



Narrating the ‘new normal’ or pre-legitimising media control? COVID-19 and the discursive shifts in the far-right imaginary of ‘crisis’ as a normalisation strategy

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Discourse & Society

2022, Vol. 33(6) 805–818

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DOI: 10.1177/09579265221095420

journals.sagepub.com/home/das



Abstract

This article highlights how the recent discourse of ‘the new normal’ – re-initiated and widely used in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in national and international media and political discourse – marks the advent of a new approach to ‘crisis’ in the normalisation of far-right populist politics. Drawing on the example of the analysis of ‘policy communication’ genres pre-legitimising the Polish right-wing populist government’s recent actions aimed at curtailing media freedom and controlling opposition media, the article shows that, in the context of an undisputed crisis such as the recent pandemic, the right-wing populist imagination has gradually and strategically altered its usual, highly ambivalent approach to crisis. However, the latter’s new, (quasi) ‘factual’ imaginary has, as is shown, become a tool in the further escalation and normalisation of far-right political strategies and policies, especially with regard to new far right strategies of media control aimed at the systemic colonisation of the wider public sphere. Therein, as the article shows, far-right actors often resort to a very peculiar – and by now common – adoption of many pro-democratic arguments while ‘flipsiding’ them in favour of far-right arguments and pre-legitimising their own undemocratic politics of control and exclusion.

Keywords

Far right, media, normalisation, discourse, policy communication, politics of exclusion

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Introduction

As the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic became a global reality from, in particular, early 2020 onwards, we have seen the gradual introduction and often, as time went by, re-introduction of various special or even ‘extraordinary’ measures in order to manage the local, regional, national or even global repercussions of the spread of the Coronavirus. Many limitations on public life and organisation, mobility and safety have been introduced in this context in order to ‘protect’ the public. This brought a very deep change – and often outright severe disruption – to routines of both everyday lives and how organisations, institutions, workplaces and even entire states have been undertaking their business and activities. As the pandemic persisted throughout the whole of 2020, 2021 and a significant part of 2022 – with several ‘waves’ occurring and the unprecedented number of infections reaching over 440 million cases with nearly 6 million casualties related to Coronavirus by early 2022¹ – questions also started to be asked about whether this ‘extraordinary’ and ‘abnormal’ state of affairs relating to various restrictions and limitations would, in fact, become the endemic ‘new normal’.

Interestingly, though certainly not introduced for the first time in history (see Krzyżanowski et al., 2022), the narrative of the ‘new normal’ has been used in this context – indeed transnationally – in a very differentiated way, albeit with a few recognisable tendencies. On the one hand, the ‘new normal’ has become the descriptor of *the already existent state of affairs* under COVID-19 characterised by restrictions, limitations and deeply changed routines, with some allowance that such a state of affairs could persist well into the future² and ongoing ‘crisis management’ (Wodak, 2021) would become an ongoing necessity. Secondly, the ‘new normal’ has also become the sometimes more precise yet often ambivalent *imaginary of a predicted, future state of affairs* with many assumptions expressed about this ‘abnormal’ state becoming the new, normalised reality. Here, we have both seen a more or less ‘realistic’ set of projections and, in particular, expert discourses about the ‘new normal’ in, for example, public health protection and beyond. Equally, we have also seen a much broader ‘new normal’ narrative which has been arguing that, since pandemics as such have historically been occurring in a cyclical manner, one should get ready for a pandemic-adjusted behaviour for many years to come in order to avoid the shock of changed routines and disruptions, such as those initially seen under COVID-19.³ Finally, the narrative of the ‘new normal’ has also become *a wider expression of future-driven global uncertainties and risks* – to some extent reminding us of the famous ‘risk society’ hypothesis (Beck, 1992). These have been showing us that, just as the COVID pandemic has called for special measures and a rethinking of patterns of social conduct and organisation, so will other persistent and recurrent challenges in society, climate and technology.⁴

Importantly, many of the above framings of the ‘new normal’ have not only included descriptions of facts, but, equally, many ideas, imaginaries and projections associated with the COVID situation and its eventual short-/mid-/long-term impact on the post-pandemic ‘future’. And, while the de facto and ‘real’ character of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly should not be disputed or in any way diminished, one needs to remain particularly mindful of its political-imaginary ‘use’ in many populist ‘illusions’ (Krastev and Leonard, 2020). Hence, one needs to be mindful of the fact that, while the pandemic

did indeed bring some new developments and phenomena – for example within politics, economy, public health or social policy – these have often only deepened various pre-existent dynamics and logics, while also deepening and solidifying political, social and economic divisions and inequalities, both nationally and transnationally.

Indeed, as this article will show, several arguments expressed within the recently prevalent ‘new normal’ discourse have relied on various imaginaries which have long been used – often in an outright strategic manner – in the public domain. One of the central such imaginaries has been that of ‘crisis’, which has long been the key element of public discourses, not only as a factual descriptor of critical periods and moments of social transformation and change but, perhaps even more frequently of late, as a certain continuous imaginary linking current and future states of affairs in, in particular, populist-political projects. As the paper argues, however, while ‘crisis’ has still remained central as well as dominant in the current ‘new normal’ discourse – and especially in the widespread right-wing populist imagination often dominating European and international public spheres – it has increasingly acquired a modified, argumentative function. Hence, unlike previously when (a) many crises were constructed and outright imagined by political and media actors and (b) they could, accordingly, be ongoingly either downplayed/discarded or played up/constructed by various social and, in particular, political actors (see Krzyżanowski, 2019 and below for more details), crisis has recently gradually become a reality-based imaginary. Constructed on the basis of its ‘presence’, such an undisputed crisis – evidenced via the COVID-19 pandemic – has allowed many political actors – and especially those located on the far-right part of the political spectrum (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2019) alternatively labelled as right-wing populists (Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017) to use it for their own benefit. Namely, framed by the ‘new normal’ logic, crisis has been used by far-right political actors as a key tool of ‘pre-legitimation’ (Krzyżanowski, 2014) of their political strategies and policy aims, often designed against far right’s political adversaries and opponents.

Hence, as the article aims to show, crisis deployed discursively in such a novel, pre-legitimising way has carried a vital, strategic, normalising effect for actions undertaken in view or in the aftermath of critical/disruptive/unprecedented occurrences and developments at hand. While there have recently been many examples of this wider tendency – see for example various far-right leaders across Europe and beyond willing to self-style themselves as ‘champions’ of national responses to COVID-19 and thus pre-legitimising their policies – there are also various reasons to be considered as to why its prevalence has been growing. These possibly include mere political opportunism and a search for new political communication strategies on the one hand, or ‘learning from the mistakes’ of the failures of far-right leaders such as, perhaps most notably, Donald Trump – who attempted to dismiss the dangers of COVID-19 and related facts by waging a ‘war on expertise’ (Rutledge, 2020) – on the other.

The ambivalence of crisis in the far right imagination

Extensively theorised and analysed across the social sciences and humanities and beyond (see, inter alia, Krzyżanowski et al., 2009; Krzyżanowski, 2019; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018), *crisis* is perhaps one of the most widely debated concepts in both intellectual

debates and wider discourses mobilising social and political action. Traditionally, crisis used to be closely related to significant moments of social and political transformation, when its use significantly increased. In most cases, the increased use of ideas and imaginaries of crisis has meant an abrupt and highly transformative moment of vital ‘epochal change’ (Koselleck and Richter, 2006: 358) or signalled ‘a critical transition period after which – if not everything, then much – will be different’ (Koselleck and Richter, 2006: 358). In late modernity, however, crisis has increasingly become a connotation of ‘a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition towards something better or worse or towards something altogether different’ (Koselleck and Richter, 2006: 358).

Entangled within the logic above, crisis emerges as, in particular, a discursive construct that allows combining the past, the present and the future and a projection of the past into the future and vice versa. Crisis has, differently put, been very strongly entangled in the dichotomy between ‘*scope of experience*’ and ‘*horizon of expectations*’ (Koselleck, 1979) which effectively intertwined socially-shared experience of the past with collectively-fuelled ideas and predictions or expectations for the future. Therein, crisis has been often shown as being directly linked to experience of the past ‘whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered’ (Koselleck, 2004: 259) as well as to projections of the future via ‘hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity’ (Koselleck, 2004: 259).

The above also highlights the nature of crisis as not only reality but also a peculiar form of an *imaginary* (see, inter alia, Taylor, 2004). It not only serves past/present-related descriptions but also, or perhaps in particular, a powerful ideological future projection (Wolin, 2008). Within such an imaginary, the combination of the ‘known’ (or the experienced) and the ‘unknown’ (the expected) remains central. Or, put differently, crisis emerges as a socially constructed *utopia* (Levitas, 2011: 1; Levitas, 2014), yet one that is invented for strategically defined ‘political’ motives (Sum and Jessop, 2013: 396).

The above features of crisis allow social and political actors to construct it in a very diffuse manner: by *augmenting or misrepresenting* it or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, by *downplaying and disclaiming* its critical character and importance. Some recent crises illustrate both of these tendencies. As many studies on, for example, the recent ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Europe have shown (see Krzyżanowski, 2018a, 2018b; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; see also Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017) the latter has surely been one such case of a crisis that has been hugely – and indeed strategically – misrepresented in populist politics, and across the majority of opportunistic traditional as well as online media. In many countries, namely, the Refugee Crisis has been, moderately speaking, blown heavily out of proportion while supporting various forms of building anti-immigration scares and various forms of ‘moral panics’ (Cohen, 1972) driven by populist politics and its eager ideological affiliates such as, for example, the online uncivil society (Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017).

However, on the other hand, recent public discourses about for example ‘Brexit’ have shown that crises may also well be downplayed even in a situation where their critical character is hard to be disputed (see Krzyżanowski, 2019 for details). As, for example, the UK Conservative government behind the Brexit project has been claiming since the infamous Brexit referendum of 2016, namely, the eventual leaving of the EU would not

only be a political but also an economic success – neither of which was, quite correctly, predicted by the opponents of Brexit in the UK and beyond who very outspokenly warned against its hugely negative implications. Nevertheless, the UK conservative political class and its media affiliates continued to effectively and persistently downplay the arguments on the eventual social, political and economic implications of Brexit, while often projecting many of the past-related arguments – of the UK’s sovereignty, imperial glory and the like – into visions and imaginaries of the country’s post-Brexit future (see Zappettini and Krzyżanowski, 2019).

Finally, whether augmented or downplayed, crisis has more often than not been used to ‘pre-legitimise’ (Krzyżanowski, 2014) strategic-political actions by using and ‘making real’ the imaginary – and very often utopian visions – of both the present and the future. Indeed, particularly the far-right groups – and especially those in power across several European countries and elsewhere globally – have been skilful in using crisis as a tool for pre-legitimising their ideological positions and policy choices by first constructing or disclaiming various crises – and often instilling their presence and permanence or absence in the collective imagination – before eventually moving on to undertake various radical solutions to allegedly tackle the said crises (see e.g. the anti-immigration rhetoric and discriminatory discourse and policies with regard to the hugely misrepresented European ‘Refugee Crisis’, above).

The ‘new normal’ and operationalisation of crisis in far-right strategies of media control

While crisis indeed is one of the core elements of the discourse of the ‘new normal’ that has been reintroduced and widely recontextualised in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the approach to crisis currently displayed in the public and in particular the political domain – and especially its far-right or right-wing populist sections – has been seen as undergoing a significant ‘discursive shift’ (Krzyżanowski, 2018a, 2020a). As the analysis below aims to show, namely, instead of being discursively constructed and either being augmented or downplayed – as has often been the case in, in particular, (right-wing) populist discourse (see above) – *crisis has frequently been moving to be operationalised as a given. This has taken place with the obvious aim of legitimising and pre-legitimising the ideologically driven strategic-political actions of, in particular, the far right.* Though, to be sure, such ‘using’ of crisis for politico-ideological motives as such is certainly far from new (cf. the traditional political slogan ‘never let a good crisis go to waste’ coined by W. Churchill), the key difference of late has been that the process has taken place without foregrounding various political actors’ own interpretations of crisis, or while debating its presence or acuteness as such. Instead, in view of its obvious severity, *crisis has recently been presented as an undisputed ‘given’, yet with the ‘certainty’ about its presence and the ‘factuality’ thereof deployed strategically to pre-legitimise activities or even outright attacks on one’s political opponents not only rhetorically but also structurally via, for example, policies, regulations etc.*

A particularly salient dynamics in the above discursive shift encompassed by the ‘new normal’ logic has been residing, as this article shows, at the intersection of political and

policy discourse wherein there has recently been a growing interrelation – but also tension – between what has been called ‘policy’ and ‘policy-communication’ genres (Krzyżanowski, 2013). While the former have encompassed the traditional regulatory text types (policies, regulations etc.), the latter genres have been increasingly used to ‘package’ the regulations, indeed often in, to some extent, more accessible ‘popular’ discourse (via, e.g. various summaries of policy texts, leaflets, brochures and other formats of ‘promotional’ narratives). And while policy and its development took place first, the ‘policy communication’ genres which followed were usually deployed only once specific regulations were in place – and with the aim of not only translating the goals and meaning of policy and giving it additional PR but also to add further ‘public’ legitimacy to specific policies regulations (see Krzyżanowski, 2015). However, as has been the case in the COVID-19 context, policy communication genres with ‘crisis’ at the core of their have most commonly been used to, paradoxically, precede rather than follow policies. Therein, crisis has been deployed as a pre-legitimatory tool, that is, as one whose apparent certainty yields additional legitimacy. Crisis, hence, has been used to pre-factually (rather than, as was the case previously, post-factually) legitimise political strategies and their constituent policies – though the latter have often, and again, indeed strategically, remained very vague and unspecified.

In order to illustrate the above tendency and the wider discursive shift, this article looks specifically at policy-communication genres framed by the ‘new normal’ discourses in Poland. The latter is chosen as a country from among a number of those in Europe currently governed by right-wing populist parties. Specifically, Poland has since 2015 been led by a government spearheaded by the far-right PiS (*Law and Justice*) party notorious for its radicalising and increasingly discriminatory rhetoric (Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2012, 2018a, 2020b) deployed to rhetorically and otherwise legitimise a number of structural and regulatory reforms in a vast number of social fields ranging from education and culture, through welfare, social and family policy including reproductive rights, social exclusion, and up to the wider system of the country’s political economy and the law (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2021; Sadurski, 2019). Those legal changes and reforms led by PiS have often been packaged in nativist-nationalist or economic-protectionist rhetoric while effectively being directly or indirectly aimed against political opponents and especially the liberal opposition including, most recently, many of the media deemed ‘disobedient’ to the PiS government.

Indeed, the recent onslaught on the media orchestrated by PiS has been typical of the so-called far-right ‘salami tactics’ – of ‘eliminating freedom slice by slice’ (Garton Ash, 2021) – or of what, given PiS’ adopting very similar tactics to those used earlier by the right-wing populist Victor Orban’s government in Hungary (Polyák, 2019), has also been referred to as the ‘Orbanisation’ of the Polish media (Williams, 2021). As part thereof, PiS has been, on the one hand, especially adamant to take control of nationwide and regional public media, with the centrepiece of that strategy being the takeover of national public TV and of national public radio. Under PiS, that takeover process has, however, seen unprecedented proportions with, for example, large numbers of liberal journalists being laid off across nationwide, as well regional, public media, with those sacked being replaced by often inexperienced people recruited from, inter alia, far- and radical-right media and online/offline outlets. As a result, soon after PiS won a parliamentary majority

in 2016 (and again in 2019), Polish public media have taken on a deeply propagandistic, government-obedient tone often relying on distorted news and facts especially so in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the above takeover of the public media, however, PiS has recently undertaken a number of additional actions designed to gain control over the wider Polish media landscape – in particular regional and nationwide commercial media, many of which traditionally remained critical of PiS and its politics. Paradoxically, especially the period of the recent pandemic, that is, from 2020 onwards, coincides with a number of PiS' strategic legal and policy actions that have so far taken place in three different periods (see also MFRR – Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2020):

- (a) late 2020 – when the government-controlled oil conglomerate PKN ORLEN initiated the takeover of the main press-distribution company RUCH before eventually moving in 2021 to acquire POLSKA PRESS, that is, the largest owner of regional press outlets. This effectively allowed PiS to gain control over a large section of commercial regional media in Poland (NB: the legality of these takeovers has subsequently been challenged at both national and EU levels).
- (b) early and mid-2021 – when, similar to some other far-right governments in Europe, PiS introduced the project of the so-called 'advertising tax' (i.e. an additional tax on online and offline advertising that would very significantly weaken economically many regime-disobedient commercial and regional media) as well as an intensified policy of channelling any public sector adverts solely via PiS-controlled media.
- (c) mid-to-late 2021 – when PiS intensified its action aiming at the so-called 'repolonisation' of the media with government developing and eventually passing laws restricting ownership of media to companies based solely within the EU. This effectively targeted the main PiS-critical media such as the US-owned nationwide commercial station TVN (so the laws hence became known as 'Lex TVN'; see Marcisz, 2021; NB: a presidential veto has unexpectedly placed the introduction of these laws on hold in late 2021).

Crisis as/and the normalisation of far-right media control: Analysis

Though various types of pre/legitimation discourses have been deployed across all three periods above when PiS undertook actions to gain media control in Poland since 2020, it is the middle period – the one focussed on the introduction of the so-called 'advertising tax' in early 2021 – which is the focus of the analysis presented below. The analysis functions as an instrumental case study (Grandy, 2010; Stake, 1994, 1995) allowing us to highlight the key tendencies in the wider Polish far-right discourse of media control actions.

That middle period of PiS media control activities requires special attention for two reasons. On the one hand, it is in that period that we witness a wider public awakening to PiS media control actions which, at least initially, went somewhat

unnoticed by the public before being effectively highlighted by the opposition media, eventually causing wider protests. In the aftermath of the proposals in early 2021, namely, we have seen several weeks of wider protests taking place across Poland – as well as internationally – under the slogan *‘Media bez wyboru’* (Media without a choice) – eventually resulting in a total ‘blackout’ of all printed, broadcast and online regime-disobedient media in Poland on 10 February 2021 (see also Krzyżanowski, 2020c, 2022).

The said period of PiS media control actions has also been the one where the ‘new normal’ logic, along with the aforementioned, renewed approach to crisis, has been used particularly extensively to discursively ‘package’ PiS actions and effectively ‘pre-legitimise’ them (Krzyżanowski, 2014), in particular with use of imaginary language, which, unlike before, has been strongly related to the ‘reality’ and ‘factuality’ of the crisis situation at hand. This has been particularly salient in the case of government communications – the prototypical aforementioned ‘policy communication genres’ (Krzyżanowski, 2013) – whose aim was, however, not to forge public legitimacy for new regulations but to effectively disguise the actual media control and anti-opposition motives behind the new regulations while presenting them as driven by acute, crisis-related needs and related goals.

The above has certainly been the case in, in particular, the PiS’ government communication of 2 February 2021, which effectively announced plans for the introduction of a focal advertising tax while arguing that the latter was prompted by the special needs that appeared in society and the media strictly as a result of COVID-19. The analysed communication comprises the following three interlinked documents:

- a 2-page document (‘A’), entitled *‘Media will help fighting COVID-19. Regulations on advertising contribution now in pre-consultations’* presenting a political PR summary of the rationale for the new legal proposal and published as an online ‘post’ on a government information portal;⁵
- a 15-page document (‘B’) – linked to from the main communication above – including a socio-political and legal ‘analysis’ framing of the background/ rationale for the new legal provisions as well as a meta-narration of the various areas of content of the new legal provisions;⁶
- a 17-page text (‘C’) of the actual legal act stipulating the introduction of provisions ‘pre-legitimised’ by the policy-communication genres above.⁷

Especially the first and the second document above are particularly relevant from the point of view of their aforementioned, ‘policy communication’ function. These documents, effectively, did not lay out the actual legal provisions in question but spelt out a number of ‘reasons’ for their introduction. They, thereby, created a discourse that would yield legitimacy path-dependencies (Van Leeuwen, 2007) to the wider discursive action, and achieved that by accumulating a number of arguments effectively normalising – that is, making ‘logical’ or ‘natural’ – the introduction of the focal, alleged ‘crisis response’ measures.

Across those documents, argumentation related to the pressing needs created by the wider crisis – that is, COVID-19 – is indeed central and forms both the general

introduction as well as a recurrent resource for any further arguments throughout. As the document B argues in its first paragraph, for example, COVID-19 is an all-embracing and long-term crisis and hence an undisputed reason for why long-term measures should be promptly introduced as if to pre-regulate this/such a critical ‘new normal’ situation. It is argued that:

“The SARS CoV-2 pandemic has affected Poland’s society in many spheres of life. The pandemic’s health-related, social and economic consequences will be long-term. The coming months and years will require intensified actions to eradicate the effects of the pandemic. Given the long-term consequences of the development and spread of the SARS CoV-2 virus and its impact on society’s health, the lawmaker sees it as necessary to introduce special measures that would facilitate actions aimed at diminishing [the pandemic’s] impact on public health”. (B, p. 1)

COVID-19 is hence used as a key resource for the recurrent – and indeed overwhelming – discursive strategy of ‘calculated ambivalence’ (Engel and Wodak, 2013) which consists of constant enumerating of many ‘facts’ related to how the pandemic has affected various areas of public and individual lives. Such ongoing enumeration allows, namely, disguising the actual motives behind the discursive practice. Notably, none of the enumerated areas of social life are, at least initially, in any way related to the media, which, however remain the key target of the proposed policies. Indeed, the media as such are only mentioned later on – for example, in the second paragraph of document B – yet it is also here that the argumentation related to the media remains very vague. It is, namely, argued that:

“An important result of Polish society’s fight with the consequences of the pandemic is the ever more rapid transfer of many social activities online. This has brought a huge change in the life of the society and generated new challenges incl. diversification of the level of digital competences, increasing difficulty in assessing the reliability of information distributed in/via the media, in addition to the loss of feeling of a community and of links with tradition as well as limited access to cultural goods and monuments of common heritage”. (B, p. 1)

An interesting feature here is not only the highly ambivalent accumulation of unrelated issues and measures – ranging from online activities, digital inequalities, through online disinformation, to lack of access to national identity resources, etc. – but also a very peculiar ‘*conceptual flipsiding*’ which allows showing that the new regulations (NB: and such introduced by the far right government whose media often resort to fake news and disinformation) will, paradoxically, allow fighting unreliable information online or alike. By the same token, the apparently pro-democratic action of ‘assessing the reliability of information distributed in/via the media’ is ‘flipsided’, that is, normalised into an element of the far-right conservative ideological catalogue which subsequently nominally connects it to a typically far-right nativist mindset (note, e.g. references to, inter alia, national identity or heritage actions all of which in the context of PiS traditionally carry nativist and nationalist implications).

As it turns out, however, the seemingly ambivalent connection above has an additional strategic function. Namely, through the vague enumeration of different ‘consequences’ of the pandemic, not only is a link between different fields of action established but even more specific information is added as to, for example, which institutions – indeed

somewhat iconic for far-right politics mentioned above – should/would be supported by the new advertising tax as it would come to be imposed on the media. As it is, namely, claimed on the first page of document A

“We are proposing to reinforce relevant targeted funds with additional income from contributions levied on online and traditional/conventional advertising. The key beneficiaries of that additional income will be the National Health Fund (Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia), National Fund for Protection of Heritage Sites (Fundusz Ochrony Zabytków) and the newly established Fund for Support of Culture and National Heritage within the Media (Fundusz Wsparcia Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego w Obszarze Mediów)”. (A, front page)

Hence, as becomes clear, the aim of the new ‘advertising tax’ is two-sided. It, namely, not only provides PiS with legal provisions that would intensify the squeeze on media organisations that are the government’s opponents but also, at the same time, constitute a significant source of funding for many strategic far-right projects, indeed widely pertaining to its identity politics. The latter, under the ambivalent cover of removing inequalities or facing up to COVID-related implications and challenges, effectively uses the pandemic as a tool for pre-legitimising the symbolic hegemony of right-wing populist ideology.

Interestingly, the legitimisation above is achieved by, in particular, normalising the far right’s own and traditionally controversial media activities, while claiming that the aim of the media control legal package promoted by PiS is, in fact, media development or research. Here, again, calculated ambivalence is achieved by numerous examples of what the funds from the advertising tax would allegedly be used for, including:

“increasing the level of knowledge and awareness about the dangers in the media, especially digital ones, building platforms for the distribution of information and for the analysis of media content, especially within digital media, creating and developing information channels and platforms (radio and TV broadcasts, Internet portals) aimed at those without high digital competences, promoting Polish cultural achievements and national heritage and sports as well as promoting the development of radio, cinematography and media research”. (B, p. 12)

Hence, the aforementioned flipside strategy connected to, and drawing on, the calculated ambivalence resource allows yet again solidifying the urgency of stipulated ‘new normal’ measures. It, effectively, creates pathways for pre-legitimising as well as normalising anti-democratic actions while concealing their actual reasons and goals under claims of funding media ‘development’ or tackling social inequalities.

Conclusions

As the analysis shows, the ‘new normal’ is a novel format of public discourse, yet one that very eagerly recontextualises many pre-existent discursive trajectories and path-dependencies of discursive traditions of perceiving individuals and social groups in the context of far-right politics. Therein, it also persistently relies on the ambivalent notion of crisis which – once inflated/deflated according to various political strategies – now becomes an assumed ‘given’ with the certainty of its presence yielding pre-legitimatory propensity to far-right politics. As the examples above illustrate, namely, the ‘new

normal' discourse, which recently proliferated across many social fields and public spheres transnationally, requires an ongoing deconstruction from the point of view of its deployment as a tool that creates affordances for processes that facilitate recourse to anti- and post-democratic actions of the far right.

Indeed, as highlighted by the above analysis, one of the central strategies of the far right's reframing – and indeed colonising – of crises such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic is that of *conceptual and wider argumentative 'flipsiding'*. It strategically deploys notions and ideas traditionally associated with and related to liberal democracy while redefining and subsequently re-appropriating them in the service of anti- and post-democratic politics of the far right. Therein, new legitimacy path-dependencies are created for nativist and reactionary ideologies (Mondon and Winter, 2020), whose otherwise known politics of exclusion and uncivility is eventually skilfully repackaged within a thereby constructed '*borderline discourse*' (Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017). The latter is characterised by legitimate language of policy actions undertaken to, allegedly, address pressing social needs and processes. At the same time, the said 'flipsiding' effect is ongoingly achieved by strategic and indeed persistent use of (calculated) ambivalence augmented by the ongoing enumeration of various social fields and issues allegedly affected by the 'crisis' – and hence in need of being addressed by the 'democratically' self-styled politics and policies of the far right.

Finally, the article also makes explicit that the very strategic use of 'crisis' remains the central and indeed the major strategy of the contemporary far right. And while the latter has traditionally been known to focus on its own, 'populist performance of crisis' (Moffitt, 2016) and on, effectively, approaching crisis in a highly ambivalent manner (Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2019), it appears that right-wing populist politics increasingly sees crisis as an indispensable resource for not only presenting – or legitimising – but also 'pre-legitimising' (Krzyżanowski, 2014) its actions. This points to the far right's opportunistic approach to crisis, indeed irrespective of the latter's severity or factuality. Therein, crisis does not emerge as a situation or occurrence calling for urgency to act (cf. COVID-19) but as the far-right's vital rhetorical 'opportunity structure' (Cammaerts, 2012). Thereby, it is discursively moulded to normalise the far right's visions, politics and ideologies and conceal their actual motives and aims (such as, e.g. the highlighted actions aimed at controlling the media) while, paradoxically, using the 'flipsided' elements of liberal-democratic discourse as a key resource.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: Research presented in this article has been funded by Swedish Research Council grant '*Immigration and the Normalisation of Racism: Discursive Shifts in Swedish Politics and Media 2010–22*' (2019–03354).

Notes

1. Data from <https://covid19.who.int> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/> (accessed 4/3/2022).
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