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How Populists Governed the COVID-19 Pandemic: Populist Governance and Social Policies in Brazil, Hungary, Mexico, Poland, Russia and Turkey

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Abstract
How did populist governments handle the COVID-19 pandemic? Did they act as erratic, irrational and unsound – in short: 'populist' – as observers expected them to do? Through which social policies did they respond to the hardships caused by the pandemic? And, what does populist governance explain about these governments' social policies? This article explores these questions through a comparative analysis of a diverse set of six populist governments. We first conceptualize, operationalize and measure populist governance by constructing a novel Populist Governance Index. Second, we describe and measure governments' welfare policies through a novel Social Policy Response Index. Third, we relate social policy responses to variations in populist governance across countries. Our mixed-method study suggests that populism explains the politics rather than the policies of populist governments. We conclude that this is the case because populism fundamentally defines a mode of governance rather than policy content

Understanding populist governance at times of crisis is of growing importance, as populist rule is on the rise and crises of all kinds – political, economic, environmental – multiply globally. A number of studies assume that populists are rather unsuccessful in handling crises as they exploit rather than handle crises professionally (Bene and Boda 2021; Hinterleitner et al. 2024). Scholars have argued that populists 'pit will against reason', eschewing technocratic expertise (Caramani 2017). Along the same lines, the populist style of governing has been characterized as erratic, irrational and unsound (Bayerlein et al. 2021). While these claims remain widespread in the literature, they

often lack solid empirical evidence, and the nature of populist governance remains undertheorized.

This article contributes to the broader efforts to conceptualize, operationalize and assess populist governance (Bartha et al. 2020; Caiani and Graziano 2022; Muno and Pfeiffer 2022) by analysing populist governance in the field of social policy during the COVID-19 crisis. The relevance of studying populist governance during the pandemic is grounded on theoretical and methodological considerations. Theoretically, the rise of populism has been associated with crisis situations, with populist leaders actively 'performing' crises (Moffitt 2015: 195). Under the pandemic, however, leaders were forced to react to an exogenous crisis rather than actively creating it. Methodologically, the COVID-19 crisis provides a common global event and timeframe for a comparative study of populist governance of a crisis across countries and regions. Our focus is on the social policy responses because they have a significant impact on life chances of individuals through social security and labour market policies, as well as social policy by other means (Béland 2019). We treat public health measures as providing the context to how governments act in terms of welfare to mitigate the social and economic impact of the crisis.

The central questions we address are as follows:

1. How 'populist' was the governance of the pandemic in the countries studied here?
2. How did populist governments respond to the pandemic in the field of social policy?
3. What does populist governance explain about the governments' social policy responses to the pandemic?

To address the questions, we conduct a comparative case study of six populist regimes from Latin America and Eastern Europe that are rarely analysed together: Brazil, Mexico, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Turkey. We selected these countries with the aim of obtaining a diverse set of cases, with strong variation in terms of politics, geography, institutions and economy. Importantly, the countries differ significantly in the scope and nature of their populist appeal, the degree of centralization of the state, the political regime (democracy/autocracy), ideological leanings, income level and economic inequality.

We argue that populist governance plays a crucial role in the policy-making process, its framing and procedures, but that it is less relevant in determining the content and outcomes of policy. Arguably, this is the case because the substance and direction of policies are influenced by factors such as the government's host ideology and are mediated by state capacities, socio-structural factors and institutional constraints (Bartha et al. 2020; Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021). By establishing that populism impacts the politics rather than the policies of the pandemic, we conclude that the relationship between the two is contingent on the specific political nature of populist appeals and the institutional context in which populist governance operates.

Our study contributes to the literature on populist governance and its relation to social policy in four major ways. First, we move beyond a dichotomic classification of populist governance by locating empirical cases along a continuum. This is in line with the argument that populism is ordinal rather than categorical (Aslanidis 2016;

Busby et al. 2024; Hawkins 2009; Laclau 2005). As Ernesto Laclau (2005: 45) put it, 'To ask oneself if a movement is or is not populist is, actually, to start with the wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves is … to what extent is a movement populist?' Second, to measure populist governance and relate it to the governments' responses to the crisis in the field of social policy, we construct a Populist Governance Index (PGI) that incorporates the ordinal and multidimensional nature of populist governance and a Social Policy Response Index (SPRI) that comprises the main subfields of social policies, and study the relations between them. Third, we extend our research to a comprehensive set of social policy areas beyond conventional cash transfers when assessing populist welfare reactions. In addition, the study looks beyond a Western-centric approach by analysing and comparing populist rule in Eastern European and Latin American countries.

The article is structured as follows: the first section conceptualizes populism and populist governance, presents the PGI, reviews the debate on populism and welfare in the context of COVID-19, presents the SPRI, and outlines the case selection and methodology. The second section presents the results of the PGI to show the extent to which the different governments fitted the template of populist governance, and the results of the SPRI to determine how populist governments catered for the population during the pandemic. In the comparative analysis that follows the article relates the PGI and SPRI scores and discusses factors other than populist governance that influenced welfare decisions. The article concludes that populism had a limited impact on social policy during the pandemic and highlights the importance of institutional constraints on populist governance.

Conceptualizing and measuring populist governance and social welfare

We understand populism as a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2016; Laclau 2005) or thin ideology (Busby et al. 2024; Hawkins 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012) that regards society to be ultimately divided between two mutually antagonistic, co-constitutive actors – 'the people' and 'the elite' – where the former are downtrodden, excluded and the holders of inalienable sovereign rights, and the latter unresponsive, corrupt and self-serving (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). This minimalist definition intends to reflect the lowest common denominator among all manifestations of a given phenomenon (Sartori 1970). The definition allows us to distinguish between populism's core and ancillary properties (Freeden 2013), between the populist frame and the host ideologies associated with it (Hawkins 2018), and between populism on the one hand and patronage and authoritarianism on the other, with which it has been frequently associated (Müller 2016; Pappas 2019). This definition also contributes to minimizing the regional and normative biases that plague empirical studies of populism (Aslanidis 2016), making it amenable to empirical investigation (Pappas 2016).

While populism is a discursive frame that can be activated both in government and opposition, populist governance is the application of populism's discursive frame to the structures and processes of decision-making, behaviour and control in government. Takis Pappas (2019) identifies four central elements of populist governance: charismatic leadership, patronage politics, assault on institutions and political polarization. Based on Pappas's characterization, Wolfgang Muno and Christian Pfeiffer (2022)

construct an ideal type of populist governance that focuses on anti-pluralism and includes three inter-related dimensions: direct political communication, state capture and measures against the opposition. However, these authors are more concerned about the impact of populist governance on democracy than on how it translates into policy-making. Moreover, their characterization of populism conflates it with authoritarianism and clientelism, which are not necessary features of populism (Stavrakakis 2024).

More directly relevant for our work, Manuela Caiani and Paolo Graziano (2022) examine how populist features relate to policies when populist parties rule. They note that most studies consider the extent to which populist parties are successful in implementing policies consistent with their ideology. But the focus on populism's host ideologies provides a limited understanding of the specific contribution of populism to the policy-making process. Focusing on policy-making, Attila Bartha et al. (2020) construct an ideal type of populist policy-making along the dimensions of content, procedures and discourses, and apply a congruence analysis test to assess whether the social policy decisions of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary conform to the populist ideal type. The work of Bartha et al. shares significant common ground with our conceptualization of populist governance. We further their approach by developing an index of populist governance and by measuring social policy performance.

In line with our conceptualization of populism, Giorgos Venizelos and Grigoris Markou (2024) argue that populism both in opposition and in power constructs 'the people' in antagonism to a certain 'other' and reinforces polarization. Along the same lines, Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia (2021: 67) use the term 'populist institutionality' to describe populism's contentious style as a logic of governance in which 'the state becomes another antagonistic space in the dispute between those on the bottom and those on the top'. While we share these arguments, the authors' study of populism in power treats populism as a dichotomous classification, while our study treats populism as a continuum to better understand its impact on the policy-making process.

A focus on the priority that populism attributes to the constitution of 'the people' in an antagonistic relation with the establishment provides a vector that can be applied to populist governance (Freeden 2013). Two features directly derived from populism's discursive frame are particularly relevant for its conceptualization. The first one is antagonistic *politicization*. Since the construction of 'the people' is a political act *par excellence*, populism's people centrism results in a hyper-politicized style of policy-making that blurs the dividing lines between governing and campaigning and between politics and administration (Lowndes 2020). Furthermore, politicization fosters a polarized governance arena that undermines the common politico-institutional ground necessary for debating policy options and legitimizing governmental policies. A polarized policy-making arena puts into question the possibility of a neutral bureaucracy embedded in an administration guided by impersonal rules and politically neutral technical expertise (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016). The second feature is *decisionism* (Loughlin 2014; Schmitt 2006). We understand by decisionism the personalistic rule of the leader in contrast with the technocratic, procedural and legal-rational Weberian model of public administration. Acting within or outside the confines of the institutional order, populist leaders' anti-establishment drive (Canovan 1999) disrupts elite-held political, cultural and policy orthodoxies, transgresses institutional rules and

procedures, and redefines what is sayable and doable in a political order. However, transgression is a broad term that covers a range of disruptive practices (Venizelos 2023). The nature and scope of the transgression of what is considered orthodoxy are specific to the politico-institutional context in which they take place.

Measuring populism along a continuum: the Populist Governance Index

To operationalize and measure populist governance, we constructed a Populist Governance Index (PGI) as a composite index that captures levels of politicization and decisionism in policy-making during the pandemic along a continuum. While most indexes of populism focus on either the politicians' rhetoric (Hawkins 2009) or party programmes (Pauwels 2011; Stöckl and Rode 2021), our index seeks to capture how populist discourse materializes in the practices of governance. To this purpose, we devised a set of conceptually related indicators as proxies of politicization and decisionism in policy-making during the pandemic. For politicization, we measured whether the leaders used antagonistic rhetoric, campaigned and mobilized their followers during the pandemic, and/or targeted resources to the government's social base. The targeting comprises different strategies both material and symbolic, only some of which may be clientelistic in nature. For decisionism, we evaluated whether the leader transgressed legal processes and/or scientific evidence, personalized decision-making, and/or fronted communications. Taken separately, these indicators are not exclusive to populist governance. For example, many governments target resources to their social base and not all personalist rulers are populists. Rather, it is the indicators' articulation into a populist frame and their aggregate scores that makes them indicative of levels of populist governance.

To determine values for the PGI, we conducted an expert survey between May and October 2023. This method is widely recognized in the social sciences as an effective technique for empirically quantifying concepts that are otherwise difficult to measure (Celico et al. 2024). In our study, the survey provided a set of supply-side assessments of populist governance indicators. To minimize potential biases, we ensured the involvement of at least seven experts per country. Experts were initially selected by country researchers based on their first-hand knowledge of the politics of the country under study, particularly during the pandemic. We also took into consideration their academic background when relevant. We then expanded the pool using a snowballing approach, requesting the first group of respondents to recommend additional experts. We made sure to include a diverse set of experts in terms of their pro-government or critical stance. Statistical aggregation techniques were applied to adjust for individual biases and enhance the reliability of responses. A triangulation strategy was employed to cross-reference experts' assessments with secondary sources, including official policy documents and media reports, thereby increasing the validity of the responses. The online questionnaire was completed by 51 native-speaking experts. The PGI was constructed as an aggregate measure of the indicators outlined in this section, based on the values provided by the experts. These values ranged from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of populist governance. Considering the relevance of antagonism as an indicator of politicization, and transgression as an indicator of decisionism, we assigned double weight to the use of antagonistic rhetoric and the transgression of established processes and scientific evidence.

A comprehensive approach to social policy measures: the Social Policy Response Index

The relationship between populism and social policy is ambiguous. As Kurt Weyland ([2013](#)) notes, populists pursue diverse economic and social policies. Populist governments' welfare policies largely depend on how insiders and outsiders are defined in the antagonistic construction of the people (Baldwin and Mares [2023](#)). Some scholars further differentiate between inclusionary (usually left-wing) and exclusionary (usually right-wing) populism (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti [2021](#)). Inclusionary populists support 'generous social protection' for which the 'corrupt elite' should pay. Exclusionary or right-wing populists promote what we call a 'dualistic' welfare state: protectionism for the 'deserving' and neoliberal austerity for the 'undeserving' (Chueri [2022](#); Greve [2019](#)). Benjamin Leruth et al. ([2024](#)) identify five categories of exclusivist, welfare chauvinist rhetoric demonstrating that populism can emerge in various forms and extents to regulate access to the welfare system. These classifications, however, are mostly based on populism in Western Europe and still need to be 'tested in more detail in other world regions' (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti [2021](#): 50–51).

Conventional measurements of social policies, such as welfare efforts (i.e. public social expenditures as a share of GDP), are difficult to interpret in times of crisis. Changes in welfare spending are triggered by automatic stabilizers related to the crisis (e.g. an increase in unemployment) but can also be the result of government initiative. During the pandemic, several international datasets collected information on social protection (e.g. OECD Policy Responses to the Covid-19 Crisis, ILO Social Protection Monitor, ILO COVID-19 and the World of Work). Only a few initiatives reached beyond data collection and attempted a systematization of social policy responses enabling cross-country comparisons, and no comprehensive dataset covers all welfare policies in the countries under study here (Cigna et al. [2022](#); Dorlach [2023](#); Hale et al. [2021](#); Mäntyneva et al. [2023](#); Pereirinha and Pereira [2021](#)). To address these shortcomings, we constructed a composite SPRI tailored to capture governments' social policy responses to the pandemic. The index focuses solely on policy initiatives during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, it does not provide a ranking of the general quality of welfare states but aims to assess how governments responded to the COVID-19 crisis with social policy initiatives.

The SPRI is grounded in a comprehensive understanding of social policy (Titmuss [1959](#)) as it encompasses three subfields:

1. Social security measures: social provision to individuals in need, including unemployment benefits, social assistance, temporary benefits, services, in-kind benefits.
2. Labour market measures: short-term work schemes, income replacement support, wage subsidies, labour market regulation.
3. 'Social policy by other means': tax exemptions, debt moratoriums and the freezing of financial obligations (see details in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary Material).

To construct the SPRI the research team country experts gathered data from international and domestic sources to produce in-depth qualitative case studies of welfare

policy initiatives in the countries studied in this article. The involvement of native-speaker country experts was especially important given that in several countries (particularly in the authoritarian ones) data were of questionable quality and difficult to access and compare. We evaluated the measures along three dimensions and assigned the following values to them: *time-frame, level of benefits* and *targeting* (universal versus focused on certain social groups). The SPRI is calculated as the sum of the observed values of the 12 indicators, standardized on a 0–1 scale, with higher values indicating a stronger social policy response.

Case selection and methodology

This is a small-n, mixed-method comparative study of the policy-making and social policies of six populist governments under the COVID-19 pandemic. We focused on countries that were governed by populist leaders during the pandemic but which are rarely analysed together: Brazil, Mexico, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Turkey. We selected our cases as a 'diverse case' selection (Seawright and Gerring 2008), considering political, geographical, institutional and economic variety. Table 1 provides an overview of our six cases with regards to the important socioeconomic and political dimensions.

Following the argument that populism is ordinal and not categorical, we chose governments whose leaders can be placed at different points in the gradient of populist governance (Aytaç and Elçi 2019; Fish 2018; Martínez-Gallardo et al. 2023; Robinson and Milne 2017; Rooduijn et al. 2024). At the top of the scale, few would dispute that President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary were populists. At the opposite end of the scale, whether President Vladimir Putin is populist or rather an outright right-wing authoritarian nationalist is contested. Nevertheless, we follow M. Steven Fish (2018: 329), who sees Putin's Russia as a 'conservative populist autocracy', and Neil Robinson and Sarah Milne (2017), who argue that the regime became populist in response to the political protests around the 2012 elections.

We compare populist regimes from Latin America and Eastern Europe, which differ significantly in the scope and nature of their populist appeals. State institutions vary in terms of centralization, ranging from federal to unitary states, which is particularly relevant for the policies under study. Political regimes range from electoral democracies (Brazil, Mexico, Poland) to electoral autocracies (Hungary, Russia, Turkey). Therefore, our case selection focusses on low-quality democracies and 'hybrid regimes' and does not include advanced liberal democracies. There are also significant differences in the populist governments' host ideologies, with one case of left-populism (Mexico) and five right-populist regimes, the latter also showing marked differences in terms of the salience and nature of their ideological backgrounds. The six cases differ greatly with regard to their welfare states, with Mexico and Turkey featuring quite low public social expenditures, while Brazil and Poland maintain higher social spending and, together with Hungary and Russia, stronger state capacity to implement welfare measures. We analyse the six political regimes across two dimensions: governance (PGI) and social policies (SPRI). In the following section, we present the PGI and SPRI scores and complement the quantitative figures with a qualitative analysis of their components. We

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Selected Cases

Country	Political regime	State structure	Ideological leaning	Institutional constraints	Income group	Income inequality (Gini)	Social spending as share of GDP
Brazil	Electoral democracy	Federal	Right-wing	High	Upper-middle	49	22
Hungary	Electoral autocracy	Unitary	Right-wing	Low	High	30	18
Mexico	Electoral democracy	Federal	Left-wing	Medium	Upper-middle	45	10
Poland	Electoral democracy	Unitary	Right-wing	Medium	High income	29	23
Russia	Electoral autocracy	Federal	Right-wing	Low	Upper-middle	36	14
Turkey	Electoral autocracy	Unitary	Right-wing	Low	Upper-middle	42	13

Notes: Political regime denotes the Regimes of the World score in the Varieties of Democracy database (https://www.v-dem.net/), given here as either Electoral democracy or Electoral autocracy. The state structure indicates the type of state based on the Fedeunit index in the Comparative Constitutional Project (https://www.constituteproject.org/content/indices_data). The income group is based on the World Bank's classification of countries by income group (https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups). Income inequality is the Gini score ranging from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest), taken from the World Bank's database (https://data.worldbank.org/). Ideological leaning and institutional constraints are our own assessment, with the latter being based on the state structure, political regime and strength of the opposition. Social spending refers to the public social expenditures as a share of GDP and is taken from Eurostat (Hungary, Poland, Turkey; https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/social-protection), CEPAL (Brazil, Mexico; https://statistics.cepal.org/portal/cepalstat/dashboard.html) and the IMF (Russia; https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.STA:GFS_COFOG(11.0.0)). Data are for 2020 or the closest previous or later year for which data are available.
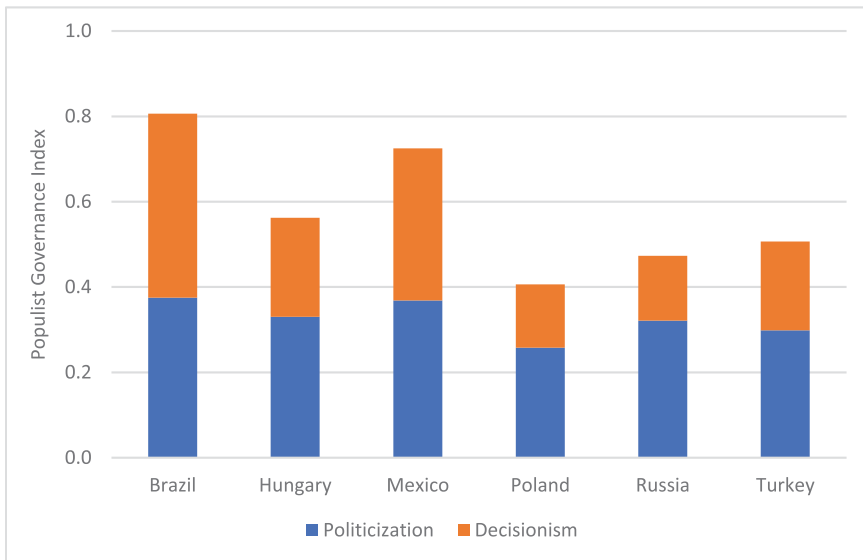
Figure 1. Populist Governance Index (PGI) Scores
Source: Own calculations based on an Expert Survey. See Appendix 1 in the Supplementary Material for further details.

then relate the scores for governance and welfare to assess the relationship between the two.

Populist governance during the pandemic

Results for the PGI (Figure 1) place Brazil and Mexico at the top of the spectrum, with top scores in both politicization and decisionism. Hungary, Turkey, Russia and Poland follow in this order, with similarly sized differences between them. Interestingly, the scores for the two subdimensions of politicization and decisionism show a correlation, with a nearly identical rank order of countries. Overall, there were large differences between the countries, with some fitting the model of populist governance much more closely than others, indicating a high diversity of governance models among populist regimes. This puts into doubt generalizations about populist governments across the board 'mishandling' the pandemic through their populist governance style (Bayerlein et al. 2021). Populist governments, it seems, did not govern the pandemic alike (Ringe et al. 2022).

President Bolsonaro's high PGI scores played out in his discursive framing, the policy-making process and policy initiatives. He sought to centralize the management of the pandemic by undermining and eventually sacking two health ministers in succession and appointing politically loyal military personnel to control health agencies (Massard da Fonseca et al. 2021; Weiffen 2020). He employed divisive and antagonistic rhetoric against state governors and mayors who favoured lockdowns. He blurred the line between politics and administration by mobilizing his supporters and actively campaigning against his political rivals and the judiciary. Moreover, by taking part in some public demonstrations, Bolsonaro openly

transgressed restrictions on public gatherings (CNN World 2020). The president openly negated scientific advice (including from his own health officials) and cast doubt on the efficacy of masks and vaccines. He famously characterized the illness as nothing but 'a little flu' (euronews 2020). However, he disrupted policy processes by means of rhetorical and discursive interventions rather than by the abuse of the president's legal powers, as these were restricted by the courts and by the federal nature of the Brazilian state. Despite his efforts, most policy decisions remained legally within the powers of state governors and local mayors, evidencing the role of institutions in constraining populist governance. This was particularly the case with the vaccination programme. The president's vaccine scepticism delayed rather than blocked the rollout of the vaccine, which was finally implemented with strong support from the Congress, subnational authorities and public opinion (France 24 2021).

Mexico ranks second highest on the PGI. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador employed a divisive and antagonistic rhetoric, transgressed scientific evidence, centralized decision-making and fronted communications. Like Bolsonaro, López Obrador initially played down the seriousness of the pandemic and was late to take containment measures (Peci et al. 2022). But in contrast with Bolsonaro, he did not dismiss scientific evidence outright but undermined it with highly idiosyncratic, ambiguous and transgressive statements. For example, in March 2020, he claimed he was shielded from COVID-19 thanks to religious pictures and amulets. He refused to wear a mask and travelled the country holding political rallies. Polarization was evident in the hostile reactions of state governors to the federal government initiatives. Disagreements exacerbated over the severity of the virus, the late crisis response and the reliability of official data (Bennouna et al. 2021). Furthermore, the highly centralized model of decision-making concentrated in the hands of the president and his top health officer contributed to polarization. In a highly populist manner, López Obrador denounced protesters against his policies as 'belonging to the elites'. Similarly, he called the mainstream media 'scoundrels' (*canallas*) and 'vultures' (*zopilotes*) that misinformed in bad faith (De la Cerda and Martinez-Gallardo 2022).

Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ranked at an intermediate level in the PGI. Orbán exercised strong personal leadership in the management of the crisis, often using the metaphor of war – fighting the virus (Szabó and Szabó 2022). Public health measures were especially restrictive in Hungary, with tight social distancing, lockdowns and mask-wearing regulations. The authoritarian centralization of power and control of communications compounded the prime minister's strong leadership. On 11 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency, which was extended regularly and was still in place in 2025. Together with the Coronavirus Act, the government gained extraordinary powers to govern by decree. The government tightly controlled access to information. Military officers took over control of the hospitals, and healthcare professionals were banned from talking to the media (Polyák and Nagy 2021). In March 2020, the government introduced a penalty of up to five years' imprisonment for spreading misinformation which could endanger the management of the crisis. The Orbán administration combined health and social welfare initiatives with the promotion of core elements of its host ideology.

It intensified campaigns against gender equality and targeted the LGBTQ+ community through legislative initiatives (Szelewa and Szikra 2024). Overall, the pandemic helped Orbán to sharpen his divisive and traditionalist appeal and undermine the remnants of Hungarian democracy. On public health, the government took a clear pro-vaccination stance, but the issue of vaccination became politicized as Hungary approved and offered Russian and Chinese vaccines that allowed the government to become a forerunner in vaccination (Kutasi et al. 2022).

In Turkey, the Erdoğan government only partially matched the populist governance template. The president employed divisive and antagonistic rhetoric, centralized decision-making and at times campaigned and mobilized followers. However, in contrast with Brazil and Mexico, the Erdoğan government formally relied on scientific advice and initially implemented harsh containment measures (Kemahlıoğlu and Yeğen 2022). Yet, in other respects, Erdoğan's politics and policies reflected both authoritarian *and* populist characteristics, as the government used its power to suppress information on the pandemic. The regime jealously guarded its crisis response monopoly to the extent of demonizing other actors, such as the doctors' association that demanded more transparency. Paradoxically, the centralization of decision-making did not result in more coherent policy implementation, and often produced chaotic results. The Islamist government initially went against its own support base by banning public religious practices (e.g. Friday prayers), but from the summer of 2020 onwards the government enacted a pattern of politically selective observance of restrictions. It held huge meetings and even a large indoor party congress without taking many precautionary measures, despite rhetorically supporting restrictions that remained in place for everyone else (Laebens and Öztürk 2021).

Governance of the pandemic in Russia was more authoritarian than populist. The Russian government centralized decision-making and employed divisive and antagonistic rhetoric. However, the rhetoric was more nationalist than populist, as it was mainly targeted at the West rather than an 'internal other'. In other respects, Putin's initiatives did not always fit the populist governance template. Lockdown measures were outsourced to local administrative units, potentially deflecting blame for unpopular restrictions. Meanwhile, the president personally announced the government's economic and social support schemes. The Russian government invested significant energy into controlling the flow of COVID-19-related information. Like in Hungary, healthcare workers in federal institutions were prohibited from speaking publicly about the Coronavirus situation. A 'fake news' law criminalized the dissemination of misinformation about the pandemic and its management. As in Hungary and Poland, the Putin administration advanced its ideological agenda during the pandemic while restricting opposition reactions on health safety grounds.[1] In July 2020, a plebiscite on a constitutional amendment eliminated presidential term limits allowing Putin to run for re-election. To increase the popularity of the amendments, the referendum also included social initiatives, including the level of the minimum wage, the regular indexation of pensions, and defining marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman. While Russia developed its own vaccine, it surprisingly had the lowest share of vaccinated people in our sample, suggesting that the Putin administration was more active in promoting the vaccine internationally than internally.

The Polish government of Mateus Morawiecki comes at the bottom of the PGI. It did not, to a significant extent, employ divisive and antagonistic rhetoric, use transgressive legal processes or dismiss scientific evidence. Prime Minister Morawiecki also did not substantially centralize decision-making or campaign and mobilize followers. Presidential elections scheduled to take place in May 2020 were postponed to 28 June. As in Hungary, the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) government enacted conservative gender policies during the pandemic (e.g. a ban on abortions) despite nationwide protests (Szelewa and Szikra 2024). Importantly, PiS formed a coalition government and unlike Orbán did not have a super-majority in parliament, which limited its room to manoeuvre.

Welfare measures during the pandemic

Results for the SPRI (Figure 2) show that Turkey and Russia implemented the most comprehensive social policies in response to the pandemic.[2] Brazil, Hungary and Poland slotted in the middle-range category with relatively similar scores, while Mexico came last.[3] Interestingly, scores for the different subdimensions show that governments faced trade-offs: a high score on social security tends to combine with a low score on labour market measures and social policy by other means and vice versa.

SPRI results go against assumptions about inclusionary (left-wing, universalist) and exclusionary (dualistic, anti-welfare) populist regimes' approaches to the welfare state (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021). Mexico's weak welfare response under left-wing populist governance and Brazil's strong, universalist one under right-wing rule are surprising. Also, the middle-range scores for the two Central Eastern European countries may appear counter-intuitive, given their 'embedded' welfare states. But precisely due to the existing comprehensive social policies, there seemed to be less need for new measures under the crisis (Aidukaite et al. 2021). In line with earlier findings (Béland et al. 2021; Dorlach 2023; Mäntyneva et al. 2023), we observed path-dependent responses by the welfare state in some cases, such as a pro-family, universalist approach in Russia. However, in other cases the social policy response deviated from the government's earlier policy stance, as in the strong focus on labour market policies in Turkey.

Russia

Russia's COVID-19 related social policy performance is understudied and eschews easy interpretation. President Putin concentrated on keeping the economy running which, while causing a high level of excess deaths, gave financial security to large segments of the population. Welfare measures were balanced between social security, labour market compensation and services. Notably, the state increased the minimum and maximum amount of unemployment benefits and made claiming procedures easier. The defining feature of Russia's social policy response was its concentration on families with children. Putin adopted new, temporary instruments, such as one-time and regular but temporary payments for young children, and for every child under 18 if they lived with their parents and, further, targeted benefits for low-income families with children in 2020 and 2021. The already existing child allowance for first children under 1.5 years provided to unemployed parents was doubled. According to the Institute of Social Policy (2020), the combined value of these two measures was equivalent to 0.2%
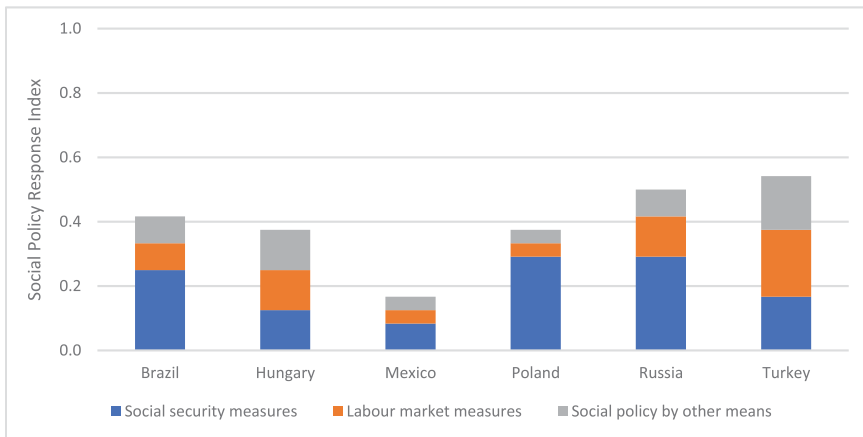
Figure 2. Social Policy Response Index (SPRI) Scores
Source: Own calculations based on a systematic collection of qualitative, country-level data. See Appendix 3 in the Supplementary Material for further details.

of the population's total income in 2019. Thus, the pandemic-related decisions were integrated into the government's long-term welfare goals that prioritize families and the poor (Győry et al. 2024). The focus on families also meant that, in contrast to Turkey and Hungary, pandemic-related welfare measures united rather than divided the nation. A peculiarity of the Russian approach was the use of social services and civil society organizations to undertake social work during the pandemic. Moreover, in-kind benefits, like free medicines, and the freezing of prices of certain basic goods featured high on Putin's agenda.

Turkey

Turkey implemented strong social policies in response to the pandemic, especially in the area of labour market policies. Under pressure from the opposition, Erdoğan built on and expanded established policies to cover more workers. Moreover, the state banned the firing of workers to protect the employees. However, to ensure that employment protection did not harm employers (and thereby the economy), the government allowed firms to put workers on unpaid leave and paid the related benefits. With these measures, the government successfully contained unemployment during the pandemic. Of all these policies, the Short-Term Work Compensation scheme was the most significant policy instrument during the crisis. Under this scheme, workers received up to 60% of their gross wage, with a benefit cap of 150% of the gross minimum wage. To put this into context, unemployment benefits were set at 40% of the gross wage with a cap of 80% of the gross minimum wage, which reflects the generosity of the scheme. At its peak, in spring 2020, more than 3 million employees (out of around 14 million employees) received the compensation, decreasing to more than 1 million before COVID-related restrictions ceased in mid-2021.

Welfare initiatives in Turkey also featured 'social policy by other means', including access to cheap credit to keep the economy running. In contrast, the government

did not significantly expand traditional social security policies. Although the state launched social assistance measures that reached millions of households, these were far less generous than, for instance, in Brazil. Overall, Turkey's social policy was stratified, differentiating between labour market insiders and outsiders. This marks a deviation from the government's previous emphasis on outsiders and its universalizing approach (Szikra and Öktem 2023). Opposition-controlled municipalities took advantage of the fact that Erdoğan hardly lived up to the image of the caring 'father state' and launched their own support campaigns. These were, in turn, vilified by the central government, creating a discursive battlefield around social policies (Öktem 2021).

Brazil

Brazil's most important welfare measure was the extension of the former flagship programme *Bolsa Familia* (BF, Family Allowance) into a new, universal and unconditional cash benefit called *Auxilio Emergencial* (AE, Emergency Aid). It primarily benefited vulnerable individuals not covered by BF, and also increased the amount. Recipients included adults (or teenage mothers) with no active formal employment, informal workers and individual micro-entrepreneurs with per capita family income below half of the minimum wage (BRL 522.50 or EUR 80) and/or with total family income no higher than three times the minimum wage (BRL 3,315.00 or EUR 507). Furthermore, as a result of a successful initiative by a coalition of lawmakers and civil society actors, the level of the payment was increased to BRL 600 (EUR 92) in general and BRL 1,200 (EUR 184) for single-parent households. AE was originally established to last for three months only. However, it ended up being extended throughout three phases and operated for 16 months. AE became less generous across phases in terms of coverage and amounts and it reached up to 55.6% of the population (Lara De Arruda et al. 2021). Other social policies provided Brazilian citizens with support in the areas of long-term care and disability, labour market protection, social assistance, education and pensions.

Overall, the Brazilian state provided one of the most generous social programmes among the Latin American countries (ECLAC 2022). The government's universalist approach and the significant increase in social spending was in contradiction with Bolsonaro's divisive right-wing populism and the government's neoliberal host ideology. The involvement of different stakeholders appears essential to explain the enactment of these ample – although temporary – social policy measures. Most importantly, the initiative to increase AE payments came from Congress rather than from the Executive (Massard da Fonseca et al. 2021). Nonetheless, the fact that the Bolsonaro administration accepted the opposition initiative suggests that pragmatism prevailed over ideology in times of COVID-19 crisis.

Hungary

In Hungary, while direct cash transfers were negligible, the state provided relatively generous labour market measures primarily through subsidising businesses to pay wages. The short-time work scheme especially helped the manufacturing industry to survive and cushioned rising unemployment. Orbán was careful to cater to the needs of multinational companies but, despite pressure coming from businesses, did not offer a helping hand to small ventures in trouble in hospitality, the arts or the catering sectors

(Albert 2021). The government implemented social policy by other means in line with Orbán's policies prior to the pandemic. Examples include easing eligibility for loans and subsidies for the purchase of properties by middle-class families. Meanwhile, the lack of social assistance and other benefits for the unemployed and families with extra care burdens was striking (Aidukaite et al. 2021). Furthermore, the Orbán administration severely cut central funding for municipalities, especially opposition-governed towns, hampering the possibilities for local social assistance. Overall, social policies were in line with previous Fidesz policies and further sharpened the government's polarizing populist ideology (Szikra and Öktem 2023). The ideology of the 'work-based society' was stronger than the pressure to provide benefits for those out of work, and thus social policies further widened the gap between labour market insiders and outsiders. Hungary's unitary nature and Fidesz's nearly unrestricted power, which was further expanded under the pandemic, made it difficult to voice alternatives or pressure for more comprehensive social policies.

Poland

In Poland, which arguably had the strongest welfare state among our cases, social security measures dominated the government's response to the pandemic. Particularly notable was a significant increase to unemployment benefits, which had been neglected for a long time, complemented by one-off cash payments for the self-employed and employees most exposed to the effects of the pandemic. Meanwhile, new forms of care allowances benefited parents with young children. Although the government also introduced a short-term work scheme, labour market policies were weaker than in Turkey or Hungary, similar to measures related to social policy by other means. Overall, Poland's social policy measures under COVID-19 were only partly in alignment with the traditionalist ideology and former policies of PiS that focused on pensioners and families. Unlike Orbán in Hungary, the Morawiecki government flexibly adjusted itself to the changed economic situation and targeted the unemployed and the self-employed. However, both governments strengthened their right-wing conservative ideology by featuring anti-gender propaganda and legislation (Szelewa and Szikra 2024).

Mexico

In Mexico, the López Obrador government took a restrictive approach in terms of social policy responses to the pandemic (Lustig and Trasberg 2021). As part of the so-called Fourth Transformation (the president's national regeneration project), the government introduced new social programmes prior to the pandemic in 2018, resulting in an increase in welfare spending (Hannan et al. 2022). During the pandemic, the administration protected these programmes from cuts but did not expand them. For example, cash advances from non-contributory old-age and disability pensions during the pandemic did not represent extra support for the beneficiaries (Velázquez Leyer 2021). In addition, the central government introduced only a few and relatively weak measures in response to the pandemic, which explains the low SPRI scores across the board. Further social initiatives greatly varied state-by-state, offering different combinations of benefits and services. The restrictive approach to welfare

spending seems counterintuitive for a left-wing populist government and reflects the government's prioritization of the economy over welfare within the agenda of the Fourth Transformation.

In sum, we observed a variety of social policy responses to the pandemic by populist governments. This diversity is clear in the extent of the policy response and in the emphasis placed on different aspects of social policy. In Russia, the social policy response was extensive and mainly family-focussed. In Brazil, the focus was on poverty alleviation through large-scale social assistance In Turkey, the government instead focused on labour market measures. In Hungary, a similar labour market focus was complemented by social policy by other means. In both countries, this translated into a prioritization of labour market insiders. In Poland, the focus was on traditional social security, but measures were less extensive. Compared with the other countries, in Mexico, the government's social policy response was marked by inaction. Hence, social policies in these two cases had less redistributive impact. While the Orbán administration's host ideology was evident in the social policies implemented in Hungary, path dependency and institutional constraints played a crucial role in other populist governments' social policy reactions. In Brazil, the most important measures were initiated by the legislative, not the executive. In Turkey, the government clashed with the opposition, restricting opposition-controlled municipalities in their social policies (as in Hungary), but also aiming to outcompete them by providing more benefits. Only in rare cases could populist governments act as they wished in their social policy under an exogenous crisis like the pandemic.

Populist governance and social policy responses to COVID-19

Having outlined the governance and welfare policies of the populist governments covered by this article, we will now explore whether there is any relationship between the two. Does a more populist style of governance align with more comprehensive social policy measures, or do governments characterized by high levels of populist governance tend to neglect social policy? To answer these questions, we compare the PGI and SPRI scores.

Given the low number of cases and the high number of contributing factors that play a role in this relationship, we keep the analysis at the descriptive level. Figure 3 below compares the SPRI scores (see Figure 1) with the PGI scores (see Figure 2). No discernible pattern emerges from the comparison, as there is no significant correlation between the two sets of scores. The countries with the highest SPRI scores (Turkey and Russia) are not in any way exceptional in terms of their governance style during the pandemic. In turn, the country with the lowest SPRI score (Mexico) features relatively high on the PGI. Conversely, the two countries with the highest and lowest populist governance scores (Brazil and Poland), register relatively similar SPRI scores. Based on our small-n sample, there are no clear connections between the degree of populist governance and the nature of the social policy response to COVID-19. This means that conforming to the populist governance template does not come with a stronger (or weaker) social policy response.

However, we may use these indexes to map the variety of populist regimes under COVID-19. Brazil scores relatively high on both dimensions, with high populism

and welfare scores. Turkey also features high in welfare, and medium in populist governance. In both cases, however, the high welfare scores do not simply reflect the choice of the country's populist ruler, but also institutional drivers and opposition pressure. Hungary is a scaled-back version of Brazil, with lower populism and welfare scores. Poland scores similar to Hungary in the index of social policy response, but governance in Poland was far less populist during COVID-19. It is important to note that for both countries the SPRI does not consider pre-existing welfare nets, which diminished the need for new social policy responses during the pandemic. Mexico and Russia are harder to categorize. Mexico features an exceptionally weak social policy response with high populism scores. Russia is the opposite, with low populism and a relatively strong social policy response. Our findings illustrate the impact of populism in terms of policy-making combined with high levels of heterogeneity in handling the crisis. They also show how populist governance frequently defies observers' expectations.

Discussion, conclusions and further research

By introducing the PGI and the SPRI, our research gives empirical substance to the argument that populism impacts the politics rather than the policies of the pandemic. Regarding the politics, the PGI made the following contributions to the study of populist governance. First, variations in PGI scores suggest that parties and leaders that can be broadly characterized as populist did not necessarily perform as such during the crisis, or they did so to different degrees. Arguably, this is the case because populist governments are never wholly defined by their 'populist' dimension (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2020). Other factors, such as the government's host ideology, also play a significant role. Second, by measuring politicization and decisionism, the index contributes to determining the extent to which populist governance shaped the practices of government. Third, politicization and decisionism (including polarization, personalism and transgression) can be strongly connected to democratic backsliding. However, our research found that in Brazil and Mexico, governments that ranked at the top of the PGI (Figure 1) while their countries were classified as electoral democracies (Table 1) did not seek to supress freedom of information or impose other authoritarian measures, as was the case in Hungary, Turkey and Russia, which ranked lower in the PGI but were classed as electoral autocracies. This finding is in line with the argument that the type of political regime and the relative strength of political institutions mediate the impact of populist governance on democratic institutions (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). However, the full exploration of how the politico-institutional contexts in the countries under study shaped and were shaped by populist governance is beyond the scope of this article.

Concerning welfare, the SPRI presents a more comprehensive picture than previous indexes that focused on a narrow set of benefits. Based on our unique dataset that included domestic sources as well as cross-country surveys, we managed to incorporate labour market, tax and social policies by other means, as well as social services for vulnerable groups. When we contrasted populist governance with social policy responses (Figure 3), we found no clear links between degrees of populist governance and welfare policies. Levels of correspondence with the populist governance model do
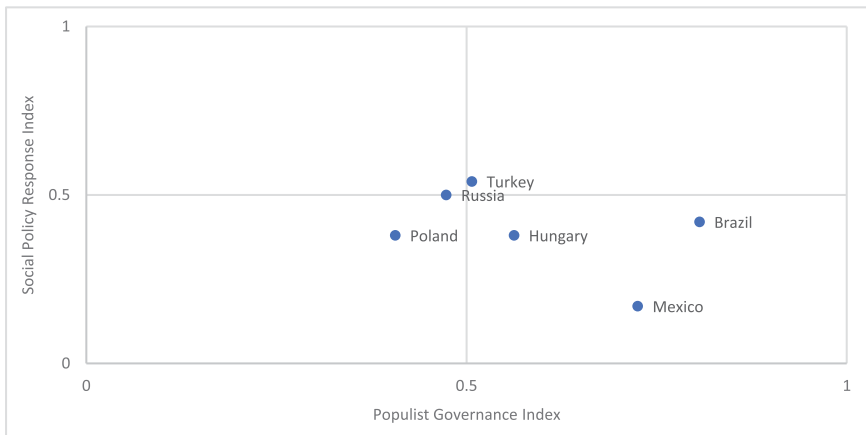
Figure 3. Populist Governance Plotted against Social Policy Response

not align with weaker or stronger social policy protection. This finding supports the view that populism is not directly related to specific policies (Bartha et al. 2020). Rather, this connection is mediated by existing welfare regimes, institutional constraints and socioeconomic contexts.

Our case study-based qualitative analysis comes with surprising findings – such as Turkey and Russia featuring at the top of the SPRI (Figure 2). Mexico, led by a left-wing populist, came bottom of the index, while Brazil, under a right-wing populist government, enacted generous universalist policies. These observations are directly at odds with the literature that differentiates between left-wing (inclusionary) populists supporting universalist social policies, and right-wing (exclusionary) populists supporting dualistic welfare reforms or retrenchment (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021). Still, the comparison between Mexico and Brazil sets forth a strong case for how the traditional understanding of left- and right-wing politics becomes blurred when it comes to welfare policies under populist rule (Afonso and Rennwald 2018). Institutional set-ups – including existing social policies, the strength of the opposition and that of state governments – played a decisive role in the introduction of new social policy initiatives.

Our research puts into question assumptions about the relationship between populism and crises. Benjamin Moffitt (2015: 195) argues that populist actors actively perform crises. COVID-19, however, posed considerable challenges to populist crisis manufacturing. The pandemic could not be easily blamed on elites (like the financial crisis) or on immigrants (like crises of criminality or public service deficiencies). As a completely exogenous shock, the impact of COVID-19 could easily be blamed on governments. Our research opens avenues to examine whether and how managing a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic was utilized by populist leaders to further widen and secure their electoral base. In a broader sense, research needs to uncover the changing class coalitions behind populist parties, and the role of social policies in building such coalitions (Scheiring 2021; Szikra and Öktem 2023).

Finally, variations in social policy responses to the pandemic cannot be fully explained within the scope of this study. In a comparative study of welfare policy differences among radical-right parties in Europe and the United States, Philip Rathgeb (2024) argued that while core ideological traits, such as nativism and authoritarianism, shaped policy preferences, existing welfare state regimes and socio-political contexts presented political actors with differing opportunities and constraints in pursuing their agendas. These findings are in line with our argument that populist governance significantly influenced the policy-making process – including its framing and procedures – while the substance and direction of policies were shaped by the populist party's underlying host ideology (Hawkins 2018), path-dependent welfare regimes, and socioeconomic and institutional limitations. Arguments concerning the specific mechanisms through which governance style, ideological orientation and institutional context produced variations in welfare provisions, however, warrant further investigation.

Notes

1. Local authorities in Moscow and elsewhere enforced similar restrictions on protests against the detention of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.
2. Turkey's high score is somewhat surprising, given its drastic decline in social spending in 2021–2022. However, it appears to be mainly the result of government inaction amid economic turbulence (e.g. inflation). The SPRI, in contrast, focuses on government actions, and is ill-suited to capture inaction.
3. Mexico had arguably the least extensive welfare system prior to the pandemic.

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