

## Biopolitics and the Construction of (Mis)Trust: Public Discourse Regarding Pandemic Governance in Saint Petersburg, Russia

*Konstantin Galkin*<sup>1</sup>, Sociological Institute of FCTAS RAS, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation  
*Oksana Parfenova*<sup>2</sup>, Sociological Institute of FCTAS RAS, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

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### Abstract

This study is dedicated to the development of trust and distrust in the measures taken by the authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the concept of biopolitics, the authors analyze the reactions of social network users and their communication with the authorities. For this purpose, throughout the course of one year, the authors have studied posts on one of the official social media groups of the Saint Petersburg authorities. The posts concerned various anti-COVID measures: vaccination, mask requirements, online learning, as well as other restrictions and comments. For the analysis, the authors used the AntConc program. Based on the findings, the authors identified three discourses. The most prominent two are those of dissent and resistance.

The theoretical context in this article is the synthesis of the ideas of Foucault and Agamben. The authors present a continuum of different discourses, ranging from liberal and oriented to the understanding of biopolitics as a norm of effective management to disciplinary discourses and the perception of measures and restrictions as attempts at control. These are based on users' distrust, doubts, and unwillingness to follow the prescribed measures. Within these two discourses, users communicate with different public authorities more actively.

The authorities' communication, based on references to legislative acts, did not foster trust and increased discontent, while users facing a lack of active resistance to biopolitical measures resorted to evasion tactics such as not wearing masks and using fake QR codes.

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<sup>1</sup> Konstantin Galkin is a Senior Researcher at the Sociological Institute, Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation.

<sup>2</sup> Oksana Parfenova is a Senior Researcher at the Sociological Institute, Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation.

## Introduction

The outbreak of the pandemic evoked distrust of the healthcare system, which manifested in skepticism toward the capabilities of medicine, preventive measures, and, eventually, vaccination. There was a considerable rise in conspiracy theories, including those concerning the origin of the pandemic. This, in turn, affected personal health practices and attitudes toward vaccination (van Mulukom et al. 2022). Several contemporary studies, which analyze the particularities of the pandemic progression, focus on studying the discourses of denial regarding the role of medicine and vaccines, as well as the denial of the mortality risk of the virus and the discussions of conspiracy theories online (Escardó 2021; Isupova et al. 2021; Lavorgna and Myles 2021). On the one hand, the creation of vaccines and the start of the vaccination campaign generated various discourses about vaccination against the new disease, but on the other hand, propelled the discussion between supporters and opponents of vaccination to the next level. This has led to discourses of trust and distrust of vaccination as the best way to combat COVID-19.

Markers of willingness and unwillingness to vaccinate as well as follow the necessary precautionary measures are the key signs of distrust of state biopolitics. Further, various protest activities indicate the way people themselves try to modify biopolitics and disciplinary bodily practices, which, of course, include mandatory vaccination (Van Bavel et al. 2020; Rouse 2021). The state measures to combat the pandemic, the most drastic of which were lockdowns and self-isolation of varying degrees of strictness, the requirement to wear masks, and eventually vaccinate, represent the classic concept of biopolitics according to Michel Foucault, where the state tries to make all citizens behave in a certain manner (Foucault 2010). In response to this, citizens show resistance and engage in various discourses, often using social networks and mass media. Although Russia was among the first to launch a vaccination campaign, citizens' level of vaccine acceptance was low from the very beginning.<sup>3</sup> There were regular scandals and stories about buying vaccination certificates, and as of May 2022, there were 1,101 criminal cases for selling fake certificates.<sup>4</sup> There were quite a few people willing to fake vaccination to get the coveted QR code, such as by using someone else's or an artificially-generated certificate or buy a certificate online. Obviously, these tactics are the result of the low trust in vaccines. In this regard, the authors consider it worthwhile to study how distrust is built in the context of the biopolitical measures introduced by the authorities, which focus on restrictions and mass preventive vaccination.

Although today there is a certain pool of research dedicated to radical COVID-dissidents and COVID-dissidence in general, pandemic-related discourses produced by casual users of social networks are still insufficiently studied (Kirzyuk 2021; Lyu et al. 2022). The authors suggest that studying commentaries made by ordinary users of social networks allows us to determine and analyze existing discourses about biopolitical measures of the authorities. This determined the focus of the authors' research interest that did not include specialized communities, for

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<sup>3</sup> As a result, almost a year and a half since the start of vaccination, Russia is in 101st place in the world by vaccination rate *GOGOV*. 2024. "Statistika vaksinatсии ot COVID-19 v mire" [Global COVID-19 vaccination statistics]. Accessed May 28, 2024. <https://gogov.ru/covid-v-stats/world>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. *MKRU*. "Vmesto ruki kolem v gubku": koroli fal'shiivkhi privivok raskryli skhemu" [Instead of injecting the arm, we inject a sponge: fake vaccination kings reveal scheme]. June 27, 2021. Accessed July 20, 2024. <https://www.mk.ru/social/health/2021/06/27/vmesto-ruki-kolem-v-gubku-koroli-falshivkhi-privivok-raskryli-skhemu.html?ysclid=l8wxzz4xhv127779942>; Bashlykova, Natal'ia. "Ne ukol'no: v Rossii vzbudili 1101 del o prodazhe COVID-sertifikatov" [No jab: in Russia, there have been 1101 criminal cases initiated for selling COVID certificates]. *Izvestia*, May 13, 2022. Accessed July 20, 2024. <https://iz.ru/1333543/natalia-bashlykova/ne-ukolno-v-rossii-vozbudili-1101-delo-o-prodazhe-covid-sertifikatov?ysclid=l8wy3nqq57494343586>.

instance, vaccination opponents or COVID-dissidents (which have clearly delineated and structured boundaries) and instead turned to a popular public group, specializing in providing official information. The authors' principal research interest is the issue of building mistrust in biopolitics among social network users during the pandemic.

### **Theoretical context**

“What is the point of continuing to live, if we can no longer do the things that give meaning to our lives?” (Friedrich 2021). This was the question that the German philosopher Jörg Phil Friedrich asked the global community, referring to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought us back to the “bare life” concept of Giorgio Agamben. This concept implies biological existence being placed outside the law and exclusively within the context of regulations and control imposed by the state and authorities (Agamben 2011). During the pandemic, Agamben's ideas have sparked a wave of criticism and prompted attempts to reinterpret the philosophical implications of global epidemics.

Agamben's criticism of the general concept of the pandemic is based on three key changes that have occurred in people's lives since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first change is technological. With the outbreak of the pandemic, people had fewer opportunities for communication, and all interaction and communication moved online, which disrupted familiar social relations. Agamben illustrates this with online learning, which, in turn, creates difficulties in receiving a quality education. The second change is biomedical. It is primarily due to total medicalization. Medicine starts to dominate society, and miraculous contexts of salvation are equated with those in religion. Medicine becomes a kind of COVID religion, lifestyle, a code of necessary rules and commandment-like regulations. The third change is military and mobilization discourse, in which individuality is erased and replaced by society's endless struggle against the virus and constant mobilization of society's resources (Agamben 2020). This thesis of Agamben is well illustrated by the speech of French President Emmanuel Macron, where he said: “We are at war” (Macron 2020). The basic premise of these three changes identified by Agamben is that anti-pandemic activities, as well as the introduction of prohibitions, restrictions, and the adoption of military and mobilization vocabulary, reduced life to mere existence and survival. Individual freedom is cancelled and replaced by collective struggle.

Upon consideration of the particularities of the distribution of freedom and power and the demarcation of lines between the two during the pandemic, it is impossible to ignore the concept of biopolitics introduced by Foucault as one of the means of regulating the life processes of people in the age of neoliberalism (Foucault 2005, 252–277; Foucault, 2010; Lemke 2001). Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been ongoing debates about the role of people in this process. Among the disputed issues is the question of the degree to which it is possible to control and dispose of one's freedom during a pandemic: bodily freedom of movement (Dinacci 2021; Wynn 2021). Broadcast by the authorities and the media, the discourse of restrictions disrupts the familiar routine and changes attitudes toward health and medicine. In this case, the concept of biopolitics becomes a reference point and provides context for theorizing about the distribution of trust in the authorities and medical technologies, as well as for understanding the peculiarities of control in a pandemic.

Considering the peculiarities of the COVID-19 pandemic's spread and its various scenarios, the authors turn to social and political models identified by Foucault, which he considered using the examples of epidemics that existed in Europe. Foucault distinguished two models common to various types of societies: the “model of exclusion of lepers” and the “model of inclusion of

the marginalized” (Foucault 2005, 208). In the modern age, society has developed a mechanism to prevent infection, and if the control of leprosy required the exclusion of an infected person and their isolation, the control of a plague called for another disciplinary mechanism, more characteristic of epidemics in modern society that implies that the state policy of epidemic control concerns not only plague victims but the public in general (Mamychev 2020; Pele and Riley 2021). Foucault considered this disciplinary mechanism to be the cornerstone of biopolitics in modern societies. It implies that most modern societies do not invoke the model of exclusion of the infected from social life, but on the contrary, integrate the ‘deviants’ into common productivity, which is achieved by the creation of vaccines and medicines. This contributes to the strict labour and political management in the treatment of different epidemics that occur in modern societies (Budzi 2022; Manichkin 2021). In these circumstances, the role of the concept of biopolitics becomes quite evident. It does not highlight the benefits and drawbacks of ‘control over people’s bodies,’ nor does it praise different forms of power, but it does facilitate understanding of transitional historical states.

Foucault notes that power, the key element of biopolitics, is a network of constantly strained and active relations rather than a privilege of certain individuals (Foucault 2002). Thus, the concept of power, according to Foucault, is a combination of strategic mechanisms that participate in this network. Resistance to the network can happen at two levels. At the first level, there is direct resistance, namely opposition to power, aimed directly at blocking it. The second level involves a restructuring of the network itself, changes and transformations of existing strategic positions, as well as changes within disciplinary practices (Giraldo Díaz 2006; Lemke 2001). The second level, as a rule, is implemented at the expense of resources outside the network. At this level, resistance depends on individual capabilities and the capabilities of specific groups of individuals. Discourse is an important resource for the second level since it creates new forms of protest and serves as a kind of “fuel” to resistance to the accepted disciplinary practices of biopolitics (Death 2010).

It is important to understand that the very concept of biopolitics proposed by Foucault is the idea of how government control can develop during a pandemic but not the ideal course of this development. Biopolitical theorizing about the processes occurring during pandemics is particularly relevant today. What matters here is not so much the analysis of total restrictions and establishment of control over society as the study of how the pandemic creates new social orders and perspectives and changes communication and subjects of interactions.

Concepts of biopolitics by Foucault and Agamben differ in their views on the creation of control mechanisms within the framework of biopolitics. In particular, an important difference is the concept proposed by Agamben of the sovereign as a key decision-making figure: “The sovereign is the one who makes a decision on a state of emergency” (Agamben 2011, 53). Thus, according to Agamben, it is the sovereign that has a monopoly on decision-making and determines when it is necessary to introduce and remove restrictions. Also, the sovereign in the concept of Agamben has the right of flaw— an exclusive right that goes beyond the norm but, at the same time, remains in a relationship with it. Therefore, going beyond the norm, according to Agamben, is primarily a temporary measure when the rule does not cease to apply but is only temporarily limited or changed (Agamben 2011, 235). Consequently, the main claim of the sovereign is the right to the possibility of including in the legal field norms and time constraints that were previously outside of it. This is well illustrated by the actions of many governments, which, with the onset of the pandemic, restricted or completely stopped the work of many large enterprises and shopping centers, changed and reduced public transport routes and so on. As noted by Agamben, it is precisely human life as such that the actions of all restrictive norms apply. In his opinion, individuals fully entrust their lives to the sovereign, which in turn

contributes to the creation of an “obedient body” and regulatory mechanisms, the purpose of which is to anticipate events and minimize risks and losses arising from events (Agamben 2011).

As Foucault himself mentioned, relatively different concepts, disciplinary and regulatory, can be combined together, considering the example of a large city where police disciplinary control is supplemented by mechanisms for regulating life, such as sanitary control, insurance, and various forms of economic behaviour (Foucault 2019). The pandemic also clearly illustrates the intersection of two ideas of biopolitics, when the general recommendations of doctors and epidemiologists are interpreted completely differently by the leadership of different countries and, as a result, are perceived differently by the residents of these countries. This is an excellent example of the intersection of concepts—disciplinary (Agamben) and regulatory (effective), which was put forward by Foucault in terms of combining harsh measures and their softer and more effective application in different regions. Based on this, the authors consider biopolitics in the context of a pandemic—a synthesis of rigid and not always productive totalitarian governance through prohibitions and control, which was carried out with varying force in different regions of the world, as well as a soft model of productive governance proposed by Foucault involving the use of various tools of soft control and coercion. In this study, in order to analyze various discourses, the authors use a synthesis of two concepts of biopolitics (Foucault and Agamben) and answer the question of how life is regulated through exceptions and prohibitions.

The innovations that shape new discourses and create biopolitical precedents of the COVID-19 pandemic include media politics, the broadcasting of restrictions, and various rallying cries. Thus, the slogan that “it is fashionable to be safe” divides society into several factions: opponents and adherents of wearing masks as well as those who intensify the discussion concerning the need to wear masks (Schubert 2022). Researchers who criticize the use of the classical concept of biopolitics do not fully agree to attribute all existing restrictions to a state policy of total control. Instead of a one-sided view on the issues and an attempt to explain all measures by total restrictions, there is a proposition to identify several areas of pressure, among which an important one is mediocracy, pressure on the media, and manipulation of the media through appropriate rhetoric (Calnan 2020; Jayasinghe 2021). Based on the work of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ebola fever outbreak, and the avian flu epidemic, scientists have documented discourses that can traumatize the public, increasing anxiety and stress for most people (Garfin, Silver, and Holman 2020). What it involves is, first, the heroification of doctors and medical personnel; second, the treatment of the virus as a military enemy and the comparison of self-isolation to military mobilization; third, the discourse of total control, which metathesizes existing restrictions and regulations. All this becomes the subject for discussion, a heated debate among social network users regarding resistance to the policies, media-created agenda of total restrictions, and a loss of individuality. As a result, the virus becomes an invisible enemy that can lurk in every person and has a “hideous” face created by media discourse and the atmosphere around it. What becomes interesting in this situation is not Agamben’s consideration of total bans, restrictions, and a loss of anthropocentricity but an examination of the whole context. As Latour pointed out, the establishment of pandemic orders takes place in the statistical state, when the individuality of citizens locked in their homes is transferred online, and the depressing cries of ambulance sirens can be heard in the streets, creating a particular fear and realization of inevitability (Latour 2020). The Italian philosopher Lorenzini notes that following Foucault’s ideas, we should not focus on the opposition between authorities and the individual during a pandemic and rather consider the danger of the biopower itself, not taking it at face value and criticizing it (Lorenzini 2020).

The study of biopolitics in a pandemic, which undoubtedly has its origins in Foucault's ideas, is therefore possible through an analysis of media discourses. The COVID-19 pandemic, unlike plague epidemics, has become largely a pandemic of media biopolitics, which creates relevant discourses regarding protection against the virus, enforcement of mask requirements, and the need for vaccination (Žižek 2020). Studies dedicated to the perception of the pandemic show that the key factor in the acceptance (or nonacceptance) of a pursued policy is trust. The majority of studies show a clear quantitative bias towards distrust of state media and the creation of various conspiracy theories, particularly the ideas about deliberate exaggeration of the scale of the pandemic and its consequences (Freeman et al. 2020; Uscinski et al. 2020). In this study, the authors consider trust as a state construct, focusing on Foucault's work *Security, Territory, Population*: "The public is the population seen under the aspect of its opinions, ways of doing things, forms of behaviour, customs, fears, prejudices, and requirements; it is what one gets a hold on through education, campaigns, and convictions" (Foucault 2007, 75). One should not treat trust or distrust as entirely exogenous to biopolitics and regulation. Instead, they can be considered as key categories under which the population is analyzed, measured, and intervened (e.g. through opinion polls). The question then becomes, what mechanisms did authorities look to in order to govern distrust?

The belief in the official concealment of the truth about the pandemic and the creation of a special positive image of vaccination is common among different groups of people, regardless of their financial state, social status, and age. Perhaps distrust is the key message of most publications analyzing COVID discourses in the media. Nevertheless, the restrictive measures themselves as well as the policy of restrictions, are perceived in absolutely different ways. There are accepting and understanding discourses, and there are radical discourses of non-acceptance, specifically labelling the non-acceptance of any restrictive measures (Enders et al. 2020; Grimes 2021; Romer et al. 2020). The inability to protect oneself from disinformation becomes the reason for the search for ideas about global conspiracies, mysticism, and distrust of current policies (Goertzel 1994). Similar conclusions can be found in social studies of these issues during the pandemic (Bodner, Welch, and Brodie 2020). The loss of control over oneself and, consequently, the appearance of "agency panic" are important in the creation of conspiracy theories (Melley 2020, 12). The lack of control over one's freedom gives rise to many ideas about total surveillance, brainwashing, alien conspiracy, and the all-seeing eye of Sauron (Melley 2008; Sarasin 2020); such ideas allow for the saving of one's individual freedom. Conspiracy theories generate discussions about the necessity to protect oneself from external control and the rejection of any expert control. Moreover, within these discourses appears resistance to the activities of political institutions in general and calls for opposition to existing biopolitics.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, what mattered was the public participation and response as well as individual and collective concern for one's freedom and safety, which may not only contradict the restrictive measures but, on the contrary, support and accept these measures. Therefore, in the context of this analysis, it is important to consider how resistance (or non-resistance) to restrictive measures broadcast by the authorities is discursively framed. To this end, the authors analyzed the comments on the posts in the official public group of the authorities of a Russian metropolitan city and demonstrated the specificity of the representations of resistance to the measures (or, on the other hand, trust in and acceptance of them), dictated by the biopolitics broadcast on the Internet.

The definition of discourse given by the authors in the article tends to the idea of Foucault: "Discourse is a set of statements about a particular area; it structures the way of speaking on a particular topic and about a particular object, process" (Foucault 2006). According to Foucault's

idea, discourse supports a certain “mode” of knowledge production and also makes possible certain ways of thinking about reality and excludes others. Important for a researcher analyzing discourses in the context of Foucault's idea is the analysis of the context in which different types of discourses are possible and the study of the classification rules within which discourses are organized, as well as the designation of the rules used to construct pictures of the world and various classification systems (Foucault 1984). At the same time, as Foucault noted, different discourses do not so much complement each other but, on the contrary, come into conflict with each other. For example, knowledge belonging to one type of discourse may exclude knowledge concerning the same ideas but belonging to other types of discourse. According to this point of view, discourse is a set of interlocking tools that bring together one of the systems of knowledge. This study examines different types of discourse regarding restrictions and controls during the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzes various perceptions of the restrictions themselves, and the degree of trust and distrust regarding the imposed norms. Thus, the discourse is defined by the authors as “various states of counteraction.” Since the theoretical context in this article is the synthesis of the ideas of Foucault and Agamben, the authors present a continuum of different discourses, ranging from liberal and oriented to the understanding of biopolitics as a norm of effective management to disciplinary discourses and the perception of measures and restrictions as attempts at control.

In this study, the synthesis of the ideas of Agamben and Foucault is tested empirically. The authors’ main objective is to show, based on the analysis of empirical material, possible combinations of different types of biopolitics, ranging from the rigid and disciplinary type of Agamben to the more liberal and more managerial in the context of Foucault's ideas. This article is a possible empirical illustration of such discourses and does not pretend to attempt a theoretical unification of these concepts since a theoretical unification of the two concepts of biopolitics would certainly require more empirically rich studies in different countries to illustrate the possibilities of combining the discourses.

In this article, the authors focus on the fact that biopolitics is a synthesis of norms of effective management and regulatory norms with strict disciplinary rules. When analyzing discourse, this allows the authors to type in detail different combinations in various types of discourse: from populist and aimed at criticizing and rejecting/accepting existing norms and rules to liberal ones that are focused on finding the possibility of effectively managing the pandemic situation.

### **Research Methodology**

The study focuses on how users in Saint Petersburg engaged with pandemic-related publications on the official VKontakte page of a local authority. The main function of this public page is to post news, events, and open discussions of various problems. VKontakte, being the most popular social network in Russia, consequently has an audience consisting of different age groups and diverse professional backgrounds. This audience is particularly representative in authorities’ official public groups. In this case, the authors consider the social network as a platform for the presentation of citizens’ opinions and views on the measures related to the pandemic and vaccination. The authors chose Saint Petersburg because, firstly, it is a large, federally significant city with an active online audience and it has a wide representation of local public authorities on social networks. Secondly, COVID-19 infection and mortality rates in Saint Petersburg were one of the highest in the country. This explains the active level of involvement in the VKontakte group; at the time of the study, the total number of subscribers in the group was more than 400,000. Moreover, communication in the public group is organized in a way that questions posed by users in the group often receive a response from the official

authorities (such authorities include the Committee on Healthcare, the Committee on Law and Order, the Committee on Labour and Employment, etc.).

According to the aim of this research, the authors consider the media as an institution that creates blanket restrictions, which have been reinforced during the pandemic. In this case, it is important to understand the specifics of the media itself, which are considered and analyzed in the study. The authors do not consider the media as an independent institution, nor do they consider independent media in the article itself; on the contrary, in this article, the authors focus on state media, in particular, the official portal of the government on the social media network VKontakte. Therefore, in this case, the media are a relay of the official position of the government with all restrictions and actions taken to create restrictions during the pandemic. In the case described on page 5, the authors are talking about the media in general, among which there are certainly independent media that oppose, condemn, and do not accept the general state policy and related restrictions. Thus, the sources of media are quite diverse, but in this article, the authors focus on official media.

The period of study was one year: January 1, 2021, to January 1, 2022. Mass vaccination started in January 2021, and a year-long analysis allowed the authors to observe the establishment of pandemic discourses, including the important topic of vaccination. The authors selected all posts related to the pandemic in one way or another, e.g., various COVID restrictions, COVID-19 vaccination, online learning, infection statistics, etc. The sample consisted of 62 posts with comments (approximately several thousand publications in total). All the selected publications were divided into different thematic blocks. Altogether there were four blocks: vaccination (21 publications), pandemic restrictions (21 publications), medical services (12 publications), and COVID-19 infection rate (eight publications).

The first step of the analysis was implemented using the AntConc program. Presently, this program is one of the few free and available tools for researchers (Koturova 2020). For the keywords, the authors selected words most frequently encountered in the comments. In order to determine this, the authors performed a frequency analysis of word usage. The words were selected from the top 300 most frequently used words in regard to all four thematic groups: “vaccination,” “vaccines,” “person,” “vaccine shots,” “antibodies,” “COVID,” “committee,” “healthcare,” “diseases,” “vaccinated,” “restrictions,” “doctor,” “immunity,” “health,” “test,” “hope,” “is sick,” “PCR,” “Sputnik,” “authorities,” “measures,” “right,” “masks,” “metro,” “clinic,” “data,” and “quantity.” The program also allowed us to analyze different contexts of the keywords’ usage.

Next, the authors performed a content analysis of text comments and focused on the wording used by commentators in their questions, reactions, and opinions about the various restrictions and vaccinations in the first place, as well as any other news related to the pandemic in one way or another.

### **Results of the study**

All pandemic-related publications provoked keen responses and detailed discussions among users. As the authors prioritized the concept of trust, in the analysis of comments and discourses, the authors focused on the wording of the users’ opinions/assessments/reactions to various actions of the authorities: restrictions, vaccination, work of medical institutions, and pandemic awareness. By analyzing the context in which the keywords were used, the authors identified several different discourses representing different levels of opposition within the issue of trust and distrust of state biopolitics. By distinguishing different types of discourse, the authors would like to note that statements within one type of discourse on any point of biopolitics did

not mean that the user would have the same opinion on the other point. In reality, perceptions and opinions are more complicated and often synthetic in their nature. Thus, a person who supports vaccination can be opposed to the necessity of wearing masks or, for instance, a user who supports remote work and online learning can, at the same time, oppose mask requirements on public transport. Therefore, the authors identified different types of discourse without claiming that every user can be unambiguously attributed as an adherent to one of them. Opinions and attitudes toward various anti-COVID measures may differ, and as a result, a user can develop and represent different types of discourse. In this analysis, the authors divided all existing kinds of discourse into emotional and, consequently, populist, as well as liberal and rational. The authors analyzed each of the kinds of discourse as a special set of knowledge and looked for features of two models of biopolitics according to the ideas of Agamben and Foucault.

### *Discourse of Dissent*

This discourse is based on criticism, disagreement, and, sometimes, outright denial of biopolitical measures regarding COVID-19. At the core of the discourse is a distrust of various degrees of expression directed at the authorities. Communication within this discourse is active, both between the users and between the users and the authorities, although the principal recipient of distrust is usually the authorities. The analysis showed that the responses of the authorities often follow the same template, with arguments of the necessity of existing measures in the form of a reference to a specific regulation (a particular COVID-19 decree). The authors could not find any other arguments in the authorities' responses expressed in the categories of care/vulnerability/epidemiological necessity. Below, the authors provide several examples. For instance, users criticized the measures related to the closure of food courts as illogical at a time when pools were open:

[id\*\*\*\*\*]<sup>5</sup> Waterparks are closed while pools are open. Weird; When will they open the fast food???(

[Response] Good day! The restrictions imposed by Decree 121 regarding food courts, food places and public catering facilities located in shopping malls will remain in force until January 31. The decision to lift or extend the restrictions will be made with regard to the current situation and *Rospotrebnadzor*<sup>6</sup> recommendations.

The need for remote work for employees aged 65 and above was also a sensitive issue, and the argument in response was limited to a reference to another regulation.

[id\*\*\*\*\*] And what about the compulsory remote work for citizens 65+? (don't tell anyone what they should do...; they will somehow figure out what to do.;

[Response]: Good day, Yulia! This is the response of the Committee on Labor and Employment of Saint Petersburg. In accordance with the Decree of the Government of Saint Petersburg of 13.03.2020 No. 121 the requirement for organizations (individual entrepreneurs) to ensure transfer of employees (executors under civil-law contracts) aged 65 and above, as well as employees (executors under civil-law contracts) with chronic diseases, to remote working mode will remain in force until January 31, 2022).

Much debated, the mask requirement was also heavily criticized by users. Most common wordings regarding masks were negative: "masks don't work," "masks don't protect," and "masks are useless." Sometimes, dissent and denial were passive. Thus, despite the criticism of

<sup>5</sup> Hereinafter in quotations the spelling and punctuation of the original comments are preserved. The [id\*\*\*\*\*] is an anonymized identifier of a member of the public who posted on social media.

<sup>6</sup> Rospotrebnadzor is the Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare.

forced online learning, parents had to use this format as there was no choice. In some cases, denial concerns not just specific measures but the danger of the pandemic itself and, thereby, the need to confront it. Opponents of vaccination actively pursued their arguments even on moderated platforms, offering to send links that, in their opinion, proved the harm of vaccination in direct messages and persuaded other users to listen to them:

[id\*\*\*\*\*] I can forward it in a DM. Here links are banned [to the sources with documents and other facts about side effects]. Only what's the point of proving to you all the same you will not believe until you live through it yourself...No doctor admits that a side effect is from the vaccine, but for example after vaccination a person cannot have children. And they will not blame it on that. Although because of the vaccine a person lost their reproductive abilities, as well as got other diseases. This has happened and happens in different countries over the years.

Representatives of the dissent discourse generally recognized the disciplinary role of the authorities' control during the pandemic but, at the same time, expressed confidence that effective regulation of norms, which would be created not by one state but by people, would be relevant and would allow for a different look at restrictions. However, representatives of this discourse did not give concrete practical examples of such measures. It should also be noted that representatives of this discourse did not express any populist ideas regarding the creation and implementation of effective measures regarding restrictions and the healthcare of the public during the pandemic. In general, such discourse should be attributed to a group of populist discourses, which are aimed at broadcasting emotions of disagreement and indignation while simultaneously accepting and submitting to existing disciplinary norms imposed by biopolitics. Adherents of these discourses believed in the possibility of the existence of some abstract liberal model of governance, however, they believed that in the current conditions in Russia, the use of such a model is hardly possible.

It should also be noted that not all users are ready to openly criticize or deny biopolitical measures. Some broadcast doubts, provided arguments, referred to different sources and debated with each other. However, the model of communication with immediate agents of biopolitical measures (the authorities) is constructed in a way that leaves no room to overcome the distrust.

Thus, the discourse of dissent expresses distrust and unwillingness (where possible) to comply with the introduced measures. Moreover, the range of arguments for dissent with the broadcast biopolitical norms is quite wide: from skepticism about the inconsistency of the existing measures (when some public places continued to be open, while others with the same number of people were closed) to references to conspiracy theories, which boil down to propagating the harms and dangers of vaccination.

### ***Discourse of Resistance***

This discourse is a continuation of the previous one; it also conveys disagreement with anti-COVID measures, but, at the same time, users express willingness to resist them with action (or inaction) where possible. Considerable resentment among users was caused by compulsory vaccination, the introduction of QR codes, and restrictions on movement. Arguments often follow the categories of rights. Users use such phrases as violation of rights, right of choice, right of movement, right to demand, right to detain, right to introduce QR codes, and civil and constitutional rights.

Resistance to vaccination is discursively expressed through the declaration of the intention not to vaccinate. These declarations vary in their emotional colouration, from neutral to emotional, containing contrasting comparisons:

[id\*\*\*\*\*] Wouldn't take it for free, take it yourself!!! Everything's gone up in price and all of a sudden it's free! Even if you pay me I won't do it. I don't believe it.  
[id\*\*\*\*\*] I can give you thirty pieces of silver and my vaccine) But I will not get a shot of untested mixture!

As is evident from the comments, users declared that they will not vaccinate and showed their distrust of the COVID-19 vaccine as it is an "untested mixture" and it is free, which particularly generated distrust because users considered themselves to be guinea pigs who are being experimented on.

Resistance to mandatory QR codes was expressed in the declaration of the intention to assert one's rights:

[id\*\*\*\*\*] Apparently someone cannot stomach the truth. So I'll say it again. Starting from August 2, people are suspended from work. Even those who are on sick leave, those who have right to medical exemption, those who have had COVID a month ago. You can delete my comments all you like. But you cannot intimidate all the people! We will stand up for our rights.

Here it is worth noting that there is little room for active and legal resistance to biopolitical measures. Despite the fact that class action suits against mandatory QR codes have been filed in different regions of Russia, there are no precedents of such lawsuits being successful (Shmidt 2021). This allows us to suggest that in practice, the discourse of resistance will likely be manifested in the fact that users will invent evasion tactics: not wearing a mask, not vaccinating, trying to get a hold of a fake QR code, etc.

This discourse is an emotionally saturated model of resistance and a rejection of rigid and structured norms and rules regarding restrictions in the COVID-19 pandemic. The discourse of resistance is characterized by extreme emotionality, which is reflected in populist discussions, pronounced resistance to the policy being pursued and calls against total control aimed at a wide audience. Representatives of the discourse view the pandemic situation as an exceptional opportunity to control everything and increase the level of discipline of individuals through vaccination tools. At the same time, there are ideas of liberalizing the norms of biopolitics among representatives of the resistance discourse, but they are connected with the search for ways to avoid compliance with the strict norms of biopolitics and thereby move to independent effective management of their lives during the pandemic.

### ***Discourse of consent (trust)***

Within this discourse, users demonstrate consent and overall commitment to the proposed anti-COVID measures in different areas, from restrictive measures to vaccination. The discourse implies support for vaccination, mask requirements, online learning, etc. There is no demand on the authorities, users are more likely to trust the expertise of the authorities in decisions concerning biopolitical matters, including supporting the moderation of anecdotal evidence and "fakes":

[id\*\*\*\*\*] you know, it just happens that recently I've read a good post just on this subject of fakes. Here is a public group of the Government and it has only verified information, and those who send videos or weird links, of course these are deleted so that other people will not give in to panic (there are many susceptible people). Whether

to take a shot of vaccine or not is up to you only. Here is a screenshot of the article, so it is better to check in several sources and preferably official.

As a rule, this type of discourse occurs between users, as supporters of this discourse often not only demonstrated their support of the measures but also tried to persuade others with various arguments. Arguments in favour of vaccinations were based on sharing one's experience or that of relatives ("I/we are vaccinated"), as well as on external arguments about the need for herd immunity, etc.:

[id\*\*\*\*\*] As you have already come to the conclusion that vaccination has not defeated the virus, there are not enough vaccinated people in the world yet to come to this conclusion. To achieve herd immunity, 90% of people need to have antibodies.

Some users engaged in spreading awareness by explaining how the vaccine affects an organism and often came into conflict with active representatives of the discourses of dissent and resistance as in the following example:

[id\*\*\*\*\*] No one is asking you to vaccinate. Why are you so worried about people getting it? Everyone should mind their own business. People like you have campaigned against vaccines to the point that in the 21st century people die of measles, tuberculosis and smallpox. You morons![...]

In this case, the user partially assumes the function of moderation, pointing out the unacceptability of anti-vaccination agitation and making emotional arguments regarding other diseases.

Concerning the issues of online learning, users who adhered to the discourse of consent broadcast perspectives about children infecting other family members and becoming transmitters of the disease and, therefore, advocating for the isolation of children. This discourse is associated with the full adoption of measures to combat the pandemic, which are created by the government and, therefore, representatives of this discourse believe in any data regarding the pandemic, including unverified data that children are the main carriers of the disease. This discourse is closer to the idea of biopolitics proposed by Foucault and is largely determined by the lack of resistance to the norms imposed by the state. At the same time, representatives of this discourse also recognize the dominance of the Agamben concept of biopolitics, which consists of the fact that the norms introduced during the pandemic were not always logical and structured restrictions. However, as most representatives of this discourse noted, there were no alternative opportunities for effective management policy. Another characteristic feature of this discourse is trust in the information contained in the official group and, consequently, the acceptance of the norms that were broadcast in it, which tends to the ideas of Agamben about the sovereign, total control over bodies and the correctness of the introduction of strict control norms.

## **Conclusions**

The new pandemic order, expressed in an unprecedented increase in state control over citizens and strict biopolitical measures, has generated a strong public response. In this article, the authors studied the different types of discourse present in these responses using the examples of users' comments on the authorities' pandemic publications on the social media network VKontakte. The analysis demonstrated that the users have developed three key discourses in response to the biopolitical measures pursued by the authorities during the pandemic. All the discourses identified in the article present a discursive (soft) form of resistance and acceptance of biopolitical measures during the pandemic. The most prominent were the discourses of

distrust (the authors identified these as discourses of dissent and resistance) linked to denial (complete or partial) of the introduced measures, doubts about the effectiveness of mask requirements, vaccination, restrictions in work hours of public places and work, and online learning. The particular feature of the discourse of resistance is the manifestation of the intent to flout biopolitical measures (the most common tactic is not to vaccinate). Within these discourses of distrust, users communicate most with the authorities since, as a rule, these discussions involve the most troubling and urgent issues and doubts. At the same time, the communication between representatives of different state institutions and users followed the same pattern: in response to their questions, users received template references to some legislative decree regulating a specific restriction. This model of communication with immediate conductors of biopolitical measures (the authorities) does not help overcome mistrust and only increases the distrust among the users. Based on the selection of various types of discourse, the article draws an important conclusion that the pandemic situation has shown the need to rethink the biopolitics model. Factors such as vaccination and various restrictions, including the accompanying indecisiveness of the authorities created by the pandemic, exemplify that there cannot be an ideal model of biopolitics associated with Agamben's total restrictions or the Foucauldian idea of effective governance and liberalization of biopolitics in general. Thus, the situation of the pandemic and the peculiarities of biopolitics have shown that to consider the situation of the pandemic, it is important to combine the two discourses of biopolitics by Foucault and Agamben and consideration of various aspects of the pandemic within the framework of these discourses.

In this article, the authors mainly consider discourses related to various types of acceptance and rejection of biopolitics. Discourses can be emotionally populist and liberal-rational, and this clarifies the different understandings of total biopolitics as well as the primacy of the sovereign in the works of Agamben's and Foucault's more liberalized biopolitics related to the consideration of the concept of biopolitics as measures of effective management and regulation. Based on the discourses highlighted in this article, the authors indicate that the concept of biopolitics itself and its application in practice is impossible, drawing on the ideal models of Foucault and Agamben. Using the example of a pandemic and the perception of control and regulation norms, a synthesis of two designated concepts is presented including elements of two existing approaches. The synthesis of two approaches to the analysis of biopolitics allowed the authors to present this concept as consisting of two zones: the zone of the sovereign right of power and the zone of the liberal art of management. As was discovered, the liberal art of management is causally connected with the functions of the naked life of Agamben. The COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied by various restrictions and calls for vaccination, demonstrated that sovereign exclusion, rejection, and maintenance of discipline through the creation of strict norms and restrictions (the concept of Agamben) can be perceived absolutely differently by citizens and agents of biopolitics on the ground and not always coincide with the ideas of total discipline. However, at the same time, restrictions can be perceived as part of necessary and sometimes effective health-saving measures. Thus, it is total control measures that become elements of effective management policy within the framework of Foucault's model.

At the same time, discussions feature the discourse of consent (trust), which implies arguments in favour of vaccination and, to a lesser extent, arguments in favour of mask requirements and online learning. Meanwhile, trust is related to the acceptance of existing biopolitics and proposed treatments; the authors demonstrate this on a specific model of the government media, which, in its definition, acts as an institution of civil society. Based on the Russian case, the authors come to the conclusion about the penetration of biopolitics into civil society.

The study of discourses is important as it helps to identify and explain different practices of users. Distrust of issues concerning bodily autonomy and health defines a person's choices regarding mask requirements, vaccination, and the evasion of measures deemed ineffective or sometimes harmful. Considering the low commitment to vaccination and virtually total disregard for mask requirements as well as outrage with QR codes, it can be assumed that the discursive dissent and resistance manifest themselves in practice. Further continuation of the study involves comparing discourses in the community with offline practices of accepting or not accepting existing restrictions during the pandemic.

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**Contact:**

Carleton University  
The Centre for European Studies  
1103 Dunton Tower  
1125 Colonel By Drive  
Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6  
Canada  
E-mail: [CJERS@carleton.ca](mailto:CJERS@carleton.ca)

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ISSN: 2562-8429

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