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**ABSTRACT OF THE PHD THESIS**

Women Leaders in Times of Global Crisis: Four Alternative Models of Political Leadership  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This research analyzes how women in political leadership positions (Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, Ana Brnabić, Maia Sandu) managed the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) in four states with different socio-political profiles: New Zealand, Germany, Serbia and the Republic of Moldova. The study is situated in a political context still marked by the numerical underrepresentation of women in management positions, despite a trend of reducing gender gaps, and in an academic landscape that is just beginning to critically problematize the influence of traditional paradigms or so-called gender-neutral perspectives. In this context, there is still a risk that contemporary forms of discrimination will adapt, become increasingly difficult to detect and, implicitly, more difficult to correct, thus perpetuating inequality in a systemic way. Accordingly, recent developments imply not only a correction of representation imbalances, but also an expansion of the analytical framework, to include the experiences, practices and perspectives of women state leaders in understanding the mechanisms of leadership.

I have assumed from the beginning that the reactions of political leaders to a crisis cannot be understood without reference to the broad context in which they exercise their function. For this reason, the thesis takes the perspective formulated by Richard Ned Lebow, according to which “successful crisis management is therefore a function of cultural, organizational and personal behavioral patterns established long before the onset of any crisis” (*Between Peace and War*, 1981, p. 335). Correlatively, I start from the idea that there is no such concept as “feminine” style of leadership, aiming to observe the way in which women in executive political positions respond to challenges and constraints. From the very beginning I expected that I will discover differences, but also similarities between the crisis management strategies of the four women leaders, given the similarity of the context (the globality of the COVID-19 crisis) in which they exercise their leadership.

In the absence of an exhaustive definition of the term “(political) leadership”, I propose an interdisciplinary theoretical framework – starting from psychology to feminism in the field of International Relations (hereinafter, IR), in order to obtain a perspective as complex as possible. Starting from the understanding of gender as a social and relational construct, the thesis is anchored in feminist literature and in emerging post-pandemic literature, which emphasizes that the leadership particularities of women state leaders require a specific analysis, without the risk of gender essentialization, so as not to lead to disproportionate expectations.

I organized the research around an analysis grid developed on four main analytical dimensions. These were extracted from the literature on political leadership in crisis situations:

<p style="text-align: right;">3</p> <p><b>Focus on Identifying Competent External Support Structures.</b></p> <p>In this section of the analysis, I will refer to the leader as an "organizational actor" (Graham T. Allison, 1969, p. 699), who makes decisions based on the specific and unique opportunities provided by the context in which they operate. Additionally, I will refer to the leader as a "bureaucratic actor" (Graham T. Allison, 1969, pp. 709–710), capable of negotiating decisions or making choices as the result of a broader negotiation process.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">4</p> <p><b>Focus on Accountability.</b></p> <p>Accountability represents a key phase in a leader's behavior during times of crisis. Leaders should not become defensive or seek excuses (Boin, Kuipers &amp; Overdijk, 2013, pp. 85–86). I argue that the process of political leadership cannot be one-dimensional, and that none of the characteristics discussed above are optional. What matters in a crisis are both the crisis actors (the leader) and the crisis context — including the nature of the political regime, the structure of political relationships, and other contextual factors — which I expect to influence the leader's individual style.</p>
<p style="text-align: right;">1</p> <p><b>Task-Oriented Focus.</b></p> <p>Elected leaders hold the legal authority to make decisions; however, to do so effectively, they must first identify the crisis situation and understand its characteristics and potential consequences. In this part of the analysis, I will primarily refer to Graham T. Allison's rational actor model (1969, p. 694), which posits that decisions are made based on a cost-benefit analysis.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">2</p> <p><b>Focus on Citizen Coordination.</b></p> <p>In addition to the powers granted by their official position, leaders possess decision-making capacity. This is relevant because, as highlighted in the theoretical section, leadership is not a solitary action — coordination and interaction lie at the very core of the concept of political leadership.</p>

These dimensions have been consistently applied to the four case studies (Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel, Ana Brnabić, Maia Sandu), which has made it possible to outline models of women leaders in times of crisis.

I believe that the present research is differentiated by an interdisciplinary and feminist approach, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between the context and the political

leadership in crisis situations. The academic contribution of the research stems, on the one hand, from the correlation of the theory with the analysis of distinct and diverse cases of political leadership in a context of unprecedented global crisis, providing a framework of interpretation that can be tested by future studies. On the other hand, the original elements of the paper are methodological: by applying an intersectional feminist perspective, the research highlights aspects neglected so far in the study of women's leadership in exceptional contexts.

### **Overview of the thesis**

The paper is structured in eight main chapters, which follow a logical progression from theoretical and methodological substantiation, to concrete data analysis and the formulation of conclusions. **The first chapter**, *Introduction: Justifying the Theme and Outlining the Research Directions*, clearly sets the general theme (characteristics of women in political leadership positions in crisis situations), and situates it in the field of IR, signaling at the same time a feminist approach. In this section, I argue that feminist analysis in IR can be extended beyond Cynthia Enloe's founding question – "where are the women?". It is highlighted that, despite an increased visibility of women in leadership positions in recent years, the topic remains relatively little explored in the literature in IR, especially regarding the intersection between political leadership, gender and the increasingly frequent crisis episodes in recent times in all areas. In this context, the current research aims to contribute to the feminist literature in the field of IR conceptually and analytically through a qualitative analysis of four women in political leadership positions in states with different socio-political profiles (Jacinda Ardern – New Zealand; Angela Merkel – Germany; Ana Brnabić – Serbia; Maia Sandu – Republic of Moldova), in the context of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021).

**The second chapter**, *Methodological Options*, establishes the ontological, epistemological and methodological perspective – individuals (including leaders) are part of unequal power structures, thus requiring the study and nuance of the positions of marginalized categories. I chose not to use a feminist methodology in this regard, given that it remains quite controversial even among feminists within IR. Instead, I referred to the data analyzed with gender conscientiousness and examining a research question that would allow reflection on inequities in society. This chapter also defines the predominantly qualitative approach adopted and justifies the use of the comparative case study method. This option allows for a detailed and contextualized analysis of each case study, emphasizing an in-depth understanding of the relationship between leader,

discourse, and institutional context. Deliberately, the research privileges the interpretative quality of the data to the detriment of the quantitative processing of large volumes of information, thus assuming the limits of statistical generalization in favor of analytical and theoretical relevance. The selection of cases was a very important stage, the aim being to obtain as much data variety as possible.

It is important to point out that I did not aim to analyze women heads of state and heads of government from the 22 states that had female leaders in these positions at the beginning of 2021. I selected four structurally diverse cases after a preliminary analysis of the structural characteristics of states with female leaders at that time, but also according to the potential for access to preliminary data relevant to research. Access to data of interest that can be analyzed is very important especially in the context of this qualitative research and the choice of the case study method, which is one of detail and depth. In order not to risk analyzing only relatively similar case studies that could have confirmed a single analytical conclusion, I chose various cases, which would allow the rendering of any inconsistencies of the patterns studied. Schwartz-Shea (2006) speaks of “negative case analysis”, which is a technique used to “prevent a researcher from settling too quickly on a pattern, answer, or interpretation; the researcher consciously searches for any evidence – that is, the “negative” or negating case – that will force a reexamination of initial impressions, pet theories, or favored explanations.” (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 107).

The selected case studies aim rather to contribute to deepening and consolidating the understanding of the phenomenon of political leadership exercised by women in crisis contexts. The aim is exploratory and interpretive, focused on highlighting the traits, practices and strategies of women in political leadership positions in exceptional situations. In this regard, I have developed an analysis grid focused on four main and representative dimensions for political leadership in crisis situations (according to data extracted from the literature): 1. the leader’s ability to make decisions quickly and autonomously; 2. the leader’s potential to mobilize others for a common purpose; 3. the leader’s willingness to rely on competent external support; 4. the degree of assumption of responsibility. Limitations in the documentation and translation process are also discussed, as well as attempts to compensate for them.

**The third chapter, *Theoretical Section: Women in Political Leadership Positions in Crisis Situations - Authority and Gender in the field of International Relations***, brings together the theoretical contributions relevant to the understanding of political leadership in exceptional

contexts and introduces a feminist perspective on power, authority and legitimacy. It starts from an interdisciplinary approach (the concept of “leadership” being analyzed by the literature in fields such as psychology or the business environment) and stops at a feminized perspective of political leadership, which (contrary to traditional IR theories) values dimensions such as relationality, interdependence and collective action. This approach emphasizes how leaders operate in a social and political context marked by networking, collaboration and shared responsibility, not just the individual exercise of power. Feminist approaches believe that it is necessary to develop profiles of female leaders that do not develop in connection with any other leadership model. Political leadership is understood, in this framework, not as a one-way command relationship, but as an interactive process between the leader and the followers, based on communication, trust and mutual influence (Sinclair, 2024).

In this context, critical attention is paid to social role theory and the tensions between traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine attributes are discussed, as well as how gender stereotypes influence the perception and exercise of political authority. The chapter problematizes the idea – frequently publicized during the pandemic – that women would be “naturally” more suitable for leadership in crisis (meaning a high degree of unpredictability, risks to the functioning of the state and the need for a rapid response – Kulich et al., 2021), emphasizing that this apparently positive association hides subtle forms of discrimination. It supports the need for a reconceptualization of the concept of political leadership, in which the individual dimensions of the leader are correlated with the specificity of the political, institutional and cultural context in which he/she acts.

The emerging post-2020 literature on the management of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that the outstanding performance of women in political leadership positions cannot be explained solely by gender, but must be understood in relation to the institutional context, the democratic capital of states and the political and social support structures. Without supporting an essentialist link between the female gender and crisis situations, multiple studies (Blake-Beard et al., 2020; Dada et al., 2020) show that women leaders have adopted strategies that are more geared towards vulnerable individuals and groups, less aggressive rhetoric, and more frequent calls for collective responsibility than their male counterparts. Thus, the pandemic functioned as a revealing moment of how women leaders can embody alternative models of power – collaborative, relational and ethical – in opposition to the dominant patterns of male authority, without being defined exclusively by them.

In the context of recent efforts to reconfigure and hybridize feminism in IR, this theory remains essentially intersectional. It no longer operates with fixed boundaries between currents, but instead favors a more fluid and responsive approach to the intersection between gender and other power factors, such as security, the global economy, migration, race, or cultural identity (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). It has become apparent that the barriers faced by women in the international space are not exclusively legislative or formal-institutional in nature – but are often systematic, cultural, structural, and symbolic (Tickner, 2001).

**Chapters IV-VII**, *Case Studies: Jacinda Ardern – New Zealand (Chapter IV), Angela Merkel – Germany (Chapter V), Ana Brnabić – Serbia (Chapter VI), Maia Sandu – Republic of Moldova (Chapter VII)*, are structured unitarily, applying the previously developed analysis grid, and aim to highlight how the four women in political leadership positions reacted in the early phase of the pandemic. The relationship between the institutional context in the respective states, the individual attributes of the leader, the political path and the way of managing similar crises, the measures implemented and the public positions in the initial phase of the pandemic (2020-2021) is analyzed.

**The eighth chapter**, *Conclusions and the research's future directions of analysis*, brings together the conclusions of the research and proposes a typology of leadership of women leaders in times of crisis, based on two analytical axes: institutional autonomy and the ability to relate to citizens. The theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed, as well as the contributions of the paper to the development of a gender perspective in IR. Women leaders have operated in very different contexts – from consolidated democracies with high administrative capacity, to hybrid regimes or regimes dominated by other centers of power – which has influenced not only their choices, but also their freedom of action and visibility. The chapter concludes with a reflection on future research directions. This paper opens future directions of analysis on women's leadership in other types of crises (conflicts, recessions, legitimacy crises) and offers a useful tool for critical reflection on power in contemporary international relations.

## **Conclusions**

The research carried out highlighted that the political leadership process exercised by women in times of crisis should not be essentialized and cannot be understood exclusively through the prism of gender, but should be contextualized in relation to the power structure, the degree of institutional autonomy and personal style. The intersectional feminism-based perspective of

analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of how multiple factors influence access to power and experiences associated with political leadership. This approach highlights the fact that women leaders do not form a homogeneous group and that their political paths are shaped by a complex network of contextual and structural factors.

Given that each actor in political leadership positions is unique and original, in order to substantiate the conclusions, I have compiled an analysis grid of women leaders in crisis situations, integrating the contributions of Graham T. Allison (1969) and crisis management researchers Ansell, Boin and 't Hart (2014), respectively Boin, Kuipers and Overdijk (2013). This grid allowed the examination of the political leader from multiple perspectives – as a rational, organizational, bureaucratic, symbolic or facilitating actor.

Applying the analysis grid developed in the methodology chapter, four models of women leaders in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic were identified:

1. The autonomous-affective leader (“Ardern model”) characterized by hyper-empathy, quick decisions, efficient, engaging in frequent and solidarity-based communication;
2. The rational-affective leader (“Merkel model”) characterized by rationality, quick decisions, exhibiting more restrained communication, based on solidarity;
3. The passive-subordinate leader (“Brnabić model”) characterized by subordination to superior political interests, restrained, exhibiting inconsistent and circumstantial communication;
4. The competitive-affective leader (“Sandu model”) characterized by a discourse against the political factor, with frequent, mobilizing and solidarity-based communication.

The Ardern and Merkel models emphasize the importance of political stability and plurality, as well as the value of empathetic and coherent public discourse. The Sandu model shows that empathy and firmness can coexist and become tools for democratic reform in a difficult political context. At the same time, the analysis warns of the limits imposed by systems with illiberal tendencies, which can turn leaders – regardless of gender – into mere extensions of a dominant power. The Brnabić model signals that women should not be promoted exclusively as “symbols” of democratic commitments and acceptance of diversity. The validity of the conclusions for other states is certainly somewhat restricted by the particularities of the cases analyzed, despite the efforts to choose states as diverse as possible for this analysis.

The present analytical grid can be extended in the future to study other crises and other female political figures, including in other regions of the world or in different crisis conditions



(caused, for example, by economic factors, migration, war). Also, the research can be extended (through the interview method) to obtain perceptions from the public opinion regarding women political leaders in times of crisis and in various political contexts. The correlation of these models of political leadership with studies carried out at the population level would allow the conclusions to be nuanced.