



# POLITICAL TRUST, DEMOCRACY AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN EUROPE

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**Abstract:** *Political trust, as well as collaboration between the population and the political component, is an issue of concern all over the world, especially in the event of extraordinary circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic, whose effects have been felt in every area of society. The primary goal of this research article is to examine the link between political trust, citizen participation in the election process, and population perceptions and attitudes concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. Using the 10th round of the European Social Survey database, the relationship between trust in public institutions, the quality of democracy, population general wellbeing, together with socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes toward the pandemic was studied, for the 22 European countries that participated in the 2020 European Social Survey (ESS). The main findings demonstrated that the lack of trust in public institutions, low levels of voter turnout, and low perceived democracy, together with low levels of population wellbeing, education, income and an increased level of religiousness among population, are associated with a passive or skeptical attitude in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated policies, making it challenging for the European governments to improve public policies in the context of an extraordinary situation.*

**JEL classification:** A13, D72, E71

**Key words:** political trust, democracy quality, Covid-19 perceptions, population behaviors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the study of political trust is particularly relevant as society is rapidly facing various new challenges, such as rapid digitization, artificial intelligence, the proximity of war, considering that citizens' views on government and governance have significant effects on economies (Alexandre, 2022). Moreover, political trust is an issue of concern all over the world,



especially in the event of extraordinary circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic, whose effects have been felt in every area of society. According to Flinders (2021), the pandemic together with the challenges it brings have further deepened the pre-existing problem of public doubts about public performance, the role of government, the quality of governance, and the quality of democracy. The relationship between political trust together with perceived democracy, and population attitudes toward such events is extremely important to study, considering the implications it has upon the general safety and wellbeing of populations and upon the successful implementation and management of public policies addressing overcoming and solving the pandemic crisis.

The present research aims to analyze the relationship between political trust alongside democracy perceptions in the European sample, in line with the existing literature, focusing on their impact on people's beliefs and attitudes towards the Covid-19 pandemic. The main goal of this study is to perform an empirical evaluation of the impact these neoliberal elements have on perceptions and conspiracies regarding the crossed pandemic, attempting to provide a response to the following research question: Does increased political trust, along with strong democratic perceptions, reduce skepticism in exceptional circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic? The present research adds to the body of knowledge by expanding on well-known models of Maglic et al. (2023), Caferra et al. (2021), Chevalier (2019), Hooghe et al. (2017) and Glatz and Eder (2020), focusing on an approach for studying the Covid-19 scenario. The paper also highlights the value of population characteristics and wellbeing, in the battle against conspiracies.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: The section that follows provides a literature review relevant to the topic of the paper, focusing on political trust, democracy, and their importance in managing a crisis such as the pandemic; section three presents the data and methodology; section four is dedicated to presenting the empirical results, and section five is dedicated to discussions, putting these findings in context with the existing studies. Conclusions are addressed in the final part.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**



The concept of political trust, together with the quality of democracy, are important elements of the neoliberal doctrine, which have been extensively examined and discussed in the literature in relation to different fundamental topics. Caffera et al. (2021) highlight the importance of political trust together with social trust when analyzing environmentally friendly behavior. The study of Fairbrother et al. (2019) proved the relationship between political trust and beliefs about environmental problems. Mari et al. (2022) argue that distrust in the political element severely impacts the wellbeing of both the population and democracy. On the same note, Van Prooijen et al. (2022) argue that lack of trust in public institutions erodes society-wide social relations and pro-active behavior, affecting the entire economy.

Focusing on more current events, Maglic et al. (2023) demonstrated the impact of political distrust as a factor that contributes to spreading conspiracies regarding the pandemic, using correlation analyses. Using an extended dataset, considering states such as Germany, Poland, Jordan, Sweden, and France, the authors Schlipphak et al. (2022) proved the link between political distrust and conspiracy theories beliefs. Furthermore, Ezeibe et al. (2020) found that political distrust is associated with populations' lack of compliance with covid safety measures and the spread of the pandemic, affecting the collective wellbeing of a society.

Political trust has been represented in the literature in several ways, using different approaches to quantify this phenomenon. The most notable source of indicators regarding political trust is the European Social Survey, which provides a series of indicators referring to the confidence of the population in various public institutions. Hooghe et al. (2017) use a composite index for quantifying political trust when analyzing the determinants of this phenomenon. An index of trust is also constructed in the work of Schnaudt et al. (2021) when exploring the link between justice and trust. Caferra et al. (2021) and Glatz and Eder (2019) propose maximum likelihood explorative factor analysis for elements such as political and social trust and energy-saving behavior, when studying energy-saving attitudes in European states, in line with the work of Fairbrother et al. (2019). Using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), Chevalier (2019) defined political trust using five dimensions from the ESS, in a study analyzing the determinants of this phenomenon both on a macroeconomic scale and also taking into account demographic characteristics.

When it comes to democracy, various publications consider the reported level of democracy from The Freedom House an important and relevant proxy for the concept Arpino and



Obydenkova (2019). Democracy perceptions and defining elements are also reported in the European Social Survey, as highlighted by Hooghe et al. (2017), when exploring the link between democratic ideals and trust in political institutions in Europe. The study of Karabulut et al. (2021) analyzes democracy through five dimensions of the phenomenon: the Freedom's House index of political right, civil liberties and total democracy, alongside Polity's Democracy Index and V-Dem Institute's Electoral Democracy Index. The study's results argue that in the short term, democratic countries tend to suffer more in terms of the impact of misinformation on infection rates in times of a pandemic, considering that in autocratic countries, citizens are more effortlessly receptive to measures imposed by the government. However, as the authors argue, in the long run, democratic nations perform better in ensuring a longer life expectancy and a healthier life, considering the increased levels of public spending efficiency in healthcare. Subjective wellbeing is also quantified in econometric studies using the European Social Survey responses (ESS). Glatz and Eder (2020) use a mean of questions regarding population happiness and satisfaction with life to compute the subjective wellbeing index. Personal characteristics such as level of education, income, age, and gender are also important elements that have to be taken into consideration when analyzing population behavior and attitudes regarding a specific topic (Arpino and Obydenkova, 2019; Goubin and Hooghe, 2020). The same remark is made by Hettich et al. (2022), who argue that sociodemographic vulnerabilities might be regarded as promoters of a conspiratorial mindset.

### **3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

As it has been mentioned before, the main aim of this research paper is to analyze the link between political trust and democracy elements alongside demographic characteristics, and the population's attitudes and levels of perceived skepticism towards Covid-19 pandemic. In order to achieve that, the employed methods consist of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to determine variables of interest (the concept of political trust, democracy, and perceptions regarding Covid-19 pandemic) together with an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to identify the main relationship between variables. The considered database consists of all 22 European countries that participated in the 10th round of the European Social Survey (May 2023 update version). The year of the survey is 2020, and it is very important to mention that



the entire dataset has been formatted to exclude respondents under 18 and respondents with no right to vote, in order to catch a realistic glimpse of the voting phenomenon.

Considering that all studied concepts such as trust in the political component, democracy, and perceptions regarding the Covid-19 pandemic are complex concepts that cannot be described by a single variable from the considered dataset, a set of similar concepts has been selected to compose the latent variables, in line with the methodological approach used by Chevalier (2019).

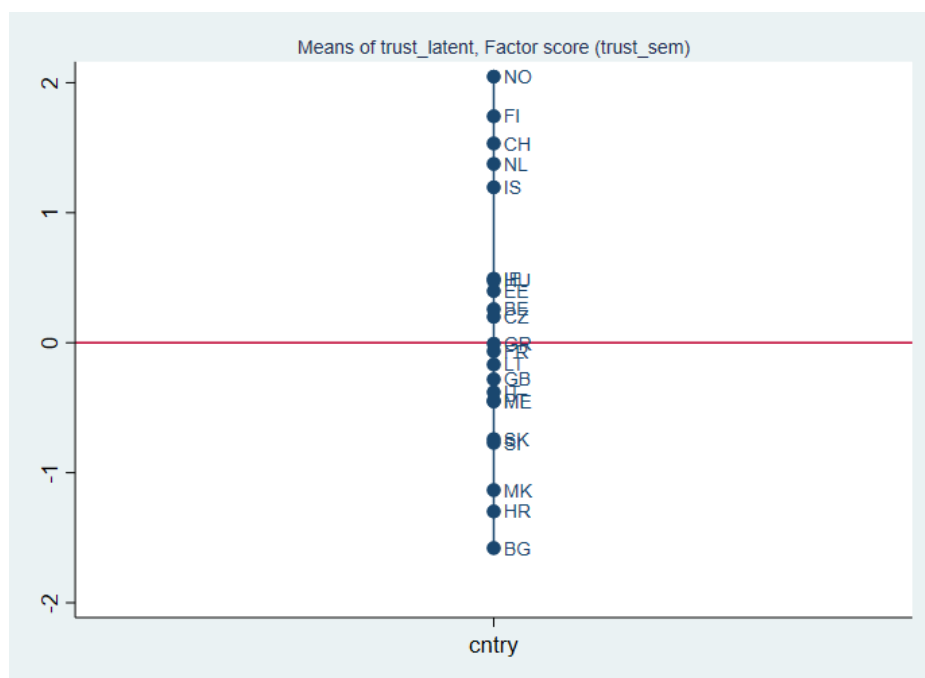
Thus, the political trust component takes into account the following variables from ESS round 10, following the approach proposed by Chevalier (2019): trust in country's parliament (trstprl), trust in the legal system (trstlgl), trust in the police (trstplc), trust in politicians (trstplt), trust in political parties (trstprt), trust in the European Parliament (trstep) and trust in the United Nations (trstun). Each variable takes values in the 0-10 interval, where a higher score is associated with higher trust in the system.

When composing the latent variable for democracy, the study of Hooghe et al. (2017) proposes a series of indicators that may compute democratic ideal scores. Following the above-mentioned study, this paper considers that variables such as "The courts treat everyone the same" (cttres), "National elections are free and fair" (farelc) and "The media are free to criticize the government" capture the essence of democracy from a neoliberal perspective. As in the case of political trust, the democracy variables range from a scale of 0-10, where a score closer to 0 means that the respondent considers that variable not important for a democratic society, while a score closer to 10 signifies that the variable is extremely important for the country's democracy, thus outlining the quality of democracy in the analyzed countries.

The last latent variable used in this study encompasses Covid-perceptions, inspired by the work of Maglic et al. (2023). The last version of the ESS offers a set of questions regarding the exceptional situation generated by the alarming spread of the coronavirus, and its impact on the personal and professional lives of the respondents. Three main variables were selected from the last version of ESS to analyze the perceptions regarding the phenomenon: "A small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in the world politics" (secgrde), "Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public (scidecpb)", and "Coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organization" (gvcocn19). These variables range from a score of 1 to 5, where

a lower score is associated with a higher level of mistrust in the pandemic, or, in other words, a lower score is associated with higher levels of conspiracies in terms of the pandemic, while a score closer to the upper bond is associated with higher levels of trust in the context of uncertainty, showing a reduced level of skepticism in exceptional circumstances.

The mean levels of these variables are illustrated using the mean graphs presented below. Figure 1 presents the mean level of the composed political trust variable. As it can be seen from the graph, the highest levels of political trust, far from the European average, are found in countries such as Norway (NO), Finland (FI), Switzerland (CH), The Netherlands (NL), and Iceland (IS), while on the other hand, European states such as Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), and North Macedonia (MK) record the lowest levels of political trust from the whole sample, considering the 10th round of the ESS.



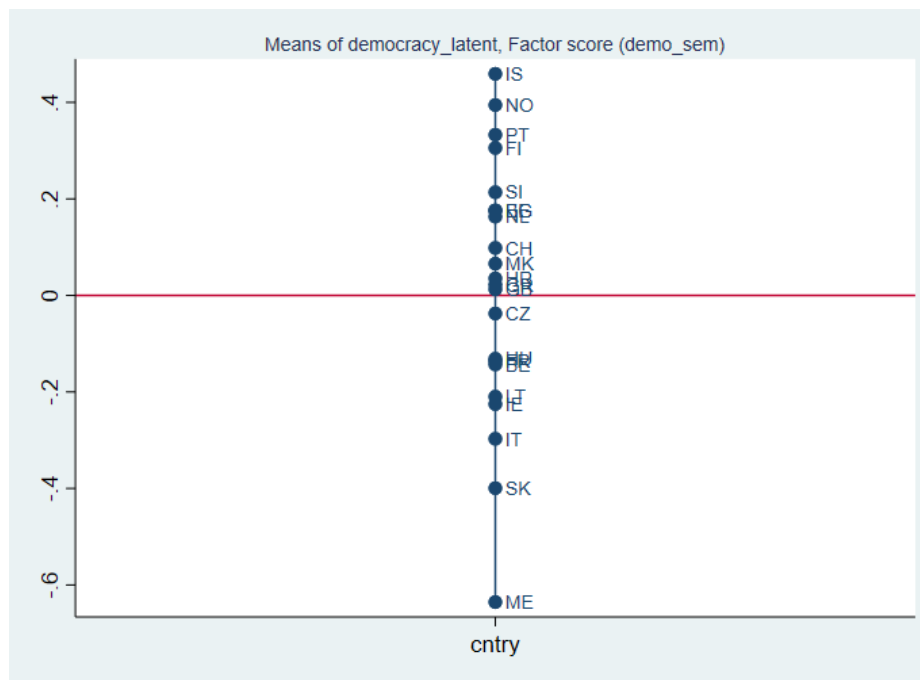
**Fig.1 - Means of trust\_latent variable, by country**

*Source: author's processing*

Figure 2. presents the mean levels of perceived democracy in terms of media freedom, voting, and equality in front of the law. Similarly to the previous graph, increased levels of perceived democracy are found in northern European countries such as Iceland (IS), Norway (NO), Finland (FI), but also Portugal (PT). Increased levels of democracy, above the European average are also found in countries such as Switzerland (CH), North Macedonia (MK), Croatia

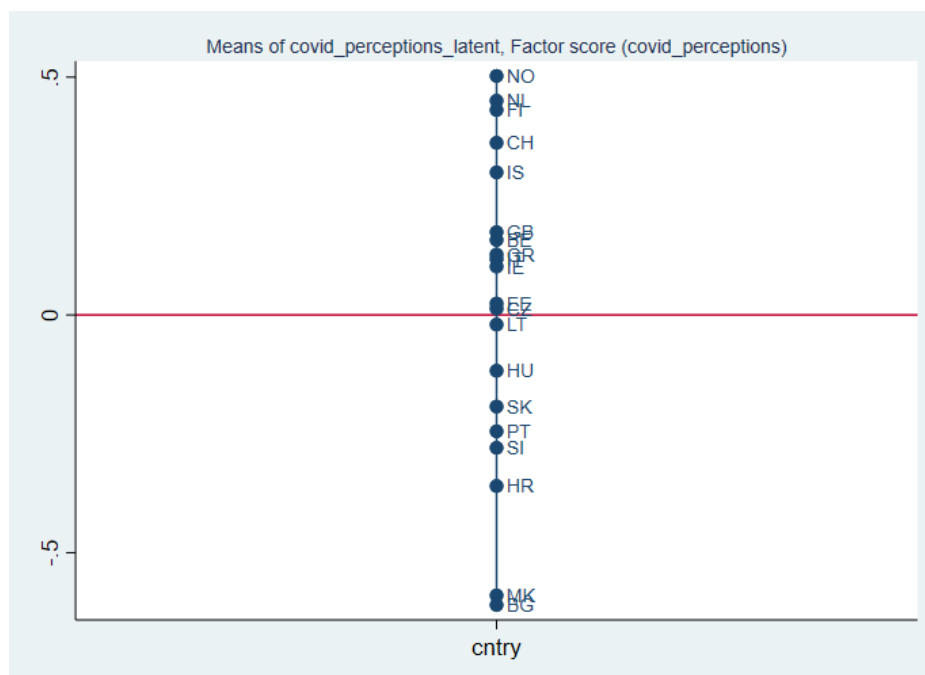
(HR), and Greece (GR), while at the opposite pole, respondents from Montenegro (ME), Slovakia (SK), and Italy (IT) consider that, on average, media freedom, voting, and equality in front of the law are not necessarily defining the concept of democracy in their states.

**Fig. 2 - Means of democracy\_latent variable, by country**



*Source: author's processing*

Following the same approach, when analyzing the distribution of Covid perceptions across the European states (Figure 3), it can be noted that high levels of trust are found in the northern European countries such as Norway (NO), the Netherlands (NL), and Finland (CH), where the population disagrees with the conspiracy theories in regard to the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic. High levels of trust are also found in countries such as Switzerland (CH) and Iceland (IS), which also record higher levels of political trust and political democracy. At the opposite pole, it can be observed that the mean tendency in countries such as Bulgaria (BG), North Macedonia (MK) and Croatia (HR) is that the population is predisposed to be skeptical regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving ground for the development of conspiracies or passive and suspicious attitudes.



**Fig. 3 - Means of covid\_perceptions\_latent variable, by country**

*Source: author's processing*

Aiming to analyze the relationship between political trust alongside democracy perceptions and their impact on people's beliefs and attitudes towards the Covid-19 pandemic, the analysis was performed for all 22 European states that participated in the last round of the ESS. More precisely, the analysis was conducted on five main samples, considering the geographical regions defined by EuroVoc. Thus, the considered samples are the following:

1. Total sample, consisting of all 22 European states: Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Switzerland, Hungary, Czechia, Ireland, Estonia, Iceland, Finland, Italy, France, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Montenegro, Norway, North Macedonia, Portugal, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Slovenia.
2. Central and Eastern European states (CEE) (8 countries): Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia
3. Northern European States (6 countries): Estonia, Iceland, Finland, Lithuania, Norway, and the Netherlands
4. Western European States (5 countries): Belgium, France, Switzerland, Ireland, and United Kingdom.
5. Southern European States (3 countries): Greece, Italy, and Portugal.





The variables used in the regression model, that focuses on population characteristics, presence at the last elections, and wellbeing, following the work of Glatz and Eder (2020), Caferra et al. (2021), Chevalier (2019), Buturoiu et al. (2021), Arif et al. (2022), and Hettich et al. (2022), are summarized in table 1, presented below:

**Table 1. Regression variables**

Variable name	Unit	Abbreviation	Source
<b>Attitudes toward Covid-19 pandemic</b>	Score	<i>covid_perception_latent</i>	Own computation based on the ESS, 2020
<b>Political trust</b>	Score	<i>trust_latent</i>	Own computation based on the ESS, 2020
<b>Democracy</b>	Score	<i>democracy_latent</i>	Own computation based on the ESS, 2020
<b>Gender (1 = Female)</b>	dummy	<i>gndr_dummy</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Voted in the last election (1 = vote)</b>	dummy	<i>vote_dummy</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Years of full-time education completed</b>	years	<i>eduyrs</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Age</b>	years	<i>agea</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Happiness</b>	Score	<i>happy</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Satisfied with life as a whole</b>	Score	<i>stflife</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Household's total income</b>	Score	<i>hinctnta</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Religiousness</b>	Score	<i>rlgdgr</i>	ESS, 2020
<b>Satisfied with job</b>	Score	<i>stfmjob</i>	ESS, 2020

Source: author's processing

Considering the presented variables, the regression equation for the present study conforms to the following formula:

$$covid\_perception\_latent = \alpha + \beta_1 trust\_latent + \beta_2 democracy\_latent + \beta_3 gndr\_dummy + vote\_dummy + \beta_5 eduyrs + \beta_6 agea + \beta_7 happy + \beta_8 stflife + \beta_9 hinctnta + \beta_{10} rlgdgr + \beta_{11} rlgdgr + \varepsilon$$

where  $\alpha$  represents the constant term,  $\beta$  represents each explanatory variable's coefficients, and  $\varepsilon$  is the error term.

Table 2 presents significant descriptive characteristics of the variables under consideration:

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the whole sample**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
<i>covid_perception_latent</i>	28,065	0	0.820761	-1.76956	1.402178
<i>trust_latent</i>	31,160	0	2.15456	-4.12868	5.719469
<i>democracy_latent</i>	33,797	0	1.050482	-6.23572	0.82515
<i>gndr_dummy</i>	34,848	0.538654	0.498511	0	1
<i>vote_dummy</i>	34,394	0.777607	0.41586	0	1
<i>edyrs</i>	34,244	13.12271	4.107975	0	65
<i>agea</i>	34,573	52.56029	17.41152	18	90
<i>happy</i>	34,763	7.21264	1.938071	0	10
<i>stflife</i>	34,530	7.047813	2.119733	0	10
<i>hinctnta</i>	27,528	5.35117	2.683091	1	10
<i>rlgdgr</i>	34,478	4.791055	3.133052	0	10
<i>stfmjob</i>	19,465	7.521552	1.909954	0	10

Source: author's processing

As for the rest of the independent variables, in terms of the characteristics of the population, the paper focuses on the respondent's gender, their participation in voting in the last elections held, the number of years they have invested in education, and their age, along with their degree of religiosity and income level. The characteristics of the entire sample show that the sample is fairly balanced in terms of gender as a whole, and on average, 77.76% of respondents voted in the last election. The respondent population is mature, ranging from 18 to 90 years old, with an average age of 52 years old, and the average level of religiosity among the European population is moderate, 4.8 on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 corresponds to the highest level of religiosity. Analyzing in terms of household income, on average, the total sample falls between the 5th and 6th decile of income categories.

In this study, wellbeing takes into account both the level of perceived happiness, satisfaction with life as a whole, and satisfaction with work. On average, the sample registers above average levels of any one indicator of wellbeing and happiness, with an average value of 7, while the maximum value, the maximum level of wellbeing satisfaction, is 10 points, concluding that European respondents are, on average, happy and satisfied with their lifestyle.

#### 4. RESULTS

As for the results of ordinary least squares regressions (OLS), their validity was tested using the variance inflation factor (VIF) test. In the case of the first model, which aims at analyzing



the whole European sanction, the mean value of the VIF indicator is low, of 1.27, demonstrating the validity of the independent variables and the lack of multicollinearity. The same observation can be made for the other samples, in all cases, the VIF indicator registers values below 1.5. Analyzing the correlation matrix results, trust in politicians as well as increased levels of perceived democracy are positively and significantly correlated with low levels of perceived conspiracies in terms of Covid-19, at 1% significance level. Other predictors that significantly diminished distrust in uncertain situations are increased levels of education, happiness, satisfaction with both life and job and increased income. Voter turnout, as a proxy for active citizen participation, is also positively correlated with low levels of mistrust and conspiracies at 1% significance level. On the other hand, an increased age, together with a high level of religiosity, are negatively correlated to an increased level of trust in Covid-19 pandemic, being associated with the development of views that foster disbelief and suspicion when it comes to an exceptional event such as the pandemic, at 1% significance levels.

Table 3 below presents the regression results for all five samples considered.

**Table 3. OLS Regression results**

<i>Dependent variable: Covid perceptions_latent</i>					
<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>(1) Full sample 22 European States</b>	<b>(2) Central and Eastern European States (CEE)</b>	<b>(3) Northern European States</b>	<b>(4) Western European States</b>	<b>(5) Southern European States</b>
<i>trust_latent</i>	0.1123*** (0.0035)	0.1030*** (0.0065)	0.1212*** (0.0054)	0.0923*** (0.0070)	0.1070*** (0.0105)
<i>democracy_latent</i>	0.0904*** (0.0070)	0.0318*** (0.0107)	0.1232*** (0.0145)	0.1244*** (0.0159)	0.1420*** (0.0195)
<i>gndr_dummy</i>	0.0535*** (0.0128)	0.0453* (0.0244)	0.0431** (0.0181)	0.0399 (0.0244)	0.0528 (0.0364)
<i>vote_dummy</i>	0.0960*** (0.0171)	0.0743*** (0.0286)	0.1240*** (0.0270)	0.1241*** (0.0331)	0.0332 (0.0528)
<i>eduysr</i>	0.0172*** (0.0018)	0.0187*** (0.0039)	0.0258*** (0.0027)	0.0180*** (0.0033)	-0.0032 (0.0041)
<i>agea</i>	-0.0010* (0.0005)	-0.0000 (0.0010)	-0.0016** (0.0007)	-0.0009 (0.0010)	-0.0019 (0.0016)
<i>happy</i>	0.0074 (0.0053)	0.0029 (0.0085)	-0.0097 (0.0087)	-0.0119 (0.0123)	0.0736*** (0.0153)
<i>stflife</i>	0.0054	0.0177**	0.0063	0.0220*	-0.0395***



	(0.0049)	(0.0080)	(0.0082)	(0.0113)	(0.0136)
<i>hinctnta</i>	0.0293***	0.0254***	0.0241***	0.0269***	0.0307***
	(0.0029)	(0.0055)	(0.0040)	(0.0052)	(0.0088)
<i>rlgdgr</i>	-0.0314***	-0.0387***	-0.0225***	-0.0289***	-0.0213***
	(0.0022)	(0.0043)	(0.0031)	(0.0040)	(0.0072)
<i>stfmjob</i>	0.0050	0.0086	0.0064	-0.0007	0.0147
	(0.0038)	(0.0065)	(0.0059)	(0.0072)	(0.0109)
<i>Constant</i>	-0.3549***	-0.7688***	-0.6468***	-0.4895***	-0.1940
	(0.0604)	(0.1002)	(0.0794)	(0.1020)	(0.1482)
<i>Country effects</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Observations	12,039	4,142	3,967	2,055	1,875
R-squared	0.3106	0.2006	0.3105	0.2193	0.1550

Standard errors in parentheses

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

Source: author's processing

As a first remark, the obtained results are in accordance with their expected influence. For all models, country specific effects were taken into consideration, in line with the methodology proposed by Caferra et al. (2021). The level of the R-squared coefficient means that the proposed model explains 31.06% of the variation in the European population's perception of the Covid-19 pandemic for the total sample. For all five samples considered according to European regions, political trust and the variable that accounts for democratic beliefs are significantly and positively associated with low levels of perceived conspiracies in terms of Covid-19. A higher level of both variables significantly (at 1% significance levels) increases the level of trust regarding the pandemic as an exceptional and uncertain event. The same observation can be made for the household income variable: high income households do not diminish the reality of the Covid-19 phenomenon, in all models.

According to our results, feminine gender positively influences trust in exceptional events in the full sample, in the CEE sample and in the Northern states sample, while active and involved society (through voting) is also significantly (at 1% level) associated with low levels of disbelief and conspiracies, with the exception of southern European sample. The same remark can be made for the years spent in education variable, which is associated with increased levels of trust and diminishes conspiracy beliefs regarding the pandemic, in all samples, except for the southern countries. An older population contributes to the development of views that foster



disbelief and suspicion when it comes to an exceptional event such as the pandemic significant at 10% and 5% significance levels respectively for the whole sample and for the model in which the northern European states are considered.

Perceived happiness reduces the levels of suspicion in relation to exceptional events at 1% significance level for the southern European sample, while for the same sample satisfaction with life manifests a negative impact on population behavior and perceptions regarding the pandemic. An increased level of satisfaction with life as a whole among respondents from Central and Eastern Europe as well as western European states contributes to less skeptical behavior, particularly under exceptional circumstances. Job satisfaction, even though positively linked to low levels of perceived conspiracies showed no statistically significant impact in the models considered.

Furthermore, increased levels of religiousness are associated with higher levels of distrust in Covid-19 pandemic and development of conspiracy theories, significant at 1% for all models.

## **5. DISCUSSIONS**

As mentioned before, the obtained results are consistent with their predicted impact as well as with the reviewed literature. The fact that political trust as well as perceived political democracy have a significant influence on populations' perceptions and behaviors regarding exceptional events such as the pandemic, represents the most notable result of the current study, considering its implications on the collective wellbeing and health state of the population. The same remark regarding political trust in relation to covid perceptions and skepticism was made by Maglic et al. (2023) and Kuźelewska and Tomaszuk (2022), who demonstrated that political distrust is highly associated with the development of conspiracies in European countries. The study of Bargain and Aminjonov (2020) proved that low levels of trust significantly affect survival rates in the case of pandemics. On the same note, Ezeibe et al. (2020) found that political distrust is associated with populations' lack of commitment to covid safety measures as well as the expansion of the pandemic.

This paper also points out that trust in public institutions and the quality of democracy are important elements to consider when it comes to developing public policies, especially in an environment dominated by uncertainty. The same observation is also underlined by the work



of the authors Caferra et al. (2021), who highlight the importance of trust, both in government and in the community, in regard to pro-environmental behavior. Studying the same link between political trust and views about climate change, Fairbrother et al. (2019) demonstrate that attitudes toward a policy, in their case the attitude toward fossil fuel taxes, are strongly related to people's trust in the political element. The concluding remark of their study points out that citizens with high political trust are more likely to support the implementation of fossil fuel tax policies, because they are also conscious of the dangers brought by climate change. The same remark can also be made about the present study. The interpretation of the results reveals that people who have more confidence in the political system do not doubt the potential threats posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and are thus more receptive and open to public policies aimed at eradicating the pandemic and getting through this period of crisis with as little human, economic, and financial loss as possible. Moreover, in such an extraordinary situation as the pandemic, as mentioned by Kuźelewska and Tomaszuk (2022), people tend to depend more on public institutions to handle these extraordinary circumstances.

Democracy and active participation through voting are also elements that contribute to increasing trust in the pandemic and the public policies that come with it. The results of the study are similar to those of Pohjolainen et al. (2021), who argue that democratic states are more ambitious when it comes to public policies, and those of Papaioannou et al. (2023), who proved that conspiracy and skepticism are related to the rejection of existing democracy and forms of governance, analyzing the case of Greece. The same author argues that conspiracy beliefs and mistrust are also associated with populations general tendencies to reject the idea of liberal democracy. Political ideology is also considered a predictor of pandemic spread, according to Tung et al. (2022) and Regazzi et al. (2023). The authors argue that a greater tendency towards right-wing ideologies is correlated with an increased likelihood of rapidly spreading the pandemic and promoting conspiracy ideas.

When it comes to population characteristics that promote fake news and conspiracies regarding the covid pandemic, our results are in line with the paper of Buturoiu et al. (2021), who concluded that low levels of education together with higher levels of religiosity are characteristics that significantly define the profile of a skeptical individual in relation to the extraordinary situation that was the Covid-19 pandemic. An important note is made by the work of Pickel et al. (2022), who explained that the link between religiousness and misconceptions



regarding the pandemic imply a broad and sensitive approach, considering that each individual's own personal relationship and interpretation of religion may be taken into account. Regarding education and income status, the results are also sustained by the work of Papaioannou et al. (2023), Arif et al. (2022) and Hettich et al. (2022), who proved that a higher degree of education and higher income levels, together with keeping up with other updated sources of information besides television, are linked to higher rates of Covid -19 vaccine acceptance, thus to a less skeptical behavior.

Furthermore, the relationship between age and pandemic perceptions is still under debate in the literature. Buturoiu et al. (2021) find no significant relationship, while Hettich et al. (2022), Allington et al. (2020), Romer and Jameison (2020), and Arif et al. (2022) argue that a younger population is more likely to promote conspiracies, being considered much more naive when it comes to misinformation. Thus, regarding the link between age and perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, our results are in contrast to those presented in the literature. On the other hand, it is important to specify that everyone may be equally exposed to the danger of misinformation, as Buturoiu et al. (2021) also point out, and that older populations are not as familiar with technology and have difficulty adapting to new contexts.

Satisfaction with life as a whole turned out to be an important predictor in terms of population behavior in times of covid pandemic, while no significant relationship was highlighted between perceived satisfaction with professional life and covid attitudes. The results regarding life satisfaction are in line with the papers of Leibovitz et al. (2021), Chen et al. (2020), Regazzi et al. (2023), and Debski et al. (2022), who argue that low satisfaction and quality of life, anxiety, and low levels of wellbeing among the population are related to the spread of false information during exceptional circumstances.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The current study sought to ascertain the link between trust in public institutions alongside democracy, population characteristics and wellbeing, and European population attitudes and beliefs towards the Covid pandemic. The main findings of this research demonstrated that the lack of trust in public institutions and low levels of perceived democracy are associated with a passive or skeptical attitude in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated policies, making it challenging for the European governments to improve public policies in the context





of an extraordinary situation. Furthermore, the results highlight that political trust plays an important role and influences population behaviors and actions, particularly under exceptional circumstances.

Another important takeaway point from this study is the fact that a more educated and democratic society does not leave room for the development of conspiracy theories and a lack of trust in major events, especially in the Northern European states. The main elements found as contributing to higher levels of skeptical attitudes with regard to Covid-19 were lack of political trust, lack of democracy, lack of active participation in society, increased levels of religiousness, and poverty.

In line with the findings and the validation provided by the existing literature, the study concludes that an educated, happy, and proactive society, paired with a well-developed legislative framework, can contribute to reducing the spread of misinformation and conspiracies that can harm, in the end, the whole economy. In addition, governments ought to take steps to foster transparency and openness in decision-making, especially in contexts of uncertainty, which will increase citizens' trust in public institutions as well as the democratic component. Furthermore, as a recommendation for future research in the field, an analysis that focuses on the evolution in time of these perceptions and their determinants should be considered, as well as developing and completing the proposed models with more independent variables to better understand the sources of skeptical attitudes and conspiracies in such events marked by uncertainty. Moreover, a detailed analysis for each European state should also be taken into consideration, to better understand the particular relationship between country specific characteristics in terms of trust, population characteristics, and citizens' attitudes toward such an extraordinary event.

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