

FOUR CASES, THE SAME STORY? THE ROLES OF THE PRIME MINISTERS IN THE V4 COUNTRIES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS*

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to deliver a comparative analysis of the behaviors and statements of the PMs in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, using the concept of adaptive leaderships as a base for analysis. We employed the usage of four fundamental skills proposed by Glover, Friedman and Jones (2002) and of five fundamental recommendations proposed by Macpherson and 't Hart (2020) to assess the behaviors and relevant statements of the PMs of the four analyzed countries during the time of the pandemic.

The fact that all four analyzed PMs did not employ many adaptive leadership skills and recommendations may serve as one of the possible explanations for the very problematic results in fighting COVID-19 during the second phase of the pandemic, when especially the Czech Republic and Slovakia belonged to the most affected countries. The costs of such limited competence are borne by citizens and businesses.

Keywords: adaptive leadership, COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister, Central and Eastern Europe.

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1. Introduction

The evolution of leadership under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic has already attracted the interest of many researchers (Bauwens *et al.*, 2022). However, the results of their research have not yet addressed all research gaps. Within this context, our main objective is to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse and offer results of comparative analysis. The goal of this article is to assess indicators of adaptive leadership at the highest level during the COVID-19 crisis in several Central and Eastern European countries, namely, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. All four countries are member countries of the EU and in all of them, the health care systems are based on the principle of universal access, and are administered by slightly different public health insurance schemes (for more about national health care systems see for example publications of WHO Health Observatory).

The first COVID-19 cases in all four countries were registered in early March 2020 and, as of today, we may speak about two waves of the pandemic. The first wave happened in spring and early summer 2020. During this period, the selected countries did not suffer so much in comparative perspective and Slovakia in particular was extremely successful from the point of the control of the spread of the infection (Slovakia registered only 35 cases per 100,000 inhabitants and only 28 deaths in the mentioned period). The second wave started in all the selected countries in late summer 2020 and relaxed in early summer 2021. The numbers of newly infected cases during this wave reached critical numbers, and

the Czech Republic and Slovakia in particular were evaluated as the worst performers in an international perspective for the winter period of 2020–2021.

The significant differences between the two waves call for deeper explanations. Existing articles (e.g., Klimovský, Malý and Nemeč, 2021) argue that in countries with limited quality of collaborative governance and without experience with a similar pandemic, some short-term ‘ultra-mobilization’ led to an effective fight against the spread of the pandemic in spring 2020, but, from the long-term perspective, failures were unavoidable. Governance weaknesses, limited administrative capacity, together with other factors, led to massive governance failures and, as a result, the governments’ responses during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic delivered very limited results in terms of the prevalence of COVID-19.

Within the described context, we identified the prime ministers (PMs) of the selected countries as the most suitable leaders for the purpose of our analysis: (1) the PMs are the most powerful executive decision makers in all the analyzed countries; (2) the PMs are on the top of crisis management hierarchy in all the analyzed countries; (3) thanks to their responsibilities and powers, the PMs’ speeches and statements are covered in detail by the national media in all the analyzed countries.

From the perspective of style of politics, especially Hungary and Poland, or more precisely their political representatives, were repeatedly criticized by the EU and its representatives, by journalists, as well as by political scientists due to their recent measures undermining the quality of democracy. The Czech PM was also often criticized due to suspicions of large-scale corruption and clientelism. On the contrary, an unexpected electoral result in Slovakia in early 2020 was welcomed as an important shift and a new start of the Slovak journey from a corrupt political system. These facts offer us an interesting group of leaders whose behaviors, statements and decisions undoubtedly and significantly influenced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective countries.

2. Adaptive leadership as a way to respond to the pandemic

The novelty of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the turbulent nature of the problems that had occurred since its beginning has recently led many researchers to analyze the institutional frameworks of various governments’ responses (Capano *et al.*, 2020). Many of them (e.g., Choi, 2020) found collaborative governance as a meaningful framework for effective adoption of necessary policy measures. However, differing results of governments declaring collaborative approaches show us that a deeper analysis and more detailed insights are needed if one wants to identify determinants of governments’ success under such circumstances.

The type and quality of leadership are undoubtedly two of the crucial determinants of successful coping with turbulent problems (Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing, 2020; Klimovský, Malý and Nemeč, 2021). Speaking on these problems, they differ a lot from common problems which usually lead to technical challenges; by virtue of the unclear roots and volatile developments, the turbulent problems are often accompanied by adap-

tive challenges. The adaptive challenges have specific characteristics: (1) transformation of inputs into outputs is not clear and linear and a copying strategy can lead to unintended consequences; (2) formal authority is insufficient, i.e., although it exists, it is not enough (or strong enough) to effect the required change; (3) different stakeholders want different outcomes and consensual decision-making is impossible; (4) previously highly successful protocols fail and do not bring expected outcomes (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009, pp. 52–53).

The COVID-19 pandemic uncovered numerous adaptive challenges and raised the question whether these adaptive challenges should be addressed by adaptive leadership. On this matter, it is important to stress that various types of leadership have been employed in different conditions since the beginning of the pandemic (Bauwens *et al.*, 2022). While some of them brought some positive results, others clearly failed. However, there is no clear evidence supporting only one type of leadership. As for the aforementioned adaptive leadership, preliminary results confirm that adaptive leadership could positively determine adoption of some effective measures. For instance, Bagwell (2020) considers an adaptive approach to leadership a crucial instrument of school leaders in their effort to build resiliency and capacity for their school communities to weather future disruptions caused by the pandemic (Bagwell, 2020, pp. 30–31). The importance of adaptive leadership is confirmed by the results of research conducted by Garavaglia, Sancino and Trivellato (2021) who focused on the leadership actions of mayors in Italy during the first as well as the second wave of the pandemic. In comparison, according to Plaček, Špaček and Ochrana (2021), mayors in the Czech Republic responded differently and they employed a variety of (non-)adaptation strategies during the first wave of the pandemic. The positive results were especially achieved by those mayors who did not remain passive and who actively tried to employ adaptive strategy in the performance of their tasks.

Glover, Friedman and Jones (2002, p. 15) proposed fundamental skills for practicing adaptive leadership, namely cultural competency, managing knowledge, creating synergy, and adaptive vision. Cultural competency could be defined as an ability to understand and interact (e.g., communicate) with people from different backgrounds, values, etc. Knowledge management requires the capacity and readiness to achieve some objectives by the proper use of knowledge and previous experience. A creation of synergy is based on a belief of individuals or groups that a common objective is paramount and joint activity, i.e., collaboration of all stakeholders, is more than the sum of individual activities of these stakeholders. Last but not least, adaptive vision facilitates a smooth and streamlined adoption of coherent measures.

Taking into account Heifetz's (1994) model, Macpherson and 't Hart (2020) propose five fundamental recommendations that should be followed by leaders while facing turbulent problems and adaptive challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1).

Table 1: Rules of adaptive leaderships

Rules of adaptive leadership	Meaning/Practice
Step back from the fray	Due to volatile developments and turbulent problems, leadership in any serious crisis is both challenging and demanding at the same time. Leaders need to find ways to step back from senseless struggles to maintain focus, address the most crucial issues, and invest all the necessary capacity as well as energy at the right time. Leaders must demonstrate not only courage to cope with turbulent challenges, but also self-discipline and organizational rigor.
Teach reality and formulate adaptive challenges	Leaders must be familiar with the system, its weaknesses and strengths. With this knowledge, they can identify which elements/mechanisms require a shift, and which elements/mechanisms can serve in the new environment. In addition, leaders must define priorities and stimulate the necessary changes.
Acknowledge emotions and losses	A large-scale crisis that is accompanied by serious loss of property and/or lives cannot be overcome through a simple set of commands. Ordinary people affected need to be treated with dignity and compassion, and in this context leaders must be prepared to show both support and understanding.
Generate meaning and learning	Although the pace of decision-making in times of crisis is one of the most important conditions for coping with a crisis, alternative or marginalized voices cannot be avoided a priori. Leaders need to formulate and set the agenda, facilitate the inclusion of groups offering diverse knowledge and experience, encourage innovative thinking, and identify all positive achievements in order to assemble the most crucial experience.
Pace the work and support the effort	Despite the fact that a large-scale crisis is associated with very limited predictability, all stakeholders (e.g., policy makers) need to know what the timeframe for their next steps is, at the very least. They expect support, encouragement, compassion and motivation from leaders, and the leaders themselves must remain visible and reachable to them as well as to the public. Last but not least, leaders are expected to remain consistent, authentic to the people, and ready to recognize not only successes but also efforts.

Source: The authors, based on Macpherson and 't Hart, 2020

3. Methodology

As already mentioned, the goal of this paper is to deliver a comparative analysis of the behaviors and statements of the PMs in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, using the concept of adaptive leadership as the basis for this analysis. We employ the concepts of the four fundamental skills proposed by Glover, Friedman and Jones (2002) and of the five fundamental recommendations proposed by Macpherson and 't Hart (2020) to assess the behaviors and relevant statements of the PMs of the four ana-

lyzed countries in times of the pandemic. On this matter, we want to address the following research questions:

- What skills for practicing adaptive leadership have been applied by the PMs of the analyzed countries since the beginning of the pandemic?
- To what extent have the PMs of the analyzed countries followed the recommendations of adaptive leadership since the beginning of the pandemic?

The main methods for this article have a qualitative character — we use national case studies to present the situation and comparative analysis to find commonalities and differences. We base our analysis on official activities and statements of the PMs in national media and statements published through their social media accounts. In addition, we also include decisions made by the PMs as well as anti-pandemic measures taken by their governments since the beginning of the pandemic until the late spring 2021 in our analysis. This approach provides us with a broader context and better data for analysis.

4. PMs and their activities, behaviors and statements during the pandemic

4.1. Czech Republic

Mr. Andrej Babiš entered the political scene with the project of the ANO political movement in 2011 and, during the 2013 election campaign, representatives of this movement emphasized the novelty and non-political nature of its candidates in contrast to other political parties. ANO started as a fiscally conservative party promising effective, lean governance ('Run the state like a business'), and a strong anti-corruption power. Soon after its electoral success, ANO became fiscally very populist and its leader, Andrej Babiš, had to face several serious suspected corruption affairs. In 2017 ANO won the parliamentary elections and Andrej Babiš became the PM.

The leadership style of Andrej Babiš relied on advice from his own marketing team (a typical example is a constant emphasis on not being a politician). As for his performance, it was partly chaotic resulting from an over-prioritization of micromanagement over the coordination of conceptual and strategic solutions. Bušíková and Boboš (2020) even point out '(his) effort to micromanage every aspect of the Czech economy'. While these elements brought him enduring popularity within a large part of the electorate during the 'good times' and related authority before the pandemic, their limits have become apparent during the crisis.

The government's communication during the COVID-19 crisis was chaotic, unclear, contradictory and with frequent unexpected twists (Eibl and Gregor, 2021). Bušíková and Boboš (2020) also talk about bypassing established, institutionalized channels of crisis response.

The PM's personal inability to admit shortcomings while, at the same time, taking even the slightest chance to boost his own image was approaching the point of ridiculousness. For instance, in a press conference on March 14, 2020, the PM was asked to address the severe shortages of respirators in hospitals and among health workers. He denied it

and stressed his personal readiness to deliver the respirators (Bušítková and Baboš, 2020, p. 499). Babiš even tweeted advice to the US President, Donald Trump, regarding the obligatory wearing of face masks (Eibl and Gregor, 2021). Babiš's statement: 'We have results, we are best in Covid' from the Bled Strategic Forum in August 2020 became legendary, and it was frequently ironized during the second wave of the pandemic. The PM's critiques often point out his alleged reluctance to bear responsibility for his shortcomings or mistakes arguing that he is the first to take credit. On this matter, Naxera and Stulik (2021) show that the PM's rhetoric after the beginning of the pandemic shifted from an anti-elite position to a neo-patrimonial populism. Good example is his participation in official press conferences: when the news was good, he was present; when the news was controversial (e.g., announcement of austerity measures), he was absent.

Babiš, as a technocratic populist, enjoyed a COVID-19 related governance mode, when the executive has assumed greater powers and the government deals with concrete problems and has the chance to see the real results of its decisions. He considers himself primarily a 'crisis manager', but he is not too compelled to seek broad consensus over matters of principle. The expert element of decision-making was flexibly outsourced to some extent, or as Bušítková and Baboš declare (2020) technocratic populists weaponized medical expertise for political purposes.

4.2. Hungary

The central government in Hungary is led by Mr. Viktor Orbán, who is a long-term Hungarian political leader and chairman of the strongest political party (FIDESZ) with rich executive experience. Although he was repeatedly criticized by both the representatives of opposition parties, national as well as international NGOs, and various representatives of the EU institutions due to his authoritarian-like style of decision making in recent years, his position in national politics remains strong.

COVID-19 became a part of the communication of the PM during March 2020 when the first cases were detected in Hungary. The first cases fitted into the discourse of the Hungarian Government focusing on migration issues (Cantat and Rajaram, 2019). During March 2020 it seemed that quick responses should be effective to slow down the spread of COVID-19. However, the situation became worse, and the originally positive and optimistic approach of the PM changed — the importance of the defense of the lives of Hungarian citizens became a prominent element of his communication.

In the very beginning of the pandemic, the PM's communication was still merely technocratic; the efficiency and professionalism of the anti-pandemic measures were emphasized by the press news. However, at the turn of March and April 2020, one could see a communication shift: the pandemic fitted into the 'militarized' public discourse of the government, and the treatment of the pandemic situation has been considered as a 'war against the pandemic'. The analysis of Orbán's speeches and announcements stated that military terminology became prominent in the PM's communications (Molnár, Takács and Jakucsné Harnos, 2020, pp. 1170–1171). The PM often used the words 'weapon', 'battle' and 'frontline'. The individual waves of the pandemic were officially called 'bat-

ties'. Last but not least, at the end of the first wave, a 'victory' was officially announced by him. The militarization of the communication remained also in later phases, for example the vaccines were called 'bulletproof vests' by the PM.

Unsurprisingly, although nation-wide cooperation was emphasized by Orbán at the beginning of March 2020, it meant rather his political demand for 'consent' than any real collaboration. It can be nicely illustrated by official reactions of the PM and his cabinet which ridiculed anti-pandemic recommendations proposed by the representatives of opposition parties at various levels. A bill on the extension of the state of emergency was also highly controversial because of its unlimited duration (Ádám, 2020, pp. 282–284). The PM, as well as his cabinet, recognized the pandemic as a good opportunity to continue in undermining the importance of local governments (Siket, 2021, pp. 272–273; also see Fazekas, 2021; Szente, 2021). The opposition leaders considered these measures a 'robbery of the municipalities'.

When the number of the infected people started to rapidly increase in November 2020, at the start of the second wave, Viktor Orbán emphasized that the most important issue is the number of lives saved and not the number of infections. This communication stopped when the number of the infected people who died dramatically increased during December 2020. Since then, the development of mortality caused by COVID-19 has been commented on by the leaders of the opposition parties and other stakeholders, but the central government and the PM have preferred a blame avoidance strategy.

4.3. Poland

Mr. Mateusz Morawiecki has been the PM in Poland since 2017. His experience with public policy making was limited because he instead had experience in managerial positions in the private financial sector. On the other hand, these positions could offer him some relevant experience with the usage of executive powers. However, political reality, as well as the turbulent nature of problems caused by COVID-19, revealed a different story.

Unlike the other PMs of the Visegrad countries, the Polish PM was not chairman of his political party and PM at one and the same time. In practice, it led to the situation when the PM was not independent from the decisions of his party (PIS) and the statements of its leader, Mr. Jarosław Kaczyński. Unsurprisingly, the central crisis management team acted as an official advisory body to the PM, but in fact, almost all important decisions and statements made by the PM in relation to COVID-19 were consulted with Jarosław Kaczyński.

At the beginning of the pandemic, public trust in the PM and his cabinet was high. The main communication between the government and general public was managed by the Ministry of Health, the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate of the State Sanitary and the PM. Especially during the beginning of the first wave it seemed that the government could control the spread of COVID-19 by means of its measures. Already in this phase the government was unable to create an expert community that could convince the public of the legitimacy of their actions. Therefore, the public perceptions of the PM and his cabinet's activities varied depending on their political preferences.

A combination of scheduled presidential elections and the pandemic circumstances became a real driver for the turmoil in politics across the whole country. The determination to win the election was so enormous that in March 2020 the Polish government decided not to declare the state of natural disaster. Instead, the government decided to declare just a state of epidemic threat, and a state of epidemics a week later. This decision influenced the perceptions of the activities undertaken by the PM and his cabinet as serving the interests of his party.

Intentionally, the leadership of the PM did not lead to any robust collaboration between various stakeholders. The government was unable to properly use existing state apparatus and its expertise to cope with the epidemics. Instead, some meaningless measures and decisions were taken, e.g., the withdrawal of the epidemiological reporting function from the National Institute of Hygiene, or an official top-down ban on provincial consultants in the field of epidemiology to comment on the epidemics.

The activities undertaken by the PM and his cabinet lacked visible consistency and proper use of the administrative apparatus. The decisions were chaotic, poorly communicated and often announced even before any relevant legislation could be drafted.

Although the PM announced that the coronavirus was in retreat in June 2020, Poland was hit by the second wave in late autumn 2020. General distrust in the PM and his cabinet has been increasing since the beginning of the pandemic not only due to the impacts of the disease and approved measures but, for instance, also due to failure to comply with their own rules (e.g., the media published a case when Morawiecki visited a restaurant during the hard national lockdown in January 2021).

The PM had only a formal leadership within his own party at his disposal, whereas the informal leadership, supported by the authority to make final decisions, belonged to the party chairman. Last but not least, collaboration efforts remained only at the level of political declarations, and party interests quickly destroyed any chance for any meaningful collaboration between all the relevant political parties.

4.4. Slovakia

The story of Mr. Igor Matovič as the most visible one of the three PMs of Slovakia during the COVID crisis is very interesting. After a few electoral periods as an MP and also the leader of one of the opposition parties, he surprisingly led his party to a clear victory in the parliamentary elections in February 2020. Consequently, he established a new ruling coalition consisting of political parties with either very limited or no executive experience. Since his official appointment happened in the second half of March 2020, the first anti-pandemic measures had been taken by the previous PM, Mr. Peter Pellegrini. Approximately after about one year in power, Matovič was forced to resign on April 1, 2021. Mr. Eduard Heger, who represents the same party, replaced him meaning the ruling coalition established in 2020 survived.

Igor Matovič entered the office of PM with a high level of legitimacy by virtue of his clear victory achieved in the 2020 parliamentary elections. He enjoyed a high level of trust from the general public (in March 2020, approximately 50% trusted him and considered

him ready to lead the national government under the circumstances of the pandemic). However, the PMs personal practical experience with the execution of executive powers was at zero in March 2020.

This favorable starting position provided Matovič with the chance to build his leadership authority through the results of the anti-pandemic and other public policies. However, this potential has not been utilized and already in late autumn the PM had lost most of his previous general public authority and his ruling was focused in particular on defending his own position. Over the one-year period, the trust in the PM had decreased to approximately 10% and almost 90% of the population declared a lack of trust in both the PM and his cabinet. An in-depth look at the developments and their drivers reveals critical determinants of such decrease.

The capacity to collaborate in a standard way seems to be very limited in the case of Matovič; more precisely, he showed a close-to-zero capacity to regularly and systematically consult and collaborate with critical stakeholders during the COVID-19 crisis. In spite of a lack of expertise as well as executive experience, the PM tried to behave in a dominant way, and many proposals of this advisory bodies were either rejected or even publicly mocked directly by the PM. When the majority of medical experts protested against blanket testing in October 2020, in retaliation, the PM publicly called them ‘mazes’ (October 28, 2020).

The government’s communication during the COVID-19 crisis was chaotic, unclear, contradictory and with frequent unexpected twists. This phenomenon became much intensive in late 2020 and the beginning of 2021 when the country’s performance in the anti-pandemic fight became poor. In such an atmosphere of distrust, the PM more openly accused everybody (including some persons from his own ruling coalition) who presented some different opinions. The tensions driven by the behavior and statements of the PM were too stressful for all the relevant stakeholders, and, at the end of the day, they ‘paralyzed’ the functionality of the government in early spring 2021. The situation resulted in the resignation of Matovič and his replacement by another member of his party.

4.5. Comparative analysis: Four cases, the same story?

At this point, we can return back to our research questions (RQs) and focus on the behavior and statements of these four leaders in terms of adaptive leadership. Regarding RQ1, the summary of our findings related to the skills for practicing adaptive leadership (Glover, Friedman and Jones, 2002) is shown in the Annex 1.

As for cultural competency, it is necessary to take into account that they did not have the same starting line at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Orbán was definitely the most experienced PM with a long political career and very rich experience with the execution of executive powers. Moreover, the position of the PM and his cabinet in the Hungarian political system was strengthened by virtue of continual centralization measures that had been implemented by Orbán’s previous cabinets. Babiš and Morawiecki came into politics from the private sector where they obtained experience in management of big companies, and their experience in politics as well as the execution of executive pow-

ers was much smaller in comparison with Orbán. Morawiecki had to accept a co-leading person, Jarosław Kaczyński, who was the chairman of his party and who directly influenced the decision-making of the government led by Morawiecki. On the contrary, Babiš was not limited by any co-leader and he also enjoyed the open support from the President. Matovič also came into politics from the private sector, but he had never managed any big company. Several years ago, he entered politics and since then he has promoted himself as a watch-dog-MP who was ready to employ unconventional measures. His experience in the execution of executive powers was at zero at the beginning of the pandemic because he became the PM in March 2020 thanks to an unexpected electoral victory.

Knowledge management required certain capacities. Orbán enjoyed the strongest support, not only from its own party but also from the state apparatus. In addition, his personal experience was also very rich in the field of executing executive powers. Babiš also enjoyed the full support from both his party and the state apparatus but his personal experience was not so rich and he was more open for recommendations from his marketing advisers. The position of Morawiecki was of a more specific nature because there was also a co-leader without an executive role, namely the chairman of his party. Therefore, he could use only limited support from his own party; surprisingly, it was the same also in regard to the state apparatus. Matovič did not have any experience with the execution of executive powers, and his party has never established any strong organizational structures. At the beginning it seemed he could enjoy support from the state apparatus and external expertise but after his attacks against almost all the other stakeholders he could not find any proper support for his ideas.

Paradoxically, as a brand-new PM, Matovič enjoyed the highest level of trust in comparison with the other three PMs. However, due to repeated breaches of settled agreements, poor results of the country in the fight against COVID-19, and decisions inconsistent with his official statements he lost this trust. Orbán, as well as Morawiecki, was criticized by political opponents in particular but, at the same time, they had to face strong criticism from the EU and various international NGOs for some of their measures. Babiš enjoyed quite good trust in the beginning of the pandemic but due to poor outcomes of the official anti-pandemic measures he began to lose this trust.

Synergy did not exist in any of analyzed countries - in all of them the involvement of stakeholders was more than limited.

It seems that only Hungary had some kind of adaptive vision strategy but it was based on Orbán's political fights with the EU, which, for instance, was clearly visible during decision-making on their vaccination strategy. Similarly, not one of these countries based its main decision-making on evidence. While Morawiecki and Orbán fought against internal and external enemies, Babiš customized his decisions to the requirements of the public. Matovič also wanted to follow the requirements and desires of the public (or at least the voters) but he soon started to fight against various internal and external enemies.

In the relation to RQ2, Annex 2 shows whether recommendations formulated by Macpherson and 't Hart (2020) were adopted by the PMs (and, if yes, to what extent) in the selected countries under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PMs were not able to step back from the fray during the pandemic. On the one hand, the political fights calmed down especially in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the beginning of the pandemic, but later developments and general dissatisfaction led to open political fights. For instance, in Slovakia these fights paralyzed not only the ruling coalition but also the necessary decision-making processes in the beginning of 2021. The political fights in Hungary and Poland had much deeper roots, and they were not stopped at all. In addition, the PMs in these two countries also fought against external stakeholders, e.g., representatives of the EU institutions who criticized the continual weakening of democracy in both these countries.

Only Orbán had at his disposal some capacity to frame the adaptive challenges, but he used them mainly during the first wave. In later developments, he opted for the preferences of his own party. All the other PMs either did not have such capacity at their disposal, or there were other obstacles that made framing the adaptive challenges insufficient.

Regarding emotions, all the PMs declared their best efforts to save the lives of the citizens of their respective countries. However, in spite of the results that differ a lot from those desired, Babiš was the only PM who apologized during the second wave for a poor performance and for bad results. All the other PMs were sensitive in particular towards their own losses. For instance, Matovič blamed the public for the beginning of the second wave by the following statement: ‘People, you let me down’.

None of the selected PMs followed the advice to ‘generate meaning and learning’ and to ‘pace the work and support the effort’. Some excuse for this could be the fact that none of the selected countries had any recent relevant experience with a large-scale epidemic. Surprisingly, the PMs did not use the existence of the Visegrad-group framework to intensify mutual collaboration and learn from each other (see for example Potešil *et al.*, 2021). Instead, in most cases, each country tried to find its own way. In spite of a lack of their own experience with turbulent pandemic problems, the PMs in all four countries rejected all proposals originating from the opposition parties or even from other stakeholders. The pace of work was determined in particular by political preferences and open populism prevailed. Decision-making in all four countries was not transparent. The PMs and their parties used their discretion and even various experts were missing in the decision-making processes. A good example of such behavior was the decision to approve nation-wide blanket testing in Slovakia. Matovič continually argued that such testing could serve as a ‘nuclear weapon’ against the spread of COVID-19 and afterwards everything would once again be fine, even if a clear majority of experts were strongly against this proposal. The PM started to blame his opponents in an unfair way, and later he publicly announced: ‘either we adopt testing, or I will resign’. In such a tense atmosphere, Slovakia experienced nation-wide blanket testing. Although the PM celebrated his ‘victory’, many experts felt insulted or even humiliated.

5. Conclusion

Although adaptive leadership could positively determine the adoption of some effective measures under the circumstances of turbulent problems, there are many leaders who have not employed this style of leadership since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis focuses on the activities, behavior and statements of the PMs in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the PMs of the selected countries did not employ many of the skills that determine the successful application of adaptive leadership. If one focuses on knowledge management or cultural competency, then any failures could be explained by a lack of previous experience and absence of sensitiveness towards the needs of other stakeholders. However, the creation of synergy by means of collaboration is rooted rather in political willingness, and it seems that the PMs in the selected countries did not want to collaborate with all the relevant stakeholders. This approach varies a lot from the collaborative approaches of some of the successful countries (e.g., Bouckaert *et al.*, 2020).

A closer look at a set of recommendations that should be followed by leaders while facing turbulent problems and adaptive challenges (Macpherson and 't Hart, 2020) unveils deviations of the PMs of the selected countries and their behavior and statements from the behavior and statements of PMs of some other EU countries. Continual political fighting instead of stepping back from the fray, unreadiness and insufficient capacity to frame the adaptive challenges, narrow focus on one's own losses, unwillingness to hear alternative proposals and to learn from others, as well as a lack of strategic planning — this is just a brief and incomplete overview of examples of how the PMs in the selected countries avoided the recommendations proposed by Macpherson and 't Hart (2020).

The fact that all four analyzed PMs did not employ most of the adaptive leadership skills and recommendations may serve as one of the possible explanations for the very problematic results in fighting COVID-19 during the second phase of the pandemic, especially when the Czech Republic and Slovakia belonged to the most affected countries. Certainly, there are many other factors of potential influence that provided significant impact on the outcomes of the pandemic that are not covered by this paper, but our ultimate goal was to focus on our selected dimension — adaptive PM leadership. There are already many other papers that provide sufficient insights into other potential factors (such as Čajková, Butoracová Šindleryová and Garaj, 2021, for the Slovak context).

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Annex 1: PM skills for adaptive leaderships

Dimension of skills	Czech Republic	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Cultural competency	Leading businessman, with rather limited cultural competency, ruling the country like his own business, misunderstanding of his own role in the execution of executive powers; strong emphasis on public demands regardless of their usefulness, relying on own marketing team	Role of a 'commanding general' in a 'war against the virus'; unwillingness to accept different preferences or demands; authoritarian style in execution of his own powers	Lack of independence in decision making ('slave' to his own political party and its preferences); unwillingness to accept different preferences or demands	Unwillingness to accept different preferences or demands; his stubbornness was intentional in the second wave; misunderstanding of his own role in the execution of executive powers
Knowledge management	Entrepreneurial experience before political career; certain experience with executive office; limited knowledge management; full knowledge and experience support from his own party	Long and rich experience with executive office; personal leadership approach and rich knowledge management; full knowledge and experience support from his own party	Relevant experience with various executive offices (e.g., Minister of Economy, Minister of Finance); limited knowledge management; limited knowledge and experience support from his own party due to existence of a dominating co-leader	Certain entrepreneurial experience before political career; absence of experience with executive office; poor knowledge management; insufficient knowledge and experience support from his own party due to absence of such knowledge and experience within the party
Creation of synergy	Very limited involvement of other stakeholders; increasing distrust since the beginning of the pandemic	Practically full refusal of involvement of other stakeholders; blame avoidance strategy in cases of failures; constant distrust between the PM and his opponents	Very limited involvement of other stakeholders; open tensions between the PM (and his supporters) and his opponents; constant distrust between the PM and his opponents	Limited involvement of other stakeholders and later very limited involvement; repeated breaches of agreements led to other stakeholders' distrust in the PM; blame avoidance strategy in cases of failure
Adaptive vision	A lack of any robust strategy or vision accompanied by populism and adoption of many spontaneous measures; a relative stability of government but some tensions in the ruling coalition; focus on micro-management; decision-making based more on political preferences than on evidence	Existence of some strategy accompanied by populism and adoption of some spontaneous measures; a clear stability of government; focus on top level issues; decision-making based more on fight against internal and external enemies than on evidence	A lack of any robust strategy or vision accompanied by populism and adoption of many spontaneous measures; a clear stability of government; two parallel decision-making centers; decision-making based more on fight against internal and external enemies than on evidence	A lack of any robust strategy or vision accompanied by populism and adoption of many spontaneous measures; significant political tensions in government and a limited stability of ruling coalition; decision-making based more on political preferences and later on fighting against internal and external enemies than on evidence

Source: The authors

Annex 2: PM reflection of recommendations for adaptive leaders

Rules of adaptive leadership	PM of the Czech Republic	PM of Hungary	PM of Poland	PM of Slovakia
Step back from the fray	Some fights between stakeholders happened during the pandemic; the PM was target of the strongest criticism but there were a few reasons, including his corruption affairs that had happened before the pandemic	Because of the personal leadership and the militarized approach, strong political fights were typical for the whole pandemic period	Political fights were intensive especially between ruling coalition and the opposition; thanks to specific situation in national politics, the PM was strongly supported by the main ruling party as well as by the President	A relative peace between political opponents was typical only during the first wave; the PM fought with all stakeholders including members of his own ruling coalition during the second wave
Teach reality and frame the adaptive challenges	Despite some relevant experience with executive office, the measures were adopted in a non-strategic manner; micro-management prevailed; framing the adaptive challenges was insufficient in later stages	For the first wave quick reactions followed by harsh economic consequences were typical; later on, framing the adaptive challenges was influenced by slower reactions and decreased willingness to adopt strict measures	There was no clear division between competences of the PM and the chairman of the main ruling party, and therefore framing the adaptive challenges was insufficient	Lack of experience with executive office led to chaotic and inconsistent measures; micro-management prevailed and unimportant issues were exaggerated by the PM; framing the adaptive challenges was insufficient in later stages
44 Acknowledge emotion and loss	The PM was proud of the achieved results during the first wave, promised to be responsible for own decisions (he even apologized for poor performance, but simultaneously blamed all others)	Although the country experienced a hard hit, official statistics were presented in less dramatic way; narrow focus on own losses	Limited capacity to empathize with the situation of others; narrow focus on own losses	The PM was proud of the results achieved during the first wave; inability to empathize with the situation of others; narrow focus on own losses
Generate meaning and learning	The alternative measures were often refused, but a few measures introduced by local governments were adopted at the central level, too	The alternative measures (mass testing, early vaccination of teachers) were firstly refused by the PM; later, the same measures were (partly at least) adopted but the opinion shift was not explained by the PM or his cabinet	The PM was not independent and he needed support from the chairman of his party; alternative measures proposed by opposition were automatically rejected	Almost all alternative suggestions were refused in advance by the PM, he considered them ridiculous, and he blamed their originators; few measures introduced by local governments were adopted at the central level
Pace the work and support the effort	Political preferences and own popularity were the main drivers of the PM's decisions; transparency of decision-making was limited; in some cases, the decisions were taken too late	The decision-making was influenced by uncertainty; discretion prevailed over transparency; political interests prevailed over expertise; political preferences and own popularity were the main drivers of the PM's decisions	Existence of two decision-making centers slowed and complicated the pace of reactions; the PM could not decide independently; party discretion prevailed over transparency; political interests prevailed over expertise	Uncertainty was typical for all decision-making processes; party discretion prevailed over transparency; political interests prevailed over expertise; decisions of the PM were made too late regardless of serious warnings, especially in the second wave

Source: The authors