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EXTERNAL POLITICAL EFFICACY AND POPULIST ATTITUDES: UNDERSTANDING THE DEMAND FOR POPULISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA[4]

Spoljna politička efikasnost i populistički stavovi: razumevanje potražnje za populizmom u Severnoj Makedoniji

ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on the underlying factors driving the demand for populism in North Macedonia. It presents an argument on populist attitudes, illustrating empirically that within this specific context, they are primarily driven by heightened dissatisfaction with state institutions. This dissatisfaction is manifested as perceived lack of external political efficacy, with state mechanisms failing to foster citizen inclusion in political processes. Additionally, this paper demonstrates that populism in this country of South East Europe is also significantly influenced by adherence to traditional values and beliefs in conspiracy theories. These findings are discussed in relation to the dominant theories on populist demand found in current literature. The objectives of this paper are twofold. Firstly, it seeks to examine the applicability of current theories to the case of North Macedonia. Secondly, it proposes a perspective on the factors stimulating populism within this context. To assess the effects of different factors on populist demand, we employ OLS regression modeling using survey data collected in June 2021. This study contributes to the existing literature on the demand side of populism, presenting findings from a region not frequently examined in this regard—Southeast Europe, specifically North Macedonia.*

KEY WORDS: *populism, populist demand, political efficacy, North Macedonia, Southeast Europe*

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APSTRAKT: *Tekst se zasniva na analizi osnovnih faktora koji utiču na rasprostranjenost populističkih stavova građana Severne Makedonije. Oslanjajući se na konkretan empirijski primer Severne Makedonije, autori nastoje da pokažu da se u specifičnom kontekstu populistički stavovi javljaju kao posledica snažnog nezadovoljstva funkcionisanjem državnih institucija. Ovo nezadovoljstvo se manifestuje kroz percepcije o niskoj političkoj efikasnosti, gde državni mehanizmi ne uspevaju da podstaknu uključivanje građana u političke procese. Pored toga, rad ukazuje da na pojavu populističkih stavova u značajnom stepenu utiču i činioci poput privrženosti tradicionalističkim vrednostima i verovanja u teorije zavere. Tumačenje dobijenih nalaza počiva na primeni savremenih teorija o populističkoj strani potražnje. Ciljevi ovog rada su dvostruki. Prvi se odnosi na ispitivanje mogućnosti primene savremenih pristupa populizmu na slučaj Severne Makedonije. Drugi cilj rada je da ukaže na faktore koji stimulišu populizam u konkretnom kontekstu. Kako bi se ispitao efekat različitih faktora na populističke stavove, primenjeno je statističko modeliranje uz pomoć OLS regresije na anketnim podacima koji su prikupljeni tokom juna 2021. godine. Na temelju podataka iz regiona Jugoistočne Evrope, tačnije Severne Makedonije, koji su retko predmet razmatranja, analiza nudi dopunu postojećih studija o populizmu, posebno onih koje se bave populističkom stranom potražnje.*

KLJUČNE REČI: *populizam, potražnja za populizmom, politička efikasnost, Severna Makedonija, Jugoistočna Evropa*

Introduction

The global surge of populist politics has heightened attention on the underlying factors influencing both its supply and demand. Within the latter strand of literature, there is recently a growing body of work focused on testing theoretical arguments through empirical research, such as those by Elchardus and Spruyt (2016); Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016); Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza (2020); and Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020). Another set of studies, including Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014); Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis (2020); and Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino (2021), examines the alignment between populist attitudes and populist voting. Meanwhile, efforts to improve the measurements and reliability of the construct of populist attitudes have been undertaken by researchers like Geurkink et al. (2020) and Castanho Silva et al. (2020). Presently, a trend is emerging that prioritizes studying populism on the demand side through attitudes rather than voting, a perspective that helps isolate populism from its host ideology. This paper attempts to contribute to this research direction by presenting original findings from a region less examined in the context of populist demand – Southeast Europe, specifically North Macedonia.

North Macedonia, ranking mid-level in global political and economic indicators, has a dynamic political landscape where major parties often use

populist rhetoric. However, populism is not the primary strategy most parties employ. The bigger political parties, in particular, often turn to non-programmatic tactics, such as clientelism, as well as to programmatic politics to attract and retain supporters. Furthermore, ethnic-based politics is a significant factor in political mobilization: North Macedonia's party system is ethnically divided, with most political parties mainly representing their own ethnic communities.

We examine the demand for populism in this specific context. To do so, we focus on populist attitudes rather than voting for pre-defined populist parties. Our choice stems from both conceptual and practical considerations. Conceptually, our interest lies in populism as an independent phenomenon, distinct from its host ideologies. Focusing on populist voting could lead to the conflation of populism with these ideologies, a concern raised by Hunger and Paxton (2022). Practically, it's not simple to categorize North Macedonian political parties purely as "populist" or "non-populist". Most parties exhibit some populist tendencies, making the distinction more about degree than a clear divide. Hence, we opt to study populist attitudes, understood as attitudes aligned with the ideational conceptualization of populism (see Mudde, 2017).

In analyzing populist attitudes, we use regression modeling based on 2021 survey data from North Macedonia. Our models test well-established theories on populism's demand side, including the effects of economic and socio-cultural factors, the "declinism" thesis, and the "disillusioned democrats" thesis, alongside our hypothesis about populism's demand in the country. We assert and empirically support that populism is mainly driven by the political system's inability to meet citizens' demands, evident in individual perceptions of lacking external political efficacy. Furthermore, our analysis shows that the established theories provide limited, inconsistent explanations for societal-level populism in North Macedonia, with the effects of related variables being mostly incidental and highly dependent on model specifications.

This paper enhances populist demand literature in three ways. First, it offers new data and insights from North Macedonia, a less-studied context in populism research. Unlike typical contexts with distinct populist actors, North Macedonia's political landscape, where populism is used by various parties, offers a unique study case. Second, it assesses how different theoretical arguments apply in the context of North Macedonia, thus testing their broader applicability. Finally, the paper introduces and validates a theory linking populism to perceptions of external political efficacy in North Macedonia, offering insights which could potentially inform studies in other settings.

The paper is organized as follows: The first section provides an overview of the main explanations for the demand side of populism. The second section defines populism and conceptualizes populist attitudes. The third provides background on North Macedonia, setting the stage for our argument. The fourth details our theory linking external political efficacy and populist attitudes. The fifth section describes our research design, while the sixth presents our regression models results. The discussion section relates our findings to well-established theories on the demand for populism.

1. What drives the demand for populism?

The literature on the demand-side of populism has generated several theories explaining citizens' attraction to populist politics. This section reviews these arguments, setting the stage for comprehensive model building.

Many studies, particularly in advanced Western democracies, attribute either economic or socio-cultural roots to populism (Berman, 2021, offers a comprehensive overview). The economic perspective posits that voters resonate with populist narratives when faced with grave economic conditions or when they harbor economic grievances against a perceived elite group, especially during systemic crises like the 2000s financial downturn. Hence, those facing economic hardships are likely primary subscribers to the populist discourse. Conversely, socio-cultural theories argue that voters gravitate towards populism in response to shifting cultural norms, prompted by increased immigration and diminishing traditional values. Here, the expectation is that citizens holding traditionalist worldviews are more susceptible to populist appeals. Norris & Inglehart (2019) propose that a combination of economic insecurity and traditional value concerns predominantly drives right-wing populism in the West. However, empirical reception to these theories is mixed, and their focus mainly on Western right-wing populism may reveal more about the "host" ideologies than about ideationally understood populism.

The "declinism" thesis is a notable variant, positing populism's demand is spurred by the perceived societal deterioration, translating to feelings of insecurity, personal dissatisfaction, and anomie (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016). Unlike earlier arguments, declinism avoids pinpointing specific economic or socio-cultural roots and might better account for populism, sidestepping the particular host ideology in question. In line with this, citizens most concerned with societal direction and their social standing are presumed primary populism subscribers. Recent literature, such as Heinisch and Jansesberger (2022), also looks in the similar direction, albeit through psychological factors, suggesting feelings of a "lack of control over one's life" influence populist voting, with effects nuanced by ideological leanings.

A recurrent theme in the literature is the role of "disillusioned democrats"—individuals valuing democracy but disheartened by its real-world application. Works like Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert (2020) suggest such citizens, experiencing "democratic discomfort", are the primary adherents of populist ideologies. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016) and Rico et al. (2020) offer similar arguments, linking perceptions of external political inefficacy and heightened internal political efficacy, respectively, to rising populist attitudes. These theories emphasize both support for democracy (especially direct democracy forms) and dissatisfaction with representative democracy, suggesting that populism thrives among those exhibiting these dual characteristics.

Additionally, populism has been associated with orientations of universalism (for left-wing populists) and authoritarianism (for right-wing populists)

(Marcos-Marne, De Zúñiga, and Borah 2022), conspiracy beliefs (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay, 2017; Balta, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Yagci, 2022) and low level of social trust (Keefer, Scartascini, and Vlaicu, 2019). Populism is associated with attitude orientations because of its attachment to a host ideology, and, in practice, populist movements and political parties have relied on both leftist and rightist arguments in their public actions. Furthermore, populism can be linked to a conspiracy mentality, as the two share a discourse focused on the perceived "wickedness" of an elite and the victimization of the "masses" (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay, 2017). Consequently, individuals prone to conspiracy theories may exhibit a higher propensity to engage with populism. In Keefer, Scartascini, and Vlaicu's argument, in sub-optimal economic contexts, voters with low social trust stimulate populism as they prevent collective action and thus create electoral space for populist competitors.

In summary, there are multiple theoretical arguments explaining engagement with populism. While some of these theories present mutually exclusive viewpoints, others intersect, allowing for their integration into broader explanatory frameworks. For example, combining economic, socio-cultural, "declinism", and the "dissatisfied democrats" thesis uncovers commonalities that suggest a heightened propensity for populism among individuals who feel dissatisfied on multiple fronts – socially, economically, politically, and personally. The insights derived from these diverse theoretical perspectives will be instrumental in shaping our argument and guiding the empirical testing of variable effects throughout this paper.

2. What are populist attitudes?

By "populist attitudes", we refer to attitudes aligned with the ideational conceptualization of populism. This is the idea that populism embodies a worldview, a "thin" ideology characterized by anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean (antagonistic, "us vs. them") outlook. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017:6), populism is a "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." Beyond this foundational clash between the morally upright people and the corrupt elites, populism lacks its own unique ideological underpinnings. Instead, it borrows from other "thick"/host ideologies. For instance, right-wing populists might blend nativist and populist attitudes, delineating the "pure people" and the "evil elites and their agents" based on ethnicity or culture. Conversely, left-wing populists might combine universalist appeals with populism, framing the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" in socio-economic terms. These two ideological perspectives share few common elements other than the core idea of antagonism between two distinct actors—people and elites—which is central to populism. Hence, scholars should avoid conflating populist appeal with the appeal of host ideologies (Hunger and Paxton, 2022). For example, both far-right and far-left

parties might endorse viewpoints like those mentioned above without resorting to populist arguments. This paper emphasizes studying populist attitudes independent of their host ideologies. We specifically focus on populist attitudes, deliberately separating the concept from any "thick" ideologies (for the benefits of such an approach, see Rooduijn, 2019).

While populist attitudes can lead to political actions, such as voting for a populist party, this is not always the case. Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis (2020) argue that populist attitudes persist in societies. However, for these attitudes to manifest as political action, they need to be "activated". This activation requires a context that makes them prominent, such as a perceived widespread democratic governance failure attributed to intentional elite actions. Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis (2020) demonstrated this empirically by comparing two settings with prevalent populist attitudes: one where they influenced voting (Greece) and one where they did not (Chile). Other research has also found correlations between populist attitudes and votes for parties pre-labeled as populist. For instance, Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) observed this relationship in the Netherlands. In contrast, Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino (2021) suggest that populist attitudes more accurately predict voting for oppositional populist parties than for those in power. While this paper does not explore the relationship between attitudes and voting directly, highlighting these measure-specific details is important.

Furthermore, Geurkink et al. (2020) examined empirically whether populist attitudes differ from related concepts like perceptions of external political efficacy and political trust. Through confirmatory factor analysis, they concluded that populist attitudes are distinct from the other two, especially regarding their relationship with populist voting. This finding is pivotal for this paper, as we consider populist attitudes as a dependent variable in our models, with both external political efficacy and political trust acting as predictors.

In constructing a measure for populist attitudes, scholars often lean towards a multi-item approach. On the demand side, this typically involves amalgamating survey statements indicative of populist attitudes into a singular measure. We adopt this method in our paper, adhering to best practices in the design of the measure outlined in Castanho Silva et al. (2020) and in alignment with the data we use. More specifically, we independently measure the three sub-dimensions of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manichean worldview. In line with best practices, however, we could not (due to our data) create a measure that equally weights these three dimensions (see Table 1 for details). This limitation represents a weakness of the present study.

3. Context

North Macedonia, a unitary parliamentary republic, transitioned from socialism to a liberal-democratic framework in the early 1990s. Initially, its statehood faced challenges: Greece disputed its name, "the Republic of Macedonia," leading to international accession blocks (Tziampiris, 2012), and Bulgaria contested the Macedonian ethnic and linguistic identity (Brunnbauer,

2022). The name dispute with Greece was resolved in 2018, bringing a change in the country name to "North Macedonia" (Nimetz, 2020), but tensions with Bulgaria have recently escalated, affecting EU accession efforts and fostering a national sense of victimization and unfairness.

Domestically, tensions between the majority Macedonian population and the Albanian minority, which comprises a quarter of the population, led to demands for greater representation and language rights (Adamson and Jovic, 2004; Bliznakovski, 2013; Koneska 2014; Lyon, 2016; Bliznakovski, 2020a), culminating in a 2001 armed conflict. A subsequent political agreement improved Albanian rights (Daskalovski, 2002), yet both internal and international disputes perpetuated feelings of identity-based unfairness among all ethnic groups.

North Macedonia's quality of liberal democracy closely aligns with that of other post-communist democracies of the Western Balkans. Its performance surpasses the post-communist non-EU members of the former Eastern bloc, yet lags behind the post-communist EU member states.[5] Since the early 1990s, the country has also faced significant economic challenges. Contentious privatizations led to pronounced economic disparities, with unemployment rates sharply rising (Slaveski, 1997:41-45). This represented a significant departure from the prosperity enjoyed during the 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time, the development of democratic institutions was tainted by pervasive corruption.[6] Such challenges have profoundly affected the electorate, amplifying concerns about the nation's political and economic path and the adverse effects of corruption.

In 2015, a significant corruption and abuse of power scandal unfolded when the opposition party, SDSM, exposed evidence of extensive wiretapping by officials from the ruling VMRO-DPMNE (see Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska, 2019, for details on VMRO-DPMNE's governance style). A year later, in 2016, the European Commission's regular report expressed concerns about the "state capture of institutions and key sectors of society" (European Commission, 2016:8). This exposure precipitated the removal of VMRO-DPMNE from power, leading to an SDSM-led government from 2017 which also failed to establish conditions for judicial resolution of the greatest political scandal the country has faced. Moreover, the SDSM administration was not without its controversies, notably facing multiple high-level corruption scandals during its reign (Bliznakovski, 2022:37-39).

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5   According to the 2022 edition of Nations in Transit by Freedom House (which references data from 2021, coinciding with our survey implementation), North Macedonia earned a democracy score of 3.82 (with 1 indicating the worst performance and 7 the best). For context, the average score for the Western Balkans was 3.62, the post-communist EU members were 5.02, and the former Eastern bloc non-EU members were 1.89 (see: Freedom House, 2022:24, for detailed country scores). Furthermore, North Macedonia occupies a median position in nearly all the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators for 2021 (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2022), signifying its mid-level liberal-democratic development on a global scale.

6   In 2021, the country ranked 87th out of 180 nations in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International 2021) and stood at the 43rd percentile in the control of corruption indicator of the Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2022). These rankings indicate a relatively limited ability to combat corruption.

Our survey was conducted in June 2021 against the backdrop of these developments. The described trends suggest rising disillusionment among the electorate with the quality of governance, the actions of political elites, and identity-based victimization resulting from both internal and external events. This sentiment is further exacerbated by growing economic insecurity. The populist narrative remained consistent, though not exclusive, during this period.

The country's party system is ethnically based, meaning most political parties primarily represent their specific ethnic communities (Hislope, 2013). This system has maintained relative stability over the past two decades: per Casal Bértoa (2023), the number of effective parties ranged from 2.8/4.1 in 2002 to 3.3/3.7 in 2020 at the parliamentary/electoral level.[7]

While we lack a precise metric to gauge the extent of populist rhetoric among the parties, our informed estimation is that all of them embrace populism to some degree, with governing parties occasionally crafting policies based on populist views. Past research has highlighted the use of populist discourse in the country. Works by Petkovski (2015), Günay and Dzihic (2016), Yabanci and Talevski (2017), and Cekikj (forthcoming) discuss this in the context of VMRO-DPMNE's governance from 2006 to 2017. Bosilkov (2021) analyzes the rhetoric of the smaller anti-establishment party Levica; Nikolovski (2021) and Trajanovski (2021) focus on memory politics; and Bosilkov (2019) examines media reporting during the recent migrant crisis. However, we argue that populism is just one of several political mobilization strategies used in the country. Non-programmatic approaches, characterized by clientelism (as outlined by Bliznakovski, 2020b; Cvetičanin, Bliznakovski and Krstić, 2023), are also prevalent. These coexist alongside programmatic politics and ethnic-based mobilization.

4. The argument

As discussed in the preceding section, North Macedonia's political landscape is characterized by a diverse range of mobilization strategies, including programmatic politics, ethnic-based mobilization, clientelism, and populism. These strategies are pursued to varying degrees by the leading political actors, while the party system itself remains remarkably stable over decades. Consequently, citizens engage in political action, including voting, driven by a complex interplay of considerations aligning with these diverse mobilization strategies.

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7   The concept of the "effective number of parties" quantifies the count of political parties within a given system, adjusting for their relative influence. It offers an adjusted measure that reflects not just the number but the significance of each party's role. Specifically, at the parliamentary level, it denotes the number of parties with substantial representation in the legislature. At the electoral level, it indicates the number of parties capturing significant portions of the vote. This metric, sensitive to variations in party relevance, was first conceptualized by Laakso and Taagepera (1979).

In the previous section, we also underscored the distinctive challenges facing North Macedonia in its political, economic, and social spheres. These challenges encompass significant governance and economic deficits, identity conflicts, and economic insecurity among certain segments of the population. Corruption, notably at the highest levels of government and administration, is widely perceived, and institutions are often evaluated (including by international actors such as the EU) as being "captured" by private interests, prioritizing the powerful over ordinary citizens.

In light of this specific political, economic, and social landscape, we contend that the roots of populist demand in North Macedonia primarily lie in the perceived inefficiency of the political system. This inefficiency manifests in the system's failure to accommodate the demands of citizens within the political process. Our argument is based on the following observations: First, political parties in North Macedonia employ a mix of mobilization strategies simultaneously, and their reputations are shaped by their performance across these various modes. For instance, parties and officials might be evaluated negatively regarding their programmatic proposals and performance, and might even be tainted by corruption scandals, yet they can still maintain positive reputations as providers of benefits (especially in cases of clientelism) or as protectors of identity (in the realm of ethnic-based politics). This dynamic provides parties and politicians with a certain leverage, which proves advantageous in the context of populist arguments. Furthermore, it is important to note that all major political parties in the country utilize populist discourse to some extent.

Secondly, and in contrast, institutions within the political system do not cultivate reputations as effective providers or identity protectors. Instead, they are often perceived as inefficient and susceptible to private capture, which further widens the gap between these institutions and the public. This disparity in reputation between political actors and institutions leads us to expect a higher prevalence of populism among those who view the institutions negatively, as opposed to those who view political parties and politicians negatively. In this regard, the shortcomings of the institutions and the political system as a whole are more susceptible to populist arguments than those associated with parties and their officials.

This argument is particularly resonant in a context where citizens can benefit from political parties but face limited opportunities through formal political channels. In such scenarios, populism emerges as a response to the institutional inefficiency in incorporating and addressing citizens' demands. This perception manifests at the individual level as a lack of external political efficacy.

Our argument thus posits that citizen disillusionment with political institutions serves as the fuel for populism in the specific context of North Macedonia. This context is marked by the weak institutional performance in addressing citizen demands and the prominent role of political parties in the daily lives of citizens. Consequently, our subsequent empirical analysis aims to establish a robust positive relationship between the lack of external political

efficacy and populist attitudes (H1). In line with our argument, we also anticipate that an increase in trust in institutions will dampen populist attitudes (H2). Furthermore, we expect that individuals not affiliated with political parties will exhibit a higher propensity to embrace populist attitudes compared to party members (H3). This last hypothesis derives from the assumption that populism could be fueled at the individual level by exclusion from both institutional and political party levels.

These three hypotheses scrutinize various facets of our argument. We will empirically test them through a multivariate analysis that also incorporates variables explicitly designed to test alternative explanations for populism on the demand side. We will explore theoretical expectations related to alternative theories, including economic and sociocultural factors, declinism, "disillusioned democrats", and the theory centered around low social trust. Additionally, we will investigate the influence of other factors, such as conspiracy theories, often associated with populism but lacking a solid theoretical foundation. Further details of our research design are outlined in the subsequent section.

5. Research design

To test our argument, we use a survey dataset (N=1000) collected in North Macedonia in June 2021. This survey, conducted by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje (IDSCS), includes specific questions that help create a measure for populist attitudes, forming our dependent variable. Additionally, various questions in the survey enable the creation and testing of measures to empirically assess the theoretical propositions highlighted in existing literature. We will detail our dependent variable, predictors, and analytical methods in the following subsections.

5.1. Dependent variable

Our dependent variable, capturing populist attitudes, is a composite derived from nine survey items that address the three dimensions of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean worldview (refer to Table 1). To measure anti-elitism, we use four statements, three for people-centrism, and two for the Manichean worldview. This distribution leads to an imbalance in our measure, a limitation we acknowledge. The choice of variables was influenced by the need for high internal validity statistics and the specific data available in our dataset. The survey items are based on the methodologies of Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014), supplemented by Castanho Silva et al.'s (2020) review of populist attitude measures. Thus, our measure integrates past research insights with our judgment on items most appropriate for North Macedonia's context.

Table 1. *Survey items used to measure populist attitudes*

dimension	survey items (level of agreement with statements)	N	min	max	mean	SD
ANTI-ELITISM	Politicians talk more than they do take action.	977	1	5	4.43	0.893
	Politicians who claim to be protecting our interests in fact care only about themselves.	984	1	5	4.37	0.96
	The politicians and the elite often fail the people.	979	1	5	4.49	0.858
	The experts who appear on TV cannot be trusted.	957	1	5	3.47	1.231
	MEAN ANTI-ELITISM				4.19	
PEOPLE-CENTRISM	I would rather be represented by a people's man than a professional politician.	952	1	5	4.06	1.172
	It is the people, and not politicians, who should make the pivotal political decisions.	974	1	5	4.05	1.159
	The politicians should follow the will of the people.	983	1	5	4.5	0.845
	MEAN PEOPLE CENTRISM				4.20	
MANICHEAN WORLDVIEW	Politics in essence is a battle between the good and the evil.	937	1	5	3.77	1.251
	Compromise in politics means selling your own principles.	916	1	5	3.31	1.413
	MEAN MANICHEAN WORLDVIEW				3.54	

Note. Data obtained from IDSCS's data set; all measures calculated by authors.

5.2. Predictors

Our models incorporate a comprehensive set of predictors. Key demographic variables include age, gender, education, residential area (urban or rural), and ethnicity. Socio-economic status is assessed through income, employment status, and individual economic insecurity perceptions, relevant for testing theories linking individual economic situations with populism, as well as aspects of the "declinism" thesis. We also explore socio-cultural factors using a variable on adherence to traditional values, to assess their impact on populism. Trust variables cover social trust, trust in political institutions, and trust in political actors, enabling us to examine theories linking low social trust to populism and test our hypothesis that higher institutional trust reduces populism (H2).

Political attitudes in our models include perceived democracy importance, satisfaction with democracy, and preference for a strong leader. These assess the "disillusioned democrats" thesis and the aspect of "declinism" linked to the desire for strong leadership as a response to perceived social disorder.

We also examine political engagement through variables like political interest, information, and party socialization. While the influence of political interest and information is exploratory, the party membership variable tests our hypothesis that exclusion from political parties increases populist tendencies (H3).

Our models also incorporate perceptions of external political efficacy and internal political efficacy, directly testing our central hypothesis of a link between external political efficacy and populism (H1). Additionally, we include conspiracy beliefs, anticipating a positive correlation with populism.

Overall, our models test our hypotheses and competing theories, including variables not explicitly linked to populist demand but potentially relevant. Table 2 presents an overview of these variables, their descriptive statistics, and coding.

Table 2. *Variables used in OLS models*

variable	N	min	max	mean	SD	coding
populist attitudes (dependent variable)	824	1	25	16.66	4.93	from low to high, composite index from nine survey items (Cronbach's Alpha = .77); squared; survey items used are available in Table 1
age	1000	18	86	47.43	16.38	from low to high
gender	1000	1	2	1.50	0.50	1 = male, 2 = female
education	1000	1	3	2.10	0.65	1=low-primary school, 2=mid-secondary school, 3=high-university
ethnicity	1000	1	3	1.39	0.64	1=Macedonian, 2=Albanian, 3=other
residential area	1000	1	2	1.45	0.50	1=urban, 2=rural
income	702	20	2500	205.41	179.53	from low to high (in euros), a variable constructed while dividing the total reported household income with the number of household members, arriving at a measure of individual level income
employment	993	1	3	1.68	0.86	1=employed, 2=unemployed, 3=not in employment-retired, students
economic insecurity	938	1	4	2.56	0.78	respondents' evaluation of present individual economic situation: from 1=very secure to 4=very insecure
obedience	955	1	5	4.09	1.27	scale: 1=fully disagree to 5=fully agree with statement: "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values that children should learn."
social trust	984	1	10	2.73	2.10	1=you can't be too careful to 10=most people can be trusted in statement "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"
trust in political institutions	951	1	10	3.85	2.41	from low to high, composite index from four survey items measuring trust in the Parliament, President, central and local governments (Cronbach's Alpha = .89)
trust in political actors	967	1	10	3.29	2.20	from low to high, composite index from four survey items measuring trust in politicians and political parties (Cronbach's Alpha = .90)
importance of democracy	968	1	10	8.45	2.31	1=not at all important to 10=very important in reply to "How important is it to you to live in a democratically governed country?"
satisfaction with democracy	959	1	10	4.54	2.51	1=not satisfied at all to 10=very satisfied in reply to "How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the country?"

variable	N	min	max	mean	SD	coding
strong leader	934	1	5	4.26	1.20	1=fully disagree to 5=fully agree with statement: "This country needs a leader who will rule with a firm hand."
political interest	992	1	4	2.14	0.93	1=completely disinterested, 2=not a lot interested, 3=somewhat interested, 4=very interested in reply to "How interested in politics would you say you are?"
political information	990	1	5	3.19	1.40	1=never, 2=rarely than once a week, 3=at least once a week, 4=several times a week, 5=every day in reply to "How often do you get informed about politics?"
party membership	984	1	2	1.78	0.41	1=yes, to 2=no
lack of external political efficacy	902	1	5	4.06	0.69	from low perceptions of lack of efficacy to high perceptions of lack of efficacy, composite index variable consisted of six survey items (Cronbach's Alpha = .68)*
level of internal political efficacy	905	1	5	2.10	1.25	1=completely unconfident to 5=fully confident in reply to "How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?"
conspiracy	588	1	5	3.72	0.98	from no conspiracy beliefs to full conspiracy beliefs, composite index variable consisted of ten survey items (Cronbach's Alpha = .92)**

* "So many people vote in elections that my vote more or less makes no difference", "The parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion", "Voting means nothing, political parties certainly do only what they want", "As soon as they win an election, politicians think they are better than people like me" (all fielded as scales ranging from 1-completely disagree to 5-completely agree) and "In your opinion, to what extent can people like you influence the policies of the Government?", "In your opinion, to what extent can people like you influence the policies of the municipality in which you live?" (both fielded as scales ranging from 1-no influence to 5-full influence and recoded to 1-full influence to 5-no influence). ** "The world is run by several powerful families"; "The pandemic was created in a laboratory in order to control humans"; "Installation of foreign services, with wiretapping equipment overthrew the previous Government"; "Soros controls NGOs in Macedonia"; "Soros was paying the people who protested in the Colorful Revolution"; "Climate is controlled by satellites and radars (HAARP)"; "The Ministry of Health registers more dead than the actual number, because they receive money for every death case from Covid-19"; "The virus is sprayed from planes"; "Climate change does not exist, it is a fabrication"; "The big media outlets mostly spread lies."

Note. Data obtained from IDSCS's data set; all measures are calculated by authors.

5.3. Analytical strategy

In our analysis, we aim to evaluate the relevance of established theories on populist demand in North Macedonia, alongside our own argument from the previous section. We will use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression modeling with various specifications, including variables to test our three hypotheses and others to examine competing theories. Our model building will be incremental, starting with a basic set of variables and gradually adding more, grouped by thematic relevance. This approach allows us to assess the interaction of different explanations and their predictors while empirically testing our hypothesis. Although we are using many variables, it's important to note that nearly all have theoretical expectations based on existing literature.

Our analysis employs nine distinct OLS regression models, each with varying predictors but the same dependent variable: our populist attitudes measure. Model 1 (M1) includes demographic predictors, economic (in)security, and traditional values, assessing the impact of economic and sociocultural factors independently. The subsequent models introduce additional variables: Model 2 (M2) adds trust-related variables; Model 3 (M3) focuses on political attitudes and perceptions; Model 4 (M4) incorporates political practices; Model 5 (M5) includes efficacy-related variables; and Model 6 (M6) considers conspiracy beliefs.

As more predictors are added, the number of observations decreases. To counter this, Models 7 to 9 (M7-M9) take a more selective approach. M7 excludes variables with consistently low impact, M8 further refines this by removing marginally contributing variables, and M9 drops one variable (conspiracy beliefs) to significantly increase observations.

This staged approach allows us to test a wide set of variables, observing changes in predictive power, significance, model fit, and observations. This approach enables a thorough examination of various theoretical arguments on populism's demand side within a specific context using a single dataset.

The following section details the outcomes of our OLS regression analyses. We focus on results where effects have reached a statistical significance of $p<0.1$. To evaluate the goodness of fit for our models, we use four statistics: R-squared, adjusted R-squared, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Given that our models are nested, the inclusion of AIC and BIC is especially pertinent. We primarily use adjusted R-squared, AIC, and BIC to determine the fit across different model specifications.

6. Results

The outcomes of our OLS regression modeling are summarized in Table 3. M1 includes standard demographic variables (age, gender, education, area of residence), a specific demographic variable for our context (ethnicity), variables assessing socioeconomic status (income, employment), personal economic insecurity perceptions, and traditional values (measured through obedience). M1 evaluates economic and sociocultural explanations for populism's demand side within a unified framework.

Among all models, M1 shows one of the lowest fits but supports economic and sociocultural explanations. Economic insecurity and adherence to traditional values like obedience are significant positive predictors of populist attitudes. Furthermore, the analysis indicates a positive association between transitioning from employment to unemployment and populist attitudes, and a negative association between being male compared to female. The link between unemployment and increased populist attitudes aligns with economic theories, suggesting that economic insecurity can fuel such attitudes.

In M2, we incorporate trust variables: interpersonal trust, trust in political institutions, and trust in political actors. These additions marginally improve the model's fit and interestingly, diminish the significance of economic insecurity. Instead, a notable negative effect of trust in institutions emerges, suggesting that increased institutional trust is associated with lower populist demand,

consistent with our hypothesis H2. This supports our theory that institutional disillusionment drives populism. The impacts of obedience and unemployment observed in M1 persist in M2.

M3 adds variables related to political attitudes, shedding light on the interplay between democracy, authoritarianism, and populism. In M3, satisfaction with democracy emerges as a significant predictor, reducing populist attitudes. This supports the "disillusioned democrats" thesis, implying that dissatisfaction with democracy fosters populist demand. In contrast, a preference for a strong leader correlates with increased populism, aligning with the "declinism" thesis. This suggests that those favoring authoritarian leadership may view it as a solution to contemporary social challenges.

Interestingly, in M3 and most of the subsequent models, trust in political actors consistently shows a positive effect, suggesting a correlation between trust in politicians and populism. This might be specific to North Macedonia, where political parties and actors often use populist strategies. Since most major parties periodically engage in people-centric and anti-elitist discourse, they become primary conduits of populist narratives. Hence, trust in these actors can enhance populist tendencies.

M3 also indicates that shifting from Macedonian to Albanian ethnicity increases populist attitudes, likely reflecting the long-standing narrative of political victimization among Albanians. Additionally, the effects of trust in political institutions and adherence to traditional values persist in M3, albeit with reduced significance and strength.

M4 introduces variables related to political practices, specifically political interest, information exposure, and party membership. However, the inclusion of these variables results in only minor improvements to the model's fit. In M4, political interest and information exposure do not significantly predict populist attitudes. However, party membership emerges as a notable predictor. Non-members of political parties show a greater inclination towards populism than members, supporting our hypothesis H3. This suggests that exclusion from political participation, as represented by party membership, may contribute to populist demand. In M4, the impacts of trust variables, traditional values, satisfaction with democracy, and preference for a strong leader continue to be significant, indicating their persistent influence on populist attitudes in this model.

M5 adds the two efficacy variables: perceived external and internal political efficacy. Their inclusion notably improves the model's fit, particularly in the adjusted R-squared value. Both variables show statistically significant impacts as predicted. Remarkably, a perception of lacking external political efficacy stands out as the strongest predictor of populist attitudes, a trend consistent in subsequent models. In M5, a unit increase in external efficacy perception leads to a nearly four-unit rise in populist attitudes, affirming our hypothesis H1. This suggests that feeling excluded from political processes significantly drives populist demand.

Additionally, an increase in internal political efficacy also amplifies populist attitudes, indicating that individuals who see themselves as politically capable might be more inclined towards populism. While obedience, trust in political actors, and ethnicity effects remain significant in M5, trust in institutions and

party membership's influence wanes, contradicting our hypotheses H2 and H3. Thus, M5 supports H1 but challenges H2 and H3.

In M6, we introduce a variable for conspiracy beliefs, resulting in a robust model as indicated by high adjusted R-squared values. M6 also stands out in terms of AIC and BIC statistics, marking it as the best model specification. Conspiracy beliefs significantly and positively predict populist attitudes, aligning with the notion that increased exposure to conspiracy theories bolsters populist discourse. This addition diminishes the impacts of trust in political actors and internal efficacy seen in M5. Nevertheless, the influences of the lack of external political efficacy, obedience, and ethnicity remain significant, consistent with earlier models. Despite its strong performance, M6 records the fewest observations across all models, a consequence of missing data in some variables.

In subsequent models, our goal is to increase observations by simplifying the equation, while carefully monitoring model fit statistics to evaluate the robustness of findings. M7, excluding variables with minimal effects (Beta coefficients below 0.1 across all models) such as age, income, and social trust, substantially boosts observations and marginally enhances the adjusted R-squared. However, it underperforms in AIC and BIC relative to M6. In M7, the significant impacts of the lack of external political efficacy, internal political efficacy, obedience, and trust in political actors persist. Intriguingly, political information (now inversely related to populism) and education (positively correlated) gain significance. The former suggests that individuals with greater access to political information are less likely to adopt populist attitudes, supporting the idea that participation in political processes (evidenced by increased information access) can diminish populist demand. The latter finding, however, contradicts sociocultural explanations, which typically anticipate higher levels of education to correlate with decreased populism.

M8 further streamlines the model by removing variables with minimal impact in M7 (Beta coefficients below 0.1), leading to the highest adjusted R-squared yet but poorer AIC and BIC outcomes compared to M7. Variables like trust in political institutions, the three attitude variables (importance of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, preference for a strong leader), and party membership were excluded. M8 reaffirms the significant influence of the two efficacy variables, conspiracy, obedience, trust in political actors, political information, and education. Intriguingly, political interest becomes significant only in this model, showing a positive correlation with populist attitudes. This implies that heightened political interest is associated with increased populism, a finding unique to M8 and not observed in other models.

In the final model, M9, we omit the conspiracy beliefs variable owing to its numerous missing cases, which significantly increases the observation count relative to earlier models. However, this removal markedly diminishes the model's overall fit, as reflected in all statistical metrics. Despite this drawback, M9 maintains significant effects noted in prior models. These include the influences of the two efficacy variables, obedience, trust in political actors, political information, and differences in ethnicity, particularly between Albanian and Macedonian ethnicities. Additionally, a gender-related effect, initially significant in M1, resurfaces in M9, suggesting that women tend to show lower populist attitudes than men.

Table 3. OLS regression models outputs

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9
age	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00			
female (base: male)	**-0.74***	-0.57	-0.43	-0.46	-0.51	-0.48	-0.57	-0.58	**-0.64****
mid education (base: low)	0.12	0.20	0.24	0.26	0.32	0.40	0.63	0.75	0.46
high education (base: low)	-0.73	-0.61	-0.39	-0.25	0.33	0.73	**1.15***	**1.20***	0.55
Albanian ethnicity (base: Macedonian)	0.74	0.66	**0.91***	0.82	**1.40****	**1.29****	0.84	0.78	**0.89****
other ethnicity (base: Macedonian)	-1.08	-0.64	-0.55	-0.65	-0.35	-0.54	-0.34	-0.39	-0.65
rural (base: urban)	-0.51	-0.49	-0.37	-0.22	0.18	-0.55	-0.14	-0.28	0.32
income	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00			
unemployed (base: employed)	**1.15***	**1.02***	0.70	0.78	0.81	0.23	0.35	0.34	0.53
not in employment (base: employed)	0.19	0.13	-0.33	-0.68	-0.15	-0.20	-0.10	-0.15	-0.13
economic insecurity	**0.67****	0.29	0.22	0.19	-0.01	0.13	0.21	0.21	0.08
obedience	**0.93****	**0.91****	**0.49***	**0.47****	**0.48****	**0.69****	**0.55****	**0.53****	**0.45****
social trust		-0.01	0.09	0.09	0.02	-0.08			
trust in political institutions		**-0.46****	**-0.35****	**-0.37****	-0.16	0.00	0.02		
trust in political actors		0.23	**0.260***	**0.36****	**0.37****	0.19	**0.29****	**0.28****	**0.25****
importance of democracy			0.11	0.11	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02		
satisfaction with democracy			**-0.26****	**-0.24****	-0.05	-0.06	-0.09		
strong leader			**0.66****	**0.63****	0.17	0.32	-0.07		
political interest				0.25	0.18	0.20	0.42	**0.45***	0.32
political information				-0.04	-0.17	-0.16	**-0.37****	**-0.38****	**-0.36****
party membership: no (base: yes)				**1.86****	0.77	0.56	0.05		
lack of external political efficacy					**3.95****	**3.29****	**4.02****	**4.07****	**4.64****
internal political efficacy					**0.41****	0.24	**0.40****	**0.38****	**0.46****
conspiracy						**0.92****	**1.14****	**1.29****	
Constant	**11.14****	**13.36****	**11.03****	**9.13****	**-4.89****	**-5.71****	**-7.74****	**-9.29****	**-5.90****
Observations	551	535	512	505	469	324	437	462	674
R-squared	0.10	0.12	0.14	0.16	0.39	0.45	0.47	0.48	0.42
Adjusted R-squared	0.08	0.09	0.11	0.13	0.36	0.40	0.44	0.47	0.41
AIC	3245.60	3143.83	2983.21	2933.40	2578.49	1764.01	2392.87	2518.19	3706.81
BIC	3301.65	3212.35	3063.74	3026.34	2678.11	1858.53	2482.63	2588.50	3779.02

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note. Data obtained from IDSCS's data set; all measures are calculated by authors.

7. Discussion

Among all the models presented, M6 demonstrates the best goodness of fit, as indicated by its comparatively high adjusted R-squared and superior performance in the AIC and BIC statistics relative to the other models. Consequently, we select M6 as our primary explanatory model. However, we remain cautious due to its feature of a smaller number of observations. For this reason, we also discuss results from other models as part of a robustness check of the effects observed in M6. We value this comprehensive approach as it is analytically effective, allowing us not only to test theoretical propositions but also to observe how different arguments interact with this particular set of empirical data.

Across the board, our results confirm the strong predictive power of our variable related to perceptions of a lack of external political efficacy, corroborating the expectations set out with H1. However, the expectations associated with H2 and H3, which we considered as partial propositions to support segments of our overall argument, tend to diminish once the variable concerning lack of political efficacy is introduced into the models. In models where lack of political efficacy is not included, specifically in M2-M4 for H2 and in M4 for H3, these hypotheses are supported. Beyond these models, however, the predictive power of the variables related to H2 and H3 appears limited. These findings do not undermine our overall argument, especially considering that our main variable of interest demonstrates strong, significant, and robust effects against many theoretically plausible controls. Instead, it suggests that while different variables can be used to test our proposition, some have much higher predictive power than others.

Our analysis also lends empirical support to several other theoretical arguments on populist attitudes discussed in this paper. Notably, our variables concerning traditional values and conspiracy beliefs have significant influence, reinforcing socio-cultural arguments and theories that link exposure to conspiracy theories with populism at the societal level. However, the effects of these predictors, while noteworthy, are considerably weaker than those of lack of external political efficacy. This comparison is facilitated by the fact that all three variables share the same 1-5 coding system. Despite their relatively weaker effects, these three variables — traditional values, conspiracy beliefs, and lack of external political efficacy — appear instrumental in explaining populist attitudes in North Macedonia.

In general, our analysis suggests that populism at the societal level in North Macedonia is most effectively explained by heightened perceptions of lack of external political efficacy, a conspiracy mentality, and an orientation towards traditional values. This final assessment represents a blend of our primary argument focusing on institutional efficacy, alongside socio-cultural explanations and the influence of exposure to and acceptance of conspiracy theories. However, it is the institutional efficacy argument that emerges as the most convincing. This is evidenced by the notably stronger effect of the corresponding variable, especially when compared to other variables representing competing arguments.

The approach of this paper consisted of evaluating arguments from several theories present in the literature that account for populist demand. Initially, we observed strong effects from variables representing socio-economic standing. However, their influence wanes once other predictors are introduced. This shift allows us to conclude that economic explanations are inadequate in explaining populism in North Macedonia. Similarly, the predictors measuring democratic satisfaction and evaluation demonstrate the expected effects in some model specifications. However, in models with the best fit, these effects are not as pronounced. This leads us to the inevitable conclusion that the "disillusioned democrats" thesis, while partially explanatory, falls short of fully accounting for the nuances of populist attitudes in the country. The "declinism" thesis faces a similar fate: given that economic insecurity does not act as a significant predictor beyond our simplest model, and the preference for a dominant leader (a variable which we use as proxy for a desired state of order in the light of perceived social disorder) diminishes in influence once efficacy variables are included, we are led to believe that declinism is not the primary explanatory factor either.

In our analysis, the variable measuring trust in political actors (politicians and parties) holds a significant positive effect on populist attitudes in most model specifications where it is included, but not in M6. We interpret this finding as context-specific and not fully capable of accounting for populist attitudes, particularly due to its lack of significant effect in M6. The contextual specificity of this finding stems from the observation that the main political parties in the country engage with populist rhetoric to some extent and employ a mixture of mobilization strategies, including clientelism and ethnic-based politics, thus cultivating diverse types of ties with supporters, which cumulatively shape their overall reputations. Therefore, it is not unexpected that those trusting political parties are more frequent holders of populist attitudes: parties are one of the main transmitters of the populist discourse and cultivate ties on several fronts, using populism as an adjunct measure in their overall mobilization strategy.

Perceptions of a lack of external political efficacy consistently emerge as the most potent predictor across our models. What implications does this have for understanding populist demand in North Macedonia? Firstly, we can infer a direct relationship between institutional inability to bolster citizen engagement in political processes and the resulting sentiments of political alienation, which likely fuel populist demand. In essence, growing institutional impediments to citizen participation can be seen as catalysts for populism. The sentiments borne from this dynamic differ from mere disillusionment with democracy. As defined in our research, a lack of external political efficacy encompasses a broader discontent with political results and the integration of citizen perspectives. Our data suggests that the ability of institutions to weave citizen demands into political processes is more crucial in understanding populist demand than the actions of political actors. Interestingly, our models indicate that trust in political actors often aligns with populist attitudes, hinting that detrimental institutional conduct may carry more weight than negative behavior by political actors.

Our findings regarding internal political efficacy in most of our models are consistent with the above perspective, suggesting that increased perceptions

of one's capability to engage in politics correlate with populism. This further implies that populist leanings are stronger among individuals eager for political participation.

Our observations on the comparative effects of Albanian ethnicity versus Macedonian ethnicity broadly corroborate the theory that political exclusion boosts populism. As a minority, ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia often adopt a political narrative that emphasizes their marginalized status, reinforcing our earlier points on the role of external political efficacy in shaping populist views.

Conclusion

This paper sought to evaluate different theories of populist demand within a context not extensively covered in existing literature: Southeast Europe, and more specifically, North Macedonia. Utilizing survey data and regression methodology, we determined that the demand for populism is primarily linked to heightened perceptions of a lack of external political efficacy. This is followed by adherence to traditional values and a conspiracy mindset. While some prevailing theories on populist demand (e.g. economic explanations, declinism, and the "disillusioned democrats" thesis) can predict populist attitudes in basic models, many of these effects diminish when external political efficacy is considered.

Our results emphasize the significance of the institutional capacity to involve citizens in political processes as a factor that could counteract populist politics. We find that citizens' perceptions of political exclusion are central drivers of populist demand in North Macedonia. Policy measures that stimulate political inclusion of citizens relative to elites could potentially mitigate populism on the demand side.

Based on our data, we argue that disillusionment with institutional outcomes has a more substantial impact on populism than mere dissatisfaction with representative democracy and its key actors. However, we advise caution against universally applying this perspective. We propose that its relevance is likely more significant in contexts where political institutions fail to adequately meet citizens' demands. This is especially the case in scenarios where political actors successfully build reputations as providers or protectors, often through clientelism or ethnic-based politics. Such dynamics are evident in the context of North Macedonia.

This paper has endeavored to contribute to the literature on populist demand, specifically through the lens of populist attitudes, in three distinct ways. First, it introduces data and findings from North Macedonia, a national context previously underexplored in this field. Second, the paper examines the applicability of established theories within this specific setting, thereby assessing their scope and relevance. Lastly, it proposes an argument, which, while centered on North Macedonia, potentially holds applicability in other contexts as well, in explaining the persistence of populism at the societal level.

Understanding the demand for populism is crucial for a comprehensive grasp of the populist phenomenon across various contexts. By examining populism in the unique setting of North Macedonia, this paper aims to contribute to this body of knowledge.

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