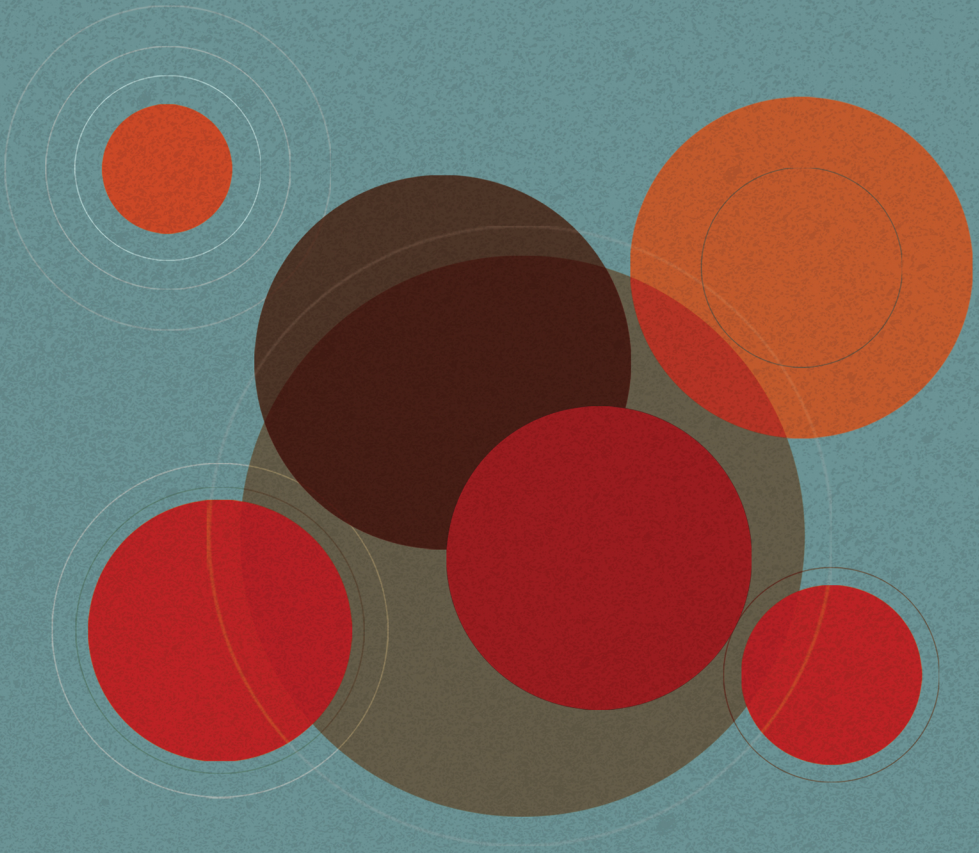


JOSIP GLAURDIĆ
CHRISTOPHE LESSCHAEVE



CONTAGIONS

NATIONALISM, POPULISM,
AND THE PANDEMIC
AT EUROPE'S EDGE

 **CEU PRESS**

Contagions

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Contagions

Nationalism, Populism, and the Pandemic at Europe's Edge

Josip Glaurdić and Christophe Lesschaeve



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For our families

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Acknowledgments

The book that follows was not planned in the form in which it now appears. It emerged out of interruption and adjustment rather than linear intellectual design. At the time the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe in early 2020, we were in the midst of a research project funded by the European Research Council on the political legacies of the wars of the 1990s in contemporary Southeast Europe. The project, ELWar (Electoral Legacies of War: Political Competition in Postwar Southeast Europe), had been conceived as a long-term investigation into how violent conflict continues to shape political competition, voter behavior, and institutional development decades after the guns fall silent. It was methodologically ambitious, empirically grounded, and heavily reliant on fieldwork: interviews, archival research, and on-site engagement with political actors and local contexts across the region.

The pandemic brought much of that work to an abrupt halt. Fieldwork plans were suspended indefinitely, borders closed, archives became inaccessible, and the rhythms of research that depend on physical presence were replaced by a pervasive sense of stasis. At first, like many others, we assumed this interruption would be temporary. It soon became clear that it was not. What followed was not simply a delay, but a qualitative transformation of the environment in which political life unfolded—and in which political analysis had to be conducted. Rather than treating the pandemic as an external shock to be bracketed off until “normality” returned, we found ourselves increasingly compelled to take it seriously as a political event in its own right.

That shift was not immediate, nor was it purely intellectual. It was driven by the growing recognition that the pandemic was not merely disrupting our research but was actively reshaping the very political dynamics we were studying. In Southeast Europe, as elsewhere, COVID-19 interacted with existing ideological repertoires, institutional weaknesses, and legacies of conflict in ways that were both familiar and unsettlingly novel. Nationalist narratives, populist framings of authority and expertise, and deep mistrust toward institutions did not disappear in the face of a public health emergency. They were reactivated, repurposed, and in some cases intensified. What initially appeared as a contingent crisis increasingly resembled a diagnostic moment—one that revealed underlying structures of political meaning rather than temporarily suspending them. *Contagions* grew out of this realization.

The conditions under which the book was written were also personally and professionally dislocating. The pandemic coincided with a sudden cessation of many of the practices that structure academic life: conferences, workshops, research visits, and informal exchanges that sustain intellectual communities. Teaching moved online, often abruptly and unevenly. Research networks that had been built over years were reduced to computer screens. Like so many others, we experienced isolation, uncertainty, and exhaustion that characterized this period. We became ill. Members of our families became ill. One of us lost a close family member to COVID-19 during the first wave. These experiences were not exceptional, but they were formative.

At the time, Joe Biden's campaign speech where he recalled "that black hole in your chest" he felt when he lost his family members to empathize with those who lost their loved ones to the virus resonated far beyond America. It captured something of the collective psychological condition of that moment: the sense of disorientation, loss of temporal bearings, and the erosion of assumptions about progress and control. In retrospect, what is perhaps most striking is not only the scale of the pandemic—likely responsible for more than twenty million excess deaths worldwide—but the speed with which it has faded from collective memory. In many societies, the pandemic now appears either to be dissipating into a kind of enforced amnesia or to be sedimented into political life in subtler, more corrosive ways: as resentment, distrust, conspiratorial thinking, and a hardened skepticism toward institutions and expertise.

This book may well be a futile attempt to resist that process. It does not aim to provide closure, nor does it assume that the political consequences of the pandemic are already fully visible or settled. Instead, it seeks to document and analyze how a global crisis was filtered through specific historical legacies, ideological frameworks, and political structures at what many consider Europe's periphery, but we consider its heart. If it succeeds at all, it does so by insisting that the pandemic matters—not only as an episode of public health failure or emergency governance, but as a moment that reconfigured political meaning in ways that will likely outlast the virus itself.

The intellectual and empirical foundations of the book are inseparable from the collective effort behind the ELWar project. We are grateful first and foremost to our colleague Michal Mochtak, who was an integral part of the project from its inception and participated directly in its conceptualization. His intellectual contributions and collaborative engagement shaped both the original research agenda and the adjustments that followed in response to the pandemic. We are also deeply indebted to Leo Fel, Alice Grignani,

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Finally, and most importantly, we owe immeasurable debt to our families. The pandemic was not only a political and social crisis. It was a profoundly intimate one. It disrupted routines, strained relationships, and tested forms of solidarity at the most basic level. Even in families that avoided death and irreversible loss, the sustained stress of isolation, uncertainty, and compressed domestic life took their toll. At some point, it felt like relationships of the people around us were collapsing like dominoes in a pandemic of breakups. We have no doubt that our partners and children, at various points, found us distracted, preoccupied, and even insufferable. That they endured this period with us—and that our families emerged from it stronger—is something for which we are deeply grateful. Without that resilience and support, this book would not exist.

List of Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, German right-wing party)
AIC	Akaike information criterion
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CAMI	Computer-assisted mobile interviewing
CAPI	Computer-assisted personal interviewing
CART	Classification and regression tree
CAWI	Computer-assisted web interviewing
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINS	Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo Srbije (Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia)
CNN	Cable News Network
COVAX	COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
DOI	Digital object identifier
DP	Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement, Croatian right-wing party)
DPS	Demokratska partija socijalista (Democratic Party of Socialists, Montenegrin center-left party)
ERG	Exponential family random graph
EU	European Union
GAVI	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization
GDP	Gross domestic product
HDZ	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (Croatian Democratic Union, Croatian center-right party)
HDZ BiH	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine (Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, center-right party of BiH Croats)
HS	Hrvatski suverenisti (Croatian Sovereignists, Croatian right-wing party)
ICU	Intensive care unit
IMF	International Monetary Fund

ITN	Има такъв народ (There is Such a People, Bulgarian populist party)
LVV	Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination Movement, Kosovo left-wing party)
MICE	Multiple imputation by chained equations
MP	Member of parliament
MRI	Magnetic resonance imaging
mRNA	Messenger ribonucleic acid
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OLS	Ordinary least squares
PAYG	Pay-as-you-go model of public pensions
PHEIC	Public health emergency of international concern
PPP	Purchasing power parity
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, Dutch right-wing populist party)
RWA	Right-wing authoritarianism
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SD	Standard deviation
SDA	Stranka demokratske akcije (Party of Democratic Action, center-right party of BiH Bosniaks)
SDO	Social dominance orientation
SDP	Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske (Social Democratic Party of Croatia, Croatian center-left party)
SDS (BiH)	Srpska demokratska stranka (Serb Democratic Party, center-right party of BiH Serbs)
SDS (Serbia)	Socijaldemokratska stranka (Social Democratic Party, Serbian center-left party)
SDS (Slovenia)	Slovenska demokratska stranka (Slovenian Democratic Party, Slovenian right-wing party)
SEE	Southeast Europe
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka (Serb Progressive Party, Serbian right-wing populist party)
SOC	Serb Orthodox Church
SPS	Socijalistička partija Srbije (Socialist Party of Serbia, Serbian left-wing populist party)
TLI	Tucker–Lewis index
UK	United Kingdom
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
US	United States

USD	United States dollar
VMRO-DPMNE	Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација—Демократска партија за македонско национално единство (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, right-wing party in North Macedonia)
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Introduction: The Pandemic of Ideology

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic unfolded not only as a public health emergency but as a profound ideological stress test. This opening chapter frames the book's central argument: that nationalism and populism shaped how the pandemic was interpreted, governed, and politicized, acting as accelerants of institutional fragility and epistemic fragmentation. Treating these ideologies as distinct yet intersecting political repertoires, it conceptualizes the pandemic as a moment in which pre-existing structures of trust, authority, and meaning were activated and intensified. By positioning Southeast Europe as a diagnostic lens rather than an exceptional case, the chapter introduces the book's broader inquiry into crisis governance, ideological contagion, and democratic resilience in Europe and beyond.

Keywords: nationalism, populism, COVID-19 pandemic, crisis governance, Southeast Europe, democratic resilience

On the first day of November 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic raged throughout Europe, thousands of mourners gathered outside the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica for the funeral of Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović—the highest-ranking clergyman of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. There were few masks and even fewer attempts at social distancing. Inside the cathedral, the coffin of the Metropolitan lay open. The mourners came forward in lines that curled out into the square. They crossed themselves, bowed, and then kissed the deceased. Bishops stood in close proximity, swinging censers and chanting prayers, their beards flecked with condensation. In a place

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where politics and faith long ago blurred into ritualized performance, the pandemic seemed to have made little dent.¹

It was a moment charged with spiritual authority and political messaging. Amfilohije had been the most powerful cleric in Montenegro, the figurehead of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the country and a firebrand critic of both pandemic restrictions and the Montenegrin state. To his followers, he was a martyr for piety and religious endurance. To his detractors, he was a dangerous populist who wrapped ethno-religious provocation in theological garb. He had spent the final months of his life railing against lockdowns, celebrating crowded liturgies, and endorsing public processions that often doubled as Serb nationalist spectacles. He died of complications related to COVID-19, after being hospitalized with bilateral pneumonia.²

The funeral was his final act of defiance—though it was performed by others. And it came with a price. Among the mourners was Serbian Patriarch Irinej, who had insisted on presiding over the service in person. He stood near the open coffin in an unventilated space packed wall to wall with clergy and lay faithful. Three weeks later, he too was dead—having contracted the virus almost certainly at the funeral.³ In the weeks that followed, several other clerics who had attended the ceremony were hospitalized. News of their illnesses circulated on the same social media platforms that had, months earlier, disseminated videos of their calls to resist pandemic “hysteria.”

To outside observers, the spectacle was unfathomable. Montenegro, a small state with a fragile health system and limited intensive care capacity, had stumbled directly into a superspreader event orchestrated by its most prominent religious institution.⁴ It was also a moment that revealed much more than just reckless disregard for public health. It captured, in a single

1 Predrag Tomović and Aneta Durović, “Masovno kršenje mjera na sahrani Amfilohija vodi kolapsu zdravstva,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-corona-covid-sahrana-amfilohije-radovic/30926241.html>.

2 Tomislav Marković, “Amfilohije Radović, arhijerej krvi i tla,” *Autonomija*, September 25, 2024, <https://autonomija.info/amfilohije-radovic-arhijerej-krvi-i-tla/>.

3 At Irinej’s funeral, mourners continued with the tradition by kissing the cross and the casket. The only difference was that the casket was now closed with protective glass. Nevena Bogdanović, “Sahranjen patrijarh SPC Irinej u Beogradu,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sahrana-patrijarha-spc-irineja-u-beogradu/30962305.html>.

4 For a comprehensive account of the responses of the Orthodox churches to the COVID-19 pandemic, see Tornike Metreveli ed., *Orthodox Christianity and the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Routledge, 2024). For a more succinct presentation, see Daniela Kalkandjieva, “Global and Local in the Response of Orthodox Churches to the First Wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic,” in *Liberals, Conservatives, and Mavericks: On Christian Churches of Eastern Europe since 1980*, ed. Frank Cibulka and Zachary T. Irwin (CEU Press, 2024).

ceremony, the dynamics that would soon come to define the pandemic across Southeast Europe: the distrust of institutions, the strategic ambiguity of elites, the layering of pandemic management over long-standing identity conflicts, the remarkable elasticity of belief in the face of death, and the seemingly indestructible power of nationalism and populism—even in the face of epidemiological reality.

By the end of 2021, Southeast Europe ranked among the worst-hit regions in the world by excess mortality. The pandemic's toll was staggering—not just in deaths, but in the collapse of public confidence, the erosion of state capacity, and the normalization of conspiratorial worldviews. The virus carved its path through societies founded upon clientelism, with polarized media systems, brittle institutional arrangements, and the steady diet of nationalist and populist politics. This tragic outcome, however, was far from inevitable. In fact, the early months of the pandemic told a strikingly different story. In the spring of 2020, much of Southeast Europe reacted swiftly and decisively to the arrival of COVID-19. Governments closed borders, restricted movement, imposed lockdowns, and in many cases acted well before their counterparts in Western Europe. Compliance was surprisingly high. Despite deeply embedded political divisions, publics initially rallied behind state authority. There were few mass protests. Social distancing rules were followed. Emergency powers were granted with little immediate resistance. For a brief moment, it seemed that the region might outperform expectations.

Montenegro, in particular, declared itself COVID-free by the end of May. Serbia imposed some of the harshest curfews on the continent. Croatia gained international attention for its effective coordination and communication. By early summer, the region's numbers were enviable: low case counts, minimal deaths, and—in most countries of the region—widespread public approval for the governments' responses. And then things began to fall apart in the summer of 2020. Political pressures to normalize life ahead of elections in Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, which were all held that summer, led to the premature lifting of restrictions and a softening of public messaging. Official narratives began to blur. Warnings about viral spread were layered with triumphalist rhetoric and mixed signals from political and religious elites. When infections began to climb again in the autumn, governments hesitated. Lockdowns became politically dangerous. Scientific expertise, once valorized, came under increasing attack because public health authorities—in many cases justifiably—began to be seen as being in the service of politicians in power. In most countries of the region, conspiracy theories about the virus, the vaccines, and global governance

systems were no longer confined to the margins—they were echoed and amplified by elected officials and religious figures alike.

The resulting collapse was not only epidemiological. It was epistemic. In a region already marked by low levels of interpersonal and institutional trust, the pandemic hastened a kind of civic unraveling. Protesters at times clashed violently with police over curfew reintroductions. Vaccine uptake stalled or even failed to launch altogether, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Competing narratives fought for dominance: that the virus was real but exaggerated, that it was a foreign plot, that it was punishment for sin, that it was a cover for political engineering. Often these conflicting narratives existed side by side—held simultaneously by large portions of the population. By the second year of the pandemic, the consequences were obvious. Health systems were overwhelmed and frontline workers exhausted. Governments, many of which had staked their legitimacy on early successes, now scrambled to reframe failure as fate. Some abandoned communication altogether, whereas others doubled down on spectacle. Rituals like the funeral of Metropolitan Amfilohije no longer stood out but became part of a political atmosphere where scientific advice was sidelined, ideological signaling took precedence, and public trust disintegrated.

What is important to understand, however, is that this is not a story of sudden collapse nor a story whose narrative arc has been predetermined by culture. The core drivers of the crisis we identify in this book—especially the erosion of trust and institutional coherence by nationalism and populism—were not unique to Southeast Europe. They were present throughout Europe and the Western world. What set the region apart was not the presence of these forces, but the degree to which their effects were allowed to unfold unchecked. The specific political, institutional, and ideological conditions produced a trajectory of failure that may have been distinctive, but analytically not at all exceptional. In this sense the region offers a magnified view of political dynamics that were operating everywhere, be it more subtly but no less destructively. The same states that had once outperformed expectations did not fall behind because they ran out of ventilators or vaccine doses—though some did. They fell behind because the virus was not met by coherent public health strategies, but by a cacophony of competing claims. They fell behind because too many people in positions of authority, when faced with a choice between short-term legitimacy and long-term resilience, chose the former. The states of Southeast Europe fell behind because they ran out of valuable social resources like trust, consistency, and collective purpose—resources that were in different (and often paradoxical) ways eroded by the two dominant political ideologies in the region: nationalism and populism.

Conceptual Framing: Pandemic as an Accelerant

While often conflated in public discourse, populism and nationalism are analytically distinct and, as this book demonstrates, can diverge in their effects. Our conceptualization of populism follows classical political science scholarship and sees this ideology as a political logic that pits a supposedly morally pure and unified people against a corrupt and self-serving elite. Populism is anti-establishment in tone and often opportunistic in content, capable of attaching itself to a range of ideological projects.⁵ Nationalism, by contrast, centers on the primacy of the nation—real or imagined—as the organizing unit of political loyalty and collective identity.⁶ While the two can overlap—especially when political elites craft narratives of national victimhood or external betrayal—they need not do so. In this book, we treat them as separate but potentially intersecting forces, both of which influenced how citizens across Southeast Europe made sense of the pandemic.⁷ In addition, while we refer to populism and nationalism as if they were unified ideological blocs, we recognize that what is actually at play here are deep cleavages running through societies and individuals, capturing how we define ourselves on the *spectrums* between nationalism and cosmopolitanism or populism and the political mainstream.

Obviously, the pandemic did not invent nationalism and populism in the political context of Southeast Europe. It exposed them. It exposed the infrastructure of belief: who was trusted, who was followed, and who was rejected as inauthentic. It laid bare the scaffolding of legitimacy. Southeast Europe entered the pandemic already steeped in nationalist and populist vocabularies. For more than a generation, these currents had shaped how politics was conducted, how loyalty was defined, and how communities imagined their boundaries. To suggest that these ideologies were somehow awakened by the crisis would be to misread their role. They were not reflexes triggered by emergency, but the conditions under which the emergency was interpreted and governed. The pandemic did not produce nationalism and

5 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Jennifer Jackson and Lina Molokotos-Liederman, eds., *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Boundaries: Conceptualising and Understanding Identity Through Boundary Approaches* (Routledge, 2018).

7 We discuss the definitions of populism and nationalism in chapter 2, and we explain how we operationalized them in practice in the methods chapter.

populism as responses. It entered a region where those forces were already constitutive, and it acted as their accelerant.

Nationalism in Southeast Europe has long operated as the dominant language of political meaning. This is not simply a matter of ethnic antagonism or mythic nostalgia. It is the architecture of statehood and moral order. Since the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and even long before that disastrous decade, nationalist logics have organized the contours of political life across the region. They have defined the relationship between state and society, between insiders and outsiders, between historical grievance and present-day entitlement. And they have often done so with a flexibility that allows for adaptation rather than obsolescence. During the pandemic, nationalism proved to be not a relic but a resilient set of ideas with an adaptable repertoire of action. Governments invoked protective nationalism as justification for closing borders, suspending liberties, and redirecting public resources. At the level of rhetoric, national community was evoked as both victim and bulwark—as the innocent recipient of foreign negligence and as the heroic subject of domestic sacrifice. Appeals to national sovereignty became vehicles for rejecting international coordination, for questioning the motives of supranational actors like the EU or the World Health Organization (WHO), and for framing mitigation strategies as tests of cultural authenticity. When vaccines arrived, nationalism re-emerged in new form: as competition over procurement, as distrust of foreign formulas, or as moral panic over contamination by the other.

Nationalist themes surfaced quickly in Southeast Europe's pandemic response. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić declared that "European solidarity does not exist" after the EU hesitated on medical aid.⁸ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, leader of Republika Srpska, seized on the pandemic to reignite separatist rhetoric. In a public clash with the country's foreign minister over pandemic aid, Dodik claimed that "Bosnia and Herzegovina has proven that it is unable to survive as a state," adding that "its only segment capable of doing something positive was the Serbian entity."⁹ This nationalist outburst was by no means confined to Southeast Europe. Across Western Europe and the United States, the pandemic similarly reactivated exclusionary instincts and narratives of national vulnerability. In France, Marine Le Pen accused EU leaders of

8 Eloise Hardy, "How Serbia's Vučić Is Playing the EU," *The Parliament Magazine*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/how-serbias-vui-is-playing-the-eu>.

9 "Negativan sam na korona virus, ali sam pozitivan tip," *Mondo*, April 17, 2020, <https://mondo.me/Info/EX-YU/a827990/Dodik-Negativan-sam-na-korona-virus-ali-sam-pozitivan-tip.html>.

adhering to a “religion of borderlessness” and called for strict border controls to protect the national population. Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) blamed the spread of the virus on “the dogma of open borders,” while politicians in Poland and Italy linked COVID-19 to asylum seekers, warning of disease-carrying migrants.¹⁰ In the Netherlands, far-right leader Geert Wilders claimed that intensive care beds were disproportionately occupied by non-Western immigrants who “don’t speak our language and flout the rules,” and called for the closure of mosques while suggesting the reopening of bars.¹¹ In the United States, President Donald Trump leveraged the crisis to implement sweeping restrictions on immigration, blaming a “foreign virus” and touting his border wall as a defense against contagion.¹² In all these cases, the pandemic became an opportunity to reaffirm nationalist boundaries, casting the virus as an external threat and foreign people as vectors of internal decay.

Nationalism, however, did not merely animate elite decisions. It shaped how citizens received and filtered those decisions. The response to pandemic restrictions—compliance or defiance, trust or suspicion—was often filtered through nationalist lenses. Was a curfew a public health tool needed for the protection of the community or an authoritarian power grab by globalist elites? Was a vaccine an instrument of science or a foreign imposition? These questions were not answered in clinical terms. They were answered through narratives of identity and loyalty, refracted through decades of contested history and political mistrust.

Populism, for its part, did not manifest as a monolithic doctrine, nor was it confined only to governing or opposition parties. It functioned as a logic of politics and relationship between the government and the governed.¹³ The populist mode had already become common currency in much of the region by the time the pandemic began. Incumbents like Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vučić or Slovenia’s prime minister Janez Janša did not discover populism as a response to the crisis—they governed through it, though

10 Pawel Zerka, “Ill Will: Populism and the Coronavirus,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 5, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_ill_will_populism_and_the_coronavirus/.

11 NOS Nieuws, “Tweet Wilders over coronapatiënten met niet-westerse achtergrond wekt woede,” *NOS*, October 11, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2351928>.

12 Akbar Shahid Ahmed and Jessica Schulberg, “Donald Trump Is Using the Pandemic to Push His Anti-Immigration Agenda,” *HuffPost*, June 24, 2020; Rachel Kleinfeld and John Dickas, “Why Trump Reaches for Nativism to Fight a Virus—And How to Respond,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 8, 2020.

13 Our views here very much follow the analysis and interpretation of Wojciech Sadurski and his excellent comparative analysis of global populisms as they were entering the COVID-19 pandemic. Wojciech Sadurski, *A Pandemic of Populists* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

often with very different policy tools. The pandemic simply amplified the salience of populism and sped up its consequences. What this meant in practice was not simply anti-elitism or conspiratorial posturing, although both were present. It meant the consolidation of a style of governing and political mobilization that treated institutional constraint as expendable, expertise as politically contingent, and the public not as a deliberative body but as a loyal audience. The populist logic—again, at times among the ruling and at times among the opposition parties—was one of oscillation: between hard-nosed technocracy and anti-system defiance, between appeals to health experts and attacks on them, between sudden lockdowns and equally sudden reopenings.¹⁴ What held the performance together was not consistency but centrality of the populist political entrepreneur as the protector of the people against both visible and invisible enemies. In this configuration, the pandemic was not an exogenous shock to be managed, but a stage on which loyalty could be tested, discipline asserted, and political opponents delegitimized. Through it all, public trust—already eroded by years of institutional failure and abuse—gradually became replaced by performative fatigue.

During the pandemic, populist rhetoric surfaced forcefully in Southeast Europe. In Serbia, the Minister of Health accused the opposition of “cheering for the corona, to have as many people infected and dead as possible,” casting critics as enemies of the people in a stark populist binary.¹⁵ In Croatia, the conservative-right party Most (The Bridge) framed COVID-19 measures as elite overreach, organizing referendums to “restore democracy” and stop what they called “stožerokracija,” portraying themselves as defenders of ordinary citizens against authoritarian rule.¹⁶ Similar populist patterns were visible far beyond Southeast Europe. Across Western democracies, populist actors exploited the crisis to amplify anti-establishment narratives, undermine institutional checks, and elevate loyalty over deliberation. In

14 This oscillation and the exogenous nature of the pandemic led some in the opening stages of the pandemic to suggest that it was unclear how or whether populists would try to capitalize on the COVID-19 crisis. Giuliano Bobba and Nicolas Hubé, eds., *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

15 Haris Dajč et al., *Populist Politics in the Context of the COVID-19 Crisis: A Comparative Analysis*, POPREBEL Working Paper no. 12 (2023), eds. Jan Kubik and Richard Mole.

16 “Stožer” here refers to the “Stožer civilne zaštite RH za sprečavanje širenja zaraze koronavirusom,” i.e., Croatian Civil Defense Headquarters for the Prevention of the Spread of Coronavirus Infection. Željko Trkanjec, “Croatia’s Radical-Right Party Starts Gathering Signatures for Referendum Against COVID Passes,” *Euractiv*, December 7, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/croatias-radical-right-party-starts-gathering-signatures-for-referendum-against-covid-passes.

the United States, Donald Trump downplayed the threat of COVID-19, accusing the Democrats and the media of politicizing the virus and even “cheering for the coronavirus” to hurt his presidency, a rhetorical move that closely resembled claims by Serbian officials. Right-wing media amplified this narrative, portraying critics as rooting for national failure. The administration and its allies framed lockdowns, mask mandates, and public health warnings as elite overreach, casting themselves as defenders of freedom against manufactured panic.¹⁷ In the Netherlands, the rightwing MP Thierry Baudet described COVID-19 as a “strong flu,” accused global elites of using the pandemic to impose a “world state,” and railed against “absurd measures” meant, in his view, to instill panic and control.¹⁸ Germany’s AfD initially supported public health measures but soon pivoted to denouncing the government’s pandemic response as a “corona dictatorship,” aligning itself with the *Querdenker* movement of vaccine skeptics and conspiracy theorists.¹⁹ Populist actors all shared a common script: framing the crisis as a power grab by elites, questioning the legitimacy of scientific expertise, and rallying the public against perceived internal and external enemies.

Importantly, nationalism and populism were often not operating on parallel tracks. At crucial junctures, they fused and reinforced each other in ways that made them difficult to disaggregate. The nationalist populism that emerged—particularly visible in Serbia, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska—presented itself as both protector and victim, as the embodiment of tradition and the last defense against global decay. The people were framed not only as sovereign, but as perpetually under siege: by foreign elites, by global pharmaceutical companies, by anyone who questioned the dominant narrative. Pandemic governance, in this setting, became symbolic politics. Mask mandates, school closures, and even vaccination campaigns were not judged by their epidemiological impact but by what they signaled: submission or sovereignty, fear or faith, treason or loyalty. Even in places where this fusion was less complete, its gravitational pull remained strong. Politicians and public figures were forced to navigate within its coordinates, lest they

17 Lauren Aratani, “They’re Rooting for the Coronavirus’: Trump Allies Attack Democrats and the Media,” *The Guardian*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/05/theyre-rooting-for-the-coronavirus-trump-allies-attack-democrats-and-the-media>.

18 NPO Radio 1, “Baudet: Corona Niet Bewust Wereld in Geslinderd,” *NPO Radio 1*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.nporadio1.nl/nieuws/binnenland/ag1cc2c3-2dc2-4a6c-ac20-c336e79d7667/baudet-corona-niet-bewust-wereld-in-geslinderd>.

19 Simon Schütz, “How the Pandemic Dented the Popularity of Germany’s Far-Right AfD Party,” *NPR*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/29/950860206/how-the-pandemic-dented-the-popularity-of-germanys-far-right-afd-party>.

be cast outside the bounds of national authenticity. Technocrats adopted the language of the nation. Opposition actors and even previously respectable scientists and public intellectuals courted conspiratorial skepticism. The boundaries of speech deemed as legitimate exploded, and as a result, the space for reasoned debate diminished.

It is in this context that the title of this book must be understood. The use of the term *contagions* is deliberate—and necessarily uneasy. We fully understand that the metaphor is not neutral. The argument advanced here, however, is primarily analytic. The metaphor of contagion—far from a polemical invention—has deep roots in the classical and modern canon. From Thucydides' depiction of civic breakdown during the Athenian plague, to Camus's insistence that we all carry the plague within us, thinkers have long used epidemiological themes and imagery to capture the rapid, mutating, and morally ambiguous transmission of beliefs. In this tradition, contagion is pattern—one that reveals how deeply ideas travel through the tissue of society in moments of rupture. The metaphor of contagion also has a long lineage in the social sciences. From the early threshold models of collective action developed by Mark Granovetter (built, in part, on the ideas of behavioral contagion from psychology) to the models of dissemination of culture of Robert Axelrod, scholars have used contagion-like frameworks to explain how ideas, norms, and behaviors diffuse through social networks—not at random, but with patterned regularity.²⁰ Political sociologists have for decades described the spread of mobilization tactics, ideological repertoires, and regime crises in epidemiological terms. Revolutions, norms of protest, belief in conspiracies, democratic backsliding: all have been treated as phenomena that travel—not necessarily because they are rationally superior or institutionally encoded, but because they resonate in vulnerable settings and adapt to host environments.

More recently, scholars like Cass Sunstein, Nicholas Christakis, and James Fowler have shown how polarization, emotion, and behavioral change propagate in networked societies, producing echo chambers and viral feedback loops that undermine public reasoning.²¹ The populist turn in Europe and beyond has been described in precisely these terms—not

20 Mark Granovetter, "Threshold Models of Collective Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 6 (1978): 1420–1443; Robert Axelrod, "The Dissemination of Culture: A Model with Local Convergence and Global Polarization," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 2 (1997): 203–226.

21 Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives—How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do* (Little, Brown, 2011); Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

only as a political realignment, but as an affective epidemic. Other scholars researching the interaction between populism and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic have noted the ability of simple and powerful populist messages—in contrast to complex expert views—to spread like a virus.²² It is in that scholarly tradition that this book situates itself. Nationalism and populism are understood as political repertoires that behave, under conditions of stress, in contagion-like ways: they replicate, mutate, exploit institutional weaknesses, and overwhelm discursive immune systems. In that sense, the metaphor serves as an analytical bridge: between the spread of a biological virus and the political ideologies that shaped how societies responded to it. The question is not whether these ideologies are inherently pathological. It is whether, in moments of systemic strain, they amplify social vulnerability or foster resilience. That is the question this book seeks to answer—by examining the interaction between the pandemic and the ideational conditions through which Southeast Europe understood, resisted, and succumbed to its effects.

Southeast Europe as the Analytical Lens

This book focuses on Southeast Europe. While every part of the world has its idiosyncrasies, and Southeast Europe is certainly no exception, this region is distinctive in how it lays bare broader patterns that often remain more obscured elsewhere. The ideational forces of nationalism and populism that shaped the responses to the COVID-19 crisis were present across the Western world. But they were especially concentrated in Southeast Europe, where a specific historical trajectory—which includes the collapse of a federal state, contested transitions to liberal democracy, and fragile post-conflict settlements—created conditions of heightened vulnerability. The result was a political and social illumination which exposed how much of the region's post-communist and post-conflict order rested on uneasy compromises, volatile legitimacy, and unexamined fictions of social cohesion. In this sense, the region functioned as a kind of petri dish, exposing with unusual clarity the mechanisms that operated more diffusely in other settings. These mechanisms, from nativist border closures and vaccine nationalism to populist denialism and conspiratorial rhetoric, were on display throughout

22 Michael Bayerlein, Vanessa A. Boese, Scott Gates, Katrin Kamin and Syed Mansoob Murshed, "Populism and COVID-19: How Populist Governments (Mis)Handle the Pandemic," *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 2, no. 3 (2021): 389–428.

the Western world and globally. But in Southeast Europe, the density of ideological signaling, the thinness of institutional buffers, and the volatility of political trust rendered the crisis especially severe. In other words, while it would have been feasible to investigate these dynamics in any part of the Western world, Southeast Europe offered a particularly compelling analytical vantage point.

The title of this book refers to Southeast Europe as “Europe’s edge.” This phrase is not meant to suggest that the region lies at the periphery of Europe in any cultural, historical, civilizational, or even geographic sense. On the contrary, one of the arguments underpinning this study is that Southeast Europe is at the core of what Europe has always been and what it still is. Southeast Europe is, however, a region that sits at the intersection of competing conceptions of what Europe means—and what it should be. Geopolitically, economically, and institutionally, it also represents the edge of EU membership and of the contemporary liberal-democratic order. As such, it is a liminal space where ideological projects are tested, where Western and non-Western influences clash and blend, and where the ambiguities of European belonging are most acutely experienced. We believe this gives the region its diagnostic utility—because it tells us something not only about the concepts our book grapples with, but also about Europe.

For years, a wide swath of academic literature has treated Southeast Europe as an intellectual trope more than an empirical reality of broader comparative relevance. In a searing critique of this tendency, Mirjana Kasapović issued what she called a farewell to “post-Yugoslavism”—a polemical but important call to abandon the kind of scholarship that reduces the region to an ideological canvas for external projection.²³ Kasapović rightly warned that much of what parades as post-Yugoslav studies is normatively saturated, often driven less by a commitment to explanation than by a compulsion to condemn everything that came after the collapse of the Yugoslav federation. Political actors become either villains or martyrs, depending on how closely they approximate the researcher’s moral imagination. The result is often scholarship that is conceptually thin and empirically unmoored.

This book heeds that warning. It does not attempt to adjudicate the rights or wrongs of post-Yugoslav statehood, nor does it treat nationalism or populism as uniquely regional pathologies. Rather, it approaches them as ideational repertoires—dynamic, context-dependent, and politically instrumental. It treats Southeast Europe as a region that, for a specific set

23 Mirjana Kasapović, *Zbogom post-jugoslavenstvu! Prilog demitologizaciji hrvatske politike i društva* (Školska knjiga, 2024).

of historical and institutional reasons, offers exceptional empirical traction on the interaction between political ideology and crisis governance. If we want to understand how elites perform authority, how voters and societies process risk, and how legitimacy is contested and reconstructed under duress, Southeast Europe is where the patterns come into sharpest focus.

Beyond the clarity it offers when it comes to broader patterns, a further analytical strength of Southeast Europe lies in its internal diversity. This region is not a monolith. It comprises a dense mosaic of states with varying experiences of state formation, democratization, war, and post-conflict settlement. Slovenia and Croatia entered the European Union and stabilized their political institutions to a significant extent; Bosnia and Herzegovina remains frozen in an externally imposed dysfunctional constitutional order; Serbia oscillates between democratic aspirations and virulent nationalism and irredentism; Montenegro and North Macedonia face their own dilemmas of contested identity and external dependence; Kosovo struggles in the international limbo related to its statehood. Conversely, these countries also often suffer from similar problems to varying degrees—from corruption and clientelism to poor governance and lack of investment. These contrasts and overlaps are not noise to be filtered out, but potentially important explanatory variables.

Indeed, the methodological payoff of a regional focus lies precisely in its capacity for intra-regional comparison. The countries examined in this book share sufficient historical and structural commonalities to warrant comparison, but diverge enough in their institutional design, elite strategies, and public opinion dynamics to allow for real analytic leverage. The pandemic tested all of them. But the manner in which it was instrumentalized—whether as an opportunity for populist assertion, technocratic evasion, or nationalist reinvention—varied in telling ways. These variations help us understand not just how populism and nationalism work in crisis, but also what makes them cohere, mutate, or unravel.

By drawing on both the region's internal diversity and its heightened visibility of broader ideological patterns, the book avoids the two analytic traps that often plague scholarship on the region: first, the trap of exceptionalism, which sees the region as hopelessly different and thus analytically unproductive; and second, the trap of sameness, which flattens difference in the pursuit of tidy regional narratives. We insist instead on a middle ground: a comparative anatomy of ideological adaptation in the face of global disruption. This is not a call to rehabilitate the region as a positive model, because—as our book outlines in painful detail—that would make little sense. Southeast Europe simply offers analytic visibility. The political

contestation that the pandemic provoked across Europe—over vaccines, lockdowns, economic redistribution, and the scope of executive power—was present everywhere. But in Southeast Europe, the density of ideological signaling, the thinness of institutional buffers, and the volatility of public trust meant that the stakes of that contestation were unusually legible.

In that sense, Southeast Europe serves here not as a deviant case but as a diagnostic site. It reveals the latent tensions that elsewhere may remain concealed. It dramatizes, often painfully, the political consequences of crisis governance in societies where institutional trust is precarious, and where historical grievances are easily activated. It exposes how the languages of nationalism and populism can be reactivated under the sign of health emergency, and how they can be used to mask failure, redistribute blame, and reconstitute legitimacy. That is the intellectual wager of this book. It does not claim to speak for Southeast Europe, nor to redeem or condemn it. It seeks, rather, to learn from it—to treat it not as an object of critique, but as a vantage point on some of the most urgent political questions of our time. The pandemic may have started as a public health crisis. But in this part of Europe, it quickly became something more: a test of democratic resilience, a mirror of ideological fault lines, and a theater of contested sovereignty. That is why Southeast Europe matters.

Organization of the Argument: The Roadmap

The main research questions this book grapples with are: How did nationalism and populism shape the trajectories of pandemic governance in Southeast Europe? Under what conditions did they reinforce compliance, erode trust, or mutate into ideational contagions of their own? And what does this tell us about the resilience—or fragility—of democratic institutions in moments of profound disruption? Rather than privileging either the supply or demand side of ideology, this book traces their interaction. It examines how political actors employed nationalist and populist frames and repertoires of action in the face of crisis—and how citizens received, adapted, or resisted those messages, often through pre-existing ideological lenses. In this way, the book provides a dual anatomy of performance and perception under duress.

We tackle our research questions in seven substantive chapters, each dealing with a distinct but interconnected aspect of the political dynamics of the pandemic in Southeast Europe. Taken together, they form a composite portrait of how nationalism, populism, and the pandemic intersected—not

only in how governments ruled, but in how citizens perceived, resisted, or internalized the extraordinary rupture of public life. Chapter 2—“Before the Storm”—sets the stage. It examines the region on the eve of the pandemic, not as a monolith, but as a collection of states with diverging democratic trajectories, institutional capacities, and socio-political vulnerabilities. Some had recently emerged from protest waves; others were consolidating illiberal rule; still others oscillated uneasily between these poles. What they shared, however, was a weakened trust in institutions, deepening political polarization, and a complex legacy of post-conflict governance. The chapter argues that these “pre-existing conditions”²⁴ shaped both the content and credibility of early pandemic responses. But it also cautions against simplistic determinism: illiberalism did not always mean bad pandemic governance, and liberal democracy did not always guarantee good outcomes. Instead, it calls attention to the importance of political agency—how elites chose to act, and how publics chose to interpret those actions.

Chapter 3—“Descent into Tragedy”—turns to the epidemiological story: the narrative arc of the pandemic itself across Southeast Europe. The region’s initial response was, by most indicators, surprisingly effective. Countries that are often cast as laggards in governance outperformed many richer Western European peers in the first wave. But by the summer of 2020, that picture began to reverse. Compliance waned, health systems buckled, and mortality spiked. The chapter traces these shifts across time and space, pointing to the political decisions that drove epidemiological divergence. It suggests that Southeast Europe’s descent into tragedy was not inevitable; it was, in part, a function of how pandemic fatigue, populist gambits, and geopolitical rivalries crowded out coherent public health strategy. Importantly, it also documents the extraordinary variation among states—variation that defies easy typologies and demands explanation.

In Chapter 4—“Liberty in Lockdown”—we explore how Southeast European publics responded to the sweeping emergency powers and curtailments of civil liberties instituted during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite initial widespread support for lockdown measures across the ideological spectrum, the chapter uncovers a sharp divergence in the underlying motivations of different ideological groups. Nationalist-leaning respondents were significantly more likely to express support for emergency measures, viewing them as essential to safeguarding the national collective.

24 We borrow the use of this term in the context of the pandemic from Shana Kushner Gadarian, Sara Wallace Goodman, and Thomas B. Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics: The Deadly Toll of Partisanship in the Age of COVID* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

However, this support did not necessarily translate into greater behavioral compliance. Populists, by contrast, opposed these measures more frequently, framing them as illegitimate impositions by untrustworthy elites. They were less likely to comply with restrictions and more likely to view the measures as violations of personal liberty. The chapter thus establishes a crucial point: while both nationalism and populism respond to crisis in ideologically driven ways, they can diverge sharply in their attitudes and behaviors, with populism fostering contestation and skepticism, and nationalism channeling a conditional, authority-affirming consent that is often devoid of actual compliance.

Chapter 5—“Going Viral”—shifts the focus to the proliferation of COVID-19 conspiracy theories across the region. The chapter documents a striking correlation between belief in pandemic-related conspiracies and nationalist *and* populist ideological orientations. Both ideological groups were far more susceptible to accepting conspiratorial narratives than their cosmopolitan or mainstream counterparts. The statistical models demonstrate that nationalism and populism were among the most powerful predictors of conspiratorial belief, with the strongest adherents of either ideology being multiple times more likely to believe in pandemic conspiracies. Importantly, nationalism and populism often coexisted and reinforced each other, creating a fertile ideological ecosystem for such beliefs to flourish. The conspiratorial narratives—blaming foreign actors, global elites, or corrupt domestic leadership—resonated particularly with these ideological profiles. This chapter thus highlights how these ideologies did not merely shape policy preferences, but also how they structured the very cognitive frameworks through which people interpreted the crisis, making nationalism and populism central to the parallel epidemic of disinformation and mistrust.

In chapter 6—“The Price of Survival”—we examine the economic ramifications of the pandemic and their intergenerational consequences. Initially, there was a strong public consensus across all ideological camps in favor of prioritizing public health over economic concerns. However, as the crisis endured, this solidarity began to erode—particularly among those with nationalist and populist orientations. These groups increasingly questioned whether the young had been asked to sacrifice too much for the elderly. The most committed nationalists, and eventually populists, came to view pandemic policies as skewed toward protecting retirees at the expense of younger generations. Nationalists, in particular, were early to favor reallocating resources to younger cohorts, a trend that was joined by populists in the later phases of the crisis. The chapter shows that nationalism and populism, while not initially antagonistic to public health priorities,

evolved over time to question the legitimacy of those priorities. This shift ultimately undermined the intergenerational social contract and introduced a new ideological cleavage into pandemic politics—between the perceived interests of the young and the old.

Chapter 7—“Moving the Needle”—turns to vaccine hesitancy, one of the most consequential challenges in the later phases of the pandemic. Southeast Europe’s dismal vaccination rates cannot be explained solely by supply issues; rather, the chapter demonstrates that vaccine refusal was deeply political. Populist attitudes emerged as a strong predictor of vaccine hesitancy, driven by widespread distrust of elites, science, and official narratives. Nationalist attitudes, by contrast, played a more muted and at times ambivalent role. In some cases, nationalists were just as likely as their non-nationalist peers to support vaccination, particularly when it was framed as a patriotic duty or a means of national self-reliance. This divergence suggests that while populism uniformly obstructed vaccine uptake, the impact of nationalism was context dependent. Municipal-level electoral and vaccination data reinforced and extended these findings, showing lower vaccination rates in areas with strong populist and right-wing support. This chapter thus exposes the complex relationship between ideology and public health behavior, where populism consistently undermines health interventions and nationalism exerts a more contingent influence.

In chapter 8—“After the Curve”—we examine how the pandemic is being remembered across Southeast Europe. Drawing on survey data from late 2023, the chapter identifies two dominant retrospective narratives: one nationalist, one populist. The nationalist narrative emphasizes national resilience, the failure of international institutions, and the need for future self-reliance. The populist narrative, by contrast, casts the pandemic as a story of elite betrayal and manipulation, aligning closely with the conspiratorial themes outlined earlier in the book. These narratives resonate strongly with those who held nationalist or populist views during the crisis and continue to shape how they interpret its legacy. Interestingly, the chapter reveals a divergence in how these groups assess the pandemic’s human cost, with nationalists being more likely to downplay the death toll, while populists, though skeptical of official counts, focus on elite culpability. This difference underscores that even when nationalism and populism coincide in their rejection of mainstream narratives, they do so with distinct emphases and emotional registers. The chapter concludes that the memory of the pandemic is not a neutral artifact but an ideologically contested terrain, with nationalism and populism continuing to shape how the crisis is narrated, politicized, and drawn upon for future mobilization.

Chapters 9 and 10 close the book with a view both backward and forward. Chapter 9 draws together the empirical threads to offer a forward-looking reflection on the ideological legacies of the pandemic—not only in Southeast Europe but for liberal democracies globally. It argues that the pandemic served as a powerful accelerant for ideological conflict in Southeast Europe, sharpening existing cleavages and laying bare deep fissures in the political culture of the region. While nationalism and populism manifested in varied and sometimes contradictory ways, their consistent presence across all domains—public health compliance, belief in conspiracies, economic grievance, vaccine hesitancy, and collective memory—suggests that these ideologies have become deeply embedded interpretive lenses. The conclusion also looks outward, suggesting that the dynamics observed in Southeast Europe offer valuable lessons for understanding the ideological challenges facing democracies elsewhere. Finally, chapter 10 provides a detailed account of our data collection and methodological choices employed throughout the book. It also presents the results of multivariate analyses underpinning the key findings, ensuring analytical transparency and providing a roadmap for replication or extension by other scholars, which should be relatively straightforward to do considering that we have placed all our datasets in reputable and publicly available repositories.

How We See Our Contribution

This book is the product of more than five years of research and our attempt to bring the findings of that research closer to the general public—particularly in Southeast Europe. If the book helps educate the people of the region about the political reality around them, we will feel we have made a valuable contribution. However, if we put our academic caps back on, we would like to think that we also make four distinct scholarly contributions. The first of those contributions concerns the book's direct engagement with classic theories of populism and nationalism, illuminating how these ideologies flexibly adapted during a time of crisis. Our contribution lies in carefully disentangling the effects of populism versus nationalism on pandemic-era attitudes and behaviors, showing that these two forces—frequently conflated in public commentary—exerted distinct and sometimes even opposite influences. While much prior work treats populist and nationalist currents as part of a singular “far-right” response to COVID-19, our analysis demonstrates that they operated as separate (if often intersecting) lenses through which people interpreted and reacted to the crisis. The result

were divergent impacts on crucial outcomes like citizens' compliance with health directives, trust in institutions, and the formation of beliefs about the pandemic. By tracing these differences, we contribute to the literatures on populism and nationalism a clearer understanding of how each ideology, on its own terms, can shape mass responses in a crisis.

Secondly, this book positions itself within the growing political science scholarship on the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing new insights on democratic governance, political polarization, and collective memory under conditions of duress. We engage deeply with debates about democratic legitimacy in times of emergency. Many commentators throughout the pandemic (building on Michel Foucault's classic notion of biopolitics—the management of populations through regimes of health, surveillance, and discipline) argued that governments were using COVID-19 to normalize the expansion of draconian controls. Such claims framed COVID-19 as a test of the balance between public safety and civil liberties. Our book speaks to these theoretical perspectives by examining how Southeast European democracies navigated emergency powers and whether pandemic governance eroded public trust or democratic norms. We find that concerns about executive overreach and the curtailment of civil liberties were indeed salient, but they were refracted through populist and nationalist narratives in the region rather than abstract legal debates alone. By grounding high-level theory in on-the-ground analysis, our study contributes to the literature on crisis governance: it shows concretely how legitimacy was contested in a pandemic—not just by jurists or philosophers, but by protesters in the streets of virtually every major city of the region.

We also situate our work in dialogue with emerging research on the politicization of public health. In the United States, for instance, Shana Gadarian, Sara Wallace Goodman, and Thomas Pepinsky's influential (and remarkably speedily produced) book *Pandemic Politics: The Deadly Toll of Partisanship in the Age of COVID* documented how partisan polarization turned the American pandemic response into a form of intense political schism. Their multi-wave surveys showed Republicans and Democrats living in different pandemic realities, with divergent behaviors and beliefs that cost lives.²⁵ Our book both resonates with and extends these findings. We similarly underscore that political cleavages can be deadly—in Southeast Europe, too, distrust and misinformation were politically nurtured forces that undermined community solidarity. But whereas *Pandemic Politics* focuses on US partisanship, we bring a comparative cross-national lens,

25 Gadarian, Wallace Goodman, and Pepinsky, *Pandemic Politics*.

examining how the cleavages of ideology (populist vs. mainstream, nationalist vs. cosmopolitan) shaped pandemic outcomes across multiple countries. In doing so, we offer one of the first systematic studies of COVID-19 politics outside the advanced Western democracies, broadening the geographic scope of pandemic scholarship and highlighting that ideological polarization in public health is a global concern, not merely an American anomaly. Moreover, our work tracks not only public opinion during the acute crisis but also the ideological reconfiguration through and after it—a dimension often missing in contemporaneous studies. We delve into the process of setting the foundations of political memory of COVID-19, examining how competing narratives about the pandemic took shape and persisted. This is where our contribution significantly diverges from earlier works. While much of the early scholarship understandably focused on immediate effects—compliance rates, approval ratings, mortality outcomes—we follow the story into its aftermath, exploring how the experience was remembered and narrativized once the initial shock subsided. By documenting this ideological imprint on collective memory, our book contributes to an emergent literature that is only just beginning to grapple with how COVID-19 will be remembered, politicized, and woven into partisan or ideological mythologies.

We also set ourselves apart from other major interpretations of pandemic politics. Of particular note here is the budding cottage industry of accounts critical of proactive mitigation efforts perhaps best epitomized by Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee's book *In COVID's Wake: How Our Politics Failed Us*.²⁶ Macedo and Lee deliver a sweeping normative critique of the US pandemic response, arguing that many non-pharmaceutical interventions (lockdowns, school closures, mask mandates) were ineffective or even misguided. They suggest that political leaders imposed lockdowns partly out of a performative desire to look in control, rather than out of evidence-based desire to mitigate the pandemic and balance the social costs of such measures. While *In COVID's Wake* contributes to important debates on the balance between public health and liberty, our book charts a very different course and offers a necessary counterpoint. Where Macedo and Lee often read the history of the pandemic backwards with a focus on policy mistakes, we are more interested in reading it forwards. Our approach also remains grounded in the hard epidemiological reality that many authors underplay. Rather than focusing on second-guessing mitigation measures with the benefit of hindsight, we ask: how did the presence of nationalism and populism influence whether

26 Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee, *In COVID's Wake: How Our Politics Failed Us* (Princeton University Press, 2025).

societies pulled together or fell apart in the face of a threat that was indisputably deadly? In highlighting this focus, we distinguish our contribution: we maintain a clear-eyed recognition of the pandemic's devastating human toll while critically analyzing the political and ideological mediation of that toll. If Macedo and Lee fault "our politics" for failing us, our work specifies which politics—which ideological currents—were most corrosive to social cohesion and trust at the very moment they were needed for collective action. In this sense, our findings challenge any revisionist narrative that might suggest pandemic outcomes were divorced from epidemiological facts on the ground. Yes, politics failed—but not in a vacuum. They failed in interaction with a pathogen, and it is precisely the interplay of political ideology with public health reality that our study lays bare.

Thirdly, we believe this book offers methodological and empirical innovations that strengthen its scholarly contributions. We bring to bear original data and a multi-faceted research design that, taken together, go beyond prior works on the pandemic's political effects. One of our major contributions is the use of original public opinion surveys and social network data across seven countries in Southeast Europe. At a time when reliable data from this region can be scarce, we fielded our own surveys to directly measure attitudes and experiences during the pandemic. This allowed us to blend attitudinal, behavioral, and ideological measures in a single analysis. By layering these dimensions, we provide a rich portrait of how ideology translates into action. Importantly, our study also takes a longitudinal perspective, spanning from the initial lockdowns of early 2020 through to the retrospective memories of late 2023. We effectively tracked how the same societies evolved over the full arc of the pandemic. This temporal breadth allows us to capture phenomena that a snapshot study would miss: the way initial trust in technocratic experts later gave way to cynicism, or the way the cleavage over the generational distribution of pandemic effects took on ideological garbs over time. The methodological chapter of our book details the choices we made in this regard and the care we took in data collection, underscoring our commitment to rigorous empirical grounding. For readers in both academia and the policy world, this methodological transparency hopefully enhances the credibility and utility of our findings.

Finally, we believe that our book makes a significant contribution to the study of Southeast Europe itself, intervening in regional studies debates with implications far beyond the region. As already noted in the explanation of our regional focus, we consciously push back against the kind of ideologically framed portrayals of the Balkans that have sometimes dominated discourse. Maria Todorova memorably coined the term "Balkanism" to describe the

West's Orientalist gaze toward Southeast Europe—the tendency to portray the Balkans as a “primordial” and backward enclave, culturally and even anthropologically lagging behind the West.²⁷ Such tropes, which paint the region as irredeemably mired in ancient hatreds or dysfunction, still lurk in popular and even academic commentary. Our work counters this perspective. We do not frame Southeast Europe as an exceptional Other, nor do we indulge in either demonizing or romanticizing its trajectory. Instead, we position the region as a revealing lens for global ideological dynamics. The pandemic, we argue, exposed rather than magically created the nationalist and populist currents in Southeast Europe—and those currents, in turn, are not unique to the Balkans but reflective of broader patterns observable across democracies worldwide. In short, we treat Southeast Europe not as an exotic oddity but as a site of analytical leverage—a region whose internal contrasts and experiences during the pandemic provide insight into phenomena that are of universal interest in political science. Instead of portraying Southeast Europe as forever haunted by its history, we show it as a region facing very contemporary challenges—fake news, anti-vaccine agitation, youth-vs.-elderly conflicts—that mirror challenges elsewhere. In this sense, the region remains an underexplored resource for comparative research, one whose empirical density and conceptual clarity can sharpen ongoing debates across subfields. Scholars of democracy, crisis governance, or ideology would do well to listen more closely to Southeast Europe, not out of curiosity but in recognition that its stories can recalibrate how we understand our own.

In sum, this book makes a contribution to both public discourse and scholarship on a deeply traumatic episode in the contemporary history of humanity. It speaks to the core of political science debates raised by COVID-19—from the fragility of democratic legitimacy under a state of exception, to the perils of polarized and ideologized public health responses—and it does so by bringing new evidence and perspectives from a region too often overlooked or misunderstood. The tone of our contribution is deliberately grounded: we do not sensationalize but rather situate our arguments in the relevant literatures and empirical realities. By distinguishing the divergent roles of populism and nationalism, we add conceptual clarity to crisis studies of ideology. By positioning Southeast Europe as both regionally rooted and globally relevant, we bridge a gap between area studies and general theory, showing that insights from this region can illuminate problems faced by democracies everywhere. And by being diligent in data collection

27 Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

and study design, we offer a robust evidence base—one that policymakers might consult as they consider how to fortify democratic resilience against the next crisis that inevitably comes. Ultimately, we hope we produced a scholarly intervention with broad resonance: a work that is unflinching about the region it studies, deeply engaged with the big ideas and debates of our post-pandemic age, and hopeful that by learning these lessons—lessons of trust, memory, and ideology, of nationalism's double-edged swords and populism's corrosive fire—all of us can better navigate the delicate balance between national solidarity and global common cause when the world is tested again.

2. Before the Storm: Southeast Europe on the Eve of the Pandemic

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic reached Southeast Europe's societies that were already marked by economic precarity, strained public health systems, weakened democratic institutions, and low levels of political and media trust. This chapter situates the crisis within these longer structural and historical trajectories, reconstructing the region's political, economic, and institutional landscape on the eve of the pandemic. It highlights both shared post-socialist and post-conflict legacies and significant intra-regional variation in state capacity, governance quality, and ideological alignment. By establishing these baseline conditions, the chapter provides the contextual foundation necessary for understanding how pandemic governance, public compliance, and ideological contestation unfolded across Southeast Europe.

Keywords: Southeast Europe, post-socialist transition, state capacity, democratic backsliding, media trust, health system preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic did not arrive in a vacuum. It collided with long-standing structural weaknesses, political legacies, and social tensions that shaped how states and societies interpreted the threat, how they responded, and how resilient they proved to be under pressure. Nowhere was this more visible than in Southeast Europe. Understanding how the pandemic unfolded in this region and why it unfolded the way it did requires first stepping back. This chapter does exactly that. It lays out where the states of the region found themselves on the eve of the crisis: not simply in terms of public health infrastructure or economic readiness, but in terms of deeper institutional conditions, political dynamics, and media environments. It is a necessary foundation for the rest of this book. The central claim of this

Glaurdić, Josip, and Christophe Lesschaeve. *Contagions: Nationalism, Populism, and the Pandemic at Europe's Edge*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press/Central European University Press, 2026.

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book is that the pandemic did not generate new political or social realities out of thin air. Rather, it acted as an accelerant by exposing and intensifying dynamics that were already in place. To make sense of what happened during those chaotic months and years, from the delayed lockdowns to the low vaccine uptake and the explosion of conspiratorial thinking, we need to first understand the region's starting point. What were the vulnerabilities, capacities, and fault lines that shaped the space into which the virus arrived?

Economically, Southeast Europe entered the pandemic with deep scars. After the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and a bumpy transition to market economies, most countries in the region were still struggling with the consequences of flawed privatization and sustained emigration. While there had been growth and partial convergence with EU standards in some areas, particularly in Slovenia and Croatia, the broader picture was one of economic precarity. For large parts of the population, financial security remained elusive. Unemployment was high, and informal employment¹ remained widespread. That same fragility defined the region's healthcare systems. Built on the foundations of Yugoslavia's universalist model, most of these systems had undergone decades of underfunding and fragmented reform. Infrastructure was uneven, modernization efforts had stalled, and shortages in equipment and personnel were widespread. Even countries that maintained relatively high numbers of hospital beds, such as Serbia and Croatia, struggled with outdated facilities and insufficient intensive care unit (ICU) capacity. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the problem was compounded by political fragmentation. Pandemic preparedness, in any meaningful sense, was minimal. Years of austerity, institutional dysfunction, and brain drain had hollowed out the very systems that would soon be placed under immense strain.

But the challenges went far beyond technocratic capacity. The political landscape of the region had, by 2020, become defined by the entrenchment of populist and nationalist currents. The initial wave of state-building and postwar stabilization gave way to a more entrenched and normalized form of identity politics. Nationalism, once a tool of war and separation, had by now become a permanent feature of political competition. In some countries, it was encoded in constitutional arrangements; in others, it was embedded in the structure of party systems. Alongside nationalism, populism had taken root. Sometimes populism overlapped with nationalist agendas, sometimes

1 Informal employment refers to work that is not regulated by the state, meaning it lacks formal contracts, social security contributions, and legal protections such as paid leave or healthcare benefits.

it was channeled through anti-elitist or anti-corruption discourses. Formal democratic institutions remained in place, but their functioning had degraded. Elections continued to be held, but with declining credibility. Media freedom, judicial independence, and civil society autonomy were all under pressure. Political elites in several countries had learned to game the system: adopting the language of EU integration while hollowing out democratic checks at home. This garnered them support from Western allies, who were all too keen to ignore clear signs of democratic backsliding if it meant maintaining stability in a volatile region. The result was a political environment marked by deep distrust of institutions and weakened democratic norms. Nowhere was this loss of trust more visible than in the media sphere. The region's media environments, though formally pluralistic, had become deeply politicized and vulnerable to capture. Public broadcasters faced pressure from ruling parties; private outlets often depended on state advertising or oligarchic funding. What looked like media diversity was, in many cases, a façade. Citizens were keenly aware of this, and their skepticism showed in surveys, where trust in media consistently trailed EU averages. At the same time, the rise of social media transformed how people consumed information. Initially celebrated as a tool of democratization, these platforms became vectors for misinformation, polarization, and manipulation. Political actors learned to use digital channels for their own ends through troll farms, disinformation campaigns, and algorithmic amplification of polarizing content. By 2020, conspiracy theories already circulated widely. When the pandemic hit, they exploded.

What ties these domains together—economy, healthcare, politics, and media—is a shared condition of fragility. In different ways and to different degrees, each country in the region entered the pandemic with institutions under strain, legitimacy eroding, and resilience compromised. This does not mean Southeast Europe was uniquely weak. But it does mean that the pandemic hit systems that were already brittle, and populations already exhausted. In such a context, the spread of misinformation, the distrust of official guidance, the resistance to vaccination, and the breakdown of solidarity were not aberrations. They were, to a significant extent, predictable outcomes of deeper structural conditions. This chapter provides the baseline from which the rest of the book departs. Later chapters will show how populist and nationalist beliefs shaped attitudes toward emergency powers, how distrust in institutions fueled conspiracy thinking, and how state capture undermined vaccination campaigns. But all of that is rooted in this story of where Southeast Europe stood when the pandemic began.

Shock, Stagnation, and the Precarious State of Post-Socialist Economies

Three decades after the collapse of Yugoslavia, the economies of Southeast Europe remain marked by the legacy of violent state disintegration, difficult transitions to market capitalism, and prolonged divergence from EU economic standards. The region's economic trajectory is best illustrated by three core indicators: GDP per capita, unemployment, and life expectancy, presented in figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3. Together, they offer a composite view of both material recovery and lingering structural deficits. The figures show that Southeast Europe has experienced substantial gains since the 1990s, yet the scars of war, flawed privatization, and institutional dysfunction continue to shape uneven development. While the region's sole EU member states of Slovenia and Croatia have approached EU averages in some areas, others have remained mired in stagnation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina endured the most severe economic collapse of all post-Yugoslav republics. The 1992–1995 war devastated the country's productive capacity, infrastructure, and labor force, with GDP estimated to have contracted by between 50 and 80%.² The human toll was equally profound: male life expectancy plunged into the 40s, while for women it fell by nearly a decade, from over 75 in 1990 to approximately 65 by the mid-1990s. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement marked the end of hostilities, but it instituted a fragmented and ethnically consociational political system that continues to obstruct coherent economic governance. In the immediate postwar years, privatization processes were marred by cronyism, with many socially owned enterprises handed to political clients rather than subjected to competitive restructuring.³ Although Bosnia joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2008, progress toward integration has been halting. Weak rule of law, entrenched clientelist networks, and an institutional architecture built around ethnic vetoes have all contributed to stagnation.⁴ Unemployment remained persistently high throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, with official rates fluctuating between 20% and 30%

2 Michael Pugh, "Postwar Political Economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Spoils of Peace," *Global Governance* 8, no. 4 (2002): 467–482.

3 Michael Pugh, "Transformation in the Political Economy of Bosnia since Dayton," *International Peacekeeping* 12, no. 3 (2005): 448–462.

4 Slobodan Petrović, "The Political System of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Fault Lines Set Down in the Dayton Agreement," *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 24, no. 1 (2021): 107–120.

before finally declining below 20% in the late 2010s. Despite international assistance and formal commitments to European convergence, Bosnia and Herzegovina's postwar economic recovery has been slow, uneven, and highly constrained by political fragmentation.

Slovenia, on the other hand, experienced the most successful post-socialist economic trajectory among the former Yugoslav republics. Spared from serious wartime destruction, it entered the 1990s as the most developed and industrialized part of Yugoslavia, benefiting from relatively liberal "worker self-management" structures that facilitated a smoother transition to a market economy.⁵ Early stabilization efforts quickly brought inflation under control, and privatization proceeded through corporatist, stakeholder-oriented models rather than opaque auctions.⁶ Slovenia signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement in 1996, acceded to the European Union in 2004, and joined the eurozone by 2007. By 2019, its GDP per capita exceeded \$25,000 (2015 USD), approaching 60% of the EU average, well ahead of its regional peers but still significantly below the EU average of \$33,000. Social infrastructure remained fairly robust throughout the transition, as indicated in a life expectancy of over 79 years for men and 85 for women by 2019. Slovenia also stood out in terms of labor market performance, with unemployment levels often falling below the EU average.

Croatia's post-socialist transition unfolded under the shadow of war and semi-authoritarian governance. During the 1990s, President Franjo Tuđman's government pursued a state-led economic model marked by heavy intervention, preferential treatment for war veterans, and the transfer of assets to politically connected firms.⁷ Early privatization initiatives, often conducted through voucher schemes or insider buyouts, produced a class of oligarchs and were tainted by frequent allegations of corruption and mismanagement.⁸ Nonetheless, macroeconomic stabilization was achieved relatively quickly by the mid-1990s, largely through restrictive monetary

5 Branko Bembič, "Slovenia: From Corporatism to Localised Conflict," in *Are Multinational Companies Good for Trade Unions? Evidence from Six Central and Eastern European Countries*, ed. Martin Myant (ETUI, 2023), 25–49.

6 Miroslav Stanojević, "The Rise and Decline of Slovenian Corporatism: Local and European Factors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 5 (2012): 857–877.

7 Milica Uvalić, "Transition in Southeast Europe: Understanding Economic Development and Institutional Change," in *Economies in Transition: The Long-Run View*, ed. Gérard Roland (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 364–399.

8 Damir Grubiša, "Political Corruption in Transitional Croatia: The Peculiarities of a Model," *Politička misao* 42, no. 5 (2005): 55–74.

policy that brought inflation under control.⁹ Following Tuđman's death in 1999, democratic reforms gathered pace, and successive governments accelerated EU-aligned economic restructuring. These efforts culminated in Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, bringing with it regulatory harmonization, investment inflows, and access to structural funds. By 2019, GDP per capita had reached approximately \$15,000 (2015 USD), or just under half the EU average. While unemployment remained high, hovering between 10% and 15% for much of the 2000s and 2010s, it had fallen to around 7% by the eve of the pandemic, reaching rough parity with the EU average. In comparative terms, Croatia's social outcomes were relatively favorable. Life expectancy stood at around 75 years for men and 81 for women in 2019, outperforming most other post-Yugoslav states.

Serbia's economic trajectory has been shaped by a turbulent legacy of conflict, sanctions, and delayed reform. As the primary successor to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia endured a particularly severe transition under the rule of Slobodan Milošević. During the 1990s, the country faced international isolation, hyperinflation, and military conflict, culminating in an 18% GDP contraction in 1999 alone.¹⁰ Hyperinflation reached historic highs in 1993, and macroeconomic stabilization began in earnest only after Milošević's fall in 2000. The early 2000s saw a wave of liberalizing reforms, including the rapid privatization of state-owned enterprises. While these measures were aimed at creating a competitive market economy, they often enabled the rise of politically connected oligarchs and contributed to the erosion of industrial capacity.¹¹ Serbia initiated its EU accession process with the signing of a Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2013, but progress has been incremental and complicated by institutional stagnation and geopolitical hedging. Successive governments have pursued closer economic ties not only with the EU but also with Russia and China, seeking to diversify trade and attract foreign investment.¹² Despite maintaining relatively conservative fiscal policies, reflected for instance in moderate public debt levels, Serbia's economy remains constrained by entrenched patronage networks and weak institutional checks.¹³ Unemployment, a

9 Vojmir Franičević and Evan Kraft, "Croatia's Economy After Stabilisation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 49, no. 4 (1997): 669–691.

10 Ivana Bajić-Hajduković, "Remembering the 'Embargo Cake': The Legacy of Hyperinflation and the UN Sanctions in Serbia," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 1, no. 2 (2014): 61–79.

11 Milica Uvalić, *Serbia's Transition: Towards a Better Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

12 Eloise Hardy, "How Serbia's Vučić Is Playing the EU," *The Parliament Magazine*, May 27, 2025.

13 Dragan Stanojević, Dragana Gundogan, and Marija Babović, "Clientelistic Relations Between Political Elite and Entrepreneurs in Serbia," *Sociologija* 58, no. 2 (2016): 220–238.

chronic challenge throughout the post-socialist period, reached peaks of around 23% in the mid-2010s before falling steadily to around 10% by 2019.

North Macedonia avoided the full-scale wars that ravaged other post-Yugoslav states, though it faced a brief internal conflict in 2001 that exposed underlying ethnic tensions. Unlike Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, it did not come under international sanctions during the 1990s, though its economic transition was severely hampered by the destructive policies (which for a substantial period of time included an embargo) of its southern neighbor Greece. The shift from a planned to a market-based economy was cautious and protracted. In response to early episodes of price instability and monetary mismanagement, North Macedonia pegged the denar to the German mark and later the euro. Despite macroeconomic stabilization, structural reforms lagged due to the persistence of clientelist networks.¹⁴ Political and familial ties heavily influenced appointments in public enterprises, slowing the restructuring of inefficient firms. Nonetheless, the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis became a modest inflection point: under IMF and EU guidance, the government introduced fiscal consolidation and reforms aimed at improving public financial management. These efforts contributed to a more stable macroeconomic framework and increased investor confidence.¹⁵ Nevertheless, North Macedonia is found consistently among the weakest performers of Southeast Europe, whether we look at GDP per capita, unemployment, or life expectancy.

Montenegro's post-socialist economic trajectory was closely tied to Serbia's until the late 1990s. After years of monetary instability and inflation under the dinar regime, Montenegro unilaterally adopted the German mark in 1999, and later the euro in 2002, despite not being a member of the Eurozone. This early move provided a foundation of monetary stability and helped curb inflationary pressures. However, the adoption of a foreign currency also eliminated independent monetary and exchange rate tools, constraining the government's ability to respond to economic shocks through devaluation or interest rate policy.¹⁶ Montenegro pursued rapid and extensive privatization during the 1990s and early 2000s, but the process was often opaque, favoring

14 Hyrije Abazi-Alili, "Privatisation in Macedonia and Communities in Transition," in *Macedonia's Long Transition: From Independence to the Prespa Agreement and Beyond*, ed. Robert Hudson and Ivan Dodovski (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 95–110.

15 Marjan Petreski, "The Economic Transition of Macedonia," in *Macedonia's Long Transition: From Independence to the Prespa Agreement and Beyond*, ed. Robert Hudson and Ivan Dodovski (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 77–94.

16 Vassilis Monastiriotis, and Ivan Žilić, "The Economic Effects of Political Disintegration: Lessons from Serbia and Montenegro," *European Journal of Political Economy* 65 (December 2020).

politically connected buyers and enabling the emergence of a domestic oligarchic class.¹⁷ Following its independence in 2006, Montenegro prioritized EU integration as its central economic and political anchor. The signing of a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2007 reinforced the adoption of EU-compatible legal frameworks and economic liberalization.¹⁸ Despite aligning with EU macroeconomic norms, Montenegro continued to struggle with high unemployment. Joblessness peaked above 30% in the mid-2000s and remained structurally high throughout the decade, gradually declining to 15% by 2019.

Kosovo's economy emerged under fundamentally different conditions than those of other Yugoslav successor states. Following the 1999 NATO intervention and the withdrawal of Serbian forces, Kosovo came under United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK), with an economy devastated by conflict.¹⁹ Unlike its neighbors, Kosovo's post-socialist transition effectively began from scratch. When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, it had a GDP per capita of about \$2,500 (in 2015 USD). By 2019, it had only reached around \$4,000, marking Kosovo as the poorest economy in Southeast Europe. Nevertheless, the GDP per capita growth trajectory since 2008 has been relatively stable, averaging 4–5% annually.²⁰ The effects of war were clearly reflected in public health indicators: male life expectancy dropped sharply from 68 in 1997 to just 52 in 1999; for women, it fell from 71 to 66. Yet over the long run, Kosovo recorded the greatest gains in life expectancy among the Yugoslav successor states, rising from just below 60 in 1980 to near parity with regional peers by 2019. Kosovo's unresolved international status and partial sovereignty constrained its economic development. The country only signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2015, much later than its neighbors. Weak rule of law and pervasive nepotistic networks further hampered private sector development during the 2000s.

Taken together, the economic trajectories of the post-Yugoslav republics reveal a shared legacy of uneven recovery, delayed convergence, and structural vulnerability. While each country followed a distinct path shaped by war,

17 Zorica Ćeranić, "Privatisation in Montenegro—Highway to Destitution?!" (Institute Alternative—Podgorica, 2015).

18 Gazmend Qorraj and Gezim Jusufi, "The EU Stabilisation and Association Agreement for the Western Balkans: Between Challenges and Opportunities," *Croatian International Relations Review* 24, no. 81 (2018): 51–68.

19 Alexandros Yannis, "The UN as Government in Kosovo," *Global Governance* 10 (2004): 67–81.

20 Kunal Sen and Colin Kirkpatrick, "A Diagnostics Approach to Economic Growth and Employment Policy in Low Income Economies: The Case of Kosovo," *Journal of International Development* 23, no. 1 (2011): 132–154.

Figure 2.1. GDP per capita in Southeast Europe and the EU (constant 2015 US\$)

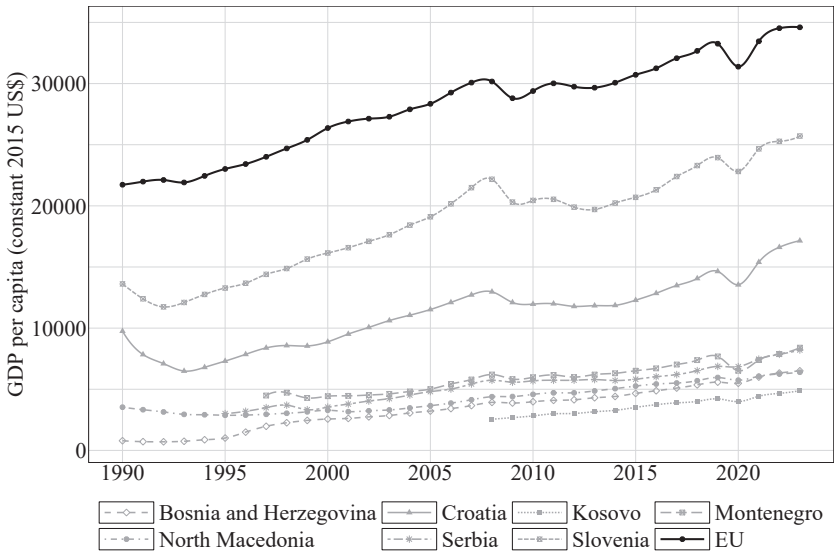


Figure 2.2. Unemployment rate in Southeast Europe and the EU (% of total labor force)

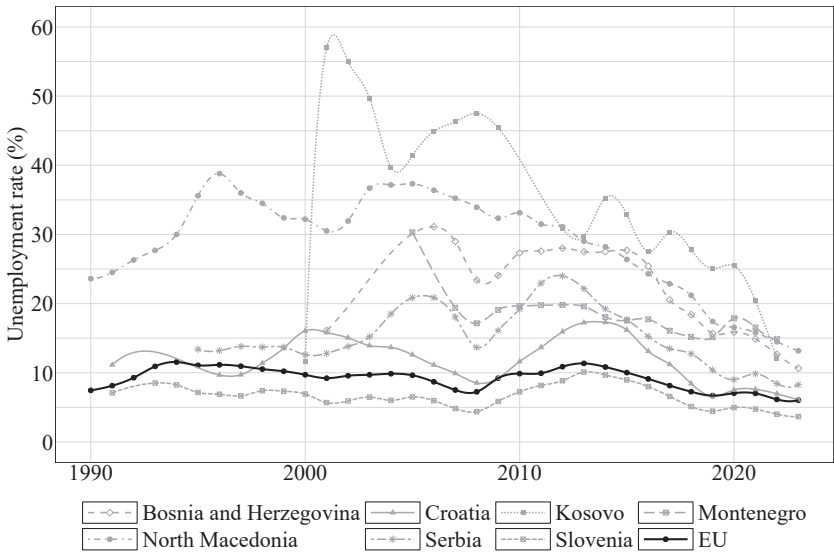
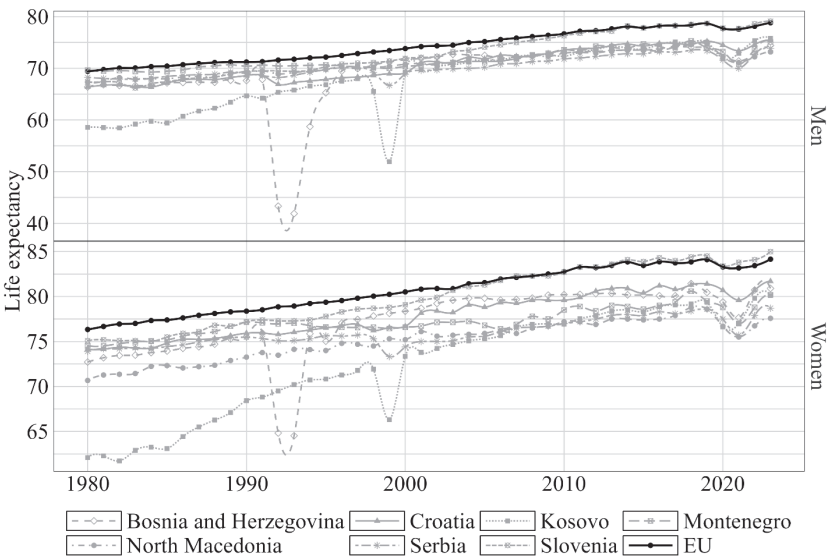


Figure 2.3. Life expectancy at birth in Southeast Europe and the EU, by gender
(years)



political reform, and external constraints, common patterns are visible. Most experienced severe output collapses in the 1990s, struggled with inflation and unemployment, and pursued privatization processes that often enriched political insiders at the expense of broad-based competitiveness. GDP per capita levels in all countries remain far below the EU average. Similarly, while unemployment rates have improved, they continue to outpace the EU average in much of the region. A critical factor compounding these economic challenges has been sustained and large-scale emigration. Faced with limited job prospects, political instability, and low wages, millions of citizens have left the region since the 1990s, particularly the young and educated. This ongoing brain drain not only deprives domestic economies of talent but also undermines long-term demographic and fiscal sustainability. One of the starkest indicators of the region's constrained development is life expectancy. While all countries have seen long-term gains since the Yugoslav era, a clear divergence has emerged since the early 2010s. During the socialist period and the first two decades of transition, life expectancy in Southeast Europe consistently trailed the EU average but rose at a broadly similar rate. Since the last decade, however, that parallel trajectory has broken down. Gains have slowed or plateaued across most post-Yugoslav states, while EU countries have continued to advance. This growing gap in

health outcomes underscores the enduring nature of Southeast Europe's post-socialist malaise. Despite formal political stabilization, the region remains caught in a pattern of partial reform, and uneven socioeconomic development.

The Unsteady Foundations of Public Health

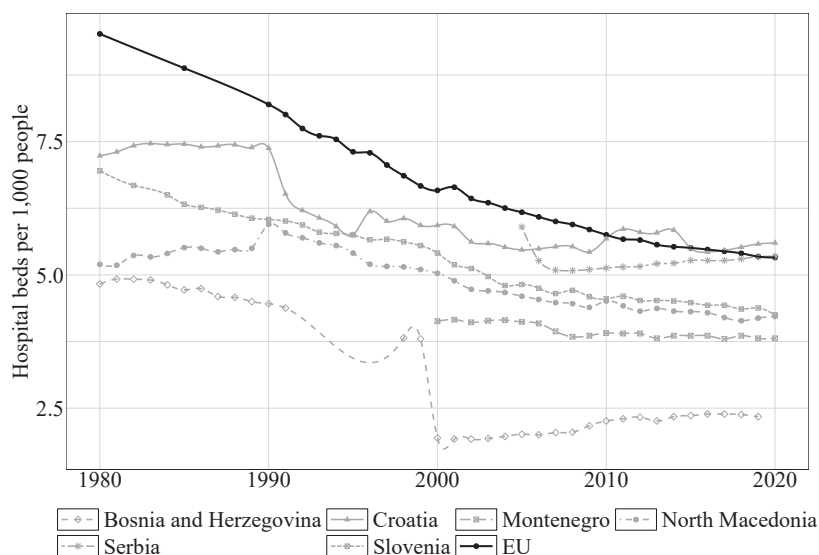
These economic vulnerabilities had direct consequences for social infrastructure, none more critical than healthcare. Like the economy as a whole, the early 1990s also marked a tumultuous period for Southeast Europe's health systems. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the newly independent states inherited socialist-era healthcare infrastructures amid war and economic collapse. The immediate post-Yugoslav years were characterized by a challenging socio-economic context, wartime destruction, and widespread dissatisfaction with the communist-era health system, resulting in deteriorating health outcomes and gaps in services.²¹

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, these countries embarked on health system reforms with support from international organizations. Most shifted from a centrally planned model toward decentralized, insurance-based systems, aiming to improve efficiency and primary care. However, reforms unfolded unevenly. By the 2010s, many systemic weaknesses from the transition era persisted, including under-resourced primary care, hospital-centric delivery, and incomplete universal coverage. Despite some country differences (for instance, Slovenia moved faster in aligning with EU norms, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina struggled with post-war fragmentation), the region as a whole entered the late 2010s still facing significant structural challenges that would later test their pandemic preparedness.²²

As figure 2.4 shows, several countries in Southeast Europe maintained hospital bed density on par with the EU (itself experiencing a steady decline in this indicator over the past four decades). For example, Croatia and Serbia had about 5.3 and 5.6 hospital beds per 1,000 people in 2019, respectively, roughly similar to the EU average of 5.4 per 1,000. Others, however, severely

21 Bernd Rechel, Jadranka Božikov, and Will Bartlett, "Lessons from Two Decades of Health Reforms in South East Europe," in *Health Reforms in South-East Europe*, ed. Will Bartlett, Jadranka Božikov, and Bernd Rechel (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 229–239.

22 Fatime Arenliu Qosaj and Margaret Bourdeaux, "Health Policy Developments in the Western Balkan Countries 2000–19: Towards European Health and Health Care Policies," *European Journal of Public Health* 34, no. 3 (2024): 460–466.

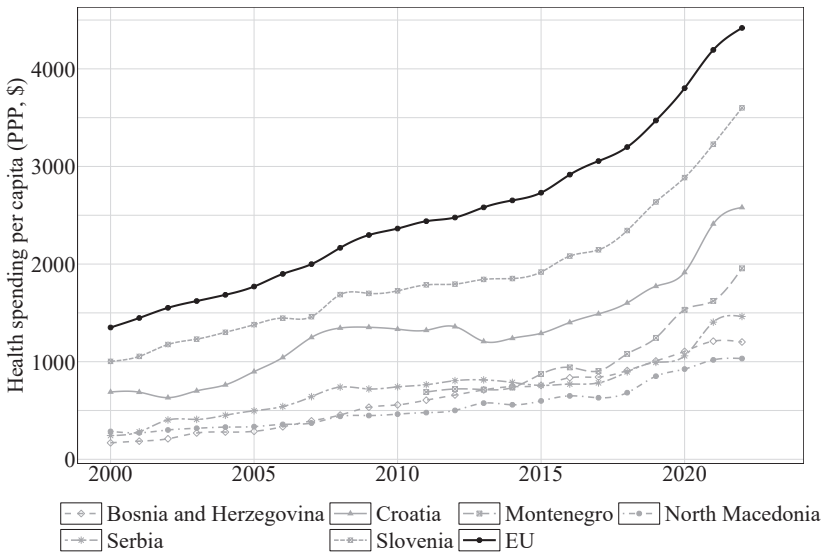
Figure 2.4. Hospital beds per 1,000 people in Southeast Europe and the EU

lagged behind. North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro had fewer than 4.5 beds per 1000 people, and Bosnia and Herzegovina even had less than 2.5, following a substantial reduction at the turn of the millennium. Across the region, however, much of the infrastructure was often outdated, lacking specialized units and equipment crucial for a major crisis. By 2019, ICU capacity and advanced medical technology were limited across Southeast Europe. In Serbia, for instance, modern inputs to service delivery fell far below European standards: the country had only 7.7 operating theaters per 100,000 people (versus about 9.5 in EU15) and 0.4 magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) units per 100,000 (one-fifth of the EU15 average of 1.9).²³ In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the entire public system in 2019 had only 523 intensive care beds, serving roughly 2.2 million people, and just five hospitals with infectious disease wards with a total of 180 beds.²⁴ While Western European nations spent decades upgrading facilities

23 Ha Thi Hong Nguyen, Predrag Djukic, Jelena Zajeganovic-Jakovljevic, Ivana Misis, Nemanja Sormaz, and Milena Gajic-Stevanovic, *Serbia—Toward a More Effective, Efficient, Equitable and Resilient Health System* (World Bank, 2023).

24 Seila Cilovic-Lagarija, Nino Hasanica, Maida Mulic, Milan Radojicic, Suada Brankovic, Aida Pilav, Senad Huseinagic, and Sanjin Musa, "An Overview of Human Resources and Capacity in Health Care Institutions in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Context of Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Materia Socio-Medica* 33, no. 1 (2021): 56–59.

Figure 2.5. Domestic government health expenditure per capita in Southeast Europe and the EU (PPP, current international \$)



and technology, many hospitals in Southeast Europe remained in need of modernization.

Chronic underinvestment in health was a defining vulnerability of Southeast European systems from the early 2000s onward. Figure 2.5 tracks the per capita health expenditures in the region over time. These expenditures remained substantially lower than EU levels. For example, in 2019 Croatia spent about \$1,772 per capita on health, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia all allocated around \$1,000 per person to healthcare. In the EU, by contrast, the average government spending on healthcare was around \$3,500. Even the most prosperous of the group, Slovenia, spent just over \$2,600 per capita in 2019, roughly 75% of the EU average in that year. Although total health spending as a share of GDP in some countries of Southeast Europe approached the EU's average of 10% of GDP (e.g., around 8–9% of GDP in most countries) due to their lower GDPs, the absolute resources available were nowhere near EU standards. Compounding the problem is the financing mix. Inadequate public funding led to heavy reliance on out-of-pocket payments instead of social health insurance by households. Across the region, this type of spending accounted for roughly one-third of total health expenditure, about 80% higher (in share) than the

EU average.²⁵ Heavy out-of-pocket financing meant that health systems had limited pooled funds to invest in system-wide needs like emergency preparedness, prevention programs, or capital upgrades.

Human resources for health have been another critical weakness in Southeast Europe, exacerbated by persistent emigration and brain drain of medical professionals. The socialist Yugoslav era produced a strong base of doctors and nurses, but by the 2010s the region faced aging personnel and shortages in key specialties. Health worker densities remained below Western European levels. In Serbia, for instance, there were about 297 doctors and 653 nurses per 100,000 people in 2018, markedly lower than the EU averages of 405 doctors and 828 nurses.²⁶ Crucially, workforce distribution was skewed, with rural and remote areas severely understaffed. This workforce gap was widened by large-scale emigration throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Thousands of health workers left the Western Balkans each year for higher pay and better conditions in the EU.

The phenomenon was widespread: The National Medical Council of Serbia issued roughly 800 certificates annually for doctors seeking jobs abroad in the late 2010s. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, professional associations reported many qualified doctors leaving each year during this period. By 2019 the cumulative impact was stark. It was estimated that for every six doctors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one was practicing in Germany. The drivers of this exodus were commonly cited as low salaries, poor working conditions, and limited career prospects at home. The consequences for health system preparedness were serious. Emigration led to the loss of vital services and even the collapse of certain local capacities. Gaps like these existed in many specialized fields (anesthesiology, radiology, intensive care), meaning that even before COVID-19, hospitals struggled to staff critical units.²⁷

While most Southeast European countries have centralized systems with a single Ministry of Health, Bosnia and Herzegovina deserves special mention. Its health system is splintered among two entities and a special district. Bosnia operates with 13 distinct health insurance funds and 14 ministries

25 World Health Organization, *Roadmap for Health and Well-Being in the Western Balkans (2021–2025)* (WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, 2021); Nguyen et al., *Serbia*; Ministry of Health, Republic of Kosovo, *National Health Accounts Report for 2017* (Ministry of Health, 2019).

26 Nguyen et al., *Serbia*.

27 Alida Vračić, “Time for Policy Change on Western Balkans Emigration,” *Europe’s Futures, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM)*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.iwm.at/blog/time-for-policy-change-on-western-balkans-emigration>.

or agencies responsible for health across different government levels.²⁸ There is no single national health authority. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, 10 cantonal ministries hold primary responsibility for healthcare delivery, with only a coordinating role played by the entity-level ministry. This extreme decentralization has long resulted in uneven health services and poor horizontal coordination between regions.²⁹ In practical terms, it meant that developing a unified pandemic response plan or pooling resources (such as stockpiling protective equipment or centralizing ICU capacity) was extraordinarily difficult.

By the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health systems of Southeast Europe were still trailing their Western European counterparts on most indicators of capacity and preparedness. As the pandemic approached, Southeast European (SEE) countries were still wrestling with the legacies of a healthcare model built in a different era, now strained by demographic pressures and economic constraints. The outbreak of COVID-19 did not so much reveal new weaknesses as it laid bare the consequences of decades of deferred reform.

Power, Distrust, and Political Fragility on the Eve of Crisis

The vulnerabilities of the health system were paralleled by deep-rooted divisions in the political sphere. Southeast Europe underwent turbulent political transformations that started in the 1990s and early 2000s and in many ways continue to this day. In the post-socialist transition after 1990, these countries experienced the simultaneous collapse of communist one-party rule and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, leading to armed conflicts along ethnic lines in the 1990s. On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region's politics were defined by the interplay of several key themes: resurgent nationalism, the rise of populism, chronically low political trust, democratic backsliding or stagnation, and recurring political instability. The legacy of socialism had by this time receded to a secondary factor, as former communist parties reinvented themselves or faded, and new cleavages emerged. Many ex-communist leaders embraced nationalist or patronage-based politics. The socialist-era left-versus-right ideological divide

28 P4H Network, *Bosnia and Herzegovina* (2025), <https://p4h.world/en/countries/bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.

29 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024: Bosnia and Herzegovina Country Report* (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

gave way to conflicts over national identity, statehood, and the “people versus elites” narratives of populism.

As the Yugoslav federation dissolved amidst war and ethnic fragmentation in the early 1990s, nationalist movements emerged as primary vehicles for state-building. In Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, ruling parties drew legitimacy not only from their wartime roles but from their capacity to articulate ethnic majoritarian visions of sovereignty and victimhood. This early phase of nationalism was not a temporary political instrument to achieve independence, but a permanent and foundational layer of post-Yugoslav political orders. During the Yugoslav collapse, hardline leaders like Slobodan Milošević in Serbia and Radovan Karadžić in the Bosnian Serb entity leveraged ethnic grievances and historical myths to legitimize their rule and to wage brutal ethnic wars. In Croatia, President Tuđman’s ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) exemplified the blend of nationalism and populism in this era. Tuđman cultivated a charismatic populist persona embodying Croatia’s drive for independence, casting himself and the HDZ as the sole protectors of Croat national rights against “Yugoslav” (often meaning Serb or communist) threats.³⁰ Similar patterns played out elsewhere: nationalist parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina—such as the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), and the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), representing Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs respectively—rose to power championing their ethnic group’s interests, contributing to the fragmentation of Bosnia and the onset of the 1992–1995 war.³¹

While the peace agreements that followed the wars of the 1990s and early 2000s ended overt warfare and diminished irredentist nationalism, this ideology remained deeply embedded in the region’s political structures and discourse. Nationalism persisted as a potent force, albeit often in a more routinized or situational form, with political elites continuing to invoke ethnic identity and nationalist themes to rally support or deflect challenges. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the post-war constitution enshrined ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of political representation, institutionalizing the dominance of three ethno-nationalist parties. To this day, Bosnian Serb politicians like Milorad Dodik routinely employ

30 Mark Biondich, “Nationalism and Populism in the Balkans: The Case of Croatia,” in *Transformations of Populism in Europe and the Americas: History and Recent Tendencies*, ed. John Abromeit et al. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 51–67.

31 Josip Glaurdić and Ensar Muharemović, “Rokkan Rules? Communist Elites and the Choice of Electoral Systems in the Yugoslav Republics, 1989–1990,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 76, no. 4 (2024): 522–545.

secessionist rhetoric, threatening the withdrawal of the Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina, strengthening their nationalist credentials and distracting voters from governance failures. In North Macedonia, governments engaged in a hyper-nationalist “antiquization” campaign (e.g., renaming airports and highways, and erecting grand statues) to reinforce Macedonian national pride.³² Montenegro presents a paradoxical case: despite having had the trappings of a separate republic during socialist Yugoslavia, a distinct Montenegrin national identity was weak for years and the proportion of people identifying as “Montenegrin” actually declined from the socialist era into the 2000s despite the republic’s autonomous institutions, basically thanks to the competing nationalist and predatory campaign from Serbia.³³ In Croatia, although nationalist mobilization moderated during EU accession negotiations, the Croatian Democratic Union remained the default governing party, returning to power repeatedly throughout the 2000s and 2010s, and into the 2020s.³ Serbia followed a similar trajectory: although Slobodan Milošević was removed in 2000, his political successors adapted nationalist tropes, culminating in the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) under Aleksandar Vučić. Nationalism here employs pan-Serb narratives to deflect criticism of corruption, economic stagnation, or EU pressure. Even Slovenia, though often perceived as the most liberal of the post-Yugoslav republics, was not immune to these dynamics. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Slovenian nationalism largely took on a defensive character, directed less at internal ethnic divisions and more toward guarding the ethnonational integrity of the state against perceived external threats.³⁴

Furthermore, wartime legacies continued to shape voter preferences and party competition. Our own research on postwar voting behavior in Croatia, for example, found that even two decades after the war of independence, candidates with war veteran credentials enjoyed a measurable electoral advantage especially among nationalists,³⁵ and especially in communities

32 Andrey Vangeli, “Nation-Building Ancient Macedonian Style: The Origins and the Effects of the So-Called Antiquization in Macedonia,” *Nationalities Papers* 39, no. 1 (2011): 13–32.

33 Erin K. Jenne and Florian Bieber, “Situational Nationalism: Nation-Building in the Balkans, Subversive Institutions and the Montenegrin Paradox,” *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 5 (2014): 431–460.

34 Rudolf M. Rizman, “Radical Right Politics in Slovenia,” in *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe Since 1989*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 147–170; Rudolf M. Rizman, *Uncertain Path: Democratic Transition and Consolidation in Slovenia* (Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

35 Christophe Lesschaeve and Josip Glaurdić, “Condoning Postwar Corruption: How Legacies of War Prevent Democratic Accountability in Contemporary Southeast Europe,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 188–207.

that had suffered greatly in the war.³⁶ Across the region, political leaders have often invoked nationalist themes at opportune moments. Authoritarian-leaning incumbents, who outwardly profess pro-EU or reformist agendas to maintain Western support, have resorted to open nationalism or even anti-Western rhetoric when their domestic position was under threat. Nationalism had become, by 2020, a normalized part of political competition and was firmly institutionalized in party systems (often aligned along ethnic lines), embedded in constitutional arrangements (such as ethnic quotas in many parliaments), and ever-ready to be weaponized in rhetoric.³⁷ In sum, nationalism in Southeast Europe since the post-socialist transition has evolved from a revolutionary force that tore apart a multinational federation into a persistent undercurrent that shapes state institutions and political rhetoric. While the region did not see a return to full-scale ethnic war after 2001, the specter of ethnonationalism never fully disappeared.

Alongside nationalism, the rise of populism has been a significant trend in Southeast Europe's post-1990 political evolution. Populism, defined as a style or thin ideology juxtaposing "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite,"³⁸ gained traction in the region in multiple guises. In the early years of transition, as noted above, some of the dominant nationalist leaders were also effectively populist in their political communication when they claimed to speak for "the people" against the old communist ruling class. Leaders like Tuđman and Milošević concentrated power in their hands, personalized rule, and routinely derided opponents as enemies of the people or nation. Even as they adopted democratic façades (elections, parliaments), they undermined liberal institutions and checks and balances.³⁹ However, the 2000s and 2010s witnessed an important diversification of populist actors and ideologies. While earlier politics were often seen solely through an ethnic lens, the 2010s saw a surge of populist mobilization that did not always align neatly with ethnicity. This includes, for instance, anti-corruption protests, grassroots civic initiatives, and the emergence of outsider parties railing against entrenched elites. A notable example is Kosovo's Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination Movement, LVV), which rose from street protests in

36 Josip Glaurdić and Christophe Lesschaeve, "Warrior Candidates: Do Voters Value Combat Experience in Postwar Elections?," *Political Research Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2022): 950–965.

37 Florian Bieber, "Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans," *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 337–354; Michal Mochtak, *War Narratives in Post-Conflict Societies: Keeping the Past Alive in the Former Yugoslavia* (Routledge, 2024).

38 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

39 Biondich, "Nationalism and Populism in the Balkans."

the 2000s to become the largest political party by 2020. LVV espouses a blend of left-wing nationalism and anti-establishment populism.⁴⁰ The success of this left-leaning populism in Kosovo demonstrates that populism in the Balkans need not always be of the right-wing variety. Right-wing populism of course remains prominent as well. Serbia's ruling party since 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party led by Aleksandar Vučić, illustrates the hybrid nature of populism in the region. Vučić, a former ultranationalist, refashioned himself as a pro-EU pragmatic leader but continued to employ populist tactics domestically. His government centralized power, curtailed independent media, and depicted opposition figures as corrupt traitors working for foreign governments.⁴¹ Populism in Southeast Europe often operates within multi-ethnic states with unresolved national questions, so the "us vs. them"-logic can target domestic ethnic opponents or foreign powers in addition to the home-grown elite. The European Union has sometimes, whether deliberately or inadvertently, bolstered incumbent regional populists by prioritizing stability over democratic pluralism, a phenomenon critics dub "stabilitocracy."⁴² Leaders like Vučić or Đukanović have mastered a dual game: speaking the language of EU reforms while employing populist-authoritarian tactics at home, thereby enjoying Western support (as guarantors of stability) even as they hollowed out democratic norms. Populism and nationalism go hand in hand with populist leaders who framed themselves as authentic representatives of the nation betrayed by self-serving elites, foreign meddlers, and disconnected liberal bureaucracies. Nationalism and populism both draw lines between in- and outgroups in society, with the former drawing horizontal lines between insiders and outsiders of the nation, and the latter constructing vertical divides between the virtuous people and corrupt elites.

To better understand the ideological contours of the region, we draw on our 2021 survey of citizens of the former Yugoslav republics. In the survey, we asked respondents a series of questions about their political views, specifically on issues related to nationalism and populism. Based on their answers, we

40 Bilge Yabanci, "Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics in Kosovo: A Case Study of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3, no. 2 (2015): 17–43.

41 Dušan Pavlović, "The Political Economy Behind the Gradual Demise of Democratic Institutions in Serbia," in *Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe: How Ruling Elites Undermine Democracy*, ed. Damir Kapidžić and Věra Stojarová (Routledge, 2021), 18–38.

42 Marko Kmezić and Florian Bieber, eds., *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion* (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2017); Florian Bieber, "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 10 (2018): 176–185.

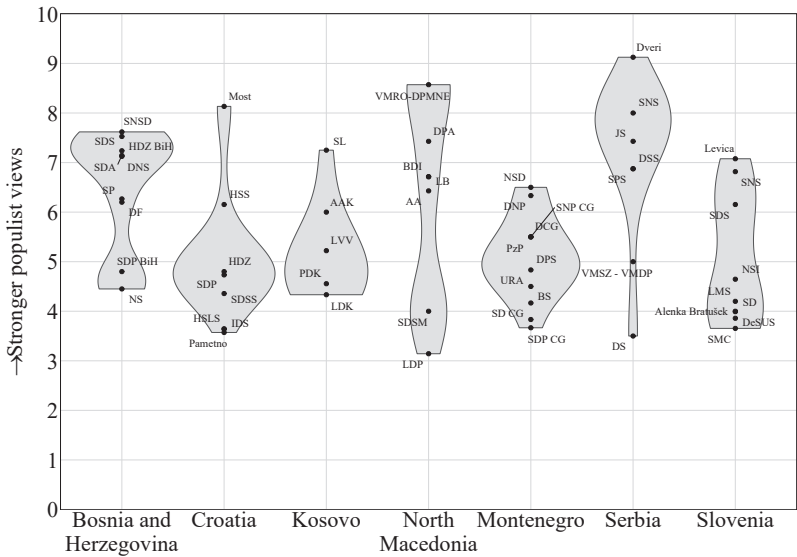
constructed two scales that allow us to position people along both dimensions of political orientation.⁴³ While conducted after the start of the pandemic, our prior wave comparisons indicate that nationalism and populism show a high degree of persistence over time. The 2021 data thus offer a reliable approximation of where the region stood, ideologically, on the eve of the pandemic. As shown in figure 2.6, a two-dimensional heat map of respondents' positions on populist and nationalist scales, the modal citizen occupies a space of moderate nationalism but relatively strong populism. The bulk of the population clusters in the upper two quadrants, indicating that while nationalist views are evenly distributed, populist sentiments are pervasive. This pattern is politically significant. It suggests that populism has become a generalized framework for interpreting politics. Nationalism, by contrast, appears more polarized: some segments of the population strongly endorse ethno-nationalist narratives, while others remain oriented toward cosmopolitan values.

This ideological pattern among the general public is closely mirrored in the party landscapes of the region. Figure 2.7 displays the distribution of party positions along the nationalism dimension, while figure 2.8 shows the same for populism. These party positions are based on expert evaluations we collected through the Southeast European Expert Survey.⁴⁴ The positions on nationalism are derived from a question that captures the extent to which parties endorse ethno-nationalist versus civic or inclusive conceptions of the nation. The positions on populism are derived from expert assessments of whether a party's rhetoric emphasizes the will of the people and opposition to entrenched elites, or whether it embraces pluralist principles such as compromise, and minority protections. Across the region, parties span a wide range of positions on the nationalism dimension, from civic or cosmopolitan orientations to strong ethno-nationalist platforms. In contrast, the results for populism reveal a more compressed distribution. While some diversity remains, most parties cluster toward the populist end of the spectrum, with relatively few exhibiting clearly pluralist orientations. In several countries—such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina—the majority of parties are situated firmly on the populist side. In this sense, the ideological supply closely mirrors public demand: populist frames have become central not only to political discourse in the electorate, but to the structure of party competition itself.

43 See the methodological chapter at the end of the book for details on how the scale was constructed.

44 More information about the Southeast European Expert Survey can be found in the methodological chapter at the end of the book.

Figure 2.8. Ideological distribution of parties in Southeast Europe on populism



Eroding Institutions: The Drift Toward Illiberalism

While nationalism and populism have shaped the tone and structure of political competition in Southeast Europe, they are only part of the region’s evolving political reality. Just as significant is the institutional trajectory of these democracies. Three decades after the fall of communism, the promise of liberal democracy in Southeast Europe remains largely unfulfilled. Instead of a linear progress toward consolidated democracy, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the countries in the region had experienced roughly a decade of deteriorating democratic standards, reversing earlier post-2000 gains.⁴⁵ No single event triggered this decline. Rather, a slow-burning downward spiral set in after the late 2000s economic crisis and amid waning EU enlargement momentum. The result has been that formally democratic institutions persist, but power is monopolized by autocrat-leaning rulers governing through patronage networks and claiming to deliver stability and EU integration.⁴⁶ Three measures best capture the

45 Miran Lavrič and Florian Bieber, “Shifts in Support for Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Western Balkans,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 68, no. 1 (2021): 17–26.
46 Bieber, “The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies”; Bieber, “Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism.”

stalled democratic transitions of Southeast Europe. Figure 2.9 plots their Electoral Democracy Index of the V-Dem project for each of the former Yugoslav republics alongside the EU average between 1980 and 2023.⁴⁷ The Electoral Democracy Index captures not only whether elections are held, but also how democratic they are in practice. It is based on whether voters can make informed choices, whether opposition parties can compete fairly, and whether civil liberties such as media freedom and freedom of assembly are respected throughout the electoral process. A second measure, shown in figure 2.10, captures developments in the rule of law. Drawing on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators,⁴⁸ this index aggregates perceptions of the extent to which citizens and businesses have confidence in the functioning of legal institutions such as courts, police, and contract enforcement mechanisms, and the extent to which laws are impartially upheld. A third dimension, depicted in figure 2.11, traces developments in the control of corruption. This index, also derived from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, reflects aggregated assessments of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain.⁴⁹ Here too, the trends show modest gains in the early post-conflict years followed by regional stagnation or decline through the 2010s.

Serbia offers a paradigmatic example of democratic backsliding trends. Throughout the 2010s, Serbia saw a steady erosion of political rights, media freedom, and government accountability under the progressively more illiberal rule of Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party. The SNS, which initially rose to power in 2012 on an anti-corruption platform, instead proceeded to capture state institutions; by the end of the decade independent agencies and judiciary bodies were defanged or stacked with loyalists, and corruption prosecutions of officials were exceedingly rare. By 2020, Serbian elections were marred by irregularities and opposition boycotts, and V-Dem formally classified Serbia as an "electoral autocracy," the only former Yugoslav republic to receive this honor. Freedom House had downgraded Serbia from a "semi-consolidated democracy" to a "transitional/hybrid regime," no longer meeting the minimum standards of an electoral democracy.⁵⁰ In fact, its democracy score had fallen to its lowest

47 Michael Coppedge et al., *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v15*, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (2025), <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25>.

48 World Bank, "Rule of Law: Estimate," (2024), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/RL.EST>.

49 World Bank, "Control of Corruption: Estimate" (2024), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/CC.EST>.

50 Zselyke Csaky, *Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Facade* (Freedom House, 2020).

Figure 2.9. V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index in Southeast Europe and the EU

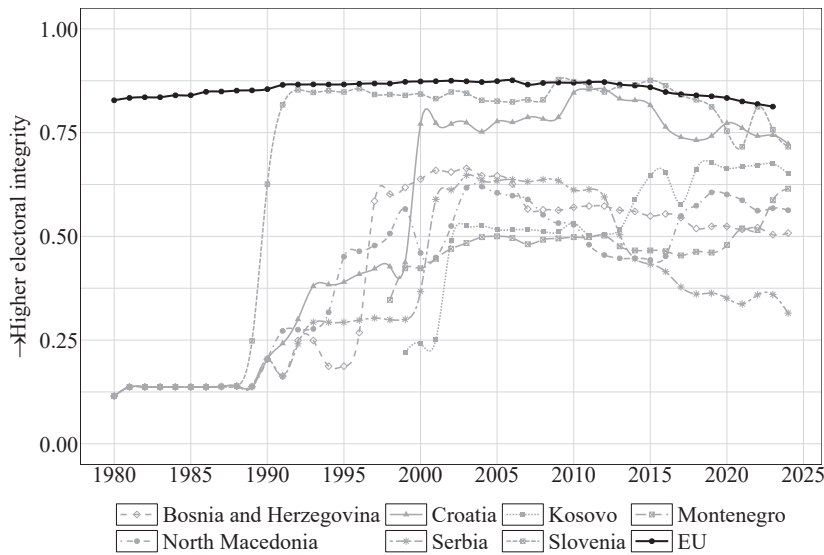


Figure 2.10. Adherence to the rule of law in Southeast Europe and the EU

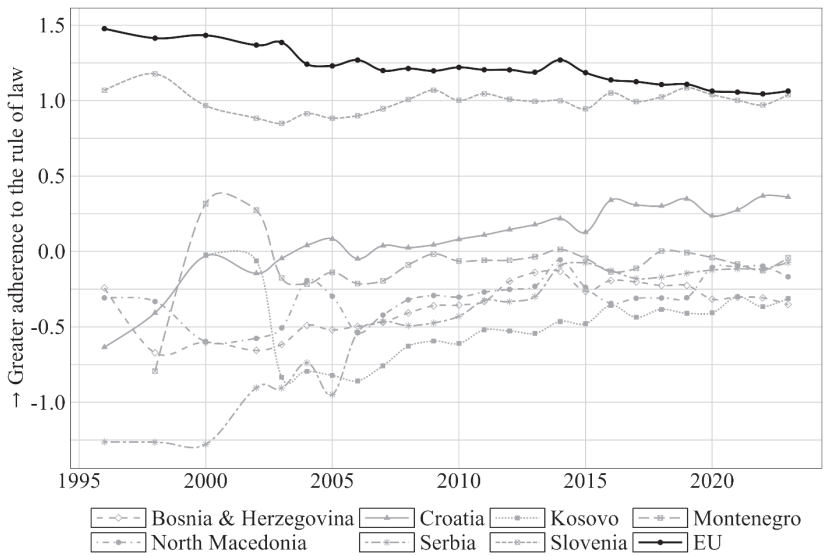
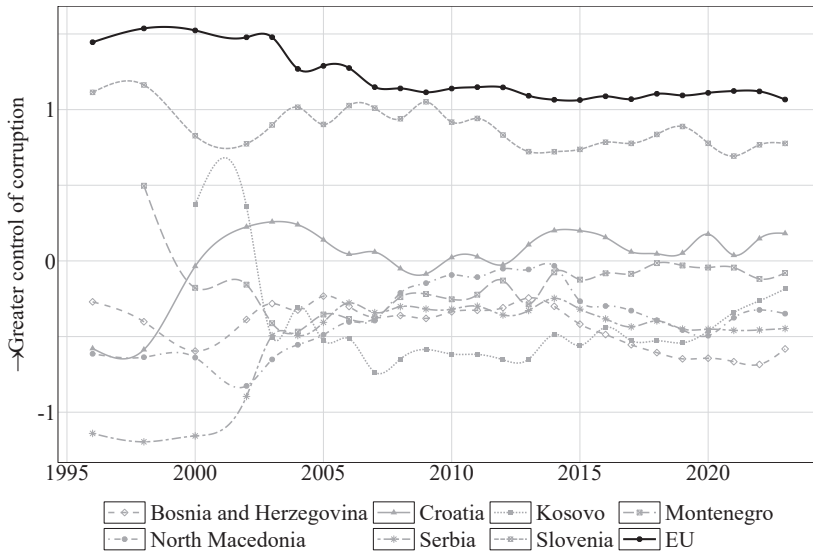


Figure 2.11. Control of corruption in Southeast Europe and the EU

point since the fall of Milošević. Montenegro closely mirrored Serbia's trajectory of democratic deterioration. Under the rule of Milo Đukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), Montenegro spent the 2010s sliding deeper into hybrid-regime territory even as it pursued NATO and EU integration.⁵¹ As figure 2.9 shows, V-Dem scores for Montenegro dipped below 0.5, and the country was designated an electoral autocracy for most of the 2010s. Power became increasingly personalized and concentrated; opposition parties remained marginal, and allegations of electoral irregularities and clientelism were common. Both Serbia and Montenegro typified the regional pattern: nominally pro-European leaders consolidating power at home through illiberal means while offering geopolitical stability to external allies.

Bosnia and Herzegovina presented a somewhat different case of democratic malaise. Rather than a sudden authoritarian turn, Bosnia faced a more chronic stagnation and gradual backsliding rooted in its dysfunctional post-war governance framework. Throughout the 2010s, virtually no democratic reforms advanced. Instead, nationalist elites in each of Bosnia's ethno-territorial entities (Republika Srpska and the Federation) perpetuated

51 Zoran Grgić, "One Client, Four Votes: Ethnopolitical Clientelism and Its Socioeconomic Consequences in the Western Balkans," *Acta Sociologica* 67, no. 2 (2024): 123–145.

a deadlock that paralyzed effective governance.⁵² The power-sharing Dayton Constitution enabled ruling ethnic parties to veto reforms and protect their patronage fiefdoms. As a result, rule of law remained weak, courts and prosecutors were subject to political pressure, and high-level corruption went largely unpunished. The enduring ethno-clientelist power structure precluded any meaningful democratic development.⁵³ Popular discontent bubbled up in periodic protests (such as the 2014 anti-corruption and social justice demonstrations), but these bursts of civic anger failed to prompt lasting institutional changes.⁵⁴ Democratic backsliding in Bosnia thus largely took the form of deepening institutional paralysis and public frustration, rather than an overt breakdown of electoral competition.

North Macedonia demonstrated both the depth of backsliding and the potential for reversal within the decade. Under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's right-wing VMRO-DPMNE government (2006–2016), Macedonia experienced a pronounced autocratic drift. Especially from 2010 onward, Gruevski's regime engaged in extensive abuses of power: intimidating the media, politicizing the judiciary, and amassing unchecked executive control. A 2015 wiretapping scandal dramatically exposed the extent of this state capture, revealing massive illegal surveillance of journalists, judges, and political opponents as well as high-level corruption and election rigging. The European Commission went so far as to declare Macedonia a "captured state" by 2016, as virtually all independent institutions had been subordinated to the ruling party's interests.⁵⁵ Macedonia's democracy index scores plummeted, matching those of Serbia. Unlike in Serbia, however, a domestic backlash combined with international mediation eventually halted and reversed this decline. Large civic protests (the 2016 "Colorful Revolution") and EU-facilitated negotiations (the Pržino Agreement) led to Gruevski's resignation and new elections.⁵⁶ By mid-2017, a reformist coalition led by Zoran Zaev took office, pledging to restore checks and

52 Filip Milačić, "Stateness and Democratic Backsliding in the Former Yugoslavia: How Political Actors Subvert Democracy in the Name of the Nation," *Nations and Nationalism* 28, no. 4 (2022): 1474–1493.

53 Damir Kapidžić, Arianna Piacentini, and Dženana Husremović, "Stuck in the Past: Bosnia and Herzegovina's Enduring Struggle with a Fractured Legacy," *Southeastern Europe* 48, no. 2–3 (2024): 173–190.

54 John Nagle, "Protesting Power-Sharing: Citizenship Acts and Eventful Protest in Divided Societies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 48, no. 1 (2025): 97–118.

55 Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, *The Irregular Pendulum of Democracy: Populism, Clientelism and Corruption in Post-Yugoslav Successor States* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

56 Nenad Markovikj and Ivan Damjanovski, "The Revolution That Ate Its Own Children: The Colourful Revolution from Consensus to Discord," *Filozofija i Društvo* 33, no. 1 (2022): 162–186.

balances and the rule of law. Some democratic repairs followed, with the judiciary beginning to reassert its independence, and a Special Prosecutor was empowered to pursue cases against former officials.

Croatia's trajectory in the 2010s highlights a more subtle form of backsliding, one that set in after the country's successful accession to the European Union in 2013. During the EU negotiation period, Croatia had enacted numerous governance reforms under external pressure, and throughout the latter 2010s, Croatia remained a functioning democracy and avoided the dramatic breakdowns seen elsewhere. Yet signs of democratic erosion were evident in governance and society.⁵⁷ In 2017, the collapse of the huge Agrokor conglomerate and the government's shady handling of that crisis exposed deep linkages between political elites and business interests, raising concerns of state capture in the economy.⁵⁸ The Agrokor affair, alongside recurring high-level corruption scandals, underscored that rule-of-law weaknesses had not been fully remedied by EU entry. Croatia's post-2013 democratic backsliding can be primarily attributed to the long-standing dominance of the HDZ which allowed the ruling party to revert to or rather continue its clientelist practices.⁵⁹

Slovenia stands out as the former Yugoslav republic with the strongest democratic credentials throughout the period since its independence.⁶⁰ Yet even Slovenia was not entirely immune to illiberal currents by the end of the 2010s. For most of that decade, Slovenia maintained high standards of governance, and it regularly scored among the top performers in Eastern Europe. Civil society was vibrant and corruption was relatively contained. However, late in the decade Slovenia experienced its own brush with democratic backsliding. Longtime populist leader Janez Janša returned to the prime ministership in early 2020 and quickly began targeting independent institutions.⁶¹ His government pressured public media (even withholding

57 Dario Čepo, "Structural Weaknesses and the Role of the Dominant Political Party: Democratic Backsliding in Croatia Since EU Accession," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 141–159.

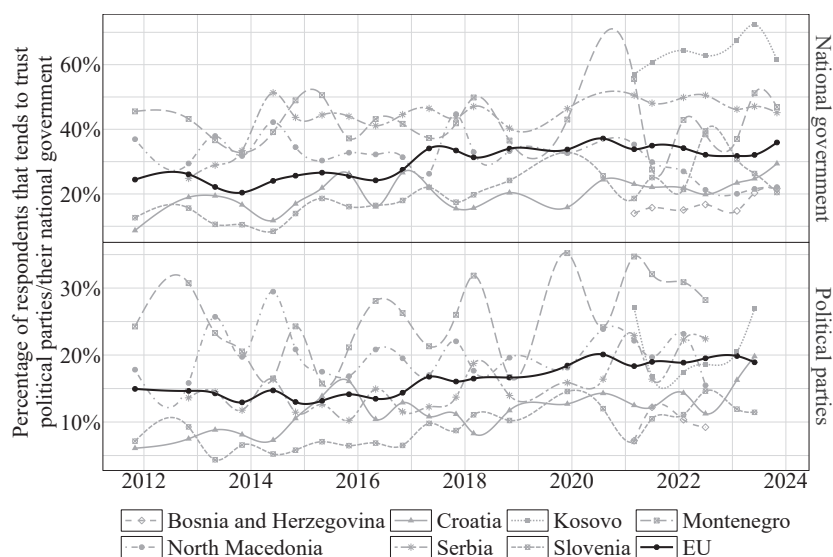
58 Barbara Frey and Miloš Lecić, "Informal Ties to Political Elites and Path Dependency in the Croatian Agro Sector: A Study of the Corruption Scandals of Agrokombinat and Agrokor," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32, no. 1 (2024): 151–172.

59 Velibor Mačkić and Filip Rusmir, "Pork Barrel Spending: The Missing Link Between Electoral Clientelism and Political Budget Cycles," *Economics & Sociology* 17, no. 3 (2024): 75–92.

60 Anton Bebler, "Slovenia's Smooth Transition," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 127–140; Sabrina Petra Ramet, "Slovenia's Road to Democracy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, no. 5 (1993): 869–886.

61 Dženita Šiljak, "Slovenia: The Rise and Fall of Janez Janša," in *Economic Populism and Policy Failures in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. István Benczes (Routledge, 2023), 142–162.

Figure 2.12. Public trust in political parties and the national government in Southeast Europe and the EU



funding to the national press agency), harassed critics in the judiciary and civil society, and mimicked the confrontational style of Hungary's illiberal regime. While Slovenia remained a consolidated democracy by classification, Janša's tenure demonstrated that even a highly democratized EU member could see erosion in liberal norms under a populist government. The silver lining was that Slovenia's democratic foundations and active civil society mounted a strong resistance: mass protests and investigative media pushed back, and in 2022 voters removed Janša in favor of an anti-corruption platform.⁶²

Kosovo, though often overlooked in broader regional analyses, presents a distinct trajectory. While it remains far from a consolidated democracy and continues to face serious institutional challenges, the trends across key governance indicators point consistently upward. In terms of electoral integrity, Kosovo has made steady gains and now closely trails Croatia and Slovenia in its convergence with EU norms. Its rule of law performance, though still at the lower end regionally, shows incremental but consistent improvement over the 2010s. Likewise, on control of corruption, Kosovo has

62 Danica Fink-Hafner, *Party System Changes and Challenges to Democracy: Slovenia in a Comparative Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

climbed to a mid-range position among the countries in our sample, with notable progress throughout the decade. In contrast to the stagnation or regression visible elsewhere, Kosovo stands out not for where it is, but for the direction in which it is moving.

Despite this widespread erosion of democratic norms and institutional performance, levels of public trust in core political institutions tell a more complex story. One might expect that a decade of backsliding, elite capture, and declining rule of law would produce an across-the-board collapse in institutional trust. Yet this is not what we observe. As shown in figure 2.12, trust in national governments and political parties across Southeast Europe, as measured in the Eurobarometer,⁶³ does not diverge drastically from EU averages. While variation exists, countries of Southeast Europe, including those with significant institutional challenges, report levels of public trust broadly comparable to those in consolidated EU democracies.

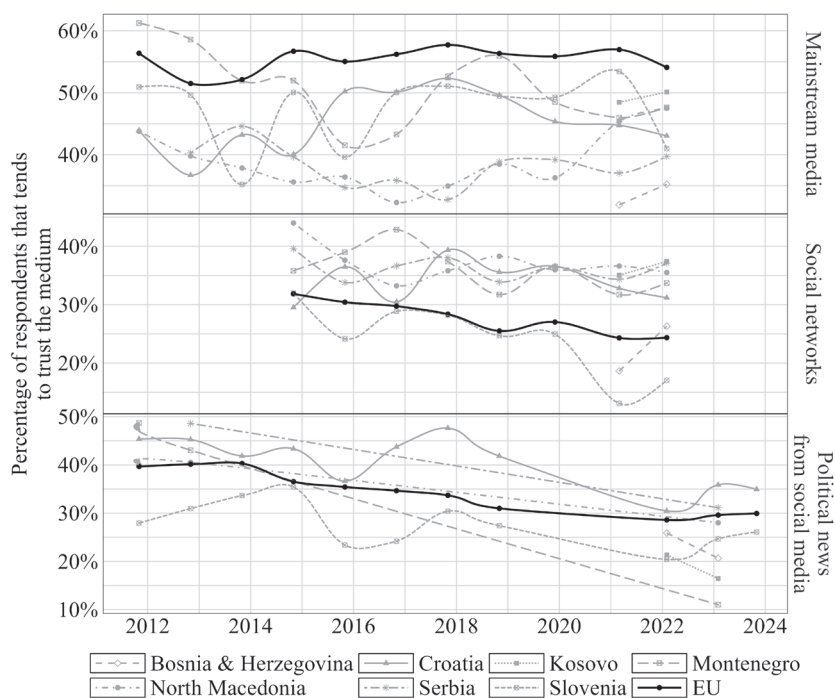
Media Trust, Capture, and Social Media in Southeast Europe

The role of media in shaping political perceptions and institutional trust became increasingly consequential in Southeast Europe in the years preceding the pandemic. As citizens navigated fragile democracies, widening inequalities, and new digital terrains, the media landscape emerged as both a critical channel of information and a contested site of influence. Public trust in media across the region has remained fragile and markedly low throughout the last decade. Eurobarometer data in figure 2.13 indicate that well under half of citizens tend to trust the mainstream media—i.e., news from newspapers, television, or radio—level consistently below the EU average of 50–55%. In most Southeast European countries, it hovers between 40 and 50%, while in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it fails to go above 40%. This pervasive distrust reflects widespread perceptions that journalists serve political agendas rather than the public interest. Despite a pluralistic façade, the Southeast European media landscape remains riddled with politicization and clientelism, eroding the credibility of journalism.⁶⁴

63 Information about the Eurobarometers used in this chapter can be found in table A2.1 of the appendix.

64 Nataliia Haluhan, “The Influence of Media Manipulation, Disinformation, and Fake News on Financial Markets: Assessments, Mechanisms, Challenges,” in *Politics and Technology: WEASA 2018* (College of Europe Natolin, 2019), 29–32; Remzi Lani, “Balkan Media: Lost in Transition?,” in *Professional Journalism and Self-Regulation: New Media, Old Dilemmas in South East Europe and Turkey* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 41–66.

Figure 2.13. Public trust in mainstream media, social networks, and political news from social media in Southeast Europe and the EU



Political leaders have actively exploited this distrust. In Croatia, for instance, independent outlets have been smeared as “unpatriotic,” and critical journalists branded as traitors in an effort to delegitimize uncomfortable reporting.⁶⁵ Similar dynamics are evident in Serbia, where attacks on critical media by government officials have become a normalized feature of public discourse.⁶⁶ This environment has generated a paradox: although most citizens remain skeptical of mainstream media, they continue to rely on it as their primary source of news. Despite low trust levels, Eurobarometer data show that mainstream media continues to dominate news consumption patterns across the region (figure 2.14, top panel). In the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream media remained the central source of information, with 85–90% of respondents reporting frequent use (two

65 Marijana Grbeša and Marija Volarević, “Media in Croatia: From Freedom Fighters to Tabloid Avengers,” *Publizistik* 66, no. 4 (2021): 621–636.

66 Antonino Castaldo and Alessandra Pinna, “De-Europeanization in the Balkans: Media Freedom in Post-Milošević Serbia,” *European Politics and Society* 19, no. 3 (2018): 264–281.

to three times per week or more). This pattern was disrupted in 2020, when regular viewership declined to around 85%. An even more pronounced decline occurred in the EU, where frequent use of mainstream media dropped to 75% by 2022. While it has since experienced a partial rebound in both Southeast Europe and the EU, the recovery has been modest, suggesting a possible structural shift in media consumption habits rather than a temporary pandemic effect.

The underpinnings of this trust deficit lie in the region's incomplete media transition after socialism. Rather than transforming into independent fourth-estate institutions, most media outlets were absorbed into post-communist networks of political and economic patronage. While formal censorship has receded, informal control through state advertising, regulatory harassment, and financial coercion has become more widespread. In Serbia, the ruling SNS party gradually consolidated control by manipulating ownership structures, sidelining critics, and leveraging public advertising funds to reward loyalist outlets.⁶⁷ In Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, media outlets remain closely aligned with ruling elites and are routinely weaponized during electoral periods.⁶⁸ Even in the EU member Croatia, political interference remains present. In the 2017 Agrokor crisis, a sitting minister admitted to pressuring media outlets to curb unfavorable reporting.⁶⁹ The root causes of the susceptibility to outside influence of media in Southeast Europe are also macro-economic in nature. Due to the smaller consumer markets of Southeast Europe, both in terms of population and GDP, ad revenue is often insufficient to keep media outlets afloat independently. As was the case for the early newspapers in the Western Balkans in the nineteenth century, the primary purpose of the media was to spread the political ideas of certain politicians and political parties.⁷⁰ And that is still largely true today.

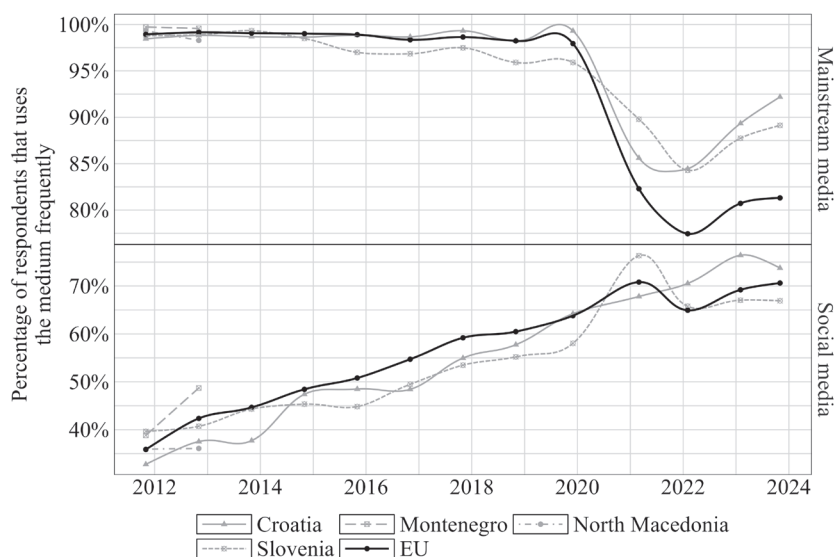
67 Aleksandra Dragojlov, "Influence of Political Clientelism on Media Freedom under Vučić and the Progressive Party," *Nationalities Papers*, First View (2025): 1–17.

68 Ognian Zlatev, "Media Accountability Systems (MAS) and Their Applications in South East Europe and Turkey," in *Professional Journalism and Self-Regulation: New Media, Old Dilemmas in South East Europe and Turkey* (UNESCO, 2011), 17–40; Nedžma Ahmetašević and Tijana Hadžiristić, "The Future of Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Up in the Air? The Future of Public Service Media in the Western Balkans*, eds. Tarik Jusić, Manuel Puppis, Laia Castro Herrero, and Davor Marko (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 49–66.

69 Věra Stojarová, "Media in the Western Balkans: Who Controls the Past Controls the Future," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 161–181.

70 Marko Milosavljević and Melita Poler, "Balkanization and Pauperization: Analysis of Media Capture of Public Service Broadcasters in the Western Balkans," *Journalism* 19, no. 8 (2018): 1149–1164.

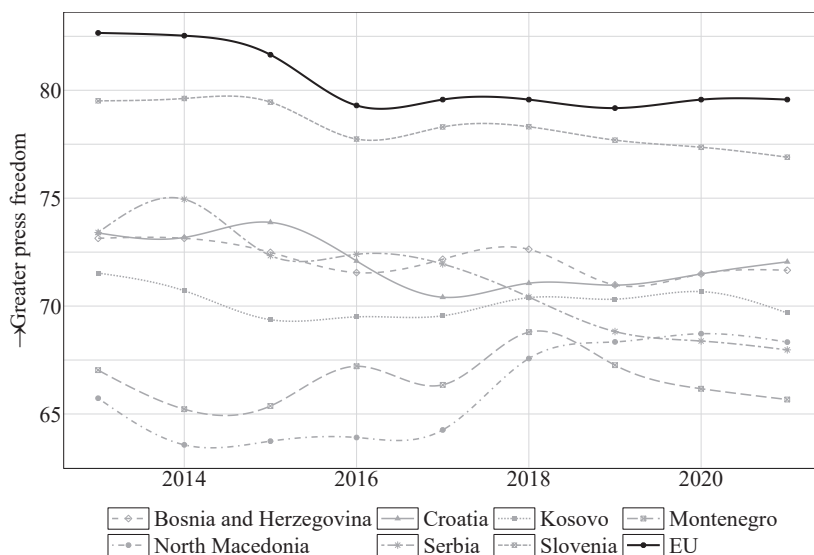
Figure 2.14. Frequent users of mainstream and social media in Southeast Europe and the EU



The Press Freedom Index⁷¹ presented in figure 2.15 further illustrates these trends. The Index evaluates the degree of freedom available to journalists based on factors like media independence and journalist safety. Between 2012 and 2023, most post-Yugoslav countries consistently scored far below the EU average. Only Slovenia scored similarly to the rest of the EU. Throughout most of the 2010s, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, and North Macedonia clustered near the bottom of the European rankings, joining the ranks of Hungary, and Poland. Only Bulgaria performs worse in the EU. This regression is not due to formal repression but rather a climate of systemic intimidation, legal harassment, and precarious employment for journalists. These conditions foster fear. Journalists who refuse to play along are exposed to verbal abuse, legal harassment, or worse. In Serbia, critical reporters have been targeted by online mobs and smeared in tabloid media as foreign agents or traitors. In Montenegro, similar strategies are deployed against journalists investigating organized crime or corruption.⁷² The impunity for such attacks emboldens aggressors and

⁷¹ Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2013–2021* (2021).

⁷² Human Rights Watch, *A Difficult Profession: Media Freedom Under Attack in the Western Balkans* (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Figure 2.15. Press Freedom Index in Southeast Europe and the EU

normalizes intimidation. Consequently, self-censorship is now a structural feature of media production, not only to avoid legal or economic reprisals but as a survival strategy.⁷³ Investigative journalism, meanwhile, survives mostly at the margins, with a few outlets such as the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) or the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS) sustaining accountability reporting through foreign grants or crowdfunding.

Against this backdrop, the rise of social media in the 2010s had a profound impact. Initially hailed as a democratizing force, digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube offered citizens new channels for political expression, protest organization, and information-sharing, especially in environments where mainstream media were co-opted or silenced.⁷⁴ Across the region, digital tools played a visible role in exposing scandals, organizing street protests, and fostering grassroots dissent. Notably, the 2013 “baby revolution” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the

73 Branislav Radeljić, “In Favour of Censorship and Propaganda: Elites, Media Capture and the Journalistic Profession in the Western Balkans,” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 28, no. 2–3 (2020): 155–173.

74 Željka Lekić-Subašić, “Social Media and the ‘Balkan Spring,’” in *Social Movements in the Balkans: Rebellion and Protest from Maribor to Taksim*, ed. Florian Bieber and Dario Brentin (Routledge, 2019), 96–112.

2012–2013 Maribor protests in Slovenia relied heavily on digital mobilization.⁷⁵ Yet by the late 2010s, this optimism was increasingly tempered by the realities of disinformation and manipulation. Figure 2.13 (panels 2 and 3) and figure 2.14 (bottom panel) illustrate this paradox: although use of social media as a news source has increased significantly since 2012 and is currently being used frequently by over half of respondents in Southeast Europe with little variation between countries, trust in these platforms had actually started to decline a bit. The pandemic accelerated this trend, further diminishing public confidence in political news coming from social media.

This mistrust is not unfounded. From 2015 onward, the region became notorious for its role in the global disinformation ecosystem. The city of Veles in North Macedonia gained international infamy as a hub of “fake news factories” during the 2016 US presidential election, churning out viral clickbait and conspiratorial content for profit.⁷⁶ But disinformation was not merely a foreign export product. Across the region, ruling parties adopted increasingly sophisticated digital propaganda strategies, mobilizing troll farms, fake accounts, and politicized online portals to manipulate public debate and discredit dissent. In Serbia, for instance, a government-linked troll network of more than 8,000 Twitter accounts reached millions of users with coordinated messaging in support of the ruling party. These tactics, often inspired by Russian disinformation playbooks, were emulated domestically and used to undermine critics, inflate government popularity, and blur the distinction between state communication and political manipulation.⁷⁷ Social media thus became not only a space for civic activism but a tool of domination. In short, the Balkan media landscape on the eve of the pandemic was one of institutional fragility, low public trust, and deep political entanglement, further destabilized by the rise of social media as both a tool for empowerment and manipulation.

75 The 2013 “baby revolution” in Bosnia and Herzegovina began when the government failed to pass a law assigning ID numbers to newborns, effectively preventing infants from receiving medical care or travel documents. The 2012–2013 Maribor protests in Slovenia began as local opposition to speed radar corruption and the authoritarian leadership of mayor Franc Kangler but quickly escalated into nationwide demonstrations against political elites and systemic corruption.

76 H. C. Hughes and Ilan Waismel-Manor, “The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 1 (2021): 19–23.

77 Megan Duffy and Samuel Green, *Organised Chaos: Russian Influence and the State of Disinformation in the Western Balkans* (Edward R. Murrow Center for a Digital World, Tufts University, 2020).

Conclusion

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and the violent upheavals that followed left a deep imprint on Southeast Europe. Three decades later, the region has yet to fully recover. The economic, institutional, and social disruptions of the 1990s and early 2000s continued to shape the capacities and fault lines of these states. This chapter has traced the structural conditions that shaped Southeast Europe's entry into the COVID-19 pandemic. Across domains—economic precarity, under-resourced health systems, politicized institutions, and low-trust media environments—the region exhibited multiple and compounding forms of fragility. However, this fragility was not monolithic but instead manifested in sharply divergent ways across the post-Yugoslav republics. This makes the region both difficult and necessary to study. While some states, like Slovenia, had come to approximate Western European standards in key governance and health indicators, others, such as Kosovo or North Macedonia, remained constrained by institutional weakness, fiscal limitations, and stalled reforms. It is precisely this variation that makes Southeast Europe an invaluable region for understanding the politics of pandemic governance. The region brings together, in close proximity, countries that resemble both consolidated EU democracies and developing states. It therefore offers an empirical window into how different constellations of state capacity, public trust, and political ideology interact under crisis conditions. At the same time, it enables theory-building. Studying the region allows us to test assumptions about how variables like populism, nationalism, or health infrastructure shape pandemic responses.

This diversity also raises a more fundamental question: is there any meaningful reason to study Southeast Europe as a region at all? The differences outlined in this chapter challenge any easy regional label. But this very diversity, situated within a shared historical trajectory, is precisely what gives the region its analytical power. The collapse of a common federal state, the experience of post-socialist transformation, overlapping timelines of EU accession, and the endurance of nationalist politics create a framework of partial comparability. These shared legacies help control for a range of contextual factors that would otherwise confound cross-national comparisons. As a result, Southeast Europe provides a rare opportunity to disentangle the role of variables like populism and nationalism in shaping pandemic outcomes. In this sense, the region can be understood as a microcosm of global inequalities. It brings into the same analytical frame conditions that elsewhere are usually separated by continental or developmental boundaries. Slovenia, in many respects, looks like a Western European state. Kosovo,

in many others, faces the kinds of structural constraints more commonly associated with the Global South. Examining pandemic governance across this space does not just tell us something about Southeast Europe, it also tells us something about the pandemic itself: how it interacted with deep inequalities, how it amplified pre-existing vulnerabilities, and how it triggered political responses shaped not just by biology, but by decades of history, reform, neglect, and contestation. It is not only because of its fragility, but also because of its analytic clarity why the region deserves attention. And it reminds us that in pandemic politics, structure and contingency constantly collide. What follows in this book builds on this premise: that to understand what the pandemic revealed and what it changed, we must first understand where it landed.

3. Descent into Tragedy: Tracing the Pandemic in Southeast Europe

Abstract: The pandemic trajectory of Southeast Europe followed a striking arc: early containment success followed by severe epidemiological collapse. Initial lockdowns in spring 2020 were among the strictest in Europe and produced low mortality rates, despite weak health systems and limited state capacity. These gains proved short-lived. Electoral pressures, economic reopening, politicized public health communication, and inconsistent enforcement undermined trust and compliance, paving the way for subsequent catastrophic waves. As the crisis deepened, pandemic governance became increasingly entangled with populist and nationalist mobilization, conspiracy narratives, and institutional gaslighting. Tracing developments from early 2020 through mid-2022, the chapter situates Southeast Europe's descent into tragedy within broader global patterns, while highlighting the distinctive role of political calculation, ideological polarization, and collapsing credibility.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Southeast Europe, crisis governance, public trust, populism, nationalism

In many ways, the countries of Southeast Europe were set up to fail in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the World Health Organization (WHO) found in 2019, all national healthcare systems around the world were unprepared for a pandemic of this kind.¹ The healthcare systems of Southeast Europe, however, were particularly vulnerable after decades of disarray and mismanagement. More generally, the political and administrative capacities of the countries of the region were deficient and weakened

¹ World Health Organization, *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness in WHO Member States: Report of a Member States Survey* (World Health Organization, 2019).

by cronyism and corruption. “Organized irresponsibility”² so characteristic of contemporary governments—democratic and autocratic alike—was arguably perfected in Southeast Europe. Little wonder that the people of the region exhibited very low levels of trust in virtually all governmental institutions. In addition to those internal structural problems, countries of Southeast Europe also found themselves adrift in the world of slowing economic growth, increasing inequality, lack of interest or initiative for the region’s further integration into the European Union, and on the verge of colossal geopolitical realignment. This realignment was marked by the conflict between the world’s two superpowers whose responses to COVID-19 would ultimately determine the trajectory of the pandemic: China and the United States.

Rather improbably, however, Southeast Europe proved to be one of the rare success stories of the pandemic’s first wave. As the virus began to spread across the continent in early 2020, the governments of Southeast Europe moved quickly to impose lockdowns and other public health measures. The relatively late arrival of the virus in the region provided a narrow window of opportunity, which these countries used to their advantage. Governments were swift to implement restrictions on movement, close borders, and shut down non-essential services. The severity of these measures was notable; the lockdowns in Southeast Europe were among the most stringent in Europe.³ For some, this reflected a cautious approach aimed at preventing the underfunded and understaffed healthcare systems from becoming overwhelmed. For others, however, the swift imposition of lockdowns was not only a public health measure but also a demonstration of state authority and control.

This led many regional experts to fear further democratic backsliding of the local regimes.⁴ For example, the centralization of power under Aleksandar Vučić during the pandemic, critics argued, was part of a broader trend toward authoritarianism in Serbia, where the crisis was used to justify the erosion of civil liberties and the suppression of political opposition.⁵ Similar

2 Ulrich Beck, *Gegengifte: Die organisierte Unverantwortlichkeit* (Suhrkamp, 1988). Used to great effect in the context of COVID-19 by Adam Tooze, *Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World’s Economy* (Allen Lane, 2021).

3 Edouard Mathieu et al., “Coronavirus Pandemic (Covid-19),” OurWorldInData.org, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>.

4 For a perfect example of dominant scholarly views on this issue at the time, see Slaviša Orlović, ed., *Demokratska prava i građanske slobode za vreme pandemije Korona virusom—Postoji li opasnost od autokratizacije?* Special issue of the journal *Politički život: Časopis za analizu politike* 18 (2020).

5 Jovana Čolić, “Sekuritizacija pandemije tokom predizborne kampanje u Srbiji 2020. Godine,” *Političke perspektive: časopis za istraživanje politike* 12, no. 1 (2022): 83–107.

concerns also emerged in Slovenia, where Prime Minister Janez Janša's government faced accusations of undermining democratic institutions under the guise of pandemic management.⁶ Janša's confrontational approach to the media and his rapid implementation of emergency measures without parliamentary oversight sparked fears that the government was using the pandemic to consolidate power. These fears were, to varying degrees, present in the rest of the region as well.

The critics of the regional governments' heavy-handed approaches may have been right to be wary, but the epidemiological results of Southeast Europe during the first several months of the pandemic were exemplary, with some of the lowest mortality and case figures on the continent. By the summer of 2020, however, things changed dramatically. National governments of the region abandoned their strict measures and Southeast Europe started to spiral to the bottom of all relevant tables that were following the epidemiological evolution of the pandemic. Part of the reason for this development certainly lies in the economic realities of the pandemic's impact. COVID-19 hit the economies of Southeast Europe hard, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in the region's fiscal and monetary systems. Most countries in the region are heavily dependent on tourism and remittances, both of which were severely disrupted by the pandemic. Governments responded with economic support packages, including wage subsidies, tax deferrals, and loan moratoriums, but the scale of these interventions was limited by the fiscal constraints facing these countries and was smaller than in most countries of Western Europe. Regional labor markets also lost more jobs and working hours on average than those in the rest of the continent.⁷ The economic impact of the pandemic thus deepened inequalities and exposed the limits of state capacity in the region.

The harsh mitigation measures, however, were not only abandoned due to the economic pressures, but arguably also due to electoral concerns. In the summer of 2020, Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro all held parliamentary elections, whereas Slovenia's minority government of Janez Janša, installed in March of that year, faced a steady stream of protests that affected its policy making. The governments in question thus loosened their rules and marketed their relative successes during the pandemic's

6 Mitja Hafner-Fink and Samo Uhan, "Life and Attitudes of Slovenians During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Problem of Trust," *International Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2021): 76–85.

7 Hirose Kenichi, *Assessment of the Social Security Responses to COVID-19: Lessons from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe During the First Stage of the Pandemic* (International Labour Organization, 2021).

first wave to considerable electoral effect.⁸ This populist turn resulted in mixed and confusing messaging by the public health authorities which were often justifiably perceived by the voters as serving the political interests of their superiors, rather than sound scientific and medical advice. As one observer put it, both the political leaders and the public health officials chose Machiavelli over Hippocrates.⁹ With the second and third waves of the pandemic wreaking havoc throughout the region during the fall and winter of 2020 and 2021, public trust in all institutions of authority plummeted even further.¹⁰ Mortality figures skyrocketed, assisted by the relative failure of the vaccination drives. This made Southeast Europe one of the regions worst hit by COVID-19 in the whole world, with four countries—Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro—placed in the global top 10 in terms of excess mortality per capita during the pandemic.¹¹

This chapter examines the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Europe, tracing the region's trajectory from an initially strong and epidemiologically successful response during the first wave to the severe consequences of inconsistent and populist policies in the subsequent waves. By contextualizing the region's developments within the broader global pandemic response, the chapter offers a form of comparative analysis of the policies implemented by the local governments. Crucially, the chapter shows that, while many similarities in pandemic responses can be observed among the governments of the region, closer analysis reveals significant differences. This was particularly the case in areas such as government transparency, media responsibility, public trust in science, and compliance with mitigation measures. As the chapter shows, these differences often aligned with the region's longstanding East-West divide defined not only by the countries' geographical position, but also by the quality of their democracies and EU membership. The narrative of the pandemic in Southeast Europe presented in this chapter underscores how political dynamics, media influence, and public perception shaped the pandemic's course in the region, with lasting implications for politics, governance, and public health.

8 Josip Glaurdić, Christophe Lesschaeve, and Michal Mochtak, "Coronavirus Pandemic Response and Voter Choice: Evidence from Serbia and Croatia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 4 (2021): 197–214.

9 Želimir Kešetović, "Crisis Communication in the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Republic of Serbia: Between Hippocrates and Machiavelli," *The Culture of Polis* 17, no. 2 (2020): 151–165.

10 Tena Prelec et al., *Outta Trust? (Post)-Pandemic Trust and Democratic Resilience in the Western Balkans*. BiEPAG policy brief (CSEES Graz, 2021).

11 Measured in May 2022 when the COVID-19 emergency was declared as over by the EU. Mathieu et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic."

Early Victories at High Costs (January–May 2020)

While the origins of COVID-19 remain contested, the timeline of its early evolution has by now been largely settled.¹² The roots of the pandemic can be traced back to early December 2019 in Wuhan, China, when reports of a mysterious respiratory disease began to surface. By the end of that year, Chinese authorities alerted the WHO about these cases, which were later identified as being caused by a novel coronavirus. The first confirmed death occurred on January 9, 2020 and was reported on by the Chinese media two days later. With dozens of infections quickly becoming hundreds and the virus spreading rapidly through human-to-human transmission, Wuhan turned into the epicenter of what was soon to become a global pandemic. On January 13, Thailand reported the first confirmed case outside China, signaling the virus's international reach. Ten days later, China imposed a strict lockdown on Wuhan, aiming to contain the virus's spread. This became one of the pivotal moments in the story of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it underscored the seriousness of the outbreak. By the end of the month, the WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), as cases began to cross borders, including into the United States (January 20) and Europe (January 24).

In the weeks that followed, virtually all principal international players failed in performing their duties of sound governance. The failures of the Chinese government—from the local to the national level—during this period have been well-documented, as have their efforts at misinformation regarding the origins of the virus, the extent of the pandemic, and their mitigation measures. Tragically, the Chinese government was not held to account by the WHO whose officials essentially avoided fulfilling their responsibilities for fear of antagonizing Beijing.¹³ This led to understandable frustrations throughout the West, but the problem was that Western governments also hardly covered themselves in glory in their early responses to the pandemic. The US administration, which in normal circumstances would have led the global efforts against the spread of the disease, did far worse than their Chinese counterparts. With the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) getting notice of the nature of the new illness on January 1, 2020 and several officials trying to mount a concerted effort

12 CDC, "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline," accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>.

13 Colin Kahl and Thomas Wright, *Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the Old International Order* (St. Martin's Press, 2021), 85–117.

at prevention, the administration essentially wasted the first two months of that year, focused as it was on the first impeachment of President Trump that ended with his acquittal in the Senate on February 5.¹⁴

The first two months of 2020 found the governments of Southeast Europe also mired in instability. Slovenia's centrist minority government resigned on January 27 and was replaced in early March by another minority government, this time led by the right-wing Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) of Janez Janša. Kosovo struggled with government formation after the October 2019 elections that resulted in a highly fractionalized parliament. A cabinet was formed in early February under the leadership of Albin Kurti and his Self-determination Movement (LVV), but it collapsed within weeks due to divisions on how to deal with the pandemic. North Macedonia was governed by a caretaker government after Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned in early January due to his country's start of EU accession negotiations being vetoed by France. Montenegro was mired in a campaign of protests against the government and its newly adopted Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities that pitted the state against the Serbian Orthodox Church and struck at the core of Montenegrin and Serb identity. Serbia had its own campaign of anti-government protests, though the regime of Aleksandar Vučić had a much firmer grip on power than was the case for Milo Đukanović in Montenegro. Bosnia and Herzegovina has become such a dramatic case of governmental disfunction that even mentioning its troubles seems redundant. Arguably the only government in the region that had something positive to look forward to at the turn of the year was Croatia, which took over the presidency of the Council of the European Union from Finland on January 1. Within weeks, however, that honor and duty would become the greatest foreign policy challenge Croatia faced in more than a decade.

The extent of that challenge became obvious in mid-February with the dramatic scenes of the pandemic consequences and mitigation efforts in the provinces of Lombardy and Veneto of Northern Italy. The virus spread rapidly through these regions with hospitals soon overwhelmed as severe cases surged, prompting the government to impose unprecedented lockdowns. By the end of February, official reporting put the number of COVID-19 cases in Italy at nearly a thousand, with over twenty deaths.¹⁵ The importance of the outbreak in Northern Italy for the evolution of the

14 Tooze, *Shutdown*, 68.

15 Mathieu et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic."

pandemic in Europe cannot be overstated. In the context of Southeast Europe, however, it will primarily be remembered for one of the most shameful displays of medical and political recklessness that took place on February 26 in Belgrade. Prompted by the outbreak in Northern Italy, the office of the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić held a press conference with his medical and scientific advisors who would soon form the so-called crisis headquarters. The most notorious contribution to public discourse came from the pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović who dismissed the danger: “I cannot believe that a nation which survived sanctions, bombing, all sorts of mistreatment, would be afraid of the funniest virus in the history of humanity which exists on Facebook.” He continued, to the laughter of president Vučić standing behind him: “Estrogen protects women. Women get a very mild form; they do not die from the virus. So, women, you can freely go shopping to Italy. I hear they will have massive sales because no one wants to go there.”¹⁶

In less than two weeks, Serbian women could not go to Italy even if they wanted to because the Italian government declared a national lockdown as the number of cases and deaths rose exponentially. With the pandemic entering mid-March, other countries followed suit. Falling like dominoes, they declared school and workplace closures, as well as travel and movement restrictions. By the third week of March, all countries of Southeast Europe were under various forms of lockdown. Croatia’s Prime Minister Andrej Plenković invoked his country’s recent war history when announcing the institution of the lockdown in his public address on March 19: “The fight against the coronavirus that we are facing today is the biggest crisis since the Homeland War and the biggest challenge for all of us. As during the war, this requires our unity, responsibility, and composure, because only then will we all overcome adversity together.”¹⁷ Plenković was not the only European leader to use war imagery in his appeal to the nation. President Macron, for example, invoked war six times in his address three days earlier.¹⁸

In contrast to the public performance by Dr. Nestorović and President Vučić in late February, all countries of Southeast Europe—including Serbia—by mid-March instituted some of the most stringent measures

16 Zoran Kesić, “Zaraznim smehom protiv Korona virusa,” YouTube video, 4:06, published March 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqvAgKrci3E&t=66s>.

17 Andrej Plenković, “Borba protiv koronavirusa najveća je kriza od Domovinskog rata,” address to the public, March 19, 2020, <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-borba-protiv-koronavirusa-najveca-je-kriza-od-domovinskog-rata-potrebna-je-odgovornost-svakog-od-nas/29041>.

18 Tooze, *Shutdown*, 83.

on the continent in combatting the virus. We show the evolution of the pandemic in Southeast Europe between the beginning of March 2020 and the end of April 2022¹⁹ using six different indicators presented in figures 3.1 and 3.2. Figure 3.1 shows: 1) *Stringency Index*, which captures the severity of governmental policy responses, with higher values representing more stringent measures; 2) *Change in time spent at home* derived from Google mobility trends, with positive/negative values representing percentage increase/decrease in time spent at home in comparison to the pre-pandemic baseline; and 3) *COVID-19 related disorder events* representing the number of protest events related to the pandemic per million inhabitants in a given month. Figure 3.2 furthermore shows: 1) *New deaths* per million inhabitants in a given month; 2) *Excess mortality minus official deaths* representing the difference between the cumulative excess mortality since the onset of the pandemic and the official COVID-19 death toll; and 3) *Vaccinated rate* showing the percentage of the population receiving at least one dose of any recognized COVID-19 vaccine.²⁰ All graphs show the data for each of the seven Southeast European (SEE) countries, as well as the EU average. We will refer to the various portions of the data presented in these two figures throughout the chapter. Here we draw attention to the *Stringency Index* and the *New deaths* numbers, which show that during the first pandemic wave in the spring of 2020 all SEE countries implemented much stricter measures than the average EU member states and they also had far lower mortality rates.

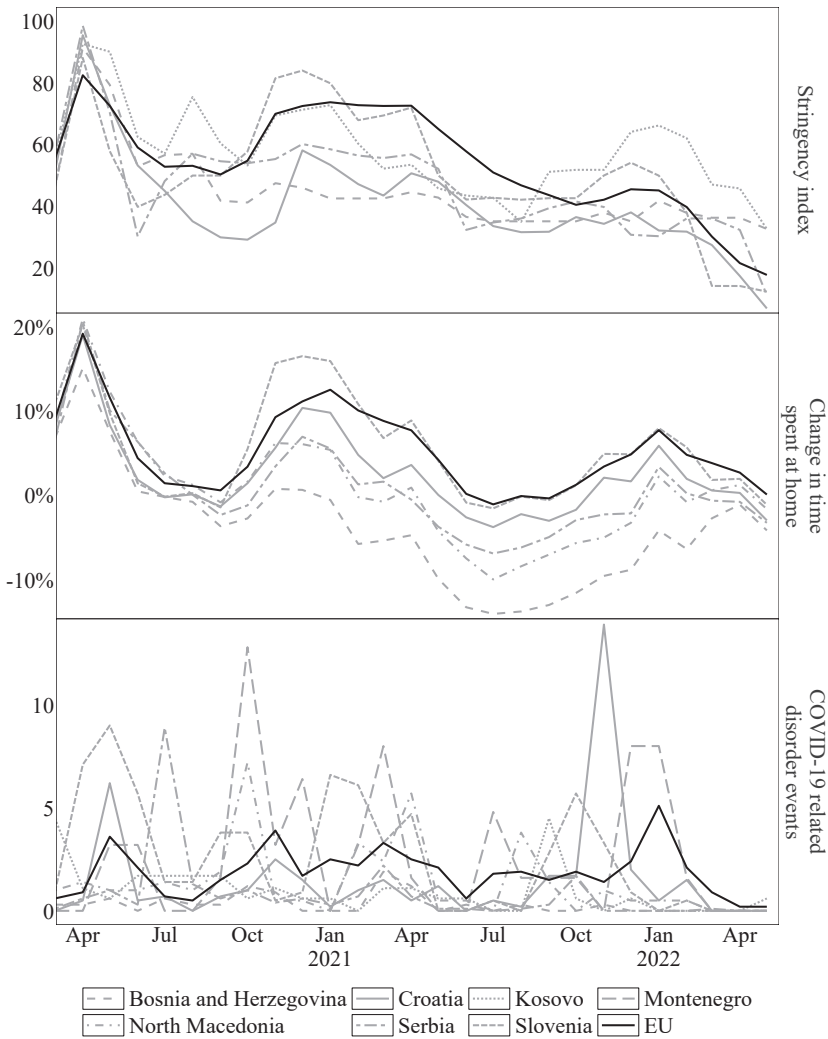
The stringent measures implemented by the SEE governments fit the general European picture where countries with lower government effectiveness, lower levels of freedom and societal trust, and with more right-wing and authoritarian governments acted more speedily and resolutely.²¹ Some

19 We chose this cutoff point because the indicators largely stabilized at that time and because the European Commission on April 26, 2022 proposed moving from the emergency phase of the pandemic response to a more sustainable management approach, marking a shift away from the crisis mode that had characterized the early stages of the pandemic. European Commission, “COVID-19—Sustaining EU Preparedness and Response: Looking Ahead,” Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, April 26, 2022, https://health.ec.europa.eu/publications/covid-19-sustaining-eu-preparedness-and-response-looking-ahead-o_en.

20 All indicators are derived from Mathieu et al., “Coronavirus Pandemic,” except for *COVID-19 related disorder events* which are from ACLED, “ACLED Codebook, 2024,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), www.acleddata.com.

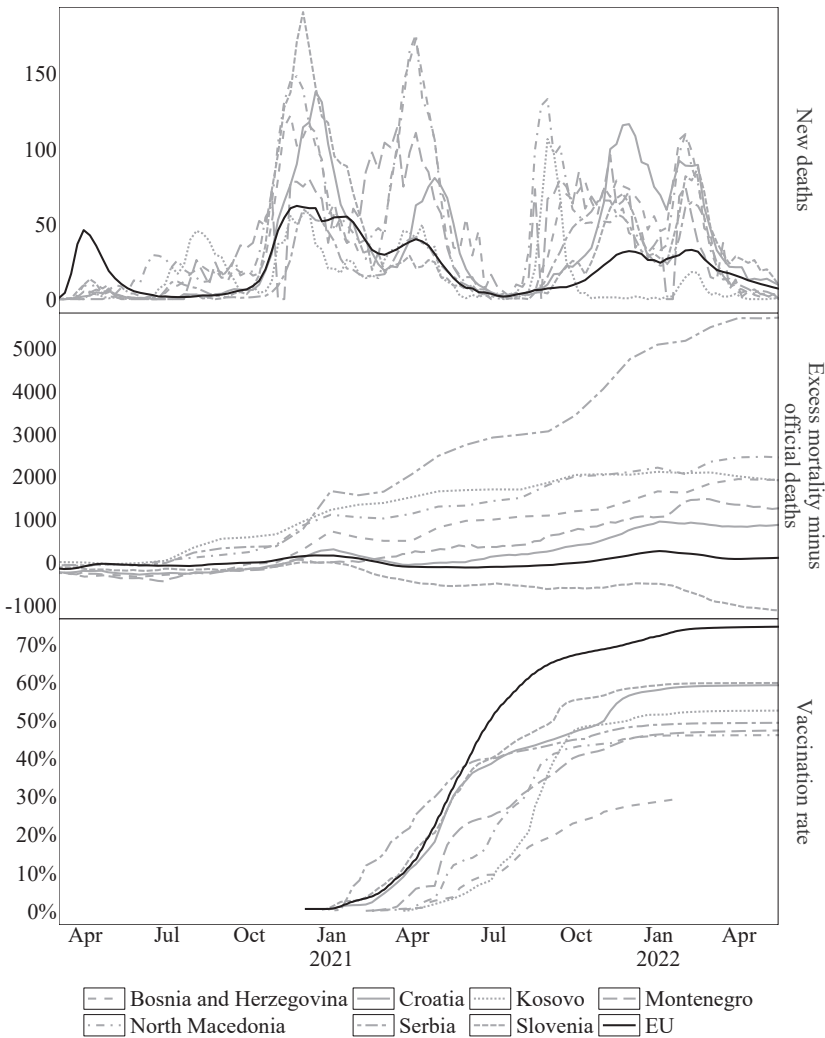
21 Dimiter Toshkov, Carroll, Brendan, and Yesilkagit, Kutsal, “Government Capacity, Societal Trust or Party Preferences: What Accounts for the Variety of National Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Europe?,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 29, no. 7 (2022): 1009–1028.

Figure 3.1. Evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Europe: Policies and compliance



have speculated that this difference may have been rooted in the false confidence of the governments with high perceived capacity of their health care systems, and the caution of the governments with low health care system capacity. Figures capturing the performance of the SEE health care systems during the first wave of the pandemic certainly suggest that the local governments had plenty to worry about. Low overall figures on cases and deaths were hiding the fact that the lethality of the virus in some areas

Figure 3.2. Evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Europe: Mortality and vaccination



was on par with the worst hit regions of the US at their peaks of the early pandemic.²² The situation in Southeast Europe was particularly dire among the hospitalized, with bacterial super-infections and pneumonias running rampant, and the shortage of ventilators and other equipment intensifying

22 Ivan Vasilj et al., “Determinants of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the West Herzegovina Canton,” *Psychiatria Danubina* 32, no. 2 (2020): 221–225.

negative outcomes.²³ What is worst, the governments of the region proved to be either unable or unwilling to make the needed investments into their health care systems during the pandemic's first wave.²⁴

Lack of confidence in the health care systems was only one possible explanation for the institution of stringent measures. These measures could also have been put in place because that was simply the natural impulse of the national governments in the region that were known for their pursuit of power and control. Here it is necessary, however, to point out that the uniformly high *Stringency Index* figures in the region mask some dramatic differences in the approaches of the national governments in question. The biggest differences concerned the securitization of the pandemic, transparency of decision making, and the nature of public discourse and messaging used by politicians and public health officials. On all three criteria, the governments of the region could be placed somewhere on the spectrum between Croatia on the one end and Serbia on the other. The Croatian government took a lighter approach to enforcing the lockdown, created a crisis headquarters and scientific council that reached their decisions more or less transparently, and communicated with the public effectively.²⁵ By the end of the first wave, the Croatian public exhibited extraordinarily high levels of approval of these ad hoc bodies' decisions and belief in their messaging.²⁶ On the other hand, the Serbian government securitized the pandemic by involving the armed forces in lockdown enforcement, created a crisis headquarters whose membership was not even made public for months, and engaged in misleading and confusing messaging—assisted by the notorious Belgrade tabloids loyal to the regime—that at the same time raised panic and dismissed the dangers posed by the pandemic.²⁷

23 Maja Ćurčić et al., "Bacterial Superinfections in Critically Ill COVID-19 Patients: Experiences from University Hospital Dubrava Tertiary COVID-19 Center," *Liječnički vjesnik* 144, no. 3 (2022): 1–14. Darko Ropac, Ina Stašević, and Goranka Rafaj, "Neki epidemiološki pokazatelji u pandemiji COVID-19 u Republici Hrvatskoj tijekom 2020. Godine," *Acta medica Croatica* 74, no. 4 (2020): 299–305.

24 Hrvoje Šimović, Maja Mihelja Žaja, and Marko Primorac, "Fiscal (Un)sustainability of the Croatian Healthcare System: Additional Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis," *Public Sector Economics* 45, no. 4 (2021): 495–515.

25 Robert Mikac, "COVID-19 Pandemic and Crisis Management in the Republic of Croatia," *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva* 17, no. 1 (2020): 31–55.

26 Marijana Grbeša, "Communicating COVID-19 Pandemic: Media Coverage of the Headquarters and the Use of Persuasion Strategies in Croatia," *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva* 17, no. 1 (2020): 57–78.

27 Kešetović, "Crisis communication"; Lovro Lukavečki, "Komparativna analiza pristupa u upravljanju krizom uzrokovanom bolešću COVID-19 u Hrvatskoj i Srbiji," *Forum za sigurnosne studije* 4/5 (2021): 64–96; Irina Milutinović, "Media Framing of COVID-19 Pandemic in the

The stringent measures, however, worked. The region experienced relatively good epidemiological results and by mid-May, the national governments expressed their eagerness to move toward a different approach, with Slovenia and Montenegro optimistically proclaiming the end of the pandemic within their borders.²⁸ The epidemiological results during that spring, however, came at a high cost and were hiding the seeds of impending collapse. The pandemic significantly impacted the economies of all SEE countries, with Montenegro experiencing the most severe economic downturn. The simultaneous shocks to both aggregate supply and demand led to a contraction in GDP and rising unemployment across the region.²⁹ Fiscal and monetary interventions—comparatively more modest than elsewhere on the continent—mitigated some of these negative effects, but they also increased public debt and strained national budgets to such an extent that it was obvious to all that they were unsustainable in the medium to long run.³⁰

More critically, although the region experienced relatively low numbers of cases and deaths, people could scarcely point to great leadership or competence in their national authorities,³¹ even though they—like the rest of Europeans at the time³²—craved for technical and managerial competence. What is particularly disappointing, the people of Southeast Europe could also scarcely point to great spiritual leadership from their religious authorities, as prominent members of the clergy of all religious groups, to varying degrees, repeatedly defied the instituted measures.³³ Lastly, the political scene in the region started to go through the same process observed elsewhere around the world—from the United States of Donald Trump to Brazil of Jair Bolsonaro. The lines of contention regarding the

Transitional Regime of Serbia: Exploring Discourses and Strategies," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 7 (2021): 1311–1327.

28 Slovenia did so on May 15, and the Institute for Public Health in Podgorica proclaimed Montenegro as COVID-19-free on May 24.

29 Kenichi, *Assessment of the Social Security Responses*.

30 Duško Bodroža and Milena Lazić, "Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Western Balkan Countries," *Economic Analysis: Journal of Emerging Economics* 54, no. 21 (2021): 30–40.

31 For a devastating assessment in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Sanela Prašović Gadžo, "Komuniciranje Vlade Federacije Bosne i Hercegovine tijekom pandemije COVID-19," *South Eastern European Journal of Communication* 3, no. 1 (2021): 71–85.

32 Sebastián Lavezzolo, Luis Ramiro, and Pablo Fernández-Vázquez, "Technocratic Attitudes in COVID-19 Times: Change and Preference over Types of Experts," *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 4 (2021): 1123–1142.

33 Nedim Begović, "Restrictions on Religions due to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Responses of Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 8, no. 2–3 (2020): 228–250.

best ways to deal with the pandemic began to be grafted onto the existing lines of political contention that were corroded by the ascent of populism, at the same time modifying and heightening conflict.

Roots of Collapse: Political Calculus and Economic Reopening (June–September 2020)

As figure 3.1 shows, in the early summer of 2020, all countries of Southeast Europe lowered the level of stringency of their COVID-19 measures, and they did so substantially more than the European Union average. Many observers interpreted the easing of various restrictions during this phase as an attempt to balance economic necessity and public health concerns, with governments trying to walk a fine line between keeping their populations safe and avoiding economic collapse. This was particularly seen as true in Croatia and Montenegro—two economies strongly reliant on tourism and hospitality. As the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković later explained in his interview with the CNN, the opening of the country to foreign tourists in June 2020 “was a bit of calculated risk ... we have managed to combine both the health of our citizens, and the income coming from one of the most important branches of our economy, and that is tourism.”³⁴

More cynical observers, however, saw the reopening in Southeast Europe as a function of the governments’ purely political calculus. This was the case in Slovenia, where the minority government of Janez Janša faced constant pressure from protesters who tied lockdowns to his party’s authoritarian inclinations. It was also the case in Kosovo, where the government of Albin Kurti fell exactly because of conflict over how to deal with the pandemic. And it was particularly the case in Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, which all held parliamentary elections that summer. Only the elections in Montenegro, which were held on August 30, were originally scheduled for that summer. The elections in North Macedonia, ultimately held on July 15, were originally set for April 12. The elections in Serbia, originally set for April 26, also had to be postponed—in this case to June 21. Lastly, the elections in Croatia were originally scheduled for that fall but were pushed forward to July 5 to preempt a possibly more negative post-summer epidemiological picture.

34 N1 Zagreb, “PM Plenkovic Talks to CNN About Croatia’s ‘Tough Choice’ of Tourism vs Lockdowns,” September 7, 2020, <https://n1info.hr/english/news/a542321-pm-plenkovic-talks-to-cnn-about-croatiaand39s-and39gtough-choice-and39g-of-tourism-vs-lockdowns/>.

In each of the four countries, the pandemic had a profound impact on the campaign and ultimately the electoral results. In Montenegro, already reeling from the conflict between the government and the pro-Serb opposition due to the new Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities, pandemic mitigation efforts were deeply politicized and seen by the opposition and their allies in Serbia as a form of government manipulation and attempt at control.³⁵ Boosted by the campaign of the Serb Orthodox Church, which chose to ignore the limitations on public assemblies, the opposition ultimately prevailed in the elections and ousted the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) for the first time since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In North Macedonia, on the other hand, the pandemic altered the political landscape and reshaped citizens' priorities. As a result, the elections focused less on the national or identity issues that had dominated the pre-pandemic era and instead centered on public health and personal safety. The ruling coalition—projected to suffer electorally because its deal with Greece on changing the name of the country to North Macedonia failed to deliver speedy progress toward European integration—held onto power arguably due to the advantages it gained from the pandemic's impact and the way in which it managed the challenges.³⁶

The ruling parties in Croatia and Serbia also gained electorally from the pandemic. On the eve of those two elections, we conducted an extensive survey of more than three thousand respondents in both countries to determine what impact—if any—COVID-19 would have on voter choice.³⁷ Obviously, the electoral landscape in the two countries was different. Before the pandemic, Serbian politics was largely shaped by the conflict between the ruling nationalist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by Aleksandar Vučić, and opposition parties that were protesting the government's increasing authoritarianism, political violence, and control over the media. These opposition protests persisted for more than a year but had to be halted in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Major opposition parties chose to boycott the parliamentary elections, citing unfair campaign conditions and the government's dominance over key media outlets. This left the SNS to compete primarily against its junior coalition partner, the Socialist

35 Dejan M. Mirović, "Kršenja univerzalnih ljudskih prava i progon SPC u Crnoj Gori u vreme epidemije COVID-19," *Sociološki pregled* 54, no. 3 (2020): 720–736.

36 Biljana Vankovska, "Covid-19 and the Macedonian Elections 2020/2021: A Story of Double Standards," *Serbian Political Thought* 4, no. 78 (2022): 73–92.

37 For extensive presentation of our findings, see Glaurdić, Lesschaeve, and Mochtak, "Coronavirus Pandemic Response and Voter Choice."

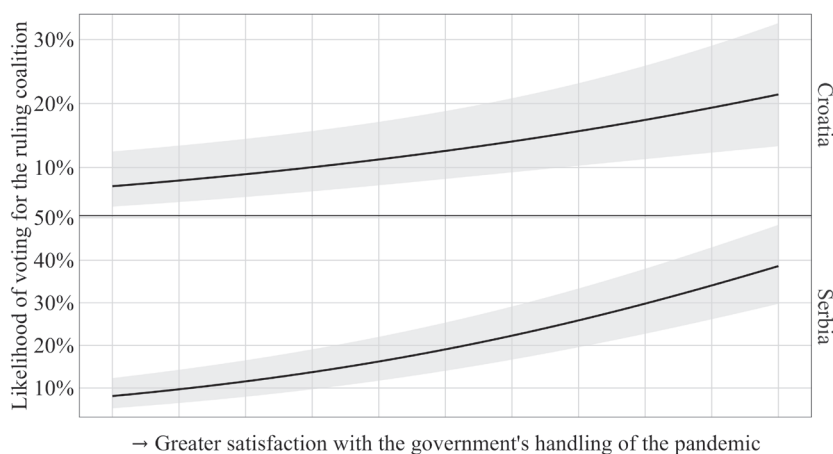
Party of Serbia (SPS), and a few minor opposition parties and candidates. In contrast, Croatia's elections were hotly contested by the ruling center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the main opposition coalition led by the Social Democrats (SDP), a growing right-wing bloc around the newly formed Homeland Movement (DP), and various smaller opposition parties and coalitions across the political spectrum. Unlike in Serbia, where the SNS was headed for a clear electoral victory, in Croatia, most opinion polls predicted that the HDZ would lose to the SDP. In both countries, the election campaigns were dominated by concerns related to the pandemic, with the governments opening public events such as sports competitions to spectators, leading to COVID-19 outbreaks. In the Serbian case, the most notorious example of this came at the football match between Red Star and Partizan in Belgrade on June 15, and in the Croatian case at a tennis exhibition match held in Zadar involving the Serbian tennis star Novak Đoković (for whom this was not his last COVID-19-related scandal) four days later.³⁸

The survey data we analyzed provided compelling evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced voter behavior in Croatia and Serbia in two important ways. First, even after accounting for respondents' prior electoral preferences, perceptions of the government's handling of the pandemic significantly shaped voters' intentions to support the ruling parties. This trend was observed not only among previous supporters of the ruling parties, but also among voters of other parties, as well as those who had previously abstained, to such an extent that it can be argued the pandemic played a pivotal role in securing the incumbent government's victory in Croatia, which was in the end comfortable. Rather tellingly, the HDZ candidate who earned the most preferential votes was the Minister of Health Vili Beroš, who assumed office only in January 2020 and was publicly unknown before joining the government but was praised for his crisis management skills during the pandemic's first wave.³⁹ We show the size of this effect of satisfaction with the government's COVID-19 response on voters' propensity to vote for the government coalition in the two countries in figure 3.3, with the underlying models shown in the appendix table A3.1.

38 Čolić, "Sekuritizacija Pandemije"; Hrvoje Kačer, Karla Gea Marcan, and Dino Marcan, "Crveni karton za Novaka Đokovića, (barem) žuti za državu Australiju," *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Splitu* 59, no. 1 (2022): 25–40.

39 Beroš's tenure as health minister ended in November 2024 when he was arrested on charges of bribery, money laundering, abuse of authority, and influence peddling. USKOK, "Pokrenuta istraga protiv trojice okrivljenika među kojima je i bivši ministar zdravstva te protiv dvije pravne osobe," November 15, 2024, <https://uskok.hr/hr/priopcenja/pokrenuta-istraga-protiv-trojice-okrivljenika-medu-kojima-je-i-bivsi-ministar-zdravstva>.

Figure 3.3. Predicted support for the ruling parties in Croatia and Serbia based on satisfaction with government response to the pandemic



What is equally important, our analysis also showed that respondents' personal experiences with COVID-19 infections within their family or social circles also heightened their likelihood of voting for the parties in power. Voters who directly witnessed the medical impact of the virus were more inclined to support policymakers who had implemented strong measures to curb its spread—which was the case in both Serbia and Croatia.

Our findings from Croatia and Serbia resonated rather well with the findings elsewhere in Europe, with incumbents experiencing boosts in support due to a rally 'round the flag effect that was driven either by the fear of infections or the resoluteness of governments' responses.⁴⁰ These political successes, however, came at a high cost—at least in Southeast Europe. As figure 3.2 shows, the region did much worse than the EU average when it comes to new COVID-19-related deaths during the summer. Even those relatively high figures, however, were hiding a much more sinister development where there were serious questions about the official reporting of both cases and deaths, most notably in Serbia. Independent investigative reporters in Serbia published an exposé showing serious discrepancies between the figures reported internally between the various public health

40 Damien Bol et al., "The Effect of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Political Support: Some Good News for Democracy?," *European Journal of Political Research* 60, no. 2 (2021): 497–505; Dominik Schraff, "Political Trust During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Rally Around the Flag or Lockdown Effects?," *European Journal of Political Research* 60, no. 4 (2020): 1007–1017.

institutions and those that were made public in the aggregate.⁴¹ Due to stalling by the public health and government officials, the story could not be published until the day after the elections. Public opinion research conducted in Serbia at the time, however, clearly shows that many people understood they were being lied to by the government.⁴² According to media reports, this was particularly the case in the hot spots of the pandemic at the time.⁴³

Despite this popular awareness—at least among some members of the public—the Serbian government continued with such a practice of gaslighting for the remainder of the pandemic. In figure 3.2, we show the evolution of the difference between the cumulative excess mortality figures from the onset of the pandemic and the officially reported COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants. In our view, this measure is a solid approximation for any possible underreporting by the public health officials, with the higher numbers suggesting higher probability (and volume) of underreporting. As can be seen from the graph, the difference between excess mortality and the officially reported COVID-19 deaths for the EU during the two most intensive years of the pandemic was close to zero per million inhabitants throughout the whole period, and it ended at 107 per million inhabitants in May 2022 where our graph concludes. The two EU member states from Southeast Europe—Slovenia and Croatia—were not too far off from zero, with the former about a thousand deaths below and the latter about a thousand above. The figures in the other SEE countries are higher, with those in Serbia standing at a whopping 6179 per million inhabitants (i.e., Serbia's excess mortality during this period was higher than the official COVID-19 death toll by about 42,000 people—nearly the same figure as that for the whole of the EU). Interestingly, Serbia's figure was the highest in Europe, suggesting it is very likely that the regime of Aleksandar Vučić was the most egregious under-reporter of COVID-19 deaths on the continent. Only Putin's Russia came close with 5,701 per million inhabitants (or more than 800,000 deaths in total).⁴⁴

41 Natalija Jovanović, "Korona: Broj umrlih i zaraženih višestruko veći od zvanično saopštenog," BIRN, June 22, 2020. The episode is also described in Kešetović, "Crisis Communication."

42 Valicon, "Istraživanje javnog mnjenja u Srbiji, mart—jul 2020. godine: Građani Srbije nemaju poverenje u zvanične informacije u vezi sa korona virusom," accessed September 10, 2024, https://www.cemaforum.rs/docs/1594031767-Saop%C5%A1tenje%20za%20medije_Valicon_Gra%C4%91ani%20Srbije%20nemaju%20poverenje%20u%20zvani%C4%8Dne%20informacije%20u%20vezi%20sa%20korona%20virusom.pdf.

43 Slobodan Maričić, "Korona virus u Novom Pazaru i Tutinu: 'Svako malo čuješ umro ovaj, umro onaj,'" *BBC News na srpskom*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-53237380>.

44 For the sake of comparison, this figure was 490 for Brazil, 406 for Italy, 367 for the US, -553 for Germany, and -912 for the UK. All figures were calculated using Mathieu et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic." For an excellent inquiry into the practices of misreporting of COVID-19 deaths in

The problem that summer was not only that people lost faith in the official figures, but also that the public health authorities lost credibility by bending over backwards to justify the changes in rules that seemed politically motivated, as well as to explain the clear disregard for those rules by their political superiors. The aforementioned tennis exhibition tournament held that June in Croatia was a perfect case in point. The verbal acrobatics employed by the members of the crisis headquarters to rationalize the actions of the Croatian Prime Minister who did not go into quarantine even after direct exposure to the virus at the tennis tournament arguably marked the point where most Croats started to irrevocably lose trust in the public health officials.⁴⁵ By early September, a public initiative of opponents of government measures, supported by the politicians from the two largest right-wing populist parties the Homeland Movement and the Bridge (Most), started a campaign of protests titled “Festival of Freedom.”⁴⁶ With speeches and slogans laced with conspiracy theories and incendiary language against the government, journalists, public health officials, and scientists, these protests paralleled rather well the protests that were taking place at the same time throughout Europe—from the attempted storming of the parliament in Berlin to the protests against lockdowns in Madrid, London, and many other cities.⁴⁷ They were also the perfect sign of even darker days to come that fall and winter.

Waves of Discontent and Mistrust (October 2020–June 2021)

In the story of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Europe, the fall and winter of 2020/2021 were arguably the most depressing periods. They were marked by the clear application of double standards of the institutions of power, destruction of even a semblance of unity among public health officials and experts on how to combat the spread of the disease, and the

Russia, see Dmitrii Kofanov et al., “Encouraged to Cheat? Federal Incentives and Career Concerns at the Sub-National Level as Determinants of Under-Reporting of COVID-19 Mortality in Russia,” *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2022): 835–860.

45 Vladimir Matijanić, “Plenković je dirao zaraženog Đokovića, a sad obilazi Hrvatsku. Gdje je samoizolacija?,” *Index.hr*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/plenkovic-je-dirao-zarazenog-djokovica-a-sad-obilazi-hrvatsku-gdje-je-samoizolacija/2192536.aspx>.

46 Ivan Zrinjski, “Na anti-korona prosvjed u Zagrebu stigli Hasanbegović, Bujanec i Krišto, Cetinski dobio ovacije,” *Jutarnji list*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/na-anti-korona-prosvjed-u-zagrebu-stigli-hasanbegovic-bujanec-i-kristo-cetinski-dobio-ovacije-15017311>.

47 “‘Anti-Corona’ Extremists Try to Storm German Parliament,” *Guardian*, August 29, 2020; “Thousands March in London in Fourth Anti-Lockdown Protest,” *Guardian*, October 24, 2020.

resulting steady collapse of the social contract, rise of public discontent and mistrust. Two episodes from that early fall—one from Montenegro and one from Croatia—perfectly encapsulate the depth of the social, political, and ultimately moral crisis in the region.

As noted above, the pro-Serb opposition won the August 2020 elections in Montenegro on the wave of protests against the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities that threatened the property and influence of the Serb Orthodox Church (SOC) in the country. The ideological (and often practical) leader of those protests was Amfilohije Radović, whom we “met” in the opening pages of this book. Amfilohije ascended to his position in 1991 and over the next three decades established himself as one of the staunchest promoters of Serb nationalism and Serbia’s war efforts in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as one of the most forceful deniers of unique Montenegrin identity. An independent journalist in Serbia probably put it best when he labeled Amfilohije as a “spiritual shepherd to war criminals” because of his support for people like Radovan Karadžić and Željko Ražnatović Arkan during and after the wars of the 1990s.⁴⁸

In addition to being a nationalist warmonger, Amfilohije also proved to be a committed science skeptic and resister of the public health measures during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Montenegro. He downplayed the severity of COVID-19 and argued that some health restrictions, such as limits on gatherings, were challenges to the Church’s autonomy and the continuation of religious life. His resistance was especially significant given the broader political context, where tensions between the Church and the Montenegrin government were already high. Amfilohije continued to lead mass religious processions throughout 2020, despite the pandemic. These processions drew thousands of participants, often without regard for social distancing or mask-wearing.

Amfilohije’s approach to COVID-19 had significant consequences, both for himself and others. He contracted the virus after months of defying public health measures and he died due to complications from COVID-19 on October 30. As noted in the introduction, his funeral was a monumental event, drawing thousands of mourners to the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Podgorica. Among those present were Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Montenegro’s newly elected Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapić, who had been closely aligned with the Church’s cause during the protests

48 Tomislav Marković, “Amfilohije Radović, arhijerej krvi i tla,” *Autonomija*, September 25, 2024, <https://autonomija.info/amfilohije-radovic-arhijerej-krvi-i-tla/>.

against the religious law and who was also a public opponent of pandemic mitigation measures. Despite the very difficult epidemiological situation with rising cases and deaths at the time, thousands of people gathered without adhering to health guidelines. During the funeral rites, Amfilohije's body was kissed by clergy and mourners, a traditional Orthodox custom that led to concerns about the event becoming a superspreader for the virus.⁴⁹ Tragically, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, who presided over the ceremony, contracted COVID-19 at the funeral and died three weeks later.⁵⁰ If there was a single event that perfectly encapsulated the interaction between the pandemic and the region's socio-political "pre-existing conditions"—it was the funeral of Metropolitan Amfilohije.

The Croatian episode from that period that perhaps was not of the same magnitude, but also perfectly captured the relationship between nationalism, populism, and the pandemic, concerned the commemoration of the battle of Vukovar from Croatia's 1991–1995 War for Independence. The commemoration was to take place—as every year—on November 18, which was the anniversary of the fall of this town on the Danube to the Serb forces in 1991. In the twenty-first century, these commemorations have taken the form of solemn marches of thousands of people from all over Croatia through the streets of Vukovar. With the epidemiological situation as difficult as it was in Montenegro at the time and the second COVID-19 wave in full swing, the expectation was that the public health authorities would at the very least limit attendance at the Vukovar march. Instead, however, nine days before the commemoration was to take place, the crisis headquarters lifted the ban on public assemblies, but only for those assemblies that were to take place to mark national public holidays—and November 18 became a national public holiday known as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Homeland War just a year earlier.⁵¹ The Vukovar march thus took place as planned, with thousands of people in attendance, and to a chorus of public

49 Predrag Tomović and Aneta Durović, "Masovno kršenje mjera na sahrani Amfilohija vodi kolapsu zdravstva," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-corona-covid-sahrana-amfilohije-radovic/30926241.html>.

50 At Irinej's funeral, mourners continued with the tradition by kissing the cross and the casket. The only difference was that the casket was now closed with protective glass. Nevena Bogdanović, "Sahranjen patrijarh SPC Irinej u Beogradu," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sahrana-patrijarha-spc-irineja-u-beogradu/30962305.html>.

51 "Stožer donio novu odluku, za državne praznike i blagdane su ukinuli vlastite mjere," *Index.hr*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/stozer-donio-novu-odluku-za-drzavne-praznike-i-blagdane-su-ukinuli-vlastite-mjere/2228947.aspx>.

criticism—this time from the political left. Within two weeks, the number of COVID-19 patients and deaths in Vukovar exploded to previously unseen levels.⁵² Whereas in June of that year 87.2% of the Croatian public trusted the crisis headquarters, by November this figure—rather predictably—shrunk to only 36%.⁵³ Public health officials bent to political pressures, instituted a system of double standards, and in the process lost the support of the public.

Another reason why the publics of the states in Southeast Europe during this period lost confidence in public health officials, epidemiologists, and medical experts was their contradictory messaging and open conflicts in both traditional and new media. Every country of the region had their own (groups of) experts and “experts” who questioned not only the wisdom of public health measures, but also of basic tenets of epidemiology, virology, or the science behind vaccines. Some of these people were already publicly known opponents of vaccination who only continued their activities and grafted the COVID-19 pandemic onto their existing platform of vaccine hesitancy. Others were, however, even members of the governments’ bodies of scientific consultants, which further planted the seeds of doubt about the motivations behind the various mitigation measures like mask mandates, lockdowns, or school closures. This clash of experts was particularly notable in Serbia and Croatia.

In Serbia, more than 1,500 medical workers signed a petition asking for the dismissal of the crisis headquarters because of its politicization and conflicting advice it was issuing to the public.⁵⁴ The union of medical and pharmaceutical workers, supported by the politicians from the opposition Democratic Party, even filed a criminal complaint against the minister of health and four members of the crisis headquarters because they “put themselves in the role of political commissars and because they put their announcements in the service of [President of Serbia] Aleksandar Vučić, the ruling party, and his coterie.”⁵⁵ The most notorious of the four accused—the aforementioned Branimir Nestorović—finally left the crisis headquarters in October 2020 and subsequently lost all scruples in his public statements. In a television show aptly titled “Conspiracy Theory?” he parroted the favorite

52 Željka Orešković, “U Vukovarsko-srijemskoj rekordni broj novozaraženih; epidemiolozi ne krive Kolonu sjećanja nego školarce,” *Telegram*, November 28, 2020.

53 Grbeša, “Communicating COVID-19 Pandemic,” 64.

54 Milica Čule, “Formiranje novog Kriznog štaba traži 1.539 lekara u Srbiji,” *nova.rs*, July 23, 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/formiranje-novog-kriznog-staba-trazi-1-539-lekara-u-srbiji/>.

55 “Podneta urgencija sudu da postupi po krivičnoj prijavi protiv Kriznog štaba,” *Danas*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/podneta-urgencija-sudu-da-postupi-po-krivicnoj-prijavi-protiv-kriznog-staba/>.

conspiracy theories of the pandemic denialists: the pandemic was a form of warfare against President Trump, COVID-19 tests were generating false positives in more than 90% of cases, official death toll was too high, and the infamous hydroxychloroquine was a miracle drug.⁵⁶ Nestorović soon used his pandemic notoriety and entered the political fray by successfully running for the national parliament in 2022 and the Belgrade assembly in 2023 and 2024 on a rightwing, Russophile, and conspiracist platform.

Compared to the situation in Serbia, the clash among experts in Croatia may have seemed tame, but it was also deeply destructive. At the center of the conflict was the member of the government's pandemic scientific council and the professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at the University of Zagreb Gordan Lauc. Through his very popular posts on social media, which were then amplified by other news sources, Lauc often went against the recommendations of the rest of the scientific council. Although his discourse was more subtle than that of Branimir Nestorović, the effects were similar. For example, Lauc proclaimed the pandemic over in December 2020—as figure 3.2 shows, even before the end of the second wave.⁵⁷ He claimed there were circumstances in which it was “better” to get infected; he relativized the effectiveness of epidemiological measures and the need for their application; recommended vaccination only for older people; and he insinuated that there may be a connection between COVID-19 vaccination and increased mortality.⁵⁸ Lauc was by no means the only skeptical voice in the scientific community in Croatia, but he was certainly one of the louder ones. His conflict with the other members of the scientific council continued for more than a year with the government finally kicking him out of the body in November 2021 when he called for public protests against the digital COVID-19 certificates.⁵⁹

Double standards by the public health authorities and the conflicting messaging by officials and scientists destroyed whatever trust there may have been during the first wave of the pandemic. As figures 3.1 and 3.2 show,

56 Milica Ljubičić, “Nestorović: Pandemija osmišljena da se sruši Tramp, PCR testovi nepouzdati,” *Raskrikavanje*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Nestorovic-Pandemija-osmišljena-da-se-srusi-Tramp-PCR-testovi-nepouzdati-814>.

57 “Lauc: Pandemija je doslovno kolabirala. Povlačim se iz medija,” *Index.hr*, December 24, 2020, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/lauc-povlacim-se-iz-medija-uvrede-prijetnje-i-sramocenja-bili-su-nebrojeni/2241463.aspx>.

58 Nenad Jarić Dauenhauer, “Petero članova Znanstvenog savjeta pisalo Plenkoviću o Laucu, pogledajte pismo,” *Index.hr*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/petero-clanova-znanstvenog-savjeta-pisalo-plenkovicu-o-laucu-pogledajte-pismo/2312702.aspx>.

59 “Vlada: Gordan Lauc više nije član Znanstvenog savjeta,” *NIInfo*, November 19, 2021, <https://niinfo.hr/vijesti/vlada-gordan-lauc-vise-nije-clan-znanstvenog-savjeta/>.

the governments of Southeast Europe—apart from Slovenia—did not dare raise the stringency of pandemic mitigation measures during the fall and winter of 2020 and 2021. For more than a year, they remained well below the EU average. What also stayed below the EU average was the level of people's adherence to the stay-at-home recommendations of the authorities. As the Google mobility numbers demonstrate, starting with the fall of 2020, the people of Southeast Europe (with the exception of Slovenia which had stronger lockdown measures on par with those in many West European countries) seemed to largely go back to their pre-pandemic lives. This was particularly the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina which became notorious for popular defiance of any limitations on public assemblies in closed spaces. Unsurprisingly, the second and third waves of the pandemic became far more lethal than the first wave, with hundreds of people in Southeast Europe dying every week and the countries of the region shooting to the top of the world rankings for COVID-19 mortality per capita. Whereas the regional hospital systems largely held out during the first wave, this time significant elements in the provision of health care collapsed.⁶⁰

All these issues were also reflected in the disastrous rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines in the region throughout the winter, spring, and summer of 2021. With the various pharmaceutical companies successfully testing their vaccines throughout the summer and fall of 2020, the world was hopeful the end of the pandemic was near. The process of vaccine procurement in Southeast Europe reflected inherent weaknesses of state administrations, as well as their geopolitical commitments. This was particularly the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the public health officials from the country's Serb half ordered the Russian vaccine Sputnik V, and those from the Bosniak-Croat Federation ordered vaccines from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) and the worldwide initiative COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) that the alliance was helping run.⁶¹

The decision to rely on COVAX by the Federation authorities, as well as those in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, proved to be extremely problematic in the early stages of vaccine rollout as the scheme failed to make the deliveries it had promised due to supply chain problems, the unwillingness of rich nations to share the produced vaccines equitably,

60 Jelena Dimnjaković et al., "Peak Health Care Burden During the First Three COVID-19 Waves in the Republic of Croatia," *Infektološki glasnik* 41, no. 4 (2022): 110–114.

61 "BiH ostala podijeljena i oko narudžbe cjepiva protiv Covida-19," *Poslovni dnevnik*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.poslovni.hr/regija/bih-ostala-podijeljena-i-oko-narudžbe-cjepiva-protiv-covida-19-4262779>.

and the desire of vaccine producers to make even more money than what they contractually agreed to.⁶² This is why initially Serbia stood out as a regional success story in vaccine rollout. By May 2021, it had one of the highest vaccination rates in Europe, with around 40% of its population having received at least one dose. Serbia's success was largely due to its strategic decision to diversify vaccine sources, securing millions of doses from Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, as well as from Russia's Sputnik V and China's Sinopharm. This diverse portfolio enabled Serbia to vaccinate rapidly and even engage in vaccine diplomacy, providing doses to neighboring countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, whose own vaccination programs were faltering. As figure 3.2 shows, Serbia's vaccination rate far outpaced the EU average of 30% during this period, illustrating its proactive procurement strategy.

By the late spring of 2021, however, vaccination rates in Serbia, as well as in the region's two EU member states of Slovenia and Croatia, started to lag significantly behind the EU average. Vaccination rates in the rest of the region, largely due to the failures of the COVAX scheme, barely began to take off until that summer. By the end of the summer, they started to plateau at levels far below the EU average. Bosnia and Herzegovina actually ended up being the country with the lowest rate of COVID-19 vaccination in Europe with only about 29% of the population receiving at least one dose by May 2022. In North Macedonia, that figure was 41%, Montenegro 46%, Serbia 49%, Kosovo 51%, Croatia 57%, and in Slovenia 60%. For comparison, the EU-27 average was about 75%.⁶³

Vaccine hesitancy was a massive problem throughout postcommunist Eastern Europe, so the countries of Southeast Europe in many ways did not differ from that larger continental trend. One of the key drivers of this development was the deterioration of already low levels of public trust that was further corroded by vaccine distribution gamesmanship on the part of wealthy nations and pharmaceutical companies. More interestingly, the other principal driver of vaccine hesitancy in Southeast Europe, as our chapter 7 shows, was the people's level of commitment to the political ideologies of populism and nationalism. With the second and third waves of the pandemic washing over Southeast Europe, virtually all policy

62 The public conflict between COVAX and the authorities in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina became particularly heated, with threats of lawsuits and international arbitration. "Tegeltija: Pfizer ucjenjuje BiH i ne isporučuje vaccine," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, February 24, 2021, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/3112_0002.html.

63 Mathieu et al., "Coronavirus Pandemic."

responses—from lockdowns through COVID-19 certificates to vaccinations—became politicized and politically salient. Nationalist and populist political entrepreneurs began to actively mobilize on these issues, leading to conflicts that further intensified in the summer of 2021.

The Ideological Turn Completed, July 2021–May 2022

By July 2021, the governments of Southeast European states struggled to institute virtually any pandemic-related policy due to public protests and opposition. In Croatia, the government tried to make the disbursement of aid to businesses conditional on their workers' vaccination status, but had to abandon it after protests by the business owners' lobby group.⁶⁴ The government also instituted an EU COVID-19 digital certificate mandate for medical workers, but it faced stiff opposition (and, as a result, poor enforcement of the policy), particularly from nurses, many of whom claimed to be concerned about the effect of vaccination on their fertility.⁶⁵ In Serbia, the government was forced to allow the organization of music festivals even though the country failed to reach the vaccination rate of 50% which had previously been determined as a threshold for such a move.⁶⁶ Public health experts pushed the Serbian government to make vaccination mandatory for medical and other public services, as well as to institute more restrictive measures for public assemblies, but the government rejected those calls while acknowledging that the epidemiological situation was "catastrophic."⁶⁷ As the pandemic mortality numbers in figure 3.2 show, that assessment of the epidemiological situation was correct—death and case numbers in Southeast Europe during this period far outpaced the EU average. And the conflict between different views on the needed responses to the pandemic

64 "Poduzetnici bijesni nakon Plenkovićeve najave: 'Ovo je na korak od fašizma,'" *Index.hr*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/poduzetnici-bijesni-nakon-plenkoviceve-najave-ovo-je-na-korak-do-fasizma/2287630.aspx>.

65 "Svećenik Berošu rekao da su Hitlerovi suradnici obješeni, vikalo se: 'Vješala,'" *Index.hr*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/video-svecenik-berosu-rekao-da-su-hitlerovi-suradnici-objeseni-vikalo-se-vjesala/2308392.aspx>.

66 Milica Radenković, "Reči Kriznog štaba ponovo pale u vodu," *Danas*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/reci-kriznog-staba-ponovo-pale-u-vodu/>.

67 "Uvesti obaveznu vakcinaciju javnih službenika," *Nova.rs*, October 1, 2021, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/radovanovic-uvesti-obaveznu-vakcinaciju-javnih-sluzbenika/>; "Brnabić: Ne verujem u mere," *Danas*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/brnabic-ne-verujem-u-mere-rekla-sam-to-medicin-skom-delu-staba-jedini-izlaz-je-vakcina/>.

only further intensified and divided policy makers, the medical community, and the general public.⁶⁸

Protests against various pandemic mitigation measures were a feature of political life in the region from the first wave of the pandemic, but things took a particularly serious turn in the fall of 2021. In early September, a group of vaccination opponents burst into the central studio of the national public broadcaster in Slovenia with claims that the virus did not exist, prompting an intervention by the police.⁶⁹ Two weeks later, Slovenian police had to use water cannons and tear gas against thousands of protesters on the streets of Ljubljana who opposed the implementation of COVID-19 certificates.⁷⁰ The concurrent protests in Croatia also reached a new level of fervor. In mid-September, the opponents of COVID-19 measures held the “Festival of Freedom 2.0” as a repetition of their protests from exactly one year earlier. This time, the slogans turned even more incendiary and fanatical. As one of the protest organizers put it: “Our freedom has obviously been taken away from us. We are under dictatorship, occupation, and aggression. In this aggression, they use many weapons, but the most destructive weapon is the vaccine. It is a genocidal vaccine of all who participate in the criminal enterprise of vaccination.”⁷¹ Protests and demonstrations continued in the months to come and progressively became coopted by rightwing and populist parties. Some of these parties were even formed on the platform against COVID-19 measures, as was the case with the Resni.ca Citizens’ Movement in Slovenia. With the rightward political shift of the protests, their iconography soon took the predictable turn of comparing COVID-19 measures to concentration camps and the Holocaust—something observed at many similar protests throughout the world.⁷² The discourse of the

68 The conflict among medical professionals became particularly heated and deeply personal, with recriminations amplified on social networks. For a perfect example from Montenegro, see “Radojević: Najmanje dva mjeseca se kasni sa punom implementacijom kovid propusnica,” *CDM*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/radojevic-najmanje-dva-mjeseca-se-kasni-sa-punom-implementacijom-kovid-propusnica/>.

69 Tadeja Voščun and Maja Račič “Nasprotniki cepljenja vdrli v studio javne televizije,” *24ur*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/nasprotniki-cepljenja-vdrli-v-studio-tv-slovenija.html>.

70 “Suzavac i vođeni top upotrebljeni u Ljubljani na protestu protiv korona mjera,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-ljubljana-slovenije-koronavirus/31462097.html>.

71 “Nekoliko tisuća ljudi na trgu u Zagrebu; policija dvaput intervenirala: ‘Cjepivo je genocidno, nuspojava je sterilizacija,’” *Novi list*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/u-zagrebu-danas-veliki-festival-slobode-policija-ga-najavila-snimati/>.

72 “Prosvjed u Zadru protiv covid-potvrda, ljudi nosili žute zvijezde na odjeći,” *Index.hr*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/foto-prosvjed-u-zadru-protiv-covidpotvrda-ljudi-nosili-zute-zvijezde-na-odjeci/2317129.aspx>.

speakers at these rallies—particularly in Croatia—also turned toward calls for violence, prompting the government to arrest one of their more prominent organizers on charges of incitement to terrorism.⁷³

The contours of the evolving political cleavage related to COVID-19 measures like lockdowns, certificates, school closures, limits on public assemblies, conspiracy theories, and vaccination were arguably apparent from the onset of the pandemic. However, they became fully actualized in the fall and winter of 2021. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Croatia where the bloc of rightwing populist parties took on the mantle of supposed protectors of civil liberties. Politicians from the opposition Homeland Movement, the Bridge (Most) party, and the Croatian Sovereignists (HS) helped organize protests, spoke at rallies, and gave statements to the media against COVID-19 certificates, vaccine mandates, and vaccines in general. For them, COVID-19 certificates were “a form of marking, the same way Jews were marked under Nazism”⁷⁴ and vaccinations were “an act of rape.”⁷⁵ The HS even deposed the head of their parliamentary delegation because he spoke in favor of vaccination. In his statement to the media after his dismissal, he suggested that he was the only MP to the right of the ruling HDZ who was vaccinated.⁷⁶ The pinnacle of this campaign by the populist right in Croatia were the two referendum initiatives by the Bridge party which would have made all mitigation policies subject to a two-thirds majority approval by the parliament. The referendum campaign collected more than 400,000 signatures, but the proposed questions were ultimately deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in a highly controversial decision.⁷⁷ Although the ideological lines in the sand were clearly drawn, what is important to note is that politicians of all stripes and colors dabbled in populist rhetoric when it came to different aspects of the pandemic. Croatian President and nominal

73 Aleksandar Brezar, “Meet the Self-Proclaimed Jihadist Leading Croatia’s Anti-Vaxxers,” *euronews*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/01/06/meet-the-self-proclaimed-jihadist-leading-croatia-s-anti-vaxxers>.

74 “Miro Bulj o covid-potvrđama i novim mjerama: Narušavaju pravo ljudi na slobodu,” *N1Info*, November 6, 2021, <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/miro-bulj-o-novim-koronamjerama-narusavaju-pravo-ljudi-na-slobodu/>.

75 Topić, Andrea, “Cijepljenje djece je čin silovanja, kaže Ivan Penava,” *Index.hr*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/cijepljenje-djece-je-cin-silovanja-kaze-ivan-penava/2316743.aspx>.

76 “Zekanović: U saboru ima barem 30 antivaksera,” *Index.hr*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/zekanovic-u-saboru-ima-barem-30-antivaksera/2324816.aspx>.

77 Ustavni sud RH, “Priopćenje za javnost sa sjednice Ustavnog suda RH od 16. svibnja 2022,” May 16, 2022, https://www.usud.hr/sites/default/files/dokumenti/Priopcenje_za_javnost_sa_sjednice_Ustavnog_suda_RH_od_16._svibnja_2022.pdf.

social democrat Zoran Milanović, for example, came out against policies aimed at increasing vaccination rates by asking, “Are we also going to prosecute people who have tooth cavities?”⁷⁸ And for the newly elected Slovenian prime minister and social and green liberal Robert Golob, there existed “two natural cures against COVID-19: sunshine and salty sea water.”⁷⁹ These and similar statements notwithstanding, however, the conflict over different forms of pandemic mitigation became a highly politicized and ideologized affair, with the cleavage particularly strong between populist and non-populist parties.

We show this cleavage in graphic form in figures 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6. In these figures we use the data we collected during and right after the pandemic in expert surveys on the COVID-19 policy preferences and ideological orientations of all relevant parties in the countries of Southeast Europe.⁸⁰ As the figure 3.4 shows, there is a clear relationship between the parties’ nationalist and populist orientation and the level to which they trusted experts to fight the pandemic, with that trust being lower for more nationalist and more populist parties. Figure 3.5 similarly shows that there is also a clear relationship between the parties’ ideological orientation and the level to which they were willing to tolerate COVID-19-related deaths in order to keep the economy open, with that tolerance being higher for more nationalist and more populist parties. Lastly, figure 3.6 shows that more nationalist and more populist parties were substantially more likely to endorse COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Substantively, the countries of Southeast Europe—similar, though also in some crucial ways very different from one another—do not stray from what has been observed throughout the world when it comes to the ideologization of policies and attitudes related to the pandemic.⁸¹

The World Health Organization’s designation of the COVID-19 pandemic as a public health emergency of international concern officially ended on May 5, 2023. However, the pandemic for all intents and purposes ended in Southeast Europe one year earlier. The European Commission announced that the European Union was out of the emergency phase of the pandemic

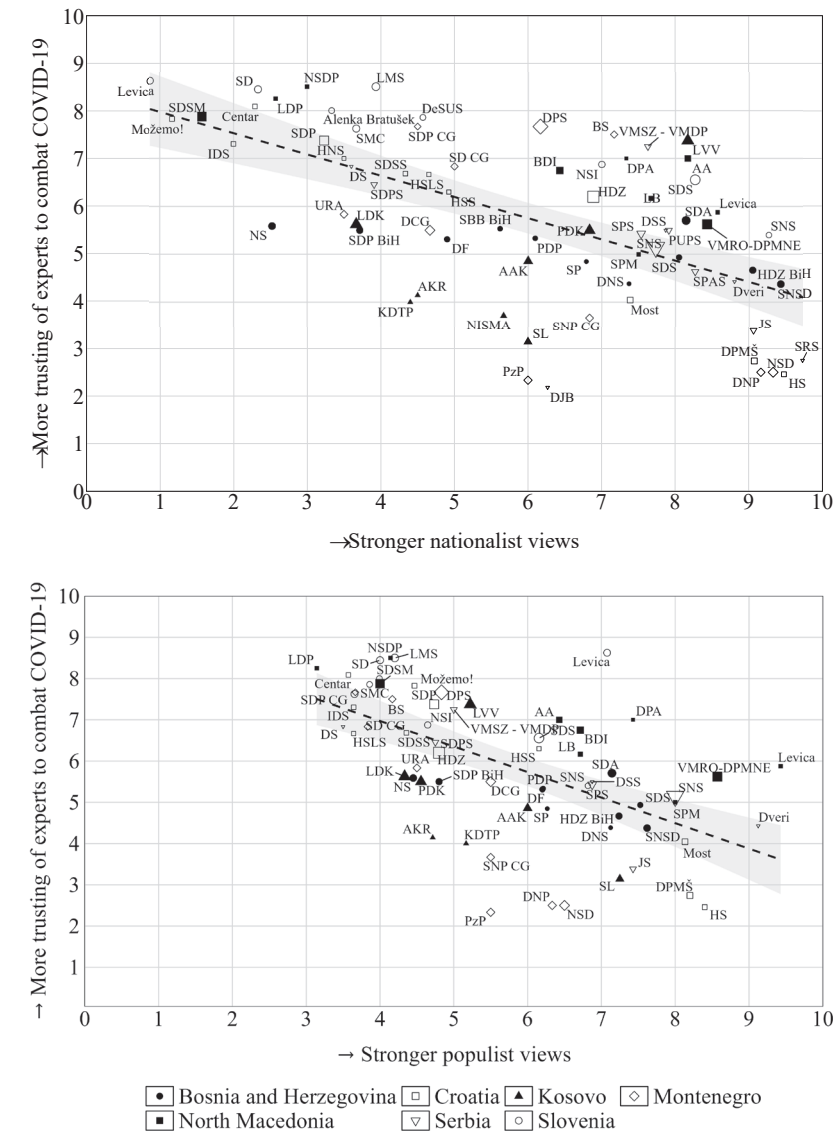
78 “Milanović o cijepljenju: Što je sljedeće? Proganjat ćemo ljude zbog karijesa?,” *N1Info*, July 16, 2021, <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/milanovic-na-prisezi-rocnika-izjavu-pratite-na-n1/>.

79 “Slovenski premijer: ‘Imamo dva prirodna lijeka protiv koronavirusa ... Ne šalim se, ovo je čista istina,’” *Dnevnik.hr*, July 17, 2022, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/premijer-slovincima-preporucio-prirodne-lijekove-protiv-covid-19---733503.html>.

80 The full dataset and accompanying documents are in Christophe Lesschaeve, Josip Glaurdić, and Michal Mochtak, “ELWar Expert Survey,” SowiDataNet Datorium—GESIS Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, 2022. The comparable data for Slovenia was adapted from Jan Rovny et al., “Contesting Covid: The Ideological Bases of Partisan Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 4 (2022): 1155–1164.

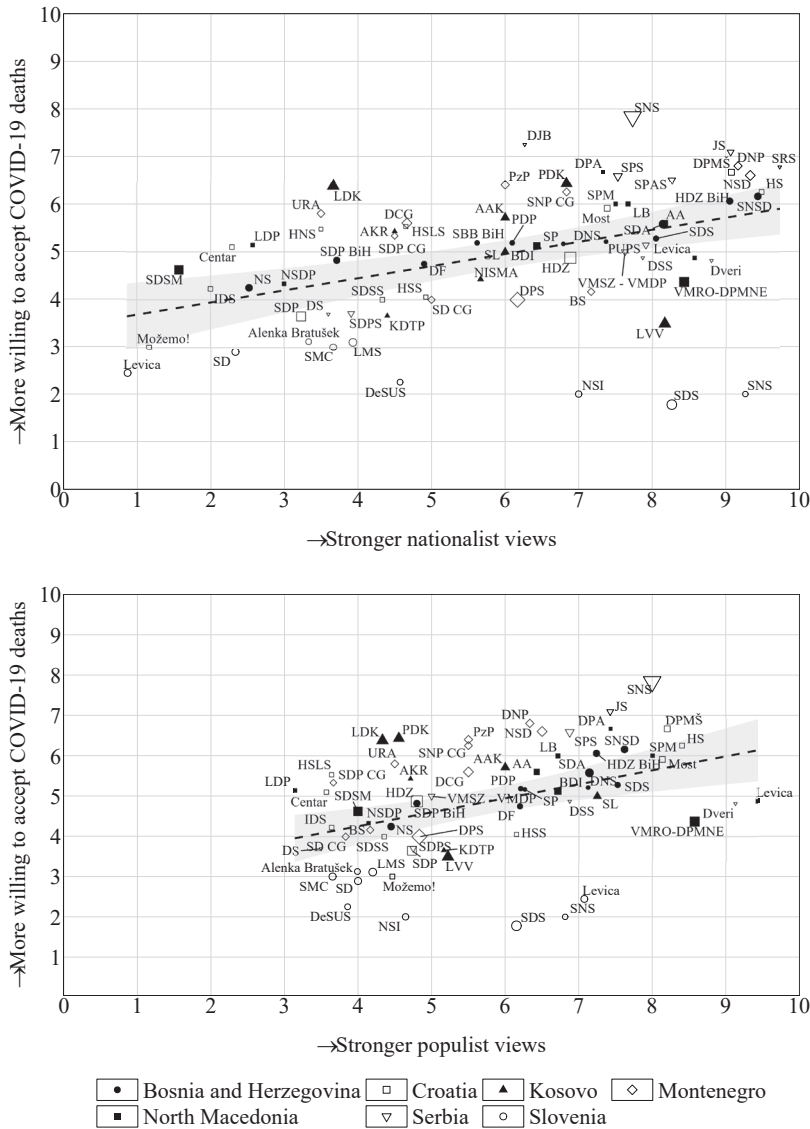
81 Rovny et al., “Contesting Covid.”

Figure 3.4. Party ideology and trust in experts to combat COVID-19



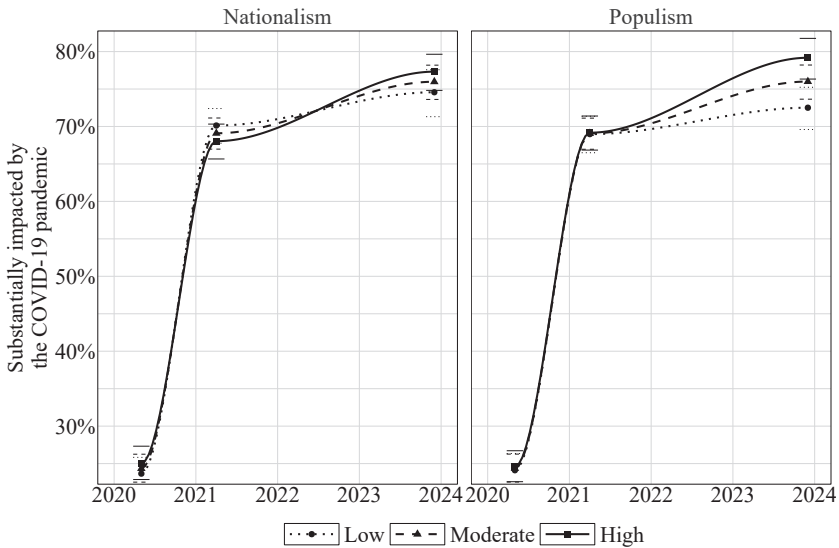
and the White House advisor Anthony Fauci made a similar announcement in the United States in the last week of April 2022. Countries throughout Europe started to lift most of their restrictive measures around the same time. As the curtain fell on this last phase of the pandemic, its consequences in Southeast Europe looked particularly dire. Poll after poll showed that

Figure 3.5. Party ideology and the COVID-19 deaths vs. economy tradeoff



the publics of the countries of the region believed a string of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic.⁸² As chapter 5 demonstrates, these beliefs

82 For an example from Montenegro, see “Vukajlović: Građani masovno vjeruju u dezinformacije i teorije zavjere,” *CDM*, March 7, 2023, <https://www.cdm.me/drustvo/vukajlovic-gradani-masovno-vjeruju-u-dezinfo-rmacije-i-teorije-zavjere/>.

Figure 3.6. Party ideology and the COVID-19 conspiracy theories

grew steadily to alarming levels throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, as figure 3.2 shows, between the summer of 2021 and the spring of 2022, rates of vaccination in the region plateaued at levels significantly lower than the EU average. Millions of vaccines had to be destroyed because they were unused.⁸³ Of course, that was the case in many places throughout the world, but in Southeast Europe with its low levels of vaccination it was particularly tragic. Even more tragic, as figure 3.2 shows, COVID-19-related deaths in Southeast Europe during this period far surpassed the EU average, with the real numbers likely even higher as the discrepancy between excess mortality and the official pandemic death toll continuing to rise, particularly in Serbia.

Picking Up the Pieces: Tests Failed and Lessons Learned

When the Croatian government announced the end of pandemic mitigation measures in April 2022, one centrist politician announced that this was “A

83 By the end of 2022, more than 1.5 million vaccines ended up being destroyed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country with the lowest vaccination rate in Europe: “Gradane BiH ne zanima cijepljenje: U smeću 1,5 milijuna cjepiva,” *Bljesak*, December 15, 2022, <https://bljesak.info/lifestyle/zdravlje/gradane-bih-ne-zanima-cijepljenje-u-smecu-15-milijuna-cjepiva/403134>.

victory for freedom! Almost all measures are abolished! Liberal democracy has won again!”⁸⁴ It was a curious interpretation of what had happened—a piece of wishful thinking at best, and a sign of serious delusion at worst. The fact is that the end of mitigation measures simply marked the beginning of a period when the local societies could cope with taking the pandemic to the background and living with the virus. There were no winners, certainly not among those who truly championed freedom and liberal democracy. If anything, the pandemic had shown such forces—in governments and outside of them—to be often powerless against both the real virus that caused the pandemic, as well as the various social viruses that plague contemporary Western polities like the lack of interpersonal and institutional trust, growing belief in toxic conspiracy theories, and the resulting support for political forces with simplistic platforms and incendiary discourse. The pandemic shook the foundations of our societies and in Southeast Europe those foundations were already unstable. What is particularly tragic, as the May 2022 report by the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response set up by the World Health Organization showed, the world was no better prepared for pandemics at that time than it was in 2019.⁸⁵ We failed the test in 2019, and we continue to fail it today.

In many ways, the evolution of the pandemic in Southeast Europe was no different than in many other places around the continent and the Western world. The governments of the region applied rules inconsistently and often used the official public health bodies for their own political and electoral ends. But few of them failed by destroying public trust in quite such spectacular fashion as the UK government of Boris Johnson with its “partygate” scandals. Many politicians in Southeast Europe—some of them at the highest levels of government—used populist rhetoric when discussing important aspects of combatting the pandemic such as lockdowns or vaccinations. But few of them matched the discourse of the US President Donald Trump in sheer recklessness and disregard for consequences. A number of protests in Southeast Europe turned violent, particularly toward the end of 2021. However, they hardly equaled the intensity of similar protests elsewhere in the world, with far-right opponents of mitigation measures attempting to storm the parliaments from Berlin, Germany to Lansing, Michigan. By

84 “Nađi: Ukidaju se skoro sve mjere, liberalna demokracija je pobijedila!” *Index.hr*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/davor-nadji-o-ukidanju-skoro-svih-mjera-pobjeda-slobode/2354201.aspx>.

85 World Health Organization Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness & Response, *COVID-19: Make It the Last Pandemic* (Geneva, Switzerland: WHO, 2022).

the end of the pandemic, governments in Southeast Europe struggled with implementing virtually any policies aimed at answering epidemiological and public health problems. That was, however, also the experience of many of their colleagues in other democracies where legal and organizational challenges to policy making were raised by local and state governments, opposition parties, or various civil society organizations. The pandemic was global, as were the associated struggles and dynamics of contention. This is arguably why Southeast Europe as a region is such a good subject of study of how the pandemic evolved and affected our societies. On the one hand, it teaches us the lesson that there were important aspects of the pandemic that were nearly universally shared, regardless of the different stages in our development or the different levels in the quality of our democracies. And on the other, it also demonstrates that—in spite of those commonalities—there were meaningful differences in outcomes, captured perfectly in the numbers on vaccinations, deaths, and the difference between excess mortality and the official pandemic death toll in our figure 3.2.

4. Liberty in Lockdown: Consent and Contestation in the State of Emergency

Abstract: Pandemic emergency measures placed civil liberties under unprecedented strain, forcing societies to renegotiate the balance between authority and freedom. Across Southeast Europe, lockdowns, curfews, and emergency powers generated divergent patterns of consent and contestation that cannot be explained by fear, performance evaluations, or partisanship alone. Drawing on original survey data from 2020 and 2021, this chapter examines how nationalist and populist worldviews structured public support for exceptional state powers, expectations about their permanence, and compliance with lockdown rules. The analysis reveals a sharp ideological asymmetry: nationalism sustained support for strong state intervention without increasing compliance, while populism eroded both support and adherence. These findings illuminate how ideology shapes the legitimacy and effectiveness of crisis governance in democratically fragile contexts.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, emergency powers, civil liberties, lockdowns, populism, nationalism

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global challenge, prompting governments worldwide to enact extraordinary measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. In Southeast Europe, these measures were particularly significant, given the region's recent history and the dueling processes of democratic consolidation and backsliding. Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia all implemented a range of emergency actions, including strict lockdowns, curfews, and the invocation of special powers, significantly altering the daily lives of their citizens. While these measures were introduced with the intent of protecting public health, they

Glaurdić, Josip, and Christophe Lesschaeve. *Contagions: Nationalism, Populism, and the Pandemic at Europe's Edge*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press/Central European University Press, 2026.

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also sparked considerable debate regarding their necessity, proportionality, and long-term implications for civil liberties and democratic governance.

In Slovenia, the government swiftly enacted one of the strictest lockdowns in Europe, closing borders, restricting movement, and imposing mandatory quarantines for returning citizens. The use of the police and military to enforce these measures, coupled with the government's determination to centralize decision-making power, raised concerns about the erosion of democratic checks and balances.¹ Similar concerns emerged in Croatia, where the government implemented a nationwide curfew and limited public gatherings to a minimum, all under the framework of a state of emergency. The centralization of authority, particularly the executive's enhanced role in managing the crisis, led to a heated public discourse on the balance between public safety and individual freedoms.²

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country already grappling with deep ethnic divisions and a fragmented political system, faced additional challenges in coordinating its pandemic response. The state government, along with the two entities, imposed varying degrees of lockdowns and curfews, often with little coordination. This fragmented approach led to inconsistencies in the enforcement of measures, exacerbating public confusion and distrust.³ Serbia, meanwhile, saw some of the most stringent measures in the region, with the government imposing a complete lockdown of cities. The concentration of power in the hands of President Aleksandar Vučić during the crisis, and the heavy-handed enforcement of the lockdown, sparked fears of democratic backsliding and the potential for authoritarianism to take root under the guise of public health.⁴

These measures, while ostensibly aimed at protecting public health, prompted significant debate regarding their justification and the extent to which they were necessary or proportionate. Critics argued that the sweeping

1 Valentina Petrović, "Threats to Democracy: Measures Taken by Right-Wing Populist Regimes During the Covid-19 Crisis in Eastern Europe," *Političke perspektive: časopis za istraživanje politike* 10, no. 2–3 (2020): 51–66.

2 Nika Lazić, Vanja Lazić, and Branko Kolarić, "First Three Months of COVID-19 in Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Comparative Assessment of Disease Control Measures," *Infektološki glasnik* 40, no. 2 (2020): 43–49.

3 Max Brändle, Tamara Branković, Arjan Dyrnishi, Besa Kabashi-Ramaj, Igor Luksic, Nenad Markovikj, Filip Milačić, Tara Tepavac, Nenad Zakošek, and Miroslav Živanović, "Democracy and the State of Emergency: Responses to the Corona Crisis in the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Slovenia—Report One" (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung–Belgrade, 2020).

4 Dušan Pavlović, "Does the State of Emergency Create an Opportunity for Democratic Erosion? Lessons from Post-Communist Central and Southeast Europe," *Politics in Central Europe* 19, no. 3 (2023): 621–643.

nature of these emergency powers, coupled with the lack of transparency and accountability in their implementation, posed a serious threat to democratic norms and civil liberties. The legal and ethical implications of curfews, travel bans, and enhanced surveillance were hotly contested, with some viewing them as essential tools in the fight against COVID-19, while others saw them as overreaches that could set dangerous precedents for future governance.⁵

However, despite these concerns, public opinion in most countries of the region was generally perceived to be supportive of the implementation of these restrictive measures,⁶ at least in the early stages of the pandemic.⁷ This is in line with studies on other European countries that reveal that public support for lockdowns and other emergency measures was high, driven by widespread fears of the virus and trust in government efforts to manage the crisis.⁸ These studies, however, also show that this support varied significantly and was influenced by factors such as political ideology, support for or trust in the current ruling party or government coalition, personal experiences with COVID-19, and respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.⁹

The focus of this chapter shifts from how governments responded to the pandemic to how citizens in Southeast Europe experienced and reacted to the most intrusive and exceptional features of pandemic governance—lockdown measures, curfews, and emergency powers. These moments of suspended democratic norms generated divergent responses across the region, revealing how deeply political beliefs shaped public attitudes and

5 Dorothee Bohle, Gergő Medve-Bálint, Vera Šćepanović, and Alen Toplišek, "Riding the COVID Waves: Authoritarian Socio-Economic Responses of East Central Europe's Anti-Liberal Governments," *East European Politics* 38, no. 4 (2022): 662–686.

6 Max Brändle et al., "Democracy and the State of Emergency: Responses."

7 Max Brändle, Tamara Branković, Arjan Dyrnishi, Besa Kabashi-Ramaj, Igor Luksic, Nenad Markovikj, Tara Tepavac, Nenad Zakošek, and Miroslav Živanović, "Democracy and the State of Emergency: Easing Measures and Rising Tensions in the Struggle with the Corona Crisis in the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Slovenia." (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung–Belgrade, 2020).

8 Sofia Collignon, Iakovos Makropoulos, and Wolfgang Rüdiger, "Consensus Secured? Elite and Public Attitudes to Lockdown Measures to Combat Covid-19 in England," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31(2021): 109–121.

9 Michael Becher, Daniel Stegmueller, Sylvain Brouard, and Éric Kerrouche, "Ideology and Compliance with Health Guidelines During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Perspective," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 5 (2021): 2106–2123; Pavlos Vasilopoulos, Sylvain Brouard, Martial Foucault, and Éric Kerrouche, "Emotions, Governmental Trust and Support for the Restriction of Civil Liberties During the Covid-19 Pandemic," *European Journal of Political Research* 62, no. 2 (2023): 422–442; Zoran M. Pavlović, Bojan Todosijević, and Dragan T. Stanojević, "Support for the Measures in Fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Political Ideology," *Psihologija* 54, no. 2 (2021): 207–222.

behaviors during the crisis. This chapter examines those responses by investigating the intersection of political ideology, public opinion, and support for emergency rule.

Unlike studies that infer ideology from partisanship or voting preferences, our analysis draws on direct measures of ideological worldviews. Specifically, we assess the extent to which nationalist and populist orientations influenced whether people supported or opposed emergency powers and lockdown policies. The findings reveal sharply contrasting patterns: nationalists were consistently more supportive of exceptional government measures, while populists were more likely to oppose them and defy the rules in practice. These ideological orientations not only shaped opinions about emergency powers but also informed broader expectations about the durability of such powers and patterns of behavioral compliance.

By tracing how these ideological divides map onto support for emergency rule, concerns about democratic erosion, and lockdown adherence, the chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of how political beliefs structure public responses to crisis governance—especially in regions where democratic institutions remain contested. The first section examines attitudes toward four emergency powers: ruling by decree, media censorship, movement tracking, and mobility restrictions. The second part focuses on public expectations about the permanence of those powers beyond the immediate health crisis. The final section analyzes attitudes toward specific lockdown rules and levels of self-reported compliance across the region.

The Cost of Protection: When Freedom Meets Fear

Freedom is a defining value of democratic societies, yet it is never without limits. From the earliest conceptions of the social contract, theorists like Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau grappled with the tension between individual liberty and collective security. For Hobbes, the chaos of the “state of nature” could only be overcome by the sovereign’s monopoly on violence: individuals, driven by fear of death, voluntarily relinquished their natural rights to a Leviathan in exchange for peace. Rousseau, though more optimistic, similarly saw the need for constraint—but imagined it as self-imposed through the general will, expressing the collective good. What unites both perspectives is the recognition that freedom, if it is to be sustainable, must be bounded by authority.

In this sense, crises such as wars, terrorist attacks, or pandemics serve as acute tests of the democratic social contract. They force societies to

renegotiate the balance between autonomy and authority. The legitimacy of exceptional measures such as curfews, surveillance, restrictions on movement depends not only on their effectiveness but also on whether citizens view them as justified. Who may decide when liberty must be suspended?

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, a substantial body of scholarship converged on the conclusion that perceived threat, emotional distress, and a heightened sense of vulnerability significantly increase public support for exceptional government powers.¹⁰ Across numerous studies, individuals who felt more threatened by terrorism—whether due to personal anxiety, heightened media exposure, or general concern for safety—were more likely to endorse policies that restricted civil liberties, expanded surveillance, and empowered the state to act unilaterally. This effect was not uniform but conditioned by political trust and ideological predispositions. While some groups—such as those with longstanding commitments to minority rights or civil liberties—remained more resistant, even typically tolerant or liberal individuals showed increased willingness to curtail freedoms when they perceived the threat to be severe. Moreover, threat perceptions did not merely amplify pre-existing authoritarian tendencies but could induce authoritarian-style thinking even among those without such predispositions.

A strikingly similar pattern unfolded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the fundamentally different nature of the threat—biological rather than political—the mechanisms underlying public support for civil liberty restrictions closely mirrored those seen in the post-9/11 era. In the early stages of the pandemic, fear emerged as the most consistent predictor of support for restrictive policies such as curfews and digital surveillance.¹¹ In France, survey waves conducted during the first month of lockdown revealed widespread public acceptance of harsh measures, including curfews, travel restrictions, and even the use of mobile phone data to monitor citizens.¹² In high-trust societies, such as Denmark, fear amplified institutional

10 Darren W. Davis and Brian D. Silver, "Civil Liberties vs. Security: Public Opinion in the Context of the Terrorist Attacks on America," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (2004): 28–46; Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber, and Gallya Lahav, "Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2005): 593–608; Marc Hetherington and Elizabeth Suhay, "Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (2011): 546–560; Murat Haner, Martha M. Sloan, Francis T. Cullen, Tara C. Kulig, and Cheryl Lero Jonson, "Public Concern About Terrorism: Fear, Worry, and Support for Anti-Muslim Policies," *Socius* 5 (2019).

11 Vasilopoulos et al., "Emotions, Governmental Trust and Support."

12 Sylvain Brouard, Martial Foucault, and Éric Kerrouche, *Pandemic: Attitudes Towards the Measures that Limit Civil Liberties*, CEVIPOF Report (2020); Sylvain Brouard, Pavlos Vasilopoulos, and Michael Becher, "Sociodemographic and Psychological Correlates of Compliance with the

confidence, leading to a temporary convergence in support for strong state action.¹³ But this consensus was short-lived. As the pandemic dragged on and the novelty of the emergency faded, public opinion began to fracture. The same policies that had initially enjoyed broad support became flashpoints for political contestation. Compliance waned, protests emerged, and stark ideological divides took shape. What the existing literature on fear and trust could not fully explain, however, was why different social groups interpreted the same emergency so differently. Why did some continue to view lockdowns and curfews as necessary sacrifices for the public good, while others came to see them as intolerable overreaches?

To be clear, scholarship has not ignored these questions. A growing number of studies have examined the political correlates of pandemic compliance, particularly in the second and third waves of the crisis. For example, partisan affiliation has been shown to shape public responses in highly polarized contexts such as the United States, where Republicans were significantly less likely than Democrats to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions.¹⁴ Other work has explored how different forms of national identity influence support for public health mandates.¹⁵ Moreover, several studies have examined how fear of political consequences, such as democratic backsliding or executive overreach, contributed to declining public support for restrictive measures as the crisis wore on.¹⁶ Some studies have also attempted to link compliance to ideology, but the conceptual and empirical tools used are often strikingly blunt.¹⁷ In most cases, ideology is measured using the

COVID-19 Public Health Measures in France," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 2 (2020): 253–258.

13 Martin Baekgaard, Julian Christensen, Jonas Krogh Madsen, and Kim Sass Mikkelsen (2020) "Rallying Around the Flag in Times of COVID-19: Societal Lockdown and Trust in Democratic Institutions," *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration* 3, no. 2 (2020): 1–12.

14 David C. Roberts and Stephen M. Utych, "Polarized Social Distancing: Residents of Republican-Majority Counties Spend More Time Away from Home During the COVID-19 Crisis," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 6 (2021): 2516–2527; Daniel A. Goldstein and Johannes Wiedemann, "Who Do You Trust? The Consequences of Partisanship and Trust for Public Responsiveness to COVID-19 Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 2 (2022): 412–438.

15 Jay J. Van Bavel, Aleksandra Cichocka, Valerio Capraro, Hallgeir Sjøstad, John B. Nezlek, Tomislav Pavlović, Mark Alfano, Michele J. Gelfand, Flávio Azevedo, Michèle D. Birtel, and Aleksandra Cislak, "National Identity Predicts Public Health Support During a Global Pandemic," *Nature Communications* 13, no. 1 (2022): 1–14.

16 Lenka Hrbková and Aleš Kudrnáč, "Fear, Trust, and Compliance with COVID-19 Measures: A Study of the Mediating Effect of Trust in Government on the Relationship Between Fear and Compliance," *Journal of Public Policy* 44, no. 3 (2024): 527–545.

17 Becher et al., "Ideology and Compliance"; Nicholas P. Brosowsky, Wijnand Van Tilburg, Abigail A. Scholer, Jennifer Boylan, Paul Seli, and James Danckert, "Boredom Proneness, Political

left–right self-placement scale, which flattens the complexity of ideological worldviews. It also overlooks the content of those beliefs. Knowing whether someone identifies as “left” or “right” reveals little about whether they trust the state, view the nation as sacred, or reject elite authority. These factors are far more likely to shape attitudes toward government-imposed restrictions. We address that gap by turning to nationalism and populism to explain people’s views about political authority, and the legitimacy of state intervention in times of crisis. We argue that these orientations structure how individuals interpret the crisis, what kinds of restrictions they deem acceptable, and whether they comply with emergency rules. Nationalists, who prioritize collective solidarity and national protection, are more likely to accept restrictions when framed as serving the national good. Populists, who view elites as untrustworthy and government power as suspect, are more likely to resist and defy those same measures.

Consent by Ideology: Who Accepts Emergency Rule?

In this section, we look at public attitudes towards various emergency powers and restrictions on civil liberties. The emergency powers taken by governments largely fell into one of four categories. The first was bypassing parliament and ruling by decree, which allowed for swift legislative action but eliminated important mechanisms of accountability and oversight. The second was media censorship, a measure aimed at curbing the spread of misinformation but one that raised concerns about the suppression of free speech and government critiques. The third category was tracking people’s movements, which facilitated rapid identification of pandemic hotspots but at the cost of undermining personal privacy rights. Finally, the fourth category was restricting people’s movements, a measure that helped to limit the spread of the virus but posed significant challenges to individual freedom and autonomy.

In both our 2020 and 2021 survey waves, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with giving their government powers in each of the four categories, and the aggregate results are shown in table 4.1. What is

Orientation and Adherence to Social-Distancing in the Pandemic,” *Motivation and Emotion* 45, no. 5 (2021): 631–640; Wolfgang Stroebe, Michelle R. van Dellen, Georgios Abakoumkin, Edward P. Lemay Jr., William M. Schiavone, Marina Agostini, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Björn Gützow, Jonas Kreienkamp, Anne-Marie Reitsema, and Jamilah Hanum Abdul Khaiyom, “Politicization of COVID-19 Health-Protective Behaviors in the United States: Longitudinal and Cross-National Evidence,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 10 (2021): e0256740.

Table 4.1. Support for emergency powers and civil liberty restrictions

Emergency power	2020	2021
Legislating without parliamentary oversight	21.9%	15.9%
Censoring or taking down media and websites	13.4%	15.3%
Tracking movements via cell phones without judicial approval	16.1%	11.2%
Restricting citizens’ freedom of movement	45.2%	30.7%

immediately noticeable is the low level of support for all types of emergency powers, apart from restricting people’s movement. While almost half of the respondents in 2020 could agree with restricting people’s freedom of movement, the other emergency powers were opposed by more than 80% of respondents. What is more, the support for emergency powers generally declined in 2021. Only the support for media censorship slightly increased, presumably in response to the rise in misinformation, but even here the overwhelming majority was opposed to it. In sum, emergency powers had little support throughout Southeast Europe for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, with people being extremely wary of granting governments the ability to put liberal democracy on hold.

To assess how support for emergency powers was structured by ideology, and how this structure evolved over time, we constructed a binary variable that captured whether respondents supported at least one of four emergency powers—rule by decree, censorship, movement tracking, or movement restrictions. The outcome distinguishes between those who rejected all deviations from normal democratic procedures and those willing to accept at least some encroachment during moments of national crisis. The multivariate analyses—reported in table A4.2 in the appendix and in which we control for our usual list of confounders such as gender, age, income, education, or experiences of the pandemic—confirm the central role of ideological beliefs. Figure 4.1 visualizes the predicted probabilities from these models, showing how support for at least one emergency measure evolved between 2020 and 2021 across low, moderate, and high levels of nationalism and populism.

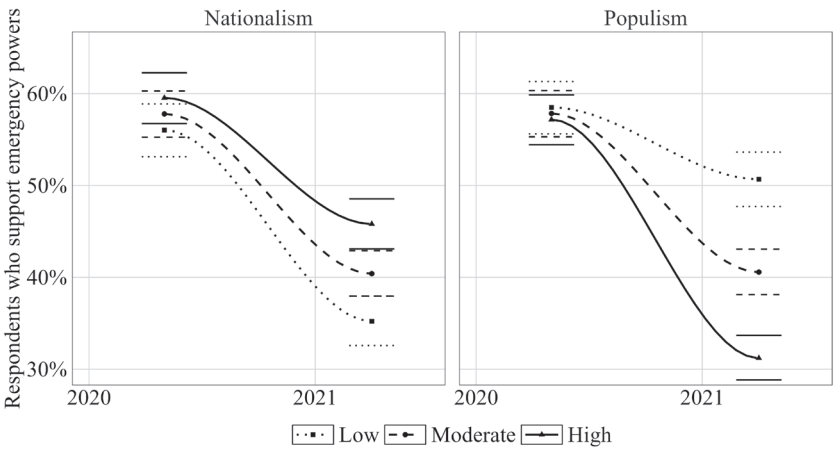
In 2020, differences in support for emergency powers by ideological orientation were limited. Among respondents with low levels of nationalist beliefs, 56% supported at least one emergency measure. Among those with strong nationalist beliefs, this figure was 60%—a small but visible gap. By 2021, the situation had changed. Support among low nationalists dropped sharply to 35%, while support among strong nationalists declined more modestly to 46%. The ideological gradient had widened. The drop in support was more pronounced among those with weaker nationalist

views—21 percentage points—compared to a smaller 14-point decline among strong nationalists. This suggests that nationalists retained a greater willingness to endorse government measures involving the suspension of civil liberties, whereas those with weaker nationalist orientations became increasingly reluctant as the crisis endured.

Figure 4.1 also shows that the trajectory moved in the opposite direction among populists. In 2020, support for emergency powers was nearly identical among respondents across the populism spectrum. But by 2021, a clear divergence had emerged. Support among low-populism respondents declined only modestly, from 59% to 51%. Among strong populists, however, support dropped sharply, from 57% to just 31%. A 20-point gap opened up where there had previously been near parity. As with nationalism, support declined overall, but the pace and direction of change were ideologically structured. The populist response was driven by growing suspicion. That suspicion did not manifest immediately. In the early stages of the pandemic, populists appeared as willing as others to accept emergency powers. But as these measures persisted beyond the initial crisis, their meaning changed. For populist respondents, emergency rule came to signify not efficiency but entrenchment or a creeping consolidation of elite power. Populism, with its core distinction between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite, reinterpreted state actions not as neutral crisis management, but as the unchecked assertion of authority without democratic accountability. Once the immediacy of the threat faded, emergency rule was no longer seen as temporary or necessary. Instead, it was perceived as illegitimate power held too long.

Taken together, these findings show that the willingness to support emergency powers was not equally elastic across ideological groups. Nationalists were more likely to maintain support for exceptional state powers over time, reflecting a worldview in which the nation is the ultimate source of political legitimacy. From this perspective, emergency measures are not inherently undemocratic if they are framed as defending national cohesion, security, or survival. Populists, by contrast, became increasingly resistant to these same measures as the crisis endured. Their initial acquiescence gave way to deepening suspicion, consistent with a belief system that views prolonged elite authority—especially when exercised without popular oversight—as illegitimate. While nationalism tends to expand the boundaries of what counts as acceptable state intervention in a crisis, populism constricts it. These diverging trajectories underscore how ideology does not just filter public opinion but shapes fundamentally different interpretations of when—and by whom—power may be exercised in exceptional times.

Figure 4.1. Support for emergency powers and civil liberty restrictions, by ideology, adjusting for confounders



In figure 4.2, we examine how removing the various explanatory variables and confounders from the model would impact its performance. We see that in 2020, removing populism from the model has no impact on its explanatory power. By 2021, however, the drop in pseudo R^2 is almost 2.5 points—the largest for any predictor. Populism becomes the most powerful explanatory variable in the model, outstripping not only nationalism but also government support and personal COVID-19 experience. The change between the two years underscores the conditional activation of populist beliefs. They are not always politically engaged in the same way. In the early pandemic phase, populist suspicion was latent. As the crisis became routinized, the lens of elite manipulation increasingly shaped how populists viewed emergency powers.

Nationalism also gained explanatory weight between 2020 and 2021. Removing nationalism from the model reduces fit by 1.7 percentage points in 2021, compared to a negligible amount a year earlier. The growing role of nationalism does not stem from a change in position—strong nationalists were consistently more supportive of emergency powers—but from a sharpening of contrast as support among non-nationalists declined more significantly. The increasing importance of nationalism as a predictor is a result of ideological consolidation, not conversion. Nationalists only slightly decreased their support for emergency powers; others moved to a far greater degree. Respondents with more socialist attitudes toward the role of government in the economy—favoring redistribution, public ownership,

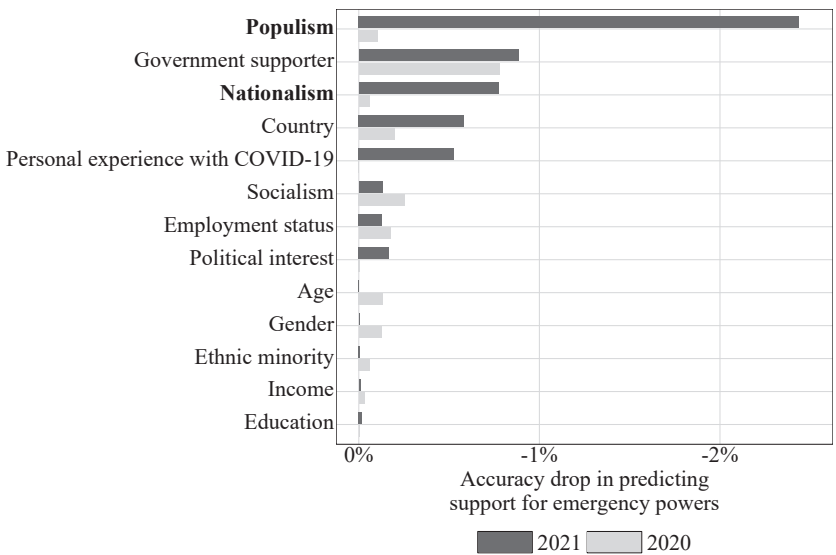
and welfare provision—are also less likely to support emergency powers. A plausible explanation is that for these individuals, state legitimacy derives not from coercion or exceptional authority, but from its capacity to provide care and material protection. In this view, a government's role during crisis should center on supporting the vulnerable, not on expanding surveillance or restricting civil liberties.

The effect of government support is the most important variable in 2020 and second-most-important in 2021. This is expected. Those aligned with the ruling party—often nationalist in orientation—were more likely to support measures implemented by that government. But this did not account for the full relationship between nationalism and support for emergency powers. The model controls for government support. Nationalism retains its effect even after removing partisan alignment as a confounding factor. The nationalist preference for exceptional powers is thus not reducible to party loyalty. Personal exposure to COVID-19 also has a measurable effect. Respondents who were infected or lost someone close to them showed greater support for emergency measures. But the relative importance of this variable was small. Excluding it results in a modest decline in model fit. This suggests that individual experience of the health threat is not the dominant driver of support. The willingness to endorse emergency powers is structured primarily by political worldview, not epidemiological proximity.

There also seem to be non-trivial differences among countries. Specifically, in 2020 about 54% of respondents in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia favored the use of emergency powers, compared to 48% in Croatia. In 2021, support had declined in all countries, but whereas it only dropped by nine percentage points in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, support fell by 14 percentage points in Croatia. Other demographic characteristics—gender, age, income, education—have negligible explanatory power. Their removal from the model does not meaningfully reduce its accuracy.

The ideological asymmetry between nationalism and populism challenges efforts to group these orientations into a single category of anti-liberalism. While both are associated with skepticism toward liberal democracy, their implications for state authority diverge. Nationalists support strong government action in times of crisis. Populists reject it when it becomes decoupled from popular accountability. By 2021, support for emergency powers was not merely a reaction to pandemic fatigue or performance evaluations. It was an expression of political belief. Populists, who once matched others in their acceptance of emergency authority, withdrew their support entirely. Nationalists held firm. Non-ideological explanations accounted for little. The acceptance or rejection of exceptional government action cannot be

Figure 4.2. Importance of factors in explaining the willingness to grant emergency powers to governments



explained by who suffered most or who you voted for—it turns on what people think power is for, and who should wield it.

Democracy on Pause: Emergency Rule in Fragile Systems

As detailed in chapter 2, Southeast European countries entered the pandemic with widely divergent levels of democratic resilience. Figure 2.9 of that chapter, which charts trends using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, highlights the precarious institutional backdrop against which emergency rule unfolded.¹⁸ Slovenia and Croatia had relatively robust democratic frameworks, with Slovenia maintaining consistently high scores and Croatia staying above the regional average despite ongoing concerns about media freedom and judicial independence. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina and

18 Jacques Rupnik, “Surging Illiberalism in the East,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (2016): 77–87; Florian Bieber, “Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans,” *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 337–354; Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Palgrave Pivot, 2019); Valery Perry and Soeren Keil, “The Business of State Capture in the Western Balkans: An Introduction,” *Southeastern Europe* 42, no. 1 (2018): 1–14.

Serbia were already experiencing stagnation or decline in key democratic indicators, hampered by ethno-political gridlock in the former and executive overreach in the latter.

This variation in pre-existing democratic strength is essential for understanding how emergency powers were received, both by political actors and by the public. In more consolidated democracies, exceptional measures may be interpreted as temporary crisis management tools, enacted within the bounds of institutional trust. In more fragile systems, however, the same measures can appear as extensions of ongoing democratic erosion. Where institutions were already weak, and executive dominance already pronounced, emergency powers were more likely to be viewed as a continuation of authoritarian tendencies. The legitimacy of such powers was therefore not judged solely by their content, but by the broader context in which they were introduced.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, democratic backsliding in Southeast Europe, at least initially, intensified as governments exploited the crisis to consolidate power and weaken democratic institutions. While the pandemic did not create authoritarianism, it did provide fertile ground for the erosion of democratic norms across the region.¹⁹ Governments enacted emergency measures to manage the health crisis, which often expanded executive powers, restricted civil liberties, and sidelined the legislative processes. As the previous chapter outlined in detail, political power holders capitalized on the crisis by framing the pandemic as a “war,” necessitating strong, centralized leadership, often at the expense of democratic debate and oversight. This framing allowed leaders to justify emergency measures that concentrated power in the executive branch. For instance, in North Macedonia, the dissolution of Parliament before the pandemic allowed the executive to manage the crisis largely unchecked.²⁰ Montenegro also exhibited clear signs of executive overreach. The ruling party, Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), already known for its authoritarian tendencies, leveraged the pandemic to further entrench its power. Emergency measures curtailed political opposition and restricted media freedoms, limiting civil society’s ability to contest government policies.²¹ In Serbia, the pan-

19 Florian Bieber, “The Authoritarian Bug,” *Politički život* 18 (2020): 10–17.

20 Nenad Markovikj, “State of Democracy in Times of Pandemic—North Macedonia,” *Politički život* 18 (2020): 61–69.

21 Jovana Marović, “Covid-19 u Crnoj Gori—novi atak vlasti na krhku demokratiju,” *Politički život* 18 (2020): 51–59; Andi Hoxhaj and Fabian Zhilla, “The Impact of Covid-19 Measures on the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans and the Increase of Authoritarianism,” *European Journal of Law Reform* 23, no. 3 (2021): 380–397.

demic significantly worsened democratic backsliding. Its government, under President Aleksandar Vučić, used the pandemic to curtail human rights and centralize power further. The emergency measures implemented in Serbia were not only disproportionate but also lacked transparency and accountability. The Serbian government imposed harsh lockdowns and restrictions on freedom of movement, assembly, and speech, with little parliamentary oversight.²² In Croatia, while avoiding some of the extreme measures seen in other countries, the pandemic did expose vulnerabilities in its democracy, particularly concerning the reduced role of Parliament during the crisis.²³

Restrictions on media freedom became a common tool for governments aiming to control the pandemic narrative. In Serbia, the government's emergency measures included strict controls over the media, further curbing the space for dissent. The government introduced severe penalties for "spreading misinformation," which effectively silenced critical media and public debate.²⁴ This trend was particularly evident in Slovenia, where Prime Minister Janez Janša's government used the pandemic to limit media freedoms. Janša, known for his populist rhetoric, attacked journalists and media outlets critical of his government.²⁵

In sum, across the region, the pandemic-induced measures led to a substantial contraction of civic space, with governments imposing strict curfews, restricting media freedoms, and increasing surveillance. With a recent past of autocratic rule, and a gradual retreat of democratic norms from the progress made mostly in the early 2000s, citizens in the region had every reason to be concerned with whether these emergency measures would be temporary, or whether the COVID-19 pandemic would be used as a Trojan horse for would-be autocrats to permanently undermine democracy.

We investigated public expectations about the permanence of emergency powers in both our 2020 and 2021 survey waves. In each year, respondents were asked whether they believed that their government would relinquish all its emergency powers once the crisis was over, or whether it would continue to exercise at least some of them permanently. When we look at how

22 Slaviša Orlović, "Pad demokratije i redukcija ljudskih prava i sloboda u vreme pandemije: slučaj Srbija," *Politički život* 18 (2020): 81–99; Nikolaos Tzifakis, "The Western Balkans During the Pandemic: Democracy and Rule of Law in Quarantine?," *European View* 19, no. 2 (2020): 197–205.

23 Goran Čular, "Ustavni i politički aspekti borbe protiv epidemije u Hrvatskoj," *Politički život* 18 (2020): 34–40.

24 Orlović, "Pad demokratije."

25 Danica Fink-Hafner, "The Struggle over Authoritarian Pressures in Slovenia in the Context of the COVID-19 Epidemic," *Politički život* 18 (2020): 20–32.

this belief evolved over time, we observe remarkable stability. In both the first and second year of the pandemic, approximately 65% of respondents expected that their government would retain some emergency powers after the pandemic ended. This skepticism about a full return to pre-pandemic democratic procedures was widespread and consistent across countries, showing little variation between 2020 and 2021.

What did change between 2020 and 2021 was the role of ideology in shaping these beliefs. To examine this, we estimated multivariate models predicting whether respondents believed their governments would retain emergency powers after the crisis, controlling for alternative explanations such as gender, age, education, and government support. The results of these models are reported in the appendix table A4.3. Figure 4.3 visualizes the predicted probabilities from these models, showing how nationalist and populist orientations shaped expectations about the permanence of emergency powers. In 2020, nationalism was somewhat related to the belief in permanent emergency powers, with higher levels of nationalism coinciding with slightly lower likelihood of believing that governments will hold on to their emergency powers. In 2021, strong nationalists had seemingly become more pessimistic about governments' willingness to relinquish their COVID-19 powers. In the first year of COVID-19, populist beliefs were inconsequential to the belief in permanent emergency powers. However, by 2021, the role of populism had massively increased. The difference between those with low and those with strong populist beliefs was 16 percentage points, with almost 75% among the former believing governments will try to keep the COVID-19 state of emergency permanent. This coincides with an increasing tendency of populist forces elsewhere in attacking lockdown measures, portraying them as unnecessary and a way to permanently increase control over the population.²⁶ This is rooted in populism's inherent skepticism of elite-driven governance. During the pandemic, this skepticism found a clear target in the prominent role of unelected experts, particularly infectious disease epidemiologists, in shaping national responses. Many of the most consequential policies, from lockdowns to curfews and vaccine mandates, were designed or justified on the basis of expert advice rather than democratic deliberation. While such interventions were often grounded in public health necessity, they were also perceived by populist audiences as technocratic impositions that bypassed popular input. As the crisis evolved, this perception reinforced

26 Rogers Brubaker, "Paradoxes of Populism During the Pandemic," *Thesis Eleven* 164, no. 1 (2021): 73–87.

the populist narrative that emergency powers were not temporary tools, but instruments of elite entrenchment.

The dominance of populism in shaping the belief in permanent emergency powers is further illustrated in figure 4.4. While the overall explanatory capabilities of the model remain limited (explaining two percentage points of permanent emergency power beliefs in 2020 and five percentage points in 2021), it is clear that populism is one of the key factors in informing peoples' beliefs, with almost twice the explanatory power of the second most important variable, support for the current government. Without populism, it is almost impossible to predict and understand people's expectations that emergency powers will be made permanent. Besides nationalism and populism, socialist attitudes are also significantly associated with the belief that governments will retain emergency powers after the crisis. This may reflect a view of government shaped by long-standing disappointment with post-socialist reforms. Successive governments have pursued neoliberal policies while failing to deliver robust social protections. From this perspective, retaining emergency powers is not seen as an exceptional measure, but as a continuation of how power is typically exercised. It is another way for governments to act unilaterally and advance agendas that do not serve the broader public interest, much like the reforms of the past. Overall, a picture emerges where nationalism and populism guide people to adopt different attitudes towards the temporary powers assumed by government in the region.

As demonstrated earlier, nationalists were more supportive of emergency powers from the outset and largely remained so throughout the pandemic. Their expectations about whether governments would retain these powers also differed only modestly from those of non-nationalists. This relative convergence suggests that nationalists may have been somewhat less concerned about the long-term use of such powers than other groups. While we cannot directly assess whether they approved of this possibility, the pattern is consistent with a worldview in which strong state authority is more readily accepted, especially when seen as advancing national cohesion or security. Populist views initially had little bearing on expectations about the permanence of emergency powers, but by 2021, respondents with strong populist beliefs were significantly more likely to anticipate that such measures would become permanent. This shift reflects a growing populist suspicion over time, as temporary emergency powers began to appear less like crisis responses and more like entrenched authority. For all its flaws and adverse impact on the politics of Southeast Europe, it appears that populism inoculated its believers with the necessary and justified suspicion of executive overreach under the guise of public health concerns.

Figure 4.3. Expectations about permanent emergency powers and ideology, adjusting for confounders

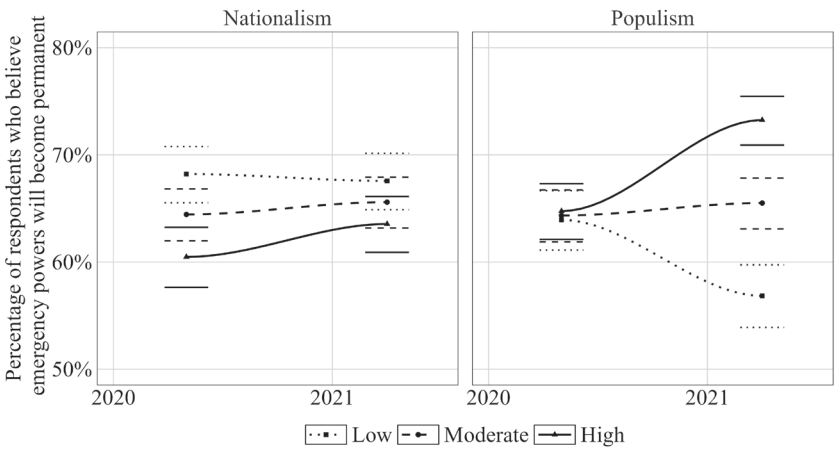
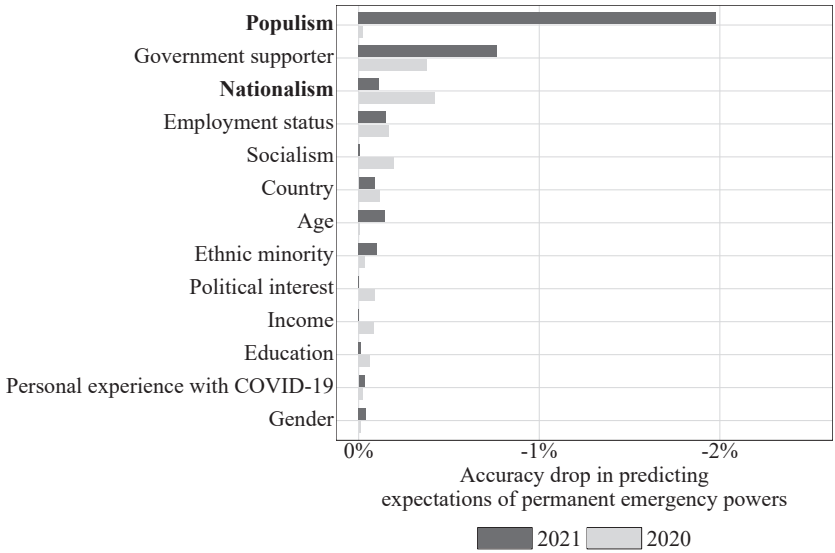


Figure 4.4. Importance of factors in explaining expectations of permanent emergency powers



Who Supports, Who Complies? Ideology and Lockdown Behavior

We now shift from general attitudes about executive authority to the more concrete domain of pandemic containment. This section examines what people thought governments should do—through support for specific lockdown rules—and what they themselves did—through self-reported compliance. Whereas the previous section examined general attitudes toward emergency powers, the analysis now shifts to more concrete interventions and personal behaviors. According to table 4.2, support for lockdown rules varied depending on the type of measure. The most broadly supported restrictions included universal mask mandates (56%) and barring visitors from care homes (57%). Nearly half of respondents also endorsed requiring those aged 70 and older or otherwise at-risk to remain at home. At the other end of the spectrum, rules that curtailed everyday mobility and economic activity—such as requiring non-essential workers to stay home (28%) or closing most shops (30%)—received far less support. The variation in support was thus not random. The least popular interventions were those that directly affected large parts of the population and interfered with work, income, or family routines. In other words, support tracked with the extent to which a rule disrupted ordinary life. The legitimacy of lockdown rules declined as their social footprint expanded. The narrow support base for measures that curtailed income or autonomy signals an implicit hierarchy: restrictions perceived as protective of others were tolerated more than those that limited one's own choices or livelihood.

Table 4.3 summarizes self-reported rule-breaking across four categories: attending large gatherings, not wearing masks, violating curfew, and leaving home despite having COVID-19 symptoms. Across these dimensions, reported non-compliance was substantial. About 42% admitted to not wearing a mask where required. Over a third said they had attended or hosted gatherings with more people than allowed. Roughly one-third also reported violating curfews, and one-third went to work or school despite showing symptoms. These numbers highlight that behavioral adherence did not always follow from formal support. While mask mandates were among the most widely supported measures, a substantial minority still reported breaking them. More generally, high levels of rule endorsement did not consistently translate into uniform compliance. The data suggest that public health adherence in the region cannot be fully explained by agreement with specific rules. Endorsement and enactment, while related, are analytically distinct.

As the figures on Google mobility trends in the previous chapter already hinted, there was significant cross-national variation in compliance.

Table 4.2. Support for lockdown measures

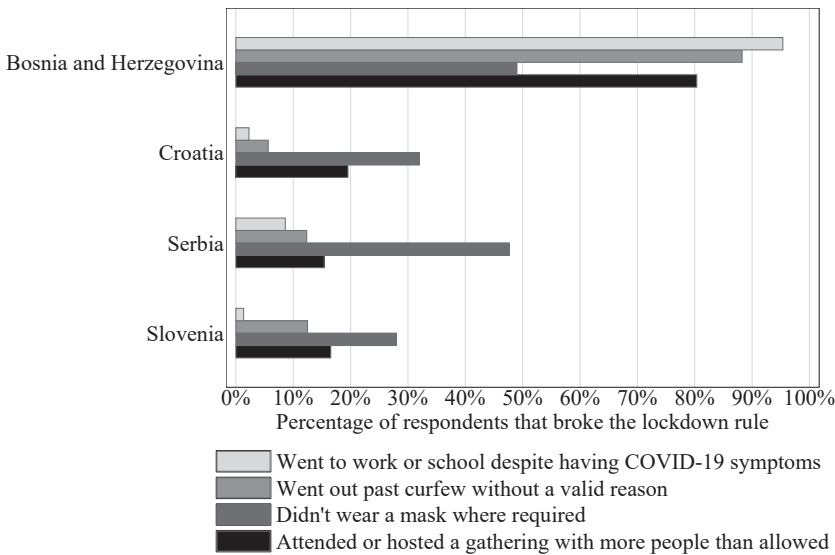
	Support	Neutral	Oppose
Close schools/daycares	35.6%	23.1%	41.4%
Close gyms	43.7%	22.3%	34.0%
Close restaurants/bars	38.4%	20.6%	41.0%
Close shops, except essentials	29.9%	19.1%	51.0%
No visitors in care homes	56.6%	20.3%	23.1%
70+ or at-risk stay home	49.0%	21.3%	29.7%
Non-essential workers stay home	28.4%	18.9%	52.7%
Universal mask-wearing	56.1%	18.6%	25.4%

Table 4.3. Compliance with lockdown measures

	Percentage
Attended or hosted a gathering with more people than allowed	36.2%
Did not wear a mask where required	42.3%
Went out past curfew without a valid reason	35.8%
Went to work or school despite having COVID-19 symptoms	33.0%

Figure 4.5 also shows that Bosnia and Herzegovina stands out as an extreme case of disobedience. Nearly half the population reported failing to wear masks, 80% admitted to violating gathering limits, and a staggering 95% went out despite having COVID-19 symptoms. In the other three countries, this is the least violated lockdown rule, with fewer than 10% of respondent admitting to it. This pattern aligns with the broader breakdown in political trust and institutional legitimacy discussed in earlier chapters. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the state's capacity to command obedience appears systematically eroded, even when rules are broadly known and codified. By contrast, countries like Slovenia and Croatia show lower non-compliance on most indicators, though the gap is one of degree rather than kind. The willingness of respondents to report violations with little hesitation also suggests that social desirability bias is limited. People were comfortable acknowledging that they broke lockdown rules. This has two implications. First, the data on compliance are likely reliable. Second, the low level of concern for enforcement—whether by the state or community—further underlines the limits of rule effectiveness in the region. A large share of respondents neither feared sanction nor sought to present themselves as more law-abiding than they were.

Figure 4.5. Compliance with lockdown rules, by country



To understand how ideological orientations shaped public responses, we examined both support for lockdown rules and compliance with those rules across levels of nationalism and populism using multivariate analyses. We constructed a single measure of lockdown support by counting, for each respondent, the number of restrictive measures they endorsed. Respondents were then divided into two groups: those who supported at least four of the eight proposed rules, and those who did not. This threshold captures a meaningful distinction between respondents broadly supportive of a stricter lockdown, and those more selectively or minimally supportive. Compliance was measured as a binary indicator reflecting whether a respondent violated at least one of four key rules: mask use, curfew adherence, social gathering limits, or going out while experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. The models are reported in tables A4.4 and A4.5 in the appendix, and we examine predicted probabilities of both support for and compliance with lockdown measures across levels of nationalism and populism in figures 4.6 and 4-7, and figures 4.8 and 4.9, respectively.

Support for stricter lockdown rules increases steadily with nationalism. Among respondents with low nationalist views, the predicted probability of supporting stricter measures is around 33%. Among strong nationalists, support rises to 55%. This is a 22-point difference across the ideological spectrum. The linear trend is clear, with no sign of attenuation at the

extremes. For nationalists, the idea of far-reaching state intervention is not inherently problematic, especially when presented as a measure to protect the collective. This is consistent with the earlier finding that nationalists were more likely to support emergency powers. The extension of that logic to specific interventions confirms that the preference for a strong, directive state is not confined to abstract principles. It extends to support for restrictive, targeted rules.

The pattern for populism is the inverse. Among low-populism respondents, support for lockdown measures is around 70%. Among strong populists, it drops to 34%. The result is a 36-point swing—larger than the nationalism gradient. The logic is ideological, not situational. Populists tend to see restrictions as illegitimate because they are imposed by elites who do not share the experiences or interests of ordinary people. Public health measures, even when scientifically justified, are viewed as coercive if they come from a distrusted source. For populists, rules are suspect not because of their content, but because of who made them.

Multivariate results also confirm the central role of ideology in shaping support for lockdown rules. Populism emerges as one of the strongest predictors, second only to country effects. Removing it from the model reduces explanatory power by more than half a percentage point. Nationalism also ranks among the top five variables, though its contribution is more modest. Government support and personal experience with COVID-19 follow closely behind. By contrast, socio-economic and demographic factors—including education, income, gender, and age—exert minimal influence. Support for stricter lockdowns was driven by ideology, not personal vulnerability or material position. At the country level, support was highest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, where around 58% of respondents favored stricter measures. The figure for Bosnia is particularly striking given the widespread disregard for lockdown rules documented earlier. In Croatia, support stood at 44%, and it was lowest in Slovenia, where just 37% of respondents favored a tougher lockdown.

When we turn to compliance, the role of nationalism and populism diverges further. As shown in figure 4.8, nationalism had little to no effect on rule-breaking. The predicted rate of non-compliance remained steady at around 40%, regardless of nationalist intensity. There is no visible slope. Nationalists endorsed strict rules but did not behave differently from non-nationalists. Populism, by contrast, exhibited a sharp increase in non-compliance. Among respondents with low populist views, the predicted rate of breaking lockdown rules was about 25%. Among strong populists, it approached 48%. The link between populist ideology and behavioral

Figure 4.6. Support for a stricter lockdown and ideology, adjusting for confounders

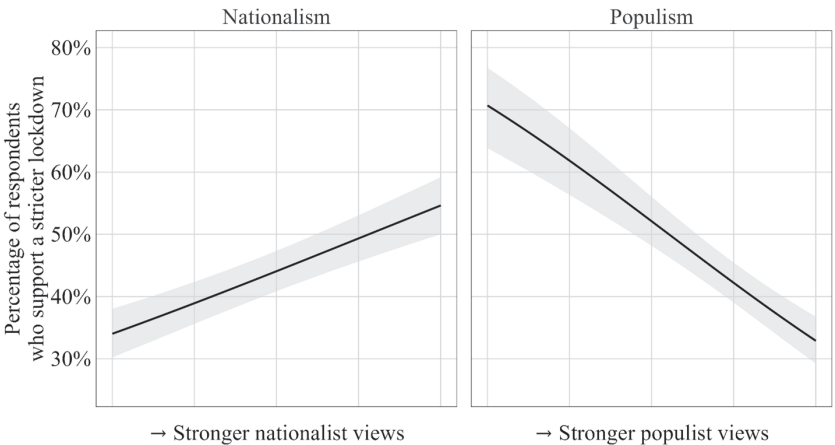
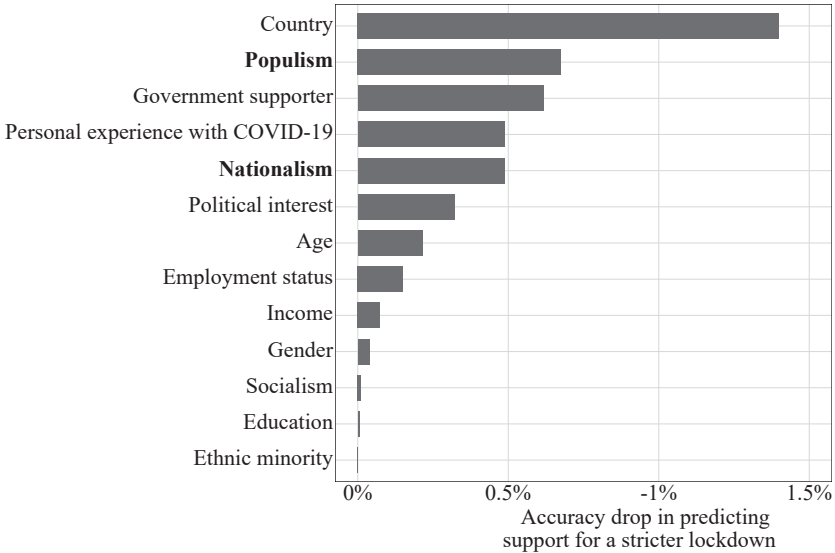


Figure 4.7. Importance of factors in explaining the support for a stricter lockdown



defiance was direct and substantial. The disconnectedness in the nationalist case deserves attention. Nationalists supported more restrictive rules, but they did not appear more likely to follow them. This is not a case of latent compliance. The same individuals who expressed strong support for state intervention were no more likely to wear masks, avoid gatherings, or stay

home when symptomatic than their non-nationalist counterparts. One possible explanation is performativity. The endorsement of strong measures may serve a symbolic function—signaling strength, order, or patriotism—without implying personal responsibility to adhere. The emphasis is on state authority, not civic discipline.

Figure 4.9 confirms the limited role of nationalism in explaining compliance. When nationalism is removed from the model, the reduction in predictive accuracy is minimal. By contrast, populism emerges as one of the strongest predictors of rule-breaking, second only to country fixed effects. Removing populism from the model reduces pseudo R^2 by almost 0.3 percentage points. Government support and personal COVID-19 experience contribute little to predicting compliance. Country is by far the most important variable, with almost every respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina admitting to having at least broken one lockdown rule, confirming the bivariate findings shown in figure 4.5. By separating support from compliance, the data reveal the distinct motivational logics at play. Nationalism structures opinion. Populism structures action. Nationalists were more willing to endorse strong measures, but this endorsement did not translate into higher adherence. Populists were less willing to support restrictions and more likely to break them.

Taken together, these findings complicate common claims about ideological anti-liberalism. While both nationalism and populism are often characterized as illiberal or authoritarian, they respond differently to the extension of state power. Nationalism permits state power when framed as protection of the group. Populism resists it when it comes from untrusted elites. These positions are not functionally equivalent. They produce different outcomes in both stated preferences and actual behavior. Understanding these distinctions is central to explaining why public health measures succeed or fail.

Conclusion

The pandemic did not introduce ideological divides in Southeast Europe—it exposed and intensified them. What began as a public health emergency quickly became a referendum on the legitimacy of government authority, the boundaries of civic duty, and the meaning of democratic accountability under strain. In a region where democratic institutions remain fragile and political trust uneven, public responses to COVID-19 restrictions reveal more than transient reactions to crisis. They illuminate the political logics that

Figure 4.8. Lockdown compliance and ideology, adjusting for confounders

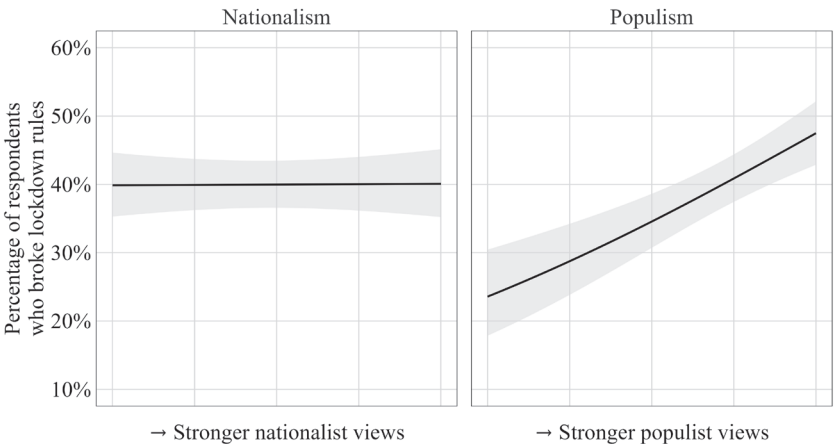
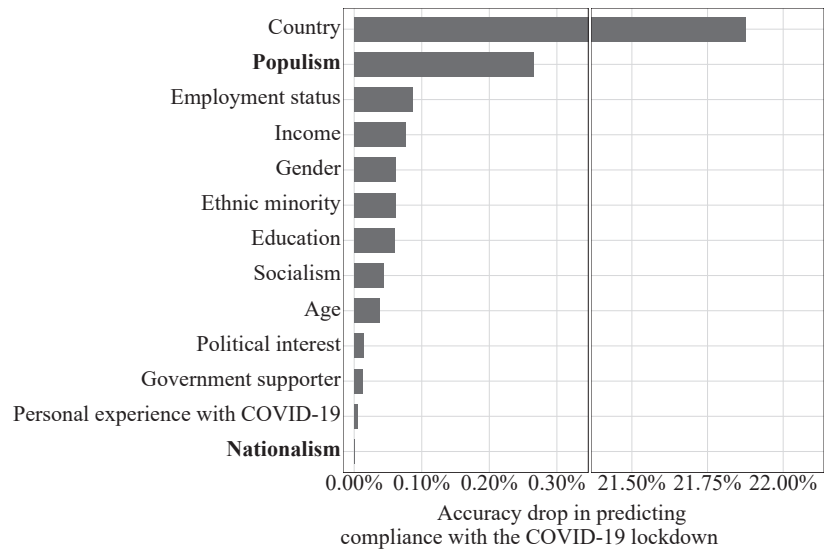


Figure 4.9. Importance of factors in explaining lockdown compliance



structure support for and resistance to the exercise of state power. Support for emergency measures was not distributed randomly. It followed familiar ideological lines. Nationalists backed strong interventions, not despite their intrusiveness but because they reinforced a collective project. Yet, despite consistently supporting stronger restrictions, nationalists were not more

likely to follow the rules themselves. The commitment was ideological, not behavioral. Populists resisted, not on principle, but because they questioned the motives of those in charge. Populists were both less supportive and more likely to break the rules. Here, skepticism toward elite authority translated directly into action. This divergence matters. Nationalism can serve as a legitimizing force for government action in times of crisis, especially when framed in terms of national protection. But its symbolic alignment with strength and unity does not guarantee civic responsibility. Populism, meanwhile, often destabilizes consensus but also serves a diagnostic function. The populist instinct to question motives, procedures, and the permanence of emergency measures played a role in articulating risks that others ignored. The concern was not only about the content of rules but about who imposed them, how, and for how long.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not merely a temporary disruption to democratic life. It served as a stark reminder that democratic institutions and freedoms are neither self-sustaining nor immutable. They require continual reaffirmation through transparent governance, inclusive dialogue, and vigilant protection against authoritarian incursions. Southeast Europe's experience suggests that ideological fragmentation—particularly the populist and nationalist cleavages—presents both risks and opportunities for democratic resilience. Indeed, neither ideology maps neatly onto democratic strength or weakness. Nationalism can reinforce a sense of shared purpose, but it also normalizes exceptionalism. Populism disrupts compliance and coordination, but it also resists authoritarian drift. Both shape public reactions in ways that are politically consequential.

What the pandemic revealed, above all, is that compliance cannot be legislated by decree, and legitimacy cannot be summoned by emergency. Where governments were trusted, citizens cooperated. Where they were not, ideology filled the gap. The logic of nationalism pulled in one direction: sacrifice for the nation, even at the cost of individual liberty. The logic of populism pulled in another: suspicion of control, even when that control might serve the public good. Democratic institutions do not fail only when they are dismantled. They also fail when they depend too heavily on compliance without legitimacy, or when they exploit unity to sidestep constraint. The pandemic offered a test—not only of governments, but of publics. What emerged is not a simple story of defiance or obedience, but of ideological structures shaping who complies, who resists, and why. In Southeast Europe, where democracy remains contested, that distinction is not academic. It is political, and it is ongoing.

5. Going Viral: Conspiracy Theories and Their Believers

Abstract: Conspiracy theories spread rapidly alongside the COVID-19 virus, shaping how large segments of the public interpreted the pandemic and responded to public health measures. Drawing on three survey waves conducted between 2020 and 2023, this chapter examines the social and political foundations of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs in Southeast Europe. It shows that such beliefs were not primarily driven by socioeconomic hardship, education, or direct exposure to the virus, but by nationalist and populist worldviews characterized by distrust, external threat perceptions, and anti-elite sentiment. Conspiracy beliefs intensified over time and increasingly structured social networks, producing ideological echo chambers that reinforced misinformation. The findings highlight conspiracy thinking as a deeply political phenomenon with enduring consequences for social cohesion and democratic governance.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, populism, nationalism, COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation, social polarization

As hospitals overflowed and governments scrambled to contain the rapid spread of COVID-19, another, less visible crisis was already taking shape. On the streets of cities in virtually every country of the Western world, thousands gathered—not in support of overwhelmed healthcare workers, but to protest against 5G towers, vaccine mandates, and shadowy global elites supposedly behind the “plandemic.” Maskless crowds stormed government buildings from Berlin, Germany to Lansing, Michigan, carrying placards that claimed the coronavirus was either a hoax or a conspiracy by globalist billionaires, the vaccination lobby, or the Chinese Communist Party. As we showed in chapter 3, the tenor of such protests in Southeast

Glaudić, Josip, and Christophe Lesschaeve. *Contagions: Nationalism, Populism, and the Pandemic at Europe's Edge*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press/Central European University Press, 2026.

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Europe was no less incendiary or fanatical. At a time when science and solidarity were most needed, these demonstrations revealed a troubling parallel pandemic—one not of viruses, but of narratives fueled by fear, distrust, and misinformation.

Obviously, this phenomenon was not entirely new. Throughout history, pandemics have been fertile grounds for suspicion and scapegoating. The echoes of the past were unmistakable. During the Black Death in the fourteenth century, as plague swept mercilessly through Europe, fear bred deadly conspiracy theories. Marginalized groups were accused of poisoning wells and deliberately spreading disease. These baseless accusations led to massacres across Europe, compounding human suffering with man-made violence. The underlying dynamic was clear: in times of existential threat, when the invisible nature of disease fuels uncertainty, societies often turn to visible—if unfounded—explanations.

Conspiracy theories satisfy our desire for certainty and understanding of the world. Despite being misguided, they can reduce confusion and help believers make sense of seemingly random events. Instead of complex and tentative explanations about human activities causing the virus to adapt to human hosts, COVID-19 conspiracy theories offered simple, comprehensible narratives. Beyond offering clear explanations, conspiracy theories can also give people a sense of control over overwhelming events like a pandemic. As governments worldwide imposed lockdowns, closing shops, bars, restaurants, and schools, individuals lost control over their lives. Conspiracy theories suggested ways to regain that control.

COVID-19, though unfolding in an era of unprecedented scientific advancement and global connectivity, proved that technological progress has not inoculated societies against the allure of conspiracy theories. The speed and reach of digital communication did not dispel irrational fears. Instead, new technologies amplified these fears. Algorithms designed to capture attention inadvertently fueled the spread of misinformation, creating echo chambers where alternative realities flourished. Platforms that once promised global connection became fertile ground for narratives that questioned the legitimacy of governments, the intentions of scientists, and even the very existence of the virus itself.

What makes the COVID-19 era particularly unsettling is not just the resurgence of conspiratorial thinking but the speed and scale at which these beliefs traveled. Within weeks of the virus's emergence, unfounded theories about its origins circulated globally, often outpacing scientific consensus. Unlike medieval Europe, where information spread slowly through rumor and word of mouth, today's conspiracy theories moved at

the speed of a click, infiltrating every corner of society, from online forums to political discourse.

This chapter explores the reasons behind conspiratorial beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic, situating them within the broader socio-political context. What made some individuals more susceptible to these narratives than others? Were their beliefs rooted in frustrations with their social status independently of the pandemic? Or were these beliefs determined by fears prompted by the economic consequences of COVID-19? Most crucially, how were these beliefs related to people's political views? Here we are particularly interested in exposing the connection between political ideologies and conspiratorial thinking. More specifically, this chapter looks at the extent to which people who subscribed to a nationalist or populist mindset were more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Both of these ideologies espouse a worldview characterized by distrust of perceived external threats and elites. Explanations in which the pandemic was the result of or used by (secretive) elites to foster their harmful agenda, may have then seemed more plausible because they fit the way nationalists or populists understand the world.

We answer these questions by analyzing the results of three survey waves administered to the countries of Southeast Europe. In each wave, we asked respondents whether they agreed with a series of conspiracy theories, most relevant and prevalent in the region. We list these conspiracy theories in table 5.1. While some of them remained the same in all three waves, changes between waves reflected the emergence of new conspiracy theories during the pandemic and the waning of others. While grounded in data from a region with its own distinct characteristics, we contend that the findings of this chapter hold global relevance, as the questions we address are significant across diverse geographic and social contexts. Our research design also distinguishes itself from comparable studies because the data we collected enabled us to uncover not only the individual factors that shape conspiracy beliefs but also how these beliefs affected social network connections.

As this chapter shows, people's inclination to endorse COVID-19 conspiracy theories was not primarily driven by factors such as lower educational attainment, reduced income levels, patterns of (social) media consumption, or perceptions of the pandemic's severe economic impact. It was driven by the ideological commitment to nationalism and populism. Additionally, our analysis of social network connections among survey participants highlights how conspiracy beliefs significantly shaped individuals' social networks. During the pandemic, both conspiracy believers and non-believers tended to

Table 5.1. COVID-19 conspiracy survey items

COVID-19 Conspiracy		2020	2021	2023
<i>Pharma hides cure</i>	There is already a cure/vaccine for COVID-19 but the pharmaceutical industry do not want to release it yet	33.2%		
<i>Chinese bioweapon</i>	COVID-19 is a bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government to wage war on America and the West	14.6%	24.3%	29.8%
<i>CIA bioweapon</i>	COVID-19 is a bioweapon engineered by the CIA to wage war on China	14.9%		
<i>Pandemic is a hoax</i>	COVID-19 is a hoax. There is no such thing as a global pandemic.	25.5%	20.6%	32.5%
<i>Vaccines alter DNA</i>	Some COVID-19 vaccines run the risk of rewriting a person’s DNA.		24.0%	34.7%
<i>Microchip implant plan</i>	COVID-19 vaccines are a cover for a plan to implant trackable microchips in people.		17.5%	25.7%
<i>Vaccines cause autism</i>	Vaccines can cause autism.		21.2%	31.9%
<i>Elites control virus</i>	COVID-19 virus has been deliberately spread by a secretive group of global elites in order to increase their control over the population.		33.5%	40.5%
<i>Exaggerated COVID deaths</i>	The number of COVID-19 deaths has been exaggerated or manipulated by governments and health organizations to create fear and control the population.			53.7%

cluster within like-minded social bubbles, even after accounting for various factors traditionally considered influential in determining social connections. Such a pattern underscores the divisive and corrosive impact of the pandemic on societal cohesion and signals the profound challenges we will face in addressing these divisions and fostering social reintegration in the post-pandemic world. This is particularly the case because, as this chapter shows, conspiracy beliefs increased dramatically during the pandemic, leading us to ask: what if the greatest threat during the pandemic was not the virus, but the stories we told about it?

Contemporary Advances in the Study of Conspiracy Beliefs

Over the past decade, research on the psychological and sociopolitical determinants of conspiracy beliefs has expanded significantly, yielding important insights into why individuals adopt conspiratorial worldviews

and the implications of such beliefs.¹ Psychological studies have largely focused on the role of personality traits in shaping susceptibility to conspiracy theories, though findings in this area have often been inconsistent. Nonetheless, certain traits have been repeatedly linked to higher levels of conspiratorial thinking. Individuals who experience heightened fear have a strong desire for control over their environment, or display narcissistic tendencies generally seem more prone to endorsing conspiracy theories.²

In contrast, research on the sociopolitical drivers of conspiracy beliefs has produced more robust and consistent findings. One of the most well-established correlations is that of social status: individuals with lower income and those who are unemployed are more likely to subscribe to conspiracy narratives. Additionally, members of marginalized ethnic and racial groups have been found to exhibit higher levels of conspiratorial belief, suggesting that experiences of social or political exclusion may contribute to such attitudes.³ Economic perceptions also appear to play an important role. Those who perceive the economy as declining demonstrate greater

1 For a comprehensive introduction to the various strands of research on conspiracy theories, see Michael Butter and Peter Knight, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2020).

2 Andreas Goreis and Martin Voracek, "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Psychological Research on Conspiracy Beliefs: Field Characteristics, Measurement Instruments, and Associations with Personality Traits," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 205; Monika Grzesiak-Feldman, "The Effect of High-Anxiety Situations on Conspiracy Thinking," *Current Psychology* 32 (2013): 100–118; Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, "Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 31, no. 1 (2017): 50–58; Aleksandra Cichocka, Marta Marchlewska, and Agnieszka Golec De Zavala, "Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Predict Conspiracy Beliefs? Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 7, no. 2 (2016): 157–166.

3 Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Fathali Ünal, "The Secret Islamization of Europe: Exploring the Integrated Threat Theory: Predicting Islamophobic Conspiracy Stereotypes," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 10, no. 1 (2016): 94–108; J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 952–966; Daniel Freeman and Richard P. Bentall, "The Concomitants of Conspiracy Concerns," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 52, no. 5 (2017): 595–604; Moreno Mancosu, Sofia Vassallo, and Luigi Vezzoni, "Believing in Conspiracy Theories: Evidence from an Exploratory Analysis of Italian Survey Data," *South European Society and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 327–344; Jennifer Crocker, Riia Luhtanen, Stephanie Broadnax, and Bruce E. Blaine, "Belief in U.S. Government Conspiracies Against Blacks Among Black and White College Students: Powerlessness or System Blame?," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25, no. 8 (1999): 941–953; Marc Steward Wilson and Chelsea Rose, "The Role of Paranoia in a Dual-Process Motivational Model of Conspiracy Belief," in *Power, Politics, and Paranoia: Why People Are Suspicious of Their Leaders*, eds. Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 273–291.

susceptibility to conspiracy theories, likely due to increased economic insecurity and uncertainty.⁴ The role of education, on the other hand, is complex and appears to be context dependent. Lower education level is generally associated with higher likelihood of conspiratorial thinking. However, while higher levels of knowledge about a given topic can reduce belief in related conspiracy theories in some settings, it can reinforce them in others. For instance, in the United States, greater knowledge has been associated with lower likelihood of believing in “birther” and “truther” conspiracy theories related to the birthplace of President Obama and to the origins of 9/11 attacks. However, in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, higher levels of knowledge have been linked to greater acceptance of anti-Western and anti-Jewish conspiracy beliefs.⁵ These findings suggest that the relationship between knowledge and conspiratorial thinking is mediated by broader sociopolitical contexts and prevailing ideological frameworks.

Conspiracy theories do not emerge in isolation, nor do they diffuse randomly across populations. Rather, they are socially constructed and disseminated through various media channels, particularly in today’s digital age. A substantial body of research has demonstrated the critical role of media consumption in shaping individuals’ susceptibility to conspiratorial beliefs. Empirical studies have consistently found that the type of media individuals engage with significantly influences their likelihood of endorsing conspiracy narratives. In the United States, consumers of traditional media—such as television news and daily newspapers—are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks compared to those who rely on less mainstream media sources.⁶ This pattern extends beyond the American context. Recent multinational studies examining conspiracy beliefs related to the COVID-19 pandemic found that exposure to traditional media correlates with a lower tendency to believe in pandemic-related misinformation, whereas reliance on social media is associated with higher

4 Suzanne Parsons, William Simmons, Franklin Shinhoster, and John Kilburn, “A Test of the Grapevine: An Empirical Examination of the Conspiracy Theories Among African Americans,” *Sociological Spectrum* 19, no. 2 (1999): 201–222.

5 Adam M. Enders, Steven M. Smallpage, and Ronald N. Lupton, “Are All ‘Birthers’ Conspiracy Theorists? On the Relationship Between Conspiratorial Thinking and Political Orientations,” *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2020): 849–866; Brendan Nyhan and Thomas Zeitzoff, “Conspiracy and Misperception Belief in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 4 (2018): 1400–1404.

6 Carl Stempel, Thomas Hargrove, and Guido H. Stempel III, “Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2007): 353–372.

susceptibility to COVID-19 conspiracy theories.⁷ Moreover, the reinforcement of conspiracy beliefs is closely linked to repeated exposure to media outlets that propagate such narratives. For instance, consumption of Fox News has been identified as a strong predictor of belief in anti-Democratic conspiracy theories, while engagement with conservative media correlates with increased endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theories in the US.⁸ Research also suggests that media literacy can mitigate these effects. Individuals with higher levels of news media literacy are less likely to adopt conspiratorial worldviews, indicating that improving public education on media consumption could serve as an effective countermeasure against the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.⁹

This finding is particularly significant given the rapidly evolving media environment, where both credible and misleading news sources are reaching new audiences through social media platforms. The role of social media in amplifying conspiracy theories, deepening political polarization, and potentially distorting electoral and referendum outcomes—most notably in the United States and the United Kingdom—has become a growing concern among both scholars and policymakers.¹⁰ While the precise effects of social media exposure on conspiracy beliefs remain difficult to quantify

7 David De Coninck, Thomas Frissen, Koen Matthijs, Leen d'Haenens, Grégoire Lits, Olivier Champagne-Poirier, Marie-Eve Carignan, et al., "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 646394; Ashraf Sadat Ahadzadeh, Fon Sim Ong, and Shin Ling Wu, "Social Media Skepticism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories About COVID-19: The Moderating Role of the Dark Triad," *Current Psychology* 42, no. 11 (2023): 8874–8886; Todd K. Hartman, Ryan McKay, Roberto A. F. Mendonça, Liam D. Satchell, Georgina M. F. Sherman, Christopher T. Thommessen, et al., "Different Conspiracy Theories Have Different Psychological and Social Determinants," *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2021): 642510; Eric A. Jensen, Axel Pflieger, Lisa Herbig, Brady Wagoner, Lars Lorenz, and Meike Watzlawik, "What Drives Belief in Vaccination Conspiracy Theories in Germany?," *Frontiers in Communication* 6 (2021): 678335; Dominik A. Stecula and Matthew Pickup, "Social Media, Cognitive Reflection, and Conspiracy Beliefs," *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2021): 647957.

8 Karen M. Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turan Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, and Farzin Deravi, "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (2019): 3–35; Barry A. Hollander, "Partisanship, Individual Differences, and News Media Exposure as Predictors of Conspiracy Beliefs," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95, no. 3 (2018): 691–713; Dominik A. Stecula and Matthew Pickup, "How Populism and Conservative Media Fuel Conspiracy Beliefs About COVID-19 and What It Means for COVID-19 Behaviors," *Research & Politics* 8, no. 1 (2021): 1–9.

9 Stephanie Craft, Seth Ashley, and Adam Maksł, "News Media Literacy and Conspiracy Theory Endorsement," *Communication and the Public* 2, no. 4 (2017): 388–401.

10 Brian G. Southwell, Emily A. Thorson, and Laura Sheble, eds. *Misinformation and Mass Audiences* (University of Texas Press, 2018).

and require further empirical investigation, emerging research in social network analysis provides compelling insights into the mechanisms of information dissemination. Studies suggest that individuals tend to form and participate in online communities composed of politically like-minded individuals, reinforcing ideological echo chambers.¹¹ We believe that this phenomenon is likely applicable to both conspiracy theory adherents and skeptics, highlighting the broader implications of social media-driven information clustering for public discourse and democratic processes.

At their core, conspiracy beliefs are inherently political. This political dimension is evident in the widely accepted definition of conspiracy theories as “unsubstantiated accusatory beliefs positing small groups working in secret, for their own benefit, and against the common good.”¹² Empirical research across diverse social and political contexts—including the United States, Pakistan, and Brazil—consistently demonstrates a strong connection between political conspiracy beliefs and partisanship.¹³ Partisanship operates as a form of “motivated reasoning,” a psychological mechanism through which individuals process information in ways that reinforce their pre-existing ideological commitments.¹⁴ This cognitive bias plays a crucial role in shaping individuals’ interactions with political phenomena, including their susceptibility to conspiracy narratives. For example, partisan affiliation is a strong predictor of belief in election fraud conspiracies or in claims that President Obama was not born in the United States. This is the

11 Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook, “Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 415–444; Pablo Barberá, “Birds of the Same Feather Tweet Together: Bayesian Ideal Point Estimation Using Twitter Data,” *Political Analysis* 23, no. 1 (2015): 76–91; Yosh Halberstam and Brian Knight, “Homophily, Group Size, and the Diffusion of Political Information in Social Networks: Evidence from Twitter,” *Journal of Public Economics* 143 (2016): 73–88; Andrei Boutyline and Robb Willer, “The Social Structure of Political Echo Chambers: Variation in Ideological Homophily in Online Networks,” *Political Psychology* 38, no. 3 (2017): 551–569.

12 Jack Edelson, Abacus A. Alduncin, Christopher Krewson, Joseph A. Sieja, and Joseph E. Uscinski, “The Effect of Conspiratorial Thinking and Motivated Reasoning on Belief in Election Fraud,” *Political Research Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017): 933.

13 Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, and Christina E. Farhart, “Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust,” *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 824–844; Josh Pasek, Tobias H. Stark, Jon A. Krosnick, and Trevor Thompson, “What Motivates a Conspiracy Theory? Birther Beliefs, Partisanship, Liberal-Conservative Ideology, and Anti-Black Attitudes,” *Electoral Studies* 40 (2015): 482–489; Niloufer A. Siddiqui, “Who Do You Believe? Political Parties and Conspiracy Theories in Pakistan,” *Party Politics* 26, no. 2 (2020): 107–119; Wesley Gramacho and Robert T. Turgeon, “Political Preferences, Knowledge, and Misinformation About COVID-19: The Case of Brazil,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2021): 646430.

14 Enders, Smallpage, and Lupton, “Are All ‘Birthers’ Conspiracy Theorists?”

case because such beliefs are not adopted in isolation but are filtered through an individual's broader political worldview, allowing them to validate and reinforce pre-existing ideological convictions.

The relationship between political ideology and a general predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking remains a subject of debate, with empirical findings offering mixed conclusions. Studies based on nationally representative samples of US adults between 2006 and 2011 suggest that conspiratorial thinking is not systematically linked to political ideology.¹⁵ However, subsequent research from 2016 to 2018, using similarly extensive national samples, indicates that conservatives are not only more likely to endorse specific conspiracy theories but also more inclined to adopt a general conspiratorial worldview.¹⁶ The ideological distribution of conspiracy beliefs is further complicated by evidence suggesting that such beliefs are most prevalent at both extremes of the political spectrum—on the far-left and the far-right—though with a somewhat stronger presence on the right.¹⁷ This pattern has been observed in the US and Western Europe and was further confirmed in our research on conspiratorial thinking in Southeast Europe during the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ Perhaps most notably, research consistently shows that individuals who place themselves outside the traditional left-right ideological spectrum, including those who identify as political independents, exhibit higher levels of conspiratorial thinking.¹⁹ This suggests that conspiracy beliefs may be less about left-right ideology per se and more closely tied to an orthogonal anti-establishment dimension of political opinion. This anti-elite sentiment is often associated with both right-wing and left-wing populism, which, in turn, appears to foster a greater propensity for conspiracy belief.²⁰

15 Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s)."

16 Sander Van der Linden, Costas Panagopoulos, Flávio Azevedo, and John T. Jost, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking," *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2021): 23–51.

17 Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, André P. M. Krouwel, and Thomas V. Pollet, "Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6, no. 5 (2015): 570–578; Yordan Kutiyski, Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Johan Martinsson, and Elin N. Markstedt, "Does Extreme Political Ideology Predict Conspiracy Beliefs, Economic Evaluations and Political Trust? Evidence from Sweden," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2017): 435–462.

18 Josip Glaurdić, Christophe Lesschaeve, and Michal Mochtak, "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories in Southeast Europe: (Non-)Believers, Social Network Bubbles, and the Discourse of Blame," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 6 (2023): 640–653.

19 Uscinski and Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories*.

20 Joseph E. Uscinski et al. "American Politics in Two Dimensions: Partisan and Ideological Identities Versus Anti-Establishment Orientations," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 877–895.

As complex as these findings on the relationship between political ideology and conspiracy beliefs may be, we believe that nationalism and populism should be the prime candidates for ideological drivers of conspiratorial thinking. In our view, conspiracy beliefs are in many ways a logical consequence of how nationalism and populism condition people to see the world. Nationalism encourages people to see their own country as better than others, and the desire to be seen as better; for one's superiority to be acknowledged.²¹ Since this acknowledgment is often seen as lacking, it nurtures a paranoid view that other nations are actively seeking to sabotage them and bring them down.²² In other words, nationalism fosters an us-versus-them mentality and views the world as a zero-sum game between nations. This blind devotion to one's nation, coupled with the belief in outside threats results in the tendency to look for external explanations for any national failings. This is particularly applicable in Southeast Europe, where, in the wake of Yugoslavia's dissolution, it was easier to assign the failure of one's own national leaders or nationalist ambitions to external forces rather than to accept personal or collective responsibility. Fast-forward to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the positive correlation between nationalism and conspiracy theories starts to make sense. The idea that the virus originates from the struggle between countries or is the result of global elites trying to undermine the nation's sovereignty fits perfectly with how nationalists understand the working of the world. In this view, vaccines were also to be distrusted because they were developed by foreign multinationals whose loyalties lie elsewhere.

Turning to populism, this ideology is arguably even more tailor-made to facilitate a conspiratorial mindset. Populism is characterized by a belief in a homogeneous *people*, a distrust of elites, and a Manichean worldview, which frames the central political struggle as one between good and evil. All three elements can be found in conspiracy theories. Almost all conspiracy theories revolve around lying to or trying to control the public, the main antagonists are always a secretive group of national or globalist elites, and their actions are unequivocally characterized as evil, to the point of the elites approaching something like cartoonish villainy. In short, conspiracy theories can be considered a logical extension and simply a more extreme

21 Aleksandra Cichocka and Aleksandra Cislak, "Nationalism as Collective Narcissism," *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2020): 69–74.

22 Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, Mjude Peker, Rita Guerra, and Tomasz Baran, "Collective Narcissism Predicts Hypersensitivity to In-Group Insult and Direct and Indirect Retaliatory Intergrout Hostility," *European Journal of Personality* 30, no. 6 (2016): 532–551.

version of a populist outlook.²³ It should therefore come as no surprise that those who subscribe to such a worldview should also be more likely to believe that COVID-19 is used as an excuse to build or expand the surveillance state, that vaccines are a ploy to alter DNA or implant micro-chips, or that elites ultimately control the spread of the virus.

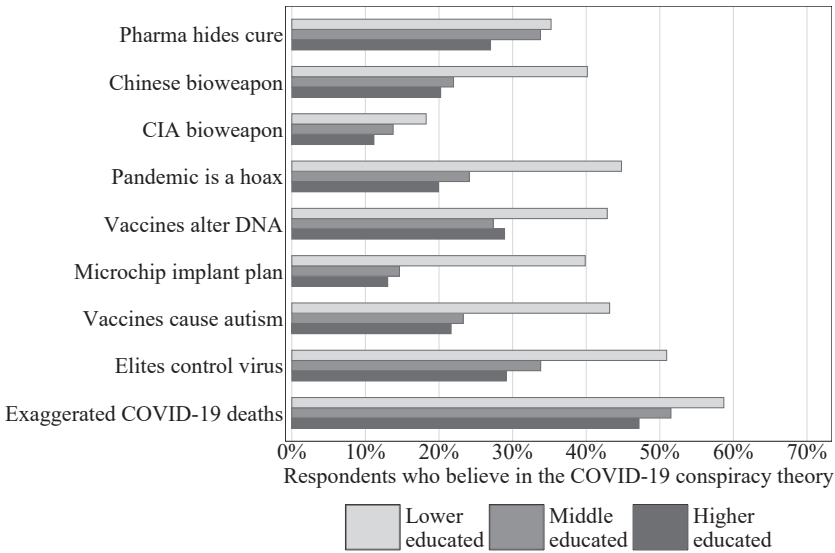
Given the current state of research on the political and social dynamics of conspiracy theories, we had several key empirical expectations regarding beliefs in COVID-19-related conspiracies prior to conducting our analysis. First, we anticipated that such beliefs would be more prevalent among individuals with lower levels of formal education and with lower socioeconomic status. Additionally, we expected media consumption patterns to play a significant role, with conspiracy beliefs more likely to be held by individuals who primarily consumed information from social media rather than traditional mainstream media sources. Here we were also very keen to test whether social connections were influenced by shared agreement or disagreement on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, reinforcing patterns of ideological and informational alignment. In other words, we wanted to see whether conspiracy theory (non-)believers lived in the bubbles of the like-minded. A key question of our interest was also whether the actual health experiences of the pandemic made a difference. To which extent was the exposure to COVID-19 sobering people up and making them understand the realities of the pandemic? Lastly, and most importantly, we wanted to answer the question to which extent the beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories were prevalent among individuals who held nationalist and populist political views.

The First Cut: Correlates of COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs

Although the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and education is empirically not as clear cut as many would believe, education is widely regarded as one of the strongest predictors of belief in conspiracy theories. This correlation is often attributed to differences in critical thinking skills, cognitive sophistication, and exposure to diverse sources of information. Higher education is seen as fostering analytical reasoning and skepticism toward unverified claims, whereas limited educational attainment may increase susceptibility to misinformation. This is why we also first explored

23 Eiríkur Bergmann and Michael Butter, "Conspiracy Theory and Populism," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (Routledge, 2020).

Figure 5.1. Conspiracy beliefs, by level of education



whether the belief in COVID-19 conspiracies differed by the level of education. As figure 5.1 shows, education clearly matters in explaining COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs: those with lower education were more likely to agree with every conspiracy belief that we asked them about. While about three in ten residents in Southeast Europe believed in 2023 that the virus was a bioweapon engineered by the Chinese government, this was two in ten among college-educated individuals and nearly five out of ten among those who only completed elementary school.

Interestingly, a persistent pattern emerges regarding conspiracy beliefs and education levels. Individuals with less education consistently exhibited higher levels of belief in conspiracies. This trend becomes particularly evident with more outlandish theories, such as the idea that vaccines were a cover for microchips or that the pandemic was a hoax. While those with higher education tended to dismiss these extreme conspiracy theories, almost four out of ten people with lower education still believed in a wide range of conspiracy theories. Despite the obvious relation between income and education, we did not find similar differences between people with means and people with more limited means. This suggests that rather than being about deeper socioeconomic differences or social class, education affected the way in which people viewed the world and interpreted events related to the pandemic. Specifically, education may have enhanced

individuals' cognitive complexity, which is their ability to understand and appreciate nuances and subtleties in various contexts. This capability reduces the likelihood of embracing simplistic explanations for complex events, which is what happens with conspiracy theories.²⁴ Higher education levels are also associated with increased feelings of control over one's life and environment. This sense of control reduces feelings of powerlessness. And people who feel in control are less likely to resort to conspiracy theories to make sense of events.²⁵

However, notwithstanding substantial differences with the lower educated, it is clear that even college-educated respondents were susceptible to conspiratorial beliefs. Almost three out of ten respondents with higher education believed that vaccines could alter your DNA, and two out of ten believed that the entire pandemic was a hoax, even in 2023. This shows that all layers of society were susceptible to conspiracy beliefs, even those more equipped to see through them.

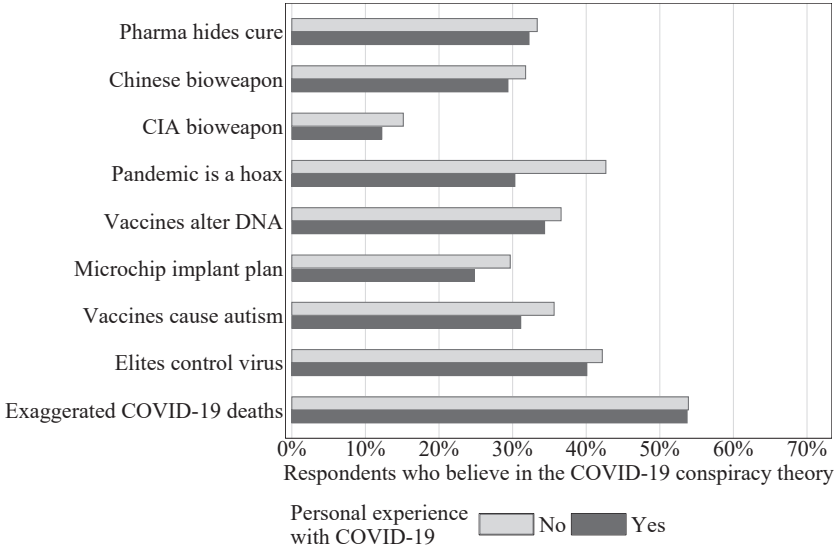
The second correlation with propensity toward conspiracy beliefs that we explored concerned respondents' personal experiences with the virus. We wanted to know whether personal experiences with COVID-19 inoculated individuals against conspiracy theories. For some, firsthand experience may have increased trust in scientific and medical authorities, countering misinformation. For others, frustration with inconsistent policies or personal hardship may have fueled skepticism and distrust. To explore this question, we analyzed differences in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs based on individuals' direct exposure to the virus, i.e., whether they or someone among their close family and friends had been officially diagnosed with COVID-19. Figure 5.2 illustrates the relationship between personal COVID-19 experiences and conspiracy beliefs. Our expectation was that direct confrontation with the virus's effects would make individuals less susceptible to theories claiming the virus and pandemic were fabrications, and more accepting of preventive measures like vaccines. The results supported this expectation, but only to some extent.

We observed that personal experience with COVID-19 seemed to decrease the likelihood of someone believing that the pandemic was a hoax. However, this finding was tempered by the observation that even among

24 Eva Ballová Mikušková, "Education and Conspiracy Beliefs: A Replication of van Prooijen (2017)," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 37, no. 1 (2023): 174–188; Van Prooijen, "Why Education Predicts."

25 John Mirowsky and Catherine E. Ross, *Education, Social Status, and Health* (Aldine de Gruyter, 2003); Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, "Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception," *Science* 322, no. 5898 (2008): 115–117.

Figure 5.2. Conspiracy beliefs, by personal experience with COVID-19



those with personal COVID-19 experiences, three out of ten still believed in this conspiracy theory. Moreover, the differences between those with and without personal COVID-19 experiences for other conspiracy theories were minimal or almost non-existent. For instance, believing that the pharmaceutical industry already had a vaccine but did not want to release it, or that reported COVID-19 deaths were exaggerated show only slight differences in belief rates between the two groups. These figures highlight the deep entrenchment of conspiracy beliefs, even in the face of undeniable personal evidence, painting a sobering picture of societies where facts are not enough, and conspiracy theories persist despite direct confrontation with reality. This suggests that factors beyond personal experience played more significant roles in shaping these beliefs.

Next, we considered what the relationship was between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and respondents' media use. In our 2023 survey, we asked people how often they used social media and how much they trusted the information they found there. We classified those who used social media to stay updated on politics and current events more than three times a week as heavy social media users. Additionally, we considered those who agreed with the statement, "I was able to stay well-informed about the pandemic through the use of social media," as trusting social media information.

Figure 5.3 shows the relationship between social media trust and conspiracy beliefs. The picture is nearly identical if one substitutes social media use for trust. In both cases, a clear pattern emerges: people who use social media to get informed and those who are less critical of the information they find on those platforms are more likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. The effect is rather consistent across the various specific conspiracy theories, though it appears that trust in information coming from social media is slightly more important than its sheer use. On average, trusting information on social media coincides with a 13 percentage point higher likelihood of finding a conspiracy theory credible.

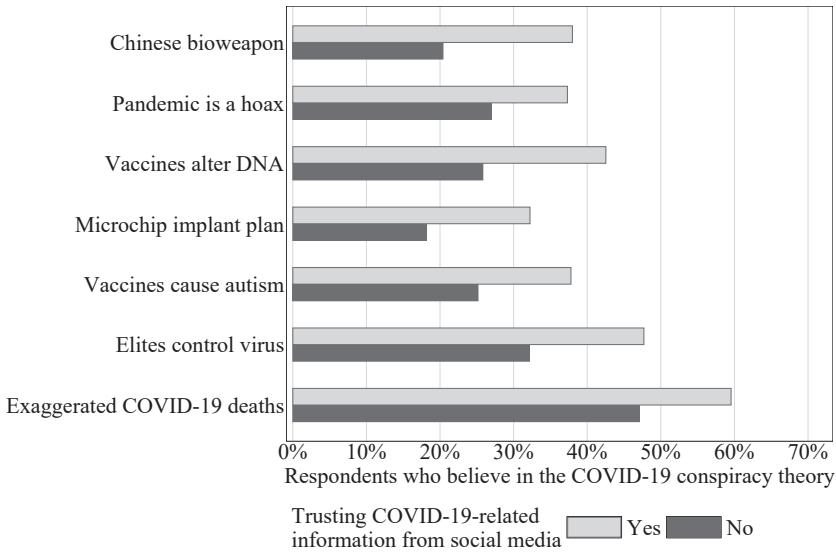
Social media has been increasingly exposed as a blight on society, from heightening the likelihood of depression to undermining people's privacy. Our data draw attention to another damaging impact: the spread of misinformation. While it would be tempting to consider the propagation and spread of conspiracy theories on social media as a glitch on those platforms or a kink that needs to be ironed out, misinformation and conspiracy theories have become integral parts of their business model. The design of social media algorithms, which prioritize engagement, inadvertently promotes sensational and conspiratorial content, as it tends to generate more interaction than factual information. Social media platforms use algorithms to curate content for users based on their previous interactions and engagement patterns. These algorithms prioritize content that is likely to generate high levels of interaction, such as likes, shares, comments, and views.²⁶ Sensational, controversial, and emotionally charged content tends to attract more engagement than straightforward factual information.²⁷ Conspiracy theories and misinformation often fall into this category because they provoke strong emotional responses and curiosity, leading to higher levels of interaction. Because algorithms prioritize content that generates high engagement, sensational and conspiratorial content is more likely to be amplified and spread widely. This creates a feedback loop where engaging with (often false) information is continually promoted, increasing its visibility and reach.

It therefore comes as no surprise that social media platforms have been slow to adopt any sort of editorial standards and regulatory frameworks

26 Erwan Dujeancourt and Marcel Garz, "The Effects of Algorithmic Content Selection on User Engagement with News on Twitter," *Information Society* 39, no. 5 (2023): 263–281.

27 Maria D. Molina, Jinping Wang, S. Shyam Sundar, Thai Le, and Carlina DiRusso, "Reading, Commenting and Sharing of Fake News: How Online Bandwagons and Bots Dictate User Engagement," *Communication Research* 50, no. 6 (2023): 667–694.

Figure 5.3. Conspiracy beliefs, by trust in social media



that crack down on misinformation and conspiracy theories—and in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s second electoral victory, they have backtracked on even those limited standards, all in the supposed defense of “free speech.” Traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, television, and radio, are still subject to editorial standards and regulatory frameworks that improve the accuracy and reliability of the information they disseminate.²⁸ To combat the digital spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, it is crucial that social media platforms be held to similar standards, implementing robust editorial guidelines and regulatory measures to protect the integrity of public discourse.

Our final examination of the correlational relationship conspiracy beliefs has with other factors concerns people’s nationalist and populist worldviews. We show this relationship in figures 5.4 and 5.5. There are very consistent political differences in whether people in Southeast Europe gave credence to COVID-19 conspiracy theories. For instance, those with low nationalist

28 Susanne Fengler, Tobias Eberwein, Salvador Alsius, Olivier Baisnée, Klaus Bichler, Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska, Huub Evers, et al., “How Effective Is Media Self-Regulation? Results from a Comparative Survey of European Journalists,” *European Journal of Communication* 30, no. 3 (2015): 249–266; Stephen Cushion, Justin Lewis, and Gordon Neil Ramsay, “The Impact of Interventionist Regulation in Reshaping News Agendas: A Comparative Analysis of Public and Commercially Funded Television Journalism,” *Journalism* 13, no. 7 (2012): 831–849.

Figure 5.4. Conspiracy beliefs, by nationalism

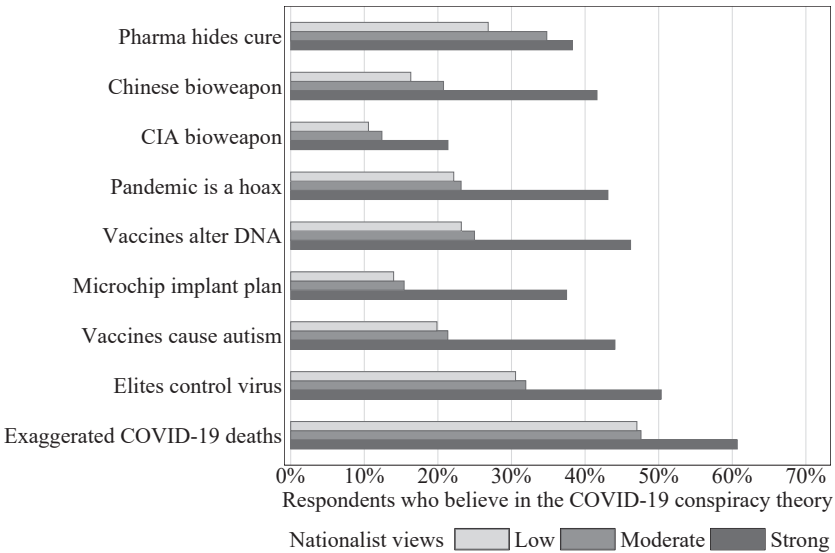
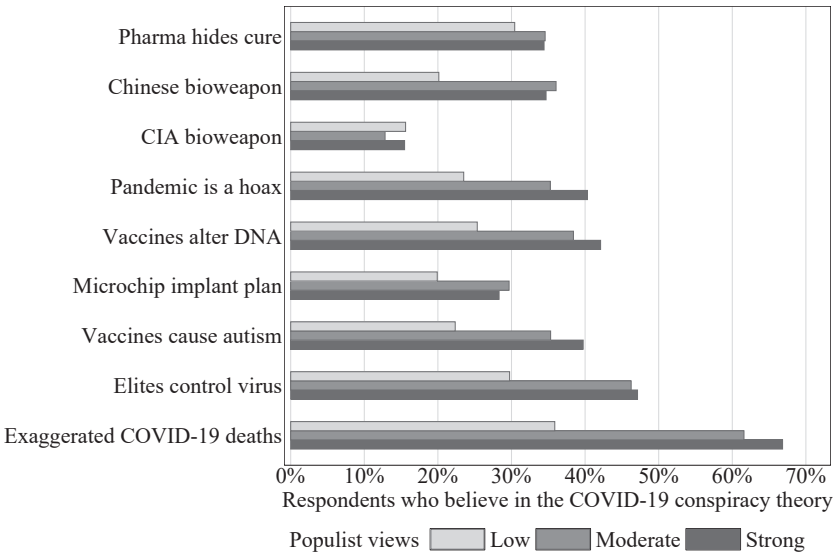


Figure 5.5. Conspiracy beliefs, by populism



views had a 20% chance of believing that vaccines cause autism. Among those with strong nationalist convictions, that number was 44%. Another example is the claim that governments exaggerated the number of COVID-19 deaths in order to increase their control over the population. This theory was very popular among those with strong populist views with 67% of such respondents believing the claim, and far less among non-populists where only 32% believed in it. Averaged across all conspiracy theories shown in the figures, about 23% of respondents with low levels of support for nationalist views believed in a conspiracy theory, while that number was 43% among respondents with strong nationalist views. We see similar figures for populism where 24% of non-populists, on average, believed in a COVID-19 conspiracy theory. By contrast, conspiracy theories were deemed credible by almost 40% of staunch populists. In sum, strong populist and nationalist worldviews resulted in being twice as likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

Is This Really About Nationalism and Populism?

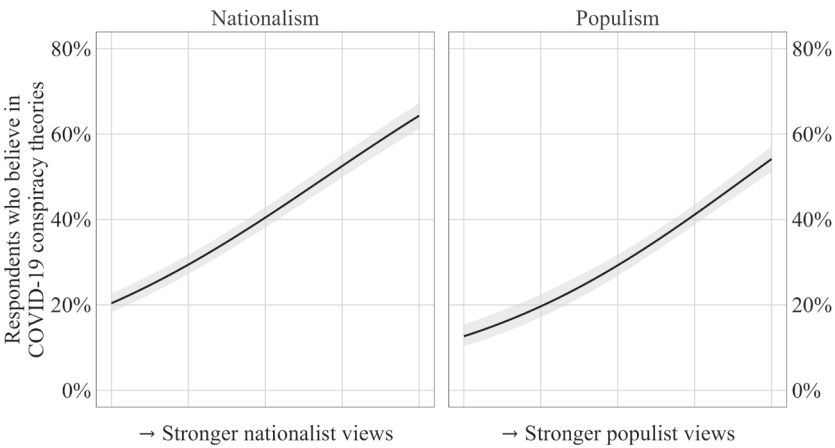
While the evidence presented so far certainly suggests that ideology plays a role in whether or not people believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, these bivariate correlations are still only tentative. Perhaps this is all about education, as we know that less educated individuals are more likely to vote for populist and nationalist parties and hold such worldviews?²⁹ Or perhaps the differences between nationalists and non-nationalists, as well as between populists and non-populists, are only a reflection of differences in media use, with the respondents of different ideological orientations often having a different appreciation of news and information that they receive from official sources and social media? In other words, are the differences shown in figures 5.4 and 5.5 the result of the nature of these ideologies or due to other differences between nationalists/populists and non-nationalists/non-populists?

29 Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," Faculty Research Working Paper Series—Harvard Kennedy School (2016), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/trump-brexit-and-rise-populism-economic-have-nots-and-cultural-backlash>; Bram Spruyt, "An Asymmetric Group Relation? An Investigation into Public Perceptions of Education-Based Groups and the Support for Populism," *Acta Politica* 49, no. 2 (2014): 123–143; Hidde Bekhuis, Marcel Lubbers, and Maykel Verkuyten, "How Education Moderates the Relation Between Globalization and Nationalist Attitudes," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 26, no. 4 (2014): 487–500.

To find out, we again used multiple regression to account for confounders. For each respondent, we first calculated an average conspiracy score based on their Likert scale answers. This average score represents the overall tendency of a person to agree or disagree with the various conspiracy theories. We used this average to categorize participants into two groups. Those who scored an average of 4 or higher (and 4 represents “agree” on the Likert scale) were classified as someone who believes in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. This means that, on average, they tended to agree with the conspiracy statements listed in table 5.1. Participants with an average score below 4 were categorized as not believing in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, indicating that they generally did not agree with such statements. Multiple regression allows us to adjust for factors like age, gender, and education, and show us to which extent nationalists and non-nationalists, as well as populists and non-populists, who are comparable on all other dimensions differed in their beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

We present the results of our regression analysis in the appendix table A5.2 where we use the same principles when building our models as in the other chapters of this book. To make the interpretation of our findings easier, we plot the relationship between nationalism (left panel) and populism (right panel) on the one hand and the odds of believing in COVID-19 conspiracies on the other in figure 5.6. The y-axis indicates the predicted percentage of believers per level of ideological commitment. For instance, our analysis suggests that among respondents with very cosmopolitan political stances, about 20% are conspiracy believers. By contrast, among the most fervent nationalists, that figure skyrockets to over 60%. The difference is equally stark when we look at populism. Our analysis suggests that among non-populists, when controlling for the full battery of possible confounders, there are only about 12% of believers in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Among committed populists, that figure shoots up to about 55%. In sum, moving from one end of the nationalism and populism ideological spectrum to the other means going from a few conspiracy believers to more than half of the people believing that some form of a conspiracy was behind the pandemic. In addition to respondents’ views on nationalism and populism, table A5.2 shows that education and personal experiences of the pandemic had the predicted effects on conspiracy beliefs. What also seemed to matter was gender, ethnic minority status, support for the government, level of political interest, and individuals’ socialist beliefs with men, members of ethnic majorities, supporters of the government, those with the greater level of political interest, and those with more liberal economic views being less

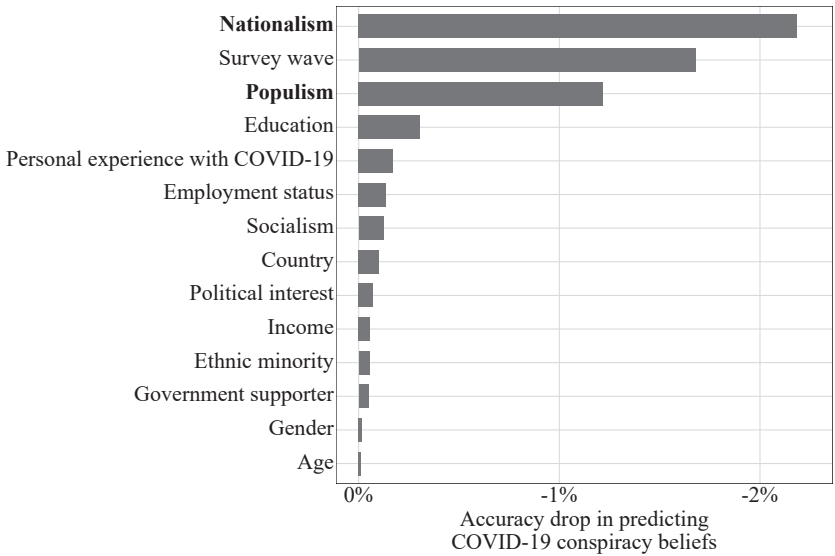
Figure 5.6. Belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories by ideology, adjusting for confounders



likely to believe in conspiracy theories (all in alignment with the general findings of the literature in other contexts).

Going back to figure 5.6—the steepness of the two curves seems to suggest that nationalism and populism are not just relevant predictors of people’s COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, but that they may be among the most important variables to explain such beliefs. We assess this possibility by re-estimating our full regression model several times, with each iteration leaving out one of the explanatory variables. We then measure how much worse the regression model becomes in accurately predicting conspiracy beliefs when that variable is excluded. The results are shown in figure 5.7. Nationalism and populism stand out as some of the most important variables in the model. Overall, the model is able to predict 7.5% of the differences in conspiracy beliefs among our respondents. Without respondents’ views on either nationalism or populism included in the model, this drops to 5.2 and 6.3%, respectively. If both nationalism and populism are absent, the model is only able to predict 4% of conspiracy beliefs. The drop in accuracy grows larger when more variables are excluded because when only one of the two is excluded the remaining variable compensates for it due to correlation between nationalism and populism. These diminishments in the model’s predictive capacity are large and substantial. In other words, a model explaining and predicting people’s belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories loses over 40% of its predictive capacity when it does not take into account how nationalist or populist people’s political views are, even

Figure 5.7. Importance of factors in explaining COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs



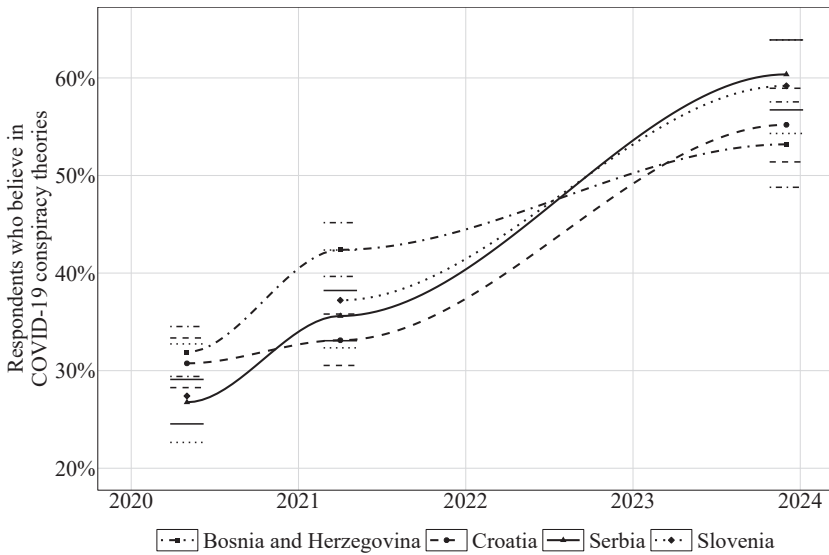
though the model can still rely on other factors such as education and media use. This strengthens our conviction that it really is the nature and content of nationalism and populism that makes people more susceptible to believing that important aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic such as its onset, management, or mitigation efforts were the result of some deliberate conspiracy. Given the well-documented role of trust in social media in shaping conspiracy beliefs, we include this variable in our robustness checks, detailed in the appendix. The results indicate that incorporating trust in social media does not substantially alter the observed relationship between populism, nationalism, and conspiracy beliefs, which remains largely stable.

The results of our analysis on the pooled samples throughout the whole pandemic are sobering. However, what can our data say about the evolution of popularity of COVID-19 conspiracy theories over time? On the one hand, as the global scientific community rapidly advanced its understanding of COVID-19, including its transmission mechanisms, clinical manifestations, and preventive measures, one would reasonably expect that this improved understanding would reduce the need for alternative, conspiratorial explanations. The swift and extensive sharing of data and research findings allowed the public and policymakers to access information quickly. And public health campaigns, supported by empirical evidence and guidelines,

were supposed to demystify the virus and counteract misinformation. On the other hand, the relatively mild dangers posed by COVID-19 for most otherwise healthy people, especially in comparison to more devastating historical pandemics, might have fueled suspicions about the pandemic's authenticity. The discrepancy between the perceived mildness of the virus and the drastic global measures taken to combat it—such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and economic shutdowns—may have led some people to question whether the pandemic was exaggerated or even manufactured to achieve some ulterior, malevolent goals. Moreover, the unprecedented speed at which vaccines for COVID-19 were developed and authorized for emergency use also likely contributed to the proliferation of conspiracy theories. Vaccines typically undergo a long development and testing process, and the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines was seen by some as too quick to be safe. This accelerated timeline, while scientifically justified and necessary given the urgency of the pandemic, fueled fears and suspicions. The novelty of the messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) vaccine technology used by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, for instance, added another layer of distrust among those unfamiliar with the science behind it.

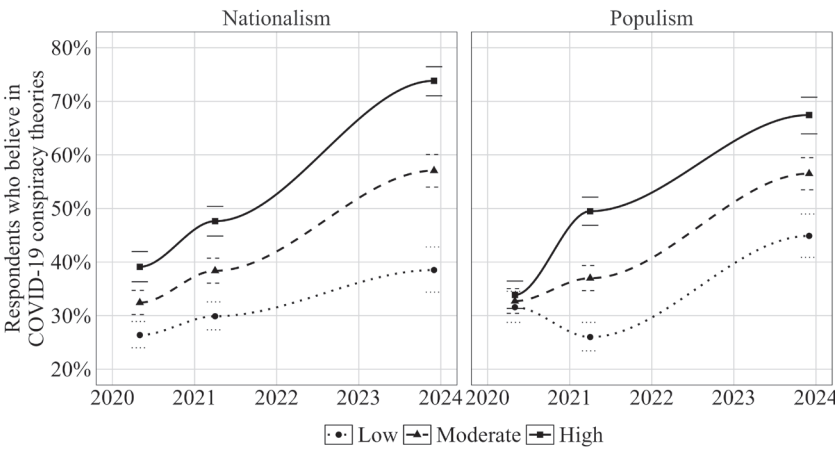
Our three surveys conducted in 2020, 2021, and 2023 did not track the same individuals over time, so we cannot directly assess whether specific individuals who did not believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories in 2020 began to do so in later years. However, each survey provides a representative snapshot of the broader population in Southeast Europe, allowing us to observe aggregate trends. Figure 5.7 already showed that the survey wave is a highly important variable, as do the models in appendix table A5.2, which indicate that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs significantly increased between 2020 to 2021, and again between 2021 and 2023. These trends per country are shown in more detail in figure 5.8. In April 2020, about 31% of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30% in Croatia, and 27% in Serbia would be considered as conspiracy theory believers by our criteria. In March 2021, this number increased by a third in both countries. The number of conspiracy believers remained basically stable in Croatia. By the end of 2023, however, we see that the number of conspiracy believers increased massively. Bosnia and Herzegovina saw their numbers further increase to 53%. The number of conspiracy believers went up by two thirds in Croatia, from 33% in 2021 to 55% at the end of 2023. Slovenia and Serbia saw similar evolutions, nearly doubling from about 35% in 2021 to about 60% in 2023. In the aggregate, the number of people believing in COVID-19 conspiracy theories simply exploded.

Figure 5.8. Evolution in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs by country, adjusting for confounders



In figure 5.9, we present the evolution of conspiratorial beliefs by ideology rather than by country. For both nationalism and populism, the disparity between those with weak convictions and those with strong convictions increased over the course of the pandemic. In early 2020, the difference between non-nationalists and fervent nationalists in terms of the number of conspiracy believers is estimated to have been 13%, though by the end of 2023 this gap widened to more than 30%. The difference between populists and non-populists was almost non-existent in the early stages of the pandemic but increased to 23% in 2023. The difference between the two ideologies is that for nationalism, this widening gap appears to have grown more gradually over the course of the pandemic, while for populism, the difference between populists and non-populists had become clear only in 2021. By the end of 2023 conspiracy theories became more popular for populists and non-populists alike, but the relative differences remained the same, as can be seen in the parallel solid, dashed, and dotted lines in the right panel in figure 5.9. All of this points to two extremely problematic trends. First, the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs increased rapidly in the whole population. And second, conspiracy beliefs became the perfect embodiment of increasing political polarization.

Figure 5.9. Evolution in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, by ideology, adjusting for confounders



Did Conspiracy Beliefs Structure People’s Social Relations?

Conspiracy theories about the pandemic did not emerge or disseminate in isolation; rather, they were shaped by social interactions and influenced by the relationships between individuals who accepted or rejected them. Our inquiry focused on whether belief in conspiracy theories significantly structured interpersonal connections, particularly in the context of social media, where such theories thrived. Specifically, we sought to determine whether individuals were disproportionately inclined to connect with others who share their views on conspiracy theories. Did conspiracy theory believers (and non-believers) live in the bubbles of the likeminded? This question is not easy to answer, but our research design and the fact that we recruited survey participants through Facebook allowed us to do it—though unfortunately only on the 2020 sample because of changes to data availability that this platform subsequently instituted for its clients.

Prior to these changes, researchers were allowed to collect not only fully anonymized survey responses, but also information on whether respondents were Facebook friends or not.

It is important to emphasize that our study did not grant us access to respondents’ complete social networks; rather, we only obtained information on whether they were connected to any other participants within the survey. This anonymized data was collected exclusively with users’ explicit consent, and it complied with Facebook’s terms and

conditions, as well as relevant national and EU legislation. Traditionally, researchers studying the formation of social ties have relied on three primary approaches: 1) asking survey respondents to identify their friends and the friends' characteristics³⁰—a method prone to cognitive bias and recall errors; 2) only collecting network data and deriving people's characteristics from limited and deeply flawed proxies;³¹ and 3) using survey and network data of completely separate samples, which limits analytical precision.³² Our research design was clearly superior as it allowed us to collect reliable network and survey data from the same sample of respondents.

We explained the full details of our methodological approach in a previously published article.³³ To make things simple here, our tests essentially asked what factors were affecting the odds of two people from our sample being Facebook friends. The main explanatory variable of our interest measured the congruence of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs between the respondents by taking the absolute difference between their scores. So, for example, if Respondent A strongly agreed (score 5) with the view that COVID-19 was a Chinese bioweapon and Respondent B strongly disagreed (score 1), then their distance on this statement was equal to 4. This process yielded a variable that took on low values when two respondents had similar stances toward COVID-19 conspiracy theories and high values when their views differed. In our model building, we progressively expanded our analysis to include other congruence variables, capturing socio-demographic factors (like gender, age, education, or income), whether respondents came from the same country and area with the same zip code, political ideology, and social media use.

We present our findings in the appendix table A5.4. Here it is important to note that for the measures of distance (conspiracy beliefs, political ideologies, education level, age, and income), negative coefficients point to a tendency of the respondents to connect to people similar to them, while for the other measures positive coefficients indicate the same. As can be seen from table A5.4, congruence of conspiracy beliefs was a statistically significant determinant of respondents' social network connections and

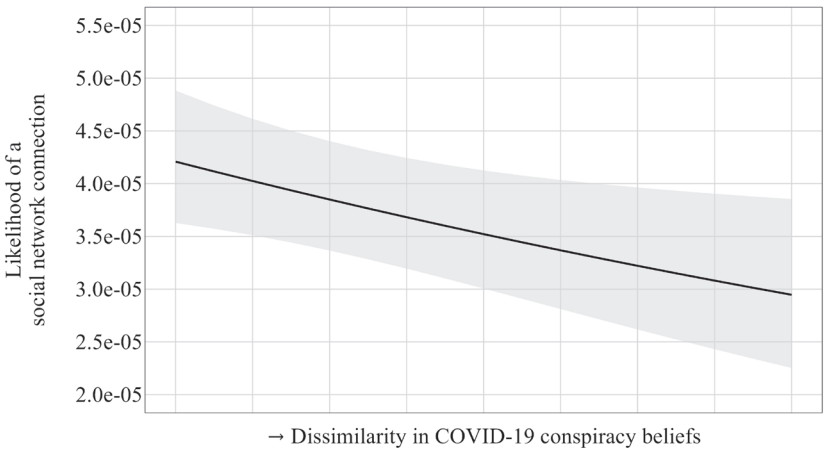
30 Robert M. Bond and Matthew D. Sweitzer, "Political Homophily in a Large-Scale Online Communication Network," *Communication Research* 49, no. 1 (2022): 93–115.

31 Boutyline and Willer, "Social Structure of Political Echo Chambers."

32 Aengus Bridgman, Eric Merkley, Oleg Zhilin, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, and Derek Ruths, "Infodemic Pathways: Evaluating the Role That Traditional and Social Media Play in Cross-National Information Transfer," *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2021): 648646.

33 Glaurdić, Lesschaeve, and Mochtak, "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories."

Figure 5.10. Similarity in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and being connected on a social network



was robust to the inclusion of all other variables. People of similar views regarding COVID-19 conspiracy theories were more likely to be friends (or, conversely, friends were more likely to have similar views of COVID-19 conspiracy theories). Our finding adds credence to the views of those who suggest that conspiracy theories do not spread indiscriminately through social media but rather stay confined to communities of people already prone to believe them.³⁴ In other words, our analysis suggests that beliefs in conspiracy theories played a significant role in shaping people’s social ties. This effect is all the more remarkable when compared to other variables capturing people’s world and policy views. Figure 5.10 shows this relationship graphically: similarity in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs increased the probability of a social network connection—even when controlling for a host of other variables, including respondents’ political orientation. All of this is clear evidence that we seek online what we seek in real life: people like us. During the pandemic, this included people who held the same beliefs about conspiracy theories, making effective public policies to counter misinformation that much more difficult.

34 Darin DeWitt, Matthew Atkinson, and Drew Wegner, “How Conspiracy Theories Spread,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (Oxford University Press, 2018), 319–334; Panagiotis T. Metaxas and Samantha Finn, “The Infamous #Pizzagate Conspiracy Theory: Insight from a TwitterTrails Investigation,” in *Proceedings of the Computation + Journalism Symposium* (Northwestern University, 2017), <https://repository.wellesley.edu/object/ir300>.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter illuminate the deeply rooted nature of conspiracy beliefs surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and their significant intersection with ideological worldviews. As our analysis has demonstrated, conspiracy theories did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they were shaped by long-standing political and social attitudes, amplified by digital media ecosystems, and reinforced by pre-existing ideological frameworks. The proliferation of these narratives, despite scientific consensus and firsthand experiences with the pandemic, underscores the extent to which belief systems function as filters for information, determining what individuals accept or reject as reality.

One of the most striking conclusions from our analysis is that belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories was not predominantly driven by socioeconomic disadvantages, lower educational attainment, or even direct personal experiences with the virus. Instead, it was strongly correlated with political ideologies that inherently distrust elites and perceive the world in binary terms. Nationalism, with its emphasis on external threats and the superiority of one's own nation, made individuals more susceptible to conspiratorial narratives framing the pandemic as a foreign-engineered crisis or a plot against national sovereignty. Similarly, populism's deep-seated skepticism of elites—both political and scientific—aligned seamlessly with theories portraying the pandemic as a manufactured tool for control. These findings are critical because they suggest that countering conspiracy beliefs cannot be achieved solely through education or fact-based rebuttals; ideological commitments provide a protective shield that insulates individuals from contradictory evidence.

The role of digital media in shaping and sustaining conspiracy beliefs was another central finding of this chapter. Our data clearly indicated that individuals who relied on social media for political information were more likely to endorse COVID-19 conspiracy theories than those who consumed traditional media. This is not an incidental correlation but a reflection of the structural design of social media platforms, which prioritize engagement over accuracy. Algorithms built to maximize user interaction tend to amplify emotionally charged, sensationalistic, and controversial content—precisely the type of material that fuels conspiracy theories. The creation of ideological echo chambers, where individuals predominantly interact with like-minded users, further entrenches these beliefs, making it increasingly difficult to challenge misinformation with factual information. This presents a formidable challenge for policymakers and public health officials seeking to combat misinformation in future crises.

Another key insight from this chapter concerns the evolving nature of conspiracy beliefs over time. Rather than diminishing as more scientific knowledge about COVID-19 became available, belief in conspiracy theories surged as the pandemic progressed. By the end of 2023, the prevalence of conspiracist thinking had more than doubled in some Southeast European countries. This trend suggests that the pandemic not only created a fertile ground for conspiracy beliefs but also exacerbated pre-existing ideological divisions within society. As conspiracy narratives became more widespread, they further polarized political discourse, reinforcing distrust in institutions and widening societal fractures. In this context, conspiracy beliefs are not merely a side effect of crisis-driven anxiety; they are a mechanism through which individuals make sense of—and resist—rapidly changing socio-political landscapes.

Perhaps one of the most sobering findings of this chapter is that conspiracy beliefs significantly shaped social networks. Individuals who believed in COVID-19 conspiracy theories were far more likely to form social ties with like-minded individuals, both online and offline. This social clustering reinforces and perpetuates conspiratorial thinking by limiting exposure to dissenting perspectives. The fact that conspiracy beliefs influenced interpersonal relationships even when controlling for other factors such as age, education, and political orientation underscores the powerful role of social identity in maintaining these narratives. This dynamic makes efforts to counter misinformation even more complex, as simply presenting factual information is unlikely to be effective when beliefs are sustained by deeply embedded social networks.

The implications of these findings extend far beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The mechanisms that facilitated the spread and entrenchment of conspiracy theories during this global crisis are not unique to this particular event. The intersection of digital misinformation, ideological worldviews, and social clustering is likely to play a significant role in future crises, whether they involve public health, climate change, or political upheavals. Addressing conspiracy beliefs requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond debunking misinformation. Policymakers must recognize that combating conspiracy theories is not just a matter of correcting false information but also addressing the underlying ideological and social structures that sustain them.

Moving forward, mitigating the impact of conspiracy theories will require concerted efforts from multiple sectors. Social media platforms must be held accountable for their role in amplifying misinformation, with regulatory measures ensuring greater transparency and responsibility in content

moderation. Education systems need to place greater emphasis on media literacy, equipping individuals with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate an information landscape saturated with both credible and misleading content. Additionally, efforts to rebuild trust in institutions—particularly among those who feel marginalized or disillusioned—will be essential in countering the broader socio-political conditions that make conspiracy narratives appealing.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that the greatest threat during the pandemic may not have been the virus itself, but the stories that were told about it. These stories—shaped by ideological commitments, amplified by digital media, and reinforced through social networks—transformed a public health crisis into a battle over reality itself. As societies continue to grapple with the lingering effects of the pandemic, addressing the consequences of these narratives will be a crucial challenge for policymakers, researchers, and civil society. The pandemic may have ended, but the divisions it deepened and the conspiracy theories it fueled will persist unless concerted efforts are made to bridge the ideological and informational divides that have come to define our era.

6. The Price of Survival: Economic Strains and Intergenerational Divides

Abstract: The economic consequences of the pandemic exposed deep structural vulnerabilities in Southeast Europe and forced societies to confront explicit trade-offs between public health protection and economic survival. While lockdowns and emergency spending mitigated mortality, they imposed uneven burdens across generations, disproportionately affecting younger cohorts in employment, education, and long-term prospects. Drawing on macroeconomic indicators and three survey waves from 2020 to 2023, this chapter examines how public attitudes toward these intergenerational trade-offs evolved over time. It shows that initial consensus around prioritizing lives fractured as economic costs mounted, with nationalism and populism increasingly shaping resentment toward policies perceived as overprotective of the elderly. The findings reveal how economic strain, ideology, and generational politics intersected to reshape solidarity during prolonged crisis.

Keywords: economic crisis, intergenerational solidarity, COVID-19 pandemic, nationalism, populism, age-based trade-offs

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the global economy in ways that will reverberate for decades. Its dual shocks to supply and demand disrupted global trade, halted industrial production, and decimated consumer confidence. The International Monetary Fund reported a 3.3% contraction in global GDP for 2020, a downturn unparalleled since the Great Depression.¹ The synchronized nature of these disruptions, spanning continents and sectors,

¹ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook, April 2021: Managing Divergent Recoveries* (2021), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021>.

rendered traditional economic recovery tools insufficient on their own. Governments around the world scrambled to mitigate the fallout, implementing expansive fiscal measures such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, and liquidity injections. While necessary to stabilize economies, these interventions came at an enormous cost, driving up public debt levels and exposing vulnerabilities in fiscal capabilities.

This was particularly critical in the healthcare systems, which faced immense strain. Overburdened hospitals and shortages of critical supplies have become emblematic of the first months of the crisis. The rapid spread of the virus, coupled with the severe cases requiring intensive care, overwhelmed even the most developed healthcare infrastructures.² Southeast Europe, which was already grappling with systemic inefficiencies and underfunded public health networks, experienced these pressures acutely.³ In Croatia, for instance, the pandemic exacerbated long-standing issues of hospital debt and inefficient healthcare financing. Recurring bailouts for hospital debts had long masked systemic weaknesses, which were starkly exposed under the weight of COVID-19.⁴

Social safety nets also bore the brunt of the pandemic's economic impact, serving as lifelines for millions suddenly thrust into unemployment. The adequacy of these safety nets also varied dramatically, reflecting the disparities in welfare systems globally. In countries like Germany, well-established social protection systems absorbed much of the shock.⁵ However, in Southeast Europe, the situation was markedly different. This was arguably exacerbated by the region's heavy reliance on informal employment, which left large segments of the population without access to formal social protections during the crisis.⁶ Temporary measures, such as wage subsidies

2 Paramjit Sandhu, Ami B. Shah, Farida B. Ahmad, Justin Kerr, Hanna B. Demeke, Ellie Graeden, Suzanne Marks, et al., "Emergency Department and Intensive Care Unit Overcrowding and Ventilator Shortages in US Hospitals During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020–2021," *Public Health Reports* 137, no. 4 (2022): 796–802.

3 Svetislav V. Kostić, "COVID-19 and Fiscal Policies: COVID-19 and Taxation in Southeastern Europe," *Intertax* 48, no. 8/9 (2020).

4 Hrvoje Šimović, Maja Mihelja Žaja, and Marko Primorac, "Fiscal (Un)sustainability of the Croatian Healthcare System: Additional Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis," *Public Sector Economics* 45, no. 4 (2021): 495–515.

5 Bernhard Ebbinghaus, Lukas Lehner, and Elias Naumann, "Welfare State Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Change and Continuity in Public Attitudes Towards Social Policies in Germany," *European Policy Analysis* 8, no. 3 (2022): 297–311.

6 Colin C. Williams, Abbi Kadir, Sara Nadin, and Tim Vorley, "Evaluating the Extent and Nature of the Informalization of Employment Relations in South-East Europe," *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 19, no. 2 (2013): 91–107; Birgit Pfau-Effinger, "Informal Employment in the Poor European Periphery," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 37, no. 7/8 (2017): 387–399.

and expanded unemployment benefits, were introduced across the region. Yet, these initiatives often fell short of addressing the scale of the crisis due to limited fiscal resources and administrative inefficiencies.⁷ Tourism, a major economic driver in countries such as Montenegro and Croatia, was devastated by the collapse of international travel, leading to sharp GDP contractions.⁸ The cessation of tourism-related income had cascading effects on employment, business revenues, and government tax collections, deepening the economic crisis across the region.

The pandemic also stressed societal cohesion and intergenerational solidarity in particular, as COVID-19 disproportionately affected older populations. This was the case not only for health outcomes but also regarding socio-economic security. While younger generations bore the brunt of disruptions to education, employment, and long-term prospects,⁹ pension systems remained relatively intact across the region.¹⁰ Southeast Europe constitutes an interesting case to examine the impact of COVID-19 on intergenerational solidarity. On the one hand, the region was particularly hard-hit by the pandemic, arguably increasing the potential for a generational divide to emerge. The sharp economic contractions could have exacerbated frustrations among younger populations, who may have perceived the stringent public health measures as prioritizing the well-being of older generations at the expense of their own opportunities and social lives. On the other hand, the region's social fabric is characterized by strong familial networks and the prevalence of multigenerational households,¹¹ which tend to reduce the likelihood of intergenerational conflict.

7 Amílcar Moreira, Margarita León, Flavia Coda Moscarola, and Antonios Roumpakis, "In the Eye of the Storm ... Again! Social Policy Responses to COVID-19 in Southern Europe," *Social Policy & Administration* 55, no. 2 (2021): 339–357; Benedikt Janzen and Doina Radulescu, "Effects of COVID-19 Related Government Response Stringency and Support Policies: Evidence from European Firms," *Economic Analysis and Policy* 76 (2022): 129–145.

8 Tanja Stanišić, Miljan Leković, and Sonja Milutinović, "Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Economic Effects of Tourism in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe (CESEE) Countries," *Facta Universitatis Series: Economics and Organization* (2022): 155; Guglielmo Maria Caporale, Luis A. Gil-Alana, and Amir Imeri, "Tourism Persistence in the Southeastern European Countries: The Impact of COVID-19," *Cogent Economics & Finance* 11, no. 2 (2023): 2280349.

9 F. Marijn Stok, Michèle Bal, Mara A. Yerkes, and John B. F. de Wit, "Social Inequality and Solidarity in Times of COVID-19," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 12 (2021): 6339.

10 David Natali, "Pensions in the Age of COVID-19: Recent Changes and Future Challenges," *SSRN Scholarly Paper* (Social Science Research Network, 2020).

11 Karen Glaser, Rachel Stuchbury, Debora Price, Giorgio Di Gessa, Eloi Ribe, and Anthea Tinker, "Trends in the Prevalence of Grandparents Living with Grandchild(ren) in Selected European Countries and the United States," *European Journal of Ageing* 15, no. 3 (2018): 237–250.

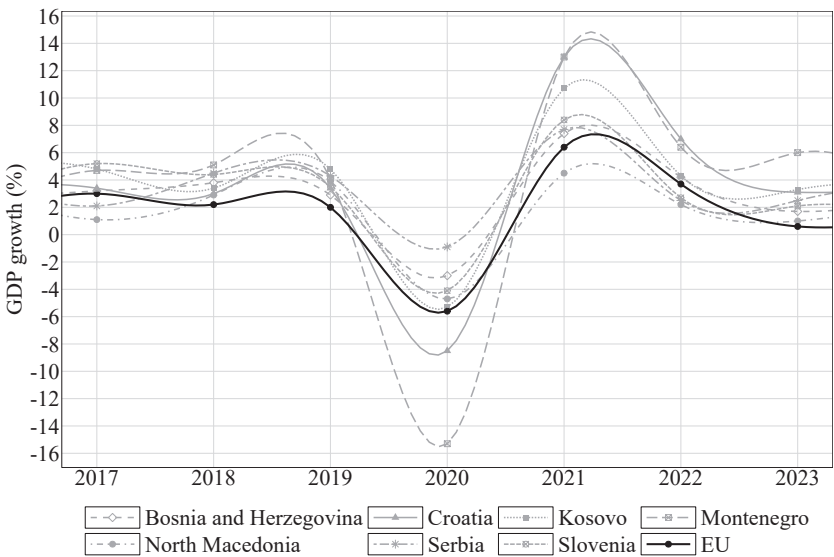
In addition to examining the macroeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter focuses on intergenerational solidarity because it is essential to understanding the broader economic consequences of the crisis. First, the pandemic forced societies into a rare and explicit confrontation with generational trade-offs. Public health measures after all were not neutral. Lockdowns, vaccine prioritization, and economic shutdowns disproportionately protected older populations while shifting the economic burden onto younger ones. These were not abstract dilemmas but morally charged choices. Second, the economic fallout itself was unevenly distributed across age groups. Younger people suffered sharp losses in employment, education, and life-course progression, while older populations remained comparatively shielded. Third, focusing on intergenerational solidarity allows us to move beyond surface-level economic indicators like GDP growth or employment rates, and instead ask more fundamental questions about the values that underpin crisis responses. It exposes how societies prioritize protection, whose lives and livelihoods are treated as most worth safeguarding, and what kinds of sacrifices are deemed acceptable or necessary.

The chapter proceeds in two parts. First, it traces the pandemic's impact on Southeast European economies by examining GDP growth, fiscal deficits, and emergency spending using data from the IMF and World Bank. Second, it turns to the question of intergenerational solidarity, exploring how short-term crisis responses may have reshaped long-standing assumptions about fairness and obligation between age groups. Particular attention is given to the role of nationalism and populism in shaping public opinion on these issues. As the crisis unfolded, initial support for prioritizing older populations began to erode, especially among those with stronger nationalist and populist views. By 2023, resentment toward policies seen as overly protective of the elderly became polarized along ideological lines—yet another dimension to the deepening cleavages organized around these two axes of political competition.

Macroeconomic Fallout: Health versus Wealth

We begin by looking at the most obvious metric, GDP growth in annual percentage change, in figure 6.1. Most countries that are the focus of this book, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, suffered a negative GDP growth of around -3% to -5% in the first pandemic year of 2020. Serbia did notably better, limiting its GDP contraction to -0.9%.

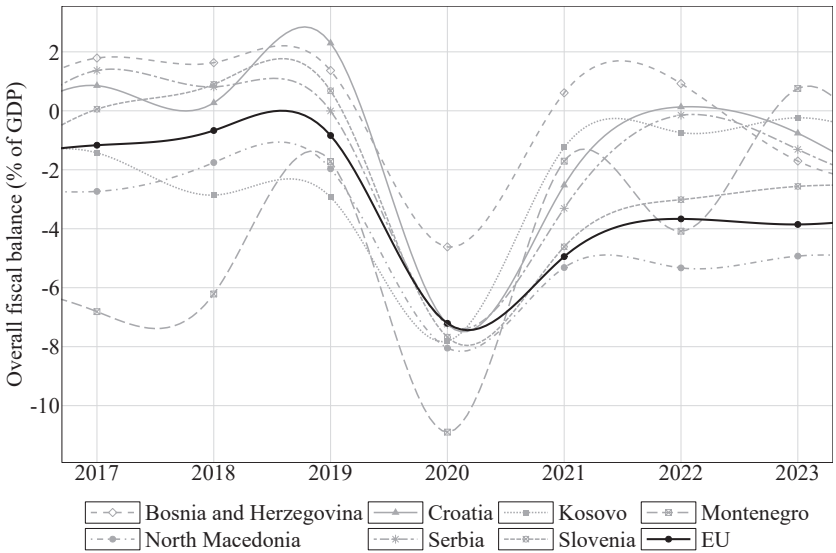
Figure 6.1. GDP growth in Southeast Europe and the EU (annual percentage change)



Countries that did markedly worse are Croatia and Montenegro, which recorded a negative growth of -8% and -15% respectively. While these two countries bounced back the strongest in 2021, it is important to remember that the graph shows the GDP growth relative to the GDP of the prior year. Therefore, a more severe negative growth lowers the economic base for the growth figure of the following year, making even modest increases in GDP result in high relative growth rates. The GDP of the EU as a whole contracted by 5.6% in 2020 compared to 2019, similar to most countries in Southeast Europe.

We now turn to examining the overall fiscal balance as a percentage of GDP (total government revenues minus total expenditures), depicted in figure 6.2, to assess how governments in Southeast Europe and the EU managed the fiscal consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, most countries in the region, as well as the EU, maintained modest fiscal deficits or balanced budgets. However, 2020 saw a sharp and universal deterioration in fiscal balances across all countries due to the economic fallout of the pandemic and the extraordinary government spending it necessitated. Montenegro recorded the steepest fiscal deficit, approaching 11% of its GDP. Bosnia and Herzegovina had the smallest deficit in 2020, amounting to only 4.5% of their GDP. Other countries, including

Figure 6.2. Overall fiscal balance in Southeast Europe and the EU (% of GDP)

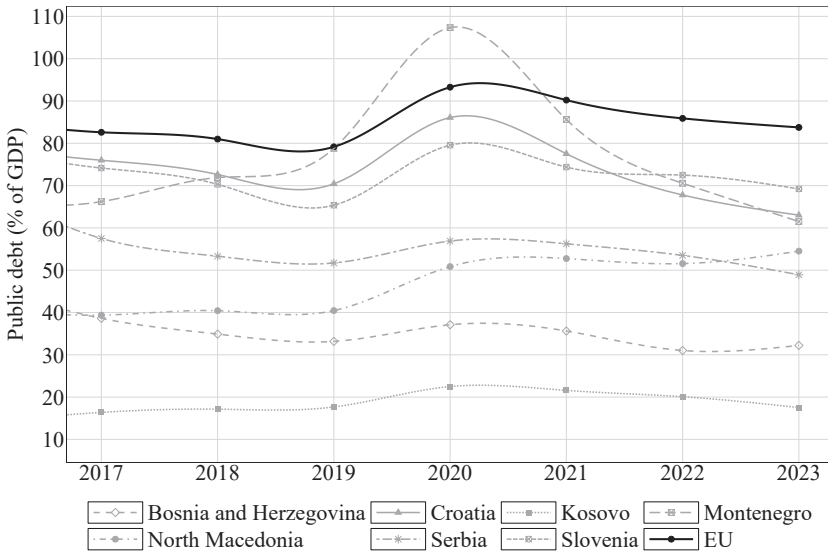


Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia registered deficits of around 7% to 8% of GDP. This is again comparable to the average fiscal deficit in the EU, which hovered around 7%.

The drop in GDP growth, combined with a widening fiscal deficit, unsurprisingly led to a substantial rise in public debt levels across countries, as illustrated in figure 6.3. In the years preceding the pandemic, most Southeast European countries maintained relatively stable or gradually increasing debt levels. The pandemic in 2020 marked a turning point, with public debt surging across all countries due to emergency fiscal measures and sharp declines in GDP. Among Southeast European (SEE) countries, Montenegro recorded the most dramatic increase, with debt surging to nearly 110% of GDP. This is largely the result of a precarious pre-pandemic situation. Montenegro's debt was already quickly rising due to infrastructure investments such as the Bar-Boljare highway. The EU average, represented by the black line, increased from approximately 80% of GDP pre-pandemic to nearly 90% at its peak in 2020. Post-pandemic, most countries began to stabilize or slightly reduce their debt levels as economies recovered and emergency spending decreased.

Previous sections have relied on relative indicators—such as GDP contraction, public debt ratios, and fiscal deficits—to assess the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent of government responses.

Figure 6.3. Public debt in Southeast Europe and the EU (% of GDP)

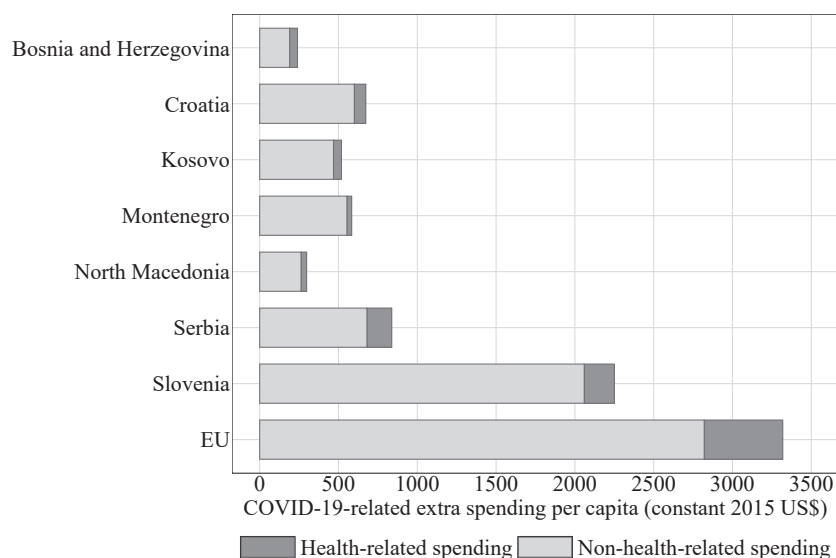


While these metrics are helpful in gauging the proportional effort made by different countries, they can be misleading when it comes to actual capacity.¹² A 10% increase in public spending may reflect equal effort across countries, but not equal means. Wealthier states can mobilize far greater sums than poorer ones, even when spending the same share of GDP. As a result, comparisons based solely on relative indicators risk obscuring the fundamental disparities in what governments could actually deliver. To better capture these differences, it is necessary to move from relative percentages to the absolute resources available per person to combat the crisis. This matters especially when key supplies such as vaccines, protective equipment, or ventilators must be purchased on global markets where prices are fixed in absolute terms. A government's ability to respond effectively thus depended not just on its willingness to spend, but on how much real spending power it could bring to bear.

Figure 6.4 presents COVID-19-related extra spending per capita, expressed in constant 2015 US dollars. We calculated this by multiplying each country's reported pandemic spending as a percentage of GDP with its 2019 GDP per

12 Francesco Bartolucci, Misbah T. Choudhry, Enrico Marelli, and Marcello Signorelli, "GDP Dynamics and Unemployment Changes in Developed and Developing Countries," *Applied Economics* 50, no. 31 (2018): 3338–3356.

Figure 6.4. COVID-19-related extra spending per capita in Southeast Europe and the EU (constant 2015 US\$)



capita.¹³ The result is a standardized measure of how much each government was effectively able to spend per resident. The disparities are stark. While the EU average reached approximately 3,319 USD per capita, no Southeast European country matched that level. Only Slovenia comes close, with an estimated 2,251 USD per person in extra spending. All other countries in the region fall far behind: Serbia allocated around 838 USD, Kosovo just over 500 USD, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia less than 300 USD per capita. These figures demonstrate that seemingly similar efforts—when measured in percentage terms—translate into vastly different realities on the ground. Serbia’s 838 USD in per capita spending, for example, represented over 12% of its GDP. A high effort in relative terms, but modest in absolute capacity. Governments in Southeast Europe faced much tighter fiscal constraints, smaller tax bases, and higher risk premiums, severely limiting their capacity to cushion the economic and social blow of the pandemic. In practical terms, this meant less money available for hospitals, wage subsidies, and emergency relief.

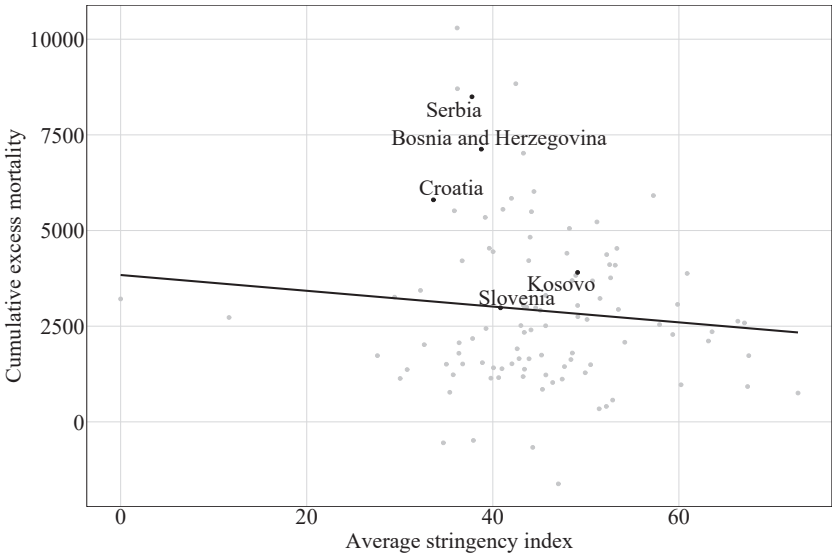
13 Ivan Nikolić and Sanja Filipović, “Comparative Analysis of the Economic Policy Response to COVID-19 in the EU-27 and Republic of Serbia,” *Ekonomika Preduzeća* 69, no. 7–8 (2021): 460–475.

The economic lockdown measures, and the government spending that they necessitated, were not without merit. A recurring narrative, often echoed by populist leaders, was that stringent lockdowns would devastate national economies while providing only marginal public health benefits. However, when we look at the relationship between stringency and mortality in figure 6.5, we see clear empirical support for this trade-off. In constructing this figure, we use the average stringency index over the course of the pandemic to capture the overall intensity of restrictions and compare it to the most recent available data on cumulative excess mortality per capita. Countries that implemented stricter and more sustained lockdown measures tended to lose fewer people to the pandemic, suggesting that the health benefits of lockdowns were real and significant. The downward slope of the trend line underscores this point: greater policy stringency was associated with lower excess mortality. Several studies have corroborated this dynamic in multivariate analyses, suggesting that while stringent lockdown measures imposed short-term economic costs, they ultimately reduced excess mortality and prevented more severe long-term economic consequences associated with uncontrolled viral transmission.¹⁴

A further examination of the graph reveals that several Southeast European countries occupy a distinctive position, with relatively moderate stringency levels but higher-than-expected excess mortality rates compared to other countries. This pattern suggests that many SEE countries may have experienced the economic downsides of the pandemic without fully reaping the protective health benefits associated with stricter lockdown rules. In chapters 4 and 5, we already discussed some of the likely culprits for this. Chapter 4 highlighted how public support for lockdown measures was closely linked to populism and nationalism, with stronger populist and nationalist sentiments correlating with lower compliance and support for restrictive public health measures. Chapter 5 expanded on this by examining the role of conspiracy beliefs during the pandemic, revealing that nationalist and populist segments of the population were more prone to endorsing COVID-19 conspiracies. This dual dynamic—weakened public

14 Francesco Giuli and Gabriele Maugeri, “The Role of NPIs in the COVID-19 Health-Economic Trade-Off: The Italian Case,” *SSRN Scholarly Paper* (Social Science Research Network, 2024); Christian Morgenstern, Daniel J. Laydon, Charles Whittaker, Swapnil Mishra, David Haw, Samir Bhatt, and Neil M. Ferguson, “The Interaction of Disease Transmission, Mortality, and Economic Output Over the First 2 Years of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 6 (2024): e0301785; Simon Galmiche, Camille Coustaury, Kelly Charniga, Rebecca Grant, Simon Cauchemez, Arnaud Fontanet, Brigitte Autran, et al., “Patterns and Drivers of Excess Mortality During the COVID-19 Pandemic in 13 Western European Countries,” *BMC Global and Public Health* 2, no. 1 (2024): 78.

Figure 6.5. Stringency of COVID-19 measures and cumulative excess mortality



compliance and heightened conspiratorial thinking—likely contributed to the SEE region’s relatively poor public health outcomes despite moderate intervention stringency. In chapter 7, we discuss how the slow and contested vaccination efforts in the region further exacerbated matters.

Intergenerational Tensions: Public Opinion on Trade-Offs During COVID-19

The severe economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic forced societies worldwide to confront unprecedented challenges. For nations with less prosperous economies, such as those in Southeast Europe, the pandemic’s dual pressures on public health systems and economic stability magnified existing vulnerabilities. Governments in the region faced stark choices: how to allocate limited resources effectively, mitigate long-term economic decline, and protect the lives of their citizens—particularly the most vulnerable. These pressures did not merely manifest as fiscal or monetary dilemmas. They also gave rise to deeply moral and social questions, exposing intergenerational tensions and forcing societies to weigh competing priorities. Should safeguarding economic opportunities for the younger generations take precedence over protecting older populations most at risk

from the virus? How do societies reconcile the ethical imperative to save lives with the practical need to sustain livelihoods?

Societies were confronted with these questions at a time when many were facing severe challenges in maintaining their mechanisms of intergenerational solidarity. At its core, intergenerational solidarity in healthcare and pensions relies on a simple yet fundamental economic mechanism: younger, working-age generations finance the welfare needs of older, retired generations through taxation and social security contributions. This so-called pay-as-you-go (PAYG) model of public pensions, which remains dominant in most European welfare states, functions on the premise that each successive generation supports the previous one, with the expectation that they, too, will receive support in old age.¹⁵ Similarly, public healthcare systems rely on contributions from active workers to fund medical care for the elderly, who are the primary consumers of healthcare services.¹⁶ Obviously, the sustainability of this system has been called into question due to demographic shifts. As birth rates declined and life expectancy increased, the ratio of workers to retirees steadily decreased, placing significant strain on welfare systems.¹⁷ Most EU countries are expected to see their aging-related cost, particularly in healthcare and pensions, increase by several percentage points of their GDP,¹⁸ sparking debates on whether current intergenerational arrangements remain equitable or whether they impose an excessive burden on younger cohorts.¹⁹ These developments have led to the emerging of a small but growing subfield in the social sciences on senior-related topics, including intergenerational tensions and age-based prejudice known as “ageism.”²⁰ That it is not just a fringe form of prejudice was demonstrated by the European Social Survey, which revealed that ageism is the most prevalent type of discrimination, reported by almost

15 Nicholas Barr, (2006) “Pensions: Overview of the issues,” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 22, no. 1 (2006): 1–14.

16 Mirela Cristea, Gratiela Georgiana Noja, Petru Stefea, and Adrian Lucian Sala, “The Impact of Population Aging and Public Health Support on EU Labor Markets,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 4 (2020): 1439.

17 S. Jay Olshansky, Simon Biggs, W. Andrew Achenbaum, Gerald C. Davison, Linda Fried, Gloria Gutman, Alexandre Kalache, et al., “The Global Agenda Council on the Ageing Society: Policy Principles,” *Global Policy* 2, no. 1 (2011): 97–105.

18 Edmund Moshhammer and Joachim Schroth, “Ageing Cost Projections—New Evidence from the 2024 Ageing Report,” *European Central Bank Bulletin Focus Box* (2024).

19 Pieter Vanhuysse, “Intergenerational Justice in Aging Societies: A Cross-National Comparison of 29 OECD countries,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2013).

20 Michael S. North and Susan T. Fiske, “An Inconvenienced Youth? Ageism and Its Potential Intergenerational Roots,” *Psychological Bulletin* 138, no. 5 (2012): 982–997.

35% of adult respondents.²¹ While ageism can be positive, most stereotypical views of elderly people are mixed to negative, viewing them as warm but incompetent and “old-fashioned.”

At the macro-level, one important factor shaping ageist attitudes is the demographic weight of older populations and the perceived strain they place on public policy systems. While cultural norms are often seen as a buffer against such attitudes, evidence from comparative studies complicates this view.²² In many Eastern societies, where Confucian traditions emphasize filial piety and reverence for the elderly, levels of ageism are surprisingly high. This runs counter to expectations that cultural respect would shield older generations from stigma. A key explanation lies in the pace of demographic aging. Countries like China and Japan are experiencing some of the fastest increases in the proportion of elderly citizens globally, intensifying concerns over healthcare costs, pension sustainability, and labor market pressures. As the elderly come to be viewed less as bearers of wisdom and more as economic dependents, perceptions of societal burden begin to displace traditional values. This shift fuels resentment and creates fertile ground for ageist narratives, even in contexts where respect for elders is ostensibly a cultural norm. In short, even in cultures with strong norms of elder respect, ageism can emerge or intensify when aging populations are perceived to place economic or social strain on society.

At the intermediate level, studies have focused almost entirely on strategies that can help reduce ageism, such as education and intergenerational contact.²³ The main findings here are that contact between the elderly and younger generations helps reduce ageism. Given that intergenerational households are more common in southeast Europe,²⁴ this should make the region more resilient and less susceptible to intergenerational tensions, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the individual level, the existing

21 Liat Ayalon, “Feelings Towards Older vs. Younger Adults: Results from the European Social Survey,” *Educational Gerontology* 39, no. 12 (2013): 888–901.

22 Sibila Marques, João Mariano, Joana Mendonça, Wouter De Tavernier, Moritz Hess, Laura Naegele, Filomena Peixeiro, and Daniel Martins, “Determinants of Ageism Against Older Adults: A Systematic Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 7 (2020): 2560.

23 David Burnes, Christine Sheppard, Charles R. Henderson, Monica Wassel, Richenda Cope, Chantal Barber, and Karl Pillemer, “Interventions to Reduce Ageism Against Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 8 (2019): e1–9; Ashley Lytle and Sheri R Levy, “Reducing Ageism: Education About Aging and Extended Contact With Older Adults,” *The Gerontologist* 59, no. 3 (2019): 580–588.

24 Bettina Isengard and Marc Szydlik, “Living Apart (or) Together? Coresidence of Elderly Parents and Their Adult Children in Europe,” *Research on Aging* 34, no. 4 (2012): 449–474.

literature on ageism largely explains it through the lens of Dual Process Theory, which posits that ideological attitudes are shaped by two core motivational systems. The first is Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which emphasizes hierarchy and dominance, and the second is Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), which prioritizes order and tradition.²⁵ While these psychological factors can help explain why some individuals develop ageist attitudes, they do not fully account for how these attitudes become widespread or politically significant. Nationalism and populism, on the other hand, play a key role in shaping how societies view older generations by influencing public debates and policy decisions. Nationalism and populism provide powerful frameworks through which political actors construct narratives about different social groups, including older generations. These ideologies do not simply reflect pre-existing societal attitudes; they actively shape perceptions by defining who belongs, who holds power, and who bears responsibility for societal challenges. Unlike individual psychological tendencies, these political forces can amplify or challenge ageist attitudes on a large scale, influencing everything from election campaigns to welfare policies. Understanding these dynamics is essential for explaining why ageism persists and how it becomes a tool in political struggles.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, governments enacted policies aimed at saving as many lives as possible by implementing strict lockdowns, reducing social interaction, and “flattening the curve.” From the onset of these measures, there was no doubt that such measures would take a heavy toll on the economy.²⁶ Suggestions that an optimal balance could be found between saving lives and limiting the economic cost of doing so were quickly dismissed. The reason for this is well known in social

25 Israel Doron and Hanna Kafka, “The Effect of Social and Cultural Factors on Ageism: Examination of the Dual-Process Motivational Model of Ideology, Politics, and Prejudice,” *Current Aging Science* 8, no. 3 (2015): 241–247; Richard S. Henry, Paul B. Perrin, and Erin R. Smith, “The Underpinnings of Ageism: Multiple Mediation Model of Epistemological Style, Social Dominance Orientation, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, and Ageist Attitudes,” *Journal of Aging Research* 1 (2019): 3672725; Linda J. Allan, James A. Johnson, and Scott D. Emerson, “The Role of Individual Difference Variables in Ageism,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 59 (2014): 32–37.

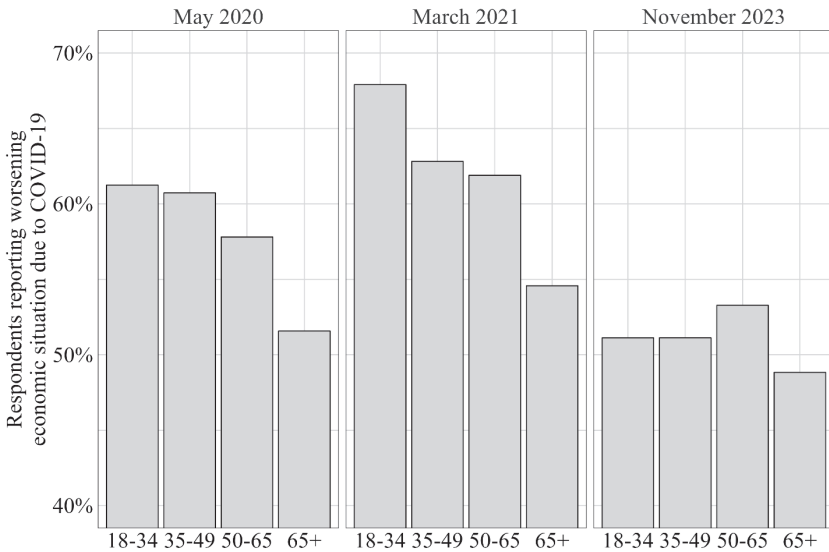
26 Carlo A. Favero, Andrea Ichino, and Aldo Rustichini, “Restarting the Economy While Saving Lives Under COVID-19,” *SSRN Scholarly Paper* (Social Science Research Network, 2020); Andrew Glover, Jonathan Heathcote, Dirk Krueger, and José-Víctor Ríos-Rull, “Health Versus Wealth: On the Distributional Effects of Controlling a Pandemic,” *Working Paper Series* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020); Robert E. Hall, Charles I. Jones, and Peter J. Klenow, “Trading Off Consumption and COVID-19 Deaths,” *Working Paper Series* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020); James K. Hammitt, “Valuing Mortality Risk in the Time of COVID-19,” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 61, no. 2 (2020): 129–154.

psychological research. Placing a monetary price on sacred values such as human life, health, love, honor, justice, and human rights is often met with indignation and outrage. Such trade-offs are thus referred to as taboo trade-offs. However, when people are confronted with a choice between two sacred values, the willingness to expend lives increases markedly. We believe this is exactly what happened over the course of the pandemic. The odds of surviving a COVID-19 infection are, *ceteris paribus*, substantially higher among younger than they are among older generations. At the same time, the economic costs of extensive lockdown measures would primarily fall on young people, and the longer social distancing rules were in place, the greater this cost would become. In other words, the pandemic involved a tragic trade-off between saving one set of lives (i.e., the young) or another (i.e., the elderly).

When we take a look at how people reported on their economic situation in our three surveys in figure 6.6, the data clearly reflect this trend. When examining one key aspect of personal COVID-19 experiences—namely, the worsening of one's economic situation due to the pandemic—it is evident that younger generations bore the brunt of the economic consequences. In the 2020 survey, over 61% of respondents aged 18–34 reported a decline in their economic situation, compared to 51% among those aged 65 and older, marking a 10-percentage-point difference. By 2021, this disparity had widened to 15 percentage points, with 68% of younger respondents experiencing economic decline, while the figure among older respondents rose more modestly to 54%. However, by 2023, economic conditions had stabilized, with roughly 50% of respondents across all age groups reporting financial difficulties.

We believe that the temporary nature of the COVID-19 pandemic made ageist policy attitudes more likely. Whenever dealing with policies related to pensions or healthcare, younger generations may be hesitant to advocate for drastic changes—recognizing that reductions in benefits will eventually affect them as well. Old age is one of the few social categories that nearly everyone can expect to enter at some point in their lives. Therefore, even younger generations can be expected to be hesitant to make sweeping structural reforms. The same logic is less applicable to the COVID-19 pandemic. The temporary nature of the crisis meant it was widely understood that the pandemic would eventually subside, allowing society to return to normal within at most several years. As a result, younger individuals could support policies that prioritized their own interests, even at the expense of the elderly, without the long-term self-interest considerations that apply to permanent welfare structures.

Figure 6.6. Worsening economic situation due to COVID-19



Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic brought ageism to the forefront, reinforcing stereotypes of older adults as frail, dependent, and burdensome to society. Public discourse often framed the virus as a disease primarily affecting the elderly, leading to the perception that protective measures disproportionately benefited older individuals at the expense of younger generations.²⁷ Social media further exacerbated this divide, as derogatory terms such as “boomer remover” and “coffin dodger” circulated widely, devaluing the lives of older adults and suggesting that their deaths were inevitable or even desirable.²⁸ In our earlier work, we demonstrated that when framed that way, people were more likely to favor sacrificing some (elderly) lives in order to reduce the scope of the economic crisis, already suggesting limits to intergenerational solidarity.²⁹

27 Federica Spaccatini, Ilaria Giovannelli, and Maria Giuseppina Pacilli, “‘You Are Stealing Our Present’: Younger People’s Ageism Towards Older People Predicts Attitude Towards Age-Based COVID-19 Restriction Measures,” *Journal of Social Issues* 78, no. 4 (2022): 769–789.

28 Antonius D. Skipper and Daniel J. Rose, “#BoomerRemover: COVID-19, Ageism, and the Intergenerational Twitter Response,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 57 (2021): 100929.

29 Christophe Lesschaeve, Josip Glaurdić, and Michal Mochtak, “Health Versus Wealth During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Saving Lives or Saving the Economy?,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2021): 808–835.

Ageism during COVID-19 extended beyond rhetoric into policy decisions, particularly in the allocation of healthcare resources. In several countries, age was used as an explicit or implicit criterion for rationing intensive care, ventilators, and vaccines.³⁰ This practice was justified under the guise of medical pragmatism, with older individuals deprioritized in favor of younger patients who were perceived as having a greater “social utility” or life expectancy. In Italy, for instance, policymakers and medical professionals debated whether older adults should be excluded from critical care in the event of overwhelming demand. Beyond healthcare, government-mandated restrictions also disproportionately affected older adults. In some countries, older individuals faced prolonged lockdowns, even as restrictions were lifted for younger populations. For instance, in Serbia, people over 65 were prohibited from leaving their homes, while younger people had to stick to a curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m.³¹ While these measures were framed as protective, they often resulted in social isolation, increased loneliness, and restricted access to essential services.³²

In our own data, we examined how attitudes towards this tragic trade-off evolved over the course of the pandemic through various survey questions. In the 2020 survey wave, we conducted an experiment, presenting respondents with 10 scenarios—each representing different ways to deal with the health versus wealth trade-off. They ranged from a scenario where lives would be saved at any economic cost, to a scenario where the economic ramification would be minimal but where the virus would be able to spread unchecked. In an experimental condition, this trade-off was reframed in a way that emphasized the differential consequential for younger and older generations, explaining that saving the economy would benefit the former and saving lives the latter. In this chapter, we only look at the responses from this experimental condition. In the 2021 survey wave, we examine responses to a question that asked whether young people should be vaccinated before the elderly. In the 2023 survey wave, we asked respondents whether, looking

30 Marcela Fernandes Silva, Diego Salvador Muniz Da Silva, Aldiane Gomes De Macedo Bacurau, Priscila Maria Stolses Bergamo Francisco, Daniela De Assumpção, Anita Liberalesso Neri, and Flávia Silva Arbex Borim, “Ageism Against Older Adults in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Integrative Review,” *Revista de Saúde Pública* 55 (2021): 4.

31 B. Stamenković, “Uvedena zabrana kretanja noću, starijima od 65 zabranjen izlazak,” *Južne vesti*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.juznevesti.com/politika/uvedena-zabrana-kretanja-nocu-starijima-od-65-zabranjen-izlazak/>.

32 Maria Gabriella Melchiorre, Stefania Cerea, Marco Socci, and Giovanni Lamura, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Frail Older People Ageing in Place Alone in Two Italian Cities: Functional Limitations, Care Arrangements and Available Services,” *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 3 (2024): e0298074.

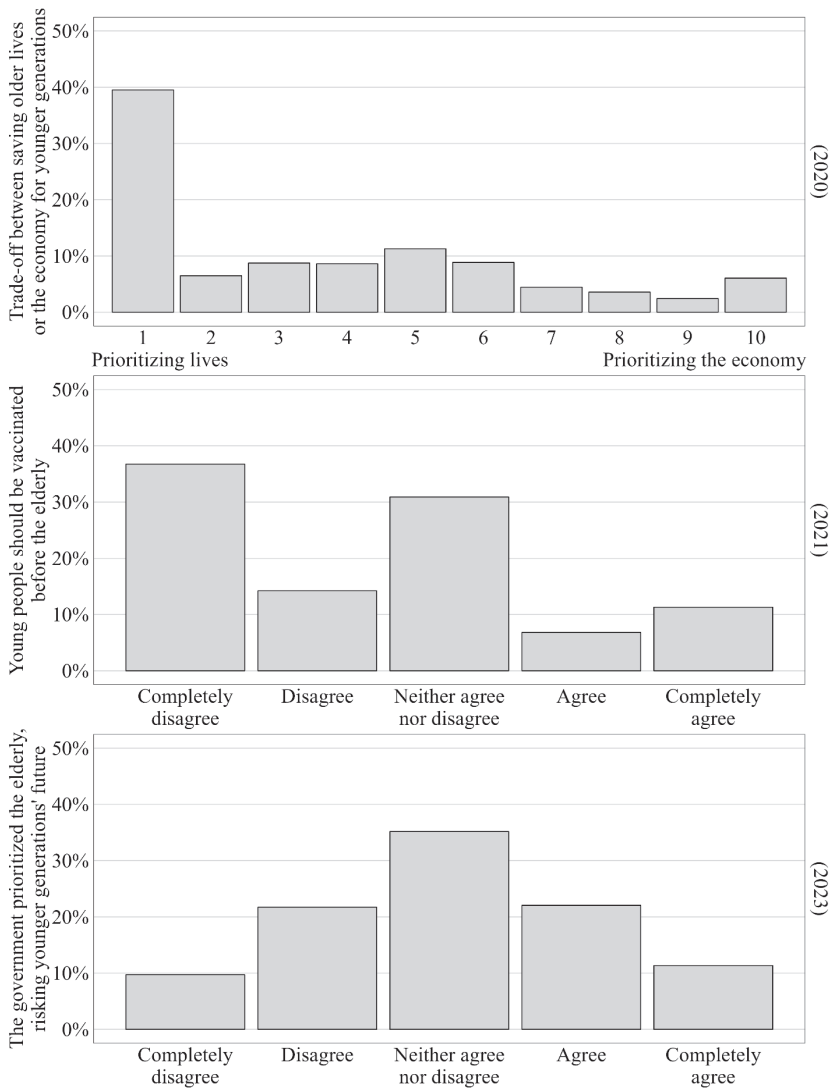
back, the government put too much emphasis on protecting the elderly from COVID-19, jeopardizing the future of younger generations.

There are obvious differences between these questions that complicate comparison, but they collectively allow us to trace the evolution of public attitudes toward intergenerational solidarity. While differing in context and timing, these survey items address a shared underlying tension: prioritizing the health of older generations versus safeguarding the economic and social futures of younger generations. Although the 2020 and 2023 questions directly address the trade-off between health and wealth—explicitly framing it as a generational conflict between younger and older populations—the 2021 vaccine prioritization question can also be meaningfully compared to them. At its core, the vaccine question encapsulates the same underlying dilemma. Vaccinating younger people first would likely have facilitated a faster reopening of the economy, alleviating the economic burdens disproportionately borne by younger generations. However, this approach would have left older populations, who were at significantly higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19, more vulnerable. Conversely, prioritizing older individuals for vaccination safeguarded their health but delayed broader economic recovery.

We analyze the distributions of the three items presented in figure 6.7. Although direct comparisons pose challenges, a discernible trend emerges across the three panels. In the top panel, which depicts the distribution of responses to scenarios balancing the trade-off between saving lives and protecting the economy, the data exhibit a strong skew toward scenarios prioritizing the preservation of lives, regardless of economic consequences. While the majority of respondents expressed a willingness to make some level of trade-off between these two considerations, nearly 40% firmly advocated saving lives at any financial cost—even if it entailed compromising future opportunities for younger generations. This distribution underscores a clear preference for prioritizing the protection of (older) lives, with only a small minority favoring significant economic sacrifices that disproportionately affected the elderly.

The second panel focuses on responses to the question of who should be prioritized for vaccination. Here, a similar reluctance to deprioritize older generations is evident. Approximately 50% of respondents strongly or somewhat disagreed with the idea of granting preferential vaccination access to younger generations. However, there is greater variation in opinion compared to the first scenario, with over 30% of respondents expressing neutrality or uncertainty regarding whether younger individuals should receive vaccines first. Between 2020 and 2021, public opinion became less

Figure 6.7. Distributions of intergenerational attitudes



unequivocally supportive of intergenerational solidarity favoring the elderly. By 2023, this divide had grown more pronounced. In the final panel, where respondents reflected on their government’s pandemic policies—specifically whether too much emphasis was placed on protecting older generations at the expense of younger cohorts—data reveal a marked split in public opinion. Respondents are divided into three nearly equal groups: one-third disagreed with the idea that older generations were excessively prioritized,

one-third expressed neutrality, and one-third agreed with the statement. Collectively, these results suggest a significant evolution in public sentiment over the course of the pandemic. While initial attitudes leaned strongly toward intergenerational solidarity and prioritizing the elderly, by 2023, public opinion had fractured into an evenly distributed set of perspectives.

In the preceding descriptive analysis, we traced the evolution of public attitudes toward intergenerational trade-offs over the course of the pandemic, focusing on the tension between saving older lives and safeguarding the economic and social prospects of younger generations. We now turn to exploring how these attitudes are shaped by the ideological beliefs of nationalism and populism in a multivariate analysis. At the onset of the pandemic, societal norms around the sanctity of life provided a strong moral foundation for prioritizing the protection of older generations. The ethical imperative to save lives—particularly those most vulnerable—overrode economic considerations, creating broad societal consensus for lockdown measures and resource allocation to safeguard public health. However, as the pandemic progressed and its economic consequences deepened, this initial solidarity began to erode, as shown in figure 6.8. The figure presents predicted probabilities derived from the logistic regression models reported in tables A6.2–A6.4 of the appendix, allowing us to visualize how support for intergenerational solidarity shifts across levels of nationalist and populist orientation. We argue, however, that this erosion was particularly pronounced among those with nationalist and populist worldviews.

Nationalism emphasizes the preservation of the nation's perceived strength, unity, and future potential. Over time, the prolonged economic downturn caused by pandemic policies—such as lockdowns and reduced economic activity—might have started to be considered a threat to the nation's vitality. The economic sacrifices made to protect older generations, who contribute less directly to the workforce and nation's strength, may have been viewed as undermining the nation's long-term resilience. This could result in a shift in public support among citizens with stronger nationalist views toward policies that prioritize younger generations.

For populists, we might expect a decline in intergenerational solidarity stemming from their inherent distrust of elites and institutions, as well as their focus on addressing perceived grievances of the “true and ordinary” people.³³ During the pandemic, the fact that the main policy focus lay on

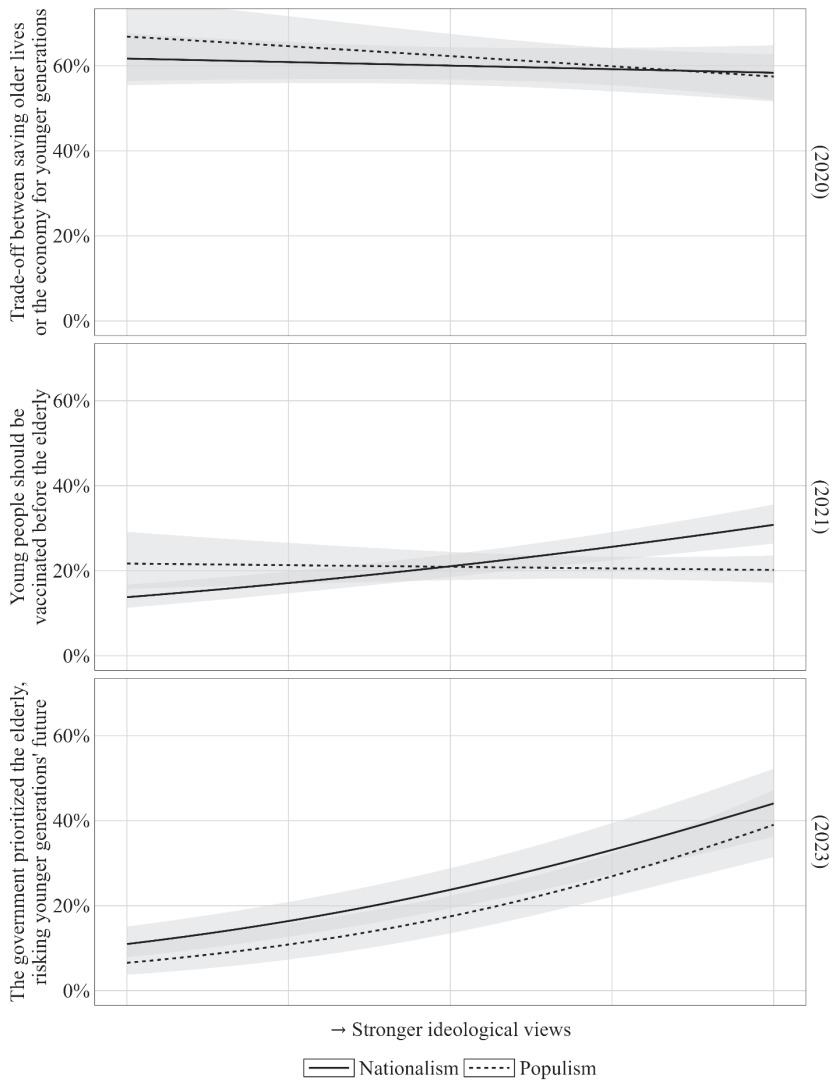
33 Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford University Press, 2017).

prioritizing the lives of the elderly could have been interpreted by citizens with stronger populist views as representing an elite-driven, out-of-touch agenda. As lockdowns extended and the economic crisis deepened, populist narratives may have framed these policies as disproportionately burdening younger, working-age citizens. This critique of policies protecting the elderly at the expense of a quicker reopening of the economy could also be amplified by the perception that governments were unable to balance the competing societal needs of various generations effectively, with populist citizens viewing pandemic policies as overly cautious or ineffective.

To test these expectations, we use dichotomized versions of all three variables. For the 2020 variable, we distinguish between respondents who preferred minimum deaths at the expense of maximum unemployment (scenario 1), and respondents who chose any of the other nine scenarios. For the 2021 and 2023 variables, we separate those who agree or fully agree with the statements, and those who disagree or are neutral. The relations between the three dichotomized variables and nationalist and populist attitudes are then tested in the multivariate model that we use throughout the book. Figure 6.8 shows the results of these analyses. The top panel explores preferences regarding the trade-off between saving older lives and protecting the economy for younger generations. It is clear that respondents regardless of their nationalist or populist views on politics and society were firmly committed to preserving lives, with approximately 60–70% favoring life-saving measures regardless of economic cost across the ideological spectrum. Crucially, the models showed no statistically significant relation between either nationalism or populism, and intergenerational solidarity in 2020.

The middle panel shifts focus to the question of vaccine prioritization in 2021: Should younger people be vaccinated before older individuals? Here, the relationship between ideological views and intergenerational preferences becomes more pronounced. Unlike the analysis from the 2020 data, stronger nationalist views were now associated with a gradual increase in support for prioritizing younger generations. The relation between nationalism and intergenerational solidarity was highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Among non-nationalists, about 12% of respondents favored vaccinating younger people before the elderly. Among those with strong nationalist convictions 28% favored it. Populist views, on the other hand, were still unrelated to intergenerational solidarity. The bottom panel examines retrospective evaluations of whether governments placed excessive emphasis on protecting older generations, thereby jeopardizing the futures of younger people. Here, the relationship between ideology and attitudes became the

Figure 6.8. Questioning intergenerational solidarity, by ideology, adjusting for confounders



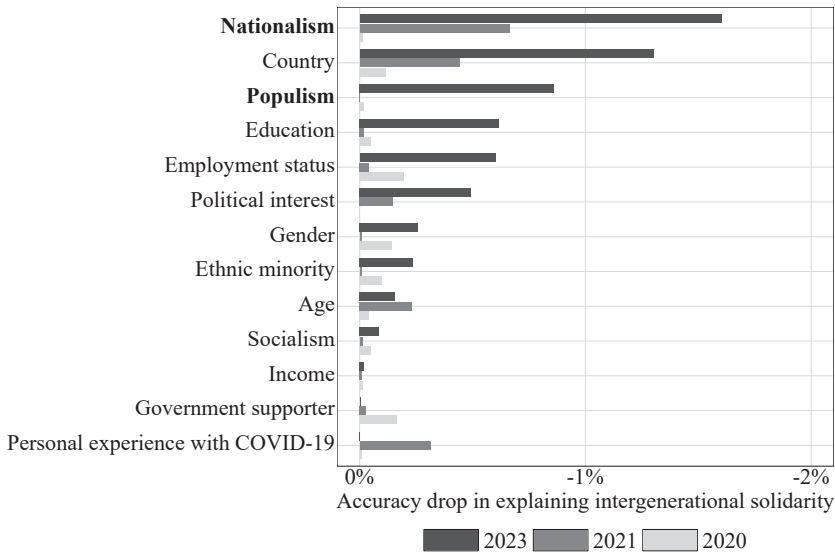
most striking. Both nationalist and populist orientations were positively correlated with agreement that governments over-prioritized the elderly. Among non-nationalists and non-populists, about 14 and 7% believed that the government put too much emphasis on protecting the elderly, respectively. Among those with strong nationalist and populist convictions, this was 47 and 44%, respectively. Taken together, the patterns across figure 6.9

and figure 6.8 reveal important insights into the role of nationalism and populism in shaping intergenerational solidarity in Southeast Europe. While initial attitudes toward pandemic trade-offs reflected widespread moral commitments to saving lives, this commitment began to fracture as the pandemic dragged on and the economic consequences of the extensive lockdown measures became more and more clear. What is more important is that these fractures occurred according to pre-existing ideological beliefs.

Figure 6.9 shows how important were the various explanatory variables of the multivariate models that were used for figure 6.8. To the extent that we can deduce an evolution by comparing the three survey questions, it is clear that political ideology, nationalism and populism in particular, became more important in shaping people's attitudes towards intergenerational solidarity during the pandemic in Southeast Europe. Both were irrelevant in 2020, as were most explanatory variables. This further demonstrates the broad consensus that favored saving lives at any cost. Nationalism became the most important factor in explaining intergenerational solidarity in 2021 and remained the most pivotal variable in 2023. Populism was still irrelevant in 2021 but emerged as a key factor in 2023. Another important variable is education, with a positive relation to intergenerational solidarity. Among the lower educated, 28% believed in 2023 that the government prioritized the elderly too much, while this was only 16% among the higher educated. Country also played a substantial role, with primarily Bosnia and Herzegovina deviating from the other countries in the sample. There only 28% felt that younger generation were disregarded in COVID-19 policies, while this is between 40 and 50% in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia. This is likely a consequence of Bosnia and Herzegovina taking fewer lockdown measures and doing so for a shorter time.

Variables notable for their lack of a strong effect are socialism and age. Socialism, despite its obvious importance in shaping the course of Southeast Europe, is non-significant for all three intergenerational solidarity questions. Age is a statistically significant explanatory variable in 2021 and 2023, but substantively minor. More interesting are the directions of its effect. While older respondents in 2023 disagreed with the suggestion that the government prioritized the elderly too much, in the 2021 survey, older respondents agreed more with the statement that younger people should be vaccinated first. This shift may reflect the evolving context of the pandemic. In 2021, when vaccine access was still limited and tightly managed, older respondents may have viewed prioritizing younger people as a reasonable concession. By 2023, however, with vaccination normalized, older individuals were more likely to reject the idea that they had been favored.

Figure 6.9. Importance of factors in explaining intergeneration solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic



Conclusion

The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Europe was not merely a crisis—it was an unmasking. The region’s economic fragility, long concealed by short-term growth and external investments, was laid bare, exposing the precarious foundations upon which many of its economies rest. Countries like Montenegro and Croatia, so deeply dependent on the volatile tourism sector, found themselves in economic freefall, while governments scrambled to provide fiscal relief with hands tied by pre-existing debt and limited financial autonomy. The pandemic did not create these vulnerabilities; it merely amplified problems that had long been humming beneath the surface.

Yet, the economic devastation was not suffered equally. A stark intergenerational divide emerged, as younger populations bore the brunt of economic hardship while older generations were shielded, at least in the short term, through prioritization in public health responses. Frustration simmered as governments enacted lockdowns and restrictions that disproportionately affected the working-age population, many of whom found themselves jobless, underpaid, or stranded without adequate social safety nets. The reliance on informal employment, a well-known but politically inconvenient

truth in Southeast Europe, only worsened the crisis, leaving large portions of the workforce invisible to government relief programs.

But this was more than an economic crisis; it was a social litmus test. In 2020, when the virus loomed as an immediate and terrifying threat, the consensus was clear: save lives at all costs. As the pandemic dragged on, however, that unity fractured. Society became more divided over time. Crucially, these divisions were not random—they aligned with the region's core political cleavages: nationalism and populism. By 2021, nationalist attitudes had begun to correlate with opposition to prioritizing older individuals for vaccination. By 2023, both nationalist and populist beliefs were strong predictors of resentment toward governments' perceived overprotection of the elderly. Nationalists, perceiving economic stagnation as an existential threat to national strength, framed pandemic restrictions as unnecessary shackles that weakened the nation. Populists, ever distrustful of elites, painted COVID-19 measures as prioritizing the elderly at the expense of "ordinary people." To our knowledge, this is the first time that ageism and attitudes toward prioritizing the young versus the old have been explicitly linked to ideological beliefs. Given the extent to which right-wing and nationalist politicians across Europe and beyond have voiced similar sentiments, we believe comparable findings would emerge elsewhere.

The findings of this chapter underscore the profound impact of pre-existing ideological forces on the region's pandemic response. Nationalism and populism, far from being abstract concepts, played a tangible and consequential role in shaping public attitudes and policy outcomes during the crisis. As Southeast Europe emerges from the shadow of the pandemic, the region faces a daunting set of challenges. The economic scars—soaring public debt and strained fiscal capacities—will take years to heal. More critically, the erosion of intergenerational solidarity, fueled by nationalist and populist ideologies, threatens social cohesion and long-term stability. This will not be the last crisis that will test these ideological and intergenerational tensions. Societies across Europe are aging rapidly, and the diverging interests of young and old will continue to shape economic policies, social protections, and political discourse. The challenge ahead is not merely to recover from the pandemic but to develop more sustainable frameworks that balance the needs of different generations and mitigate the growing rifts between them. If Southeast Europe is to avoid deeper political and economic fragmentation in future crises, it must confront its structural vulnerabilities and rethink how it navigates the intersection of ideology, governance, and social solidarity.

7. Moving the Needle: The Politics of Vaccine Hesitancy

Abstract: Low COVID-19 vaccination rates emerged as one of the most proximate causes of excess mortality in Southeast Europe after 2021. Vaccine uptake varied sharply across countries and communities, reflecting not only differences in access or information, but deeply politicized patterns of trust and authority. Drawing on large-scale survey waves and municipal-level vaccination data from Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia, this chapter examines the political determinants of vaccine hesitancy. It shows that populist attitudes, more than nationalism, consistently reduced willingness to vaccinate. Vaccination behavior thus mirrored broader ideological cleavages, revealing public health compliance as a form of political behavior embedded in contested state-citizen relations.

Keywords: vaccine hesitancy, populism, nationalism, political trust, COVID-19 pandemic, Southeast Europe

For all the problems countries of Southeast Europe had in mitigating the effects of the pandemic during its first several waves, things could have turned out differently had the vaccination drives in the region been successful. If one is looking for the most proximate cause of high COVID-19 mortality throughout Southeast Europe after the spring of 2021, severe vaccine hesitancy is the prime candidate. Vaccination rates in the countries of the region ranged from a mere 29.1% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 59.7% in Slovenia, placing them among the continent's poorest performers. While challenges in procurement, distribution, and the disorganized operations of local public health authorities undoubtedly contributed to these low figures, the core issue appears to have been the exceptionally high level of vaccine hesitancy among their populations. What factors could account

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for that? Why were citizens of Southeast Europe so reluctant to receive COVID-19 vaccines?

The rapidly growing body of research on the COVID-19 pandemic highlights several factors likely influencing support for vaccination efforts, both at individual and aggregate levels. These include education, socioeconomic status, trust in public health institutions, and the extent of exposure to the pandemic's economic and health impacts.¹ We contend, however, that vaccination has also become a profoundly political act. Vaccine hesitancy should, therefore, be analyzed using the same frameworks political scientists apply to other political behaviors, such as voting or engaging in protest. While research on the political underpinnings of vaccine hesitancy outside the US remains limited, the politicization of public health during the pandemic underscores that political dynamics are central to vaccine acceptance worldwide, including in Southeast Europe. To some extent, this is not surprising since the state's authority over bodily autonomy and the debate surrounding individual social responsibility in vaccination directly engage deeply held ideological beliefs.

In this chapter, we tackle the question of the political determinants of vaccine hesitancy by analyzing two sets of data. First, we examine the results of two large surveys we administered on representative samples of more than ten thousand respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. The first survey was run in the spring of 2021, i.e., at the onset of the second large wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths, as well as at the onset of the vaccination drives in the region. The second survey wave was run in the fall of 2023, as the region and the world basically

1 Daniel Albrecht, "Vaccination, Politics, and COVID-19 Impacts," *BMC Public Health* 22 (2022): 96; Dragan Bačić, Anja Šuljak, and Branko Ančić, "Determinants and Reasons for Coronavirus Disease 2019 Vaccine Hesitancy in Croatia," *Croatian Medical Journal* 63, no. 1 (2022): 89–97; Amila Fojnica et al., "COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance and Rejection in an Adult Population in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 2 (2022): e0264754; Jagdish Khubchandani et al., "COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy in the United States: A Rapid National Assessment," *Journal of Community Health* 46, no. 2 (2021): 270–277; Senad Musa et al., "COVID-19 Risk Perception, Trust in Institutions and Negative Affect Drive Positive COVID-19 Vaccine Intentions," *International Journal of Public Health* 67 (2022): 1604231; Anca D. Popa et al., "Determinants of the Hesitancy Toward COVID-19 Vaccination in Eastern European Countries and the Relationship with Health and Vaccine Literacy: A Literature Review," *Vaccines* 10, no. 5 (2022): 672; Paul L. Reiter, Michael L. Pennell, and Mira L. Katz, "Acceptability of a COVID-19 Vaccine Among Adults in the United States: How Many People Would Get Vaccinated?," *Vaccine* 38, no. 42 (2020): 6500–6507; K. Viswanath et al., "Individual and Social Determinants of COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake," *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021): 1–10; Joris Wynen et al., "Taking a COVID-19 Vaccine or Not? Do Trust in Government and Trust in Experts Help Us to Understand Vaccination Intention?," *Administration & Society* 54, no. 19 (2022): 1875–1901.

closed the book on the pandemic and the respondents could reflect on its consequences. We supplement this analysis of individual-level data with the examination of vaccination data on the municipal level in three countries of the region where one could get public access to such data: Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. Both sets of our analyses—individual and aggregate—use a wealth of attitudinal, public health, socio-demographic, economic, and political data—all in an effort to shed light on the political determinants of vaccine hesitancy in the region.

As the results of our analyses in this chapter show, taking or refusing the vaccine has indeed become fundamentally political. Both the individual- and aggregate-level findings suggest vaccine hesitancy in Southeast Europe to be closely related not only to the standard non-political variables such as personal experiences of the pandemic, education, and age, but also to voters' and communities' levels of support for populist and nationalist political parties and ideas. These findings correspond perfectly to the growing body of evidence in other contexts—particularly in the US and Western Europe—which suggests that the underlying logic of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy as a public health crisis had a globally consistent transnational dimension.

Determinants of Vaccine Hesitancy: State of the Art

Vaccine hesitancy is commonly defined as the “delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite availability of vaccination services.”² The issue has posed a public health challenge since the advent of vaccines, but it has gained heightened prominence in recent years due to the spread of conspiracy theories surrounding vaccination, particularly in Western societies. Pre-pandemic research on vaccine hesitancy, both at the individual and aggregate levels, has revealed its determinants to be diverse and highly context dependent. Nearly every factor associated with vaccine hesitancy prior to the COVID-19 pandemic has yielded mixed findings in the literature. For instance, income has been identified as a facilitator and a barrier to vaccine acceptance in both highly developed and developing countries. The relationship between education and vaccine hesitancy is also unclear, though the conventional view is that higher education leads to higher acceptance of vaccination. Religiosity is arguably the only socio-demographic variable that has consistently demonstrated a stable influence on general vaccine hesitancy, with more religious

2 Noni E. MacDonald and the SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy, “Vaccine Hesitancy: Definition, Scope and Determinants,” *Vaccine* 33, no. 34 (2015): 4161–4164.

individuals reporting higher levels of reluctance toward vaccination.³ When it comes to COVID-19 more specifically, due to the generational distribution of the virus's negative effects, age has been found to be a useful predictor of vaccine hesitancy, with younger respondents being less likely to be vaccinated or to accept vaccination. Other research, including our own, has also shown the decisive influence of personal exposure to the pandemic's negative health outcomes—whether through friends or family—on vaccine uptake during the pandemic.⁴ Tragically, for many people it took seeing the negative consequences of COVID-19 first-hand to convince them to take the vaccine.

As we suggested above, public health is political, with the state's mandate over bodily autonomy and the question of individual social responsibility inherent in vaccination related directly with the essence of people's ideological worldviews. Researchers have suggested that the key factor influencing individuals' willingness to get vaccinated is their level of trust in the scientists and pharmaceutical companies producing vaccines, as well as in those responsible for public policy on vaccines, particularly government and health officials. Trust occupies a complex role within democratic governance. While excessive mistrust can undermine policy implementation, a moderate degree of skepticism can be beneficial, encouraging citizens to remain vigilant and actively monitor government actions.⁵ Conversely, political trust is an essential component of a functioning democracy, serving as the grease that allows the wheels of policy making to turn.⁶ A regime facing widespread mistrust will struggle to implement its policies effectively, ultimately jeopardizing its stability.

Trust becomes particularly significant in situations of power imbalance caused by information asymmetry.⁷ This dynamic was a defining feature of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the public relied almost entirely on the scientists and pharmaceutical companies to develop vaccines at “warp speed,” and then on policymakers to evaluate vaccine efficacy and make

3 Heidi J. Larson, Clarissa Jarrett, Elisabeth Eckersberger, David M. Smith, and Pauline Paterson, “Understanding Vaccine Hesitancy Around Vaccines and Vaccination from a Global Perspective: A Systematic Review of Published Literature, 2007–2012,” *Vaccine* 32, no. 19 (2014): 2150–2159.

4 Josip Glaurdić and Christophe Lesschaeve, “The Politics of COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy in Southeast Europe,” *Contemporary Southeast European Studies* 72, no. 1 (2024): 33–57.

5 Tom W. G. van der Meer, “Political Trust and the Crisis of Democracy,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. Tom W. G. van der Meer (Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

7 Heidi J. Larson et al., “Measuring Trust in Vaccination: A Systematic Review,” *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics* 14, no. 7 (2018): 1599–1609.

informed decisions.⁸ In essence, individuals had limited opportunity for independent verification that the medical research and the public health systems functioned effectively and that decision-makers were competent. As a result, media, public, and the research community have anticipated trust—or the lack thereof—to influence individuals' willingness to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. This expectation has been corroborated by much of the emerging research, which has highlighted the role of trust in health officials and the broader political system in shaping vaccine acceptance,⁹ though we have to acknowledge the difficulties of disentangling general feelings of trust in medicine or science from the views specific to this pandemic.

Political mistrust is often associated with, and sometimes conflated with, populism. However, the two concepts are distinct and can influence vaccine hesitancy in different ways.¹⁰ Both political mistrust and populist attitudes reflect a belief that politicians fail to serve the public's interests. Political mistrust primarily suggests that politicians are viewed as incompetent and self-serving, whereas populism introduces an additional dimension of antagonism, framing the relationship between political elites and citizens as inherently adversarial. This antagonistic sentiment has increasingly extended into public health, a phenomenon some have termed "medical populism."¹¹ In an environment characterized by constant media scrutiny, the proliferation of unfiltered and personalized news, and the spread of conspiracy theories through social networks, public health policies have become highly politicized. Populist political actors have sought to exploit public fears to advance their agendas. Recent public opinion research, drawing on data collected shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, indicates that Europeans with populist views are more likely to exhibit vaccine hesitancy. However, this relationship appears to hold primarily at the individual level and does not consistently translate to aggregate patterns.¹² The distinction between political trust and populism is subtle but not insignificant. A lack of trust in politicians does not necessarily imply a belief that their actions

8 Emma Pertwee, Clarissa Simas, and Heidi J. Larson, "An Epidemic of Uncertainty: Rumors, Conspiracy Theories, and Vaccine Hesitancy," *Nature Medicine* 28, no. 3 (2022): Article 3.

9 Bagić, Šuljok, and Ančić, "Determinants and Reasons"; Musa et al., "COVID-19 Risk Perception"; Popa et al., "Determinants of the Hesitancy"; Wynen et al., "Taking a COVID-19 Vaccine or Not?"

10 Bram Geurkink et al., "Populist Attitudes, Political Trust, and External Political Efficacy: Old Wine in New Bottles?," *Political Studies* 68, no. 1 (2020): 247–267.

11 Gideon Lasco and Nicole Curato, "Medical Populism," *Social Science & Medicine* 221 (2019): 1–8.

12 Florian Stoeckel et al., "The Politics of Vaccine Hesitancy in Europe," *European Journal of Public Health* 32, no. 4 (2022): 636–642.

are deliberately intended to harm the public. Thus, both political trust and populism can independently contribute to vaccine hesitancy: the former reflects perceptions of incompetence, while the latter embodies suspicions of malicious intent by political elites. Nevertheless, due to the closeness of the concepts, special care is needed when conducting multivariate analyses.

In addition to their perceptions of politicians, experts, or elites more broadly, individuals' ideological commitments and worldviews can also significantly influence their willingness to accept vaccination. Vaccination often challenges core political beliefs by raising questions about the social contract between citizens and the state, as well as the balance between individual freedoms and collective responsibilities.¹³ This dynamic has been particularly evident in the United States, where conservative or right-wing individuals have consistently demonstrated higher levels of vaccine hesitancy.¹⁴ This trend was apparent even before the COVID-19 pandemic and has been further amplified as nearly every aspect of the pandemic and its mitigation became deeply politicized in the polarized context of the Trump presidency. In the US context, Christian nationalism in particular has been found to positively correlate with vaccine hesitancy.¹⁵ Some have suggested this to be the case because Christian nationalists see their faith as the ultimate source of moral authority, invalidating other sources such as science.¹⁶ In the European context, adherents to culturally more closed attitudes have also been found to be more vaccine hesitant,¹⁷ with some suggesting these views

13 Kristin Michaud, Juliet Carlisle, and Eric Smith, "The Relationship Between Cultural Values and Political Ideology, and the Role of Political Knowledge," *Political Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2009): 27–42.

14 Bert Baumgaertner, Juliet E. Carlisle, and Florian Justwan, "The Influence of Political Ideology and Trust on Willingness to Vaccinate," *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 1 (2018): e0191728; David P. Calvillo et al., "Political Ideology Predicts Perceptions of the Threat of COVID-19 (and Susceptibility to Fake News About It)," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11, no. 8 (2020): 1119–1128; Ariel Fridman, Rachel Gershon, and Ayelet Gneezy, "COVID-19 and Vaccine Hesitancy: A Longitudinal Study," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 4 (2021): e0250123; Matthew J. Hornsey, Melanie Finlayson, Georgia Chatwood, and Chad T. Begeny, "Donald Trump and Vaccination: The Effect of Political Identity, Conspiracist Ideation, and Presidential Tweets on Vaccine Hesitancy," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 88 (2020): 103947; Khubchandani et al., "COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy"; Gustavo S. Mesch and Kent P. Schwirian, "Confidence in Government and Vaccination Willingness in the USA," *Health Promotion International* 30, no. 2 (2015): 213–221; Reiter, Pennell, and Katz, "Acceptability of a COVID-19 Vaccine"; Viswanath et al., "Individual and Social Determinants."

15 Kevin E. Corcoran, Christopher P. Scheitle, and Brian D. DiGregorio, "Christian Nationalism and COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy and Uptake," *Vaccine* 39, no. 45 (2021): 6614–6621.

16 Joseph O. Baker, Samuel L. Perry, and Andrew L. Whitehead, "Crusading for Moral Authority: Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Science," *Sociological Forum* 35, no. 3 (2020): 587–607.

17 Stoeckl et al., "Politics of Vaccine Hesitancy."

are rooted in the idealization of the ingroup—a foundational component of nationalism. The question of the relationship between nationalism and vaccination hesitancy is interesting because one could logically hypothesize that nationalist beliefs could actually increase the willingness to vaccinate and be vaccinated, as this might be perceived as a way of protecting the ingroup. While the rapid development of the vaccines understandably raised concerns about their safety, nationalism often makes such concerns for personal safety subservient to the well-being of the group. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, we have observed that nationalism has led to pushbacks against those perceived to exert external pressure on the group, like health experts, pharmaceutical companies, and health organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO).¹⁸ Southeast Europe is, obviously, the preeminent battleground of nationalisms in contemporary European politics. As we explained in chapter 2, one of the strongest political cleavages in the region is centered on the protection and cultivation of a national identity based on ethnic membership, separating cosmopolitans from nationalists.¹⁹ Considering all of this, and considering the evolution of political competition regarding the various aspects of the pandemic and its mitigation that we presented in chapter 3, our expectation prior to conducting the analysis of the data we collected was that, if vaccine hesitancy in Southeast Europe had any political drivers, populism and nationalism were the likeliest culprits.

Individual-Level Determinants of Vaccine Hesitancy

Our analysis of vaccine hesitancy is, in the first instance, based on data we collected in two survey waves of more than ten thousand respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia in the spring of 2021 and fall of 2023. To keep things simpler and more easily comparable, we used the same approach to building our models as in previous chapters where we analyzed survey data. Here the primary dependent variable in our survey analysis is vaccination status, defined as a binary variable. It takes a value of 1 for respondents who have either been vaccinated or expressed willingness to be vaccinated. Notably, 54.6% of respondents in the

18 Anna Sternisko et al., “National Narcissism Predicts the Belief in and the Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence From 56 Countries,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 49, no. 1 (2023): 48–65.

19 Garth Massey, Randy Hodson, and Duško Sekulić, “Nationalism, Liberalism, and Liberal Nationalism in Post-War Croatia,” *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 1 (2003): 55–82.

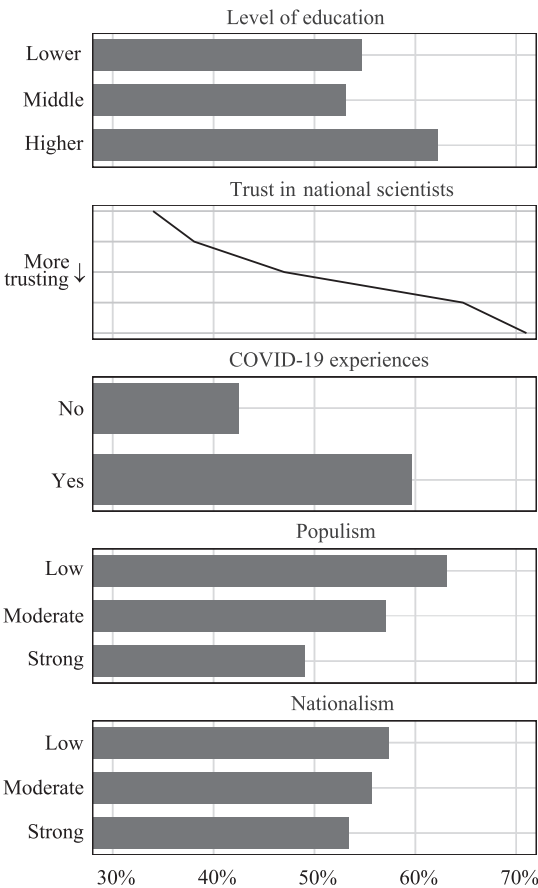
sample met this criterion, with minimal variation across the three countries surveyed: Bosnia and Herzegovina (53.6%), Croatia (57.6%), Serbia (52.1%), and Slovenia (57%). These proportions closely align with the eventual rates of fully vaccinated adults in Croatia (57.4%), Slovenia (59.7%), and Serbia (48.8%), but deviate significantly in Bosnia and Herzegovina (29.1%), where the vaccination campaign faced substantial challenges. Given the binary nature of vaccination status, we analyze its determinants using logistic regression models and we present them in detail in the appendix.

We start the discussion of our findings with correlations between vaccination status and some variables of interest presented in figure 7.1. This panel of graphs is based on the pooled data from both 2021 and 2023 and shows the relationship between vaccination status and the level of education, trust in national medical scientists, personal experiences with the pandemic, as well as respondents' nationalist and populist views. What is immediately apparent is the clear negative relationship between trust, as well as personal experiences with the pandemic, and vaccine hesitancy. Respondents who trusted scientists and who had first-hand negative experiences of the pandemic were much more likely to be (willing to be) vaccinated. The data presented in figure 7.1 are also highly suggestive that our expectations regarding the relationship of nationalism and particularly populism and vaccine hesitancy could be supported by multivariate analysis. When it comes to education, on the other hand, the relationship seems to contradict the conventional wisdom and to be as interestingly non-linear as in many other contexts, with respondents with middle education expressing higher levels of vaccine hesitancy than both those with lower and higher education. Perhaps another piece of evidence for the maxim that some knowledge can be worse than none.

Since the process of multivariate model building in this chapter is identical as in the rest of the book, we start with a basic test of populism and nationalism on the pooled sample with country and survey controls. We then progressively add the usual battery of control variables to properly test whether the effects of our principal explanatory variables hold up. Once again, we opt for this approach to maintain consistency and ease of interpretation across the chapters. However, considering the importance of trust in the literature on vaccination hesitancy, as well as its close relationship with populism, we include the measures of trust in our robustness checks, which we present in the appendix. Briefly put, those robustness checks show—and this nicely reflects our previously published research on the topic²⁰—that the direction of the relationship of populism and

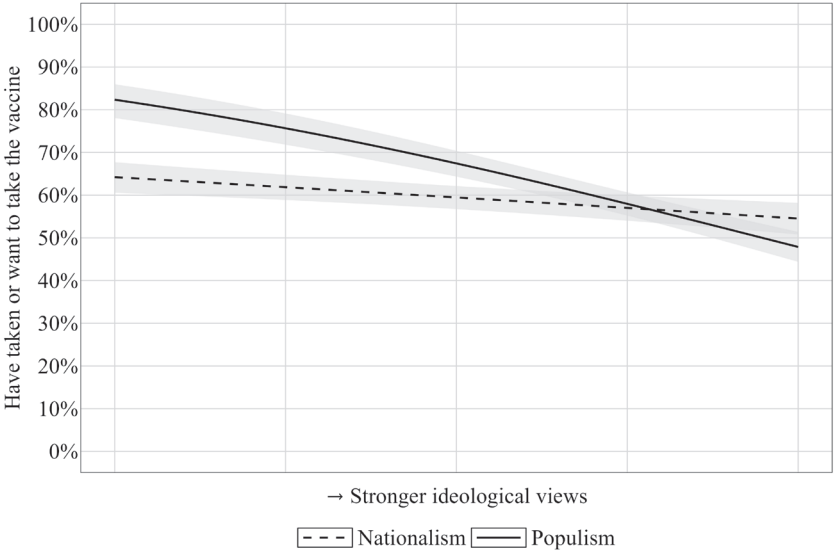
20 Glaurdić and Lesschaeve, "Politics of COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy."

Figure 7.1. Correlates of vaccination status



nationalism with vaccination status remains largely unchanged even with the inclusion of the measures of trust. And, as expected from our theoretical discussion and from the correlational graphs presented in figure 7.1, that relationship is clearly negative. Respondents with higher levels of *Populism* and *Nationalism* were less likely to be (willing to get) vaccinated. To be specific, one standard deviation ($SD = 0.54$) higher value of *Populism* than the mean implied a decrease in the likelihood of being open to vaccination of 5.2 percentage points, and one standard deviation ($SD = 0.84$) higher value of *Nationalism* than the mean implied a decrease in this likelihood of 2.2 percentage points. Guided by the findings in the US context, where it was the pairing of Christian fundamentalism and nationalism that seemed to be driving vaccine hesitancy, we also tested for the interaction between religiosity and nationalism using our 2023 data but found this interaction

Figure 7.2. Political ideology and vaccination status



not to have any effect.²¹ In other words, it was not religious belief that was driving this dynamic. Religious nationalists in Southeast Europe were neither more nor less likely to be vaccine hesitant than civic nationalists. We show the nature of the relationship between nationalism and populism on the one hand and vaccine status on the other graphically in figure 7.2, using results from the complete model that includes all control variables.

Our findings also have much to say about other drivers of vaccine hesitancy. When it comes to remaining political variables, *Socialism* once again has no impact, showing that the dominant divisions in the region—at least when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic—revolved around nationalism and populism. Vaccination status did have a positive relationship with respondents’ political interest—suggesting that better informed respondents were more likely to find the evidence about the vaccines convincing and reassuring. Our findings also show that positive vaccination status was more likely among government supporters—another piece of evidence suggesting a deeply politicized nature of vaccination. On the sociodemographic front, our findings mainly show the high relevance of age, gender, and ethnic minority identification, as well as at best limited importance of various

21 Unfortunately, we collected data on religiosity—captured by respondents’ 1–10 answer to the question “How important is God in your life?”—only in 2023, which is why we had to limit our analysis here in this way.

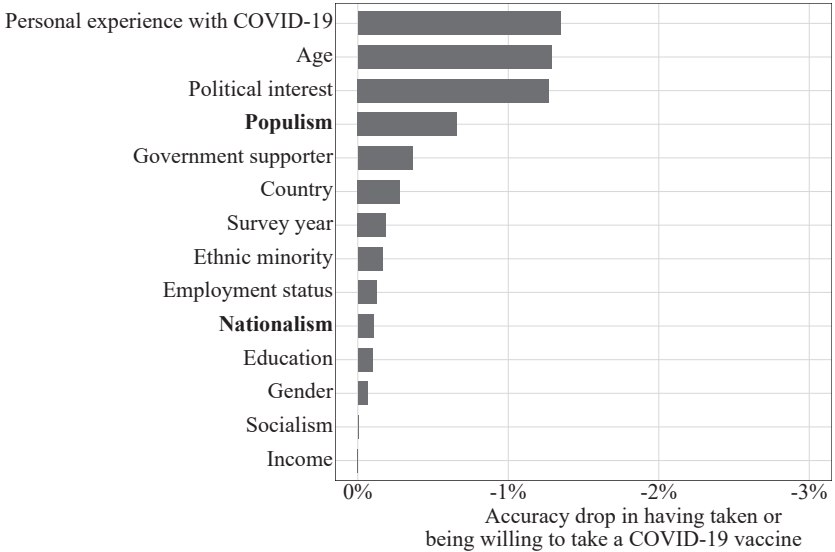
economic variables and education. Whether a person got vaccinated or not had little to do with how well off or how well educated they were. Considering the disproportionate negative effects of the virus on older populations and the literature showing similar findings,²² it is perhaps not surprising that age had a positive relationship with vaccination status. In line with comparable outcomes in a variety of geographical and political contexts, we also show that women were less likely to be (willing to be) vaccinated—3.4% less likely than men, to be exact.²³ Interestingly, our findings when it comes to ethnic minority status contradict some findings in the literature which suggest ethnic and racial minorities to be less likely to take vaccines. Our analysis shows the opposite: members of ethnic minorities in Southeast Europe were 6.4% more likely to be (willing to be) vaccinated. Last, but by no means least, respondents' vaccination status had a clearly positive relationship with their personal experience with COVID-19 (defined as being diagnosed with the virus or having someone among close family or friends diagnosed). Having exposure to the health consequences of the virus made people a whopping 16.6% more likely to be (willing to be) vaccinated.

We now know what the main drivers of vaccine hesitancy in Southeast Europe were, but can we say something about their comparative importance? As in previous chapters, we once again answer this question by re-estimating our full regression model several times, each time leaving out one of the explanatory variables. We then compare how much worse the regression model becomes in accurately predicting vaccination status when that explanatory variable is excluded. We show the results of this exercise in figure 7.3. As can be seen, the primary drivers of vaccination status were respondents' personal experiences with COVID-19, age, and political interest—suggesting that vaccinated people were more likely to be found among the well-informed, older people who had first-hand negative health experiences with the virus. Right behind these three variables, however, we find respondents' populist beliefs. Their nationalist beliefs, though statistically significant and in the expected direction, on the other hand do not exhibit as much of substantive importance. In other European contexts, those with culturally more closed attitudes have been found to be

22 Ajna Fojnica et al., "COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance and Rejection in an Adult Population in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 2 (2022): e0264754; Jamal X. Moore et al., "Correlates of COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy among a Community Sample of African Americans Living in the Southern United States," *Vaccines* 9, no. 8 (2021): 879; Wynen et al., "Taking a COVID-19 Vaccine or Not?"

23 Khubchandani et al., "COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy"; Reiter, Pennell, and Katz, "Acceptability of a COVID-19 Vaccine"; Viswanath et al., "Individual and Social Determinants."

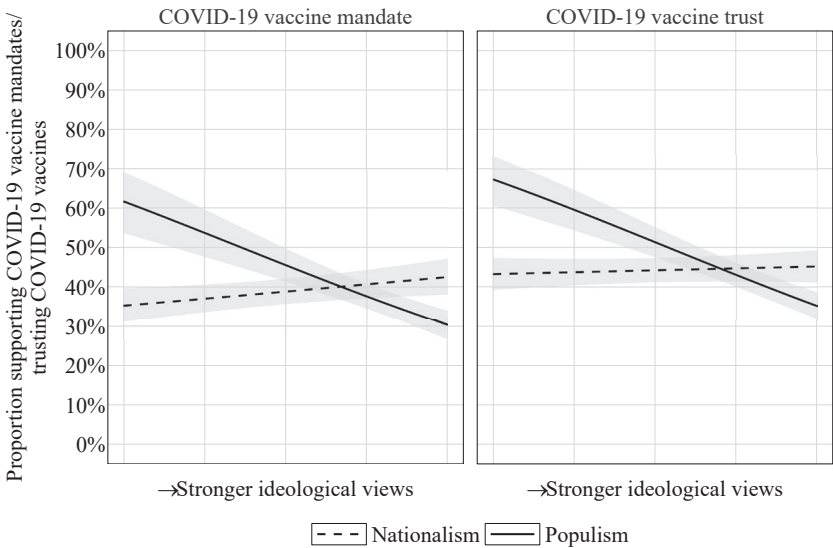
Figure 7.3. Importance of factors in explaining vaccine hesitancy



more vaccine hesitant—possibly due to their idealization of the ingroup, which is one of elementary components of nationalism. That was likely also the case in Southeast Europe, though to a substantively limited extent.

How do we explain the negative relationship between *Populism* and *Vaccine status*? What could have been driving more populist individuals to resist vaccination during the pandemic? Considering the cross-sectional nature of our data (in other words, the two waves of our surveys interviewed different people), that question is difficult to answer. Nevertheless, some of the data we collected does offer possible answers. As we discussed above, there is a close relationship between political mistrust and populism, even though populism builds on political mistrust by framing the relationship between political elites and citizens as adversarial. People with populist views do not trust authorities not only because they see them as incompetent, but also because they believe them to have an ulterior motive of unchecked power. In our 2021 survey wave, we asked the respondents two questions that try to unpack this issue when it comes to COVID-19 vaccines. We asked them about the extent to which they had trust in the vaccines that had just been developed, and we asked them whether they believed vaccination against COVID-19 should be mandatory. Testing for the determinants of trust in vaccines and support for making vaccines mandatory with models identical to those built for the analysis of vaccination status reveals that these two issues may be at the core of what drove people with populist views to oppose

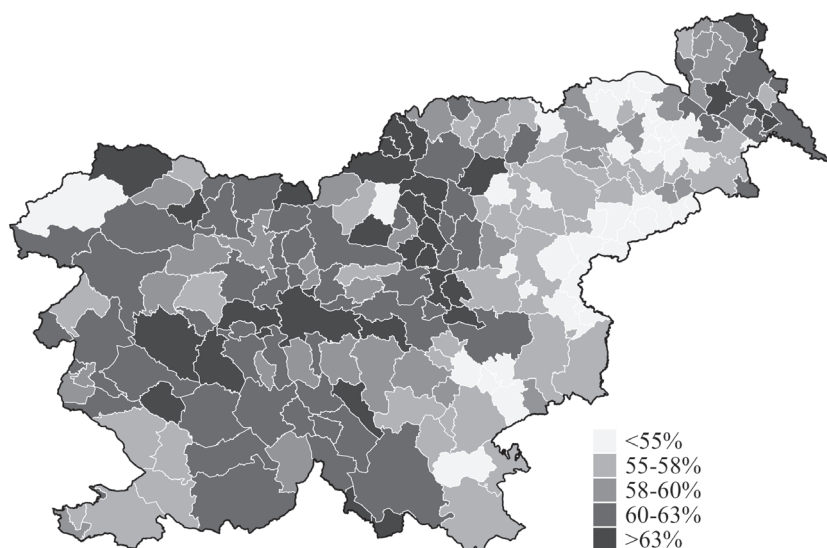
Figure 7.4. Political ideology, trust, and mandating COVID-19 vaccination



COVID-19 vaccines. As figure 7.4 shows, on both issues, *Populism* has a clearly negative relationship with the dependent variable (trust in vaccines and support for making them mandatory), whereas the flat line for *Nationalism* suggests this aspect of respondents' ideological orientation had little to do with it. In fact, *Nationalism* has a statistically significant and positive (!), though substantively minimal, relationship with the level of support for making COVID-19 vaccines mandatory, highlighting the complex and at times contradictory relationship nationalist beliefs have with vaccination hesitancy. Put otherwise, at the core of vaccine hesitancy for people with populist views was their lack of trust in medical, scientific, and political authorities, as well as their opposition to government-imposed mandates on individual liberties. This was not the case with the people espousing more nationalist views. In some ways, today's populism can be seen as a new, anti-authority but also anti-science, version of Libertarianism.

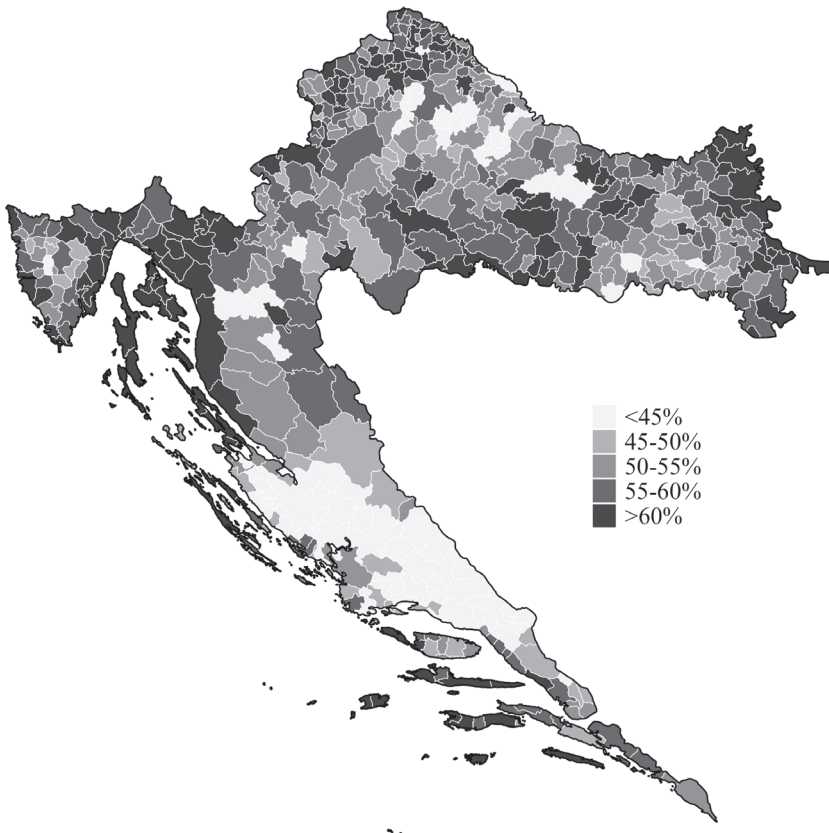
Aggregate-Level Determinants of Vaccine Hesitancy

Choosing to take a vaccine is an individual decision, but it is not made independently of the social environment. The dynamics of a pandemic, as well as of epidemiological measures and their popular uptake, are obviously socially determined. Communities matter. This is why we supplement our

Figure 7.5. COVID-19 vaccination rate in Slovenia

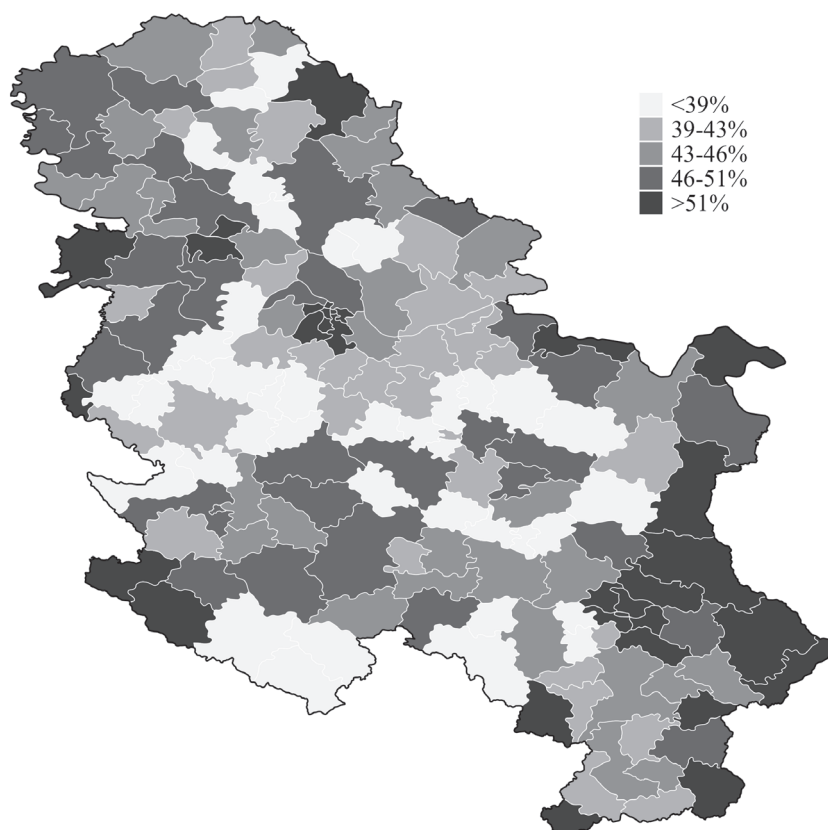
analysis of survey data with the analysis of vaccination rates on the municipal level for three countries of the region where we could find the relevant vaccination figures and the various political, sociodemographic, and economic explanatory variables of satisfactory quality: Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. In Croatia and Slovenia, public health authorities reported vaccination rates rather transparently and included data for the uptake of both first and second doses. In Serbia, on the other hand, we had to file a freedom of information request, and we received data only for the frequency of first dose vaccination. This is why our dependent variable *Vaccination rate* represents the proportion of the municipal population vaccinated with at least one dose of any COVID-19 vaccine. We show the geographic distribution of this variable on the maps of the three countries in figures 7.5, 7.6, and 7.7. All three maps show clear regionally determined differences, with, for example, Eastern Styria in Slovenia, the Dalmatian hinterland in Croatia, and the central regions and Eastern Sandžak in Serbia exhibiting lower levels of vaccination.

Our main task is to establish whether local vaccination rates are related to the population's political orientation—in particular its level of support for populist and nationalist options. We derive the political variables of interest from the parliamentary elections in the three countries that were temporally the closest to the vaccination drives: the July 2020 elections in Croatia, and the April 2022 elections in Serbia and Slovenia. Political markets in the three countries are clearly structured differently, with a great variety

Figure 7.6. COVID-19 vaccination rate in Croatia

of options that voters are able to choose from. For a number of reasons, political supply in Serbia is simply different than what it is in Slovenia or Croatia. Moreover, while some voters' electoral decisions may appear to be identical in the three countries, they could signify diametrically opposite political views. For example, not turning out to vote can be a statement of distrust in the political mainstream, but it captures very different people in Slovenia and Croatia on the one hand, and in Serbia on the other. Due to the authoritarian turn of the Serbian regime of Aleksandar Vučić, the bulk of Serbia's center-left and liberal electorate has in several recent electoral cycles chosen to boycott the elections. That is not the case in Croatia and Slovenia.

Keeping the idiosyncrasies of each of the three countries in mind, we approach their electorates in the following way. Crucially, we consider the whole electorates in our analysis, and not just the voters who cast valid ballots as is usually the case, exactly because not voting or casting an

Figure 7.7. COVID-19 vaccination rate in Serbia

invalid ballot can be seen as a political statement.²⁴ In each country, we use the votes for the parties of the government as the reference category. Notably, in all three countries, these coalitions generally represented the (center)-right end of the political spectrum. In Slovenia, they were led by the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) of Janez Janša; in Croatia, by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) of Andrej Plenković; and in Serbia, by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Aleksandar Vučić. We then split the remainder of the electorates into non-voters, voters who cast invalid ballots, and voters of rightwing, leftwing, and centrist options. This nearly completes the full electorate in each of the three countries. What remains are the parties representing the ethnic minorities in Serbia that are competing with other

24 Josip Glaurdić and Vuk Vuković, "Prosperity and Peace: Economic Interests and War Legacy in Croatia's EU Referendum Vote," *European Union Politics* 16, no. 4 (2015): 577–600.

“regular” parties due to the nature of Serbia’s electoral law, and the clearly populist options in Slovenia and Croatia. We realize that many parties of different ideological persuasions—both rightwing and leftwing—also fit the populist bill.²⁵ Nevertheless, we opt for the narrow definition here and assign this label only to parties where populism is their dominant trait. What is also important to note is that in Serbia it is difficult to find a party that does *not* count as populist in some shape or form. The government coalition parties of SNS and the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) are about as populist as parties in Europe get, which is why in Serbia we do not have a special grouping of populist parties.²⁶ Our models also include a set of sociodemographic and economic variables that generally correspond to the variables in the individual-level analysis. We control for ethnic composition, religious identification, age, education, economic activity, unemployment, and income of municipalities’ populations.²⁷

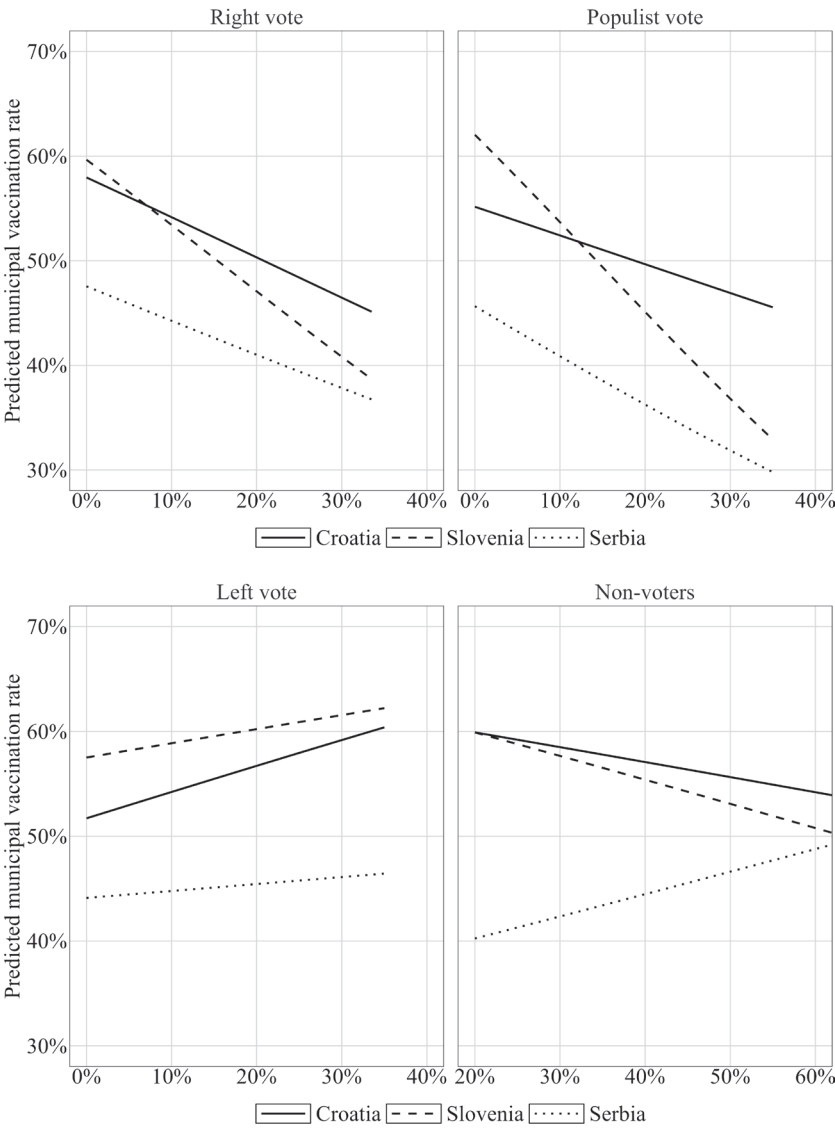
As can be seen from the tables we present in the appendix and from figure 7.8 which shows the predicted municipal vaccination rates dependent on the voting inclinations of the municipal populations, the political and politicized nature of vaccination is immediately apparent. In each

25 We consulted the data and guiding principles provided by the expert assessments in PopuList but found its definitions of individual parties as populist to be at times so broad to render the concept nearly all-encompassing and thus of little analytical use. Matthijs Rooduijn et al., “The PopuList 3.0: An Overview of Populist, Far-Left and Far-Right Parties in Europe,” *The PopuList*, 2023, <https://www.popu-list.org>.

26 To be more specific, in Croatia the left wing was mainly composed of the Social Democrats (SDP) and We Can! (Možemo). The non-government right wing consisted of the Homeland Movement (DP), the Bridge Party (Most), and a string of smaller parties. The largest list of the center was the liberal coalition of the party led by Dalija Orešković, the party Fokus, and the Center Party. The clearly populist option was the Human Shield party. In Serbia, the non-government right wing was led by the extremist Radicals, Oathkeepers, and the Dveri Movement. The center was represented by the main opposition coalition United for the Victory of Serbia, and the non-government left was led by We Must (Moramo) and the Social Democratic Party (SDS). Minority parties represented mainly the Hungarian, Bosniak, and Croat options. In Slovenia, the center was led by the ultimately victorious Freedom Movement; the left wing was led by the Left and the Social Democrats; the non-government right wing was led by the Slovenian National Party; and the clearly populist options were the parties Resni.ca, the Healthy Society Movement, and For the People of Slovenia.

27 To be more specific, our controls include: 1) proportion of the local population that is of the country’s ethnic majority, 2) proportion of the local population that identifies itself as atheist or agnostic, 3) average age of the local population, 4) proportion of the local population that is over 65 years of age, 5) average number of years of education of the local population that is older than 15 years of age, 6) rate of economic activity, 7) unemployment rate, and 8) officially reported net income of the municipal population in thousands of euros. Our models also control for the three countries’ regions.

Figure 7.8. Predicted municipal vaccination rate dependent on voting pattern



of the three countries, higher vote proportions for right wing options (in comparison to the reference categories of votes for the government) were negatively related to vaccination rates. Similarly, in Croatia and Slovenia higher vote proportions for overtly populist options led to lower vaccination rates, whereas higher vote proportions for left wing parties led to higher

vaccination rates. What is particularly interesting, in Croatia and Slovenia higher rate of voter abstention is negatively related to vaccination rate, whereas in Serbia it is positively related to vaccination rate. This perfectly captures the different compositions and motivations of the electoral abstainers in the three countries. In Serbia, the bulk of the traditional center-left and liberal electorate have abstained from elections due to the nature of the SNS rule. Such a dynamic does not exist in Slovenia and Croatia where the abstainers are the classical distrusters of the political mainstream, making those sets of voters radically different than their Serbian counterparts. In fact, in Serbia, voter abstention is the only political variable that is positively related to the rate of vaccination. Vote for minority parties as well as for the centrist opposition coalition United for the Victory of Serbia also had a negative effect on vaccination rate. If we account for the distinct features of political competition in the three countries, the essentially uniform political nature of COVID-19 vaccination, however, is clearly apparent, and it corresponds rather well with our individual-level findings.

When it comes to sociodemographic and economic controls, models show no effect of ethnic composition or religious affiliation, as well as limited influence of economic variables only in Croatia. As could be expected, higher rates of economic activity and employment led to higher rates of vaccination there—likely due to the impact of various forms of mandates and the implementation of COVID-19 passes that were necessary for many employees in different sectors of the economy. What matters in all three countries is the higher age of the local population (though in ways that suggest a non-linear relationship with vaccination rate) as well as education. Whereas in individual-level analysis education exhibited a substantively small and non-linear relationship with vaccination rate, in the analysis on the municipal level it suggested a clearly positive relationship with vaccination rate. Communities with better educated populations exhibited higher rates of COVID-19 vaccination in all three countries. One standard deviation increase in the average number of years of education in Slovenia led to 1.1% higher vaccination rate. In Croatia, that figure was 3.3%, and in Serbia a sizeable 6.4%—signifying that to fully understand the pattern of vaccine hesitancy, we need to look at both individual and aggregate levels.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that vaccine hesitancy in Southeast Europe was not merely a matter of individual choice shaped by

personal experiences, socioeconomic status, or access to healthcare. Instead, it was profoundly political, embedded in broader ideological divisions, trust in institutions, and patterns of political allegiance. The findings reveal a striking alignment between vaccine hesitancy and the core political cleavages of the region. These dynamics parallel trends observed in other parts of the world, reinforcing the notion that vaccine hesitancy is not only a public health issue but also a political phenomenon with deep structural roots.

Throughout the pandemic, public health decisions—particularly those surrounding vaccines—became political acts. In Southeast Europe, where political distrust has long shaped governance and citizen-state relations, the act of receiving or rejecting a COVID-19 vaccine often reflected broader political identities and ideological worldviews. The data analyzed in this chapter clearly show that support for populist and nationalist parties correlated with vaccine hesitancy, while government support was positively associated with vaccine uptake. In this sense, vaccination patterns mirrored political behavior in electoral participation, protest mobilization, and policy support.

The politicization of public health in the region is not surprising when placed in the context of existing research on governance and political attitudes. Vaccine hesitancy represents another domain where the erosion of trust in institutions manifests in tangible public behaviors. While health crises typically provide governments an opportunity to consolidate legitimacy through effective crisis management, the COVID-19 pandemic instead exacerbated skepticism toward authorities in many countries, particularly those where preexisting mistrust was already high. In this way, vaccine hesitancy became another battlefield in the ongoing struggle between political elites and their skeptical or outright antagonistic publics.

Among the key findings of this chapter is the role of populist attitudes in shaping vaccine hesitancy. Populism is fundamentally rooted in an anti-elitist worldview, one that frames political elites, experts, and institutions as self-serving and detached from the common people. This skepticism extends to medical and scientific authorities, reinforcing doubts about vaccine efficacy and safety. Our analysis finds that respondents with higher levels of populist attitudes were significantly less likely to accept vaccination, even when controlling for other sociodemographic and attitudinal factors. This aligns with similar findings in Western Europe and the United States, where populist constituencies have exhibited heightened resistance to public health measures, often perceiving them as infringements on personal freedoms.

Importantly, however, nationalism—though statistically significant—played a less pronounced role in vaccine hesitancy compared to populism.

Unlike in the United States, where Christian nationalism strongly correlates with vaccine rejection, the intersection of nationalism and religious belief in Southeast Europe did not yield the same effect. Our survey data show that nationalist attitudes had a relatively weaker substantive impact on vaccine hesitancy, and, in some cases, nationalists even expressed marginally greater support for mandatory vaccination policies. This suggests that while nationalism may foster skepticism toward external actors (such as the WHO or global pharmaceutical companies), it does not necessarily translate into outright rejection of vaccines at the individual level.

The municipal-level analysis in Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia reinforced the individual-level data by highlighting that vaccination rates were significantly lower in areas with strong electoral support for right-wing and populist parties. In Croatia and Slovenia, higher abstention from elections was associated with lower vaccination rates, reinforcing the idea that disengagement from formal political institutions correlates with skepticism toward government-led public health initiatives. However, in Serbia, electoral abstention had the opposite effect, a pattern explained by the country's unique political context, where opposition to the ruling government among center-left and liberal voters has led to strategic non-participation in elections. This divergence underscores the importance of considering national political environments when interpreting the relationship between political behavior and vaccine attitudes.

The findings of this chapter contribute to a growing body of research demonstrating that public health interventions cannot be divorced from political realities. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored how deeply entrenched political attitudes shape responses to crises, and vaccine hesitancy is no exception. In Southeast Europe, as in many other parts of the world, attitudes toward vaccination reflect broader struggles over trust, authority, and political identity. Future public health efforts must take these political dynamics into account. Simply increasing access to vaccines or providing more information about their safety is unlikely to be sufficient in contexts where distrust in institutions runs deep. Instead, public health campaigns must engage with communities on their own terms, leveraging trusted local figures and depoliticizing health messaging where possible. Moreover, efforts to rebuild political trust—whether through transparent governance, inclusive decision-making, or targeted outreach—may have spillover effects in improving public compliance with health measures. Ultimately, our analysis shows that the politics of vaccine hesitancy is a symptom of broader societal divisions. Addressing it requires not only medical solutions but also political strategies aimed at fostering trust, countering misinformation, and bridging ideological divides.

8. After the Curve: How the Pandemic Is Remembered

Abstract: As the immediate threat of COVID-19 receded, the pandemic began to be refracted through processes of collective memory and political identity. Drawing on survey data from 2023, this chapter examines how retrospective interpretations of the pandemic took shape in Southeast Europe. It identifies two dominant and partially overlapping narratives: a nationalist retrospective emphasizing sovereignty, self-reliance, and national failure or neglect, and a populist retrospective centered on elite deception and mistrust of expertise. These frames are shown to be closely aligned with deeper ideological commitments and to structure how citizens remember core aspects of the crisis, including its death toll. The findings reveal pandemic memory as an emerging site of ideological contestation, marked by denial, motivated reasoning, and epistemic fragmentation.

Keywords: collective memory, nationalism, populism, motivated reasoning, COVID-19 pandemic, Southeast Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic was not only a public health crisis but also a collective experience whose political remembrance will be shaped by deep-rooted dynamics of memory and identity. Collective memory, as Maurice Halbwachs famously observed, is fundamentally a social phenomenon—our recollection of the past is framed by the groups to which we belong.¹ It is through these “social frameworks” that individual memories are structured and given meaning. We can think of collective memory as a process through which we remember ourselves as part of a group that constitutes our identity. Collective

1 Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Alcan, 1925).

memory is also a process through which communities—not only nations or ethnic groups, but also supporters of political parties, members of religious groups, or even fans of sports clubs—weave past events into narratives that reinforce shared identities. In other words, what societies remember (and forget) about crises is inseparable from questions of who we are. Memory is the “connective tissue” of society and strikes at the core of group identities, especially after traumatic events that shake a community’s sense of self.²

Classic studies of cultural memory illuminate how profound shocks—wars, disasters, atrocities—become imbued with meaning and integrated into collective identity. As Aleida Assmann notes, remembering is an active, effortful process: societies must choose to remember, often in opposition to pressures to forget. Indeed, what is remembered or omitted is often political. Assmann observes that communities may “recall one’s own suffering in order to avoid being reminded of one’s own guilt,” highlighting a pernicious tendency to remember history in ways that bolster a sense of victimhood while marginalizing inconvenient truths.³ Conversely, acknowledging the suffering one may have caused to others—however painful—is crucial for genuine reconciliation. Theories of cultural trauma similarly emphasize that events become “traumatic” to a collective not simply by their objective horror, but by being constructed as fundamental wounds to a group’s identity. Collective traumas are made and negotiated through narrative: public figures and memory entrepreneurs define an event as a grievous rupture (“trauma”) and in doing so can reshape the group’s identity around victimhood, survival, or moral lessons.⁴

Our experience of studying the uses and abuses of history and memory in the post-conflict societies of Southeast Europe has informed how we see the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic legacies. This is a process already underway as politicians, scholars, journalists, and citizens assign meaning to the pandemic’s hardships and losses. It is important to understand that collective memory is not a neutral recording of history but an active construction, continually reshaped to serve present needs. What a society retains or silences about a crisis often reflects the exigencies of the present: political elites and communities select aspects of the past that resonate with contemporary identities, fears, and aspirations. This constructive aspect

2 Katherine Hite, *Politics and the Art of Commemoration: Memorials to Struggle in Latin America and Spain* (Routledge, 2012).

3 Aleida Assmann, “Europe: A Community of Memory?,” *Bulletin of the GHI Washington* 40 (2007): 16.

4 Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (University of California Press, 2004), 1–30.

does not mean the past is pure invention. It is constrained by historical events and the repertoire of interpretations deemed culturally credible.⁵ Within those bounds, however, there is enormous flexibility. It is exactly after traumatic upheavals such as wars, revolutions, or pandemics that collective memories become fiercely contested in the public sphere. Different groups advance rival interpretations of the crisis, its causes, and its lessons, each seeking to inscribe their version into the social narrative. Memory is not a fixed object, but the object of struggle, and nowhere is this more evident than in societies emerging from trauma.

Thus, the question of how COVID-19 will be remembered—as a tragedy wrought by particular failures, as a testament to solidarity and sacrifice, or perhaps not remembered much at all—will be decided in the arena of social and political contestation, not by the magnitude of the event alone. History offers a cautionary example: the 1918 influenza pandemic, despite killing tens of millions, remained a relatively faint presence in collective memory for decades. Monuments and schoolbooks enshrined the heroics of World War I, while the worldwide flu was often relegated to a footnote, if mentioned at all. As one historian noted, we wrongly assume that great calamities “will inevitably be remembered” commensurate with their impact. The “Spanish flu” warns us that even cataclysmic losses can be socially forgotten.⁶ Whether COVID-19’s memory fades or persists, as well as which form it takes, will depend on the narratives we construct now and in the coming years. Many political entrepreneurs have already begun that process of construction to great electoral effect. For example, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s view of the pandemic as an excuse to impose a “biosecurity agenda that will enslave the entire human race and plunge us into a dystopian nightmare,”⁷ was a core tenet of his 2024 presidential campaign and one of the reasons why he became such an appealing candidate for the Secretary of Health and Human Services in the second Trump Administration. Vaccine skepticism and criticism of various pandemic mitigation measures has also taken center stage in the campaigns of a string of European parties—most often of the rightwing and/or populist

5 Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, “A Theory of Politics of Memory,” in *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, eds. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford University Press, 2014).

6 Scott Hershberger, “The Pandemic We Forgot,” *Scientific American Magazine* 323, no. 5 (2020): 66.

7 Gustaf Kilander, “RFK Jr. Once Said Covid-19 Pandemic ‘Feels Very Planned to Me,’” *Independent*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/rfk-jr-kennedy-covid-pandemic-planned-b2650127.html>.

orientation—from the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to the Bulgarian There is Such a People (ITN).

In this chapter, we explore how the people of Southeast Europe began to remember the COVID-19 pandemic using data from the last wave of our survey administered in the fall of 2023 as the threat of infection receded firmly into the background. In doing so, we deconstruct what we consider to be the two particularly powerful narrative struggles in public discourse throughout the region and the rest of Europe that closely mirror the two main political cleavages of our interest in this book. The first one could be seen as the struggle between the nationalist and cosmopolitan/global views of the necessary responses to the pandemic. And the second one could be seen as the struggle between the populist and anti-populist views of the pandemic, especially when it comes to the roles played by the political elites, mainstream media, and public health authorities. We focus our attention in particular on the question of the number of pandemic victims, which has become a quantifiable point of contention among the different political camps. Our aim was to expose the extent to which the different retrospective narratives of the pandemic graft onto the existing political cleavages, as well as how they interact with and possibly reinforce one another.

The results of our analysis provided in this chapter are clear. Nationalist and populist retrospective narratives about the pandemic are very powerful and have deep appeal for many people. They also have a strong relationship with the extent to which people already subscribe to deeper nationalist and populist worldviews—in other words, they weave into and build on our existing ideological commitments. Crucially, when it comes to retrospective evaluation of the lethality of the pandemic, nationalism proves to be far more dismissive of its human cost than populism, showing yet again the depth of its social impact.

Collective Memory, Nationalism, and Populism in a Pandemic

How societies remember crises is profoundly mediated by national narratives and the politics of identity. Nations, as Benedict Anderson observed, are “imagined communities” built in no small part upon shared memories of a common past.⁸ National history—often a selective tapestry of glories and tragedies—provides the storyline that binds strangers together as a

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2010).

people. This means that when a major crisis strikes, its remembrance is frequently folded into pre-existing narratives of the nation, and the immediate aftermath of a crisis is often the most fertile moment for such memory construction. When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, many memory entrepreneurs have already begun to promote narratives that cast the event in a nation-centered light. For instance, they have been calling for greater national resilience and self-sufficiency; they have been highlighting the destructive influence of various global actors; and they have been pushing narratives that highlight national trauma and the guilt of those in positions of authority. We believe that the struggle over how to remember COVID-19 has intersected and will continue to intersect with longer-running debates over national identity in Southeast Europe and beyond.

Post-crisis memory politics are especially vivid in post-conflict and transitional societies, where competing groups vie to have their version of history recognized. As our own research has shown, Southeast Europe offers a powerful comparative lens in this regard: the region's contemporary social relations have been deeply shaped by clashing memories of twentieth-century wars and conflicts.⁹ In countries emerging from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, public discourse remains polarized by divergent war memories, with each ethnic group nurturing its own narrative of victimhood and heroism. What is key to understand is that memory is not a passive recollection but an actively contested political resource: whoever controls the past, George Orwell warned, controls the future. It is precisely because collective memories strike at the core of national identities that they are so fiercely fought over. The breakup of Yugoslavia, the wars that accompanied that breakup, and the transition from communism all placed collective memories at the heart of public debate in the region, as communities sought narratives that made sense of trauma and justified their political aspirations.

In such contexts, memory debates are anything but academic. In a recent study of party competition and voter choice in Southeast Europe, we have shown that memories of the wars of the 1990s are not merely sites of historiographical contention, but that they translate into concrete political divides among both elites and voters.¹⁰ Opposing interpretations of culpability for what happened in the 1990s align with partisan identities and predict voting behavior in the region. In other words, memory has become an axis of

9 Christophe Lesschaeve and Josip Glaurdić, "The Ties That Bind: War Histories and Online Social Networks in Postwar Societies," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68, no. 7–8 (2023): 1443–1467.

10 Josip Glaurdić, Christophe Lesschaeve, and Michal Mochtak, "Contesting War Memories: Parties and Voters in Contemporary Southeast Europe," *Party Politics* 28, no. 6 (2021): 1094–1108.

political competition: parties champion particular versions of the national past, and citizens' stances on those memories correlate with their ideological orientations and electoral choices. This insight is highly pertinent to the politics of pandemic memory. Just as collective war memories served as "connective tissue" binding group identities and differentiating political camps, narratives about the COVID-19 crisis may be becoming woven into the fabric of political identity. Throughout the region and beyond, we are seeing a construction of what we term a "nationalist retrospective" of the pandemic that emphasizes how the interests of the nation and its citizens should have guided pandemic response instead of some nebulous global solidarity and how, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the nation should pursue economic and security self-sufficiency. Before we set out to explore the determinants of beliefs in this "nationalist retrospective," we thought it plausible that such narratives would resonate with those who were already inclined toward nationalist interpretations of political reality and recent history. At the same time, we also thought it plausible that alternative narratives—for example, those stressing the global nature of the fight against the pandemic, scientific triumph, or the need for international cooperation—would align with more cosmopolitan or pro-European ideological commitments. The key point here is that we believed that memory of COVID-19 would likely be refracted through the prism of existing political identities.

The outcome of that process, however, is not preordained. Historical precedents suggest a range of possibilities. As already noted, the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, despite its immense death toll, never became a core element of nationalist narratives in most countries—partly because it coincided with the grand drama of World War I, which offered more vivid heroes, villains, and turning points.¹¹ Lacking a clear "plot" or enemy, the flu pandemic quickly faded into a medical footnote, privately remembered by families but scarcely commemorated in national histories. By contrast, wars and revolutionary crises—which lend themselves to epic, morally charged storytelling—tend to be deeply memorialized. COVID-19, while not a war, has been frequently described in warlike terms ("battle" against the virus, "frontline" health workers, etc.), a rhetorical move that could facilitate integrating it into nationalist memory. If political leaders cast the pandemic as a challenge to the nation's interests and survival exacerbated by foreign foes or global negligence, those frames are likely to guide how the pandemic is remembered in years to come. In Southeast Europe, where recent collective traumas are already politicized, the memory of COVID-19 may

11 Hershberger, "The Pandemic We Forgot," 66.

be filtered through the same ideological lenses that color perceptions of earlier national traumas.

Layered on top of these memory dynamics is the influence of populism and the spread of anti-elitist and conspiratorial narratives during crises. Populist politics, whether right-wing or left-wing, thrives on a discourse of us vs. them, frequently accompanied by a deep distrust of establishment institutions, experts, and official accounts. As we demonstrated in chapter 5, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic provide fertile ground for populist and conspiratorial thinking. When people face fear and uncertainty, they may become more receptive to narratives that assign clear blame and intentionality to complex events—even if that means embracing conspiracy theories that mainstream science and media reject. Why do such narratives take hold? Psychological research suggests that during upheavals people turn to conspiracy theories to fulfill important epistemic and existential needs.¹² In a crisis that defies easy understanding, conspiracy theories promise simple explanations that satisfy the desire for clarity and causal order. They can also serve existential functions: by identifying villains, they help restore a sense of control and agency in the face of a threatening, invisible enemy. Populist rhetoric often overlaps with these motifs, as populists are quick to claim that nefarious elites or “outsiders” are responsible for the people’s hardships. Thus, it is no surprise that individuals with strong populist attitudes have proven especially susceptible to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. If one already believes “the elite” are lying, then one is likely primed to doubt official narratives—including public health statistics—and to entertain alternative accounts, no matter how outlandish.

The COVID-19 crisis has showcased the political power of such anti-elite narratives that go beyond conspiracist beliefs and capture the essence of how contemporary democratic administrations function. In numerous countries, populist leaders and movements seized on pandemic issues to propagate their broader worldview. Some right-populist figures downplayed the virus’s impact and accused global institutions or rival politicians of exaggerating the danger for nefarious ends. Others promoted or tolerated conspiracy theories about vaccines and lockdowns, suggesting that pharmaceutical companies or “deep state” actors were profiting from panic. These narratives often cast ordinary people as victims of a manipulative elite, whether in government, or among public health officials and scientists, or in the mainstream media. As we showed in chapter 4, mask mandates,

12 Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (2017): 538–542.

business closures, and lockdowns were reframed by extreme populists as an authoritarian attack on civil liberties orchestrated by powerful forces. Even when populists themselves were in power, they often maintained this stance by identifying new enemies, conspiracies, or simply incompetence of those who argued for a different way forward. In the period since the pandemic, we have witnessed a consolidation of these themes into a unified narrative we call a “populist retrospective.” It is a set of beliefs that sees the pandemic as a period when the will of the people was disregarded by a set of political, public health, and media “experts” who were either incompetent or had hidden agendas or both. As with the “nationalist retrospective,” our expectation here was also that these beliefs would resonate deeply with people’s deeper ideological views on the nature of politics. In other words, our view was that the “populist retrospective” was likely closely related to a more general commitment to populist ideology.

There was a question, however, about the extent to which these two retrospectives on the pandemic—nationalist and populist—were related and how they interacted. On the one hand, it would be reasonable to expect that nationalism and populism may reinforce one another in this context, even as they originate from distinct logics.¹³ Nationalist memory of the pandemic might emphasize how “we, the nation,” need to protect ourselves from outside threats, whereas populist memory will foreground “we, the people,” deceived or resilient in spite of “them,” the globalist elites. These two frames could be plausibly converging on a common story and that certainly resonates with what we—at least anecdotally—observe throughout Southeast Europe and beyond. More generally, scholars have also observed that right-wing populist movements often appropriate nationalist historical symbols and traumas, deploying them in the service of an anti-elite narrative. In such a synthesis, past national traumas are portrayed as injustices inflicted by outsider forces abetted by local elite complicity—a theme that resonates both with nationalist sentiment (the nation as victim of outsiders) and populist sentiment (the common folk betrayed by cosmopolitan elites).

However, nationalism and populism could also diverge in memory-making. Nationalist narratives demand a degree of cohesion and pride in the collective past, whereas populist narratives thrive on outrage at internal betrayal. Tensions might arise, for example, if a sitting national government managed the pandemic well (from a technocratic standpoint)—nationalists

13 Geneviève Zubrzycki and Anna Woźny, “The Comparative Politics of Collective Memory,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (2020): 175–194.

might want to celebrate that success as a national achievement, but populist critics might still paint the leaders as self-serving elites who exaggerated the crisis. Conversely, if the state's pandemic response is seen as a failure, nationalist opposition might blame external factors (e.g., "the EU left us in the lurch" or "international pharma companies exploited us"), while populist opposition would blame domestic leaders. Settling this question of the relationship between the nationalist and populist retrospectives on the pandemic was one of the driving forces behind this chapter's analysis.

Here we were particularly keen to expose how people's ideological commitments affected their views of one very tangible and easily measurable legacy of the pandemic—its death toll. One striking phenomenon documented in many countries has been a partisan or ideological split in beliefs about the pandemic's severity. People who follow populist leaders or consume partisan media often hold markedly different perceptions of how many died or whether official statistics were exaggerated or fabricated. In the United States, for example, conservative media consumers tend to believe the death toll was inflated (a view encouraged by President Trump), whereas others fear undercounting.¹⁴ This tendency of American conservatives to underestimate pandemic deaths goes well with their lower estimates of risk associated with the virus—what some scholars have associated with "group pride" so characteristic of the nationalist right.¹⁵ Likewise, in parts of Europe, some far-right populists spread the notion that COVID-19 fatalities were overstated to justify draconian measures, while others accused governments of hiding the true numbers. The result has been a divergence between perceived and official death figures in the public mind—effectively, separate "realities" of memory. Psychologists refer to this as motivated reasoning or ideologically motivated cognition. Once people have an ideological commitment, they will interpret new information in ways that confirm that belief.¹⁶ Misinformation, once ingested, is notoriously difficult to dislodge. Even if false claims are later debunked, they often leave a "continued influence" on memory and reasoning. Research on misinformation correction during the pandemic found that simply providing accurate data had limited success in changing

14 Megan Brennan, "Republicans Still Skeptical of COVID-19 Lethality," *Gallup News*, May 22, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/311408/republicans-skeptical-covid-lethality.aspx>.

15 Ellie J. Kyung, Manoj Thomas, and Aradhna Krishna, "How Political Identity Influences COVID-19 Risk Perception: A Model of Identity-Based Risk Perception," *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 7, no. 3 (2022): 316–324.

16 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "Displacing Misinformation About Events: An Experimental Test of Causal Corrections," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2, no. 1 (2015): 81–93.

the minds of those deeply suspicious of mainstream sources.¹⁷ In some cases, attempts to correct false beliefs about COVID-19 (for example, the efficacy of vaccines or the accuracy of case counts) met with resistance or even backfired, reinforcing the original misconception—a phenomenon previously observed in studies of ideological misinformation in politics.¹⁸ All of this suggests that collective memory of COVID-19 may be fracturing along partisan and ideological lines—and that is what we set out to expose with this chapter.

Nationalist and Populist Retrospectives on the Pandemic

As noted above, the crux of our analysis in this chapter centers on the two key interpretative frames we believe have emerged in the collective reflection on COVID-19: the *Nationalist retrospective* and the *Populist retrospective*. We measured these constructs through batteries of Likert-scale questions administered to the large, cross-national sample in our survey wave from the autumn of 2023. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (“completely disagree”) to 5 (“completely agree”), allowing us to derive composite scores for each dimension by averaging across the items in the respective battery.

The *Nationalist retrospective* comprises five items emphasizing national sovereignty, cultural identity, and skepticism toward international coordination. The thematic core of this battery reflects a valorization of national self-sufficiency, a rediscovery of the nation as the ultimate source of security, and a critique of the perceived erosion of traditional values in pandemic governance. In contrast, the *Populist retrospective* is captured through seven items that interrogate the legitimacy and competence of political and expert elites during the pandemic. This battery reflects classic populist themes: anti-elitism, mistrust of expertise and mainstream media, and the elevation of direct popular will over technocratic decision-making, including support for pandemic referenda. We present all twelve statements comprising these two variables in the appendix tables A8.1 and A8.2.

17 John M. Carey, Alexander M. Guess, Peter John Loewen, et al., “The Ephemeral Effects of Fact-Checks on COVID-19 Misperceptions in the United States, Great Britain and Canada,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 6 (2022): 236–243.

18 Brendan Nyhan, “Why the Backfire Effect Does Not Explain the Durability of Political Misperceptions,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 15 (April 13, 2021): e1912440117.

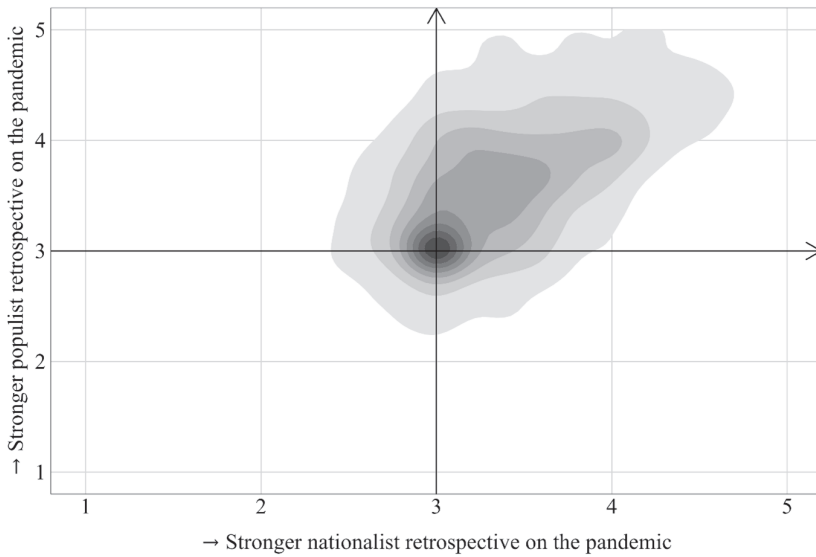
Figure 8.1. Distribution of nationalist and populist retrospectives in the sample

Figure 8.1 presents a heat map showing the distribution of respondents' average scores on both retrospective dimensions. The two-dimensional density plot reveals substantial variation within the sample, with notable clustering in the moderate to high range of both axes in the upper right quadrant of the graph. This indicates that significant portions of the population endorsed either or both interpretative frames to varying degrees. Particularly striking is the co-occurrence of high scores on both dimensions, suggesting a potential ideological convergence—or at least compatibility—between nationalist and populist readings of the pandemic experience. This empirical foundation informs the subsequent regression analysis, where we explore the predictors of each retrospective. The goal is to disentangle the socio-demographic, attitudinal, and political correlates of these narratives, shedding light on how pandemic memory is being refracted through ideological prisms in the countries of Southeast Europe.

Our primary empirical expectations in trying to identify the determinants of the nationalist and populist retrospectives on the pandemic revolved around respondents' general ideological outlooks. Simply put, we expected nationalists to be more likely to subscribe to the nationalist retrospective and populists to be more likely to subscribe to the populist retrospective. We were also keen to explore how these two were related to one another, though agnostic on the possible direction of that relationship. An important

concern that warranted closer scrutiny on this front, however, was whether the items measuring retrospective populism and nationalism captured something distinct from their dispositional counterparts, or whether they merely expressed the same underlying ideological orientations in pandemic-specific language. If the latter were the case, models using retrospective nationalism or populism as dependent variables and their dispositional equivalents as predictors would risk tautology as we would essentially be regressing a concept on itself. To address this, we subjected the full item batteries to an exploratory factor analysis.¹⁹ This technique allowed us to identify clusters of items that load onto distinct underlying dimensions based on their patterns of correlation. So essentially, are the various items capturing similar or different attitudes? For both nationalism and populism, the results revealed a two-factor structure: one capturing stable ideological orientations and the other reflecting pandemic-specific interpretations. This distinction thus matters. *Dispositional* nationalism and populism tap into broader, enduring beliefs about the political world, about the role of the nation or the people, and the distrust of elites. *Retrospective* nationalism and populism, by contrast, indicate how respondents made sense of the pandemic itself: whether they saw COVID-19 as proof that their country should have acted unilaterally, or whether they viewed elite actors as having manipulated the crisis to consolidate power. The factor analysis thus supports treating these as empirically and conceptually related, but not interchangeable constructs. We show the results of factor analysis in graphic form in the appendix figures A8.1 and A8.2.

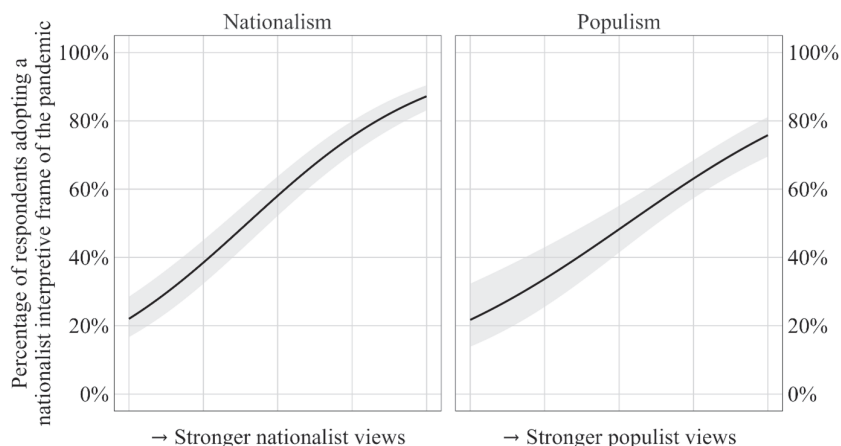
Continuing from the conceptual and empirical framework outlined above, we now turn to the results of our multivariate analysis, which bring clarity to the central questions of this chapter: who embraces the nationalist and populist retrospectives on the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Europe, and how are these narratives shaped by broader ideological worldviews? Our empirical strategy here is identical to the one we use in the other chapters, and we present the results of our regression analysis in the appendix table A8.3 (nationalist retrospective) and A8.4 (populist retrospective). As our findings show, the strongest predictor of a nationalist reading of the pandemic is a prior disposition toward nationalism itself. This might seem unsurprising.

19 The distinction between dispositional and retrospective dimensions was established through an exploratory factor analysis using maximum likelihood extraction and oblimin rotation. The analysis was run using the psych package in R. An oblique rotation was preferred over orthogonal alternatives (such as varimax) because the two dimensions, while conceptually distinct, are theoretically expected to be related.

After all, those who believe in the primacy of the nation-state are more likely to interpret COVID-19 as a lesson in the dangers of relying on international solidarity or global supply chains. Yet the strength of this association is striking. The regression results suggest that dispositional nationalism is not only statistically significant but substantively powerful: the more one views the nation as the fundamental unit of political and moral community, the more one is inclined to remember the pandemic as a moment of national neglect and as a call for renewed self-reliance. The nation, imagined through shared memory and mutual obligation, becomes the frame through which even a global pandemic is understood. In this retrospective, COVID-19 is not just a public health crisis—it is a national failure or, alternatively, a missed opportunity for national revival. The idea that “we should have taken care of our own first” resonates strongly in post-conflict societies like those of Southeast Europe, where national identity has long been tightly wound around trauma, sacrifice, and sovereignty. We would be surprised, however, if this was not the case elsewhere in Europe as well.

What is important to note here is that, as our results show, nationalism does not operate alone. Populism—defined here not as a party strategy but as a deep-seated worldview characterized by distrust of elites and belief in the moral primacy of the “common people”—also plays a significant role. Our results indicate that even after controlling for nationalism, individuals with higher populist dispositions are significantly more likely to adopt the nationalist retrospective. This is illuminating: it suggests that anti-elitism and national pride often travel together, as theorized by scholars of right-wing populism. In this view, the pandemic is remembered as a time when “the people” were let down not only by supranational bodies but by domestic elites who bowed to international pressure or failed to defend national interests. This synergy between nationalism and populism is vividly illustrated in figure 8.2. The highest probability of endorsing the nationalist retrospective occurs among those who score high on both ideological dimensions. The graph confirms what we suspected in our theoretical framing: these narratives, though distinct in logic, often converge in practice. This aligns with the literature noting how populist actors frequently appropriate nationalist symbols and grievances—turning historical memory into a shared resource for political mobilization.

Other findings in the analysis of the determinants of the *Nationalist perspective* also merit attention. What is particularly interesting, dispositional socialism is positively associated with nationalist retrospection, potentially indicating a leftist/nationalist/populist synthesis prevalent among many in Southeast Europe. In our view, this is also likely rooted in the distrust

Figure 8.2. Nationalist retrospective by dispositional nationalism and populism

economic socialists in the region have for any policies imposed or pushed for from the outside, particularly if they are coming from organizations seen as part of neoliberal international structures. Furthermore, individuals who had direct personal experience with COVID-19—whether through illness, loss, or disruption—are more likely to adopt the nationalist retrospective. This may reflect a desire for political narratives that help make sense of personal suffering, especially ones that identify national failure or abandonment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, education emerges as a clear moderating factor: higher levels of education are associated with lower endorsement of nationalist narratives, which aligns with previous findings on the moderating effects of education on political tribalism and motivated reasoning.²⁰ There are also important geographic effects. Respondents in Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia are significantly more likely to adopt the nationalist retrospective than those in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is our reference category—perhaps a reflection of the esteem respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina have for their national institutions.

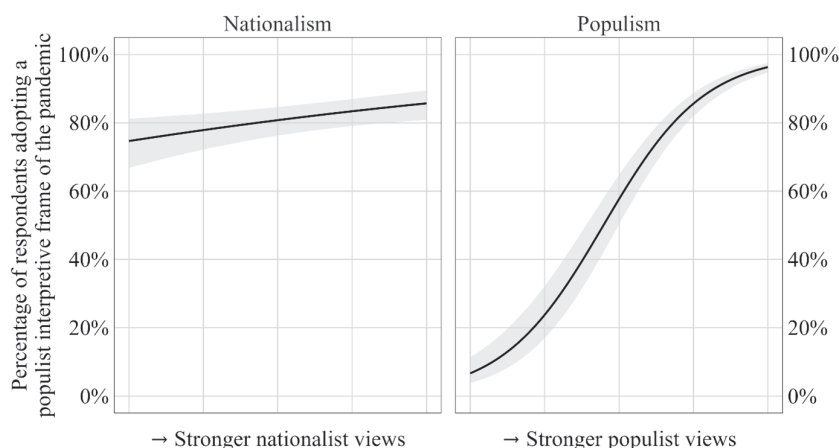
Turning to the *Populist retrospective*, the results are even more emphatic. As shown in the appendix table A8.4, dispositional populism is the single

20 Marcel Coenders, Marcel Lubbers, and Peer Scheepers, "Nationalism in Europe: Trends and Cross-National Differences in Public Opinion," *European Review* 29, no. 4 (2021): 484–496; Charlotte Cavaille and John Marshall, "Education and Anti-Immigration Attitudes: Evidence from Compulsory Schooling Reforms across Western Europe," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 1 (2019): 254–263.

strongest predictor of this view. This retrospective casts the pandemic not as a failure of international coordination, but as a period of elite deception and incompetence. In this framing, it was not the virus that posed the greatest threat—it was the political class, the experts, and the media, all of whom are portrayed as either hopelessly out of touch or actively conspiratorial. This is entirely consistent with the psychological and political mechanisms outlined above. Crises often breed conspiracy beliefs, which in turn serve epistemic and existential needs by providing simple, agentic explanations in the face of uncertainty. Populist ideologies are especially prone to such reinterpretations because they posit a dichotomy between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite, making them fertile ground for anti-establishment narratives about the pandemic. As documented in earlier chapters, this was particularly evident in how mask mandates, vaccine campaigns, and lockdowns were recast by some political actors as tools of elite domination rather than public health necessities.

Although nationalism also has a positive and statistically significant relationship with the populist retrospective, the effect is far smaller. In other words, while nationalists may harbor some populist suspicions, it is primarily populists who embrace the anti-elite (and nationalist) version of pandemic memory. This asymmetry is clearly visible in figure 8.3, where the increase in predicted probability is steeper along the populism axis than the nationalism one. This supports our earlier suggestion that while populism and nationalism often interact, they can also diverge—particularly when it comes to who is blamed for crisis mismanagement.

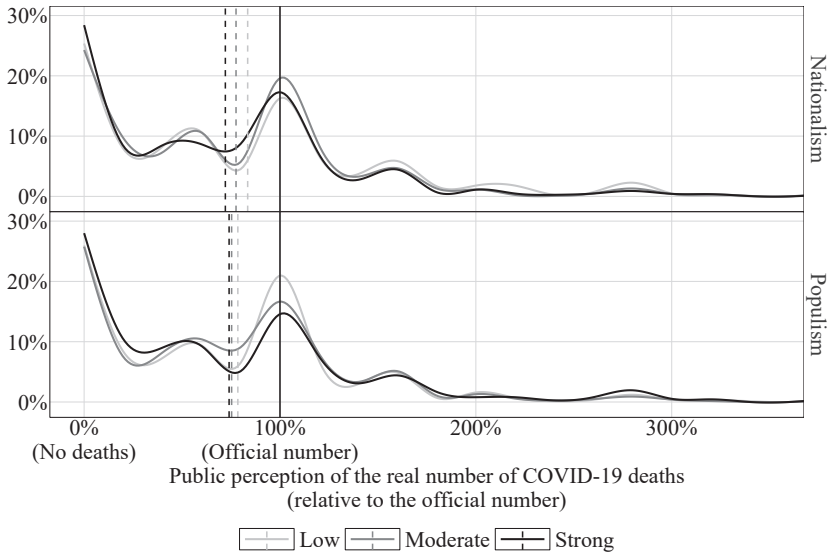
Education again plays a dampening role: individuals with middle or high levels of education are significantly less likely to endorse the populist retrospective. This likely reflects not only informational effects (better knowledge of pandemic facts) but also the social trust and institutional confidence that higher education tends to cultivate. Interestingly, political interest is positively associated with both retrospectives, suggesting that these narratives are not simply passive reactions but reflect actively held worldviews among politically engaged citizens. Together, these findings lend strong empirical support to the idea—central to this chapter—that retrospective narratives of the pandemic are not formed in a vacuum. Instead, they are deeply shaped by pre-existing ideological commitments. The pandemic may have been a universal event, but its memory is being fragmented along familiar ideological lines. In Southeast Europe, as in many other parts of the world, nationalism and populism provide distinct yet converging lenses through which people make sense of crisis, suffering, and blame.

Figure 8.3. Populist retrospective by dispositional nationalism and populism

This fragmentation of memory has important political implications. Just as collective memories of the Yugoslav wars remain sites of ongoing political contention, so too may pandemic memories come to serve as symbolic markers of political identity and partisan alignment. Whether framed as a story of national betrayal or elite conspiracy, these narratives are becoming part of the region's evolving mnemonic landscape—deeply political, emotionally resonant, and ideologically encoded. In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic is not just an epidemiological episode to be archived in official histories; it is a chapter already being rewritten in the language of national grievance and popular outrage. And as Orwell warned, it matters greatly who gets to do the rewriting.

Counting the Dead: Ideological Memory and the Politics of Pandemic Numbers

In times of crisis, numbers matter—not just as markers of reality, but as tools of narrative. The death toll from COVID-19 is not only a measure of the pandemic's severity; it is also a prism through which citizens interpret government credibility, elite truthfulness, and national resilience. Yet as our analysis shows, even a basic factual claim—how many people died—is deeply contested. In our last survey wave administered in the fall of 2023, we asked respondents across the region to estimate how many people in their country had really died from COVID-19. First, however, we gave them

Figure 8.4. Respondents' estimates of the COVID-19 death count

an anchor: the official death toll for their country, as reported by public health authorities. Respondents then provided their own estimate, which allowed us to calculate a simple yet revealing measure: their estimate as a percentage of the official figure. This approach allows us to tap directly into what scholars of neuroscience and cognitive psychology call motivated memory.²¹ As noted above, political identity and ideological predispositions often shape how individuals process even factual information. For those deeply distrustful of elites (as in populist thinking) or deeply committed to national pride and cohesion (as in nationalist thinking), the official death count is not simply a neutral statistic—it becomes a contested figure, refracted through beliefs about betrayal, exaggeration, or cover-up.

We present the distribution of respondents' estimates, broken down by levels of nationalism and populism in figure 8.4. Several things immediately stand out—and they deserve to be taken seriously, both for what they reveal about pandemic memory and for what they suggest about political culture in post-conflict democracies. First and most striking is the prevalence of denial. Across the entire sample, more than 30% of respondents believe that

21 Kimberly S. Chiew and R. Alison Adcock, "Motivated Memory," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Motivation and Learning*, ed. K. Ann Renninger and Suzanne E. Hidi (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 517–546.

zero people died from COVID-19 in their country. This figure is astounding, not only in terms of epidemiological reality but also in what it implies about public trust. Such widespread disbelief cannot be explained by data uncertainty or statistical illiteracy alone. Rather, it reflects a deeper erosion of epistemic authority: the rejection of official narratives not just as inaccurate, but as fundamentally fraudulent. Second, the modal response lies below the official figure. As shown by the vertical dashed lines signifying averages for the different levels of populism and nationalism, the majority of respondents believe that the actual number of COVID-19 deaths was substantially smaller than what was officially reported. In short, the dominant view is not that governments undercounted, as was most likely the case in every country of the region except for Slovenia and maybe Croatia (see chapter 3), but rather that they overstated the toll.²² This speaks to a pervasive belief in manipulation: the sense that authorities used the pandemic as a means to instill fear, justify restrictions, or consolidate control.

Lastly, this generalized skepticism does not seem to be evenly distributed, though perhaps in unexpected ways. The upper panel of figure 8.4, which disaggregates by levels of nationalism, reveals a meaningful distinction between those with low levels of nationalist sentiment and all others. Respondents low in nationalist sentiment are significantly more likely to align their estimates with the official count. The dashed vertical line for low nationalists falls reasonably close to the 100% mark, indicating near-acceptance of official data. In contrast, respondents with moderate or high levels of nationalism are more inclined to believe that the death toll was exaggerated. The implication is clear: nationalism may be associated with the minimization of pandemic harm. The lower panel, which disaggregates by levels of populist belief, however, tells a different story. Here, the vertical dashed lines—representing the average estimates for low, moderate, and high populists—cluster closely around each other. There does not seem to be any meaningful variation across the different levels of populism. In other words, populism appears to have little explanatory power in shaping death toll estimates, at least in the aggregate. These patterns—where nationalism seems to drive differentiation and populism does not—offer an early clue about the psychological and political mechanisms at play.

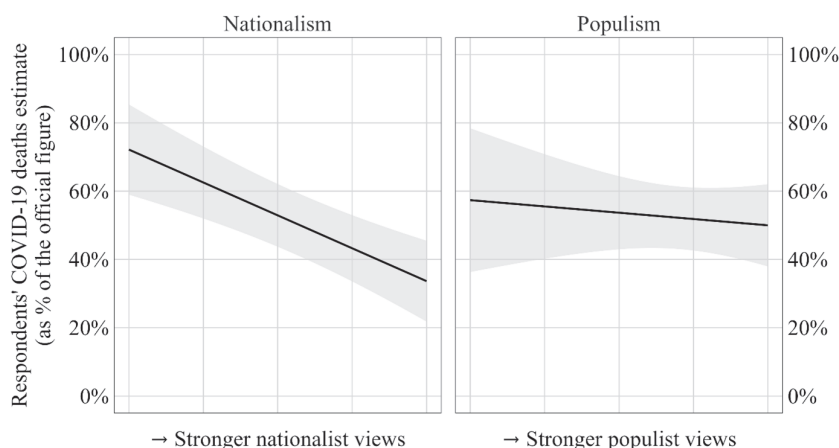
22 In each country of the region, majorities of respondents believed that the death toll was smaller than the official figures. This belief was particularly pronounced in Slovenia—the only country in the region where the official number of COVID-19 deaths was actually larger than the excess mortality figures. Nearly 85% of Slovenian respondents believed that the actual number of COVID-19 deaths was smaller than the official death toll. In the other countries of the region, that figure ranged between 53% in Montenegro to 74% in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For nationalists, the death toll may be a reputational issue or a question of group pride: accepting high casualties could imply that the nation failed to protect its own.²³ Populist logic, by contrast, may be cutting both ways. For some populists, the elites may have exaggerated the pandemic to seize control. For others, the elites may have downplayed the danger to protect economic interests or preserve power. Either way, the descriptive data presented in figure 8.4 suggests that populism alone does not seem to have a clear directional bias.

We present the results of our multivariate regression analysis in the appendix table A8.5, where the dependent variable is the respondent's estimate of the COVID-19 death count, expressed as a percentage of the official figure. The models progressively introduce control variables to assess the robustness of effects across ideological, experiential, and sociodemographic domains. The findings are unequivocal: dispositional nationalism is the strongest and most consistent predictor of death toll underestimation. Across all three models, nationalism has a negative and statistically significant effect on the estimated death count ratio. Even when controlling for personal experience, education, income, and other key variables, nationalism remains independently associated with downward revision of the pandemic toll. This supports the view that nationalism shapes not just the interpretation of crisis, but the perception of basic facts. As we argued above, nationalist memory seeks coherence with a narrative of national resilience. A high pandemic death toll disrupts that narrative—it suggests vulnerability, institutional failure, and possibly even shame. To defend the nation's symbolic integrity, nationalist respondents appear willing to disbelieve the official death count altogether.

Populism, by contrast, shows no consistent effect. While Model 1 indicates a marginally positive relationship—suggesting that more populist individuals might slightly overestimate deaths—this effect vanishes once controls are added. In the fully specified Model 3, populism is statistically insignificant and substantively negligible. This mirrors what we saw in the descriptive data: populist distrust of elites does not, in this case, drive a clear pattern of belief about the pandemic's toll. These conclusions are reinforced visually in figure 8.5, which shows predicted death count estimates based on Model 3, plotted against levels of nationalism and populism. The downward slope across levels of nationalism is clear and consistent: the more nationalist the respondent, the lower their estimate. By contrast, the populism curve is

23 Kyung, Thomas, and Krishna, "How Political Identity Influences COVID-19 Risk Perception."

Figure 8.5. Estimate of the COVID-19 death count by nationalism and populism

basically flat. This confirms that nationalism, not populism, is the ideological lens most closely associated with pandemic denialism in this domain.

Beyond the ideological factors, the regression results also highlight the role of personal experience and education in this form of pandemic memory. Respondents who had direct experience with COVID-19 were significantly more likely to believe that the official death toll was too low. This is both intuitive and important: direct experience serves as an epistemic anchor, counterbalancing ideological filters and prompting higher estimates. As was the case with the *Nationalist retrospective* and the *Populist retrospective*, education also has a powerful and positive effect. Respondents with middle and especially higher levels of education are more likely to estimate a higher death toll—suggesting greater trust in public health data, better information literacy, or broader awareness of international reporting debates. This is an interesting addition to the literature on motivated reasoning. Scholars have found that, while education increases information-processing capacity and political sophistication, it does not necessarily lead to more accurate factual beliefs. Rather, it tends to sharpen ideological consistency. Better-educated individuals are more likely to interpret information in ways that align with their preexisting beliefs—whether that means accepting official data or rejecting it.²⁴ Our findings here suggest a more straightforward relationship

24 Dan M. Kahan, "Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection," *Judgment and Decision Making* 8, no. 4 (2013): 407–424; D. J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, "The Nature

between education and factual beliefs. Other variables exert more modest effects. Women, ethnic minorities, and those with lower incomes tend to estimate fewer deaths, although these effects are not large. Remarkably, respondents' political interest and being a government supporter have no discernible impact—suggesting that being more politically engaged and voting for the government managing the public health institutions and the national response to the pandemic does not necessarily make one more accurate or more trusting. In our view, it is a telling sign of the depth of the lack of public trust in the state institutions and of the drivers of voter choice in the region having little to do with the evaluation of politicians and their parties as competent or trustworthy managers of the public administration and bureaucracy.

What does it mean that more than a third of respondents believe nobody died of COVID-19 in their country? Or that the most common response is to disbelieve the official toll? These are not minor anomalies—they are signals of profound epistemic fracture. In much of Southeast Europe, the pandemic is not only a medical crisis that happened in the past. It is a contested memory still unfolding in the present. For scholars of nationalism, this is familiar terrain. Nations are held together not just by territory and institutions, but by shared stories of triumph and loss. When that story is disrupted—in other words, when the nation appears weak, fallible, or unprepared—nationalist memory responds by rewriting the script. In this case, the script appears to omit the dead. For students of populism, the lesson is different but no less important: distrust alone does not always translate into distorted belief. Populist suspicion is diffuse, ambivalent, and often self-contradictory. In contrast to nationalism—which seeks coherence, meaning, and pride—populism thrives on ambiguity and outrage. That may explain why populism in this case did not yield a consistent response: it is not that populists trust the data, but that they distrust it in too many directions at once. What emerges from this analysis is a sobering picture: the memory of the pandemic is not just divided—it is fractured. And in this fractured memoryscape, ideology plays an outsized role. The numbers may be simple. But the stories they tell, and the truths people are willing to believe, remain deeply political.

and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs About Politics," *Political Psychology* 38, no. S1 (2017): 127–150; Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–769.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that the politics of memory surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are already crystallizing along ideological lines, particularly in the form of two potent retrospective frames: the *Nationalist retrospective* and the *Populist retrospective*. Anchoring our analysis in the theories of collective memory, nationalism, and populism, we have shown that these frames are not merely rhetorical tropes advanced by political elites. They are increasingly internalized by citizens and shape how they interpret—and misinterpret—one of the most consequential global events in recent history.

Our findings confirm that collective memory is not a passive storage of factual information, but a deeply political process structured by group identities, ideological commitments, and cognitive motivations. The death toll from COVID-19, a seemingly straightforward statistic, has become a terrain of symbolic contestation. In this mnemonic struggle, nationalism stands out as the most consistent predictor of pandemic denialism—with more nationalist individuals significantly more likely to understate the death toll, presumably to preserve a narrative of national resilience and competence. Populism, although influential in shaping broader distrust of elites, fails to show a consistent directional effect in this domain.

One of the central contributions of this chapter is the empirical distinction we make between dispositional and retrospective forms of nationalism and populism. We show that pandemic-specific interpretations—what we term retrospectives—are not merely proxies for underlying ideological orientations. Rather, they represent distinct constructions of meaning, crafted in response to the unique experience of the pandemic, even as they are scaffolded by deeper worldviews. This analytical separation is essential for understanding how citizens translate abstract ideological dispositions into concrete interpretations of historical events. It also points to the importance of studying memory politics not merely as top-down elite narratives but as deeply embedded in public opinion.

Importantly, we also find evidence of convergence between nationalist and populist retrospectives. Although rooted in different logics—one anchored in loyalty to the nation, the other in suspicion of elites—these narratives often coalesce in the post-pandemic context, reinforcing each other's emotional and explanatory appeal. In particular, we observe that individuals high in both dispositions are the most likely to adopt a strongly revisionist interpretation of the pandemic's toll and meaning. This suggests a broader ideological synthesis at work, one that reflects the increasingly

blurred boundaries between nationalism and populism in contemporary political discourse. The implication is that pandemic memory is not just fragmented but being actively polarized, potentially becoming a new axis of identity conflict and political mobilization.

The political implications of these findings are sobering. In many parts of Southeast Europe—and, we suspect, beyond—public health data are no longer trusted merely because it is official. Rather, it is believed or rejected based on how well it aligns with ideological priors. This form of epistemic partisanship is bound to undermine concerted and efficient responses to any future public health crisis. When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has undermined the very possibility of a shared factual basis for public debate. When more than 30% of respondents believe that no one died of COVID-19 in their country, the issue is no longer just one of misinformation. It reflects a deeper collapse of institutional trust and a readiness to reject even the most basic realities if they are inconvenient to one's political worldview. In such a climate, traditional strategies of memory preservation—such as official commemoration, textbook inclusion, or museum curation—may have limited reach unless they are perceived as legitimate across partisan divides.

More broadly, our results invite reflection on the conditions under which collective memory can function as a resource for social cohesion rather than division. Scholars have long noted that remembrance can serve both integrative and disintegrative functions. The pandemic, with its universal scope and human toll, could have offered an opportunity for solidarity-based memory—a chance to build new civic ideas centered around resilience, sacrifice, and scientific achievement. And in some places, that may yet occur. But in Southeast Europe, the evidence suggests that it is more likely to be appropriated into familiar patterns of victimhood, blame attribution, and ideological sorting. In this respect, pandemic memory joins the ranks of other politically loaded historical episodes, from the Yugoslav wars to the postcommunist transition—episodes that have been remembered in radically different ways by different groups and that continue to shape political attitudes today.

This raises important questions for future research. Will the fragmentation of pandemic memory deepen or recede as time goes on? What role will education systems, political parties, and media ecosystems play in institutionalizing one version of the pandemic's memory over others? How might international actors, such as the EU, engage with pandemic remembrance in ways that foster cohesion rather than amplify cleavages? And to what

extent can societies correct ideologically motivated misperceptions when even public health crises fail to command epistemic consensus?

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic was not only a medical and social crisis, but also a mnemonic event—one whose remembrance is actively being forged in the crucible of contemporary political identity. In the years to come, how we remember (or forget) the pandemic may prove just as consequential as how we experienced it. The struggle over memory, as always, is a struggle over meaning, and ultimately, over power. As Southeast Europe's post-pandemic memoryscape begins to take shape, it will reflect not only what happened, but who we have become.

9. Conclusion: Ideologies in the Time of Contagion

Abstract: The pandemic did not suspend politics; it exposed and reactivated long-standing ideological dynamics. Drawing evidence from across Southeast Europe, this chapter reflects on how nationalism and populism shaped crisis governance, public trust, compliance, and collective memory during and after the pandemic. It argues that COVID-19 functioned less as a discrete shock than as an accelerant of pre-existing ideological cleavages, transforming public health into a site of symbolic struggle. Situating Southeast Europe as a magnifying lens rather than an exception, the chapter connects regional dynamics to broader European and global patterns of democratic fragility. It concludes by warning that future crises will be shaped not only by institutional preparedness, but by the ideological repertoires societies bring to bear when uncertainty returns.

Keywords: nationalism, populism, crisis politics, democratic resilience, collective memory

In May 2023, Croatia's populist party the Bridge (Most) made headlines by calling for the formation of a parliamentary inquiry commission to investigate what they called a massive scandal: the destruction of hundreds of thousands of doses of expired COVID-19 vaccines.¹ The government had ordered too many, they claimed—recklessly overspending public funds in an effort to cozy up to its EU overlords and international corporate interests. In their retelling, vaccine waste was not just a logistical failure but a symptom of broader administrative decay and elite unaccountability. The irony was

¹ "Raspudić opleo po Vladi: Počinili su veleizdaju, pljačku stoljeća," *NilInfo*, May 29, 2023, <https://ninfo.hr/vijesti/raspudic-vlada-kupovinom-cjepiva-pocinila-veleizdaju-i-pljacku-stoljeca/>.

difficult to miss. The Bridge and its allies had spent the better part of the pandemic railing against vaccination campaigns, warning of international pharmaceutical conspiracies, and celebrating individual freedom over collective responsibility. Their attempt to pin the blame for unused vaccines on the very institutions they had worked to undermine was not just politically convenient—it bordered on absurdism.

The episode unfolded like a scene from a satirical play. A party that had fueled vaccine skepticism now demanded to know why the vaccines were not being used. A government that had quietly allowed public messaging to drift—occasionally nodding to scientific authority, occasionally indulging populist sentiment—found itself accused of waste and reluctant to forcefully defend its own record. And a society caught in between, fatigued and fragmented, mostly shrugged. Ultimately, the parliamentary commission was never formed.² The government dismissed the accusations, the Bridge moved on to its next outrage, and the broader public debate fizzled.

The affair, however, was instructive. It encapsulated the strange ideological choreography that had defined the pandemic across much of Southeast Europe: the nationalist and populist exploitation of public health measures, and the institutional hesitation to confront it head-on. The story of the destroyed vaccines in Croatia was not exceptional. It was emblematic of what took place across Southeast Europe and the rest of the Western world. It revealed the enduring ideological prisms through which the crisis and its aftermath were refracted, interpreted, contested, and performed. It also crystallized a broader pattern of the strategic repurposing of crisis management failures into rhetorical attacks, often by the very actors whose actions or ideologies helped fuel the failures in the first place.

Revisiting the Core Empirical Findings: Ideological Divisions in Crisis

Looking back from the vantage point of the mid-2020s, the COVID-19 crisis feels less like a discrete episode than like an accelerant poured onto already smoldering fires. The pandemic obviously did not create nationalism or populism in Southeast Europe, nor did it single-handedly collapse fragile health systems or corrode public trust. Instead, it made visible the ways in which long-standing ideological cleavages framed how societies understood

2 “MPs Vote Against Forming COVID Inquiry Commission,” *Sabor*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.sabor.hr/en/press/news/mps-vote-against-forming-covid-inquiry-commission>.

and endured the crisis. In this book we have argued that nationalism and populism were not merely backdrops to the pandemic, but that they were interpretive lenses through which both elites and citizens made sense of risk, authority, and solidarity. The pandemic was a stress test and a mirror: it reflected the deep fissures of the region's political cultures while also magnifying their consequences.

The empirical record across Southeast Europe underscores the centrality of this claim. Compliance with extraordinary measures may have been high in the first months of 2020, but from the very beginning of the pandemic the ideological scaffolding of compliance and defiance became apparent and only grew in intensity as the pandemic progressed. Those with more nationalist orientations were more likely to accept sweeping restrictions as necessary to protect the collective, but their willingness to comply in practice was more limited, perhaps due to private skepticism or the conflicting cues of nationalist elites themselves. Those with more populist orientations, by contrast, tended to see those same measures as impositions by corrupt or untrustworthy elites, eroding legitimacy rather than building it. The contrast was telling: nationalism could legitimate the exercise of power, even if only superficially, while populism corroded it almost immediately.

Conspiratorial belief became one of the most striking domains where ideological orientations mattered. Across our surveys, both nationalists and populists were far more likely than their cosmopolitan or mainstream/pluralist counterparts to endorse COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Our statistical models show that moving from the low to the high end of either scale more than doubled the likelihood of believing that the pandemic was deliberately manipulated or misrepresented. The content of these beliefs was not neatly divided between the two ideologies: both nationalists and populists found plausibility in narratives that blamed hostile outsiders, global elites, or untrustworthy authorities. What distinguished them was not the substance of the conspiracy theories but the growth of their intensity and diffusion. For nationalists, the gap with non-nationalists widened gradually over the course of the pandemic, whereas for populists, the divergence crystallized more abruptly from 2021 onward. Taken together, the effect was virtually cumulative: nationalist and populist orientations reinforced one another, producing a public sphere where mistrust spread as fast as the virus itself and nearly any authoritative claim could be reinterpreted as evidence of deception.

The pandemic's economic fallout further illustrates the adaptive power of these ideological repertoires. Early in the crisis, citizens across the ideological spectrum expressed support for prioritizing health over wealth. But as

lockdowns endured and costs mounted, nationalist and populist orientations proved crucial in reframing the terms of sacrifice. Nationalists were among the first to question whether the young had been asked to give up too much for the old, couching this intergenerational grievance in the language of national vitality and renewal. Populists joined this critique later, reframing it as yet another instance of elites privileging some groups at the expense of others. What began as a broad social consensus fractured into an ideologically inflected cleavage over generational justice—a cleavage that continues to reverberate in post-pandemic politics.

Vaccination campaigns revealed these ideological logics in perhaps their starkest form. Populist distrust translated directly into vaccine refusal, with survey and electoral data showing that areas of strong populist support were also areas of persistently low vaccination uptake. For populists, vaccines epitomized the overreach of corrupt elites and the collusion of governments with pharmaceutical or international interests. Nationalists, however, displayed more ambivalence. In some contexts, vaccination was framed as a patriotic duty, a test of national discipline, or a demonstration of self-reliance. In others, vaccines were cast as foreign impositions or unsafe intrusions on the national body. The result was not uniform resistance, but a kaleidoscope of interpretations filtered through nationalist vocabularies. What distinguished nationalism from populism in this domain was precisely its malleability: it could either reinforce or undermine public health efforts, depending on how it was framed by political elites.

By late 2023, the memory of the pandemic in Southeast Europe—the subject of our last empirical chapter—had crystallized into two dominant ideological narratives. The nationalist retrospective emphasized resilience and self-reliance, framing the crisis as proof that the nation had survived despite the failures of international institutions. In this telling, the pandemic's human toll was minimized or reframed as less consequential than the lesson of national endurance. The populist retrospective, by contrast, cast the pandemic as a story of elite betrayal and manipulation: governments were accused of hiding the true costs, privileging their own interests, and using the crisis to erode liberty. While both narratives rejected mainstream accounts, they diverged in emphasis. Nationalists downplayed loss, presenting the crisis as a reaffirmation of the need for collective resilience and independence, whereas populists foregrounded elite culpability and deception. Together, they ensured that the pandemic was not remembered as a neutral episode of public health (mis-)management, but as an ideologically contested event whose meaning continues to shape political mobilization.

Taken together, these findings underline a central argument of this book: that nationalism and populism are distinct but intersecting sets of ideological commitment whose role in crisis politics cannot be understood through a single “far-right” lens. Nationalism was often authority-affirming, but not necessarily compliance-enhancing. It offered legitimacy to governments, but one that was fragile and conditional. Populism was consistently authority-eroding, a corrosive force that undermined both expert guidance and collective action. When these two were fused—most obviously in the nationalist-populist projects in Serbia, Montenegro, or Republika Srpska—the result was particularly potent. Here, pandemic governance became symbolic politics: mask mandates or vaccines were less about epidemiology than about loyalty, sovereignty, and identity.

Comparative and Global Resonances

By the time the acute phase of the pandemic had passed, the region of Southeast Europe had settled into a paradox: substantial variation in outcomes, but surprising consistency in underlying drivers. In public health terms—whether measured by excess mortality, vaccine uptake, or compliance behavior—the region revealed a spectrum. It was a disappointing spectrum that went from bad to terrible, but a spectrum nonetheless. Slovenia and, to a lesser extent, Croatia anchored the better performing end, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia consistently ranked among the worst in Europe. Serbia proved a positive outlier only in its early vaccine procurement, but ultimately converged with its southern neighbors in terms of mistrust and low uptake. In short: Southeast Europe did not respond as a bloc. It fractured—largely along a familiar gradient from northwest to southeast.

That epidemiological performance gradient, however, tells only part of the story. It maps relatively neatly onto a range of overlapping structural variables: state capacity, economic development, EU membership, and institutional quality. But therein lies the problem, as these variables correlate so closely. Was Slovenia’s performance not as bad because it was wealthier? Because it had stronger institutions? Because it belonged to the EU? Because it retained a modicum of social trust? And was Bosnia and Herzegovina’s performance dreadful because it was Slovenia’s poorer neighbor with weaker institutions and social trust destroyed by the decades of ethnic conflict and ineffective post-conflict governance? The answer is likely yes—to all

of those questions, in combination. The variables overlap too tightly for clean causal attribution.

This overdetermination complicates tidy explanation. Deeper analysis of the trajectory of the pandemic, moreover, reveals something more important: the pandemic's outcomes were neither easily nor directly reducible to structural conditions. In most of these countries, early performance defied expectations and earned rare plaudits from the domestic publics and international experts. But those initial responses proved ephemeral. By late 2020, the virus resurged, compliance collapsed, and the region fell into epidemiological freefall. That collapse was not uniform in timing or severity, but it was region-wide in trajectory. Every state—regardless of how well it was doing economically, or whether it enjoyed the logistical and normative support of EU membership—ultimately converged toward public confusion, ideological polarization, and institutional strain.

We believe that this is where the more significant analytical insight of our book lies. If the public health performance of Southeast European states varied, the ideological mechanisms shaping behavior did not. Across the board, the pandemic became a site of ideological contestation that may have differed in intensity but not in kind. The ideological conflicts were present everywhere and largely worked in the same direction. This was most visible in the two empirical areas that came to define the pandemic's later phase: vaccine hesitancy and conspiratorial belief. As shown in chapters 5 and 7, both were pervasive across the region. Belief in conspiracy theories surrounding the virus, its origins, and the motivations behind lockdowns and vaccines was not confined to the southeast part of the region, where media capture and authoritarian tactics were most pronounced. It surged everywhere, across states with different media ecologies and political configurations. Even Slovenia, with its comparatively high vaccination rate, experienced a similar wave of populist rhetoric and anti-elite suspicion. The drivers of these phenomena were consistent across countries. As our survey data demonstrated, populist and nationalist ideological orientations were the strongest predictors of vaccine rejection and conspiratorial thinking. What changed from country to country was not the direction of the effect, but its magnitude.

In our view, this is one of the reasons why Southeast Europe matters in the context of what was a global pandemic. Countries of the region (to a differing extent) succumbed to the pandemic because their most valuable social resources of trust, coherence, and collective purpose had been depleted (again: to a differing extent) by decades of ideological contestation along

the axes of nationalism and populism. What the countries of the region also displayed with unusual clarity were dynamics present everywhere: elites choosing short-term legitimacy over long-term resilience, citizens interpreting risk through ideological filters, and societies struggling to sustain solidarity in the face of prolonged crisis.

If there is a single lesson to be drawn from these patterns, it is that crises are not ideologically neutral. They do not suspend politics but intensify it. The pandemic was not a hiatus from nationalist and populist contention—it was their stimulant. And while Southeast Europe offers a magnified view, it is not an outlier. From Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin to Warsaw, Budapest, Belgrade, or Zagreb, the same ideological cleavages shaped compliance, conspiracy beliefs, memory, and trust. The difference was that in Southeast Europe, the thinness of institutional buffers and the density of ideological signaling made the consequences unusually stark.

All of this therefore tells us something about Europe writ large. If Southeast Europe sits “at Europe’s edge,” as the book’s title provocatively suggests, then that edge is not a clearly defined border. It is a vantage point. The region shows, in stark relief, how ideological contestation can destabilize crisis governance—regardless of whether policies follow epidemiological expert advice. This is not a Balkan pathology. Similar patterns played out across Europe: in Germany, where the Querdenker movement blurred left- and right-wing populism;³ in France, where vaccine resistance drew from both secular and religious distrust;⁴ in Italy, where pandemic narratives were folded into longstanding anti-political sentiment,⁵ and in the Netherlands,

3 Thomas Plümper, Eric Neumayer, and Katharina Gabriela Pfaff, “The Strategy of Protest Against Covid-19 Containment Policies in Germany,” *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 5 (2021): 2236–2250; Andrew Green, “Anti-Lockdown Group Querdenken Pulls Germans to the Far Right,” *CodaStory*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.codastory.com/polarization/querdenken-movement>; William Callison and Quinn Slobodian, “Der Aufstieg des Mittelstands,” *Die Zeit*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2021-04/querdenken-corona-politik-protest-regierung-verschwoerung-esoterik-rechtsextremismus>.

4 Samuel Laurent, “Civitas, de l’intégrisme chrétien à l’opposition au passe sanitaire,” *Le Monde*, August 18, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/08/18/civitas-de-l-integrisme-chretien-a-l-opposition-au-passe-sanitaire_6091720_3224.html; “How France tackled vaccine hesitancy,” *Economist*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/09/18/how-france-tackled-vaccine-hesitancy>.

5 Hannah Roberts and Carlo Martuscelli, “Black Flags and Crucifixes: Italy Vaccine Passport Protests Unite Strange Bedfellows,” *Politico*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-vaccine-passport-protest-neo-fascists-green-pass/>; Ilvo Diamanti, “Il virus dell’antipolitica che combatte la scienza, No vax due italiani su 10,” *La Repubblica*, <https://>

where Bible Belt vaccine skepticism combined with large street protests against lockdowns and mandates.⁶

The story we tell, then, is not just of crisis management efforts undone by poor governance, but of democracies everywhere confronted with the fragility of their civic immune systems. Viruses spread through bodies, and ideas spread through societies. When the two contagions meet, the outcome depends not only on hospitals or vaccines, but on the ideological lenses through which citizens interpret and act. In Southeast Europe, and—we would argue—in most of the Western world, those lenses were nationalism and populism. They proved resilient, adaptive, and—in their interaction—often devastating. They remain so today, shaping not just how the pandemic is remembered, but how future crises will be faced.

What Southeast Europe offers is not exception but magnification. It condenses into sharper relief the same currents that surged across the continent. The region's pandemic, then, was both distinct and deeply connected to broader trends. Distinct in its intensity, in the density of ideological signaling, and in the fragility of its institutional architectures. But connected in the underlying dynamics it revealed. Nationalism and populism were not regional anomalies. They were regionally concentrated expressions of a broader democratic malaise. The pandemic accelerated their effects, but the logic behind them predated the virus and will outlast it. In this light, the region's diversity becomes an asset for analysis. It forces us to resist reductive categories and engage the complexity of ideological mediation under duress. It cautions against reading public health outcomes solely through structural lenses. And it reminds us that the most damaging contagions of the pandemic era were not viral but political. Southeast Europe teaches us that ideological repertoires—especially when normalized in public discourse—can overwhelm even the best institutional designs, as we have witnessed in the United States under both Trump administrations. It also teaches us that the difference between collapse and resilience lies not in whether nationalism or populism exist, but in how they are channeled. That lesson resonates well beyond the region. It suggests that what we witnessed in Southeast Europe was not just a crisis at Europe's edge. It was a warning from its center.

www.repubblica.it/economia/2021/05/30/news/il_virus_dell_antipolitica_che_combatte_la_scienza_no_vax_due_italiani_su_10-303520463/

6 Het Parool, "3600 boetes en 25 aanhoudingen in de eerste nacht van de avondklok," Het Parool, January 24, 2021, <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/3600-boetes-en-25-aanhoudingen-in-de-eerste-nacht-van-de-avondklok-b75fd43d/>; De Standaard, "Strenggelovige antivaxers brengen Nederlandse ziekenhuizen in last," *De Standaard*, October 20, 2021.

Aftershocks and Afterlives: Pandemic Consequences in Southeast Europe and Beyond

By the time COVID-19 retreated from the front pages, its political work was far from done. In Southeast Europe, as elsewhere, the pandemic's epidemiological chapter closed with neither a catharsis nor a reckoning. Instead, it gave way to a protracted and often subterranean struggle over memory, meaning, and legitimacy. What began as a health emergency mutated into a selectively activated (or strategically forgotten) political resource. The consequences of this shift continue to unfold, but even now, they trace a path from acute disruption to diffuse sedimentation: a politics of crisis has turned into a politics of its afterlife.

In Southeast Europe, this afterlife has not produced a coherent narrative of victory or failure. The pandemic has largely receded from political discourse, not because its legacy has been resolved, but because it resists resolution. Its ambiguities proved too ideologically useful for some—and too politically costly for others—to confront head-on. Some governments sought to erase their missteps by avoiding all retrospection. Others attempted to rewrite the pandemic as a moment of resilience, even as excess mortality statistics told a grimmer truth. But in most cases, the politics of forgetting has prevailed. Pandemic-era institutions have been dismantled, data dashboards taken offline, and crisis managers rotated out of view. No comprehensive public inquiries have been held. Public memory has been left to partisan interpretations, persistent conspiracy theories, or the inertia of fatigue.

Yet even in this relative silence, the imprint of the pandemic remains visible. It lingers in the erosion of institutional trust, the normalization of anti-expert rhetoric, and the strategic entrenchment of ideological repertoires honed during the crisis. Across Southeast Europe, we see electoral aftershocks and discursive recalibrations. In Serbia, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has continued to fuse pandemic-era authoritarianism with electoral engineering, aided by its domination of the media and a narrative of competence forged in the early days of crisis. In Croatia, the government survived successive challenges to its pandemic response by shifting public attention elsewhere, thus insulating itself from retrospective judgment. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where no state-level pandemic governance structure ever truly cohered, COVID-19 seemingly disappeared from political discourse, absorbed into the broader matrix of systemic dysfunction and fragmented sovereignty. Ideological entrepreneurs were quick to recode the pandemic into existing moral and political terms and these frames survived the virus.

This dynamic is not unique to Southeast Europe. It is, in fact, part of a broader pattern observable across the Western world. In the United States, the politicization of the pandemic reached extraordinary levels, but its consequences have been even more enduring. The backlash against vaccine mandates, mask policies, and school closures has been institutionalized in state-level legislation, judicial rulings, and the administrative curtailment of public health powers. Conservative states have passed laws banning vaccine mandates, and courts have struck down federal public health authorities.⁷ The Department of Health and Human Services and a host of public health institutions have been gutted by the administration led by a vaccine skeptic under an Orwellian guise of “Making America Healthy Again.”⁸ In this sense, the pandemic served not merely as a flashpoint but as a stimulator of preexisting ideological rifts. It was an intensifier of (both left-wing and right-wing) populist suspicion toward expertise and food and drug business corporations; and it was a rallying cry for libertarian-conservative reassertion of state-level sovereignty, while—paradoxically—also giving a new impetus for the most virulent form of American nationalism.

Moreover, the pandemic’s memory in the United States has been profoundly fragmented. There is no national narrative, no agreed-upon public interpretation. Instead, COVID-19 has been folded into the wider culture war: as evidence of elite overreach for some, and of social irresponsibility for others. Like in Southeast Europe, the virus became less important than the values it came to represent. And just as importantly, its memory is being actively managed. President Trump has attempted to reframe his pandemic record as one of triumphant vaccine delivery, while simultaneously courting anti-vaccine sentiment.⁹ The Republican Party now mobilizes pandemic grievance not to defend past policy but to delegitimize future governance.¹⁰ The result is a form of political amnesia, not because nothing

7 Michelle M. Mello, David Jiang, Elizabeth Platt, Katie Moran-McCabe, and Scott Burris, “Legal Infrastructure for Pandemic Response: Lessons Not Learnt in the US,” *BMJ* 384 (2024): e076269.

8 Office of the Press Secretary, “Establishing the President’s Make America Healthy Again Commission,” *The White House*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/establishing-the-presidents-make-america-healthy-again-commission/>; Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Christina Jewett, “10,000 Federal Health Workers to Be Laid Off,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/27/us/politics/health-department-job-layoffs-rfk-jr.html>.

9 Daniel Gilbert, Carolyn Y. Johnson, and Rachel Roubein, “Celebrated, Then Disparaged: mRNA’s Promise is Tarnished Under Trump,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/06/14/celebrated-then-disparaged-mrnas-promise-is-tarnished-under-trump/>.

10 For a perfect example, one should consult: United States House of Representatives, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, Committee on Oversight and Accountability,

is remembered, but because everything is re-remembered in real time—a trend that has been uncritically embraced by mainstream media outlets and some academics in the United States.¹¹

In Europe, the politics of memory has followed different trajectories. Sweden's exceptionalism—its refusal to impose lockdowns—has become a contested legacy, viewed by some as enlightened and by others as reckless.¹² The Netherlands, initially reluctant to enforce strict measures, pivoted to harsher policies later, leading to public confusion and periodic unrest.¹³ In both cases, debates over the past have become proxies for deeper disputes about expertise, liberty, and the role of the state. Italy and Spain, two of the hardest-hit countries in the first wave, centralized power early in the crisis and enforced some of the strictest lockdowns in Europe, leading eventually to executive overreach and later political blowback. In Italy, technocratic governance came under intense scrutiny—even portrayed by Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy as detached from national needs and beholden to EU elites. Her government then reclaimed authority over pandemic recovery, weaving COVID-era measures into a narrative of sovereignty and populist legitimacy.¹⁴ In Spain, the left-wing government of Pedro Sánchez faced criticism not only from opposition parties but from regional governments, reigniting long-standing territorial disputes.¹⁵ In the UK, the post-lockdown period has been shaped by public reckoning—not with the virus per se, but with the behavior of elites during the crisis. The Partygate scandal, in which senior

After Action Review of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Lessons Learned and a Path Forward (Final Report, December 4, 2024), <https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/12.04.2024-SSCP-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>.

11 Rogé Karma, "COVID Revisionism Has Gone Too Far," *The Atlantic*, August 21, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/08/covid-pandemic-revisionism-books/683954>.

12 Coronakommissionen, *Slutrapport från Coronakommissionen: Regeringen och myndigheterna under pandemin* [Final Report from the Coronavirus Commission: The Government and Authorities During the Pandemic], (Regeringskansliet and Elanders Sverige AB, February 2022), 49–50.

13 Iris Wallenburg, Jan-Kees Helderman, Patrick Jeurissen, and Roland Bal, "Unmasking a Healthcare System: The Dutch Policy Response to the Covid-19 Crisis," *Health Economics, Policy and Law* 17, no. 1 (2022): 27–36.

14 Andrea L. P. Pirro, "Performing (During) the Coronavirus Crisis: The Italian Populist Radical Right Between National Opposition and Subnational Government," *Government and Opposition* 59, no. 4 (2024): 1092–1108; Giuseppe Fonte, "Italy's Meloni Tightens Grip on Post-COVID Recovery Plan Management," *Reuters*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italys-meloni-tightens-grip-management-national-post-covid-recovery-plan-2023-02-16>.

15 Juan Rodríguez Teruel, Eloísa del Pino, and José Real-Dato, "The Limits of Power Concentration and Expert Knowledge in Emergency Management: Spain's Government Response During the First Phase of the Covid-19 Pandemic," *South European Society and Politics* 27, no. 4 (2022): 487–519.

government officials violated the very lockdown rules they imposed, triggered a cascading crisis of legitimacy for Boris Johnson's government. The damage was not epidemiological, but moral: a breach of the collective sacrifice narrative that had sustained public compliance. This narrative breakdown catalyzed Johnson's resignation and forced the UK into a prolonged period of introspection, now institutionalized in the ongoing COVID-19 inquiry.¹⁶ Yet even here, memory remains unstable. The inquiry has been criticized for its length and narrow scope. Public opinion is ambivalent. What remains is a deepened skepticism toward government, a weariness with moralizing politics, and a fragmented sense of what the crisis really meant.

In the less democratic part of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the pandemic demonstrated the blatant disregard for human life by its authoritarian regimes, further confirmed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine which understandably relegated COVID-19 to history.¹⁷ In the more democratic part of Eastern Europe, Hungary and Poland serve as perfect examples of countries where ruling parties used the pandemic emergency powers to deepen institutional control, suppress dissent, and alter electoral rules.¹⁸ The crisis became a vehicle not for legitimacy-building but for autocratic consolidation. While these states were already on the path toward illiberalism, the pandemic served as a pretext to speed it up. What we observed here was not the erosion of liberal institutions as an unintended consequence—but as a strategic objective. Across all of these cases, one theme recurs: the memory of the pandemic is not shaped by its death tolls, hospitalizations, or even economic costs. It is shaped by ideological framing and elite competition. Narratives matter more than numbers. In that sense, Southeast Europe's fragmented, ambiguous, and often instrumentalized memory politics are not an exception. They are an early and magnified version of what others are now confronting.

History offers a longer view. The 1918–1920 influenza pandemic killed tens of millions, but its political memory was almost entirely suppressed, with

16 The UK COVID-19 Inquiry, launched in 2022, is an independent public investigation into the nation's pandemic response. Public hearings began in June 2023 and will continue in modules through at least 2026, making it the most extensive and expensive public inquiry in British history. UK COVID-19 Inquiry, "UK COVID-19 Inquiry," <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/>.

17 Margarita Zavadskaya, ed. *The Politics of the Pandemic in Eastern Europe and Eurasia: Blame Game and Governance* (Routledge, 2023).

18 Gábor Mészáros, "How Misuse of Emergency Powers Dismantled the Rule of Law in Hungary," *Israel Law Review* 57, no. 2 (July 2024): 288–307; Joanna Rak, "The Use of Medical Populism to Claim the Right to Rule in Poland During a Public Health Emergency," *Journal of Populism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1–19.

few monuments, no sustained inquiries, and little cultural reckoning.¹⁹ The silence was not accidental—it reflected a world eager to move on, exhausted by war and unwilling to confront another trauma. That post-pandemic period the world moved on into was not one of democratic renewal—far from it. It was a time of polarization, economic turmoil, authoritarian drift, and global instability that the influenza pandemic likely helped precipitate.²⁰ We see danger today not in relegating the COVID-19 pandemic to oblivion, but in its flawed remembrance where what happened is only half-forgotten, selectively cited, and ideologically weaponized. Southeast Europe reminds us of this danger precisely because its pandemic was always more than a public health event. It was a stage on which old ideological repertoires of nationalism and populism were re-performed under new conditions. These repertoires proved resilient. They did not dissolve with the virus but adapted. They turned crisis into narrative, uncertainty into blame, policy into morality play, and they will do so again.

So, for us, the lesson here is not one of regional exceptionalism, but of European (or even Western) continuity. The pandemic tested not only state capacity but democratic durability under conditions of ideological stress. That stress has been a continental condition for more than a decade and a half—from the 2008 financial crisis, through the sovereign debt crisis, the migrant crisis, Brexit, the pandemic, and most recently the war in Ukraine. Southeast Europe, in this respect, was not just Europe's edge during the pandemic. It was Europe's long bleeding wound—a site of particularly visible exposure to forces that have been reshaping politics across the West.

Final Reflections: Situated Critique and the Necessity of Democratic Vigilance

As we bring this book to a close, it is important to acknowledge not only what we have analyzed, but how and from where we have analyzed it. From the beginning, our aim was to treat the ideational forces of nationalism

19 Scott Hershberger, "The Pandemic We Forgot," *Scientific American Magazine* 323, no. 5 (2020): 66.

20 The electoral consequences of the influenza pandemic are still the subject of debate in the literature. For contrasting views on the example of Weimar Germany, see Kristian Blickle, "Pandemics Change Cities: Municipal Spending and Voter Extremism in Germany, 1918–1933," *Federal Reserve Bank of New York Staff Reports*, no. 921 (2020); Stefan Bauernschuster, Matthias Blum, Erik Hornung, Christoph Koenig, "The Political Effects of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Weimar Germany," *Explorations in Economic History*, 96 (2025): 101648.

and populism with as much conceptual clarity and empirical rigor as the data would allow. We sought to understand how these ideologies shaped, constrained, and refracted pandemic responses in Southeast Europe, not as exogenous shocks, but as endogenous interpretive systems. We examined compliance, contestation, conspiracy, and memory not as isolated behaviors, but as expressions of deeper political logics.

However, we are not observers without ideological orientations of our own. Throughout the research and writing of this book, we have been acutely aware that our own perspectives are shaped by normative commitments. On our own survey measures of nationalism and populism, both of us score comparatively low. When it comes to retrospective nationalist or populist readings of the pandemic, we score even lower. In that respect, we likely reflect the ideological dispositions of the scientific and scholarly mainstream—one that tends to value technocratic reason, liberal pluralism, and institutional restraint. We do not pretend otherwise.

Rather than attempting to obscure this orientation behind a façade of objectivity, we believe it is important to foreground it—not as a confession of bias, but as a recognition of interpretive situatedness. Political analysis is never entirely neutral. It always reflects judgments about what matters, what merits explanation, and what constitutes a problem. Political scientists are not immune to the ideological climates they study. The best we can do—and the standard to which we believe we have held ourselves—is to make those judgments transparent, and to remain open to what the evidence reveals, even when it complicates our expectations. We do not regard nationalism or populism as aberrant or irrational. On the contrary, we have tried to show that these are powerful and adaptable sets of ideas. They emerge not simply from manipulation or elite engineering, but from real fears, real failures, and real aspirations. They offer meaning, clarity, and moral coherence in moments of systemic uncertainty—especially when institutions falter or expertise appears unresponsive. In this sense, their instrumentalization during the pandemic was neither accidental nor merely cynical. It was often effective because it resonated. And if we are to understand why some citizens rejected vaccines, questioned mandates, or embraced conspiratorial interpretations, we must do more than dismiss them as misinformed. We must understand the ideological templates through which their worldviews were constructed.

At the same time, we believe that our own distance from these ideologies—our analytical separation from their moral frameworks—has likely sharpened our interpretive lens. We have tried to use that distance not to pathologize those we studied, but to remain attuned to the structures of

belief and the conditions of their formation. Understanding does not require endorsement, just as critique does not preclude empathy. This has been a central methodological and ethical commitment throughout our work. And what our work has shown—both empirically and normatively—is that the greatest dangers in moments of crisis do not come only from the absence of state capacity. They also arise from the presence of ideological opportunism. Across Southeast Europe, we observed governments that governed too little, or too late, or too aggressively—not necessarily because they lacked tools, but because they framed the crisis through the lens of political gain. And across the wider Western world, we have since seen similar dynamics at play: the erosion of trust in public health institutions, the retroactive mythologization of pandemic responses, and the absorption of crisis narratives into broader culture wars.

This brings us to the larger question looming over this book. This question is whether the experiences of COVID-19 have made us better prepared for the next health crisis. It is fair to concede that governments in 2020 were caught off guard. The last real pandemic of comparable scale had been more than a century earlier, and leaders were forced to make decisions under conditions of extraordinary uncertainty. Many choices that now appear absurd, such as the Belgian rule that prohibited walkers from sitting on a park bench to rest, reflected the difficulty of governing in real time with imperfect knowledge.²¹ These errors were perhaps inevitable. What is not inevitable is repeating them. Yet five years after the end of the pandemic, we are failing to draw the lessons that could prepare us better for the next one.

The next pandemic is coming. While the specific reaction will always depend on the nature of the pathogen, what we can say on the basis of this book's findings is that the world today is in many ways less prepared than it was before COVID-19. In the United States, funding for messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) research, the very technology that made rapid vaccine development possible, has been withdrawn.²² In the Netherlands, the right-wing government led by the Party for Freedom (PVV) cut its pandemic preparedness fund.²³ And even where governments are drafting emergency plans or stockpiling supplies, those efforts are conceived as technical fixes.

21 Mathieu Lonbois and Gianni Paelinck, "Bart De Wever (N-VA): 'Rusten op een bankje verboden? Sorry, dat ga ik niet handhaven'," *VRTNWS*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/04/06/bart-de-wever-n-va-we-zullen-op-een-lager-welvaartsniveau-wa/>.

22 Madeline Halpert, "RFK Jr Cancels \$500m in Funding for mRNA Vaccines for Diseases Like Covid," *BBC News*, August 6, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c74dzddvmjjo>.

23 Matthias van der Vlist, "Is the Netherlands Five Years on Ready for the Next Pandemic?," *Folia*, April 22, 2025.

They assume that pandemic governance is a matter of logistics rather than politics, and they leave unaddressed the ideological forces that so deeply shaped compliance, trust, and solidarity.

The central lesson of this book is precisely that the failure to manage COVID-19 effectively was not technical but ideological, not administrative but political. Some governments, especially those led by populists, actively undermined preparedness. Others, governed by more responsible elites, are now learning the wrong lessons, preparing for supply shortages but ignoring the far greater risk of political contagion. In the absence of definitive closure on COVID-19, what endures from the last pandemic is not a coherent national narrative of victory or failure, but fragmented frames of meaning, nationalist versus cosmopolitan and populist versus pluralist. These frames structure the memory of COVID-19, and they will almost certainly be reactivated in the next emergency. When the next crisis comes, people will not reason from scratch. They will fall back on the ideological heuristics that helped them navigate COVID-19, even if those heuristics deepened division and mistrust. The tragedy is that five years on, we are capable of learning this lesson, but we are not doing so. Instead of building resilience, we are allowing the ideological contagions of the last pandemic to lie dormant, ready to mutate and spread once more when the next virus arrives.

This book is not only about what happened. It is about how it was made legible, and by whom, and to what ends. If we are to learn anything from this moment—whether in Southeast Europe or across the wider democratic world—it is that resilience does not come from institutional design alone. It comes from a political culture that values transparency, reasoned deliberation, and humility in the face of uncertainty. It comes from leaders who can communicate complexity without collapsing into theatrics. And it comes from publics who are not treated as enemies of the state or as empty vessels of misinformation, but as citizens capable of judgment and change.

That is why we end this book not with prescriptions but with a warning. If democracies are to be ready for the next crisis, which will certainly come, preparedness cannot be reduced to vaccines, supply chains, or emergency laws. It must also extend to the narrative infrastructure they bring to bear. If they are to withstand the seductive clarity of populist blame and resist the temptation of nationalist closure, they must cultivate enough trust to carry legitimacy through another storm. This is not a call for more expertise alone. It is a call for more responsible politics, for governance that does not fear transparency, and for institutions that anticipate ideological contestation rather than deny it. It is a call for scholars, journalists, and citizens to treat interpretation as a shared responsibility rather than a zero-sum game. We

chose to title this book *Contagions* not simply because of the virus that upended our lives, but because of the ideational currents that accompanied it—currents that moved faster than pathogens and lingered longer than case counts. What spread in Southeast Europe, and far beyond it, were not just infections but different interpretations: of threat, identity, legitimacy, of the full nature of our sociopolitical system. Some of those interpretations deepened democratic fractures, whereas others filled institutional voids. What they had in common was their capacity to frame crisis in strong and almost moral terms—and to do so in ways that proved resistant to evidence, indifferent to compromise, and hostile to ambiguity. Those ideational frames have not vanished. They remain part of our political bloodstream, ready to be reactivated when the next rupture comes.

10. From Fieldwork to Findings: The Surveys and Methods of This Book

Abstract: The analyses presented in this book are grounded in a unique combination of original public opinion surveys and expert surveys conducted at multiple stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter documents the design, timing, and implementation of these data collections, situating each survey wave within the evolving epidemiological and political context of Southeast Europe. It details sampling strategies, weighting procedures, and data validation protocols, as well as the construction of key ideological measures of nationalism and populism. Particular attention is given to issues of comparability over time and across countries, including the imputation of missing ideological measures. By making the research design transparent, the chapter establishes the empirical foundations of the book and enables replication, critique, and future research.

Keywords: survey methodology, public opinion, expert surveys, nationalism, populism, Southeast Europe

The previous chapters have told the story of how the pandemic played out in Southeast Europe. This chapter explains how we arrived at these conclusions. The evidence that underpins the arguments in this book comes from a series of public opinion surveys and expert surveys that we carried out at different stages of the crisis. All datasets have been deposited in publicly accessible repositories, where they can be freely consulted and re-used by other researchers.¹ Figure 10.1 places each of these fieldwork periods against the

1 Christophe Lesschaeve, Josip Glaurdić, and Michal Mochtak, "ELWar Expert Survey," *SowiDataNet Datorium—GESIS Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.7802/2400>; Christophe Lesschaeve, Josip Glaurdić, and Michal Mochtak, "ELWar COVID-19

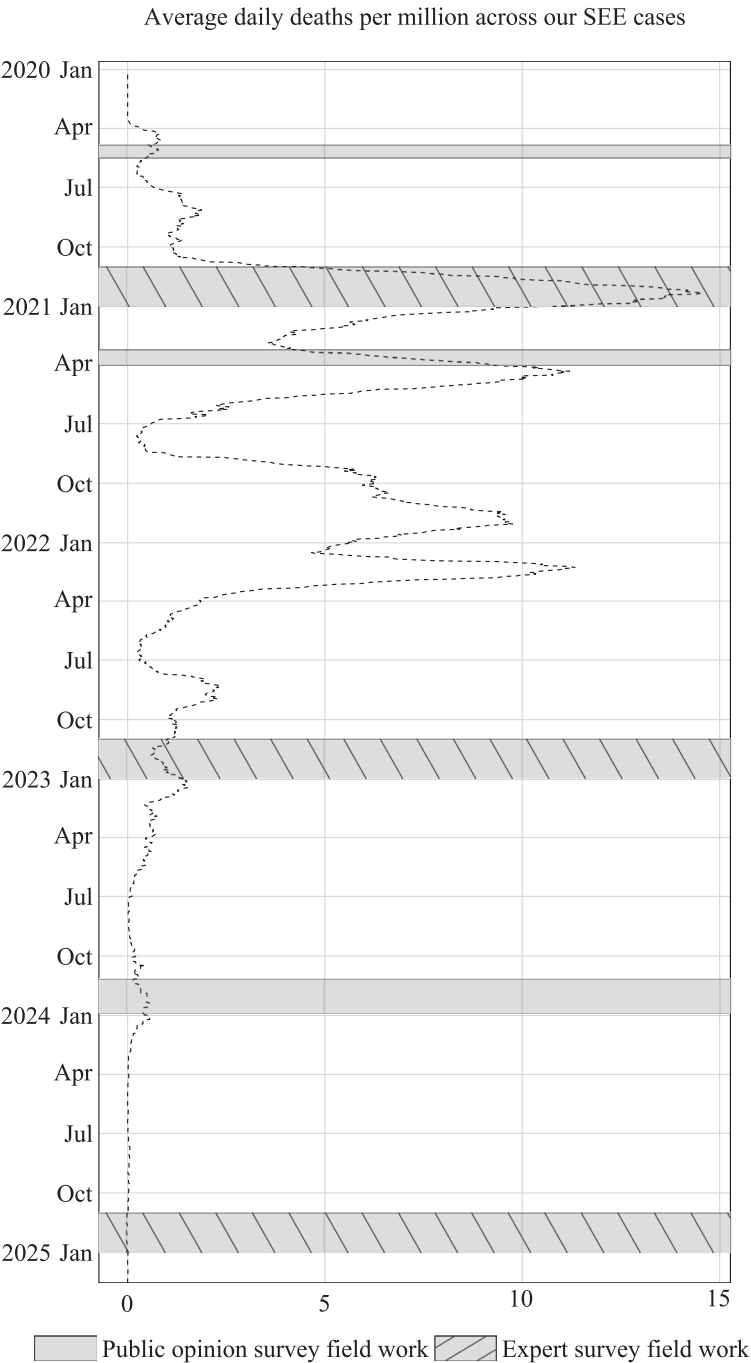
backdrop of the average daily COVID-19 death count in the seven countries of Southeast Europe we study. By setting these survey moments alongside the course of the pandemic itself, we can see not only when the data were gathered but also the social and political climate in which respondents and experts were answering. This is essential for understanding why their answers looked the way they did. Seeing them together makes clear that each survey captured a very different moment in the unfolding crisis.

The three waves of public opinion research were not planned with the benefit of hindsight. The first wave in April and May 2020 was launched because the pandemic had just begun and there was an urgent need to record how people understood and reacted to something unprecedented in living memory. The second, in March and April 2021, came at a point when the situation in much of the region had spun out of control, with high infection rates, rising death counts, and governments under increasing pressure. By this point, the crisis was no longer a sudden shock but an entrenched reality, allowing us to capture how attitudes had shifted in the face of prolonged restrictions and visible governance challenges. The third, in November and December 2023, was designed as a retrospective, when the immediate health threat had faded but the political and social memory of the pandemic was still taking shape. This timing lets us examine not only what people believed during the pandemic, but how they reconstructed those beliefs once the threat had receded. Having surveys that line up with these specific phases of the pandemic gives us an advantage. We can compare attitudes and political positions not only across countries, but also across very different conditions: when fear was at its peak, when fatigue and frustration set in, and when people had the space to look back and judge what had happened.

Southeast European Expert Survey Project, which we also run, takes place every two years regardless of events. The first round relevant to this book was conducted at the end of 2020, in the middle of a severe winter wave, and included a set of questions directly addressing the pandemic. These data give us an assessment of party positions during an acute phase of crisis management. The second wave at the end of 2022 did not include COVID-specific items, but it was the first to measure populism systematically,

Public Opinion Survey—2021 Round,” *SowiDataNet Datorium—GESIS Leibniz-Institut für Sozial-wissenschaften* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.7802/2398>; Christophe Lesschaeve, Josip Glaurdić, and Michal Mochtak, “ELWar COVID-19 Public Opinion Survey—2020 Round,” *SowiDataNet Datorium—GESIS Leibniz-Institut für Sozial-wissenschaften* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.7802/2397>; Christophe Lesschaeve, Josip Glaurdić, and Michal Mochtak, “ELWar Croatian and Serbian 2020 Election Survey,” *SowiDataNet Datorium—GESIS Leibniz-Institut für Sozial-wissenschaften* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.7802/2399>.

Figure 10.1. COVID-19 mortality and empirical fieldwork



thereby filling an important gap in our analysis of party ideology. The third wave, at the end of 2024, returned to the pandemic theme with a question on COVID-related conspiracy narratives. Although the timing of these waves was dictated by the biennial survey cycle rather than the pandemic itself, the fieldwork nonetheless coincided with moments that are revealing for our purposes: from the height of the crisis in 2020, to the consolidation of ideological dimensions in 2022, to the reframing of the pandemic as a political legacy in 2024. The rest of this chapter sets out in detail how these surveys were designed, how the data were collected and weighted, and how the measures used throughout the book were constructed.

The Public Opinion Surveys

Our surveys provide a rare and systematic insight into public attitudes across the region during a period of profound political, social, and economic disruption. All three surveys used online data collection and quota sampling to obtain nationally balanced samples of adult respondents (18+). The 2020 and 2021 waves were implemented by Oraclum Intelligence Systems, while the 2023 wave was fielded by Cint using its online panel infrastructure. Despite differences in recruitment channels, Facebook-based recruitment for Oraclum and opt-in panels for Cint, the methodological foundations were consistent across all three waves.

In each case, pre-stratified quota sampling was applied, with quotas set for age, gender, and education. The targets were based on population benchmarks developed by the authors, drawing on official national statistics for each country. This stratification ensured that the final sample broadly mirrored the underlying demographic structure of the population. This is a particularly important consideration in online surveys, where certain age or education groups are often underrepresented. Quota sampling is a widely used and pragmatic approach in online survey research, especially in regions where probability-based sampling frames are difficult or prohibitively expensive to construct. A series of pre-screening measures were implemented, prior to participation. These included the use of internet protocol-based geolocation filters to ensure that participants were located in the correct country, platform-based identity verification to avoid duplicate participation, and internal screening mechanisms to detect fake or suspicious profiles. While the precise technical procedures varied slightly across survey providers, they served the same overarching goal of delivering high-quality, demographically balanced data. Every country received the

complete version of the questionnaire without any variation in item inclusion, ensuring full comparability across cases. The number of respondents per country and wave is reported in table 10.1.

To further improve data quality, each wave was subject to an additional validation protocol designed by the authors. Respondents were excluded if their answers triggered logical inconsistencies that made their participation unreliable. For example, participants were removed if they reported an age above 100 or indicated that they had voted in national elections despite being too young to have been legally eligible at the time, based on their stated year of birth. In addition to these plausibility checks, the survey instrument always included a series of time-based controls to detect excessively fast completion. Each questionnaire was segmented into timed pages, and respondents who consistently rushed through the survey were flagged. Specifically, any respondent who fell into the fastest 5% of completion times on more than five separate pages received multiple “speeding tickets” and was excluded from the analytical sample on that basis. Response speed is often a proxy for attentiveness. Removing speeders ensured that retained responses were based on deliberate engagement rather than satisficing behavior.

While quota sampling aimed to achieve balance on key demographics, final samples were post-stratified to better match national population distributions. Weighting targets were based on age $\times$ gender and gender $\times$ education profiles. Using two cross-classifications improves accuracy by ensuring that both age and education differences between men and women are properly reflected in the data. Indeed, these are often demographic factors that are highly relevant to political and social behavior. Each respondent was assigned a weight through iterative proportional fitting, also known as “raking,” with caps applied at a maximum value of five to prevent extreme weights from distorting the results. Very high weights can give undue influence to a small number of respondents, increasing variance and potentially biasing estimates. Capping at five also follows best practices used in high-quality surveys such as the European Social Survey. Raking was chosen over cell-based methods because it can accurately adjust for multiple variables even when joint distributions are unknown. This is relevant for our data as age and education breakdowns are available separately for women, but not age $\times$ education $\times$ gender.

Table 10.2 summarizes the survey weights for each country-wave, showing the mean weight and the maximum weight. The mean is 1.00 in all weighted country-waves, while maxima are modest in 2020–2021, and occasionally higher in 2023 where calibration required larger adjustments. Dashes mark

Table 10.1 Sample size, by country-wave

Country	2020	2021	2023
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2,236	2,420	665
Croatia	2,307	2,158	912
Kosovo	538	660	498
North Macedonia	615	755	180
Montenegro	301	466	227
Serbia	2,637	2,687	976
Slovenia	—	511	484
Total	8,634	9,657	3,942

country-waves for which weights were not calculated because aligning the sample to population benchmarks would have required extreme weights exceeding our cap of 5, most notably Kosovo and Montenegro. All multivariate analyses reported in this book make use of these survey weights, thus excluding these country-waves. However, we re-estimated all models including these countries without weights, and coefficient signs and magnitudes were virtually unchanged and none of our substantive conclusions were altered.

Nationalism and Populism Scales

Two central ideological constructs that underpin the analysis in this book are nationalism and populism. Both are treated as distinct dimensions of one’s political worldview. While they may occasionally overlap in political discourse or manifest together in specific party strategies, they are analytically separable. Populism emphasizes an antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite,” whereas nationalism draws boundaries around the in-group, often in ethnic or cultural terms. Each scale was developed using multiple items presented to respondents as part of the core questionnaire modules in the public opinion surveys conducted in 2020, 2021, and 2023.

The nationalism battery, shown in table 10.3, administered in all three waves, consisted of five statements designed to tap into attitudes of national exclusivity, ethnic homogeneity, and symbolic in-group preference. These statements have been used to capture nationalist sentiment in Southeast Europe.² These included statements such as whether one can feel safe only

2 Karin Dyrstad, Tanja Ellingsen, and Jan Ketil Rød, “Ethnonationalism in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo: The Effects of Local Violence and Ethnic Composition,” *International*

Table 10.2 Descriptives of the survey weights, by country-wave

	2020 Mean wt. (max wt.)	2021 Mean wt. (max wt.)	2023 Mean wt. (max wt.)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1 (2.06)	1 (2.16)	1 (5.00)
Croatia	1 (2.43)	1 (2.15)	1 (1.37)
Kosovo	—	—	—
North Macedonia	—	—	1 (4.93)
Montenegro	—	—	—
Serbia	1 (2.40)	1 (2.18)	1 (1.68)
Slovenia	—	1 (2.86)	1 (1.40)

when surrounded by members of one’s own nationality, or whether towns and cities should ideally be monoethnic. Other items captured sentiments of national superiority, distrust among nations, and pride in national belonging. Respondents rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree.” To minimize priming effects, the order of the items was randomized.

A factor analysis conducted on the 2023 survey wave confirmed that the five nationalism items load onto a single latent dimension. The two items expressing ethnic exclusivity, that safety depends on being surrounded by one’s own nationality and that settlements should be monoethnic, had the strongest factor loadings (0.82 and 0.74 respectively), suggesting they anchor the scale conceptually. The item on international trust also loaded reasonably well (0.54), while statements reflecting symbolic pride and competitive nationalism loaded somewhat lower (0.34 and 0.32). Nevertheless, the factor model fit the data well overall, with a Cin^3 (Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI)) of 0.872 and a minimum correlation of 0.59 between predicted and true factor scores. This supports the use of an additive index, where the final score is

Area Studies Review 18, no. 1 (2015): 4–25; Garth Massey, Randy Hodson, and Duško Sekulić, “Ethnic Enclaves and Intolerance: The Case of Yugoslavia,” *Social Forces* 78, no. 2 (1999): 669–694; Zan Strabac and Kristen Ringdal, “Individual and Contextual Influences of War on Ethnic Prejudice in Croatia,” *Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2008): 769–796.

3 The Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) evaluates model fit in factor analysis by comparing the proposed factor solution to a null model in which all variables are uncorrelated. It adjusts for model complexity, making it especially useful in principal factor analysis (PFA) when testing whether a small number of latent dimensions can adequately explain the observed correlations. Although the nationalism battery yields a TLI of 0.875, slightly below the conventional 0.90 cutoff, the scale is theoretically coherent, empirically unidimensional, and anchored by two strongly loading items that reflect its core construct. Therefore, it remains a valid and robust measure for comparative analysis.

Table 10.3 The nationalism survey battery

Nationalism statement
Men can feel completely safe only when the majority belong to his nation(ality).
Among nations, it is possible to create cooperation, but not full trust.
I would rather be a citizen of this country than of any other country in the world.
It is important that my country performs better than other countries.
It is best that villages, towns, and cities should be composed of only one nationality.

computed as the mean of available item responses, provided the respondent answered at least three of the five questions.

The populism scale, included in the 2021 and 2023 waves, follows a similar construction. It is based on a set of seven items drawn from prominent academic efforts to operationalize populist attitudes in mass surveys. The exact wording of the seven items can be found in table 10.4. They originate from Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014),⁴ which covers key dimensions of populist thinking, such as the primacy of the people’s will, the moral superiority of ordinary citizens, and hostility to compromise in politics. Similar to the nationalism battery, respondents were given a Likert scale to indicate their position. The battery has been widely adopted and has become a standard in the field due to its internal coherence and external validity.⁵ A factor analysis confirmed the unidimensionality of the populism battery, with all seven items loading cleanly on a single factor. Loadings ranged from 0.64 to 0.72 for the first six items, while the reverse-coded technocratic item loaded negatively at –0.58. The model explained 43% of the total variance and produced an excellent overall fit (TLI = 0.942). The scoring approach mirrors that of the nationalism scale: respondents receive a populism score equal to the mean of the non-missing items, provided they answered at least four out of seven.

In both scales, scores are treated as continuous variables throughout the analysis. At the same time, for interpretive clarity, we occasionally describe respondents or groups as exhibiting “high” or “low” levels of nationalism or

4 Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove, “How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters,” *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 9 (2014): 1324–1353.
5 Bruno Castanho Silva, Sebastian Jungkunz, Marc Helbling, and Levente Littvay, “An Empirical Comparison of Seven Populist Attitudes Scales,” *Political Research Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2020): 409–424; Alexander Wuttke, Christian Schimpf, and Harald Schoen, “When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: On the Conceptualization and Measurement of Populist Attitudes and Other Multidimensional Constructs,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 356–374.

Table 10.4 The populism survey battery

Populism statement
The politicians in the national parliament need to follow the will of the people.
The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.
I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.
Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.
What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles.
Our country would be governed better if important decisions were left up to independent experts.

populism. These labels refer to values that deviate at one standard deviation above or below the overall mean. To enable comparisons across survey waves, we imputed populism scores for the 2020 survey wave, which did not include the populism battery. This imputation was necessary because populism constitutes a core ideological dimension throughout the book, and many of our key findings depend on tracking both nationalism and populism consistently across time. Rather than dropping the 2020 data from analyses or relying on simplistic approximations, we used a matching-based imputation strategy designed to preserve the comparability and representativeness of the dataset. Specifically, we implemented multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) with a Classification and Regression Tree (CART) estimator, which learns the 2021 association structure and predicts plausible 2020 scores while retaining representativeness. The imputation was conducted using the mice package in R.

The choice of CART was motivated by its flexibility in handling complex, nonlinear relationships between variables, as well as its robustness to outliers and non-normal distributions. These properties are particularly useful when imputing ideological constructs like populism, whose associations with observable covariates such as education, age, media use, and political behavior are likely to be nonlinear and interaction-driven.⁶ CART also handles missingness in predictor variables more gracefully than standard parametric alternatives, and allows us to avoid the need to discard otherwise useful cases.

The imputation model drew on a broad set of variables measured consistently across the 2020 and 2021 public opinion surveys, including political interest, education level, media consumption patterns (newspapers,

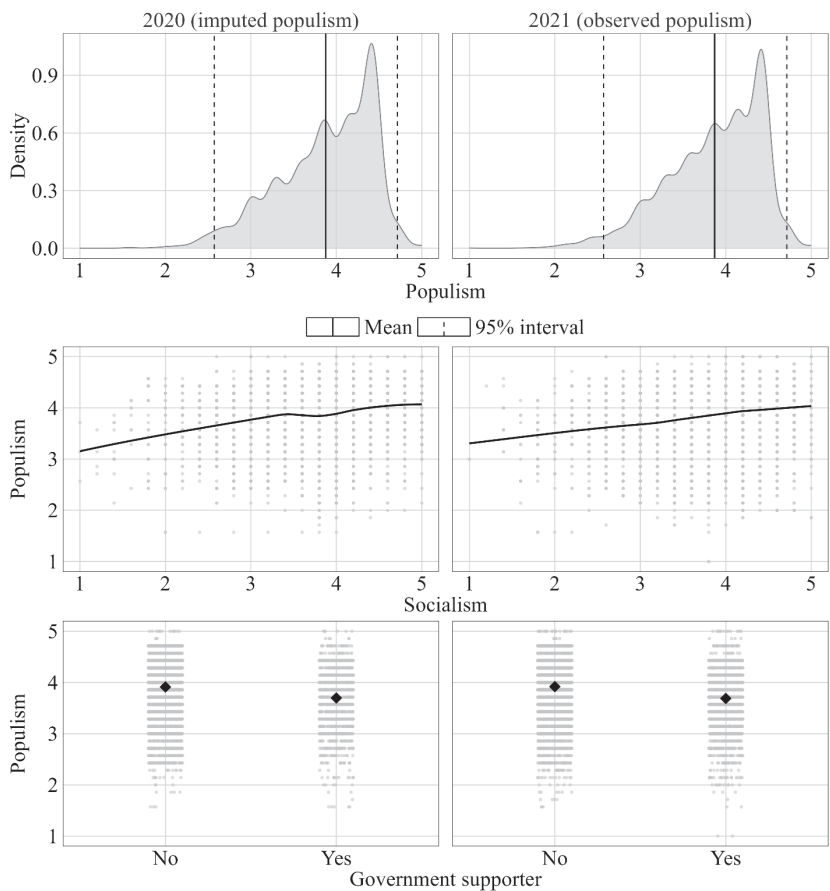
6 Lane F. Burgette and Jerome P. Reiter, “Multiple Imputation for Missing Data via Sequential Regression Trees,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 172, no. 9 (2010): 1070–1076.

television, websites, radio, and social media), self-placement on the left-right scale, having voted in the last election, support for the incumbent government, and socialist and nationalist attitudes. In essence, the model sought to learn how populism co-varied with these characteristics in 2021, and then applied that structure to predict plausible populism scores for 2020 respondents. Importantly, we did not include the COVID-related measures as predictors in the imputation. Doing so would likely have “built in” the very relationships we study, thus potentially inflating associations between populism and pandemic attitudes and experiences in 2020. Furthermore, we only used the data from the 2021 public opinion survey to calculate the imputed values 2020 survey because it was the closest temporally survey in which the full populism battery was included. The imputed populism scores are treated as regular continuous variables throughout the analysis and are used whenever populism is required in 2020-based models or plots.

The main results reported in this book use a single imputation. However, as a robustness check, we re-estimated every model with pooled estimates of five and 10 imputations, using Rubin’s rules.⁷ These robustness checks showed that increasing the number of imputations did not change the substantive conclusions, with coefficients retaining their signs and magnitudes. Figure 10.2. provides a validity check. The top-row plots show the weighted kernel densities of populism in 2020 (imputed) and 2021 (observed), with a solid vertical line marking the weighted mean and dashed lines marking the weighted 95% interval. The two distributions are highly similar, indicating that the imputed scores are neither inflated nor compressed compared to the observed scores. The second row plots populism against socialism. The trend line (LOESS fit) curve slopes upward in both the 2020 and in the 2021 data, meaning that higher socialism scores are associated with higher populism in both the imputed and observed data. Finally, the bottom row shows the weighted means of populism for government and opposition supporters. In both years, government supporters have lower populism scores than non-supporters. In sum, figure 10.2 demonstrates that the imputed populism scores reproduce the ideological structure we see in 2021, when the populism battery was included in the survey questionnaire. This imputation method inevitably depends on how informative the predictors are about populism.

7 Rubin’s rules combine results from multiple imputed datasets by averaging the coefficient estimates and then inflating the uncertainty to reflect both the average (within-imputation) variance and the variability of estimates across imputations (between-imputation variance). The resulting total variance (and adjusted degrees of freedom) yields standard errors, confidence intervals, and p-values that properly account for missing-data uncertainty. See Donald B. Rubin, *Multiple Imputation for Nonresponse in Surveys* (John Wiley & Sons, 1987).

Figure 10.2. Comparison of the 2020 imputed populism scores with the 2021 observed populism scores



When predictiveness is modest, imputed values tend to pull toward the conditional mean. Though the main gradients are preserved, extremes may be flattened. However, our robustness checks (distributional similarity, replicated bivariate relationships, and pooled estimates with $m = 5$ and $m = 10$) suggest that any such attenuation is limited and does not affect our conclusions.

Covariates

In addition to the main attitudinal measures, the surveys collected several demographic and contextual control variables that are used throughout the

analyses. The first of these captures socialist vs. liberal economic policy views. Similar to the nationalism and populism spectra, these are measured by averaging people's responses to five policy statements on the role of government in the economy and the redistribution of wealth, presented in table 10.5. We conceive of socialism vs. liberalism, together with nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism and populism vs. pluralism/mainstream politics, as one of the structural ideological dimensions that underpin politics in the region, alongside enduring cleavages related to the legacy of war. We initially viewed nationalism, populism, and socialism continuums as the most relevant axes in the context of pandemic politics. The potential relevance of the economic policy dimension of socialism vs. liberalism stems from the region's socialist past and the turbulent transition to a market-oriented economy in the 1990s, which imprinted lasting legacies in how citizens think about the role of the state. This role, and particularly the ability of the state to provide public goods such as health care, was arguably a key factor during COVID-19. At the same time, the analyses presented in the preceding chapters show that nationalism and populism were the only ideological dimensions that consistently shaped COVID-related attitudes and behaviors. Socialism, by contrast, proved largely impotent in this context. This limited explanatory role is consistent with our previous work on political competition in Southeast Europe, where we have shown that economic orientations are less decisive for political alignments than nationalist, or war-related cleavages.⁸ We nevertheless include socialism in all analyses as a covariate to ensure the validity of our analyses.

The second control variable is whether a respondent belongs to an ethnic minority in their country of residence. For respondents in Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia, this information was taken directly from a survey question on ethnicity. In North Macedonia, respondents were asked whether they were ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, or other. Ethnic Albanians and other minorities were coded as ethnic minorities, and ethnic Macedonians as the ethnic majority. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, minority status was determined using both region of residence (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina or Republika Srpska) and self-identified ethnicity. In the Federation, ethnic Serbs are the minority, while ethnic Croats and Bosniaks

8 Josip Glaurdić, Christophe Lesschaeve, and Michal Mochtak, "Contesting War Memories: Parties and Voters in Contemporary Southeast Europe," *Party Politics* 28, no. 6 (2021): 1094–1108; Christophe Lesschaeve and Josip Glaurdić, "The Ties That Bind: War Histories and Online Social Networks in Postwar Societies," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68, no. 7–8 (2023): 1443–1467.

Table 10.5 The socialism survey battery

Socialism statements
Important sectors of the economy should be nationalized.
The government should reduce the differences in income.
The government should guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living.
People should receive unemployment benefits until they find a new job.
Public services would work better if they were privatized.
The national healthcare system should be privatized more.

are the majority. In Republika Srpska, the situation is reversed, with ethnic Croats and Bosniaks as minorities and ethnic Serbs as the majority. Members of other ethnic communities are considered as minorities in the whole territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A third covariate, education, was measured by the highest completed level of formal schooling, recorded in seven categories ranging from “None” to “Doctoral degree.” These categories were subsequently collapsed into three broader groups: lower educated (none, elementary, or vocational school), middle educated (secondary school degree), and higher educated (post-secondary, university, or doctoral degree). The fourth control variable, personal experience with COVID-19, was captured through a composite measure combining various exposures to the disease. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they had been officially diagnosed with COVID-19, whether someone in their close family or circle of friends had been diagnosed, and whether someone in their close family or circle of friends had died because of the virus. The binary yes/no answers of respondents were then combined into a single dichotomous measure coded 1 if the respondent reported any of these experiences and 0 if none were reported. The question on whether someone in a respondent’s close family or circle of friends had died of COVID-19 was not included in the first wave, as this was still in the early days of the pandemic when the region had recorded comparatively few infections and even fewer deaths. As discussed in chapter 3, the first wave in Southeast Europe was handled relatively well, and mortality remained low compared to many other countries, making the inclusion of such a question less relevant at that time. This operationalization thus captures both direct and indirect exposure to COVID-19, taking into account the fact that personal encounters with the virus can occur not only through one’s own illness but also through the illness or loss of close family members or friends.

The variable identifying government supporters was derived from respondents' reported vote choice in the most recent national election. Specifically, if the party they indicated voting for was part of the governing coalition at the time of the survey, they were coded as a government supporter (1); all others were coded as non-supporters (0). Using the last vote rather than current party preference provides a more stable and reliable measure of partisan alignment with the governing coalition. Current vote intention can be volatile and is often influenced by short-term events or temporary dissatisfaction, whereas the last vote captures a more concrete and behaviorally validated act of political support. The other control variables such as gender, age, income, and political interest were directly derived from survey questions.

Expert Surveys

In addition to public opinion data, this book relies on three original waves of expert surveys to estimate party-level characteristics in Southeast Europe. These surveys, fielded in 2020, 2022, and 2024 are central to our comparative analysis of party ideology, with a particular focus on nationalism and populism. They follow the logic of established party expert surveys but are adapted to the specific political and informational context of Southeast Europe, where fragmented party landscapes and the scarcity of standardized ideological measures make expert assessments a uniquely valuable resource.

The 2020 wave, conducted between October and December of that year, is the primary reference point throughout the book. It included two COVID-related items that are used in chapter 3 to capture how parties positioned themselves in relation to the pandemic. The survey also included a full battery measuring party-level nationalism, which is incorporated across the book. However, no populism measure was included at that time. For populism, we rely on the fact that the Southeast European Expert Survey is conducted biennially, and that the 2022 wave did include such a measure. In order to analyze both ideological dimensions together in chapter 3, we take the 2022 populism values and apply them retrospectively to the 2020 setting. This rests on the reasonable assumption that populism is a highly stable trait: parties rarely transition in or out of populist status once established, and their anti-elitist and anti-institutional rhetoric tends to be consistent over time.

The nationalism item asked experts to place parties on a scale ranging from cosmopolitan to nationalist. This item was directly adapted from the

Chapel Hill Expert Survey,⁹ which enhances comparability with existing datasets and ensures that our measure of nationalism is consistent with the broader literature. The populism item, introduced in 2022, was taken from the Global Party Survey.¹⁰ It operationalizes populism through the distinction between populist and pluralist rhetoric, with populist discourse challenging established institutions and elevating the will of the people, and pluralist discourse emphasizing compromise and institutional constraints. Finally, the two COVID-specific measures, parties' trust in experts to combat COVID-19 and their stance on the trade-off between preventing deaths and protecting the economy, were designed by the authors specifically for this book, in order to capture dimensions of party positioning that were uniquely salient in the pandemic context. A "don't know" option was always included, giving experts the opportunity to decline answering, which arguably improved the quality of the data.

Experts in each country were political scientists, sociologists, and other analysts with demonstrable expertise in party politics. They were invited to participate with the expectation that they would provide ratings for all parliamentary parties as well as any extra-parliamentary parties that were relevant enough to merit inclusion. While there were no strict formal criteria for party selection, practical limits on survey length meant that coverage was restricted to a set of parties sufficient to account for at least 95% of parliamentary seats in each country. In cases where elections had recently taken place, the party list was updated to reflect the new composition of the political arena. Across countries, the 2020 wave yielded 121 completed questionnaires covering six states, while the 2022 wave yielded 82 completed questionnaires covering all countries in our sample, apart from Slovenia. In all country-years, at least five experts completed ratings, which is a widely used benchmark for ensuring reliable aggregation. The aggregation procedure followed standard practice in expert survey research. For each party, scores were calculated as the mean of valid expert ratings. No additional weighting was applied to individual experts; each qualified rating carried equal influence in the party's final score.

9 Jan Rovny et al., "The 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on Political Party Positioning in Europe: Twenty-Five Years of Party Positional Data," *Electoral Studies* 97 (2025): 102981.

10 Pippa Norris, "Measuring Populism Worldwide," *Party Politics* 26, no. 6 (2020): 697–717.

Conclusion

This methods chapter provides the evidentiary base on which the book rests. By setting out how surveys were designed, how scales were constructed, and how missing data were handled, it makes the analyses reproducible. This transparency is the necessary condition for taking claims about nationalism and populism seriously in a region where reliable comparative data are scarce. The methods laid out here ensure that the book's central findings are not the product of selective observation. The patterns described in the preceding chapters emerge from measures applied consistently across countries and over time, supported by documented procedures. Without this consistency, conclusions about the role of nationalism and populism in shaping pandemic outcomes would remain conjecture. At the same time, the appendix does not claim perfection. Online quota sampling, expert surveys, and imputation procedures all involve trade-offs. Their value lies in producing systematic evidence under the constraints of the Southeast European context. By making these trade-offs explicit, the appendix clarifies both the strengths and the limits of the evidence on which the analysis relies.

The data infrastructure also extends beyond this book. The three survey waves and three expert surveys form a unique resource for studying the longer-term legacies of the pandemic in the region. They provide leverage for research on democratic resilience, institutional trust, and the durability of nationalist and populist attitudes. The methods chapter thus serves both as documentation of past analysis and as an invitation to future work. Finally, the methods are part of the argument. Just as the pandemic exposed structural weaknesses in governance, the research design demonstrates that only systematic and transparent evidence can reveal how populism and nationalism mattered. By showing exactly how evidence was built, the appendix ensures that the book's claims can be tested, challenged, and extended. That is its contribution: to ground an argument about politics and crisis in a framework that others can interrogate.

11. Appendix: Models and Results

Table A2.1 Eurobarometer data used

Eurobarometer	Fieldwork Dates	Year	Digital Object Identifier (DOI)	Mode
76.1	05/11/2011–20/11/2011	2011	10.4232/1.12007, 10.4232/1.11848, 10.4232/1.11448	CAPI
78.1	03/11/2012–18/11/2012	2012	10.4232/1.12061, 10.4232/1.11706	CAPI
79.4	10/05/2013–26/05/2013	2013	10.4232/1.12718, 10.4232/1.12445, 10.4232/1.11781	CAPI
80.1	02/11/2013–17/11/2013	2013	10.4232/1.12768, 10.4232/1.11881	CAPI
81.1	31/05/2014–14/06/2014	2014	10.4232/1.12956, 10.4232/1.12201, 10.4232/1.12170	CAPI
82.4	08/11/2014–17/11/2014	2014	10.4232/1.13021, 10.4232/1.12854, 10.4232/1.12259, 10.4232/1.12251, 10.4232/1.12208	CAPI
83.3	16/05/2015–27/05/2015	2015	10.4232/1.13133, 10.4232/1.12798, 10.4232/1.12356	CAPI
84.3	07/11/2015–17/11/2015	2015	10.4232/1.13249, 10.4232/1.12799, 10.4232/1.12664, 10.4232/1.12539, 10.4232/1.12495	CAPI
85.2	21/05/2016–31/05/2016	2016	10.4232/1.13438, 10.4232/1.12800, 10.4232/1.12633	CAPI
86.2	03/11/2016–16/11/2016	2016	10.4232/1.13602, 10.4232/1.13467, 10.4232/1.13313, 10.4232/1.12853, 10.4232/1.12801, 10.4232/1.12763, 10.4232/1.12757	CAPI
87.3	20.05.2017–30.05.2017	2017	10.4232/1.13839, 10.4232/1.12847	CAPI
88.3	05/11/2017–19/11/2017	2017	10.4232/1.13938, 10.4232/1.13007	CAPI/CAMI
89.1	13/03/2018–28/03/2018	2018	10.4232/1.14082, 10.4232/1.13154	CAPI/CAMI
90.3	08/11/2018–22/11/2018	2018	10.4232/1.14392, 10.4232/1.13254	CAPI/CAMI
92.3	14/11/2019–13/12/2019	2019	10.4232/1.13564	CAPI
93.1	09/07/2020–26/08/2020	2020	10.4232/1.14393, 10.4232/1.13866, 10.4232/1.13746, 10.4232/1.13696, 10.4232/1.13671	CAPI/CAMI, CAMI
94.3	12/02/2021–18/03/2021	2021	10.4232/1.14076, 10.4232/1.13793	CAPI/CAMI, CAMI
95.2	13/04/2021–11/05/2021	2021	10.4232/1.13884	CAPI/CAMI, CAMI

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Eurobarometer	Fieldwork Dates	Year	Digital Object Identifier (DOI)	Mode
95.3	14/06/2021–15/07/2021	2021	10.4232/1.13826	CAPI/CAMI, CAWI
96.3	18/01/2022–14/02/2022	2022	10.4232/1.13908	CAPI/CAMI, CAWI
97.5	17/06/2022–24/04/2022	2022	10.4232/1.14010	CAPI/CAMI, CAWI
98.2	12/01/2023–06/02/2023	2023	10.4232/1.14081	CAPI/CAMI, CAWI
99.4	31/05/2023–25/06/2023	2023	10.4232/1.14167	CAPI/CAMI, CAWI
100.2	18/10/2023–17/11/2023	2023	10.4232/1.14363	CAPI/CAMI, CAWI
101.3	02/04/2024–09/05/2024	2024	10.4232/1.14376	CAPI/CAMI

Table A3.1 Determinants of 2020 vote for the principal government coalition

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Second largest coalition	-5.48	0.44	***	-5.41	0.44	***	-5.41	0.44	***
Other party coalitions	-4.16	0.17	***	-4.12	0.17	***	-4.11	0.17	***
Abstain / invalid vote	-3.10	0.14	***	-3.06	0.14	***	-3.05	0.14	***
Satisfaction with government response to the pandemic	0.20	0.02	***	0.19	0.02	***	0.18	0.02	***
Populism				-0.11	0.10		-0.09	0.10	
Nationalism				0.32	0.08	***	0.32	0.08	***
Socialism				-0.21	0.10	*	-0.23	0.10	*
Personal experience with COVID-19				0.32	0.18		0.31	0.18	
Gender							0.29	0.12	*
Age							-0.01	0.01	
Middle education							-0.25	0.14	

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Higher education							-0.28	0.19	
Income							0.00	0.02	
Part time							-0.36	0.34	
Unemployed							-0.09	0.17	
Retired							0.22	0.18	
Stay-at-home spouse							-0.31	0.36	
Student							-0.33	0.26	
Sick/disabled							-1.72	0.71	*
Self-employed							0.17	0.25	
Ethnic minority							0.05	0.18	
Political interest							0.02	0.02	
Serbia	0.78	0.12	***	0.76	0.13	***	0.82	0.13	***
Intercept	-0.19	0.17		0.07	0.52		0.08	0.65	
N		3277			3277			3277	
Log Likelihood		-968.97			-956.88			-943.52	
Pseudo R ²		45.70%			46.40%			47.10%	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A4.1 Descriptive statistics

		Support for emergency powers ¹				Expectations about the permanence of emergency powers ¹			
		Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Dependent variable		0.47	0.50	0	1	0.66	0.47	0	1
Populism		3.87	0.56	1	5	3.87	0.56	1	5
Nationalism		2.85	0.80	1	5	2.83	0.80	1	5
Socialism		3.81	0.59	1	5	3.79	0.59	1	5
Personal exp. with COVID-19		0.40	0.49	0	1	0.40	0.49	0	1
Gender		0.51	0.50	0	1	0.53	0.50	0	1
Age		45.93	14.19	18	95	44.43	14.47	18	95
Education	Lower	0.16	0.36	0	1	0.35	0.48	0	1
	Middle	0.33	0.47	0	1	0.30	0.46	0	1
	Higher	0.51	0.50	0	1	0.35	0.48	0	1
Income		5.36	2.79	1	10	5.55	2.85	1	10
Employment status	Full time	0.46	0.50	0	1	0.46	0.50	0	1
	Part time	0.07	0.25	0	1	0.07	0.26	0	1
	Unemployed	0.21	0.40	0	1	0.21	0.40	0	1
	Retired	0.11	0.32	0	1	0.10	0.30	0	1
	Stay-at-home spouse	0.07	0.26	0	1	0.07	0.25	0	1
	Student	0.03	0.17	0	1	0.03	0.18	0	1
	Sick/disabled	0.01	0.09	0	1	0.01	0.08	0	1
	Self-employed	0.05	0.22	0	1	0.05	0.21	0	1
Ethnic minority		0.13	0.34	0	1	0.14	0.34	0	1

	Support for emergency powers ¹				Expectations about the permanence of emergency powers ¹			
	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Government supporter	0.20	0.40	0	1	0.19	0.39	0	1
Political interest	4.70	3.15	0	10	4.74	3.16	0	10
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.30	0.46	0	1	0.31	0.46	0	1
Croatia	0.30	0.46	0	1	0.30	0.46	0	1
Serbia	0.36	0.48	0	1	0.36	0.48	0	1
Slovenia	0.03	0.18	0	1	0.03	0.18	0	1

¹ n = 13974

Table A4.1 Descriptive statistics (*continued*)

		Support for lockdown ²				Lockdown compliance ³			
		Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Dependent variable		0.52	0.50	0	1	0.63	0.48	0	1
Populism		3.87	0.55	1	5	3.86	0.55	1	5
Nationalism		2.89	0.85	1	5	2.90	0.85	1	5
Socialism		3.85	0.60	1	5	3.85	0.59	1	5
Personal exp. with COVID-19		0.72	0.45	0	1	0.72	0.45	0	1
Gender		0.50	0.50	0	1	0.51	0.50	0	1
Age		46.62	14.17	18	79	46.47	14.17	18	79
Education	Lower	0.16	0.37	0	1	0.16	0.37	0	1

		Support for lockdown ²				Lockdown compliance ³			
		Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Income	Middle	0.33	0.47	0	1	0.34	0.47	0	1
	Higher	0.51	0.50	0	1	0.51	0.50	0	1
Employment status		5.39	2.72	1	10	5.39	2.72	1	10
	Full time	0.48	0.50	0	1	0.48	0.50	0	1
	Part time	0.06	0.23	0	1	0.06	0.23	0	1
	Unemployed	0.14	0.35	0	1	0.14	0.35	0	1
	Retired	0.11	0.31	0	1	0.11	0.31	0	1
	Stay-at-home spouse	0.06	0.24	0	1	0.06	0.24	0	1
	Student	0.05	0.22	0	1	0.05	0.22	0	1
	Sick/disabled	0.01	0.12	0	1	0.01	0.12	0	1
	Self-employed	0.09	0.28	0	1	0.09	0.28	0	1
Ethnic minority		0.12	0.33	0	1	0.12	0.33	0	1
Government supporter		0.22	0.42	0	1	0.23	0.42	0	1
Political interest		4.53	3.03	0	10	4.53	3.04	0	10
Bosnia and Herzegovina		0.30	0.46	0	1	0.31	0.46	0	1
Croatia		0.28	0.45	0	1	0.27	0.44	0	1
Serbia		0.35	0.48	0	1	0.36	0.48	0	1
Slovenia		0.07	0.25	0	1	0.07	0.25	0	1

² n = 6592³ n = 6871

Table A4.2 Determinants of support for emergency powers (& time interaction models)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism	-0.51	0.03	***	-0.46	0.03	***	-0.39	0.03	***	-0.08	0.05	†
Nationalism	0.24	0.02	***	0.25	0.02	***	0.18	0.02	***	0.09	0.03	**
Socialism				-0.19	0.03	***	-0.20	0.03	***	-0.20	0.03	***
Personal experience with COVID-19				0.30	0.05	***	0.30	0.05	***	0.30	0.05	***
Gender							0.10	0.04	**	0.10	0.04	**
Age							0.00	0.00	**	0.00	0.00	**
Middle education							-0.04	0.04		-0.05	0.04	
Higher education							-0.02	0.06		-0.04	0.06	
Income							-0.02	0.01	*	-0.02	0.01	*
Part time							0.03	0.07		0.02	0.07	
Unemployed							0.06	0.05		0.06	0.05	
Retired							0.17	0.06	**	0.18	0.06	**
Stay-at-home spouse							0.02	0.07		0.02	0.07	
Student							0.03	0.11		-0.01	0.11	
Sick/disabled							-0.39	0.21	†	-0.38	0.21	†
Self-employed							0.01	0.08		0.01	0.09	
Ethnic minority							-0.07	0.05		-0.07	0.05	
Government supporter							0.61	0.05	***	0.59	0.05	***
Political interest							0.02	0.01	***	0.02	0.01	***
Croatia	-0.35	0.04	***	-0.35	0.04	***	-0.31	0.05	***	-0.33	0.05	***
Serbia	-0.03	0.04		-0.01	0.04		-0.02	0.04		-0.03	0.04	

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Slovenia	-0.57	0.11	***	-0.60	0.11	***	-0.42	0.11	***	-0.44	0.11	***
Survey wave 2021	-0.50	0.04	***	-0.68	0.05	***	-0.70	0.05	***	1.31	0.29	***
Intercept	1.53	0.15	***	2.00	0.17	***	1.86	0.20	***	0.98	0.25	***
Nationalism * Survey wave 2021										0.19	0.04	***
Populism * Survey wave 2021										-0.66	0.07	***
N		13974			13974			13974			13974	
Log Likelihood		-9408.94			-9366.74			-9246.03			-9183.74	
Pseudo R ²		3.80%			4.20%			5.40%			6.00%	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A4.3 Determinants of expectations of permanent emergency powers (& time interaction models)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism	0.42	0.03	***	0.39	0.03	***	0.34	0.03	***	0.02	0.05	
Nationalism	-0.19	0.02	***	-0.19	0.02	***	-0.15	0.02	***	-0.21	0.03	***
Socialism				0.12	0.03	***	0.12	0.03	***	0.12	0.03	***
Personal experience with COVID-19				0.08	0.05	†	0.09	0.05	†	0.10	0.05	*
Gender							0.07	0.04	†	0.07	0.04	†
Age							0.00	0.00	**	0.00	0.00	**
Middle education							0.10	0.04	*	0.10	0.04	*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Higher education							0.04	0.06		0.05	0.06	
Income							-0.02	0.01	**	-0.02	0.01	**
Part time							0.09	0.08		0.09	0.08	
Unemployed							-0.12	0.05	*	-0.11	0.05	*
Retired							-0.09	0.06		-0.10	0.06	
Stay-at-home spouse							-0.11	0.07		-0.11	0.08	
Student							-0.40	0.12	***	-0.36	0.12	**
Sick/disabled							0.22	0.21		0.20	0.22	
Self-employed							-0.14	0.09		-0.14	0.09	
Ethnic minority							0.19	0.05	***	0.19	0.06	***
Government supporter							-0.50	0.05	***	-0.49	0.05	***
Political interest							0.01	0.01	*	0.01	0.01	*
Croatia	0.13	0.05	**	0.14	0.05	**	0.10	0.05	*	0.11	0.05	*
Serbia	0.07	0.04		0.05	0.05		0.03	0.05		0.04	0.05	
Slovenia	0.45	0.11	***	0.48	0.11	***	0.38	0.11	**	0.39	0.12	***
Survey wave 2021	0.05	0.04		-0.01	0.05		0.05	0.05		-2.69	0.29	***
Intercept	-0.51	0.15	***	-0.85	0.17	***	-0.54	0.21	**	0.80	0.25	**
Nationalism * Survey wave 2021										0.10	0.05	*
Populism * Survey wave 2021										0.63	0.07	***
N	13974			13974			13974			13974		
Log Likelihood	-8926.82			-8916.61			-8827.28			-8772.52		
Pseudo R ²	1.50%			1.50%			2.50%			3.00%		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A4.4 Determinants of support for a stricter lockdown

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism	-0.45	0.05	***	-0.46	0.05	***	-0.40	0.05	***
Nationalism	0.27	0.03	***	0.28	0.03	***	0.21	0.03	***
Socialism				0.09	0.04		0.05	0.04	
Personal experience with COVID-19				0.37	0.06	***	0.39	0.06	***
Gender							0.10	0.05	
Age							0.01	0.00	***
Middle education							-0.04	0.06	
Higher education							-0.05	0.08	
Income							-0.03	0.01	**
Part time							-0.09	0.11	
Unemployed							0.03	0.08	
Retired							0.01	0.09	
Stay-at-home spouse							0.32	0.12	**
Student							-0.07	0.13	
Sick/disabled							-0.41	0.22	
Self-employed							-0.01	0.09	
Ethnic minority							-0.02	0.08	
Government supporter							0.50	0.07	***
Political interest							0.05	0.01	***
Croatia	-0.62	0.07	***	-0.60	0.07	***	-0.55	0.07	***
Serbia	0.13	0.06	*	0.10	0.06		0.05	0.06	

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Slovenia	-0.98	0.11	***	-0.95	0.11	***	-0.84	0.11	***
Intercept	1.21	0.21	***	0.65	0.25	**	-0.02	0.30	
N		6871			6871			6871	
Log Likelihood		-4685.68			-4660.16			-4580.33	
Pseudo R ²		4.70%			5.20%			7.00%	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A4.5 Determinants of compliance with lockdown rules

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism	0.25	0.05	***	0.27	0.05	***	0.27	0.06	***
Nationalism	0.01	0.03		0.01	0.03		0.00	0.04	
Socialism				-0.09	0.05		-0.10	0.05	*
Personal experience with COVID-19				-0.05	0.07		-0.05	0.07	
Gender							-0.14	0.06	*
Age							0.00	0.00	
Middle education							0.12	0.07	
Higher education							-0.05	0.09	
Income							-0.03	0.01	**
Part time							0.02	0.14	

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Unemployed							-0.05	0.10	
Retired							-0.11	0.11	
Stay-at-home spouse							-0.28	0.13	*
Student							0.14	0.15	
Sick/disabled							0.09	0.26	
Self-employed							0.07	0.11	
Ethnic minority							0.22	0.09	*
Government supporter							-0.08	0.08	
Political interest							0.01	0.01	
Croatia	-4.20	0.16	***	-4.21	0.16	***	-4.20	0.16	***
Serbia	-3.60	0.16	***	-3.58	0.16	***	-3.60	0.16	***
Slovenia	-4.19	0.18	***	-4.22	0.18	***	-4.23	0.18	***
Intercept	2.84	0.28	***	3.14	0.32	***	3.72	0.37	***
N		6592			6592			6592	
Log Likelihood		-3429.33			-3426.97			-3399.94	
Pseudo R ²		23.6%			23.6%			24.2%	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A5.1 Descriptive statistics of individual-level data

		Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
COVID-19 conspiracy theory believers		0.34	0.47	0	1
Populism		3.85	0.54	1	5
Nationalism		2.90	0.80	1	5
Social media trust		0.53	0.50	0	1
Socialism		3.78	0.58	1	5
Personal experience with COVID-19		0.48	0.50	0	1
Gender		1.51	0.50	1	2
Age		45.92	14.48	18	95
Education	Lower	0.36	0.48	0	1
	Middle	0.47	0.50	0	1
	Higher	0.17	0.38	0	1
Income		5.63	2.86	1	10
Employment status	Full time	0.45	0.50	0	1
	Part time	0.07	0.25	0	1
	Unemployed	0.19	0.39	0	1
	Retired	0.12	0.32	0	1
	Stay-at-home spouse	0.07	0.25	0	1
	Student	0.03	0.18	0	1
	Sick/disabled	0.01	0.10	0	1
	Self-employed	0.06	0.24	0	1
Ethnic minority		0.15	0.36	0	1
Government supporter		0.20	0.40	0	1
Political interest		4.74	3.18	0	10

		Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Bosnia and Herzegovina		0.29	0.45	0	1
Croatia		0.30	0.46	0	1
Serbia		0.35	0.48	0	1
Slovenia		0.06	0.23	0	1
Survey wave	2020	0.42	0.49	0	1
	2021	0.41	0.49	0	1
	2023	0.18	0.38	0	1

Notes: n = 17011; n for Social media trust is limited to the 2023 sample of 3,037 to match the sample size of the analyses shown in table A5.2.

Table A5.2 Determinants of conspiracy beliefs

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism		0.57	0.03	***	0.53	0.03	***	0.52	0.04	***
Nationalism		0.51	0.02	***	0.51	0.02	***	0.49	0.02	***
Socialism					0.16	0.03	***	0.17	0.03	***
Personal experience with COVID-19					0.32	0.04	***	-0.28	0.05	***
Gender								0.07	0.03	.
Age								0.00	0.00	
Education	Lower									
	Middle							-0.21	0.04	***
	Higher							-0.43	0.05	***
Income								-0.02	0.01	***

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time							-0.03	0.07	
	Unemployed							-0.07	0.05	
	Retired							-0.11	0.06	.
	Stay-at-home spouse							0.08	0.07	
	Student							-0.27	0.10	*
	Sick/disabled							0.38	0.16	*
	Self-employed							0.18	0.07	*
Ethnic minority								0.16	0.05	***
Government supporter								-0.14	0.04	**
Political interest								-0.02	0.01	***
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		-0.18	0.04	***	-0.18	0.04	***	-0.18	0.04	***
Serbia		-0.18	0.04	***	-0.18	0.04	***	-0.20	0.04	***
Slovenia		-0.16	0.08	*	-0.15	0.08	.	-0.10	0.08	
Survey wave	2020	-0.14	0.04	***	-0.32	0.05	***	-0.29	0.05	***
	2021									
	2023	0.71	0.05	***	0.78	0.05	***	0.80	0.05	***
Intercept		-4.35	0.16	***	-4.58	0.18	***	-4.11	0.21	***
n		17011			17011			17011		
Log Likelihood		-10336.1			-10296.2			-10182.8		
Pseudo R ²		6.10%			6.47%			7.44%		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A5.3 Determinants of conspiracy beliefs (Trust in social media robustness checks & time and country interaction models)

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism		0.86	0.09	***	0.31	0.02	***	0.51	0.04	***
Nationalism		0.72	0.06	***	0.41	0.02	***	0.38	0.03	***
Trust in social media		0.50	0.08	***						
Survey wave*Country	2020*Croatia				0.32	0.10	***			
	2020*Serbia				0.02	0.09				
	2023*Croatia				0.46	0.13	***			
	2023*Serbia				0.57	0.13	***			
	2023*Slovenia				0.45	0.17	**			
Survey wave*Populism	2020							-0.46	0.05	***
	2023							-0.05	0.06	
Survey wave*Nationalism								-0.09	0.05	.
	2020									
	2023							0.37	0.06	***
Socialism		0.02	0.08		0.19	0.03	***	0.19	0.03	***
Personal experience with COVID-19		-0.49	0.11	***	-0.30	0.05	***	-0.28	0.05	***
Gender		0.32	0.09	***	0.06	0.03	.	0.05	0.03	
Age		0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	*	0.00	0.00	*
Education	Lower									
	Middle	-0.64	0.10	***	-0.23	0.04	***	-0.21	0.04	***
	Higher	-0.78	0.12	***	-0.43	0.05	***	-0.43	0.05	***
Income		0.01	0.02		-0.02	0.01	***	-0.03	0.01	***

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time	0.14	0.18		-0.03	0.07		-0.03	0.07	
	Unemployed	-0.17	0.14		-0.07	0.05		-0.06	0.05	
	Retired	-0.38	0.15	**	-0.12	0.06	*	-0.11	0.06	.
	Stay-at-home spouse	-0.19	0.20		0.08	0.07		0.09	0.07	
	Student	-0.82	0.20	***	-0.28	0.10	**	-0.28	0.11	**
	Sick/disabled	0.26	0.30		0.39	0.16	*	0.38	0.16	*
	Self-employed	0.29	0.15	*	0.18	0.07	*	0.18	0.07	*
Ethnic minority		0.41	0.11	***	0.17	0.05	***	0.16	0.05	***
Government supporter		-0.26	0.10	**	-0.14	0.04	**	-0.13	0.04	**
Political interest		0.03	0.01	*	-0.02	0.01	***	-0.02	0.01	***
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		-0.15	0.12		-0.39	0.07	***	-0.18	0.04	***
Serbia		0.12	0.12		-0.30	0.07	***	-0.20	0.04	***
Slovenia		0.08	0.15		-0.22	0.11	*	-0.10	0.08	
Survey wave	2020				-0.43	0.07	***	0.91	0.16	***
	2021									
	2023				0.44	0.10	***	0.11	0.20	
Intercept		-5.76	0.50	***	-2.12	0.17	***	-2.63	0.19	***
n		3037			17011			17011		
Log Likelihood		-1745.533			-10253.49			-10196.41		
Pseudo R ²		15.90%			6.89%			7.43%		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A5.4 Determinants of a social network connection

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Congruence of conspiracy beliefs	-0.03	0.01	**	-0.02	0.01	*	-0.02	0.01	*	-0.02	0.01	*
Gender				0.24	0.06	***	0.23	0.06	***	0.22	0.06	***
Age				-0.06	0.00	***	-0.06	0.00	***	-0.06	0.00	***
Education				-0.28	0.04	***	-0.27	0.04	***	-0.27	0.04	***
Income				-0.06	0.01	***	-0.06	0.01	***	-0.06	0.01	***
Country				2.39	0.09	***	2.38	0.09	***	2.38	0.09	***
Zip code				2.12	0.06	***	2.13	0.06	***	2.09	0.07	***
Nationalism							-0.13	0.05	**	-0.14	0.04	***
Socialism							-0.06	0.06		-0.06	0.06	
Social media as news source										0.34	0.07	***
Alternating K-stars	1.93	0.08	***	1.78	0.07	***	1.77	0.08	***	1.77	0.08	***
Intercept	-11.09	0.07	***	-11.67	0.13	***	-11.55	0.13	***	-11.79	0.15	***
n		7,105			7,105			7,105			7,105	
Δ AIC		-6			-2907			-2943			-2919	

Note: Exponential family random graph (ERG) model; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Δ AIC compares the model to one with only the endogenous terms

Table A6.1 Descriptive statistics

		Trade-off between saving older lives or the economy for younger generations ¹				Young people should be vaccinated before the elderly ²				The government prioritized the elderly, risking younger generations' future ³			
		Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Dependent variable		0.60	0.49	0	1	0.18	0.39	0	1	0.33	0.47	0	1
Populism		3.88	0.55	1.57	5	3.87	0.55	1	5	3.78	0.49	1.57	5
Nationalism		2.81	0.74	1	5	2.89	0.85	1	5	3.09	0.78	1	5
Socialism		3.77	0.57	1.2	5	3.85	0.60	1	5	3.69	0.54	1	5
Personal exp. with COVID-19		0.08	0.27	0	1	0.72	0.45	0	1	0.82	0.38	0	1
Gender		1.52	0.50	1	2	1.50	0.50	1	2	1.52	0.50	1	2
Age		45.30	14.26	18	95	46.62	14.17	18	79	45.73	15.65	18	83
Education	Lower	0.33	0.47	0	1	0.33	0.47	0	1	0.45	0.50	0	1
	Middle	0.51	0.50	0	1	0.51	0.50	0	1	0.31	0.46	0	1
	Higher	0.15	0.36	0	1	0.16	0.37	0	1	0.24	0.43	0	1
Income		5.40	2.84	1	10	5.39	2.72	1	10	6.85	2.82	1	10
Employment status	Full time	0.43	0.50	0	1	0.48	0.50	0	1	0.43	0.50	0	1
	Part time	0.08	0.26	0	1	0.06	0.23	0	1	0.06	0.24	0	1
	Unemployed	0.26	0.44	0	1	0.14	0.35	0	1	0.13	0.33	0	1
	Retired	0.11	0.31	0	1	0.11	0.31	0	1	0.13	0.34	0	1
	Stay-at-home spouse	0.09	0.29	0	1	0.06	0.24	0	1	0.06	0.23	0	1
	Student	0.01	0.10	0	1	0.05	0.22	0	1	0.05	0.22	0	1
	Sick/disabled	0.00	0.06	0	1	0.01	0.12	0	1	0.02	0.15	0	1
	Self-employed	0.01	0.11	0	1	0.09	0.28	0	1	0.12	0.32	0	1
Ethnic minority		0.15	0.36	0	1	0.12	0.33	0	1	0.22	0.41	0	1

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Education	Lower									
	Middle							0.11	0.08	
	Higher							0.15	0.11	
Income								0.01	0.01	
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time							-0.07	0.14	
	Unemployed							-0.03	0.09	
	Retired							-0.16	0.12	
	Stay-at-home spouse							-0.19	0.13	
	Student							-0.56	0.36	
	Sick/disabled							0.66	0.68	
	Self-employed							0.40	0.33	
								0.22	0.10	*
Ethnic minority								-0.23	0.09	*
Government supporter								0.00	0.01	
Political interest										
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		0.14	0.09		0.13	0.09		0.12	0.09	
Serbia		-0.03	0.09		-0.02	0.09		-0.04	0.09	
Intercept		0.25	0.30		0.66	0.36	†	1.01	0.42	*
n			4267			4267			4267	
Δ AIC			-2.1			-2.1			-10.1	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A6.3 Determinants of attitudes towards the statement “young people should be vaccinated before the elderly”

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Populism		-0.06	0.06		-0.05	0.06		-0.02	0.06	
Nationalism		0.27	0.04	***	0.27	0.04	***	0.26	0.04	***
Socialism					-0.03	0.06		-0.05	0.06	
Personal experience with COVID-19					0.34	0.07	***	0.33	0.07	***
Gender					-0.22	0.08	**	-0.05	0.07	
Age					-0.40	0.08	***	0.01	0.00	***
Education	Lower				-0.47	0.14	**			
	Middle							0.07	0.07	
	Higher							-0.01	0.10	
Income								-0.01	0.01	
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time							-0.08	0.15	
	Unemployed							-0.01	0.11	
	Retired							-0.02	0.11	
	Stay-at-home spouse							0.17	0.13	
	Student							-0.08	0.18	
	Sick/disabled							-0.12	0.27	
	Self-employed							0.00	0.12	
Ethnic minority								-0.07	0.10	
Government supporter								0.11	0.08	
Political interest								0.03	0.01	**

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Bosnia and Herzegovina									
Croatia	-0.24	0.08	**	-0.22	0.08	**	-0.21	0.08	*
Serbia	-0.39	0.08	***	-0.40	0.08	***	-0.40	0.08	***
Slovenia	-0.48	0.14	***	-0.47	0.14	**	-0.46	0.15	**
Intercept	-1.82	0.26	***	-2.06	0.31	***	-2.58	0.38	***
n		9657			9657			9657	
Δ AIC		-49.9			-66.1			-84.2	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A6.4 Determinants of attitudes towards the statement “the government prioritized the elderly, risking younger generations’ future”

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Populism	0.47	0.08	***	0.43	0.09	***	0.55	0.09	***
Nationalism	0.67	0.05	***	0.67	0.05	***	0.46	0.06	***
Socialism				0.11	0.08		0.15	0.08	.
Personal experience with COVID-19				-0.03	0.10		-0.03	0.11	
Gender							0.27	0.08	**
Age							-0.01	0.00	*
Education									
Lower									
Middle							-0.4	0.1	***

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Income	Higher							-0.56	0.12	***
								0.01	0.02	
Employment status	Full time							0.20	0.17	
	Part time							-0.10	0.1	
	Unemployed							-0.37	0.15	*
	Retired							0.45	0.18	*
	Stay-at-home spouse							-0.10	0.19	
	Student							0.54	0.26	*
	Sick/disabled							0.17	0.13	
	Self-employed							0.32	0.10	**
Ethnic minority								-0.04	0.10	
Government supporter								0.06	0.01	***
Political interest										
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		0.69	0.12	***	0.69	0.1	***	0.63	0.14	***
Montenegro		0.42	0.19	*	0.42	0.2	*	0.28	0.19	
Serbia		0.93	0.12	***	0.92	0.12	***	0.88	0.1	***
Slovenia		0.75	0.14	***	0.76	0.14	***	0.86	0.16	***
Intercept		-5.23	0.37	***	-5.47	0.42	***	-5.70	0.48	***
n		3942			3942			3942		
Δ AIC		-222.1			-220.8			-327.6		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A7.1 Descriptive statistics of individual-level data

		Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Vaccinated		0.55	0.50	0	1
Populism		3.84	0.54	1	5
Nationalism		2.96	0.84	1	5
Religiosity		6.96	3.35	0	10
Trust in scientists		3.50	0.97	1	5
Socialism		3.80	0.58	1	5
Personal experience with COVID-19		0.75	0.43	0	1
Gender		1.51	0.50	1	2
Age		46.30	14.69	18	83
Education	Lower	0.37	0.48	0	1
	Middle	0.45	0.50	0	1
	Higher	0.18	0.39	0	1
Income		5.84	2.83	1	10
Employment status	Full time	0.46	0.50	0	1
	Part time	0.06	0.23	0	1
	Unemployed	0.14	0.34	0	1
	Retired	0.12	0.32	0	1
	Stay-at-home spouse	0.06	0.23	0	1
	Student	0.05	0.22	0	1
	Sick/disabled	0.02	0.13	0	1
	Self-employed	0.10	0.30	0	1
Ethnic minority		0.15	0.36	0	1
Government supporter		0.23	0.42	0	1

		Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Political interest		4.65	3.12	0	10
Bosnia and Herzegovina		0.28	0.45	0	1
Croatia		0.29	0.45	0	1
Serbia		0.34	0.47	0	1
Slovenia		0.10	0.29	0	1
Survey wave	2021	0.70	0.46	0	1
	2023	0.30	0.46	0	1

Notes: n = 10027; n for Religiosity and Trust in scientists is limited to the 2023 sample of 3,073 to match the sample size of the analyses shown in table A7.2.

Table A7.2 Determinants of vaccination status using individual-level data

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism		-0.42	0.04	***	-0.43	0.04	***	-0.40	0.04	***
Nationalism		-0.05	0.02	*	-0.04	0.02	†	-0.10	0.03	***
Socialism					0.00	0.04		-0.04	0.04	
Personal experience with COVID-19					0.67	0.05	***	0.68	0.05	***
Gender								-0.14	0.04	**
Age								0.02	0.00	***
Education	Lower									
	Middle							-0.07	0.05	
	Higher							0.16	0.06	*
Income								0.00	0.01	

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time							-0.16	0.09	†
	Unemployed							-0.08	0.07	
	Retired							-0.08	0.08	
	Stay-at-home spouse							-0.33	0.10	***
	Student							-0.06	0.11	
	Sick/disabled							-0.33	0.17	*
	Self-employed							0.08	0.08	
Ethnic minority								0.28	0.06	***
Government supporter								0.38	0.05	***
Political interest								0.09	0.01	***
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		0.08	0.05		0.09	0.05		0.02	0.06	
Serbia		-0.10	0.05	*	-0.15	0.05	**	-0.28	0.06	***
Slovenia		0.02	0.08		0.03	0.08		-0.15	0.08	†
Survey wave	2021									
	2023	0.35	0.05	***	0.29	0.05	***	0.26	0.05	***
Intercept		1.90	0.17	***	1.40	0.21	***	0.36	0.25	
n		10027			10027			10027		
Log Likelihood		-6953.6			-6842.4			-6485.9		
Pseudo R ²		1.41%			2.99%			8.05%		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A7.3 Determinants of vaccination status using individual-level data (Trust and religiosity robustness checks)

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism		-0.35	0.04	***	-0.34	0.09	***	-0.34	0.09	***
Nationalism		-0.18	0.03	***	0.13	0.06	*	-0.02	0.13	
Trust in scientists		0.45	0.02	***						
Religiosity					-0.09	0.01	***	-0.15	0.05	**
Religiosity*Nationalism								0.02	0.02	
Socialism		-0.07	0.04	†	-0.19	0.08	*	-0.20	0.08	*
Personal experience with COVID-19		0.64	0.05	***	0.89	0.11	***	0.88	0.11	***
Gender		-0.15	0.04	***	-0.09	0.08		-0.09	0.08	
Age		0.02	0.00	***	0.03	0.00	***	0.03	0.00	***
Education	Lower									
	Middle	-0.09	0.05	†	-0.15	0.10		-0.14	0.10	
	Higher	0.14	0.07	*	0.11	0.12		0.11	0.12	
Income		-0.01	0.01		0.03	0.02	*	0.03	0.02	*
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time	-0.20	0.10	*	-0.49	0.18	**	-0.50	0.18	**
	Unemployed	-0.07	0.07		-0.12	0.14		-0.12	0.14	
	Retired	-0.09	0.08		0.03	0.16		0.03	0.16	
	Stay-at-home spouse	-0.32	0.10	**	-0.65	0.20	**	-0.67	0.20	***
	Student	-0.14	0.11		0.20	0.20		0.19	0.20	
	Sick/disabled	-0.33	0.17	†	-0.20	0.28		-0.20	0.28	
	Self-employed	0.09	0.08		0.24	0.14	†	0.23	0.14	

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Ethnic minority		0.32	0.06	***	0.55	0.11	***	0.55	0.11	***
Government supporter		0.33	0.05	***	0.30	0.10	**	0.30	0.10	**
Political interest		0.08	0.01	***	0.06	0.01	***	0.06	0.01	***
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		-0.02	0.06		0.25	0.13	*	0.25	0.13	†
Serbia		-0.32	0.06	***	-0.17	0.12		-0.17	0.12	
Slovenia		-0.23	0.08	**	-0.11	0.16		-0.10	0.16	
Survey wave	2021									
	2023	0.31	0.05	***						
Intercept		-0.82	0.26	**	0.27	0.47		0.71	0.59	
n		10027			3037			3037		
Log Likelihood		-6268.7			-2016.3			-1769.5		
Pseudo R2		11.12%			12.18%			12.24%		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A7.4 Descriptive statistics of municipality-level data

	Croatia		Serbia		Slovenia	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Vaccination rate	0.548	0.086	0.444	0.076	0.587	0.044
Government vote	0.192	0.077	0.372	0.111	0.300	0.074
Non-voters	0.554	0.080	0.392	0.085	0.252	0.058
Invalid votes	0.012	0.004	0.019	0.005	0.008	0.002
Right vote	0.082	0.040	0.099	0.036	0.015	0.006
Center vote	0.024	0.025	0.063	0.035	0.294	0.066
Left vote	0.125	0.069	0.027	0.018	0.091	0.033
Populist vote	0.011	0.012			0.040	0.013
Minority vote			0.028	0.061		
Ethnic majority	0.898	0.156	0.789	0.221	0.873	0.075
Non-religious	0.042	0.040	0.007	0.010	0.062	0.046
Average age	45.443	3.088	45.192	2.717	44.220	2.082
Population 65+	0.241	0.053	0.242	0.044	0.214	0.031
Education	10.913	0.742	10.753	0.983	10.103	0.563
Activity	0.476	0.062	0.393	0.044	0.562	0.032
Unemployment	0.059	0.043	0.173	0.086	0.067	0.021
Income	0.623	0.082	0.621	0.129	1.267	0.094
Central Croatia (ref.)	0.462	0.499				
Dalmatia	0.236	0.424				
Slavonia	0.228	0.420				
Istria	0.074	0.261				
Belgrade (ref.)			0.101	0.302		
Vojvodina			0.268	0.443		
Šumadija and West			0.315	0.465		
South and East			0.315	0.465		
Carniola (ref.)					0.349	0.477
Littoral					0.085	0.279
Carinthia					0.033	0.179
Styria					0.443	0.497
Prekmurje					0.090	0.286

Table A7.5 Determinants of rate of vaccination in municipalities of Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia

	Croatia			Serbia			Slovenia		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Government vote (ref.cat.)									
Non-voters	-0.142	0.049	**	0.210	0.047	***	-0.223	0.061	***
Invalid votes	-1.396	0.600	*	-0.165	1.059		0.337	0.974	
Right vote	-0.374	0.090	***	-0.323	0.141	*	-0.613	0.366	†
Center vote	0.271	0.108	*	-0.563	0.242	*	-0.007	0.046	
Left vote	0.245	0.063	***	0.065	0.357		0.135	0.081	†
Populist vote	-0.268	0.139	†				-0.829	0.160	***
Minority vote				-0.473	0.122	***			
Ethnic majority	0.033	0.027		-0.029	0.036		0.002	0.043	
Non-religious	0.098	0.097		0.847	0.809		0.023	0.117	
Average age	0.024	0.003	***	0.039	0.007	***	-0.002	0.004	
Population 65+	-0.662	0.215	**	-1.499	0.406	***	0.684	0.263	***
Education	0.044	0.006	***	0.065	0.010	***	0.019	0.006	**
Activity	0.226	0.095	*	0.032	0.148		0.055	0.149	
Unemployment	-0.248	0.076	***	0.117	0.066	†	-0.178	0.160	
Income	-0.182	0.032	***	0.028	0.085		-0.027	0.024	
Regions		Yes			Yes			Yes	
N		556			168			212	
Log pseudolikelihood		-248.1			-74.8			-93.9	
R ²		0.66			0.70			0.63	

Notes: Fractional logit throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A8.1 Components of the nationalist retrospective

1	Global solidarity was important, but higher priority should have been given to protect and support our own citizens during the pandemic.
2	The pandemic has highlighted the importance of self-sufficiency in healthcare and essential supplies, emphasizing the need for strong national infrastructure.
3	The pandemic has made me see my nation increasingly as the ultimate source of safety and security.
4	The decline and neglect of our national identity and traditional values has prevented us from responding more resiliently to COVID-19.
5	International bodies and organizations should not have dictated our pandemic policies; we should have acted more in our own national interests.

Table A8.2 Components of the populist retrospective

1	When politicians or experts proposed measures to stop the COVID-19 pandemic, they always had a hidden agenda.
2	Official and mainstream news sources could not be trusted to give accurate information about the pandemic.
3	When trying to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians cared more about the rich and powerful than about the rest of society.
4	Neither politicians nor experts had any real idea on how to handle the COVID-19 pandemic.
5	The most dangerous thing during the pandemic was not the virus but politicians' incompetence.
6	Measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic that limit people's freedom should have been approved first by a referendum.
7	The will of the people should have been the most important factor when implementing measures to halt the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table A8.3 Determinants of the nationalist retrospective

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism		0.70	0.08	***	0.57	0.09	***	0.61	0.09	***
Nationalism		0.87	0.06	***	0.90	0.06	***	0.79	0.06	***
Socialism					0.32	0.08	***	0.34	0.08	***
Personal experience with COVID-19					0.36	0.1	***	0.31	0.11	**
Gender								0.23	0.08	**
Age								0.00	0.00	
Education	Lower									
	Middle							-0.3	0.10	**
	Higher							-0.53	0.11	***
Income								0.04	0.02	**
Employment status	Full time									
	Part time							-0.21	0.18	
	Unemployed							-0.32	0.13	*
	Retired							-0.06	0.14	
	Stay-at-home spouse							0.05	0.19	
	Student							-0.04	0.19	
	Sick/disabled							-0.11	0.29	
	Self-employed							0.09	0.14	
Ethnic minority								-0.21	0.10	*
Government supporter								0.11	0.10	
Political interest								0.09	0.01	***

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Bosnia and Herzegovina									
Croatia	0.63	0.11	***	0.60	0.11	***	0.52	0.12	***
Montenegro	0.27	0.16		0.19	0.16		0.18	0.17	
Serbia	0.83	0.11	***	0.74	0.11	***	0.62	0.12	***
Slovenia	0.87	0.13	***	0.86	0.13	***	0.78	0.15	***
Intercept	-5.38	0.36	***	-6.42	0.42	***	-6.76	0.48	***
N		3264			3264			3264	
Log Likelihood		-1865.98			-1849.26			-1797.95	
Pseudo R ²		11.1%			11.8%			13.9%	

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Table A8.4 Determinants of the populist retrospective

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Populism	1.52	0.09	***	1.45	0.10	***	1.47	0.10	***
Nationalism	0.29	0.06	***	0.30	0.06	***	0.18	0.06	**
Socialism				0.15	0.08	†	0.20	0.08	*
Personal experience with COVID-19				0.17	0.11		0.19	0.11	†
Gender							0.07	0.09	
Age							-0.01	0.00	
Education	Lower								

		Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
		dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Income Employment status	Middle							-0.39	0.11	***
	Higher							-0.47	0.12	***
								0.05	0.02	**
	Full time									
	Part time							0.28	0.20	
	Unemployed							-0.19	0.14	
	Retired							-0.10	0.15	
	Stay-at-home spouse							0.00	0.20	
	Student							-0.23	0.20	
	Sick/disabled							0.33	0.34	
	Self-employed							0.19	0.15	
Ethnic minority								-0.06	0.11	
Government supporter								-0.06	0.11	
Political interest								0.04	0.01	**
Bosnia and Herzegovina										
Croatia		-0.04	0.12		-0.06	0.13		-0.08	0.14	
Montenegro		0.18	0.19		0.15	0.19		0.12	0.20	
Serbia		-0.07	0.12		-0.11	0.12		-0.15	0.13	
Slovenia		-0.10	0.14		-0.11	0.14		-0.01	0.16	
Intercept		-5.44	0.38	***	-5.90	0.44	***	-5.96	0.49	***
N		3264			3264			3264		
Log Likelihood		-1663.6			-1660.97			-1627.81		
Pseudo R ²		9.8%			9.9%			11.3%		

Notes: Logistic regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.	dy/dx	S.E.	Sig.
Bosnia and Herzegovina									
Croatia	-0.04	0.12		-0.06	0.13		0.00	0.05	
Montenegro	0.18	0.19		0.15	0.19		0.25	0.06	***
Serbia	-0.07	0.12		-0.11	0.12		0.33	0.04	***
Slovenia	-0.10	0.14		-0.11	0.14		-0.13	0.05	*
Intercept	-5.44	0.38	***	-5.90	0.44	***	0.78	0.16	***
N		3264			3264			3264	
Log Likelihood		-4235.81			-4213.72			-4168.78	
Pseudo R ²		5.6%			6.9%			9.4%	

Notes: Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression throughout; *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p<0.1

Figure A8.1. Exploratory factor analysis of the Nationalist retrospective

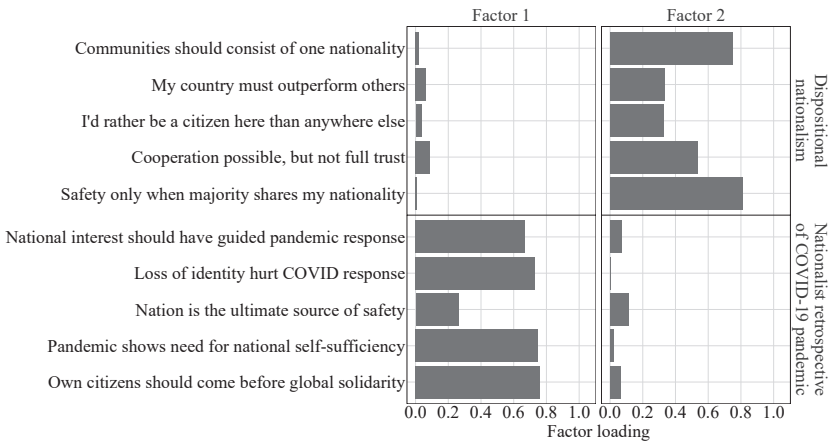
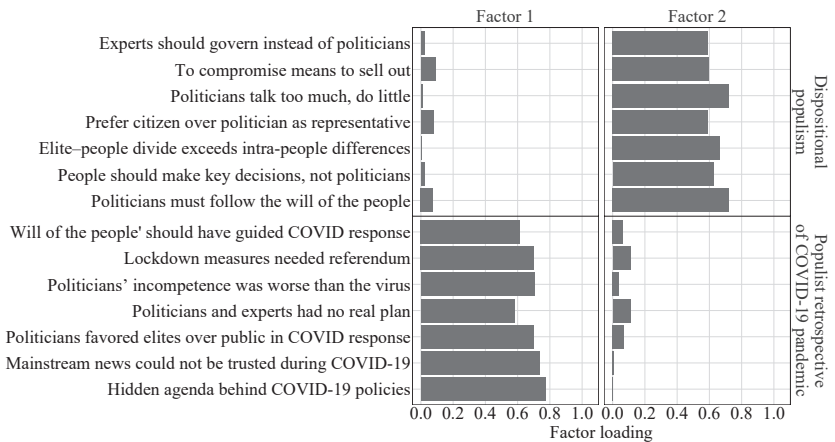


Figure A8.2. Exploratory factor analysis of the Populist retrospective



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