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“Give Us Our Daily *Dread*”: Dystopian Traces in the COVID-19 Media Discourse on the Croatian Civil Protection Headquarters

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Abstract

Even before the war in Ukraine delivered the final blow to contemporary semblances of freedom, safety, and democracy in the Western civilized world, the COVID-19 pandemic has since the early 2020 reminded society at large that dystopias, despite being highly imaginative and often futuristic, are never mere fantasy. In fact, repressive social, political, linguistic, media, and other forms of discourse found in fictional dystopias are deeply grounded in reality. In the face of the pronounced individualization, one of the postulates of modern society, individual freedom, has been unmasked as an intensely fragile concept during the pandemic. Introduction of “the new normal”—restriction of movement, suddenly illegal physical contact, police hours, ostracization of the (potentially) infected, peer pressure—underpinned by a constant and intimidating media rhetoric, has disclosed within an allegedly free society the notable inner workings of a repressive dystopia. Beyond the preventative and safety measures devised to curb the virus spreading, the typical dystopian inequality, political hypocrisy, and fear-mongering can be discerned, disseminated mainly through media. In tracing the social, political, and media discourses of Orwell’s classical dystopia *1984*, the aim of this paper is to exhibit the ways in which the COVID-19 media discourse on the Croatian Civil Protection Headquarters connects contemporary Croatia with a typical dystopian society.

Keywords: Media discourse, COVID-19, the Civil Protection Headquarters, dystopia, Orwell, *1984*

1. Introduction

In her paper “Communicating Covid-19 Pandemic: Media Coverage of the Headquarters and the Use of Persuasion Strategies in Croatia,” Marijana Grbeša explores how four key figures of the Headquarters of Civil Protection of the Republic of Croatia were portrayed by the Croatian mainstream media during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. These key figures are Vili Beroš (the Croatian Minister of Health), Davor Božinović (Croatian Minister of the Interior), Krunoslav Capak (Head of the Croatian Institute for Public Health), and Alemka Markotić (Head of the “Fran Mihaljević” Clinic for Infective Diseases in Zagreb) (Grbeša 57). Grbeša argues that the predominantly positive media portrayal of the said four Civil Protection representatives and their use of “pandemic-related strategies of persuasion to achieve public compliance” ensured that the Croatian population followed their rigorous instructions without reproach usually reserved for politicians (57). The present chapter uses Grbeša’s analysis of the media rhetoric and the said four prominent figures’ “persuasive strategies” (57) as a starting point to explore the similarities between discourses used by both the Croatian media and the Civil Protection representatives and discourses employed by canonical dystopian regimes. Specifically, Grbeša finds that the Headquarters used “fear appeals, military metaphors and insistence on the messages of togetherness” (57) as well as that the Croatian media praised the Civil Protection representatives, all of which strengthened their influence and authority over people. This paper argues that the intimidating rhetoric used by the Headquarters and their exaltation by the Croatian media platforms are comparable to manipulation tactics that are often employed in fictional dystopias such as *1984* by George Orwell.

It is important to note that this chapter refrains from any suggestion that the pandemic was a worldwide “hoax” or a conspiracy theory (Booth) and that the key representatives of Civil Protection deliberately deceived the Croatian population in all aspects in order to oppress it, as is the case with leader figures in canonical dystopias. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe striking similarities between the oppressive discourses used by fictional dystopian regimes and the fear-mongering proclamations that surrounded restrictive physical measures imposed by the Civil Protection members on the Croatian population during the 2020 pandemic. These parallels stem from the fact that both of these discourses represent the biopolitical investment of life, as first proposed by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1976) (139). Proclaiming the aim of protecting the life and health of the general public in contemporary societies and employing methods of careful monitoring and control, the biopolitical approach to governing life is often misused by fictional dystopian regimes since it can easily cross the barrier from the utopian aim of protection to outright oppression. This is especially true in crisis situations and health scares since dystopian regimes exploit times of uncertainty to impose new rules and restrictions and to force the population into submission, which they perpetuate even after the imminent danger has passed.¹ In support of this view, Daniele Lorenzini emphasizes that the aim of biopolitics is to exert its influence over large numbers of people and at all times:

[T]he biological processes characterizing the life of human beings as a species became a crucial issue for political decision-

¹ For instance, Aldous Huxley’s World State was established in the aftermath of the global crisis culminating in the Nine Years’ War (41). Orwell’s Oceania in *1984* keeps its citizens subdued by reminding them of “the ravages of the atomic war of the nineteen-fifties” (197), while Margaret Atwood’s Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* was established as a result of the global infertility crisis.

making, a new “problem” to be addressed by governments – and this, not only in “exceptional” circumstances (such as that of an epidemic), but in “normal” circumstances as well. . . . We are no longer governed only, nor even primarily, as political subjects of law, but also as living beings who, collectively, form a global mass – a “population.” (41)

The main tool that is often employed by biopolitics for such extensive control is fear. In the case of COVID-19, “the fear of the coronavirus reduce[d] our social lives to the preoccupation with bare life, which in turn legitimize[d] the emergency measures undertaken by governments” (Agamben qtd. in Prozorov 64).² The main aim of this paper, therefore, is to analyze how the Civil Protection representatives and their media portrayals contributed to creating a pandemic Panopticon that approximated contemporary Croatian society to typical dystopian regimes by using strategies of restriction, surveillance, intimidation, and peer pressure, all enabled and exacerbated by the media.

2. The Pandemic Panopticon

In one of his first texts in which he discusses biopolitics, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault ties the notion of biopower and its practices to Jeremy Bentham’s concept of Panopticon. Described as a prison building of such an architectural design that puts prisoners under constant surveillance due to the obscure position of the guard(s), Panopticon represents a perfect metaphor for contemporary societies (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200). Without the prisoners really knowing when they are being watched or not, they assume that they

² Giorgio Agamben would be the most logical choice for a recent secondary source, as he notes in his book *Where We Are Now? The Epidemic as Politics* (2021): “Once terrorism ceased to exist as a cause for measures of exception, the invention of an epidemic offers the ideal pretext for widening them beyond all known limits” (13). Yet, this article refrains from directly engaging with Agamben for his at times “exaggerated and conspiratorial” (Prozorov 63) attitude to the COVID-19 pandemic.

are under constant surveillance and start to restrict their own behavior; thus, the power exacted over them is not necessarily material or physical in nature but, rather, psychological. Foucault saw such an internalization of rules and auto-censorship of the prisoners' behavior as governing principles of many contemporary social institutions (205). Consequently, he characterized armies, schools, and hospitals, among others, as institutions under severe restriction and monitoring of movement, instilled self-restriction, and peer pressure, just like prisons. As M. Keith Booker summarizes Foucault's argument, the latter claimed that "the difference between life inside a prison and outside is not so great as might first appear" (81). The said "carceral nature" of society (Booker 79) was especially prominent during the pandemic. As Foucault notes, "[w]hen one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used" (*Discipline and Punish* 205), and the pandemic lockdown was a time when large numbers of people had to quickly adopt behaviors in response to new rules.

Overnight, a series of decisions on restrictions was introduced (Krnić "Priopćenje za medije"), curbing the liberties of the population in a way unprecedented in the modern world. Similar to the entire world, the Croatian population was subjected to harsh physical restrictions. As soon as the lockdown was announced on March 19, 2020, all public institutions, shops, and entertainment areas were closed down, with schools and higher education institutions being relegated to virtual classrooms, and only emergency services, pharmacies, and grocery stores being allowed to work ("Croatia – COVID-19"). Additionally, the grocery stores and pharmacies were "under strict disease control measures and shorter . . . [working] hours" (Lazić et al. 44). All others were confined to working from home, and citizens were warned not to leave their homes except for emergencies. The re-

striction that most resembled dystopian scenarios from books and TV screens, however, was the severe curbing of social contact.³ Except for the “persons from the same household” (“Recommendations and Instructions”), people were prohibited from socializing with, engaging in physical gestures, and even standing in proximity to other people due to the danger of spreading the disease. Detailed protocols for entering stores and public institutions were rapidly introduced, prohibiting citizens from entering public buildings without face masks and hand disinfection, obligating them to fulfill visitors’ records upon entering any public service, and the like (“Recommendations and Instructions”).

Furthermore, to ensure compliance of the population regarding the prohibition of spending time in public places, police hours or curfews were introduced, banning people from leaving their homes during the night and outside of regular working hours. In order to make the citizens conform to these restrictions, police patrols were employed to cruise the streets and prevent social gatherings as well as guard inter-city and international roads. All of a sudden, a simple activity such as walking down the street with a friend or family member was potentially a punishable act and constituted a threat to national health and security, according to the Civil Protection proclamations. As such, Grbeša quotes Davor Božinović: “He warned that ‘Croatian police is going to monitor how people comply with the measures; if they don’t[,] they (the police) are going to react’ and ‘I saw people walking in pairs this morning. This should not be happening. Keep

³ Naturally, this approach follows the established system response to medical crises, which Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish* (189–90) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (35–37), but the system’s, at times, overemphasized harshness will be discussed in detail in subsection “3.3. Hypocrisy and Doublespeak” through examples such as the funeral of the Zagreb City mayor, in which none of the social distancing measures were adhered to.

the distance or [the] police will punish you' (*Index*, 21 March 2020)" (71). This easily evokes Margaret Atwood's highly-policed state of Gilead, in which women's movements are similarly restricted and in which physical proximity on the street is a warrant for trouble: "[W]hen we met, outside on the street, we were careful to exchange nothing more than the ordinary greetings. Nobody wanted to be reported, for disloyalty" (Atwood 278–79).

During the COVID-19 lockdown in Croatia, not only public spaces were subjected to police scrutiny but also private homes. The main restrictions and rules related to people's private homes had to do with social gatherings and the practice of self-isolation. During the lockdown, between March and May, house gatherings with more than five people were prohibited, and fines were issued to those who engaged in them (Krnić "Proglašen kraj epidemije"). Police raids were undertaken on "suspicious" locations where large social gatherings could be possible, including restaurants, nightclubs, but also private homes ("Policija rastjerala desetak veseljaka"). This evokes Orwell's description of the police-state into which Oceania suddenly turned, with "the police patrol snooping into people's windows" (Orwell, 1984 4). Those infected with COVID-19 were obliged to inform their primary healthcare providers, and police patrols also visited those registered in their private homes to verify that they were adhering to the rules of self-isolation. In the case of transgression and violation of the "new rules," fines and punishments were administered. While it is logical that the police and Civil Protection representatives, who informed the population of the newly imposed measures and prohibitions, wanted to prevent the disease from spreading, it is possible to observe similarities between their *modus operandi* and fictional dystopian regimes' repression of social contact. Namely, people were asked to report their family members and others for not complying with the rules

of self-isolation and movement restrictions. In other words, people were encouraged to “snitch” the “uncompliant” to the government officials (Weiner qtd. in Grbeša 60). The encouragement of peer pressure is highly reminiscent of Orwell’s *1984* and its use of “the family as a tool” of political power, whereby “[f]amily members are effectively turned against one another, with children being encouraged to inform on their parents and spouses encouraged to spy on one another” (Booker 75).

Moreover, traces of fictional canonical dystopias’ precedence of the communal over the individual could also be noted. This is because during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals and the family in particular lost the power against the system: mothers were not allowed to be with their underage and, in some instances, even new-born children in hospitals, husbands were not allowed to be with their wives during childbirth (“Šok za roditelje”), and terminally ill people were prevented from being visited by their relatives (Perinić Lewis and Rajić Šikanjić 28). It was as if those same ill people, whether infected with COVID-19 or any other illness, had become the property of the state; in case they needed to seek medical assistance, they were taken to a hospital and isolated from the rest of the population and their loved ones. The unprecedented demands on doctors and medical workers meant that the family members received scarce or no information on the patient’s status (Perinić Lewis and Rajić Šikanjić 28), and they would either recover and return home or be administered by the state with no input by their family members, in the case of patient demise. All this resulted in strong feelings of helplessness, fear, and uncertainty, which were exacerbated by the publicly available and regularly disseminated data on the number of COVID-19-infected and deceased people, available in daily news reports (Nakić).

In fact, just like in canonical dystopian literature, the media assumed the central position in restricting and controlling people's behavior. Due to restrictions and concomitant lack of social and physical contact, people were forced to turn to media outlets as their only source of information about governmental prohibitions, prevention measures, and health instructions. This added another level to the digital Panopticon due to constant media streaming and the barrage of deaths, possible ways of spreading the virus, and infection symptoms, which increased the already high levels of anxiety and fear among the population. For this reason, the media and their role during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic can be directly linked to *1984* and its telescreen, a TV-like technological device installed in every citizen's house to control their behavior and shape their consciousness due to a constant stream of interpellating content from the government:

An oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely. (Orwell, *1984* 4)

While the citizens of Oceania are unable to switch their telescreens off, there was no physical barrier that prevented the Croatian citizens from doing so. Nevertheless, what precluded the population from 'switching off' the constant media streams on pandemic developments was the same: the need to be regularly informed about the changing rules of behavior to avoid getting infected and being punished by government officials. As Booker explains in the case of *1984*, since telescreens function as spying devices, Orwell's citizens "modify their behavior . . . assuming themselves to be under surveillance at all time" (79) because the rules imposed by the regime are ever-changing. The same could be said in relation to restrictions and rules imposed by the Croatian government and disseminated by the Civil Protection repre-

sentatives in the media. It was necessary for individuals to constantly inform themselves because the regulations could change from day to day, from hour to hour. It is for this reason that the representatives' claim "The next two weeks are crucial" ("Capak: Sljedeća dva tjedna su ključna") became famous because it kept the citizens in constant wait of the new rules and turns of events.

The fear, uncertainty, and restrictions were the initial reasons which made the Croatian population willing to "sacrifice our personal freedom and uncritically obey the orders issued by Vili Beroš, Alemka Markotić and Krunoslav Capak" (Grbeša 59). According to Foucault, the Panopticon and, in turn, prison-like contemporary societies force individuals to restrain and oppress themselves and their peers. He deems that the individual "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202–203). As Capak reminded the Croatian population in 2020, they had to internalize the Headquarters' orders and follow them even without blatant surveillance: "We will not be there to monitor the people, but we will make sure that they adhere to the health measures we prescribed. If people disregard them, we can revoke them and close the markets at any time" ("Capak objasnio"). The biopolitical strategies carefully employed by the media and especially by Beroš, Markotić, Božinović, and Capak as the Civil Protection heads ensured the docility of the population by perpetuating these widespread feelings of fear and uncertainty despite official proclamations on wanting to calm and protect the population as their only goals. The purpose of the next few paragraphs will thus be to analyze the media reports on these four Civil Protection representatives, their

rhetorical strategies, and the similarities between these two and dystopian media discourse.

3. Dystopian Traces in the COVID-19 Media Discourse on the Croatian Civil Protection Headquarters

In canonical dystopias such as *1984*, the media have a key role in shaping the population's consciousness and directing their behavior. Next to the "ever-present surveillance," Booker sees the telescreens in *1984* as the main interpellating force in this canonical dystopia (80). His claim is in line with Althusser's view of interpellation as a set of practices that shape individuals' consciousness in accordance with the ruling ideology (Althusser 190–91). The said telescreens constantly emit propaganda and media reports that either heavily praise the leader, Big Brother, for his competence in leading the people of Oceania or report on enemies, whether external or internal, and the consequent need to introduce even more strict rules among the population to protect it. These two discourses can thus be divided into two categories: exaltation and intimidation, which are to be analyzed in the next subsections. Incidentally, they correspond to what Grbeša terms as "the flattering media image of the key [pandemic] communicators" (58) and their "fear appeals" (70), which we observed during the 2020 pandemic in Croatia.

3.1. The Exaltation of the Leader(s)

Although the Croatian media usually portray politicians in a negative light, the image they painted in the first couple of months of the 2020 pandemic was "exceptionally favourable" for the said four figures (Grbeša 66). Considering the unprecedented health crisis the modern world faced at the time, it seems natural that the nation turned to those in charge for information, assurance, and leadership. That said,

the sudden sway from media denunciations of politicians and distrust in their leadership skills to the unreserved exaltation of the “fantastic four” (Horvat qtd. in Grbeša 62) can be compared to the sudden change of sentiment the protagonist of *1984* feels for his leader, encouraged by the exposure to media. Orwell thus describes Winston Smith’s inner state as follows: “At those moments his secret loathing of Big Brother changed into adoration, and Big Brother seemed to tower up, *an invincible, fearless protector*, standing like a rock against [enemy forces]” (Orwell, *1984* 17; my emphasis). Granted, the enemy forces in the times of pandemic were the coronavirus and all those who in any way strayed from the rules imposed by the government and endangered the life of the population, but the role of protector and the swaying of the individual(s) sentiment in favor of the ruler are the same. The epithets that the media reports attributed to Vili Beroš, Davor Božinović, Alemka Markotić, and Krunoslav Capak often approximate an almost religious “devotion and loyalty” (Booker 72) reserved for Orwell’s Big Brother. In line with that, Alemka Markotić was praised as “the woman who brought peace to the Croatian people” in times of such uncertainty, “whose day lasts longer than 24 hours,” and who is above all “a woman of faith” who strives to “live her faith every day” (“Prof. Alemka Markotić: Životna priča žene koja je smirila Hrvatsku”). Grbeša also notes that the Civil Protection representatives’ “heroism” was constructed around people’s admiration for the members of the team, especially for Vili Beroš,” since he was “often glorified as the ‘savior’” (74). This almost religious sentiment evokes the praise of “My Saviour!”, which a woman directs at Big Brother during a media stream called Two Minute Hate (Orwell, *1984* 18).

The framing of the Civil Protection representatives as superheroes was directly linked to children, with media displaying the chil-

dren's drawings of them "as superheroes" (Grbeša 74; see also "Dječak iz Nuštra..."). Once again, this is reminiscent of the role of children as instruments of regime propaganda in 1984, whereby children become an "extension" of the regime (Booker 75) by adopting the behaviors imposed by the leaders or by reporting those who refuse to act by governmental orders.

Moreover, the four Civil Protection representatives were "praised for their competence, clarity, and sobriety" (Grbeša 74). All of them were on the receiving end of media praise, but special attention was given to the then newly appointed Minister of Health, Vili Beroš.⁴ In a similar manner in which Big Brother is saluted for his infallibility, knowledge, wisdom, virtue, inspiration, and leadership (Orwell 1984 74), the persona of Vili Beroš was apotheosized. He was termed "the hero of the nation" and "the best thing that . . . happen[ed] to Croatia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic" (Pintar). The media simultaneously lauded Beroš for his personal and political achievements, assuring the population that he had a key role in protecting all our lives and health, just as Big Brother protected the citizens of Oceania.

3.2. (Homeland) War Language

Apart from the exaltations of the leader, the most frequent tune that the citizens of Oceania are exposed to through telescreens is the "strident military music" (9), with its alleged purpose of boosting the nation's spirit regarding their brave soldiers in faraway countries. However, the war music that constantly fills the living spaces of citizens of Oceania spurs sentiments of hate and distrust among people, as if

⁴ Beroš assumed the function of the Croatian Minister of Health on January 31, 2020 (Hrvatska liječnička komora), and the COVID-19 lockdown started on March 19, 2020.

their everyday life were a constant battle and they had to destroy the enemy or live in fear that the enemy will destroy them. This reminds the citizens of Oceania that Big Brother is their great leader and that they need him to protect them; otherwise, they would perish as a country and as individuals.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, war metaphors were used globally, as witnessed by the Director-General of WHO Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus's statement "We are at war with a virus that threatens to tear us apart" (qtd. in Chappell). However, metaphors had a special role among the Croatian people. On the one hand, the "language of war" (Grbeša 61) was used to remind the Croatian people of their own resilience during the Homeland War and their loyalty to their leaders, who had led them to victory. As Grbeša quotes Davor Božinović, the Minister of the Interior, who reminded the citizens of Croatia of the Homeland War: "Like 29 years ago . . . I would like to thank the police, civil protection services, army, and of course, health workers" (72). He lauded the services for being efficient first responders during both the war and the pandemic. Thereby, terms such as "mobilization," "battle with coronavirus," "soldier," and "first line of defense" (Grbeša 72) were all used to remind the Croatian population of the hard times they had already been to and boost their morale against the enemy.

On the other hand, such language was a constant reminder that the Croatian population was at war with the virus. This suggested that people had to remain vigilant and ready to listen to the Civil Protection representatives' rigorous instructions if they wished to survive, scaring people into obedience and inciting more unease and uncertainty. As such, Minister Beroš noted: "If people . . . [refuse to] trust me, as the Minister of Health, if they . . . [refuse to] trust doctors, scientists, or institutions, they must trust the horrendous death tolls, which

show the nature of the disease we are at *war* with” (qtd. in Grund). Similarly, when it came to their vaccination appeals in 2021, Markotić infamously warned: “We will either get vaccinated or we will have *zimmer frei*, online classes for children, older people locked up, and we will fill hospitals and cemeteries once again” (“Važna novost o nošenju maski”). Their statements and warnings were to be taken as *de facto* laws, even if the safety measures and infringements changed from day to day. In support of this, the reports praised the work of doctors, nurses, and other medical staff in an attempt to calm the people’s anxiety and convince them of the efficacy of the healthcare systems. At the same time, scenes such as the preparation of beds in Arena Zagreb, Croatia’s largest concert hall, were shown to people to scare them into obedience (Krnčić “Arena Zagreb”).



Fig. 1. Hospital Beds Prepared in Croatia’s Largest Concert Hall; Krnčić, Ivana. “Arena Zagreb uskoro prima prve pacijente: Doznajemo koga će ondje prebacivati iz Dubrave.” *Jutarnji list*, 25 Nov. 2020, jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/arena-zagreb-uskoro-prima-prve-pacijente-doznajemo-koga-ce-ondje-prebacivati-iz-dubrave-15033285#&gid=1&pid=6. Photograph by Ronald Goršić/Cropix. Reproduced by permission of Ronald Goršić and Cropix.

This dual function of the war rhetoric used by the Civil Protection figures approximates yet another dystopian strategy and that is doublespeak, which will be delineated and exemplified in the next subsection.

3.3. Hypocrisy and Doublespeak

Many rhetorical strategies and statements in fictional dystopias are often aimed at outright deceiving the population or asking them to participate in the act of deceiving themselves by accepting double standards. Orwell's two dystopian texts term this strategy in two different ways. In *Animal Farm* (2013), it is "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (107). In *1984*, this governmental strategy is called "*doublethink*" (9) and it has the following role: "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it" (Orwell 37). Numerous media reports and the Civil Protection representatives' statements and rules issued during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic were incongruent and paradoxical, asking the Croatian population to suspend belief and accept them.

The first example is the funeral of the former Zagreb City mayor, Milan Bandić. Since funerals are mass gatherings, according to the regulation issued by the Civil Protection Headquarters, the participation of a large number of people was forbidden (Perinić Lewis and Rajić Šikanjić 23). Many citizens buried their loved ones in private ceremonies without the support of their wider families and friends, exacerbated by the fear for their own and others' health. However, the media blatantly showed several hundreds of people who participated

at Milan Bandić's funeral ("Na pogrebu") on March 3, 2021, before, after, and *during* which date the said restriction of a severely limited number of participants was still in force. Although no repercussions and fines were issued to the participants, this did not stop the Civil Protection representatives from insisting that *all* citizens of the Republic of Croatia must follow the rules, from claiming they would be punished, and from demanding the adherence of the general population. According to Booker, this is a typical dystopian strategy: dissemination of "[b]latant absurdities – . . . [due to which] coldly calculated rational procedures turn out to be the ultimate form of irrationality" (71). The same happened with local elections in 2020, when, as the journalist Ivana Krnić notes:

Just before the local elections in 2020, Croatia had allegedly got rid of the coronavirus epidemic. Although the pandemic was officially still in force, the Prime Minister and other officials declared their victory over the coronavirus and so the elections were held with next to none safety measures, loud music, celebration, and everything that was up until that point [and thereafter] strictly prohibited. ("25 najluđih stvari")

The next instance of hypocrisy and "doublethink" resembling the *modus operandi* of Orwell's Oceanian regime is the Civil Protection representative's constant use of "war metaphors and scare tactics" (Grbeša 60) while at the same time urging the population to remain calm and not panic. It is the same as the function of the telescreen in 1984, through which the propaganda is constantly delivered to the citizens of Oceania. On the one hand, the aim is to keep them in a constant state of distrust and animosity in order to direct their hate toward their family members, closest neighbors, and faraway soldiers. On the other hand, the constant exposure to propaganda aims to scare people by reminding them of the need to be docile and follow Big Brother's lead, otherwise their life will be in danger. When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, the constant media coverage warned the Croa-

tian population against those who did not comply with the measures, claiming they would be caught and punished, thus exhibiting the typical dystopian role of “constant peer pressure that attaches a strong stigma to any deviation from the communal norm” (Booker 57). As mentioned above, people were encouraged “to scrutinize, shame and ‘snitch’ uncompliant neighbors” (Weiner qtd. Grbeša 60).

This leads to the final connection between the pandemic media discourse and dystopian rhetoric strategies, which Grbeša terms as “pandemic shaming” and “negative solidarity” by emphasizing the divide between us and them (73). This practice of denouncing those who refused to comply with the restrictions and warning them of possible consequences compares to “scapegoating,” through which fictional dystopian “governments typically enforce their intolerance of difference through persecution of specified marginal groups” (Booker 11). In literary dystopias such as *Brave New World* and *1984*, all those who oppose the regime’s ideology, propaganda, and rules of conduct are scapegoated and threatened to be eliminated from mainstream society. During the pandemic, those who refused to comply with the strict regulations were not only accused of endangering their own health and warned that they might be denied help if they contracted COVID-19 and needed medical assistance but also stigmatized as walking hazards and basically murderers. Grbeša quotes Alemka Markotić, who said: “Breaking self-isolation is the same thing as having a gun and want[ing] to kill someone because you are irresponsible” (71). Markotić was also quoted saying, “Anyone who does not self-isolate is a bioterrorist” (qtd. in Krnić “25 najluđih stvari”).

Later, toward the end of 2020 and during 2021, when the vaccination was introduced and workers were obliged to present a vaccination certificate or undergo a COVID-19 test every time they entered a public building, the scapegoats became those who refused to

vaccinate. Certain workers were under threats of losing their jobs and citizens were scared that they would be denied medical help if not vaccinated. Yet, the vaccination period revealed yet another instance of doublespeak and hypocrisy. While the vaccination was said to be “extremely sensitive and to be kept in a cool environment of –70 degrees Celsius” (“Anketa: Je li Capak na primjeren način”), the head of the Croatian Institute for Public Health, Krunoslav Capak, was photographed sitting and posing on a case containing the vaccine.

In turn, this exacerbated the Civil Protection representatives’ fall from the grace bestowed on them by the media during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Beroš, Božinović, Capak, and Markotić became “yesterday’s national heroes” (Karlović Sabolić), and the media re-established the negative narrative of the Croatian politicians and leading figures, which is a topic that warrants additional research in the context of dystopian media strategies and rhetoric to be embarked on sometime in the future.

4. Conclusion

In dystopian literature, media and the language of the media have a key role in establishing and maintaining the regime’s rule. Since “the power of language . . . lies in its ability to carry out or perform changes in people’s way of thinking or perceiving the world” (Matek and Pataki 359), fictional dystopian regimes often resort to propaganda disseminated by the media to maintain their position. They often manipulate the language and use specific rhetorical strategies either to change or perpetuate public opinion on certain issues, mainly to keep the population subdued and docile. Arising in times of crisis, fictional dystopian leaders—such as Orwell’s Big Brother or Huxley’s World Controllers—often gain people’s trust and ensure their obedience by establishing themselves as knowledgeable, competent, and benevolent

protectors. Such an image is perpetuated by the media through constant exposure, praises, and slogans, perpetuating the attitude that the leader or leaders are there to guide and protect the population. Due to the fear of the unprecedented crisis that was the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the population was confined to their homes and forbidden from engaging in physical contact with anyone outside their households, the media outlets became the population's only source of information.

This chapter has compared a selection of the most persuasive statements by the four representatives of the Civil Protection of the Republic of Croatia during the 2020 pandemic lockdown—Vili Beroš, Alemka Markotić, Davor Božinović, and Krunoslav Capak—in the context of discourse and tactics used by the leaders of canonical dystopian texts such as George Orwell's *1984*. Building on the rhetoric which the Civil Protection representatives used to impose the lockdown restrictions and maintain adherence of the population, and which Marijana Grbeša discusses in her article "Communicating Covid-19 Pandemic: Media Coverage of the Headquarters and the Use of Persuasion Strategies in Croatia," this chapter has concluded that these strategies strongly correspond to and find examples in canonical dystopias *1984* and even *The Handmaid's Tale*. These strategies are the exultation of the Civil Protection representatives in the manner of Big Brother, the prohibition of social contact similar to that in Gilead (which targets only those who are not in the position of power), the instrumentalization of children and family members to shame and report "rebellious behavior," and paradoxical "doublespeak" in the form of boosting the spirit of the population while actively working to scare them through constant exposure to intimidating media discourse.

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