



UDC 616.98:578.834]:321.6(438)(82)
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.7442021.1>
Review article

Serbian Political Thought
No. 4/2021, Year XXVIII,
Vol. 74
pp. 05-32

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THE POPULIST RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE POSITIONS OF DUDA AND FERNÁNDEZ***

Abstract

Drawing on the theory of political myths and qualitative source analysis, this article compares political mythologies created by the presidents of Poland and Argentina. The main argument is that they struck populist notes by using conspiracy, saviour, unity, and golden age myths to legitimize government policies during the pandemic. The crisis gave rise to a search for legitimacy for anti-democratic measures limiting pluralism. These leaders persuaded their supporters to respect political changes which facilitate a gradual weakening of democratic institutions in the service of weathering the crisis. The study contributes to our understanding of the presidents' engagement in institutional change.

Keywords: populism, political myths, political thought during the crisis, democracy, de-democratization, legitimization.

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*** This research paper is a result of the research project Contentious Politics and Neo-Militant Democracy. It was financially supported by the National Science Centre, Poland [grant number 2018/31/B/HS5/01410].

1. INTRODUCTION

In Argentina, since the founding of the populist Worker's Party (*Partido Laborista*) by Juan Perón in 1946, its representatives have served as presidents for more than half of the post-war period and achieved results in the range of 30-60% of the vote in the presidential elections. The party, which was officially renamed the Justicialist Party in 1950 (*Partido Justicialista*), plays a prominent role in the Argentine political scene. It was successful in parliamentary and local elections (Muno 2018, 12). The emergence of a significant populist force contributed to a polarization on the Argentine political scene. After 1945, the division into Peronists and anti-Peronists is visible. During the Cold War, internal political divisions intensified, contributing to social unrest and political crises. Perón and Peronism strengthened this cleavage by distributing a down-to-earth leader image, using ordinary language, and drawing a sharp line of separation between the people and what they referred to as the elite (Muno 2018, 12). The method of conducting politics and creating messages for voters introduced by Perón was largely continued by his successors, including his wife Eva Perón, Héctor José Cámpora, Carlos Menem, Néstor Carlos Kirchner Jr., and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Seman 2020). The incumbent president of Argentina also identifies himself as a Peronist. In October 2019, Alberto Fernández defeated President Mauricio Macri in the election, thereby restoring the Peronist camp's influence in Argentina. Additionally, the incumbent vice-president is Kirchner, which only strengthens the belief that the Peronists' influence in the state, in its variant, already referred to as Kirchnerism, has been preserved, even if Kirchnerism is not endorsed by many politicians self-identifying as Peronists, mainly because of its strongly leftist and populist profile (Baud 2013, 121–123).

Fernández refers to populism elements that have in recent years regained importance in Argentina. This was due to several factors. The criticism of his predecessor largely determined Fernández's electoral result. Macri was the first president to try to change the balance of power, dominated by Peronists, since the removal of the military dictatorship in 1983. He advocated closer relations with the United States, promoted gradualist neoliberalism, and pressed for free-market solutions. Macri also supported

budgetary discipline and monetary policy stabilization (Harper 2019). However, what improved Argentina's credibility among foreign investors did not win Macri great support among common citizens. The difficult economic situation translated into a renewed rise in populist attitudes. A similar situation took place in Poland on the eve of the presidential election in 2015.

In Poland, populism does not have such a long tradition and is not as rooted in the political system as in Argentina (cf. Jasiewicz 2008). Nevertheless, the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis and no clear pro-social policy of the liberal government dominated by the Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*) created a favourable situation for populist rhetoric that developed from populist sentiments shaped in 1990s (Jasiewicz 2008, 11; Pytlas 2021). Andrzej Duda, a candidate nominated for the presidential election by Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) in 2015, referred to the populist arguments, especially promising to introduce new social programs and social justice (Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016). Moreover, unlike the then ruling liberal coalition of the Christian-democratic Civic Platform and the agrarian Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*), Duda opposed the consent to the quota system to redistribution of refugees during the migration crisis. He often referred to national symbols and traditions by publicly emphasizing his commitment to the Catholic Church (Moskwa and Jefferson 2020). Duda's victory in the presidential elections and the subsequent success of Law and Justice in the 2015 parliamentary elections resulted in political and legal changes within the Polish political regime. The changes included dismantling institutional government safeguards by hamstringing the Constitutional Tribunal, and then its transformation into an active supporter of the government, subordination of the courts' judges to the government, and restriction of political rights (the right to assembly, privacy, and the freedom of the press) (Sadurski 2019, 53). The newly elected president and members of the government skilfully read public moods, adjusting official rhetoric and actions to the expectations of at least part of Polish society (Rezmer-Płotka 2021). An example of such action was the almost immediate introduction of the 500+ program based on the monthly payment of an allowance of PLN 500 (EUR 108) for the second and each subsequent child (Bill and Stanley 2020).

In Argentina and Poland, populist presidents have engaged in institutional change to an unprecedented extent (Axford 2021). Although the political systems of Argentina and Poland are different, and the list of differences includes substantially different political roles, positions, and competencies of presidents in the presidential system (Argentina) and parliamentary system with a directly elected head of state (Poland), the presidents of these states are important and influential state opinion-forming bodies. The Polish president's impact on policies is considerably limited due to his constitutional position, but his discursive power to shape political views and the interpretation of governmental policies is as strong as the Argentinian.

Fernández and Duda emphasize the need to defend national interests and social solidarity, understood as state support for poorer social groups at the expense of the elite, especially those associated with opposition groups. Losing the quality of democracy is treated as a cost of these activities. A preliminary comparison of populisms in the varieties represented by Fernández and Duda can draw upon the analysis of Robert R. Barr. He defined populism as "a mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages" (Barr 2009, 38). As was the case with Fernández, it was a big surprise to the public that Duda received a party nomination in the presidential election. Just as Kirchner overshadowed Fernández, Duda was a politician of moderate stature and political influence. Up until 2015, he had worked mainly for the election success of Law and Justice's undisputed leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. Despite their electoral victories, Duda and Fernández are not perceived as independent leaders but rather as executors of their political patrons' tasks and orders. The presidents deliver emotional speeches that refer to symbolism, national values, and traditions. They expect to be seen as those who oppose the domination of the political and business elites and care for all citizens' well-being, including the weak and the down-trodden. In 2015, Duda's election victory and the defeat of the then-president Bronisław Komorowski, who enjoyed clear support from the intelligentsia, specialists, representatives of liberal professions, and entrepreneurs, were indicative of breaking the dominance of the

so-called elite domination (Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2018). Fernández's victory against Macri was seen in a similar vein.

Like other states, in Poland and Argentina, the pandemic has created conditions for expanding populists' rule. Governments imposed anti-democratic restrictions to extend their own power competencies, exclude political competitors from the democratic game, introduce laws serving particular interests, and thus undermined democracies. Lockdown measures, restrictions on political rights were to weaken civil society, the social structure of liberal democracy (de Aragão et al. 2020, 51; Skrzypek 2021). Despite their overtly anti-democratic nature, these measures were widely followed in Poland and Argentina. Protests were relatively rare and with low attendance. It begs the question how populists have managed to convince their followers to support solutions restricting their civil rights and liberties.

This article aims to discover the characteristics of Duda's and Fernández's engagement in the legitimization of anti-democratic government policies during the Covid-19 pandemic. By delving analytically into political mythologies that supported anti-democratic measures limiting pluralism, the article shows how the presidents persuaded their supporters to accept and respect political changes. The mythology structure reveals how Duda and Fernández exploited fears to justify and explain the Covid-19-induced anti-democratic institutional change. The study contributes empirically to democratization studies by accounting for the presidents' direct engagement in anti-democratic changes during the coronavirus pandemic. The study of legitimization practices exposes the mechanisms of building public support for de-democratization. It also contributes to comparative studies on contemporary populism by enriching our understanding of populist discursive strategies among the factors behind achieving social approval of the changes leading to the progressive weakening of democratic institutions.

The remainder of the article is organized into four sections. The second section introduces a review of the literature on political myths as a discursive tool. Concentrating on the study's research objectives and questions, the review provides theoretical grounds for empirical research. The following section discusses methodological assumptions, including methods, techniques, materials,

data gathering, and analysis procedures. The fourth section compares political mythologies produced by Duda and Fernández in terms of using conspiracy, saviour, unity, and golden age myths to legitimize government policies. The conclusion gives an insight into the populist attempts to gain acceptance and respect for political changes which facilitate a gradual weakening of democratic institutions in the service of weathering the Corona crisis.

2. THEORETICAL GROUNDS: POLITICAL MYTHS AS A VEHICLE FOR POPULISM

In the last years, political scientists have gradually been interested in the role of political myths in de-democratization and populist discourse (Olzi 2020; Wainberg 2020; Susanto 2019). The particular importance attached to myths results from using them in political communication as a vehicle for ideology (Flood 2013, 17). Myths serve individuals as a framework to produce meaning, interpret events, and make sense of the specific way they function within a given political structure (Schmitt 2018, 490). Moreover, myths are constantly updated to overcome the emerging obstacles to the legitimacy of a desired political structure. This article falls into the body of research on political myths as a tool for legitimizing anti-democratic practices and activities (Bauer and Becker 2020). These works emerged as a response to a need for understanding how populists managed to gain legitimacy for democratic backsliding towards authoritarianism or nondemocratic regime establishment after the 2008 financial crisis (Huber and Schimpf 2016; Ruth 2018).

Political myths are a linguistic strategy efficient in times of uncertainty, social cohesion weakening, and crises (Zglobiu 2017, 117; Sviličić and Maldini 2014, 726). Especially then, the great social groups express a need for immediate solutions to complex issues and their simple articulation. The latter aims at the cognitive patterns firmly rooted in people's social consciousness. Resorting to myths, populists access the mythical thinking and draw upon their structures to facilitate the decoding of a political message (Zglobiu 2017, 117). They take advantage of people's susceptibility to the ideas of change and the creation of a new political structure. There-

by, anti-democratic tendencies draw energy from political myths, which serve as a cohesive factor for those who accept submission to the rulers (Sviličić and Maldini 2014, 726).

During the Corona crisis, socioeconomic deprivation and value anomie, characteristic of great social and economic crises, have resulted in socio-psychological insecurity, disorientation, and fear (Sviličić and Maldini 2014, 725; de Aragão et al. 2020, 52). These processes have triggered the transformation of social trauma into individuals' psychological problems. It has generated fertile ground for producing and adopting political myths (Sviličić and Maldini 2014, 726). Populists immediately have managed the public's expectations of fighting the coronavirus and easing the crisis effects. Myth-rooted promises of a new, better society, social, economic security, protection, and the integrative power of a new political structure aimed to determine the re-realization of collective identity and meaning (Sviličić and Maldini 2014, 726).

Raoul Girardet determined functions of political mythologies in populist discourse and formulated a classification framework of myths that represent modes of discursive legitimization (Girardet, 1987, 11; 54). The functions include the fictionalization of politics, explanation, and mobilization. First, by creating new forms of truth, embedded in a power structure and located within specific narrative contexts, mythologies produce a continuous fictionalization of politics. Politicians contest the facticity of the *status quo* with appropriate discourse creations of the past, present, future, heroes, and villains (Stoica2014, 106). Second, mythologies generate a coherent framework of these creations' interpretation. Politicians establish a normative vision of the individual and society to organize chaos into a stable order (Stoica2014, 107). Third, mythologies allow politicians to gain, manage, and take advantage of socially shared emotions, anger, frustrations, hopes, and desires. Value-laden semantic structures build a new reality of alterity in political discourse to unite society with common goals and enemies (Stoica2014, 107; Girardet 1987, 55).

Girardet's classification framework covers linguistic strategies peculiar to gaining support for political projects during the crisis (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, 42). It includes conspiracy, golden age, saviour, and unity myths (Girardet 1987, 11).

Mihnea-Simion Stoica argues that these political myths organize populist mythologies and provide populists with tools to shape the understanding of events. Populists describe the world as a space of uncertainty and insecurity, where others (“they”) endanger nations, ordinary people, good men, society (“we”). “The others” disrespect a community founded on well-known rules and roles for its members (Stoica 2017, 71). According to the conspiracy myth, a group of people aims to surreptitiously disrupt the *status quo* for purely selfish reasons (Girardet 1987, 11). However, the conspiracy myth is efficient only when coupled with the remaining three myths. The saviour emerges along with a crisis because a state of emergency conduces a need for being saved among those who feel endangered. The power of the saviour results from his or her will to act, skills, and knowledge. Establishing an asymmetric power relationship and submission are the conditions for salvation, gaining protection, and restoring the socially desirable order. Populist subjects are in a position to save the world, reinstate solidarity in a community at risk, recognize and solve their followers’ problems. The golden age promises a utopian state of political stability, prosperity, peace, harmony, lack of threats. The condition for fulfilling the promise is the resignation from at least some rights and freedoms. In a fantasy populist world, the golden age myth determines an ultimate objective a particular community must strive to achieve. This goal is associated with *status quo* adversaries. The present is a period between the golden age and what can be considered revenge of times. Unity stands for the organization into a utopian community untouched by internal conflicts. The unity myth is an identity-forming factor used by populists to provide the majority with an awareness framework to become the people (Girardet 1987, 11, 187; Stoica 2017, 71–72). The Girardet-Stoica classification framework constitutes a theoretical basis for codes and coding that underlie a thematic analysis of populist mythologies.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study responds to two matters in order to uncover the nature of populist legitimization of anti-democratic measures. Whereas the first delves into the structure of political mythology produced by the presidents and reveals its essential features, the

second concentrates on the practical use of political myths and discursive legitimization processes. They are as follows: What types of political myths did Duda and Fernández use to justify and explain government policies? How did they use these myths to persuade their supporters to accept and respect political changes leading to the weakening of democratic institutions as a way to weather the Corona crisis?

To address these questions, the research draws upon the comparative qualitative source analysis of the presidents' verified Twitter accounts. During the pandemic, those official profiles served them to maintain direct communication with citizens and provided records of exchanges concerning current political affairs. The analysis covers tweets published during the first wave of the pandemic. It spanned from the first confirmed cases up until the loosening of lockdown measures, from March 4 to May 31, 2020, in Poland and from March 3 to July 17, 2020, in Argentina. The document analysis combines content analysis and thematic analysis in the iterative process of text skimming, examination, and interpretation. The content analysis commences with the identification of text passages that hold direct references to the state measures taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and minimize the effects of the crisis, including the limitations of freedom of movement, assembly, speech, trade, and religious worship even if they are not defined as measures by the presidents. The following stage rests on a theoretical framework that assigns information into categories of conspiracy, golden age, savior, and unity myths.

The remaining stages focus on thematic analysis. Rereading and reviewing information are crucial procedures to determine themes relevant to the categories. They lead to the data characteristics-based coding and category definition (Bowen 2009, 31–32). The concept-driven coding of the tweet content draws on four groups of search terms: for conspiracy: social, political division, exclusion, outcast, others, opponents, enemies, violators of social norms and law, they, threat, risk, negative influence; for the saviour: restoration, unsymmetrical relation of power, the helping and the helped, help, protection, rescue, safety, security; for unity: the people, our society, we, majority, solidarity, unity, social cooperation, responsibility; for the golden age: future, aspirations, development

directions, attempts, endeavours, objectives, promises, recovery, and change. By applying an inductive approach, a continuous comparative method enhances thematic analysis within the scope of searching the data for the myth-related theoretical qualities. In turn, a back-and-forth interplay with the data serves to investigate the codes and concepts. Notably, while data pieces (sentences) are mutually listed and compared, codes are necessary to group ideas and pinpoint clustering concepts (Bowen 2009, 37). The final stage involves reporting the analysing process and the research results through the conceptual systems of myths and the model of political mythologies produced by the presidents.

4. POLITICAL MYTHOLOGY IN TIMES OF THE CORONA CRISIS

Gaining the incumbent presidents' support for the institutional change was oriented towards channelling the social support that they received in general elections. By distributing populist mythologies, they produced a comprehensive and coherent picture of the socially desired change. Thereby, they discursively legitimated the weakening of democratic institutions and curbing pluralism. The Covid-19 crisis prompted a tough economic situation for both Poles and Argentinians. Public support for anti-democratic solutions was viewed as a condition under which the governments could build a new social and political structure and economic prosperity.

While both presidents used political mythology to promote desirable interpretations of government policies, Fernández was much more active in tweeting and producing the discourse on restrictions. In 254 out of 323 tweets, the president of Argentina distributed political myths. This means that as much as 79% of the politician's message during the first wave of the pandemic was subordinated to the overarching goal of legitimizing anti-democratic solutions. These were almost all of the president's political announcements. The remaining 21% were private and contained wishes for health and prosperity on various occasions, words of gratefulness for support, lauds from children, and calls to observe restrictions. In Poland, the first wave of the pandemic coincided with the presidential campaign. During that time, Duda published

only 76 tweets, 58 of which aimed to legitimize the government's policy. The remainder was to thank for signs of support and express "admiration and respect" for various social groups. The proportion between the number of tweets aimed at generating support for the government (76%) and the pursuit of other campaign goals (24%) uncovered that the former was a priority. Despite the ongoing campaign in Poland, Duda, as much as Fernández, mythicized the government's actions.

Conspiracy myth

The conspiracy myth dominated Fernández's (36%) and Duda's (34%) political mythology. It was of particular importance since it allowed the populists to justify the "we" and "they" division. At the same time, it organized the perception of the past, present, and future as a consistent struggle with the enemy acting to the detriment of the people. As a result, the presidents could logically explain all undesirable events and phenomena by the powerful enemy's subversive activities (Stoica2014, 107). A common enemy unites the community in a common struggle. It justifies the need to implement unconventional solutions under exceptional leadership to achieve a common goal of defeating the enemy and overcoming the crisis.

In the discourse on the internal enemy, Poland's president accusingly pointed to hostile actions which allegedly accelerated the pandemic. Duda stated that some people used their energy to destroy the Polish community. All those who criticized state measures implemented to mitigate the pandemic's social and economic consequences contributed to the mass misinformation and coronavirus spread. Lying and manipulation were to weaken the position of the government, the president, and their cooperation. Duda also opposed the hostile but undefined political forces that strove to take money from ordinary people, given under the government's flagship social programs (e.g., the 500+ program), and deprive them of means of income (Duda 2020, March 11; April 20; May 12). The level of hostility towards political parties other than Law and Justice was very high because it was built on the assumption that those parties wanted to deprive Poles of their livelihoods.

Apart from the internal enemy, Duda referred to the immemorial external enemy of Poland, Russia. During the pandemic, the government continued the Vistula Spit dyke construction. The canal would connect the Vistula Lagoon with the Bay of Gdańsk by sea within Poland's territory to shorten the sea route to the Baltic Sea. The investment worth EUR 222.61 million was expensive considering Polish conditions and social needs during the Corona crisis. Furthermore, environmentalists criticized it as harmful to the natural environment (Mmj/lw 2020). The discussion on the government's initiative created opportunities to discredit opponents, including the incumbent president's counter-candidates in the upcoming elections. The lynchpin of the dispute was hence founded on the conspiracy myth. All those who opposed the government investment pursued Russian interests (Duda 2020, May 30). The Russians and their agents of influence present in Polish politics sought to limit Poles' freedom and weaken the domestic economy. The mere questioning of the government's arguments was tantamount to acting to Poles' detriment.

Like Duda, Fernández established internal enemies by pointing to undefined individuals or groups standing in the way of Argentina's prosperity, exploiting the poorer, or simply failing to comply with applicable restrictions, as happened many times during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fernández directly threatened the audience with severe consequences for all those who did not adhere to the government restrictions imposed for the public good (Fernández 2020, March 22). The president also condemned speculators who tried to take advantage of the crisis in the country and earn more on the goods offered. Nevertheless, no industry or professional group was called by name (Fernández 2020, March 5; Fernández 2020, March 17). This approach to the unidentified internal enemy was consistent with Duda's policy. Both presidents stressed the need to take decisive action to end the practices that destroyed the social structure from within.

Not unlike Duda, Fernández warned against disinformation and fake news disseminated by unspecified people via social media and external interference in the state politics. Simultaneously, he referred to this phenomenon as "infodemic" (Fernández 2020, March 28). The hidden message was relatively simple and intended

to undermine citizens' trust in the information disseminated through social media while making them responsible for their own actions and vigilance. The only reliable source of information was the state media. The call to limit the sources of information, i.e., to ignore hostile, non-state outlets, took place as part of the promotion of conscious news selection. Like in Poland, the rejection of false messages aimed to prevent Argentines from being influenced by those who wanted to harm them.

Finally, Fernández often rose to his critics and decisions made by executive bodies during the pandemic. The president accused the critics of displaying an antisocial approach. Moreover, he blamed unnamed entities for not understanding the executive bodies' correct and just decisions (Fernández 2020, April 29). Like in Poland, the lack of subordination to executive bodies' decisions posed a real threat to state security and public health.

Duda and Fernández pointed to hostile attempts to attain political power and control the people by describing both the internal and external enemy. The Polish and Argentinian social and political structures became areas of uncertainty. Functioning in them, especially entering into relationships with "the others," was risky and required great vigilance. Duda and Fernández did not indicate what social groups or entities they meant. Instead, they made the category of public enemy highly inclusive. It covered political opponents, critics, and people who did not comply with the restrictions. Moreover, the context of their posts was self-evident, and the recipients could identify enemies on their own. Both presidents were eager to use the conspiracy myth because it strengthened their position and created the impression that they were the only ones who could recognize the sources of threats. At the same time, despite clear goals and ubiquitous activities, the enemies remained elusive due to deeply secretive organization (Stoica 2017, 67). In the context of constant insecurity, Duda and Fernández stood for limiting the pluralism that permitted the distribution of misleading ideas. The anti-pluralist approach built strong antagonisms between "the people to be saved" and those considered putting the people in jeopardy (Stoica 2017, 71; Galston et al. 2018, 33). Fear of the latter aimed to fuel scares about social and economic security during the pandemic. It meant trying to undermine civil society's structures

by discouraging active participation in the public debate, the free exchange of views, and reducing mutual trust.

Saviour myth

Creating the enemies allowed the presidents to generate a need for defenders. This second most frequent myth served Fernández (27%) and Duda (28%) to deliver a quick and straightforward solution to the problems arising from the crisis. The governments were considered the saviours whose unique characteristics made them indispensable to the people. Despite living under constant threat, the governments persistently strove to identify and solve emerging social problems and restore order by averting immediate danger (Stoica 2017, 67).

According to Duda, state authorities were the people's praiseworthy saviour because they took up the fight against the threat and responded to the needs resulting from the pandemic. However, the assistance to the people was effective due to the professional cooperation between the president, the prime minister, and the government. Joint efforts allowed them to identify potential problems accurately even before citizens realized they were happening. Only thanks to prompt financial support from the state, Polish enterprises and borrowers survived the lockdown. The primary relief instruments were the government's anti-crisis shields, i.e., remuneration subsidies granted to entrepreneurs, Polish companies, and families. The government was also involved in removing any and all obstacles standing in the way of personal safety and medical assistance. The end of the first phase of the pandemic was celebrated with by presidential visits to select companies. Smiling employees talking to their special guest illustrated the success of the government's initiatives (Duda 2020, March 9; March 15; March 17; March 26; March 28; April 6; May 29). Due to the developed procedures, only the state-derived assistance could protect citizens from threats accompanying the pandemic. The myth of the sole saviour gave a feeling of no alternative and complete dependence on the state.

Apart from Poles, the beneficiaries of the government and the president's actions were all European states (Duda 2020, May 27). In May 2020, the European Commission, the European Par-

liament, and European Union (EU) leaders agreed on a recovery plan that would help repair the economic and social damage caused by the pandemic. The program aimed to lead the way out of the crisis and provide the foundations for a modern and sustainable Europe. Duda noted that although all countries would receive aid, Poland would be one of the biggest beneficiaries. The state offered its citizens financial security but in return for their commitment and obedience. The president's contribution to the plan was a letter to EU leaders to draw their attention to the need to support the common economy (Duda 2020, May 27). Despite no evidence of Poland's role in establishing the program, Duda appropriated it as a state success. It was an argument to convince the readers of the profile about Duda's and Poland's overwhelming influence on world politics.

Duda sanctified the state investment in Vistula Spit dyke construction by defining it as a turning point in the fight for liberty that the Polish nation wages against external threats. Duda supported the government's narrative that the investment was an attempt to gain independence from Russia and provide Poles with free trade and shipping (Duda 2020, May 30). On the one hand, the investment distracted Poles from the actual problems resulting from the ineffectiveness of the government's actions in the fight against the coronavirus. On the other hand, the image of the investment fed into the mythology of a strong state that defended its citizens from any threat. Due to the historical background, the vision of defence against Russian influence was deeply rooted in the public consciousness. Skilfully fuelled during the pandemic, the myth of protection against a total enemy awoke emotions and won over opposing Russia's supporters.

Fernández discussed actions taken by himself or via his initiative that would significantly improve the well-being and general living conditions. He directly pointed to his adamant attitude in the fight for social justice and honesty. In this way, the president criticized raising the prices of various goods and services for no apparent reason (Fernández 2020, March 5; March 17). Fernández promised to take action, although in this case, he avoided specifying precisely what exactly would be done (Fernández 2020, March 17). The declaration of a fight against speculators who tried to generate

income during the pandemic exposed an image of a president who cared for social justice and stood up for the interests of the weak.

Fernández invoked his position as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and the orders he issued to support civilians and other services in the fight against the pandemic (Fernández 2020, March 21). Like Duda, he projected his image as a politically active and worthy representative of Argentina in the international arena. It was the case just after the G20 summit when Fernández announced a Global Humanitarian Emergency Fund (Fernández 2020, March 26). He self-introduced as a strong leader able to care for the interests of his own state and the international community. Thereby, like Duda, Fernández claimed that he was respected by other world leaders.

Under the saviour myth, Duda and Fernández aimed to convince citizens that restrictions were suitable. In times of crisis, citizens sought care and support from the leaders who knew when and what decisions to make. Moreover, they expected help from the leaders whose decisions were correct. The need for a saviour arose along with the appearance of an enemy acting to the detriment of society. Thereby, the government policies became indispensable to the people that expected to survive the crisis. For Duda, the main point of reference was the epidemic crisis. At the same time, Fernández used the epidemic crisis and the long-lasting economic crisis in Argentina to justify a need for state-driven restrictions.

Unity myth

Social unity was a necessary condition for political salvation and the golden age to come true. In times of crises that shook civilization, only exceptional communities could unite to overcome adversity. The unity myth mattered in the presidents' plans for fighting the crisis since it enabled the majority to become "the people." They shared the collective identity and constituted the union around the government restrictions that allowed the communities to survive. Potential internal conflicts caused by enemies were destructive since they broke down unity and prevented common goals. Therefore, any split or breach could render political, social, or economic efforts utterly useless (Stoica 2017, 68; 72).

Poland's president repeatedly appealed to Poles to stop engaging in political disputes and comply with governmental recommendations. According to Duda, the crisis would end if citizens started to build a future by drawing on Poles' shared experiences and patriotism. However, the shared experience was a common participation in the successful struggle against the coronavirus. This meant closely following all restrictions, and in turn, the submission became an expression of patriotism (Duda 2020, May 25; May 14). Therefore, in order to end the pandemic, people were directly prompted to provide unanimous support for the government. Unity meant unconditional support for the political decisions of state authorities.

Furthermore, Duda praised all initiatives bringing citizens and Polish enterprises together in times of crisis. Citizens' mutual social and economic support was crucial for the social structure to survive. The president recognized that the government united Polish companies to build the Vistula Spit dyke (Duda 2020, May 30). Accordingly, the president and the government supported the cooperation of Poles around state-approved initiatives. It was an image of union for the common good that opposed internal and external enemies.

Fernández, on the other hand, referred to the need for national unity and defined its internal and external dimensions. In the former, Argentina's president stressed the need for universal mobilization and unification to improve the economic situation and ensure social justice. He pointed out not so much to his own responsibility for the consequences of future and present decisions but instead presented them as shared responsibility. Emphasis was on the need to undertake joint efforts and unite around a common goal. The implication was also to urge society to unite around him as he was the leader who engineered a new post-pandemic reality and took efforts to implement this plan (Fernández 2020, April 1). According to the president, during the pandemic, collective sacrifices and the need to cooperate to eliminate the threat were of tremendous importance. It was not the decisions of executive bodies that determined the success in the fight to stop the spread of the virus, but the resignation of citizens from particular interests and habits in the name of the common good (Fernández 2020,

May 25). Such an approach and shared responsibility for fighting the pandemic strengthened the myth of unity. Moreover, the president mentioned neither the opponents of the restrictions nor their arguments. Thus, one could get the impression that all, except for some unspecified groups of insubordinate citizens, supported the executive bodies' position.

Regarding the external dimension, Fernández was particularly active on anniversaries of events important to Argentina's recent history. Those certainly included the anniversaries of the seizure of the Falkland Islands and the 1982 war with Great Britain to maintain control over these islands (Fernández 2020, June 10). The president underlined the Argentinean position's persistence on the territorial control of the Falkland Islands and other islands whose territorial affiliation is the subject of dispute with the United Kingdom even during the pandemic. His posts referred to national identity and collective memory (Fernández 2020, April 2), which made it possible to gather around the president also his opponents. In Fernández's opinion, it should be the same with respecting the restrictions. Such references to a painful history during another crisis, allowed the comparison of those two situations and justified the need to comply with restrictions. Any other attitude could be classified as hostile to society. At the same time, the president could divert public attention from current pandemic-derived problems.

Duda and Fernández shared the definition of unity as the uncompromising submission to governmental policies motivated by common goals and enemies. Compliance with the restrictions, and thus the relinquishment of some civil rights and freedoms, was a condition for gaining government support and participation in the community to be rebuilt after the pandemic ended. Both presidents promoted the myth of national unity in the face of the epidemic threat. Fernandez reinforced this myth also through historical references to the Argentine territorial claims related to the Falkland Islands. Finally, both presidents desired to achieve a high level of national unity through the limitation of political pluralism and readiness for individual sacrifices by citizens.

Golden age myth

Duda (12%) and Fernández (10%) paid relatively little attention to visions of the future. Diagnosing the causes of harm to the people and defining the ways of overcoming the crisis were of higher importance than designing a post-pandemic reality. The golden age myth served the presidents to establish the ultimate goals that helped attract present or potential followers unhappy with the current political situation. By drawing upon the images of future happiness and the patriarchal authority's safety, the golden age became a promise of a desired political and social structure. The reward for submitting to the saviours' will was a utopia, which strengthened social divisions. Only a closed social group of the submitted could be protected, immune to dangers, and experience a predictable rhythm of life (Stoica 2017, 68; 72).

In keeping with the "return to normal" discourse, Duda promised to restore a pre-pandemic *status quo* (At/mf 2020). According to the Polish president, the coronavirus crisis would end soon, and Poles would no longer suffer from its social and economic consequences. In post-pandemic Poland, citizens would still benefit from the government's usual support and social programs (Duda 2020, April 20; May 19). Therefore, the primary goal of the anti-democratic restrictions was to restore the state of the social structure before the pandemic. Making this state an object of aspiration was mythization through the sacralization of the state authorities' actions to date as universally desired and beneficial.

The state authorities were considered powerful enough to protect the weak effectively, and its citizens did not have to be afraid of strong enemies. Duda presented the widely criticized concentration of the executive, legislature, and judiciary in the hands of one political party (Law and Justice) as an advantage in trying times. Unanimity and good cooperation provided the most effective way to end the ongoing as well as future crises. The anti-democratic solutions were a deliberate action by the state authorities focused on the protection of Poles in the long term.

Nevertheless, the near future would also bring new benefits thanks to the state authorities' efforts. Obedient to the restrictions, Poles were to benefit from the EU recovery plan (Duda 2020, May

27), which meant an increase in living standards. Furthermore, after the completion of the investment, Poles were to have guaranteed the freedom to enter the Vistula Lagoon without Russian consent (Duda 2020, May 30). These predictions were an assurance that external and internal enemies would be defeated, and public space would become free from uncertainty.

Similarly, the Argentinian head of state conjured up a vision of a prosperous future. However, neither did he indicate any data or state of affairs that would be achieved. All one could learn was that the situation would improve. Nevertheless, achieving this state depended on meeting several conditions, such as cooperation, willingness to sacrifice, and perseverance. Regarding Argentina's financial problems, Fernández assured citizens that Argentina had all the assets to handle the crisis and recover efficiently. Referring to the economic situation and the necessity to make joint efforts, the president addressed the recipients by using the pronoun "we" (Fernández 2020, March 5; Fernández 2020, April 27). The Argentine leader also addressed the positions of the most deprived by promising to eliminate social disparities and improve living conditions in the indefinite future (Fernández 2020, May 26). According to Fernández, the nation, so far divided, came together in the name of rebuilding the market and repairing the damage. The unprecedented change heralded the creation of higher standards of living than ever before.

The vision of a safer future was conveyed to minority groups, including the LGBTI+ community. In this context, Fernández spread an idea of Argentina where everyone could "be themselves" and "love whomever they wanted" (Fernández 2020, June 28). Moreover, he promised a better future for the whole nation, provided more investment in public education and knowledge development (Fernández 2020, July 16). All those arguments and declarations were to create the image of a leader who fought for a better future for everyone. Argentina was to become a prosperous country and home to everyone.

The presidents used the golden age myth but to a limited extent. Although its major components were the future, recovery, and promises, they consistently avoided presenting specific recovery plans. Their visions of a better future served only to empha-

size the need for change and justify that the current situation was undesired. The only way to improve it was to act together and to be willing to make sacrifices. The presidents' images of the future were a response to and depended on the current societal expectations. Duda and Fernández promised the people to return to a pre-pandemic state, which began to be presented as desirable and safe in new circumstances.

5. CONCLUSION

Duda and Fernández took advantage of the whole range of political myths to justify and explain government policies. The scope and strength of enemies heightened the sense of threat. While the Polish president pointed to potential threats from Russia, the Argentinian focused on external enemies from the UK. Moreover, the presidents warned against the people that opposed the governments and hampered social change. Any individual or group of people who did not comply with the presidents' and government decisions or the Covid-19-induced restrictions acted to the people's detriment. Duda and Fernández had in common that they did not directly indicate who exactly was a threat or behaved contrary to the public interest and order. An enemy present, but elusive, not fully exposed, increased social vigilance, thus generating a general reduction in social trust in other people and democratic institutions. At the same time, the conspiracy myth fed the crisis-determined socio-psychological insecurity, disorientation, and fear that were to be exploited by the presidents.

The inevitable consequences of hostile actions gave rise to the need to recognize and eliminate damages and rectify the situation. Both heads of state used the saviour myth to present themselves as just and strong leaders who cared for public interest and social justice. Together with the governments, they stood up for their nations. Only they, the state actors, had the necessary knowledge, power competencies, and institutional background to fight the coronavirus pandemic. This statement's tone was reinforced by messages about international recognition of the presidents' actions during the fight against the coronavirus crisis. The self-creation of authority served to build national pride in the ruling camp. A vital element of the savior creation strategy was to convince the audience

of the non-alternative nature of socially unpopular solutions such as anti-democratic restriction of civil rights and freedoms.

The myth of unity served the presidents to show that the exceptional national communities could unite to overcome difficulties. The common enemy, community objectives, national identity, collective memory, patriotism, and successes in limiting the pandemic's effects made the nations strong. Although the pandemic destroyed the existing standards of living, national cohesion remained intact. They constituted a union around a specific goal to follow the state-determined restrictions, which allowed the communities to survive. A potential internal conflict could be destructive because it would break down unity and prevent common goals.

Both Duda and Fernández referred to the golden age myth. While the critical thing for Duda was to complete the so-called good change based on the social and political reform program, Fernández highlighted the need for unity to achieve financial stability and economic growth. What they both had in common was a vision of a just and prosperous future, which, however, required forfeiting particular interests or views in the name of joint actions.

Duda and Fernández referred to formulations and arguments characteristic of populism. They sought to legitimate government policies by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages. However, while Fernández is a part of the long tradition of Argentine populism, especially Peronism and Kirchnerism, Duda's populist attitude is a relatively new phenomenon on the Polish political scene. Despite this difference, they used almost the same, albeit slightly varied, political mythology during the pandemic. Duda and Fernández created a narrative according to which anyone who did not comply with the imposed restrictions (conspiracy myth) prevented the return to the pre-epidemic state (golden age myth) and stood in the way of national unity (unity myth). The undefined internal and external enemies (conspiracy myth), which threatened the people were to be defeated by governments acting for Poles' and Argentinians' public good in times of crisis (saviour myth).

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* Manuscript was received on June 19, 2021 and the paper was accepted for publishing on October 30, 2021.