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The Covid-19 Pandemic in the Light of Populism

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DOI: 10.2478/ejis-2023-0007

Abstract

This article discusses the negative impact of populism on covid-19. In the article we are trying to analyze the essence of populism. We believe that populism is not an ideology or a phenomenon characteristic of any part of the political spectrum. Its occurrence is the same across the political spectrum. Populism can also be linked to the covid-19 pandemic. As part of this connection, there have been several misconceptions surrounding the pandemic. These are misconceptions that deny and vulgarize the pandemic, cast doubt on the effectiveness of vaccination, cast doubt on the Sputnik V vaccine, as well as other misconceptions and untruths. The article provides a deeper analysis of these lies, and also points out the perniciousness of their connection with populist politics.

Keywords: populism, covid-19, misinformation, vaccination.

Introduction

Populist politics is one of the ancient phenomena that has accompanied it since the very beginning of human history. Pluralistically oriented social concepts were opposed by others - Nazism, fascism, Marxism, Falangism, etc. Their real influence gradually decreased after the Second World War. "Within the new social movement, new ideologies emerged in the 1960s" (Rosůlek 2012, p. 162). Multiculturalism, pacifism, feminism, etc. pointed to the lack of legitimacy of existing pluralistic systems.

Historically, the original root of populism is the approach of the political elites that represented the agricultural circles of North America in the 19th century. They were concentrated in the People's Party (Rosůlek 2012, p. 163). We consider it necessary to point out that populism cannot be reduced only to ultra-right parties, since its elements are manifested in almost the entire spectrum of the political spectrum. For example, in the 1960s and 1980s, the left engaged in populist politics.

Theoretical study of the issue

It is sometimes customary to attach a certain meaning to the term populism. Since there are no classical texts of the 20th century, or even texts recognized as key ones that could serve as a common starting point for all studies of this phenomenon, it is difficult to single out any social philosophy or ideology as the essence of populism in its purest form. Trying to find common features of populism in a motley political spectrum is really difficult. Etymologically, it is very difficult to deduce anything, except perhaps for the relatively recent People's Party from North America. Populists have influenced the later argumentation of both key political parties in the US. This party positioned itself as a mass party, voted for by declassified elements and marginalized groups. Populism did not escape the political practice of the 20th century, where it manifested itself across the entire range of the political spectrum. It cannot be described as a phenomenon of the political center, right or left.

The Latin term *populus* means "people" and was associated with the population of the Roman Empire as *populus Romanus*. This collective entity could acquire property, enter into contracts, and be appointed heir. We can meet this term in the framework of Russian political history. We are talking about the orientation of the Russian intelligence towards the Russian peasants in the sense that they will build a socialist society. An important political scientist, one of the first to describe populism, is Ernesto Laclau. He did this in his seminal work *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. "Populism links Laclau to the concept of hegemony. It begins at the moment when popular democratic elements act as antagonistic views against the ideology of the ruling bloc" (Rosůlek 2012: 166). Populism is often seen as one of the causes of military conflicts. "Military conflicts have one thing in common in terms of origin, populism" (Hikmet 2016, p. 298). Another populist theorist, Margaret Canovan, describes populism as an appeal to people who oppose established power structures and the prevailing ideas and values of society. Canovan tries to characterize populism as a form of political thinking and rhetoric containing a set of rhetorical devices and devices with one common feature - constant appeal and reference to the collective form of people (Chamulová 2009).

It is important to realize that the idea of a single, monolithic people with the same problems and preferences is misleading. We believe that the term populism cannot be considered only in the sense of a democratic state. There are many types of social organization, and democratic systems are only one part of the whole. Finally, not all countries of the world have a democratic state system. We can talk about populism

both in history and in the present. We can find several attempts to characterize populism, apart from the one already mentioned, for example, the idea of direct contact between the people and the political elite without institutions that would constitute the transmission lever. Populism in this case is essentially a strategy aimed at ensuring direct contact between the elites and the masses. Some populist leaders are leaning towards a plebiscite. In principle, we can say that populism as such is not tied to any geographical or historical context. It can appear in a different culture, as well as in a state with a different structure and historical development. Consequently, it is not ideologized, it is neither a social philosophy nor an ideological trend, it does not have a specific place in the political spectrum and is not tied to a specific political culture. "Left populism is predominant in Latin America, appears in Greece and often also in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, respectively in the post-communist states" (Štefančík 2022, p. 42). The far-left anarchist position really works only marginally. Right-wing populism can be found in Austria, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, etc. Right-wing populism is mainly focused on protecting the cultural identity of a particular culture, the concept of otherness (Štefančík 2022, p. 42). Right-wing populism has its own language, dominated by conspiracy theories that divide people into theirs and them, appeals to emotions, scandalous tendencies, adjectives expressing skin color, and so on. (Štefančík and Hvasta 2019).

The topic of covid-19 resonates around the world to this day. Although the war in Ukraine took first place in the media in the Central European space, the topic of covid-19 is still relevant. The pandemic appeared at the end of 2019 in China. "The public became more aware when the first cases of pneumonia caused by a virus of unknown origin were reported among local residents in Wuhan, a city located in Hubei province in central China, in late December 2019" (Przybyla and Bačík 2019, p. 44). If until the end of 2019 this topic was not highly relevant in the media space, then since the beginning of 2020 the topic has become the most topical in the world, which lasted until the start of the war in Ukraine. The penetration and connections of the topic of the pandemic are quite diverse. There is also a connection with ethics and social philosophy.

The covid-19 pandemic has definitely come as a big surprise to the whole world. Mainly due to the large distribution around the world. It was not a matter of spreading to several continents, the pandemic covered all continents in a short time. Some naturally isolated states have benefited from their geographical position - they have suffered only slightly. The pandemic has also affected the social sphere. Here it was reflected in the deterioration of relations at different levels. Negative economic developments are also significant. Many countries have experienced relatively significant economic downturns. Strict restrictive policies, vaccination of the majority of the population, and other measures in many states have prevented even more deaths in many states.

Today's task is to learn how to prevent a crisis and especially how to deal with a crisis in such a case. It is about eliminating mortality, as well as economic consequences. The strict lockdown was able to largely eliminate the health effects of the pandemic. The movement of goods is saved. This strategy has also been largely applied in countries that are geographically isolated or that have a policy of high closure to foreign tourists. Denmark, for example, coped well with the pandemic. In Asia, many countries have suffered, except for states with a relatively closed foreign policy. The whole of Europe suffered greatly. The worst performers in South America were Argentina, Chile and Brazil. The situation was also bad in many African countries. The naturally geographically isolated Australia and Oceania fared relatively best. In terms of the economic situation and trade turnover, the pandemic marked a real economic downturn in many countries. International trade, tourism and, in some cases, even manufacturing has experienced declines. Uncertainty in financial and capital markets has also increased. "The measures taken to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the entire economy, consumption was limited, and there was a general slowdown in the economy" (Krásna 2021, p. 32).

Covid-19 as a topic of populist misinformation

The underestimation of the pandemic is due to the arguments of some populist politicians. Ignoring and simplifying the pandemic is a serious problem. Basically it has two reasons: ignorance and populism. Some theorists and politicians oppose the violation of human freedom. You can ask how things are with human freedom and anti-pandemic measures. Measures against a pandemic should not be spontaneous, chaotic or determined by the arbitrary decisions of politicians. On the contrary, their introduction is due to compliance with the findings of scientific medicine. Decisions should not have political reasons and should not be associated with any clientelism. Public communication and education are also important. "The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that effective public health messaging is an essential component of a robust pandemic response system" (Nan, Iles and Ma 2022, p. 1).

The primary objective of restrictive measures is to protect the life and health of the population. Restriction of movement and social contacts pursues this main goal. A significant change is the increase in remote work. This form of work can have far-reaching implications.

There are certain connections between the topic of covid-19 and populism. In the countries of Central and Western Europe, parties across the political spectrum have been involved in discussions about the covid-19 pandemic. Parties at the end of this spectrum, both right and left, were no exception (Štefančík 2022, p. 16). Štefančík made an interesting argument according to which "populists consider scientists to be part of the elite, and since they do not trust the elites, they do not trust scientists either" (Štefančík 2022, p. 97). According to this author, populists do not even trust those institutions that change people's lives with measures against the pandemic. This attitude is called scientific skepticism. "Populism, associated with doubting the

results of scientific research, is aimed at the scientific, research and academic elite and depicts it as opposed to ordinary, ordinary people” (Štefančík and Zamborová, 2022, p. 393). Reality is completely different. “Scientists are obliged to participate in solving problems, explain, offer ready-made solutions, advise the public and advisory bodies, guide public opinion, and prevent the spread of pseudoscience” (Lešková Blahová 2022, p. 38).

In the early months of the pandemic, it may have seemed to some that the measures against covid-19 were aimed at a fictitious pandemic. This disease has not yet become widespread. Questions arose on several fronts. Several doubts arose. The first concerned the plausibility of the danger of the covid-19 pandemic. The second was related to the effectiveness of wearing masks. The third doubt concerned the meaning of vaccination against the pandemic. It was also appropriate to ask whether these measures are contrary to human rights and freedoms. The economic aspect of the issue is also a relatively important issue. Remote work, on the one hand, makes changes in the form of exclusion of social contacts. On the other hand, remote work provides many significant opportunities for change, especially in the sense that the worker is not tied to work at the place of residence. The measures are also related to the restriction of freedom. From the point of view of liberal philosophy, this is definitely a restriction of freedom. It should be noted that the concept of freedom is also present in Spinoza, as an understanding of necessity. It is necessary to look at meaningful anti-pandemic measures as a necessity if they are implemented in close accordance with the conclusions of scientists. However, anti-pandemic measures should not be abused for the sake of senseless measures and clientelism.

The economic side of the problem is also interesting. During a pandemic, it is interesting to look at the well-known contradictions between Keynes and Friedman about government intervention in the economy. During a pandemic, such interventions are essential. The approach taken by Keynes is definitely more correct in this context. Friedman's approach in this matter would mean taking special care of his business, thus losing the holistic effect. If the state applied the Friedman approach, the economic situation would become unsustainable. Many businesses need to be rescued from the government during the pandemic crisis, without government intervention they would not have survived (Gaffová, Šatanová 2017). Reliance on the natural mechanism of the market economy, according to Friedman, would necessarily lead to the death of many enterprises that would not have a chance to survive. “With the world on the cusp of another steep recession and with an environmental catastrophe looming, we can no longer afford the luxury of an economic policy that concentrates on fighting inflation, leaves unemployment for emergency measures, and wealth and income distribution to the market.” and ignores environmental issues” (Skidelski 2020, p. 345).

As we have already mentioned, populism also uses conspiracy theories in its argument. This fact is also pointed out by the philosopher Popper in *The Open Society*

and Its Enemies. Popper argues that these are reminiscences of religion, which was once a near-universal explanation, especially in the context of bad events. According to Popper, religious explanations were later replaced by conspiracy explanations. Several conspiracy theories regarding the Covid-19 pandemic have been reported. For example, in Slovakia, information appeared on social networks, according to which test equipment was deliberately saturated with a pathogenic mixture. Thus, the real purpose of testing was to cause disease in the population.

Another of the problematic theories has emerged in connection with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. There were negative statements by a Slovak doctor about this vaccine. She claimed that each bottle contains a different sample that has been tested in different countries of the world, and only the name connects them. At the same time, the aforementioned employee did not have samples from other states, so she did not have the right to such a deduction. Finally, the Sputnik V vaccine was approved in Slovakia, and citizens were able to get vaccinated with it. Although the said person found two different batches, he unduly expanded the sample of two samples into test samples distributed throughout Europe. Based on two chemical analyzes, it is not possible to draw conclusions from several dozen samples. The named vaccine was developed by a serious scientific institution with a long scientific tradition, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences. All professional and scientific topics were politicized in Slovakia. The result was the dismissal of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic and his replacement.

A fairly common conspiracy theory is that covid-19 is a media hoax. According to these statements, the covid-19 pandemic has no content. The conspirators claim that the entire real nature of the covid-19 disease does not exist and is a fabrication. They think it's a media game. The opinion that the pandemic is a fiction and does not actually exist was also expressed by some politicians. With a sharp increase in the number of cases and with the experience of lethal outcomes in everyday practice, this position of opinion has gradually become marginalized. Another relatively common belief is that a pandemic is an attempt to wipe out the number of people on the planet.

“A hugely popular conspiracy theory has been the idea that vaccination is primarily tied to the profits of pharmaceutical companies” (Štefančík 2022, p. 111). It is clear that many companies and individuals have profited from vaccination. It should be remembered that the main reason for vaccination was not financial gain. The primary reason for vaccination has been and remains the protection of the population. Many empirical studies, as well as statistical data, clearly point to the obvious positive effect of vaccines in preventing a pandemic. “Regularly updated data from the US for December 2021 shows that vaccines reduce the risk of infection by 67% and the risk of hospitalization by 85%” (Flák 2022, p. 2). There are many scientific studies and statistical analyzes that provide real results. “In this area, sensitive and non-confrontational communication with the provision of facts is important” (Vaclaviková

and Gažovičová 2021, p. 95). Real facts speak of positive results in the prevention of the pandemic, its course and symptoms.

The other side of the issue is the degree of danger of vaccination. The truth is that vaccination is not always without negative side effects. Several deaths in direct causal relationship to vaccination have been reported in Slovakia. It was a one-digit number, up to 10 people. Unfortunately, the adverse effects of vaccination also came in this form. Other adverse health effects have also been reported. Statistics from the Slovak Republic say that 1715 serious consequences of various types of covid-19 vaccines have been registered to date. It is worth noting that of the total number of severe consequences, only 6 severe consequences are attributed to Sputnik V. Similarly, no deaths have been reported in connection with the Sputnik V vaccine. Serious side effects included: persistent increase in blood pressure (mainly in patients treated for hypertension), pre-collapse, collapse, loss of consciousness, thrombosis, allergic reactions, anaphylactic reactions, facial nerve palsy, vaccine failure, phlebothrombosis, pulmonary embolism, sudden cerebrovascular accident, thrombocytopenia (mild to severe), fibrillation, myocarditis, myocardial infarction, arthritis, pericarditis, hypertensive crisis, hearing loss, polyneuropathy, hyperthermia, epileptic seizure in patients treated for epilepsy (National Institute for Medicines Control, 2022). Much is also said about the effect on female pregnancy. "The fact is that there is a common amino acid sequence between the viral spike protein and syncytin-1 (a protein in the placenta), but it is too small to initiate an immune response that can affect pregnancy" (Saleem 2020, p. 1).

In comparison, in Slovakia 20,964 people died as a direct cause of the covid-19 pandemic, which is the size of an average regional city. This is a relatively large population. Fortunately, the percentage of deaths from the pandemic was not comparable to the cholera epidemics of the 19th century. Despite the sacrifices on the part of the vaccinated, where 7 deaths were recorded, despite some side effects, vaccination saved the lives of a large number of people.

In this regard, another misconception has appeared that vaccination is ineffective. According to this view, the overall value of vaccination is zero because vaccines were developed too quickly. This point of view simplifies the work of scientists in the field of medicine. As a counterargument, one can cite real experimental results, as well as statistical indicators (Petráš 2021; Andrews et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2022). The vaccine reduces the risk of infection and also facilitates the course of the disease. This is an effective and fully justified tool in the fight against the covid-19 pandemic.

In connection with vaccination, there have been rumors that covid-19 vaccines change DNA. "There are other myths that this vaccine contains a tracking device and can change a person's DNA" (Saleem 2020, p. 1). The role of the vaccine is to build the immune system. With it, the body must create a sufficient amount of antibodies. The vaccine does not interact with DNA and does not have the ability to transform it in any way. It is also true that it is impossible to get sick directly from a vaccine. There

were also rumors that vaccines affected blood types differently. Experiments have not confirmed this fact.

The success of general population testing remains in question. It is known that the reliability of the PCR test is close to 100%. The antigen test has a reliability of 34-80%. This depends on various factors such as the stage of the disease, the amount of virus in the sample, and the method of collecting and processing the sample. Obviously, a confidence of 50% or less refers to a result that has 2 possible values - person covid-19 positive and covid-19 negative without meaning. This means that the validity of the antigen test is indeed questionable. According to statistics, 7,391,882 PCR tests were used in Slovakia, but as many as 44,672,712 antigen tests. Thus, the effectiveness of testing was indeed very questionable. Antigen tests have been widely used, despite the variance of significance, the lower limit of which is less than 50%. I believe that this measure has not achieved the necessary effectiveness and the expected effect. Testing has replaced strict lockdowns, resulting in unnecessary deaths.

Conclusion

In principle, the pernicious influence of populism can be ascertained in several directions. The full extent of this influence is also having an impact in the area of covid-19. It manifested itself in the interpretation of obvious misconceptions, affecting primarily a part of the less educated population. Sharing, spreading and repeating such disinformation has very negative consequences. This increases the number of people who reject various forms of measures against the covid-19 pandemic. In principle, there are three types of nonsense spread not only by other people, but also by populists. First of all, these are the most common statements based on premises: a) the covid-19 pandemic is a hoax, it does not exist; b) the negative effects of vaccination exceed the positive ones, as a result it is harmful, c) the Sputnik B vaccine is a vaccine with a high level of unwanted side effects. All three statements are misconceptions, helped to spread by poorly informed and uninformed citizens, as well as populist politicians. According to a study (Pažitný et al. 2021; Pažitný et al. 2022), several thousand people could be saved in Slovakia if the anti-COVID policy were identical to those in Denmark. A certain share of responsibility for these deaths is also borne by populist politics (vaccinations should have been higher, a hard lockdown was introduced late, permission for weddings without a reason, politicization of the use of the Sputnik V vaccine, a false dilemma - either mass testing or strict quarantine that puts questioned the danger of a pandemic by some politicians). It is necessary that citizens trust scientists, science as a socially useful institution, and not dubious politically motivated claims.

Acknowledgement: This paper was supported by the grant VEGA 1/0595/21 – Public administration interventions at the time of COVID-19 and their impact on the quality of life of citizens of selected communities.

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