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Political alliance with COVID-19: Macedonian politics and the strategic use of the pandemic

Aleksandar Takovski
AAB College, Kosovo

Abstract

The emergence of COVID-19 in Macedonia in March 2020 overlapped with a period in which the country was run by a technical Government tasked to organize premature elections. In circumstances of highlighted inter-party conflict predating the health crisis, the newly emerged health emergency has only added to the political confrontation and the existing political crisis. COVID-19 and the resulting discourses on health crisis in this respect, I argue, have been used strategically by the political actors to make a populist advancement in the struggle over state power. Moreover, the strategic use of the COVID-19 by the two major political parties in a discourse marked by blame casting and (inter)dependence on past political misconduct indexes, and at the same time perpetuates, a larger ongoing political crisis in the country. To demonstrate the strategic use of the COVID-19 health discourse within the interparty conflict and its diagnostic potential to witness a prolonged political crisis, I will use internet data collected from the websites of the two largest Macedonian political parties in order to analyze the discursive strategies of predication and argumentation employed by the political parties.

Keywords

COVID-19, Macedonia, political crisis, interparty conflict, online discourse (press releases and conferences), discursive strategies, self-praise, blame casting

Introduction

Inter-party conflicts are structuring elements of parties' struggle for power which manifest through various discourses, global pandemics including. Such is the case with the two largest Macedonian parties SDSM[1] and VMRO-DPMNE.[2] Although their conflict pre-dates the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic,[3] several events are formative of the

Corresponding author:
Aleksandar Takovski, AAB College, Kosovo.
Email: aleksandar.takovski@universitetiaab.com

political crisis the country was in at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak. Of central significance is the (in)famous Prespa Agreement signed on June 17th, 2018, between the Republic of Macedonia represented by the SDSM elected Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Nikola Dimitrov, and the Republic of Greece represented by MFA Nikos Kotzias. The Agreement settled the 27-year old dispute between the countries over the constitutional name of Macedonian (the Republic of Macedonia) that was changed into RN Macedonia.[4] The incumbent party, SDSM, has framed the Agreement as a political action that will secure country's accession to EU.[5] The French veto to Macedonian accession to EU raised the following year, however, brought popular disillusionment, sparkled EU scepticism and empowered the opposition's party – VMRO DPMNE – criticism of the incumbent Social Democrats leading to political instability and election of technical government in early January 2020 tasked to organize the premature elections held in July the same year. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the country in March 2020 brought new dimension to the interparty conflict. While the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Finance, as ministries most directly involved in the COVID-19 crisis management system, were run by SDSM, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was run by VMRO. In practical terms, this allocation has legitimated the parties' criticism of each other based on the type of their involvement in the crisis (the Social Democrats' decision making power and the execution of the anti-crisis measures by VMRO led ministry). The two parties have both took advantage of the crisis and the opponent's involvement to extend and deepen the interparty conflict. In his context, the general aim of this study is to learn more about the interdependence of the discourse on crisis and the discourse of interparty conflict by analyzing how the pandemic was appropriated and used as an instrument of political confrontation.

Crisis are advantageous opportunities to promote oneself at the expanse of the other. They are convenient opportunities for political actors to communicate commitment to crisis resolution in order to reduce anxiety and fear, and in consequence gain pubic trust. To accomplish this, political actors use strategies that reassure the citizens in the efficiency of the anti-crisis measures and the capacity of those undertaking them. Crisis thus occasions a chance to promote political wisdom, conduct and diligence, but at the same time it opens a door to criticism. The criticism is largely built on the premise that whoever is in charge of the situation is incompetent, incapable and hence the results of his actions inefficient. This antagonism between the representations of the crisis management involvement produced by the political actors, is structured, not surprisingly around the praise and blame system that enables an uninterrupted construction of positive images of oneself and negative images of the other. Given the importance of the two macro strategies, one would expect political actors to make equal, or nearly equal, use of the two key strategies (praise and blame). However, the misbalance in the strategies deployed (criticism being more frequent than praise), as the data will show, points to a larger problem, that of the discourse on crisis being merely an index of a serious crisis in the political discourse in Macedonia. Thus, the discourse produced vis-à-vis the health crisis, I argue, can serve as a diagnostic tool for a yearlong political crisis. To validate the claim and demonstrate the manners in which COVID-19 was appropriated in the interparty conflict, I will identify and discuss the key discursive strategies political actors used to construct their involvement in the crisis. To do so, the study will rely on data gathered from the parties' official websites consisting of news releases, press releases and press conferences issued in the period between April 2020 and June the same year.

Theoretical framework

Crisis as discourse

Crises are socially produced and discursively constituted phenomena, endowed with material and semiotic properties (Hay, 1996). As such, their construction and successful management depends on language use, communication and discourse (Hearit and Courtright, 2003; Rycker and Mohd Don, 2013). Moreover, they are brought into existence "through narrative and discourse" (Hay, 1996) that takes form of specific genres **(**medical reports and recommendations, expert reports and opinions, news articles, online debates, everyday encounters etc.). These reflect the understandings, interpretations and interests of diverse groups, organizations, and institutions, political parties including. (Powers and Gong, 2008; Powers and Xiao, 2008). Media play major role in the discursive construction of crises. They offer varying representations of the crises depending on the geopolitical and social proximity of the readership to the region affected (Houston et al., 2008), they act as interactive crises managers (Lee, 2008), serve as an extended hand of the Government (Xiaoyan and Xiaoming, 2008), and even help revive nationalism through the positive construction of the national leaders and medical workers (Lu, 2008.) In this manner, media construct biased images of crises, thus helping legitimate particular forms of inclusion/exclusion, maintain existing power structures and set political agendas (Ryker and Don Mohd Don, 2013).

Media are powerful instruments of ideological criticism accomplished through the production of news coverage that frames crisis negatively by relating it to the inefficiency (slow responses), incapacity and mismanagement (unable to prevent and control the spread and provide sufficient medial support) of international Governments, at times embedding the blame in a wider ideological criticism of the political system for the lack of democracy (Abbas, 2020). The international media have been particularly keen on blaming China for its lack of responsibility in the SARS crisis, in particular for the institutional mismanagement of the outbreak, bureaucratic obstacles, poor health system and primitive living conditions (Joye, 2003; Buus and Olsson, 2006; Leung and Huang, 2007). In consequence, such representation has perpetuated an unfavourable image of China as the negative other (Leung and Huang, 2007), and reproduced a Euro-American centred world order that perpetuates the socio-cultural difference between 'us' and 'them' (Joye, 2010). Although the ultimate end of the discursive politics based on aggressive communication strategies and blame casting in particular, is the struggle for global domination (Zhang and Savage, 2020). Very often political actors, Governments including, (ab)use a health crisis to legitimate discriminatory and aggressive policies and actions against certain, often religious groups, within national borders. By demonizing groups for being carriers and transmitters of the diseases, the Governments create an atmosphere of fear and paranoia which in turn justifies control, prejudice, discrimination, even aggression and violence against these groups. Such are the cases with Muslims in India (Prasad, 2020) and the Shiite Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Iran (Morazzoni and Zavittiere, 2020).

It is clear that demonization and blaming are instrumental building blocks of the power-ridden constructions of health crises. What comes as a surprise is the relative absence of self-praising discourse, and in consequence, research on self-heroization in times of crisis, albeit the convenience of the hero genre made possible by its structural praise and blame dichotomy, which is a suitable framework to legitimate inclusion and

exclusion and challenge or perpetuate existing power relations, especially in times of crisis. Hero narratives (stories about bold, resolute, dependable, capable leadership) Xiao argues (2008) offer the much necessary comfort, psychological relief and motivational booster in times of grave danger, confusion and uncertainty. These circumstances, idiomatically known as 'damsel in distress' are an ideal opportunity to discursively construct an image of a competent leadership capable of overcoming the threats and challenges and maintaining social order, cohesion and well-being. Although the discursive strategy of heroization based on praise and self-praise seems like a fitting means to the end, the discourse on crisis in Macedonia and elsewhere has favoured blame casting much frequently than self-praise. The tendency to criticize and blame cast the political other for a health-crisis mismanagement has gone as far as to accommodate criticism for other, non-health-related, past political misconduct. An intertextual link to the past is created in order to empower present criticism, making the current incompetence (health mismanagement) only the last example in a series of political failures and misdoings of the political opponent. Matus-Mendoza and De Rycker (2010) have demonstrated the interdependence of different crises – past, present and future – within representations of the H1N1 crisis in Mexico in 2009, arguing that "the health crisis enabled editorialists, journalists, columnists and commentators revisit ongoing and/or unresolved crises in Mexico, especially those to do with the political situation, the economy, crime and security.

In this manner, issues preceding and superseding the crisis become part of its discourse allowing expression of criticism for actions past, present and future. Such temporally extended framework in turn makes a good diagnostic tool to look into the political antagonisms and conflicts that structure political communication and confrontation. The COVID-19 is merely a new instrument in the toolbox of the long-lasting interparty conflict. Such is the case I argue with the discourse on health crisis produced in Macedonia that taps into other discourses to empower its critical edge. The intertextual interdependence of the health crisis discourse on other discourses, and especially their mobilization within the interparty conflict perpetuated over the COVID management may serve as a powerful diagnostic instrument capable of revealing these conflicts indicative of a long ongoing political crisis. This interparty discourse dominated by criticism and negative othering that has been a common practice for some time in Macedonia, indexes a communication impasse, an absence of political dialogue, emblematic of an ongoing political polarization and social crisis. The use of the health crisis as an instrument of criticism that draws power on discourses preceding the crisis is best understood as a discursive move that is structured upon the praise and blame system typical of crisis, and the ways political actors construct themselves and their involvement in the crisis and its resolution.

Crisis and the construction of political actors

The construction of social actors out of crisis has always been organised around a praise- and blame system, although the discursive and linguistic particularities have changed over time (Kendrick, 2010; Takovski, 2021a; Takovski and Muhic, 2017). The system is convenient discursive framework as it offers opportunity to advance positive presentation of oneself through the acts of self-praise (boasting about performance), self-justification, and self-identification as a source of authority, reason, vision and sanity (Chilton, 2004: 47). This helps construct positive, trustworthy images of capable leadership, especially in times

of crisis. To enhance this image, other social actors, political opponents in this case, are discredited, delegitimized, accused, blamed and criticized for being less capable, less knowledgeable, unworthy of public praise, trust and fellowship. This binary system is constructed and perpetuated through several discursive strategies among which nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization and intensification/mitigation (Reisgl and Wodak, 2001). Predication and argumentation strategies are of key interest to this study. The former are strategies which are used to label social actors positively or negatively. The labels are realized as evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits taking different linguistic forms of predicates such as: adjectives, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, infinitive clauses, collocations, comparisons, similes, metaphors, and others. Argumentation strategies are used to justify the predications by the use of different argumentative moves and a fund of topoi[6] (comparisons, examples, benefits, external constraints, and appeal to authority, threat, consequence, and other).

Methodology

Having this in mind the key task is to identify and discuss the discursive strategies of predication and argumentation and the linguistic units that structure the praise and blame system upon which the whole discourse on crisis is built. I am interested to find out how the crisis was used as a pretext and contextualised within this system, and how it was used instrumentally to evaluate actors' involvement and contribution in the crisis management. To accomplish this, I will analyse the acts of self-praise and self-justification that political actors used to highlight their own knowledge and capacity to cope with the crisis, with the focus on positive predicates and their semantic content used to label these acts positively, as well as the (types) of arguments and topoi mobilized towards the same ends. At the same time I will be looking in the acts of blame casting and accusation addressed to the opponent, the formal and lexical structure of the negative predications of his actions and the arguments used in support, especially those based on the topoi of negative examples, negative consequences, and threat. The purpose of so doing is twofold – to map out the structure of the discourse on crisis and to use it as a diagnostic tool of the interparty conflict and the political crisis that precede the current COVID discourse.

To do so, I will first look into the internal structure of the praise and blame system, that is, the ratio between texts that praise one's involvement in the crisis versus those that criticize the opponent, and the most common targets of criticism. The data will help establish a general understanding of the interparty interaction and its hidden (opaque) aspects. Further, I will identify and discuss the key predicates the two political parties used to construct their own engagement with the crisis positively, and those predicates they have used to negatively present the opponents' actions. Then, I will identify and discuss the key arguments and topoi the parties used to justify the predications, by looking into the topics and the semantic content (the specific reasons, explanations, scenarios, images, etc.) of the arguments and the types of topoi used (threat, positive/negative consequence). Finally, I will discuss the ways in which political actors use past discourses to justify the predications and justifications underpinning the criticism of the opponent within the health crisis discourse.

To accomplish the ends, I have used the parties' official websites to collect data, including news and press releases, and press conferences, published in the period

between April 2020 and June 15, 2020. By using the keywords' search 'COVID', 'pandemic', 'crisis', and by eliminating cross postings, and posts that treated other COVID non-related topics, or did not contain a topical framing of COVID within the context of political/party communication, I have come up with workable data sets consisting of: 44 texts produced by the Social Democrats and 131 texts produced by VMRO-DPMNE.[7]The sets were manually converted into two single word texts to be read and analysed. The SD data set consists of 52 pages/14613 words, while the VMRO data set has 82 pages, and 28427 words. Within these sets I have first identified the most frequently used predicates (by using word frequency counter), and the most frequent targets of criticism, presented in the first table. The sets were then read in order to identify the most frequent arguments used in support of the predicates, the results of which are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively. The texts were all written in Macedonian language, so I have provided the English translations of the extracts used in the data presentation section. The extracts were referenced by using a system that reveals the source (a party's official representative whose party's position is revealed in the text or the Party's Press Centre if the statement was issued by the Centre not an individual) and the date the statement was made.

Data

The following table presents the scope of criticism in the two political parties' internet discourse on COVID-19, the people who were the targets of criticism, and the key predicates used (Table 1).

Table 1. Texts, targets and negative labels.

SDMS	VMRO-DPMNE
Total number of texts/number of texts that praise the party/number of texts that criticise the opponent	
44/2/42 (4,54%)	131/41/90 (31, 29%)
Targets of criticism	
VMRO'S Party leader, Mr Mickovski (307 mentions)	SDSM (209 mentions)
Acting Minister of Internal Affairs, Mr Chulev (134)	SDSM party leader, Mr. Zoran Zaev (188)
VMRO DPMNE 130	Acting Minister of Health Mr Filipce (105)
Expressions used to label political opponent and their actions	
Irresponsible (77) and immature (55)	Incapable/incompetent (51)
Fake (50), manipulating information (33)	Manipulating figures (24), lying (17)
Unserious (24)	Unserious (11)
Incapable (11)	Irresponsible (1) and immature (1)

The set of data collected from the official site of SDSM consists of 44 texts, but only two praise the officials' response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, while the majority of the texts (42 texts, or 95,46% of the corpus) criticize the

opponent (VMRO) for lacking the skills to address the public health emergency. The set of data collected from VMRO-DPMNE's site totals 131 texts, out of which 90 texts (68.71% of the corpus) criticize the opponent, while 41 texts (31.29% of the corpus) praise the party's commitment to the public management of COVID-19. Although varying in scope, blame cast and criticism dominate overpraise in both data sets. The difference in the focal point of criticism in the two parties' discourses deserves some attention. The Social Democrats most frequently criticize the leader of the Opposition, Mr Hristijan Mickovski, whose surname appears 307 times in a data set that is half the size of that collected from the VMRO site, making their criticism more poignant. Second in line is VMRO's Minister of Internal Affairs Mr Nake Chulev (134 occurrences), while the opposition party is negatively addressed 130 times. VMRO's criticism shows a different tendency. The main focus is on SDSM, which is negatively addressed on 209 occasions, just a little more than its leader, Mr Zoran Zaev who is negatively addressed 188 times.[8]

Criticisms of the opponent's actions in both party discourses rely on predications that are most often expressed through descriptive adjectives with negative meaning. For the Social Democrats, VMRO-DPMNE, and its leader in particular, is most of all *irresponsible* (77 occurrences), and *immature* (55), while at the same time he is described as a liar and a manipulator of news (68). To a lesser degree, he is labelled as *non-serious* (24) and *incapable* (11). The lexical structure of VMRO-DPMNE's criticism differs significantly. For the party, the Social Democrats are most of all *incompetent* political actors (51) who *pretend* that the situation is under control and who artificially create an image of normalcy by *manipulating* the figures of the COVID-19 infected (24). Contrary to their opponent, irresponsibility and non-seriousness are not the key building blocks of their criticism. These, then, are the only explicit predications made by the parties. Other, implied predications may be elicited from the discourse each party deployed, by identifying the strategies deployed by the parties, each presented in the following two sections.

Social democrats

The following table summarizes the most frequent predicates and arguments used by the Social Democrats to assign blame to VMRO-DPMNE. For the reader's convenience, the predicates are divided into explicitly stated (marked in bold type), and implied (italicized); the latter have been constructed by paying attention to the nuances of argument.

Table 2. Predications and arguments that criticize VMRO's involvement in the COVID-19 crisis.

Predication	**Argumentation**
adjectives with negative lexical meaning:	justifying predication through ascription of morally, legally and politically unacceptable behaviour
Irresponsible, immature, *lying, dishonest.*	**Disinformation, spread of fake news, lying** about lack of tests, the 140.000 layoffs, the pensions' reduction, lying about getting help form Slovenia, etc.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Irresponsible, unserious, immature, *destructive, unconscientious*.	**Personal violation of anti-COVID-19 measures.** Mickovski's visit to the gym during curfew (lying about not knowing the protocol), visit to a restaurant, members of party violating the ban on public gathering.
Abusive, professionally negligent	**Professional negligence and abuse of position**. Chulev's statements encourage violation of anti-COVID measures; Chulev has not sanctioned violations of the ban on public gathering (among which 7 police officers – members of VMRO), self – isolation abused his position as MIA to cover up for VMRO leader, in consequence, Chulev sabotage increased the number of COVID infected.
Irrational	**Irrational behaviour**: (a) requesting impossible conditions for elections & postponing elections to avoid defeat, (b) irrational suggestions: request for the resignation of the Commission for infectious deceases, (c) suggests unreasonable economic measures.
Extended criticism	Power abuse, intimidation same as in the time of the VMRO rule

The bases upon which Social Democrats' accusations against VMRO, its leader Mickovski in particular, are raised are the following: (a) spreading lies, disinformation, and fake news, (b) personal violation of anti-COVID measures, (c) abuse of position and unprofessional conduct, and (d) irrational behaviour. SDSM accuses Mickovski of spreading misinformation about the Government's failure to offer sufficient number of COVID diagnostic tests and undertake efficient measures to bring the nationwide epidemic under control. Mickovski in this respect is blamed for manipulating the public that the inefficient measures undertaken by the SDSM lead government have resulted in layoffs, salary and pension reductions. In April 2020, during the strictest COVID-19 lockdown in the country, social media and mass media were flooded with videos of Mr Mickovski's visit to a gym. Expectedly, The Social Democrats used the event to criticize the VRMO leader for violating anti-COVID-19 measures. This, in consequence, has sparked criticism against VMRO Minister of Internal Affairs, Mr Chulev, for reportedly abusing the powers of his office to help cover up Mickovski's violation and leave unsanctioned party members' and supporters' violations of anti-COVID-19 measures. Finally, Mickoski is criticized for irrational behaviour, which manifested itself in the act of making unreasonable demands and unsubstantiated arguments about calling for snap elections. On several occasions, SDSM spokesperson Mr Kostadinov accused Mickovski of manipulation and violation of anti-COVID-19 measures and Chulev of covering up such violations and of negligent behaviour:

(1) Mickovski lied that there was a sufficient number of tests, he lied about 140,000 people being laid off, while at the same time he visited closed gyms and participated in collective mountain hikes. The behaviour of Hristijan Mickovski in a time of serious health crisis is the behaviour of a non-serious, immature politician – a political profiteer at the expanse of citizens' health (Kostadin Kostadinov,

> May 25th, 2020)[9] [. . .] But more scandalous is the fact that Mickovski, assisted by the technical Minister of Internal Affairs, Nake Chulev, has abused the Ministry for his own personal and party interests and protection [cover up], in the same manner as in the time of VMRO when VMRO had used coercion and pressure over workers to have court cases involving persecution closed (SDSM, May 25th, 2020)[10] [. . .] similar to the time when the Ministry was under VMRO's control trying to conceal a murder. Today, controlled by Nake Chulev, they [the Ministry of Internal Affairs] are trying to conceal Mickovski's offences (Kostadin Kostadinov, June 9th, 2020).[11]

The excerpt explicitly labels Mickovski as non-serious, immature, irresponsible and law-disrespecting politician, and supports these predications through accusations regarding his spreading of false information about the number of tests and people being laid off, and violating the anti-COVID-19 measures (by visiting closed down facilities). VMRO Minister Chulev is blamed for abusing his position to cover up for Mickovski's misconduct. The criticism of VRMO, however, does not stop at the coronavirus pandemic, which, at the time of this writing, is still ongoing. Instead, it extends into the past, referring to morally corrupt and, therefore, unacceptable acts of political behaviour, such as abuse of judicial system, intimidations, and even murder. These references not only create continuity between past and present but also bring the past into the present by foregrounding the assumption that VMRO has a history of power abuse, much worse than the violation of anti-epidemic measures, which in turn legimitizes the tacit implication that VMRO should not be trusted. Additionally, sharp criticism of Chulev for professional negligence validates these assumptions and strengthens SDSM's criticism of VMRO for long-lasting abuse of governmental power. I offer the following suggestive examples. The first is an announcement by the party's press centre and the second and extracts form a press conference by one of the party's spoke persons, Mrs Kuzeska:

(2) Instead of making sure the citizens respect the anti-COVID measures, and sanctioning violations, his [Chulev's] priority is to cover up for his leader Mickovski (SDSM Press Centre, May 30th, 2020).[12]

> Lately, we have witnessed a number of violations deliberately ignored by Chulev. The police force run by Nake Chulev did not take any actions against citizens who have freely moved, disrespecting the decision for (self)isolation, he allowed a public gathering on a church mass in Struga, did not act out against the gathering of the sports fans.[13] (Bogdanka Kuzeska, May 30th, 2020).[14]
>
> The number of the newly infected citizens is a direct consequence of the absence of work commitment, the populism and the self-interests of the technical Minster Nake Chulev and his boss Hristijan Mickovski (ibid.)[15]

The selected texts above contain explicit accusations, levied against Minister Chulev over abusing his position of power to cover up for his leader's personal violations of the anti-COVID-19 measures. Emphasis on the abuse and negligence is used to legitimize the premise that Mickovski's personal misconduct and Chulev's professional negligence led to an increased number of infections. The populism in this respect, most likely refers

to the fact that not sanctioning movement in times of severe restrictions is a populistic move pulled to win the support by Macedonian citizens.

A further point of criticism against Mickovski concerns the evaluation of his political vision and acts as irrational, whereby he is making not only ungrounded excuses for postponing the parliamentary elections but also harmful suggestions:

(3) We will not allow Mickosvsi to harm the pensions of 515,000 pensioners. The vague measures by Mickovski demanding the use of the second pension fund are inadmissible (SDSM Press Centre, April 4th, 2020). [16]
Instead of supporting the work of the Commission [for Infectious Diseases], they are demanding the Commission resignation, they want to make people helpless and leave people with nothing. (Bogdanka Kuzeska, May 30, 2020)[17]

Mickovski's suggestion to deal with the economic consequences of the crisis by re-allocating financial resources from the pension fund is labelled as harmful while his request for the resignation of the Commission for Infectious Diseases is considered untactful, unconscientious, malicious, lacking empathy and hence unacceptable. In such circumstances, the incumbent party is the voice of reason and the power that saves the people by protecting them from the harmful ideas of the opponent. Although crises are excellent opportunities to enhance one's own image as a hero-saviour what is intriguing in the Macedonian case is that such acts of self-praise are rare. Only on two occasions did the Social Democrats communicate straightforwardly their commitment to resolve the emergency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting the economic and financial campaigns and measures they undertook to cope with the financial consequences from the pandemic. In a press release titled 'The anti-crisis measures by the Social Democrats are the foundation for economic revival after the end of the crisis', the press centre of the SD sates:

(4) Citizens' health and measures preventing the spread of the corona virus are a general priority, but the priority of the Government led by SDSM in this grave crisis are the measures in support of the economy [. . .] More than 20,000 companies are using or have applied for the anti-crisis measures offered by the government. More than 1,000 companies use income tax alleviation, 631 companies with 5,600 employees have been granted no interest loans from the COVID-19 line of 4.7 million euros (SDSM Press Centre, May 7th, 2020).[18]

The selection illustrates the relation and embeddedness of economic strategy within the pertinent public health emergency management and lists the specific actions undertaken by the Social Democrats to manage the resultant economic crisis through measures intended to support the smooth running of the national economy. In keeping with the strategy of positive self-presentation (Reisgl and Wodak, 2001), the party relies on the use of specific numbers (companies, applications, sums) affected by the measures. This creates the image of accurate, mathematically modelled thinking and knowledge, while also indexing progress, achievement, investment, involvement, measurable effort with visible (positive) results. Thus, the use of the topos of numbers generates confidence through the creation of measurability, visibility, and 'concreteness'.

Vmro-Dpmne

The predications and arguments used by the incumbent VMRO to blame cast SDSM are summarized in the table below.

Table 3. Predications and arguments that criticize SDSM's involvement in the COVID-19 crisis.

Predication	Argumentation
Incompetence	**Inadequate/inefficient measures** Low number of tests, slow process of testing, lack of adequate equipment, and trainings for medical personnel.
	Negative consequences (increase in numbers of infected, worst statistics), realized through topos of 'worst place' in the region/world.
Manipulative and abusive	**Manipulation of information.** Deliberately making a low number of tests, deliberate reporting low number of infected, lying about the weakening of the virus, lying about situation being normal, hiding the total number of cases, purposefully creating image of normalcy to legitimate organization of elections.
Irresponsible	Financial embezzlement and unreasonable, irresponsible spending.
Extended criticism	*Last-three-years* narrative: problems, injustice, chaos, devastated economy, empty promises, drop of industrial production, etc.

VMRO-DPMNE criticizes its opponent mostly on three grounds: (a) incompetence to organize and undertake adequate and efficient anti-COVID measures, (b) manipulation of information and deliberate creation of image of normalcy, (c) unreasonable spending. Similarly to its political opponent, VMRO-DPMNE extends its criticism beyond the context of the pandemic, tapping into the period preceding it – the period after the 2016 elections – during which the country is being run by the Social Democrats. The following selections by Igor Nikolov, a member of VMRO's Central Committee, and Igor Janushev, the party's Secretary General, illustrate VMRO's criticism:

(5) Macedonia has completely failed to cope with the corona virus. Those in charge have failed in all aspects [including] efficiency of measures undertaken, [early/timely] detection of those infected, [and low] number of tests made (Igor Nikolov, June 8th, 2020).[19]
The doctors do not have protective equipment, while the Government is buying luxurious drinks, expensive wines, whiskeys (Igor Janushev, May 4th, 2020)[20][. . .]
The doctors are not adequately protected, they buy their own equipment, that is why the number of infected is almost 200. The fact that worries is that more than 17% of the total number of infected in the Republic of Macedonia are doctors and medical personnel. We have the highest figures of infected medical personnel in the region. They are infected because they are not adequately equipped, trained or informed (Igor Nikolov, April 21st, 2020).[21]

The selection here lays bare the hidden meaning of the attribute 'incompetent' and illustrates the arguments raised in support of the implication. In the first place, it is reportedly the Government's failure to undertake both timely and numerically sufficient tests. What is made explicit is the Government's failure to adequately support the work of the health care system and its members, doctors, and medical personnel with adequate resources (protective equipment, skills and knowledge). To make the criticism more brazen and sharper, the incumbent VMRO combines incompetence with financial irresponsibility, accusing the SDSM-led government of irresponsible even debauched spending on luxuries, such as drinks and food, in times of grave crisis. The assertion of incompetence, inferred from the premise of managerial inefficiency, is further strengthened by the topos of negative consequences – the increase in the number of infected citizens, medical personnel including. Additional force of criticism is achieved by framing this consequence in the worst place' topos. In the words of doctor Boro Ilievski, a VMRO member, and Igor Nikolov, member of VMRO's Central Committee, respectively

(6) The situation with the Corona virus is worsening only in Macedonia! Macedonia is on the top of the list of daily newly infected and diseased. All is clear – this is a result of the incompetence of those in charge to organize an adequate system to protect citizens' health. (Boro Ilievski, June 3rd, 2020)[22]
Macedonia is the only country in the wider region where the system has completely failed to cope with the corona virus. This has been confirmed by *Forbes*, according to which Macedonia is not on the list of the first 100 countries with successful crisis management (Igor Nikolov, June 9th, 2020)[23]

By combining the adverb 'only' and the lexemes with negative meaning 'worsening' and 'failing' Macedonia is singled out and constructed exclusively as the only country where the situation deteriorates and the only country in the region that has failed in its crisis management. These moves help construct an image of exclusivity in disaster ('the worst place'). The topos of authority, specifically related to *Forbes International*, is used to lend credibility and legitimacy to this image. Besides international sources of allegedly objective, unbiased opinions, VMRO-DPMNE has mobilized its member doctors and used their medical expertise to support the accusations of information manipulation. For example, Dr Andonovska is one of the many medical experts, VMRO members, who have publicly stated that:

(7) Not only are there no adequate measures, but also there is a manipulation of the daily figures of the newly infected, and misinformation that the virus is weakening and that they [SDSM] have it under control (Marija Andonovska, June 10th, 2020)[24]

Similarly, Doctor Chibishev's comments have also attracted widespread criticism:

(8) We will not be surprised if the speculations prove true that the Government is concealing the figures of the newly infected, tailoring them, with one purpose

> – to avoid creating an image that there are no conditions for running the elections on July 5th (Andon Chibishev, June 10th, 2020).[25]

Accusations of incompetence and deliberate manipulation permeated VMRO-DPMNE's discourse on SDSM's involvement in the crisis. So does embedding of criticism for past actions into the current criticism, as the following comments by VMRO's leader Mickovski show:

(9) Zoran Zaev [the Prime Minister] is 3 years in power, 3 years of problems, giving up, injustice, hard life, perpetuate hope for better life, lost hope [. . .] And what did they do in those 3 years of running the country? Chaos, economic devastation [. . .] Macedonia cannot forget the unfulfilled promises: the 500 euros average salary, 500 kilometres of highways [. . .] 5% GDP increase, and the economic growth that did not happen ever since they are in power. (Hristijan Mickoski, June 2nd, 2020 [26]

In the selection, VMRO-DPMNE accuses SDSM of political and economic failures, such as economic devastation, empty promises, drop in industrial production, and many other, in the three-year period between the 2016 elections in December and the occurrence of the COVID-19 health crisis in March 2020. These accusations, embedded in a larger narrative of current line of criticism focused on COVID-19, serve to strengthen the current criticism of the political opponent. By fusing criticism of the past with the criticism of the present, VMRO-DPMNE implies a continuity in the narrative of the opponents' incompetence. The specific forms of incompetence (financial, political, health management), both past and present are brought into a close relation in order to create an image of general incompetence that surpasses the current state of affairs. These forms are not so much important in the criticism raised as much as their consequences (injustice, hard life, etc.) and the 'fact' they are the result of the (mis)doing of the same political entity- the opponent. The negative image thus created is an excellent opportunity to create a boundary between them-the incompetent, and us-the competent. Such boundary in the following example is created though the topos of comparison realized through the 'different from' structure, lexicalized though a negative metaphorical labelling (Social Democrat are an epidemic) and entextualized in the '3 year' narrative as explained in the following VMRO's press release:

(10) VMRO is different from SDSM. We say, let's beat the corona epidemic first and then we will beat the epidemic of incompetence of this Government by Zaev and SDSM, who in 3 years brought about a hybrid regime, growing corruption, and crime and poverty to the whole state (VMRO Press Centre, June 9th, 2020).[27]

The vehement criticism of the Social Democrats is a background for VMRO to build a convincing positive image of itself as a political saviour, an actor endowed with

the necessary knowledge and skills to both cope with the crisis specifically and run the country in general. What is linguistically interesting is the framing of this image within a conditioned narrative, a sort of political daydreaming, a hypothetical scenario of how the crisis should have been managed if VMRO was in power. These visions are linguistically expressed as suggestions, proposals of what ought to be done (there should be more testing, better plan for organizing elections, temporary rearrangement of traffic etc.), or requests for actions different than those undertaken (requests addressed to the Government for the procurement of medical equipment, medical staff work plan, urgent fond, use of all available resources). By implying negative evaluations of the actual actions and presupposing their inefficiency, the suggestions and the requests conflate criticism with praise. They dwell on the implied assumption that 'if our strategy was used, these negative outcomes would not have occurred', or in the words of Igor Niklov, VMRO Central Committee member:

(11) This is a proof that what we have proposed should have been undertaken much earlier – more tests, mass screening, of the groups at risk in particular, of those with chronic disease, the elderly, and the medical personnel (Igor Nikolov, June 2020).[28]

'this' refers to the rapidly increased number of infected, which is a consequence of the belated measures proposed by VMRO but not considered by the Government, hence the negative outcome. The contrast between the timely proposed and the belatedly adopted measures help establish and maintain the boundary between 'our sound ideas' and their late/inefficient response, our capacity and their incapacity. What gives force and credibility of the criticism thus expressed, through the use of us and them dichotomies manifested in conditioned narratives ('should our ideas have been considered'), is the source of the ideas and the recommendations. The suggestions and the narratives they underpin are produced by party mobilized medical experts to purposefully empower criticism and make it more brazen and credible.

Discussion

Several observations may be drawn from the data. The COVID-19 discourse produced by the political parties in Macedonia is dominantly a discourse of blame casting the opponent for crisis management incompetence, unacceptable political behaviour, and past political misconduct. The particular lexico-structural properties of the discourses produced, and the contents of the predication and argumentation strategies present therein depend on the role and responsibilities parties play in the crisis management, determined by their participation in the technical Government and the allocations of Ministries. These particular engagements shape the speaking positions and the discourses produced. The following table reflects the dominance of the blame casing strategy and summarizes the key predicates and arguments used in support (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of the parties' discourses.

Categories	SDSM	VMRO
Number of texts analysed	44	131
Text that cast blame on the opponent (%)	95,46%	68, 71%
Predicates used	Irresponsible, immature, unserious	Incompetent (crisis management)
	Manipulative, and disrespectful of measures	Manipulative
	Politically abusive, professionally negligent	Unserious, irresponsible
Arguments used	Manipulation of information/ disinformation/fake news to harm the image of the opponent and avoid elections	Manipulation of figures to create sense of normalcy and organize elections
	Violation of anti-COVID-19 measures, not-sanctioning these violations/professional negligence and power abuse	Undertaking inadequate, belated and insufficient measures.
	Irrationality (unreasonable suggestions/ideas)	Financial irresponsibility and embezzlement
Extended accusations	Former power abuse (corruption, intimidation, concealing murder)	State and financial management incompetence, former political dishonesty and mismanagement
Self-praise	Economic strategy/crisis management competence	Competent and efficient vision of successful crisis management

Although the two parties have raised criticism against one another, what surprises is the misbalance between the praise of one's own contribution to the crisis management compared to the blame of the opponents' counter-productive involvement. The presence of blame casting is particularly self-evident in the discourse of the Social Democrats, where the majority of the texts criticize and accuse the opponent and only marginal 4.54% of the texts (two in number) boast the performance and diligence of the party. The data is puzzling and hard to explain, but it definitely indicates a trend in political communication that extends more than 10 years in the past.

The use of the specific predication and argumentation strategies show systematic relation between the party and its involvement in the crisis management determined by the participation in the technical Government. Thus, the predicates and the arguments the Social Democrats used to blame cast VMRO are based on VMRO's behaviour and communication during the crisis and their charge over the Ministry of Internal Affairs. For the Social Democrats, VMRO are irresponsible, immature, manipulative, but not incompetent due to their external position in the crisis management system in which they were only in charge of implementing the decisions made by SDSM led Ministry of Health. Hence, the party was susceptible to criticism targeting mismanagement of this particular instance of state power, which SDSM capitalized on, by raising accusations of power

abuse and professional negligence for covering up and not sanctioning violations of anti-COVID measures undertaken by the party leader and its members. The only traces of criticism of VMRO's incompetence in the discourse by SDSM can be identified in their accusation of VMRO's incompetent reasoning manifested in irrational demands (resignation of the Commission for Contagious Diseases, inadequate economic measures, etc.). On the other hand, the Social Democrats charge over the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance made them susceptible to a fully-fledged criticism and blame cast built on the predication of incompetence and justified though accusations/arguments that highlight the inefficiency, belatedness and inadequacy of the health measures (number, frequency an scope of diagnostic tests), and inappropriate state financial management that resulted with layoffs, decrease of salaries, lack of support, etc.

Another difference in the discourses produced by the two parties is the object of their accusation of the opponents' alleged manipulation with the public communication. For SDSM, their opponent deliberately spreads misinformation and fake news in order to create panic, harm the image of the opponent and temporarily avoid premature elections. In the context of the same sub-strategy of blame cast based on manipulation of information, VMRO accuses their opponent of deliberate misinformation about the figures of daily infected, and tests made, done according to VMRO for the purpose of creating and image of normalcy, which among else, allows organization of premature elections.

The criticism of the opponent and the mutual accusations merged from and related to the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 has also drawn on parties' track record.

The Social Democrats have embedded critique of former power abuse by VMRO in the time of Mr Nikola Gruevski's rule[29] into the criticism of the present abuse of the office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, while VMRO has contextualized the criticism of the opponent's past political actions (financial irresponsibility, increase in unemployment, decrease in average salaries, etc.) preceding the health crisis into the criticism of the health emergency management. In a similar manner, both parties have created a continuity of the narrative of the opponent's incompetence and abuse. In so doing they have interdiscursively mobilised past crisis to empower present criticism, a grave political problem that seriously affects constructive communication in general, and resolution of any political or heath crisis in particular.

These findings confirm the discursive nature of crisis (Hay, 1996; Rycker and Mohd Don, 2013) and the assumption, the blame game starts no sooner than crisis is reported (Buus and Olsson, 2006). There is no doubt that blame casting is a structuring element of political confrontation and communication, and a handy discursive tool in the struggle for power. However, its dominance in the public discourse, its repetitive occurrence, and its mobilization of the discourses of the past to empower the accusations of the present, significantly lower the possibility of a political dialogue while at the same time reveal a much larger problem, that of crisis in the political constructive dialogue and communication.

Conclusion

Crisis are discursive constructs that serve many political ends, power struggle including. The public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. In circumstances of a technical Government tasked to prepare premature elections, the

Macedonian political parties have taken full advantage of the situation, using their and their opponents' involvement in the health crisis management as a very practical ground to perpetuate and extend their interparty conflict. The political actors have employed predication and argumentation strategies to present their and their opponents' engagement with the crisis. While these strategies are equally useful for one's own positive presentation as much as the negative presentation of the other, the misbalanced use of blame casting over self-praise in the interparty confrontation and the use of criticism that draws on the past is a sure sign of different type of a crisis, a political, prolonged crisis structured by and though continuous and seemingly never ending mutual accusations and criticism. Unfortunately, in an interparty conflict in which power struggle and political rule are more important than the safety and prosperity of the citizens it is not surprising to form alliances with the 'enemy'/the danger (COVID-19), for the mere purposes of political advancement.

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Notes

1. SDSM (Eng. SDUM), stands for Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, henceforth referred to as SDMS, is a centre-left political party with a an agenda based, among other, on pro-EU attitudes, values of multi-ethnicity and citizenship. Ideological positioning, however, in times of highly competitive political market, is almost impossible.
2. VMRO-DPMNE (Eng. IMRO-DPMNU) stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, henceforth VMRO-DPMNE, is a right-wing conservative party, tacitly Eurosceptic, but openly nationalist/patriotic.
3. For more on this topic see Neofotistos's edited volume (2021), and Takovski (2019).
4. The current constitutional name of the country is Republic of North Macedonia. For few reasons, I shall refer to the country with NR Macedonia from this point on.
5. See Takovski 2021b on this.
6. Highly conventionalized and obligatory parts of argumentation, that take the form of premises and act as warrants, justifying the transition from an argument or arguments to the conclusion (Kienpointner in Wodak et al., 1999: 34–35).
7. The discrepancy in the scope of online texts produced by the two parties dates back from the VRMO's rule (2006–2016) when the party seriously invested in media propaganda resulting in a hyper production of media contents as part of their political propaganda, hence the

difference is neither surprising nor new. (For more on this, see Takovski, 2019; 2021).

8. The criticism of the Social Democrats with its focus of the leader of VMRO not the party itself is a critical framework that has remained unchanged for years. Ever since the rise of VMRO's previous leader Nikola Gruevski in 2006, SDSM has equalize criticism of the leader with the criticism of the party. The process of metonymisation is thus indicative of SDSM understanding of VMRO as authoritarian party.
9. https://sdsm.org.mk/pres-konferencii/1573
10. https://sdsm.org.mk/soopstenija/3240
11. https://utrinskivesnik.mk/%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%81
12. https://sdsm.org.mk/soopstenija/3200
13. https://sdsm.org.mk/pres-konferencii/1545
14. https://sdsm.org.mk/pres-konferencii/1545
15. https://sdsm.org.mk/pres-konferencii/1545
16. https://makedonskivesnik.com/sdsm-mickoski-frustracii/
17. https://360stepeni.mk/sdsm-bara-ostavka-od-chulev-i-obvinuva-deka-pridonel-za-zgolemuvane-na-brojot-na-zarazeni/
18. https://sdsm.org.mk/soopstenija/3529
19. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1447
20. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/459-lekarite-nemaat-zashtitna-oprema-a-vladata-kupuva-luksuzni-pijalaci-sortni-vina-burbon-viski
21. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/300-lekarite-ne-se-soodvetno-zashtiteni-sami-kupuvaat-zashtitna-oprema-zatoa-brojot-na-zarazeni-e-skoro-200
22. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1344
23. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1468
24. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1487
25. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1361
26. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1326
27. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/soopstenija/1456
28. https://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/index.php/vesti/pres-konferencii/1468
29. Nikola Gruevski is the former leader of VMRO DPMNE, and former Prime Minster in the period between 2006 and 2016, now in political exile in Hungary, considered by most of its opponents as an authoritarian political figure and corrupted politician.

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Author biography

Aleksandar Takovski is an Assistant Professor at AAB College, Kosovo, where he teaches Linguistics and Literature. His research interest spans across several areas including political discourse, critical discourse analysis, social semiotics and monumental architecture, nationalism, political and ethnic humour, extracurricular didactic resources and informal teaching/learning. He has published two monographs and a series of articles in renown journals such as *Journal of Language and Politics, HUMOR, European Journal of Humour Research* and other.