



THE ANTI-CRISIS SHIELDS AS A MEANS OF CONSOLIDATING POWER. THE CASE OF THE LAW AND JUSTICE GOVERNMENT IN POLAND

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In Poland, the pandemic coincided with and exacerbated the existing rule of law crisis, which had been ongoing for several years. The paper explores the Polish government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic through public policy tools known as Anti-Crisis Shields (ACS). These shields, initially designed to mitigate the pandemic's negative economic impact, were also used by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party as a strategic instrument to consolidate political power. By analysing government's promotional content and policy implementation during the pandemic, the paper reveals how the government leveraged economic aid to strengthen its electoral base and reinforce its authority. The research addresses questions about the instrumentalisation of public policies for political gain, the manipulation of crisis narratives, a turbulent election campaign and the effects on democratic backsliding in Poland. Ultimately, the paper discusses how crisis management, when politically driven, can undermine democratic norms and accountability.

Key words: anti-crisis shield; power consolidation; democratic backsliding; Law and Justice party.

1 INTRODUCTION

Anti-crisis shields, also known as economic or financial shields, play a critical role in stabilising economies during periods of severe economic downturns or crises. These shields are government-led initiatives designed to protect businesses, employees, and the broader economy from the negative impacts of financial

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crises, such as those caused by economic recessions, pandemics, or geopolitical events. This was also the case in the context of the global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2². A considerable number of countries introduced comprehensive anti-crisis shields. By way of illustration, the European Union introduced the Next Generation EU (NextGenerationEU 2024) recovery plan, which included grants and loans to member states with the objective of supporting economic recovery, with a particular focus on green and digital transitions. Similarly, the United States implemented the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES Act 2024), which provided direct payments to citizens, unemployment benefits, and loans to businesses. In Poland, the Law and Justice government imposed a series of extensive restrictions during the initial phase of the epidemic response. These measures not only caused social distress and frustration but also led to a deceleration in economic activity. Subsequently, the government implemented image restoration strategies (Benoit 1997, 179), including compensation mechanisms and corrective actions in the form of state financial aid, which was politically branded as the Anti-Crisis Shield (Tarcza Antykryzysowa).

A review of economic and political economy literature reveals that the 2007-2009 financial crisis had a detrimental impact on the SME sector, potentially precipitating another economic crisis (Carbo-Valverde, Rodriguez-Fernandez and Udell 2016). It has been therefore assumed that the crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic created risks for the activities of SMEs and posed a significant threat to the labour market. The government in Poland and elsewhere was thus confronted with the challenge of mitigating the adverse effects of restrictions that had a detrimental impact on national economies and global economic systems, while preventing a recession. The health, social and economic challenges were rapidly eclipsed and subsumed by the political agenda and the political events that occurred.

The objective of this article is to provide answers to the following research questions: 1) What economic instruments did the Polish government deploy to engage with the electorate during the pandemic? 2) To what extent did the political context associate with the election cycle influence government policy? 3) What narrative structures were constructed in the communication materials promoted by the government and government-controlled public bodies? 4) To what extent did the government's policies and communication practices serve instrumental, ongoing political goals with the objective of consolidating power? The paper's objectives are closely tied to the widely discussed concept of democratic backsliding³ (e.g. Grillo et al. 2023; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Wunsch and Blanchard, 2022), as it examines how the Polish government under the Law and Justice (PiS) party used crisis management tools, such as the Anti-Crisis Shields (ACS), to consolidate power. This connection is evident in several ways: instrumental use of public policies, influence of the electoral cycle, narrative manipulation and erosion of democratic norms.

To meet paper's objectives a method of narrative analysis was used to study how ruling government constructed, communicated, and promoted specific narratives to the public through official statements and owned media content.

² SARS-CoV-2 - Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2, further referred to as coronavirus.

³ The concept of democratic backsliding has been a significant topic of discussion in academic journals, particularly in light of the growing concerns surrounding the global state of democracy in recent years. The core debates concern the definition of the phenomenon, the identification of its causes, the understanding of its mechanisms, and the exploration of its consequences.

The research examined also the government's support programmes for businesses and households in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Government narrative analysis is used to explore how the Polish government, under the Law and Justice (PiS) party, framed the Anti-Crisis Shields as a means of crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis examines promotional videos, government websites, and public statements to reveal how the PiS government portrayed itself as a protector of the economy and society, while also subtly advancing its political agenda by reinforcing its image, suppressing opposition, and consolidating its power. Through this method, the paper uncovers how the government used crisis communication as a political tool leading to further democratic backsliding. Narrative analyses can help identify and understand the dynamics of backsliding by uncovering manipulative framing, exposing selective messaging or revealing the use of crisis to justify power consolidation. A government narrative structures analysis was conducted on nearly 20 promotional and informational videos pertaining to government Anti-Crisis Shields programs and four government websites were analysed.

2 WHEN OPPORTUNITY MAKES THE THIEF

Crises can be exploited by governments to take advantage of exceptional circumstances for personal or political gain. In the context of democratic governance, a crisis such as a pandemic, economic downturn (effects of the pandemic) or security threat (war in Ukraine) creates a unique opportunity for leaders to consolidate power, weaken democratic institutions, or erode civil liberties. This exploitation of crises for political purposes is what transforms "opportunity" into a "thief," as it steals democratic norms and public trust.

From a theoretical standpoint, the management of a crisis may have several adverse implications for democracy. In certain instances, governments may exploit crises as a means of consolidating or centralising power, which could potentially result in the erosion of democratic norms. For instance, the proclamation of a state of emergency may occasionally result in the suspension of specific democratic procedures or the circumvention of legislative bodies, which could potentially diminish the efficacy of checks and balances. A further negative impact on the quality of democracy is the reduction in accountability. The hasty and imprudent implementation of anti-crisis measures can, on occasion, result in a deficiency of transparency and a diminution of accountability on the part of those in authority. In the absence of adequate public oversight, the implementation of anti-crisis measures may give rise to instances of corruption or the misuse of funds, which could have a detrimental impact on the quality of democratic governance. The implementation of public policies in response to a crisis may result in an unequal distribution of resources. If anti-crisis measures are not meticulously devised, they may intensify pre-existing inequalities, conferring advantages upon specific groups while disadvantaging others. This can result in a loss of public confidence in democratic institutions, leading to the perception that the government serves the interests of a selected few, rather than the broader population or specific groups within its electorate. In periods of crisis, there is a potential for civil society organisations (CSOs) to be marginalised in decision-making processes or for political opposition to be muted in public debate. This can have the effect of weakening the democratic principle of pluralism. The marginalisation of CSOs or opposition groups can result in a reduction in the diversity of voices present in the public discourse. Finally, the utilisation of anti-crisis measures to justify the erosion of democratic norms has

the potential to contribute to a phenomenon known as 'democratic backsliding'. This is a particularly troubling prospect in national contexts where democratic institutions are already vulnerable. Following the electoral victory of PiS in 2015, Poland embarked on an illiberal trajectory, with the erosion of democratic norms continuing apace. Consequently, the management of the crisis may give rise to several adverse effects, leading to a deterioration in the quality of democracy.

The theoretical assumptions are corroborated by expert opinions. Notable international research centres on democracy, including Freedom House (Repucci and Slipowitz 2020), IDEA (2021), V-Dem (Edgell et. al. 2020) and the Economist Intelligence Unit (2020), have expressed concern that the pandemic may have a detrimental impact. As evidenced in their reports, there has been a decline in democratic indicators in 2020. Furthermore, it is posited that this phenomenon is a consequence of the misuse of authority in states that were previously non-democratic prior to the advent of the pandemic. The issues primarily pertain to the implementation of safety protocols to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus and the infringement upon several civil liberties, including the freedom of the press. In Poland, the situation was further complicated by the fact that the presidential election was scheduled to take place just two months after the onset of the pandemic. This created an opportunity for the organisation of elections that circumvented legal and constitutional principles. As Bermeo (2016) notes, one of the key characteristics of democratic backsliding is the undermining of the free and fair nature of elections through the introduction of illegal changes to the legal framework governing them. This shift towards an electoral democracy represents a significant challenge to the principles of liberal democracy.

In terms of the context of communication, the implementation of Anti-Crisis Shields and other anti-crisis measures created an opportunity to promote the government and its efficiency. This was an unsurprising development in Poland, where the government has a history of utilizing public media and a range of crises and pseudo-crises as instruments of political propaganda. This has manifested in several ways, including the promotion of the government before elections, the provision of selective support for aligned voters, the marginalisation of the opposition, and the extended ability to manage the narrative surrounding the crisis. The ruling party in Poland, Law and Justice (PiS), has been accused of utilising the Anti-Crisis Shields as a means of advancing its political agenda. The government's communication strategy surrounding the anti-crisis shields frequently emphasised the party's role in safeguarding the economy and citizens, at times portraying the government as a robust and resolute force during the crisis. The success of the anti-crisis measures was frequently emphasised by state-controlled media, government officials and state-owned agencies, firms and institutions. This framing served to demonstrate the government's competence and to justify continued public support for the ruling party. It has been alleged that the distribution of funds from the Anti-Crisis Shields was not always conducted in an impartial manner. Those with a critical perspective (Supreme Audit's Office, Polish Economic Institute) have suggested that businesses and regions with political ties to the ruling party were on occasions the recipients of preferential treatment, whereas those less aligned with PiS encountered greater difficulties in accessing support. Moreover, financial aid focused on temporary measures and failed to invest in long-term economic resilience, leaving SMEs vulnerable. Such selective distribution of aid can be viewed as a strategy for consolidating political power, whereby those who demonstrate loyalty are rewarded while opposition is punished. This is a

common tactic employed in political propaganda, when reinforcing a narrative of competence and leadership limits opposition voices. The government's narratives frequently excluded the role of opposition parties, portraying them as obstructive or unhelpful during the crisis. In this way, the government sought to enhance its reputation as the primary defender of national interests during periods of adversity, a strategy commonly employed in propaganda. The government's control over public media enabled it to influence the narrative surrounding the Anti-Crisis Shields. By focusing on positive outcomes and downplaying any criticisms or shortcomings, the government was able to influence public perception, thereby presenting the shields as a major success of the PiS administration.

3 POLITICAL RATIONALE FOR INTRODUCING ACS BEFORE AND DURING THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The political landscape in Poland began to shift several months prior to the onset of the epidemic. Although the PiS party was successful in winning the majority in parliament and forming a government following the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2019, the upper house of parliament, the Senate, was taken over by the opposition, which proceeded to appoint the Speaker of the Senate. Following several years of independent rule by the PiS party, an institutional and political counterpoint emerged, which was likely to complicate the governance process. The indications of a decline in authority in the context of the approaching presidential election in 2020 necessitated the undertaking of supplementary efforts by the incumbent administration. The shifting balance of power prompted the PiS to pursue the objective of retaining the presidency, an influential role previously occupied by Andrzej Duda from PiS from 2015. For the PiS, ensuring the swift re-election of the incumbent assumed great importance, a goal that acquired new significance with the advent of the pandemic (Jacunski 2021, 280). For the opposition, the presidential election also held significant importance. The election presented an opportunity to challenge the political dominance of the PiS party and advance other political objectives associated with the strategic plans of emerging political competitors. Additionally, Szymon Hołownia and his party, Polska 2050, as well as Krzysztof Bosak of the Konfederacja, were involved. A significant point of contention emerged regarding the date and manner of conducting the elections, which gave rise to a political and constitutional crisis. The five-year term of Andrzej Duda was due to conclude on 6 August 2020. The first round of elections could have been held on a weekday between 28 April and 23 May 2020, while the second round would have been scheduled for between 12 May and 6 June 2020. PiS was resolute in its intention to proceed with the scheduled elections. In the initial phase of the opinion polls, incumbent President Andrzej Duda was shown to enjoy considerable and increasing levels of support. Sula et al. have elucidated (2021, 30) that Law and Justice had justifiable concerns that the government's pandemic response would rapidly lose support as mortality rates increased and the economic impact became evident. Consequently, the government resolved to modify the obligatory election-oriented stipulations and refrain from postponing the electoral process. During the lead-up to the presidential elections, the PiS government emphasized its role in safeguarding the nation against the dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn.

The elections were scheduled for 10 May 2020. Meanwhile, since 20 March 2020, a plethora of restrictions have been in place, including, for example, the

prohibition of assembling or free movement of people, which one can recognize as an abuse of a democratic principles and non-direct deprivation of a right to protest. This had significant implications for the course and implementation of the basic functions of elections. Consequently, in the context of the ongoing epidemiological crisis associated with the novel coronavirus in Poland, several voices have emerged, both among the candidates in the electoral process and among constitutional experts, advocating for the postponement of the scheduled elections. Michalak (2020, 6) posited that "during an epidemic of the novel coronavirus and the associated restrictions imposed by the state of epidemic, it is practically unfeasible and entails a multitude of legal and organisational complications." The Ombudsman highlighted that conducting the elections in the scheduled timeframe would constitute a violation of the health and lives of the citizens (Bodnar 2020). The Supreme Court ruled that it would be impossible to collect the requisite 100,000 signatures in support of a candidate as directed by the PKW in the context of a pandemic. The question of the legality of the elections was a prominent topic of discussion in both the public sphere and the academic community (Matczak 2020; Pyrżyńska 2022). Furthermore, legal experts have observed that, in the current legal framework, there is no explicit provision enabling the alteration of the scheduled date of elections that have already been convened within the course of a term. The incumbent administration sought to hold the elections in accordance with the legal deadline. In mid-April 2020, the Prime Minister entrusted the Polish Post with the task of preparing and carrying out the necessary actions for the organisation of the 2020 presidential elections, which were to be held in a postal voting system due to the prevailing pandemic circumstances. This situation was without precedent, as elections in Poland are conducted exclusively in a stationary mode. The transfer of responsibility for the organisation of what are known as 'envelope elections' gave rise to considerable opposition from numerous local government officials, who were unwilling to transfer the data of electors to the state postal operator. Meanwhile, one of the presidential candidates revealed the contents of the electoral campaign material, which had been leaked from one of the printing plants. This included copies of the electoral cards with the candidates' names and a form for voters to complete their details. The events, in conjunction with the lack of preparedness for the electoral process, resulted in a situation wherein the State Electoral Commission formally declared the impossibility of casting votes for candidates and appealed to the Marshal of the Sejm regarding the organisation of new elections, which were duly scheduled for 28 June 2020. A total of 11 candidates were registered for the presidential election in Poland. The elections were conducted in a hybrid manner. The default option would be traditional in-person voting; however, an alternative option for voting by post remained available. The competitive nature of the political process resulted in a second round of voting, in which the incumbent President of the Republic, Andrzej Duda, representing the right-wing camp, and Rafał Trzaskowski, representing the opposition, participated. President Duda emerged as the winner of the election, securing a margin of approximately 2% in terms of popular support over his rival. The victory and subsequent re-election of the incumbent president, who is associated with the ruling political party, did not result in a reduction of political conflict in Poland; on the contrary, it contributed to the intensification of the existing political crisis. In the autumn of 2020, the government was confronted with a dual challenge: the public health crisis caused by the pandemic and the political crisis resulting from the confrontation with anti-government protests. These challenges were compounded by internal conflicts within PiS (Pytlas 2021, 350). The Polish population demonstrated scepticism regarding the necessity of implementing numerous restrictions in the context of observing political and governmental

events, as well as the management of the pandemic. The results of the survey (Duszyński et al. 2020, 43–44) indicate a clear discrepancy between the objective reality and the perception of danger. During the electoral period, the government's messaging and decision-making processes were not entirely consistent, which may have led to perceptions that the government was overreacting and sowing unnecessary panic. In May 2020, approximately one-third of respondents indicated that they held such an attitude.

An evaluation of the government's actions in response to the pandemic confirms a critical attitude towards the government and the polarisation of opinions. In 2022, following the lifting of the threat, over half of respondents evaluated the implemented actions and their efficacy negatively (including almost 29% who expressed a definitive negative opinion), while approximately 30% of participants in the survey provided positive assessments in this regard. Conversely, approximately 16% of respondents did not provide a definitive response (Wojnicki 2022, 26). Furthermore, in the same study, over half of the respondents assessed the functioning of democracy in contemporary Poland as unsatisfactory (*ibidem*, 16). It must be noticed though, that the distrust to information related to coronavirus was pretty high across many other countries, too. Freedom House report survey data from 192 countries shows that majority (62%) survey respondents distrusted national governments in that respect.

4 ANTI-CRISIS SHIELDS IN POLAND

The Polish government has initiated the implementation of an aid programme, designated the Anti-Crisis Shield (ACS), which encompasses a series of measures designed to address the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic. The package of solutions, prepared by the government, is designed to address the potential emergence of a crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The government has identified three principal objectives of the legislative package that constitutes the Anti-Crisis Shields. These are: (1) the protection of employment, (2) the reduction of burdens and (3) the preservation of liquidity in companies (Tarcza Antykryzysowa, 2020). Anti-crisis programmes have been developed by a number of government departments and agencies, including the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Development, the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Finance, the Social Insurance Institution, the National Health Fund, the Polish Development Fund, as well as the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Administration, Education and Science, and other central agencies. These programmes commenced the process of becoming legally binding as early as March 2020, thereby forming the basis for the crisis management strategy. In addition to public health institutions, other agencies under the control of the ruling party were included in the implementation of the anti-crisis programmes. The National Bank of Poland, the National Development Bank, Pekao Polish Bank, the Polish Development Fund, the Social Insurance Institution, the Ministry of Development, Labour and Technology, the Industrial Development Agency and other central institutions were also involved.

The government solutions introduced in connection with the 2019 novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in Poland came into force on 1 April 2020 (Shield 1.0). Subsequent iterations of the Shield were introduced in 2020, including 2.0 (April), 3.0 (May), 4.0 (June), 5.0 (September), and 6.0 (December). In 2021, the seventh iteration of the Shield (January), eighth (February) and ninth (April) versions were implemented. As calculated by Kubiczek and Derej

(2022, 43–47), the total number of instruments designed to support the SME sector in Poland alone was approximately 80. The introduction of the package was intended to provide economic, business and employment support during the pandemic. The Shields encompassed five domains of intervention: health protection, job protection and workers' safety; public investment; strengthening the financial system; and financing for entrepreneurs. The estimated budget of the ACS is PLN 312 billion, while a report by the Polish Economic Institute indicates that the total amount of ACS support in 2020 was PLN 162.9 billion (Dębkowska et al. 2021).

The Anti-Crisis Shields introduced between 2020 and 2022 were related to the pandemic. Their objective was to mitigate the effects of the reduction in activity across numerous sectors of the economy. Over the course of approximately two years, successive iterations of the shields encompassed new sectors of economic activity, the scope of beneficiaries was expanded, and the shortcomings of previous solutions were addressed. In 2022, the outbreak of war in Ukraine led to the emergence of new challenges for the Polish economy and society. These included the intensification of the inflationary pressure and the onset of a migration crisis, characterised by a significant influx of individuals fleeing Ukraine due to the ongoing conflict. The government is resorting to a well-established image and political instrument, namely the announcement of further shields. One of the initial measures introduced was the Anti-Inflation Shield (AIS), comprising a series of measures implemented in February 2022. The package includes a zero-rate VAT on food items, with the objective of providing citizens with some respite from the effects of the prevailing inflationary pressures. However, the government does not attribute inflation and other negative economic phenomena solely to its own decisions or internal conditions. Instead, it increasingly points to Russian aggression as a primary cause. The rationale for the introduction of the AIS asserts that "in the fight against inflation and the crisis caused by Russia, the most important thing for us is to protect the wallets of Poles."⁴ (web2). Another shield introduced by the government is the Government Energy Shield (GES). The rationale for this shield reiterates the government's stance on Russia, stating that "Russian energy blackmail against Europe has caused fuel and raw material prices to skyrocket in a short period of time, thus making system heat more expensive too." It is our intention to safeguard you and your loved ones from the adverse consequences of the crisis. It is why we are making improvements to the price cap mechanism (web1).

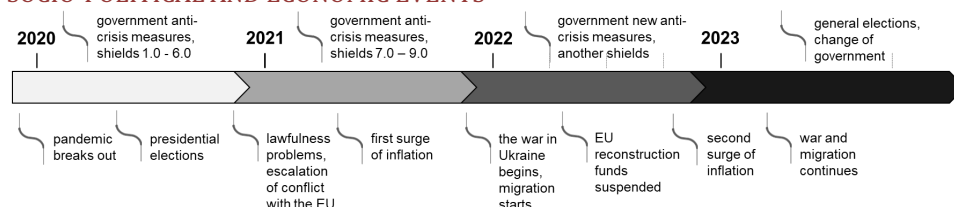
The PLN 3,000 coal allowance was incorporated into the household budgets of those whose primary heating source was coal or coal-based fuels. Furthermore, the government introduced the shelter allowance, also referred to as the inflation allowance, which constituted a pivotal component of the government's AIS. This offset the rising costs of energy, gas and food. Approximately seven million households in Poland with the lowest incomes will be provided with support. Furthermore, the government announced the introduction of the Government Solidarity Shield (GSS), which was designed to protect households against significant increases in electricity prices. The government has indicated that the GSS will prevent most Polish households from experiencing any impact from electricity price increases. In essence, they will not perceive any change in their energy costs. Once again, the rationale behind the shield was to ascribe culpability to a specific exogenous entity and to absolve the government of responsibility for the prevailing circumstances. A new line of argument emerged, whereby responsibility for the rise in energy prices was attributed not only to

⁴ Government websites are referred to as web 1-4.

Russia, but also to the European Union: "At this time, we are bearing the financial burden of Europe's misguided energy and climate policies, as well as the repercussions of Russia's unscrupulous military aggression against Ukraine. In these challenging circumstances, our objective is to aid the Polish people, which is why we are implementing the Solidarity Shield. The objective of the shield is to safeguard the Polish population from the significant price increases that have already been observed. Such elevated costs are also incurred by citizens in all member states of the European Union. (web3)

To conclude, between 2020 and 2022, the government introduced a series of solution packages, grouped under the concept of the shield. The initial aim was to deal with the immediate consequences of the pandemic. However, the rationale subsequently shifted to include the war in Ukraine and the European Union's climate and energy policies. The following figure 1 presents a timeline of government action and related socio-political and economic events.

FIGURE 1: TIMELINE OF GOVERNMENT ANTI-CRISIS MEASURES AND IMPORTANT SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EVENTS



Source: own elaboration.

5 GOVERNMENT NARRATIVE STRUCTURES ANALYSIS OF ANTI-CRISIS SHIELDS COMMUNICATION

The article was informed by the collection and analysis of audio-visual and textual content. The video corpus comprises 17 spots or statements, that promote government anti-crisis programmes and were published between 2021 and 2022. The video content was selected based on the identification of materials tagged #CrisisShield on YouTube. The broadcasters of these materials included political actors such as ministries, the prime minister's office, a political party, government agencies, and state-controlled banks and energy companies. The video sample comprised a diverse range of material published exclusively by various actors linked directly or indirectly to the government. Additionally, an analysis was conducted of government websites where source information on Anti-Crisis Shields was published.

In the videos, the verbal layer was transcribed, and a link was sought to categories that fit into the construction of an intervening welfare state with the dominant political position of PiS. This is in line with Sadurski's (2019) argument that persistent support for the populist Law and Justice party can be explained by its successful, if irrational, welfare policies.

The following analysis employs the concepts of frames and narratives. In the context of political communication, the use of frames is frequently observed as a means of influencing the way in which narratives are perceived by the public. The two concepts are closely related yet serve distinct functions in the construction of meaning and the shaping of perception. The interdependence of frames and narratives is a fundamental aspect of their relationship. Frames shape the context

in which a narrative is told, while narratives imbue frames with depth and meaning. While frames establish the context, narratives serve to reinforce and imbue the frames with life by offering concrete examples and emotional appeals. A frame can be defined as the underlying structure or lens through which a story, event, or idea is presented. Frames shape how an audience perceives an issue by emphasising certain aspects and downplaying others. A narrative, on the other hand, is a structured, coherent story with a beginning, middle, and end that conveys a specific message or moral. Narratives contain characters, events, conflicts, and resolutions. They tell a story by connecting events in a meaningful way and are more concrete than frames.

The principal categories of narrative framework identified in the analysis are as follows: 1) the state as a caregiver, 2) the state as a benefactor, and 3) the government as a protector. Tables 1-3 provide a summary of the above-mentioned framing categories, examples of narratives and their manifestations, and a brief interpretation. The concept of the state as a caregiver draws upon political theories pertaining to welfare state models, social democracy, and paternalism. The state apparatus established by PiS in 2015 has introduced a universal and widely available system of social welfare. This constitutes a contract between the government and the citizens. The narrative around caregiving focuses on the emotional, financial, and social well-being of the population. The government frames its interventions as swift, decisive, and essential in preventing a catastrophic collapse of the economy. Statements from officials and promotional materials emphasizes how early decisions prevented widespread economic ruin.

TABLE 1: NARRATIVE STRUCTURES ANALYSIS - FRAMING CATEGORY "STATE AS A CAREGIVER"

Examples of narratives and their manifestation	Interpretation
<p>1. Personal experience and testimonials "I [entrepreneur] was able to keep my employees and pay them regular salaries." (v1) "Thanks to government support programmes, we have maintained jobs" (v5, v12)</p> <p>2. Government action, reassurance „The Polish government responded [to the crisis] already in December by cutting taxes and excise duties (...) „We will help Poles in this difficult period (...) That is why M. Morawiecki's government has prepared the Anti-Inflation Shield 2.0 (...) so that the effects of the global crisis are felt as little as possible' (v11) „Crisis shield - timely assistance" (v12)</p> <p>3. Emotional and psychological impact "The shield gave me a sense of security" (v13)</p> <p>4. Avoidance and prevention "Thanks to the government's Crisis Shield, companies and workers will get through the current crisis safely. (...) We have saved millions of jobs." (v14) „Thanks to swift government decisions, Poland avoided the worst-case scenario" (v16) "If there had been no Anti-Crisis Shield, our business would no longer exist." (v17)</p>	<p>Each narrative structure contributes to a broader storyline that promotes the effectiveness and necessity of the Polish government's Anti-Crisis Shield and other support programs. The narratives vary from personal testimonials and emotional appeals to government-centric success stories, preventive narratives, and reassurance claims.</p> <p>This combination of structures creates a multifaceted message that aims to instil trust, gratitude, and support for the caregiving government's crisis management efforts.</p>

Source: own elaboration.

The frame of the state as a caregiver emphasized the government's paternalistic role in protecting citizens, fostering gratitude, trust, and loyalty to the ruling party. It portrayed the PiS government as indispensable, reinforcing its position as the saviour of the nation. The state as a benefactor provides targeted subsidies and support to key economic sectors. The government highlights its role in distributing resources. This narrative structure focused on the government's generosity and the tangible benefits provided to the aid-recipients. This framing painted the government as a benevolent provider of resources, underscoring its ability to take care of the population's economic needs.

TABLE 2: NARRATIVE STRUCTURES ANALYSIS - FRAMING CATEGORY "STATE AS A BENEFACTOR"

<p>1. Personal experience and testimonials "We are very satisfied. This is the first time we have received anything from the state." (v1) 2. Cause-and-effect narrative „Thanks to the National Bank of Poland measures, loan instalments will be lower" (v2) 3. Support " The package (...) is the largest scale of aid in Poland's modern history. (...) Above all, we must keep jobs. (...) We will therefore provide financial support" (v3) „Fortunately, financial subsidies have been put in place" (v4) 4. Direct benefit and targeted beneficiary „We have introduced allowances for coal, for pellets and other biomass, for LPG, fuel oil, chunk wood" (v7) "We are introducing a shelter allowance that will benefit more than 7 million households" (v8) " Save 2,000 PLN on your electricity bill with the government's Solidarity Shield" (v15)</p>	<p>The narrative structures in these texts collectively present a comprehensive story of government intervention during a crisis, using various rhetorical techniques to convey effectiveness, satisfaction, scale, and targeted benefits. Direct benefit statements play a role in reinforcing a positive image of government action. The structure presents a causal and attribution narrative, build on a straightforward relationship between government action and a tangible benefit for the public.</p>
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Source: own elaboration.

By portraying itself as a benefactor, the PiS government could reinforce a sense of dependency on its leadership, positioning itself as the only force capable of delivering critical support during the crisis. The concept of the government as a protector is a fundamental tenet of modern governance. This highlights the government's obligation to guarantee security across a multitude of domains, including economic, health, and national security. The roles entail considerable challenges in maintaining equilibrium between protection, freedom, and citizens' empowerment. Protection should not be equated with paternalism or reinforce regressive tendencies. A protective metaphor prompts the audience to take a specific action ('reach for the crisis shield'), while the metaphor of a 'shield' suggests defence and safety. A shield is positioned as a necessary safeguard. The government as a protector frame reinforced its image as a strong and capable authority, stepping in to shield the country from external threats. By invoking metaphors of defence and solidarity, the government bolstered its role as an indispensable force in protecting Poland, both economically and socially.

TABLE 3: NARRATIVE STRUCTURES ANALYSIS - FRAMING CATEGORY "GOVERNMENT AS A PROTECTOR"

<p>1. Protective metaphor "Reach for the crisis shield to protect jobs and Polish companies" (v6) „We protect Polish families!" (v7) "We have saved millions of jobs." (v14) 2. Comprehensive assurance "We protect Polish families, we cut taxes" (v10) 3. Emotional and psychological reassurance "The shield gave me a sense of security" (v13) 4. Solidarity "Government Solidarity Shield - together we protect against energy price increases" (v15)</p>	<p>The narrative structures in these texts utilize a combination of metaphorical language, collective and emotive appeals, and solidarity-focused messages to convey the government's reassurance role in crisis management and protection of citizens. The government acts as an effective and proactive protector.</p>
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Source: own elaboration.

A detailed examination of the narrative presented in the materials reveals that the focus is on the perspectives of the protagonists in relation to the solutions. The video materials employ both first-person (e.g., the Prime Minister, entrepreneurs) and third person (lector's voice-over) narrative voices. The nature of the material is indicative of the formula employed in the promotional videos, which typically comprise a brief, pre-recorded segment uploaded to a digital platform. The duration of the videos also corroborates this assessment, as they typically range from 15 to 60 seconds. The analysed videos exemplify a concise and targeted approach to messaging.

Several narrative structures were identified within the three main categories that the government was framed within. One of the narrative structures was related to personal experience and testimonials. This structure involved the sharing of a personal story in which the speaker benefited from government support. Another structure attributed the saving of jobs directly to government programmes or actions undertaken by other government-dependent actors. This is therefore an example of a cause-and-effect narrative. The PiS government highlighted its role in securing a safe passage through a crisis for companies and workers, which was framed in a reassurance and success narrative. The other narrative employs a targeted beneficiary approach, emphasising the scale or amount of the aid provided.

The above analysis of the government narrative structures and frames of Anti-Crisis Shield communication reveals the existence of a carefully constructed narrative, the purpose of which is to consolidate power, manage public perception, and promote the PiS government as the only reliable force during the ongoing pandemic. The deployment of personal testimonies, protective metaphors and cause-and-effect narratives served to reinforce the government's image as a caregiver, benefactor and protector, while simultaneously marginalising the opposition and reducing democratic accountability. This analysis demonstrates how communication during a crisis can be instrumentalised for political gain, particularly in environments experiencing democratic backsliding.

6 CONCLUSION

The impact of Anti-Crisis Shields on democracy is contingent upon their design and implementation. When implemented with transparency, inclusivity, and respect for democratic norms, these measures can reinforce democratic governance and economic and social stability. However, if they result in the consolidation of power and a reduction in accountability, they can erode the very foundations of democracy. It is therefore imperative that governments strike a balance between the immediate requirements of crisis management and the long-term sustainability of democratic institutions. Narrative analysis used in this paper served as a tool for identifying and understanding few mechanisms of democratic backsliding. By examining how government framed its actions, particularly during pandemic, it helped expose hidden autocratic agendas, the manipulation of public opinion, and the erosion of democratic norms. In Poland, Anti-Crisis Shields were introduced by the government as a means of mitigating the economic impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and other crises on businesses and individuals. These measures, officially designated as the "Anti-Crisis Shields" encompassed a spectrum of financial assistance, including subsidies for businesses to retain employment, deferred tax payments, and other financial support mechanisms for a duration of approximately two years, inclusive of the electoral period. However, in the initial stages of the pandemic, the government was not averse to becoming embroiled in political manoeuvring, seeking to consolidate the authority of the incumbent president from the United Right. For a period spanning more than two years, the government engaged in active communication regarding its various financial programmes, utilising the extensive communication resources of actors subservient to the ruling party. This was to consolidate further the power of the PiS government, with an awareness of the impending general elections scheduled for 2023.

The anti-crisis measures implemented by the state in 2020-2021 were evaluated by the Supreme Audit Office in its report (NIK 2023) as being poorly designed and, furthermore, lacking in supervision. One of the shortcomings was the lack of alignment between the criteria for granting the aid and the intended objectives, namely the protection of jobs and the provision of liquidity to companies. The politicians responsible for overseeing the aid programmes did not evaluate the effectiveness or efficiency of the forms of support that were applied. Therefore, it seems reasonable to posit that other objectives may have been pursued, including the advancement of a political image-focused agenda. This was achieved, in part, through the frames and narrative structures described in this article. Furthermore, it can be surmised that this was part of the 'closure' of the PiS government rule (Makowski and Waszak 2020, 2) through the utilisation of frames related to welfare (the state as a caregiver), generosity (the state as a benefactor) and the capacity to effectively protect (the government as a protector), while simultaneously undermining the mechanisms of social and institutional control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following AI tools were used while working on this paper: DeepL Pro and DeepL Write Pro to optimise the translation of source texts and ChatGPT to support the analysis of narrative structures and organize references.

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APPENDIX

Inventory of Materials and Codes Used for Units of Analysis

1. YouTube videos (v1 – v17):

- v1) Ministry of Finance spot, #TarczaAntykryzysowa, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_6SHLMudvA
- v2) statement by the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy Marlena Maciąg, #TarczaAntykryzysowa, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mjk8ISoH07Y>
- v3) statement by the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on the Anti-Crisis Shield <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg-qHG0r8g8>
- v4) Ministry of Finance spot, How the #AnticrisisShield helps entrepreneurs https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di17da_NclA
- v5) PKO Bank Polski corporate spot, Anti-crisis Shield | We support Polish companies | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XJdvOxQDmc>
- v6) Ministry of Development and Technology spot, Anticrisis Shield <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fife7juWOU0>
- v7) Ministry of Climate and Environment spot, The Polish Energy Shield - spot 30 sec. English subtitles, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SAL4YvE_i8
- v8) playlist Governmental Energy Shield - information campaign https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLrWAtxHx4r7o_FBE4Rh2hlmdSD46QYTV3
- v9) spot by the Prime Minister's Office, We introduce a shield allowance - we protect Polish families. #Anti-inflation Shield, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCi75P_E3h4
- v10) spot by the Prime Minister's Office, We reduce taxes - we protect Polish families, #Anti-inflation Shield, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUC42_Ajyz4
- v11) spot by the Prime Minister's Office, Fighting inflation together - Government's #Anti-Inflation Shield 2.0 will reduce prices of basic products <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHwcZCjM54M>
- v12) Polish Development Fund corporate spot, Anti-crisis shield - timely help <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMzRHhG56xY&t=1s>
- v13) Industrial Development Agency corporate spot, The Shield gave me a sense of security Dentica Stomatologia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWr2QaqboVg>
- v14) BGK corporate spot, Crisis Shield, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R_a8T4ZaBw
- v15) PGE CG corporate spot, Thanks to the government's Solidarity Shield you save 2k on your electricity bill!, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKS1HpzkBxA>
- v16) Law and Justice spot, #TheCrisis Shield. #PolskiŁad, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeKABY3Uq-w>
- v17) Industrial Development Agency corporate spot, Salon VR Łomża: "Gdyby nie było Tarczy Antykryzysowej, naszej działalności już by nie było", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPo3KtrIQKk>

2. Government websites (web1 – web4):

web1)	Government	Energy	Shield
https://www.gov.pl/web/chronimyrodziny/rzadowa-tarcza-energetyczna			
web2)	Government	Anti-Inflation	Shield,
https://www.gov.pl/web/chronimyrodziny/rzadowa-tarcza-antynflacyjna			
web3)	Government	Solidarity	Shield,
https://www.gov.pl/web/chronimyrodziny/rzadowa-tarcza-solidarnosciowa			
web4)	Government	Anti-Crisis Shield,	https://www.gov.pl/web/tarczaantykrzysowa

**PROTIKRIZNI ŠČITI KOT SREDSTVO ZA UTRDITEV OBLASTI. PRIMER STRANKE ZAKON IN PRAVIČNOST NA POLJSKEM**

Na Poljskem je pandemija sovpadla z že dlje časa obstoječo krizo pravne države ter jo še zaostrila. Članek raziskuje odziv poljske vlade na pandemijo COVID-19 z orodji javne politike, znanimi kot protikrizni ščiti (ACS). Ščite, ki so bili prvotno namenjeni ublažitvi negativnega gospodarskega vpliva pandemije, je uporabila tudi desničarska stranka Zakon in pravičnost (PiS) kot strateški instrument za utrjevanje politične moči. Z analizo vladne promocijske vsebine in izvajanja politike med pandemijo prispevek razkriva, kako je vlada izkoristila gospodarsko pomoč za okrepitev svoje volilne baze in avtoritete. Raziskava obravnava vprašanja o instrumentalizaciji javnih politik za politične koristi, manipulaciji kriznih narativov, turbulentni volilni kampanji in učinkih na procese demokratičnega nazadovanja na Poljskem. Navsezadnje članek razpravlja tudi o tem, kako lahko krizno upravljanje, kadar je politično usmerjeno, spodkopava demokratične norme in odgovornost.

Ključne besede: protikrizni ščit; utrjevanje oblasti; demokratično nazadovanje; stranka Zakon in pravičnost.