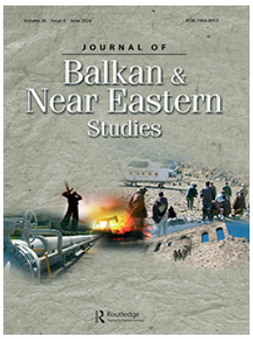

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The Strategic Use of Narratives and Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Major Autocratisers in Europe

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ABSTRACT

By the end of 2022, scholars had published heavily on authoritarian consolidation at the time of COVID-19 and explored how governments adopted measures weakening democratic checks and balances yet strengthened their regimes during the COVID crisis. Yet, we do not know much about how political leaders narrated the pandemic in their domestic and foreign policy choices in a way that reinforces their power. By focusing on the major autocratisers in Europe (Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Serbia) whose democracy scores have fallen the most over the last 10 years, we reveal a set of influential narratives identified in the discourses of state leaders and government representatives which were constructed around the governance of the COVID-19 pandemic. These narratives were utilized by political leaders to legitimize their repressive policies geared towards controlling the society, and to contest the European Union (EU) in particular and the liberal democratic order in general.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed a sudden and unprecedented hardship on many governments around the world. Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, described the COVID-19 crisis as a 'war-like' situation which 'requires the mobilization and direction of resources at unprecedented levels'.[1]To counter the spread of the COVID-19 virus, many countries in the EU and its near abroad have declared a state of emergency, enforcing lockdowns, curfews, and quarantine measures, and imposing travel bans.[2] We have also witnessed the suspension of the oversight and accountability institutions and limitations of the civil liberties in the name of fighting coronavirus even in the consolidated democracies.[3] For autocratic regimes, such as China under President *Xi Jinping*, the COVID-19 crisis offered a more convenient pretext to grab power and silence critics. Labelling the crisis as a 'people's war against COVID-19', *Xi Jinping's* government subjected citizens to intense digital surveillance, frequent harsh

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lockdowns, and took measures to detain those who dare to criticize the official response to the coronavirus.[4]

There is a fast-growing body of literature on authoritarianism in the time of COVID addressing how political leaders abuse emergency measures to consolidate their regimes and strengthen their grip on power.[5] Governments have also heavily benefitted from various data sharing and reporting methods to portray themselves as successful in fighting the pandemic compared to other nations and employed an accusatory language against the critical voices from journalists, civil society organizations, opposition parties, and health professionals.[6]

While dealing with economic and health crises at home, governments have had to simultaneously handle diplomatic conflicts related to the suspension of international flights and management of migration flows—both returnees and refugees—and distribution of medical aid and vaccines. The foreign policy positions of the governments have been increasingly affected by the geopolitical competition among major global players, namely China, Russia, and the EU. Scholars argued that 'coronavirus diplomacy' emerged as a new soft power used by regional players such as China and Russia, and to some extent Turkey,[7] to highlight the decline of the West, promote their images, widen their area of geopolitical influence in the 'like-minded' authoritarian countries, and strengthen their political leverage *vis-a-vis* the EU.[8]

This paper seeks to contribute to this emerging literature on authoritarian consolidation during the pandemic by analysing how political leaders narrated the COVID-19 crisis to justify their repressive policies. By focusing on four countries in the enlarged EU —Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Serbia—which are listed as major autocratisers or democratic backsliders in the V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index,[9] the article reveals two types of policy narratives that were constructed around the governance of the COVID 19-pandemic: narratives of war, and narratives of crisis and decline. The 'narratives of war' are crafted by political leaders to take control of the situation and legitimize their repressive policy measures deemed necessary in the state of emergency. The war narratives are also used to promote national solidarity against a common enemy (the coronavirus), mobilize political support for government's official line on pandemic and persecute opponents. In the foreign policy choices, the 'narratives of crisis and decline' are employed by the political leaders to highlight the worsening conditions and decline of the West and urge a policy change. This is done by showing the inability of the EU to respond to the pandemic in general (in Poland) or in comparison to themselves (in Turkey) and other global players such as Russia (in Hungary) and China (in Serbia).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework that elucidates how narratives serve as policy tools to reinforce authoritarian policies. This section delves into the different plot structures that interconnect the key elements of narratives, namely the political context, the characters and policy solutions. Moreover, we outline the methodological framework of the research. The empirical analysis is presented through three subsections. Firstly, we provide a concise background for the cases under examination. Then, in two subsequent subsections, we illustrate our theoretical argument by analysing the articulation of the 'narrative of war' and the 'narrative of crisis and decline' in the discourses of state leaders and government representatives in the four countries during the COVID-19 outbreak. In the following section, we present

a short comparative account showing differences and similarities across four countries in use of narratives. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments and discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the findings for the research on policy narratives and authoritarian turn in global politics.

Strategic use of narratives-the analytical framework

There is a growing literature on narrative analysis in political science, public policy, and international relations.[10] Narrative analysis has been used extensively to explore or (re) construct varying aspects of political realities[11] such as foreign policy and security,[12] identity[13] or public policy.[14]

In its basic definition, narratives are discourses that organize sequences of historical events and connect them in a meaningful way for a definite audience. They offer insights into how we experience the world, interpret reality[15] and give shape to things in the world around us. For the purposes of this article, 'narrative' is defined as a storyline that helps actors to describe a political issue concerning a particular phenomenon in a certain way.[16]

This is achieved by deliberately constructing powerful policy narratives (also referred to issue narratives) that set governmental actions in a social—economic—geographic—political context (setting: time and space) with an explanation of what the issue is (a plot: content of the story and what it is about), who the important actors are (characters: heroes, villains, and victims), and persuasive accounts of what can be done about it (moral of the story: policy solution).[17] The main element of the policy narrative is the plot which defines a problem, assigns blame to certain characters, and proposes a solution. As discussed in the literature, plot types include the story of decline, progress, and helplessness and control.[18]

The narrative research focusing on the meso-level addresses how policy actors strategically construct and communicate narratives to influence policy processes and bolster their power.[19] As such, the narratives that politicians use might turn into strategic policy tools or weapons [20] for the purposes of 'convincing [an] audience of a particular understanding of reality'[21] especially when situations are unfamiliar, uncertain or confusing at a time of a crisis.[22]

The COVID-19 global pandemic has served a unique opportunity for exploring narratives and how they enforce repressive and authoritarian policies. Previous research on authoritarian consolidation underlined several tools employed by political leaders with the aim of controlling the society such as repression and legitimation.[23] We argue that politicians can also use narratives as policy tools to legitimize their repressive policies and consolidate power. This is achieved by crafting a plot out of a problem or a crisis and narrate it in a way to persuade the public to support their policy solutions at domestic and international level.

At home, political leaders seek to provide a solution to the crisis not only through crafting narratives from everyday politics but also a range of historical stories, national memories, and heroic myths related to wars. The narratives of war enable politicians to portray their policy response as a needed battle against a cruel enemy or villain (COVID-19) that must be defeated to protect the public (victims) and thus legitimize their repressive authoritarian policy responses that go beyond what is necessary (policy solution). The war narratives resemble the story of control and utilize plot elements

and characters to broaden and strengthen the public support for the government officials and bureaucrats (heroes). The opposition and critical voices, on the other hand, are casted as villains and thus silenced, blamed, or side-lined.

At international level, the foreign policy choices and behaviour are affected by the narratives at domestic politics. Narrating a war at home, politicians may need to take a side at the global level competition and define and redefine their friends, allies, and enemies (characters). [24] To do that, they narrate a story of decline to highlight that the conditions which are good in the beginning become worse[25] and a new action (policy solution) must be taken to solve the problem (COVID-19). The narratives of crisis include stories of decline and enable politicians to contest the existing order, make a policy shift and praise certain actors as heroes while discrediting others. By using foreign policy narratives, they also seek to strengthen their positions against the domestic rivals.

In this paper, we explore how these narratives are used by the political leaders at the time of pandemic in four countries: Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Serbia. These countries are listed as the leading cases of democratic backsliding in the enlarged EU, whose democracy scores have fallen the most over the last 10 years in the V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index.[26] Coined as major autocratisers in the V-Dem Index, they progressively slipped further towards authoritarianism during the pandemic and increasingly contested the democratic principles of the EU.[27]

We purposely selected these countries as critical cases since they provide rich information which helps illustrate our theoretical argument. The comparative analysis of four countries, with similar autocratising dynamics, reveals a diverse set of plots and strengthens the explanatory power of the narratives. The incorporation of insights from multiple case studies, however, also enables us to address the varying levels in the narrative tones and differences in the narrative components and to assess the limits to their use in different national contexts among these countries which tend to be lumped together. By doing so, we aim to explore the scope of use of narratives by autocratisers in their domestic and foreign policy responses and contribute to the literature on authoritarian consolidation in enlarged EU countries of central, eastern, and south-eastern Europe.

We have adopted a dual approach to investigate how the COVID-19 crisis was narrated in these four countries. We use a data set of 238 news stories that includes speeches, presentations, and statements by state leaders (Viktor Orbán, Andrzej Duda/Mateusz Morawiecki, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Aleksandar Vučić) and government representatives appeared in major English-language news agencies in each country: HungaryToday in Hungary, PAP in Poland, Anadolu Agency in Turkey, and Beta in Serbia (see Table 1). All these media sources are controlled and funded by the government (or government-friendly business), and thus provide us with the perfect venue to examine the construction of narratives by the political leaders in these four countries. The data was collected from the online databases of these four new agencies over one year from late January/early February 2020 to April 2021 because this was when the WHO declared a global public health emergency and defined the COVID-19 to be a pandemic (Jan/Feb 2020) and when the first COVID-19 vaccine was approved in the world (April 2021). In the first stage of analysis, we conducted a qualitative search for texts containing terms referring to 'Covid/Covid-19', 'pandemic', 'virus', 'emergency', 'fight', 'curfew', 'health', 'medical aid', 'vaccine', 'vaccination', 'cooperation'

and 'conflict'. In the second stage, we analysed the data to conduct a detailed qualitative discourse analysis that is, we explored the context of narratives that were constructed by the governments and examined different components of the storylines.

The policy narratives in major autocratisers in Europe in the time of COVID-19

After a short background on democratic backsliding experienced in the selected countries, this section illustrates how the COVID crisis has been narrated by the politicians to enhance powers in the four countries in the time of the pandemic. While doing that, we trace main components of the policy narratives, namely the political context, the characters, and the policy solutions.[28] The empirical insights coming from our qualitative analysis of four countries—Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Serbia—is organized under narratives of war and narratives of crisis and decline, respectively. As presented in Table 1, the plots constructed by the political leaders connect the characters to each other as well as to the political context and highlight the policy solutions under two narratives. At home, politicians narrate war-like situations to justify their policies, blame opposition and take control. At the international level, the narratives establish a plot of a crisis and decline and enable the political leaders to paint a picture of the worsening conditions in the West, contest the existing liberal order and make a shift in the policy preference.

Table 1. Policy narratives based on selected keywords and rationale for policy choice in four countries.

Country *News Agency **Number of news articles	Narratives of war	Narratives of crisis and decline
Hungary *HungaryToday **79 articles	*The plots* COVID is an invisible enemy. Military plan of defence is necessary. Blame the opposition, defend the emergency measures. Hungary is winning the war.	*The plots* Brussels has messed up. Hungary needs Russia's vaccine. No to a European empire. Global economy shifts to the East.
Poland *PAP **34 articles	*The plots* COVID is a disease 'like any other'. Epidemic as a modern-day world war The spread of virus must be stemmed at all costs. Cooperation is needed to counterstrike.	*The plots* The EU has disagreements. Visegrad group became stronger. EU is arbitrary and politically motivated. Solidarity in Europe needed, but respect to state too.
Turkey *AA **98 articles	*The plots* Medical professionals are an army -religious implication of martyrs. Every penny is needed for the battle. Turkey is a model country. Contribution to global war against coronavirus.	*The plots* Turkey is an influential regional power. Doing better than Europe West is engaged in mask wars. Turkey is a responsible global actor.
Serbia *BETA **24 articles	*The plots* COVID is a dangerous opponent. Vučić is a caring father taking risks for his nation. Serbian opposition is politically attacking. State protects the nation.	*The plots* European solidarity is a fairy tale. EU neglects the Western Balkans Only China can help Serbia. Serbia turns to China

Source: Authors' own analysis and presentation.

Background to the cases

In Hungary, the *Viktor Orbán* government first declared the country's 'state of danger' as a response to the pandemic, and then issued the Coronavirus Act 2020, allowing the executive to rule by decree for an indefinite period.[29] Following the Act, the government restricted access to public information, put security forces front and centre of the fight against the coronavirus, and obtained the right to imprison journalists and others who criticized the government. The government's coronavirus operational corps have been the only source of information on COVID-19 updates. Orbán has also used the emergency powers to change laws or adopt new ones, such as an anti-LGBTQI law, that are clearly not public health priorities.[30] Hungarian policies diverting from the EU's norms and rules have also become evident in the country's foreign policy responses during the pandemic. Together with Poland, Hungary vetoed the EU's new budget and the recovery funds as a reaction to the EU's decision to make its funding contingent on meeting certain rule-of-law criteria. Hungary has also become the first country in the EU to give preliminary approval to the Russian coronavirus vaccine, ignoring calls to stick to a common European vaccine policy.[31]

In Poland, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) government opted for an array of measures found both in existing statutes of the parliament and resolutions (decrees) of the executive to counter the COVID-19 threat. In this way, the *Mateusz Morawiecki*-led government managed to bypass the constitution while disproportionally limiting the freedoms of movement and to assembly. The COVID-19 restrictions on political rights were also intended to manipulate the presidential elections that took place amid the pandemic.[32] The elections, held in July 2020, brought a victory for President *Andrzej Duda*, backed by the incumbent PiS government, for a second five-year term. The new government immediately adopted a pandemic impunity bill that allowed breaking the law to fight coronavirus, and emplaced further restrictions on various political and individual rights by amending the ordinary legislation[33] and introduced legal reforms undermining the already heavily challenged independence of the judiciary and breaching the EU's rule of law principle.[34] Very recently, the European Court of Justice ordered the immediate suspension of judicial reforms and fined Poland €1 million per day until the PiS government complies with its ruling. Yet, the government has backed the Constitutional Court that challenges the primacy of EU law in its ruling.[35]

In Turkey, the Justice and Development (AKP) government deployed quite stringent measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus and managed to implement the authoritative policy tools and directions of the President *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan* without any delays such as travel bans, curfews, quarantines for returning nationals, and the closures of schools/universities.[36] The relative success of the Turkey compared to the European countries was considered as a positive outcome of the presidential regime in Turkey. Yet, during the same period, the government changed its terminology when reporting COVID cases and diverged from the WHO's guidance to further promote its successful image while at the same time attempting to contain the flow of information about the level of COVID-19 and silence those who challenged the government's official line on the pandemic including medical associations, social media users, journalists.[37] The AKP government also systematically blocked efforts by opposition parties to fight the coronavirus. [38] Under the pretext of preventing COVID-19 from spreading, certain

restrictions were adopted to deepen censorship of social media platforms and weaken the authority of bar associations and passed a new law arbitrarily curtailing nongovernmental organizations' activities.[39] Such policies which were geared towards enhancing domestic control contributed to authoritarian policies of the government. At the international level, the AKP government embraced a humanitarian foreign policy, seeking to enforce its reputation as a regional leader[40] and a reliable global partner by sending medical aid to more than 100 countries in the world including the EU countries.

In its fight against the COVID pandemic, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)-led government declared an open-ended state of exception, imposed strict lockdown measures, and sidelined the Serbian parliament in handling the emergency.[41] The emergency measures, which were accompanied by governmental regulations gave President *Alexander Vučić* sweeping powers to limit the freedoms of movement and assembly to counter the spread of the coronavirus.[42] Lengthy curfews and heavy legal penalties were coupled with various other authoritarian policies such as clamping down on independent media outlets that are not sharing 'official information' coming from the state's information system and arresting journalists who reported on the weak healthcare systems.[43] Yet independent sources indicate that the Serbian government under-reported the numbers of COVID deaths and infections[44] so as not to weaken the Vučić's authoritarian regime. In the parliamentary elections held on 21 June 2020, the SNS party received a landslide victory. As became evident during the election campaigns, the COVID outbreak also exacerbated the geopolitical drift of Serbia towards alternative authoritarian partners amidst growing uncertainty about the prospect of EU accession.[45] After forming billion-dollar investment agreements with China over the years[46] the Serbian government has signed a memorandum of cooperation with a Chinese manufacturer to produce the Sinopharm vaccine in Serbia and bought four million doses, even though it has not been approved by the European Medicines Agency.[47]

Narratives of war

The narratives of war were adopted by four leaders to craft stories of control. As such the COVID-19 pandemic is narrated as an 'existential threat', a 'war against an invisible enemy' (plots) to be defeated without delay to protect the public (victims). The political actors presented themselves as the only ones (heroes) that could win this battle, protect their nations at all costs and guarantee domestic stability while praising their bureaucrats, medical staff, armies, and the public that obey the restrictions (heroes). The war narrative was utilized to legitimize not only urgent measures but also restrictive policies (policy solution) silencing the dissidents (villains) and expanding the power of the existing regimes.

In Hungary, a clear war narrative was constructed around COVID-19 in the speeches given by Orbán and government representatives to show the government was well prepared to fight the disease. Orbán said: 'We have organised a proper military plan of defence'[48] and 'we will have to succeed on the battlefield'.[49] His narratives established a plot of war that enabled him to define the military as the prominent actor implementing COVID-19 measures and to organize action against it. While heavily armed soldiers patrolled the streets to enforce curfew regulations, hospital commanders oversaw decisions at the medical centres in the early phases of the pandemic. [50] Responding to

criticism from the opposition parties concerning the government's handling of the epidemic, Orbán noted that his government had acted more swiftly to introduce the necessary response measures than many other countries. He also expressed his gratitude to Hungarians who protected the hinterland and the front lines in that war situation[51] and followed the measures of the military plan of command to fight back against a mass epidemic.[52] Yet, he and his government officials consistently underlined the necessity of the continuation of restrictive measures. In a public interview on 1 May 2020, Orbán said: 'The first battle against novel coronavirus has been won in Hungary. Yet, we've just prepared to ward off the next attack'.[53] Orbán government's war narratives were used to justify the executive's enhanced powers during the state of emergency. Orbán noted that granting special emergency powers to the government was 'one of the best decisions' since it allowed for timely action without 'having to fight the leftist opposition'[54] and 'these practices would be needed again in the event of a second wave'[55] to 'win the war again'.[56] He accused the opposition left wing of undermining his government's efforts to protect the country.[57] To keep these stringent restrictions in place, Orbán government made frequent references to statistics announced by Coronavirus operational corps and received full authorization from Parliament for implementing the corona measures.[58] In March 2021, Orbán thanked those doctors, nurses, scientists, law enforcement officers, and others going to work and doing their job every day in spite of the threat of the pandemic and added that 'they are warriors who are fighting this campaign tirelessly so that we can get our lives back'[59] and underlined that Hungary has entered the 'the last phase of the war against the invisible enemy'[60] which would be finalized with the full vaccination.[61]

Like Hungary, Poland also employed a narrative of war to justify the epidemic-related emergency measures aimed at maximally limiting the number of infections and saving the greatest number of people.[62] Yet, during the elections, PM Morawiecki framed the coronavirus a disease 'like any other' to encourage the masses to go to the ballot box.[63] Meanwhile, the incumbent Duda, backed by the PiS, was touring the country even more frantically than before. After Duda's slim victory in the run-off elections, the PiS government ordered stricter pandemic measures which disproportionally limited freedom of assembly. In his opening address at the 3rd Development Visions Forum, Morawiecki declared the coronavirus epidemic to be 'a modern-day world war' that changed the balance of power, where 'Poland's allies, Western Europe and the United States have been subjected to pressure of a magnitude they have not experienced since the fall of communism 30 years ago'.[64] The government also mobilized militias and new territorial units, known as Weekend Warriors, to the frontline of the fight against the coronavirus and tasked them with disinfecting public areas and delivering food to the elderly.[65] Morawiecki justified the further restrictions by saying that the spread of COVID-19 must be stemmed 'at all costs'.[66] Upon the approval of the National Vaccination Programme, he stated: 'This is a very important moment, when Europe starts its counteroffensive'.[67] In a letter to European leaders, Duda wrote: 'the time has come to consider how the world and international cooperation will look once the coronavirus pandemic has been defeated'.[68] Still, compared to other countries under research here, Polish leaders expressed much greater concern about the impact of the pandemic on the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic was almost always commemorated with its economic effects.[69] While a narrative of war was present, Poland resorted to such

narratives to a considerably lesser extent then Hungary, Turkey, or Serbia. Yet, with the third wave of the coronavirus, the Minister of Health underlined that 'this is indeed a war, and the situation requires non-standard behaviours', addressing the exhausted doctors in a hospital in Katowice.[70]

In Turkey, the politicians have utilized an explicit war narrative. On the World Health Day, the President Erdoğan emphasized the 'frontline fight' by healthcare workers against the pandemic.[71] The government officials used every opportunity to praise Turkish health sector workers, one of the world's greatest and best-qualified 'medical armies' with more than one million personnel for 'serving the nation with heart and soul'.[72] The war rhetoric and the appraisal of the medical professionals as an army reached such a level that the rector of Health Sciences University, invited officials to acknowledge medical professionals who died fighting COVID-19 to be martyrs, in the same manner as soldiers dying in counter-terrorism operations.[73] The government also launched war time-like solidarity and donation campaigns such as 'We are self-sufficient, Turkey'. Addressing to his party members, Erdoğan reminded the 'Tekalif-i Milliye' orders that were put into effect during the War of Independence.[74] Yet, the donation campaigns of the municipalities led by the opposition parties were banned as the government was portrayed as the only actor that could fight against the virus. In early summer 2020, the incumbents took steps towards normalization by claiming that Turkey had won the battle against the virus. Erdoğan mentioned that 'Turkey successfully managed the course of the pandemic and won general acclaim as one of the best countries in the world on health during this process'.[75] 'Turkey was often cited as a model country in its battle against the virus', he added. The government slammed the critics and associated warnings coming from Turkish Medical Association (TTB, Turkish acronym) after easing the restrictions nearing the end of the outbreak and allowing large public gatherings, such as an inaugural Friday prayer in the-then museum Hagia Sophia mosque in July 2020.[76] President Erdoğan accused the TTB members of spreading fake news and even suggested they were linked to terrorism.[77] Some members posting actual numbers of corona cases on the chamber's Twitter account were detained and questioned by police.[78]

In Serbia, President Vučić heavily used war-like terms such as 'fight', 'enemy', and 'battle' in his narrative-building at the beginning of the pandemic. In his nationwide COVID-19-related address in March 2020, he declared a state of emergency in the country and added: 'Serbia is at war today against an invisible and dangerous opponent'.[79] The narratives developed by Vučić and government representatives throughout the pandemic articulated the need to adopt strict COVID measures and restrictions on the fundamental freedoms to save the nation. Delivering medical aid and respirators in person across Serbia, Vučić noted that 'we are all together in a difficult fight' and called on citizens to be disciplined.[80] By doing so, he sought to underline the exceptional nature of the situation but also presented himself as a caring father taking risks for his nation, including the unpopular quarantine measures[81] and portraying the SNS government as successful. Similar to Erdoğan, Vučić slammed the criticism coming from the opposition concerning the under-reporting of fatalities and new infections, framing them as political attacks.[82] The narratives of war became crucial before the elections that took place amidst the COVID pandemic. The elections were held in June and almost all coronavirus countermeasures were removed during the election campaign,

including party rallies, sports matches, tournaments, and mass celebrations. Appearing in various construction sites for COVID-19 hospitals and health clinics across Serbia following his election victory, Vučić reimposed bans and weekend curfews against the alarming situation in the hospitals and used brutal police force to suppress the ensuing protests. He gave public justifications for reimposing stringent restrictions that went beyond what was necessary. For example, in a speech on 30 November 2020, Vučić stated 'to us, the coronavirus is the enemy' and mentioned that the government was doing everything that it could for Serbia. The Serbian Prime Minister also added that the authorities 'think every day' about new restrictions to curb the spread of the virus.[83] In their narrative-building, Vučić and other top government officials repeated their commitment to following the countermeasures introduced by the COVID-19 crisis headquarters. Vučić mentioned that he was 'not worried' about the people's reaction to the implemented measures. 'The job of the state is to protect the people's health, not just their rights' he added.[84]

Narratives of crisis and decline

The narratives of crisis and decline were constructed by the political leaders to highlight worsening conditions in the West and more specifically in the EU and urge for taking new policy actions at the international level. The narratives of crisis resemble stories of decline as they include plots such as 'Brussels has messed up', 'Doing better than Europe' or 'Only China can help' (plots). By doing so, political leaders seek to discredit and even blame the EU (characters) or otherwise to promote their own power, regional actorness, or regional alliances while rising global players such as China or Russia are praised as friends and allies providing medical equipment (policy solutions) and vaccines to curb the spread of the virus.

In Hungary, the divergence from EU's norms and rules manifested itself in the narratives structured around its foreign policy responses that juxtaposed the fragile West with the rising East. Orbán clearly mentioned his discomfort regarding the EU's centralized policies to fight the pandemic and underlined the importance of the Eastern direction. Asked about his decision to buy Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, Orbán said that EU's centralized programme was a poor decision that had delayed vaccine procurement. In the West, 'the Russian vaccine was not adopted for ideological reasons' … 'Let the European Commission do what it has to do. We won't get in its way, we'll exercise our national competences'[85] and 'create the means to protect ourselves', he added.[86] In the narratives adopted by Hungarian government representatives, the crisis was presented as evidence of the fragility of the West. Orbán said, 'Hungary could not afford to hew solely to the West' and noted that 'this was a fact of economic policy because the centre of gravity of the global economy was constantly shifting Eastwards, we must adapt to that'.[87] He even used the word 'colonialism' to criticize Western Europe by suggesting that it has maintained a superior attitude from colonial times. Orbán said the 'Western European countries want to prove that they can resolve the problem on their own. But when the crisis is over, they will see that some 70 percent of the world used 'Eastern vaccines', 'Russian and Chinese vaccines'.[88] Orbán defended his government's pro-Eastern policies by saying that Brussels has 'messed up' the procurement of coronavirus vaccines and gave examples from the non-EU countries that had nearly completed vaccinating their

populations. 'Hungary would be in big trouble right now if it had not ordered 3.5 million vaccines from the East' he added.[89] After meeting Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, in Budapest, Orbán clearly mentioned that they all had all said no to a European empire run by Brussels and would work together for a European renaissance.[90]

Like in Hungary, the EU was at the heart of narratives of crisis and decline in Poland. In an article posted on the Ukrainian opinion-forming portal, Morawiecki wrote that he believed the EU response to the threat associated with COVID-19 was of historic importance as it would determine the future of European society.[91] He continued: In my opinion, the epidemic has put the EU in a situation where it needs solidarity more than ever before. Today, solidarity is at the heart of the European project as its weapon in the fight against pandemics and a common springboard to restore the single market. For this to happen, we need an ambitious budget . . . .[92] Morawiecki added 'our citizens expect us to respond urgently and proportionately to the pandemic and the crisis related to it. Yet, the disagreements and divergent positions within the EU prevent the Union from taking necessary actions'.[93] During the discussions over the EU budget and recovery funds, like Hungary, Poland also announced its discontent with the 'EU's arbitrary and politically motivated mechanism that allows the EU to target states that do not submit to the political will of the institutions in Brussels'. The PM accused the EU of not accepting 'the diversity of legal and constitutional systems rooted in the traditions of different countries'[94] while praising the alliance among the Visegrad Group, which has turned into an effective regional forum within the EU.[95] Known as the V4, the Visegrad group of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia have become an area of increasing political concern as these four countries have adopted authoritarian policies damaging the rule of law, human rights, and media freedom.[96] In an interview, PM Morawiecki mentioned that the V4 had much in common, which made them stronger, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.[97] The leaders of the V4 met under the leadership of Poland in Krakow during the COVID pandemic and urged faster deliveries of vaccines to their Central European countries. The leaders said they supported buying vaccines from producers regardless of 'geopolitics', addressing the inability of the EU to develop its own self-sufficient vaccine programme.[98]

Similar to Hungary, the decline of the West and rise of the East was strongly highlighted by the political leaders in Turkey. In his New Year message, President Erdoğan claimed Turkey's bed capacity in intensive care units equated to that of all Europe's[99] and defined the health systems in European countries as inefficient. He even claimed that Turkey (together with Japan) showed the world how to be successful in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak.[100] While discrediting the West, the narratives of crisis and decline portrayed Turkey as a responsible global actor, providing aid supplies and implementing a solid COVID-19 diplomacy. During several meetings (such as the 15th G20 Leaders' Summit and the 60th anniversary of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), Erdoğan underlined that Turkey had reached out with 'a helping hand to 156 countries and nine international organizations in the fight against the pandemic, as well as meeting the needs of its own people'.[101] Beyond Europe, in a video call during the Turkey-Africa Business Forum Erdoğan stated: 'The peoples of Africa were unfortunately left to their fate in the face of the virus while Western developed countries were engaged in mask wars'.[102] He underlined that Turkey did not

consider African countries to purely be new markets for Turkish products, but sought win–win cooperation, and that Turkey sent them Turkish-made respirators, masks, and vaccines to support their fight against the coronavirus.[103] After the US and China, Turkey has become the third country to develop vaccines locally, said President Erdoğan.[104] Presenting Turkey as a reliable global actor, Erdoğan criticized the current structure of the world order which 'favoured a handful of strong actors over righteous masses and rich over poor people, where international organizations failed to respond to the ongoing crises, which uncovered their apathy in the wake of the pandemic'.[105] Having coined the saying 'the world is bigger than five' as a slogan at a UN gathering, Erdoğan used the COVID pandemic to stress the necessity for 'a new global establishment based on justice not power'.[106]

In Serbia, the narratives of decline and crisis were evident both in the early stages of the crisis and the later in the beginning of the international vaccine rollout. President Vučić heavily criticized the lack of supplies from their friends in the EU, as many EU countries refused to export medical equipment. Speaking at a press conference held on 15 March 2020, he said that it is now clear to everyone that European solidarity does not exist. It was a beautiful fairy tale on paper. The only ones who can help us now is the People's Republic of China. I wrote a letter to Xi Jinping, I didn't call him friend, but brother, not my friend, but my country's friend and brother. Only China can help us.[107] A few days after this appearance, Serbia received the largest shipment of medical aid made during the coronavirus outbreak from China. Vučić greeted Chinese doctors at the airport and kissed the Chinese flag to show his gratitude for the timely support against COVID-19. 'We should thank them with all our hearts, they have proven to be great friends of Serbia and Serbs. From now on, we will do everything they say', he added.[108] In the following days, the pro-government media filled billboards at the centre of Belgrade thanking 'Brother Xi'. In early January, Serbia received one million doses of China's Sinopharm COVID vaccine. Serbia became the first country in Europe to receive such a large volume of Chinese vaccines and overtook the EU in terms of vaccine rollout.[109] Talking at the airport, Vučić said that 'many countries got their vaccines. And so far, we didn't get one from the WHO's vaccine programme. We got it from China. But we didn't get it from the EU'. 'Serbia's friends will send another one million doses before March to save Serbia' he added.[110] Such a narrative was used not only to show Serbia's 'steel friendship' with China, which was strengthened amid COVID-19 fight, but also to highlight the decline of the EU and accuse Brussels of neglecting its Western Balkan neighbours in the vaccine race.

A comparative analysis

Our comparative study illustrated how politicians in four countries—Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Serbia—structured various plots under two narratives to promote their authoritarian agendas at domestic and foreign policy choices (see Table 1 above). 'Narratives of war' against the 'enemy' of COVID-19 were used by all political leaders. Most of the time, the narrative served to legitimize repressive policies curtailing civil liberties but also to strengthen their image in front of their constituencies, assign blame to opponents and silence critical voices. In Hungary, the coronavirus was presented as an invisible enemy that required a military plan of defence. The government used all means to

blame the opposition to defend the war-like emergency measures and persecuted journalists and others who criticized the government. Compared to Hungary, the tone of the war narrative in Poland was milder. The Polish government first tried to normalize the pandemic to encourage people to go to the ballot box. Yet, after the elections, the war narrative has become more prevalent. In the aftermath of the elections the Morawiecki mobilized even the military units to defeat the virus. In Turkey, emergency measures were adopted together with the repressive policies thanks to war narratives. While praising medical army for its victory against the virus, the government slammed the critics and associated warnings coming from medical associations and opposition parties under the guise of combating fake news. The President Erdoğan accused the opponents of acting as enemies even terrorists harming successful policies of the government and spreading fear and panic. In Serbia, the COVID was framed as a dangerous opponent, against which only Vučić could fight against. As the government was also under the attack from its political oppositions, emergency actions together with repressive policies were presented to the public as necessary measures to be taken by the state to protect the nation.

The state leaders also crafted a variety of plots under the 'narratives of crisis and decline' in relation to their foreign policy choices and addressed varying actors as their allies while discrediting others. In Hungary, a general rhetoric was that Brussels had failed to help in times of need, therefore, Hungary needed look for Russia's vaccine. Poland again adopted a milder stance. The Polish leaders strongly underlined the theme of solidarity in the EU, which was needed to fight the pandemic in an effective manner. However, our analysis showed the discomfort felt by the Polish government concerning the arbitrary and politicized decisions taken by Brussels that failed to respect different state traditions. Thus, like Hungary, Poland experienced a certain friction with the EU, but unlike Hungary it did not turn to the East as a foreign policy choice but rather highlighted the importance of the regional alliances (Visegrad group) within the EU. Turkey also felt a certain tension with the EU, albeit an invisible one. Turkey was engaged in a constant effort to prove to itself that it was doing better than Europe, not only as a regional but a responsible global power for the solidarity of the world. Serbia, instead, openly criticized Brussels as they turned a blind eye to the Western Balkans during the pandemic. Due to worsening conditions in the EU, Serbian leaders turned to China.

Conclusion

This paper explored how political leaders in the enlarged EU—Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Serbia—narrated the COVID-19 crisis to justify their authoritarian and restrictive policies. Our empirical analysis revealed that politicians used two types of policy narratives (narratives of war, and narratives of crisis and decline) not only to deal with the uncertainty of COVID governance and convince the public for their proposed solutions but also to promote their authoritarian agendas at domestic and international level. This is done by structuring various plots to introduce a war-like situation or a crisis, assign blame to certain actors or discredit some others and define what has to be done to deal with the problem in a particular way. At domestic politics, political actors used war narratives to take control of the situation and justify the expansion of power under emergency laws as necessary. While doing that, the opposition is blamed for criticizing the official response to the coronavirus or spreading fake news. At the foreign policy

level, we see that political actors employed narratives of crisis and decline to show the declining conditions in the West, contest the existing liberal order and legitimize the shift in their political preferences.

The findings of this research have important theoretical and empirical implications for research on policy narratives and authoritarian turn in global politics. As depicted by our comparative analysis, the four countries relied heavily on the narratives not only to justify their authoritarian policy responses, which were taken in the name of combating COVID-19 at home, but also to redefine their global partners, to promote their image in regional and global politics, and to contest liberal democratic order. This outcome is likely to uncover connections between domestic and international dynamics of authoritarian consolidation, and which might be also observed in different countries with autocratising tendencies outside Europe. More importantly, the use of narratives as policy tools might subvert the facts, justify certain policy actions, and convince the masses as to what can be done about a policy problem. Although this is part of everyday politics, we should be alert to the fact that the political and economic crises (refugee crisis, climate change, COVID, Russia–Ukraine war, etc.) provide autocratic rulers with further opportunities to remake reality and mobilize the public for their immoral, undemocratic, and even dangerous policy solutions. As the empirical evidence illustrated, they also learn from each other. Further research may investigate when, under which conditions, and to what extent governments learn from each other in terms of how to use narratives to fight back against crises or threats. This might reveal how reality is narrated in the like-minded authoritarian regimes and may shed light on the new dynamics of regional authoritarianism and the narrative making by autocratisers.

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[105] AA, 09.11.2020.
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] BETA, 15.03.2020.
[108] BETA, 22.03.2020.
[109] Juncos, op.cit.
[110] BETA, 18.02.2021.

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