

Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism (PANCOPOP)

Summary of Key Findings – to be shared with participants of the final T-AP RRR conference, 15-16 May 2025

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The PANCOPOP project delivered the first comprehensive study of health crisis communication in the context of populist politics. Research focused on four countries led by right-wing populist governments at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic – Brazil, Poland, Serbia and the United States – and combined elite interviews, policy analysis, population surveys and news coverage analysis. In line with our original objectives, the key findings shed light on five aspects of health crisis communication:

1. *Patterns of crisis communication in the context of populist political leadership* (Hallin et al., 2024): We identified key characteristics of populism that are likely to affect health crisis communication. We find that many of these characteristics can be seen across the four countries. A common characteristic was a high degree of politicization, but we also found significant divergences across the four countries. We identified two main patterns of communication; one found in the U.S. and Brazil and the other in Poland and Serbia. We offer two hypotheses to explain the divergence of populist responses.
2. *Populist media policies* (Klimkiewicz et al, under review): General media policies in all four countries oscillated between control and support. On the one hand, several policies were aimed at controlling pandemic communication and limiting journalists' access to public information; on the other hand, efforts were made to support the media. On the whole, the drive to control overshadowed the efforts to provide support, and even when support was provided, it was often distributed in an untransparent or unfair manner that benefitted pro-government outlets.
3. *Populist attitudes, public trust, media use, and vulnerability to health misinformation* (Štětka et al. 2024a and 2024b): Our findings show that people who hold populist beliefs and who mistrust experts are generally more likely to believe health misinformation. Populist attitudes are also the most significant predictor of distrust in political institutions. Our results also challenge common assumptions about the detrimental effects of social networking platforms and instead draw attention to the role of legacy news brands and messaging platforms as channels of health misinformation.
4. *Journalistic coverage of COVID-19* (Rothberg et al., under review): COVID-19 coverage paid relatively little attention to scientific advances and expert advice and was polarized along the pro- vs. anti-populist axis. While some outlets were openly critical of populism, others supported populist actors due to ownership pressures or regulatory control.
5. *Responses to Chinese and Russian COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy* attracted limited attention and varied depending on the type of political regime, the geopolitical stance, the approach to the pandemic, and the type of media system (Laruelle et al., under review). Our findings highlight the role of strategic narratives and news media in shaping the local reception of vaccine diplomacy (Stojiljković and Mihelj, 2025).

We envisage our findings to serve as a basis for further research on the impact of political context on (health) crisis communication across several fields, including political communication, crisis/risk communication, health communication, science communication, journalism studies, disinformation studies, public health, public policy and governance, and public diplomacy. We also believe our

theoretical and methodological contributions will be relevant to future research on populism and populist political communication.

We developed a range of recommendations for stakeholders based on our findings and published them in an open access report (Mihelj et al., 2024) and a policy brief (Mihelj, 2024). They are aimed at key stakeholders involved in (health) crisis communication, including crisis and risk communication practitioners, public health authorities and government officials, media regulators and policy makers, journalists, and think tanks involved in public health. The recommendations cover issues such as management of political interference with the flow of information, enhanced protection of journalists, and changes to guidance for public emergencies. We hope these recommendations will help stakeholders address the challenges created by populist leadership and increase the effectiveness of crisis communication in the context of future crises.

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