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POPULIST ATTITUDES AND CONSPIRACY BELIEFS IN SLOVAK SOCIETY: PANDEMIC VS. POST-PANDEMIC DATA

Ivana Václaviková – Lucia Viteková*

ABSTRACT
The continued success of populist political subjects can be observed in many countries in recent years, including Slovakia. Society is polarized, and dissatisfaction, anger, and fear are coming to the fore. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which, as a crisis, typically increases the potential for the spread of unfounded or even conspiratorial beliefs. As the occurrence of the mentioned phenomena postulates similar questions, the study's objective is to identify the rate of occurrence of populist attitudes and trust in conspiracy content during and after the pandemic. At different stages of the pandemic course, the prevalence of populist attitudes in the sample of Slovak adult men and women (N = 1345) and the tendency to trust conspiracy beliefs both in general and specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are examined. Using the Populist Attitudes Scale, the Generic conspiracist beliefs scale, and the authors' questionnaire on belief in conspiracy claims related to the COVID-19 virus, we found a high prevalence of the variables of interest, with the highest rates observed in women, people of older age and people with lower education. Across the different phases of data collection, attitudes and beliefs were relatively stable, and a linear association was observed between them. The results demonstrate the validity of the study of populist attitudes and the tendency to believe in conspiracy content, while at the same time raising questions for further research.

Key words: Populist Attitudes, Anti-Elitism, Sovereignty, Belief in Homogeneity, Conspiracy Theories, COVID-19

* Mgr. Ivana Václaviková, PhD. is a Postdoc at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. Nám. J. Herdu 2, Trnava 917 01, Slovak Republic, e-mail: ivana.vaclavikova@ucm.sk.

* Mgr. Lucia Viteková, PhD. is a Postdoc at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. Nám. J. Herdu 2, Trnava 917 01, Slovak Republic, e-mail: lucia.vitekova@ucm.sk.

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1. Introduction

Modern democracies have been confronted with increasing resistance to elites (Forgas et al., 2021), the emergence of demagogic leaders, and the spread of misinformation (Petersen, Osmundsen, Bor, 2020). Society is polarized, with accumulating feelings of discontent, recently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Populism at the country level is at an all-time high, with more than 25% of nations currently governed by populists (Funke, Schularick, Trebesch, 2022), including Slovakia. The crisis also harbours the considerable potential for disseminating conspiracies (Čavojová, Šrol, 2022). Populism often goes hand-in-hand with conspiratorial thinking (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, Littvay, 2017), with populist leaders being a source of misinformation and openly supporting conspiracy theories in pandemic times (Lasco, 2020 in Eberl, Huber, Greussing, 2021). This may lead to negative consequences, including wrong decisions and actions (Oliver, Wood, 2014; Oleksy et al., 2021), increasing prejudices, and negative health-related attitudes or behaviour (Halama, 2019). Manipulative narratives undermine democracy and the unity of the West. It may pose a direct threat to modern democracies (Goliaš, Hajko, Piško, 2017; Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018), as it disfigures representative democracy (Urbinati, 2019), leads to further problematic development of society and prevents maintaining progress (GLOBSEC, 2023).

As populism is prevalent in many countries around the world, researchers are calling for populist attitudes to be measured at an individual level. This construct has been shown to explain support for populist parties regardless of their left-right ideology (Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz et al., 2018; Geurkink et al., 2020). Slovakia has a tradition of favouring populist political subjects and leaders (Funke et al., 2022; Dočkal, 2023). Simultaneously, we can note the vulnerability of the Slovak population in the face of disinformation and conspiracies (GLOBSEC, 2020; 2022; 2023), which have potentially negative impact on people’s experiences and behaviour in important areas (Halama, 2019; Oleksy et al., 2021). In line with Piterová et al. (2021), we, therefore, consider it justified to directly investigate populist attitudes in society, using a method that takes into account the conceptualization of populism as a political ideology with three subdimensions (Schulz et al., 2018). Since the worldviews of populism and conspiracy theories are very similar and are often associated with each other (Castanho Silva et al., 2017), especially through their anti-elitist stance (Eberl et al., 2021), attention should be focused not only on the presence of populist attitudes but also on the current tendencies to trust conspiracy content among
Slovak men and women of different ages and education. Ultimately, if we conclude that trust in conspiracies may increase especially in times of crisis (Čavojová, Šrol, 2022) and populist slogans are more successful back then, the question remains how widespread they are and how they may change over time - during the pandemic and afterward. Thus, the study's objective is to identify the rate of occurrence of populist attitudes and trust in conspiracy content during and after the pandemic. Based on the research objectives, the following research questions are formulated: 1. What is the rate of occurrence of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs (in general as well as in particular) in Slovak society during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? 2. What is the rate of occurrence of these variables based on gender, age, and education level?

1.1 Populism and populist attitudes

According to Urbinati (2019), populism is a part of democracy with two main entities at its ideological core, “the nation” and “the people”. It can be conceived as a political strategy (Weyland, 2001), a communication style (Jagers, Walgrave, 2007), a representative process (Urbinati, 2019), or since it is a relatively coherent set of ideas about the structure of power in society (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008), as a political ideology (Mudde, 2004). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as a thin-centred ideology that ultimately divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. A thin-centred ideology can become a thick-centred ideology when combined with broader ideologies such as nativism (right-wing populism) or socialism (left-wing populism). Populist ideology combines an advocative position towards the people and a conflictual one towards the elites (Wirth et al., 2016).

Schulz et al. (2018) extract three political ideas that together form populism: (1) an anti-elitism approach, with elites seen as corrupt, betraying, and deceiving the people; (2) a belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty that leaves the power to the people; and (3) an understanding of the people as being homogenous and virtuous. Urbinati (2019) characterizes populist democracy as the new form of representative government, based on (1) the direct relation between the leader and those defined as “the right” or “good” and (2) the superlative authority of the audience. She notices that populism in power depicts only one part of the people as legitimate and points out its radical partiality in interpreting the people and the majority.

Slovakia has recorded 57% of years under populist rule since independence
in the early 1990s (Funke et al., 2022). Populist parties and leaders are widespread in Western Europe, the USA, and Latin America; the citizens of European countries such as Sweden, Finland, Poland, Denmark, and Austria have shown strong support for populist parties and/or their candidates, as indicated by the proportion of voters (Schulz et al., 2018). Three groups of attitudes are often associated with voting for populist parties (Geurkink et al., 2020; Piterová et al., 2021): political trust, external political efficacy, and populist attitudes. Geurkink et al. (2020) argue that the three constructs are conceptually different and that they measure empirically distinct phenomena, while populist attitudes capture all three core components of populism: people-centrism and anti-elitism, the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, and a focus on the general will. While Stanley (2011) examined the impact of populist attitudes on party preferences and voting behaviour in the 2010 Slovakian elections and concluded that they were far less influential than expected, Akkerman et al. (2014) found a significant and positive correlation between populist attitudes and the intention to vote for populist parties on a representative Dutch sample. Geurkink et al. (2020) identified populist attitudes as the only consistent and exclusive indicator of voting for a populist party. Of the three groups of attitudes examined (political trust, external political efficacy, and populist attitudes), the authors find that only the latter is able to explain voting for left- and right-wing populist parties. Using data from the 2018 European Social Survey, Piterová et al. (2021) indirectly confirmed attitudes that can be understood as populist in a Slovak sample via institutional trust and external political efficacy.

Voters may be led to side with populist movements not only by emotions, such as feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction, and anger, but also feelings of helplessness, threat, and fear (Obradovic et al., 2020). Needless to say, the pandemic is a typical example of a threatening situation. It can be assumed that the tendency towards populism is related to the experience of fear and insecurity, mistrust of others, and the feeling of weak political influence (Staerklé, Green, 2018; Freeman et al., 2020). Rico et al. (2017) investigated the importance of fear together with anger and found that the emotion of anger is important for the propensity to populist attitudes. This is how Laclau (in Biháryová, 2018) perceives populism – as a form of expression of angry citizens who feel frustrated by the situation and restless about how it is treated by the elites. In this state of dissatisfaction and frustration, populist leaders use anti-establishment imagery in order to ask the people to identify with them (Urbinati, 2019).
1.2 Conspiracy theories

When emotions are whipped up by perceived threats, people are more willing to accept alternative explanations of reality, even if they are unlikely to be true (Freeman et al., 2020). More than half of Slovaks tend to believe various conspiracies (GLOBSEC, 2022), such as the existence of secret groups and organizations controlling events on a global scale to create a totalitarian world government. Conspiracy theorists see the cause of phenomena and events around us in the secret and planned actions of influential people and groups that are intended to harm, manipulate, or mislead the public to achieve a specific, usually malevolent and sinister goal (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Wood, Douglas, Sutton, 2012; Douglas et al., 2019). It is assumed that the world and events are not as they appear and that influential people and institutions have an interest in keeping the nature of things secret. Douglas et al. (2017) have identified three main reasons why people believe them. The first reason is epistemic, i.e. conspiracy theories help people make sense of the world and understand events that they find difficult to comprehend. Second, conspiracy theories can provide certainty and predictability in uncertain and anxiety-ridden situations. Thirdly, conspiracy theories can help the losers of a situation, such as elections, to save face.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a dangerous situation in which the proliferation of alternative explanations for events usually prevails (van Prooijen, 2019; Douglas, 2021). The scientific complexity of the topic, the question of the origin of the virus, management, and options for resolving the situation, all encourage the creation and spread of related conspiracy theories. These represent specific efforts to explain the causes of the pandemic, as well as considerations about who can benefit from it. In general, about a third of participants in an international survey conducted in 28 countries around the world are inclined to believe that the spread of the virus was deliberately caused by a foreign power or other force (European Commission, 2020). Information about a potential threat triggers an emotional response, while emotions reflect how a person perceives and evaluates a subjectively significant situation. As in the case of populism, it is anger and fear that have the potential to support and promote the spread of conspiracies both in general and in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (van Prooijen, 2019; Panczová, 2020). The primary emotion of conspiracy theories is fear of the situation society finds itself in, while anger motivates people to act against a target perceived to be its originator (Jolley, Paterson, 2020; Šrol et al., 2021).
1.3 Populism and conspiracies

Castanho Silva et al. (2017) state that worldviews of populism and conspiracy theories are very similar. They share a preference for Manichaean narratives, which reduce events to a struggle between good and evil – the people and the elite – with populism stressing the innocence of the people and conspiracy theories stressing their lack of knowledge about the secret plot (Bergmann, Butter, 2020). Populists see the elites as a corrupt group that works against the people – and this kind of narrative is typical of many conspiracy theories as well (Sutton, Douglas, 2014), with the distrust of elites identified as the most important common factor (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Furthermore, researchers in the field of conspiracies have identified similar predictors as researchers in the field of populism. The tendency to adopt conspiracy beliefs increases with authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999), perceived danger and uncertainty (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, Furnham, 2010), anxiety (Spasovski, Démuthová, Kuzmanovič, 2021), loss of control (Douglas et al., 2019; Oleksy et al., 2021a; Šrol et al., 2021) and low trust in others as well as low trust in institutions (Thórisdóttir, Mari, Krouwel, 2020).

Conspiracy theories try to explain important social or political events as the results of plots that involve powerful actors (influential people, organizations, governments) that work in secret to achieve some sinister goal. As such, they take a complex event – e.g. an outbreak of a deadly virus – and provide an explanation of the event and someone to blame for it (Kofta et al., 2020). This is how they may present useful tools for populists in their opposition to scientific and political elites (Eberl et al., 2021).

2. Methodology

2.1 Data and procedure

To determine the extent of populist attitudes and conspiracy theories in general and in relation to the COVID-19 virus and the pandemic, 3 phases of data collection were conducted - spring 2021 during the second wave of the pandemic, spring 2022 at the end of the pandemic and fall 2023 after the pandemic. The total research sample consisted of 1345 participants with a mean age of 30.8 years (SD=13.38), of which 63% were female, 41.5% were unmarried and 62% had the highest secondary school degree. In the first phase of data collection, there were 300 participants with an average age of 34.77 (SD=14.17), 56% female, and 58% with the highest secondary education, in the second phase there were 307 participants with an average age of 36.94 (SD=13.24), 60.3%
female, 51.1% with highest secondary education and in the third phase of data collection there were 738 participants with an average age of 31.73 (SD=13.44), 62% female and 68% with highest secondary education.

2.2 Measurement

Populist attitudes were measured using the Populist Attitudes Scale (Schulz et al., 2018), which was constructed to measure three dimensions: 1. Anti-elitism attitudes (e.g., the differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.); 2. Preference for popular sovereignty (e.g., the people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.); 3. Belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people (e.g., although Slovaks are very different from each other when it comes down to it they all think the same.). The questionnaire consists of 15 statements to which respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The value of Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient reached 0.822 in our research sample.

In addition, a Generic conspiracist beliefs scale (Brotherton, French, Pickering, 2013) was used, which consists of 15 items that are rated equally on a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree with the statement). The scale consists of sub-dimensions: government malfeasance (e.g., the government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures and keeps this secret.), malevolent global (e.g., secret organizations communicate with aliens but keep this fact from the public.), personal wellbeing (e.g., experiments with new drugs or technologies are routinely performed on the public without their knowledge or consent.), and control of information (e.g., groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence to deceive the public.). The extraterrestrial cover-up subscale of the original GCBs was excluded. Given the observed correlations between the individual factors when using the scale in the different studies, we can consider belief in conspiracy theories as a unidimensional construct expressed in the overall GCBs score. The value of the reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha reached 0.922 in our research sample.

To obtain data on participants' belief in the COVID-19 conspiracy, four claims were made, two of which were neutral or factual information ("The artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus) has not been confirmed. Most likely it arose by natural selection in an animal host and was then transmitted to humans." and "The COVID-19 pandemic was real. The fastest and most effective way to bring
it under control was vaccination with approved vaccines." and two conspiracy statements ("Certain influential groups have decided that the human population is too large. SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus) was artificially created and used as a biological weapon with the aim of eliminating it." and "The vaccination against COVID-19 was not necessary quite the opposite. It was merely an instrument of manipulation and intimidation designed to make profits for a few. COVID-19 was not a serious disease at all."). The participants assigned the statements to their level of trust or agreement with the information (1- I do not trust the information at all to 7- I trust the information completely). Confidence in neutral or factual statements was reversed and then a total score was calculated for all four statements. The higher the score, the greater the confidence in the conspiracy statements about the COVID-19 virus. The internal consistency coefficient of Cronbach's alpha method reached 0.808 in our research sample.

3. Results

In order to determine the prevalence of measured populist attitudes and individual dimensions of populist attitudes in the Slovak population, the total score was divided into four categories based on the interquartile range - participants who disagreed, mostly disagreed, partially agreed, or strongly agreed with populist statements (Graph 1). When measuring overall populist attitudes, we find that 61.4% of participants identify partially or strongly with populist statements. We observe a similar trend in the first two dimensions of populism, with up to 74.8% of participants having mostly or strongly anti-elitist attitudes and 63.8% of participants mostly or strongly favouring popular sovereignty. The results are contradictory concerning the belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people, which, on the contrary, was not at all or mostly shared by 74.1% and was only held by 25.9% of the study sample across all phases of data collection.
Graph 1: Measures of overall populist attitudes and dimensions of anti-elitism attitudes, preference for popular sovereignty, and belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people (N=1345)

The prevalence of belief in conspiracy theories in general and specifically in relation to the pandemic and COVID-19 is shown in Graph 2. The percentages represent the participants who predominantly or exclusively believed in the conspiratorial claims. 39.9% of participants believed in conspiracy theories in general and a total of 30.6% in relation to COVID-19.

Graph 2: Measures of general belief in conspiracy theories and belief in a conspiracy about COVID-19 (N=1345)
Across the three waves of data collection over the three years, we observe no significant change in the extent of populist attitudes and their dimensions, with overall more than 60% of respondents holding populist attitudes in general, more than 73% holding anti-elitist attitudes, more than 60% holding a preference for popular sovereignty belief, and more than 24% of respondents holding a belief in popular homogeneity and virtuousness of the people. Based on further data in Table 1, we can see that populist attitudes are more likely to be held by women, citizens of older age groups, and participants with secondary education being the highest achieved education.

If we look more closely at the extent of belief in conspiracy theories across the different waves of data collection, we find that belief in general conspiracies has been relatively stable over time across the research samples, but we see a slight increase in belief in conspiracies about the COVID-19 pandemic. General conspiracies were more likely to be believed by women, participants in the 41-80 age group, and those with primary school education. Conspiracies about the pandemic and the COVID-19 virus were more likely to be believed by women, participants in the 41-60 age group, and participants with a primary school education.

Table 1: Prevalence of populist attitudes, its dimensions, a general belief in conspiracy theories and belief in a conspiracy about COVID-19 across phases of data collection, gender, age categories, and education level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>PAS</th>
<th>Anti- elitism</th>
<th>Sovereignty</th>
<th>Homogeneity</th>
<th>GCB</th>
<th>COVID-19 conspiracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>64,0 %</td>
<td>77,6 %</td>
<td>68,4 %</td>
<td>30,4 %</td>
<td>43,0 %</td>
<td>30,8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>61,3 %</td>
<td>75,9 %</td>
<td>63,5 %</td>
<td>25,7 %</td>
<td>34,2 %</td>
<td>26,8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>60,3 %</td>
<td>73,3 %</td>
<td>62,0 %</td>
<td>24,3 %</td>
<td>41,0 %</td>
<td>32,2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>56,5 %</td>
<td>71,9 %</td>
<td>57,7 %</td>
<td>21,9 %</td>
<td>30,9 %</td>
<td>28,7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>64,0 %</td>
<td>76,7 %</td>
<td>67,1 %</td>
<td>28,8 %</td>
<td>44,9 %</td>
<td>31,7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>55,0 %</td>
<td>70,5 %</td>
<td>58,7 %</td>
<td>21,8 %</td>
<td>37,2 %</td>
<td>27,8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-40</td>
<td>59,4 %</td>
<td>76,5 %</td>
<td>61,4 %</td>
<td>22,5 %</td>
<td>37,6 %</td>
<td>29,2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-60</td>
<td>75,8 %</td>
<td>82,5 %</td>
<td>75,8 %</td>
<td>36,7 %</td>
<td>48,3 %</td>
<td>40,9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-80</td>
<td>87,8 %</td>
<td>87,8 %</td>
<td>85,4 %</td>
<td>51,2 %</td>
<td>48,8 %</td>
<td>25,0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Education | | | | | | |

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Conclusively, by showing scatterplots of linearity between populist attitudes and belief in conspiracies in general (Graph 3) and the COVID-19 virus and pandemic (Graph 4), it becomes clear that there is a direct proportionality between these phenomena. As populist attitudes increase, belief in conspiracy claims also increases. Based on the $R^2$ coefficient in the graphs, it is also possible to infer an existing correlation moderately strong positive relationship between the measured variables.

**Graph 3:** Scatter plot showing linearity between populist attitudes and general belief in conspiracy theories (N=1345)

Source: Authors, based on own calculations
Graph 4: Scatter plot showing linearity between populist attitudes and belief in a conspiracy about COVID-19 (N=1345)

Source: Authors, based on own calculations

4. Discussion

As far as we know, populist attitudes have not yet been directly studied in our context. They have been indirectly confirmed by Piterová et al. (2021). Based on the observed lower political trust, the perceived closed nature of the political system, and the higher dissatisfaction of respondents with the state of democracy and the functioning of the government, the authors assume that they would also score high on the populist attitudes scale. This assumption is in line with our results, we can confirm that populist attitudes are widespread (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014 in Schulz et al., 2018).

Using the three-dimensional method, we were able to examine populist attitudes in more detail. Participants have a negative image of the government, parliament, and possibly other elites and support attitudes that reflect the populist ideal of power-sharing, i.e. that the people should come to power at the expense of the current ruling class. To be classified as a populist, a person must hold all aspects of populist attitudes (Wirth et al., 2016). This also includes a positive image of the people, who are perceived as a homogeneous mass with positive characteristics. This dimension is represented by just over a quarter of the sample in our study. Based on the results, we can conclude that anti-elitism and people-
centrism are strongly prevalent, regardless of the phase of the pandemic. This could be due to disappointment and disillusionment with a political system that subjectively does not care about the concerns of ordinary people. The fact that people are not quite perceived as a homogeneous and virtuous group may reflect a strong polarization of society and feelings of distrust and anomie (Staerklé, Green, 2018; Freeman et al., 2020). It may just as well reflect the way populism in power divides society by legitimizing only one part of the population (those represented by populist movements and leaders) and humiliates the opposition as not being made of the “right” people. This is an important moment as it poses a risk of creating a climate in which the majority may be prone to act in a discriminatory manner against minorities or opponents (Urbinati, 2019).

Populist attitudes seem to be quite stable over the years, but differences in gender, age, and to some extent, education have been found. Other results were found by Geurkink et al. (2020), who found that women and older people are less likely to vote populist and therefore appear to have fewer populist attitudes. In our research, it was women and the 40+ age group that had the highest levels of populist attitudes and their dimensions, which may lead us to reflect on how gender and age-related factors may influence perceptions of politics and social issues and their impact on the political climate and decision-making process. However, the study provides a finding that is consistent with foreign research (Spruyt, Keppens, & Droogenbroeck, 2016; Geurkink et al, 2020) in the field of education, namely that populist attitudes and support for populist parties and ideologies are particularly common among those with lower levels of education.

In the fall of 2020, more than a fifth of Slovak respondents saw the coronavirus vaccination as preparation for the implantation of a nanochip (GLOBSEC, 2020). In our survey, around a third of participants trust conspiracy claims regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, with these values not changing fundamentally over the years. However, Čavojová and Šrol (2022) found an increase in conspiracy beliefs regarding COVID-19 in 2020. The content of the conspiracy itself probably plays a key role here, as it has changed during the pandemic. Overall belief in conspiracies is higher among our participants, similar to agency data: 55% believe in conspiracies about secret groups creating a totalitarian world government (GLOBSEC, 2022) and 57% of Slovaks believe that pharmaceutical companies hide effective, real treatments for diseases because they are driven by profits (GLOBSEC, 2023).

In a state of threat, as the pandemic undoubtedly is, the spread of alarmist messages and conspiratorial content thrives (van Prooijen, 2019; Douglas et al.,
Naturally, people try to find a way in an unfamiliar situation, and it turns out that conspiracies can be attractive due to their offer of clear explanations for unclear events (Douglas et al., 2017). The opacity of events motivates understanding - and in certain circumstances, or for some people, even a bizarre conspiracy can help satisfy the need to make some sense of their experiences and external circumstances. At the same time, conspiracy content can help some people reduce anxiety and cope with feelings of lack of control (Šrol et al., 2021).

The results suggest stronger support for conspiracies among women; this does not apply to beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracies. Age and education also seem to play a role. Older and less educated people are more susceptible to conspiracy claims. We could consider different amount and type of information available to participants with regard to their educational level or different processes of information and its source assessment used by more educated people. The only exception is the oldest age group in the case of conspiracies about COVID-19 with these participants being the least susceptible. We can speculate about the causes of this phenomenon - whether it is an underlying health concern coupled with the awareness of one's own vulnerability, or a personal experience of a difficult course or even a death in close proximity. However, the importance of demographic factors is questionable, as research in this area comes to contradictory conclusions (Douglas et al., 2019). Čavojová and Šrol (2022) confirmed lower education, older age, and gender as predictors of confidence in conspiracy theories about COVID-19, with the last two factors having a negligible effect. In line with van Mulukom et al. (2022 in Čavojová, Šrol, 2022), it can be assumed that these contradictory results point to a more complex interplay of psychological and social factors. For example, if members of a certain gender or age group gain a lower proportion of power, the tendency of their members to hold conspiracy beliefs increases.

The existence of a link between populism and conspiracy theory is already indicated by the fact that similar questions are discussed in the academic work on both phenomena (Bergmann, Butter, 2020). In our study, we found not only relatively strong support for populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs but also a correlation between them. This argues in favour of investigating the links between these phenomena under Slovak conditions, as foreign research confirms them (e.g. Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2021). It is assumed that a conspiratorial mindset, which divides the world into evil conspirators and powerless victims, can explain the endorsement of a populist worldview, especially its anti-elitist and Manichean aspects. Since populism carries a
conspiratorial element, populists may be particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories based on allegations of abuse of power by elites (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Moreover, conspiracies can be a useful tool for populists in their opposition to scientific and political elites (Eberl et al., 2021). We could observe this during the pandemic in the activities of the then-opposition (now the current coalition). However, the anti-elitist attitude of populists is not only directed against political institutions but also against scientific institutions (Wirth et al. 2016). This is particularly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as populism indirectly influences belief in the COVID-19 conspiracy via trust in political and scientific institutions (Eberl et al., 2021).

However, we are aware of the limitations of the research. The contribution of the current research paper would be to collect data from a single research sample across the phases of data collection, based on which we could interpret changes in the observed attitudes and not just their prevalence.

The analytical potential of the research could be further exploited with the help of higher statistics, e.g. regression models. On an interpretive level, it may be a challenge for future research to use the findings to analyse the reasons why populism and belief in conspiracies gain momentum in certain population groups more than in others, or to analyse the effects of these attitudes on social stability and the political process.

Conclusion

On the basis of available sources, for the first time the measurement of populist attitudes was carried out on a Slovak sample using the method of the Populist Attitudes Scale. We believe that the research results confirm the validity of their study, which could also contribute to answering the question of why people in Slovakia keep voting for populist parties. We found not only a non-negligible level of support for populist attitudes, but also trust in conspiratorial content, both during and after the pandemic. The link between populism and belief in conspiracies is embedded in common thematic elements that appeal to individuals' desire for change. Both phenomena arise as a reaction to the perceived influence of established elites who are seen as detached from ordinary people and their needs. This is another reason why the high presence of populist attitudes makes society vulnerable to various unfounded claims and conspiracies, especially in times of crisis or threat. The question remains, which predictors have the potential to reliably explain the tendency to adopt populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs and, in particular, whether and how their predictive significance
changes across individual social groups and strata. In an effort to understand these trends, a deeper examination of the topic would be appropriate, taking into account several variables, including individual characteristics, low levels of trust in other people and the media, levels of social welfare, and uncertainty related to economic development. These factors form a complex context that needs to be considered when developing effective measures.

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