Fighting the virus, "hunting the witches" – moralizing in public discourses during the coronavirus pandemic in Croatia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to discuss particular features of the public debate around the COVID-19 pandemic and its mitigation strategies in Croatian media from the beginning of 2020 to mid-September of the same year.

Design/methodology/approach – The discussion is theoretically grounded on Luhmann's concept of moral communication combined with the key assumption of critical discourse analysis that language reflects a position of power of social actors. Based on these premises, the analysis of a sample of articles in a chosen online media was conducted to uncover the moral codes in the public debate concerning the corona outbreak and connect them with specific moral discourses of particular social actors.

Findings – The findings clearly indicate that the communication about the pandemic is considerably imbued with moralization and that moral coding is profoundly used to generate preferred types of behaviour of citizens and their compliance with the imposed epidemiologic measures. In conclusion, Luhmann's claim of moralization as a contentious form of communication is confirmed as the examined public discussion fosters confrontations and generates disruptions rather than contributing to a productive dialogue among diverse social actors.

Originality/value – The novelty of the approach lies in the combination of Luhman's conceiving of moral communication with critical discourse analysis that, taken together, entails a pertinent research tool for analysing relevant attributes of the ongoing vibrant debate on the coronavirus outbreak.

Keywords Social systems, Sociology

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is barely disputable that the coronavirus pandemic is one the most significant events in the past few years on a global scale, implying enormous effects on all social subsystems, i.e. all domains of social life. Alongside medical aspects of the pandemic circumstances and consequent responses of the health-care system, it is also particularly valuable to observe how the coronavirus affects the economy, political and legal system, science, art, sport and the entire social system and its environment.

Apart from that, this pandemic situation generates a remarkably vibrant moral communication with respect to the behaviour of individuals in a situation of globally proclaimed severe health risks, including life-threatening risks.

The central aim of this article is to examine some particular features of moral communication around the coronavirus-caused COVID-19 disease pandemic in Croatia between January and mid-September 2020.

Theoretical background

The used research approach combines particular elements of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theoretical toolbox and critical discourse analysis. The starting point is Luhmann's conceiving of moral communication (1991; 1992; 1996; 2012 pp. 239–245) as the distinction between respect and disrespect, esteem and dis-esteem that produces specific semantics based on binary codes (like good-bad) i.e. positive/negative oppositions, around which the moral dispute is taking place. According to his position, this is a particularly contentious form of communication as it generates social conflicts rather than contributing to their solving or leading towards integration: "morality can no longer serve to integrate society with regard to its optimum state" (Luhmann, 2012, p. 243), but (morality) rather generalizes controversies (Luhmann, 1996, p. 34), "arises from conflicts and encourages conflicts" (Luhmann, 2012, p. 244). Moreover, in the political field, moral communication is a highly effective tool for discrediting opponents (Luhmann, 1992, p. 1007). Although moralization, in a certain sense, decreases complexity as it reduces the content of moral communication to the two binary opposites such as "good" and "bad", it is impossible to establish objective criteria in judgements about moral values. At the same time, it is obvious that characterizing objects of moral claims as, for instance, "evil" represents their disqualification, devaluation and may lead towards discrimination and subsequently towards a wide scope of hostile treatments. By referring to Luhmann, Moeller (2009, p. 25) effectively points out: "Morality is, thus, a social technique for introducing distinctions. It is a way of dividing our world into goodies and baddies" [1]. Contrary to pre-modern societies, in which moral authorities and hierarchies of moral values were clearly fixed and principally undisputed, functionally differentiated modern societies are characterized by moral pluralism where moral judgements could be equally legitimately provided from diverse viewpoints, so the same issue could be evaluated as "good" or "bad" (Roth *et al.*, 2020; Luhmann, 1992).

Regarding distinctions, Roth (2019) rightly differentiates *true* and *false* distinctions, depending on whether a binary pair is mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive (as it is in true distinctions), where "good/bad" is the example (alongside "nature/men", "individual/ society", "economy/society", "men/women", "conflict/consensus" and numerous other examples) of a false distinction, while "good/not-good" and "bad/not-bad" are the instances of true distinction. However, to my understanding and following Luhmann's logic, the difference between the two types of distinctions is not crucial for examining moralization, as moral communication absorbs both, i.e. both types of distinctions can be the subject matter of moral dispute and tools of dividing the world into the spheres of morally acceptable and morally contested [2].

Several authors have recently conveyed valuable contributions to discussing morality from the perspective of social systems theory. For instance, Roth and Schütz (2015) convincingly argue that, due to its lack of reference to society as a whole, morality cannot be considered as a distinctive function system. Valentinov (2019, p. 105) claims that moral communication is actually proliferating nowadays and that point is well corroborated by Carlton's analysis which clearly demonstrates that since the early 1980s moral communication is on the rise (Carlton, 2019), which is also confirmed by Luhmann's (2012, p. 241) assertion about the everyday presence of moralization in both media and in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, Valentinov (2019, p. 105) suggests that moral communication today is particularly present in the domain of politics and business. The latter is

documented by Laursen and Noe (2017), who, by exploring particular empirical cases of food production chains, betoken on the interconnection between economy and morality, as organizations within these chains communicate values by using moral coding.

It should be stressed that according to Luhmann (1991, p. 84) moralization is not constantly present with an equal intensity all the time, but especially rises in dangerous situations. Thus, it might be assumed that moral communication within the overall context of the coronavirus pandemic would be intensified.

For the purpose of this work Luhmann's conceiving of the moral communication, the concept has been supplemented with the critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak and Meyer, 2001; Wodak and Chilton, 2005; Weiss and Wodak, 2007; Wooffitt, 2005, pp. 137–145). The latter can be most simply comprehended as a theoretical position, as well as an analytical approach, that is anchored in the assumption that discursive practices are tightly intertwined with the social context within which they appear. Discourse is conceived "as an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). The crucial assumption in this sense is that language represents a form of social action and to properly understand it one needs to envision how particular social structures produce discourses. Of immense interest are issues of power, history and ideology as features that take important roles in forming discourses (Wodak, 2001)[3].

When translating a critical discourse analysis standpoint into the examined issue of moral communication within "corona times", it can be assumed that by inspecting morally imbued language it is possible to unfold which social actors promote particular moral discourses. That bridge between the language itself and social actors who practice a given type of discourse is labelled as "mediation" by the proponents of critical discourse analysis (Meyer, 2001, p. 15; Fairclough, 2003, pp. 30–31). Hence, alongside unfolding whether the public discourse around the pandemic comprises moral semantics, it is valuable to identify which social actors produce certain types of moral discourse.

Empirical research design

After clarifying the eclectic theoretical standpoint, at the empirical level of analysis the key aim is to detect moral codes, notably, moral binary codes in the described Luhmann's sense, that emerged out of the corona pandemic environment as discursive elements that reflect positions and practices of social actors in the Croatian public space. The empirical analysis is based on the critical discourse analysis technique and encompasses diverse sources: public announcements, interviews, comments and various articles tackling the theme of the coronavirus pandemic and strategies of coping with it. As the scope of media-produced content is immense, the empirical content included in the analysis is limited to the sample including articles from two news websites: "Index.hr" and "Dnevno.hr". The logic of such a selection is to encompass a broader ideological spectrum as "Index.hr" generally targets the leftist oriented audience, although right-libertarian content also appears, while on the other hand "Dnevno.hr" is primarily oriented towards rightist positions albeit occasionally also addresses the (social) conservative-right position. For the analysis, the articles tagged with "koronavirus Hrvatska" (op. a. "coronavirus Croatia") were chosen. In the examined time framework, on the "Index.hr" website there were nearly 6,000 articles available with the relevant tag. To reduce this tremendous bulk of the content, for a detailed analysis articles were selected whose headings apparently dealt with the epidemiologic dimension of the debate and referred to the behaviour of citizens, while articles dealing primarily with other aspects of the complex corona issue were left out. In total, 912 articles remained which then were analysed. Following the same logic, 447 articles out of 1,155 tagged with the "coronavirus Croatia" marker were chosen from the "Dnevno.hr" website. The length of the

analysed articles differs considerably, ranging from short news to more extensive ones that often included statements of responsible ministers, health-care officials, members of the "Croatian Institute of Public Health" and other relevant actors, of which the representatives of the "National Crisis Headquarters for the Coronavirus Pandemic" (further NCHFTCP), the central entity in charge of dealing with the pandemic, should specifically be mentioned. Besides their own news and comments, both news websites often published the content from other news websites, news agencies, newspapers, TV media, as well as reports by readers, so that the range of inputs to the debate around the corona outbreak was very broad. The empirical content included in the analysis covers the time framework from the end of January when the corona outbreak started and began being discussed as a separate topic, to 15 September 2020.

By its epistemological profile, this is an exploratory type of research (Swedberg (2020) in Elman *et al.* (2020), Stebbins (2001)), which means that possible initial hypotheses have not been stated, but rather the basic understanding of moral communication attributes has yet to be conveyed. The analytical technique was relatively simple as it was based on coding the exclusively moralizing discursive elements solely on binary dichotomies in the described Luhmann's sense. Hence, discursive components that did not bear a moralizing connotation were left out as irrelevant for this study. The focus was placed on moral semantics and moral codes only. In terms of technical implementation of the analysis, the blend of an *in vivo, descriptive, value, versus*, and *protocol* coding [4] technique (Saldaña, 2009, pp. 46–148) was used. All articles were read in minute detail and out of expressions such as "[. . .] everybody must take care of himself/herself and behave *responsibly* [. . .]", "[. . .] we all must behave very *responsibly*" or "[. . .] I thank all people in Croatia who are *responsible* and follow instructions of the Headquarters [. . .]" the code *responsible* as one part of the dichotomy was extracted. The other pole of the moral code "responsible/irresponsible" was distilled out of formulations like: "[. . .] there are *irresponsible* people who spread fake news [. . .] ", " [. . .] passengers complained as he was the only one without a mask and due to such *irresponsible* behaviour all the others suffered [. . .] " or " [. . .] nobody, neither parents nor teachers will be hostages of *irresponsible* night parties [. . .] ". Hence, sometimes verbatim expressions by the actors were taken, while in other cases expressions in the detected morally connoted binary dichotomies were derived by the author. Such is especially the case with expressions in binary pairs that were not explicitly expressed, but rather implicitly present, so they were articulated by the researcher when it was obvious that using a particular word, like "aware", implies the presence of people that are morally discredited as "unaware" or if "egoistic/ selfish" individuals are explicitly mentioned, it is implied that there are also "empathic" persons, although such a label was not immediately found in the analysed sample. Additionally, the usage of categorizations such as "idiots", "covidiots", "manipulated", "fake" or "stupid" suggests that there are also others who are "reasonable", "free-minded", "trustworthy" and/or "wise". These unarticulated opposites and positively evaluated parts of the dichotomies were rather reconstructed during the analysis. It is interesting and symptomatic to note that mostly negative poles of moral semantics appear explicitly, while positive judgements remain rather unarticulated, perhaps, as a specific discursive strategy to discredit the "opponents". This observation, however, inevitably requires some further and more precise analyses prior to drawing any firm conclusions.

The analysis was conducted with the assistance of "Maxqda" software to handle more easily the considerable amount of data with the required accuracy. The targeted outcome of the analysis has been to:

- extract moral binary codes and
- attach their usage to particular types of social actors, i.e. to unravel "mediation".

The next section brings the most relevant insights. To some extent the section will also be descriptive, to depict the circumstances within which moral communication has emerged.

Main findings of the study – moralization about the COVID-19 pandemic

During the analysis, it became obvious that the dynamics of moral communication differs with regard to the dynamics of the pandemic itself. Therefore, it is relevant to take into account the temporal dimension of changes of semantics and moral discourses over the different stages of the pandemic. When looking retrospectively, it becomes apparent that 5 diverse stages can be distinguished:

(1) pre-pandemic stage,

(2) the "first wave",

(3) end of lock-down,

(4) wide opening and the

(5) dawn of the uncertain autumn.

These periods should be primarily conceived as the distinctive stages in the moralization about the pandemic that also correspond to the real dynamics of the virus spreading (Figure 1).

The explanation about the borderlines among the periods and their crucial attributes are provided in the upcoming subsections.

Pre-pandemic stage (prior to February 25)

The topic of COVID-19 was introduced in the public media space quite early, practically when the first cases of the new unknown disease in the Chinese province of Wuhan were recorded in late 2019. The topic was given bigger attention parallel to the expansion of the virus, first in China and then, especially when the virus entered the European ground. A tremendous rise of interest for the coronavirus in Croatia ensued when the rates of the infected drastically increased in Italy. As Italy is not far away from Croatia, the threat of COVID-19 started being treated as a real risk and not an abstract danger that is happening somewhere else. When it became obvious that the import of the virus, in the media often accompanied with the adjective "deadly", was inevitable, the preparation of the medical care system for this occurrence intensified and citizens started to accumulate their food supplies.

It should be emphasized that no traces of moralization were present then. Thus, the pre-pandemic stage is generally marked by the absence of moral categorizations. However, some elements of xenophobia appeared, mainly as fear of "Chinese tourists" and passengers coming from China, that was present in several articles on both of the analysed news websites, most apparently expressed in the title of the article "Citizens of Zagreb massively buy face masks due to fear of Chinese tourists" published on "Dnevno.hr" on January 29, 2020. On the other hand, gratitude towards Chinese authorities and praising the efficient cooperation in organizing the return of Croatian citizens to their homeland was mentioned as well. Hence, the detected xenophobic elements can be conceived as bearing certain moral connotations, however, this stage was not predominantly marked by moral evaluations. The situation concerning this matter profoundly and promptly changed after February 25, when the first coronavirus positive case was recorded.

The "first wave" (February 25 – April 27)

Right after the coronavirus-related infection appeared in Croatia, the vibrant moralization commenced, which was greatly amplified by the fear of the population. The moral
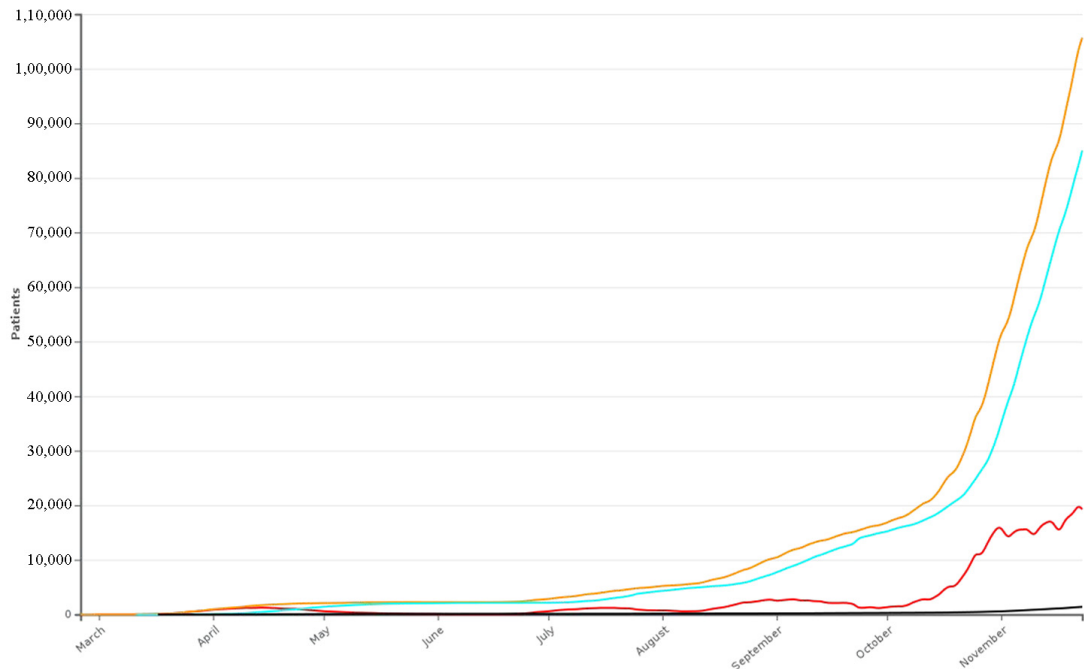
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Figure 1.
The COVID-19
pandemic dynamics
in Croatia

communication was even intensified after the lock-down measures were gradually implemented. Very quickly it became obvious who the "good" and who the "bad" guys were in the newly emerged pandemic "reality". Members of the civil protection service, employees in supply chains, truck drivers, staff of a wide scope of public services like the police and fire brigades and especially medical doctors and medical staff in general, were widely admired as highly positive figures, owing to whom the pandemic would be overcome. On the other hand, moral evaluation was negative in the case of hospitalized patients, potentially contagious persons in imposed self-isolation or people in coerced quarantine – these people were often deeply morally disqualified and even stigmatized as culprits who brought the infection to Croatia. For a considerable period, the local transmission of the virus was neglected and all infected cases were categorized as coming from abroad or stemming from personal contacts with people returning to Croatia. The Croatian "patient zero" went to see the "Champions League" football match between Atalanta and Valencia played in Milano (Italy) on February 19, an event often depicted as the "biological bomb", as it facilitated the spread of the infection particularly in the Bergamo region in Italy. The category of "bad guys" also comprised persons (especially medical doctors) who returned from alpine skiing vacations, tourist visits from abroad, as well as temporary employees coming back to Croatia. The hostility towards these categories was especially present in social media and social networks were particularly rude, even threatening comments, appeared. However, the biggest moral disqualification and stigmatization was towards "COVID-19" positive persons and people in imposed self-isolation. The moral disrespect towards the infected and potentially contagious people to a certain extent even resembled the "witch hunt".

The moral codes extracted from the analysed media sample were the following: "irresponsible/responsible", "aware/unaware", "heroic/shameful", "(bio)-terroristic/heroic", "shameful/proud", "egoistic-selfish/empathic", "idiots-jerks/reasonable", "panicking/reasonable", "careful/selfish", "dangerous/safe", "sincere/foolish", "self-disciplined/selfish", "disciplined/undisciplined", "controlled/

uncontrolled", "moral/immoral", "normal/abnormal", "human/inhuman", "trustworthy/fake" and "evil/good".

Another interesting phenomenon specific for this period is the denunciation of neighbours who infringed the mandatory self-isolation, which is also an expression of their moral devaluation. According to some sources (www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/otkriveno-koliko-je-ljudi-kaznjeno-zbog-krsenja-samoizolacije-i-kolike-su-bile-kazne/2182379.aspx) until May 9 more than 1,500 cases of breaking self-isolation were reported, out of which 82 implied financial penalties. However, some of the cases of intervention were quite controversial, as was the case of a peasant who went out of self-isolation to fertilize the soil on his farm and was charged a penalty of 8.000,00 HRK (slightly more than 1.000,00 euro).

Another relevant attribute of the general discourse in this stage was the invocation of *war rhetoric* [5] and insisting on national homogenization. In this respect, the statement of prime minister Andrej Plenković given on March 13 is illustrative: "We are at war with the virus, panic and socio-economic effects of this pandemic" (Dnevno.hr, 2020,14 March 2020; Index.hr, 2020, 14 March 2020). Hence, the "heroic discourse" emerged, which was additionally intensified during the days right after the two strong earthquakes (the strongest was 5.5 on the Richter scale) that hit the capital of Croatia, Zagreb, on March 22. With respect to the heroic discourse, particular merits were given to members of the NCHFTCP, who were even portrayed as kind of superheroes. The NCHFTCP can undoubtedly be identified as the key social actor in this stage, as well as in all the subsequent periods. Albeit founded by the government, it convincingly profiled itself as the "apolitical" expert body that competently and successfully made crucial moves during the pandemic. That image was reinforced by the relatively low number of corona infection cases during the entire "first wave". Concerning the mediation issue, it was exactly that social actor who was the most powerful one in shaping the public discourse, as the majority of the listed moral labels were first introduced by NCHFTCP members.

Albeit rare, the critiques of the war rhetoric were detected in an inspected media sample. The same also holds true for the critique of celebrating some prominent NCHFTCP figures (especially health minister Vili Beroš) as heroes, which was evaluated as a dangerous attempt at creating a personality cult. Generally, critical discourses regarding the activities of that entity and the entire pandemic mitigation strategy were rare, which might be linked to a controversial meeting of the prime minister with the editors of influential media held at the end of March 2020. In this regard, minister Beroš and Alemka Markotić, another eminent figure of NCHFTCP, praised the work of the media during the pandemic in May praised the work of the media during the pandemic.

Also "sceptical discourses", which would diminish the jeopardy of the global pandemic and the seriousness of the "COVID-19" disease, were considerably marginalized. They were barely present, mostly in extreme right wings media. One of the very few such examples was the TV show "Bujica" of the highly controversial journalist Velimir Bujanac, whose show was penalized due to fostering hate speech several times. He invited the well-known (also controversial) medical doctor Srećko Sladoljev, known for his anti-vax attitudes, who claimed that the entire story around the coronavirus was exaggerated and represented a manipulation and refused to accept the label of being a conspiracy theories advocate. Some other examples of such discourses are related to the (then) member of the parliament Ivan Pernar, known for advocating conspiracy theories but also in the case of some Catholic priests who refused not to serve mass when that was not allowed. Furthermore, in mid-April, the weekly newspaper "Hrvatski tjednik" also launched the story that the hidden agenda behind the anti-corona vaccination is micro-chipping of the population. Such standpoints, entirely opposed to the dominant views, opened an epistemic debate around

trusting a particular discourse. Albeit this dimension of the discourse opens up the relevant issue on the epistemic legitimacy of information related to the pandemic, certainly it also possesses particular moral connotations. At this discursive level the following two binary codes were introduced and have constantly re-appeared since then: *fake/trustworthy* and *trustworthy/manipulated* [6]. The former label was also applied to disvalue intentionally generated fake news, which was not seldom in this period. It is also worth mentioning that the attachment to a sceptical standpoint often entailed the ascription of being a proponent of the "conspiracy theory" as the argument of someone's epistemic disqualification, which also bears apparently negative moral connotations.

The "first wave" period was marked by intensive moral communication that was mainly used to morally discredit those who were infected and to somehow intimidate citizens and make them obey the imposed lock-down rules. On the other hand, moral coding was used to highlight the merits of all those, especially medical staff, who offer themselves coping with diverse aspects of the pandemic. The crucial public actor that shaped the discourse agenda was NCHFTCP, presented as an apolitical expert body that competently fights with the virus, while other social actors were pushed back, particularly those who advocated more critical and sceptical views towards the pandemic.

End of lock-down (April 27 – July 5)

The beginning of this stage commenced on April 27 when a series of diminishing restrictive lockdown measures began and in the upcoming weeks, a gradual reduction of quarantine ensued. This tendency is followed by a change at the discursive level, where the "(You) Stay Home!" motto on May 5 was replaced with a "(We) Stay Responsible!" requirement. In May the unofficial pre-election campaign period also started, as July 5 was set as the date of parliamentary elections. Normally, the parliamentary elections would have taken place in autumn, but this time they were exceptionally scheduled for summer. The debate about the timing of the elections was imbued with controversies as the then ruling party (HDZ – "Hrvatska demokratska zajednica"/"CDU" – "Croatian Democratic Union") and its partners insisted that the polls should be in summer, due to the expected worsening of epidemiologic circumstances in autumn, while political opponents claimed that the change to an earlier date was an attempt to politically capitalize on the objectively favourable pandemic situation before economic circumstances get even worse.

The coronavirus pandemic was the main reference point in political discourse and soon it became clear that the pandemic was not just a medical issue. Namely, the pandemic situation was strongly present in political debates in the pre-election period. A salient example of that was the attempt of political capitalization of handling pandemic strategies on the part of the CDU party, which ascribed itself credits for succeeding in coping with the "first wave". It was underlined that some of the prominent figures of NCHFTCP were members of that party and also their candidates for the parliament. Hence, NCHFTCP was politically instrumentalized, which led to the loss of trust in it by a part of the public. The attachment of CDU to the rhetoric that emerged in the pandemic times was also obvious with the introduction of the motto "Safe Croatia!" with an evident reference to the successful management of the pandemic. This notion, i.e. binary code *safe/unsafe*, appeared in the third stage and could be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand it alludes to the medical aspects of "virus-free" Croatia, while on the other hand, this binary code suggests political stability if a vote is given to CDU rather than to some other political option. Thus, this binary expression includes coding as a subtle discursive tool for gaining an advantage over political opponents.

In the third stage some further codes appeared, the list of which is significantly shorter compared to the previous period: "cautious/incautious", "aware/unaware", "sincere/foolish" and "disciplined/undisciplined". However, the prevalent dichotomy was that with its positive side embedded in the motto: "responsible/irresponsible".

Contrary to the relatively homogenous discursive field of the "first wave" period, the following one was more fragmented, with more sceptical voices surfacing. Among politicians, oppositional parties criticized the strict lockdown measures, which was also their discursive strategy for positioning in the pre-polls campaign. The voice of entrepreneurs became remarkably stronger, as well as their demand for reducing lockdown measures and relaunch economic activities. The space given to economic actors in the examined media was considerably larger in this stage.

Moreover, glaring inconsistencies and double standards in applying epidemiologic measures contributed to discursive heterogeneity. For instance, while dozens of public events were not allowed, some of the religious rituals such as public processions were permitted, which was accurately interpreted as favouring the Catholic church as a social actor quite close to CDU. That point was often emphasized in articles on "Index.hr" discussing the privileged status of the Catholic church and the contentious issue of work-free Sundays. Moreover, that which was once profoundly morally disqualified, like leaving home when in self-isolation, now was rehabilitated as justified in the case of voting. Such diametrical switches of standpoints greatly undermined the authority of NCHFTCP and resulted in a decrease of confidence in it. Also, the voices of citizens who drew attention to the unequal treatment of patients with and without the coronavirus could be heard [7]. Besides, the first public protests against the introduced epidemiological measures took place in Zagreb and Rijeka at the beginning of May, at which a small number of citizens gathered. The messages sent from the protests appraised the measures as "absurd", "totalitarian" and anchored the standpoints in conspiracy theories theses.

The outcome of the parliamentary elections at which CDU gained a convincing victory showed that the strategy of instrumentalization of handling the "coronavirus" pandemic was politically opportune. This example also demonstrates how moralizing around the pandemic can be pertinently applied for political purposes and that launching and nurturing particular moral communication can be closely intertwined with the encrypted political agenda of particular power structures and their practical activities.

Wide opening (July 6 – August 17)
The period after the elections considerably resembled the "old normal" circumstances. Owing to the low rates of corona positive cases the state borders were opened already in May, first towards neighbouring countries and later to other EU states and further. Opening the borders was primarily motivated by facilitating tourism, which is a particularly important branch of the Croatian economy. Then, in fact, the several summer weeks until mid-August brought a relatively successful tourist season, particularly at the northern coast, which is more easily accessible by road from Central and West European countries. The relative percentage of 62% of overnights in July compared to the same month in 2019 and even more favourable data for the first half of August (www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/ministrica-turizma-brnjac-hrvatska-ove-godine-ima-dobru-turisticku-sezonu/2206519.aspx) suggested quite a successful touristic season, having in mind the overall global pandemic context. The images and reports that came from the northern Adriatic coast to some extent resembled those in previous years and the overall atmosphere seemed somewhat relaxed.

However, that surely did not mean the absence of the coronavirus issue and disappearance of the corresponding moral communication, especially already from the

second half of June, when the infection rates were on the rise again. The dominant moral code was "responsible/irresponsible" alongside the following: "aware/unaware", "stupid/wise" and "relaxed/responsible". A specific new code was "honest/dishonest" that emerged with respect to whether the infected persons were willing to admit their contacts or not.

The specificity of this stage was the constant indicating that family meetings, especially wedding parties and night parties of youngsters at the sea-side were hot spots of new infections. Without contending whether such occasions are objectively the riskiest in terms of getting infected, it could be assumed that determining parties as the most dangerous places encrypted certain moralizing messages, as it is morally controversial and irresponsible to be relaxed too much. This imposes a sense of guilt if someone is having fun in company with others, which is interpreted as inappropriate social behaviour. Hence, once again particular moralizing practices implemented through morally coded messages were used to generate a particular behaviour pattern.

The gradual rise of the number of infections during summer led towards concerns of the neighbouring and other EU countries, which was consequently followed by the re-introduction of travelling restrictions.

The dawn of uncertain autumn (after August 17)

The fifth identified stage commenced in mid-August when nearby countries such as Slovenia and Austria introduced obligatory isolation for travellers from Croatia (in "new normal terminology" placed it on the "red list"). That practically meant the withdrawal of thousands of tourists from Croatia and their return to their homelands, and thus basically the end of the tourist season. When looking at the discursive level, besides moral semantics underlining the necessity of responsibility of citizens, a further strengthening of the heterogenization of discourses could be observed, as sceptical voices in the media became stronger. In connection to that, a protest against the introduced measures (including wearing masks) as part of the coronavirus mitigation strategy under the header "Festival of Freedom" took place in Zagreb on September 5. The semantics produced around the protest included codes such as: "democratic/totalitarian", "covidiots/reasonable (people)" or "manipulated/free-minded (people)". The social profiles of the protestors were quite diverse: Croatian "anti-vaxxers", clerically oriented NGOs, as well as extreme right-wing political actors, who supported the protest gathered. In terms of mediation, i.e. the linkage of discourses to social actors, the above occurrence additionally reinforces the thesis that discourses, also in the case of the coronavirus outbreak, are used as instruments for positioning particular actors in the political field.

In this stage, the "Constitutional Court" of the Republic of Croatia also took a more relevant role in the public debate. Namely, at a meeting of the "Constitutional Court" on September 14 it was decided that the vast majority of measures installed by NCHFTCP, including the necessity of wearing masks, were legitimate, and thus indirectly confirmed the legitimacy of that body that had become heavily contested.

The dominant moral code in this period was still "responsible/irresponsible", which was literally present everywhere, as the authorities and the media constantly sent the message that it was up to every individual to prevent the spreading of the infection. Another frequently used and similar code was "sincere/foolish". Still, night parties in clubs and meetings, especially celebrations in private circles were pin-pointed as hot spots for spreading the virus, while fitness rooms were pin-pointed as risky places for getting infected. Generally, the population of youngsters was marked as the most problematic in terms of spreading the virus. Here, the invocation of *self-discipline* and moralization that requires abstaining from relaxation, particularly in a big company, is obvious.

Despite the tremendous increase in the number of coronavirus positive cases and the pandemic situation worsening during autumn (for instance, on November 22, when this research report was finalized, the number of newly detected coronavirus infections was 3,308 persons in a single day (www.koronavirus.hr/; see also Figure 1 available above), which was higher than the entire "first wave" during which (until April 27) 2,039 infections were recorded in total (https://civilna-zastita.gov.hr/)[8], "softer" rhetoric of the authorities was obvious. Namely, the government led by the same party, prime minister, health-care minister and NCHFTCP chaired by the same board, that had introduced one of the strictest quarantines in the world during the "first wave" of the pandemic, during autumn hit an entirely opposite direction and constantly emphasized that the lockdown is not an option. Instead of strict measures, the authorities insisted on softer measures such as keeping the distance, wearing masks and limiting the size of meetings. Moreover, it was underlined that the purpose of epidemiologic measures was primarily educative in nature and not restrictive (a standpoint significantly different compared to the "first wave"). The use of the "responsibility discourse" was constantly favoured, although the overall rhetoric was more moderate and the general discourse considerably milder. The interesting alternation of strategy and a certain "amortization" of the discourse, might be explained by the changes in political pragmatism oriented towards prioritizing economic activities after the parliamentary polls had been won.

Discussion, limitation of the study and further research tasks

The crucial features of the inspected moral communication surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are condensed in the following table (Table 1).

It is apparent that the dimension of time matters a lot, as the moral discourses and produced semantics during the different stages of the pandemic transformed. The conducted analysis indicates that at the peak of the "first wave" the moral coding tended to be radical, as disrespect towards infected people and those that infringed the obligatory self-isolation regime was profound. Prior to the pandemic, moralization was mostly absent (although xenophobic attitudes towards Chinese visitors to Croatia occurred) from the media space, while after the "first wave" climax, the discursive markers went in a remarkably milder direction. This tendency continued during summer and especially autumn when, objectively, the pandemic was distinctly more widespread.

The above confirms the standpoint that a series of objective events and their discursive interpretations represent two types of things *mediated* through social actors, who generate discourses that consequently direct concrete social practices. In that complex interplay, the power of a given discourse depends on the real political, economic and overall social power of actors that advocate a certain type of discourse and corresponding moral semantics. In the pandemic circumstances, the most powerful actor was the government and the tightly interconnected body NCHFTCP, partially consisting of ministers of the same government but also of medical experts who provided expert legitimacy to their decisions.

In this context, moral communication can be conceived as a part of the overall pandemic discourse; moralizing was used as an efficient tool for initiating behaviour suitable for introducing epidemiologic measures. Moral semantics was one of the crucial, if not the main, instruments in governing the attitudes and behaviours of citizens. These were introduced by using binary moral codes that clearly suggest what is "good" behaviour and which types of behaviour deserve profound moral accusation and disqualification. At the collective level, disrespect appears as an enormous pressure of others to obey the imposed rules of behaviour, while on the individual level it takes the form of (self) governance, in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2008), when an individual must control himself/herself and

	Label of the stage	Time framework	Moral codes
1	PRE-PANDEMIC STAGE	until 25/02/2020	-
2	"FIRST WAVE"	25/02/ – 27/04/2020	"responsible/irresponsible" "aware/unaware" "heroic/shameful" "(bio)-terroristic/heroic" "shameful/proud" "egoistic-selfish/empathic" "idiots-jerks/reasonable" "panicking/reasonable" "careful/selfish" "dangerous/safe" "sincere/foolish" "self-disciplined/selfish" "disciplined/undisciplined" "controlled/uncontrolled" "moral/immoral" "normal/abnormal" "human/inhuman" "trustworthy/fake" "evil/good"
3	END OF LOCK-DOWN	27/04/ – 05/07/2020	"responsible/irresponsible" "cautious/incautious" "aware/unaware" "sincere/foolish" "disciplined/undisciplined"
4	WIDE OPENING	06/07/ – 17/08/2020	"responsible/irresponsible" "aware/unaware" "stupid/wise" "relaxed/responsible" "honest/dishonest"
5	DAWN OF THE UNCERTAIN AUTUMN	after 17/08/2020	"responsible/irresponsible" "aware/unaware" "sincere/foolish" "disciplined/undisciplined" "acceptable/unacceptable" "democratic/totalitarian", "covidiots/reasonable" "manipulated/free-minded"

Table 1.
Moral semantics
around the COVID-19
pandemic debate

suppress any type of relaxing or morally unacceptable behaviour. Hence, moral coding seems to be an efficient tool in handling the pandemic mitigation strategy, especially when the situation is perceived as dangerous, which confirms Luhmann's claim.

The other identified social actors represent a heterogeneous continuum of gradual (or neglected) sceptical views and criticism of the coronavirus mitigation strategy including oppositional political parties, entrepreneurs and especially radical right-wing political actors and NGO's with the support of individual Catholic priests, as well as part of the general public. The latter groups, especially in September's public protest abandoned the dominant discourse about the coronavirus pandemic, revealed it as an instrument of manipulation, as a tool of concealing the real "truth" about the pandemic, which by these groups is conceived as "conspiracy". These social actors produced their own moral semantics; their binary codes were mostly related to the field of epistemology and the question of who has the right to

monopolize the truth and, in the next step, command another what must be done. The conducted analysis has proven that the moral debate around the COVID-19 pandemic has its social background with diverse types of social groups that advocate particular discourses and as an integral part of them, produce specific moral semantics. In that sense, moral communication is a sort of discursive expression of power games. This finding clearly suggests that the moral language represents a powerful and efficient instrument in articulating someone's interests, setting agenda, framing the worldview and imposing certain rules of acting. Exactly in this point lies the advantage of combining Luhmann's understanding of moral communication with CDA, whose vigour compared to other text analysis methods lies not just in the indication that language has a social background, but goes a step further and strives to grasp which concrete actors, in whose interest, initiate a specific type of discourse. Hence, such an analytical approach to moralization is capable of detecting not just who is represented as "bad guys" and "good guys", but of revealing who, in the end, are real "losers" and "winners" in the social power games. Although I managed to generally grasp which social actors advocate a given type of moral discourse, the issue of *mediation*, i.e. linking particular moral semantics with specific social actors, should be addressed in more depth in some further analyses.

Due to the explorative profile of the research and its focus on the case of Croatian society, it is hard to deduce any conclusion about the specificities of the moralization on the "coronavirus" in Croatia compared to the wider European and global context because of lack of insights regarding this issue in a broader framework. However, this study may represent a useful reference point to similar analysis in other societies. In the bulk of constantly growing body of literature concerning the coronavirus outbreak, in very few references cited here, there are some indications that moral communication and specific moral codes, particularly those connected to war rhetoric, are present in other countries as well, but a comprehensive analysis in a comparative international setting that would uncover possible common patterns of moral communication during the ongoing pandemic is only yet to be pursued.

Concerning the auto-reflexivity of this small research, the conducted empirical analysis apparently was not completely exhaustive and samples of the inspected website articles could be more extensive – this point reflects the central limitation of the paper. Nevertheless, the analysis has produced interesting and indicative preliminary findings that ought to be extended in the upcoming and more comprehensive studies. The focus should be directed to other Internet websites, print media and especially digital social media and networks. Even a partial review of the discussions on social networks indicates that significantly more critical and sceptical discourses have been present there in contrast to the majority of the media. A larger number of interactive channels of communication open the floor for articulating critical and sceptical views on the coronavirus pandemic from the standpoint of "ordinary" citizens, which has simultaneously even amplified moral communication. Certainly, the aspects of the moral debate surrounding the coronavirus pandemic that basically happens at the inter-individual level require detailed analysis by applying a proper research design.

The employment of "moral codes" combined with the critical discourse analysis approach seems to be a pertinent analytical instrument to reveal what is happening in our social systems. It might be useful in examining the social background of a language, moral communication, growing social inequalities, disparities, discrepancies and ever intensified polarization, especially in the political field. Furthermore, this analytical approach can be applied for a research of a broad scope of social phenomena such as political language analysis, moralization in business, media content in a general sense, digital censorship in

social media, discrimination, exclusion and "blocking/cancel culture", filter bubbles, conspiracy theories even debate around political correctness, also to inspect moralization in daily face-to-face interactions, to name a few examples – in sum, in all social occasions where a certain moral communication is present "on the surface" and one can ask which social actor(s) produce(s) it "under the surface" and aim(s) to impose a particular moral semantics. In my opinion, the tremendous analytical possibilities of this approach should be explored in further research practices in diverse fields.

Concluding remarks

Although at first sight moralization reduces social complexity by introducing binary judgements on an action, it actually fosters social confrontations and conflicts, as is it anchored in the moral disqualification of "others", which has been shown on the concrete example of the coronavirus pandemic related public debate in Croatia in this article. The conflicts are even facilitated as diverse social actors generate their own moral positions. As it is really impossible to objectively evaluate who is and who is not right in terms of moral judgement, especially in a situation in which scientists offer quite inconsistent and even contradictory explanations concerning the coronavirus, which serves diverse social actors as a justification for their "moral position". As a final point, it turns out that Luhmann was right when he underlined the immanently contentious character of moral communication. The currently ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly represents a complex and multifarious phenomenon that can be examined from various aspects. Certainly, it is greatly pervaded by moral communication. Without an attempt to moralize over moralizing it is highly disputable whether moralizing contributes to decreasing the degree of the complexity of the issue or even deepens it. Most likely the latter is the case. This is relevant also in practical terms, as social actors should take into account that moralizing about the coronavirus crisis does not represent a remedy in overcoming its outbreak, the end of which is far from being visible yet.

Notes

1. Here it is relevant to underline that unlike the (dis)approval that addresses a particular attribute, act or performance of a person, moral evaluation in terms of (dis)esteem always judges about a person in his/her totality, i.e. entirely (dis)respects him/her (Luhmann, 1991 p. 84; Moeller, 2009 p. 25).

2. In this respect, moral evaluation principally does not endure a neutral position because moralization presumes an inclination either towards the positive or the negative pole in a dichotomy. One may add that advocating a neutral position in a moral debate implies certain moral exclusivism which is itself morally coloured.

3. When referring to the term discourse the name of Michel Foucault cannot be omitted, as he has had a decisive impact in raising the interest for examining the underlying social background of language in social sciences and humanities (Fairclough, 2003, p. 123), since his study on the archaeology of knowledge in the early 1970s (Foucault, 2002). Since then, the research of discourse has diverged in a myriad of directions, diverse disciplinary and theoretical orientations and research programmes: discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis, conversation analysis, discursive psychology, etc. For an explanation on the differences among the mentioned approaches it is advisable to consult (Wooffitt, 2005). I prefer the position of critical discourse analysis due to the above explained conceiving of discourse of these authors. However, it should be noted that in this analysis no emancipatory or ideologically engaged premises are followed, usually connected with critical discourse analysis, which is reflected with the adjective "critical".

4. It is important to bear in mind the difference between "coding" as a qualitative data analysis technique from "codes" as the specific concept in Luhmann's social systems theory terminology. In this study, coding is used as an analytical technique and its outcomes are moral binary codes conceived in Luhmann's sense.

5. However, such usage of war metaphors and the corresponding semantic of heroism is not exclusive to Croatia, but is used broadly (Morales, 2020).

6. Surely, "true/untrue" is the code specific to the function system of science (Luhmann, 1991, pp. 85-86; Roth and Schütz, 2015, p. 24) and does not indeed represent a morally communicated code. However, it is evident that the question of what is "true" and what is "false" regarding the coronavirus pandemic is often present in public debates as a tool of claiming the epistemic legitimacy of particular views. In these discussions, besides scientists who often provide contradictory explanations, also proponents of conspiracy theories who develop pseudoscientific, not empirically evidenced arguments take part. At this point, the issue of epistemic legitimacy overlaps with moral communication, where the advocates of conspiracy theories lean on moralizing to disregard scientifically proved statements (see also Morales, 2020, pp. 5-8), also the "corona-sceptics" are discredited in moral terms.

7. The issue of the somewhat privileged status of COVID-19 ill people compared to patients suffering from other diseases is very convincingly elaborated in Grothe-Hammer and Roth (2020).

8. However, microbiologist Gordan Lauc already in May claimed that it is disputable whether Croatia had the "first wave" in spring as the numbers of infected were very low (www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/znanstvenik-lauc-o-drugom-valu-epidemije-hrvatska-nije-imala-ni-prvi-val/2181604.aspx).

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