Culture, Practice & Europeanization, 2021, Vol. 6, No. 1, 112-134

Making sense of the 'new normal': The COVID-19 crisis in the communication of the prime ministers of Ireland and New Zealand

Stefan Wallaschek (stefan.wallaschek@uni-flensburg.de)
Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany
Franziska Lena Ziegler (franziska.ziegler@uni-hildesheim.de)
University of Hildesheim, Germany

This article analyzes the communication of the prime ministers of Ireland and New Zealand during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Ireland and New Zealand share the characteristics of being small, prosperous OECD island states with a liberal political culture. Both countries experienced a similar COVID-19 trajectory in which a sharp increase in cases was followed by a strict shutdown of public life and a decreasing rate of infection in early summer 2020. Our analysis focuses on three aspects: Firstly, we investigate the role of the prime ministers' political orientation on public communication in times of crisis. Secondly, we examine the framing of solidarity by conceptualizing it as either action-oriented or institutionalized and we account for different scales of solidarity. Thirdly, we ask how solidarity is referred to in various policy fields. We apply a qualitative content analysis to examine these aspects in press releases and public speeches in the time period February to June 2020. We demonstrate that political orientation has little bearing on the framing of solidarity. Both prime ministers used both conceptions of solidarity to a similar extent. Moreover, they emphasized public health and economic policies to deal with the crisis and overcome the pandemic. The article contributes to the study of governmental communication in times of crisis, how solidarity is articulated by heads of government, and how small island states have dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, governmental communication, Ireland, New Zealand, Solidarity

Acknowledgements: *We would like to thank the participants of Maurizio Bach's research colloquium at the Europa-Universität Flensburg for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of our manuscript. We are also grateful for the comments by the anonymous reviewer and the guest editor, Stefanie Börner, that helped to improve our work.*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global crisis. It strongly challenges the current societal, economic, and political relations and questions the stability of state and societal structures in these hard times (Tooze, 2020). Hence, the way in which national governments make sense of the crisis, the types of solution they offer, and the justifications they give for the actions they take, are crucial. One response to such an unstable situation and a perceived threat is the appeal to solidarity (Prainsack, 2020): a call to the public to

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

support each other and overcome adversity together. While prior research argues that a crisis is a sufficient rather than a necessary condition for solidarity (Koos, 2019), research also demonstrates that times of crisis are still exceptional situations in which the call for solidarity resonates more strongly in public debate than in "normal times" (Wallaschek et al., 2020). Solidarity may be used by political actors, such as governments, to justify measures that limit civil liberties or demand more financial assistance in specific public sectors. Solidarity may also be a rhetorical feature in public speeches by national party leaders: it may constitute a moral appeal to citizens to follow the rules and contribute to the common good, reducing the existential health threat in the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper addresses the crisis-solidarity relation by examining how heads of government communicated to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and analyzes to what extent and in which ways solidarity featured in public speeches. This encompasses an analysis of whether solidarity is encouraged at a national or international level and of the policy fields addressed. For this purpose, Ireland and New Zealand, and the public communication by their prime ministers, respectively Leo Varadkar and Jacinda Ardern, between late February and June 2020 have been selected as the focus of this research.

Ireland and New Zealand provide a highly interesting selection of cases for the purpose of analyzing governmental crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on contextual economic, political, and cultural factors, the two islands constitute rather similar cases. The trajectories of the two countries during the first phase of the pandemic were also comparable. A sharp increase in the number of cases in March was followed by a strong decrease in new cases and deaths after the introduction of severe lockdown measures. Until the end of June 2020, it seemed that both countries were able to contain the virus sufficiently to not overburden the health and economic sectors and, subsequently, relax the lockdown measures and slowly re-open economic, social, and cultural activities.

Ireland and New Zealand, however, differ in one crucial aspect: political orientation of the head of government. During the first six months of 2020, EU member state Ireland was governed—although in the capacity of a caretaker government after the general elections on 20 February—by a coalition of the liberal-conservative party, Fine Gael, and several independent politicians, with Varadkar as prime minister (in office from 2017 until end of June 2020). New Zealand, on the other hand, was governed by a Labour-led coalition (together with the Green Party and the nationalist party New Zealand First) with the prime minister Ardern (in office since 2017). Previous studies on the effect of economic and cultural conflicts suggest that the divide between left and right parties (Thijssen & Verheyen, 2020; Kriesi et al., 2012) may impact the frequency and the manner in which heads of government refer to solidarity as part of their crisis communication. Nonetheless, we do not claim a causal relation due to the complex nature of such an unprecedented crisis (Kuehn, 2020).

The paper makes three important contributions. Firstly, we show that governmental communication in Ireland and New Zealand was similar in terms of the use and scope of solidarity during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, we highlight the role of public health and economic policy measures as topics within the governments' public addresses during the crisis. While they were at the core of governmental communication in both countries, their framing differed. Lastly, we demonstrate that both prime ministers emphasized national issues and national solidarity in their public communication and hardly referred to the European or international dimension of the pandemic.

The paper is structured as follows: In the second section, we discuss the literature on solidarity in times of crisis and how party politics matter in dealing with crisis situations. Next, we describe our data and method and explain our coding procedure. We present the main

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

findings of our analysis in the fourth section which is followed by a discussion of the results, the limitations of the study, and potential future research pathways.

2. Solidarity and party orientation in times of crisis

Solidarity has become one of the most active research fields over the last decade. The increased interest in solidarity goes hand in hand with recurring crises situations. Whether it was the global recession from 2007 onwards, the eurozone crisis, the migration crisis in Europe or the various protest movements across the globe (Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring) being addressed, the appeal to solidarity was strongly present in public debates (Wallaschek et al., 2020). It resonated in party manifestos (Thijssen & Verheyen, 2020) and parliamentary debates (Hobbach, 2019; Closa & Maatsch, 2014) as well as in offline and online media debates (Brändle et al., 2019; Trenz et al., 2020) and thereby demonstrated that public claims on solidarity may refer to any kind of crisis.

The growing interest in solidarity has also spurred a debate on the conceptualization of solidarity. Concepts of solidarity are predominantly centred either on structures and institutions or on actions and behaviour (Lahusen, 2020; Stjernø, 2009). The former focuses on institutional settings and uses the welfare state as an example of a solidarity structure which is reciprocal, collective, and relocates goods and resources to people in need. It has predefined boundaries which are mostly defined in a national-territorial manner and are based on group membership (of national citizens) (Ferrera, 2006; Börner, 2013). An institutional understanding of solidarity may also include providing economic assistance and financial aid to other countries or companies, as we have previously seen in the eurozone crisis (Gerhards et al., 2020). Hence, we follow Stjernø in his definition of solidarity as the "preparedness to share resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle or need and through taxation and redistribution organized by the state" (Stjernø, [2005] 2009, 2). This type of solidarity is called "institutionalized solidarity" (Gelissen, 2000).

A second type of solidarity refers to specific actions and shared values that convey mutual support or common beliefs. It locates solidarity not so much in structural arrangements but rather in individual or collective behaviour and perceptions regarding certain issues or social groups (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018; Sangiovanni, 2015). As Lahusen (2020, 10) has recently stated in this regard: "Solidarity is understood here as dispositions and practices of mutual help or support, be that by personal contributions or by the active support of activities of others, tied to informal and/or institutionalised groups". We call this type of solidarity 'action-oriented solidarity'.

We use the two concepts to study the political communication by the heads of government in Ireland and New Zealand. Thus, we can assess which type of solidarity is used more often, how it is used, and whether this changes during the pandemic. We expect that the political orientation of actors shapes the framing of solidarity. Furthermore, we expect that it not only influences the degree to which crisis communication refers to solidarity and in what way, but also the emphasis on certain thematic fields. Additionally, we expect that the COVID-19 crisis shapes the scope of solidarity claims.

Regarding the *first expectation*, scholars have demonstrated that a leftist political leaning favours a solidary attitude toward immigration or Europe (Ciornei & Recchi, 2017; Mau & Burkhardt, 2009). On the party level, prior studies show mixed results on whether party ideology shapes the framing of solidarity (Closa & Maatsch, 2014). In an historical and seminal study, Stjernø (2009) points out that the ideological and historical foundations of the conservative and Christian democratic parties lie in Catholic social teaching and religious ideas of charity and altruism. Conversely, the social-democratic parties tend to derive their understanding of solidarity from the emergence of the labour movement in the 19th century as well as Marxist ideas about class structure and the basic conflict between labour

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

and capital. However, traditional fault lines have shifted due to contextual changes such as economic globalization, changing social structures, or the rise of new parties. Thijssen and Verheyen (2020) show that these structural transformations have led to the emergence of the new social and political fault line of solidarity which structures the political programme of all parties. Solidarity is thus no longer expressed exclusively by actors to the left of the political spectrum, but in various forms by all other party groupings as well.

In line with this argumentation, studies show that conservative parties, and in particular the German parties CDU and CSU, significantly shaped the solidarity discourse in the eurozone crisis and European migration crisis (Wallaschek, 2020a). Conversely, Hobbach (2019) demonstrates that the German and French solidarity discourses in the national parliament during the eurozone crisis follow a left-right positioning, with parties on the left making more statements on European solidarity than right-wing parties. Interestingly, according to Hobbach (2019), French parties on the right made more solidarity statements than German parties on the left during the eurozone crisis. National political cultures thus seem to influence the use of solidarity in political-discursive language.

Against this background, it is not possible to formulate an expectation about the frequency of use of solidarity statements based on the party's positioning on the left-right spectrum. Various studies have demonstrated that not only left-wing parties, but also more conservative parties, make frequent use of solidarity references during crises. Nor is it possible to make a similar distinction based on political culture, as the political culture is similar in the two cases of Ireland and New Zealand. Yet, we can examine how the political orientation of the heads of government shapes the *framing* of solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis. We expect to find a similar number of statements on solidarity in both countries. Nonetheless, regarding the specific framing, we expect to see that, due to the historical legacy of the labour movement, the support of the welfare state, and a more state-centric political programme of leftist political actors, Ardern claims more institutionalized solidarity in her public statements than Varadkar. In contrast, we expect the conservative politician Varadkar to argue for 'action-oriented solidarity' to a greater extent than Ardern, by locating solidarity in individual behaviour and private contexts rather than in state-centred arrangements.

Directly linked to the first expectation, our *second expectation* relates to the relative importance of policy fields addressed by governmental crisis communication in the two countries and the framing of solidarity within each individual policy field. Partisan politics theory is a good starting point for this endeavour. The left-right criterion is still one of the most important criteria to differentiate between parties. Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011) show that voters in democracies still attach vital importance to the left-right dimension in choosing parties that match their personal positions. The authors also demonstrate that political parties largely abide by their electoral promises once in government. Differences based on the location on the left-right spectrum are particularly evident in the context of social spending. Their conclusion is in line with findings of earlier studies on the partisan effects on distributive spending (Hibbs, 1977).

Two caveats apply: Firstly, the suggested prominence of the left-right dimension does not imply that other criteria are irrelevant for the organization of the political space. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that multiple dimensions beyond the left-right cleavage are at play (Bakker et al, 2015; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). Moreover, a comparison across countries and over time discloses additional shortcomings of a simple left-right differentiation. Existing research shows that the national context as well as the moment in time influence the specific meaning of left and right (Blais et al, 2020; de Vries et al, 2013). Secondly, social spending—and attitudes towards it—is not only a function of partisan politics but might be influenced by additional factors. Numerous studies have highlighted

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

shortcomings of the traditional partisan politics approach with its inherent focus on the ideological family. Instead, they put the spotlight on the role of electoral constituencies, institutions (for example, the electoral system), and the linkages between parties and electorates for the party's position on welfare issues (Häusermann et al, 2013).

A global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic may alter political preferences, including those on welfare spending. The crisis urged governments around the world to present prompt and adequate solutions in various fields affected by the crisis. Cleavage theory (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) may help us understand party positions as well as their implementtation in the face of a crisis. The literature suggests that political parties' positions remain relatively stable over time. Although they try to adapt their positions to voters' preferences, research reveals their positional room for manoeuvre to be limited because of internal selection mechanisms in terms of personnel and topics (Dalton & McAllister, 2015; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Cleavage theory adds that, even against the background of a major external shock, extant political parties tend to adhere to their traditional positions (Hooghe & Marks, 2018, 119). With the example of the transnational cleavage, the authors show not only how changes to international trade and migration—culminating in Europe in the eurozone crisis and the migration crisis—led to the emergence of a new cleavage, but also how national political systems reacted to it. Instead of established political parties shifting their positions to accommodate concerns about European integration and immigration, they clung to their traditional positioning. Changes to the party systems, on the other hand, stemmed from the rise of new political parties within the political arena.

With that in mind, and with respect to our study, we do not expect partisan politics to determine the relative importance of individual policy fields in the public communication of Ardern and Varadkar. However, we predict that it shapes how the policy fields are framed. Following expectation one, we envisage a tendency to frame solidarity as 'action-oriented solidarity' by the conservative politician Varadkar and a tendency to frame solidarity as 'institutionalized solidarity' by the Labour party politician Ardern to become most manifest in the policy fields that convey the differences between left-wing and right-wing political parties: 'economy' and 'public health'. However, we expect the differences to be relatively small, as additional factors beyond partisan politics may equally impact the prime ministers' political positions.

Our *third expectation* revolves around the scope of solidarity claims. The literature suggests that crisis contexts are not always favourable to attitudes towards cooperative and solidary behaviour beyond the nation state. While successive crises have accompanied the European project since its early beginnings without seriously impeding further integration (Cross, 2017), Kriesi and Grande (2015) observe indications for a "renaissance of nationalism" in the political debate around the eurozone crisis. Similarly, Polyakova and Fligstein (2016) demonstrate how the financial crisis 2007-2009 affected European citizens' sense of belonging. Against the background of the failure to find collective political solutions at the EU level that would mitigate the deteriorating economic effects across the EU, the authors find that Europeans reverted to national identities. This finding is particularly strong in EU member states that were worst hit by the economic recession, including the Baltic States, Great Britain, Italy, Ireland, France, and Greece.

A similar tendency can be observed when considering early reflections of nationalism scholars on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role of the nation state and international cooperation around six months into the pandemic (Woods et al., 2020). They highlight the temporal coincidence of the COVID-19 pandemic with a more general nationalist resurgence around the globe, reinforced by ethnic and populist dimensions. As a result of the pandemic, they expect the influence of transnational institutions to decrease—as exemplified by the US's temporary withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO)—

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

and the "securitization of health" to increase (Woods et al., 2020, 815)—as evidenced in the competition over medical supplies in Europe and the Americas (Woods et al., 2020, 821). At the same time, scholars highlight the compatibility of a strengthened nation state with strong international cooperation. Accordingly, in the past it was often at the initiative of states that international institutions were founded or further developed (Woods et al., 2020, 822).

Additionally, previous studies on solidarity demonstrate that geographical scope is a crucial category for understanding which social groups and territorial entities actors refer to in their political actions as well as in their public communication (Gerhards et al., 2020; Lahusen, 2020; Wallaschek, 2020b). These studies evince that the national scope is still the main reference point for solidary actions. While citizens seem to prefer a national over a European solidarity scheme, scholars also observe that national and European solidarity are not mutually exclusive but can complement each other (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018; Gerhards et al., 2020; Ignácz & Langenkamp 2021, in this issue). Owing to the multi-layered nature of the concept of solidarity, we analyze the degree to which different scopes of solidarity figure in governmental crisis communication. Drawing on the former considerations, our third expectation is that both Ardern and Varadkar articulate predominantly national solidarity in their public communication. Regarding the European and/or international scope of solidarity, we expect that Ireland, due to its EU membership, tends towards an international cooperative framing more strongly than New Zealand which is not a member of any regional integration project of this kind.

3. Data and Methods

For analyzing governmental public communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have selected the cases of Ireland and New Zealand and the public communication by their heads of government, respectively Varadkar and Ardern, between February and June 2020. The selected period of investigation allows us to closely examine the first phase of the pandemic, including the first lockdown in both countries. In order to investigate the governmental crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, our case selection was driven by a "paired comparison" (Tarrow, 2010) and the method of difference, dating back to John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic* (1843/2011). Following the most-similar-systems design, we have selected two cases that share multiple contextual economic, political, and cultural characteristics but differ with respect to one explanatory variable of interest (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Ireland and New Zealand are contextually similar. Both are small islands with almost the same size of population (approximately 4.8 to 4.9 million inhabitants). Both countries have open and prospering economies, with a high GDP (in the global comparison, Ireland is ranked 32nd and New Zealand is ranked 52nd) and have a comparable Gini coefficient (Ireland: 0.796; New Zealand: 0.672) which points to increased levels of inequality in both countries. They both have a proportional electoral system and are predominantly perceived as liberal countries and as countries in the "English speaking cultural zone" (Payne & McCashin, 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Inglehart, 2002). Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, they also showed similar trajectories of sharp increases in the number of cases in March and a strong decrease in new cases and deaths after the introduction of severe lockdown measures. Until the end of June 2020, it seemed that both countries were able to contain the virus to avoid overburdening the health and economic sectors and could subsequently relax the lockdown measures and slowly restart economic, social, and cultural activities.

Ireland and New Zealand, however, differ with respect to the party ideology of the head of government. For the duration of the period under investigation, the Irish government

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

was led by the centre-right party, Fine Gael, and the prime minister Varadkar (in office from 2017 until end of June 2020), while New Zealand was governed by a Labour-led coalition (together with the Green Party and the nationalist party New Zealand First) with the prime minister Ardern (in office since 2017).

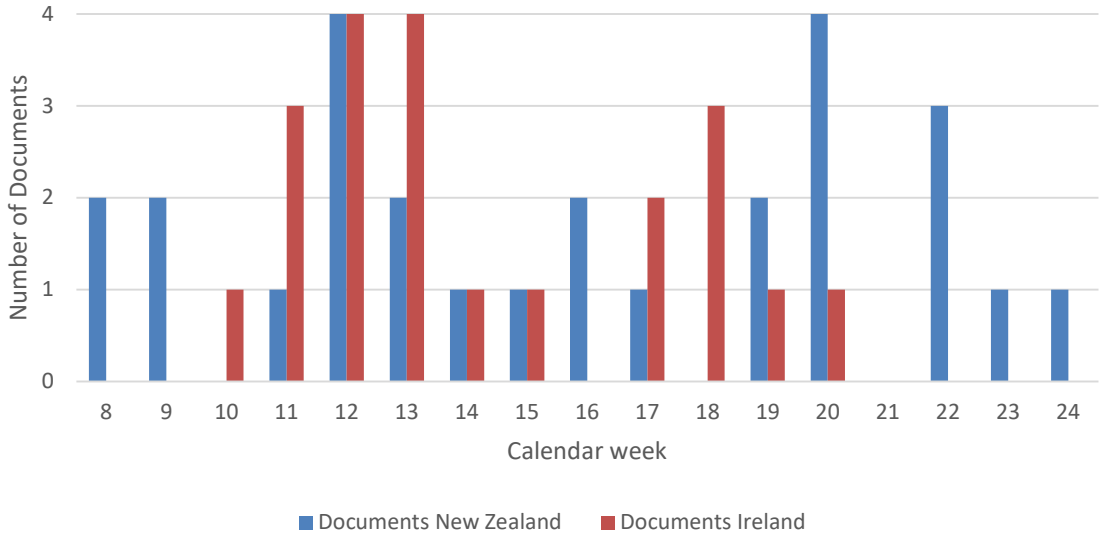
The corpus comprises all public speeches and press releases by Varadkar and Ardern that broached the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic between late February and June 2020. The items were identified by a search for the keyword 'COVID-19' on the official online portals of the government of Ireland (www.gov.ie and https://merrionstreet.ie) and New Zealand (https://www.beehive.govt.nz) respectively. We have limited our corpus in three ways: in terms of governmental actors, document type, and timespan covered. *Firstly*, the present analysis encompasses the public communication by the heads of governments of the two countries studied. While other government portfolios, especially health and, later, economy, also played a crucial role during the first phase of the pandemic, both heads of government, as in many other states across the globe, declared the management of the COVID-19 crisis a top priority for themselves. As both Varadkar and Ardern were in the spotlight during the first phase of the pandemic, we focus on their public communication. As prime ministers, they can set the country's political agenda and represent the government's position. Moreover, by speaking to the public, they legitimize the political actions and measures taken during the pandemic.

Secondly, as concerns the types of documents, the corpus includes official press releases and speeches at press conferences or other occasions that directly addressed the wider public. Speeches or statements made in parliament, by contrast, have been largely excluded from the corpus for the reason of audience. Two exceptions apply in the case of New Zealand: The Ministerial Statement on the State of Emergency of 25 March as well as the Prime Minister's Budget 2020 speech of 14 May were included in the corpus because of their general importance to the situation of country and, therefore, their visibility in the public arena.

Finally, with respect to the time covered, the corpus is limited to the so-called first wave of infections, covering all governmental communication from the start of the pandemic—that is, around the time when the first case of COVID-19 was registered in the country—up until the moment when the number of weekly new infections decreased to the extent that governments started to lift the severe lockdown measures that had been introduced earlier. The time period varies slightly for the two countries (see also Figures A1 and A2 in the appendix). Both Ireland and New Zealand witnessed their first official COVID-19 case in calendar week 9. In the case of Ireland, the first relevant document was issued on 6 March (week 10)—a press release providing guidance on mass gatherings, yet not prohibiting them. The final document to be included in the Irish sub-corpus is a press release issued on 15 May (week 20), which announced and specified the decision to move to Phase 1 of COVID-19 restrictions. With respect to New Zealand, the first document identified is dated 20 February (week 8), before the first case of COVID-19 was even registered in the country. The press release issued on the occasion of the Papua New Guinean Prime Minister's visit to New Zealand specifies the two countries' cooperation in their responses to the COVID-19 outbreak, in particular regarding the safe return of citizens. The final document included in the New Zealand sub-corpus is Ardern's speech on 8 June (week 24) when she announced that, after 17 days without any new cases of COVID-19 in the country, New Zealand would move to Alert Level 1 again. In total, the corpus comprises 48 documents (21 Ireland and 27 New Zealand) over a period of 16 weeks, of which 18 are speeches (6 Ireland and 12 New Zealand) and 30 are press releases (15 Ireland and 15 New Zealand), as shown in Figure 1.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Figure 1: Number of corpus documents per calendar week



Source: Own illustration.

We used the software Maxqda to apply a qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2014) and combined content structuring coding through the assignment of deductive categories with theme analysis through inductive category formation (Mayring, 2014). We proceeded in three steps. Firstly, based on our solidarity conceptualization (see above), we differentiated between 'institutionalized solidarity', 'action-oriented solidarity', and 'non-solidarity issues'. For each category, we identified exemplary phrases in both corpora that guided our subsequent coding process. These contained the term solidarity for the first two categories. In a second step, we extended the coding to phrases that did not have the term solidarity in it but referred to understandings of mutual support by the state or by citizens, the redistribution of resources, and active engagement of individuals to help each other. By doing so, we were able to capture a broad spectrum of solidarity meanings that are covered by the concepts 'institutionalized solidarity' and 'action-oriented solidarity'. If none of the meanings or the term solidarity appeared in the selected text material, but still the text referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, we coded the phrase as 'non-solidarity issue'. We also established five scope categories to analyze the relative importance of various levels of governance in governmental crisis communication: global, neighbouring countries, European Union, national, and local. Through the allocation of a specific territorial level to each issue identified in the first step, we aimed at analyzing potential differences between the scopes of solidarity. In a final step, we developed additional categories inductively to analyze the texts more closely and identified the following policy fields in which both solidarity and non-solidarity issues occur: public health, economy, social/culture/sports, civil liberties, other. The appendix of this article includes the codebook which lists and explains the categories and sub-categories. In total, we coded 196 phrases in 21 documents in Ireland (9.3 coded phrases per document) and 275 phrases in 27 documents in New Zealand (10.2 coded phrases per document).

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

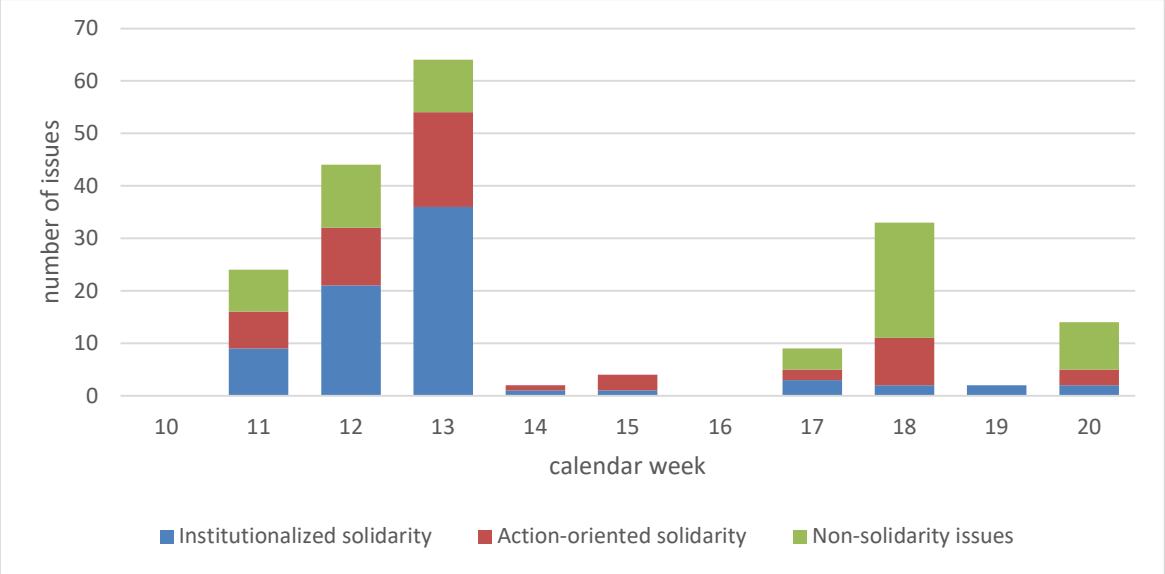
4. Results

The results of our qualitative content analysis are presented in four steps. First, we give an overview of the codes for both countries and describe temporal changes to contextualize our findings. Second, we discuss our findings on how political ideology affects the framing of solidarity. Third, we explore potential differences between policy fields. In the fourth and final step, we show the results for the scope of solidarity. We present quotes from the text material to underline our findings and interpret them in greater detail.

4.1 Overview of the cases

Ireland and New Zealand reacted slightly differently to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the New Zealand government addressed the virus before the country had its first case (week 8 in 2020), the Irish government issued its first statement after having detected the first COVID-19 case in Ireland (week 11 in 2020), as shown in Figure 2. After different beginnings, however, Ireland followed a similar but time-delayed trajectory to that of New Zealand, as the numbers of newly infected people sharply increased in the following weeks, hitting a peak in week 13 (New Zealand) and week 16 (Ireland), and swiftly declining thereafter (more sharply in New Zealand than in Ireland).

Figure 2: Number of issues in government communication in Ireland (per week)



Source: Own illustration.
Note: N = 196 (institutionalized solidarity = 77; action-oriented solidarity = 54, non-solidarity issues = 65).

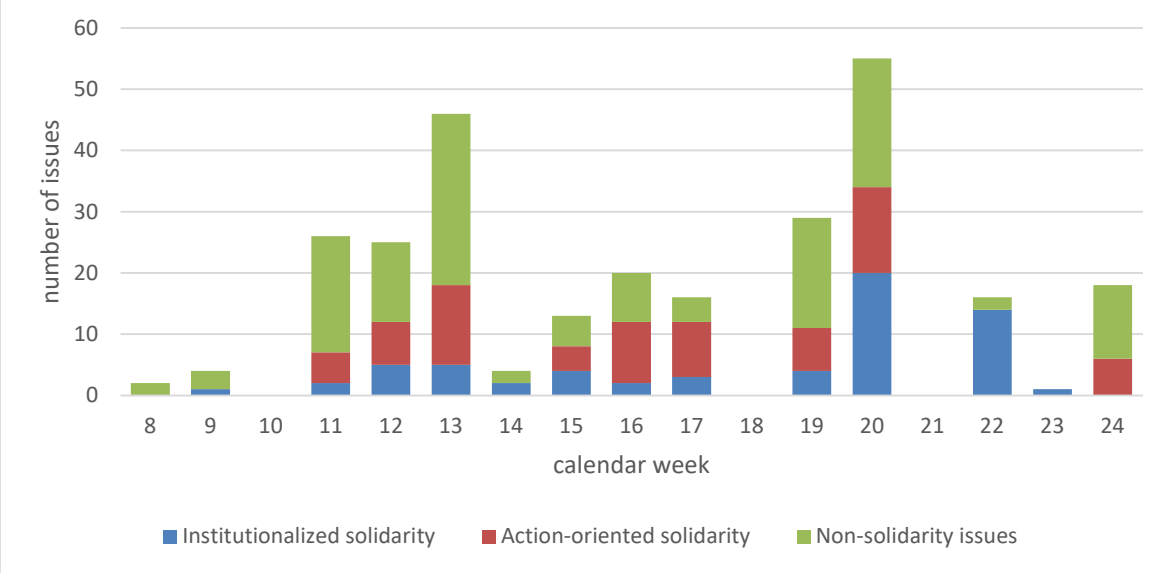
At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in Ireland, Varadkar highlighted the dangers and the severity of the pandemic for Irish politics and society. Hence, on 12 March (week 11), the Irish prime minister declared a national lockdown. In the subsequent two weeks, he explained and justified in various public speeches the measures that had been taken to this end—four out of six speeches took place in these three weeks (week 11 to 13). Simultaneously, the number of public references to solidarity increased. As of week 14, the number of coded issues sharply declined, particularly the share of issues that refer to solidarity. On 1 May (week 18), Varadkar declared the lockdown measures would be relaxed in a five-step process, starting on 18 May. His public speech on that day justified the governmental actions and explained the upcoming changes once again. Solidarity, however, only played a minor role in his communication at that point.

In comparison to Ireland, New Zealand shows a similar trend with respect to the relation between the number of newly infected people and the number of coded issues in governmental texts (Figure 3). Until week 13, both rose and then fell again until week 18. Ardern

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

announced the lockdown on 21 March (week 12) as well as a four-stage alert system to minimize the risk of a further virus outbreak. This underlines the government's awareness of the health crisis from the beginning of the pandemic. From the end of March (25 March, week 13) to the end of April (28 April, week 18), New Zealand was in a national lockdown. Even after the lockdown, Ardern regularly explained governmental actions to the public, indicated by the higher number of public speeches that she gave during this time (a total of 12 speeches). Even when the number of newly infected cases almost reached zero (week 20), the New Zealand prime minister continued to raise public awareness of the danger of the virus and publicly addressed its severity and potential consequences. In contrast to Ireland, Ardern did not refer to solidarity as regularly as her Irish counterpart Varadkar. Claims on non-solidarity issues often constituted a similar or even higher share of weekly statements than solidarity issues.

Figure 3: Number of issues in government communication in New Zealand (per week)



Source: Own illustration.
Note: N = 275 (institutionalized solidarity = 63; action-oriented solidarity = 75, non-solidarity issues = 137).

Following this short overview, we now present a more in-depth analysis of the public communication by Varadkar and Ardern. The section is guided by the first expectation on the relevance of party ideology for the framing of solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis.

4.2 The role of political orientation

We expected the same number of solidarity claims in both countries, yet differences with respect to the specific framing of solidarity: While Labour politician Ardern might refer more often to institutionalized solidarity than the conservative politician Varadkar, he might use action-oriented solidarity more often than Ardern.

In both countries, we see a high share of solidarity issues, demonstrating the relevance of solidarity claims during the pandemic. Ardern used understandings of solidarity 138 times in 27 documents while Varadkar referred to solidarity 131 times in 21 documents. Notably, however, the relative share is lower in the case of New Zealand than in Ireland (50% and 66.8%, respectively, of all coded issues referred to solidarity). To further differentiate the use of solidarity in governmental communication, we examine the presence of institutionalized and action-oriented solidarity in the text material. Overall, Ardern and Varadkar referred to action-oriented solidarity to the same extent (about 27% of all issues in both countries) while Varadkar used the notion of institutionalized solidarity considerably more frequently (about 39% of all issues in Ireland; about 23% in New Zealand).

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

As shown in Figure 2, Varadkar appealed to institutionalized solidarity in the unfolding of the pandemic in Ireland and stressed that the Irish government would do whatever it took to protect its citizens and initiated various measures to implement the national lockdown, support the economy, and minimize the impact on the labour market and health sector. Thus, most of Varadkar's claims referred to the economy and the public health sector that the Irish government (financially) supported from March 2020 onwards (see also section 4.3). As Varadkar stressed in his speech on 24 March:

> *"The government has today announced a National COVID-19 Income Support Scheme. This will provide financial support to Irish workers and companies affected by the crisis." (IRE_0324_CW13)*

> *"In recognition of the fact that so many fellow citizens have lost their jobs so suddenly, we are raising the COVID Unemployment Payment to €350 a week. This is approximately 75% of average earnings in the sectors most affected, and compares favourably to what is being done in other countries. The first payments will be made on Friday." (IRE_0324_CW13)*

The Irish politician highlighted the responsibility of the Irish state to support Irish workers and companies to overcome the crisis by setting up financial schemes. The latter can be interpreted as a sign of institutionalized solidarity. Financial schemes are crucial for managing the crisis as they offer support to those who are most strongly affected. Varadkar stressed this aspect throughout the timespan covered. He argued that if the Irish state did not support the Irish workers and the Irish economy during the pandemic, there would be severe and lasting economic consequences. Beyond the economic sector, Varadkar also announced various measures to support the health sector, cultural activities, and artists, as well as educational facilities, to deal with the crisis. Thus, he pointed out:

> *"All our resources are being deployed in this great national effort." (IRE_0324_CW13)*

The New Zealand prime minister also announced government schemes to combat the COVID-19 pandemic by financially supporting workers and companies as a form of institutionalized solidarity. Ardern highlighted the danger that the pandemic posed to the economy and the labour market:

> *"The Coalition is united in doing everything we can to support New Zealand workers and businesses." (NZ_0317_CW12)*

Additionally, Ardern linked the crisis to other areas, such as education or the climate crisis, to expand the significance of the crisis beyond its understanding as a public health crisis. She even depicted it as a window of opportunity to change politics. She stated:

> *"We went hard and early to fight COVID-19 and that success has opened up economic opportunities. Now, it's time to make the most of the head start New Zealand has with its economic recovery. This Budget shows how we are positioning New Zealand for that right now. It shows that we know this is not the time for business as usual, it's the time for a relentless focus on jobs, on training, on education, and the role they all can play to support our environment, and our people." (NZ_0514_CW20)*

Although institutionalized solidarity features most prominently in the governmental texts by the Irish politician, his public communication regularly referred to action-oriented solidarity as well: Varadkar appealed to Irish citizens to comply with the rules of conduct put in place to manage the further spread of the virus. Varadkar's communication suggested that a person's compliance with the COVID rules constituted solidarity with fellow citizens. He claimed that only if individuals supported each other, kept their distance, and helped those in danger or those who cannot live by themselves, could Ireland cope with the

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

pandemic. Institutionalized solidarity alone is not enough. Instead, Varadkar emphasized the social duty that people have to protect one another:

> *"Unfortunately we cannot stop this virus but working together we can slow it in its tracks and push it back. Our national objective must be to flatten the curve. We can succeed if everyone takes sustained action. Nothing less will do." (IRE_0326_CW13)*

Ardern equally empathically urged the 'Kiwis'—New Zealand inhabitants—to follow the health advice to help flatten the curve of newly infected people whilst still supporting each other in this unprecedented crisis. In this way, she emphasized the need for action-oriented solidarity. While she highlighted that the government could establish national schemes to help the economy and the people, Ardern also stressed that, to overcome this crisis, New Zealanders needed to actively show mutual support and translate it into practice through considerate behaviour.

> *"In the face of the greatest threat to human health we have seen in over a century, Kiwis have quietly and collectively implemented a nationwide wall of defence. You are breaking the chain of transmission. And you did it for each other. As a Government, we may have had pandemic notices. We may have had powers that come with being in a national emergency. But you held the greatest power of all. You made the decision that together, we could protect one other. And you have. You have saved lives." (NZ_0409_CW15)*

Interestingly, Varadkar and Ardern both used the expression, the 'new normal', indicating that the people must get used to certain precautions, such as physical distancing or limited social gatherings. The severe health crisis would render this situation unavoidable for the time being and the near future. Yet, both heads of government also highlighted the citizens' possibility to shape this 'new normal'. Accordingly, the crisis could be understood as a chance to change or adapt personal behaviour. In doing so, Ardern and Varadkar linked this 'new normal' to coping with the crisis in the long run.

> Ardern: "*But there does have to be a new normal. And that normal means that we will be breaking out of our bubbles, we will be around more people. But we can do that, and get more activity going, if we balance that with keeping our distance, and keeping our social gatherings small for now. […] That's why we are asking you all to be incredibly careful as we get back to a new safer normal. None of us can assume COVID isn't with us." (NZ_0511_CW20)*

> Varadkar: "*It will take some time for our lives to get back to normal. To a new normal. But it will happen." (IRE_0501_CW18)*

In conclusion, our initial expectation that Ardern refers more to institutionalized solidarity while Varadkar uses the notion of actor-oriented solidarity is not supported. Both prime ministers appealed to action-oriented solidarity in a similar way and stressed that people's behaviour and mutual support for each other make a difference in the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding institutionalized solidarity, Ardern and Varadkar both highlighted that the government would take whatever action is necessary to combat the crisis and minimize the impact on the economy and labour market by setting up national support schemes. Hence, the public communication of both prime ministers hardly differed in this respect. This seems to support the idea that, notwithstanding divergent political orientations, governmental communication works similarly in the event of crises for which no one was directly responsible. Due to the specific crisis constellation for which no one can be blamed, solidarity is not linked to any conditions or requirements that should be fulfilled beforehand. Solidarity is predominantly framed as a solution to a crisis and as such takes

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

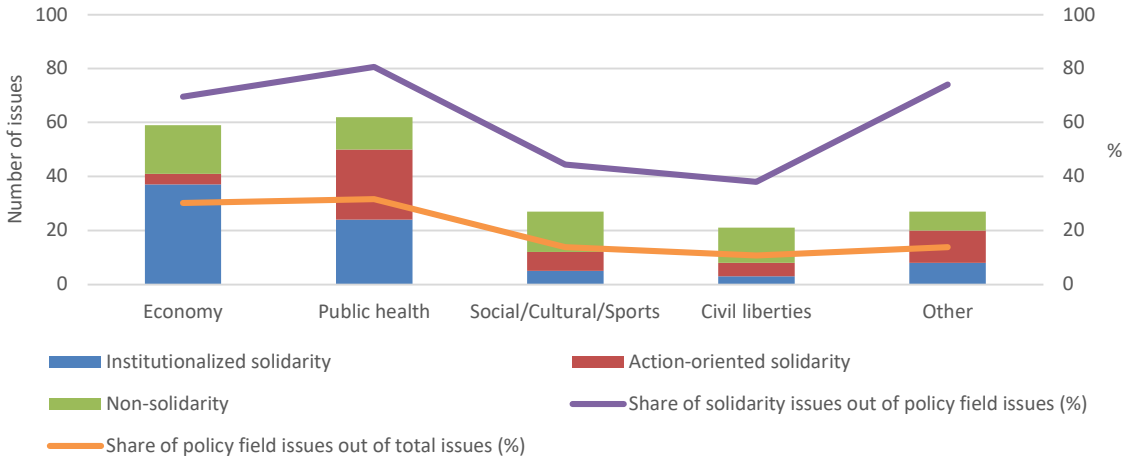
whatever is necessary to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on the society and economy.

4.3 Differences between policy fields

Here, we examine the various policy fields that Varadkar and Ardern addressed and compare the relative importance of each policy field, as well as its framing in solidarity and non-solidarity terms, between Ireland and New Zealand. We expected no difference in the distribution of issues in the various policy fields, yet envisaged that the tendency toward more action-oriented solidarity framing by a conservative politician and the tendency toward more institutionalized solidarity framing by a Labour party politician would become most manifest in the fields of economy and public health.

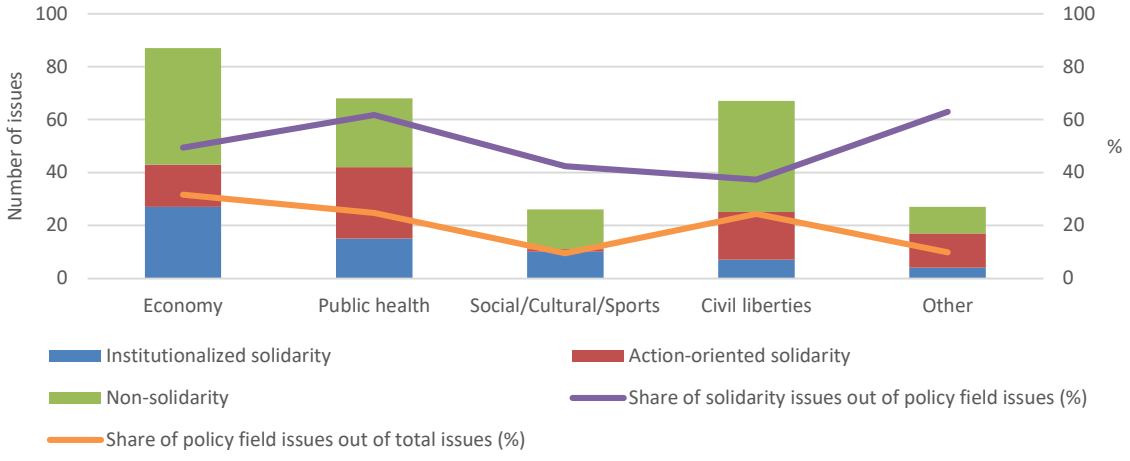
With respect to the overall distribution of policy fields (Figures 4 and 5), we can observe that 'economy' and 'public health' constitute important policy fields in the communication of both prime ministers with at least a quarter of the total number of issues accorded to each field in both countries. By contrast, 'culture/social/sports' plays only a minor role, with 13.8% of the issues in Ireland and 9.5% of the issues in New Zealand. Differences exist with respect to the field 'civil liberties', which also includes mobility aspects. While in Ireland only around one in ten issues (10.7%) pertain to this policy field, the share is more than twice the size in New Zealand (24.4%).

Figure 4: Distribution of issues per policy field in Ireland



Source: Own illustration.

Figure 5: Distribution of issues per policy field in New Zealand



Source: Own illustration.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

When taking a closer look at the individual policy fields, and given the nature of the crisis, the salience of public health issues in the communication of the two prime ministers comes as no surprise. Moreover, as compared to New Zealand, 'public health' was framed more frequently in terms of solidarity in the governmental crisis communication in Ireland. Around four fifths (80.6%) of all 'public health' issues in Ireland were framed as a solidarity issue as opposed to around three fifths (61.8%) of the public health related issues in New Zealand. The difference between the two countries also has to do with Ardern's sometimes detailed description of the (health-related) policy measures, especially when she announced changes to the national alert level.

Nonetheless, 'public health' is characterized by numerous references to action-oriented solidarity in both countries. In fact, it constitutes the policy field with the highest share of action-oriented solidarity issues in Ireland (41.9% of total issues within policy field) and in New Zealand (39.7% of total issues within policy field). Both prime ministers frequently referred to the citizens' responsibility toward one another:

> Ardern*: "In short, if you have a sniffle, or a sore throat, or a cough—get advice and get a test. Quickly. Please don't be a stoic Kiwi. If you do your bit, we all must keep doing ours."* (NZ_0511_CW20)

> Varadkar: "*We all need to stay physically active, stay connected with friends and family, and look after our mental health. […] We're in this together and we will come out of it together too. So let's set ourselves the target to do something each day to make us feel a little healthier and a little happier."* (IRE_0424_CW17)

Moreover, in New Zealand, the government's efforts in the field of public health were regularly accompanied by a war-like rhetoric vis-à-vis the virus: For example, Ardern spoke about the "explosion of COVID-19" (NZ_0420_CW17) and the need to "eliminate the virus" (NZ_0416_CW16) or to "stamp it out" (NZ_0314_CW11) in order to keep New Zealanders safe. Action-oriented solidarity is central in this context, too: When Ardern announced the relaxation of restrictions from alert level 3 to level 2 on 11 May she reflected upon the collective efforts that had led the way:

> *"Determined that this was a war we could eventually win, but only if we acted together. So we formed a team, and as a team we created a wall of protection for one another."* (NZ_0511_CW20)

To some extent, we also find this kind of martial language in Varadkar's statements on health issues, for example when he highlighted the need to "defeat [the] global threat" (IRE_0504_CW19).

Secondly, statements in the policy field of "economy" account for almost one third of the total number of issues in either country (31.6% in New Zealand; 30.1% in Ireland). The public communication of both prime ministers evinces the vital importance of this policy field in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Both prime ministers openly communicated their awareness of the consequences of health-related lockdown measures on businesses and employment early on. They warned the public about hard times in the period ahead, stressing the "significant" (Ardern, NZ_0319_CW12), "sudden and […] enormous" (Varadkar, IRE_0324_CW13) impact on the economy. These warnings were usually followed by the intention to mitigate adverse economic effects as far as possible. Additionally, Ardern justified short-term adverse economic effects with their necessity for economic viability in the long run. She directly connected public health related measures to measures in the field of the economy and highlighted this already back in March:

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

> *"Ultimately though, the best protection for the economy is containing the virus. A widespread outbreak will hurt our economy far more in the long run than short term measures to prevent a mass outbreak occurring."* (NZ_0314_CW11)

Ardern affirmed her position two months later, stating that "[the] best economic response to the virus was always a strong health response" (NZ_0513_CW20).

As the crisis continued, statements of intention to bolster the economic effects of the crisis were followed by the announcement of concrete governmental support measures in both countries. Moreover, the narrative of damage reduction was supplemented by plans of economic recovery. Although we can make this observation in both the Irish case and the New Zealand case, there are differences with respect to the framing of economic issues. Whereas in Ireland, more than two thirds of all economy-related issues (69.5%) were framed as a solidarity issue, this was the case for about half of the economy issues in the New Zealand case (49.4%). In particular, the Irish case is characterized by references to institutionalized solidarity in this policy field: 'economy' does not only constitute the policy field with the highest share of institutionalized solidarity issues (62.7% of total issues in this policy field); it also represents a very small share of action-related solidarity issues (6.8%). Varadkar's speeches on the introduction of subsidy schemes for various groups that were worst hit by the crisis, are exemplary of this trend. In this context, the Irish prime minister regularly referred to the responsibility of society, illustrated by the following statement:

> *"Everyone in our society must show solidarity in this time of national sacrifice. For those who have lost their jobs and had their incomes reduced temporarily… there must be help and understanding from those who can give it… particularly the banks… government bodies and utilities."* (IRE_0317_CW12)

The New Zealand case is different: the share of institutionalized solidarity issues within the economic policy field is much lower (31%) than in the Irish case. At the same time, Ardern also regularly deployed an action-oriented framing of economic issues (18.4% of total issues in this policy field). Interestingly, this is not only the case when she referred to the individuals' and businesses' contribution in the national economic recovery, for example by encouraging people "to buy, play and experience New Zealand-made to get our country moving again" (NZ_0608_CW24). It is also the case when Ardern introduced government support measures—which are usually prime examples of institutionalized solidarity. She regularly framed government measures as action-oriented solidarity, as exemplified by the following statement made at the announcement of the new annual budget:

> *"In fact, that is what the Budget is called, 'Rebuilding together'. At its heart it is the simple idea that our team of 5 million has united to beat the virus, now together we can also unite to rebuild our economy."* (NZ_0511_CW20)

Thirdly, as mentioned above, the policy field of 'civil liberties' is considerably more relevant for the New Zealand case than for the Irish case (10.7% of the total issues in Ireland and 24.4% of the total issues in New Zealand). Issues relating to 'civil liberties' were present in Ardern's public communication throughout the first phase of the pandemic as she repeatedly referred to aspects concerning citizens' ability to move freely in the public sphere. Border-related policy, including the arrival of tourists and the return of New Zealanders, also accounts for a considerable share within this policy field. The border constituted a significant element of the New Zealand crisis strategy: The country closed its borders to everyone except for New Zealanders three weeks after the first case was confirmed. Furthermore, the prime minister continued to refer to the importance of border measures throughout the first phase of the pandemic, as represented by the following statement:

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

> *"[O]ur border remains our first line of defence as we aim not to import the virus."* (NZ_0608_CW24)

Although travel restrictions and border controls at ports, airports, and land border crossing points with Northern Ireland occasionally figure in Varadkar's public communication, too, we do not find the same relevance attached to the border in the Irish crisis strategy. Instead, the majority of his statements in this policy field refer to (the reduction of) social interactions.

It is striking that the policy field 'civil liberties' was widely framed as a non-solidarity issue in both countries. The combined share of institutionalized solidarity and action-oriented solidarity issues accounts for less than 40% in both countries: the lowest share of all policy fields. Admittedly, both prime ministers expressed their sympathy for citizens having to bear measures that severely restricted their personal freedom. For example, Ardern acknowledged that she could "understand that self-isolation [was] a daunting prospect" (NZ_0323_CW13) and that she did "not underestimate the gravity of what [was] being asked of [New Zealanders]" (NZ_0325_CW13). Similarly, Varadkar noted that "some of this [was] coming as a real shock" (IRE_0312_CW11). Both prime ministers alluded to the individuals' solidarity at times. Yet, in the majority of cases these measures were presented as obligations individuals were simply supposed to fulfill. This observation is surprising, not least because 'civil liberties' measures affected every individual equally.

One reason may relate to the type of measures applied in the respective policy field. In comparison to the fields of 'public health' and 'economy', measures relating to 'civil liberties' have a lower threshold and do not require extensive financial resources from the public and private sectors. The two prime ministers might have felt that in particular public expenditures required the solidarity of taxpayers and, therefore, might have felt less compelled to allude to solidarity when introducing (inexpensive) restrictions to civil liberties. Additionally, restrictions to individual mobility and social interactions interfere with individuals' fundamental rights and private life and need to be justified by law. These restrictions might be perceived as unpopular sacrifices by the citizens. Therefore, the two prime ministers might have felt the need to refer to instrumental arguments that emphasized the severity of the pandemic for public and personal health as well as the sheer necessity to avoid personal contacts as a result of it. Appeals to solidarity by both prime ministers might thus be understood as more suitable regarding the economy and public health.

In summary, apart from 'civil liberties', the policy fields are distributed fairly similarly in the two countries. 'Economy' and 'public health' were highly important in the crisis communication of the heads of government of Ireland and New Zealand, while 'social/culture/sports' were referred to less frequently. In terms of relative numbers, the two countries differ most with respect to the importance of 'civil liberties': the share of issues is more than twice as high in New Zealand than in Ireland. When comparing the different policy fields in terms of how they were framed, the two cases also demonstrate similar tendencies: the share of solidarity issues is highest in the policy fields 'economy', 'public health' (and 'other') and lowest in the policy fields 'social/culture/sports' and 'civil liberties'. However, unlike our expectation, the data do not provide any major indication for Labour politician Ardern using more institutionalized solidarity or for the conservative politician Varadkar using more action-oriented solidarity, especially in the fields of 'public health' and 'economy'. Instead, action-oriented solidarity plays an important role in the communication of both prime ministers in the field of 'public health'. As concerns the field of 'economy', institutionalized solidarity is predominantly present in the Irish case: while it constitutes the policy field with the highest share of institutionalized solidarity issues in Ireland, the share is only half the size in New Zealand (62.7% v. 31.0% of total issues in this

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

policy field). Therefore, expectation three is only partially met by our data. This may constitute yet another indication that factors other than partisan politics impact a prime minister's policy preferences as well as her communication about those preferences.

4.4 National and international solidarity

The fourth and final step considers the relevance of the scope of solidarity. We expected that national solidarity would figure more prominently in public communication by both Ardern and Varadkar than the European and/or international scope of solidarity. Yet, due to its EU membership, we expected that this level would play a more important role in Ireland than it would in New Zealand.

Overall, it is not possible to discern any quantitative differences between Ireland and New Zealand with respect to the geographical scope of the government's crisis communication. In both cases, national issues largely dominated the public communication by the heads of government. Of the total number of issues brought up, 88.4% in New Zealand and 88.8% in Ireland were aimed at the domestic level. Conversely, in both countries the heads of government directed their statements at a level beyond the national in only around one in ten cases. Small variations between the two cases can be observed with respect to the relative importance of the individual geographical levels (see Figure A3 in the appendix) as well as their distribution in time during the period of analysis. Notwithstanding the general trend, international cooperation in times of crisis was valued in the public communication of both heads of states. We can find examples of this kind in both countries:

> Ardern: *"Working collectively is paramount. We recognise the importance of multilateralism as essential for global post-COVID-19 recovery, for peacebuilding and prosperity, and for addressing other critical global issues, such as climate change."* (NZ_0527_CW22)

> Varadkar: *"The only way we can defeat a global threat is by working together on a multilateral basis. Ireland and the European Union are committed to doing exactly that."* (IRE_0504_CW19)

The European Union only played a minor role in Varadkar's crisis communication. In particular, the press release following the European Council meeting on COVID-19 of 17 March included several issues that indicated cooperation among EU member states in various fields: medical supply, the mitigation of economic disturbances caused by the crisis, the management of external borders, or the evacuation of EU citizens from destinations outside the EU. They were mostly framed as issues of institutional solidarity, as exemplified by the following section:

> *"They [the heads of states of EU member states] agreed that in all matters they would do whatever it takes to protect citizens in the face of an unprecedented crisis, and that they would continue work together on this."* (IRE_0317_CW12)

What seems to be more important in the Irish case are references to Northern Ireland. Several statements underlined the "all-island dimension to the crisis" (IRE_0316_12) and the related need for coordinated action. Whereas this was mostly framed as a non-solidarity issue, by simply referring to the individual field cooperation (public health, border management, economy), in one instance Varadkar also signalled institutional solidarity by stating:

> *"The protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on the island is paramount, and no effort will be spared in that regard."* (IRE_0314_CW11).

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Consequently, the data confirms our expectation about the national focus in the public crisis communication; yet it does not demonstrate a tendency toward more international/European solidarity in the Irish case.

5. Conclusion

When the present text was written, much of the world remained preoccupied with the struggle against the repercussions of the global COVID-19 pandemic. With the number of new cases sharply increasing in the autumn of 2020, many governments found themselves forced to reintroduce severe lockdown measures (or lockdown-like measures for that matter) to curtail the further spread of the virus. State and governmental actors across the world needed to communicate to their citizenry again the rationale for the reintroduction of severe restrictions to public life.

We have analyzed the governmental communication during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, more specifically by the (then) heads of government of Ireland and New Zealand, Varadkar and Ardern. The two island states constituted an interesting pair as they shared numerous contextual economic, political, and socio-cultural factors and experienced a similar COVID-19 trajectory during the first months of the year 2020. Building on prior research, we investigated the use of two types of solidarity (institutionalized and action-oriented solidarity), including the scope of solidarity and the policy fields addressed in the communication by Ardern and Varadkar.

Based on a qualitative content analysis, we presented three main findings. First, government communication regarding solidarity hardly differs between the two countries. Despite differences in the political orientation of the national leaders, the claim for solidarity was present in both contexts. Both stressed that people's behaviour and mutual support make a difference in the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Ardern and Varadkar highlighted the full commitment of their respective governments toward minimizing negative repercussions of the crisis on the economy and the labour market. The public communication was less concerned with shifting the blame for the crisis to a specific social group or actor and more focused on dealing with the crisis and overcoming the pandemic. This is a stark contrast to previous crises (such as the eurozone crisis or migration crisis in Europe) and might explain why solidarity claims have been so widely shared. Appeals to mutual support and reassuring public statements that the crisis can be overcome by the head of government aim to demonstrate responsible actions by, and increase the trust in, the national government. Another explanation might be the selected time period, since we looked at the beginning of the crisis. As previous research has shown (Closa & Maatsch, 2014; Brändle et al., 2019; Wallaschek, 2020b), when directly facing a moment of crisis, the appeal to solidarity becomes prominent. In as serious a situation as the COVID-19 crisis, partisan differences seem to be supplanted by other, more pressing considerations: the key priority is to overcome the crisis quickly and decisively. Therefore, government communication focuses on financial support for the economy, the protection of the people, and the application of rules of conduct. In that sense, public appeals to solidarity in the first months of the crisis can be understood as coping mechanisms for dealing with the severity of the pandemic and the insecurity created for political actors as well as ordinary citizens who are uncertain how to act/behave in such an unprecedented time.

Secondly, regarding the policy fields, we show that 'economy' and 'public health' are highly important in the crisis communication of the heads of government of Ireland and New Zealand. The two fields are also predominantly framed as solidarity issues by the two prime ministers. While it is possible to observe a tendency toward institutionalized solidarity in the economic field and action-oriented solidarity in the field of public health, we cannot note any major differences based on partisan politics. The main reason for this difference

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

might be the two varying foci: Solidarity in the economic policy field is mainly adopted to provide state-led schemes and financial assistance to companies and employees to minimize the impact of the crisis on the national economy and the labour market. In that sense, institutionalized solidarity is a rather *top-down perspective* from the national government to the economy and citizens, and the government shows its capabilities in hard times by setting up various support schemes. On the other hand, action-oriented solidarity in the public health field rests on the moral demand from the heads of government that people follow the new rules of conduct. Accordingly, action-oriented solidarity might be understood as a *bottom-up action* in the pandemic. The threshold to governments in democracies to physically enforce social distancing and reduce social mobility is high and therefore Varadkar and Ardern regularly refer to action-oriented solidarity in their public speeches highlighting the relevance and necessity of these new rules of conduct in pandemic times. Thirdly, the strong presence of the national solidarity scope shows that the COVID-19 crisis itself, as well as the political measures to contain it, were mainly perceived as a domestic issue in both countries. When either prime minister proclaims solidarity, in most of the cases he or she refers to either the national economy or the national population. While this is not necessarily a sign of the 'renaissance of nationalism' in hard times, it still demonstrates that the political priority of solidarity claims is the domestic context. Despite the fact that the pandemic is also a transnational phenomenon, much as the eurozone crisis or Europe's migration crisis were, framing the crisis in general and solidarity in particular in more global terms did not seem to matter. The heads of government seemed to be more concerned with their constituency (voters in Ireland and New Zealand) and domestic issues than with addressing the pandemic on an international level.

Both cases clearly demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic is not only seen as a health crisis but is strongly linked to economic issues and the question of how institutional and action-oriented solidarity can help to overcome the crisis. In the case of Ireland, one reason for this strategy might be that the country experienced one of the worst economic and financial recessions including a bailout and a strict austerity programme during the eurozone crisis. Ardern might also have had the voters in mind when communicating during the pandemic since, at the start of the crisis, the New Zealand general elections were in sight. The results of the elections demonstrated that Ardern's communication strategy was successful: Labour increased their share of the vote by more than 12% and now occupy the majority of seats in parliament.

Our study has some limitations. The time period is rather short and only includes the first phase of the global pandemic. Thus, future studies can build upon our analysis and might reveal discursive changes or continuities at a later stage of the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, our study could also be extended to other countries to get a better understanding of government communication across different contexts and of how other governments frame solidarity in times of crisis. By looking at two small island states—a European and a non-European country—with similar political liberal cultures, we can demonstrate that solidarity also resonates beyond Europe and receives similar public attention as was observed in previous crises, such as the eurozone crisis or the European migration crisis (Wallaschek, 2020a). Hence, our study also offers a closer examination of solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic and helps to broaden the geographical focus in the study of solidarity.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

References

Bakker, R., de Vries, C., Edwards, E., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M. & Vachudova, M.A. (2015). Measuring party positions in Europe: The Chapel Hill expert survey trend file, 1999-2010. *Party Politics 21*(2), 143-152. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068812462931.

Blais, A., Guntermann, E., Arel-Bundock, V., Dassonneville, R., Laslier, J-F. & Péloquin-Skulski, G. (2020). Party preference representation. *Party Politics*, online first, 1-13. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820954631.

Börner, S. (2013). *Belonging, Solidarity and Expansion in Social Policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brändle, V. K., Eisele, O. & Trenz, H.-J. (2019). Contesting European solidarity during the "Refugee Crisis": A comparative investigation of media claims in Denmark, Germany, Greece and Italy. *Mass Communication and Society*, *22*(6), 708–32. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1674877.

Ciornei, I. & Recchi, C. (2017). At the source of European solidarity: Assessing the effects of cross-border practices and political attitudes. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *55*(3), 468–85. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12507.

Closa, C. & Maatsch, A. (2014). In a spirit of solidarity? Justifying the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) in national parliamentary debates. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 52*(4), 826–42. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12119.

Cross, M. (2017). *The Politics of Crisis in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalton, R.J., Farrell, D.M. & McAllister, I. (2011). *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dalton, R.J. & McAllister, I. (2015). Random Walk or Planned Excursion? Continuity and Change in the Left-Right Positions of Political Parties. *Comparative Political Studies*, *48*(6), 759-787. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014558257.

De Vries, C.E., Hakhverdian, A. & Lancee, B. (2013). The dynamics of voters' left/right identification: the role of economic and cultural attitudes. *Political Science Research and Methods*, *1*(2), 223-238. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2013.4.

Ferrera, M. (2006). *The boundaries of welfare: European integration and the new spatial politics of social protection*. Reprint. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gelissen, J. (2000). Popular support for institutionalised solidarity: A comparison between European welfare states. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 9*(4), 285–300. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2397.00140.

Gerhards, J., Lengfeld, H., Ignácz, Z. S., Kley, F. K. & Priem, M. (2020). *European solidarity in times of crisis: insights from a thirteen-country survey*. Abingdon: Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Government of Irland (n.d.). Retrieved from: https://www.gov.ie/en/ Accessed 14 April 2021.

Häusermann, S., Picot, G., & Geering, D. (2013). Rethinking Party Politics and the Welfare State – Recent Advances in the Literature. *British Journal of Political Science*, *43*(1), 221-240. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000336.

Hallin, D. C. & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hibbs, D.A. (1977). Political Parties and Macroeconomic Policy. *American Political Science Review*, *71*(4), 1467-87. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.2307/1961490.

Hobbach, R. (2019). *European solidarity? Analysing debates on redistributive EU policies in France and Germany*. Unpublished Dissertation, München: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.

Hooghe, L. & Marks, G. (2018). Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *25*(1), 109-135. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1310279.

Ignácz, Z., & Langenkamp, A. (2021). European solidarity patterns during a pandemic. *Culture, Practice & Europeanization*, *6*(1), 135-157.

Inglehart, R. (2002). Cultural cleavages in the Roller, & B. Weßels (Eds.), *Bürger und Demokratie in Ost und West Studien zur politischen Kultur und zum politischen Prozess. Festschrift für Hans-Dieter Klingemann* (73–84). Wiesbaden: Springer VS. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-89596-7.

Irish Government News Service (n.d.). Retrieved from: Retrieved from: https://merrionstreet.ie. Accessed 14 April 2021.

Koos, S. (2019). Crises and the reconfiguration of solidarities in Europe – Origins, scope, variations. *European Societies, 21*(5), 629–48. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2019.1616797.

Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Dolezal, M., Helbling, M., Höglinger, D., Hutter, S. & Wüest, B. (Eds.) (2012). *Political Conflict in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

European Union. Modernization and cultural persistence. In D. Fuchs, E.
Kriesi, H. & Grande, E. (2015). The Europeanization of the National Political Debate. In O. Cramme & S. B. Hobolt (Eds.), *Democratic politics in a European Union under stress* (67–86). Oxford, United Kingdom, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kuehn, D. (2020). Theoriegeleitete Fallauswahl. In C. Wagemann, A. Goerres & M. B. Siewert (Eds.), *Handbuch Methoden der Politikwissenschaft*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Lahusen, C. (Ed.) (2020). *Citizens' Solidarity in Europe. Civic Engagement and Public Discourse in Times of Crises*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789909500.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Lahusen, C. & Grasso, M. (Eds.) (2018). *Solidarity in Europe: Citizens' Responses in Times of Crisis*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lipset, S.M. & Rokkan, S. (1967). Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: an introduction. In S.M. Lispet & S. Rokkan (Eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (1-64). Toronto: The Free Press.

Mau, S. & Burkhardt, C. (2009). Migration and welfare state solidarity in Western Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *19*(3), 213–29. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928709104737.

Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis: foundation, basic procedures and software solution*. Klagenfurt. Retrieved from: https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/39517 .

Mill, J. S. (1843/2011). *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive. Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Payne, D. & McCashin, A. (2005). Welfare state legitimacy: The republic of Ireland in comparative perspective. *Geary Discussion Paper Series*, no. 2. Retrieved from: https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/1875.

Polyakova, A. & Fligstein, N. (2016). Is European integration causing Europe to become more nationalist? Evidence from the 2007–9 financial crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *23(*1), 60-83. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1080286.

Prainsack, B. (2020). Solidarity in times of pandemics. *Democratic Theory, 7*(2), 124-33. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2020.070215.

Sangiovanni, A. (2015). Solidarity as joint action. *Journal of Applied Philosophy, 32*(4), 340-59. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12130.

Seawright, J. & Gerring, J. (2008). Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research. *Political Research Quarterly, 61*(2), 294-308. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912907313077.

Stecker, C. & Tausendpfund, M. (2016). Multidimensional government-citizen congruence and satisfaction with democracy. *European Journal of Political Research*, *55*(3), 492-511. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12147.

Stjernø, S. (2009). *Solidarity in Europe: The history of an idea*. Reprint. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tarrow, S. (2010). The Strategy of Paired Comparison: Toward a Theory of Practice. *Comparative Political Studies*, *43*(2), 230-259. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009350044.

The Official website of the New Zealand Government (n.d.). Retrieved from: https://www.beehive.govt.nz Accessed 14 April 2021.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Thijssen, P. & Verheyen, P. (2020). It's all about solidarity stupid! How solidarity frames structure the party political sphere. *British Journal of Political Science*, September, 1-18. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000137.

Tooze, A. (2020, April 9). The normal economy is never coming back. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/09/unemployment-coronavirus-pandemic-normal-economy-is-never-coming-back/.

Trenz, H.-J., Brändle, V. K., Cinalli, M. & Eisele, O. (2020). Taking voice and taking sides: The role of social media commenting in solidarity contestation. In C. Lahusen (Ed.), *Citizens' Solidarity in Europe: Civic Engagement and Public Discourse in Times of Crises* (149–76). Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Wallaschek, S. (2020a). Contested solidarity in the Euro crisis and Europe's migration crisis: A discourse network analysis. *Journal of European Public Policy, 27*(7), 1034–53. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1659844.

Wallaschek, S. (2020b). The discursive construction of solidarity: Analysing public claims in Europe's migration crisis. *Political Studies*, *68*(1), 74-92. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719831585.

Wallaschek, S., Starke, C. & Brüning, C. (2020). Solidarity in the public sphere: A discourse network analysis of German newspapers (2008–2017). *Politics and Governance, 8*(2), 257–71. Retrieved from: http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i2.2609.

Woods, E. T., Schertzer, R., Greenfeld, L., Hughes, C. & Miller-Idriss, C. (2020). COVID-19, nationalism, and the politics of crisis: A scholarly exchange. *Nations and nationalism*, 26(4), 807-825. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12644.

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2021-1-112 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY