

Populist attitudes in Croatia: first analysis with notes on conceptualisation and measurement

BARTUL VUKSAN-ĆUSA



Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)

Vol. 19, No. 1

DOI: 10.2478/pce-2023-0007

Abstract: *This paper analyses individual-level populism in Croatia. Starting from the ideational definition of populism, the study tests to what extent the economic grievances, sociocultural and ideational explanations, respectively, reflect the average populism subscriber in Croatia. The analysis was made using hierarchical linear regression based on field survey data from 2020 (n=979). Results show how populism is mostly associated with authoritarianism, conspiratorial thinking and institutional (dis)trust. The economic grievances explanation has only marginal relevance, revealing that sociotropic perception is more important than the socioeconomic position of the individual. Furthermore, the study emphasises the importance of operationalising populism in accordance with the assumed structure of the concept. In the same vein, it is noted that populism on an attitudinal level should be separated from the concepts of thick ideologies. If this is not done with caution, the conclusions drawn are questionable, and the analytical contribution of populism is imprecisely determined.*

Keywords: *populist attitudes, ideational theory, economic grievances, sociocultural backlash, authoritarianism, conspiracy theories*

I. Introduction

One should not spend a lot of words on proving that populism is one of the central research interests of political science: from the pioneering studies of populism (Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Canovan 1981), through the intensive development of the research tradition in the 2000s (Taggart 2000; Mudde, 2004; 2007), up to recent advances primarily characterised by the evolution of

various attitudinal populist scales, the study of populism has gradually become part of the disciplinary mainstream.

However, the intensity of this development in populism studies is not the same everywhere. In Croatia, as elsewhere, most studies have focused on the political supply-side by analysing populist parties and actors. Recently, though, this field has been increasingly marked by demand-side phenomenon analysis, with an emphasis on attitudes at the individual level. This type of study has not yet been made in Croatia, and it seems necessary given that populism in Croatian society is an omnipresent part of political discourse and media narratives (Grbeša – Volarević 2021). As Grbeša and Šalaj (2018) put it, the analysis of populism in Croatia is mostly placed in the framework of daily political comments, with a more comprehensive study yet to be undertaken at the individual level.

This study seeks to fill this gap by settling into an ideational tradition, emphasising micro-level analysis of the correlates of populism. Since the previous scholarly work on populism at the individual level has not covered Croatia, this broadens the reach of the ideational approach and thus the extent of populism studies in general. Also, this study has the added value of addressing particular in-field conceptual and measurement pitfalls; that is, additional attention is paid to the operationalisation of populism as a dependent variable. On that basis, some common wisdom on populism is being challenged: as studies of populism have developed rapidly, this has sometimes implied conceptual ambiguity, leading to populism being inferred from measures that do not depict the phenomenon faithfully.

This study processes as follows: first, populism and its components are defined, after which the perspectives on its predictors are explained. Next, the framework narrows to the Croatian context, from which the hypotheses are derived. The following section is dedicated to the operationalisation of populism and the creation of an adequate model for its measurement. Independent variables are then described, the grouping of which reflects the dominant explanandums. Finally, the results of linear regressions based on survey data from Croatia are presented and interpreted.

II. Populism and its components

Although much ink has been spilled in attempts to define it, populism remains an essentially contested concept (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). From pioneering to contemporary studies, notions about slipperiness and impalpability of populism seem axiomatic (Taggart 2000). This elusiveness of populism is reflected in the number of its conceptions that mostly fit into ideational (Hawkins et al. 2018), political-strategic (Weyland 2001) and sociocultural or relational approaches (Ostiguy 2017).

Whilst no conceptualisation is completely dominant in the study of populism, the ideational approach has become increasingly prominent over time. This perspective stemmed substantially from Mudde's benchmark definition, according to which populism is a thin-centred ideology that sees society as divided into two homogeneous but antagonistic groups of pure people on one side and a corrupt elite on the other side, and which, in addition, believes that politics needs to be an expression of *volonté générale* (Mudde 2004: 543–544). However, it should be emphasised that, for the ideational camp, the key element of this definition is not in treating populism as an ideology. More precisely, the pivotal segment of this understanding is that it acknowledges a distinctive but rather limited morphology of the concept. Therefore, the decisive moment in Mudde's definition is the reference to the ideational thinness of the concept; the substance of populism is the unique albeit minimalist body of normative ideas (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6; Hawkins – Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 3), with secondary importance being given to whether the phenomenon is conceived as a discourse, outlook or ideology. But what set of ideas are we talking about and what elements make up this minimalist notion of populism?

As indicated, the first key component in the ideational conceptualisation of populism is people-centrism as its core feature (Canovan 1981) – people are understood here as an essentially pure and idealised community (Taggart 2004). Simply put, 'ordinary folk' is perceived as a homogeneous entity that embodies democratic virtues (Hawkins – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) which is why its sovereignty should constitute the basis of the political system. In the populist imaginary, all differences between people have been reconciled (Muller 2016), which is why the expression of a common will is uniform and thus easily identifiable.¹

However, in the populist mind, the underlying reason for this is that pure people are in struggle with a contrasting entity: the elites, who are their primary adversaries in the political landscape. This juxtaposition makes anti-elitism the second key concept in the ideational notion of populism. In the populist interpretation, the elite corrupted the system and institutions by subordinating them to their interests at the expense of the benefits of ordinary people. This crystallised homogeneous groups on both sides and created an antagonistic relationship between them, although the embodiment of these groups is contextually conditioned; ergo, people and elites can be defined economically, politically, culturally, *et cetera*. (Roodujin 2014).

What is most important, however, is that the distinction between entities is primarily of a moral nature (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; 2013). From this follows how the essence of the ideational conceptualisation is the Manichaeian

1 To be precise, Mudde (2004) makes a theoretical distinction between people-centrism and popular sovereignty. However, later studies show that at the empirical level it is not possible to clearly differentiate between these concepts (Castanho Silva et al. 2018).

worldview which divides people and the elite in the monistic and ethical sense; the people are classified as pure because they are morally virtuous, while elites are categorised as corrupt because they embody moral deficiency and monopolise vice (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Castanho Silva et al. 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). In other words, this is an essentialist political cosmology according to which politics is a struggle between good and evil, whereby the nature of all opponents is interpreted as diabolical (s. Hawkins 2009). Based on the above, it can be said that populism is a set of ideas whose distinctiveness hinges on the interplay or ‘simultaneous co-occurrence’ (Erisen et al. 2021: 165) of Manichaeism outlook, anti-elitism and people-centrism, i.e., its specificity rests on the interaction of these subcomponents which form an idiosyncratic interpretation of political and especially democratic reality (Van Hauwaert – Schimpf – Azavedo 2020: 5).

If we conceive populism as a set of ideas, it is implied that the construct can manifest itself on an individual level and, consequently, that it can be measured (van Hauwaert – Schimpf – Azevedo 2019). On this basis, there has been a proliferation of what is often called the study of populist attitudes at the individual level which in effect testifies to the empirical utilisation of the ideational approach (Stanley 2011; Hawkins – Ridding – Mudde 2012; Akkerman – Mudde – Zaslove 2014; Spruyt – Keppens – van Droogenbroeck 2016; Castanho Silva – Veggetti – Littvay 2017; Castanho Silva et al. 2018; van Hauwaert – Schimpf – Azavedo, 2020). But it should be noted that populism is not to be perceived as a full-fledged attitude – it is more of a latent disposition whose activation depends on the context (Hawkins – Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 7). This means that the populist predisposition remains quiescent until credible populist discourse and rhetoric trigger it (Ardag et al. 2019).

The previously presented conceptual map and definition of populism form the theoretical starting point of this study; that is, the paper builds on the settings of the ideational tradition according to which populism is understood as a latently present set of ideas whose core consists of the simultaneous presence of people-centrism, anti-elitism and Manichaeism. This kind of elaboration is crucial because ideational conceptualisation is widely used without being properly reflected in terms of measurement. However, this shortcoming will be addressed more closely in the methodological section of the text, which comes after an overview of theories about the causes of populism and an explanation of the context of Croatia.

III. Studying the demand side of populism

To classify the explanans that have gained significant momentum in the clarification of the characteristics of a populist citizen, there are two key positions worth noting. That is, scholars emphasise that most studies start from an eco-

conomic grievances perspective or viewpoint that highlights sociocultural backlash (Castanho Silva 2017; Hawkins – Rovira Kaltwasser 2019; Berman 2021).

The perspective in which economic grievances and demands are the focal point essentially echoes the Downsian political-economic outlook. According to this interpretation, human behaviour is mostly conditioned by our self-interested nature: in a time of post-industrialisation characterised by the increasing importance of the service and information sector and the decline of the industrial sector, populism occurs as response to the increased vulnerability and insecurity of citizens whose skill set is not flexible enough to meet these changes. Increased competition in the labour market and growing liberalisation of national economies have benefited managers and professional classes, investors, multinational companies and banks, whilst workers and the middle class have found themselves in a less favourable position (Rodrik 2018). Thus, this endangered social stratum has found the defense and vent mechanism in populism whose actors represent a departure from established parties that have implemented such, at least from their perspective, disadvantageous policies. In sum, it is argued how these developments do not suit the pockets of the less educated, unskilled, older and those who come from rural areas; alternatively, all those commonly placed under the syntagm of globalisation losers (Kriesi et al. 2006).

The second perspective puts the value dimension of the previously mentioned changes in the spotlight. It is argued that increased access to education (Bovens – Wille 2017), intergenerational change (Inglehart 1997) and the increasingly urban population structure (Norris and Inglehart 2019) have led to the proliferation of post-materialist, multicultural and liberal values that have begun to overtake a more socially conservative outlook. The changed understanding of gender roles and the increasing emphasis on the values of self-expression and individual autonomy (Inglehart – Welzel 2005) have triggered a reaction in the part of the population that does not look at the world through similar lenses. In a context where the importance of a common identity and norms is eroding, certain sections of the population are turning to populism because, through the notion of an idealised community of pure people, populism gives them meaningful placement in a rapidly changing world. This counter-response is most often characterised by authoritarianism (Oesch 2008; Inglehart – Norris 2017) and, from a right-wing populist parties' perspective, by an anti-migration stance and nativism (Mudde 2007; Roodujin 2018). For authoritarians, populism is a natural ally because, under the guise of unlimited general will, it opens space for legitimising attacks on all those perceived as a threat to alleged homogeneity (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). For right-wingers, populism represents a new point of convergence for the restoration of national identity whose demise has been fueled by minority rights and a growing share of the non-native population.

However, both perspectives base their contributions mostly on the confusion between the populist voter and the populist citizen (Rovira Kaltwasser – van Hauwaert 2020). That is, it is shown how even though populist dispositions may be widespread (Hawkins – Littvay 2019; Rico – Anduiza 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser – van Hauwaert 2019; van Hauwaert – van Kessel 2018), this does not mean that these sentiments transfer to votes for populists – populist potential must be activated (s. Hawkins – Rovira Kaltwasser – Andreadis, 2020). What's more, it is shown how most in-field findings are often based on a lack of distinction between populism and other concepts such as nativism, radicalism and protectionism (Hunger – Paxton 2022). As response to this, the ideational approach emerged which, by defining the construct as a unique set of ideas, established the study of populism as a distinctive concept; i.e., it directed the analysis of populism towards the research of the concept without simultaneously clustering it with the phenomenological baggage of other concepts and host ideologies.

IV. Characteristics of the ideational approach

First, the ideationalist camp pinpoints the importance of normative ideas in understanding the emergence of populism (Hawkins – Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). In other words, a fundamental objection to existing explanations is that they do not leave enough room for normative concerns that are indicated by the very definition of populism; that is, the question of how to interpret populism in the context of democracy, institutions, norms and fundamental ideas of the regime has been neglected.

In that sense, ideationalists have articulated some other explanations about demand for populism. As this stance is strongly anti-elitist, then it is logical to characterise populists as distrustful of institutions as objects of elite habitat. Given that institutions rest on a set of rules whose role is to protect the normative ideas of their founding (Warren 1999), it is reasonable to assume that populists do not trust institutions since normative democratic ideas are largely circumvented in their perspective (s. Castanho Silva 2017; Erisen et al. 2021). Along with political trust, the ideational approach has opened space for discussion about interpersonal trust as a predictor of populism. On that note, several studies have found that low trust in others is negatively correlated with voting for populist parties (Berning – Ziller 2017; Staerklé – Green 2018). Oliver and Wood (2014) are on the same track in terms of the Manichaeian outlook, i.e., it is shown that lower interpersonal trust is associated with Manichaeianism. From an ideational perspective, this would mean that the Manichaeian struggle between good and evil is projected onto the understanding of other people in the populist imaginary.

Furthermore, treating populism as a distinctive set of ideas enables analysis of whether populism is associated with other beliefs. One such set of beliefs is the conspiratorial mindset whose reasoning structure coincides with a populist

worldview. Namely, conspiratorial thinking and populism are both characterised by simple dualistic narratives that separate groups on a moral basis (Castanho Silva – Veggetti – Littvay, 2017). Moreover, conspiracies can be a coping mechanism in conditions of insecurity and lack of control, with which populism, as a politics of hope (Spruyt – Keppens – van Droogenbroeck, 2016) resonates significantly, especially in its people-centrist dimension.

In addition, the ideational approach provides a different perspective in the context of some hitherto established insights on populism. Ergo, once populism began to be treated independently of other ‘neighboring’ concepts, it quickly became apparent that it was not reserved only for either radical right or left ideologies at the individual level. In a sense, it is shown how populism is ideologically ambivalent; some studies show that left-wing people are more prone to populism (Rico – Guinjoan – Anduiza 2017; Tsatsanis – Andreadis – Teperoglu 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser – van Hauwaert 2020) while others show that right-wing people are characterised by higher levels of populism (Bernhard – Hänggli 2018; Wehrkamp – Wratil 2018). At the same time, there is increasing evidence that populism is associated with extremism at both ideological ends, thus the so-called extremity hypothesis is becoming more resonant (s. Hawkins – Riding – Mudde 2012; Wettstein et al. 2020).

This overview covers most of the soil, as it considers perspectives of economic grievances, sociocultural backlash and the ideational approach thus merging the research line of new populism scholars and the somewhat older comparative tradition (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). All in all, this body of comparative literature provides the contours of a populist citizen, and thus a rough sketch of the hypotheses of this text.

V. Croatian context and hypotheses

After the collapse of socialism and the acquisition of independence, the party system that emerged in Croatia can best be described as relatively stable bipolarism (Henjak – Zakošek – Čular 2013). This axis of party competition is based on the dominant historical-identitarian cleavage, the focal point of which is a different family affiliation in the Second World War which serves as the basis of a divergent interpretation of the conflict itself, its legacy and the socialist period (Šiber 1997; Raos 2020). Other ideological and value divisions are based on these foundations, whereby two main parties act as polarised symbols with strong expressive functions (Henjak 2017). At the same time, research shows that party competition and voter mobilisation on economic grounds in Croatia is absent (Henjak 2005; Nikić Čakar – Čular 2012); moreover, the relationship between socioeconomic mobilisation and party identification is shown to be somewhat inverse, with party identification shaping attitudes about economic issues such as property taxes (Henjak 2007).

However, this hitherto solid bipolar party system was challenged in the 2015 and 2016 elections, in which newly formed populist parties gained significant voter support (Grbeša – Šalaj 2019). In more detail, the greatest success was achieved by MOST (*The Bridge*) and Živi zid (*The Human Shield*), which most studies categorise as populist parties (Meijers – Zaslove 2021; Zulianello 2020; Grbeša – Šalaj 2018). Given that Živi zid, among other things, advocated redistribution and protectionist policies and had an anti-capitalistic character (s. Henjak, 2018), one may argue that populism in Croatia can be a sign of voter mobilisation on a formerly absent socioeconomic basis, i.e., it might be an expression of economic grievances. Still, studies have not confirmed that socioeconomic determinants have a consistent influence on support for these parties (Henjak 2018). Or, to put it differently, although the new parties clearly positioned themselves as critics of the existing political and economic model, their voters did not have the profile of globalisation losers. In addition, it is shown that in Croatia preferences for what could be described as economic populism are not related to more permanent elements of socioeconomic position such as education, occupation and property ownership (Henjak – Vuksan-Ćusa 2019), which is at odds with the economic grievances' perspective. Therefore, the first hypothesis is that *variables that measure an individual's economic position will have no effect on the level of populist attitudes* (H1). Nevertheless, a small addition to this needs to be done. One should remember that populism, as an ideational approach would put it, is primarily a matter of ideas about the world. This implies that sociotropic evaluations of society may have a greater effect on political ideas than egotropic ones (Anduiza – Guinjoan – Rico 2018) especially when it comes to retrospective evaluations in which eventual resentment can be stated in clearer manner (Rico – Anduiza 2019). This is also related to findings on how perceptions of relative deprivation and anomie can affect populist attitudes (Elchardus – Spruyt 2016), given that these measures tap into the feeling of shared grievances of community. Therefore, the next hypothesis is that *negative sociotropic evaluations of the economic situation are associated with higher levels of populism* (H1a).

As for the sociocultural characteristics of the electorate in Croatia, there are well-documented findings about the preference for authoritarianism among a noticeable share of the population (s. Nikodem 2019). In other words, democratic consolidation in Croatia is still on a thorny path: the number of people who favour an authoritarian leader at the expense of democracy is increasing (Čular – Šalaj 2019). If we assume that populist rhetoric can trigger this apparent authoritarian disposition, then populism and authoritarianism can be expected to go hand in hand on an attitudinal level (s. Castanho Silva et al. 2018). The same can be said for the link between conspiracy theories and populist attitudes, as these are shown to be correlated in both domestic and international literature. In more concrete terms, Blanuša (2013) shows how in

Croatia conspiracy theories are associated with 'simulated democracy', which is a concept whose content partially coincides with populism. More precisely, simulated democracy describes a situation in which democratic institutions and norms, although functioning, are seriously violated by elites and important social groups (s. Lengyel – Ilonszki 2012), which overlaps with the anti-elitist component of populism. Therefore, the next hypothesis is that *conspiratorial thinking and authoritarianism are positively associated with populism* (H2).

Considering the substantial impact of the historical-identarian cleavage on sociocultural values of citizens in Croatia, it seems plausible to test its eventual association with populism on an individual level. On that note, previous studies show that voters of Most and Živi zid are less associated with historical events and personalities that otherwise serve as the backbone of the fundamental identarian cleavage (Henjak 2018), implying that these people are less associated with components of established left and right political identities in Croatia. This was also supported by the finding that the voters of these parties are substantially closer to centrist ideological self-positioning (Henjak 2018). So, in Croatian context, it seems reasonable to assume that populism is not the stance of ideological extremists, as is usually recorded in comparative literature on populism. However, this should not come as a surprise given that Central and Eastern Europe is the natural habitat of centrist or mainstream reformist populism (Pop-Eleches 2010; Hanley – Sikk 2014; Stanley 2017). Parties like this are prescribed to the 'non-positional' framework of democratic reforms and the fight against corruption, which were the dominant themes in the rhetoric of Most and, although combined with other elements, in the programme of Živi zid (Zulianello, 2020).

At the same time, this does not mean that the populist parties of Central and Eastern Europe do not come in radical right or left variants. The populist radical right exists there as well, with a significant difference in terms of who is portrayed as the 'undesirable others'. Due to the lack of clear patterns of mass migration (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2018), migrants are not a group that is excluded from 'pure people' as is the case with parties of the same profile in the Western part of the continent; instead, ethnic minorities that are already positioned within the state and outside the nation are targeted (Mudde 2007; Pirro 2014). However, such findings, no matter how widespread they are, still rest on an approach that blends populism with nativism. Given that such an operationalisation treats populism as part of a broader and multipart phenomenological set, it is possible that populism is not the driving force of anti-minority sentiment. This seems particularly cogent in the case of Croatia, where the new populist actors did not base their support on such nativist elements of right-wing imagery (Grbeša – Šalaj 2018). Therefore, based on the above, the second hypothesis regarding sociocultural values is that *familiarisation with the dominant historical-identarian cleavage, extremist ideological self-positioning and*

intolerance towards minorities are not associated with populism at the micro-level in Croatia (H2a).

Finally, the Croatian context should also be described from an ideational perspective. The key concept of this approach is political (institutional) trust, i.e., its negative relationship with populism. The same association can be expected in Croatia, otherwise characterised by low levels of institutional trust (Rose – Mishler 2010) which has further decreased in recent years (Bovan – Baketa 2022). Furthermore, as signaled in previous chapters, recent studies connect populism with social mistrust. Considering that social mistrust is often an indicator that an individual perceives the world in generally threatening terms (Berning – Ziller 2017), for those who do not trust others, populism can provide a notion of community that protects them. This seems plausible in Croatia as well, since Croatians have low levels of social trust too (Šalaj 2005). Therefore, from an ideational perspective, the hypothesis is that *institutional and interpersonal trust are negatively associated with populist attitudes (H3)*. In the next section, the operationalisation of the concepts listed here is described, followed by an empirical test of the hypotheses set.

VI. Data and methods

The analysis is based on a nationally representative probability sample survey conducted by the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb. This survey is part of a research series called the *Croatian Election Studies* that has been running since 1990. The survey from 2020 is used because its questionnaire is the only one to include a populism scale in the context of Croatia. In more detail, this is a field survey with a sample of 979 respondents. It was carried out in February and March 2020 by the *Ipsos*, i.e., data collection was completed just before the introduction of public health measures caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Only respondents over the age of 18 participated in the survey.

VII. Dependent variable: measurement of populist attitudes

As said, ideational tradition understands populism as a construct that sits at the intersection of several distinctive subcomponents that exist independently of each other. That is, for example, a certain part of the population may think the worst of the elites, but that does not mean that these citizens at the same time interpret the political world as a moral struggle between good and evil. What is more, studies show that Manichaeism is weakly (Castanho Silva et al. 2018) and even negatively correlated with other subcomponents (Erisen et al. 2021; Castanho Silva – Vegetti – Littvay 2017). The point here is that components of populism in the individual mind often do not occur together, which is why measuring instruments should consider for core concepts separately; i.e., the

scales should not be unidimensional as this does not reflect the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon (Schulz et al. 2018). In a nutshell, we need a scale whose structure mirrors this conceptual setting.

The scale by Castanho Silva et al (2018) was developed following this logic; starting with a large pool of items, researchers developed a three-subcomponent battery of populism that follows the ideational theory and is cross-nationally validated.² Although research on populism is growing rapidly, this is the only scale whose development has been described and tested in detail and which performs well in terms of psychometric properties (Castanho Silva et al. 2020). The scale by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014), which is probably the most-used instrument, also performs well, but its construction does not depict the multidimensional nature of populism (Huber – Fesenfeld – Bernauer 2020) as it uses double-barreled items that relate to more than one subcomponent (Wuttke – Schimpf – Schoen, 2020).

This study uses items that Castanho Silva and coauthors have incorporated into a longer (9-item) scale. Two items are used to capture each subcomponent of populism: items *Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people* (pc1) and *The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics* (pc2) measure people-centrism while *The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves* (ae1) and *A few of the people running the government are crooked* (ae2) are items that indicate anti-elitism.³ Manichaeism is measured by *You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics* (man1) and *The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed* (man2) items. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale where 1 stands for complete disagreement and 5 for complete agreement with the statement.

To be able to use this battery as a dependent variable, it should be shown that the proposed model fits the data. To meet this, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted, with populism modeled as a second-order factor with three subcomponents. Since this is a dimensionalised structure, items were allowed to load only on latent constructs (subcomponents) that they are expected to measure (Schulz et al. 2018). However, the model designed in this way did not

2 Of course, there are studies that have measured populism as a multidimensional construct. Of these, Stanley (2011) measured subcomponents without operationalising the scale altogether, while Oliver and Rahn (2016) treated populism with anti-elitism, national affiliation and mistrust in experts, which does not correspond to the nucleus of the phenomenon. More recent scales developed by Schulz et al. (2018), Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg (2019) and Wettstein et al. (2020) have not incorporated items that tap into the Manichaean dimension.

3 The second item indicating anti-elitism in the original scale (Castanho Silva et al. 2018) goes as *Quite few of the people running the government are crooked*, which has the opposite direction from the item used here. That is, in the original scale this item is not negatively worded, while in the battery used here it is, which is the result of an error that occurred in translating the scale from English to Croatian. Because of this, the item had to be recoded in the opposite direction.

have a satisfactory fit. As shown in Table 1., the majority of goodness-of-fit indicators are below recommended levels; CFI (comparative fit index) is 0.94 which is slightly below the suggested point of 0.95, TLI (Tucker-Lewis index) is also lower than the recommended value (0.85 < 0.90) and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) is 0.086 which is above the recommended value of 0.06. Only SRMR (standardised root mean square residual) value is satisfactory at 0.05 – that is, below the advocated cut-off value of 0.08 (Hu – Bentler 1999).

Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis results (three-factor populism model)

Component/Item	Baseline model	Modified model
<i>People-centrism (PC)</i>		
pc1	0.727	0.747
pc2	0.688	0.653
<i>Anti-elitism (AE)</i>		
ae1	0.546	0.662
ae2/ae2rep	0.379	0.452
<i>Manichaean outlook (MAN)</i>		
man1	0.515	0.517
man2	0.813	0.798
Covariances		
PC-ANTIE	0.730	0.649
PC-MAN	0.021	0.009
ANTIE-MAN	-0.268	-0.099
Fit indices		
χ^2	42.84 (0.000)	11.45 (0.076)
RMSEA	0.086	0.033
CFI	0.938	0.991
TLI	0.846	0.977
SRMR	0.053	0.020

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors’ own compilation.

This means that the initial model needs re-specification. This is probably because the items used, although taken from the scale developed by Castanho Silva et al. (2018), do not correspond to it fully. Namely, the original scale has nine items, and the shorter version has six, with one positively worded and negatively

worded item on each factor, which is not reflected in the scale that is part of the *Croatian Election Studies* surveys where all items are positively worded. In addition, the fourth item (ae2), as noted in footnote 5, was mistranslated when compiling the questionnaire. Therefore, for the purpose of model re-specification, item ae2 was dropped, and the item *Political scandals show us that elites, when their interests are threatened, abuse public institutions* (ae2rep) was added to the scale. When these adjustments are made, the fit of the model improves. Now all indices show an acceptable fit; RMSEA is 0.033, CFI is 0.991, TLI is 0.977 and SRMR has a value of 0.020. Models are illustrated in Appendix (Figures 1 and 2).

The final step in the construction of the dependent variable concerns the aggregation of the subcomponents. To label someone as a populist, one needs to be a people-centrist, anti-elitist and Manichaeist at the same time. In a word, populism has a non-compensatory nature which should be reflected in its operationalisation (Wuttke – Schimpf – Schoen 2020). Therefore, factor scores were taken for each subcomponent after which the three results were rescaled from 0 to 1 and then multiplied (s. Castanho Silva et al. 2020; Erisen et al. 2021; Mohrenberg – Huber – Freyburg 2019). This ensures that only individuals with high scores on all three subcomponents can obtain high scores on the final populism scale.

VIII. Independent variables

To test the set hypotheses, the main explanatory variables are categorised into three groups that reflect the dominant theoretical explanations of populism at the individual level. The first category of variables refers to economic grievances; that is, indicators measuring education, household income, assets, unemployment and sociotropic evaluation of the economy are included in analysis. Education was measured on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means that the respondent has not completed primary school and 7 stands for a completed master or doctoral level of study. Income was measured with the question on monthly household income in October of the corresponding year, where respondents were free to write their response. As is often done, to reduce the effect of outlier values, the logarithmic value of this measure was used in the analysis. Assets is a composite measure created by adding up values of variables that ask whether a respondent has a house or flat, a property that can be rented, stocks or bonds, and savings. Unemployment is operationalised as a dummy variable (1-unemployed, 0-everything else), whilst the variable measuring sociotropic evaluation asks respondents whether the economic situation in the country has improved or deteriorated (on a 5-item scale where higher values indicate the perception of worsening). This item was added as an indicator of subjective perception, in contrast to previous measures that are impartial indicators of an individual's economic hardship.

The next category of variables refers to sociocultural indicators. Authoritarianism is operationalised with the 4-item scale developed by Šiber (1998), which treats this concept as a one-dimensional syndrome characterised by a combination of submissiveness and conformism (Čular – Šalaj, 2019). The in-scale items are presented in Appendix (Table 4). Cronbach's α coefficient for this scale is 0.62 and the average inter-item correlation is 0.28 which is consistent with interpretations that state how the mean correlation of in-scale items should be above 0.15 or 0.2 (Clark – Watson 1995; Briggs – Cheek 1986).⁴ Conspiracy theories inclination was measured with an *ad hoc* scale consisting of nine items categorised into three subtypes. The three groupings represent distinct factors that measure theories about personal wellbeing, malevolent global conspiracies, and control of information (Brotherton – French – Pickering 2013). The CFA showed that the fit of the model is relatively good (RMSEA=0.065, CFI=0.96, TLI=0.95, SRMR=0.033). More precisely, only the RMSEA value is slightly above the recommended 0.06. However, the RMSEA 90 percent confidence interval is between 0.05 and 0.08, i.e., below the reasonable error of approximation criterion (Browne – Cudeck 1993) which indicates a mediocre but adequate fit. All items that make up the scale can be seen in the Appendix (Table 5.).

Other predictors from the sociocultural set of variables refer to familiarisation with the historical-identarian cleavage, extremist ideological self-positioning and attitude towards minorities. Proximity of an individual to the main political cleavage in Croatia is operationalised by questioning the position of the respondent's family during World War II (Šiber 1997). This variable was recoded in such a way that 1 labels the anti-fascist position of the family and 0 marks all other categories of answers, as is usually operationalised in voter behaviour studies in Croatia (s. Henjak – Zakošek – Čular 2013; Raos 2020). Extremist ideological self-positioning is measured by the classic left-right scale in which 1 represents the left and 10 the right pole of the scale. The variable was recoded so that the extreme values (1 and 10) were given a value of 1 and other values were coded as 0. The attitude towards minorities is operationalised using Bogardus' social distance scale which measures what kind of social relationship one is willing to enter with Albanians, Bosnians, Roma people and Serbs. The scale represents a continuum with seven answers, where 1 labels the will for the closest type of interaction (kinship) and 7 indicates the greatest distance (ban on entering Croatia) towards members of the group. Cronbach's α for this measure is 0.90, while the average correlation between items is 0.69. A composite variable was created by taking the arithmetic means of the enumerated minorities.

4 Although the value of Cronbach's α is not at the recommended level of 0.7 or 0.8 (Hair et al. 2019), it should be borne in mind that there is no universal cutoff value when it comes to this coefficient (Hoekstra et al. 2019). Specifically, there are suggestions that note how value above 0.5 can be considered reliable (Schmitt 1996).

The last category of variables refers to institutional and interpersonal trust as indicators of ideational theory (Castanho Silva 2017). Institutional trust is created by taking the mean value of the respondent's answers on trust in the government, parliament, courts and public administration where higher values indicate more trust. Cronbach's alpha of this battery of items is 0.85 and the average inter-item correlation is 0.59. Interpersonal trust is measured by the question of whether most people can be trusted which, as an indicator of social capital, is one of the instruments present for decades in comparative research. This variable is dichotomous: 1 indicates the stance that most people can be trusted, whilst 0 stands for the opinion that one should be careful in dealing with other people. Finally, a group of control variables including gender, age and settlement size were also added to the analysis. Descriptive statistics of independent variables is shown in detail in Appendix.⁵

IX. Results

Since the included variables relate to different perspectives, four separate linear regression models have been created that reflect this; Model 1 consists of variables that measure economic grievances, Model 2 of variables that cover socio-cultural backlash indicators and Model 3 of ideational theory variables, with controls added in each model. This approach makes it possible to see how much each perspective contributes to the explanation of the variance of populism. Model 4 consists of all variables included, and ultimately tells which independent variables are most significant when controlled for measures of all perspectives involved. The results of linear regressions are shown in Table 2 below.

The results of the first model show that the perspective emphasising economic grievances is not particularly relevant in Croatia. Namely, although the variables measuring education, assets and sociotropic evaluation are significant, the first model explains only 3.7 percent of the variance of populism which is in line with the findings showing the weak explanatory power of the economic vulnerability-based approach (Margalit 2019). More precisely, in the final model that includes all variables, none of the variables that measure the objective indicators of an individual's socioeconomic position are significant, indicating that populism is not a reaction of the losers of globalisation or, to put it somewhat closer to the Croatian context, this shows how there is no sign that populism outlines the hitherto absent socioeconomic cleavage. The only variable that is significant in the final model is one that measures sociotropic evaluation, showing how those who feel that the state of the economy has deteriorated in the past four years are more prone to populism. This shows that, in the context of the economic

⁵ In addition, it should be added that direct oblimin rotation was used in all factor analyses because it produces orthogonal results if there is no correlation between factors, and at the same time allows for the possibility of their mutual relationship (Watkins 2018).

Table 2: Results of OLS regressions (populist attitudes as a dependent variable)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	
Controls	B (std. err)	B (std. err)	B (std. err)	B (std. err)	Beta
Gender (1=female)	-0.032 (0.017)	-0.027 (0.014)	-0.030 (0.015) *	-0.029 (0.016)	-0.062
Age	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.000) **	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.021
Settlement size	-0.002 (0.007)	0.004 (0.006)	-0.012 (0.006)	0.007 (0.007)	-0.034
<i>Economic grievances</i>					
Education	-0.019 (0.007) **			-0.011 (0.007)	-0.059
Income	-0.006 (0.014)			-0.010 (0.013)	0.025
Assets	-0.020 (0.009) *			-0.012 (0.009)	-0.046
Unemployed	0.015 (0.030)			-0.000 (0.029)	-0.000
Sociotropic evaluation	0.024 (0.008) **			0.018 (0.008) *	0.078 *
<i>Socio-cultural backlash</i>					
Authoritarianism		0.057 (0.009) ***		0.061 (0.009) ***	0.238***
Ethnic distance		0.007 (0.005)		0.005 (0.005)	0.037
Extremist ideology		0.021 (0.020)		0.018 (0.021)	0.029
Anti-fascist pol. affil.		0.009 (0.021)		0.014 (0.022)	0.023
Conspiratorial thinking		0.203 (0.035) ***		0.195 (0.038) ***	0.178***
<i>Ideational approach</i>					
Trust in institutions			-0.037 (0.009) ***	-0.032 (0.009) ***	-0.123***
Interpersonal trust			-0.055 (0.024) *	-0.027 (0.024)	-0.036
Constant	0.303 (0.074)	-0.047 (0.043)	0.360 (0.034)	0.008 (0.086)	
Observations	823	977	952	803	
R squared	0.037	0.111	0.044	0.153	
F statistic	3.94***	15.10***	8.74***	9.46***	

Note: significance levels are .05*, .01**, .001***.

Multicollinearity statistics (average VIF): Model 1 (1,07), Model 2 (1,13), Model 3 (1,02), Model 4 (1,14).

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

vulnerability of the individual, populism in Croatia is more a matter of holistic perception than personal hardship; it is more about general feeling than ego-tropic calculation. Therefore, the results confirmed hypotheses H1 and H1a.

On the other hand, results show that Model 2, which measures sociocultural backlash, explains the higher percentage of variance in populist attitudes (around 11%). As expected, the variables that measure authoritarianism and propensity for conspiratorial thinking have a statistically significant positive effect on populist attitudes, meaning that higher values on these scales are associated with higher levels of populism. This was also verified by the results of the final model in which authoritarianism and conspiratorial thinking have the highest effects on individual level populism, meaning that H2 is strongly supported. Given that authoritarianism and conspiratorial thinking are correlated among respondents in Croatia (Tonković et al. 2021), this nexus should certainly be further investigated. This is even more relevant in the context of the current pandemic which, as a period of increased uncertainty and unpredictability, is characterised by an increased propensity for conspiracy theories (Douglas 2021).

However, in the context of comparative research on populism, the more interesting findings regard affiliation with the fundamental political cleavage, extremist ideological self-identification and ethnic distance towards minorities. More specifically, the results show that these variables have no effect on the variance of populism, thus confirming Hypothesis H2a. This demonstrates how populist citizens structure their political attitudes beyond the historical-identarian cleavage that dominates Croatian politics, as indicated by previous research. However, given that the effect of the main cleavage is operationalised through anti-fascist family affiliation which is otherwise an important (thick) element of left-wing political identity in Croatia (Šiber 1997; Henjak – Zakošek – Čular 2013; Raos 2020), this may have a wider implication. Namely, experimental studies show that thick positions of host ideologies such as advocacy of taxation of the rich, anti-globalism, Euroscepticism and opposition to migration do not generate greater support among populist citizens (Neuner – Wratil 2022). Considering how thick elements of host ideologies are often conflated with populism (Hunger – Paxton 2022), this points to a broader need for their explicit differentiation, if we are to properly address and analyse phenomena separately or in their interplay. From the perspective of findings of this study, this is also corroborated by the lack of effect of ethnic distance on populism as xenophobia and ethnocentrism are usually thick elements of right-wing identities. Even though these findings, along with the lack of effect of extremist ideological self-positioning, are in line with this thesis on centrist populism, more robust tests have yet to be done in this regard.⁶

6 That is, one should note that anti-fascist historical affiliation is not emblematic of the conventional content of the left. Therefore, these results should not be taken as solid evidence that populism in

Going forward, future works should analyse if populism is indeed centrist; it remains to be tested whether individual-level populism is associated with elements of centrist politics such as the fight against corruption and advocacy for increased transparency. While it seems that micro-level populism in Croatia is not based on the positioning of the individual in relation to the thick level concepts of established ideologies, it is also possible that populism has a different face. Although the non-extremist and anti-establishment posture dominates, this does not mean that this attitude is free of ideology or purely centrist; it can be non-extremist in a form of expression and still receptive to loaded ideological elements, depending on what triggers it and how it is channeled by populist actors. Ultimately, populism is a dynamic phenomenon whose activation can be vitalised by different sentiments. Above all, these findings suggest that populist heartland represents an open call for all sides of the ideological continuum – no ideological position, as such, is *a priori* reserved for populism. All things considered, although Taggart (2002: 70) spoke primarily about populist movements, the same seems to be true for the analysis of micro-level populism: ‘insofar as it [populism] is chameleonic, the study of populism needs to be aware of this as we study it’.

As for the assumptions of the ideational approach, the results of Model 3 and the final model partially confirm them. More precisely, it is shown how institutional trust is associated with populism, while interpersonal trust, although significant in Model 3, does not have an effect on populism in the final model. Therefore, H3 is only partially confirmed. If we are to generalise, this exhibits that populism in Croatia is the attitude of those who are above all politically distrustful, where the social dimension of trust is only peripherally important. Also, it is important to note how one should not be too quick about generalising these results as Model 3 explains only four percent of the variance in populist attitudes.

Overall, it can be said that in Croatia there is no homogeneity in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of populist citizens. Somewhat paradoxically, the impression one may get is that indicators that did not prove to be significant in the analysis say more about populist attitudes in Croatia than significant ones. More precisely, along with the ‘standard’ comparative findings on the link of populism with authoritarianism, conspiratorial thinking, institutional trust and sociotropic evaluation of the economy, the variables whose association lacked imply that the sketch of the ordinary populist citizen in Croatia is not as straightforward as stipulated in most of the literature (s. Roodujin 2018).

Croatia (or elsewhere) is not associated with common left-wing components that go beyond specifics of given context, such as advocacy of taxation of the rich, pro-redistributive policies, protectionism, etc.

X. Conclusion

This study set out to analyse populism in Croatia at an individual level for the first time. Since previous studies have focused exclusively on the demand side, this has emerged as a research vacuum to be filled. The study started from the ideational approach and defined populism as a latent set of ideas consisting of three subcomponents: anti-elitism, people-centrism and Manichean outlook. One of the study's contributions is that the operationalisation of populism reflects background theory; although there are many studies out there on populism at the individual level, most cover only some of its elements (Van Hauwaert – Schimpf – Azevedo 2019) and/or do not adequately treat its non-compensatory nature (Wuttke – Schimpf – Schoen 2020). An even bigger omission is that the phenomenon is often tangled up with a conceptual baggage of host ideologies and their thick components. As results show that left-wing (anti-fascist historical affiliation) and right-wing (ethnic distance) concepts are not connected with populism, this paper, along with others (Hunger – Paxton 2021), testifies against such unclear conceptualisations. At the same time, this is not to say that populism exists in an ideological and conceptual vacuum – it is more about the fact that we need to disentangle these phenomena so that we can properly identify their effects when they appear separately, as well as when they appear intertwined. In addition, this is the only way to see to what extent the concept of populism is analytically useful at the individual level, as an increasing body of evidence alerts (Art, 2022; Castanho Silva – Neuner – Wratil 2022).

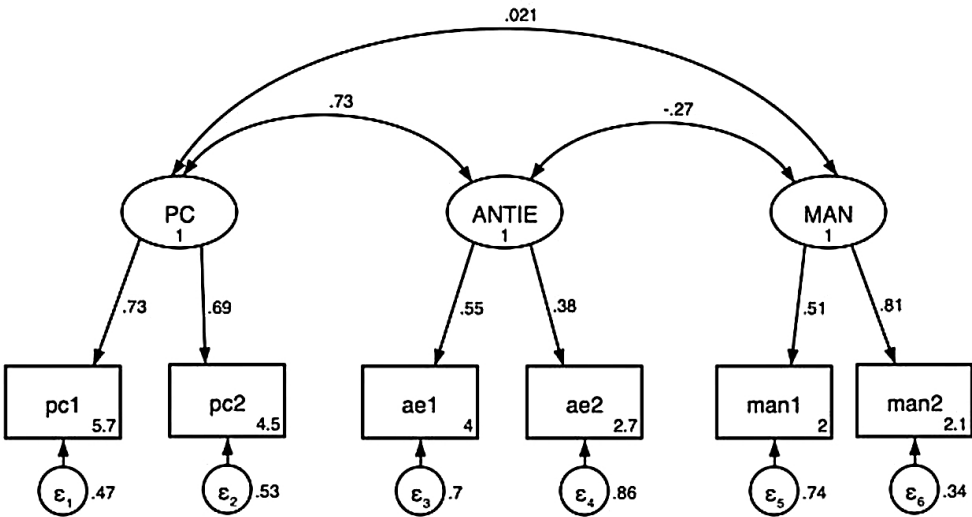
As for Croatia, the results show that populism is not the attitude of the economic losers of globalisation, but a slant that is associated with certain sociocultural predictors and distrust. The common findings on the link of populism with sociotropic evaluations, authoritarianism, conspiratorial thinking and institutional distrust have been confirmed – in this regard, the usual suspects have come to the fore once again. Moreover, whilst the results imply that individual-level populism in Croatia is not ideology-loaded, future research should test whether populism is associated with other elements of the left and right, apart from those covered here. Furthermore, subsequent studies should disaggregate populism into its subcomponents to see if these results hold when people-centrism, anti-elitism and Manichaeism are operationalised separately, as their prevalence among the population is significantly different (Erisen et al. 2021; Kefford – Moffit – Werner 2021).

Finally, this study has limitations that should be kept in mind. As this is a study of populism in one country, its generalisability is quite limited, especially since the analysis is based on data from a single survey. A further important caveat is that this study is based on 2020 data, which is more than five years after the first populist actors became a relevant part of politics in Croatia. This opens the possibility that populist attitudes were different at the time when

populists achieved major electoral success. Also, the populism scale used here does not fully correspond to the most-used instruments. To be exact, although most of the items were taken from the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale, one item measuring anti-elitism was added *ad hoc*, which may have influenced the results. In addition, the final model explains about 15% of the variance of populism, meaning that such attitudes are still clarified to a limited extent. Given that the original scale (Castanho Silva et al. 2018) performed less well in terms of invariance testing in the case of Croatia and considering that the baseline model in this analysis had an inadequate fit, future research might try to create a scale whose content would be more suitable to the local context.

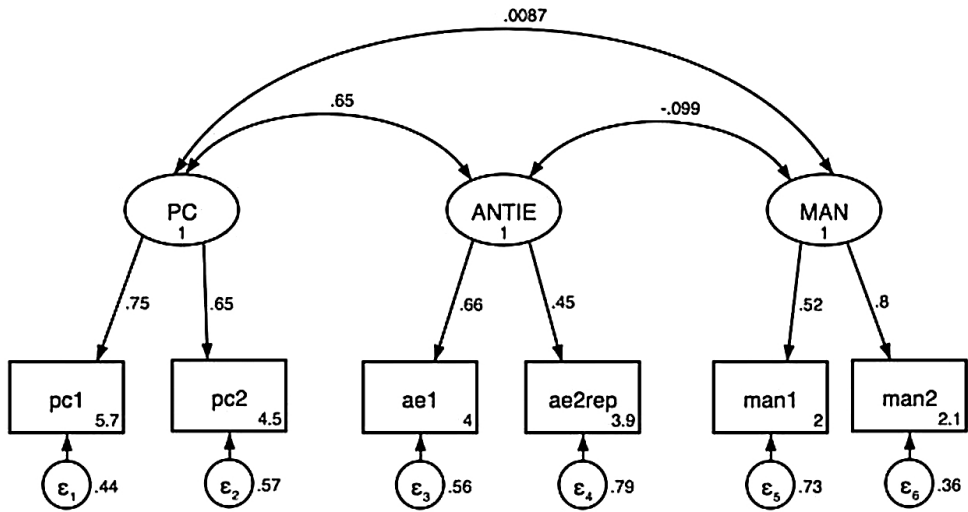
Appendix

Figure 1: Populism (baseline model, SEM)



Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

Figure 2: Populism (modified model, SEM)



Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

Table 3: EFA (authoritarianism scale)

Items/Dimension	1
The opinion of the majority is always the best.	0.591
One does not need to express one's own opinion because person never knows they may suffer from.	0.778
Authorities and powerful people should not be opposed.	0.784
Young people need strict discipline, dedication, and willingness to work and to fight for family and homeland.	0.554
Variance explained (%)	46.88
Eigenvalue	1.86

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

Table 4: CFA (conspiratorial thinking scale)

Component/Item	Baseline model
<i>Personal well-being (PW)</i>	
It is hidden from the public that vaccines are harmful to health.	0.607
Big pharmaceutical companies deliberately spread various diseases to increase drug sales.	0.778
The global elite seeks to control the growth of the Earth's population through genetically modified food.	0.758
<i>Malevolent global conspiracies (MG)</i>	
Jews control the most important world events.	0.670
Freemasons and the Illuminati have been influencing the decisions of the authorities in many countries for a long time.	0.793
There is a secret organization in the world whose goal is to destroy nation states and impose a "New World Order".	0.791
<i>Control of information (CI)</i>	
The white streaks in the sky that are left behind by the plane are chemicals used in experiments on humans.	0.606
Anyone with a computer connected to the Internet is being secretly tracked and surveilled.	0.611
Evidence of contacts with extraterrestrials is hidden from the public.	0.443
<i>Covariances</i>	
PW-MG	0.769
PW-CI	0.677
MG-CI	0.761
<i>Fit indices</i>	
χ^2	81.00 (0.000)
RMSEA	0.065
CFI	0.964
TLI	0.946
SRMR	0.033

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

Table 5: EFA (ethnic distance scale)

Items/Dimension	1
Albanians	0.886
Bosnians	0.894
Roma people	0.849
Serbs	0.881
Variance explained (%)	77.07
Eigenvalue	3.83

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics (non-dichotomous independent variables)

Predictors	Min	Max	N	M	SD	0,25	0,75
Age	18	99	979	47,21	17,31	31,00	61,00
Settlement size	1	4	979	2,45	1,23	1,00	4,00
Education	1	7	979	4,01	1,22	3,00	4,00
Household income	0	80000	837	8352,75	6646,98	4150	11000
Assets	0	4	979	1,43	0,90	1,00	2,00
Sociotropic evaluations	1	5	962	3,23	1,01	2,00	4,00
Ethnic distance	1	7	979	4,61	1,62	3,50	6,00
Authoritarianism	1	5	977	3,20	0,91	2,50	3,75
Conspiratorial thinking	0	1	979	0,57	0,23	0,44	0,72
Institutional trust	1	5	974	2,13	0,90	1,50	2,75

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

Table 7: Contingency table of dichotomous predictors

Gender		Unemployed		Extreme ideology		Antifa pol. affiliation		Interp. trust	
1(F)	0(M)	Yes	Other	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
53,7%	46,3%	8,2%	91,8%	16,3%	83,7%	16,2%	83,8%	11,2%	88,8%

Source: Croatian Election Studies, 2020. Authors' own compilation.

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Bartul Vuksan-Ćusa is an assistant and lecturer at the Faculty of Political Sciences (University of Zagreb). He gained his MA at Central European University in 2022. His main research interests include populism, economic attitudes and voting behavior. E-mail: bartul.vuksan-cusa@fpzg.hr.