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***It's like being hit by a tsunami:***  
**The use of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor for conceptualising**  
**the COVID-19 pandemic in English and Serbian\*\*\***

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Many different metaphors have been used so far in public health communication to capture different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic since they serve as an apt instrument in crisis discourse of conveying important messages to various audiences in a simple and easily understandable manner. Within the theoretical framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2019; Musolff, 2004, 2006, 2016) and drawing on the data gathered during the period 2020-2021 from various British/American and Serbian online news media (*The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, *The Economist*, *Blic*, *NovaS*, *Novosti*), we explore the strategic and arguably deliberate use of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor as an effective instrument in public health communication discourse concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Our main aim is to demonstrate the universal power of this metaphor in channeling the general public's perceptions and behaviour into a desired direction in crisis communication, independent of the language or culture in which the crisis discourse is produced. This power is attested in this metaphor's strong emotional and evaluative contents – it serves both to communicate a sense of danger, uncertainty and threat coming from the virus, as well as to legitimise the wanted course of action and conceal the responsibility of government officials and health experts by shifting all the blame for possible inefficiencies of anti-epidemic measures solely on the allegedly uncontrollable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** metaphor, COVID-19 pandemic, NATURAL FORCE metaphor, public health communication, English, Serbian

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## 1. Introduction

Many different metaphors have been used so far in public health communication globally to capture various facets of the current COVID-19 pandemic. This is mainly because metaphors in any crisis discourse serve as an apt instrument of conveying important messages to various audiences in a simple and easily understandable manner. This has been attested in the past research dealing with different crises so far, such as the *global 2008 financial crisis* (Arrese & Vara-Miguel, 2016; Blickes, Otten, & Weymann, 2014; Đurović & Silaški, 2013; Silaški & Đurović, 2010, 2011; etc.), the *European sovereign debt crisis* (Silaški & Đurović, 2017), the *migrant crisis* (Charteris-Black, 2006; Đurović & Silaški, 2019; Musolff, 2015; Neagu & Colipcă-Ciobanu, 2014; Silaški & Đurović, 2019a), the *Brexit crisis* (Đurović & Silaški, 2018; Charteris-Black, 2019; Musolff, 2017; Silaški & Đurović, 2019b), as well as different *health crises*, such as AIDS, Ebola, SARS, bird flu (Demjén & Semino, 2017; Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002; Larson, Nerlich, & Wallis, 2005; Nerlich & Halliday, 2007; Sontag, 1989; Wallis & Nerlich, 2005; etc.). In these and similar studies several metaphors feature as dominant: WARFARE, HEALTH/DISEASE, JOURNEY, NATURAL DISASTERS. However, apart from accentuating that metaphor is a device for simplifying various highly complex and abstract phenomena (target domains) and making them intelligible by describing them in terms of more concrete ones (source domains), the aforementioned studies also reflect on the evaluative and ideological role of metaphor emanating from its actual use in discourse.

This paper explores the conceptualisation of yet another crisis, a public health crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic. The papers produced so far on the same topic (Musolff et al., 2022; Nerlich, 2020; Olza et al., 2021; Semino, 2021; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020) reveal that (a) the pandemic also tends to be heavily talked about and conceived of through metaphors, and that (b) the discourse around the COVID-19 pandemic excessively draws on the WAR metaphor<sup>1</sup> which, as it has been demonstrated (Musolff et al., 2022; Olza et al., 2021; Silaški & Đurović, 2022; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020), cannot successfully draw on all the aspects of the pandemic particularly under different conditions of this, *inter alia*, social process. This has emphasised the need for detecting other metaphors and for investigating their potential in framing “complex, destabilising and long-term phenomena such as a global pandemic” (Olza et al., 2021: 117).

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the pandemic, a group of researchers launched the initiative #ReframeCovid with the aim of suggesting alternative metaphors which may be used for the conceptualisation of the COVID-19 pandemic following a period in which WAR metaphors “attracted an unprecedented amount of criticism from diverse social agents, for a variety of reasons” (Olza et al., 2021: 100).

In this paper, therefore, by investigating the data gathered during the period 2020-2021 from various British/American and Serbian online news media within the theoretical framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2019, 2021; Musolff, 2004, 2006, 2016), we deal with the NATURAL FORCE metaphor as an effective instrument in public health communication and crisis discourse and how it is used strategically and, we believe, deliberately, to conceptualise the COVID-19 pandemic in English and Serbian. Our main aim is to demonstrate the potentially universal power of this metaphor in channeling the general public's perceptions and behaviour into a desired direction in crisis communication, independent of the language or culture in which the crisis discourse is produced. We will argue that the power of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor is attested in its strong emotional and evaluative contents – it serves both (1) to communicate a sense of danger and uncertainty coming from the virus, and (2) to construct a collective illusion that no-one may be held responsible for the disastrous effects of a human activity. This in turn helps to conceal the responsibility of government officials and health experts for possible inefficiencies of anti-epidemic measures.

The paper unfolds in the following way: after this Introduction, in section 2 we provide a short account of the theoretical framework our paper is guided by, Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2019; Musolff, 2006, 2016; Semino, 2008). This is followed by section 3 which describes our data and method. Section 4 offers the analysis of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor in the British/American and Serbian public discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 5 discusses the potential of this metaphor as a framing tool in health crisis discourse, while the last section 6 offers some concluding remarks.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The paper is couched in the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005, 2019, 2021; Musolff, 2006, 2016; Semino, 2008), whose main goal is 'to make explicit political and ideological motivations that would, otherwise, be implicit or concealed' (Charteris-Black, 2004: 29). The choice of this particular framework is due to the fact that in it both the ideological and rhetorical roles of metaphors used in media discourse may find their fuller interpretation. That is, it reveals "how metaphors are used to create rival, contested views of the world, ideologies" (Charteris-Black, 2019: 12) and thus regarded as powerful persuasive tools used for generating specific value judgments thus constructing via discourse a certain

point of view. Namely, according to Critical Metaphor Analysis approach to metaphors, by using a specific metaphor discourse participants may reveal the *motivation* lying behind the choice of one metaphor over another, since, by changing the metaphor, we may change the way that we think and feel about a particular aspect of social or political life, in this case a health crisis. Therefore, we regard metaphors as *discursive* means which may aid in understanding certain social processes – consequently, they can be labelled *discourse metaphors*, those which are “conceptually grounded but whose meaning is also shaped by their use at a given time and in the context of a debate about a certain topic” (Koteyko & Ryazanova-Clarke, 2009: 114), in this case the COVID-19 pandemic.

We will also argue that the NATURAL FORCE metaphor is used intentionally in the COVID-19 pandemic discourse, so we will rely on Steen’s view of deliberate metaphors (2011, 2017), where these are understood as having a three-dimensional blend of the linguistic, conceptual, and communicative purposes (see Musolff, 2016; Steen, 2011, 2017), with a special emphasis on the third dimension – the communicative context where metaphors are used. According to this view, deliberate metaphors are constructed in such a way that the sender, by using a particular metaphor, instructs the addressee to use a particular source domain (in this case the natural force) to think about the target domain of the metaphor (in this case the pandemic) (Steen, 2011: 84). More specifically, metaphors are deemed to be deliberate in the sense that the use of one metaphor over another is intended as an invitation for the discourse participants to pay attention to a particular target concept (here, the COVID-19 pandemic) from the independent standpoint so as to draw desired conclusions from such figurative comparison (Steen, 2011: 84). We argue, therefore, that the NATURAL FORCE metaphor is used deliberately in the COVID-19 discourse “to fit specific socio-communicative purposes” (Musolff, 2016: 92) of the conveyor of the message (in this case, government officials and health experts, and in turn newspaper reporters), which is to facilitate the desired course of action. In this sense, deliberate metaphors may serve as “perspective changers” (Steen, 2011: 84), which function as deliberate choices with which discourse participants operate in discourse (Musolff, 2016: 92). They are invoked intentionally to suit a particular context and its different ideologies and evaluations.

### 3. Data and method

Our analysis of the COVID-19 NATURAL FORCE metaphor is conducted on two sets of data – the English and the Serbian one. The data in both sets were gathered from various British/American and Serbian online news media sources (*The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, *The Economist*, *Blic*, *NovaS*, *Novosti*, *Danas*) published during the period between March 2020 and December 2021. The examples of linguistic metaphors instantiating the NATURAL FORCE metaphor were obtained by conducting Google searches, in which the queries were the relevant words and expressions referring to and expected to be salient in the NATURAL FORCE metaphor such as *disaster*, *hurricane*, *tsunami*, *storm*, *flood*, *earthquake*, *fire* in English, i.e. *katastrofa*, *oluja*, *poplava*, *zemljotres*, *požar* in Serbian, combined with the words *pandemic*, *COVID-19*, *coronavirus*. This enabled us to extract topically relevant texts for the analysis.

As for the method of identifying metaphors in discourse, we recognise that in a discourse-oriented approach to the analysis of metaphors one should be more loose and liberal when establishing the presence of metaphoricity. This is especially true compared to the rather rigid and, for our qualitative analysis, perhaps not entirely suitable dictionary-based word-by-word analyses suggested both by MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) and by MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010). The process, therefore, employed a somewhat adapted procedure for metaphor identification suggested both by MIP and MIPVU which focused on establishing the contextual meaning of the lexical units, but without consulting the dictionaries for each lexical unit (see, for example, Đurović & Silaški, 2019; Silaški & Đurović, 2019a). Following a close reading of the media texts obtained by Google searches in order to identify the linguistic metaphors which both raters agreed provided instantiations of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor, we classified the selected stretches of discourse according to the sub-domains belonging to the NATURAL FORCE source domain.

It should be stressed that the goal of the paper is not to offer a corpus-based analysis of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor nor is it to establish absolute or relative frequencies of linguistic metaphors or metaphor density in the two sets of data. The analysis of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor is conducted in a qualitative manner instead, which allows us to investigate how this metaphor is an apt vehicle for structuring different aspects of a complex social phenomenon – the COVID-19 pandemic in British/American and Serbian public and political discourse.

#### 4. The analysis

In an attempt to find perceivable analogies in their environment to cognitively and linguistically present the full impact of the pandemic, metaphor creators tap into phenomena which in terms of their power, dynamism, unruliness, willfulness, etc. are reminiscent of the severity of the coronavirus pandemic. It is the forces of nature and natural disasters (such as movements of the Earth, weather-, especially extreme weather-related disasters, tectonic shifts, etc.) whose features of being highly spontaneous, involuntary, largely unpredictable, destructive, and hazardous map onto the abstract concept of the crisis. The topic, overarching NATURAL FORCE metaphor is realised in both sets of data via the reiterative use of several metaphors, classified according to the source sub-domains used to conceptualise the pandemic and its various aspects in English and Serbian. In the sections which follow we deal with the CATASTROPHE/DISASTER, FIRE, WATER, AIR/WIND, EARTHQUAKE, and VOLCANO metaphors, which we illustrate with their linguistic instantiations. We also provide possible explanation for the use of individual sub-domains in light of the ideological role metaphors play in authentic media discourse in the two languages, at the same time showing how the NATURAL FORCE metaphor shapes the understanding of the pandemic as something unmanageable and due to external causes, which in turn serves to strip governments and health policy makers of guilt or responsibility for their poor management of this health crisis.

##### 4.1. CATASTROPHE/DISASTER metaphors

As both English and Serbian data sets show, the global pandemic crisis is generally structured by the broad, unspecific NATURAL FORCE theme (i.e. it does not make reference to any particular natural force such as water, wind or air) by means of the linguistic metaphors such as *Covid-19 cataclysm*, *Covid catastrophe* in English, or *apokalipsa*, *kataklizma*, *katastrofa* in Serbian.

###### ENGLISH

(1) The 2008 financial crisis will be seen as a dry run for *Covid-19 cataclysm* (*The Guardian*, 8 Apr 2020)

(2) India is in the midst of a *Covid catastrophe*. (*The Economist*, 17 Sep 2021)

SERBIAN

(3) *Apokalipsa* u Srbiji. Ne treba se čuditi što je došlo do nagle ekspanzije kovida 19. (*Danas*, 2 Sept 2021)

[*The Apocalypse* in Serbia. No wonder there's been a sudden explosion of COVID-19.]

(4) *KATAKLIZMA*: Novi soj korone sa sobom donosi *KATASTROFU!* (*Espresso*, 22 Dec 2020)

[*The Cataclysm*: A new variant of coronavirus brings a *CATASTROPHE!*]

Invoking catastrophic scenarios of unspecified disasters, in which massive, apocalyptic destruction ensues (as if in the aftermath of floods or hurricanes, for instance), serves to convey the devastating impact of the coronavirus, which has been felt globally. The element of hyperbole contained in the selected linguistic metaphors in both languages exaggerates the scale and destructive power of the coronavirus disease, and also heightens the emotional impact of the metaphor – its uncontrollable and “nothing-can-be-done-about-it” aspect. However, the general NATURAL FORCE metaphor downplays one important notion – the COVID-19 crisis is not a natural disaster, but being a real life social process, it is the product of humans’ decisions and their doings and non-doings. Therefore, depicting the COVID crisis by means of the natural disaster metaphor as a disembodied, extraneous force helps to highlight the dramatic aspects of the pandemic by trading on its unmanageability and stressing its unruly character. More importantly, it may help to mask the doers in this process and their responsibility, stressing that this crisis is an Act of God which cannot be controlled.

#### **4.2. FIRE metaphors**

One of the metaphors that has particularly proved its aptness for metaphorical representation of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is the FIRE metaphor. Semino (2021: 54) points out several reasons that make FIRE an effective source domain: “[f]ires are vivid, or image-rich; they are familiar, even if not necessarily through direct experience; [...]; they have multiple elements and participants (e.g., arsonists, trees, fire-fighters, victims, etc.); and, they have a clear evolution (causes, beginnings, middles, ends, and aftermaths).” Here are some examples:

ENGLISH

(5) Coronavirus could *flare up* again or *burn out like a firework*. (*Sky News*, 5 May 2020)

"There are two scenarios one could consider: you think you've *put the fire out* and *the firemen* go home – and yet there are little *embers that will flare up* again if they leave prematurely. This would be the flare-up analogy." (*Sky News*, 5 May 2020)

(6) In the coming months, US morbidity and mortality will largely depend on how much fuel *the Covid-19 wildfire* has access to. (*The Guardian*, 4 Aug 2020)

SERBIAN

(7) "Videli smo da čim mu se dozvoli, virus se širi kao *požar u šumi*, to je karakteristika ovog virusa", dodaje ona [Darija Kisić Tepavčević] naglašavajući da disciplinom može da se spreči to širenje. (*B92*, 10 Oct 2020)

["We have seen that if allowed, the *virus spreads like a wildfire*, it is a characteristic of this virus", she [Darija Kisić Tepavčević] added, stressing that the spreading can be prevented by self-discipline.

(8) Koronavirus *se razbuktao* u celoj zemlji, zdravstveni sistem je na udaru (*Alo*, 25 March 2021)

[The coronavirus *has flared up* in the whole of the country, our health system is at stake]

Mapped onto the concept of the COVID-19 pandemic, FIRE metaphors may serve different purposes: to convey danger and urgency, bearing in mind the destructive and uncontrollable nature of fire, to distinguish between different phases of the pandemic, to explain how contagion happens, and perhaps the most important one, to justify preventive measures taken by governments for reducing contagion (Semino, 2020, 2021).

The property of fire that it can cause harm and destruction if not unchecked is particularly depicted in Serbian data with the verb *flare (up)*. By endowing the coronavirus with an active role, the metaphor creators not only trade on the intensity and uncontrollability of the pandemic, but also on exonerating the government officials and health experts from the responsibility for the reiterating and progressive increase in further spreading of the disease. In English, particularly effective are linguistic



metaphors which are suggestive of the different phases of the pandemic: thus, the coronavirus outbreak could be similar to a *smouldering fire* whose *embers could flare up* again – otherwise it *may have burnt out like a firework*. Likewise, different approaches to coping with the contagion are also likened to a fire, e.g. you think you've *put the fire out* and *the firemen* can go home – and yet there are little *embers that will flare up* again if they leave prematurely, as well as the possible outcome depending on the measures pursued (*putting out* the fire or *quashing the embers to prevent a second flare-up*). The linguistic metaphor *ember* accentuates the sense of caution and serves as a reminder that the danger of spreading the disease has not passed yet in spite of a more favourable situation with the number of the infected people, and that the anti-epidemic measures should not be relaxed before there is a clear sign that the pandemic, or the *fire*, is under control.

#### **4.3. WATER metaphors**

WATER metaphors also appear to be an indispensable tool for constructing the COVID-19 crisis discourse. The depth of water and its magnitude should conjure up the negative connotations of water being dangerous and threatening. Conceiving of the coronavirus crisis as a huge rush of water is instantiated by linguistic metaphors such as *flood, wave, drowning, tsunami, deluge, engulf* in English, i.e. *plima korona virusa, talas, potop, korona cunami, preplaviti* in Serbian. The potent imagery of rapid and sudden overflows of rivers and huge waves formed by the sea convey the aspects of peril, hardships and above all, powerlessness to control the force of water having a massive and detrimental impact on people's lives.

##### ENGLISH

(9) '*We're drowning*': COVID cases *flood* hospitals in America's heartland (*Reuters*, 30 Nov 2020)

(10) India Covid-19 second *wave*: '*A coronavirus tsunami* we had never seen before' (*BBC*, 15 Apr 2021)

(11) Covid's '*viral tsunami*' *floods* California's hospitals (*FT*, 25 Dec 2020)

(12) A *wave of Covid-19 is engulfing* Indonesia. South-East Asia *is swimming* in Covid-19. (*The Economist*, 17 Jul 2021)

SERBIAN

(13) Nova *plima korona virusa* u Vojvodini. Novi, letnji *talas korona virusa* *zapljusnuo je* Vojvodinu skoro kao prethodni prolećni. (*Danas*, 5 Jul 2020)

[A new *tidal wave of coronavirus* in Vojvodina. A new, summer *coronavirus wave* *has splashed* Vojvodina almost in the same way as the previous one last spring.]

(14) Ako se "*korona cunami*" pod hitno ne zaustavi, epidemiološka situacija u Srbiji mogla bi potpuno da izmakne kontroli. (*Mondo*, 26 Oct 2020)

[Unless the "*corona tsunami*" is urgently stopped, the epidemiological situation in Serbia may totally get out of control.]

(15) *Korona potopila Srbiju* (*Blic*, 20 Nov 2020)

[*Corona floods* Serbia]

Equating the coronavirus crisis in both English and Serbian with water as a natural force foregrounds its imminence and power, difficulty of curbing it, viewing this crisis as a force which turns people into passive victims of circumstances. It "serves to visualize the felt quality of the shock, its suddenness and vehemence" (Kimmel, 2009: 72), at the same time emphasizing the unpredictable, violent and hostile character of a catastrophe which is thus conceived of as outstripping people of their ability to cope with its emergence and consequences. This is particularly communicated via the *tsunami* metaphor (examples 10 and 11 in English, and 14 in Serbian), where the magnitude of the pandemic crisis and the fact that it is getting completely out of control are notably accentuated. Yet, a tsunami, as well as floods or waves, is a natural hazard, and this fact again aptly downplays the responsibility to address the pandemic crisis.

The SNOW metaphor, as one of the WATER metaphors, also connotes the scale of the pandemic crisis and an exaggerated sense of inability of those in charge to be prepared to embrace the full impact of the crisis and react in a timely manner.

ENGLISH

(16) "They are not understanding that this is *an avalanche*," said [Dr. T. Jacob] John, who was also chairman of the Indian Government Expert Advisory Group on Polio Eradication [...]. "As every week passes, *the avalanche is growing bigger and bigger*." (*Bloomberg*, 17 March 2020)

SERBIAN

(17) "Korona lavina" se približava (*Mondo*, 22 Oct 2020)

[*The corona avalanche* is approaching]

Metaphorically speaking, "an avalanche is a tremendous amount of something that was not expected" (Gallagher, 2014), so the *avalanche* ('lavina') metaphor implies that the snowslide should have been stopped at its source when it was still a snowball, before spreading devastation. It signals that people in charge should have foreseen the threat of the COVID-19 disease and undertaken the precautionary measures to keep the population safe.

#### 4.4. AIR/WIND metaphors

As revealed by both English and Serbian data, the COVID-19 pandemic is sometimes likened to extremely strong, devastating winds such as a *hurricane*, a *tornado* in English or *uragan*, *tornado*, *kovitlac* in Serbian. It appears that the overwhelming force of wind, i.e. its intensity and the way in which it can affect a wide area along its path conveniently serves to depict the severity of the pandemic crisis.

ENGLISH

(18) Epidemiologist Michael Osterholm compared a UK coronavirus variant to a "Category 5 hurricane" churning off the coast, saying some strains could cause a "major surge" in new cases in the US. (*CNN*, 4 Feb 2021)

(19) The World Health Organization's top official in Europe warned Thursday that the coronavirus is a "tornado with a long tail" (*NBC News*, 27 Aug 2020)

SERBIAN

(20) *Korona uragan*: U Nemačkoj prvi put preko 10.000 novozaraženih, u Meksiku milion! (*24 sedam*, 22 Oct 2020)

[*Corona hurricane*: For the first time over 10,000 new cases in Germany, whereas one million in Mexico!]

(21) *Korona k'o tornado*: Evropljani idu pod ključ (*NovaS*, 26 Oct 2020)

[*Corona like a tornado*: Europeans to be locked down]

(22) Ulazimo u "korona kovitlac" (*Novosti*, 12 Oct 2020)

[We are entering a "corona whirlpool"]

However, deliberately opting for the WIND metaphors to visualise the pandemic crisis and depict a huge upheaval, metaphor creators are also drawing on the ingrained characteristic of the wind of having nothing solid or substantial about it, employing it metaphorically to signify the futility of efforts on behalf of human agents and policy makers to stop it or influence it in any way. Mapping unobstructed and strong forward movements of *storms*, *hurricanes* or *tornados*, and awesome power and overwhelming force that we attach to these natural events onto the global COVID-19 pandemic seems to be intentionally utilised as a convenient shelter for those in charge faced with the imminent disaster.

#### **4.5. EARTHQUAKE and VOLCANO metaphors**

Similar to other NATURAL FORCE metaphors, the EARTHQUAKE metaphor conveys a sense that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, structured as a sudden shaking of the ground, is abrupt and unforeseeable, and causes the overall instability of the society and its institutions. Just as the sudden release of great energy in the earth's crust that creates seismic waves drastically changes the environment, so does the pandemic crisis reshaping the society at large. Two aspects of the EARTHQUAKE metaphor seem to be specifically emphasised, the *epicentre*, which is known to be widely used for metaphorically describing the focal point and the place of origin of diseases and other destructive events, and *aftershocks*, used mainly for depicting the consequences of such events.

ENGLISH

(23) Florida Breaks Daily Covid-19 Case Record, Becomes New U.S. Pandemic 'Epicenter' (*Forbes*, 1 Aug 2021)

(24) If Covid-19 is an *earthquake*, the mental health *aftershocks* have only just begun (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 Jun 2020)

SERBIAN

(25) EVROPA OPET U EPICENTRU KORONE (*Blic*, 4 Nov 2021)

[Europe again in the *epicentre* of corona]

Foregrounding the aspects of abruptness, the EARTHQUAKE metaphor may obscure other aspects of the COVID-19 crisis which are embedded in inefficient and ill-timed anti-epidemic measures as well as careless behaviour of people unwilling to take precautions against the virus.

As a destructive force which totally changes the landscape it is surrounded by, the VOLCANO metaphors serve the similar purpose as the *epicentre* metaphor of metaphorically portraying the COVID-19 pandemic crisis as an unconstrained energy mounting from the inside which once released causes massive ravaging.

ENGLISH

(26) "Right now, we are also living in the shadow of a *COVID-19 volcano*. And we need to expect the coronavirus-equivalence of a Mount Saint Helens-like *eruption* in the next few months," [an American health official]. (*Fox News*, 22 Jan 2021)

SERBIAN

(27) *ERUPCIJA KORONE* (*Blic*, 23 Oct 2020)  
[CORONA *ERUPTION*]

The *eruption* metaphor is also very useful for likening the spreading of the coronavirus to a volcano with its magma and the gases being explosively released and its lava flowing down its sides.

## 5. Discussion

Natural forces, just like pandemics, have a global character and this makes them an apt source domain in the framing of the COVID-19 crisis as well. Our analysis has shown that the pandemic is communicated in different cultural spaces by relying on the same source domain, that of the NATURAL FORCE, which is used, among other things, as a vehicle for facilitating the understanding of an abstract concept. Also, AIR, WATER, FIRE, EARTHQUAKE, and VOLCANO metaphors are linguistically realised in a similar manner so that the two languages, English and Serbian, exhibit a significant overlap in linguistic instantiations of the over-arching NATURAL FORCE metaphor. This conceptual and linguistic similarity in English and Serbian can be explained by the fact that the NATURAL FORCE metaphor is grounded in human physical experience with the forces of

nature, whether directly or indirectly, and therefore tends to have a quality of universality. Embodied experience with a highly familiar concept such as the natural force in different cultural and linguistic spaces thus becomes a metaphorical vehicle for the strategic profiling of the various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those linked with the devastating impact of the crisis, its unpredictability and uncontrollability.

According to Maalej (2007: 149), "metaphors evaluate by passing on a judgment through the framing chosen in the mapping". Therefore, judging from the context in which they are embedded, all metaphors of the overarching NATURAL FORCE metaphor in both English and Serbian feature extremely negative values, which lies primarily in imparting the scale and destructive power of the current coronavirus pandemic. Hence the imagery of *Covid's viral tsunami which floods and deluges, a Category 5 hurricane, an avalanche, an earthquake, a wildfire, or nova plima korona virusa, virus kao šumski požar, erupcija korone*, etc. serves to imply the magnitude of the natural catastrophe conveyed by the image of a large number of people infected with the COVID-19 virus. Invoking apocalyptic scenarios arouses particularly intense negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear and helplessness, since by the use of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor, which appears to be a deliberate metaphor choice, it is suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is going to cause pain and leave loss of lives and destruction in its wake.

The role of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor in instilling fear and trading on its emotional loadedness in both languages is closely related to another role of this metaphor, that of allocating the responsibility to nature and its uncontrollable character. Metaphorising the COVID-19 pandemic as an unforeseeable force of nature shifts the focus of attention away from its consequences, letting health experts and policy makers evade responsibility they should accept for possible inefficiencies of anti-epidemic measures, and shift the blame for the damage solely on nature. Consequently, they are presented as innocent and powerless lookers-on unable to discern the early warning signs of the impending events. Therefore, conceptualising an abstract concept such as the coronavirus pandemic as only and exclusively a natural process, serves to veil the origins of this adverse social event and obfuscate the doers, but also to make unpopular decisions and measures more acceptable to the general public. The arguably deliberate choice of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor in communicating the COVID-19 pandemic thus serves the purpose of holding the force of nature responsible, a force which essentially absolves all the parties from liability or obligation

in case of an extraordinary event or circumstance allegedly beyond the control of those parties. This in turn facilitates the legitimisation of the wanted course of action in managing the COVID-19 pandemic crisis by the health experts and political actors.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we hope to have demonstrated the power of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor for structuring the concept of the COVID-19 pandemic in English and Serbian media and public health communication discourse. This power stems from this metaphor's profound experiential basis, its conceptual and cultural relevance, as well as the strategic employment in this particular type of discourse. Our analysis has revealed the potential of the NATURAL FORCE metaphor as it can be used for several intertwined and mutually dependent purposes: as an instrument of emotional, affective manipulation, by accentuating the aspects of danger, fear and uncertainty coming from the virus; as a tool for channeling the general public's perceptions and behaviour into a desired direction independent of the language or culture in which the crisis discourse is produced; as a device for strategic and deliberate use in discourse, by constructing a collective illusion that the pandemic is a product of the uncontrollable force of nature, thus emphasising its allegedly nothing-can-be-done-about-it character. Also, similarly to some other crisis discourses where it is used, the NATURAL FORCE metaphor has once again demonstrated that it may serve as an effective justification mechanism, making authorities seem innocent and helpless as regards their slow and inefficient responses to certain social phenomena with severe and devastating consequences, of which the current COVID-19 pandemic is a prime example.

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