

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN RESISTING LINGUISTIC MANIPULATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ITALY AND UKRAINE

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Abstract

Questo lavoro mostra l'impatto delle manipolazioni linguistiche sul benessere psicologico e sul comportamento delle persone durante la pandemia di COVID-19 in Italia e in Ucraina. Un sondaggio effettuato tramite una piattaforma online ha portato alla luce che gli italiani hanno avuto una percezione delle informazioni non critica che ha causato delle forti paure irrazionali. Gli ucraini, invece, sembrano essere più stati calmi, equilibrati e razionali. Una spiegazione per questa differenza può avere origine nelle proporzioni epidemiche e nel modo in cui le notizie sono state divulgate. L'Italia ha scelto la retorica dell'intimidazione basata sulle parole con un forte stimolo negativo "morte", "nuovi casi" e "cronaca della pandemia". I media ucraini hanno invece evitato di creare una pressione emotiva legata al panico e si sono concentrati maggiormente su argomentazioni razionali. La pandemia di coronavirus ha dimostrato che le persone non sono capaci di gestire manipolazioni emotive indotte dai mass media e dai politici. L'unico modo per riuscire a rimanere razionali è quello di sviluppare l'intelligenza emotiva come uno strumento di pensiero critico nel mondo della manipolazione linguistica globale.

This paper reveals the impact of linguistic manipulations on the psychological well-being and behavior of people during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy and Ukraine. An online survey discovered uncritical information perception and intense, irrational fears among the Italians. Ukrainians appeared to be more calm, balanced, and rational. An explanation may originate in the epidemic proportions and the news tonality. Italy chose the intimidation rhetoric based on the negative stimulus words 'death', 'new cases', and 'pandemic chronicle'. Ukrainian media avoided emotional pressure through panic and focused more on rational arguments. The coronavirus pandemic has shown that people are not prepared to bear emotional manipulation by mass media and politicians. The only way is to develop emotional intelligence as a critical thinking tool in the world of global linguistic manipulation.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, linguistic manipulation, COVID-19, content analysis, stimulus words.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic that in the spring of 2020 sent most countries into a lockdown, once again proved the importance of the emotional intelligence in resisting public opinion manipulation by mass media and politicians. Media hysteria over the virus lethality resulted with

increasing of irrational and groundless fears even for people with critical thinking. Some experts believe that the pandemic has inevitably changed a society that will gravitate toward greater distancing¹. However, a person's readiness for long-term isolation seems controversial since its sociality has evolved, and the psychological consequences of changing the current social behavior paradigm can be extremely harmful².

The essence of emotional intelligence (EI) is usually revealed by the definition of Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer: «the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and use this information to guide one's thinking and actions»³. The concept of EI began to develop in the 1970s as a response to the limited use of the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) for assessing intelligence. As a result, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences⁴ and Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence⁵ were developed. In parallel, studies on the emotional effect on mental activity and memory were conducted⁶. The modern concept of EI is based on three main models: the ability model⁷, the trait EI model⁸, and mixed models⁹. Researchers are

¹ See M. SULLIVAN, *All the things COVID-19 will change forever, according to 30 top experts*, in *FastCompany*, 2020, April 20 (<https://www.fastcompany.com/90486053/all-the-things-covid-19-will-change-forever-according-to-30-top-experts>); R. KENNEDY, *Life after lockdown: Will our social habits be changed forever?* in *Euronews*, 2020, May 14 (<https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/09/life-after-lockdown-will-our-social-habits-be-changed-forever>).

² A. YASMIN, *Permanent work from home can be damaging for mental health of employees, says Satya Nadella*, in *India Today*, 2020, May 18 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/permanent-work-from-home-can-be-damaging-for-mental-health-of-employees-says-satya-nadella-1679313-2020-05-18>).

³ P. SALOVEY, J.D. MAYER, *Emotional intelligence*, in *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 1989-1990, vol. 9(3), pp. 185-211 (<https://doi.org/10.2190/DUGG-P24E-52WK-6CDG>).

⁴ H. GARDNER, *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences* (10th Anniversary Edition), New York, 1993.

⁵ R.J. STERNBERG, *The triarchic mind: A new theory of human intelligence*, New York, 1985.

⁶ See A.M. ISEN, T.E. SHALKER, M. CLARK, L. KARP, *Affect, accessibility of material in memory, and behavior: A cognitive loop?* in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1978, vol. 36(1), pp. 1-12 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.1.1>); G.H. BOWER, *Mood and memory*, in *American Psychologist*, 1981, vol. 36(2), pp. 129-148 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.36.2.129>).

⁷ See J.D. MAYER, P. SALOVEY, *What is emotional intelligence?*, in P. SALOVEY, D.J. SLUYTER (Eds.), *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications*, New York, 1997, pp. 3-34; P. SALOVEY, J.D. MAYER, *Emotional intelligence*, in *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 1989-1990, vol. 9(3), pp. 185-211 (<https://doi.org/10.2190/DUGG-P24E-52WK-6CDG>).

⁸ K.V. PETRIDES, A. FURNHAM, *Trait emotional intelligence: Behavioural validation in two studies of emotion recognition and reactivity to mood induction*, in *European Journal of Personality*, 2003, vol. 17, pp. 39-57 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/per.466>).

⁹ See R. BAR-ON, *The Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence (ESI)*, in *Psicothema*, 2006, vol. 18, suppl., pp. 13-25 (<http://www.psycothema.com/pdf/3271.pdf>); R. BOYATZIS, F. SALA, *The Emotional Competency Inventory (ECI)*, in G. GEHER (Ed.), *Measuring emotional intelligence: Common ground and controversy*, NY, 2004, pp. 143-178.

focused on improving the effectiveness of Emotional Quotient (EQ) measurement methods and ways to increase EQ to achieve personal and professional success¹⁰.

According to EI researchers, each person can control her emotions to improve mental activity and behavior. This primarily involves reflection on her emotional sphere, understanding the sources and motives of certain sensations, and controlling the emotional state. Thus, EI becomes an effective weapon to resist mass verbal manipulations through the use of stimulus words that affect a person's emotional sphere. Most often, linguistic manipulation is observed in the field of politics and the media. Moreover, the impact on people's emotions is carried out both openly and implicitly to increase its effectiveness. As Reah correctly noted, «it is easy to resist a particular viewpoint or ideology when you know it is being presented to you, but not so easy to resist when the viewpoint or ideology is concealed»¹¹. Emotionally charged words evoke strong feelings¹² and therefore affect the physiological state of a person. E.g., a sense of fear increases heart and respiratory rates, the secretion of cortisol and adrenaline stress hormones, and focuses a person's attention on a perceived threat¹³. Similarly, other 'primary' emotions (anger, joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, expectancy, and surprise)¹⁴ cause changes in the physiological reactions of a person.

The purpose of this article is to analyze mass media emotional manipulations during the COVID-19 pandemic and their consequences in two countries, Ukraine and Italy, that was the first European country most affected by the virus. On March 9, 2020, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, with his "io resto a casa" ('I stay at home', ital.) decree announced strict

¹⁰ See J.D.A. PARKER, D.H. SAKLOFSKE, C. STOUGH, *Assessing Emotional Intelligence. Theory, Research, and Applications*, Springer, Boston, 2009; T. BRADBERRY, *Are you emotionally intelligent? Here's how to know for sure*, in *Inc.com*, 2015, March 24 (<http://www.inc.com/travis-bradberry/are-you-emotionally-intelligent-here-s-how-to-know-for-sure.html>); A. GRANT, *The dark side of emotional intelligence*, in *The Atlantic*, 2014, January 2 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/01/the-dark-side-of-emotional-intelligence/282720/>); C. GREGOIRE, *How emotionally intelligent are you? Here's how to tell*, in *Huffington Post*, 2014, January 23 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/05/are-you-emotionally-intel_n_4371920.html).

¹¹ D. REAH, *The language of newspapers*, London, 1998.

¹² H. FEZEUS, *Quando fai quello che voglio io. Tecniche di manipolazione occulta*, Tea Pratica, 2016.

¹³ A. DAMASIO, G.B. CARVALHO, *The nature of feelings: evolutionary and neurobiological origins*, in *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 2013, vol. 14, pp. 143-152.

¹⁴ R. PLUTCHIK, *Emotion: A Psychoevolutionary Synthesis*, New York, 1980.

quarantine from March 12¹⁵. Despite a small number of cases, Ukraine did the same sending the country to a lockdown on the same day of March 12, 2020¹⁶.

2. Method: survey

The study was carried out in two directions. The first included an anonymous online survey in Italy and Ukraine about people's attitudes to quarantine and changes in behavior due to lockdown. The sample was formed by the snowball method. Respondents were encouraged to distribute the questionnaire among their friends and acquaintances. As a result, 1,159 people were interviewed: 678 in Italy and 481 in Ukraine (Table 1). As the table shows, there was some bias towards women in Ukraine, which is explained by the general predominance of women in the population structure and their higher social activity and desire to participate in research. However, due to the specifics of the study, this did not affect its results. For other demographic indicators, the sample was representative.

Table 1 – Sample characteristics for Italy and Ukraine

	Italy	Ukraine
Sample	N=678	N=481
Gender, %		
Female	49.0	72.8
Male	51.0	27.2
Marital status, %		
Single	36.3	35.8
Living together or married	54.4	55.7
Separated or divorced	7.8	7.5
Widow	1.5	1.0
Kids, %		
No kids	53.5	54.7
1	15.5	26.0
2	26.8	16.4
2+	4.4	2.9
Education, %		

¹⁵ ANSA, *Conte annuncia l'inasprimento delle misure: "Italia zona protetta"*, in *Ansa.it*, 2020, March 10 (<https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2020/03/09/borrelli-salgono-a-7985-i-malati-1598-rispetto-a-ieri.-dd169084-d4a9-4391-9d1c-2d9f42bace3f.html>).

¹⁶ UNIAN, *Coronavirus: Ukraine announces nationwide quarantine as prevention measure*, in *Unian.info*, 2020, March 11 (<https://www.unian.info/society/10910234-coronavirus-ukraine-announces-nationwide-quarantine-as-prevention-measure.html>).

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School, college	32.6	5.2
University degree (bachelor and higher)	63.1	88.4
Several university degrees	4.3	11.4
Occupation, %		
Full-time job	65.6	67.1
Part-time or occasional job	12.4	9.8
Unemployed	6.3	6.4
Other	15.7	16.7
Suitable price for a mobile phone (in euro), %		
Less than 150	23.7	31.8
150-300	54.6	33.9
300-600	16.5	15.4
600+	14.4	18.9

Source: results of the survey

The survey was conducted in the period from 7 to 21 of April 2020. During this period, Italy has already passed the highest incidence of COVID-19. Ukraine, on the contrary, was at the stage of growth (Fig. 1). According to official statistics¹⁷, the incidence of coronavirus in Italy during the study period was 10.7 times higher than in Ukraine (52,280 new cases in Italy vs. 4,874 in Ukraine). The gap in mortality was even more significant. During the survey, 8,225 people died of coronavirus in Italy. At the same time, the death rate in Ukraine was 129 people. This gap definitely affected the survey results.

¹⁷ H. RITCHIE, *Coronavirus Source Data*, in *Our World in Data*, retrieved June 3, 2020 (<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-source-data>).

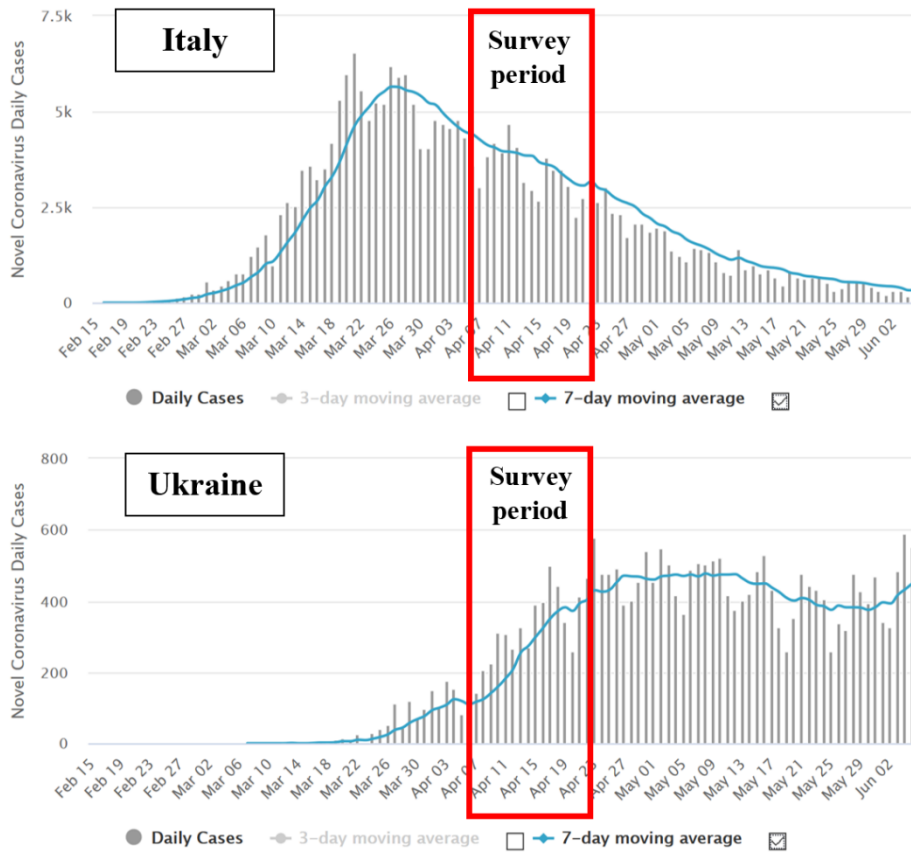


Figure 1. COVID-19 daily new cases in Italy and Ukraine during the survey period

Source: www.worldometers.info¹⁸

The questionnaire consisted of three groups of research questions:

RQ1: Do residents of Italy and Ukraine support quarantine restrictions?

RQ2: How intelligent is their quarantine behavior?

RQ3: Do they consider the actions of their governments sufficient in terms of information and financial support?

To answer these research questions, six closed-ended and one open-ended question were formulated. Closed questions were based on the nominal scale with multi-choice options and unipolar 5-point Likert scale to determine the respondents' attitude to quarantine restrictions. Such a scale took on values from 'extremely positive' to 'extremely negative'. An open-ended question

¹⁸ See coronavirus statistics for Italy <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/italy/> and for Ukraine <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/ukraine/>.

encouraged respondents to act as experts answering the question: ‘If the decision depended on you, how should you organize the lives of citizens in a situation of a coronavirus pandemic?’.

3. Method: content and correlation analysis

The second direction of the study was a content analysis of news selected by the ‘coronavirus’ keyword in official news agencies in Italy (ANSA) and Ukraine (UNIAN). The study period lasted from the first coronavirus publication in January 2020 to the end of the survey described above (April 21, 2020). During this period, 28,444 news about the COVID-19 pandemic was published in Italy. In Ukraine, this number was six times lower and amounted to 4,829. A sample of 4,820 Italian and 1,875 Ukrainian messages was analyzed (16.9% and 38.8% of the total pandemic news, respectively).

Semantic analysis has been applied to news headlines that talked about the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, the most common words and phrases were identified, and word clouds were built. The words ‘*coronavirus*’, ‘*COVID-19*’, and other noisy data (prepositions, conjunctions, and particles) were excluded from the analysis to avoid distortion of the semantic research results. The analysis covered various calendar periods to determine how news tonality changed from January to April 2020.

The last step was to find a correlation between the number of pandemic news and the coronavirus incidence and mortality rate. For this purpose, a correlation analysis was applied.

4. Results of the survey: Italy vs. Ukraine

Figure 2 shows that the quarantine deteriorated the respondents’ quality of life in both countries (60.7% of citizens in Italy and 64.9% in Ukraine). Only 22.8% of Italians and 21.4% of Ukrainians said that their life has not changed. Many people lost their jobs or wages due to business blocking during the quarantine. At the same time, their savings were not enough to maintain an everyday lifestyle in case of a lockdown. Thus, ISTAT data indicates that 5 million Italians (8.4%) live in complete poverty and another 9 million (15.0%) in relative poverty¹⁹. According to a study

¹⁹ ISTITUTO NAZIONALE DI STATISTICA, *Le statistiche dell’Istat sulla povertà*, in *Istat.it* (<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/231263>).

by the Rating sociological group conducted on April 10-12, 2020, 55.0% of Ukrainians said that they had got only one month savings in case of losing their jobs²⁰. The lack of governmental support for business and low-income groups also contributed to a decrease in paying capacity in the two countries.

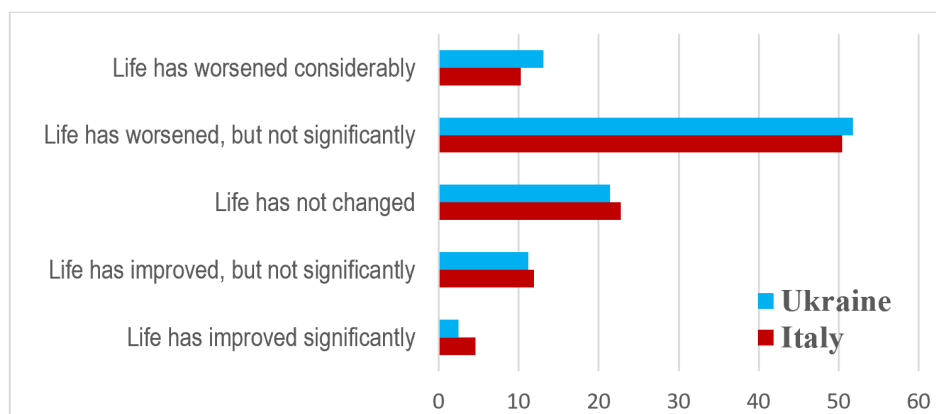


Figure 2. Changes in people's life due to COVID-19 quarantine, %

Source: results of the survey

RQ1: Do residents of Italy and Ukraine support quarantine restrictions?

Despite a deterioration in the people's quality of life in the analyzed countries, the level of support for governmental efforts to overcome the pandemic in April 2020 remained high. At the same time, Italians showed more approval of strict quarantine than Ukrainians (Fig. 3). Only 6.9% of Italian residents perceived restrictions negatively (against 12.9% in Ukraine). On the one hand, it could be explained by the high coronavirus incidence in Italy, which caused real concerns of the population. On the other hand, as noted earlier, the level of information pressure in Italy was six times higher than Ukrainian. Moreover, its tonality was significantly different, as disclosed by the content analysis discussed below. Consequently, Italian society showed a much higher degree of nervousness and intimidation than Ukraine, as evidenced by the answers to the following questions.

²⁰ RATING SOCIOLOGIC GROUP, *Ukraine during the quarantine: public mood monitoring*, in *ratinggroup.ua*, 2020, April 14 (<http://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/7ffb32fbac0ba2a21713d0a9f2c5d5.html>).

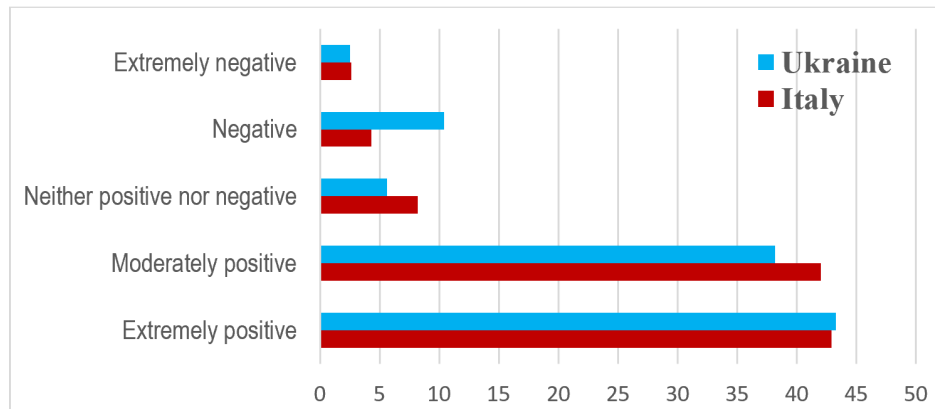


Figure 3. Attitude towards the COVID-19 restrictions, %

Source: results of the survey

Fig. 4 shows a moderate attitude of the Ukrainians towards the lockdown. Only 58.8% of respondents considered quarantine the only option. Every fourth Ukrainian (23.7%) supported the idea of isolating people who were abroad and had a risk of contacting COVID-19 positives. 13.9% supported quarantine for risk groups and children.

In contrast, Italians considered lockdown the only way to overcome the epidemic. 89.8% chose this option. Remarkably, the percentage of people who considered the situation far-fetched and denied the need for quarantine was practically equal in Italy and Ukraine (3.1% and 3.6%, respectively). Over time, the Ukrainian attitude to quarantine became even more critical. At the same time, Italians continued to demonstrate a neurotic fear of becoming infected, even in regions with minimal morbidity and mortality rates (e.g., in southern Italy and on the islands of Sardinia and Sicily). The next question more deeply demonstrated the Italians' irrational fear of the coronavirus.

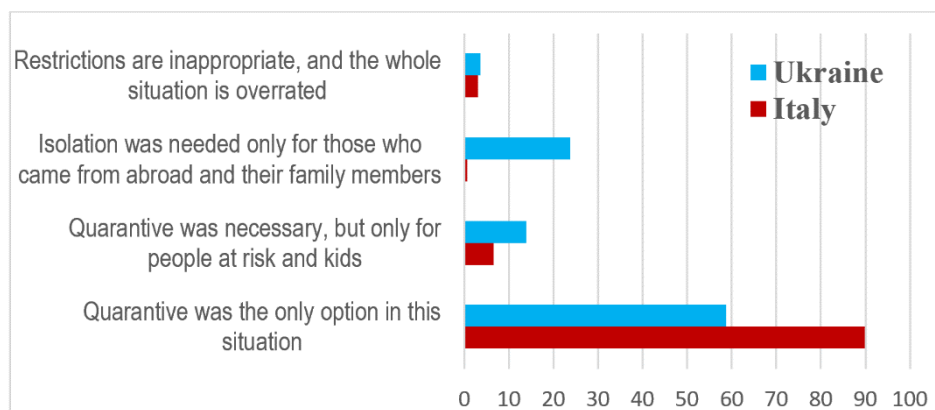
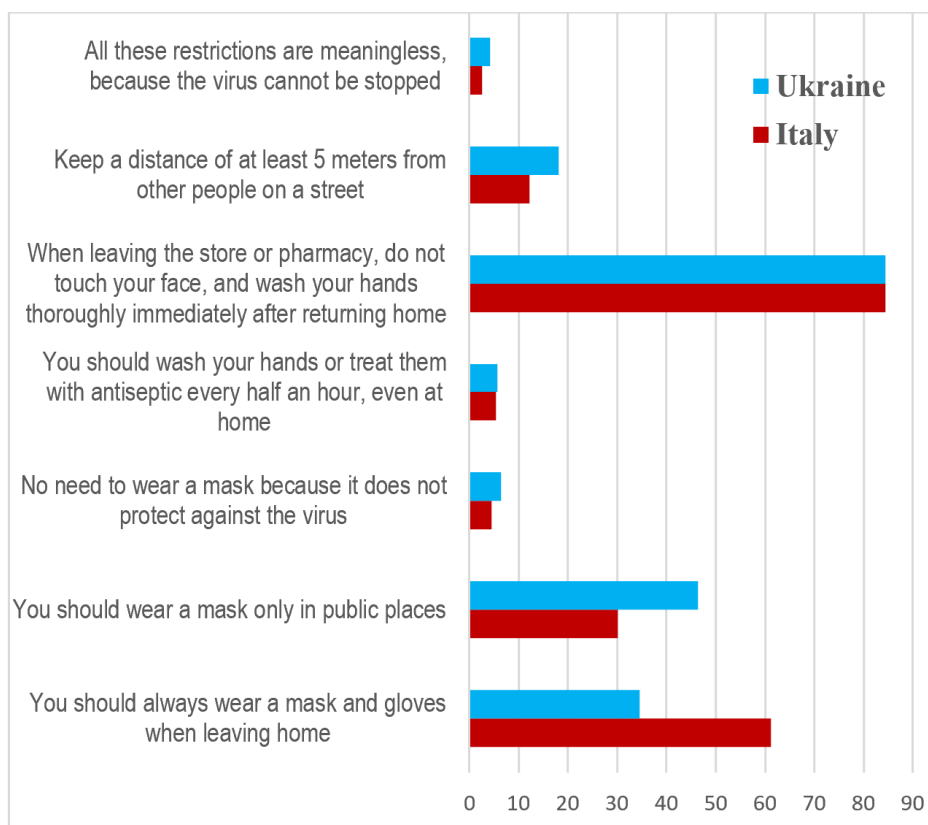


Figure 4. Quarantine reasonability, % (*Source: results of the survey*)

RQ2: How intelligent is the people quarantine behavior in Italy and Ukraine?

To answer this research question, respondents were asked to choose two phrases they support (Fig. 5). The figure shows that skeptics voted for the absurdity of the proposed restrictions (options 1 and 5). A small percentage of people with panic fear of becoming infected chose option 4. The expectedly high popularity (84.4%) received option 3 with the same percentage for the analyzed countries.



Note. Percentages do not add up to 100% as respondents chose two of the proposed options

Figure 5. Behavioral patterns during the COVID-19 quarantine, %

Source: results of the survey

Significant differences were observed in wearing mask patterns. 61.2% of Italians considered it necessary to wear a mask before leaving home. This was another indication of great irrational fears as the risk of contracting a virus in a deserted street is minimal²¹. In contrast, Ukrainians voted

²¹ WHO, *Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19*, in World Health Organization, 2020, June 5 ([https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/advice-on-the-use-of-masks-the-community-during-home-care-and-in-health-care-settings-in-the-context-of-the-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)-outbreak](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/advice-on-the-use-of-masks-the-community-during-home-care-and-in-health-care-settings-in-the-context-of-the-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov)-outbreak)).

more for the mask regime in crowded places (46.6%) and further distancing (18.1%). This position was more reasonable. Interestingly, with a decrease in the incidence and mortality rate from COVID-19, Italians did not change their behavior even in regions with zero new cases.

Answers to an open-ended question further emphasized the difference in attitude towards a lockdown in Italy and Ukraine. The Italians generally agreed with the governmental action plan, and the phrase “*a casa*” in various variations (“*tutti a casa*”, “*stare a casa*”) was the most used. A few revealing responses:

- ‘*completely block the transport, allow to leave the house only for purchases of food and other necessities once a week, wearing a mask and gloves*’;
- ‘*stay at home and comply with all instructions from the government and doctors*’.

There were few reasonable responses about conducting full testing and allowing people with COVID antibodies to return to work and ordinary life. However, most thought-provoking was appealing to journalists not to create a panic and adequately and unemotionally inform the population about the real situation:

- ‘*mass media should calm down the population*’;
- ‘*stop psychological terrorism and provide accurate and objective information based on real data*’.

Among Ukrainians, the most widespread was the idea of isolating people returned from countries affected by the virus (primarily China and Italy). Content analysis showed that “*from abroad*” phrase in various variations was on the top of most used open-ended responses. Ukrainians also talked more about total testing, the need for financial support for business and ordinary people, and returning to work (the most popular words were ‘*quarantine*’, ‘*testing*’ and ‘*work*’):

- ‘*the virus is new, so we sit at home and wait, but the economy is suffering*’;
- ‘*restrictions on visiting public places, but free access to open-air spaces; masks (personal decision of each person); financial support for citizens*’;
- ‘*quarantine for risk groups, especially for people over 60; additional financial support for them; for all the others - open public transport and go to work*’;
- ‘*create a representative sample (2000-3000 people) according to the main indicators (age, gender, region) to make a PCR and antibodies check*’.

In contrast to the Italian, the Ukrainian audience did not complain about the aggressive news in mass-media. However, people were worried about the possible psychological consequences of long isolation:

- *‘we worry about the people’s mental health, as everything depends on it: quality of work, concentration of attention, ability to think critically, restrain oneself where necessary, propose optimal algorithms, and live a normal life’.*

RQ3: Do Italians and Ukrainians consider their government’s activity sufficient in terms of information and financial support?

The pandemic issue prevalence in the media agenda-setting in Italy has led to higher satisfaction of Italians with information sharing. 82.4% believe that the government provides sufficient pandemic data (Fig. 6). However, the majority of Ukrainians (52.6%) believe that the government needs to inform the population better. Further correlation analysis showed the lack of transparent information policy on pandemic issues in Ukraine. The number of news about COVID-19 in Ukrainian media did not correlate with the incidence and mortality rate in the country. In contrast, there was a clear correlation between these indicators in Italy.

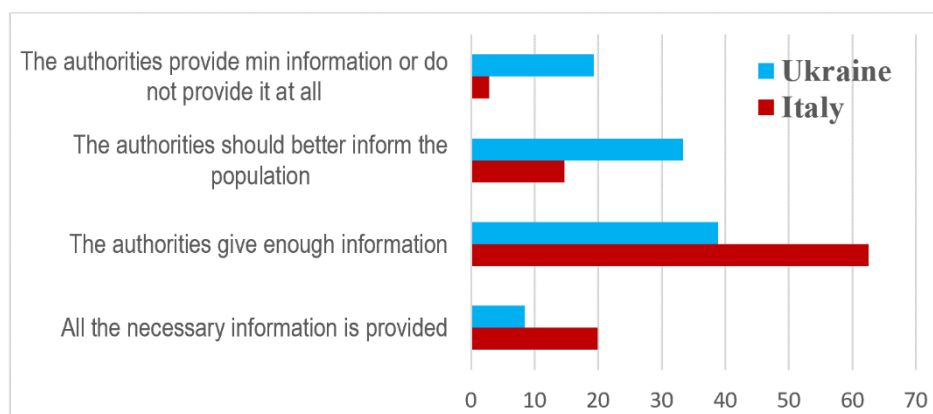


Figure 6. Amount of COVID-19 information provided by the country authorities, %

Source: results of the survey

The survey showed that both Italians and Ukrainians believe that the government should financially support its citizens during quarantine (Fig. 7). Only 2.7% of Ukrainian people do not

expect any state funding. Respondents provided such answers under limited governmental support for business and population in the analyzed countries²².

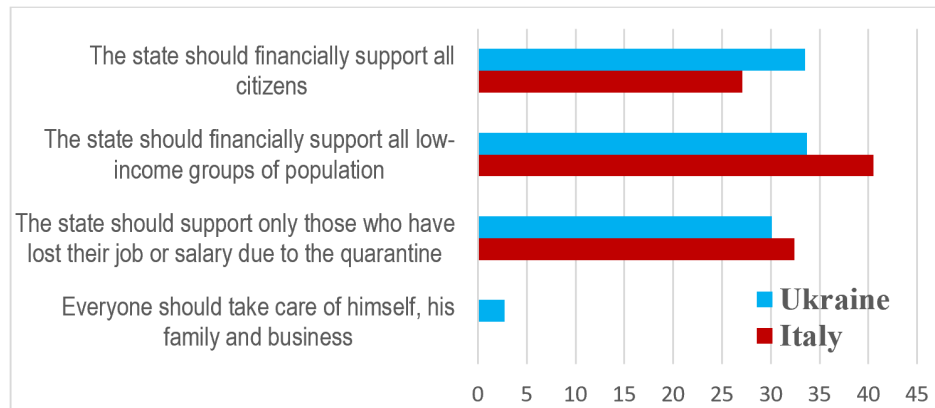


Figure 7. Governmental financial support of the citizens during COVID-19 quarantine, %

Source: results of the survey

In general, the results of the survey showed a much higher level of COVID irrational fear from Italians than from Ukrainians. Citizens of Ukraine were calmer, more balanced and moderate. We think that explanation lies in the number and tonality of pandemic news in the analyzed countries.

5. Results of the content and correlation analysis: Italy vs. Ukraine

Fig. 8 displays that the number of COVID news in the official agencies (ANSA, Italy, and UNIAN, Ukraine) grew since the first report of the China epidemic till the survey ending on April 21, 2020. In Italy, the growth rate was more intense due to the high incidence rate. The most significant number of news about the pandemic (700) came out the day after quarantine began –

²² See Decreto legge n. 18, Misure di potenziamento del Servizio sanitario nazionale e di sostegno economico per famiglie, lavoratori e imprese connesse all'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, in *Gazzetta ufficiale*, 2020, March 17 (<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/17/20G00034/sg>); Law n. 3219, On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine Aimed at Preventing the Occurrence and Spread of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), in *Verhovna Rada of Ukraine official web portal*, 2020, March 17 (<https://rada.gov.ua/news/Novyny/191055.html>); Law n. 3220, On Amendments to the Tax Code of Ukraine and Other Laws of Ukraine Concerning Support to Taxpayers for the Period of Implementing Measures Aimed at Preventing the Occurrence and Spread of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), in *Verhovna Rada of Ukraine official web portal*, 2020, March 17 (<https://rada.gov.ua/news/Novyny/191075.html>).

on March 13, 2020. In Ukraine, the maximum number of news (141) was observed two weeks after the quarantine was announced – on March 25, 2020. Further, the information sharing began to decline, despite the rise in the incidence and mortality rates.

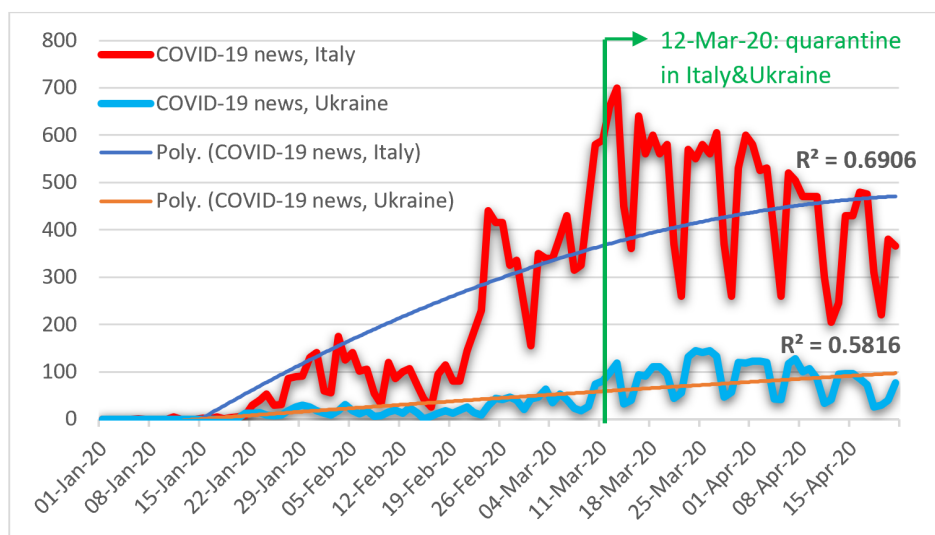


Figure 8. Number of COVID-19 news in ANSA and UNIAN agencies

Source: results of the correlation analysis

Correlation analysis showed a lack of connection between the number of news and new virus cases in Ukraine (determination coefficient for the polynomial trend $R^2 = 0.14$). Thus, Ukrainian news was more focused on the situation in the world than in Ukraine. Their number proliferated as the incidence in Europe increased. At the same time, Italian news was aimed at reproducing the situation both in the world and domestically (Fig. 9).

We have found a strong nonlinear correlation between the number of pandemic news in the two analyzed countries (Fig. 10). Ukraine actually followed Italy in raising awareness. Even quarantine was introduced on the same day (March 12, 2020). Laws on financial support for businesses and the public were also adopted on the same day (March 17, 2020).

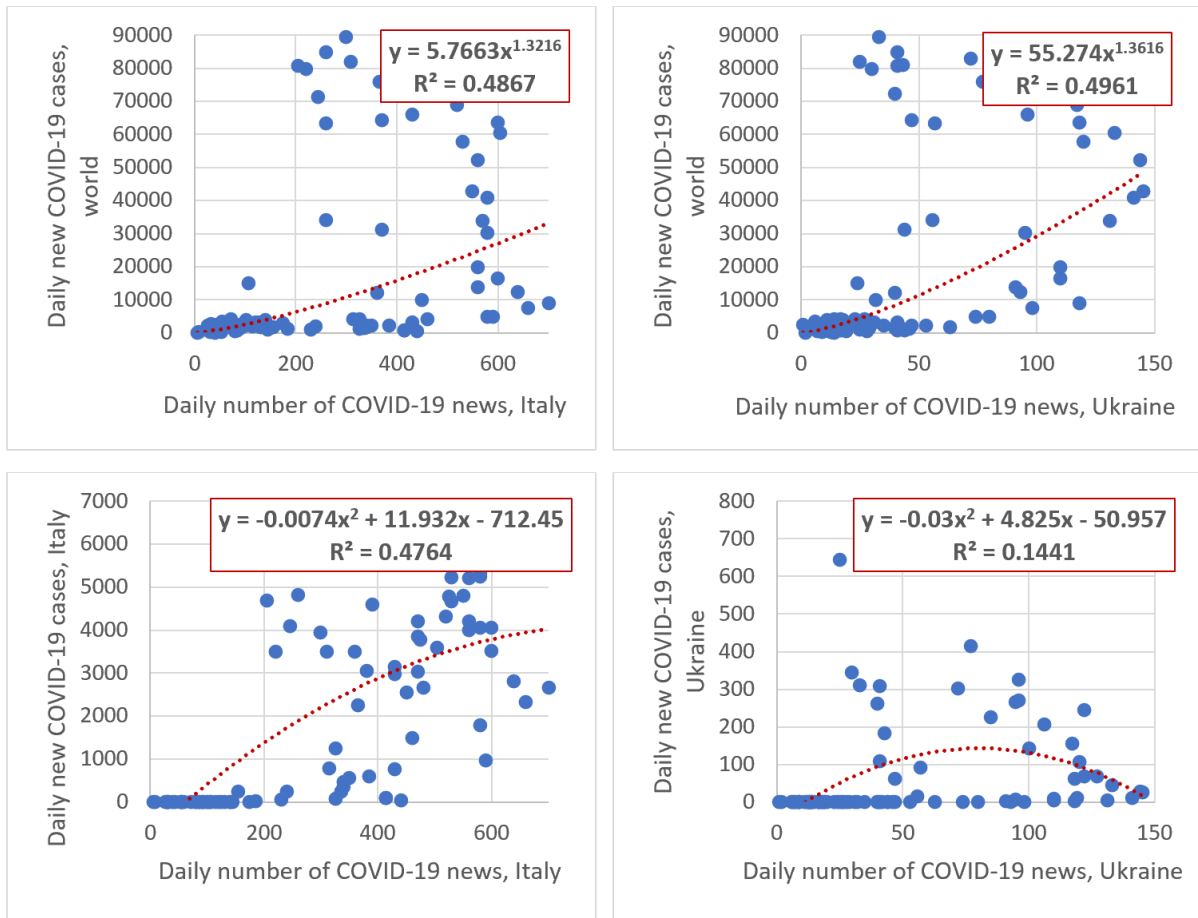


Figure 9. Correlation between the number of COVID-19 news and new virus cases (20/01/2020 – 21/04/2020)

Source: results of the correlation analysis

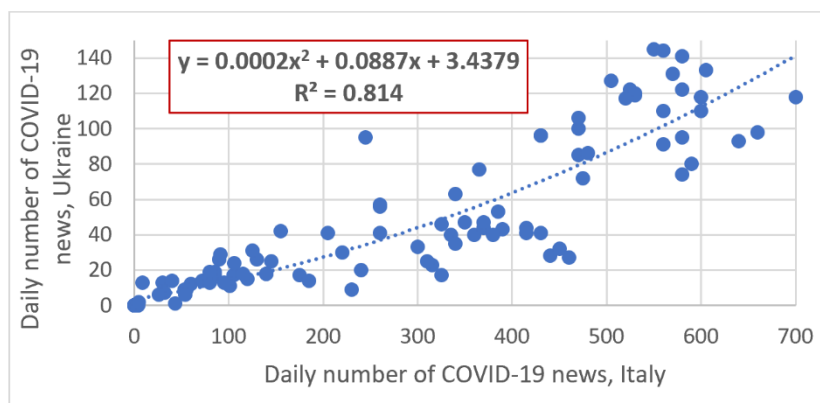


Figure 10. Correlation between the number of COVID-19 news in Italy and Ukraine (20/01/2020 – 21/04/2020)

Source: results of the correlation analysis

Content analysis of pandemic news in the two countries showed a significant difference in their tonality. Italy voted for terrorization strategy, widely using the word ‘death’ in its variations (Table 2). Only at the beginning of January – end of February 2020, neutral rhetoric prevailed. Italian media talked about the ‘Chinese virus’, which later transformed into the ‘Chinese coronavirus’. Later, the virus lost its country affiliation, and the words ‘coronavirus’ and ‘COVID-19’ became the most used in the pandemic news.

Table 2 – Results of the content analysis, Italy

Period of study	Description	Daily COVID news	Daily new COVID cases	Daily new COVID deaths	TOP-5 most used words
05/01-21/02	Since 1 st COVID news in Italy	2664	1	0	China virus Wuhan stock [market] [in] Milan
22/02-08/03	Beginning of epidemic in Italy	5225	5880	233	cases [coronavirus] positive [cases] schools closed measures, Milan
09/03-06/04	Since “io resto a casa” decree	14800	123065	15656	dead positive [cases] cases [coronavirus] hospitals Milan, China
07/04-21/04	Online survey	5755	52280	8225	dead [morti, ital.] positive [cases] China dead [decessi, ital.] cases [coronavirus]

Source: results of the content analysis

Fig. 11 shows word clouds with the evolution of news about coronavirus in the context of keywords. The start of the epidemic in Italy can be considered on February 22, 2020. From this date, Italian news began to change the moderate rhetoric towards the aggressive and scary. From the beginning, journalists talked about new cases, schools closure, or “zona rossa” (‘red zone’, ital.), mainly in the Lombardy region. Subsequently, the tone and number of appeals have changed

dramatically. The leading positions captured phrases like ‘*died from the virus*’, ‘*positive for coronavirus*’, ‘*hospital*’, ‘*new infections*’. and others. News began to share new data on the number of deaths in each region under the ‘*pandemic chronicle*’ slogan. Similar linguistic manipulations have led to an increase in panic among the population of Italy and irrational fear of contracting. All these signs were observed in the survey described earlier in this article.

We are talking about the use of stimulus words that cause negative emotions of fear and panic. In the latter case, the mechanisms of the collective unconscious are turned on. So people are starting to spread panic among their family mates, friends, and acquaintances²³.



Figure 11. Keywords evolution in COVID-19 news in Italy

Source: results of the content analysis

In contrast to Italian, Ukrainian news agencies tried to use more restrained rhetoric and avoid the word “*death*” (Table 3). The news usually talked about ‘*suspected on coronavirus*’, ‘*epidemic*’, ‘*hospitalization*’, ‘*infection*’, and ‘*new cases*’. All these words and phrases did not have such a negative connotation as the word ‘*death*’ widely used in Italy.

²³ J. DEBIEC, *Fear can spread from person to person faster than the coronavirus – but there are ways to slow it down*, in *The conversation*, 2020, March 16 (<https://theconversation.com/fear-can-spread-from-person-to-person-faster-than-the-coronavirus-but-there-are-ways-to-slow-it-down-133129>).

Table 3 – Results of the content analysis, Ukraine

Period of study	Description	Daily COVID news	Daily new COVID cases	Daily new COVID deaths	TOP-5 most used words
20/01-20/02	Since 1 st COVID news in Ukraine	489	0	0	China Ministry of health [of Ukraine] people Ukraine deadly [virus]
21/01-10/03	Since Novi Sanzhary case ²⁴	689	1	0	Italy Ukraine Ministry of health [of Ukraine] Ukrainians suspected, [new] cases
11/03-06/04	Since the quarantine announcement	2567	1250	32	Ukraine number [cases] Italy people, ill thousands [people]
07/04-21/04	Online survey	1109	4874	129	Ukraine ill [per] day number [cases] Ministry of health [of Ukraine]

Source: results of the content analysis

Fig. 12 reflects the evolution of COVID-19 news by the Ukrainian UNIAN agency. Like Italy, Ukraine initially spoke of a new deadly virus from China. Gradually, the emphasis shifted to an epidemic in Italy itself. It remained the top topic until the beginning of March 2020. Given this, the results of the correlation analysis look not surprising as they showed a strong relationship between the number of coronavirus news in Italy and Ukraine (see Fig. 10).

Subsequently, the virus came to Ukraine. From March 11, mass-media began to pay more attention to the situation inside the country than outside. They spoke about quarantine, the need to respect it, and the number of patients. The media avoided using words with negative

²⁴ BBC, *Coronavirus: Ukraine protesters attack buses carrying China evacuees*, in *BBC News*, 2020, February 21 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51581805>).

connotations. Instead, it was about persuading the population to comply with quarantine requirements, despite the severe economic consequences of remaining home without work. As a result, Ukrainians showed a much more critical and moderate attitude towards the epidemic than Italians. All these results showed the survey described earlier.



Figure 11. Keywords evolution in COVID-19 news in Ukraine

Source: results of the content analysis

6. Conclusion

The study once again confirmed the power of mass media in manipulating public opinion. Each country chose a specific way to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, from a complete lockdown (most European countries, China) to a slight restriction on the level of contacts (Sweden, Belarus). Official news agencies also selected a specific tonality of media agenda. Italy has chosen emotional manipulation by intimidation. The official news rhetoric based on negative stimulus words such as ‘death’, ‘new infections’, and ‘pandemic chronicle’ resulted in an uncritical perception of information due to intense, irrational fears of infection and death. Ukrainian media have chosen a more calm and balanced approach to pandemic news. They avoided using emotional pressure through panic fear and focused more on persuading the population to comply with

quarantine rules by introducing rational arguments. As a result, Ukrainians were calmer, balanced, and reasonable.

The coronavirus pandemic appeared to be a global social experiment. It revealed a person's vulnerability and unpreparedness to resist emotional manipulation by the media and politicians. This fact again emphasized the need for emotional intelligence development, which allows a person to perceive information more critically, analyze her emotional state, and control it even in a situation of global panic.

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