

THE (POLY)CRISIS – GAME CHANGER OR CONTINUATION? INTERLINKED CRISES IN THE WORLD OF WORK IN POLAND

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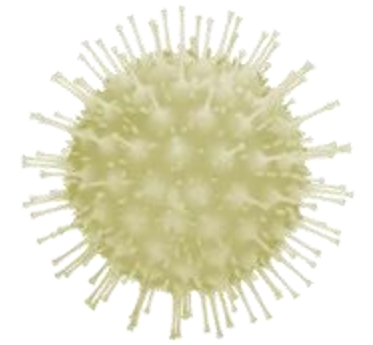
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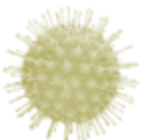
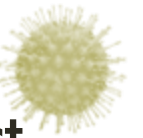
NCN OPUS COV-WORK project funded
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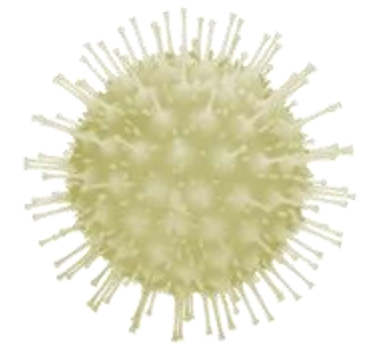




OVERVIEW

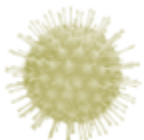
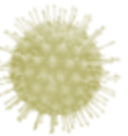
- Introduction
- Theoretical inspirations to study polycrisis
- Methodological framework of the COV-WORK project
- Continuity in change: the key conclusions of the COV-WORK project
- A comparative outlook (in discussion ?)





INTRODUCTION

- Big question: the role of an exogenous crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic as a moment of broader polycrisis on the persistence and change of the sphere of work and workers' coping strategies
- COV-WORK project funded by the National Science Center in Poland:
 - How and to what extent was the health, social and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic reflected in changes in the organisation of work and the quality of workplaces, collective labour relations and media discourse about work, as well as in the socio-economic consciousness of workers in Poland and their individual and collective life strategies?
- Mixed-method, *quasi-longitudinal*, worker-centred study carried out in 2020-24 finalized by a book on “(Un)usual crisis. Polycrisis in the world of work in Poland” (in review) by research team: A. Mrozowicki, J. Burski, J. Czarzasty, J. Gardawski, A. Drabina-Różewicz, M. Karolak, A. Krasowska, A. Palęcka, Sz. Pilch



THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS (I)



- The COVID-19 pandemic approached as a large-scale, unexpected, exogenous crisis, leading to expectations of fundamental changes in the world of work.
- “Sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1954) used to study workers’ responses to the crisis, build a link between meso- and macro-levels and explore the transformation and reproduction of social order at work:
 - Bottom-up **innovation** (J. Schumpeter): improvised innovations in health care (Wiedner et al. 2020), often based on informal relationships and mutual help in the workplace (Chemali et al. 2022; McCallum 2022) and aimed at maintaining the provision of basic services (Drozdowski et al. 2020).
 - Conflicts over **control** (Marx) and new forms of labor process control (including sanitary regimes) in the wake of the pandemic (Hodder 2020)
 - Emerging **resistance** of essential workers: both “voice” and “exit” (Hirschman) in response to the malfunctioning of commodified public services: a potential for a counter-movement (Polanyi)?
 - **Normalization**: (1) institutionalization of practices created during the crisis (May, Finch 2009), (2) return to a normality (Drozdowski et al. 2020), (3) chronicity of problems (Vigh 2008)

THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS (II)



- From pandemic to polycrisis (Tooze 2021): health, economic, social, political, migration, environmental, war and humanitarian – what are the implications for public service workers who are essential for social reproduction?
- **Social reproduction** “comprising the structures, practices, activities and realms aimed at the daily and intergenerational regeneration of life and capitalist relations” (Mezzadri 2022: 381)
- Social reproduction theory pointing to “social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism” (Fraser 2017) and its “reluctant dependence on processes and institutions of life-making” (Bhattacharya 2020)
- Pandemic considered as the amplification of **the crisis of social reproduction** (Jayasuriya, 2023; Mezzadri 2022) fits into the anthropological notion of **the chronicity of the crisis** as “the result of slow processes of deterioration, erosion and negative change” (Vigh 2008: 9)
- SRT also helps to critically address the category of “essential work” and expose its classed, gendered and racialised character (Mezzadri 2022; Stevano et al. 2021)

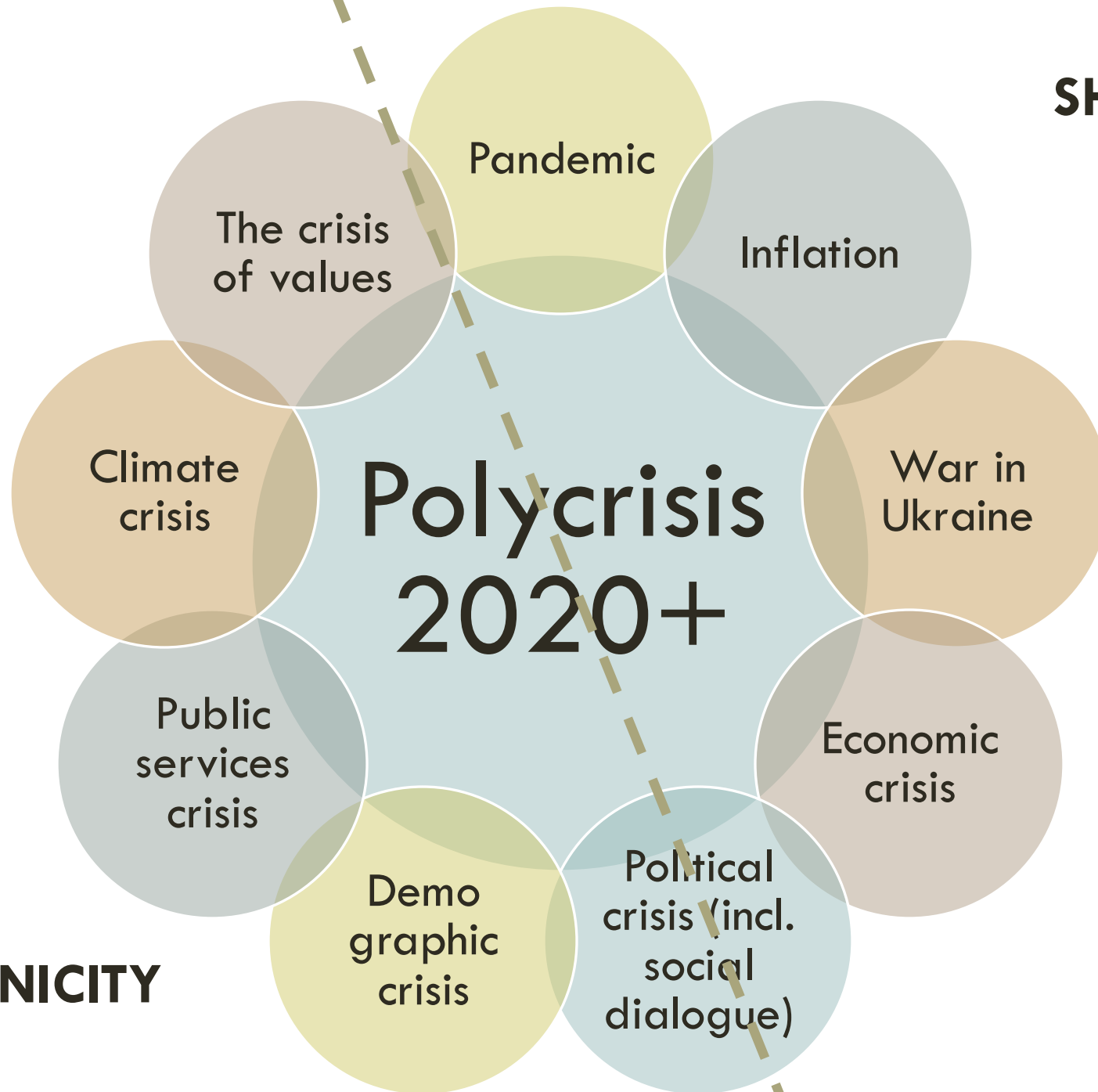
POLYCRISIS AS AN (UN)USUAL CRISIS

- Systemic approaches to the polycrisis: how entangled crises reflect the characteristics of global systems, making them 'vulnerable to systemic risk' (Lawrence et al., 2022)
- The COV-WORK definition of a polycrisis as a situation in which short-term, largely exogenous shocks interact and overlap with longer-term endogenous systemic crises.
- **Chronicity:** long-term, structurally and institutionally determined failure to meet some of the most important social needs, a "pervasive critical state" (Vigh 2008)
- **Discursivity:** the role of the media and political groups in defining different aspects of the crises as serious crises and others as non-crises (Strolovitch 2023)
- **Subjectivity:** the widespread sense that we are living in uncertain, risky times in society (Beck 2002, Pustulka et al. 2023)
- **Unequal exposure and immunisation against the effects of polycrisis** reflecting chronic and intersecting social inequalities

THE CHRONIC CRISIS OF PUBLIC SERVICES

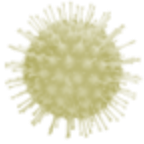
- The cases of the public services, in which the **unexpected crises overlapped and amplified the effects of the chronic crisis**
- **A deep and protracted crisis in public services** essential for the reproduction of social life both in Poland and other countries in Europe and in the USA (Greer&Umney 2022; Kozek 2011; Keune 2020; McCallum 2022)
 - Liberalization, privatization, financialization, introduction of outsourcing and the new public management, deterioration of job quality, labor shortages
- **"Patchwork" institutional order** (Rapacki [ed.] 2019) shaped in confronting crises in **Poland**. The expected results included:
 - H1: Inconsistent, delayed and poorly consulted anti-crisis policies of the state
 - H2: the crucial role of informal, bottom-up responses to exogenous shocks
 - H3: the dominance of conservative over transformative effects of crises

CHRONICITY



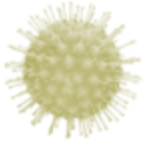
SHOCKS

**STUDYING THE
POLYCRISIS IN
POLAND**



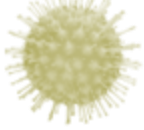
COV-WORK PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Work packages	Methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WP1: Socio-economic consciousness of Poles during the pandemic/polycrisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Panel, questionnaire survey - CATI survey (n=1400 - 1st wave (11.2021); n=602 - 2nd wave (03.2023))
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WP2-WP4: Biographical experiences and job quality in 'essential' industries (i.e. education, health care, social care and logistics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus group interviews in essential industries (n=15)• Biographical interviews with workers in 2021-2024 (n=90)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WP5: New and old conflicts in collective labour relations and social dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expert interviews with trade unions, employer organisation, managers and government administration in 2021 and 2023 (n=42)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• WP6: Media discourse on the crisis/crises, essential work, pandemics, and the future of the labour market	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitoring and analysing online press discourse.: Rzeczpospolita, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, Gazeta Wyborcza, Gazeta Polska Codziennie, Fakt, onet.pl, wpolityce.pl, money.pl (130,000 + articles in 2020-2023)



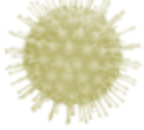
KEY CONCLUSIONS (I)

1. The dominance of the trend towards normalisation of the 2020+ polycrisis observed in all WPs can be explained not only by the overcoming and forgetting of shocks over time and institutional and social resilience, but also by **the chronic nature of the polycrisis and the ways of its management by the state and society**
2. Top-down and bottom-up responses to 2020+ shocks reflect the basic characteristics of **patchwork capitalism**, such as the weakness and limited complementarity of the institutional 'fabric' of the socio-economic order
3. The weakness of formal and strategic crisis management by the state, reflecting the patchwork order, has been (partly) compensated by **informal institutions and the resourcefulness** of individuals and micro-social groups leading to **conservative rather than transformative outcomes**



KEY CONCLUSIONS (II)

4. The media discourse in 2020-23 does not reflect the existence of the polycrisis, and **the 2020+ shocks were not ‘framed’ in terms conducive to fixing chronic problems** at work, but were politicised as criticism or defence of the illiberal ‘PiS state’; this further aided the “normalisation”
5. CATI panel surveys in 2020-23 indicate that the exogenous shocks had a **limited impact on socio-economic consciousness**, including workers’ images of a well-ordered economy, their subjective assessments of well-being and aggregated ratings of job quality. Crises in social consciousness are correlated in **the clusters of crisis experiences** corresponding to social positions and worldview differences.



KEY CONCLUSIONS (III)

6. Despite a sense of declining job quality across all industries surveyed in 2020-24, workers **relatively rarely engaged in protests** (as compared to other countries), but The 2020+ shocks **did not translate into fundamental changes** in industrial relations, but further facilitated and justified governmental unilateralism.
7. The 2020+ shocks were **rarely experienced by workers as biographical turning points**. The 2020+ crises have reinforced processes of privatisation of life strategies and the search for support in micro-groups rather than collective action, despite clear counter-trends in parts of the key industries (and the Polish society at large) in the form of labour and civic protests and organising.

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THANK YOU!

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