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# Heroes, villains and naked nations: micro-solidarity and grounded nationalism in times of crisis

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## Abstract

Figuratively speaking, the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–22) stripped nations naked, exposing the bare structure of how nationalism, as the driving force behind the nation-states, operates on the ground. Based on a survey conducted in April 2021 in five countries (Sweden, Serbia, Germany, Ireland and England), we thematically analyze two open-ended questions on who should be remembered as the heroes and villains of the pandemic, demonstrating that people's perception of COVID-19 is shaped and reimagined through the category of their own nation-state. Two main arguments are put forward: (1) the vast majority of answers show that heroes and villains are found in small group encounters; (2) yet in-group micro-solidarity is referential to the existing organizational and ideological power of the nation-state. We utilize the notion of "naked nations" to show that, in times of crisis, people's selfhood is profoundly grounded in micro-solidarity encounters that are tightly linked to nation-states.

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**KEYWORDS** Grounded nationalism; micro-solidarity; COVID-19; heroes; villains; qualitative research

## Introduction

Facing the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, governments around the world had to develop a series of measures to mitigate the spread of the virus. Based on the available incoming information, the stage of development of the country, the resources that were in place, political settings and many other geo-political circumstances, each state accordingly started developing a response to the evolving crisis. The solutions and measures taken differed immensely from one state to another. Though the rhetoric of "we are at war" (David 2021) proliferated and remained during

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the entire pandemic, the world faced an invisible enemy – one that was not easy to identify, attack or defend against.

Despite the noble attempts to forge global solidarity bonds (Bin-Nashwan et al. 2022; Tomasini 2021), this project largely failed (Bauhr and Charron 2021; Mould et al. 2022) and states, for the most part, continued to exclusively safeguard their own national borders. Hence, the question is “what was the source of micro-solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis?” We argue here that micro-solidarity during the COVID pandemic became a measure of success or failure of the nation-states themselves. Those micro-solidarities were not created in a vacuum, but instead were resonant of both the organizational and ideological power of nationalism. The survey shows that the organizational power of nationalism – where institutions such as the government itself, the ministries for health, COVID-19 crisis headquarters, or other establishments that took part in the new pandemic regime, and the ideological power of nationalism, such as discourses and disseminated practices that defined the nation-state’s achievements vis-à-vis external factors (other countries, global institutions or influential foreign individuals), were all for the purposes of reclaiming a sense of national belonging via micro-solidarity emotional bonds. Despite the wide variety of measures across the globe, we claim in this article that, though the people themselves perceived the crisis almost exclusively through the lenses of micro-level encounters, such solidarity largely encapsulates their commitment to their nation. In other words, we claim that people’s perception of the COVID-19 crisis was tightly linked, shaped and reimagined through the category of the nation-state. By scrutinizing the respondents’ perceptions on who the “heroes” were, as opposed to the “villains” during COVID, we expose the link between micro-solidarity (as shaped by their own communities – their friends, neighbors, peers, or a variety of societal sectors which they encountered during the pandemic) and the nation-state as the prime category of reference for the respondents claims of what solidarity is.

This article proceeds in four parts. We first bring to the fore micro-solidarity and the grounded nationalism approach, and the importance of heroes and villains in creating micro-solidarity bonds for the nation-state. Secondly, we describe the methodology used here, further explaining the thematic approach when analyzing two open-ended questions. Next, while presenting all three emerging themes in the five countries (Sweden, Serbia, Germany, Ireland and England), the main focus is placed on the micro-solidarity theme to demonstrate how it is constructed in relation to the organizational and ideological power of nationalism (the other two themes). Lastly, we discuss the relational nature of micro-solidarity to the category of “nation”, and how this connection exposes the prevalent force of nationalism – a phenomenon that we regard as a “naked nation”. Two main arguments are put forward: (1) in all five countries analyzed, the vast majority of answers show that heroes and villains are found in small group encounters; (2) yet

in-group micro-solidarity is referential to, and shaped in relation to, the existing organizational and ideological power of the nation-state. We conclude by arguing that the COVID-19 crisis stripped nations naked, exposing the bare structure of the nation-state and the ways in which people internalize nationalism in order to reclaim their belonging to a nation-state.

### **Micro-solidarity, grounded nationalism and the importance of heroes and villains for defining the nation**

As a micro-level phenomenon, solidarity has been conceptualized as pro-social behavior across different situations, avoiding breaches in situations of trust, and moral repair when violations have taken place. Starting from Durkheim (1893) onwards, sociologists have posited social solidarity as a universal, trans-historical and, for the most part, uniform phenomenon. Most forms of genuine durable solidarity entail a substantial degree of interpersonal contact and face-to-face interaction. Extensive research, such as that of Michael Mann (2004), Omer Bartov (1992), Randall Collins (2008), David Laitin (2007), Siniša Malešević (2022) and Danny Kaplan (2002), to name but a few, shows the importance of micro-social attachment and individual motivation when it comes to ideological mobilization. Micro-solidarity matters greatly because it ultimately shows how certain values, ideas and norms recruit people into a moral, value-based action (David 2020). Whereas the vast majority of scholars ask *What is solidarity? What is the scope of solidarity?* and *Where does solidarity come from?* (Smith and Sorrell 2014, 227), we widen the scope of this investigation to consider the process in which micro-solidarity becomes referential to the nation-state in the everyday understanding of oneself and the wider social world. In other words, we ask “who is seen as a hero that encapsulates the desired values and who is perceived as a villain, a destructive force that corrupts such values, and how is such an understanding shaped by nationalism?” Hence, the main focus here is on the link between micro-solidarity and the nation-state during a crisis such as COVID-19.

While Anthony Smith (2010, 1993), John Hutchinson (2009) and other neo-Durkheimian theorists of nationhood acknowledge the importance of “a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions” (Smith 1993, 17), they build on an erroneous premise that nationhood by itself automatically generates affection and meaning. Modernists, such as Gellner (1983), Breuilly (1993), Mann (1993) and others, oppose this presumption, arguing that “nationhood is still not universally accepted as the primary source of one’s emotional bond” (Malešević 2019, 36). In fact, the “perception of distant familial ties alone does not translate into national community unless it is accompanied with a sense that those common ancestors suffered and sacrificed to maintain the

group as a group” (Mock 2012, 87). They do not dispute the significance of personal emotional bonds, and are in general consensus that the majority of human beings derive their emotional fulfillment, meaning and sense of ontological security from small-scale group encounters (Collins 2008; Malešević 2015; Skey 2013). Yet, modernists claim that such affective bonds are not “natural”, and that nationhood does not inevitably produce micro-solidarity bonds. In fact, it requires prolonged, small-scale, face-to-face interaction that one usually experiences within local communities, “family networks, deep friendships, close neighborhoods, peers, clans, gangs and other tightly bound groupings” (Malešević 2019, 38).

To understand how nation-states, as bureaucratic, formalized, anonymous, instrumental and emotionally detached large-scale organizations, mobilize micro-level emotional attachments, we utilize a grounded nationalism approach. The grounded nationalism approach argues that much of nationalism’s power stems from its organizational, ideological and micro-interactional grounding in state institutions, civil society networks and the habits of everyday life (Malešević 2019). The theory of grounded nationalism shows that three interconnected long-term historical processes made nationalism the dominant operative ideology of modernity and also the principal ideological discourse that legitimizes the existence and workings of the nation-state (Malešević 2019). Those are: (1) the constant and on-going institutionalization of its cumulative organizational power; (2) the institutionalization of its cumulative doctrinal power and (3) its ability to effectively bond people on the ground and produce attachments of micro-solidarity. The organizational power of nationalism, defined as an ongoing historical process that grows through discourses, knowledge and institutions, through its bureaucratic apparatus, involves the constant increase of its organizational capability for coercion (Malešević 2013c, 262). The persistence and the success of any ideology requires organization (Collins 2008) and lies in its capacity to ideologically and organizationally bind together and translate micro-solidarity into a recruiting ideological action. Through their coercive foundation, the organizational power of nationalism attempts to institutionalize and mandate normative standards – ideological or doctrinal power – meaning the institutions that promote and legitimize a certain normative system of beliefs to advance a particular worldview. According to Malešević (2013b, 26):

The ultimate outcome of this process is a greater ideological unity among disparate individuals inhabiting the same social or political space. This historically contingent, uneven and contested process is expressed in a way that different social strata became highly receptive, not only to ideological justification of particular forms of social action, but also for ideological mobilization in the pursuit of such action.

However, both organizational and ideological power are necessary but not sufficient preconditions to make nationalism an emotionally-recruiting ideology on the ground. It is crucial to recognize that the persistence and success of any ideology lies in its capacity to ideologically and organizationally penetrate people's feelings of attachment and mutual solidarity and link them into a relatively coherent and potentially-recruiting ideological meta-narrative (Malešević 2013b). Simply put, a more shared emotional and cognitive action is likely to forge stronger and more durable bonds of micro-solidarity (Malešević 2017, 289).

Yet, micro-solidarity is always value-driven and grounded in binary notions of "the world as it should be". Hence, understanding what is perceived as good and desired versus bad and destructive indicates the ways in which people align around a certain vision of what a society should look like. In times of crisis (but not only), those ideas, values and norms are projected onto the ways certain figures and(or) institutions are evaluated and remembered, heroized or vilified, or both, and this is a crucial source of micro-solidarity attachments within the nation-state. Influential individuals, as well as local, national and global institutions, may be praised and adored, or stigmatized and vilified. Historical figures can symbolize, objectify and embody national (Schwartz 2008, 1982) and civilizational political cultures (Appadurai 1996), whereas critical events in national (or global) history often turn into cultural schemata that may be invoked or mobilized as lessons to justify action (Reicher and Hopkins 2001) to define national boundaries. Events impart lessons, whereas both heroes and villains embody values and inspire actions (Hanke et al. 2015) by providing morality tales about the invincibility of a nation-state.

Whereas heroes resemble the moral ideals of a nation, villains set boundaries on who is not welcome and they are perceived as a threat to a nation itself. Villains embed a danger and are an obstacle to a nation; they are a threat to everything that is perceived as desirable and valued within a nation. Viewed through Mary Douglas's (1966) conceptual framework of purity and danger, villains are seen as antidotes to heroes – they symbolize "dirt, disorder and pollution" whereas heroes represent "order and purity". They both violate moral norms. Heroes violate moral norms in domains of authority, whereas villains violate moral norms in the domains of caring and group loyalty (Eden et al. 2015).

However, people's interpretations and evaluations of who is a "hero" and who is a "villain" are not stable and they can be contested within the nation or altered drastically over time. But the categories themselves – of heroes and villains – are a steady marker of the embedding of the desired nationalist values and virtues. Nations, via nation-state sponsored projects, or "national memory", such as history textbooks, commemorations, museums, monuments or national awards (Young 1994), social media (Zhang 2022), as well

as the everyday forms of nationalism (Antonsich 2016; Goode and Stroup 2015; Hammett 2018), strive to name both heroes and villains. Nation-states, as the main vehicle of mnemonic agency, attempt to further carefully tailor memories and ensure their recognition (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 2000) for the sake of homogenizing the nation. These are essentially memories which serve the state's need for control, unity, legitimization, homogenization, discipline etc. This includes the power to name, identify, categorize and state who is who and what is what (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). This is how nations claim their "seemingly natural right to exist" (Young 1994). Since heroes – resembling what is "good" and "desired" – and villains – resembling what is "bad" and "dangerous" – are a central vehicle through which nationalist ideologies recruit citizens into (more or less) homogenized nations, understanding how people produce and internalize those categories, is crucial to assessing the process of nationalist grounding.

## Methodology

This analysis draws data from a broader project entitled "World Problem, National Solutions" conducted between November 2020 and May 2022 and funded by the Health Research Board (ref. 7530) of Ireland. The data collection was conducted by Ipsos Geneva between 8 and 30 March 2021, in five randomly chosen European countries: Ireland, Germany, England, Sweden and Serbia. The project examined perceptions of the nation and national past and their (possible) impact on people's behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey used quota sampling of the general population aged from 18 to 74 and, as a result of population sizes, in Germany and England the sample size was 2,000, while in Sweden, Serbia and Ireland 1,000 questionnaires were completed per country. The aligning of the sample and population on key variables was carried out using RIM (Random Iterative Method) weighting. The survey took about 20 minutes and all responses were completely anonymous. Apart from the standard demographic part, the survey contained 31 questions, with four open-ended questions and one experiment. It covered themes relating to nation and nationalism, national past, trust, emotions and behaviors.

This article focuses on two open-ended questions (Q12a and Q12b): Q12: In your opinion, who should be remembered as heroes and villains from this pandemic in our history? Q12a was dedicated to "heroes" and Q12b to "villains" with a blank space provided to write freely, or to choose "I don't know" or "refuse" answers. Out of 7,000 respondents, the first question, 12a, received 4,255 answers and, after filtering out the answers that included random letters or signs, "nothing", "no", "good", or answers that did not provide any clear information, the actual number of answers analyzed is

3,937, or 92.5 per cent of valid answers and 56.2 per cent of total sample. Out of the 3,937 answers, 670 (17.01 per cent) came from Sweden, 606 (15.39 per cent) from Serbia, 729 (18.52 per cent) from Germany, 482 (12.25 per cent) from Ireland and 1,450 (36.83 per cent) from England. The second question, Q12b, received, all in all, 3,986 answers, and after “cleaning” them for invalid replies, 3,729 or 53.27 per cent of the answers were placed in the analysis pool. Out of the 3,729 answers, 664 (17.8 per cent) came from Sweden, 508 (13.62 per cent) from Serbia, 793 (21.27 per cent) from Germany, 446 (11.96 per cent) from Ireland and 1,318 (35.34 per cent) from England.

All of the answers we subjected to a thematic analysis in order to identify, detect and reveal recurring patterns or themes within the dataset. Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena, understanding individuals’ experiences, and examining social processes and structures (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). After repeatedly reading the provided answers in the dataset, all of which (Swedish, Serbian and German) were translated into English and double checked against the original language by the team members, and systematically labeling different segments of the data with codes, we isolated the emerging patterns by grouping them into recurring themes. In cases where an answer contained multiple themes (not only one but two or three), those answers were counted according to the number of themes they included. Hence, it was often the case that one response was counted two or even three times. Once the themes were crystalized and divided into different sections, they revealed full compatibility with the grounded nationalism perspective (2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2019). It shows that in all of the cases analyzed, the three concurrent and interlinked processes – organizational power, ideological power and the envelopment of micro-solidarity – were internalized by the respondents and utilized as an operative category to define self-positioning during the pandemic. It is important to stress that none of the themes emerging from the open questions analyzed were pre-conceptualized or pre-meditated. Only once clear patterns were recognized did it point to the theoretical model, not the other way around.

## **The results**

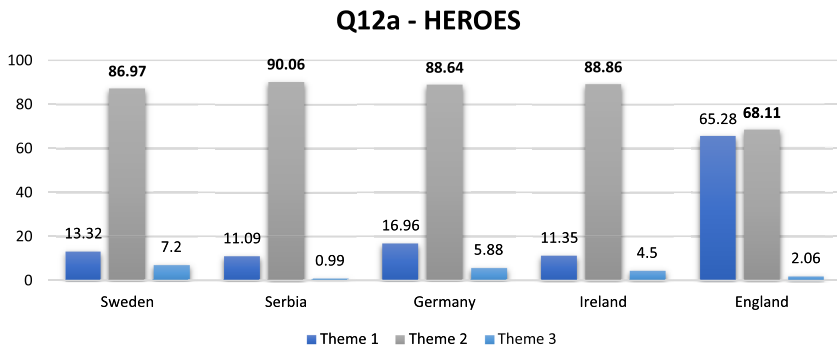
### ***Q12a: Emerging themes – the heroes during the COVID-19 pandemic***

Figuratively speaking, the COVID-19 pandemic stripped nations naked, exposing the bare structure of how nationalism, as the driving force behind nation-states, operates on the ground. The question on who the heroes and villains are during any crisis reveals imagined moral ideals about the nations as well as the boundaries of the nation itself. Heroes inspire respect and admiration, simply because their deeds are perceived



as sacrifices that go beyond individual benefits. Heroes might be individuals, peers, neighbors, or entire sectors or communities in a society, and are perceived as guiding leaders whose behaviors should serve as the *modus operandi* for the entire nation. Yet, while we see that naming the heroes is most often a top-down process where, even if the heroes emerge bottom-up they have to be ratified and accepted via national structures in order to be recognized (David 2014; Eriksonas 2004; Zerubavel 1997), we know little about how people themselves perceive who the heroes are and what should count as a heroic deed.

In this survey, we can see a clear matrix through which different people define what is admirable and considerate behavior, and an inspiration for the nation. Three themes are found in the participants' answers on who should be remembered as a hero from the COVID-19 pandemic. The first group of answers points to the organizational power of nationalism – government, governmental representatives, institutional bodies or local individuals that serve as a model for the nation-state. The second group of answers, and the largest one in all of the countries, focuses on micro-solidarity and the importance of people themselves and their communities resembling the best of the nation-state. The third, and significantly less pronounced, point to the ideological power of grounded nationalism – theme refers to the desired ideals outside the nation-state – to other states, global organizations or heroic individuals that, according to the respondents, represent ideals beyond the scope of one's own national boundaries. While all three themes, regardless of their prime focus, offer a vision on how a nation should look, we focus here on micro-solidarity – both because it was found to be the most important category for deciding who the heroes are and who the villains are, and because we lack evidence on how those micro-solidarities link with the nation-state.



### ***Theme 1 – organizational power: “our people”***

We see that valorizing one's own nation is unambiguously present in all of the countries, albeit with slight variations in their weighting: in the Swedish case,

only 13.32 per cent of 668 responses share this sentiment; in Serbia 11.09 per cent of 604; in Germany 16.96 per cent of 731; Ireland, 11.35 per cent of 458; while in England, a staggering 65.28 per cent of people out of 1,452 invoke either a specific national institution, the government or certain individuals as a source of pride. This pride, expressed in terms of heroism, comes in three different forms. The first form includes answers where the person surveyed directly said that the hero of the pandemic is their own nation, saying “my (Irish, Serbian, English, German, Swedish) people”. The second form refers to all those answers where national institutions, such as the government itself, or a specific health-related system or organization (such as the NHS or Oxford in the English case, the HSE in the Irish case, or RKI in the German case) are seen as heroic. In the English case, out of 1,452 entries/cases the NHS was mentioned 777 times (whereas “doctors” were mentioned 172 times and nurses 193 times). Of course, one can argue that, in the English case, these are synonyms. However, we claim that the language used is an indicative marker of how they distinguish their nation from other nations. We suggest that there is an important difference between a person answering “NHS staff” as opposed to “health workers, doctors and nurses” (the two most common answers in the case of England). The first answer points to a unique institution that differs from any similar health institution elsewhere, and is a source of national pride. In contrast to that, saying “health workers” puts the focus not specifically on national pride. In fact, such a distinction provides a useful tool for understanding how people understand their nation and where they place its value.

The third form of valorizing the nation itself is found in praising different influential national figures such as politicians, doctors or celebrities. Often the same people that are seen as heroes are by others named as villains. The most admired people – the leading politicians and coordinators of the pandemic response – in the Swedish case are Tegnell, Olsen, Akesson and Lofven; in the Serbian case, Vučić, Kon and Nestorović; in the German case, Söder, Spahn, Merkel and Wieler; in the Irish case, Varadkar, Holohan and O’Neill, and in the English case, Hancock, Morgan, Sunak and Johnson. Out of all those mentioned, interestingly, only Tony Holohan, the former Chief Medical Officer of Ireland, was not called out a single time as a villain, whereas all the others are seen by some as heroes and others as villains. The only two people that stood out and were not connected to politics or science, are Marcus Rashford, a young British footballer and a campaigner for hungry children and, by far the most adored, British Army Officer Captain Tom Moore (mentioned 206 times in the English case but also sporadically mentioned in all other countries). This clearly indicates that the perceived importance of nation-state organizations and leading individuals is the result of a continuous ideologization that is grounded in the organizational configuration of the modern world (Malešević 2019, 13).

### ***Theme 2 – micro-solidarity: “doctors who lost their lives”***

In all five countries, the most common answer to asking who the heroes are, is the people among us, or more precisely the deserving segments of society. In Sweden, 86.97 per cent; in Serbia 90.06 per cent; in Germany 88.64 per cent; in Ireland 88.86 per cent; and in England 68.11 per cent of the responses found that their heroes were among the population. In all of the cases, the most gratitude went to the medical sector: doctors, nurses, carers, and those who developed the vaccine (virologists, epidemiologists and scientists in general). Often these are mentioned under “key workers”, “medics”, “hospital staff”, “emergency services”, “medical professionals”, “frontline workers”, “paramedics”, “care home staff”, “clinical staff”, “healthcare staff”, “medical workers in the red zone”, “those caring for the elderly”, and such like. However, many other professions are named as well, such as “teachers”, “delivery drivers”, “pharmacists”, “dentists”, “supermarket workers”, “soldiers and military people”, “police”, “volunteers”, “charities”, “bus drivers”, “people in food manufacturing”, “bin men”, “train drivers”, “retail staff” and more. Others simply said that the heroes are all those who adhere to the given measurement.

Here we saw that most people perceive “the invisible man” as the most important driver of a society, pointing out the immense importance of micro-solidarity networks for the success of the nation. The “invisible man”, often referred to in categorical terms (policeman, neighbor, mailman ...), points to the particular experience lived during COVID-19 (stories they’ve heard or personally witnessed), demonstrating how the connections and micro-solidarity attachments are shaped in small societal pockets. Hence, it is vital for understanding the impact that the processes of meaning-making at the micro-solidarity level have and “their capacity to ideologically and organizationally penetrate the micro-world and to link disparate pockets of micro-solidarity into a relatively coherent, all embracing, macro-narrative of ideological unity” (Malešević 2013c, 30).

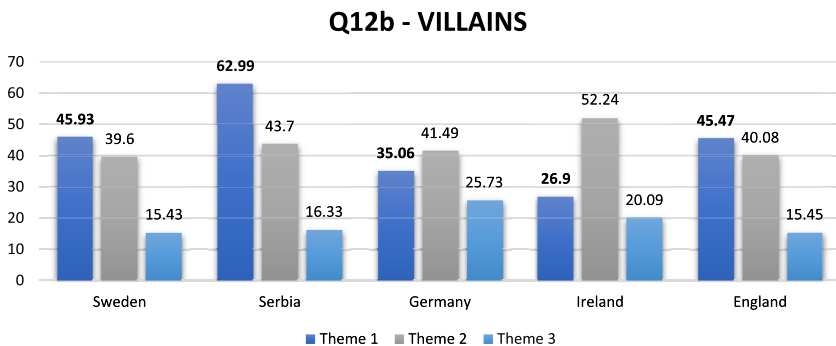
### ***Theme 3 – ideological power: “a whistleblower who speaks the truth”***

The third theme shows that some look outside of their own nation-state to find heroes. Though it is a relatively small number of people who outsource heroism beyond their national borders (Sweden 7.2 per cent; Serbia 0.99 per cent; Germany 5.88 per cent; Ireland 4.5 per cent; and England 2.06 per cent of all answers), we see here how they inspire the nation. Whereas with the previous two themes, there is a significant overlap in the responses across all five countries, here we see more pronounced geo-political differences. While respondents from different national settings name different countries (such as Australia, Denmark, Finland, New Zealand and Norway in the Swedish case; China and Russia in the Serbian case; the USA, Chile and

Sweden in the German case; New Zealand and Taiwan for Ireland; and New Zealand and the USA for England), and different people (such as Fauci, Obama, Hitler, Trump, Putin, Biden, or Bill Gates), those answers are few and insignificant in terms of their number. However, there are two names that stand out and are repeated: the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden and Li Wenliang, a Chinese doctor who was a whistleblower for the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, many find the WHO as the main hero of the pandemic, also showing the need for the interconnectedness of nations. Hence, the power of ideology resides not in unified ideas and practices but mostly in its legitimizing and mobilizing capacity (Malešević 2019, 12) where people use referential points outside their nation-state to define their nation in terms of what their nation should look like.

### **Q12b: Emerging themes: the villains during the COVID-19 pandemic**

While it is certain that, with the passage of time, the state will shape “heroes” and “villains” in order to accommodate its current political needs, this survey reveals to us people’s thinking of it during the pandemic. Interestingly, as with the choice of heroes, we find the same pattern among the responses of those surveyed when it comes to who they perceive to be villains. Three categories, divided here into (1) organizational power; (2) institutional power and (3) micro-solidarity, through which they allocate guilt, responsibility, shame and anger, correspond with the three channels of nationalist embedding. Organizational power is seen through finger pointing at the guilt of government and politicians that effectively runs the nation. Ideological power, which reflects beliefs, values and norms, is projected onto foreign organizations, countries, or individuals who are identified as a threat to the nation. Finally, micro-solidarity points to what is happening within the different segments of the nation, where people direct blame and guilt to particular groups or communities that they find responsible and culpable during the pandemic.



**Theme 1 – organizational power: “corrupt government”**

In Sweden, 45.93 per cent of all the responses received blame, in some shape or form, their government, and think they should be remembered as the main villains of the pandemic. In Serbia, 62.99 per cent share this resentment. In Germany, 35.06 per cent blame their own government. In Ireland, 26.9 per cent perceive their government as a villain, while in England, 45.47 per cent share this perception. Governments, in all of the countries we analyzed, are front and center as they are seen as being those in possession of knowledge, those who decide to bend the facts for political benefits, those who impose measures “without providing any evidence”, and “scam vulnerable people”.<sup>1</sup> In all cases, we see that often the government is blamed for spreading “false information”, “not daring to speak the truth”, or “constantly lying”. In the responses, we also see that the government is often subsumed to “politicians” in general, or “those in power”, or “authorities”, who are seen as “consciously violating the measures”, or “having made a profit out of this situation”.

While the majority mentioned governments in general, many also listed specific politicians, ministry representatives, or individuals who were in a position of power or policy making. In Sweden, 27 respondents specifically named Stefan Lofven and Anders Tegnell. Many other names were sporadically called out such as Jimmy Akesson, Dan Eliasson, Bjorn Olsen and Ebba Busch. In Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić was mentioned 23 times, and Ana Brnabić and Branimir Nestorović 6 times, whereas others also mentioned Darija Kisić, Predrag Kon or Željko Mitrović. In the German context, Angela Merkel (32) and Jens Spahn (40) were most frequently called out, together with Markus Söder, Lothar Wieler and Christian Drosten. The politicians mentioned in Ireland were Micheál Martin (5) and Leo Varadkar (3), together with Gemma O’Doherty, Gemma Collins and Stephen Donnelly. In England, however, in comparison to other countries, it seems that people blame particular persons, not just the government in general. We see that out of 1,318 cases, Boris Johnson was called out a staggering 160 times, Dominic Cummings 85 times and Matt Hancock 58 times. Others like Priti Patel and Chris Witty, among others, appear sporadically. Parties or medical advisory boards that managed the pandemic are also seen as villains, such as NPHET in Ireland, the conservatives in England or AdF or medical advisory boards such as RKI in Germany.

In three of the five countries (Serbia, England and Sweden), governments, ruling parties, politicians or the health bodies that were in charge of COVID-19 policy recommendations, were seen as the main villains. In Ireland and Germany, they come only after particular segments within society that have guilt associated with them. And again, those responses show that people’s understanding of social reality is tightly linked with nation-state

institutions that “inevitably reproduce the structural contexts that continuously produce nation-centric thinking” (Malešević 2019, 13).

### ***Theme 2 – micro-solidarity: “anti-COVID people”***

The second theme that emerged in all five countries shows that many people direct the blame and guilt, not necessarily at the ruling parties, politicians or government but to different segments within society itself (though many pointed out both). In Sweden, out of 702 responses on question Q12b, 39.6 per cent named different segments within society as being the main villains. In Serbia, 43.7 per cent shared that view. In Germany, Ireland and England, we see exactly the same pattern: in Germany, 41.49 per cent; in Ireland, 52.24 per cent; and in England, 40.08 per cent place blame and guilt on a certain community inside society that is perceived as being the main villains.

Roughly, this theme includes three sub-themes that overlap, visible in all five countries that name the villains as being within society, according to slightly different logical patterns. The first group blamed is simply those who did not adhere to the given measures; in the second group are those who profited out of the COVID-19 crisis; and the third group of villains refers to those who actively advocated against the particular COVID-19 measures.

Generally speaking, in the first sub-theme, we see the recurring pattern of blame being placed on those who do not adhere to the rules, stating that the villains are: “everyone who refuses to wear masks”, “all the idiots who are putting the health of others at risk”, “those not taking the whole thing seriously”, “egoistic people”, “irresponsible people who did not quarantine”, “the people going out onto the streets in their thousands making everything even worse”, “selfish people who are always looking for loopholes, to hold parties, for example, or go away on holidays”, “citizens who respect nothing and no one”, “the people who broke lockdown rules” and many more along those lines.

However, we also see this tendency to point out more specific segments of societies, communities, or professions, such as in the following statements, where the respondents say that the main villains are: “most young people who ignore the existence of COVID”, “irresponsible individuals in the medical profession”, “those who arrange demonstrations”, “managers at care facilities, old people’s homes and home care personnel who did not order protective equipment for their personnel”, “travelers”, “immigrants”, “those between the ages of 40 and 60”, “those who gather in large groups for entertainment”, “anti-lockdown demonstrators”, “students having parties”, “protestors”, “people going abroad on holidays”, “tourists spreading the disease”, “parents who allow their teenage children to meet up regularly”, “people not wearing masks in supermarkets”, “famous people who flout the rules”, “wealthy celebs”, “teachers”, or the “general public”. We see a wide

range of societal segments that different people recognize as villains, according to their own personal experiences and the governmental policies in place. Yet, the same pattern is apparent in all of the countries where people effectively talk about social cohesion or the lack of it.

Under the second sub-theme, people tend to recognize those who profit from the situation as the main villains. When asked who the villains are, they say, for example: “people making even more money out of the crisis”, “covid profiteers”, “those who are lining their pockets to the detriment of others and profiting unjustifiably from the pandemic”, “those who sought to take advantage of the pandemic”, “people who control money, usually bosses, who jump the vaccination queues”, “those who scam vulnerable people or use the pandemic for their own means”, “CEO directors of companies putting profit over the care of workers”, “supermarkets with their inflated prices” or “anyone who actively decided to profiteer, price gouge or exploit the pandemic for personal or commercial benefit”. It is very clear from their statements that economic inequality and pandemic profiteering became a transparent and troubling factor during the pandemic.

In the third sub-theme, we see people pointing out those who actively and intentionally advocated for non-compliance with the state measures and the policies in place. Hence, the villains are recognized in those groups who are: “corona deniers”, “Trump supporters”, “lateral thinkers”, “people protesting against the epidemic (measures)”, “right-wing populists”, “the people talking rubbish who think they know everything”, “anti-vaxxers”, “people who spread rumors” or “people who went on social media to spread falsehoods and panic”. Blaming those groups shows the real struggle in all five countries around deciding who to believe and who the source of credible authority is.

### ***Theme 3 – ideological power: “the Chinese scientists who developed the virus”***

The third theme represented in all sampled countries, when respondents are asked to name the villains, addresses a foreign factor as being the most culpable in the situation. When allocating blame and responsibility for the pandemic, in England, 15.45 per cent claimed that individuals, organizations or different foreign countries were the main villain during the pandemic. In Sweden, this stands at 15.43 per cent; in Serbia 16.33 per cent; in Germany 25.73 per cent and in Ireland 20.9 per cent.

When discussing individuals that are not situated in the domestic settings, by far, the most frequently mentioned name was Trump. In Sweden, Trump’s name is mentioned in 36.79 per cent of all cases; in Germany 39.22 per cent; in Ireland 35 per cent; and in England 44.33 per cent. Interestingly, Trump was not mentioned in Serbia, not even once, but Fauci and Bill Gates are. Other names mentioned include Bolsonaro, Bill Gates, Soros, Hitler, Fauci, Putin and Lukashenko.

While respondents in some countries name a long list of countries as their main villain, such as The Philippines, Iran, Iraq, Russia, the EU, the USA, Britain, Northern Ireland, Switzerland, Italy, Sweden, Hungary or the Vatican, by far the most common answer is China or the Chinese government. In Sweden, China is recognized as the main villain in 59.43 per cent of the responses, in Serbia, 16.33 per cent, in Germany 48.04 per cent, in Ireland 31.66 per cent and in England, a remarkable 75.86 per cent mention China. Two more sub-themes are present. The first in which the blame is put on various organizations and corporations, such as airlines, the World Bank, the church, Fox News, big pharma, NATO, QAnon and with the WHO being the most frequently referenced. The second sub-theme includes all of the answers that mention capitalists, liberalists, globalists, monarchists, corrupt scientists, Muslims, Jews, the deep state or world leaders. By pointing the finger outside their own nation, this conspiratorial-like thinking is in fact deployed to legitimize nation-state centric inclusion (Malešević 2019) by dissolving the ideological boundaries of nation-states: who we are as a nation and what is perceived as a threat and a danger to the nation-state.

### **Discussion: undressing nation-states – naked nations and micro-solidarity**

The theory of grounded nationalism suggests that three simultaneous and interlinked *longue-durée* processes take place in every nation-state: a centrifugal ideologization, a cumulative bureaucratization of coercion, and an envelopment of micro-solidarity (Malešević 2019, 27). Centrifugal ideologization refers to ideological power i.e. how certain normative values and norms are disseminated. The cumulative bureaucratization of coercion refers to organizational power. In other words, the institutions and organizations that enforce those norms and values through ever-growing bureaucratic procedures. Finally, the envelopment of micro-solidarity bonds reflects the generative strength of the previous two – are people on the ground receptive to those ideological norms and values?

The results from the survey not only validate this theoretical approach of grounded nationalism but in fact demonstrate that the people themselves perceive their societal placement in their nation-state via micro-solidarity encounters in their own communities. The survey results show that micro-solidarity is by far the most important process through which they evaluate their nation-state. However, we demonstrate here that micro-solidarity is both relational and referential to the nation-state.

The connection between micro-solidarity and the nation-state is apparent on at least three different levels of analysis. Firstly, we see that many of the participants explicitly include more than just one theme in their responses, and at times all three of them, saying, for example, that the heroes are the



“Irish government” (first theme), “front-line workers” (second theme) and “Dr. Fauci” (third theme), pointing to an ideal model for their nation-state. Even at first glance, relational positioning is apparent in their responses. This suggests the direct interconnectedness of micro-solidarity with organizational and ideological power, meaning, micro-solidarity alone should not be seen (nor do the participants see it) in isolation of the nation-state.

Secondly, the interlinking between micro-solidarity and the nation-state is clearly constructed in responses such as “our/my” “nation/country/community”, a dominant answer in all countries. It again points out that micro-solidarity is embedded in and relational to the notion of nation-states. The intensity of nationalist attachments remains dependent on specific institutionalized and non-institutionalized events (Collins 2012), and yet, while the success of such a top-down agenda is often questionable, we see here that people themselves internalize and adopt the ideological and organizational penetration aimed at linking the disparate pockets of micro-solidarity into a society-wide macro-level narrative of ideological unity (Malešević 2019). Here, we suggest, we have evidence that shows how this ideological messaging proliferates resulting in the respondents perceiving their position in small societal pockets as an extension of the nation-state.

Thirdly, the micro-solidarity levels of attachment show a great level of intimacy, not only between people in their local communities but, more importantly, between them and their understanding of the nation-state. Regardless of whether we talk about heroes or villains, answers such as “people who are knowingly spreading lies in our community”, “conspiracy theorists among us”, “people who forced their opinions on others”, “everyone who persuaded the people not to get vaccinated”, “organizers of public gatherings and parties”, “everyone who went shopping on Sundays and those who decided that the shops had to work and made it impossible for the sellers in the grocery stores to have a weekend off”, “people who had huge funerals and weddings”, “my doctor”, “our medics”, etc. all point out how their personal experiences shape their understanding of the desired/undesired boundaries of the nation-state. Those results stem from their own intimate experiences and encounters during the COVID-19 crisis; and though the use of the general notion of “people” for example, might seem sterile and distant, the answers point to their actual experiences (“people who got rich”). Though narrated as a generalization, those statements in fact resonate with their lived experience in their own surrounding. It is precisely this intimacy through which they relate and signal to other (distant) people beyond their local communities on what is wrong and what is right that makes people feel embedded in their own nation-states. The emotional language being used by the respondents, regardless of their country, shows a broader attachment to their nation-state as a principle of care, not indifference. In their responses, those who damage the fabric of national

solidarity are called “selfish”, “rotten”, “rogue”, “idiots”, “morons”, “liars”, “wafflers”, “obstructors”, “ignorant”, “stupid”, “spineless” or other phrases along those lines. Those who safeguard the nation are a source of pride and respect and bravery. Pointing to one’s own community, peers, colleagues, neighbors, and the elderly and youth, demonstrates that people place great importance in micro-level solidarity bonds when it comes to the perceived success of a nation. It is precisely those intense emotions that point out the importance of micro-level solidarity networks that reflect “a society-wide macro-level narrative of ideological unity” (Malešević 2019, 39). Finally, and above all, the answers show that “family and friendship-related micro-groups are built on the sense of familiarity, intimacy, affective bonds, spontaneity and shared morality” (Malešević 2019, 37). Jon Fox (2004, 363) rightly pointed out that “the effectiveness of nationalist politics in advancing this view ultimately rests upon the uses ordinary people make of it”. Hence, these are perceived as the most crucial factor for the success of the nation. This consequently reinforces the idea that nationalism is potent precisely because it is grounded in networks of genuine micro-solidarity (Collins 2008; Kaplan 2002; Malešević 2019), as seen during the pandemic.

This, however, does not suggest that the link between nation-states and micro-solidarity is evenly or consistently salient everywhere. Firstly, it is true that, though we see clear evidence of imagining “selfhood” as inseparable from the category of “nation” in all of the countries analyzed, this article does not provide answers on why different people find different processes of grounding nationalism as the most important aspect for the proper functioning of (their) nation-state. Secondly, it is also true that, when taking a closer look at the three processes for the successful grounding of nationalism, we also see significant differences between the countries. Lastly, this is also true when it comes to micro-solidarity. For example, zeroing in on micro-solidarity and pro-social behavior shows a more nuanced and in-depth picture, demonstrating the emerging of different types of solidarity but also its limits (Arab-Zozani and Hassanipour 2020; Carol et al. 2024; Tomasini 2021). However, despite these differences, this article claims that, regardless of internal national differences, in all cases, people themselves use “nation” as the ultimate point of reference to understand their own placement in the world.

This link between micro-solidarity attachments in small societal pockets and the nation-state is at the heart of what we call here the “naked nation”. Naked nations refer to the phenomenon in which those three long-term processes of organizational power, ideologization and micro-solidarity become almost completely transparent – like the “bare bones” of the nation-state where the mechanism through which those processes become grounded surface and become highly visible. The term “naked nations”

stands in stark contrast to what Max Bergholz (2016) called “sudden nationalism” as it argues that, even when not visible, the force of nationalism is well grounded and present. The concept of “naked nations” discloses the vast potency of grounded nationalism, and the blind spot that exists when it comes to people imagining the world beyond their own nation-states.

In that sense, the grounding of micro-solidarity into nationalism during the COVID-19, as Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman (2022) rightly pointed out, served to restore a sense of normality, that is mainly understood with reference to the nation-state, and not in global terms. Organizational power, ideological power and micro-solidarity within the nation are inseparable and necessary conditions for every nation-state project, we know, but the fact that the people assume the nation-state as their primary referential category, offers clear evidence that people’s perceptions are inseparable from the forces of grounded nationalism. The fact that the respondents themselves think of the pandemic in terms of their nation, not as a global crisis, exposes both the strength of nationalism and nation-states as an ultimate framework for defining selfhood, and the limits of global connectedness and solidarity. It shows that citizens live in a world that is structured through and around nation-states and their own imagination and focus cannot transcend this nation-centric world. This reluctance in people’s minds for them to separate themselves from their nation-states is precisely what we refer to when we say “naked nation”.

## Conclusion

Many authors have theorized that mass media and migration have created multiple landscapes of global cultural flows characterized by complexity, overlap and disorder, where new forms of identity formation, that are often de-territorialized, emerge in reaction to dominant Western influences (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Yet, the research here suggests that, even though the pandemic was a global phenomenon, characterized by an immense flow of information via mass media, people’s perceptions of heroes and villains were ultimately underpinned by the contemporary nation-state. In other words, nation-states, and their own nation, acted constantly as the main point of reference when imagining “heroes” and “villains”, revealing the strength of the internalization of grounded nationalism. The results of the qualitative analysis on the two open-ended questions on heroes and villains demonstrate that, in all of the countries analyzed, micro-solidarity attachments are tightly linked with, and referential to nation-states. In other words, people internalize nationalism, making the category of “nation” inseparable from “selfhood” when the nation is in crisis. This matters because, ultimately, the internalization of nationalism at the bottom-

up level leaves little or no space for reimagining global connectedness apart from through the category of (my) “nation”.

## Note

1. Quotes taken from respondents on Q12b.

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