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Between Mitigation and Dramatization: The Effect of the COVID-19 Crisis on Populists' Discourses and Strategies

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
United Kingdom		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
Spain		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
Italy		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
France		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
Germany		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
Hungary		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
Czech Republic		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
Poland		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

CHAPTER 10

BETWEEN MITIGATION AND DRAMATIZATION: THE EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON POPULISTS' DISCOURSES AND STRATEGIES

Abstract

This chapter addresses the general research questions of the book, namely the possibility that populists in Europe can profit from a peculiar crisis such as COVID-19, and it wonders whether populists reacted in a similar way across countries or whether the institutional role they play at the national level has affected their reactions. Findings show that while populists have tried to take advantage of the crisis situation, the impossibility of taking ownership of the COVID-19 issue has made the crisis hard to be exploited. In particular, populists in power have tried to depoliticize the pandemic, whereas radical right-populists in opposition tried to politicize the crisis without gaining relevant public support though.

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It is generally believed that populists benefit from crisis situations. However, the COVID-19 health crisis is an unconventional event that, at the time of writing this conclusion, is far from being under control. The general research question addressed by this book relates to the possibility that populists in Europe are profiting from a peculiar crisis such as COVID-19, gaining centrality in the political field and/or using the crisis to push forward new opposition lines (RQ1). A second, related, question has tried to pinpoint whether populists reacted in a similar way across countries or whether they adapted their response according to their institutional role - in power or not (RQ2). Findings show that while populists have tried to take advantage of the crisis situation, the impossibility of taking ownership of COVID-19 has made benefits more difficult to gain and dependent on the institutional role held.

1. Who has benefited from the crisis? Citizens' support, public relevance, and windows of opportunity

There is *a priori* no political purpose to, or direct responsibility for the origin of the pandemic. Contrary to previous European crises (i.e. financial and migrant), the causes are accidental, and determined by unintended and unguided shocks. These accidents are difficult to politicize since they are caused by 'events beyond human control'. For this issue, the process of politicization is therefore more complex, since causal attribution of responsibility is not always possible and unambiguous (Stone, 1989). In addition, governments have tried to manage the COVID-19 crisis as a non-political and science-based task, steering the problem away from intentional cause and pushing it toward the realm of nature. Public awareness of the problem in a 'high-choice media environment' (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2017) has made citizens highly informed and given them a means of scanning the evolution of the pandemic in the same way as governments. Transparency and (rational) explanations of governmental decisions have thus been demanded loudly by public opinion throughout Europe.

In the eight European cases analysed in this book, it has been a fact that governments have taken similar health-policy decisions, regardless of their liberal, conservative or populist positioning and the relatively high or low impact of COVID-19.

Of course, there have been some variations in the responses: during the early days of the pandemic, Boris Johnson claimed to be in favour to herd immunity in the UK; Spain, Italy, and France experienced a strict lockdown; while Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary had lighter forms of movement restrictions and control. These differences, however, have been more a matter of

variations by degrees than of the nature of the measures taken. Everywhere, the health emergency has been the highest priority of the state, allowing the adoption of exceptional temporary measures (such as state of emergency). Only several weeks after the outbreak in Wuhan and its appearance in Europe, it was realized that warnings from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDPC) had to be taken seriously. Each government thus appointed a scientific and medical committee upon which to rely for the most important decisions. In the same vein, the Europeanisation of the crisis has also meant that the timetable for policy decisions has been fairly similar between countries. Because the pandemic arrived there some weeks earlier than elsewhere, Italy showed other European countries how to act, allowing them to structure their health-policy solutions accordingly. Nevertheless, despite this Europeanisation of the crisis, responses were not coordinated at the EU level. On the contrary, they can be more clearly interpreted in the light of the political balance of each country.

While crises can usually serve as a window of opportunity for populist parties to maintain a high degree of polarization in debates and crisis-handling action (Moffit, 2015), the COVID-19 pandemic generated a completely different and new context. The suddenness of this external crisis has produced different outcomes for populists depending on whether they are in power or in opposition. In general, populist parties in power have exploited this critical situation to foster their political centrality and legitimacy. M5S in Italy, Podemos in Spain, PiS in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary and ANO in the Czech Republic saw this as an opportunity to show their ability to take care of the people even during a pandemic. In countries where populists are firmly in power and the COVID-19 impact has been low (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic), populist leaders have used the rhetoric of the outstanding leader who 'provides direction' to his people (Weyland, 2017) through the evocation of threat and reassurance (Edelman, 1977). On the contrary, where populist parties are in a coalition government (i.e. PODEMOS and M5S), populist stances have been softened by governmental solidarity and the necessity to justify these extraordinary decisions. In other words, in contrast to the evidence that emerged previously (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Pappas, 2019), the strategy of populists in power has been quite the reverse of that adopted in normal situations: forced to deal with a non-controversial issue, they have tried to depoliticize the issue and to reduce the level of polarization around it.

For populist parties in opposition, the use of their classical tactics during the pandemic crisis has been certainly complicated. Since the crisis has pervaded every aspect of public and private life, to 'perform and spread a sense of crisis' (Moffitt, 2015) has been virtually impossible. The main strategy that has generally succeeded has been an insistence on the need to overcome the health crisis by the nation as a whole. The emergence and success of divisive and polarizing counter-arguments have not only been difficult to achieve but also potentially damaging in terms of image and reputation for populist parties. This explains why, with a few exceptions (i.e. the Brexit Party criticizing the lockdown), all the opposition populist parties included in this studied voted for the emergency measures during phase 2. Hindered by the discourse of national unity that could have made their criticisms perceived as inappropriate, French populists, for example, were forced to shift the focus of their critique using the most legitimate political tool at their disposal: legislative activities at a time when parliament was in semi-lockdown.

Only after several weeks and the mitigation of the contagion (phase 3) were populist parties able to get back to their key arguments, especially those against the national and supranational elite as well as migrants. The crisis has led to the radicalization of discourse for the Brexit Party, Vox and Konfederacja, acting as a trigger for a more intense campaign against the ‘enemies of the people’. The AfD, instead, has been hindered by more radical stances of the extra-parliamentary opposition (APO). Finally, in other countries – like Italy, France or the SPD in the Czech Republic – populist parties in opposition have resumed their classical stances, updating their discursive repertoire to the new COVID-19 age.

To sum up, it is hard to identify a single populist pattern during the pandemic. In general it seems that the populists have not substantially benefited, nor substantially lost out, from the COVID-19 crisis: governing populist parties have maintained or slightly increased their centrality and public support, whereas opposition parties have remained stable or have seen their positions slightly worsen. A possible explanation is that policy options converged towards a few shared solutions, especially in phases 1 and 2. This means that populist and non-populist parties have often voted together, despite the rhetoric from both sides describing the two types of party as irreconcilable. The need to overcome the crisis appears, therefore, to have left the situation apparently unchanged in the short term. However, it might be worth exploring what will happen in the medium term. Although, as mentioned earlier, in phase 3 some populist actors returned to their pre-crisis rhetoric, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced two new elements that could point to certain consequences in the coming months. On the one hand, it has shown that populist parties, far from being a democratic aberration, are political actors in all respects that can contribute to finding solutions and implementing policies. On the other hand, it has also shown that the post-COVID-19 age could offer new opportunities in terms of alliances and policy repositioning – such as the role of science or strengthening the health system – between populist and non-populist parties.

Table 10.1 The consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on populist parties' performance

	COVID-19 impact	Populists' role	Crisis consequences
UK	High	Brexit Party: in opposition	Decreasing political relevance and support in the polls
Spain	High	Podemos: in power	Stable institutional relevance and decreasing support in the polls and in local elections
		Vox: in opposition	Increasing institutional relevance and increasing support in the polls and in local elections
Italy	High	M5S: in power	Increasing institutional relevance and stable support in the polls
		Lega: in opposition	Decreasing political relevance and support in the polls
France	High	RN: in opposition	Stable institutional relevance and support in the polls and in local elections
		LFI: in opposition	Stable institutional relevance and decreasing support during the local elections
Germany	Medium	AfD: in opposition	Stable institutional relevance and support in the polls.
Hungary	Medium	Fidesz: in power	Stable and high levels of public support and political centrality
Poland	Low	PiS: in power	Stable institutional relevance and slight decrease in support in the Presidential elections
		Konfederacja: in opposition	Stable institutional relevance and public support
Czech Republic	Low	ANO: in power	Stable and high levels of public support and political centrality
		KSČM: external support	

		SPD: in opposition	Stable levels of public support and institutional political relevance

2. The changing relevance of the key elements of populism in the light of (de)politicization of the COVID-19 issue

While populists have not really benefited from the crisis, they have had to face it like all the other political players and adapt their discourse to this unprecedented situation, outside the usual framework of political competition. In particular, as already mentioned, COVID-19 initially had the effect of restraining any form of radical opposition to the policy responses to be implemented, at least in the European Union. During the first month of the crisis, with very few exceptions (i.e. some claims by the Brexit Party, the AfD and the Lega), the pandemic was not a subject of political confrontation. Other 'normal' issues were at stake within national debates, including, for example, strikes and local elections in France. Suddenly, from the beginning of the *confrontation phase* onwards (end of February-beginning of March), COVID-19 became the overwhelming subject, crowding out all other issues at stake on the EU and national political agenda. The general opinion – both public and political – was consensual: there is an urgent need to act to protect the population from the pandemic.

One of the aims of this book was to identify how populists have adapted their discourse to the pandemic crisis (RQ1a). As regards the action of *naming* (Felstiner, Abel & Sarat, 1981), all the political actors (both populist and otherwise, in power or in opposition) moved rapidly from minimising the problem as a minor form of flu or a Chinese disease to admitting the seriousness of the health emergency, without any other form of intermediate categorisation. No symbolic struggle or political opposition to its naming was noted from March to June: the COVID-19 pandemic was recognized in all countries and by all main political parties as a scientific challenge and a relevant issue to be solved.

As a result of the urgency of finding a response, it is noteworthy that both *blaming* and *claiming* actions have been concomitant, and quite fluctuating (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). Prevented from using the appeal to the people as an original and effective argument, during the *confrontation* and *managing* phases, populists emphasized the other two key elements – anti-elitism and exclusionism. Depending on the national political game, criticism of a slow and uncoordinated EU-elite responsiveness has taken different forms: in the United Kingdom, for example, Nigel Farage saw the crisis as an opportunity to call for a no-deal Brexit; in Italy, meanwhile, after years of austerity, the arguments were framed around the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) blamed as a tool used to limit the economic autonomy of the country. Not all anti-elite claims are, however, necessarily specific to populists. There can be much more wide-ranging issues at stake at the national level. For instance, criticism of the unpreparedness of the French government was endorsed by the entire political and media spectrum; similarly, worries about European austerity measures are widely shared in Italy. A second blaming theme concerned the handling of migration issues. While in the UK, Germany, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Spain this included the request to close borders to reduce the risk of contagion from abroad, in France and Italy the two right-wing populist leaders, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, accused governments of taking care of migrants instead of focusing only on nationals.

This book also found evidence that right-wing and left-wing populist parties have reacted in a very different way to the challenge of the COVID-19 crisis. On the one hand, right-wing populism has identified new lines of conflict: an intensification of the emphasis on nationalism (and neo-natalism), and the (resulting) opposition of 'we, the national people', not only against the EU but also against the other member states. These findings confirm that right-wing populism and Euroscepticism are reinforcing each other (Conti 2018; Rooduijn & van Kessel 2019). On the other hand, it is evident that left-wing parties (Podemos, LFI, and to a certain extent M5S) are not using this kind of discourse.

During the crisis, they were more focused on denouncing the lack of public investment in the national health-care system and the disastrous consequences of years of EU neoliberalism.

Country-specific chapters also offer relevant findings regarding the politicization of COVID-19 issues by populist parties (RQ1b). Similarly to Euroscepticism (Sitter, 2001; Hubé, 2013), the way populists in power and populists in opposition have faced COVID-19 emphasizes the importance of the institutional role in party behaviour (RQ2). Being (or not being) in power structures partisan discourse. Politicization strategies may be placed on a continuum line ranging from complete politicization to complete depoliticization, structured around the party's position in the national institutional framework. The combination of politicization line with left-right positioning provides a relational map of the different arguments and reactions of populists in the eight countries analysed (figure 10.1)[63].

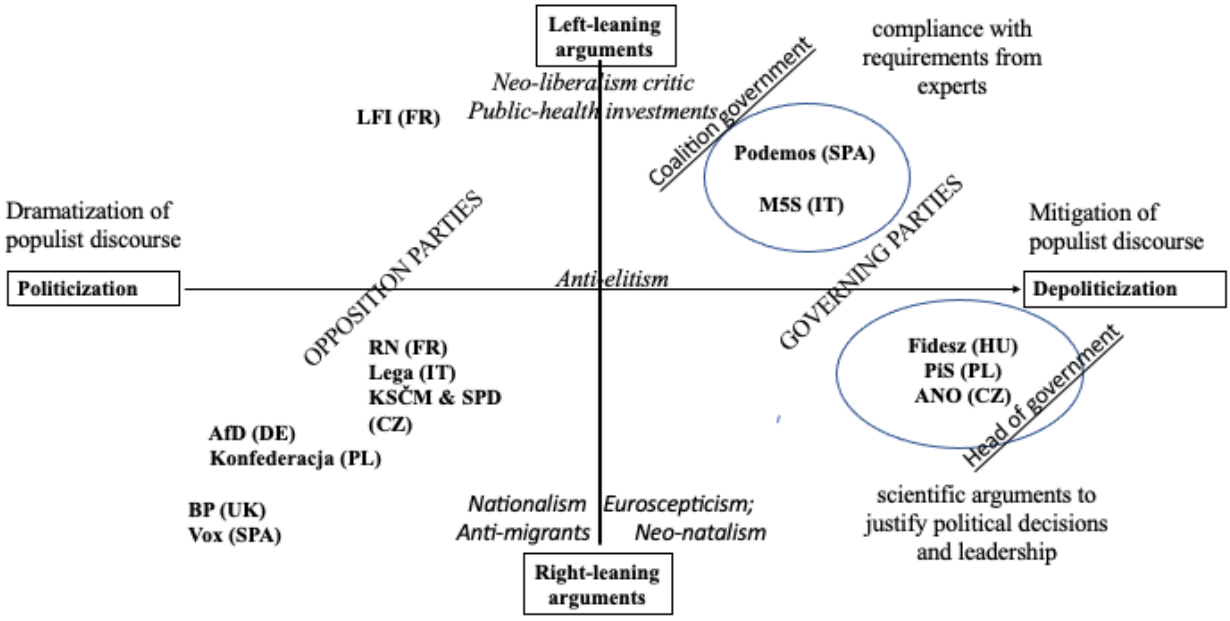
On the one hand, opposition parties tried to politicize the pandemic, but they only partly succeeded, in phase 3, mainly focusing on the management of the pandemic and blaming the ruling parties. No populist party has attempted to politicize the pandemic outbreak as, for example, Donald Trump did by questioning the origin of the virus. The institutional position has seemed to play a major role in this politicization process. The most marginal parties (i.e. the Brexit Party, Vox, AfD and Konfederacja) have clearly radicalized their discourse based on nationalist, protectionist and neo-natalist agendas. The opposition parties aspiring to govern – such as RN, LFI and Lega – have been much more cautious, mainly focusing on alleged governmental incompetence.

On the other hand, governmental parties have tried to depoliticize the crisis using technical and scientific arguments, following the recommendations of national experts. For them, the crisis has been an excellent chance to show their political competence, managerial abilities and dedication to the people. The most typical case here is undoubtedly the Czech Republic, whose Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, has stressed his ability to govern the country in this situation as successfully as he managed his companies in the past. Again, a difference seems to emerge between left-wing and right-wing populists in power. Podemos in Spain and M5S in Italy, as members of coalition governments, have based their political action on the advice of the technical-scientific committee, denouncing the need for more public investment in health-care. At the opposite end of the spectrum, right-wing populists in power in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have mainly used scientific arguments to justify their political decisions, emphasizing their leader's ability to make informed decisions solely on the basis of the authority of their political leadership.

A clear pattern of politicization of the COVID-19 crisis by populist political parties in Europe can thus be observed. The institutional position of the party in the national political game affects the way populists have addressed the issues, ranging from mitigation of populist discourse (populists in power) to its dramatization (populists in opposition).

Figure 10.1 Map of European populist discourse faced with the COVID-19 crisis

[63] The map provides a qualitative classification of different party positions based on the evidence that emerged from the national chapters.



It is worth noting that this pattern based on the institutional role works for the cases analysed here but does not include a further situation that everyone has heard of: some leaders in power have rejected the scientific evidence on the virus and have used the dispute between politicians and scientists to justify political decisions (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2020). Aside from some initial (and careless) statements by Boris Johnson and some comments between Farage and Trump, in the EU this kind of populist governmental style seems to be absent. It is also somewhat surprising that no leaders analysed here have given credit to or supported the conspiracy theories that are usually an integral part of populist strategy (Bergmann, 2018). In France, the debate around the chloroquine (HCQ) issue could have been endorsed by populist leaders, while in fact all the main French political actors distanced themselves from this scientific controversy when the debate became too sticky. Similarly, in Italy, both M5S and Lega – close to the No-Vax movement in recent years – have not argued against big pharma companies or stirred any controversy against the scientific world. The number of intensive care patients and the death toll has likely discouraged European populist leaders from resorting to this kind of argumentation.

3. Crises as a catalyst for change, populists as entrepreneurs of crises

The literature has interpreted crises as opportunities for change (see chapter 1). A crisis occurs when systemic contradictions are politically exploited and publicly perceived as such (Hay, 1999). Populists are generally considered to benefit from a crisis: they play an active role as crisis facilitators by pushing problematic situations towards a crisis at both the political and communicative levels (Moffitt, 2015). The success of populism is then often interpreted as the result of an external crisis (economic, financial, political, migrant, traditional values), questioning the problem-solving rationality with respect to a certain issue. Populists take advantage of this fuzziness to propose their clear and popular policy solutions. This general pattern seems not to work when applied to the COVID-19 crisis. As already mentioned, the peculiar nature of the crisis, as well as the implementation of similar policy solutions across all the European states, has virtually prevented populists from gaining centrality in the political field and support from public opinion.

Nevertheless, slightly broadening the analytical perspective and taking into account the relational approach through which parties position themselves in the national political field (Bourdieu, 1991), it is noticeable that all populist actors acted as ‘crisis entrepreneurs’, that is, as someone who

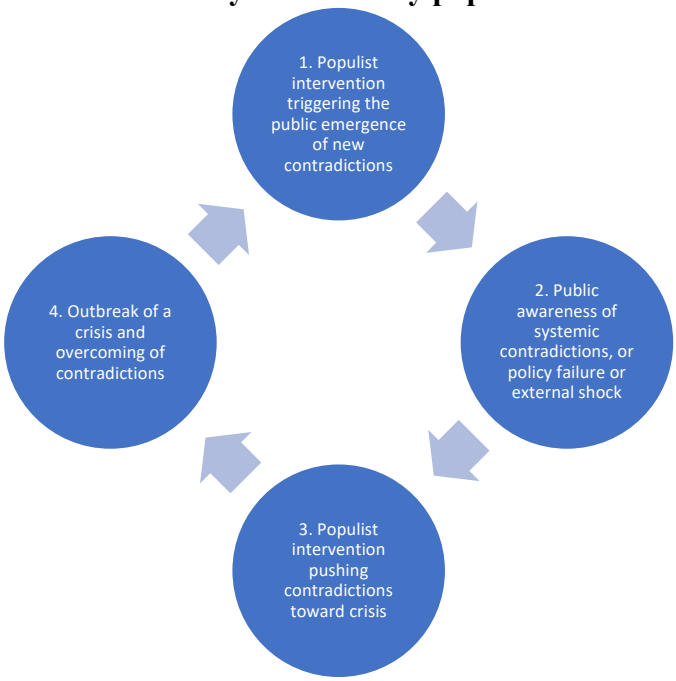
identifies, denounces and claims to be the solver of one or more systemic contradictions. As they have been unable to exploit the COVID-19 issue – or able to do so to a limited extent – the populists analysed in this book have focused their actions on the new contradictions emerging from the crisis situation, such as the role of the EU in managing the health problem and the economic recovery plan; the opposition of interests between European states; the unresolved issue of migrant arrivals.

Evidence suggests that populists – in power or in opposition – benefit more from a situation of continual complaint against new contradictions than from the actual outbreak of a crisis (i.e. COVID-19) or, worse still, from a solution to it (i.e. Brexit for the UKIP). In fact, populists are crisis entrepreneurs who strive to fuel a permanent crisis cycle. This is, in fact, the condition that allows them to take full advantage of crises in terms of political centrality and voter support. Of course, as already mentioned, not all crises are the same. Populists take ownership of the contradictions that best suit their Manichean view of society. The quest for this crisis ownership is what feeds the continuous process of *naming*, *blaming*, *claiming* of systemic contradictions that populists implement as a political strategy.

Figure 10.2 summarizes the permanent crisis cycle fuelled by populists. In a usual situation, the pattern begins with the emergence, triggered by populists, of a political contradiction (1), which becomes publicly recognized as a relevant problem (2) and is exploited by populists (3), who push it towards an actual crisis (4). Populists do not focus on one contradiction at a time; on the contrary, they trigger this cycle for all the contradictions they see at a given time. Points 1 to 3 are the moments when populists can benefit the most from the crisis situation, while in point 4, the climax, the contradiction finds a solution or a compromise that weakens the issue.

In external shocks, such as the pandemic outbreak, all political actors suddenly found themselves in point 4, where a crisis had broken out and a solution had to be found. This is the worst condition for populists because citizens perceive problems as real or experience them directly, and so political responses must be rapidly implemented. At these critical junctures, disputes and polarization often leave room for forms of political collaboration or non-hostile, tacit agreement in the name of national solidarity. However, as soon as this state of emergency ends, populists begin to implement the permanent crisis strategy again, fostering the emergence of new contradictions (point 1). This is exactly what happened in the eight countries analysed in this book between March and June.

Figure 10.2 The permanent crisis cycle fuelled by populists



In our view, therefore, crises *per se* do not necessarily benefit populism. It is populists, instead, who fuel a 'permanent crisis cycle' consisting of a continuous quest for 'crisis ownership' around stable or emerging political contradictions. The COVID-19 pandemic is an interesting case for which populists have been unable to achieve this kind of ownership, at least so far.

The health crisis, however, is anything but over, nor under control. On the contrary, after a relatively quiet summer, the second wave of the outbreak seems to be worse than the previous one. For a few months now, COVID-19 has moved into policy routine and governments are oscillating between economic, public health, and preventive policy measures. In the coming months, the COVID-19 crisis will be then 'normalized', becoming the new standard situation in which political struggle will occur and the people will have to live. This normalization of the COVID-19 crisis will probably offer to the opposition parties greater opportunities to politicize the policies implemented by governments and possibly to benefit from the crisis.

However, the factors involved are so numerous - i.e. the actual harshness of the second wave, the economic implications, the discovery of an effective vaccine or medicine - that it is not possible today to outline reliable future scenarios. What we do know however is that a political challenge will be played between the parties in power – that risk being worn by the health crisis – and the opposition parties – that could take advantage of the inevitable discontents that the pandemic is generating. Populists in power and in opposition, therefore, will have to face opposite challenges, the outcome of which will determine the features of the European populism in the post-COVID-19 Age.

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