

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is a global phenomenon, as it affects directly or indirectly almost all people on earth. Social distancing, commonly introduced by governments to prevent the development of the pandemic, is also of a global character. However, the main measures implemented in the fight against the economic consequences of the pandemic, such as aid programmes for entrepreneurs and people who have lost their jobs because of the economy lockdown, are national, local in nature. Decisions taken by those in power in the face of the new threat had to consider the specific social, economic, and political situation in the country concerned. The state of public finances and the ability of the national health system to meet the new challenge were also important. When analysing the actions of those in power, one should also pay attention to whether the first cases of coronavirus infection came as a surprise, or more of an unwanted but expected phenomenon.

In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, it was not only the actions taken by governments that were important, but also the information communicated to the public in this regard and the way it was presented. Politicians, aware of the importance of appropriate communication with the society in the modern world, used the mass media to inform citizens about decisions made in the face of the crisis. Sometimes the informational message was replaced by propaganda, through which the authorities sought to show the public the advisability of the decisions made and convince it about the effectiveness of actions taken to limit the negative effects of the pandemic.

The paper assumes that the government should consider social standards and universal ethical values in its decisions and actions. In a state of pandemic, the most important challenge for the authorities should be to create the conditions to protect the health and life of citizens. With a view to the stable functioning of the state in the long term, subsequent activities of politicians should focus on the economy. The economic development of the country allows for the preservation of jobs, it also provides budget revenues necessary to maintain the state finances in good condition. Yet it seems unacceptable from the point of view of public interest to exploit the pandemic firstly, or mainly, to achieve political goals.

2. Research Objective and Methodology

The aim of this work is to determine the factors that impact the way in which the coronavirus pandemic is presented to the society in Poland. Using the case study method, it shows how governments communicated the actions taken in public finance and economy, as well as socio-political life. The study covered the period from 28 January to 31 August 2020.

The unique character of the research conducted based on the situation in Poland should be associated with the fact that two completely different presidential campaigns took place over the course of several months. The first one, due to the government's actions

taken in the face of the epidemic, was characterised by very limited social activity. The second campaign was marked by a significant loosening of social distance. The paper will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What place in the presidential election campaigns of the candidates was occupied by the problem of the impact the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic had on the Polish economy and public finances?
2. Were the actions and attitudes of the authorities during the period of epidemic and social distancing based on ethical values?

3. Literature Review

The fact that people could move between countries and continents was treated as an unquestionable advantage of the globalisation process until it began to be the cause of the rapid spread of coronavirus. Similarly, the location of production in countries with lower production costs, in a situation of disruption of supply chains, suddenly transformed from a source of competitive advantage into a significant threat to the functioning of individual companies, sometimes leading to distortions felt at the scale of national economies (Economist, 2020b; Harvard Business Review, 2020; Time, 2020). The presented consequences of the coronavirus pandemic indicate that a medical phenomenon has caused effects far beyond the area of the health care system. as the impact of the pandemic has been visible in economic, social, and political terms.

In the literature, the pandemic is analysed in the context of the global economy. In their work, Kohlscheen *et al.* (2020) present estimates of the negative impact of the pandemic on GDP in selected economic areas of the world, assuming one or two waves of this phenomenon. They also suggest coordinating macroeconomic policies internationally to make them more effective. In turn, the World Bank (2020) forecasts a decline in global GDP of 5.2 per cent in 2020, despite the strong support of the economy provided by politicians. Kolodko (2020) points the economic and geopolitical consequences of the pandemic. He does not consider the phenomenon as a threat only. He also perceives it as an opportunity to implement social, economic, and environmental sustainability on a wider scale. Also van Barneveld *et al.* (2020) see the pandemic as a catalyst for positive global change. In their view, the departure of governments from the application of neoliberal thought can reduce social and economic inequalities.

The outbreak of the pandemic has led to a lockdown of the economy in many parts of the world and the obligation to observe social distancing. This had a negative impact on the economy, and the condition of state finances. According to Clemens and Veuger (2020) and Devereux *et al.* (2020), extraordinary circumstances require the application of discretionary fiscal policy regarding tax revenue and budgetary expenditure. The reduction in government revenue combined with the need to finance aid schemes has led to an increase in government debt (Browne, 2020; Economist,

2020a; United Nations, 2020) and deficit in national budgets (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

To reduce the socio-economic disadvantages caused by the coronavirus, many governments have implemented aid programmes (Nicola *et al.*, 2020). For example, an estimated GBP 330 billion stimulus to support the UK economy through the coronavirus outbreak included the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Coronavirus Statutory Sick Pay Rebate Scheme, the VAT payments deferral scheme, business rates relief, business support grant funds, support for the self-employed, support for small and medium-sized businesses, and support for large businesses (HM Government, 2020a). Under these schemes the government paid 80% of wages up to GBP 2,500 for employees who were not working due to coronavirus, government supported lenders to offer loans of up to GBP 5 million with no interest due for 12 months, retail, leisure and hospitality businesses paid no business rates for 12 months regardless of rateable value, businesses got access to grants of up to GBP 25,000, small businesses that paid little or no business rates received a GBP 10,000 cash grant to help with ongoing costs (HM Government, 2020b). A significant part of the government's support was provided by cash transfers addressed to those most affected by the lockdown policy. This form of aid, according to Braun and Ikeda (2020), contributes to the reduction of consumption inequalities caused by the pandemic and may also encourage social distancing.

An area of research strongly exploited in literature is the impact of the pandemic on society and individuals. Of particular importance is the problem of unemployment, caused by the loss of jobs on a mass scale. Petrosky-Nadeau and Valletta (2020) present scenarios for the development of the American labour market. Blustein and Guarino (2020) in turn draw attention to the psychological aspect of job loss.

Much attention has been paid to social distancing in the analysis of societies' behaviour during the pandemic. Alongside restrictions of mass gatherings, restriction of non-essential businesses, closure of schools, quarantine or lockdown and external border restrictions, this was one of the main measures put in place to limit public activity in the face of the threat of coronavirus infection (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). Physical distance between people and limited person-to-person contact, as intended by governments, were to halt the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (Courtemanche *et al.*, 2020; Briscese *et al.*, 2020). However, it has had undesirable social and economic consequences (Thunström *et al.*, 2020). Research has also shown that the functioning of individuals in a regime of social distancing, in significant isolation from family members and friends, leads to negative consequences such as deterioration of physical and mental health (Foremny *et al.*, 2020; Tyrrell and Williams, 2020). In relation to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and domestic violence, Abel and McQueen (2020) request the practical use of the terms spatial distancing and social closeness instead of social distancing.

The introduction of regulations limiting social and economic activity during the pandemic was a political decision (Adolph *et al.*, 2020). It involved the use of coercion and repression by the state. However, it turned out that voluntary decisions had a greater impact on the practical application of social distance. This was demonstrated by a study in the United States which used Google data on the mobility of Americans in states with varying degrees of restrictions. It concludes that appealing to citizens' awareness, fear of infection, or social responsibility can be more effective in reducing mobility than state intervention (Maloney and Taskin, 2020). Therefore, it turns out that if the message contains suggestions about the possibility of infecting vulnerable people or large numbers of people, it has a positive impact on the attitudes of respondents (Lunn *et al.*, 2020).

Effective communication in a crisis, regardless of its cause, must lead to building trust between sender and recipient. This relationship is based on credibility, honesty, transparency, and accountability of the source and content of the message (Ataguba and Ataguba, 2020). Bowen (2010) stresses the importance of the ethical dimension of the responsibility of what and how politicians communicate with society. The results of the research conducted by Nielsen *et al.* (2020) on representative samples of residents of Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the USA indicate that respondents regard scientists, doctors, and other health experts as reliable sources of information about coronavirus. National and international public health organisations also enjoy great confidence. Most of the respondents consider the media to be relatively reliable. Similarly, the majority believe that the government in their country is also trustworthy. The opinions of respondents from the United States and Spain are an exception in this respect.

The literature on the subject points to factors that are the source of inappropriate attitudes of the society towards the phenomenon of pandemic and the application of social distancing. The first important one is infodemic, i.e., an epidemic of information accompanying the virus pandemic, which limits the effectiveness of communication between those in power and the public. This phenomenon has been observed on a global scale and is characterised by the rapid spread of a mixture of facts, fears, lies, and speculation in the public space, which makes it difficult to properly analyse and assess the pandemic. Due to the massive scale of the infodemic, the World Health Organization, the European Commission, and the health ministries of several countries around the world have combined with technology companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google to limit the spread of this phenomenon (European Commission, 2020b; Donovan, 2020; Tasnim *et al.*, 2020).

The authorities of China, Russia, Venezuela, Turkey, Brazil, and Iran have been accused of dis-informational activities regarding the pandemic on an international scale. These actions have been used to attack the principles and values of Western democracies and to hide their own incompetence in crisis management (Fisher, 2020; Lovari *et al.*, 2020; Rebello *et al.*, 2020). The media also contribute to the information

epidemic. Simonov *et al.* (2020) indicate a persuasive influence of America's largest cable TV news channel, Fox News, on the attitudes and behaviour of Americans regarding social distancing. The station's coverage contained false information showing that the risk of spreading coronavirus was low. The spread of disinformation can also be attributed to celebrities (Brennen *et al.*, 2020). In their case, the wide reach of the message is crucial.

It seems, however, that the greatest influence on the misperception of the pandemic and its accompanying phenomena is exerted by the statements, actions, and attitudes of politicians. This is particularly true for populists who, by using fake news, may destabilise the perception of reality and interfere with the assessment of risks connected with the pandemic (McKee *et al.*, 2020; Till, 2020). It seems that their use of post-truth is even more dangerous. Public opinion about the pandemic is then shaped by emotions and beliefs, not by objective facts (Oxford University Press, 2017).

According to Waisbord (2018), the consequence of applying post-truth is the downplaying, or even rejection, of expert opinions in favour of political perceptions of reality. Identification with political parties, in turn, may put loyalty to politics before the truth (Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018). Those who perceive reality from a political perspective are ready to trust unreliable sources that are more in line with their worldview than credible sources of a politically neutral nature (Gentzkow *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, belief in the false message of post-truth may lead to inadequate assessment of the pandemic risk and result in the wrong attitude towards social distancing (Barrios and Hochberg, 2020; Vieira *et al.*, 2020). A similar effect can also be caused by poorly conducted information campaigns, as emphasising the effectiveness of the protective measures taken may create false confidence in society and encourage risky behaviour (Maloney and Taskin, 2020).

The greatest threat to society, or more broadly, to the functioning of the state, may occur when several factors have a combined negative impact on the perception of the pandemic. The case presented by Jovanović (2020) showed the use of the media by Serbian politicians for socially harmful and irresponsible propaganda. The author presents a radical change in the attitude of the authorities, from nonchalance and lack of preventive measures, to spreading fear, panic, and using the issue of pandemic in the political fight against the opposition. This case demonstrates the lack of respect for ethical values such as human dignity, truth, honesty, justice, sense of duty and responsibility among those in power (Christians, 1997; Durcik, 2017).

4. Propaganda of Socio-Economic Success

The term propaganda is understood as the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions and manipulate cognitions to achieve a result that is coherent with the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018). The cited definition fully reflects the way the representatives of the ruling fraction in Poland, i.e., the

coalition of three political parties functioning under the name United Right, communicate with the society. These parties share conservative and Christian values and advocate an active role for the state. After winning the elections in 2015, the United Right took control of all important public institutions subordinate to the government and companies with significant Treasury shareholding. The change that took place in public media when people connected with the United Right started to manage them is important for the analysis carried out in the further part of the work.

According to the Ombudsman, public television and radio have ceased to be objective and no longer fulfil the tasks of the public service broadcaster. The resolution of the Senate of the Republic of Poland of 4 June 2020 on the role of the public media in the election of the President of the Republic of Poland states that in recent years the public media have been turned into a party propaganda tool. They do not respect the principles of honest journalism. There is a lack of diversity of views and evaluations of current events. Individuals and social groups are attacked, information messages are of evaluative nature, favouring only one option (Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2020b). The move of the public media from information to party propaganda has also been noticed by a large part of the population. In a survey carried out in 2019, the credibility of news and journalistic programmes broadcast on public television was rated the lowest among the main broadcasters. In the case of public media, the last few years have also seen the greatest reduction in public trust. In 2012, public television was assessed as unreliable by 12% of respondents, while in 2019 by 38% of respondents. In 2012, according to 50% of respondents' public television deserved trust, in 2019 only 31% of respondents shared the same view (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2019).

At the same time, many publicists note that the propaganda message of public media is highly effective. This should be associated with universal access to terrestrial public television and public radio, high-frequency propaganda coverage of almost every area of social life, and the use of social impact techniques such as testimonials, false dilemma, card stacking, glittering generalities, desires and fears, simplifications, or assertions (Shabo, 2008). Another important issue is the susceptibility of a part of society to messages referring to such values as: patriotism, Christian roots of the state, loyalty to tradition, and national pride.

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, the authorities, by means of broadcast propaganda, sought to create the image of Poland as a European leader in economic growth, a country skilfully combining innovation with an increase in social spending, while maintaining balance in state finances. The Prime Minister of the United Right government placed particular emphasis on the high GDP growth rate of 5.1% recorded in 2018. He referred to this achievement during media interviews, even when the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus had already reached Poland. The government's propaganda of success was not hampered by the fact that in the fourth quarter of 2019 the growth rate fell to 3.2%, and the assumptions for the budget for 2020 were 3.7%. The

propaganda message ignored or diminished the importance of the fact that the said result (5.1%) was achieved in exceptionally favourable economic conditions. This was a period of strong growth of the global economy, lack of crisis phenomena in the main financial and commodity markets, low interest rates maintained by central banks and stable exchange rates. Access to tens of billions of euro of EU funds, as well as the fact that domestic demand was supported by social transfers were also contributing factors (Górska and Krzemińska, 2019).

The GDP growth rate emphasised in the public media and reaching historically heights, was in fact below the potential for the Polish economy. This was due to the low level of investment in fixed assets. The investment rate recorded in the years 2016–2019 was 17–19%, i.e., the lowest levels in over two decades. However, the low value of investment outlays in the economy did not prevent the government from sending a positive propaganda message. It made use of references to numerous investment projects presented to the public by the government, such as the construction of the central communication port, a nuclear power plant, a Polish electric car, or the reconstruction of the shipbuilding industry. The propaganda message completely ignored the lack of any real effects of these projects.

One of the most important parameters describing the situation in the economy is the level of unemployment. This applies to Poland, where, in the first years of the 21st century, it was the most important social problem (at the end of 2003, the unemployment rate in Poland was 20%, and the number of unemployed people was about 3.2 million). The data concerning the record low unemployment rate which were mentioned by those in power during specially convened conferences were perceived by the public as a success of the ruling parties. In fact, the downward trend in the unemployment rate started already in 2014. The reasons for the low unemployment, apart from the good economic situation, should be seen in demographic factors (1950s boomers are replaced on the labour market by people from the population decline period of the 1990s) and legal issues (reduction of the retirement age) leading to a reduction in labour supply. Contrary to the opinions of those in power, the record low level of unemployment was not a favourable situation for the economy, as it posed a threat to its development. In the country's highly developed regions, the unemployment rate had come close to the level of natural unemployment, and entrepreneurs were increasingly reporting local shortages in skilled labour.

The examples presented thus far have concerned the creation of a conviction in the society about the economic success of the United Right government. The authorities, with the help of public media, sought to demonstrate a high level of efficiency also in social policy and public finances. An important place in the propaganda message of the United Right is occupied by the Family 500 plus programme. The idea of financial support for families to improve fertility, given the demographic situation of the country, was a good move in social, economic, and political terms. In fact, however, in the first three years of the programme (2016–2018) there was only a slight increase in the number of births. On the other hand, the data concerning 2019, completely

ignored in the public media, which show a decrease in the number of births almost back to the level registered in 2015, indicate that the critics of this scheme were right (Business Insider Polska, 2020; Magda *et al.*, 2019). In view of the low effectiveness of the programme in fertility, the government and the public media began to demonstrate its positive impact on reducing child poverty levels. However, the problem of aimlessness and ineffectiveness of the state's social spending directed to the wealthy under this programme was not raised.

In the area of public finance, the main topic of propaganda was sealing the tax system. The public media stressed that the huge increase in VAT budget revenues between 2015 and 2019 from PLN 123 billion (EUR 28 billion) to PLN 183 billion (EUR 42 billion) was achieved thanks to the government's bold and active attitude in the regulatory and control areas. This achievement was also supported by the economic growth shown at that time in Poland and worldwide.

The topic of implementation of the state budget was also strongly exposed in the public media. During media conferences held every month, the public was usually informed about the good situation in the state budget. This was because the government had a creative approach to budgetary management, postponing a significant part of expenditure (payments) to the end of the year. As a result, after 10 or even 11 months of budget implementation, there was still a surplus. The subject of the surplus was heavily exposed in the media until the turn of February of the following year, when data showing the budget deficit for the previous year were briefly presented. Commenting on the deficit figures in the public media, government representatives highlighted the decline in the deficit figures in subsequent years of the United Right's rule, despite the launch of successive social programmes. This was followed by the presentation of optimistic information on budget implementation in the first months of the following year, with the surplus as the main theme.

The examples presented show that the government and public media did not limit themselves to informing the public on the results of their socio-economic policies. The authorities used propaganda and manipulation to create a positive public perception of their actions. They did not hesitate to use of unethical techniques, such as using half-truths, manipulating information, hiding facts that were inconvenient to them, presenting them in a biased way. Public media, which had a strong influence on a part of the society, did not maintain balance between showing the achievements of those in power and the voices of experts critical of the functioning of the state and the economy.

5. Actions Taken by the Government and Public Institutions in the Face of the Pandemic

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic was the first serious test for the ruling parties since taking power in late 2015. Actions to reduce the negative effects of the

pandemic were taken in several areas: health care, support for the economy, reorganisation of social life, and organisation of the presidential election.

On 28 January 2020, the Minister of Health at the meeting of the Health Workgroup of the Social Dialogue Council warned that the onset of the disease would only be a matter of time. At the same time, he also reassured that this virus was far less infectious than flu. This event was pinpointed as the beginning of the period covered by the present analysis. One of the first serious discussions on the possible coronavirus threat in Poland took place during the meeting of the Senate Health Committee on 4 February 2020. The Chief Sanitary Inspector of the country and a representative of the Minister of Health ensured that the country was well-prepared for running diagnoses and the society should have a sense of health security (Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2020a). On 2 March, during a session of the Sejm at which the government presented the situation concerning coronavirus, the Minister of Health appealed to the media to provide reliable information to avoid an epidemic of panic accompanying the virus epidemic.

Although on 4 March 2020 the first case of a coronavirus-infected patient in Poland was confirmed, one could have the impression that it was more important for the government to secure media support for the candidate of the United Right in the presidential election, whose date was set for 10 May 2020. This was the aim of the law signed by the president on 6 March, under which the state budget in 2020 provided the public media with approximately PLN 2 billion (EUR 450 million). Then, on 7 March, the Act on Special Arrangements for Preventing, Counteracting and Combating COVID-19, other Infectious Diseases and the Crisis Situations They Cause (the COVID Act) entered into force; it was the basis for the Anti-Crisis Shield 1.0 that was created a few weeks later.

5.1 Authorities' Actions in the Field of Health Protection

The main task of the authorities in the face of a pandemic is to minimise the number of illnesses and deaths. This can be achieved by reducing social and economic activity and by providing material, financial, and personal support for health care. It also seems appropriate to use pandemic development forecasts (Kufel, 2020).

Analysing daily number of SARS-CoV-2 infections in Poland from 4 March to 31 August reported by the Ministry of Health we can see several stages of development of the coronavirus epidemic in Poland. In the first month there was a clear upward trend in the number of daily infections. On 5 April 2020, a local maximum of 475 cases was recorded. During this period there was growing concern in the society about the further direction of the pandemic. The public media, on the other hand, convinced the public of the high effectiveness of the actions taken by those in power. To increase the effect of the propaganda message, comparisons were made between the number of cases in Poland and the situation in Germany, France, Italy, or the United Kingdom. Indeed, at that time, Poland had a much lower incidence of the disease than in the

countries mentioned. Data from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2020) indicate that e.g., on 28 March 2020, 249 infections were recorded in Poland, 6824 in Germany, 4703 in France, 5974 in Italy, and 2843 in the UK.

Comparisons to the epidemic situation in Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, or Romania were avoided in the public media, as it would transpire that many countries in this part of the world, not only Poland, had low levels of SARS-CoV-2 infections and mortality in absolute numbers and per 1 million inhabitants. In the second stage, which lasted until the end of June, the infection curve flattened, with the daily number of new cases usually remaining below 400. Initially, this state was pursued due to the limited possibilities of providing care for coronavirus-infected patients in the Polish health service. However, the occurrence of such a situation in June, in the fourth month of the pandemic, was giving rise to anxiety, a sense of impatience, or doubts about the existence of a threat, which was manifested by the increasing frequency of risky behaviour. During this period, in addition to information on the number of cases and deaths, the Ministry of Health and the public media began to provide data on the number of people who had recovered. In turn, after outbreaks in the mining region of Poland, the data on the number of infected people per day were presented for the entire country and excluding the mentioned region.

The first two weeks of July were a period when the number of infections fell below 300 cases per day. This coincided with the last days of the second election campaign and the day of the presidential election. The fourth and final stage began in mid-July and lasted until the end of the analysed period. It was characterised by a growing number of cases. On 31 August 2020, the total number of infected people in Poland reached 67,372. The number of detected infections in the last two analysed weeks oscillated around 700 cases per day. In absolute terms, these were still not high levels, but after calculating the number of infections detected each day per one million inhabitants, it turned out that the resulting value for Poland was like the levels observed in Italy and the United Kingdom, while being twice as high as in Germany.

Stopping the spread of the pandemic requires the identification and subsequent isolation and treatment of the infected. It is therefore necessary to carry out large-scale tests for the presence of this coronavirus in the body. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organisation was among those calling for many tests. However, this position was not shared by the Polish government which maintained, contrary to experts' opinions, that the number of tests performed was sufficient. On 20 March 2020, during a press conference, the Minister of Health even argued that given the stage of development of the pandemic, more tests per million inhabitants (344) were carried out in Poland than in the United States (10) and France (17). These calculations were based on data from different days, when in Poland the daily number of detected infections was 387, in the United States – 350 and in France – 212. In turn, from the graphics published on 1 July 2020 on the website of the

Ministry of Health, and then reproduced by the mass media, it can be concluded that Poland, in which about 1.5 million tests were carried out by that time, was fifth in this category among EU countries.

Journalists pointed out, however, that comparing the total number of tests carried out in Poland, inhabited by about 38 million people, with the results in countries such as Croatia, Slovakia, Sweden, and Austria are not legitimate due to the fact that their population is several times lower. The appropriate measure in this situation is the number of tests performed per million inhabitants. Regardless of the facts, the minister's view about the appropriate number of tests performed in Poland became a valid version of the truth repeated many times in public media. The reality was that by 23 August 2020, a total of 2,538,761 tests were carried out in Poland, which translated to 67,091 tests per million inhabitants. Thus, the result was worse than that shown in an earlier US comparison (total number of tests - 76,159,378, number of tests per million inhabitants - 229,889), and worse than in France (total number of tests 6,000,000, number of tests per million inhabitants 91,891) (Worldometers.info, 2020). This result was also one of the weakest among the 27 EU countries. Until 23 August, fewer tests per million inhabitants than in Poland were performed only in Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia.

The small number of tests performed (the average number of tests since the beginning of the pandemic is about 14,700 per day, the average for July and 23 days of August is about 23,200 tests per day) (Koronawirusunas.pl, 2020) makes the real scale of the epidemic in Poland unknown. Experts estimate that the number of people infected in this country is even about 5–10 or even 30 times higher than the official statistics. They also accuse the Ministry of Health that for several months of the pandemic it failed to develop a systemic solution for testing the population for the virus. Another symptom of officials' incompetence is the correction (reduction) of the number of tests performed at national level by more than 10%, i.e., by about 230,000, on 8 August 2020.

Although Poland belonged to the group of countries that had the time and opportunity to respond adequately to the pandemic, according to experts its health service entered the epidemic largely unprepared. There were no guidelines from the Ministry of Health on the reorganisation of work in hospitals, or they were frequently changed, procedures for tackling people suspected of infection appearing on hospital premises were not developed in time, appropriate training of medical personnel was not carried out. As a result, as of 2 April 2020, about 60 health care facilities were closed, 461 employees of medical personnel were infected with coronavirus, which accounted for 17% of the total number of cases in Poland, while the number of physicians in quarantine was estimated at 4,500.

These were therefore some of the highest values in Europe. The government's reluctance to provide doctors, nurses and paramedics with periodic coronavirus tests was also incomprehensible. In addition, by letter of 20 March 2020, the Ministry of

Health tried to ban doctors and other medical workers from talking to the media about coronavirus. This was probably the way in which it wanted to silence the criticism from doctors about the lack of masks, visors, goggles, and protective suits from the first days of the pandemic. At the same time, the Ministry, responding to the criticism, suggested that the organisation of purchases was a matter for hospital managers. The public media did not generally mention the fact that hospitals usually do not have a large reserve of funds for the purchase of medical equipment and that the Ministry of Health, which did not commission the Material Reserve Agency to prepare stocks of medical supplies in the event of a pandemic, was responsible for its shortage in the country. Rather than that, the public broadcaster presented the comments of the Minister of Health, who in mid-March praised the packages prepared for hospitals designated to receive infected people. The Minister seriously argued that a thousand masks and suits per package are each a large number (Infodent24.pl, 2020).

At this point it should be added that during the peak of the disease in Italy, hospitals in Lombardy used about 5 thousand masks a day. Apart from the lack of managerial competence among the officials of the Ministry of Health, journalistic investigations and parliamentary interventions revealed numerous examples of mismanagement. For instance, the authorities purchased masks without the appropriate certificates from companies whose shareholders were related to the officials of the Ministry of Health, as well as coronavirus tests from a foreign supplier through companies related to the United Right activists at a price two-three times higher than that of their domestic counterparts. Tests were still purchased at high prices in May and June, even though their market prices fell, and availability increased significantly. By mid-August 2020, the public had also not been informed who was responsible for the delivery of 150,000 tests purchased in South Korea that were destroyed due to inadequate transport condition. Moreover, the public was not sufficiently communicated about how the Ministry ordered the delivery of 2200 ventilators worth PLN 370 million to an entity associated with an arms dealer which, by the end of the analysed period, had not fulfilled his obligation and had not returned the undue advances.

The way in which the authorities were acting and their priorities during the pandemic are very illustrated by the purchase and transport of medical supplies from China. The media stressed that the project was financed by two large state-owned companies, Lotos and KGHM. The largest transport plane in the world, Antonov An-225 Mriya, was used to bring the medical equipment. On 14 April 2020, the plane landing at Warsaw airport was welcomed in the presence of cameras, among others, by the Prime Minister and Minister of State Assets. The Prime Minister thanked the President of Poland for facilitating contacts with the Chinese side, he stressed the negotiation skills of Polish diplomacy. He said that at a time of shortage of medical equipment all over the world, such transport was sought by many countries. For a few more days, the public media presented the purchase of the equipment as a success of those in power and were also excited about the transport of cargo of record volume in the history of aviation (just under 1000 m³).

In general, uncomfortable truths were overlooked, such as the fact that, instead of the 400 tonnes of cargo announced by a government representative, some 80 tonnes were transported by the airplane, that transport costs would have been much lower if a national carrier had been used and that the Prime Minister and some of the people present at the airport did not maintain social distance. However, the most important problem related to the delivery was that a significant part of the medical equipment delivered to Poland did not have the required EU attestations. Initially, the transport organisers described the information given in the media as fake news, but when it turned out to be true, they tried to convince the public that the faulty masks would not end up in hospitals. However, this was in contradiction with the announcements issued shortly after the arrival of the cargo, according to which the purchased equipment was provided to hospitals.

5.2 Support for the Economy

Public media strongly emphasised the quick and proper reaction of the government to the appearance of coronavirus. In fact, however, it was not until mid-March that work on an aid programme addressed to entrepreneurs was announced. Within the framework of the first aid programme operating under the name of the Anti-Crisis Shield 1.0, entrepreneurs could count, among other measures, on a temporary exemption from social security contributions, a loan, aid for job protection and an idle time benefit. The government, presenting the assumptions of the programme in the media, informed about support costing ca. PLN 212 billion (ca. EUR 50 billion), i.e., just under 10% of Poland's GDP. This figure was challenged from the very beginning by economists, pointing to less than PLN 40 billion as the real amount of aid. On 14 May 2020, the public media, praising the government's actions, stated that since the beginning of the programme's operation, i.e., 1 April 2020, funds in the amount of over PLN 8.7 billion had been transferred to entrepreneurs. Thus, the critics were proven right. Bearing in mind the fact that entrepreneurs particularly strongly expected government support in the first weeks of the pandemic, and the fact that state support under the Shield was often limited in time to three months, the amount of aid granted should be assessed as low. The poor preparation of the programme, including complex procedures and a high degree of formalisation of applications, were also noticed by entrepreneurs themselves. They showed their dissatisfaction during the protests that took place on 9, 16 and 23 May in Warsaw.

Support for companies also came from the COVID-19 Counteraction Fund managed by a state-owned bank – Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego. The potential of the Fund was set at PLN 100 billion, while the value of funds obtained from the issue of bonds between 23 April and 20 July 2020 was PLN 66 billion. On 27 April 2020, the Council of Ministers adopted a resolution on the launch of the next programme – the Financial Shield of the Polish Development Fund. PLN 100 billion was allocated to support companies. According to data as of 3 August 2020, the support granted by the Polish Development Fund exceeded PLN 60 billion (Polski Fundusz Rozwoju, 2020).

In the area of support for the economy, the Central Bank was also active, carrying out quantitative easing operations for the first time in its history. Printed money transferred through funds serviced by Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego and the Polish Development Fund eventually ended up with entrepreneurs (Business Insider Polska, 2020a). Three central bank interest rate cuts were also carried out in the period of March–May 2020, which brought the reference rate from 1.50% to the all-time low of 0.10%.

The aim of this measure was to increase the demand for credit from businesses and thus stimulate the economy. The reduction of interest rates also contributed to reducing the costs of obtaining financing under government aid schemes addressed to companies (Wirtualnemedi.pl, 2020). However, there was an undesirable consequence of interest rate cuts from the point of view of the banking sector in Poland in the form of a reduction in interest margins of banks. Paradoxically, therefore, the central bank, which in its June 2020 Financial System Stability Report warned of the threat of unbalancing the system, caused a drop in interest margins, which worsened banks' financial performance (Narodowy Bank Polski, 2020).

The aid programmes introduced by the government were designed to financially support entrepreneurs in the fight against the effects of COVID-19. However, these programmes aroused a lot of controversy because of the regulations they contained that were not related to helping people and companies affected by the crisis. Anti-Crisis Shield 1.0 introduced regulations which de facto interfered with the Electoral Code. Among other things, the form of voting in the presidential elections was changed, the State Election Commission's powers to organise the elections were taken away and handed over to a politician from the ruling fraction. The COVID Act, on the other hand, removed the requirement to use tenders for goods and services necessary to counter COVID-19, which significantly reduced the legal liability of officials.

Bearing in mind the previously presented cases of mismanagement of public funds accompanying the purchase of medical materials, the project supposed to complement the provisions of the Anti-Crisis Shield 2.0 submitted to the Sejm on 13 August 2020 by Members of the United Right deserves special attention. It stated: "he does not commit an offence, who, in order to prevent COVID-19, violates official duties or applicable laws, if he acts in the public interest and without violating those duties or laws the action taken would not be possible or would be significantly impeded".

The attempt to remove criminal responsibility from the authorities contrasts with the increased penalties for unintentional medical errors committed by doctors, nurses, or paramedics. The introduction of these provisions, de facto amending the Penal Code, in the Act on Subsidies to Interest Rates on Bank Loans Granted to Entrepreneurs Affected by COVID-19 and on the Simplified Procedure for the Approval of Arrangement in Connection with COVID-19 of 19 June 2020, called the Anti-Crisis

Shield 4.0, shows the actual attitude of the rulers to the Constitution and the law-making process.

5.3 Reduction of Social Activity During the Pandemic

The detection of the first case of coronavirus on 4 March 2020 did not fundamentally change the purchasing activity of Poles. The observed increase in the number of customers in supermarkets and at the chemists' can be explained by the accumulation of stocks, mainly food and the purchase of hygiene products. It was not until 12 March 2020, the day schools, kindergartens, and universities were closed that Poles began to take the issue of coronavirus more seriously. However, no outbreak of the epidemic was expected, as evidenced by the results of the public opinion poll conducted by CBOS in the first half of March 2020.

In the opinion of 42% of respondents, the epidemic, mass incidence of coronavirus in Poland, was only a matter of time, while in the opinion of 48% of respondents, there would only be singular cases of the disease in Poland and the country would avoid the coronavirus epidemic. At the same time, however, 62% of respondents were very afraid or somewhat afraid of being infected with coronavirus (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020c). The upward trend in the number of infections occurring in the first period of the epidemic pushed the government to declare a state of epidemic hazard on the territory of the Republic of Poland due to SARS-CoV-2 virus infections from 14 March 2020. The provisions of the Ordinance of the Minister of Health introduced an order to close bars and restaurants, cinemas, theatres, swimming pools, libraries, and museums.

They also banned the organisation of shows and other gatherings with the number of participants exceeding 50 (Ministerstwo Zdrowia, 2020a). On the other hand, since 20 March, on the basis of another Ordinance of the Minister of Health, a state of epidemic began to apply throughout the country. Further restrictions on trade and business were introduced. There was also an obligation to quarantine people coming to Poland (Ministerstwo Zdrowia, 2020b). The Ordinance of the Minister of Health of 24 March introduced a ban on the movement of persons, except for the movement in order to perform professional activities or official tasks, and in order to satisfy the necessary needs related to everyday life. The number of people in churches was limited to five (not including priests and liturgical service), the organisation of gatherings was completely prohibited. Pedestrians were ordered to keep a minimum distance of 1.5 meters. The number of passengers on public transport was limited to no more than half the number of seats.

As of 1 April 2020, an Ordinance of the Council of Ministers banned the use of parks, beaches, boulevards, promenades, banned people under 18 years-old from leaving the house unassisted by adults, suspended the performance of rehabilitation treatments and massages, closed beauty, hairdressing, and tattoo parlours, closed hotels and other accommodation, limited the number of customers in a shop, market, or post office at

the same time, obliged public institutions to provide services remotely, ordered a minimum distance of two meters between pedestrians (except for parents with children requiring care). Since 2 April, on the basis of the above regulation, employers had to ensure a distance of at least 1.5 metres between workstations. Between 3 and 19 April the most controversial ban was in force, as access to forests was prohibited.

This decision was criticised, not only because of the adverse impact on the mental and physical health of Poles. The Ombudsman pointed out that it was taken without a legal basis and in gross violation of the Constitution. In his view, under current legislation, the forest management company could not prohibit access to the forest on the grounds of a state of epidemic. Since 16 April 2020, there was a general obligation to cover the mouth and nose while away from the place of residence with a part of the clothing or a mask.

Also, in this case, according to experts, the law in force was broken. The Ordinance of the Council of Ministers of 10 April 2020 referred to the Act of 5 December 2008 on Preventing and Combating Infections and Infectious Diseases in Humans, which provides for the application of preventive measures, but only by ill and suspected persons (Dogmaty Karnisty, 2020).

From 20 April to 30 May 2020 the economy lockdown was gradually lifted. The basic conditions for removing the restrictions were: maintaining a minimum distance of two metres from other people in the public space, and complying with sanitary rules (Ministerstwo Rozwoju, 2020). First, the number of people who could stay in shops or churches at one time was increased. As of 4 May, the possibility of functioning of shopping malls, hotels, and libraries was restored. From 6 May onwards, nurseries and kindergartens could again function. From 18 May, hairdressing and cosmetic companies and catering facilities could resume their activities.

From 25 May, primary schools could once again conduct care and educational classes in grades 1–3 and universities could hold didactic classes for students in their final years of studies. As of 30 May, meetings with up to 150 participants were allowed, provided that a two-metre distance between participants was maintained. From that day on, the obligation to keep one's mouth and nose covered in public spaces was also removed, except for places such as shops, offices, cinemas, buses, and trams. The Minister of Health argued this decision by expressing the belief that "the peak of the epidemic is behind us". This decision contradicted the claim made during the press conference on 16 April 2020 that the obligation to wear masks in public spaces would continue until a vaccine had been invented.

Due to the increasing number of infections, restrictions were reinstated in some areas of the country from 8 August. In the yellow zones, restrictions on the number of persons were introduced for sports, cultural, and catering events. The limit for weddings and family celebrations was set at 100. In the red zones, bans on congresses

and fairs, cultural events were introduced, cinemas, gyms and amusement parks were closed, the wearing of masks in public space was ordered, the number of participants in weddings and family celebrations was limited to 50.

5.4 Organization of the Presidential Elections

The last of the analysed areas where those in power should consider the functioning of society in the conditions of the coronavirus epidemic was the organisation of presidential elections, whose date was set for 10 May 2020 by the Speaker of the Sejm on 5 February 2020. Because of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the world, already in mid-March there were voices concerning the need to postpone the election date. The ruling fraction, fearing a drop-in support for their candidate as the coronavirus-induced economic crisis worsened, did not allow the elections to be postponed. In the public media, government representatives argued that such a change would be unconstitutional.

However, the Constitution provides for a state of natural disaster which is one of three states of emergency. This situation is introduced by the Council of Ministers in order to prevent the effects of natural disasters and to remove them. Importantly, the Act on the State of Natural Disaster of 18 April 2002 includes the mass occurrence of infectious human diseases among natural disasters. The lack of such mass nature of infections was the reason the authorities gave for the introduction of a state of epidemic instead of a state of natural disaster provided for in the Constitution.

However, it seems that Article 228 of the Constitution, according to which during the state of emergency and within 90 days after the end of the epidemic, elections of the President of the Republic cannot be held, was key in declaring the state of epidemic. To sum up, from 20 March 2020 there was a state of epidemic in Poland, although the actions taken by the authorities were undoubtedly of an extraordinary nature. This was manifested by limiting various forms of social and economic activity in the country. The constitutionally guaranteed rights of citizens were limited by ordinances, i.e. low-rank acts of law.

The fear of infection caused by the development of the epidemic translated into the expectations of Poles regarding the voting date. In the second half of March 2020, about 72% of the population expected it to be postponed to a later date (Zaborowska *et al.*, 2020). Those in power, on the other hand, in order to hold elections on 10 May, introduced a provision in the first anti-crisis shield allowing postal voting for people over 60 years of age. Such a move was justified with the need to protect elderly citizens, who are particularly vulnerable to coronavirus. The amendment to the anti-crisis shield, which fundamentally changed the way the President was elected in Poland, was carried out by the Sejm in a few hours, without giving Members of Parliament time to read it (Gazeta.pl, 2020a).

The amendments made changed the regulations of the Electoral Code. This action was contrary to the judgment of the Constitutional Court, according to which it is possible to introduce significant changes to the Electoral Code six months before the election date at the latest (Trybunał Konstytucyjny, 2011). Then, on 6 April 2020, the Sejm passed a law providing for the possibility to vote only by mail in the presidential elections in 2020 and sent it to the Senate. Shortly afterwards, public media began to criticise the Senate, which had been in the hands of the opposition since November 2019, for prolonging work on the law. At the same time, public media started to publish the results of research according to which the Polish society assessed postal voting during the epidemic as safer than that made in the traditional form. The fact that more than 57% of those surveyed had a negative opinion of the idea of universal vote by mail was ignored.

Politicians of the ruling coalition argued in the media almost every day that it was organisationally possible to hold elections by mail on 10 May and that such elections would be safe for the health of the citizens. The government in turn had the ballots printed and packed into envelopes. The Polish Post, a company with a dominant shareholding of the State Treasury, started preparations to deliver and collect envelopes with voting cards to and from the citizens. It also made a request to the local authorities for the transmission of the rolls of voters. It should be noted that, in the opinion of legal authorities, the mentioned actions of the government and the Polish Post were not based on legal regulations, as the regulations referred to were included in the act that was still in the Senate. In the meantime, a conflict in the coalition over the possibility of holding elections had escalated. In the arrangements between the leaders of the parties forming the governing coalition it was decided that the elections on 10 May would not take place.

6. Two Campaigns – Two Different Faces of the Pandemic

The 2020 presidential election in Poland was accompanied by two completely different campaigns. The first one related to the elections scheduled for 10 May. Due to the introduction of social distancing, including a ban on assemblies and significant restrictions on the movement of people, campaign meetings with voters were practically non-existent. The activity of the candidates moved to the Internet. However, it was not intense due to the widespread public expectation that the election would be postponed. The only candidate who implemented his campaign in the field in these conditions was the incumbent president.

On 6 May, public television broadcast the meeting of the presidential candidates. For many voters it was the first opportunity to get to know the candidates and their views. The formula of the meeting presented to the public as a presidential debate did not provide for discussions between the candidates. The candidates replied to the five questions asked. The length of each answer, as well as the candidate's free speech, was limited to one minute. One of the questions asked was related to the crisis caused

by the pandemic. How to return to the high growth rates of recent years? The question was preceded by information on the European Commission's forecast indicating that Polish economy would be relatively least damaged by the crisis. The viewers did not in fact learn the opinions of the candidates for the office of the President on the threats to the economy resulting from the pandemic, the state of public finances, the efficiency and costs of government anti-crisis programmes and the problems faced by the Polish health service during the pandemic.

On 3 June, the Speaker of the Sejm ordered that the election take place on 28 June (first round) and 12 July 2020 (second round). These dates were in line with the political interests of the United Right, as they were not distant in time. The effects of the crisis were not felt strongly by society at the time. To a certain extent, this was also because the aid provided under government programmes was still flowing. However, the dates set were not based on the Constitution. In the legal situation at that time, Article 128 of the Constitution was applicable, allowing elections to be held only after the day when the President vacated his office, i.e., after 6 August 2020 (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1997).

In accordance with the law in force in Poland, it was not possible to conduct agitation until the day when the next election date was announced. The only candidate who, regardless of the regulations, visited various places in the country was the incumbent president. During such meetings, the principles of social distance and restrictions on the number of people gathered were broken.

The second meeting, called the presidential debate, which took place on 17 June 2020 among all candidates was also organised by public television. During the presentation of their positions, many candidates criticised the prepared questions as omitting the most important issues that Polish families care for. They also suggested that the questions were undermining the views expressed by the representative of the largest opposition group in Parliament, and at the same time the president's main rival.

In debates, interviews and speeches during electoral rallies, the incumbent President emphasised the achievements of social policy, including above all the implementation of the Family 500+ programme and the lowering of the retirement age. He also praised the reduction of taxes, the increase in the minimum and average wage and the high dynamics of economic growth. He announced the implementation of large projects, such as the construction of the Central Communication Port, which were to help the economy to recover from the crisis caused by the epidemic. He promised that at the end of his second term of office, the earnings of Poles would reach the average EU level.

These achievements and promises, however, had little connection with the president's prerogatives enshrined in the Constitution and his personal merits, while they referred more to the projects of the United Right government. During his speeches, the President also appealed to national pride and patriotism. He stressed the increase in

military and energy security. He paid much attention to the issue of state's special treatment of the institution of family. He also did not avoid criticising those who ruled the country before him, referring to the motive of thievery and cunning. He opposed the urban elite to the inhabitants of villages and small towns. His statement was also noticed in the Western media: "LGBT is not people, it's ideology".

The analysis of the statements of the incumbent president during the second election campaign shows that he practically did not refer to the issue of negative effects of the pandemic. However, it seemed that the opposition candidate would devote a lot of attention to issues such as the entry of the economy into recession, the abuse of power before and during the coronavirus pandemic, the threat to the stability of the banking sector presented in the critical report of the National Bank of Poland, as well as the sharp increase in public debt and budget deficit and the concealment of their actual size in official statistics through the large-scale use of extra-budgetary special purpose funds.

However, the analysis of the content of TV debates and interviews as well as the speeches given at election rallies indicated that this sphere was practically ignored. One of the few references of the opposition candidate to the subject of finance concerned the answer to a question asked by journalists about the implementation of his social programmes. He stated that he would take a decision in this respect once he knew the condition of state finances. In this way, he referred to the lack of reaction from the government to the Senate's request, made at the end of June 2020, to present the situation of Polish public finances (Business Insider Polska, 2020b).

Changes in regulations concerning social distancing and their application in practice were an important factor influencing the course of the presidential campaigns. During the first campaign and in the period between the campaigns, i.e., from 11 May to 2 June 2020, the authorities required strict compliance with all restrictions in social life related to the epidemic. Society, on the other hand, obediently applied the existing restrictions. This is confirmed by the results of a survey conducted at the turn of June 2020, in which 79% of the respondents expressed the belief that all or most of the population complied with restrictions on movement and social distancing (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020g). It can therefore be concluded that this was an example of a phenomenon described by Prati *et al.* (2011) whereby people observe the recommended behaviour based on their trust in the government, largely independent of the assessment of risk reduction measures taken, in this case related to the spread of the epidemic.

Shortly before the start of the second election campaign, some restrictions were relaxed. It was possible to organise meetings for up to 150 people. The obligation to cover one's mouth and nose in the open air, provided that social distance is maintained, was also abolished. However, very often the election rallies were attended by hundreds or even thousands of people who, in most cases, did not observe the

principles of social distancing. Those who sympathised with the candidate were close to each other for a long time, shouting rally slogans. The causes of this phenomenon are largely due to the increasingly dismissive attitude of the authorities to the issue of social distancing. An event widely commented on in the media was the meeting of the Prime Minister with the local authorities on 22 May, during which a meal was eaten in a restaurant without maintaining social distance. Public outrage increased when in the following days the Prime Minister, politicians of the ruling camp and public media, explaining the behaviour in the restaurant, argued that the regulations cited by journalists were not an order, but only a recommendation. As a result, during the second election campaign, two attitudes of Poles towards social distancing could be observed. In shops, offices, restaurants, they kept their social distance, while during election rallies, usually not. Moreover, despite numerous examples of ostentatious violations of the law during election rallies, the number of interventions by the police and the Sanitary Service clearly decreased. This phenomenon is recognised in the report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR, 2020).

7. Post-Truth and Effectiveness of Government Communication

The United Right has introduced a new style of communication between those in power and the public. It is characterised by an almost constant presence of government representatives in the media. Numerous press conferences and interviews were used to present public with the activities undertaken in the social, economic, and political spheres. This treatment gave the impression of the government being highly active.

Taking control over public media allowed the United Right to shape the propaganda message autonomically and at the same time to reach the mass audience. In fact, a survey conducted in April 2019 shows that the highest number of respondents (63%) indicated at least one of the public television channels as the one in which they watch news and publicity programmes (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2019). The use of publicly funded media for party propaganda particularly intensified during the election campaign period in 2020. In a report by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, this phenomenon was described as the blurring of the difference between the state and the party (ODIHR, 2020).

Irrespective of the facts, the message addressed to the society by the government and public media created the image of Poland as a country of economic success. As a result, in the run-up to the pandemic, part of the population showed low awareness of the risks associated with declining GDP growth, low levels of investment in the economy, an increasingly pronounced shortage of skilled workers, as well as the high cost and low effectiveness of many government programmes. This view is confirmed by the results of a survey conducted on 5-15 March 2020, wherein respondents most often expressed the belief (49%) that the government's actions created opportunities to improve the country's economic situation (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020b).

The outbreak of the pandemic did not cause the ruling coalition to depart from the rhetoric of success. On the contrary, the public media stressed at every step how the government was professionally overcoming the difficulties caused by the pandemic, how it cared for the public interest and showed responsibility for the fate of the country. The message was primarily to arouse emotions, the truth was not the most important. Thus, on one occasion the Prime Minister would convince the public that the pandemic surprised Poland, like many other countries in the world. Another time, he would claim that appropriate preparations had been made by the government many weeks before the outbreak of the pandemic. The shortage of equipment reported by hospital managers, as well as the long wait for aid programmes that entrepreneurs had to endure give evidence that the government did not sufficiently use the time which it had gained from fate to prepare the country for the epidemic. On the other hand, it was perfectly prepared to present to the public the successes, often exclusively of a media nature, achieved in every area of the fight against the pandemic.

In the field of health protection, it is controversial that such a small number of tests were performed, and that the government defended this practice with the help of public media. To act contrary to the recommendations of experts, and at the same time differently from the governments of economically developed countries, should be assessed as a deliberate exposure of citizens to the risk of spreading the epidemic. Equally dangerous effects on the health of citizens may have been caused by the Prime Minister's statements suggesting that the coronavirus should not be feared, as it is in retreat (Gazeta Prawna.pl, 2020). The periodic decrease in the number of detected cases of coronavirus infections that occurred in the first days of July did not give rise to such claims, much less should it be used to persuade seniors to take part in elections.

Analysing the implementation of successive programmes addressed to entrepreneurs, one can see a change in the government's approach to providing aid. As shown in the present study, in the first stage actual support for entrepreneurs was limited to relatively small amounts. However, the public media showed the high effectiveness of the government's actions, using cases of individual beneficiaries of this aid. Later, the amount of money spent increased significantly and this fact was often highlighted by the Prime Minister who was actively involved in the presidential electoral campaign. Although the support programmes for the economy were introduced late on, they may have contributed to increased support for the government, as research indicates that voters appreciate the allocation of funds for emergency relief more than spending them for disaster preparedness (Healy and Malhotra, 2009).

The primary objective of government programmes addressed to entrepreneurs was to protect jobs. The President underlined their effectiveness, indicating that they saved two and a half million jobs. At the same time, the Prime Minister mentioned four million jobs protected, while the Minister for Family, Labour and Social Policy mentioned five million jobs saved. Labour market experts are not aware of the basis of these calculations, but they assess the figures indicated as significantly overstated.

The optimistic message created by the Prime Minister also concerned the issue of economic growth. As early as mid-April 2020, despite the coronavirus pandemic in the world, the Prime Minister kept repeating that the Polish economy was one of the fastest growing in Europe. Moreover, he treated the slight increase in budget revenues in June 2020 (3% higher than in June 2019) as a sign of the development of the Polish economy. This was contrary to facts – Poland’s GDP in the second quarter of 2020 fell by 8.2% year-on-year. It also did not go in line with the European Commission’s (2020a) forecasts which indicated a 4.3% drop in Poland’s GDP in 2020.

The Prime Minister, referring to the issue of assistance to companies provided under government programmes, assured that the government had substantial funds at its disposal and could count on the central bank to print more money if necessary. In this way, actions taken by the central bank in this emergency, consisting in purchasing with printed money bonds issued by the Polish Development Fund and Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, were presented to the public as a simple recipe for solving the problems of the country’s economy. The negative effects of these measures in the form of an increase in public debt and a possible increase in inflation were ignored. The huge scale of state intervention in the economy, as well as the way it was presented to the public, also points to the phenomenon of moral hazard (Claassen, 2015), or more broadly, the negative influence of politicians on the economy and state finances (Dziawgo, 2020). The government, thanks to the aid programmes financed by the debt, bought the support of the public, leaving the repayment of these liabilities to its successors.

The outbreak of the pandemic did not prevent those in power from creating a positive image of public finances. The 2020 budget, which was passed by the Sejm on 28 March 2020, was presented to the public as the first budget without deficit in the history of the country. To arouse positive emotions, the ruling fraction completely ignored the fact that the budget was based on a project adopted back in 2019, which was unrealistic in a time of pandemic. Moreover, the absence of a deficit was achieved by shifting a part of the expenditure from the budget to earmarked funds.

Throughout the period under analysis, the issues of amending the Budget Act, the growing budget deficit and public debt were not the subject of detailed explanations by the government. They were almost exclusively presented in laconic messages to the public. The public media did not pay much attention to these issues either. On 20 August, however, when the government presented the long-awaited draft amendment to the Budget Act for 2020 containing the highest budget deficit in Poland’s history, the public media focused primarily on the developmental character of the budget.

Even in such a difficult situation for state finances, the Prime Minister continued to create an optimistic message addressed to the public. He stressed that the amendment was another of government instruments employed to give a new impulse to the development of the Polish economy so that it could return to the path of growth as soon as possible. According to economists, neither the data from the implementation

of the budget (at the end of June the budget showed a deficit of PLN 17 billion) nor the size of the deficit after the amendment of the Budget Act (PLN 109 billion) reflected the actual situation of public finances. Bearing in mind that the government financed and implemented aid programmes mainly through institutions (Polish Development Fund and Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego), which, in accordance with Polish regulations, were not included in the public finance sector (general government), the true picture of the state finances is presented by projections of the amount of public deficit and debt considering EU methodology. Experts estimate that the public finance sector deficit at the end of 2020 will amount to PLN 270 billion, i.e., 12% of GDP, while the EDP debt to GDP will reach 62.2% (2019 closed at 46.1%).

As indicated in the literature studies, the appropriate attitudes, and actions of the society in terms of social distancing are influenced by the obligation resulting from legal regulations and voluntary actions of the society formed under the influence of each citizen's awareness of the fact that they may infect or become infected. The research carried out allows the author to conclude that those in power, through their actions and attitudes, but also the way they communicated about the pandemic, had a negative impact on voluntary social behaviour. The government's violation of the principles of social distancing during the first election campaign created in society a sense of injustice and double standards.

However, it did not result in large-scale phenomena increasing the risk of the epidemic spreading. The very rapid easing of restrictions which took place mainly in May 2020 and was not justified by the state of the epidemic in the country, did not find acceptance among a large part of the society (43%) (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020i), but the introduced communication chaos in terms of easing restrictions may have contributed to some citizens displaying a laxer attitude towards social distancing. The silent consent of the authorities to the violation of the principles of social distancing at election rallies during the second presidential campaign and the message of those in power pointing to unnecessary fears of coronavirus infection, clearly indicate that the aim of the authorities was to reduce these fears. The message sent proved to be, in the short term, politically effective, as demonstrated by the extremely high turnout in the presidential elections. However, it also exacerbated the public's carefree and sometimes even dismissive approach to the pandemic and the restrictions resulting from social distancing, which was visible in the behaviour of citizens also in the period after the presidential elections.

The actions of the authorities regarding the timing of elections are a classic example of post-communication (Macnamara, 2016). The ruling coalition justified their actions with concern for the political stability of the country and the need to observe the provisions of the Constitution. In fact, public opinion was influenced to gain permission to break the law and accept voting during the epidemic, despite the widespread fear of infection in the society. The government also managed to minimise

the public presence of topics inconvenient for the authorities but important for the functioning of the state during the election campaigns, such as the rapidly deteriorating state of the economy and public finances, numerous violations of the rule of law, or inadequate preparation of the health service to fight the pandemic. The main message of the campaign was directed towards ideological and world-view themes. They aroused emotions, mobilised the electorate, but contributed to the consolidation of mental social distancing in Polish society.

The research conducted in this paper has shown numerous examples of the use of disinformation in the communication of those in power with the society in Poland. In turn, literature studies have shown that this phenomenon may have a negative impact on social trust in the authorities and the effectiveness of their communication. The following section, therefore, uses data on public support for political parties and confidence in elected politicians to determine the how effective the message of those in power was during the pandemic.

In a series of public opinion polls carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre Foundation (CBOS), a leading Polish centre conducting polls representative of the Polish society, respondents were asked about their declared intention to vote in parliamentary elections. The United Right obtained the following support (the time of the survey is given in parentheses): 44% (9–16.01.2020), 44% (6–16.02.2020), 49% (5–15.03.2020), 46% (22.05–4.06.2020), 44% (15–25.06.2020) (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020h). It is noticeable that public support for the United Right increased in the first period of the epidemic in Poland. This should be linked to citizens' expectations of politicians to resolve the problems arising from the pandemic. This phenomenon corresponds to the rallying of citizens around the authorities in crisis situations presented in the works of Bol *et al.* (2020) and Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011).

Particular attention in the rankings of confidence in politicians developed on the basis of the results of polls conducted by CBOS was paid to the assessments of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health. These politicians were very active in the media during the pandemic. In the ranking prepared in February 2020, the Prime Minister was trusted by 55% of respondents, while a lack of trust was shown by 31%. The Minister of Health enjoyed the trust of 19% of the respondents, while a lack of trust was declared by 12%. As many as 52% of the respondents did not even know who the head of the Ministry of Health was (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020a). In the March ranking of confidence, the Prime Minister was trusted by 59% of respondents, while 30% distrusted him. The Minister of Health was trusted and distrusted by 46% and 11%, respectively (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020d).

In a survey conducted at the turn of June 2020, 54% of respondents trusted the Prime Minister, while 34% did not. In the case of the Minister of Health it was 53% and 25%, respectively (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020f). Trust in the Prime

Minister in the second half of June was declared by 53% of Poles, and distrust by 35%. In the case of the Minister of Health it was 49% and 31%, respectively. Only 7% of respondents did not know him (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020j).

The results indicate that in the first weeks after the detection of coronavirus infections in Poland, trust in the Prime Minister increased. Later, however, it plummeted below the level recorded in February. Moreover, the percentage of people not trusting the Prime Minister also rose. Thus, it can be concluded that the actions taken by the Prime Minister, as well as the way the Prime Minister communicated with the society, started to be more and more commonly assessed as inappropriate. However, this does not change the fact that the Prime Minister enjoyed the trust of the majority of Poles in all studies. It can therefore be assumed that his actions, and even more so the way he communicated them to the public, proved effective. He was able to convince the majority of citizens of the validity of his actions and views.

The Minister of Health was a person little known in society before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. However, the decisions he made in the first weeks of the epidemic and the skilful use of the media to communicate with the public resulted in a rapid increase in recognition and confidence in him. In the first period, the percentage of people who did not trust him remained low. However, the scandals involving the minister and ministry officials revealed by opposition politicians and the private media caused confidence in him to decrease.

Also, the public perception of the decisions on social distancing that he made during the election campaigns may have contributed to the fact that he was no longer perceived as a doctor, an expert, but started to be treated as a politician. This may have contributed to the level of distrust towards him at the end of June being close to that recorded for the Prime Minister.

It was extremely important from the point of view of achieving the aim of the work to get to know the opinions of Poles about the government's actions taken in the fight against the coronavirus epidemic in terms of health and economy. In a survey conducted at the turn of June 2020, 70% of the respondents stated that the government was coping rather well or well with the epidemic; 25% of the respondents were of the opposite opinion. By far the best ratings for the government's actions were observed among the supporters of the United Right – 95% of positive ratings. The government's fight against the coronavirus pandemic was also highly valued by those declaring a different political and world-view orientation. Regardless of party preferences, positive ratings were always over 40% (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020e). It can therefore be concluded that although there was a party filter in the assessments of the government's actions, the politicians of the United Right, with the support of the public media, managed to convince most of the society that the actions they took contributed to stopping the development of the epidemic. Thus, the communication message of those in power proved to be highly effective from their point of view.

The survey also asked respondents how they assessed the government's actions aimed at helping Polish companies and their employees. According to 39% of those surveyed, the government's actions were or rather sufficient. The opposite opinion was expressed by 43% of respondents (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2020e). This shows that respondents were more critical in their assessments of actions taken in the economic sphere than in the government's fight against the coronavirus epidemic. This can be linked to the confrontation of personal experience with the propaganda message of those in power. Most of the respondents were employees or entrepreneurs. Therefore, they personally experienced the effects of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. The low assessment of the government's actions in this respect resulted from comparing their expectations with the actual impact of government programmes on the economy and labour market. In this situation, the optimistic message created by the government and the public media did not prove convincing enough. The opposite was true of the government's actions to limit the spread of the epidemic.

Because of the small number of people hospitalised due to COVID-19, the vast majority of the respondents did not have personal experience allowing them to know the actual state of readiness of the health service to fight the coronavirus. In addition, the optimistic message of the government and the propaganda of the public media about the fight against the pandemic effectively concealed criticism from the medical community. Although there is no scientific research conducted on this professional group's assessment of the government's actions taken to combat the epidemic, numerous statements, interviews, comments by hospital managers, doctors, and paramedics, and representatives of health care workers' organisations published throughout the entire period of the epidemic in Poland were a token of a very critical opinion from this community. According to doctors, the government did not enter into a dialogue with them, did not take into account the substantive comments made by the environment, and did not provide sufficient material, financial, and personal support. In their opinion, the health care system in Poland is not prepared for the increase in the incidence of COVID-19 expected in the autumn and winter season.

8. Conclusions

The research conducted has shown that the Polish government, to achieve its political goals, was ready to violate the existing legal regulations and ethical standards. Ordinances of the Minister of Health, i.e., low-rank acts of law, limited the rights guaranteed to the citizens of the country by the Constitution, and many times actions were taken without an appropriate legal basis or in violation of regulations, one of the most glaring examples of which was the setting of an election date against the provisions of the Constitution.

Those in power sought through public media to arouse emotions in the society, positive towards their own actions and negative towards those of their political competitors. In their message they referred to such values as truth, honesty,

community, responsibility, respect. However, these were only slogans which concealed a disregard for ethical values and human dignity. However, the high level of public trust enjoyed by politicians of the United Right during the election campaigns indicates that a part of the society did not notice the unethical behaviour of the authorities or treated it as a necessary condition for increasing the effectiveness of the government.

The results of the research carried out for the purposes of the paper allow for a conclusion that the issue of the coronavirus pandemic and the actions taken to combat the crisis it triggered were utilised in the government's message to the public to achieve the political goal of creating conditions conducive to the victory of the United Right candidate in the presidential elections. Efforts were made to maintain the image of Poland as a country of economic success. The crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic was treated as another opportunity to demonstrate the activity of those in power and the effectiveness of their actions.

The coronavirus pandemic was presented differently by United Right politicians and public media during each of the two campaigns accompanying the elections for the office of the President of Poland. Before the elections scheduled for 10 May 2020, the coronavirus pandemic was presented to the public as a serious threat to life and health which required significant restrictions on socio-economic activity. However, the introduction of a ban on access to forests, with an average of less than 300 new cases per day in the week preceding this decision, shows a strong determination of those in power to stop the development of the epidemic.

It can be assumed that contrary to the official message indicating the health aspect of the restrictions introduced, the authorities were guided mainly by a political objective. This was because the occurrence of mass infections could result in the need to declare a state of natural disaster, which in turn would make it impossible to hold elections in time. The message of the ruling coalition concerning regulatory actions taken in the face of the coronavirus threat and presenting the difficult experiences of other countries resulted in the widespread application of the principles of social distancing. However, it caused anxiety, fear, and even panic in the society. This resulted in strong opposition to the holding of the elections on schedule, even though there were just over 300 infections per day in the week preceding the polling day.

This situation caused the government to change its attitude and actions towards the epidemic and social distancing during the second campaign. Holding the elections as soon as possible required actions reducing public concerns about coronavirus infection. Restrictions in social and economic life were quickly relaxed, although these actions were not justified by the state of epidemics in the country. Moreover, violations of the law on social distancing and assemblies were accepted, and the authorities went as far as to suggest a low risk of coronavirus infection. The high voter turnout proves that fears in society about the possibility of voting during the epidemic

decreased. However, the irresponsible actions of those in power increased the carefree and sometimes even dismissive attitude towards the coronavirus epidemic observed in the society, which resulted in an increased risk of infection.

To boost the chances of the United Right's candidate to win the presidential elections in 2020, the politicians of the coalition consciously avoided raising issues related to the difficult situation in the Polish economy and public finances during the election campaigns. At the same time, based on partial or manipulated data, they convinced the society that the Polish economy had defeated the coronavirus and that the government programs allowed employers to preserve millions of jobs.

The use of post-truth in presenting the situation in the economy and public finances, including health care, may be explained by the priority of a political goal over ethical values. However, it is difficult to understand why the main opposition candidate in the election campaign almost completely failed to address the effects of the crisis caused by the pandemic and the actions taken by the government in this respect. The reason for this attitude can be seen in the fear that any criticism of the government's anti-crisis programmes would be presented in the public media as a lack of willingness to support entrepreneurs and protect jobs during the pandemic, while raising the issue of debt and deficit as an expression of the desire to reduce the state's social spending. It should be remembered that during the election campaign the opposition candidate had to face not only the incumbent president, but also the government and public media supporting him. However, this does not change the fact that, guided by ethical values, he should have strived to present the public with a true picture of the situation of the state's economy and finances, regardless of the political consequences of this action.

The analysis of the activities of the government in Poland in terms of the application of social standards calls into question its treatment of the health and life of citizens as a primary objective, a priority. The opinions of health care representatives quoted in the paper contradicted the optimistic message disseminated by the government and public media, as well as the feelings of most Poles. In the opinion of infectious diseases experts, the ruling parties did not adequately prepare the Polish health service for the fight against coronavirus, did not provide the expected support at a later stage, and did not create a system for the fight against coronavirus which would prove effective in the event of a significant increase in the number of illnesses expected as soon as in September 2020 due to the end of holidays and return to stationary education. The low number of detected coronavirus cases, strongly emphasised in the message of the government, cannot serve as a measure of the effectiveness actions.

This is due to the low number of coronavirus tests performed in relation to population size during the whole period covered by the study. Such action should be assessed as contradictory to experts' recommendations and highly unethical, as it has resulted in an increased risk of coronavirus infection from people suffering from COVID-19 unknowingly, very gently, or asymptotically.

Referring to the title of the paper, it can be asserted that in the presented case we could notice the primacy of goals over values. The authorities were prepared to act unethically to achieve a political goal. The priority given to the implementation of a political objective during a coronavirus outbreak also calls into question the ethical values of those in power. In the face of COVID-19, the authorities should prioritise fighting for the health and life of citizens.

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