

University in Belgrade
Faculty of Political Science

Master Academic Studies
Peace, Security and Development

Master's thesis

SECURITISATION OF COVID-19 IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
AND THE ROLE OF WAR DISCOURSE

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Belgrade, September 2024

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1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation

The pandemic of COVID-19 has often been dubbed the largest social and political crisis since the World War II. It disrupted global economy, destabilised countries, invigorated populisms, nationalisms and autocratic trends across the world, increased social inequalities, gave rise to post-truth phenomena such as infodemic and conspiracy theories, disrupted lives of individuals, communities and entire societies, and caused 7,059,612 deaths worldwide.¹ Yet, the impression is that we, individually and collectively, have not learnt many lessons yet, and that the level of preparedness to deal with similar crisis in future is even worse than over four years ago when it all started.

Following COVID-19 outbreak in December 2019, many political leaders resorted to war rhetoric to describe the nature and the scale of the threat of unrestrained virus spread. War metaphors and analogies became part of political discourse in many democratic countries during the so-called first wave of the pandemic. In many of these countries, the armed forces were directly involved in the enforcement of the measures to restrain the spread of the virus. This includes Serbia.

The first case of COVID-19 in Serbia was officially recorded at the beginning of March 2020. From 15 March till 6 May 2020, the country functioned under the state of emergency, with some of the most stringent measures and restrictions introduced. The longest complete lockdown lasted for 84 hours. According to the available data, until 18 August 2024, the total number of deaths reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) was 18,057.² Long term consequences are still to be fully understood. The research in this thesis is an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of how Serbian institutions first responded to this crisis, why they responded in this way and what can be learnt from that.

¹ As of 18 August 2024 [COVID-19 deaths | WHO COVID-19 dashboard](#)

² Ibid.

1.2. Subject and research goal

As a country which is still grappling with the legacy of wars from the 1990s, Serbia quickly joined a global war against the “invisible enemy,” but, as many others, waged it locally. Although it was not, in fact, in a real war, but in the middle of an enormous public health crisis, for a brief period of time, Serbia functioned in a war-like reality. The citizens were ordered to stay in the isolation of their homes, away from an invisible enemy, and to fear any social interaction, as the consequences may be of cataclysmic proportions. Such an extreme and often paradoxical situation, in which we were defending ourselves by hiding from each other, was constructed through abundant use of war metaphors. The goal of this research is to analyse militarised discourse and the role it had in the process of securitisation of COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Serbia. This analysis focuses both on the securitisation of COVID-19 and on war metaphors, and historical and war analogies that were used in speeches, interviews and public statements by Serbia’s officials (President of the Republic, Prime Minister, members of the Government and representatives of state bodies and agencies, as well as healthcare professionals).

1.3. Argumentation

In response to the main research question, who, how, why and with what consequences used the war discourse in the process of COVID-19 securitisation in the Republic of Serbia, during the state of emergency in 2020, I offer three arguments.

My main argument is that the ruling elite in Serbia used securitisation of the pandemic with the aim to strengthen their authoritarian rule. In my analysis, I will show how the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing trends of democratic decline and how the executive power took deliberate steps in the securitisation process to further weaken the mechanisms of democratic control.

I further contend that militarised political discourse in the securitisation of the pandemic was used with the aim to gain wide acceptance for the measures that were introduced and to silence the criticism. The analysis will show how the metaphor of war was deployed in order to justify introduction of the state of emergency and measures that were among the most restrictive in the world.

Finally, I argue that the governing elite in Serbia used the securitisation of the pandemic to gain legitimacy for its foreign policy position of balancing between the West and the East, in particular in the triangle the EU – Russia – China.

1.4. Structure of the paper

Following a brief introduction, which outlined the main research question and hypotheses, the analysis in this thesis starts with an extensive overview of literature on securitisation of health in general, followed by securitisation of COVID-19 and use of war discourse during the pandemic.

The following chapter provides the outline of theoretical and methodological framework. The research in this thesis relies on two theories – Securitisation Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In order to answer the research question, the methodology that is applied is discourse analysis.

In the analysis, insights from the literature review and the theoretical framework are applied to the case of securitisation of COVID-19 in Serbia and use of war discourse during the state of emergency.

The final chapter outlines main conclusions of the research, followed by the list of literature references.

2. Literature overview

COVID-19 is both a global and a national, and a security and public health issue. In order to offer an understanding of this complexity, this chapter will give an overview of the literature that deals with historic links between security and health, followed by a critical review of the key questions and debates in the academic body of work on securitisation of health. Special attention will be given to the securitisation of COVID-19, with specific overview of securitisation in democratic countries. Considering the main focus of the research in this thesis, in the rest of this chapter, I will give an overview of the use of war metaphor in political discourse, in particular the papers that analyse the use of war metaphors in securitisation of COVID-19. Finally, the literature overview will include the review of the key issues related to the impact of the pandemic on the state of democracy and strengthening of autocratic trends.

2.1. Securitisation and health

The link between health and security is not new. History has recorded a number of pandemics of infectious diseases that had jeopardised political and economic stability and affected social relations to a significant degree in the past. Some of the examples include the 6th century Plague of Justinian, the 14th century Black Death, going all the way to the early 20th century Spanish flu pandemic (Rokvić 2020, 65-66). However, only after the end of the Cold War, were health threats observed through a security lens and did health security become “one of the many global securities that were first invented in the 1990s” (Weir 2014, 18).

The first outline of the concept of health security was drawn in the UNDP 1994 *Human Development Report: new Dimensions of Human Security* (Lo Yuk-ping and Thomas 2010, 447-448). This report calls for the expansion of the traditional concept of military, state-centred security and for a crucial shift in thinking, towards human security. Human security threats are classified into seven categories, including health security³ (UNDP 1994, 22-24). The UNDP report does not offer an explicit definition of health security concept, but it enlists the most important threats, which include infective and parasitic diseases, cardiovascular diseases, cancer which is often linked with pollution, as well as access to healthcare, which particularly

³ The other six are: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.

affects mothers and infants' death rates. The spread of HIV/AIDS is explicitly enlisted/listed as a threat to health security (UNDP 1994, 27-28).

Many researchers have looked into the complex relations between health, security, politics and international relations. They raise several questions which are relevant for the analysis in this thesis. These questions can be grouped into three categories: what is global health security and how it works, what are the scope and consequences of securitisation of health threats, and what are the alternative paradigms for observing health threats.

Although the link between health and security is not new, the first steps towards securitisation of health were recorded at the beginning of the 20th century. The estimations are that the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918-1919 affected more than a quarter of the world population, and that around 50 million people died, out of which 675,000 in the United States (Crosby 2003, by Huang 2014, 83). The pandemic came in the follow up to the First World War and it proved that it could cause even more catastrophic devastation than the war itself (Francis 1958, 85, by Kamradt-Scott and McInnes 2012, 98). Led by this fact, the US army established a special research and development department as soon as the Second World War broke out, with the aim of developing and testing an efficient vaccine (Frances 1947, by Kamradt-Scott and McInnes 2012, 98). This is how the issue of health first appeared in the context of national security. Despite the fact that the world was struck by two large influenza pandemics in 1957 and 1968, and that HIV was recognised as a global health issue back in the 1980s, the issue of health security was included in the global security agenda only after the changes in the international political context during the 1990s.

Global health security, which is primarily connected with the World Health Organization (WHO), was formed by linking the concepts of health and national and international security (Weir 2014, 18). The first securitising move came from the USA in 1992, when the U.S. Institute of Medicine, in its report *Emerging Infections: Microbial Threats to Health in the United States*, defined the concept of emerging infectious diseases (EID) that broke out in the US over the last few decades and jeopardised its security, and, by extension, the international security. This report offered a concrete recommendation to raise this issue within the WHO and to establish a global surveillance system, as well as to develop the capacities that would enable detection and reaction to EID outbreaks (Weir 2014, 19).

With the support of Canada and the European Union in the second half of the 1990s and in early 2000s, the USA managed to raise the issue of control of EID spread in various forums

and bodies within the WHO, which resulted in the adoption of the new definition of EID and development of new monitoring mechanisms on a global level, of which the most important was Global Outbreak and Response Network (GOARN). The role of GOARN is defined as “maintaining global health security by ensuring mechanisms for outbreak alert and response” (WHO 2000b, 17, by Weir 2014, 21). Its mandate for warning and response was formalised in 2000 and it refers to EID, familiar infectious diseases and intentional or accidental spreading of biological agents (WHO 2000a, 3-4, by Weir 2014, 21).

The success of the initiative to escalate the issue of emerging infectious diseases from the US national level to the international level was significantly contributed by the fact that the WHO wanted to be more meaningfully present in the area of infectious diseases prevention and control, where it had not been active since the 1950s and the 1960s, except in the area of HIV monitoring (Amrith 2006, by Weir 2014, 20). The other important factor was that at the time the powers of the WHO for monitoring outbreaks of infectious diseases were defined by the International Health Regulations from 1969. The Regulations stipulated the obligation to report only about cholera, plague and yellow fever and it was evident that it was outdated and that it must be amended in order to be more responsive to the challenges of the early 21st century. The Regulations amendment procedure lasted for ten years and the New International Health Regulations were adopted in 2005 (Weir 2014, 22-23). This process was finalised with the global health report that the WHO published in 2007, in which the global health security was designated as a series of activities that should lead to “reduced vulnerability of populations to acute threats to health” (WHO 2007, vii).

This genesis of global health security, described in detail by Lorna Weir (Wier 2014), provides a good ground for the analysis of several important issues related to health security, which have proven particularly topical even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Geopolitical relations between the Global North and the Global South are among those issues. Wier believes that the global health security is designed primarily “to prevent the diseases of poor people in the South from spreading to the North and laterally to other areas in the South” (Wier 2014, 27). States of the Global North, the USA in the first place, have succeeded in internationalising the issue of emerging infectious diseases and their control within the WHO system. However, this process has shown that the Global North and the Global South have a different understanding of the term ‘disease.’ Considering that the South states are most often a source or a fertile ground for the health incidents, they have successfully resisted the notion that spread

of emerging infectious diseases knows no borders and they have insisted on retaining the state sovereignty in the global health security (Wier 2014, 23).

Even though revised International Health Regulations reduced the possibilities for states to block dissemination of information on health incidents and provided wider possibilities to the WHO to obtain the information on incidents from non-governmental sources (which still must be verified by the state), the rule remained that the WHO could not enter the territory of a state without its explicit invitation (Lo Yuk-ping and Thomas 2010, 451-452). The fact that mostly developed countries benefit from the global health security, and that underdeveloped countries are often a source of insecurity, has given rise to the so-called “viral sovereignty”. This term was created during the bird flu pandemic (H5N1) in 2005, and it was used by the Indonesian Minister of Health Siti Supari, when she argued that the countries on whose territory a specific virus strain appeared should have legal ownership over it, i.e. sovereign right to decide whether to share a virus sample with the others or not. She refused to share the information on the Indonesian strain of H5N1 with the WHO. The reason she gave was that the underdeveloped countries shared the information on virus strains free of charge through the international health cooperation mechanisms, and that such strains ended up with pharmaceutical companies producing vaccines. These companies would eventually offer the vaccines back to those underdeveloped countries at commercial terms, which they could not afford (Huang 2014, 88; Elbe 2022, 2-3).

After Indonesia, some other countries embraced the viral sovereignty doctrine, and argued over samples of virus strains causing MERS, Ebola and some new types of flu (H7N9). This practice was seen even during COVID-19 pandemic (Elbe 2022, 5). Although Chinese scientists shared the information on the SARS-CoV-2 genome sequence in less than two weeks after China had reported the virus to the WHO, there are indications that many countries did not want to share physical samples of strains detected in their territories in early phases of the pandemic, which had restricted the scientists in their research significantly (Hammond 2021, 2, by Elbe 2022, 5). Stefan Elbe believes that these phenomena are the reactions to historic injustice and structural inequalities in the global health security. In management of global health crises such inequalities are particularly visible in how available biomedical assets are and how big the disparity is in the production of and access to scientific knowledge (Elbe 2022, 5-9). The question that still remains is whether the global health security would change and in what direction, especially in the context of all the shortcomings that became obvious during COVID-19 pandemic.

Another important issue, on which numerous authors wrote, refers to the consequences of intersection between health and security. The expansion of the security concept has resulted in more social issues being analysed through security lens. Some authors believe that securitisation of health is a way to direct attention and resources to resolving issues that jeopardise a large number of people. Others put in focus the resulting threats to human rights and freedoms, as well as deepening inequalities in the global health agenda (Rushton and Youde 2014, 2).

Many authors analyse this ethical dilemma on the example of securitisation of HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS was securitised at the international level by the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1308 in July 2000. Although the UN SCR 1308 primarily refers to the risk that HIV poses to the staff of peacekeeping missions, it explicitly states that, if not controlled, “the pandemic of [HIV/AIDS] may pose risk to stability and security” (UNSCR 1308 2000, 2; McInnes and Rushton 2011, 122). Prior to this, HIV/AIDS was securitised in the USA at the national level by the adoption of the HIV/AIDS strategy in 1995. Upon its adoption, in 1996, President Bill Clinton passed the Directive 7 by which HIV/AIDS was designated as one of the most important health and security challenges on the global level. This process was completed in 2000, when the American National Intelligence Council published the report in which AIDS and other infectious diseases were recognised as a matter of national security (Rokvić 2016, 230).

Stefan Elbe identifies several key potential risks arising from treating HIV/AIDS as a security threat. The logic of threat and defence from the threat has three types of consequences. Firstly, such framing causes the HIV/AIDS issue to be removed from the health and development domain and placed in the security domain in which a central role is played by the state, whose interest is to protect itself and its institutions as holders of power. The second consequence is the distribution of resources intended for the control of HIV/AIDS. In the security framing, the interest of a wider vulnerable population is secondary to the interest of the military forces and political elites treated as a priority in the distribution of medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE). Alternatively, the resources are redirected to military instead to development programmes. The third consequence of treating HIV/AIDS as security threat is stigmatisation of persons infected and living with HIV/AIDS (Elbe 2006, 129-130). In his paper from 2011, Elbe underlines another aspect of using security paradigm in dealing with a health issue, primarily on the global level. He particularly points out the danger that the global health agenda, within security framing, may deal only with the diseases and issues

jeopardising developed countries, while the diseases burdening the poor and undeveloped countries will receive insufficient attention (Elbe 2011, 221).

There are also other authors who have looked into the relation of health security and human rights. In his article from 2014, Amon gives an example from South Africa, in which the incidence of multi-resistant strain of tuberculosis in 2006 was declared threat to public health, which served as an excuse for multi-year imprisonment of thousands of people. Lead poisoning in China caused by environmental pollution was declared security threat so that the government could intervene and suppress civil protests against continued pollution (Amon 2014, 295-298).

Elbe, however, notices positive consequences of HIV/AIDS securitisation. The fact that this security threat has a unique status in the international law, as it is recognised at the level of the UN Security Council, means that there is a strong political pressure on the countries mostly affected by the pandemic to take measures that would improve the status of persons living with HIV/AIDS. In some countries, the problem is not the government's significant involvement in resolving the issue, but insufficient interest of the government to engage more intensely in the procurement and distribution of available medicines (Elbe 2006, 131-132). Although by limiting the existing legal framework, HIV/AIDS securitisation may jeopardise human and civil rights and freedoms, in a different setting, restricting or bypassing the existing legal system can have a positive effect. This primarily refers to patent protection for the production of specific medicines and the fact that applicable regulations within the World Trade Organization restrict the rights of poor countries to produce generic drugs or import them from other countries that purchase them at more favourable prices (Elbe 2006, 133).

On the other hand, Fidler believes that the dilemma whether the security framing is adequate for resolving global health issues is outdated, as the global health management is in its post-securitisation phase and the security paradigm has fully prevailed in resolving health challenges (Fidler 2016, 71).

Finally, the analysis in this thesis draws on the insights of the authors who criticise the securitisation as an adequate frame to study the approaches to development and global health. Duarte and Valença deem that the focus should be on daily, bureaucratic, routine practices that experts apply when they address various risks and threats. The knowledge to manage the pandemic, even an unknown one such as COVID-19, is accumulated from such practices. In that sense, the securitisation of COVID-19 is “the result and not the cause of the articulation

between medical and security knowledge, practices, and techniques” (Duarte and Valença 2021, 244).

As an alternative to securitisation, Allison Howel proposes the global politics of medicine as a more comprehensive framework (Howel 2014). She deems that securitisation of health does not properly acknowledge long-term connection between security and medicine, and how they co-constructed each other, in the manner that many medical findings have shaped security behaviours and practices, and that, equally, a number of branches of medicine developed from warfare experience (Howel 2014, 983). This point of view is similar to Stefan Elbe’s considerations on two-way impact arising from the connection between health and security. He deems that not only has health been securitised, but security has been medicalised as well (Elbe 2010). The focus on medicine, instead on health would, according to Howel, resolve numerous ethical dilemmas arising from treating global health as security issue, which primarily refer to unequal availability and distribution of biomedical assets. New paradigm would also allow to extend the focus to non-infectious diseases i.e. to diseases arising from lifestyle habits, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and so on, which are more and more recognised as problems falling within a scope of global public health and which have not been acknowledged within security paradigm (Howel 2014, 983-984).

Most of these issues have shown to be topical during COVID-19 pandemic, and key debates and problems addressed in scholarly literature published since 2020 will be presented below.

2.2. Securitisation of COVID-19 pandemic

Since 2020 to date, a great number of papers, researches and analyses have been published addressing various aspects of this crisis, mostly from the standpoint of social science, humanities and medicine. Considering that the focus of this paper is on the so-called first wave of the pandemic, the body of work dealing with how the key stakeholders reacted in the first half of 2020 and what questions it raised are particularly significant.

Numerous authors deem that this crisis is an opportunity to review the theories of liberalism, neoliberalism and globalism (Nunes 2020; Jović 2020; Bacevic and McGoey 2021). Jović and Nunes point out that what is specific in the securitisation of this pandemic is the fact that it was not only the virus that was securitised, but mobility and social contacts as well, as factors that significantly affected the speed of virus spread, and consequently the rise in

mortality rates (Jović 2020, 3; Nunes 2020, 2). Jović holds that the countries were caught “in the sandwich between the global and individual” and that in their response to the global issue they reached out for traditional and national responses. However, the first reactions to the crisis showed that traditional instruments of response, and seeking answers at the level of national security, were not sufficient, which called for review whether the solution would be found in a larger global connectedness and stronger global institutions (Jović 2020, 482).

On the other hand, Nunes deems that COVID-19 was the crisis that unveiled a paradox of neoliberal economic model dependant on circulation, even when it directly posed risk to lives of a great number of people (Nunes 2020, 2). He argues that one of the main lessons learnt from this crisis is that resilience to such security threats does not lie in neoliberal concepts of privatised health systems nor in economic model reliant on a continuous growth, but on building a public health system based on understanding that health is a universal value. He draws parallels between the dynamics of securitisation of COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis and points out that the pandemic example clearly shows how necessary it is to find a balance between individual needs, on one hand, and solidarity and responsibility towards the collective on the other (Nunes 2020, 3). Salma Daoudi comes to a similar conclusion when she says that the link between supply chains and consequential crisis of production and procurement of PPE and respiratory ventilators unveiled vulnerabilities of individual countries and raised a new question of health sovereignty (Daoudi 2020, 9).

In addition to the dilemma what the referent object is – whether it is the entire humanity or if national security is jeopardised, the securitisation of COVID-19 pandemic brings other dilemmas as well (Sears 2020, 1-2). Various responses that individual countries employed have shown that there are disagreements whether it was a disaster of global proportions or a crisis that could be managed. These discrepancies in opinion are not present only among the politicians but also among the experts, thus the scientific debate becomes a part of a political process of decision making on various measures to be taken (Sears 2020; Baćević 2020).

Several authors look into the relationship between politics, administration and medicine in management of the crisis caused by the pandemic. Christensen and Lægreid examined the Norwegian model and they particularly looked into how the position and the role in the hierarchy, as well as the organisational culture and internalised norms of a certain structure, impact how the measures for pandemic management are proposed and adopted (Christensen and Lægreid 2022). They identified the paradox, that, although the Norwegian expert body which had the greatest experience in dealing with infectious diseases in the past, was formally

consulted in adopting the measures, it had less impact on policies and regulations due to its lower position in the administrative chain compared to the executive bodies (Christensen and Læg Reid 2022, 302). Bacevic and McGoe y also analysed the relationship between the expertise and the politics, and they examined to which extent the measures that the UK government took were based on ignorance or insufficient knowledge of the novel virus, and to which degree such ignorance had been a strategic decision. These two authors conclude that the knowledge was used only when it was opportune for the elites or when certain decisions needed to be legitimised. They label such model as ‘surfing ignorance’ (Bacevic and McGoe y 2021, 13). This model is typical of a new, hybrid type of liberalism, that they term ‘fatalistic liberalism,’ in which, during the pandemic, the advantage was given to the control of information and management of public expectations rather than to virus management (Bacevic and McGoe y 2021, 14).

Some authors analysed another important aspect of COVID-19 pandemic securitisation – the relationship between democracy and efficiency in the pandemic management. Yuen Ang deems that this dilemma is misplaced, as the example of China shows that one country can be both successful and unsuccessful in combating virus. In her opinion, autocracies are very successful in rapid deployment of resources and in decision making, but there is no transparency nor are the individuals encouraged to speak openly about problems, which negatively affects the control of epidemics (Ang 2020, 445). Due to the fact that the decision-making in China is very centralised, there was a significant delay in information on the virus reaching the central level from the level of cities and provinces. During such delay, the virus had already spread and, in that regard, such method of ruling was unsuccessful in the pandemic management. On the other hand, when the decision was made at the top level and when the instructions were issued, massive mobilisation, construction of hospitals and implementation of all pandemic control measures happened very quickly. Then again, a democratic country, such as the USA, may be deemed unsuccessful, as President Trump at the very beginning downplayed the threat coming from the pandemic, which delayed the measures and allowed uncontrolled virus spreading. South Korea and Taiwan are democracies that managed to control virus spreading with minimum consequences for the economy with quick testing, lockdown measures and transparency in communication. Hence, Ang concludes that democracies can be successful only if they have strong leadership and administrative capacities to implement all necessary measures (Ang 2020, 447).

Having analysed the sample of 156 countries and comparing democracy index (Economist's Intelligence Unit's 2019 Democracy Index) with their efficiency in pandemic management during the first six months in 2020, Juan Dempere concludes that, on average, countries with a higher democracy index implemented less restrictive measures during the first wave of the pandemic and were faster in responding than the countries with a lower democracy index (Dempere 2020, 603). On the other hand, countries with a higher democracy index, which stands in positive correlation with GDP and healthcare system efficiency index, experienced more severe form of the pandemic due to densely populated urban settlements, high number of elderly and people with comorbidities such as cardiovascular diseases and obesity (Dempere 2020, 605). However, there are limitations to comparing the data, due to, among other factors, different ways in which countries recorded COVID-19 deaths and (un)reliability of the data released by less liberal political systems (Morris and Reuben 2020, by Dempere 2020, 607). Relying on research of other authors (Pearce et al. 2020; Shortland et al. 2018), who compared the decision-making method in military regimes against civilian regimes, Dempere makes a conclusion that, during the first wave of the pandemic, faster decision making based on incomplete information proved to be more efficient than slower decision making based on more complete information (Dempere 2020, 607). Some authors studied the correlation between the autocratic past and how restrictive were the measures introduced for the purpose of controlling the first wave of the pandemic. The conclusion is that the current democracies that used to be autocratic in the past (reference periods are 1850-1945 and 1945-1990) were more prone to limit personal freedoms than those that were more democratic during the reference periods (Trein 2020, 6).

2.2.1. Securitisation of COVID-19 pandemic in democratic countries

When it comes to liberal democracies, in the securitisation of the pandemic, they faced the tension between security and freedom (Sears 2020). This means that they faced the dilemma whether to prioritise public health and protection of lives against economic prosperity and personal freedoms, or to prioritise economic and political stability and cause a crisis that would jeopardise socio-political stability in the long run. Each country decided for itself on the measures to be introduced and there was not much cooperation or use of the existing mechanisms of knowledge exchange, the phenomenon that was dubbed by some authors 'coronationalism' (Bouckaert et al. 2020, 14).

A great number of authors looked into the methods by which individual countries responded to the first wave of the pandemic, either by analysing individual models and strategies or by making comparative analyses. Some authors consider that the countries differed in strategies as they made decisions based on incomplete information and changed their approaches depending on the current political debate, criticism and epidemiological situation at the moment (Staupe-Delgado 2021, by Larsson 2022, 230). However, the research on typical examples differentiates other factors that had an impact on the countries to turn to specific strategies in the first half of 2020.

One of the patterns is the relation between dominant political culture and institutional organisation on the one hand, and the method of managing the pandemic during the first wave on the other. Numerous authors quote this as the reason why Sweden opted for the strategy that was significantly different than those of other European countries (Pierre 2021; Kuhlmann et al. 2021; Larsson 2022). Unlike majority of European states, Sweden applied almost no extraordinary or restrictive measures although it faced comparatively high rates of infections and deaths during the first wave of the pandemic. The reason for this lies in the fact that Sweden is extremely decentralised country with strong bureaucracy apparatus and with expert agencies that have great level of autonomy from the executive. Even in the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemics proportions, the government authorities were not willing to depart from the established dualism in governance (Larsson 2022, 237), nor were they prepared to go beyond the existing constitutional and legislative framework that stipulated the introduction of the state of emergency only in the case of war (Pierre 2020, 484).

In contrast, France, with extremely centralised governance and strong role of the executive, introduced very restrictive measures in the form of mandatory lockdown and restrictions of movement from March to May 2020, and even used the opportunity to expand the competences of the executive power (Kuhlmann et al. 2021, 9-10). Germany is an example of decentralised state with strong federal units that have legislative, executive and judicial power and thus stands as an example between the models of Sweden and France presented above. The competence of the central level is to define public policies, while federal units are responsible for the implementation. This type of German political and administrative system influenced the fact that the federal government had little authority to impose measures at the level of the entire Federal Republic. However, a relative uniformity of measures and strategy for suppressing pandemic at the level of the Republic was quickly achieved through horizontal coordination

between sixteen federal states and vertical coordination with the federal level. (Kuhlmann et al. 2021, 8-10).

There was criticism on chosen strategies in all three countries. They all used experts not only to give advice on measures to be taken, but also to give legitimacy to the selected strategy. The technocratic and strictly scientific approach in France was dubbed a ‘republic of experts,’ in Germany they said that ‘the virologists govern’ (Kuhlmann et al. 2021, 11), while in Sweden the criticism was aimed at the absent political leadership (Pierre 2020, 483). Germany used the crisis to extend the Federal Ministry of Health’s authority in coordinating and issuing orders in crises of national impact, while in France the control of the Parliament over the executive power in crisis management was suspended. In Sweden, there was a minimal rearrangement in power relations (Kuhlmann et al. 2021, 12-13).

Since many countries implemented restrictive measures, several authors looked into how police services took their role in enforcement, and how this affected police integrity. The examination of relevant literature indicates that the policing method during the pandemic was also determined by the existing social relations, political culture and internalised values of each police service (Sheptycki 2020, 160). Where the most restrictive measures were introduced and where the control of the central executive power was strong, the police acted in a repressive manner. This was the case in France, where Amnesty International recorded the examples of abuse of police power, excessive use of force and discriminatory control and sanctioning of citizens, especially in deprived suburbs, where the citizens had already distrusted the police (Terpstra et al. 2021, 175).

The Dutch police stood as a contrasting example during the first wave of the pandemic, as it had already had a developed model of community policing. Since the Dutch Prime Minister stated explicitly that the war rhetoric was not appropriate for the Dutch society and called the chosen strategy a mutual social venture, the behaviour of the police followed that line and was more pragmatic, directed more to communication with citizens aiming to achieve cooperativeness and voluntary acceptance of the introduced measures (Terpstra et al. 2021, 174). However, the authors point out that neither model was homogenous. In the work of the French police, in particular that of gendarmerie, there were elements of cooperation with citizens, while the Dutch police had to act repressively occasionally, especially towards the youth who most often violated bans on gatherings. Still, these two models, to a great extent, reflected the identity of each society, as well as a prevailing political and police culture (Terpstra et al. 2021, 177-178).

In many countries virus threat was securitised through war rhetoric, the purpose of which was mostly to obtain quick support from the society for restrictive measures that were imposed to suppress the pandemic, such as mandatory lockdown, closure of borders, surveillance, restriction of human rights and civil freedoms. However, such rhetoric was also used with the aim to expand the executive powers. The literature dealing with war rhetoric and its effects, as well strengthening of autocratic tendencies in the context of the pandemic, will be reviewed below in more detail.

2.3. War metaphors in political discourse

War metaphors are found in all spheres of life and politicians often use them as a frame to present their strategic goals. Hence, they used to declare a war on poverty, crime, terrorism, inflation, plastic waste, various diseases, etc. (Flusberg et al. 2018, 1-2). Metaphors are an effective way to communicate or to comprehend some complex or abstract information by establishing a connection with already known concept (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). A structural connection that is made between the new and the unknown, and the concept that already carries a meaning, is not just semantic and it does not stay the level of a simple analogy. The meaning of a metaphor originates also from the emotional tone it establishes, which is particularly applicable for war metaphors (Flusberg et al. 2018, 3).

War metaphors are efficient in communication because they fall within conventional, well-known metaphors, i.e. structural metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). It means that there is clearly structured knowledge of *what a war is*. It means that there are opposing parties – us and the other, i.e. an enemy. It also means that there are strategic decisions to be made, resources to be allocated, as well as clear roles in the hierarchy structure, from the person in command, through soldiers, to the civilians affected by the war, even if they do not participate in it. The war also means a series of events that take place in a specific area and time and implies the idea of finality and victory that is achieved by destroying an enemy. Finally, war brings strong emotions as well, mostly fear and anxiety (Flusberg et al. 2018, 4). However, war metaphors in a modern context carry a certain complexity as the modern war is a total war in which everyone has a certain role and the metaphors can mean a general invitation for everyone to join the fight (Chapman and Miller 2020, 1109). However, a specific meaning of the war metaphor depends on the context in which it is used, and the impact it will have in a society

depends on a rhetoric and practice associated with the use of such metaphor (Flusberg et al. 2018, 8; Castro Seixas 2021, 1).

War metaphors are often used when speaking about new or unknown diseases. Numerous authors dealt with this topic in the context of SARS, HIV, Ebola, and, more recently, during COVID-19 pandemic. Some authors recognise positive aspects of using war metaphors in medical practice, such as higher motivation of patients and physicians to face and cope with the disease, as well as higher will in the society to direct their resources to research and treatment (Nie et al. 2016, 5). Others, however, question the expedience of military rhetoric in this context, as it puts too much emphasis on biological and physical aspects of coping with the disease, and neglects psychological and social aspects (Annas 1995; Fuks 2009, by Nie et al. 2016, 5). Some authors also deal with the fact how war framing contributes to medical treatment procedures and research methods that are problematic from the aspect of medical ethics (Nie et al. 2016, 6). A large number of authors that analyse war metaphors as inadequate for a medical context start from the papers of Susan Sontag, primarily her essays *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1990), in which she presents her view that such rhetoric “directly contributes to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill” (Sontag 1990, 99).

A frequent use of war metaphors indicates that they have always been an effective rhetoric tool in communication, especially in times of big crises. However, only with the COVID-19 pandemic, when the use of war rhetoric was widely spread, did a significant number of authors review how this framing shaped the communication in a crisis situation and how such crisis was managed. The papers that analyse how militarised rhetoric served to justify specific measures or to divert public’s attention from some decisions that key stakeholders adopted are particularly important. The key conclusions of these papers will be reviewed in more detail below.

2.3.1. War metaphors and COVID-19 pandemic

Papers that address the use of war metaphors during COVID-19 pandemic can be grouped in two distinct clusters: papers analysing the connection between the war rhetoric and measures introduced in particular countries, and those examining the role of military forces in pandemic management.

The use of war metaphor in this crisis spread almost at the same speed as the pandemic, and most authors agree that many leaders used this rhetoric in order to communicate to the public the urgency and severity of the situation, as well as the need for the entire society to get engaged (Caso 2020; Van Rythoven 2020; Gillis 2020). In addition to these reasons, war metaphors, mostly paired with historical analogies to important battles, trigger strong emotions, primarily fear and anxiety, and often evoke empathy and solidarity (Gillis 2020, 136).

The authors identify several purposes for which these metaphors were used: to prepare the public for hard times that were coming, to demonstrate compassion, care and empathy, to persuade the citizens to change their behaviour, to ensure support for emergency measures and for sacrifice requested from the citizens, to encourage the feeling of national affiliation and endurance, and, finally, to construct the enemy and transfer the responsibility to someone else (Castro Seixas 2021, 2; Van Rythoven 2020). However, Benzi and Novarese warn against taking the intended efficacy of war metaphor for granted. By analysing the vast body of literature on the use of war metaphors during COVID-19 pandemic, and by comparing experimental results of using war metaphors against some more neutral ones, they conclude that the effect of war metaphors is very much dependant on the context and it is linked to too many variables to be able to make such generalisations (Benzi and Novarese 2022, 18-19).

Matilda Gillis sums legislative responses which certain countries introduced in the early phase of the pandemic: measures restricting the freedom of movement, those limiting gatherings of people, and the measures of closing public institutions, restaurants, bars, museums, sport centres, non-essential shops, etc. Although these measures significantly limited civil rights and freedoms guaranteed by the laws and the constitution, they were adopted in parliaments without much debate, they were not criticized in the media and in public, and they were, at least at the beginning, widely accepted (Gillis 2020, 136-138). The use of war rhetoric contributed to all these aspects.

Gillis also identifies four clusters among metaphors that were in use: war context, virus as an enemy, healthcare professionals as first frontline soldiers and general public as the 'home front' (Gillis 2020, 136). When the French President, in his addressing the nation to declare the state of emergency, says "we are at war" or when the Portuguese President says "this is war," they announce to the nation that the hard times are coming and that they should prepare for sacrifices. By using the first-person plural pronoun, President Macron creates the image of a national unity and calls for solidarity (Castro Seixas 2020, 5-7). When Spain's Prime Minister calls the virus "an invisible enemy" or when President Trump calls it "a foreign virus" or "a

Chinese virus,” they use war rhetoric to create an enemy and to pass the responsibility to someone else. Such rhetoric serves to avoid the responsibility for delays in the implementation of measures for pandemic control, as was the case in the USA, or to disguise the fact that both the health and the economic systems were completely unprepared to cope with such crisis, as was the case in most neoliberal democracies (Castro Seixas 2020l, 7; Van Rythoven 2020; Castro 2020).

War rhetoric, by constructing solidarity and the image that “we are all in this together,” also serves to obscure the fact that not all social categories are equally affected by the pandemic. Chapman and Miller posit that the pandemic unequally affected different categories of population and that it deepened the existing social differences. In the USA, the death rate caused by COVID-19 in some parts was by six times higher among the black and other minority populations than among the white population. Minority groups had also been disproportionately affected by poverty, non-employment, low-paid jobs and low access to healthcare prior to this crisis (Chapman and Miller 2020, 1118).

Amy Haddad and Federica Caso point to the fact that war framing narrows the issue of security in such a manner that numerous social categories remain invisible, especially women who take up a big burden in the situation of mandatory lockdown, because of care duties they assume along with working from home. The fact which did not receive sufficient attention was that the measures taken for the purpose of controlling the spread of the virus contributed to the increase of domestic violence, the majority victims of which were women. Women and other vulnerable categories were usually excluded from decision making processes, as war rhetoric created the sense of urgency calling for immediate decisions and there was no time to consider inclusion. They were also excluded from the discussion how the society would look like when the crisis was over (Haddad 2020; Caso 2020).

One of the consequences of militarised discourse is that it leads to militarised responses to a crisis, and the engagement of the army in various countries was a subject of interest for numerous authors. Opillard et al. engage in a detailed analysis of deployment of the French army within the operation *Résilience*. Their paper raises two questions – what army is used for in this specific war and how this particular engagement affects the relation between the army and the society and a traditional role and the mission of the army outside the context of COVID-19 (Opillard et al. 2020, 240). Their analysis showed that the military was engaged to compensate for weaknesses of the French government to cope with such crisis. Those weaknesses stem from neoliberal model, which resulted in an unequal development of the

regions at the territory of the entire country due to the implementation of private-public partnerships in the healthcare system. The consequence of this was that, during the pandemic, some hospitals reached the saturation level more quickly, so the army engagement was necessary to transport patients where there were available hospital capacities, sometimes even across the borders, for example to Germany, (Opillard et al. 2020, 248-250). By engaging the army in the operation called *Résilience*, i.e. resilience, which is a military concept, the French government created a coherent narrative that the state was actually at war. This concept designates the army's capacity or the capacity of the society to defy aggression or disaster, and to restore very quickly normal functioning on a social, economic and every other level. In combination with war framing, it serves to mobilise rapid support for all the measures to be implemented and to silence all those that might oppose them (Opillard et al. 2020, 243).

The second important aspect highlighted by Opillard et al. is also that this crisis showed that the role of the army was changed, and that it was expected more and more to engage in environmental disasters. This expectation causes that the military strategic analyses increasingly include environmental lens, which, in the COVID-19 pandemic, intersected with health lens. Their conclusion is that it will affect the changes in the army itself, and also the perception of the public of what the role of the army is in specific wars such as the one against an invisible enemy, i.e. the virus (Opillard et al. 2020, 248-253). Some authors recognised the interest of the army to engage in the pandemic, since the virus affected its operational capacities. Such crisis represents also a political opportunity to justify investments and military budgets in many countries or to rectify the army's image that has been impaired by other engagements, such as, for example, the case of the engagement of the British army in Iraq (Kalkman 2020).

In their paper, Lambert, Ejodus and Schmidt give a detailed overview of various roles given to military forces during the pandemic in the OSCE participating States and analyse to what extent their engagement was in compliance with the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security.⁴ One of the key areas in which the military was engaged included the logistics and transport, primarily of patients and personal protective equipment, but in some cases in providing humanitarian relief. The military was also engaged in supporting the construction of temporary hospitals, disinfection of public spaces, production of disinfectants and PPE, but also in the engagement of military medical doctors and other staff. Military

⁴ [41355.pdf \(osce.org\)](#)

members were involved in vaccine testing, development of contact tracing applications, but also as a support to civilian authorities in strategic communication and planning. From the aspect of compliance with the norms under the Code of Conduct, the most sensitive one was the area of engagement in providing internal security, primarily in border control, control of migrations, providing security of public institutions, hospitals, homes for the elderly and critical infrastructure, but also the enforcement of mandatory lockdown measures. These authors believe that the pandemic was a good opportunity to assess the state of democracy in these countries, primarily through the analysis of the extent of civilian control over military forces in the management of the crisis (Lambert et al. 2020, 6-9).

Another interesting aspect of militarised responses to COVID-19 crisis was deployment of military forces abroad. Both Chinese and Russian military doctors, as well as regular military personnel, were sent to various countries (e.g. Italy, Serbia) to help domestic forces in disinfecting public spaces, as well as in providing protective equipment (Kalkan 2020). Apart from providing support where it was acutely needed, such as in Italy during the first wave of the pandemic, the crisis was also an opportunity for these countries to ensure their presence in the areas and countries where they had already had vested interests.

Such multifaceted involvement of military forces in response to COVID-19 during the first wave of the pandemic also caused that the military personnel were disproportionately exposed to the virus and the stemming health risks compared to general population, often conducting their task on the ground without proper protective equipment. This impact of their deployment went largely undocumented, due to confidentiality of such data that many military forces imposed (Glušac and Kuduzovic 2021, 12). This is just one of many examples of how the use of militarised rhetoric served the purpose of obscuring the reality on the ground or diverting the public attention from the full scale of consequences of the measures that were introduced in order to control the spread of the virus.

The impact of the pandemic on the state of democracy is also addressed by Amat et al., who draw a conclusion that the shock caused by the pandemic and the very nature of this threat shifted the citizens' preference, at least on a short-time basis, for technocratic expert governance as opposed to political governance, as well as the tendency of the citizens towards voluntary compliance, and the need for strong leadership (Amat et al. 2020, 5-6). They particularly point out the danger that no resistance to strict and restrictive measures may open the space for the authorities to take more power, especially where autocratic tendencies are already present (Amat et al. 2020, 25).

2.4. COVID-19 pandemic and autocracy

Almost all the authors addressing the impact of the pandemic on the state of democracy agree that the strengthening of authoritarianism did not start with the pandemic, but that it only deepened and intensified already existing trends. Florian Bieber deems that the pandemic comes at the moment when nationalism is on the rise, when the rhetoric against immigrants and Muslims intensifies in the Global North. This trend has been particularly increasing since 2016, i.e., since Brexit, the victory of Donald Trump at the US presidential elections and the European migrant crisis (Bieber 2022, 16). Cooper and Aitchison observe that the trend of nationalism and authoritarianism rise has been present for much longer, during the last fifteen years. Right-wing parties that used to be marginal in the past now take portions of power either by making coalitions with centrist parties or former conservative parties shift to the right, or there is the combination of these two trends. What all three models have in common are cronyism, ethnic nationalism and erosion of democracy (Cooper and Aitchison 2020, 9). Lee and Johnstone observe that authoritarianism, although nationally oriented, becomes a global phenomenon and that populisms in various countries reinforce each other, which establishes a metanarrative that becomes a norm on the global level (Lee and Johnstone 2021, 719).

These two authors deem that the key characteristics of populism from which authoritarianism arises are problem management and post-truth. Focus on problem solving rather than on public policies, whether it is about climate change, financial crisis, terrorism or pandemic, creates an image of constant crisis that the populists can resolve. In the situation of high tension, they often propose drastic solutions, which would not be easily accepted otherwise, and which are often inconsistent. For example, during the pandemic, the borders were closed, the movement was restricted, social distancing was imposed, while, on the other hand, basic sanitary conditions or any other conditions for the implementation of the pandemic measures were not provided in migrant camps. However, with the politics that constantly creates the relationship 'us v. the Other,' these paradoxes face no resistance or criticism (Lee and Johnstone 2021, 720).

The politics of post-truth is, on the other hand, based more on emotions and beliefs, and very little on the facts. It is characterised by the feeling of fear and constant crisis and threat management, which becomes a norm, as well as nostalgic glorification of the past and the tendency to go back to some idealised state before the crisis. This is manifested in the slogans such as 'Make America Great Again' in the USA and 'Take Our Country Back' in the UK, as

well as in the tendency to 'bring back normality' which existed before the pandemic, and which obliterates all the problems that existed before the crisis. The post-truth politics is characterised by attacks on critical thinking, science and scientific facts, as well as dissemination of false information on social networks, with the ultimate goal to make it impossible to establish facts and differentiate the truth from lies (Lee and Johnstone 2021, 721). Due to this last element, some authors were encouraged when the experts came to the forefront at the very beginning of the pandemic (Bieber 2022, 17).

The majority of authors agree that the risks brought by the pandemic, which jeopardise democracy, include deglobalisation, higher centralisation, decreased democratic participation, stronger government surveillance and decline in human rights, as well as deepening of the existing social inequalities (Cooper and Aitchison 2020; Greitens 2020; Lee and Johnstone 2021; Bieber 2022).

Deglobalisation has its origins in the financial crisis in 2008, when regional markets started to become more important than the global market. The pandemic has also shown that national responses to health and social crisis had greater impact and significance than global initiatives (Cooper and Aitchison 2020, 5). Closing borders was part of deglobalisation and border control strengthened the concept of citizenship, which became the ground for controlling someone's movement. Chinese and Iranian citizens were subject to control at the beginning of the pandemic and when the epidemic broke out in Italy, the control gradually extended to include citizens of other countries (Bieber 2022, 19-21).

Centralised method of pandemic management, which China implemented, showed to be efficient and there is a risk that the trend expands even to other countries prone to copying efficient models. This is especially important in the context of atmosphere similar to the state of war during the pandemic, where there is not much space for democratic participation in decision making. China even tried to export its model of pandemic management and control the narrative on the origin of the virus, primarily by exporting masks and sending its experts as aid to other countries. However, it is more likely that the countries that are closer to China in terms of politics and culture would copy this model than some other countries. (Greitens 2020, 174-175).

One of the bigger risks that the pandemic brought was the increased surveillance by the government. It has been on the rise from before, using the fight against terrorism as a pretext, but the Internet and new technologies enable monitoring and control of citizens' behaviour

(Cooper and Aitchison 2020, 6). In its strategy of prevention and control, China implemented mass surveillance of the population by collecting and cross-linking the data, which violated privacy to a great extent. On the other hand, consolidated democracies that used surveillance and monitoring managed to implement it to a great extent without significant violation of rights, while controlling existing mechanisms of the democratic system (Greitens 2020).

The V-Dem project (The Varieties of Democracies)⁵ has developed a Pandemic Democratic Violations Index and a Pandemic Backsliding Index, which measure to what extent democratic standards were violated by emergency measures introduced to control the pandemic. The project monitors six main violations of democratic standards: 1) emergency measures without time limitation, 2) discriminatory measures, 3) *de jure* violations of what the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights defines as ‘non-derogable’ rights, 4) limitations of the media freedom, 5) disproportionate limitations on legislative power, and 6) abusive enforcement. The indices show that the severest violations were made where autocracies had already existed and that two thirds of democracies have not significantly violated democratic principles in the implementation of emergency measures. (Greitens 2020, 180-181).

On the other hand, successful democratic responses were in accordance with three criteria: 1) the measures that were implemented were necessary and proportionate, 2) the measures were time limited and limited in scope, 3) the measures were subject to democratic process of oversight and accountability. On the example of Taiwan, it meant that the collection of data and monitoring was for the purpose of identifying the infected persons, separating the infected from the healthy and collecting the data for the purpose of identifying other related risks. Data keeping was limited to 14 days after leaving quarantine and the government announced that it would delete the entire system after the pandemic ended. As far as the control is concerned, during the SARS epidemic, Taiwan implemented the procedure that required court oversight and legislative control in introducing emergency measures (Greitens 2020, 183-184). Greitens also thinks that one of the reasons why Taiwan and South Korea were efficient during the first wave of the pandemic without violating democratic principles was because they had had the experience with previous pandemics of SARS and MERS and because, at that time, they had

⁵ V-Dem is a joint research project of the University of Gothenburg and the University of Notre Dame, developed with the aim to offer a unique approach to conceptualising and measuring democracy. More information available at: [V-Dem](https://v-dem.net/).

had the opportunity to review and further develop their measures and policies before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Greitens 2020, 186).

2.5. Conclusions and research gaps

The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of many aspects of the crisis caused by securitisation of COVID-19 and, in particular, the use of war discourse. Although the authors identified many commonalities in how the pandemic was securitised across the world, they also pointed out to the fact that each securitisation and each deployment of war framing had its idiosyncrasies and depended on the specific social and political context of a given country. The literature offers some insight into how the responses chosen by various democratic countries correlated with their existing institutional setting and dominant political culture, and how the pandemic strengthened pre-existing autocratic trends. However, there is still need to shed further light on how this health crisis was securitised in hybrid regimes, such as Serbia.

The literature mapped various effects of use of war metaphors, and pointed out to the methodological problem of comparing the data on the actual reception of war framing due to many variables. However, a possible gap that it leaves, and where one of the motives for this research lies, is the effect of its deployment in a society with recent experience of war, such as Serbia, and with the populist regime that constantly produces threats and crises that get enhanced through tabloid media. My analysis will show that the use of war discourse was intended not only to justify the introduction of measures to control the spread of virus, but that it was used with a longer-term perspective, both backward and forward looking, to justify past and future policy choices of the regime. This is in line with Juha Vuori's view of different strands of securitisation in non-democratic regimes, which will be explained in more detail in the chapter laying out the theoretical framework.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In order to answer my primary research question, in the analysis of the empirical material, I will rely on two theoretical frameworks – Securitisation Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Given that the focus of my analysis is how a non-military threat (the pandemic) was securitised through the use of war metaphor, application of both theories will provide a more comprehensive insight into how the securitisation was conducted, how it was connected to the broader context in which it took place and what the motives were of the securitising actors.

Securitisation Theory relies on John Austin's and John Searle's Speech Act Theory and its premise that language does not have only a function to describe and convey information, but that it also has a performative function, i.e., an action is performed by saying, e.g. *I promise, thank you*, etc. (Elbe 2006, 124). Thus, the theory of securitisation starts from the fact that by "speaking security" an issue is shifted from the sphere of politics into the sphere of security. "Speaking security" does not necessarily mean the use of the word *security* itself, but it refers to the discourse by which something is presented as an existential threat to the referent object and thus requires emergency measures (Buzan et al. 1998, 25).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), laid out by John Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, first published in 1980, starts from the idea that metaphors are not only a part of language, but that our everyday conceptual system, which determines both how we think and how we act, is, in its nature, metaphorical. As this conceptual system is mostly unconscious, our thinking and actions in everyday situations are often automated. One way to understand what constitutes this system is to analyse language, which is mostly metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 15). I will apply CMT to map out and deconstruct the war metaphor and all related under-metaphors used in official discourse during the observed period, and I will subsume the conclusions to the paradigm of the Securitisation Theory in order to better explain how the threat was articulated and with what consequences.

3.1 Securitisation Theory

Although the starting premise of the Securitisation theory is language – a speech act, i.e. a securitising move, on its own, it is not a sufficient condition for a successful securitisation (Buzan et al. 1998, 25). Other elements need to be in place for a successful securitisation, and they include securitising actors, proposed emergency measures and acceptance of the audience.

Securitising actor(s) must have a formal or informal authority, i.e. they must be recognised as someone who can speak on behalf of the collective and legitimately articulate the threat, including proposed measures that need to be taken. These measures must be recognised as legitimate in order to protect the referent object. Finally, an important element of securitisation is the audience that accepts or does not accept the measures proposed by the securitising actor. The audience can be general public, but also a part of expert or technocratic public in specific structures and institutions, depending on to whom the speech act is directed. The audience can give formal or moral support to the proposed measures. Without its acceptance that something is an existential threat to their common values, an issue cannot be successfully securitised (Ejdus 2016, 203-205).

Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde deem that the securitisation is intersubjective and socially constructed process in which three criteria are crucial for making the securitising move successful. The first criterion refers to the fact that the speech act must conform with the grammar of security. It means that it must present the threat as dramatic, the one that directly jeopardises survival. It also has to point to exit from such situation, that is, to the measures that must be taken to mitigate or overcome the threat. The second criterion refers to the fact that a securitising actor must have a social capital to declare something a threat to the referent object and to convince the others to agree with the measures which go outside of regular political functioning. Social capital can originate from formal positions of power, or it may refer to the expert or moral authority of the actors. Finally, the third criterion is that a threat must be accepted as existential. It means that the referent object must be recognised to have such legitimacy that it must survive (Buzan et al. 1998, 33).

Although securitisation can be a legitimate method of resolving an issue, Wæver deems that one should not neglect that it still represents the shift from the area of normal politics into the sphere of functioning under emergency measures. Optimal long-range option should be desecuritisation, i.e. abandoning the threat-defence dynamics and return to normal functioning within the public sphere (Wæver 1995, according to Buzan et al. 1998, 29). The concept of desecuritisation, although developed in parallel with the concept of securitisation, is an aspect to which authors of Copenhagen School of Security studies (CSS) did not pay sufficient attention, which often faced criticism. The contribution that Lene Hansen made to the understanding of the concept of desecuritisation is particularly important for the analysis in this paper.

She deems that the concepts of securitisation and desecuritisation are complementary and that one would not exist without another. The situations where there would be only securitisation would lead to hyper-politicisation and there would be no normal politics against which securitisation would be defined. Furthermore, just like securitisation, desecuritisation also requires a specific level of acceptance by the audience that something no longer presents such a threat that it must be resolved by the implementation of emergency measures. Desecuritisation even calls for the engagement and acceptance by a broader range of actors than when it comes to securitisation, because it implies the process of transformation of the identity of Self and Others, i.e. it implies that the Others must be reconstituted as non-threatening (Hansen 2012, 531-533). Relying on the methodological model of discourse analysis, I will particularly look into the identities of Self and Other(s) and how they were constructed in order to first securitise the threat of the pandemic, and later on, desecuritize it, within the broader social and political context.

Based on the empirical application of this concept, Hansen identifies four forms of desecuritisation: change through stabilisation, replacement, rearticulation and silencing. Change through stabilisation represents the process of a gradual stabilisation, but the question remains whether this is a form of a permanent conflict resolution or the stabilisation only enables the conflict to slip into the background. Replacement is a form by which one issue is transferred from the sphere of security while the other is simultaneously securitised. With this form, a question arises whether it represents a qualitative change, i.e. whether the dynamics remains the same following the line threat-enemy, or whether the quality of the relation between Self and Others becomes different. Rearticulation implies a significant transformation of identity and interest of Self and Others and resolution of the dynamics friend-enemy. On the other hand, it would be difficult to claim that a certain conflict is permanently resolved, and there arises a question whether rearticulation is a paradoxical concept or it represents a form of silencing. Silencing happens when an issue disappears from the security discourse. This form of desecuritisation represents a shift not to a political sphere, but to a non-political one, which is not subject to any public interest or debate whatsoever (Hansen 2012, 539-545).

Given that the focus of the analysis in this thesis is official discourse during the securitisation, it will not be sufficient to stay at the level of the analysis of speech act and grammar of security only, as posited by the original Securitisation Theory. The insights of the critics, who expanded it with externalist, sociological perspective, will be particularly significant. Thierry Balzacq's main criticism of the CSS is that its theoretical starting point is

too focused on the speech act and the internal grammar of security, and that it pays insufficient attention to the context in which the audience should accept the pronounced threat and emergency measures. Instead of a speech act, Balzacq develops the concept of security as a pragmatic act, and within that framework he relies on three basic presumptions of successful securitisation. The first presumption is that securitisation is highly dependent on the context. This practically means that the audience will more easily accept an uttered security threat if it is embedded in external reality, i.e. if the moment is sufficiently critical. It is the context that activates specific elements of the concept that is offered, while it removes the others. An articulated threat can only be understood within the linguistic, i.e. the semantic and cultural reference frame to which the securitising actor points and in which he/she uses metaphors, historical analogies, stereotypes, and even lies, to convince the audience. It practically means that the securitising actor should establish a common symbolic understanding of the threat to which he/she points, with the audience in a given context (Balzacq 2005, 182-184).

Balzacq's second presumption of successful securitisation is that it is directed to the audience. To persuade the audience, the securitising actor must "tune his/her language to [its] experience," i.e. a specific level of identification is necessary (Balzacq 2005, 184). Securitising actor relies on the formal and moral support of the audience, and securitisation is more successful if an actor can get both types of support, i.e. convince as wide as possible audience (Balzacq 2005, 184-185). The third and last presumption of successful securitisation is that the dynamics of securitisation depends on power relations. It means that the securitising actor, in order to get the support of the audience, must know what is happening, be trusted to work in the interest of the community and be in a position of power, either political or symbolic, to be able to "utter security" (Balzacq 2005, 191).

Holger Stritzel criticises the fact that securitisation theory, as postulated by the CSS authors, observes the speech act too statically and that it pays little attention to the situational context of the speech act itself. He holds that both speech act and the actors are part of wider socio-linguistic structures and that the very fact that they are embedded in social relations of meaning and power constitutes both speech act and the securitising actors (Stritzel 2007, 366-367). He distinguishes between the socio-linguistic dimension of the context, the one in which the speech act is understood, in which the actors use a particular linguistic register to formulate their arguments, and the socio-political dimension, which is a more layered and long-lasting structure in which the actors position themselves so that they can influence the process of constructing the meaning. The text, i.e. the formulation of a security threat does not have a

predefined meaning, but its meaning is generated as a result of a dynamic social process. This process implies translating the formulation of a threat into the existing discourse. The more the formulation, i.e. the text of the threat, resonates with the existing discourse (the better it is embedded in the discourse) and the better the positional power of the securitising actor, the easier it will be to impose a given narrative as dominant to a wider group, i.e. to the community (Stritzel 2007, 369-370). The war metaphors that were used in the official discourse of securitisation in Serbia will be analysed against this backdrop, to test to which extent the predominant formulations deployed by the key actors were embedded in the wider social, political and historical context in Serbia during the first wave of the pandemic.

Finally, taking into consideration that Serbia is a hybrid regime, Juha Vuori's contributions on securitisation in non-democratic systems will be particularly important. In democratic societies, the speech act serves to free decision makers from the constraints imposed by the democratic system, and in non-democratic systems it can serve to free authoritarian leaders and decision makers from some other constraints and to legitimise the actions they take. Vuori starts from the fact that every regime seeks some degree of validation and approval for its actions and that it cannot survive on pure coercion (Vuori 2008, 68-69).

Unlike securitisation that serves to legitimise future events, as defined by Wæver, Vuori identifies at least four other strands: securitisation that serves to raise an issue on the political agenda, securitisation for deterrence, securitisation for legitimising past actions or to reproduce the security status of an issue, and finally, securitisation that serves to establish control. In practice, these types are often intertwined and can rarely be seen in their pure form (Vuori 2008, 76). In this way, Vuori expanded the concept of securitisation, which, in his view, does not have to be aimed only at obtaining consent for the emergency measures to resolve an existential threat. Through the analysis, I will show that this was the case in Serbia, and that several strands can be identified in the securitisation of the pandemic during the state of emergency.

3.2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

A conceptual metaphor, which, in cognitive linguistics, is denoted as X IS Y, represents the understanding of one, unknown or abstract concept, through another, concrete concept. The cognitive process of establishing links between two concepts, i.e. two domains, takes place by

copying or mapping the elements of the source domain to the other, target domain (Kövecses 2020, 1-2). To explain this process, Lakoff and Johnson use the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. It illustrates how mapping of the meaning from the source domain (WAR) affects not only our understanding of the target domain (ARGUMENT), but also how we think about and behave during the argument. In an argument, we see the other person as an opponent. By attacking other people's position or defending our own, we can win or lose in the argument. If our position cannot be defended, we will retreat or design a new strategy of attack. Such understanding of an argument as a verbal war shows that the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR is rooted in our culture and shapes our behaviour to a great extent (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 16-17).

The metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR represents a structural metaphor, because the structure of one term is copied, i.e. it shapes the understanding of the other term. However, the structural metaphor, in addition to allowing that one term is understood through the experience of the other ("argument" understood as "conflict or war"), inevitably hides some aspects of the target domain that are inconsistent with the source. In this case, it hides the aspects of the argument that move away just from the confrontation with an opponent, but include the intention to reach a common understanding of what a subject of the argument is (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 21).

This view is particularly important for understanding how and for what purpose war metaphors were used in the securitisation of the pandemic. Two structural metaphors – PANDEMIC IS WAR and VIRUS IS INVISIBLE ENEMY, as well as all the related under-metaphors that can be identified in the official discourse, will be deconstructed using the methodological model of discourse analysis, to understand how the threat was constructed, and how the identities and relations between the referent object (Self) and threat (Other(s)) developed.

Both the language of security and the language of metaphors serve the purpose of persuasion. In addition to shaping our thinking and behaviour, conceptual metaphors also construct our reality (Kövecses 2020, 7). The use of war metaphors in the securitisation of the pandemic was intentional. Selection of metaphor is influenced by what the speaker considers will be most effective in a given context and what best resonates with ideological, historical, and cultural aspects of such context (Charteris-Black 2004, 248). Public health crisis was, in fact, not a real war. I will analyse how the persuasive power of war metaphors contributed to the construction of a war-like reality. I will also point to the fact how the choice of metaphors changed during the securitisation to serve the changed intention of the securitising actor.

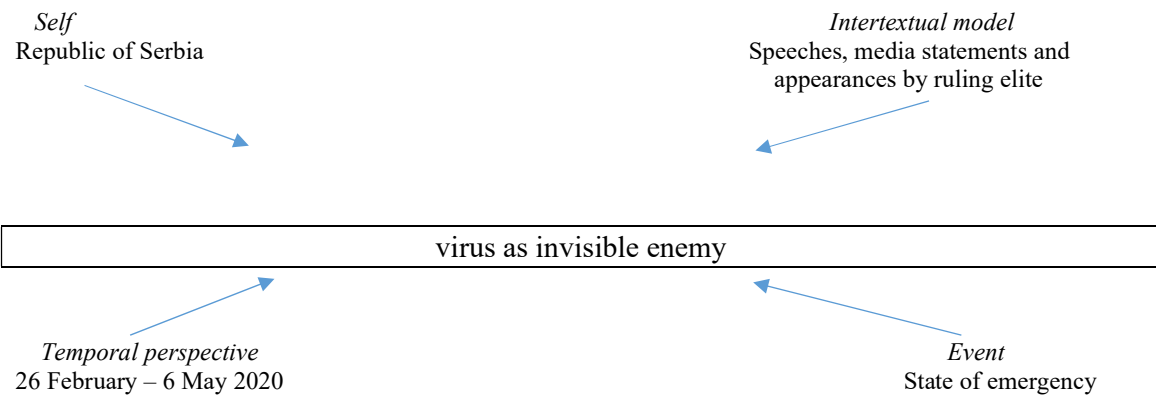
3.3. Methodology

The methodology applied in this thesis is discourse analysis that Lene Hansen developed to analyse western discourses on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hansen 2013). The analysis will use conceptual intertextual model, in which the articulation of a certain concept (e.g. war, enemy, bombing etc.) relies on a wide field of existing representations of the subject. Such articulation, i.e. the offered text, does not only refer to previous articulations and interpretations in order to construct legitimacy of a new reading, but it simultaneously reconstructs and reproduces the status of previous readings. Such intertextual link, constructed in this way, produces mutual legitimacy and leads to the exchange at the level of meaning (Hansen 2013, 51).

Hansen's theoretical and methodological principles for discourse analysis, which will be applied in this thesis, imply that basic discourse should be established based on the reading of a broad spectrum of sources and that the basic discourses should be based on explicit articulation of key representations of identity. Such representations could be geographical identities, historical analogies, striking metaphors, political concepts etc., and they do not necessarily have to repeat previous articulations consistently, but they have to make a relation with them (Hansen 2013, 47).

Research design applied in the discourse analysis in this paper includes: one Self – the Republic of Serbia. The timeframe of this research is from 26 February till 6 May 2020, which is the period from the first press conference in which the key actors spoke, until the decision to lift the state of emergency. The paper will focus primarily on the discourse analysis during the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia. However, considering the key research question, the analysis also needs to include the narrative that preceded the decision to declare the state of emergency. The intertextual model includes speeches, press releases, statements and interviews by government officials, representatives of state institutions and bodies, representatives of the Crisis Taskforce, i.e. 'the healthcare professionals.' Finally, the research observes one event – the state of emergency, which was declared on 15 March and lifted on 6 May 2020.

Research design by Hansen (2013, 67):



In the selected intertextual model (model 1), the analytic focus is on the official discourse; the object of analysis includes official texts, statements, speeches etc., as well as direct and secondary intertextual links, supportive and critical texts (Hansen 2013, 57).

4. Analysis

4.1. Securitisation of COVID-19 and use of military metaphors worldwide

Although first media reports on a new virus that emerged in Wuhan, in the Chinese province of Hubei, were available in early December 2019, China reported its first COVID-19 case to the World Health Organization only on 31 December 2019. From that moment on, almost the entire world was quickly seized by the crisis considered to be the greatest since the end of the World War II. As a result, the WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020. Although there was much awareness of how pandemics in the globalised world posed a severe threat to national and international security, it showed very quickly that state governments, international institutions and global health security were unprepared for the pandemic of such proportions.

Despite the long-standing link between health and national security, the analysis shows that not many countries put much priority to the threats coming from the infectious diseases or pandemics in their security strategies, including many of the most powerful countries of the world. Malik et al. (2021) provide a useful overview of most of the G-20 countries, as well as the EU, and their strategic security documents and frameworks, drawing a conclusion that, even where the pandemics and emerging health threats have been identified as important for national security, there is insufficient strategic link between security structures and health and emergency response systems (Malik et al. 2021, 2-3). This lack of previous strategic security approach or action plan in place, however, did not prevent many of these countries to resort to security or even war framing when faced with the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The war rhetoric spread at almost the same speed as the virus. Even Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, in his address to the virtual summit of the G-20 countries on 26 March 2020, used the war metaphor to call for peace, solidarity and cooperation in combatting the “common enemy” (Guterres 2020). Many political leaders have used the war framing to communicate the level of severity and urgency of the situation to the citizens. Although there are numerous universalities in how this kind of rhetoric had been applied in individual countries, the motives of key actors and the outcomes largely depended on the context.

When it comes to liberal democracies, in the securitisation of the pandemic, they faced the tension between security and freedom (Sears 2020). This means that they faced the dilemma whether to prioritise public health and protection of lives against economic prosperity and personal freedoms, or to prioritise economic and political stability and cause a crisis that would jeopardise socio-political stability in the long run. Each country decided for itself on the measures to be introduced and there was not much cooperation or use of the existing mechanisms of knowledge exchange, the phenomenon that was dubbed by some authors ‘coronationalism’ (Bouckaert et al. 2020, 14).

In France, in a dramatic televised address to the nation on 16 March 2020, President Macron repeated the phrase “nous sommes en guerre (we are at war)” several times and announced a series of highly restrictive measures to be applied to stop the uncontrolled spread of the virus (Macron 2020). Just a day before, the first round of local elections was held without any restrictions, and this announcement came as a shock to most citizens. The unexpected war framing was supposed, among other things, to convey to the public how sudden and out of control the crisis was, and essentially to divert attention from the fact that the government was unprepared to respond properly in such situations. The healthcare system in some parts of the country quickly became overburdened, which was a consequence of years of uneven development (Opillard et al. 2020). In the securitisation of the pandemic, Macron pointed to several referent objects that needed to be protected – the life and health of citizens, the healthcare system and the economy (Opillard et al. 2020). In each segment of his speech, in which he specifically described the emergency measures and whom they were supposed to protect, he kept repeating the phrase “we are at war,” thereby seeking to obtain support or prevent opposition. The war framing, among other things, also served the purpose of silencing the fact that there was not much national unity prior to the pandemic. By invoking the war, French President was creating the image of national unity, which stood in contrast to 2018 Yellow Vests Protests, which started as a revolt against the gasoline tax prices, but grew into a strong revolt against Macron and the government (Castro Seixas 2021, 6). Militarised rhetoric was accompanied by a militarised response, not only through the involvement of the army in the operation *Résilience*, but also in the increasingly repressive actions of the police, which was already discussed in chapter 2.3.1.

The USA case is an example of several securitisation narratives that often overlapped and collided. Initial response of Trump’s administration was to downplay the threat when most of the world was raising all alarms, following the sharp rise in infections and deaths in China and

Italy in January 2020. The rhetoric shifted in March 2020, when Trump declared himself a war president and called the virus a “foreign enemy” and the “Chinese virus.” The borders were closed and emergency measures were introduced through the plan entitled “15 Days to Stop the Spread.” This plan imposed the closure of some non-essential businesses, introduced social distancing, working and schooling from home, and significantly disrupted everyday life. In parallel with the use of war metaphors, Trump was overestimating the abilities of the USA to “win over the virus,” thus implying that the measures they introduced, albeit extreme, were only temporary and short-term (Kirk 2022, 9-11). Since the promised quick victory over the virus was not happening as expected, and the curve graph representing the spread of the COVID-19 was not flattening, prolongation of imposed measures was posing threats to the American economy. It was causing social unrest and protests in several states, and there were even the court cases claiming the measures were the infringement of constitutional rights.

The divide in already polarised Trump’s America was widening along the ideological lines on the issue of how to deal with COVID-19. This led Trump’s administration to introduce another plan, entitled “Opening Up America Again,” which presented new referent object in the securitisation of COVID-19. Instead of people’s lives being threatened by the “foreign virus,” now the economy and the ‘American way of living,’ including guaranteed constitutional freedoms, were threatened by the emergency measures that were introduced to stop the spread of the virus – an example of securitisation of securitisation (Kirk 2022, 11-14).

As was the case in many other countries, COVID-19 increased social inequalities and exposed deficiencies of privatised healthcare system in the USA. The protests that started after the murder of George Floyd and police brutality, were the point where social, health and economic crises intersected. Militarised narrative in which Trump called himself the ‘President of law and order,’ and threatened to bring the army out to the streets to safeguard the law, as well as the pledge to protect the second amendment, i.e., the right to ‘keep and bear arms,’ encouraged para-military and para-police units, which altogether created the greatest crisis in the American democracy (Cooper and Aitchison 2020, 10).

In the UK, the pandemic intersected with the Brexit crisis. The Conservative Party had already led populist politics, which was emboldened after the referendum on leaving the EU, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. In addition to anti-immigrant rhetoric, the Conservatives attacked the right to protest and put forward motions for constitutional reforms. Since there is no written constitution, the majority of the Conservatives in the Parliament would be sufficient to have such amendments implemented and essentially

there is nothing in the UK politics which would prevent it to eventually become autocratic. The UK is additionally burdened with social inequalities, failure to face its colonial past and strong right-wing oriented media, which all intensified during the pandemic (Cooper and Aitchison 2020, 18-21).

The United Kingdom was an atypical example of securitisation, as the pressure to introduce restrictive measures came from ‘below.’ At the beginning of the pandemic, the UK government’s strategy was to protect the economy first, and to manage the virus by acquiring ‘herd immunity.’ Due to this approach, the UK was far behind, compared to other European countries, in implementing measures that limited gatherings, imposed mandatory social distancing and closing of restaurants, pubs, museums, shopping malls, etc. The UK is a prime example that the threat language does not necessarily have to come from the political elite, as in this case the elite only responded to the citizens’ request to protect lives and provide security (Kirk and McDonald 2021).

Regardless of the fact that the measures were legitimised in advance, Boris Johnson adopted the war rhetoric, called the virus a ‘deadly enemy’ and stated that they “must act like a wartime government.” He also justified the decision to impose restrictive measures by making analogies with the Blitz – bombing of Britain in the Second World War, thus appealing to citizens’ solidarity and endurance (Johnson 2020). Historian Richard Overy points out the problematic nature of this myth, which exists in the British collective consciousness as a representation of national endurance and courage, and which is, in fact, historically inaccurate, as it ignores the immense fear bombed citizens experienced and the consequences it left on their mental health (Overy 2020).

British politicians had already been invoking this idealised image of national resilience in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in London in 2005, and again in the crisis caused by Brexit, to which the pandemic merely continued back-to-back. Among other things, this myth served to divert attention from the fact that the Conservatives, who had been in power for years, were systematically reducing investments in the national healthcare system, and concealing the real consequences of Brexit, which, among other things, affected the ability to procure PPE and the COVID-19 tests in time to prevent such a staggering COVID-19 death toll that the UK experienced. Apart from the fact that the war rhetoric was deployed partly to divert the focus from the country’s unpreparedness at all levels to handle the crisis of this scale, it was also a justification to involve the UK military forces in what the UK Ministry of Defence referred to as “the biggest ever homeland military operation in peacetime, with more than 5,000 personnel

involved” (Forces.net 2020, by Juvan 2021, 81). Their roles were similar to those in other countries – supporting the national healthcare system, distributing protective equipment and providing logistic support, but also participating in pandemic support at the UK overseas territories and in repatriation of the UK nationals from abroad in the early days of the pandemic (Juvan 2021, 82).

Hungary’s example offers some comparisons with how COVID-19 crisis was handled in Serbia. When the pandemic started, Viktor Orbán had already been the head of government for ten years and, during his rule, Hungary had slid into illiberal democracy state, despite being an EU member. His populist policies peaked during the Europe’s migrant crisis in 2015 and 2016, when he used anti-migrant rhetoric and policies to further solidify his position as a strongman who opposes Brussels bureaucrats. It was only expected that he would use the new crisis for the same purpose, once the opportunity presented itself. Orbán securitised the threat by continuing on the same rhetoric he exploited for years, by claiming that the virus was brought in by the foreigners, and he used that as justification to completely close the borders for all non-Hungarian nationals. This included detaining asylum seekers at the Hungarian border with Serbia. He explicitly stated that Hungary was “in war on two fronts – against migration and against coronavirus pandemic,” thus making the connection between the two threats. The same “enemies” that were designated as threatening Hungarian sovereignty in previous crises, were reiterated again – migrants (foreigners in general), the European Union, George Soros and the in-country opposition (Massida and Saccà 2023, 233-234).

In order to reaffirm himself as a unifying leader in the times of crisis, Orbán declared that Hungary was fighting the war on four fronts – at borders, with the engagement of armed forces, internally with the police, in the healthcare system and in the economy. In order to be able to protect the nation, he declared the state of danger on 11 March, and on 30 March the Parliament adopted the Authorisation Act, which released the Government from the Constitutional bounds and gave it power to manage the state of danger through decrees. Although the Authorisation Act was revoked on 18 June, many prerogatives of the Government to declare the state of *medical* emergency without the decision of the Parliament were still kept (Massida and Saccà 2023, 238-239).

Israel provides another interesting example how it handled the pandemic during the so called first wave, as many comparisons may be drawn to the Serbian case. Israel was in the midst of a constitutional crisis when the pandemic hit in late February and early March 2020, since it had held two previous rounds of elections failing to provide stable majority in the

parliament that would be able to form the government. The third round of elections was scheduled for 2 March 2020, and Benjamin Netanyahu was a caretaker Prime Minister. On top of that, he was facing charges for fraud and bribery and he was due to appear in court in March. As his opposition stated, the COVID-19 crisis “fell from the sky” as a gift for Netanyahu (Maor et al. 2020, 448), and the way he handled the crisis indicates that he used that ‘gift’ for his own political benefit.

His rhetoric was carefully planned to first restore his integrity and authority as a nation’s leader in the time of crisis, and then to silence any dissenting voices. In his televised speeches, he painted the picture of incoming disaster of cataclysmic proportions, drawing the parallels with the destruction of Jerusalem (Lahav 2022, 58) in order to minimise the resistance among the citizens to restrictive measures that were introduced and surveillance that was imposed under the excuse of tracing the infected cases. The crisis was also an excuse to block the work of the parliament and disable any parliamentary oversight of the measures taken in the management of the pandemic, and to introduce the state of emergency which resulted in delaying already scheduled court appearance to May. Finally, repeating the references to the ‘war against invisible enemy’ and even using the analogy to the Holocaust, saying that unlike then, this time Israel was prepared for what was coming, Netanyahu invited the opposition leaders to join him in forming the unity government and to handle the crisis together, as a united nation. The opposition leaders had little choice but to accept this invitation, which created more disunity on the opposition front, already lacking sufficient and stable ideological cohesion (Maor et al. 2020, 448-449). The use of such strong rhetoric and playing the card of strong emotions, primarily fear and anxiety among the citizens, obscured the facts that during the first wave of the pandemic, the government was very inconsistent in how and why it implemented the emergency measures. It was also diverting the attention from the fact that the health system was unequipped to handle the pandemic of this proportion, and that Israel was very slow in increasing the number of COVID-19 tests and procuring the necessary PPE from abroad, despite what the Prime Minister was promising in his speeches (Maor et al. 2020, 451).

Many other political leaders resorted to war rhetoric, all for similar reasons that have already been mentioned – to blame someone else for their failure to contain the crisis due to previous lack of investment in national health systems, to justify huge sacrifices that were expected from essential service workers that had to work around the clock during the pandemic, and to ensure that their critics and opponents are silenced in the times when their governments were implementing extraordinary or emergency measures. Australian Prime Minister, for

example, used the terms such as ‘battle’ against the virus for which all the Australians were ‘enlisted,’ invoking the World War II and the Anzacs sentiment and encouraging the solidarity among the nation to protect the most vulnerable, as their predecessors would do. Australia closed its borders off almost completely, even for its own citizens who found themselves abroad when the pandemic hit, but with such a strong rhetoric, this extreme measure was mostly accepted as necessary (Kirk and McDonald 2021).

All these elements are identified in the work of the authors who analyse the countries of the Western Balkans. These countries have already had strong autocratic tendencies, even the state capture, and the pandemic presented an ideal opportunity for stabilocrats to take even more power. Serbia and North Macedonia introduced the state of emergency, although Serbia did so without a decision in the Parliament and North Macedonia with a wide political consensus. Montenegro drastically violated right to privacy by disclosing data on citizens who were in mandatory quarantine. In Serbia, the military was engaged in the streets to control the enforcement of pandemic measures. The pandemic public discourse contains the elements of nationalism, regional rivalry and tensions, and these countries used the absence of the EU to turn geopolitically to autocratic strategic partners – China and Russia (Bieber et al. 2020; Wunsch 2020; Vankovska 2020; Ejodus 2020).

Although the use of war references and historical analogies was specific for each country’s context, those who resorted to such rhetoric seem to have copied from the same book, and this includes the political leaders and key stakeholders in Serbia during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2. Social and political context in Serbia before pandemic

Following the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević’s regime on 5 October 2000, Serbia entered a period of political and economic stabilisation and democratisation, which was soon interrupted by the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić on 12 March 2003. The state proved insufficiently able to combat organised crime and to deal with compromised integrity of the security sector, whose representatives were directly involved in the assassination. The political coalition which ousted Milošević – the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), was ideologically too incoherent and dissonant voices among the so called pro-European and nationalistic parties soon grew into irreconcilable differences on key issues of national interest,

such as the status of Kosovo and the process of accession towards the EU. The two largest parties of DOS – the Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia, were irrevocably grappling in a clinch over the direction in which the country should go. None could secure a comfortable majority for their political vision without forming a coalition with the extreme right Serbian Radical Party, which opened space for return of once defeated Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia, now with old-new leadership.

Nebojša Vladislavljević (2019) describes extensively the process that led to disillusionment of the citizens and civilian sector in Serbia in the democratisation and European integration process, as well as slow yet steady democratic backsliding that started while the Democratic Party was in government and during the two terms in office of their president and the President of the Republic Boris Tadić. Key institutions of the security sector – the police, the armed forces and the intelligence services, were still very much under political control and if there was ever an attempt to depoliticise and fully professionalise them, it failed. Whoever controlled them, had the most political power in the country. Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, as well as the spillover of the global financial crisis of 2008, further aggravated the political divisions and economic situation in the country and gave rise to populism, clientelism and corruption that had already dominated the social and political scene.

Against such backdrop, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was formed in late 2008, initially as a faction of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) in the National Assembly that dissented from the SRS' position not to support EU Stabilisation and Association Agreement. Since their establishment, until they came into power in 2012, they gained strength very quickly, mostly by co-opting majority of the pro-European stances and policies of the former DOS parties, thus presenting themselves as a viable alternative to DS for some parts of the electorate. At the same time, the DS' support was rapidly declining among their core voters.

Since the SNS came into power, Serbia has been experiencing rise of authoritarianism and rapid democratic backsliding. V-Dem's Democracy Report for 2020 denotes Serbia as one of the countries that have "autocratised most over the past ten years, along with Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Brazil and India" (V-Dem 2020, 16). This process first included suppression of media freedoms and freedom of expression of the civil society and academia, and it moved on to compromising the integrity of the elections. Free and fair elections were among few achievements of the post-5th October democratisation process. According to V-Dem, in 2020, Serbia was electoral autocracy regime, which scored significantly less on Liberal Democracy

Index (LDI), Electoral Democracy Index (EDI), Liberal Component Index (LCI) and Deliberative Component Index (DCI),⁶ and was ranked in the bottom 30% out of 179 countries in which the democracy indicators were monitored (V-Dem 2020, 31). This sequence of deterioration of freedoms – first the watchdogs (the media and the civil society), then the elections, is in concurrence with Vladislavljević’s view how Serbia slid into electoral autocracy. He even offers a pessimistic perspective, that brief democratisation process in early 2000s was just a “mere distraction in otherwise continuous authoritarianism,” placed neatly in between fall of Milošević’s more repressive authoritarianism and rise of Vučić’s more manipulative kind (Vladislavljević 2019, 334-335).

Florian Bieber refers to the regime in Serbia, and similar regimes in the Western Balkans, as stabilitocracies – “governments that claim to secure stability, pretend to espouse EU integration and rely on informal, clientelist structures, control of the media, and the regular production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law” (Bieber 2018, 176). Richter and Wunsch posit that the EU integration process in Serbia, and in the rest of the Western Balkans, which started almost at the same time as the democratisation, consolidated state capture. Conditional EU perspective that was offered to Serbia (and the others) was primarily concerned with the stability of the region and pacification of the remaining contentious regional relations, and in exchange for delivering stability, the EU was willing to turn blind eye to the decline in the rule of law, deterioration of democratic institutions and rise of clientelism (Richter and Wunsch 2020, 47).

Between 2012, when SNS came into power, and 2020, when the pandemic started, Serbia went through several cycles of early elections. In May 2012, Tomislav Nikolić, then the SNS leader, was elected President of the Republic and the SNS-led coalition became the largest caucus in the National Assembly, eventually forming the government together with the SPS, United Regions of Serbia and several other smaller parties. SPS leader Ivica Dačić became the Prime Minister and Aleksandar Vučić, deputy leader of the SNS at the time, was the Minister of Defence and First Deputy Prime Minister. First snap elections were held in March 2014, after which Aleksandar Vučić became Prime Minister. This was soon followed by another snap elections in March 2016. In the meantime, there were several reshuffles of the government. In 2017 Presidential elections, Tomislav Nikolić did not run for the second term in office, but Vučić did, and won. When he transferred to the new position, Ana Brnabić became Prime

⁶ More on what each index captures in V-Dem 2020 (32-37), available online at [dr_2020_dqumD5e.pdf\(v-dem.net\)](https://dr_2020_dqumD5e.pdf(v-dem.net))

Minister in yet another government reshuffle. It is fair to say that in this entire period, Serbia was almost in a permanent state of electoral campaign, and more and more power was concentrated in Aleksandar Vučić, no matter what formal position he occupied at the moment.

The government formed after 2016 elections managed to push through the full four-year term in office and regular elections were due in 2020. As the President of the Republic, Vučić dissolved the National Assembly and announced parliamentary elections on 4 March 2020, scheduling them together with the provincial and local elections for 26 April 2020. Prior to this, major opposition parties had already announced that they would boycott all the institutions and any elections under existing conditions, as there were no minimal requirements in place that would guarantee fair and democratic electoral process. The process of inter-party dialogue between the opposition and the Government on how to improve electoral conditions took the good part of 2019. It was firstly facilitated by the civil society, and then by the delegation of the European Parliament, but it reached an impasse. The main requirements of the opposition parties related to equal media representation, prevention of functionary campaign and of the abuse of public resources. In order to limit the effects of the boycott, the ruling party adopted amendments to the electoral laws and lowered the electoral threshold from five to three percent, and did so three months before the elections without much public debate. In the lead up to the elections, independent monitors also noted that the ruling parties dominated the media space, and that the opposition parties – both those who were in electoral campaign and those promoting boycott, were significantly less visible (CRTA 2020).

4.3. Legal and institutional framework for crisis management in Serbia

Serbia was in the state of emergency twice in the 21st century – the first time after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić on 12 March 2003, and for the second time starting on 15 March 2020, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Numerous analysts and lawyers wondered whether in this latter case it was necessary to introduce a state of emergency, or whether declaring an emergency situation would have been a more adequate measure, so the difference between these two legal concepts will be briefly presented here.

The state of emergency is regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia,⁷ where Article 200 stipulates that “when public danger threatens the survival of the state or citizens, the National Assembly declares the state of emergency.” The Constitution also stipulates that, when the National Assembly is unable to convene, the decision can be reached together by the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic, which was, in fact, applied when the state of emergency was declared on 15 March 2020. The Constitution also prescribes which human and minority rights can be derogated and under what conditions during the state of emergency. In the event that the National Assembly cannot convene and prescribe the measures that derogate human and minority rights, such measures can be prescribed by the Government, through a decree, with co-signature of the President of the Republic. The state of emergency is also defined and regulated by the Law on Defence,⁸ including a more precise definition that it represents “a state of public danger in which the survival of the state or citizens is threatened, and is a consequence of military or non-military challenges, risks and security threats.” The same law stipulates that “non-military challenges, risks and security threats are manifested in the form of: terrorism, organised crime, corruption, natural disasters, technical, technological and other accidents and dangers.”

On the other hand, the emergency situation is regulated by the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management.⁹ This law envisages introduction of special measures when the competent authorities cannot mitigate or eliminate “risks and threats for the population, the environment and material and cultural assets” through regular actions and procedures.

The state of emergency institute enables significantly greater restrictions on human and minority rights compared to an emergency situation (Vasić 2020). The other important difference is that army has a central role in a state of emergency, while civil structures have key roles in the management of an emergency situation, primarily the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the local self-governments (Ejdus 2020). Considering the fact that the armed forces plays a significant role in the state of emergency, the Defence Strategy of the Republic of Serbia,¹⁰ adopted in December 2019, is also important for full understanding of the layout of the institutional framework. In this strategy, one of the three missions of the Serbian Armed

⁷ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 98/2006 and 115/2021.

⁸ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 116/2007, 88/2009, 88/2009 – as amended, 104/2009 – as amended, 10/2015 and 36/2018.

⁹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 87/2018.

¹⁰ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 94/2019-4.

Forces is “support to civil authorities in addressing security threats.” These threats are defined in the strategy as “terrorism, separatism, organised crime and other forms of internal threats to security,” and the strategy foresees “assistance to civil authorities in case of natural disasters and technical, technological and other accidents.” Despite the strategic framework, this aspect of military engagement is not sufficiently recognised in practice, given that only 0.01% of the total budget of the Ministry of Defence is allocated for these purposes (Ejdus 2020).

Vladimir Erceg believes that measures to control the pandemic could have been implemented in Serbia without introducing the state of emergency, but that one of the reasons why it was introduced was that the emergency management system did not function well. He sees the reasons for this in the fact that it does not suit the highly centralised government in Serbia to develop a strong system that involves planning, decision-making and responding at the local level, as well as the involvement of a large number of civilian actors (Erceg 2020). Ejdus also points to an underdeveloped civil defence sector. According to him, the main reasons for the systematic neglect of the civil protection system and the role of the armed forces in civil disasters lie in the understanding of the concept of national security, which is primarily focused on the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity, while it neglects human security (Ejdus 2020). Examples of engagement of military forces in other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as France and Operation *Résilience*, raised the question of the role of the military in the 21st century, its relationship with society and its capacity to face new non-military threats. This is just one of the important social issues that arose from the experience of managing the pandemic, both in Serbia and in many other countries.

4.4. Securitisation of COVID-19 in Serbia

The first significant date for the analysis of the securitisation of COVID-19 in Serbia is 26 February 2020 – the date of the first press conference held in the President’s Office in Belgrade, following President Vučić’s meeting with, as he said, “all the relevant state institutions and experts in charge of handling the problem of coronavirus” (Vučić 2020a). At the moment when this press conference was held, the news all over the world, including Serbia, were dominated by the disturbing reports and images from Italy, which had declared the first case of COVID-19 death on 22 February, with 17 confirmed infections by that date (Marković 2020b). Before that, on 30 January, the Director General of the WHO declared “the novel coronavirus outbreak

a public health emergency of international concern,” which is WHO’s highest level of alarm.¹¹ Yet, the key message that was sent to the public by President Vučić and his team of expert advisors was that there were no reasons for worry:

“Thank God, we have enough protective equipment for the doctors and medical staff; what we don’t have will arrive in the next two-three days. The armed forces are going to help too, we are also supplying the police, as the police officers are the first one who will be in contact with someone at the border.”

“We will not be closing borders. We have to think about the economic factors. I will not be wearing a mask; I will be going across the country and talking to people. There will be no cancellation of large events, elections, basketball or football matches, only the events where there will be a lot of foreigners [...] People can freely go to the stadiums, sports halls, live their lives normal [...] we will not be hiding in mouseholes” (Vučić 2020a).

This was said in response to some claims that appeared on social networks that the virus was already in the country and that the state institutions were hiding the facts from the public. President Vučić called the people who were sharing these concerns “those whose false love for the country wants, in fact, to bring it down.” Since clearly, some pressure or expectation to securitise the threat of COVID-19 was coming from the media reports and social networks, President’s speech act was an attempt to desecuritisate, through counter-securitisation. In his desecuritisating move, he clearly denoted the “normal life” as referent object. Since the situation regarding public health was presented as under complete control, the real threat for referent object would come from securitisation that had already been happening in some countries (e.g. closing of borders, cancelling public events). This is an example of what Jessica Kirk describes as contestation of securitisation through counter-securitisation. Following the grammar of security, securitising act is challenged (i.e. no closing of our borders) and the counter-act is formulated (procuring additional equipment for the medical staff, additionally engaging the military staff and supplying the police at the borders with protective equipment) (Kirk 2022, 4).

President of the Republic, as (de)securitising actor, has been the key political figure in the country for a number of years, and a lot formal and informal power is concentrated in his person. In his frequent public appearances, he presents himself not only as a political strongman but as an expert on many subjects, such as economy, statistics, mathematical modelling, civil engineering, to mention some. In that sense, his social capital as a securitising actor is unquestionable. However, in this particular press conference, he surrounded himself with

¹¹ [Timeline of WHO's response to COVID-19](#)

medical professionals whose expert medical advice was the basis on which the state institutions, i.e. the President and the Government, were making the decisions. In this (de)securitisation, they were the functional actors, and their role was to influence the dynamic of (de)securitisation by providing science-based legitimacy for political decisions. Most of these doctors who were present were already known to a wider public, whether from previous experiences with epidemics, or from their media appearances on a number of health-related issues. Three out of four present were either epidemiologists or infectious disease specialists, but it was the fourth – a paediatric pulmonologist Dr Branimir Nestorović who played the most memorable role in that press conference. He said:

“I cannot believe that people who survived sanctions, bombing, would now be afraid of the most ridiculous virus in the history of humankind which exists only on Facebook [...] And I have to say to women – estrogens protect women, they don’t get serious forms of illness, so as far as women are concerned, you can freely go shopping in Italy, there will be great discounts now [...] Live your lives, let coronavirus live its life, come April, with the sun and the UV rays, the virus will disappear. I really like it when I don’t have to lie” (Vučić 2020a).

As the others, including the President, were visibly amused by Dr Nestorović’s carefree and jovial tone, the claim that there was no reason to worry was just corroborated by, as Vučić referred to them, “wonderful people who have been defending this country for decades, and when they say there are no reason to worry, then that is so.” The President closed the press conference by saying that “Serbia has overcome much bigger problems. Long live Serbia!” (Vučić 2020a).

This press conference was held at the time when Serbia was preparing for elections, as mentioned above in chapter 4.2. and, in the lead-up to securitisation of COVID-19, there were several milestones which are important for better understanding of the social and political setting. On 4 March President Vučić announced the decision on dissolving the National Assembly and calling for parliamentary elections on 26 April, scheduling them on the same day as provincial and local elections. Already on 5 March, Vučić announced that 90,000 people signed their support for the SNS electoral list (Marković 2020b).

On 6 March, Minister of Health Zlatibor Lončar held a press conference in which he informed the public that there was the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Serbia and that it was a Serbian national who came from abroad. However, this date was later contested, as in a TV show on Radio Television of Serbia, Dr Darija Kisić Tepavčević, at the time a Deputy Director of Public Health Institute “Batut,” said that the first registered case in Serbia was on 1 March and that on 3 March there was the second case, which was followed by the local

transmission of the virus. During this entire time, the SNS functionaries, both Vučić and the others, continued their electoral campaign activities. Vučić visited the ammunition factory Krušik, with large number of people gathered in a closed space, while others were visiting the elderly and vulnerable (Marković 2020a).

On 9 March, it was reported that President Vučić returned from New York, where he attended America-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference, where there were two confirmed infected participants, but he refused to take COVID-19 test. It is interesting to note that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu initially refused to suspend travels from the USA, although the number of cases there was growing, as he was making decisions based on political and not public health interests, but that the return of a large number of infected participants from this very conference prompted mandatory quarantine for all returnees (Maor et al. 2020). As for President Vučić, he, as usual, was sending a message that the regular rules that would apply to anyone, did not necessarily apply to him. He would continue to display this type of attitude throughout the entire state of emergency, where he was wearing his face mask down or not at all, while all the others around him were wearing both face masks and surgical gloves.

On 10 March, Serbia declared COVID-19 epidemic, and on 11 March, the WHO declared global pandemic. On the same day, President Vučić held a press conference in which he informed the public that Serbia had 12 confirmed infected cases. The medical experts were again standing behind him, but the tone and the messages were in a stark contrast to the press conference held on 26 February. In his address, the President announced some measures that the Government would introduce, but he was still insisting on the message that the country was prepared and that the situation was under control. The measures were: ban on any public events in closed spaces larger than 100 attendees and increased border control and closure of smaller border crossings. He also announced that the SNS would suspend all the party activities until 1 April and addressed “the hysteria in the society to close schools.” He said that the experts advised it unnecessary at the moment and that “all the decisions were made by the experts, not by the politicians” (Vučić 2020b). This was an interesting claim, as some members of the expert team were later often reiterating that they were merely providing the advice and that the decisions were made by the politicians. As the crisis was developing, Vučić continued to use this advice strategically, and switch between taking the credit for the decisions himself, or crediting the experts for them, as was opportune at the moment, or to incorporate or ignore the scientific facts in decision making process. This kind of (ab)use of knowledge was not unique to Serbia, and Bacevic and McGoey analysed it extensively on the case of the UK

Government's behaviour during the first wave of the pandemic, dubbing such conduct "surfing ignorance" (Bacevic and McGoeys 2021).

This press conference was an indication that securitisation of COVID-19 in Serbia would be gradual, and that it would take several speech acts to reach full securitisation and justify the emergency measures. On 11 March, Vučić again referred to the need to protect the economy and "mitigate the economic shocks, protect the salaries and pensions." He, however, contrasted this with the prediction that some more developed EU countries would be much worse off than Serbia, that they "would not recover in ten years, despite the EU pumping in billions" and that he would "talk to Merkel about the EU financial support, as we were a candidate country." This is the speech in which the narrative of China as a special friend of Serbia emerged, and the President called for "admiration for China's marvelous way in which they handled the virus" and called for "empathy for our Chinese friends, for whom we must not close our borders and whose advice we should seek." (Vučić 2020b).

This is also the speech in which the first hints of future war framing can be detected. President Vučić praised the doctors and nurses for their courage and called them "the heroes of our time." He insisted that these were the times in which we needed solidarity, unity and strength:

"I appeal to the Serbian people and all the citizens to show unity they have always known how to show [...] I will be with my people, as I have always been, when my people were going through difficulties, with my doctors and my nurses who are going through the hardest times, and we will pass through this crisis" (Vučić 2020b).

On 13 March, the Serbian Government formed two COVID-19 Crisis Taskforces, one to deal with health aspects of the crisis, and the other to mitigate the economic impact,¹² which gathered a number of medical professionals, and representatives of relevant line ministries and state institutions. Although the decision of the Government was to establish two Taskforces, in public there was no visible distinction between the two, and in regular press briefings that were held on daily basis from that moment on, both the health and economic topics were covered, in most cases, by the President of the Republic. The first such briefing of the Taskforce was held on 14 March. On this instance, behind President Vučić, were the Minister of Finance, the President of the Chamber of Commerce and the Governor of the National Bank. The President started off very optimistically, saying that Serbia had sufficient state stockpiles of wheat and

¹² [Образован Кризни штаб за сузбијање COVID-19 \(srbija.gov.rs\)](https://www.srbija.gov.rs/obrazovan-krizni-shtab-za-suzbijanje-COVID-19)

flour, cooking oil, sugar and other essential food commodities and that the export of these goods would be banned. Vučić offered reassurance by reminding of his leadership in the previous years:

“I’m here and I will be making key decisions that you will see in the next few days. I will be making the most difficult decisions, as I was making them in the past seven years. And as it is easy and nice for me to lead the nation when I’m received by Putin, Merkel and Xi Jinping and the others, and when I receive awards and praises, I will be with you, with my people, when the times are the hardest, when we are fighting such a disaster [...] I will privately see Viktor, to see how we can protect our countries” (Vučić 2020c).

However, as this press conference continued, the President was visibly more agitated than in the previous briefings, and he spent most of the speech arguing with the opposition, media and social networks criticism published or posted in the previous days. The criticism was mostly directed on being untransparent with the COVID-19 numbers, even faking them, and on how the state resources were managed and the decisions made.

When asked directly by one of the journalists on the possibility to introduce the state of emergency, President said that he would not exclude it, but that would be the most drastic measure that would limit the freedom of movement for everyone, people would stay in, and the armed forces would be out in the streets. Only one day later, on 15 March, in a press conference, President Vučić declared the state of emergency. The procedure to declare the state of emergency is stipulated in the Article 200 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, and it has already been outlined in the Chapter 4.3 above. Given that the Government previously adopted the decision to limit indoor gatherings to up to 100 people, this was used as a justification why the National Assembly could not convene, and the decision in this instance was made and co-signed by the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic. In this way, the executive sidelined the parliament from the very beginning of the crisis. Serbia was not the only one who did this, and the cases how the governments in France, Israel and Hungary also limited the roles of their respective parliaments in overseeing how the pandemic was managed, were described in the Chapters 2.2.1. and 4.1. above.

In the speech, which was televised live, President Vučić said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, dear citizens of the Republic of Serbia, as of today, Serbia is in a war against an invisible opponent. Dangerous and vicious opponent that our country must conquer! The fight that is ahead of us is the fight for those who established this country, who built this country. It is, above all, the fight for our parents, our elderly, but also for the future of the

Republic of Serbia [...] In line with the Article 200 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, I inform you that we have made the decision to introduce the state of emergency at the territory of the entire country.” (Vučić 2020d)

His co-signatories of the decision to introduce the state of emergency – Speaker of the Parliament Maja Gojković and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, were standing behind him, and several of the most prominent members of the Crisis Taskforce – medical doctors – behind them. In words and in image, this speech act followed the grammar of security. The primary securitising actor – President of the Republic – clearly articulated the threat and what was being threatened. *Invisible, dangerous and vicious opponent*, i.e. the virus, is jeopardising *the survival of our parents, those who established and built our country, and of our country itself*. In order to overcome this threat, he offered the exit – *a state of emergency* must be introduced, as this is the only way to conquer the opponent. The threat was dramatic, since *we are at war*.

Previous speeches – securitising moves – by the securitising actor, were carefully constructed to ensure the three elements, which Balzacq points out as crucial for successful securitisation, in addition to internal grammar of security: embeddedness in the context, identification with the experience of the audience and both positional and personal power of the securitising actor (Balzacq 2005). Some level of approval for extraordinary measures among the audience – in this case general public – had already existed even before the threat was articulated as imminent and existential. It came from the international context in which dramatic figures on infections and deaths were shared through all the media, and in which the countries had already been implementing their measures to mitigate the situation. However, it was important to embed this threat in the specific social and political context in Serbia, and for that, it was necessary to gradually escalate the proportions of the threat and the level of danger it was posing. By naming *our parents* and *our country* for whom we must wage this *war*, the identification was instant and the support, both formal and moral, was imminent. Finally, the securitising actor is the most powerful political figure in the country, who has been deciding on all the issues of life and death for a number of years, so this speech act could not come from anyone else.

A lot of power has been concentrated in the hands of President Vučić, and over the years his rule has been becoming more and more autocratic and Serbia has been assessed as electoral autocracy. The President was more often than not dealing with issues that were completely outside of his purview, and this continued during the state of emergency. As, according to Juha Vuori, the securitisation serves to free the decision makers from the restraints of the democratic

norms (Vuori 2008, 68-69), it is relevant to analyse what the norm was in this case and what the securitising actor was seeking to achieve with this securitisation in a non-democratic setting.

The norm in Serbia seems to be a moving target. The role of the parliament was suspended based on the decision of Government to ban indoor gatherings of more than 100 people. However, the parliament had not exercised its role of the oversight of the executive for years. The measures that the Government introduced during the state of emergency significantly derogated the freedom of movement and freedom of assembly, guaranteed by the Constitution and relevant legislation in Serbia. They included: postponing the elections, introducing police curfew which varied from 8pm till 5am every day, to be extended from 5pm to 5am in certain periods of time. Total lockdown was ordered for all the citizens aged 65 and above in the cities and aged 70 and above in the rural areas. Several multi-day curfews were imposed over the observed period, the longest one lasting 84 hours. Other bans included closure of borders for anyone who was not a citizen or resident of Serbia. No gatherings were allowed indoors, outdoor gatherings were limited to maximum five people, and mandatory close down of many non-essential shops, services and schools was imposed. For a while, during prolonged curfews, it was even banned to take the pets outside.¹³

Such drastic measures required a lot of discipline, even obedience by the citizens, and it was not possible to rely on pure coercion. To corroborate the formulation of the threat – *we are at war* – the armed forces were tasked with what would usually be police responsibility, to ensure public order, provide security around hospitals, migrant centres and critical infrastructure, as well as to take over the control of borders. They were patrolling the streets armed with automatic rifles, which are normally used in combat and anti-terrorist actions (Ejduš 2020). These all lead to conclusion that the goal of such securitisation was to establish control and impose strict discipline, and perhaps legitimise past and future events (Vuori 2008, 83-89). Some of the policies for which the justification was sought may have included untransparent spending of state budget and deviation from public procurement procedures, of which President Vučić spoke openly in his press conferences and in TV interview:

“And don’t ask me how I procure ventilators, you can prosecute me, you can crucify me, I don’t care, it’s none of your business how I do it [...] For the ventilators, from now on, it’s a state secret, and you can write in your dumb posts whatever you want” (Vučić 2020c).

¹³ [Hronološki prikaz mera Vlade RS kojima se ograničava pravo kretanja i okupljanja građana donetih za vreme trajanja vanrednog stanja \(paragraf.rs\)](#)

“Do you think we respected all the international laws when we shipped a truck to Kosovo? Do you think we do everything by the budget when we send supplies to the Republic of Srpska? The situation has forced us [to do this way] [...] To tell you right, had we respected every procedure, I have no idea where we would be now” (Vučić 2020e).

Similar to the process of securitising the threat of COVID-19 in a way that it required a state of emergency, the process of desecuritisation was gradual. The Crisis Taskforce was regularly sharing the data on the number of newly infected, hospitalised, ventilated and deceased as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The proclaimed goal was to ‘flatten the curve,’ which would be an indicator that the virus spread was slowing down and that the responsible services were in control of the situation. In reality, the public health system had quickly reached its saturation point, so an emergency measure of putting up temporary COVID-19 hospitals by the military in large sports halls in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš had to be introduced. While the actions were directed at introducing more stringent measures, the rhetoric was more war like and aggressive, aimed at inducing fear and anxiety:

“This is your army, people, this is our army, the police will do a tough job, enforce the mandatory isolation. We will sanction them with three years of imprisonment immediately if they breach the isolation... This is not an extraordinary measure, this is the existing law, the Criminal Code [...] We will adjust many measures from day to day, it will be difficult, but the more disciplined we are, we will have better chance to save the lives of our elderly, of our parents. This is a tough fight for us” (Vučić 2020d).

“Dear citizens of Serbia, brothers and sisters, this is the worst day for Serbia, 7 deaths and 115 newly infected. I repeat, this is the worst day for Serbia, but I’m afraid not the worst it will ever be. If we continue to act so irresponsibly towards ourselves and the others, we are really approaching Italian and Spanish scenario. We still socialise, there is no system which can compensate for that and there is no healthcare system that can help such a large number of infected” (Stevanović 2020).

Common denominator of the President’s, Prime Minister’s and other Taskforce members’ speeches in regular press conferences during March and April 2020, was that they were trying to induce as much fear as possible among the citizens, threatening with catastrophic Italian or Spanish scenario or with years of imprisonment, all with the aim to deter them from breaching the imposed measures. Since the measures were so stringent and, at times, not based on common sense, the discipline even among the most committed started waning. At the end of April, more and more people were joining the call of “Ne davimo Beograd” initiative to express their protest against such measures by banging their pots and pans every evening, after a round

of applause for all the medical workers and other emergency services who were taking great sacrifice to fight the virus (Danas 2020). This stands in contrast to the public perception poll conducted by IPSOS in mid-March, end of March and early April, which showed that 92% respondents supported the measures that were introduced and 99% self-reported that they were respecting them. According to the same survey, Vučić enjoyed an all-time high support as a political leader (IPSOS 2020). Since he was used to governing by public perception for years, he soon realised that the measures needed to loosen if his party wanted to capitalise on his overwhelming popularity in the upcoming elections.

As was the case with a buildup of securitisation through more and more aggressive rhetoric in early March, the public was gradually prepared for the abolishment of the state of emergency and loosening of all the pandemic restrictions. Instead of talking about the “fight for our parents” and “that we were under attack,” the narrative shifted more towards ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ sentiment. In his interview on TV Pink on 19 April, when prompted by the anchor that “many were losing their patience” and that some end date had to be announced, he abandoned war metaphors and used a sport one, to illustrate how important it was that the timing of the measures was right:

“As they say in track and field, we have to run into the starter gun, not to wait to hear it, and then start running” (Vučić 2020j).

All of a sudden, Vučić’s focus was on praising discipline of the citizens, which he previously severely criticised as the main source of all the troubles. The message that he himself, and everyone involved, were taking such a huge sacrifice to save lives, and that we, the people, were acting irresponsibly, was reiterated in every speech and statement throughout March and April. This time, he invited everyone to continue with discipline for a bit longer, announcing for the first time that non-essential shops would reopen the week after. In his interview to RTS on 29 April, he already started talking about the virus as “something we have overcome, something behind us” and he was speaking more in the past tense:

“We are not sadists, we did not want to torture anyone [...] All this time we were fighting for the life of Serbia and we gave our best” (Vučić 2020k).

The focus of this interview was on summing up the achievements during the state of emergency and he was more willing to go into a pretend-dialogue¹⁴ with the critics, which he

¹⁴ The structure and style of these interviews has been established for years. An anchor would prompt Vučić with a readout of a comment that one of his critics made, and then Vučić would improvise, back and forth in his monologue, what his critics would have said had they been in a real dialogue, and giving his own answers.

was not doing as much in the previous interviews. His closing words were to thank the “doctors, nurses, soldiers and police officers and all the others who fought,” and to announce that the Government was considering abolishing the state of emergency. The decision to abolish it was made by the National Assembly and came into effect on 6 May. Although the police curfew was immediately lifted, some restrictions were still in place, especially regarding public gatherings, wearing face masks and gloves, social distancing and online schooling.¹⁵ The COVID-19 was not fully desecuritized but the threat was deescalated significantly through a process that resembles what Lene Hansen would refer to as gradual stabilisation (Hansen 2012). COVID-19 did not completely disappear from the threat discourse, and possible worsening of the situation was occasionally announced for the coming autumn, but it seemed there was a truce in this war, in which we managed to conquer the opponent. The only remaining uncertainty was for how long.

Silaški and Đurović posit that the choice of metaphor in both stages of the pandemic management were deliberate. In the first phase, when the stringent measures were introduced, aggressive war metaphor was more suitable, whereas the sports metaphor was more appropriate to introduce relaxation of measures and direct the behavior of the population accordingly (Silaški and Đurović 2022, 273). Such a changed discourse was exploited in the election campaign, which continued as soon as the state of emergency was abolished. Sports metaphors dominated the discourse used both by the politicians and by the health experts, but this falls outside of the timeframe and focus of this thesis. However, the path that the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia took in the immediate aftermath of the state of emergency indicates that the decisions made by the politicians were less grounded in the pandemic-related facts and more guided by the political interest of the ruling party. This opens the question whether the same principle was applied during the state of emergency. From the measures which were the most stringent in Europe and included 84-hour long lockdowns in April, Serbia quickly went to hosting a 16,000 people sports event in June, among other things, which received a lot of criticism (BBC News, 2020). Furthermore, as the year 2020 progressed, and the infamous curve representing the virus spread started to go up again during the autumn, no new pandemic measures were introduced and the communication from the authorities was more in the form of recommendations, rather than bans.

¹⁵ [Vanredne mere koje su na snazi nakon ukidanja vanrednog stanja \(paragraf.rs\)](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the existing social differences, divisions and inequalities in many countries, and this includes Serbia. Due to prolonged fear mongering and implementation of sometimes unreasonably strict measures, the space in which the people could vent their frustration and engage in a meaningful dialogue was very narrow during the state of emergency. Serbian society had already been divided on many issues, including on the European perspective, status of Kosovo, representations of national identity and core values, to mention some. The dissatisfaction that was accumulating during the lockdown, burst out as soon as the measures were loosened, as demonstrated in the protests organised in Belgrade in July, which ended in violence and police brutality (BBC News 2020). Based on the analysis above, and the available data, I can conclude that the ruling elite carefully monitored the public mood and understood that the patience the majority of people displayed during the state of emergency was wearing off. Therefore, as the pandemic continued throughout 2020 and 2021, the authorities tailored their communication and governance strategies to such public mood in order to dilute the dissatisfaction and prevent more forceful and effective outbursts of social unrest.

4.5. Use of militarised discourse in Serbia during the state of emergency

In the analysis of militarised discourse during the state of emergency, the focus was on the official discourse, i.e on what the President of the Republic, Prime Minister, members of the Crisis Taskforce, and representatives of other relevant authorities were saying. For that purpose, the following speeches, statements and TV interviews were analysed:

Date	Speaker(s)	Type of text
26 Feb 2020	Aleksandar Vučić Dr Branimir Nestorović	Press conference
11 Mar 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Press conference
14 Mar 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Press conference
15 Mar 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Press conference
16 Mar 2020	Ana Brnabić	Kurir TV media statement

16 Mar 2020	Ana Brnabić	Prva TV media statement
17 Mar 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Press conference
30 Mar 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Prva TV interview
31 Mar 2020	Aleksandar Vučić Dr Goran Stevanović	Press conference
7 April 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Press conference
13 April 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	RTS TV interview
14 April 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	Pink TV interview
29 April 2020	Aleksandar Vučić	RTS TV interview

Table 1 Official discourse – list of texts

When the news on the pandemic of the novel coronavirus that originated from China first broke out, it was a big unknown. The virus was spreading at great speed and quickly causing the health systems in affected countries to be overwhelmed, first Italy, then the others. The metaphor of war, which is a well-known metaphor and had been used before to talk about health, was as quickly deployed. In the structural metaphor PANDEMIC IS WAR, the familiar meaning of the source domain (WAR) is mapped onto the abstract and unknown target domain (PANDEMIC), and our understanding of the new pandemic is inevitably shaped by our pre-existing understanding or experience of war (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). The metaphor of war is familiar and present in everyday use when we talk about various topics, and due to that it is associated with a very rich semantic field. The words such as *enemy, fight, conquer, attack, defend, threat, jeopardise, survive, courage, hero, sacrifice, death, live, force*, to mention some, can all be identified in the texts selected for the analysis of discourse during the state of emergency. The use of this repertoire in communication aims not only to facilitate the understanding of the relatively unknown concept, such as the pandemic, but also to shape our behaviour in the encounter with the said pandemic.

Various authors who analysed the use of war metaphors during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, identified several purposes for which they were used: to communicate the urgency and severity of the situation, prepare the public for hardships, to demonstrate

empathy, to persuade the citizens to change their behaviour, to ensure support for emergency measures, to encourage the feeling of national affiliation and endurance, and, finally, to construct the enemy and transfer the responsibility to someone else (Caso 2020; Van Rythoven 2020; Gillis 2020; Castro Seixas 2021). All these elements can be identified in the discourse that was used in Serbia during the state of emergency.

When president Vučić said “we are at war with an invisible opponent, a dangerous and vicious opponent that our country must conquer,” he immediately achieved multiple effects: he conveyed the sense of urgency and severity, and persuaded the audience that extraordinary measures were necessary in order to deal with this urgency. As a lot of meaning of the metaphor that is used is generated from the context, it is important to note that this statement carries additional weight when we take into consideration that many of the Serbian citizens have direct experience of wars of the 1990s. This fact was abundantly exploited by the authorities to continuously induce fear and anxiety among the audience so that they would get obedience and support for the strict measures they were introducing, but also to establish some kind of unity and strengthen the sense of belonging to the nation and to the country:

“I call the entire Serbian nation, but our brothers and sisters who live with us as well, Hungarians, Albanians, Roma, Slovaks, Croats, Macedonians, to be disciplined and to save our Serbia to fight with discipline for our future.”

We have another challenge, but we will not show European but Serbian kind of solidarity – that is Republic of Srpska, we will have to take their burden, save some ventilators for the Republic of Srpska – but we must not act towards our own people how the others treat us”

“Surrender is not the option, surrender has never been and never will be the option for Serbia, we will fight and will win. Long live Serbia!” (Vučić 2020d).

As the metaphor of war inevitably carries with it the dynamic of *I/ we* v. *the enemy*, it is interesting to observe how another, related structural metaphor was shaped in the dominant discourse: VIRUS IS INVISIBLE ENEMY. While in the metaphor PANDEMIC IS WAR, the meaning of source domain WAR is clear and its familiarity is mapped onto the less clear target domain of PANDEMIC, things are a bit more complex with INVISIBLE ENEMY. The meaning of ENEMY is familiar, but it is the adjective invisible that makes it complex. There is no familiarity in the source domain of INVISIBLE ENEMY that would be mapped onto VIRUS, equally unknown, to facilitate its understanding. It is not clear how we fight an invisible enemy. That is why this invisible enemy had to take different forms in various stages of the state of emergency.

When we look at the basic research design for this discourse analysis, as explained in Chapter 3.4, the identity of Self – the Republic of Serbia, was relatively stable. Selected corps of texts shows that the Self that needed to be protected from the (invisible) enemy was taking either the forms of the collective – the Republic of Serbia/ our Serbia/ our country, or the parts of the collective – our parents/ those who established and built this country/ our elderly/ our grannies and granpas/ the most vulnerable/ doctors and nurses (all described as those who either made sacrifice for us in the past, or were making that sacrifice now).

The invisible enemy, i.e. the Other, was also taking various visible forms, and here, as well, the identity was relatively stable. It is important to note that, unlike in many other countries, where the virus was called “Chinese virus” or “foreign virus,” Serbia did not have this kind of labelling. Instead, the enemy was almost always an internal one and represented by different parts of our own society: our people who travelled from abroad, or the undisciplined and irresponsible, or the critics in the media and social networks. They were often blamed for the fact that the situation was dramatically worsening and they were used as a justification to introduce even more stringent measures.

Calls for solidarity, empathy, unity, change of behaviour etc. in order to protect the most vulnerable among us were all positive purposes for which the war metaphor was used during the state of emergency, but it is important to look at how it was also used to hide certain undesirable aspects. When the public health emergency was declared a security threat and even called a war against an invisible enemy, the medical staff – doctors, nurses and the others working in healthcare centres and hospitals, became frontline soldiers overnight. The image of the total war that was created through President Vučić’s dramatic speeches presented something that was sudden and unexpected, that the enemy was dangerous and vicious, and that even richer and more developed than us were less prepared to face it. The doctors were praised for their courage, called the “heroes of our times,” and even the soldiers armed with automatic rifles were sent to protect them (Ejdus 2020).

Behind this, the reality when the pandemic started was that the hospitals and health centres did not have sufficient amounts of personal protection equipment and disinfectants. With the outbreak of the pandemic, supply chains were broken and China, which was the largest supplier of this equipment quickly introduced bans on the exports and redirected all the production for their internal needs. As a result, the medical staff in Serbia went through several weeks of the pandemic without proper protection, and their exposure to the infection was immense. This, paired with work burnout, resulted in disproportional number of deaths compared to other

countries (BBC News 2021). Opening of temporary hospitals in sports halls in large cities across Serbia without reasonable plan how to staff them, further aggravated the situation. However, this grim reality in which the doctors and nurses were working was obscured by the glorification of those who died. When Dr Miodrag Lazić, a well-known surgeon from Niš died, President Vučić said:

“He was with his nation, with his people, from Krajina, to Kosovo, he is one of the heroes of our time” (Vučić 2020i).

This was presented in a way that it was almost a noble thing if a doctor died on COVID-19 duty, answering the call to support the nation. Those who were not so prepared to sacrifice themselves, were exposed to criticism:

“Doctors and medical staff are the ones where there are a lot of infected. But there are those who avoided their duty, who took sick leaves. Your job is to cure people, we have heroes who did not hide away! [...] When you have the war, many soldiers and police officers will die, this is what we prepare them for; you try that there is no war, but if it happens, your job is to defend the county. It’s the same with doctors” (Vučić 2020j).

Another aspect that was obscured by such a use of war discourse is that the soldiers were also disproportionally exposed to health risks while they undertook all the tasks that were assigned to them in the state of emergency. Apart from the fact that scale and type of their engagement was problematic from the aspects of democratic governance and control of armed forces, they were also unprepared for many of the tasks and sent to perform them without adequate PPE. Full impact of such deployment of armed forces is unknown, as data on morbidity and mortality rates in the Serbian army were declared classified (Ejdus 2020).

Besides the enemies, the fighters and the victims, the dynamic of the war includes friends and allies as well. This was particularly interesting to observe in the analysis of the war discourse during the state of emergency. President Vučić’s statements varied from “we are on our own” and “there is no solidarity,” to “our Chinese friends” and “my brother Xi Jinping.” It was particularly important for Vučić to declare the European project “a fairy-tale on a piece of paper.” He stated that there was “no international solidarity, no European solidarity, not even for their own,” and he made sure to juxtapose it with an ‘amazing friendship’ that Serbia had with China and “the others who were not on the West.”

“We have a shipping from China, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan is preparing support, I will see what, Norway, the Europeans – but no one has helped as much as the Chinese [...] European leaders are asking me for the

ventilators to give, I would give, but I don't have any to give away [...] We have the ventilators because we are resourceful. We have worked hard and that is the result of our friendships and love towards Serbia" (Vučić 2020f).

What was omitted from such narrative was the fact that over the years, the EU had been the largest investor in the Serbian healthcare system, both through donations and loans, and that without these investments the level of preparedness to face the pandemic would be even smaller (Ruge and Oertel 2020). This narrative also served to portray Serbia as prudent to have nurtured its relations and friendships on all sides of the world, not just the West. Although China was dominating Vučić's speeches when he was talking about international support, it also included Russia, which did not feature much in the words, yet, it did in actions. The members of the Russian armed forces came to Serbia during the state of emergency and supported the Serbian army and health system by disinfecting the public areas. Prior to the pandemic, Serbia had been criticised by the European Union for not aligning its foreign policy with the EU and for fostering good relations with Russia in particular. On several occasions, the EU officials also expressed their concern because of Chinese growing influence in the Western Balkans region. Serbia was the largest recipient of Chinese loans and investments among the six countries of the WB region, and fourth biggest recipient in Europe (Ruge and Oertel 2020) Constructing China as Serbia's saviour in the times of need served the purpose to justify past foreign policy choices. What is obscured here is the fact that China had other interests to be recognised in this way, not just altruistic ones. Apart from the existing economic and political interests it had before the pandemic, China was also interested in repairing its image by supplying PPE and providing experts to those in need, as the country was largely blamed for not reporting the outbreak in time and not containing the virus in December 2019.

Special friendship, even brotherhood with Chinese President Xi Jinping, enabled Vučić to enter the race in procuring medical ventilators when they were a rare commodity on the market. Almost every press conference and interview during the state of emergency included the section of reading out how many ventilators were procured and how many would arrive in the coming days. This was to demonstrate not only the resourcefulness of Serbia and especially the President himself, but also to show that Serbia was, at least on this criterion, completely dominant compared to the other countries in the region, and most other countries in Europe. What was obscured by this narrative is that the invasive medical ventilators can be placed only by a limited number of medical specialists, and that the patients could only be cared for by intensive care nurses. Needless to say, the increase in number of respiratory ventilators was not

followed by the number of qualified staff to operate them to treat patients and many of them remained unused. Finally, the procurement procedures during the state of emergency were, by President's confession, done outside the existing Serbian laws. CINS research indicates that billions of dinars were spent on contracts without any transparency or control, and the question which remains is who actually profited from that (CINS 2023). This was the question that was not allowed during the "state of war."

4.6. Final considerations

The analysis of the securitisation of COVID-19 in Serbia and the use of war discourse in that context, showed that the authoritarian rule became even stronger, in particular during the state of emergency. This proves the main argument of my analysis. Although the state of emergency was introduced in line with the procedure stipulated in the Constitution, it was done without the decision of the National Assembly. In fact, the Government subdued the National Assembly to its decisions and excluded it from performing its role in overseeing the work of the executive during the state of emergency. The measures that were introduced during the state of emergency significantly limited civil freedoms and rights, and the security sector institutions, primarily the armed forces, were given the roles that are very dubious from the aspect of democratic control. Although the election campaign was officially suspended, the ruling party used the state of emergency to completely dominate the public sphere and further narrow down the space for any democratic dialogue. The strand of securitisation that can be identified in this analysis is typical of non-democratic societies, and it served several purposes to establish the control over the public and political space, and justify past and future actions of the securitising actor (Vuori 2008).

The analysis of the conceptual metaphor of war, that was used to securitise the threat of virus, revealed that the one of the reasons it was deployed, was to create a war-like situation, in which very strict police curfew and even periodic complete lockdown was introduced for the entire population. Certain categories of the general population – the elderly, were practically incarcerated for weeks in their own homes, under the pretence of their own safety and protection. Normal life was suspended and the ruling elite took over the control over all spheres of life in Serbia, which might not have been possible had the elites not resorted to such powerful and emotionally loaded images of war threat. The situation during the state of emergency could almost be likened to a simulated reality, where the enemy was invisible, but

the war leader was omnipresent via televised press conferences and interviews, and the guardians were armed with heavy weaponry and deployed in the streets.

When it comes to using the securitisation to justify past and future actions, it is important to map President Vučić's own political history here. He was a prominent member of the regime that waged and lost several wars during the 1990s. When the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina started, he was a senior member of the Serbian Radical Party and a Member of Parliament, as well as very vocal promoter of the concept of "Greater Serbia," whose borders would have included the territories of other ex-Yugoslav republics. During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, he was a member of the Government as a Minister of Information. The opportunity to wage another war, in which he would declare the victory on his own terms, presented him with a possibility to re-establish his authority as a triumphant leader of the nation. In that sense, this securitisation served to justify (and redeem) his past actions.

Such a meticulously planned and scripted triumph was also forward looking. The narrative of victory over a deadly virus was heavily exploited in the SNS election campaign when the state of emergency was over. When he announced the state of emergency, in his speech, the President made references to the founding fathers of modern Serbia, nation's strife and pride in participation in two Balkan Wars, two World Wars and "the glorious battle of Kajmakčalan." In one of SNS promotional videos,¹⁶ he made the same references in words and in images, thus making direct links between past victories and the recent one, over the virus. This indicates that the war metaphors that were used to securitise the threat were chosen with a clear intention, both to redeem the image of the nation's leader and to capitalise on that image in the upcoming elections and further solidify his autocratic rule.

The war discourse that was used to securitise the threat of COVID-19 and introduce the state of emergency also served the purpose of communicating the urgency of situation, and convincing the audience that the emergency measures were necessary. Although the emergency measures were initially accepted by the majority of the population, as the pandemic was progressing and the restrictions were becoming more and more stringent and disproportionate, the support started wavering. Insufficient discipline and disregard of the imposed restrictions were often criticised by the key actors, but this may have also been the intimidation technique by the ruling elite. The (beginning of the) rejection of the measures was not necessarily expressed through disobedience and breaking of the law, but through other forms of protest

¹⁶ [За будућност наше деце. \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3aBuduћност_наше_деце)

that indicate that, at least, the moral support for the imposed emergency measures was declining. This somewhat proves the first specific hypothesis. However, a more nuanced analysis would be warranted to show how the support for imposed measures correlated with other variables, such as political beliefs, social and economic status, living conditions etc. and whether it changed over time.

The war framing used in securitisation of COVID-19 was an opportunity for the Serbian President to gain internal support and external validation for his foreign policy actions and country's strategic partnership with China. He used the crisis and lacking response of the EU in the first wave of the pandemic to legitimise the fact that Serbia was right not to fully align with the EU's foreign policy although it was a candidate country. This was facilitated by the use of war framing, which enabled the construction of enemies and allies. Although the enemies were taking various forms, China was a constant ally in this metaphorical war throughout the entire observed period. However, during the state of emergency, Serbia's interest to procure PPE and China's interest to repair its image in the world overlapped. China had its reputation badly damaged by the fact that it did not contain the virus when it first broke out in 2019. Also, China had vested interests in Serbia prior to the pandemic and the overlapping interest around the provision of PPE was an opportunity to further solidify their presence.

The analysis somewhat proves the second specific hypothesis, that Serbia used securitisation of the pandemic to legitimise its foreign policy orientation. This could be further corroborated by the fact that, at later stages of the pandemic management, when the COVID-19 vaccines were rolled out, Serbia was among the first countries to offer the vaccines to general population. It was also one of few countries that offered almost all the vaccines that were developed in different laboratories across the world and the citizens were free to choose a la carte which one they wanted to take. During certain periods, this opportunity was even offered to the nationals of the countries of the region, when their own states were not able to provide sufficient numbers of vaccines. Although this is outside the scope of the analysis in this thesis, the hindsight provides useful perspective of what was happening during the state of emergency.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of 2020, when the world was caught in the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic, many countries declared this public health emergency a national security threat. There were many commonalities in how different countries responded, yet each response was shaped by the national social and political context. Serbian context, in which the first wave of the pandemic hit, included preparations for general elections in the atmosphere of substantial divisions in the country and announced boycott by the opposition political parties. Prior to the pandemic, the country had already been in democratic decline for a while, and based on several indicators, it was assessed as electoral autocracy.

The period from the moment when the COVID-19 was first publicly addressed by Serbia's state officials at the end of February 2020, through the first registered case at the beginning of March, introduction of the state of emergency in mid-March and abolishment of the state of emergency in early May, lasted exactly ten weeks. Yet, in this relatively short time span, Serbia crossed the full path between two extremes on the spectrum of possible reactions to the ongoing global pandemic, twice. It went from completely dismissing its seriousness and overstating its preparedness when most others were already raising shields, to introducing the most stringent emergency measures, including multiple total lockdowns, only to go back almost to the point zero, when it relaxed most of the measures and resumed large gatherings when the rest of the world was still exercising caution. This seemingly counter-intuitive behaviour of the ruling elite in Serbia first prompted the interest to engage in this research.

The analysis of the securitisation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia during the state of emergency in 2020 showed that the militarised discourse was deliberately used by the governing elite to further solidify its autocratic rule, which is the main argument of this thesis. This was achieved by framing the threat of COVID-19 through the metaphor of 'war against invisible enemy,' which served as justification to introduce disproportionate emergency measures and establish almost total and unchecked control over political and social life in the country. By circumventing the regular constitutional procedure for introducing the state of emergency, the executive subsumed the legislative power to its decision-making and control, thus contributing to further erosion of the role of the parliament in the Serbian political system. The war framing and the daily televised war-like reports from the frontlines occupied the entire space for social dialogue and further marginalised critical voices by declaring them the enemies

of the state and pushing them outside of the public discourse to the social networks and fringe media outlets.

In my analysis of the official discourse, I relied on two theoretical frameworks, by combining the Securitisation Theory and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Mapping out the conceptual metaphor of war and all the related under-metaphors that were deployed in the official discourse during securitisation, enabled more comprehensive understanding of the possible motives of the securitising actor to frame a public health threat as a war threat, and introduce responses that were aligned with such framing. War metaphors are routinely used in official discourse and in everyday language to talk about many non-war related issues, and this is done without much conscious consideration of the consequences of such language deployment. When such a ubiquitous metaphor is intentionally used by decision-makers in extreme situations such as state of emergency, not only to convey certain message but also to incite certain types of behaviour, it is important to unpack as much as possible what consequences the use of this metaphor has for individuals, institutions and society at large.

The analysis of the official discourse observed only the period of ten weeks during which the COVID-19 was securitised and desecuritised in Serbia. During this time, almost the entire public space was dominated by one person – President Vučić, and the other state officials who spoke on the topic, merely repeated what the President had already said. Even some of the doctors – the members of the Crisis Taskforce, used the same war metaphors routinely and often spoke not like medical experts handling a public health crisis but as if they were co-opted by the war paradigm imposed by the governing elite. The question remains whether this was done consciously or unconsciously. Given that both Securitisation Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory look into the persuasive powers of language, it would be beneficial if official discourse was observed during a longer period of time and if comparisons could be drawn how different conceptual metaphors were used in different stages of pandemic management, and with what effects.

Finally, the metaphor of war anywhere, but in Serbian context in particular, is loaded with strong emotions and pre-conceived images that are related to recent experience of conflict, and it can easily capture full attention of the entire community. One avenue of research would be to see how in a non-democratic setting such framing could be effectively contested, by whom and in what space. Apart from institutional decline, the process of erosion of democracy also lies on reduced capacities of other actors to engage in a social dialogue in a meaningful way and not simply follow the agenda set by the autocratic elite.

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