Conflict of Interest: Justifying International Cooperation in Populist Discourse

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Abstract

Contrary to the stereotypical assumption that the foreign policy of populists is geared towards conflict, much of the literature in recent years has converged on the understanding that populism results in a complex and often seemingly incoherent mix of cooperation and confrontation. Populist leaders often adopt a confrontational stance towards other states and international institutions, yet they are also capable of striking deals, defusing tensions and reconciling with multilateral settings. This inconsistency is due to a variety of factors like geopolitical and economic pressures or the thick-ideological proclivities of populists. But in this article, we are interested in how populists reconcile the contradictory trend to antagonize internationally but end up striking deals. Drawing on the literature on populist discourses and a view of foreign policy as political management of state-society relations, we argue that this reconciliation takes place primarily at a discursive level, as populists deploy a discourse of cooperation that remains consistent with the binary and Manichean logic of populism. We identify three populist discursive strategies of justifying cooperation after conflict: elite-splitting; issue-bundling and audience-hopping. We demonstrate our argument by comparing two cases of populist compromising with the EU following a protracted period of confrontation: Greece's acceptance of a third bailout from the Eurozone under Alexis Tsipras in 2015; and Britain's signing of a final Brexit deal under Boris Johnson in 2020.

Introduction

The foreign policies of populist governments are often assumed to be disruptive, confrontational, and sceptical of international cooperation. Yet recent research has shown that populists are not always opposed to engagement with international institutions, multilateral agreements, or cooperative diplomacy. In practice, populist leaders often oscillate between antagonism and cooperation, combining confrontational rhetoric with pragmatic compromises, sometimes in close succession. This observation raises a puzzle: how do populists justify international cooperation without undermining their appeal, which rests on a binary opposition

between a virtuous 'people' and a corrupt 'elite' that may have played out previously in their foreign policy posturing?

We focus on the discursive strategies populist leaders use to legitimate acts of international cooperation after conflict. We argue that, rather than abandoning their populist logic when engaging internationally, populists adapt it through specific discursive strategies. Drawing on a discursive understanding of populism, influenced by the work of Ernesto Laclau, we show that populist discourse provides resources to reframe cooperation in ways that preserve — and sometimes even intensify — the foundational antagonism between people and elites. Our contribution lies in identifying and theorizing three main discursive strategies—elite-splitting, issue-bundling, and audience-hopping—which populists deploy to justify international compromises while maintaining their populist credentials.

In terms of theory, we build a bridge between discursive approaches to populism and critical foreign policy analysis, emphasizing the centrality of domestic political dynamics in shaping populist foreign engagement. We conceptualize populist foreign policy not primarily as a set of substantive ideological positions, but as one mode of articulation that seeks to constantly renew the people/elite antagonism across different arenas (Stavrakakis et al. 2018; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Lacatus et al. 2023). This perspective helps explain the apparent inconsistency in populist foreign policies: while their actions may vary, the logic of legitimation remains remarkably consistent. This in turn opens further avenues to studying the intersections of populism, political communication and (de)legitimation (Goddard and Krebs 2015; Hooghe et al. 2019; Spandler and Söderbaum 2023; Stanko 2025; Wajner 2022).

Empirically, we substantiate our argument through two case studies of populist cooperation after a protracted period of confrontation/conflict: Greece's acceptance of a third Eurozone bailout under the SYRIZA government of Alexis Tsipras, and Britain's negotiation of a Brexit withdrawal agreement under Boris Johnson. These cases span different ideological orientations (left- and right-wing populism), domestic contexts, and structural constraints, yet both illustrate how populists managed to justify major international agreements without abandoning their populist identity. In these cases, we demonstrate how the discursive strategies we identify allow populists to transform potentially delegitimizing acts of compromise into (manipulative) affirmations of their commitment to the 'people.' By foregrounding discursive strategies, this article advances a more systematic understanding of populist foreign policy behaviour and

offers insights into the mechanisms of populist governance under international interdependence.

Justifying Populist Foreign Policy

Until recently, scholars of international relations (IR) had a relatively straightforward view of how populists engage with the international order. Drawing on the so-called ideational approach (see most recently Hawkins et al. 2019), early foreign policy scholarship argued that populism could be identified with such foreign policy traits as opposition to multilateralism, economic protectionism, anti-Americanism and support for Putin's Russia, Euroscepticism and a generally belligerent posture in international affairs (Chryssogelos 2011; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Populists claim to represent those disillusioned with globalization, resentful of unaccountable 'globalist' elites and the liberal establishment, and frustrated with their failed policies. In particular, they blame national decline and pervasive crises on, variously, multilateralism (Müller 2017), trade liberalization and open borders (Caiani and Graziano 2019; Moffitt 2016), as well as international law and human rights (Voeten 2020). In response, populists present themselves as saviours, advocating for a reconfiguration of domestic as well as international politics (Maher et al. 2022). Their approach to foreign policy is often personalist with the populist leader as the authentic voice of the 'true people' in international as well as domestic politics (Destradi and Plagemann 2019; Lacatus and Meibauer 2022).

Populist leaders were widely expected to translate their ideas into action once in power—and in some cases, they have. This could manifest in various ways, such as asserting greater national control over politics, reducing international solidarity and cooperation, or even withdrawing from international organizations and alliances (Chryssogelos 2020; Löfflmann 2022). At the very least, populist incumbents were expected to conduct themselves differently due to their distinctive political style, producing a more defiant and transgressive foreign policy (Lacatus et al. 2023; Wojczewski 2023).

Recent scholarship has done much to complicate this view however. It is not so much that populist foreign policy does not contain a certain element of transgression and break with established modes of foreign policy making and diplomacy (Cadier 2021; Cornut et al. 2022; Lequesne 2021). It is rather that patterns of antagonism, protectionism and retrenchment can coincide with processes of cooperation, engagement with international issues and even embrace of elements of the architecture of the international order (Spandler and Söderbaum 2025).

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Moreover, populists of very similar ideological pedigree may well choose quite antithetical external policies, as for example in the area of trade (Brusenbauch-Meislová and Chryssogelos 2024). Similarly, the idea that populists bring a distinct and consistently more confrontational style to international politics is not borne out (Wajner 2022, 673). Recent studies instead suggest that populist governments do not systematically adopt more aggressive foreign policy rhetoric (Destradi et al. 2023). Just as mainstream politicians, then, populist leaders do not consistently adhere to their own stated ideas in foreign policy, and show considerable willingness to compromise in international politics.

We are here concerned not so much with the *reasons* for this willingness, which are likely the product of a combination of structural, institutional and contextual factors, some idiosyncratic to the individual leaders and movements in question (Cadier 2024; Fouquet 2024; Wajner 2025). Rather, we focus on its *consequences* for (domestic) populist mobilization and discursive strategy. Incumbents are evaluated against their electoral promises and consistency with previously stated positions, including with regards to their foreign policy performance (Sorek et al. 2018; Jerit 2004). How, then, (if at all) do populists reconcile their antagonistic rhetoric with the need for international cooperation? How do they justify 'cooperating with the enemy', especially after periods of highly confrontational and aggressive posturing?

Extensive literature covers how politicians seek to legitimate, sell, justify or otherwise persuade other elites and domestic audiences of their foreign policies, including from the perspectives of strategic communication (Aldrich et al. 2006; Western 2005; Meibauer 2020; Krebs and Jackson 2007). In addition to deliberative and persuasive approaches, leaders can also lie, evade, divert attention, rhetorically coerce or otherwise manipulate political discourses in order to gain electoral advantage; though there are limits to what they can get away with (Holland and Aaronson 2014; Condor et al. 2013). In that sense, populist leaders are not dissimilar from other politicians faced with likely audience costs should they produce foreign policies that break electoral promises.

However, populists face a particular conundrum when they have to justify a foreign policy of cooperation. Mainstream politics price in the need for compromise: not everyone can get exactly what they said they wanted, especially in international politics. Populist politics, however, is in essence Manichean. A compromise vis-a-vis the liberal international order and the global elites sustaining it is by populist definition a compromise with a corrupt enemy that perpetuates violations of popular sovereignty (Fouquet 2024). Populists are thus particularly

hard-pressed to justify these compromises. Extant literature has not systematically explored the discursive strategies that enable populists to justify and sell such cooperation to their domestic audiences that depart from their previous promises, stances or policies.

A discourse-strategic approach

In tackling this question, this article leans on a discursive understanding of populism. The discursive turn can reconcile the reality of a highly diverse and often contradictory foreign policy by populists, with the need to identify a distinct and consistent character of populist foreign policy. It may sacrifice methodological parsimony like the one found in other parts of the literature on parties, ideologies and foreign policy (for a comprehensive overview see Wagner 2020). But it is more suitable for understanding foreign policy informed by an inherently malleable and 'thin' phenomenon as populism. Most significantly, the discursive approach is useful because it allows to form a bridge between two literatures – populism studies and foreign policy analysis – by focusing on their discursive approaches respectively.

The discursive approach in the study of populism, associated primarily with the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005), understands populism as a discourse that divides the political and social field in two irreconcilable camps, the 'people' and the system/power/elites. The distinction of the discursive move of populism is that it constructs a political identity around the signifier of the 'people', assembling multiple frustrated social demands and excluded groups united by their claim that *they* are the real subjects of politics. On this basis, populism is characterized chiefly by the centrality of this signifier of the 'people', its binary/divisive nature, and its antagonistic character. Crucially, the discursive approach puts at the epicentre of populism the notion of the 'people', which is a significant difference from the mainstream ideational approach that sees populism as an appendage to 'thick' ideologies from where substantial policy positions flow (Stavrakakis et al. 2017).

This discursive approach in populism studies has its equivalent in discursive, critical and post-structural approaches in the field of foreign policy analysis. In recent years these approaches have been used to link populism with such concepts as ontological (in)security (Löfflmann 2024), sovereign imaginaries (Jenne 2021) and securitization (Wojczewski 2020). Despite their different theoretical and empirical foci, these works point to some common characteristics of populism in foreign policy understood in discursive terms. The main one is that populist foreign policy discourses are formulated and used overwhelmingly with a view at domestic objectives

(Cadier 2024; Destradi et al. 2022). Or, put differently, foreign policy is a field where the people/elite polarity can be constantly reproduced and renewed, allowing even populist leaders who are safely entrenched in power to target foreign 'elites' or to update the sense of their followers that they constitute a downtrodden 'people'. This means that leaders will try to communicate their foreign policy ideas, narratives, justifications etc. strategically (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Lacatus and Meibauer 2021).

This is not necessarily to say that populists formulate their foreign policies exclusively with an eye at domestic needs, unresponsive to external pressures or unconscious of conventionally understood 'interests' in the international arena. If anything, they can be highly alert to stimuli such as international structural shifts (as per IR realism) or the preferences of influential domestic groups (as per liberalism). What it does mean however is that populist foreign policy distinctly articulates its objectives and actions in terms of the people/elite opposition, reinforcing binary dynamics of political competition at home, and mobilizing a unified identity of the 'people'.

That said, and while populism need not be understood necessarily as a force of irrationality in foreign policy, the logic of populist articulation should more often than not lead to foreign policies that at least sometimes diverge from elite notions of the 'national interest'. Indeed, another characteristic of populist foreign policy-as-discourse is that, on some emblematic foreign policy issues, populists follow policies that are detrimental to national interests according to conventional cost/benefit analyses (Chryssogelos 2024, 193–94). The question here however is, first, whether such policies persist and populists do not eventually succumb to the adverse consequences of their actions; and second, whether such policies make sense (at least for a while) if one appreciates that for populists the main referent of 'interests' is not the state or society as a whole, but a partial political identity of the 'people'.

Populist articulation, a binary mindset, primacy of domestic political considerations, and oscillation between defiance in the face of international costs and rapid re-adjustment in the face of adversity can then be said to form the main features of populist foreign policy-as-discourse. The next question becomes if such a foreign policy type necessarily cues confrontation. In her analysis of populist foreign policy for example, Erin Jenne (2021) argues that generally populism cues foreign policies that are aggressive and revisionist. But again, the point here is not to associate populist foreign policy with a specific trend or substantial policy. Understanding populist foreign policy as discourse leaves perfectly open the possibility that

populists pursue cooperative foreign policies just as much as confrontational ones (Destradi and Vüllers 2024; Söderbaum et al. 2021; van der Veer and Meibauer 2024).

The apparent problem is that the core features of populism-as-discourse cannot be easily envisaged to legitimize cooperative foreign policies. As the populist logic is inherently binary and antagonistic, many IR scholars instinctively see populism as a force of belligerence, foreign policy polarization or international fragmentation (e.g. Patman 2019). Populist discourses must always make reference to a 'people' that is constantly mobilized in opposition to some elite. Especially for entrenched populist governments, the expectation is that foreign policy offers alternative targets of popular opposition as, domestically, these populists have become the new 'system'. Finally, the populist logic is to coalesce a variety of popular frustrations and unfulfilled demands in a 'chain of equivalence'. International deals and negotiations by definition entail trade-offs and compromises that can alienate groups belonging to this chain of equivalence, which is often held together by antagonism towards external actors anyways. In light of this, and given that populists often start off in their foreign policy with a confrontational stance towards some adversaries, can cooperation ever be legitimated in populist terms?

Discursive strategies of justification

We argue here that the nature and structure of populist discourse make it possible for populists to continue pursuing their main objectives – domestic mobilization, perpetuation of a binary view of the world – while engaging in cooperative foreign policies like treaty-making, joining international institutions and burden-sharing, departing from previous posturing or actions. We are thus primarily interested in their justificatory discursive strategies. By discursive strategy, we mean 'the calculated, strategic interplay of linguistic, rhetorical, and performative choices that a politician puts forth to advance their own political interests' (Lacatus and Meibauer 2025, 255). We identify three main discursive-strategic mechanisms by which populist leaders justify cooperative behaviour:

1. *Elite-splitting*: Populism is by definition used against an elite, political system or official 'power' in Laclau's language. The potency of populism is that it offers an integrated view of the world as divided between the 'people' and 'power', and this straddles the borders of the domestic and the international. Tellingly, populists have been able to construct transnational dimensions of the 'people' (de Cleen 2017) against supranational and global 'elites' like international and technocratic institutions or hegemonic powers like the USA

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(Dodson and Dorraj 2008; van der Veer and Meibauer 2024). While they do this however, most populist movements are conditioned by the borders of a national political arena where their mobilized 'people' resides. The discursive boundaries of populism are malleable, as shifting understandings of the 'people' can over time include or exclude a rotating cast of groups and actors (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). While this is difficult to achieve domestically in a credible way, it is easier to shift the dividing line of the people/elite polarity externally. Elite-splitting is the act by which some international actors, formerly considered part of a unified front together with domestic elites against the people, are dissociated from domestic elites and presented as indifferent, neutral or even new allies of the 'people'. Agreement with such reconciled (if not outright 'virtuous') elites can be legitimized if it helps to perpetuate the struggle against domestic elites that more directly threaten the people.

2. *Issue-bundling*: For Laclau, populism follows the 'logic of equivalence', which dictates the bundling of multiple frustrated demands through the very fact of them being unaddressed (Arditi 2010). This contrasts with the 'logic of difference' used by mainstream and technocratic forces aiming to isolate and treat each political demand separately, thus avoiding its politicization. This should make populists averse to international treaties that entail compromises, trade-offs and distribution of costs and benefits between different constituencies – indeed, international diplomacy can be seen as an exemplary type of the 'logic of difference' (on tensions between populism and diplomacy: Lequesne 2021). However, international deal-making can be reconciled with the logic of equivalence in different ways. By bundling multiple dimensions of a state's external relations and touching upon various domestic problems and crises all at once, international deals can be presented in an equivalent manner as omnibus solutions to all (or at least the core) frustrations of the 'people', especially if struck in a theatrical way by the leaders themselves, rather than negotiated by faceless diplomats (Eiran et al. 2025). In the same vein, they can be sold as results of popular strength, through which other states were 'forced' into concessions. Finally, downplaying their technical nature and fine print, they can be narrated as 'silver bullets': big, break-through mega-deals that remedy a number of frustrations and deficits that had led to the emergence of populism in the first place (on this strategy and how it can be used also by non-populist actors, see: Chryssogelos and Martill 2021). Just like a chain of equivalence had given rise to populism, an international agreement can become emblematic of populist leaders solving

multiple problems all at once, while also 'performing' popular sovereignty on the international stage.

3. *Audience-hopping*: Audience-hopping – using different discourses and emphasizing different aspects of international cooperation towards different audiences – is not exclusive to populists, but there are elements of populism as a discursive strategy that make it particularly compatible with their foreign policy. First, populism in power is a top-down phenomenon determined by the actions and rhetoric of its leaders (Weyland 2017). The populist leader is generally freer than mainstream politicians in shaping a movement's message and directing its followers, always by dictating what the needs of the 'people' are and explaining how these change under new circumstances (Mair 2002). In this way, using different and sometimes contradictory discourses to different audiences is easier. Second, audience-hopping may be easier in polarized contexts. In partisan 'bubbles', contrasting information and alternative viewpoints do not feature. In assessing whether a populist's statement is consistent with (a) their actions and (b) their statements vis-à-vis other audiences, supporters may base their assessment primarily on in-group credentials (Meibauer 2023). Given that populists position their in-groups ('the people') against a corrupt and (almost by definition) lying opponent ('the elite'), any statement from within the in-group is more likely true, or at least truthful, than false. This makes it easier to sell a different story about foreign policy to the in-group than to other domestic and international audiences. Finally, populists can reconcile themselves with international institutions and networks of technocratic cooperation if they can be presented as allies in a struggle against foreign enemies, 'entrenched interests' and the needless politicking of mainstream political 'elites' (van der Veer and Meibauer 2024). This hints at the important overlaps between populism and technocracy, discussed by various scholars (Caramani 2017; Bertsou 2020).

We see then that international cooperation – signing treaties, striking deals, joining international organizations, partaking in multilateral processes – is perfectly possible for populists precisely because there are ample resources in populist discourse to justify such actions. Shifting the boundaries of the people/elite division, playing the domestic off the international audiences, bundling issues that can be resolved with the single signing of a treaty, and making international cooperation an ally in the open-ended fight against domestic elites, are all compatible with populism's core features of binary antagonism, opposition to official power, bundling multiple demands and groups in chains of equivalence, and focus on the needs of a loosely defined

'people'. While we agree with much of the literature that foreign policy antagonism and disruption predominate, we argue that cooperation is far from impossible in populist foreign policy. Populist discourse provides enough tools to populist leaders to legitimize international cooperation on the way towards redemption of the people, even after confrontation.

Cases and Methodology

Our theoretical framework points at the need to employ a discursive methodology to explore the actual strategies of populist leaders in justifying international cooperation. Building on Stavrakakis et al. (2017) and other works in the tradition of the discursive approach in the study of populism, we analyse argumentative statements of populist leaders from a variety of sources (official speeches, interviews, parliamentary statements, written articles), discussing their choice to sign an international agreement or treaty or to otherwise pursue cooperation. In these statements, we aim to show that central nodes of this argumentation correspond to core characteristics of a populist discourse. These include central references to the interests of the 'people' and a juxtaposition to those of the 'elite'.

We also aim to show however that these populist discursive elements are not woven in randomly or crudely. Rather, they are tied in to the legitimation of international cooperation through one of the three discursive strategies we have identified above: elite splitting, issue-bundling, and audience-hopping. The reason is that all three of these discursive strategies correspond to the discursive populist logic, particularly as it translates cooperative behaviour internationally as part of a persistent strategy of anti-elite mobilization domestically. Also significantly, our interrogation is not meant to be causalistic or exhaustive. We do not claim that other discursive strategies are not present, nor do we seek to compare the relative weight or extent of some modes of legitimation over others. Rather, we simply show that a persistent populist discursive pattern of argumentation was present in justifying international cooperation.

Our choice of case studies follows a consistent comparative logic. We choose two similar cases in that in both we see the same pattern: populist incumbents accepting an international agreement of major economic importance and high symbolic significance pertaining to their national sovereignty following a protracted period of confrontation with the same international partner, the European Union. We investigate Greece's acceptance of a third bailout from the Eurozone under Alexis Tsipras' SYRIZA government in 2015; and Britain's signing of a final

Brexit deal with the EU under Boris Johnson in 2020. Both cases belong to the same 'populist wave' of the mid-2010s, growing out of a global structural condition of economic malaise and representational crisis in Western liberal democracies (Chryssogelos, 2020). But they are also different along a variety of other dimensions: thick ideology of populists in power (left versus right), form of government (coalition versus single-party), political system (Westminster versus continental), and intended outcome of the treaty (remaining in the Eurozone versus exit from the EU). Whether our discursive strategies are present in both cases (and how) will provide clues about whether these varying factors influence the use of some strategies over others.

Greece's 2015 Bailout (SYRIZA and Alexis Tsipras)

In January 2015 the Greek party system was shaken when for the first time a party of the radical left, SYRIZA, won the election and formed a government under its young leader Alexis Tsipras. Even more shockingly, Tsipras chose as his coalition partner the small populist right-wing party Independent Greeks (ANEL). What united these two parties was their opposition to EU-mandated economic austerity. Since 2010 and under the pressure of the Eurozone's debt crisis, Greece was implementing harsh economic measures under the joint supervision of the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), and the IMF. These three institutions, collectively known as the 'Troika', became identified not only with a punitive economic regime but also the subjugation of the sovereignty of the Greek people (Featherstone 2011).

The harsh programme of the Troika, codified in two bailout packages that Greece signed in 2010 and 2012, was implemented by mainstream pro-European centre-right and centre-left parties who argued that, without EU and IMF money, Greece would be forced to exit the euro and face economic ruin. Between 2010-15, SYRIZA under Tsipras formulated a powerful populist message, framing opposition to austerity as a struggle for dignity, as well as for independence from externally-imposed restrictions. This struggle extended beyond Greece, aiming to bring together the peoples particularly of the South of the EU, where austerity programmes were being implemented (Stavrakakis and and Katsambekis 2014).

The new Tsipras government immediately embarked on an antagonistic renegotiation of the terms of Greece's financing, with Tsipras accusing powerful interests in Greece, Europe and beyond of aiming to subjugate Greek resistance. While this gained some sympathy internationally, Greece was fighting against time as the previous funding programme had expired and the country was rapidly running out of money. At the height of his confrontation

with Greece's creditors, Tsipras called a referendum in late June 2015 for the Greek people to reject the terms of a new austerity package. The result was a resounding 60% in favour of 'No', but under immense economic pressure Tsipras ended up signing a few days later a new three-year bailout package of measures of equal harshness as those of previous years. After an internal split in SYRIZA and a snap election in September 2015 which re-elected the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition, Tsipras' government dutifully implemented the third bailout until 2018, the exact opposite of the promises they had made when they were in opposition.

Tsipras managed to avert bankruptcy and Greece's exit from the Eurozone, but his signing of a new austerity package upended his previous rhetoric. But while Tsipras and SYRIZA gradually lost their popular support, leading to their electoral defeat in 2019, what was impressive was that the party did not collapse. Even more impressively, this was done not by shedding but by doubling down on the party's populist rhetoric. As Giorgos Venizelos (2023) has shown, SYRIZA retained the main features of a populist party during its time in power, all the while it implemented an economic programme that went completely against its previous promises. It managed to do so by reinventing and rearticulating its understanding of the people/elite opposition packaged in a popular, everyday style (Markou 2020).

The main discursive technique of Tsipras to legitimize his abrupt turn was elite-splitting. This was a radical departure from the strategy of SYRIZA during the crisis when, in typical Laclauian fashion, it had constructed an expansive 'system' against which the people were to be mobilized, including the traditional pro-European parties of Greece, the 'vested interests' and 'oligarchs' inside the country, international institutions like the EU and the IMF, the 'international forces of neoliberalism', the most important creditors of Greece and especially Germany, the 'conservative establishment of the EU', and prominent personalities in the drama like German leaders Merkel and Schäuble. In contrast, once the agreement was signed, SYRIZA was forced to deconstruct this coherent set of enemies of the people.

The first major elite-splitting concerned the divide between the international and domestic enemies of the people. While surrender to Greece's international creditors was presented as inevitable, and indeed as an achievement of Tsipras to avert bankruptcy, it was also presented as a 'victory' that ensured SYRIZA's stay in power against the economic oligarchy and powerful corporate and media interests inside Greece. The argument was that these interests were colluding with external enemies of the people, and by reaching an agreement Tsipras exposed their real agenda which was the removal of SYRIZA from power. Tsipras' government

survival was presented as a popular victory in itself (Huffpost.gr 2015). Especially during the first two years after the signing of the new programme, references from Tsipras to 'oligarchy' and 'diaplekomena' (a word in the Greek political vocabulary denoting economic interests with outsize influence in politics, usually through manipulation of the media) were frequent (e.g. Tsipras 2015), as were accusations against the main opposition party, the centre-right New Democracy, that it was an agent of these interests. While this did not amount to a wholehearted embrace of Greece's new international commitment, it at least excused it as a necessary concession in the broader fight against the domestic oligarchy.[1]

The second rhetorical step of elite-splitting concerned the international. Once implementation of the new programme started, Tsipras had to reintegrate himself in EU institutions from where he could update his domestic legitimacy as well (on the international legitimation of populist regimes: (Wajner 2022)). Implementation of the programme was a dynamic process, whereby Greece had to meet various milestones to receive new tranches of loans and some leeway in the implementation of next measures. In this, Tsipras chose to single out the IMF as the 'difficult' negotiator who was extracting more from Greece, reverting to a typical anti-austerity and anti-neoliberal discourse prominent in the 2000s anti-globalization left.[2]

Next step of elite-splitting was to position SYRIZA as a leading force of a 'progressive' Europe fighting against conservative and neoliberal forces and a growing far right. A transnational dimension was never absent in Tsipras' populism, after all he had run as candidate for president of the EU Commission in 2014 for the European Left. But in 2010-15 Tsipras' transnational populism drew more on a vision of a pan-European people (especially in Southern austerity-hit countries) mobilized against an EU 'establishment'.

After 2015 Tsipras instead adopted a more conventional left-right ideological view of EU politics. The opponents were no longer the 'EU establishment' as such, although to the extent that the centre-right dominated EU institutions at the time, Tsipras could still maintain a populist tone in his rhetoric. In a speech in 2017 for example, Tsipras drew a distinction between the 'outside' and the 'inside', as he saw himself divided between the space of social movements (where he presumably felt more comfortable) and the world of EU institutions where the elites

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[1] See for example Tsipras' speech to the central committee of SYRIZA in December 2015: 'We are fighting a big battle with oligarchy and neoliberalism that requires some tactical manoeuvres so we can stand tall and be useful to the social groups we represent' (EFSYN 2015).
[2] In April 2016 for example Tsipras had stated that he will 'not allow [Paul] Thomsen [NB: the IMF's representative in Greece] to destroy Europe' (Huffpost.gr 2016).

reside. In the same speech he repeated his argument that SYRIZA's agreement was a 'tactical compromise to avoid a strategic defeat' (Taxheaven.gr 2017). By increasing contacts with ideologically close leaders from around the EU, Tsipras could 'split' the EU in the eyes of the Greek public in terms of ideological allies and adversaries (Beskos 2016).

While initially Tsipras highlighted his alliances among other international actors of the radical left, the final step in elite-splitting for Tsipras led him to the complete identification with the goals of EU integration and his full integration in the European mainstream. In this final stage of his premiership, conventional and rather liberal European values were presented as compatible with the interests of the Greek people. This time the 'power' against whom the people were mobilized were the forces of nationalism and the far-right threatening the achievements of European integration from which the people also benefit. In this stage, one can question whether Tsipras had remained a populist at all and was not simply re-articulating in an inventive way fully pro-establishment positions in a populist mode.[3]

Once Greece had completed its final adjustment programme in 2018, Tsipras embarked on a new project to resolve a long-lasting diplomatic dispute with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (as it was recognized by Greece) that resulted in the country's official renaming into North Macedonia in 2019 (Chryssogelos and Stavreska 2019). The change of tone was notable, as by that point Tsipras was praising the values of international cooperation, North Macedonia's accession in NATO and the EU, and the benefits for Greece from streamlining its foreign policy with the priorities of its allies.

However, here as well Tsipras sought to defend his policy with using a populist logic. Aligning with the social democrat prime minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, allowed him to present the agreement as the effort of two underdogs fighting against superior forces of nationalism and ethnic exclusion in the Balkans. Domestically this translated into presenting mass demonstrations against the deal all over Greece as efforts by the 'far right' to destabilize his progressive government (in.gr 2019). Although by this point, with the vast majority of public opinion against him and his alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions evident, he had shifted to raison d'etat based arguments, he did not fully abandon populist themes.

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[3] See e.g. Tsipras' speech in the European Parliament in September 2018 where he proclaimed that Europe is 'not threatened by Syriza and the left' (Psara 2018). While in his interview for Le Figaro in 2017 he admitted that he shares a 'common vision with Emmanuel Macron' despite their 'different political origins' (Daskalakis 2017).

Moving to the other strategies of justifying international cooperation, issue-bundling arguments obviously were not forthcoming given that Greece signed its new austerity agreement under duress and with SYRIZA accepting a very bad deal contrary to all its prior promises. Interestingly, issue-bundling discourses were more prominent in the rhetoric of Yanis Varoufakis, Tsipras' finance minister who had undertaken negotiations with Greece's creditors in the first half of 2015. Varoufakis founded a small left-wing populist party, DiEM25, that entered parliament in the 2019 elections. A big part of the party's appeal was a certain cult of Varoufakis as negotiator who was betrayed by both the international establishment and Tsipras' weak resolve. The rhetoric of Varoufakis however was not aimed at justifying international cooperation but rather to decry Tsipras' 'surrender' (his version of the story is presented exhaustively in (Varoufakis 2017); on DiEM, see (De Cleen et al. 2020)).

After signing the agreement, perhaps the main populist feature of Tsipras' rhetoric towards his audience was his ability to selectively highlight different goals and objectives as 'the will of the people' in different phases of his political strategy. Presenting his actions as commensurate with the wishes of the Greek people allowed him to evade the issue of betraying his anti-austerity promises while remaining a populist. It was true, for example, that throughout the Greek crisis, while Greeks were extremely dissatisfied with austerity, they also consistently expressed support for remaining in the Eurozone (Clements et al. 2014). This allowed Tsipras to present his deal as fulfilling the wishes of the Greek people (which was technically true) all the while he abrogated his promises to end austerity. Similarly, implementation of the new austerity package was presented as a heroic effort by the Greek people to prove their detractors wrong and 'earn' their membership of the Eurozone. Tsipras also defined the success of his programme in terms of shifting its burdens away from the more vulnerable members of society. Under him Greece balanced its budget primarily through taxation on businesses and the middle class, while Tsipras claimed that it was finally being implemented in a way that shifted the burden from the weakest classes of the people, while the centre-right opposition was fixated on the dictates of the IMF (SKAI 2016).

The Brexit Deal (Boris Johnson, 2020)

In June 2016 a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) called by Conservative prime minister David Cameron was unexpectedly won by the supporters of exit (Brexit) from the EU. The result unleashed a half-decade long political crisis in the UK and

inside the ruling Conservative party that was only resolved with the formal exit of the country from the EU in February 2020 on the basis of a transitory withdrawal agreement. During these four years the UK changed prime minister twice, went to the polls for two general elections and grappled with 'cliff edge' no-deal exits a number of times.

Having supported 'remain' in the referendum, Cameron resigned after his defeat and was replaced by Theresa May, a remainer who undertook to implement the 'will of the people' and lead the UK out of the EU. The result however unleashed a major political that threatened to realign party politics around a European in/out cleavage that cut through both major parties. In this new divide, supporters of exit from the EU presented themselves as the 'voice of the people'. A further nuance of the debate concerned the precise form of exit, with moderates on both sides aiming to keep the UK closely aligned to the EU rules, while supporters of 'hard Brexit' aimed for a full sovereignty on all matters, in the economy and especially migration.

In an evenly divided and polarized country, the 'remain' camp was relatively more homogeneous in its views of the need to remain closely aligned with the EU. 'Leavers' however represented a broader range of opinion, as it had played out in the referendum where the 'Leave' position was represented by two campaign organizations. One was led by arch-populist Nigel Farage who emphasized borders and migration and presented the EU as a remote elite that imposed itself on the British people. The other, more 'respectable' campaign was led by Conservative politician Boris Johnson and it promised an orderly exit that would not disrupt the British economy (for the views and tactics of the Leave argument, see Vasilopoulou 2016).

Despite these differences, Johnson quickly leaned on a radical populist message of a 'clean' Brexit as a way to undermine the more moderate May inside the Conservative party. May's efforts to balance opposing agendas – securing British sovereignty on a range of policies, including migration, while keeping the UK close to the EU market – faltered, especially after she failed to win a majority in the 2017 general election. After a series of failed votes in parliament for deals she had negotiated with the EU, May resigned in 2019 allowing Johnson to become leader of the Conservatives and prime minister (Shipman 2024).

The May years were a period of crystallization of a diffuse populist agenda in the UK. Clamouring for the 'will of the people' to be implemented, this movement interpreted the result of the referendum as a mandate for a hard Brexit: a minimal economic deal with the EU that left the UK fully sovereign in its affairs or, failing this, an exit without an agreement. Pressure

from this movement, which inside the House of Commons was represented by a very small faction of Conservative MPs (Quinn et al. 2024), had led May to declare, that 'no deal is better than a bad deal'. In this phase, anti-European discourse increasingly hardened, adopting a heightened populist rhetoric, even among members of the establishment of the Conservative party. An element of this was a pronounced rhetorical theme of 'elite-bundling, presenting opponents of Brexit (including not only supporters of 'remain' but even supporters of an orderly exit with close alignment with the EU) as agents of a unified elite composed of the EU in Brussels a 'deep state' at home (see the infamous 'enemies of the people' front page of the Daily Mail; (Rone 2023)). This was a typical populist technique of constructing a broad identity of the 'people' mobilized by a variety of frustrations against an equally diverse – but presented as monolithic – 'elite' (Freeden 2017).

When Johnson finally became prime minister in 2019 however, it became obvious that the UK would need a deal to exit the EU, if anything for the new leader to avoid any major economic disruptions. With him at the helm, compromises that were presented as treason under May became necessary steps towards the emancipation of the 'people'. This became evident when a few weeks after he entered power, Johnson met Irish prime minister Leo Varadkar to break the deadlock over how Brexit would play out in Northern Ireland (BBC News 2019).

Quickly it became obvious that Johnson was ready to relinquish much of UK economic sovereignty over Northern Ireland – a topic over which Theresa May had been heavily criticized – for the sake of pushing forward with Brexit. Johnson presented his deal for Northern Ireland in parliament in October 2019 as a successful compromise that respected the special circumstances in Ireland and therefore a good deal, even if it meant in practice that NI would be fully incorporated in the EU regulatory sphere. In the same speech Johnson used repeated references to 'our European friends', choosing a conciliatory tone towards the EU ahead of final negotiations very much different from his own rhetoric in previous years (Gov.uk 2019b).

Soon thereafter Johnson put forward a renegotiated version of May's withdrawal agreement, which failed to secure support in parliament. As a result, he called a new election for December 2019 with the exclusive focus on finalizing UK withdrawal from the EU. The Conservative campaign had all the characteristics of populist issue-bundling. Johnson was asking voters to help him 'get Brexit done', a simplistic message that both promised to implement the 'will of the people' in the referendum and implicitly conceded that some negotiated agreement with the EU was better than a no-deal Brexit. Tellingly, he had called a no-deal Brexit a 'failure of

statecraft', a major departure from the tone of hard-Brexit arguments that had brought May down (Gov.uk 2019a). Johnson's election with a strong majority was presented as necessary to realize the promises of Brexit, which had been left in limbo over three years: control of borders and migration, 'levelling up' the 'left-behind' areas of the country, and restoring the sovereignty of British political institutions. As PM, Johnson had shifted from supporting a no-deal Brexit if necessary to a negotiated exit (which he as the genuine representative of the 'people' would guarantee would be in the true spirit of the 2016 referendum) as precondition for 'making Brexit work' (Cooper and Cooper 2020; Prosser 2021).

The gamble paid off and Johnson won an overwhelming majority in December 2019, on the basis of which he ratified the withdrawal agreement for the UK to exit the EU in February 2020. The withdrawal agreement contained a deadline for a final treaty between the two parties at the end of 2020, which was concluded with much less drama as by that point the world was consumed by the Covid pandemic. Johnson's Brexit was clearly on the 'hard' end of the potential options, containing a minimal free trade agreement, no jurisdiction of the ECJ and full control of UK immigration policy. Johnson presented such an outcome as successful deal-making ensuring the UK's economic prosperity, even if this belied both remainers' warnings about the negative consequences of Brexit and the desire of his most hardcore populist followers for a full and radical break from the EU.[4]

The negotiated exit of the UK from the EU had a more important implication for British foreign policy however. Early on in the May premiership, the Conservative government had developed the concept of 'Global Britain' as a new foreign policy identity of the UK, denoting a country that was exiting the EU but was 'entering' the world, becoming more confident to engage with international processes and global issues. As foreign minister in May's government, Johnson had actively promoted this message. Thus, with 'Global Britain' the UK was trying to forge an internationalist, liberal and open foreign policy profile, when Brexit was widely perceived internationally as exactly the opposite (Daddow 2019). A chaotic 'no-deal' Brexit would undermine this image of the UK, which was another reason why Johnson pursued a deal with the EU.

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[4] Strikingly, Johnson presented the final agreement as a 'free trade agreement' that opened up trade and economic opportunity between the two sides, although it did exactly the opposite. But in the same speech celebrating the final agreement he also praised the newfound 'sovereignty' in the UK (Gov.uk 2020).

What is impressive is how much Johnson's foreign policy as PM differed from his professed attitude towards the EU. In many ways he turned out to be a prototypical liberal internationalist, with his government strongly supporting global free trade and economic openness, international multilateralism and the values of the so-called 'liberal international order'. Given that the UK's freedom to strike free trade deals outside the EU was always presented as one of the main benefits of Brexit, Johnson's government was very active in signing trade agreements (although of limited extent) with various non-European partners, presenting them as active deal-making. With characteristic bravado, in his Conservative party conference speech in 2021, Johnson stated that 'we have done 68 free trade deals [a claim debunked by various experts], and that great free trade deal with our friends in the EU' (BBC News 2021). The UK also took a leading position on climate change, hosting the COP26 summit in Glasgow in 2021, and as supporter of Ukraine after Russia's invasion in February 2022, while it struck the AUKUS agreement with the US and Australia to strengthen Western security cooperation in the Pacific.

Interestingly however, what would have been broadly in agreement with the UK's foreign policy priorities if it had remained a member of the EU was articulated very differently inside the UK, in a typical showcase of 'audience-hopping' of Johnson's foreign policy rhetoric. While internationally the UK tried to restore its image as a good international liberal citizen, domestically these actions were presented in a way that tried to keep alive the people/elite divide. Free trade deals like the one with Australia were presented as an expression of newfound independence of the UK, especially as it strengthened ties with a major power of the 'Anglosphere' evoking Britain's imperial past (Sleigh 2021). Equally, AUKUS was celebrated as security cooperation on nuclear technology that also raised the promise of setting up new industrial production in England's depressed areas that had supported Brexit (Gov.uk 2021). In all these ways, an internationalist foreign policy was articulated domestically as the implementation of the 'will of the people', as it flowed from the UK's new independence from the EU.

Conclusion

This article set out to explain how populist leaders justify international cooperation despite the inherently antagonistic and binary logic of populist discourse. Challenging the view that populist foreign policy is necessarily confrontational or isolationist, we argued that populists can reconcile cooperation with their core discursive commitments through specific strategies:

in particular, we highlight elite-splitting, issue-bundling, and audience-hopping. Drawing on detailed case studies of Alexis Tsipras' acceptance of a third Eurozone bailout for Greece and Boris Johnson's negotiation of a Brexit withdrawal agreement, we demonstrated that populist leaders maintain the central populist cleavage between 'the people' and 'the elites' even when engaging in cooperative foreign policy and even in direct opposition to their previous stance of assertive confrontation. Rather than abandoning populist logic, they adapt it — repositioning external actors, reframing compromises as popular victories, and selectively emphasizing different elements of foreign policy to domestic and international audiences. Our contribution thus shows that populist foreign policy is not inherently incoherent or unpredictable when viewed through a discursive lens; rather, it follows identifiable patterns of legitimation rooted in the strategic deployment of the populist worldview.

The discursive strategies we outlined contribute to a broader understanding of populist governance by highlighting how populists sustain political mobilization even when compelled to compromise. Discursive flexibility enables populists to adapt to external constraints without abandoning their core appeal, reinforcing the insight that populist governance thrives on the constant renewal and dramatization of the people/elite antagonism across different policy fields. Regarding predictability, while populist foreign policy remains shaped by structural and contextual pressures, our framework suggests that discursive patterns offer meaningful indicators. In particular, elite-splitting is likely when international deals can be framed as victories over domestic elites; issue-bundling surfaces when complex compromises can be bundled into simplified narratives of success; and audience-hopping becomes salient when populists must reconcile starkly different audiences simultaneously. Thus, while populist foreign policy may not always be substantively predictable in terms of outcomes, the rhetorical strategies used to legitimate international cooperation are more systematic than previously appreciated.

Our empirical analysis also carries some interesting comparative findings, which can be further explored, corroborated or refined in further research. Based on our case studies we see that a left-wing populist (Tsipras) found it easier to 'split' elites and articulate parts of the international system as allies against domestic elites. A right-wing populist (Johnson) on the other hand seemed more adept to issue-bundling strategies, whereby the main outside foe (the EU) remained at arm's length. This is commensurate with a view that assigns substantial importance to the thick ideologies of populists in power. Left-wing populists are likely to identify some element of the international structure that they can engage with, as a fully

nationalist-sovereigntist populism would be inimical to their ideology. Right-wing populists on the other hand will try to maintain a horizontal inside-outside perspective in their definition of the 'people' and its demarcation from the 'elites' (Jenne 2021). International engagement for them will be legitimized mostly in terms of immediate national interests, consistent with scholarship on right-wing party politics of foreign policy (Wagner 2020).

In this way, our analysis also has policy implications for current debates, for example about how to deal with President Trump's initiatives on issues like Ukraine, trade and transatlantic relations. While one must expect many more such disruptive initiatives by Trump, his populist logic also dictates that periods of confrontation can (and indeed, for his purposes, must) be punctuated by moments of break-through 'deal-making' in ways that satisfy his domestic audience. This presents a challenge for international partners who are repeatedly put on edge by increasingly outlandish and erratic demands. Concurrently, the need for 'big wins' also weakens the Trump administration's negotiating. While professional diplomats and policymakers will want to work out the details in negotiations initiated by Trump, political leaders can exploit high-profile 'deal-making' with Trump centre-stage, seeking to domesticate those of Trump's instincts hostile to international cooperation through gradual and successive negotiated outcomes presented as major breakthroughs.

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