



Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe

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Key word list

Affect
Anti-vaxxers
Anthropology
Communist nostalgia and anti-nostalgia
Coding
COVID-19
Czechia (The Czech Republic)
Data visualisation
Declinism
Digital ethnography
Distrust
Ethnography
Freedom
Gender
Germany
Mixed methods approach
Nationalism
Poland
Polarisation
Political ethnography
Populism
Reduction techniques
Retraditionalisation
Right-wing
Semantic network analysis (SNA)

Definitions and acronyms

Acronym	Definition
AfD	Political party Alternative for Germany



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ANO	Czech political movement/party of Andrej Babiš
CCN	Co-occurrence network
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
COVID or Covid-19	Name used for the infectious disease Sars-CoV-2
ČSSD	Czech Social Democratic Party
EU	European Union
GDR	German Democratic Republic, the socialist state of East Germany pre-1989
LGBT	Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODS	Civic Democratic Party, Czech right-wing democratic conservative party
PEGIDA	German movement Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident
PiS	Law and Justice, Polish right-wing party led by Jarosław Kaczyński
PO	Civic Platform, Polish centre-right party led by Donald Tusk
POPREBEL	Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism (<i>project acronym</i>)
SPD	Czech populist party Freedom and Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura



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Executive Summary

Overview

POPREBEL is a large-scale, interdisciplinary, Horizon 2020-funded research project on the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe, with the goal of understanding the “anatomy” of this phenomenon and its causes, assessing its potential consequences, and proposing actionable policy solutions. Within this project, the objective of Work Package 2 (WP2) is to mobilise ethnographic methods and anthropological frameworks, paired with data visualisation and semantic network analysis, to render visible the processes of cultural meaning-making that underpin the rise of new populism in three countries under study: Poland, The Czech Republic, and Germany, with a specific emphasis on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these processes. Through ethnographic interviews, we achieve insight into people’s affective interpretations of their social and communal reality, and analyse how these interpretations coalesce into cultural narratives and political subject formations. The combination of ethnography and network science allows us to construct a robust mixed-methods study, where we have been able to achieve nuanced country-specific and comparative insights through an iterative process that moves between ethnographic interpretation and semantic visualisation.

Topic Areas

Because of the comparative, multi-sited design of this project, the topic areas are organised by country. Four main topic areas emerged in each of the three countries under study. The first topic area “The Pandemic Context” was common to all three case studies, while the other three topic areas were individual to the specific case studies. In all three countries we found that the Covid-19 pandemic has functioned as simultaneously an amplifying and clarifying affective lens for already-existing sociopolitical ruptures. In other words, the government handling of the pandemic in all three cases appears to have both confirmed and exacerbated people’s feelings of alienation, disappointment, discontent, and disenchantment. This melange of feelings then finds expression in reactive, and often reactionary, forms of political or social engagement. In terms of the other key topic areas, they are as follows:



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Country	Key Topic 1	Key Topic 2	Key Topic 3	Key Topic 4
Poland	The Pandemic Context (see above)	Polarisation of the Polish society	Images and values of an ideal state	“The cardboard state” (a.k.a. disillusionment / distrust toward state institutions)
The Czech Republic	The Pandemic Context (see above)	Political disillusionment	Subjectivity and affect as voting determinants	Romanticization of history
Germany	The Pandemic Context (see above)	Politics of affect	Distrust of scientific expertise/anti-vax sentiments	Retraditionalisation of gender roles

Our key findings and conclusions are as follows, listed by country and then synthesised in a comparative, broader perspective.

In the Czech Republic, there is pervasive political disillusionment that cross-cuts through various socioeconomic and ideological demographic segments of the population. Politics are deeply personalised, and consequently people’s electoral choices are often inconsistent, driven by immediate perceptions and feelings much more so than political alignment on the left-to-right spectrum. Important symbolic nodes in the affective political universe include communism (which triggers anti-nostalgia, rather than nostalgia), the EU (which is seen as oppressive by the conservative contingent of the society), and, most recently, the anti-Covid-vaccination movement, which has amplified anti-systemic illiberal factions of the society, as their conspiratological and nationalist thinking has dovetailed and merged with populist rhetoric.

In Poland, there is a pervasive conviction that the Polish society is increasingly polarised due to the conflict dynamics between the current government and the main opposition party. The perceived division builds on two main sets of values, centred around a positive or a negative take on self-reliance: (1) **individualization**, where self-reliance is seen as aspirational and beneficial in an untrustworthy political context and (2) **togetherness**, where the current push for individual self-reliance is seen as a anti-social, and a sign of the decline of a



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well-functioning welfare state. There is also general widespread discontent with the 2020-2021 controversial abortion legislation, with criticism on both sides of the issue. In a sense mirroring that discontent on both sides, most study participants felt that no political party represented their values and worldviews, regardless of where they fell on the political spectrum: far-right and far-left voters share a critique of the current state of Polish politics, and a critique of global economic inequality. The value that's important to all study participants is **freedom**. It is, however, understood differently, in ways that can be incompatible with one another.

In Germany, the government's response to the pandemic aroused anger at the centralisation of control in the hands of a small group of politicians and unelected medical experts. Another salient finding pertained to the negative portrayal of the unvaccinated and their depiction as selfish. In a society increasingly polarised into the vaccinated and unvaccinated contingents, former friends and family members turn against each other, creating social ruptures. The study of Germany also provided an important insight into the manner in which the cultural construction of the pandemic is gendered, as women construed the image of this event drawing on their experience of being disproportionately affected and burdened by the lockdown, being isolated from their support networks, and having to shoulder the bulk burden of stay-at-home labour. This gendered disjuncture in the pandemic experience demonstrates another axis for the fraying of social ties and, in a sense, the social contract.

Comparative Insights based on key findings across the three case studies are as follows:

- There is a high degree of both polarisation and concomitant high affect in people's political subjectivities. This high emotional pitch and polarisation are mapped onto a discursive reality where key concepts that organise social life are affectively charged and can be claimed and defined in ways that are downright mutually exclusive, and each concept may become a site of paradoxical, deeply charged, incompatible meanings. Our study reveals that concrete concepts whose meanings are commonly imagined to be universal (like, for example, "freedom") are deeply splintered and become carriers of meanings that are particularised and sometimes antithetical.
- The three country comparison also offers us an insight into a broad sense of disappointment, distrust, and criticism when it comes to the government or leadership.
- In all three cases, the Covid-19 pandemic has functioned as an amplifying and clarifying affective lens for existing socio-political ruptures.
- In particular in the Polish and Czech cases, corruption emerged as one of the dominant negative tropes in people's analysis of their sociopolitical predicament. There is a strong sentiment that the years of liberal governance have delivered an inefficient state; the result is a sizable group of disillusioned people who may



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not be showing enthusiastic support for right-wing populists, who are definitely jaded and thus unprepared or unwilling to start functioning as committed and deliberate citizens of liberal democracy. They are focused on taking care of themselves and their loved ones, and do not trust the existing political system. They are vulnerable to the “soft” slide into populism.

We conclude by synthesising policy recommendations that are specific to each of the three national contexts in a chart at the end. In the case of policy recommendations, we do not attempt to generalise, as the first principles of applied anthropology, which guided us in formulating these recommendations, emphasise that solutions have to be tailored to site-specific systems of meaning, which, in this case means at the country level, as these are policy recommendations coming out of research that focuses on constructions of nationalism and national politics.



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1. Introduction

The POPREBEL project was designed to take stock of the recent rise of populism – in its various forms – in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). We set out to describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences, and propose policy solutions. Our focus is on the CEE region, but we engaged with other comparative projects on populisms in other parts of the world, particularly Western Europe. Our approach was from the outset thoroughly interdisciplinary.

The main goal was to reconstruct mental models people carry in their heads and which – we assume – reflect the content of discursive communities in which they participate.

We wanted, however, to avoid asking people directly about their views on and support for populist parties and politicians, assuming that (1) they will have vastly divergent ideas about what populism is and (2) may be put off by a direct question concerning a controversial topic. From the very beginning of this project we adopted a strategy of engaging people in conversations about their problems, making sure, for example, that they would talk to us about their wellbeing, broadly understood. The idea was that in a multi thematic conversation we would learn a lot about the issues that bother them and about their general views on the situation in the country and wait until their preferences will slowly emerge, tucked somewhere in a long conversation.

Another goal was more ambitious. We assumed that by conversing with people, recording such conversations, and submitting them to a rigorous analysis we will be able to reconstruct at least some fragments and rudimentary outlines of their mental maps, their 'collective intelligence' as we sometimes called it. Looking at this issue from a more Durkheimian perspective, our job was to reconstruct at least some features of (sub)cultures people live in, their communities of discourse.¹ We opted for open free-flowing conversations assuming that *ordinary language interviewing* will allow us to grasp how 'everyday words reflect the accumulated wisdom or shared culture of a community' (Schaffer 2014: 184). The most important point about this method is that it is not designed to uncover people's motivations, but to *reconstruct at least rudimentary structural attributes of meaning networks*. This is accomplished by collecting "samples" of people's speech and subjecting them to a rigorous examination, for example via the semantic network analysis. Relying on an old wisdom of linguistics, we assume with Schaffer that people do not have full control over the language they use. As he puts it 'I may lie about

¹ The study of concepts humans use to build their pictures of the world (ontologies) belongs to the traditional preoccupations of anthropology, not only of its linguistic or cognitive branches. With what is known as "the ontological turn," it has come to the front of the discipline (Haywood 2017).



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whether I think the political system of a country is just, but it would be difficult for me to alter how I use the word “just.” (2014: 193).

Why did we turn towards ethnography, as the principal discipline of our study? As we wrote in the grant proposal, ethnographers study individuals as community members: how people with their own unique worldviews and life experience live together and act in social groups. Ethnography is a qualitative research technique aimed at discovering how a certain group of humans perceives a set of issues. Its unique value lies in that its findings encode the culture and worldview of the group being studied. Social and cultural meanings that arise organically from human interactions are the main objects of research rather than pre-conceived, researcher-imposed analytical categories.

Ethnographic coding, or simply 'coding', is the act of associating keywords to excerpts of text in the transcripts of the interview with key informants, or other text that can be ascribed directly to key informants. Traditional ethnography is oriented towards one or a few physical sites, involving a small amount of participants and a few researchers at a time (Geertz 1973). As ethnographic methodologies have been applied to the parts of everyday life that unfold online, they are no longer limited in terms of site, but can still only encompass a limited amount of information from a small number of participants, as the manual coding and qualitative analysis of such information is time-consuming and costly. Conventionally, the in-depth qualitative richness of ethnographic analysis on the micro level of social interaction has been seen as irreconcilable with macro level statistics and quantitative methods. As a consequence, ethnography is commonly not understood to scale well. We have joined a developing tradition of computationally intensive analysis of large corpora of social data, and showed that it is possible to computationally enrich the ethnographic toolbox. This enrichment can take several forms, for example that of a network analysis of large datasets generated by interactions conducted at the minimum as in-depth interviews.

A recent contribution proposes a data model to encode ethnographic materials that is amenable to representation as semantic social networks (Cottica et al. 2020) or semantic networks. This move allows the deployment of methods from network mathematics to process contributions from key informants in network form. For example, it becomes possible to compute quantitative measures of the strength of the connection between ethnographic codes.

Due to the restrictions on our research caused by the pandemic we had to abandon the ambition of using the semantic social networks approach and instead opted for semantic network analysis (SNA). IN essence, we



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managed to collect a lot of textual material via in-depth interviews, but did not manage to establish discourse networks.

We managed, however, to realise the goal of field-testing three extensions to the method of SNA proposed in Cottica et al. (2020):²

1. Multilingualism
2. Open coding standards
4. Computational methods.

Multilingualism. POPREBEL's raw ethnographic data is constituted by transcripts of the in-depth interviews carried out in three languages: Polish, Czech, and German. For consistent analysis, the semantic network must keep track of the fact that 'bezrobocie' is the roughly same thing as 'nezaměstnanost', which is the same thing as 'unemployment'. At the same time, it should preserve information about the language that the original contribution was made in, as the connections taken for granted in one language might well vary across different languages. We address this problem by an innovation in the data model of semantic networks: the introduction of hierarchies of ethnographic codes. This means arranging codes in a hierarchy, where the parent node encodes the semantics (in our example, unemployment) and the children nodes encode the language-specific formulation of the semantics. The network can then be induced at the level of the parent node, allowing to map the entire conversation across all languages, or at the level of the children nodes, allowing to map the conversation in each language as its own separate network.

Open coding standards. Ethnographic coding in POPREBEL was the responsibility of a team of ethnographers operating across the project's three languages. They sought maximum consistency across their projects, making sure that they really meant the same thing by 'bezrobocie' and 'unemployment', and that all contributions by informants were coded with the same code when the informants pointed to the same concept. For example, one informant might talk about unemployment, and another about lack of jobs. If they mean the same thing, the same code should be used for both contributions. We addressed this problem by documenting our ontology of codes, in the same sense that open source software developers document their code. This was done through an evolving wiki where codes were defined and translated. This ensured maximum accountability of the coding process.

² In the initial grant proposal we listed four extensions. Ultimately we dropped the task of multimedia coding, as the existing textual material proved to be so rich that we had to focus all our attention on coding its content



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Computational methods. Semantic networks induced by studies at the scale of POPREBEL tend to be very large and unwieldy (thousands of codes, tens of thousands of connections between them). To get a 'big picture' of the conversation that is legible by human researchers, the network needs to be reduced, discarding 'weak' edges and keeping 'strong' ones. In a paper preliminary to the present study, we propose four criteria for ranking edges, and suggest that they map to major methods and approaches used in anthropology and sociology (Cottica et al 2022). We see these criteria as complementary more than alternative to one another, and in the present work used all of them. The methods we employed are described in Sections 1.2.3 - 1.2.5.



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1.1. The Ethnographic Sensibility

Although political science as a discipline has developed along a more universalizing and quantitative route than anthropology, and has used ethnographic methods sparsely, power and politics are among the “bread and butter” topics within anthropology, and political anthropology is its own robust subfield of cultural / social anthropology. Historically anthropologists have worked in small-scale, non-Western societies where 'politics cannot be analytically isolated from kinship, religion, age-grade associations, or secret societies, because these are precisely the institutions through which power and authority are manifested; in many societies and in political subgroups within larger societies, 'government' either doesn't exist or is irrelevant at the local level.' (Lewellen, *Political Anthropology: An Introduction*) But ethnography, the constitutive method of anthropology, has since been used both by anthropologists and other social scientists to study many dimensions of modern, complex societies (Aronoff and Kubik 2013).

Among the various genres of ethnography, one that centres on the problem of meaning formation, transmission and reception is associated with symbolic and interpretive anthropology. It is in this branch of the discipline that the “scientific” preoccupation with explanation and generalising gives way to the emphasis on interpretation, and attention is turned towards situational details. To illustrate this contrast one may recall Geertz's (1983: 57) distinction between an “experience-near concept” which a person would use to define 'what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine,' and an 'experience-distant concept' employed by specialists, e.g., ethnographers to further their scientific (or other) aims, although '... the matter is one of degree, not polar opposition.' (1983: 57). Anthropology tends to rely more on experience-near concepts and work from the particular to the universal or to find the universal within the particular. As Geertz (1973: 23) says, 'Small facts speak to large issues.'

Interpretive ethnography, whose version we try to practise here, is 'based on participant observation of semiotic practices is premised on: (1) constructivism (the interpretation of actions “meaningful” to actors), (2) ontological realism and an epistemology that focuses on actual actions of real people, rather than variables, and (3) microscale observation of actual settings and the reconstruction of relevant mechanisms' (Aronoff and Kubik 2013: xvii). What is left, if these principles are not realised? The pandemic made in-person fieldwork impossible, so we had to drop the third principle. But in our work on mapping the meanings people attach to their current situation, based on in-depth interviews, our team of trained anthropologists worked in the spirit of two other principles, constructivism and ontological realism.



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“The objects” we are interested in (governments, parliaments, gender, nation, etc.) are socially constructed, meaning that they exist in narratives (texts) and people’s minds, and have certain attributes arranged in a way that may be construed differently by each discursive community. But the state is also an institutional reality, as it imposes constraints on human behaviour, and this twinned discursive-institutional mode of existence of all institutions, including the state, is the argument of *discursive institutionalism* in political science (Schmidt 2008). In other words it is a discursive reality endowed with enormous *ontological heft*.

Thus, the state is not just “imagined” in a specific way; it is believed to exist (to be) in a specific way. The proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology go beyond discursive institutionalism and argue against the idea that there is only one “state” and different people have different views or interpretations of it (Haywood 2017). They work with the idea that “the state” I live in may be different from “the state” you live in, although conventionally we are both citizens of the same political entity called, for example “the American state.” The ontologies of the “real” we take for granted are different from what other people see as “natural,” as their reality is “put together” differently than ours and this has profound consequences for the way we reason and behave. As one of the most original anthropological thinkers, Arthur Maurice Hocart, put it: 'How can we make any progress in understanding of cultures, ancient or modern, if we persist in dividing what the people join and joining what they keep apart' ([1952] 1970: 23).

Our job in the project is to reconstruct different ontologies of “the state” and other “objects” to be found in different discursive communities. *We assume that various socio-political “objects” have complex meanings that can be reconstructed through the analysis of semantic networks in which they are embedded and which we extract from our data through coding and the four data reduction techniques that generate analyzable visualisations.*



1.2. Project background and context

1.2.1. Designing new digital ethnographies in Czechia, Germany, and Poland

The national sub-fora in Czech, Polish, and German within Edgeryders platform that started their activities in early 2019 did not get as much interest from targeted audiences as expected, despite considerable efforts put into their promotion. When the SARS-Cov-2 (Covid-19) pandemic broke out, changing lives across the world for months to come, the project leaders decided to hire additional fieldwork researchers to conduct ethnographies and collect 'deep' interview data for the project. They were asked to: (1) design and conduct their own ethnographic studies tightly related to the main goal of the whole project, (2) engage people in person if possible, but (3) focus their energy on online interviews. In general, due to the pandemic situation, studies were to take place mostly online, making use of digital research methods.

The idea was that the final product – presented in this deliverable – would be based on a combination of data and insights from two modes of ethnographic engagement: *traditional*, whose products are narrative accounts of ethnographers' experiences, and *ethnographic data visualisation* expected to result in visualisation of semantic networks constructed with the use of data generated by the coding process. We expected two situations: congruence and discrepancy. In the first case, each mode would produce mutually reinforcing results. In the second case, the results would be different. The latter situation would be particularly interesting – we assumed – as it would force us to look closely at the data and approach coding and interpretations iteratively, while also on the otherwise known fact that different methods may produce different pictures of reality. Our analysis has shown mostly congruence, with some notable discrepancies (for example, in the case of affect and gendered reactions to the Covid lockdowns in the German sample, as discussed in Section 3.3)

In the final interpretations of the results, reported below, we took into account differences between the Czech, Polish, and German socio-historical contexts, reflected in many historical and sociological studies we consulted.

The ethnographers set a goal to produce data of a nature similar, or at least analogous, to the one that would come out of the Edgeryders platform, had the fora worked as intended. Hence, research participants had to be social media users, who actively participate in public networked spaces, such as Facebook groups, Instagram comment sections, or public WhatsApp and Telegram chats. Also taken into account in the design of the new part of the study, was the different characteristics of populisms in Czech, Germany, and in Poland. Keeping these two



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simple points in mind, the ethnographers established their field sites in public spaces of social media on their Polish-speaking, Czech-speaking, and German-speaking Internets.

Digital ethnography is a well-established method of qualitative research (Bakardjieva 2005; Knox and Nafus 2018; Pink 2016), that has developed over the past 20 years as a response of social sciences to the growing popularity of digital communication and information technologies, namely the Internet, personal computers, and later on, mobile telephones. Qualitative research methodology has easily adjusted to new research conditions, following the idea that the same research methodology ought to be applied to the study of the online, as it was to the offline realm.

When it comes to the study of the Internet, many studies take place in what Zizzi Papacharissi (2002, 2010, 2015), a communication scientist, and danah boyd (2007), a technology and social media scholar, call *networked publics*, or networked public spaces. Networked publics are publicly available spheres of social interaction, set by affordances of digital communication, where public debates and discussions take place. Digital fieldsites within the ethnographic part of the project were situated in those networked publics.

If the essence of ethnography is commonly considered to be participant observation (Wacquant 2003), the meaning of ethnography in a study of networked publics needs to be elucidated, as it is not clear why a study of the discursive content generated on various social media platforms or via ethnographic interviews is not called simple content or discourse analysis. The answer depends, of course, on the definition of ethnography. As Schatz notes, ethnography can be understood not only as participant observation but also as a method of approaching the research topic with *specific sensibility* (2009: 5) whose main goal is the *recovery of meaning* actors generate, transmit and interpret. According to Boswell et al, '... focus groups are an ethnographic method because ethnography is now a diverse set of practices linked not by a shared method – participant observation – but by a shared focus on the recovery of meaning: the ethnographic sensibility' (Boswell et al. 2018). We agree with these points and although our principal method of data collection ultimately was interviewing, our interviewees were trained anthropologists equipped with *ethnographic sensibility*.

The digital fieldwork that ultimately emerged as the dominant method of ethnographic engagement in this sub-project was conducted using two leading ethnographic research methods, adopted to the online environment. Entering the fieldsite would start with a participant observation of relevant posts and subsequent discussions that appeared on the selected platforms. Based on those observations, platform users were approached with an invitation to take part in the study, and if they agreed, semi-structured interviews were



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conducted with contributing study participants. The potential participants, based on their engagement in the online discussions, were contacted via private messages on FB messenger. The one logistical issue of this approach was the particular configuration of Facebook messenger which automatically assigns messages from users who are not friends on Facebook into the category of 'message requests' which do not appear automatically on the messenger's feed. This sometimes resulted in contacted users never receiving the messages, and required a more effort and proactive approach from the research.

We did not explicitly ask study participants about their demographic data, giving them the freedom to choose what information they wished to share with us. However, most interviewees decided to include information on their education, profession or domicile, and related topics, in their answers to questions asked during the interview.

Participants of this study represent a broad category of social media users, who engage in information exchange online. This purposive sample is not statistically representative of Polish, Czech or German societies, as there were no objectives set when it comes to the political leaning of the study participants and their demographic profiles. However, the sample is naturally randomised³, due the sampling method we used – digitally approaching social media users, active in online groups, without prior knowledge of their political profiling. Users who do not have trust in public research institutions didn't agree to take part of the study, hence the study is biased in that area.

To provide a broad context to the study we estimated political leanings, as well as demographic profiles of research participants, based on the information they shared with us during interviews. The study doesn't look into differences between responses of individual participants in relation to their estimated demographic or political profiles, hence the data presented below is strictly additional and contextual. Our methods of data analysis look at the empirical dataset as if it was a uniform body of text, a single voice multiple, hence details on who said what are not relevant.

1.2.1.1. The comparative basis of the three country-specific fieldworks

In ethnography, and in humanities and social sciences more broadly, finding the right balance between particularism of single-case studies and comparative analysis of several cases has been widely debated for decades, and has mapped onto the broader debate about cultural universalism within anthropology. At times,

³ Within certain parameters – as we discuss elsewhere in the report, we aimed to target ethnographic informants who were analogous to informants who would have been likely to engage with the Edgeryders platform, as per the original research design plan.



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anthropology (especially the American anthropological community, grounded in Boasian historical particularism), has frowned on the uses of comparison, wary of its history as a heuristic going back to the early days of anthropological thought, when comparison, as the engine of cultural evolutionism, underpinned a model that ranked cultures in a Eurocentric hierarchy and erased the integrity of individual cultures. Recently, over time, anthropology has integrated the virtues of a comparative approach, when executed with nuance, as a generative one – for example, in the work of Heather Swanson, who notes that 'comparison is a practice that folds multiple worlds together' (2018: 104) – a practice in line with our aspiration in this project.

Most anthropologists would agree that in the context of generating ethnographic knowledge, which is always inherently contextualized, localized, and 'locally' intersubjective, questions of scale and quantifiable comparisons are particularly difficult to navigate. This however does not render the identification of shared processes and social relations across different sites impossible. Ethnographic reality – for instance, the “anomieization” (cf Durkheim⁴) and fragmentation of the European Union (and unity) project – can at times explicitly invite such comparisons, and we accept that invitation, while, in the ethnographic tradition, reserving primary importance for the local forms of meaning-making and agency-shaping practices, in specific contexts and situations. Comparing across ethnographic contexts thus entails a detailed thinking through analogies, relations and metaphors, placed side by side to one another (Candea 2019).

In comparative politics, the whole family of comparative methods has recently become a subject of intense debate among methodologists and practitioners. While some scholars, including some of the best known adherents of the method of paired comparison (Tarrow 2010) or the method of controlled comparison (Slater and Ziblatt 2013) have continued advocating for these methods' analytical usefulness rooted in Mill's seminal work, others have called for a major overhaul of all comparative methods either within the positivist tradition (see, for example Seawright 2021) or some version of *the interpretivist paradigm* (Simmons and Smith 2021; Boswell, Corbet, and Rhodes 2019). As the researchers who adhere to this paradigm, we assume that even if the stringent conditions required for an effective application of the Millean controlled qualitative comparison are not met, a comparison can be productive for example to study systematically how people deal with “common dilemmas” (Boswell, Corbett, and Rhodes 2019, 1; see also Simmons and Smith 2021, 3).

⁴ Emile Durkheim famously coined the concept of *anomie* in his book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897) – it is commonly used as a shorthand for the breakdown of social bonds but has been more precisely argued to mean a waning of the moral regulatory power of society, in particular during periods of disruption and crises, and a mismatch individual action and social framework of norms.



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From the onset of the study, the ethnographers drew upon a series of methodological approaches and practices, aimed at achieving a 'comparativeness' of the ethnographic material generated across the three country-specific fieldworks. These involved a number of meetings during which ethnographers exchanged relevant knowledge of their respective field sites (Poland, Czech Republic, Germany), and discussed similarities and patterns arising from the shared socialist experience and the country-specific political developments related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The outcome of these sessions shaped a shared fieldwork strategy, including a common conversation protocol listing [themes and topics](#) reflective of people's dilemmas and intended for a discussion during the interviews with participants. However, the contextual specificity of each country did not impact only the research findings, meaning the configuration of the public opinion regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and populist politics more broadly. It also significantly shaped the methodological approaches and fieldwork practices which had to be adjusted to align with the country-specific notions of privacy and trust when sharing personal information in the online space. As a result, ethnographers had to make several strategic methodological decisions to match the needs and preferences of online users in each respective fieldsite. Each of them is summarised below.

1.2.1.2. The Czech fieldwork

The digital fieldwork in Czech-speaking online spaces took place across 12 months between February 2021 and February 2022, and consisted of two primary phases. The first phase (Feb–April 2021) involved 10 semi-structured interviews held online, focused on the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic crisis on labour and care. The aim was to get an overall picture of the nature and diversity of the experiences and perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects. Building on these insights, the fieldwork set out to capture the participants' changing political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and to establish a broader connection between the covid-19 crisis and the new emerging forms of populist politics. The participants have been sampled through a snowballing method, which targeted primarily smaller-town-dwelling and non-university educated demographics. The decision to focus on this particular section of the society was made in order to balance out the fairly narrow sample of primarily university educated and liberal opinionated individuals who had been previously contributing to the Czech forum on the Edgeryders platform.

The second fieldwork phase (April 2021 – February 2022) focused explicitly on online spaces on which, to put it broadly, Czech netizens express their views about the Covid crisis and the government handling thereof. While during the first phase, the research questions were approached via the lens of the socioeconomic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the second phase shifted the focus to their political expressions in the online spaces. In doing so, the outcomes of the initial research have been operationalized as a contextual background for the multiple



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interactions and discussions taking place on the web. Given the nature of the Czech online spaces and the particular demographics which each social media outlet tends to attract, the research focus was narrowed down to Facebook. This is because the targeted participant sample consisted of primarily middle-aged and older, smaller-town-dwelling and politically engaged users for whom Facebook represents the most accessible online platform.

I.a. People expressing their political views on social media

The participants were to be sought out on different Facebook groups and pages where general news about the Covid-19 pandemic situation (both domestically and internationally) would be shared and commented on. These included some of the main media outlet platforms and information channels across political spectrum (ČT24, Seznam zprávy, Echo24, A2LARM). Furthermore, potential participants were contacted based on their activity on Facebook pages of key politicians (Andrej Babiš (ANO), Tomio Okamura (SPD), The Czech Pirate Party). This strategy generated further understanding of how different political parties framed their discourses on relevant pandemic-related issues.

I.b. People actively participating in various online 'anti-covid' groups

The Czech 'anti-Covid' movement's growing influence online and the populist style of their discourses made it a relevant field of investigation. The focus in this sub-category was on the Facebook groups and pages of the key emerging groups and actors (Volný Blok, Manifest.cz, Občanská Neposlušnost, TV Rapport, KTV, Zdravé Fórum), comprised of both civil society movements and emerging political parties. The research included participant observation of the discussions developing on these platforms and semi-structured interviews with participants who agreed to participate in an online call, primarily over Facebook messenger.

II. People seeking Covid-related medical advice online

This category involved several Facebook self-help groups, where individuals discussed and inquired about health-themed questions related to the Covid-19 viral infection (*Pacienti s COVID 19 v ČESKU a na SLOVENSKU, SVĚPOMOC INSPIRACE, Detoxikuj život*). This included individuals who tested positive, and who because of the lack of effective response from the official medical sources, had sought alternative remedies and tips from fellow group members. Another type of queries consisted of individuals suffering from long Covid symptoms, for whom the Facebook group provided a space to share their experiences and frustrations. Finally, on the more alt-med



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style groups the primary topic of discussion centred on the resistance to and the negative effects of the Covid-19 vaccination.

Online Interviews

Jitka Kralova, the ethnographer who worked in the Czech Republic, sought out potential research participants based on their activity in the comment section under these posts. If their comment was expressing an opinion on the Covid-19 pandemic (its development and the Czech government's response to it), she sent them a Facebook private message explaining the purpose of the research, how she found them (the specific Facebook discussion under which they commented) and asked whether they would be interested in arranging an online interview. The below screenshot is an example of the model message she would send:

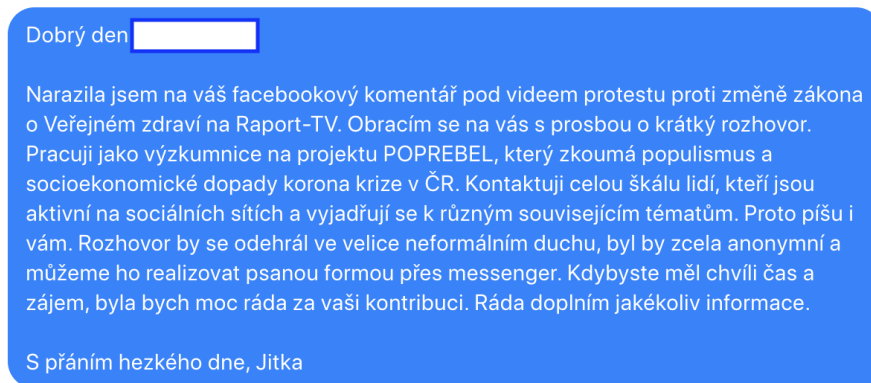


Figure 1: Invitation to join or project as a participant (in Czech)

The message translated into English:

Hello,

I came across your comment under the FB post of Raport-TV involving a video of a protest against the change in the Public Health law. I am messaging you with a kind request for an interview. I am working as a researcher on a POPREBEL project, which investigates the phenomenon of populism and the socioeconomic impacts of the Covid-19 crisis in the Czech Republic. I contact a whole range of people, who are active on social media and express their opinions on related topics. This is why I am also contacting you. The interview would be very informal, fully anonymous and if you prefer, we can also conduct it in a written form, through the Facebook messenger chat. If you are interested and could dedicate some time in taking part in the research, I would be very grateful for your contribution. I will also gladly provide more information.

Have a nice day, Jitka



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In case of a participant's interest, we would arrange an interview via online call on the platform of participant's choice (either Facebook messenger call or Zoom), or, if the participants felt uncomfortable speaking over the phone, in the form of chatnography (carrying out the interview via Facebook messenger chat). Prior to each interview I would send each research participant a more detailed description of the study in Czech and an electronic consent form to be signed before the beginning of the interview.

The questions posed to the participants can be summarised under five main topic areas:

- a. the general views about the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic
- b. the perceptions of the Czech government's approach to the pandemic
- c. the personal experience of the related restrictions and lockdowns and the impacts this had on participants' personal and professional lives
- d. the perceptions of the current political representation and more general political views
- e. the assessment of the state institutions and media.

These core thematic categories were discussed consistently across the sample, with individual questions varying slightly based on the participants' responses and interest.

In order to address the research question at the core of this POPREBEL project's deliverable, **namely the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on people's changing political choices and voting behaviour (with particular focus on emerging populist sentiments)**, the following matters were discussed:

- **The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic**, the socioeconomic impacts of the restrictions on one's life, overall perception of the pandemic and government's restrictions, the attitude towards Covid-19 vaccination, and the reasons underpinning that attitude.
- **The perceptions of the current government and its response to the Covid-19 crisis**, how they perceived the imposed restrictions and the overall management of the pandemic, how effective were the compensations in their opinion, etc.
- **The general state of politics**, how do they feel about the choice of political parties, do they feel represented, who do they support/why, did the Covid-19 pandemic change their electoral choices in any way, why and how?
- **The state institutions**, can they rely on help from the state if needed, should the state be helping more, why/why not, what are some of the biggest gaps in the functioning of the state, what should be improved, what are some of the biggest challenges for the future?



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- **Perception of the postsocialist transition**, how do they assess the political and socio-economic developments after the transition, how do they see the country's socialist past, etc.
- **The media**, the overall perception of the mainstream media channels, how do they keep up to date with current events, can the mainstream media be trusted, their approach to disinformation, etc.
- **The perception of the EU**, how they perceive the institution as a whole, is Czech membership to the EU a positive or a negative thing, why or why not?

The composition of research participants

In the Czech sample, overall 54 research participants have been interviewed, out of which 29 identified as male and 25 identified as female. We estimate their political leanings as follows:

1. **right-wing, libertarian**: libertarian approach to economy (laissez-faire), light conservative moral values, against covid restrictions
2. **right-wing, conservative**: state-interventionist approach to economy, more towards national socialism⁵, strong conservative moral values, SPD voters
3. **right-wing, liberal**: neoliberal approach to economy (little state intervention), liberal values (democracy, generally pro-Western orientation)
4. **centre-right, liberal**: neoliberal approach to economy (some limited state intervention), liberal values (democracy, pro-Western orientation, support of the EU)
5. **centre-left, progressive**: neoliberal approach to economy but more moderate state interventionist and redistributive policies, progressive left leaning values (social justice, equality, human rights)
6. **leftist, progressive**: critique of the neoliberal approach to economy, pro strong state interventionist redistributive policies, progressive left leaning values (social justice, equality, human rights)
7. **leftist, conservative**: extreme state-interventionist approach to economy (nationalisation), mostly interested in social-welfare, conservative moral values, nostalgia for the socialist regime.

The political leaning was classified into 6 key categories (applicable to the Czech context), which were based purely on the participants' personal accounts. These categories are fairly fluid and expected to reflect inconsistencies of people's own narratives of their own political subjectivities.

Table 1: Political categories in Czech fieldwork in relation to Covid-19 vaccination data, gender data and domicile data.

⁵ In a sense of combining strong nativist and welfare-state elements.



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Politics	M	F	Covid vaccination		> 300 000	> 100 000	< 100 000	< 20 000
			YES	NO				
(R) libertarian	2	4		6	2		4	
(R) conservative	3	8	2	9			8	2
(R) liberal	5		3	2	1	1	3	
(CR) liberal	6	4	8	2	2	1	7	
(CL) progressive	6	2	6	2	4		4	
(L) progressive	1	2	3		3			
(L) conservative	5	6	3	8		8	3	

The table 2 below shows how political categorizations unfold throughout age groups.

Table 2: Political categories in Czech fieldwork in relation to age categories.

Politics	<20	>20	>30	>40	>50	>60	>70
(R) libertarian			2	3	1		
(R) conservative			2	2	6	1	
(R) liberal			3	2			
(CR) liberal			5	3		1	
(CL) progressive	3	1	1	1	2		



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(L) progressive	1		2				
(L) conservative		2	1		4	3	1

Based on the data that we presented in tables above, we can draw following conclusions about the character of the Czech data set:

- The majority of the research sample falls under the age category between 30–60 years old.
- About two thirds of the participants lived in cities and towns with less than 100,000 inhabitants.
- The three participants with leftwing progressive views lived in cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants. All of those received the vaccination against Covid-19.
- The majority of participants with right-wing conservative views lived in cities and towns with less than 100,000 inhabitants, with three living in villages of less than 20,000. Majority of them were women.
- None of the six participants with right-wing libertarian views received the vaccine against Covid-19.

1.2.1.3. The Polish fieldwork

During the initial pre-COVID, pilot stage of the project, the team managed to generate some initial secondary data based on the contributions of about 80 original users. The analysed stories were focused around three main overarching areas, namely,

- the so-called cardboard state, an expression encapsulating a frequent complaint by the respondents pertaining to living in a state “made of cardboard and sticks” – i.e. a caricature of what a caring state should be, a facade with nothing behind it, an entity on the verge of collapse. Our “diagnosis” of this emergent category was based on contributions in which people complained of *inadequate income* (38 assigned codes), *low quality of the healthcare system* (20), *lack of support* (20), *(lack of) affordable housing* (17), *political inaction* (15), *democratic backsliding* (13), *institutional failure* (11), and several other aspects of a failing democratic welfare state.
- polarisation, which as a concept reflected the fact that especially in the political sphere, the respondents often expressed the idea that it was instigated primarily by the ruling *Law and Justice party*. Such opinions correlated with remarks on *dogmatism*, *breeding hate*, and decreasing social cohesion stemming from the *lack of solidarity*. But our respondents also reported hopes that a *civilised debate* (or dialogue) in the search for consensus (*need for consensus*) and peaceful coexistence, together with teaching and spreading



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tolerance (the opposite of discrimination), pluralism, some form of psychological intervention (“need for therapy”) may alleviate it (*alleviating polarisation*).

- conservatism and right-wing politics – a domain that revolved around the role of the *Catholic church* (the code *catholic church* has 38 annotations) and the rise of nationalist tendencies (*nationalism*, 26). Many respondents mentioned the role of the Catholic church in their lives (*religiosity*, *religious upbringing*). The institution was said to have close ties with the ruling party (*Law and Justice party*), which suggested its politicisation (*politicisation*). The Catholic Church was said to be the defender of traditional values (more often stated as an accusation rather than a compliment) and a sower of discrimination. Nationalism (*nationalism*) with its 26 annotations was one of the most salient topics in the Polish community. It prevailed in less populated areas (*provinces* as opposed to *big cities*) and had strong ties with the ruling party (a relatively large number of co-occurrences with the *Law and Justice party*). Polish nationalism was often directed at the growing Ukrainian minority, underpinned some violence, but also encountered resistance from anti-fascist movements (*anti-fascism*) and anarchists (*anarchism*). Quite a few respondents, who by and large suggest that Poles need to start alleviating polarisation by engaging in a form of peaceful dialogue, expressed beliefs that nationalists should be denied any platform for debate (*denying platform*).

This material was later treated not only as valuable primary data, but also as a ‘testing ground’ to design revisions and improvements in the coding process. Unfortunately, this phase was terminated, primarily due to the eruption of the pandemic. This development forced us to revise our research strategy.

After a thorough review of our process, the second phase of fieldwork in Poland started in February 2021 and lasted until February 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced.⁶ During the 12 months of the second phase, 59 social media users took part in the study, out of which 36 identified as female and 23 as male. The fieldsite of the study was set within the public networked spaces of the Polish-speaking web. In particular, it took place inside three public Facebook groups, that were dedicated to the sharing of current pandemic and Covid-19-related news and advice. The groups did not have a clear political profile. Methodologically, the fieldwork was based on two digital research methods: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation was used to determine potential research participants. If a candidate for an interviewee agreed to take part in the study, after filling in a participation form, they would take part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview.

⁶ The third stage, whose results are not reported in this deliverable, started soon after the invasion and ended in November 2022.



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The interview script in the Polish fieldwork was designed to be sensitive to current news, with the interviewer asking research participants which recent public, political or social events got their attention, or were important to them. The interviews were held online, via telephone calls, online calls or video calls, using applications such as Zoom or Facebook Messenger. Each interview lasted on average 45 minutes. There were four interviews conducted through a chat, as it was the preferred way of communication, chosen by the interviewee. In addition, there were five interviews that took place offline in Warsaw in parks, at the request of interviewees, tired of mostly online communication during the pandemic.

Polish conversation script

The Polish version of the questionnaire focused on four main topics: (1) the socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods, (2) reminiscents of the past, (3) opinions on the current political system, (4) most pressing social and political matters. Each set of questions had a particular aim:

1. Questions related to the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic – to provide an insight into experience and perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects.
2. Questions about the past – to try to capture changing political views of research participants, in particular, in relation to the communist time, political transformation, and the joining of the European Union.
3. Questions on the political system – to capture participants' view on the current political system, including issues such as public administration, public service and a sense of political representation in the parliament.
4. Questions on most pressing social and political matters – establish a broader connection between opinions on the current situation within the country, governmental policies implemented by the ruling Law and Justice party, and populist politics in Poland.

In order to provide answers to the POPREBEL project's main research questions and address the above mentioned topics, interviewees were asked in particular about the following matters:

- perception and experiences (if applicable) of political and economic transition from the communist governance to the neoliberal one,
- perception of Poland joining the EU in 2004,
- attitudes towards the future of the country,
- voting choices and political sympathies,
- satisfaction with political representation,
- thoughts on the current state of the economy,



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- recent and current political events of importance,
- use of media,
- use of state institutions,
- ideas of how the state and the political class should be like,
- the experience of the pandemic.

Interviewee characteristics

Out of the 59 research participants, 36 identified as female (f) and 23 as male (m). We estimate their political leaning as follows:

1. **right-wing, libertarian, 8:** mostly interested in (neo-liberal) economic policy, light conservative moral values, libertarian approach to economy,
2. **right-wing, conservative, 5:** mostly interested in social-welfare, conservative moral values, state-interventionist (social-democratic) approach to economy, PiS voters, family oriented.
3. **centrist, liberal, 11:** mostly interested in Law and Justice party losing, liberal moral values, neoliberal approach to economy,
4. **centrist, conservative, 3:** mostly interested in Law and Justice party losing, conservative moral values, neoliberal approach to economy,
5. **leftist, liberal, 7:** mostly interested in moral issues, strong anti-Law and Justice party sentiment, liberal moral values, light neoliberal approach to economy,
6. **leftist, social-democratic, 21:** mostly interested in social-welfare, liberal moral values, state-interventionist (social-democratic) approach to economy,
7. **leftist, conservative, 3:** mostly interested in social-welfare, conservative moral values, state-interventionist (social-democratic) approach to economy, community oriented.
8. **outside categorizations, 1 (m):** anarchist or apolitical.

Those categories were assigned based on the dominant set of views and values expressed by participants during interviews. The table below shows gender balance in those 7 categories. One respondent belongs to the 8th category, both men from small cities (< 100 000).

Table 3. Political categories in Polish fieldwork in relation to gender data and domicile data.



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Politics	M	F	> 300 000	> 100 000	< 100 000	< 20 000
(R) libertarian	7	1	2	1		5
(R) conservative	1	4	3			2
(C) liberal	6	5	9	1		1
(C) conservative	1	2	1	1		1
(L) liberal	1	6	6			1
(L) social-dem	5	16	19		1	1
(L) conservative	1	2	3			

The table below shows how political categorizations unfold throughout age groups.

Table 4. Political categories in Polish fieldwork in relation to age categories.

Politics	<20	>20	>30	>40	>50	>60	>70
(R) libertarian		2	3	2		1	
(R) conservative			5				
(C) liberal			5	2	3		1
(C) conservative	1	1				1	
(L) liberal		4	2		1		
(L) social-dem		12	7	1	1		
(L) conservative		2	1				



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(0) non-cat				1			
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Based on the data that we presented in tables above, we can draw several conclusions about the character of the Polish data set:

- Nearly two out of three study participants lived in cities whose population is larger than 300 000.
- One out of three study participants was below the age of 30, while one in three participants below the age of 40.
- Out of the 11 respondents that lived in cities below 20 000 inhabitants, or in villages, more than a half have conservative views, predominantly right-wing libertarian views.
- Centrist or right-wing views were more popular among study participants who were over 30 years old, while leftist views were generally more popular among those below 20 years old.
- Preliminary analysis suggests that most big city inhabitants had liberal, centrist or leftist views.
- Interestingly, by coincidence the age representation in this study is consistent with Internet usage statistics in Poland (CBOS, 2019).

While this breakdown won't be used in the data analyses presented further in the report, it will guide our further work and inform the preparation of some materials used in broader dissemination of the results.

1.2.1.4. *The German fieldwork*

Germany was arguably the spearhead/ground zero (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2021) for anti-lockdown movements, conspiracy theories (Loucaides, Perrone and Holnburger 2021), vaccine hesitancy, and anti-elites' discourses during the pandemic in Europe. Due to limitations posed by the realities of Covid-19 and lockdowns, the ethnography⁷ focused on finding informants discussing the issues above online on Facebook groups. In a nutshell, where anthroposophist attitudes and populist narratives intersected in discussions. It is important to note that populist sentiments and movements in Eastern Germany during the pandemic did not suddenly emerge but are the result of several decades of socio-economic and socio-political grievances. The electoral success of the far-right party AFD (Alternative for Germany) and the severity of PEGIDA movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) laid a lot of the populist groundwork in the Eastern states (Göpffarth 2018).

⁷ Unlike the Polish and Czech case studies, the German study did not have the initial, pre-Covid Edgeryders platform-based phase



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The first phase of online research consisted of detecting suitable groups on Facebook. Suitable in this context means digital social ecosystems in which German speaking users voiced their opinions on the pandemic, with a strong emphasis on opinions that displayed discontent and mistrust vis a vis political elites. This fieldwork built on a fluid set of questions that were used in semi-structured interviews with informants that agreed to participate in the study. Given Germany's special relationship to data privacy and data protection (Germany has the most stringent data protection laws in Europe), getting potential informants to agree to be interviewed proved to be challenging. This hesitancy has its roots in Nazism, where Hitler used extensive census tools in his fascist state and in the practices of the STASI in the GDR, where up to 1% of the population were informants for the state (Waxman 2018). The informants who agreed to be interviewed mostly preferred conducting them via Facebook messenger, email exchange, or video calls where the camera was shut off. In September 2021, Facebook decided to shut down numerous Facebook sites and groups due to the spread of misinformation. Some of the groups shut down had proven to produce interviewees willing to talk, which further hampered the progress of research (Culliford 2021).

In order to attract more informants, the researchers organised and hosted an online event with ca. 20 participants. This digital event enabled us to create break out rooms on zoom, so that we could conduct focus group style discussions revolving around the same topics as in the 1 on 1 interviews.

1.2.2. Ethnographic coding: Generating the secondary data and re-building the codebook

The first step in the analysis of the POPREBEL ethnographic material was qualitative coding. Codes were developed via an interactive process, as coders were engaged in constant mutual rigorous scrutiny of their proposals and were subjected to ongoing revisions. This process resulted in the generation of what we called the final 'ontology' for the ethnographic part of the project. However, mirroring the overall dynamics of the research as a whole, the evolution of the coding practices and the construction of ontology were closely tied to the changes in the methods of data collection and digital their (re-)production.

Phase 1: Inductive exploration (1/2019–1/2020). The pilot phase.

During the first year, the coders went through an initial training and acquainted themselves with the Open Ethnographer platform created by Edgeryders and learned the principles of the codes/ontology creation. During the initial phase, coders were working individually on their respective datasets and were given free hand to code the emerging online conversation in a purely inductive manner in their own languages. At the end of the first



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phase the first version of the ontology was created. In addition to producing a set of codes in the languages of interviews, it also included a standardised labelling convention for compatibility. The first version of the hierarchy of codes was also developed. In general, this phase was very much a pilot study of the new methodology as the ground rules for coding practice were continuously amended and nuanced on the ER platform.

Phase 2: Global codebook organisation (4/2020–4/2021)

Following a relatively brief COVID-caused intermission, the work on the ontology resumed with completion of the first dataset coding (online conversations). The data analysis was in parallel accompanied by firstly a unification code usage and codebooks between the joint teams coders processing the same linguistic segments (Czech and Polish).

The second step was the creation of a platform for a global codebook revision, which marked the beginning of the focused process of ontology rewriting. After many discussions, a new set of foundational principles emerged from this phase. This was necessary – we decided – as the initial, inductive phase of coding resulted in the creation of a set of codes that was simply too large. After a short period of testing, we developed several simple principles whose adoption was going to lead to the controlled loss of information but generate a more readable map of the meaning network that emerged from the interviews. The new principles included:

- Non-differentiation of codes in terms of meta-analysis (personal, behavioural etc.)
- Abandonment polarity recording (“non-” prefix, “negation” via co-occurrences)
- Adoption of English as the sole language of coding
- The reduction of emic/etic perspectives differentiation to “in-vivo” and general codes and other. The expanding methodological discussions were recorded in [Ethnographic Coding Wiki](#) and the general Open Ethnographer Manual thread (<https://edgeryders.eu/t/open-ethnographer-manual/6811>).

The project ontology began to go through a process of both vertical and horizontal reduction, as the initial dataset coding product was evaluated as too granular and containing too many overlaps among the different strains of coding. The result was an ontologically-proper pillar structure of the codebook.

Phase 3: Reduction through categorization (4/2021–2/2022)

After the major revisions an idea for application of meta-categories emerged to tackle several issues – generative aggregation of codes around general concepts, continuously increasing number of codes representative of the



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emerging ontological and functional nuances and the felt need to create a relevant analytical structure for populism (discussion here). The codes were to be organised into the following topology of 9 categories: Type of action or inaction, Actor, Issue, Ideology, Emotions, Value(s), Places/locations/scale, Institutions and Time (History/past, Diagnosis of the present, Prognosis).

The system was dubbed “Project's grammar” and was designed with the intention to contain incoming codes as well as closely represent the narratives found in the data. Methodologically this moment represents the abductive-shift in terms of the project ontology vision, as this categorisation was supported by a broad spectrum of theoretical literature. Ontology reorganisation along these principles was implemented in the Open Ethnographer environment, the Categories became top level codes in the hierarchy, dubbed Z-level codes. Z codes became merely analytical containers not to be used for final visualisations. Within these containers, the ontological hierarchy was reduced to only two levels: more general Y and more specific X.

For further review process, the categorization proved as an invaluable asset, though a decision was made in the end not to produce its network visualisation or further analytical implementation. It is worth noting that all the three levels of project ontology were subjected to changes to correspond with the development of the global codebook, including the Z level. The code reduction protocol consisted of a repeated set of procedures proving the salience of each individual code: confirming proper ontological relations [X and Y] and [Z, X and Y], searching for label duplicates (similarly named codes denoting same or similar phenomena), searching for semantic duplicates (codes labelled differently but denoting same or similar phenomena). The following operations were responding to any issues identified through these procedures – repositioning the codes within the ontology, merging similar codes, reorganising and redistributing annotations within codes by forking them and finally destroying codes found to be of little significance or improper conceptualization.

Phase 4: Second dataset implementation (2/2022–12/2022)

While performing continuous reduction along these lines, it was clear based on previous experiences, that the second phase of coding over the second set of ethnographic data poses a potential challenge of an influx of new codes. In order to avoid such a situation, a decision was taken to push the whole vertical dimension of the project ontology to a slightly higher level of abstraction and generality. To accomplish this, the existing X-level codes were reorganised into new X-level codes, belonging to what might be called a meso-level occupying an imagined space between the previous Y-level and X-level codes. With this operation, after continuous review accompanying the coding of the second dataset of ethnographic interviews, we arrived at the final version of the project ontology.



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1.2.3. Data

The POPREBEL corpus data analysed in this document consists of transcripts from semi-structured interviews in Czech, German and Polish. Their breakdown by country is as follows. All informants were pseudonymized before the transcripts of the interviews were recorded on the cloud software we used for coding.

Table 5: the number of project participants and the number of words recorded

	Women	Men	Total	Word count
Czech	25	29	54	253,046
German	32	10	42	72,869
Polish	35	24	59	239,661
<i>Total</i>	<i>92</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>155</i>	<i>565,576</i>

A multi-lingual team headed by UCL then coded the corpus. The team held regular meetings to ensure inter-coder methodological consistency. It maintained a cross-language ontology of codes, to ensure that the same codes could be used across the different languages. Coding was iterative and abductive. The team coded using Open Ethnographer, a tool embedded in the edgeryders.eu forum platform. Open Ethnographer supports character-based coding. This means that ethnographers highlight snippets of text, and associate to each snippet one or more ethnographic codes.

Table 6: the number of annotations and codes

	Annotations	Codes
Czech	3,694	588
German	2,299	882

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Polish	6,196	808
<i>Total</i>	<i>12,189</i>	<i>1,516</i>

The total number of codes is smaller than the sum of the number of codes used in each of the three languages, precisely because some codes are used to annotate transcripts across POPREBEL languages. In particular: that is annotated with both those codes. The CCN is undirected ($A \Rightarrow B \equiv B \Rightarrow A$). There can be more than one edge between each pair of nodes.

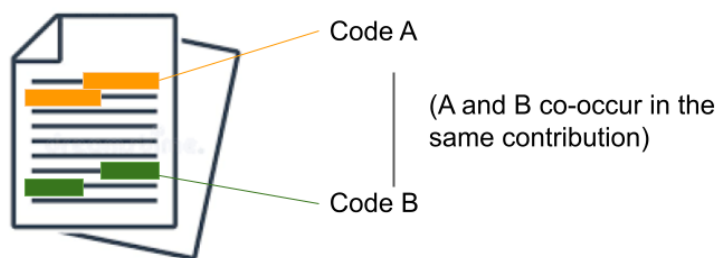


Figure 2: Logic of co-occurrences between two codes in the same contribution

- 213 codes annotate interviews in all three languages.
- 76 codes annotate interviews in Czech and German.
- 123 codes annotate interviews in Czech and Polish.
- 137 codes annotate interviews in German and Polish.

POPREBEL data are archived on Zenodo: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7477600>

1.2.4. Building the codes co-occurrence network

Following Cottica et al (2020), we call the minimal unit of text data that can be meaningfully coded a *contribution*. Coding consists of associating snippets of the contribution's text to keywords, called *codes*. The association of a snippet and a code is called an *annotation*.



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We can think of such an annotated corpus as a two-mode network. Nodes are of two types, contributions and codes. By associating a code to a contribution, the ethnographer creates an edge between the respective nodes.

From the two-mode network described above, we induce, by projection, the one-mode codes co-occurrence network (CCN). In it, each node represents an ethnographic code. An edge is induced between any two codes for every contribution. We interpret co-occurrence as association. If two codes co-occur, it means that one informant has made references to the concepts or entities described by the codes in the same contribution, seen as a unit. Hence, we assume, both concepts belong to this person's culture-generated mental map. The corpus-wide pattern of co-occurrences is taken to encode the collective mental map of informants.

1.2.5. Mixed methods at work

Once constructed, CCNs can be studied to reveal patterns of associations prevalent among informants. Networks lend themselves to intuitive visualisations that can support inference in many fields, including the social sciences (Munzner 2014). Unfortunately, CCNs tend to be large and dense, and therefore resistant to visual analysis. To overcome this limitation, we have developed a systematic, theoretically-grounded approach to the reduction of this type of network. (Cottica et al 2022). The idea is to rank-and-prune the network's edges: first, choose a metric to rank edges. Next, discard the lowest-ranking ones. Repeat the process until the network becomes small and sparse enough for visual analysis.

In this perspective, reducing a CCN boils down to choosing a theoretically grounded criterion according to which to rank its edges. We argue that four criteria have three attractive properties. The first: they are *effective* in reducing the size and density of the CCN, so that the reduced CCN is amenable to visual analysis. The second: they can be *mapped to major approaches in anthropology and sociology*. The third: they are *complementary*, allowing us to examine the data from different theoretical perspectives. They are summarised in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Four techniques of reduction of codes co-occurrence networks (CCNs)

Technique	Edges are important when...	Reduction techniques correspond to some central theoretical ideas in anthropology
core values	... they connect two codes with high	Central or dominant symbols in a



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	core values (Giatsidis et al., 2011)	culture (Ortner, 1973; Turner, 1973)
Simmelian backbone	... they are highly redundant (Nick et al., 2013)	Culture as a field of competing forces (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019; Gramsci, 1975; Laitin, 1986)
association depth (d)	... they encode a co-occurrence that occurs many times in the corpus	Culture as a structured network of uneven density (structuralism and post-structuralism, for example Lévi-Strauss, 2010)
association breadth (b)	... they encode a co-occurrence that occurs in the contributions of many informants	

The workflow we used is the following:

- First, we identified the codes with the very highest core values, and examined their list as a proxy for the “core symbols” used in our corpus.
- Second, we extracted the CCN’s Simmelian backbone, experimenting with different redundancy thresholds until the reduced network resolved in clearly identifiable communities of codes; we then examined the different semantic communities of codes and how they connect to one another.
- Finally, we reduced the CCN to its edges whose association depth was highest, and examined the reduced network as a collection of the most frequently repeated, hence in a sense structural, association between codes. We then repeated the latter operation with highest association breadth edges; this was mostly a way to control for the presence of deep associations between codes that were, nevertheless, the byproduct of only one or two informants repeating those associations over and over again. We also applied the reduction by association depth and/or association breadth to the ego networks of individual codes of interest, based on the research questions pursued by POPREBEL as a whole and by researchers analysing subsets of the data.
- It is important to note that not all reduction techniques are optimal for every research question and every research design. Part of the iterative process of us working with the ethnographic data and the visualisations was establishing which reductions would be most relevant to this particular study, and the



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outcomes of that process are reflected in the visualisations that are present in this report. In other words, while the visualisations included in the report in the subsequent sections were produced with the association depth and association breadth reduction techniques, that does not mean that we did not utilise the other techniques in our data analysis process, or that those techniques were irrelevant – starting with the Core Values and Simmelian Backbone reduction techniques, as exemplified [here](#), helped us recognize that reductions geared at structural analysis of the corpus (i.e. the depth and the breadth reductions) should be our primary focus. Thus, in this particular case, the absence of those visualisations in the final report is also a testament to their usefulness.

1.2.6. Accounting for gender

Gender has a profound impact on how individuals participate in their culture. Our data account for gender as follows. First, field ethnographers kept track of the (self-reported) gender of informants. These data were not stored in the POPREBEL forum platform, but in separate tables associating a letter denoting gender (“M” or “F”, since no informant reported other genders) to the pseudonym assigned to the informant.

When building the CCN, data on informant gender were used to build a variable we called “female prevalence” or fp , computed as follows:

$$fp(code1, code2) = \frac{\text{number of female informants whose contributions contain at least one co-occurrence of code1 and code2}}{\text{total number of informants whose contributions contain at least one co-occurrence of code1 and code2}}$$

fp varies between 0 and 1. When $fp(code1, code2) = 0$, the association between $code1$ and $code2$ is being supported only by males; vice versa, $fp(code1, code2) = 1$ indicates an association supported only by female informants. For example, if two codes A and B co-occur in the interviews of four female and one male informants, $fp(A, B) = 4/5 = 0.8$. In the CCN, fp is a property of the edges, not of the codes; in the visualisations of section 3 we represent it using edge colour. We used an algorithm that colours edges bright green when $fp = 0$; grey when $fp = 0.5$; and bright orange when $fp = 1$. Intermediate values of fp are shaded accordingly between these three main colours, using a linear algorithm so that, for example, an edge with $fp = 0.25$ is halfway between green and grey.

1.3. The Process

One of the frequent questions that arise in more inductive and exploratory research projects like this one concerns the choice of topics researchers focus on and investigate in depth in their final reports. In this project, the choice of topics that eventually focused our attention was driven by considerations in four areas: (1) literature



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review, (2) preliminary ethnographic narratives prepared by the ethnographers and later analysed in project's internal workshops, (3) experimentation with visualisations, (4) and comparisons of salient issues in all three language communities.

Literature review, including the studies of other POPREBEL teams, brought to our attention a number of issues, such as the incompetent state or the decline of trust in the CEE societies. Narratives produced by the ethnographers, and insights stemming from them, further confirmed some of the choices (for example the incompetent state), and, additionally, turned our attention to other adjacent or corollary issues, such as retraditionalization. Intense experimentation with various modes of visualisation in Graphryder and Tulip software helped us sharpen the analysis of a number of topics, revealing topics that did not initially attract attention in standard ethnographic writeups, and allowing us to reconstruct semantic networks (or, more technically: codes co-occurrence networks, CCNs) around the concepts of interest, thus adding critical nuances to the analysis of the meaning various objects, such as 'corruption' for example, have for our respondents. Awareness of these nuances emerged gradually through an iterative process of moving back and forth between the evolving body of data and its interpretations. Eventually, a series of conversations between three teams, each working on a different discursive community, led to the formulation of important questions on whether certain concerns people had were limited to their communities of discourse, embedded in/emergent from specific national cultures, or were more general, transcending the boundaries of national discourses.

While the sections below in the results part are laid by country/study, the methodology shared by the three case studies has been continuously reconciled and refined as a collaborative process between the three ethnographic teams.



2. Results

2.1. POLISH CASE

2.1.1. The Pandemic Context

2.1.1.1. *Ethnographic fieldwork in Poland in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic*

In Poland, SARS-CoV-2 became a matter of public concern in February 2020, when the news of the novel coronavirus went viral. When on the March 11th the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of a global pandemic, Poland have already had its first confirmed cases of Covid-19 (Polish Ministry of Health Report 2020b), and was about to implement strict lockdown-type control measures, following the example set by the Italian response to the virus. The first ordeal has closed schools, universities, offices, and cancelled large-scale events. On March 20 the Polish government declared a state of emergency and announced that over the next two weeks new restrictions would be gradually introduced, aiming to fully contain the virus with a nation-wide lockdown (Polish Ministry of Health Report 2020c). Obligatory masks were to be worn when going outside in all cases, unless medical recommendations stated otherwise, till the 27th of May. Non-essential travel to and across the country was forbidden, gatherings of more than two people were limited, except family get-togethers and religious ceremonies, that had a limitation of up to six participants.

The first lockdown was introduced suddenly, but people were stocking up on basic foods, fuel or hygiene products before the announcement, fearing the pandemic over the news coming from across the world (Otto-Duszczuk 2020). The strictest stay-at-home measures lasted for two months, including a brief period when even entering forests and parks was forbidden, but a significant critique from the public opinion made the government lift those restrictions (Jurszo, 2020). Restrictions were gradually adjusted to the pandemic situation, and in the summer of the 2020 the pandemic seemed to have lifted. Infection rates and death toll were at a low level, but the experts were warning that the worst is yet to come (Rapiej-Szczęśna 2020). In the fall of 2020, a system of yellow and red zones was introduced across the country to differentiate areas with different infection rates, and help local authorities respond to the crisis. On the 23rd of October, the government issued the next set of anti-pandemic measures that again limited social gatherings and the use of public spaces nation-wide, which lasted till the spring of 2022, being adjusted based on current infection rates. The obligatory mask-wearing injunction in shops and confined public spaces was in force throughout the pandemic till the 28th of March 2022, when it was lifted with



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an exception of pharmacies and healthcare centres, where it's going to stay obligatory for the time being. During the pandemic there were only three 'lockdowns', in the spring 2020, the fall 2020 and the spring 2021, when the government advised citizens to not leave their homes unless necessary. Governmental strategy aimed at introducing measures that last for longer periods of time, but are less strict, and hence are met with greater social acceptance and result in better rule following (Polish Ministry of Health Report 2020a). On 16 May 2022 the government announced the pandemic to be over (Grzela 2022).

As of June 2022, the number of fully (twice) vaccinated Poles accounts to 22,5 million, which makes up almost 59 percent of the population. Only 12,1 million people took the third shot. The official number of deaths caused by the SARS-CoV-2 and co-existing diseases is 116 405 (Polish Ministry of Health Report 2022). Some experts estimate that the death toll of the Covid-19 pandemic is twice or three times higher (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2021).

2.1.1.2. Social response to pandemic restrictions

Pandemic restrictions have affected the majority of non-virtual forms of public life, particularly the economy. While some businesses flourished, successfully adapting to the new situation, countless sources of livelihood were strained significantly. Both the governments and the European Union's responses to the pandemic were broadly discussed across the media-scape, repeatedly gaining momentum each time infections were on the rise.

The critique of governmental actions, that inevitably became a part of the conversation, came from all sides of the political spectrum. Initially, people responded to the pandemic breakout showing strong unity against the crisis. However, when it became clear after the first couple of weeks that the pandemic "is here to stay" for the foreseeable future, or at least a year, voices critical of the pandemic restrictions, or sceptical of the pandemic in general, became louder across all public online spaces, amplified by several far-right media outlets. Most of those critical comments were directed towards main public institutions, starting with the Polish government, but extending to scientists and experts – those who were judging the severity of the pandemic and designing policy responses, including advising in the introduction of measures that resulted in the crippling of the Polish economy. Soon afterwards, as the news about different vaccines against Covid-19 being developed reached the public, vaccine scepticism, fueled by the anti-vaccination movement, entered the mainstream public discourse (Świątkiewicz-Mośny et al., 2022; Żuk et al. 2019). Once a niche, a number of vaccination-related concerns became a popular conversation topic during the pandemic (Szostak 2021).



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Pandemic scepticism in Poland has revolved around two main issues: the critique of the ruling party's response, including an objection against obligatory mask-wearing and mobility restrictions, and the Covid-19 vaccinations. The first registered protest focused on the obligatory mask wearing in public spaces, calling masks "muzzles" (pl. *kagańce*), and those who believed in the coronavirus "covidians" (pl. *covidianie/kowidianie*), and calling on the government to be held responsible for the 'fascist', unlawful pandemic restrictions that are destroying the Polish economy (Polska Times 2020). The only political party of which politicians were supporting the protests and have joined them several times was Konfederacja, an oppositional libertarian party whose members and supporters include far-right conservatives, libertarian entrepreneurs and alternative medicine users. What unites them is support for the minimal involvement of the state in the life of its citizens. However, social conservatives make an exception for the state's regulation of abortion and its role in restricting women's reproductive rights (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2021). The party itself never officially issued a statement negating the need for vaccinations, but it didn't discipline their politicians who did. The ruling Law and Justice party didn't either, but their politicians, including the President and Ministers, refrained from any straightforward comments, only occasionally mentioning the need to respect one's free will when it comes to not imposing obligatory vaccinations. It is difficult to judge to what degree media narratives and social media discourses sceptical towards Covid-19 vaccinations influenced the vaccination rate.

2.1.1.3. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork during the pandemic in Poland

Ever since the early 2020 the pandemic has been the key factor dictating the pace of everyday life around the world. Poland is no exception, so it was necessary to take the pandemic's impact on the society into account while designing the Polish part of the project's ethnographic study. However, by contrast to the Czech and German cases, Poland had yet another historic event that shook the nation in the fall of 2020. The Polish Constitutional Court, which remains under strong influence of the ruling Law and Justice Party (Sadurski 2019), declared the existing abortion law unconstitutional on the 23th of October that year (BBC News 2020). The aftermath of the ruling spared nation-wide protests, the largest popular uprising since the Solidarity movement in the late 1980s, which led to a large political change both in Poland, and across the Eastern Bloc. This wave of protests, focused on women's rights, built on the earlier mobilisation of 2016 (Korolczuk et al. 2019), spread well beyond major cities (Muszel and Piotrowski 2022) and was tightly intertwined with a broader mobilisation against the official propaganda operation waged under the banner of fighting what the right-wing called 'gender ideology' (Graff and Korolczuk 2022).



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Given the importance of this event, the themes used to start a conversation during the initial stages of the Polish ethnographic fieldwork included both the pandemic and the revision of the abortion law that led to massive protests. Gradually, a conversation would turn towards Polish politics in general, the overall condition of the Polish state, and the way it has been governed for the last three decades. While the pandemic was the main axis of the study, due to its universality, importance and unavoidability, other current matters became a good starting point for interviews. The abortion was the main one, later replaced by the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, or crushing inflation. All those politically charged events, and the right-ward change in the law regulating access to abortion in particular, became the source of common worries, matters that were of concern to both the researcher and the research participant, irrespective of their personal views. Both sides agreed that these were important events, and this agreement seems to make it easier to establish trust between the two parties, as it communicated to research participants that the conversation with the researcher is a safe space to share any thoughts and reflections they may have.

2.1.2. Political and economic context

This case study is based on a distinction between the state as a system and the state as an idea or ideal (see, for example, Abrams 1988). By doing so we aim to show how different ideas of the state and political system influence one's political choices and perceptions of the state as a specific system of societal governance. We also pay particular attention to the consequences of the economic liberalisation policies of the early 1990s that were introduced by the first postcommunist governments. Those policies were based on a particular set of values and principles, assumed to be universal at that particular moment in time and modelled upon the experience of Western economies (Kubik 2013, Douarin and Havrylyshyn 2021). For instance, a specific idea of "efficiency" was at the time promoted by the International Monetary Fund.⁸ It guided, for example, the restructuring policies designed by Leszek Balcerowicz and his team, and implemented to change Poland's centrally planned economy into a free market one, making public companies profitable while privatising them.⁹ Conclusions of the analysis of the Polish case will draw upon those two fundamentals.

⁸ Anthropologist Akhil Gupta analyses the consequences of this idea in his paper on corruption in India (1995).

⁹ We do not engage with a complex debate on the post-communist economic transformations, their differential pace, and its more radical versions in some cases referred to as a shock therapy (see Załęski 2012), or their effects (for a review, see Douarin and Havrylyshyn 2021). We only note that these effects have become a subject of a heated debate and their assessment has evolved over time (Wilke *et al* 2019).



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In order to make the analysis clearer to the reader, and to show how the traditional left-centre-right divide applies to the political scene in Poland, we provide below a brief description of major political parties and coalitions they form.

To date the major political parties in Poland include:

- **Prawo i Sprawiedliwość** (PiS; eng. Law and Justice Party) – the ruling party with nationalistic, conservative, and euro-sceptical views, with solidaristic and interventionist economic views, at the far right of the Polish political spectrum. The party chairman is Jarosław Kaczyński. PiS holds 200 seats in the 2019 Sejm, the lower house of the bicameral parliament of Poland, and 44 seats in the 2019 Senat, the higher chamber.
- **Solidarna Polska** (SD, eng. Solidarity Poland) – conservative, and euro-sceptical views, with solidaristic and interventionist economic views, at the far right political spectrum. The party leader is Zbigniew Ziobro, the Minister of Justice. SD has 20 seats in the 2019 Sejm and one seat in the 2019 Senat.
- **Porozumienie** – a centre-right party, with liberal-conservative views, adhering to Christian-democratic and republican values. The party leader is Jarosław Gowin. The party holds 5 seats in the 2019 Sejm.
- **Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość** (Konfederacja, eng. Confederation Freedom and Independence) – a far-right, conservative, nationalist party with libertarian views, strong free-market deregulatory and neoliberal economic views. The head of the party is Krzysztof Bosak. The party holds 11 seats in the 2019 Sejm.
- **KORWiN** – a fringe, far-right conservative-liberal nationalist party, representing libertarian views, strong free-market deregulatory and neoliberal economic views. The head of the party is Sławomir Mentzen. The party holds 3 seats in the 2019 Sejm.
- **Kukiz'15** – conservative-liberal centre-right party, in coalition with PSL. Holds 4 seats in the 2019 Sejm.
- **Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe** (PSL; eng. Polish People's Party) – centre-right, a conservative party with an agriculture-oriented program. Member of the Polish Coalition in the 2019 Sejm. Part of the European People's Party in the EP. It holds 19 seats in the lower chamber and 2 seats in the higher chamber of the 2019 parliament.
- **Platforma Obywatelska** (PO; eng. Civic Platform Party) – a major opposition party with conservative, Christian democratic, liberal, and centre-right views, with neoliberal economic views, in the centre-right of the political spectrum in Poland. The Party leader is Donald Tusk. PO holds 107 seats in the 2019 Sejm and 41 in the 2019 Senat.
- **Nowoczesna** – liberal, centric and pro-European party, holding 6 seats in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament, in the Civic Coalition (pol. Koalicja Obywatelska) with the Civic Platform Party.
- **Partia Zieloni** – Polish Green Party, member of the Civic Coalition. Holds 3 seats in the 2019 Sejm.



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- **Nowa Lewica** (N; eng. the New Left Party) – a centre-left party, representing state-interventionist, social-democratic, socio-liberal, anticlerical, feminist, and pro-environmentalist ideals. It's a new political formation created in 2021 by the union of the *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* (SLD, eng. Democratic Left Alliance) and *Wiosna* (eng. Spring). In the parliamentary coalition with the Razem party, holding 38 seats in the 2019 Sejm.
- **Razem** (eng. Together) – a left-wing party, in coalition with the New Left Party, representing feminist, pro-European, and social-democratic ideas. Established in 2015 as an answer to the 2015 parliamentary elections, when none of the left-wing parties entered the parliament. In the 2019 Sejm it holds 6 seats.
- **Polska Partia Socjalistyczna** (PPS; eng. Polish Socialist Party) – a socialist party with 3 parliamentarians in Sejm and 2 senators in Senate in the 2019 elections.

Figure 3 shows the five major coalitions in the Polish Sejm, the lower chamber of the parliament, in 2019. For the purpose of clarity, we have listed them below by the number of seats won:

1. **Law and Justice Party Coalition** (235): PiS, SD, Porozumienie,
2. **Civic Coalition** (134): parties Civic Platform, Nowoczesna, Green Party,
3. **Left Coalition** (49): parties New Left, PPS, and Razem,
4. **PSL/Polish Coalition** (30): parties PSL and Kukiz'15),
5. **Confederation Freedom and Independence** (11): parties Konfederacja, KORWiN, non-party nationalist politicians.



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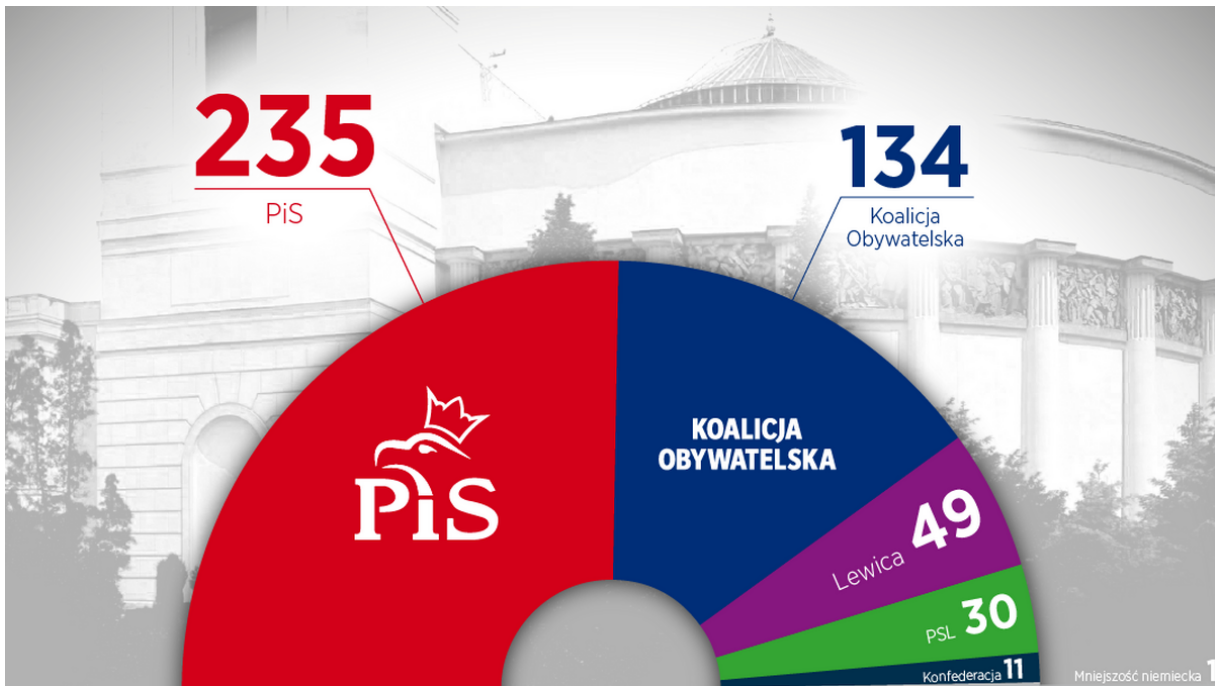


Figure 3: Five major coalitions in Sejm, the lower chamber of the Polish parliament, in a result of 2019 parliamentary elections.

Source: Newsweek Polska

These general characteristics of the political spectrum provide context for the analysis presented in paragraphs below. We believe that it is crucial to recognize the extent to which a strict application of simplifying definitions of what constitutes the left, the centre, and the right is fruitless, when it comes to analysing one country's political culture in all its past and present complexity.

There are three major themes that stand out in the Polish fieldwork data: (1) the polarisation of Polish society, as seen and experienced by research participants; (2) images of an ideal state, embedded in specific values; (3) the notion of a cardboard state, which captures the disillusionment with the political class and the lack of trust towards state institutions. The following section is structured around those themes, while the analysis of the material itself is framed by two theoretical assumptions.

2.1.3. Polarisation, antagonism, division? Narratives on the condition of Polish society



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This section provides an overview of several major issues related to the overall condition of Polish society, a major topic in conversations Magda Goralska had with research participants during the study. Questions such as 'how do you like living in Poland?' or 'what would you like to change in Poland?' provoked the interviewees to share their often critical thoughts on the state of their own, smaller community, broader society, or the nation.

The formation of nations and the emergence of the national form of collective identity belong to the core themes studied by the modern social sciences from their beginning. A well-established, post-modern anthropological perspective on the matter is best summarised by the concept of imagined communities, a term coined by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book. Together with a number of other influential scholars (Gellner, Kohn, Billig), Anderson sees nation as a community of people, who perceive themselves as being a part of a certain group, pointing out that the nation is a cultural and social construct, with a traceable and relatively short history. In his recent *Ludowa Historia Polski* (2020), Leszczynski traces in detail how the idea of the Polish nation has evolved from the “elites as the nation” to the modern version of the concept, in which the peasant nation (pl. *naród chłopski*) and the noble nation (pl. *naród szlachecki*) merge. He points towards the centuries of state and class divisions to explain the origins of current political polarisation and social cleavages, whose study has a long tradition in Polish sociology.¹⁰ Keeping this in mind, Goralska looked into ways research participants perceive Polish society and their communities. The findings are summarised in three subsections: (1) social divisions, (2) antagonisms and polarisation, and (3) alienation.

2.1.3.1. Narratives of differences and divisions

What are the major divisions within Polish society in the eyes of the study's participants? The question was never asked directly, but several answers emerged organically during the conversations about the state of Polish society, the country, and, most importantly, Polish politics. The social cleavage that's at the centre of those conversations each time is the clash between two major parties, the Civic Platform (pol. Platforma Obywatelska, PO) and the Law and Justice Party (pol. Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), or rather social groups they represent, or are perceived to be representing. Ola, who lives in Katowice in the south of Poland and perceives herself as having leftists political views, says:

I think that the Civic Coalition didn't notice any social issues, the growing inequalities, that a part of society is excluded... Neither the Left did give an answer to the problem, so some people who needed

¹⁰ For the results of an authoritative study, see, for example Słomczyński et al 2014. Jasiewicz (2022) examines, *inter alia*, the links between social structure and political behaviour of Poles.



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money to live just voted for PiS. Some people think there is a culture war in Poland, and that the Christian tradition is dying, and that it's absurd that we are introducing some equality standards. This is that group, which really wants for us not to change, so conservative, who do what it takes to make sure that such changes do not happen. (PL55Ola30a)

To her, the people she talks about are those who voted for the Law and Justice Party and brought it to power, whereas the current opposition parties, PO and the New Left, were unable to appeal to those parts of the society. What drives PiS voters are money, social welfare concerns and/or conservatism. They are *'mostly people from smaller cities, from the country, less educated, older, right. So it's a little bit like those are people who have the smallest, the narrowest cognitive horizon, are the easiest to manipulate'* (PL15Dawid30b).

When asked about the condition of Polish society, Mateusz, who is over 45 years old, says that *'this dream to be someone of higher status, a nobleman, it's some sort of obsession of those who got rich, and now they think they are from the better league. [...] We are [however] living in the country of the peasants, because our intelligentsia was wiped out [during World War II]'* (PL36Mateusz40b). The divisions in Polish society in the words of research participants refer to values, education and financial situation. The class, when referred to, is deemed inadequate as a concept, because the differences in the society are more complex and do not easily align with class distinctions. Ethnographic data suggest that Polish society is not only divided, but also fragmented. Social fragmentation is often referred to in people's remarks on class-based and geography-based bubbles, such as *'my Warsaw bubble'* (PL39Wiktoria30a). Another interviewee, Ola from Katowice, speaks more directly on the matter, when asked why in her opinion people vote for the Law and Justice Party. She admits while it is the question she asks herself every time, when thinking about divisions in Poland, she is *'in a bubble, I am completely aware of it, so my friends do not represent such [PiS] views'* (PL55Ola30a). Ania, who lives in a big city as well and works as a public official, notes that we are *'too much of a mix, in between the mentality of the West and the East'*, and that the *'divisions will always be there, and if the divides are going to be there so will wars, and there never be an agreement'* (PL26Ania30b).¹¹

Has the pandemic changed anything? According to some research participants, despite the initial unity in the wake of the crisis, the pandemic has strengthened social divisions. The biggest issue was the one of vaccinations. Mateusz notes that *'suddenly some of my friends are anti-vaxxers'* (PL36Mateusz40b), and Maciej says that even families got divided over it (PL49Maciej60a).

¹¹ Other studies confirm the existence of a very strong sense that Polish society is deeply divided. See Sadura and Sierakowski (2021:19).



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Visualisations of the coded data corpus, where codes represent topics raised by the research participants, not only sheds light at the structure of discourse (culture) our respondents 'carry in their heads', but can also provide a different perspective on the complexities of social divisions. The visualisation below shows the networks of concepts, affects and institutions the interviewees associated with the Catholic Church and the topic of abortion. The *abortion* code is linked with codes that capture social perception of the issue, in light of recent changes in law that regulates pregnancy termination in Poland, which sparked social unrest and a wave of protests in 2020 and 2021.

On the 23rd of October 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that the current law on abortion, known as the abortion compromise, is against the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, as it doesn't protect life. The compromise was a regulation governing the matter of pregnancy termination, that was a result of the Church-supported conservative lobbying during the transition period of early 1990s, when Poland was shifting towards becoming a neoliberal state. During the communist times access to abortion was supported by the state and available by request till the 12th week of pregnancy. In 1993 the new abortion regulations allowed abortion only in three cases: in the case of criminal activity, such as rape or incest (1), in the case of a threat to the mother's life (2), and in the case of the severe and irreversible damaged to the fetus (3), that makes up 98% of all abortion performed in Poland each year (Rada Ministrów 2022). The ruling issued on October 23rd 2020 stated that performing abortion in case 3 is against the Polish Constitution. The decision sparked nation-wide protests, the largest since the game-changing Solidarity movement's strikes that brought the end to the rule of the Communist Party, and started the complex process of quintuple regime transformation (Kubik 2013). Thousands went to the streets despite restrictions, accusing the government for pushing for the controversial change in the law during the pandemic, in the hope that the society will not oppose. Protests known as Strajk Kobiet didn't stop the new law that took effect in January 2021 (Kuraś 2021).

Based on the results of semantic network analysis, Figure 4 shows that the discursive clusters around the two important codes, 'abortion' and 'the Catholic Church', are strongly interconnected through codes that signify various aspects of social divisions and speak to societal differences. The set of codes in-between the two codes of interest includes several categories denoting various phenomena such as 'tolerance' or 'legality' but also relevant social agents, such as 'young people '. The colour of edges maps to gender balance: recall from section 1.2.6 that bright green edges represent associations supported predominantly by male informants; grey edges represent associations supported equally by female or male informants; and bright orange edges represent associations supported predominantly by female informants. Grey edges represent co-occurrences supported more or less equally by female and male informants, with more muted tones of green/orange representing prevalence (but not



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exclusivity) of, respectively, male/female informants. We can see that the study participants have spoken about *politicisation*, *religiosity*, *LGBT community* within the context of political corruption (code *DDpolcor*), political manipulation efforts (code *CULman*) and propaganda narratives (code *CULdemon*). The existence of such a cluster seems to signal a hostile environment, where social divisions are exacerbated, making a civilised public debate (code *seeking civilised debate*) on issues such as abortion or Church reform impossible. The graph also suggests that social divisions attributable to different worldviews or values might have their roots in the deepening generational gap. When we look at the semantic network around the *Catholic Church* node, we note that it contains the issues the Church currently faces: its negatively assessed deep involvement in politics and the slow exodus from the Church. Our results are confirmed by recent survey data that shows a growing number of apostasies (KAI, 2021), declining participation in religious rituals among highly educated and city dwellers, and a drastic fall in a number of young people participating in the Church life, the process that indicates the deepening disagreement with the conservative worldview of older generations (CBOS, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

Equally importantly, Figure 4 provides a powerful insight into the gender gap in the analysed set of interviewee responses. The topic of abortion was connected with a host of other topics predominantly by women (orange edges), and was raised, for example, in the context of social activism, social inequality, difficulties in access to healthcare, and more general criticism of the state. The topic is associated with the younger generation, for which taking part in the protests has often been the first act of political engagement, as we know from other studies. The code 'young people' connects to the code 'Catholic Church' with a green line that shows that the relationship between the Church and the younger generation was more frequently discussed by men. In the context of abortion, male respondents tended to speak about polarisation and social divisions more often than women. When talking about the Catholic Church, they would also mention the Church's importance in supporting traditional values and being part of Polish heritage. This suggests that male study participants were overall more conservative than female respondents, a tendency well documented by survey-based studies (Jasiewicz 2022, CBOS 2021a, CBOS 2021b).

Both genders (grey edges) across the political spectrum agreed, however, that the Church is in need of reforms, suffering from the detachment from reality, demagoguery, lack of openness (code *tolerance*), and political overinvolvement, as represented by the code *politicisation*, that is linked to both the *abortion* code and the *Catholic Church* code. Another interesting take away from the visualisation is the character of the semantic network around the node *SAsupdef* (support deficit), particularly the links to abortion and the Church. This relationship can be interpreted as an expression of disappointment with both the state and the Church, which introduce rules and limitations that are seen as purely political or ideological, and not based on objective points of



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reference, such as science or evidence-based medicine. While displaying such authoritarian proclivities, both institutions do not offer enough support to those affected by the new reality, especially when it comes to healthcare issues, such as access to abortion. While the pandemic was without question a truly total experience in its own right, the change in the pregnancy termination law was a highly polarising event of strongly political nature.

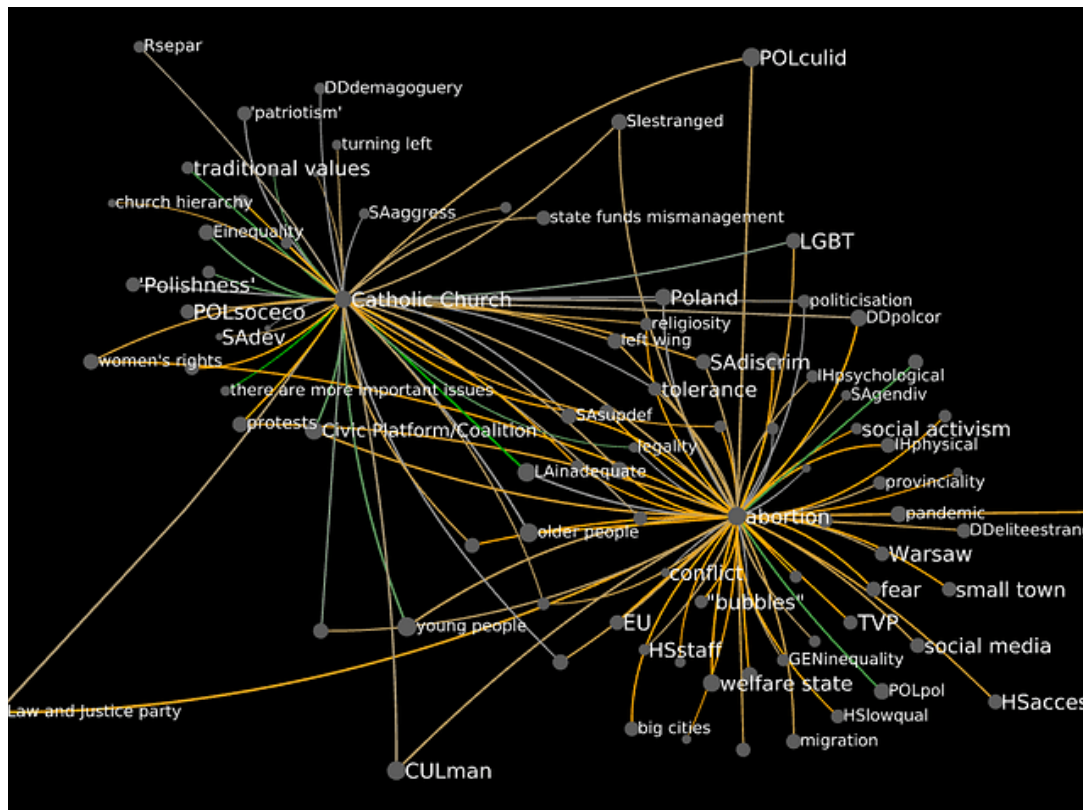


Figure 4: the codes Catholic Church and abortion and their neighbours. Each edge is underpinned by the contributions of at least 3 informants.

In the following visualisation (Figure 5) we present a highly reduced semantic network around the node representing the ruling party, PiS.¹²

¹² These visualisations show only those nodes that cocurred with node 'PiS' at least 25 times.



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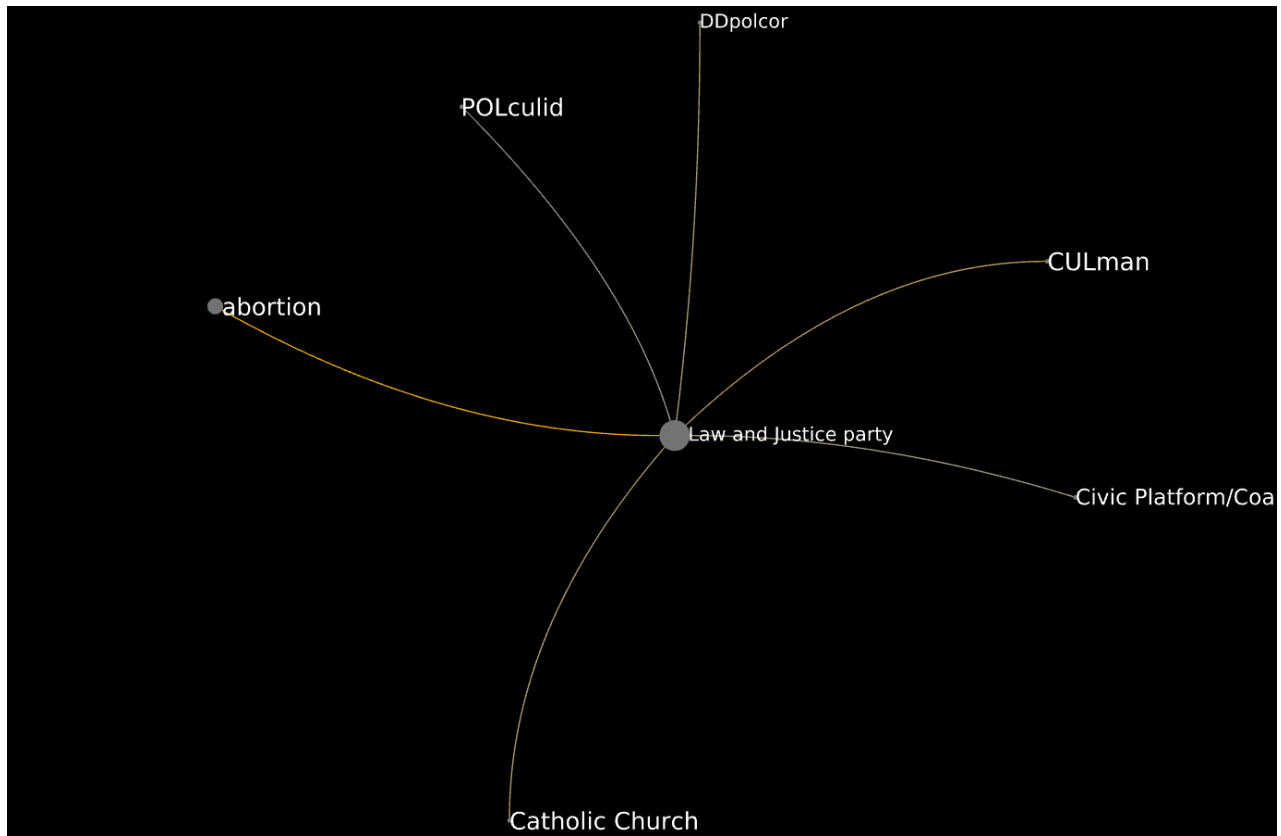


Figure 5: Highly reduced CCN ($d \geq 25$). The codes for abortion and the Catholic Church are connected via that for the Law and Justice party.

The Catholic Church is the main champion of the strict anti-abortion regime in Poland. But which frame do people employ when they think about the relationship between abortion and the most powerful religious institution in the country? In other words, what is the semantic context within which this relationship is embedded? Our method of semantic network analysis allows us to shed some light on such questions. In strongly reduced CCNs the relationship between the Catholic Church and abortion, as construed by almost half our study's participants, is not direct but mediated by reference to the most powerful political actor on the Polish political scene: the ruling Law and Justice Party¹³. This means that when these people talk about the Catholic Church and abortion, they simultaneously reference the ruling party. This, in turn, indicates *a high level of politicisation of the issue of abortion* that is framed in people's minds not just in moral but also in political terms. To put this finding in the

¹³ The codes for abortion and the Catholic Church are also directly associated to one another, but their association is shallower than those with the code for the Law and Justice party ($d = 12$).



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fullest perspective afforded by our study, we can set the level of co-occurrence to its highest level for this dataset ($d = 38$). It turns out that when the parameter is at its maximum only two concepts, both centrally relevant for the present analysis, remain: Law and Justice Party and... cultural or ideological manipulation.

The graph reveals two further intriguing semantic phenomena. When the parameter is set to 25 co-occurrences, the Law and Justice Party is associated not only with *cultural-ideological manipulation*, but also with *political corruption* and *cultural polarisation*, while its main competitor on the political scene, the Civic Platform Coalition, is not associated with any of these vices with the same frequency. To be precise, all the three vices our interviewees attribute to Law and Justice Party and still present when the level of co-occurrences is set at 25, in the case of Civic Platform Coalition, disappear at a lower level of 18. Importantly, people associate the Coalition with the question of abortion far less frequently. The link between these two concepts disappears at the level of co-occurrence set at 7. This confirms the idea found in other studies that in 2021-2 it is the Law and Justice Party that is responsible for the incessant politicisation of the issue of abortion.

2.1.3.2. Social antagonisms and polarisation

Some contemporary theorists and researchers of media communication point out that new information and communication technologies lead to the polarisation of the public debate. This in turn, they argue, could reinforce social divisions and antagonise certain groups against each other. While the thesis is debatable (Postill, 2018), the topic of polarisation and antagonisms within Polish society has often come up during conversations with our research participants. Reflecting on the matter in the more global context, Olek, who works in the IT sector and is in his late 30s, says that,

[...] The majority of conversation on the Internet, at least in the political context, ends with negative emotion between the sides. And it seems like it is a slow process of escalation of negative emotions as a result of the lack of communication, or being open to communication, which comes from the limitations of social media, which are at large textual, there is no tone of voice involved, and so on. And also people use different definitions of different concepts. It's even worse than the lack of communication, it's an inverse of communication, de-communication. It makes people see the other side in a more and more negative light. And this strong polarisation is escalating all the time. And we are right now in a moment, where it is an advanced problem, and it's hard to do anything about it. (PL45Olek20b)



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As a result some Internet users refrain from engaging in discussions online. Beata, who is in her late thirties and has leftist views, shares that *'I am not commenting. I did it a few times and it is incredibly emotionally straining. I am not commenting in public [anymore]. I write right away that I can talk [on the topic] in a private chat'* (PL10Beata30b).

However, for the majority of the interviewees the actions of political parties are the main cause of the growing antagonism between various groups within Polish society. According to some research participants, the two most voted-for parties, the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice, are the ones to blame in particular, as both use very polarising narratives about their political opponents and their voters. Zosia, who grew up in the suburbs of Warsaw and is in her late twenties, thinks that *'the biggest problem with the politics is this setup, that there are two parties, and they don't want to allow the third [power] in. They are fighting against it in all ways possible. Paradoxically, in my opinion, especially when it comes to local authorities'* (PL07Zosia20b). Mateusz, an over 45 years old businessman, sees the beginning of the growing political divisionism and *'antagonisation by the two camps'* in the early 2000 (PL36Mateusz40b). Even the respondents who vote for the two biggest parties note negative consequences of such polarising narrative strategies. Jacek, a PiS voter who is in his early thirties and has two small daughters, grew up in bigger city in northeast Poland, but lives in the capital now, says that Jarosław Kaczyński, who is the PiS party leader, is *'a very controversial person, and I am aware of it, and he is far from ideal, when it comes to the national consensus [pl. zgoda narodowa] or not inspiring divisions'* (PL48Jacek30a).

The semantic network analysis allowed us to have a more systematic look at the context in which people talk about polarisation and – in particular – who is to be blamed for it in their view. The results of this analysis for cultural-ideological polarisation, POLculid, are presented in Figure 6. It is no surprise that polarisation shows up in the semantic space of LGBT issues and the Catholic Church; it does however co-occur more frequently with the mentions of abortion ($d = 17$), cultural manipulation (CULman) ($d = 14$), and social media ($d = 13$). Predictably, it co-occurs also with political polarisation POLpol ($d = 20$). However, the most interesting result of this analysis is the discovery that the code that co-occurs most frequently with cultural-ideological polarisation is Law and Justice Party ($d = 30$), the ruling party. Its chief competitor, the Civic Platform Coalition is mentioned in the context of polarisation less frequently.



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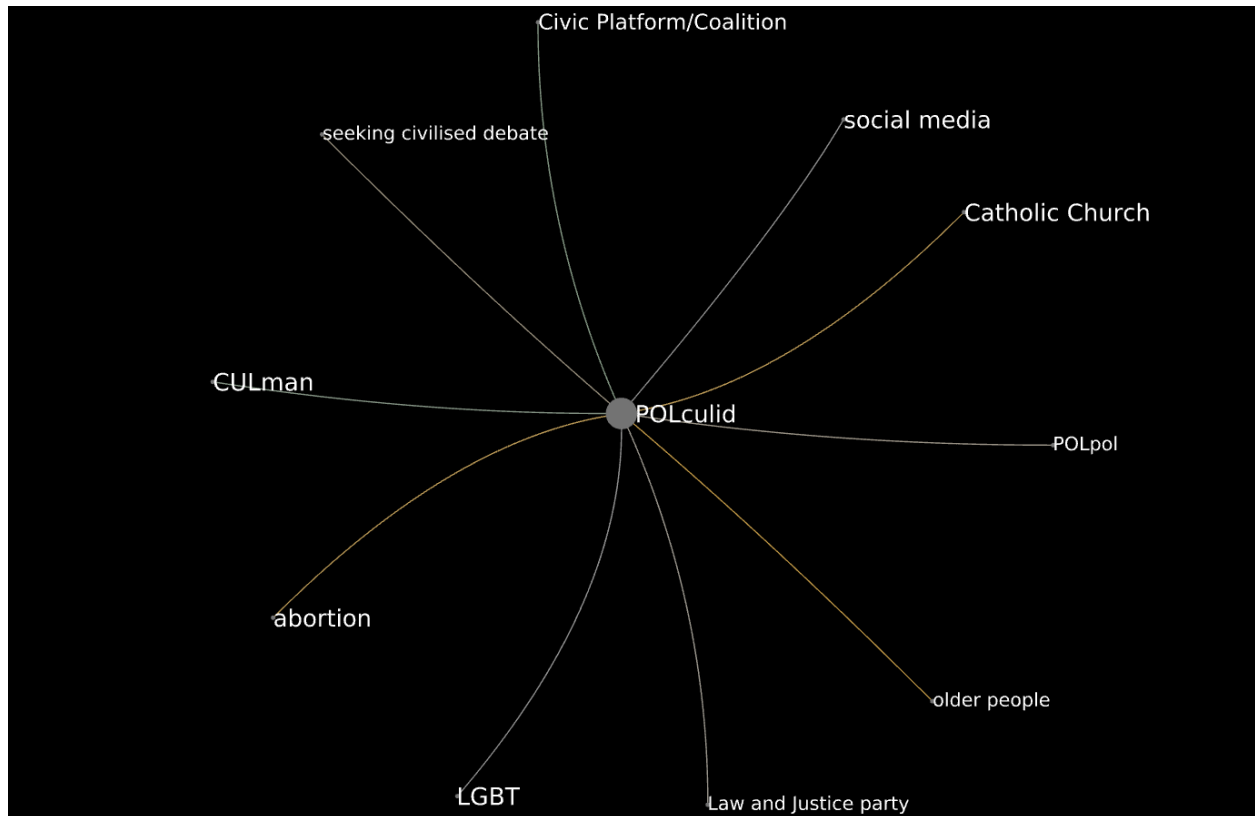


Figure 6: Ego network of cultural-ideological polarisation (POLculid). The five deepest edges are, from deepest down: with Law and Justice Party ($d = 30$), with POLpol ($d = 20$), with abortion ($d = 17$), with CULman ($d = 14$) and with social media ($d = 13$).

When it comes to voting strategies, some of our interviewees admitted relying on the ‘being against’ approach, that is voting for the lesser evil. Voters from across the political spectrum admit to voting for a particular party, because they are against another one, and they wish for it to lose. This tendency was pronounced in narratives on the 2020 presidential election in Poland. For example, Maciek, a farmer who votes for Konfederacja and is in his early thirties, says:

At large... I think it's in both cases, that the PiS party voters and the PO party voters vote against each other, they antagonise their political choices based on what they believe the other side stands for, which they oppose. I think this is something like 60-70 percent of voters. However, maybe not in the case of the first [2015] elections when PiS won, because they did show some sort of a program, which



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made sense. And they did surprise everybody, showing that the election program actually can be turned into reality, [that's not all words]. So the first elections [they] won with that they made a program, more so than with amplifying the negative sentiment against the Civic Platform party. The second election... Now, if they win again, they will win only because of the negative sentiment towards the PO (PL42Maciek30a).

Some, however, agree with antagonising narratives of the parties they vote for, and have a negative image of 'the other', the voter of a competing party. An interesting example of such a dynamic among our interlocutors are the Civic Platform and the New Left voters, who criticise PiS voters that are welfare recipients. Bruno, an engineer in his late twenties says that his father, who votes for the Civic Platform party despite his difficult housing situation, insists on credit taking, and believe that those '*who are not doing it like that*', meaning buying an apartment on credit instead of renting or expecting state supported housing are '*lazy, take social welfare, are of course addicted to it*' (PL30Bruno20b). However, Zofia, who is a conservative voter in her late thirties, observes that she often can hear the word *loafers* (pl. *nieroby*) particularly in her conservative family circles, that '*the views are such that one must work, not be lazy*' (PL11Zofia30b). PiS voters are perceived by those who do not vote for the party as social welfare free-riders, who are too lazy to actually go to work. Alicja who is in her early thirties says that she knows many families, who are welfare takers and who take the 500+ child support and '*are able to support their lives*', and even though they live '*on a rather low level*' they '*don't work, because they don't feel like it and they don't really need to*' (PL31Alicja30a).

Visualisations in Figures 7 and 8 help to locate polarisation in a context of other concerns and topics, most importantly political corruption.



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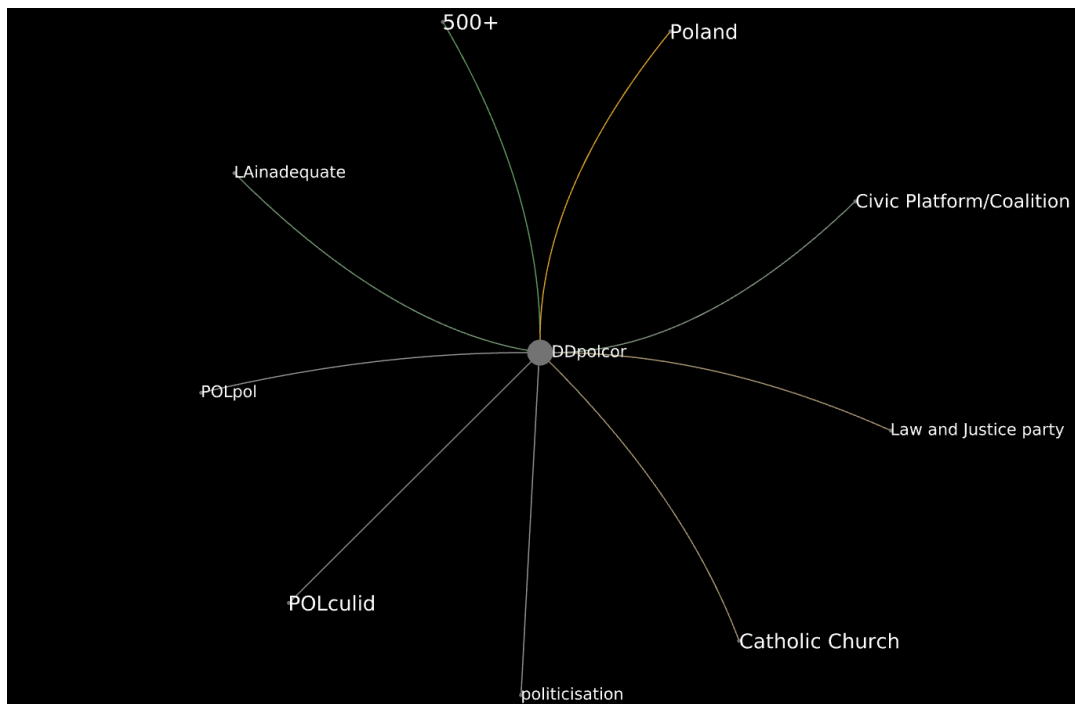


Figure 7: Ego network of the code for political corruption (DDpolcor) code with $d > 5$

Political corruption (code 'DDpolcor') co-occurs on our respondents' mental maps with three major institutions of public life – two leading political parties and the Catholic Church, as well as with two forms of polarisation, political ('POLpol') and cultural-ideological ('POLculid').¹⁴ This semantic cluster seems to constitute the core of people's understanding of the situation in the country. We do not know if people think that corruption causes polarisation or vice versa, but we note that when people think about the situation in the country these two notions come to the forefront of their conceptualisation. After reducing the level of co-occurrence just one step to $d > 4$, the picture reveals a richer semantic network of political corruption (see Figure 8). The welfare program '500+' that contributed to the reduction of childhood poverty in the country is mentioned in the context of corruption more often by males (green edge), whereas women tend to see Poland and corruption as belonging to the same semantic space more often than men.

¹⁴ The co-occurrence between 'DDpolcor' and Law and Justice party is supported by 20 informants, of which 12 are female. That between 'DDpolcor' and Civic Platform/Coalition is supported by 9 informants, of which 4 are female. That between 'DDpolcor' and Catholic Church by 10 informants, of which 6 are female.



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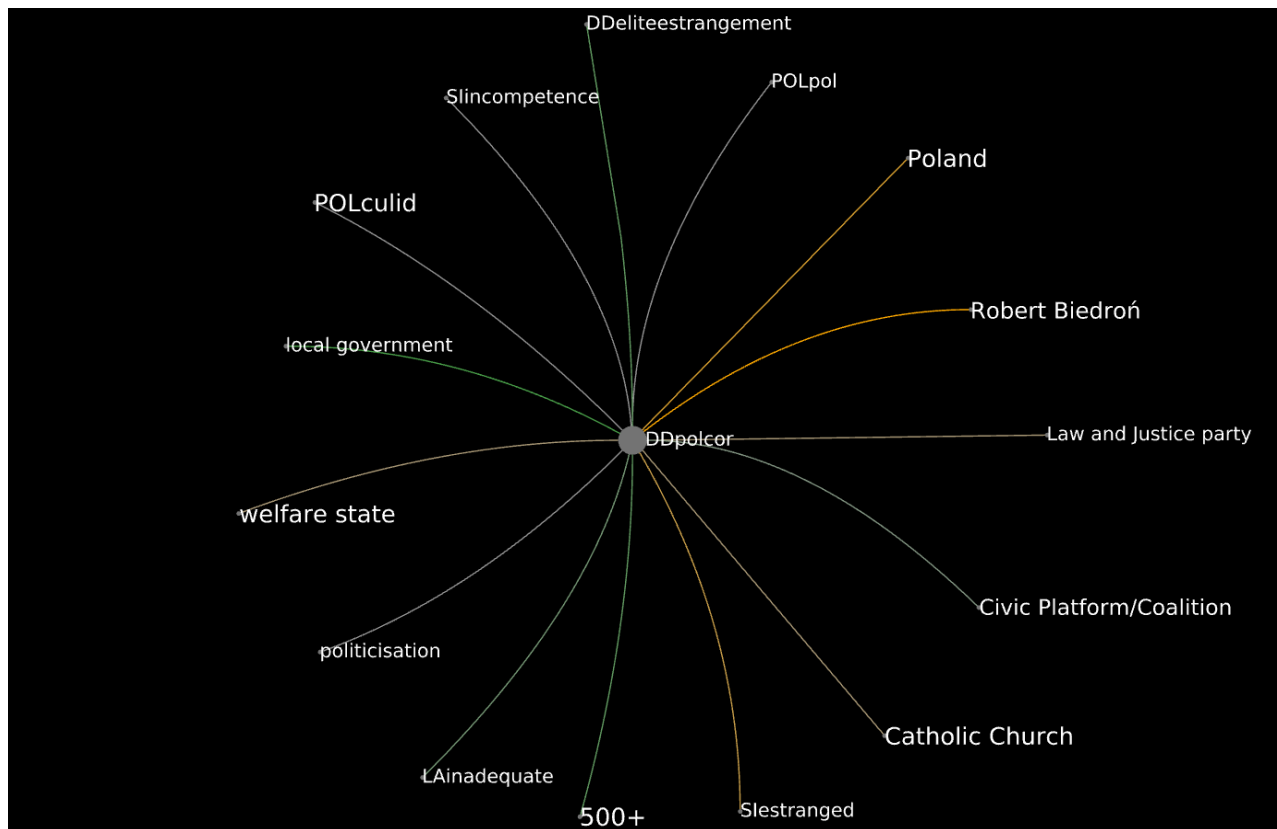


Figure 8: Ego network of the code for political corruption (DDpolcor) code with $d > 4$

2.1.3.3. Alienation, individualism, collectivism

Conversations about the condition of Polish society often end with a reflection that there are some general problems with its current condition. Izabela, a librarian from a mid-size city in her late fifties, says that there is a generic 'lack of responsibility, some sort of empathy, thinking of others', adding that it's about egoism (PL40Izabela50b). According to Flora, in her late thirties, it is due to 'decades of education that bets strongly on individualism, and it misses some sort of civic education, I think, to go out of me and my immediate family, and the rest is out of the picture' PL58Flora30b.

For some research participants, antagonising political narratives and social divisions they observe were a reason for the growing feeling of uncertainty and fear: 'I am a bit afraid of the future. I can see now how much the society



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is getting polarised, not only in Poland, but also across the world' (01PLZuzanna20b). Such thoughts sometimes lead to thoughts of emigration, especially in the case of alienated minorities, but also go towards having to rely more on the support of a local community, instead of the larger structure such as the state. Martyna says that we 'need to get into the mechanism of acting locally' (PL44Martyna30b). Sizing down is also the way to substitute the idea of large fatherland with the notion of small fatherland (*mała ojczyzna*).¹⁵ To Mateusz the idea of the nation 'as a group of fanatics that must believe in particular values' doesn't resonate with him. Instead, he says that 'we live in a particular place, and in this place we can do something for the local community. I think this should be a manifestation of patriotism, but Poles are unable to do it' (PL36Mateusz40b).

The overview presented in this section provides us with an image of the Polish society that is fundamentally divided and whose political culture and social media environments are permeated by antagonism. Polish sociologist Andrzej Zybała sees the current political status quo in Poland as one of cultural conflict (2019). Some scholars, such as Leszczyński (2020), see deep roots of those societal divisions in the history of Polish society. Some of our interviewees point towards more recent times, seeing origins of the current political tensions in the events of 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s. In the following sections we will provide an insight into research participants' views on the ideal of state and their critiques of the actual state.

2.1.4. Tales of an ideal state: politics, citizenship, values

I think it is my civic duty, an expression of care for the state. I consider myself a patriot, and this is why I am critiquing my country, if there is something that doesn't work in it. It is an expression of concern, as is voting. PL25Marta20b

At some point during an interview, I would ask research participants about their opinions on the desired role of the state in their lives, and how the country should be governed. Sometimes these questions were addressed without any prompt from me, with interviewees bringing up such topics themselves. Following Abrams differentiations of the state as an idea and the state as a system (1988), this section provides an overview of research participant's take on what the state and its representatives should be.

¹⁵ For a useful review of the concept of 'small fatherland' see <https://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/artykuly/mala-ojczyzna/>. Accessed on 12 December 2022.



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At their core, the conversations I had with research participants were about qualities and values the state and those who work for it should embody or act upon. Research questions that have led our ethnographic study from the beginning, direct our attention to the matter of how individuals' life stories shape people's political agency, as well as their ideas of the state, society, and civic duties, including voting choices. Their narratives on such abstract concepts as 'authority', generic 'politicians', or 'public services', whether of praise or critique, are based on their judgement of the matters discussed, informed by their lived experiences, their habitus, as well as their cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977; 1986).

2.1.4.1. Conceptions of an ideal state

What is the ideal state made of? What qualities should it have? First and foremost, according to our research participants, *'the state should be able to guarantee medical care, so we won't have a situation like in America, when people cannot afford [it]'* (PL51Jerzy20a). *The state as care provider* is the ideal that comes up the most often, in conversations with both the right-wing and left-wing voters. The 'proper' scale and scope of such care is where the differences begin. The right-wing voters, both those voting for PiS and for Konfederacja, want the state that provides security and stability, while more left-leaning interviewees want the state that is more inclusive, caring, tolerant, 'without discrimination based on race, gender, orientation, education, anything' (PL38Anita20b), and brings back dignity:

They say that liberal parties forgot about the fact that people did indeed lose in that economic transition. There are places, like that America village in the Mazury region, that movies are made about, where during the transition people were losing everything, and the world has forgotten about it, the politicians [forgot about them]. And those people lost their dignity, their fortune, and didn't get any help. (PL23Krystyna50a)

Zosia, who is in her late twenties, a home-staying mom of two, who lives near the capital city thinks that it is *'the basis of the basics, for the normal country to have [a government] that takes care of demography'*. She uses the social welfare program called 500 Plus, which gives each family 500 PLN each month per child. *'I use 100 percent of that money to pay for the kindergarten'*, she says, *'there are only private kindergartens here'*. She adds, *'The 500 Plus program, in my opinion, cannot be called populism. In my opinion, it is a basic program'* (PL07Zosia20b). To Marcin, who is in his early twenties, the state needs to be a social democracy, like it is in the case of Western European countries, ruled by social-democratic parties (PL09Marcin20a).



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Jacek, a journalist and a father of two who votes for the Law and Justice Party, shares his perspective on the state's role in the life of its citizens. To him the state should provide *'conditions for people to feel free and at ease to be able to live the same quality of life like in the West'*, based on the *'military and geopolitical security'* (PL48Jacek30a). Fundamentally, it should be simply run well, so it *'functions well, and all benefit in the end'* (PL15Dawid30b), *'like in a small company; the country is like a small company and one needs to know how to manage it'* (PL26Ania30b). Social welfare programs should be well thought through, not like the 500 PLUS program: *'in a sense [it] is a positive move, but I somewhat think that money shouldn't be given to the rich'* (PL23Krystyna50a). To summarise, the state should be a welfare state, but one that is organised in such a way that it *'helps those who are not coping, but helps in a smart way'* (PL23Krystyna50a),¹⁶ by people who are well-qualified, secular experts, especially when it comes to healthcare by *'an medical or scientific body of experts'* (01PLZuzanna20b).

While social welfare belongs to the topics that are mentioned most frequently, the ideal state should also be an *'enlightened, good democracy'* (PL37Andrzej50b), where the state *'cares about the tripartite division of power'* (PL23Krystyna50a), but is also not too top heavy, focused on local governance. Maks, a Ph.D. student in humanities, who has working class roots and is the first in this family to receive a higher education degree, shares:

[My] first thought was that an ideal [governance] should be based on qualifications, on people, who are engaged and have some kind of background in third sector work. [...] I think, it is an ideal, towards which, against odds, even if what is now continues, that this governance will continue the evolution towards the governance based on dialogue, participation, and recognizing the needs of citizens. (PL12Maks30a)

Another interviewee, Andrzej, who is a business psychologist in his late fifties, would like to see the local governments becoming the base of the political system in Poland: *'unicameral parliament [...] with a chamber of local self-governments (pol. izba samorządowa), with, for example, representatives of, I don't know, voivodeships, or something like that'* (PL37Andrzej50b). The role and importance of local authorities is a significant part of the experience of the state, the state that's close to the people, especially when it comes to their role in building local communities and doing grassroots work:

For example, one local administrative unit (pol. *gmina*), that is really pro-sports and pro-environmentalism, and the education they do works very well. More people get into running, take

¹⁶ Such a view of the proper function of the welfare state, not too large ('Scandinavian') yet not too small, is noted also by Sadura and Sierakowski (2019:66). They call this model 'Bavarian', as it combines social protection with conservative worldview.



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part in some sport events, and the community gets activated. It's not like school education, but like a generic one, locally. Picnics, flayers, talks, social media. The mayor is running so he is transferring his passion to his local community and it works, it changes [things]. (PL550Ia30a)

Would strengthening local governments help make the state more "user friendly"? Flora thinks that not everything should be decided on the top state level: *'I want things to be like that, when we are somewhere on the ground, in a particular place, we know what's happening there, and Poland is quite diverse locally, because of the historical conditions, field conditions, natural resources, traditions, many reasons'* (PL58Flora30b).¹⁷

The idea of an ideal state that emerges from our analysis of the interviews is a vision of a state that's humane throughout, both when it comes to its ability to provide various forms of care to its citizens, as well as being close to them through local governance. As another team of researchers observed: *'When it comes to the views on the tasks the authorities should realise, the decisive majority of Poles takes a position close to the Catholic social doctrine and conservatism, identifying simultaneously with the anti-paternalistic heritage of liberalism'* (Rau et al 2018:161). What does make research participants value the state that is focused on the community, where authority is close to the people and not far away, vested in anonymous state officials and administrative bureaucracy? Let's keep this question in mind for it might be answered in the next section. Meanwhile, let's see how the respondents see the ideal features of politicians and political culture.

2.1.4.2. Politicians and the ideal of political culture

Ideal political culture

While conversations about an ideal state might take on a more abstract tone or involve questions that may prove difficult to be answered, questions about what qualities a politician or political culture should have and what values they should stand for seem to be a bit easier to engage with. What emerges from the interviews is condensed in the following list:

- society-oriented, society-sensitive, *'especially in a country that was affected by all those years of brutal neoliberalism'* (PL48Jacek30a),
- being close to people and engaging in matters that matter to citizens, like supporting strikes, working with NGOs, being available to meet and listen to their voters,

¹⁷ In 2022, Poles trusted local governments twice as strongly as the executive branch of central government – 63% to 32% (CBOS, 2022a:8).



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- open, inclusive, tolerant and respectful, *'not getting into the Polish-Polish war, which is now happening in Polish politics'* (PL16Lena20b),
- independent of networks of dependency and immune to corruption: *'it cannot be, that 'party people' are chosen and again particular arrangements and circles are in power'*, it should rather be a choice of a person *'that is known to the society'*, the community, to voters from their constituency (PL49Maciej60a),
- aspires to Western standards of governance, but is also cautious of novel worldviews and historical and cultural conditions of Polish reality,
- wants to help citizens, but is *'not afraid to take unpopular decisions. In Poland we have the problem of the healthcare system [...]. No government wants to do what needs to be done'* (PL37Andrzej50b),
- expert qualifications for the job: *'what I mean is that someone with head should be taking care of it, not a friend of a friend'* (PL35Konrad30b),
- not crystal clear, but active in shaping the direction of public debate (PL58Flora30b),
- must follow through with their promises, *'it is detachment from reality, when all seems to be great, a politician makes an appearance, supposedly is with the people during some meetings, supposedly listens to them, but there is no action that follows, it all ends with empty words'* (PL26Ania30b),
- focus on the people, not on the PR: *'when a politician is asked why they changed their opinion on a topic and gives a very diplomatic answer, or dismisses the question, this results in anger in people, because they are not understood, listened to, because people need it'* (PL26Ania30b),
- locally-oriented: *'if you are somewhere you know how it works and what they need, no detachment, where politics is its own thing, and life is also its own thing, and there is no coherence'* (PL26Ania30b).

This detailed list of qualities our respondents expect to find in politics and politicians, as well as the catalogue of the latter's obligations, take us to the topic of values in politics and their relationship with (mis)trust, which we discuss below. Here we begin with the one of the central values associated with democracy: freedom.

Values, politics, and the politics of values: freedom

Kamila, who is in her late twenties and works as a data administrator for a private company, says that her voting choices are based on the social matters that are important for her: *'generally speaking, LGBT rights, women rights'* (PL29Kamila20b). Flora thinks that political choices are not about worldviews, but about values. *'Values are like a lens of sorts, through which you look at the world, and impose categories of good and bad upon it. [...] It is just like that, that if you have strong values, a strong sense of ethics and if you deeply believe that abortion is bad always, then yes, if you are older and are repeating to yourself those words for the last 40 years [...], then you*



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have no space in your mind for an idea that other worldviews are good, because it is something very, very bad to you' (PL58Flora30b).

In order to make it clear what values research participants invoked to ground axiologically their political choices, we investigate them as they appear in the context of concrete matters.

In the following paragraphs, we will discuss how research participants speak about the value of freedom, or liberty, in both its classical forms, positive and negative. The concept of negative liberty, discussed at length by Berlin (1969), in the simplest of words means the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. In the Polish context, "freedom from" has been construed as freedom from the communist system of power, pandemic restrictions, obligatory vaccinations, or human irrationality/nature.

The pandemic has brought temporary restrictions to mobility, which eventually turned into long-term constraints that caused a broad economic crisis and the failure of the healthcare system. Maciek, a far-right voter and a farmer in his mid-thirties, says *'the pandemic will have a very negative, long-term effect on us. And the covid problem is nothing, compared to lockdowns and restrictions, of which effects we will need to address in the future'* (PL42Maciek30a). The libertarian take on the value of "freedom from" in the pandemic context relates to the unwanted state interventionism and obligatory vaccination policies. Maciej, who is a 60+ Polish migrant to Austria and a driver, says *'here it's all about our own decision about our bodies which, of course, can be seen as like "not about your body, because you are infecting [others]"... but no'* (PL49Maciej60a).

Outside of the pandemic, some right-wing voters also seek such "freedom from" in the area of economic liberties that should be standard in 'Free Poland' (pol. Wolna Polska), as the post-1989 3rd Republic of Poland is commonly called by older generations. Interestingly, here is where the voters of libertarian right-wing Konfederacja differ from most voters of the interventionist-welfarist right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS). Research participants, who vote for either of those parties, might find a common ground in championing conservative moral values, but their views on economic matters are quite different. Not being exactly on the opposite side of the spectrum, as PiS didn't introduce higher corporate or property ownership taxes, which the Left is advocating for, Konfederacja strongly pushes for the lowering of the taxes and curtailing the scope of social welfare, even openly supporting tax avoidance [REF Mentzen], as it sees *'tax increase and obligatory fees as an attempt to curb freedom and entrepreneurship, a punishment for hard work'* (PL27Piotrek20b). Meanwhile, Alicja, a Law and Justice Party voter in her early 30 years with conservative Christian values, says: *'For me, the social support [for children] indeed is*



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support because I see how much of money is being taken from me through taxes. Meaning, I am taking back what was taken from my husband in taxes and various other fees' (PL31Alicja30a).

Those research participants who vote for the Civic Platform party or the Left, hope to get back 'Free Poland' and their own version of "freedom from", if the ruling party loses its power. *'Now after what happened 7 years ago, we are being controlled by a right-wing party, which makes me really angry and restricts my freedom, and I hate it'*, says Krystyna, a journalist in her early fifties. When I asked her, in what ways PiS restricts her freedom, she explained at length:

Firstly, I don't like all forms of instigation against LGBT people, refugees. For the past couple of years I have worked with refugees. Since 2016 I have been helping in an initiative called the Children from the Brześć Railway station. During the first [refugee] crisis in 2016, when it happened, PiS attacked the refugees and created [this atmosphere]... When Chechen mothers were stuck on the border in Brześć, it was a tragedy to me, and that's why I decided to get involved in helping. [What angers me is] mostly that the ruling party is spreading hatred. As a lawyer [by education] I was really feeling through all those attacks on the judiciary, on the Constitutional Court. What was really getting to me are the restrictions of the judiciary power and distroyal of it. That this power is going to be subjected to politicians. PL23Krystyna50a

Such "freedom from" in both of those contexts seems to be quintessentially a freedom from what the respondents perceive as mistakes of those in power, of the medical, scientific or political authorities. Moreover, people seem to be concerned not only with actual but also potential mistakes.¹⁸

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines positive liberty as a freedom to act, as the presence of the possibility of acting ((2003) 2021). This form of liberty can be usefully studied in the Polish context since the right-wing government introduced controversial changes to the abortion law that took place in the fall of 2020 and in the early 2021. The topic of abortion was broadly discussed by some of the interviewees, who expressed their need to have the freedom to choose abortion. Halina, a left-wing supporter in her early thirties, asks me: *'I remember all that fuss about the mask wearing, that it is an attack on freedoms... and it's not an attack on freedom to be forced to be pregnant?'* (PL52Halina30a). Nadia, who is an 18-years old high school student from the northwest of Poland sees the matter differently: *'I understand the issue in such a way, that some issues... that*

¹⁸ This situation is fittingly encapsulated by Anthony Giddens's concept of reflexive modernization, characterised, among others, by the decline of trust in traditional authorities claiming to be always right (1994).



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one is for freedom, for the freedom of choice, somewhat, let's say that all humans are equal, and that the youth needs to be educated on certain topics, like sexual education, but... not in the direction of extremes, like having a million sexual orientations, or opting for a certain sexual orientation as a matter of fashion, or having an abortion like it is shopping for bread' (PL28Nadia18). In those two interview fragments we can see a clash of ideas of what positive liberty should be when it comes to abortion. The topic brings to light other sets of values, associated with specific conceptions of human rights; it is also related to the tension and debate between two worldviews, liberal and conservative.

Wiktorja, whose mother was a left libertarian and brought her up to accept the right to abortion as a human right, points out: *'I understand that someone may have different views, but if they don't want to do it let them not do it... I mean... I know it might sound Spartan, but it's not the state that pays for a disabled child to be born. Because neither the parent contributes to the GDP, neither the child will. Secondly, the child will be doomed to suffer, and if the parent dies before it dies, then it's totally doomed to life in an institution'* (PL39Wiktorja30a). Bruno, in his late twenties who is more of a centrist voter, thinks that *'religion shouldn't have influence when it comes to topics related to abortion'* (PL30Bruno20b).

'Thank God in our country freedom of speech still applies', Maciek, a far-right voters joyfully highlights, before adding: *'However, if you would like to conduct research on the eventual negative influence of the sex change procedure on children, then I think you could have had problems at the university. It makes me laugh, truly, because during the Civic Platform Party's rule the Central Anticorruption Bureau went to the Wprost newspaper headquarters and tried to block printing of an article that discriminated them'*, but with the PiS in power nobody is gagging anybody' (PL42Maciek30a).

The 'freedom to' in the words of some research participants seems to be a lack of restrictions that would preclude the possibility of certain actions. When asked about changes the systemic transition in the 1990s and the joining of the EU brought to their lives, some people would point towards an increase in freedoms, understood as a theoretical increase in the number of possibilities. Entering the Union *'was a clear step forward: investments, possibility to travel, possibility to work anywhere. The freedom'* (PL37Andrzej50b). The overall positive assessment of the Polish membership in the EU, well documented in international comparative surveys (see, for example, Fagan and Gubbala 2022), is confirmed by our semantic network analysis: already at the level of co-occurrence higher than 6, the code for the EU is associated only with such 'positive' phenomena as the freedom of movement and the new infrastructure.



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To Antoni (PL50Antoni70a) the systemic transition was *'a joy of getting the freedom back, the free media, and most importantly, the free work, the free media, and free elections, [...] [where] we could select whoever we wanted. [...] We were the prototype, which created democracy inside the Communist Bloc. [It was] a unique phenomenon on a global scale. Contrary to what's happening today, where we are going back to the totalitarian country inside the family of free nation-states'*. To others, the freedom associated with the democratic state after the systemic change was about freedom to be Polish, to vote for *'pro-Polish parties, because Poland was too long under Russia'* (PL32Marek30b).

When it comes to the question of values, semantic network analysis allows us to see how the topic of freedom (code *general freedom*) is linked to other concepts recorded in the dataset. The code 'general freedom' is linked to 'imaging the future' code via 'Poland', 'pandemic', and 'young people'. The latter is also directly linked to 'tolerance'. 'Need for simplicity' is connected to 'general freedom' through the most frequent code of the network, the code for the Law and Justice party. The visualisation suggests that the young generation seeks freedom and tolerance, and hopes for the future to provide it.



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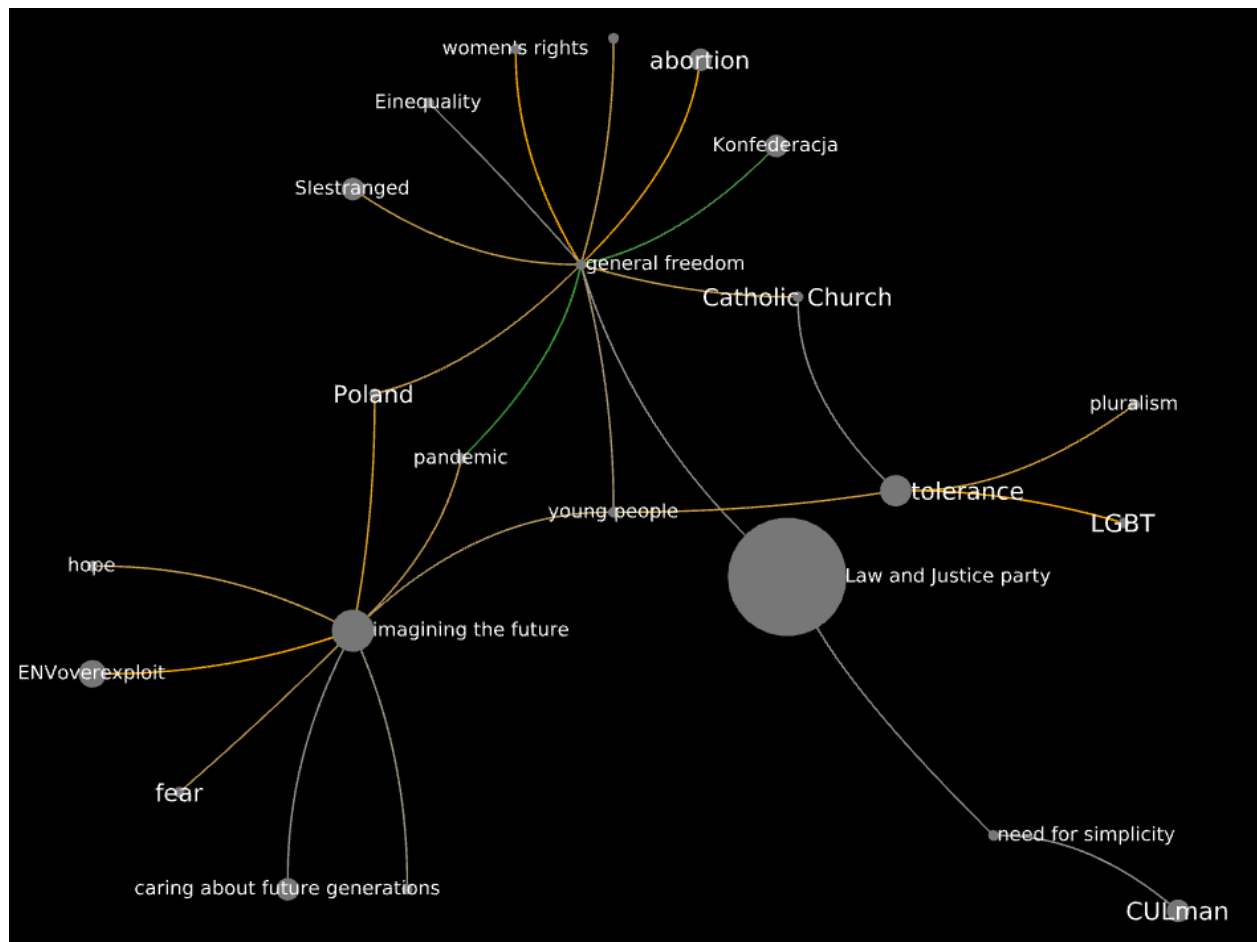


Figure 9: The codes for general freedom, imagining the future, need for simplicity and tolerance and their neighbours. Only edges supported by at least four informants are shown ($b \geq 4$).

The respondents who associate freedom with the pandemic and the far right political party 'Konfederacja', are predominantly male (over 50%). There is another semantic network detectable in the participants' discourse on freedom. Prevalent among female participants (more than 50% of respondents), it connects freedom with abortion (no doubt what we see here is women's reaction to the draconian pregnancy termination laws), women's rights, and the government's detachment from the populace (code *Slestranged*). Both genders, more or less in equal measure, see freedom in the context of social inequality and its relation to such key institutions as the ruling Law and Justice Party, and the Catholic Church. Interestingly, the latter is also linked with the code 'tolerance'. To understand what it means, we need to go back to the interview data, as the graph doesn't tell us whether the code's links refer to the Church's lack of tolerance, or its support for tolerance. Ethnographic data



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shows that the former is the case: the Church is invoked as an institution that falls short in its support of tolerance. Here is a fragment of our conversation with Ignacy, a paramedic in training who votes for the centre-liberal Nowoczesna:

Ignacy: The next issue is the issue of culture. I am very open and tolerant; differences are to me something completely normal. Those are the laws of nature. No one is exactly the same. Sure, there's naturally going to be the hetero majority, but there are also people who are homo, people who are nonbinary and trans people. It's normal and if other species were also as developed as we [humans] are, things would be the same. Among primates there is a lot of homosexuality, there is nothing unnatural about it. And what the Law and Justice party is trying to persuade [everybody], I have a brother in primary school, is that it's unnatural, evil, bad.

Interviewer: During biology classes?

Ignacy: No, during the [Catholic] religion lessons. But what I know about the textbooks... Those politics in school, [the narrative the state-recommended textbooks spread is] that Poland is great, it's the best. It really annoys me. [They say] that Poland is without a fault. Well now, Poland has a great deal of faults and a difficult history, hence saying that we are without guilt, the chosen nation, or something along those lines, it really truly upsets me. This isn't true. [Because of that] a generation of nationalists will grow up. What I am worried about the most is that Poland will cease to be... till recently [historically] it was seen as an open and tolerant country, and [it's on the way] to become the backwater of Europe.

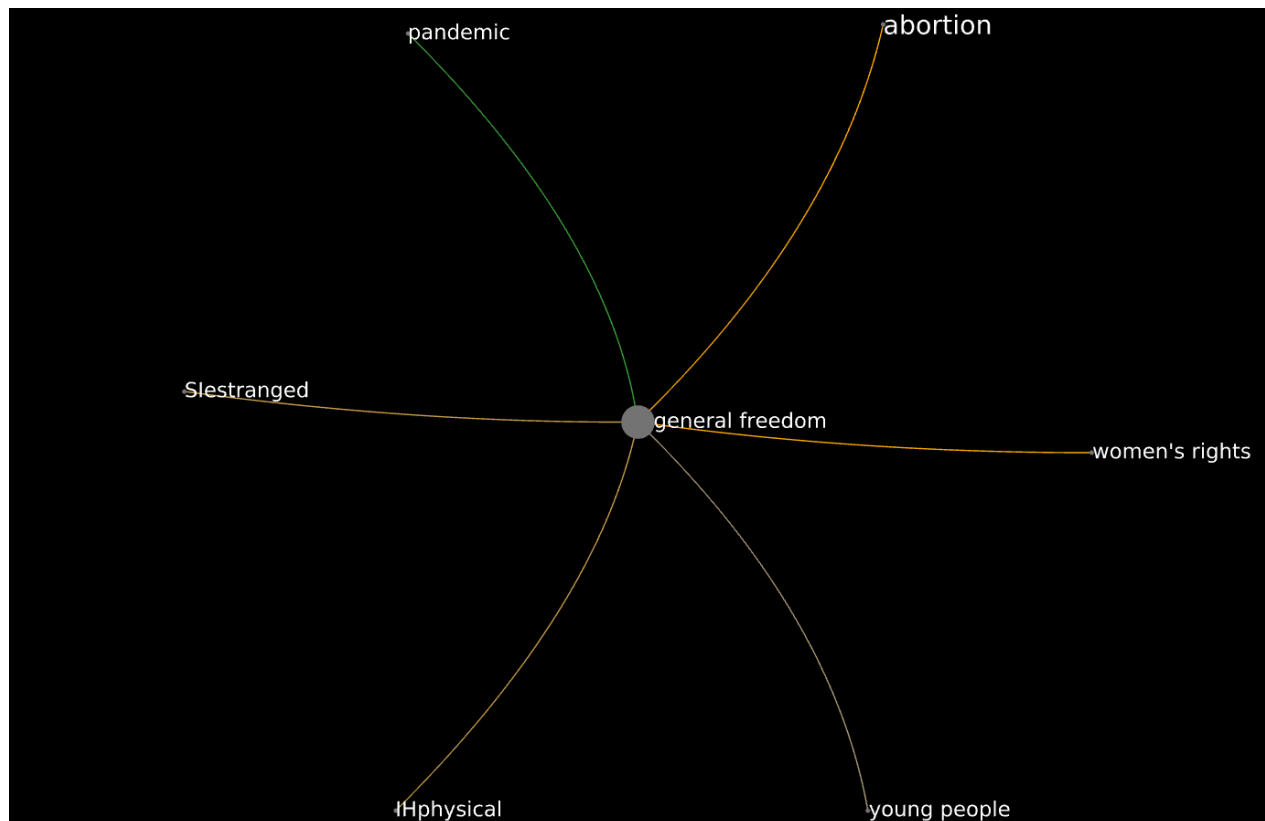
Ignacy worries that tolerance is marginalised in the set of values taught in many Polish schools. He points out, in the history textbooks for decades Polish students were taught that in the past, for example, in the 16th century or in the 1920's, Poland was a tolerant nation state, welcoming both ethnic and religious minorities. To Ignacy, PiS is promoting a different narrative, where tolerance isn't an important value, and the Catholic Church is supporting those efforts. In Poland's public education system, the Church is solely responsible for preparing and carrying out religious instruction, including the lessons' content and the choice of teachers. Contrary to what the name of the class might suggest, the religion class isn't a class that talks about different religions, it just teaches about the Christian Catholic faith. Interestingly, the Centre for Public Opinion Research (pl. *Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*), a non-governmental research organisation, which for decades now has studied social and cultural trends, has recently published results of its study amongst all students of 440 public educational institutions in Warsaw. The study, based on the surveys involving 133,000 primary school, high-school and technical schools students (CBOS, 2022c) was conducted in October 2021. The results paint a sad picture of the Church's popularity



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among the youth. Three decades ago, in a similar study conducted by CBOS almost three out of four respondents aged 18-24 declared to be regular churchgoers (1992). Among those aged 17-19, 93% percent attended religion classes. Today, in the same age group only 30,9% declared the same, while among the primary school students it's 67,7%. Studies conducted in other large cities across the country show similar trends. To a various degree, younger generations seem to be turning away from the Catholic Church.

After exploring the link between freedom, tolerance, and the Catholic Church, as these topics are discussed by some of our respondents and analysed in an influential survey, we return to the semantic network encapsulating 'general freedom.' As Visualisation 4 shows, freedom is a concern for young people, and many people worry about the protection of freedom during the pandemic. However, the nodes that are most deeply associated with 'freedom' are 'physical well being,' 'women's rights,' and 'abortion.' The edge connecting 'general freedom' to 'abortion' is the deepest of all edges incident to the former code ($d = 7$). The bright orange colour of the edge indicates that the informants supporting this association are all females. Male informants do not appear to associate freedom equally strongly with anything.





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Figure 10: The ego network of general freedom for $d > 4$

As we showed in the previous (Figure 9) and argued in the accompanying commentary, the talk about freedom is often saturated with mentions, usually negative, of the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS). Not unexpectedly, PiS co-occurs in people's minds with many if not all issues dominating the public debate in Poland. What do people think about its motivations or intentions? The semantic network analysis suggests a gripping answer. Recall that the highest density of co-occurrences that we recorded in this study is 38 and there are only two codes that co-occur at this level: 'PiS,' the ruling right-wing party and 'cultural manipulation.'

Cardboard state: political disillusionment and mistrust of state institutions

The cardboard state is a term used commonly in informal discussions, media discourses and across the networked public spaces of the Polish-speaking Internet. *Państwo z tektury* or *państwo z kartonu*, as it is originally phrased in Polish, is a term broadly used to express dissatisfaction, disappointment, or frustration with the way the country functions. In an online dictionary of the Language Observatory at the University of Warsaw, an institution that collects new terms and phrases inhabiting Polish language, the term cardboard state is defined as a neologism, political phraseologism, that means '*a state, whose institutions do not work correctly; a state that is malorganised, and is unable to correctly execute its functions*' (Czeszewski & Dec, 2021 (2018)). In a comment to that definition, one of the authors names *państwo z kartonu* to be the most important phrase of the political journalism during the last decade, a term that replaced another politics-related buzzword that dominated the early 2000s – the *wojna polsko-polska*, or the Polish-Polish war (Dec, 2021).

While the coinage of the term is attributed to leftist activist Jan Śpiewak, who used the phrase *kraj z dykty*, or plywood country in his article expressing disappointment with the functioning of state institution and the condition of the country, the cardboard state and its synonyms are used by journalists, opinion makers and politicians across the political spectrum. The plywood, cardboard, or paper metaphors are used to highlight the weakness of materials that were used to put together the country or the state, the feeble, temporary solutions that were put together to make the post-transitional Poland look like a well functioning democracy. The metaphor is used very broadly to critique all aspects of Polish public life, starting with national politics all the way down to local state structures, including public institutions such as the police or the army, healthcare or education system.

The cardboard state is an exact opposition of what the ideal state should look like, according to what research participants have shared with us during the interviews, and what we have tried to summarise in the previous section. The key attribute of the cardboard state is incompetence. We have examined the semantic network

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surrounding this concept (Figure 11).

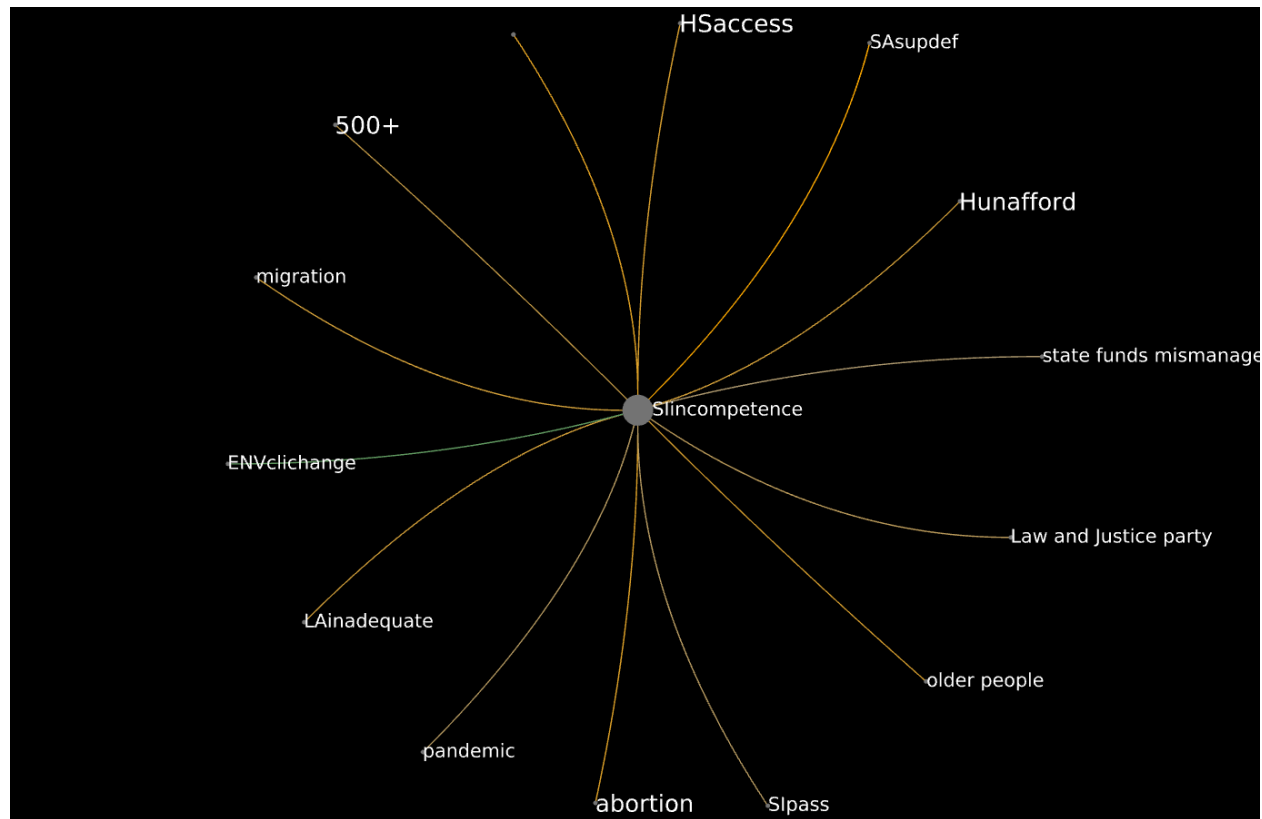


Figure 11: Ego network of incompetence (*Slincompetence*), $d > 6$

The talk on incompetence is full of references to a number of issues of importance for the populace, including abortion, pandemic, older people, environmental concerns (*ENVclchange*), migration and affordability of health-related services (*Hunafford*). However, there are two takeaways from the analysis of the visualisation presented in Figure 11 that are particularly striking. First, the only political formation whose name co-occurs with mentions of incompetence is the ruling Law and Justice Party. Second, women are more prone to talk about incompetence in the context of a number of issues. Interestingly, the only edge that is mentioned more often by males than females is the one between incompetence and environmental concerns.

The dysfunctional state

To answer the research question guiding this study let's first look at the experiences our research participants



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have shared with us. To Anthony, a retiree in his 70's, who experienced and well remembers transitional period of the 1990s, the first sign of the state's declining condition is the worsening of the public media autonomy and freedom from spreading mostly the ruling party's agenda:

The first sign is the media. Free press, free media, freedom of speech. This is something that says that one lives in a free country, whether the authority usurps the right to ideologize society. Truth be told, we have some free TV stations [...], but it's evident that the domination of state media and the official narrative weighs down the information from independent sources. During komuna we would listen to Radio Free Europe, today we are watching TVN24 (PL50Antoni70a).

Antoni, a voter of the Civic Platform, sees the ruling Law and Justice Party as a formation that makes Poland more dysfunctional as a state, undoing the work of the last 30 years of the so-called Free Poland (pol. *Wolna Polska*), and returning the country back to the communist-era modes of governance. His experience of politics through public media is bringing back his memories and influencing his voting choice. When it comes to another research participant, 30-years old Jagoda, all main media outlets are not trustworthy: *'trust crisis towards commercial media is big and that's why more trust is evoked by individual [opinion makers in social media, that I trust and follow]'* (PL17Jagoda30a). Traditional media this way or another seem to be losing social trust, but access to information and trustworthy sources of that information are crucial components of the functioning of any state. What will be the result of the fragmentation of the public sphere, as defined by Jurgen Habermas, where the public debate with the help of media outlets should be taking place?

After making the point about media, Antoni adds: *'the second example [I have] is the assigning of public offices, administrative ones and economic ones to [people] from one's direct [political] circle. It used to be that there were competitions for chairs, directors of state enterprises. Once upon a time there was civil service'*, where in the case of new local elections and the change of politicians in power the administrative workers wouldn't change, and they would secure the continuity of governance. *'Now all that is gone, so we are recreating the system we had during the communist times'* (PL50Antoni70a). Maciej, a driver in his mid sixties shares Antoni's disappointment in how the state institutions are managed: *'From what the president of the National Bank of Poland was saying, he doesn't have competence to be the president'* (PL49Maciej60a). Another research participant, Franek, who is in his early twenties and works for the National Railway, notes:

And as I am into transportation then of course the actions of the Ministry of Infrastructure are at the centre of my attention. So all the actions, with the proportion of the expenditure on the roads versus



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on the railways... it's not even. It's more spent on roads, which encourages usage of the less environmentally-friendly transportation. The way things are built, the scale, it's all overestimated, I think. (PL46Franek20a)

The topic of state or ruling party mismanagement is popular across all the conversations within the study, relating to each and every state institution: *'It's all car-oriented, there are no nurseries, kindergartens, very little local clinics, doctors are older. I have a feeling that it all is not done the way it could have been done'* (PL17Jagoda30a).

Various state institutions are dysfunctional because employees of the state, such as public school teachers, nurses, and doctors are underpaid, leading to the lack of personnel: *'it slowly turns in a direction, where there are going to be none of those positions [with privatisation of services] and they are key to maintain good life [with in the society]'* (PL46Franek20a). Healthcare system is the one that's particularly affected. Andrzej, who is a business psychologist that works with healthcare workers notes:

Nobody really wants to take it on, because when you introduce [the possible fix such as] the package of guaranteed services [in healthcare], as a state you need to tell [the people] what you are not going to get covered and here is the problem. The state is already not paying for a number of medical services anyway, let's not kid ourselves, but that happens unofficially, without telling it to your face, that's they are not going to pay for this or that. [Instead] it's pretending that you got this public healthcare system for free, which is totally not true [that you do]. PL37Andrzej50b

That game of pretending, which the state is playing, in Andrzej's words, is particularly present in what the social welfare programs have to offer. Paulina, who is a social worker in her early fifties, shares:

Here, in the country it's very poor. The young people that I work with are completely non adjusted to adult life, they have absolutely nothing to start their lives with. With huge deficits, with inherited bad patterns, I am not at all surprised they are turning towards alcohol, drugs, both dealing and usage, or stealing. This is an area abandoned by the state. Only the Law and Justice did something, but it's not enough. PL22Paulina50b

Another research participant, Halina, who is a well-educated 30-year-old currently without a job, says that she didn't receive unemployment relief benefits, because the law doesn't meet the reality. Similarly, to hundreds of thousands young people in Poland she never had a proper job agreement, which disqualified her from receiving



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state support where she lost her job. Precarity is a serious problem; job insecurity made Halina seek mental health support. When she asked Labour Office to support her IT course so she can get new skills and find a more stable job than those she could qualify to as art historian, the office told her *'that they won't finance my courses, because I have never worked in that sector'* (PL52Halina30a).

The Law and Justice Party is usually praised for its social program, of which two core examples are the 500 Plus program, which aids each family with 500 PLN per child, and the so-called 13th pension payment scheme, where each state pensioner receives an extra payment in December. Some research participants see those two programs as the key factors that make people join the so-called hard electorate of PiS. Magda, in her late twenties, shares: *'my parents had good income, when they were working. It wasn't like a lot, but it was a good life, they were not living paycheck to paycheck. But now their state pensions are enough only to buy meds, pay the bills and barely enough to buy food'* (PL47Magda20b). Magda is scared for her own future, saving money on her own for when she retires, not expecting the state to be able to support her through the state pension scheme: *'I feel that the state is stealing from me. I have an impression that at some point the Social Insurance Institution will cease to be efficient, it will cease to exist, and I won't see my retirement. And I will make it, the money won't be enough, it won't be a liveable amount. Because I can see what's happening right now, when it's really difficult for people'* (PL47Magda20b).

Artur, who is in his late fifties, receives a state-funded disability pension, that is about 300 EUR per month. Due to insufficient state support, he cannot afford to properly heat his small apartment of 24 square metres: *'when it comes to inflation, I was really scared that the bills would crush me, so because of that fear I was sitting in a cold apartment. I am warming the apartment with a gas furnace, and it's the gas, which [price] skyrocketed the most [in the pandemic]'* (PL18Artur50b).

The pandemic was a single event that exposed all the shortcomings of the ruling party, as well as malfunctions of the state apparatus. Politicians were accused of unprofessionalism, and *'an inability to learn from their own mistakes'* (PL58Flora30b), the state relief programs supporting private businesses were deemed *'insufficient'* (PL43Klaudia30b), so were the state's informational and educational programs, that were supposed to make the society follow recommendations and respect restrictions. Magda, a mom of two young boys in her late twenties, shares: *There was a lot of disinformation. If not for my own need to look [for information] among friends, who work in the medical sector.... They are not even doctors... And also through the Internet on my own. [They, the government was] sowing disinformation, generally speaking. I felt threatened by those restrictions, nobody explained to me what is the course [of the COVID-19 illness], and what are its consequences'* (PL47Magda20b).

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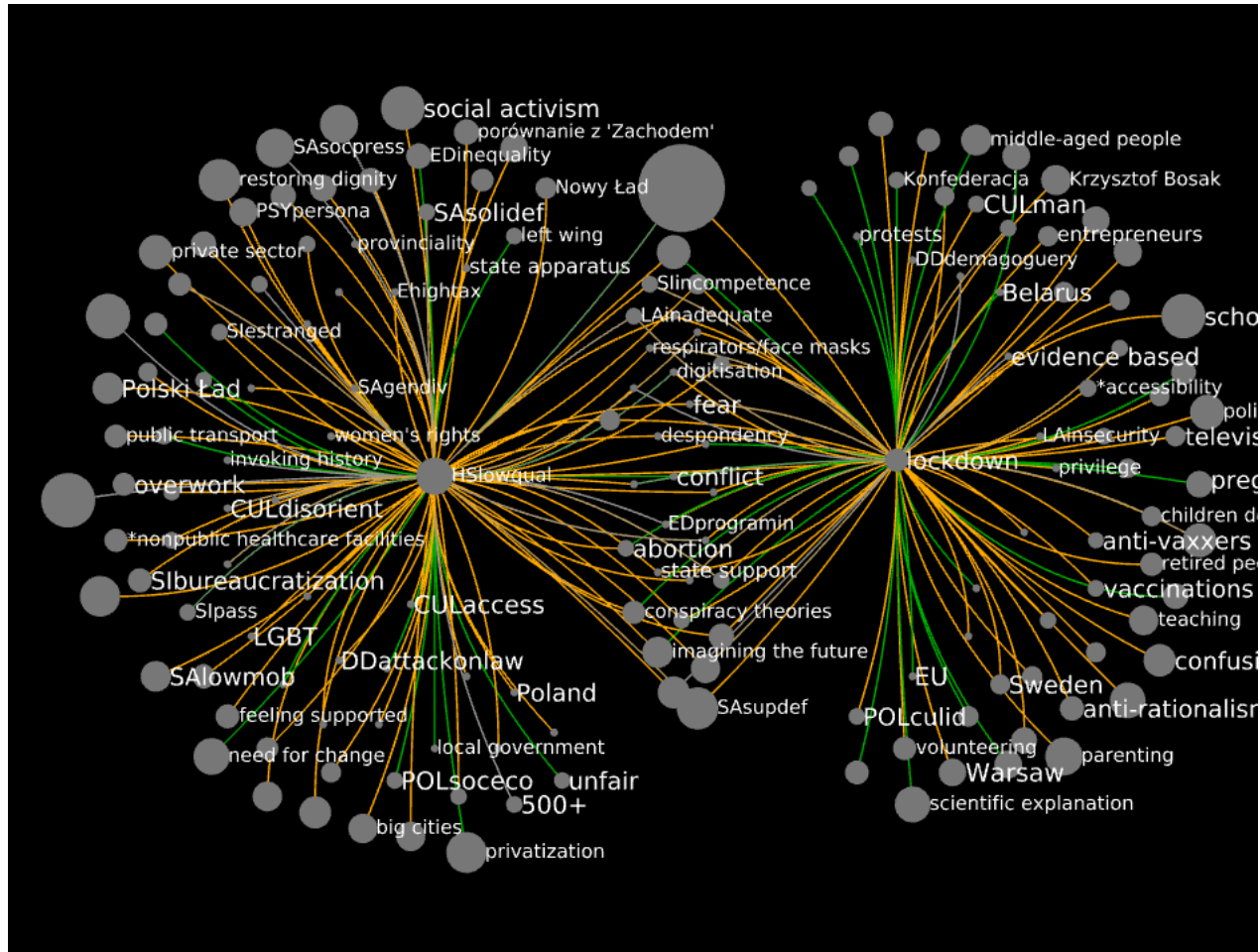


Figure 12: The codes HSlowqual and lockdown and their neighbours, network not reduced.

The visualisation above shows a comparison between the ego networks of codes *HSlowqual*, which references the low quality of health services, and *lockdown*, which signifies commentary on pandemic lockdowns. The two networks have a number of codes in common, which enables us to get an insight in what seems like a network representation of critical narratives on state functioning. A closer look at the shared codes reveals an interesting list. The biggest node at the top represent the Law and Justice Party, and the nodes below talk about emotions of fear and despondency (codes *fear* and *despondency*), which the the two topics spark, as well as critique of the state response (code *state support*) – inadequate measures taken during the pandemic (code *Lainadequate*), incompetence (code *Slincompetence*), and support deficit (code *SAsupdef*). All those codes speak to a sense of instability and danger felt by research participants during the most severe pandemic periods.



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A look at the gender difference in participant responses suggests that the topic *lockdown* was of importance to the majority of interviewees, as the proportions between male and female participants (respectively, orange and green links between nodes) corresponds with the gender balance of the study. However, different issues related to the lockdown topic were interesting to the two genders represented in the study. Based on an overview of narrative codes, men spoke more about pandemic protests, vaccinations, EU involvement, conspiracy theories, conflict and the role of scientific explanation. Women spoke more often about anti-rationalism, parenting during the pandemic, lack of state support and incompetence of the ruling Law and Justice party, worries about the future, expressing fear and a sense of confusion. Male and female narratives on pandemic lockdowns seem to differ in the area of interviewee's primary focus. Male respondents were thinking more in terms of the political and economic aspects of the pandemic, while female respondents were reflecting more on its social aspect.

The topic of low quality of health services was, however, of more interest to female participants of the study, who discussed it in the context of the broader condition of the Polish state in a pandemic reality. According to them, the state, weakened by the inability of politicians to respond to the pandemic crisis adequately, is bringing about the worsening of the economy, which might lead to further privatisation of healthcare services, and hence, its further inaccessibility to low-income earners.

2.1.4.3. Political disillusionment

While sharing their thoughts on state malfunctioning, research participants were also expressing views on the current political system. An analysis of the Czech fieldwork brought some interesting insights into how the far-right voters are perceiving their state, suggesting that while there is a sense of disappointment in the political systems, which manifests in a strong disaffection towards state institutions, those sentiments do not mean there is a similar feeling towards democracy in general. However, while some of the Czech study participants see a pressing need for improvements to the current political system, pointing out a variety of issues that should be tended to, their critique, while constructive, is also characterised by cynicism, distrust and non-belief.

In the case of the Polish part of the study, similar sentiments can be found among research participants. Here also even those interviewees who declared to be active voters in both local and state elections are critical of the political system. Interestingly, similarly to the Czech far-right study participants, they are as *disaffected* with particular state institutions as they are with the entire political culture of the country. They express more generalised reflections, which seem to reflect a deep sense of political disillusionment with all political options.



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Despite the fact that almost all participants are active voters, and despite the fact that each represents a unique and diverse set of political views, they all are very critical of politicians, both the currently ruling party and the opposition. When asked *'do you feel you have a representation among politicians today?'*, many of them would answer *'no, not really, but I vote anyway, because what else is left?'*

The critique of the particular politicians or parties can be divided into four categories:

- mishandling of the office as **lack of qualifications**, for example:

Konrad, a graphic designer in his late thirties, shares: *'it really upsets me when... I am really upset by the government's decisions that are not well-thought through, from which they then have to next withdraw'* (PL35Konrad30b).

- mishandling of the office as **corruption**, for example:

Andrzej, a business psychologist, thinks that the ruling Law and Justice Party is destroying the local government financially: *'It's a very simple method. [...] They take from the rich and give to the poor, but THEIR poor. For example, they take from a city like Tricity, and it's all public, and everybody knows about it, and they give that money to... Dębica. Where there is a PiS clique.'* (PL37Andrzej50b).

Ignacy, a paramedic trainee in his early twenties, who votes for Konfederacja, compares corruption and mismanagement of the current and the previous ruling party: *When it comes to economic issues, there's an entire load of scams. It used to be that during the Tusk era there were more scams, but now PiS has beat them ten times over. During the Tusk era those scams were small, image-based, but today I feel "a next scam, again, ah well", an indifference of sorts towards what the government is doing.* (PL19Ignacy20a). Ignacy's views on corruption seem to be quite common, as is illustrated in Figure 13 that shows associations between 'corruption' and the three major institutions of public life in Poland: the Catholic Church, Law and Justice Party (currently ruling) and Civic Platform (previously dominant, led by Donald Tusk).



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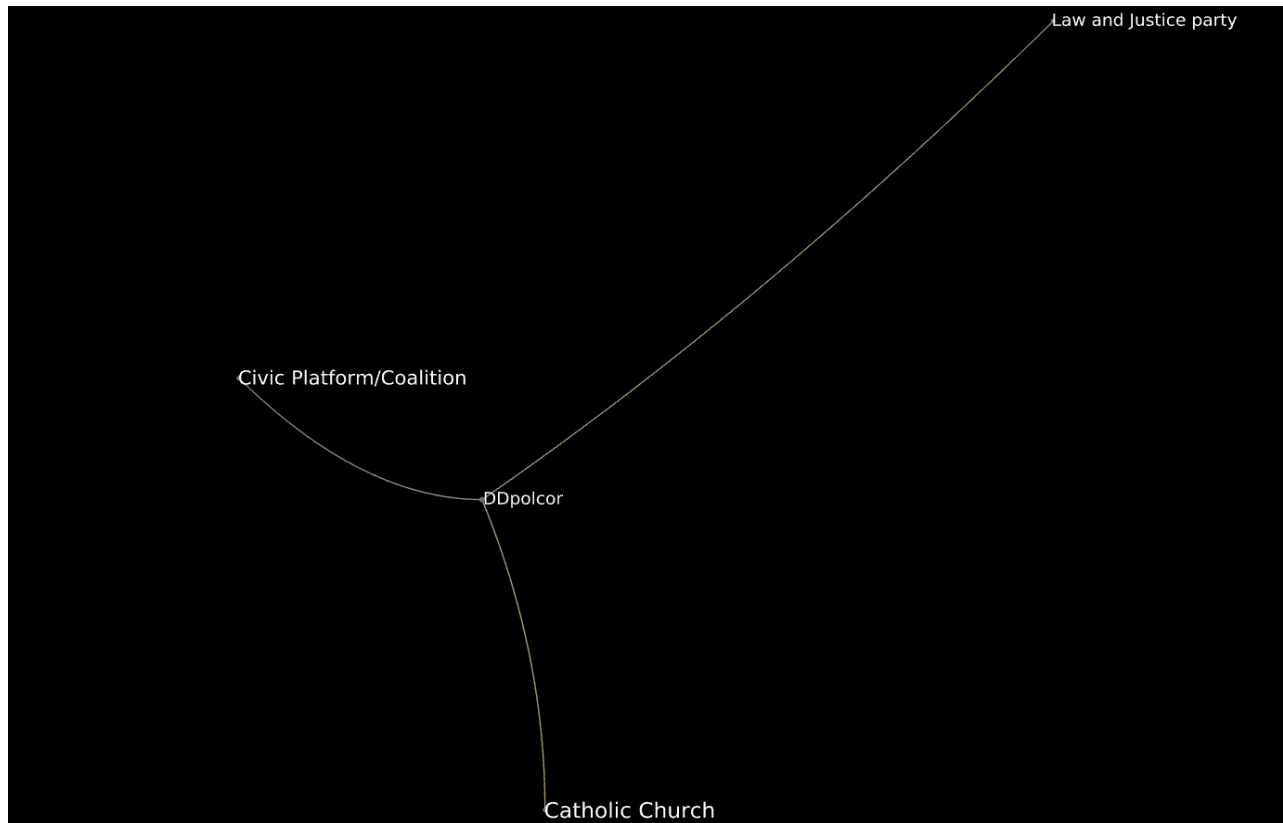


Figure 13: The deepest associations with political corruption (DDpolcor). For all edges shown, $d > 12$.

When the minimum level of association is decreased to 6 (such that $d > 6$ for all edges), we observe a truly important set of associations. Political corruption co-occurs not only with the three major public actors, but also with the arguably most negative feature of public life: polarisation. Its two forms, cultural-ideological ('POLculid') and political ('POLpol'), are central in the semantic field surrounding political corruption. At the minimum, this means that in people's minds corruption and polarisation, two phenomena detrimental for liberal democracy, tend to coexist.



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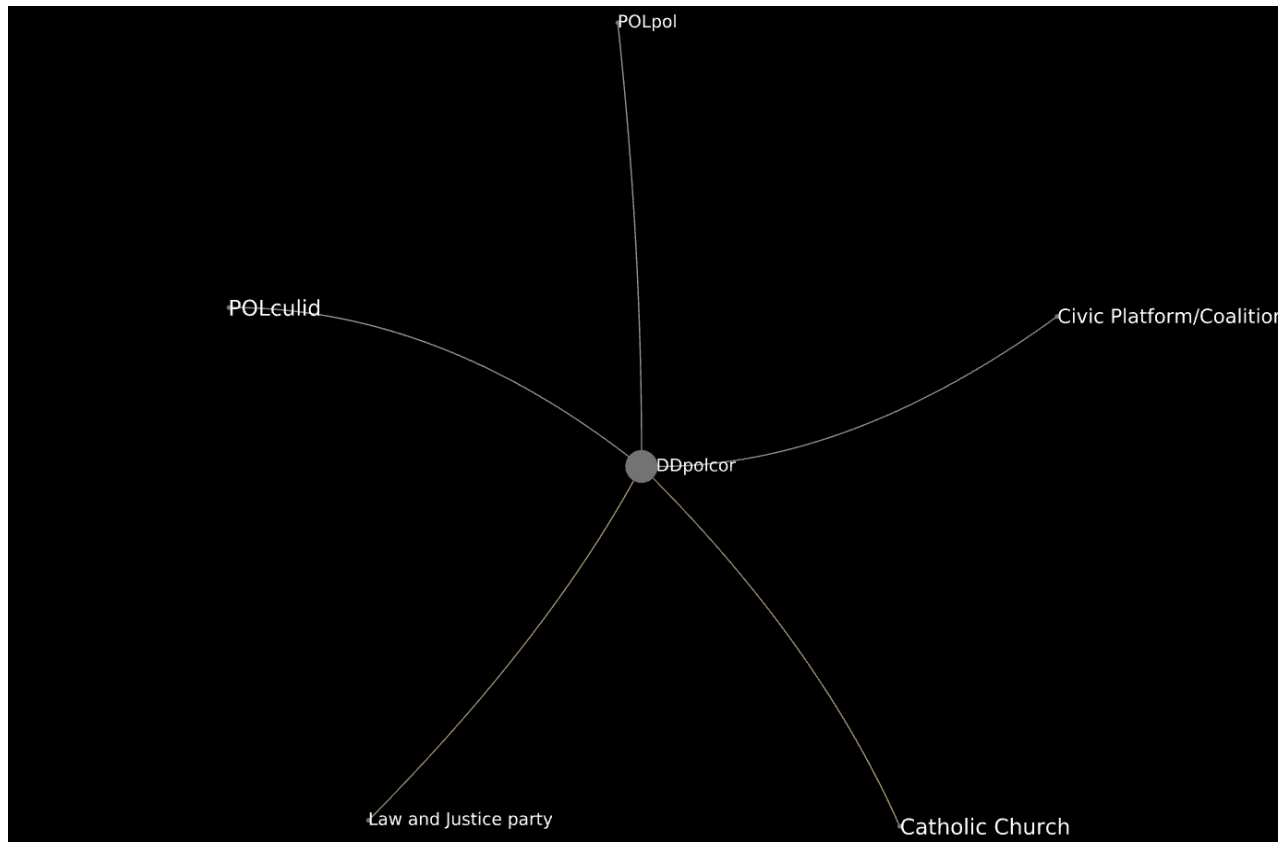


Figure 14: The deepest associations with political corruption (DDpolcor). For all edges shown, $d > 6$

- **dishonesty**, for example:

Ewa, an IT specialist in her late twenties who used to live many years abroad, thinks that the Law and Justice Party are manipulative and have a (not so) secret deal with the Church, who helps them get the votes: *'I think PiS [...] has a deal with the Church, which gets them a lot of votes, and in the same time PiS uses a fear tactic to manipulate, [...] so I think they are playing dirty, and [their position] is a thing of great manipulation and great propaganda, an taking care of the people [in the country], for whom nobody else cared for'* (PL53Ewa20b).

Tadeusz, an addiction therapist who lives in the lubuskie voivodeship, shares his deep disappointment in a politician he voted for in the last parliamentary elections: *'Now, actually, I don't have anybody [to vote for], I am devastated. I mean, I remember, my last hopes were with Mr. Kukiz. I remember the way he seduced me, the way he charmed me, and how delighted I was with everything Mr. Kukiz was saying. So, I agreed with him, maybe not*



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with everything [he says], but I was in agreement with him on many issues. And so his priorities, his flagship slogans were very close to me. And I have an impression that all of that has been compromised, and I now feel left abandoned. (PL34Tadeusz40a).

- **communist-like politics**, for example:

'Back to the past, it's what the current government is giving us. Because they don't know a different world, so they are trying to do the People's Polish Republic BiS. The etatism, which the ruling party shows us, it's naive, it's 19-century-like, and very primitive. It looks like socialism, national socialism, like what we had in the PRL. (PL36Mateusz40b)

The critique of a single party or a politician goes hand in hand with a shared sense of mistrust towards the political class in general. Some interviewees criticise the sole existence of *'professional politicians'* (PL15Dawid30b), who have no alternatives to working as a politician. If not elected to an office they will seek employment in state institutions or state-owned enterprises, using connections rather than the merit of their expertise to secure a position. *'I think this is what people holding a political position need to deal with'*, Ania, a white-collar worker in her late thirties notes. *'Arrangements big and small, own interests, not looking further than a tip of one's own nose, trying to gain something out of the society... it really hurts and is the biggest obstacle [ouf our political culture]'* (PL26Ania30b). Another interviewee, Olek, an IT developer in his late twenties, bitterly points out: *'A politician makes a career not by actually wanting to change things, but by looking like wanting to change things'*.

A real, actual need to bring in changes is not necessary, if one keeps up does appearances long enough to gain a strong position, but then *'if there was any intention to bring change to begin with, it gets weaker, because people are afraid to lose their position'* (PL45Olek20b). Paweł, who recently moved out of Poland, shares that one of the reasons for leaving was the *'Polish reality'* (pol. *rzeczywistość polska*): *'It doesn't look good to me'*, he notes, *'there are so many scandals that we have already forgotten about, a billion lost in Ostrołęka, to billions given to the TVP'* (PL13Paweł30b). Kamila, who works for the army and is in her late twenties, notes: *'I am surprised, like, all that scandals are exposed and nothing is happening, no one is being held responsible. I have an impression they [the politicians] are above the rules, above the law'*, adding next: *'I have this feeling of great dirt in all that. The politicians have this impression, and actually we can say they are right, that they are above the law. I don't like it at all, I am expecting higher standards of work, and higher moral standards among [them]*. When asked by me, if that makes her not want to vote, she answers: *'No. What is left, really? I don't have many options to have a*



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direct influence [on politics], so I go and vote' (PL29Kamila20b). Lena, also in her late twenties, is a food safety expert, whose parents are working-class small-scale farmers. She has lost all hope for the political class to actually represent the people: *Politicians say what we [the voters] want to hear, they only care for their own interests, irrespective of the party they belong to. Those have that target group, others have other target groups, but when it comes to [doing their job], they only make sure they have it best, not the society, which they should be representing* (PL16Lena20b).

Semantic network analysis of topics raised throughout the ethnographic data set shows that the codes the two leading parties, the Law and Justice Party and the Civic Platform Party, have in common, all represent notions of dissatisfaction with the political culture. The visualisation below shows that both parties were involved in scandals (code *political scandals*), corruption (code *DDpolcor*), narrative manipulations (code *CULman*), and contribute to growing social inequality (code *LAINadequette*), while their politicians are incompetent and polarising in their public commentary (code *POLpol*), both politically and culturally (code *POLculid*).

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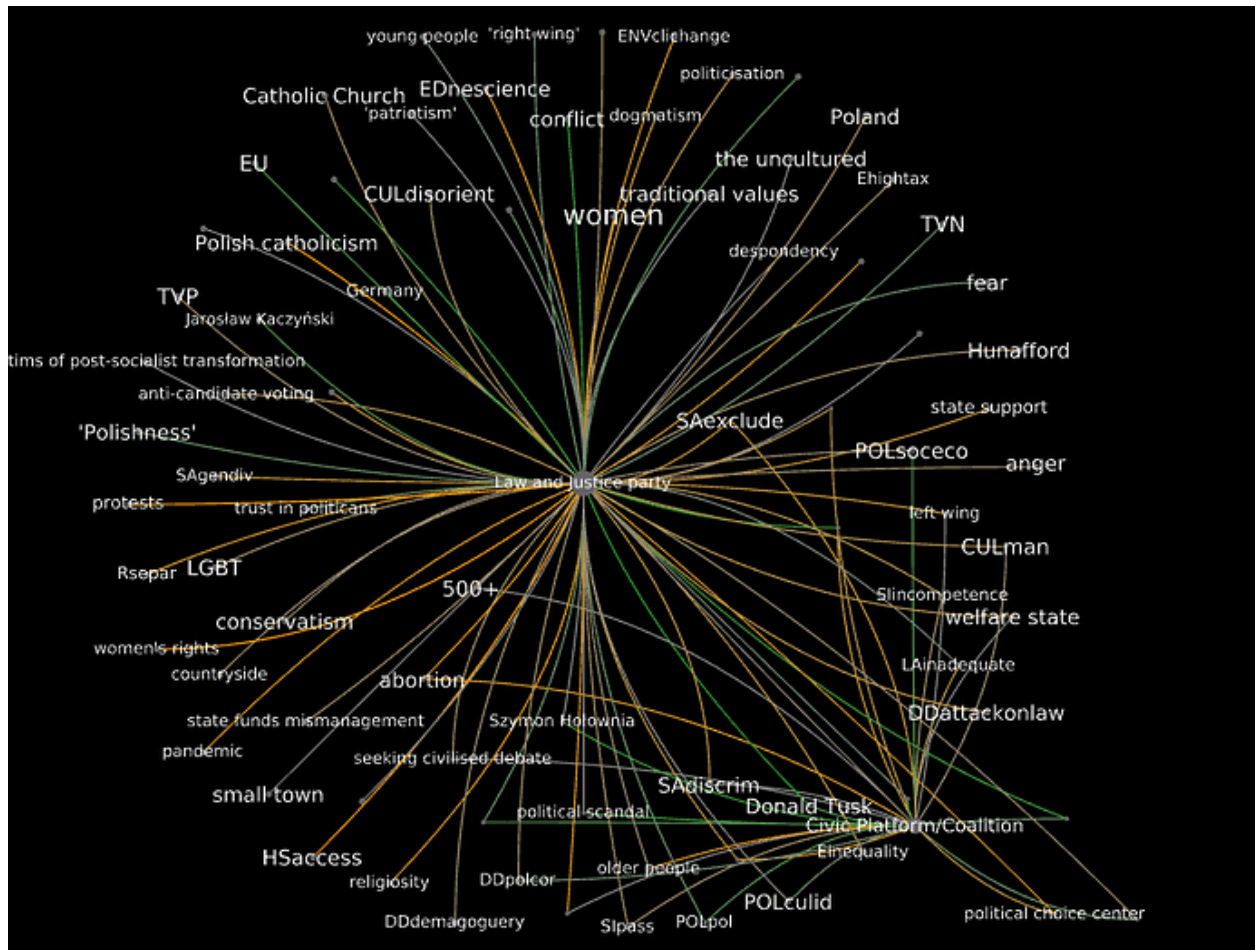


Figure 15: The codes for the Law and Justice and Civic Platform Coalition parties and their neighbours. Only the broadest edges are shown ($b > 3$).

A closer look at how gender differences impact the visualisation presented in Figure 15 helps to identify different priorities of males and females. Female respondents (orange lines) have talked more about such topics as abortion protests (codes *protests* and *abortion*), separation of the state and the Church (code *Rsepar*), the political effect on women’s rights (code *women’s rights*), and healthcare accessibility and quality (codes *HSlowqual* and *HSaccess*). Male respondents were, on the other hand, focusing on topics such as political conflict (code *conflict*), scandal (code *political scandal*), polarisation (code *POLpol*), clearly referring to more abstract problems, rather than pragmatic, everyday (in the present situation) concerns. Topics that both genders would brought up related to social welfare programs (codes *500+*) or more general concerns associated with political dissatisfaction, such as the role of Polish Catholicism (code of the same name) or long-term effects of the



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post-socialist transformation in the 1990s (code *victims of post-socialist transformation*).

A common notion that contributes to political disillusionment is the sense of a lack of representation. While some politicians have their reputation devastated by scandals, others seem to have *'too radical views'* (PL34Tadeusz40a). Halina, in her early thirties, shares:

I am wondering and I don't know... I have a generic impression that politicians represent... What I mean is that politicians, who have different tiers of power, starting with local government structures to the national ones, have an entirely different vision that I have, completely different, which I cannot at all understand in the long run. They don't want to work with society... They don't care. They only care about their own interests, their own finances, for example, making it, playing to their own benefit, and not for the people, who feed them [with the taxes] and who are dependent on them. (PL52Halina30a)

Others see all politicians as thieves and liars, and refrain from voting: *'I think there are many people like me. One third of the country doesn't take part in the elections'* (PL59Miroslaw40b).

The Centre for Public Opinion Research (pol. *Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*, CBOS), which regularly carries out survey studies, provides additional evidence on the declining trust of the public in the political elite. Their study on social trust, conducted in early February 2020 among a representative, randomised sample of adult Poles, shows that over a half of respondents (56%) declares lack of trust in political parties (CBOS, 2020). The government is almost equally trusted (46%) and not trusted (45%), while both chambers of the Polish parliament are more often not trusted (45%), then trusted (33%). Moreover, in November 2022, 68% of the surveyed saw the situation of the country as heading in the wrong direction (CBOS, 2022e). The negative assessment of the situation in the country remained above 50% since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020.

2.1.4.4. Towards a summary: trust and mistrust

Martyna, an IT specialist in her late thirties who recently moved back to her countryside hometown in central Poland, when asked about how she sees her country's future, she answers:

It is a very difficult question, honestly, I don't know. It's going all towards the doom. [I am joking], but it looks bad. In the next few years, I do hope that something will change. That the people who were elected, if they open their eyes and come outside of their bubble... I think they all remain in their



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bubbles and they overlook issues important to the average breadwinner. (PL44Martyna30b)

The analysis of the Polish ethnographic data suggests that the condition of political culture in Poland is assessed negatively and this contributes to a generalised negative view of Polish society among our research participants. The disparity, between what the state should be and what it actually is, is – in their view – pronounced. How will the growing dissatisfaction with the political scene, or even the political culture in Poland, influence the future of the democratic state? Is democracy in danger? Survey studies show that the support for democracy as a system in the last few years (say, 2015-21) is relatively high in Poland (CBOS 2021c), particularly among the young people (Babraj 2021). Also the assessment of the functioning of democracy in the country was relatively high from 2018 to July 2020, as positive views were more frequent than the negative ones. However, one of the 2021 CBOS surveys revealed that between July 2020 and April 2021, this assessment turned negative. The percentage of the people satisfied with the performance of democracy declined from 49% to 38%, while the percentage of the unsatisfied increased from 44% to 52% (CBOS 2021c). This is the period that roughly corresponds with our qualitative study whose results are reported here and which show a rather unhappy populace. For example, our conversations have revealed the existence of a strong sense of mistrust towards the state and its various representatives. As we have argued earlier, the pandemic may have something to do with this rather pronounced reversal.

Since Simmel (1950), at least, trust is regarded as the fundament of a society, allowing its members to turn their back on each other, without a fear of consequences (Sztompka 1999). Various levels and applications of trust result in a variety of forms social relations take. Historians and political scientists study trust in its relation to the self-legitimising efforts of the government in a democratic state (Hardin 2002, Hosking 2014). Weber and Tilly see trust as a relational quality, which gradually expanded from immediate family circle to state institutions, allowing for the functioning of legal structures within the modern state (Weber 1947, Tilly 2005).

Carey distinguishes between 'mistrust' and 'distrust', defining the first more as 'a general sense of the unreliability of a person or thing', and the latter as 'based on a specific past experience' (Carey, 2017:8). If we were to apply those definitions to the dataset, both sentiments were expressed by research participants.

Left-leaning interviewees point towards the pandemic as a focal point that uncovered pathologies of the current government, but the analysis of Polish history suggests that anti-government sentiments are long present in public discourses. Social policies of the ruling Law and Justice Party are perceived by left voters positively because they address the so-called common man, but those voters also point towards the country being torn between different



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groups of interests, be it political or economic. Other interviews point towards scandals that involved other parties' members, or a more generalised malfunction of the state – the cardboard state.

2.1.5. Network analysis and visualisation summary

The use of a mix method approach, that marries qualitative and quantitative approaches, can be of great use in the analysis of complex data sets. In this study the dataset consists of transcribed interviews, of which text was coded using a previously built codebook. The fundament of the analysis presented in this chapter is a qualitative, ethnographic analysis, that looks at main motives that emerge from the empirical material. Relations between the codes, that represent topics raised during in-depth interviews, such as various phenomena, events, social agents, institutions and affects, was analysed using semantic network analysis method, that is based on two methods – algorithmic analysis and network visualisation.

In the case of the Polish data set, which represents a mental map constructed on the basis of in-depth interviews with diverse set of research participants,, the application of SNA allowed us to observe three otherwise “hidden” phenomena:

- **A broader view** – network analysis and visualisation allow an ethnographer to have a broader look at the dataset, providing an opportunity for a top-down, systematic examination of the entire body of text. This way the topics that were mentioned most often (as most connected nodes) could be spotted and compared across the three language communities
- **Gender comparison** – by making a note of which topics were mentioned more often by which gender, the network analysis allowed us to identify gender-based differences in narratives, helping to spot them, if there were any, a task that's a challenge for a qualitative-narrative analysis alone.
- **Unexpected connections** – the networked representations of our data, observed at different levels of reduction, allowed us to see connections between topics that were otherwise not visible when a standard narrative analysis was conducted.

The SNA proved to be particularly useful in analysis of the Polish dataset, helping to see through its complexity. Study participants represent diverse views on a variety of matters. Network visualisations provided a very insightful top view on the relationship between narratives around the Law and Justice Party and the Civic Platform Party. Gender visualisations unveiled significant differences in how the two genders represented in the study see issues related to major themes that emerged in qualitative analysis – freedom, polarisation, the pandemic's social impact and political dissatisfaction. Without the semantic network analysis the hidden relationship between



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various freedom limitations and ideals would stay unnoticed.

There are many more insights that can be derived from the dataset through the SNA visualisations. The analysis summarised in this chapter inspires further questions that could be addressed with further network analysis. There is a sea of connections between the 686 codes, that correspond with as many as 6196 annotations to fragments of transcribed interviews. The issues in question refer to topics such as:

1. Sentiment analysis in comparison with semantic analysis: the codebook created for the project comprises notions describing emotions, states and affects. Next level of visualisations would use different colours to mark and differentiate codes signifying sentiments and semantics.
2. Further investigation of polarisation examples – singling out topics that respondents would polarise around, except abortion and Church related topics.
3. Visualise codes denominating narratives on various opposition parties, to see more clearly the critique of their actions, and to next compare it with the critique of the ruling party. The goal of such comparison would allow a more in-depth look at the bottom-level dynamics of criticism of the political culture in Poland, and provide a broader view on the general sentiment of disappointment in the current state of politics in the country.
4. Visualise codes from the analysis of the right-leaning, centre-leaning and left leaning respondents, to see if there are any general trends in their topics of interest or shared values.



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2.2. CZECH CASE

2.2.1. The Pandemic Context

The COVID-19 epidemic officially became a subject of national concern on March 1, 2020, when the first patients tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 in the Czech territory. The government reacted to the initial threat swiftly and introduced a series of strict anti-covid measures including closure of schools, inter-regional lockdowns, and a mask mandate soon after the first cases appeared. In comparison to other countries, the first COVID-19 wave passed through the Czech Republic with a relatively low infection rate and a low death count, while the public complied with the restrictions and safety measures without major protest. In fact, if anything, the hallmark of this period was a nation-wide expression of solidarity with the government and grassroots organising to address the national shortage of surgical masks. Hundreds of individuals sat down in front of their sewing machines to sew home-made masks and distribute them to those in need (Lokšová and Hoření 2020). In August 2020 Andrej Babiš (ANO), the prime minister at the time, who also happens to be one of the country's richest oligarchs known for his technocratic style of populist politics, evaluated his efforts in responding to the pandemic with the following words: 'My profession is businessman, crisis manager, actually Prime Minister of the Czech Republic...we have results, best in Covid' (Bled Strategic Forum 2020).

Little did he know that in the next couple of months, the Czech Republic would drop from being the 'best' to being the 'worst' country in containing the covid pandemic, as by mid-October it registered the highest daily increase in new covid cases (per million) in the world (Lázňovský 2022). The second wave which started taking root during the summer has spiralled out of control due to the government's delayed response to the steadily increasing numbers of infection. The public demand for the easing of the covid-related restrictions largely influenced the decision of the Babiš' government to lift the majority of the protective measures. This was perceived by the Babiš' team as a strategic move, given the upcoming regional and Senate elections (October 2020) and their need to preserve the populations' support (Buščíková and Baboš 2020: 502).

With the worsening epidemic situation, the country re-entered the emergency state on October 5, nevertheless the restrictions remained confusing and inconsistent. Increasingly the government became a subject of wide criticism from the opposition parties, as well as health expert groups and advisory boards who condemned Babiš' cabinet for lack of transparency in their chaotic response to the second wave and the poor communication surrounding it. The ensuing introduction of contradictory restrictions, the collapse of the nation-wide track and



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trace system or the “populistic” lifting of the restrictions during the Christmas holidays (despite the health experts advising against it) all led to a growing mistrust of the public towards the government and its (mis)handling of the intensifying health crisis.

What worsened the public opinion further was a series of government scandals, such as when on October 22 Roman Prymula (ANO), the Health Minister at the time, was captured on camera as he was leaving a restaurant in the middle of the night, not wearing a mask. This incident took place one day after the national lock-down was enforced (mandating a compulsory use of the masks and a closure of all restaurants) (Seznam Zprávy 2022). Following Babiš' call for his resignation (which he initially ignored, claiming that he had done nothing wrong), Prymula finally handed in his resignation. Over the next months the Ministry of Health would become an object of public ridicule and a symbol of the government's mismanagement of the pandemic, as from March 2020 to November 2022 overall five Health Ministers have taken turns in the office. This has been accompanied by several other mishaps and corruption scandals, including the purchase of overpriced medical supplies (medical masks, respirators, and protective gear) from China (Novák 2022).

All these events contributed to the growing mistrust and discontent among the population, which had been instructed by the government to observe a confusing and ever-changing set of measures, the very same measures which some politicians disregarded. What further enhanced the population's frustration was the restrictions' effectiveness, as the series of stricter and looser lockdowns introduced between autumn 2020 and spring 2021 did not yield any tangible results which would limit the spread of the pandemic. By the end of January 2021, hospitals and medical centres across several regions were reporting to have reached their full capacities and essentially had been operating in an emergency state. The Czech Republic became one of the hardest hit countries in Europe in terms of cases per 100,000 inhabitants (as of Jan 13, 1119/ 100,000) and deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (as of Jan 13, 15.58/100,000) (Hartikainen 2021: 8). Around the same time the government commenced its first SARS-CoV-2 vaccination campaign, which was yet again extremely poorly executed and communicated, further enhancing the vaccine hesitancy which was by the time vigorously spreading across the Czech online spaces.

The previously established role of the online sphere as a strategic space for political mobilisation and protest has been further reinforced during the pandemic. In the Czech Republic dozens of new online anti-establishment groups and movements sprung up in response to the government's mishandling of the crisis. Kralova has spent the past twelve months conducting a deep observation of some of these online spaces and engaged in conversations with their members. Far from being a homogenous group, what the participants had in common



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was an acute mistrust and disillusionment with the political elites and state institutions. She found a perception of the widening gap between the interests of the elites and the interests of the 'common people' and a belief in an encroaching conspiracy aimed at curtailing citizens' personal and constitutional freedoms and rights. The participants' lived experience of the pandemic, its socioeconomic consequences and their broader personal histories thus became a backdrop for discovering how the covid-19 crisis impacted their political views and choices.

It is also important to mention that during the last parliamentary elections in October 2021, Babiš' ANO lost to the coalition SPOLU over 0.67%. Different commentators and experts agreed that the mishandling of the covid-19 crisis played an important role in Babiš' defeat. Kralova provided a more detailed analysis of the parliamentary elections [here](#).

2.2.2. Political Disillusionment

2.2.2.1. "Disillusionment" in the ethnographic context

One of the central themes emerging from the fieldwork in the Czech online spaces has been a sense of disillusionment with formal politics in the country. Across a diverse range of socio-economic classes, educational backgrounds and ideological orientations, participants have expressed feeling frustrated with the traditional political institutions (political parties, government), actors (politicians) and the general state of affairs, both in the past and today. When asked about future alternatives, a similar sense of disaffection prevailed.

While some participants believed that there was hope for improvements within the current political system, although their ideas about *what* or *who* should be subject to change, or *how* things should change varied considerably, their accounts were nevertheless almost always pervaded by cynicism, distrust and non-belief. This was the case even when participants had clear preferences and voted for a specific political party.

Interestingly enough, and contrary to other findings in the literature (Linek 2010), in the span of our conversations participants almost *never directly questioned the democratic political regime as such*, nor expressed preferences for a non-democratic form of governance. There have been instances where participants challenged the actual implementation of the democratic principles in the country, for example when disputing the existence or validity of fair democratic elections. This is demonstrated by the quote of Hana (30b) who is of Roma origin, lives in a mid-sized city in the Central Bohemian Region and is currently unemployed; *'Anyways I do not vote in the*



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elections, because for sure one vote will not influence what has already been decided. I am hundred percent certain that the elections are manipulated. Elections exist just for the show for the public... "give us your vote, but we already know how the elections will turn out"; (05hanna30b).

Karel (70a), who lives in the Liberec region where he has already retired, but because of his low pension had to find an informal part-time job, further affirms Hana's statement when he says: *'It was all a fraud, all of the elections were manipulated. You know what they say: if voting could change anything, they would have banned it a long time ago'* (05karel70a). In the context of the discussions about the consequences and the perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, participants who did not believe that democratic principles in the country have been implemented and enforced (such as Hana and Karel), were often also those who believed in the most extreme forms of covid-related conspiracies.

In other interviews, respondents expressed nostalgia for the 'good old' socialist times¹⁹ equated with greater equality and security, however very rarely did this lead to calls for the re-installment of the former, or other, non-democratic forms of political regime. The exceptions included participants belonging to the most vulnerable sections of the society, primarily of Roma ethnic background, such as Pavla (50a) and Margarita (60b), quoted below:

When Kralova spoke to Pavla (50a) who lives in the north western part of the country, about her current living conditions, she spontaneously began recalling life under socialism; *'Back then I really liked totalitarianism (totalitu), things were not so expensive, we could go anywhere, nothing was prohibited.'* And she continued: *'We didn't have to fear that someone would attack us, that skinheads would beat us up. We could go out for dinner, they let us in. Today it is not like that anymore. Entry for the Roma is prohibited'* (0222pavla50b). This sentiment is reiterated by Margarita (60b), who happens to be from the same region: *'And back then, when there was no democracy, things were really much easier'* (0222margarita60b).

The strong socialist nostalgia was also prevalent among former coal miners, whose social and economic status deteriorated significantly as a result of the postsocialist transformation and the associated steep decline of the mining industry. Robert (60b), who is from the Ostravský region (one of the Czechoslovakia's former coal mining heartlands), is one of the former miners who I interviewed. When I asked him about the status of miners today, he contended: *'These days, they completely forget about the miners. We don't mean anything to them anymore. Back then miners used to have the highest pension..today, the miner who worked like crazy and wasted his health*

¹⁹ More on the role of postsocialist nostalgia in the [third section](#).



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gets only 18 000 CZK (731 EUR). What even is that? If it was up to me, I would return it all back to how it used to be' (0222robert60b).

Speaking more broadly, the type of disillusionment which Kralova encountered in the field corresponds with what scholars (Linek 2010; Montero, Gunther, Torcal 1997; Torcal, Montero 2006) referred to as political disaffection, which does not necessarily result in undermining legitimacy of democracy as a system. The sentiment in question has been most succinctly described by Linek (2016: 52) as 'negative or even cynical evaluations of politics and political institutions, feelings of distrust in and helplessness vis-à-vis politics'. The way this is manifested in my interviews can be categorised under four main tropes:

1. *Corruption* – The numerous corruption scandals that Czech political parties and politicians have been associated with or directly involved in since the postsocialist transition makes them untrustworthy in the eyes of the participants.

2. *Formal politics as inherently corrupt* – Closely linked to the first point, the field of formal politics is perceived as something inherently corrupt, inefficient, polluted; as a site generating immoral and selfish actions among the politicians.

3. *The gap between the political elite and 'the people'* – The politicians' high wages, access to numerous benefits, privileges and lavish lifestyles and simultaneously their work inefficacy is often contrasted with the hard work and modest living of ordinary citizens, who can not afford half as much as the political elite.

4. *Lack of an alternative* (within the realm of formal politics) – While the majority of participants stated that they participate in the parliamentary elections, they often do so out of a sense of 'citizen duty' and can hardly choose a party which they could fully trust (voting for the lesser evil).

2.2.2.2. Historical context

The series of corruption scandals that became emblematic of the Czech postcommunist political development represent a crucial context for understanding the widespread disillusionment/disaffection among Czech society. While the reasons behind the emergence of the postsocialist corruption are complex and historically contingent, this section aims to briefly summarise the key historical moments which shaped this phenomenon in the Czech Republic.

First, the period of postsocialist privatization, initiated in 1992 as a key national economic reform, consisted of a large-scale transfer of previously state owned assets into private ownership. The so-called 'voucher privatization'



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(*kupónovka*) proposed by Václav Klaus, the federal minister of finance at the time, was based on the idea that 'everybody could participate by buying vouchers to become a shareholder in the newly established privatization funds' (Slacalek and Sitera 2022: 138) with the objective of creating a previously non-existent Czech capitalist class. In practice the process was carried out in a questionable and an extremely non-transparent manner. Towards the end of the nineties, evidence of many economic crimes, including multiple instances of severe fraud and large scale stripping of state assets by private companies (*tunelování*) surfaced in the public discourse. The legitimacy of the political regime, which played a central role in the facilitation of these processes, deteriorated considerably. The corruption associated with the privatization period set the basis for many more cases of state capture in years to come (on privatization and its woes see Myant and Drahokoupil 2013, Myant 2003, Eyal 2000; 2003).

Another milestone which substantially worsened the citizen perception of the political regime and its corrupt nature was the Opposition Agreement signed between the two largest parties in the parliament – ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party) and ODS (Civic Democratic Party). This political deal (1998–2002) included a provision according to which: 'ODS would allow ČSSD to govern alone as a minority government. In return, ODS would receive a number of parliamentary posts and the two parties would together adopt several constitutional amendments' (Roberts 2010: 1273). The opposition agreement was seen by many as the culmination of crony capitalism and corruption (Slacalek and Sitera 2022: 139), with the critics highlighting its negative consequences for democracy, national stability and constitutional functioning of the state. The implementation of the Opposition Agreement provoked a series of large-scale protests, whose participants coined a slogan 'Thank you, now go', aimed at the leaders of the transition period (*ibid.*). Against the background of the steadily increasing number of corruption scandals, involving the majority of the mainstream political parties from the right to the left, the Opposition Agreement further discredited the political class as internally corrupt and driven by pure self-interest.

The compromised ČSSD, which figured prominently in many corruption scandals, was replaced by the ODS-led government in 2006. The ensuing period of the ODS rule, which came to an end in 2013 with the dissolving of the prime minister Nečas' cabinet and the arrest of several of his top associates charged with 'state capture' corruption, only fortified the already existing public disillusionment. This corruption scandal was particularly unsettling as it took place during a period of severe austerity measures (following the 2008 GFC) with the public repeatedly reminded by the political elite about the need to 'tighten the belts'. What is more, the 'Palermo' style Czech politics prepared the ground for the rise of the populist oligarch Andrej Babiš, who gained popularity



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thanks to his strong anti-corruption rhetoric combined with 'technocratic centrism against traditional party politics' (Slačálek 2022: 164).

Discussion

For the majority of our study's Czech participants, *political corruption* figures as a key factor behind their political disillusionment. Kralova would hear the 'corruption narrative' while talking to people from the working class and the underclass²⁰, such as Ludvik (20b) who lives in the Moravian-Silesian Region and works there as a volunteer firefighter: 'A normal person with a brain can see that this political mess has been here for many years. It was not Babiš' invention. Every government in this country that has been in power since the transition has left behind a series of frauds, scandals...they've been stealing from the people – each and every one of them' (06ludvik20b).

I would also hear it from participants of secured middle class and emerging cosmopolitan class backgrounds. Radek (50a) who works as a regional manager in an international corporation feels equally disillusioned: 'They (the politicians) then slide into the routine and start to take advantage of their position for their own interest. They learn how to 'walk in it' and their efficacy decreases and they become more prone to corruption' (04radek50a).

And the same picture was painted to me by those already retired, who spent a significant part of their lives living under the socialist regime and vividly remembered the transition period. Robert (60b) a former miner from the Ostravský region is very critical of the way in which the closure and privatisation of the state-owned mines has been carried out; 'I will tell you, they really messed it up. When transition happened, they came here and started spreading their capitalist smart talk. They shut down the mines and they got loads and loads of money from it. They literally looted this state. They stole whatever they could' (0222robert60b).

²⁰ For the class designation used in this paper (which I approximated based on the research participants' narratives of their living conditions), I am using the framework suggested by Prokop et al. (2019). In their study, the authors looked at class formation in the Czech Republic since the postsocialist transition and came up with a holistic approach to class which takes into consideration variations of economic, social and cultural capitals. Their typology of 6 key classes includes the *secured middle class* (high levels of income, home property ownership, social and cultural capital – the richest and most secure of all classes), the *emerging cosmopolitan class* (high levels of economic, social and cultural capital, however lesser rates of home property ownership, knowledge of languages, IT which means higher opportunities at the globalising job market), the *traditional working class* (decent levels of economic capital and home property ownership, lesser social and cultural capital and high risk employment) the *class of local ties* (high social capital and home property ownership, strong local community ties, lower levels of economic capital, decreasing opportunities at the globalised job market), the *endangered/precarious class* (low economic capital and low levels of home property ownership, however fairly high social capital (social connections), lower opportunities at the globalised job market) and the *deprived class* (low levels of economic, social and cultural capital, high rates of over-indebtedness, unqualified workers and unemployment). Click [here](#) for a detailed description.



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Did the perception of state corruption affect our participants' political ideas and actions? Certainly. While Radek does not even feel like participating in the parliamentary elections, he will eventually go to '*prevent the worst political scenario*' (04radek50a). Robert, the former miner, feels utterly disillusioned and has not gone to vote in the parliamentary elections since the socialist times. Ludvik on the other hand, will probably cast his vote to one of the newer political parties *Přísaha*, which criticises the traditional political parties, corruption and clientelism – a campaigning strategy very similar to that which brought Andrej Babiš' ANO to power. The notion of the formal political arena as inherently corrupt thus further encourages citizens to look for alternatives, including anti-systemic parties and protest movements. These subjects and their representatives are often also very successful in bridging the perceived gap between 'the people' and the political elite. This is explained by Stela (30a), who is a representative of the emerging cosmopolitan class with progressive political leanings and who works as a fantasy sci fi writer:

Babiš was actively spending time among the people and giving them things, even if it was a stupid 'kobliha' (typical Czech pastry that Babiš was giving out in Prague metro during his first election campaign). He did things that were visible. And he also made a brilliant use of social media. He was sharing popular views at the time, like "there is so much corruption, let's bring these thieves (politicians of the traditional parties) to jail". (07stela30a)

The ability of a political leader to use their personal and communication styles to evoke authenticity and resemble the 'commoner' has been identified by many scholars as one of the central features of successful populist politics (Laclau 2005, Brubaker 2017, Cassulo 2020). The same applies to the Czech context, where the notion of the estrangement from the political class is particularly pertinent. The following account of Nela (20a), a university student who works part-time in a hospital Covid ward well illustrates this recurring sentiment:

And the politicians...my father told me how much salary they receive... an average of 80 thousand crowns per month (almost 3 x the average Czech salary). They have their private chauffeur, secretaries and paid lunches in luxury restaurants. And when you watch them online (during parliamentary live streams) how during the sessions they do nothing and are always on their phones...that's just terrible. (03nelaa20a)

As it was revealed throughout this section, finding alternatives within the existing political configuration and particularly among the traditional political parties becomes increasingly unappealing and difficult. Large section of the society adopts the strategy of voting for 'lesser evil', because as they explained, they feel it is their citizen



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obligation to participate in the elections. In the fieldwork context, this occurred on several occasions. When I talked to Sara (50a), about her electoral choices, she instantly responded: *'For sure I will go vote, it is a necessity. As I said, I'd be surprised if the elections were not fraudulent (zkorumpovaný) but we will go'* (08sara50a). In another conversation with Nela (20a), who I just quoted above, she raised an interesting point about young peoples' relationship to parliamentary elections: *'Well us young people we are really being 'lynched' for not voting'*, she continues by explaining her own approach, *'I personally go, even though I don't understand much of what's going on and I don't even like any of the parties. It seems to be that it's all a bit of fraud (zkorumpovaný) and that in the end it won't have any impact'* (03nelaa20a).

Others opt out from the elections completely and a growing number shift their sympathies to new anti-system or protest movements and parties, often of populist nature. As the proceeding section illustrates, the COVID-19 crisis further amplified such trends by introducing new political subjects on the political scene.

2.2.2.3. Re-politicisation in times of crisis

According to the literature, political disaffection tends to intensify when politicians appear not to respond to citizens' demands and fail to represent their interests, often in times of economic or political crises. To the realm of political disaffection, Linek includes in the realm of political disaffection also a subcategory of individual disaffection which encompasses the belief that politics is unimportant, incomprehensive and inaccessible, resulting in disengaged and disinterested citizens (Linek 2016: 59). This however was not the case in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which in fact had often become the main catalyst for the politicisation of many of the participants with whom Kralova spoke.

As Rudolf (30a) observed: *'I was always living my comfortable life, we would go on trips with my son – a normal life. I wasn't interested in politics. Only last year in May 2021 I started getting curious and then in October it completely opened my eyes and I started getting active (in the anti-covid movement)'* (06rudolf30a). Rudolf is from the Karlovy Vary region, which during the pandemic reported one of the highest numbers of Covid-related deaths. It has always been one of the country's economically less developed areas, and the pandemic has only made things worse for those trying to make ends meet. For Rudolf, the prolonged closure of schools forced him to reduce his working hours in order to assist his seven year old son (who he has in shared custody) with online schooling. The closure of schools and the subsequent deterioration of mental (and physical) health of many children (including Rudolf's son) is what instigated Rudolf to start campaigning around these issues.



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Another research participant Sara (50a) lost her job during the pandemic because of a downsizing at her workplace. She had started to take interest in the various online 'anti-covid' groups because of a friend, who started sending her links to various groups and websites. Initially, Sara was genuinely scared of the spread and health risks of the virus and followed the recommended restrictions. But gradually, as the government's everchanging measures became less and less comprehensive, Sara became suspicious about their real intentions. According to her, because she became increasingly invested in the various 'anti-covid' groups and absorbed their news and articles, she was able to 'see through'. The following quote illustrates this process:

Then in 1989 the postsocialist transition (převrat) happened and I thought – that's it, I don't have to care about politics anymore. I was enjoying my youth, my family ... I wasn't interested. Then we started hearing about all the corruption scandals, the huge privatisation thefts etc. but I thought that anyways I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. And now, as we entered the 'covid era', I thought that it was about time that I should really start getting interested in politics again. (08sara50a)

Later Sara talked about fearing that the government would impose another strict lockdown, *'I only hope, that if something like that were to happen, that people would finally wake up and take to the streets and throw those bastards from their positions'* (08sara50a). This became a noticeable pattern among our interlocutors who were actively participating in various online 'anti-covid' groups Kralova studied. The pandemic and their opposition to the government restrictions turned them from disengaged or allegiant citizens – not actively engaging with politics and 'living their ordinary lives' – into critical or assertive citizens (Dalton and Welzel 2014, Dalton 2004; Klingemann 1999; Norris 1999). With regards to their subsequent political (re)engagement, Kralova identified four core trends:

1. Defiant attitude towards the government in power (even by those who would previously support it) was almost unanimous. This is captured by the following quote from Karel (70a), who I mentioned earlier: *'Back then I became quite enchanted with Babiš, when he had appeared as one of the richest Czechs on TV and stated that all the politicians steal and that he was going to put an end to this. But now, looking at how he's acting with regards to covid, I totally changed my mind about him'* (05karel70a).
2. Change in voting preferences towards new, non-established political parties that advocate the abolition or limitation of covid-related restrictions (either SPD and Trikolora – both far right and populist parties). The following statement by Rudolf is one of many examples; *'And who will I vote for...someone for sure. Someone who can do something about this situation (covid restrictions). I don't really trust Okamura'*



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(leader of SPD), but he has some good people there and I think they have the power to change something' (06rudolf30a).

3. Active engagement in new emerging political movements and parties with an aspiration to enter parliamentary politics. Pavlina (30b) is one of the research participants who openly shared with us their anti-covid positions:

'Well because of my disagreement with the situation I joined a political party – Volný Blok. People can say whatever they want about them, but to me they seemed the best choice. And we organise trips to Prague to go to demonstrations, and thanks to this demonstrations I also started a local Volný Blok fb group, because on the way there, our bus was stopped by the cops and we couldn't continue and couldn't make it to the demo' (at the time there was a national ban on interregional travel). (09pavlina30b)

4. Support of anti-systemic and protest 'civil society' movements calling for direct action, showing strong anti-party sentiments.

Barbora works as a caregiver in an elderly care home in the Ostravský region. When asked why she supports the figure of Daniel Landa (a famous musician, an ex member of a far right skinhead band, who was during the pandemic calling for civil disobedience), she responded: *'I like him because he is apolitical. It doesn't matter if you vote for ČSSD (social democrats) or whoever else. He says he is apolitical. He has nothing to do with politics. And this I really like – he doesn't divide the people'*, she concludes pessimistically by saying, *'But as always, when someone starts this kind of social movement, they end up in politics and everything goes wrong'* (09barbora50a).

This section provided an overview of some of the key underlying causes of the widespread phenomenon of political disillusionment, namely the enduring effects of many corruption scandals on the worsening public perceptions of formal political parties and representatives. Using the example of the anti-covid movement, it drew attention to the ways in which unaddressed political disillusionment, when combined with an ongoing socio-economic crisis, can encourage (re)politicisation of previously politically inactive citizens. While the anti-covid movement remains a marginal force in the society, its inner dynamics and style of political mobilisation provide valuable examples of how new anti-systemic political actors and movements establish themselves in times of crisis and monopolise political organising of the disillusionment widespread in the society.



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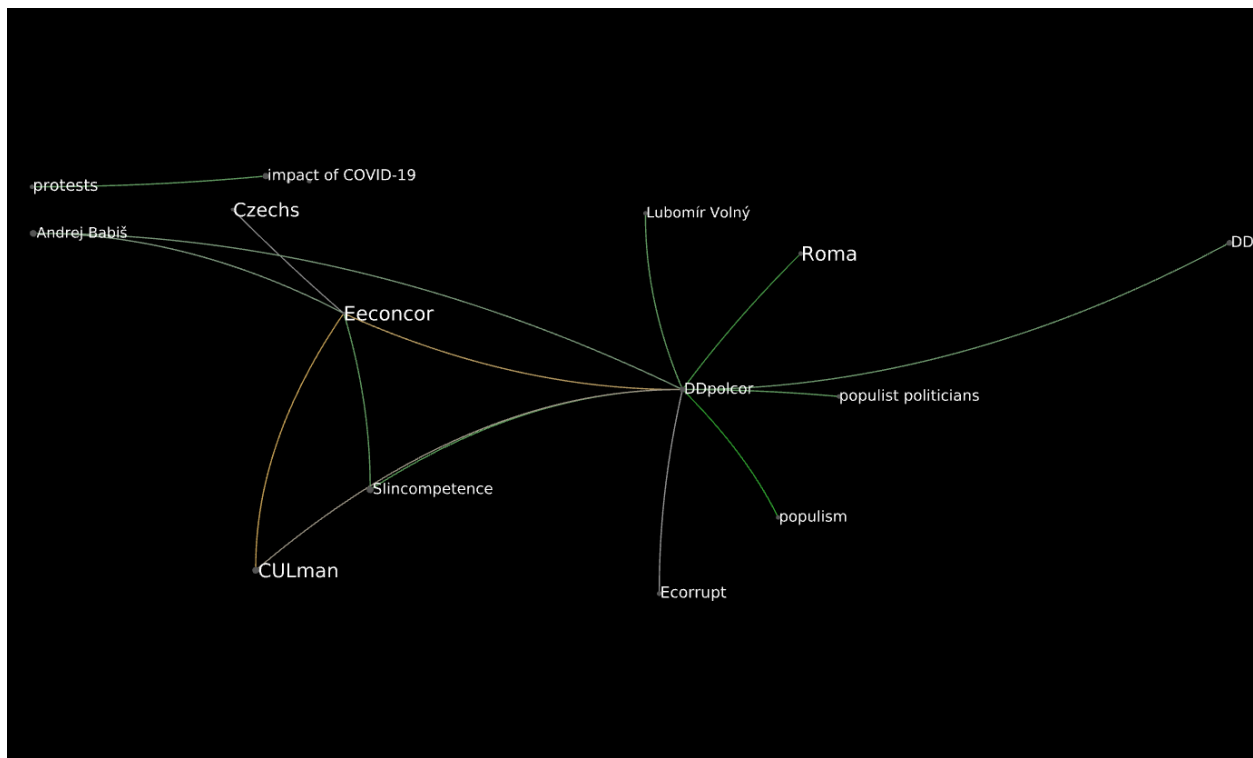


Figure 16: The deepest edges of the Czech interviews corpus relevant for the trust/distrust pillar ($d \geq 8$). The codes for political and economic corruption, `DDpolcor` and `Eeconcor` are highly central.

The visualisation in Figure 16 portrays `DDpolcor` (political corruption) and `Eeconcor` (economic corruption) as the central codes informing the topic of political and institutional trust/distrust. They emerged as key nodes from the network of other topically relevant codes such as mistrust protests and alienation. This is in line with the ethnographic insights, where corruption has been identified by the majority of the research participants as the main reason behind their political disillusionment. This widespread sentiment is in its many varieties captured by the `DDeliteestremgment` code, which is located at the right (East) edge of this visualisation view, connected to `DDpolcor`. It is worth noting that the code for protests resists a reduction of up to $d \geq 12$, `Eeconcor` up to $d \geq 17$, and `DDpolcor` up to $d \geq 36$, which makes the last by far the most important of the set. Simultaneously, it has the broadest co-occurrence with the code for Andrej Babiš, meaning the highest number of respondents associated these two with each other. Certain inconsistencies between the choice of words as applied in the ethnographic analysis and the coding visualisations are due to the difference in methodological approaches in each.



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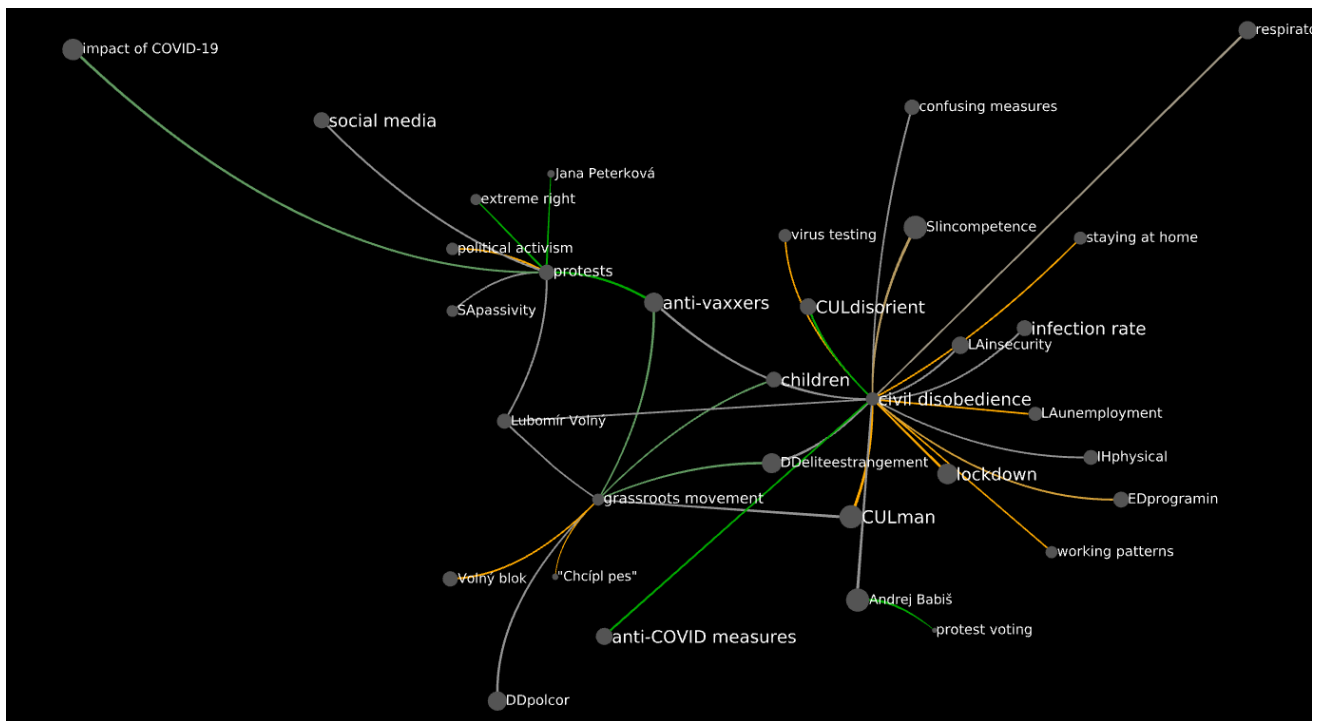


Figure 17: the edges supported by at least 2 informants ($b \geq 2$), including the following codes and their neighbours: victims of post-socialist transformation (isolated, not shown), grassroots movements, protests, protest voting, civil disobedience.

The visualisation (Figure 17) provides a general overview of the key codes which capture different aspects of political radicalization in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The networks around the two central codes – *civil disobedience* and *protests* enable us to see a range of conditions, perceptions, actions and outcomes, which have led the research participants to join ranks with those calling for anti-systemic action. The visualisation helps to reveal the deeply gendered aspect of those pandemic-related phenomena, which confirms the traditional division of gender roles in Czech society. Namely, it renders visible the fact that the women’s (orange lines) experience of the pandemic (and resistance to it) was centred around issues of increased domestic work, family care and barriers to the job market, while men (green) were able to invest more of their time to becoming politically involved and engaged in the ‘anti-Covid’ grassroots movement. Another interesting point emerging from the visualisation is the way in which the personification of politics can influence the electoral choices not only in the positive sense (voting for a candidate based on the sympathies), but also based on negative and polarised perceptions (anti-candidate voting).



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2.2.3. Subjectivity and affect as voting determinants

2.2.3.1. *The role of affect and subjectivities in political choices*

The emotional choice of a political party is I think obvious. I do not know anyone who reads party electoral programmes in order to decide who to vote for. I've never read one and I think only under 1% of the voters actually read them. The voters of ANO are a completely apolitical group composed of protest votes from the left to the right. (05richard40b)

This is how Richard, who lives in Prague where he owns several small businesses, responded to my question about the main factors behind people's electoral choices. His response illustrates nicely one of the key observations emerging from Kralova's fieldwork data, which itself mirrors what has been widely affirmed in anthropological and political-psychological literature: emotions are important. They embody everyday experiences and connect the individual to a wider collective, while shaping political choices, underpinning enhancing agency and directing action. In political psychology the recognition of the impact emotions have on political choices has become mainstreamed (Lau and Redlawsk 2001, Redlawsk and Mattes 2022)

Anthropologists have contributed to extending our understanding of subjectivity, conceived in political psychology as relating to something predominantly individual, by pointing out to the central role of society and culture in shaping the experiences of personhood (Biehl 2007). This implies that the individuals' deeply embodied sense of self, their sensibilities and sentiments are strongly shaped by wider societal norms, values and expectations. Furthermore, Sherry Ortner (2005) has accentuated the influence of the political on the formation of the individual and argued that subjectivity is in fact constituted by the emotional experience of the political subject, 'a subject caught up in a world of violence, state authority and pain, the subject's distress under the authority of another' (Ortner in Lührman 2006: 346). In the context of our ethnographic findings, these insights are significant because they show how the participants' agency and involvement in their country's politics is closely determined by their experience as political subjects and vice versa.

To draw on specific examples, several research participants shared their feeling of being *not represented by the existing political parties* (as the previous section on political disillusionment illuminated) and not having their individual needs addressed or even acknowledged by the dominant political representation. *'What I do not get from this state is security, that 'What I do not get from this state is security, that if something bad happened, I would be supported'* (06rudolf30a), or as expressed by Marie (50a), who is from one of the poorest regions in Czechia (Usti nad Labem) and is currently unemployed, *'I am very saddened by what is going on in this country.*



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The government gets on my nerves, they do not care about the people, but just about themselves. We need someone new who will care about the people' (05marie50a), can deeply affect one's sense of the self and their role in the wider society, their level of trust towards public institutions and finally their political choices and actions.

As Richard (40b) elaborated further, *'A lot of people shift to the extremist parties because they do not see any real support from the state...in this country we have over one million indebted people subjected to legal debt enforcement processes, who are having their Christmas bonuses taken away from them...of course they will vote for the extremists'* (05richard40b).

The formation of subjectivity in connection to politics is deeply internalized, and translates into a concrete political action through *affect*. In anthropological literature affect is recognized as the main driver of emotions, 'a felt bodily intensity, the feeling of having a feeling' (Massumi in Rutherford 2016: 18.2). It is essentially what animates the acting subject. In a similar vein as subjectivity, affect is social through and through, strongly shaped by its socio-cultural surroundings. It has been identified by various scholars (Ahmed 2004, Massumi 2015, White 2017, Mason 2018) as playing a key role in the sphere of politics, unsettling the liberal myth that politics represents a domain 'of reasoned democratic deliberation based on facts' (Bangstad 2019, Redlawsk and Mattes 2022).

In the past decade, 'the politics of affect' has become closely associated with the rise of right-wing populism, as populist politicians globally have shown to be particularly skilled in mobilising their support around affective intensification (Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza, 2017). Populist politics therefore not only challenges the liberal democracy's principles and values, it also transgresses its traditional style of political deliberation by drawing on a wide range of affective sentiments including anger, fear, anxiety but also positive affects such as security, belonging and closeness. While the significance of emotions has been most visible within the realm of populist politics, it should be emphasised that affect has played a central role in all different kinds of political mobilisations, liberal and conservative, left and right. What follows is a discussion of the main ways in which affect and subjectivity shaped the political choices and actions of our participants.

Discussion

Personalities over party partisanship

One of the striking aspects emerging from the ethnographic data was the importance that participants placed on



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having known particular politicians in deciding whether to vote for a given party. This would come out most clearly in the context of municipal politics. Participants would often refer to having personal connections to their mayors or other local political representatives, appreciative of the work they have done for the place where they lived. This is illustrated by the following quote from Pavlina (30b), with whom I connected through her activity on one of the anti-covid online groups. While in the latest parliamentary elections she voted for Volný Blok – one of the new 'anti-covid' political parties, with a extreme rightwing ideological basis – when I asked her about her past voting choices she replied: *'I started voting when I was 18 and I always voted based on who I knew. I had quite a lot of acquaintances in politics. It was always a vote for someone I knew, so it wouldn't fall through to 'just anyone', she continues by explaining her electoral choices, 'before Volný Blok I voted Trikolóra²¹ but as I said it was more about the people than the party. I became more informed about politics only during the Covid period'* (09pavlina30b).

Similar accounts were repeated by both liberal and conservative voters or even those who no longer participated in the elections. Further ethnographic examples include Milan (30a), a civil servant from South Bohemian Region, with liberal conservative political leanings, who told me: *'I vote ODS (Civic Democratic Party), because the mayor we have here is good'* (01milan30a). Or Blanka (50a) a nurse based in Prague, who describes her political views as conservative. When I asked about her electoral choices, her response was:

I voted ODS, because here in my town we have a mayor, and he is an incredible person. Because here he arranged a road bypass and also renovated our local school, kindergarden and a playground... This mayor does a really great PR for our town and he is just great. When the gypsies started stealing cobblestones from the main square, he took photos of them and published them on facebook, what a hero....My grandad used to say that politics is a swamp and he is right. I am just waiting for the moment that this mayor becomes corrupt. (11blanka50a)

When I asked Petr (50a), a fairly known Roma musician, whom the Roma community in his town tended to vote for, his response was: *'Well it depends, each time it is a bit different, depending a lot on sympathies. For instance if we know that there is a Roma candidate from our region, that there is a possibility that he could get a seat (on the municipality level) then we will all vote for him to try to support him. So we also get some representation'* (04petr50a).

What surfaces from these accounts is a great importance of local municipal politics, to which participants often feel more closely connected and feel like they can participate by delegating the responsibility to a political

²¹ Far right wing populist party



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representative whom they personally know or who is sympathetic to them. This phenomenon is well documented by survey research on the differential levels of trust in institutions that shows higher levels of trust in local than central institutions of politics and administration.²² The widespread shift towards personalization of politics, where individual electoral choices are strongly influenced by the (un)popularity of particular politicians is an associated phenomenon (Garzia and Ferreira da Silva 2021). For most participants Kralova spoke to, apart from a few exceptions, voting preferences were hardly based on the party's manifestos or their ideological orientation. Subsequently party partisanship was scarce, as participants would often tell me of having voted for parties from the opposite sides of the ideological spectrum.

For instance Rudolf (30a), who in the most recent parliamentary elections (October 2021) casted his vote for SPD (right-wing populist party) because of their opposition to the covid-19 imposed restrictions told me that in the previous elections he voted ČSSD (Social Democrats). Or Láďa (60b) who is even an active representative at the level of municipality politics in his town in Ostravský region. When he became politically active, he ran for ČSSD. When I asked him why he chose this party, he said it was because; *'my friend from primary school contacted me and told me to join the party because they needed people and votes....so I entered. But when I saw how badly it was working, all the corruption and inner party conflicts...for example when we were running internal party leadership contests, we were given the voting card with a candidate's name already written on it beforehand...that's wrong'* (10lada60b).

After many years, disillusioned by the experience, Láďa terminated his membership in ČSSD and later considered joining Trikolóra (neoconservative and populist far right-wing party). When I asked him where on the ideological spectrum he would locate himself, his answer was: *'more like a democrat...towards ODS...although I really don't like their leader (Petr Fiala – current prime minister). But better this than some kind of nationalisation'* (10lada60b).

These examples illustrate a broader trend which points out to the inconsistencies of people's political convictions, ideas and the fading away of party partisanship, observable in the Czech context. The reasons for this are complex and cannot be easily generalized. Furthermore, this trend is observable across the whole of the Western Europe, as Garzia, Ferreira and DeAngelis (2022) evidence in their comparative study on partisan dealignment and the personalisation of politics. Nevertheless, what is worth mentioning for the Czech case is the impact of the rhetoric of free market determinism and anti-communism which, following the postsocialist transition, became incredibly

²² According to the Czech agency STEM, in June 2022 trust in the Czech Parliament stood at 36%, in the government 30% at, while 69% of respondents trusted the local government (<https://www.stem.cz/duvera-v-institute-v-cervnu-2022/>) For the very similar results from Poland see CBOS 2022a.



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pervasive. The moral argument of anti-communism consisted of highlighting the criminal nature of communism, which led to, as Slačálek and Šitera argue, 'discrediting not only the past regime but a much broader group of actors—often the whole Left, or even centrist liberals' (2022: 143).

What became quite evident from my conversations with the participants was that they associated the word 'ideology' with the past regime²³ and neoliberal capitalism was, rather than an ideology, perceived as a norm which was never explicitly challenged by any of the participants.²⁴ The ensuing series of corruption scandals in which parties across ideological spectrum have taken part in (described in more detail in the [previous section](#)) only further discredited the traditional, ideologically defined political parties. This trend was perceived and described by some of the participants, primarily younger and left-leaning progressives. One of those was Stela, who I previously quoted;

The political topics that should be dealt with structurally, are not at all mentioned in the party manifestos. The campaigns are totally confusing [...] The traditional political campaigning that would say: "This is us, we target this part of the electorate, e.g. targeting small business entrepreneurs, or the middle classes, etc. We offer you x, y, z." You don't see this anymore. I think people are very confused and often don't even think "I vote for this party, because I am from this demographic and this party will represent and protect my interests." They are much more driven by some immediate emotional impulses. (07stela30a)

This then partially contributed to the emergence of the so called 'catch-all' parties, which reject the left – right cleavage altogether. The most notable example of this is the rise of Andrej Babiš' ANO which has until recently been the leading party in government (October 2021) and in the public survey polls remains the strongest party of all. This process has been described to me by Miroslav (30a), an IT administrator for the public sector, who lives in Prague and self-identifies as having leftist views. '*Babiš was the first one who came up with the apolitical programme. He said: "I'll take care of everything." and to be honest, in a lot of the matters he did. Of course he stole loads of money in the process, but who cares anymore? He increased the wages of civil servants, he increased the maternity pay etc. He actually really **did** things for people*' (07miroslav30a).

Closeness, Security and Care

While A. Babiš widely exploited the narrative of anti-corruption and the critique of traditional political parties to gain wide-scale popularity, his image of the 'billionaire commoner', someone who is physically there for people

²³ During which, as argued by Hirt (2012: 27), the socialist ideology became artificially orchestrated and hollowed of any real meaning.

²⁴For more on Czech neoliberal resilience see: Šitera 2021



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and 'works hard' on their behalf, was equally important for his success. These have been identified by scholars as foundational features of the 'technocratic populism of ordinary people', which 'offers a technocratic vision of politics that relieves "the people" of the responsibility to lead active civic lives and to hold politicians accountable' (Buščíková and Gusati 2019: 304). Nevertheless, the affective dimension, namely feelings of security and closeness, have been equally important in determining political preferences and voting behaviours, something that also emerged from the ethnographic material.

In the span of Kralova's conversations with the participants, whenever positive attributions of political representatives were discussed, the accent was commonly placed on them appearing 'common, normal or even ordinary'. When I asked Ondřej (20b), a precarious worker informally employed in a private factory based in Prague, who was a political figure he most respected, he answered: *'Václav Havel... I remember him when he was president when I was younger. He seemed to be a really wise person. Someone who wanted to work for his country. Someone who was capable of sitting down by a bonfire (táborák) with a group of ordinary people from the village, talking to them about their problems and trying to help them out.'* (O2ondrej20b)

In the context of today's political representation, Ondřej struggles to find someone of a similar 'moral' standing, sees the whole political class as corrupt and as a result of this disillusionment does not participate in the elections. The following quote from Dagmar (30a), an IT administrator from Karlovarský region, further affirms Ondřej's earlier sentiment: *'I was inspired by Havel because he was a man of the crowd (člověk z davu). An ordinary working man from a brewery, who made it all the way up to become a president and while leading the nation, he had to learn a lot of new things. This is no joke'* (O7dagmar30a).

The fact that Dagmar chose V. Havel as a politician she admires, a figure deeply associated with liberal progressive values, is compelling because at the same time, she admitted that she was a long time supporter of SPD (populist extreme right-wing) and an avid opposer of the covid-19 restrictions. When Kralova asked Dagmar, what led her to vote for SPD, she responded: *'You could never trust the politicians. Until recently when SPD appeared, as the ONLY political party, to fight for decent working people and for the future of our country'* (O7dagmar30a).

Dagmar's ideological inconsistency further highlights the previous point, that subjectivity and affect often play a more significant role in the choice of the political parties than their programmatic or policy position (Mason 2019). These affective connections between the politicians and their voters are achieved through a variety of means, including their physical performance, bodily gestures, style of speech and even the way they dress (Casullo 2020: 29). All of those elements are important in creating feelings of likeability and closeness between the populist leader and their electorate, simultaneously emphasising the ever widening gap between 'the people'



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and the mainstream 'corrupt political elite' which continues to style its political presentation according to the 'liberal ethics of self-control and deferred gratification' (Mazzarella 2019: 51).²⁵

This emotional connection is evoked by Hana (30b), when explaining her liking of A. Babiš, *'For instance I really like Babiš. He's really sympathetic. Whenever I see him, he's really amusing, he always makes me laugh when I observe him. How he presents himself, how he speaks, with such sarcasm... I like him very much, even though I know he's a piece of shit, I still do'* (05hana30b).

Moreover, as Hana's (30b) comment suggests, the realm of politics can also be perceived by citizens as a form of entertainment, a Debordian "society of the spectacle," most vivid during the pre-election periods, where politicians, particularly those with populist leanings, intensify their affective performances and fully invest themselves into taunting their rivals (Ostiguy 2017; Moffitt and Tormey 2014). In the Czech Republic, the emotional charging of political campaigns is particularly pronounced during the presidential elections, where the candidate is elected by popular vote. The historically first presidential contest by popular vote took place in 2013. These elections brought to power Miloš Zeman, largely due to his strong populist rhetoric, plebeian stylization and deeply offensive statements towards Karel Schwarzeberg, the other main presidential candidate. Zeman centred his campaign around discourses of Islamophobia, anti-Roma and anti-German nationalism, topics in the Czech collective consciousness charged with highly negative emotions (Slačálek 2021). In the interviews with participants who supported or actively participated in the various online anti-covid movements, such negative affective triggers have also been strongly present.

2.2.3.2. Fear, anxiety, distrust

As has been highlighted in the section on the [Covid-19 Pandemic in the Czech Context](#), the Czech government's handling of the covid-19 crisis has been evaluated by the majority as frantic and confusing. This, alongside other factors, contributed to growing levels of institutional and political distrust in Czech society, which subsequently bolstered the influence of the 'anti-covid' movement. The participants' motivations for their active support of these various civil society and political groups varied, but can broadly be characterised by high levels of distrust towards the politicians, media and official medical experts. When I was discussing the ways in which the pandemic affected the levels of trust among the Czech population, Lubos (30a) a civil servant from the Central

²⁵ Elsewhere Mazarella notes: "Liberalism oscillates between an (anxious) invocation and a (scornful) abjection of the affective and corporeal substance of social life" (2019: 49).



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Bohemian Region, asserted that *'It's difficult, because the crisis of trust²⁶ towards the government, state institutions and media was already strongly present in the society long before covid...this was just a continuation or rather intensification of it'*, he then states that *'I think it is quite a rational reaction (referring to covid denial), when all of this uncertainty and fear which the pandemic induced combines with the mistrust towards the institutions and media'* (0222lubos30a).

Among the people Kralova interviewed, she could sense a pervasive sentiment of fear and anxiety over what they interpreted as an ongoing 'conspiracy of the big pharma companies', 'biological experiment tested on humans' and 'change of world orders' initiated by the global elites in the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic. And while these various conspiracies which have sprung up across the online spaces were trusted by different participants to different extents, the sense that 'we are not being told everything' and that 'there is more to it than just the virus' were widespread even among those who did not directly participate in any of those 'anti-covid' groups. Below are just a few examples illustrating the prevalent distrust and fear.

'When I think about it through and through, covid was basically another 'Great Depression'. You want to start something, you want to enslave the normal hardworking people so our great, rich, noble elite could make even more money. So for this reason I would say, it was just another wave of the Great Depression.' (06ludvik20b)

'It's not something I believe... I am convinced that the virus has been artificially created. There was a video on YouTube where Bill Gates himself said that there is a need to reduce the population by over 10-15 percent and if the vaccine is developed, we will achieve this.' (05karel70a)

'Anyways, we will never find out how it really is. We can only speculate how things are. These people at the top are big liars and we ordinary people will certainly not know.' (05hana30b)

Since the spread of the Covid-related 'fake news' and conspiracies online began, various social scientists and digital security experts have written at length about the various mechanisms underlying this phenomenon (Scheares et. al. 2020, Ahmed et. al. 2020, and also see Veriter et. al. 2020 specifically pertaining to the European Union). Some of them warned against the effects of the Russian propaganda and other anti-liberal entities (various far-right movements, QAnon etc.) on spreading fear and panic primarily around the Covid-19 vaccination,

²⁶ This corresponds with the data from the latest Eurobarometer surveys (2022) which puts the Czech Republic at the bottom of the EU ladder regarding trust in government.



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with the ultimate aim of destabilising the western liberal order.

In the context of the Czech online spaces which I studied, the followers of these 'conspiracies' would then often be described by the 'liberal-minded' majority of the internet as 'irrational', 'emotional' and 'dumb' castaways who did not manage to climb up the social ladder, and this led them to believe in this *nonsense*.

When I interviewed Tom (40b), a person who in his free time was running one of satire Facebook groups dedicated to making fun of the 'anti-covid' movement, his response to how he perceived their supporters was:

Well we live with people who are so stupid that it seems that they would find it difficult not to bump into nonmoving objects... I essentially agree with the explanation that Kellner (one of the richest oligarchs in the Czech Republic, who passed away in 2021) once gave. These people are the victims of globalisation. You have people who were able to profit from it – accept it, work with it, learn new languages and skills – people capable of adapting. And then you have the others, who see themselves as victims, but they just refuse to adapt, they do not want to try new things, they do not want to change. (05tom40b)

Tom's response is fairly representative of the wider views shared among some members of the middle class who tend to be liberal in their outlook, which tend to blame individuals and families' socio-economic difficulties on their personal responsibility or even, as alluded to by Tom, on some sort of inherent flaw in their character. Such perspectives which tend to omit structural basis of poverty can also be partially attributed to the previously mentioned anti-communist rhetoric, which excluded critiques of class divisions and social inequalities and stigmatised them as manifestation of the Communist past (Slačálek and Šitera 2022: 143).

Some of these structural disadvantages surfaced strongly during the Covid-19 pandemic, taking the form of withering working conditions and loss of job security. While it would be inaccurate to state that all of the participants supporting the anti-covid movements were from working class or lower income backgrounds, I did identify a certain pattern among them. One large group of individuals I spoke to were primarily employed in the sectors dominated by precarious labour and as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic lost their jobs. For instance Anastazie (50a), a single woman in her late fifties, lost her job several times since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. She primarily worked in call centres doing telemarketing and because of the decrease in demand, she was made redundant. Throughout the pandemic she has struggled financially and is convinced that the virus has been created artificially in order to reduce the world's population. She started following some of the anti-covid groups out of *anger* about the ongoing covid restrictions which were, according to her, designed to gradually 'curtail our freedoms' and also with *hope* that as a group, they could change something. Pavlina (30b) another of the participants who I mentioned earlier, joined the new political party Volný Blok centred around 'anti-covid'



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rhetoric for similar reasons as Anastazie. Pavlina on the other hand, had to quit her job out of her own initiative because of the unexpected childcare responsibilities which arose as a result of the pandemic. As one of her sons has ADHD, the switch to online schooling forced her to spend more time at home with her children (Pavlina's boss in the industrial bakery where she worked was unwilling to adjust her working hours).

Another section of the participants supporting or voting for the emerging 'anti-covid' political parties consisted of workers, who had to continue to be physically present at their workplaces even during the periods of higher infection rates. For instance Ondřej (20b) who works in a factory in Prague told me:

Yes I was going to work throughout covid. We did not stop the production. We were even lying – if we had covid, we were asked not to report it. We lied to the doctors and the tracking centres about (not) being in contact with someone positive. We got instructions from the management that if we did, we shouldn't report it. But it was us, the workers lying, so essentially if they found out, the blame would be on us. They put all of the responsibility on us, but it was the management that forced us to do it. And this was a common practice in many factories. (O2ondrej20b)

Ondřej also told me that there was almost no protective measures in place which made him anxious because he lives in the same household as his grandmother, *'When covid started, I was the only one who was pressuring our boss to introduce some PPE at work, because I live with my grandmother and I was worried that I might pass it to her. Also I wanted to say something, because everyone from the management switched to home office and us, on the factory floor had to keep coming – but I also wanted to stay home! So I told him – either you give me face masks – or I will stay at home. And the next day, he gave them to us'* (O2ondrej20b).

I have heard similar stories from several other participants. In one instance, a worker employed in a large ironworks factory told me that they were asked to keep going to work even if they themselves tested positive. And even if these instructions did not come from above, many people decided not to follow the official guidelines and measures for practical reasons. Because to stay at home rather than to show up to work, with the sick pay amounting to only 60% of their declared salary (the declared salary in cases of precarious work tends to already be very low) would significantly reduce their family income, which many could not afford.²⁷

Quite a few of the participants I spoke to were also essential workers, working in the medical and care sectors. Even here, I observed quite a lot of vaccine scepticism and some support for the anti-covid movement. For instance Barbora (50a), who was employed in a private retirement home told me that during the strongest waves

²⁷ PAQ Research' sociological survey, mapping the impacts of the covid-19 on the work life in the Czech Republic: <https://zivotbehempandemie.cz/destabilizace-prace>



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of infection rates, almost all of the staff tested positive with Covid. As a result she was asked to cover shifts for her colleagues, working five days in a row, sometimes even 24 hour shifts. There was a lack of PPE and as the virus spread around the retirement home, Barbora also had to deal with many of the clients passing away; *'A lot of them were dying. I was walking across the ward with a saturator, torch, tonometr and thermometer, wrapped up in the 'covid spacesuit' (skafandr), praying that no one else dies. It was terrible'* (09barbora50a).

While Barbora made use of the extra financial bonuses that majority of the medical staff received during the pandemic, she said that this was never going to make up for the 'trauma' that she endured during those days. She also complained that the management never appreciated the sacrifices that the staff had to make and that they never received any formal appraisal. The pressure that Barbora experienced at her workplace strongly affected her personal life which culminated in a breakup with her long-term partner. Angered by all the 'nonsensical' restrictions, Barbora started following one of the civil movement anticovid initiatives, hoping in the power of the "united people in resistance".

What clearly emerges from the participants' accounts is the role of anger in guiding their political support of the emerging 'anti-covid' movement. The importance of fear in mobilising this support can also not be stressed hard enough, as on a daily basis, new videos about the 'new world order' and the deadly effects of the covid vaccines would dominate facebook groups and group chats. However, we should not underestimate the importance of distrust, anxiety and even anger as key factors driving the political mobilisation of those anti-covid groups (and other similar populist-leaning movements).²⁸

While the anxiety over worsening living conditions on one hand, and the growing support for such groups (or simply just covid scepticism) on the other, have not been explicitly connected or described by the participants, the few examples which were presented here illuminate the relevance of this connection. First is the lack of opportunity to opt out from coming to work (contrary to the majority of the middle and upper-middle class people able to work in home offices) and essentially exposing oneself and one's family to the danger of contagion. Second, hearing from the government that closure of big industries (full lockdown) was unthinkable because of the negative impact this would have on the national economy (capital is more valuable than human live). Third, having one's source of already precarious livelihoods actively threatened or stripped down due to the government-imposed restrictions – all of these factors have certainly contributed to an immense amount of psychological and material pressure. This could perhaps serve as another explanation for the participants'

²⁸ As Salmela and Sheve argue: 'right-wing populism is characterized by repressed shame that transforms fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived "enemies" of the precarious self. Left-wing populism, in turn, associates more with acknowledged shame that allows individuals to self-identify as aggrieved and humiliated by neoliberal policies and their advocates' (2018, 434).



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complete rejection of the virus.

Finally, being targeted by the discourse of individualized blame and responsibility, designed and circulated by primarily liberal politicians and the media for the past thirty odd years, has created an additional layer of (partially internalised) frustrations. All of these accumulated sentiments then become an easily exploited target by various populist parties and movements. However, populists around the world do not draw their support only from subjectivities and affects associated with fear, anger and hate. As was demonstrated by the narratives of the participants involved in the anti-covid movement, these new collectivities can also bring about an important sense of belonging, care and hope. To conclude with the words of Spruyt et al. (2016: 336) 'what distinguishes the support for populism from simple political discontent and frustrations is that populism remains a politics of hope, that is, the hope that where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folks, common sense, and the politicians who give them a voice can find solutions.'

The visualisation presented in Figure 18 shows the semantic space encapsulating the codes for anger and fear.

Fear and anger are the central nodes in this view, revealing the importance of gender for the study of emotions: women are more likely to talk about fear while men more often invoke anger. All of these are strongly related to COVID experiences (CULman, Slincomp, lockdown, vaccinations, respirators masks). The "Fear" subgraph points to concerns related primarily to physical and mental health issues, while anger is connected to codes signalling institutional issues. "Anger" is directly related to "cultural manipulation," while fear is more often invoked in the context of concern with immigration. Finally, cultural manipulation is connected with a cluster centred around thinking in terms of nation, concerns with the EU, and the invocation of history.



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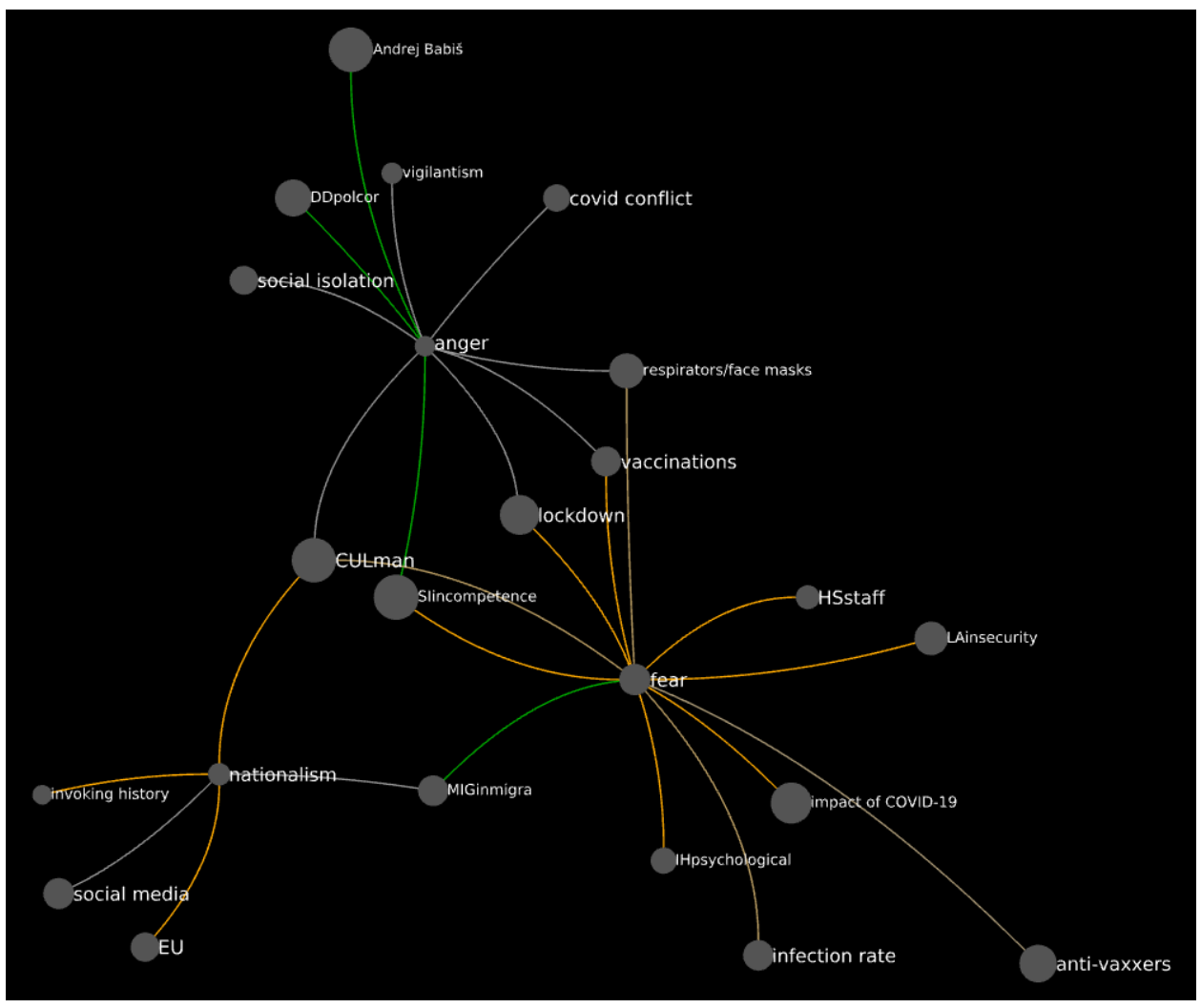


Figure 18: the codes for fear, anger and nationalism and their neighbours. Edges are supported by at least 2 informants ($b \geq 2$).

2.2.4. Romanticization of history, declinism and (anti-)nostalgia

2.2.4.1. The role of history in fueling populist sentiments

'The past frames the present, imbuing it with distinctive meaning' (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 11).



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Scholars across social sciences have written at great lengths about the ways in which historical production, rather than constituting some sort of objective process, becomes subjected to various political strategies of power and domination (Kubik and Bernhard 2014, Foucault 1980). Collective memory therefore emerges as an important component of various nationalist projects because it provides a core structure and meaning to the collective history and identity making processes. Instinctively, having control over the knowledge of the past has become crucially important for advancing various political agendas of (right-wing) populist actors, which tend to structure their discourses around nationalist and nativist categories (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

These historical narratives however are not only instrumentalized and spread by the political and cultural elites. They are simultaneously reappropriated, sustained and circulated by the citizens. They turn into popular folk tales which we *tell to ourselves about ourselves* and constitute important cultural signposts according to which people interpret and navigate their everyday realities and events of a wider scale.

In the digital ethnography of the Czech online spaces, we have identified three main ways in which historical discourses were evoked by participants when they expressed nationalist sentiments or frustrations with the current state of affairs. These are 1. The Nation in Opposition 2. Declinism 3. Postsocialist (Anti)-Nostalgia.

2.2.4.2. The Nation in Opposition

'On the other hand history has shown us that whenever they tried to subjugate our nation, we always persevered. Even if it lasted a century, two centuries or 40-50 years. We, the Czechs, have always managed to persevere and come out of it as winners. Sometimes they say that Hussites were the last warriors – I do not think so. We survived the Habsburgs and the Second World War, during which we were supposed to be exterminated as a nation. We survived communism and I think we will also be able to survive these Covid times.' (06rudolf30a)

Rudolf (30a) is a founder and an active supporter of one of the anti-covid civil society groups, which primarily campaigned around the rights of children to attend school 'without conditions' during the pandemic.²⁹ When he was talking to me about his frustrations with the government-imposed restrictions, he used national historical references to invoke hope in overcoming the current situation. Each of the periods referenced by Rudolf (the Hussite movement, the Habsburg monarchy, the Nazi Protectorate and the Soviet Communist rule) are some of the key historical moments which have shaped the construction of the Czech collective identity and political

²⁹ During the first year of the pandemic, Czech Republic was one of the countries with the longest closure of educational institutions in Europe (started on March 11 and ended May 25, 2020). A lot of the 'anti-covid' movement organising originated around this issue.



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culture. Slačálek (2021) identifies their common root in the 'oppositional unity' (originating with the opposition to the Habsburg Empire) and characterises Czech nationalism as based on the idea of a 'nation in opposition'.

The negative affective dimension of the collective memory of 'the nation in opposition', very much operating on the oppositional mechanism of 'us versus them', can result in real material implications. In the Czech context for instance, it has served as a partial legitimization for the violent expulsion of Sudeten German after 1945. The collective anxieties connected with Sudeten Germans remained one of the key agitation topics of the Czech culture wars of the first decade following the postsocialist transition.

In the context of my fieldwork, the majority of these 'nation in opposition' narratives which invoked the heroic history of standing up to the oppression of the foreign occupying forces, occurred primarily in the *supply* side of the anti-covid movements' discourses. They were instrumentalized by their various 'leaders' and 'spokesmen' with the objective of fueling nationalist sentiments and engendering a sense of unity, strength and a 'will to act' among their followers. They were mobilised during speeches at demonstrations or appeared in some of the posts shared on various 'anti-covid' facebook groups which I studied. Below is an extract from a speech by Jan Zítko, during a demonstration against the introduction of the Green Covid Passes (7.7.2021):

'Europe and Europeans always defended themselves from the pressure of the incoming settlers. We can remember when Turks tried to conquer Vienna...it was basically Czechs, Moravians and Selesians who put an end to it and saved Vienna from starvation. And there are plenty of moments like this in history. We just have to remember them. Because if our ancestors saw this, they would have to turn in their graves!'

However, whenever during our conversations participants organically started talking about what they believed were some common traits of the Czech character and identity, their accounts were more in line with what Ladislav Holý (1996) coined the 'nationalism of little men'. One of the aspects that Holý described in his elaboration on the Czech national identity and nationalism is that 'Czechs do not have ideas of national greatness – it is connected much more with self-defence or with small apolitical values' (Holý in Slačálek 2021: 174). And this sentiment surfaced across the dataset.

Zuzana (40a) a highschool teacher from a Moravian region, explaining why Czechs are not very good at following the covid-19 restrictions, *'But what if you pass it (covid) to someone and the person dies... we are not used to being honest or playing fair. We are used to circumvent the rules [...] We are generally very inward-looking. Germans for example, they feel a way greater responsibility towards Europe. They are completely on a different level when it comes to developing their country and democracy'* (03zuzana40a). Blanka (50a) a hospital nurse



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living in the South Bohemian region, echoed Zuzana's view, when stating that *'Yes we are a nation of Švejs³⁰ What kind of frauds are the Czechs capable of coming up with! For instance we were told – you have to vaccinate, you will have certificates with QR code as a proof. And at the very same moment the Czechs start producing fake QR codes and falsify the certificates'* (11blanka50a).

When I spoke to Ludvik (20b), a firefighter from the same region as Zuzana, about the current pandemic restrictions, he complained that Czechs are not capable of any real protest: *'This is our nature...we are simply velvet (referring to the 1989 Velvet Revolution which was described as a 'peaceful transfer of power'), too soft. We are the banana republic in the centre of Europe and all we can do is to complain. This we do well...we go to the pub, sit down and complain. But when the time comes to do something real and brave, we shut up and go to hide'* (06ludvik20b).

These accounts speak of the 'smallness' of the Czech people who are faced with the shared fate of 'grand' national history, narrated through the trope of 'us against the world'. Some key historical events (and their national hegemonic interpretation) have further reinforced this mythology, such as the Battle of White Mountain (1620), the Munich Agreement (1938) and the failed Prague Spring culminating with the Warsaw Pact military intervention (1968). These have bolstered the theme of 'about us without us' (*'o nás bez nás'*) associated with the collective memory of treason, abandonment and 'foreign domination' which continues to shape the Czech national identity and its relations with the wider world.

2.2.4.3. Declinism

According to various surveys and public opinion polls, the Czech Republic is one of the most eurosceptic countries of all the EU member states. For example, in the Summer 2022 Eurobarometer, 29% of Czechs admitted to having a negative image of the EU, which was (after Greece) the second highest, whereas the 39% held a positive view,

³⁰ 'It is hard not to think about an important strand of the Czech culture, expressed in the self-ironic tenor of Hrabal's novels, early Forman films, or—most important—that quintessential Czech character, Hašek's good soldier Švejk. The main message of this version of Czechness is that mockery, satire, and auto-irony are handy political weapons. It is employed by actors who are comfortable invoking the irreverent pole of the Czech national culture, one of several potentially usable reservoirs of enactable scripts of action (or specific points of concern). In this "Švejkian" vision of national identity "the strength of the nation is not in its moral victories..., but in its ability to survive three hundred years of Habsburg oppression, six years of German occupation, and forty-three years of communism through pretended loyalty and tacit or explicit collaboration" (Holy 1996: 130). In 2009, the students commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism did not invoke the "heroic" version of Czech history (see Holy 1996), but its Švejkian rendition, albeit combined with a public stance inspired by the Havelian spirit of "anti-politics" (Bernhard and Kubik 2014: 286).



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the third lowest in this study³¹ (Eurobarometer 2022: 122). The level of euroscepticism found during Kralova's digital fieldwork was equally startling. While it is true that the majority of the participants with whom she spoke held right-wing and conservative views (among which the EU criticism was to be expected), the level of doubt about the correct functioning of the institution was high even among liberal minded individuals.

The reasons for this are numerous and in this section we will examine the ways in which my participants' romanticization of the national past has impacted their views of the European Union as the main driver behind the perceived decline of the Czech Republic (and Europe more broadly). The notion of declinism as an 'ideology resting on decline of the West as a whole' (Slačálek 2021: 173) was most commonly referenced by the participants on two co-occurring levels – the economic and the moral.

In the context of the former, accounts of Czechoslovakia's 'golden industrial age' were commonly invoked, emphasising the nation's international prestige in a given industry, national self-sufficiency and overall prosperity. These were brought up in order to contrast the current semi-peripheral position of the Czech Republic within the EU and the wider globalised neoliberal economy. The following ethnographic examples illuminate this sentiment;

'We used to be self-sufficient, in terms of food production...everything. We used to build steam boats, weapons – at weapons production we used to be at the top. And when I look at it today, what they import here... We also used to be debtless – medical care for free, school for free...everything for free. I would never think that I would be glorifying the communist time – I used to be so opposed to the regime.' (05karel70a)

'First things first, we need to renew our domestic production. Throw away rape (used for rapeseed oil) from our fields and start planting potatoes, carrots, coll, garlic... Revitalise our industry. There used to be times when our steel plants were the second most renowned internationally. We used to have our sugar factories, renowned glass and porcelain factories, and the automobile industry. The ratio of export to import was much higher.' (07dagmar30a)

'We used to have our own mark of trucks (Tatra), arms manufacturing, glassworks Jablonec, textile factory Liberec... today, we have nothing. We are a transfer station of Europe. I know that we are in the heart of Europe, but in the 1990s we had zero international debt...we used to own everything and today we own nothing.' (11blanka50a)

³¹ For comparison, the EU average was 47% (positive image of the EU) and 16% (negative image). Expressed positive image of the EU among Poles was 63% and Germans 50%, with 4%, respectively 13% having a negative image.



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According to Groman and Stehlík (2021), the myth of 'the industrial greatness' has its roots in the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), where industrial production flourished. This myth was further strengthened during the socialist era (1948-1949), where industrial production and productivity constituted the key elements of state propaganda. Building on the available statistics, Groman and Stehlík note that the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic's claims to being the 'world's top industrial producer' were largely fictional, because at times when the national production was reaching its peak, it only managed to equal to the international average. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Czechoslovakia stood out as one of the most industrialised and urbanised areas in the region (Janos 2000). Regardless, this imagined past constituted an important reference point of several of my participants who used it to channel their frustrations with the perceived economic decline which they associated with the Czech membership in the European Union.

A very common point articulated by the research participants across political spectrum was the perceived unequal position of the EU member states, particularly the CEE countries, within the overall structure of the EU. Their criticism focused on worsening labour conditions, wage inequality and a perceived loss of national sovereignty. This point is expanded by Miroslav (30a) in the following quote:

I was never a big fan of the EU. I think it is a bit of a colonial project and we represent the cheap labour force. The aim is not for us to align with the standards of Germany. No one wants that, it wouldn't be profitable for them. That is why Orban is such an ideal ally of the EU, because he keeps Hungary in shits. So my opinion of the current functioning of the EU is negative, but it's difficult to suggest any alternative. Currently the EU opposition is based on some nationalist views, which is not a path which I would agree with. Any other reform looks difficult. (07miroslav30a)

Rostislav (50a), an entrepreneur from the Ostravský region, who contrary to Miroslav has right-wing conservative political leanings, also put forward a similar critique towards the EU.

What do you think was the reason for the expansion of the EU member states...to expand the financial markets. So they took the semi dead, drained country after the Warsaw Pact, which did not yet manage to recover, in the same way as the other Eastern European countries did not recover. And they flooded us with products, investment, foreign capital...so the people are frustrated that they work for Koreans, for Germans. [...] We basically lost our sovereignty. (07rostislav50a)



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When it comes to morality, the EU which in the participants' narratives figures as a substitution for the whole of 'West', is seen as the key driver of the decline of traditional values and order, the embodiment of 'progressivism which has gone too far'. In the wider context of the Czech Republic, the discourses of the morally compromised West have started to take a more concrete shape with the onset of the 2016 'refugee crisis' and the highly polarising public debate which followed. This brought to the forefront a plethora of conservative and right-wing populist voices across the cultural and political spheres. Aside from their critique of the refugee quotas enforcement, these actors began labelling the EU as 'socialist Brussels', imposing its agenda of 'human-rightism, ecologism, feminism and multiculturalism' (Slačálek 2021: 180).

Radek (50a) who works as a regional manager of an international company and enjoys a very high standard of living, told me that he is definitely in support of CZEXIT. Part of his explanations for this was, *'It is this political correctness again. They want us to be like sheep. When they give us orders, these EU politicians, they just expect us to shut our mouths and obey. Even if their decisions do not make any sense. Whether it's the migrants, or the genders, or religion, or the vaccine distribution. I definitely think we should be able to decide ourselves about our internal matters. And not that some auntie from Germany will decide for us'* (04radek50a).

Radek also complained about the decline of the 'values which really mattered' and he used the lack of respect for the elderly as an example. He feels like these values have been now replaced by political correctness, which he sees as 'unnatural' and 'forced'. The importance of honouring the previous generations and paying respect to their legacy was something that re-occurred frequently across the dataset. For instance, when I asked Blanka (50a) how she felt about the government of A. Babiš, she replied: *'I don't care that Babiš raised the pensions. It is the pensioners who built this country. They built the highrise buildings (paneláky). They built this country up.'* (11blanka50a)

Later when I asked Blanka about what topics she wished that the political representative would raise more, her response was that she completely resented politics and that she preferred to invest her time and energy into her personal life;

I think that all civilised nations will become extinct. They used to say that once men will wear skirts and women will wear pants, there will be a yellow threat and look what China is doing to us. I don't want to think that the end of the world is near... and I don't believe any of these covid-related conspiracy theories...but I think that nature is angry with us. Something has to change. Look now at all the migration and all the wars that it will provoke. Because the 'černý huby' (lit translation: black mouths)



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really have no culture. They are different. If they are beheading people and stoning them, that means they have no culture. (11blanka50a)

Apart from migration and the enforcement of political correctness, participants also often evoked the issue of gender and LGBTQ 'ideologies' as embodying the processes of moral decline. Nevertheless, apart from a very few exceptions, the majority of participants did not hold any extremely discriminatory views against the LGBTQ community, generally claimed that they have 'nothing against them'³², but complained about their exaggerated exposure and public endorsement of their 'agenda'. Participants would often blame liberal politicians for privileging the LGBTQ issues (in the form of financing gay pride) over the real needs of their citizens. Anastazie (50a), who was quoted earlier, complained that the state prioritises the financing of gay pride over the real needs of Czech people, *'What I thought was really twisted this year...and that is just one of the millions of examples...that we had this huge tornado in Moravia. People lost everything. They had nothing to eat, there was not enough help and Hřib (Prague Mayor for the Pirate Party) gave 600 thousand CZK to Prague Pride. I don't think this is normal. And to Moravia he did not send anything?'* (08anastazie50a).

The 'gender ideology', commonly associated with the issues of reproductive and LGBTQ rights, trans identities and gender diversity, wrapped in the seemingly neutral discourse of protecting the children and family, was often referenced as something which is being imported from the 'West', and EU especially. It unsettles the natural order of things and brings unwanted, even dangerous new order of modernity and consumerism, i.e. consumption of identities. Therefore, the mobilisation and discourse against the 'gender ideology' is strongly inherent to the populist discourses and politics (see, e.g. Graff and Korolczuk 2022).

At the centre of many participants' narratives of economic and moral decline was the image of the EU as a foreign hegemonic force, which was imposing its economic policies and moral norms on the Czech people. This generated a great sense of anxiety and frustration expressed in a complaint that people did not have a say in important domestic matters and did not have the autonomy over deciding the country's direction in the future. This complaint constitutes a key motif evoked by various populist mobilizations, including the 'anti-covid' movement, where the EU is a common substitute for the 'corrupt elite':

Another extract from a speech held during a demonstration against the introduction of the Green Covid Passes (7.7.2021):

³² According to opinion surveys, Czech Republic is by far one of the most tolerant countries in the post-socialist block and sometimes exceeds South European countries, reaching the numbers of the West European countries in its approach to gay and lesbian relationships (Sloboda 2021, Takacs and Szalma 2020).



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'We will not be the stooges of the West. We will not be the dumpster of the EU, where they are exporting toxic food products. Now they are forcing the monkey masks (surgical facemasks) on our children so they will become as dumb as the "herd of bushwackers" which crawl to our Europe and they are forcing us to welcome them... We are being trampled upon, we are being defiled. We are called racist, nazis etc. But it is the EU that are nazis, their 'Fourth Reich'. It is them who are dictating to us. Let's not be a colony, let's be our own nation. Czechoslovaks, let's be healthy. I can imagine with all of you that we could build Czechoslovakia in 7-10 years back on its feet, so we belong where we are supposed to belong – the front seats. This nation used to be one of the best in engineering, heavy industry, glass, ceramics, submachine guns, arms.'

Coming back to the earlier point about the 'nation in opposition' discourse and its importance for the formation of the Czech collective memory and identity, it is clear why such critique of the EU holds a powerful social resonance. While the immediate period following the postsocialist transition has been characterized by a powerful pro-Western enthusiasm and a will to 'return to Europe' (Kundera 1984), the accession to the EU and the subsequent newly found semi-peripheral position within it replaced the initial optimism with disappointment and an overly negative image of the West (Slačálek 2021: 180). This is associated with the fact that for the more marginal subjects, who were the majority of Kralova's research partners, and who have suffered the most the negative consequences associated with the postsocialist neoliberal restructuring of the economy, 'the futures past were always futures deferred, that is, the futures that others could access but that were always out of reach for them' (Dzenovska and DeGenoa 2018: 9).³³

2.2.4.4. The postsocialist (anti)-nostalgia

In addition to the emergence of collective nostalgia for the 'futures past' and the rising sense of national loss of prestige and self-sufficiency, the postsocialist transition also generated a series of personal grievances and anxieties on the individual level. Many scholars (Boym 2001, Todorova and Gille 2010, Asavei 2020) have written about the particular postsocialist configuration of nostalgia and its inherently conflicting nature. In their nostalgic accounts of the 'socialist past', the participants with whom Kralova spoke were not trying to deny the negative aspects of the socialist regime, but chose to emphasise the positives associated with economic security and stability. Láďa (60b) shared his view of the postsocialist transition:

³³ 'Futures past' is the phrase coined by Koselleck (1985) to reference futures promised by earlier hegemony, governments, regimes, etc.



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Well I believe a lot of things have improved for the better (since transition). Well for the better, it's a bit difficult to say. A lot of people under socialism were used to being taken care of by the state. They did not have to worry about anything, the state took care of it for them – housing, everything...everyone had a job, if they did not, they got it. Everything cost less, but on the other hand there were lower wages. But the state took care of them. Now it's like – 'if you want something, you are responsible for getting it'. Some like it, some don't. But especially the older generation remembers the old times as better. (10lada60b)

Following Kotwas and Kubik who observe that 'nostalgic invocations of the past are saturated with a powerful emotion, a bittersweet longing. One yearns for a past moment or period – however purely imaginary it may be – and attempts to dwell in it' (2022: 2), the intense emotional attachment to the socialist past and a wish for its return was, in Kralova's ethnographic data, rarely present. As was already commented in the section on [political disillusionment](#), this nostalgic yearning was only expressed by former coal miners from the Ostrava region, whose social and economic status deteriorated significantly as a result of the sharp decline of the socialist mining industry. This aligns with the existing literature on deindustrialization (Vacaro et. al 2016) that emphasises the role of industrial decline in generating profound economic and cultural dispossession, which affects particularly those who reside in peripheral regions and deindustrializing cities. The second group of participants with an enduring nostalgic sentiment for the socialist times were the Roma, for whom the capitalist transition led to a significant deterioration of their socioeconomic status and an exposure to growing racist tendencies in the society, of which they became the main target (Šotola and Rodríguez Polo 2017). Pavla, from whom we heard earlier, remembered the socialist times as a period of greater economic stability and safety for the Roma.

Speaking overall, the nostalgia for socialism, if it occurred, was expressed by the majority of participants in the context of their attempts to cope with the growing economic insecurity and instability of the present times, but apart from the exceptions mentioned above, state socialism was never nostalgically remembered as a desired model for the future. What was certainly more persistent was the anti-nostalgic referencing of the socialist regime, in the sense of 'dwelling on a negative emotion towards the past' (Boym in Kotwas and Kubik 2022:7). In the Czech context, the postsocialist anti-nostalgia gained particular importance, partially because of the pervasiveness of the anti-communist rhetoric, which was elaborated on in more detail in the previous sections.

In fact references to the collective experience of state socialism were used frequently in the context of the anti-covid movement for the purposes of political mobilisation. The movement's spokespeople and supporters were often comparing the government-imposed covid restrictions with the socialist regime, where personal



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freedoms and rights were harshly curtailed. For instance, the media censorship and the lack of freedom of speech under state socialism were evoked as an analogy to the censorship and bans of social media groups and other online channels associated with the spread of covid-related disinformation and conspiracies. Another frequently cited example was the compulsory vaccination, which was perceived as an excessive intervention of the state into personal matters.

Participants (in)directly involved in these various groups were invoking the memories of socialism's oppressive and totalitarian nature in order to claim that the present reality of 'covid totality' has become even worse. This is illustrated by another example from the speeches held during the demonstration against the introduction of the Green Covid Passes (7.7.2021):

'The introduction of this new world order is a nazi like action. Bolshevik was a light version of what we are experiencing today. We are experiencing mass killings through vaccination.'

'Soon they will start telling you that there won't be meat, pasta, or bread in the shops. They will be telling you – you didn't have bananas, you didn't have bananas (the ques for bananas became one of the symbolisms for the unavailability of products during socialism in Czechoslovakia) – but now it is a much bigger totality than under Bolshevik.'

To conclude, the examples from the ethnographic material illuminate how narratives about the collective past continue to shape people's understanding and expectations of politics today. More importantly, the participants' accounts highlighted the ways in which history comes to constitute a powerful tool of political mobilisation. In the Czech context, the romanticisation of the country's industrial past, narratives of national victimhood and discourses of declinism emerged as the key themes which influence people's perception of the EU (and the West more broadly), and the wider economy and politics today.



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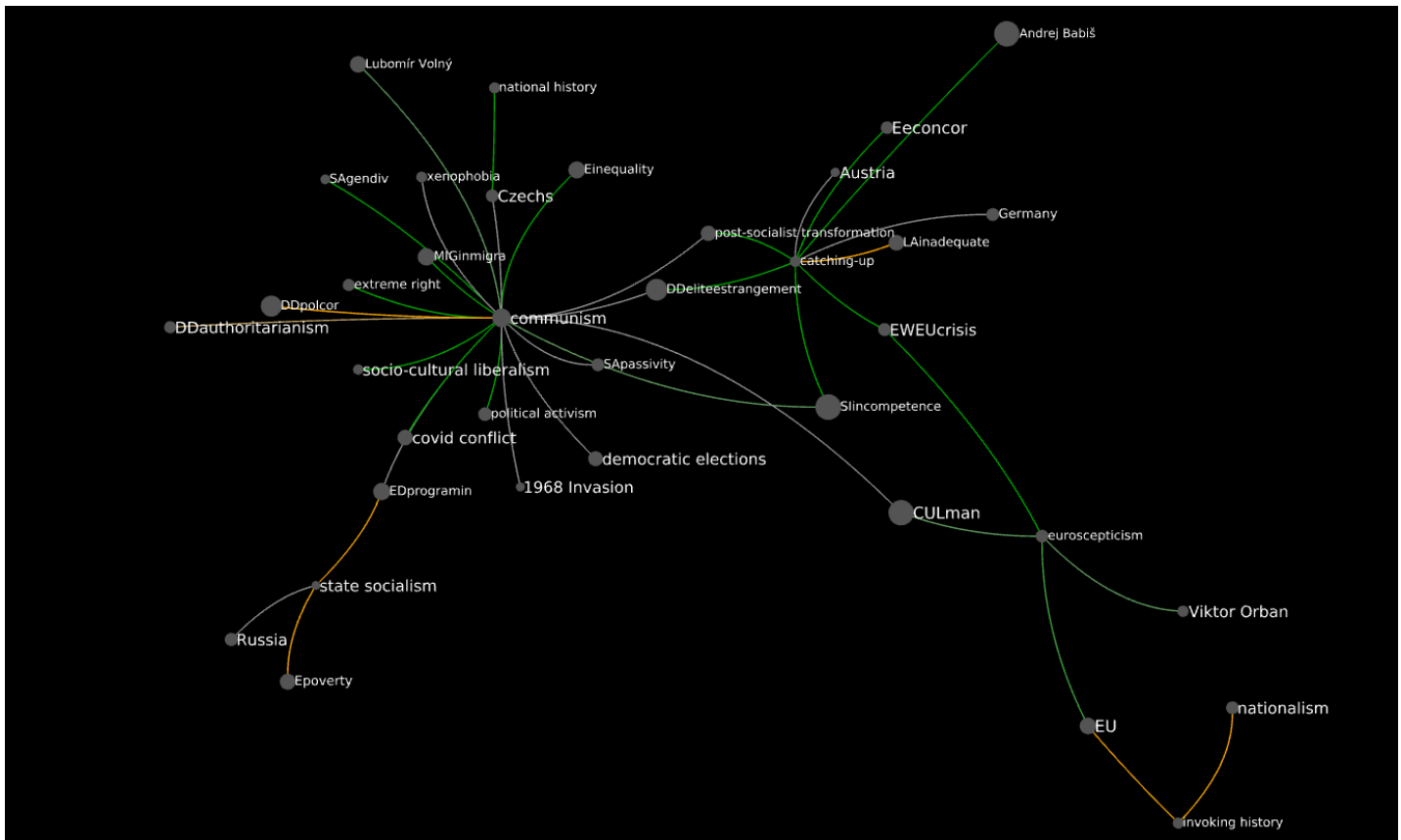


Figure 19: the codes for invoking history, national history, catching up, euroscepticism, communism, state socialism and their neighbours. All edges shown are supported by at least 2 informants ($b \geq 2$).

The visualisation shows *communism* as a central node in the network. This is in close accordance to the ethnographic insights, where research participants would commonly reference communism to evoke a set of both positive and negative associations related to that historical period (nostalgia and anti-nostalgia). The visualisation nuances the ethnographic analysis by highlighting that communism represents a core signifier which structures the research participants' understanding of their collective/national history (as opposed to other historical periods, which are way more prevalent in the Polish case). The 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia constitutes an important moment in that history, symbolising the most recent instance of national betrayal and foreign occupation. The set of codes on the right side of the visualisation – *EU*, *euroscepticism*, *EWEU crisis*, *nationalism*, *invoking history* – further confirms the ethnographic insights. Namely, that the participants' perception of the EU is closely associated with the historical memory of foreign domination and that the



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perceived unsuccessful postcommunist transformation (codes: *postsocialist transformation, catching up*) is supposedly linked to the Czech accession to the EU.

3.2.5. Network analysis and visualisations summary

Visualisations support the ethnographic insights

There is a quite remarkable disdain for the EU. It is seen as an unwelcome oppressive transnational structure, promoting 'globalism', not unlike the Soviet Union in the past. Simultaneously it represents (and is a promoter of) the value and societal decadence of the postmodern era we live in now. To a certain degree, it is an overarching theme justifying or supercharging nationalist pushback from both the non-radicalized (pro-Babiš) and radicalised (pro-Fringe) populist supporters.

The aforementioned split of pro-populist sphere is clearly seen by both visions. Babiš and to a large extent also Okamura/SPD (which co-exists as a actor-dyad, unlike the Babiš case) are perceived as already corrupt, consumed by their own mainstreamization.

Visualisations nuance the ethnographic insights

There are several key phenomena that are presented in a more refined light through the visualisations. First of all the gendered nature of the COVID-crises related issues, primarily work precarisation, along with mental and physical wellbeing, but also different avenues of political radicalization. In general, the graph vision informs us about the push for reaffirmation of traditional gender norms. Whereas male participants are clearly claiming their own political agency, women are facing deeply running marginalisation, regression of their agency into familial care and service and as the ethnographic vision demonstrates, openly and directly leaving the political agency to men. Interestingly, Lubomír Volný, a prominent figure in the fringe populist scene, shows a "champion" among the female population of our sample.

The second avenue where the graph view differs from the ethnographic one is the matter of clustering, especially the affective aspects of the discourses under umbrella nodes. In this way, the codes for economic and political corruption and elite estrangement contain expressions of distrust or mistrust, lack of legitimacy of the political elite. Though it seemingly reduces the importance of affective elements for the understanding of pro-populist tendencies, and thus presents a contradiction between the graph and ethnographic visions, it is rather a way in which the two complement each other in attest to the methodological parallelism within the project.



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Visualisations complement the ethnographic insights

One specific aspect of the general Czech discourse on populism, coming both from those supporting and opposing it, is the way in which historical references are emerging from the interviews. This aspect is completely taken over by the all-consuming concepts or myths related to the Communist era, as in the ethnographic perspective, the graph view only reinforces the claim that the experience of Czechoslovak socialism and post-socialism are the key history-related nodes. Interestingly enough, as a reference point, they serve both as a positive and negative analogy, sometimes simultaneously even in one single interview. However no other expected major historical episodes, eras, events or personalities complement the overall picture in a similar manner, such as the interwar democratic republic or the Nazi occupation and World War II do not seem to exist in the consciousness or cultural knowledge of the respondents.

For further investigation

One major issue posing a question for further research, is to what extent do affective elements play a role in the context of pro- or anti-populist tendencies. A more detailed focus on them in terms of the data might help introduce them as a more substantial category in the graph visualisations and thus allow for a more robust comparison with the ethnographic findings..

2.3. GERMAN CASE

2.3.1. The Pandemic Context

2.3.1.1. *General trajectory and government response*

It is not easy to provide a concise and coherent overview of all anti-pandemic measures in Germany. One of the central cleavages between the central government and the Länder was how to adequately respond to the Coronavirus. Should there be a central, unified approach or tailor-made, regional regulations aimed at curbing the spread of the virus? And like in all other countries, communication with the public during a constantly evolving and highly complex situation affecting almost all areas of life proved to be extremely difficult.

Constitutionally, health policy in Germany is “Ländersache” (responsibility of federal states). Chancellor Merkel and her health minister Jens Spahn had to come to agreement with 16 different state governors. This time-consuming “horse trading” created notable frustration and dents in the public’s perception regarding policy

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makers' ability to tackle the pandemic, a pandemic that did not care about Länder borders. While various laws and regulations were passed on the central government level, they were often tied to fluctuating case numbers, rates of hospitalisation, and availability of intensive care hospital beds on the regional level.

These indicators differed from state to state, which led to a lot of confusion, most notably during cross-border travel. In general one can state that while there were overarching principles such as social distancing, mask mandates, closing of shops, no two states had the exact same lockdown measures in place and the ability to enforce those measures also varied substantially.



Figure 20: An example of diverging Corona regulations between central government and states. Source: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/coronavirus/regelungen-ab-2-november-1806818>

There were two main “hard lockdowns” in Germany (22 March – 4 May 2020, 16 December 2020 – 10 January 2021). But throughout the pandemic the government adapted measures according to shifting infection rates. From August 2021 onwards Germany implemented what is referred to as the “3G Regel” (geimpft, getestet, genesen). This regulation requires people who enter public and private buildings to be either vaccinated, have recently recovered from Covid-19, or tested negative for the virus within 24 hours.



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2.3.1.2. *Cultural Climate around Covid: Conspiracy myths' driven populism*

Since the research focus of the project for Germany revolves around the “Neue Bundesländer” – the former GDR states (including almost all of the semi-structured interviews) this brief overview mostly highlights developments, movements, narratives in those regions, especially in Saxony

While Germany was lauded internationally for curbing the spread of the Coronavirus initially, wide-spread resistance to lockdown measures and public health advice, anti-elite agitation against scientists and policy makers increasingly intensified. This was especially true in the eastern Bundesländer, where the AfD managed to sow populist discontent against the central government reminiscent of PEGIDA in 2014, thus using the pandemic to bolster its profile.

Heterogeneous groups composed of ‘anti-vaxxers,’ far-right groups, new age spiritualists, and conspiracy theorists gathered to protest against state authority and elites. The fervour of their opposition manifested itself most notably in the attempt to storm the German Bundestag in August 2020, but also in various gatherings and protest marches (often 10,000-50,000) that violated lockdown measures. Many identify as freedom fighters defending their constitutional rights, and in extreme cases view themselves as victims of a freedom-eroding, autocratic state – a state they compare to the Third Reich. This self-victimization and the accusation that fascist tyranny is being imposed on them ironically often go hand-in-hand with the propagation of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic Coronavirus conspiracy theories (QAnon, Reichsbürger, Querdenken, SHAEF etc.).

In Saxony, the AfD managed to successfully frame the Merkel government’s anti-COVID measures as unlawful and tyrannical, evoking memories of and drawing parallels with the pre-unification era and the socialist regime. By framing lockdowns, mask mandates, and later vaccine regulations as externally imposed measures the far-right party instrumentalized and deepened socio-political grievances in the East. It is remarkable that the AfD in the eastern Bundesländer managed to flip a 70-year-old script on vaccinations by framing vaccinations as an illiberal and freedom-robbing tool imposed by a power-hungry central government. Historically, vaccinations were compulsory and highly organised in East Germany, whereas they were often voluntary in West Germany. Furthermore, anti-vaccine beliefs were more prominent in the West (Staiano-Daniels 2022). This has now changed, as there is positive correlation between voting for AfD and being unvaccinated, and regions that have the most unvaccinated citizens are AfD strongholds (Hecking and Maxwill 2021).



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In late February 2021, a new political movement and party emerged in Saxony. The “Freie Sachsen” (Free Saxonians) have organised dozens of protest marches and have the largest Saxony focused Telegram group (approx. 150,000 members). The leadership consists of former Neo-Nazis and other far-right agitators. The goal of the Freie Sachsen, according to its website, is to end Berlin’s stranglehold on Saxonian socio-historical identity, including anti-lockdown measures and other Corona-related activities. Saxony’s CDU Minister Michael Kretschmer is depicted as an illegitimate, West German leader, defending Berlin’s and not Saxony’s interests (see image below)



Figure 21: Image posted by Twitter account of Freie Sachsen on 06 November 2021. Translation: When will the tyrant fall? Kretschmer's mercenaries driven by bloodlust. Source: <https://twitter.com/freiesachsen/status/1457104389903106052>

The German government has responded by nudging Facebook to delete several conspiracy groups on Facebook. This has hampered the ability to reach out to potential respondents online, because a) some of the observed spaces don't exist anymore, b) there is an additional layer of mistrust and c) because most populist social media groups have pivoted to Telegram. General themes that became evident in conducted interviews were feelings of being abandoned and/or not represented by policy makers, financial insecurity, detrimental impact of social isolation, general confusion of lockdown measures, and distrust of scientists and the media.



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2.3.2. The politics of affect

The discussion of the government's anti-COVID measures aroused a range of negative emotions among respondents. Some, like GER01Kevin50b, verbalised their anger towards state institutions ('I was really angry also about what the Federal Constitutional Court did.') but, even when they did not, one could nevertheless infer 'a strong, uncomfortable emotional response' to the actions of the government that were considered 'incongruent with [their] values, beliefs, or rights' (Thomas 2001, 42). Other emotions one could infer were *frustration* (annoyance at being unable to perform specific tasks or achieve specific goals as a result of the lockdown), *anxiety* (feelings of unease about the vaccination) and *stress* (physical or psychological manifestation of anxiety). Previous research confirms that understanding the affective power of anger and anxiety is key to understanding how populists acquire and maintain political power. As Nguyen argues (and as has been confirmed by other POPREBEL researchers), 'Voters' *anger* at elites and outsiders for their real, or imagined, loss of social and economic security is a powerful kindling for the resentment-fueled, anti-elite politics of populist parties. Moreover, the appeal of populism lies at least in part in its ability to validate voters' *anxiety* that they are economically and socially left behind by distant elites and an increasingly heterogeneous lifeworld' (2019, 2, emphasis added).

The perception of specific groups as elites was inferred from the interviews and was understood, first and foremost, to refer to the German government – either as a single actor or individual politicians – and other mainstream MPs. While not all legal and medical experts (by virtue of their specialist knowledge and skills) would necessarily be understood as members of the elite, they would be included if they were called in to provide policy advice to the government. Some respondents expressed distrust towards these medical advisors; this was primarily due to the fact the government was perceived to have decided not to draw on a range of expertise but relied too much on the views of just a handful of experts, ignoring medical opinions that went against the government's (perceived) interests. Capitalists were also mentioned as an elite group, albeit not as frequently.

Negative sentiment was attached to the government/capitalists/medical advisors and positive sentiment to 'us', reflecting the moral hierarchy between the 'corrupt elites' and 'pure people' common to most populist discourses. Other out-groups (such as social liberals) could also be inferred from interviews but they were not necessarily positioned in a hierarchical relationship to the respondents. The construction of borders between the in-group and out-group allows populists and their supporters to delimit the definition of the 'pure people' in whose name they claim to speak, as this allows them to delegitimise any voices that oppose or challenge their views. As Osuna argues, 'borders are used in a multiplicity of populist discursive articulatory practices and play an important role in underpinning several of the dimensions of the populist construct', whereby defining the in-group and out-group



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along multiple axes allows populists to construct 'an idealised society based on emotional and ahistorical interpretations of the past that the populist projects aspire to revive' (Osuna 2022: 6). The significance of the past was a theme that emerged clearly from the interviews with some respondents (see below).

There was general support for the lockdown at the start of the pandemic but over time the various policies (particularly testing requirements, the mask mandates and vaccinations) and their effects were criticised and the motivations for the policies questioned.

Anger was directed at the centralisation of control in the hands of a small group of political, legal and medical experts; the lack of critical voices among mainstream politicians and the impact on democracy; at the perceived illogicality of the measures; and the negative construction of the unvaccinated and resultant social polarisation. As a consequence, the motivations behind the government's anti-COVID measures were questioned and alternative explanations were presented, the belief in which fuelled further waves of anger. Finally, the respondents discussed how they responded to (their perception of) the government anti-COVID measures.

Hans, a man in his early 40s from the former GDR, understood the need for expertise but questioned what he saw as the overcentralisation of decision-making: 'At the beginning you think, yes, okay, an expert will be brought in. Okay, but then only one expert is brought in. But a pandemic like this has different aspects. So it's like when I set up a project, I don't just need a project planner who's good at planning *material value flows* ((RM: check translation)). I need a recruiter as well. I need the people working on the machinery. I need another process expert. I might need someone from development. So I need diversity. And you didn't feel it at all [with the COVID response]. They just focused on that one, that one strand over there. I think it was also a huge mistake that there weren't just different people ... In the event of a pandemic like this, I would form a committee and just get all the experts that are there together and let them decide or also give a recommendation and concentrate everything in the hands of such a small group of people.' While Hans accepted that the government was elected to make decisions on behalf of the people, he found the idea of unelected committees granting themselves the authority to pass resolutions undemocratic.

It was not only the government that stoked the respondents' anger but also other mainstream politicians who failed to challenge the government's COVID policy; it was noted that the only critical voices were coming from the far-left and far-right. As Hans went on to say: 'What I did notice, however, is that there were no critical voices anywhere and the only ones who said something were *Die Linke* [a socialist party] or the AfD [Alternative for



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Germany, a far-right populist party]. ... And for example Ms Wagenknecht of *Die Linke*, yes – she is not my favourite now – but at least she speaks plainly.’

Hopes that the Federal Constitutional Court would intervene and declare the government's anti-COVID measures [regarding school closures] unconstitutional were dashed on 19 November 2021, when the Court rejected several complaints challenging school closures and a remote schooling requirement. Thinking back to that day, Kevin, a man in his late 50s living in eastern Germany, recalled ‘I was really upset ... I was really angry about what the Federal Constitutional Court did.’ Sabine, a woman living in South-West Germany, was also troubled by the fact that the government and Constitutional Court appeared to be speaking with one voice and criticised both institutions for ‘attacking the Basic Law [the *Grundgesetz*, the German constitution] by restricting our freedom. As some say so nicely now: Welcome to the GDR.’ While her reference to present-day Germany turning into the former communist state was intended as an insult, we will see later that other respondents who had grown up in the GDR bemoaned the fact that present-day German society had moved too far away from the values of the society of the former German Democratic Republic.

While Beate, a woman in her early 50s from the former GDR, did not necessarily oppose all anti-COVID measures, she was frustrated by what she saw as a lack of logic guiding the government's actions: ‘I would say, in the hospital, operations are performed with surgical masks and we should go shopping with FFP2 masks. That makes no sense to me. And, above all, what I find makes even less sense is that all these measures, if they are required, will only apply in three weeks’ time. Yes, why? If something is really bad ... then it has to be now and not in three weeks or so. In my opinion, that's very strange.’

The respondents not only objected to the way the policies were decided and implemented but, in particular, were angry at the impact of these measures on the economy and society. Kevin saw the testing requirement as a ‘financial challenge for many employers because there are of course companies that are perhaps not so well positioned’. This would suggest that his concern was for smaller firms rather than international corporations, which would be better placed to absorb the costs. However, his anger was directed even more so at the way the government has constructed unvaccinated people as selfish, resulting in a society that has become increasingly polarised into the vaccinated and unvaccinated, which in turn has turned former friends against each other:

The tone on the street is so raw, the people are so hostile to one another, people who used to be friends, who used to sit together at the table, now no longer say a word to each other. Just because they are vaccinated or unvaccinated. It's ridiculous! (Kevin)



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He was particularly concerned that this polarisation had also entered the private sphere of the home: '... our entire private life, except for that little bit at home, is suppressed. And the little bit at home you also destroy by inciting people within the family against each other: vaccinated and unvaccinated ... Through all these measures that interfere with family life, tried to destroy the smallest common unit, namely the family.' To understand Kevin's anger we also need to remember that he grew up in the GDR, a communist state which sought to exercise maximum control over the population. As Paul Betts explains, as a result, 'social cohesion became polarised. It may have eroded in the wider "public" sense, but it was reinforced in smaller, more private networks. The Stasi's concerted efforts to break down the family through surveillance and denunciation actually tended to strengthen—not undermine—family solidarity. [...] Despite the Stasi's best efforts, there was a low rate of success in getting children to spy on their own family members. In this way, the family still functioned as a kind of protective refuge for most people.' (2010, p. 49) We can therefore understand why his perception that the government is encroaching into the private sphere of the home and turning family members against one another became a source of anger.

The effect on individual respondents of what was seen as the overly centralised, undemocratic behaviour on the part of the government and of the effect of the various anti-COVID measures on the economy and society was mixed. What did unite them was a suspicion of the motivations behind the government's various policies. When asked whether she thought the government was acting in the best interests of the German people, Beate responded: 'So I think rather differently: money. Money and power. And something, I have no idea what's going on in the background. But you get the feeling that it doesn't have very much to do with health.' The financial interests of government ministers was brought up by a number of respondents, such as Lisa: 'The decisions were made for purely political reasons. It's not about health, it's about money and power.'

The politicisation of the anti-COVID measures was felt to be related to the overall aim of exercising control over the population, whereby the government's attempt to generate an atmosphere of fear was seen as a tool used by governments over the world to ensure quiescence:

So 2001: terror. Then from time to time we kept trying to get in touch with some, I'll say yes, we died of something every year. Then came swine fever, then came mad cow disease, then came bird flu and we already had everything. It's like *Groundhog Day*. I keep saying: We have died a hundred times and are still alive. So they tried to scare us again and again. (Kevin)



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In this connection, he argued that the testing requirement was a means to 'keep the numbers [of infections] high' and thereby justify putting further extraordinary political measures in place.

Politically, the anger generated by the government's anti-COVID measures resulted in some respondents losing trust in elected politicians ['all my understanding and trust kind of went totally down the drain' (Beate)] or turning away from democratic politics ['I don't vote anymore' (Kevin)]. Both Beate and Kevin thus supported moving away from representative politics and returning to the protest politics of 1989. Beate sees parallels between 1989 and today in that the 'people wake up very, very slowly and finally get up. That was then too. It took a while but it came and it will come now I guess ... At least I hope so.' Similarly, Kevin advocates the people taking back control and restoring balance between the government and the people, a balance which no longer exists:

I always say we need a critical mass, we need a million on the streets, and all coming together in one place, something like in Leipzig in 1989 [the demonstrations that brought down the communist government]. And then we'll see. Because then you bring back the balance of power. Because one thing is a fact. One must always remember, what is the state? We are the state. The state is not the politicians who are politicians, they are actually our social representatives, but they are not currently representing us, they are currently crushing us, and that is the difference. (Kevin)



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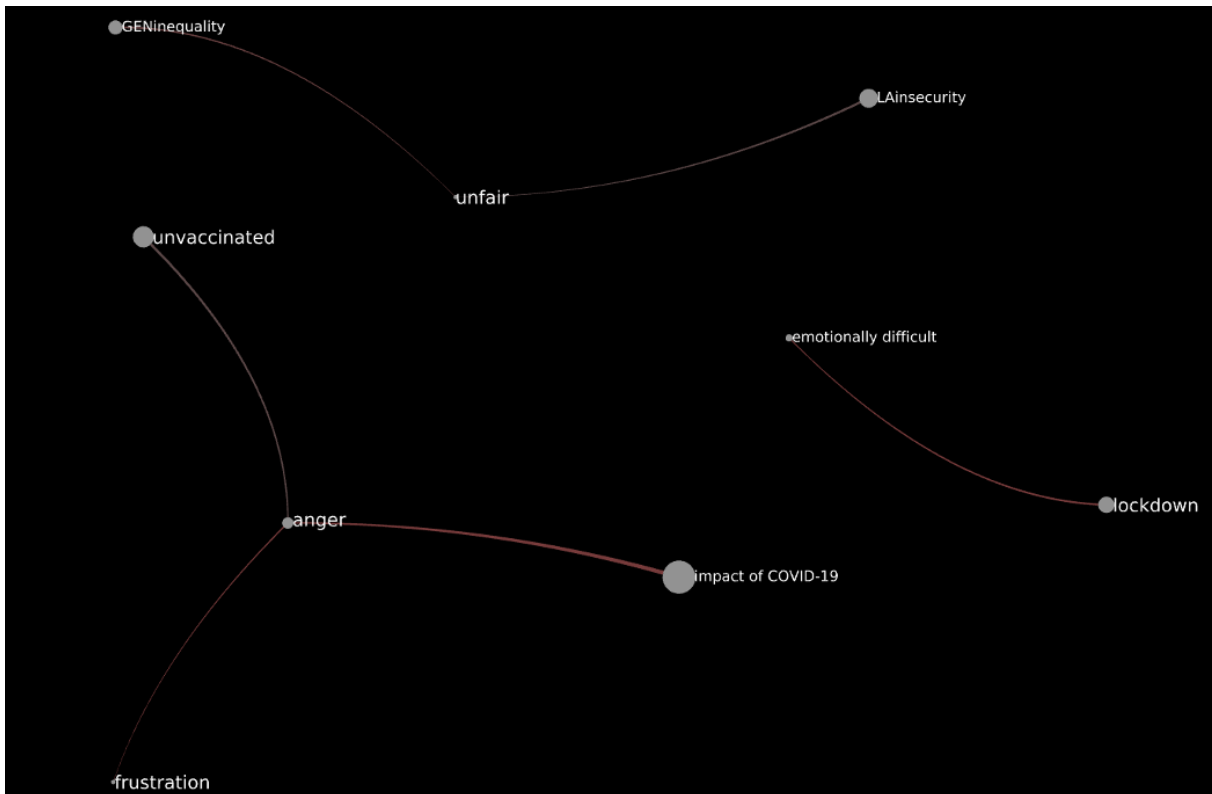


Figure 22: The ego networks of the codes for anger, emotionally difficult and unfair ($d \geq 5$).
*LInsecurity: Job insecurity, *GENequality: Gender inequality

The visualisation (Figure 22) shows these three emotions/sentiments coded: anger, unfair and emotionally difficult. The highest value of d (co-occurrence depth) for which all three codes are still visible in the graph is 5. The visualisation highlights three of the most commonly referenced affects – emotional difficulty, unfairness and anger – and the events associated with them. As highlighted repeatedly by our respondents, the government-imposed lockdown was found to be emotionally difficult as it cut them off from their networks of support. The visualisation shows that women were affected more than men, supporting the insights from the interviews that it was women who were more likely to suffer from feelings of isolation due to the fact they were more likely to stay at home, while men often continued to go to work. Secondly, the visualisation supports the insight from the ethnographic data that women found the gender inequality reinforced or exposed by the lockdown to be unfair. Finally, the visualisation highlighted the anger and frustration that the COVID pandemic provoked among our respondents, with the anger directed primarily at those who refused to be vaccinated.



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While we had initially assumed that the three emotions would be interrelated, the visualisation showed that they were in fact discreet. From this we could infer that, while the lockdown was emotionally difficult for many women, they did understand the reasons for it and did not therefore consider it unfair. Their anger was not thus provoked by the lockdown *per se* but by those who refused to be vaccinated, thereby prolonging the lockdown and the women's ensuing childcare responsibilities, which in turn exacerbated the gender inequality at home and in society at large.

2.3.3. Distrust of scientific expertise/anti-vax sentiment

It is difficult to disentangle the respondents' distrust of scientific expertise and their anger at the elites in that the anti-vax sentiment often had more to do with the political implementation of the vaccination programme than with distrust in the expertise of the scientists who developed the vaccines.

Initially, for example, GER05Tatjana00 expressed her support for scientists' work on developing a vaccination and recognised that people would need 'to be patient a little longer until science discovers the solution that's somehow good for everyone.' However, distrust in the vaccine was expressed by a significant number of respondents and for multiple reasons relating to: the vaccine ingredients; its side effects; the lack of sufficient testing; the lack of alternatives to the vaccine solution; and the suppression of critical research and voices.

The fact that some of the vaccines used genetic engineering was cited as reason enough to reject the offer of vaccination. As GER02Beate50a argued: 'there are substances in there – any simple person who does a bit of research can understand that – that have no business being there.' Beate was so concerned about the genetic engineering used to create some of the Western vaccines that she said that she would only consider taking the Russian Sputnik vaccine, which she believed did not use genetic modification. Similarly, GER04Andrea00 said that many of her friends were concerned that the vaccine would change their DNA or affect their ability to conceive. Once the vaccine began to be rolled out, the side effects of the vaccine – or, more accurately, side effects *attributed* to the vaccine – were often cited by respondents as further proof that the vaccine could not be trusted. As a result of her job, Beate was frequently in contact with members of the public and thus heard numerous horror stories about the effects of the vaccination, from 'huge bruises' and 'terrible skin itching and pain' to the inability to walk and even death: 'I've had so many people come to work and say, 'Yes, my husband, we got vaccinated. Yes, after he was boosted, the next day he was dead. And I've been really bad with my heart ever since.' [...] In the end, I'm more afraid of the vaccination than of Corona.' She was particularly concerned by the



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inability of doctors to explain why these reactions to the vaccine were occurring, a view shared by Ulrike, who was initially receptive to the idea of being vaccinated but changed her mind when she heard reports of its effects:

I wasn't against vaccination from the start. I just said I don't want to be the first to get vaccinated. Back when vaccines were still scarce, it would have been my turn sometime at the end of the year. So I thought, I'll just wait and see what's going on there. Then someone in our neighbouring community, a 24-year-old young man, died right after the vaccination, which scared me. [...] all these autoimmune diseases, they occur, you go to the doctor and ask: how can this happen? Nobody can tell you. So I'm already stressed enough with that. I'm just scared of this syringe. Much, much more afraid than Corona.

One of the most common reasons given for the various effects was that the vaccine had been rushed out under political pressure and had not been subject to sufficient testing procedures. As GER08Lisa40b explained at length:

The phase 3 studies are still ongoing. [...] From the point of view of medical law, drugs with "conditional approval" may only be administered under special conditions. This is where the Nuremberg Code comes into play. For example, such drugs may only be administered under a very careful cost-benefit analysis if the benefit is greater than the potential harm with 100% certainty. [...] Drugs with "conditional approval" are not suitable for widespread administration in the population and are not approved for this either. At this point, the legal provisions are blatantly ignored. In my opinion, all four vaccines should be taken off the market urgently. [...] Since all drugs used so far only have conditional approval (see EMA [European Medicines Agency]), these are in fact medical experiments.

The view that the vaccinations should be seen as medical experiments on the population was taken to the extreme by GER12Andre30b, a Polish man living in Germany, who gave the following response to the possibility of the government introducing compulsory vaccinations:

We are in a situation that is new to us and humanity is not exactly known for mastering the unknown with confidence but rather for making every possible mistake along the way. For this reason, I think it would be fatal to introduce 'compulsory vaccinations' in such circumstances. Especially since we live in a country where the leading vaccine specialist, Karl Lauterbach, is the personification of a cross between Dr Mengele and his poor patients.



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Karl Lauterbach is the Federal Minister of Health and former Professor of Health Economics and Epidemiology at the University of Cologne and Josef Mengele was a high-ranking Nazi officer and physician, who performed inhumane medical experiments on prisoners at the Auschwitz concentration camp. While this comparison is extreme, Andre was not the only respondent to express concern about the science underpinning the anti-COVID measures – at least, after the initial period of goodwill had expired.

GER04Sabine00: I think the measures were certainly good at the beginning, because they simply said we have no idea, we have to do something. Unfortunately, in hindsight, I now find that decisions about Corona are simply being made indiscriminately, which I simply can no longer understand because they are not based on any scientific research.

As respondents such as GER02Beate50a and GER08Ulrike50a above could not even rely on the expertise of their own doctors (whom they at least knew personally) to explain the effects of the vaccine, they were even more suspicious of the competence and honesty of the medical and political elites (who were also seen as detached from the people). As discussed in the previous report, many respondents were angry that decisions were being taken without sufficient discussion and consideration of alternative options. GER02Hans40a was frustrated that the vaccine was seen as the only way to fight COVID: 'What can I do for my immune system? Nothing? It's not talked about at all. So from this whole structure you focused so blatantly on one point [vaccine]. And I still can't understand why nobody really noticed it and everyone ran along without anyone questioning it critically or, if anyone questioned it critically, that was never really communicated in public.' GER01Kevin50b went further, suggesting that the government sought to suppress research which went against their position:

... there are now so many studies from the UK, Denmark, from all over the world. There is an association of doctors, in which more than 60,000 scientists from a wide variety of disciplines are involved, who speak out against these corona measures. You don't hear anything from them because of the media violence – and now we're getting back to the subject. The one who steers also has the power of the media. That was the case in the Third Reich and it's the same again today. (Andre)

Like Andre above, Kevin compared the present-day government with the Nazi regime, with the attack on individual freedoms and perceived repression of critical voices underlying the comparison. As Andre continued, 'What bothers me in Germany is the media, political and social approach to the unvaccinated and the stigmatisation of critical voices as *Querdenker* [an anti-vax movement].'



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As all the mainstream political parties – the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Free Democrats and the Greens – worked together to implement the anti-COVID measures, those respondents who opposed the measures frequently considered voting for more extreme political parties, which are at least considered to be ‘close to the people’ (Kevin). GER01Kevin50b and GER08Ulrike50a are clear examples of this shift to the right-wing populist *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) party:

Kevin: Of course, I also voted for the AfD in the meantime. And I also think of many politicians who speak from the AfD, as opposition, that they are currently the only true opposition in Germany, because everything else is unity.

Ulrike: These 1.5 years in Corona have shaped my political decisions very, very, very much. Well, I never thought that I would come up with the idea of choosing the AfD. I used to point fingers at anyone who did this. But I will definitely not vote for the party I used to vote for, the Greens. I was happy with our Minister-President [of Baden-Württemberg], Winfried Kretschmann, over the years and I always put my cross there quite contentedly. But I didn't vote for him in the last state election.

Even though Hans admits that he does not particularly like the AfD, he was impressed that it – along with the far-left *Die Linken* – actually offered critical voices. While Beate had lost faith with party politics, she took to the streets in anti-vax demonstrations, which she argued was part of a large global trend:

And if you say it's a few thousand, no, it's a few hundred thousand or millions. And it's not just in Germany, they're getting up all over the world. But of course nobody will bring that to us here on ZDF and ARD [German TV channels], but rather ... you have to go out on the street yourself to find out.

Although Beate preferred the direct-political action of demonstrations rather than going through political parties, it was, according to Hans, the AfD and other extreme right-wing parties that were organising these rallies. While these events may therefore appear to be examples of spontaneous grassroots protest, we must not forget how easily they can be instrumentalised by populist agitators.



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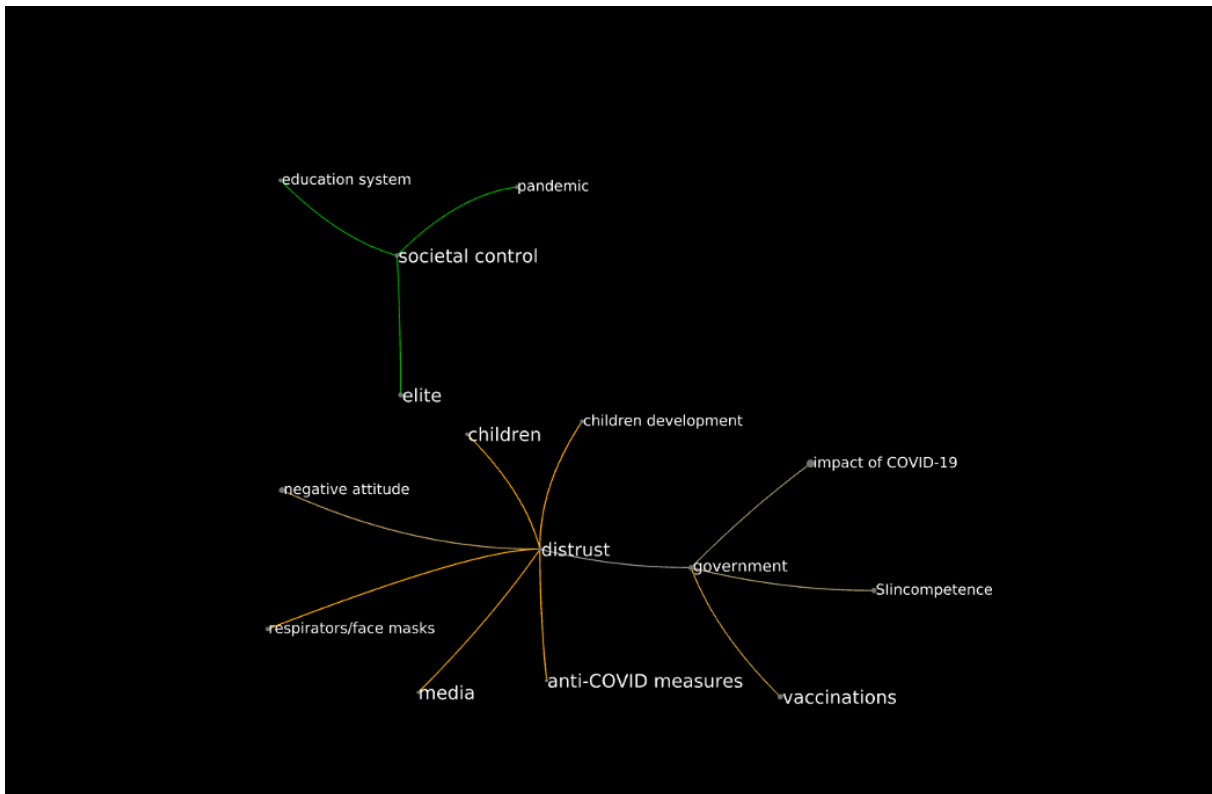


Figure 23: The codes for distrust, government and societal control and their deepest associations ($d \geq 6$).

***Slincompetence:** government inefficiency and/or incompetence, state institutions not working as they should

While the analysis of the ethnographic data highlighted distrust in the vaccine for multiple reasons relating to the make-up of the vaccine; its side effects; the lack of sufficient testing; the lack of alternatives to the vaccine solution; and the suppression of critical research and voices, a different constellation of factors appeared in the visualisation. Distrust in the government and a negative assessment of its competence was expressed across all respondents, both men and women. However, women were more likely to distrust the government's anti-COVID measures at the micro level with regard to their impact on children and their development. This can be linked to other visualisations, which show that responsibility for looking after children during the lockdown fell overwhelmingly on women. For men, by contrast, distrust of elites related more to the latter's attempt to exercise control at the macro level of society in part through the state education system. This could be said to reflect the distinction between the roles of men and women in the public and private spheres, respectively.



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The following visualisation (Figure 24) shows the polarisation (code 'polarisation') around vaccination which involves codes: 'vaccinated', 'unvaccinated' and also 'anti-vaxxers'.

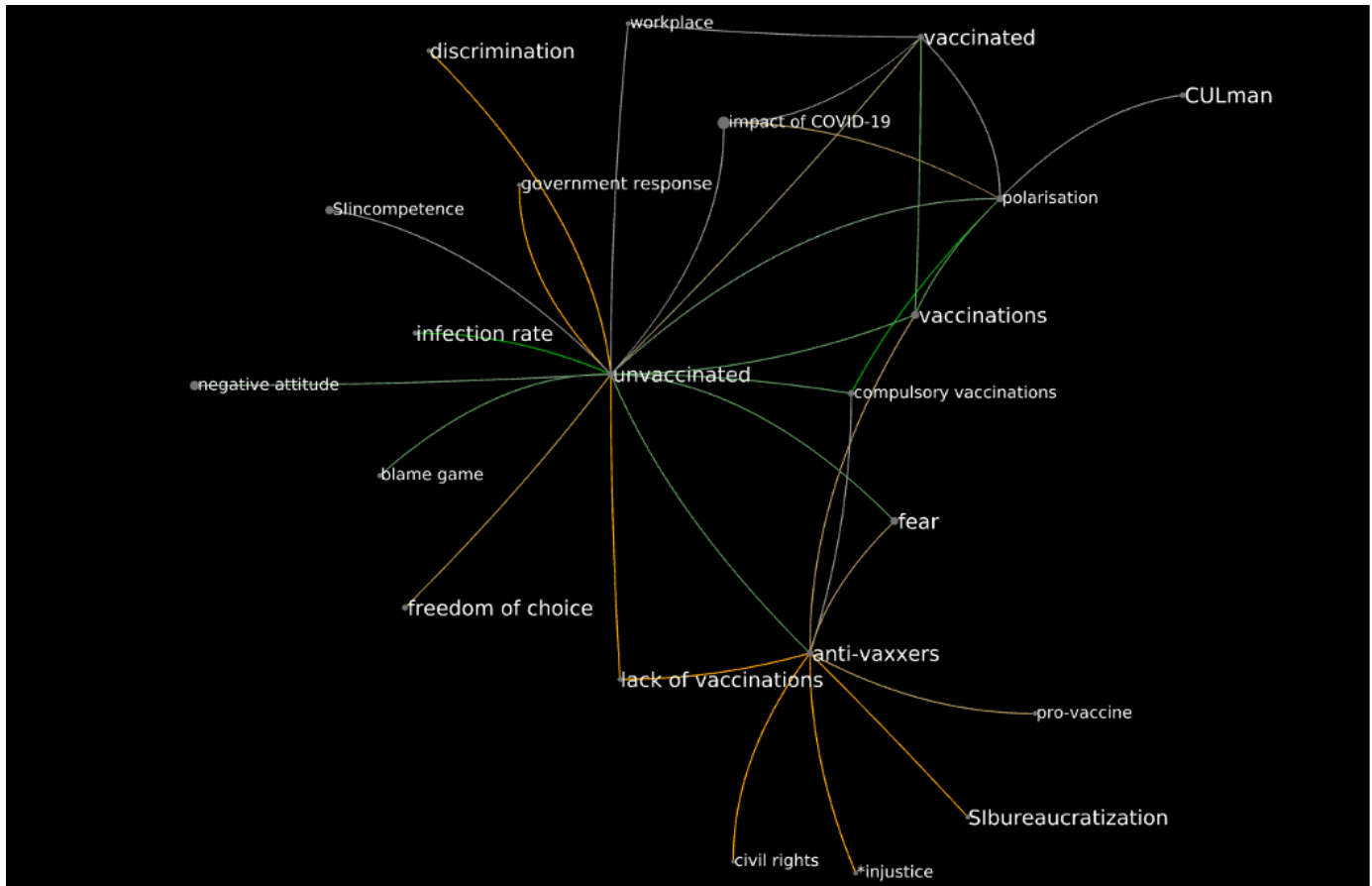


Figure 24: The codes for vaccinated, unvaccinated and anti-vaxxers and their deepest associations ($d \geq 6$)

- ***CULman**: Mentions of manipulation, disinformation, indoctrination and propaganda in communicating
- ***SIbureaucratization**: State/Administration Incapacity (SI): Bureaucratization | (e.g. bureaucracy and red tape)
- ***SIincompetence**: government inefficiency and/or incompetence, state institutions not working as they should

In general, the visualisation supports the ethnographic insight that German society was polarised along the lines of vaccination status, i.e. between the vaccinated and unvaccinated. However, it provides greater nuance in highlighting that men were more likely than women to frame discourses about vaccination status as polarising, with debates about compulsory vaccinations particularly contentious. [NB: It is unclear from the visualisation



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whether respondents blame the unvaccinated for the ongoing pandemic or are they criticising those who blame the unvaccinated for the ongoing pandemic. This needs to be analysed in conjunction with the ethno-graphic data.] For women, there were two (potentially clashing) debates: (i) one which centred on the government's ineffectual and overly bureaucratic response to the vaccine roll-out and the insufficient supply of vaccines and (ii) the other which criticises what they see as discrimination against those who choose not to be vaccinated, which is associated with the government's attempt to foment fear of not being vaccinated. The latter discourse frames this debate as one of injustice and civil rights. While the first debate is in line with what we see in the Affect visualisation, i.e. women wanting the lockdown to end and being frustrated by the government's ineffectual vaccine rollout, the latter debate contradicts the inference that women were angry towards the unvaccinated for potentially prolonging the pandemic and thus the lockdown. For both men and women, the visualisation also identifies that the discourse fuelling polarisation was to some extent based on misinformation or the manipulation of data. The visualisation further supports the difficulty (highlighted in the ethnographic data) of disentangling the respondents' opposition to the vaccine and their anger at the government in that the anti-vax sentiment had as much to do with the political implementation of the vaccination programme than with distrust in the vaccines themselves.

2.3.4. Retraditionalisation of gender roles

While COVID was only recognised as a global pandemic in 2019, there has already emerged a sizeable literature on its gendered dimensions, with researchers examining the differential impact of the virus on men and women from both epidemiological and societal perspectives (Alon et al. 2020; Cain Miller 2020; Collins et al. 2020; Czymara et al. 2021; Wenham et al. 2020). The aim of this report is to provide a bottom-up analysis of the gendered impact of the German government's anti-COVID measures – especially, the lockdown – and is driven, in particular, by the question of whether the respondents felt that the lockdown led to a retraditionalisation of gender roles, whereby men would revert to being the primary breadwinners and women would assume responsibility for looking after the children, or simply exposed patriarchal gender relations that had always existed.³⁴

The main gendered impact of the lockdown cited by our respondents related to childcare. From March 2020 onwards the German federal government and the 16 Länder, which run local education policy, agreed to the

³⁴ Unlike neo-traditionalism, which is understood in the POPREBEL project (see D1.1) to be a top-down socio-political strategy aimed at returning to what is claimed to be original, authentic 'traditions' after a period of disruption, retraditionalisation is used here to refer to a micro-level process whereby individuals or collectivities consciously or subconsciously revert to the traditional roles into which they or earlier generations had previously been socialised.



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closure of schools and kindergartens during each of the three coronavirus waves. (By contrast, the government sought to keep factories open in a bid to protect the economy.) As a result, many women saw a shift in the role they played in the family, with men continuing to work as normal, while women were expected to assume responsibility for looking after the children – either by combining their full-time work and childcare responsibilities or by cutting back their working hours to make time for childcare.

In the interviews, we see multiple examples of retraditionalisation of gender roles. While GER04Sonja00 does not have children herself, she observed this 'old behaviour' among her friends and family: 'What I notice [is] that the man goes to work and the woman says 'I'm just giving up my job temporarily' or 'I'll just do it on the side.' Working somehow and looking after the children at the same time, which everyone knows isn't possible [...] one is really taken back to the old days.' Even when couples agreed to share childcare responsibilities, the intention did not always match the reality. While GER04Frederike00's husband did offer to work from home to help look after their autistic son when the lockdown was introduced, she found that he did not pull his weight and that she ended up doing most of the childcare in addition to working remotely. Nor could she count on the support of her parents (because of the social distancing requirements) or of the foreign au pair they had hired (due to the closure of Germany's borders). As a result, she felt she had been 'transported back to the forties or fifties. Cooking, shopping, children. And my job is a hobby.'

Very few of the male respondents mentioned childcare or other household duties when discussing the impact of the lockdown on their day-to-day lives. As the report on 'Anger at elites' showed, men were more likely to express concern about infringements on their personal liberty. GER04Andrea00 noted that, within her circle of acquaintances, the main negative impact of the lockdown for men was 'that they can no longer go out for a beer in the evening and meet up with their buddies'. Some men, according GER02Simone20b, even saw the lockdown as an opportunity: 'I work in academia and with the start of the lockdown there was this positive wave, especially among male academics, who said: 'Oh, finally I can finish my books, finally I can finish all my articles.' And I think there are now even studies that show that many male academics have published a lot more in 2020 or at least can spend a lot more time on it, while that was not the case at all for women in academia. So, it seems that way to give this relapse into certain traditional gender roles, at least in some parts of the population.'

With their reference to 'old behaviour', being 'transported back to the forties or fifties' or a 'relapse into certain traditional gender roles', the gendered impact of the lockdown can be understood as a form of gender retraditionalization for women such as GER04Frederike00, GER04Sonja00 and GER02Simone20b. For other respondents, the lockdown did not usher in a *return* to traditional gender norms but rather exposed the



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patriarchal values that had always underpinned family politics in Germany. GER02Daniel20b noted how quickly 'old role models and ways of thinking almost instinctively came to the fore' during the crisis. 'You describe it as "retraditionalization",' he continued, 'but I wonder whether we perhaps only managed to change 'traditional role models' superficially. GER02Simone20b agreed, arguing that 'the patriarchal ideal of the nuclear family of father, mother, child still strongly shapes family politics'. This is reflected in academic research which shows that, despite having made great progress in various indicators of gender equality, German women – even before the pandemic – were still considerably more likely than men to be responsible for looking after children, with over two-thirds of working mothers taking part-time jobs to square their employment with their childcare duties compared with just 1.9% of working fathers.³⁵ Women complained that employers failed to make adjustments to working culture to take account of women's dual burden as workers and mothers. As GER02Emma30b complained:

In Spain and England, for example, it is normal for mothers to go back to work after three months – and there is also the appropriate support, such as day-care centres, which then take in the children from the age of just a few months. Germany is still very traditional here.

When she did go back to work at a lower FTE after her maternity leave, her employers showed no understanding for her new situation, still expecting her to work the same number of hours a week, just in fewer days. Similarly, she noted that it would have been 'unimaginable' for her husband to reduce his work hours from 40 to 35 a week to look after their daughter for one afternoon.

While some women were forced to juggle their work and childcare responsibilities, for others they had to give up work entirely, becoming completely financially dependent on their husbands. GER08Lisa40b shared her experience:

Due to the school closure, the care of my younger child was no longer guaranteed and I was no longer able to work. I was a self-employed solo entrepreneur. With the loss of work, we are missing a complete second salary and my husband, as an employed roofer, is solely responsible for supporting the family. [...] There was no help from the state for me.

A further gendered impact of the lockdown related to the psychological harm on women. As women were more likely to stay at home, while men often continued to go to work, the former were more likely to suffer from

³⁵ 'German women face large equality gap in child care: study', *Deutsche Welle*, 23.02.2022. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/german-women-face-large-equality-gap-in-child-care-study/a-60883610> (accessed: 07.08.2022)



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feelings of isolation due to the fact, according to GER05Tatjana00, that women place more value on sociality: 'That's why social interaction is sometimes even more important for women than it is for men.' The additional responsibility for childcare placed an extra burden on many women, causing psychological stress. To GER05Kerstin00, 'women are more affected by the pandemic because women are usually more sensitive. So when there are difficulties and problems, then the women deal with them much more intensively. I think most men can sort of process that faster somehow or can repress it and stuff like that. And for women I think this psychological burden is heavier.' As a result of the lockdown and forced isolation, GERUlrike50a suffered a series of panic attacks. Being unable to socialise and interact with other people reminded her of her abusive childhood, stuck at home with a violent, alcoholic mother: 'Just these mental images [of my childhood], to think there are many more families than you think where domestic violence takes place behind closed doors.'

One positive upside of COVID was that many men were required to work remotely from home for the first time and thus discovered what it was like for women to work 'with screaming children in the home office' (GER01Simone40a). Although he needed to be taught when his daughter's meal times and nap times were, GER02Emma30b's husband did eventually recognise that he was able to look after his child for a few hours a day without neglecting his work.

What is important to stress is that not all women shared the belief that the impact of the lockdown was harder on them than on men. For those who did not think the impact of the lockdown was gendered in its effects, one common explanation was it was 'more about the job than the gender' (GER05Leonie00). GER04Martina00 agreed that the impact of the lockdown was linked more to the professional sector in which one was working, arguing that 'there are also male hairdressers who have suffered from it [the lockdown]'. However, in her example, the man who had been badly affected by the lockdown worked in a sector that is more traditionally associated with women; we can therefore infer that the closure of hairdressing salons did affect women more than men and the impact of the closures was thus gendered. Similarly, GER04Tamara00 argued that the lockdown affected 'both sides equally, both men and women' and this depended on whether it was the husband or the wife who stayed at home with the children, while the other went to work. However, in Germany, women are much more likely to stay at home with the children, undermining GER04Tamara00's claim that the impact of the lockdown is not gendered. In addition, fathers are only half as likely to take parental leave as new mothers.³⁶ To GER02Emma30b, this is due to the fact that this could be used against men when applying for promotion, etc. In addition, she continued, 'men still live with the basic idea that they have to look after the family alone. Although that's no longer true these days.'

³⁶ Ibid.



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While the lockdown has had a disproportionate impact on women, who have been expected to assume greater responsibility for childcare during the lockdown than their husbands, and many women referred to the impact using language that hinted at retraditionalisation, i.e. a *return* to traditional gender norms, this assumes gender roles had been more equal prior to the pandemic. However, as GER02Cathrin20b cogently sums it up, 'I think this pandemic is amplifying all the inequalities that we already have in our society, and that means that inequalities based on gender are also increasing.'

Whereas anger at elites and distrust of science prompted a political response on the part of many of our respondents, this was not the case with the gendered impact of the government's anti-COVID measures. As the Affect visualisation (above) shows, women understood the reasons for the lockdown and did not therefore consider it unfair. Their anger was not thus provoked by the lockdown per se and thus not directed at the government but by those who refused to be vaccinated, thereby prolonging the lockdown and the women's ensuing childcare responsibilities.

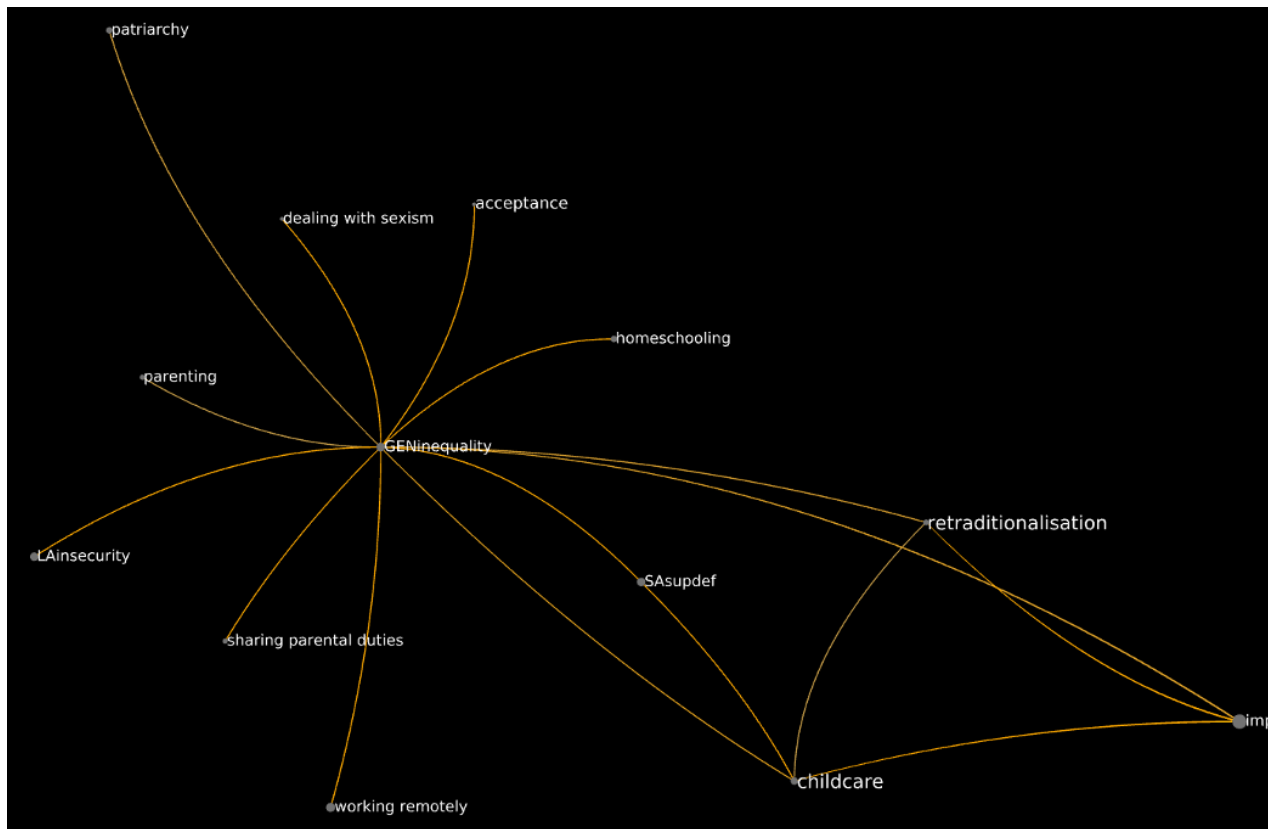


Figure 25: the codes for Retraditionalisation, GENequality, Patriarchy and Childcare and their deepest



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associations ($d \geq 6$).

***Lainsecurity:** Job insecurity, ***GENequality:** Gender inequality, ***SAsupdef:** Social anomie and social relations: support deficit

Figure 25 shows us how retraditionalisation is linked to gender. In the visualisation we can see three other codes: gender inequality (GENequality), patriarchy and childcare. These four codes are connected to one another and to the impact of COVID-19 (not shown) by deep associations ($d \geq 12$). Figure 23 supports the key insights from the ethnographic data that impact of the lockdown was gendered in its effects in that responsibility for childcare, parenting and home-schooling lay overwhelmingly with women. To balance childcare with working responsibilities meant that they were more likely to work remotely from home, while men often continued to go to work. The visualisation provides further support to the insight discussed with reference to Affect that many women found the lockdown emotionally difficult as they lost access to their networks of support and thus felt socially isolated. As the testimonies of many of our female respondents made clear, combining a career with children was hard enough before the pandemic, with many women reporting that they experienced sexism and unequal treatment when they returned to work after maternity leave, resulting in feelings of job insecurity. Two broader debates about gender that emerged from the ethnographic data are also reflected in the visualisations: firstly, that the greater responsibility for childcare that women had to take on reflected a process of retraditionalisation of gender roles and, secondly, that the gender inequality that became apparent during the lockdown simply amplified patriarchal structures that already existed. Unsurprisingly, the respondents who discussed these issues were almost exclusively women, a fact also confirmed by the visualisation.

2.3.5. Network analysis and visualisations summary

The visualisations serve to triangulate the insights from the ethnographic data. They support the view that German society was polarised as a result of the government response to the COVID pandemic, to some extent fuelled by misinformation or the manipulation of data. They also highlight the emotional response to the lockdown. The visualisation further supports the difficulty highlighted in the ethnographic data of disentangling the respondents' opposition to the vaccine and their anger at the government in that the anti-vax sentiment had as much to do with the political implementation of the vaccination programme than with distrust in the vaccines themselves. The Gender visualisation highlighted the debate in the ethnographic data between women who argue that the greater responsibility for childcare that women had to take on reflected a process of retraditionalisation of gender roles and those who believe that the gender inequality that became apparent during the lockdown simply amplified patriarchal structures that already existed.



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The visualisations bring out the gender dimensions of the ethnographic data. They highlight the differential impact of the lockdown on men and women, with responsibility for childcare and home-schooling falling almost exclusively on women. With regard to the emotional response to the lockdown, the visualisation demonstrated that the key emotions did not necessarily feed into each other. While women were angry at those prolonging the lockdown, they did not feel it was unfair.

The visualisation highlights three of the most commonly referenced affects – emotional difficulty, unfairness and anger – and the events associated with them. As highlighted repeatedly by our respondents, the government-imposed lockdown was found to be emotionally difficult as it cut them off from their networks of support. The visualisation shows that women were affected more than men, supporting the insights from the interviews that it was women who were more likely to suffer from feelings of isolation due to the fact they were more likely to stay at home, while men often continued to go to work. Secondly, the visualisation supports the insight from the ethnographic data that women found the gender inequality reinforced or exposed by the lockdown to be unfair. Finally, the visualisation highlighted the anger and frustration that the COVID pandemic provoked among our respondents, with the anger directed primarily at those who refused to be vaccinated.

While we had initially assumed that the three emotions would be interrelated, the visualisation showed that they were, in fact, discreet. From this we could infer that, while the lockdown was emotionally difficult for many women, they did understand the reasons for it and did not therefore consider it unfair. Their anger was not thus provoked by the lockdown *per se* but by those who refused to be vaccinated, thereby prolonging the lockdown and the women's ensuing childcare responsibilities, which in turn exacerbated the gender inequality at home and in society at large.

Further research can examine in greater detail men and women's different emotional responses to the lockdown, elucidated by the visualisations and the ethnographic data.



2.4. Key findings and conclusions

Among several analytical distinctions that help to organise the massive literature on the rise of populism in recent years, one of the most effective is the one between the demand and supply sides of the phenomenon. While the latter has been studied in several POPREBEL sub-projects, here we report on an in-depth study of the *demand side*. As we indicated earlier, we decided not to ask people about their views on or support for (right-wing) populism directly, but to engage them in a conversation in which they would share with us their concerns, loosely related to the idea of wellbeing. We assumed that we would eventually learn about the respondents' political choices or at least their general political-ideological predilections from the way they would link choices and concerns using a map of the socio-political reality they carry in their heads.

The picture that emerges from the ethnographic narratives based on the more traditional qualitative-narrative interpretation of the interview material and the semantic network analysis of the coded interview transcripts is complex but there are several common threats that run through all three communities of discourse. People raise several issues that signal the existence of agitated, disturbed, and untrustful societies, traumatised by the pandemic, but concerned not only with the impact of this calamity on their lives. They have other concerns, related to their sense that the system is out of whack and does not provide the sufficient level of support for the people. It is easy to see why at least some elements of the populist ideology promoted by various actors resonate with people so strongly.

Before we offer several closing thoughts, we review the main findings of each case study.

2.4.1. The Czech Republic:

- **Political disillusionment** across socioeconomic classes, demographics and political beliefs – primarily rooted in a series of **corruption** scandals following 1989. The political representatives from left to right are seen as corrupt, morally compromised, working for their own interests (enriching themselves).
- **People's electoral choices are often inconsistent** – swinging from left to the right – they are much more driven by immediate perceptions, affective intensification and 'feeling of familiarity/closeness.' Personalisation of politics.
- **Communism** represents a key historical node, through which people navigate and interpret their socioeconomic realities and wider geopolitical trends. This primarily takes the form of 'anti-nostalgia',



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rather than an overly romanticised view of the past.

- **The EU** – for the more conservative participants, the EU is seen as an essentially oppressive structure, which is imposing its norms, regulations and values onto ‘us’. It is closely associated with the historical memory of foreign domination and that the perceived unsuccessful postsocialist transformation is supposedly linked to the Czech accession to the EU. A wider spectrum of participants (not just conservative/illiberal) are fairly sceptical of the institution and have their reservations.
- **The anti-covid movement** – the pandemic has given rise to a new anti-systemic illiberal force in the society, which was fairly fringe/marginal, but with the developing economic crisis (energies, inflation, war) has grown substantially (at the forefront of anti-government protests. So the anti-covid movement’s anti-vaccination positions, conspiratorial theories, excessive nationalism and numerous other phenomena have merged into an ideological conglomerate which is inseparably intertwined with populist rhetoric.

2.4.2. Poland:

- **Pandemic side-effects.** All interviewees share an impression that the pandemic has had a generalised effect of not only exposing already existing social and systemic issues, but also enhancing them. The viral pandemic and the economic recession reinforced the belief in self-reliance and further weakened people’s trust in the state and broader society.
- **Polarisation.** There is a strong conviction among the study participants that Polish society is very divided, fragmented, and increasingly polarised, due to the conflict dynamics between the current PiS government and the main opposition party, PO. The perceived division builds on two main sets of values, centered around a positive or a negative take on self-reliance: (1) **individualization**, where self-reliance is seen as the ultimate goal, something that ought to be sought after, as the state or the society in general, and political elites in particular, are seen to be ultimately unreliable and untrustworthy; (2) **togetherness**, where the current push for individual self-reliance is seen as a negative turn, a sign that the condition of the society, the state, or the community is worsening, unable to take care of the individual as it should within a well-functioning and carrying welfare state.
- **Abortion.** The 2020-2021 changes to the abortion law sparked controversies across Polish society. Participants of the study unanimously were critical of the change, irrespective of their political leanings or whether they identified as pro-choice or in favour of the so-called abortion compromise. Those interviewees, who broadly discussed the matter, saw the change as a violation of their liberty or the right of self-determination. Semantic network analysis showed a gender gap – female respondents saw the issue in the broader context of other social issues, while males more in the context of polarisation and



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social divisions. This suggests that male study participants were overall more conservative than female respondents. The topic was also particularly raised by the younger generation, for which taking part in the protests has often been the first act of political engagement.

- **Critique of Polish political culture.** Most of the study participants felt that no political party represented their values and worldviews. Moreover, the study suggests a profound disappointment with the Polish political culture across the political spectrum. Voting for any party requires acceptance that in politics various forms of nepotism, corruption, and unprofessionalism are unavoidable. In that sense, a sense of voting for a lesser evil is unavoidable.
- **Critique of the state.** Voters of the far-right and far-left share a critique of the current state of Polish politics, and to an extent a critique of global economic inequality.
- The value that's important to all study participants is **freedom**. It is, however, understood differently – for some it relates to particular rights, such a right to abortion or a right to not get a vaccination; for others it is an abstract concept. In the latter case it is used to talk about the lack of freedom, in the context of the rule of either the Civic Platform Party or the Law and Justice Party.
- **From the left to the right:** interestingly, **interventionist economic politics** are part of political programmes of both the Left parties in the Polish parliament and the Law and Justice Party. This means that those policies have a majority in the Sejm. Some of the younger left-leaning voters would consider voting for the Law and Justice Party for their socio-economic policies, if not their conservative, moralising narratives and related political agenda and decisions. The Law and Justice party is attractive to the left-leaning voters of generations 50+, because of their focus on socio-economic policies. They don't vote for the left-wing parties because of their unacceptable moral agenda and strong support for human rights, for example, their advocacy for abortion or minority rights, including the rights of the LGBTQ people and/or of refugees.

2.4.3. Germany:

- **The government's response to the pandemic** aroused anger at the centralisation of control in the hands of a small group of politicians and unelected medical experts and the lack of critical voices among mainstream politicians, which was considered to be undemocratic. The motivations behind the government's anti-COVID measures were questioned and alternative explanations were presented, the belief in which fuelled further waves of anger. It was felt that the government was using the anti-COVID measures to exercise control over the population, whereby its attempt to generate an atmosphere of fear was seen as a tool to ensure quiescence.



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- **The unvaccinated.** Anger was directed at the negative construction of the unvaccinated. Unvaccinated people were seen as selfish, resulting in a society that had become increasingly polarised into the vaccinated and unvaccinated, which in turn turned former friends and family members against each other.
- **Gendered perception of the pandemic.** Women found the lockdown to be emotionally difficult as it cut them off from their networks of support. Women were affected more than men due to the fact they were more likely to stay at home, while men often continued to go to work. However, they understood the reason for the lockdown and did not thus consider it unfair. Women's anger was not provoked by the lockdown *per se* but by those who refused to be vaccinated, thereby prolonging the lockdown and women's ensuing childcare responsibilities, which in turn exacerbated the gender inequality at home and in society at large.

2.4.4. Comparative insights based on key findings

Looking at the three sets of data from our three country case studies, we can synthesise the findings into a number of general conclusions. Comparative insights as a category can bridge country-specific findings (discussed above) and the conclusions (discussed below) and more broadly, can serve as observations about the trends and patterns that have emerged from this three-country project, and which can also inform future research on this topic. There are SEVERAL general conclusions that have emerged from the three cases studies and our comparative analysis of their findings:

1. There is a high degree of both polarisation and concomitant high affect in people's political subjectivities. It may seem paradoxical to think of polarisation as a node of common experience and similarity, but the comparative perspective allows us to do precisely that. Almost all our research participants, in all three countries, tell the story of polarisation, disunity, and partition with high levels of affect. People are sharing, in common, an intensity of political subjectivity and identification couched in terms of polarity and oppositions, rather than unity and compromise. It is also clear that people experience the current situation in intensely emotional terms, and this emotionality is a constitutive element of not just collective identities, but the fabric of sociality itself. Our work seems to confirm social philosopher Brian Massumi's theorising. He wrote: 'Affect is individual. Affect is transindividual. It is ontogenetically prior to the distinction between the individual understood as a separate unit and the collective understood as a molar aggregate of separate units. It is 'collective' in the sense that it expresses itself in collective individuations (emergent populations of individuals whose formation is processually correlated at a distance, across their differences). Affect...is directly relational...it is pure sociality' (2015: 205). This situation of higher affectivity, combined with the rejection of many elements of the liberal order, creates a propitious



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emotional opportunity structure (EOS) for the rise of support for right-wing populism (on the EOS see Salmela and von Scheve 2018).

2. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously wrote (after Weber) that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (1973: 5), but affective realities such spinning generates are rarely consensual in a large, complex society. Key concepts that organise social life are affectively charged and can be claimed and defined in ways that are downright mutually exclusive, and each concept may become a site of paradoxical, deeply charged, incompatible meanings. Our study reveals that concrete concepts whose meanings are commonly imagined to be universal have splintered and became carriers of meanings that are particularised and sometimes antithetical. People may feel very strongly about such constructs as "freedom" but the arc of their feeling lands them in very different communities of meaning and practice. "Freedom" is understood and mobilised as, alternately, something very concrete (the *freedom to* have an abortion, or the freedom not to get vaccinated), or something more abstract, possibility experienced as a lack (the *freedom from* an unwanted form of governance or the rule of a particular party). Freedom can, then, be associated with various positions, be it pro-abortion, or anti-vaccine, or anti-particular-party, or anti-government. An anti-abortion, pro-vaccination, Law and Justice Party adherent (in Poland) may feel affectively mobilised by their dedication to freedom just as strongly as a pro-abortion, anti-vaccination, anti-government compatriot, who also values freedom very deeply. Their common use of the concept of "freedom" exemplifies a fundamental dissensus, rather than consensus. "Freedom" from censorship (associated with information dispersal around the Covid pandemic and Covid vaccines) may have affective historical referents for Czech citizens who link "freedom from censorship" with the authoritarian communist regime and for German citizens who link "freedom from censorship" with the Third Reich. However, even those "rhyming" historical referents to past oppressive regimes diverge – there is a greater legitimate space for nostalgia for communism in the Czech Republic than there is for the Third Reich / Nazi regime in Germany, conferring different affective nuances to the semiotics of associating freedom and lack thereof with past authoritarianisms.
3. In addition to gaining new insights into divergent affective realities, we observed in all three cases, we have also detected a high level of commonality. It is a broad sense of disappointment, distrust, and criticism when it comes to the government or leadership. This conclusion is related to the first point above, where we note that the Covid-19 pandemic has functioned as an amplifying and clarifying affective lens for existing sociopolitical ruptures. Importantly, those feelings of alienation, disappointment, discontent, and disenchantment sometimes find expression in reactive, and often reactionary, forms of political or social engagement. Distrust and criticism necessarily shape space for alternatives where trust and approval might be found. The nature of that alternative space, and the path to it, is far from uniform,



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but the understanding of its construction – often taking place in the right-wing corners of the cultural-ideological space – is absolutely relevant for the explanation of the key phenomenon under study in this project – the rise of new populism in Europe.

4. The Covid-19 pandemic has functioned as a clarifying and amplifying lens for existing sociopolitical ruptures. It has rendered visible the existing feelings of scepticism, distrust, abandonment, and disillusionment pertaining to the government institutions. It has both amplified those already-existing feelings, as people observed mishandling of the various aspects of the pandemic (restrictions of the lockdown, vaccination protocols, inadequate support, the burden on women), and also validated them as accurate affective critiques of the government; critiques that grew and self-perpetuated with every discontent over the handling of the pandemic.
5. The experience of unwanted polarisation and the mounting sense of crisis of trust is related to the perception that the system's functionaries tend to be corrupt. Corruption emerged as one of the dominant topics of conversations in Poland and the Czech Republic. In these two countries, the top-down populist discourse of the ruling parties promoting the image of 'corrupt elites' seems to have merged rather seamlessly with the genuine bottom up sentiment generated by the idea of a treasonous elite, inept and fatally focused on taking care only of itself. By contrast, in Germany the rejection of the elite was generally couched in other arguments and the trope of 'the corrupt elite,' if it showed up at all, was mostly the repetition of right-wing populist discourse.
6. For many respondents, the stress caused by the pandemic, the sense that the system is excessively polarised and its functionaries tend to be corrupt, combined with the rejection of traditional political representation and traditional parties of the left and the right. We have not observed an explicitly articulated call for authoritarian solutions, but we noted that many 'disillusioned' respondents had it with the system that was unable to alleviate people's suffering and attend effectively to their needs. It is however troubling, as the literature in political psychology demonstrates a sense of crisis or threat tends to activate people's latent authoritarian predispositions (Stenner 2005). And as Mason concluded, in a deeply divided and/or polarised society 'a candidate who picks up the banner of "us versus them" and "winning versus losing" is almost guaranteed to tap into a current of resentment and anger across racial, religious and cultural lines, which have recently divided neatly by party' (2018, 3). Mason observes this 'neat division' in American society, but her observation works well also for East Central Europe.
7. The years of liberal governance that in people's eyes failed to deliver an efficient state have created a sizable group of disillusioned people who may not be showing enthusiastic support for right-wing populists, but who are definitely jaded and unprepared or unwilling to start functioning as committed and deliberate citizens of liberal democracy. They are focused on taking care of themselves and their loved



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ones, and do not trust the existing political system. Many are not antidemocratic, but quite a few are indifferent when it comes to politics. The cultural worlds in which they live are often privatised, focused on everyday problems unresolved by the inept, 'cardboard' state. They are often filled with anger or at least resignation and although they do not necessarily belong to a category of 'hard' supporters of right-wing populists, they look for alternatives to the traditional parties that they find spent and useless as their political representation. Among them are people who can easily become or did become 'soft' supporters of (right-wing) populists. Their commitment is 'soft' (although it may harden) because it does not come from the deliberate and calculated choice, but rather from the emotional need to find someone who promises change and who is not compromised as a functionary of the (neo)liberal system.

8. The image and assessment of the European Union in member countries is of great interest to researchers and practitioners. Our study confirmed a wide range of situations. Predictably, this relationship does not rise to the top of issues dominating the German public discourse (as we accessed it through our interviews). Our Polish and Czech did, however, talk about the EU a lot but the discursive context in which they placed this institution could not be more different. The former tended to associate the EU with such benefits as freedom to travel and infrastructural investment, while the latter placed their talk about the EU in the context of such negative phenomena as undesired control and the EU's domineering or 'neo-colonial' ambitions. This discrepancy dovetails with the results of one of the last Eurobarometer surveys.³⁷ While the negative image of the EU was conjured up by 29% of Czechs (only Greeks conjured up a more negative image, at 31%), only 4% of Poles admitted to holding such an image, making them, together with the Portuguese, a national group that is the least critical of the EU.

3. Policy recommendations

In this research project and in this report we have integrated a number of anthropological and ethnographic traditions when it comes to research design, methodology, and sensibility. In this coda, we draw upon the applied paradigm in anthropology and ethnography – the utilisation of ethnographic insights for the purpose of producing actionable interventions and recommendations, in sectors that include but are not limited to policy, international development, healthcare, education, urban planning, and more. Turning to this approach is especially relevant in the case of this project because as van Willigen and Kedia (2005: 337) note in their overview of applied anthropology, 'policy work demands a firm knowledge of the empirical realities for which ethnographic methods

³⁷ Standard Eurobarometer 97. Summer 2022. Public opinion in the European Union, 122. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/all>. Accessed 28 December 2022.



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are most appropriate.' The chart below synthesises policy recommendations that are inferred from the ethnographic data we have gathered and analysed by country. The recommendations are, of course, not exhaustive, yet we hope that they represent a solid starting point for evidence-based interventions that could serve as a response to the rise of new populism in Europe today.

Table 8: Policy Recommendations

Poland	The Czech Republic	Germany
<p>Housing policy reform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize the housing burden and the feeling of disenfranchisement in that regard compared to the communist era and the 90's Establish a social safety net through a combination of legislation, subsidies, affordable loan programmes, etc. where housing is a guaranteed right 	<p>Social welfare / benefit system reform to ease the bureaucratic burden of seeking welfare support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digitization Improvement of working conditions and remuneration of social workers and system officers Improve proactive targeting of vulnerable populations eligible for welfare (retirees, low-income individuals and families, single parents) 	<p>Reduce distance between the people and the government during periods of emergency when civil rights are being temporarily constrained:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include a broader range of voices in the decision-making process (e.g. NGOs, unions), not just politicians Enhance digital democracy so as to enable members of the public to feed into strategic decisions Encourage and listen to critical voices within mainstream parties. Otherwise, people will turn to those who question the mainstream narrative, i.e. far right and left
<p>Healthcare reform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reform primary care centres that work on local level, to make healthcare more accessible Rectify shortages of particular spatialized staff through prioritising specialisations of doctors in 	<p>Social welfare / benefit system messaging strategy shift to ease the emotional barriers of seeking welfare support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat narratives of state benefit abusers Develop communication strategies that normalise receiving state benefits 	<p>Recognise that the COVID-19 vaccine was developed very quickly and that people can be hesitant to try out new untested, at least in their minds, medical interventions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not scapegoat those who choose not to be vaccinated Emphasise that other effective prevention measures exist



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<p>state medical schools based on the demand. For example, psychiatrist and children psychiatrists aren't enough</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Address brain-drain of Polish doctors, who emigrate after graduation, through a reform that requires them to stay in the country for a number of years after getting their diploma ● Improve working conditions – no b2b contracts, limiting workable hours per week, so doctors do not take too many position, get overworked and make mistakes ● Introduce obligatory refresher courses, so doctors stay up to date with current medical knowledge ● Digitalize the healthcare system 		<p>besides vaccines</p>
<p>Schooling reform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge schooling issues: shortages of teachers are resulting in poorly educated children, who are burdened with excessive homework assignments and curriculum that's outdated ● Initiate a large-scale public education reform that 	<p>More rigorous research into the informal labour sector and the informal economy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify common worker issues in the informal labour sector ● Identify labour regulations breaches in the informal labour sector ● Classify the informal labour market 	<p>Recognise the gendered effect of the lockdown on childcare responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invest more in childcare, so that this is not seen as the sole responsibility of mothers ● Enshrine in law the requirement that employers offer flexible working arrangements to parents returning to work after parental leave



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<p>includes all teachers in the country, starting with a study of their needs and opinions on the education system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updating sex education, which is a victim of political game and influenced by religious groups, while it should be approached in an objective manner per health safety requests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement evidence-based legislation and regulation designed to improve worker conditions (and consequently worker confidence in the state) in the informal labour sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop online networks of support for parents stuck at home with their children
<p>Civil society support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge a need to further invest in the growth of civil society, • Introduce special classes or an entire course that teaches children and youth how to cooperate over joint goals, without reproducing harmful gender, racial, or other stereotypes • Provide counsel to local communities to facilitate local community building and cooperation 	<p>Social media regulation and literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislate and organise private-public partnerships to curtail the spread of disinformation on social media platforms • Start social media literacy educational campaigns integrated educational curricula at all levels • Initiate dedicated communication campaign targeting specifically vulnerable and disinformation-prone communities to promote media literacy in an empowering, rather than patronising way 	



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