
Research
Paper

Europe Programme

March 2021

Is there a populist foreign policy?

Angelos Chrysosgelos



Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a world-leading policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

Summary

- In recent years, populist figures, movements and parties have been widely seen as a threat to the liberal international order. But this prevalent narrative is misleading.
- Much analysis has focused on the attitudes of populist figures, movements and parties to the EU. This paper focuses instead on the broader approaches they take to questions of foreign policy beyond Europe and in particular on their attitudes to Atlanticism, which reveals a much more complicated picture.
- European populists are extremely diverse. First, they differ in ideological terms – i.e. whether they are on the right or left. Second, they differ in how they approach foreign policy, which often reflects the dominant strategic tradition and national interests of their countries more than ideology.
- When populists have entered government in the last decade – for example in Hungary, Poland, Greece and Italy – they have rarely implemented foreign policies that diverged significantly from their countries' previous orientation. In so far as they differ from the foreign policy actions of mainstream parties in their countries, it is primarily in terms of discourse.
- While it is misleading to generalize about a single populist approach to foreign policy, there are certain distinct themes and positions that link some populist figures, movements and parties. This paper identifies three types of populists in Europe: Atlanticist nationalists, continental nationalists and anti-imperialist internationalists.
- Focusing on the threat of a populist takeover of European foreign policy distracts from the real difficulties in developing a coherent, effective European foreign policy, which must balance different national interests and strategic cultures in Europe.

Introduction

During the last few years, debates about the rise of ‘populism’ have been entangled with debates about the future of the set of norms, rules and institutions established after the Second World War, known as the ‘liberal international order’. Populist figures, movements and parties have been widely seen as a threat to the liberal international order and are often also linked to threats from revisionist non-Western powers like Russia. Former President Donald Trump, who was indifferent or even hostile to the liberal international order, was often seen as its biggest threat. However, other populists on both the left and right – many of whom, unlike Trump, are still in power in their countries – share a similar approach to foreign policy that is distinct from more centrist parties and endangers the order.

Despite this widespread idea that populists represent a threat to the liberal international order, there is little clarity about how to understand populist foreign policy – if there is such a thing. For example, it is not clear how populism fits into the divide in international relations between ‘realism’ and ‘idealism’, if at all. Populists are sometimes seen as, and indeed themselves often claim to be, hyper-realists whose single-minded focus on the ‘good of the people’ leads them to discard international commitments and values.¹ At the same time, some see populists as ideologues who allow right-wing or left-wing ideologies, or even personal whims, to guide them to harmful and baseless policies.

Populists are sometimes seen as hyper-realists whose single-minded focus on the ‘good of the people’ leads them to discard international commitments and values.

This paper, which focuses exclusively on populists in Europe, argues that this prevalent narrative about a populist threat to the liberal international order is misleading. First, the idea of a ‘populist playbook’ on foreign policy overlooks the heterogeneity of populism. In particular, left and right populists are very different, though often the term is used to imply similarities between them, and left-wing and right-wing populists also differ substantially from country to country. Second, populists do not diverge from mainstream foreign policy positions as much as is often assumed. In fact, focusing on the threat of a populist takeover of European foreign policy distracts from the real difficulties in developing a coherent, effective European foreign policy, which must take into account different national interests and strategic cultures in Europe.

¹ Ettinger, A. (2020), ‘Principled realism and populist sovereignty in Trump’s foreign policy’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(3): pp. 410–431, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1659229>; Martill, B. and Rogstad, A. (2019), ‘The end of consensus? Folk theory and the politics of foreign policy in the Brexit referendum’, *Global Affairs*, 5(4–5): pp. 347–367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2019.1701950>.

The assumption that populism is a threat to the liberal international order is based to a large extent on the Euroscepticism of nearly all populist figures, movements and parties in Europe.² Because the EU is widely seen as a part of the liberal international order, any opposition to the former is often by extension seen as undermining the latter. This paper does not look at the attitudes of populist figures, movements and parties to the EU. Instead, it focuses on the broader approaches they take to questions of foreign policy beyond Europe and in particular on their attitudes to Atlanticism. Although populism is often assumed to be antithetical to Atlanticism, not all ‘populist’ figures, movements and parties oppose the Transatlantic alliance.

The paper argues that, in practice, populism affects European foreign policies much less than the profile, rhetoric or style of populists would suggest. In particular, it examines four populist-led governments in Europe in recent years – the single-party governments of Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and the coalitions of SYRIZA and ANEL in Greece and the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Lega in Italy.³ Once in power, all these parties largely remained within the parameters of their countries’ traditional national interests. In some cases, they introduced new elements to their states’ foreign policies. But even these shifts reflected the influence of established strategic traditions rather than populist ideology per se.

Finally, the paper sketches out a typology of populist approaches to foreign policy in Europe. A detailed examination of populist figures, parties and movements shows that while it is misleading to generalize about a single populist approach to foreign policy, there are certain distinct themes and positions that link some populist figures, movements and parties. On the basis of an analysis of similarities and differences in their approaches to foreign policy, the paper identifies three types of populists in Europe: Atlanticist nationalists and continental nationalists on the right and anti-imperialist internationalists on the left. Each of them challenges the liberal international order in a different way.

Populist ideology and foreign policy in Europe

Populists see society as divided into two antithetical camps: the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’.⁴ They see the people as pure, oppressed and downtrodden and elites as corrupt, aloof and dismissive.⁵ Populism is often understood as a ‘thin-centred ideology’ – that is, it merely posits that politics revolves around the people–elite opposition, while the exact content of this opposition, and who is part of the people and the elites, is defined by other, more consistent ideologies that populism

² For a full list of populist parties in Europe, see The PopuList, <https://populistorg.files.wordpress.com/2020/02/01-thepopulist.pdf>.

³ In Poland, the PiS government and majority in parliament is formally composed of a coalition of parties. But PiS is by far the biggest of those and the other small parties are essentially personal vehicles of prominent politicians who belonged to PiS. Although it is officially not a uniform party like Fidesz, the PiS government for practical purposes can be seen as a single-party one, albeit containing factions.

⁴ Taggart, P. (2000), *Populism*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

⁵ Mudde, C. and Rovira-Kaltwasser, C. (2017), *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

usually appears with.⁶ In particular, whereas left-wing populists usually define the people–elite divide in economic terms, right-wing populists define it along ethnic and cultural lines. When this thin-centred ideology is applied to foreign policy, it can take different forms. Left-wing populists tend to be internationalists (though they may take some sovereigntist positions on economic policy), whereas right-wing populists tend to be nationalists.

That said, the exact form each party's approach to foreign policy takes is determined not just by a combination of a 'thin' ideology like populism, which prescribes only a very basic perspective of the world, and 'thick' ideologies like socialism or liberalism that cue coherent approaches across all policy areas, but also by the existing foreign policy orientation and strategic culture of the country. Populists may oppose some long-established tenets of their country's foreign policy as part of an attempt to highlight their opposition to the elites who designed them. But they may also support elements of their country's traditional foreign policy, while distancing themselves from centrist parties by claiming that elites that are in thrall to international institutions and foreign actors have 'betrayed' the national interest or the will of the people.

Right-wing populists

The most established populist family in Europe is the populist radical right, rooted in Western and Northern Europe and often with origins in post-fascist parties. The Rassemblement National (RN, formerly the Front National) of Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen is the typical exponent of this party family, which also includes the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Freedom Party (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Lega in Italy, and more recently the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The populist radical right is characterized by nativism, with the people defined in ethnic or cultural terms as the virtuous natives threatened by immigration and its elite enablers.⁷ But despite this shared ideology, there is diversity in the foreign policy positions of right-wing populists in Europe – and they have evolved over time.

In the 1980s, the RN and the FPÖ were quite pro-US as part of their Cold War anti-communism. But after the end of the Cold War they became more anti-American and increasingly saw the US as a global hegemon that threatened the economic, political and cultural sovereignty of the people. In this context, they opposed NATO and US-led military interventions. In some ways, this opposition to American power is similar to the position of left-wing populists – though the right usually opposes US power in the name of a narrowly defined national interest rather than the alternative internationalism of the left.⁸

However, populist radical right parties elsewhere in Europe have taken different positions in relation to the US. In the 2000s, the Danish People's Party and the Dutch populist right were concerned above all with Islamic influence in Europe and were

⁶ Mudde, C. (2004), 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39(4): pp. 531–563, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

⁷ Mudde, C. (2007), *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Chrysosgelos, A. (2011), *Old Ghosts in New Sheets: European Populist Parties and Foreign Policy*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies research paper, https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/old_ghosts.pdf.

therefore supportive of the US-led ‘war on terror’ – in conformity with the Atlanticist strategic identity of these countries.⁹ In the 2010s, the consequences of the Arab Spring further complicated the positions of right-wing populists in Europe. Some like the RN maintained their anti-interventionist, anti-US and anti-NATO impulses – for example, it opposed the Western intervention in Libya in 2011.¹⁰ The populist right in France and Austria also expressed pro-Assad positions.¹¹

The attitude of right-wing populists in Europe to the US was further complicated by the election of Donald Trump as president. Many right-wing populists saw Trump as an ideological ally. Geert Wilders hailed Trump’s victory in 2016 as the beginning of a ‘patriotic spring’ and Marine Le Pen spoke of a ‘great movement’ around the world.¹² Right-wing populist parties in Denmark and Sweden have also supported following the US under Trump in moving their countries’ embassies in Israel to Jerusalem.¹³ But Trump also presented a dilemma for far-right parties that were historically opposed to American power like the RN. His defeat in 2020 may offer them a way out of the inconsistency of the last four years, as they can revert to their anti-US positions with Joe Biden as president while adopting Trump’s anti-institutional rhetoric concerning the validity of the election and the hostility of the elites against him – and, by extension, them.¹⁴

Parties of the far right have maintained close connections with Russia since the end of the Cold War. These links intensified after 2010 against the background of the euro crisis and Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Much attention has been paid to the way that, during the past decade, many right-wing populist parties have become entangled with Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Parties of the far right have maintained close connections with Russia since the end of the Cold War. These links intensified after 2010 against the background of the euro crisis and Russian aggression in Ukraine. In recent years right-wing populist leaders have visited Moscow and signed cooperation agreements with Putin’s United Russia party and Russia has allegedly facilitated the financing of parties

⁹ Schori Liand, C. (ed.) (2007), *Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right*, London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Front National (2011), ‘Libye : les réserves du Front National confirmées’ [Libya: The reservations of the Front National have been confirmed], 30 March 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110817174734/http://www.frontnational.com/?p=6725>.

¹¹ Reuters (2015), ‘Austrian far-right leader blames U.S., NATO for migrant crisis’, 5 September 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-austria-strache/austrian-far-right-leader-blames-u-s-nato-for-migrant-crisis-idUSKCN0R50HP20150905>.

¹² Dearden, L. (2016), ‘Far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders hails Donald Trump’s victory as ‘Patriotic Spring’ that should inspire Europe’, *The Independent*, 10 November 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/donald-trump-geert-wilders-president-win-response-patriotic-spring-europe-revolution-take-country-back-a7408931.html>; Chrisafis, A. (2016), ‘Marine Le Pen says Trump’s victory marks ‘great movement across world’’, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/marine-le-pen-says-trumps-victory-marks-great-movement-across-world>.

¹³ Times of Israel (2018), ‘Swedish far-right party calls to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital’, 28 September 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/swedish-far-right-party-calls-to-recognize-jerusalem-as-israels-capital>.

¹⁴ Peel, M. (2020), ‘Europe’s Biden-deniers suggest Trump’s political legacy can live on’, *Financial Times*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/3e7d00c1-eee5-4b20-be75-904433b5528a>.

like the RN.¹⁵ In policy terms, populist radical right parties in Western Europe view Russia as a necessary and important participant in European security and in some cases as a counterweight to the US.

The AfD typifies these links with Russia. The Kremlin has cultivated relations with various AfD politicians, invited them to conferences in Russia and used them as ‘electoral observers’.¹⁶ The AfD’s elaborate foreign policy positions also reflect a clear pro-Russian proclivity – in particular, it has called on Germany to recreate Bismarck’s Reinsurance Treaty with Russia.¹⁷ It sees Russia as necessary for a ‘stable peace order in Europe’ and rejects sanctions. (However, the AfD also recognizes the importance of the US and NATO for European security. It supports increased defence spending and criticizes German elites for neglecting Germany’s security.¹⁸)

However, far-right parties elsewhere challenge the assumption that all populist parties in Europe are pro-Russian. In particular, in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, far-right parties can be quite hawkish on Russia. The most obvious example is PiS in Poland – but it is not the only one. For example, the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE), which was a junior partner in the governing coalition from 2019 until early 2021, opposed a border treaty with Russia and described those who supported it as ‘traitors’, played on fears about the infiltration of the Estonian military by ethnic Russians, and advocated increasing defence spending and improving capabilities within NATO (although it also asked for Estonia to equip itself to act unilaterally if allies were not ready to support it).¹⁹

A similar dynamic can be seen in Sweden and Finland. The far-right Sweden Democrats (SD) are also hawkish on Russia and support closer cooperation with NATO – though, like centrist parties, they do not support full membership.²⁰ The picture is a bit more confusing in Finland. Under its leader Timo Soini, who was also foreign minister between 2015 and 2019 in a government with the Centre Party, the far-right Finns Party was broadly Atlanticist. But in 2017 the party went through a leadership change and some members including Soini left to form a new party, Blue Reform. Although more pro-Russian and pro-Chinese voices have now emerged within the Finns Party, new leader Jussi Halla-aho appears to be continuing to oppose Russia and its actions in the Baltic and Ukraine.

¹⁵ Shekhovtsov, A. (2017), ‘Moscow and the far right in France and Austria: From Plan A to Plan B (and back?)’, *Eurozine*, 6 February 2017, <https://www.eurozine.com/from-plan-a-to-plan-b-and-back/>; Atkins, R. and Seddon, M. (2016), ‘Far-right Austrian group strikes deal with Russia’s ruling party’, *Financial Times*, 21 December 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/086c1674-c788-11e6-8f29-9445cac8966f>.

¹⁶ Fiedler, M. and von Salzen, C. (2019), ‘Russlands Spiel mit den Rechten’ [Russia’s Game with the Right], *Der Tagesspiegel*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/einflussnahme-auf-die-afd-russlands-spiel-mit-den-rechten/24196526.html>.

¹⁷ Lachmann, G. (2013), ‘Die AfD will zurück zu Bismarcks Außenpolitik’ [The AfD Wants to Return to Bismarck’s Foreign Policy], *Die Welt*, 10 September 2013, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article119895035/Die-AfD-will-zurueck-zu-Bismarcks-Aussenpolitik.html>.

¹⁸ AfD Fraktion im Bundestag (2019), ‘Gauland: Deutschland wird seiner Rolle in der NATO nicht gerecht’ [Germany isn’t fulfilling its NATO obligations], 4 December 2019, <https://www.afdbundestag.de/gauland-deutschland-wird-seiner-rolle-in-der-nato-nicht-gerecht>.

¹⁹ Postimees (2013), ‘Estonia’s Conservative People’s Party criticizes border treaty with Russia’, 19 May 2013, <https://news.postimees.ee/1240490/estonia-s-conservative-people-s-party-criticizes-border-treaty-with-russia>; ERR (2018), ‘Helme: With enough defence capability, Estonia can ignore allies’ advice’, 31 October 2018, <https://news.err.ee/873385/helme-with-enough-defence-capability-estonia-can-ignore-allies-advice>.

²⁰ News Now Finland (2018), ‘Sweden’s right wing: More Finland, less NATO’, 8 September 2018, <https://newsnowfinland.fi/finland-international/swedens-right-wing-more-finland-less-nato>.

Elsewhere in Europe, the attitudes of right-wing populists towards Russia have been contradictory or unclear. Although Geert Wilders in the Netherlands has made supportive statements of Russia, he is also seen as being pro-American – in particular, he has close links to the Evangelical right in the United States. In 2020, leaked WhatsApp messages suggested that Thierry Baudet, another populist right-wing politician whose new party Forum for Democracy (FvD) was founded on the strengths of his success in 2015 in demanding and winning a referendum against the EU–Ukraine association treaty, had received Russian money, though he denied this.²¹ Nigel Farage controversially once said that he ‘admires’ Vladimir Putin although he disagrees with his actions.²²

Left-wing populists

Up until 2010, the populist left was primarily centred in Northern Europe and included parties like the Socialist Party (SP) in the Netherlands and Die Linke in Germany. But just as the euro crisis led to the emergence of right-wing populist parties in Northern Europe like the AfD, it also led to a surge of left-wing populist parties in Southern Europe. Some were existing parties like SYRIZA in Greece, which was founded in 2004. Others were new like Podemos in Spain, which emerged in 2014 from the anti-austerity Indignados movement. While the populist right defines the ‘people’ both in terms of a vertical opposition against ‘elites’ and a horizontal opposition against ethnic outsiders, the populist left adopts only the core idea of populism as a struggle between the ‘people down here’ and the ‘elites up there’.²³

It is often suggested that left-wing populists take a similar approach to foreign policy as right-wing populists. But although some of the foreign policy positions of the populist left overlap significantly with those of the populist radical right, its thinking differs markedly. While the populist left can be anti-American, the focus of its rhetoric is on US imperialism and militarism. In particular, the populist left has opposed NATO and US-led interventions in the Balkans and the Middle East in the last 25 years.²⁴ But the populist left is not instinctively anti-internationalist; rather, it stands for a different, radical and emancipatory kind of internationalism. It is not opposed to the liberal international order as such (though it opposes elements of the economic order) but rather to the hegemonic position of the US within the order.

In this context of opposition to American power, some left-wing populists in Europe, like some right-wing populists, have long sympathized with Russia, which they see as a counterweight to the US. Perhaps the best example is the Die Linke. It opposes German military deployments abroad and proposes a unilateral withdrawal of Germany from NATO, which it considers to have ‘outlived’ its mission. It aims

²¹ Teffer, P. (2017), ‘Wilders says Russia is “no enemy” ahead of Moscow visit’, *EU Observer*, 23 November 2017, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/139996>; DutchNews.nl (2020), ‘Did Thierry Baudet take Russian money? He says messages were ironic’, 17 April 2020, <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2020/04/did-thierry-baudet-take-russian-money-he-says-messages-were-ironic>.

²² *The Guardian* (2014), ‘Nigel Farage: I admire Vladimir Putin’, 31 March 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/31/farage-i-admire-putin>.

²³ De Cleen, B. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2017), ‘Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism’, *Javnost* 24(4): pp. 301–319, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083>.

²⁴ Chryssogelos (2011), *Old Ghosts in New Sheets: European Populist Parties and Foreign Policy*.

for a ‘collective security system in Europe’ that would include Russia. The party acknowledges human rights abuses and Russian aggression in Ukraine and Syria, but tends to see them as a reaction to Western aggression.²⁵ Die Linke did not condemn Russia for the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, and leading figures like Gregor Gysi have expressed doubts whether the Kremlin was behind it.²⁶

However, while left-wing populist parties are generally sympathetic towards Russia and support some sort of accommodation with it, they are not identical in their approach. For example, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (LFI) party in France, a country with a Gaullist tradition, goes much further than the SP in the Netherlands, a country with a strong Atlanticist orientation. The SP opposes turning NATO into a ‘global aggressive intervention force’ and wants to avoid a ‘new cold war in Europe’ with Russia.²⁷ LFI, on the other hand, calls for France to withdraw from NATO.²⁸ Mélenchon has visited Moscow, defended Russian actions and denounced the ‘anti-Russian and pro-NATO hysteria of the EU’.²⁹

The relationship between a predominant strategic culture and populism can also work the opposite way – that is, instead of being constrained by the state’s strategic orientation, populists can criticize that orientation as part of their opposition to elites.

Yet the relationship between a predominant strategic culture and populism can also work the opposite way – that is, instead of being constrained by the state’s strategic orientation, populists can criticize that orientation as part of their opposition to elites. For example, former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn rejected the UK’s Atlanticism and liberal internationalism. In fact, in opposing NATO and the use of military force against those who ‘transgress the rules of the liberal order’, prioritizing the UN as an inclusive forum bringing in non-Western voices, highlighting global economic injustices, and accepting Russia and China as legitimate interlocutors of a West that in many ways enjoyed unjustified privileges in the international system, he went further than left-wing populists in other Atlanticist countries like the Netherlands.³⁰

²⁵ Fraktion der Linke im Bundestag [Parliamentary Group of Die Linke in the Bundestag] (n.d.), ‘Russland’, thematic paper, <https://www.linksfraktion.de/themen/a-z/detailansicht/russland>.

²⁶ Küstner, K. (2020), ‘Linkspartei streitet über Russlandkurs’ [The Left Feuds over Russian Course], *ARD Tagesschau*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/linke-russlandpolitik-101.html>.

²⁷ See SP foreign policy positions at SP (n.d.), ‘Buitenlandse Zaken’ [Foreign Policy], <https://www.sp.nl/onderwerp/buitenlandse-zaken>.

²⁸ La France Insoumise (2019), ‘70 ans de l’OTAN : il est temps d’en sortir!’ [70 years of NATO : It’s time to get out], 4 April 2019, <https://lafranceinsoumise.fr/2019/04/04/elementor-31323>.

²⁹ Quinault-Maupoil, T. (2019), ‘Jean-Luc Mélenchon dénonce «l’hystérie anti-russe et pro-Otan» de l’Union européenne’ [Jean-Luc Melenchon denounces «the anti-Russian and pro-NATO hysteria» of the EU], *Le Monde*, 11 May 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/jean-luc-melenchon-denonce-l-hysterie-anti-russe-et-pro-otan-de-l-union-europeenne-20190511>.

³⁰ Raines, T. (2019), ‘Foreign policy: It’s all change’, *The World Today*, December 2018–January 2019, pp. 31–32.

Other populists

One of the most successful populist parties in Europe, the Italian M5S, is unusual because it is difficult to classify in left/right terms. The party's name is a reference to the five issues on which it originally focused: public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, the right to internet access, and environmentalism. M5S is driven by a generalized suspicion of official authority and support for instruments of direct and digital democracy. Italy's biggest party since 2013 and the senior coalition partner in power in Rome since 2018, M5S has been described as an 'eclectic' populist party, with mostly left-wing positions on economic issues and an approach to migration based on 'national securitization and international humanitarianism'.³¹

M5S's foreign policy positions have been erratic and difficult to pin down ideologically. On questions of military operations and security policy, M5S was found in its first term in parliament (2013–18) to resemble more a 'left-libertarian populist party rather than a sovereigntist far-right one'.³² It opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 – one of the few populist parties to do so – but also opposed EU sanctions against Moscow. It presented the US, the EU and NATO as oppressive actors who force Italian elites to neglect the national interest. Some of its leading members have contacts with Kremlin-connected actors. Yet the party's leading figure, Luigi di Maio, who has been foreign minister since 2019, has also supported Italy's alliance with the US.³³

Populists in power in Europe

Until recently there were only a few cases of populists in power in Europe. Some populist parties had been in government as junior coalition partners, for example the Lega in Italy from 2001 to 2006 and from 2008 to 2011 and the FPÖ in Austria from 2000 to 2006, but had little opportunity or proved incapable of influencing foreign policy.³⁴ Others led short-lived governments like the coalition led by PiS in Poland between 2005 and 2007. Since 2010, however, populist parties have increasingly achieved positions of power and have been able to make their own foreign policy. This section of the paper examines the four populist parties that have led governments in Europe in recent years – Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, SYRIZA in Greece and M5S in Italy.

³¹ Mosca, L. and Tronconi, T. (2019), 'Beyond left and right: the eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement', *West European Politics*, 42(6): pp. 1258–1283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596691>.

³² Cotichia, F. and Vignoli, V. (2020), 'Populist parties and foreign policy: The case of Italy's Five Star Movement', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(3): pp. 523–541, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120922808>.

³³ Siddi, M. (2019), 'Italy's 'Middle Power' Approach to Russia', *International Spectator*, 54(2): pp. 123–138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1519765>.

³⁴ Verbeek, B. and Zaslove, A. (2015), 'The impact of populist radical right parties on foreign policy: The Northern League as a junior coalition partner in the Berlusconi governments', *European Political Science Review*, 7(4): pp. 525–546, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773914000319>.

Fidesz

Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has been in power since 2010 – longer than any other populist party in Europe. Orbán started as an anti-communist and liberal politician in the 1990s. As a Euro-Atlanticist prime minister in 1998–2002, he led Hungary into NATO and continued negotiations for EU accession, both goals shared by major Hungarian parties at the time.³⁵ But while in opposition in the 2000s, when the Hungarian centre left continued with the EU accession process, Fidesz radicalized – while remaining a member of the European People's Party grouping in the European Parliament. In particular, its Atlanticism became more qualified. As Orbán put it in 2019, 'I belong among those who consider NATO important, but I don't think Hungary's military security can be based on NATO.'³⁶

In other words, Orbán seeks to diversify Hungary's security relationships. He talks frequently about the rise of Eurasia and sees Hungary as being in the centre of a 'Berlin–Moscow–Istanbul triangle'. In particular, he has increased ties with Moscow in areas like energy, by joining Russian pipeline projects, granting a Russian company the contract to build a nuclear power plant, and, most recently, deciding to host the Russian-controlled International Investment Bank.³⁷ But although he has tried to steer NATO towards his ideological objectives, for example by pushing the alliance to designate immigration as a security threat, he has not sought to undermine it.³⁸ Nor has he vetoed the rollover of EU sanctions against Russia. Orbán has also sought to increase connections with China. In 2011 he announced an 'opening to the East', which led to economic projects with China like the Budapest–Belgrade railway.³⁹ Hungary has also allowed Huawei to invest in 5G and became the first EU country to authorize both a Russian and Chinese vaccine against COVID-19.⁴⁰

There has certainly been a change in the ideological orientation of the Hungarian government under Fidesz. Orbán described Trump's election as 'great news' (and appeared equally distraught at a Biden victory) and has strengthened links with other authoritarian or illiberal leaders around the world.⁴¹ But the fundamentals of Hungarian strategy – membership of NATO and a close economic relationship with the EU and above all Germany – remain unaltered. Moreover, most of Orbán's positions, for example on NATO, are shared by some mainstream parties elsewhere in Europe. Orbán presents what is in reality a largely pragmatic and stable foreign policy in ideological terms in order to justify the real change in Hungary: the illiberal transformation of its political system, presented as a precondition for an inescapable and necessary 'turn to Eurasia'.

³⁵ Long, A. (1998), 'NATO membership seen as point of no return for Hungary', *Irish Times*, 7 October 1998, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/nato-membership-seen-as-point-of-no-return-for-hungary-1.201078>.

³⁶ Bayer, L. (2019), 'Orbán: Hungarian military should be able to defend country "from any direction"', *Politico*, 14 February 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/orban-hungarian-military-should-defend-country-from-any-direction-mike-pompeo-russia>.

³⁷ Zalan, E. (2019), 'Hungary's Orbán defends close ties with Russia', *EU Observer*, 31 October 2019, <https://euobserver.com/political/146485>.

³⁸ Kovacs, Z. (2019), 'PM Orbán: NATO focus on migration is a Central European success', *About Hungary*, 4 December 2019, <http://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-nato-focus-on-migration-is-a-central-european-success>.

³⁹ Prager, A. (2019), 'Budapest-Belgrade railway: Orbán flirts with China', *Euractiv*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/interview/budapest-belgrade-railway-orban-flirts-with-china>.

⁴⁰ Thorpe, N. (2021), 'Coronavirus: Hungary first in EU to approve Russian vaccine', *BBC News*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-55747623>.

⁴¹ Reuters (2016), 'Hungarian PM Orbán hails Trump victory as "great news"', 9 November 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-hungary-orban-idUSKBN13417B>.

PiS

The focus of the foreign policy of PiS, which returned to power in 2015 after being in opposition since 2007, is Russia. Its hostility towards Russia, which is informed by the Smolensk air crash in 2010, in which President Lech Kaczyński (the twin brother of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński) died, differentiates it from many right-wing populists in Europe, including Fidesz. But it does not differentiate it significantly from mainstream opinion in Poland. Most PiS positions – for example its opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline; its support for Ukraine and Georgia and for EU sanctions against Moscow; and emphasis on NATO readiness against Russian aggression – are shared by the opposition Civic Platform.⁴²

PiS has always been Atlanticist. For example, during its previous spell in power between 2005 and 2007, it welcomed the Bush administration's plan to deploy missiles in Poland. In his speech in Warsaw in 2017, Trump presented the relationship between Poland and the US as an ideological alliance against Islamism, socialism and forces that threaten national sovereignty, outlining a vision of the West defined not by secular values but by cultural and civilizational traits.⁴³ The Polish government responded with an invitation to the US to deploy more American troops in Poland and build a 'Fort Trump'.⁴⁴ After the election of Joe Biden, the relationship between the two governments may become more awkward, particularly on issues around democracy within Poland, but PiS will remain Atlanticist.⁴⁵

This raises the question of whether PiS should be thought of as 'pro-Western'. The answer depends on how the West is defined. PiS, like Trump, sees the West in cultural or civilizational rather than 'normative' terms.⁴⁶ What changed after PiS came to power is not so much Poland's relationship with the West, but the way it understands the role of the EU within that relationship with the West. PiS is suspicious of Western Europe, and in particular Germany, which it sees as soft on Russia. It also sees Brussels as the propagator of ultra-liberal ideas that undermine traditional Polish values and threaten national sovereignty. In this context, PiS sees the relationship with the US, regardless of who is president, not as a complement to Poland's membership of the EU but as a counterweight to it. In sum, PiS are Atlanticists, but not Euro-Atlanticists.

The strength of PiS's Atlanticism can also be seen in the way its approach to China has evolved. In its first years in power, PiS sought to increase links with China and use the 16+1 initiative, which began when Civic Platform was still in power, to revive the idea of the *intermarium*, which goes back to interwar considerations of Poland's difficult position between Germany and Russia and the need to counter

⁴² Deutsche Welle (2020), 'Nord Stream 2: Poland urges Germany to drop Russia's gas pipeline project', 10 September 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-russia-nord-stream-2-poland/a-54867550>; Rettman, A. (2020), 'Poland calls for Nato 'readiness' on Russia', *EU Observer*, 27 January 2020, <https://euobserver.com/justice/147271>.

⁴³ The White House (2017), 'Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland', 6 July 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-people-poland>.

⁴⁴ Stavridis, J. (2019), 'Poland isn't getting its 'Fort Trump' – yet', *Bloomberg*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-06-13/poland-may-get-its-fort-trump-someday>.

⁴⁵ Baranowski, M. and Prochwicz-Jazowska, M. (2020), 'With a Biden Administration, Poland Expects Continuity in Security and a Return of Democracy', German Marshall Fund, 16 November 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2020/11/16/biden-administration-poland-expects-continuity-security-and-return-democracy>.

⁴⁶ On different concepts of the West, see Kundnani, H. and Kuz, M. (2020), 'The Weimar Triangle and the West', Stiftung Genshagen, September 2020, pp. 4–6, http://www.stiftung-genshagen.de/uploads/media/Genshagener_Papier_No_25.pdf.

it through a regional alliance from the Baltic to the Black Sea. This thinking informed the Three Seas Initiative, which President Duda promoted. But as Washington has reframed its foreign policy around the idea of ‘strategic competition’ with China, Poland also distanced itself from China. Prime Minister Morawiecki has described China as a challenge to NATO and the West and the government has taken a tough approach on Chinese involvement in 5G networks.⁴⁷

SYRIZA

SYRIZA is the only example of a left-wing populist party that has led a government in Europe. It was for many years a small party of the reformed left, typically struggling to enter parliament in elections and historically split between a radical leftist and a moderate reformist wing. After 2004 the radical wing took control of the party. Support for SYRIZA exploded with the euro crisis in 2010 and it came to power in 2015 in a coalition with the nationalist Independent Greeks (ANEL), which lasted for four years. SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras articulated a typical left-wing populist message against EU-imposed austerity.

SYRIZA is the only example of a left-wing populist party that has led a government in Europe.

As SYRIZA radicalized, it had also become more explicitly anti-American and anti-Atlanticist. Shortly after the coalition was formed, the then Greek foreign minister, Nikos Kotzias, threatened to block EU sanctions against Russia unless the EU made concessions on renegotiating Greek debt.⁴⁸ In April 2015, Tsipras made a high-profile visit to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin and signed economic agreements that, although they did not meet Greece’s financial needs, highlighted to its allies its alternative geopolitical options if renegotiation with the EU failed.⁴⁹ SYRIZA also continued attempts by previous Greek governments to seek Chinese and Russian investment – in 2016, the Chinese company COSCO was allowed to take a majority stake in the Piraeus port authority.

When SYRIZA came to power, fears that a collision with the EU would result in Greece’s de-alignment from the West were rife. But, in fact, the struggle against austerity created new dynamics. Tsipras saw President Barack Obama as an ally in the fight against Brussels and Berlin and toned down the party’s anti-Americanism. It dropped its previous support for withdrawal from NATO, which it had advocated until the 2012 elections. In the end, Greece did not block sanctions against Russia – and although radical plans about turning to China, Iran or Venezuela were considered by SYRIZA’s far-left wing, its members were

⁴⁷ Sarek, L. (2019), ‘The “16+1” Initiative and Poland’s Disengagement from China’, The Jamestown Foundation, 15 February 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-161-initiative-and-polands-disengagement-from-china>; Cerulus, L. and Kayali, L. (2020), ‘Poland wants to go beyond EU on 5G security, says minister’, *Politico*, 3 February 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-wants-to-go-beyond-5g-security-toolbox-restrictions>.

⁴⁸ Traynor, I. (2015), ‘Greece delays EU agreement on Russia sanctions’, *The Guardian*, 29 January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/29/greece-delays-eu-agreement-russia-sanctions>.

⁴⁹ Walker, S. (2015), ‘Alexis Tsipras in Moscow asks Europe to end sanctions against Russia’, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/08/alexis-tsipras-in-moscow-asks-europe-to-end-sanctions-against-russia>.

jettisoned from the party once Tsipras accepted a new bailout in July 2015. Though Tsipras continued to welcome Chinese investment, the coalition steadily realigned with the European mainstream.⁵⁰

Relations with Russia also worsened in the course of the government's term. After Tsipras accepted a negotiated solution to the Macedonia name issue in 2018 that would open the way for North Macedonia to enter NATO, Moscow's opposition to NATO enlargement in the Balkans put it at loggerheads with Greece. The Tsipras government even accused Russia of spying.⁵¹ The resolution of the Macedonia issue, celebrated in the presence of European commissioners and strongly supported by Brussels, Berlin and Washington, showcased Tsipras's transition to an almost fully mainstream international foreign policy profile in which SYRIZA's anti-Americanism and even Euroscepticism were muted if not completely jettisoned.

M5S

The M5S–Lega coalition that entered power in Rome in 2018 with Giuseppe Conte as prime minister resembled the SYRIZA–ANEL government in Greece in that it brought together two parties that had different ideological profiles but were united by their populist opposition to national and European elites. While the coalition was marred from the beginning by disagreements between the two parties, leading eventually to its dissolution in 2019, it was kept together for a year by its antagonistic attitude towards the EU. The Lega's radical right imprint was seen in Lega leader Matteo Salvini's overtures towards Orban and Kaczynski and in a hardening of Italy's immigration policy.

However, the wider foreign policy of the M5S–Lega coalition exhibited more continuity than change. Both parties had spoken out loudly against EU sanctions on Russia before entering government, but once in power made no moves to block them and followed the EU line on new tensions with Russia such as in response to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal.⁵² In part, this limited change in foreign policy was because the foreign minister, Enzo Milanese, was a technocrat who had been Europe minister under previous centre-left governments. It was also in part because of the policy differences between the M5S and the Lega. For example, when the M5S defence minister called for a review of the presence of Italian troops from Afghanistan in 2019, the idea was immediately shot down by the foreign ministry and the Lega.⁵³

⁵⁰ Horowitz, J. and Alderman, L. (2017), 'Chastised by E.U., a resentful Greece embraces China's cash and interests', *New York Times*, 26 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/26/world/europe/greece-china-piraeus-alexis-tsipras.html>.

⁵¹ Smith, H. (2018), 'Greece accuses Russia of bribery and meddling in its affairs', *The Guardian*, 11 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/11/greece-accuses-russia-bribery-meddling-macedonia-deal>.

⁵² Nelli Feroci, F. (2019), *La politica estera del Governo giallo-verde* [The Foreign Policy of the Yellow-Green Government], Istituto Affari Internazionali research paper, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1904.pdf>.

⁵³ Rosini, G. (2019), 'Afghanistan, fonti Difesa: "Entro un anno via truppe italiane". Moavero: "Apprendo ora". Lega: "Nessuna decisione" [Afghanistan, Defence sources: "Within a Year Italian Troops Will be Gone". Moavero: 'I'm only learning this now.' Lega: 'No decision']', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 28 January 2019, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/01/28/afghanistan-entro-un-anno-ritiro-del-contingente-italiano-moavero-lo-apprendo-ora-trenta-non-ne-ha-parlato-con-me/4930395>. The withdrawal of Italian troops was ultimately confirmed in June 2020 for the first half of 2021, in accordance with NATO policy.

The one major foreign policy initiative of the populist coalition in Rome was its much-discussed decision to become a partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2019 – the first European country to do so. However, this decision was not warmly welcomed by Matteo Salvini, who, like some other right-wing populists such as Marine Le Pen, has a negative view of China as an unfair economic competitor. Salvini had in the past warned of China 'colonizing' Italian markets and did not meet Xi or attend the dinner in his honour in Rome in April 2019.⁵⁴ In any case, the decision to join China's Belt and Road Initiative should be understood as an economically driven decision rather than the harbinger of strategic realignment of Italy away from the West.

After the coalition collapsed and the Lega went into opposition in 2019, M5S stayed in government in a new coalition with the centre-left Democratic Party (PD). Conte stayed on as prime minister, while M5S leader Luigi di Maio became foreign minister and the defence ministry passed from M5S to the PD. This new coalition has moved back towards the European mainstream in a range of policy areas, particularly on immigration. To the extent that the M5S–Lega coalition's foreign policy was marked more by a change of tone than of substance, the new government continues implementing the same policies while presenting the EU and liberal internationalism in a more positive light.

The limited impact of populists on foreign policy

In addition to these four examples of populists leading governments, populist parties have also been junior coalition partners in a number of other governments in Europe in recent years. In Austria, for example, a coalition government between the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right FPÖ, in 2017–19, created worries of a more confrontational foreign policy towards the EU and a closer alignment with Russia. Austria became the focus of international attention when the FPÖ-appointed foreign minister, Karin Kneissl, was pictured dancing with Vladimir Putin at her wedding in Austria in 2019. Yet in practice FPÖ's participation in government affected the patterns of Austria's foreign policy very little.⁵⁵

In Finland, the Finns Party was part of a centre-right coalition government between 2015 and 2019 in which it held the posts of both foreign and defence ministers. Yet the changes to the Finnish foreign and security policy were very modest. As foreign minister, Timo Soini tried to strengthen the Atlanticist dimension in Finnish foreign policy, but otherwise the changes were negligible. As defence minister, Jussi Niinistö sought closer military cooperation with NATO and in particular with Sweden, the UK and the US – to a large extent a continuation of trends in Finnish foreign policy that had been underway since the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

In Spain, Podemos became the junior partner in a coalition with the socialists in early 2020, but here too there are few signs of a significant shift in the country's foreign policy. The one change may be that Podemos' participation in the government has moderated Spain's support to oppositionist Juan Guaidó in Venezuela, which

⁵⁴ Miner, L. and Abellan-Matamoros, C. (2019), 'China's Belt and Road plan: Why did Italy sign it and why is Brussels worried?', *Euronews*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/03/24/china-and-italy-sign-silk-road-project>.
⁵⁵ Matzner, S. (2019), 'The foreign policy of the Austrian Freedom Party: Strategy or blunders?', paper presented at Sciences Po workshop on populism and European foreign policy, December 2019.

socialist prime minister Pedro Sanchez had provided in 2019, since Podemos are close to the populist Maduro regime. In a tour of Europe in January 2020, Guaido met with many EU leaders and Boris Johnson, but was received by Spain's foreign minister, rather than Sanchez, in Madrid.⁵⁶

These examples show that populism has had only a limited impact on foreign policy in terms of departure from previously established patterns. Even where populists adopt new orientations, like Orban's rapprochement with Russia and China, they do so alongside existing commitments like NATO and EU membership. In other cases, like Greece in 2015, experiments in populist reorientation of foreign policy are quickly reined in by the realities of the international system. Despite fears about a populist takeover of foreign policy, the real impact of populist parties in this area is small.

A typology of populist foreign policy

If populists are heterogenous and do not enact radical changes when they are in power, is there anything distinctive about populist foreign policy at all? One common thread is the way that populist parties in Europe, which are nearly all Eurosceptic, seek extra-European connections as ways to counterbalance the EU. But they do so in different ways: some populist parties on the right and left see Russia as a useful ally against the dominance of the EU and the US; others like SYRIZA turned to China and Russia and the US for support in their negotiations with the eurozone; and Atlanticist populists like PiS in Poland seek to strengthen links with the US in pursuit of security and as an alternative to European integration.

It is often claimed, or simply assumed, that populists in Europe are pro-Russian, but, as this paper has shown, that generalization is too simple – right-wing populists in Scandinavia and Central and Eastern Europe can be even more hawkish on Russia than mainstream parties. Many populists do support the idea of a multipolar world, albeit for different reasons – the populist right due to its emphasis on national sovereignty, the populist left due to its critique of American power and neoliberalism. Moreover, whereas some right-wing populists seem to oppose the West as such, others seem to want to reinvent it along cultural or civilizational lines – what has been called the 'alt-West'.⁵⁷

On other issues like China, it is difficult to see any kind of pattern in how populist figures, movements and parties in Europe approach foreign policy. Populist parties of the right in Western Europe like the RN in France and the Lega in Italy tend to view China as an unfair economic competitor that contributes to the deindustrialization of these countries. Scandinavian right-wing populists have also expressed strong concerns about China in recent years. But some populists in Central and Eastern

⁵⁶ Castro, B. (2020), 'Venezuela: Spain's growing ambiguity about Juan Guaido', *Euronews*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/23/venezuela-spain-s-growing-ambiguity-about-juan-guaido>.

⁵⁷ Kundnani and Kuz (2020), 'The Weimar Triangle and the West', p. 19.

Europe like Fidesz welcome Chinese investment and influence. Yet other populist parties see China in more geopolitical terms. For example, Die Linke has called on Germany not to follow the US in ‘antagonizing’ Beijing.⁵⁸

Nor are all populists in Europe opposed to the liberal international order. The populist left may think the liberal economic order is ‘rigged’ – a view they share with many serious analysts including theorists of the liberal international order.⁵⁹ At times this can push the populist left close to the populist right’s emphasis on sovereignty, though they usually emphasize popular rather than national sovereignty. Yet the populist left’s ‘thick’ ideology also contains elements that are understood as ‘liberal’ – in particular, left-wing populists are generally internationalists. Many left-wing populists do not oppose the liberal international order so much as want to reform it – in particular its ‘neoliberal’ economic element.

The populist left may think the liberal economic order is ‘rigged’. At times this can push the populist left close to the populist right’s emphasis on sovereignty, though they usually emphasize popular rather national sovereignty.

However, although it is not possible to generalize about the way *all* populists in Europe approach foreign policy, it is nevertheless possible to identify several types. On foreign policy issues, populist parties in Europe differ above all in two ways. First, they differ in ideological terms. Their ‘thick’ ideologies – whether on the left or the right – substantially influence their approaches to foreign policy. Second, populist approaches to foreign policy differ in terms of the dominant strategic culture of the state they operate in. Based on these two fault lines, we can identify three different types of populist foreign policy approaches in Europe: Atlanticist nationalists and continental nationalists on the right and anti-imperialist internationalists on the left (see Table 1).

Continental nationalists

Right-wing populists in Central and Southern Europe – like Fidesz, RN, La Lega, the FPÖ and the AfD – can be thought of as continental nationalists. They are critical of NATO and Western militarism, using rhetoric that sometimes resembles that of the left, and tend to be pro-Russian. However, they were also pro-Trump, who they saw as a defender of national sovereignty. To the extent that they adopted a pro-American profile, it was largely a reflection of the ideology of the previous US government – and thus we should expect them to revert to anti-Americanism under Joe Biden. In other words, their Atlanticism depends on the ideology of who

⁵⁸ Die Linke Fraktion im Bundestag (2020), ‘Nein zu einem Wirtschaftskrieg gegen China’ [No to an Economic War with China], 28 May 2020, <https://www.linksfraktion.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/detail/nein-zu-einem-wirtschaftskrieg-gegen-china>.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Colgan, J. and Keohane, R. (2017), ‘The liberal order is rigged: Fix it now or watch it wither’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-04-17/liberal-order-rigged>.

holds power in Washington. They have no shared position on China: some like Fidesz are open to a vision of Eurasian integration as a sovereigntist alternative to Euro-Atlanticism but others are hostile to China.

Atlanticist nationalists

Right-wing populists in European states with dominant Atlanticist security traditions – like PiS in Poland, UKIP in the UK and Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands – can be thought of as Atlanticist nationalists. Although they were particularly supportive of the US under Trump, who they saw as reinventing the West along cultural or civilizational lines, their support pre-dates him. In other words, they are principled rather than opportunist Atlanticists. (A partial exception here may be Nigel Farage’s opposition to Joe Biden’s election in the US, although this is attributable to his personal connection to Donald Trump rather than any kind of ideological anti-Americanism.⁶⁰) There are some differences between them on Russia – right-wing populists in the Netherlands and the UK are equivocal about Russia in comparison to PiS in Poland – but in general Atlanticist nationalists are much more hawkish on Russia than continental nationalists. They also share a hostile attitude to China.

Anti-imperialist internationalists

Left-wing populists in Europe – like Die Linke in Germany, Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece – can be seen as anti-imperialist internationalists. They distrust NATO, military interventions and the US, although their attitude to the US is also influenced by who holds power in Washington and generally deteriorates under Republican presidents. Die Linke may be the most consistently anti-Atlanticist, although it has never been tested in government, as opposed to SYRIZA, whose positions changed substantially over its years in power. Anti-imperialist internationalists are generally sympathetic to Russia, though sometimes critical of its human rights abuses, but they differ on China.

Table 1. Populist approaches to foreign policy in Europe

	Left	Right
Atlanticist	–	Atlanticist nationalists UKIP, PiS, EKRE, FvD (Baudet), PVV (Wilders), SD
Anti-Atlanticist	Anti-imperialist internationalists Momentum (Corbyn), SYRIZA, Podemos, La France Insoumise (Melenchon), Die Linke	Continental nationalists Fidesz, RN, Lega, FPÖ, AfD, Finns

Source: Compiled by the author.

⁶⁰ Farage, N. (2020), ‘Joe Biden is no friend of Britain’, *The Telegraph*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/11/11/joe-biden-no-friend-britain>.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the perception of populism as a mortal danger to the international liberal order needs to be qualified, at least with respect to the foreign policy of European populists. There is much heterogeneity among populists in Europe – even while in opposition, when one would expect them to have more space to adopt ideological readings of foreign policy. Populists seem to be more conditioned by the strategic culture of their respective country. One would expect populists to oppose their dominant strategic culture as something designed by elites. This, however, seemed to be truer for populists of the left than those of the right. But when they come to power, both left-wing and right-wing populists rarely implement foreign policies that are substantially different from those of non-populists.

Although populists may not pursue substantially different foreign policies, they may present them somewhat differently – in particular, as being against the international system – than centrists who are more adept at using the language of liberal internationalism while promoting national goals. Thus the effect of populism is seen more in terms of different discourses, styles and emphases than actual policy change. The ‘thinness’ of populism as an ideology means that its actual impact on policy is rather small. In fact, at least in foreign policy, it may be better to see populism as a discourse rather than an ideology – a new way of *talking about* foreign policy while *doing* largely the same things.

To the extent that populists do threaten the liberal international order, they do so in different ways. Continental nationalists are certainly opposed to the West as a strategic project. In particular, they are sceptical of NATO, which is sometimes seen as one of the key institutions of the liberal international order – and governments led or influenced by continental nationalists will be difficult alliance partners. Atlanticist nationalists, on the other hand, support the idea of the West but want to reinvent it along cultural or civilizational lines. They are supportive of NATO and of other international institutions that they see as a bulwark against non-Western powers and in particular China. Meanwhile, anti-imperialist internationalists do not so much oppose the liberal international order as seek to reform it – particularly its economic element.

The obsessive focus on populism distracts from the real source of disruption in European foreign policy debates: differences between the national interests of European countries and the way they have been exacerbated by the crises within Europe and wider shifts in international politics. In this respect, populism is more of a symptom than a cause – a symptom of structural forces that have been accentuating national divides in Europe for almost a decade now. In other words, if there is a crisis of the liberal international order, populists are not to blame. Populism is simply the face of big systemic changes in international politics that are putting national interests and the liberal international order at odds with each other.

About the author

Angelos Chrysogelos is an associate fellow of the Europe Programme at Chatham House. He is assistant professor in politics at the School of Social Sciences of London Metropolitan University, and Jean Monnet Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute. He has held positions at LSE, Harvard and SAIS Johns Hopkins. He is the author of *Party Systems and Foreign Policy Change in Liberal Democracies* (Routledge, 2021).

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the comments and support of Hans Kundnani that helped to significantly improve the paper. Helpful suggestions were also made by Hiski Haukkala, Pepijn Bergsen and two anonymous reviewers. Any errors or omissions are the author's.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder. Please direct all enquiries to the publishers.

Chatham House does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

Copyright © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021

Cover image: Leader of Rassemblement National (RN) Marine Le Pen, leader of Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) Tomio Okamura, leader of Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) Geert Wilders and leader of Bulgarian 'Volya' party Veselin Mareski during a meeting of populist far-right party leaders in Wenceslas Square on 25 April 2019 in Prague, Czech Republic.

Photo credit: Copyright © Gabriel Kuchta/Stringer/Getty Images

ISBN 978 1 78413 467 9

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.
designbysoapbox.com

Independent thinking since 1920



**The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House**

10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T +44 (0)20 7957 5700

contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223