

All Bark No Bite? Systematic Analysis of Populism and Foreign Policy in the European Union

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Abstract

Academics and popular media expect populist leaders to implement protectionist economic measures, collaborate with like-minded populist leaders at the expense of traditional alliances, and pursue isolationist but unpredictable security policy. We argue that European radical right populists (RRP) in government do not act according to these expectations. EU membership imposes asymmetric interdependence that limits choices of member states. On issues of lower interdependence, populists will only choose uniquely populist policy if the issue does not affect core security and economic interests, *and* it directly serves the populist agenda of concentrating domestic power. We term these Domestically Targeted Foreign Policies (DTFPs). This paper evaluates our theory using two sets of comparative case studies: Hungary and Croatia (populist and non-populist leadership) and Hungary and Poland (radical right populist leadership).

Introduction

“There has never been so much open friction between national and globalist forces. We, the millions with national sentiments, on the one side, the citizen-of-the-world elite on the other side. We who believe in nation states, in the defense of borders, in the value of the family and work on the one side and in opposition to us those who want an open society, a world without borders and nations, a new kind of family, devalued work and cheap workers over which an opaque and unaccountable army of bureaucrats reigns. On one side are national and democratic forces, on the other supranational and anti-democratic forces.”

—Viktor Orbán, March 15, 2018, speaking at commemoration of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution.¹

¹ Hungarian government website. Available at: <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszede-kulcsos-ujrallamozas/orban-viktor-unnepi-beszede-az-1848-49-evi-forradalom-es-szabadsagharc-170-evfordulojan>

Popular media and academic scholarship have developed a set of assumptions about the foreign policy behavior of populists in government. Broadly, the expectation is that populists will implement protectionist economic policies and collaborate with like-minded populists leaders at the expense of traditional alliances (Boucher & Thies, 2019; Carnegie & Clark, 2020; Hafner-Burton et al., 2019; B. Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015; J. A. Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). In regards to security, the assumptions are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, populists are expected to be isolationist, but on the other hand, they are perceived as impulsive and belligerent, leading to an expectation of increased propensity for conflict.

These assumptions are based on several sets of observations related to populist rhetoric and prominent isolated cases. Populists are vocal in their opposition to globalism and international institutions, they use crude language, and foment hatred toward political rivals and external enemies. Many studies are empirically based on data such as speeches and party platforms (Boucher & Thies, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2019; Jenne, 2021; Trubowitz & Burgoon, 2020). Second, populist voters are often described as the losers of globalization influenced by trade shocks (Colantone & Stanig, 2018b; Kriesi, 2014; Rodrik, 2018), and as such the expectation is that populist leaders will promote protectionism. Finally, assumptions about populists are also based on prominent recent cases, in particular that of U.S. president, Donald Trump (Hafner-Burton et al., 2019).

Our paper challenges these common assumptions by examining the actions of populists in government. Specifically, we challenge the assumption that populist leaders in government will act on populist preferences in a way that is significantly different from non-populist leaders. We argue that the implemented policies of populists in government depend heavily on the context of the state's economic and geopolitical interests, and the winning coalition of populists.

In this paper we examine a narrow subsection of populist leaders – right wing populists within the European Union. EU membership is a limiting environment for any leader, and thus we argue that on many issues, membership will largely inform the foreign policy choices of populists and non-populists alike. We theorize that under these circumstances, populists will generally act according to the limitations that follow from interdependence. Moreover, though populists frequently express opposition to the EU, they make few efforts to avoid or amend what they term the limiting arrangements of the EU. In policy areas that EU membership does not prescribe, member states will usually choose to follow state interests rather than right wing populist policies. Only in policy areas that are both very important to populists and low in terms of core state interests, will populists choose what we define as domestically targeted foreign policy (DTFP) – foreign policies that target domestic audiences and are intended to reinforce the populist coalition. This behavior follows from both the interdependent nature of the European Union (and to a lesser extent the global system), and the nature of populism itself, as populism (including right wing populism) has no emphasis on foreign policy, but rather in sustaining domestic coalitions, and transforming the domestic political arena.

To evaluate this theory we use two sets of case study comparisons. First, we compare populist and a non-populist led states that share economic and geo-political interests (Hungary and Croatia). Within the populist case we examine case key decision making on foreign policy issues to elucidate the mechanism behind policy making. In addition, we compare two populists led states (Hungary and Poland) on energy policy, an area in which their geopolitical interests differ.

Our paper makes a novel contribution to the debate on populism and foreign policy and the existing literature in several respects. First, we offer much needed systematic empirical evidence for foreign policy behavior of European radical right populist led states compared to non-populist states, and between similar populist governments. Unlike many works in the field, we focus on foreign policy choices, rather than foreign policy rhetoric. Our paper demonstrates that populists will match their rhetoric only under a limited set of conditions. Finally, our analysis distinguishes between domestic and foreign policies. Radical right populists in Europe make significant domestic changes that erode democratic rule of law norms and institutions, at the same time we find that they remain mostly committed to consistent security and economic international norms and practices. This suggests that radical right populist states are compliant actors in the European context, which may facilitates the freedom to pursue radical domestic policies while avoiding supranational and international condemnation.

Theory

Populism

In the most commonly used minimal definition, populism is a thin ideology that views society as divided into a corrupt and immoral elite, and the pure and good people, and argues that politics

ought to be a representation of the popular will (Mudde, 2004). This definition includes various historical and geographic populist occurrences under one umbrella. The assumption is that these occurrences have unique characteristics, but also share a basic Manichean view of the world that is meaningful for political processes (Hawkins, 2010).

Populism is thin in the sense that it does not prescribe a set of solutions to real world problems, but instead pertains to the nature of politics and society (Stanley, 2008). As a result, some scholars add to the minimal definition by focusing on the transformative effect that populism has on politics and society (Laclau, 2005; Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Mouffe, 2018; Urbinati, 2019). These accounts stress the change from sovereignty of the people in non-populist democracies to sovereignty of the “populist people”, a sub section of the population that populists consider “the real people,” the only source of legitimate political power. Scholars have also identified the majoritarian focus of populism that is both theoretical, and has practical implications in the strive of many populists to eliminate formal and informal checks and balances. These accounts also identify a form of strong (and often male) leadership. (Urbinati, 2019).

In this paper we examine a subsection of this broad definition – radical right populism (RRP) (Betz, 1993; Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005; Pirro, 2014). According to Mudde (2007), RRP is an ideology characterized by antiestablishment sentiment, authoritarianism, and nativism. RRP views establishment elites—including political, cultural and economic gatekeepers--as detached from the will of the people or subverting it to serve their own purposes. RRP are authoritarian in the sense that they favor strong charismatic leaders. Nativism is a

preference for native born, but also for traditionally dominant groups in society in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and others.

Populism and Foreign Policy – Common Assumptions

The literature on the outcomes of populism in government beyond the context of Latin America, which has rich experience with populist governance, is still nascent. However, we believe that this literature, along with popular discourse, generates a set of expectations about the behavior of populists in government.

First, populists are expected to pursue protectionist economic policies such as raising trade barriers and limiting capital mobility. This expectation is based on several observations. Populists express an aversion to the international economic system and stress national sovereignty. As the Viktor Orbán quote at the top of this paper suggests, populists often contrast their own commitment to national sovereignty with implicit support of a globalist or cosmopolitan transnational elite that is only committed to its own interests. Second, a vast literature stresses the economic roots and impact of globalization on populist vote. This literature describes the effect of trade shocks (Barone & Kreuter, 2020; Colantone & Stanig, 2018b, 2018a; Ferguson et al., 2020), financial globalization (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Bergh & Kärnä, 2020), and economic insecurity (Algan et al., 2017; Anelli et al., 2019; Dal Bó et al., 2020; Guiso et al., 2017; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016) on populist support. If voters select populist parties because of their preferences for economic protectionism, then the implied expectation is that populists in government will chose more protectionist economic policies (Hadiz & Chryssogelos, 2017; Trubowitz & Burgoon, 2020). Finally, the case of President

Trump greatly impacted the popular perception of populism: policies including his trade war with China and increased protectionism have generated similar expectations for populist leaders.

A second expectation about populists in government is that populists are birds of a feather will stick together. Populists are expected to prefer cooperation with other populist leaders when crafting bi-lateral relations including trade alliances, joint ventures, and voting in international institutions. These new relationships are expected to at least partially replace the traditional alliances that have been the backbone of the liberal order (Cooley & Nexon, 2020; Trubowitz & Burgoon, 2020). Relatedly, this the literature expects populists to shirk their commitments to traditional allies and alliances (Becker, 2020) and demonstrate less cooperative and transparent behavior in international institutions (Carnegie & Clark, 2020).

The third set of assumptions pertains to military engagement and conflict. Here expectations are more mixed. In some accounts, populists are expected to be isolationist and averse to military engagement abroad (Becker, 2020; J. A. Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). This narrative is largely derived from President Donald Trump's "America First" banner, and attempts to limit engagement overseas on a few fronts. On the other hand, some of the discourse on populists leaders seems to indicate that they would be more prone to conflict. First, populists often use belligerent rhetoric toward their real and perceived enemies at home and abroad. This rhetoric could potentially tie their hands or create audience costs, encouraging them to act on their rhetoric (Fearon, 1994; Kertzer & Brutger, 2016; Tomz, 2007). Second, even when rhetoric and actions are targeted against domestic groups, they may have spillover effects. In the case of India for example, anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions can impact India-Pakistan relations. Similar spillover issues are

possible in other regions with tense relations between ethnic groups that cross borders including the Balkans.

Finally, some populist leaders actively diminish liberal and democratic practices and institutions, effectively eroding democracy. The vast literature on democratic peace theory demonstrates that consolidated democracies do not fight each other (Doyle, 1983; Russett, 1994). Moreover, transitioning regimes appear to be the most prone to war of all regimes (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995). Thus the erosion of democracy itself can lead to conflict with democracies or other countries in general.

Strategic Interests, Populism, and Domestically Targeted Foreign Policy

The expectations of populism in governance and foreign policy do generally capture populists' views on foreign policy, but they are disproportionately influenced by few cases, by populist rhetoric, and by the preferences of voters. As a result they do not sufficiently problematize the ability and inclination of populist leaders to follow through on their foreign policy views once in power. We focus here on the factors that impact the *implementation* of populist leaders' foreign policy rather than their *views*.

Broadly, three sets of calculations will shape populist leaders' foreign policies: the level of dependence on other states and or international organizations to achieve a policy goal (interdependence); the level of importance of the policy for state security and prosperity

(importance); and the relevance of policy to sustaining the populist base of support (populist saliency).

Interdependence is a defining feature of the international system. The meaning of interdependence is that change in one state will be costly for other states, whose ability to adapt to this change will vary asymmetrically. (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Increased interdependence is theorized to be constraining state foreign policy choices (Andrews, 1994; Cerny, 1990; Kurzer, 1993; Strange, 1996). However, others argue that the changes brought about by globalization are far more nuanced than an overall decline in the role of the state (Garrett, 1998; Kahler & Lake, 2003; Moravcsik, 2013).

Members of the EU have a particularly high level of interdependence, as they share pivotal policies (and currency for Eurozone members). This interdependence is asymmetric – generally, the smaller, poorer, and newer members of the EU have lower bargaining power than prosperous core members (Moravcsik, 2008). The implication of the shared policies and of this asymmetry is that all members are limited in their foreign policy making, some more than others.

Certain policy areas are particularly restricted: trade barriers are European rather than national; and similarly, capital and labor mobility within the EU are mostly free of barriers. In these areas, member states with lower bargaining power often choose between loyalty and exit, as voice, or an attempt to change EU policies, is extremely difficult. As the case of Brexit demonstrates so far,

exit is a highly costly option and thus we do not expect states, including those led by populists, to opt for it.²

Though states generally opt for loyalty, voice is still a viable option, particularly for states with higher bargaining power. In 2003 for example, both France and Germany exceeded the Eurozone's agreed three percent deficit limit, but neither was sanctioned by Brussels (Tooze, 2018, 94). On the other hand, when populist- governed Italy attempted to increase its deficit, the EU response was much more severe. Another prominent example is that of Greece. Though the Syriza led populist government promised to oppose the harsh condition of debt restructuring following a domestic referendum, it was not able to do so due to particularly low bargaining power. These examples illustrate that when interdependence is very high it trumps right wing populist interests in countries that do not have the bargaining power to challenge prevailing norms.

***H1:** In policy areas with high interdependence, populists and non-populists in government under similar economic and geo-political constraints will likely make similar foreign policy decisions.*

The other calculations that shape foreign policy implementation come into play only when the cost of change in policy is not significant, or when states can overcome this cost by achieving their desired goal through different means.

² Notably, the UK's decision to leave the European Union was not made by a populist government, but by a referendum issued by a non-populist government due to political pressure. Brexit demonstrates that increased social pressure can indeed have an impact on foreign policy making, but not necessarily through populist leadership.

Some foreign policies are more crucial for the integrity, security, geopolitical standing, and economic prosperity of states. For example, EU member states are relatively free to design their own energy policies based on unique factor endowments, but energy policy is pivotal for the security and prosperity of states. Nonetheless, though states are not highly constrained by the EU in terms of crafting energy policy, their degree of energy independence varies greatly according to own resource endowments, geography, infrastructure, and storage capacity (Holland, 2017).

On issues crucial to security and prosperity, populists will act according to state interests rather than any populist preference. First, populist leaders rely on popular support. Most of them operate within more or less democratic settings, and even those who do not use popular support to legitimize their rule (Urbinati, 2019). As such they are unlikely to take steps that may notably worsen the lives of their constituency. Though some studies argue that voters are uninformed about foreign policy or do not matter in foreign policy making (Holsti, 2004; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Zaller, 1994), other studies show that public opinion can impact foreign policy (Aldrich et al., 2006; Baum, 2004; Sobel, 2001). Moreover, much of this literature is focused on U.S. foreign policy, whereas we focus on smaller powers that are not involved in numerous operations overseas. Second, as we discuss below, RRP does not focus on foreign policy. Foreign policies are generally not crucial to maintaining their base of support and they are thus unlikely to use policy areas that are pivotal to prosperity and security to galvanize support.

As a result, we also believe that populist leaders in government will not necessarily form alliances with like-minded leaders. Different types of populists do not share a strategic worldview. Even populists that share a worldview may find that this shared ideology forms little common ground

on which to base a formal alliance or create a new network (Voeten, 2020). In 2018-2019, Hungary and Italy both had RRP governments that opposed immigration and promoted Euroscepticism. However, their vastly different positions within the EU in terms of budget allocation, immigration, and divergent threat perceptions of Russia would have made a joint informal network challenging. Populism cannot generate meaningful relationships if it does not also alter core strategic and economic interests. Even in terms of rhetoric, populists are far more prone to constructing enemies than to emphasizing the commonalities between themselves and other populists (Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016).

***H2:** In core state security and prosperity areas populists and non-populists in government under similar economic and geo-political constraints will likely make similar foreign policy decisions.*

Populists in government make a final policy calculation based on the content of a policy and its salience to the populist agenda and populist voters. Both the nature of populism in general, and the particular populist coalition in a given state determine how important a foreign policy will be to populist leaders and their goals. Populists in power aim to transform the nature of politics such that legitimacy will stem from a group they define as “the people”. Certain policies are inherent to this goal, like funneling checks and balances to a central power that represents this majority, or the vilification and othering of any opposition forces (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Moffitt, 2016; Urbinati, 2019).

In addition to these domestic policies, certain foreign policies can support domestic populist aims. Populists often use material benefits to galvanize support, including cash transfers or other benefits

that specifically target their supporters. These benefits imply the need for an inflated budget and to achieve it Latin American populists have historically increased debt, nationalized assets, and implemented trade protectionism (Kaufman & Stallings, 1991; Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). This has not been the case in Europe, where such transfers have either relied on a combination of EU budget and growth in Hungary and Poland, or in the Greek case, did not occur despite populists' promises.

However, even within the EU, there are foreign policies that populists use to satisfy their base of supporters. First, right wing populists can shore up support by portraying themselves as defending national pride and national sovereignty. Myra Waterbury shows that nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe used policies favoring co-ethnics in kin states to construct their narrative (Waterbury, 2010). Policies such as material benefits and loosening of naturalization requirements are foreign policies because they address citizens of neighboring countries, often at the cost of provoking these host countries. Second, as part of their efforts to eliminate the opposition, populists often target liberal civil society organization, and their international and transnational sources of funding. In the same vein, populists may target symbols of liberal globalism like academic institutions and museums which have ties or sources of funding abroad. Finally, immigration is a central target of right wing populists who portray both immigrants and liberal domestic and international actors who assist them as a danger to the sovereignty and the character of the nation (Brubaker, 2017; Hogan & Haltinner, 2015; Taggart, 2017; Zaslove, 2004). Immigration policy is not in itself foreign policy, but does have international implications. Immigration policy in one country can have spillover effects in other regions by exacerbating conflict (Byman & Speakman, 2016; Greenhill, 2016). In addition, immigrants can assist their

home economies by sending remittances (Bodomo, 2013), and thus restrictive immigration policies can have economic spillover effects. Within the context of the EU, decision-making in one member state will influence the rest of the members. Lenient immigration policy creates more EU citizens, and restrictive immigration policy can block immigrant flows to other member states. Moreover, a state can block a joint immigration policy if it manages to sway the opinion of more states in the union.

All of these policies are inward facing – they target a domestic audience and are not designed to serve international goals. Their main, and sometimes only, goal is to satisfy and solidify the populist base. On these issues, we expect populists to choose policies that are highly visible to domestic audiences, rather than highly effective. Populists are more likely to focus on symbolic legislation, campaign, or tangible policies like the construction of a border fence. We define these policies as Domestically Targeted Foreign Policies (DTFP).

When an issue is both highly important to state goals and highly salient for populists, we expect to see some tradeoff between policies based on state interests and DTFP. For example, if immigration is important for economic prosperity populists will face a dilemma. In these instances, we expect that populists will generally choose state interests, though miscalculations may occur. Importantly, Peters (2017) shows that there is a tradeoff between immigration policy and other aspects of globalization. The more borders are open to trade and capital, the less there is need for low-skilled labor, and thus firms have fewer incentives to lobby for expansive immigration policies (Peters, 2017). Thus, while closing the border to trade and capital is met with extreme resistance, strict immigration policy is far easier to implement. This logic should still apply to RRP

governments. Where powerful domestic interest groups push for immigration, we expect immigration policies to be more lenient.

H3: In policy areas that are highly salient for the populist base of support, populists in government will choose demonstrative foreign policies that target their domestic audience (DTFP).

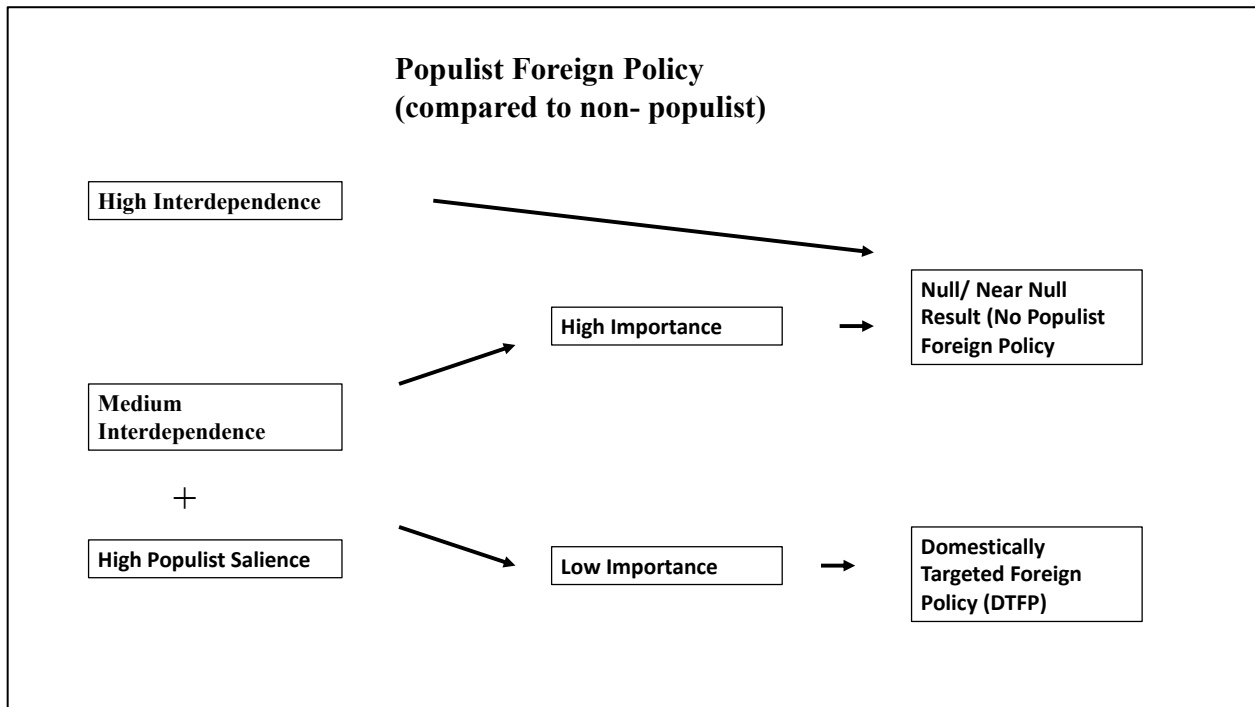


Figure 1 Strategic Interests, Populism, and Domestically Targeted Foreign Policy

Several issues are left outside the scope of our theory. First, one of the most important issues in international politics is spreading and upholding human rights norms and practices. Some populist leaders violate human rights of minority and immigrant populations. Though this is a very crucial and concerning facet of these regimes, we limit our scope here to economic and security related policies and thus do not address it.

Equally important, we do not attempt to analyze or evaluate the importance of populist rhetoric on the international system. Words certainly have consequences, and the populist rhetoric can erode liberal international norms leading the erosion of international institutions. This is particularly true when great powers employ populist rhetoric, but the importance of the spread of anti-globalist rhetoric around the globe should not be underestimated (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Our aim here is only to examine whether the rhetoric is currently translated into policy choices. Similarly, we do not examine whether the very real erosion of democracy in the cases we selected influences democratic norms in other countries, as we limit the investigation to foreign policy behavior of populist led countries compared to non-populist.

Finally, our analysis does not address one important element that may influence foreign policy – domestic politics. Indeed, variation in domestic institutions, and the nature of political opposition can explain foreign policy choices (Gilpin, 2016; Simmons, 2020). Since populist leaders attempt to eliminate checks and balances, domestic institutions, and opposition outside and inside their party often become irrelevant in policy making. To simplify our theory for the purpose of this research we have indeed chosen two cases in which the populist government faced little internal barrier to policy making (absolute majorities; little within party opposition;³ no meaningful courts). We do describe in our case study analyses the role domestic economic interests played in the decision making of populist leaders. At the same time, we recognize that domestic institutions and the opposition can indeed play a role in other cases and generate a variation in foreign policy behavior which our paper does not address.

³ Although currently PiS in Poland is facing opposition from within its coalition, and this has become an important factor in policy making in the last few months, we examine decision making prior to this recent development.

Methodology

Our first two hypotheses surmise that states facing similar economic and geopolitical constraints will choose similar foreign policies in areas that are either highly interdependent (*H1*) or of great importance for the security and prosperity of the state (*H2*). To support these hypotheses we use two different types of comparative case study analysis.

First, we use the method of agreement (Levy, 2008) – comparing cases that are similar on the dependent variable (foreign policy), and share several conditions (geopolitical and economic constraints), but differ on one independent variable of interest (populists in government).⁴ Our aim is to demonstrate that geopolitical and economic constraints, rather than populist governance, shape policies in areas high interdependence or importance.

The cases we have selected for this comparison are Hungary and Croatia, EU member states with similar GDPs and population size. In addition they share borders, as well as notable challenges including their communist past, emigration concerns, and energy dependence on Russia. Since most Central and Eastern European states are currently led by populist governments, we were unable to choose a non-populist comparator for Hungary like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Bulgaria, and thus settled on Croatia despite a different socialist experience and timing of EU membership.

⁴ For a discussion of John Stuart Mill's method of agreement and method of difference see Levy (2008), 10. For case study methodology more broadly see (George & Bennett, 2005; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Seawright & Gerring, 2008)

We relied on information garnered from several sources to determine whether populists were in government during the examined period (Bakker et al., 2015; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018; Norris, 2020). These datasets classify Hungary's Fidesz, the ruling party since 2010 (and Poland's PiS we discuss below), as populist or RRP where such classification is available. In Croatia, the major conservative party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was mildly populist in some measures,⁵ but was for the most part classified as a Christian Democratic party (Bakker et al., 2015).

The second type of comparative case study we employ is the method of difference (Levy, 2008). Here we chose two cases that differ on the dependent variable (energy policy, an area of high importance), and differ on one possible explanatory factor (energy constraints), but share one key independent variable (populists in government). Our aim here is to demonstrate that two similar right wing populist governments will make different foreign policy choices if they face different constraints.

The cases we selected for this comparison are Hungary and Poland, both led by right wing populist parties (Fidesz since 2010, and PiS since 2015 respectively). Domestically, these ruling parties have taken similar steps to curtail oversight institutions including constitutional courts, the media, and civil society (Grzymala-Busse, 2017). However, the two countries have different factor endowments, thus we exploit this variation for this comparative analysis.

⁵ For example in scored 6.1 out 10 for populist rhetoric in the Norris (2000) Global Party Survey compared to Hungarian Fidesz's 9.5 score.

Table 1 Strategic Interests, Populism, and Foreign Policy

	Share Core Strategic Interest	Do not Share Core Strategic Interests
Share Populist Leadership	Our Expectation: Similar international policies	Our Expectation: Different international policies Hungary & Poland on energy
	Literature Expectation: Similar international policies	Literature Expectation: Similar international policies
Do not Share populist Leadership	Our expectation: Similar international policies Hungary & Croatia	Our expectation: Different international policies
	Literature Expectation: Different international policies	Literature Expectation: Different international policies

H3 surmises that on issues highly salient to populists that are neither highly interdependent nor highly important for security and prosperity, populists will choose visible policies that appeal directly to their domestic base of support (DTFPs). We use the comparative analysis of Hungary and Croatia to support this hypothesis. Here we look at the more rare incidents in which the two cases differed on the dependent variable (foreign policy), and aim to demonstrate that they only occurred under three necessary conditions: low interdependence and low importance (which were similar for Hungary and Croatia), and high salience to populists (which was present in the Hungarian case, but not in the Croatian one).

For the populist cases, we selected two post-communist countries because RRP governments in Western and Southern Europe have been few and too short lived to evaluate (Austria and Italy both had right wing populist governments for only a brief period). We chose Hungary and Poland over other post-communist countries for three reasons: first, in both cases domestic opposition was very limited, allowing us to hold this factor constant. Second, both countries have populist governments that are very vocal on foreign policy issues, allowing us to examine whether foreign policy behavior matched rhetoric. Finally, Hungary and Poland have different energy security strategies and this variation was an important testing case for us. To avoid selection bias we selected cases that vary in the values of the dependent variable (both similar and different foreign policies), and have chosen hard cases in one respect – both Hungary and Poland have relatively long terms of populist governments that implement drastic domestic policies and emphasize foreign policy as part of their rhetoric. We acknowledge however, that there are limitations to these cases. Neither country has high bargaining power globally, or within the EU. As such, the scope of our investigation is limited to countries with relatively low bargaining power. Though we suggest broader interpretations of our findings, we cannot confirm them empirically in this study.

Empirical Analysis

Hungary and Croatia

Hungary's membership in the European Union and its NATO membership are the state's most significant economic and security arrangements respectively. Moreover, in both cases, Hungary has limited bargaining power on certain issues, and indeed on these issues we observed no significant foreign policy behavior differences between populist Hungary and either non-populist Hungary in previous years or Croatia.

In terms of security, populist Hungary continued to stress the importance of NATO membership as the cornerstone of its security strategy, and did not seek alternative security arrangements either rhetorically or through policies. Neither Hungary nor Croatia was involved in armed conflict in the past decade. Both states decreased their defense budgets after the 2008 financial crisis, Hungary budgeting.⁶ Both countries significantly increased their defense budgets from 2016 to the present - the 2020 Hungarian Defense budget represents the fifth consecutive year of 20% annual budget increases in line with the country's goal to achieve 2% of GDP by 2026. Croatia also aspires to 2% defense spending but due to financial pressures is only likely to recover to 2009 levels from 2031 onwards. The economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis are further likely to delay these objectives in both countries.

Hungary's most crucial international commitment is EU membership. Hungary is one of the largest net beneficiaries of EU budgetary spending. In 2018, total EU spending in Hungary was €6.298 billion, equivalent to 4.97% of the Hungarian economy, whereas its total contribution to the EU budget was €1.076 billion, equivalent to 0.85% of the Hungarian economy. EU spending in Croatia was far lower and amounted to 2.2% of the Croatian economy.⁷

Hungary and Croatia rely heavily on intra-EU trade — 82% of Hungarian exports, and 75% of imports are with other EU states; 68% of Croatian exports and 78% of imports are intra EU trade.⁸ Hungary's trading partners have remained relatively constant over the past 25 years (See Figures

⁶ 2020 Dollars. *Jane's Defense Budgets*.

⁷ Data available at: https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries_en

⁸ *ibid*

in Appendix).⁹ Both countries was a rise in trade with China, which reflects the growth of the Chinese economy. This occurred prior to Orbán's election in 2010, and was reflected in most EU states, populist and non-populist alike.

Hungary was a leader in East and Central Europe in trade and diplomatic relations with China. In the past decade China invested in a strategic relationship with East Central Europe, viewing the region as a potential zone of influence. The result was the China's 17+1 initiative to strengthen cooperation with the region. Though the initiative was founded in Budapest, all countries in the region, including Croatia are a part of this partnership group and have signed intergovernmental cooperation agreements as part of the Belt and Road initiative.

One notable change for both Hungary and Croatia was the decline in trade volume with Russia after 2014, due to sanctions imposed post-Crimea, and a dramatic decline in oil prices (Korhonen et al., 2018). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán denounced the sanctions on Russia repeatedly over the years¹⁰, calling for a more friendly European approach toward Russia. Nonetheless, Hungary complied with the sanctions.

Indeed on issues related to European economic ties, we often observed that Hungary vocally expresses anti EU views but it rarely blocks EU decision making. An interesting example is the recent COVID-19 recovery package. Hungary strongly opposed the program which ties funds to

⁹ Croatia has had far more volatile trading partnerships in the past two decades. Lithuania and Poland are better comparators here, both show very similar trade partner patterns.

¹⁰ A few examples are: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-russia-belarus/hungarys-orban-says-eu-should-reverse-russia-sanctions-not-push-cyprus-on-belarus-idUSKCN26G2IU>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28801353>; <https://www.france24.com/en/20180715-hungarys-orban-denounces-eu-sanctions-moscow>

rule and law practices such as independent Judiciary and transparency in spending, specifically targeting Hungary and Poland. Hungary along with Poland temporarily vetoed the plan and expressed its opposition both abroad and in the Hungarian parliament in a lengthy session at the foreign affairs committee.¹¹ Ultimately though, Hungary and Poland reached a compromise with the EU brokered by Germany. The funds remain tied to rule of law practices, but the legal process for activations of sanctions has been made more difficult. The compromise allowed Hungary (and Poland) to present the deal as a win, but at the same time to back away from the abstractionist position they took. It also highlights the role Germany plays in Hungarian foreign policy. Germany is both Hungary's most significant trade partner and largest source of foreign direct investment.¹² Hungarian exports are based on German industry (for example, the mostly German auto manufacturing comprises approximately 15 percent of Hungarian exports). For many years Germany's ruling party, CDU embraced Fidesz – until recently Fidesz was a member of the European People's Party group in the European parliament alongside CDU, and a loyal voter with the group. The relationship has been reciprocal, while Germany did not exert its power to strongly demand domestic changes in Hungary, Hungary did not often abstract EU policy making. The recovery package is thus an exception for both countries, and the compromise is in line with their previous pattern of behavior.

More broadly, a systematic review of votes on foreign policy issues in the Hungarian parliament is revelatory. Hungarian politics is highly polarized and most votes are split along the government/opposition line. In the hundreds of votes from the last few years we reviewed, the

¹¹ December 10, 2020 Foreign Affairs Committee minutes, available at: <https://www.parlament.hu/documents/static/biz41/bizj41/KUB/2012101.pdf>

¹² See US State Department Investment Climate Report available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-investment-climate-statements/hungary/>

government and the opposition only tend to vote together on procedural matters and on foreign policy decisions, demonstrating that the government did not often use foreign policy as a wedge issue.

In the same vein, for the most part the populist government did not pursue economic protectionism (though we discuss exceptions to the rule below). Over the past several decades, Hungary has viewed economic openness as the primary means to achieve prosperity. The KOF Index, an overall measure of economic globalization, shows that Hungary and Croatia have very similar trends of integration over time. Moreover, both states have high scores of economic openness: Hungary was consistently one of the top fifteen most integrated countries in the world, including after 2010, and Croatia is in the top 30. As evidenced in *Figure 2*, Hungary was already extremely open when Orbán took office in 2010, making it highly costly to change directions.

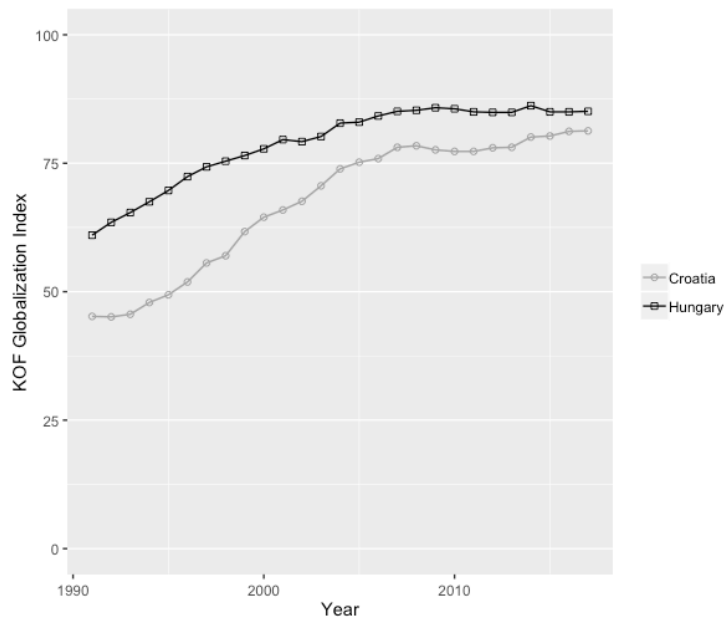


Figure 2 KOF Globalization Index, Hungary & Croatia

Under populism, Hungary has received significant attention for its controversial rhetoric and policies. In the decade since taking office, Viktor Orbán's populist government transformed Hungarian institutions and society. Orbán's RRP party Fidesz won a decisive super-majority in parliament and wrote and instituted a new constitution in 2012 without input from opposition or civil society (Tóth 2012). Fidesz significantly reduced the role of the constitutional court (Scheppele 2015), restricted independent civil society, eliminated all but loyal print and broadcast media, and targeted academic freedom through both legislation and structural reforms. In 2020 Freedom House lowered Hungary's Global Freedom score to 'Partly Free', rendering it the only non-democracy in the EU. Orbán has consistently employed 'us vs. them' rhetoric that casts a variety of domestic and external actors as 'Them' – foreigners to the Hungarian nation who threaten its existence and strive to suppress its greatness.

Some of the measures Fidesz took had international effect. We will briefly discuss three significant policy changes with international effect. First, Hungary's most notable policy change that had impact beyond its border has been on the issue of immigration and refugee resettlement. In 2015, a record number of over 1.3 million refugees sought asylum in Europe. Due to its geographic position on the South-East border of the EU, Hungary received the second largest number of asylum applications in Europe. In response, Hungary implemented a series of aggressive immigration policies: migrants were held in substandard detention centers, harassed, and denied legal representation.¹³ Hungary led Central European opposition to the EU initiative to distribute

¹³ Commissioner of Human Rights of the Council of Europe report available at: <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-hungary-from-4-to-8-february-2019-by-dunja-mija/1680942f0d>

migrants across member states. Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic all voted with Hungary against the plan, arguing that it infringed on their sovereignty.

The EU did not formally sanction Hungary's highly restrictive immigration policies, demonstrating that immigration policy is not subject to the same constraints of interdependence as other economic and security policies. As there was a general lack of consensus over immigration policy in Europe, by implementing these policies Hungary did not risk its relationship with the European Union. It is also important to note that Hungary's economy does not rely on immigration and thus there was no contradiction between the state's material interests and populist views on immigration. In contrast, in Poland there was similar populist anti-immigration rhetoric following the 2015 refugee crisis,¹⁴ but at the same time the country readily accepted millions of immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus because there was an economic need for them.

Thus, the main target of immigration policy in Hungary (though of course not its main victims) was the domestic audience. Hungary accompanied tight immigration policies with a Hungarian language billboard campaign warning immigrants against stealing Hungarian jobs, but it is difficult to imagine that the intended target audience was in fact Hungarian speaking refugees from the Middle East.

The second policy area is the structure of market ownership in Hungary. In their declared policy goals, Fidesz promised to alter market ownership from foreign to Hungarian. Indeed, the

¹⁴ For example: Jan Cienski "Migrants carry 'parasites and protozoa,' warns Polish opposition leader" Politico. October 14, 2015

government partially followed through on this promise, but only in very specific sectors. Most prominently, Fidesz used targeted tax legislation to push out foreign owners in the media sector. This was intended to generate a favorable media environment for the populist government, a part of a broad strategy of elimination of checks and balances. Other sectors were effected as well, primarily banking and retail. These policies served to favor government cronies at the expense of foreign companies.¹⁵ At the same time, the government continued to encourage foreign owned industry, on which the Hungarian economy relies significantly. For example, in 2017, the Fidesz government reduced business income tax to nine percent, the lowest in Europe. Again, these policies on foreign ownership highlight the type of foreign policy changes populist do take on: ones that do not disturb core interests, and that are crucial to the concentration of power.

Related to taxation on foreign owned media, using targeted legislation the Orbán government also pushed out the Central European University, a world renowned academic institution.¹⁶ This act received broad international condemnation, but like other domestic policies and DTFPs, it was a part of a domestic agenda intended to eliminate opposition strongholds in politics, civil society, media, and academia.

Finally, in 2011 the Fidesz government passed a law that allowed citizens of former “Greater Hungary”, the territory of Hungary before the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, to obtain Hungarian citizenship. The law pertained to ethnic Hungarians in present day Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, and Austria. The law generated tensions between Hungary and its neighbors, and Slovakia

¹⁵ US State Department Investment Climate Report

¹⁶ The law was since deemed to violate EU law and the matter remain unsettled
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54433398>

even passed a counter law that revokes Slovak citizenship from those who sought to obtain Hungarian dual citizenship. The law had two goals, first it portrayed Fidesz as the protector of the Hungarian nation at home and abroad (Waterbury, 2006), and conversely the liberal opposition as having failed to protect the nation. In addition it granted the new citizens voting rights in Hungary, and as expected overwhelming majority of them voted for Fidesz.¹⁷ Again, this was a low cost policy that achieved core populist rhetorical and strategic goals.

Hungary and Poland

The EU relies on Russia for approximately a third of total energy needs, but many states in Central and Eastern Europe are highly or even completely dependent on Russian energy imports.¹⁸ Although the issue of European energy security did not become a major focus of Brussels' agenda until after the 2006 Ukrainian gas crisis, for years Eastern European states had warned about the security risk inherent in Russian market domination.

Theoretically, states have a choice in their pursuit of energy security. Most choose supply diversification, but others foster a close relationship with a dominant supplier to ensure a stable supply of energy. In the context of the EU, transit infrastructure set up during the Soviet period and geographic constraints has made diversification difficult for some states. For example, states with port access can invest in liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure and import from suppliers including Norway and Qatar. States without access to ports could still choose to invest in strategic

¹⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-courts-voters-in-transylvania-romania-hungarian-election-2018/>

¹⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/energy/bloc-2c.html>

storage facilities or multiple interconnectors, but they cannot turn their back on Russian supplies altogether. Because of long-term divergence in assessment of the overall Russian security threat as well as divergent structural factors, particularly after the 2009 Ukrainian gas crisis, Poland and Hungary chose opposite energy security strategies: populist Poland maintained the post-independence energy strategy, investing heavily in both supply and fuel diversification, while populist Hungary chose to strengthen its relationship with Moscow to ensure continued Russian energy supplies.

Since independence, Hungary has been energy insecure, with an overly developed heavy industrial sector, depleted domestic reserves of natural gas, and a residential sector highly dependent on gas. By 1991, natural gas constituted 35% of its primary energy share, nearly all of which was supplied by Russia.¹⁹ Adding to Hungary's energy insecurity was the fact that it was not a transit state for suppliers but a "dead end". Poland too was locked into energy dependence on Russia by Soviet infrastructure. However, several structural factors contributed to Poland's favorable energy situation vis-à-vis Hungary. Poland is a key transit route for Russian gas and oil supply to lucrative Western markets and thus has more leverage in contractual negotiations, it has well developed port infrastructure, and large domestic deposits of hard coal. Despite these advantages, since 2008, Poland's energy dependency rate²⁰ for all energy products increased from approximately 30% to under 50% in 2018, largely due to its rapidly declining coal industry.

¹⁹ IEA Country Data. <<https://www.iea.org/countries/hungary>>

²⁰ % of net imports in gross available energy, based on tonnes of oil equivalent. Source: Eurostat

Initially, both Poland and Hungary focused on diversification away from Russian imports. The 1992 Hungarian Energy Policy highlighted reducing dependency on Russia, and increasing strategic storage capacity.²¹ Upon its accession to the EU in 2004, Hungary embraced opportunities that were emerging as the result of Union-wide energy security policy including instituting the most advanced green energy legislation in Eastern Europe. Poland, which was struggling with managing the transition away from its politically important domestic coal sector, resisted EU green energy legislation, but did focus on supply diversification. In 2007, Poland's then state owned gas conglomerate, PGNiG, initiated the construction of an LNG terminal that would allow Poland to purchase natural gas from a variety of suppliers including Norway.

In 2006 Russia turned off gas supplies to Ukraine during a contractual dispute. This frightened European consumers, some of whom were affected during the four-day shut-down. The crisis prompted the socialist-liberal Hungarian government to further invest in diversification, most notably expressing support for the Nabucco Pipeline, a pipeline project framed as a competitor to Russia's Gazprom South Stream pipeline project. Although both Nabucco and South Stream were eventually cancelled, Hungarian support for Gazprom's rival project was a major indicator of the government's energy priorities. Warsaw saw this disruption as further evidence of Russia's nefarious influence, and became one of the fiercest critics of Gazprom's Nord Stream project, which would establish a direct gas link between Russia and Germany.

In November 2007 Poland's new liberal government announced that it would continue to support diversification projects, while simultaneously improving relations with Russia. The

²¹ The Government of the Hungarian Republic. "The Hungarian Energy Policy," Budapest, 1992.

rapprochement effort was halted by the 2010 Smolensk air disaster, which killed the President of Poland Lech Kaczynski and a number of senior government officials. This incident greatly increased Warsaw's anti-Russian rhetoric, and sped up diversification projects.

The 2009 Ukrainian gas crisis caused large-scale disruptions to East and Southern Europe's natural gas supply, and highlights the structural differences between Hungary and Poland that ultimately led them to choose different energy security policies. Poland, whose supply was cut 33% during the 13-day interruption, was able to replace some lost volumes through alternative pipelines. In contrast, Hungary, who lost 45% of its supply (Stern et al., 2009), did not have alternative transmission systems, or even access to ports that could replace significant volumes. Moreover, Hungary's residential sector was already more dependent on natural gas for home heating, and did not have a viable domestic alternative like Poland's coal deposits.

After 2009, Hungarian energy policy shifted away from diversification. Hungarian policy makers recognized the limits of diversification: while Hungary could invest in increased interconnections to other states and increase storage and green energy capacity, they could not feasibly transition away from Russian gas in any significant quantities due to infrastructure and geographic constraints. In March 2009, just two months after the 2009 gas crisis, Hungarian PM Ferenc Gyurcsany, reversed course, expressing support for Gazprom's South Stream over the Nabucco project, arguing that Russia had sufficient gas reserves to meet Hungary's growing demands for the next 100 years.²² Populist Fidesz, which took power in 2010, came into office on a platform of

²² <<https://www.reuters.com/article/gas-russia-hungary/update-2-russia-wins-hungarys-support-for-gas-pipeline-idUSLA93660420090310>>

Euroscepticism and increased Hungarian nationalism: both of which made cooperation with EU led energy directives that would have increased Brussels' control over domestic Hungarian affairs rhetorically difficult.

Hungary adopted the *National Energy Strategy for 2030*, which placed a strategic emphasis on a special relationship with Moscow. The document states that Russia is Hungary's most important energy partner," and that Hungary should seek closer relations with Central European states that act as a buffer against Brussels.²³ This position took place in the context of upcoming renegotiations of Hungary's long-term gas contract (LTC) with Gazprom, scheduled for 2015.

In 2015, Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Budapest (his first visit to the EU since Russia's annexation of Crimea) to renew Hungary's LTC. As a result of the negotiations, Hungary reduced its gas costs, and increased guaranteed volumes. Controversially, Moscow also agreed to finance the \$12 billion expansion of Hungary's Paks nuclear power plant, a project that was awarded, without tender, to Russia's state atomic agency Rosatom.²⁴

In contrast, the 2009 crisis hardened Warsaw's stance on diversification and encouraged more investment in alternative fuel supply arrangements, and rhetorical position against the Russian threat. Poland completed construction of its LNG terminal in 2015. Warsaw justified the significant cost of the project (€950m) as a necessary investment to protect Polish energy security, despite the fact that imported LNG was more expensive than the pipeline gas Poland was

²³ Hungarian Ministry of National Development, *National Energy Strategy 2030*, p. 27.

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-europe-hungary-specialreport/special-report-inside-hungarys-10-8-billion-nuclear-deal-with-russia-idUSKBN0MQ0MP20150330>

purchasing from Gazprom. Increases in Polish utility prices were justified to the public as a necessary security investment, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Toplišek, 2020). Prior to PiS' electoral victory in June 2015, an agreement to build Gazprom's controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline was concluded, Warsaw, which had long and vocally opposed the project, formally blocked the creation of a joint venture between Gazprom and several European energy firms, claiming that it would violate EU anti-trust laws. The project was forced to proceed under a different contractual arrangement.

Once in government, PiS maintained the key priorities of Poland's post-independence energy security strategy: it sought to continue Poland's opposition to EU climate and energy policies while simultaneously reducing dependence on Russian supplies. The main energy priority of the PiS government was opposition to Nord Stream 2 and diversification of Poland's gas supply by increasing LNG capacity and interconnectors. In 2019 PGNiG announced that it would not renew its gas supply contract with Gazprom upon its expiry in 2022, stating that its contracted LNG volumes would guarantee security of supply after 2022.²⁵

Conclusions

During the past decade, populism has been on the rise across different regions and political systems. In many cases, populism emerged in response to anti-globalization economic and cultural pressures, with populists vocally expressing opposition to globalism. As a result, academic and popular media developed a set of expectations about the foreign policy behavior of populists in

²⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/pgnig-gazprom/update-1-polands-pgnig-tells-gazprom-it-plans-to-end-gas-supply-deal-in-2022-idUSL8N27V469>

power: economic protectionism, non-traditional cooperation with fellow populists, and isolationism combined with unpredictable behavior in areas of national security. These expectations have also been shaped by prominent cases including the presidency of Donald Trump.

Despite these expectations, populists' views and rhetoric do not necessarily translate into foreign policy. In this paper, we developed a more nuanced theory on foreign policy behavior. We argued that where interdependence is high, a change in foreign policy toward protectionism will be too costly and thus populists will not pursue it, especially in states with relatively low bargaining power. Even in areas of policy with more room for maneuvering, populists will not pursue "populist" policies – protectionist; non-traditional cooperation; isolationism or belligerence – on issues that are pivotal to core security and economic interests. Populists will only pursue the expected populist policies on issues that are both less crucial for core state interests and are central to the populist goal of concentrating domestic power. These policies, which we term Domestically Targeted Foreign Policies (DTFPs), are explored in both of our comparative case study analyses.

The Hungarian case demonstrates the nature of DTFPs, which tend to be visible policies, often of symbolic nature, that have the added benefit (to populists) of undermining domestic opposition and mobilizing core supporters and cronies.

Our research raises several important issues. First, to what extent is our theory generalizable beyond EU members or even post-communist EU members. EU members, especially those with low bargaining power, are admittedly very limited in their foreign policy choices. However, the nuances we present here still apply beyond this context. States that are less interdependent have

more freedom in foreign policy decision making, thus the two other calculations we presented – policy significance relative to core state interests and its salience to the populist agenda --will come into play more often. This also implies more room for error for populists in government in more powerful states. These calculations of policy significance for core interests and salience to the populist agenda may also vary for great powers. The US is a net contributor to international institutions, which may change the calculus of membership as opposed to a state that is a net beneficiary.

Second, as the pace of globalization accelerated in recent decades, the world experienced a concurrent rise in social pressures and demands to change the international system. These pressures are a counter movement to disembedded liberalism (Ruggie, 1982; Snyder, 2019) or the insulation of economic decisions from political institutions and thus from election outcomes. These two movements, globalization on the one hand and calls for protectionism on the other, are reminiscent of the *great transformations*, that according to Karl Polanyi, led to the collapse of the international system in the interwar period (Polanyi, 1944). Our paper demonstrates that populist governments do not necessarily implement policies that counter globalization.

This does not preclude such changes in the long-term. First, as Brexit demonstrates, non-populist leaders face pressures that may result in policy changes without populists in government (the rejection of an EU constitution in the early 2000s is a similar occurrence). Second, changes to the international distribution of power can reshape the strategic interests of states, which may favor new types of leaders, and it is possible that a critical mass will indeed change state incentives sufficiently to lead to overall change.

Finally, our paper does not address long term effects to the international norms that the populist erosion of democracy, illiberal practices, and rhetoric may induce. Given the proliferation of populist and illiberal governments, this is an important topic that deserves further empirical examination.

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