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COVID'19 vs. Resentments. At the Source of Corona-Scepti- cism Movements in Poland

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Abstract

Among the social and political outcomes of the pandemic in Poland, one should list the development of anti-COVID social movements. Their specific character, as compared to other social movements, is the subject of exploration in this paper. The basic objective of the paper is thus to analyse the motivations of members and supporters of the so-called corona-sceptic movement at the early stage of its presence in the Polish political arena. Key questions the authors sought to answer concern individuals' assessment of their situation associated with the pandemic and their attitude to public institutions managing the crisis on behalf of the government. The paper is based on the results of a quantitative research carried out in December 2020.

Keywords

corona-skeptics, social movement, COVID-19 pandemic, social attitudes, Poland

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which was officially announced in Poland in March 2020, brought about not only adverse economic results, but also a range of social consequences. The governments worldwide implemented restrictive policies of limiting civic freedoms¹ in order to reduce the number of new infections, thus blocking the spread of the disease. The restrictions triggered the development of social movements referred to as pandemic negationists, covid deniers, or corona-sceptics.

In their search to answer the questions concerning why social movements come to existence, scholars have identified various factors. Representatives of the theory of collective behaviour, including T. Blumer, sought a psychological explanation for the formation of a movement and they focused on emotions: tensions, dissatisfaction of the individuals with the current lifestyle, and “wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living” which direct them towards collective action.² T. Gurr also stressed psychological aspects in his studies on violent conflicts. According to the researcher’s findings, such conflicts are caused by a discrepancy between value expectation and value capabilities perceived by an individual (theory of relative deprivation).³ Among the representatives of the theory of collective behaviour, one also finds various attempts to explain the phenomenon of social movements. They pointed out that the sources might lie in tensions within the system, structural changes taking place in mass societies, and disintegration of traditional social bonds.⁴

On the other hand, supporters of the resource mobilization theory assume that social movements are rational actors making deliberate choices.⁵ A movement occurs when it is possible to accumulate appropriate resources (moral, cultural, social, organizational, human).⁶ A basic social organization and a chance for success are essential to developing a movement.⁷

In the theories of new social movements⁸, the reasons for the emergence of the movement are associated with factors of a macrostructural nature, mainly with cultural changes⁹. Social movements are defined as collective actions centered around post-materialist values, such as dignity, equality, and ecology¹⁰.

Summarizing the contribution of individual theories to the development of social movement research, Buechler stated that the theory of new social movements refers to the level of macrostruc-

1. K. Baran, W. Burek, M. Gibek, *Wpływ Covid-19 na społeczeństwo i prawo*, “Rocznik Administracji Publicznej”, 2020, (6), pp. 282–299. DOI: [10.4467/24497800RAP.20.016.12910](https://doi.org/10.4467/24497800RAP.20.016.12910)

2. H. Blumer, *Collective Behavior*, in: *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology*, ed. A. Lee, Barnes & Noble 1946, p. 199, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.260951/page/n3/mode/lup?view=theater>, (access 10.09.2022).

3. T.R. Gurr, *Psychological factors in civil violence*, “World Politics”, 1968, Vol. 20, Issue 2, pp. 245–278.

4. N. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, Routledge 1962; W. Korhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society*, Routledge 1959.

5. D. della Porta, M. Diani, *Ruchy społeczne*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2009, p. 18.

6. B. Edwards, J.D. McCarthy, *Resources and Social Movement Mobilization*, in: *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. D.A. Snow, S.A. Soule, H. Kriesi, Blackwell Publishing 2004, p. 117.

7. J.D. McCarthy, M.N. Zald, *The Trends of Social Movements in America: Professionalization and Resource Mobilization*, General Learning Press 1973, pp. 1–30, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/50939/164.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, (access

tures and contexts, the theory of resource mobilization addresses the problem of meso-organization and strategy, while social constructivism is responsible for the micro-level of identity and dissatisfaction.¹¹

In our analysis, we are focusing on the reasons why individuals engage in a social movement, so we mainly refer to the theory of collective behaviour. We presume that movements arise under the conditions of social change, when people miss chances, or when expectations grow out of proportion to the potential to satisfy them, thus leading to a sense of relative deprivation,¹² whereby individuals and groups are motivated to get involved in social movements by actual or perceived loss/harm. Therefore, a social movement is born out of a shared sense of harm.¹³

The objective of the paper is to analyse a corona-sceptics movement in order to identify the motivations of its members and supporters who got involved in its online and offline activities. Therefore, the paper strives to seek the major sources of “harm” experienced by members of anti-covid movements and their assessment of the measures taken by public institutions, including especially the government responsible for managing the crisis situation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. The presented data concern late 2020, a time when the pandemic negationist movement in Poland was forming during the second wave of the pandemic.

The reasons to choose this subject involved its current importance. At the same time, there have been relatively few study reports published concerning motivations of corona-sceptics. Scientific literature, especially within the area of political science, refers to anti-covid movements mostly in the context of their relations with particular political groups,¹⁴ spread of conspiracy theories,¹⁵ or consequences of their activities.¹⁶ In Poland, there was a multi-author publication edited by K. Hajder, M. Musiał-Karg and M. Górny, entitled “Konsekwencje pandemii COVID-19: Państwo i społeczeństwo” (2020).¹⁷ The subject of social attitudes toward the pandemic and related restrictions was explored by J. Radzioch¹⁸ in a chapter of the said collective volume and also by K. Skarżyńska in the report prepared for the Batory Foundation (2020).¹⁹ Meanwhile, anti-covid social movements were predominantly discussed in the context of conspiracy theories²⁰ or their characteristic models of communication, including spread of fake news and disinformation.²¹ However, studies focusing on corona-sceptics themselves are missing and this is the gap we are trying to fill with this paper.

19.09.2022); C. Tilly, *From Interactions to Outcomes in Social Movements*, in: *How Social Movements Matter*, eds. M. Giugni, D. McAdam, C. Tilly, University of Minnesota Press 1999, pp. 253–270; M. Olson, *Logika działania zbiorowego: dobra publiczne i teoria grup*, Scholar 2012; D. McAdam, W.R. Scott, *Organizations and Movements*, in: *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, eds. G.F. Davis, D. McAdam, S. Mayer, N. Zald, Cambridge University Press 2012, pp. 4–40.

8. A. Touraine, *An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements*, “Social Research”, 1985, Vol. 52, No. 4, pp. 749–787; A. Melucci, *The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements*, “Social Research”, 1985, Vol. 51, No. 4, pp. 789–816; C. Offe, *New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics*, “Social Research”, 1985, Vol. 52 (4), pp. 817–868; M. Castells, *Sieci oburzenia i nadziei: ruchy społeczne w erze internetu*, transl. O. Siara, PWN 2013.

9. S.M. Buechler, *Teorie nowych ruchów społecznych*, transl. P. Sadura, in: *Dynamika życia społecznego: współczesne koncepcje ruchów społecznych*, eds. K. Gorlach, P.M. Mooney, Scholar 2008, p. 162.

10. R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Public*, Princeton University Press 1977.

11. S.M. Buechler, *Teorie nowych ruchów...*, op. cit., p. 184.

Pandemic negationists as a social movement

A social movement is defined as “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.”²² As the author notes, “deprivation is a particular form of common purposes that all movement express.”²³ Basing on this definition, P. Almeida distinguishes three features of a social movement. The first one is sustainable collective mobilization. The author states that the long-lasting forms of mobilization (at least a year) deserve the name of a social movement rather than individual demonstrations or protests. Another distinguishing feature is the fact that the motivation for individuals and groups to become involved in the movement is their actual or perceived harm. Finally, a social movement usually includes individuals/ groups that are outside of institutionalized power (excluded social groups).²⁴ Considering the features indicated by P. Almeida, it is worth looking at the nature of the pandemic deniers movement in Poland.

The beginnings of the activities of pandemic deniers are related to the Internet and various groups created on social media. Some of them emerged in March 2020, including “I don’t believe in coronavirus - Support group / You are not alone”.²⁵

Other groups consist of perpetual contestants who, depending on the situation, protest against G5, forced vaccination, etc. An example is the “STOP NOP” group, which changed its name to “STOP PLANDEMIA” due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic deniers mostly support one of several conspiracy theories. They include the plandemic theory, which excludes the accidental or natural origin of the SARS-COV-2 virus, and the concept of a “fake pandemic”, i.e. the belief that the SARS-COV-2 virus and the COVID-19 disease it causes do not exist.²⁶

The pandemic negationist movement was supported by social movement organizations (SMOs), including the anti-vaccine National Association of Vaccination Knowledge STOP NOP (Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Wiedzy o Szczepieniach “STOP NOP”), or the Association of Bydgoszcz Fellowship of Compatriots (Bydgoskie Kamractwo Rodaków), founded in 2020.

The popularization of the content denying the pandemic or its effects on the Internet was supplemented by various forms of social protests. Analysing the goals and forms of the protests in hindsight, it can be observed that they corresponded with the successive waves of the pandemic. October 2020 was the beginning of the so-called second wave of the pandemic and – at the same time – the

12. D.E. Morrison, *Some Notes Toward Theory on Relative Deprivation, Social Movements, and Social Change*, “American Behavioral Scientist”, 1971, Vol. 14, Issue 5, pp. 675–690. DOI: [10.1177/000276427101400504](https://doi.org/10.1177/000276427101400504); M. Nowosielski, *Ruchy społeczne jako czynnik i wynik zmian społecznych*, “Kultura i Edukacja”, 2012, No. 4 (90), pp. 7–33; P. Almeida, *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization*, University of California Press 2019. DOI: [10.2307/j.ctvd1c7d7](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd1c7d7)

13. P. Almeida, *Social Movements...*, op. cit., pp. 6–8. DOI: [10.2307/j.ctvd1c7d7](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd1c7d7)

14. C. Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*, Princeton University Press 2020; D. Freeman, et al., *Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance with government guidelines in England*, “Psychological Medicine”, 2020, 52 (2), pp. 251–263. DOI: [10.1017/S0033291720001890](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720001890); W. Callison, Q. Slobodian, *Coronapoltics from the Reichstag to the Capitol*, “Boston Review”, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspeticism/>, (access 10.07.2022); H. Schulze, et al., *Far-right conspiracy groups on fringe platforms: a longitudinal analysis of radicalization dynamics on Telegram*, “Convergence”, 2022, Vol. 28 (4), pp. 1103–1126. DOI: [10.1177/13548565221104977](https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221104977)

15. F.M. Magarini, et al., *Irrational Beliefs about COVID-19, A Scoping Review*, “International Journal of Environmental Research and Public

period of rising waves of anti-coronavirus protests. Association STOP NOP organized *inter alia* a “March for Freedom”, presenting such slogans as e.g.: “We prefer to die fighting for our homeland than die like old men in bed!”, “The authorities and all of Europe will hear about us”.²⁷ The protests during this period were therefore associated with negating the sense of the introduced restrictions (mainly the lockdown).²⁸ The next period of street protests took place in February-March 2021, i.e. at the beginning of the so-called third wave of the pandemic. Happenings and demonstrations were organized under the slogans: “Marches of slaves” (initiated by the Butterfly Group/ Grupa Motyla) and “Marches of freedom” (initiated by the Association STOP NOP). Among the slogans on the banners were: “Stop compulsory vaccination”, “Stop plandemic”, “Stop genetic therapy”, and “Children go to school!”. In turn, in January and March 2022 (the fourth wave of the pandemic), the protests were held under the slogans: “Stop sanitary segregation”, “Stop segregation, stop forced vaccination against COVID-19, stop quarantine” and concerned ways to combat the pandemic, mainly introducing so-called COVID passports for people vaccinated against COVID-19 and thus exempt from some restrictions.

Compared to other social movements protesting during the pandemic, denialists’ manifestations and marches were distinguished by their demonstrative non-compliance with sanitary recommendations. As Kowalewski stressed, they organized the “protest as usual”, without paying attention to the specific conditions in which it was carried out.²⁹ For pandemic deniers, rejecting the need to wear facemasks, respecting social distancing, and ignoring other recommendations of state authorities became everyday forms of resistance. Summarizing this thread, it should be noted that the forms of protest used by the anti-COVID movement included both non-violent forms (e.g. petitions addressed to public institutions, as well as international organizations, marches, and demonstrations) and violent ones. Examples of the use of the latter are threats to burn down public institutions (March 2021) or attacks on vaccination points (July - August 2021).³⁰

Research design

The analysis is based on an empirical study. Its results allow identification of the knowledge the corona-sceptics have and their emotional condition (including various fears and anxieties) associated with the pandemic of COVID-19 – a disease caused by the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus infection, as well as their attitude to various systemic solutions applied by the Polish government in response to the pandemic.

Health”, 2021, Vol. 18 (19), pp. 1–21. DOI: [10.3390/ijerph18199839](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18199839)

16. L. Pummerer, et al., *Conspiracy theories and their societal effects during the COVID-19 pandemic*, “Social Psychological and Personality Science”, 2022, Vol. 13 (1), pp. 49–59. DOI: [10.1177/19485506211000217](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211000217); J. Šrol, E. Ballová Mikušková, V. Čavojsková, *When we are worried, what are we thinking? Anxiety, lack of control, and conspiracy beliefs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic*, “Applied Cognitive Psychology”, 2021, Vol. 35, Issue 3, pp. 720–729. DOI: [10.1002/acp.3798](https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3798)

17. K. Hajder, M. Musiał-Karg, M. Górny, *Konsekwencje pandemii COVID-19: Państwo i społeczeństwo*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Politycznych i Dziennikarstwa UAM 2020.

18. J. Radzioch, *Koronawirus a poglądy polityczne w Polsce*, in: *Koronawirus a poglądy polityczne w Polsce. Państwo i społeczeństwo*, eds. W.K. Hajder, M. Musiał-Karg, M. Górny, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Politycznych i Dziennikarstwa UAM 2020, pp. 179–194.

19. K. Skarżyńska, *Polityka i pandemia. Czas sprawdzania (testowania) i rozliczania władzy*, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego 2020, pp. 1–16, <https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/polityka-i-pandemia-czas-sprawdzania-testowania-i-rozliczania-wladzy/>, (access 19.09.2022).

The quantitative study was carried out from 10 to 28 December 2020, with a purposive sample of 301 people.³¹ The respondents were asked about their personal experience (including experience of their families) related to the pandemic, the consequences of the pandemic for the respondents themselves and for Polish society, the sources of their knowledge about COVID-19, including the morbidity and nature of the pandemic, the respondents' quality of life during the pandemic and their opinions on the solutions and measures applied in Poland. The tool was posted at groups active in epidemiology discussions, especially those where users displayed their depreciating and negationist opinions on the announced COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant health hazard. For the purpose of these considerations, we shall refer to them using a generalizing terms: corona-sceptics / covid deniers / negationists.

The research team reposted messages encouraging users to take part in the study several times at each group. The strategy against the same individuals' filling in the questionnaire multiple times involved application of the *cookies* functionality, specifically saving cookies on the respondents' devices. If the scripts implemented within the portal used to hold the study revealed the relevant *cookies*, the option to fill in the questionnaire was excluded.

As mentioned above, those types of groups were first created on social media as early as in March 2020, for instance, "Nie wierzę w koronawirusa – Grupa Wsparcia/ Nie jesteś sam" ("I don't believe in the coronavirus – Support Group / You are not alone"), "STOP PLANDEMII" ("STOP THE PLANDEMIC").

The analysis of the research results presented in the article was based only on the general multiplicity results. We would also like to point out that the research is not representative due to the limited number of people taking part in it. However, we believe that it can be treated as a pilot study, primarily due to the results obtained.

Two hypotheses had been developed for the study:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): People who participate in / support the corona-scepticism movement highlight the sense of lacking individual security in various areas of their own activities in association with the COVID-19 pandemic.

20. A. Jankowiak, *Wpływ teorii spiskowych na postawy społeczne w okresie pandemii wirusa SARS COV-2*, in: *Lock-down: Prawo i Społeczeństwo*, ed. K. Łukomiak, ArchaeGraph 2021, pp. 365–386; F. Czech, F. Ścigaj, *Popularność narracji spiskowych w Polsce czasu pandemii. Raport z reprezentatywnych badań sondażowych*, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, <https://wsmip.uj.edu.pl/documents/41658/145634371/CZECH%2C+%C5%9ACIGAJ+-+RAPORT+-%20+Popularno%C5%9B%C4%87+narracji+spiskowych+w+Polsce+czasu+pandemii+COVID-19.pdf/22b0085f-1c67-423f-992f-6d06dc84e281>, (access 18.07.2022).

21. E.g. K. Pałka-Suchojad, *Disinformation virus: fake news in the pandemic era*, "Athenaeum", 2020, Vol. 68 (4), pp. 32–41. DOI: 10.15804/athena.2020.68.03; A. Chudzik, *Pandemiczne mity i teorie spiskowe w memach internetowych*, in: *Komunikowanie w procesie zmian*, eds. W. Świerczyńska-Głównia, A. Hess, M. Nowina-Konopka, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego 2021, pp. 145–164.

22. S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movement and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press 2011, pp. 7–8.

23. Ibidem, p. 9.

24. P. Almeida, *Social Movements...*, op. cit., pp. 6–8. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctvd1c7d7

Individual security may be defined as “(...) the possibility to satisfy [the individual’s – M.C, A.L] needs, to pursue their interests and ensure their expansion potential. (...)”³² Currently, dimensions of individual security are defined to include above all the basic existence, taking into account professional and occupational stability, sense of confidence and freedom of development in the political, economic, social and environmental aspects, as well as the lack of threats to correct functioning in the private sphere.³³

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Opinions of members and supporters of anti-covid movements about the measures taken by the government in crisis management will be more negative than in the case of the general population. The hypothesis was verified by a comparison of the results of the Wrocław study of pandemic negationists and the results of all-Polish sample studies (mainly by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS)).

Corona-scepticism peaked as regards its popularity and impact on Poles’ awareness at the turn of September and October 2020. It was then when half of the respondents declared that the coronavirus pandemic was no exception, just another one of many epidemics that had occurred in modern history. In August, when the restrictions had been partially lifted and morbidity was relatively low, Poles were divided as to whether the coronavirus pandemic was a real threat to Poles’ health: 48% of the respondents declared that it was an actual threat, while 38% were convinced that the coronavirus pandemic was an exaggerated or even false (8%) threat.³⁴

Poles’ opinions concerning the pandemic evolved in the late months of 2020. In a survey carried out in November, at the peak of the second wave of the pandemic in Poland, CBOS found that the majority of the respondents believed that the coronavirus pandemic posed an actual threat to Poles’ health (60% of the answers, an increase of 12 percentage points as compared to August), and the minority (a total of 33%) claimed that the threat was exaggerated (31% of the answers, down by 7 p.p.) or fictional (3% of the answers, down by 5 p.p.³⁵).

The results of the Wrocław team’s study conducted in December 2020 also confirmed this change in the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the respondents declared that the COVID-19 pandemic was true and posed an actual danger to Poles’ health and life – 59.14%. An opposite stance, regarding the pandemic as a fake, was chosen by 9.63% of the respondents. Moreover, the

25. J. Bodziony, *Trzeci obieg. Koronawirus i alt-internet w Polsce*, “Kultura Liberalna”, <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2020/09/08/trzeci-obieg-koronawirus-i-alt-internet-w-polsce/>, (access 10.09.2022).

26. A. Jankowiak, *Wpływ teorii spiskowych ...*, op. cit., pp. 371–372.

27. A. Kielczykowska, *Koronawirus w Polsce: “Marsz o wolność”. Antycovidowcy razem z kibolami protestują w całej Polsce*, <https://i.pl/koronawirus-w-polsce-marsz-o-wolnosc-antycovidowcy-razem-z-kibolami-protestuja-w-calej-polsce-zdjecia/ar/c1-15253602>, (access 13.07.2022).

28. A. Jankowiak, *Wpływ teorii spiskowych...*, op. cit., p. 367.

29. M. Kowalewski, *Street protests in times of COVID-19: adjusting tactics and marching ‘as usual’*, “Social Movement Studies”, 2021, Vol. 20, Issue 6, pp. 760–761. DOI: [10.1080/14742837.2020.1843014](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2020.1843014)

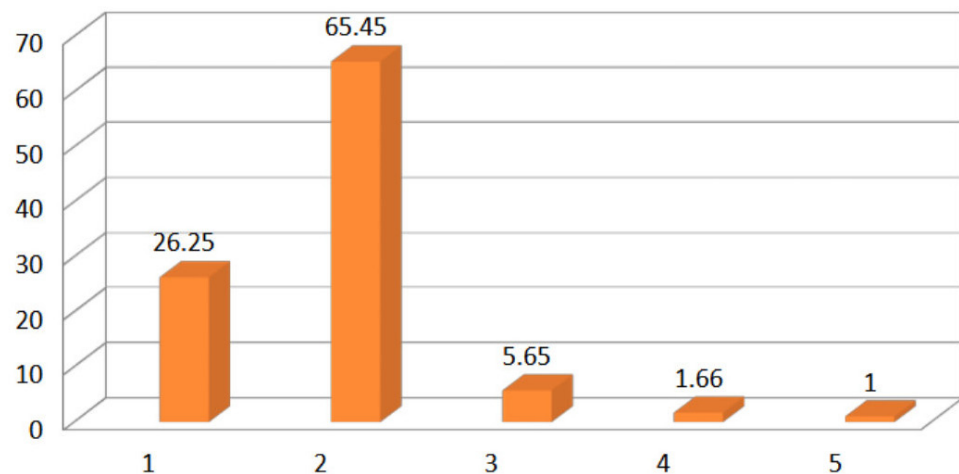
30. R. Guz, *Protest antycovidowców w Warszawie. Policja użyła granatów hukowych i gazu*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8124410,marsz-o-wolnosc-falszywa-pandemia-stop-covid-19.html>, (access 07.09.2022).

31. The study was carried out by a team composed of Szymon Kacprzak, and Karolina Wnuk, headed by Alicja Lisowska.

vast majority of the study participants declared that COVID-19 posed a graver threat to the health and life of an average Pole than the seasonal flu – 59.80% of the answers (definitely yes – 42.19%; rather yes – 17.61%). Disagreement with this view was declared by 26.58% of the respondents (definitely no – 13.95%; rather no – 12.62%). Thus, overt corona-sceptics found themselves living in a population of people starting to realize the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to realize the difficult social situation occurring in Poland in association with the spread of the disease.

Various challenges that occurred in Poland in association with another (second) wave of the pandemic – multiple systemic difficulties and problems – had a significant effect on the sense of individual security of the respondents. The results obtained in the original study allow making a conclusion that the respondents noticed in the Polish society a lack of the sense of security concerning the area of health and in the area related to material conditions, including existential needs.

Chart 1. Corona-sceptics on their sense of health security (%)



Source: Original work.

option 1). Meanwhile, only for 5.65% of the respondents the lack of the sense of health security was a natural consequence of the growing number of hospitalizations (answer option 3) (Chart 1).

Nine out of ten respondents declared that hampered access to health care due to the pandemic had a significant impact on Poles' sense of health security. The vast majority declared that considering the bad condition of the public health care system and the lack of preparedness for an epidemic, the Polish society felt threatened – 65.45% (answer option 2), while 26.25% claimed that their lack of the sense of health security resulted from the inadequate treatment of coronavirus-positive patients – too much attention being paid to them (answer

32. J. Szczepański, *Elementarne pojęcia socjologii*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 1972, p. 554. More on individual security: *Zarządzanie bezpieczeństwem - wyzwania XXI wieku*, ed. M. Lisiecki, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Zarządzania i Prawa im. Heleny Chodkowskiej 2008; M. Pomykała, *Bezpieczeństwo: w poszukiwaniu definicji*, "Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Rzeszowskiej. Zarządzanie i Marketing", 2010, Vol. 17 (4), pp. 107-114; S. Koziej, *Bezpieczeństwo: istota, podstawowe kategorie i historyczna ewolucja*, "Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe", 2011, Vol. 18 (2), pp. 19-39; R. Klamut, *Bezpieczeństwo jako pojęcie psychologiczne*, "Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Rzeszowskiej", 2012, Vol. 19 (4), pp. 41-51. DOI: [10.7862/rz.2012.einh.26](https://doi.org/10.7862/rz.2012.einh.26)

33. K. Novikova, A. Orzydłowska, *Jednostka ludzka w obliczu zagrożeń współczesności: bezpieczeństwo indywidualne w Polsce. Implikacje metodologiczne*, "Journal of Modern Science", 2019, Vol. 40 (1), pp. 305-323. DOI: [10.13166/JMS/106044](https://doi.org/10.13166/JMS/106044)

34. CBOS, *Koronasceptycyzm, czyli kto nie wierzy w zagrożenie epidemią*, Research communique no. 158/2020, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2020/K_158_20.PDF, (access 10.07.2022).

35. Ibidem.

The sense of threat among the respondents was determined by their trust or mistrust in medical staff. The original study involved asking the respondents about their trust in doctors. The obtained results revealed that the low level of the sense of health security in the society was not only due to the difficult situation within the healthcare system, but it depended also on the decreasing trust in this category of professionals. As many as 68.11% of the respondents believed that social trust in doctors in Poland was lower than before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 14.29% described the level of trust as the same as before the pandemic, and 8.31% indicated a higher level of trust.

Further, according to the majority of the respondents (66.11%), the quality of their lives fell and 10.96% found it difficult to define clearly the negative impact of the restrictions related to COVID-19 on the quality of their lives (an opposite opinion was declared by 22.92% of the respondents). Those who declared a decrease in the quality of life most frequently listed the following consequences:

- changed lifestyle – 57.33%,
- deterioration of interpersonal relations – 52.15%,
- limited possibilities to pursue one's hobbies – 47.84%,
- limited possibilities of personal development (spiritual development or improvement of skills) – 31.03%,
- increased level of stress in life – 69.83%,
- decreased trust in public institutions – 59.48%,
- other – 12.36%.

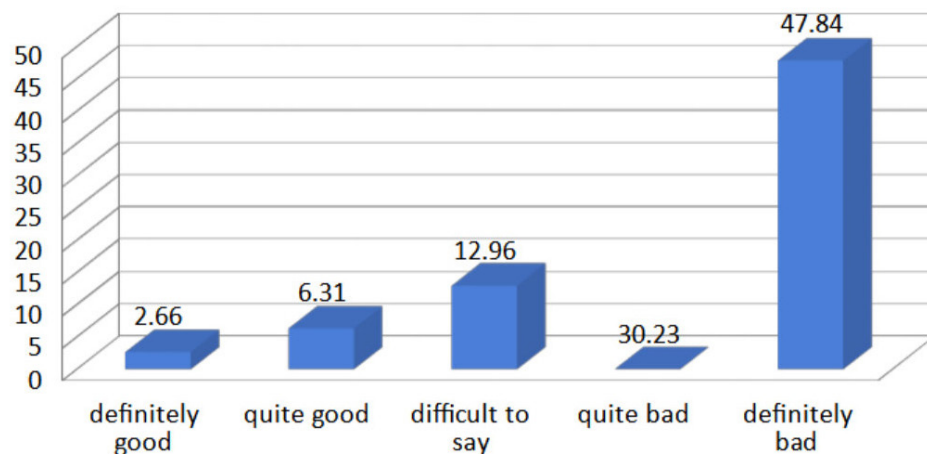
All the options chosen by the respondents show that the restrictions imposed by the government in association with the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their experience of individual security. The decreased quality of life was evidenced, according to the respondents, by deprivation of their basic material needs, limitations in social development, including personal and professional development, leading to potential emotional and mental problems related to a high level of

stress and degradation of trust in public institutions. Concluding this theme, one may argue that the respondents' key motivation to get involved in the corona-scepticism movement was their lack of the sense of personal security associated with various fears and anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of those fears and anxieties on the respondents' functioning in various areas was not only negative, but even destructive.

Corona-sceptics vs. the functioning of state institutions

The respondents not only assessed the particular measures and restrictions implemented by the government, but they also expressed a specific general attitude toward the efficiency of the activities of the government itself.³⁶ The study results justify a conclusion that a vast majority of the respondents displayed negative attitudes toward the government's activities associated to the COVID-19 pandemic and the quality of those activities.

Chart 2. Assessment of the government's actions associated with the COVID'19 pandemic (%)



Source: Original work.

In December 2020, 78.07% of the respondents assessed the government's actions in response to the pandemic as bad, while a positive opinion was declared only by 8.97% of the respondents (Chart 2).

Further, 61.13% of the respondents assessed the measures taken by the government as inadequate to the situation and delayed, while 20.27% claimed that the government's actions had been inadequate, though timely. Another 13.95% believed that the government had acted rightly, although too late, and 4.65% were convinced that the measures had been both adequate

36. E. Żołnierczyk, W. Szumowski, *Skuteczność jako zasada dobrego rządzenia*, in: *Dobre rządzenie w gminach małych. Empiryczny wymiar nowego paradygmatu rozwoju*, eds. K. Kobielska, A. Lisowska, Oficyna Wydawnicza Edward Mitek 2014, pp. 107–121.

to the conditions and timely. Moreover, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents described the government's stand toward the threat of pandemic as changeable and unclear (an opposite declaration was chosen by 3.65% of the respondents). Corona-sceptics noted also that the instability and lack of a uniform government stand towards the pandemic threat would affect a decrease in the society's trust in the government – 82.55% of the answers, the society's neglecting public institutions' decisions and initiatives – 34.18% and an increased number of people convinced that there was no threat – 37.82% of the answers.

It should be highlighted that this negative opinion on the government's actions associated with the COVID'19 pandemic, as declared in December 2020 by members and supporters of coronavirus denial movements corresponded with results of the survey conducted by CBOS in October and then repeated in November of the same year. Thus, in the second half of October 2020, the public opinion grew more critical of the government's policies. The most frequent answer indicated that the Polish government handled the pandemic badly - 55% (definitely badly – 28%; quite badly – 27%). The government's efforts were appreciated by 38% of the respondents (definitely well – 6%; quite well – 32%),³⁷ while in November, the share of negative opinions (52%) still exceeded one half (definitely badly – 25%; quite badly – 27%). The opposite view, appreciating the government's efforts, was chosen by 41% of the respondents (definitely well – 9%; quite well – 32%).³⁸

As of 15 April 2020, the obligation to cover one's mouth and nose with clothing, mask or facemask was imposed in the entire country.³⁹ There was just a general rule of wearing facemasks, but the provision was not broken if the mouth and nose were covered with different parts of clothing, scarves, etc.⁴⁰ The members and supporters of the movements who took part in the study were not asked directly whether they themselves wore facemasks or not, but they were asked about their opinion on wearing facemasks, and 45.51% of the respondents declared that the obligation to wear masks was only partially right as masks were not needed outside where one could keep distance from other people (answer option 3), and 20.60% declared that the obligation was wrong as facemasks should be worn only by people displaying symptoms of the disease. Further, 13.29% stressed that in a longer term wearing a mask was harmful. At the same time, 30.23% of the respondents declared that the obligation to wear facemasks was an efficient means of anti-virus protection.

Wearing a mask as an absolute obligation was contested by a vast majority of the respondents. Also, more than 1/3 of them expressed doubts concerning the reliability of the tests recom-

37. CBOS, *Obawy przed zarażeniem koronawirusem i postrzeganie działań rządu*, Research communique no. 141/2020, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2020/K_141_20.PDF, (access 10.07.2022).

38. CBOS, *Rząd wobec epidemii – oceny w pierwszej połowie listopada*, Research communique no. 146/2020, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2020/K_146_20.PDF, (access 10.07.2022).

39. Rozporządzenie Rady Ministrów z dnia 15 kwietnia 2020 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie ustanowienia określonych ograniczeń, nakazów i zakazów w związku z wystąpieniem stanu epidemii, Dz.U. 2020 poz. 673, [Ordinance of the Council of Ministers of 15 April 2020 amending the Ordinance on the establishment of certain restrictions, orders and prohibitions in connection with an epidemic situation, Journal of Laws 2020, item 673].

40. K. Baran, W. Burek, M. Gibek, *Wpływ Covid-19...*, op. cit., pp. 282–299. DOI: [10.4467/24497800RAP.20.016.12910](https://doi.org/10.4467/24497800RAP.20.016.12910)

mended by the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate (GIS). According to 37.87% of the respondents, the tests recommended by this central administration institution were unreliable (32.89% - hard to say; 26.58% - reliable).

The respondent corona-sceptics also declared their negative attitude to the government information campaign concerning the coronavirus in Poland. They found the official communication about the coronavirus either completely untrue (10.63% of the respondents) or mostly untrue (40.86%). However, as many as one in four (26.58%) described the official announcements as mostly or entirely true. The respondents who questioned reliability of the information concerning the coronavirus were also highly critical of the intentions of the announcements' authors. According to those respondents, the information provided in the official announcements served to misinform and manipulate the society (60.91%), to build political capital (26.36%) and to advance the interests of specific categories of people: manufacturers of medical devices (24.55%). Further, 11.36% of the respondents could not identify the reasons for misinformation, while almost 23% of the respondents declared that false information in official announcements had not been spread intentionally and that they it had been rather due to incompetence and ignorance of state officials (17.73%).

People who questioned reliability of official communication on the coronavirus, most frequently indicated several entities as responsible for providing false information to the society. According to 63.35% of the respondents, these were Polish state institutions responsible for this situation, specifically the Polish government – 36.20% and public administration – 27.15%. The corona-sceptics' catalogue of other entities responsible for spreading false information included also a supranational organizations shaping world policies (with no specific organization named) and particular categories of interest groups, including banks and the medical industry.

According to the respondents, trust in official announcements about the COVID-19 pandemic was also affected by statements of some politicians. For 69.10% of them, this effect was definitely significant (44.85%) and significant (24.25%), while for 15.95% it was very small (5.98%) or small (9.97%).

Conclusion

The study presented in this paper was conducted in December 2020, after the wave of anti-covid movements' protests in October 2020 and during the second wave of the pandemic in Poland. Therefore, the results obtained should be associated with the specific circumstances: particular stages/waves of the pandemic, restrictions and obligations imposed by the Polish government, and the actual presence of the disease in social space evidenced by the number of hospitalizations and deaths due to COVID-19 (not only symbolic or media presence). We may assume that opinions and convictions declared in the study reflected the attitudes towards and opinions about the COVID-19 pandemic at that time, and the respondents' motivation to get involved in corona-sceptical groups at that time involved mainly their fear associated with the level of individual security, thus confirming hypothesis 1.

The participants in the study were critical of the actions taken by the government and competent state institutions to combat the pandemic. However, it should be stressed that when the study was carried out, negative and critical opinions on the government's activities were expressed not only by corona-sceptics, as the opinions of the studied population on the COVID-19 pandemic were in many aspects similar to those of the majority of Poles (reflected in the results of all-Polish surveys by CBOS). Therefore, another possible interpretation suggests that in some areas of their activities corona-sceptics themselves and their supporters did not differ significantly from the convictions declared by the rest of the society, and thus that they did not form an exceptional or unique population. Furthermore, the participants self-declaring themselves as corona-sceptics were revealed to be an internally diverse community in terms of opinions expressed and actions declared. It was shown that beside the dominating part of the population expressing critical or even negative opinions about the solutions applied in Poland by state administration, there was also a group of corona-sceptics characterized by less radical convictions (e.g. the attitude as regards wearing facemasks – some respondents found this solution right or at least did not contest it). This finding, a negative verification of hypothesis 2, may be important for the verification of future research hypotheses, including those related to the political/electoral potential of corona-sceptics. It may be the starting point for a working hypothesis that members of the anti-covid movements in their early functioning on the political scene were not a "lost" electorate for the right-wing parties ruling in Poland.

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