How Populism Impacts EU Foreign Policy

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EU-LISTCO

POLICY PAPERS SERIES

No. 08. November 2020

ABSTRACT

The rise of populism in the European Union represents a key internal political development that is likely to have repercussions on its foreign policy. It is traditionally assumed that, when in the opposition, populist parties affect foreign policy debates though not foreign policy outcomes. But when they are elected into office, as happened in several EU member states, how do they shape policy decisions and processes in EU foreign policy? This policy paper argues that although populist actors can be vocal and conspicuous in aligning with external actors contesting the international liberal order, they rarely go as far as swaying or blocking EU foreign policy decisions and outputs. At the same time, however, populist governments' domestic illiberal policies have the potential to undermine the EU's legitimacy, structural power, and resilience-building endeavours.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of populism in the European Union (EU) represents a key internal political development that is likely to have repercussions on its foreign policy. Previous studies have suggested that, when in the opposition, populist parties have affected foreign policy debates though not foreign policy outcomes (Balfour 2016). But the situation might be different when they are elected into office. In this context does populism translate into mere rhetorical posturing in EU foreign policy, or does it shape policy decisions and processes? This policy paper will show that the rise of populism has not, thus far, dramatically affected the substance and process of EU foreign policy. Yet, by putting into question the founding norms and principles of democratic governance; by aligning rhetorically, economically, or diplomatically with external actors that challenge the international liberal order; and by promoting exclusive political processes and social identities, populist parties and governments risk undermining EU structural power and resilience-building capacities in the long term.

1. POPULISM AND EU FOREIGN POLICY

At its core, populism perceives society as being fundamentally structured by an opposition between the people and the elite, and promises to conduct politics in the name of the former and against the latter (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). The central categories of "people" and "elite" can be alternatively defined in moral, economic, cultural, or sociological terms, but the former is essentially cast in a positive light (e.g., the people as pure, genuine, or bearers of common-sense), and the latter in a negative one (e.g., the elite as corrupt, unauthentic, or cosmopolitan). As an ideology, populism rests on an anti-pluralist interpretation of politics: populists consider that they are the only true representatives of the people, and, as such, they view their political opponents as inherently illegitimate and intermediary institutions as necessarily suspicious (Muller 2016). As a political practice, populism relies on a top-down, personalistic, and opportunistic political strategy (Urbinati 2016), as well as on a disruptive and dramatic political style (Moffit 2016).

The political logic of populism has several implications for the formulation and conduct of EU foreign policy. Populists project the defining "people vs. elite" opposition onto international affairs and vow to protect the sovereignty of the people (however the term is defined) (Chryssogelos 2017). This often leads them to align rhetorically with actors who challenge the international liberal order. Similarly, populists' anti-pluralism and personalization of power tend to lead them to be suspicious of institutionalised foreign policy cooperation (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). Finally, the desire to mark a break with elites—whether rhetorically, aesthetically, or procedurally—pushes populist actors to engage in "undiplomatic diplomacy" and indulge in conspiracy theories, with repercussions for collective foreign policy making (Cadier 2019). Notably, this leads most populist actors and movements to castigate the EU for its supranational character, its institutionalised multilateral processes, and its reliance on a technocratic mode of governance.

2. POPULIST ACTORS' FOREIGN POLICY PREFERENCES: RADICAL OR INCHOATE?

While populism can be understood as a political ideology, it does not seem to translate into distinctive, shared, or revolutionary ideas about foreign policy. In fact, many populist parties are rather disinterested in international politics, and very few articulate a clear vision or strategy in this regard. For instance, ANO, the party of the current Czech Prime Minister, had no section on foreign policy in its political program when it was elected to parliament in 2013, while that of the Five Star Movement (M5S) in the 2018 Italian elections was thin and vague. More generally, populist parties tend *not* to adopt similar positions on international affairs (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Contrary to what is generally expected of populist actors, Jean-Luc Melenchon's France Insoumise (LFI) is in favour of welcoming refugees; the Netherland's Pim Fortuyn was a supporter of both of European integration and international free-trade agreements; and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) Party stands among the European political parties most critical of Russia.

Still, there are signposts where populist actors have been active and vocal—both at the national level and in the European Parliament—and where they have directly impacted EU external action. Migration is a paragon of this: the populist governments of Hungary and Poland forcefully and systematically opposed EU relocation schemes for refugees or asylum seekers, which overrode the possibility of a common EU response to the 2015 migration crisis. There again, however, these positions appeared to be primarily grounded in domestic posturing and hardly translated into a coherent policy vision. The diplomatic alliance between the then Italian Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, and Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, regardless of their antagonistic positions on the relocation issue, suggests that they were driven by the desire to be seen as opposing migration, rather than to substantively define EU policies (Tondo 2018).

Similar patterns prevail with regard to populist actors' preferences regarding sectoral EU policies such as enlargement and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). For instance, while both far-left and far-right French populist parties reject further EU enlargement and regularly criticize the preceding waves, the populist governments in Hungary and Italy have maintained their countries' traditional support for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. Similarly, some populist radical right parties (such as Germany's Alternative fur Deutschland have called for the dismantling of CSDP as a form of supranational security cooperation, while others (such as France's *Rassemblement National* support CSDP missions that promote security sector reforms, seeing it as a way to curb migration and terrorism.

Finally, populist parties have criticized and contested the mainstream parties' and EU institutions' positions and policy responses to security crises in the European neighbourhood, yet they have not agreed on or even suggested alternative policy courses. During the European Parliament debates on the Ukraine and Syria crises, populist parties have resorted to "vociferous rhetoric" while "abstaining from institutional politics", such as the negotiations of joint motions for resolution (Van Berlo and Natorski 2019: 199). In other words, populist parties have challenged the institutionalised search for consensus in EU external relations but have not sought to affect the substance of policy outputs.

3. POPULISM AND EU STRUCTURAL POWER

While populism does not typically translate into distinctive or convergent ideas about foreign affairs, this does not mean that the rise of populist actors in European political and policy-making structures has had no effect on the process and substance of EU foreign policy. This impact has been mainly indirect and has notably pertained to the EU's structural power and its ability to foster societal resilience.

This is most visible with regard to their contestations of the norms that have constituted both the vector and the cement of EU foreign policy. To foster peace, stability, and prosperity at its borders, the EU has essentially relied on the export of norms, standards, and principles of democratic governance and a free-market economy, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood. The objective has been to influence outcomes by shaping the political, economic, legal, and social structures in which states and societies evolve – the extent that the EU is sometimes referred to as a "normative power" and its external action as "structural foreign policy" aiming to influence the rules of the game and organising principles in other countries (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014; Laïdi 2008).

By questioning norms of democratic governance and Rule of Law principles in their domestic political systems, populist governments in Hungary and Poland undermine the EU's legitimacy to export them. How credible is the Polish executive in vowing to "help the People of Belarus build a democratic path […] via the Rule of Law" (President of Poland 2020), as it recently did in a joint statement with Lithuania and Romania, when it is facing a RoL infringement procedures from the European Commission? Illiberal policies and democratic backsliding also risk weakening the EU's effectiveness in applying democratic conditionality in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and enlargement frameworks. External actors seeking to push back against the EU's structural power in these regions—and to contest the international liberal order more generally—have been prompt to use these developments in their own interests. They have denounced "double standards" on the part of the EU and suggested that its normative principles are geopolitical objectives in disguise.

In addition, populist governments in Central Europe have "frequently exploited historical or ethnical animosities with [their] Eastern neighbours," as "having unstable neighbours in the East creates a sense of uncertainty that favours illiberal politicians" (Zielonka and Rupnik 2020: 1090). For instance, in response to controversial language and historical policies adopted by the Ukrainian government, Hungary and Poland have not hesitated to block (or threaten to block) Ukraine's cooperation and integration with the EU and NATO, even though they had been the staunchest supporters of such integration in the past (Zinets and Than 2017; Cadier and Szulecki 2020).

In sum, populism as a political practice directly challenges, contradicts, or undermines the norms of democratic governance. As a result, it also compromises the EU's ability, credibility, and legitimacy in promoting and exporting it.

4. POPULIST CONTESTATIONS AND ILLIBERAL POWERS: ALLIANCE IN THE MAKING

Just as populist actors contest liberal norms at home and in the EU, they tend to align with the rhetoric of external actors contesting the international liberal order. However, there seems to be a gap between the discourses and the practices of populist parties when they are in power. The examples of Austria, Italy, and Poland show that populist parties may vocally embrace the agenda of illiberal international forces but then accept EU compromises, because they are reluctant to overly weaken their countries' position inside the EU. That is, when in power, populist parties do not totally forget the logic of their national interests (Chryssogelos 2017).

For instance, the Lega/M5S governmental coalition in Italy (2018–2019) had reservations about the renewal of sanctions on Russia but did not block the process at the EU level. The leader of Lega and then Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini —known to have close political relations with Putin's United Russia party— vocally opposed the sanctions and criticised their negative effects on Italian businesses. In the end, though, the Italian government followed the mainstream EU position on the sanctions for several reasons: the preference of a technocratic minister of foreign affairs, Enzo Moavero, for European solutions; the opposition of the Italian President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella; and the wish not to lose the Italian margin for manoeuver in EU negotiations over the sanctions; a minor issue in comparison to migration policies and economic and monetary union.[1]

Similarly, during the 2018 American re-installation of sanctions against Iran and following its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), the Polish PiS government was tempted to push for an alignment of the EU's position with Washington's policy, due to the party's fierce Atlanticism and ideological affinities with the Trump administration (Sobczak 2018). In minority in Brussels, the Polish government has not, in the end, created opposition on a relatively minor issue compared to crucial EU dossiers such as the benefits of structural funds and the debates on RoL.

Most often, populist parties vocalize their discontent with the international liberal order and are in favour of the external actors contesting it. However, when concrete and final decisions have to be taken, they tend to follow the views of the EU mainstream, as they regard isolation as unnecessarily costly and foreign policy as not sufficiently important. The presence of ministers of foreign affairs chosen outside populist parties (as were Moavero in Italy and Kneissl in Austria) also favours compromises following mainstream trends on EU foreign policy. In the end, EU collective responses to contestations of the international liberal order have, in practice, only been marginally affected by the positions of populist governments.

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1.   Interviews with former members of the Italian government, Rome, 07/09/2020 and 09/09/2020.

5. POPULIST DIPLOMACY AND EU FOREIGN POLICY COORDINATION

EU foreign policy is a multi-level game which requires horizontal coordination between the different EU institutions (especially the European Commission and the European External Action Service [EEAS]) and vertical coordination between the EU and the 27 member states (Lequesne 2013). From the beginning, it is rare that there is a convergent position on foreign policy issues among EU member states. Finding a compromise is easier in areas of EU external relations (e.g., trade, development aid, and neighbourhood policy), which are decided by qualified majority voting, than in those under the purview of the CFSP/CSDP, which require unanimity.

Populist governments also have weak strategies of influence inside EU institutions: to affect change, they must go through their permanent representatives to the EU and ambassadors to the Political and Security Committee, who are usually diplomats able to soften the positions of their capital.[2] For instance, in Italy and Austria, diplomats sent to Brussels are career diplomats who adhere to the strong corporatist culture of the foreign services, even if they have different political sensitivities.

Lega/M5S and FPÖ parties have never been able to destroy the role of career diplomats in favour of pure political appointees in their respective countries.[3] On the contrary, after winning the 2015 parliamentary elections, the PiS government in Poland sidelined many career diplomats who served previous governments, because they were considered too lclose to the previous government and not loyal enough to the PiS ideology (Brzozowski 2017). As one senior official working for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, himself a political appointee of PiS, declared: "Senior diplomats posted in the EU or European capitals have to align with the ruling party".[4]

Most of the time, countries ruled by populist parties do not have the institutional capacity or political will to push the EU coordination process into a deadlock. However, this point needs to be qualified regarding People's Republic of China. Along with other countries in Central Europe, Hungary and Poland participate in the 17+1 cooperation[5], while Italy has signed a memorandum of understanding with China in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[6] Considering the geo-economic clout of these structures, populist governments have a certain incentive to block EU coordination on foreign policy against China. In this context, Budapest has not hesitated to veto CFSP declarations condemning China's Human Rights record. Again, however, not all populist governments are in agreement regarding China. The difference in perception of the Chinese issue by M5S and Lega have limited M5S's wish to proceed in ambitious agreements with China. For instance, there has not been any formal agreement on the harbour in Trieste, while the Chinese delegation was very interested to get the exploitation rights, as they did in Pyreus with the agreement of the Greek government.[7] Moreover, the fact that the big member states (i.e., France, Germany, and the UK until December 2019) were all prepared to introduce limits to EU-China relations never allowed the populist governments to impose drastic changes to positions.

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2. Interview with a former Polish ambassador to the EU, Warsaw, 25/09/2020.
3. Interviews with an Austrian diplomat, Vienna 08/01/2019 and with three Italian diplomats, Rome, 08/09/2020.
4. Interview with a Polish Vice-Minister or Foreign Affairs, Warsaw, 25/09/2020.
5. Informal cooperation since 2012 between China and 17 countries from Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.
6. Interview with a former member of Italian government, Rome, 7/09/2020.
7. Interview with Professor Federico Niglia, Rome, 7/09/2020.

In sum, when it comes to EU foreign policy coordination, the impact of populist actors is limited and involves more nuisance power than the ability to create a deadlock. Populist governments can, however, block decisions on China more easily than those on Russia, and they appear more determined to do so.

CONCLUSION

In a meeting alongside Marine Le Pen in the run-up to the 2019 EU Parliamentary elections, Matteo Salvini claimed that populist forces would unleash a "revolution" in Europe (France 24 2018), but as far as EU foreign policy is concerned, the revolution has not yet happened. Populist actors tend to adopt divergent and often inchoate positions on foreign policy. Although they can be vocal and conspicuous in rhetorically aligning with external powers that contest the international liberal order, populist actors rarely translate these positions into a concrete and determined policy at the EU level. They rarely go as far as swaying or blocking EU foreign policy decisions and outputs.

At the same time, however, populist governments' domestic illiberal policies have the potential to undermine the EU's structural power and resilience-building endeavours. By putting norms of democratic governance and RoL principles into question, populist governments weaken the EU's legitimacy in exporting them and effectiveness in promoting flexible, fair, and transparent governance institutions. By relying on a divisive political rhetoric and scapegoating, they run counter to the EU's efforts to promote social trust via positive interactions between social groups and inclusive social identities. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent populist actors' domestic legitimacy has been impacted by their handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and how populist actors might affect the EU's ability to deal with the world that has emerged as a result of it (Morillas 2020).

These findings have two implications for EU foreign policy. On the one hand, in light of the discrepancy between populist actors' words and deeds, it is important not to caricature their stances or exaggerate their influence. Sidelining or isolating populist governments in collective foreign policy-making structures and processes would thus be counter-productive: it would only feed these actors' Eurosceptic discourse and agenda without changing much in terms of foreign policy outputs. On the contrary, it is important that representatives and diplomats from these countries remain closely integrated in these structures because, as highlighted in this policy paper, in political systems ruled by populist parties, career diplomats have often acted as gatekeepers of EU foreign policy practices and principles.

On the other hand, considering that the support of democratic governance reforms and the promotion of inclusive political processes and social identities is central to EU resilience-building endeavours, the EU and its member states cannot allow for core RoL principles to be encroached upon. Otherwise, this would risk undermining these endeavours and the EU's credibility and legitimacy as a whole. There is thus a need to firmly reject the violation of such principles inside the EU by supporting and carrying out the RoL infringement procedures launched by the European Commission. This should also include ensuring coherence in appointments. For instance, it appears questionable for representatives from populist governments that have cracked down on independent media at home and turned public media into mouthpieces for their own political agendas to have a prominent role in EU institutions tasked with fighting disinformation. Deprived of such coherence in values, the EU would cease to be a foreign policy actor and turn into a mere diplomatic structure — as is the United Nations, where countries responsible for gross Human Rights violations sits the UN Human Rights Council.

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ABOUT EU-LISTCO RESEARCH

EU-LISTCO investigates the challenges posed to European foreign policy by identifying risks connected to areas of limited statehood and contested orders. Through the analysis of the EU Global Strategy and Europe's foreign policy instruments, the project assesses how the preparedness of the EU and its member states can be strengthened to better anticipate, prevent and respond to threats of governance breakdown and to foster resilience in Europe's neighbourhoods. Continuous knowledge exchange between researchers and foreign policy practitioners is at the cornerstone of EU-LISTCO. Since the project's inception, a consortium of fourteen leading universities and think tanks have been working together to develop policy recommendations for the EU's external action toolbox, in close coordination with European decision-makers. The EU-LISTCO Policy Papers are peer-reviewed research papers based on findings from the project.

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