

# Securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic by metaphoric discourse during the state of emergency in Hungary

Securitization  
of the  
COVID-19  
pandemic

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Politicians' response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic worldwide relied on war scenarios having a tradition in disease management. The study contrasts how the political measures introduced during the state of emergency were presented by the Prime Minister of Hungary in his social media posts and his speeches and announcements broadcast by public media.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A computer-assisted content analysis was conducted to extract data on war and military metaphors, followed by a qualitative analysis of the metaphor scenarios used for explaining the situation and justifying action. The role of the prime minister (PM) indicated by the social media posts and by his transcribed speeches was compared with the suggestion of the visual illustrations.

**Findings** – The study's findings were that verbal communication shifted between war-related metaphoric to military-related realistic. The third conceptual domain identified was fear. Messages were mostly about national cohesion, however, visually, the PM was the protagonist of the events. The communication proved efficient according to opinion polls.

**Originality/value** – The research revealed how the securitization of the pandemic took place via the political discourse constructed both for Internet users and traditional media consumers. Metaphors of fear, war and military action created the justification of the declaration of a state of emergency. The PM as a capable and responsible leader was placed in focus of the events. Although verbal messages by the PM were centred on a sense of community and joint action, the personalization of political action was remarkable by indirect means, such as visual messages. The personalization of politics throughout the period researched served the purpose of securitization of the pandemic with the PM as a charismatic leader attracting attention and giving credit to the severity of the threat along with the introduction of extraordinary measures.

**Keywords** Securitization, Personalization, Metaphoric discourse, State of emergency, Media analysis

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The use of wartime metaphors seems to be a frequent response by politicians and news media to describe the challenges caused by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. On March 9, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte referred to the Second World War when he quoted Winston Churchill to talk about Italy's "darkest hour" (Lowen, 2020), then the notion of war-economy was used within this context by Italy's special commissioner for COVID-19 (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2020). In Britain, Queen Elizabeth II addressed the nation in a special speech on April 5 evoking a Second World War song "we will meet again" (Landler, 2020). US President Donald Trump described himself as a "war-time president" (Mason and Holland, 2020) who combats an invisible enemy. Xi Jinping's official narrative has been to wage a



“people’s war” on COVID. Taking a look on international organizations, we see that UN Secretary-General Antonio Gutiérrez–embraced the comparison during his remarks at a virtual G20 summit on the pandemic: “*We are at war with a virus – and not winning it. . . . This war needs a war-time plan to fight it.*” (United Nations, 2020) The use of wartime metaphors can be widely and recurrently observed in Hungary, as well, where Prime Minister Viktor Orbán uses wartime terminology almost daily. The aim of the paper is to provide an in-depth analysis of the Hungarian Prime Minister’s use of wartime terminology from 4 March to 26 May looking for patterns, similarities and dissimilarities in his traditional and social media communication.

### *Securitization and personalization*

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public health has increasingly become a matter of securitization (Dijkstra, 2020; Temitope and Knight, 2020). According to the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School, brought forward by the Conflict and Peace Research Institute of Copenhagen, an issue is “securitized” when it is presented as an “existential threat”, which requires extraordinary emergency measures and which justifies actions that go beyond the normal boundaries of the political procedures. It involves a specific rhetorical communication and a political choice that allows the adoption of exceptional measures, including the limitations of rights otherwise considered inviolable. In this practice, the issue turns into a security issue through a speech act, and it “is only securitized if and when the audience accepts it as such” (Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 25). Securitization is successful only when the “securitizing actor” achieves to justify and legitimize exceptional and urgent measures (Wæver, 1995; Wæver and Buzan, 1993; Buzan *et al.*, 1998, p. 25; Balzacq, 2005, pp. 171–201; Balzacq, 2008, pp. 75–100; Balzacq, 2011; Balzacq *et al.*, 2015).

Péter Tálas, Director of the Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies at the National University of Public Service, argues that in modern politics, the exercise of power through the process of securitization has become widely used. It could become a common tool because societies always turn to the executive, that is, to governments, expecting a solution from them, and they usually give them confidence. In such situations, the popularity of governments tends to increase significantly. The society also gives the executive the right to use extraordinary tools to eradicate the phenomenon considered as an existential threat, which in practice means many additional resources, limited social debate and the possibility of using extraordinary means. In modern societies, the average citizen acquires his knowledge of security from the mass media, social media and political public discourse. His perception of security is not shaped by direct experience, but by the media and public discourse, which facilitates the securitization of individual issues (Tálas, 2016). In our research, we examine how the securitizing process works through communication and which are the main features of the successful process of securitization during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary. As it was said in the previous paragraph, securitization happens essentially by a speech act which can be considered a hybrid type in nature (Verschueren, 1999, p. 24) combining elements of assertiveness (statements) and declarations (utterances bringing about a change in reality, often institutionally). Thus, either an institution or a personality may have the influence to make securitization credible. In Hungary, government communication about the pandemic centred on the prime minister (PM), therefore, investigation into possible links between this securitization strategy and the current trend in personalization of politics seemed justifiable.

During the last decades, one of the defining phenomena of politics has been the personalization of politics which has been closely related to the strengthening of the role of the political leaders. The centralization of political leadership and the personalization of executive leadership also appear in contemporary democracies. In recent decades, the

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personalization of politics and electoral success of personalized parties have been widely discussed in the literature (see Papp and Zorigt, 2016; Kendall-Taylor, 2017; Körösényi, 2018; Körösényi *et al.*, 2020; Sata and Karolewsky, 2020). In the process of personalization, “the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e. political party) declines” (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007, p. 65; Garzia, 2017)

With traditional ideologies being pushed into the background, the personal characteristics of a politician, his life, his often simplistic communication style are appreciated, instead of the program of the political party or movement he/she represents. The personalization of executive leadership is closely related to the phenomenon of securitization. According to Mariaeugenia Parito (2015), in the middle of an unprecedented crisis, where “enemy”, “victim” and “savior” can be clearly articulated for populist politicians, instead of fact-based politicking backed by a strong party ideological background, emotion-based decisions come to the fore. In this new contest, the role of charismatic leaders who can simplify the political responses to the crisis and who are able to serve them convincingly for the electorate is crucial.

Parallel to the deepening of the crisis, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Orbán Viktor started to securitize COVID-19 phenomena. In this case, the political securitization campaign of the government contributed to enhancing popular support of the political leadership. Thus, the issue of the pandemic has been used for internal political purposes as well.

Since it seems that COVID-19 has a higher lethality rate than that of influenza and the growth in the number of serious cases can lead to the collapse of the healthcare system, the COVID-19 pandemic developed quickly into an existential public health threat (see Murphy, 2020; Kolfshootten and Ruijter, 2020; Ferhani and Rushton, 2020; Grundy-Warr and Lin, 2020). In Hungary, governmental actions to slow down the speed of spread of the disease created an exceptional scenario: the state of emergency brought increased powers to the executive, and it led to a militarization of the response. In Hungary, the pandemic was depicted as an existential threat. The securitizing actor, in our case the PM, identified the public health threat as an existential threat to the entire Hungarian nation. Extraordinary measures regarding COVID-19 were implemented, and citizens had to sacrifice some of their freedom. The consequent state of emergency justified reactions otherwise avoided. These responses were accepted by the Hungarian society.

The chronology of the measures can be summarized as follows ([www.koronavirus.gov.hu](http://www.koronavirus.gov.hu)). An Operational Group was set up on January 31, 2020, which held its first session on February 28. As the pandemic reached Europe, the first state of danger measures were announced: on March 11, higher education, then, on March 13, all education were suspended and later went online. On March 17, the opening hours of shops were shortened. On March 27, citizens' movement was restricted. Military and police commanders were dispatched to hospitals to supervise the implementation of emergency measures and later to institutions of strategic importance from March 29. Economic packages to reduce damage were announced from March 19 on.

The Hungarian Government launched its official webpage and official Facebook page about the pandemic, on 4 March 2020. On 30 March, the Hungarian Parliament approved a highly criticized law concerning the state of emergency, which allowed the government to rule by decree for an indefinite period of time. According to Kolfshootten and Ruijter (2020, p. 481), the securitization of infections can lead to more involvement of the military. In March, the Hungarian military sent “*control teams*” to work with the country's strategic companies with the task of “*monitoring and coordinating*” their operation and ensuring “*physical security*” (MTI, 2020). On 17 June, the National Assembly terminated the state of emergency. On 22 July 2020, Hungary had 4,347 confirmed people infected with the COVID-19, and the number of deceased was 596 (About Hungary, 2020).

**Methodology**

Warfare metaphors are widely used as a source of schematic background knowledge when unity of action and cohesion of society are needed (Steinert, 2003; Lakoff, 2008; Gibbs, 2017; Flusberg *et al.*, 2018). The use of war metaphors in communication about infectious diseases has been documented and analysed in relation to the epidemics of the early 2000s, especially foot and mouth disease and avian influenza, which threatened humans apart from animals (Nerlich, 2011). War metaphors draw on shared historical experience of a community and their use reflects cultural peculiarities. Although they are conceptual in nature, they are perceived as realistic due to the frequent occurrence of wars and even serve as the source domain of discourse metaphors describing seemingly unrelated events.

Discourse metaphors (Wallis *et al.*, 2005; Zinken, 2007) are used to reduce the complexity of an issue, for instance, to symbolize the spread of an invisible micro-organism threatening lives worldwide and bringing global economy and policy to a halt. They are developed for creating shared narratives providing the justification of social or political action as the framing of reality actually triggers scenarios. The success of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary during the first wave has inspired our investigation into how the crisis situation was socially constructed through political communication. An analysis of the use of warfare metaphors in Hungarian political discourse about the epidemic seemed suitable, especially because their prevalence was remarkable. Besides, such research has not been conducted before. Our research into political discourse about the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary examined three clusters of metaphors in traditional media communication: one describing fear, another framing the events as a war and a third one framing the events as a military action (see Table 1). In social media posts by the PM, two clusters of metaphors were identified (see Table 2 in the section Wartime metaphors in social media discourse).

In our paper, we carry out a software-assisted corpus-based analysis on the PM's communication between 4 March 2020 (when the first official COVID-related announcement was made by Orbán) and 26 May (the day when a proposal to lift the emergency law was

FEAR	WAR	MILITARY
Impending dangers	Battle against the virus	Mobilise
Generate panic	Combating the virus	Strategy
Restore sense of security	Invisible, unknown enemy	Operational group
Cause harm	Defence efforts	Protection of human lives
A threat to human life	Reserves of strength	Task force of virologists
Primary danger	Self-defence against the global pandemic	Operational military control units
State of danger	Line of defence	NCOs
State of emergency	Military front	Volunteers
Grave danger	Defence period	Officers
Endangering	Battle plan	Military capabilities
Fear	Healthcare front	Deployed on medical service
Difficult times	Theatre of defence operations	The country's capacity to protect itself
	Defence operations	Deployment unit
	Fight against the spread of the virus	Chemical protection specialists
	Repel this attack	
	Defences on four fronts	
	Hold the line	
	Four theatres of operations	
	Ward off the attack	

**Table 1.**  
Clusters formed for identifying the three domains of metaphors in traditional media communication

**Source(s):** Authors' own table

**Table 2.**  
Clusters formed for  
identifying the two  
domains of war and  
military metaphors in  
social media  
communication

WAR	MILITARY
Battle against the virus	Mobilise
Combating the virus	Strategy
Defence efforts	Operational Group
	Protection of human lives
Line of defence	Volunteers
Military front	Officers
Defence period	Military capabilities
Healthcare front	Action groups
Front lines	Task force
Defence operations	Situation analysis
Fight against the spread of the Virus	Curfew
Hold the line	Staying alert
Ward off the attack	
Fight	
Danger	
Staying alert	

**Source(s):** Authors' own table

submitted to the Parliament). Within this timeframe, we analyse his communication in social and in traditional media.

Our main goal is to identify similarities and dissimilarities between PM's communication in these two parts of the media system and to establish patterns regarding the use of war and military-related terminology. One objective of our research was to find out what major differences social media communication and conventional media communication demonstrated at the time of the state of emergency. Our presumption about variation is underpinned partly by suggestions that the public use more conventional sources of information in an emergency, and partly by the technical opportunity of exploitation of delivering longer messages on conventional media. Even though the audience of public broadcasters and conventional media is diminishing globally, Nielsen measured a 56% increase in television usage in the US during Hurricane Harvey emergency in 2017. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy and South Korea, an increase of 12–17% in TV consumption was experienced (Hall, 2020). This proves that news consumers tend to turn to public broadcasters when confined to their homes in a national state of danger and justifies the necessity of analysing conventional media discourse.

Quantitative and qualitative computer-assisted methods are appropriate for a corpus-based analysis with a supervised approach (Franzosi, 2018; Kutter, 2018). Two text corpora were constructed: one from Facebook posts by the PM, another from his speeches and interviews on traditional media between March 4 and May 26. Following the compilation of the three clusters indicated in Table 1 and of the two clusters shown in Table 2, the frequency of occurrence of the key words and phrases in the given period was checked with SentiOne tool in each corpus. Significant difference was expected between the use of the war and military frames in each. References to danger and fear were also supposed to divert, and the computer-assisted analysis proved that the cluster of fear was not in fact present in the social media posts. Our research was intended to be issue-specific, i.e. the aim was to find out how the fear, war and military metaphors were used for the securitization of the pandemic, and to what extent the PM exploited them for the personalization of political measures. The latter aspect is the reason why statistics on the use of first person singular and plural ("I" and "we") were compared in the two corpora. This methodology is considered heuristic as far as the pre-reading of texts and the classification of key words and phrases is

concerned; however, it is accepted in the social sciences (Kutter 2018, pp. 170–171). The statistics by the computer analysis were used to confirm or disconfirm our hypotheses when interpreting our findings.

The choice of texts required different approaches: on traditional media, the titles were the main clue. As to the Facebook posts, we utilized a qualitative coding process. All the posts created by the PM were analysed: a total of 174 Facebook posts were collected that form the corpus of this part of our analysis. All posts were coded independently by two coders. Three categories were used to determine whether the posts are in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic situation or not: direct connection, indirect connection (based on semantics or visual effects) or no connection [1]. Eight days after the first COVID patient was identified in Hungary, the PM started to count the days in his Facebook posts (e.g. day fifteen, day twelve, etc.). Even though it could be interpreted as a direct reference to the COVID situation, upon coding we decided to ignore the counting due to the following reasons: (1) he did not start counting the days of the emergency situation until the eighth day, (2) he used day-counting quite inconsistently: some post directly related to the pandemic situation were not counted, while some irrelevant posts were counted.

A detailed sentiment analysis was not carried out since it can be presumed that comments on his official page are moderated and a certain amount of negative comments are deleted, follower's engagement is moderated.

Besides the social media communication by the PM on the COVID-19 state of emergency, analysis of his communication in more conventional media on the same issue proved essential for comparison. A government homepage ([www.koronavirus.gov.hu](http://www.koronavirus.gov.hu)) was launched for official announcements and communication with the citizens as early as the declaration of a national state of emergency. Its English language version displays the transcript of the speeches delivered by the PM in Parliament (parts of which were broadcast in news bulletins on the public television) and weekly interviews given on the public radio.

The texts of 21 speeches and interviews given from the declaration of the state of emergency till lifting it were analysed with the same content analysis method as the social media posts so as to reveal possible variations in narratives on the situation. Including the transcripts of speeches and announcements by the PM published on the government homepage and broadcast on public television and radio was justified by the media consumption habits of the population. According to Reuters Digital News Report 2019, 85% of news consumers in Hungary use online sources including the social media (Newman *et al.*, 2019). The Standard Eurobarometer opinion poll in autumn 2019 found that 61% of Hungarians obtained information on home affairs from television and 28% from home pages; and 57% of citizens used the Internet daily, while 80% used television and 39% listened to radio broadcast every day (European Commission, 2019). Consequently, a content analysis of online transcripts of speeches and announcements by the PM seemed appropriate for scientific fairness.

In order to explain why we chose two different text corpora for analysing the use of wartime metaphors in Orbán's communication, it is necessary to highlight the significant differences between his traditional and social media communication.

#### *Politicians and social media—Orbán and social media*

In order to provide a comprehensive picture of the “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2013; Chadwick *et al.*, 2016), we find it imperative to analyse social media communication as well.

Political information on social media might have an extremely powerful influence on persuasion because in social media news is delivered alongside information about social traits and public opinion (Zúñiga *et al.*, 2018). Thus, as the use of social media has become more widespread, they have grown in importance as sources of political information, not only

from the news media, but also from personal social ties (Bond *et al.*, 2012). According to Reuters's 2019 Digital Media Report, social media as a news source – especially Facebook – is growingly used within the Hungarian electorate (Bognar, 2019).

Social media like Facebook and Twitter are particularly apt for political communication in personalized political communities, since they place the focus on the individual politician rather than the political party they represent, thus they expand the political arena for increase for personalized campaigning (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013).

The PM is the most influential politician of Hungary with the biggest supporter base online and offline alike. Facebook can be considered his most important online communication channel, since Twitter – the other main social media platform widely used by politicians – is not widespread in Hungary (Orbán's last tweet dates back to February 2017). Although he also has an official Instagram account – probably to counterbalance the fact that the popularity of the main government party, FIDESZ, that is, of the Young Democrats' Association amongst people under 30 is very poor (HVG, 2020) – but the majority of his Instagram posts matches his Facebook posts. Within the timeframe of our analysis, one significant “Instagram-moment” has to be highlighted: on April 16, Orbán had posted a signed decree about the maturity exams on his Instagram account before it was published in the Official Journal (Bozzay, 2020). Since Facebook is the most used social media platform by the Hungarian electorate and by the PM as well and since Orbán several times used Facebook to announce new measures *in live* instead of more traditional platforms like the national television channel or press conferences, we chose Facebook as the second component of our analysis.

## Discussion and findings

After coding, we found that from our corpus a total of 131 of the PM's Facebook posts were directly or indirectly connected to the pandemic: 114 direct and 16 indirect, meaning that in 75% of his posts he propagated content in connection with the coronavirus.

Orbán's posts usually contain one or more pictures or a video with a maximum one sentence long text (we decided to apply the term “message” to them) which summarizes the contents of the post. Moreover, 88% (153) of his messages are translated into English, posts without English translation pertain to each category, inconsistently [2], and thus this trait is not put under closer observation within the study. Since these are often very short, title-like messages, it is impossible to analyse them from cognitive point of view, however, compared to his traditional media communication significant differences can be observed.

### *The use of personal pronouns*

On his official account Orbán's messages grammatically tend to be impersonal, either in Hungarian or in English, messages are usually formed using gerund or infinitive structures. When using personal pronouns, the use of “we” prevails in both languages, giving a sensation of national unity. Within the corpus of the social media analysis, first person singular was used only three times (less than 2%), all of these posts were categorized as posts referring directly to COVID-19. Since – as mentioned above – about 3/4 of his posts refer directly or indirectly to the pandemic situation *semantically*, Orbán's social media communication does not centre on the PM's individual action to save Hungary from the consequences of the crisis rather than that emphasizing the collective nature of defence prevails.

Our findings were similar in the case of the transcript of speeches. The creation of a keyword cloud at the end of our content analysis of speeches and announcements by the PM resulted in displaying “coronavirus”, “Hungary” and “Hungarian” as the most frequently occurring items in the text corpus researched. The sense of cohesion and the proximization

(Cap, 2006) of danger posed by the COVID-19 virus may offer an explanation. Nevertheless, the crucial role of the PM in communication about the pandemic and the introduction of the state of emergency raise the question whether the PM forged national unity or reinforced his position as a trusted leader of the country at the time of crisis. In other words, statistics on the number of references to “I” and “we” seemed to be necessary.

In the transcript of the 21 speeches and interviews for traditional media, a quantitative comparison between the occurrences of “I” and “my” in contrast to “we” and “our” among the personal pronouns displayed a proportion of 27 versus 73%, respectively. This proves that the PM focused on a sense of unity rather than his role or merits in his communication. The peak period for the occurrence of “we” and “our” lasted much longer (from March 14 to April 13) than the peak period for the use of “I” and “my” (from March 22 to March 26). This can be interpreted as the maintenance of a sense of national unity over an extensive period with a short span when the PM took responsibility for taking the key decisions.

Nevertheless, the visual impact of the government’s official COVID-19 information site’s homepage seems contradictory. The illustration of the homepage displaying speeches and remarks is rather conventional: each transcript is accompanied by a photo of the PM in the centre, whether he is in his office or in the garden of his official residence. If the photo was taken in Parliament or at a meeting of the Operational Group, the PM is in the foreground. In summary, visually, the PM is the protagonist of the events, unlike in his political discourse.

#### *Military and war metaphor scenarios in conventional media discourse*

The analysis of the speeches and interviews of the PM showed that three domains of meaning were at interplay when depicting the pandemic’s arrival to Hungary: (1) fear; (2) war; (3) current military-related terminology. Fear rooted in the shared historical experience of being attacked was mostly related to the impact of the virus on the life of society. The narrative included phrases like “impending dangers”, “grave danger”, “endangering”, “cause harm”, “a threat to human life”, “fear”. The language largely contributed to the securitization of the pandemic, identifying it as perilous to both human health and economic stability.

For accuracy of analysis, language describing military forces and action was handled separately from highly metaphorical language placing events in the realm of war. Thus, the second domain of meaning referred to the military, members of which were physically present at major locations of events, such as the Operational Group or chemical protection specialists supporting the findings put forward by [Kolfschooten and Ruijter \(2020\)](#). The narrative describing military forces and action was shifting between metaphorical and literal usage, establishing a link between the virtual world of discourse-created danger and real-world danger. The appearance of the military on footage and discourse related to them authenticated the first domain of fear and being attacked since they elicited the frame of self-defence. A remarkable characteristic of the military-related domain of discourse was that it contained nouns and noun phrases mostly (with the exception of “mobilise”), that is, it was static in nature. Nouns and noun phrases convey the idea of factuality rather than that of action, unlike verbs and verb phrases. As a result, they evade components of meaning which are peculiar to verbs, such as reference to actor, time or process. Discourse did not leave ground for questions or doubts concerning the involvement of the military in the defence operations.

The third semantic domain constructed in political discourse by the PM was the metaphoric representation of home-defence and self-defence against “*an invisible, unknown enemy*”, the COVID-19 virus. The amount of linguistic signs classified as war-related was the largest [3]. War against the invisible enemy was described with military terminology (“*battle*”, “*line of defence*”, “*four theatres of operations*”, “*reserves of strength*”), which included verb



phrases conveying the idea that the forces of defence led by the Operational Group and the PM are in action (“*we have also prepared a battle plan*”, “*fight against the spread of the virus*”, “*hold the line*”, “*repel this attack together*”, “*ward off this attack*”). By the time the lifting of the state of emergency was announced, the war scenario reached its last phase with the PM cautiously announcing their victory: he talked about “*containment*” and “*suppression of the virus*”, then he said: “*we have won the first battle*” and “*we’ve defended ourselves*”.

On the whole, throughout the speeches and announcements a number of conceptual metaphors and the related scenarios were exploited beside the main one, WAR; just to mention a few of them: ENEMY, BATTLE, FIGHT, SELF-DEFENCE, FRONT, FRONTLINE, THEATRE OF OPERATIONS. Each of them triggered a cognitive scenario linked with the concept of war, multiplying forms of discourse about the topic and heightening the impression of being endangered and being at war. They were used for rendering the measures plausible and for explaining the citizens what was happening. A prominent feature of the discourse was securitization: the way it transformed a security risk into imminent danger. This was achieved by proximization (Cap, 2006): the global pandemic (“*self-defence against the global pandemic*”) served as a background to a metaphorized war against the virus (“*battle against the virus in Hungary*”) described as a destructive invader “*endangering human health and people’s jobs*”. In other words, the epidemic was pulled close in time and space in order to visualize it as an imminent danger. This can be interpreted from the perspective of risk and crisis communication too. Risk communication involves real-time exchange of information so that the receiver can take informed decisions (WHO, 2020). Crisis communication is reactive to an unforeseen event (ECDC, 2020). Rationally, health communication would have been about risks, involving reference to future outcomes. In the discourse, the war metaphors described danger as present, expressing the securitization of the risks and presenting the situation as a crisis. Risk communication and crisis communication were combined, which was probably facilitated by the fact that the concepts of “defence” and “protection” are not distinguished sharply in Hungary [4].

Wartime metaphors and military-related expressions are present on Orbán’s Facebook page, however, due to the shortness of the messages only to a lesser extent and in a more simplistic way than in traditional media. The second semantic domain comprises current military action related terminology, since Orbán frequently uses expressions that cannot be considered metaphors, but they reflect a militant approach to the pandemic: *curfew*, *action groups*, *operational groups*, etc., via this practice he strengthens further the securitized approach to the pandemic by leaving the realm of metaphors and entering the world of contemporary warfare. The use of these expressions contributes to depicting the pandemic as a concrete threat that necessitates war efforts. It is in accordance with our findings about the PM’s public media communication. Due to the limited length of these messages the FEAR metaphor was not identified as a cluster at its own. The shortness of the messages can be the reason behind the fact that military and war related metaphors are less noticeable than in the traditional media.

During this period, 46 of his written statements contained wartime metaphors or direct military references. It has to be mentioned, however, that this cannot be considered a novelty, since his usual communication contains these elements as well. About 14% of his non-COVID-related posts have wartime metaphors or military terminology, while this rate is more than two-fold (30%) amongst his posts directly or indirectly related to the pandemic.

His communication with war-related elements (a total of 46 posts) centres on the notion of defence. While the activity of the government-related action groups and operational groups is highly emphasized within these posts (cc. 35% of these posts refer to the work of these groups), they are being pictured as the protagonists of the battle against COVID-19, only two references can be found about healthcare workers who *serve in the frontline*. While in his discourse in traditional media, Orbán uses fear-related metaphors, this feature is almost

absent from his written social media communication, having only a low number of reference to “danger”.

Another distinctive feature of Orbán’s social media communication within the timeframe is that based on his written messages there is mainly one enemy to combat: COVID-19. There are no direct reactions to international or internal critics in his written statements, although Orbán was heavily criticized by the European Union (EU) and by several member states during this period ([Radio Free Europe, 2020](#); [Walker and Rankin, 2020](#); [Deutsche Welle, 2020](#); [De Launey, 2020](#)).

He does not fight back *explicitly* in his posts, however some subtle references can be found in which partners are appreciated and who are less acknowledged. Any international reference (e.g. EU, V4, US, Serbia, Moldova) has either a positive overtone mentioning cooperation, consultation or re-launch (of the economy), or they are considered neutral. However, the notion of “fight” against coronavirus—which is presumably common—appears only in his post about a phone call with US President Donald Trump, stating that bilateral relations with the US are in top shape. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is considered a friend [5], who is the most positive manifestation in his communication regarding international partners. Help from abroad is mentioned only in connection with China, while no reference to EU support is displayed at all. Posts regarding the EU are mostly neutral; however, in one of his posts he indirectly refers to fight *against* the EU [6] ([Orbán, 2020](#)), while posts with explicitly positive connotations regard only partners *outside* the EU.

It is interesting to see that when creating a keyword cloud from Orbán’s written statements on Facebook, no classical wartime metaphors (defence, battle etc.) can be found within the 25 most frequently used words; however, military-related expressions, such as operational (as of operational group) or action (as of action group) can be found.

#### *Pictures and videos on social media*

Since Orbán’s Facebook posts contain visual elements (pictures, videos, YouTube links) apart from the short written messages, it is worth observing them, as well, since they slightly alter our findings about his written social media communication. The online realm pictures can be considered as important means of conveying (nonverbal) messages, signifying a meaning that would be much harder to be put in words and thereby (co-)shaping the politician’s image as a leader—or at least revealing the image Orbán tries to convey of himself ([Schmalenberger, 2016](#)). The photos look very professional (in terms of quality) but not staged and often try to offer a “behind the scene” impression of Orbán in his everyday life as political leader. He is the absolute protagonist of his videos, the notion of Orbán as a modern general-like leader seems to be a desired visual element: Orbán is usually portrayed as a dedicated, general-like statesman who personally controls the defensive efforts (e.g. personally checking on COVID-hospitals all across the country), busy with organizing the defence from dawn until dusk. He also posted several videos where he directly addresses the nation from his study room, presenting the latest defensive measures. It is important to note that his videos do not have English subtitles, only Hungarian.

All together 70 videos were analysed [7] from the PM’s Facebook page, a part of these are edited clips from his speeches from the Parliamentary Q&A sessions. It is important to highlight that Orbán is much more militant in his Parliamentary videos where open and direct criticism appears: he attacks directly oppositional parties. A new element of his communication appears within these videos: Orbán is using wartime metaphors regarding opposition parties claiming that they *attacked* those who are very busy with the *defence* of the country. This is a second “line” of militant communication that appears on his Facebook page. As only three videos with direct and one with indirect criticism to opposition parties were posted during this period this cannot be considered as a main feature of his communication,

however, these videos have the most confrontational tone, as these are the only references on what can possibly hinder defence.

In his 33 videos—more than 47%—Orbán uses direct war or military-related references. Visually, military-related persons (e.g. police, hospital commanders wearing uniform reporting for duty) are recurrently portrayed. Apart from the basic wartime metaphors (battle/defence against the virus) the use of contemporary military terminology is repetitive. A wide range of military ranks are mentioned, he talks about designing battle plans and the notion of collective self-defence appears (where collective regards the Hungarian nation) as an ultimate task for the nation. Metaphorical and literal use of war and military related terminology are mixed in his videos similarly to his discourse in conventional media.

Although the use of first person plural prevails in his videos just like in his written statements, first person singular is used in a more decisive way suggesting a leader in control. First person singular is used at the beginning of the first part of the defence (*I need report from the operational group, I am working on stockpiling enough medicine*) and usually when talking about the past—when the successful first part of the defence has ended. However, when talking about the much more uncertain future (the second stage of the pandemic) the use of plural is prevalent. In his logins from his study he concentrates on collective efforts, particularly courteous tone (If I may. . . I respectfully ask, etc.) is used when talking to the elderly. The recurring element of *reporting for duty* to Orbán by military and non-military related personnel, as well strengthens the image of a general-like leader in action.

Visually—based on his videos—he is more decisively portrayed as the protagonist of the defence than in his written Facebook posts. In one of his videos government officials headed by Orbán—as the protagonists of the national “defence” team—are displayed with special visual effects mostly used in action movies as if they were superheroes. When presenting action groups for the electorate for the first time, the operational group is described as the group responsible for saving human lives. This correlates with the idea of operational and action groups being displayed as protagonists of the battle.

## Conclusion

The personalization of the measures concerning the pandemic led to focused and integrated communication by placing the best known member of government, the PM, in the centre. His ethos combined with war and military rhetoric allowed the securitization of the COVID issue. His communication exploited military and war metaphor scenarios in two ways: on one hand, war metaphors were used for legitimizing the measures taken during the state of emergency. On the other hand, military terminology was applied for linking figurative language and metaphorical meaning with real-world references and events. A systematic analysis of the interlinks between visual information and discourse could lead to detecting how context was created or modified with either, in order to amplify the persuasive effect on citizens. Further research could probably reveal how discourse was constructed for various target audiences, for instance, different age groups or citizens with different political affiliations.

As to the reception of the PM's communication about the management of the pandemic, the regular opinion polls published on the homepage of Századvég Foundation ([Piackutatás, közvéleménykutatás, 2020](#)) documented a change in public sentiment: before the declaration of a state of danger, on March 6, the COVID pandemic ranked only third (with 56%) among the most feared things in the minds of Hungarians after climate change (87%) and illegal migration (63%). Consequently, the PM had to raise awareness to the issue and win citizens' approval within a short time. On April 23, a survey indicated that 79% of citizens appreciated health workers' efforts and 84% endorsed acquisition of equipment related to the management of the health crisis. Towards the end of the state of danger, on May 26, findings showed that 76% of the population thought the management of the COVID crisis was appropriate.

Orbán's speeches and announcements described vividly the fear fuelled by an invisible enemy, the virus. The technique of personalization, which involves presenting a threat and offering rescue or shelter from it, and the course of action taken by the government were rationally linked and were even mutually reinforcing. Fear was presented as instilled by imminent danger threatening human lives, society and economy. Discourse focused on national cohesion and unity of action but in the photos the PM was visualized as the protagonist of the fight against the COVID-19 virus. Orbán's Facebook communication during the COVID-19 emergency is less militant than his traditional media communication, while posting mostly short messages in Hungarian and English with picture(s) or videos, seemingly there is only one enemy to combat—COVID-19. The use of military-related terminology intensified in his social media posts directly or indirectly related to COVID-19, however, it was still much more limited than in traditional media. As a whole his written Facebook communication concentrates on the battle and the defence against COVID-19, in more than a quarter of his posts he uses militant expressions, however he usually uses a non-confrontational tone. Nevertheless, when taking a closer look to his video a new front appears—opposition parties. This seems to be a general feature of Orbán's social media communication: while using wartime metaphors and direct war-related terminology, his bilingual written statements are more conciliatory than his communication through videos which might not be intended for international public due to the lack of their English translation.

#### Notes

1. We used our categories as follows:
  - (1) Direct: posts containing concrete and direct reference to the pandemic in the written messages.
  - (2) Indirect: posts containing indirect reference (either within the written messages or visually) to the pandemic. The main difference between direct and indirect categories is that indirect posts refer to the indirect consequences of the pandemic (e.g. loss of workplaces, maturity exams under the newly-changed circumstances), or they contain some special visual element that characterizes the pandemic periods (e.g. wearing face masks, giving elbow-bumps).
  - (3) No connection: the post within this category do not contain any reference either to the pandemic, or to any phenomena connected to it.
2. Examples for posts not translated into English: Mama, kérlek contains a link of a well-known Hungarian song about Mothers' Day)/52. Harminc éve szabadon. Ahogy akkor is, most is összefogásra van szükség Magyarországon. Együtt sikerülhet! – Thirty years of freedom. Just like then, we need unity now. Together we can make it./Coronavirus. Breaking news, here on Facebook. As it can be seen, posts belonging to each of the three categories can lack English translation.
3. 26 items were coded as warfare-related, as compared with 16 as military-related and 14 as fear-related.
4. The equivalent of both is "védelem" in Hungarian.
5. It should be noted that Orbán visited Vucic only a day after when he refused to go to Bruxelles to respond to EU criticism about the Hungarian emergency law, claiming that he is too busy with defending Hungary against the coronavirus.
6. This is how a Hungarian amazon fights. Due to the fact that this post was categorized by the coders as having an indirect connection with the pandemic situation we do not consider this post as direct criticism against the EU.
7. During the analysed period, 81 of Orbán's posts contained a short video. Within this part only videos that are not edited clips from his usual Friday morning radio interview are analysed in order to avoid duplication with the previous part. Based on this consideration our corpus of analysis consists of 70 short videos posted on his Facebook page.

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