

Ioana-Elena Oana (European University Institute) [ioana.oana@eui.eu] and Abel Bojar (European University Institute). *Populism, crisis management dissatisfaction, and COVID related conspiracy beliefs across Europe.*

**Abstract:** For all their electoral breakthroughs over the last decade, the COVID pandemic has arguably created an inhospitable environment for populist forces across the Western world. With a newfound embrace of technocratic policy advice and expertise by large segments of the electorate in the first phases of the pandemic, governments led by mainstream parties enjoyed wide-spread popular support while populist politicians appeared to struggle. Though it is certainly too early to speak of the end of the populist wave, the pandemic has thrown sand in its gear by distracting public attention from populist politicians' preferred issues, such as immigration, crime, and the EU's alleged encroachment on national sovereignty. At the same time, the pandemic has also created fertile grounds for novel types of misinformation and conspiracy beliefs, the type of attitudes that populist parties tend to thrive on because they are closely linked to underlying populist attitudes (Oliver and Wood 2014, Castanho-Silva et al 2017, Eberl et al 2021).

Our paper seeks to disentangle the puzzle on how a struggling populist party landscape is compatible with ever louder rejections of science and an ever more widely shared acceptance of misinformation related to the pandemic. In particular, we offer three contributions to the literature on conspiracy beliefs and populism. First, we build on the multidimensionality of the concept of populism (Akkerman et al 2014, Scultz et al 2017) and show that despite the loss of electoral credibility of many of the most potent populist forces in Europe, many of the underlying populist attitudes survive, creating a highly receptive audience to conspiracy theories. Second, we inquire into the moderating role that general dissatisfaction with the management of the crisis plays in this populism-conspiracy nexus. Thirdly, we bring in the analysis the electoral link that the conspiracy literature has underexplored (though see, for exceptions Swami et al 2018, Mancosu et al 2021) and seek to understand whether these attitudes are most likely to push citizens in the arms of populist challenger parties. We assess our claims with an original cross-national survey fielded in 16 EU member states, on a sample of ~33,000 respondents, at the end of the pandemic's third wave (August 2021). Our results show that populist attitudes and COVID conspiracy beliefs are highly prevalent and related to each other, while performance evaluations have a small moderation effect on the relationship between the two. Finally, our results also show that conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes have small, but significant consequences for political behaviour in terms of vote intention for populist parties.