

Abstract

The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic demanded a strong and firm state response in order to curb the unprecedented, multilevel crisis caused by the spread of SARS-CoV-2. The arrival of the virus in the EU in early 2020, including the terrible Italian first-wave outbreak, incited the primacy of health and life over any other right or freedom. Although understandable, this scenario raised concerns over the possibility of instrumentalization of the pandemic by the populist governments, given the affinity between the rise of populism discourse and practices in the event, or narrative, of crisis. With consideration of the conditions of the rule of law in the European Union, the quasi-autocracies of Poland and Hungary become interesting research objects. The present work describes these countries' measures and analyses their legality and compliance to the rule of law, together with considerations to the impact of said measures upon these countries' democratic institutions. Furthermore, the same operation will be performed for the Italian scenario, which leads to a comparison to be made between the three countries' pandemic managements, and, ultimately, a comparison between the Central-Eastern European populism and Western European populism. Due to the novelty of the subject, there is a lack of work on the topic of the instrumentalization of the pandemic, as well as the usage of such scenarios to highlight the practical differences between the two types of populism. In order to make a substantial consideration of these populisms, this work initially concentrated on an extensive description of the recent political and epidemiological pasts, relating each country to its respective populism cluster. Three separate content analyses on the collections of each country's measures provided with a view on instrumentalization or legal compliance. This was followed by a qualitative comparative analysis directly derived from the previous three analyses. The analytical approach reveals each country's idiosyncrasies and differences in managing the pandemic and, eventually, instrumentalizing it.

Through comparison of the three cases, the thesis' hypotheses were met. Poland and Hungary demonstrated an active instrumentalization of the pandemic in order to fulfill their needs. In addition, it was also noted that said needs are shaped by the countries' political, legal and institutional conditions, and, secondarily, the epidemiological context. Under these conditions the Italian pandemic response is also better understood. As initially imagined, the different rationales between Western and Central-Eastern populism determined their modus operandi in fighting the pandemic and in exploiting the emergence scenario in their favor.