

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE COVID-19 VACCINATION NARRATIVE  
ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract**

In the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, online media outlets with their newsfeeds have played a crucial role in shaping the public's opinion on many issues. The chapter at hand offers a critical discourse and pragmatic analysis of the vaccination-related comments posted in the comment sections of posts on newsfeeds dealing with the Covid-19 vaccination from a number of online media outlets published in North Macedonia. The purpose of the analysis is to explore Macedonian citizens' stance towards the vaccination through analysis of the lexical, pragmatic and discursive devices they employ in building their argumentation, be it pro- or anti-vaccination. In addition, parallels are drawn between two periods, the beginning of the first and second halves of 2021, in order to draw conclusions as to how the rhetoric online changed in the country and whether it was in line with the situation in other countries worldwide.

The results show differences in the rhetoric of commenters in the two periods. Namely, in the first half of 2021, people's concern was not about the vaccines or the vaccine-related side effects, but the comments mostly reflected people's deep-rooted mistrust in the authorities and their ability to provide them. In the second half of 2021, however, the comments revealed people's concern with the nature of the vaccine and its imposition by the government so their comments were burdened with irony, threats, curses and even summons for action against the government-imposed restrictions. These results might not come as a surprise since similar reactions were present in many countries, especially in the last few months

of the period studied when many protested against the imposed vaccination and the restrictive measures against the unvaccinated.

**Key words:** vaccination, social media, comments section, critical discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis

## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak took even the most powerful and influential countries in the world by surprise and the fight against it involved introducing, on and off, countless restrictive measures, lockdowns, and quarantines. Many people have tragically lost their lives or have suffered the painful losses of family members or close friends. The attempts to curb the spread of the virus and to mitigate its harmful, and in some cases, deadly effects induced many renowned and prestigious universities and scientific labs worldwide to start a frantic race of discovering an effective vaccination against this extremely unpredictable and dangerous virus. The result of this was basically the emergence of a number of vaccinations, towards the end of 2020, in several different countries – the USA, the UK, Russia, and China amongst them. What ensued was a prolonged and rather intensive campaign on the part of the World Health Organization, as well as state and medical authorities worldwide, promoting the vaccination as the only possible way for effectively protecting human kind against the deadly consequences of the virus. The campaign clearly made use of both traditional and online news media ‘to spread the word’. This, in turn, spurred a number of valid dilemmas in people’s minds across the globe: “Given the short period of time in which they were developed and tested, are the vaccines safe?”, “Should the vaccination be mandatory?”, “Which vaccination offers the best protection against Covid-19?”. These dilemmas are reflected particularly in social media comments sections where many people shared their thoughts on the vaccination against Covid-19, some in a desperate need to figure out what is transpiring with respect to the virus and some in the hope that they would reach as many people as possible and persuade them to accept their point of view on the serious matter at hand.

Pro- and anti-vaccination rhetoric has always attracted the attention of language researchers, many of whom have based their research on corpora gathered from social media (see for instance Furini and Menegoni 2018; Germani and Biller-Andorno 2021; Wawrzuta et al. 2021 etc.). Furini and Menegoni (2018) analyzed about 200,000 vaccination related messages on Facebook and defined four different linguistic and psychological types of messages: affective, social, medical and biological. Their results show that

the anti-vaxxers use a language that is difficult to refute because it is not focused on specific health issues or diseases and is therefore not anxious, while the pro-vaxxers are more specific giving information about specific diseases, family cases etc. and are therefore more anxious. In their opinion, these results might help health professionals to stop the negative vaccination coverage trend. Wawrzuta et al. (2021) were focused on the false news linked to the vaccines that, in their opinion, anti-vaxxers share on social media. Therefore, in their research they aimed to gather, assess and synthesize data which would reveal the antivaccine social media users' web-based activities. Their analysis shows that the anti-vaccine movement uses a limited number of arguments in their messages so they suggest that publications should be prepared to clarify doubts and debunk the most common lies. Germani and Biller-Andorno (2021) analyzed the behavior of anti-vaccination supporters on Twitter, and they found the success of anti-vaccination supporters relies on a strong sense of community, sharing conspiracy theories and using emotional language.

However, in this paper we do not attempt to analyze the argumentation of pro- and anti-vaxxers in depth or take any stance in terms of whether people should be vaccinated or not. Instead, this chapter seeks simply to unveil Macedonian citizens' stances on the vaccination against the Covid-19 virus expressed on social media in two specific periods, the beginning of the first half of 2021 and the beginning of the second half of 2021. It also draws parallels with the vaccination situation in most countries worldwide. These two periods in particular were critical to the vaccination and immunization process of people worldwide because vaccines became available to most countries at the beginning of 2021, and then in the second half of 2021, the second or third dose was administered, and governments started imposing stricter restrictions for the unvaccinated which caused protests in many countries. Therefore, this study aims to conduct critical discourse and pragmatic analysis of the vaccination-related comments in a number of online media outlets, posted in the comment section of newsfeeds, published and shared on social media in North Macedonia in these two specific periods. More precisely, through analysis of the lexical, pragmatic and discursive devices employed by commenters to build their argumentation for or against the vaccination, the chapter unveils the social reactions triggered by the vaccination-related newsfeeds issued by the authorities or the media. The current research seeks answers to the following research questions:

- 1) *Is there any difference in the language (lexical, pragmatic and discursive) devices employed in the comments from the two periods? If yes, then what is the difference?*
- 2) *How do commenters position themselves in relation to the measures taken by the Government in the two different periods?*
- 3) *Who were the comments mostly directed to in both periods?*
- 4) *How do these results compare to the general vaccination situation in most countries?*

## **2. Social media and stance taking**

Social media has become one of the main sources for disseminating news online and delivering tailored content to meet outlets' personal needs (Mortimer 2014, in Bouvier and Machin 2018, 10). They "allow citizens, civic society, politicians and business elites to directly communicate with each other" (Paulussen and Harder 2014, 543, in Bouvier and Machin 2018), especially in the online comment sections which operate as forum-like venues analogous to letters to the editor (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2012), where users can express their opinion, share information, and entertain themselves (Duncan et al. 2020, 192). More specifically, with the comment sections users are given the choice to engage in four ways: (1) to start a new comment thread, (2) to respond to another's comment, (3) to do both, or (4) to choose not to comment (Duncan et al. 2020, 192).

Despite the fact that the majority of people nowadays use social media to get their daily share of news, not everyone is equally tempted to make use of the comment sections and interact with the news producers and the other users. Anderson et al. (2014) suggest that individuals who participate in online forums set a tone for public opinion, and can influence the tone of future comments. Stroud et al. (2016) show in their research that although around half of online news audience members read article comments, only 14% post comments regularly (in Duncan et al. 2020). Mutz (2002; 2006, in Duncan et al. 2020) suggests that users are enticed to use online comment sections because they allow them access to people outside their usual social network and because talking to others helps them to fully crystalize their opinion. According to Katz (1981) those who identify themselves with the minority position in the case of hard news (dealing with political and economic issues) are less likely to speak up due to fear of social isolation and possible sanctions inflicted by the majority group. Levitan and Verhulst

(2016) and Tsfati et al. (2013) come to the similar conclusion that people with moderate opinions remain relatively silent, whereas partisans and highly involved individuals tend to express opinions publicly (in Duncan et al. 2020).

During the last two years, a lot of information connected to the Covid-19 crisis has been published on social media, mostly Facebook, especially connected to the measures taken by governments, including the vaccination. Citizens have been using this opportunity to openly express their stance and communicate their fears, dissatisfaction or dis/agreement related to these decisions. The notion of ‘stance’ encompasses evaluation and assessment (Conrad and Biber 2000; Hunston and Thompson 2000; Goodwin 2006), and gives a clear indication of why people say what they say in the way they say it. Stance can be understood as affective or epistemic, depending on whether the speaker positions themselves affectively, by presenting their feelings towards the content of the utterance (e.g., *I am glad/amazed* etc.) or epistemically, emphasizing the degree of access the speaker has to the information that follows (e.g. *I know, obviously* etc.) (Bridges 2017, 95; Du Bois 2007, 143). The general concept which subsumes them both is positioning (Du Bois 2007, 143); however, as Du Bois (2007) states, positioning goes hand in hand with subjectivity, as people mostly rely on their own subjective opinion. We dwell on the concept of stance in our analysis as we try to understand commenters’ stances or positioning concerning the vaccination-related news published online.

### **3. Research methodology**

In order to answer the research questions, both a quantitative and qualitative analysis was undertaken on a corpus of social media users’ comments made as a response to the news articles published by Macedonian media sources related to the Covid-19 vaccination. The focus was narrowed down to Facebook users’ reactions to news articles, tracking the progress of the vaccination process in the Republic of North Macedonia in the first half of 2021, and then at the beginning of the second half of 2021, in August. These two periods were purposefully selected. First, although the vaccines were discovered towards the end of 2020, and procured by most countries at the beginning of 2021, the vaccine was not made available for the people of North Macedonia until late March and early April 2021. This was interpreted as a major lack of competence on the part of the Macedonian government. In addition, in August 2021, the authorities, seeing the relatively low vaccination acceptance and hesitancy in the coming months,

imposed severe restrictive measures on the people who refused to take the vaccine, which in turn spurred a number of dilemmas and controversies among the Macedonian people. Around that time the vaccine was imposed as mandatory in many countries around the world which caused a lot of protests against it<sup>1</sup>, and this further increased the suspicion and negative feelings among the Macedonian people who used social media to express their dissatisfaction.

So, the corpus consisted of 572 online comments in total made in these two periods as a response to some vaccination-related official statements by the Minister of Health and the Prime Minister (published on their official Facebook profiles) and as a response to online news articles shared on Facebook by various news portals. The news articles mainly revolved around official statements from medical and political authorities in which the public was informed about the progress of the vaccination process (see the Appendix for exact links to the articles and official statements) and the search for relevant articles and statements was made with the use of the key words #vaccine #vaccination. As a selection criterion, the posts had to be connected to the vaccination process in North Macedonia in the first three months of 2021 (before the official arrival of the vaccines in the country) and in August 2021 when the government imposed restrictive measures for the unvaccinated.

In order to answer the research questions methods of critical discourse analysis and pragmatic analysis were employed. The purpose was to reveal the Macedonian people's stances towards the vaccination in the two specific periods and see whether there was any difference in the argumentation for and against the vaccination and the restrictive governmental measures, as well as who the comments were mostly directed to. For that reason, an analysis of the lexical, pragmatic and discursive means employed by commenters to build their argumentation was performed. First came a lexical analysis to determine the polarity of the comments – positive or negative, i.e., pro- or anti-vaccination, and supportive or critical of the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-thousands-protest-against-restrictions-across-europe/a-58627841>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/us/anti-vaxxers-coronavirus-protests.html>, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/vaccine-mandates-spread-protests-follow-spurred-nurses-rcna1654>, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/latvians-protest-mandatory-covid-19-vaccination-1.5553124>, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/21/1039301977/anti-vaccine-protesters-clash-with-police-in-melbourne-for-the-second-straight-d>

authorities and the imposed measures. Then, a pragmatic coding analysis on the comments gathered from the two selected periods was done, for which we followed Atifi and Marcoccia's (2017) analysis which determines the most frequently used speech acts by commenters as well as their illocutionary value (see also Trajkova and Neshkovska 2018). We followed Searle's taxonomy (1976) of five main types of speech acts: representative (or assertive), commissive, directive, expressive and declarative acts. Atifi and Marcoccia (2017) determine three main pragmatic functions which correspond to three sub-categories of speech acts: 1) *evaluative*, as a sub-category of expressive (the expression of the speaker's/writer's attitude towards the propositions or entities which are the topic of discussion), 2) *directive*, and 3) *analytical*, as a sub-category of assertive (the use of descriptive discourse by the speaker/writer to interpret a certain phenomenon). In line with this, Atifi and Marcoccia (2007) suggest that authors of Twitter and Facebook posts play one (or more) of three major social roles when posting: that of judge, activist and analyst. When they play the role of a judge they mainly assess and evaluate a certain situation or action (they perform asserting, evaluating, assessing, stating, affirming acts). The activist's main focus is on persuading people to act, to do something about the issue at stake (they perform questioning, ordering, imploring, challenging, summoning acts). The analyst, on the other hand, mainly aims to make an analysis of the situation and clarify it so that their FB friends, their readers, can better understand it (they explain, contextualize, enlighten, clarify, analyze, etc.) (Atifi and Marcoccia 2017). So, we applied this division of pragmatic functions to determine the roles commenters take as well as their stance towards the authorities, the vaccination and the measures imposed.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 General results of the analysis of the online news comments

The analysis shows that in both phases online comments of support for the government and health authorities' decisions were rather low in number. The majority of the comments were critical outbursts against the government's inability to manage the vaccination process adequately as well as against their imposition of the new restrictive measures, which are deemed to be directly affecting the basic human rights of those citizens who refuse to get vaccinated, the so called anti-vaxxers.

Despite the fact that the critically oriented comments were a common denominator of the two selected periods, several crucial differences were

noted between the online comments analyzed in these two timeframes. First, a clear shift in attitude on the part of social media users was very unambiguously reflected in the content of their comments in the second phase. In fact, in the first phase, when the government was struggling really hard to strike a deal with the vaccine suppliers, users produced comments directed at officials in a non-serious and bantering manner, seasoned with humor, irony, nonsensical suggestions and offers; whereas, in the second phase, when they were protesting against the officials' latest restrictive measures, their comments were laden with earnestness, worry, confusion, fear, anxiety, anger and revolt.

Apart from the content, a visible difference was spotted in the length of the comments too. Unlike the comments in the first phase, which typically ranged from a word or a phrase to one or several sentences at most (89.88%), the comments in the second phase were much longer and frequently included a list of arguments strung one after the other (55.56%). This difference in comments' length was in line with the change in users' attitude towards the issue under study. In the first phase, users were taking the role of 'onlookers', 'observers' and 'critics' of the government's actions, whereas in the second phase, being directly affected by the restrictive measures, many felt angry, afraid and desperate to find a 'way out' of the 'dead-end' they were forced into. Hence, the lengthy comments in the second phase are clear attempts at serious reasoning, directed at bringing forth as many valid arguments against the government's newest restrictive measures as possible and persuading as many people as possible to defy the latest measures. In that sense, the basic line of argumentation that surfaced in the online comments was that the government has absolutely no right to oblige citizens to get vaccinated, as their right to free choice is guaranteed in the Constitution. Moreover, an overt blaming of government officials concerning their 'unethical behavior' and 'their interest in profit' rather than in people's health and wellbeing could not go unnoticed in users' online commenting as well.

A third major difference is that in the second phase users showed a much more pronounced tendency towards engaging in interactions with other users (27.34%) than in their commenting in the first phase (7.13%). Hence, responding to other users' comments was nothing out of the ordinary in the second phase. This, in turn, led to producing rather long exchanges among users which pretty much resembled people's everyday oral interactions. In any case, the commenters in the second phase were usually like-minded individuals as far as the vaccination issue is concerned and the majority of them simply supported each other by sharing and solidifying their already



common views. As there were merely a few comments in which users clearly signaled that they were taking the government's side regarding the vaccination, it is not difficult to see how these comments were neither 'warmly welcomed' nor 'applauded' by the majority of commenters; quite the contrary, they instigated surges of rage and severe attacks directed both at government officials and the authors of the comments.

In the next part a more detailed analysis of the online comments from the two selected periods is performed and parallels are drawn in terms of similarities and differences in both timeframes.

#### **4.2 Analysis of the online comments made at the beginning of the first half of 2021**

The comments made by social media users in the first phase of 2021 were mostly critically oriented towards the authorities – the Minister of Health or the Government. Social media users used offensive and derogatory comments (29.36%), abundant with a strongly negative lexis to express their negative stance towards government officials and their actions, blaming them for causing the country to lag too far behind all other Balkan and European countries with the procurement of the vaccines, and, consequently, with the process of immunization of the population. They describe the Government and the politicians (especially the Minister of Health) as unstable and incapable because even the fridges necessary to store the vaccines had not been provided (see examples 1-4).

(1) *<sup>2</sup>Сите се снабдија со вакцини, вие допрва фрижидери, срамота, неспособни*

[Every country has vaccines, and you cannot even provide the fridges, shame on you!]

(2) *Ah be Filipce uste li nemate skluceno dogovor so faizer. Aj da se kladime deka nema februar ili mart da stigma vakcini tek kraj godinava ce stigma :)))) za zalenje si samo so se brukas pred narodo.*

[Oh, Filip, you haven't even signed a contract with Pfizer. Let's bet that there won't be any vaccines in February and March, but they will be here at the end of the year :))) I feel sorry for you!]

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<sup>2</sup> All examples were translated into English by the authors.

(3) *Толку неспособни не сум видела на крај и вакцината од Кина нема да ја добиеме. Сите си играат со нас ни ЕУ не не ферма ниту па како членка на НАТО што станавме, ги видоа мутави овие и ајде.*

[I haven't seen anyone so incapable, in the end we won't even get the Chinese vaccine. Everyone plays with us, EU doesn't give a damn, even though we became a NATO member. They think we are stupid!]

(4) *Еееее министерче министерче, ти уште планираш, додека други држави масовно се вакцинираат!!! А уште и се фалиш со тоа!!! Лесно е за планови, со реализацијата кога? Абе се обратно во државава. Прво треба вакцини па план*

[Heey Minister, you are still just planning while other countries massively vaccinate their citizens!!! You even boast about it!!! Easy to plan, but realization when? It's all upside down in this country. First you need to provide the vaccines and then plan!]

Very few (0.96%) of the critical comments were addressed not only to the officials but to non-likeminded online users, who actually supported the officials despite their 'lack of capacity' to manage the vaccination.

(5) *На оваа идиотитина, човекот и лајкови добива. Колку ненормален народ има....цицици 🤔*

[Such idiotism, and you even get likes by some people! They are crazy ... unbelievable!!!]

Many of these critical comments made in the first phase (3.15%) particularly drew an analogy between the vaccination and other controversial issues in the country with respect to which the authorities, according to the users, had grossly failed and underperformed (e.g. the name change, the upcoming census of the population, the new law on marijuana, etc.).

(6) *Да беа лубриканти во прашање до сега ке имавме за извоз ама со вакцините нема кар некако мора пари да се платат, а нема се е искрадено... ке стигнат вакцините од како ке заврши пандемијата и тоа бесплатни.*

[If this whole fuss was about lubricants we would have had so many to even export them, but they saw the vaccines do not pay off because a lot of money needs to be paid, and they do not have them because they stole it... so there will be vaccines after the pandemic is over and they will be free of charge then.]

(7) *Нее лошо барем да причекаме да заврши пописот да знаете колку да увезете Срамота.*

[It won't be a bad idea to wait until the census is over so you know better how many you need to import. Shame on you]

(8) *Со марихуаната ќе се вакцинираат.*

[We will be vaccinated with the marijuana.]

(9) *Не рекоја Грција ќе им обезбеди вакцини, или то беше ко датумот што го добија.*

[They didn't say that Greece will provide the vaccines, or it would be done in the same way as the accession to the EU.]

Consequently, the most frequently used rhetorical figure in the corpora was **irony** (used in 56.79% of comments). The analysis of the irony-laden comments made in the first phase showed that the comments mostly made allusions to the officials failing to adequately plan and prepare for the vaccination process and therefore the comments had mostly evaluative and analytical pragmatic functions, reflected in the use of the speech acts of directives and commissives, i.e. **ironic suggestions, offers** and **requests**. Commenters mostly assumed the roles of analysts and judges and their purpose was to alert the officials of their incapability to protect and take care of their citizens. What commenters mocked the most was the fact that even when the government eventually provided the fridges for the vaccines, there was still no sign of the vaccines themselves (see examples 10-12).

(10) *Само 4 милиони вакцини ти фалат... Следно не избори, фудбал на мали голчиња у маало нема да победите...*

[Only 4 million vaccines are not provided yet... In the next elections, you can play football but you won't win it either...]

(11) *А у меѓувреме да не зјаат празни фрижидерите чувајте смрзнати пилиња, прасиња и јагниња 😂*

[And in the meantime, you could fill the fridges with frozen chicken, pork and mutton 😂]

(12) *Министре, дали може во фрижидерите да ја ставам полутката прасечка што ја купив денес додека да дојдат вакцините. Ќе ве молам да ми излезите во пресрет...*

[Minister, can I please put the pork I bought today in the fridges, until the vaccines arrive. Please help me out... ]

Some of these ironic comments (4.51%) were in the form of **proverbs** and **popular sayings** used by ordinary people day in and day out to imply that the officials are seriously behind with the procurement of the vaccines. Although they have the form of assertives, in this context they are used to implicitly give a negative evaluation of the situation and mock the “work” of the politicians. With them commenters assume the role of analysts and judges.

(13) *Рибата в море, тавата на оган.*

[(lit.) The fish is still in the sea, and you put the frying pan on the cooker./ Make not the sauce till you have caught the fish.]

(14) *Свадба се спрема уште невеста да се најде.*

[(lit.) The wedding preparations are already done, all we need to do is find a bride.]

(15) *На нероден Петко капа му кројат.*

[Don't try to rush things that need time to grow./(lit.) The baby is not born yet, but they have already tailored a hat for it.]

(16) *Касно стигнува Марко во Косово.*

[He who arrives too late finds the plate turned over.]

Finally, a small proportion of the comments were **statements** (5.72%) in which the commenters assumed the roles of analysts because they simply stated their observations and shared the information they had on the vaccination process (see examples 17 and 18). Fewer still took the form of **questions** (3.82%) addressing the authorities, asking for further explanations regarding the vaccination process (examples 19-20):

(17) *Значи ние што сме родители на мали деца и што имаме астма, поради возраста сме последни на список во втората група. Не се зема предвид родителството а се знае дека тие со белодробни забилувања имаат најголем ризик на смртност.*

[So, people like us who are parents of young children and have asthma, because of the age are the last on the list in the second group. The parenthood is not taken into consideration, despite the fact that people with lung diseases are at high risk]

(18) *Од сè што слушнав и прочитав излегува дека за луѓе со кардио и други болести., тие со мртов вирус вакцини се најбезбедни.*

[From all I've read and heard, it turns out that the ones (vaccines) based on a dead virus are much safer for people with cardio and other diseases.]

(19) *После вакцинација колку време сме имуни на вирусот?*

[After the vaccination, how long will we be immune to the virus?]

(20) *Од кои кинески? Со жив или мртов вирус?*

[Which one of the Chinese (vaccines)? The one with the alive virus or dead virus?]


So, overall, the analysis of the corpus of comments made in the first three months of 2021 showed that commenters mostly assumed the roles of analysts and judges to analyze and also criticize the government's actions connected to their citizens' vaccination. Compared to other countries in the region and the world, Macedonian authorities did not respond well to people's needs, so comments were abundant with a negative lexis, ironic criticism and mockery. It is interesting to note they were not directed against the vaccines or the fear of vaccine-related side effects, as was also shown in Furini and Menegoni's (2018) research, but they mostly reflected people's deeply-rooted mistrust in the authorities and their involvement in some kind of conspiracy against humanity.


### **4.3 Analysis of the online comments made at the beginning of the second half of 2021**

As for the beginning of the second part of 2021, most of the comments posted in the comment sections of newsfeeds were related mainly to the measures the government decided to take to make people take the vaccines, like restricting the movement of those who were not vaccinated (banning them from bars, shopping centres, or all sorts of cultural gatherings). Consequently, comments applauding and giving support to the officials' decisions and actions with respect to the vaccination were a true rarity (only 5.1%). They were mainly used by those who in all probability had responded positively to the authorities' calls for vaccination and viewed the vaccines as the only way out of the pandemic. In these comments, users were commending the authorities for all their efforts to cope with the pandemic and expressing gratitude to them for their concern and help in fighting the pandemic via the vaccination in particular (see 21-22).

(21) *Zoran Zaev поздрав за мерките но дополнително да се воведува задолжителна вакцинација целиот персонал во градинките, училиштата и факултетите... Бидејќи тамо е најголем собир на затворено и така ќе се заштитат најмладите...*

[Zoran Zaev congratulations on the measures taken. I suggest that you also introduce an obligatory vaccination of the whole personnel in the nurseries, schools and faculties... Because that's where a lot of people gather and that's how you would protect the youngest...]

(22) *Така је премијере, само напред, знаје се дека вакцинација не е морална а кој нејке да се вакцинира од оваја најопасна болес нема да смее да мрдне нигде така треба, тоа е демократија... никој не тера некого да се вакцинира, а ако нејке некој нека си седе дома и нека не искача, исто и ако некој има антители а е прележал и он мора да се вакцинира, и за нив исто ако нејкат нека си седеат дома нема тука што да се кажува, право на избор, или вакцина или ќе си седеат дома. Зоки Заев во  то.*

[That's right Prime Minister, you go ahead. It is known that the vaccine shot is not obligatory but those who do not want to take it should not move, that's right, that's democracy... no one makes anyone take a vaccine shot, but if someone doesn't want to they should stay home and not go out, and if someone has anti-bodies and used to be infected, they also need to be vaccinated, and if they don't want to they should stay home too, that's it, their choice, either get vaccinated or stay home. Zoran Zaev in my  ]

However, a lot of people posted offensive and derogatory comments (36.38%) reacting very strongly to the authorities' inability to carry out the vaccination process appropriately and their imposition of the restrictive measures. The offensive and derogatory comments revolved around instances of strongly negative lexis such as 'liars', 'thieves', 'trash', 'good-for-nothing', 'beggars', and 'fags'. In this second phase, the comments were much more aggressive and people's dissatisfaction was much more clearly and openly stated via critical comments that were comparing government officials to fascists, tyrants, Hitler and North Korea, as the examples (23-26) below show. Statements, questions and suggestions were used to strengthen the commenters' negative stance towards the imposed vaccination.

(23) *Наредна "мерка" од Вас и компанија е промена на тоа "Македонија" од Република Северна Македонија во Кореја и кажете кога да закажаме термини кај "вашите фризерски и кројачки"!?!?! Ова го нема ни во Северна Кореја.*

[Next “measure” from you and the company is to change the term “Macedonia” in the Republic of North Macedonia into Korea and let us know when we can schedule an appointment with “your hairdressers and tailors!?!?” This is not typical even for North Korea.]

(24) Се врати Хитлер! 🧑

[Hitler is back!]

(25) Ова е чист Фашизам!!

[This is sheer fascism!!]

(26) За ова што ни се случува посебно во Германија Hitler was nicer!

[If we compare what is happening to us with Germany, Hitler was nicer!]

The most frequent rhetorical figure employed in these comments was again **irony** (26.08%), often accompanied by an emoji (see for instance [27] and [29] below). The commenters mocked the government’s decision to overstep their authority by introducing restrictive measures that broke the basic human right to free movement, as the non-vaccinated people were forbidden to go to weddings (28) or enter any institutions (29). Obviously the commenters mostly assumed the roles of judges by asking rhetorical questions and making negative evaluations.

(27) Да имаше првенство во НЕСПОСОБНОСТ, втори ќе биде! 😂

[If there was a competition in incapability, they would have been second! 😂]

(28) При што “Ти си од кај зетот или невестата?” се заменува со “Ти си од кај вакцинираните или невакцинираните”?

[And the question “Are you a guest of the bride or the groom?” is being replaced with “are you part of the vaccinated or unvaccinated?”]

(29) Најкриво ми е што нема да можам да влезам во институциите да си платам данок и остали давачки 😞

[I really feel bad that I won’t be able to enter the institutions and pay tax 😞]

The analysis of the comments made in this second phase showed that in comparison to the first phase, commenters here used a wider variety of speech acts and pragmatic functions. They used directives and commissives, realized through **suggestions** (3.3%), which were all made by the anti-vaxxers in our corpus and **requests** (15.5%), 13.6% of which were made by the anti-vaxxers and 1.9% of which by the pro-vaxxers, as in the examples (30) and (31) below:

(30) *И попишувачи да не одат кај невакцинираните. И оние што тропнат по вратите пред избори и молат за глас, овој пат нека ги прескокнат невакцинираните.*

[Don't let census takers visit the unvaccinated. And those who knock on the doors before the elections and beg for votes, they better skip the unvaccinated this time.]

(31) *Премиере најдобро е да воведете јавно стрелање на невакцинираните и по брза постапка да ја прогласите Короната за умрено. Само напред!*

[Prime minister, you better publicly kill the unvaccinated and pronounce the Corona virus dead. Go ahead!]

The comments were mainly expressions of dissatisfaction, mostly directed towards politicians, government officials and the World Health Organisation. In addition, commenters also used **refusals** (2.41%) to openly state their rejection of the imposed measures, as in the following examples:

(32) *za vakcina NIKOGAS NEMA DA KAZAM DA .Prosta matematika TOJ STO ME TRUE TOJ LEK NEMOZE DA MI DADE.*

[I WILL NEVER SAY YES to the vaccine. Simple Mathematics. THE ONE WHO POISONS ME CANNOT GIVE ME ANY CURE.]

(33) *Никад нема да ја примам таа вакцина.*

[I will never take that vaccine shot.]

(34) *Не сум антиваксер али конкретно во оваа вакцина се сомневам. Идете у три леле и ти и СЗО, ќе идам ќе живеам во планина и не се вакцинирам...*

[I am not an anti-vaxxer but I doubt this vaccine concretely. You can go F... yourself, including WHO, I would sooner go live in the mountain than vaccinate myself.]



They again assumed the roles of judges and at times analysts by mainly assessing and evaluating the situation.

In addition, feeling threatened that they would be forced to take a shot of the vaccine despite the fact that they were against it, some users issued **threats** (a commissive speech act) (7.24%) against government officials. The threats were either directed towards the politicians' lives or they referred to their 'inevitable defeat' in the upcoming elections (see 35-39).

(35) *Ќе го јадеи ти кај да е, мрсолче*

[You're gonna get it, bugger]

(36) *Следни избори уште пред да почнат знајте дека толку ви е позз*

[Next elections will be over before they start, that's it with you. Bye.]

(37) *Лелее како ќе го јадеи ти и директорите што ги тераи да не притискаат да се вакцинираме. Ќе заврши и оваа приказка. Само нека пробаат, нека бидат слепи послушници и да ви ги извршуваат овие уцени. Заедно со тие шефови и директори ќе одите во затвор...*

[Oh, you're gonna pay for this and the directors you make to impose the vaccination on us. This story will end too. Let them try and be blind followers of these blackmails. You and those managers and directors will go to prison...]

(38) *Фашист, знаеш како заврши фашизмот. Ќе висии со главата надолу на плоштад*

[Fascist, you know how fascism ended. You will hang in the city square with your head down.]

(39) *И така нема веќе кој да работи..ако се водеде присилно вакцинирање за работно место ...а одма давам отказ е тогаш Вилипче кога ќе останам без приходи..нема мирно вака да ти коментирам.*

[There's no one to work anyway...if they impose the vaccine at work... I am gonna immediately quit and then Vilip I am gonna be broke... and then I won't be commenting peacefully like this.]

Furthermore, the most disgusted users resorted to using **curses** against government officials (2.89%), wishing death on them (40-45) and cursing their family members, usually their mother or wife (44). Curses are part of

expressives as they are used to openly state the negative evaluation and feelings caused by the whole situation.

(40) *Да те притисне горниот и да не те пушти*

[May God squeeze you and not let go of you.]

(41) *Црко да бог да*

[I wish you died!]

(42) *За пари и власт децата ќе си ги продадеш господ да ве казни сите*

[You are ready to sell your own children for money and power. May God punish you all.]

(43) *Да те притиснат два кубика земја да ти ебам мамицата*

[May you rot under the ground, you piece of shit.]

(44) *Да ја притиснам јас женати и тоа каква вакцина ќе и ставам ќе побара не само ревакцина туку и 3и 4 доза*

[I am gonna impose it on your wife, and she is gonna get such a good dose that she would ask to be revaccinated with a third and fourth dose]

(45) *зашто наметнувате бре рептили сатански, сега се на ред децата па толку ли можеш да си умноболен за да ги труеши и децата....секоја пара што сте ја земале да даде бог само за лошо да ги трошите....*

[Why do you impose it on us, you satanised reptiles, now it's the kids' turn. Have you lost your mind, to poison the kids too... May God let you waste in vain all the money you got for this...]

However, apart from these ones, there were also comments which were mere **statements that the latest restrictions grossly breached people's freedom of choice** (17.39%). There was no irony, criticism, offenses or cursing in these comments, just a reminder of and reference to specific laws and constitutional rights. Obviously, commenters used assertives as speech acts, and assumed the roles of analysts only because they made no judgment and did not use any aggressive persuasion techniques.

(46) *Каде се човековите права и еднаквост? Ваквата потврда за имунизација го крши правото на самоопределување, крши неколку договори и закони за човекови права и насочување кон целосна контрола и сегрегација.*

[Where are the human rights for equality? This imposition for immunization breaks the right for self-determination, breaks several contracts and laws for human rights and is directed towards total control and segregation.]

(47) *Присилните мерките не се колективна заштита тие се дескриминација и кршење на човековите права и слободи*

[The imposed measures are not collective protection, they are discrimination and a breach of human rights and freedom]

(48) *Се разбираам, но немате право да не присилувате на вакцинација! Според кој законик ние немаме право на избор? Можеби намерата е добра, но не со присила, немате право на тоа!*

[I can understand it all, but you don't have the right to make people take a vaccine shot! According to which legal code do we not have the right to choose? Maybe you have an honest intention, but you still don't have the right to it.]

(49) *Не сум против вакцинарање како цивилизациска придобивка.НО Секој што се вакцинира или не сака да се вакцинира е свесен за својата постапка и ризик.Зошто насила, зошто ограничување, зошто санкции секој сам одговара за себе,убедете не , зошто не терате со сила*

[I am not against vaccination as a benefit of civilization. BUT, whoever wants or does not want to take a vaccine shot is aware of their decision and risk. Why by force, why restrictions, why sanctions, everyone is responsible for themselves, persuade us, why do you do it forcefully?]

Finally, besides comments where commenters appeared as either judges or analysts, by using directives, some commenters also assumed the roles of activists by making clear **calls for protests and civic disobedience** against the government's latest restrictive measures (3.86%):

(50) *Сите на протест џабе се коментира овде јас имам прележано корона април и ако се вакцинирам кој ќе одговара за мене или ако има некаква лексрска грешка починал од корона луѓето со месеци чекаа термини за операции секако за вас други болести не постојат*

[Let's go to a protest everyone, there is no point in commenting here. I was infected by the virus in April and who will be responsible for me if I take the vaccine shot and because of a doctor's mistake I die. People have been waiting for months to have an operation date set. You act as if people don't suffer from other illnesses.]

(51) *На 15 Август (недела) во Скопје, пред Собрание во 19 часот ќе се одржи ПРОТЕСТ ПРОТИВ ФАШИСТИЧКИТЕ КОВИД МЕРКИ (Напомена: протестот е народен, непартиски, без разлика на вера, политика, статус, бидејќи се работи за заштита на најосновните човекови права...*

[On 15<sup>th</sup> August (Sunday) in Skopje, in front of the Assembly, at 7 p.m. a PROTEST AGAINST THE FASCIST COVID MEASURES will be held (P.S. the protest is for the general public, irrespective of their religious, political or social affiliation and is not organized by any party, because its main aim is protection of human rights...)]

So, overall, the comments made in this second phase were abundant with a negative lexis and had all three pragmatic functions: evaluative, directive and analytical. In addition, besides the role of analysts and judges, commenters also assumed the role of activists.

The analysis of the comments of FB users in the two selected periods shows a marked change in people's rhetoric – in the first period they did not oppose the vaccination but criticized the government for not procuring the vaccines in time, something the governments of other countries in the world had done successfully. However, in the second period they took a firm position both against the vaccines and the government's measures. This signals that they had not been given sufficient and reliable arguments by the authorities about why they should get the vaccine, especially if they had already been infected and gained immunity. Their position was that the authorities failed to share useful and scientifically well-supported data, but instead attempted to forcefully assert their will by imposing restrictive measures on their basic human rights under the pretext that it was for their own good.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of the two sets of data collected in two different periods reflect the social impact of the North Macedonian government's actions and decisions concerning the vaccination process. There were few comments of support; the majority of the comments analyzed reflected people's dissatisfaction with the government's incapability to provide vaccines at the beginning of 2021, and then with the imposed restrictive measures on the unvaccinated in the second half of 2021. So, in the first few months of 2021, the comments were not directed against the vaccines or the potential side-effects, but were more against the government's incapability to take care of their people. The commenters' positioning in this period indicated that they would most probably take the vaccine provided there was one. However,

later, at the beginning of the second half of 2021, the rhetoric turned into criticism of the vaccines and the government which imposed them. The commenters' argumentation was pretty straightforward and reflected their feelings of unsafety, disbelief and refusal to succumb to authorities' 'blackmail'.

The analysis of the comments made in the first half of 2021 showed that commenters assumed mostly the roles of judges and analysts through the use of directives and commissives, while in the second one, besides these, commenters also used expressives and assertives – which were reflected in the evaluative, directive and analytical pragmatic functions of the comments – and they assumed all three roles, namely those of judge, analyst and activist. During both periods, comments were very ironic, and were seasoned with sarcasm and banter. In addition, at the beginning of the second half of 2021, comments became even harsher as threats and curses against government officials were used rather frequently. Commenters seemed much more involved in the problem and openly expressed their concerns, fears and criticism as well as making appeals for protests against the government and its imposed restrictive measures.

Our data show that the more people that lose trust in the authorities and are coerced by them to do something which they are not clearly convinced by, the harsher (laden with negatively-connoted words) and more emotional their language becomes. Therefore, our results serve as an indicator that authorities need to work harder and learn to respect the voice of their people and find a way to regain people's trust as it is vital for the normal functioning of any state. The governed need to be able to rely on those whom they have elected to govern and guide them. Instead of forceful restrictive measures, the authorities' approach should have been more focused on providing valid argumentation, on explanation and clarification of the aspects of the vaccination which gave cause for people's concern. Even more so, they were expected to give their people some explanation about the nature of this huge concern of theirs – the pandemic. What is important to note is that the results are in alignment with the situation in many other countries in the world, in which the suspicion of people towards their governments and vaccines grew in the last few months and caused thousands to protest against the mandatory vaccination.

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## Appendix

Portal / FB Profile	Link	Title of article	Date
Venko Filipche @filipce.venko · Politician	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/filipce.venko/posts/2600624420244575">https://www.facebook.com/filipce.venko/posts/2600624420244575</a>	A post by Venko Filipche, the Minister of Health of RNM	11.01.2021
Denesheh vesnik	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/denesen.mk/posts/3977620055604607">https://www.facebook.com/denesen.mk/posts/3977620055604607</a>	ВЈАДА: Освен фриждер сега имаме и Национален план вакцинација против коронавирусот, само уште вакцини ни фалат	26.01.2021
MK Reporter	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/mkreporter/posts/5155405254499785">https://www.facebook.com/mkreporter/posts/5155405254499785</a>	Филипче: Преговараме со кинески производител на вакцини	26.01.2021



Venko Filipche @filipce.venko · Politician	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/filipce.venko/posts/2616098328697184">https://www.facebook.com/filipce.venko/posts/2616098328697184</a>	Планот за вакцинација согласно денешната пресконференција.	06.02.2021
Sloboden pechat	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/filipce.venko/posts/2616098328697184">https://www.facebook.com/filipce.venko/posts/2616098328697184</a>	Министерот Филипче денес го потпиша договорот за набавка на кинеската вакцина – Слободен печат	08.02.2021
Zoran Zaev @zoran.zaev Politician	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/66035312931/posts/10159887505857932/">https://www.facebook.com/66035312931/posts/10159887505857932/</a>	A post by the Prime Minister	07.08.2021
Denesheh vesnik	<a href="https://denesen.mk/filipche-virusot-se-shiri-apeliram-do-shefovite-i-vo-drzavniot-i-vo-privatniot-sektor-da-gi-pritiskaat-vrabotenite-da-se-vakciniraat/">https://denesen.mk/filipche-virusot-se-shiri-apeliram-do-shefovite-i-vo-drzavniot-i-vo-privatniot-sektor-da-gi-pritiskaat-vrabotenite-da-se-vakciniraat/</a>	ФИЛИПЧЕ: Апелирам до шефовите, и во државниот и во приватниот сектор, да ги притискаат вработените да се вакцинираат	08.08.2021

MIA	<a href="https://mia.mk/filipeche-novite-merki-ne-go-delat-narodot-nichie-lichno-pravo-ne-e-nad-pravoto-na-kolektivna-zashita-na-zdrav-etona-gra-anite/">https://mia.mk/filipeche-novite-merki-ne-go-delat-narodot-nichie-lichno-pravo-ne-e-nad-pravoto-na-kolektivna-zashita-na-zdrav-etona-gra-anite/</a>	Филипче: Новите мерки не го „делат народот“, ничие лично право не е над правото на колективна заштита на здравјето на граѓаните	08.08.2021
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