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# Analyzing pro-vax discourse during the pandemic: Techno-scientism, elitism, anti-populism

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates pro-vax discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Expert and political discussions about the pandemic are abundant, commonly focusing on anti-vax and science-skeptic politics and further connecting them with post-truth and populism. However, research on pro-vax discourse remains largely overlooked. The article focuses on the case of Cyprus which received little scholarly attention in the context of the pandemic, especially by political science and media and communication scholarship. Applying discourse analysis to 120 media units that connect the articulations of scientific experts, politicians and journalists, empirical findings show that the discursive management of the pandemic takes place in the name of science, reason and responsibility, with key mechanisms of persuasion being the moralistic and fear-mongering narratives that place the responsibility for the return to normality on individual citizens. This highlights that communication about COVID-19 is not merely about healthcare and science. Rather, it is politicized and disciplinary in nature. The examination of the case of Cyprus alongside existing theories and debates reveals the internationally salient character of discursive features and patterns including the hegemony of techno-scientific objectivism, epistemological elitism and anti-populism.

## KEYWORDS

Techno-scientific discourse; anti-populism; elitism; COVID-19; post-truth

## Introduction

This article investigates pro-vax discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak saw an outpouring of media reports on various aspects of the virus beyond the spheres of healthcare and epidemiology. The discourse of science experts, commentators, politicians and scholars sought predominantly to understand and criticize science-skeptic politics, vaccine hesitance, anti-vax discourse, pseudo-scientific claims, and alternative facts and truth denialism (Marwick & Partin, 2022; Monsees, 2023; Newman, Lewandowsky, & Mayo, 2022). As such, dominant discourse exemplified the negative implications of

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such phenomena for all politics, policy and polity – often generating moral panic (Bratich, 2020). In so doing, dominant discourses connected these politics with post-truth (broadly conceived as fake news, conspiracies, mis-/dis-information etc.) as well as populism (Massa 2020; Marko, 2022).

However, the camp advocating *for* the vaccine has been largely overlooked. While scholarly research on post-truth politics and populism has grown exponentially in the last years and especially since the COVID-19 outbreak, the study of discourses opposing the former is lacking (Farkas & Schou, 2023; Wright, 2021). This article contributes to filling this gap. Building on the discourse-theoretical axiom that socio-political reality and identities are discursively constructed (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000), this article moves beyond fact-checking and the examination of the validity of claims. Rather, it focuses on the mechanisms of meaning production and the processes of articulation that structure the debate on science and truth.

The article focuses on the case of Cyprus – in which scholarly attention in the context of the pandemic, especially concerning politics and political communication, is significantly lacking. It asks, what are the key signifiers that structure dominant discourses during this conjuncture? What are the key polarities, and mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, that construct antagonistic camps through the interpellation of the other? What devices of persuasion are used to legitimate dominant discourse? Empirical findings suggest that dominant discourse exemplifies the role of science, reason and responsibility. To promote its arguments, it relies on moralistic and fear-mongering appeals, placing responsibility for the return to normality on individual citizens. Those who do not subscribe to scientific advice are dismissed as ignorant and irrational. The in-depth exploration of a single and understudied case allows to test dominant theoretical frameworks, challenge and rethink dominant core arguments and assumptions. In fact, examining Cyprus alongside existing theories and debates highlights the internationally salient character of discursive features and patterns, including the hegemony of techno-scientific objectivism, epistemological elitism and anti-populism. This highlights that communication about COVID-19 is not merely about healthcare and science. Rather, it is politicized and disciplinary in nature.

The article is structured as follows. The first section provides an overview of discussions about populism, misinformation and fake news, critically evaluating not so much their ‘real meaning,’ but the way these key contemporary notions are articulated as signifiers in public discourse and are connected to one another. The second section justifies the use of discourse analysis as a method; outlines the data collection strategy followed as well as the analytical approach employed to study pro-vax communication in Cyprus during the pandemic. The third section of the paper presents the findings from the case of Cyprus. The fourth section discusses the findings in an inductive manner and

alongside international theories and debates. This article concludes that more reflexivity is required by political, pundit and scientific elites when communicating their agendas, and that their elitist discourse may fuel further distrust toward scientific expertise and political authorities.

### **Discourses about populism, misinformation, fake news and post-truth**

This theoretical section critically evaluates key notions connected with this study – namely mis-/dis-information, fake news, post-truth and populism – focusing, mainly, on their role as signifiers in public discourse rather than essential concepts. In what follows, the text reviews the reinvented form of anti-populism that emerged in the so-called age of post-truth. Then it scrutinizes the presupposition of the objectivity of truth while highlighting the political/antagonistic nature of the discursive wars on truth. Finally, the section shifts from the attempt to determine the meaning of (post-)truth to the way it is used in public discourse.

### ***Anti-populism in the age of post-truth***

This subsection explores the notion of anti-populism, which constitutes the conventional point of departure for any discussion about populism, and links it to the so-called post-truth era. The notions of populism, mis-/dis-information, fake news and conspiracies received enormous public and scholarly attention in the last years (Bergmann, 2018; Effron & Helgason, 2022; Kim, Ahn, Atkinson, & Kahlor, 2020; Mudde, 2004), and are often discussed as a group or altogether conflated. More recently, they are even viewed as a one single phenomenon: ‘post-truth populism’ (see Conrad, Hálfðanarson, Michailidou, Galpin, & Pyrhönen, 2023). According to this narrative, societies live in post-truth times where populist demagogues seek to distort democracy and pollute the public sphere by spreading fake news and disinformation through social media, attacking critical and progressive voices (Ball, 2017; Carlson, 2020; Conrad et al., 2023; D’Ancona, 2017; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Waisbord, 2018).

Functioning as an umbrella category, the notion ‘post-truth populism’ obscures the distinction between the various concepts that are (perhaps forcefully) lumped together under it. Thus, not only are differences among these differential notions overlooked, but the blame is also put on the usual suspect: *populism*. Arguably, this says little about populism and more about the anti-populist forces opposing it.

Anti-populism is defined as a discourse that uncritically employs the notion of ‘populism’ in order to discredit its political adversaries, generating moral panic and hype (De Cleen, Glynos, & Mondon, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2014). It has no particular ideological family, as it is employed by left, right and center, and

is reactivating, malleable and adaptive to politico-historical circumstances. Anti-populism equates populism with irresponsibility, irrationality, demagoguery, manipulation and anti-pluralism (Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2021); and – during the contemporary conjuncture – post-truth, misinformation, fake news and conspiracies (Venizelos, 2024). In so doing it reveals a division of political space between superior and inferior, right and wrong, good and bad, as well as a hierarchy of political visions, forms of knowledge and even morality. This underlines anti-populism's elitist/technocratic ontological foundations.

Due to the normatively charged status of populism and post-truth (and notions related to it), their association becomes increasingly easy. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, populism was associated with vaccine-hesitancy and anti-science positions (Raffini & Penalva-Verdú, 2022). Major media such as Politico argued that 'support for populists and vaccine skepticism go hand in hand in Western Europe' (Kennedy, 2019). Such characteristics are only peripherally connected with populism; at best, they are connected with *radical right-wing* variants of populism, or cases where the 'populism' might not be the appropriate term.

In addition to identifying and describing the contemporary malaise of 'post-truth populism,' scholars delved deeper into understanding the cognitive and psychological core of the problem as well as proposing solutions to counter it. Studies on the moral psychology of misinformation explore the factors making individuals susceptible to false information (Effron & Helgason, 2022); quantitative political scientists explore the connections between beliefs in conspiracies and populism (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017); computational social scientists develop apps and platforms able to detect misinformation, hiding it from users or informing them of the potentially invalid, inaccurate information they are about to read (Kyza et al., 2020; Shao, Ciampaglia, Flammini, & Menczer, 2016).

Researchers and practitioners countering misinformation seem to presuppose the existence of a specific type of personality, with particular mentality and cognitive characteristics, that is more prone to follow populist leaders and believe in fake news.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, citizens who are 'prone to' misinformation and fake news are treated as victims, uneducated, or at best lacking capacity to critically evaluate information. Consequently, the agency of subjects and the complex psycho-social processes that mobilize affects, interpellate identifications and construct collective identities are overlooked (Venizelos, 2022). Overall, expert practice appears wary of popular opinion, and especially aspects connected with decentralization and quality-control, revealing 'an

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<sup>1</sup>This treatment resembles political psychology, from the Freudo-Marxists of the 1930s to their positivist counterparts in contemporary times (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, Sanford, & Gordon, 2019 [1950]; Feldman, 2003; Funke, 2005).

elite anxiety about the consequences of political ignorance' (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022, p. 408).

### ***Between Truth and Post-Truth***

This subsection interrogates the distinction between truth and post-truth that is presupposed in dominant discussions. The nodal point of post-truth, around which the discursive cleavage is organized, functions as an overarching concept encompassing the terms that are defined here. First, *misinformation* is commonly understood as incorrect or misleading information. *Disinformation*, on the other hand, differs in that it is deliberately deceptive (Fallis, 2015). Following similar logic, the concept of *fake news* refers to fabricated news that mimics the form, style and delivery of 'legitimate' news, and is intended to spread lies, manipulate and distort the truth (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Importantly, a stark analytical distinction between *truth* and *lies*, *information* and *mis-/dis-information*, the *real* and *fake* is visible. On the one hand lies post-truth which is usually associated with populist and anti-vax claims (Bandimaroudis, 2021; Bratich, 2021; Conrad et al., 2023); and on the other, correct information, valid claims, substantiated arguments and brands of journalism that are understood as serious, careful, of high quality and fact-oriented and data-driven (Graves, 2016).

The idea of *fake news* presupposes the existence of *real news* and the articulation of *misinformation* presupposes the existence of *true information*. Such distinctions rest on the presupposition of a guaranteed and objective truth: a kind of truth (often technocratic or based on some higher qualities such as education and expertise) that is coded as superior (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022). The critique of post-truth seems to suggest that truth no longer matters in contemporary socialization: citizens polarize over their own truths no matter what data suggest, politicians face no consequences for lying etc. Against this argument, Conrad et al. (2023) argue the concept of post-truth is 'somewhat misleading in that it suggests that the relevance of the truth in politics may be fading.' Rather, 'it is indeed the factual basis of truth claims that is becoming increasingly contentious, not the idea of the truth itself.'

Arguably, the strict differentiation between 'fake news' and its opposite is not productive. Besides examining the validity of facts, one also needs to observe the language games contesting the meaning of 'facts' as a signifier, as well as other signifiers such as 'truth.' Fake news is used both by 'critical journalists,' 'liberal politicians' and 'progressive citizens' attacking Trump and his supporters *and* by Trump and his supporters attacking established and liberal media. While liberal commentators framed the Trump movement as 'post-truth,' actually fact-checking its claims to prove the invalid status of the

information it diffused, the members of the movement itself saw themselves as being in a battle to defend their values (Venizelos, 2023).

Certainly, our aim is not to legitimize fake news and mis-/dis-information. Rather, it constitutes an invitation to critically reflect on the language games and discursive strategies operative in the contestation of truth (Wodak, 2015). A crisis such as a pandemic constitutes a moment of dislocation where multiple discourses emerge and compete with one another in a complex struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. Thus, the contestation of truth is not a by-product of 'post-truth populists.' Anti-vax discourse does not operate in isolation during the pandemic conjuncture: its 'other' – pro-vax discourse – served as its antagonist. Already from the 1960s, theorists have critiqued the idea of one absolute, universal, truth. They relativized and historicized truth, revealing its political nature. Taking seriously the axiom that identity presupposes difference highlights the relational dynamics in conflicts between 'truth' and 'anti-truth' actors. Consequently, it is important observe the production of politics in this relational antagonism. This shifts the attention from determining the meaning of truth to the way truth is used as a signifier in public discourse.

### **'Post-truth' as a signifier**

This subsection explores 'post-truth' as a signifier in public discourse. There is an evidently exponential growth of research on post-truth, fake news, mis-/dis-information, conspiracy theories and populism. Much of this research focuses on cases of deception (Farkas, 2022; Monsees, 2020). This research is pre-occupied with the 'real' meaning of these phenomena and their (negative) consequences on society and politics. However, the role they play as signifiers in public discourse is overlooked (Farkas & Schou, 2023). Collective and individual actors that employ these notions are also understudied.

To resolve the tension between competing interpretations of truth, the article proposes – following De Cleen et al. (2018), pp. – to move from the validity of claims to *the way these claims are used, by whom, how, with what intent and performative effects*. Discourse is not 'just talking' and cannot be reduced to words. Nor it is neutral or apolitical, but performative, constituting socio-political reality through articulatory practices and representations that rest on the antagonistic demarcation between insiders and outsiders (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). Advancing a discourse-theoretical perspective on pandemic communication and discourses about truth presupposes a shift in the analytical focus, from the validity of each claim to the logic of the articulatory practices that connect elements, objects and subjects together, always in antagonistic relation to 'the other.' In the context of the pandemic, signifiers such as truth and science as well as antagonistic identities such as responsible/ irresponsible,

rational/irrational are not understood to be preexisting and essential categories with fixed meanings, but rather categories or signifiers that, articulated in a specific conjuncture, exemplify its political nature.

## Methods

In order to study pro-vax communication during the pandemic, this article employs discourse analysis as a method to develop our discourse-theoretical presuppositions that public communication extends beyond speech and functions pivotally in constructing the very identities and social reality that it purports to represent (Angermuller, Wodak, & Maingueneau, 2014; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Torfing, 1999). In the context of COVID-19, discourse analysis enables close examination of the rhetorical devices and emotional and moralistic appeals through which processes of articulation and representation occur. Such processes are central to the antagonistic demarcation of identities (e.g., rational/responsible vs irrational/irresponsible citizens) and the construction of the overall meaning of the pandemic.

This article draws on media sources that incorporate, share and cite discourse articulated by other elite actors. The general category of elites includes politicians (in opposition and in government), experts (i.e., scientists, virologists, members of epidemiological committees) and journalists. These actors and their discourse are often accepted as legitimate due to their status (Trimithiotis, 2021). Due to the key positions they hold, such actors, who are also understood as an (informal) 'alliance' (Bratich, 2020), are understood to be critical in setting the agenda, influencing, or in fact constructing and conditioning public debate through the production of knowledge (Brown & Mondon, 2020; Goyvaerts, 2021). Furthermore, discourses are woven together by the increasing interconnectedness between the three categories of elites, resulting in a communicative bubble that often functions intertextually: i.e., through the integration into one source of distinct texts and discourses, such as politicians' statements and epidemiological committee announcements. Intertextuality reveals how producers of media content compose their discourse from the discourses of their sources, making conscious or unconscious choices concerning why and how to represent them (Fairclough, 1992).

## Case selection

This article focuses on the case of Cyprus. Studies of Cyprus, undertaken by scholars of International Relations, Security, Law, Conflict and Peace Building, have predominantly focused on the 1974 Turkish invasion and its ongoing occupation and impact. Thus, scientific inquiries on other matters are rare. The few existing studies on the pandemic in Cyprus are usually situated outside the social and political sciences (e.g. pharmacology/medicine, see:

Andrianou et al., 2022). When situated within political sciences, studies on the pandemic in Cyprus deal with questions of policy change (see: Kakoullis et al., 2021). Thus, little attention has been drawn to the communicational dimension of pandemic politics in Cyprus (Paraskeva, 2022).

The in-depth analysis of a single case is arguably the most appropriate method to apply and test theoretical frameworks. Findings from the Cypriot case will be discussed in connection with and juxtaposition to existing theories and national debates, allowing for theory building and expansion as well as challenging normative assumptions. Determining whether Cyprus is a unique or extreme case, or whether it brings to the surface (discursive) patterns that are also salient elsewhere, will uncover grounds for comparisons and benefit future research (cf. Pepinsky, 2019).

### **Data**

A total of 120 discursive units were collected from the six most popular online news media outlets in Cyprus: (i) Cyprus Times (ii) Dialogos (iii) Philenews (iv) Politis (v) Sigmalive and (vi) ThemaOnline. The search terms used were 'vaccination,' 'vaccinations,' 'vaccinated,' and 'vaccine,' and all articles included 'vaccination' in their title. The study focused on 01–31 May 2021, an important period in Cyprus' vaccination campaign. This month saw the lifting of restrictions in the vaccination program, allowing for the vaccination of the general population.

### **Analytical approach**

Qualitative analysis focused on the identification of discursive utterances highlighting common patterns of articulation, exhibiting:

- Key polarities during the pandemic which discursively constructed antagonistic identities (i.e. 'rational citizens' vs 'irrational citizens');
- Key signifiers in the framing of the vaccine that revealed approaches to pandemic management ('necessity', 'one-way road', 'responsible stance');
- Discursively constructed linkages between notions and signifiers (such as 'populism', 'COVID-19', 'post-truth').

### **In the Name of Science, Reason and Responsibility (Findings)**

This part of the paper presents the results of the empirical analysis conducted on mainstream discourse on the pandemic in Cyprus. The findings exemplify the overwhelmingly 'pro-science' position articulated by media, experts and politicians who structure their narratives in the name of science, reason and (individual) responsibility. This dominant discourse on the management of

the pandemic derives its facts-based legitimacy from prestigious international bodies and experts' authority. Consequently, we show, the pandemic is reduced to a purely scientific issue – neither political nor social. Furthermore, findings highlight the moralistic nature of dominant discourse that appeal to fear and uncertainty, laying the responsibility for return to pre-COVID-19 normality on individual citizens. Those who do not subscribe to the dominant perception of pandemic management are dismissed as irrational and irresponsible.

### ***Legitimacy, authority of science, experts***

Our empirical analysis of dominant discourse during the pandemic in Cyprus finds that scientists and scientific bodies or authorities (e.g., doctors, virologists, epidemiological committees, ministries) are treated (by media, commentators and politicians cited in media sources) as *the* source or authority from which information about the pandemic (and its management) emanates. When communicating about the pandemic, (pro-vax) politicians and journalists justify and legitimize measures taken by governments in the name of science, and substantiate their arguments via references to local and international medical experts, committees and international organizations. Media discourse analysis indicates that almost all sources legitimize information on any aspect of the pandemic – including its overall management, the vaccines, the numbers of contagions and deaths – using the prepositional phrase ‘according to ...,’ with the authorities appealed to including the ‘World Health Organization,’ ‘European Medicines Agency,’ ‘Cyprus Ministry of Health,’ ‘Cyprus Health Organization,’ and ‘Epidemiological Team of Cyprus.’

Indeed, besides the prepositional phrase ‘according to,’ other methods of drawing legitimacy from scientific bodies are evident. Interestingly, an inter-organizational reference collecting local to international organizations serves the same goal. For example:

The decision made by the Ministry of Health’s committee responsible for the vaccination campaign *follows the guidance of* the World Health Organization and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention of the US [Themaonline, emphasis added]

In some other occasions, the source of legitimacy is not directly a scientific body or individual but a state – which, however, endorses the scientific pathway. For example:

On Wednesday, *Canada approved* the use of the Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine on teenagers from 12 years of age and above. It is the *first country* that approves the vaccine for this age group. *However, it is expected that the USA will follow* its example next week. *Germany has announced* that it is in a position to propose the use of the vaccine on all teenagers until the end of August [Cyprus Times, emphasis added]

Another example illustrating how science provides legitimacy via the state is the following:

*According to official announcements made by the Greek government, the operation ‘Blue Freedom’ concerns the universal vaccination of all the population above the age of 19 that reside on the islands [Dialogos, emphasis added]*

Following from the above findings, the pandemic management is framed as (or reduced to) a purely scientific issue. Experts and expert bodies – as outlined above – are presented as the only ones capable of talking about the healthcare emergency (including issues that do not pertain specifically to healthcare, but that are treated as such). Dominant discourse has often employed the language of war (Bratich, 2021). In the so-called ‘fight’ against COVID-19 (Isentyeva, 2020), vaccination constituted perhaps the most important ‘weapon.’ Thus, the following subsection delves into the weight the vaccine received in dominant discourse, reinforcing the scientific understanding of the pandemic.

### ***The importance of the vaccine***

A key feature in dominant discourse is connected with the positive framing of the vaccine and vaccination more broadly, and the importance attributed to them in the given conjuncture. Vaccination and the vaccine are promoted as the best, most efficient, safe and scientifically proven methods to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively ending it. Pro-vax discourse articulated by experts, journalists and politicians draws on statistics and data provided by international organizations to support its argument, while statistics and data are commonly promoted – perhaps unconsciously and not strategically – as objective and unquestionable facts. For example:

*SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are safe and, based on the latest safety data, the benefits outweigh the risks. Before each approval, vaccines undergo rigorous controls and clinical trials to ensure they meet internationally agreed safety and efficacy standards [Dialogos]*

Dominant discourse frequently provides updates on the vaccination process and, subsequently, the increasing rates of vaccinated people. The increasing percentage of vaccination rates is framed as an achievement. The importance of the vaccine and vaccination is exemplified with reference to the low levels of hospitalization among the vaccinated parts of the population. For example:

*In elderly populations where vaccine coverage has reached 80%, the number of contagions remains steadily at very low levels [...], while hospitalization in this age group has been dramatically reduced [Philenews]*

Given the quality standards guaranteed by local and international experts and organizations, which are then conveyed by journalists and politicians, citizens

are (directly or indirectly) advised to endorse this scientific method and vaccinate themselves. The vaccine is characterized as a generally safe method:

Indeed, *some side effects* may be experienced. However, they are considered *rare and minor*, while they will *only last for a few days* [Dialogos, emphasis added]

Although you may not feel well, *this is normal*, it only lasts a few days and it is *a good sign* as it shows that the vaccine is working [Signalive]

Despite potential effects, the vaccine is still promoted as the best option.

### **Individual responsibility**

Another key feature of pro-vax discourse is the presupposition that the responsibility to stop further spread of the virus, and ultimately end the pandemic, lies at the individual level. Some of the key ways that the individual becomes responsible to contribute to the ‘fight against the pandemic’ include the following actions: self-isolate, stay-home, respect restrictions, wear a mask, test, vaccinate, self-hygiene.

Since the effective management of the pandemic is intrinsically associated with science (which is generated by experts, implemented by the government and communicated by the media), the only agency allowed to the general population is *to follow* healthcare protocols and guidelines. Thus, the responsibility to stop contagions and eventually end the pandemic lies on the shoulders of citizens:

The strongest scientific weapon at our disposal in order to deal with the pandemic, *is the citizens’ positive response* [Philenews, emphasis added]

The population’s immunization continues at an intensive pace with the *citizens’ positive response* [Philenews, emphasis added]

To promote this pro-scientific strategy locally, and encourage the population to endorse the vaccine, the press frequently draws on the successful record and upward vaccination rates achieved by other countries – indirectly encouraging Cypriot citizens to follow their example:

Britain shows the way to immunity: More than 20 million citizens vaccinated [Politis]

Official government announcements reproduced by the media frequently update the public about the vaccination process in Cyprus too:

Vaccinations reached 42%: which city *leads the race?* [Philenews, emphasis added]

Vaccination: 53% have been vaccinated with the 1<sup>st</sup> shot and 28% *have complicated their vaccination program* [Dialogos, emphasis added]

### **Return to normality**

‘Normality’ functioned as a core signifier in pro-vax discourse during the pandemic. Indeed, the promise for a return to normality – back to a previous state of life, without COVID-19, lockdowns, social distancing and masks – was dependent upon citizens’ endorsement of the vaccine and science as presented in the preceding sections. According to pro-vax discourse:

*Vaccination is the only way back to normality and the only way, the only option for competitive activity* [Dialogos, emphasis added]

Our goal to be achieved is nothing else but the *return to normality* [Dialogos, emphasis added]

The intertwining and combining of core discursive frames analyzed above is also evident. For instance, ‘the legitimacy of experts’ (first subsection) was repeatedly invoked, justifying the ‘importance of the vaccine’ (second subsection) and promising ‘a return to normality’ (this subsection):

We should call the world to get vaccinated, since experts and scientists say that this is the way to *normality* [Dialogos, emphasis added]

### **Dismissing challengers**

Besides positive features (e.g., positive framing of experts and scientific bodies, vaccination and the vaccine and appraisal of science) some negative features can be identified in pro-vax claims. For example, elite discourse often dismisses those who question the dominant management of the pandemic as articulated by scientists, politicians and commentators. Furthermore, the dismissive style of pro-vax discourse presented in this section exhibits qualities that are connected with the third subsection exemplifying individual responsibility as a key mechanism to manage the pandemic. Furthermore, pro-vax discourse reveals moralistic traits too. Citizens are categorized as responsible and irresponsible, rational and irrational, safe and dangerous. The actions of the latter categories of citizens are presented as having negative implications for the society as a whole. For example:

Individual *awareness* of responsibility towards the collective body and society will lead us to the achievement of our goal [Dialogos, emphasis added]

(...) they [i.e. the unvaccinated] have *no right to endanger* the health and lives of others. All those who refuse vaccination must bear in mind that their rights presuppose corresponding *obligations* [Politis, emphasis added]

### ***Appeal through fear***

The inciting of fear through the use of emotive, dramatic, hyperbolic and moralistic language constitutes another key characteristic that structures elite narratives during the pandemic. On many occasions, pro-vax discourse employed fearmongering techniques to convince citizens of the necessity of the vaccine and the lack of other strategies for ending the pandemic. According to such narratives, the future will be uncertain and unpredictable if citizens do not act according to scientific guidance:

There is a *fear* that the chance of *transmission* will increase by up to 50% (...) This is why the virus is so *difficult to control*' [Philenews, emphasis added]

According to this statement, if citizens do not abide by scientific and governmental guidance, the future will be unpredictable.

Following the rationale presented in the previous subsections, vaccination constitutes a remedy to a potentially uncontrollable situation. Therefore, the fear of an unpredictable future becomes a key instrument in pro-vax discourse aimed at appealing to citizens.

Those who choose not to get vaccinated are at risk and are urged to follow the example of the sensible citizens who are vaccinated:

Those who will not get vaccinated *will be vulnerable* [...] *There is the risk* that some unvaccinated people will get infected, the virus will reproduce and some *possible new variants will emerge* [Signalive, emphasis added]

A moralistic undertone implying that those who do not follow scientific advice will be punished – not by the government but by fate – is also evident. According to the above statement the unvaccinated are likely to become ill and therefore suffer. According to the following statement, there are other more grave consequences, such as death:

It is not random that the *death toll* from coronavirus is increasing [...] *Patients struggle*. Even *young people are now losing their lives* – people in fact who do not have serious underlying diseases, in good health or even without underlying diseases, and this worries us (...). Experts warn ... *anyone who is not vaccinated will be infected* (...). Next winter *many people will be hospitalized in Intensive Care Units* due to complications of Covid-19' [Politis, emphasis added]

Overall, our empirical analysis highlights that the dominant pro-vax discourse on the pandemic in Cyprus is structured in the name of science, reason and responsibility. In promoting its argument, the communication of pundit, political and scientific elites reveals six distinct yet interconnected features: A) The dominant discourse draws legitimacy from scientific sources, including individual experts and prestigious international institutions. B) One of its key characteristics is the positive framing of the vaccine and vaccination as the only scientifically-proven way out of the pandemic – including of course social

measures such as distancing and masking. C) Analyzing pro-vax discourse during the pandemic in Cyprus reveals the presupposition that individual citizens are responsible for leading the way out of the health crisis; the onus is on citizens to follow governmental mandates and scientific advice, and not, for example, on institutions and politicians to support medical infrastructure. D) Only via this route can society, according to pro-vax discourse, return to normality. E) Those who questioned the dominant narrative were dismissed as irresponsible and irrational. F) Campaigns to convince citizens to follow governmental and scientific advice were often rooted in appeals to fear and moralization. In making sense of these findings, the following section will juxtapose the case of Cyprus to the international debate and theory.

### **Techno-scientific objectivism, elitism, anti-populism (Discussion)**

The discussion extends our analysis of pro-vax discourse during the pandemic in Cyprus to explore its broader implications and connections with global discussions and theorizations. Building upon the empirical findings presented earlier, we adopt an inductive approach to examine the unique characteristics of the Cypriot case and its resonance within the global context. What can one make of the findings associated with the Cypriot case? How does the hegemonic discourse on the pandemic in Cyprus relate to public discourse internationally? Is Cyprus an isolated case or does it follow a pattern similar to the one found in other countries around the world?

By situating our study within a comparative framework, we aim to elucidate the relationship between local responses and broader discourses surrounding science, public health, and societal trust. Through this exploration, we seek to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in navigating public discourse amidst a global health crisis. The core argument presented in this section is that the findings connected with the case of Cyprus reveal certain salient features of global pro-vax discourse that enable us to rethink dominant discourse and contribute to theory development. More specifically, as this section highlights, pro-vax discourse exhibits profound degrees of techno-scientific objectivism, elitism and anti-populism.

#### ***Techno-scientific objectivism***

To begin with, dominant discussions on the pandemic and its management reveal an understanding of the healthcare crisis that is intrinsically rooted in expertise and science. Effectively, the reduction of the state of emergency to a purely scientific issue reveals the hegemony of techno-scientific objectivism. Beyond Cyprus, media (Science Business, 2022), academics (Newman, 2023; Speed & Mannion, 2017), scientists (Bolisani, Cegarra Navarro, & Garcia-Perez, 2021; Matta, 2020; Wiysonge et al., 2022) and official bodies (United

Nations, 2021) internationally, place science at the core of the debate stressing its importance in understanding and combatting the healthcare emergency.

In the post-Weberian paradigm, societies moved toward a narrow expertise-oriented culture where technocratic knowledge is accepted *a priori* as objective and superior without any problematization. During the pandemic, and amidst a growing mistrust of elites and technocrats over the past decade, decision-making was thought to shift from political to expert authority. The legitimacy of experts derives from an assumed and yet not uncontested universal rationality, based on ‘undeniable facts’ and ‘evidence’ and thus lacking the legitimacy of the sovereign people (Boschele, 2020). On many occasions, politicians used experts’ authorities instrumentally in order to legitimize political decisions, justifying their responses in the name of science (Hart, Chinn, & Soroka, 2020; Jaworska & Vásquez, 2022; Sambaraju, 2022). Claims that lie outside the dominant techno-scientific paradigm are often dismissed ‘by the new alliance of panic actors (journalism, technology companies, intelligence agencies, politicians, civil society organizations)’ (Bratich, 2020, p. 311) as denialists who undermine science (and therefore truth) (see Michailidou, Eike, & Trenz, 2023; Fossum 2023).

The discourse against post-truth, fake news, misinformation etc., does not only serve to denounce ‘the other,’ but also to reinforce one’s own identity, status and legitimacy. In the case of the top-down pro-science discourse, it is the identity of professionals such as journalists, healthcare experts but also scholars and politicians that is asserted (Wasserman, 2020). At this point, it is important to highlight the implications of the top-down, pro-vax interpellation carried out by dominant epistemic positions and disguised in the name of objectivity. This is not to downplay the role of science in such an extraordinary and challenging moment. Especially when one considers that the necessary expertise lies mainly in the hands of epidemiologists, virologists, and doctors (and not, for example, politicians and ordinary citizens). However, overemphasizing the superior quality of science, expertise and knowledge has both theoretical and political implications related to elitism – which will be addressed next.

### **Elitism**

The elitism of techno-scientism is visible in the dismissal of those who do not subscribe to the dominant way the pandemic ought to be managed. Those who were skeptical of science or the vaccine, or were opposed to government mandates on containment measures, were frequently labeled as irresponsible and irrational, as populists, followers of post-truth fake news and conspiracy theories (Farkas & Schou, 2023). Again, this is not an isolated characteristic of the Cypriot case, but rather a salient feature of discourses about the pandemic. Academic research defines vaccine hesitancy as *contagious* and *misinformed*,

connecting it with anti-intellectualism and aversion to expertise (Marwick & Partin, 2022) and conspiracy theories (like QAnon) (Eberl, Huber, & Greussing, 2021; Stecula & Pickup, 2021), and viewing it as the result of a social media boost leading to viral sharing of fringe views (Carlson, 2020; Wiysonge et al., 2022). But even if these people err, they are denied their own agency as they are understood as victims of the internet.

As in the case of Cyprus, global pundit and political discourses dismiss these citizens, labeling them irrational and irresponsible. For example, as Halloran (2020) wrote in *The Spectrum* '[f]or these individuals, they seem to have a lot of methods to *rationalize being irresponsible during a pandemic*' (emphasis added). The Government of Singapore (2020) stated that COVID-19 spread was caused by socially *irresponsible behavior* (emphasis added). Following the same trend, India's Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Dr. Harsh Vardhan, held the 'irresponsible behavior of *people responsible for the surge of Covid-19 cases in the country*' (Times of India, 2020).

The above discourses reveal a moralistic undertone predicated on an ethical and normative stance that distinguishes between right and wrong, good and bad, and superior and inferior approaches to the understanding and management of the pandemic. For instance, Halloran (2020) argues 'the truth is, if you're not socially distancing, not wearing a mask, not *doing everything in your power to keep from spreading the virus: you're a bad person*' (emphasis added). This argument neglects factors leading citizens to protest scientific measures (e.g., anti-establishment attitudes and distrust toward technocratic and scientific authorities, politicization and polarization). Instead, it pre-supposes a universally accepted collective process that will lead humanity out of the pandemic and moralistically dismisses those who reject it as *bad*. Indeed, the importance of individual measures is not to be downplayed. However, in placing all responsibility at the individual level, political and technocratic responsibilities (understood as structural inadequacies) are overlooked.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, as Bratich (2020, p. 311) argues, 'moral panic protocols have lost their recuperative discursive powers and have reverted to more bellicose forms of neutralization.'

Pro-vax discourse overlooks the centrality of dissensus and antagonism in politics (Rancière, 1999). It fails to recognize the antagonistic nature of knowledge-production and presupposes objective and universal knowledge. As such, a hierarchical relationship between the knowledgeable (experts, politicians, journalists) and the ignorant (anti-vaxers, 'populists') becomes visible. The former have a privileged access to truth which is coded as superior. The latter

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<sup>2</sup>Political/technocratic responsibilities and structural inadequacies refer to the state of public healthcare following economic austerity during the 2008 financial crisis, which left healthcare services underequipped during the pandemic. Furthermore, during the pandemic, governments were unable to offer adequate material and immaterial support to the overwhelmed population (see Bamba et al., 2020; Otero-García et al., 2023). These factors are largely overlooked.

are denied access to it (Galanopoulos & Stavrakakis, 2022). In sum, the top-down attitude of established forms of knowledge toward popular frustration and claims (even if unfounded) betrays degrees of elitism – that is, a core dimension of anti-populism, which is discussed next.

### **Anti-Populism**

As it is briefly mentioned throughout the text, those who articulated anti-scientific views were often portrayed as populist, while popular knowledge and grievances were met with elitist dismissal grounded in expert knowledge that was seen as superior. The argument that this final subsection puts forward is that the way populism was used during the pandemic conjuncture globally says little about the phenomenon itself and more about those who oppose it: anti-populists (De Cleen et al., 2018; Stavrakakis, 2014; Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022).

Theorized as a malleable and adaptive political logic, anti-populism reinvents itself during the pandemic conjuncture (Venizelos, 2024). Academic accounts view ‘populism’ as a strong predictor of belief in COVID conspiracy theories (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2021; Marwick & Partin, 2022). ‘Those who believe COVID conspiracies’ are said to be ‘less likely to adapt behaviors recommended by public health officials’ (Stecula & Pickup, 2021, p. 2; see also Speed & Mannion, 2017).

Similarly, major international media authorities, such as Politico, connect populism with vaccine hesitancy, arguing that countries with a strong populist presence are more likely to reject science (see Kennedy, 2019). According to these outlets, what unites populism and vaccine skepticism is that they both spread the politics of fear, distrust and animosity toward elites and experts.

Reinforcing the connection between populism and science-skepticism, the relationship between populism and the anti-vax movement is presented as mutually beneficial and reciprocal:

The anti-vax movement has also had a helping hand from populist parties across the Continent (Kennedy, 2019)

The ‘populism versus science’ dichotomy constituted a salient discursive divide in the discourse of experts, politicians and journalists globally. On the one hand lie responsible political actors and citizens who subscribe to scientific views, abide by the protocols and exhibit the ability to implement them. On the other hand lie political actors and citizens who question the hegemonic management of the pandemic, who lack the ability or willingness to follow protocols, as well as those who subscribe to conspiracy theories and anti-scientific views. Anti-populists presented themselves as capable of offering solutions to complex matters with respect to the management of the

pandemic. Populists, on the contrary, were portrayed as purely responsive to the demands and frustration of ‘the people’ (Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2021).

Indeed, populists like Bolsonaro and Trump may fit such a description. However, the vast majority of scholarly research on the politics of the pandemic tests this connection by drawing on cases of *right-wing* populism. Conclusions, though, take place in the name of populism *in general*, reifying a supposedly intrinsic relationship between post-truth politics and populism. Instances of left-wing populism (e.g., in Greece [SYRIZA], France [France [Insoumise/Jean-Luc Mélenchon], Mexico [AMLO]) (Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022) advocating for science and the vaccine are neglected.

In concluding the discussion, findings locally in Cyprus related to more general patterns of discourse during the pandemic (and likely beyond). In connecting the findings from the Cypriot case to international political and scholarly discussions, we exemplified that pro-vax discourse exhibit traits of techno-scientific objectivism, elitism and anti-populism.

## Conclusion

This article focused on pro-vax communication during the pandemic. Scholarly and public attention on ‘pandemic politics’ have overwhelmingly focused on science-skeptic discourses and actors, like the anti-vax movement, and their consequences for democracy, policy-making and society. However, little emphasis has been placed on pro-vax discourse and the role scientific, pundit and political elites play in the intense discursive polarization observed in the context of COVID-19. This article contributed by filling this gap, critically examining pro-vax discourse during the pandemic. The category of elites comprised scientists (e.g., virologists, epidemiologists), pundits (journalists and scholars) and politicians (in opposition and in power). These were key actors in the pro-vax camp, contributing to and even constructing and conditioning the public debate, and above all interpellating identities through the demarcation between rational and irrational citizens, fake news and science, populists and responsible politicians.

The article investigated empirically and in-depth the case of Cyprus, which has generally been overlooked by studies on pandemic communication. Our discursive analysis of the textual data highlights that dominant pro-vaccination discourse on the pandemic is structured in the name of science, reason and responsibility. To substantiate its arguments, dominant discourse makes references to scientific authorities, draws on data that is used as evidence, and promotes the role of science and the vaccine. Furthermore, through appeals to moralism and fear, it communicates to the public that the responsibility for society’s return to normality lies on the shoulders of individuals who ought to follow advised measures. In this regard, the dominant discourse takes a

disciplinary character in that it promotes and controls specific citizen behavior. Those who question the measures are dismissed.

In making sense of our findings, we brought them into discussion with international theoretical and expert debates. Our inductive take highlights that Cyprus is not an isolated case, as discursive patterns related to pandemic communication relate with theoretical discussions and empirical observations made beyond our case. Trends in Cyprus resonate with the global technoscientific objectivism that has been on the rise particularly during the era of technocratic austerity (2008) (Trimithiotis 2016), and reached its peak with the science-led governance during COVID-19. Furthermore, there is an evident elitist tone in pro-vax communication, stressing the superior nature of scientific knowledge that is inaccessible to the masses. This feature of pro-vax discourse resonates with anti-populism in that it dismisses popular frustration and views on the basis of ignorance.

Notwithstanding the consequences of fake news and of misinformation often spread by radical right and anti-vax/science actors, the discourse that opposes the former reveals a lack of reflexivity that is barely discussed. Not only this discourse has its own implications, but it also plays a role in fueling socio-political reactions. The causes of such phenomena, including growing social and economic inequalities, sentiments of exclusion and marginalization and the accumulation of politically unmet demands, are often disregarded. Against a backdrop of rising anti-establishment sentiments and mobilizations (from anti-austerity to the pandemic conjuncture), those often challenged by such movements – namely pundits, science experts, politicians and academics – unreflexively dismiss these reactions as populist and irrational.

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