Populist Discourses on COVID-19 in the Global South (POP-DISC)

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Populism appears to have substantial implications in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of undermining the fight against the pandemic through appeals to 'common sense' against 'elitist' expert knowledge (Lasco 2020), and with regards to a weakening of democratic institutions in the name of crisis management for the 'people' ('pandemic backsliding', see V-Dem 2021). In the deeply divided societies of several countries of the Global South, these effects of populism can be expected to be particularly detrimental (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020). Yet, we actually see a high degree of variation in populists' approaches to the pandemic.

The proposed project (POP-DISC) aims to make a first contribution towards a theorization and systematic empirical analysis of the impact of populism in the context of COVID-19. It does so by focusing on **populist discourses on the pandemic**, asking the following questions:

RQ1: Which narratives shape the official discourse on the pandemic in countries governed by populists?

RQ2: How are these narratives received, reproduced or contested by the wider public, including on social media?

The main assumption underlying POP-DISC is that the way in which governments communicate about the pandemic with the public plays a fundamental role in the implementation of policies aimed at limiting the spread of the virus. Convincingly framing state responses to COVID-19 as a common battle of the 'people' against the virus might help the implementation of such policies, while discrediting science would obviously undermine them (Lasco 2020; Painter and Qiu 2020). At the same time, populist discourses on the pandemic, for example entailing the stigmatization of minorities excluded from the 'true people', can exacerbate societal divisions and underscore 'pandemic backsliding'. If we want to understand the impact of populism in the context of COVID-19, we therefore need to study populist discourses on the pandemic in the first place.

POP-DISC takes a theory-led explorative approach, assessing to what extent the constitutive elements of populism (anti-elitism and people-centrism, involving an often exclusionary definition of the 'people') are reflected in discourses on the pandemic. The empirical analysis will focus on **five countries in different regions of the Global South with populist governments: Brazil, India, Israel, Mexico, and Turkey**.

POP-DISC will analyze both official **government** narratives on the pandemic as well as the reception, reproduction or contestation of such narratives among the **larger public**, with a particular focus on **social media and chat apps**.