



COVID-19: CRISIS, ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT FOR POPULIST-AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNMENTS IN POLAND AND HUNGARY

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We examine how pandemic crisis management has affected public support in the democratic backsliding members of the EU – Poland and Hungary. We claim the first, immediate effect of the pandemic is to “rally around flag” but since populist illiberal governments adopt authoritarian measures, the ongoing pandemic brings to the fore populists’ failure/ineffective crisis management, and thus public dissatisfaction should erode support for the incumbents. Relying on original survey data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, we test several possible sources of dissatisfaction: the state of the healthcare; the economy; corruption and abuse of power; and distorted communication/false information on the crisis. Citizens dissatisfied with governing populist parties’ performance should be willing to punish the “guilty” party withdrawing their support, yet we find partisan preferences affect government accountability evaluations and leave supporters immune to policy negative effects. Comparing Hungary to Poland, we see the more polarized society is, the more likely extraordinary circumstances will only reinforce divisions in society and strengthen incumbents.

Key words: Covid-19; accountability; partisanship; public support; democratic backsliding.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has proven a challenge for the very foundations of modern life. Following the appearance of the Coronavirus, quickly introduced strict lockdown rules paused all human interaction, having wide-ranging effects not only for individual lives but entire societies, national and international economic systems, as well as political regimes. The protracted nature of the

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pandemic and its many waves only deepened these challenges, the cyclical easing-and-harshening restriction measures only putting further strain on people everywhere. In these extraordinary circumstances, managing the pandemic has become the centre focus of everyday life and our paper investigates how government response to the pandemic affects public support for incumbent political actors.

We look at Poland and Hungary as two closely similar cases to investigate how pandemic management affects public support for governing parties in an illiberal setting. We believe it is important to analyse how the pandemic is managed in the context of democratic backsliding – as the crisis leads to further curtailment of rights and dissatisfaction with authoritarian governments may be relevant for their electoral future (and democracy in general). More specifically, we concentrate on how the Covid-19 crisis could revitalize democratic accountability of governments, claiming performance under the pandemic triggers the punishment-reward mechanisms of political accountability. We think this should be the case specifically for Central and Eastern European countries within the European community, as these seem to have been particularly hard hit by Covid-19 – despite being largely unaffected by the first wave, the second, third and following waves have taken a high toll.

To verify to what extent government performance under the pandemic influences support for incumbent populist-authoritarian parties, we evaluate survey data collected during the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic for both countries, in February-July 2021. We demonstrate that a sense of personal economic security and positive evaluation of government economic measures are the strongest predictors of vote choice under the pandemic, confirming the punishment-reward mechanism of political accountability. Furthermore, our analyses confirm the positive relationship between positive assessment of authorities' crisis response and support for the government party in general. We also find important differences: while Poles do not forgive politicians drawing material gains from the pandemic, neither Poles nor Hungarians are prone to punish the incumbent parties for abuse of power in these extraordinary circumstances. Our most important finding is that positive evaluation of pandemic management is strongly dependent on partisan preferences. Strong party attachment (that is also reinforced by one-sided media communication) makes government supporters almost immune to negative effects of government decisions made during the pandemic. This is especially true in case of Hungary, where Fidesz voters have a strong bias in their assessment and uncritically support the party's governing acts. This way the punishment-reward mechanism is in fact disabled and acts rather as 'accelerator' or 'accentuator' of partisanship, at least for Hungary. This suggests that if political polarization is extreme, even an extraordinary crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic will be assessed along party lines, and only if society is less divided along party lines, governing parties are more likely to be held accountable for their policies.

2 ACCOUNTABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The mechanism of accountability, defined as "a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences" (Bovens 2010), is one of the key pillars of democracy. The importance of holding political actors accountable for their actions is crucial for

all representative democracies (O'Donnell, Cullell and Iazzetta 2016; Diamond and Morlino 2005; Roberts 2009; Bühlmann et al. 2012), but the issue seems to be of particular importance in countries such as Poland and Hungary that advanced furthest on the path of democratic backsliding (Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Sata and Karolewski 2020). While some might claim that the virtue of being accountable ceased to be a desirable state of affairs (M. D. Dowdle 2006), we believe the fundamental role of democracy is to ensure people's evaluation of the performance of politicians and political institutions can be enacted (at least) via elections. We do not contest that many actors entertain very different experiences and visions of public accountability in current governance systems (M. W. Dowdle 2017), yet this does not mean governments shall not be held accountable for policies they adopt.

In times of crisis, the balance between accountability, transparency and integrity can be disrupted. Crisis requires urgent actions by governments, which are often not subject to usual control. At the same time, studies of the support for political leaders during international crises and wars (Dinesen and Jæger 2013; Mueller 1973; Schubert, Stewart and Curran 2002), terrorist attacks (Chowanietz 2011; Dinesen and Jæger 2013; Woods 2011; Chanley 2002; Lai and Reiter 2005), natural disasters (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011) and most recently Covid 19 pandemic (Blais, Chen and Pruyers 2021; Bol et al. 2021; Baekgaard et al. 2020; De Vries et al. 2021; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Hegewald and Schraff 2024; Yam et al. 2020; Schraff 2021; Turska-Kawa, Csanyi and Kucharčík 2022) prove existential threats tend to make voters more trustful towards the authorities. This phenomenon is known as the "rallying around the flag" effect and describes situations in which public opinion becomes more favourable towards political leaders or institutions during times of crisis or external threats (Johansson, Hopmann and Shehata 2021, 321).

The rallying around the flag effect can be triggered by several factors, such as the desire for stability and security in times of uncertainty and fear (Baekgaard et al. 2020). The public may look to political leaders for guidance and reassurance, leading to increased support for those in power (Falkheimer et al. 2022). Additionally, the perception that leaders are taking decisive action and demonstrate strong leadership in response to the crisis can contribute to the rallying effect (Hintson and Vaishnav 2023). The public may rally behind leaders who are seen as capable of effectively managing the crisis and protecting the nation's interests (Nooruddin 2010). The rallying around the flag effect can also be influenced by factors such as nationalism and patriotism. In times of crisis, there is often a heightened sense of national identity and solidarity, which can lead to increased support for leaders, who are perceived as defending the nation's interests (Hintson and Vaishnav 2023; Malešič 2021).

One of the important characteristics of the rallying around the flag effect is its temporality. The boost in popularity of the authorities is rather short-term, there is little or no chance this phenomenon gets transformed into long-term support (Kernell 1978; Mueller 1973; Woods 2011; Hetherington and Nelson 2003). The research shows that once the intensity of crisis subsides, approval reverts to the levels it was at before the crisis began. Simultaneously, the usual mechanisms shaping support for the government come back into play. First, the crisis gets politicized: its perception becomes affected by how media and opposition politicians highlight ineffective crisis management (Baker and Oneal 2001; Boin, Stern and Sundelius 2016; Hetherington and Nelson 2003; Johansson, Hopmann and Shehata 2021). Second, as the salience of the crisis declines, political ideology

regains its significant role (Dalton 2021; Schmitt 1983; Johansson, Hopmann and Shehata 2021). As Johansson and colleagues (2021, 324) describe, the public reverts to judging political actors along the partisan lines of political ideology, and perceptions of how society is affected by the crisis lose in explanatory power.

We believe the same logic applies to the Covid-19 pandemic management in Poland and Hungary, therefore we argue: (1) the immediate effect of the pandemic is to rally around flag and in response, (2) populist illiberal governments adopt authoritarian measures under the pretext of crisis management, yet (3) the ongoing pandemic can bring to the fore populists' failure/ineffective crisis management and thus (4) erode public support for incumbents. Based on political accountability literature, we expect to find eroding government support as citizens become dissatisfied with the governing party's performance in the pandemic and are willing to punish the "guilty" party with support withdrawal (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Achen and Bartels 2016). Furthermore, we believe that in times of the world pandemic, the debate about government performance seems to go beyond partisan ideological preferences and traditional issues (economy, welfare, cultural issues) and instead focuses primarily on pandemic related problems and government response to these. Analysing the two 'illiberal democracies', characterized by highly crystalized polarized politics and deeply divided society (Sata and Karolewski 2020), enables us to examine how polarization and partisanship play a role in assessing incumbent political parties' often undemocratic policies during pandemic management.

3 PANDEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN HUNGARY AND POLAND

Holding Hungarian and Polish governmental parties electorally accountable is especially important since decisions made by Orbán's and Kaczyński's governments have led to the politicization of key institutions, which together with puppet presidents of various public bodies have impaired the functioning of horizontal accountability. There are no "state agencies that are legally enabled and empowered, and factually willing and able, to take action that span from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to actions or omissions by other agents or agencies of the state that may be qualified as unlawful" (O'Donnell 1999, 38). As many examples prove, the party-captured Polish and Hungarian state institutions are unable to prevent or punish unlawful actions by government actors.

In such settings, the ability to perform vertical accountability, actions that citizens can perform to limit the unwanted actions of elected representatives (O'Donnell 1999), is even more important, even if it is to a large extent restricted by the illiberal regimes. Both countries attempt to disable societal control and have installed obstacles to social mobilization, expanded control on media and even the possibility to punish authorities at the ballot box has been limited through institutional obstacles that were put in face of opposition forces (fait accompli in Hungary (Várnagy and Ilonszki 2018), present to some extent in Poland during the 2020 presidential elections (Flis and Ciszewski 2020)). Notwithstanding these undemocratic developments and the already in-built advantages for incumbent parties for both Hungary and Poland that question how fair or free elections are, we believe governing parties can (still) be held accountable by electorates in both countries (opposition parties can run for and eventually win elections, see the 2023 Polish elections).

The impairment of political accountability in both Hungary and Poland has been only reinforced by the sudden outbreak of the pandemic. The quickly introduced pandemic measures largely limited one's freedoms yet were readily accepted amidst fears of the spread of the Coronavirus. This initial rallying around the flag effect enhanced the power of governing parties in most countries, enabling adoption of further authoritarian measures (Guasti 2020; Levine 2020; Changotra et al. 2020; Weiffen 2020; Kukovič 2022). In Poland, government adopted a new law on specific solutions related to the preventing, counteracting and combating of COVID-19, which provided more power to the executive at the expense of checks and balances, while in Hungary the government opted for rule by decree and a prolonged emergency state, disabling any opposition oversight or institutional control of policies adopted.

Comparing Poland and Hungary makes sense as the two have had a very similar track record with Covid-19 and the government response – ranging from lockdown policies to economic or health policies – has been also very similar throughout the crisis (Ritchie et al. 2020). While both countries have been affected little by the first wave of the pandemic, both suffered seriously in the second, third and following waves compared to other European countries. Our data has been collected during these most difficult times, when pandemic management and governmental decisions related to it should establish the primary basis for electoral accountability of incumbent governments. As a result, we expect to find increasing erosion of government support as citizens dissatisfied with the governing party's performance should be willing to punish the "guilty" party with withdrawal of their support (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Achen and Bartels 2016).

There are several premises that support our claim. First, the pandemic has serious economic consequences for national economies as well as for individual households. Studies reveal the pandemic's impact on increasing social inequalities (worsening the situation of the young, women, less educated people (Ali and Ali 2020) and increasing economic inequalities (Favero, Ichino and Rustichini 2020). This makes it plausible that basic economic voting theory could explain vote choice in the context of the pandemic, i.e. the more dissatisfied with government economic relief efforts people are, the less likely they are to support incumbents.

Second, the pandemic had negative political consequences for democracy, especially for some countries (Guasti 2020). Hungary and Poland are clear examples of such countries, both being poster children of democratic backsliding, already way before the Covid-19 pandemic, only using the health crisis to further cement illiberal rule. Yet, despite the authorities' excuse of fighting the pandemic, undemocratic decisions have not gone unnoticed. Recurring protests that were organized despite lockdown conditions are the best evidence of civil society discontent with government action. We do expect that people who think governments abuse their power under the pretext of the pandemic will also be likely to withdraw their electoral support of incumbents.

Third, the different decisions governments have made to slow down the spread of the Coronavirus often caused controversies not only among political actors or experts – doctors, epidemiologists, as well as constitutionalists – but citizens as well. Many people object to pandemic measures claiming they limit personal, economic, and political freedoms and privacy. Given the extraordinary nature of

the pandemic crisis, we expect these controversies should lead to the intensification of the punishment-reward mechanism of government accountability with regards to specific pandemic response, as the management of the health crisis becomes the most important issue of the day. As such, Hungarian and Polish voters might be more inclined to withdraw their electoral support from the incumbent parties than before the pandemic, given their failure/ineffective crisis management. This way the pandemic (more specifically dissatisfaction with its mismanagement) could erode the support of populist authoritarian parties in both Poland and Hungary thus increasing the chances of moving them (back) onto a more democratic track.

4 HYPOTHESES

Based on the above-described premises, we believe that Polish and Hungarian government's evaluation at the beginning of pandemic benefited from the rallying around the flag effect, but as the pandemic continued, it became politicized (used in political games by parties and media) and ideologized (the political actors became judged along partisan lines) (Johansson, Hopmann and Shehata 2021). We propose a range of hypotheses focusing on the determinants of electoral accountability in times of Covid-19 crisis, noting a number of possible sources of dissatisfaction under the pandemic: economy (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Brug, Eijk and Franklin 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Palmer and Whitten 2011); healthcare (Kavanagh and Singh 2020); abuse of power by authorities (radical legal steps as well as corruption, see Guasti 2020); and distorted/one-sided communication/false information (Hart, Chinn and Soroka 2020; Pennycook et al. 2020). We hypothesize that negative evaluation of government actions related to pandemic and its immediate consequences (general government pandemic performance, economic support for entrepreneurs and the state of healthcare) will reduce support for Fidesz and PIS.

We formulate the following hypotheses to test these claims:

- *H1a: The more negative the evaluation of the government reaction to the pandemic, the higher the propensity to punish the governing party at the ballot.*
- *H1b: The worse the evaluation of the governmental support to protect the economy, the higher the propensity to punish the governing party at the ballot.*
- *H1c: The worse the evaluation of the state of healthcare, the higher the propensity to punish the governing party at the ballot.*

Similarly, the conviction that government is using the pretext of fighting the pandemic to abuse its power and/or gets financial benefits makes people less prone to endorse the governing party. Therefore, we expect:

- *H2a: the stronger the conviction that the government has used the epidemic situation to further strengthen its power by declaring an emergency to carry out its previous policy plans and*
- *H2b: the stronger the conviction that the government and those associated with it engaged in completely opaque activities and made a lot of money during the crisis, the higher the propensity to punish the governing party at the ballot.*

Following the punishment-reward mechanism, we assume that people not only assess government responsibilities on the national level, but they also look at how authorities' decision affect their own situation (Achen and Bartels 2017). Therefore, we assume that deterioration of one's own economic situation will also affect the propensity to support the government. We expect:

- *H3a: voters, who already lost their job because of the pandemic or are very likely to lose it and*
- *H3b: voters, who suffered financial loss because of the pandemic to be more prone to punish the governing party at the ballot box.*

Finally, let us note that the functioning of the punishment-reward mechanism is context-dependent. First, we expect the sense of security to play an important role.

- *H4: People, who perceive Covid-19 as a significant threat, will rally around flag, and thus be less willing to punish the government for its failures.*

We test this assumption with respect to different aspects such as the state of national economy, the health of Hungarians/Poles, their everyday lives, personal financial situation, inflation and price rises, and lasting shortages of goods. The politicization of the crisis presumes that opposition and news media will play important roles in the process (Johansson, Hopmann and Shehata 2021; Baker and Oneal 2001; Boin, Stern and Sundelius 2016; Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Media coverage critical of the government's management of the crisis should enhance people's awareness of incumbent failures and augment propensity to punish the government parties. This effect is diminished by one-sided media consumption, which is the case of the significant part of Hungarian and Polish society. We assume therefore that:

- *H5: Exposure to government favouring media will reinforce the positive evaluation of Fidesz/PIS pandemic performance.*

5 METHODOLOGY

To verify our hypotheses, we use data for both countries collected in online surveys during the third wave of the pandemic. The surveys were carried out on quota samples, with quotas for gender, age, level of education and place of residence. Quotas were specified according to national census data (Polish and Hungarian Central Statistical Office) to ensure a nationally representative sample. To reduce the sampling error and potential non-response bias all data has been weighted with post-stratification weights. Data has been collected in two series: February and July 2021 for Poland and March and May 2021 for Hungary. The closeness of timing for the surveys in both countries allows us to make comparisons as both countries faced very similar conditions throughout the pandemic. The Polish sample is 702 people for the first survey and 1,202 people for the second; the Hungarian sample has 2,000 respondents for each series of the survey. Although the sample of the first series for Poland is relatively small, it does not impede the quality of the results of our analyses.²

As we focus on vertical accountability, our dependent variable is the declared vote for the governing parties, Fidesz or PIS (vs. vote for other parties), if the election was held next Sunday. Due to the specificity of online survey research, the results for party preferences are slightly biased (despite the weighting procedure, the support for governing party in both countries is lower than opinion polls suggest – see Appendix). Notwithstanding this bias, the sample is

² The models are tested with either both series combined or with the second series of the survey only. The single model using each series of the survey separately (which serves information purpose) does not show essential differences between the series as far as the influence of variables is concerned.

fit for analysis as we concentrate on deciphering the voting intentions of incumbent supporters vs. opposition voters.

We use different statistical models to examine what explains the changes in the support for the incumbent parties in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. In our basic model, we verify the functioning of the punishment-reward mechanism. Our key explanatory variables are the positive evaluation of government response to the pandemic and positive assessment of governmental economic relief solutions (see Appendix for details of variables coding and distribution). Since individual perception of the Coronavirus and its possible effects can affect the assessment of the ruling party actions, we include in the model the pandemic threat index (measuring the perception of Covid-19 as a threat for personal and national issues), financial loss index (capturing the influence of pandemic on personal financial situation) and the sense of threat of losing one's job because of pandemic. We first conduct our analyses using all four series of data (series 1 and 2 of the survey combined for each country). To check the temporal effect of the punishment-reward mechanism, we control for the series.

In the second model, we add three political variables as possible sources of dissatisfaction with incumbents: the perceived status of the healthcare system, the conviction that the government has used the pandemic as a pretext to further strengthen its power and the belief that the government and those associated with it engaged in opaque activities to make money from the crisis. These variables were available only in the data from the second survey series for both Hungary and Poland. We test these variables as proxies of further democratic backsliding. We include additionally a country variable to capture possible differences between Hungary and Poland. Next, to check for the country differences (statistically significant in the previous model), we verify the complemented model, which includes the interaction between each variable of interest and the country variable.

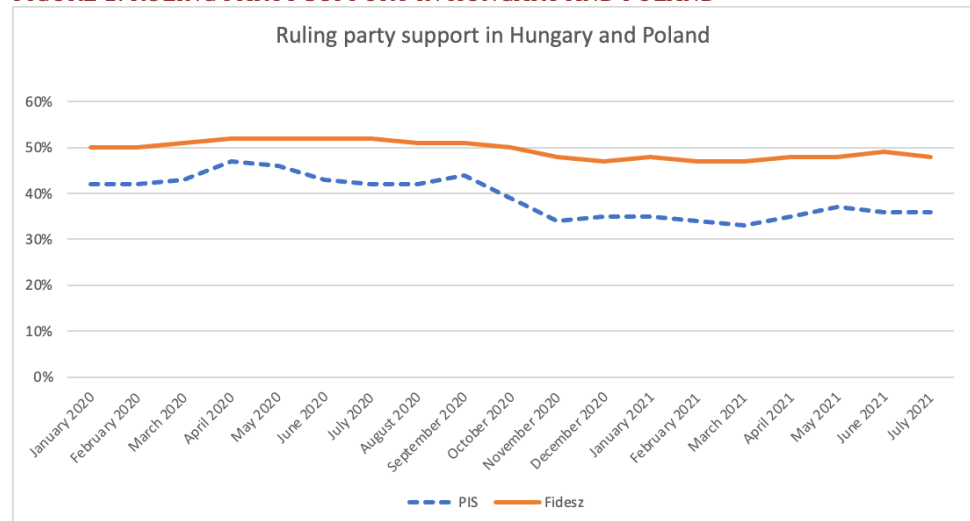
Finally, by adding dummy variables for the main source of information on the Coronavirus, we examine the role of media consumption in the political accountability process. We check to what extent the consumption of television, radio, newspapers, internet portals and social media affects the propensity to vote for the governing party. When possible, we also check how government-media consumption might affect voting intentions. All models include a range of control variables: gender, age, level of education (lower, medium, higher), job status (employed vs others), to ensure that our results are generalizable.

6 RALLYING AROUND THE FLAG?

A very quick look at the voting intention data for both Hungary and Poland (Figure 1) gives us mixed results on our expectations that (1) the first, immediate effect of the pandemic is to rally around flag but since (2) populist illiberal governments tend to adopt authoritarian measures, (3) the ongoing pandemic can bring to the fore populists' failure/ineffective crisis management and thus (4) dissatisfaction erodes public support for the incumbents. More precisely, while for Poland we can see an initial surge in popularity from the start of the crisis in March 2020 and then a drop already in May 2020, with another continuous decrease from September to December 2020, PiS losing 10% in support rates, for Hungary the trends are barely noticeable. More precisely, we see that the continuous drop in Fidesz's popularity since October 2019 stopped in March

2020 – the start of the pandemic, yet the initial rally around the flag effect is minimal: an increase in support from 51% to 53% by April 2020. This level then oscillates during the summer, and we see a drop from October 2020 until January 2021, but once again the decrease is 5-6%, close to the margin of error.

FIGURE 1: RULING PARTY SUPPORT IN HUNGARY AND POLAND



Source: Politico (see <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls>).

As such, while Poland clearly illustrates our claim that the pandemic has affected incumbent parties' support by an increase via the rally the flag effect first, followed by a substantial drop as the pandemic rages on, in Hungary, while the direction of change in incumbent support is in the direction that we expect, the effects seem to be very minor. The very high support rate for Fidesz (above 50% of voters) coupled with the high polarization of society could potentially explain why only this marginal effect on incumbent support (see discussion later). Yet, since the direction of these changes is in line with our expectation, and the more substantial decreases in Fidesz support happen exactly at the second wave of the pandemic in the country, these mixed results do not exclude but rather point towards the functioning of the punishment-reward mechanism during the protracted crisis.

7 ASSESSING GOVERNMENT PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT

Since the rally of the flag effect does not explain incumbent support in a prolonged crisis, we examine whether the punishment-reward mechanism explains better the support base for government parties during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Given the importance of the health crisis, we analyze first the influence of Covid-19 related attitudes and beliefs among voters on support for the governing party in Hungary and Poland (Table 1).

As Table 1. shows, three variables are statistically significant in both countries: positive evaluation of the government reaction to Covid-19 and positive assessment of the governmental support for entrepreneurs increase propensity to vote for incumbent Fidesz or PiS, while the perception of the Coronavirus as a threat for various aspects of personal and national life decreases support for the governing party in both countries. This confirms that the pandemic has an important effect on the support of governing parties.

TABLE 1: MODELS FOR COVID-19 AND INCUMBENT SUPPORT IN HU AND POL

| | HUNGARY | | | POLAND | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------|--------|-----------|------|--------|
| | B | S.E. | Exp(B) | B | S.E. | Exp(B) |
| Government reaction to Covid | 3,43*** | 0,19 | 30,79 | 1,48*** | 0,15 | 4,39 |
| Job loss threat | 0,29 | 0,43 | 1,34 | -0,28 | 0,24 | 0,76 |
| Pandemic threat index | -0,18*** | 0,05 | 0,84 | -0,10** | 0,04 | 0,91 |
| Pandemic financial loss index | -0,34*** | 0,07 | 0,71 | 0,07 | 0,04 | 1,07 |
| Support for entrepreneurs | 2,67*** | 0,22 | 14,46 | 1,85*** | 0,17 | 6,35 |
| Gender | -0,43** | 0,18 | 0,65 | 0,31** | 0,15 | 1,36 |
| Age | 0,00 | 0,01 | 1,00 | 0,02*** | 0,01 | 1,02 |
| Education | -0,49*** | 0,11 | 0,61 | -0,24* | 0,12 | 0,79 |
| Job status | 0,45** | 0,19 | 1,57 | 0,37** | 0,17 | 1,45 |
| Wave 1 | 0,05 | 0,18 | 1,06 | 0,02 | 0,15 | 1,02 |
| Constant | -2,13*** | 0,52 | 0,12 | -2,97 | 0,40 | 0,05 |
| -2 Log likelihood | 1067,489a | | | 1299,618a | | |
| Chi-square | 1841,28 | | | 442,04 | | |
| df | 10,00 | | | 10,00 | | |
| Sig. | 0,00 | | | 0,00 | | |
| Cox & Snell R Square | 0,42 | | | 0,23 | | |
| Nagelkerke R Square | 0,73 | | | 0,36 | | |

Source: Own calculations, waves 1 and 2 combined for each country.

More precisely, the fact that the perception of the pandemic as a major threat decreases support for incumbents' points towards the importance of government action in times of crisis since one could argue that proper government action should translate in lowering the perception of threat among the population (because of that action). Results show, Hungarians' vote choice is also influenced by the personal financial loss caused by the pandemic, which only strengthens our argument that in extraordinary circumstances of crises, personal issues (due to the crisis) will outweigh ideology or other issues and matter most for political support. In other words, when a crisis affects the individual negatively, support for the governing party that oversees managing the crisis will decrease.

Yet, looking closer at the data, the distribution of the responses (Appendix) makes us suspect that the responses in Hungary were primarily driven by party loyalty, i.e. only supporters of opposition parties declare they have suffered financially from the crisis - while no such distortion is present in the Polish sample. For Hungary, the same partisanship dependency is true for the rest of variables, only perception of Covid-19 as a threat is slightly less dependent on what party you support. This is a surprising result as the economic and societal effects of the pandemic were very similar across the globe and for the two countries, they were almost identical. Despite this, for Hungary, Fidesz supporters do not seem to be affected by the major disruption of the economy and its consequences for social life. This way, our data reveals that extreme polarization of society can affect every aspect of social life - even the assessment of an extraordinary health crisis and its effects seems to be done not along objective or scientific arguments but along party preferences.

It must be noted there is no statistically significant difference between the survey series in either of countries, but as Table 2 shows, the significance of the perception of Covid-19 as a threat differs in subsequent datasets (for Poland the significance of this variable in the joint dataset may result from the increased sample, as the p value strongly depends on the number of cases). Given the protracted nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, we argue the data reflect well societal attitudes: as people have more-or-less gotten used to the different restrictions and the gradual easing of these restrictions at the time of data collection, threat perceptions ameliorated consequently (see Figure 2). This is true for both countries, although there is more societal unease in Hungary than

we see in Poland, which again might be due to the local dynamics of the pandemic, Poland faring slightly better than Hungary in the later waves of the crisis (Ritchie et al. 2020). More importantly, we cannot speak of the rally the flag effect any longer for our second survey wave, but it is rather the punishment-reward mechanism of accountability that explains electoral support.

TABLE 2: SIGNIFICANT COVID-19 VARIABLES FOR INCUMBENT SUPPORT FOR EACH SURVEY

| | HU 1 | HU 2 | PL 1 | PL2 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|-----|
| Government reaction to Covid | *** | *** | *** | *** |
| Job loss threat | | | | |
| Pandemic threat index | *** | | | |
| Pandemic financial loss index | *** | *** | | |
| Support for entrepreneurs | *** | *** | *** | *** |
| Gender | *** | | | * |
| Age | | | ** | |
| Education | *** | ** | | |
| Job status | ** | ** | | |
| Constant | *** | *** | *** | *** |

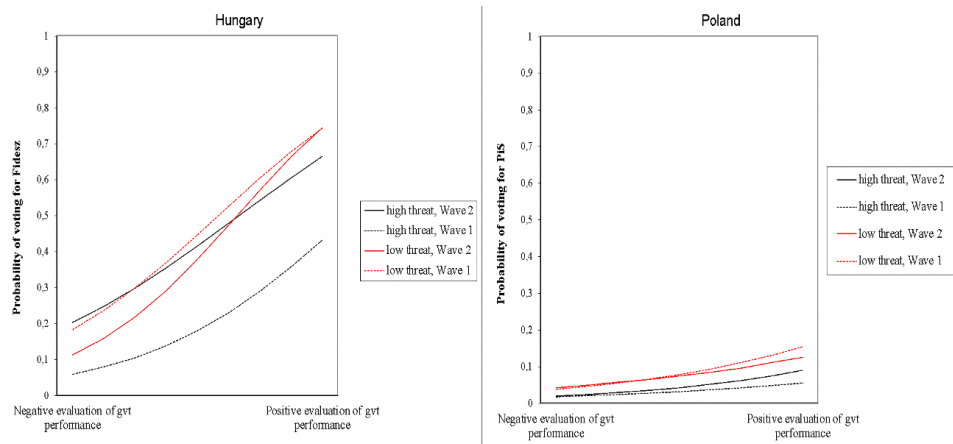
Source: Own calculations, series 1 and 2 separately for each country.

The significance level of our control variables (age, gender, education, job status) as well as the direction of the effects (like the more educated, the more critical towards government you are) also seem to strengthen this conclusion as these are nothing but the traditional covariates of assessing governing parties' performance, well established in the party literature. At the same time, we should note that the significance levels of the different variables decrease for the later waves of data, which once again only underlines that as the third wave of the pandemic eases, the Covid-19 crisis is slowly normalized and becomes part of everyday life and issues related to the pandemic matter less and less for voters.

Looking at the two countries comparatively, what is worth emphasizing is the fact that the model fits very well the Hungarian data, while it does less so for Poland. The very high values of r-squared of the model, together with the previous findings emphasizing the influence of party loyalty on the distribution of variables lead us to conclude that in the case of Hungary, we face a very strong partisan bias that handicaps the perception of government crisis measures. This directly affects the assessment of government response to the pandemic – although we expect that the unprecedented health crisis brings critical responses that cut across partisanship this seems to happen only in Poland, while in Hungary even the Covid-19 crisis, as extraordinary as it is, is assessed through the lenses of partisanship: supporters of government parties evaluate positively government response, while opposition voters evaluate every aspect of the crisis and its management negatively.

To learn more about the possible factors behind public evaluation of government response to the Covid-19 crisis, in the second step of our analysis we add political variables related to government malpractices and the evaluation of the current state of the healthcare system as possible explanatory factors of how voters evaluate governmental management of the health crisis (Table 3).

FIGURE 2: RALLY AROUND THE FLAG? COVID-19 THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND GOVERNMENT EVALUATION IN HUNGARY AND POLAND



Source: Own calculations, series 1 and 2 combined for each country.

The complemented model includes evaluation of the status of the healthcare system, conviction that the government has used the epidemic as a pretext to further strengthen its power and that the government and those associated with it engaged in corrupt activities during the crisis. We expect that since the Covid-19 crisis directs attention to healthcare services, people should penalize governing parties if they cannot access health services in the quality they expect. Similarly, the crisis (in its later waves) also brings to the fore government response action, and we expect if these actions are considered inappropriate by voters, this will negatively affect vote choice for incumbent parties, as predicted by political accountability.

TABLE 3: COVID-19, POLITICAL ABUSE AND INCUMBENT SUPPORT

| | B | S.E. | Exp(B) |
|--|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| Government reaction to Covid | 1,97*** | 0,15 | 7,20 |
| Support for entrepreneurs | 2,00*** | 0,17 | 7,35 |
| State of healthcare | 0,06 | 0,18 | 1,06 |
| Abuse of power due to Covid | -0,50 | 0,26 | 0,61 |
| Gvt financial benefits due to Covid | -1,59*** | 0,27 | 0,20 |
| Job loss threat | 0,11 | 0,26 | 1,12 |
| Pandemic financial loss index | -0,05 | 0,05 | 0,95 |
| Pandemic threat index | 0,11** | 0,04 | 1,12 |
| Gender | 0,29* | 0,13 | 1,33 |
| Age | 0,00 | 0,00 | 1,00 |
| Education | -0,11 | 0,09 | 0,89 |
| Job status | 0,46*** | 0,14 | 1,58 |
| HU | 0,78*** | 0,17 | 2,18 |
| Constant | -2,68*** | 0,35 | 0,07 |
| -2 Log likelihood | 1660,109a | | |
| Chi-square | 1487,423 | | |
| df | 13 | | |
| Sig. | 0 | | |
| Cox & Snell R Square | 0,43 | | |
| Nagelkerke R Square | 0,62 | | |

Source: Own calculations, wave 2 combined for Hungary and Poland.

As Table 3 shows, contrary to what we expect, the negative evaluation of the state of national healthcare systems is not a significant predictor of vote choice for incumbents. The possible explanation for this result is that the general poor condition of healthcare, which has been a characteristic for the entire region ever since regime change (Sitek 2008; Pažitný et al. 2021), seems to be attributed not (only) to present governments but is rather considered an effect of the activity (or negligence) of their predecessors. In a sense, voters take it for granted that

the healthcare system is underfinanced and unable to cope with the pandemic as it has been neglected by all post-communist governments. In turn, this 'shared' responsibility for poor healthcare might then explain why there is no immediate punishment mechanism present in voting intentions, although CEE countries pay a high death-toll to Covid-19 due to deficiencies of their healthcare systems.

Our analysis yields similar results that contradict our expectations regarding the effect of government malpractices on incumbent support. Most significantly, the belief that the government has used the Covid-19 crisis as a pretext to further strengthen its power by declaring emergency rule to carry out its previous policy plans is statistically insignificant. While both governments have been accused of using emergency rule to sidestep the opposition or democratic controls to pursue their political goals (Guasti 2020), people seem unaffected by these allegations, when making their vote choice. The only variable included in the model that significantly reduces chances to support incumbent parties is the conviction that the government and those associated with it engaged in opaque activities to make money from the crisis. This suggests that both Hungarian and Polish societies display a low trust of politics in general and voters accept abuse of power against political opponents or democratic norms to a larger extent than corrupt activities that bring financial benefit for incumbents and their associates.

At the same time, the inclusion of political variables in the model predicting incumbent support changes the vector of the Covid-19-threat variable index in Hungary: as we noted (see Figure 2 and 3) those, who perceive Covid-19 a threat, are more prone to support the government. We explain this with the rally around the flag effect – the more threat you see, the more you rally the flag. The influence of the other two Covid-19 related variables: evaluation of government response and assessment of governmental support for entrepreneurs work as expected, suggesting that the punishment-reward mechanism can operate simultaneously with the rally around the flag effect: for those most fearing the health crisis, it is less about actual performance of governments or direct economic assistance provided during the crisis but for the less fearful and more instrumental voter, these will be factors driving incumbent support.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between Hungary and Poland as the country variable is statistically significant in our analysis, therefore we add interactions to our models in the next step of analysis to check the performance of key variables in the two cases separately (Table 4).

The findings once again confirm that abuse of political power using the pretext of the pandemic is not significant for predicting vote choice in any of the two countries. These findings suggest that people seem to take for granted that the pandemic might call for concentration of political power to respond effectively to the crisis or voters are less concerned with democratic values in a major crisis. The analysis of interactions further confirms that perception of the state of the healthcare system is not a significant predictor of vote choice, which we explain again with a general and longer-term underdevelopment of the sector in the region. Yet, to our surprise, the most important finding in the country comparison is that enrichment of government actors and their allies significantly diminishes support for PiS in Poland but does not have a similar effect in Hungary for Fidesz.

TABLE 4: COVID-19, GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND INCUMBENT SUPPORT – HUNGARY VS. POLAND

| | B | S.E. | Exp(B) |
|---|-----------|------|--------|
| Government reaction to Covid | 1,12*** | 0,20 | 3,06 |
| Government reaction *HU | 1,52*** | 0,30 | 4,58 |
| Job loss threat | -0,16 | 0,30 | 0,85 |
| Job loss threat*HU | 1,05 | 0,56 | 2,85 |
| Pandemic threat index | -0,03 | 0,06 | 0,97 |
| Pandemic threat index *HU | 0,32*** | 0,08 | 1,38 |
| Pandemic financial loss index | 0,08 | 0,05 | 1,09 |
| Pandemic financial loss index*HU | -0,46*** | 0,10 | 0,63 |
| Support for entrepreneurs | 1,58*** | 0,22 | 4,85 |
| Support for entrepreneurs*HU | 0,84* | 0,40 | 2,32 |
| Healthcare | 0,12 | 0,20 | 1,13 |
| Healthcare*HU | -0,17 | 0,39 | 0,85 |
| Financial benefits due to Covid | -1,66*** | 0,34 | 0,19 |
| Financial benefits*HU | 0,18 | 0,55 | 1,20 |
| Abuse of power due to Covid | -0,10 | 0,33 | 0,90 |
| Abuse of power*HU | -0,85 | 0,53 | 0,43 |
| Gender | 0,26* | 0,13 | 1,30 |
| Age | 0,01 | 0,00 | 1,01 |
| Education | -0,16 | 0,10 | 0,86 |
| Job status | 0,47*** | 0,15 | 1,59 |
| HU | -0,05 | 0,27 | 0,95 |
| Constant | -2,19*** | 0,40 | 0,11 |
| -2 Log likelihood | 1574,276a | | |
| Chi-square | 1573,255 | | |
| df | 21 | | |
| Sig. | 0 | | |
| Cox & Snell R Square | 0,44 | | |
| Nagelkerke R Square | 0,64 | | |

Source: Own calculations, series 2 combined for Hungary and Poland.

This finding contradicts our expectations especially since independent Hungarian media reports noted several shady businesses in relation to buying medical equipment, vaccines or developing contact tracing software or Covid-19 vaccination cards that all benefitted government cronies (Transparency International 2023). Notwithstanding these reports, we find governmental corruption does not affect voting preferences in Hungary. It would be cynical to argue corruption is widely expected and accepted by Hungarian voters (although clientelism is a widely accepted phenomena for CEE countries (Innes 2014; Hale 2017; Magyar 2016), instead we think a possible explanation is that questionable government action is evaluated through partisanship and therefore the significance of the issue is cancelled out: on the one hand, Fidesz supporters disregard any criticism of the government they might hear of, while opposition voters only strengthen in their anti-Fidesz choice upon learning such news.

The interactive model also confirms already observed patterns related to our other variables: positive evaluation of government reaction to the pandemic and financial support offered for entrepreneurs significantly influence support for the governing party (strength of the former is greater in Hungary, strength of the latter greater in Poland). At the same time, the other two variables on threat and economic loss due to Covid-19 perform as expected only in Hungary: perception of Covid-19 as a threat increases and financial loss caused by the pandemic decreases support for Fidesz. This means that by the second round of our survey (towards the end of the third wave of the pandemic in both countries), both threat perceptions and financial relief efforts proved insignificant in explaining vote choice in Poland, which again suggests a 'normalization' of the Covid-19 crisis into everyday life somewhat faster than in Hungary, which in turn might be due to the heavier toll of the pandemic in Hungary at the time (Ritchie et al. 2020).

In addition, Hungary has also suffered a decline in GDP, while Poland has managed to retain the same level of GDP during the crisis (Aidukaite et al. 2021).

Given the differences between the two countries in how government evaluations might explain vote choice for the incumbent parties, we move forward and verify the influence of media consumption. We expect that pro-government media consumers evaluate government response to the crisis more positively and thus are more inclined to vote for incumbents. Similarly, we expect that reliance on social media vs. more traditional media outlets increases vote for incumbent parties since unfavourable information is often screened out by algorithms of user preferences of social media. Unfortunately, differences in questionnaire design allow us to make significantly more meaningful analysis for Poland as the Hungarian survey had less focused questions on media consumption habits and we are unable to distinguish between pro-government media variables for Hungary. Moreover, for Hungary, none of the media indicated as the main source of information significantly influences the support for Fidesz. In Poland, consumption of pro-governmental public television (TVP) and anti-governmental broadcaster TVN influences support for PiS in the expected direction. In addition, those who use radio as the main source of information on the pandemic are more prone to support PiS – unfortunately, our data is not detailed enough to explain this finding, but we suspect these might be the more elderly, rural voters, who have a higher tendency to support PiS.

TABLE 5: COVID-19, MEDIA INFLUENCE AND INCUMBENT SUPPORT

| | HUNGARY | | | POLAND | | |
|--|----------|------|--------|----------|------|--------|
| | B | S.E. | Exp(B) | B | S.E. | Exp(B) |
| Government reaction to Covid | 2,39*** | 0,27 | 10,93 | 0,98*** | 0,23 | 2,65 |
| Job loss threat | 0,71 | 0,48 | 2,04 | -0,39 | 0,33 | 0,68 |
| Pandemic financial loss index | 0,21*** | 0,07 | 1,23 | -0,02 | 0,06 | 0,98 |
| Pandemic financial loss index | -0,42*** | 0,09 | 0,66 | 0,11 | 0,06 | 1,12 |
| Support for entrepreneurs | 2,40*** | 0,35 | 11,02 | 1,42*** | 0,24 | 4,15 |
| State of healthcare | -0,16 | 0,33 | 0,85 | 0,00 | 0,11 | 1,00 |
| Financial benefits due to Covid | -0,68 | 0,76 | 0,51 | 2,00*** | 0,65 | 7,38 |
| Abuse of power due to Covid | -0,95* | 0,41 | 0,39 | -1,72*** | 0,38 | 0,18 |
| TV | 0,08 | 0,25 | 1,08 | | | |
| TVP | | | | 2,13*** | 0,35 | 8,43 |
| TVN | | | | -0,92* | 0,42 | 0,40 |
| Polsat | | | | 0,16 | 0,36 | 1,17 |
| Radio | -0,53 | 0,29 | 0,59 | 1,02* | 0,45 | 2,76 |
| Newspapers | -0,10 | 0,52 | 0,91 | 1,12 | 0,67 | 3,06 |
| Internet portals | 0,48 | 0,27 | 1,62 | -0,21 | 0,38 | 0,81 |
| Social media | -0,15 | 0,24 | 0,86 | 0,54 | 0,42 | 1,72 |
| Gender | 0,11 | 0,25 | 1,12 | 0,30 | 0,22 | 1,35 |
| Age | 0,01 | 0,01 | 1,01 | 0,01 | 0,01 | 1,01 |
| Education | -0,41** | 0,15 | 0,67 | -0,02 | 0,19 | 0,98 |
| Job status | 0,17 | 0,25 | 1,19 | 0,65** | 0,24 | 1,91 |
| Constant | -1,32** | 0,58 | 0,27 | -3,35*** | 0,69 | 0,04 |
| -2 Log likelihood | 540,107a | | | 643,753a | | |
| Chi-square | 1135,375 | | | 407,003 | | |
| df | 17 | | | 19 | | |
| Sig. | 0,000 | | | 0,000 | | |
| Cox & Snell R Square | 0,59 | | | 0,33 | | |
| Nagelkerke R Square | 0,81 | | | 0,51 | | |

Source: Own calculations, wave 2 separately for Hungary and Poland.

When examining the role of media, we see that the abuse of power variable becomes a statistically significant predictor for voting for Fidesz and PiS once media variables are added to our explanatory model. This confirms media consumption influences the perception of the integrity of government actions. It seems irrespective of the media source or type, people who do seek information on Covid-19 using various media have a clearer evaluation of government action (be that positive or negative). Our immediate interpretation is that those who inform themselves about the pandemic using any media source are most likely

also the persons who will possibly learn about allegations of government abuse of power in relation to the pandemic and thus have their vote choice affected. Unfortunately, our data is unable to explain the direction of the change and further studies are needed to fully explain how information effects might in fact work both for and against incumbents.

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The most important conclusion of our analyses is that political accountability remains important even in the times of an extraordinary crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, one should be cautious about claims that voters evaluate crises and their management similarly to other political issues or policies. We have demonstrated that an extraordinary crisis will most likely result in an immediate rally around the flag effect, the entire electorate (not only supporters of incumbents) can increase support of the government if there is great sense of threat due to an unprecedented disruption of human life. This was more clearly visible in the case of Poland than in Hungary, with PiS gaining 4-5% in votes while Fidesz gained only 2% in support, but the same trend could be observed in the Netherlands, Germany or Lithuania (Political Capital 2020). At the same time, such a rally around the flag effect might last little or may not always occur, we know that countries that were particularly hard hit by the first wave of the pandemic (UK, Spain) rather experienced a drop in approval rates. We believe this is explained by the punishment-reward mechanism of political accountability and it is exactly the difficulties experienced by these countries in the very first wave of the Covid-19 crisis management that are responsible for quickly pushing people away from, rather than rallying them to the flag.

Notwithstanding the importance of the initial reaction of societies to rally around the flag, we demonstrate that this is only a temporary response, and it is followed by a more critical evaluation of government actions by voters, who find themselves in a prolonged crisis. The on-going pandemic situation forces voters to re-evaluate the actions of their governments, and it is at this time that the availability of healthcare services, economic relief packages or policies aimed at protecting or helping individuals become paramount for deciding on the approval rates for incumbents. While both Poland and Hungary was largely unaffected by the first wave of the pandemic, the second and consecutive waves of the pandemic had a serious toll in human lives and impacted greatly on the every-day life of citizens. This results in a more critical view of governmental efforts to deal with the pandemic that translates into a continuous drop of governmental approval ratings, again much more visible in Poland (PiS losing more than 10% in approval rates) than in Hungary (4-5% drop for Fidesz), although we see the changes in approval rates follow the direction predicted by our punishment-reward mechanism of political accountability.

Our data show that the prolonged Covid-19 pandemic raised important concerns among voters, largely similar in the two countries, except for job-loss feared almost twice as much in Poland, while Hungarian voters feared more financial loss due to Covid-19, almost at the same rate. We explain this difference by the different approach the two countries adopted in their economic relief efforts: Hungary targeted mainly employers with labour cost subsidies and tax exemptions, with unemployment benefits and social assistance unchanged; Poland instituted only incremental increase of unemployment and sickness benefits that were then extended (Aidukaite et al. 2021). Moreover, while these

fears of Covid-19 were shared across the political spectrum in Poland, in Hungary it is opposition voters that fear a financial loss (and their jobs), which is much less the case for Fidesz supporters. These differences proved important for our analysis, as our first results show that in Poland neither the threat of losing one's job, nor that of financial loss due to the pandemic prove significant to explain voting preferences, while in Hungary financial loss due to Covid-19 is significant predictor for decreasing support for Fidesz. Notwithstanding this difference, results prove that government reaction to the pandemic is the most significant predictor of voters' preferences, which confirms our expectations that in times of crisis, citizens vote based on how well they think the government is dealing with the crisis.

We also find that evaluation of government management of the crisis together with the economic relief measures to compensate for losses due to the pandemic are the key determinants behind electoral support. Yet again, in Hungary, fear of financial loss remains an important predictor but what is more important is that as the pandemic progresses and is 'normalized' into everyday life, we see the significance of other factors decrease (e.g. Covid-19 perceived as a threat), more specifically even our control factors such as age, education, or job status loose from their significance (in Hungary) or become insignificant (in Poland). In other words, while traditional socio-economic explanations behind government evaluation weaken, we see that crisis response and relief policies remain key determinants for judging governing parties even at the later stages of the pandemic. This is also confirmed by the high values of r squared of the model, though the very high score for Hungary seems to be partly because many of the explanatory factors are perceived very differently by government supporters and opposition voters.

When we examine together the effect of Covid-19 factors with political issues related to the crisis, we find once again that what matters most is how the government deals with the crisis. We confirm once more that positive evaluation of crisis response policies and economic relief measures are equally predicting more support for governing parties. Interestingly, the troubled status of the healthcare system in both countries leaves voters indifferent, although we expected that the high death-toll, at least partly attributed to limited healthcare possibilities, would kick-in voters' punishment mechanism with regards to government parties. In the same way, although opposition forces and independent media outlets in both countries have rallied against non-democratic steps taken by the governing parties under the disguise of the pandemic, we find no significant effect of power abuse on voters. The only factor that negatively affects incumbent parties' support is claims that they engage in corruption to make money out of the pandemic for themselves or their close associates.

While for most of the analysis the two countries largely fare the same way as we expect (with the exceptions noted above), it is here that the situation in Hungary differs from that in Poland significantly. More specifically, although we expect both abuse of power and corruption related to Covid-19 policies will be severely punished by voters, instead we find that in Hungary, neither of these issues affects incumbent support, while in Poland corruption – but not abuse of power – will result in less support for incumbents. Our data does not allow for further investigation, but the results suggest a rather cynical conclusion that in both Hungary and Poland, citizens accept abuse of political power as a natural part for politics and it is only in Poland where governmental corruption or patronage seems to bring severe consequences for incumbent support.

While there may be some truth in these bleak expectations regarding illiberal governments in the EU's two most criticized members, we believe our results should be interpreted differently. If we consider the analysis together with the distribution of the survey responses, we can see that the punishment-reward mechanism does matter in fact, but it only acts as 'accelerator' or 'accentuator' of partisanship, at least for Hungary. We see that in Hungary, government supporters judge the entire Covid-19 pandemic and all its aspects more positively than opposition voters, who in turn see negatively almost every aspect of government action during the pandemic. This way the pandemic only seems to reconfirm existing polarization of society: supporters of Fidesz are convinced the government is at its best in dealing with the crisis, while opposition supporters seem to evaluate negatively every adopted policy – and blame the government party for all ills. (This might be also the reason why we see a much weaker rally around the flag effect for Hungary than in Poland).

In addition, we find only limited evidence that different media consumption habits would result in different evaluations of government in times of the pandemic. This way we cannot confirm expectations that social media consumers would have more radical opinions than those that rely on more traditional media. While our imperfect data allows only for more detailed evaluation in Poland, we do find that pro- and anti-government media consumption – more precisely TV consumption – does reinforce partisan views: those consuming pro-government TV are also more likely to vote for incumbent parties. We also find radio consumers to be more pro-PiS, which we cannot explore further given data limitations, but might be attributed to the prominence of specific pro-government stations, such as Radio Maria especially among the elderly, rural voter. As such, our results seem to confirm the importance of partisan media consumption for determining vote choice (at least for Poland). This in turn leads us to conclude that government control of media and information is crucial for incumbent support, and since both Hungarian and Polish governments have moved towards controlling media, this might help shield government actions from criticism (not only in crisis).

As such, our study shows that although the Covid-19 pandemic is a world crisis that affects all, it is experienced in different ways by societies in different countries. While there are general reactions among citizens with regards to restrictive measures or the halt of economies, we do not find a uniform reaction to these controversies. More precisely, although we expect the punishment-reward mechanism of governmental accountability to intensify in the prolonged crisis, instead local, contextual conditions – such as the health of the economy, institutions of social protection or the nature of the political regime – will determine not only how citizens react to their governments' attempts to deal with the crisis but also how they see the crisis itself. More importantly, polarization of society along partisan lines affects not only how governments are evaluated but also how severe the crisis is perceived, despite the extraordinary nature of the Covid-19 crisis.

Extreme political polarization, reinforced by partisan media consumption, leave people immune of the negative effects of misguided or inappropriate pandemic policies. This is why we see little or no increase in critical evaluation of government action, despite the immediate and direct effect of pandemic policies on people's everyday life. Instead, we find that societal polarization and partisanship explain government endorsement, people are little affected by the

available healthcare services, the economic relief packages or the abuse of political power, corruption related to pandemic, and media consumption habits. In other words, even an extraordinary world crisis is unable to bridge extreme political polarization and fails to trigger more critical evaluations of populist authoritarian governments in office, despite their weak record of dealing with the crisis. Instead, we see Covid-19 become just another issue – like any other political issue – that only further divides society, permeating conditions that disable the functioning of accountability mechanisms without which democratic politics cannot function.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our research was supported by the Central European University Private University Grant 2020-2021/1/RSS, “The Pandemic and its management – an end to illiberal political support?” and the Institute of Social Sciences of the SWPS University Grant SUB/INS/2020/39, “Changes in consciousness and protests of Poles during a pandemic: democratic values in the era of restrictions.

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APPENDIX

Variables Coding and Distribution of Responses

Dummies:

The evaluation of the government reaction to the pandemic - 1 - government reacted adequately; 0 - government reacted in an exaggerated fashion and they are underestimating the threat.

The threat of losing a job because of the pandemic - 1 - those who have already lost their jobs or are very likely to lose it; 0 – others.

The evaluation of governmental support to protect the economy from negative impact - 1 - it is a good and well-targeted set of measures which helps in dealing with the current problems, 0-others.

State of the healthcare system - 1- respondents convinced that healthcare has been neglected and underfunded for years, so it doesn't cope with the epidemic, 0 – others;

Conviction that the government has used the epidemic situation to further strengthen its power by declaring an emergency and carrying out its previous policy plans - 1 – definitely agree, 0 – others;

Conviction that the government and those associated with it engaged in completely opaque activities and made a lot of money during the crisis - 1 – definitely agree, 0 – others.

Indices:

Pandemic threat index – additive index of variables measuring the perception of Covid-19 as a threat for the national economy, the health of Hungarians/Poles, their everyday lives (in Polish questionnaire only), personal financial situation, personal health (in Hungarian questionnaire there were two health items: about physical and mental health), inflation and price rises, and lasting shortages of goods (we created an index measuring perception of Covid-19 as a threat ranging from 0 to 7; for Poland, Cronbach's Alpha = 0,8 for both waves, for HU = 0,7 for both waves).

Pandemic financial loss index - perceived influence of the pandemic on personal financial situation: savings and investments, a reduction or elimination of income, an ability to give material assistance to members of your family, ability to pay bills (electricity, water, gas, waste disposal) and an ability to repay credit, loans, monthly maintenance etc. (we created an index ranging from 0 to 5; for Poland, Cronbach's Alpha = 0,9 for both waves, for HU = 0,8 for both waves).

Distribution of key variables

| | Hungary w1 | Hungary w2 | Poland w1 | Poland w2 |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Vote choice | | | | |
| Vote for governing party | 28,4% | 30,5% | 27,9% | 21,8% |
| Vote for other party | 71,6% | 69,5% | 72,1% | 78,2% |
| Government reaction to pandemic | | | | |
| Positive | 29,6% | 29,1% | 27% | 30,2% |
| Negative | 70,4% | 70,9% | 73% | 69,8% |
| Risk of losing a job | | | | |
| Yes | 44,9% | 7,7% | 12,2% | 15,1% |
| No | 55,1% | 92,3% | 87,8% | 84,9% |
| Pandemic threat index | | | | |
| 0 | 14,4% | 44% | 22,2% | 40,8% |
| 1 | 13,5% | 14,9% | 23,6% | 17,3% |
| 2 | 17,5% | 10,4% | 17,4% | 12,6% |
| 3 | 16% | 9,3% | 13,5% | 11% |
| 4 | 15,1% | 9,8% | 9,3% | 5,4% |
| 5 | 11,8% | 6,2% | 14% | 12,8% |
| 6 | 8,3% | 2,5% | | |
| 7 | 3,3% | 2,7% | | |
| mean (s.dev.) | 2,89 (1,98) | 1,69 (1,99) | 2,06 (1,99) | 1,61 (1,77) |
| Pandemic financial loss index | | | | |
| 0 | 48,7% | 68,2% | 33,8% | 36,9% |
| 1 | 9,1% | 6,3% | 11,3% | 10,4% |
| 2 | 10,2% | 4,2% | 11% | 11,8% |
| 3 | 10,2% | 6,5% | 12,7% | 12% |
| 4 | 9% | 7,8% | 8,4% | 7,7% |
| 5 | 12,9% | 7% | 22,9% | 21,3% |
| meanm(s.dev.) | 1,66 (1,87) | 1 (1,68) | 2,2 (1,99) | 2,07 (1,98) |
| Evaluation of support for entrepreneurs | | | | |
| Positive | 78% | 79,2% | 85,3% | 80,8% |
| Negative | 22% | 20,8% | 14,7% | 19,2% |
| State of healthcare | | | | |
| Bad | 71,6% | 40,2% | | 72,4% |
| Good | 24,8% | 59,9% | | 27,5% |
| Financial benefits due to Covid | | | | |
| Yes | 67,7% | 61,8% | | 66,1% |
| No | 32,3% | 38,1% | | 33,9% |
| Abuse of power due to Covid | | | | |
| Yes | 65,5% | 63,6% | | 58,4% |
| No | 39% | 36,4% | | 41,5% |
| N | 1740 | 1685 | 702 | 1002 |

Source: Own calculations, waves 1 and 2 for each country.



COVID-19: KRIZA, ODGOVORNOST IN PODPORA POPULISTIČNO-AVTORITARNIM VLADAM NA POLJSKEM IN MADŽARSKEM

V prispevku analiziramo kako je krizno upravljanje med pandemijo covid-19 vplivalo na javno podporo v demokratično nazadujočih članicah EU – Poljski in Madžarski. Trdimo, da je prvi, takojšnji učinek pandemije "združevanje okoli zastave", toda ker populistične neliberalne vlade sprejemajo avtoritarne ukrepe, pandemija postavlja v ospredje neuspeh populistov in neučinkovito krizno upravljanje, zato bi morale nezadovoljstvo javnosti zmanjšati podpora politike, ki je na oblasti. Na podlagi izvirnih anketnih podatkov, zbranih v času pandemije covid-19, testiramo več možnih virov nezadovoljstva: stanje v zdravstvu, gospodarstvo, korupcija in zloraba oblasti in izkrivljena komunikacija oziroma lažne informacije. Državljeni, ki so nezadovoljni z delovanjem vladajočih populističnih strank, bi morali biti pripravljene kaznovati "krivca", vendar ugotavljamo, da strankarske preference vplivajo na ocene odgovornosti vlade in puščajo podpornike imune na negativne učinke politike. Če primerjamo Madžarsko s Poljsko, vidimo, da bolj kot je družba polarizirana, večja je verjetnost, da bodo izredne okoliščine okrepile delitve v družbi in s tem tudi obstoječe oblasti.

Ključne besede: Covid-19; odgovornost; strankarstvo; javna podpore; demokratično nazadovanje.