



Populism and the Pandemic

A Collaborative Report

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Populism and the pandemic: introduction and preliminary findings

With the COVID-19 pandemic dominating the public sphere in recent months and no aspect of social and political life left unaffected, it seems almost natural that this unprecedented public health crisis would soon be reflected on discussions around the other buzzword of our time: *populism*. From the very early days of the outbreak, several pundits and commentators were quick to conclude that the new coronavirus would ‘kill’ populist politics as this new conjuncture was allegedly bringing – once more – to prominence the figure of the impartial ‘expert,’ the supposed opposite of the ‘populist demagogue.’¹ Referring to cases like Donald Trump or Boris Johnson as characteristic examples, analysts have commented on how ‘populists’ were reluctant to face reality and that when they did, they only managed to do too little too late, exposing to the public the supposed ‘hollowness’ of their populist promise.² Despite the early and sober cautioning of Cas Mudde, who rightly noted that populism, as a highly diverse and heterogeneous phenomenon, would ‘not have one, unitary response to the pandemic,’³ and thus its fortunes could not be predicted safely across the board, analyses and commentary that made gross generalizations kept proliferating.⁴

Indeed, if one looks at countries with populists in power, from Argentina to Hungary and from the Philippines to Italy, they will soon realise that there is no common reaction to the pandemic nor any coherent pattern regarding the success and/or approval ratings of such governments. Some are doing quite well with fighting the pandemic and this is reflected in high approval rates (e.g. Argentina, Fernández), while others seem to have followed catastrophic and erratic policies, leading not only to terrifying death tolls, but also to a serious decrease in their support in the relevant opinion polls (e.g. US, Trump). If we extend the scope to include countries with significant populist forces in opposition, the picture becomes even more diverse and complex. In Italy, for example, Matteo Salvini has tried to connect the COVID-19 virus to immigrants in a bid to further fuel xenophobic sentiments in the population, while in Greece, SYRIZA has emphasised the need for generous social programmes to protect the most vulnerable, including migrants and refugees. Interestingly, the ones that initially attempted to link the pandemic to incoming migrants in Greece were actually politicians from the supposedly moderate centre-right New Democracy party, currently in government.⁵

¹ Otto English, ‘Coronavirus’ next victim: Populism,’ *Politico*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-next-victim-populism-uk-boris-johnson-us-donald-trump>; Walter Russell Mead, ‘Will Coronavirus Kill Populism?’ *Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/will-coronavirus-kill-populism-11585004780>; Robert Patman, ‘Is Covid-19 turning the tide against national populism?’ *Newsroom*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2020/04/15/1128345/is-covid-19-turning-the-tide-against-national-populism> (all accessed 1 May 2020).

² Peter Bolton, ‘Coronavirus is making the fight against far-right populists even more urgent,’ *the Canary*, 24 April 2020, <https://www.thecanary.co/global/world-analysis/2020/04/24/coronavirus-is-making-the-fight-against-far-right-populists-even-more-urgent>; Paul Niland, ‘The Crisis of Incompetence,’ *Byline Times*, 19 March 2020, <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/03/19/the-coronavirus-crisis-the-crisis-of-incompetence>; Andrea Kendall-Taylor & Carisa Nietzsche, ‘The Coronavirus Is Exposing Populists’ Hollow Politics,’ *Foreign Policy*, 16 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/coronavirus-populism-extremism-europe-league-italy> (all accessed 1 May 2020).

³ Cas Mudde, ‘Will the coronavirus “kill populism”? Don’t count on it,’ *The Guardian*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-populism-trump-politics-response> (accessed 1 May 2020).

⁴ David Leonhardt and Lauren Leatherby, ‘Where the Virus Is Growing Most: Countries With “Illiberal Populist” Leaders,’ *The New York Times*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/briefing/coronavirus-populist-leaders.html> (accessed 3 June 2020).

⁵ Ef.Syn., ‘The government is circulating new dangerous scenarios about refugees in the Aegean,’ *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 13 April 2020, https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/dikaiomata/239031_nea-epikindyna-senaria-diakinei-i-kybernisi-gia-prosfyges-sto-aigaio (accessed 3 June 2020) [in Greek].

Aims, scope and theoretical background of the report

Despite these contradictions and the fact that public debate around the COVID-19 crisis and populism has so far developed with often little or no touch with the crucial lessons that scholarly research has accumulated over the past decades, we still consider this a crucial discussion, the importance of which goes beyond the hype of merely putting the words ‘pandemic,’ ‘crisis’ and ‘populism’ in the same sentence. Indeed, the relation between ‘crisis’ and populism has been one of the most important themes in the relevant literature since its very early stage back in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ Not only ‘crises’ are considered particularly opportune environments for the rise of populist actors, as they usually designate moments that exaggerate socio-political divisions, creating new rifts and potentially increasing the distance between ‘people’ and ‘elites,’ government and the governed. In addition, populists themselves, in most cases, invoke and perform some notion of ‘crisis’ in their own discourse as they address popular grievances and frustrations in a bid to unify and mobilise broader social strata against unresponsive political ‘elites’ that are rendered responsible for their troubles.⁷ Finally, such populist crisis narratives are never alone in the public sphere; they usually antagonise other, anti-populist crisis narratives, thus constituting a comprehensive analysis encompassing both camps a priority if one is to understand the socio-political stakes in a given conjuncture.⁸

The fact that we are currently facing what, with no exaggeration, might be the worst global crisis of a generation⁹ makes discussion and critical reflection around the role and prospects of populism extremely important, if not urgent. This is exactly what this report is aiming to provide: a concise yet rigorous global comparative mapping of populist politics in the context of the ongoing pandemic. This will not only shed further light on the specificities, the potentials and limitations of the phenomenon, but we also expect it to highlight its irreducible heterogeneity and diversity as a way of doing politics. As this is a report produced ‘in the heat of the moment,’ while we are all still part of an unfolding crisis, we realise that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to take a step back and assess the available data in the depth and scope that would allow for the reflexivity necessary to produce viable generalisations. This would be the aim of a future project. However, the foundation for this critical endeavour is laid out here and we are hoping that this report will act as a common point of reference to facilitate and inform relevant research, media reports and commentary as well as discussions among stake holders.

For the needs of this report, we do not consider it necessary to enter into complex theoretical discussions about the nature of populism, its normative status and the best way to categorise it as a phenomenon. It makes little sense here to discuss whether populism is better understood as a type of discourse, style, ideology or strategy. We see merit on all those approaches, and we chose to build here on the accumulated knowledge in the field. In this context, we prefer to adopt a ‘minimal’ understanding of populism for this report, based on an emerging consensus that sees it as *a kind of politics that champions ‘the people’ and their sovereignty while antagonising unresponsive political ‘elites’ or a multifaceted ‘establishment.’*¹⁰ By adopting such a ‘minimal’ understanding, we should stress at the outset that we do not

⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, 1977, London: NLB.

⁷ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, 2016, California: Stanford University Press; Yannis Stavrakakis et al., ‘Populism, anti-populism and crisis,’ *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17(1), 2018, pp. 4–27.

⁸ Stavrakakis et al., ‘Populism, anti-populism and crisis.’

⁹ Josh Zumbrun, ‘World Bank Sees 5.2% Decline in Global Economy in 2020 From Coronavirus,’ *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/world-bank-sees-5-2-decline-in-global-economy-in-2020-from-coronavirus-11591631209> (accessed 9 June 2020).

¹⁰ Benjamin Moffitt, *Populism*, Cambridge: Polity; Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Simon Tormey, *Populism: A Beginner’s Guide*, London: Oneworld Publications.

consider populism as a threat, nor, of course, as a panacea for reviving democracy. We rather see it as a form of politics that has the potential to ‘democratise democracy,’ when enhancing inclusion and expanding the scope of representation, but also to reverse democratisation when it adopts an exclusionary understanding of the popular community and develops authoritarian tendencies. In other words, populism indicates:

a dichotomic discourse in which ‘the people’ are juxtaposed to ‘the elite’ along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which ‘the people’ is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to ‘the elite’ conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics thus claim to represent ‘the people’ against an ‘elite’ that frustrates their legitimate demands, and present these demands as expressions of the will of ‘the people.’¹¹

Given the ambiguous potential of populism and the radically volatile times we have now entered, that open up new possibilities and re-ignite hegemonic struggle at a global level, we consider it crucial to develop such a comparative mapping and assess different responses to the pandemic in order to intervene in a constructive and meaningful way in the ongoing debate. This will not only give us crucial insight into the ever-malleable nature of populism, but it can act as a springboard for reflection on the prospects for the ‘next day,’ especially in relation to democracy and representation, emergency politics, the role of the state and party competition, to mention just a few relevant areas of inquiry.

The key questions that we posed to contributors in this report when looking at different countries across the world can be summarised as follows:

- How have populist actors reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic when in government or opposition?
- Has their ideological position on the left or right, or indeed somewhere in-between, played a role to that reaction?
- How have the rates of approval and vote intentions for populist actors developed during that period?
- More generally, how have discussions around ‘populism’ and the role of ‘experts’ and ‘science’ developed in each country during this time? Have they reproduced standard anti-populist stereotypes?

In this context, we are not merely interested in assessing the role, behaviour and prospects of various populist actors in the context of the pandemic, but we also aim to discuss and problematise the very use of the label and signifier ‘populism’ itself, as the COVID-19 crisis seems to be amplifying certain trends related to the ‘populist hype’ and the mainstreaming or euphemisation of the far right and authoritarianism that have already been registered in the relevant literature.¹²

In order to shed light on these crucial aspects of the discussion and set the agenda for future comparative research as well as conceptual enquiry, we approached a series of well-established scholars, along with several dynamic younger researchers specialising on both populism and the study of politics in different countries and regions. This gave us a sum of

¹¹ Benjamin De Cleen & Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,’ *Javnost* 24(4), 2017, p. 310

¹² Jason Glynos & Aurelien Mondon, ‘The political logic of populist hype: The case of right-wing populism’s “meteoric rise” and its relation to the status quo,’ *POPULISMUS Working Papers* No. 4, December 2016, <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/WP4-glynos-mondon-final-upload.pdf>; Katy Brown, Aaron Winter & Aurelien Mondon, ‘“Populist” can be a weasel word for “racist,” and that’s dangerous,’ *openDemocracy*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/populist-can-be-a-weasel-word-for-racist-and-thats-dangerous/> (both accessed 9 June 2020).

sixteen (16) case studies of countries and political actors from across the world, making the scope of our report truly global, extending from Australia to Sweden and from the Philippines to Brazil and the United States. Our aim when choosing cases was to cover the countries that seem to be more prominent in public discussions across international media, but also others that, despite remaining ‘under the radar,’ are still quite important for anyone wanting to understand populist politics in all its diversity and scope. We are thus looking at countries with populists in power and populists in opposition, countries with tighter lockdowns and countries with more relaxed social distancing measures, countries with important populist actors on the right and others with important populist actors of the left, countries in which social unrest and frustration with government is already at a critical level and countries in which governments still enjoy the benefits of a rally ‘round the flag effect.

Some preliminary comparative findings

The picture with which we end up once we take into account the findings and insights from this diverse, yet representative sample of case studies looks more like a mosaic and less like a clear pattern. Indeed, populist responses to the pandemic have been as heterogeneous and as context-dependent as the ideological profile and programmatic orientation of populist actors themselves (something also applying to various types of anti-populists internationally). However, it is possible to highlight some key comparative findings as well as some indicative markers for future research:

1. **No, COVID-19 is not ‘killing’ populists.** One might be tempted to assume that populist leaders like Donald Trump in the US or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil will have a bumpy ride ahead due to their catastrophic management of the pandemic so far and the staggering death tolls in the two countries currently among the worst hit globally. The former is now also facing an unprecedented uprising against racism and police brutality that was probably amplified by ‘the dramatic immiseration caused by the economic shutdown during the pandemic,’ as Joseph Lowndes notes. However, there are other populist leaders like the Peronist Alberto Fernández in Argentina, currently in power, who has managed to successfully contain the spread of the virus up to now, while implementing a policy encapsulated in the notion of a social and ‘caring’ State, as described by Paula Biglieri, leading to high approval ratings for his government. Finally, there are populist actors in opposition who seem very likely to benefit from the erosion of trust to governments that have been seen as handling the pandemic in inadequate or problematic ways, as the cases of France and Italy exemplify.
2. **No, not all populists have responded in the same way to the COVID-19 pandemic.** As discussed in the beginning of this introduction, several pundits and commentators have assumed from early on in the pandemic that ‘populists’ would react as a more or less unified bloc, discrediting ‘experts’ and science, attacking government when they are in opposition and aiming to score points against their political opponents, employing demagogic and opportunistic strategies. Our report shows that reality reveals a much more complex picture with populist actors defending different policies and taking different positions vis-à-vis the pandemic, from criticising certain aspects of lockdown as ‘authoritarian’ (e.g. AfD in Germany, Vox in Spain) to castigating the government for being too relaxed (e.g. PVV in the Netherlands), and from leaders of federal states like Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil, that are vehemently anti-lockdown in order to ‘keep the economy running,’ even clashing with state governors that choose to implement lockdown measures, to others like Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines who has literally asked the police to shoot down quarantine violators. Similarly, not all populist actors in opposition have opposed governments for their key decisions at the peak of the crisis. In Greece, for example, the populist left SYRIZA supported the centre-right government’s decision

to enter a tight lockdown, while some of its key officials have openly praised the epidemiologist put in charge of emergency planning.

3. **Ideology is a crucial factor that should not be overlooked.** As stressed in numerous studies that differentiate right- from left-wing populists or populist socialists from neoliberal populists,¹³ ideology is a key factor when assessing the responses of populist actors to certain challenges. In other words, populism in itself does not have the ideological/programmatic ‘thickness’ necessary to provide a concrete policy framework encompassing most aspects of the economy and society, hence it is combined with various ideological traditions and platforms, producing sub-types and ‘hybrids’ at various points of the political spectrum. In this sense, it should not come as a surprise that populists on the left (e.g. Unidas Podemos in Spain, Fernández in Argentina) have prioritised social cohesion and the support/protection of the most vulnerable social strata while populists on the right have tended to prioritise the economy, even if that seems to lead to unemployment and social devastation (e.g. Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil). Similarly, populist actors on the left have been vocal about protecting ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees during the pandemic (e.g. SYRIZA in Greece), while populist actors on the far right have used the threat of the pandemic to further scapegoat migrants and refugees as potential carriers and transmitters of the disease (e.g. Salvini and the League in Italy, VB in Belgium), which further demonstrates the importance of differentiating between inclusionary and exclusionary types of populism.
4. **In many cases, understanding the policies of certain actors through the lens of ‘populism’ can be both inaccurate and misleading.** The study of certain cases that keep popping up in relevant analyses as examples of populism in the pandemic reveals that in fact ‘populism’ as an analytical category explains very little of their policies and general stance throughout this period. As exemplified by the cases of Turkey and Hungary, it is authoritarianism along with nationalism/nativism that more accurately captures the political experience of crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Fidesz in Hungary castigating and effectively delegitimising parties in opposition, including the far right Jobbik, as foreign-like and ‘anti-national,’ while holding emergency powers under the so-called ‘Enabling Act.’ Similarly, nationalism and nativism are at least as important as populism when trying to understand framings of the pandemic by politicians like Trump in the US or Pauline Hanson in Australia, who have both repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus,’ fuelling racism and anti-immigrant (especially Sinophobic) sentiments in their countries. Establishing the centrality of authoritarian and thus anti-democratic ideological framings and policies along with nationalist and nativist discourses is crucial when trying to make sense of the politics of certain actors during the pandemic. To put it in other words, the overuse and abuse of the ‘populist’ label and the vague notion of a ‘populist threat to democracy,’ often adopted in typical anti-populist discourses, seems to be diverting attention from other imminent dangers to democracy, most importantly: nativism, nationalism, authoritarianism, racism.
5. **‘Experts’ are not neutral actors that will save liberal democracy from ‘bad populists.’** Despite the focus and hopes put on the figure of the impartial ‘expert’ that by virtue of their expertise and privileged access to knowledge will debunk the hollowness of populist politics and restore faith to liberal democracy, the pandemic

¹³ Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,’ *Government & Opposition*, 48(2), 2013, pp. 147-174; Luke March, ‘Left and right populism compared: The British case,’ *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(2), 2017, pp. 282-303; Kurt Weyland, ‘Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe,’ *Comparative Politics*, 31(4), 1999, pp. 379-401.

has rather revealed the deeply political character of scientific input in critical junctures as well as the very political agency of experts themselves. Take for example the rather contrasting cases of Anders Tegnell in Sweden and Professor Sotiris Tsiodras in Greece, both epidemiologists that were put at key positions for shaping emergency policies during the pandemic in their countries, gaining unprecedented visibility and prominence in the public sphere. The former is well known for his heterodox views and is regarded as co-responsible for Sweden's more relaxed approach and reluctance to enter a full lockdown, as most other European and Western countries have done. The latter has been praised for his role in imposing a rather early and quite tight lockdown in Greece. Tsiodras has been largely regarded as being in tune with World Health Organisation (WHO) suggestions and the international expert community, while he is described as being globally acclaimed for his contribution to containing the virus in Greece. Tegnell, on the other hand, has become the symbol of Swedish exceptionality in a country where a nationalist framing of the current crisis, 'with Sweden portrayed as more rational and less prone to panic and "alarmism" than the rest of the world,' as Liv Sunnercrantz notes, has become the mainstream narrative, embraced by most parties and the media. If one includes the case of the UK here and the role of certain experts in the management of the crisis, from Professor Neil Ferguson and his group at Imperial College London to the once called 'nudge unit,' things become further complicated. It becomes apparent then that exactly as populists do not form a coherent bloc in the pandemic, experts too cannot be treated as a unified front,¹⁴ thus the dichotomy '*experts vs populists*' is exposed as fundamentally flawed once more in the context of the ongoing crisis. Moving beyond that to the actual interaction between populists and experts in recent months, we observe that the majority of populist actors in government have actually relied on expert knowledge as well and aimed to ground their decision-making on expert consultation and scientific input. Those that attacked heterodox experts, seem to have done so driven more by their authoritarian tendencies and an intolerance to critique (e.g. Erdoğan in Turkey), not in order to defend 'the people' against a supposed 'expert elite,' which again brings us to the previous point about neglecting or downplaying certain threats to democracy in the current conjuncture.

What's next for democracy and populism in a post-COVID-19 world?

So, if this is how things seem to be morphing so far, what can one expect for democracy and populism in a post-COVID-19 world, assuming that the optimist scenario prevails and we are currently on a steady path towards an exodus from COVID-19 lockdown and a return to some kind of social interaction that feels closer to 'normal'? We are afraid that the underwhelming response here is that there is no clear answer, no easy prediction that could apply broadly. Given that populism is a complex and diverse phenomenon deeply embedded in representative democracy, a lot will depend in the coming months and years on how the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic are handled by governments, how the economic burdens of the long road to recovery are allocated and how certain stimuli and aid packages are distributed. If a sense of inequality and socio-economic injustice is cultivated in certain countries, if citizens feel that decision making during the pandemic is lacking in accountability, transparency and democratic legitimation, then one should expect that this would create fertile ground for various populist actors to represent and unify social grievances against the political elites held responsible – if, of course, such *credible* actors do emerge. And this might actually be a good thing for democracy, as long as such populist projects are articulated with an inclusive and pluralistic vision of society. On the other hand, no one can guarantee that accumulated frustrations will not be channelled through exclusionary discourses that scapegoat immigrants or even target the more vulnerable members of society,

¹⁴ Jan Zielonka, 'Who Should Be in Charge: Doctors or Politicians?' *openDemocracy*, 21 April 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/who-should-be-charge-doctors-or-politicians> (accessed 9 June 2020).

flirting with a dystopian social Darwinism ('survival of the strongest/younger for the sake of the economy'). This is why, drawing on the comparative findings of this report, we believe that attention in the ongoing debate should shift from the vague and often misrepresented 'threat' of populism, to more imminent and tangible dangers, such as authoritarianism, nativism, nationalism, racism and indeed the risk of the sedimentation of certain emergency policies curtailing fundamental freedoms and rights currently enacted by both populist and non-populist actors, by both radical and moderate governments across the world in the fight against COVID-19.

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Paula Biglieri

I. Argentina

On December 10th, 2019, Alberto Fernández (AF) came into office in Argentina. A month and a half earlier he had won the presidential elections, beating in the first round the anti-populist (neoliberal/conservative) coalition led by Mauricio Macri (MM), who was attempting to be re-elected. AF's candidacy was decided by former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), who until that moment was leading the polls, but without being able to amalgamate the whole variety of popular political forces and therefore avoiding a candidature. Once CFK stepped aside to run as vice-president, a re-articulation of the popular field took place allowing a new version of left populism to take power once again in the country.

The first policies implemented by AF (let us remember that in Argentina the executive involves a one-person power) made clear that his government would operate within the populist (Peronist) tradition of inclusion by expanding the local market and the scope of rights, creating institutions to reinforce equality as the fundamental aspect of social justice. For instance, he decided to re-categorize the areas of Health,¹⁵ Labour, Science and Technology, and Culture back to Ministries (MM had degraded them from Ministries to Secretaries following an austerity programme) and also created the Ministry of Housing and Territory Development (to mainly but not exclusively ameliorate the precarity of slums) and the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity (to attend to the demands of the powerful feminist movement; in fact, later on he announced that he would also send a bill to the National Congress to legalise abortion).¹⁶ Among other socio-economic measures taken, his government launched a programme to guarantee the right to feeding, 'frozen' gas and electricity rates, highway tolls and public transport fares, raised the lower salaries of both the private and the public sectors, raised the lowest pensions, and also launched a programme of tax deferral to facilitate small and medium sized enterprises to face the problematic economic situation, etc. He also announced a restructuring process concerning foreign debt to face the new crisis (MM had the astonishing record of having 'reprofiled' – this is the exact word that his Minister of Finance used – the foreign debt incurred during his own government and getting the IMF's biggest ever bailout of \$56 billion).¹⁷

This was the general context in which the populist government of AF found itself when it was forced to deal with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 20th AF declared an obligatory and strict lockdown for the entire population when Argentina still faced merely 128 cases of infection and three deaths.¹⁸ This 'early' lockdown was decided on the basis of the advice given by a 'committee of experts' created *ad hoc* for the pandemic (composed of epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists¹⁹) and the political agreement reached with

¹⁵ Three months later with the outbreak of the pandemic, the decision to reinstate the Ministry of Health turned to be an important factor of political benefit for the government.

¹⁶ Uki Goñi, 'Argentina set to become first major Latin American country to legalise abortion,' *The Guardian*, 1 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/01/argentina-set-to-become-first-major-latin-american-country-to-legalise-abortion> (accessed 13 May, 2020).

¹⁷ The Minister of Finance dealing with the restructuration of the foreign debt is Martín Guzmán, a disciple of Joseph Stiglitz with whom he used to work until he accepted to be part of AF's government. As a matter of fact, Guzmán has recently received the explicit support of a group of world's leading economists headed by Stiglitz and followed by Thomas Piketty and Jeffrey Sachs among others. See LPO, 'Nobel Prize winning economists Stiglitz, Phelps endorsed Argentina's debt repayment proposal,' *La Política On Line*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/126409-nobel-prize-winning-economists-stiglitz-phelps-endorsed-argentinas-debt-repayment-proposal/> (accessed 13 May, 2020).

¹⁸ The lockdown is still on (at the moment, May 2020, two months so far). However, it has been lighted in different regions of the country free of COVID-19, not in Buenos Aires city and surrounding where the 86% of the cases have been detected.

¹⁹ It is worth to mention that on March 1st, in the inaugural speech delivered by AF to open the year of ordinary sessions of the National Congress, when he was highlighting the reinstatement of the Ministry of Science and

the governors of different provinces. If we observe the scene where AF announced the extension of the lockdown on May 8th, we encounter, on the one hand, two scientists of the committee sitting behind him and, on the other hand, two politicians sitting by his side (on his left the governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, the Peronist Axel Kicillof and, on his right, the governor of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, who belongs to the moderate sector of the anti-populist coalition that took MM to the presidency in 2015). These have been the two axes that functioned as a source of legitimation of the sanitary measures: the political coordination with the different governors of provinces and cities – including those political opponents who have executive positions – and the ‘committee of expert scientists’.²⁰ Polls have shown that they have worked quite well as they bring out very favourable numbers for AF and the way in which he is dealing with the pandemic. The rates of approval for the president are high, as well as, the rates of approval of the ‘scientists.’ The same can be said regarding the decision of declaring a strict lockdown.²¹

If we look at the general political orientation of the national government, we can affirm that indeed it has to do with the way in which AF is dealing with the pandemic. The political argument in face of the pandemic has been to counterpose the importance of a ‘caring State’ determined to intervene in different areas vs. the neoliberal logic of individual sacrifice for the sake of the market’s health. In a way, the pandemic has reinforced the traditional importance given by Peronism to the State to tip the scales in favour of the dispossessed. The best example is the implementation of the Family Emergency Income, that is, an exceptional basic income for all those who cannot secure one due to the lockdown.

Last but not least, although there has been a political agreement – on how to deal with the pandemic – with governors who belong to the anti-populist political landscape of MM, the antagonistic division of the social space into two positions of enunciation, two opposing camps (*us*, the people vs. *them*, the oligarchy, the rich, etc.), has not come to an end. On the one hand, along with different leaders and political activists of the populist field, AF has insisted on the importance of a social and ‘caring’ oriented State and has harshly criticized MM’s former government, blaming it for the cuts in the national health system, for the cuts in the Malbrán Institute (the national institute for research in microbiology, which has been a key institution to face the pandemic), for creating a new debt crisis, high inflation and unemployment, etc. On the other hand, the response from the hard wing of the anti-populist coalition has been marked by accusations against the government that they have usually associated with populism; these have centred on: corruption (the government is paying high prices for the food distributed to the most vulnerable popular sectors), authoritarianism (the lockdown indicates an excessive disrespect for basic individual rights and an excuse to control production and the markets or, at least, to sidestep the private sector), etc. For instance, on 30 April, a well spread fake news warning about the massive release of prisoners unleashed an important pan-banging in major cities. All in all, the populist-antipopulist division continues to be the main political mark of Argentinean politics and has remained prominent during the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this framework, the policies implemented by the newly appointed President AF seem to directly contradict most of the stereotypes circulating internationally on the way populism has dealt with the crisis and may also indicate the huge distance between left and right-wing populism.

Technology, the president stated that ‘his government would be a government of scientists, and not of CEOs’ (antagonizing with former government of MM).

²⁰ Cecilia Camarano, ‘La cuarentena sigue hasta el 24 de mayo con una reapertura progresiva en todo el país menos en el AMBA,’ *Ámbito Financiero*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.ambito.com/politica/cuarentena/la-sigue-el-24-mayo-una-reapertura-progresiva-todo-el-pais-menos-el-amba-n5101093> (accessed 13 May, 2020).

²¹ ‘La encuesta que sigue Alberto Fernández,’ *Página Política*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.paginapolitica.com/actualidad/la-encuesta-que-sigue-alberto-fernaacutendez.htm> (accessed 18 May, 2020).

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Kurt Sengul

2. Australia

With the need for global cooperation, technocratic driven responses, the prominent role of scientific expert advice, large-scale expansion of government welfare programs, and the central role of international organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), all in response to the COVID-19 crisis, it may have been safe to assume that this would be a conjuncture ripe for populist politics. Indeed, anti-elite and anti-expert sentiments that are frequently associated (often pejoratively) with populism have played a certain role in Australia's most prominent *populist radical right* (PRR) party. Yet One Nation's and its leader, Pauline Hanson's response to COVID-19, has largely been characterised by *nativism*. Nativism, which Cas Mudde notes, combines *nationalism* with *xenophobia* has been central to One Nation's response to COVID-19.²²

One Nation's response to the crisis can largely be described as exploitation. Through their political communication and policy announcements, One Nation have looked to aggressively pursue a range of exclusionary nativist policies in reaction to the crisis. This should not come as a surprise. It is widely accepted that the populist radical right are adept at both exploiting and manufacturing crises for political purposes.²³ As Mudde rightly points out, the contemporary populist radical right has profited politically and electorally from the exploitation of the three most significant 21st century crises: The September 11 Terrorist Attacks, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the 2015 'refugee crisis.'²⁴ It is clear that One Nation viewed COVID-19 as an opportunity to legitimise many of their draconian and exclusionary policies. In this sense, the party's response to the crisis has followed a relatively predictable script.

In particular, Pauline Hanson has revived the Sinophobic rhetoric that was prominent during her first iteration as a parliamentarian in the late 1990s. Hanson has echoed Donald Trump's anti-Chinese language, almost exclusively referring to COVID-19 as the 'The Chinese Virus'. Her Sinophobic and racist rhetoric has undoubtedly been the strongest in Australian politics. While, at the same time, there have been numerous racist attacks targeting Chinese people in the country.²⁵

Hanson's rhetoric and the language of the PRR are consequential. The populist radical right have been increasingly mainstreamed and normalised in the 21st century, with their ideas gaining currency in mainstream circles. Despite their relatively modest electoral presence in Australia, parties like Hanson's One Nation are consistently given a disproportionately large media platform to voice their ideas.

One Nation clearly seek to exploit and fuel anti-Chinese sentiment to prosecute their longstanding nativist policies around immigration and foreign investment. Throughout the current crisis, One Nation have called for Australia to withdraw from its free trade agreement with China, have urged Australians to boycott products made in China, called for the immediate suspension of all Chinese foreign investment into Australia, suggested that backpackers and foreign workers should be denied welfare assistance, called for Australia to

²² Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 2019, Cambridge: Polity.

²³ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, 2016, California: Stanford University Press; Cas Mudde & Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2017, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Mudde, *The Far Right Today*.

²⁵ Jason Fang, Samuel Yang & Bang Xiao, 'Racist coronavirus graffiti sprayed on Chinese-Australian family's home in Melbourne,' ABC, 22 April 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-22/racist-coronavirus-graffiti-sprayed-on-family-home-in-melbourne/12170162> (accessed 1 June 2020).

cease all foreign aid, and floated the unfounded conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 virus was developed in a Chinese laboratory.

Hanson's populist rhetoric has been most frequently articulated through her attacks on international organisations like the World Health Organisation and United Nations (UN). Hanson has railed against 'corrupt globalist bureaucracies like the United Nations and World Health Organisation...[which] act as propaganda arm of the Chinese Government' and has called for Australia to 'leave the UN' and 'take back our sovereignty.' Further arguing that: 'It's time to call this out and make sure the United Nations and its left-wing allies can't use this tragedy to squeeze more money from struggling Australians.'

Yet, like many of her contemporaries on the populist radical right, One Nation's response to the COVID-19 crisis has been somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, Hanson and One Nation have sought to exploit and capitalise on the crisis to further their nativist agenda, while on the other, they have sought to downplay the severity of the virus and resisted social distancing and lockdown laws.

While largely supportive of the Australian (centre-right) government's economic response to COVID-19, Hanson and One Nation have been more resistant to 'ridiculous nanny state' social distancing laws and lockdown enforcement. For example, Hanson has stated that: 'No premier of any state is going to tell me whether I can go and see someone or not [...] I'm going to go and lie down in my paddock tomorrow, let's see if they will turn up and fine me because I'm out there in my paddock laying on the ground.'²⁶

One Nation NSW leader Mark Latham has echoed Donald Trump's language around 'the cure being worse than disease,' suggesting that the lockdowns have gone too far and that the economic costs of COVID-19 will be more dangerous than the virus itself. Latham's populism has predominately manifested through his critique of the role of expert advice in the handling of COVID-19, arguing that 'our country has been a dictatorship of the health bureaucrats.'

As nations start to reflect on a post-COVID-19 world, it's important to consider how the populist radical right have historically exploited crises and scapegoated marginalised communities.²⁷ As the economic implications of COVID-19 are further realised, with many countries forecasted to experience significant financial downturns, we may see populist responses of the left and right come to the fore. In the Australian context, One Nation have already started the process of scapegoating immigrants and poor people, promoting welfare chauvinism and hinting towards austerity measures. It's unclear how successful the PRR will be in profiting from the COVID-19 crisis, but the case of Australia shows that they will certainly endeavour to exploit it.

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²⁶ Patrick Lenton, 'Pauline Hanson has decided to lay in a paddock to protest social distancing rules,' *Junkee*, 2 April 2020, <https://junkee.com/pauline-hanson-social-distancing/249384> (accessed 1 June 2020).

²⁷ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*, 2015, London: Sage.

Benjamin De Cleen & Jana Goyvaerts

3. Belgium

Belgium has two parties for which populism plays a significant role: the radical right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB) and the radical left Partij van de Arbeid van België / Parti du Travail de Belgique (Party of Labour of Belgium, PVDA-PTB).²⁸ Both of these opposition parties have been vocal critics of the government's management of the COVID-19 crisis, with their arguments having a clear populist slant.

True to their reputation, during the pandemic both parties have shown themselves to be very active in opposition. In COVID-19 times, they have targeted mainly the federal Belgian government, which is the level at which decisions about the lockdown are made. The federal government is currently made up of the francophone liberal party MR, the Flemish liberals of Open Vld and the Flemish Christian-democratic CD&V. At the moment of the COVID-19 outbreak in Belgium, this government was a caretaker government left at the helm of the country after the May 2019 elections, with negotiations on the formation of a new government stalling. The caretaker government is far from having a majority in the parliament (38 out of 150 seats). To allow the executive to take exceptional measures, on the 15th of March, the government acquired support for its actions related to COVID-19 for a six-month period from all opposition parties, except for VB and PVDA-PTB, who were excluded from discussions.

Both parties have castigated the political elite as incompetent for its management of the pandemic. The procurement of face masks, in particular, has been the object of much criticism, as Belgium's acquisition and delivery of masks faced numerous delays and problems. PVDA-PTB and VB have presented themselves as the voice of the working people, demanding better protection measures as well as more financial support for workers and small entrepreneurs. They also procured protective masks and distributed these among (health)care workers.

PVDA-PTB's strategy is clearly marked by its socialism.²⁹ The party presents itself as the voice and protector of healthcare workers, particularly of the lesser paid categories. Like other parties, the party speaks of healthcare workers as 'heroes,' but it demands higher salaries for them and a better financing of the healthcare and elderly care system. Referring to the daily routine of applauding healthcare workers, one of its slogans noted that 'After the applause, it's time for a higher budget.'

This budget, argues PVDA-PTB, should come from the rich: 'get the money where it really is, at the top of society.' A central demand of the party has been a 'corona tax' on what it calls 'the super-super rich,' proposing a one-time 5% tax on fortunes above three million euros. Such a 'corona tax' is seen as a way to ensure that 'ordinary Joe [Jan met de pet] doesn't have to pay'.³⁰ Following a distinctly populist strategy, the party also turned the salaries of politicians into a symbol, demanding they give away half of their salary for May 2020 to help deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The party opposes the use of emergency budget for multinational companies and the rich and speaks out against the easing of corona measures at workplaces that would endanger workers' health.

The VB too uses the COVID-19 crisis to highlight the political elite's incompetence, castigating the fact that Belgium has considerable trouble procuring facial masks but also accusing the

²⁸ Pauwels, Teun, *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*, 2014, London: Routledge; Bram Wauters & Gilles Pittoors, 'Populist Party Leaders in Belgium: an Analysis of VB and PVDA-PTB,' *Polish Political Science Review*, 7(1), 2019, pp. 1-23.

²⁹ Pascal Delwit, *PTB-Nouvelle gauche, vieille recette*, 2016, Liège: Editions Luc Pire.

³⁰ Raoul Hedeboew, Facebook video, 6 May 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/raoul.hedeboew.be/posts/1270364689823733> (accessed 28 May 2020).

government and virologists of lying to the population about the importance of these masks in the early days of the pandemic. Indeed, much more so than PVDA-PTB, the VB questions the legitimacy of the virologists leading Belgium's pandemic measures. At the same time, in demanding strict measures and even handing out facial masks, the VB's response to COVID-19 stands in marked contrast to that of certain other right-wing populists such as Trump and Bolsonaro who have been accused of underplaying the health risks of the new virus and of putting economic interests above public health.

Whilst presenting itself as the 'voice of the people', compared to the socialist PVDA-PTB, the VB has less clearly defined (and much less redistribution-focused) recipes for dealing with COVID-19 and its fallout on the socio-economic level. As a radical right party, the VB does link COVID-19 to its nativist demands. As it does in discussions on every other political issue, the party criticizes the federal government and uses COVID-19 to push for Flemish autonomy. The party also calls the temporary and partial closure of intra-European borders as a proof of how 'borders save people,' and criticizes China for its role in the pandemic.

VB has also attempted to bring its nativist rejection of diversity into the public debate on COVID-19, by for example opposing the release of asylum seekers from closed asylum centres (and of prisoners from prisons) where COVID-19 measures could not be maintained. The party also shared videos of people of foreign descent not respecting social distancing measures, calling out the double standards that are supposedly being applied in allowing these 'foreigners' more leeway than 'the Flemish.' Combining nativism with authoritarianism, the VB also demanded a zero-tolerance policy and support for the police in dealing with 'corona-spitters' (again, a term almost exclusively applied to people of migrant descent) and with young people rioting in Brussels in response to the death of a teenager in a collision with a police car after fleeing from a police control during the peak of the lockdown. Filip Dewinter also criticized the use of Arab in posters informing citizens about protective measures. Some of these demands show how the party's concerns about health seem to not extend to certain categories of people, or are at least subordinate to its nativist and authoritarian ideas.

Turning our attention to the broader public debate, Belgium has seen some discussions about how populist governments deal with the pandemic and on the impact of COVID-19 on the fate of populist parties. In the most important Dutch-speaking newspapers, in the period between 13 March (the start of the lockdown) and 13 May we found a total of 99 articles referring to populism.³¹ One striking finding is that in these articles the term 'populism' is hardly used to refer to the politics of VB or PVDA-PTB. More broadly speaking, VB and PVDA-PTB are quite absent from the public debate in general: despite their efforts, the focus on COVID-19 in public debate and the media has made the two parties less visible than in the period right before the outbreak of the pandemic. This also holds true for other opposition parties and is a consequence of the focus on the spread and effects of the virus as well as of the temporary suspension of attempts to form a government (as corona measures are loosened, 'normal' political debate has quickly returned).

Instead, many mentions of 'populism' refer to foreign populist political actors, mainly in critical evaluations of populist leaders' management of the pandemic, with Trump and Bolsonaro getting most extensive attention. Other populist parties in government are much less discussed in terms of populism, including the populist parties that are part of the governments of two of the most hard-hit countries, the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain.

As was the case elsewhere, Belgium also saw broader discussions on the impact of COVID-19 on populism. Several articles speculate on how the world will be afterwards. Will we 'return to normal', and is that desirable or not? What will the post-corona world look like?

³¹ *De Morgen* (29), *De Standaard* (32), *De Tijd* (19), *Het Nieuwsblad* (11), *Het Laatste Nieuws* (8)

Populism is a rather central element in these reflections, usually considered as a worrying phenomenon.

Another recurring theme in the debate is the supposed tension between populism and scientific expertise. Populists are portrayed as the ones opposing the science-based management of COVID-19. The authority of the expert panel (including scientists) appointed by the government to develop an exit strategy is deemed to be threatened by 'the populists.' Some voices also occasionally warn against the increasing presence of these experts in the public debate, signalling that they are taking over the role of politicians to a worrying extent.

All in all, and as was the case before the COVID-19 crisis,³² most usage of the signifier 'populism' during the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by an anti-populist attitude that sees populism as a threat to democracy, and that tends to use the term populism mainly to refer to the radical right.³³ The COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a watershed moment, and one that stirs up hope about the demise of populism as well as fears about how populists might exploit the crisis. At the same time, it has certainly not been a watershed moment in terms of how populism is discussed in public debate. Nor has it had much visible impact on the strategies of populist forces in Belgium or on their popularity. Even if it made them less prominent in mainstream media and political debate temporarily during the peak of the pandemic (March-May 2020), this did not result in a declining popularity, both of them scoring higher than their 2019 election result in a survey undertaken in Flanders in April 2020.³⁴

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³² Jana Goyvaerts & Benjamin De Cleen, 'Media, Anti-Populist Discourse and the Dynamics of the Populism Debate,' in Krämer, Benjamin & Holtz-Bacha, Christina (Eds) *Handbook of Populism and the Media*, 2020, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, pp. 83-108.

³³ See also Yannis Stavrakakis et al., 'Populism, anti-populism and crisis,' *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17(1), 2018, pp. 4-27; Benjamin Moffit, 'The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe,' *Democratic Theory*, 5(2), 2018, pp. 1-16; Benjamin De Cleen, Jason Glynos & Aurelien Mondon, 'Critical research on populism: Nine rules of engagement,' *Organization*, 25(5), 2018, pp. 649-661.

³⁴ Jan-Frederik Abbeeloos, 'Het centrum verschaalt,' *De Standaard*, 23 May 2020, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200522_04968710 (accessed 28 May 2020).

Thomás Zicman de Barros

4. Brazil

As the proverb says, the best way to weather the storm is to be the storm. This may be a good way to characterize populism as a political style, and Jair Messias Bolsonaro's way of governing in particular. It may also help to explain why the COVID-19 pandemic may put his power in danger. Since his election, Bolsonaro had been capable of setting and framing the political agenda in Brazil. As a populist, he was not only a product of an economic and political crisis, but an actor actively triggering crisis.³⁵ His statements and actions are willing to choc, to bring attention to a (frequently fictitious) wrong in society, to deepen the antagonism against adversaries and institutions he scapegoats and, in this way, to change the coordinates of what is normal politics. The coronavirus pandemic, however, inaugurated a new situation. It has operated as the psychoanalytic 'real' that Bolsonaro may not be able to symbolize, generating a hurricane possibly beyond his control.³⁶

Despite the usefulness of the concept of populism to interpret Bolsonaro's government during the pandemic, this is not an uncontroversial notion. Although there is a growing agreement within the Brazilian public sphere that Bolsonaro is a populist leader, there is very little consensus on why this is the case. The reasons pundits label him as a populist do vary immensely. Notwithstanding the careful advancements to define populism as a political logic or style by specialists, in lay communication populism is simply a pejorative term. Its meaning varies according to the smear one needs to assign to political adversaries at certain moments. Nevertheless, instead of being a problem, this cacophony may contribute to an understanding of Bolsonaro's activity in the context of the pandemic.

For this text, I analysed all uses of the term 'populism' in two important Brazilian newspapers – *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* – from the first confirmed death by COVID-19 on March 17th to May 17th 2020, when the country reached 20 thousand registered fatalities. From this research, I can identify four main uses of the term: populism as anti-scientism, populism as demagogic opportunism, populism as authoritarianism and populism as irresponsible economic policies.

The presentation of populism in opposition to science is now frequent in Brazilian press, as it is in many Western countries, but this has been something rather new for the country.³⁷ In particular, this is due to Bolsonaro's own approach to the pandemic. Initially, being informed by far-right ideologues and inspired by Donald Trump, Bolsonaro simply dismissed the crisis as 'hysteria' or a 'little cold.'³⁸ He suggested that less than a thousand people would die because of the virus. The most vulnerable, he said, could be easily healed by hydroxychloroquine. Quarantine would unnecessarily hurt the economy. The president fired two health ministers in less than a month because, following the advice of the World Health Organisation, they defended social distancing measures and did not support generalized use of untested medicine. All those who defended some kind of lock-down, including far-right populist governors who had previously supported Bolsonaro, were attacked as 'traitors' and even 'communists.' That said, the association between populism and anti-scientism is not always universally accepted. For instance, some pundits indicate that other world leaders commonly considered as far-

³⁵ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, 2016, California: Stanford University Press, pp. 113-32.

³⁶ For one reading on the psychoanalytic notion of the 'real' applied to politics, check Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*, 2007, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 5-7.

³⁷ Érica Fraga, 'Coronavírus pode mostrar o risco de políticos que desprezam ciência, diz economista,' *Folha de S. Paulo*, 17 March 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/folha-covid-01> (accessed 1 June 2020).

³⁸ Jair Bolsonaro, 'Pronunciamento Oficial do Presidente da República,' 24 March 2020, 1:30-3:40, <https://youtu.be/VW5DcYK4STw?t=90> (accessed 1 June 2020).

right populist had followed a different path, suggesting that there could be various degrees of ‘anti-scientism’ in populism.³⁹

The case for populism as demagogic opportunism comes from the idea that, foreseeing the inevitable crisis, in a macabre calculation, Bolsonaro decided that saving jobs in the short-run was more important than saving human lives.⁴⁰ ‘Brazil can’t stop!’, he said, hoping that a working economy could preserve his approval ratings. Yet, the association between populism and demagoguery is problematic. Demagoguery, usually linked to vague notions of manipulation and insincerity, is hard to measure. In the case of Bolsonaro, even when confronted with the severity of the crisis and Trump’s backtracking on dismissing the pandemic, he seems to sincerely follow a far-right ideology that disregards human lives, banalizes death and advocates for a society governed by the law of the strongest. Sincere or demagogic, though, what matters is that prioritizing the economy was a failed strategy. By choosing production over health, Bolsonaro did not protect jobs, but rather led deaths to skyrocket and further impacted the economy. Consequently, despite his moves to deny his responsibility for the deaths – ‘My middle name is Messiah [Messiah], but I do no miracles!’ – as well as for recession, Bolsonaro’s disapproval ratings increased. While from the outbreak of the crisis until mid-May 2020 his approval ratings only slightly decreased, namely moving from 29% to 24% on average, those dissatisfied with his government moved from 37% to 54%. It led old allies to abandon him and calls for his impeachment to multiply.

The idea of populism as authoritarianism grew due to Bolsonaro’s reaction to this increasing isolation.⁴¹ Accosted, he organized rallies during the pandemic, mobilizing his basis against Congress, the Supreme Court and other judiciary institutions currently investigating his family. According to Sergio Moro, Bolsonaro’s popular but controversial former justice minister who deserted the government at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, by threatening the institutions the president has become a ‘populist’ who wants to be ‘above the law’.⁴² Radicalizing, Bolsonaro even suggested arming his militants, constantly flirting with the idea of a *coup d’état*. Howbeit, although this association between populism and authoritarianism is not new, it is hard to sustain. Not only there are authoritarians who are not populist, but there are also populists who are not authoritarian – an obvious neighbouring example being Argentina’s Alberto Fernández. In any case, it is worth noticing that authoritarian threats were not Bolsonaro’s only reaction to his loss of support. To survive, his government split between two strategies: rupture and normalization. Normalization, here, means that Bolsonaro – an outsider who packed his cabinet with military men instead of politicians – may try to construct a more solid parliamentary base. Curiously enough, on the very same day Bolsonaro claimed to a crowd that he would never negotiate with Congress, he sat down with traditional crony politicians and gave them control over key governmental agencies and their budgets.

The association between populism and irresponsible inflationary welfare measures is not new in Brazil.⁴³ Currently, it resurfaces precisely because of the way that Bolsonaro dealt with other political parties. The hypothesis here is that sharing power could possibly imply breaking

³⁹ Fábio Zanini & Bruno Benevides, ‘Ao combater restrições, Bolsonaro se isola até entre aliados,’ *Folha de S. Paulo*, 25 March 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/folha-covid-02> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁴⁰ Affonso Celso Pastore, ‘Estadistas, populistas e a pandemia,’ *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 26 April 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/estadao-covid-01> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁴¹ ‘Golpista que mia,’ *Folha de S. Paulo*, 20 April 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/folha-covid-03> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁴² Sergio Moro, ‘Contra o populismo,’ *O Globo*, 3 June 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/oglobo-covid-01> (accessed 4 June 2020).

⁴³ Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis,’ in Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds) *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, 2012, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 4-5n.

with austerity. Hence, some pundits have indicated that Bolsonaro could only now make a 'populist turn', relaxing austerity in order to survive.⁴⁴

If all four lay uses of the term in the press present conceptual and other problems while also capturing the dynamics of the COVID-19 conjuncture, the last one is especially interesting. This is the case because the hypothesis it invokes – that of Bolsonaro moving towards some kind of 'normalcy' and establishing, furthermore, a set of welfare policies – would demand an unlikely transformation in the affective dynamics of his discourse.

Considering populism as a political style that opposes the people against the elites and can assume many ideological contents, already from its inception, Bolsonaro's government is characterized by what one could call 'austerity populism.' It is true that Bolsonaro had never adopted a pro-market attitude before the 2018 elections. He was simply a fringe far-right reactionary congressman, praising the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil until the 1980s and advocating for paramilitary violence to solve social issues. Still, Bolsonaro's move towards pro-market rhetoric to seduce big businessmen articulated a new pro-austerity discourse that accentuated his appeal to the law of the strongest. This austerity populism was voiced by Bolsonaro's finance minister, who antagonized the '*parasites*', living on the state, the '*corrupt bureaucrats and creatures from the political swamp who associated against the Brazilian people*'.⁴⁵ The main problem of this discourse is that it does not carry within it any constructive proposition. It consists only in breaking with traditional politics and the left, undoing all that was conquered in thirty years of democracy, and replacing it by some kind of 'state of nature'. In this sense, Bolsonaro's movement should be interpreted as embodying an acephalous death drive, a reinless will to power.⁴⁶

Through eventual removal, increased authoritarianism or a certain step towards 'normalcy', what is clear is that the storm caused by the coronavirus will mark a pivotal moment in the choreography of Bolsonaro's government.

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⁴⁴ Fernando Canzian, 'A pergunta agora é quanto Paulo Guedes dura,' *Folha de S. Paulo*, 24 April 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/folha-covid-04> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁴⁵ Paulo Guedes, 'Cerimônia de transmissão de cargo ao Ministro da Economia,' *YouTube*, 2 January 2019, 9:45-10:00, https://youtu.be/jgHueV_kZjc?t=585 (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism,' in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud 19, 1961 [1924]*, London: The Hogarth Press, p. 163.

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5. France

On 16 March 2020, Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic, declared that his country was 'at war' against the new COVID-19 virus, a declaration followed by the implementation of a lockdown policy that partly ended on 11 May. Since the beginning of the crisis, Macron had expressed his fears concerning the lack of coordination at the European level which could lead to the consolidation of populism around the world. Simultaneously, he recalled the irresponsibility and the lack of solidarity of populists that 'don't protect you [in times of] crisis [and] don't protect you the next day.'⁴⁷ Following a minimal definition of populism, based on people-centrism and anti-elitism,⁴⁸ two populist parties can be identified in France: Marine Le Pen's radical right *Rassemblement national* (National Rally, RN) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical left *France insoumise* (Unbowed France, FI). Both mobilize a people/elite dichotomy to address the crisis, and construct each of those categories in an *exclusionary* or *inclusionary* way depending on their respective ideologies. During the same period, the political *establishment* increased its anti-populist discourse in a bid to give more legitimacy to experts.

Both the RN and FI called for respect of the lockdown while still criticizing the government's reaction considered as disorganized by Mélenchon, and as too permissive by Le Pen. They both consider that the COVID-19 pandemic validates their respective ideologies, and they see the crisis as an opportunity to build a 'new world.' According to them, the crisis: (1) shows the failures of neo-liberalism; (2) validates the importance of regaining France's lost sovereignty; (3) reveals the authoritarian tendencies of liberalism; (4) highlights the failure of the European Union. Although they both develop a sovereignist, anti-establishment and critical discourse regarding globalization, the projects they defend differ.

The RN identifies globalization and open frontiers as the main culprits of the pandemic. Le Pen continues to draw a people/elite dichotomy associated with an *exclusionary* frontier between 'native-born French' and 'immigrants.' She argues that the government mismanaged the crisis by giving priority to 'migrants' over residential care homes for senior citizens (Ehpad), and by increasing violence after allowing some early-release of prisoners. According to Le Pen, this (dis)organization testifies the 'collapse of the sovereign and managing functions of the State.' Therefore, the government effectively 'contribute[d] to deepen[ing] the confidence divide between the French people and their ruling elites.'⁴⁹ She insists on the fact that the lockdown is not respected in sensitive urban zones and draws a new frontier between 'disciplined native French people' and 'unruly immigrants.'⁵⁰

On the other side, Mélenchon considers that the pandemic is due to an 'ecological crisis.' He warns against the 'shock doctrine', which could lead to an authoritarian liberalism by imposing anti-social measures and by adopting measures that threaten freedom such as the state of health emergency and tracking. One can observe an important shift in his speech. Whereas in 2017 Mélenchon chose to leave aside the rhetoric of the left,⁵¹ he now mobilizes signifiers

⁴⁷ Victor Mallet & Roula Khalaf, 'FT Interview: Emmanuel Macron says it is time to think the unthinkable,' *Financial Times*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/3ea8d790-7fd1-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84> (accessed 13 May 2020).

⁴⁸ Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2017, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005, London: Verso.

⁴⁹ Interview of Marine Le Pen, CNEWS, 27 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=535930443772710> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁵⁰ Max-Valentin Robert, 'Nationalism in times of pandemic: How the radical and extreme-right framed the COVID-19 crisis in France,' *BilGi Prime Youth blog*, <https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/blog/nationalism-times-pandemic-how-radical-and-extreme> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁵¹ Paolo Chiochetti, 'Make way for the people! Left-wing populism in the rhetoric of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 2012 and 2017 presidential campaigns,' in Giorgos Charalambous & Gregoris Ioannou (Eds) *Left Radicalism and Populism*

from socialist ideology: collectivism, planning, requisitioning. He adds to this rhetoric a post-Marxist and Green dimension, for instance by explaining that the future world should be based on 'ecological collectivism.' He draws three oppositions. Firstly, he continues to rely on an opposition between a 'German Europe' and its 'rogue leaders' versus a 'Latin Europe' of 'sincere Europeans.'⁵² He also attempts a *reversal of the stigma* by opposing 'ideologues' (the liberals blinded by their ideology) to 'organized pragmatists' (the opposition represented by FI). Thirdly, he opposes 'liberals' ('every man for himself'), represented by Emmanuel Macron, to 'collectivists' ('all together'), represented by his movement. He continues to construct 'the people' in an *inclusionary* way by deploying a strategy of 'common causes' which targets 'the weakest, the most isolated, the most destitute' citizens facing the neo-liberal offensive.

Since the beginning of the crisis, mass media have regularly pointed out the 'blindness', the 'denial', and the opportunism of populists who would have 'take[n] advantage of the anger.'⁵³ More generally, the French *establishment* has warned against the 'populist threat' in three ways. Firstly, by accusing populist actors of merely criticizing without putting forward any concrete solutions. Secondly, by further emphasizing the role of experts in the public space. Both the RN and FI responded to this 'technocratization' of the debate by condemning the 'lies' of the executive and asked, once the crisis is over, the government to be accountable to the citizens. This rhetoric is fuelled, and largely justified, by the controversies linked to the executive's lies revealed by *Mediapart* in April 2020⁵⁴ – negation of the shortage of masks and circulation of false information on the worthlessness of wearing masks to slow down the pandemic. Mélenchon has also, repeatedly, warned against the dangers of a 'lockdown of democracy' and the 'omniscience of experts.' Thirdly, populists have been accused of spreading conspiracy theories according to which the virus has directly originated from a Chinese laboratory. In fact, contrary to Mélenchon who rejects such 'theories,' Le Pen declared it was legitimate to 'doubt' and 40% of her voters think the virus was created 'intentionally' (this view is adopted by only 19% of Mélenchon's voters).⁵⁵

The controversy around Didier Raoult, an international renowned infectious disease expert, Professor of microbiology in Marseille, illustrates the debates around populism and expertise well. His figure has been highly operationalised within conspiracy circles but also by populist actors. Raoult began to gain notoriety after claiming he had found a treatment for COVID-19 based on chloroquine. He quickly became one of the favorite public personas in France. Often accused of 'health populism,' he divides the medical and political *establishment*, mainly because of his scientific methods, and is sometimes described as a 'charlatan,' others as a 'genius.' Both

in *Europe*, 2019, London: Routledge; Philippe Marlière, 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise: The Manufacturing of Populism,' in Giorgos Katsambekis & Alexandros Kioupiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, 2019, London: Routledge.

⁵²Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 'L'Europe allemande frappe encore l'Europe latine', *Blog de Jean-Luc Mélenchon*, 5 May 2020, <https://melenchon.fr/2020/05/08/coronavirus-une-periode-deveil-des-consciences-politiques-entretien-avec-la-presse-europeenne> (accessed 11 May 2020).

⁵³ Alain Frachon, 'Le virus, les populistes et leurs modèles,' 7 May 2020, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/05/06/le-virus-les-populistes-et-leurs-modeles_6038900_3232.html; Philippe Boulet-Gercourt, 'Trump, Bolsonaro, Johnson: radiographie de l'aveuglement des populistes face au coronavirus', 17 April 2020; *Nouvel Obs*, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/coronavirus-de-wuhan/20200417.OBS27638/trump-bolsonaro-johnson-radiographie-de-l-aveuglement-des-populistes-face-au-coronavirus.html>; Lucie Soullier, Abel Mestre, 'Coronavirus: La France insoumise et le Rassemblement national veulent profiter de la colère,' 12 May 2020, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/05/12/coronavirus-la-france-insoumise-et-le-rassemblement-national-veulent-profiter-de-la-colere_6039375_823448.html (all accessed 12 May 2020).

⁵⁴ Yann Philippin, Antton Rouget & Marine Turchi, 'Masques: les preuves d'un mensonge d'État,' *Mediapart*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/020420/masques-les-preuves-d-un-mensonge-d-etat?onglet=full> (accessed 20 May 2020).

⁵⁵ 'L'origine perçue du Covid-19. Ifop pour Fondation Jean Jaurès et L'Observatoire du conspirationnisme,' *Fondation Jean Jaurès*, March 2020, https://jean-jaurès.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2020/2803/117275_rapport_covid_19.pdf (accessed 14 May 2020).

RN (in favor of a generalized prescription of chloroquine) and FI (Mélenchon considers Raoult 'too hated by "important" people to not arouse interest')⁵⁶ took him seriously. Given his growing notoriety, the government also showed interest in his research despite the controversies surrounding him. On 11 March, Raoult was chosen as a member to sit on the COVID-19 scientific council (although he eventually refused), and Macron visited him on 9 April, qualifying him as a 'great scientist.' However, the presidency then insisted that this visit did not mean 'legitimizing [Raoult's] scientific protocol.'⁵⁷

In contrast to other European countries, in France the confidence in the executive has fallen during the COVID-19 crisis. At the end of April, 80% of French people considered that the government had made 'mistakes' during the crisis, and only 39% of the population considered that it 'managed the crisis well.' In the absence of any serious and recent study on voting intentions, it is difficult to estimate if populist actors will benefit from this crisis or not. However, recent polls showed that the COVID-19 crisis increased distrust towards globalization and 'exacerbated the social and political divide.'⁵⁸ If this tendency is confirmed in the near future, it could indeed boost the popularity of populist actors in the long run.

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⁵⁶ Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 'Billet d'enquête – Échange avec le professeur Didier Raoult,' *Le Blog de Jean-Luc Mélenchon*, 26 March 2020, <https://melenchon.fr/2020/03/26/billet-denquete-echange-avec-le-professeur-didier-raoult> (accessed 11 May 2020).

⁵⁷ Alain Auffray, Stéphanie Aubert & Stéphanie Harounyan, 'Macron en consultation surprise à Marseille chez Raoult,' *Libération*, 9 April 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/04/09/macron-en-consultation-surprise-a-marseille_1784783 (accessed 14 May 2020).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

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6. Germany

In 2017, Germany stopped being the exception to the rule of radical right parties in Western Europe, as the elections of 25th of September brought the party Alternative for Germany (AfD) in third place with 12.6% of the vote. At the same time, AfD's victory signalled the end of the German political system's containment strategy towards the far-right, which included a range of actions, from the exclusion of those forces from political coalitions to their total exclusion from the political system.⁵⁹ Since then, the AfD has seen an upward trend in electoral support at local elections, while remaining consistent at the national level.

One of the reasons for AfD's endurance has been its ability to develop a discourse that combines nationalist and populist elements. The party has articulated a notion of 'the people' defined in nationalist terms, by using the controversial term of 'Das Volk,' juxtaposed against German and European 'elites' as well as immigrants. In this sense, AfD's success often relied on criticizing Angela Merkel's government and the EU regarding immigration policy on the domestic and the European level. This was the case until the first months of 2020, when the state elections of Thuringia not only put AfD in a difficult position but shook the entire German party system to its core. This was caused by the decision of both Christian-democrats (CDU) and AfD to support the liberal candidate Thomas Kemmerich (FDP) for the position of State President. This choice, that was effectively mainstreaming the far-right, by providing AfD with crucial political leverage, caused national protests, including Merkel's condemnation, leading also to the resignation of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's successor in CDU.⁶⁰

It also marked the beginning of a crisis for the AfD itself that would continue with the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time that the virus started spreading in EU countries, AfD's most radical wing (coincidentally, in Thuringia, where the party has gained its biggest electoral support thus far) was characterized as an 'extreme entity' by Germany's intelligent services and was put under surveillance. In response, AfD leaders asked from their radical wing to cease its activities, but without expelling its members, which created further intra-party strife. As the borders of EU countries started closing, AfD not only had to deal with internal issues, but found itself in a peculiar situation. On the one hand, the closing of the borders seemed to satisfy the party's demands regarding uncontrolled immigration, as, according to the AfD, the virus had proved the 'failure of border-free globalization.' On the other hand, the party was effectively deprived of its most central point of criticism towards the Merkel government and its key point of communication with parts of the electorate.⁶¹

In turn, the party reconfigured its discourse to focus on Merkel's response to the pandemic, accusing her of authoritarian behaviour based on the measures that were taken. Nevertheless, this argumentation has not resonated with the party's supporters who seem to have rather resorted to conspiracy theories in order to explain the COVID-19 pandemic, rendering AfD's ability to act as an alternative political force, rather obsolete.⁶² On the other hand, Merkel's crisis management has left little room for contestation, as the Chancellor's response to the

⁵⁹ David Art, 'The AfD and the end of Containment in Germany?' *German Politics and Society*, 36(2), 2018, pp. 76-86.

⁶⁰ Yasmeen Serhan, 'A Far-Right Warning from Germany,' *The Atlantic*, 19 February 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/02/germany-afd-angela-merkel-thuringia/606541/> (accessed 13 May 2020).

⁶¹ Emily Schultheis, 'The Coronavirus Has Paralyzed Europe's Far- Right,' *Foreign Policy*, 14 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/14/coronavirus-has-paralyzed-europes-far-right/> (accessed 14 May 2020). Patrick Gensing, 'Populisten und die Pandemie. Wenn plötzlich Sündenböcke fehlen,' *Tagesschau.de*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/corona-populisten-101.html> (accessed 14 May 2020).

⁶² Hans Georg-Betz, 'In Germany, the radical right is hit hard by the virus,' *openDemocracy*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/germany-radical-right-hit-hard-virus/> (accessed 14 May 2020).

pandemic has been well-received by the public, leading to a 74% rate of approval for her and 39% for her party, the CDU. Based on that, commentators have rushed to declare that Merkel's management has acted as a deterrent to AfD, arguing that 'it is the hour of the professionals and not populists'.⁶³ In this direction, German media also project this assumption to other countries, in order to make the argument that 'dull populism has had its day' and that people have developed a renewed trust on experts, since 'politics is no longer a game' to be played.⁶⁴

In this context, it is true that developments in recent months have created an image of stagnation for the AfD, as the party struggles with intra-party turmoil and its inability to address the current crisis. However, despite its temporary setback, there is no guarantee that the party will not be able to find its footing in the post-COVID-19 political environment, which will likely render AfD a formidable force again.⁶⁵ It is for this reason that there can be no definitive conclusion until the crisis is over, which makes any argument about how the current pandemic has managed to dismantle AfD or not rather impetuous. One thing is sure though: mainstream media and political actors will continue to focus on how the alleged 'populism' of the radical right has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to brand any other actor – even the left-wing Linke (The Left Party) which is already drafting policy proposals on the post-COVID-19 political reality and focuses on the actual needs of 'the people' – as 'populist' in a derogatory sense.

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⁶³ Susanne Betz, 'Die AfD in der Corona-Krise: Profis gefragt, nicht Populisten,' *BR24*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/die-afd-in-der-corona-krise-profis-gefragt-nicht-populisten,RtfyB7VW> (accessed 14 May 2020).

⁶⁴ Bettina Schutz, 'Politik ist plötzlich kein Spiel mehr,' *Zeit Online*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-03/boris-johnson-grossbritannien-regierungsstil-coronavirus-bekaempfung> (accessed 19 May 2020).

Jan Ross, 'Virus der Vernunft,' *Zeit Online*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/2020/12/coronavirus-politik-vernunft-populismus-medien> (accessed 19 May 2020).

⁶⁵ Thamil Venthan Ananthavinayagan, 'The German radical right are not so hit by the virus: a reply to Hans-Georg Betz,' *openDemocracy*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/german-radical-right-are-not-so-hit-virus-reply-hans-georg-betz/> (accessed 14 May 2020).

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7. Greece

Many columnists and analysts worldwide rushed after the COVID-19 outbreak to associate populism with the pandemic, more precisely with the mishandling of the crisis by specific – allegedly ‘populist’ – governments. However, this type of discourse was not limited to populism in government. It has often targeted forces in opposition, as the case of Greece exemplifies. On the one hand, Greece is portrayed in national and international media as a ‘success story’ regarding the management of the pandemic. It is true that the conservative government of (anti-populist) New Democracy (ND) adopted early the necessary measures to contain the spread of the virus and imposed nationwide restrictions on movement. Most often, liberal commentators accuse populism for its confrontational discourse and its irresponsibility; now, it seems, many include mishandling the pandemic as a species of the latter genus. If the Greek (populist) opposition has been often debated along these lines, can we really identify such features in the political stance of SYRIZA during the pandemic?

On the contrary, Andreas Xanthos, former health minister in the SYRIZA government, supported publicly in various occasions Professor Sotiris Tsiodras, the chairman of the government advisory committee for the management of the pandemic. In March 2020, he stated⁶⁶ that if SYRIZA was in government, they would have also appointed Professor Tsiodras to this crucial position. In April, he claimed⁶⁷ again that Professor Tsiodras is an excellent choice and that the recommendations of the scientific committee that he chairs are in the right direction. This consensual spirit was evident even in the statements of Alexis Tsipras, the leader of SYRIZA. In an article⁶⁸ in late March, he argued that ‘What matters, at the moment, is that we all fight together, united in one front, so that there are as few casualties as possible. That means that we calmly, and without panic, follow the instructions of the scientists.’

Indeed one could argue that (populist) SYRIZA adopted a responsible stance, supported the main choices of the ND government, helped in the formation of a unitary political front in the face of an unprecedented crisis and clearly respected the scientific advice and policy recommendations, debunking claims that populism is equated to anti-science or that it necessarily rejects expert’s knowledge.

The situation started to change when Alexis Tsipras presented the package of measures proposed by SYRIZA in order to address the (economic, social, etc.) effects of the pandemic and even more when the public debate regarding the end of the lockdown measures started. When the debate moved to how the state will manage the consequences of the pandemic on the economy and society at large and whether the government adequately supported the public healthcare system during the lockdown period, the dominant anti-populist discursive repertoire returned in the public sphere and the old cleavage between responsible, rational anti-populist politicians and the absurd, irresponsible, populist ones was rapidly re-activated.

Stelios Petsas, the Greek Government Spokesman, dismissed twice the proposals of SYRIZA by employing the signifier ‘populism’ as an accusation, as a derogatory, pejorative label. The following two statements are quite telling:

⁶⁶ Andreas Xanthos, ‘If we were in government, we would have chosen Tsiodras too,’ *TheToc*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.thetoc.gr/politiki/article/xanthos-kai-emeis-an-imastan-kubernisi-ton-tsiotra-tha-epilegame/> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁶⁷ Andreas Xanthos, ‘Tests are required in order to “loosen” the quarantine,’ *TVXS*, 6 April 2020, <https://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/andreas-ksanthos-ti-tha-kaname-diaforetika> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁶⁸ Alexis Tsipras, ‘Front of life today, front of reason tomorrow,’ *Ethnos*, 22 March 2020, https://www.ethnos.gr/politiki/95602_arthro-parembasi-toy-alexi-tsipra-sto-ethnos-metopo-zois-simera-metopologikis-ayrio (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

The government will use every opportunity to support both workers and businesses. It is the time for responsibility, not for cheap populism.⁶⁹

He [Tsipras] is happy because Greece will face a recession this year, as will the whole of Europe. Recession due to an unpredictable and unprecedented event: the COVID-19 pandemic. Tsipras remains the same; divisive and populist.⁷⁰

Greek mainstream media adopted their familiar anti-populist tone as well. The influential column 'Vimatodotis' of the newspaper *To Vima* commented⁷¹ that the government has done well so far, mainly because it doesn't listen to the populist voices that champion an aggressive programme of 'benefits to everyone.' In the newspaper *Fileleftheros* (Liberal), an analyst coined the term 'corona-populism',⁷² a supposedly new threat, far more dangerous than the virus itself. Even before the pandemic, populism was often described as a 'disease' or a 'virus' in Greece, so it was not a big surprise that a commentator and former PASOK official described⁷³ populism again as the 'underlying disease' of SYRIZA.

The 'We Stay Standing' programme of SYRIZA represents a combination of typical left-wing and neo-keynesian economic policies (i.e. additional funding for the public health care system, hiring additional medical staff, prohibiting foreclosures, social solidarity allowances, and state coverage of salary for private sector workers). The social dimension of SYRIZA policies was also evident in its emphasis on the value of public health for all, including the necessary care for the refugees. The party issued a public statement⁷⁴ denouncing the outrageous indifference on behalf of the ND government for the lives of thousands of refugees in the detention centres, asking for the substantial strengthening of the healthcare structures in these centres and the immediate transfer of the refugee population to hotel accommodation, especially for the vulnerable and the unaccompanied children.

What conclusions can we then draw from the Greek case? In short, populism is not necessarily an irresponsible political force: populist parties are not opposing governmental decisions merely for the sake of the opposition and populist politicians can and often do respect and adopt scientific expertise. It needs to be stressed that the populist dimension does not suffice to explain the type of politics adopted by a party at any given conjuncture. Populist parties or politicians are never merely 'populist'; their ideological component should always be taken into account. Left-wing populist parties, in particular, seem to be much more interested in the economic and social consequences of the pandemic and especially in the consequences on the most vulnerable parts of the population (precarious workers, low-wage workers, the

⁶⁹ Stelios Petsas, 'Response by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesman to the announcement by the press office of SYRIZA,' *MediaGov*, 26 March 2020, <https://media.gov.gr/apantisi-tou-yfypourgou-para-to-prothypourgou-kai-kyvernitikou-ekprosopou-steliou-petsa-stin-anakoinosi-tou-grafeiou-tyvou-tou-syriza/> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁷⁰ Stelios Petsas, 'Statement by the Deputy Minister to the Prime Minister and Government Spokesman on the post of the Leader of the Opposition Alexis Tsipras on social media networks,' *MediaGov*, 6 May 2020, <https://media.gov.gr/dilosi-tou-yfypourgou-para-to-prothypourgou-kai-kyvernitikou-ekprosopou-steliou-petsa-gia-tin-anartisi-tou-archigou-tis-aksiomatikis-antipolitefsis-aleksi-tsipra-meso-ton-koinonikon-diktyon/> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁷¹ Vimatodotis, 'Populism, Tsovolas and Roosevelt,' *To Vima*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.tovima.gr/2020/03/27/opinions/o-laikismos-o-tsovolas-kai-o-rouzvelt/> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁷² Minas Analytis, 'Corona-populism: A new threat,' *Liberal*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.liberal.gr/apopsi/koronolaikismos-mia-sugchroni-apeili/301628> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁷³ Giorgos Pantagias, 'The underlying disease of SYRIZA,' *Proto Thema*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.protothema.gr/blogs/giorgos-padagias/article/1004591/to-upokeimeno-nosima-tou-suriza/> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

⁷⁴ Department of refugee and migrant policy, 'Refugees are in danger,' *Avgi*, 10 April 2020, <http://www.avgi.gr/article/10836/10937659/tmema-metanasteutikes-politikes-syriza-oi-prosphyges-kindyneuoun> (accessed 18 May 2020) [In Greek].

unemployed) as well as on the marginalized and minority groups (i.e. immigrants and refugees). Finally, as is well-known, populist discourse presents fluctuations over time. Arguably, while SYRIZA is still correctly recognized as a left-wing populist party, its populist discourse was admittedly toned down during the pandemic.

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8. Hungary

Populism in Hungary has been a subject of international attention especially in the past decade, one that began with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz winning an unprecedented two-thirds majority of seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections. While Fidesz had featured a social-populist discourse pitting 'the people' and 'the new majority' against 'the aristocracy' in power following then-PM Ferenc Gyurcsány's infamous 'Őszöd speech' of 2006, Orbán's outfit now shifted gears onto an institutionalist⁷⁵ discourse of national harmony rather than antagonistic division and, following its landslide victory, declared in a parliamentary resolution that 'national unity' had prevailed and that the voters had given the party a mandate to institute a 'System of National Cooperation' (NER) founded on 'peace, freedom, and accord.'⁷⁶ What has been characteristic for Fidesz's post-2010 discourse is an authoritarian institutionalism of enacting an exclusive claim to the 'nation' in a methodical, administrative, largely non-antagonistic manner via two-thirds majority while effectively ignoring or bypassing (rather than seeking direct confrontation with) opposition. Populism takes on an instituting function for this institutionalism by making the boundaries of the new order intelligible, having previously defined the Other of 'the people' (albeit not in authoritarian terms at the time) as a small, privileged, discredited 'aristocracy.' Similarly, the 'Stop Soros' campaign that climaxed with the 2018 elections represents a phase in which populism, in close conjunction with nationalism and nativism, re-emerges in Fidesz's discourse to re-define the identity of 'the nation' against ever newer enemies in the form of the Soros 'empire' and its alleged agents at home and abroad.

In short, Fidesz's post-2010 rule is characterized by a constant interplay between moments of the political as antagonism (of which populism is one possible manifestation) and a non-antagonistic institutionalized normality of 'business as usual.' The same holds for the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As widely reported in international media, the two-thirds Fidesz majority in parliament adopted on 30 March a so-called 'Enabling Act' granting the government emergency powers without any kind of built-in time limit, which made the law unusual among its European counterparts. Importantly, the government decided to put the bill up for an early vote on 23 March, requiring a four-fifths majority under the rules of procedure, which it then predictably lost. By designing the emergency legislation so as to make it unacceptable for the entire spectrum of opposition parties – from Jobbik to the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) – and then forcing an early vote that it knew it would lose, Fidesz effectively staged an antagonistic frontier of government vs. opposition as the founding moment of the COVID-19 crisis regime: the government defending the emergency legislation in terms of 'national unity' on the one hand, the opposition supposedly placing itself outside 'the nation' by opposing the law on the other – and Orbán smugly telling opposition MPs that 'we are going to resolve this crisis even without you.'⁷⁷

It is in this discursive context that Fidesz's otherwise run-of-the-mill, holding-together institutionalism during the pandemic – with slogans such as 'Let's take care of each other' – appears in a not so innocuous light: the 'we' or 'us' implies a founding exclusion of those who refused to work in the interest of 'national unity' in the hour of greatest need. Fidesz politician and president of the parliament László Kövér only made this implicit exclusion blatantly explicit

⁷⁵ Understood here following Laclau as a conceptual opposite of populism: whereas the latter constructs an antagonistic division in society (between a popular subject and a power bloc), institutionalism produces a non-antagonistic image of society as a field of differences. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005, London: Verso.

⁷⁶ Office of the National Assembly, 'The Programme of National Cooperation,' 22 May 2010, https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/00047/00047_e.pdf (accessed 18 May 2020).

⁷⁷ Marianna Biró, 'Orbán: Ezt a válságot önök nélkül is meg fogjuk oldani,' *Index.hu*, 23 March 2020, https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/23/parlament/orban_holnap_reggel_visszavehetik_ha_ugy_latjak/ (accessed 18 May 2020).

when he claimed in an April interview that '[t]his opposition is not part of the Hungarian nation' for opposing the Enabling Act and courting international criticism of the government:

Above all, let's recognize clearly that on this matter, the international objection and the domestic opposition criticism do not differ. The two are one and the same. The Hungarian left-liberal opposition is part of the global, anti-national network, the Western European opinion-makers base their own propaganda campaign on its deliberately false information and slander.⁷⁸

To be sure, the logic of this exclusion is hardly a populist, but rather an authoritarian nationalist one that delegitimizes opponents as foreign-like and 'anti-national'⁷⁹ – a recurring strain in Fidesz's discourse since the 1990s. A conspiracist populism of accusing the global mega-rich powers-that-be, such as Bill Gates or indeed George Soros, of spreading COVID-19 – a claim commonly heard in the weekly 'Corona demonstrations' in German cities – has not been the message of the Fidesz government; instead, the latter's accusations have been directed at an opposition allegedly failing to stick with 'the nation' in the moment of crisis. This strategy is a telling one given how party competition in Hungary has been slowly but surely shifting toward a pro- vs. anti-NER logic, with the liberal parties and Jobbik rallying behind unity candidates to score numerous successes in the 2019 local elections (as well as the parliamentary by-election in Dunaújváros, Jobbik's lone single-member-district win from the 2018 elections). Yet the NER as a hegemonic formation is predicated on a differential, fragmented opposition that cannot form a united front against Fidesz – a barrier that now finally appears to be crumbling. In designating the entire opposition as a unitary anti-national bloc – including its erstwhile far-right (and now increasingly de-radicalized) competitor Jobbik – Fidesz is getting a head start on what was already expected to be a dirty and hard-fought 2022 election campaign, in which the reproduction of the two-thirds majority order against a more united opposition will be at stake.

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⁷⁸ 'Bunkerben várják a csodafegyvert,' *Demokrata*, 28 April 2020, <https://demokrata.hu/magyarorszag/bunkerben-varjak-a-csodafegyvert-2-237021> (accessed 18 May 2020).

⁷⁹ For the conceptual distinction between populism and nationalism, see also Benjamin De Cleen & Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,' *Javnost*, 24(4), 2017, pp. 301-319.

Luca Manucci

9. Italy

We need more time to assess how populist actors have reacted to the pandemic. Looking at US, Brazil, and UK one might be tempted to jump to conclusions, but for now it is more advisable to focus on a less ambitious – though compelling – question: is COVID-19 exposing the weaknesses of populism, or rather reinforcing it? Looking at the case of Italy, the answer is: it depends, since there are populist actors both in power and in opposition. After a very predictable *rally 'round the flag* effect in March and April, Prime Minister Conte remains very popular and trusted while the two parties in government, the center left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico – PD) and the populist Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle – M5S), are losing consensus.

Indeed, the political and social ramifications of the emergency seem to constitute an advantage for opposition parties like Matteo Salvini's League and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia – FdI). Meloni criticized the government for ignoring the opposition and therefore undermining democracy, which is ironic for a party that does not disown Italy's fascist past (to the point that a party leading figure, Ignazio La Russa, suggested to replace handshakes with fascist salutes to stop the diffusion of the virus). FdI has been extremely vocal in criticizing the government in the last months and recently protested in front of the parliament, wearing masks with the colours of the Italian flag, to 'give voice to the common people,' the 'silent majority' whose future is at risk.⁸⁰ FdI is the party that, according to the polls, gained most since the beginning of the pandemic.

The League, in a similar fashion, occupied the Italian parliament in April to protest against the government and to 'bring the voice of many abandoned Italians into the palace of power.'⁸¹ Overall, the party's line on the emergency has been volatile. First, Salvini followed his most congenial script and attempted to politicise the topic by implying that migrants are responsible for the virus' outbreak and asking Conte to resign 'if he is not able to defend Italy and Italians.'⁸² In the following weeks, the League incoherently switched between requests to restore normality and reopen economic activities, on the one hand, and critiques for the excessive permissiveness of the lockdown, on the other.

Moreover, Salvini promoted himself as a devoted super-Catholic, to the point that he asked to reopen churches for Easter while even the Pope was more cautious on the matter. His devotion went as far as reciting a prayer for the victims of COVID-19 while on live TV asking the Virgin Mary to protect Italians.⁸³ On the European Stability Mechanism, the League argued that accepting money via this route would inevitably lead to establishing 'a dictatorship in the name of the virus.'⁸⁴ The party, however, has not been able to capitalize on the emergency

⁸⁰ Mauro Bazzocchi, 'Il flash mob (modello Israele) di Fratelli d'Italia davanti a Palazzo Chigi,' *AGI*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2020-04-28/flash-mob-fratelli-italia-palazzo-chigi-costituzione-8463718/> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸¹ Federica Valenti, 'La Lega occupa le Camere. Salvini "Qui a oltranza",' *AGI*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2020-04-30/fase-2-lega-camere-occupazione-salvini-protesta-8482209/> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸² Lorenzo Tondo, 'Salvini attacks Italy PM over coronavirus and links to rescue ship,' *The Guardian*, 24 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/24/salvini-attacks-italy-pm-over-coronavirus-and-links-to-rescue-ship> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸³ Hans-Georg Betz, 'After COVID-19: will Matteo Salvini lead Europe's radical right?' *Open Democracy*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/after-covid-19-will-matteo-salvini-lead-europes-radical-right/> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸⁴ Daniele Albertazzi and Mattia Zulianello, 'Populism and the Collapse of Italy's Coronavirus Truce,' *EA Worldview*, 21 April 2020, <https://eaworldview.com/2020/04/populism-collapse-italy-coronavirus-truce/> (accessed 30 May 2020).

despite the favourable conditions, and the polls indicate that the League suffered a significant setback since the beginning of the pandemic.

If we were to vote today, the polls say, the two far right populist parties currently at the opposition, Lega and Fdl, together would collect over 40% of the votes. In particular, Meloni's party reached an unprecedented 14% that will be hard to confirm in elections but shows how much Fdl gained consensus during the pandemic.⁸⁵ Given that in the following months the opposition could profit from the inevitable unfolding of a new economic crisis, it is not hard to imagine that a far-right populist coalition will win the next elections.

The only party that could prevent this scenario is M5S. Compared to League and Fdl, M5S is currently in power and cannot rely on its classic anti-establishment rhetoric. One might be tempted to predict the imminent demise of the party, but the issue requires a deeper reflection for several reasons. First, situations of emergency and crisis are the party's cup of tea. In 2011, the two leaders – Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio – wrote a book titled 'We are at war: For new politics,' and the movement always insisted on the idea of a looming ecological, political, and social crisis. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic fits the party's war rhetoric, with its own heroes on the front line ('the people') and powerful elites that plot against them (the 'frugal four' – Austria, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands – together with EU institutions).

Second, the EU lack of solidarity will fuel Eurosceptic sentiments without the need of much work from populists, and M5S can establish a Manichean dichotomy between the protection of 'people's interests' and the threats coming from external hostile forces. The party could go back to its hard Eurosceptic positions, softened and mitigated in the last years, and could possibly restart a campaign for a referendum to leave the Euro. In line with this idea, some of the party's MPs recently voted against the adoption of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), together with the far right.

Third, the party's right wing is in line with the populist far right also when it comes to migrants: several MPs voted against a decree that would have granted permits to irregular migrants working in farms and as carers.⁸⁶ The opposing factions within the party might be a sign of fragmentation, but at the same time, they could allow M5S to retain some anti-establishment credibility, by showing that a faction within the party opposes the measures proposed by the government.

Finally, M5S has another ace up its sleeve: it can combine its populist rhetoric with technocratic elements. Given the pandemic, Italian voters might privilege political actors that seem to foster expertise over ideological partisanship, and M5S is equipped for such a scenario. Indeed, the M5S-PD government is operating through task forces and extraordinary commissioners, bypassing the parliament. Most decisions have been delegated to a 'technical scientific committee' composed of twelve experts, subsequently supported by a 'technological task force' composed of seventy-four experts that are supposed to evaluate and propose data driven technological solutions to help the government against the pandemic. Thanks to its ideological flexibility, M5S is a Swiss army knife ready to face any situation, including a techno-populist management of the pandemic.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Giovanni Forti, 'Simulazione YouTrend: un anno dopo le elezioni europee, chi vince comune per comune,' *YouTrend*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.youtrend.it/2020/05/26/simulazione-youtrend-un-anno-dopo-le-elezioni-europee-chi-vince-comune-per-comune/> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸⁶ Angelo Amante, 'Migration issue opens rift in Italy's coalition amid COVID-19 crisis,' *Reuters*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-politics/migration-issue-opens-rift-in-italys-coalition-amid-covid-19-crisis-idUSKBN22O2IY> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸⁷ Luca Manucci and Michi Amsler, 'Where the wind blows: Five Star Movement's populism, direct democracy and ideological flexibility,' *Italian Political Science Review*, 48(1), 2017, pp. 109-132.

The Italian case shows that populist actors, both in power and opposition, can exploit the inevitable fear that a pandemic generates by using emotional, dramatic or messianic tones to attack other parties and supranational institutions. Moreover, in a situation where scientific disagreements are normal, populist actors can easily accuse the elites of incompetence, opacity and manipulation.⁸⁸ All this while spreading conspiracy theories that reduce the cognitive chaos and deliver to the people a simple message. Several M5S members are against compulsory vaccinations and Sara Cunial, ex M5S, even claimed that Bill Gates is developing a vaccine for COVID-19 to enslave the world's population.⁸⁹

While left wing populism continues to be virtually non-existent in Italy, it seems that in the aftermath of the pandemic it will be the populist far right to reap the benefit. The inevitable economic crisis, as we already observed after the Great Recession, will redirect the public debate towards the topics most congenial to League and Fdl. In conclusion, the pandemic is generating plenty of opportunities for populist actors to stage the classic populist fight between the 'silent majority' and national as well as supranational elites. Whether they will be able to profit from it depends on the strategy of each party as well as the credibility of the competition.

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⁸⁸ Catherine Fieschi, 'Europe's populists will try to exploit coronavirus. We can stop them,' *The Guardian*, 17 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/mar/17/europe-populists-coronavirus-salvini> (accessed 30 May 2020).

⁸⁹ Ryan Broderick, 'Bill Gates Conspiracy Theories Have Circulated For Years. It Took The Coronavirus Pandemic To Turn Him Into A Fake Villain,' *Buzzfeed*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/coronavirus-bill-gates-conspiracy-theories> (accessed 30 May 2020).

Tjitske Akkerman

10. The Netherlands

During the COVID-19 crisis, the reactions of populist leaders like Trump and Orban have reasserted widespread stereotypes of populists. Namely, that they exalt popular wisdom over expertise, distract the public from reality by offering scapegoats and conspiracy theories or exploit the crisis by introducing authoritarian measures. However, populist leaders have reacted in diverse ways to the current crisis. Indeed, the reactions of the populist parties in the Netherlands do not conform to this stereotype.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in the Netherlands diminished traditional divides in the Dutch parliament, but the radical right populist parties did not soften their opposition role. While the rest of the parties, including the left-wing populist Socialist Party (SP), made a truce with the government, the populist radical right parties Party for Freedom (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FvD) refused to support the measures taken by the Rutte cabinet on 12 March. The populist radical right leaders Geert Wilders (PVV) and Thierry Baudet (FvD) criticized these measures as being far too relaxed and presented a motion on 18 March to impose a hard lockdown. They stood alone; all the other parties positioned themselves as 'responsible players.'

Unlike neighbouring countries, like Belgium, France and Germany, the Dutch government favoured a relatively mild approach to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. When a so-called 'intelligent lockdown' was announced on 23 March, meaning that shops were allowed to stay open and people could go out for a walk or visit others with no more than two persons together, Wilders (PVV) held on to his critical position, but Baudet (FvD) switched to supporting the lockdown. Wilders consistently held up a confrontational position and style. He often attacked prime minister Mark Rutte in a very direct way. On 17 March, for instance, he tweeted: 'All of Europe is in lockdown except for the Netherlands of #Rutte, because Rutte prefers to play with the lives of people rather than saving them. Dangerous man.'⁹⁰ As there is little prospect of a future coalition with Rutte after the latter ostracized the PVV in 2017, Wilders does not have much of an incentive to spare the prime-minister.

PVV and FvD struggled to set the agenda during the COVID-19 crisis. With the pandemic dominating the news, the key issues of the populist radical right parties were relegated to the margins. Their nationalist ideology did not provide much guidance during the crisis. Although PVV and FvD, like other populist radical right parties, emphasized the need for border protection, they were mainly operating on uncharted terrain. The diverging reactions of neighbouring parties suggest that context rather than ideology was guiding their approach. While the two Dutch parties promoted a stricter lockdown in opposition to the relatively relaxed approach of the government, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany criticized the stricter regime of the German government for being too authoritarian. Moreover, the PVV and FvD hardly had the opportunity or the will to link the crisis to immigration issues. While Matteo Salvini in Italy suggested that African immigrants 'imported' the virus, the PVV and FvD leaders did not single out immigrants or minorities as potential sources of infection. However, when the EU planned a rescue fund for the member-states affected by the crisis, the PVV and FvD were back on familiar terrain and highlighted their Nexit positions. The left-wing SP had more difficulty to address this issue in clearcut terms; its message was a mix of euroscepticism and international solidarity. Lilian Marijnissen, the leader of the SP, avoided the subject on social media.

⁹⁰ Geert Wilders, *Twitter* post, 17 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1239993069308719104> (accessed 1 June 2020).

FvD and PVV realized that the government had broad popular support for the way it handled the COVID-19 crisis. Yet, their electoral success was also dependent on fierce opposition to the government and distrust of 'elitist' media and knowledge institutes. Their reactions were exploratory, sometimes following and sometimes deviating from the populist pattern. Experts played a central role in the Netherlands, as in many other countries, in advising governments on how to combat the virus. Especially in the first stage of the pandemic, from mid March to mid April, when healthcare sectors were (almost) overburdened, experts were wheeled to central stage. Virologists and other experts became well-known faces to a broad public thanks to their prominent role in talkshows. Although populists are often characterized as being averse to expertise, the messages that Baudet, Wilders and Marijnissen launched on social media during the height of the crisis do not accord with this idea. Wilders, for instance, referred to Italian experts and the World Health Organization to substantiate his motion, submitted on 18 March together with Baudet, for a stricter lockdown. Although Wilders and Baudet did not question the central role of experts as such, they were highly critical of the guidelines issued by the National Institute for Public Health and Environment.

Baudet and Wilders changed their message in the course of April. They started to press for more freedoms in order to support various economic sectors. Baudet recently twittered that the Dutch approach was too strict: '1 million people working in and around the catering sector fear they might lose their jobs. Because the Netherlands is 30% stricter than neighbouring countries.'⁹¹ He also tweeted that the rule of keeping a distance of 1.5 metre, advised by the World Health Organization and adopted by the Dutch government, should be done away with. To underscore his position, he invited a survey researcher with TV fame to vent the theory that COVID-19 is not contagious in the open air or in well ventilated rooms.⁹² Wilders supported this message.⁹³ Baudet and Wilders apparently have abandoned their initial prudence, and now endorse amateurish ideas that contradict any advice widely supported by experts.

To conclude, the reactions of the Dutch populist parties to the COVID-19 pandemic show that even within one country there is not a clear populist pattern. First, there is a clear divide between the reactions of the right-wing and left-wing populist parties. While the SP made a truce with government and remained consistent in its position, the PVV consistently and the FvD incidentally chose confrontation. Right-wing and left-wing populist parties differ with respect to core ideology, but this does not explain the different reactions.⁹⁴ All the populist parties lacked an ideological guide when they were confronted with this new crisis. The variation in reactions shows that populism is a matter of degree; for the SP it is more a rhetorical device, while the PVV and FvD are more fundamentally distrusting of government, knowledge institutes and media.⁹⁵ Second, the PVV and FvD are opposition parties and therefore hardly comparable to populist leaders like Trump, Bolsonaro or Orban, who are in power. Even as opposition parties, however, their reactions depend to some extent on their prospects of office. Wilders has been politically isolated since the PVV has been ostracized by all the mainstream parties in 2017. There is little incentive for Wilders to moderate his confrontational style and harsh criticism of the government. The FvD, in contrast, has not

⁹¹ Forum voor Democratie, *Twitter* post, 14 May 2020, <https://twitter.com/fvdemocratie/status/1260962180603805696> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁹² Forum voor Democratie, *Twitter* post, 15 May 2020, <https://twitter.com/fvdemocratie/status/1261312418183098368/photo/1> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁹³ Geert Wilders, *Twitter* post, 19 May 2020, <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1262797423421919233> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁹⁴ Tjitske Akkerman, 'Populist Parties Under Scrutiny – One Common Vision or a Scattered Agenda?' in Sascha Hardt, Aalt Willem Heringa & Hoai-Thu Nguyen (Eds) *Populism and Democracy*, 2020, Den Haag: Boom, pp. 53-68.

⁹⁵ Stijn van Kessel, 'Dutch Populism during the Crisis', in H. Kriesi & T. Pappas (Eds) *Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, 2015, Colchester: ECPR Press, pp. 109-124.

been ostracized. Its prospect for office is highly dependent on a coalition with the two mainstream right-wing parties that are in government at the moment. These different prospects may explain why the PVV has been more consistent than the FvD in its opposition to the government approach of the COVID-19 crisis.

Populists are supposed to fare well in times of crisis, but at least in the short term, the COVID-19 pandemic has the opposite effect. While those in power have profited during the COVID-19 crisis, the support for populist radical right parties has declined. In the Netherlands, prime minister Rutte has gained substantial electoral support for his People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). The other Dutch parties in the coalition government have hardly profited. Of all the parties in parliament, the FvD suffered most. Overall, there are no signs yet that the Dutch populist parties will profit from this crisis, but it is still early days.

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Nicole Curato

11. The Philippines

'Shoot them dead' has been President Rodrigo Duterte's response to many problems the Philippines faces.⁹⁶ Whether this is the issue of illegal drugs or urban crime, local communist insurgency or global terrorism, the President has been consistent in using and acting on threats to solve complex problems. The COVID-19 crisis is no exception.

The Philippines COVID-19 story started with a proud declaration from the country's health minister that the Philippines is a 'model country' in fighting the pandemic. But this self-congratulatory tone did not last long. On March 16, Duterte declared an 'enhanced community quarantine' in the entire island of Luzon after local cases of transmission were reported. International flights were banned, military men were deployed in checkpoints, non-essential services were shutdown, healthcare workers were prohibited from working overseas. Duterte formed an all-male COVID-19 interagency taskforce, mostly composed of former armed forces chiefs and high-ranking military officers.⁹⁷ Today, Manila is in the running for the world's longest and strictest COVID-19 lockdown.

Duterte's initially ambiguous ideological position became clear four years into his term. Having rid his cabinet of progressive politicians and populating them with retired military generals, Duterte's illiberal project is getting consolidated as time goes by. The pandemic gave Duterte the justification to further tighten the control of security forces especially in the capital. The protest of urban poor communities against ineffective government response to the crisis was violently dispersed by police in full riot gear. Incidents of police brutality were reported nationwide, with violators of the lockdown arrested, humiliated and beaten up.⁹⁸ Citizens who speak up against the regime's handling of the pandemic were arrested as well, raising serious concerns about the curtailment of free speech at a time when public scrutiny is most needed.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the politics of double standards continue. High-profile violators of quarantine rules remain unpunished. A key Duterte ally and former Senate President flouted quarantine protocols and accompanied his wife to the hospital, despite testing positive for COVID-19.¹⁰⁰ The National Capital Region's police force shamelessly posted photos of their chief's birthday bash on their Facebook page, violating rules on mass gathering, social distancing, and liquor ban. And then the preferential treatment of Chinese investors. Among the 'essential services' given the exemption to operate during the lockdown are offshore gambling operations serving clients in China.

That the pandemic did not halt but instead furthered Duterte's illiberal project is best instantiated in the shutdown of ABS-CBN – a media giant Duterte singled out in his previous speeches for its alleged bias against him. The last time the network went off air was in 1972

⁹⁶ Mark Thompson, 'Bloodied Democracy: Duterte and the Death of Liberal Reformism in the Philippines,' *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35(3), 2017, pages 39-68.

⁹⁷ Raisa Robles, 'Coronavirus: is Covid-19 task force Duterte's 'Rolex 12' in plan for Marcos-style martial law in the Philippines?' *South China Morning Post*, 28 April 2020 <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3081939/coronavirus-covid-19-task-force-dutertes-rolex-12-plan-marcos> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁹⁸ Jamela Alindogan, 'HRW: COVID-19 lockdown violators in Philippines abused,' *Al Jazeera*, 29 April 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/hrw-covid-19-lockdown-violators-philippines-abused-200429080703660.html> (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁹⁹ Melissa Luy Lopez, 'Police acted on 'good reason' in arresting online critics of Duterte – PNP' *CNN Philippines*, 15 May 2020. <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/5/15/PNP-regularity-arrest-anti-Duterte-post-netizens.html> (accessed 1 June 2020).

¹⁰⁰ Alan Robles, 'Coronavirus: Duterte ally Koko Pimentel blasted for putting health care workers in danger as more doctors die,' *South China Morning Post*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3077162/coronavirus-duterte-ally-koko-pimentel-blasted-putting> (accessed 1 June 2020).

during the Marcos dictatorship. The network was forced to go off air at the height of the pandemic because its franchise was not renewed. There are many implications of the network's shutdown. Aside from curtailing press freedom, ABS-CBN's absence means many Filipinos living in far-flung and vulnerable areas have no access to news and information not only about the pandemic but also about forthcoming disasters including the destructive Typhoon VongFong.

The implications of COVID-19 to Duterte's popularity will be hard to ascertain. Before the pandemic, polling firms reported that the President's popularity just 'hit a new high.'¹⁰¹ Pollsters, however, had to stop field research during the lockdown, and so precise, comparable, and time-sensitive figures will be impossible to get.

Social media sentiments may serve as proxy for the public's pulse. After all, the Philippines is one of the world's top users of social media because of its huge diasporic population that uses Facebook and messaging services to maintain connections in the country. Quick impressions lead to a murky picture though. Online conversations are disrupted by fake accounts that actively defend the President's #WeHealAsOne policy to COVID-19. These accounts also harass critics of the President, including high-profile celebrities starring in ABS-CBN's top-rated telenovelas who were vocal in defending press freedom. In response, seemingly organic campaigns appear to be successful in countering Duterte's propaganda machine. #OustDuterte was one of several hashtags critical of Duterte that trended at the height of the pandemic.

One possible test to Duterte's popularity is the impending economic downturn. Popularity ratings of Philippine presidents often dip when unemployment or inflation is high. How this will affect the President remains to be seen. In the meantime, Duterte's performative populism and authoritarian rhetoric remain, with his rambling late-night press conferences that Filipinos now call The Late Late Show with Rodrigo Duterte. His crass and macho political style continues. This time, Duterte threatened to slap the virus if they meet face-to-face.¹⁰²

However, unlike populists like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro who have expressed disregard for expert knowledge, Duterte has been largely receptive of the advice of scientific experts and health authorities. The challenge, however, is the extent to which these experts are supported and held accountable. The accuracy of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines can only be read with utmost scepticism given that there remains no mass testing to date. Getting tested has also been politicised, with VIPs like politicians and their relatives jumping the queue, getting ahead of health workers and front liners. The number of fatalities with the health community is alarming, with physicians comprising one of ten COVID-19-related deaths due to the lack of PPEs.¹⁰³

One could also raise questions about the hierarchy of credibility among experts within Duterte's circles. With a heavily securitised approach to the pandemic, it seems that experts in security could wield more power than experts in health. For many Filipinos, however, the

¹⁰¹ Andreo Calonzo, 'Duterte's Popularity Hits New High, Pollster SWS Says,' *Bloomberg*, 22 January 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-22/duterte-s-popularity-hits-new-high-pollster-sws-says> (accessed 1 June 2020).

¹⁰² Ronald D. Holmes and Paul Hutchcroft, 'A Failure of Execution,' *Inside Story*, 4 April 2020, <https://insidestory.org.au/a-failure-of-execution/> (accessed 1 June 2020).

¹⁰³ Julie McCarthy, 'Pandemic Claims The Lives Of Doctors In The Philippines At Startling Rates,' *NPR*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826804519/pandemic-claims-doctors-in-the-philippines-at-startling-rates> (accessed 1 June 2020).

challenge is as simple as it is threatening. Follow Duterte's orders and they will live. Otherwise, the police is tasked to shoot them dead.¹⁰⁴

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¹⁰⁴ Lynzy Billing, 'Duterte's Response to the Coronavirus: "Shoot Them Dead"', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/duterte-philippines-coronavirus-response-shoot-them-dead/> (accessed 1 June 2020).

Emmy Eklundh

12. Spain

Spain is currently led by a coalition government between the social-democratic Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the left-populist Unidas Podemos (UP). This coalition was formed after two general elections in 2019 (April and November), which both failed to produce a clear majority for either side of the political spectrum. After some initial reluctance from PSOE to accept the leader of UP as part of the cabinet, the current government was installed. Pablo Iglesias, for many the beacon of Podemos, is currently serving as Second Deputy Prime Minister in the Cabinet of Ministers led by the PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez.

The political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic began in the week commencing March 9, 2020, with a closing of schools and cancellation of flights to and from Italy. On March 14, the government declared an official state of emergency, which indicated the beginning of the lockdown. Spain instituted one of the strictest quarantine legislations in Europe, where activity outside the home was only allowed when buying food or medicines.¹⁰⁵ Podemos supported this lockdown, as it was part of the government's response. On March 16, Salvador Illa, the health minister, made the decision to nationalise all private hospitals and healthcare related companies, such as pharmaceutical providers.¹⁰⁶ This did not mean that the structure of all hospitals or companies was immediately changed, but it gave the Autonomous Communities (the administrative units responsible for health care) the capacity to utilise private spaces in the public interest. Illa is a member of PSOE in Catalonia (PSC), but this policy is very much in line with the official Podemos agenda.

The government has implemented a series of measures to aid the economy. Spain has to some extent recovered from the serious financial crisis in 2008, but still carries the scars from this period. While the 2008 crisis was heavily driven by the housing sector, structural factors make Spain more vulnerable to economic fluctuations. In some areas, Spain is weaker than 12 years ago, and has now higher national debt levels, unemployment at 14% instead of 8%, and a deficit of 3% of GDP instead of 2%. On the other hand, the Spanish economy is better in terms of higher GDP, a higher level of exports (35% vs 24%) and a lower level of inflation.¹⁰⁷ This gives the government more space for manoeuvre to support the economy. The economic measures have had a clear ambition to support citizens and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), such as the decision to offer unemployment support to workers who had previously been ineligible and also to extend support to those who would still be ineligible for traditional unemployment benefits, such as temporary workers. Moreover, the government has imposed a fiscal stimulus package, which should, according to the calculations, release up to €1,100 millions of liquidity for SMEs.¹⁰⁸

Podemos are working for a more socially equal society promoting a traditionally socialist agenda, having long advocated more state-led intervention to that end. The party supports increased minimum wage, an expansion of social housing, and an end to the privatisation of public services, including health care. The privatisation of hospitals is something which

¹⁰⁵ Boletín oficial de Estado, *Número 67 2020*, 14 March 2020, <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2020/03/14/pdfs/BOE-A-2020-3692.pdf> (accessed 15 May 2020).

¹⁰⁶ Nuria Ramírez de Castro, 'El Gobierno ordena la "nacionalización" de la Sanidad privada,' *ABC*, 16 March 2020, https://www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-gobierno-pone-orden-consejerias-instalaciones-sanitarias-privadas-coronavirus-202003152113_noticia.html (accessed 18 May 2020).

¹⁰⁷ José Luis Aranda, 'La nueva crisis pilla a España con menos margen pero con nuevas armas,' *El País*, 7 April 2020, <https://elpais.com/economia/2020-04-06/la-nueva-crisis-pilla-a-espana-con-menos-margen-pero-con-nuevas-armas.html> (accessed 18 May 2020).

¹⁰⁸ Gobierno de España, *Medidas económicas y sociales en la crisis del COVID-19*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/Paginas/enlaces/210420-enlace-medidas.aspx> (accessed 18 May 2020).

Podemos has long opposed.¹⁰⁹ The fact that private hospitals can now be used for public purposes is clearly a development in Podemos' favour.

The crisis has also revitalised the discussion around Universal Basic Income (UBI) in Spain. Podemos has consistently argued for UBI,¹¹⁰ but in the current proposals from the government, it seems as though a proposal of a minimum income level are more likely to be agreed. In line with one of Podemos' flagship policies around decent housing conditions, evictions have also been halted for 6 months.¹¹¹ The crisis has also had a clear effect on immigration policy. In the end of March and early April this year, the Ministry of the Interior decided to close the most high-profile detention centres, in order to halt the virus, which has long been a policy of Podemos, who argue that effective imprisonment is not an adequate way of handling migration.¹¹²

As a contrast, the extreme-right VOX party, which has also been labelled as populist by some scholars and commentators, is taking a radically different view on the crisis. The party has accused the government of eroding democracy, of being surgeons killing people on the operating table, and of wrecking the economy, and have organised several marches to protest what they label inhibitions to personal freedoms.¹¹³ The party is deeply critical of the lockdown measures, while they have left the cross-party commission for rebuilding Spain after the crisis, after the government announced a further reform of the labour market.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, there has been quite limited movement in the polls. Generally, the trend points to that support for the two traditional parties, PSOE and the conservative Partido Popular (PP) is stable or slightly surging. In the latest figures (mid-May 2020), PSOE is polling at around 27%, which is similar to their result in the 2019 general election (28%). PP, on the other hand, has experienced an increase, with figures now standing around 25%, compared to the 2019 electoral result of 20.8%.¹¹⁴ Support for specifically populist parties, such as Podemos and VOX, has decreased. Podemos gained 12.9% in the last election and is now polling at around 11%. VOX had support of 15.1% but is now polling at 14%. Admittedly, these changes are quite minor and could simply be normal fluctuations.

Spain has bad memories from the 2008 financial crisis, when so-called technocrats affirmed that austerity was the only way out of the crisis, which had profound negative consequences for the Spanish economy and its citizens. This time around, the political leadership of the country is wary not to make the same mistake and the foreign minister María Aránzazu González Laya has argued that 'this is a time for politics, not for technocracy'.¹¹⁵

The government's critics have, however, also made use of this rhetorical figure and argued that when decisions are based on science, one must ask what science this is, and to what political ends it is being employed. Political commentators on the right are at the same time

¹⁰⁹ Unidas Podemos, *Programa: 218: Poner freno a la mercantilización de la sanidad*, 2020 <https://podemos.info/bloque/garantias-justicia-social> (accessed 15 May 2020).

¹¹⁰ Unidas Podemos, *Programa: 213: Ingreso Básico Garantizado*, 2020 <https://podemos.info/bloque/garantias-justicia-social> (accessed 15 May 2020).

¹¹¹ Max Jiménez Botías, 'El Gobierno impedirá los desahucios durante seis meses,' *El Periódico*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/economia/20200330/el-gobierno-impedira-los-desahucios-durante-seis-meses-7910815> (accessed 15 May 2020).

¹¹² Unidas Podemos, *Programa: 146: Cerrar los centros de internamiento de extranjeros*, 2020. <https://podemos.info/bloque/garantias-democraticas-ciudadania> (Accessed May 15 2020).

¹¹³ Miguel González, 'La Extrema Derecha busca su 15-M,' *El País*, 20 May 2020, <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-05-19/la-extrema-derecha-busca-su-15-m.html> (accessed 15 May 2020)

¹¹⁴ Electrocraacia 'Todos los sondeos electorales', 18 May 2020 <https://electocraacia.com> (accessed 15 May 2020)

¹¹⁵ Bernardo De Miguel, 'Arancha González Laya: "Es tiempo de política, no de tecnocracia",' *El País*, 14 May 2020, <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-05-14/arancha-gonzalez-laya-es-tiempo-de-politica-no-de-tecnocracia.html> (accessed 18 May 2020).

issuing warnings about the ‘simple solutions’ of populists to this very complex crisis and are also signalling the need for fiscal prudence in the face of a looming economic crisis. Some are very critical of Podemos, arguing that they are manipulating Sánchez, and are governing by invoking emotions and fear.¹¹⁶ Overall, the debate around populism in Spain is multifaceted. Countries with right-wing populist in government are labelled as less effective in their battle against the virus, whereas there is simultaneous criticism against the Spanish government, and in particular Podemos, for playing on people’s fear and offering simple solutions. Populism is seen as both the cause of under-reaction, as well as over-reaction.

Spain is one of the European countries heaviest affected by COVID-19 and have implemented far-reaching measures to combat the health crisis and the economic crisis. The left coalition government are clearly looking to also deliver their electoral promises as much as possible, and not to repeat mistakes made during the 2008 financial crisis. These measures are likely to be heavily disputed by their political opponents.

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¹¹⁶ Mario Garcés, ‘De la fantasía a la pesadilla populista en España,’ *El Mundo*, 29 April 2020 <https://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2020/04/29/5ea94eb621efa0c4548b45d9.html> (accessed 18 May 2020).

Liv Sunnercrantz

13. Sweden

The Swedish response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been exceptional. Unlike its Nordic neighbours, Sweden did not legislate for lockdown, quarantine or social distancing. Authorities issued recommendations that were less severe and always later than neighbouring countries. In the first of two public speeches, the Social Democrat prime minister Stefan Löfven addressed 'the Swedish people' and emphasised individual responsibility, solidarity and efforts 'for our society and for Sweden.'¹¹⁷ He described a crisis and a national 'us' but not in contrast to an outside elite or establishment. The outside that united the 'us' was either the vulnerable other, a threatening crisis, or COVID-19 itself.

Like a shadow following Löfven, the Sweden Democrats' (SD) leader Jimmie Åkesson presented his own 'speech to the nation,' the latest example of Åkesson's attempts to usurp Löfven's position. Åkesson downplayed political antagonisms in favour of national unity: 'We go through this crisis as a united country, as a nation, as a family.'¹¹⁸ His speech was ridden with emotive appeals to fear and worry, and Åkesson positioned himself among 'elected politicians' – an 'us' rather than an unresponsive elite. For years, SD have successfully played the role of the underdog, oppressed by cultural and political elites. In the current media climate Sweden and Swedish authorities have instead become the underdog in a global arena.

In previous crises populist rhetoric has aided, first, the social democratic hegemony that began in the 1930s, and second, the transition to a neoliberal hegemony around 1990.¹¹⁹ A dismantling of the welfare state, declining class politics and a market-liberal consensus among established parties followed. SD challenged this status quo with populist practices. Despite their Nazi past and a trail of scandals, SD's popularity increased dramatically through the 2010s. Their rhetoric constructed an ethnically homogenous 'us' threatened by an immigrant-friendly political establishment and politically correct intellectual elites. Attempts to form government among established parties who (initially) agreed to block SD from power have been fraught with crises since 2014.¹²⁰

Law, order and migration dominated media before the pandemic. SD received ample attention and soared in the polls, threatening the lingering Social Democrats' dominance and surpassing the conservative Moderates. When the pandemic turned into a crisis, news media changed foci and polls showed increased support for the Social Democrats and Löfven.¹²¹ In conjunction with media shifting attention to healthcare, financial and labour market politics, the public's main concern also shifted from integration/immigration to healthcare, state

¹¹⁷ Stefan Löfven, *Tal till nationen*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2020/03/statsministerns-tal-till-nationen-den-22-mars-2020> (accessed 18 May 2020).

¹¹⁸ Jimmie Åkesson, *Tal till Nationen*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIZqwlzRBQk> (accessed 18 May 2020).

¹¹⁹ Liv Sunnercrantz, *Hegemony and the Intellectual Function: Medialised Public Discourse on Privatisation in Sweden 1988-1993*, 2017, Lund: Media-Tryck.

¹²⁰ Jens Rydgren & Sara van der Meiden, 'The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism,' *European Political Science*, 18(3), 2018, pp. 439-455; Juha Herkman, 'Old Patterns on New Clothes? Populism and Political Scandals in the Nordic Countries,' *Acta Sociologica*, 61(4), 2018, pp. 341-355; Emilia Palonen & Liv Sunnercrantz, 'Nordic Populist Parties as Hegemony Challengers,' in Anu Koivunen, Jari Ojala & Janne Holmén (Eds) *The Nordic Economic, Social and Political Model: Challenges in the 21st Century*, Routledge [Accepted/In press].

¹²¹ For election results, rates of approval and voter intentions cf. Örjan Hultåker, 'SKOPs Väljarbarometer, 11 May 2020,' *SKOP*, 11 May 2020; Toivo Sjören, 'Väljarbarometern,' *Kantar Sifo*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.kantarsifo.se/rapporter-undersokningar/valjarbarometern>; Statistiska Centralbyrån, 'Partisypatiundersökningen,' 10 December 2019, <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/demokrati/partisypati/partisypatiundersokningen-psu>; Torbjörn Sjöström, 'Novus/SVT april 2020: S fortsätter öka, SD och L tappar signifikant,' *Novus* (blog), 23 April 2020, <https://novus.se/valjarbarometer-arkiv/novus-svt-april-2020-s-fortsatter-oka-sd-och-l-tappar-signifikant> (all accessed 20 May 2020).

finances and education¹²². Party-political antagonisms, opinion polls, and discussions around populism were toned down. Löfven was referred to more as prime minister and government representative than party leader. References to opposition parties decreased. News and social media framed SD and Åkesson in more negative terms, while the Social Democrats gained more positive mentions.¹²³ Nationalism has become more prominent in public discourse, with Sweden portrayed as more rational and less prone to panic and 'alarmism' than the rest of the world – the dominant theme being that Sweden is the only country doing (mostly) the right thing. In this context, it is difficult for the nationalist SD to oppose what has become *the* 'Swedish' strategy.

State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell has become a central reference point in pandemic discourse. A personification of the technocratic expert, Tegnell has been presented as rational, impartial and serious. He appears variably as un-attached expert, the face of authorities, or a popular 'national icon.'¹²⁴ When Donald Trump criticised the Swedish strategy, media interviewed Tegnell – not Löfven. Tegnell invoked professional expertise to re-assert the truth: 'we who work with infectious diseases know that [...] this is the only way.'¹²⁵ In this context, the government has largely deferred decision-making to Tegnell, making him a potential scapegoat should their strategy fail.

Instead of pitting experts against common sense, ordinary people, or politicians, Swedish media have pitted Tegnell and Swedish exceptionalism against domestic and foreign experts to generate conflict narratives in the news coverage.¹²⁶ In public debate, medical experts who demanded political intervention¹²⁷ were met with ridicule and anti-intellectualism by commentators defending Tegnell.¹²⁸ Rather than antagonising experts, SD have retrospectively lamented the lack of political decisiveness early in the crisis.¹²⁹

In colloquial and mass-media discourse, 'populist' has become an insult equated with popular demands, racisms and far-right politics: the will of the uneducated and irrational majority. In the Corona-spring, oppositional populist actors have toned down and re-framed their rhetoric. SD have appealed to the authority of dissident experts rather than the state-epidemiologist. Still, Swedish exceptionalism must be understood in context. Individual freedom is fundamental to the existing neoliberal hegemony, which draws its legitimacy from the sanctity of individual rights, freedom and independence. It is hard to argue for incursion in that freedom. The Social Democrats have addressed popular grievances and frustrations without threatening these values. Although there are signs that they might reassert their dominance against the populist challenger SD, the outcome is still unclear.

¹²² Cf. Per Söderpalm & Ulla von Lochlow, 'Mediamätaren: Hur politik diskuteras i media,' *Kantar Sifo*, 27 April 2020; Martinson, Johan & Ulrika Andersson, 'Svenska Trender 1986-2019,' Göteborg: SOM-institutet, 2020.

¹²³ Söderpalm & von Lochlow, 'Mediamätaren: Hur politik diskuteras i media.'

¹²⁴ Lena Melin, 'Anders Tegnell – på väg att bli nationalidol,' *Aftonbladet*, 21 March 2020, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/a/wPQmzG> (accessed 19 May 2020).

¹²⁵ Prescilia Haddad, 'Tegnell om Trumps utspel: Man ska inte ta det på allvar,' *SVT*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/tegnell-om-trumps-utspe-1-jamfort-med-new-york-fungerar-det-bra-i-sverige> (accessed 20 May 2020).

¹²⁶ 'Här möts två forskare om den svenska linjen i coronakrisen,' *Mötet*, *SVT*, 9 May 2020.

¹²⁷ Marcus Carlsson et al., 'Folkhälsomyndigheten har misslyckats - nu måste politikerna gripa in,' *DN.SE*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/folkhalsomyndigheten-har-misslyckats-nu-maste-politikerna-gripa-in> (accessed 20 May 2020).

¹²⁸ Victor Malm, 'Coronahaveristerna är en skam för Sverige,' *Expressen*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/victor-malm/coronahaveristerna-ar-en-skam-for-sverige>; Alex Schulman, 'Ett intellektuellt haveri,' *Expressen*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.expressen.se/blogg/schulman/2020/04/ett-intellektuellt-haveri> (both accessed 20 May 2020).

¹²⁹ Jimmie Åkesson - Vi behöver politisk handlingskraft nu, 12 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSz_P8HjuVg&feature=youtu.be (accessed 19 May 2020).

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Halil Gürhanlı

14. Turkey

The first reported case of COVID-19 infection in Turkey was registered on March 10th 2020, and as of May 2020, Turkey is one of the top ten countries with the most confirmed cases and ranks 14th when it comes to COVID-19-related deaths. Despite these figures and the country's average test capacity (38th out of 85),¹³⁰ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other officials of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) insist that their competent handling of the crisis has resulted in Turkey being one of the countries that are least affected by the pandemic.

Having come to power in a landslide election victory in 2002 and ruling the country single-handedly ever since, Erdoğan – usually in the same breath with other usual suspects such as Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump – is often listed among the typical examples of populist leaders of the 21st century. This has been the case especially since the 2013 Gezi Events,¹³¹ when his authoritarian response to the anti-government protests, which he labelled as a conspiracy instigated by Turkey's foreign enemies to overturn the nation's will, decisively dispelled the 'conservative democratic' image his party had carefully cultivated in the preceding decade. Throughout those earlier years, hardly anyone in academia or media called Erdoğan and his government populist, although the widespread appeal that the party generated was largely thanks to its archetypically populist politics which championed the forgotten, ordinary people of Anatolia and their right to popular sovereignty against a small clique of corrupted, power-hungry, ultra-secular elite and their tutelary regime.¹³² In the post-Gezi era, however, Erdoğan and his government have taken a decisive turn towards nativism and the radical-right, articulating the political fault-lines between 'native and national' [*yerli ve milli*] in-groups and their domestic and foreign enemies (out-groups).¹³³ Interestingly, it was only when the AKP transformed its early populism with an undeniably authoritarian and nativist discourse, effectively turning into a populist radical-right party, that 'populist' became a common adjective used to describe both the party and its leader.

In any case, since the Gezi events in 2013, the AKP government rearticulated each crisis through the same authoritarian and nativist discourse and the current global pandemic has been no exception. On April 13, Erdoğan typically declared: 'Some media and politicians are more dangerous than the virus. They attack and criticise the government instead of supporting it in these hard days, but our country will get rid of those viruses in media and politics very soon.'¹³⁴ Although it seems reasonable to suspect that the Turkish government has been trying to systematically 'hide a wider coronavirus calamity,'¹³⁵ hundreds of citizens who doubt, ridicule or in any way publicly undermine the official policies and relevant statistics are taken in custody on charges of terrorism and are often accused of causing public unrest. Investigative accounts from abroad that have drawn attention to the discrepancies in official figures were

¹³⁰ Max Roser et.al., 'Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19),' *OurWorldInData.org*, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus> (Accessed 14 May 2020).

¹³¹ Umut Özkırımlı (ed.), *The making of a protest movement in Turkey: #Occupygezi*, 2014, London: Springer.

¹³² S. Erdem Aytaç and Ezgi Elçi, 'Populism in Turkey,' in Stockemer D. (ed.) *Populism Around the World*, 2019, Springer, pp. 89-108.

¹³³ Halil Gürhanlı, 'Populism on Steroids: Erdoğanists and Their Enemies in Turkey,' in Urpo Kovala et.al. (eds), *Populism on the Loose*, 2018, Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Press, pp. 53-80; Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,' *Javnost - The Public*, 24(4), 2017, pp. 301-319.

¹³⁴ 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, 'Kabine Toplantısı'nın ardından açıklamalarda bulundu,' *Turkish Presidency's Directorate of Communications*, 13 April 2020, https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/yerel_basin/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-kabine-toplantisinin-ardindan-aciklamalarda-bulundu (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹³⁵ Carlotta Gall, 'Istanbul Death Toll Hints Turkey Is Hiding a Wider Coronavirus Calamity,' *The New York Times*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/20/world/middleeast/coronavirus-turkey-deaths.html> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

dismissed as ‘nothing but an expression of hostility against Turkey.’¹³⁶ In his weekly ‘Address to the Nation,’ Erdoğan has repeatedly accused opposition parties and leaders of ‘national treason’ for casting doubt on the official figures and criticising the government’s handling of the crisis.¹³⁷ Due to the authoritarian practices that the Turkish government has been perfecting in the course of recent crises, such as the failed coup d’etat attempt in 2016, the AKP has been able to largely control information related to the pandemic, monopolise public narratives and present itself as the only actor capable of dealing with the crisis. Consequently, Erdoğan’s approval ratings have rocketed from the record low of 42% in February to a four-year high of 56% in March 2020.¹³⁸

The Turkish case is also a stark reminder that there is no singular division between *populists* and *experts*, for it largely depends on the way in which the latter group is framed by particular actors. That is to say, experts in general do not stand as a monolith out-group of scientific elites targeted by the Turkish government – only those who diverge from the official narrative are attacked as such. Those who scrutinize Turkey’s official statistics and shed doubt on government policies related to the pandemic are labelled as nefarious ‘traitors’ and are even persecuted.¹³⁹ On the other hand, scientists seating at the state-sanctioned Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board are treated with the utmost respect – as long as their findings and statements stay in line with the official narrative. One good example is the case of the Turkish Medical Association (TMA), the country’s largest independent medical and health professional organisation representing 80% of its doctors. As an outspoken critic of the AKP government, the TMA has been at the receiving end of its push against left-leaning professional groups for quite some time, having its senior members detained for opposing Turkey’s military campaign in Syria a few years back. On that instance, Erdoğan had accused the TMA of treason, declaring it as ‘unworthy of the notion of Turkishness’ and thus promising to enact a new law to ensure the group ‘will not be able to use the notion of Turkishness, nor the name Turkey’ in its title.¹⁴⁰ Thus during the coronavirus outbreak, TMA has not only been excluded from the decision-making process, but also targeted by the latter through a proposed law that threatens to diminish the independence of professional associations.¹⁴¹

Lastly, a point not to be overlooked while examining the Turkish case is that, rather than public health, economic concerns over the sinking currency and Turkey’s domestic consumption-driven model of growth seem to largely determine the government’s handling of the crisis.¹⁴² Most strikingly, of all measures taken to tackle the spread of coronavirus, the first one to be dropped has been the closure of shopping malls, which were reopened just two months after the first confirmed case of infection. Despite warnings from the scientific

¹³⁶ Fahrettin Altun, ‘Turkey is the flagbearer with its aids in the world,’ *Turkish Presidency’s Directorate of Communications*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/altun-turkey-is-the-flagbearer-with-its-aids-in-the-world> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹³⁷ ‘Erdoğan, normalleşme planını açıkladığı ulusa sesleniş konuşmasında yine CHP’ye yüklendi,’ *Cumhuriyet*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdogan-normallesme-planini-acikladigi-ulusa-seslenis-konusmasinda-yine-chpye-yuklendi-1736861> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹³⁸ ‘Erdoğan’s approval rating bolstered by coronavirus pandemic – Metropoll,’ *AhvalNews*, 7 April 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/approval-rating/erdogans-approval-rating-bolstered-coronavirus-pandemic-metropoll> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹³⁹ ‘Turkish doctors issue apologies for coronavirus statements,’ *AhvalNews*, 30 March 2020, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-coronavirus/turkish-doctors-issue-apologies-coronavirus-statements> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹⁴⁰ Tuvan Gümrükcü, ‘Medical association to lose Turkish tag over criticism of Syria campaign,’ *Reuters*, 8 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-security/medical-association-to-lose-turkish-tag-over-criticism-of-syria-campaign-idUSKBN1FS2KJ> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹⁴¹ ‘From Istanbul Medical Chamber to Erdoğan: We Demand Respect for Physicians’ Will,’ *Bianet.org*, 13 May 2020, <http://bianet.org/english/print/224201-from-istanbul-medical-chamber-to-erdogan-we-demand-respect-for-physicians-will> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

¹⁴² Mustafa Sönmez, ‘Why is Turkey prioritizing shopping malls in reopening plan?,’ *Al-Monitor*, 8 May 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/turkey-coronavirus-first-step-to-reopen-economy-malls.html> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

community and a subsequent rise in the number of cases, these 454 malls have stayed open when public spaces such as parks have remained closed. Similarly, plans for resuming international flights already by the beginning of June to resuscitate the sinking tourism industry remain unchanged even in the face of warnings of a looming second-wave of virus spread globally.¹⁴³

Overall, the way in which the AKP government has been handling the COVID-19 pandemic stands witness to the party's long rightward swing, highlighting authoritarian and nationalist/nativist, not populist, elements of its politics. As Erdoğan's success in his quest to become Turkey's most powerful figure negated the basis of his claim to represent the oppressed people against an illegitimately powerful elite, authoritarian nativism towers above the party's early anti-elitism, determining its framing of the pandemic as not a public health crisis but yet another war of independence where the nation has to fight for its survival against domestic and foreign enemies.

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¹⁴³ 'Turkish Airlines plans to resume limited number of flights in June,' *TRT World*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkish-airlines-plans-to-resume-limited-number-of-flights-in-june-36064> (Accessed 17 May 2020).

Simon Tormey

15. United Kingdom

Notwithstanding a vociferous debate concerning whether Boris Johnson can or cannot be considered a populist, his victory in the general election of 2020 owed a great deal to a recognisably populist strategy.¹⁴⁴ It offered a strikingly reductive, simplistic solution to an issue that had bedevilled Britain's elites since 2016. It said, quite simply, 'Get Brexit Done.' The phrase spurned the complexity, the nuance, the calculations of national income, the opinions of experts in favour of three words that promised an end to a hurtful saga, and a tortuous one as far as many British citizens were concerned.¹⁴⁵ A simple solution to a complex problem in order to develop the hegemonic base for his non-specific brand of One Nation Toryism; yet, one that could claim to honour people's choice in a referendum, something no populist is supposed to ignore.

Assuming we can agree that a hallmark of populism is the radical simplification of the terms of political antagonism in a way seen as honouring popular sentiment, the Brexit election demonstrated the efficacy of an approach based around a condensation of political messaging, affective appeals to 'common sense' and charismatic leadership with a core pitch of 'I understand what you the People want; they (i.e. other parties, the elites, the technocrats, the experts etc) don't.' This moment of triumphant univocity was, however, rudely punctured by the outbreak of the pandemic, a complex phenomenon requiring scientific expertise, careful deliberation and multiple insights to resolve. Would this be the end of the UK's flirtation with populism?

Those familiar with Johnson's approach suspected otherwise, correctly so as it turned out. The impulse to simplify, to reduce complexity to easily digestible concepts and edicts has been at the heart of the Government's approach.¹⁴⁶ If this approach was successful in pressing on with Brexit, why wouldn't the same approach – radical simplification of a complex set of issues – not work in the case of COVID-19?

This approach manifested itself in a number of important ways, which in turn help build a picture of the limitations of Johnson's approach.

I. Johnson chose to run with evidence supplied by a single source, Prof Neil Ferguson's group at Imperial College London. The latter advised Johnson to adopt a strategy of 'herd immunity,' or more plainly of letting the pandemic take its course without major remedial action in order to achieve a self-vaccination of the population. Prof Ferguson added that such a strategy would come at the cost of around 500,000 deaths. Understandably the 'herd' reacted badly with social media awash with accusations of callous disregard for the people. Ferguson backtracked and instead recommended a strategy of lockdown in order to guarantee that the NHS would be able to manage the increase in load.

The virtue of lockdown is that it is easy to understand – 'stay at home, and all will be well.' It's a nice neat solution to a complex issue. The problem with this approach is however twofold. Firstly, the scientific evidence is by no means settled. Ferguson himself was able to backtrack on what days before had been his considered advice. If Ferguson himself could

¹⁴⁴ Tim Bale, 'The Real Boris Johnson: One Nation Tory or Raging Populist,' *The Observer*, 14 December 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/dec/14/boris-johnson-one-nation-tory-or-raging-populist> (accessed 30 May 2020).

¹⁴⁵ Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment,' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32(3), 2019, pp. 222-244.

¹⁴⁶ Ben Margulies, 'Understanding Boris Johnson's Appeal: Performative Rebelliousness, Impishness and Ill-Discipline,' *LSE British Politics & Policy Blog*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-appeal-of-boris-johnson/> (accessed 30 May 2020).

change tack, didn't that show how unstable the hypotheses were that underpinned this massive unplanned experiment in social engineering?

Secondly, lockdown is not itself a solution. It is not 'getting X done' in the manner of leaving the EU. It offers to mitigate one disaster, spread of the virus, by risking another, a severe economic downturn leading to recession and possibly depression. What worked in the case of Brexit – the simplification of a complex issue through focusing on an endpoint – was proving more difficult as far as COVID-19 is concerned. How therefore to keep minds off the Hobson's choice presented by the virus?

2. The key plank in this mitigation strategy was the fetishisation of the NHS as the totemic axis around which government policy would rotate. All this despite the fact that due to Conservative-led policies of austerity over the previous 10 years the NHS was under-equipped to manage a pandemic. The more the Conservative government emphasised the importance of the NHS, the more exposed it looked on the basis of its previous policy, which was to squeeze productivity and savings out of the NHS until it creaked.

This was not lost on high-profile media figures such as Piers Morgan, who delighted in torturing government ministers from his privileged spot on a daily breakfast TV programme. Why was there no testing? Why did the NHS run out of PPE – personal protective equipment? Why have we failed to learn from other countries using contact tracing and sophisticated apps to monitor the spread of the virus? The more the NHS was celebrated the more exposed the Government became to the accusation of double handed dealing with it: why the cuts, the lack of equipment, the lack of preparation?

Brief respite was achieved when Boris himself succumbed to the virus spending a week in intensive care, in the NHS it should be added. This permitted him to celebrate the NHS on the basis of personal experience, and even mischievously to name two non-UK citizens as instrumental in his own recovery. His underlining of the importance of recent migrants to the cause demonstrated a magnanimous cosmopolitan side that had been singularly absent in the Brexit campaign.

3. Johnson's radical simplification of COVID-19 led inevitably to a need for condensing slogans along the lines of 'Get Brexit Done' to meet the urgent need of the British for readily digestible ways of comprehending the virus and what they should do in response to it. 'Stay at Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives.' Simple, effective, direct. Just what the British were looking for, so it seems, as the high approval ratings for Johnson showed.

This sense of a government in control was further underlined by the actions of Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor, who announced an ambitious furlough scheme the likes of which had not been seen in the UK outside wartime. It guaranteed 80% of pay for around 6 million workers for an unstated period. Within days Britain resembled Oceania from Orwell's *1984*, a society of handily docile 'proles' bombarded with slogans designed to mitigate anxiety with a sense that someone was looking after the needs and interests of the People. But at a cost estimated by the *Financial Times* at £16 billion a month, this could only ever be a temporary measure, as opposed to the semi-permanent condition imagined by Orwell. Economic ruin would inevitably follow a prolonged period of dormancy.

Undeterred, the Government rolled the dice on trying to get itself out of the cul-de-sac of its lockdown strategy by modifying the message and the slogans. Its new simplified advice asked now to 'Stay alert. Control the Virus. Save Lives.' Same formula, but different words and, more worryingly a very different effect. Instead of reassuring people, it made them uneasy. Instead of clarifying what they should do, it left actions up to 'common sense.' Instead of putting the state at the centre of the strategy, it devolved the responsibility to individuals. Many began to

query the competence of the regime. The Government's polls showed decline, even if Johnson's have remained resilient, for the time being.

What does the above tell us about the interplay of populism and COVID-19?

As we noted at the outset populism's success depends on its ability to radically simplify the terms of political discourse (People vs elites etc). Crisis is often useful to this process, which is why populism thrives under conditions of crisis and why populists seek to maintain and build on a sense of crisis to bolster their popularity and legitimacy. No crisis, and politics tends to revert to its default setting of a contest of interests and ideologies with specific audiences and constituencies.

What Johnson's deft handling of the Brexit crisis showed is that by reducing the complexity of the issues to a simple mandate ('Get Brexit Done') he could outflank opponents hamstrung by competing interests and interpretations, and build a surprising coalition of disaffected working class voters with older middle class voters seeking a return to Britain's glorious past. What the current pandemic shows, however, is not all crises are amenable to reduction in such fashion, and thus that a populist strategy of radical simplification of the issues for the purpose of maintaining power and popularity is not without its own risks and pitfalls.

Here the risk is one of imagining that merely by invoking 'science' one can somehow tame the war of interpretation that lies at the very heart of the scientific enterprise. It is to imagine that celebrating the NHS will win popularity when only recently the latter was made to suffer at the hands of those leading the celebrations. It is to imagine that one can avoid trade-offs between personal safety, public health and economic activity. It is to imagine that offering a frenetic imitation of Churchillian bravado will win over increasingly anxious citizens faced with the prospect of unemployment and diminishing prospects. It is to imagine that political style can trump a substantive, sober and pragmatic accommodation to emerging social and political realities of the kind we have seen in Sweden, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan.

Radical simplification of this kind does not constitute populism; but all populists use these techniques to build and sustain hegemony. So is Boris's handling COVID-19 evidence that he is a populist, or merely one adept at using populist tactics to sustain his own popularity?

It's a complex question and one that gets at the heart of a key faultline between populist studies and everyday usage of the term 'populism'. Many scholars of populism dispute the notion that Trump, Johnson at all are 'really' populists. They are nativists or elitists or conservative anti-globalisers, or something else entirely – but not populists. They may occasionally speak to a populist dichotomy of us and them, but at heart they are content to sustain the status quo, in large measure. In everyday discourse however, we see these figures regularly referred to as populists.¹⁴⁷ They're rude, blustery, unpredictable figures who delight in upsetting the po-faced mainstream. Moreover, their unpredictability and disdain for process means they are an incipient threat to democratic procedure. This for most intents and purposes is evidence of populism, so it is argued.

Notwithstanding these distinctions something common to both approaches can be discerned. They both agree that populism can be distinguished from a *technocratic* mode and style of governance, which is to say an approach that looks for consensus, that is prepared to consider a variety of insights and expert opinion and to move ahead cautiously and on the basis of the

¹⁴⁷ Mark Landler, 'Trump and Boris Johnson: Populist Peas in a Pod? Not Really', *New York Times*, September 27 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/europe/trump-johnson-populism.html>; Michael Lind, 'What's behind the West's Populist Wave?' *Prospect*, March 5 2020 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/whats-behind-the-wests-populist-wave-immigration-brexite-boris-johnson-class-divide> (both accessed 30 May 2020).

best evidence. It is to put facts, process and deliberation at the heart of policy making. As I think is clear Johnson has undeniably tried to give the impression of a technocratic approach, with his seeming kowtowing to the 'experts'. But his populism has shined through at every stage, not least in his cavalier approach to choosing experts in the first place, to selecting evidence, and to approaching complexity more generally.

His approach has been *political*. It has been concerned with neutralising critique, mobilising alliances, and securing his own power base. The 'public good' has taken second place to the good of Boris and his clique, and most notably Dominic Cummings. If the mark of populism is, as many have argued, a radical substitutionism that collapses the distance between the interests of the regime and the interests of the people, then the COVID affair gives ample evidence to sustain the view that Johnson's approach, style and instincts are populist, albeit with a very English accent, literally and metaphorically.

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Joseph Lowndes

16. United States of America

There has been relatively modest public discussion of populism in the United States in regard to COVID-19. The figure most associated with left-wing populism, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, was beginning to exit the public stage by late March after losing the battle for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, and with him the public conversations about both universal healthcare and wealth redistribution, so relevant to the twinned epidemiological and economic crises that were now emerging. In any case, there could no longer be large rallies for Sanders or for the causes he represented. To the degree that journalists and pundits associate populism with leaders and/or rallies, neither was available on the Left. However, an insurrectionary protest movement has emerged in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, an African-American man, on a scale far exceeding anything seen in half a century in cities and towns across the country. It is likely that much of the intensity of the uprising is linked directly to the dramatic immiseration caused by the economic shutdown during the pandemic. Nevertheless, its spontaneous, leaderless character makes it unlikely to be categorized as populist.

On the Right, Donald Trump has neither acted decisively, nor expanded his power in ways associated with populist leadership. A national right-wing protest movement has emerged that has decidedly populist elements, although it remains small in terms of numbers. Nevertheless, there is a distinct populism of the Right discursively shaping the political landscape.

The Republican Party itself has largely emphasized neoliberal responses – resisting federal aid to individuals, communities, and small businesses; pushing back against the expansion of unemployment benefits; and insisting that economic remedies must come from the marketplace. However, this neoliberalism has gained populist cover in a social movement centered on demands that shelter-in-place orders be lifted in the subnational states where they are currently in force, and framed as a struggle between ‘the people’ and government elites, intergovernmental organizations, scientific experts and the media. The movement’s demands and energy, in turn, have shaped the tenor of the Republican neoliberal response among governors, members of Congress, and President Trump.

As noted above, the populist response on the right has not included the expansion of political power and authority by a strong leader, as for instance Viktor Orbán did in Hungary has done. This is partly due to the constitutional structure of U.S. federalism, whereby broad police powers to respond to the crisis rests with the subnational states and localities. Nevertheless, in other times of perceived crisis U.S. presidents have found ways to overcome barriers of both federalism and the constitutional separation of powers – Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s response to the Great Depression and George W. Bush’s response to the September 11 attacks being only two examples. Trump largely did not take the opportunity raised by the pandemic to demand more sweeping powers for the executive branch. He did not, for instance, use it to fashion a broad response that compelled industries or workers (except in particular circumstances), did not call for vast federal spending to contain the virus through testing or tracing, did not create and empower new executive agencies, and did not, until the George Floyd protests, call to utilize federal law enforcement powers in a decisive way. He has now threatened to use his powers as Commander in Chief of the US armed forces to send troops into states and cities.¹⁴⁸ His Constitutional powers to do so are dubious, but we are presently in untested waters.

¹⁴⁸ CNN, ‘President Trump’s Rose Garden speech on protests,’ *cnn.com*, 2 June 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/01/politics/read-trumps-rose-garden-remarks/index.html> (accessed 3 June 2020).

Trump has made other attempts to claim executive authority beyond his Constitutional powers, but clumsily and to little effect. In late April, after weeks of stating that the power to re-open states rests with the states, he shifted and maintained that as president, the decision ultimately rested with him. ‘When somebody is the president of the United States, the authority is total, and that’s the way it’s got to be,’ he said in a press conference on April 13. ‘It’s total, and the governors know that.’¹⁴⁹ After New York governor Andrew Cuomo balked at the statement and numerous pundits and scholars chimed in that the president had no such power, Trump backed down the next day. Subsequently US Attorney General William Barr threatened to sue states that did not reopen, but it appeared to have no effect on the actions of individual states or localities.¹⁵⁰

Rather than expand presidential power in this moment, Trump has mostly used populist performance in daily White House press briefings and on Twitter to rebuff expert knowledge and epidemiological protocols coming from the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Centers for Disease Control (the US agency primarily responsible for pandemic response); to tout untested treatments like the anti-malarial drug Hydroxchloroquine, to refuse to wear a mask; to call for the ‘liberation’ of states from lockdown orders; and to ratchet up nationalism and nativism. Trump has repeatedly sought to blame China for the spread of virus. ‘I think they made a horrible mistake and they didn’t want to admit it. We wanted to go in. They didn’t want us there,’ he said in one typical statement about the US economic rival. ‘This virus should not have spread all over the world. They should have put it out.’¹⁵¹

More consequentially, however, in late April, Attorney General William Barr told Fox News commentator Laura Ingraham that he had ‘felt for a long time – as much as people talk about global warming – that the real threat to human beings is microbes and being able to control disease, and that starts with controlling your border. So, I think people will be more attuned to more protective measures.’¹⁵² Not long after, the Trump administration moved from the threat of foreign microbes to the threat of foreign workers by issuing an executive order suspending the issuance of new green cards. Meanwhile Education Secretary Betsy DeVos set down policy guidelines to exempt undocumented students from COVID-19 relief aid.

The ‘re-open’ protests have occurred with growing regularity across the United States. There have been hundreds of them both at state capitols and in counties and municipalities where lockdown orders are in place. The protest movement enjoys backing from wealthy donors who are opposed to an expansion of government spending to unemployed workers, small businesses, or to subnational states and municipalities – and who thus see re-opening economies as the only way to avoid that. But the protests have also activated a diverse array

¹⁴⁹ James S. Brady Press Briefing Room, ‘Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing,’ *White House Briefings and Statements*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-25/> (accessed 3 June 2020).

¹⁵⁰ James Hohnmann, ‘The Daily 202: Barr memo threatening law suits against coronavirus restrictions is a warning shot,’ *Washington Post*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2020/04/28/daily-202-barr-memo-threatening-lawsuits-against-coronavirus-restrictions-is-a-warning-shot/5ea7a78e88e0fa3dea9c4414/> (accessed 3 June 2020).

¹⁵¹ Morgan Chalfant & Niv Elis, ‘Trump steps up effort to blame China for coronavirus,’ *The Hill*, 5 April 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/496047-trump-steps-up-effort-to-blame-china-for-coronavirus> (accessed 3 June 2020).

¹⁵² Ian Schwartz, ‘AG Barr: The Real Threat To Humans Is Ability To Control Disease, “And That Starts With Controlling Your Border”’, *RealClear Politics*, 9 April 2020, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/04/09/ag_barr_the_real_threat_to_humans_is_ability_to_control_disease_and_that_starts_with_controlling_your_border.html (accessed 3 June 2020).

of groups: anti-vaccination activists, gun rights advocates, adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory, members of private armed militias, and Trump supporters among them.¹⁵³

The demonstrations enact populism both in performance and rhetoric. As performance, the protests portray citizens coming together, assembled to articulate their grievances. In other words, they provide a visual spectacle of 'the people.' This spectacle is politically sharpened by the nature of the grievance, which is that citizens are locked inside their homes by government fiat. Thus, the very act of assembling together is a performed assertion of popular will. Many of the protests feature demonstrators wielding semi-automatic rifles and other firearms, meant as symbols of popular sovereignty against the perceived oppression of government elites. The protestors' belief that the danger of the virus is overblown gives them the advantage of public assembly, in the short term anyway. The act of breaking both laws and social mores in protesting together adds a thrilling transgressive element that is a staple of populist performance.

Rhetorically, the 're-open' protest movement evinces the terms of right-wing populism in a number of ways. First of course is the framing of people versus government elites. State governors have been depicted as oppressors who have over-reached in their executive authority to keep the people away from work, shopping, attending concerts and sporting events, and religious services. Second is the producerist opposition of work to welfare, and 'self-reliance' to dependence. These oppositions--animated by longstanding tropes of race, gender, and class in American political culture--are principle elements of contemporary right-wing populism. It is worth noting that the fiercest political anger has been focused on women governors – Michigan's Gretchen Witmer and Oregon's Kate Brown. These figures are made to fit a profile of gendered maternal care, symbols of a smothering 'nanny state.'

The protests demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic amplifies political right-wing populist feelings around healthcare, race, and class that have been growing on the Right in the U.S. over the last decade. The most recent right-wing populist insurgency in the country, the Tea Party Movement, emerged during the Great Recession. It quickly grew first in response to the election of a black president and then to that president's proposed healthcare plan, as protesters mobbed townhalls across the summer of 2009, loudly declaiming against any form of socialized medical coverage. Those two animating features of the movement – antiblack racism and opposition to the Affordable Care Act – defined a movement that in essence chose investments in whiteness over the assurance of at least some semblance of healthcare.

The current movement focused on opposition to public health practices and protections for workers extends the Tea Party's demonization of care, making it a kind of populism of the body – an assertion of health, virility, and corporeal sovereignty. The protests are mirrored performatively by Republican elected officials as well albeit in a lesser way. The dozen or so Republicans in the House of Representatives refusing to wear masks when called to vote on the latest coronavirus relief bill performed precisely that kind of political theater for their constituents. It is meant to show their own virility and the weakness of their opponents.

The small openings for populism on the Left that emerged are an almost mirror-opposite of those on the Right. Emphasizing the unequal effects of the virus on poor communities, Blacks and Latinos, immigrants, women, marginalized labor in agriculture, meatpacking, or along the supply chain, activists have emphasized collectivity, care and safety as the contrast to elite power and control. Walk-outs at jobs that are deemed 'essential' but provide neither personal

¹⁵³ Jason Wilson, 'The rightwing groups behind wave of protests against Covid-19 restrictions,' *The Guardian*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/far-right-coronavirus-protests-restrictions>; Joe Lowndes, 'The Morbid Ideology Behind the Drive to Reopen America,' *The Soapbox*, 30 April 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/157505/morbid-ideology-behind-drive-reopen-america> (both accessed 3 June 2020).



LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY POPULISM RESEARCH GROUP

The Populism Research Group (PRG) at Loughborough University was established in 2018 and is hosted at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities. The Group has contributed since to the development of a dynamic intellectual community for postgraduate researchers and members of staff working on different aspects of the populist phenomenon, organizing several events and activities, while coordinating with other groups and external networks with the aim to promote international collaborative research. For more information, please visit the Group's webpage: <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/politics-international-studies/research/prg>

ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismissed the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the current administration of the global financial crisis, the Tea Party movement and the Trump presidency in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis. POPULISMUS website: <http://www.populismus.gr>

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