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CuRe Research Team



CULTURES OF REJECTION IN THE COVID-CRISIS

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CULTURES OF
REJECTION



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“**C**CULTURES OF REJECTION”
IN THE COVID CRISIS

INTRO**D**UCTION

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The Cultures of Rejection (CuRe) Research Group started its work at the beginning of 2019. By that time, the world had already been significantly changed by the financial crisis of 2008 onwards. Europe and the European project in particular had been shaken by the past decade of massive upheavals: the political decisions around the deep economic crisis in Greece that implemented the austerity measures of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (the “Troika”) despite enormous protests across the continent, the reactions to the refugee movements of 2015, and the 2016 Brexit referendum represented only the most obvious events in a development that is briefly outlined here. At that time, a global pandemic of the kind we will experience from 2020 onwards was still unimaginable, and the war in Ukraine was still far away.

In the context of these transformations, right-wing and extreme right-wing movements and parties gradually succeeded in politically capitalizing on the influx of refugees by bringing to the fore a profane (i.e., racist) ideology that was nevertheless accepted by large sections of society, and by providing an interpretive framework for the material, political and cultural changes in Europe: Refugees in particular and migration in general were to blame for this development—if they had not been taken in, the domestic population would be better off.

Migration struggles were also an essential feature of the social and political landscape in Europe. We set out to investigate the social and cultural conditions in which right-wing authoritarian movements operate and

thrive, and conducted systematically coordinated research along the transnational space created by migration movements in 2015: in Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Germany and Sweden. The consortium of researchers from various disciplines, including anthropology and sociology, cultural and political sciences, and philosophy, was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. In response to the new circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the research group began in 2021 to conduct in-depth studies in all five countries on the mobilizations against the COVID-19 measures (such as lockdowns, mandatory face masks and vaccinations) and on the relationship between the mobilizations and the media responses to them to date.

This volume summarizes the group's research findings, with each contribution focusing on the specifics of the developments in the individual countries, thus at the same time presenting a panorama of developments beyond the five specific locations.

Urošević examines how political polarization in Serbia affected how the media covered the pandemic and vaccination, and how mistrust of political institutions and actors influenced the narratives that constructed the "ordinary citizen" to make sense of the measures taken against the pandemic.

Bojanić, Stojanović-Čehajić and Zubčić trace the media treatment of the pandemic protests and scientific disagreements in Croatia. In the context of institutional distrust, this setting provided an opportunity for right-wing political movements and parties to personalize the political process and prepare distrustful, fearful and rejected members of society for nationalist anti-institutionalism.

For the Austrian case, Zeller highlights how far-right actors are able to mobilize skepticism regarding modern medicine in order to forge alliance with new constituencies. He argues that the rejection of anti-pandemic measures and governmental institution is partly rooted in a desire for holistic explanations and the search for meaning in suffering.

Harder examines the heterogeneous makeup of the protest movement in Germany. He outlines how the movement's use of "counter-knowl-

edge” against hegemonic interpretations of the crisis strengthens ideals of individual sovereignty and uniqueness. Members of the movement’s social media channels view these ideas as threatened and emphasize their capacity to “think for themselves”. As a result, a community emerges in which what you believe was less important than what you do not believe.

Ortega Soto’s paper examines Swedish offline discourses in conjunction with social media posts on relevant channels about COVID-19 and the relationship between protesters against COVID-19 measures and the media, with a particular focus on the first organized demonstration against the measures in Stockholm. This contribution is of particular interest in light of the recent national elections in Sweden, in which the far-right Sweden Democrats achieved considerable success and propped up the existing government.

While each contribution to this volume deals with the specifics of the movement and the reaction of the media in the individual countries, in this introduction I would like to briefly present the most important common features of the protest movements from an international, comparative perspective. They can be briefly summarized in four statements:

1 | THE PROTEST MOVEMENTS HAVE DEVELOPED ON THE FERTILE GROUND OF PRE-EXISTING “CULTURES OF REJECTION.”

In every country we studied, large protests against COVID-19 measures have taken place, and in some cases developed into full-fledged social movements. This did not happen spontaneously. Rather, they have developed on the fertile ground of widespread skepticism towards political and social authorities, which we have analyzed as part of “cultures of rejection” that preceded the pandemic. In all participating countries, our research shows that faith in political efficacy is waning, leading either to an explicit rejection of politicians or politics as such, or to a retreat into the private sphere and a distancing from political events. Trust in existing media institutions is broken, and there is a perception that freedom of expression is threatened by censorship in the established media, but also online.

This latent crisis of authority has been catalyzed by the pandemic. Expert panels and scientific advisory boards have gained unprecedented political power, and broadcast media and social media platforms are coming to the fore, through which people have learned about the dynamic development of the pandemic. The sociologist Gil Eyal has pointed out that an increasing “expertization of politics” goes hand in hand with a “politicization of expertise.” i.e., with a stronger contestation of scientific and medical expertise. The protest movement has radicalized this politicization under the exceptional circumstances of a global pandemic, in many cases drawing on the symbolic repertoires created in the past by right-wing extremist discourses.

2 | AUTHORITARIAN AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST ACTORS STRIVE TO MONOPOLIZE THE SOCIO-POLITICALLY QUITE DIVERSE MOVEMENT, WHICH THEY HAVE PARTLY SUCCEEDED IN DOING.

All the protest movements studied are characterized by a heterogeneous composition in social and political terms. At the beginning of our research in early 2021, we observed that demonstrators from different social and cultural milieus came together, united by their opposition to state intervention in everyday life. Right-wing extremist groups and parties were present at most of the protests, but in the initial phase they represented only a fraction of the demonstrators. However, this gradually changed as the movement developed over time. Increasingly, the protests were dominated by a combination of far-right conspiracy myths and the populist divide between “the people” and “the elite,” giving them a more right-wing character.

Crucially, however, far-right and right-wing populist parties and groups have been able to exploit the specific ideological mix of hyper-individualism, conspiracy thinking, spiritualism, and a strong rejection of institutions of authority that has developed within the movements. These processes, we would like to emphasize, are enabled by the digital infrastructures of both established and alternative social media channels. An investigation of so-called hate discourses is therefore not enough. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide central channels for

communication between participants in all countries. However, the alternative media environments developed in opposition to the traditional social media channels, which tightened their rules on disinformation in 2020. In almost all cases, the messaging service Telegram is a central organizing tool, but so are Twitter clones such as Gab and Gettr, alternative streaming services and social networks for self-proclaimed dissidents.

3 | THE EMERGING COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENTS CAN BE SUMMARIZED THUS: HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM AND HYPER-PERSONALIZED POLITICS, A MIX OF CONSPIRACY THINKING AND SPIRITUALISM, AND DISTRUST AND REJECTION OF EXISTING AUTHORITIES TO THE POINT OF RESURRECTIONIST ASPIRATIONS.

In all countries, the movements show a type of political mobilization strongly focused on specific personalities.. Many key actors have no major organizational background or political history, but instead have emerged as movement entrepreneurs representing their personal political brand. Often this personal style is accompanied by sectarian, sometimes even messianic rhetoric, but also by more mundane commercial interests. In the latter case, leaders of the movement either directly collect donations, sell goods or tickets for transport to protest events, or advertise products for a commission.

This hyper-personalized style of politics corresponds to a widespread notion of hyper-individualism among protesters. Demands for an end to COVID-19 measures and opposition to vaccination are articulated in the name of a personal, individual freedom that ignores the social and collective dynamics of a pandemic. In its most radical form, this leads to an implicitly Malthusian worldview in which the price society has to pay for protecting individual freedom is the demise of those deemed too old, too sick, or otherwise unable to survive.

This hyper-individualism also forms a central contradiction at the heart of protest movements, which often combine libertarian and ethno-conservative or nationalist elements. On the one hand, they demand libera-

tion from state restrictions in the name of personal freedom and out of fear of an authoritarian state. At the same time, far-right parties, movements or individuals whose rhetoric is imbued with demands for national unity, ethno-nationalist and illiberal ideas regularly take part. The protests thus oscillate between minority and majority positions. Many activists in the movement claim to speak for a silent majority that includes all of “humanity,” the country, or “the people” who are oppressed by powerful elites. At the same time, they invoke a position as discriminated outcasts, persecuted minorities or excluded “free thinkers.” In Germany and Austria, the latter self-minorization makes use of historical references from the National Socialist era, such as persecuted Jews or anti-fascist resistance fighters. This attitude trivializes the crimes of National Socialism, associates today’s governments with the fascist dictatorship, and claims that the protesters are the persecuted victims of a totalitarian government. This implies antagonisms both between the protesters and the political authorities and between the protesters and the supporters of the ruling forces. The latter are seen not only as obedient fellow travelers, but as passive supporters of a violent and dictatorial regime. Combined with the belief in a mysterious and malevolent power that rules the world, this self-victimization follows an anti-Semitic ideological structure.

Significant parts of the protest movements go far beyond a critique of the measures taken to contain the pandemic and call for an “awakening” that will reconnect humanity with nature and a holistic way of life. A striking feature of all the mobilizations we have observed is the peculiar combination of conspiratorial and spiritual thinking. The global scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, which simultaneously affects people in the most intimate ways, makes the body and its immune system the subject of intense political debate and governance.

In particular, a general mistrust underlies the rejection of vaccines. On the surface, this mistrust can be seen as directed against “science.” Our research shows a more complex picture. Participants in the protest movements do not necessarily reject science or medical expertise as such, but scientific institutions, authorities, and their representatives. Participants regularly resort to certain scientific or research practices. They collect

data to produce their own studies on COVID-19, they encourage others to “do their own research,” and they employ medical “counter experts.” The rejection of established authorities, including scientific experts, political and governmental authorities, and established media institutions, is thus a central feature of the movements against the pandemic measures.

4 | THE PROTEST MOVEMENTS AGAINST COVID-19 MEASURES COULD HAVE LONG-TERM POLITICAL EFFECTS.

In all the countries where we have done research, significant numbers of people have regularly participated in protest actions. Even where it has not been possible to mobilize large numbers of protesters, the movements represent significant minorities in their respective countries. Their long-term impact must be taken into account for several reasons. First, the demonstrations are crucial events in an unprecedented crisis that will shape the biographies of countless people. In contrast to the many restrictions on personal contact and social life, the often spectacular and emotional quality of the demonstrations is well suited to inscribe itself in these narratives. Second, beyond the immediate experience, the demonstrators have created social connections and organizational infrastructures that are capable of enduring beyond the pandemic. In particular, the expansion of digital communication channels seems to have reached people who were previously inactive or unaware of “alternative” media environments. Finally, these protests catalyze “rejection cultures” that were already present before the pandemic—e.g. those protesting against migration, advocating a fundamental distrust of democratic institutions, or reviving nationalist tendencies through populist techniques—in ways that could be crucial for the coming political crises and the increasing frequency of socio-environmental disasters.

Whether and how the political ideas, social connections and organizational infrastructures of the protests against COVID-19 measures will change the political landscape in Europe depends on how governments, civil society, and media institutions deal with crises and the emergence of similar movements in the near future. There are considerable uncertainties and divergences in political assessments and about the terms

in which we should think of the current transformations in large parts of the population. At present, and in the wake of the war in Europe, we are dealing with epochal changes that we are triggering, but for which we are obviously not able to find sustainable solutions. Nevertheless, we know it is long past time to radically change the perspective on who we are in this world, where we stand and what we want to be, how we live and how we want (and can) live and survive together. Countering the cultures of despair and rejection with concrete and solidaristic policies of the future, which would dare to initiate a new beginning in Europe, seems to us the most promising perspective.

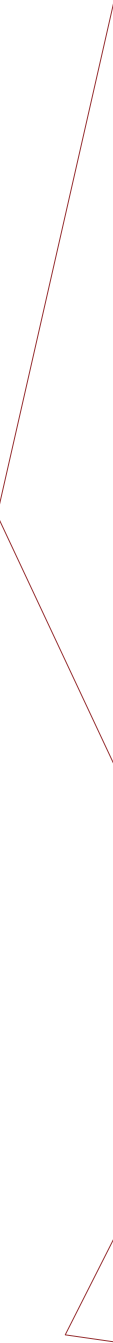
On behalf of the entire research team, Manuela Bojadžijev



ROUNDTABLE

PROTESTS AGAINST
THE PANDEMIC
RESPONSE IN
EUROPE

MILAN UROŠEVIĆ
MARKO LUKA ZUBČIĆ
CELINA ORTEGA SOTO
BENJAMIN OPRATKO
ALEXANDER HARDER



DANIEL MULLI (CHAIR) Let me begin with a warm welcome to everyone at this roundtable on Cultures of Rejection in the COVID-19 Crisis, which I have the honor to host. We will talk about different perspectives on the protests conducted by COVID-19 denialists during the pandemic, reflect on their similarities and differences, and ask what we can learn from reflecting on these protests relationally. We have three aspects which we would like to address together: the first one is about the different dynamics of the protests themselves, and the second one is about the relations between institutional decisions and protest formations as well as the process of institutionalization during these protests. Finally, we will shed light on the reasons and motives behind these protests. We will start with the Serbian case: **What happened during the protests in the Serbian case? What were the main events and how was the protest embedded in long-term trajectories?**

MILAN UROŠEVIĆ The protests in Serbia, like many things here, were to some degree overdetermined by the particular political situation—like the enduring political instability and the authoritarian regime in Serbia. The first kind of protest happened at the beginning of the pandemic, during the curfews in the spring of 2020. At the time people would applaud the hard-working medical staff at 8 pm in the evening. The political opposition in Serbia then proposed that five minutes after that, at 8:05 pm, people would express their disagreement with the handling of the pan-

demically by clapping, hitting pots and pans and things like that by their windows. This was very interesting in light of the fact that the government used the pandemic, among other things, to present themselves as the saviors of the nation and of the people. The curfews and the isolation were felt as a physical manifestation of the atomization and the disappearance of the public sphere in Serbia—so people were protesting that, in a way.

We had the elections in 2020, which happened right after the curfews and the period of isolation, when the COVID-19 measures were relaxed or had almost entirely disappeared. The party in power won the elections with a lot of seats and after the elections, they announced that curfews were going to start again because of the rising infection rate. In response to that, people went out on the streets, a situation that turned into very violent protests in July 2020. People tried to storm the parliament, and the government reacted very violently. In this case, these protests were not, at least explicitly, led by the political opposition. Instead, they were an amalgam of various different left-wing as well as right-wing ideas and movements who coalesced into a violent manifestation of disagreement with the way the government was using COVID-19 measures for its own benefit, stopping and restarting them whenever it suited them with regard to the election. That's why the shared feeling was that the party in power was misusing its power and authority. In these protests, there were strong right-wing elements—for example, chants concerning the Kosovo situation. Overall, the protests were a manifestation of public disagreement and public dissatisfaction with the government itself. After that, the government did not reinstate curfews or other COVID-19 measures.

The next wave of protests happened at the beginning of 2021, when the vaccinations started. Those protests were more similar to COVID-19 and anti-vaccine protests happening in March 2020 in other parts of Europe and elsewhere. They were focused on protesting the vaccination itself. They were organized and led by right-wing organizations and movements but not by the political parties in opposition. There were a lot of anti-vaccine spokespeople present who were well-known even before the pandemic started. The protests were, to a certain extent, ignored by

the government since the government didn't impose strict vaccination mandates—not even for medical staff. I think one reason for that was that they knew about the general distrust in Serbia concerning anything the state does. They learned their lesson in 2020 and didn't want to agitate people further. The protests in 2020 were very violent, as I already mentioned earlier, which resulted in media coverage in other countries and by online newspapers and generated reports about government oppression in Serbia.

In the protests of March 2021, you could hear various chants referring to conspiracy theories, and there were banners against globalists, the deep state, and even against Satanists who sacrifice babies. While these protests were ignored to a certain extent, the government was, however, also ridiculing them in various media claiming that they were crazy, and that, since the government did so much to acquire so many different types of vaccines, these protesters were actually acting irresponsibly and not patriotically.

I would say that, apart from that, the only other kind of protest was a small protest in October 2021, when vaccine passes were instituted in Serbia. Those protests tended to be really small, with perhaps only a few dozen people gathered; even the anti-vaccine spokespeople and conspiracy theorists weren't present.

In the case of Serbia, all of the protests were, in a way, a reaction to actions by the ruling party and the state. Furthermore, they were overdetermined by an anti-political orientation of the people and by distrust in the state itself. I want to highlight that the government actually reacted to those protests and took them into account. In March and April 2021, Serbia held the highest rate of vaccination in Europe for a short time, but that stopped soon after all the people who wanted to get vaccinated received it. I think that actually shows that the government is working by having in mind the distrust that people have in it.

MULLIS **Turning to Croatia, what can you tell us from your perspective? Can you relate to the Serbian context, or point out differences and similarities?**

I can relate to a point with regards to this core motivation: deep distrust of both state institutions and global institutions, including scientific institutions. This is the core of both the beginning of the protests and the movement in general, but even more so for their continuation through 2021 and 2022. That said, the protests in Croatia consisted, particularly at the beginning, of really diverse communities. Since the Croatian government largely tried to avoid harsher lockdowns and curfews, they went for ad hoc measures which aggravated a lot of different communities, particularly because they fed into economic anxiety and the pervasive distrust of the governing party. So these communities, namely people who are motivated by distrust of the governing party and strong economic anxiety, were a large part of the initial movement, along with libertarians, conspiracy theorists, and the far right. In short, the movement was really a mixed bag. In 2020 and early 2021, the “conspirituality” crowd, this sort of new-age-meets-conspiracy-theory-crowd, was perhaps the loudest, but even this sort of waned with time as one political party decided to become the face of protests against corona measures. This party, “The Bridge” (“Most”), represented a new kind of right wing for Croatia in the sense of being much more focused on trying to avoid explicit far-right imagery or rhetoric. On the other hand, the “old school” far-right party, Homeland Movement (“Domovinski pokret”), was internally split on the protest and part of it was even very much pro-vaccines. One member even made a point in his speech: “Since when are we for choice, since when are we for freedom?” Most is essentially a new kind of right-wing populist party, for the Croatian context, in the sense of rhetorical tactics as well as in the sense of being extremely media savvy, both in legacy and social media. This savviness also allows them to totally personalize politics; media personalities say they joined Most because other people in Most are trustworthy and want to help the Croatian people and not because they share a political position with the party, and they always repeat that the party itself is irrelevant. They worked to mobilize people against corona measures, both because they promote distrust in the government and because they promote fundamental distrust of global, and particularly scientific, institutions. But, notably, they also keep promising that their own experts will take over once they are in power. This last point is something I’ll return to later in the conversation.

MULLIS Benjamin, you have conducted research on the Austrian case. **Looking from Germany to Austria myself, I sometimes had the feeling that Vienna became something like the European capital of anti-corona protests. Is this picture wrong or what do you think about it?**

BENJAMIN OPRATKO Indeed, it's usually not a good sign when people look to Vienna from Germany in political terms. Anyway, it really is an extraordinary story given that the political culture in Austria for the past fifty or sixty years was one where social movements and street protests did not really feature prominently. Austria has, for a long time, been characterized by a kind of consensual politics along with a relatively weak civil society when it comes to mobilization of street protests. This is particularly so because the far right and the populist far right in Austria, as you may know, have been and still are dominated by one party, the Freedom Party, which had a kind of avant-garde role ever since the late 1980s in European far-right populism. One of the interesting things about this party is that they largely refrained from mobilizing on the street, which is also something that distinguishes them from neo-fascist parties. They have been very focused on parliamentary politics and media strategies, starting with classical media strategies in the 1990s and then kind of pioneering social media strategies for the far right.

Interestingly, this changed during the pandemic. The Freedom Party, which itself was in a deep internal crisis just before the pandemic happened, faced a large corruption scandal. They were basically kicked out of a coalition government that they had been part of for two years before that. They faced a short period of disorientation during which they did not really know how to react, just as most political forces initially did not really know how to react to the pandemic and to the new emerging questions and forces and dynamics. However, at some point in the second half of 2020, they decided to go all in and support the protests. It was the first time really that the Freedom Party became a mass mobilizing force in Austrian politics. This, among other things, has led to really large protests, which happened not only in Vienna, but emerged in a lot of mid-sized cities and towns and also in the Austrian countryside. Protests started happening in a lot of places where the Freedom Party did not

even have a mobilizing goal; these were, at least partly, locally-organized mobilizations with some—we would call it probably “grassroots elements.” Usually some far-right organizations were present, which were sometimes linked to the Freedom Party and sometimes outside of their sphere of influence. However, I think it remained a very mixed political composition.

Then we had these really huge demonstrations in Austria for a while, where the Freedom Party did feature very prominently. They were defying police bans on protests; it was a matter of mass civil disobedience. There were between 50,000 and 70,000 people on the streets of Vienna in a demonstration that was organized and led by members of parliament from the Freedom Party. It’s quite obvious, I would say, that they were able to mobilize much more people and way beyond their usual followers. So, in this case, yes, you could probably say that the Austrian case is a kind of outlier or maybe an extreme case. However, in some other ways, it did connect with mobilizations in other parts of Europe, quite obviously with those in Germany. With the difference, I think, that in Germany, The Alternative for Germany (AfD) had a more ambivalent role in the protests, but I am sure we will touch on that.

MULLIS I think we can turn back to this question when we talk about the institutions, which is actually the second topic I would really like to address. You have shown in your accounts up till now that some protests did actually relate to state decisions—that is, to measures imposed by the state—and were processed through and by institutions, and on the other hand established parties also played in some protests at some point a crucial role. **When you look at the Swedish case, how was the situation there? What role did the state or institutions play in the protests there, and were there any signs of institutionalization of the protests?**

CELINA ORTEGA SOTO The case of Sweden was somewhat different. The Swedish government and all of the political parties agreed that the virus was a threat, so official denialism wasn’t really a problem. Rather than lockdowns, the Swedish anti-pandemic effort largely relied on a voluntary strategy and a lot of recommendations. Protests emerged

very late in comparison to other countries, and they were joined by none of the political parties. They began in 2021, when a new law came into effect—the preliminary corona law. That’s when reactions started. We had different individuals from Alternative for Sweden and from The Nordic Resistance Movement attending the protests, but no official political parties. In January 2022, however, The Nordic Resistance Movement joined one of the biggest demonstrations, which had about 10,000 people. As to your question if there were signs of institutionalization: The key figures of these protests actually started a political party, albeit a very, very small one, called Rikslagen, which is hard to translate but it’s pointing to a governmental law and their key issues are truth and justice.

MULLIS Thank you. **When we look to the German case – I think Benjamin already related to initially ambivalent perspective of the right-wing populists –there were nonetheless strong processes of institutionalization I would say. Groups like the Free Saxons (“Freie Sachsen”) indicated a kind of institutionalization during this process. What is your perspective on this process regarding the German case?**

ALEX HARDER I think what’s really interesting, and I think this is in line with what a colleague of yours, Paul Zschocke, has also worked out for the case of Leipzig, is that in Germany we see phases of institutionalization within the protest dynamics. At first, the protests were initiated by fairly local organizing. Then they were mediated through a sort of self-institutionalized association that was called “Querdenken,” (“lateral thinking”). It had a very contemporary way of working, because it was essentially a franchise model. It was run by one guy, an investor from southern Germany, who basically decided that this was the moment to start a movement against the COVID-19 measures with a vague conception of freedom in mind, which we might touch on later. He then also started to supply branding, merchandise, and organizational tools to other local branches, which then could also claim to be part of this movement of “lateralists.” Over the course of 2020, they became so big that the term “Querdenken” is synonymous with opposition to the anti-pandemic measures in popular discourse. Potentially due to the shifts in the gov-

ernment response to the virus, which loosened up somewhat throughout 2020 when the response started to be coordinated more locally by the individual states rather than on the federal level, the movement waned. It also broke apart due to internal conflicts that had to do with the fact that, quite clearly, the guy running it was monetizing this movement. Additionally, the movement was also not really cohesive in terms of its ideologies. Next, the focus of the protest shifted, and more radical actors such as the Free Saxons became visible. They were founded in early 2021 and quickly started to become the new face of the protests. The Free Saxons are a micro party founded by actors long enmeshed in far-right movements in Germany, and they attempt to exert influence mainly on the state level. There were also attempts in preparation for the German federal election in 2021 to build a party that originated much closer to the lateralists, called “die Basis.” There were multiple attempts to kick-start this party, and although their total number of votes might have been quite high regionally, they failed to enter parliament. Their core tenets differ from the overtly far-right rhetoric of the Free Saxons and involve vaguer terms such as “freedom,” “awareness,” “power limitation,” and “swarm intelligence.” They very much believe that technological infrastructures and specific decision-making processes make for a more democratic consensus building, while also being steeped in conspiratorial thinking.

Nonetheless, I am skeptical that parliamentary parties will be the predominant form of institutionalization of these protests. If you think about all of the digital communication channels and the groups that have emerged on Telegram, but also on other “alternative” platforms, we can see that the protests have spawned a digital ecosystem that has expanded its reach, and it definitely has drawn in more people than it did during previous waves of right-wing protests in 2014 or 2015-16. And those digital channels, they’re also a kind of institutionalization.

MULLIS **As you just related to the question of right-wing protests now, we should ask in all cases, what role the far right played in this. In what way were these mobilizations far-right protests? How did far-right organizations relate to these protests?**

UROŠEVIĆ As I mentioned earlier, I think that compared to other countries, the case of Serbia is in a way simpler but in other ways a little more complex. The ruling party in Serbia is like the Borg in Star Trek; they assimilate everything. The movements and the parties that were active in the Serbian protests in July of 2020 were the right-wingers that are not assimilated and are oriented against the ruling party. Actually, you can see in those protests that precisely because of this, these protests weren't in any way formally organized. They were like an outburst of violence, which those movements tried to direct— to use to show their dissatisfaction. It's precisely for that reason that those protests were ostensibly against the new COVID-19 measures but people were chanting about Kosovo. In March of 2021, those who led the protests were the right-wing movements in Serbia that claimed to be sovereigntists and anti-globalists, similar to populist right-wing rhetoric in other countries. Additionally, many ideas and symbols can be traced back to the online sphere, such as QAnon, for example. I think that those protests were led by parts of the right-wing sphere and not assimilated by the party in power. However, they are not institutionalized in that way, not organized or formally connected in any way between each other in a sense that they would present a coherent political power that people could support during elections. They also didn't present any new or different alternative policies for Serbia. They're really best captured as expressions of dissatisfaction in this post-modern way. They're like a network that simply appears sometimes without actually presenting an important factor in the current political sphere.

HARDER In Germany, regional differences play a crucial role when it comes to the far-right in these protests, especially between the south of Germany and parts of the east of Germany. As I just explained, more organized movements have really taken over the protests, or lay their claims to them, in states like Saxony. But across Germany, you could see that the far-right has been active within the protest from the beginning. They were in many cases tolerated as protesters. Especially in the early, big demonstrations where spiritual, esoteric or libertarian actors mingled with self-proclaimed patriots, Q-Anon adherents, and identitarians, neo-Nazis were definitely part of the picture. This wasn't something that

was hidden at these demonstrations, you can recognize all of these actors within the protests. It was like the language of “freedom” allowed them all to protest together. However, then it starts to become really difficult to draw the boundaries between what is part of the organized far right and where these ideologies begin to sort of get blurry. How do you place the Q-Anon protesters, for example, or the “Trumpists” within a German frame of reference where the political categories appear so different? And just to shortly mention the Alternative for Germany, the AFD, here. The AFD has definitely aligned with a strong criticism of the government’s response. But in contrast to the Austrian FPÖ, there is an ongoing conflict inside the AFD with regards to its relationship to actual on-the-ground movements. There are wings of the party looking at cooperating and maintaining ties to far-right movement actors, and there are those that are keen on keeping their professional and ideological distance. Just like after 2015, this division has also characterized the AFD’s ambivalent approach to the current protest, which does not necessarily mean that they have weakened. I think this ambivalence and internal conflict of the party actually contributes to its longevity, but it is of course also a constant source of tension.

ORTEGA SOTO As I said before, in Sweden the far right didn’t really have big connections to the movement, except for the Nordic Resistance Movement. So there’s not much more to say about it, but what’s interesting and what’s relevant for the research in the case of Sweden is to look into how those that might be called leftists or those talking about peace and love—and we have a lot of those in our movements—how they come to find themselves at a demonstration in Stockholm alongside the Nordic Resistance Movement, sharing a big banner together. So I think this is something crucial that we have to look into, and that goes back to the question that this conference started with, the question about “conditions of acceptability.”

ZUBČIĆ In Croatia, the unofficial far-right groups were always there at the protests, and they always had the biggest banner, and they were the loudest, and, crucially, legacy media tended to focus on them a lot—but

they were always just a part of a larger movement. The other thing is this esoteric Q-Anon-hippie-far-right which is, as Milan said, essentially disorganized and fragmented. There are specific people who hold these beliefs and they may congregate online, but they don't appear to cohere into any sort of relevant political force and they don't appear to even have any tendency actually to organize into such a force. I think that in the Croatian case, the most interesting political player are these right-wing populists, Most, who tend to obfuscate their far-right agenda by focusing on tactics relating to the deep dissatisfaction of the population. They also import a lot of tactics, particularly from American far-right Republicans, but they mostly tend to work their most popular points into the general conversation: the economic anxiety, the corruption of the governing party, the untrustworthiness of Croatian institutions. They also work the nationalist tropes, but always with the hand behind their back, so to speak. They might gain more votes with these tactics, they may appeal to the "everyday Croat" as well as fascists and conspiratorial crowd, so they present the greatest danger in Croatia today.

OPRATKO I would add three quick things to what I already said. I briefly mentioned this, but I think it's worth repeating that apart from the Freedom Party, some smaller openly fascist, neo-fascist, and Nazi groups were present at these protests from the very beginning. They really saw this as an opportunity to present themselves and to, you know, be on the street in ways that they haven't been able to for decades. You could see the most prominent neo-Nazi who spent quite a few years in prison at the demonstration. This would not have been possible before! The future will reveal if this opportunity really translates into strengthening their cause and their organizations. I think at this point it's still an open question, we don't really know, but they're at least trying. The second thing to note is that for The Freedom Party, as I mentioned earlier, it really represents a shift in their attitude towards street mobilizations and street politics due to the fact that they decided to not only participate but try to hegemonize the movement. What is still unclear to me and to many other analysts, I think, is whether this represents more than a tactical and instrumentalist approach. As I mentioned before, the Freedom

Party was in a deep internal crisis, and it's quite clear that the now sole leader and former minister of the interior, Herbert Kickl, really saw this as an opening, as a window of opportunity to strengthen his own position within the party and also to regain momentum politically in the broader sense. Whether this reliance on street politics and mobilization transforms the political nature of the party, which is a possibility, or whether it remains a purely tactical and instrumentalist approach, is still to be seen. We will see in the coming months when the protests—this is at least what I'm expecting—will regain momentum, once the government will reintroduce measures during the winter when the rate of infection, the numbers of infections rise again.

The third aspect that I haven't talked about yet is that there is one new political force that has emerged directly from these protests. It's to some degree similar to what Alex just described with die Basis, it's a party called MFG, whose name translates to "people, freedom, and fundamental rights" in English. It managed to become quite successful in one regional election where it got something like eight per cent of the vote and became part of the state parliament. In national polls, they've been at something like ten or eleven per cent, though it has gone down a little bit in the past few months. If we had snap elections tomorrow, they would most certainly be part of the next parliament and they do not represent themselves as part of the right, even though some of the key members have a political history of being part of the far-right. They really try to hide that though. However, many of the people they mobilized and who are now actively engaged in this new political party, don't see themselves as part of the right, perhaps more part of the center. They are okay with working with the right, they agree with some of the policies or at least they don't care, but it's an interesting and I think complicated case. I think it's something that we see in many different places where the political spectrum itself becomes more difficult to read.

MULLIS I would like to move on to the third question. Celina, you have already actually addressed this question of the conditions of acceptability, to inquire about the motives and reasons behind these protests. I think you have written this paper where you emphasized the question

of hyper-individualism. In her work on the protests, Christina Henschel argues, for example, that this idea of freedom which is promoted there is something that is deeply selfish because it's freedom aimed at doing just whatever you want and what you have done before without accepting it as something in relation to society. Perhaps you could elaborate on the German case and on the motives that lie behind these protests?

HARDER Sure, I'll try while also relying on my co-panelists probably because there are some things I think that are similar across all of our cases, but of course, also ideological specificities. In general, I do think what you are pointing to is that there is an incredible reliance on the language of freedom and on a rhetoric of liberation. The first really big protests in Germany happened in August of 2020. About 20,000 protesters came together at the Brandenburg Gate in a sort of surreal festival or bizarre Comic-Con, where hardcore neo-Nazis marched right next to these hippie-families with dreadlocks, sandals, and socks. Eerily reminiscent of Leni Riefstahl's propaganda film on the seventh convention of the Nazi Party, the event was called "The Day of Freedom." It was supposed to announce the end of the pandemic and the end of all the counter-measures with it. On this day, and in many other protests, the aim was taken at all the new measures in everyday life, such as wearing masks, the vaccines, and the social distancing rules. Growing economic uncertainty, the extreme strain on health care workers, the insecurity of migrant workers or of victims of domestic violence, all relevant problems during the pandemic, did not figure into these protests at all. Instead, when we looked at the demonstrations and the online discourse, we mainly see this broad rejection of political institutions, of certain scientific institutions, as well as media institutions. For many German protesters, it seemed that the government and individual politicians, scientific experts, the pharmaceutical industry as well as mainstream, but crucially also social media like Facebook, all came together in order to subjugate, manipulate, and experiment on the people. I think that the term "freedom" and especially a focus on self-determination and individual sovereignty was really mobilized against this anxiety. In regard to the vaccination and the face masks, this sovereignty mainly involved issues of bodily autonomy. Pro-

testers adopted political slogans from the left, like “my body, my choice” or “I can’t breathe.” Especially striking, in my research on the online communities of this movement, was the role of the “immune system.” In their discussion, the immune system is almost always invoked against measures like masks or vaccination. It is something you trust in, something you take care of yourself, something you are responsible for yourself. So there is on one hand a strong investment in the ownership of your own body that seems threatened in the pandemic, and on the other a complete refusal of the idea that your personal health is in any way related to that of the wider society. So when people do get severely ill from corona or get long COVID, ultimately it is seen of as their fault for not taking proper care and responsibility of their immune system.

A second dimension where individual sovereignty comes to bear, I think, is the question of epistemic authorities. There is a deep distrust of the interpretations that politicians, experts, or the media offer about the crisis and in the face of this, many protesters and opponents of the measures draw on “counter-truths” that involve personal perspectives, their own feelings, and obviously, conspiracy theories. I think in all of these cases, there’s a desire for autonomous judgement, a sort of individualized epistemology, that is hyper-focused on coming to your own conclusion rather than following the mainstream. It either involves “gut feelings,” very personal experiences in the pandemic, or doing your own research—and then drifting off into these conspiracy bubbles online. So of course, epistemic authority is in many cases just transferred to some conspiracy peddlers, but it comes in the guise of individual, self-directed research and decision-making, which is what makes it so attractive, I think.

Lastly, there is a third element I find interesting. In the protests in Germany and in the online communities, this individualism also involves a moment of personal distinction, of heroism. There is really a strong attempt to highlight your own uniqueness, to show how you personally are a hero resisting the pandemic regime. They often compare themselves with resistance fighters, for example against the Nazi regime. Everyone who follows the measures—they’re always “sheeple” or “lab rats,” a mass of mindless followers, but the protesters, they are special in a way because they see themselves as different. There is always a performative aspect

to this sort of resistance, maybe a fear also of being assimilated into the mainstream, and I think it adds something to understanding the situation. Because of course, there is a sort of neoliberal logic at the heart of many of these protests, like the idea of refusing any interdependence within society and being only responsible for yourself and nobody else. But this strong focus on personal epistemic autonomy and also heroic uniqueness—I think it speaks to a broader concern with individuality, with the borders of the body and the sense of subjectivity in the pandemic, where all of these things really have to be re-negotiated, and also are, in practice, re-negotiated through all these new and sometimes unprecedented ways of governing.

MULLIS Thank you Alex. **Celina, as you have brought up the question of the conditions of acceptability and said that you would wish to do more research on this, have you got ideas about what these conditions are in the situation you have observed?**

ORTEGASOTO The conditions of acceptability for the movements in Sweden? Well, I think people are sick and tired, they feel that some things are changing, and they don't really understand what it is, and I think it's incredibly easy to just find a scapegoat and point to that. Sometimes it ends up being migrants, sometimes the pandemic. Then again, the Swedish government has had a rough time handling the crisis. It hasn't really gone as planned. For example, we should have had a lot of masks in reserve, but we burned them up a couple years before the pandemic. A lot of scandals like these came to the fore eventually, and so I think they contributed to these conditions of acceptability. I also think that there's a lot of frustration. When we were doing interviews with workers in retail and logistics, a lot of people there pointed to a very stressful workload, bad working conditions, etc. as well as not getting to spend enough time with friends and family, not enough time to sleep, not enough time for—well, not having to choose between your hobby or sleep. That's why I argue that there are a lot of different aspects that come together. There are many different answers to these conditions of acceptability. We also have, what Alex mentioned, conspiracy theories, which also offer a very

limited narration about why everything is perceived as wrong. They offer simple stories and then eventually, I guess, some people believe them. There are many different conditions for that, so that might not be the most straightforward answer, but I believe it's a lot of different things that come together.

MULLIS **Thank you. I think one topic that hasn't been put forward until now in this situation is the question of the "outside" I think you raised this question in our preliminary discussions. We find this picture of the "outside," i.e., of the elites, also in anti-Semitic narratives. Perhaps, Milan, you could elaborate a little bit on the role of the "outside" in the protests here, because I think it's an important aspect.**

UROŠEVIĆ I forgot to mention that the, let's say, most coherently organized group, which has participated in the protests against the vaccination, is an organization called Dosta je bilo, the translation would be "enough is enough." They started as neoliberal technocrats, and a few years ago, they changed their narrative along with an internal change. Since then, they adopted sovereigntist, protectionist ideas similar to the American Republicans. I think they are illustrative of this idea that these protests in the Serbian context were aimed against something that is being imposed from the outside, which isn't truly "ours." This idea that because of a lot of conditions, such as economic instability, poverty, political instability, and dysfunctional institutions, are being projected onto something presented as coming from either outside our borders, outside of the true spirit of our nation, or outside of our tradition, imposed by the globalist elites from the United States, from NATO or from the EU and so forth.

All of those conditions are projected as being caused by this unknown force against which they are rising up, all the while not perceiving that they rely on some internal contradictions. In that sense, it's like the vaccination, the COVID-19 measures, and the virus itself; they're presented as something infecting our national body, our pure national soul, which is being corrupted. I think this kind of individualist idea surfaces here, that now we are rising up to fight because we want to be true to our-

selves. You want to be true to yourself, you know, protect the body of the individual. It is presented as connected to the body of the nation in that sense—putting walls up to protect ourselves. I think it's interesting how it has this certain kind of libertarian twist to it, like the “don't tread on me” idea, and I think that it's not surprising that an organization like Dosta je bilo, which were neoliberal-oriented, adopted these ideas and try to propagate them through presenting the vaccination and the vaccine itself as something that shouldn't be trusted. It's interesting that they actually proposed that they would accept the vaccine if our government organizations would test them out. They suggested it would need to go through our own ways of testing because the ones conducted elsewhere can't be trusted because they're coming from the outside, therefore we have to protect ourselves from that.

ZUBČIĆ All of these aspects apply to Croatia as well. I just want to add one more condition of acceptability I think is relevant—namely, the answer the political and academic and media elites give to the movement, which has, in part, fed right into the narrative which the protest movement has nurtured. In significant ways, political, academic, and media elites responded to the movement in a patronizing, semi-technocratic way, portraying the diverse communities of the movement as if they are essentially all stupid and insane. The elites overwhelmingly responded exactly how the conspiratorial and anti-institutionalist members of movement said they would, and I think this was critical to the continuation and strengthening of the movement. They played right into the right-wing populist narrative. This will also be one of the things that might be a legacy of COVID-19 crisis, a political landscape strongly shaped by two competing, de-politicized and quasi-technocratic political options, the right-wing populists and the neoliberal “expertocrats”. On one hand, we will have the right-wing populists with their own experts; it is crucial to understand that they also have their experts and promote “trusting the profession” in governance. They are neither rhetorically nor substantively against science as a whole, they're just against some specific institutionalist science when it suits them. On the other hand, we will have post-neoliberal expertocrats, who promote the idea of voters and the people as basically misinformed, irrational and incompetent in mat-

ters of self-governance. They believe that we cannot trust the people anymore, that democracy is a fatally compromised system, and that we have to put the governance into the hands of the epistemically superior, exceptional people. This political landscape dominated by competing depoliticized technocracies, both nota bene epistemically catastrophic, is the greatest future threat arising from the corona crisis.

OPRATKO Just to pick up on this, because I think it's very important and it's also one of the longer-term trends, meaning it's one of the trends that go way back and originated way before the pandemic. The role of expertise in politics constitutes one element of the conditions of acceptability. I've learned a lot from a book I read last year by Gil Eyal, titled *The Crisis of Expertise*. He describes what he terms the "expertization of politics" and how it involves increasing reliance on this idea of mutual technocratic expertise by governments. According to Eyal, this expertization of politics inevitably leads to a politicization of expertise, and he argues that you could witness this long before the pandemic. However, the pandemic really served as a catalyst. I think what we are seeing in these movements is a certain type of politicization of expertise. It's a type that we don't necessarily like, but it is related to other forms of politicization of expertise that historically belonged to the left—think of genetic engineering, nuclear power, or climate politics. We see that the political left has a long track record of trying to politicize expertise, question science, and not rely on this naive idea of science and expertise as something outside of society and politics that provides a neutral compass. With the pandemic management introduced by many of the centrist governments in Europe, we now have a situation where left and liberal forces increasingly fall back on this naive idea and defend science and expertise, calling everyone to "listen to the experts," which I think is troublesome.

MULLIS **You managed to already make the link to the question of what will come next and what will remain. How about the others also give a brief answer to this question so that we can have a fuller picture, and then we will perhaps open the floor for a brief discussion.**

UROŠEVIĆ Well, speaking from the Serbian context and connecting to what the others said already, I think one of the important problems in Serbia, usually coming from the sphere of civil society, is this idea that people believe and behave this way because they are dumb nationalist right-wingers and it's essentially those people's fault—they don't trust the science, they're uneducated and it's hopeless, in the kind of patronizing way that Marko-Luka mentioned. I think that has an adverse effect because it tends to drive people further from us, from our ideas, from for what we try to present, and I think what's important is—and I think that our project contributes to that—to try to understand why those ideas, those conspiracies, those narratives, why do they make sense for those people? In a Foucauldian way, they are true for them, they're a regime of truth through which they understand their reality in which they are, and we need to understand, from their perspective, why does it make sense for someone to believe that Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden sacrifice babies to Satan? It sounds horrible, but for someone it does make sense to behave in accordance with those narratives. In a way, I think that it's our job as intellectuals to understand that and to try to approach those people from their life world and to grasp why those narratives are acceptable to them and why other narratives aren't.

HARDER I really don't know what's coming next. It feels like at least in Germany, these protests have a sort of lineage to similar protests before, such as the Pegida protests in 2015 and the so-called peace protest in 2014 about the annexation of Crimea. My feeling is that the protests do arise as ways of dealing with fairly large shifts and transformations that people perceive. In the interviews and in the fieldwork we conducted before the pandemic started, so many people already talked about their anxiety about the future. People were preoccupied with how their work is going to change, how their lives are going to change, for example through the introduction of new technologies. And they rarely expect it to change for the better. There is deep sense of unease about the future and about what is to come. All these conspiratorial narratives about "The Great Reset" or other secret plans appear to me as ways of anticipating social transformations that come with responding to pandemics, but also to the coming climate catastrophes. They respond to them in

a very individualized, sovereigntist way that's still kind of hard to place in the political spectrum we envision. I fear that going into the climate crisis or going into future crises, even geopolitical crises like the current ones, this is a response that might grow stronger because the political responses to such crises might take a similar form to the one that we're currently seeing, questioning ideas of sovereignty and individual freedom that have so long been held very dear. So, while I am skeptical that the specific organs of the German "Querdenker" movement will endure for long, I do think that their ideologies and maybe their organizing is a kind of template for future protests to come.

ORTEGA SOTO For Sweden, the protest movement wasn't really that strong, but I do think that they did a really good job of planting a seed of fear and skepticism among the general public. I think this is something that might grow. It doesn't mean that the movement itself will grow but I do think that people won't be looking at science, expertise, or politicians in the same way. I think this is something we will have to carry on with us. I also think that the pandemic has shown that the Swedish government wasn't ready for such a crisis, which also fuels fear and skepticism. However, we'll see, we'll have an election in September 2022, so hopefully, we'll know more by then, and get more answers to where we are really heading.

MANUELA BOJADŽIJEV (COMMENT) **Thank you so much, it was really great listening to you and hearing these different accounts that at the same time work so well together. I have a feeling that there is something that hasn't been mentioned, perhaps because it wasn't part of your research. However, it seems really important. You are looking very closely at these protest movements and how they make sense of it all, how this also relates to their lives and what they were able to do and what they were not able to do anymore. We are now in this in-between phase—as you mentioned, Benjamin—so we're not done with the pandemic, we'll probably be back in it deep by autumn.**

However, there is a sense that somehow, we've overcome this pandemic—at the moment, at least. We're all behaving like that's a fact, but peo-

ple are really different now. Everyone went through an incredibly long period of a reconfiguration of social relations. In connection with this, there was a deep sense that the ways we are being governed don't make sense to us, either. I think this is the whole narrative about the climate crisis; we know it doesn't make sense what's going on. It's the same with the war—okay, I do know a lot of people who think that makes sense—but it's definitely an incredibly destructive force that has come to the fore, and that is adding to the other destructive forces that we need to confront.

We have that sense that the governing forces are not really responding to it in the right way, and at the same time, it seems that if these movements had one effect, it was the destruction of how social relations used to be before. In a time now where these have been put to a halt in a way that disabled the continuation of the routine, of the reproduction, while at the same time pretending that we are still reproducing just the way we did before. So if we are to reorganize these meanings, then the practices also have to change right? I mean they have to be different; we have to behave differently. We cannot keep up with what has been before. The question is, if there is something to learn, if there are any cracks that could become informative for a way out. Because otherwise, we just move into the next step of this agony.

OPRATKO My short response would be yes to the very last thing you said. However, I wanted to mention maybe one thing in response to your comment, which is, I think, what we've seen in the past two years in these movements and also in the wider cultural sphere of sociality, which was maybe not part of the movement but somehow influenced by some of the ideas, sentiments, affects and emotions. What we've seen there really is a glimpse into a future in which modes of living will have to be transformed in one way or the other. As it stands, the state will play a significant role in this process and in the lives of individual people when it comes to economic crises, raging inflation in prices of food and energy shortages and rationing, as well as when it comes to everything related to the climate crisis.

The reason for this is that we are not in a position of a democratic collective community where we could consciously self-impose new ways of living. We're not there. Instead, this will happen in one way or the other as a wild mixture of policies and measures that will be introduced and imposed by the state. We've lived through a brief era now of experiencing what it means when the state intervenes in a very practical, concrete way in the lives of people who are not used to being policed in that way—who are not migrants, who are not minorities. It affected parts of the population who usually only deal with the state when they have to do their taxes or when they're speeding on the motorway. Then, all of a sudden, the state was telling them to stay at home, to not see their grandparents, not do this and that. What we saw wasn't a reaction to that. This is what worries me that we now have a pattern and experiences of how people think they should or can or might react to such experiences. Even if the pandemic was over tomorrow, we would still have to expect experiences like that, and this is something to bear in mind for the future.

UROŠEVIĆ I wanted to add something. I think you're right in mentioning that the pandemic has triggered a change. It's a big change, but I think that what we should be wary of is that for those opposing these protests, right-wing movements, conspiracy movements, a lot of time the answer was only "just trust the experts." This is, of course, fine and I'm not an epidemiologist so it is hard to say whether there were other ways of governing the situation of the pandemic. However, I think that the big problem was that these movements reacted to the lockdowns, the curfews, the extreme isolation, and the disappearance of this kind of social life like meeting each other, hanging out, going out etc. A lot of these movements were capturing the feeling that people wanted those things back. I'm saying this because online, some people are proposing to have climate change lockdowns because climate change is coming. We should have lockdowns to stop people from moving unnecessarily. Due to the pandemic, we had some debates like for example, "do we need people to physically go to university, can't we have all of this online only?" Of course, I was horrified by that, because if I was to go to the university online for four years, I would probably kill myself. The point

of going to a university is the experience. As Benjamin mentioned, the government had to stop people from seeing their grandparents, their families for the holidays, etc. I think that what we need to imagine is that we need a change, but we need to keep the element of social life, which provides meaning to people.

These movements are doing that. They're saying if you protest, we can go back to previous times and our new meaning will be the nation, patriarchy, our race, etc. We are failing to do that because in the pandemic, the epidemiologists and experts were telling us that we needed a lockdown. In Serbia, after the curfews were lifted at the end of 2020, there was the highest number of people in hospitals. There then was some sort of lockdown. Everyone who could work from home or stay home was supposed to do that. But we have to consider people who have kids who can't go to school. However, for companies, their employees/workers had to go to work. What are we giving to these people then? How are they going to solve this problem? Calling for a lockdown only because of high infection rates isn't a long-term solution. I think we failed at imagining a solution which could look different. I'm not an expert and I can't imagine it right now, but I think that this is something that we need to do.

MULLIS I will shortly step out of my role and give a very brief answer myself. I've been conducting interviews again, and it really struck me when I ask people what has changed during the pandemic, they can barely give an answer. I think they also lack a language to describe what's happening to them and what has happened and I think that will deepen the problem.

SANJA BOJANIĆ (COMMENT) Thanks a lot, I've been following your work from the beginning. Manuela mentioned the systemic crisis. We are back, maybe not in the exact same words of how Wallerstein described it, but it is systemic. Now I do not consider it a description, it's more of a modality of thinking and analyzing. Something I noticed as a leftist response to find meaning is providing all along a second-degree meaning: developing irony, developing sarcasm, developing something which is not taking the stance in the here and now but projecting a conditionality

of “what if.” We are lost, and as such, the first thing to do will be to root yourself in the present moment, in what’s happening. The thinking of pandemics as endemic. The crisis is not behind us, we are living with it. You have a simple cough and then well, let’s see my temperature and let’s test. It’s a vegetative reaction to the crisis, and my question to all of you, from each of your perspectives, would be not on the rational level of thinking about endemics but touching upon the emotional fluency or emotional literacy among people that you observed and engaged with. Just give a brief response as researchers, as observers, as those who were in the field either digitally or spatially. What was your first reaction to this emotional fluency that you received through their reactions?

STEFAN JONSSON (COMMENT)

I just wanted to add two things. First, we had a sociologist at our research institute, a prominent Indian senior sociologist, and she gave a talk on the pandemic in India. It wasn’t really until I heard her talk that I really understood the implications. It was a theoretical talk on risk and how the state responds to risk and how we need to rethink risk in this context. There were two lockdowns in India. They were both extremely severe and the consequences of them were that the government suddenly understood that there were workers and people in India who worked away from home and who were stuck. They were just stuck where they were and they couldn’t survive, so this became a big problem. She continued to analyze that, and it turned into this kind of nightmarish futuristic dystopic story about a state who responds only through a lockdown and there is no health care system in place and there is no food. There is a repressive apparatus, police and military, but people are staying in their places. For how long can that state of society remain? I mean either people will simply die, they would starve to death, they are locked down, they are not allowed to move, they are forced to sit down in a square with their hands behind their heads in this case because of all kinds of repressive measures. This gave a kind of frightening counterpoint to the European situation, and I think this is an issue concerning the state and authority, Milan, you spoke about it and also Benjamin—about the political measure of a lockdown. What does a lockdown as a state measure in societies that see themselves as democratic really imply? I mean the absolute contrast to this Indian sit-

uation is the Swedish case: we never had any lockdowns. There only was a small minority who suggested we should have them. There weren't any curfews whatsoever. At some point, the corona law came into effect, which managed to limit the number of people who could be in a store at the same time, but that was basically it. Theaters, cultural centers, universities were closed, but schools remained open. That is because the public health authority argued that there was no evidence that lockdowns in this situation would be good for public health. So, there was a health argument against the lockdown as an alternative health measure against the pandemic. I just want to add this to the discussion that there are two things that we should think about more. That is the repressive capacity of the state. You can have a repressive measure when you take care of citizens but when there is nothing there, when there is no health care apparatus that can complement the lockdown and cure people, what happens then? The other thing that remains to be seen as a result of the pandemic is a huge debate about the health care system, which we are waiting for but that hasn't really materialized.

ZUBČIĆ To tie in Sanja's question about emotional fluency with Manuela's question and then with Stefan's in some ways, the thing that is easily missed, particularly given the focus of our research, is that aside from the general distrust, isolation and so forth, which we mentioned many times, the COVID-19 crisis was also marked by a really organized solidarity and by collaborative movements. People actually organized among themselves and helped each other out, and they created conditions for potentially real change in some workplaces. So, there is a possibility that we disregard that this crisis also gave us, in some respects, more emotional fluency, and didn't only diminish it. Also, connecting to Stefan's point, I think that it's relevant to recognize that the pandemic opened a space for possibilities. This relates to a talk with regards to state capacity, when suddenly we discovered the state could do things during the pandemic that before the pandemic were unimaginable. The repressive political forces, both right-wing populists and post-neoliberal expertocrats, saw and seized these new possibilities, while the left-wing political classes somewhat blanked out and appear to still have to fully recognize that there is this opening up and that this is a moment when

we imagine new institutions and new systems of governance. I think that this is something we still have time to do, and that the political left should promptly recognize and seize this opportunity.

UROŠEVIĆ To maybe connect both questions in a way, I think that for me there were two reactions which were mostly emotional. The right-wing movements, the people who were protesting, their basic reaction was “okay, I want my right to do something; you are imposing this on me, and I am a sovereign citizen and I want it back.” On the other side were people who were rightfully insisting on public health risks and demanding to protect themselves: “We need to stay at home.” Of course, this is justified, it is a feeling of fear for our health. Of course, the virus and the risks related to the virus are a problem. I know there’s some really left-wing people in Serbia who were doing this Facebook analysis of answers to the pandemic. Their basic point was that the example of Sweden is Social Darwinism, and the example of the Chinese reaction is scientific, but if you look now at China their answer to the omicron strain is ludicrous, of course. You can’t stop it from spreading and it is pointless to do such harsh lockdowns to stop it. As Marko said, we need a space to think about new ways of governing these kinds of situations which won’t have this kind of harsh disciplinary focus on our biological existence. I think that is good for the short-term, but we need to think of new ways where we can have lives which go beyond, which have this social substrate, but that at the same time won’t expose us to these kinds of new health risks. I think that it is a lack of imagination if we only think that the only answer is either to do nothing or to impose a lockdown. I likewise think that a space to try to imagine new ways of thinking about these things is needed. We need to have in mind that we can’t just reduce ourselves to either individuals with rights or individuals who are scared they’re going to get sick. So it may be some sort of a Butlerian answer.

OPRATKO Two quick responses, one to what Stefan just said in your last intervention. It’s not only that we haven’t had this debate on the nature of our healthcare systems and how we need to improve and adapt them to an age of pandemics and an age of climate crisis, it’s that we—at least

in the Austrian case—it's that the healthcare system is actively drained. It's worse now than it was two years ago, which has to do directly with the COVID-19 situation. You have doctors and healthcare professionals who are just burned out. In Austria, it's now the case that all of the major hospitals have reduced the number of hospital beds due to lack of resources and that is lack of human resources. This is something that happens in a situation when we are actually now living through a new ongoing wave of infections, which will fill hospital beds. There is no debate about that. There's no idea of what a long-term strategy of transforming the role of the state could look like. Again, I'm coming back to the question of how transforming the role of the state could look like and would have to look like in the face of coming challenges. So it's an extraordinary instance of ignorance, of active political ignorance that we're witnessing. But at the same time, the public discussion is mainly about how many weapons can we produce and ship to the Ukraine. As we've heard yesterday, Germany can just materialize 100 billion euros out of thin air to support their military, but they cannot support their hospitals. This leads me to the question of the affects and emotions, and what kinds of emotions we encountered in our research. I would say before the pandemic there was a very strong case of alienation. This affect of "I don't want to be part of this society; I don't want to be bothered with politics; I have my own problems; just leave me alone." I think what happened in the past two years and what will increasingly happen in the next years is that you won't be left alone by history and you won't be left alone by politics. It's a nuisance, it's something that people are really upset about: "how dare the world impose itself on my personal freedom, on my personal feelings, I don't want to be part of this." In the coming months, people will experience in parts of Europe that usually have not experienced that for generations, they will experience what it means to not be able to pay for your heating, to really have to think about food security. This will affect sections of society who haven't had this as an issue for three generations. History bears on your personal life, this is I think what's in front of us and this will unleash a bundle of emotions and affects that I'm afraid will have political effects and in some ways political effects that connect back to what we just talked about for the past two hours.



BELGRADE
SERBIA

CASE STUDY **O**F SERBIA

POLITICAL
POLARIZATION
AND CONSPIRACY
THEORIES IN
THE TIME OF
THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

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In the case of Serbia, my research followed the ideas Stuart Hall laid out in his paper “Encoding/Decoding.” Hall claims that media messages are encoded discourses created by media structures and are later decoded by consumers¹. His point was that the process of encoding can’t completely determine how the messages will be decoded. The situation of the pandemic can be seen as a beginning of a “historical conjuncture” or a “period of time when a series of causes has a predominant influence over the creation of events and ideas.”² Therefore, my research focused on the ways the media produces discourses that give meaning to various aspects of the pandemic, like COVID-19 measures and the vaccination. I also researched online spaces where citizens explicitly against COVID-19 measures and vaccination congregate, since ideas propagated within them are closely related to the situation of the pandemic and have a profound influence on its future development. My research focused on delineating discursive structures of media messages and of the narratives that permeate the aforementioned online spaces in order to see whether they are structured by cultures of rejection.

Serbia is a polarized society in many ways. Political polarization in Serbia consists of a conflict between the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which is in power, and the opposition. Since coming to power in 2012,

1 Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays: Volume 1* (London: Duke University Press, 2019).

2 Justin. Rosenberg, “Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem,” *International Politics* 42, no. 1 (2005): 2–74.

SNS has built a huge clientelist system through which it maintains control of the government and ensures itself victory in every election. The president of the party and of Serbia is Aleksandar Vučić, who, along with other leading party members, usually deploys rhetoric with a mixture of nationalism, populism, and authoritarian neoliberalism. The opposition in Serbia is an atomized and heterogeneous assemblage of parties and movements, most of which are liberal-left oriented. Their criticism of the government mostly consists of pointing out the authoritarian tendencies of SNS, its use of clientelistic methods to manipulate the outcomes of elections, and the lack of the rule of law in Serbia. Polarization can be seen in the voting population as well; the voters of SNS are usually lower class, less educated, and live in rural areas, while the opposition's voters are usually middle class, more educated, and live in urban areas.³

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THE PANDEMIC IN THE SERBIAN MEDIA

This polarization can be seen in the media as well. Hence, I decided to focus my research on the most prominent media outlets in Serbia on each side of the political divide. The first media outlet in my sample was *Informer*, the most famous pro-government newspaper. The media outlet on the opposition's side I chose was N1, a cable news channel and CNN's local broadcast partner.

My research consisted of analyzing various articles on these two media outlets' websites posted from April 5, 2021, to May 2, 2021. More precisely, I focused on articles that talk about three recent events related to the current situation of the pandemic in Serbia. Those events are: (1) an anti-vaccination/anti-COVID-19 measures protest, (2) the process of the vaccination, and (3) the "vaccination of the region." By analyzing these

3 CRTA, "Podrivanje demokratije: Procesi i institucije u Srbiji"(2021), https://demokratija.crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CRTA_Podrivanje-Demokratije_procesi-i-institucije-u-Srbiji-2010_2020.pdf

articles, I tried to find a common discursive mechanism for producing meaning, and to see how the rules of that mechanism intersect with the Serbian context as well as whether they can be said to be structured by cultures of rejection.

The anti-vaccination/anti-Covid measures protest was held in Belgrade on March 20, 2021. It was a part of a worldwide wave of protests against restrictions concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, though in Serbia it was primarily aimed at the vaccination. The articles concerning this protest on N1's website primarily presented it as a "right-wing" protest. Apart from its COVID-19 measures and anti-vaccination aspects, these articles focused on anti-LGBT, anti-migrant, and anti-globalization slogans that could be heard during the protest. In contrast, articles on the *Informer's* website presented it as an "anti-Serbia" protest, claiming that the protesters were "crazy" for being against the vaccines, since the government worked so hard to acquire them. Also, these articles presented comments from social media supposedly made by "ordinary citizens" who also claimed that the protesters were "crazy." We can see that polarization is expressed in the way both media outlets frame and criticize the protesters. While N1 presented them as "right-wingers," the *Informer* framed the protest as aimed against the country.

The articles that deal with the vaccination process usually also talk about various aspects of the anti-vaccination discourse and the dangers it poses. Articles on N1's website are usually transcribed versions of interviews with various doctors and immunologists. They mostly consist of criticisms of the anti-vaccination movement and calls for citizens to get vaccinated. But these articles also always included various criticisms of the government's COVID-19 measures and the ways it promoted the vaccination. Some interviews also included claims that President Vučić himself might be an anti-vaxxer since he was constantly postponing his own vaccination. After the president got vaccinated, some interviewees started claiming that his vaccination was broadcast on various TV channels because SNS's voters are uneducated and prone to conspiracy theories, so seeing his vaccination would encourage them to get vaccinated.

Articles on the *Informer's* website concerning the vaccination usually have a form of public shaming. More precisely, these articles consist in picking a certain celebrity who posted content online that could be interpreted as against the vaccination. Those articles then ridiculed this person and presented comments from social media supposedly made by “regular people” that are also mocked the celebrity.

Again, we can see the polarization in media messages in the way they frame the topic of their criticism. N1 evoked scientific authority and tried to present anti-vaxxers as uneducated, while the *Informer* evoked the “voice of the people” in order to presents anti-vaxxers as against the will of the majority of citizens.

The “vaccination of the region” is a name the media gave to a specific act of the Serbian government. Namely, the Serbian government acquired many more vaccine doses than there were Serbians interested in getting vaccinated. Therefore, the government called upon citizens from neighboring countries to come to Serbia and get vaccinated for free. This resulted in people from Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, etc. coming to Belgrade in March and April 2021 to get vaccinated. Articles on N1's website presented this as President Vučić's attempt to promote himself as a “benefactor” of the region and attract more voters that way. Some articles also claimed that Vučić was trying to get people to forget his past this way, since in the 1990s he was a prominent member of the Serbian Radical Party, a right-wing party that promoted nationalistic ideas and supported the war in Bosnia and Croatia.

In contrast, articles on the *Informer's* website presented the “vaccination of the region” as an act of solidarity by the Serbian government. In various articles, they conveyed claims supposedly made by regular people who came from Croatia and Bosnia to get vaccinated praising the efficiency of the Serbian government and medical staff. Some articles also presented statements made by politicians from neighboring countries accusing President Vučić of re-creating the political program of “Greater Serbia” through vaccines. “Greater Serbia” is a name given to the political program of the Serbian Radical Party in the 1990s, which claimed that Serbia should annex parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

with majority Serbian populations. These articles refer to those claims as unjust accusations against Vučić, arguing that “vaccination of the region” was completely altruistic.

Again, polarization in media can be seen in the way a certain event is framed. While neither N1 nor the *Informer* question the “vaccination of the region” itself, the difference can be seen in the motivations they ascribe to it. N1 presented the vaccination of the region as a political act motivated by Vučić’s desire to stay in power and enlarge the political influence of his government. On the other side, the *Informer* tried to negate this interpretation by highlighting how pleased foreign citizens were at being able to get vaccinated in Serbia. The *Informer* then used that satisfaction to argue that interpreting the “vaccination of the region” as motivated by anything other than Vučić’s altruism is malicious.

We can now delineate the basic discursive mechanisms of these two media outlets and see how they are tied to the Serbian context and how they reproduce cultures of rejection. The political polarization that permeates Serbian society had to adapt to the situation of the pandemic. The government, the ruling party, and the opposition all support COVID-19 measures and the vaccination. Therefore, their discursive mechanisms had to adapt to this fact to maintain the polarization. The *Informer*, as a pro-government newspaper, used a discursive strategy that combined populist and nationalist rhetoric characteristic of the ruling party. That is why their articles often presented quotes supposedly made by “regular people” on social media and described those who protested the vaccination as “anti-Serbian.” This way, their discursive strategy constructs the fight against the pandemic as a “fight for Serbia” and tries to evoke a “we are all in this together” kind of sensation in the readers. Those who protest against the vaccination are therefore constructed as the “other” who undermines the struggle, waged by the whole nation, against the pandemic.

In contrast, N1 used a discursive strategy in accordance with the liberal-left orientation of the opposition. Their articles presented arguments made by critical of the anti-vaccination discourse as well as the way the government dealt with the pandemic. Their discursive strategy

consisted of evoking expert authority and presenting the government and anti-vaxxers as guilty of not respecting it. In this way, N1's discursive strategy "othered" those citizens who were against the vaccination as incapable or unwilling to follow expert authority, while at the same attempting to discredit the government by presenting it in the same way.

THE PANDEMIC AND CONSPIRATORIAL NARRATIVES IN SERBIAN ONLINE SPACES

In the next part of my research, I focused on digital spaces where citizens against COVID-19 measures and the vaccination congregate and engage in discussion. I did this to better understand how those who protest against COVID-19 measures and the vaccination give meaning to the situation of the pandemic. My aim was to delineate discursive mechanisms through which they construct narratives and to see how those mechanisms relate to cultures of rejection.

Since the protest against COVID-19 measures mainly focused on the vaccination process, I chose to research the Facebook page of one of the most prominent anti-vaccination figures in Serbia, Jovana Stojković, a psychiatrist working in Belgrade. Stojković has advocated against obligatory vaccination since 2016. Since then, she has appeared on various talk shows, and in 2020, She founded the "Movement Living for Serbia." This movement created a coalition with a neo-Nazi organization called "The Leviathan" and together they ran for parliamentary elections in Serbia in June 2020. Stojković has also publicly appeared with Goran Davidović (nicknamed "Führer"), a former leader of "Nacionalni Stroj," one of the biggest neo-Nazi organizations in Serbia, founded in the early 2000s. I chose to examine the Facebook page "Покрет Живим за Србију – др Јована Стојковић" (Movement Living for Serbia – Jovana Stojković, M.D.), which has 82,177 followers. My research consisted of analyzing discussions in the comment sections of this page's posts from February 15, 2021 to March 28, 2021.

While researching these discussions, I came across various narratives that shared the same conspiratorial content. I noticed a similar structure within them and chose to analyze it using narrative analysis. This means I will try to map out relations between elements of these narratives to delineate a common structure⁴.

The first common element is what we can call “they.” This element stands for actors within these narratives that are constructed as powerful elites with sinister intentions. This element shows us populist, anti-elitist sentiments within these narratives. By looking at signifiers for this element, we can identify various forms of rejection. For example, this “elite” is sometimes referred to as “the Jews,” which clearly shows an anti-Semitic orientation, but also as “the West,” which is a specific form of rejection that evokes “anti-colonial” sentiments.

Namely, since the democratic changes in the beginning of the 2000s, Serbian governments have expressed a strong desire for Serbia to become part of the European Union. This has led to a propagation, by the government and various domestic and foreign actors, of the idea that the Serbian people should adopt “European” or “Western” values. Their claim was that the decades of communist rule made developing a democratic and liberal culture in Serbia very difficult and that Serbia needs to “catch up” to the West⁵. Various nationalist right-wing parties and movements opposed this idea, claiming that “European and Western values” are not in line with Serbian national culture and that the “Europeanization” of the Serbian people is analogous to a form of colonialism⁶.

Other signifiers tell us that various alt-right and Q-Anon-type ideas permeate discussions on this page. Namely this “elite” is sometimes referred to as the “Deep State,” “Satanists,” “pedophiles,” “George Soros,” etc. Various narratives also claim that this “elite” has representatives in Serbia

4 Mark Freeman, “Narrative as a Mode of Understanding: Method, Theory, Praxis,” in *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, ed. Anna De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou . (Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

5 Zoran Stoilković, “Partijske ideologije, evropski politički prostor i Srbija,” *Godišnjak FPN 6* (2011): 105–118

6 Jovo Bakić, “Političke stranke umerene I krajnje desnice u Srbiji,” *Nova Srpska politička misao 11*, No. 1–4 (2004): 105–123.

like the government, SNS, President Vučić—but also the opposition and NGOs. Those signifiers clearly show us a rejection of politics that is common for most Serbian citizens. They are disillusioned with the political system and reject all its actors. In some narratives, it is claimed that the “elite” has associates in Serbia that further its interests; signifiers that are used to signify them are tied to the context of the pandemic—doctors, immunologist, experts, and the media.

The second element of the narrative structure refers to the actions of this global elite; this element is tied to the question of what the elite is doing. The common way most narratives answer this question is through the claim that the “elite” aims to take away people’s civil liberties and institute a new kind of “fascism,” usually referred to as “corona-fascism.” These narratives claim not only that the “elite” created Covid-19 in a lab, but also that they are using the media to present Covid-19 as more dangerous than it is. It is also claimed that the “elite” intends to impose vaccines onto people in order to divide them into those who are vaccinated and those who are not. By looking at the ways this segment of the narrative structure is constructed, we find claims that the representatives of the elite in Serbia are using the pandemic in order to impose “Western values” onto people. This clearly shows the way the narratives that construct the situation of the pandemic get articulated with existing anti-Western narratives that have permeated Serbian society for decades.

The next element of the narrative structure is concerned with the motivation of the “elite”; more precisely, it answers the question why are “they” doing what they are doing. In one of the narratives, it is claimed that the “elite” wants to reduce the Earth’s population. In accordance with this element, these narratives claim that “their” representatives in Serbia are using the virus to kill off the elderly population since they are mostly affected by it. Another narrative claims that the Jews and Catholics are using the virus to destroy Orthodox Christians. In this narrative, representatives of the “elite” in Serbia and their associates are accused of betraying the Serbian nation and working for the Vatican. In all these narratives, the citizens who support COVID-19 measures and want to get vaccinated are accused of betraying the Serbian nation as well, but they are also referred to as “blind” for not seeing “the truth.”

The last element of the narrative structure refers to those who propagate them through the discussions I have analyzed. It also refers to those actors who the actions of the “elite” are targeting. Since the “elite” is usually referred to as the “they,” this element of the narrative structure is usually referred to as “we.” The construction of this element again shows us the populist aspects of these narratives, but now we can take notice of their ethno-nationalist aspects as well. Those who propagate these narratives refer to themselves as “real Serbs” who are “colonized” by the West, which is in accordance with some narratives I have so far presented. Some commentators refer to themselves as Orthodox Christians, which is in accordance with the previously mentioned narrative of Jews and Catholics using the virus to destroy Orthodox Christianity. Another way these commentators refer to themselves is as those who are being experimented on by the global elite.

This way of constructing the “we” element of the narrative structure perfectly illustrates its relation to the element of the “they.” The last way the commentators refer to themselves I will mention is the way which shows their rejection of those citizens who support COVID-19 measures and choose to get vaccinated. Since they are referred to as “blind” and not “thinking for themselves,” the commentators refer to themselves as those who “ask questions,” “use their head,” and “fight for freedom,” in contrast to other citizens who blindly accept imposed restrictions.

Analyzing these discussions gives us insight into how cultures of rejection structure narratives through which regular citizens give meaning to the situation of the pandemic. We can see that cultures of rejection are able to adapt to local contexts, but also that they have transnational forms which come into contact with local conditions. These contacts then result in narratives that look like heterogeneous discursive assemblages and are reproduced through everyday life. In our case, it is the alt-right and Q-Anon-type narrative elements that are articulated with a deep mistrust of political actors, and anyone affiliated with them, that is prevalent in Serbian society. The articulation of these elements gave rise to a conspiratorial, populist, and ethno-nationalist discursive structure through which the pandemic is being framed in these discussions.

CONCLUSION

Going back to Hall's ideas with which I started this article, I can say that my research analyzed two perspectives: the first is the perspective of the media and political actors, and the second is the "popular" perspective of "regular people." I used the notion of cultures of rejection to research the way the pandemic is being discursively constructed in these two perspectives. In the first case, the mechanism of "othering," as the basic discursive mechanism of cultures of rejection, can be seen in the way political actors construct the situation of the pandemic in order to delegitimize and exclude their political opponents. In the second case, the mechanism of othering is regularly used to construct various narratives that frame the pandemic as a ploy by a cultural or ethnic "other."

We can see in both instances that the way the pandemic is being discursively constructed in Serbia is overdetermined by the political and social contexts. In the case of the media, political polarization structures the discursive construction of the pandemic. In the case of citizens, the narratives they use to construct the pandemic are influenced both by their anti-political orientation and anti-Western narratives common throughout Serbian society. Also, in this case we can take notice of how conspiratorial narratives constructed through norms of cultures of rejection in other parts of the world, like the USA, got transferred and articulated with the narratives used by Serbian citizens. In conclusion, in the Serbian case, pre-existing forms of cultures of rejection overdetermined the discursive construction of the pandemic and adapted to this emerging conjuncture. This tells us that cultures of rejection are best seen as a complex "form of life," or a deep structure that underpins the ways narratives and discourses are constructed, and that this structure can adapt to various new and unpredictable situations.



RIJEKA
CROATIA

MEDIA AND PROTESTS
IN COVID-19 CRISIS
IN CROATIA

“I REJECT THE
INSTITUTIONS
REJECTING ME”

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1 | CONTEXT

THE MANY FACES OF THE RETURN OF THE STATE

In February and March of 2021, COVID-19 measures in Croatia were comparatively light—there was no full lockdown or curfew, but there was a limit on public gatherings. The measures were, however, also frequently stunningly counterproductive—the most extreme example was a measure that all supermarkets must close at 5 PM, which led to massive crowds from 4 PM, when the majority of people finish work. Measures were burdensome on the private sector, whose work was either fully put on hold or seriously impeded, though the government did provide several financial relief measures. Epidemiologists, immunologists, and other scientists disagreed publicly, through legacy and social media, forming camps around extreme positions—full lockdown or the end of almost all measures. Social scientists and policy researchers appear to have barely engaged in the public discussion—the vast majority of opinions on measures and strategy in the media came from experts in the natural sciences. Protests against COVID-19 measures were held in five Croatian cities, all under the name “World Procession for Freedom, Peace, and Democracy”. The vaccine program was in its early stages, and vaccine hesitancy was already growing for months—the usual doubts proliferated: the vaccines were made too soon, with too little testing, and some

vaccines had to be kept and administered under conditions which people suspected the Croatian medical system couldn't provide. Conspiracy theories spread—aside from the usual hodgepodge of homegrown variants, QAnon also infiltrated Croatian social media. The great international “return of the state” occasioned by the pandemic was welcomed by some as the final nail in the coffin of the supremacy of monetarist cny capitalism, which had marked the last three decades. Others, however, saw it as the final act in the coming of the New World Order, in which global elites would take away our freedoms and establish a totalitarian biopolitical oligarchy. In brief, it was a time of mass confusion and uncertainty, economic anxiety, and intense fear of both the disease and the possibility of government overreach.

Our research focused on 1) legacy media response to the rejection of COVID-19 measures, 2) the most extreme community rejecting COVID-19 measures, which was gathering around Ivan Pernar, an ex-member of parliament from an “anti-political” party. Our specific research focus was on tracing the interplay of these two phenomena. While the research was conducted in the first months of 2021, and thus at the beginning of the second year of the global pandemic, the key observations are salient for later and current developments.

2 | LEGACY MEDIA

SCARE THE PIGS FOR CLICKS AND PUT YOUR FAITH IN EXPERTS

During our research period, legacy media in Croatia¹ largely failed to provide their key service of informing their audiences and moderating nuanced public deliberation under conditions of pluralism and information asymmetry.

1 Our research covered five mainstream media outlets with national reach: *Index.hr*, *Jutarnji List*, *Večernji List*, *Novi List*, and Telegram.

One notable exception was an article in Index.hr, which offered a thorough and detailed rundown of responses to the claims of Croatian members of European Parliament Ivan Vilibor Sinčić (Živi zid, anti-political² right-wing party) and Mislav Kolakušić (independent, ideologically belonging to the anti-political right), who were engaged in promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19 in the European Parliament. However, two dominant trends we observed in the Croatian legacy media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis during the research period were: *affective carpet bombing and scientism*.

By the metaphorical term “affective carpet bombing,” we refer to the practice of shaping messaging to increase negative affectivity and emotions of panic, confusion, anger, and fear as primary reactions to *all* sides of the given issue in a public debate. Typically, this is achieved by the use of enthymeme, a rhetorical device for strongly insinuating, but never fully explicating or accounting for, the reasons for the aforementioned affects and emotions, while also ignoring context, reasoning, and debate and refusing to provide a thorough account.

One crucial aspect of affective carpet bombing is casting all sides of the debate as a personal or social threat (thus the metaphor of “carpet bombing”). In our case study, the legacy media portrayed *both* vaccine production *and* distribution and COVID-19 measures and protests against vaccines and COVID-19 measures as reasons for public panic. On one hand, reports on vaccines tended to have headlines that “screamed” about the dangers of vaccines, which were reported in the same articles as uncommon and insignificant. Likewise, we found several dubiously

2 We use the term “anti-politics” to denote the strategic rhetorical obscuring of ideological commitments and rejection of the key objects of the political process (politicians as such, elections, democratic deliberative bodies and/or other democratic institutions). Our use closely mirrors the conceptual development of the term by Irena Fiket, Gazela Pudar Draško and Milan Urošević in their forthcoming contribution to the Patterns of Prejudice special issue on Cultures of Rejection. In the Croatian case, both Živi zid and Kolakušić rooted their political engagement in a single legitimate systemic injustice (respectively, evictions and debt payments), but they denied explicitly committing themselves to any comprehensive political ideology and instead portrayed themselves as siding with the manifest institutional and policy solutions endorsed by regular people, and proceeded to embrace a variety of positions from the family of right-wing populism.

tentative articles that verged on supporting a conspiracy theory about China's role in the spread of COVID-19 in the same media outlet that also featured a report portraying critics of COVID-19 measures as pandemic deniers. On the other hand, protests against COVID-19 measures were covered almost exclusively by focusing on the most extreme (and, frequently, ridiculous) protesters' claims and protest signs. The media have largely failed to provide a discussion on justification, grievances, and problems with particular COVID-19 measures and crisis governance. While they did give separate space to a handful of entrepreneurs criticizing the Croatian government's handling of the crisis and its economic effects, they did not account for nor engage with the protesters who have lost their jobs or businesses due to COVID-19 measures, and who, according to research by Ančić and Cepić,³ make up the majority of "anti-mask" groups in Croatia. Vaccine hesitancy, arguably in part also fueled by the media's coverage of vaccines featuring clickbait titles that emphasized their dangers or verged on conspiracy theories, was also never thoroughly discussed, but tended to be conflated with the anti-vaccine movement.⁴

This typical structure of messaging in affective carpet bombing, precisely because it always remains allusive and insufficiently precise, as already mentioned, follows the rhetorical form of the enthymeme. Analytically, any linguistic construction introducing multiple premises that are not fully exposed or explained bears the danger of misunderstanding and double meaning. Suggestive and never explicit utterances quickly saturate existing fears of possible contamination or government incompetence or overreach. Through affective carpet bombing, legacy media constructed a simplified caricature of a *total threat environment* through a barrage of contextless and highly affectively charged snippets on a continually worsening pandemic, government orders without provision

3 Branko Ančić and Dražen Cepić D, "Tko su antimaskeri u Hrvatskoj? Prilog istraživanju antimaskerske reakcije tijekom pandemije bolesti COVID-19 u Hrvatskoj," *Sociologija i prostor* 59, no.219 (2021): 187-218.

4 After the research period, some advances were made by Index.hr in this regard. Namely, they have begun publishing articles that respectfully engage people with vaccine hesitancy with arguments and information.

of reasons or justifications, supposedly inevitable economic disasters, pernicious or incompetent international medical elites, dangerously unhinged conspiracy theorists, and immoral violators of COVID-19 measures. It is very easy to imagine that this rhetorical approach of exploiting anxiety, fear, and anger to cast both institutions and fellow citizens as untrustworthy and dangerous contributed to the rise of extreme distrust of all institutions and authorities among individuals who were initially reasonably or moderately critical or suspicious of the government or the ability of Croatian medical system to reliably administer vaccines.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic was notable for providing unparalleled public exposure to scientific processes. While diverse studies and developments were being reported in Croatian legacy media, the communication of key aspects of the scientific process itself—namely, revision and disagreement—was largely defective or lacking. The overall effect was incoherence, with the clash between naive scientism and the proper epistemic values of science taking center stage. On one hand, the repetition of pleas for people to “trust the science” implied the image of science as an uncontestable producer of truths—in many ways, it also built on the popular “trust the profession”⁵ mantra which has become a go-to phrase for Croatian politicians to show their allegiance to fighting nepotism and corruption, particularly as sources of incompetence in public service. On the other hand, the diverse studies frequently revising or contesting certain propositions were reported mostly independently of each other, with little or no reference to larger research developments. While there was significant disagreement among scientists in Croatia, and around the world, on various relevant aspects of COVID-19 and appropriate public health measures, this disagreement was largely not explicitly accounted for in any depth. Media did provide a platform

5 The “trust the profession” mantra popular in Croatia quite precisely invokes the curious connection between technocratic and populist impulses discussed by Mudde (Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563; Jeffrey Friedman, *Power Without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy* (Oxford University Press, 2020). The technocratic imaginary frequently serves a mainstreamed populist purpose in Croatia—it is used by the parties across the political spectrum to pit the paradigm of educated and competent professionals in service of the people against the clientelistic practices of political elites. The analysis of this phenomena is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

for scientists, who tended to repeat the “mantra” that we have to trust science and “put our faith in experts,” but also to argue for their “side” and to disparage other experts who disagreed with them in the rare instances they referred to them at all. The most extreme example is an interview with a major epidemiologist who focused on discrediting the academic track record of colleagues he disagreed with, and likened entering the discussion with them and other disagreeing members of the public to “wrestling with pigs in the mud.” Thus, the dominant implication of the image of science conveyed by Croatian media was one in which disagreement, epistemic or institutional complexity, and revisions during ongoing and fallible investigations of the unknown signaled a kind of weakness of science—instead of being its key epistemically valuable feature.

3 | GROUPS PROTESTING THE COVID-19 MEASURES:

THE RISE OF ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISM, OR DOCTOR PERNAR WILL SEE YOU NOW

The common belief in academic circles, as well as in the media, appears to be that the groups opposing COVID-19 restrictions broadly—and conspiracy theorists (including anti-vaxxers) narrowly—are bluntly against science. This interpretation, however, misses the key element. These groups indeed distrust *institutional* science⁶ because they believe it is riddled with corruption, political influence, and private interests. However, this is not to say that they distrust science as a broader ethos of inquiry—quite the opposite, they tend to consider themselves to be the true guardians of science as free inquiry and critical thinking. Instead, the distrust of science piggybacks on the larger distrust of institutions.

6 This is not to say that these groups distrust *all* scientists, since they do use works of some scientists to back up their claims. However, those whose work they use, while frequently also employed by institutions and part of the institutional science, are always in some crucial ways portrayed as “renegades,” i.e., as critically distinct from the institutional science. We are grateful to Celina Ortega Soto for this insight.

The major clustering of groups opposing COVID-19 measures in Croatia occurred not around a semi-formalized movement but around individuals, and particularly around Ivan Pernar, Croatian alt-right politician, a former member of the parliament, and one of the founders of the populist anti-political party Živi zid (Human shield)—which is why we focused on him during our digital ethnography. Pernar split with Živi zid and formed his party named the Party of Ivan Pernar (Croatian: Stranka Ivana Pernara or SIP). He is a prominent figure in the anti-mask and anti-vaxx movement, and his signature is anti-establishment, anti-migrant, and antisemitic attitudes. He is also one of the most prominent users of social media among Croatian politicians, and he uses his channels to invite people to join the protests. He participated in the March 20 protest against COVID-19 measures, “World Procession for Freedom, Peace, and Democracy,” held in five Croatian cities (Zagreb, Split, Osijek, Šibenik, and Dubrovnik). Along with the aforementioned Croatian members of the European Parliament, Ivan Vilibor Sinčić (Živi zid) and Mislav Kolakušić (independent, ideologically belonging to the anti-political right), Ivan Pernar was the most prominent “entrepreneur” of anti-institutionalism and anti-politics trying to profit politically from the COVID-19 crisis during our research period.⁷

His “journey” through social media platforms is also interesting because it traces dynamics of content regulation on mainstream platforms and migration to new ones dedicated to looser community standards. Pernar used to have 300,000 followers on Facebook until his page was shut in October 2020 due to the spread of fake news and hate speech. He reopened the page, but it gained only a fragment of its former glory (around 2,000 followers) and featured auto-censored content. At the beginning of our fieldwork (March 1), his activity on Facebook completely ceased, and his accounts on Gab and Telegram became his key outlets. He has been a member of Gab since August 2018, and has 3,200 followers. His activity started to increase after October 15, when Facebook deleted his account. Gab users are predominantly male, and the platform provides

7 In the time following our research period, and particularly in the later stages of vaccine distribution, the populist right-wing party Most became the most prominent political party of rejection of COVID-19 vaccines, green passes and other measures.

a space for various conspiracy theories to cluster and feed off each other. Ivan Pernar uses it to connect with like-minded public figures and as a place for inspiration, claiming it is “eye-opening.” As his usage of Gab intensified, his content became more extreme. On Telegram, he has a public channel, @ipernavethe, as well as a public group chat named “Ivan Pernar Chat,” which was created on January 29, 2021. He has 278 subscribers, while the group chat has 121 members. The user base and content sharing are growing. He uses his Telegram channel as a news board for “alternative” information, including Gab content—it is a place where global conspiracy theories meet local audiences.

Pernar’s Telegram chat, on the other hand, provides a space for a more intimate and intense exchange, and affective and emotional content—sharing of anxiety, fear, paranoia, and anger. The exchanges in Pernar’s chat appropriate the language of oppressed minorities, with members referring to themselves as victims of a violation of their constitutional liberties and human rights, primarily their freedom of speech and bodily autonomy. This practice is likewise common among the distrust-sowing, anti-political right-wing politicians mentioned earlier. The other notable mode of exchange is one of quasi-free-inquiry and quasi-critical thinking. While the process of inquiry and discussion in the chat is epistemically flawed in many ways, it nevertheless exemplifies an explicit commitment to seeking knowledge. One aspect of exchange stands out in particular as arguably constitutive of deeply flawed epistemology shared by chat participants—they exhibit strong comprehensive epistemic optimism; in other words, they seem to believe that the world is fully knowable.

The chat’s central structure of exchange is one of a visit to an alternative doctor’s office, where people share their anamnesis and lab findings, and Pernar as “the doctor” provides a diagnosis and advice on treatment. This image of an alternative doctor’s office in an obscure corner of the internet as more trustworthy than the institutions of medicine struck us as the paradigmatic image of the relation between the groups thoroughly distrustful of institutionalized science, medicine, and governance and their anti-institutional folk epistemology. Their main structuring belief is not that free inquiry and critical thinking are somehow wrong or false ideals, but that institutions endanger them. The group’s response to this

appears to strongly hinge on the *personalization* of epistemic authority—a tempting conjecture is that they come to Pernar for medical advice because the personalized nature of the exchange ranks higher in their assessment of epistemic trustworthiness than the official credentials of the members of the anonymous institutional structures of Croatian healthcare system, the dominant popular image of which is one of neglect, delay, mistakes, and hostility. It is easy to disagree with reasoning that favors the healthcare advice of an unhinged entrepreneur of anti-politics and conspiracy theories without any medical training over the diagnosis and treatment advised by an imperfect institutional system. However, changing these practices and (unfortunately it seems) trends will require systemic upgrades to remove trust-destroying features of existing systems, and much more substantial engagement than lofty pleas to “trust science” and patronizing demonization built on the groups’ falsely attributed “anti-truth” commitments.

3.1 | NOTE ON THE ANTI-INSTITUTIONALIST DEVELOPMENTS

YOUR PERSONAL DAVID AGAINST THE GOLIATH OF PANIC AND CONTROL

Following our research period, the rejection of COVID-19 measures was also notably accompanied by personalization of political representation. While Ivan Pernar continued to serve the appetites of the most radical wing of the COVID-19 measures rejection movement, the right-wing populist opposition party Most (The Bridge) picked up the mantle of rejection and transformed it into the mainstream political position. Most replaced the more eccentric and esoteric convictions with a mishmash of quasi-libertarian nationalism, weaponization of distrust in the governing party, paranoia focused on the threats of vaccines to children and youth, and opportunist spin tactics. Most is strategically personalized—their key members are social media influencers, political pundits, and small-town mayors, all of whom bring their “star power” to the party and continuously emphasize how the party itself is irrelevant

because they represent “the people.” Such anti-political personalization quite clearly reinforces the imaginary of the unmediated channeling of the general will from “the people” to the political entrepreneur fighting in their name against vast, faceless, hostile systems of control. Marin Miletić—one of the key figures of rejection of COVID-19 measures in Most—likens his fight to one of David against Goliath.

4 | SOME CONDITIONS ARE DECISIONS:

HOW TO BREAK THE PROCESS OF GROOMING THE PEOPLE FOR ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISM

In our research into cultures of rejection, we have repeatedly noticed that they tend to arise from a reasonable and, for all purposes, correct initial observation of institutional deficits or social problems which, under a set of social, economic, and affective conditions, becomes an extreme version of this initial belief, which now commands rejection. In the case of the Croatian COVID-19 crisis, the interlocking conditions which we indicated here were

- 1 crisis governance through ad hoc command, with little or no recourse to public justification of measures, transparent planning, or civic participation in policy development,**
- 2 the scientific community and legacy media pushing the narrative of blind faith in the institutions of science in crisis policy-making, and favoring exclusionary and demeaning rhetoric when dealing with both peer and non-peer disagreement,**
- 3 affective carpet bombing by legacy media, and**
- 4 the mobilization of entrepreneurs of anti-politics and anti-institutionalism through personalization of epistemic authority and political representation, reinforced by the structure of social media exchanges (providing a semblance of direct access and conducive to echo chambers).**

Under these conditions, further reinforced by socio-economic inequalities, anxieties and vulnerabilities intensifying in the complex crisis, the experiences of failures of existing institutions easily turn into the wholesale rejection of institutions. Entrepreneurs of rejection exploit the deficiencies of current institutional system, crisis governance style, legacy media, and the approach to scientific communication, and present an alternative by personalizing their political brand and entrenching themselves as the symbol of governance which is a result of the spontaneous emergence of the general will of the heartland people⁸, uncorrupted by mediation, proceduralism, complexity and, critically, negotiation under pluralism.

Crucially, this development is not inevitable and can be mitigated. While some individuals within groups protesting COVID-19 measures are committed fully and independently to conspiracy theories and right-wing populist phantasmagorias, *a relevant part of these groups are people who have been “groomed” into anti-institutional and anti-political sentiments and opinions by the aforementioned conditions.* If we can change these conditions—which are to a relevant degree a result of *decisions* by political, economic, scientific, technological, and media elites—we can set a course to a different future.

8 Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 541-563.

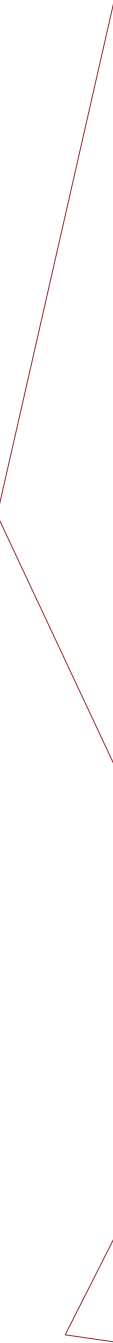


VIENNA
AUSTRIA

THE COVID-19 MOBILIZATION
IN AUSTRIA

THE FAR RIGHT,
“ALTERNATIVE
MEDICINE” AND
THE ECONOMY OF
CONSPIRACY
MOBILIZATIONS.

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In this article, I will discuss some findings of the COVID-19 research our team did in Austria. First, I give a brief introduction to the situation in Austria by explaining the degree of mobilization and representation in the media. The second part will focus on the results of an online ethnography, which I combined with existing empirical data. With that empirical grounding, I will elaborate on three dimensions of the COVID-19 protests in Austria. The first dimension is the composition of the protests and the specific role of the far right. The second dimension concerns what I call the economy of conspiracy mobilizations, which explores the monetary involvement of some of the movement's actors. The third dimension concerns the important role that so-called "alternative medicine" plays in the movement and the rejection of established medicine.

In early 2020, the first protests in Austria against COVID-19 measures were already taking place, and by the beginning of 2021, the number of participants in Vienna reached five figures. This was when we started our online ethnography. Over the summer the mobilizations declined, only to return in the fall. Especially after the announcement of compulsory vaccination in November, the number and frequency of the demonstrations rose to a new level. In addition to frequent demonstrations with up to 40,000 participants in Vienna, there were also protest marches of sometimes considerable size in other provincial capitals and smaller communities. Besides demonstrations, there were also other forms of protest present, like flash mobs and performances of people wearing

white masks and suits, Even before the trucker protests in Canada took place, car convoys were a common form of protest in Austria.

From the beginning, there was no unified structure behind these mobilizations, but rather a multitude of regional initiatives and actors. Even the big demonstrations in Vienna always consisted of several rallies that tended to later unite on the Ringstraße, the major street circling Vienna's central first district.

Because of the wide span of actors, these mobilizations were very difficult to classify—they weren't unified by political affiliation or ideology. Participants ranged from parliamentary parties like the far-right Freedom Party and the single purpose MFG party, which was founded to rally against COVID-19 measures to several mostly personality-centered mobilizations, which I will further investigate below.

It was difficult to find a common denominator apart from the rejection of COVID-19 measures. Unique to the Austrian case, however, was that over the course of 2021, the far right managed to take a leading role in the movement, especially in shaping the external image of the demonstrations. The Freedom Party consolidated their presence by openly mobilizing at COVID-19 demonstrations, where their party leader and former home secretary Herbert Kickl gave speeches. Other far-right extremist groups like the Neofascist "Identitarians" managed to shape the image of the demonstrations by moving to the front of the marches and presenting their messages on big banners. Besides that, we could also observe that the usually not-very-visible Neonazi scene, which is gathered around its most prominent figure, Gottfried Küssel, was able to gain an audience and public visibility.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to classify the COVID-19 protesters in Austria as an exclusively far-right movement, even if most of the followers have little or no problem demonstrating under their banner. The visible overrepresentation of the far right in the media could to some extent divert from the question of who else was affiliated with the mass mobilizations and their motives.

To get a better understanding of the composition of the movement, we added to our media observation a digital ethnography and chose samples that represented very different groups. The Telegram channel “Österreich Steht auf” (Stand up Austria) was at the time one of the most frequently used channels to discuss and mobilize for COVID-19 demonstrations. Hundreds of messages a day were shared, from conspiracy theories, newspaper articles, and “alternative” media reports to exchanges of the sender’s own experiences of the pandemic, and plans for demonstrations.

The second sample was a Facebook group called “Initiative for Evidence-Based Corona Information,” one of whose most prominent figures is Doctor Christian Fiala. The group features mainly “alternative medicine” and highlights the negative effects of the COVID-19 measures and vaccination.

These very different groups helped demonstrate the different facets of the so-called “corona rebels,” but to outline the protest’s demographic and ideological features, I also drew on quantitative data gathered from other studies.

THE ROLE OF THE FAR RIGHT

Our first group, the Telegram channel “Österreich Steht auf” (Stand up Austria), appeared as an important place where different actors of the Austrian “corona rebels” were seeking attention. Systematic qualitative research of the Telegram channel was challenging because of the large number of messages in the observation period. That’s why we decided to complement our qualitative study with quantitative data. Analyzing the Telegram data revealed that even before the far-right Freedom Party decided to focus on campaigning against the COVID-19 measures, far-right news outlets were one of the most forwarded sources in the channel. By counting from which sources messages were most forwarded from the creation of the channel until early 2021, we managed to identify that by March 2021, *Wochenblick* a far-right cross-media project with close

ties to the Freedom Party, was the main source of the channel. Bernhard Weidinger, an expert on extremism in Austria, emphasizes that the content of the *Wochenblick* is largely conspiracy narratives and disinformation, despite its journalistic appearance.¹

Following *Wochenblick*, at the time of observation, Alexander Ehrlich a travel company owner and founder of the Initiative “Honk for Hope,” was one of the most-featured people on the channel. He provided shocking scenes by playing a Hitler Speech on the day of a liberation ceremony at the former concentration camp in Mauthausen. After Ehrlich, Martin Rutter former candidate in Carinthia for the right-wing BZÖ (Alliance for the Future of Austria), was the second most-featured personality. Less featured, but still prominent, was Jennifer Klauninger, as one of the founders of the far-right party Partei des Volkes (Party of the People), who became prominent for tearing down a gay pride flag onstage at a COVID-19 demonstration, saying “You are not part of our society.” With respect to the prominent role of these actors in the channel, it wasn’t surprising that the channel featured homophobic, antisemitic, racist, and right-wing populist content. Besides prominent figures of the movement, many of whom had had ties to the far right, mainly sources that are already known for conspiracy theory content were promoted. Some were national, like the “Qanon Austria” channel, but other German-speaking fringe media like “Uncut news.ch” from Switzerland were also present.

This group seemed to underline the involvement of far-right actors and the widespread conspiracy narratives within the movement. This result is consistent with the data of the “Austrian Corona Panel Project,” which showed based on survey data that, besides the recently founded anti-vaccination party MFG, which supported the protest by 82 percent, the far-right Freedom Party was, with 50 percent, the main established party where supporters of the COVID-19 protests gathered². This reflected our

1 Bernhard Weidinger, *Medien von heute für eine Zukunft von gestern: Ein publizistisches Panorama des österreichischen Rechtsextremismus*. Ed. Christine Schindler (Vienna: DÖW Jahrbuch, 2021), 255-267.

2 Jakob-Moritz Eberl and Noëlle S. Lebernegg, „Corona-Demonstrant*innen: Rechts, wissenschaftsfeindlich und esoterisch,“ Austrian Corona Panel Project (ACPP) last modified 23.12.2021 <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/corona-blog/corona-blog.beitraege/blog138/>.

observed anti-statism and a tendency toward far-right populist parties in our material. But it also highlights the importance of our second group, which has close ties in terms of personnel and content to the MFG Party.

THE BROKEN PROMISE OF MODERN MEDICINE

The second facet of our second online research took place in a Facebook group called “Initiative for Evidence-Based Corona Information;” one of its most prominent figures is Dr. Christian Fiala, the deputy party leader of the MFG Party. He is a very interesting character in the movement because he is prominent for advocating women’s right to abortion, which contradicts often raised far-right and religious standpoints in the movement. However, he was also previously known for his book *Lieben wir gefährlich? (Dangerous Love?)*, in which he denies the danger of AIDS. Early in the pandemic, Fiala started rallies against COVID-19 measures and published his “alternative medical opinions” on Facebook. In contrast to the analyzed Telegram channel, far-right positions didn’t find much acceptance in this group. When an article was posted announcing the that Freedom Party leader Herbert Kickl would visit the next COVID-19 demonstration, negative comments followed like “Den depp braucht Kana” (“Nobody needs this idiot”). The political positions within the Facebook group were more progressive, and even feminist and antiracist positions were raised, while in the Telegram group, conspiracy theories, esoterica, Christian fundamentalism, and rejection of measures against COVID-19 were promoted in a way that was compatible with far-right narratives like “the great replacement” and QAnon. In the Facebook group, conspiracy narratives differed and mostly focused on “Big Pharma.”

As different as these two groups are in terms of their political worldview, they were united by their rejection of modern medicine. But it was also obvious that not every piece of medical expertise was rejected. While the established experts were described as either naive, part of a con-

spiracy, or corrupt, the movement praised their own alternative experts as courageous doctors raising critical questions against a corrupt, elitist “Pharma lobby.”

In general, these narratives benefit from already widespread skepticism of political and social authorities like the loss of trust in journalism and the media. The identified narratives follow the typical populist division of “the people” versus “the elite.” The existing data from The Counselling Centre for Extremism also showed that 25 percent of their clients were described as already interested in “alternative medicine” or esoterica/spirituality/religion before the pandemic³ and the Austrian Corona Panel Project discovered that people who sympathize with COVID-19 demonstrations are more anti-science than average, and have a strong tendency to believe in esoteric and spiritual explanations.⁴

Simply identifying the deepening of a populist division, anti-science beliefs, and trust in alternative medicine, however, often fails to explain why so many people are attracted to these narratives. While the important role of anti-institutionalism is further investigated by the Croatian team in the article “I Reject the Institutions Rejecting Me,” I want to focus how this movement rejects the idea of modern medicine in particular.

Most “corona rebels” seem to turn towards “alternative medical” explanations that promote “natural immunity,” rejecting vaccinations as “artificial” and therefore dangerous medicine. Even wearing a mask and washing your hands are sometimes seen as unnecessary and even dangerous measures. In some cases, this naturalistic view is combined with conspiracy theories about a supposed planned population reduction. The offerings of “alternative medicine,” however, weren’t always naturalistic. Sometimes chemical components like Chlordioxid were promoted or theories about energy and healing codes were considered as alter-

3 Alexander Fontó, Verena Fabris and Fabian Reicher, „Verschwörungsideologien in Zeiten der Corona-Krise“, Beratungsstelle Extremismus, last modified 27.10.2022, <https://www.beratungsstelleextremismus.at/thema-verschwoerungsideologien-in-zeiten-der-corona-krise/>.

4 Jakob-Moritz Eberl and Noëlle S. Lebernegg, „Corona-Demonstrant*innen: Rechts, wissenschaftsfeindlich und esoterisch.“

native treatments against COVID-19. Besides these esoteric treatments, religious groups promote God as the only healing power in the universe.

Taking a look at the genesis of today's religious and esoteric beliefs alongside the consolidation of the natural sciences can help us to understand these apparently contradictory approaches. Religious scholar Michael Bergunder points out that today's esoteric and religious beliefs can be understood as a twin birth in the second half of the 19th century. Challenged by the emergence of natural science, most religions transformed "inward." That means natural science restrained itself towards religion leaving the "region of emotion" to religion. On the other hand, religion undertook a fundamental reorientation towards inner belief, leaving the material world to science. It was this separation between religion (spiritual) and science (materialism) that also triggered the emergence of the esoteric movement. Instead of accepting this separation, esotericism aimed to re-merge the two spheres. Esotericism's goal is to explain supernatural phenomena with supposedly scientific methods and understand the material world as a result of spiritual rules.⁵ With that genesis in mind, the often contradicting and confusing responses towards the pandemic can be classified as esoteric, religious, and scientific. While the esoteric movement imitates scientific methods and promotes a holistic bond between the spiritual and materialistic world, religious actors promote a primacy of the spiritual over natural science, by believing in healing through God.

Especially in times of crisis, these different forms of sensemaking seem to reappear. But it is still unclear why so many people find comfort in esoteric, religious, or conspiratorial explanations. Looking back on how trust in modern medicine and expertise has been established can help us understand why "alternative medicine" and conspiracy narratives today often become an alternative to so many. As Davis Williams shows in his book *Nervous States*, modern medicine established the separation

5 Michael Bergunder, „Umkämpfte Historisierung. Die Zwillingsgeburt von ‚Religion‘ und ‚Esoterik‘ in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und das Programm einer globalen Religionsgeschichte,“ in *Wissen um Religion: Erkenntnis – Interesse Epistemologie und Episteme in Religionswissenschaft und Interkultureller Theologie*, ed. Klaus Hock (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 47–133.

of body and soul. Descartes offered a philosophy in which the soul and mind were metaphysical and immortal, but the body remained subject to the geometrical laws of motion. The result of this separation of body from soul was important to lift restrictions by religious authorities and the church. With this separation in place, science could research the human body as an object detached from spiritual questions. Particularly controversial was cadaverous research, which even after the lifting of restrictions by religious authorities, caused discomfort. Even today, for many it can be repelling when our bodies are reduced to just physical objects. This aspect of modern medicine is counterintuitive on an emotional level and lacks a holistic narrative that connects the body with society or moral institutions. Davis illustrates this by showing how the meaning of pain has changed in society. “In previous epochs, pain was considered to have a moral function, a form of religious retribution for sin”.⁶ In today’s medicine, pain is mostly considered as an individual phenomena that has no broader significance. “alternative medicine,” however, connects to the pre-modern urge to ascribe meaning to pain. The narratives revolving around “alternative medicine” offer holistic explanations, or at least comfort in experienced pain.

Modern medicine tried to build trust under the circumstances that patients could only offer feelings and observations as symptoms, and doctors were needed to find the deeper, often hidden anatomical cause. For this to work, the patient needed to discard to some extent his or her own interpretations and myths about the cause of the pain. Davis argues modern health policy isolates the human body from broader questions of morality and politics, but it was built on the bargain that by sacrificing our own mythical explanations, we would at least get more and/or better life as a result.⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic, like no other medical catastrophe in modern times, challenged this bargain and called it into question. Today’s desire for “alternative medicine” narrated by spiritual, esoteric, and holistic

6 William Davis, *Nervöse Zeiten. Wie Emotionen Argumente ablösen* (München Piper Verlag, 2019), 154–193.

7 Davis, *Nervöse Zeiten. Wie Emotionen Argumente ablösen*, 92-119.

narratives feeds off the fact that governments and modern medicine increasingly couldn't hold up their side of the bargain. However, this promise wasn't only broken by the COVID-19 pandemic—it was fractured from the beginning. The emergence of modern medicine and natural science was also entangled with racism, sexism, and ableism, which culminated in eugenics. There is good reason to mistrust modern medicine, starting from the male norm which resulted in drug research that is often only done on men and causes higher risks for women, to the worse treatment of minorities in hospitals or hindered access to healthcare for refugees. There are many good reasons to distrust modern medicine, but the narratives we encountered weren't based on this critique. Instead, the narratives and myths we observed tried to ascribe meaning to their preexisting worldviews. Religious actors interpreted the pandemic as God's will or as a result of humanity's wrongdoing, while esoteric explanations emphasized humanity's disconnection from nature or "the universe."

In some cases, religious and esoteric explanations were combined with conspiracy theories. They provided scapegoats and a sense of control instead of difficult-to-predict situations. The narrative of a pharma company conspiracy offers clear enemies like "Bill Gates" and provides a sense of order as to how and why things are happening. Psychological studies have repeatedly shown that one important function of conspiracy theories is compensation for lost control. By creating a conspiracy narrative, the person at least imagines knowing how everything is connected.⁸ Not surprisingly, many conspiracy theories either deny the existence of the coronavirus or follow the common conspiracy theory logic of *cui bono*, where supposed profiteers are declared puppet masters of the pandemic.

The complex situation in the pandemic poses many new challenges for modern medicine, which can no longer credibly convey the promise of a better or longer life that Davies considers central. In contrast, the narratives around "alternative medicine" and conspiracy myths offer immediate explanations at an emotional level, and relate personal experiences

8 Pia Lamberty and Jonas Rees, „Mitreißende Wahrheiten: Verschwörungsmymthen als Gefahr für den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt,“ in *Verlorene Mitte-Feindselige Zustände: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland*, ed. Andreas Zick, 203–222. Berlin Dietz, 2019.

to social processes. From the perspective of cultures of rejection, they offer “alternative” meaning, practices, and rituals that express the experience of the current crisis as a rejection of central institutions of modernity. Its rejection is rooted in the desire for holistic explanations and the search for meaning in suffering. In contrast to this explanation, we also identified material reasons to take part in the corona mobilizations.

THE ECONOMY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

One surprising aspect we observed in our research was the strong tendency toward commercialization. Especially the Telegram channel we investigated revealed not only a bazaar of contradicting ideologies, but also a place where entrepreneurs offered advice as coaches and invitations to seminars. Others pursued fundraising and sold a large selection of products from their literature to t-shirts. Even the often-used self-description of the demonstration, “Querdenker” (“lateral thinker”) was registered as a trademark of its founder, Michael Ballweg in Stuttgart, Germany, and needed authorization to be used by others.⁹ In the beginning, this label was imported to Austria, but after a homophobic incident by Jennifer Klauninger on a “Querdenken” demonstration, the organizer Hannes Brejcha started to relabel the demonstration as “Fairdenker” (Fair thinker).¹⁰ Commercial practices like relabeling and the involvement of professional marketing weren’t an exception. Another good example is the already mentioned Alexander Ehrlich, whose travel company, provided transportation for most protests. In an interview, he said, “The lateral thinkers are a boon to the industry. They want to ride the bus, we need passengers — it’s a win-win situation.”¹¹

9 Daniel Laufer, „Der geschäftige Herr Ballweg,“ *Netzpolitik*, 18.12.2020, <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/querdenken-der-geschaeftige-herr-ballweg/>.

10 Vanessa Gaigg and Laurin Lorenz, „Die Köpfe hinter den ‚Querdenker‘-Demos“ *Standard*, 15.01.2021, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000123339446/die-koepfe-hinter-den-querdenker-demos>.

11 „Gutes Geschäft mit Groll gegen Maßnahmen,“ *ORF*, 18.12.2020, <https://orf.at/stories/3191221/>.

Besides the already mentioned examples, there are many more like lawyers collecting money for supposed important legal actions or coaches providing expansive counseling for life decisions. The obvious commercial interests of prominent activists in Austria at least raise the question about their often-emphasized altruistic motives.

Understanding the COVID-19 mobilizations in Austria from the perspective of Cultures of Rejection means understanding them not as a marginal phenomenon detached from society, but asking what conditions led to them being an attractive alternative for so many people. Why do crises and transformations give rise to these specific movements and what are the pre-existing conditions that make them conceivable in the first place? In this article, only a few aspects could be touched upon. A central precondition seems to be a general crisis of authority that is combined with an “expertization” of politics. The mobilizations react to these conditions by creating their own institutions and experts to replace the discredited authorities. They create “alternative medical” experts and promote narratives that promote esoteric holism or divine authority. Far-right actors however try to use the fertile ground of these mobilizations for their agitation, while some central figures seem to profit financially.

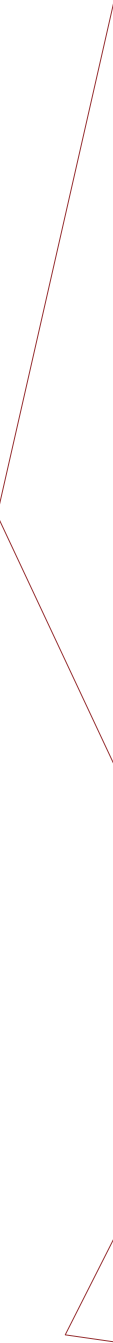
A stylized map of Europe is shown in a dark red color. A white outline highlights the geographical shape of Germany. The text "BERLIN GERMANY" is printed in white, uppercase letters within the German outline. A white, angular line graphic extends from the right side of the German outline, pointing towards the right edge of the page. The background features faint, darker red silhouettes of trees and foliage.

BERLIN
GERMANY

“THINKING FOR YOURSELF”

SOURCES OF
COUNTERKNOWLEDGE
IN THE GERMAN
COVID-19-PROTESTS

ALEXANDER HARDER
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In her first televised speech on the pandemic in early 2020, the German chancellor Angela Merkel addressed an anxious audience of 18 million. “This is what an epidemic demonstrates: how vulnerable we are, how dependent on the considerate actions of others [...] the situation is serious. You have to take it seriously as well”.¹ Collective responsibility for others’ well-being, as well as unprecedented state interventions appeared necessary to combat COVID-19. The pandemic called into question the long-held maxims of neoliberalism – free market reign, sparse state interventions, an austere welfare state and individual self-responsibility. The perception that everybody might be vulnerable in the same way raised hopes for renewed solidarity and care.

The developments that followed Merkel’s speech dampened such expectations. Clearly, some were more vulnerable than others. Necessary as shutdowns, restrictions of public and private life or financial injections were, the anti-pandemic response catalyzed social divisions and contradictions that predated the crisis. The pandemic hit those with little financial resources, those working in precarious and self-employed positions or those doubly burdened by wage and care labor the hardest. Income equality rose, gendered and racialized divisions deepened. At the same time, large businesses were often left unscathed, shielded by

1 Merkel, Angela. 2020. Fernsehansprache von Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel vom 18. März 2020. Translation by Author

fiscal protection measures.² Already powerful technology and software providers facilitated social distancing efforts, through remote work or videotelephony, and increased their influence and profits.³ Political decisions on the pandemic were regularly transferred to the executive and hashed out between the heads of federal and state government, while much of the crisis management rested on disciplinary measures and strengthened the policing of everyday life.⁴

Germany's crisis management gave ample reason for political contestation. The most prominent protest movement that voiced opposition, however, did not call for a more solidaristic management of the crisis, but demanded freedom from the pandemic measures altogether. It was unusually heterogeneous, steeped in esoteric and conspiratorial thinking and expressed anxiety concerning a coming dictatorship or doubts concerning the existence of the virus. Politicians and the press condemned protesters as "Covidiot": irrational, crazed and cognitively impaired, opposing the supposedly rational and scientifically informed state interventions. This remains an unsatisfactory characterization of a protest movement that defined the political situation during the crisis. Participants drew on a mix of motivations, knowledge sources and political allegiances that warrant closer inspection. Drawing on digital fieldwork among participants of the movement, I will highlight how dominant interpretations of the pandemic are challenged with recourse to knowledge that is not necessarily irrational or anti-scientific, but encompasses references to alternative experts and "common sense" under the claim to "Think for yourself".

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- 2 Butterwegge, Christoph. 2021. "Das neuartige Virus trifft auf die alten Verteilungsmechanismen: Warum die COVID-19-Pandemie zu mehr sozialer Ungleichheit führt." *Wirtschaftsdienst* 101(1):11–14. doi: [10.1007/s10273-021-2817-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10273-021-2817-5).
 - 3 Klein, Naomi. 2020. "Screen New Deal: Under Cover of Mass Death, Andrew Cuomo Calls in the Billionaires to Build a High-Tech Dystopia." *The Intercept*. Retrieved February 15, 2021 (<https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/>).
 - 4 Mullis, Daniel. 2021. "Gesellschaftliche Transformationen in Zeiten von Corona." in *Corona und Gesellschaft. Soziale Kämpfe in der Pandemie*, edited by Corona-Monitor. Wien: Mandelbaum. 32.

COMIC-CON FOR CONSPIRACISTS

The first protests against the German pandemic management started as early as March 2020. Out of the initially small and decentralized demonstrations, a central actor emerged: an initiative called “Querdenken”, spearheaded by IT-Entrepreneur Michael Ballweg. Querdenken professionalized the movement and, by mid-2020, grew into a franchise that featured local branches across Germany, as well as a lineup of prominent movement ideologues.⁵ It included alternative health experts doubting the severity of the virus, medical professionals versed in alternative treatment methods and lawyers worried about the curtailment of individual rights. All of them nurtured their own social media followings and monetization strategies.

The initiative organized a number of spectacular and festival-like protests events in large cities, such as the “Day of Freedom” in Berlin. There, spiritualists carrying portraits of Mahatma Ghandi mingled with Q-Anon-adherents. Wagons covered in colorful “No Border, No Nation” Graffiti were stuck in traffic behind trucks advertising the “Patriotic Opposition Europe”. Young families in Birkenstocks and dreadlocks celebrated along groups of Neo-Nazis sporting “FCK ZION – Read the Protocols” T-shirts. Like a convention for conspiracists, attendants donned the outfits and symbols of their own particular political philosophies, creating a dizzying mix of protesters that included far-right groups and other fringe political actors. By 2021, almost all opposition to the anti-pandemic measures had become synonymous with the term “Querdenken”. Michael Ballweg capitalized on the popularity of the brand by collecting donations, offering costly speaking engagements and selling merchandise.⁶

5 Callison, William, and Quinn Slobodian. 2021. “Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol.” *Boston Review*. Retrieved January 13, 2021 (<https://bostonreview.net/politics/william-callison-quinn-slobodian-coronapolitics-reichstag-capitol>).

6 Laufer, Daniel. 2020. “Querdenken: Der geschäftige Herr Ballweg.” *netzpolitik.org*. Retrieved November 12, 2022 (<https://netzpolitik.org/2020/querdenken-der-geschaftige-herr-ballweg/>).

In the course of 2021 the movement started to wane. Fraudulent monetization schemes, escalating violence at the protests and the closure of key online communication channels contributed to its deterioration. A criminal investigation into Querdenken's opaque financial structure put Ballweg in jail on suspicions of money laundering and fraud. Although supporters can still purchase commemorative "Free Michael Ballweg" tote bags for 24,95€, the movement's heyday is over. Without a central actor, the hotbed of protests shifted from southern and western Germany towards the eastern states. The 2021 protests in Saxony and Thuringia were attended, but also increasingly promoted and organized, by openly far-right actors. Instead of the convention-like celebrations, their demonstrations took the form of torch-lit marches, euphemistically called "strolls". They drew parallels to the protests against the GDR in 1989 and attendants regularly assaulted journalists, threatened politicians and even made plans to abduct the secretary of health.

MOBILIZING COUNTERKNOWLEDGE

It is not easy to succinctly characterize the German movement. Its composition differed both in regards to time, as well as in regards to location. The demonstrations developed from scattered protest to centralized and professionalized events, before deteriorating into smaller "strolls", and they radicalized accordingly.⁷ Far-right groups were organizationally active from the get-go in eastern Germany, but largely remained participants and observers in the western states.⁸ Data on who actually participated in the protests exists mainly on centralized protest in western Germany, where it shows that attendants often possessed above-average education levels, were disproportionately self-employed

7 Hummel, Steve, and Paul Zschocke. 2021. "Die Bewegung Der Pandemie-Leugner*innen in Leipzig." in *Corona und Gesellschaft. Soziale Kämpfe in der Pandemie*, edited by Corona-Monitor. Wien: Mandelbaum.

8 Teune, Simon. 2021. "Querdenken Und Die Bewegungsforschung – Neue Herausforderung Oder Déjà-Vu?" *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 34(2):326–34. doi: [10.1515/fjsb-2021-0029](https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2021-0029).

and included a higher number of women when compared to similar demonstrations.⁹ Personal or material disadvantages brought on by the crisis mattered much less to protesters than general anxieties about its social consequences and fear of an authoritarian dictatorship.¹⁰ The term “Querdenken” suggests that the ways people think about the crisis, the epistemological dimensions of the protest, are characteristic of the movement. Indeed, it was profound distrust in government, expert and media explanations of the pandemic, which united demonstrators. Rather than relying on official interpretations of the crisis, its supporters drew on alternative sources – often found online - to understand the political situation. They employed “counterknowledge”, the “contestation of epistemic authority by advocating alternative knowledge authorities.”¹¹

In winter of 2020, a local activist based in western Germany initiated a hashtag-campaign called “#IAmNotGettingVaccinated”. A shutdown that would last until spring, the acceleration of vaccination efforts and a general drop in protest events made virtual engagement an attractive prospect. Administrators set up groups on Telegram and Facebook where members attached the hashtag to selfies, introduced themselves and their reasons for rejecting the anti-pandemic measures. The images were compiled in videos and funneled into the wider digital cosmos of the protests. By February 2022, #IAmNotGettingVaccinated’s Facebook group had become one of the largest groups related to the protest on social media with approximately 118 000 members. The movement’s already extensive online communication infrastructures helped circulate the hashtag, which ultimately made its way onto stickers, hoodies and buttons. Although the campaign nominally opposed vaccination, virtually all posts by participants rejected the pandemic management

9 Nachtwey, Oliver, Robert Schäfer, and Nadine Frei. 2020. *Politische Soziologie Der Corona-Protteste*. preprint. SocArXiv. doi: [10.31235/osf.io/zyp3f](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/zyp3f).

10 Koos, Sebastian. 2021. “Konturen einer heterogenen »Misstrauensgemeinschaft«.” in *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der »Querdenker«: die Corona-Protteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, edited by S. Reichardt. Frankfurt New York: Campus Verlag. 73.

11 Ylä-Anttila, Tuukka. 2018. “Populist Knowledge: ‘Post-Truth’ Repertoires of Contesting Epistemic Authorities.” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 5(4):356–88. doi: [10.1080/23254823.2017.1414620](https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1414620). 4.

altogether and laid out their reasons for doing so. To better understand how counter-knowledge was mobilized during the pandemic and why it became as compelling as it did, it is worth investigating what sources and discourses participants of #IAmNotGettingVaccinated employed to stage their opposition and how these practices contributed to a shared sense of collective resistance.

THE “THEY” IN “THEY ARE LYING TO YOU”

“I will definitely not get vaccinated, because I have identified the root of the problem”, Frank introduces himself to the group.¹² “We are being lied to and cheated. There are no viruses that cause disease.” Almost all posts in the campaign’s social media group include the claim that members are being deceived, manipulated, or – in the words of another member - “fucked with”, when it comes to the reasons for the anti-pandemic measures. For Frank and others, the pharmaceutical industry is the culprit. Posts on the danger of vaccines and Big Pharma’s greedy, deceptive and criminal motives are especially frequent, but many more parties and schemes are associated with this all-encompassing lie. “Such an enormous lie only works when the whole thing is done globally”, a group member speculates. She believes that the “1st place of current global goals is the abolition of cash payments”, and “the vaccine could help to reduce the global population a bit, and who knows what’s in there, that possibly serves this goal as well?”. According to many posts, the German public broadcasting network and other mass media deliberately spew “vaccine propaganda” or stoke fear. Social Media and Facebook manipulate public discourse in order to quell dissenting voices and sow division, while Bill Gates, aided by the WHO, is planning to become dictator of the world. Angela Merkel is a sadistic traitor planning to make everybody ill and depressed, health experts such as Christian Drosten are either paid actors or useful idiots for their powerful overlords.

12 All citations are taken from fieldnotes and data gathered between the 1st and the 7th of March 2021, names have been anonymized and posts translated by the author.

Covertly operating groups, Manichean divisions between good and evil as well as the belief that in essence, there are no coincidences, all form staple elements of conspiracy thinking.¹³ Striking about the discussions among the group's members, however, is the absence of a singular conspiracy narrative. Posts and comments posit very different explanations for the crisis. Conflicts, however, about the believability of this or that theory are practically absent, even where narratives contradict one another. Some deny the pandemic outright, while others stress that they simply view the measures as exaggerated. Rather than a common interpretation, participants of #IAmNotGettingVaccinated share, foremost, the perception that they are being lied to. But the "They" in "They are lying to you" and their motivations are notoriously underdetermined.

EXPERT VERSUS EXPERT

In such a situation of all-encompassing deception, who can be trusted? Members of the group are sparse with reference to sources. When they do make mention of who or what they trust, two authorities come up frequently. The first is alternative experts. The second is what could be termed "common sense".

In their discussions of the pandemic, participants in #IAmNotGettingVaccinated cite a range of influencers, media personalities and spiritualist that comprise the Querdenken cosmos. Some of them have emerged during the crisis, some had been active prior to it. They form part of a digital ecology adjacent to the movement that makes use of YouTube, of Telegram, as well as of other largely unmoderated Websites such as Odyssee to distribute their content. One of the voices cited by members is Samuel Eckert, a former entrepreneur, amateur, poker professional and Seventh-Day Adventist. In several copy-and-pasted comments, users quote his statement that "33 medical experts" agree: "There is no pandemic". Many more posts include Eckert's view not only that there is no

13 Butter, Michael. 2018. »Nichts Ist Wie Es Scheint«. Über Verschwörungstheorien. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. 10.

pandemic, but that viruses in general do not exist. This belief, which traces back to “Germanic New Medicine”, proposes that unresolved psychological conflicts are the cause for illness – and that a Jewish conspiracy is behind mainstream clinical medicine.¹⁴ The opposition to mainstream clinical medicine is also shared by another figurehead mentioned by members. The Austrian author Clemens Arvay writes books on issues of ecology and health, questioning the risks of the COVID-vaccine and developing a conception of the immune system in relation to its ecological contexts.

Not all voices deemed trustworthy, however, are as fundamentally opposed to clinical medicine or Arvay. Many participants follow Sucharit Bakhdi, a retired professor of microbiology and author of *Corona Unmasked: New Data, Numbers and Facts* (2021), as well as Wolfgang Wodarg, a physician and former member of parliament, who opposed the anti-pandemic measures as exaggerated and fear-mongering. Both are members of the “Corona Ausschuss” [Committee], in which medical and legal practitioners come together in regular “proceedings” to critically assess and oppose the government’s actions. They mimic the parliamentary device of the “Ausschuss” in an attempt to hold the government accountable for what they view as their dictatorial excesses. Members of #IAmNotGettingVaccinated laud these scientist and physicians for their clarity and express empathy with their struggle. “Wolfgang Wodarg and all the other scientists and physicians that are not being heard, it is very sad”, a user comments. It would be false to characterize the group’s participants as entirely anti-science. Supposedly “new data, numbers and facts” are often welcomed in the group, and some discussants emphasize that their scientists are actually more scientific than those agreeing with official policy. Rather than opposing scientific expertise outright, the group draws on their own roster of experts whose credibility stems less from their specific ideological leanings, but from their opposition to the measures and their marginalization in the dominant discourse.

14 Speit, Andreas. 2006. “der rechte rand: Germanisch gegen den Krebs.” *Die Tageszeitung: taz*, January 30, 24.

COMMON SENSE AND THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

References to experts are not always necessary, however. “I think that’s all fine, but I think not everyone has to dive in so deep”, somebody comments a post sharing a video exposing Lipid-Nanoparticles in the COVID-vaccine. “If you don’t know what consequences the injection of a drug has, you keep your hands off. That’s all you need to know”. Such comments point to the capacity to critically assess the situation by yourself, without experts, as a source for counterknowledge. Famous epidemiologists, but also health ministers are in turn ridiculed as naïve and stupid. A widely shared satiric text claims that a new “Lauterbach”-mutation (named after the parliamentarian and current health minister Karl Lauterbach) has been discovered, whose symptoms include the loss of sanity and reason and overwhelming fear. In contrast, members appeal to a kind of “common sense” that foregrounds the individual’s capacity to understand and to decide against the opinions and regulations suggested by politicians and experts. This capacity also involves references to “gut feelings” and intuitions, as well as immediate experience, for example when members doubt the severity of the pandemic: “I know nobody who got it and nobody who died from it”, one user shares.

This reference to the capacity for autonomous judgment is most pronounced when members discuss the trust in their immune system. Again and again, posts state that “I trust in my immune system”, or that “my immune system is too good to get vaccinated”. The immune system, in this context, is perceived as something that members – and members alone – take care of. They talk about doing so by taking vitamins, tinctures or ointments, but also by staying active, going outside and by simply being happy. Some share stories about past illnesses or chronic disease, which they overcame by themselves. The authority to know and to decide over the immune system lies exclusively with its owner. “I take good care of my immune system, because I am responsible for my body”, a user writes, “and I will not have that responsibility taken from me by people, organizations etc, who only care about power and profit!” Individual authority over one’s health is positioned against greedy and power-hungry

actors that threaten its integrity. But this idea of the “immune system” also reveals the proprietary logic that underpins common sense about the body. Personal well-being is conceived not as a socially entangled phenomenon relying on public measures, regulations or economic inequalities. The implications of this view are made explicit when users argue that those who do fall ill failed to properly care for their own health.

THINKING FOR YOURSELF, TOGETHER

The knowledge that members of #IAmNotGettingVaccinated draw on to contest epistemic authority involves both a broad roster of alternative experts, as well as a shared common sense about health and well-being. The defining feature of almost all statements, however, is the emphasis of one’s individual capacity to know, understand and assess the situation. Almost all posts mention that their opposition to the anti-pandemic measures stems from a critical attitude, independent thinking and a general willingness to object. Members of the group often stress the self as the most important epistemological authority:

“I am 56 year old and I have learned a lot in life. I can form my own opinion and I often go against the grain. I question a lot of things, not always to everyone’s liking. But that’s me, and I won’t change.”

Such proclamations, summarized in the statement “I think for myself”, are made even when alternative experts and external knowledge authorities are drawn upon. These are viewed as products of self-directed research or of “staying informed”, a crucial duty for members that often leads into the depth of an online ecology of conspiracists and spiritualist. Participants rhetorically distinguish themselves from the mass of “sheeple”, “mask people” or “fact finders”. The faceless mass of followers and adherents of the government’s policy are seen as manipulated, irrational and at points dangerously hysterical. “People”, one member laments, “have lost the ability to think autonomously”. In contrast, the posts and the attached selfies serve to highlight the individuality and the uniqueness of their authors and featured an undeniable element of narcissism and self-promotion. The group conceives of their community

as a collective of like-minded individuals united by their willingness to go against the grain. As long as autonomous judgement and uniqueness of thought are emphasized, the concrete explanations or reasons for opposition fall by the wayside. In the rare cases where differences become an issue – for example when discussing whether viruses exist – members defer to the idea that individual paths can all lead to the same goal: “In a way, we all think the right thing and that is a good thing, dear people!”, a member comments.

The idea of counterknowledge is often contrasted with “epistemic populism”. While the former entails alternative knowledge authorities, the latter appeals to the knowledge, experiences and feelings of the “common people”¹⁵. In #IAmNotGettingVaccinated, and arguable the broader protests, alternative authorities as well as appeals to common sense are present and permissible sources for contestation – as long as rejection of the measures is the bottom line. More important than the origin or even the contents of a claim, however, is the mode of its articulation as individually ascertained and drawn from self-directed thinking and research. The claim to “think for yourself” serves as one bracket for the heterogeneity and apparent incoherence of the movement.

15 Ylä-Anttila, Tuukka. 2018. “Populist Knowledge: ‘Post-Truth’ Repertoires of Contesting Epistemic Authorities.” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 5(4):356–88. doi: [10.1080/23254823.2017.1414620](https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1414620). 4.



LINKÖPING
SWEDEN

REJECTION IN TIMES
OF **C**COVID-19

DIGITAL DISC**O**URSE,
MEDIA, AND
DEMONSTRATION**S**
IN SWEDEN

CELINA ORTEGA SOTO
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1 | INTRODUCTION

INFORMATION SOCIETY

In this paper, I approach online and offline expressions of uncertainty, mistrust, dissent, skepticism, and critique through the scope of conspiracy thinking that has emerged in discourses related to the COVID-19 pandemic¹. Some of the several important questions that run across the different critical debates and political contexts during the pandemic concern issues of objectivity, knowledge, information, and, broadly speaking, truth. Inspired by this research and questions, this article will seek to analyze the explicit and implicit conditions of their discursive articulation in political mobilizations surrounding the pandemic. More specifically, I explore changes in digital discourse surrounding COVID-19; I investigate connections between online practices and offline political organization; finally, I study the relation of the people engaged in public protests to the depiction of the protests and the pandemic more generally in mainstream media, with particular focus on the first and second

1 Önnfors, Andreas. *Conspiracy theories and COVID-19: the mechanisms behind a rapidly growing societal challenge*. Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2021. <https://www.msb.se/siteassets/dokument/publikationer/english-publications/conspiracy-theories-and-covid-19.pdf> (Retrieved 2022-10-20).
Theocharis, Yannis, Ana, Cardenal, Soyeon, Jin, Toril, Aalberg, David, Nicolas, Hopmann, Jesper, Strömbäck, Laia, Castro, Esser, Frank, Van Aelst, Peter, de Vreese, Claes, Corbu, Nicoleta, Koc-Michalska, Karolina, Matthes, Joerg, Schemer, Christian, Sheaffer, Tamir, Splendore, Sergio, Stanyer, James, Stepinska, Agnieszka, Štetka, Václav. Does the platform matter? Social media and COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs in 17 countries. *New media & society*. Vol. 00, issue 0. 2021: 1-26. <https://doi.org.e.bibl.liu.se/10.1177/14614448211045666>.

organized anti-COVID-19 measure demonstrations in Stockholm in the spring of 2021.

The article will be using the concept of Cultures of Rejection, which looks at the social and cultural relations and articulations in which rejection of otherness takes form, how scapegoats are created, and antagonisms against perceived enemies are nourished². The concept of Cultures of Rejection can thus guide analyses of everyday practices in relation to processes of rejection, objectification, and affect, and study such practices in relation to the material conditions that lay the ground for such expressions.

For this paper I ask the questions: How do people make sense of COVID-19 in Facebook groups in relation to Cultures of Rejection? What role does the media play in the understanding of COVID-19? I seek to answer these questions in the context of Sweden. I will do so by discussing Swedish rejection discourses targeting COVID-19 measures in online spaces on Facebook, together with anti-COVID-19-measure movements, and the media's depiction of the movement³.

2 | THE SWEDISH COVID-19 STRATEGIES

Sweden's handling of COVID-19 has been characterized as unique, in that the government actively chose to place great reliance on expert authorities, mainly their own epidemiologists from the Public Health Agency.⁴ Ultimately, this meant that the government authorized the Public Health Agency (PHA) to design an expert-based response to the pandemic, thus also asserting the autonomy of the PHA in relation to the government

2 Harder, Alexander, Benjamin, Opratko. Cultures of Rejection at Work: Investigating the Acceptability of Authoritarian Populism. *Ethnicities*. Vol. 22, issue 3. 2021: 425-445. doi: [10.1177/14687968211012437](https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968211012437).

3 The material consists of field notes from ethnographical observations, interviews, digital ethnography, and articles from different periods in 2020-2021.

4 SOU 2021:89. *Coronakommissionen. Sverige under pandemin: smittspridning och smittskydd*, volym 1.

and the parliament and putting it in charge of communicating the information to the public⁵. While other European countries implemented radical restrictions and lockdowns, Sweden applied protection measures late into the first wave of the pandemic (April 2020 – May 2020).⁶ This strategy was met by critique from researchers who argued that politicians should intervene in the Swedish strategy.⁷ At the same time, voices in social media highlighted the stricter strategies of other countries and the recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO). During the second wave of the pandemic (October 2020 – January 2021), the government chose to turn to stricter restrictions without justification of the new changes.⁸ This sparked affective reactions to and criticism of what was seen as a contradictory response from both the PHA and the government. In December 2020, several politicians were again criticized for their contradictory actions, now because they violated the very recommendations that they had issued themselves.⁹ At the end of December 2020, as soon as the EU commission authorized the vaccine, Sweden started vaccinating people in risk groups. In December 2020, the Swedish government introduced a new emergency law, called the Corona law or the pandemic law, which was implemented in January 2021. This law made it possible to legally apply special restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19¹⁰.

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- 5 Nylén, Lars. Den svenska responsen år 2020: krisberedskap i kris. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*. Vol. 123, issue 5. 2021: 287-313.
 - 6 Socialstyrelsen. *Analys av första och andra covid-19-vågen – produktion, köer och väntetider i vården*. Socialstyrelsen, 2021. <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalasets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2021-5-7371.pdf> (Retrieved 2022-04-14)
 - 7 Carlsson, Marcus, Einhorn, Lena, Einhorn, Stefan, et al. "Folkhälsomyndigheten har misslyckats – nu måste politikerna gripa in". *DN Debate. Dagens Nyheter*. 2020-04-14. <https://www.dn.se/debatt/folkhalsomyndigheten-har-misslyckats-nu-maste-politikerna-gripa-in/>. (Retrieved 2022-05-24).
 - 8 SOU 2021:89. Coronakommissionen. *Sverige under pandemin: smittspridning och smittskydd*, volym 1.
 - 9 Sandén, Tilda. Stort förtroendetapp för regeringens och myndigheternas coronahantering. *SVT*. 2021-01-23. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/stort-fortroendetapp-for-regeringens-och-myndigheternas-coronahantering> (Retrieved 2022-09-26)
 - 10 SFS 2022:104. Förordning (2021:8) om särskilda begränsningar för att förhindra spridning av sjukdomen covid-19. e.g., forced retail businesses and commercial outlets to

Despite Sweden's relatively limited restrictions from an international perspective, COVID-19 skeptics and anti-vaccination activists mobilized for the first time in the autumn of 2020 in Stockholm¹¹. Because of historically high vaccination rates among Swedes¹² and Sweden's constitutional law on "bodily integrity and freedom of movement," mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 was not, at that point, on the political agenda, if it ever was. This may explain why it was not until the beginning of March 2021 that the first publicly organized demonstration took place in Stockholm, in response to restrictions imposed through the temporary COVID-19 law. The organizers of the demonstration would later found the organization "Föreningen Frihet Sverige" (the Freedom Sweden Association) and chose to name the demonstration "Tusenmannamarschen" ("the Millennium Man March). The first demonstration in March 2021 gathered around 600 people from a broad ideological spectrum.¹³

limit the number of customers in proportion to their floor area. If shop owners and managers failed to comply with the law, authorities could force it to close (for a period of time).

- 11 Dalsbro, Anders. Svensk anti-lockdown. Expo. 2021-04-30. <https://expo.se/svensk-anti-lockdown> (Retrieved: 2022-03-05).
- 12 Folkhälsomyndigheten. Vaccination register and vaccination coverage. *Folkhälsomyndigheten*. 2022. <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/the-public-health-agency-of-sweden/communicable-disease-control/vaccinations/vaccination-register-and-vaccination-coverage/>. (Retrieved 2022-04-16). Folkhälsomyndigheten. Figurer om vaccinationstäckning för vaccin mot mässling, påssjuka och röda hund. *Folkhälsomyndigheten*. 2022. <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/folkhalsorapportering-statistik/statistikdatabaser-och-visualisering/vaccinationsstatistik/figurer-vaccinationstäckning/>. (Retrieved 2022-04-16).
- 13 Jansson, Kalle, Johansson, Malin. Damberg om demonstrationen: "totalt respektlöst". SVT. 2021. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/damberg-om-demonstrationen-to-talt-respektlost> (Retrieved 2022-10-18) Dagens Industri. Damberg om coronademonstration: "total brist på respekt". Dagens Industri. <https://www.di.se/nyheter/damberg-om-coronademonstration-total-brist-pa-respekt/> (Retrieved 2022-10-18)

THE SHIFT IN POLARIZED FACEBOOK GROUPS

The material for this article consists of a combination of 1) digital discourse on one Facebook group and one news site from 2020, 2) digital discourse in two Facebook groups relating to COVID-19 in 2021, 3) field-notes and interviews from the two first organized anti-COVID-19-measure demonstrations in Sweden in March 2020, and 4) several journalistic articles relating to COVID-19 from 2021.¹⁴

The comment section on the Facebook news site from 2020 first expressed disappointment with the Swedish strategy for not implementing harsher restrictions in the beginning of the pandemic, which aligns with the criticism later made by the Corona Commission.¹⁵ Another Facebook group from 2021 expressed dissent when such restrictions were eventually imposed, in form of sarcastic and humoristic takes on the contradiction between the relaxed attitude at the beginning of the pandemic and the harsh restrictions during the second wave. The comments on the Facebook news site reacted negatively to the voluntary strategy, the lack of restrictions, and ultimately, the lack of leadership from politicians during the crisis.

14 Due to ethics, the material is anonymized as the range of Facebook groups in Sweden are few, and some of the groups have been made private, which I had the privilege of studying with consent. The material I use for this article consists of one Facebook-group and one Facebook-site where I scraped my material in 2020. The rest of the digital material was collected in 2021 and consist of two Swedish Facebook group in relation to COVID-19 in 2021. I have also analysed coverage of COVID-19 and the anti-corona law demonstration in Stockholm in five different newspapers during one week in March 2021. The chosen newspapers were Aftonbladet, Expressen, Svenska Dagbladet, Dagens Nyheter and Göteborgsposten. The first four are Sweden's major national newspapers, the fifth is the country's largest regional newspaper. The material is a total of 35 articles, written before and after the first demonstration in Stockholm. This section will focus on the articles on the demonstration, and the reaction of the protesters. Lastly, I will include some of the observations that I made from my fieldwork from the first and second organized anti-covid-measure demonstrations in Stockholm the 6th and 20th of March 2021.

15 SOU 2021:89. Coronakommissionen. Sverige under pandemin: smittspridning och smittskydd, volume 1.

The Facebook groups that showed an anti-restriction discourse, reacted and questioned the restrictions, recommendations, vaccination, and desired a whole new government, and therefore, another type of leadership. Such rejections were first noted in the summer of 2020, as the online discourse expressed disagreement with or rejection of the government and the PHA.¹⁶ In the Facebook group from 2020, a cruel caricature was soon established, as members generally referred to Dr. Anders Tegnell, state epidemiologist of Sweden, as “Dr. Tengele”.¹⁷ Several comments and posts were critical of the government, expressing hatred towards then-Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and blaming him for the decline of Swedish society. Some of the COVID-19-related criticism in the discourse of 2020 consisted of posts and discussions about government handling of the crisis in relation to the elderly, claiming that the government, together with the PHA, had euthanized parts of the senior population¹⁸. In general, COVID-19 was often used to pinpoint the worthlessness and rejection of the sitting government, which often was made to appear as a greater danger than the virus itself.

By 2021, the discussion had shifted from calls for more restrictions, and criticisms of the government for not taking enough actions, to reactions *against new restrictions and recommendations*. This was apparently in tune with changes in governmental policy, which gradually became stricter towards business and the public sector, even as several recommendations were still voluntary to the public.¹⁹ One of the anti-COVID-19-measure groups in 2021 worked actively to organize digital dissent against the pandemic law and protest governmental restrictions and recommendations. Members of the group discussed and demonstrated how they rejected masks when going to health centers, and they shared

16 Public Health Authority.

17 Referring to the SS officer Dr. Josef Mengele, known for performing deadly experiments in Auschwitz.

18 Önnefors, Andreas. *Conspiracy theories and COVID-19: the mechanisms behind a rapidly growing societal challenge*. Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2021. <https://www.msb.se/siteassets/dokument/publikationer/english-publications/conspiracy-theories-and-covid-19.pdf> (Retrieved 2022-10-20).

19 SOU 2021:89. Coronakommissionen. *Sverige under pandemin: smittspridning och smittskydd, volume 1*.

ideas and personal experiences. Arguably, the group served as a source of support for people who felt their everyday life was full of frustrations and confinements and their freedom was lost. In the online discourse, there had been clear rejection of restrictions, recommendations, vaccines, and vaccine certificates. Here, the antagonists were often depicted as coming from established media, the sitting government, the WHO, and established science. The only common denominator of these actors was their increased visibility and central role during the crisis, which attributed to a discourse of these actors as “the elite” and “the establishment”. Interestingly, however, not all media and science were rejected in these digital groups, but only what was often referred to as *established* media and *established* science, whereas so-called alternative or “free” media and alternative science were often credited as truthful and trustworthy²⁰. Based on conversations in these digital spaces, it is impossible to tell why participants find certain research trustworthy or not; rather, the main discursive mechanism seems to operate by negation, to the extent that alternative narratives or versions are rewarded as trustworthy in such groups simply because they correspond to the participants’ rejection of “the established.” Other findings in this Facebook group concerned the rejection of sanitary masks and the anxiety in having to carry one when going to healthcare centers. In comments about wearing or not wearing masks, people were divided between those not trusting it to work and those not wanting to wear it, with some people arguing that the refusal to wear a mask is an expression of freedom and human rights, and some stating that it was “their right to protect their body against [e.g.,] nanoparticles and [other] chemicals.” It is important to note here that Sweden never implemented any general restrictions or recommendations about wearing masks, focusing instead on particular contexts.²¹ Besides the more negatively affective discourse, however, there was also a positive discourse, in which people expressed discourse of love, empathy, and care for the children. Many stated that their aim was to

20 Moreno, Mancosu, Vegetti, Frederico. “Is It the Message or the Messenger?": Conspiracy Endorsement and Media Sources. *Social Science Computer Review*. Vol. 39, issue 6, 2021: 1203-1217. <https://doi-org.e.bibl.liu.se/10.1177/0894439320965107>.

21 In healthcare centers, group homes for elderly, hospitals, airports, and during certain hours in public transport.

protect children from the society the virus had created, which isolated the children and robbed them of freedom, childhood, and the right to education²². Very few in this Facebook group showed any interest in public demonstrations. Instead, they showed interest in organizing in more modest and comfortable ways. Besides organizing digitally through the Facebook group, several people sent red letters with discontent addressed to the parliament.

What was notable about the digital spaces I studied was that they displayed two opposed ways of making sense of the pandemic, both leading to rejection: the first one rejected actors for not implementing harsher restrictions, thus leading to a lack of trust of the actors, the second, rejected COVID-19 and COVID-measures, ultimately leading to a lack of trust of actors, which in some cases led to the narrative of conspiracy thinking. Both have led to expressed dissent with or lack of trust in the government, the PHA, and politicians in general—but for opposite reasons. While the digital spaces I observed differed in time and subjects, there were also some common denominators such as dissent, rejection, and affect, and the discourse about loss of freedom and security was prominent. Ultimately, these examples together with the other material point towards expressions of loss of control. This was often expressed in articulations of desire for a freedom that was felt to be lost, for returning to an ordinary life without restrictions, but also in the ways in which people confessed having been forced into attitudes of rejection, for instance in relation to the requirement to wear masks at the healthcare center.

²² This critique was understood as part of the PHA:s recommendation for distance learning for secondary school students.

THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT AND MEDIA’S RESPONSE

I have analysed the coverage of COVID-19 and the anti-COVID-19 law demonstration in Stockholm in five different newspapers during one week in March 2021. The articles were written before and after the first demonstration in Stockholm. This section will focus on the articles on the demonstration, and some of the reactions of the protesters.

The newspapers that carried most articles about the demonstration were the evening tabloids, *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*. In one article *Aftonbladet* described the demonstration as gathering of a “diverse crowd” where “5G opponents, immigrant repatriation advocates, climate deniers, all participated in the march.”²³ Another article described the demonstration as a “huge anger based only on rumors and free fantasies,” and said that this anger had trickled down from closed Facebook groups to find its way to the streets of Stockholm.²⁴ A third wrote “Sweden is now affected by the conspiracy pandemic” and further compared it to a “contagion.”²⁵ Most of the reports emphasized the violence and clashes with the police that occurred towards the end of the demonstration, as some of the demonstrators attempted to cross a bridge that was blocked by the police forces in their effort to disperse the crowd. Having been organized without authorization from the police, the demonstration explicitly violated the temporary ordinance that, to prevent contamination, prohibited public assemblies of more than eight individuals. The original police report stated that six police officers had been injured,

23 Tanha, Sophie. 2021. Arrangören firar demonstrationen trots brottsmisstanke. *Aftonbladet*. 2021-03-06. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/vAn9RB/arrangoren-firar-demonstrationen-trots-brottsmisstanke> (Retrieved 2021-03-16).

24 Aagård, Martin. 2021. Ilska odlas i Facebookgrupper och letar sig ut på gatorna. *Aftonbladet*. 2021-03-06. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/kolumnister/a/Blk6pw/ilska-odlas-i-facebookgrupper-och-letar-sig-ut-pa-gatorna> (Retrieved 2021-03-16).

25 Aagård, Martin. 2021. Ilska odlas i Facebookgrupper och letar sig ut på gatorna. *Aftonbladet*. 2021-03-06. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/R9omdx/nu-drab-bas-sverige-av-konspirations-pandemin> (Retrieved 2021-03-16).

of which one had to be taken to the hospital. By virtue of the pandemic law, several people had been arrested and a total of 50 people were removed from the site.²⁶

Five of six newspapers reported on the demonstration. However, far from all articles focused on the demonstrations in Stockholm. Some articles criticized the government and emphasized the contradiction of focusing on the death toll of COVID-19 when restrictions and lockdowns around the world had severe implication on the death of infants and small children,²⁷ while other articles focused on critique of government policy or discussed the pandemic in relation to the consequences of a neoliberal era²⁸. Here, I want to emphasize that most of the critique was mentioned in opinion articles written through letters to the editors.

According to several of the demonstrators, the newspapers categorized them as conspiratorial or immune to facts and arguments (carrying a tinfoil hat), in addition to being right-wing or far-right populists. Reactions to these accusations were expressed in the different demonstrations on placards stating that “The media is the virus,” and sarcastically wearing a tinfoil hat. Such messages were often addressed, as explained by the demonstrators, to Swedish “mainstream” media and journalists in the upcoming demonstration later in March. Two young men said that they chose to join the demonstration simply because they wanted to see for themselves how the media lied and reported from the first demonstration. Other people joked about “being Nazis” because, in their own view, that was how they had been perceived in the media’s reaction to the demonstration.

26 Polisen. Demonstration i centrala Stockholm. *Polisen*. 2021-03-06 <https://polisen.se/aktuellt/nyheter/2021/mars/demonstration-i-centrala-stockholm/>. (Retrieved 2022-06-16).

27 Gardell, Jonas. Vi offrar barnens hälsa och framtid i covidstrategin. *Expressen*. 2021-03-01. <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/jonas-gardell/vi-offrar-barnenes-halsa-och-framtid-i-covidstrategin/>. (Retrieved 2021-03-16).

28 Gerle, Elisabeth. 2021. *Kulturdebatt*. ”Den nyliberala epoken har skadat känslan av delaktighet i samhället”. *Dagens Nyheter*. 2021-03-04. <https://www.dn.se/kultur/den-nyliberala-epoken-har-skadat-kanslan-av-delaktighet-i-samhallet/>. (Retrieved 2021-03-16).

Overall, both digital material and observation of the demonstrations showed an ambiguous relation to the media itself, rejecting established media channels because of the narrative they have promoted. As an alternative, people at the demonstration endorsed alternative or “free” media that, in their view, offered channels for critical thought. Although it is true that populist, conspiratorial, and spiritual ideas flourished in anti-vaccine and anti-restriction movements across Europe, it remains important to analyze the content of their discourses, in which skepticism and criticism of the reigning social order blends with a variety of expressions of dissatisfaction and longing for alternatives to a system that is felt to be too repressive. It might, therefore, be more important to ask critical questions. One question journalists and media should ask themselves was phrased by *Dagens Nyheter*: “What is more important, to condemn or to try to understand and explain?”²⁹

5 | CONCLUSION

The material has showed that much of the discourse of Facebook groups and demonstrators who have protested against the dominant COVID-19 policies consisted of affective reactions against what was perceived as a contradictory politicization of the virus, such as in the case of vaccination, which was perceived as mandatory because it prevented non-vaccinated people from travelling and attending big public events. The COVID-19 law was also perceived as contradictory, due to the shift from a lenient state strategy to a temporary law implementing binding restrictions. In the material, I encountered reactions to profound social changes, such as restrictions affecting the economy, physical and mental health, as well as education and everyday life in general. These reactions or expressions were articulated in both online and offline environments, and they apparently derive from feelings of powerlessness and loss of control—feelings which in many cases are transformed into motivations to actively build communities and organize protests in these same envi-

29 Ibid.

ronments. Several people used the COVID-19 crisis to express their dissatisfaction with the government, the Public Health Agency, the health-care system, established media, and established science. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis revealed deep-seated criticism of Swedish society, something that was addressed by both sides—those criticizing the government and the Public Health Agency for being too “voluntary” and “passive,” and those who criticized the same actors for restricting their “freedom” and “human rights.”³⁰

The reporting on the demonstration during the time of research used different ways to report a new phenomenon in Sweden. While there were interesting articles that were more nuanced and asked critical questions, there were also articles that overemphasized demonstrators’ violence against the police and portrayed them as conspiracy theorists, climate deniers, and right-wing extremists. This type of reporting created a reaction, motivating individuals to continue showing up in demonstration’s against “the establishment.” In the light of such discourse, alternative or “free” media was given the opportunity to gain grounds, amongst groups with tendencies towards Cultures of Rejection.

From the observations on anti-COVID-19-measures, I found rejection expressed through anti-elite sentiments with somewhat radical tendencies in digital and ethnographic observations from broad ideological spectrums. These observations can be understood as part of Cultures of Rejection, leading to distrust in the media and other established actors discarded as untrustworthy and a part of “the establishment”. The pandemic became, or has functioned as, a catalyst for motivating groups to organize and react to different social structures, emphasized by the COVID-19 pandemic, this has resulted in several social media groups on Facebook, the usage of Telegram, one political party, several organizations, and even merchandise for the so-called “Freedom movement.”

30 Önnfors, Andreas. Conspiracy theories and COVID-19: the mechanisms behind a rapidly growing societal challenge. Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2021. <https://www.msb.se/siteassets/dokument/publikationer/english-publications/conspiracy-theories-and-covid-19.pdf> (Retrieved 2022-10-20).

CULTURES OF REJECTION
IN THE COVID-CRISIS

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CULTURES OF REJECTION

“Cultures of Rejection” set out to investigate the social and cultural conditions in which right-wing authoritarian movements operate and thrive, and conducted systematically coordinated research along the transnational space created by migration movements in 2015: in Serbia, Croatia, Austria, Germany and Sweden. This volume summarises the group’s research findings regarding the mobilisations against the COVID-19 measures (such as lockdowns, mandatory face masks and vaccinations) and on the relationship between these mobilisations and the media responses to them to date. Each contribution focuses on the specifics of the developments in the individual countries, assembling a panorama of the political dynamics during the pandemic beyond the five specific constellations.



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