# Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe

*Edited by* Giuliano Bobba *and* Nicolas Hubé
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*Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe,* with its focus on eight countries in the context of the pandemic, provides empirical insight into the unique crisis environment bracketed by COVID-19 and how populist political parties capitalize on this environment. The book exquisitely posits the presupposition that the COVID-19 crisis is a fertile ground for populists, as the pandemic created an entirely new, salient scenario where governments' inability to take control of COVID-19 made it more difficult to exploit the advantages, depending on whether populists are in the office or are the opposition.

The book meticulously traces populist leaders' narratives from January to May 2020 that display the fundamental characteristics of populism. In Chapter 1, written by Bobba and Hubé, the 5 months period is divided into three parts: (i) absence of contagions and nationwide epidemics prior to the COVID-19 crisis, (ii) "virus spread and containment" and (iii) "mitigation of the contagion phase" (p. 11). First, they explore the fundamental proponents of populism–"the people, the elites, and out-groups" (p. 11) –to see whether their discourses emerged throughout the crisis or whether they differ from discourses in a normal era. Next, they conducted a review of how populists characterized the pandemic and endeavored to politicize COVID-19, utilizing the concept of politicization based on the "naming (emergence), blaming (confrontation), and claiming (managing) formula" (p. 11).
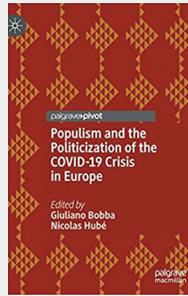
Chapter 2, written by Şahin and Ianosev, focuses on the United Kingdom (UK), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the Brexit Party. The scarcity of healthcare equipment offers an ideal environment for populist parties; the UKIP's criticism of the British government's aloofness toward the pandemic and its "herd immunity" (p. 21) approach, in the author's perspective, exemplifies a populist party's reaction when it is in opposition. For the marginal Brexit Party, the crisis fueled the populist discourse, thereby serving as a catalyst for a more vigorous battle against the "enemies of the people" (p. 135).

In Chapter 3, Magre, Medir, and Pano focus on the Spanish populist parties, UP and VOX, which have largely emphasized the intellectual nature of their ideas rather than their populist positions. "Anti-science and anti-expert" (p. 43) rhetoric –characteristic of populist movements– go unmentioned, and the two parties have not portrayed health professionals as judgmental "people-versus-political-class" (p. 43) figures. *VOX* has, however, taken on the role of "national opposition" to the Spanish government. The political objectives of both parties are to use the pandemic to destabilize the political system and to appear as a representative of a certain Spanish right-wing group. To preserve its autonomy

in office, Unidas Podemos has had to emphasize its left-wing elements. Governmental cohesiveness and the need to legitimize harsh measures have pruned the populist emotive language of *Podemos*.

In Chapter 4, Bertero and Seddone concentrate on Italy's populist groups: The League (Lega) and the Five Star Movement. The former has maintained its typical populist bases and the latter, as part of a coalition government, has emphasized its commitment to the measures taken by the government. In that respect, the Five Star Movement is a good example of conformity by a populist party when it is on a rule or a party in a coalition. In Chapter 5, Baloge and Hubé, focus on the populist response to the pandemic in France. The Front National (FN) mainly targeted the ruling classes. It is no surprise that Marine Le Pen expressly associated COVID-19 with migrants by means of scapegoating. Indomitable France, (LFI, *La France Insoumise*) an eco-socialist movement, and its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, bases the discourse on the fear that the side effects of the pandemic measures might be irreversible. However, the Rassemblement National (RN) and LFI, like Lega of Italy, as the opposition parties seeking power, significantly focus on government incompetence.

In Chapter 6, the German government's inability, per the Alternative for Germany (AfD), to control the pandemic is due to lack of assessment, inability to take measures/inefficient response, and neglect of the devastating consequences for the people. The government is imagined as an entity incapable of securing German interests. European cooperation is only a tool to supplement national politics, not to replace it. Similar to FN, AfD attributes the problems raised by the pandemic to immigration.

Chapter 7 provides the frame of the policies of Hungarian leader Viktor Orban. The primary trope of his populist tale is that the figurehead (i.e., Orban) and the people battle together to secure national interests and dignity. This battle takes place amid interwoven domestic and foreign forces that threaten these national interests and liberties for their own sociopolitical gain. This chapter deserves appreciation for its success in depicting how the pandemic was instrumentalized for Orban's strategy of silencing the opposition through strict measures.

Chapter 8 provides a detailed anatomy of the Czech populist parties: ANO (in government), Freedom and Direct Democracy, and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. In practice, populist political groups in the Czech Republic have not changed their discourse in response to the COVID-19 problem. The leader, Babiš fashioned his image into a good boss as well as a loving father (p. 107). In the case of ANO, this image has been characterized as the most essential weapon for combating COVID-19.

Chapter 9 focuses on PiS in Poland, which is like Fidesz in Hungary. In both groups, populist leaders are fully in power and frequently exploit the image of the great leader who guides citizens when the COVID-19 influence is minimal (p. 134).

The book underlines governmental structure as a major factor in the cycle of politicization. The precarious conditions of the pandemic have paved a road for parties in office (i.e., PODEMOS, M5S, and Fidesz) to increase their leverage and legitimacy; leaders of these groups perceive COVID-19 as a chance to display their capacity to care for citizens. Ruling populists have sustained or significantly improved their primacy and

popular support by depoliticizing the pandemic response and minimizing polarization by relying on scientific evidence and medical experts. The use of traditional populist techniques by opposition parties amid the pandemic threat has surely been problematic. The authors present a complete picture of the crisis atmosphere infiltrating political and private life, in which it is much easier to propagate a sense of urgency.

Obviously, it is difficult to pinpoint a single populist trend during the pandemic. However, the book is deserving of praise for breaking the ground that such a crisis would yield significant benefits for the populist parties in opposition. Overall, *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* is a successful discourse analysis of populist parties. The authors' clean organization

of these exceedingly difficult and intersecting cases can serve as a useful and trustworthy guide for scholars studying different strategies of right- and left-wing populist parties and the discursive battles they wage in the context of a crisis environment. It provides a sense of why populists use this particular rhetoric and how this plays out with their core constituency. However, the analytic nature of the book places undue pressure on the authors to apply the same frame and this raises major problems that may cast doubt on the book's central conclusion: there is little sense of the contestation and deep divides these populist strategies both tapped into and opened up further. Along with its scholarly value, the book will be of considerable interest to anybody curious about the populist parties and their reactions in a time of worldwide turmoil.

## The Road Before Me Weeps:
### On the Refugee Road through Europe

*Reviewed by* Zehra Çelik, İstanbul University

*The Road Before Me Weeps*, written by *BBC* correspondent in Budapest Nick Thorpe, traces the stories of migrants and refugees coming from the war-torn countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The book tells the stories of refugees using the Western Balkan route, the preferred route from Turkey to Western Europe between 2014-2018. Thorpe details the experiences of the refugees on the road, the assistance and the hostility directed at them, and their failures and successes as
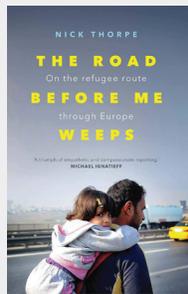
they strive toward a life of peace and security in Western Europe. The author ingeniously blends facts and emotions, thanks to his recurrent visits to the fields, forests, refugee camps, villages, and towns where refugees rest or hide from officials. Thorpe's conversations with these travelers allow readers to witness the harsh living conditions to which they are exposed in their home countries, the conditions that make their decision to flee the country in which they were born unavoidable,