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# A 'Romantic Public Tragedy'?
# COVID Pandemic and the Changes of Governance in Poland

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**Abstract:** The impact of pandemic governance on state regimes is a topic of lively debate. While some researchers suggest that governments may use a 'state of exception' to consolidate their power and introduce new methods of control, others see it as an opportunity for new civil society initiatives and social innovation. In this paper, we examine both the actions and discourses of the Polish government and its associated actors and the independent bottom-up responses of Polish society and how these were incorporated or rejected by the government. Our primary focus is on public health governance, including quarantine policies, the management of scarce personal protective equipment, related narratives and societal responses. This study is based primarily on desk research, analysis of key legislation and regulations tailored to the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland and analysis of social media (X/Twitter) discourse related to COVID-19. Our research reveals a crisis not only of governance but primarily of the neoliberal capitalist state. We conclude that governance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland showed uneven patterns.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, Poland, crisis, social movements, governance, state, sociology

**Introduction**

Recent geopolitical turbulence, including public health pandemics, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Anthropocene-induced environmental conflicts and humanitarian migration crises, has refocused scholarly attention on the concept of governance. In these cases, governance is invoked to illustrate the complex response of state- and state-adjacent actors, involving institutional actors, markets, and networks, in managing state-society relations amid interlocking crises. Since the 1980s, it has been claimed that many European states are morphing away from the rigidity of the previous bureaucratic structure towards a more open and fluid mode of operation (Bevir, 2012). The (partial) openness of governance means that it is a process that is constantly evolving and adapting, but also differentiating according to regional and local conditions and extraordinary events. The unprecedented nature and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 compelled governments across Europe to innovate and, in some cases, improvise new forms of governance in response to this crisis.

The impact of pandemic governance on European regimes is a subject of lively debate. Once the vision of unprecedented lockdowns on a pan-European (and global) scale started to become increasingly obvious, famous Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben claimed that governments would use the "state of exception" to fortify their power and implement new techniques of power and control (Agamben, 2020a). On the other hand, other scholars have argued that in such extraordinary situations, centralized governments fail to deliver a proper response, which leads to the emergence of new civil society initiatives and social innovations. These not only help mitigate the worst effects of the crisis but in some cases also become institutionalized as new forms of governance, resulting in an overall more democratic system (Jessop, 2020).

To empirically verify Agamben's uncanny prophecy as well as Jessop's optimistic model of sustainable participatory governance, this paper aims to understand the shapes and dynamics of the relationship between the state and society during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. To assess this, we examine both the actions and discourses of the Polish government and its associated actors, as well as the independent bottom-up responses of Polish society and how these were incorporated or rejected by the government. We understand the complex nature of state-society relations in Poland through a multi-level, multi-stakeholder governance perspective. This approach not only examines the changes of relations across different levels of governance but also includes a wide range of actors involved in crisis management. It is crucial to observe how competencies and responsibilities are distributed between central and local governments, as well as between institutionalised and non-institutionalised societal actors. Emphasising the heterogeneity of grassroots social initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw on feminist and social reproduction theories to underline the importance of considering class, gender, and race (ethnicity) in understanding the uneven social distribution of costs. Our approach assumes that the reality of governance is shaped not only by legal frameworks but also by accompanying discourses and practices. Therefore, our

research combines the analysis of regulations with an examination of related discourses and societal responses. Our primary focus is on public health governance, encompassing quarantine policies, the management of scarce personal protective equipment (PPE), related narratives and societal responses.

**Conceptual framework – understanding governance in times of crisis**

As noted above, in our paper, we explore the simultaneous centralization and extension of power, as anticipated by Agamben, and the emergence of acts of solidarity and governance innovations, as envisaged by Jessop, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. We aim to understand the interplay between these two tendencies and to examine whether they have acted in opposition to each other or have complemented each other. In addition, we critically assess Agamben's interpretation of the modern state and Jessop's perspective on the agency of civil society in bringing about democratic change in governance during crises. Adopting a feminist and intersectional critique rooted in social reproduction theory, we interrogate the state, capitalism and civil society (Stevano et al., 2021). We also embed our study within a more specific, regional context of de-democratization and the creation of new clientelist elites, often via corrupt networks and private-public relationships.

The neo-liberal shift and its subsequent long-term hegemony in the political and ideological discourses of Western Europe has transformed the functioning of governments. In the 1980s, Western and Northern European states initiated processes that changed decision-making and the management of state resources. Like other post-socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland began experimenting with different forms of government during its transition to Western-style democracy. However, as a semi-peripheral state, Polish elites uncritically embraced neoliberal ideological hegemony while attempting to emulate certain Western forms and tools of governance (Sowa, 2012). Initially, reforms aimed at transforming state governance were criticised for their rigidity and bureaucracy. Recognising that markets also require control, support and regulation, there was a call for more open and flexible approaches to governance. This led to internal administrative reforms, the emergence of dynamic networks, public-private partnerships, and government-funded quasi-NGOs under the umbrella term “governance”, which distinguishes it from hierarchical government. Over the past two decades, attention has expanded to different levels of governance, including various EU institutions and regional and local self-government. Furthermore, a shift towards citizen participation, such as co-governance through NGOs and deliberative innovations, emphasises the importance of inclusive, bottom-up input and the amplification of marginalised voices for a more democratic process.

In Poland, the adoption of governance and state transformation witnessed the widespread use of policy innovations such as public-private partnerships, driven by a justified desire to improve the inefficient post-socialist state apparatus. Inspired by New Public Management and private-public partnership concepts, successive governments implemented public policy

solutions that resulted in more effective resource management, albeit sometimes accompanied by extensive corruption and the emergence of a new elite. Conversely, institutionalised social dialogue has been overlooked and often developed into rigid, patronage-based hierarchies. Relations between the authorities and NGOs, as well as social movements at both national and local levels, have been characterised by mistrust and misunderstanding, hindering successful cooperation (Bevir, 2012). Governance mechanisms in Poland have at times been exploited by governments to support corrupt networks or to serve particular interests through foundations or associations with personal ties to the incumbent.

We therefore take a critical approach to governance not only as a normative ideal that is successfully implemented or adapted but as a discursive practice that always has far-reaching effects on political and social reality, including failure and resistance by existing power structures as well as deliberate abuse for personal or political gain. We look at governance from a broad perspective, not narrowing it down to a particular practice or set of practices, but also as a historically tangible political process that produces effects in the form of localised knowledge, networks, and practices. While our focus is on a set of relations between the government and civil society actors, we are aware of the broader concepts of multi-level governance (see: Piattoni, 2009) and multi-stakeholder governance (Vallejo, Hauselmann, 2004) help depict both multiple levels (from local to international) and multiple actors involved in governance. We do not analyse the full complexity of these concepts, but we apply their elements to depict the dynamics of governance on two crucial occasions: when talking about the overburdening of local and regional self-governments and when describing the role of private-public partnerships in expanding corrupt networks of the government. We also draw on the concepts of "co-governance" (Ackerman, 2004) and "self-governance" (Kooiman, 2003) to denote different possible levels and ways in which government gets involved and interferes in these relationships. These conceptual tools are best suited to capture the dynamics of governance in Poland due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic: not only did it require multiple actors to coordinate and cooperate to manage the crisis and ensure public safety, but this cooperation and coordination occurred at multiple levels and varied in the level of engagement of the actors.

There is no consensus among scholars about the impact of governance on democracy in such turbulent times. Among the most optimistic are those who focus on the emerging opportunities for social innovation or spontaneous bottom-up responses that not only alleviate the problem at hand but also become embedded in the everyday tools of governance - especially at the level of local government. Bob Jessop notes that in an extraordinary situation, influenced by mutually rapid and unpredictable factors, existing governance strategies will fail to provide a timely and satisfactory response since failure is a "contingently necessary outcome of attempts at governance" (2020: 65). In such situations, innovation and its further integration with the actions of other actors and at other levels of governance prove

necessary for a humanitarian and democratic response. Jessop advocates a “romantic public ironist” approach (2020: 80-85) in which more heterarchical, self-reflexive and solidarity-oriented initiatives are preferred to hierarchical and autocratic governments, even though, like all modes of governance, they are doomed to fail. Drawing on the collective intelligence of stakeholders and harnessing the energy of formal and informal citizens' initiatives helps to achieve change and adapt to new challenges in a democratic and empowering way.

However, governance is not only evolving towards more participatory, democratic and horizontal structures. Even Jessop himself argued that the UK government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic did not focus enough on providing strong and equitable institutions and solutions (Jessop, 2021). However, another tendency - the centralisation of power within the government and its dependent institutions or public bodies - has become increasingly evident in recent years, especially in CEE (Bieber et al., 2018). This happens even during crises when regular governance fails and citizens are left to find solutions. Numerous studies of Europe's largest pre-pandemic political and humanitarian crisis, the Long Summer of Migration 2015, show that governance did not treat social organisations and movements equally across the continent. For instance, while civil energy in Western and Southern Europe was to some extent transformed into more sustainable and heterogeneous relations with other public and private actors (Søholt and Aasland, 2021), this was not the case in the Balkans (Šelo-Šabić, 2017) and in Hungary, where the securitisation discourse was used to suppress the role of society.

Such a narrative of securitisation echoes concerns raised in critical studies of governmentality (Foucault, 1991), particularly during the state of exception (Agamben, 1995). In his seminal work, Giorgio Agamben focused on the Holocaust and the case of a concentration camp in which the biopolitical power of the state has reached its maximum control over bare human life. Staying within this framework, he expressed similar doubts during the first days of the pandemic, when severe closures were imposed in Italy. While his downplaying of the risks posed by the pandemic was soon proven wrong, his concern about “the tendency to use a state of emergency as a normal paradigm for government. . . [and] producing an authentic militarisation” (Agamben, 2020c), or later clarifications about society's readiness to give up freedoms and rights in the name of security (Agamben, 2020b), deserve more careful consideration. The publication of this short essay immediately triggered a critical debate in which other philosophers criticised Agamben for his careless and even harmful approach (Esposito, 2020; Nancy, 2021) or even used this essay as an opportunity to revoke his key concepts, such as the state of exception or bare life (Prozorov, 2023). However, some arguments are more nuanced, crediting Agamben for his reservations about how democratic a blindly technocratic government can be (Christiaens, 2021; Silva and Higuera, 2021). Numerous empirical studies also show how government responses to pandemics - whether in the EU or elsewhere - can lead to the erosion of democracy, state accountability and transparency (Lewkowicz et al., 2022; Russack, 2021).

In light of Agamben's concerns about the securitisation of modern states, the nature of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly challenging for social activism and democratic governance. While the engagement of volunteers in direct humanitarian action involves mobility and a lot of personal contact, the first ubiquitous measure to deal with the outbreak of the virus was lockdown. Moreover, these acts of solidarity and social care are often strongly linked to gender, class and racial inequalities embedded in deeper social and cultural modes of reproduction. In this context, the term “imposed volunteering” (Andersen et al., 2022) has been coined to conceptualise the situation where people - mostly, but not exclusively, working-class women - are forced to take on new responsibilities. This also means that government responses to COVID-19 and its aftermath are likely to neglect the needs of people with low socio-economic status, who are often more exposed to the virus (inter alia because they are frontline workers) and to severe complications (due to poorer health in general) (Patel et al., 2020). At another level, the division of responsibilities - and funding - between central and local governments involved in the pandemic response is also a serious challenge (Czuryk, 2021). While some involvement of municipalities and local institutions is necessary to manage such immediate and complex threats, the direct threat to the ontological security of citizens makes centralising discourses more likely to emerge (Scott, 2019). As the response to the 2015 refugee crisis in states such as Hungary and Serbia demonstrates, this creates a tempting situation for governments to increase their power and withdraw competencies from other actors in multi-level governance, whether private, civil or municipal. While Agamben's uncompromising statement was initially criticised, over time it has gained more recognition and understanding.

**Methodology**

In our analyses, we draw on a variety of research methods that not only complement each other but also allow us to perceive and juxtapose different aspects of governance and broader social reality. Our study is based primarily on desk research, analysis of key legislative acts and regulations tailored to address the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland (Cowan and Mumford, 2021) as well as analysis of the social media (X/Twitter) discourse related to COVID-19.

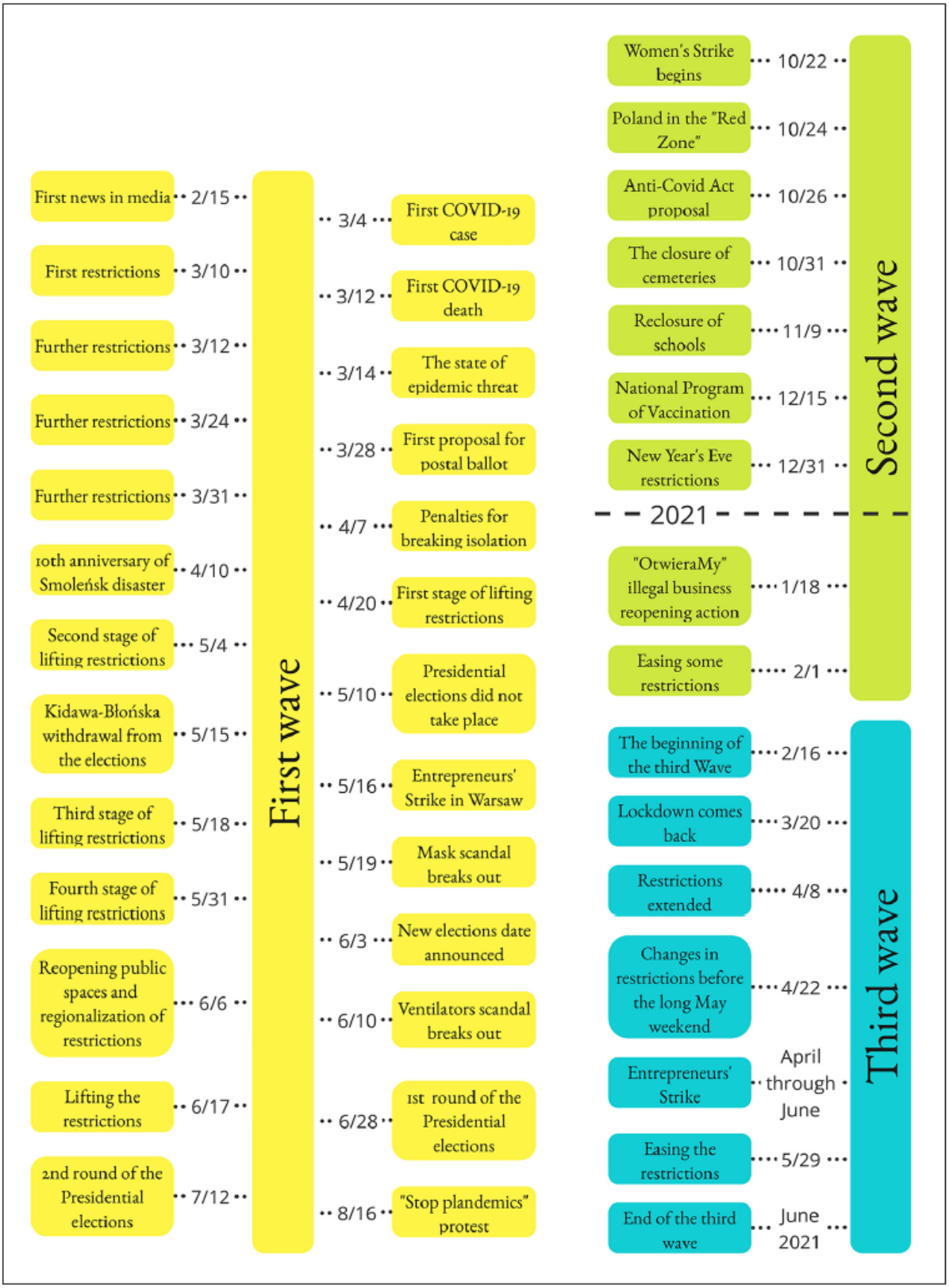


Figure 1. Timeline of COVID-19 key events related to lockdowns and governance in Poland from February 2020 till June 2021.

We analysed the corpus of a total of 22 legal documents consists of 18 Acts, two Ordinances and two Regulations issued by the Polish government between 2 March 2020 and 18 June 2021[1]. This period covers the most significant events related to the COVID-19 pandemic, starting with its outbreak and the so-called 'Special Act' aimed at pandemic preparedness, through varieties of lockdowns and restrictions and the introduction of vaccination until the fourth wave started (a more detailed timeline of key events regarding this phase is attached as Figure 1 at the end of this article). In total, therefore, we cover the first three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland,[2] along with the government and society's responses to it. The documents have been carefully read and coded with regard to the content of the regulations, their recipients and the actors identified as responsible for their implementation and monitoring (including local governments and their role in governance).

To grasp and understand the official narrations behind the new legislation as well as its social perception, we employed the discourse analysis of Polish social media, in particular X (formerly Twitter). We analysed tweets published between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2021 on two of the most popular official government accounts on Twitter/X that is: the Prime Ministers Office (@PremierRP, 760,000 followers) and the Ministry of Health (@MZ_GOV_PL, 610,000 followers). Tweets from these accounts were often the first source of information about the pandemic and were widely discussed and frequently quoted in the media. Moreover, unlike the legal documents, the data from official social media accounts contained information both about the actions taken and their justifications. The downloaded tweets (N = 16,431) were prequalified by marking those related to COVID-19, and then tweets related to governance (N = 540) were subjected to qualitative open coding aimed to extract official narratives accompanying government actions.

The social grassroots responses to the positions of the state were identified in two ways. First, by looking at the aggravated level at the 'hashtag landscape' (Koljonen and Palonen, 2021) of tweets related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular those mentioning lockdowns (n = 650,865) or masks (n = 356,976). The identified changes in the popularity of various hashtags

[1] Minister of Health. (2020). Epidemic Emergency Declaration, 13 March; Council of Ministers. (2020). Restrictions and Prohibitions, 10 April; Minister of Health. (2020). Regulation Amending Epidemic Declaration, 24 March; Council of Ministers. (2020). Restrictions in Epidemic Condition, 19 April; The Sejm. (2020). Special Solutions Act, 2 March; The Sejm. (2020). Amendments in COVID-19 Prevention Acts, 31 March; The Sejm. (2020). Amendments in Government Administration Act, 31 March; The Sejm. (2020). Special Solutions Act for Crisis, 31 March; The Sejm. (2020e). Amendments in Fiscal Administration Act, 16 April; The Sejm. (2020). Amendments in Social Insurance Act, 24 April; The Sejm. (2020). Amendments in Commercial Inspection Act, 31 July; The Sejm. (2020). Amendments in State Sanitary Inspection Act, 31 July; The Sejm. (2020i). Amendments in Civil Service Act, 16 October; The Sejm. (2020). Amendments in Acts for COVID-19, 13 October; The Sejm. (2020). Further Amendments in Acts for COVID-19, 17 December; The Sejm. (2021). Additional Amendments in Government Administration Act, 29 January; The Sejm. (2021). Further Amendments in Fiscal Administration Act, 29 January; The Sejm. (2021). Additional Amendments in COVID-19 Prevention Act, 25 February; The Sejm. (2021). Amendments in Commercial Inspection Act, 5 March; The Sejm. (2021). Further Amendments in Acts for COVID-19, 9 April; The Sejm. (2021). Subsequent Amendments in Acts for COVID-19, 16 April; The Sejm. (2021). Amendments in State Sanitary Inspection Act, 18 June.

[2] Analysing the first three COVID-19 waves in Poland provides insights into the government's effectiveness during crises. The first wave shows emergency measures and crisis management strategies. The second wave highlights policy adaptations, while the third wave examines the sustainability of these strategies.

and keywords in the social media discussions during the pandemic were however treated only as one of the indicators of the social attitudes towards government actions. These findings were simultaneously verified by the desk research and extended literature review, as well as our observations.

**Findings**

In an empirical investigation of Agamben's and Jessop's theories, we looked at the varieties of relations between state actors (government) and society in the context of pandemic crisis management in Poland. Our focus was on understanding its dynamics and changes as well as accompanying its discourses. We identified four types of such relations: compliance, contestation, complement and correction. The proposed typology of four 'Cos' is based on two axes, that is (1) the agency (and efficiency) of the state in response to the pandemic-related challenges (efficiency vs inefficiency/ passivity), and (2) the attitude of society towards the state's actions or lack thereof (support/ contestation). We understand the agency of the state as utilisation by its actors the capacity to make things happen. In other words, it is not only a question of the state's potential to make a change, but the actual implementation of the change, for example by introducing and enforcing lockdowns. Consequently, the lack of the agency of the state is understood as a lack of efficient actions, whatever the reasons. We juxtapose this axis with the attitude of society towards state actions. When we refer to society, we encompass individuals who actively participate in the governance process, whether through institutionalised or non-institutionalised means. Thus, compliance refers to submission to and active support of state actions; contestation means active disagreement with state actions and attempts to change them; complement indicates initiated from above support of the state actions in the situation of its ineffectiveness and correction points at grassroots replacement of the state in the situation of its ineffectiveness, thus changing the situation but not necessarily the state position (see Table 1).

It should be stressed that the identified ideal types do not always occur distinctly in time and space. Firstly, due to the heterogeneity of the very society, in which there are simultaneously supporters and opponents of the particular state actions. Secondly, because of the state's varying efficiency in handling different challenges. However, as the case of Poland shows, there were logical and chronological links between the various types as well as the discursive frames intended to justify them. Let us now finally take a closer look at the different types by analysing pandemic governance in Poland.

| STATE / SOCIETY | EFFICIENT | INEFFICIENT/PASSIVE |
|---|---|---|
| **APPROVAL/SUPPORT OF STATE ACTION** | **COMPLIANCE**<br><br>**time:** the beginning of the pandemic<br>**official discourse**: safety and responsibility | **COMPLEMENT**<br><br>**time:** from the 2nd wave of the pandemic<br>**official discourse:** unity and solidarity |
| **CONTESTATION OF STATE ACTION** | **CONTESTATION**<br><br>**time:** from the 2 part of the 1st wave<br>**official discourse:** discipline and economy | **CORRECTION**<br><br>**time:** entire period of the pandemic<br>**official discourse:** non |

Table 1. Types of the relationship between state and society in the 2020 governance of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland.

***Compliance***

Compliance of the society with the state's laws and guidance was typical of the beginning of the pandemic. The early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak prompted a decisive response from the Polish government (Szymański and Zamęcki, 2022), resulting in the adoption of stringent measures, which were met with widespread acceptance. By the compliance it is meant here not only passive acceptance of state orders but also actions aimed at its broad implementation (e.g. by urging others to follow the restrictions and admonish those who were insubordinate)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government utilized formal legal acts as well as more flexible instruments like ordinances to introduce and regulate various limitations and measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus and managing the crisis (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020). In short, in March 2020, the Polish government implemented a series of lockdown protocols, including the closure of educational institutions, non-essential businesses, and national borders, while also enforcing a widespread stay-at-home directive (The Act of 2 March 2020; The Act of 31 March 2020). This was Poland's first attempt to reduce viral transmission and prevent the potential overload of the healthcare system (Kohtamäki and Sikorski, 2022), in line with the global response to the emerging crisis (Busse, et al. 2020). The rapid sequence of events led to the confirmation of Poland's first COVID-19 case on 4 March 2020[3], signalling the beginning of the First Wave of the pandemic and its impact on

[3] It is worth noting that Poland confirmed its first COVID-19 fatality on 12th March 2020 and the first COVID-19 recovery on 17th March 2020.

governance paradigms. It was followed by the controversial prohibition of mass gatherings - recognized later as unconstitutional (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020), as well as closing schools, and cultural institutions and implementing remote learning. A crucial turning point occurred when Poland declared a state of epidemic threat (March 14th, 2020) and eventually the state of pandemic (20 March 2020), which allowed for even stricter restrictions to be imposed. Complete implementation of restrictions brought contentious measures like limiting gatherings and movement, strict rules for leaving home, capping social gatherings at two (except for household, religious, or workplace groups), and essential-only travel. People were also advised to restrict outdoor activities to essential errands, medical appointments, or necessary exercises like walking the dog.

Importantly, actions and initiatives were primarily coordinated from the central government level, with regional governors receiving directives and responsibilities (Achremowicz and Kamińska-Sztark, 2020). The directives were issued by the central authorities, reflecting a top-down approach to crisis management. The regional authorities, as representatives of the central government at the local level, were tasked with implementing and monitoring various measures to contain the spread of the virus. This hierarchical coordination framework aimed to ensure a unified and coordinated response across the country, although it also raised discussions about the balance between central control and local autonomy in times of crisis (Klimek 2022). In addition, the government's response to the pandemic included the imposition of numerous measures to control the population, enforced by various security forces, including the police, border guards, army and potentially other law enforcement agencies. To monitor quarantined citizens, government-run mobile applications were introduced. Importantly, these new powers were gradually normalised and incorporated into ordinary law in the absence of a declaration of a state of emergency (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020).

On a discursive level, even before the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Poland, the government focused on reassuring citizens, asserting safety and emphasizing preparedness against the coronavirus. After initial and only a few attempts to downplay the risks posed by COVID-19 (e.g. @MZ_GOV_PL, 6.02.2023), it was reported that there are enough resources needed to fight the pandemic (mainly personal protective equipment). Initially, the restrictions introduced by the government were justified primarily by the need to stop the spread of the virus and, implicitly, to protect the health of Poles. One of the main incentives for compliance was the slogan "protect yourself and others", indicating simultaneous action in the own and public interest. With time, the government started recognizing age-specific differences in the disease's trajectory, urging “intergenerational solidarity”. The overriding values referred to were responsibility and safety, as summarized by the prime minister: "In the face of a pandemic, the most important words are safety and responsibility. We are obliged to ensure that the safety of the Polish people is maintained. Responsible action is needed that can minimize the impact of this pandemic." (@PremierRP, 13.03.2020)

In terms of the discourse around governance, although the government used its various prerogatives, sometimes on the edge of the law, the dominant narrative was one of cooperation, especially between the traditional governance actors (government, opposition, local government). From the very beginning, the need to suspend political disputes was repeatedly stressed: "We are on the frontline of the fight, but please make it not a political fight but a fight against #coronavirus. We need not only cooperation between ministries, not also between local government units. We need cooperation between the government and the opposition" (@PremierRP, 2.03.2020).

The role of the society was also recognized. However, its expected activity was to follow the letter of the law, in the name of the aforementioned responsibility and solidarity. E.g. "No administrative action can stop the spread of the virus. What is crucial is how society acts." (@PremierRP, 11.03.2020). From the government's point of view, members of society cooperate, for which they are praised, e.g. "It is with pride and emotion to see how responsible we are. (...). Thank you for your consideration and calmness." (@PremierRP, 14.03.2020) or "Thank you for the fact that 99.5% of people stick to the rules of this quarantine. This is one of the best indicators in Europe. Thanks to this discipline, I think we will come out stronger and be able to rebuild the economy after the freeze." (@PremierRP, 19.03.2020).

In justifying its actions, the government also relied on the international context, citing organizations such as the WHO to legitimize its decisions: “(…) The @WHO confirms that Poland is taking the action that is most appropriate. We are not sparing resources." (@PremierRP, 18.03); or referring to the negative examples from abroad, especially Italy: "We learn from the unpleasant experiences of other countries and do not want to repeat their mistakes."(@PremierRP, 13.03).

Eventually, strict pandemic restrictions and public compliance allowed the first wave of the pandemic to pass relatively smoothly. In the government's narrative, this came down to its success: "3 months ago everyone thought there would be a health and economic Armageddon in Poland. And it turned out that Poland among the 27 EU countries is doing best." (@PremierRP, 6.06.2020); "The number of deaths per million patients is incomparably lower than in richer countries. We made good decisions." (@PremierRP, 23.05.2020). Indeed, the initial response of the society was compliance and cooperation with the terms proposed by the government. Poles followed the pandemic restrictions, which were emphasized by those in power. This was also evident in the popularity at that time of the hashtag #StayAtHome (*#ZostanWDomu*) which was used more than 216,000 times in the entire dataset, of which as much as 83.6% only in March and April 2020. It was accompanied by several grassroots initiatives to make it more pleasant to stay at home for those who could (e.g. “100 ideas of what to do indoors without going outside #stayathome(…)”

@mordeczka_jol, 13.03.2020; 189 retweets (RT)). Additionally the few who did not comply to restrictions were pointed fingers at (e.g. “It is because of such jerks that further restrictions are necessary (…)” @SamPereira_ 24.03.2020; 179 RT).

The public's support of the initial lockdown may seem surprising, given its role in worsening class, gender, and minority inequalities (Rubery and Tavora, 2020). The pandemic accentuated class divisions: middle and upper classes turned to remote work (Górska et al., 2021; Wojnicka and Kubisa, 2023), while frontline and working-class people confronted higher chances of job loss and coronavirus exposure (Paul, 2020). Educational inequalities were also evident as middle-class children had more educational resources, whereas those from lower-income backgrounds dealt with issues like technological poverty (Kuc-Czarnecka, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic exacerbated gender inequalities, with women bearing most additional home care responsibilities (Wojnicka and Kubisa, 2023). In addition, the impact of the pandemic was not evenly distributed between the native Polish population and minority groups with Ukrainian migrant workers disproportionately affected. They were among the first to lose their jobs and many chose to return to Ukraine in the early days of the pandemic. Despite administrative measures aimed at extending the legal permits to stay and work in Poland during the pandemic, many Ukrainians were not protected in their jobs and faced an increase in racist incidents during the second phase of the pandemic (Shelest-Szumilas and Wozniak, 2023).

All in all, with the passage of time and the tightening of restrictions, more and more opponents of the government's policy emerged. A hitherto invisible actor also appeared, namely the “economy”, which leads us to the next type of relationship we identified - contestation.

**Contestation**

As the number of infections and the number of deaths increased, several further strict measures were implemented (The Act of 16 April 2020; The Act of 24 April 2020). This time, however, it was met with growing public contestation (Achremowicz and Kamińska-Sztark, 2020). We understand contestation as acts of opposing and challenging state actions in various forms (incl. discursive and militant ones), with the aim of changing them. The resistance to state actions in Poland did not have a single source – while some people questioned the threat posed by the virus in general, others disagreed with the effectiveness of the measures taken by the government (e.g. the ban on entering the forest) (Czarniawska, 2020). Yet others questioned the necessity of the economic lockdown, especially for businesses, downplaying the negative role of the virus and focusing on the economic consequences directly affecting them (Kowalewski, 2021). Discontent was exacerbated by the selectivity of some restrictions and cases of their violation by those in power, especially, strong pressure to hold presidential elections in May 2020. For example, the regulations did not allow people under the age of 18 to leave their homes unaccompanied; public parks,

boulevards and beaches were closed, as were small businesses; hotels could only accept people on business trips. As Easter approached, laws on religious gatherings changed, limiting congregations to five pre-Easter and increasing to 50 during Easter. This sparked criticism of government yielding to church pressure and downplaying pandemic risks. Public resistance was also aroused by the ban on entering the forests and the severe penalties (up to 30,000 PLN, ca. 7500$) for violating the rules on social isolation (Chwat, 2021).

Public criticism grew at the end of March 2020, when the government, despite the pandemic, began to prepare for the organisation of the presidential elections in May. On 28 March, in the middle of the night at 4.25 a.m., the Sejm voted on amendments to the Electoral Code, introducing the provision that voters who are quarantined or isolated, as well as those aged 60 and over, will be allowed to cast their ballots by postal vote on the day of the presidential election. The Sejm has also announced that the elections will take place as planned, on the 10th of May. It raised concerns about postal voting accessibility and insufficient time to establish and test a reliable remote system before the elections, raising risks of electoral fraud, and manipulation, and questioning the transparency and legitimacy of the democratic outcomes. Furthermore, several legal experts and opposition figures raised constitutional concerns about the legality of introducing significant changes to the electoral process without proper legislative procedures (Musiał-Karg and Kapsa, 2021). Despite these objections, on 6 April 2020, the Sejm passed a law on presidential postal voting, which mandated local authorities to provide voter information to the post offices. However, this requirement was contested by the majority of the local authorities on the grounds of data protection. It effectively jeopardised government attempts to hold postal elections as soon as possible. Finally, the presidential election was postponed to June 28 and postal voting was added as an option to traditional polling station voting.

It was more than evident that the pre-election period in Poland exhibited a dual approach: relaxing restrictions on the one hand and societal downplaying the effect of recommendations that remained in force on the other. Negative sentiments about the elections intensified after entrepreneurs protested on the streets of Warsaw on 16 May. During the demonstration which - ironically - was called by the organizers “the entrepreneurs' strike” some participants faced police obstruction, with the use of tear gas and a significant police presence providing a striking backdrop (Piasecki, 2020). The event highlighted the selectivity and inconsistency of the government's pandemic management efforts and was seen as evidence of the enduring presence and risks of the pandemic. These sentiments were further fueled by the activities of pandemic deniers and opponents of vaccines, exemplified by the “STOP NOP” movement, which organized a significant protest on 16 August 2020 to challenge the very existence of COVID-19 (Lisowska and Cichosz, 2022). By the middle of 2020, Poland had changed its approach and certain restrictions have been lifted completely, although precautionary measures such as the mandatory wearing of masks remain in place.

What all the contesting cases had in common was disagreement with the actions taken by the government. The optics also changed, and society was increasingly seen not as a supportive community under the paternalistic guidance and protection of government, but as a collection of individualized people who should have freedom of choice, including the choice of risk of contracting coronavirus. The social inequalities resulting from the policies of pandemic management have increasingly become a source of contestation and resistance to government action. At the same time, the intersection of class and gender that has emerged in social responses and protests has added complexity to the dynamics of public dissent. This is most evident in the examples of the aforementioned Entrepreneurs Strike and the later Women's Strike. Whereas the former was led by middle-class men protesting government restrictions aimed at curbing economic activity, the latter was led by middle-class women protesting against a cruel anti-abortion law (Czarniawska, 2020). Over time, however, it evolved into something much bigger than the struggle for women's rights, becoming an "all-gender anti-government protest" against government policies expressed by the floating signifier “***** ***” hiding the crude slogan "fuck PiS". Both cases represented different aspects of pre-existing inequalities of class and gender that were being exacerbated and deemed unacceptable in the context of the management of the public health crisis (Nandagiri, Coast and Strong, 2020). Given the above, it is also clear that attempts to limit the number of people who can gather in public have been used to suppress protests in terms of exercising state power.

When tensions and divergent interests emerged in the practice of governance there were also important changes in the discourse of the government. Firstly, the consequence of actions on the economy began to be considered e.g.: "On the frontline of the fight against #coronavirus, we all come together today. The public, businesses, workers government and local authorities. We are all responsible for limiting the impact on the economy, society and public health" (@PremierRP, 16.03.2020). Although safety and responsibility are still to be the primary value, the government's restrictions appear to aim at reinforcing discipline in non-compliant Poles, e.g.: "We are introducing restrictions on access to parks, to boulevards, to squares, recreation areas, beaches, because we have seen that we have not maintained social discipline as much as we should." (@PremierRP, 31.03.2020). Severe penalties for non-compliance are also supposed to be disciplinary: "We have to comply with these strictures that we introduce. If we continue to break the rules there may be a penalty of restriction of liberty. If we do not follow these rules then we may unknowingly infect another person." (@PremierRP, 31.03.2020).

Moreover, official narratives increasingly focused on the limitation of necessary supplies. On the one hand, the government denies claims about the resource shortages by reaching for the logic of numbers and calculating all accumulated stocks; on the other hand, it indirectly admits to some shortages, explaining that: "This is a problem not only in Poland but in Europe." (@PremierRP, 19.03.2020)

Eventually, after a relatively mild passage of the first wave of the virus, another wave hit in the autumn of 2020, which overloaded the healthcare system and brought the final number of COVID-19-related deaths per million population to over 3,000. Placing Poland 10th across the EU and 26th globally in the infamous mortality rankings. In the face of the growing crisis and the increasingly ineffective state, citizens became active and, depending on the circumstances, either supported the state in a state-coordinated manner (type: complement) or, as predicted by Jessop, replaced the state by taking over its various functions (type: correction).

**Complement**

Complementarity as a type of relationship between society and the state is characterised by the state's recognition of its shortcomings in certain areas and actively seeking support from citizens, leading to the emergence of a society orchestrated from above. This type of relationship is typical of the second and subsequent waves of the pandemic in Poland.

From the summer of 2020, in the face of growing public dissatisfaction with restrictions and increasing pressure from businesses and capital for a "return to normality" (Czarniawska, 2020) on the one hand, and unfavourable forecasts for the development of the next waves of the pandemic (Regencia et al., 2020) on the other, the government decided on a flexible policy, which the government called a "middle way" (@PremierRP, 21.10.2020). It was flexible both spatially, i.e. different restrictions were applied in different parts of the country, and age-wise (it was considered that the elderly in particular should be protected). Poland has been divided into zones (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020), prompting the ruling party to propose an anti-COVID-19 law and a return to the implementation of strict lockdown measures but only on the regional levels. The government stated that the change in strategy was crucial to address the ongoing struggle to balance health and financial considerations, what in a peculiar neoliberal dialectic was summed up by the Prime Minister: "Societies and countries, governments around the world, have faced a dilemma – save the economy or save society. We always thought that was a false dilemma because the economy is society. We have been successful in helping people save their jobs". (@PremierRP 21.05.2020). Consequently, areas with a higher level of infections were subject to stricter restrictions on social gatherings and trading activities. While this approach was recognised for its sophistication, it was criticised for inconsistencies in the classification criteria and their application, and for shifting the burden of pandemic management to local authorities that had neither the necessary resources nor adequate preparation.

As the second wave of the pandemic hit in October 2020, the main declared objective of the government was to "flatten the tide of infections" and thus to avoid at all costs both the lockdowns and the collapse of the health care system: "Our approach here must lead to slowing down the growth of infections. Only in this way will we avoid a second lockdown and inaccessibility of the health service to patients." (@PremierRP, 8.10.2020). To preserve

political capital and move away past disputes, accusations and conflicts (including those over personal protective equipment or presidential elections), the government started promoting the hashtags “TimeForAgreement” and “TogetherAgainstVirus”.

The winter of 2020 saw a spike in cases, leading to the implementation of "red zones" in regions with high infection rates. In this context, the discursive shift was not only about why the pandemic should be stopped but also who should be protected from it. The government's official communication focused primarily on the threat to the elderly, which was stated explicitly: "The most important issue is the topic of protecting our seniors. As part of intergenerational solidarity, we need to be aware that by following the rules we are helping seniors - we are protecting their health and their lives." (@PremierRP, 10.10.2020). Responsibility this time was no longer reduced to simply adhering to pandemic restrictions, it also meant to help the elderly members of the society, which was actively encouraged by the Polish government. Interestingly, in this case, ethical arguments contrary to neoliberal ideology were appealed to: "We live not only for ourselves. By protecting ourselves, we also protect the oldest and weakest." (@PremierRP, 21.10.2020)

The essence of this logic was the organisation by the government of a Solidarity Senior Support Corps (*Solidarnościowy Korpus Wsparcia Seniorów)*, with a dedicated website where volunteers could declare their support. The government's social media channels regularly reported on the progress of the campaign, " 👵 👴 More than 3,000 volunteers have already declared their willingness to help in the #SupportSeniors campaign 💪" (@PremierRP, 26.10.2020). It was followed by photos and videos of the Prime Minister delivering groceries to an elderly person while wearing military-style clothing and a mask. The primary aim of the Solidarity Senior Support Corps was to provide assistance and support to the elderly and vulnerable, who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. With restrictions and health concerns for seniors, many faced isolation and difficulty accessing essential services. Volunteers from all walks of life, including students, professionals and retirees responded to the government's request and came together to provide various forms of assistance. These included delivering food and medication, providing transportation to medical appointments, offering companionship through phone calls and virtual meetings, and assisting with daily tasks that seniors may have struggled with as a result of the pandemic. As well as providing practical help, the initiative helped to combat the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by many older people during the pandemic (Achremowicz and Kamińska-Sztark, 2020).

The complement as a type of relationship between the state and society is unique insofar as the state admits its inefficiencies and, in this situation, reaches out to support the other institutionalised and non-institutionalised actors while trying to coordinate these activities. It could be interpreted as a manifestation of the ideology of new public management. Years of systematic dismantling and slashing of resources allocated to social care institutions and their

staff have forced the state to tap into the non-obvious resources of freelancers, on the one hand, and to introduce controversial work orders for qualified staff, on the other, as well as to suspend hitherto existing labour standards. Furthermore, our findings show that the era of complementarity is marked by class and gender distinctions. The class element stems from state power shifts, involving public fund embezzlement and clientelistic redistribution to a "new establishment," alongside private-public partnership patronage (NIK, 2023). In contrast, there's voluntary unpaid social work, distinctly separate from this "establishment" (Chwat, 2021), and predominantly undertaken by women, often at the cost of their needs, in a spirit of empathy and solidarity (Łapniewska 2022, Struzik 2023). In such a way, socialisation into care translated into sustaining the top-down governance and power inequalities during the pandemic crisis, which could be interpreted as an unintended consequence of solidarity orchestrated from above.

**Correction**

The last type of relationship we have observed between society and the state is correction. It is characterised by the intervention of creative society in a crisis where the state is either passive or unable to cope. Although the roots of both correction and contestation lie in the social discontent with the state, the difference consists in the direct target of the social actions. In case of contestation it is state with its laws and actions, whereas in case of correction it is society itself. This reflects Jessop's (2021) model of response, evident in Poland during the pandemic period. However, it is noteworthy that such public engagement also compensated for gaps caused by government scandals and legal transgressions (Chwat, 2021).

Poland encountered controversies and challenges concerning the procurement, distribution, and quality assurance of masks and respirators (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020). These incidents, indicative of wider global supply chain problems, emphasised the complex connection between public health demands and ethical concerns (Busse et al., 2020). The pandemic has led to an unprecedented surge in demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) creating a frantic market characterized by scarcity and competition. Several instances of irregularities have emerged in this context, encompassing allegations of price gouging, counterfeit products, and questionable procurement practices (NIK, 2023). Such events not only eroded public trust but also highlighted the need for strong regulatory oversight and transparent procurement procedures.

The situation was exacerbated by the mixing of political and economic interests. It was reported that politically connected organisations received lucrative contracts for personal protective equipment (PPE), increasing perceptions of cronyism and fostering a sense of injustice among the population (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, 2020). These scandals had far-reaching consequences and damaged the overall pandemic response plan. As uncertainty and fear prevailed, the reliability of masks and respirators became critical to controlling the spread of the virus. The emergence of substandard or counterfeit products posed a direct threat to

public health and the effectiveness of containment measures. In response, the authorities in Poland introduced corrective measures, including increased scrutiny of procurement practices, stricter quality control measures and punitive action against those found guilty of malpractice. However, these actions have highlighted the complex nature of public health governance, where rapid and effective decision-making must balance the urgency of pandemic control with the need for transparency.

One notable instance of correction was the “Visible Hand” grassroots movement, created to help those in need. Spreading across Poland through social media it involved volunteers offering assistance to vulnerable individuals and communities affected by the pandemic. The assistance was organized from the bottom up and without clear leaders. It included delivering food and medical supplies to the elderly, providing support to health workers, and assisting with various other essential tasks (Chwat, 2021, Łapniewska 2022). Similarly, the collective sewing of face masks has developed. In response to the shortage of PPE for healthcare workers and the general public, many individuals, including volunteers and sewing enthusiasts, began making cloth masks at home. They were distributed to local communities, health facilities and essential workers to provide an extra layer of protection against the spread of the virus (Achremowicz and Kamińska-Sztark, 2020).

Both of these grassroots initiatives were popular, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, and both demonstrated how ordinary people could contribute to public health and safety during a crisis by using their skills and resources to meet urgent needs. There was evidence of solidarity between the working class and the middle class in the emergence of bottom-up activities. Although participants of all genders and classes were found in these initiatives, they appeared to be mostly female-dominated. For example, the percentage of women involved in the “Visible Hand” groups was as high as 80 per cent (Łapniewska 2022). Importantly, the main motivations of the female volunteers were not related only to care as such but rather the need for community building (Łapniewska 2022). Part of these acts of solidarity and sisterhood were not only a spontaneous reaction to the pandemic crisis but also rooted in a longstanding culture of resistance of oppressed minorities (including LGBTQ+ persons) (Struzik 2023), which often entered into non-obvious alliances following one of the slogans of the women's strike, “When the state doesn't protect me, I will protect my sister.” This also shows how closely intertwined the theoretically distinct ideal types of correction and contestation could be.

In contrast to other types, activities related to the correction type were practically unnoticed in the official state discourse. Despite the increased societal activity, the government ignored these efforts, as if not want to present itself as lacking agency or ineffective. It seems that a capable society, compensating for the state's shortcomings, appeared to the authorities not as an opportunity to strengthen multilevel governance, but rather as a threat to its monopoly.

However, in social media platforms beyond official government accounts, these activities were not only appreciated but simply operated through them. It is enough to mention that in addition to the “Visible Hand” coordinated on Facebook, other grassroots initiatives also emerged on Twitter, ranging from the broader #FoodForMedics to countless individual acts of mutual support on- and offline.

**Conclusions**

The way in which governance was conducted and evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland is not uniform, according to the available evidence. Varying degrees of interaction between government and society, as well as its discursive legitimacy, were observed, depending on factors such as economic interests, political maneuvering and the timing of the pandemic. Our classification of 4 “co’s” of pandemic co-governance depicts that after the initial phase of compliance and trust in governments’ actions, a variety of other approaches emerged as a social response to the insufficient or unaccepted regulations and activities. Over time, protests were raised against the government’s response across various groups of society, and several grassroots initiatives emerged to fulfill the tasks where the government failed. Those activities remained largely unnoticed or—in the case of protests—criticized by the government and public media. At the same time, complementing the government activities led to officially coordinated activities with volunteers or private actors closely tied to the state and its officials, which we often found exploited for pro-government political marketing and cronyism.

In examining the Polish case, it can be argued that both Giorgio Agamben and Bob Jessop make credible arguments in the above-mentioned debate on the nature of governance, but that each vision misses certain key points of what we observed in Poland. As far as Agamben's claim about the normalisation of the state of emergency is concerned, while certain measures to extend biopolitical measures were implemented on a permanent basis (such as new government applications with surveillance options or new police powers), many of the government's activities were also aimed at creating a new elite, using multiple methods of governance, such as private-public partnerships for corruption and embezzlement of public funds.

However, after the initial societal consensus on the authorities' extreme measures to ensure safety, inclinations toward centralization and aggrandization of power were held in check by active society opposition. Concurrently, grassroots movements targeting the inadequacies of state functions surfaced. Nevertheless, the government chose not to interface with such initiatives and refrained from assimilating them into governance frameworks. It could be argued that this attitude had a negative impact on state-society relations, as the government reacted to expressions of dissent against its actions through legal and discursive means (such as extending police powers) while simultaneously disregarding and failing to take advantage of grassroots initiatives by citizens. While the state did rely on social engagement and

initiative in the governance of the pandemics, it was very likely to abuse this situation to focus on the particular interests of the ruling parties.

Jessop's predictions of the crisis as a vehicle for new, more democratic forms of governance were borne out in the extent to which society provided immediate and extensive support to medics or to those left most vulnerable by the lockdown. It can be hypothesised that this rapid and widespread increase in society's participation in governance prepared the ground for an even more intense response to the war on Ukraine in 2022, which brought millions of refugees to Poland and could not have been managed without society's support (Dunn and Kaliszewska, 2023; Rudnicki, 2023). The public anger and resistance that flourished during the pandemic had an impact on the Polish political scene, challenging the strategies of the main political parties. On the one hand, the inclusion of individuals associated with the STOP NOP movement in the party lists of the right-wing populists, and on the other, the long-term impact of the women's strike, show that some forms of grassroots activism from the pandemic era have been institutionalised.

However, as soon as we look at the role of society in the pandemics through critical lenses of intersectional perspective, a major lacuna in Jessop's "romantic public irony" attitude is revealed. His claim is as follows:

> romantic ironists adopt a satisficing approach. They accept incompleteness and failure as essential features of social life but continue to act as if completeness and success were possible. (…) Requisite irony entails that those involved in governance choose among forms of failure and make a reasoned decision in favour of one or another form of failure (2020: 82).

This assumes considerable agency and self-reflection of the ironist who chooses to engage and transform governance in times of crisis. However, the observations conducted during the pandemic indicate that the individuals often got involved because they had little choice, to recall the notion of "imposed volunteering" (Andersen et al., 2021). Our observations are consistent with findings from Poland (Korolczuk, 2020; Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2022) and other European countries (Carli, 2020; Derndorfer et al., 2020; Farré et al. 2022) in these regards, depicting that pandemics have petrified or exacerbated inequalities based on gender, class, and race (Stevano et al., 2021). Remote work, effective homeschooling, or financial aid were measures available only to a certain portion of society, while families and individuals conducting (frontline) essential or unregulated work, living in suboptimal conditions, or conducting care work with their relatives, had to unevenly carry the burden of lockdowns and anti-covid measures.

Our analysis depicts, therefore, first and foremostly not the crisis of governance per se, but rather of a neoliberal, capitalist state. The underlying decades of austerity and neoliberal policies were elucidated by the demise of state capacities, especially regarding health care

and education. Jessop's view of civil society seems to be aware of some of the problems caused by neoliberal capitalism but neglects its structural consequences in which society operates, as well as the agency of malevolent state authorities that is the pinnacle of Agamben's criticism of contemporary politics. Rapid and often chaotic responses of the neoliberal state created a vacuum of public services, hurtful especially to the most vulnerable groups, while at the same time employing various governance tactics to keep aggrandizing its power and influence. While it is true that social reaction to the crisis was crucial in providing a certain relief to these groups, it is difficult to argue that it led to a more egalitarian or democratic society. Rather, by leaving more obligations with the society without giving it more power, we see it as another tactic of exploitation of the most vulnerable, typical of modern capitalism and the people it claims to be "dispensable" (cf. Bauman 2013). Just this time, ironically, these "dispensable" were very often called "essential". This is perhaps the only "irony" visible in the social reaction to the failure of the governance crisis, and given the scale of the state incompetence, we claim that Jessop's term should in this case be paraphrased to "romantic public tragedy".

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