Understanding populism: Voting behavior, gullibility and misleading narratives

IVANA PITEROVÁ (Ed.) / ALEXANDER LOZIAK / JANA PAPCUNOVÁ

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Contents

Introduction

Slovakia is a country where populism, conspiratorial beliefs and misinformation have long thrived. Periods of crisis, uncertainty and instability such as the COVID-19 pandemic, war in neighboring Ukraine, along with the arrival of many Ukrainians, have provided an ideal environment for their spread.

This publication will link populist attitudes to the support of populists, gullibility and spread of misleading or harmful speech. Data collected in 2021, 2022 and 2023 from samples representing the Slovak population in terms of gender, age, education and region, seeks to determine whether the populist attitudes in Slovakia may be one of the causes of widespread populist support, populist gullibility and the dissemination of misleading or harmful speech about Ukraine and Ukrainians. Furthermore, it aims to inform about the possible consequences of populist attitudes for individuals and society as a whole.

The first chapter examines the relationship between political and science-related populist attitudes and voting behavior, focusing on the 2020 and 2023 parliamentary elections. The data consistently show a significant association between higher levels of populist attitudes and support for populist parties. Scores on the populist attitude scale effectively predict voting behavior of both past and prospective choices for populist parties. This trend also applies to science-related populist attitudes, demonstrating an alignment between ideological leanings and electoral decisions. Although not yet studied in the Slovak context, science-related populist attitudes have shown even stronger predictive power for voting behaviour than political populist attitudes. The interplay between political and science-related populist attitudes highlights the multifaceted nature of populist dynamics and the meaningful implications for electoral outcomes and policy discourse in Slovakia.

In the second chapter, the relationship between populist attitudes, faith in intuition and unsubstantiated claims are examined. While the results indicate that populist attitudes can predict unsubstantiated claims, the perception of academic elites is the most consistent predictor. There were two mediation models tested in the chapter. The first links political populist attitudes to conspiracy beliefs, mediated by faith intuition. The second model examines science-related populist attitudes, showing how intuitive thinking influence conspiracy beliefs.

The third chapter examines the interplay between populist attitudes and misleading speech about Ukraine amid the Russia-Ukraine war. In Slovakia, these attitudes are linked to unsubstantiated claims, especially regarding the economic impacts of Ukrainian migration. The study has revealed that populist beliefs, particularly sovereignty of people, conception of academic elites, decision-making sovereignty (with an inverse relationship) and truth-speaking sovereignty significantly predicted misleading and harmful speech about the war in Ukraine. The second regression analysis revealed that anti-elitism, truth-speaking sovereignty, and conception of academic elites significantly predicted misleading speech and harmful speech about migrating Ukrainians. This highlights the importance of context-specific research as well as the need to address populist-driven misinformation in promoting social cohesion and resilience.

The publication was produced as an output of a project VEGA on Social and psychological correlates of populist attitudes in Slovakia. While it is intended for the scientific community, it provides up-to-date insights for anyone interested in the potential consequences of populist attitudes.

On behalf of the author team, Ivana Piterová

1. Voting behaviour as a consequence of populist attitudes

Ivana Piterová

1.1 Political populist attitudes

Populism can be understood as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). According to this definition, populism is associated with the Manichean perception of society where only friends and enemies exist (Mudde, 2004). In this view, society is divided into two equally opposing groups of the people and the elite. Mudde (2004) claims that the primary distinction between them is moral in nature. While the common people are characterized as being hard-working, tax-paying and law-abiding individuals with strong moral values, the elite are depicted as being corrupt, arrogant and self-centered.

While populism does not provide answers to all major socio-political questions, it can easily align with other ideologies such as liberalism, nationalism and socialism. Furthermore, it can be adapted to both the political right and left (Muro, 2017). On the right, populism often uses nationalism, religion and/or ethnicity while on the left, it highlights the class system where ordinary people are portrayed as a disadvantaged group (Aslanidis, 2011). In essence, it is possible to identify two forms of populism: exclusive or right-wing populism and inclusive or left-wing populism. The former tends to emerge in prosperous societies with an increasing concern about migrants and foreign influences, while the latter is more prevalent in poorer societies struggling with pervasive corruption and poverty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). In Slovakia, it is possible to encounter both left-wing (SMER-SD), right-wing (Sme Rodina) as well as catch-all-parties (OĽaNO) alternating in the government.

Based on this theoretical framework, numerous empirical studies have sought to identify and quantify populist attitudes by developing various measures and scales, e.g., Akkerman et al., (2014); Schulz et al. (2018); Castanho Silva et al. (2018) (for more information, see Piterová et al., 2021). Schulz et al. (2018) have developed a scale that has been adapted and validated on the Slovak population (Piterová & Kováčová Holevová, 2022). The authors incorporated twelve items into three subscales that collectively embody populist attitudes:

1. **Anti-elitist attitudes** can be described as those where elites are perceived as remote and deceitful towards the people (The items in the scale included: Members of parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people; The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people; People like me have no influence on what the government does; Politicians talk too much and take too little action).

2. **Demand for popular sovereignty** concerns which power should be vested in the people (Items: The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums; The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken; The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions; The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people.)

3. **Belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of people** (Items: Ordinary people all pull together; Ordinary people are of good and honest character; Although the [nationality] are very different from each other, when it comes down to it they all think the same; The [nationality] are a coherent entity, rather than just a bunch of individuals).

Across all the dimensions, **the Manichean perspective** of populism has been captured through the portrayal of the people versus politicians or the government (Schulz et al., 2018). This same scale is used in the following chapters and provides more empirically based information about the possible consequences of populist attitudes in Slovakia.

The data was collected from three online surveys carried out by a local research agency. The respondents were selected to ensure a balanced representation of gender, age, education and region within the Slovak population. These are the three sets of data (collected in November 2021, December 2022 and August 2023) (Table 1.1) which are referred to throughout the book.

Table 1.1 *Sociodemographic characteristics of the research samples used in the analyses*

	Time of data collection	November 2021	December 2022	August 2023
Gender	Men	406 (49%)	122 (48%)	313 (49%)
	Women	426 (51%)	132 (52%)	330 (51%)
Age	M	43.8	44.8	44.84
	SD	15.01	15.39	14.37
Education	Primary	91 (11%)	30 (12%)	75 (12%)
	Lower secondary	259 (31%)	69 (27%)	165 (26%)
	Higher secondary	327 (39%)	88 (35%)	246 (38%)
	University	155 (19%)	67 (26%)	157 (24%)
Region	Bratislava	97 (11.66%)	28 (11.02%)	83 (12.91%)
	Trnava	84 (10.10%)	26 (10.24%)	68 (10.58%)
	Trenčín	96 (11.54%)	34 (13.39%)	71 (11.04%)
	Nitra	106 (12.74%)	31 (12.20%)	82 (12.75%)
	Žilina	114 (13.7%)	32 (12.60%)	82 (12.75%)
	Banská Bystrica	102 (12.26%)	28 (11.02%)	75 (11.66%)
	Prešov	117 (14.06%)	40 (15.75%)	92 (14.31%)
	Košice	116 (13.94%)	35 (13.78%)	90 (14%)
Total	N	832	254	643

Table 1.2 presents the means and standard deviations for populist attitudes and their sub-dimensions. The proportion of respondents classified as either having populist or non-populist attitudes based on the Goertzian concept structure (Wuttke, 2020) is also provided. According to this framework, populist attitudes are considered a non-compensatory construct. In other words, it is only those respondents scoring high on all three sub-dimensions who can be classified as having populist attitudes (Wuttke et al., 2020).

The lowest mean score, which fell around the midpoint of the response scale, was observed in the subscale measuring belief in the homogeneity of people. The highest mean score was observed in anti-elitism. The mean scores for populist attitudes remained relatively stable over the three-year period. The ratio values remained unchanged throughout the three-year time frame, indicating only a slightly higher proportion of people with non-populist attitudes in Slovakia.

However, it is important to clarify that this data is not part of a longitudinal survey. Consequently, the findings do not reflect changes in attitudes among the same individuals over time. Rather, a cross-sectional design was used which provides insights into the current state of populist attitudes within the population in different years.

Table 1.2 *The prevalence of political populist attitudes in Slovakia*

	November 2021	December 2022	August 2023
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Anti-elitism	5.87 (1.07)	6.14 (0.86)	5.77 (1.17)
Sovereignty of people	5.43 (1.26)	5.74 (1.21)	5.43 (1.27)
Homogeneity of people	4.05 (1.32)	3.96 (1.40)	4.21 (1.31)
Populist attitudes (average score)	5.12 (0.94)	5.28 (0.89)	5.14 (1.01)
Populist attitudes (minimum score)*	3.93 (1.27)	3.88 (1.38)	4.09 (1.29)
Ratio**	352:480	108:146	302:341

Notes. Representative samples (gender, age, education, regions in Slovakia), collected using an online panel, N (2021) = 832, N (2022) = 254, N (2023) = 643;
Populist attitudes are measured using the Slovak version of the Schulz et al. (2018) scale; Response scale 1-7, 7 = totally agree; a higher score indicates a higher level of populist attitudes;
*Goertz approach (Wuttke, 2020);
**The ratio of people with populist attitudes (average score > 4 on all three sub-dimensions): people with non-populist attitudes (average score < 4 on at least one sub-dimension) in the research sample.

1.2 Science-related populist attitudes

Given the research challenges encountered when studying political populist attitudes in countries where populists hold positions in government, researchers have started to shift their focus towards other populist influences such as the academic elite. This has led to the development of a more recent concept known as science-related populism (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). While it is related to political populism, it represents a distinct construct of its own. In their study, the authors propose four primary domains that serve as subscales for measuring populist attitudes: defining common people, the academic elite, as well as two forms of sovereignty. In a similar way to political populism, science-related populists emphasize the antagonistic dynamic between ordinary people and the academic elite. They view common people as a homogeneous group who share values and interests and rely on "common sense, everyday experience, or even gut feeling" (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 481). Amongst

this group, scientific knowledge is seen as contradictory to common sense. The academic elite, which includes universities, research institutes and individual scientists is regarded as a subset of a broader elite possessing supreme epistemic authority and the ability to make science-related decisions.

In line with political populism, science-related populism also labels the academic elite as morally inferior and perceives them as being a homogeneous entity. They believe that the elite collectively determines science and research agendas, methods, publications and claims to produce "true" knowledge (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 481). Furthermore, the academic elite is seen as disconnected from the everyday lives of ordinary people and incapable of providing the practical solutions demanded by the public. Science-related populists argue that the elite undermines the simple, naturalistic and reliable epistemology of ordinary people (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 481).

The demand for sovereignty is another key aspect of science-related populism. Rather than focusing on political decision-making, two types of sovereignty are emphasized: truth-speaking sovereignty and decision-making sovereignty. Truth-speaking sovereignty refers to the right to determine valid information, formulate truth claims, and challenge the legitimacy of the academic elite in shaping scientific knowledge (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 482). Science-related populists argue that the academic elite's scientific approaches fail to incorporate the everyday experiences and opinions of ordinary people. On the other hand, decision-making sovereignty pertains to the right to shape research agendas, allocate funding, determine study designs and have control over research processes (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 482). Science-related populists advocate for ordinary people to possess this sovereignty, ensuring that research aligns with their needs and values while preventing uncontrolled or secretive practices by researchers.

Based on this theoretical framework, Mede et al. (2021) have constructed the SciPop scale for measuring science-related populist attitudes that includes eight items in four sub-dimensions:

1. **Conception of the ordinary people** (Items: What unites the ordinary people is that they trust their common sense in everyday life; Ordinary people are of good and honest character.)
2. **Conception of the academic elite** (Items: Scientists are only after their own advantage; Scientists are in cahoots with politics and business.)
3. **Decision-making sovereignty** (Items: The people should have influence on the work of scientists; People like me should be involved in decisions about the topics scientists research.)
4. **Truth-speaking sovereignty** (Items: In case of doubt, one should trust the life experience of ordinary people rather than the estimations of scientists; We should rely more on common sense and less on scientific studies.)

The Slovak version of this scale (Piterová, 2024) is used in the following chapters and provides more empirical evidence on the possible consequences of populist attitudes in Slovakia.

The SciPop scale was included in the August 2023 data collection in Slovakia. Table 1.3 presents the means and standard deviations for populist attitudes and their sub-dimensions. It also provides the proportion of respondents classified as either having populist or non-populist attitudes based on the Goertzian concept structure (Wuttke, 2020).

In comparison to political populist attitudes (Table 1.2), the results suggest a lower average level of science-related populist attitudes. It also shows a lower ratio of people with populist attitudes compared to non-populist attitudes in Slovakia.

Table 1.3 *The prevalence of science-related populist attitudes in Slovakia*

	August 2023
	M (SD)
Conception of ordinary people	4.55 (1.28)
Conception of elites	3.94 (1.56)
Decision-making sovereignty	3.76 (1.48)
Truth-speaking sovereignty	4.06 (1.56)
Populist attitudes (average score)	4.08 (1.18)
Populist attitudes (minimum score)*	3.07 (1.37)
the Ratio**	96:547

Notes. Representative sample (gender, age, education, regions in Slovakia), collected using an online panel, N (2023) = 643;
Populist attitudes were measured using the Slovak version of the SciPop scale, Response scale was 1-7, 7 = totally agree; a higher score indicates a higher level of populist attitudes;
*Goertz approach (Wuttke, 2020);
**The ratio of people with populist attitudes (average score > 4 on all three sub-dimensions): people with non-populist attitudes (average score < 4 on at least one sub-dimension) in the research sample.

The differences between political and science-related populist attitudes in Slovakia can be initially observed in their distinct sub-dimensions. Political populist attitudes primarily revolve around anti-elite sentiment, belief in homogeneity and the sovereignty of the "common people". In contrast, science-related populist attitudes are structured around four specific subdimensions: (1) *Conception of the ordinary people* which emphasizes trust in common sense and the inherent goodness of ordinary individuals; (2) *Conception of the academic elite* which involves scepticism toward scientists, often perceived as self-serving or colluding with political and business interests; (3) *Decision-making sovereignty* which is the belief that ordinary people should have a say in the direction and focus of scientific research; and (4) *Truth-speaking sovereignty* which is a preference for the life experience and common sense of ordinary people over scientific findings. Although both forms of populism express distrust toward established authorities, political populism targets political elites while science-related populism is more focused on academic and scientific authorities.

The expression of populism takes on diverse forms in various political contexts. Indeed, international research has revealed that this variability impacts the significance of various predictors of populist attitudes. As a result, the findings from international contexts may not hold for the Slovak population. In Slovakia, the relationship between political populist attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics, socio-economic characteristics, political orientation, social identity, trust, emotions, and cognitions were examined using data collected in December 2022. A previous study (see Piterová & Loziak, 2024) has confirmed several significant predictors of populist attitudes. In particular, relative deprivation, belief in simple solutions, external political efficacy and conspiracy mentality were positively associated with stronger populist attitudes. Conversely, trust in experts was negatively associated with populist attitudes. This means that greater trust in experts predicted lower populist attitudes. One particularly interesting point is that the effect of education and subjective income diminished after accounting for other variables. This indicates that these factors alone may not be

direct drivers of populist attitudes in Slovakia. The model used in the study accounted for 54% of the variance in populist attitudes, suggesting that these factors together offer a substantial understanding of who is likely to hold populist views.

As science-related populist attitudes are a relatively unexplored area in Slovakia, information on the predictors of these attitudes is still lacking. Although we collected data in August 2023 to explore this area in more depth, the results have not yet been published. While both forms of populism share some common elements, preliminary findings suggest that they are ultimately driven by different socio-psychological processes and belief systems, which calls for tailored approaches for each in the Slovak context.

1.3 Prediction of voting behaviour according to populist attitudes

Previous research on the predictive power of populist attitudes in terms of voting behaviour has yielded inconclusive results so far. In their original study, Akkerman et al. (2014) confirmed a connection between populist attitudes and the intention to vote for populist political parties in Holland. Similarly, Van Hauwaert et al. (2020) found that a modified version of the scale (Akkerman et al., 2014) successfully predicted voting behaviour in nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden and the United Kingdom). However, Jungkunz et al. (2021) have discovered that populist attitudes fail to explain voting patterns for populist parties in countries where populist leaders are already in power such as Hungary, Montenegro, and Turkey. Indeed, higher populist attitudes reduced the likelihood of voting for populist parties, suggesting the existence of multiple types of populism in different political and social contexts. This finding aligns with an earlier paper by Stanley (2011) which indicates that a set of questions specifically designed to measure populism did not accurately predict electoral behaviour among Slovak respondents over a decade ago.

The findings from our data collected in 2021 demonstrated the instability of political populist attitudes (average and minimum score) in predicting both past voting for a populist party and the intention to vote for such a party in the next election (Piterová & Kováčová Holevová, 2022). This result was based on the scales developed by Van Hauwaert et al. (2020) and Schulz et al. (2018). However, the average score on the modified scale of Schulz et al. (2018) and Van Hauwaert et al. (2020) allowed the vote for populist parties in the last Parliamentary elections to be predicted. The intention to vote for populist parties in the future was consistently predicted only by using the minimum score on the Schulz et al. (2018) scale. However, these findings needed to be verified on other samples.

There were similar results found in terms of predicting the extent to which people identify with populist parties. In a cross-national comparison conducted by Castanho Silva et al. (2020), the scales developed by Akkerman et al. (2014) and Schulz et al. (2018) demonstrated high external validity and were successful in predicting populist party identification in Italy, Spain, and France. However, these scales failed to accurately predict populist party identification in Mexico, the United Kingdom and Greece. These were the only countries with populist governments during the data collection period, supporting the contextual specificity of populism.

Thus may be explained by the changing perception of people as populists come into power and redirect their anti-elite rhetoric towards other groups, including academics, journalists, judges and minorities (Jungkunz et al., 2021). Therefore, this chapter will look at examining the role of political and science-related populist attitudes scales in predicting previous and future voting behavior in Slovakia. In particular, it will focus on two specific elite groups: political parties or the government and academic elites. The data were collected one month before the Slovak Parliamentary elections held in September 2023.

Slovakia is a country with experienced populist parties holding power for several decades. After the fall of communism in 1989, Slovakia witnessed the rise and success of populist parties which tapped

into public dissatisfaction with established political elites, economic concerns and societal grievances. However, it should be noted that there is a paradox in Slovakia where populist parties, despite being anti-establishment and anti-elitist, have become part of the political establishment itself. One prominent populist party that has achieved electoral success since 1992 is the People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), led by Vladimír Mečiar. HZDS has formed coalitions with the right-wing populist Slovak National Party (SNS) and later with the Workers' Association of Slovakia (ZRS). The SNS focuses on nationalist sentiments and advocates for the preservation of Slovak culture, identity and interests. Despite experiencing periods of success, including entering coalition governments and holding ministerial positions, the SNS has also faced internal divisions and controversies. This has resulted in fluctuations in its electoral performance. Another notable populist party in Slovakia is Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), led by Robert Fico. Smer-SD has gained significant popularity and electoral victories since its establishment in 1999. The party has positioned itself as a left-wing populist party, promoting social welfare policies, economic protectionism and a strong national identity. Smer-SD has been successful in forming governments and Robert Fico has held the position of Prime Minister over multiple terms. However, its popularity has declined after facing criticism for alleged corruption and losing ground to other political forces. In the 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections, the populist movement OĽaNO, led by Igor Matovič, received the most votes and won 53 seats. This marked the first time since the 2006 elections that SMER–SD had not emerged as the party with the most seats. OĽaNO formed a coalition with the right-wing populist party We are Family (Sme Rodina), the liberal political party Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita) and the liberal conservative party For the People (Za ľudí). After three years of government under firstly Matovič, then Heger and finally the technocratic government, early elections were held in Slovakia in September 2023. A month before those elections, data was collected asking about voting behaviour and support for populist government proposals. During this period, the social and political situation in Slovakia was not only marked by the Covid-19 pandemic but also by the ongoing war in Ukraine, high inflation and the economic consequences of these events. The voting behaviour of Slovaks has long been described as volatile, characterized by support for new or anti-system political parties and the removal of traditional political parties from the parliament (see Gyárfášová et al., 2017 for further information). In addition, voter turnout in Slovakia is relatively low. However, parliamentary elections show a slightly higher turnout than other elections.

The political parties were categorized as being either populist or non-populist (Table 1.4 and Table 1.6), using the PopuList framework (Rooduijn et al., 2019), the TIMBRO Authoritarian Index (TAPI, 2019) and the POPPA (Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey) (Meijers et al., 2020). However, this approach has resulted in some inconsistencies. One example is TAPI which fails to acknowledge the clearly populist OĽaNO movement and the SMER-SD party as being populist, but includes the far-right-wing party ĽSNS. In contrast, PopuList identifies OĽaNO and SMER-SD as being populist but labels ĽSNS as right-wing and Eurosceptic, rather than populist. Notably, the POPPA survey ranks ĽSNS highest in populism, scoring 9.27 out of 10, while SMER-SD receives a relatively low score of under 4 out of 10.

In order to address these discrepancies, the study relied on a previous report by Školkay et al. (2021) who categorized political parties as populist if they fall into one of the following categories: purely populist with a populist ideology (e.g., OĽaNO, We are family), exhibit populist rhetoric and authentic ideology (e.g., SMER-SD, ĽSNS), and/or are considered borderline cases (e.g., SNS).

The number and percentage of respondents who voted for individual political parties in the 2020 Parliamentary election are summarized in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 *Voting behaviour in the last Parliamentary election in 2020 and coding of political parties*

Political party	**Populism**	**Number of respondents who voted for the party (%)**
OĽANO-NOVA-KÚ-ZMENA ZDOLA	Populist	115 (17.88)
SMER - SD	Populist	97 (15.08)
Sme rodina (We are family)	Populist	76 (11.82)
Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS)	Populist	56 (8.71)
Koalícia Progresívne Slovensko a a SPOLU – občianska demokracia (PS SPOLU)	Non-populist	35 (5.44)
Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS)	Non-populist	36 (5.59)
Za ľudí	Non-populist	21 (3.26)
Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH)	Non-populist	15 (2.33)
Magyar Közösségi Összefogás - Maďarská komunitná spolupatričnosť (MKO-MKS)	Non-populist	7 (1.08)
Slovenská národná strana (SNS)	Populist	14 (2.17)
Dobrá voľba	Non-populist	10 (1.55)
Vlasť	Non-populist	15 (2.33)
Most-Híd	Non-populist	10 (1.55)
Other	Excluded from analysis	7 (1.08)
Don´t know	Excluded from analysis	44 (6.84)
I wasn't eligible to vote/I didn't vote	Excluded from analysis	85 (13.22)

Notes. N = 643

The model aimed to predict the likelihood of voting for a populist party in the 2020 Parliamentary election, based on political and science-related populist attitudes (controlling for socio-demographic characteristics). The results of the logistic regression (Table 1.5) suggest that both political and science-related populist attitudes were significant predictors of voting for a populist party, with science-related populist attitudes showing a slightly stronger association.

Table 1.5 *Results of the logistic regression for populist party voting*

	Est.	SE	z	p
(Intercept)	-0.55	0.56	-0.98	0.325
Political populist attitudes	0.19	0.09	2.16	0.03*
Science-related populist attitudes	0.23	0.09	2.63	0.008**
Gender (women)	0.11	0.20	0.54	0.588
Age group (30-39)	-0.10	0.36	-0.27	0.790
Age group (40-54)	-0.14	0.36	-0.40	0.691
Age group (55<)	-0.15	0.37	-0.40	0.691
Education group (lower secondary)	0.57	0.38	-1.49	0.136
Education group (upper secondary)	-0.02	0..35	-0.07	0.949
Education group (university)	-0.17	0.36	-0.48	0.633

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, Age reference group (18-29); Education reference group (primary education)

The intercept indicates the log-odds of voting for a populist party when both political and science-related populist attitudes are zero. In this case, the intercept is -0.55 which translates to a lower likelihood of voting for a populist party when political and science-related populist attitudes are at their baseline.

The coefficient 0.19 suggests that for each one-unit increase in political populist attitudes, the log-odds of voting for a populist party increase by 0.23, holding science-related populist attitudes constant. The p-value (0.03) indicates that the result was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. In the case of the second predictor, the log-odds of voting for a populist party increase by 0.23 for each one-unit increase in science-related populist attitudes, holding political populist attitudes constant. The p-value (0.008) is even lower, suggesting this effect is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Gender, age and education were not significant predictors of voting for a populist party in the 2020 General election.

The study also looked at whether people who voted populist parties in the 2020 elections have a higher level of populist attitudes. A Welch t-test supported the differences ($t = 3.95$, $df = 257.55$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen´s $d = 0.40$) in the level of political populist attitudes between people who voted for populist parties (M = 4.27 out of 7) and people who did not vote for populist parties (M = 3.74 out of 7). The Welch t-test also supported the differences ($t = 4.25$, $df = 273.53$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen´s $d = 0.44$) in the level of science-related populist attitudes between people who voted for populist parties (M = 3.21out of 7) and people who did not vote for populist parties (M = 2.63 out of 7).

The number and percentage of respondents planning to vote for individual political parties in the 2023 Parliamentary election are summarized in Table 1.6.

Table 1.6 *Planned voting behaviour in the upcoming Parliamentary election in 2023 and coding of political parties*

Political party	Populism	Number of respondents who plan to vote for a party (%)
SMER – sociálna demokracia	Populist	91 (14.15)
Progresívne Slovensko	Non-populist	82 (12.75)
HLAS – sociálna demokracia	Populist	72 (11.19)
Republika	Populist	41 (6.37)
SME Rodina	Populist	48 (7.46)
SAS – Sloboda a solidarita	Non-populist	26 (4.04)
OĽANO A PRIATELIA*	Populist	33 (5.13)
KDH – Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie	Non-populist	18 (2.79)
Slovenská národná strana (SNS)	Populist	35 (5.44)
Demokrati	Non-populist	11 (1.7)
Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko	Populist	16 (2.48)
Modrí, Most-Híd	Non-populist	0 (0)
Other	Excluded from analysis	8 (1.23)
Don't know	Excluded from analysis	133 (20.68)
I'm not going to vote/I'm going to hand in a blank ballot paper	Excluded from analysis	29 (4.51)

Notes. N = 643; *Obyčajní ľudia (OĽANO), Nezávislí kandidáti (NEKA), NOVA, Slobodní a zodpovední, Pačivale roma, Magyar Szívek a Kresťanská únia a Za ľudí

The second model aims to predict planned voting behaviour in the upcoming 2023 Parliamentary election based on political and science-related populist attitudes (controlling for socio-demographic characteristics). The results of the logistic regression (Table 1.7) suggest that both political populist attitudes and science-related populist attitudes are statistically significant at the 0.01 and 0.001 level, respectively. This provides strong evidence that both are positively associated with planned voting behaviour for a populist party. In particular, science-related populist attitudes have a larger coefficient (0.60) compared to political populist attitudes (0.36), implying a stronger association with the likelihood of voting for a populist party.

Table 1.7 *Results of the logistic regression for planned voting behaviour in the 2023 General election*

	Est.	SE	z	p
(Intercept)	-1.97	0.64	-3.07	0.02**
Political populist attitudes	0.27	0.10	2.67	0.007**
Science-related populist attitudes	0.65	0.11	5.92	<0.001***
Gender (women)	0.21	0.23	0.89	0.373
Age group (30 – 39)	0.68	0.38	1.83	0.678
Age group (40 – 54)	0.62	0.38	1.65	0.100
Age group (55<)	0.98	0.38	2.53	0.011*
Education group (lower secondary)	-0.23	0.48	-0.53	0.59
Education group (upper secondary)	-0.77	0.44	-1.77	0.07
Education group (university)	-1.28	0.45	-2.87	0.004**

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, Age reference group (18-29); Education reference group (primary education)

The negative intercept (-1.97) indicates that individuals are much less likely to plan to vote for the populist party in the upcoming Parliamentary elections although as either type of populist attitude increases, the likelihood of planned voting for a populist party increases significantly. A one-unit increase in political populist attitudes increases the log-odds of planning to vote for a populist party by 0.27, holding science-related populist attitudes constant. For each one-unit increase in science-related populist attitudes, the log-odds of planned voting for a populist party increase by 0.65, holding political populist attitudes constant. Thus, science-related populist attitudes appear to have an even stronger impact on planned voting behaviour than political populist attitudes. The highly significant p-values suggest that these relationships are unlikely to be due to chance, providing robust support for the association between populist attitudes and planned voting behaviour. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, older people and those with lower levels of education were more likely to vote for populist parties, while gender was not a significant predictor.

Moreover, we have examined whether people who plan to vote for populist parties in the 2023 Parliamentary elections have a higher level of populist attitudes. Welch t-test supported the differences between people with political populist attitudes (M = 4.33 out of 7) and people with non-populist attitudes (M = 3.43 out of 7) in their support for populist party ($t = 6.97$, $df = 248.99$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen´s $d = 0.71$). Welch t-test supported the differences between people with science-related populist attitudes (M = 3.36 out of 7) and people with non-populist attitudes (M = 2.25 out of 7) in their support for populist party ($t = 9.08$, $df = 311.14$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.88$).

Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the characteristics and prevalence of populist attitudes in Slovakia, summarizes their determinants and assesses their potential in predicting electoral behaviour. While political populist attitudes are more common, attitudes toward scientists as elites are also emerging. These two types of populism appear to be distinct constructs, as indicated by the differing predictors associated with them.

Previous research (Piterová & Loziak, 2024) has identified some key determinants of political populist attitudes. It was found that relative deprivation, belief in simple solutions, external political efficacy and a tendency to lean towards conspiracy thinking were all positively associated with stronger political populist attitudes. This means that higher levels in each of these factors predicted higher populist tendencies. In contrast, trust in experts was negatively associated with political populist attitudes, where greater trust in experts was linked to lower levels of populist attitudes. Our newest data included science-related populism, a relatively new concept in the Slovak context. The findings were not published yet, but the notion of scientists as a "malevolent elite" is particularly concerning and warrants further investigation in Slovakia.

This study has used rigorous methodologies and data to enhance understanding of populist attitudes in Slovakia. The research contributes to ongoing discussions about populism, highlighting the importance of context-specific analyses in understanding the complex nature of societal attitudes. Populist attitudes, whether political or science-related, are deeply rooted in Slovakia's unique social, cultural and political landscape.

In order to examine the relationship between populist attitudes and voting behaviour, the focus was on the 2020 and 2023 parliamentary elections. The data has consistently shown a strong link between higher levels of populist attitudes and support for populist parties, both in past elections and voting intentions in the future. While political elites in Slovakia are typically perceived as politicians and government officials, populist attitudes targeting scientists as elites have also shown themselves to be relevant in the Slovak context. Indeed, it was found that science-related populist attitudes were slightly more predictive of voting behaviour than traditional political populism.

Minimal scores on the populist attitudes scale (Schulz et al., 2018) effectively predicted support for populist parties, both retrospectively and in terms of future voting intentions. This finding aligns with earlier research from 2021 involving Slovak samples (Piterová & Kováčová Holevová, 202). The Welch's t-tests have confirmed that individuals with higher levels of political populist attitudes were more likely to vote for populist parties. A similar pattern emerged for science-related populist attitudes, further illustrating the broad alignment between ideological dispositions and voting behaviour.

However, it is important to note that voting behaviour is influenced by numerous factors, including cultural context. Slovakia’s electoral landscape is notably volatile (Gyárfášová et al., 2017) and is shaped by processes like peripheralization (Dvořák & Zouhar, 2022). Recent opinion polls have suggested that Slovak society is vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and displays a pro-Russian sentiment, both of which may also impact electoral choices.

The current findings contribute to a deeper understanding of populist attitudes in Slovakia, highlighting their influence on voting behaviour. The interplay between political and science-related populism highlights the multifaceted dynamics of populist movements with significant implications for electoral outcomes and policy debates in Slovakia.

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2. Populist gullibility as a consequence of populist attitudes

Alexander Loziak

2.1 Conspiracy mentality – links to beliefs and cognitive styles

Conspiracy mentality is the general propensity to see major events as being secretly manipulated by powerful and malevolent groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). This belief system has become a significant subject of research in contemporary psychology and sociology, as the rise of the internet and social media platforms has exponentially increased the spread and influence of conspiracy theories (Cinelli et al., 2022). Conspiracy mentality is not only relevant as a psychological construct but also consequential in its societal impacts. Indeed, conspiracy mentality has the capacity to influence political, environmental and health-related behaviours and attitudes (Hornsey et al., 2018a; Hornsey et al., 2018b; Imhoff et al., 2022).

In essence, a conspiracy mentality is characterized by the intrinsic tendency to believe in the deceptive and malevolent nature of authorities or other powerful entities (i.e. conspiracy beliefs) (Grabow & Rock, 2023). Individuals with a high level of conspiracy mentality are likelier to adopt multiple conspiracy beliefs and believe in various conspiracy theories, regardless of their content. This suggests that it is a generalized tendency rather than a series of isolated beliefs (Bruder et al., 2013).

A notable characteristic of those who tend to believe conspiracy theories is a lack of control. People who feel powerless, socially excluded or anxious are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories, perhaps to make sense of complex societal events. This belief in conspiracies can help individuals regain a sense of understanding and control in a world perceived as threatening and chaotic. These beliefs provide straightforward and reassuring explanations for complex events albeit without factual foundations (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas et al, 2017; Dow et al., 2022; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013). Societal crises that can cause feelings of threat and chaos, such as pandemics or economic recessions, can act as catalysts for spreading conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Recent research has focused on the cognitive processes underlying conspiracy mentality. A review of the literature on cognitive biases in conspiracy beliefs (Gagliardi, 2022) has suggested that people inclined towards conspiratorial thinking are more likely to display a bias known as "proportionality bias". This can be defined as the inclination to believe that big events must have big causes. This bias can lead individuals to dismiss simpler explanations in favour of more elaborate, and often unlikely, conspiracy theories. Furthermore, the role of cognitive dissonance, a state of psychological discomfort arising from holding two contradictory beliefs or attitudes, has been emphasised in understanding why individuals might choose to believe in conspiracy theories despite overwhelming counter-evidence (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013).

The social implications of conspiracy mentality are profound and especially in the context of public health. Hornsey et al. (2018b) have highlighted the negative consequences of conspiracy beliefs, particularly with regard to vaccinations. Indeed, the belief in vaccination-related conspiracy theories has been linked to higher rates of anti-vaccination attitudes which poses a significant risk to public health efforts in managing outbreaks of preventable diseases.

However, it is not only health behaviours that are influenced by conspiracy mentality. Political attitudes are also significantly shaped by conspiratorial beliefs. A study by van Prooijen et al. (2015) explored the connection between conspiracy mentality and political extremism and found that belief in conspiracies can fuel radicalization and extremist political behaviour. This is particularly concerning given the current polarized nature of contemporary politics where conspiracy theories are sometimes weaponized for political ends.

The digital age has significantly amplified the spread of conspiracy beliefs. Platforms like social media allow conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific ideas to reach vast audiences quickly, often without any fact-checking. This has created echo chambers where these unverified beliefs are not only shared but also reinforced within communities (Cinelli et al., 2022).

While pseudoscientific beliefs and conspiracy beliefs are not the same concepts, they do share similar roots. Pseudoscientific beliefs are false causal beliefs that appear to be based on facts and evidence but are not grounded in scientific method (Chow et al., 2021). As in the case of conspiracy beliefs, the spread of pseudoscientific beliefs can be attributed to similar psychological and social mechanisms. People tend to gravitate towards pseudoscientific beliefs when they offer simplicity in face of complexity, a sense of control in uncertain situations or when they align with pre-existing world views. The appeal of pseudoscience is often rooted in its ability to provide immediate answers to complex problems, albeit misleading information. This appeal is amplified by the cognitive errors and perception biases inherent in human reasoning (Escolà-Gascón et al., 2020).

The prevalence of conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs varies significantly across populations, reflecting diverse societal and cultural factors. In the United States, surveys have indicated that approximately 50% of the population endorses at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Similarly, a US-Canadian survey (Leibovitz et al., 2021) showed that 49.7% of respondents believed at least one conspiracy theory at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pseudoscientific beliefs are also present in many areas. Indeed, an online survey of U.S. adults revealed that around 10% of respondents agreed with conspiracy claims that the Earth is flat, that NASA had faked the Moon landings, or that COVID-19 vaccinations had implanted tracking microchips (POLES, 2021). These statistics highlight the prevalence of conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs, indicating a need for educational and policy interventions aimed at promoting scientific literacy and critical thinking.

A comprehensive strategy is necessary in order to address such beliefs. This should include educational programs that emphasize the development of critical thinking and an analytical mindset. It is possible to develop a more critical assessment of information through greater critical and analytical thinking (O´Mahony et al., 2023).

Previous research has indicated that the endorsement of conspiracy theories and pseudoscientific beliefs is not just a matter of misinformation but is deeply connected to the cognitive styles and world views of individuals. Those who exhibit a higher propensity for intuitive rather than analytical thinking, are more likely to endorse such beliefs (Swami et al., 2014).

In terms of cognitive psychology, 'Faith in Intuition' and 'Need for Evidence' are two predominant cognitive styles that determine how individuals process information and make decisions. Faith in Intuition represents the degree to which people believe they can trust instinctive feelings during the appraisal of information. Intuition can be a relevant source of knowledge (Kahneman, 2011), particularly when it forms the basis of subsequent consideration. However, if reliance on intuition is not balanced with analytical reasoning, there is a tendency to overlook and dismiss existing evidence (Swami et al., 2014). The Need for Evidence refers to the degree to which individuals perceive that their views should be grounded in externally verified data. Those with high levels of Need for Evidence strive to align their beliefs with established facts. In contrast, individuals with a low Need for Evidence tend to maintain views influenced by their ideological beliefs. This is irrespective of whether these beliefs contradict the prevailing scientific consensus (Garrett et al., 2016; Hindman, 2009).

Garrett and Weeks (2017) examined the role of these cognitive styles in shaping beliefs and highlighted how they can lead to the formation of misperceptions and conspiracist ideation. They suggest that individuals with a stronger Faith in Intuition are more prone to accepting and propagating misinformed or baseless ideas as a result of putting less emphasis on analytical verification (Garrett & Weeks, 2017). Other research supports this notion with Pytlik et al. (2020) stating that an intuitive thinking style accompanied by a propensity for faster decision-making serves as the potential cognitive basis for

believing in conspiracy theories. This effect was also confirmed in the case of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs where lower analytical thinking was shown to be one of the significant predictors (alongside higher spirituality and higher narcissism) of such beliefs (Gligorić et al., 2021). Despite this, research looking at the connection between cognitive styles and populist attitudes is lacking. Although there is some limited evidence that populist attitudes might be linked to cognitive traits in the form of a need for cognition (Erisen et al., 2021), these connections require much more attention. In subchapter 2.5, the connections between populist attitudes, faith in intuition and measurements of unsubstantiated epistemic claims are explored in Slovak samples.

2.2 The case of Slovakia

There is a growing body of research which indicates that conspiracy beliefs in many countries are not merely a fringe phenomenon but are prevalent and intertwined with the conspiracy mentality and cognitive styles of the population (Mikušková, 2021). Surveys have shown that Slovakia, followed by Hungary, have the highest tendency to believe in conspiracy theories among Central European countries (Globsec, 2018; Klingová, 2019). It was found that 53% of Slovak respondents said they believed that secret groups control world events with the aim of establishing a totalitarian world system. A number of Slovak studies have examined conspiracy mentality and beliefs in different contexts. In particular, the associations between conspiracy mentality/beliefs and anxiety and lack of control (Šrol et al., 2021), cognitive reflection (Mikušková, 2021), socially aversive traits (Teličák, 2023) and populist attitudes and relative deprivation (Loziak & Piterová, 2023).

Conspiracy mentality, conspiracy beliefs, pseudoscientific beliefs and cognitive styles were measured in three Slovak surveys during August 2023. Conspiracy mentality was assessed by The Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) (Bruder et al., 2013). This scale consists of 5 items e.g., “I think that many very important things happen in the world which the public is never informed about”. In order to measure pseudo-scientific beliefs, there were four items which focused on homeopathy, vaccinations, alternative treatment and drinking solutions of sodium chlorite, e.g., “Vaccinations do more harm to people's health than good.” Conspiracy beliefs were measured using four items focused on the pharmaceutical industry, migration, attack on World Trade Centre and the existence and concealment of extraterrestrial beings e.g., “There is compelling evidence of extraterrestrial visitation on Earth, but it is being kept secret by government institutions.” (Halama, 2019). Faith in intuition for facts was measured using four items, e.g., “I trust my initial feeling about the facts” while the need for evidence was also measured using four items e.g., “Evidence is more important than whether something feels true.” (Garrett & Weeks, 2017).

Table 2.1 presents the means, standard deviations and scales for these measurements. The mean conspiracy mentality score remained stable and relatively high across all three samples. This means that the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories did not change much over three years and remained fairly strong. The stability of this score also suggests a persistent tendency in the population towards conspiracy beliefs which merits further investigation. Conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs and cognitive styles were only measured in the 2023 sample. However, it appears that both pseudoscientific ideas and conspiracy beliefs are deeply rooted in the population. Conspiracy beliefs scored slightly higher on average relative to pseudoscientific beliefs while Need for Evidence achieved a slightly higher mean score relative to Faith in Intuition. Need for Evidence and Faith in Intuition were weakly correlated ($r = 0.300$, $p < 0.001$) while conspiracy belief and pseudoscientific beliefs demonstrated a stronger correlation ($r = 0.712$, $p < 0.001$). There was a marginally higher mean score for Need for Evidence over Faith in Intuition which implies a preference for empirical evidence although the strength of this preference appears limited given the correlation between the two cognitive styles. The weak correlation between Need for Evidence and Faith in Intuition might suggest that these cognitive styles operate independently to some extent. This could mean that people can be guided by either logic or gut feelings, depending on the situation, without one strongly influencing the other. On the other hand, the strong correlation between conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs

indicates a possible common underlying cognitive or psychological mechanism driving these belief systems. Table 2.2 provides the means, standard deviations and scales for the individual beliefs that were measured.

Table 2.1 *Conspiracy mentality, conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs and cognitive styles in Slovak samples: the descriptive statistics*

	Mean	Standard deviation	Scale
Conspiracy mentality (2021)	6.78	2.11	0-10
Conspiracy mentality (2022)	6.57	2.45	0-10
Conspiracy mentality (2023)	6.67	2.24	0-10
Conspiracy beliefs (2023)	3.10	1.02	1-5
Pseudoscientific beliefs (2023)	2.83	0.93	1-5
Faith in Intuition (2023)	4.87	1.16	1-7
Need for Evidence (2023)	5.14	1.11	1-7

Notes. Representative samples (gender, age, education, regions of the Slovak Republic), collected using an online panel, N (2021) = 832, N (2022) = 254, N (2023) = 643

Table 2.2 *Conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs items in Slovak samples: the descriptive statistics*

	Mean	Standard deviation	Scale
The pharmaceutical industry is concealing the existence of an effective cure for cancer for the sake of financial gain from chemotherapy.	3.42	1.30	1-5
The influx of immigrants into Europe is being deliberately provoked in order to harm European countries and their culture.	3.36	1.40	1-5
The terrorist attack by planes on the World Trade Center in New York (the so-called twin towers) was organised by US government institutions.	2.96	1.32	1-5
There is compelling evidence of extraterrestrial visitation on Earth, but it is being kept secret by government institutions.	2.67	1.27	1-5
Various alternative methods of treating cancer that are not recognised by conventional medicine are indeed effective.	3.10	1.16	1-5
Homeopathy is an effective form of treatment for many physical problems and diseases.	2.99	1.23	1-5
Drinking sodium chlorite solution has significant healing effects on the human body.	2.35	1.16	1-5
Vaccinations do more harm to people's health than good.	2.89	1.39	1-5

Notes. N (2023) = 643

The first four claims fall under the category of conspiracy beliefs while the following four come under pseudoscientific beliefs. In terms of conspiracy beliefs, the highest score was in the statement: “The pharmaceutical industry is concealing the existence of an effective cure for cancer for the sake of financial gain from chemotherapy”, closely followed by “The influx of immigrants into Europe is being deliberately provoked in order to harm European countries and their culture”. With regard to the pseudoscientific beliefs, the highest mean score was measured in the statement: “Various alternative methods of treating cancer that are not recognised by conventional medicine are indeed effective.” It should also be noted that all but one of the statements exceeded the mean score of 2.5, indicating the considerable popularity of these beliefs in the sample. These results are alarming because they reveal a widespread acceptance of misinformation which can undermine trust in science and institutions. Beliefs in conspiracy theories and pseudoscience can lead to harmful health decisions such as rejecting effective medical treatments as well as fostering social mistrust, particularly when tied to xenophobic narratives.

2.3 Populist gullibility

Populistic and conspiracy discourses share striking similarities as they both depict society as divided between a corrupt elite and the oppressed masses. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) have emphasized this division by portraying the people positively and the elite negatively. This theme also resonates in conspiracy theories where the powerful groups are often labelled as sinister actors (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). While both constructs share this vision of a polarized world, the distinctions should be noted. Conspiracy theories do not inherently champion the morality or political authority of the masses (like populist discourse does), often viewing the public as victims, not as virtuous actors (Silva et al., 2017).

Populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs also often intertwine and this has been supported by recent research. Silva et al. (2017) have examined this link and identified a significant correlation between the two constructs. The study has argued that individuals harbouring populist attitudes are more prone to believing in conspiracy theories due to their inherent mistrust of the elite. Van Prooijen et al. (2022) carried out a large multinational study in 13 EU countries and found that populist attitudes are largely associated with conspiracy mentality. This relationship was even experimentally tested in an attempt to gain evidence on the causality between the constructs. This online experiment exposed a randomly selected group to a vignette on three 9/11 conspiratorial stories, followed by measuring their populist attitudes. The findings support the notion suggesting that belief in conspiracy theories tends to lead individuals to adopt only one dimension of populist views. In particular, the perspective of seeing the world in a starkly divided, good-versus-evil manner, known as the Manichean perspective (Guinjoan & Galais, 2023).

The connection between these constructs is so profound that Van Prooijen et al. (2022) have coined the term ´Populist gullibility´. They have delved into the core of this phenomenon by exploring the relationship between populist attitudes and a conspiracy mentality, credibility of obscure news, people's tendency to perceive nonsense statements as profound (termed 'bullshit receptivity') and accepting supernatural beliefs. Their analysis revealed that populist attitudes are related to all of these constructs. In addition, these relationships were mediated by faith in intuition. They go on to argue that tendencies to believe unsubstantiated or obscure epistemic claims as true, including non-political ones, are not merely coincidental but are deeply rooted in the psychological makeup of individuals with strong populist leanings (Van Prooijen et al., 2022).

2.4 Connections between populist attitudes, faith in intuition and measurements of unsubstantiated epistemic claims

This subchapter will explore the relationships between the constructs discussed in previous chapters. In particular, political and science-related populist attitudes (and their dimensions), faith in intuition as a cognitive style, conspiracy mentality and conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs. This is based on data collected from a Slovak sample in 2023. The analysis in this subchapter utilizes the notion of populist gullibility as a consequence of populist attitudes. In other words, the premise that populist attitudes predict different measurements of unsubstantiated epistemic claims. Based on current research, the directionality of the relationship between populist attitudes and unsubstantiated epistemic claims is not clear and it is reasonable to suggest that these relationships work both ways. However, the direction of the relationship proposed in the current analysis has been explored less and thus merits a more thorough look. Firstly, a regression analysis is used to test whether the dimensions of political and science-oriented populist attitudes predict the three measures of unsubstantiated epistemic claims – conspiracy mentality, conspiracy beliefs and pseudoscientific beliefs. Table 2.3 provides the correlations of the analyzed variables.

Table 2.3 *Correlation matrix of conspiracy mentality, conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs and dimensions of populist attitudes*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. conspiracy mentality									
2. conspiracy beliefs	0.65*								
3. pseudoscientific beliefs	0.49*	0.71*							
4. anti-elitism	0.50*	0.29*	0.21*						
5. sovereignty of people	0.53*	0.42*	0.36*	0.63*					
6. homogeneity of people	0.33*	0.38*	0.42*	0.30*	0.51*				
7. conception of ordinary people	0.40*	0.39*	0.40*	0.36*	0.52*	0.73*			
8. conception of academic elites	0.48*	0.58*	0.49*	0.27*	0.39*	0.35*	0.40*		
9. decision-making sovereignty	0.31*	0.37*	0.40*	0.13*	0.34*	0.36*	0.42*	0.52*	
10. truth-speaking sovereignty	0.42*	0.53*	0.51*	0.27*	0.44*	0.43*	0.54*	0.67*	0.59*

Notes. * $p < 0.001$

The findings reveal a notable link between the various measurements of unsubstantiated epistemic claims. These are indicated by the high correlation coefficients and align well with expectations. Moreover, there are substantial correlations between the measures of these unsubstantiated claims and the various dimensions of populist attitudes. Indeed, the correlation coefficients in this context range from 0.21 to 0.58, with each identified relationship being statistically significant. These results are in line with existing literature with research conducted by Guinjoan and Galais (2023), Van Prooijen et al. (2022), and Silva et al. (2017) all identifying similar connections. The consistency of these findings across different studies highlights the robustness of the observed relationship.

The first regression analysis was conducted to test if the dimensions of political and science-oriented populist attitudes predicted conspiracy mentality. Firstly, all required assumptions were tested to establish the adequacy of the data for the regression analysis. All the tested assumptions were met. Table 2.4 shows the regression statistics.

Table 2.4 *Summary of the linear regression analysis with conspiracy mentality as the dependent variable*

dependent variable - conspiracy mentality					
predictors	est.	SE	t	p	VIF
intercept	-0.50	0.37	-1.34	0.180	
anti-elitism	0.49	0.08	6.48	<0.001***	1.72
sovereignty of people	0.37	0.08	4.65	<0.001***	2.21
homogeneity of people	-0.05	0.08	-0.68	0.497	2.29
conception of ordinary people	0.15	0.09	1.78	0.076	2.57
conception of academic elites	0.40	0.06	6.66	<0.001***	1.92
decision- making sovereignty	0.03	0.06	0.44	0.659	1.68
truth- speaking sovereignty	0.05	0.07	0.67	0.504	2.37
F = 64.7, p = < 0.001, R Square = 0.416, Adj. R Square = 0.410					

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

The overall regression was found to be statistically significant with anti-elitism, sovereignty of people and conception of academic elites significantly predicting conspiracy mentality. In other words, people who hold strong anti-elite beliefs, believe in the absolute power of the people over elites, or distrust academic elites are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. Regarding these results, dimensions of political populist attitudes might be better predictors of conspiracy mentality compared to dimensions of science-related populist attitudes.

The second regression analysis sought to ascertain whether dimensions of political and science-related populist attitudes predicted conspiracy beliefs. All necessary assumptions were examined and met. Table 2.5 provides a detailed overview of the regression statistics. The overall regression was found to

be statistically significant with sovereignty of people, homogeneity of people, truth-speaking sovereignty and conception of elites significantly predicting conspiracy beliefs. These results are concerning because they suggest that certain political and social attitudes, particularly those linked to populism, are driving conspiracy beliefs. When people prioritize the idea that people are uniform and sovereign, and view elites with suspicion, it can lead to a rejection of established facts and institutions. This can weaken public trust and fuel division.

Table 2.5 *Summary of the linear regression analysis with conspiracy beliefs as the dependent variable*

dependent variable - conspiracy beliefs					
predictors	est.	SE	t	p	VIF
intercept	0.63	0.17	3.64	<0.001***	
anti-elitism	0.04	0.03	1.09	0.275	1.72
sovereignty of people	0.10	0.04	2.63	0.009**	2.21
homogeneity of people	0.08	0.04	2.33	0.020*	2.29
conception of ordinary people	-0.01	0.04	-0.25	0.807	2.57
conception of academic elites	0.25	0.03	8.99	<0.001***	1.92
decision- making sovereignty	-0.01	0.03	-0.30	0.760	1.68
truth- speaking sovereignty	0.12	0.03	3.76	<0.001***	2.37
F = 62.7, p = < 0.001, R Square = 0.409, Adj. R Square = 0.402					

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

The third regression analysis evaluated the predictive capacity of political and science-focused populist inclinations on pseudoscientific beliefs. All necessary assumptions were examined and met. The results of the regression are presented in Table 2.6. The overall regression was statistically significant. It was found that homogeneity of people, truth-speaking sovereignty and conception of elites significantly predicted conspiracy beliefs.

A similar set of predictors were identified in all the tested regression models. The conception of academic elites appeared as a significant predictor in every regression analysis, making it the most stable predictor of unsubstantiated epistemic claims. This association appears rational, given that the character of this dimension emphasizes that scientists pursue their own interests. The scepticism towards scientists and the scientific community seems to foster a predisposition in accepting unsubstantiated claims. On the other hand, the dimensions of a conception of ordinary people, which highlights the positive and sincere nature of the general population, in addition to decision-making sovereignty, advocating for public influence over scientific work, do not appear to predict adherence to unsubstantiated claims.

Table 2.6 *Summary of the linear regression analysis with pseudoscientific beliefs as the dependent variable*

dependent variable - pseudoscientific beliefs					
predictors	est.	SE	t	p	VIF
intercept	0.86	0.17	5.19	<0.001***	
anti-elitism	-0.02	0.03	-0.50	0.620	1.72
sovereignty of people	0.05	0.03	1.55	0.122	2.21
homogeneity of people	0.14	0.03	3.91	<0.001***	2.29
conception of ordinary people	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.983	2.57
conception of academic elites	0.14	0.03	5.28	<0.001***	1.92
decision- making sovereignty	0.04	0.03	1.42	0.157	1.68
truth- speaking sovereignty	0.12	0.03	4.25	<0.001***	2.37
F = 48.2, p = < 0.001, R Square = 0.347, Adj. R Square = 0.340					

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

In the next step, mediation models were created to test the mediation role of faith in intuition in the relationship between populist attitudes and conspiracy mentality. This model design was proposed and supported by a study drawing samples from 13 European countries (Van Prooijen et al., 2022). The role of faith in intuition is tested separately with political populist attitudes and science-related attitudes. The correlations of all tested variables are available in Table 2.7.

Table 2.7 *Correlation matrix of populist attitudes, conspiracy mentality and faith in intuition*

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. political populist attitudes				
2. science-related populist attitudes	0.58*			
3. faith in intuition	0.60*	0.51*		
4. conspiracy mentality	0.58*	0.50*	0.46*	

Note. * p < .001

Each variable analyzed exhibited a moderate level of correlation with the others. This indicates a consistent relationship among them.

Firstly, the model with political populist attitudes was tested. Figure 2.1 shows the mediation model with the path estimates depicted. In Table 2.8, the z-values, standardized estimates and statistical significance of the calculated effects are shown.

Figure 2.1. *Diagram of the mediation model of political populist attitudes, faith in intuition and conspiracy mentality*

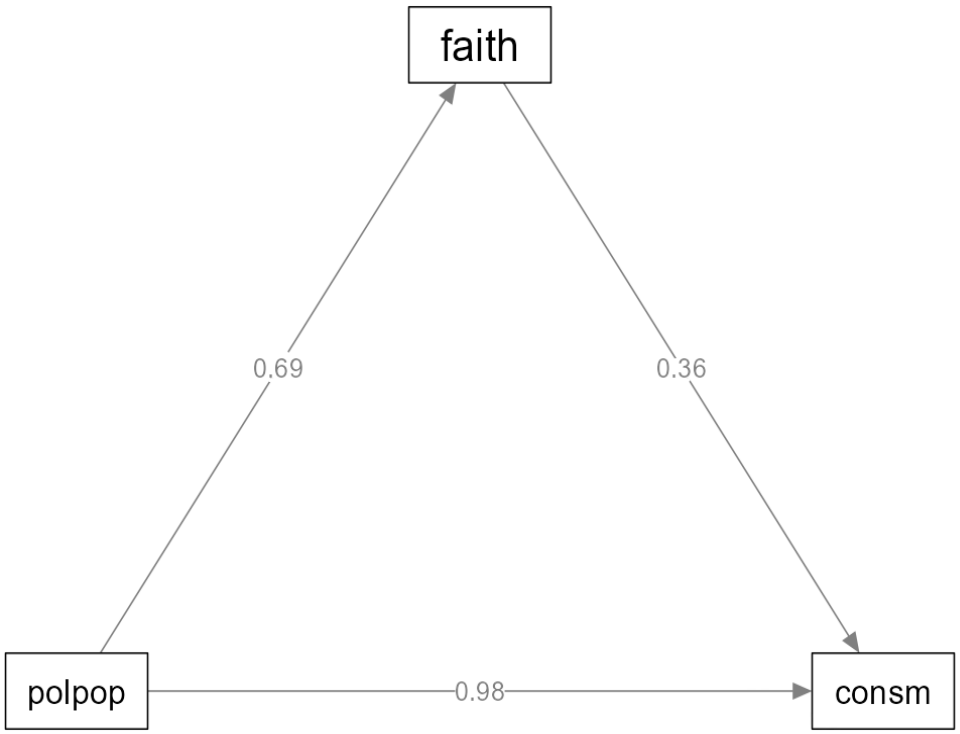

Table 2.8. *Mediation estimates for the model of political populist attitudes, faith in intuition and conspiracy mentality*

effects	Est.	SE	Z	p
indirect	0.25	0.05	4.55	<0.001***
direct	0.98	0.09	11.0	<0.001***
total	1.23	0.07	16.99	<0.001***

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Secondly, the model with science-related populist attitudes was tested. Figure 2.2 shows the mediation model with the path estimates depicted. In Table 2.9, the z-values, standardized estimates and statistical significance of the calculated effects are presented.

Figure 2.2. *Diagram of the mediation model of science-oriented populist attitudes, faith in intuition and conspiracy mentality*

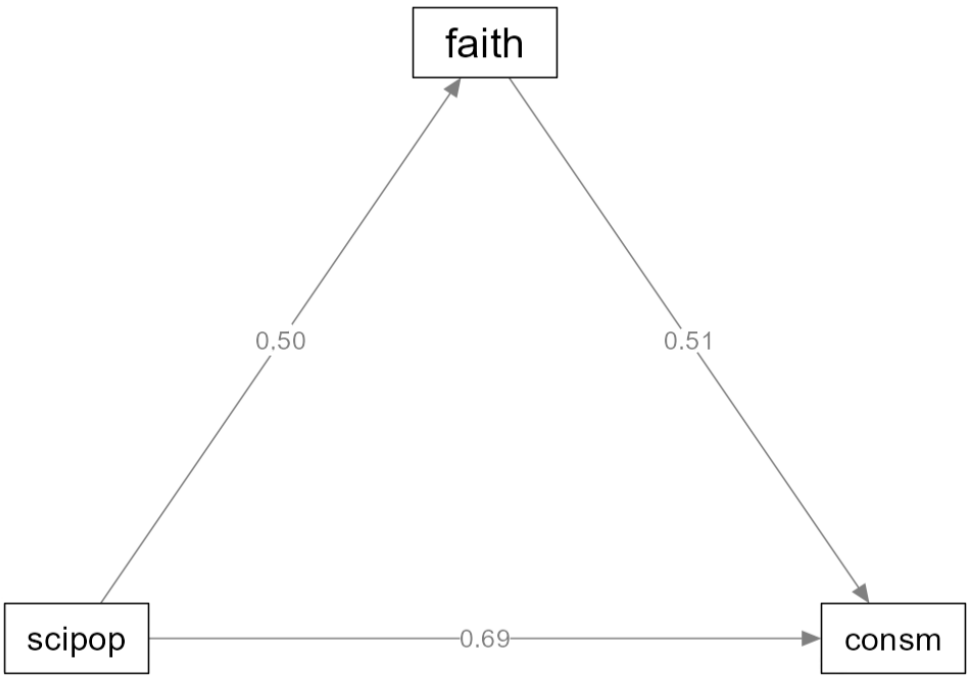

Table 2.9. *Mediation estimates for the model of science-related populist attitudes, faith in intuition and conspiracy mentality*

effects	Est.	SE	Z	p
indirect	0.26	0.04	6.34	<0.001***
direct	0.69	0.07	9.56	<0.001***
total	0.95	0.06	14.76	<0.001***

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

In both models, the direct paths (from political or science-related populist attitudes to conspiracy mentality) and the indirect paths (mediated by faith in intuition) are not only statistically significant but also sizable. This indicates that while populist attitudes (whether political or science-related) have a direct impact on conspiracy mentality, a significant proportion of this effect is channelled through an individual's propensity to trust intuitive over analytical reasoning. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. As suggested in the previous text, these two types of reasoning can be independent to a certain extent. In addition, mediation models with three variables can oversimplify complex processes, potentially missing other influential unmeasured mediators or moderators.

Conclusion

This subchapter has explored the relationship between populist attitudes, faith in intuition and different measures of unsubstantiated claims. The regression analyses indicate that unsubstantiated claims can be predicted by dimensions of populist attitudes to a certain degree. Nonetheless, the predictive power of these dimensions varies. While the conception of academic elites consistently emerged as a reliable predictor for all measures, the other dimensions failed to predict any of the measures effectively. There were also two mediation models which were tested. The first model explored how political populist attitudes might lead to conspiracy beliefs. This is mainly due to a deep-seated distrust in mainstream institutions and preference for simple explanations of complex social issues. Faith in intuition was found to be a relevant mediator which suggests that individuals with strong populist views may rely more on gut feelings than analytical thinking, making them more susceptible to conspiracy theories. The second model looked at science-related populist attitudes and how scepticism towards scientific institutions and experts might influence conspiracy beliefs, especially when individuals favour intuitive over analytical thinking. In this model, faith in intuition also served as an important mediating factor. These findings show how a combination of populist attitudes, dangerous rejection of evidence and expert opinion and reliance on intuition can fuel conspiracy thinking.

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3. Misleading and harmful speech about Ukraine as a consequence of populist attitudes

Jana Papcunová

The spread of misleading and harmful speech can have severe consequences by perpetuating stereotypes, fostering discrimination and even inciting violence. Populist attitudes can sometimes exploit existing biases and grievances, leading to the presence of misinformation and demonization of certain groups. This chapter aims to provide an insight into understanding how populist attitudes contribute to misleading and/or harmful speech, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine.

While the literature acknowledges disinformation, misinformation and hate speech as a threat to democracy and social cohesion (Maher et al., 2022), there has been limited research into the relationship between populist attitudes and beliefs in misleading/harmful speech. This is particularly the case regarding the context of war and especially that in Ukraine (Baysha, 2023).

Populist attitudes are characterised by a belief in the division of society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." Individuals holding populist attitudes believe in people's sovereignty, the homogeneity of people sharing the same values and interests and the fight against the elite (Schulz et al., 2018). This rhetoric can extend to migrants or refugees, exacerbating tensions and contributing to the polarised discourse surrounding war. Populists often emphasise the idea that it is the external enemy which causes the problems facing a country or a group. These are often identified as minorities such as refugees or immigrants (Mudde, 2019). These attitudes can engender strong negative emotions, including inter-group or interpersonal hatred (Martínez et al., 2022). Several studies have supported the direct relationship between populist attitudes and negative emotions such as anger, contempt, anxiety and powerlessness (Abadi, 2020; Pappaioannou et al., 2023; Rico et al., 2017). The current study builds on Martínez et al. (2022) and posits that populist attitudes may predict negative attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees. This is believed to be reflected in the beliefs in harmful speech against them.

Anti-elitism extends to political, scientific, economic, media or anyone who opposes the "people's" values (Hameleers & de Vrese, 2020; Mede et al., 2022; Mudde, 2007). Left-wing populism emphasises the fight against powerful elites, while right-wing populism highlights nationalism and the fight against minorities, immigrants and refugees (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). However, it is crucial to note that voting for radical right parties does not only stem from hatred against minorities. Rather, it often arises from opposition to policies perceived as accommodating minority demands and facilitating their political advancement (Bustiková, 2014).

Populism often emerges in response to perceived grievances or inequalities within society and seeks to mobilise support by tapping into popular discontent (Giebler, et al., 2020). Similarly, science-related populism emphasises the divide between ordinary individuals and the academic elite. They see the public as sharing common values and relying on everyday intuition, claiming scientific knowledge as contradictory (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 481). Populist attitudes often attribute the problems of a country or group to an external enemy such as refugees or immigrants. Both the political left and right in Slovakia share a stance on migration-related issues, including the rejection of migration quotas. While Slovaks generally hold negative views regarding refugees, particularly Muslims, their attitudes towards culturally similar and educated immigrants are somewhat more positive (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2021).

People endorsing populist attitudes may blame refugees for economic problems or perceive them as threats to their own culture and well-being (Vašečka, 2009; Verkuyten, 2021). The us-versus-them

mentality fostered by populism can lead to the acceptance of false narratives and stereotypes about refugees or migrants. This is especially the case regarding the recent influx of refugees from Ukraine as a result of war. Indeed, the presence of such narratives and stereotypes can further exacerbate negative attitudes and behaviours towards Ukrainians.

This chapter aims to explore how populist attitudes and beliefs in misleading and harmful messages are interconnected and often reinforced by each other within societal contexts. The main focus is on beliefs of misleading narratives regarding Ukraine (e.g., false claims like "Ukraine refuses peace talks with Russia") and the proliferation of harmful speech targeting Ukrainians (accusations such as "Ukrainians brought various diseases to Slovakia"). It is crucial to understand these dynamics in order to comprehend the broader implications for public discourse, intergroup relationships and societal cohesion.

3.1 Misleading speech about Ukraine in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war

Research has shown a strong link between populist attitudes and the use of misleading and harmful speech. Akkerman (2013) found that voters with populist attitudes are more likely to support populist parties which often use such rhetoric. Schultz (2018) uses social identity theory as an explanatory framework to suggest that populists perceive public opinion as congruent with their own views and mainstream media as hostile toward their beliefs. This phenomenon becomes particularly pronounced during periods of societal turmoil or crisis, where populist sentiments tend to intensify and gain greater traction (Maher et al., 2022).

In today's information-rich world, news travels rapidly through various channels and the subsequent prevalence of misleading information poses significant challenges. Misleading information can have far-reaching consequences, affecting public opinion and the social cohesion of different social groups.

Misleading information can be described as content that is *inaccurate, deceptive, or incomplete, leading individuals to form incorrect conclusions or beliefs* (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020). This can include misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and false advertising. However, there is no single definition of disinformation or related categories (Jaster & Lanius, 2021). The current work uses the term “misleading information” where information is spread intentionally to manipulate perceptions, influence behaviour, or achieve specific goals. However, it can also arise unintentionally due to errors, biases or misunderstandings.

The Russia-Ukraine war has been characterised by a significant amount of misleading information. This misinformation has been disseminated through various channels including social media, and has been used as a strategic tool in the conflict (Alonso-Martín-Romo, 2023; Dov Bachmann, 2023; Savelyev, 2023). The Ukrainian population has been particularly targeted, with the aim of undermining their morale and influencing their perception of the war (Alonso-Martín-Romo, 2023). Despite these efforts, the Russian narrative has faced challenges, particularly in the face of increased scrutiny from Western media and academia (Fridrichová, 2023).

3.2 Harmful speech about Ukrainians in the context of the Russia - Ukraine war

Harmful messages encompass rhetoric that promotes prejudice, discrimination or violence against particular social groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion or ideology (Leets & Giles, 1997). These messages can be disseminated through various channels such as social media, news outlets and political speeches, and can contribute to the normalisation of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. Unlike misleading information, harmful speech is *most often intentional* in its delivery and aims to incite negative perceptions or actions towards marginalised communities (Sellar, 2016).

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, harmful speech targeting Ukrainians often takes the form of blaming Ukrainian refugees for various issues related to the war. This rhetoric can include portraying

Ukrainians as invaders or aggressors, spreading false information about their intentions or actions, and inciting hatred or violence against them (Kerusauskaite et al., 2023).

Populist public statements from leaders or influential figures can further exacerbate tensions by legitimising and normalising discriminatory attitudes towards Ukrainians. This not only fosters division and animosity within communities, but also undermines efforts towards peace and reconciliation.

Furthermore, harmful speech directed at Ukrainian refugees exacerbates the plight of those already traumatised by conflict (Wypych & Bilewicz, 2024). Blaming them for causing the war, rising prices or being ungrateful not only ignores their status as victims but also perpetuates a cycle of suffering and marginalisation. This rhetoric not only obstructs humanitarian efforts but also fuels xenophobia and intolerance in host countries, undermining the principles of solidarity and compassion.

3.3 Misleading and Harmful Narratives about Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Slovak Context

Misleading or harmful narratives are prevalent in Slovakia. This reflects the nation's diverse stances towards Russia, the EU and Ukraine. Despite strong support (60-70%) for NATO and EU membership among Slovaks, pre-war sentiments leaned towards Russia, with around 50% viewing it as a strategic partner until 2021 (GLOBSEC, 2022). The invasion of Ukraine has led to increased radicalization of public discourse, leading to an increase in both misleading and harmful messages online (European Centre of Populism, 2023). This phenomenon compounds Slovakia's existing challenge of combating large-scale disinformation, particularly concerning topics like COVID-19 and migration.

At the outset of the Russia-Ukraine war, surveys in Slovakia initially revealed high solidarity and positive attitudes towards Ukrainians. These have gradually diminished over time (European Commission, 2022). The latest report by the GLOBSEC (2024) states that there is still a considerable number of respondents without a firm stance on issues related to Ukraine, making them more vulnerable to information manipulation and thus potential targets for malign actors.

Based on two-wave panel data, it was observed that Slovaks' attitudes toward aspects of integration and asylum processes for Ukrainians entering the country became slightly more negative over the two-year period (Papcunová, 2023). This shift may stem from mounting concerns about the country's economic situation which is exacerbated by the financial difficulties and employment problems many face. Misinformation and incendiary campaigns often target populations susceptible to populist rhetoric. This spreading of false narratives reinforces pre-existing biases and distrust towards out-groups. These campaigns can have profound and negative impacts on social cohesion and intergroup relationships, contributing to tensions, conflicts and divisions between different social, ethnic or religious groups. It is essential to understand the psychology behind harmful speech before it can be effectively tackled (Papcunová, 2022; Wypych & Bilewicz, 2024).

3.4 Links Between Populist Attitudes and Misleading/Harmful Beliefs About the War in Ukraine and Ukrainian Migrants

This chapter delves into the connections between populist attitudes and misleading and harmful beliefs concerning Ukraine and migrating Ukrainians. It builds upon previous research to explore how populist ideologies shape perceptions and contribute to the beliefs of inaccurate narratives about these issues.

Schulz et al. (2018) examined the intricacies of populist attitudes, culminating in the development of an appropriate scale. This has been validated on the Slovak population by Piterová and Kováčová Holevová (2022). This scale comprises 12 items divided across 3 subscales (anti-elitist attitudes, demand for popular sovereignty and belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of people). Mede et al. (2021) has extended this foundation by developing the SciPop scale. This scale consists of eight items distributed among four sub-dimensions and providing a more nuanced understanding of populist

beliefs: 1) Conception of the ordinary people; 2) Conception of the academic elite; 3) Decision-making sovereignty; and 4) Truth-speaking sovereignty (see Chapter 1 for further information).

Following the work of Kerusauskaite et al. (2023), a set of statements was adapted to explore participants' perceptions of the war in Ukraine and their attitudes toward Ukrainians in Slovakia. Each statement was accompanied by the instruction: "Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)."

For perceptions regarding the war in Ukraine, participants responded to the following statements: 1) Ukraine refuses peace talks with Russia 2) Aggression in Ukraine is a forced response to provocation by Ukraine and the West 3) The war was provoked in order for Ukraine to join the EU. The reliability analysis indicates that the scale created from these items has satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.843).

In terms of gaining further insight into perceptions surrounding Ukrainians, participants responded to these statements: 1) The Ukrainians are to blame for the war and therefore the price increases. 2) Ukrainians reduce the price of labour in the market. 3) Ungrateful Ukrainian refugees throw donated food into the trash can. 4) Ukrainians brought various diseases to Slovakia. 5) Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia receive high allowances and benefits at the expense of Slovak citizens. The reliability analysis showed that the scale created from these items also had satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.892).

Table 3.1 provides the means, standard deviations and scales for the individual statements that were measured.

Table 3.1 *Misleading and harmful speech items regarding Ukraine and Ukrainians in Slovak samples – descriptive statistics*

	Mean	Standard deviation	Scale
Ukraine refuses peace talks with Russia.	3.34	1.40	1-5
Aggression in Ukraine is a forced response to provocation by Ukraine and the West.	3.15	1.43	1-5
The war was provoked in order for Ukraine to join the EU.	2.82	1.42	1-5
The Ukrainians are to blame for the war and therefore the price increases.	2.95	1.40	1-5
Ukrainians reduce the price of labour in the market.	3.45	1.34	1-5
Ungrateful Ukrainian refugees throw donated food into the trash can.	3.13	1.38	1-5
Ukrainians brought various diseases to Slovakia.	2.84	1.36	1-5
Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia receive high allowances and benefits at the expense of Slovak citizens.	3.53	1.41	1-5

Notes. Representative samples (gender, age, education, regions of the Slovak Republic), collected using an online panel, N (2023) = 643

The mean scores of the statements ranged from 2.82 to 3.53 on a 1 to 5 measurement scale. The scores were therefore found to be above average. The highest mean scores were observed in the statements: ´Ukrainians reduce the price of labour in the market´ and ´Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia receive high allowances and benefits at the expense of Slovak citizens´ concerning the economic consequences of migrating Ukrainians. The mean score of the statement ´Ukraine refuses peace talks with Russia.´ was also high.

A correlation analysis of science-related and political populist attitudes and misleading and harmful speech beliefs was subsequently carried out. Table 3.2 provides the correlations of the analysed variables.

Table 3.2 *Correlation matrix of misleading and harmful speech beliefs and populist attitudes*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1.science-related populist attitudes										
2. political populist attitudes	0.58*									
3. refusal of peace talks	0.42*	0.35*								
4. response to WEST provocation	0.52*	0.41*	0.69*							
5. response to wanting to join EU	0.49*	0.29*	0.56*	0.66*						
6. Ukrainians = price increase	0.51*	0.37*	0.61*	0.67*	0.65*					
7. Ukrainians = cheap labour	0.46*	0.35*	0.56*	0.59*	0.52*	0.57*				
8. Ungrateful Ukrainians	0.47*	0.34*	0.56*	0.62*	0.63*	0.61*	0.54*			
9. Ukrainians = diseases	0.47*	0.29*	0.50*	0.54*	0.53*	0.60*	0.58*	0.64*		
10. Ukrainians = high benefits	0.48*	0.38*	0.58*	0.64*	0.57*	0.58*	0.71*	0.69*	0.59*	

Note. * $p < 0.001$

It should be noted that the correlation coefficients were consistently stronger between the science-related populist attitudes and the measured statements compared to the political populist attitudes and measured statements. All coefficients between the science-related populist attitudes and misleading and harmful statements ranged from 0.42 to 0.52 (all statistically significant) and can be considered moderately strong.

A correlation analysis was also conducted on the sum scores of the measured statements (divided into the sum score of the items regarding war and the sum score of the items regarding migrating people) and dimensions of populist attitudes. The results are presented in Table 3.3. This analysis has revealed

that the sum scores of the items are more strongly correlated with certain dimensions of populist attitudes such as the conception of academic elites (0.57 and 0.56) and truth-speaking sovereignty (0.50 and 0.53).

Table 3.3 *Correlation matrix of misleading and harmful speech about war and migrating Ukrainians and dimensions of populist attitudes*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. war								
2. Ukrainians	0.80*							
3. anti-elitism	0.27*	0.29*						
4. sovereignty of people	0.37*	0.36*	0.63*					
5. homogeneity of people	0.33*	0.35*	0.30*	0.51*				
6. conception of ordinary people	0.36*	0.38*	0.36*	0.52*	0.73*			
7. conception of academic elites	0.57*	0.56*	0.27*	0.39*	0.35*	0.40*		
8. decision-making sovereignty	0.30*	0.34*	0.13*	0.34*	0.36*	0.42*	0.52*	
9. truth-speaking sovereignty	0.50*	0.53*	0.27*	0.44*	0.43*	0.53*	0.66*	0.59*

Note. * $p < 0.001$

A regression analysis was carried out to test if the dimensions of political and science-oriented populist attitudes predicted misleading speech and harmful speech regarding the war in Ukraine. Firstly, all required assumptions were tested to establish the adequacy of the data for the regression analysis. All the tested assumptions were met. The regression statistics are available in Table 3.4. The overall regression was statistically significant. It was found that the sovereignty of people, conception of academic elites, decision-making sovereignty (with an inverse relationship) and truth-speaking sovereignty significantly predicted misleading and harmful speech about the war in Ukraine. In terms of these results, the dimensions of science-related populist attitudes might be better predictors of misleading and harmful speech regarding the war on Ukraine compared to dimensions of political populist attitudes.

The second regression analysis was undertaken to ascertain whether the dimensions of political and science-related populist attitudes predicted misleading and harmful speech about migrating Ukrainians. All the necessary assumptions were examined and met. Table 3.5 shows the regression statistics. The overall regression was statistically significant. It was found that anti-elitism, truth-speaking sovereignty, and conception of academic elites significantly predicted misleading speech and harmful speech about migrating Ukrainians.

Table 3.4 *Summary of the linear regression analysis with misleading and harmful speech about war as the dependent variable*

dependent variable - misleading speech and harmful speech about war					
predictors	est.	SE	t	p	VIF
intercept	1.36	0.65	2.09	0.04*	
anti-elitism	0.09	0.13	0.65	0.51	1.72
sovereignty of people	0.31	0.14	2.26	0.02*	2.21
homogeneity of people	0.17	0.13	1.25	0.21	2.29
conception of ordinary people	0.05	0.15	0.33	0.74	2.57
conception of academic elites	1.00	0.10	9.67	<0.001***	1.92
decision- making sovereignty	-0.22	0.10	-2.18	0.03*	1.68
truth- speaking sovereignty	0.43	0.12	3.78	<0.001***	2.37
F = 54.5 , p = < 0.001, R Square = 0.375, Adj. R Square = 0.369					

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 3.5 *Summary of the linear regression analysis with misleading speech and harmful speech about Ukrainians as the dependent variable*

dependent variable - misleading speech and harmful speech about Ukrainians					
predictors	est.	SE	t	p	VIF
intercept	2.69	1.01	2.68	<0.001***	
anti-elitism	0.41	0.20	2.04	0.04*	1.72
sovereignty of people	0.16	0.21	0.77	0.44	2.21
homogeneity of people	0.34	0.21	1.64	0.10	2.29
conception of ordinary people	0.09	0.23	0.44	0.66	2.57
conception of academic elites	1.33	0.16	8.31	<0.001***	1.92
decision- making sovereignty	-0.15	0.16	-0.97	0.33	1.68
truth- speaking sovereignty	0.84	0.18	4.76	<0.001***	2.37
F = 56.1 , p = < 0.001, R Square = 0.382, Adj. R Square = 0.375					

Notes. * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intertwining of populist attitudes with misleading and harmful speech about Ukraine and its people in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war presents a multifaceted challenge with significant societal implications. Populist ideologies, characterised by a dichotomy between "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," provide fertile ground for the proliferation of divisive rhetoric targeting various societal groups, including migrants and refugees.

Populist appeal is based on emotions that mix fear and glory, hope and despair (Maher, 2022). Populist movements have shown themselves to be effective in bringing people together and stirring up shared grievances. They capitalise on anxieties and concerns by framing them as issues affecting society as a whole (Giebler, 2020). This fits well with the populist idea of "the people" as a united group with a common identity that needs to be protected.

In addition, the manifestation of both political and scientific anti-elitism further exacerbates tensions and polarises discourse (Szabados, 2019), contributing to the perpetuation of false narratives and stereotypes about Ukraine and Ukrainians. The scapegoating of external enemies such as migrants and refugees, not only fosters in-group unity but also fuels resentment and hostility towards the out-group. This further perpetuates discrimination and marginalisation. Moreover, the combination of populist attitudes with misleading and harmful speech exacerbates the influence of such rhetoric, especially in times of societal crisis (McCoy, 2018). This connection to a perceived crisis, closely associated with populism (Giebler, 2020), highlights the need to address the spread of false, misleading, and harmful narratives.

The present study took place in Slovakia which is a country where conspiracy narratives proliferate (Šrol et al., 2022). Moreover, Slovakia has a high prevalence of harmful online content (Globsec, 2022; Globsec. 2024) as well as one of the lowest COVID-19 vaccination rates globally (Worldometers, 2022). Additionally, it exhibits some of the most adverse public sentiments towards migrants (European Commission, 2018; Findor et al., 2021).

The results have revealed that the statements related to the economic impacts of Ukrainian migration had the highest mean scores. This was particularly evident in perceptions of Ukrainians lowering labour prices in the market and receiving substantial benefits at the expense of Slovak citizens. This apprehension reflects broader anxieties about job security and economic stability in countries in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region facing socio-economic challenges (Globsec, 2024).

It also aligns with previous research on migration and populist radical right parties (Mudde, 2007), which distinguishes between a "cultural backlash" and "economic anxiety" in relation to migrants and migration. It highlights the notion that nations should be exclusively inhabited by native members, viewing non-natives as a threat to national homogeneity. This sentiment often arises from fears of immigrants and societal changes. The result of this is the fostering of support for reactionary political forces promising a return to an idealised past characterised by ethnic homogeneity and social cohesion. It appears that the public still overlooks the fact that certain skilled positions may demand expertise that is no longer readily available within the local population (Seberíni et al., 2024).

Additionally, the influx of Ukrainians into the workforce requires funding, which many Slovaks feel is insufficient. A higher level of populist attitudes has been found to correlate with animosity towards Ukrainian refugees, driven by attributions of blame for the economic situation. Furthermore, perceived economic threats directly fuel hatred and indirectly through populist beliefs. The ongoing media coverage of Ukraine's conflict and its economic fallout, coupled with internal economic strains, heightens the risk of scapegoating Ukrainian refugees.

The statement regarding Ukraine's stance on peace talks with Russia also had a particularly high mean score. This indicates a significant level of agreement among respondents regarding perceptions of Ukraine's position in diplomatic negotiations with Russia. According to the European Centre of Populism Studies (2023), narratives shift blame for the war from Russia to Ukraine, the West, NATO and the US. This includes claims of Russian aggression or manipulation by the West. Others suggest it is mainly a conflict between the US and Russia and have advocated for Slovakia's non-involvement. There is a narrative undermining support for Ukraine in its struggle for freedom which resonates within the CEE region (Globsec. 2024).

The findings from the statistically significant regression analysis have revealed compelling insights into the relationship between populist attitudes and the propagation of misleading and harmful speech about the war in Ukraine. Firstly, the dimensions of sovereignty of people, conception of academic elites and truth-speaking sovereignty emerged as significant predictors of such beliefs in misleading and harmful speech. This suggests that individuals who endorse populist attitudes characterised by a belief in the supremacy of the people's sovereignty, scepticism toward academic elites and a perceived imperative for truth-speaking are more likely to engage in or be influenced by misleading narratives about Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Populist ideologies often emphasise a distrust of established institutions including governments, mainstream media and academic experts (Kohoutová, 2021; Reznik, 2023). Individuals who hold populist views may be more sceptical of information coming from these sources, leading them to seek out alternative narratives that align with their beliefs. In the case of Slovakia, this could manifest as a willingness to accept misleading narratives from alternative media sources or online communities that reinforce populist viewpoints. Indeed, the present findings have highlighted the significance of strategic narratives in the context of international conflicts (Fridrichová, 2023).

One point of interest is the inverse relationship found between the dimension of decision-making sovereignty and the beliefs of misleading and harmful speech. This unexpected finding suggests that individuals who perceive a greater level of decision-making sovereignty (e.g., the people should influence the work of scientists) within the populist framework might be less inclined to believe or support misleading narratives about the war in Ukraine. This could potentially reflect a sense of responsibility or accountability associated with decision-making authority, leading to greater caution or restraint in disseminating false information.

Moreover, the suggestion that dimensions of science-related populist attitudes may serve as better predictors of misleading and harmful speech about the war in Ukraine than political populist attitudes highlights the unique role of scientific authority (Lyons, 2023) and expertise in shaping public perception in Slovakia. Individuals who align with science-related populist attitudes, characterised by scepticism toward scientific knowledge and deference to common sense, may be particularly susceptible to misleading or harmful theories about complex geopolitical events like the Russia-Ukraine war. In the context of Slovakia, key predictors such as higher religiosity, a conservative political orientation, lower scientific literacy and trust in science were identified.

As mentioned in other chapters, it is crucial to note that the present findings challenge the generalizability of international research results to the Slovak population, highlighting the need for context-specific studies. The intricacies of populist attitudes, whether in the political or science-related domain, are deeply rooted in the unique social, cultural and political landscape of different countries.

In conclusion, these findings highlight the intricate interplay between populist attitudes and beliefs in misleading and harmful speech, particularly during periods of crisis. Concurrently, harmful speech can exacerbate inequality by accentuating the differences and divisions between groups, disproportionately impacting the vulnerable (Blanco-Herrero, 2024). It is essential to recognize this dynamic in order to devise effective strategies to counteract the spread of divisive discourse and promote critical thinking among the population.

Initiatives should address both the causes and effects of populist ideologies, encourage dialogue between different groups, and strengthen democratic institutions. Given the ongoing media coverage of the conflict in Ukraine and its economic ramifications, as well as the internal economic challenges, there is an increased risk of scapegoating Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and beyond.

A greater understanding of the complex interplay between populist attitudes and misleading speech is essential for addressing the broader implications for public discourse, intergroup relationships and societal stability. As such, societies can strive towards inclusivity and resilience, promoting communities grounded in mutual respect and understanding.

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