

POPREBEL

**Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century
Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism**

Working Paper no. 12

Populist politics in the context of the COVID-19 crisis: a comparative analysis

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POPREBEL Working Paper series

POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism) is a large Horizon 2020-funded research project on the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The aim of the project is to describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, reconstruct trajectories of its growth and decline, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences and propose policy solutions.

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The POPREBEL consortium comprises six universities – UCL (co-ordinating institution), University of Belgrade, Charles University, Corvinus University of Budapest, Jagiellonian University and University of Tartu – and Edgeryders, a social enterprise.



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1. Introduction

This report is a comparative analysis of discourses, narratives, and strategies of populist parties in the context of the COVID-19 crisis in seven Central and East European (CEE) countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Montenegro, Poland, and Serbia). In order to obtain a better understanding of how populism impacts politics and governance in a crisis context, the paper analyses the populist framing of the pandemic, policy responses advocated by the populists, populist political and electoral strategies, as well as populist reactions to governmental policies, including restrictions and emergency measures. The results showed that the rhetoric and actions of populist parties varied as a function of government status (incumbent or opposition), with populists in opposition much more likely to engage in COVID-19-denialism, anti-vaxxerism, and conspiracy theories. Populist politics in the context of the pandemic have shown to be profoundly opportunistic and polarizing, with variations in the specific manifestation in different countries. Finally, the results show that the COVID-19 crisis has temporarily altered the rhetoric and political repertoire of populist parties, enabling the conservative and nativist far-right to pose as liberals defending individual rights and liberties against state oppression.

While the first cases of coronavirus in Europe were registered in January 2020 (Spiteri et al. 2020), the first cases of the virus in the seven analyzed CEE countries were confirmed a bit later, during the last week of February and the first week of March, except for Montenegro, where the first case was registered in the second half of March. More precisely, COVID-19 was first registered in Croatia on 25 February (Reuters, 25.2.2020); in Estonia on 27 February (Baltic News Network, 27.2.2020.); in the Czech Republic on 1 March (Crisis24, 1.3.2020); in Poland on 4 March (Crisis24, 4.3.2020.); in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 5 March (Crisis24, 5.3.2020), in Serbia on 6 March (Government of Republic of Serbia, 6.3.2020); and in Montenegro on 17 March (European Western Balkans, 17.3.2020.). Additionally, on 11 March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 11.3.2020), and the new virus and crisis it caused became a dominant topic in the entire region.

The pandemic crisis represented "the perfect storm for national political systems", testing "political institutions, political processes, and public policies" (Lynggaard, Jensen, & Kluth 2022, 1). Besides, it created a crisis that, as some authors argue, is an essential "necessary precondition for populism" (Laclau 2005, 177). Though not everyone is convinced that there is a causal relation between populism and crisis, it is evident that "crisis can be a facilitating factor" for the rise of populism (Bobba & Hubé 2021, 5). As such, it naturally became the main topic of political discourses. The pandemic brought a massive change in policy making but also the practice of everyday life. The travel and movement restrictions, followed by the closure of the public and private sectors as well as the ban on gatherings, brought a fertile ground for the populists. Those who, like president Victor Orban or the *de facto* leader of Poland Jarosław Kaczyński, found themselves in a convenient position to limit civic freedoms, as well as to impose scrutiny over policy making and public spending.

1.2 Conceptual framework and the state of the art

As already mentioned in the introduction, this study draws from and tests the theoretical claims of the authors about the relation between populism and crisis (Laclau 2005, Bobba & Hubé 2021), applied to the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Also, it relies on the conceptual framework of our POPREBEL Working paper no. 4: Political populism from the fringe to the mainstream (<https://zenodo.org/record/6402099#.YkW7aihBzEY>).

There are already some studies analysing how COVID-19 affected policies, how it entered populist narratives, and how it affected the popularity of politicians using such narratives.

A recently published volume (Lynggaard, Jensen, & Kluth 2023) offers a comprehensive overview of governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in thirty-one European countries (EU Member States plus the UK, Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland), also based on the theoretical background of crisis and policy responses. Taking into account the variable of the historically conditioned features, the section on "Eastern Grouping" is of particular interest for this research, covering eleven post-communist EU Member States. The results showed that in the cases of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary the COVID-19 crisis was used to strengthen the government that took the lead in the crisis and reinforced its Eurosceptic and nationalist government rhetoric. Estonia also concentrated the executive's decision-making power in combination with the expert, while Croatia's case differed because of uneven results over



time. Also, the analysis showed that, although not always from the start, in all the countries of the Eastern grouping the COVID-19 crisis eventually became a politicized and divisive issue. At a more general level, several patterns/trends were established: at least the initial strengthening of the executive at the expense of parliaments and re/politicization. However, the overall conclusion of the volume is that "the pandemic's long-term effects on democracy in Europe seem insignificant, and the viability of Western models of governance has furthermore been boosted by a rally around liberal democracy" (Lynggaard, Jensen, & Kluth 2023, 449).

Pevehouse analysed the effects of populism on international relations and cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being anti-elitist in its essence, the author foresaw that "populism will attenuate the informational effects of international organizations, discourage the delegation of authority, and create concerns about relative gains domestically and internationally" (Pevehouse 2020, E205).

Bolleyer and Sallat (2021) analysed the "executive aggrandisement" in six European countries (Hungary, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland) due to the COVID-19 pandemic to the detriment of the role of the national parliaments in policy-making and concluded that this was more pronounced in countries with single-party governments, even more than in governmental coalitions with major populist parties, "pointing to a source of 'democratic vulnerability' in emergency situations transcending Central Eastern Europe" (Bolleyer, and Sallat, 1103).

Furthermore, a study of populism and COVID-19 in eight countries (three of them from the CEE region): UK, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Poland (Bobba & Hubé 2021), concluded that the practical policy decisions were the same everywhere, regardless of their ideology, but that the populists' narratives depended on whether they were in power or in opposition.

The populist parties in power used the pandemic crisis to strengthen their legitimacy by showing that they care for their people. However, the concrete outcome depended on two variables: whether they were in a coalition government in power or ruling by themselves, and whether the COVID-19 impact was high or low: "where populists are firmly in power and the COVID-19 impact has been low (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic), populist leaders have used the rhetoric of the outstanding leader who 'provides direction' to his people (Weyland 2017) through the evocation of threat and reassurance (Edelman 1977). On the contrary, where populist parties are in a coalition government (i.e. Podemos and M5S), populist stances have been softened by governmental solidarity and the necessity to justify these extraordinary decisions. In other words, in contrast to the evidence that emerged previously (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Pappas 2019), the strategy of populists in power has been quite the reverse of that adopted in normal situations: forced to deal with a noncontroversial issue, they have tried to depoliticize the issue and to reduce the level of polarization around it" (Bobba & Hubé 2021, 134). A small parenthesis should be made here: the populist parties in coalition governments analysed in this volume were both on the left side of the political spectrum, influencing the populist strategies (see further in the text).

On the other hand, where populists were in opposition, the pandemic made it challenging to continue with their traditional divisive discourse, since the crisis required national unity, and any dissonance would be counter-productive, at least in the initial period. It was not until the mitigation period that they could go back to the old rhetoric, "especially those against the national and supranational elite as well as migrants. The crisis has led to the radicalization of discourse for the Brexit Party, Vox, and Konfederacja, acting as a trigger for a more intense campaign against the 'enemies of the people'. The AfD, instead, has been hindered by more radical stances of the extra-parliamentary opposition (APO). Finally, in other countries—like Italy, France or the SPD in the Czech Republic—populist parties in opposition have resumed their classical stances, updating their discursive repertoire to the new COVID-19 age" (Bobba & Hubé 2021, 135).

Another difference was detected among the left and right-wing populists: left-wing populism usually perceives itself as the defender of "us" in terms of the poorest, while for right-wing populism "us" is defined in terms of ethnicity or one's own nation (Garner, Ferdinand & Lawson 2020, 142). In this case, for the right-wing populism, the "them" category, apart from the EU, also included the other EU Member States, thus confirming "that right-wing populism and Euroscepticism are reinforcing each other (Conti 2018; Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019)." The left-wing parties, however, "were more focused on denouncing the lack of public investment in the national healthcare system and the disastrous consequences of years of EU neoliberalism" (Bobba & Hubé 2021, 137).

In line with the right-wing populism traits, Bieber (2022) analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nationalism worldwide and its reinforcement. He concludes that, on the one hand, the pandemic reinforced the pre-existing



nationalism in the countries but also fostered a rise in exclusionary nationalism. He identified four aspects that might be shaped by the pandemic: the pre-existing nationalism, “the rise of authoritarianism as governments suspend or reduce democratic freedoms and civil liberties, the rise of biases against some groups associated with the pandemic, the rise of borders and deglobalization, and the politics of fear” (Bieber 2022, 13). Finally, the author pointed to a very important conclusion, that “government responses to the pandemic risk turning fragile democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes. Such competitive authoritarian regimes might initially rely on the pandemic to justify repressive policies. However, they are likely to turn to exclusionary nationalism as a key legitimizing ideology in order to sustain power” (Bieber 2022, 22).

A comparative case study of the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Buščíková & Baboš 2020) asks a very legitimate question, given that the main mobilization of populists is crisis – how do they govern in crisis? The study identified “three features of the populist pandemic response. First, populists bypassed established, institutionalized channels of crisis response. Second, they engaged in erratic yet responsive policy making. These two features are ubiquitous to populism. The third feature, specific to technocratic populism, is the politicization of expertise in order to gain legitimacy. Technocratic populists in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia weaponized medical expertise for political purposes” (Buščíková & Baboš 2020, 496). The conclusion of Buščíková and Baboš is similar to Bieber’s: in the first phase the populists in power used the pandemic to erode democratic institutions and curb civil liberties and strengthen themselves in power in the short-term. However, they foresaw that after the initial shock and urgent measures, “economies weakened by lockdowns will undermine all governments in the future. The spring surge in solidarity, quick yet blunt measures, and responsiveness driven by medical expertise worked miracles in the first wave. Unfortunately, it may have set the stage for failure in the second wave, which requires responsible, de-politicized and fine-tuned governance” (Buščíková & Baboš 2020, 505).

A study of Brazil, US, and the Philippines, all ruled by populist leaders, found that the leaders were diminishing the importance of COVID “simplifying the pandemic by downplaying its impacts or touting easy solutions or treatments, spectacularizing their responses to crisis, forging divisions between the ‘people’ and dangerous ‘others’, and making medical knowledge claims to support the above” (Lasco 2020, 1417). We draw the frame of downplaying the gravity of the situation from this paper for our discourse analysis in the seven CEE countries.

Finally, Banjeglav and Moll (2021) analysed how historical analogies and collective memories of the 1990s wars figured in public discussions during the first wave of the coronavirus crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, an element which will be taken as one of the frames in the discourse of populist politicians in the seven countries that are the object of this study.

1.3 Research questions and methods

Given that the populists necessarily thrive on crisis and polarization (Laclau 2005, Bobba & Hubé 2021) in order to gain voters’ support, logical research questions arise: a) how did the populists react in the context of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic countries? b) how did COVID-19 pandemic affect their strategies and their political success? c) Which factors or variables affected the differences in the outcomes?

These research questions will be tested in seven CEE countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Montenegro, Poland, and Serbia. This paper fills the research gap by expanding the study of the COVID-19 crisis and populism to the countries that have not been analysed so far by the scholars (BiH, Montenegro, and Serbia), while also putting them in comparison with other countries from the CEE region in order to detect patterns of similarities and differences.

In the selected case studies, we are going to observe the populist framing of the pandemic, policy responses advocated by the populists, populist political and electoral strategies, as well as populist reactions to governmental policies, including restrictions and emergency measures. The primary method applied in this paper is critical discourse and frame analysis combined with policy analysis.

We are also taking into account similar variables as Bobba & Hubé (2021): whether the populists are in government (single-party or coalition) or in opposition, as well the different phases of the COVID-19 crisis management. Differently from Bobba & Hubé, we are not going to analyse the differences in terms of the side of the political spectrum since



in the selected case studies there are no left-wing populist parties, which can be explained by the fact that we are analysing the post-communist space.

Finally, the individual case studies will be put in a comparative perspective, not only among themselves but also in other countries analysed by the works mentioned in the State of the Art.

2 Case studies

2.1 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The first case of COVID-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina was registered on 5 March 2020. The two entities of the state – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska initially reacted promptly, and in a similar manner. The Federation declared the state of emergency on 16 March (Arnautović 2020) while on the same day, Republika Srpska declared equivalent state of emergency (Slobodna Evropa, 16.3.2020). A lockdown was implemented, and citizen movements were restricted in both entities, as well as in the third (micro)entity – the Brčko District. The borders, public areas, parks, and shopping malls were closed, while grocery stores and pharmacies remained open. A series of short-term measures were taken to mitigate the negative impact of the crisis on the economy: coverage of wage and social security contributions in certain sectors, accommodation vouchers, price controls, reduction of rent for private enterprise, easing of loan repayment and preferential treatment of domestic companies in public procurement (Impact of COVID-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020). Due to its complex administrative division (the state government, three entities – the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska and the Brčko District, plus ten cantonal governments within the Federation), the country did not have a unified body to govern the crisis and the responsibility of the institutions at the state level were limited to the closing of the border crossings and regulation of the air traffic (Miladinović 2020).

The politics began to meddle in the handling of the crisis at the end of March of 2020, when the leaders of the three major parties in the country, representing Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, almost simultaneously asked the help from Turkey, Serbia and Croatia respectively, taking care more of self-promotion and emphasizing their ties with their political mentors, rather than responding to the actual needs of the local population (Sadiković 2020). Nationalism remained a dominant common element of political discourse (Dajč et al 2022, 3). The antagonizing relations between the two entities were soon reflected on the handling of the pandemic. In mid-April, the populist leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik had a verbal exchange of fire with Bisera Turković, minister of foreign affairs of the country, coming from the Federation. Dodik insisted that due to inadequate measures and decisions taken, related to the coronavirus pandemic, "Bosnia and Herzegovina has proven that it is unable to survive as a state, while its only segment capable of doing something positive was the Serbian entity" (Mondo, 17.4.2020). In addition to the divisive politics along ethnic lines, the fight against COVID-19 was followed by corruption scandals. In late May of 2020, in the Federation, prime minister Fadil Novalić and several prominent health officials were arrested in what media labelled as the "respirators affair", related to the procurement of faulty respirators from China; as of December 2022 the court trial is still ongoing (Huseinović 2020 and Aljović 2022). In Republika Srpska, in October 2021, so-called "oxygen affair" became widely known when the opposition released documents leading to suspicion that during the pandemic, patients were given industrial oxygen of inferior quality instead of medical oxygen. The Officials rejected the accusations, labelling them as an attempt by the opposition to score political points; one year later the investigation by the public prosecutor is still ongoing and the affair is largely forgotten (Maksimović 2021 and Danas, 15.4.2022).

Unlike the first response, the later stages of pandemics in Bosnia and Herzegovina were characterized by the mistrust of the wider population towards the authorities, initial lack of vaccines and, later, distrust towards the vaccination. Procurement of vaccines also became a political issue. Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić capitalized on the inability of Bosnian authorities to secure vaccines. Astra Zeneca and Chinese manufactured vaccines were donated by Serbia to both entities, while all citizens of Bosnia were allowed to have their jabs in Serbia if they wished to. Croatia soon followed the example of Serbia, allowing citizens to take their vaccines there. Unlike in Belgrade and Zagreb, in Sarajevo and other major Bosnian cities, anti-COVID-19 measures did not lead to significant street protests, and the activities of antivaccination and conspiracy groups were mostly limited on the internet and social networks (Al Jazeera 31.1.2021). To a large extent, they were influenced by similar groups in Serbia and Croatia. The sad outcome for Bosnia and Herzegovina was that it had one of the lowest levels of vaccination in Europe. Until November 2021, only 20% of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina were fully vaccinated, and half a million doses (mostly Astra Zeneca) had to be



destroyed due to expiry (Lalić 2021 and Ćosić 2022, 19-20). Today the country has 29% of vaccinated people with at least one dose, and 26% of BiH citizens are fully vaccinated (Holder 25.12.2022).

Both entities' local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place in November 2020. The candidates of the populist ruling parties – SDA in Federation and SNSD in Srpska were defeated in several important cities – Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Bijeljina. The bad handling of the COVID-19 crisis had some weight on the loss of their support. However, other social and related factors (widespread corruption) played a more prominent role in the political campaign. Due to the specific conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina: administrative and entity division, dysfunctional central government, constant mutual accusations between officials of the Federation and Srpska, and numerous health affairs that accompanied the crisis, the two main populist ruling parties: SDA and SNSD did not further capitalize their power and even lost some of the support among the electorate. The further consequences of the poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis were somewhat different in the two entities. In the Federation, the populist SDA lost to the moderate SDP on the general elections in 2022. While in the Serbian entity both the ruling party and the opposition belong to the populist line and are dependent on political elites in Belgrade, the general elections of 2022, despite being tightly contested, did not bring significant changes, and COVID-19 (mis)management was not an important issue raised during the elections.

2.2 Croatia

Populism in Croatia has been characterized by the right-wing centrist populism of the ruling party – Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*- HDZ), and several conservative and far right-wing populist initiatives and movements that were familiar or new to Croatian public, even bizarre personalities who became leader of protests such as Marko Francišković (see Brezar 2021). Finally, the populist parties/movements/initiatives from the 1990s to the present time acted with the support of the Catholic Church.

Burdened with the economic crisis, Croatia in 2020 dealt with two significant new challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic from late February and earthquakes in Zagreb on 22 March and in Glina and Petrinja in 28 and 29 December (see analysis and critique of management of these two challenges in 2020 in: Mikac 2020; Jambrović Dobrić 2021). In December, when the COVID-19 certificates were introduced in Croatia, the first signs of COVID-19-denial and anti-vaxxer standpoint gave results when the heads of several municipalities refused to apply certificates saying, "they did not want to create divisions among citizens" (Reuters 2021). Further, due to unsuccessful procurement of vaccines in Croatia, citizens were forced to receive them in other countries, e.g. a significant number in Serbia. Ultimately, Croatia has one of the European Union's lowest vaccination rates, with around 55% of its population inoculated against COVID-19 (Holder, 25.12.2022).

The ruling HDZ government took advantage of the pandemic crisis on several levels, from electoral strategies to politicization of COVID-19 and abuse of the crisis for political interests. Firstly, when trust in the ruling party was weakening, a snap election was scheduled in July 2020. With the slogan "Safe Croatia" at a time when the results of the battle with the coronavirus were not in sight, and vaccination had not even started, they based their populist campaign promoting "victory over virus" (Nacional 2020). That standpoint of the HDZ, some scholars wisely observed that elections were timed to suit political calculations and in favour of the economy, especially tourism (Prelec and Bojanić 2023, 186). Furthermore, HDZ candidates in the elections in 2020 were chosen from the ranks of health institutions, especially those intended to solve the problem of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was before the campaign already omnipresent in the media. For example, one of the leading figures in the Headquarters of the Civil Protection of the Republic of Croatia to prevent the spread of the coronavirus infection (*Stožer*), Vili Beroš, Health Minister, was a candidate for HDZ for the mayor of Zagreb, at local elections in Spring 2020. Second, abuse of crisis and politicization could be understood as a general trend of their framing of the pandemic (see further in Prelec and Bojanić 2023, 186-188). In the political narratives, we found different opinions about the Headquarters even of the main parties in government, the HDZ, and the SDP (Social Democratic Party). President Zoran Milanović from SDP called Headquarters "para-constitutional body" to emphasize their decision-making practice beyond their competence (Liberportal.hr 2020). In relation to other political factions, the ruling party HDZ took an opportunistic stance and used radical right-wing populists to play the role of "bad cop", which showed successful weapons for staying in power.

Opposition populists played a twofold role during the pandemic, as a non-public proxy to ruling HDZ, and as a representative of the same values but in a sharp manner. In general, the pandemic crisis gave conservative populists in



opposition a context suitable for dynamizing their role as victims of "evil elites" and to advocate attack on their liberal democratic freedoms. The best example of that is the former reformist initiative The Bridge (*Most*), which became a conservative right-wing party during COVID-19 and organized two referendum-type initiatives against vaccination and COVID certificates, as well as for a referendum to regulate the work of Stožer in December 2021 to "restore democracy" and to stop "stožerocracy" (see further: Trkanjec 2021). They gathered 410.533 signatures in more than a thousand places (see further details: Reuters 2022). Besides them, the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to several marginal movements and representatives established on social media and mobilizing through private groups on "Telegram", such as groups The Righteous (*Pravednici*) or movement 'Free Together' (*Slobodni zajedno*). As a result, conservative populists presented themselves as savior of the "ordinary people" in the clutches of the "evil elite" which deprives them of their civil liberties regarding vaccinations, COVID passes and measures of protection, such as quarantine (biggest protest of this faction was organized with 15.000-20.000 protestants on 21 November, 2021 at Ban Jelačić Square). November rally of right-wingers in the centre of Zagreb, consisted of neofascists, orthodox Catholics, and anti-vaxxers, and will be remembered for the persecution of journalists, threats, praise chanting to the veterinarian drug "Ivermectin" etc. Apart from the mentioned "enemies", in September 2022 mass anti-government protest united the same organizers, but this time they presented themselves as Eurosceptics and anti-globalists too, and at protests they insisted that everything bad started with the Croatian government management of COVID-19, and they advocated against: science and censorship, the World Health Organization and its "communist-digital totalitarianism", the European Union, which "proved to be worse than Yugoslavia" (Index.hr 2022).

The anti-vaxxer protests in Croatia and several others dedicated to the protection of citizens from the "enemy" represented as the government or the HDZ party, and then journalists as the second "enemy", led to two consequences. On the one hand, they influenced a decrease in the trust of citizens in the state institutions and within medically prescribed methods of prevention and treatment of corona. Proof that this process was supported by HDZ too, and that anti-vaxxers were just a more radical part of the same faction in Croatian politics and policy of COVID-19 is a fact that low vaccination rates against COVID-19 were observed in municipalities with HDZ in power. Second, the anti-vaxxers in Croatia have given rise to violent phenomena, from specific threats and calls for violent measures against politicians, journalists, and schoolteachers, as well as making a list of traitors of the Croatian people regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to their violent representation, the HDZ advocates peaceful and scientifically guided solutions to the pandemic. Finally, we agree with Prelec and Bojanić that "almost every measure proclaimed by the government came under intense scrutiny, with wide swathes of the public opinion and the media landscape framing them as an attack against fundamental human rights and freedoms" (2023, 186). Therefore, conservatism and denial of scientific medical prevention and treatment prevailed in Croatia, guided by populists.

2.3 Czech Republic

Populism in the Czech Republic has been characterised by a blend of dominant 'technocratic' or 'managerial' populism, chiefly embodied by the ANO movement founded in 2011 by the agro-food billionaire Andrej Babiš, and a weaker current of illiberal radical right populism currently represented by the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party headed by Tomio Okamura (Havlík, Voda, et al 2016; Havlík 2019; Heinisch and Saxonberg 2021; Wondreys 2021). While ANO has been a governing party since 2013, working predominantly at the national level with parties of the traditional left, while represented in parliament since 2013 and steadily gaining support, Okamura's SPD has remained an outsider.

When the COVID-19 struck the Czech Republic in early 2020, ANO had been the dominant partner in a minority two-party coalition since 2018. Although ANO was a governing party faced with the multiple uncertainties of an unprecedented crisis politics of a public health and economic and social emergency, the COVID-19 crisis, in principle, should have played to the party's political strengths. Babiš had continually profiled himself against 'traditional parties' as a non-political outsider from the business world and a seasoned 'crisis manager' who would efficiently 'run the state like a firm' achieving results that more hide-bound establishment politicians could not. Several of the party's ministers had a business, technocratic or specialist backgrounds and Babiš's ability to hire-and-fire ministers unencumbered by structures of a conventional governing party (ANO was an 'entrepreneurial party') seemed to offer flexibility to deploy experts to political decision-making posts: the ANO-appointed health minister who took office in September 2020 and header the government's Central Crisis Staff at the height of the pandemic, Roman Prymula, was a leading



epidemiologist. Enumerating the various claimed achievements of his government – and style of governance – in the same month, had no hesitation in claiming that Czechia was 'best in Covid' (Bustikova and Baboš 2020; Ramboušková 2021).

However, as subsequent phases of the pandemic were mishandled and death rates, it rapidly became clear that, while the rhetoric was one of technocratic solutions, in reality, decision-making in Babiš government was chaotic, undermined by the personalization of power around the prime minister, disregard for procedure and an over-responsive to shifts in public opinion, resulting in inconsistent policy and lack of strategic direction. Noting the relatively effective performance of Social Democrat leader and Interior Minister Jan Hamáček as Central Crisis Staff - a role initially given to an appointee - commentators even speculated that the pandemic might lead to a revival of traditional parties, whose leaders were assumed to have the experience and political skills to manage that crisis that ANO's technically qualified political newcomers lacked.

The pandemic left ANO damaged both as it was the incumbent governing party and hence blamed for the failures of political and health management, where Czechia performed relatively poorly compared to many European countries and because the main claims shaping its technocratic populist pitch had been brutally exposed. Such failures arguably pushed ANO towards economically left policies targeting groups like pensioners, already inclined towards the party by Babiš's expansive spending on benefits and public sector salaries, and towards culturally illiberal appeals targeting the two main opposition alliance as 'green fanatics' or supporters of uncontrolled migration (Anderson 2021). Tellingly, Babiš, who had once framed himself as an anti-establishment liberal in the mould of Emmanuel Macron (*Byznys noviny* 2017) invited Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to join him at a campaign rally before the 2021 elections (which Babiš narrowly lost).

In contrast to the governing ANO, Tomio Okamura's oppositional radical right SPD latched on to pandemic-related emergency measures at issue on which it could challenge established parties by drawing upon fears and frustrations in society weakly articulated by mainstream parties. This was characteristic of Okamura's career as a populist outsider, which saw seamlessly shift issues and emphasis first engaging with corruption, then with the (illusory) prospect of migration from majority Muslim country before championing Czech withdrawal from the EU and engaging with the bread-and-butter economic and cost-of-living issues as inflation re-emerged.

During the pandemic Okamura and the SPD adopted raucous critical stances against first lockdown measures and, subsequently, on vaccination with the usual thrust of their political appeal centring on opposing compulsion and 'discrimination' against those who did not wish to be vaccinated or observe measure such as mask wearing (Krýslová 2020). However, while sometimes expressing scepticism about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines and downplaying the severity of the virus (*Parlamentní listy* 2021), Okamura avoided embracing the more extreme and conspiracy-minded views of radical anti-lockdown and anti-vax subcultures and movements (discussed below), denying the existence of the virus, questioning its origins, or viewing government COVID policies in terms of authoritarian crackdown by shadowy forces fuelled by hidden technologies.¹

2.4 Estonia

On 12 March 2020, Estonia's government declared an emergency situation (Government of Estonia, 2020), signalling the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first two years of the pandemic, the country was led by two coalition governments. The populist Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) was a member of the first cabinet that dealt with the hardest period of the pandemic, including imposing restrictions ranging from isolation, mask-wearing and closing schools and public places. EKRE's approach towards the pandemic can be divided into three distinct periods: the short period around the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020; the party's time in government during the hardest part of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, and the breakup of the government and EKRE's move into opposition in early 2021.

When the pandemic first unrolled in Europe in early 2020, the mood in Estonia was mostly one of worrisome anticipation. EKRE, who was a member of the coalition government at the time, chose as its main strategy the downplaying

¹ Mainstream opposition and civic society critics of Babiš suspected that he might, consciously or unconsciously, exploit the COVID-19 emergency to push for democratic backsliding. However, courts, media scrutiny and civil society pushback were sufficient to contain the limited autocratic trends observable (Guasti 2020; Guasti and Buštikova 2022).



of the potential danger of the virus. This was famously illustrated by the then party chairman, Mart Helme, comparing COVID-19 to a common cold, advising to fight it using traditional remedies such as goose fat (Õhtuleht, 2020). EKRE attributed the responsibility for the virus outbreak to non-friendly countries, including Iran and China (ibid.), thus aligning the virus-rhetoric with its anti-immigrant ideology.

When the coronavirus started spreading in Estonia in the spring 2020, EKRE slightly toned down its rhetoric. Its initial messaging was largely in line with the government's general stance, focusing on managing the crisis as effectively as possible. The father-and-son duo who led the party were both government ministers at the time. Martin Helme, Finance Minister, presented a new plan for the country's economy during the crisis, and Mart Helme, Interior Minister, dealt with false news that created some panic among the public (ERR, 2020a, 2020b). During its time in government, EKRE did not directly oppose coronavirus restrictions or preventive measures. However, it distanced itself from the prime ministerial Center Party by contesting two main issues, mask-wearing and vaccination. The wearing of masks was "strongly recommended" not mandatory in Estonia, but EKRE's Martin Helme spoke publicly about his hesitancy about the effectiveness of wearing masks in constraining the virus and argued that imposing a mandatory mask regime would transform the country into a "mask-checking police state" (Pealinn, 2020). EKRE's position on vaccination was somewhat vague while in government, but the party sided with people's right not to vaccinate. Martin Helme "categorically" disagreed with a suggestion by the European Commission President von der Leyen to impose vaccination in the EU (Uued Uudised, 2021). Importantly, EKRE led the controversial initiative introduced in the spring 2020 that included amendments to the Aliens Act—one of the two major legislative acts in Estonia that regulates immigration—that significantly curbed the rights of non-EU nationals in Estonia, e.g., by revoking the visas and residence/work permits of foreign workers in case of unemployment and by restricting student mobility from outside the EU. The amendments are permanent and did not change when the emergency situation was terminated. By doing so, populists used the legislative process to advance their ideological goals.

After the government collapsed in January 2021 amid the Center's corruption investigations, EKRE was forced into opposition and this brought change to its rhetoric on COVID-19. The party took a clear anti-establishment stance aiming to mobilize alienated population groups with low political trust. EKRE repeatedly discounted science, called for civil disobedience against mandatory restrictions, which it labelled violations of freedom, and even called for overthrowing the democratically elected government (ERR, ERR News 2021). EKRE never publicly condemned the use of COVID-19 vaccines but claimed that the new government aims to make vaccination mandatory (ERR, 2021). The party began advocating for 'individual rights' of the unvaccinated. Some of the largest anti-restriction and antivaccination demonstrations that took place in Estonia were organized by a conservative nongovernmental organization (NGO) associated with EKRE and created major societal backlash, given that they took place when the medical system was on the verge of collapse. Some of the rallies also led to small-scale confrontations between the protestors and the police, encouraging EKRE to engage in the rhetoric of the "new police state" (Postimees, 2021). Siding with anti-vaxxers and anti-restriction protesters secured EKRE a solid second place in opinion polls and, according to some, even the position of most popular party in Estonia for a brief period (Nikolajev, 2021).

All in all, the coronavirus issue was heavily politicized by populists in Estonia, whose supporters were as a result sceptical of the health risks and less likely to adhere to social distancing, masking, and vaccination protocols. The pandemic opened an opportunity for populists to introduce policies in line with their core ideologies and election promises, e.g., tough border control (see also Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015:3), but also added new claims to their agenda, such as the limitation of public freedoms and support for conspiracy theories (Bobba 2021).

2.5 Montenegro

Montenegro was hit by COVID-19 during the process of political changes that started in the Winter 2019 with clashes of government with Serbian Orthodox clergy on the Law of Religious Property. Anti-government protests, led by the SPC (Serbian Orthodox Church) in Winter 2019, accelerated the process of political change in Montenegro. Namely, after three decades of ruling in Montenegro, in the 2020 elections (for programs of parties and movements see: Vukanović 2020), the right-wing populist party DPS (Democratic party of Socialists) loses, and the majority is won by the conservative alliance Democratic Front (DF) Democrats and Green party URA. During the COVID-19 pandemic, two governments fell. Montenegro is in a political crisis trapped in ideological divisions into two factions - pro-Western (DPS) on the one, and pro-Serbian/pro-Russian (DF), and mediators of the URA green option on the other side. After



the vote of no confidence in the government of Dritan Abazović, in August 2022, Montenegro is at a crossroads between the impossibility of organizing new elections and international intervention (status of the country in 2022 all fields see in Muk and Stošić 2022). On the one hand, the winner of the 2020 elections DF called in September 2022 for recycling of the people's will and re-establish a new government. Beside the impossibility of forming a government due to ideological disagreements, the process of blocking the judicial system is also current, which is an obstacle to establishing new elections and thus providing political stability, which could lead to the opening of chapters for accession to the EU.

As populism research with cases from Montenegro still didn't develop, a short review of the general populist groupings need to be singled out. The classification of the "saviours" of the "common (Montenegrin or Serbian) people" from the clutches of the "evil elite" continued the existing divisions from the earlier decades. DF and URA saw DPS as a representative of the "corrupted elite" that destroyed Montenegrin society for three decades. On the other hand, they were portrayed by the DPS as "enemies" of independent Montenegro which they undermined by allowing interference of SPC, Serbia and Russia in Montenegrin politics. In the course of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, DPS successfully used the mentioned ideological strain of DF to approve their own status as pro-EU faction (compare programs in: Vukanović 2020).

Considering the chronology of pandemic management in Montenegro and its relations to politics, it is important to emphasize that the first phase of the pandemic of COVID-19 was framed successfully and without interference from politicians. With minimal death rates, quick conducting of the measures of closing restaurants and cafes, as well as public transport, and with movement restrictions on Sundays, but without complete lockdown, citizens respond well to all measures of prevention of COVID-19 guided by the Head of the Institute for Public Health Boban Mugoša and Senad Begić, senior consultant for health issues of the UNICEF representative office in Montenegro. However, after the May proclamation of Montenegro as a "corona-free country" and citizens back to work ordinarily from the offices, which was well timed to prepare the tourist season and opening of borders, a few months later Montenegro ranked 5th in terms of the number of deaths in the world.

Already during the first phase of COVID-19 management, the opposition DF focused on the devaluation of the DPS as their primary weapon. The opposition launched a vigilantly COVID-19-denial campaign with the view that the government is dealing with unimportant things like the COVID-19 mocking the proclamation of a corona-free country and considering that sperm donation is a more constructive issue in the situation in which the country finds itself. Namely, the representative of DF Slaven Radulovic attacked in May 2020 DPS for "lying to the people about the real numbers". Finally, he concluded that DPS was "speaking to their naive voters about the virus that does not even exist in Montenegro." (Mondo.ba 2020)

In the following 2nd COVID-19 phase, political divisions and clashes, along with mass religious processions and numerous para-religious but actually political events with mass gatherings, brought Montenegro to the brink of civil war. In that manner, the protagonists of mentioned events denied the real problems the country was facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the lack of medical infrastructure, equipment and medicines. Further, divisions brought to light politicization about the procurement of vaccines, with several affairs of refusal of donations from the Russian, Chinese and Greek sides, which postponed the vaccination process guided by politicians. Finally, the politicization of vaccine procurement followed and increased after Dritan Abazović arranged a donation from Serbia.

The focal point for the politicization of COVID-19 was the dissolution of the National Contagious Disease Board which handed over its jurisdiction to several political and medical institutions. Then, for the first time during COVID-19 management in Montenegro, the final decision was left to the Prime minister, leading to an increased loss of citizens' trust in official medical institutions and their representatives. In line with that, politicians from both factions stopped adhering to COVID-19 prevention measures and shared that practice to citizens.

However, mentioned political changes and denial of COVID-19 threat in Montenegrin society wouldn't have happened without religious processions which have turned out to be the most massive protests ever seen in Montenegro. As a result, the conservative values advocated by SPC and their followers had a negative impact on the prevention process during the COVID-19 pandemic and constituted a strong agenda of denial of COVID-19 in the society of Montenegro. Speaking about populism, the most important mediator of conservative right-wing populism in Montenegro was from 2020 to 2022 the Serbian Orthodox Church and certain politicians on their influence. Beside by Metropolitan Amfilohije as a particularly strong figure in which religious and political interests came together, said that it's perfectly safe



to use same spoon during eucharistic because "God wouldn't allow anyone to be infected while receiving eucharistic" (see in: Marković and Georgijević 2022, 9). Following this, PM Zdravko Krivokapić said: "if you have faith, you will not be infected by communion with the same spoon" (Bursać 2020), which launched debate in public known as the "spoon affair", and confirmed the influence of the SPC clergy on politicians and their denial agenda. Even after the death of Metropolitan Amfilohije from the COVID-19, and keeping secret about this from the public, SPC was continuously on the path of the idea of disinfection through faith.

2.6 Poland

The COVID-19 pandemic in Poland occurred during the rule of the populist right-wing 'United Right' coalition led by the Law and Justice party (PiS) since 2015. The leader of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, is known for his scepticism towards European Union and its institutions. At the same time, reforms introduced by the government (e.g. judiciary) have been condemned by the European Commission and debated at the plenary sitting of the European Parliament. PiS designed and implemented reforms that brought concern over the standards of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights and resulted in the Commission's activation of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union against Poland due to a risk of a serious breach of the rule of law (DW 2017). Law and Justice-led coalition is not openly rejecting the EU but demonstrates a critical approach to the performance and prerogatives of the European institutions. Jarosław Kaczyński is opposing deeper political integration and rejects the federal model. This stance is also expressed by the majority of PiS members of parliament, as well as Polish MEPs belonging to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group in the EP. The advent of the pandemic only intensified the voices about the EU's inefficiency, its slow bureaucracy and the need for urgent reform.

The COVID-19 pandemic developed in Poland in the second half of March 2020, and from the very beginning, the pandemic crisis was politicised. The conflict was visible between the parties in power, criticizing EU performance, and the forces (mainly opposition) of pro-EU advocates who supported common EU activities. As in other countries ruled by populist forces, Poland can serve as an example of how the rulers used the pandemic to limit civil rights, quickly pass laws and create a favourable narrative. The Polish case stood out from other European countries due to the presidential elections planned for May 2020, and the Eurosceptic government in power pursuing anti-EU rhetoric, politicising the pandemic and limiting civic rights (Styczyńska and Zubek 2023).

The 2020 presidential elections constituted the main challenge and the bone of contention in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government decided that the elections would be organised on the planned date but will be held by correspondence voting, which was criticized for several reasons. Firstly, due to doubts about whether such elections will be safe for the citizens, but also since in the pandemic, there was no chance for a regular election campaign. Lockdown prevented gatherings and the public debate was dominated by health-related issues. The lack of a fair campaign would give the incumbent President an advantage. Finally, due to widespread criticism, the elections were postponed to June and held in stationary form despite the pandemic. The results brought the victory of the incumbent President Duda. Tatarczyk and Wojtasik (2022:14) point out that Poland is a peculiar case of democratic backsliding because it used the COVID-19 pandemic to instrumentalize the election more than any other country.

In autumn 2020 the loyal to the ruling party Constitutional Tribunal declared that abortion due to foetal abnormalities is unconstitutional. This ruling effectively ban abortion in Poland and, despite the ban on gatherings, caused mass street protests gathering up to 100.000 people only in Warsaw (Ptak and Charlish 2020). The Court's ruling coincided with another wave of pandemic and caused a shock to a society focused primarily on the fight against the pandemic and grassroots aid initiatives. Later on, the ban on gatherings, which the protesters did not comply with, was declared unconstitutional (BIP BRPO 2021). It seems that the introduction of the ban on assemblies was intended to help the government to suppress social protests caused by unpopular policies: both the restriction of business activities and the abortion ban.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the anti-EU rhetoric that has been observed since 2015. Already before, the conflict with the European Commission over the rule of law helped PiS to generate the image of the European Union as something distant and ambivalent. After the outbreak of the pandemic, this trend only strengthened, and the ruling party began criticizing EU institutions and accusing them of a lack of effective engagement. Prime Minister Morawiecki emphasized that the EU was acting too slowly in fighting the pandemic (GOV.PL 2020), and this lack of effectiveness would explain the need to strengthen the sovereignty of nation-states. Jarosław Kaczyński, in turn, used the pandemic



to convince his vision of a united Europe – as he emphasized that "the pandemic has made many people aware of the weakness of the Union and the key importance of nation-states" (Dzielnik.pl 2020).

The notion of independence in fighting the crisis and the uselessness of the EU was part of the governmental rhetoric from the beginning of the pandemic. Looking at the evolution of the situation in China and Italy, the government declared that it would manage at the national level, so the EU as a whole does not have to take action. Later, Warsaw accused the European Commission of a lack of coordinated action. This example only confirms what has been characteristic of the rhetoric of Kaczyński's party and its coalition partners for years - the European Union is criticized for what is problematic or unpopular, while the government takes credit for everything that is done effectively and what helps to increase prosperity. In the face of the pandemic, however, this mechanism gained strength, especially in its second phase, when vaccines were invented and distributed. On the one hand, the government recommended vaccination, and on the other hand, it "winked" at antivaccination movements, pointing to Brussels as the source of oppression and regulations.

The pandemic is still a topic in the political discourse. In autumn 2022 Jarosław Kaczyński, during meetings with PiS supporters, emphasized that Poland won the fight against the pandemic thanks to good management performed by the government and that in Poland "no one (as in Lombardy) died on the street (Pacewicz 2022)". The ruling party used the pandemic to criticize the inefficiency and sluggishness of the EU, pointing out that in the face of the crisis, member states are more effective than the European Union as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened the already existing divisions in Poland and contributed to the huge polarization of society (Fomina 2020), which may have very negative effects on the functioning of society in the future. At the same time, the pandemic was used by populist governments (not only in Poland) to exploit the suspension of normal life to implement long-held plans (Sierakowski 2020) and stressed the problems with liberal democracy that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.7 Serbia

During the first months of 2020 COVID19 became the dominant topic in the public sphere of Serbia. It is interesting to see how this topic was used by politicians and how it was incorporated in populist narratives. Since in Serbian media there is a "trend of degradation of media pluralism" (Milutinović 2022, 291) and public space is dominated by pro-government media, the main focus will be on messages coming from politicians in power.

Narratives of key politicians in Serbia regarding COVID-19 changed rapidly during the first months of pandemics. Before the first cases of COVID-19 were officially recorded in Serbia, politicians were trying to diminish the importance of this virus. Doctor Branimir Nestorović (later on political actor, that was in coalition with the right-wing extremist opposition party *Dveri*), in a press conference that was held on 26 February 2020, while the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić was standing behind him and smiling as a sign of approval, stated that COVID-19 is "the most ridiculous virus in human history, that exists (just) on Facebook" (Istinomer, 11.3.2020). Similarly, Serbian Minister of Health, Zoran Lončar, a few days later said that more people have complications and die from seasonal flu than from COVID-19 (RTV, 1.3.2020). Finally, the President Vučić himself stated, "where you put alcohol, the coronavirus does not grow", so he "found an excuse to drink a few more cups a day" (Seebiz, 26.2.2020). So, in addition to diminishing the importance of the virus, he tried to present himself as one of the regular "rakija drinking" people.

With the first cases of COVID-19 in Serbia, the narratives of politicians changed dramatically. Just a few weeks after previously mentioned statements, the President Vučić claimed that no one ever said that COVID-19 is "the most ridiculous virus" (Istinomer, 11.3.2020) and soon after that a state of exception was introduced (BBC, 15.3.2020). Instead of suggesting *rakija* as prevention of infection, Vučić started to frighten people by saying that "all cemeteries in Belgrade will not be big enough" if people don't obey newly introduced rules (Mondo 25.3.2020). More and more the syntagm "war against virus" was present in the media and, if the virus was portrayed as "evil" or "other", politicians in power tried to present themselves as fighters for the people, making perfect dynamics for creation of populist narratives. In that vein Vučić tried to present himself as saviour who is fighting for buying respirators, saying that all countries are trying to buy them and that it is difficult for a small country such as Serbia to get them, but that "in almost impossible conditions, we are fighting to change something in the country" (Blic 7.4.2020). Once some of the respirators were bought, posing as saviour and in the presence of the media, Vučić delivered respirators to hospitals.



"The image of the President of the Republic in person delivering respirators across Serbia symbolized in its own way the functioning of democratic and the rule of law institutions during the state of exception. The institutions themselves were on respirators controlled by one man" (Marinković, 18.05.2020). Even more interestingly, the parliamentary and local elections, scheduled for 26 April were postponed for 21 June. But since the country was under the state of exception, Vučić completely kidnapped the campaigning process and received undivided media attention. Since his Serbian Progressive Party does not really have any opposition, not only did it win, but it also won two thirds of the votes in the Assembly, a potential danger for further drifting into authoritarianism.

Similarly, once vaccines were created, politicians in power tried to present themselves as saviours of people who are fighting to buy vaccines. If war against "evil", i.e. virus, was a good opportunity for politicians in power (and in control of media) to present themselves as saviours of regular people, they surely made most of it by, in a way, suggesting that there is an "alliance" between the virus and other "evils" (opposition political parties). In that vein, the Minister of Health Lončar said that opposition is "cheering for the corona, to have as many people infected and dead as possible" (Slobodni Mediji, 8.4.2021). Additionally, pro-government tabloids tried to present some parts of opposition as anti vaxxers, when these opposition politicians expressed scepticism toward vaccines that are not approved by European institutions (Kurir 25.1.2021).

While politicians in power tried to present themselves as saviours, some other political actors used COVID-19 in different, nonetheless populist, manner. This is mostly the case with some right wing movements and parties that were talking about the virus and vaccination as part of a conspiracy of the western elites. Though big opposition parties manifested some scientism toward vaccines, that are not tested enough or certified by relevant organizations, and often insisted on the right of people to choose for themselves if they want to be vaccinated (Kurir 25.1.2021; N1 13.5.2021; Danas 29.09.2021), real conspiracy theories were usually used by smaller organizations/movements. These movements usually combined anti vaxxer attitudes and some form of anti globalism, creating narratives about western/globalist enemies of regular people. Good example of this narrative may be seen in the speeches of doctor Jovana Stojković (the President of movement "I live for Serbia", part of a broader "Sovereignist" coalition) who is presenting globalists, i.e. "semi-secret groups that are now public ... such as G7" as main actors that made the decision to vaccinate everyone (Balkan info 8.7.2021). Though such narratives are present, these political actors still remain relatively marginalized, and it seems that the main profiteers of the COVID-19 related populism are the parties in power.

3. Comparative analysis: COVID-19 and populism in seven CEE countries, patterns of similarities and differences

In all the countries object of this study, we have had populists in power at least at the beginning of the pandemic. In the case of Croatia, Poland, and Serbia, the populists are firmly in power, with due differences. While HDZ in Croatia is still moderate, Poland under PiS is an illiberal democracy, and SPS is dragging Serbia into authoritarianism. In Montenegro, the right-wing populist party DPS was in power for three decades until it lost the August 2020 elections. On the other hand, in the Czech Republic, the technocratic-populist ANO was a dominant party in a two-party coalition, while in Estonia, the conservative populist EKRE party was also in a government coalition but not dominant. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, due to its political context, the parties are nationalistic populists, where the divisions in B&H go along ethnic lines.

When it comes to the opposition, in Poland and Serbia, the populists are firmly in power, so the opposition is weak (Poland) or almost inexistent (Serbia) and mostly liberal, with some marginal right-wing extremists groups (eg. Serbian *Dveri*). In Croatia, with HDZ being moderate and in general, portraying itself as a conservative pro-European political party, the former coalition partner *Most* is a conservative-right populist force, together with some other minor far-right nationalist populist parties that flirt with neofascism. Similarly, in the Czech Republic, with a technocratic ANO in power, far-right SPD was the main disturbing force in times of pandemic. In Estonia, the populist party that was earlier in power (EKRE) and even undermined its coalition partner's efforts in curbing the pandemic became the main opposition and showed its true colours after going into opposition. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the opposition usually goes along ethnic lines and in the relations between the two entities so we can say that the Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik opposed the federal government for his own political agenda (see further in the text). In Montenegro, the opposition goes along the lines of pro-EU or pro-Serbia/Russia positions

Initially, some leaders (Serbia, Estonia) downplayed the coronavirus, and, typically for populist politicians, offered simple solutions to complex issues, whether it was to eat goose fat (Estonia) or drink *rakija* brandy (Serbia). The countries



soon realized the severity of the situation (in Serbia, the President even denied the earlier statements), and in the first weeks, we can observe the governments engaging in crisis management. However, soon after, both the populists in government and those in opposition, started politicizing the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The populists firmly in government capitalized on the pandemic in different ways. In the case of Croatia, Poland, and Serbia, they organized elections in the early stage of the pandemic and managed to reaffirm themselves in power, which they succeeded. Poland's PiS also instrumentalized the pandemic to impose stricter civil rights laws and curb protests organized by the liberal opposition, while in Serbia the state of exception disfavoured the opposition in the wake of elections. Serbian leader Aleksandar Vučić not only capitalized and instrumentalized elections but also completely capitalized on the procurement of vaccines not only to his own citizens, but also from the neighbouring countries, by engaging in regional "vaccine-diplomacy". His flexible tactics consisting in getting Russian and Chinese vaccines openly defied the European Union, but also pointed to the limitations in terms of vaccine procurement of other CEE countries that are EU Member States.

In the Czech Republic, ANO also tried to capitalize on the pandemic at the elections but failed. In Montenegro, a long-time dominant party DPS lost the elections in August 2020. In Estonia, while in government, ERTE managed to push for a stricter Aliens Act (while still undermining their own coalition partners regarding the pandemic management). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the leader of Republika Srpska (RS) Milorad Dodik tried to capitalize on the pandemic (mis)management of the federal authorities by pushing for his traditional agenda – the secession of RS from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Different rhetorical frames were also observed. A first frame worth noting goes on the line of "victory" and even used war vocabulary, especially in Croatia, even with the main coordinating body for the pandemic called "Headquarters" and the government mentioning "victory over virus". Both the Serbian and Polish governments "fought against the virus and the pandemic". In the same line, we have the capitalization frame of being "the best", noted in the Czech Republic ("best in Covid"), B-H Milorad Dodik pointed out that RS did better than the federal authorities, and Poland also bragged about the results ("no one died on the streets" – like in Italy). In the case of Poland, PiS also used the EU-level pandemic management to reinforce its Eurosceptic discourse.

When it comes to the rhetoric of populists in opposition, we observe right-wing populists using the pandemic for its traditional anti-immigration discourse in the sense of closing the borders for the sake of curbing the spread of the virus. This is mostly seen in the countries of Central Europe (Czech Republic, Estonia), not that much in the Western Balkans, traditionally not anti-immigrant (more anti- neighbouring countries and ethnicities).

An interesting phenomenon occurred with the protests (against vaccination and mask-wearing). The populists in opposition posed as liberals and managed to link anti-vaxxer and anti-lockdown protests with the defence of individual rights and liberties against state oppression. In a similar line of posing as liberals, Croatian populists used regular legal tools of gathering signatures for a referendum to gain legitimacy of their claims. In the classical line of "us" vs. "them" rhetoric, meaning us, the liberals, and them, the repressive government, an old spook of communism was recalled, talking about communist-digital totalitarianism in Croatia or the "new police state" in Estonia. Inevitably, anti-waxxer frame goes hand in hand with the denial frame and, more to the extreme, with conspiracy theories, but marginalized and extremist groups only showed these.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this working paper was to analyse how populists, who traditionally use crisis and fear as their mobilization tool, reacted in the context of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic countries. Thus, we analysed their strategies, different rhetoric frames (especially when in power), and their reactions to governmental policies when in opposition, including restrictions and emergency measures.

By taking into account whether the populists are in government (single-party or coalition) or opposition, as well as the different phases of the COVID-19 crisis management, we could detect similar patterns of behaviour in seven CEE countries, both EU and non-EU Member States, but all belonging to the post-communist space.

In this context, we can conclude that the results have shown similar patterns as in the rest of Europe. After the initial shock, populists, both in power and in opposition, soon politicized and capitalized on the crisis caused by the pandemic



either to further reaffirm themselves in power or to pursue their traditional anti-immigration or Eurosceptic agenda. As previously noticed in earlier research, populists are flexible and find a fertile ground to instrumentalize situations for their benefit and gain popular support.

Contrary to the findings the volume on thirty-one European countries (EU+ Norway, Iceland, and Switzerland) that “the pandemic’s long-term effects on democracy in Europe seem insignificant, and the viability of Western models of governance has furthermore been boosted by a rally around liberal democracy”, argued by Lynggaard, Jensen, & Kluth (2023, 449), and in line with Bieber (2021), the result of this study showed that in weak and illiberal democracies, the populist leaders used the pandemic to strengthen their power and further pursue their non-democratic agenda, or drag the country further into competitive authoritarianism.

Finally, the invisibility cloak of the "populist" label attributed to many far-right and neo-fascist parties has gained another layer of the "defenders of liberal democratic values", a potentially dangerous phenomenon.



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