

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
United Kingdom		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
Spain		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
Italy		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
France		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
Germany		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
Hungary		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
Czech Republic		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
Poland		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

CHAPTER 2

UK: BETWEEN MANAGED MODERATION AND FAR-RIGHT CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Abstract

This chapter deals with the response of populist actors in the UK to the COVID-19 pandemic. Populism in the UK is divided among Nigel Farage and Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Farage and Johnson, both campaigning for Britain to leave the EU, had distinct responses to the pandemic, the former being more in line with common themes of populist discourse. True to his anti-immigrant stance, Farage antagonized national and international agencies for allegedly smuggling migrants into the UK, blamed China for the pandemic, and echoed the US president Trump's trade war in calling for a boycott on Chinese goods. Farage criticised government lockdown and social distancing measures for allegedly being too harsh. In doing so, Farage employed common far right conspiracist tropes and populist rhetoric aimed at UK politicians, the EU, and China. Johnson on the other hand, displayed a rather measured response and did not engage in antagonizing political entities.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the pandemic in the UK was perceived to be inevitable as other European countries, most notably Italy, had already succumbed to COVID-19. The Johnson government explained that the United Kingdom (UK) was two weeks behind Italy and the NHS could be overwhelmed by COVID-19 very much like the Italian health system had been. By mid-March 2020, it became clear in the UK that the pandemic was no longer a 'Chinese problem'. Nevertheless, the UK government seemed from the beginning insufficiently prepared. The government was slow in stopping international flights from regions with high infection rates, which probably contributed to the spread of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, there was a shortage in personal protective equipment, causing hundreds of the NHS staff to be infected with the virus. These factors provided a fertile ground for populist politics. Despite of this fact, Farage and his Brexit Party kept a rather low profile during the pandemic. This was due to two reasons. First, populism in the UK is mostly geared towards Brexit. Therefore, the pandemic at least at the beginning was not on Farage's radar. Second, UK populists' influence on public opinion is mostly limited to Brexit. This does not mean that Farage abstained from politicising the issue and using it to advance his agenda.

1. Political context

The British variant of the latest wave of populism engulfing the world in the past few decades can be traced back to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP was founded in 1993 by members of the Anti-Federalist League. At the beginning, UKIP was considered a splinter group of the Conservative Party, and was originally designed as a single-issue, policy-seeking party having the sole aim of facilitating the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) (Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Rekawek, 2015). Since its early days, UKIP sought to pressure the Conservative party into adopting a harsher stance on Europe, opposed plans for further European integration and sought the withdrawal of the UK from the EU (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). UKIP followed into the footsteps of an established British political tradition of Euroscepticism (Bale, 2018). Although some scholars argue that the marriage between Euroscepticism and populism was present from the first stages of UKIP's historical development (Tournier-Sol, 2015), others suggest that populism was rather a subsequent, although invaluable addition to the party's repertoire (Taggart, 2017; Bale, 2018).

By 2010, UKIP switched to being a vote-seeking party mainly due to the contribution of then-party leader Nigel Farage who popularized UKIP's single issue by connecting it to populist backlash toward current immigration policies. This afforded UKIP to set the limelight on the longstanding issue the party was promoting ever since its inception, and which never before truly captured the full attention of the British electorate (Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Tournier-Sol, 2015; Bale 2018). Banking on voters' understanding that leaving the EU would increase the possibility of restricting immigration, UKIP, as the only party openly advocating exit from the EU, could therefore credibly signal that they mean business (Rekawek, 2015; Bale, 2018). Nigel Farage's appeal to voters was straightforwardly right-wing populist, anti-establishment, nativist, neo-nostalgic, and neo-traditionalist (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Reed, 2016; Breeze, 2019).

For most of its existence so far, UKIP never really took off in the polls. The party started off with a meagre 1% of the vote in 1994 European Parliament (EP) election, while settling for a mere 0.3% of the vote in the 1997 general election. It was only after 2010 that UKIP experienced a surge in popularity, which culminated with the 2014 EP election, when UKIP won the first place in the popular vote by securing 27.5% of the votes (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). In the 2014 by-election, support for main parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Conservatives) plummeted, while support for UKIP rose by 36% (Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Tournier-Sol, 2015). Ultimately, the biggest contribution of UKIP was in succeeding to pressure the Conservatives into holding an EU membership referendum (Rekawek, 2015; Taggart, 2017). The referendum was held on June 23, 2016, and Britain voted to leave the EU by a close margin, leading to a deeply polarized political environment ever since. After the referendum, support for UKIP practically collapsed. By then, however, Nigel Farage had already left UKIP, and, followed by several UKIP MEPs, in January 2019, formed the Brexit Party, which later that year ended up winning the 2019 EP election with 31.6% of the vote and 29 seats.

Nigel Farage's Brexit Party has clung onto the 2016 Leave campaign promises in its fight to see through Britain's exit from the EU, as Brexit negotiations are set to be concluded by the end of 2020. Although largely debunked, Leave campaign slogans seem today as valid as ever, judging by Farage's electoral success in EP elections, and by the overwhelming victory of Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson's Conservative Party in the 2019 general election, after campaigning on the very same messaging (Tormey, 2020). The election result seemed a logical outcome of all the 'good' work done by the Leave campaign in 2016, of which Johnson was an integral part. The campaign used simple stories and false but intuitive narratives while depicting migrants and politicians alike in populist Manichean terms of outgroups competing for British resources. Similarly, the EU was portrayed as an imperialist superpower planning to subdue Britain. To all this, Brexit was supposed to be the answer, the magical one-shot win-all option, aptly summarized by PM Boris Johnson's 2019 electoral motto 'Get Brexit Done'. In this way, populism and Brexit came together and decided the election results. Finally, in July 2020, UKIP polled at about 2%, while the Brexit Party had garnered only 1% of popular support, once Brexit was finally being done.

Table 2.1 Main UK political parties (>5% in the last European election)¹

Political party	2019 general election		2019 European election	
	Vote shares	Seats	Vote shares	Seats
<i>In power</i>				
The Conservative and Unionist Party	43.6%	365	9.1%	4
<i>In opposition</i>				
The Labour Party	32.2%	203	14.1%	10
Brexit Party	2%	0	30.5%	29
Greens	2.7%	1	4%	7

¹ Because first-past-the-post system is used in general elections, the threshold for the UK case is calculated considering the European elections instead of the general elections.

Liberal Democrats	11.5%	11	19.6%	16
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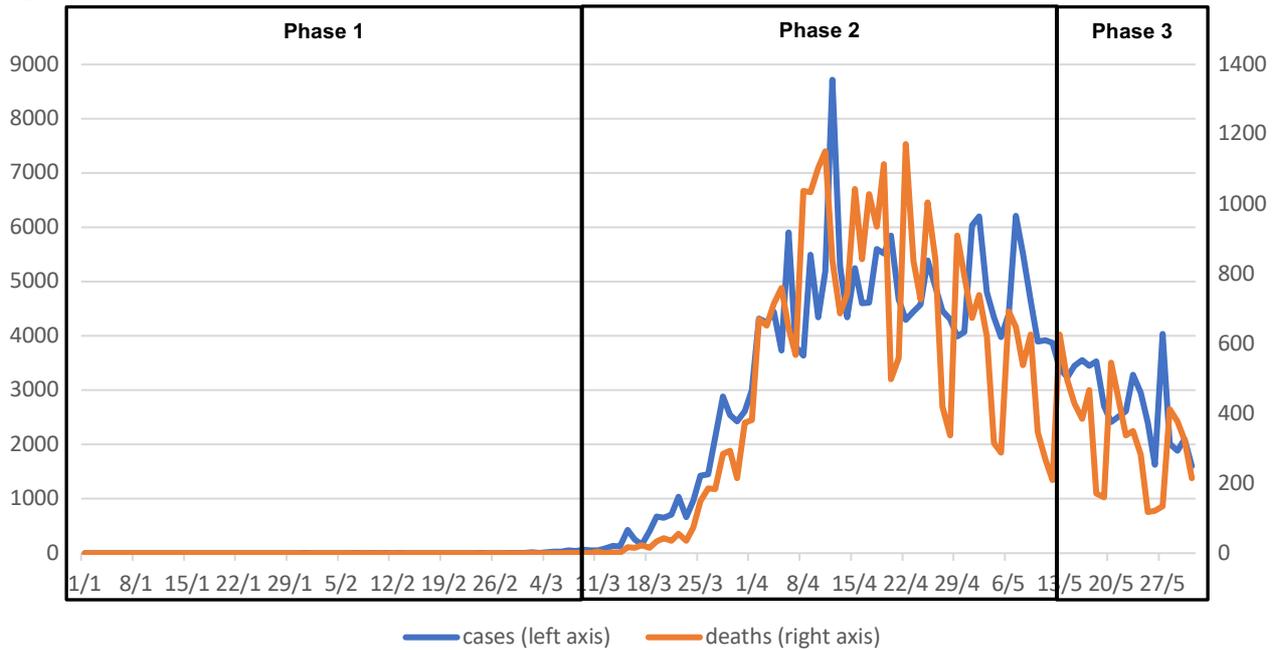
2. COVID-19 diffusion and political measures

In the UK, during the *first phase* of the pandemic, the attention of the public and the media was focused on Italy, which was the first epicentre of the pandemic in Europe. This was despite the fact that the first COVID-19 diagnosis in the UK was recorded as early as 31 January. Accordingly, one can argue that the initial reaction of the public and the state authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic was rather weak. No quarantine or extra safety checks were introduced for international passengers arriving from Southeast Asia or Europe. As of March 18, the UK still did not impose a ban on non-essential travel whereas the EU banned all non-essential travel from outside the European Union². The only noticeable action of the government was to advise its citizens to abstain from any non-essential travel for the next 30 days. It also advised its citizens abroad to return to the country if they can. Despite the pressure from the opposition, Boris Johnson declined to treat the situation as an emergency, which was also apparent in his unwillingness to hold a so-called Cobra meeting – namely meetings with Prime Minister advisers in times of national emergencies – even after the pandemic started to spread throughout Europe in late February.

The *second phase* started in March where local cases with no travel history started to spike. As of March 10, 2020, the number of tests reached 26,000 with 373 people testing positive. Six people died because of COVID-19 by March 10. Only 18 days later, the government reported 17,089 positive cases while the death toll reached 1,019 people. These figures included PM Johnson who tested positive on March 27, and who was hospitalised due to breathing difficulties. This new reality check compelled the government to reconsider its strategy. While the government previously insisted that based on scientific advice, a ‘herd immunity’ approach was the best strategy to deal with the pandemic, they had to backtrack from this position after heavy criticism and after an influential report from the Imperial College London. This report predicted that, if left unchecked, the government strategy would cause as much as 260,000 deaths and the NHS would most likely ‘break’ under the increasing number of patients. Hence, the government had to announce a lockdown on March 23, 2020. Johnson announced that all non-essential shops must close effective immediately and people must stay at home. He also advised the people not to go to shopping except for essentials such as food and medicine. Despite these measures, the Johnson government was criticised for acting late as London had already buckled under the weight of the pandemic. Throughout April 2020, cases in the UK increased so much so that by the end of May 2020 it was clear that the UK was one of the worst performing countries in fighting the pandemic. The death toll in the UK passed 50,000 on June 2, making it the highest in Europe.

² PWC, COVID-19: Global travel restrictions, entry bans and quarantine measures, 18 March 2020.

Figure 2.1 Daily death toll and new cases in UK



Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

Phase 1: pre-Covid-19; Phase 2: spread and containment measures; Phase 3: contagion mitigation

Table 2.2 COVID-19 pandemic in UK

Cases	289,140
Total deaths	40,883
Total recovered	N/A
Cases for 1 M pop	4,260
Deaths for 1 M pop	602

Source: www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/ (update 10/6/2020)

The UK started to flatten the curve towards the beginning of May, which enabled the government to introduce some relaxation measures to the lockdown. Thus, the *third phase* started on May 13, 2020. Johnson encouraged people in England to go back to work if they cannot work from home. He also advised citizens to avoid public transport when possible. Other devolved nations, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland however, did not rush to follow Johnson’s footsteps as their governments argued that it was still too early to introduce a relaxation of lockdown measures. This also signified the beginning of diverging approaches the devolved nations took during the third phase. Especially Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was quite cautious to follow the 10 Downing Street as she argued that England was too hasty to open up the economy. Nevertheless, the situation has almost normalized all across the UK especially in July. Foreign flights to major hubs have resumed with important exceptions such as the US. Pubs, restaurants and hairdressers were allowed to open throughout the UK in July while schools resumed their normal curriculum in August 2020.

3. Populist discourse at the time of COVID-19

Nigel Farage took the opportunity of the pandemic to fight for some questionable goals while deploying established right-wing populist tropes. The thematic proximity of right-wing populism to conspiracism as established in previous research (Bergmann, 2018) is also evident in the communication of Farage on social media and in his political messaging in the media and at rallies.

Given that Nigel Farage had left his seat in the European Parliament (EP) as a result of Brexit before the pandemic captured the national awareness in Britain, most of his statements on COVID-19 have been uttered either in the media or posted on social media.

Nigel Farage adapted his discourse to the COVID-19 crisis mainly in two ways. First, and probably least problematic, Farage criticised the latency with which the British government introduced measures to counteract the spread of the pandemic. He also criticised the government for providing the inadequate response of adopting a ‘herd immunity’ approach. To this end, he pointed out that PM Boris Johnson’s policy of herd immunity would likely lead to 400,000 thousand deaths, from his own estimates, or alternatively to 260,000 deaths, citing an estimate by the Imperial College London³. Second, his central position on the pandemic was twofold: (1) he argued against the lockdown and against what he believed were harsh enforcement measures, likening the UK government to East Germany (Farage’s Facebook page, 30/03/2020) while at the same time (2) decrying the government’s decision to both allow inbound flights during lockdown and the ‘daily import of spreaders’ from high-risk countries such as China, Italy, or the United States (US) (Farage’s Facebook page, 02/04/2020). Within his central position on the pandemic, he vilified China as the paradigmatic enemy of ‘the West’ and attempted to promote outrage over the silent ‘invasion’ of migrants on the beaches of England (Farage’s Facebook page, 20/05/2020).

Farage echoed Trump in blaming China for the pandemic, claiming that the Chinese government caused COVID-19. He also called for a tougher stance on China⁴. For Farage, China was ‘a surveillance state that infected the world with a deadly disease’ (Farage’s Facebook page, 20/04/2020) that expels American journalists and oppresses religious minorities, that caused three viruses (i.e., SARS, the swine flu, and COVID-19), and that initially suppressed the truth about COVID-19 costing thousands of lives worldwide. China is also held responsible for global pollution and was ultimately characterized by Farage as ‘*this murderous atrocity that has brought the world such misery*’⁵. He then assumed a novel role for his Brexit Party: to hold China to account.⁶

During the pandemic, in an article peroration published in *Newsweek.co.uk*, Nigel Farage deployed most of the tropes associated with white supremacist conspiracy theories. These included: ‘the West’ (framed as a unified and distinct body in opposition to China); ‘the Left’ (an amorphous pseudo-entity embodying all which does not conform to the right-wing populist notion of ‘the [in this case mainly white] people’) collaborating with proponents of ‘political correctness’; environmental movements such as ‘extinction rebellion’ (the youth movement that has supposedly ‘brought British cities to a standstill’) or the (imagined) ‘Green Lobby’ who are seen to inflict ‘chaos on our society’; and even the World Health Organization (WHO) is depicted as being pro-China. Farage ends his peroration by calling for an all-out boycott on Chinese products, as well as calling for PM Johnson to deny Chinese company Huawei the right to build Britain’s 5G network (Farage’s Facebook page, 20/04/2020). He also claimed that the British establishment had previously sold Britain out to EU leaders in Brussels and is now selling Britain out to Beijing (Farage’s Facebook page, 19/04/2020). Farage’s populist anti- ‘Left’ discourse mirrored US president Trump’s attempt to pinpoint yet another term for the collectively conspiring enemy: ‘far-left fascism’. To this end, Farage referred to the government’s stay-at-home advice as ‘house arrest’ (Farage’s Facebook page, 30/03/2020). Farage portrayed ‘the Left’ and all its subsidiaries as conspiring to destroy the British way of life and to strip citizens’ rights and freedoms, as ‘the Left’ is beholden to Chinese interests and would not criticise the Chinese government in fear of losing lucrative business deals and that the political ‘establishment’ has been ‘payed off by China’ (Farage’s Facebook page, 22/02/2020). ‘The Green Lobby’ was depicted as a malevolent agent to which Farage ascribed intentionality and emotion

³ Farage, N., The Virus is Yet Another Reason to Rethink the West’s Relationship With China. *Newsweek*, 18 March 2020.

⁴ Harris, K, Nigel Farage lashes out at China over coronavirus: ‘We need to get TOUGH!’. *Express*, 2 June 2020.

⁵ Farage, N., The Virus is Yet Another Reason to Rethink the West’s Relationship With China. *Newsweek*, 18 March 2020.

⁶ Harris, K, Nigel Farage lashes out at China over coronavirus: ‘We need to get TOUGH!’. *Express*, 2 June 2020.

(e.g., ‘happy to inflict chaos’)⁷. He implicitly referred to alt-right conspiracy theories by mentioning ‘globalists’ in relation to ‘the Left’ and to the establishment as promoting globalization against the will of the people (Farage’s Facebook page, 01/05/2020). Farage also blamed globalization for the pandemic partly because globalization allegedly leads powerful figures to play in the hands of the Chinese government⁸.

Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Farage engaged in fearmongering over a small number of migrants crossing the English Channel illegally. He breached government lockdown advice to travel 100 miles to East Sussex to document the alleged migrant ‘invasion’⁹. After being reprimanded by the police for breaching social distancing rules, Farage called the police visit ‘lunacy’.¹⁰ He further suggested that migrants are carrying COVID-19 (reminiscent of established dehumanization strategies deployed by right-wing populists against migrants and refugees), and claimed that the media is silent about the ‘invasion’ (Farage’s Facebook page, 26/04/2020). He further claimed that French ships were ‘escorting’ migrant boats into British waters and tried to ‘cover it up’ (Farage’s Facebook page, 27/05/2020). He also called for a stop on flights bringing seasonal workers from Romania into western Europe as he suggested that seasonal workers might spread the virus in Britain (Farage’s Facebook page, 18/04/2020).

4. The politicization of COVID-19 issue by populists

During the pandemic, the Johnson government avoided using a discourse that could have contributed to the politicisation of the crisis. Instead, on several occasions, Johnson emphasized that the government would be guided by scientific advice. Indeed, early in the pandemic, the Chief Scientific Advisor Patrick Vallance became a household name as PM Johnson included him in the daily COVID-19 press conferences where Vallance explained the government strategy to fight the pandemic. When the herd immunity approach, initially cherished by the UK government, drew heavy criticism by the public health authorities (i.e. the Imperial College London report), the government overrode its initial decision and imposed a lockdown throughout the nation. Furthermore, unlike Nigel Farage or the Trump administration, the Johnson government was hesitant to put any blame on China. When conspiracy theories emerged that 5G is behind the spread of COVID-19, the Cabinet Secretary Michael Gove was quick to define these theories as ‘dangerous nonsense’.¹¹

Unlike the government however, Nigel Farage chose to politicise the COVID-19 crisis early in the *emergence phase*. On January 23, Farage slammed the Johnson government for its lax response to the outbreak in relation to China.¹² He suggested that all passengers coming from China should have their temperatures checked in the airports. Farage also differed from the government approach in terms of his take on the pandemic. While the government undermined the seriousness of the crisis mostly because of economic concerns, Farage opportunistically used the COVID-19 crisis to suggest a scale down to the UK’s relations with the EU and China. For instance, he argued that while the government could monitor flights from China landing back in the UK, it was not possible to monitor those flights landing from China in the rest of Europe. He therefore suggested that the EU freedom of movement did make the UK more vulnerable to the pandemic.¹³

⁷ Farage, N., The Virus is Yet Another Reason to Rethink the West’s Relationship With China. *Newsweek*, 18 March 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nigel Farage, *Talk Radio Interview*, 30 April 2020.

¹⁰ ‘Lunacy,’ says Nigel Farage after police visit over lockdown trip. *Politico*, 5 May 2020.

¹¹ Gove warns 5G-coronavirus conspiracy theory is ‘dangerous nonsense’. *The Guardian*, 4 April 2020.

¹² Nigel Farage ‘astonished’ at UK government’s response to coronavirus ‘just a leaflet?!’. *Daily Express*, 23 January 2020.

¹³ Is the EU holding up Britain’s coronavirus response?. *Daily Mail*, 5 February 2020.

There is a certain overlap between the first phase (*emergence phase*) and the second phase (*confrontation phase*) as Farage moved onto the identification of actors who were responsible for the COVID-19 crisis in the UK. Farage suggested that those who were responsible for the UK's crisis were China, the Johnson government, and migrants. Farage was in the same boat with Donald Trump in blaming China for the pandemic. He argued that before the pandemic, China was a surveillance state; now, it is a surveillance state that infected the world with a deadly disease (Farage's Facebook page, 20/04/2020). In several statements and social media posts during April and May 2020, Farage accused China for the pandemic and asserted that China should let independent investigators into the country to reveal the true scope of its guilt during the spread of the virus. Farage also referred to China several times in his accusations levelled against the Johnson government and the establishment. He blamed the Johnson government for being soft on China despite China's share in the pandemic. He suggested the government should learn from the Trump administration. After Trump's announcement that the US is withdrawing its financial support from what Farage defined as the 'pro-China' WHO, he argued that the Johnson government should be ashamed of continuing to fund the WHO (Farage's Facebook page, 14/04/2020). In fact, during the pandemic, Farage emerged as a vocal proponent of the US position on China's role in the pandemic. Farage said that Trump was correct to define COVID-19 as the 'Chinese virus' because, he claimed, China was responsible for the outbreak.¹⁴

A second target for Farage during the confrontation phase was the Johnson government. Along with his accusations against the government for being subordinated to China, Farage blamed the Johnson government for being incompetent and indecisive in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. After Johnson's announcement in early March 2020 that no immediate steps would be taken against COVID-19, Farage stated that Johnson is failing to show leadership (Farage's Facebook page, 12/03/2020). Furthermore, on several occasions, Farage criticised the government over its lockdown decision, which was announced by PM Johnson on March 23, 2020. He likened the lockdown to a house arrest or home detention.¹⁵ Farage argued that while other measures such as wearing mask or keeping social distance were acceptable, the government decision to impose a total lockdown was going too far as a measure in the fight against the virus.

Another target of Farage during the COVID-19 crisis was irregular and regular migrants. He claimed that COVID-19 diverted attention from what he perceived to be a serious problem. Farage suggested that during the pandemic there had been a 'continuing flow of illegal migrants that makes many of us very angry' (Farage's Facebook page, 24/04/2020). According to Farage, the media was ignoring the flow of these immigrants crossing the English Channel, which he described as 'the beginning of an invasion' (Farage's Facebook page, 08/05/2020). Farage presented these immigrants as potential COVID-19 spreaders by arguing that irregular migrants would be neither sent back nor quarantined. Farage also suggested that seasonal workers from abroad (generally from Romania or Poland) who come to the UK to pick fruit or vegetables must be stopped because they are potential spreaders of the virus. In addition, he argued, as many British workers were either out of their jobs or furloughed due to the COVID-19 crisis, they could easily replace the seasonal workers from abroad.

In the following *managing phase*, which started in mid-May, Farage proposed several solutions to deal with the pandemic while criticizing the government for some of its policies. Unlike other populist leaders such as Trump or Bolsonaro, Farage did not despise face masks. On the contrary, he criticised the Johnson government for failing to enforce wearing face masks in the public. Farage argued that

¹⁴ Nigel Farage facing backlash after blaming China for coronavirus pandemic. *The National*, 19 March 2020.

¹⁵ Farage, N., Of course we must stop coronavirus, but not at the cost of becoming a police state. *The Telegraph*, 30 March 2020.

anything that could help ease the lockdown (i.e. face masks) should be encouraged (Farage's Facebook page, 16/04/2020). Farage also proposed to stop international flights to the UK whereas the government was reluctant to do so. Despite these proposals, it would be an exaggeration to claim that Nigel Farage had a comprehensive program to fight the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, his proposals were mostly ad hoc and mostly aiming to curb the severity of the lockdown in the UK. Rather, he benefited from the pandemic to frame China as the new enemy of 'the West' renewing the relevance of his Brexit Party in current affairs.

As for PM Boris Johnson, aside from benefitting from the pronounced populist undertones of the pro-Brexit campaign, and from decades of right-wing, pro-Brexit mainstream media (Cromby, 2019), any populist elements inside his discourse surrounding the pandemic were considerably toned down, arguably even non-existent. The mainstream media was also careful to avoid a populist tone in criticising the prime minister. Most of the criticisms towards the government was built upon the premise that the government paid too much attention to the economic implications of measures against the pandemic while overlooking scientific advice. In fact, the media's insistence on publicizing the now-famous Imperial College London report on COVID-19, which argued that herd immunity could cause as much as 260,000 deaths, was probably a major factor in the government's decision to ditch this strategy and impose a total lockdown.

Conclusion

Nigel Farage used the pandemic to advance his goal of realizing a no-deal Brexit. Even as polls place the Brexit Party below 2%, his contribution was only ever reflected within the Brexit process. This explains the observed discrepancy between the infinitesimal polling of the Brexit Party on the one hand, and its crushing victory in the 2019 EP election on the other. The relevance of Nigel Farage and his party increases as he is careful to include common right-wing conspiracist tropes in his discourse and as he appears willing to wage a pseudo-crusade against alleged external and internal enemies of Britain and 'the West', such as China and the 'politically correct Left'. This is why Farage chose to employ similar tactics during the pandemic.

Recent electoral success of the British Conservatives suggests that a majority of British voters are still willing to buy what Farage and his more soft-spoken populist counterpart, PM Boris Johnson, are selling. As Britain is rapidly heading toward a no-deal Brexit scenario due to the UK government's apparent unwillingness to strike any kind of deal with the EU, thus fulfilling Farage's long time aim, Farage is careful to confer novel relevancy to his party by setting the new goal of antagonizing China. To this end, Farage added the pandemic to his case against China. At the same time, his opposition to lockdown measures is not so much opposition directed at government policy as it is intended to work as a dog whistle against globalization and the 'oppressive' 'Left' collaborating with and never criticising China.

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