

Public Enemy Number One: Covid-19

*A Critical Look at Discourses of Protection from the Dutch State During the Corona Pandemic*

**Master's thesis**

**Sociology**

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## **Abstract**

*The Corona pandemic of 2020 is not merely a health crisis, as it has also severely affected the socioeconomic status-quo in countries hit by the virus. In the Netherlands for instance, political actors have set up security measures that have sizeable implications for the social lives of citizens. This thesis explores how the Dutch government constructs narratives of protection, and how these are used during the pandemic to legitimize measures in support of the political economy. This is supported by a review of literature pertaining to Beck's conceptualization of risks and Foucault's notion of biopolitical strategies. Depictions and dialogues of threats, protection or care in response to societal challenges should be critically questioned on account of their utility to the neoliberal project. With the aim of the discovery of, and reflection on, the narratives of protection in the communications of the Dutch state to the public, an extensive critical discourse analysis was performed. The protective roles taken up by the government in the communications were that of a 'technocrat', 'parent', 'negotiator', and 'entrepreneur'. This thesis closes by emphasizing the political opportunism surrounding protective measures during the Corona pandemic, subsequently arguing for a transcendence past our conventional understandings of protection.*

Keywords: Biopolitics, crisis, neoliberalism, protection, risk

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## **Introduction**

The beginning of the year 2020 has been typified by one of the most serious health crises since the aids troubles of the 1980's. Starting from the winter months and continuing throughout spring, the world has been gripped by the spread of the Covid-19 virus, now colloquially known as the still unfolding Corona pandemic of 2020. In response to the rapid advance of the disease across the globe, governments have been reacting to the issue to secure the health and safety of their citizens. Means to accomplish this range from the now almost unexceptional practice of 'social distancing', to more compelling measures such as quarantines (Taylor, 2020). The World Health Organization

has even called on national leaders to “pull out all the stops in the battle against Covid-19” (World Health Organization, 2020), seemingly making any decision aimed at limiting the impact of the Corona virus acceptable in current times<sup>1</sup>. Governments around the world heeded these words, taking drastic measures in order to protect public health, treating the virus as an ‘enemy’ that must be fought at any cost (Mutsaers, 2020).

However, the ongoing pandemic is not merely a health crisis, as it has also been having an immense impact on the socioeconomic domain in countries affected by the virus, the Netherlands being one of them (Schuilenburg, 2020). As a response to the economic downturn caused by the safety measures, the Dutch government quickly formulated legislation aimed at supporting businesses, arguing for their necessity to the wellbeing of the public (Hofs & Mebius, 2020). However, economic interventions such as these are in line with what Maurizio Lazzarato describes as administrative neoliberalism, which is aimed at controlling citizens through market rationalizations (Lazzarato, 2009). In the Netherlands for instance, advocating for the ‘protection’ of the economy has allowed corporations to operate more freely regarding employment laws, which has facilitated layoffs (Hofs & Mebius, 2020). Decision-making such as this thus brings up the important question of where the line has been drawn between genuine care for public health and political opportunism during the pandemic, which is what I aim to discern in this thesis.

By fixating on biopolitical discourses of risk and security, this thesis seeks to critically examine the positioning as a ‘protector’ of public wellbeing performed by the Dutch state. This will be done by looking at the public communications of the government during the Corona pandemic. According to various scholars, practices such as treating the virus as an intruder and wanting to ‘protect’ the economy are characteristic of the modern political culture in western nations (Collier, 2014). Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens argue that this is related to the emergence of the *risk society* (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). This society is obsessed with techno-managerial solutions to societal threats in order to protect the collective. By drawing parallels to immunology, social philosopher Peter Sloterdijk expands on this, arguing that technological advancements and liberalization caused humans to see a multitude of these risks. As a result, policymaking places much emphasis on ‘immunization’ against outside threats (Mutsaers, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Covid-19’ (SARS-CoV-2), the specific variation of the currently active Coronavirus, and ‘Corona’, the collective term for variations of the virus, will be used interchangeably in this thesis. This is because the Dutch government treats it similarly in regards to legislation. Source: [www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19)

This positioning of states as a ‘protector’ is a representation of what Foucault conceptualized as *biopower* (Foucault, 1990). According to Foucault, modern political strategies have become increasingly concerned with the regulation of life and the protection of populations, which caused the political and biological concept of a person to become intertwined (Foucault, 1990). However, these practices also give government actors the ability to use the narratives of protection to legitimize controversial legislation (Agamben, 2020). Because of this, thinkers such as Judith Butler and Roberto Esposito have warned against these *biopolitical* strategies, for instance immunization, cautioning against their (de)politicizing discursive powers (Butler and Esposito, as presented in Huang, 2011). By highlighting the necessity for a policy to protect the human or collective body, biopolitical strategies can be used to reproduce the existing political economy, which can consequently give rise to the proliferation of neoliberal order and capitalism itself (Lazzarato, 2009).

According to researcher and activist Naomi Klein (2020), the Corona pandemic illustrates the above impeccably, as the legislation that is pushed forward in order to protect public wellbeing has deliberate political and economic implications. According to Klein, this is part of the project of ‘disaster capitalism’: a calculated strategy of neoliberal actors to exploit the distraction crises bring to restructure the economy. By underlining the ‘protection’ proposed measures and legislation bring, either in the domain of public health or pertaining to the economy, governments can legitimize political opportunism (Klein, 2020). In consequence of this, a critical reflection of measures taken by the Dutch government during the Corona pandemic is warranted, as the impactful decisions made by the ruling coalition, such as reducing market restrictions and supporting corporate interests, are slowly furthering already existing inequalities in societies (Engbersen, et al., 2020).

To interrogate the implications of discourses of protection during times of crisis, this thesis will discern and subsequently investigate government narratives used to justify measures and legislation. As most studies on this subject are done after-the-fact (Klein, 2020), analysing the currently unfolding Corona pandemic of 2020 from an ongoing perspective gives grounds for this research project to fill this previously unoccupied scholarly space. The crisis is highly talked about, experienced and felt, making it a hotbed of political and social unrest. Being at this centre of all of this will prevent potent emotive data to be unaccounted for, as is prevalent in more longitudinal studies, which primarily focus on macro-level consequences (Twist & de Vente, 2002).

Furthermore, by utilizing a critical lens on the inseparability of protection and biopolitical strategies during a crisis (Lemke, Casper & Moore, 2011), I hope to find new insights pertaining to the broader literature on disaster neoliberalism (Comaroff, 2007). Lastly, by looking at the dichotomies between narratives of health and the economy, the social paradoxes of administrative neoliberalism can be questioned, which could add to existing scholarly work on inequalities (Lazzarato, 2009).

This thesis will primarily focus on the protective narratives that the Dutch government produces in its correspondences to the public, predominantly press conferences and news-articles, in order to legitimize liberal measures during the Corona pandemic. At the same time, attention will be put on the neutrality of scientific measures aimed at managing the risks of the crisis. This will be supported by pinpointing the biopolitical strategies of the state actors pursuing the project of neoliberalism. In line with these goals, this thesis will explore the following question: *How does the Dutch government construct discourses of protection during the Corona pandemic, and how do these narratives help in legitimizing neoliberal measures?*

In the following section the theoretical outline and design of the thesis will be presented. Firstly, literature on risk management and biopower will be explicated, linking these concepts to the ascent of neoliberalism after. Next, the research design and methodology will be displayed. Thirdly, the findings and results of the study will be presented. Finally, the thesis will be concluded and discussed, presenting possible limitations, implications, and possibilities for future research.

## **Literature review**

### *Risk and the immunization of society*

Threats, hazards, and crises, for example pandemics, have always been a part of the human experience. Throughout history, the perception was that these *risks* could ultimately not be managed, despite human interventions. However, according to Ulrich Beck (1992), modern day risks are of a different constitution, as contemporary hazards are the direct result of human activities, which caused an ‘obsession’ with risk management. Anthony Giddens later adds to this, defining the new risks as manufactured, characterized by high socio-political visibility. Examples of these visible and politicized risks that society obsesses over are pollution, war and newly

discovered illnesses (Giddens, 1999), of which the Covid-19 crisis is a splendid example, as protection against the virus wholly dictated public sentiment and political debate during the spring of 2020, fully occupying the collective consciousness of societies (Klein, 2020).

This thesis will be supported by Beck's view on government protection against risks in modern nations, perceiving it not as an objective measure, but as a political tool (Beck, 1998). Fear, as the emotional reaction to risk, has become an instrument that binds societies as it brings persons together in a powerful way to combat threats (Beck, 2009). Due to this, the need for political-technological solutions to 'protect' various aspects of society has increased (Yearley, 2001; Collier, 2014). Public health has been caught in this process especially, resulting in an intensification of risk management in this domain from governments (Diprose, 2008). Various intertwined sociologists, philosophers and social theorists have examined this, ranging from *immunization* (Sloterdijk, 1998; Esposito, 2011, Kaika, 2017), to the popular field of *biopolitics* (Foucault, 1990; Lazzarato, 2002; Rose, 2001; Agamben, 1995; Butler, 2006, among others).

As a result of the focus on risk management, protection against hazards from outside (or outsiders) has thus become commonplace within political discourse. Peter Sloterdijk argues that this 'immunization' against threats is the key characteristic of modern political culture (Sloterdijk, 1998). Within this political culture, comparisons are made between the biological immune system and institutional immune systems that protect us against threats (Huang, 2011; Boyne, 1998). By highlighting the threats of a metaphorical 'contagion', such as migrants or the literal contagion of the Coronavirus, protective measures against these risks are used to legitimize political discourse. In consequence of this, it justifies social control or 'immunization' by state institutions, such as restrictive integration, police surveillance, and monitoring (Mutsears, 2020). Lastly, by defining a situation as a crisis, it creates a situation in which risk and fear can aid with depoliticizing inherently political choices made by the state by underlining the protection proposed measures bring to society, or the 'body' (Huang, 2011).

Michel Foucault analyses this functioning of state power in relation to human life in his conceptualisations of *biopower* (Foucault, 2019a; Foucault, 1990). This form of power concerns the preservation and nurturing of individual life as well as the interest in the lives of entire populations, or the collective body (Esposito & Rose, 2010). In the eyes of Foucault, biopower is a form of power that originated in the eighteen-hundreds, and began to grow in throughout recent history. Through processes of modernity, man as a living being and man as a political subject have

become indistinguishable (Lazzarato, 2002). This caused biological life, of individuals as well collectives, to emerge as the central object of state politics and the economy. Foucault argues that modern authorities continuously nurture the concept of human life for political means, as biopower is “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy” (Foucault, 2019b). In a more critical sense biopower thus relates to the techniques of modern-day governments aimed at the regulation of their subjects (Collier, 2009).

More recently, thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben (1995), Antonio Negri (2008), and Roberto Esposito (2008) have taken up the ideas of Foucault and continued the discussion on the relation of biological power and politics, in what is now the field of ‘*biopolitics*’. Biopolitics, in this sense, is the social and political power the state has over life itself, allowing the state to order how, where, and why human bodies are used (Lemke, et al., 2011; Foucault, 2007; Esposito & Rose, 2010). Foucault argues that this power is exerted through the regulatory institutions of a given country, allowing human bodies to be moulded in susceptible subjects (Foucault & Ewald, 2003). As a result of this, modern power synthesizes into social practices of life, death, birth, reproduction and other biological aspects of human existence. An example of this is the social norms propagated through health institutes during the Corona-pandemic (Benvenuto, 2020). In summary, biopolitics questions the political managing of modern nations using various techniques to subjugate the bodies of the people, making the population internalize the expectations and norms of the social order (Esposito, 2008).

According to Foucault, the changes in the valuation and use of human life developed simultaneously with another now omnipresent part of society, the political economy. He argues that the mechanism of power changed at the same time that the economy and politics became intertwined as well (Foucault, as presented in Lazzarato, 2002). However, there are of course frictions with other facets of social power, as the way bodies adjust also happens via the workings gender or race normativity for instance, which are widely supported in language, news, popular culture, science, music, et cetera (Butler, 2006; Essed & Trienekens, 2008). In essence, biopolitical power makes possible the internalizations of social expectations and norms through the institutions of a given country. In light of this, concepts and dialogues of ‘protection’ or ‘care’ in response to societal challenges should be critically questioned in their utility to the existing institutional system (Comaroff, 2007).

## *Neoliberalism*

According to Foucault, biopower makes possible the modern workings and existence of capitalism and neoliberalism through the internalization of norms (Foucault, as presented in Weidner, 2009). Maurizio Lazzarato (2009) continues this discussion, arguing that biopolitics allows for the creation of “strategies of individualization, securitization and depoliticization used as part of neoliberal social policy”. It is therefore crucial to trace the histories of neoliberalism in conjunction with biopolitics in order to investigate their affiliations in modern day societies.

Over the past few decades, the distinguishing characteristic of administrative culture across the globe has been rise of neoliberalism, happening in both the political as well as legislative circles. The focus of this new global administrative ideology is that of market deregulation, state decentralization, and individual responsibility in favour of the economy, influenced by forces of global capitalism (Albert, 1993). Social geographer David Harvey describes it as: “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2007; Harvey, 2016). More broadly defined, neoliberalism is thus the socio-political renunciation of power to the economy by governments (Thorsen & Lie, 2006).

A somewhat divergent approach to neoliberalism, and the view employed in this thesis, is taken by Foucault. To Foucault, neoliberalism is primarily a way of governing (*gouvernementalité*), a means to organize subjects through state practices. This form of liberalism, Foucault argues, acknowledges that markets are social constructs in need of constant maintenance from the government (Foucault, in Lazzarato, 2002), justifying various interventions. This maintenance by neoliberal actors entails the internalization of market rationality through the state. By top-down internalization of individual responsibility for instance, social risks such as sickness and unemployment can be reduced to economic-rational happenings, rather than political consequences. Seen as this, it is another means to make bodies susceptible to discipline, a key facet of biopower. Lazzarato continues from here, arguing that “the aim of neoliberal politics is the restoration of the power of capital to establish the enterprise as dominant form; this requires that it targets society as a whole for a fundamental reconstruction” (Lazzarato, 2009). Central to this

effort is the regulation of citizens, or human bodies, from the self-positioning as a ‘caretaker’, or ‘protector’ by the government. Instances of this are healthcare, medical regulations, health insurance, or the mode of the welfare state itself (Lobo-Guerrero, 2010).

Events that highlight this phenomenon immaculately are national crises, as they are especially potent in providing space for economic and social restructuring at the legislative level (Klein, 2007a). In the eyes of the followers of Foucault, examples of social breakdowns that come into existence simultaneously with neoliberal economic policies are thus not simply the result of incompetence or mismanagement, but are an integral part of the neoliberal ideology (Saltman, 2015; Dupuy, 2010). According to Naomi Klein, this project has picked up prominence in recent years, and has produced a more deliberate strategy too, aimed at facilitating neoliberal economic restructuring during times of ‘shock’, for instance a pandemic, which she dubbed ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein, 2020; Klein, 2007a). She argues that while a disaster such as the Covid-19 crisis unfolds, citizens are too emotionally and physically preoccupied to engage with the legislation process and resist against potentially harmful or controversial policies. By highlighting the dangers to the human body the pandemic brings, neoliberal actors can thus facilitate the internalization of new (economic) norms, which aids the pursuit of capitalism.

### *Disaster entrepreneurialism and the Dutch state*

Historically, the Netherlands too has various actors that utilize crises to facilitate policymaking in line with the neoliberal project. During the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, for instance, the Dutch government created the Crisis and Recovery-law. This legislation was promoted as a way to stimulate the development sector and construction industry. However, it also allowed governments and construction companies to deviate from various environmental, housing, and noise and hindrance laws to make the realization of projects easier (Crisis en Herstelwet, 2010). An example of this was the continuation of the A27 road near Utrecht, which was previously halted to due to hinderance-complaints by poorer residents living on the outskirts of the city (Meerhof, 2013). The law was proposed as a temporary measure in 2010 and 2011, but became a permanent law in 2013. Another example is that of the Rotterdamwet, this legislation was made in quick response to the fatal shooting of politician Pim Fortuyn, an event that caused significant public tensions. The law, which turned from a city ordinance to national policy, allows authorities to

block ‘low-income groups’ from settling in certain urban areas. The law is highly contentious, as it is now mostly used to spatially control persons with a migration background (Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008).

These are but a few of the examples that show that policy-responses to catastrophes and unrest have been deployed as *political technologies of power* (Foucault, 2019b) in the Netherlands. Therefore, it could be argued that modern plans and policies pertaining to protecting citizens, and subsequently crisis management, have a dual objective. For one thing, they provide a technical solution to a problem, which reinforces the protective role of the government. On the other hand, these political technologies facilitate the reframing of the aims and objectives of governing, society and citizenship, allowing for political opportunism in favour of neoliberalism (Collier, 2014).

In line with the thoughts of Stephen J. Collier (2009; 2014), the strategies and measures revolving around states of emergency can be viewed as instruments used to change the public discourse. Here, a key characteristic of biopolitics, the management of life as a political strategy, comes into play in regards to the main subject and goals of this thesis. This is because the Corona pandemic, as a risk to public health, and in the view of Ulrich Beck (1998), the collective, could be used as grounds for political strategizing, and more specifically in favour of the neoliberal political economy (Lazzarato, 2002). One of the strategies that allows for such governance is highlighting what are necessary constructions for the protection of life and the economy based on scientific knowledge. By underlining the potentiality for harm to the (collective) human body, even in the metaphorical sense, certain policies are made acceptable while others are made unacceptable (Fassin, 2001). Following the above literature review, the next sections of this thesis will examine the current discourses of ‘protection’ to legitimize measures in government communications during the pandemic.

## **Research design**

### *Methodology: critical discourse analysis*

Acceptable policies during times of crisis are constructed by the government using different narratives and themes. By utilizing a critical discourse analysis, government communications with the public can be examined critically. Traditional discourse analysis as a qualitative method is

interested in the way linguistic narratives are formulated to depict contentious topics within social reality, such as political issues, sexuality, life, and the nation state (Woofitt, 2005). However, critical discourse analysis goes beyond this method, and is concerned with the question why a certain actor is propagating a particular narrative regarding a topic. In doing so, it allows for explorations of resistance against these narratives. In the words of Kirsty Williamson, critical discourse analysis “plays a key ethical and political role in showing how social phenomena are discursively constituted: it demonstrates how things come to be as they are, that they could be different, and thereby that they can be changed” (Williamson & Johanson, 2017). A critical discourse approach thus allows for a problem-oriented way to analytically investigate the connections between power, knowledge, life, and the state (Lazar, 2005). Metaphors play a key role here, as metaphors are an important part of our conceptualisation of social reality. They are inherently connected to the way we perceive the world and others through communication (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

I followed the steps of analysing textual and visual documents proposed by Glenn Bowen (2009). This process combines the elements and characteristics of both content and thematic analysis, involving stages of skimming, reading and interpreting the government communications. During the content analysis, the information and data was organized into categories that are connected to the main research question, while during the thematic analysis, patterns were recognized within the data, facilitating the coding of results and emergence of themes and meanings pertaining to the research goals (Lune & Berg, 2017).

By following this research design, this thesis aimed to uncover why the Dutch state pursued certain narratives of protection while omitting others during the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic served as a case-study to look into the way authorities legitimize policy choices by influencing the experience of social reality through depictions of protection. In light of this, I analysed the narratives present in the government communications. This was done in accordance with the conceptualization of risk management as a biopolitical strategy, as explored in the literature review. Data was gathered by looking at the discourses in state correspondences with the public, searching for patterns and themes in the narratives of the sources. Subsequently, I examined key formulations, repeated types or definitions, specific omissions of information and the reoccurrence of specific words. The data was systematically coded in the software Atlas.ti in order to organize the data in ways that allowed the main narratives and assumptions within the data to

come light. Finally, the ethical prerequisites for research were adhered to in line with the data protection laws of the European Union (GDPR, 2018).

### *Data collection*

Data sources were collected by using a twofold approach. Firstly, government media communications and documents were accessed through the publicly available database on the website of the government<sup>2</sup>. A focus was put on press conferences and speeches of the cabinet and president, as they provided the most succinct representation of the narrative choices and discourses aimed at the public in regards to Corona-legislation. In total, 27 conferences were watched and examined, totalling 15 hours of footage. Alongside this, 51 policy documents pertaining to the Corona pandemic present in the press conferences were surveyed. The timeframe of the data was set to late February and the 28th of May of the year 2020 (Feb 21-May 28), as this is when the policymaking and legislative process regarding the Corona pandemic was at its peak. Because the Corona pandemic was still unfolding at the time of writing the thesis, I chose to set this cut-off date to designate a specific timeframe for the study.

Secondly, traditional media sources were gathered as auxiliary sources through the database LexisNexis, accessed through the at-home proxy of service of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. As this was a health crisis of previously unforeseen proportions in the Netherlands, choosing this period of time assured a great deal of coverage. The search for traditional news sources was limited to news publications based in the Netherlands, both English and Dutch language articles were used. Following this, the search was refined to the five most-read daily publications, restricting the search to: Telegraaf, Algemeen Dagblad, Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, and Trouw. Using the Covid-19 search guide provided by LexisNexis, results were further narrowed down by formulating specific accurate phrases related to Corona-measures and the economy<sup>3</sup>. In total, 37 news articles were surveyed based on their relevance to the case.

An inductive approach was performed in examining and identifying codes in the data. This means no prior scheme of codes or set of themes was used in uncovering the discourses of protection. Instead, the codes and subsequent typologies were discovered during various steps of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten>

<sup>3</sup> For a full list of search phrases see: [https://p.widencdn.net/mjgamb/COVID-19\\_NexisUniTips\\_English](https://p.widencdn.net/mjgamb/COVID-19_NexisUniTips_English)

the coding process in Atlas.ti. Later, I based these codes on the content of the research question and by linking the observed data with the theories presented in the literature review. By coding the government press conferences and media articles on the basis of this method, I discovered four roles the government positioned itself as. The mantles taken up by the government were as following: technocrat, parent, negotiator, and entrepreneur. In order to highlight these types, 15 government press conferences and 4 news publications were chosen that present the narratives of the specific discourses.

## **Findings**

Examining the contents of the public press conferences pertaining to the pandemic throughout time reveals varying constructions of protection against the Corona-virus by the Dutch state. After careful analysis of the positioning of the government towards the public, four protective roles were observed: ‘the Technocrat’, ‘the Parent’, ‘the Negotiator’, and ‘the Entrepreneur’. These performances changed throughout time in accordance with the changes in medical knowledge and variations in public sentiment. To support this changing self-positioning, several narratives, analogies and metaphors of health and safety were used. Besides this, these ‘protective’ discourses by the Dutch government never fully disappeared from the communications, making them highly intertwined not only with each other, but also with the overarching neoliberal discourse.

In order to highlight the continuous negotiation between public health and the economy, I compare and contrast the different themes identified in the press conferences and their relation to political opportunism in favour of the liberal government. Below, the findings in the documents, press conferences, and media articles will be presented so as to achieve this examination.

### *The Technocrat*

The positioning of the government actors at the start of the crisis, as well as prior to the Corona virus being present in the Netherlands, was aimed at limiting political responsibility, presenting themselves as protective technocrats. In response to threat of the spreading of Covid-19 to Europe, the government quickly assumed a discourse that places the cabinet of ministers outside the crisis, placing responsibility on health professionals and their expertise. This is supported by highlighting

the lack of knowledge the individual government members have regarding the virus. In response to the first signs of contamination in the Netherlands, while replying to a question asking if action needed to be taken, the prime-minister stated:

I am in constant contact with the minister of public health, Bruno Bruins, for instance in regards to the measures that need to be taken in order to prepare our country. Furthermore, my gratitude goes out to the healthcare professionals, who are working hard to do everything that is necessary, it is of great importance that we follow their advice first and foremost. (*Twitter message by Mark Rutte*, as presented by *Algemeen Dagblad*, February 27, 2020).

Here, protection was constructed through a narrative of objective scientific expertise. In order to legitimize this stance, the state positioned itself as a layman up against the health professionals, allowing the government decisions to be depoliticized by underlining the objective scientific foundation of the decision-making (Esposito, 2008).

Moreover, while the government assumed a depoliticized stance on the measures, the strategy was further substantiated by linking it to core ideas of the liberal ideology. For instance, in regards to the question if the government should forbid shaking hands for the time being due to the rapid spread of the virus in Southern Europe, the prime-minister answered: “Everyone can do what they want, it’s a free country” (Mark Rutte, *press conference after meeting with minister of health*, March 6, 2020). In addition to this, the government saw no need to limit prices of primary goods that saw a rise in value as a result of early hoarding at this stage: “We are of course always debating these things, but for now there is no need for new decisions on this subject” (ibid.). These are key representations of characteristics presented by neoliberalism, more specifically that of individual freedom and a free market (Harvey, 2007). This shows that the government decisions at the time were depoliticized by presenting them as being in favour of public wellbeing while simultaneously utilizing them to reinforce the existing political economy.

At this moment in time, there is no reason to take additional measures [...] Let me put it this way: let us sail a course based on expertise, I think this is what the Netherlands

appreciates, that we have very good people in this domain of health (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with the minister of health*. Rijksoverheid, March 6, 2020).

The first links with biopolitical strategizing become visible here, as (the lack of) medical knowledge at the start of the crisis was used as a political instrument to support the decisions made by the government. Through the expertise of the state health institutions (GGD, RIVM)<sup>4</sup>, inaction to the virus was normalized as being in favour of public wellbeing. In light of this, the lack of preparation in regards to the virus potentially coming to the Netherlands was justified because of the ‘preparedness’ of the Dutch government and health institutions. Up until the 9th of March, much emphasis was placed on the already existing technologies, protective capabilities, and expertise of the Dutch health institutions and ministries in being able to deal with Covid-19. Therefore, the Dutch government chose against new policies or the formulation of measures in limiting the spread of Covid-19.

This stage of the crisis was thus characterized by subduing the fears and anxieties caused from happenings ‘outside’ the Netherlands, much in line with the day-to-day operations of ‘immunization’ in the risk society (Sloterdijk, 1998). By immunizing the Netherlands against the virus through techno-managerial solutions, in this case through absent legislation on the basis of existing medical knowledges regarding viruses, the ‘protective’ role is reproduced by alleviating public fears. Furthermore, by shifting responsibility to health professionals, and their answers to hazards, the government can absolve itself from any mishaps. Subsequently, by diminishing risks as a result of involvement with public health experts, the liberal status quo can be reproduced through strategies of government inaction and individual freedom, showcasing marginal political opportunism. Lastly, this role as a ‘technocrat’ also limits room for criticisms from oppositional forces, as going against the decisions of the government, and thus the health professionals, would mean going against the wellbeing of the public.

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<sup>4</sup> Gemeentelijke of Gemeenschappelijke Gezondheidsdienst (municipal health services), and Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu (national research institute for health and environment), respectively.

## *The Parent*

Soon after the first week of march however, more and more people began getting infected by the Covid-19 virus. This caused the fears of the public to once again rise, calling for a more parental role from the government. As a result of this, the ruling coalition created various measures in an attempt to control the well-being of the public. The principal measure in the Netherlands became the ‘one-and-a-half-meter society’, part of the ‘liberal’ and ‘intelligent’ lockdown aimed at reducing the threat of the virus while still allowing for personal freedom in mobility: “With this [lockdown] you can still do things outside such as going to the park, but please keep the 1,5-meter distance because this leads to an enormous decrease in safety risks” (Mark Rutte, *Press conference of Mark Rutte and Bruno Bruins in response to the presentation of Corona measures*, Rijksoverheid, March 12, 2020).

While this position was initially presented as unpolitical, critics increasingly began pointing out fallacies in the ‘intelligence’ of the lockdown in the weeks following the 1,5-meter legislation. Soon after this, the prime minister had to concede that the choices that were made were inherently political: “Yes, the political sphere is making decisions here for the people [...], based on the risks and subsequent advice” (Mark Rutte, *press conference after meeting with the ministers*, March 20, 2020). This parental response shows the transformative nature of the self-positioning of the government, with the previous role being adapted to fit the current political environment but not fully fading when discussing the new 1,5-meter measures.

I understand that some people will say: yeah but what about this or what about that, arguing for different measures. And every time I have to say: no, we build the measures on that advice. That means we should not think about ifs or buts, because this has no use [...], because, look, I am not a virologist, and I thought you [NOS journalist] are not one either. (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*. Rijksoverheid, March 9, 2020).

The prior narrative of the authorities as a stoic technocrat was still being utilized when it suited a certain discourse to substantiate legislation, but the new role taken up by the government was more akin to a stern but caring parent. This role was characterised by the position that the government

was prescribing righteous measures for the good of the public (the child), directing the Dutch society to aid with the fragile and unknowing position it was in, much akin to a wise mother or father figure.

We are always thinking about what we need to do for good of the Netherlands. [...] But I have also said, what we are doing now... Jaap van Dissel calls it a treatment. The Netherlands is a patient, and this patient must be carefully treated (Mark Rutte, *Press conference of Mark Rutte and Bruno Bruins in response to the presentation of Corona measures*, Rijksoverheid, March 12, 2020).

In conjunction with the increased interest in public health, the government, and especially the prime-minister, began to appeal to the morals of the people in regards to ‘doing what is right’ and ‘caring’ for the nation. The role of the Parent as an uncompromising guardian is strengthened here by showing how people should be behaving during the pandemic. This was done by adopting the mantra of ‘either you are with us or against us’, passing off responsibility in a different manner than with the previous mantle as a technocrat. Now, instead of shifting the burden primarily to the healthcare professionals, the government puts it on every citizen not following the 1,5-meter society. By doing this, the burden is put on the individual instead of the government, reinforcing the neoliberal idea of personal responsibility.

I think the Netherlands is starting to realize this is not something you can just leave to the government, or to the bosses at the National Health Institute, or the minister of Medical Care. They are working tirelessly, yes, but I want to reiterate, we can only do this together as seventeen million people, that is just the practicality of the situation (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*, Rijksoverheid, March 9, 2020)

This shift to a communitarian approach seems counterproductive to the neoliberal project, but is actually part of the political strategy of neoliberal actors in Western-European countries (Van Houdt, Suvarierol & Schinkel, 2011). The ideology of neoliberalism means a shift in personal responsibility on the one hand, but on the other hand it also entails facilitating a shared sense of community to protect the in-group. This is showcased by the ‘we are all in this together’ mentality

propagated by the government, which simultaneously argues for ‘fighting as one’ as well as individual culpability. Any mishaps related to Corona during this time were hitherto blamed on the lack of responsibility citizens took. This was especially targeted at youths: “When I cycle to work I see those youths together at a food stall and get disappointed”, and people who unnecessarily stockpiled food and medical items (hoarders): “There is no need to be absurd and hoard” (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting the cabinet of ministers*, Rijksoverheid, March 20, 2020). By doing this, the moral appeal of the neoliberal ‘parent’ is reinforced while also manipulating responsibilities away from the state and toward the individual ‘children’.

Following the stricter parental stance, a tougher emergency decree was justified. This resulted in increased police monitoring and significant a fine (€400,-) for not following the 1,5-meter legislation. These increases in control and moral appeals lingered as topics in the press conferences throughout March:

And you can see that not everyone has internalized this 1,5-meter together, as a society, and how important following this decision is. [...] They think ‘ah that 1,5-meter, I don’t see the truth in that’. That personal stubbornness can sometimes be good, but now that is not the case. That is what I want to make sure everyone understands with these new measures (Hugo de Jonge, *Press conference of Mark Rutte and Hugo de Jonge in response to the resignation of Bruno Bruins, and the Corona measures*, Rijksoverheid, March 19, 2020).

Furthermore, by highlighting the righteousness of the government as a parent in protecting the wellbeing of society, the government was able to slowly begin pushing through legislation in support of neoliberal economic policymaking. An example from this period of the crisis is the necessity for a bailout of KLM-AirFrance while other sectors, such as the cultural sector, remained underfunded. This market intervention by the Dutch government is a pronounced representation of modern neoliberal governing presented by Lazzarato (2002), as it allowed for the internalization of economic policies in the following months. This was accomplished by arguing for the necessity of the intervention for the collective Dutch society.

It is crucial that cash keeps flowing to KLM in the following two months. [...] KLM is not more piteous than labourers or independents, but it will hurt society as a whole if KLM struggles. The emergency surrounding KLM is extraordinary and therefore justifies special measures (Eric Wiebes, as presented in NRC Handelsblad, *Bodem is nog niet bereikt bij KLM*, March 16, 2020).

Taken together, the stern protective role of the Parent during this period was used to highlight the urgency and legitimacy of various political decisions. Consequently, by reiterating this position as a ‘mother’ or ‘father’ figure, the government was able to reinforce the political economy by stressing how liberal values help to ‘look after’ or ‘safeguard’ the country for the future. Concludingly, the construction of this discourse of the state as caring guardian constructs policy choices as acceptable as they are protecting the society from harm, either in terms of personal harm for individuals as well as collective harm in prevention of economic losses.

### *The Negotiator*

The mantle of the Parent persisted until the week of the 27th of march, when the economy started to falter and the public started to lose hope in the measures, causing a reconsideration of strategy. Here, the third role was taken up by the government, as it could no longer primarily position itself around health and instead decides to place itself as a negotiator between the economy and the wellbeing of the public. The correspondences in the last week of March and first weeks of April were thus characterized by the interwovenness of the market and public health, and how decisions must be negotiated between safety of the people and the health of the economy to protect both of these domains.

We all realise that priority number one regarding the Corona-crisis is public health. But [...] I want to assure you all that we will also attempt to limit the economic impact as much as possible (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*. Rijksoverheid, April 02, 2020).

That contrast [between public health and the economy] does not exist. The measures in place cannot be made more strict or lax as that would hit both the economy and health. What we do now for public health will contribute to economic recovery later. Both aspects are two sides of the same coin (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*. Rijksoverheid, April 07, 2020).

During the weeks following these statements, the protective role of the Negotiator was instrumentalized for neoliberal propagations of individual freedom, much akin to the technocratic position prior. This was supported by following a discourse supporting the ruling party: “The Netherlands has the most liberal lockdown of Europe [...] I don’t like hierarchy myself either, so I am happy we did it this way and people don’t see them as a dictatorship (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with the council of ministers*, May 1, 2020). This narrative of the liberal protector was also employed in response to the economic hardships in southern Europe, showcasing the neoliberal communitarianism of the parental role. In response to the question whether or not the Netherlands would be interested in economic solidarity with Italy, the prime minister argued that that would be in contention with ‘protection’ of the national economy, or in the words the in-group (Mark Rutte, as presented in *De Telegraaf*, *Vriendschap blijft, maar Mark, help ons nou*, April 01, 2020).

Later on, this period saw a more emphasized focus towards businesses in the government plans however, with corporate interests becoming more and more important in the correspondences and news publications. Here, the state also used fear of the future after the virus as a political instrument to support these neoliberal decision-making practices. The government repeatedly highlighted “preparing for stormy weather”, having to “pay a price”, “securing vital sectors” and “preventing budget shortage” (Mark Rutte, *press conference after meeting with ministers*, March 27, 2020)”. Alongside this, the government labelled 84 laws as urgent legislation, designating all of them rubber-stamp issues that needed to be handled “hastily” in order to create room to support both public health and the economy during the pandemic. (Jan Anthonie Bruijn, as presented in *AD*, *Eerste Kamer even open voor spoedwetten*, March 27, 2020). However, some of the packaged laws are very contentious, for example an extension to the previously mentioned crisis and recovery-law, aimed at reducing the restrictiveness of environmental regulations for construction and development companies (Rijksoverheid, 2020c).

In concurrence with these events an emergency plan was devised to ‘save’ the economy. Nevertheless, this strategy to aid the economy primarily focused on businesses rather than employees: “any company where the water reaches up to their necks is one too many” (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after crisis-meeting with the cabinet of ministers*, April 15, 2020). Furthermore, these plans were substantiated by highlighting the (future) protection they would bring:

This fiscal-economic policy is aimed at limiting the risks and increasing the security of the economy. [...] This emergency package is therefore of big importance for employment and therefore for the economy, for our businesses and subsequently for the people that work in those businesses, that are reliant on these businesses for their livelihood, their income, those employment opportunities. Obviously, a big portion of the workers in the Netherlands do not work for the government, around three-quarters of Dutch people either owns a company or works for a company, those jobs are important for our country and for the prosperity and wellbeing of the people. (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*. Rijksoverheid, March 27, 2020).

Taken together, this mantle of the ‘Negotiator’ constructs policy choices as acceptable by presenting them in ways that highlight the interwovenness of protecting public health and the economy. By underlining the need of saving the economy in order to protect future public wellbeing, legislation is presented as the objective result of protecting the future collective body, situating it as a biopolitical strategy. It presents policy choices as rational results of weighing the certain values of the economy against public health. However, policy choices are never the result of an objective deliberation, and are always the result of certain political ideologies or strategies (Genel, 2006), in the case of this thesis the political ideology of the neoliberal government coalition, led by the VVD.

This period was characterized by subsiding fears for the virus, while the public tensions surrounding the economy began growing. As a result, the Dutch government increasingly constructed protection around the economy, rather than health. It was able to do this by tactically changing the protective role during this portion of the pandemic. By moving up on the spectrum from a caring parent in favour of public health, to a negotiator that concerns itself with both public health and the economy, the governing coalition was able to gradually shift the discourse towards

the economy, which was the result of the employment becoming the new hotbed of public concern. Following this, the economy became the new fragment of society that had to be protected.

### *The Entrepreneur*

As a result of the shifting public sentiment, the weeks of May were characterised by a coalescing of public health and the economy. By following the motif of an entrepreneur, the state continued with economic plans and strategies while simultaneously lowering the emphasis on the still ongoing risks to health, as public tensions began reflect that a sizeable portion of the population was getting ‘tired’ of 1,5-meter society: “I get that some people are worn out because of this new normal. [...], but we are making changes to our strategy to help people live a regular life” (De Jonge, *Press conference of Mark Rutte and Hugo de Jonge after meeting with ministers. Rijksoverheid, May 6, 2020*).

Following the increasing public stress, the press conferences ensuing the first week of May focussed on protecting the economy, gradually shifting away from a negotiator. This self-positioning had the goal of removing the worries of the public towards health, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the economy and businesses.

We have entered a new phase in which we can take new measures with certainty. We must take steps to reopen our economy and society, albeit slowly but surely, steps to be taken so every business and person in our country can look ahead and make plans (Mark Rutte, *Press conference of Mark Rutte and Hugo de Jonge after meeting with ministers. Rijksoverheid, May 6, 2020*).

A narrative of security was still used, with it being integrated with health in some instances to highlight the need for economic interventions through protection: “We have an enormous rocket launcher with measures to combat this economic problem” (Mark Rutte, *press conference after meeting the cabinet of ministers, May 8, 2020*). Alongside the continuation of this self-positioning, the liberal stance of the government was also explicitly reinforced as the proper way to deal with the issue at hand: “We need to open up the economy for certain sectors”; followed by “I feel that people can deal with this on their own”; and lastly “We’re not living in a children’s playground

[...] I don't want to play the role of the boss" (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*. Rijksoverheid, May 8, 2020). These statements show that the role of the Parent also returned as a narrative performance, as the government once again appeals to the morality of the citizens in doing what is right at this time.

However, in response to criticism from researchers at the national health agency to the scientific underpinnings of the measures, the government reluctantly conceded that the measures made during this stage of crisis were inherently politically charged, moving away from the Technocrat.

Look, we did not feel it that way. But, of course that is always the case. [...] If you are purely asking what the current situation is of the virus, you have to ask epidemiologists or other people with expertise, and we weigh those recommendations heavily. But we don't blindly listen to them and apply them to the real world, we discuss those behind closed doors. There are also problems regarding the economy and society we [as the governing party] have to consider (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with ministers*. Rijksoverheid, May 6, 2020).

During this time, the government continued to prioritize business interests over the concerns of the labour force, supporting a strategy of 'trickle down economics' in the second emergency plan to save the economy, a popular liberal narrative to gain a platform for supporting corporatism (Harvey, 2016). Here, the role of the entrepreneur aimed at protecting the financial security of the collective was used to create the discourse that protecting the businesses will eventually favour the labourers. An example of this is the removal of the increased protection from being let go from a company offered to employees in the first weeks of the crisis.

The question is, are you allowed to fire anyone? But I think the question should be: how can you keep as many people employed in the future as possible. [...] My goal with removing it [the increased fine for firing people], is that people that are reliant on company jobs – which is a lot of people – is that those companies make it out of this Corona crisis in one piece so they can offer those same jobs down the line (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with the council of ministers*. Rijksoverheid, May 8, 2020)

Furthermore, the government plans also included several controversial policies that could be considered as a part of a neoliberal project of disaster capitalism. In order to support the ‘economic endurance’, ‘fighting spirit’, and ‘longevity’ of various sectors, a lot of development, labour and omission laws were relaxed for an undetermined amount of time to facilitate development projects and corporate interests (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting the cabinet*, May 20, 2020; Rijksoverheid, *Emergency Package for Employment and Economy*, 2020). This is a continuation of the discourse that was presented by the Parent months prior, as the bailouts of early march laid the grounds for these current economic rationalizations.

All in all, this political motif of the state as a protective entrepreneur was hugely effective, as the ruling party had never polled as high as it did during these weeks. Which is peculiar, as the support for the measures taken by the government during the crisis was rapidly dropping. This showcases that the traditional supporters of the party, businesspeople, prevailed because the ‘we are all in this together’ seemed to not apply in terms of the economy. However, the prime minister quickly dismissed these outcomes as being “irrelevant” (Mark Rutte, *Press conference after meeting with the council of ministers*. Rijksoverheid, May 15, 2020). Despite this, this shows that shifting the narrative away from public health and towards saving the economy was an important strategic choice in continuing political support for the ruling liberal VVD party in times of crisis, especially in regards to the upcoming general elections of 2021.

## **Conclusion & discussion**

Instead of being an objective and neutral practice, protection against threats, as performed by governments, is fundamentally political. Through the alleviation of the fear and tension that societal risks such as pandemics bring, it may be used as an instrument to depoliticize and justify legislation. By constructing what it means to protect, it helps to determine a distinct answer to a problem, while on the other hand also restricting room for opposing solutions. Thus, by controlling the notion of ‘protection’, the concept may be used to legitimize measures. This thesis sought to answer how discourses of protection are used to support neoliberal measures during the ongoing health crisis. The remedies proposed by the Dutch government are biopolitically legitimized, consequently strengthening the existing neoliberal political economy.

The roles the government took up to direct the narrative of protection during the crisis were highly transformative and temporal, as they changed throughout time assisted by advances in medical knowledge and public disconcertment. However, instead of fully disappearing when the knowledges and tensions shifted, the performances flowed to and from one another, with characteristics of the roles being used when it fit a discursive strategy. The four positionings of protection, as discovered in the extensive critical discourse analysis, highlight both of these aspects supremely.

Initially, the government positioned itself as a subdued technocrat. The depoliticized expertise of medical professionals made the (lack of) measures righteous, while also allowing the Technocrat to position itself away from the crisis. After increased necessity to address the risks of Covid-19 however, this position gradually grew to one of a stern but caring ‘parent’. This guise takes a more hands-on approach, positioning itself along neoliberal moral appeals to individual responsibility and communitarianism while still relying on its technocratic roots. However, after the economy became a hazard within the pandemic also, the previous parental role shifted, changing to a negotiator between threats to public health and the economy. Finally, the Negotiator turned into an ‘entrepreneur’, following and legitimizing neoliberal ideas in order to form the dialogue that economic policy would help every citizen. Here the morals of the Parent resurface also, as the benefits of the survival and strength of the economy and businesses post-Corona would eventually help the wellbeing of the greater society.

The narrative discursive roles highlight how the Corona pandemic can be used to shape acceptable policies by demarcating ‘protection’ against threats during the crisis. When political tensions rise or fall within the public, switching between protective roles allowed the government to reinforce their authoritative position, which also gave rise to political opportunism. It becomes clear in the analysis that this is a deliberate practice in order to publicly legitimize the reproduction of the political economy. In light of this, the subduing of public fears during the press conferences through the liberal protective roles can be seen as a biopolitical instrument that highlights the need for neoliberalism. The most glaring example of this can be seen in the emergency plan to save the economy (Rijksoverheid, 2020b), which continuously omits social innovations while supporting conventional liberal policy measures. Here, the future biological health was used as a legitimizing political technology, as the economic restructuring was to be seen as rational and lawful in support of the fragile collective body. Thus, while the government pursued this centuries-old narrative of

a ‘caretaker’ or ‘protector’, state and neoliberal political power is acquired and centralized through the exploitation of the crisis.

The ongoing Corona pandemic investigated here has highlighted the neoliberal constructions of protection from the Dutch government. However, as the disaster is still unfolding, the long-term effects of these choices made during the crisis cannot be investigated in this exposition. An investigation into this would contribute greatly to the literature on disaster neoliberalism, as it could solidify the findings of this study longitudinally. Additionally, in this analysis the media were perceived as passive channels of information. The media are not neutral actors however, but partial arbiters that also shape public discourse. Nevertheless, as a result of the time limitations of this thesis, the role of traditional media sources in constructing narratives was not included in the analysis. Thus, a future scientific analysis of the role of the media during the pandemic might allow for unique insights pertaining to the construction of neoliberal discourse.

Several decades ago, Foucault warned us of the socially destructive capabilities of pandemics and their resulting solutions. The plague gave rise to disciplinary projects, lepers made right social exiling and individualism (Foucault, 1975, p. 228). In light of this, Sergio Benvenuto (2020) asks us to reflect on what it means to protect during the Corona pandemic. This study has shown that through neoliberal discourses of protection, governments reproduce differences in power during the Covid-19 crisis, which demonstrates that a critical reflection on protection is indeed necessary. Human existence will always have a modicum of hazards and risks that require protection, and the political actors of the state will always have quick answers. However, in order to break free from this influential facet of modern-day biopolitical opportunism, we must begin to find our own understandings of security, uninfluenced by the discursive power of the state. Thus, in order for progress to a more just society to be made, we must move toward bottom-up constructions of protection. As a result, instead of splitting people apart, fighting hazards could truly bring us together.

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## Appendix A: Ethics and privacy checklist



### CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

#### INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website ([http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page\\_id=17](http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17)). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

#### PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Public Enemy Number One: Covid-19

Name, email of student: Alex López Alberola – 453229al@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Maja Hertoghs – hertoghs@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 06-04-2020 – 21-06-2020

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES - ~~NO~~

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?  
(e.g. internship organization)

## PART II: TYPE OF RESEARCH STUDY

Please indicate the type of research study by circling the appropriate answer:

1. Research involving human participants. YES - NO  
  
If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO  
*Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).*
2. Field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. YES - NO
3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - NO

## PART III: PARTICIPANTS

**(Complete this section only if your study involves human participants)**

Where will you collect your data?

N/A

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*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

N/A

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*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

N/A

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*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - NO

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - NO
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - NO  
*Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).*
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?  
  
YES - ~~NO~~
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - ~~NO~~
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - ~~NO~~

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

Confidentiality: the research concerns public figures, most notably the president of the Netherlands and his cabinet.

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What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

N/A: in the case of confidentiality, in case there are inquiries by the government about the study I will happily amend sections in response of the anonymity of them.

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Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Perhaps political statements that could harm the future electability of the ministers.

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*Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.*

N/A

#### **Part IV: Data storage and backup**

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Digital files will be stored on the personal computer of the researcher and possibly in the secure data-transfer software of the Erasmus University Rotterdam

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*Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.*

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Alex López Alberola, the head researcher, master student at the Erasmus University Rotterdam

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How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Weekly backups will be made of the digital files to ensure data security

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In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

N/A

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*Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.*

#### **PART VI: SIGNATURE**

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Alex López Alberola

Date: 19-03-2020

Name (EUR) supervisor: Maja Hertoghs

Date: 19-03-2020