

## Populist Foreign Policy in Southern Europe

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*Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene*

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### *Introduction*

This chapter explores the foreign policies of populist governments in several countries of Southern Europe, notably France, Greece, Italy, and Spain. These Mediterranean countries not only show similar characteristics in terms of geography, culture, religion, and political system, but also a dense presence of populist leaderships with governmental power (or close to having it, in the French case), both from the right and from the left. A comparative analysis of PFP in this subregion allows us to unravel some of the distinctive ways in which populists shape foreign policy, especially in relation to the EU, and how this is influenced by structural positions in the regional distribution of power and the relative strength of domestic parties and institutions.

Indeed, France, Greece, Italy, and Spain are states that show multiple similarities in the context of South European politics of the last decade. They found themselves, to varying degrees, in the intersection of the two major EU governance crises of the 2010s: the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis. As a result of the politicization and contestation fuelled by these crises, their party politics were dramatically altered, from a conventional competition between moderate parties of the centre-right and the centre-left to the rise or strengthening of anti-establishment parties. In the case of Italy and Greece, these changes culminated in the creation of unorthodox all-populist governing coalitions: the government of the radical-left SYRIZA and the right-nationalist ANEL in Greece between 2015-19; and the government of the progressive populist Five Star Movement and the radical-right Lega in Italy between 2018-19. In the case of Spain, the crisis strongly deepened populist and anti-establishment attitudes, thus putting an end to the “Iberian exceptionalism” regarding populism (see Alonso and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2015; Turnbull-Dugarte, Rama, and Santana 2020). The massive anti-austerity protests that followed the crises of 2011-2012 led to the rise in January 2014 of a left-wing political party -*Podemos*- that reached the European Parliament four months later and the Spanish congresses in 2015 and ultimately joined the national coalition in November 2019; and the rise of a far right populist party -*Vox*- that split from the *Partido Popular* in January 2014 and by 2019 had achieved substantial power in the legislature. In the case of France, these crises catalysed existing populist trends, both from the right and from the left, which led to the progressive strengthening of the *Front Nationale* since the presidential candidacy of Marine Le Pen in May 2011 to her participation (and defeat) in the April 2022 Presidential ballot, and the creation of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La France Insoumise* since 2016, which came in third place with 22% of the vote in the 2022 Presidential elections.

These parallel trajectories make a comparison of Southern Europe's populist particularly fruitful for assessing the role of populism in foreign policy and provides lessons for other countries in Europe and beyond, where populists enjoy relatively high levels of public support and could conceivably take full executive power in future elections. Following the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction of this book, this chapter will conceptualize populism primarily as a discursive strategy and PFP as a practice and will look at the factors that induced the influence of populism on the foreign policy in these four key Southern European countries. The examples of these countries will be used to illustrate some of the structural constraints to PFP which ultimately forced the populist parties of Greece and Italy to realign with the European and Western mainstream. On the basis of this outcome, we can derive general conclusions relevant to populists elsewhere, and particularly in Southern Europe.

### *International Sources and Effects of Southern Europe's Populism*

Greece and Italy are the most obvious cases to compare the sources and the international effects of populism, in part because in both, populists obtained the reigns of executive power, giving them the responsibility for decisions in the field of foreign policy. Moreover, the post-World War II geopolitical trajectories of two countries at the crossroads of the Cold War divide that ultimately settled in a firm Euro-Atlantic alignment, have been closely tied with the dynamics of their party politics. For this reason, the fracturing of centripetal party politics in Greece and Italy immediately gave rise to concerns about the foreign policy orientation of both states, especially in a context of rising geopolitical challenges to the Western-led international order after the global financial crisis and the passing of the US 'unipolar moment' (Zakaria 2019). Both the SYRIZA-ANEL and the 5SM-Lega coalitions elicited a significant number of analyses on their foreign policy implications and, by extension, the significance of populism for foreign policy (see Coticchia & Vignoli 2020, Feroci 2019, Pugliese, Ghiretti, & Inisia 2022). Meanwhile, in the case of Spain, even though Podemos has come to power in the national government power since November 2019, the areas of foreign affairs are under the control of the Socialist Party (PSOE) (see Manfredi, Amado, & Waisbord 2021). This distanced Podemos from foreign policy decision-making but enabled it to maintain a certain degree of independent speech and criticism towards the EU institutions. That said, populist attitudes remain clearly entrenched in the society, as polls show that Spain is the country with the highest proportion of the population (over two-thirds) who believe that the political system needs to be completely reformed (Pew Research, 13/12/21).

Another similarity between the cases of Greece and Italy is the foreign policy trajectory under these two populist governing coalitions, which started off their terms with declared ambitions and transparent efforts to rebalance their foreign policy. Of particular importance here was Greece and Italy's perceived dependence and subjugation to the priorities of the EU, a sentiment heightened during the economic and refugee crises of the 2010s that in turn fed frustration with established pro-European parties and bolstered the vote of Eurosceptic populists. SYRIZA, ANEL, 5SM and Lega were all successful, despite their diverse ideological origins, in framing economic and migration crises in terms of a crisis of democratic representation for states embedded in the process of European integration (Claudi & Locatelli 2020, Coticchia 2022; Monteleone 2021). In

Spain and France, populist also were fuelled by the frustration of the decisions taken in foreign capitals, such as Brussels or Berlin/Frankfurt, and although they did not take the reins of foreign policy (and some could argue that because of it), they too framed the crises in terms of elite corruption and the unrepresentativeness of the EU technocrats and proposed foreign policy policies which indicated the potential for substantive rupture. Interestingly enough, despite these parties' Euroscepticism in rhetoric, in practice their leaderships took advantage of the political game of alliances in the European Parliament, and both Podemos' Pablo Iglesias and Vox's Aleix Vidal-Quadras were MEPs (see Iglesias and Alonso 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte et al 2020; Sola & Rendueles 2018). Similarly, Marine Le Pen's career was launched by her participation as MEP for almost thirteen years, from 2004 to 2017, while even serving as Chair of the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group between 2015 and 2017.

The cases are also particularly well suited for comparison because they found similar conditions in terms of their PFP effects. In the cases of Greece and Italy, the primary consequence of these populist governing coalitions was moves that challenged their states' alignment with core tenets of EU foreign policy, cooperation with other EU member states and their position within the West as a whole. In its first year, the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition appeared to pursue closer relations with non-Western powers like Russia, China, and Venezuela to find alternative sources of financing for the Greek debt. As the danger of Greece's eviction from the Eurozone increased throughout 2015, so did concerns about its exit from the Western orbit, with its exit from the EU perhaps being followed by its exit from NATO as well. Similarly, in Italy, the 5SM-Lega coalition adopted a confrontational stance towards other EU partners, and during tense and acrimonious negotiations signaled its willingness to exit the Eurozone (Giurlando 2021). The Italian populist coalition was also hostile to French president Emmanuel Macron, made overtures to Russia, was sympathetic to Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, and signed a controversial partnership agreement with China as part of the One Belt One Road initiative (Pugliesi, Ghiretti, & Ansisi 2022). Populist parties in Spain and France, meanwhile, expressed favourable evaluations to these positions, although in opposition and in varying degrees. The strengthening of Podemos and La France Insoumise on the one hand and FN and Vox on the other, had a relative success in terms of internal debate, adding a certain Eurosceptic impact to their country's stances. In parallel, all these parties strengthened alliances and bonds of solidarity with other populist leaders in Europe (including between them, as well as with Hungarian and Polish right-wing populists), with Putin's Russia, in the US (Trump and Sanders, respectively) and in Latin America (either with Pink Tide populist leaderships led by Venezuela's Chavismo-Madurismo or with the Brazilian government of the right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro) (see Wajner 2022:424-5).

Ultimately, what appeared like a populist-induced foreign policy realignment, particularly in Greece and Italy, was eventually halted because of a combination of domestic and international constraints which put a serious brake on populists' willingness to follow through with their radical proposals. After ignoring the historic and dramatic referendum in 2015, when 62% of Greeks voted against austerity proposals emanating from foreign capitals, the SYRIZA-led coalition under Alexis Tsipras replaced the foreign minister and aligned with the preferences of Greek president Papoulias and other members of the establishment (Varofakis 2016), and eventually came closer to the priorities of the EU and NATO so much so that by the end of its term in 2019 they could be

considered fully mainstream members of the Western alliance. In Italy the radicalism of the populist coalition was interrupted by the intervention of the President of the Republic Mattarella, the pressure of financial markets and creditor countries (Giurlando 2021), and the fracturing of the coalition and convoluted processes of government formation which saw the two populist parties, 5SM and Lega, first opposing each other and, eventually, becoming coalition partners again under Mario Draghi. Throughout much of this period, 5SM leader Luigi di Maio has held the post of foreign minister, which only highlights even more his party's, and Italian populism's more generally, re-alignment with the European and Western mainstream after the fracturing of the first populist coalition in 2019. Similarly, Podemos has found clear limitations in their preliminary positions towards Russia, Catalunya, and Western Sahara in their own conflicts, and has stepped back in their preliminary stances on these issues. Vox, such as FN and LFI, has mostly tried to act at the EU level, such as when they launched a strategy of legal warfare through the EU Parliament against the Catalan independentists. We delve into this international (multi)polarity as follows.

### *International (multi)polarity*

While the rise of populism in Southern Europe is, as seen above, inextricably connected with the economic crisis and the austerity programs imposed by the EU from an international relations perspective, it can also be viewed as a national and regional expression of a larger structural shift in global politics: the passage from the world of Western-led globalization and US hegemony to the world of multipolarity, where non-Western powers hold increasing sway. Indeed, in Greece, the appeal of populism during this period cannot be understood outside the context when calls for a rebalancing of Greece's international orientation towards emerging powers gained increasing credence. Populism in Italy has a similar pedigree but with some important differences. The country was one of the first with a Trump-like populist showman, Silvio Berlusconi, who governed four times, between 1994 and 1995, 2001 to 2006, and 2008 to 2011. Italy's second wave of populism occurred shortly after, with the rise of the Five Star Movement and the Lega's turn towards sovereigntism. Neither were initially intrinsically anti-EU.

In contrast, an anti-Western and Eurosceptic posture characterized parties of both the radical left and the radical right in Greece in the post-Cold War period. However, these ideas had limited appeal at a time when Greece's main political parties had successfully convinced voters that it was in the country's interest to remain closely aligned with the West and the EU, a choice from which significant economic benefits flowed to Greece. The crisis however shattered this consensus, revealing Greece's European integration as a problem both of prosperity and national and democratic sovereignty. In fact, since the late 2000s Greek foreign policy had begun to experiment with contacts beyond the core of the country's Western allies. Interestingly, such contacts were initiated by non-populist parties, such as when a conservative government signed an energy pipeline deal with Russia in 2009 and a socialist government pursued closer relations with Israel's government under Binyamin Netanyahu since 2010, welcomed Chinese investments in the port of Piraeus and actively courted investment from non-Western sources like the Gulf in the beginning of the crisis. Italian foreign policy, too, began a shift from near uncritical obsequiousness to Atlanticist and Europeanist positions toward exploring opportunities among

alternative power centres, including Russia and China. Yet populists greatly accelerated these trends and openly embraced non-Western powers.

A similar trend can be observed in Spain: just as Italy, both had a consensus about the benefits of European integration, and this condition was seriously undermined by the crisis, so much so that both went from being two of the most Europhile countries to two of the most Eurosceptic. Podemos absorbed the anti-American (i.e., anti-US) stances of the left-wing populism in Latin America, which encourages a strategy of soft-balancing the hegemon, delegitimizing its international institutions, and backing alternative global and regional powers such as Russia, China, and Iran (Dodson & Dorraj 2008; Sola & Rendueles 2018; Wajner 2021:672; Wehner & Thies 2021). Vox also advocated multiplying links with other global powers towards the insertion of Spain in the world, yet it disagreed on Podemos' views towards the United States, particularly during the government of the like-minded Donald Trump (Gonzales 2022). In addition, VOX embraced the notion of the Spanish "commonwealth" according to their view of Spain's imperial past, expressed in cooperation practices through Ibero-American frameworks as well as in Spain's relationship with emerging powers in the Global South. Vox has also actively collaborated through European frameworks together with Hungarian Fidesz, Poland's PiS, and Italy's Lega, pushing the political coalition of "Identity and Democracy" in the European Parliament (see Rama et al. 2021). That said, the situation is more complex in France, where the economic and migration crises fuelled the rise of LFI and FT (Giurlando 2019), but the country's central position of power in the EU brings it more close to Germany than to their Mediterranean peers.

The rise of anti-austerity populists after 2010 in all the countries under discussion (Sotirakopoulos & Sotiropoulos 2013, Lapavitsas 2012), initially appearing in street mobilization, the media, and public debates before transferring to the party arena, drew on this geopolitical shift. Populism was particularly appropriate to frame this 'rise of the Rest' in domestic politics. Contrary to radical ideologies of the left and right that had a more limited appeal, populism could mobilize broad feelings of democratic exclusion, a sense of betrayal by domestic elites (Giurlando 2019, Rinaldi 2018), and political frustration with domestic and European elites. This was particularly pronounced in Italy, where the democratically elected government of Silvio Berlusconi was replaced by the Brussels-friendly technocrat Mario Monti in part because financial and European elites believed that the former could not carry out the necessary "structural reforms" to make Italy solvent and, by extension, ensure the Eurozone's stability (Middelaar 2017). Meanwhile, in France, the elected governments of Sarkozy and Holland were perceived to be following the dictates of Berlin, Brussels, and financial markets rather than the supposedly sovereign people who elected them (Streeck 2018, Delaume 2018, Lordon 2015, Melanchon 2015, Tavel 2013, Odent 2014). Similarly, Spain's traditional parties (PSOE and PP) appeared to be disconnected from the suffering of workers, students, and other vulnerable groups affected by the recession (Alonso & Rovira-Kaltwasser; Fassin 2018, Iglesias & Juliana 2018). In this framework, Greece's, Italy's, France's, and Spain's traditional partners in the US and the EU could be presented as the 'elites' of the international system ("globalists"), and alternative powers such as China and Russia now were portrayed as their credible opponents. Consequently, the domestic and international features of populism ('people' vs. 'elites') mutually reinforced each other at times of crisis.

The main source of populism in three highly indebted Mediterranean countries, Greece, Italy, and Spain, was frustration with austerity measures 'recommended' by the EU on their sovereignty (Barbeito and Alonso 2021; Sanchez-Cuenca 2014). In Greece, in particular, flirtations with rising non-Western powers took the form especially of calls for Greece to turn to them for the financing of Greek debt. For populists in both countries, espousing a view of the Greek 'people' defined by nationalistic features, Russia was especially appealing, with Vladimir Putin appearing as a prototypical 'strong leader' juxtaposed to the bureaucratic and technocratic mode of EU governance. China also appeared as a welcome counterweight to Greece's dependence on the EU, a position that was particularly held by Italy's Five Star Movement. Similarly attractive was Putin for Podemos, LFI, and the Five Star movement, while solidarity with Venezuela was particularly appealing given the affinities felt with the regime of Hugo Chavez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro (see Wajner and Roniger 2019:468).

Likewise, in the case of Greece, the crisis catalyzed a more sophisticated differentiation in the view of populist forces towards the two main pillars of the Western alliance to which it belonged, the US and the EU. For most of the post-World War II period in Greece, the US was seen in a particularly negative light in large parts of the Greek population, and especially the left, because of its meddling in Greek politics during the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War, that antipathy was shared with elements of the nationalistic and religious right viewing the US as the leading force of globalization and the cultural threat this represented. As a result, populists of both the right and left in Greece, similar to their populist cousins in France, historically targeted the US as the 'elite' of the international system. While also distrusted on various counts (e.g., seen as a neoliberal free-market project), the EU was seen by most Greeks as the more palatable 'face' of the West where Greece could belong. In Italy, meanwhile, anti-US sentiment was much more subdued and held mainly by the communist party; other parties were either indifferent to the US or favourable to the alliance, particularly as Italy hosted several important American military bases. But in Italy, like in Greece, favourable attitudes towards the EU were felt across the political spectrum.

With the beginning of the Eurozone crisis in 2010 however, these roles were reversed. While the EU was seen primarily as a threat to Greek prosperity, independence and sovereignty, many populist forces held a more positive view of the US as a potential counterweight and a source of political support for Greece against the EU, and especially Germany. The perception was that under president Obama the US had implemented policies of Keynesian flavour to escape the 2008-09 recession, a recipe which the EU would also have to follow instead of focusing on austerity. Although seen exclusively through the lens of the crisis, austerity, and debt, this more positive perspective of the US role created a potential opening of Greek populism towards the West all the while relations with Europe fractured. After the double parliamentary elections of 2012, the populist parties of SYRIZA and ANEL emerged as the bearers of popular discontent with austerity, while the old adversaries New Democracy (conservatives) and PASOK (socialists) formed a pro-European coalition implementing the EU's austerity programme. SYRIZA and ANEL systematized in their party platforms the populist perspectives of foreign policy developed over the first years of crisis, including a mistrust of the EU, a sovereigntist perspective of Greece's role in the world, a willingness to align more closely with non-Western powers and espousal of

multipolarity, and an instrumental perspective of foreign policy in the service of debt renegotiation and freeing Greece from austerity. During those years however, both parties also allowed openings towards the US to appear, something that went against familiar tenets of Greek populism as well as the thicker ideologies these parties carried, especially SYRIZA's radical leftism. As leader of the opposition, Alexis Tsipras cultivated relations with progressive figures in the US, while ANEL leader Kammenos maintained the Atlanticist outlook he had since the time he belonged to ND. When the SYRIZA-ANEL government took over in early 2015, some of its first actions indeed showcased this turn towards non-Western powers. Most notably, alike the populist coalition in Italy, the new government signalled its opposition to the imposition of additional EU sanctions on Russia over its annexation of Crimea, although notably it did not veto the extension of existing sanctions. During the so-called 'renegotiation' with the EU of the first half of 2015, Tsipras and a number of his ministers visited Moscow to negotiate funding and energy cooperation agreements with Russia. There were also reports of SYRIZA politicians exploring opportunities of funding or energy and food supplies from non-Western powers like China, Venezuela and Iran. All these initiatives however came to a halt after Tsipras capitulated and accepted a new bailout package from the EU in July 2015.

In Italy, the replacement of Silvio Berlusconi with the Brussels friendly technocrat Mario Monti, who subsequently cut spending and raised taxes to meet the demands of creditors, leading to a significant increase of economic distress, fuelled the rise of populism. The Five Star Movement and the Lega performed well in general elections of 2013 but did not gain enough votes to be power brokers. Consequently, in a trend seen elsewhere in Southern Europe, including Spain and Greece, an unholy coalition of the centre-left and centre-right governed together in order to reassure financial markets, Brussels, and Berlin and to ensure some continuity with the "structural reforms" of the previous, technocratic government. Hopes were dashed when Italy's economic distress continued (Giurlando 2019). Matteo Renzi, a kind of Italian version of Emmanuel Macron, attempted to turn the tide with neoliberal reforms, particularly his signature piece of legislation, the Jobs Act, with reduced worker protections. During the same period, the Syriza-ANEL coalition was engaged in tense negotiations with Brussels, France, and Germany over the question of Greece's willingness to bow to creditors and, by extension, remain a member of the Eurozone. When the majority of Greeks voted no to more austerity, and yet Greek Prime Minister Tsipras buckled to creditors' demands, Italian populists of the Left and the Right, as well as large sections of the Italian masses, expressed outrage (Giurlando 2016). Meanwhile, America's destabilizing policies in the Middle East, and Brussels' inability to adequately clean up the mess, led to the migration crisis which exacerbated the sense that the country was losing control (Lazar & Diamanti 2019, Soggi 2018, Goodhart 2017).

These trends in Italy—the failure of Monti's technocratic government and his successors to reduce or stem economic distress, the perceived humiliation of Greece, and the migration crisis—set the stage for populists' dramatic success in the general elections of 2018. The Five Star Movement won an unprecedented 34% of the vote; meanwhile the Lega won 17%, which was not enough to form a coalition government with its partners—Forza Italia and Fratelli de Italia—on the Right. The Five Star Movement had the option to form a coalition with the centre-left PD, but this would have meant governing with a detested faction of the establishment which was

perceived to be an agent of hostile foreign capitals. Similar to what occurred in Greece, populists of the Right and Left entered a coalition government, in part because of their shared distaste of international actors accused of working in complicity with domestic parties who were perceived to be responsible for the country's economic decline. Consistent with their underlying belief in the desirability of a multipolar world, Italian populists made overtures to Russia and China, with varying degrees and nuances in terms of preferred partner and strategy (Giurlando 2021). Both were favourable towards Russia and wanted to veto sanctions against the country for its annexation of Crimea. However, they neglected to exercise their veto twice, in part because these decisions occurred during tense negotiations with Brussels over public spending and gaining advantage on the latter was clearly their priority. Regarding China, the Five Star Movement's top brass, and many sympathetic intellectuals, viewed the closer ties as potential leverage against Western capitals (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2020), particularly Paris, Berlin, and Brussels, and signed the BRI despite loud protestations.

On challenging austerity, the coalition made a serious attempt in this direction when it chose the Keynesian economist Paolo Savona as the candidate for minister of Finance. Similar to Yannis Varoufakis, he was willing to exit the Eurozone if demands for less austerity were not met. The president of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, vetoed his candidacy, on the grounds that this possibility of rupture with the EU would bankrupt and impoverish millions of Italians. For all the talk of multipolarity and challenging Brussels and Berlin, then, the main structural constraint that proved insurmountable for Greek and Italian populists was economic dependence on the EU. With the only alternative to a deal with the EU being bankruptcy and eviction from the Eurozone, and with no assistance forthcoming from any non-Western power (at least of the magnitude required to keep Greece and Italy afloat), the SYRIZA-ANEL and 5SM-Lega governments were forced to lay to rest the rhetoric about realigning away from its traditional allies. In Italy, the populist coalition governed only for a period of 14 months, and so its attempts to alter Italy's traditional Atlanticist and Europeanist orientation in foreign affairs was cut short. The SYRIZA-ANEL government, meanwhile, continued to govern and to invest in a variety of bilateral relationships beyond the EU, with Tsipras visiting China twice during his premiership, making a high-profile visit to Cuba on the occasion of Fidel Castro's funeral, and deepening his ties with the US. Sometimes these ties offered opportunities to the government to use a rhetoric of diversification of Greece's relations or to employ populist themes of global justice or a growing multipolarity against Western dominance. However, during the same period Greece became increasingly aligned with the priorities and functioning of the EU foreign policy system. By the end of Tsipras' term, even relations with Russia, once the main reference point of Greek populists, had soured due to Moscow's opposition and undermining of the deal that resolved the Macedonia name-issue and paved the way for North Macedonia to join NATO.

The effect of four years of populist rule in Greece from the perspective of international polarity then was to cement Greece's alignment with the West all the while international politics moved inexorably away from unipolarity. In this sense, the geopolitical gravity of dependence on the EU and Greece's traditional orientation proved more important than populist ideas. For Italy, Greece, and Spain, it was precisely the peculiar international systemic pressures that they operated under, especially their embeddedness in the web of EU governance, that reigned in the populist coalition.

France perhaps might be an exception, given its higher ranking in international hierarchies which would presumably give it more leverage than Italy, Greece or Spain to carry out its promises to challenge Brussels and more closely align with Russia and/or China.

### *Ideology*

PFP in Southern Europe was also constrained by ideological features. That two parties from the opposites of the ideological spectrum ended up forming a governing coalition is a testament to the strength of populist ideology in the context formed by the economic crisis and the collapse of the old party system in Greece and Italy. Despite SYRIZA coming from the radical left and ANEL from the nationalist right, and 5SM having more progressive leanings while the League had right-wing roots, and the two camps differing in a host of policy issues (especially on questions of religion, multiculturalism and social rights), their common opposition to austerity and Greece's and Italy's subjugation to the EU was enough for them to cooperate. In Italy, in addition, both parties shared a pro-China orientation, although for different reasons; the 5SM was and is also very sympathetic to China for reasons of realpolitik, while the League sees this country mainly as an opportunity for Italian exports and investors. One position that arguably flowed from populist ideology was the idea that the corrupt or malicious international "elite" originated in Frankfurt (as a representation of the European Central Bank) and in Germany more broadly (as the most powerful regional pivot), and that a policy of soft balancing was essential to counter its accused imposition of austerity (Giurlando 2021).

In the case of Greece, however, it is unclear whether this hints at an independent role of populism as the main ideological guide of the two parties' stances and the policies they followed when in office. The reason is that many of the foreign policy positions of the two parties could be attributed to their thick host ideologies rather than populism. SYRIZA's opposition to the EU as a neoliberal free-market project and its preference for a multipolar world that would balance against US imperialism were positions long associated with the Greek and European radical left, well before the party made its populist turn. Equally, ANEL's affinity for Russia on the basis of common culture and religion and distrust of the West out of concerns for Greek national sovereignty are core elements of right-wing nationalist ideology, again not reducible to populism. Therefore, the evidence is mixed for the hypothesis of populism being an independent cause of PFP: regarding the Eurozone crisis and Germany's role in it, in both Greece and Italy populists from different ideological traditions interpreted it very similarly, and in a way which reflected the people-elite dichotomy which is intrinsic to populist ideology; on various other issues, PFP positions can be traced to their host ideologies.

Another fruitful line of inquiry is that PFP was a specific kind of discourse or articulation of these positions. In other words, populism helped political forces with relatively fundamental and restricted ideological outlooks to reach out to larger groups of voters based on anti-establishment and pro-democratic appeals, calling for restitution of the 'people' against domestic and European power structures. Therefore, foreign policy positions that emanated from specific ideologies – the radical left's anti-Westernism, the nationalist right's affinity for

Russia – could be presented in the context of the crisis as preconditions for giving power back to the people, as pro-Western and pro-European elites had betrayed their mission by accepting austerity and violations of Greeks' and Italians' sovereignty. Although these positions were accepted by large parts of the population even before the crisis, they were never majoritarian as most accepted the logic of the Western anchoring and European integration of the country. Populism gave them a much larger audience as part of a broader rhetoric that presented a recalibration of relations with Europe as a precondition for the 'people' to recover its democratic dignity (Busher, Giurlando, & Sullivan 2018). In this direction should also be understood the positions of France's FN and LFI as well as Spain's Podemos towards NATO, portrayed as a pro-US organization that constrained the sovereignty of French-Spanish and Europeans more generally vis-à-vis other global powers and institutions.

In its role as a discursive ground for foreign policy performance, in the case of Greece populism helped SYRIZA and ANEL to be agile in the face of shifting geopolitical circumstances and their leaders to escape some of the rigid ideological positions of their political camps. For example, by prioritizing the 'struggle' the end of austerity and reinstating independence and sovereignty to the Greek people, Tsipras could justify the mellowing of some of SYRIZA's traditional hardcore left-wing positions on issues of foreign policy. While in the 2012 elections, where SYRIZA emerged as the main opposition party, its platform still stated its opposition to Greece's NATO membership and to Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, both positions were silently jettisoned by Tsipras when he entered power. Instead, the US under Barack Obama was seen as an important ally and counterweight to Germany's dominance in the EU, while close relations with Israel (initiated by previous governments) was seen to offer opportunities to Greece to diversify its relations and raise its geopolitical importance as a counterbalance to its precarious economic situation and its protracted conflict with Turkey.

For both the Greek and Italian governments, populism, understood as a stand-alone discursive strategy that influenced PFP eventually withered, but for different reasons. In Italy, the European elections of 2019 demonstrated that the balance of power was more and more in Salvini's favour, and he began to make maximalist demands; at the same time, the stand-off with Brussels and Berlin had calmed down, lessening the need for unity. These and other factors contributed to the Italian populist government's short lifespan of 14 months. In the case of Greece, Varoufakis was replaced with the more pliant Tsakalotos, and shortly after the crisis receded, leading to Tsipras's reintegration into the European mainstream. This became evident in 2018-19, when Tsipras decided to resolve the Macedonia name-issue. In this way, Tsipras was repositioning SYRIZA as a party of the left, rather than a populist party that had embraced during the crisis a rhetoric that often-used sovereigntist and nationalist language at odds with orthodox leftist ideology. Like his comrades in Italy, Tsipras initially used foreign policy in a way often associated with populism – i.e., to redraw the boundaries of the people-elite antagonism according to his political interests. However, he eventually buckled under the pressure of Brussels and Berlin and ended up strengthening the conventional left-right axis of ideological competition that the crisis had upset.

## *Domestic politics*

PFP in the Southern region of Europe was also strongly conditioned by local characteristics of the political systems, parties, and cultures. In Greece, for instance, SYRIZA and ANEL were two very different populist parties. Although before the economic crisis SYRIZA was a small party, rarely exceeding 4-5% of the vote, it had a long historical pedigree reaching all the way back to the 1960s, when the reformed left broke away from the Greek Communist Party (KKE). In its various iterations, the reformed left comprised multiple parties, movements and personalities engaged in deep ideological debates. As the latest iteration of this stream in party politics and serving as a loose coalition of various groupings, SYRIZA included both a number of experts and well-defined ideological positions on questions of foreign policy. ANEL on the other hand resembled much more the typical model of splinter-parties in Greece created by disgruntled politicians (usually ex-ministers who failed in leadership bids) from one of the two historical major parties, New Democracy and PASOK. ANEL founder Panos Kammenos was a maverick MP of New Democracy who acquired a high-profile in the first phase of the crisis, in 2010-11, when ND opposed the first austerity package brought in by PASOK. Articulating a radically populist and anti-austerity discourse, Kammenos became identified with the right-wing critique of austerity as a danger not only to Greece's economic prosperity but also its national and cultural independence.

The Five Star Movement and the League have very different origins even if their trajectory, in terms of the path to taking power, were similar to those of the Greek government's. Beppe Grillo, the Italian comedian and performer, and his associate Gianroberto Casaleggio launched the party in 2009 as a revolt against corruption in the Italian party system (Grillo and Casaleggio 2010). Policy proposals were a hodgepodge of attempts to enhance environmental sustainability and internet connectivity, but, consistent with their populist roots, their priority was the implementation of measures, such as referendums and recalls, that would give citizens the tools to override a distant and corrupt establishment (Grillo 2010, Grillo & Casaleggio 2010, Grillo & Casaleggio 2014). In contrast, the League's origins were as a northern separatist movement angry about Rome's taxation and corruption. The perceived corruption and betrayal of Italy's mainstream parties, plus the migration and financial crisis, turned Matteo Salvini into an anti-establishment icon (Mosetti 2021), giving him a similar status as Beppe Grillo. Both, at this point, were perceived by many as charismatic leaders who could potentially embody the people's will against the corrupt and treasonous establishment.

In Spain, the fate of the populist parties and their PFP was also related to the main conflicts in which modern Spain is involved: the secessionist attempts of Catalonia and the Basques, as well as the vindication of the independence of Western Sahara and the disputed control over Melilla and Ceuta (on populism and territorial politics in Spain, see Vampa 2020). Podemos and Vox have shown very different positions in this regard, and their own positions in the face of these conflicts have greatly influenced their very essence from an ideological perspective. In contrast with the majority of the Socialist Party, Podemos has taken a more favourable stance towards the collective rights of Catalonia during the 2017–2018 Spanish constitutional crisis, as particularly discussed in October 2017, in the aftermath of the referendum for the independence of Catalonia led by the former President of the Generalitat de Catalunya, Carles Puigdemont. Indeed, some

figures of Podemos in the region, such as the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, led the criticism of the Spanish government's repression of Catalan public servants and the expressions of King Felipe VI in which he accused the organizers of the referendum of acting "outside the law" with "unacceptable disloyalty". Likewise, Vox has stood out for its strong ultra-nationalistic stance during this conflict, and it is believed that part of its appeal in the subsequent elections was earned thanks for this assertive stance at such a critical juncture (Wheeler 2020; Rama et al, 2020). Vox has also taken advantage of a kind of nostalgia among Spanish population about Hispanic 'imperial' past ("make Spain great again"), that also influenced Spanish public attitudes in relation to the dispute with Morocco over the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which are in Spain's hands. This follows the decision of December 10, 2020, once US President Donald Trump announced the official recognition of Morocco's claims to Western Sahara by the United States. Vox members then abstained from voting in the Parliamentary vote on a motion over one area once known as the "Spanish province in Africa." For different reasons, Podemos voted against the decision of the President of Spain, PSOE's leader Pedro Sánchez, to break a 46-year-old consensus on the "active neutrality" of Spain in the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front combatants; a decision that Sánchez supposedly made alone, without consulting their allies in the coalition, including Podemos, which has historically expressed sympathy for the Sahrawis.

In Greece, when ND accepted austerity in 2011, Kammenos and a number of other MPs disagreed, left the party and formed ANEL. As through a series of national elections in 2012-15 most of these MPs lost their seats, Kammenos consolidated himself as the undisputed leader of ANEL, which in turn appeared like a classical populist party, with minimal organizational structures and relying on the personalistic leadership of its founder. In that sense, ANEL's foreign policy positions reflected in essence Kammenos' personal preferences and ideas. When the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition was formed, a distribution of labour was implemented in the management of foreign affairs. Kammenos received the ministry of defence, which allowed him to exploit opportunities for militaristic performances and to pose as protector of Greece's national independence and sovereignty. Once the populist government accepted a new austerity package from the EU, these opportunities were all that Kammenos had to showcase his populist credentials, which did not save his party from obliteration in the 2019 elections after all.

Interestingly, Tsipras appointed as foreign minister Nikos Kotzias, his close foreign policy advisor and an academic with a history of advisory roles in PASOK governments and high-profile public interventions on questions of foreign policy. The appointment of Kotzias is interesting from the perspective of the study of populist foreign policy for two reasons. On the one hand, it seemed to agree with the expectation of a populist government realigning Greece away from the West, since Kotzias had for long advocated for Greek foreign policy to embrace international multipolarity and non-Western rising powers. But at the same time, Kotzias was a formally non-partisan actor: not only did he not belong to SYRIZA, but was not even elected a member of parliament. Kotzias conducted foreign policy largely insulated from pressures from within his own government, the opposition and most of public opinion. Although he took various personal initiatives based on his own reading of Greece's interests in such international situation, Kotzias largely remained within the parameters of established foreign policy processes, which he had after all served as advisor to PASOK governments in previous years. This arrangement served the

main purpose of Tsipras, which was to centralize most important and highly political foreign policy decisions and strategic overview in his person. Owing to his high international profile acquired during the years of his opposition to austerity, Tsipras maintained the initiative in representing Greece internationally and connecting foreign policy with his goals in domestic party politics. This made foreign policy part of an overall populist strategy, such as during the adversarial renegotiation with the EU in the first half of 2015, where international claims were instrumentalized for domestic political purposes. On the other hand, it bears noting that centralization of foreign policy making and the primacy of elected leaders over foreign policy bureaucracies is not a particularly new phenomenon nor confined to populists.

In Italy, in contrast, the formation of the government, including key cabinet positions such as finance and foreign affairs, were made when the populist coalition was under pressure from Brussels, financial markets, foreign capitals, and the President of the Republic, who ensured that centrist technocrats, Giovanni Tria and Enzo Milanese, occupied these key posts (Giurlando 2021). Consequently, the government's foreign policies, particularly decisions regarding Russia and negotiations with Brussels, were implemented by agents who had to face the Scylla of satisfying populist colleagues who demanded rupture and the Charybdis of external actors pressuring Italy to conform to decisions previously taken by non-populist predecessors.

### *Policy domains*

Contrary to the stereotype that populists do not invest significantly in the development of concrete policy proposals, populists in Greece in the 2010s attempted to underpin their vision of an alternative relationship between the 'people' and the 'system', as well as between Greece and Europe, with a different policy orientation than what the Greek state had taken until that point. Naturally, a big part of the policy debate revolved around the economy and the question of the Greek debt, since that was the reason for the imposition of austerity and the emergence of populism in the first place. As a result, various anti-establishment actors in the early period of the crisis 2010-12 formulated elaborate (albeit mostly unrealistic) proposals for Greece's exit from the Eurozone, the financing of its debt, a restructuring of its economy etc. After 2012, with populist and anti-establishment sentiments channelled through the party system and especially SYRIZA and ANEL, proposals for exit from the Eurozone were toned down (although they were still harboured by SYRIZA's far left wing). Italy followed a similar path. Leaders of the 5SM and the League, Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini respectively, are on record as saying the Eurozone was a betrayal and that a referendum should be held on Italy's membership to the currency union (Giurlando 2021). Their preferred candidate for the post of minister of finance also endorsed this potential rupture (Savona 2018). Ultimately, the coalition government could not overcome the domestic and geopolitical pressures that constrained their agenda. France's La France Insoumise and Rassemblement National shared both this critique of the euro and the desire for a referendum on it (Giurlando 2019). In Spain, in contrast, Podemos never endorsed an exit from the currency union even if its critiques—that it was a tool for German and financial interests to impose neoliberal austerity on Europe's workers—were identical to those of populists elsewhere, including Greece, Italy and France.

In the case of Greece, energy became a highly salient area of foreign policy in the public debate during the crisis for various reasons. First, energy security carried obvious material implications for the Greek economy. For anti-austerity populists like ANEL leader Panos Kammenos, if Greece were 'allowed' to exploit the energy resources in its soil it would not need to implement austerity to pay off its debt. When the SYRIZA-ANEL government came to power, energy policy became an important parameter of the search for alternative financing. The energy ministry was occupied by Panos Lafazanis, leader of SYRIZA's far left anti-euro wing, and he immediately sought to deepen cooperation with Russia and highlight Greece's independence from EU energy policy.

Second, energy policy carried a high symbolic value in domestic debates because it embodied different alternatives about Greece's geopolitical orientation as well as its ability to stand up to regional rivals. Admittedly, energy was instrumentalized for domestic purposes already by pro-European, anti-populist governments during the years of crisis. The ND-led government under Antonis Samaras (2012-15) invested a lot in presenting Greek participation in the energy geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean as a dimension of the nation's assertiveness, despite the massive economic crisis, especially the prospect of 'encircling' Turkey by building a pipeline running from Israel to Greece via Cyprus. Whether it was Samaras looking for counterweights to his dependence on the EU faced with the danger of bankruptcy, or the SYRIZA-ANEL government highlighting the promise of energy to liberate Greece from austerity, energy symbolized the re-politicization and geo-politicization of Greece's economic and external policies, thus allowing it to escape the legalistic proceduralism of EU macroeconomic rules.

Finally, energy dovetailed with the popularity of non-Western powers in Greece during the crisis, especially Russia. For populists of both the left and right, highlighting the role of energy for Greece's economy was a veiled reference to the need to approach Russia. In the context of the crisis, Europe was presented as an actor who limited Greece's independence and wanted to exploit its natural resources, thus keeping it subjugated.

### *Conclusions*

This chapter has explored how populist governments in Mediterranean Europe, notably France, Greece, Italy, and Spain, have conducted their foreign policies. To this end, we have conceptualized populism primarily as a discursive strategy and PFP as a practice, following the introduction to this book. The large presence of both right-wing and left-wing populist parties in these countries and their success in accessing governmental power make the comparison between these cases of populist foreign policy particularly compelling. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of Southern Europe's populist trajectories was particularly helpful for further scholarly understanding of the role of populism in foreign policy in general and its connection with regionalist and globalist performances in particular.

Several factors induced the influence of populism on foreign policy in these four key Southern European countries throughout the last decade. Populism in the four cases under analysis was strongly affected by the politicization and contestation fuelled by the Eurozone crisis and the

refugee crisis, the two major EU governance crises of the 2010s. Since both crises were transnational by definition, they dramatically affected not only national party politics, but also political discourse about foreign policy processes, goals, and establishments. Anti-austerity protests thus catalysed existing populist tendencies, both on the right and the left, to find 'corrupt', 'impure' elites among regionalist technocrats ('Brussels', 'Frankfurt'), foreign powers (USA, Germany), and international institutions (the IMF, NATO, the European Court of Justice, 'Wall Street'), conspiring together with their domestic allies.

That said, all cases have shown specific structural constraints on their PFP, either international or domestic, which ultimately forced Southern European populist parties to realign themselves in their interaction with regional and international powers...

The comparison of Mediterranean populist foreign policies provides lessons for the academic study of other countries in Europe and beyond it, particularly among those countries where populists have also enjoyed relatively high levels of public support and could conceivably seize executive power in national elections...

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