
National Identity and Anti-elitism: Examining the Demand Side of Populism

Yelyzaveta Yeroshkina

University of Edinburgh

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Abstract:

The rise of populism is a central theme of our present era. To understand it, we need to look at the possible ‘triggers’ that have caused this rise. This paper examines the triggers of populist attitudes among the populations of Eastern and Western Europe. I use the post-election nationality-representative survey conducted by Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES) dataset Module 5 from 2021. The research uses an ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regression model to examine the effect of national identity, distrust in politicians, and acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders on populist attitudes across the EU. The findings suggest that populism in both Eastern and Western Europe is significantly affected by the lack of trust in politicians, especially in Eastern Europe. Although the research hypothesis states that national identity would have a bigger influence on the rise of populism in post-communist Eastern Europe, it appeared not to be the case. The acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders had more impact in Eastern Europe, while national identity played a more important role in Western Europe. Despite little heteroscedasticity in the OLS regression models, the results *are* statistically significant.

Keywords: Demand Side of Populism, national identity, anti-elitism, rule of law, Eastern and Western Europe, OLS multivariate regression

Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament elections emphasized the appeal of “people first” rhetoric to Western voters. However, such populist talking points in politics are widely considered to be one of the main challenges to the liberal democratic political order (Mudde, 2004). While populism as an ideology is not inherently hostile toward democracies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), it might conflict with key elements such as minority rights protection, power checks and balances and the consensual nature of political decision-making. Scholars such as Canovan (1999), Mudde (2004), and Crick (2005) have warned about the damaging effects of populist ideologies.

Cas Mudde (2021) examines the claim that populism could be interpreted as an illiberal response to the lack of democracy promised by liberal institutions. Mudde (2021) sees populist illiberalism as hostile to any restraints on majoritarian power imposed by non-elected state institutions. This is done by estimating and comparing the triggers of populist attitudes across populations in Eastern and Western Europe. To ground the theory in empirical evidence, the study asked: “To what extent can different political cultures explain the dissimilarities between populist attitudes across societies of the liberal democracies?” The following two sections will introduce and discuss existing literature, and state the research hypothesis and methodology, respectively. The final section will evaluate the strength of the relationships using OLS regression models that predict the effects of national identity, distrust in politicians, and acceptance of law-breaking by leaders on populist attitudes in Eastern and Western Europe. It will then test the OLS models for multicollinearity to ensure that none of the independent variables are highly correlated and therefore don’t affect the regression coefficients. Test on heteroscedasticity indicates the accuracy of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable estimated by the model. I will conclude that the lack of trust in politicians and the acceptance of the abuse of the law by leaders have proven to be

stronger predictors of populist attitudes in Eastern than in Western Europe. In contrast, national identity has played a more important role in the rise of populism in Western Europe.

Literature Review

In the next section, I will present and assess different approaches to populism, focusing on the literature which theories the demand side of populism. There is significant academic literature that presents various approaches to define and measure populism, conceptualizing both its supply and demand sides (Goodwyn, 1976; Laclau, 2005; Pappas, 2015). The literature on the supply side of populism views it as a strategy or style employed by political elites for electoral gain. Charismatic leaders are key to promoting populist movements, according to these theories (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). However, this fails to take into account latent populist opinions within civil society, which also contribute to the demand side of populism. According to Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017), the demand side of populism refers to the latent force that activates under certain circumstances, such as system unresponsiveness. Recently, the most prominent theories related to the demand side of populism are dominated by cultural reaction theory (Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016). The theory tries to account for populist attitudes among civil society by acknowledging the strong connection between national identity and religion. That connection is argued to facilitate the reaction against liberal cultural values. Another explanation is the backlash against neoliberal or globalist approaches to the economy (Ost, 2006). That is, the growing sense of grievance regarding social inequality in postindustrial Western societies.

According to the ideological approach, populism is a set of ideas which considers society to be divided into “homogeneous and antagonistic camps” of the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites”, where politics is seen as an “expression of the general will of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6). One of the main strengths of this particular definition is its universal relevance to both political elites and the general constituency. The ideological

approach focuses on the “thin-centred” nature of populists’ rhetoric. In short, it accounts for populism not as a mature ideology like neoliberalism, but as attached to other “thick-ideologies”. Indeed, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 19) believe that populism can usually be found coupled with a “host-ideology,” such as socialism or nationalism. The attachment of populism to other ideologies is argued to arise in accordance with the unique national political culture formed under the experience of democratization (Krygier, 2019).

Petsinis (2019) argues that in Eastern Europe, nation-states played a key role in mobilizing the population, or the “nation,” to participate in “ethnic democracy,” opposing the elites - the Communist Party. Western Europe's democratization, in contrast, sprang from the struggle between the “elite” (the aristocracy and landowners), and the “common people” (the lower classes) (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 107). The main research hypothesis is that we expect to see stronger national identity in Eastern European populations as the dominant force behind populist party electoral success, than in Western Europe.

The following two hypotheses are the basis for the control variables. Such variables will help us to estimate the main relationship between the national identity and populism. The first hypothesis expects that we will see greater support for populist movements in Eastern Europe, driven by an underdeveloped respect for the rule of law. Introduced ‘from above’ legal frameworks were portrayed as a threat to the ‘national unity’, reflecting the experience of the communist bureaucracy in Eastern Europe and provoking calls for deinstitutionalization (Krygier 2019, 566). In Eastern Europe rule of law was perceived as an invisible force to constrain the power of the state to effectively respond to the people’s will (Krygier 2019, 569). Thus, lack of conditions for successful incorporation of the new tradition of institutionalized constitution triggered populist attitudes during periods of system unresponsiveness (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, 102), namely during the 2014 refugee flow mismanagement by the EU institutions.

Another hypothesis that the research aims to examine is the stronger effect of distrust in politicians on populism in Eastern Europe. Distrust in politicians as one of the populist triggers linked to the party dealignment could occur due to political and economic instability (Kestler, 2023). According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Algan (2017), the combination of weak political attachments and economic instability can lead to a lack of trust in ‘the political class’, thereby provoking populism. As such, a positive relationship between economic insecurity and political distrust was observed during the Great Recession in Europe (Algan et al. 2017). Moreover, lack of political integration was considered to create a gap between “the people” and “the elites” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 101), allowing populist parties to absorb an electorate unified around national, rather than global, values (Kestler, 2023). Fomina and Kucharczyk (2016, 66) argue that the backlash against liberal values is responsible for anti-establishment attitudes in Eastern European states such as Poland.

Methodology

In order to test the hypothetical relationship, this section will conceptualize populist triggers and populist attitudes. It will be done with the help of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) questionnaires. Using the CSES dataset allows us to test the significance of the relationship between each populist activator and populist attitudes by running an OLS model in the following section. To demonstrate the differences in political cultures that create unique bonds with populist attitudes among citizens of liberal democracies, the research focuses on samples from 5 Eastern European (Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Latvia, Estonia) and 5 Western European states (Italy, Austria, France, Germany, Denmark). The selection of countries was informed by The PopuList (2022) reports and based on the available literature regarding state representatives in Eastern and Western Europe.

This research engages with Module 5 of the CSES dataset, as it focuses on citizens' attitudes toward political elites and democratic institutions in the period from 2015 to 2021. The individual unit of analysis allows us to compare populist attitudes across Eastern and Western European populations using cross-national survey data. This module collects more than 1,000 individual responses from each of the 56 electoral studies, including responses from 5 Eastern and 5 Western European states of interest to this research. Thus, the dependent and independent variables were operationalized based on a CSES questionnaire.

National identity is the independent variable, meaning it is expected to affect the dependent variable: populism. Nativist sentiments are usually attached to ethnographic nationalism, and are conceptualized by Smith (2000) as a populist attitude fuel. National identity (natident) was measured on the basis of the questions concerned with being “truly [*name of the respondent's* NATIONALITY].” The questions were measured on the scale from 1- “very important” to 4- “not important at all,” including the categories such as importance of being born in [*name of respondent's* COUNTRY], to have the grandparents born in [COUNTRY] and to follow local customs and traditions. Populism is the dependent variable, the variable affected by national identity. Populism (elitatt) was calculated by the ordinal scale from 1- “strongly agree” to 5- “strongly disagree” that “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.” This particular measure of the ideological approach to populism reflected the dominant rhetoric among populists that “the people” should take the most important decisions instead of delegating their sovereign power to professional politicians (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 99).

The control variables are “distrust in politicians” and “acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders.” The former variable (distrstpol) was measured using the statement “Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.” The original scale goes from 1- “strongly agree” to 5- “strongly disagree.” An identical scale was created for the

second control variable (rlflaw). “Acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders” was measured by the statement that it “is good for [COUNTRY]” to have a strong leader even if they “bend the rules to get things done.”

The scales for the dependent and independent variables were arranged so that higher levels of agreement corresponded to lower numerical values. For research purposes, I reversed the variable numerical values so that the higher number in the scale represents the higher level of importance or agreement. Besides, a new set of variables was created, which excluded categories such as “Refused”, “Don’t know” and “Missing”. Moreover, while the Eastern European sample counted 7,804 observations, the Western Europe samples only counted 6,982 observations. However, the central limit theorem provides the analyses with enough statistical confidence to generalize the findings for the wider population thanks to the large sample sizes. The methodology used to test the hypothesis assumptions was an OLS multivariate regression, given the continuous nature of the variables.

Findings

OLS Regression Predicting Populist Attitudes in Western and Eastern Europe (1 to 5 Scale)			
VARIABLES	(1) Model	(2) Model	(3) Model
natident	0.1049*** (8.6516)	0.1104*** (6.0895)	0.0871*** (5.1182)
distrstpol	0.4394*** (56.4652)	0.4248*** (37.6021)	0.4463*** (39.6126)
rlflaw	0.0849*** (11.9458)	0.0727*** (6.6799)	0.1000*** (10.6901)
Constant	1.1303*** (27.8061)	1.1658*** (21.4302)	1.1435*** (17.3022)
Observations	14,786	6,982	7,804
R-squared	0.226	0.222	0.200
t-statistics in parentheses			
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1			

Table 1

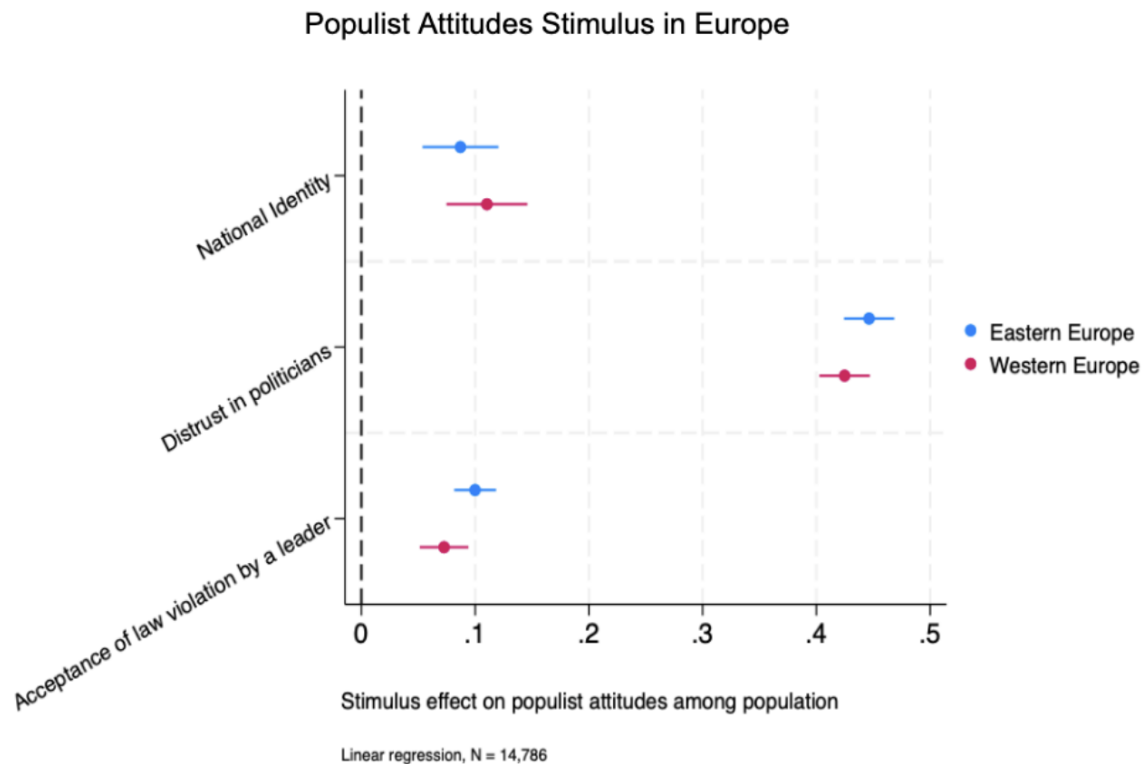


Figure 1 - Regression coefficient plot showing the relative effect of the predictors on the populist attitudes

The main relationship the research is interested in is that between national identity (natident) and populism (elitatt). Model (1) in Table 1 shows that national identity has a positive, statistically significant effect on populism across the whole European sample ($p < 0.001$). This p-value indicates that it is extremely unlikely that there is no relationship between the variables. However, the effect of national identity on populism is small, with an increase of 1 point in the national identity scale resulting in an increase in populist attitudes of 0.10 on a 5-point scale. Besides, the R-squared, which measures the goodness-of-fit, equals 0.23, indicating that national identity explains 23% of variation in populist attitudes. Although the results of the regression reject the null hypothesis that stands for no relationship

between the variables, model (1) in Table 1 doesn't show the regional differences in populist attitudes activators.

The results of the OLS multivariate regression for Eastern and Western European samples are visualized in Figure 1. Thus, the model (2) based on the Western European sample suggested that a one-point increase in the national identity scale resulted in an increase of populist attitudes of 0.11 on a 5-point scale. The model (3) predicting for the Eastern European sample indicated only an increase of populism of 0.09 on the same scale, while holding distrust in politicians and acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders constant. While the effect of national identity is small and statistically significant in both samples, the models show no evidence to support the hypothesis that it has a larger effect on populism in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. However, the attitudinal control variables provided additional data to support theoretical hypotheses about differences in populism triggers between Western and Eastern Europe.

The regression models suggest that both control variables have significant, positive effects on the dependent variable. Acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders was predicted to have a bigger effect on populism in Eastern Europe compared to the Western, holding national identity and distrust in politicians constant. Model (3) shows that a 1-point increase on the scale of the acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders lead to an increase of 0.10 in populism in Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, an increase of 1 point on the scale of the acceptance of the leader who violates the law leads to an increase of populist attitudes of 0.07 according to Model (2). Finally, distrust in politicians appeared to have the strongest association with populist attitudes, with a significant and positive effect in both models, holding national identity and acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders constant. Model (3) accounting for the Eastern European samples demonstrates that a 1 point increase in distrust in politicians leads to an increase in populist attitudes of 0.44, while model (2) predicts the

increase of populist attitudes of 0.42 for the Western European sample. Moreover, while model (2) predicts 22% of the variance in populists' attitudes with an R-squared value of 0.22, model (3) explains 20% of the variance in the dependent variable with an R-squared value of 0.20.

To ensure that there are no highly correlated independent variables that would erode the estimate of the regression coefficient, tests for multicollinearity were conducted and are presented in Tables 2.2 and 2.3 (Appendix 1). The method used to compute the linear relationship between the independent variables were variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance statistics. Based on this, both models, accounting for the Eastern Europe sample (Table 2.1) and the Western Europe sample (Table 2.2), show that none of the independent variables are highly correlated. Table 2.1 suggests that the mean VIF for the Eastern European sample is not significantly greater than 1 (1.03), and that the tolerance value indicates that only 5% of the variance is shared with the other independent variable. In the Western European sample (Table 2.2), the value of the mean VIF is 1.14, while the tolerance value suggests that less than 15% of the variance is shared by the other predictors. The finding suggests that there is no collinearity to introduce biases into the regression models. Tests for homoscedasticity are presented in Appendix 2. A normal probability plot and histogram of the residuals were used to assess whether the model performs better at predicting values at some points on the regression line than at others. Figures 2.1 and 3.1 assess the normal redistribution of the residuals by plotting the observed value of residuals against the linear prediction of standard errors. Figure 2.1 is based on the Eastern European sample and demonstrates more skewed residuals than the Western European sample in Figure 3.1. That means that the model assumptions fit better into the Western European samples than the Eastern European one. The histograms of the standardized residuals confirm that. Figure 2.2 and 3.2 show that both models predict more accurately populist attitudes at some points

of the dependent variable over others. The comparison of the residual histograms in Figures 2.2 and 3.2 demonstrates that the residuals for the Eastern European model are more right-skewed than they are for the Western European model. This implies that the model is less effective at accounting for variation in national identity and populism across the Eastern European sample. Nevertheless, both samples are slightly clustered around lower values of the populism scale, indicating that the data is quite dispersed, meaning that the statistics might vary from the parameters of the population. To examine this issue - heteroscedasticity of the regression models - the regression with robust standard errors was run and presented in Table 3. The t-test results from the OLS and robust regression suggest that the OLS model slightly overestimated the correlation between the independent and dependent variables. However, the relationship is still statistically significant: t-test is greater than 2.58, meaning that there is a 99 percent confidence interval to reject the null hypothesis, which expects no correlation between the variables.

Despite little heteroscedasticity in the OLS regression models, the findings are statistically significant, so there is confidence in claiming that the model predicts the effect of national identity on populism, especially in Western Europe. The model's results suggest that populism in both Eastern and Western Europe is significantly affected by the lack of trust in politicians. It is stronger for Eastern Europe. The same applies to the acceptance of abuse of the law by leaders, which affects populist attitudes in Western Europe, although not as much as in Eastern Europe. Interestingly, the findings reject the research hypothesis that national identity would have a greater influence on populism in post-communist Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to contribute to the debate and theories concerning the demand side of populism. The research findings advance the understanding of the rise of populism in Europe. The main research hypothesis was that national identity would have a larger effect on populism in Eastern, rather than Western Europe. To examine it, the model included control variables such as distrust in politicians and acceptance of leaders' abuse of the law. Control variables helped to determine the strength of the relationship between national identity and populism. Firstly, findings indicate that national identity appears not to be a strong predictor of populist attitudes in Eastern Europe, rather than in Western Europe, rejecting the hypothesis. Secondly, the findings support the second hypothesis, demonstrating the larger effect of the lack of trust in politicians in explaining the rise of populism in Eastern Europe. Thirdly, citizen's acceptance of law abuse by leaders appeared to have more effect in Eastern Europe, supporting the final hypothesis. Despite little heteroscedasticity in the OLS regression models, the results are nonetheless statistically significant. Thus, the models could generalize the effects of populist triggers for the population of European states. The future comparison-based research on populism could be done by creating a more detailed measurement of the variable "national identity," including such categories as culture and religion. Besides, concerns about economic stability could become another variable for tracing populists' attitudes, given differences in economic development across Europe.

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Appendix 1 - Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Tolerance and VIF for Nativism, Distrust in politicians and Support for law violation in Eastern Europe		
	VIF	Tolerance (1/VIF)
natident	1.04	0.96
distrstpol	1.03	0.96
rlflaw	1.03	0.97
Mean VIF	1.03	

Table 2.1 - Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor for independent variables in Eastern Europe

Tolerance and VIF for Nativism, Distrust in politicians and Support for law violation in Western Europe		
	VIF	Tolerance (1/VIF)
natident	1.17	0.85
distrstpol	1.14	0.88
rlflaw	1.12	0.89
Mean VIF	1.14	

Table 2.2 - Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor for independent variables in Western Europe

Appendix 2 - Homoscedasticity Diagnostics

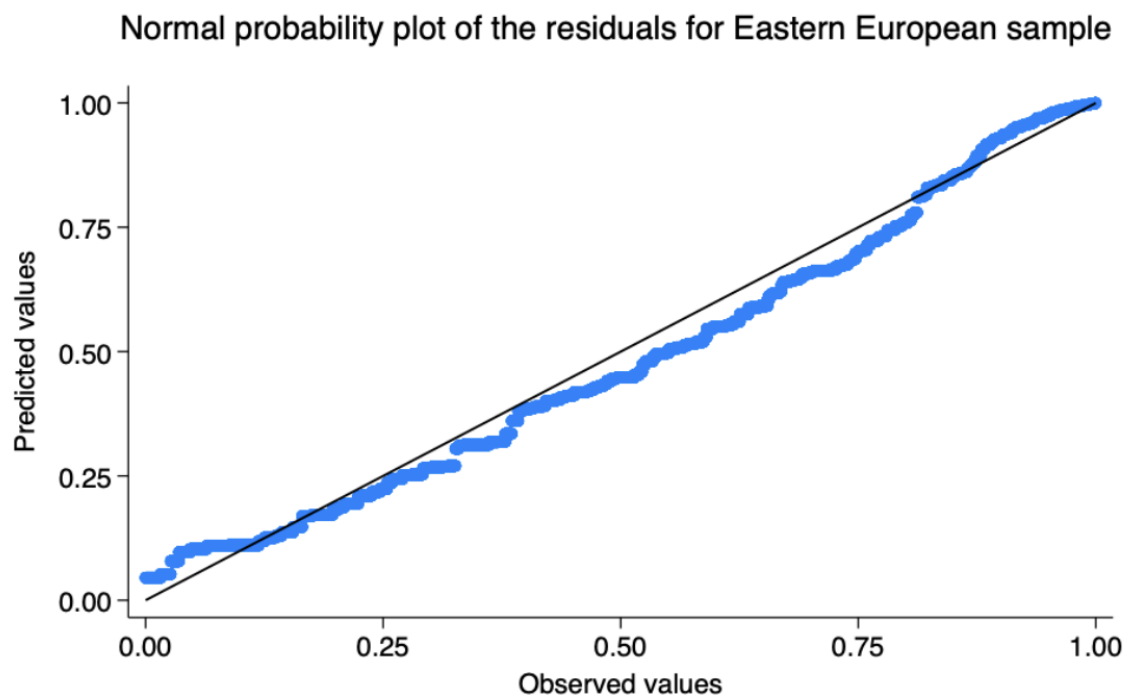


Figure 2.1

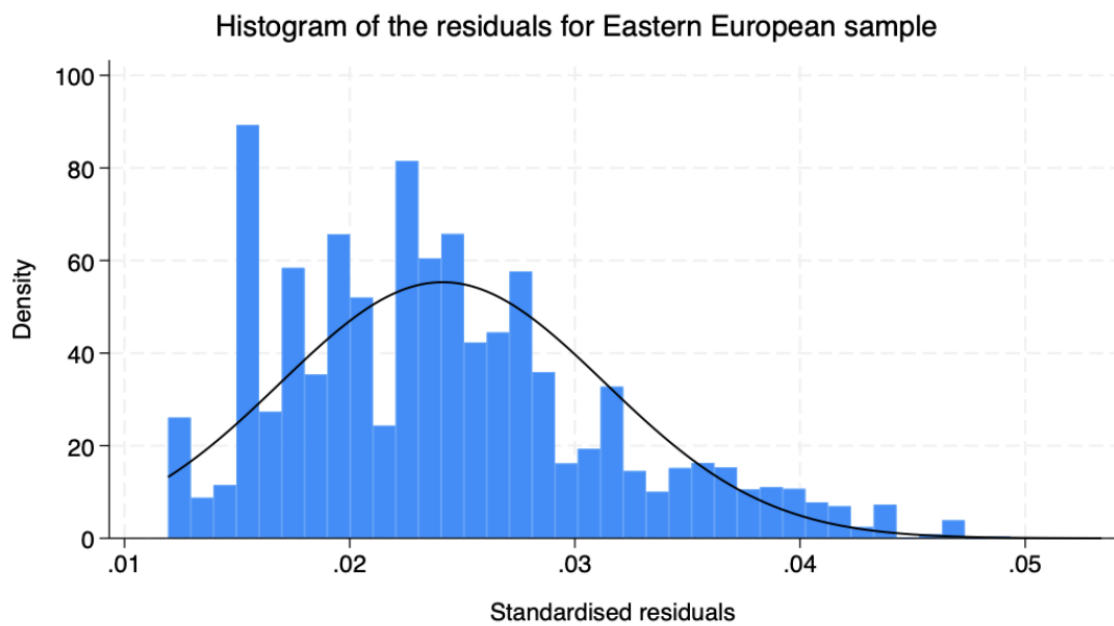


Figure 2.2

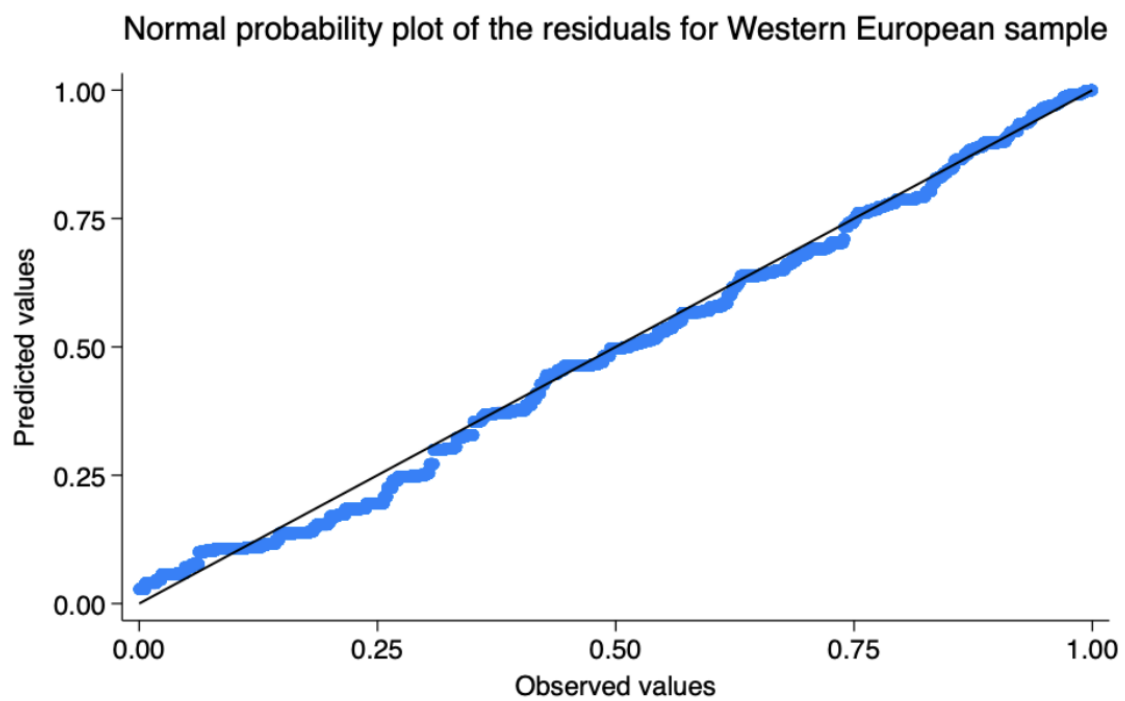


Figure 3.1

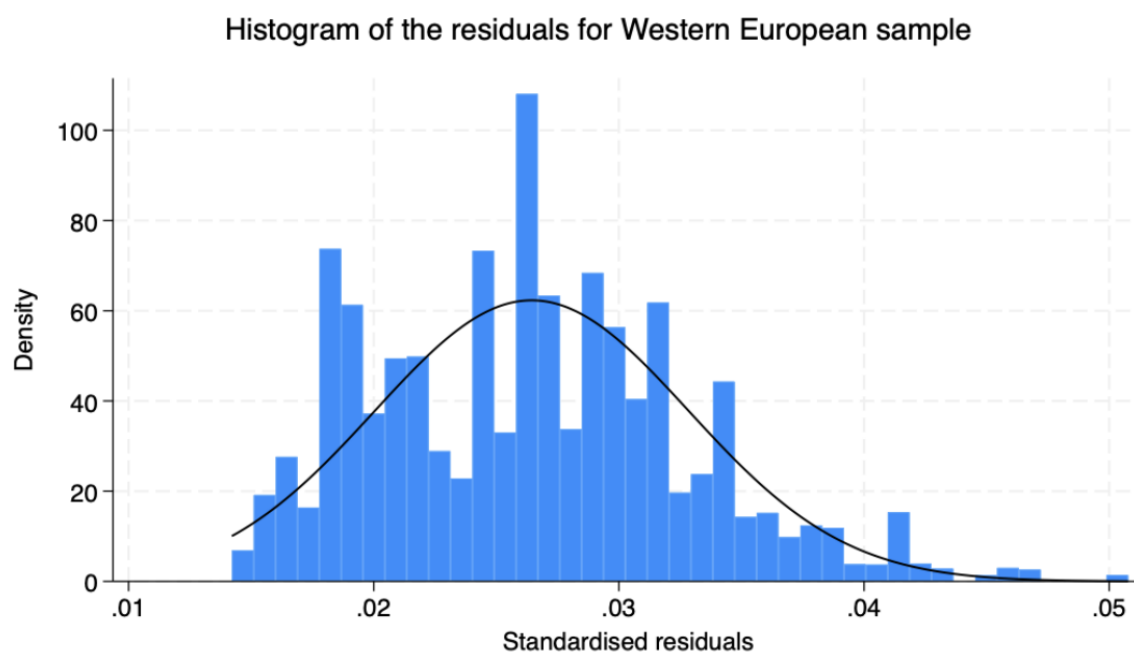


Figure 3.2

Regression with Robust Standard Errors predicting populist attitudes in Western and Eastern Europe (1 to 5 scale)		
VARIABLES	(1) elitatt	(2) elitatt
natident	0.1104*** (5.7907)	0.0871*** (4.8232)
distrstpol	0.4248*** (35.2888)	0.4463*** (36.3574)
rlflaw	0.0727*** (6.1768)	0.1000*** (9.9216)
Constant	1.1658*** (21.7098)	1.1435*** (16.7660)
Observations	6,982	7,804
R-squared	0.222	0.200

Robust t-statistics in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3 - Robust regression