

# Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism: Building Resilient Media and Ensuring Effective Pandemic Communication in Divided Societies

## (Project Summary)

Media serve as important sources of information about public health, and their role increases during health crises. The way media select and frame information during a crisis can have a significant impact on public attitudes and behaviour. On the one hand, it can encourage social cohesion and willingness to comply with public health measures. On the other hand, it can alternatively deepen division and generate distrust.

The presence of populist parties and leaders limits the capacity of media organisations to engage in effective health crisis communication. It fosters antielite sentiments, contributes to divisive media coverage, and thereby encourages polarized attitudes and distrust among citizens, making them more vulnerable to misinformation spreading through social media and digital platforms. Given the growing popularity of populism globally, efforts aimed at making societies more resilient in the face of future pandemics urgently need a better understanding of how populism affects health crisis communication.

This project will develop the first comprehensive, comparative study of health crisis communication in the context of populist politics, bringing significant advances in knowledge at the intersection of political communication and public health. Research will examine the impact of populism on four aspects of the pandemic communication circuit during COVID-19: government-led health crisis communication, media policy, media coverage, and public attitudes. The fifth strand will take a transnational perspective and analyse how the interaction between populism and pandemic communication was shaped by China and Russia's pandemic geopolitics.

The focus will be on four countries which capture different types of populist responses to the pandemic: Brazil, Poland, Serbia, and the USA. This research will inform recommendations aimed at building more resilient media organisations that are better able to withstand the challenges of future pandemics in divided societies. The recommendations will be developed and disseminated in collaboration with key organisations representing media regulators, communication professionals, and public service media.